

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #4

DYSTOPIAN STAND

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ANGELA WHITE

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

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ANGELA WHITE

DYSTOPIAN
STAND

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Books 4-6
by
Angela White

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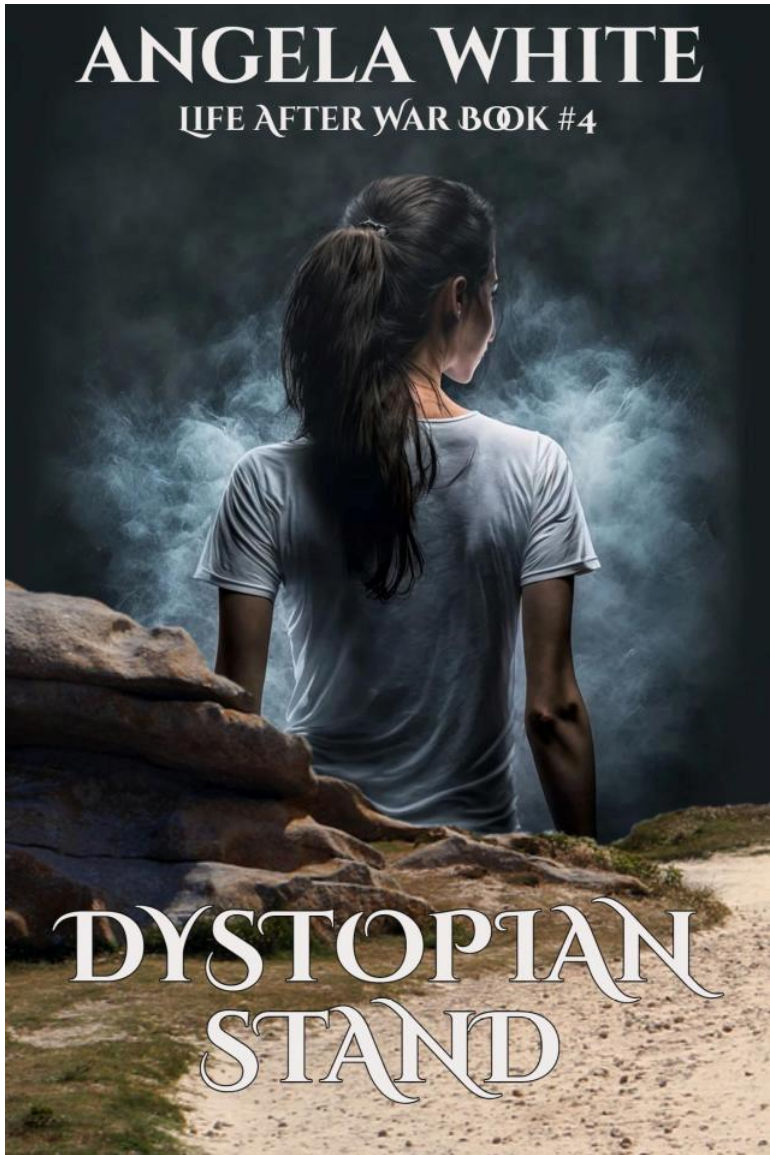
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(For book 4)

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Dystopian Stand
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Close

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.

8

“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 XO's 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 imposter. 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 cool 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

“Thirty 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!

Grinndd! 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

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Deleted Scenes BK4

“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 BK4

“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 BK4

“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.

Place a Review BK4

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Book Five

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #5



Copyright BK5
Fight For Survival
by
Angela White

Title: Fight For Survival

Life After War Book 5

Edition: 2024

Author: Angela White

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Low Lead & Thin Walls

When it's all on the line,
When instinct says its time,
Do you run, hide, or fight?
Do you pray? Support? Provide sight?

Never an easy choice,
Others always figure in.
Women and children go first;
Laws from an age of bigger men.

Backs to thin walls,
Lead running low...
Do you step out front?
Or disgrace yourself down low?

Can you give it all up?
Can you truly say goodbye?
Can you stumble over their bodies?
And not see yourself cry?

And to our enemy, would you hand us over?
We used to be your neighbors!
Our children played together,
Where we refused to allow these bad behaviors.

How many of you will betray us?
How many of us will you kill?

It's a question of numbers,
And who pays the final bill.

What will be the cost?
What will be the price we pay?
“Any win, is a win,” people quote,
Uncaring as their souls decay.

Why does our existence terrify you?
How can you respect life so little?
Our freedoms have been your hidden vices,
Even as you lie and cast *us* evil.

We used to be one nation,
Under our own god.
United, not divided.
Kind, not blind.
More considerate, than hypocrite!

To terror, from near bliss.
From the Promised Land, to cursed.
When did it come to this?
While we were busy conquering the earth.

Chapter One BK5
Is Anyone Listening?
Safe Haven Refuge
September 1st

1

As sunrise began to lighten the giant mountain peaks around Safe Haven, large envelopes were delivered to nearly every member of camp and then to 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.

Normally there might have been jokes about plain brown envelopes being quietly delivered, but not now. In those packages was life for some and death for 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. 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.

2

“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 emptily 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 through 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.

Chapter Two BK5
Cold Winds

1

“**I** gave you a job to do. Why isn’t it rolling yet?”

Kenn flinched, turning to see Marc. Instead of submitting to the scold, he scowled. “You don’t know what she’s like!”

Marc chuckled. “Don’t I?”

“I mean it. She does what *you* want, but everyone else has to fight with her. She isn’t Angela.”

“Yeah.” If she had been, he might have been tempted. Once he got over the scars, Kendle had a nice body and a lot of heat to keep a man warm at night.

“Adrian isn’t helping me.”

Kenn’s complaint surprised Marc.

“He says to leave her alone and let her settle in, so go argue with him.”

Marc could have growled or threatened, or even hit. “Okay.”

As he left, Kenn stared worriedly, not sure what he should do. Marc and Angela were running things, but Adrian had experience with battered women.

Marc was thinking the same thing. If Adrian thought Kendle needed more time to adjust, he would leave it alone, but he had her under guard. She wasn't in control and being here, where there was no blood spilling, was rough on her. Marc had wanted to spend more time drilling his wishes concerning Adrian into Kenn, but a slender figure subtly dropping out of sight drew his attention. Marc headed for the livestock tent in concern.

2

Angela paused behind a pile of fat boulders, trying to calm her stomach. She'd been walking by the tents they used for protection while butchering and the smells had been too much to take.

Angela heaved noisily into the weeds, bringing up nothing. It seemed like it wasn't ever going to stop; by the time it did, she was aware of not being alone anymore.

She wiped her face on the hoodie she was wearing, then unzipped it and dropped it on the ground. When she was handed a bottle of water, she rinsed and drank until it was empty.

"He's going to figure it out. Tell him and let him try to help you. Or let *me*."

Angela doubled over as a sharp pain hit.

The witch came forward to sooth the muscles.
Easy.

When she looked up, Adrian had seated himself on a large boulder and was chewing on a long blade

of grass. He stared at her with a thoughtful expression and dangerously dark eyes.

Angela felt his power swirling over her, ready to give her what she needed, but he stopped before making contact.

Angela had tensed to tolerate it; she glowered.

Adrian let his energy slide across hers and pulled it back. “Ask me.”

Angela’s rage flew out.

Adrian found himself on the ground. When he stood up, she was out of sight.

Adrian chuckled. He loved her spirit, loved pushing her to be stronger than she thought she could. Having a child was hard and she wasn’t a teenager this time, though he was sure she hadn’t had it easy then either. He wondered if she’d ever talked about it and decided it was unlikely. She was doing it all on her own, like she had been after the war and like she probably had been all her life. And there was no way she would tell him anything. Marc would have to grow the balls to dig it out of her.

“What is she hiding?”

Adrian turned to spot Marc standing inside the butchering tent. There was a slit cut in the canvas next to him—a quick exit point.

“The truth you’re too scared to ask for.”

“Tell me.”

Adrian had been waiting for this moment. “I suspect she had trouble the first time around, with Charlie. Something went wrong. I think she would

have been told she shouldn't have more kids. *Maybe she was told that.*"

Marc's stomach dropped into his feet. "How can you know that?"

"How can you not? She knows too much about birthing to be avoiding her checkup with the doctor. She's not eating well. I'm guessing her sleep is restless and she..." Adrian glanced away, not ready to be hit again. "She never smiles anymore, not the real ones."

Marc had noticed all of those things and others. She was quick to snap and slow to offer encouragement. He'd assumed she was preparing everyone for the ugliness she expected this fight to result in, but she wasn't spending bonding time with anyone. Even the sex was distracted. He'd barely been able to get her there.

Adrian winced at that image, but still devoured the sights and sounds of the memory in Marc's mind. Any time with Angela would be incredible. The wolfman was a fool.

"I may be a fool, but at least I'm not a Jody!" Marc went straight toward the medical area, mentally going over the questions he had. He wanted to talk to Angela about it, but she would deny anything that interfered with her battle plans. He wanted a professional opinion before confronting her.

Marc ducked into the medical canvas, but stopped when he spotted Angela talking quietly with the doctor. He waited for her to notice him. He

was relieved when she waved him over instead of acting secretive.

Angela rested against Marc's warmth as he wrapped his arm around her. "He's going to give me an exam and make sure things are okay. Will you stay?"

"Sure." Marc leered. "Can I help? I am familiar with that area."

Angela snorted.

Even the sour-faced doctor snickered. "Here's your gown. Please get changed and get on the table."

Angela felt a sudden sob burn her throat. "I miss John."

"Me too." Marc understood. It didn't help that she'd recently been reading John's personal notebooks and papers from his tent. A fast death compared to the lingering one from cancer that many of their sheep were still suffering was preferable, but it didn't make the aftermath any less emotional. It had been almost two months, but the pain was still fresh. Marc glared at the new doctor. "We use the recliner and real sheets."

The doctor huffed. "That is incredibly inconvenient to the physician and unsanitary."

Marc stared in cold contemplation. "You know, *Doctor*, we don't have a place for anyone who can't follow our rules and ways. That includes important people, like healers. I'll have someone come for you after mess. We'll let you get a hot meal first."

Marc steered Angela out of the tent, ignoring the doctor's angry protests.

"We need him." Angela signed resignedly. "It's why I've allowed it."

"No more," Marc stated, loud enough to be overheard. "They live here under our care. They can follow or go."

Angela gave in, allowing Marc to handle this one on his own.

Marc led her to the rear tents that wouldn't be up much longer and directed her in to Hilda, who was sitting at a small table as if she'd known they were coming. Marc hadn't sought the information yet, but he'd always known the sources Adrian used.

Angela sank down in the padded seat as Marc leaned over and whispered a few words to the German. Angela had assumed Marc wanted her to visit the real doctor, but she'd been tempted to ask Hilda to midwife for her. It was a relief to know they could agree on this.

Hilda shrugged in response to Marc's query. "Don't need to pass word. When they see she's here, they'll follow."

Marc was satisfied. The new doctor would lose half his patients and suffer the outcast status for a while. He would either come around or be left behind, and Marc wasn't sorry. Here, you were either one of the team or you fended for yourself outside the fence. No one was too important.

Angela wasn't sure that she agreed, but she suspected this lesson would teach the new doctor to get to know his patients, as any good family physician should. Hurtful or not, it was part of the job to bond with them as people, not just paychecks.

Marc stayed with Angela while Hilda checked her out. While she worked, Hilda told them of the midwifing she'd done. She didn't say it had been done in another camp, a lifetime ago, but they knew. She'd been forced to hold those females hostage, but she'd cared for them too or those women wouldn't have survived to give birth. They would have had their baby slit from their guts as soon as they began to show.

Hilda also reminded them to keep the doctor's students happy, so that they would stay in Safe Haven. Hilda's age wouldn't allow for this type of work much longer than John's illness would have.

After the exam, Hilda went outside with Marc while Angela dressed. They both knew she could hear them, but it was easier to pretend they were alone than to talk in front of the witch right now.

"Well?"

Hilda's face was grave. "Things are twisted. She'll need a caesarian section. If..."

Marc paled. "If, what?"

"If she makes it to term." Hilda lowered her voice, though she knew it wouldn't do any good. "I would not give you odds on that."

“Why not?” Marc demanded. They would cut the baby free when the time came. What else was there?

“I told you. Things are twisted, injuries that healed incorrectly. When she begins to stretch, there will be problems.”

Marc’s mind went straight to Kenn, but Hilda’s next words eased that fury.

“Many women are tilted, but in her case, the doctor made a mistake. I have seen it happen.”

Marc’s face was thunderous. “And they didn’t tell her.”

“I’d guess that she knew anyway.”

Marc was suddenly terrified. “What can I do?”

“Pray?” Hilda shrugged at his upset expression. “Miracles do still happen, especially now.”

Marc didn’t answer. He was busy mentally calling for his demon. Hilda and the doctor might be limited, but he wasn’t.

What have you got?

The demon hated to answer. *You won’t like it.*

Marc braced. *Tell me anyway.*

3

Kendle spotted Adrian moving through the sparse trees in the rear of camp, weaving lightly. He looked rough. Sighing heavily, she left the tray of freshly harvested green beans she was supposed to be snapping and bagging. During the last few days, she’d discovered things about Adrian and Safe

Haven. They weren't observations that she could share with anyone, but seeing his stop, his pause in obvious discomfort, she found pity for him anyway. He wasn't a good man, despite what some of the people here thought, but he also wasn't evil.

"He's just a man. They expected him to be perfect."

Adrian heard steps behind him, but he was busy fighting the heaviness in his chest. He'd gone for a fast trot around the fence and the dizziness had forced him to find a private place for recovery.

Kendle took a seat on a big boulder next to him, staying silent. She wouldn't have known what to say even if she'd been a member of this camp all along. The things he'd done, the rumors circling the Eagles, were nothing short of criminal. Most of the men thought Marc had plans to take Adrian out on a run and put a bullet into his brain.

"He'll use his hands." Adrian barked a laugh. "Bullets are too valuable to waste on a Jody."

"He actually prefers a knife." Kendle's voice was toneless. She was getting used to being around others like herself, but slowly.

"Yeah."

"Are you scared of him? 'Cause you should be. He loathes you."

Adrian slowly straightened, but didn't look at her as he answered. "The only thing I fear is already being held over my head."

"The camp being told what you've done?"

Adrian snorted. "Like I care now."

That response, the incredible heartbreak, gave the needed clue for Kendle to make the connection. “Banishment. Being away from her.”

Adrian didn’t answer verbally, but Kendle heard him thinking death was preferable. “Marc will give you that.”

“So you’ve said. Why are you here?”

Kendle sighed restlessly. “I have no idea why I’m here at all. None.”

Adrian saw her distant stare, the tears she wouldn’t let anyone know that she shed each night, and felt his own misery ease off a bit. “Are you okay? She does want you to fit in here and—”

“And find a man!” Kendle finished angrily. “Stop it.”

“Okay.”

“I’m fine. Thanks!” Each word was nearly a growl.

Adrian felt an honest grin stretch his lips. “You are a bitch, aren’t you?”

Not insulted, Kendle bobbed her head. “Of course. And you?”

Adrian’s amusement faded. “I’m a sorry son of a bitch.”

“See?” Kendle snickered this time. “Just be honest. It works for you.”

“No,” Adrian denied quietly. “It never has.” He turned to go and stumbled a bit as the dizziness returned, stronger.

“You shouldn’t have tried it yet.” Kendle slipped a stiff arm around his waist as he began to

shake. “More idiots now than before the war.” Against his protests, she led him to his tent on the outskirts of camp. “Come on. Take a snooze.”

Adrian stopped arguing and tried to pretend he didn’t need her help. He tossed an arm around her shoulders instead and tugged her closer. “Thanks.”

Kendle shuddered at the manhandling and dug her fingers into his hip until her nails were able to rake skin even through the shirt. Her other hand tightened on the gun in her holster.

“Easy... I’m not him.”

Kendle pulled the rage in as best she could to tolerate the closeness. Being touched without a warning was enough to send her into a bloody fury.

“I understand, a little.” Adrian had avoided her mental state during the times Angela had scheduled them together. It was ironic that they had today free from each other and yet here they were.

“About what?” Kendle faked understanding, trying to avoid this conversation.

“Why you need to kill to get a release.”

Kendle paled a bit at hearing it aloud, but she didn’t deny it. “So do I. I’m killing him again and again.”

“A lot of the women here feel that way. It’s why females in the Eagles had to happen. If not, women might have become dangerous.”

Kendle stopped, shrugging his arm off. “Don’t you understand that we already are? Men, in control just because they are men, is a myth. We’ve allowed it, but at some point, we’re going to make a different

choice and slaughter your gender. *You'll* go in the first few waves." She left him standing there with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Kendle didn't care why. All she could see was a future where women ruled and men served. It was her dream now, along with blood. She hoped she lived long enough to witness that shift in power. Males didn't understand how often women had reconsidered their choice to be subservient. Now that the war had done so much damage to the world, it would be an easy repeal if they ever got together and voted on it. No mistakes that a woman-ruled world could ever make would be as bad as what the males had done during their centuries of terror.

4

Cynthia was relieved to discover the main room of the workout tent abandoned. The Eagles were busy loading and training outdoors with the new hit-and-run styles that Marc had introduced upon his return. They were trying to get the basics down before everyone left for their missions.

Cynthia dropped down on the weight bench with a low grunt, hoping the morning mess bell now ringing would also keep people occupied. She needed the peace.

The lifting weight limit for her was too strict as far as Cynthia was concerned, but she didn't push it as she worked out. She wasn't going to do anything to risk her child's life. At least, no more than she

had to for them to survive. Angela's chore was ugly enough to cost both of their lives if she screwed up or something unexpected went wrong, but it was a risk that everyone was taking.

"Can I join you?"

Cynthia didn't growl at the primed rookie Eagle who had just come in. "I'm not good company."

Kip didn't take the hint, immediately choosing the bench next to hers instead of one of the other five scattered around the canvas.

"That's okay." Cynthia's Asian features were the center of every fantasy that Kip had ever had. "No sweat. I'll talk for both of us."

Cynthia gritted her teeth and kept doing the repetitions without a change in expression, but the air in the tent grew chilly. She wanted to be alone.

"So, I hear you like to read. Me too. Read a lot before the war." Kip loaded too much weight for his 5'11", 190 lb. frame onto the bar, and didn't secure the disks tightly. He dropped heavily onto the bench, making the plastic fart. "Bet we like the same stories."

Kip began doing fast lifts that quickly had him breathing like a train and throwing off stale body odor.

Cynthia ground her teeth harder and tried to concentrate. The temperature in the tent went down again, cooling her off despite the sweating.

"I was thinking you and me are a lot alike. We should date or something." Kip snatched a quick

peek at his love interest and saw her nipples poking against the thin shirt and bra she had on. He lost his grip; the weights tilted, sliding the disks off the bar. They slammed to the floor with nerve-jarring clangs.

“Damn it.” Trying to be cool, Kip spun up and off the bench, but he slammed into the metal brace for the bar.

“Ug!” He slid to his knees. “Oh...” Kip felt around on his skull, whining, “That hurts! Why didn’t you warn me?”

Cynthia’s breath streamed out in front of her as she blew anger through clenched teeth instead of screaming. She lifted the weights faster as he stumbled around collecting the pieces and grumbling. *What an asshat.*

“I guess I’ll have to pay you back for that one.” Trying to carry too much at once, he lost his hold on the stack of heavy disks. They clanged to the floor again.

Cynthia set her bar into place. Icy air blew across the tent and lifted the flap from the inside. “In exactly one minute, this tent will be ripped apart. You should leave.”

Kip opened his mouth to protest.

A gust of cold wind slammed into his face. It sucked his breath away and replaced it with painful, choked tears.

Cynthia couldn’t have stopped even if she wanted to. The wind slammed down Kip’s throat until he was clutching his neck and gasping. His

face filled with panic, face going bluish. Cynthia closed her lids in ecstasy. She'd never felt anything so amazing. *It will kill him. I can kill him.*

The thought snapped Cynthia into a place of miserable guilt.

Kip fell to the ground as the wind vanished. He lay there gasping and coughing, as she moved to his side.

Cynthia knelt down, stung by the way he flinched, but she didn't let that stop her from gently taking his hand. "Do you still want me and my dangerous child?"

As he realized it was the baby, not her, Kip felt some of his anger fade. The fear however, had him cautiously shaking his head.

"Good." Cynthia smiled, patted his cold hand. "I'm sorry for what he did to you. I promise to talk to Angela about it and learn how to control him."

Soothed more, Kip rubbed at his throat and kept his mouth shut. Talking would feel like chewing broken glass.

Cynthia leaned closer, face serene enough to make Kip think she was about to hug him. What she did was put her mouth against his neck and sniff him as if he were a buffet.

When she drew back, Kip was shaking lightly, expression fearful.

"You'll tell them you gulped your entire mug of coffee while it was still hot. They'll give you pain meds. You'll spend a few days in your tent stoned and off work detail." She stared hungrily at his neck,

though she actually thought his smells might make her puke. “This didn’t happen. Because if it did, and you told on my child, I might have to do something about it. You can see that, right? I would have no choice.”

Kip nodded jerkily, opening his mouth to swear he would never tell.

Cynthia placed a finger across his lips; he froze in revulsion, very near panic. “Shhh. That coffee was hot. You better go visit the doctor.”

Kip didn’t move until she did and then he was up and out of the tent before she could blink.

Cynthia dropped back down onto the bench, ignoring the evidence in the tent and the feeling of being gaped at. She was too shocked by what she’d done.

“That won’t work on everyone.”

Cynthia found Kevin in the doorway of the large hay room. He’d clearly witnessed it all. They hadn’t spoken since Marc had delivered the news.

Cynthia shrugged as if she wasn’t horrified at her tactics. “It will on *his* kind.”

Kevin stayed where he was. “Don’t you think it was overkill?”

“You can say that.” Cynthia’s voice was dazed.

Kevin frowned. “What is it?”

Cynthia slid a loving hand over her mostly still flat stomach. “My son.”

Kevin felt the curls of jealousy and fear, but it also completed Cynthia for him. She’d been a fierce

reporter. As a mother, she would be dangerous. It was admirable. And intimidating.

Cynthia started to ask Kevin if he'd made a choice yet, but he was gone from the doorway. The sound of him hitting the bags in the large hay room echoed. Cynthia felt the chill wanting to return. She rubbed her stomach. "How about some food?"

"If you wait a couple minutes, I'll go along," Kevin called, swinging out his anger and confusion as best he could.

Cynthia, surprised, stayed sitting on the bench, listening to his sounds and trying to catch a hint of his smells. She wasn't worried over Angela finding out. Her kind wouldn't become deadly when they found out how powerful her baby already was. However, the sheep would become the wolves and tear her apart in their blind terror. She'd known that as soon as she'd felt Jennifer's child express her anger at a hold that was too tight. Only a handful of people knew, thanks to careful babysitting and swift excuses, but something like this was a direct threat.

The camp wouldn't understand the babies had no other way to communicate yet. How Cynthia knew that was common sense. In a few months, when their brains were more developed, advanced communications might be possible, but for now, it was sleepy, angry, hungry, or content, and nothing else would pacify them until those needs were satisfied. It was exhausting. She had no idea how she was going to hold it all together, but if it was

like this for her, what was it like for their leader, who had to be a rock at all times?

Cynthia wouldn't have traded places with Angela for anything. The stress, on top of this constant demanding and weariness, would be too much.

5

“You're quiet these days.”

Jennifer tore her gaze from the amazing mountain views around camp to gaze at Kyle with shuttered eyes. She didn't like pretending things were fine when they weren't. “I'm growing up these days.”

Kyle didn't argue. It was becoming harder and harder to think of her as a teenager.

Jennifer flushed. “I know. You're doing great.”

Kyle grinned at the praise. He couldn't help it. “You think?”

“Yes. Especially at night.”

Kyle swallowed at the quick, hot images. Just lying in the same tent, in the same bed, was enough to keep him... Kyle stopped the thought, reddening as she giggled. There was an edge of flirting between them now that was driving him crazy.

Jennifer didn't want to ruin the good mood, but she had to let him know part of her role in Angela's plan. He wouldn't like it, but orders were orders.

Kyle felt the calm vanish and braced. “What is it?”

“I’m supposed to work with Conner. Alone.”

Kyle took that in as well as he could. “Does he scare you?”

“All guys do, but I’m working through it. He’s just a boy.”

“So why bring it up?” People were being thrown off teams for much less than what she’d just told him.

“My orders said to tell you.”

Kyle didn’t like the sound of that. “Did she say why?”

“Yeah, she...uh...” Jennifer stared at the ground. “She said I may need help later and you’ll know where Conner is and be able to find me.”

Kyle realized several things at once. The first was that Jennifer wasn’t scared, she was excited. The second was that Angela knew all of them too well. Her ability to predict their future choices was frightening. The third was that Angela was providing him and Jennifer a way out.

“I don’t want it!” he growled, making her jump. “I don’t need a safety net.”

Jennifer waited for him to calm down before delivering the rest of her message. “Angela also said the baby deserves a chance to live free, even if it is on the run. That’s why you’ll take the safety net she’s giving you. Her exact words.”

Kyle’s anger and guilt fought a nasty battle, but in the end, he chose to keep the information to himself. He loved Autumn and wanted her to be

happy, but if it would allow Jennifer to live, he would do it and honor be damned.

Jennifer caught that and was relieved. Kyle knew he had to save the baby to have a future with her and that now meant two determined adults to look after Autumn. The baby was all Jennifer cared about. She was preparing herself to be hurt if it was needed, or even die. As long as Autumn got to live, it was enough. And if by some miracle they all survived, she was driving away from here, alone, and never looking back. She'd had enough of the ghosts, but she didn't think it would come to that. She'd had the dream too many times to ignore it. She was supposed to die in this war, and Safe Haven would raise her daughter.

"The herd is on the move." Kyle didn't smile at his joke. He could feel Jennifer stewing over the future.

Jennifer saw three of the pregnant women advancing toward the mess and scanned for the others. She spotted Cynthia and Kevin emerging from the training tent, then Marc and Angela coming from behind a supply truck. Kenn and Tonya, appearing happy despite how hard Marc was working the Marine, fell in behind the couple as they came from the new doctor's tent, where Tonya had just received her checkup. It was as if a bell had been rung. Two minutes later, every mother-to-be was under the awning of the mess, cackling and picking through the food left over from breakfast.

Kyle wasn't surprised when the cook and his two assistants rushed out with fresh bowls. Extra food was one of the first concessions that Marc had made to the basic camp rules. He wanted fat, healthy babies and that only happened from feeding the moms.

"It's a bit creepy."

"Agreed." Jennifer laughed. "But it's also sweet. It's like the babies are..." Jennifer clammed up.

Kyle frowned. "Don't do that, Jenny. I know we're different, but don't shut me out. It'll put walls up that I can't get through."

Jennifer briefly considered telling him that she didn't want him behind some of her walls, but she decided that wasn't entirely true. She wanted to be able to be honest with him on everything. She just didn't want his bad reactions. She didn't know how to handle most of them. "It's like the babies want a play date."

Kyle recognized the trust moment and was careful with his response. "That might raise some alarm in the sheep."

"I don't like it when you call them that!" Jennifer snapped. "They're our people."

Surprised, Kyle grinned at her. "Caught the bug, didn't you?"

"Yes. I love Safe Haven."

Kyle gently put an arm around her for a soft hug. "So do I."

“I’m taking it.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “We’re taking the safety net, Reece. You’re coming with me.”

Kyle leaned down and placed a light kiss to her forehead. “Yes, ma’am.”

Secure in what she’d needed from him, Jennifer placed a return kiss on his jaw as a reward for agreeing, and for being patient.

Kyle froze, as he always did.

Jennifer lingered, resting her head against his.

Kyle felt peace and strength surround them, and gave up the act. He grinned like a fool. “You should insist on stuff more often, Jenny.”

“Maybe I will.” She liked the feel of his arm, the smell of his aftershave. “I miss the stubble a bit. That first night, it made you seem...”

“Dangerous?” Kyle supplied.

“Yes, but more than that.” She hesitated, not sure how to explain.

Kyle lifted a brow in amusement. “Sexy?”

“Yes.”

Kyle felt his day was getting better and better, and didn’t push. “Nice. You looked like hell.”

Jennifer gasped.

Kyle laughed aloud as she playfully slapped at him. This was all he’d ever wanted—someone to love who could at least care for him in return. He hadn’t planned to become obsessed with an abused teenager, but now that he had, Kyle wouldn’t trade it for anything. *Before rescuing Jennifer, I was only faking life.*

Chapter Three BK5

I See More

1

“**T**ry to relax.”

Kenn’s words drew a snort from both females. They were behind the main camp, using the naturally rough landscape and dreary weather to simulate bad sniper conditions.

Kenn frowned. “You can’t pull the trigger when you’re tense. You’ll miss every single time.”

Crista took in a breath and released it slowly, seeing her shot before she took it.

“Now fire.”

Crista jerked the trigger; there was only a puff of dirt near the target.

“Next.” Kenn wondered how much skill Angela needed these two to have. Crista was good when she took her time and Samantha was good even when she was rushed, but neither was trained for doing this during combat.

Sam gently pulled the trigger. She was pleased when her slug smacked into the balloon and popped it. They were saving the more powerful shells for the battle, but hitting a target hundreds of feet away was a big rush.

“Good. Next.”

Crista didn't like being shown up. She hit the next two balloons without even trying.

Sam responded in kind by hitting her next target dead center.

Kenn settled down a bit. This was the first time he had worked directly with the snipers on Angela's team. He hadn't been expecting much.

"Bump them to the next set." Marc was passing by on his way to help Charlie's team with their practice. Marc had refused the teenager's demand of Kenn as his running target; their aim wouldn't be as careful with someone they didn't like.

Kenn frowned. "Now or later?"

"May not be a later." Marc paused. That old feeling of trouble was everywhere he went today.

"Tonight." Angela joined them, leaning against his big arm. "Something's close."

"Yeah." Marc didn't ask what it was or send his demon searching for it. From here on, this was Angela's show. He had to be careful not to interfere with it.

"I love you."

Marc glanced down in surprise. Not at the words, but the tone. It held an endless well of sadness. "You okay?"

Angela shook her head, allowing him a tiny glimpse into the true feelings that she could share. "I'm damned after this, Marc. We all are."

Marc didn't realize how much that would matter later as he slid an arm around her hip. "It's worth it, right?"

“Of course!” She’d forced cheer into her voice. There was a long time to go before the full truth could be revealed to everyone. She needed to cowboy up. “I have rounds.” She moved off toward the small row of tents where she had other teams working on their coming runs.

Marc didn’t watch her, drawn into the session again as both sniper women began to protest the new distance for the next level, insisting their coming targets would be closer. “Does that matter? If you can hit it at three hundred yards, you can definitely hit it at one hundred, right?”

The females got his point and returned to their challenge.

“Aim small.” Kenn appreciated the support from Marc, but he didn’t show it as he continued the lesson. “Account for the wind, the leaves, and even the spider web that might blow across right as you fire.”

Samantha went first. Hard or not, she couldn’t wait to be doing this for real.

Marc didn’t stay for the next shots, but he was positive the females would hit whatever they aimed at. Kenn didn’t understand how intent these women would become once the actual moment arrived to kill. Angela had chosen well.

Angela ducked into the tinkering tent, as Theo had dubbed it, and saw that their new partner had arrived. “Candy.”

“Boss.”

Theo held up a sheet of paper from the messy stack on the table. “These okay for her?”

Angela read it, sensing a spark that she hadn’t seen before. That was good. “Yes. She can do all of that. Marc evaluated her yesterday.”

“Great.” Theo blew out a sigh of nerves and excitement. “We’re all set then.”

“Can I keep this?” Angela was sure they had another copy. Everyone was using carbon paper these days to be sure not to miss a single line of details.

“Yep.” Theo glanced at Candy, who was sitting quietly, waiting to be told what to do. “Can I eval her? For my team?”

Candy didn’t have the training her other females did. She’d come late to the party, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t work for her. Angela shrugged. “If it makes you feel better. I think she’ll be fine with you.”

“No, I meant keeping her. We don’t have a female yet.”

Angela stared in surprise, along with Candy. “What position?”

“Lackey to start.” Theo passed over another sheet. “Eventually she’ll help us place things we don’t want seen. She has design experience.”

The second page was observations on all the members of his team, plus Candy and a few others. “I am keeping this.”

Theo grinned. “I thought you might find some of that useful.”

“Why wasn’t all this included on the personal sheets?” Angela skimmed it and saw that Candy had designed websites for her business and had a degree in graphics. The next line was about Theo himself. “And why didn’t you tell us you speak four languages and have a minor in architecture?”

“It wasn’t on the questionnaire when I joined.” Theo shrugged. “I’ve been a tool engineer for a decade. Didn’t think the other stuff mattered until recently.”

“I’ll let you know about her position. Handle her as you see fit until then.” Angela tucked the papers into her pocket and ducked out of the canvas. After this was all over, she would revamp the Safe Haven personal information sheets. If Adrian had known Theo was so valuable, she was sure he would have given the engineer serious work long before the government had reemerged. Engineering was a prize during the apocalypse, but add architecture with it and that was someone who could actually build the future.

Zack fell in with Angela as she came from the tinkering tent; she let him stay as she slid into the next canvas where Seth and Doug were at a table with the same messy stack of papers that Theo had

been surrounded by. “Gentlemen, are we all set here?”

“Almost.” Seth kept scribbling. “We’ve got it packed up except for the padding. I don’t have it on my list.”

“You’ll see to that personally?” Angela was depending on it. The padding would save lives.

Seth tried a little humor to ease her worry. “Right this minute, if you like.”

“Yes, that would be good.”

Seth frowned at the grim tone, but rose and did as she wanted.

Angela waited until Seth was gone and then met Doug’s glare. The big man hadn’t been given an envelope; he was staring resentfully. “It’s not because you’re sick. You won’t accept that, I know, but time will prove it.”

Doug didn’t respond.

She left the tent. In a few days, the big man would understand why she’d put him with the camp for the fight. Until then, he would help with the thousand other chores she needed done. It was FND, for lying. Everyone now knew he had type II diabetes.

Angela knew where Seth would go first and took herself there as well, aware of Zack still trailing her. Zack had opened his first order this morning and he had questions. His was one of the few envelopes that hadn’t been dated for Labor Day.

Angela spotted Seth lingering outside the kids' training tent, hoping for a moment with her even though Becky was busy working and he was supposed to be getting ready for a run to find the padding they needed. Angela took a paper from her notebook as she joined him.

Seth straightened defensively, but Angela only handed him the sheet, not even casting a disapproving glare. He understood when he read it.

I want the camp moved tonight. You're overseeing it. Start right this minute. I already have a crew going for the padding.

Seth hadn't been given an envelope either. This was the reason why.

Seth spun away from the training tent. He would see Becky in the morning, when he returned from escorting their people to the den. It was a job with too much honor and authority to allow anything to distract him. Seth was out of sight, then out of mind, a few minutes later.

Angela was pleased with being able to predict Seth's moves and moods. And sorry for it. More guilt settled onto her shoulders; she stood straighter, balancing it. She'd discovered why Adrian had stopped to do this so often. There was always a new layer of weight being added.

3

Inside the kid's training tent, Marc wasn't happy. "What are you hiding from me?"

All four teens went still and silent, tossing up even thicker mental blocks than they had already been using.

“Let me guess. She gave you a job that I won’t like and then told you to keep it secret?” Marc snorted at the crumbling walls and shifting eyes. “Great.” He took the chair in the center of the tent and brought up his protective bubble. “Someone shoot me and do it now!”

Shoulder-to-shoulder, all of the kids drew weapons and started pulling the trigger.

Marc waited until all of them were empty before lowering his shield. Bullets clattered to the floor at his feet. “Jennifer, perfect. Conner and Charlie, not bad, but a bit low. Becky?”

The girl was staring at the gun in her hand.

“Rebecca?”

Becky’s head snapped up. She shrugged. “Got lost for a minute. What?”

Marc pointed at the slug in the tent wall behind his head. “Is that yours?”

She nodded resignedly. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I flinched at all the noise, even though we have the plugs in our ears.”

“That makes you a frontline shooter.” Marc motioned them to reload. “If you’re in front of your team, you won’t hit any of them with a stray round.”

Becky vowed to always do that. She only wanted to hurt the enemy.

Marc got into the target position again and gestured. “Put the blindfolds on, one at a time. You’re following my sounds. Becky goes first. Everyone else, stay behind her.”

Outside the tent, Angela sent the witch in to be sure that no one was wounded. The teenagers weren’t like her girls, who were making fewer mistakes now that they had a couple months of training under their belts. It would take time for these kids to show that progress. In the meantime, Marc would pass on important details that might save their lives when things went crazy.

The kids knew what was coming. With their gifts, she wouldn’t have been able to keep their roles from them, so she’d told them shortly after they’d chosen Charlie as their team leader. Despite the youth and inexperience, all four of these teenagers were going to play vital roles in her plan and she would try to live with what came from it.

Angela went to the final canvas in the widely spaced row and tapped on the flap. The men inside were working on under the table projects that had to be in place when the majority of the other envelopes were opened.

“Hey, Boss.” Neil didn’t look up from the temperamental explosives he and Jeremy were packing for travel. “Almost set. We’re on the last box.”

Angela stayed near the flap, aware of Shawn right outside. As her guard, he was ready to grab her

and pull her to safety if something went wrong with the boxes.

Neil tucked the plastic under the edge of the white block and slid the package into the anti-static bag.

Jeremy took the brick from there and placed it in the thickly padded box. Neither man spoke.

Angela left the warm tent, not wanting them to be the least bit rushed. She felt Shawn's relief and flashed him an annoyed glance.

Shawn shrugged, smiling wide enough to make his dimples show.

Angela threw her hands up in exasperation. *Men!*

Shawn chuckled, dropping back a bit as Jeremy and Neil came outside while their team loaded the boxes onto the truck that was also inside the wide tent. Angela hadn't wanted anyone to see what this team was working on. They'd done a great job of deflecting the curious, even Kevin, who had pretended he was searching for Cynthia.

Jeremy updated her. "It's a go—on all of it."

"All three locations?"

"Yes. Half a team is at each site to wait for the main group." Neil didn't like it that Angela had felt the need for three dens to keep their people safe. It implied two of those might be breached.

"We cleared them yesterday and last night." Jeremy smiled at her. "We're all set."

“Good. Seth is in charge of the move. You two will help him until it’s time to open your envelopes.”

Both men nodded, stifling questions and protests. She hadn’t responded to anyone who had tried to get more information out of her.

“In a few days you two will be here, with a lot on your minds. My plan is bigger and I see more. Follow your orders and things will all work out in the end.”

“Can you swear that?” Neil knew it was connected to Samantha or they wouldn’t be getting this warning. “Can you swear we’ll be with her again?”

“Yes, so long as everyone does their job.” Angela didn’t flinch at the new guilt layer. She had to have people like Samantha on the front lines, even if it cost their lives.

Zack had been observing as she visited with each tent; he now had the answers to most of his questions. “I’m heading out.”

Angela nodded. She’d let him figure it out for himself and he had. He wasn’t the only one being kept out of the main loop with a secret job. Most of the fighters wouldn’t like knowing Zack was wiring explosives into all three of the dens that she’d chosen. Zack and his team had already been busy since Marc returned and their days were only going to get longer.

He comes. Beware.

Sam paused in the middle of twirling cold spaghetti onto her fork. She'd been enjoying the warmth of Dog curled on top of her boots, but that comfort was gone. She glanced around slowly, feeling an icy chill that screamed for attention.

Who? she asked warily. Samantha hadn't been communicating with that voice inside. She wasn't sure of the rules or the etiquette.

The enemy.

Samantha found Angela at the next table and locked eyes with her, uncomfortable with the new gifts she'd been given. The visions were often ugly.

Angela scanned her and then left the mess without a word to anyone.

Samantha found Marc in her mind an instant later.

Marc took in the blurry images with dismay and also left without speaking.

Neither of them had told her to keep it quiet, so Samantha didn't try to stop Jennifer and others from reading the danger. Instead of the panic and confusion that could have ensued, all of the females and their mates looked at Samantha, waiting for orders. Even Cynthia.

Samantha felt the pride and the stress of making the choices, but the need to save whoever she could overwhelmed the other emotions. "He's here. She's right on the time. Go get your gear. While you're

alone, open the first envelope and get on it. The waiting is over.”

Neil and Jeremy appeared at her side an instant later.

Sam grinned sadly. “Wish there was time to get used to this.”

Neither man knew what to say.

Sam let them off the hook with a sharp tone and a big smile. “Snap to, Eagles!”

Neil opened his mouth, maybe to question her real meaning, and Sam stopped him. “No. Let’s go spend a few minutes in our tent while I pack.” She headed that way before either of them could argue.

The mess was deserted a minute later.

A few seconds after that, the camp sirens began to blare.

“There’s a storm coming. Take cover. I repeat, there’s a storm coming. Please proceed to your tent and open your first envelope. Camp will be rolled in according to the new directives. Be in your assigned place before evening mess. There is no backing out now, no backing down. We are going to reclaim our country and drive out the enemy. This is our land, our lives, and we will never surrender!”

The prerecorded message from Angela repeated continuously for an hour.

Conner stayed still and silent as the camp rushed around, chattering and appearing scared. He didn't care as much about that right now. He would do his part, and do it better than even Angela expected, but right now, he was focused on the couple lingering outside their tent. The pair didn't know they were being observed, and that was how Conner wanted it. His dad had said he would help, if Conner had the patience to wait for the right time. So he was contenting himself with watching from a distance. He'd excused his behavior by saying he went for a walk every morning to help strengthen the leg that had been shot.

Conner stopped breathing as a pair of Eagles came by, but they didn't notice him and he was able to resume his stalking. He had a basic pattern now (*find her, observe her and the guard that was always on her tent, then allow nature to take its course*) and he moved into the final part in a daze. This was the time when he could be easily caught. The excitement sent blood rushing into his loins.

Not far away, the vet spotted Conner hiding in the bushes and weeds, and scowled heavily at the scene, but he didn't stop. He had somewhere to be. Angela hadn't given him an envelope. He was supposed to be with the rest of the camp when it all went down, but the vet had other plans. If he was successful, Angela would be grateful enough to grant him favors later, when it mattered.

Conner fell to his knees, breathing in hurried gasps that he tried to muffle with the sleeve of his jacket. As he knelt there, trying to recover, movement drew his attention. He watched the vet disappear into the thicker part of the woods. *Did he see me?*

Conner hurriedly covered himself and got out of the area in case Chris told someone and Eagles came searching. The teenager didn't wonder why the vet was sneaking out of camp, too concerned with his own infractions.

Conner hurried to his tent to reread his first instructions, vaguely aware of birds fleeing the new noises and small animals running for dens.

That'll be us shortly.

6

“Look.”

Sherman spotted the flock of upset birds that his right hand man had pointed out. “Finally!”

The mercenary team leader pulled a radio from his kit, aware that the other men with him were packing their gear in quick, eager motions. They were always relieved when the waiting was over.

Sherman clicked the mike in the code they'd chosen for this mission, breaking the static with calculated pauses of communication. If Safe Haven figured out what they were doing, they would switch to a different format. Sherman didn't think they would need to. He and his team had performed

this particular invasion many times. It always worked. All they'd been waiting for was a sign that Safe Haven was on the move. Command knew they wouldn't stay out in the open for the fight. In the confusion of relocating so many people, Sherman and his team would have an opportunity to grab a few members of leadership.

Sherman didn't wait for a response. He slipped the radio onto the tool belt around his lean hips and began packing up his gear. They would be on their way within the hour. Dressed as Eagles, they wouldn't be stopped.

Chapter Four BK5
Do Your Duty!

1

“**W**e’re almost there, sir.” The pilot hadn’t expected an answer, but he couldn’t stop a quick glance at his passenger. Jonathan had never transported anyone as deadly. The Butcher even appeared dangerous while sleeping. The pilot didn’t repeat himself. The stories about Major Donner implied he was always alert.

The pilot checked his gauges, adjusting a bit for the stiff winds. He glanced through his left window, spotting one of the hundreds of battlefields that the descendants had left in their wake. The ground was charred, gaping, and even gone in some places.

The pilot looked to the right and found Major Donner sitting there, staring at him. “Fuck me!”

The Major grinned coolly. “I might, if you don’t pull up. Now.”

The pilot jerked hard on the stick; the plane missed the looted water tower by a foot.

“You’ll do.” Major Donner yawned. “How long?”

The pilot swallowed his guts. “Five minutes, sir.”

“Fine. Circle twice, then bring this bird down exactly where I tell you to.”

“Yes, sir.”

The landscape was harsh and ugly in the morning glare, matching Major Donner’s countenance. His scars, crooked nose, and missing tooth were a warning of how dangerous he was, much like the land below. Only the smartest would survive here, or those with descendants watching out for them. Major Donner didn’t plan to underestimate his prey. The powers that be had reached desperation in their fight to capture the Safe Haven descendants. They’d finally sent in the best.

Donner had cleaned out several pockets of their kind since the war, including one in Washington State that had earned him top-level security clearance. He’d spent the last four months in the north, cleaning. He was glad to be under American military rule again. The Canadians had been extremely strict when it came to visits from foreigners. Considering that Major Donner and his team had been there to assassinate their slowly forming leadership council, it seemed wise on their part. It hadn’t mattered, of course, but Donner had respected the effort.

The United States government also had people in the south, though few of those had checked in recently. The Mexicans, led by a man called Sebastian, were fighting more aggressively than anyone had anticipated. Safe Haven’s hope had spread, but Major Donner was slotted to head there

as soon as he put out these flames. The Mexicans would have a couple more weeks to live and then Donner was supposed to lay waste to them all. At least, that's what Uncle Sam had planned. What Donner ended up doing wouldn't even be close, but the boss wouldn't know until it was too late.

“Damn.”

The pilot's shock was to be expected. The base below was destroyed. It was so bad that a tent city had been set up for the troops. Donner assumed the remaining buildings weren't safe, but he didn't care either way. The men now staring up at his plane with resentment would learn that he wasn't wasting any more time here than he had to. “Bring us down right there in the middle.”

The pilot didn't argue, despite the fact that some of the tents below would be damaged. He brought the heavy plane down with careful, light hands, then gave Major Donner a nod. “All clear. Wait for you?”

“No.” Donner grunted as he stood up. “I'll find my own way from here.”

The pilot waited until Major Donner was visible through the big window and then began to turn the plane around to reuse the same area he'd cleared with his landing. As he rolled by the shouting men, the pilot radioed base. “Package is delivered. No trouble. Headed in.”

The tent city was a disorderly clutter of canvas, equipment, and drunken, angry men. These were the

reserves from the western base, the men who had earned passes and been promised that they would never have to venture out into this hell. Unlike the soldiers who had died in this fight before them, these thousand men *wanted* to be underground. It showed in the bad tempers and nasty remarks that had already begun to cause physical confrontations.

Philips, the highest ranked man on site, didn't push them or try to take control. He had to sleep and without friends (he was working on that, but it was slow going), Philips was sure he'd wake up to feel a blade sliding across his throat if he tried to insist on anything. He'd told base that in his last dispatch, flatly refusing to do his job. They'd informed him that a new commander was being sent to relieve him. The Butcher was rumored to be one of the best mercenaries in the business, but Philips wasn't sure that one man could handle these unruly soldiers, let alone make them attack Safe Haven.

Frowning, Philips watched Major Donner strut to the clearly marked tent waiting for him and duck inside. Didn't the Major understand how upset these men were? They needed a sign of leadership.

Aware of all the resentful eyes on him, Philips limped into the tent behind his new boss.

"Welcome, Major Donner..." The man in front of him already intimidated Philips. "You have a full battalion of men to work with." The lackey looked around nervously when the imposing man didn't reply. "It's not much, I'm sure, compared to what you're used to, but it's all..."

“Stop.”

Philips fell silent immediately. He'd served a congressional representative before the war. He knew when to be offended and when to tolerate. This was neither of those. Major Donner was here to assume command and Philips wanted to stay close. With his limp, he wasn't good for much else beyond supervising personal comforts.

“Where's the leader of this base?”

“I believe I'm talking to him, sir.”

Major Donner sat down behind the ornate desk he was sure had once been in the hall of the base. It was a reception piece. Donner pulled a nearby pad of paper and pen closer, and wrote a short message. He held it out to his new lackey. “Take that to the *former* leader of these men. Make sure his group gets to read it. Report back.”

“Yes, sir.” Philips waited to be outside before scanning the small, tight script.

Only cowards go AWOL when it gets bloody. Remember your training and you may even come back alive.

Philips quickly handed the note to the man he thought of killing every day and quickly got out of the line of fire. It was a direct challenge that Sergeant Shilling wouldn't let pass.

“Get out here!”

“Come on, you bastard! No one calls me a coward!”

Major Donner came from his tent dressed in his usual hunting attire—kit on his back, rifle in his grip, pointed at the ground. The sight of those worn, well-fitting knives brought a tense silence to the small crowd. He was good with them.

Sergeant Shilling had brought a few friends, ten other angry men who thought they would shine while in charge. He stood in front of them with his arms crossed.

Donner raised a brow. “Well?”

Suddenly remembering that he’d called the Major out, Sergeant Shilling stepped forward. “Uh, call base and tell them we ain’t attacking those people. Tell them to come and get us!”

Major Donner didn’t respond to the demand or the cheering. He spent a few seconds evaluating positions, possible skills and reactions, then shrugged. “Maybe I will. First, you’ll listen to what I have to say and make a choice. Okay?”

Caught off guard by the lack of resistance, the Sergeant caved. “Yeah, we’ll listen, but it ain’t gonna matter. We wanna go back where it’s safe.”

Major Donner smiled sarcastically. “So do I, but I ain’t goin’ underground to be ordered out again the next time they pick a fight they can’t win.”

“You sayin’ we couldn’t beat those Safe Haven rent-a-cops?” a soldier from Shilling’s group asked cockily. “Cause that isn’t true.”

“That’s right, man! We choose not to.”

Major Donner kept his smile in place. “You don’t have to convince me. I’m telling you that men

who serve with me won't be going back to the base after the fight. Ever. We're going to...promote ourselves, to free contractors."

No one spoke, confused to hear that talk from someone with so much authority.

Major Donner waved toward the serene mountains. "That's where I'm going first. After I take over that camp, I will have supplies, livestock, and females, and maybe even a few powerful slaves to keep Uncle Sam off my ass."

Now there was complete shock, exactly what Donner needed in this uneasy moment. He looked to Philips "You with me? They plan to send you off to Mexico to be a lackey there. One way ticket, I hear."

Philips felt rage grow thicker in his heart. "Free contractor sounds good." His choice confirmed, Philips was surprised when other soldiers began giving their agreement. It was as if they'd followed his choice. Philips hid a frown. They were responding to the intimidating man next to him. Pretending he had their loyalty could get him killed and Philips wasn't going to let that happen. Not after everything he'd already suffered.

Sergeant Shilling felt his power slipping as men in his little group agreed with Philips. He snarled in defiance of the change in leadership. "This is my team! My men! We're not following you!"

The ten men came forward despite their true feelings, as Philips had known they would. He got

out of the line of fire, sure he was about to witness Donner's death.

Ready for the reaction that he'd provoked, Major Donner jerked his rifle upward and began firing.

Soldiers scattered, some reaching for weapons still in holsters, but the element of surprise gave victory to the lone man and the hot machine in his hand. The Butcher mowed down the entire group.

The nearest witnesses fled, while the rest observed in shock. None of them had ever seen a commanding officer do that before the war.

If he had wanted to, Donner could have wiped out nearly a hundred gaping lemmings. Instead, he deftly slung the rifle over his shoulder and headed toward the largest tent. "Is that the mess? I'm starved."

Philips waited for the other soldiers to attack the crazy man or at least protest, but the shifting, eager faces said it wasn't going to happen unless a spark was tossed.

Philips thought about it, but in the end, knowing his planned future tipped it in Major Donner's favor. Philips limped after their new boss, getting his notebook and pen out.

"Someone clean that up," Philips called over his shoulder, no longer worried about his orders not being followed. He stopped at the flap and looked back long enough to memorize the sight of his bitter enemy lying dead. "Leave that one there; let him rot."

Most of the men here knew how Shillings had killed Philips's son over a whore they'd found on a supply run. The order was obeyed without argument.

Major Donner ducked into the mess canvas and dropped his rifle and kit onto the front table. Behind the bare racks, a dirty, sullen cook was mixing something in a large bowl. The smell wasn't encouraging.

"We'll start on plans in a bit." Donner scanned the rest of the tent. "For now, no more calls to or from base. Tell them we're going quiet."

"Yes, sir, but won't they send a plane to find us after a while?"

"Yes."

"Do you know when?"

"We'll watch for it." When the plane came, Donner would either order it shot down or use it to secure his ride to the bunker for that attack. He hadn't made up his mind yet and he certainly wasn't going to let these unhappy soldiers know when it was coming so they could plot a mutiny around it.

Philips studied the handsewn patches and symbols on the Major's kit. It appeared that the Butcher had traveled the world during his career.

"I have." Major Donner faced the opened flap where half a dozen men were watching and listening.

Philips paled. "You're one of them!"

"How else did you expect to defeat an entire group of descendants? You guys didn't stand a

chance on your own.” Donner eyed them, making silent promises. “But I can’t kill them and take that mountain, not without all of you. Pass that on as well.”

Philips was sure the troops would feel better knowing the Major was powerful. All of them had dreaded fighting Safe Haven after witnessing the destruction here. Their egos had prevented them from saying it, but the reason for refusing to fight had been clear.

“That’s why I’m here.” Major Donner noted the empty dishes waiting for mess to be called for this side of tent city. “We’ll lose a bit—don’t doubt it, but more than half will survive if they follow my orders. That’s better odds than a bunker right now, yes?”

“Yes.” Philips knew that to be true. Survival rates below ground were at 35%. The government needed control of the land again if they were going to rebuild their evil empire. “We’ll get freedom after that? From you?”

Major Donner shrugged. “I’m the boss wherever I’m at and I like to have a wide space around me to roam. Any good man can stay with me and follow my lifestyle, or run for their tiny lives and stay out of my way. I couldn’t care less.”

Philips didn’t like all of it, but not answering to the government ever again was enough to start with. “I’m in.” Philips ignored the surprised sounds from those listening. “What do you need first?”

Major Donner grinned, brown eyes becoming solid black in his joy. “Hostages—as many as you

can find. Any age will do.” In the silence, Donner pinned the surly cook with a hard glare. “Get out.”

The boy didn’t waste any time leaving.

Donner finally began the part of this job that Philips was familiar with. “Send out a hunting team. There’s a small farm ten clicks due north. Bring back everything they find—alive. Then call them all together right here. I have things to say.” Donner took a map from his jacket and unrolled it. “There are two underground ammo dumps, here and here.” He pointed as Philips came forward to hold one side. “We’ll scavenge what we can and then head here.” He pointed again. “This is a stockpile zone and has likely gone untouched. We’ll be in the black on weapons by this time tomorrow.”

The men were glad to discover the three areas were close by. It wasn’t hard for Philips to gather three teams to head out on those missions. They were quickly out of sight as he returned to Donner’s side, waiting for the next orders.

2

Donner stood on a stack of crates a short time later, rifle in hand as he addressed the troops. The rumors had circled the battalion. There was no need for a bullhorn; the soldiers all strained to hear and passed it back.

Donner knew how to set up a takeover. “Fresh meat for lunch!”

The cheer from that was loud enough to send birds flying and bring spies to their feet with notebooks in hand.

“Fresh ammo for breakfast!”

Another cheer came, this one nearly as enthusiastic. Bullets were always needed.

“I have promotions, awards, and a pass to give.”

Quiet fell as confusion took over.

Donner stared at them. “I’ll let forty of you compete for the bunker pass. Who wants to go? See me privately.”

The soldiers muttered, wondering what the chore was.

Donner filled in the blanks with a simple sentence. “Snatch and grab. I only expect a few of the forty to survive.”

There were more mutters as Donner finished his address by pointing to a small dust cloud in the distance. “That’s our food rolling in. Pick the best three cooks and get them into the mess. Steaks for dinner, as rare as you want them.”

He hopped down from the crates and strode toward the coming team and their cargo. The four cows running behind the vehicle didn’t look as good as they had when he’d flown over, but Donner didn’t worry over it. The fresh meat would be enough. He would gain their loyalty through the benefits he delivered and when it all finally came together, south wasn’t the direction they would go. He’d decided on west, toward the skeleton crew of protection the government now had. It was the

perfect time to take over the world. He just needed a few Safe Haven descendants to help him control things. *After that, nothing will stand in my way.*

3

“What are you doing?”

Shawn didn’t answer as he handed Angela a kit and a heavier coat. He pointed toward the truck nearby that was already running.

Angela kept a hand on her gun as she went to check it out. Around her, the camp was emptying and there wasn’t much for her to do. She’d been planning to grab a shower and a snack.

Angela opened the passenger door to find an envelope, a small purple flower, and a grinning driver. “What’s going on?”

Greg clicked his mike once, looking pointedly at the message.

Angela tore open the white envelope to read the small card.

I’m naked, I’m alone, and I have chocolate. Get in the truck.

Angela flushed bright red, sensing her driver was aware of what it said. Greg was a great blocker. His thoughts were currently full of gun names, serial numbers, and the various gear for those weapons—something she’d never bothered to memorize. He knew it would distract her.

Angela read the note again.

Then she got in the truck.

Dog scanned the camp as Angela left. She had moved the weaker members of her pack, leaving the strength and the magic here. For Dog, who caught too many of their thoughts and often sought out Charlie's one track mind for relief, the change was stressful. All the people here were worrying over the future; so were the ants. Dog was trying to work with them, mostly to keep busy, but their thoughts were full of anger at the sacrifice being asked of them. They also held loathing for the soldiers. Their communications were buzzing across the wolf's brain.

Dog padded into the middle of the struggling ants, sending a shout for silence.

The ants around him froze for an instant, then advanced aggressively.

Do it!

The insects weren't used to challenging things larger than they were and Dog had no trouble shaking them off. He tried to be careful not to step on them, as well, but that was a lost cause as the ants attacked.

Bite too!

The ants began nipping him, using their bodies to shove. The wolf allowed them to tip him over, completing the run.

Dog stayed down. He would have to do the wet work. The ants would make an excellent distraction

so he would be able to get close to his target. That would have to be enough, because these insects weren't fighters, despite their size and numbers. He was relieved that Angela was only counting on the decoy.

Watching from nearby, Shawn joined Dog, kneeling down as the ants backed up. "Things okay?"

Dog liked Shawn almost as much as Dale. He pushed up to nuzzle Shawn's arm for a scratch.

Shawn did it carefully, still not used to the big animal's human qualities.

Yeah, right there!

Shawn rubbed a little harder, snickering a bit when the wolf began reacting to the urge to roll over and had to stop himself.

Dog got up after a minute, sitting on his haunches to view the Eagle he often walked their perimeter with. *I feel your unhappiness.*

Shawn's false cheer fell as the wolf glanced toward the couple walking by. Charlie and Tracy were laughing and whispering, arms around each other. Both males watching them sighed heavily.

"Yeah." Shawn forced his attention back to Dog. "But it's not our turn yet, you know?"

Dog huffed, rising. *That's not my problem.*

It is mine. Shawn was happy for the couples here, but loneliness was hard. "I need to do rounds. Come along?"

Dog padded to Shawn's heel. *Yes. She gave the ants training lessons today to keep them ready for tomorrow.*

“So it will happen then?”

Dog nodded his huge head. *Oh yes. Nothing can stop it now except fate. I believe this was her plan all along.*

That didn't comfort Shawn, but with nothing to do now except wait, he tried to put it from his mind. He and Dog would walk a while, then come back and surprise Charlie and Tracy.

Dog caught the thought and blew out an amused snort. *I'll jump through the window if you want.*

Shawn chuckled. “That'll kill their mood.”

The pair made it to the rear of the newly shrunken camp, noting Jennifer and Kyle going into the training tent that was empty of people but not gear.

Dog looked up. *We'll make it a twofer.*

5

“Can I ask you something? You won't like it.”

Kyle nodded, bracing a bit. “Sure.”

“If I were doing a...hit, what's the most important thing to remember?”

Kyle's expression became thunderous.

Jennifer was glad she'd waited until they were alone in the training tent.

“Are you?”

Jennifer nodded quickly. Angela knew they would have to release some details to their trainers. “More than one.”

Kyle was instantly terrified. Fear stopped the anger and replaced it with concern. “At the same time?”

Jennifer shrugged. “That wasn’t revealed.”

Kyle spun toward the small hay room to take his rage out on the punching bag. He already knew yelling at her or Angela wouldn’t change anything.

Jennifer winced when Kyle swung and blood splattered the bottom of the bag. He hit again, harder, and she forced herself to stay there and watch. She would be facing much worse soon.

Kyle seemed to catch the thought, but before he could begin ranting, Jennifer shoved into his darkening mind. *Come kiss me twice and then teach me. I’d like to survive this.*

Kyle was stunned with pain and desire, brain and body in opposition. “What?”

Jennifer leaned against the hay wall. “We’re alone and you keep thinking about kissing me. I said you can.”

Kyle was being led away from the danger line and he knew it; he allowed it because there was no other choice. Angela would have her way and maybe Jennifer’s life.

Jennifer paled a bit, but nodded. “If that’s what it takes, I’ll give it willingly, Reece. Wouldn’t you?”

“It should be me! You’re a kid, not a killer!”

Jennifer stiffened. “I’m neither of those things, though I’ve been both. Now, I’m a mother and there isn’t a hell I won’t smother myself in to save my daughter.” She went to their setup and started firing at multiple targets as quickly as she could.

Kyle watched without speaking, still running through ways to stop this even though he knew there wasn’t any. Angela’s warning was ringing in his ears as Jennifer rolled and fired smoothly. She was mad at him.

“Yeah, a little.” She reloaded. “You expect me to sit by quietly when you risk your life, but I don’t get the same respect.”

“It’s not what I want for you. I know it’s your life, your choice. I still don’t want it.”

“Then we have a problem, Kyle.” Jennifer resumed her starting position. “If I survive this run, there will be others.”

If you stay...

Jennifer went through her run again.

Kyle felt her teetering on the edge of a choice, though he wasn’t sure exactly what decision she was stewing over.

“Us. I either have your support or I don’t.”

“I’m afraid you’ll be killed. Or hurt.”

“So am I.” Jennifer was unhappy with her coverage of the two-dozen targets scattered around the tent. “But I’m more afraid of hiding and letting everyone else die for me. That’s not the person I am, not after everything I’ve been through.”

Kyle often forgot how much older she was mentally because of the hells she'd suffered. All he could see was a beautiful kid about to give up her life for nothing. In his mind, there wasn't anything Jennifer could do to help or hinder this war—at least not any more than Angela's male fighters.

Kyle was unprepared for her reaction to the thought.

Jennifer shoved her gun into the holster and faced him with her hands on her hips. “Do you think she's doing this so women can be full Eagles? Or to prove we already are? Do you think she would ever send females to the front lines if it wasn't needed?!”

Kyle hadn't been able to come up with a reason. “Then why?”

“Numbers.” Jennifer placated him, knowing the biggest answer was one he couldn't handle yet. “She gave us the numbers, Kyle. Our enemy expects to face an army of men. If that happens, we'll lose our fighters, our protectors. Safe Haven will be exposed to every group of evil that comes by and it would take decades for those who survive to be old enough for any adult chore, like reproduction.” Jennifer stared toward where her daughter was currently napping in Angela's tent, with a guard standing inside the open flap. “By using women and kids to lure those soldiers into traps, she will have saved us now and for the future.”

Kyle accepted that answer because he knew it was the only one he was going to get. Jennifer had made up her mind. She was doing this.

“Yes, I am.” She motioned to the target. “But I have to do better. My aim is great, but I have to hit them faster. Help me?”

Kyle nodded, reluctantly moving to the training position. “You have one issue that I see.”

Jennifer gave him a go-ahead gesture.

Kyle forced the rest of it from his mind. She was doing it. He would help her. “Change the order of your targets. When you face a group, there’s a simple rule to remember. Packing, Possible, Everyone else.”

Jennifer raised a brow. “I don’t get it.”

Kyle explained. “Those with a weapon come first—Packing. Those who might have a weapon out of sight are second—Possible. Everyone else comes last.”

Jennifer stared at the targets, quickly picking out those details before firing in the new order.

It flowed better from the first shot. She grinned as she finished four seconds faster. “Sweet!”

Kyle chuckled at her happiness. *How about that kiss now?*

Jennifer moved straight to his side and slid into his tensing arms. “Here you go.”

Dog lunged through the tent flap and slammed into the side of the hay wall, knocking both of them to the ground.

Jennifer landed on top of Kyle.

His sexy chuckle gave her the courage to lean down and deliver the promised kiss.

Dog and Shawn stared in resignation at the couple.

Shawn shook his head. “That’s not the reaction we got from the camper couple.”

Dog snorted. *I know, right? We got to see cheek out of that one!*

Chapter Five BK5
Bingo Time

1

“**A**re you finished yet?”

Tonya turned around to say she’d get out of the camper when she was done and found Kenn standing against the closed door.

Tonya noted that stare and those smirking lips, and shook her head. “No way. I’ve got work to do.”

Kenn flipped the lock on the door, aware of Shawn and Dog making rounds. “Come here.”

Tonya giggled as Kenn chased her around the narrow area, both ending up in a stall without the water running, but still making steam rise. If the boss could steal down time, so could they.

Outside the camper, a shadow padded by. Dog hadn’t planned to bother Kenn, but the Marine thinking he had things covered by simply locking the door offended the wolf. He slipped under the camper and came out at the rear, hearing the couple right above him. He slowly used his nose to raise the latch on the rear door to the camper, the one they used during waste removal times. Dog nosed the door open.

“Hey!”

“Who did that?!”

“Close the door!”

The wolf casually padded away among the whistles and catcalls. There was more than a cheek showing now.

2

Quinn watched the island woman thoughtfully. He was her shadow this evening, but he didn't expect trouble from her. On the road, Kendle had done well at not hurting anyone except for the enemy and herself. Quinn thought the same would apply here.

Kendle stopped on the top of the cliff she'd just climbed for the fourth time. Working on skills and toughening muscles, she was also wearing out her body so she could sleep. Angela had said she would be given orders when the time came, but waiting sucked.

Kendle glanced down and spotted Quinn again. He wasn't trying to hide from her. She recognized it as a broken rule. “Do you want something?”

Quinn easily joined her on the rise, following her lead when she sat down with her legs swinging off the edge. “Thought you might like to talk, now that you've worked some of it out.”

Kendle frowned. “About what?”

“Your choice.”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

Kendle waited for him to leave. When he didn't, she couldn't find the energy to be upset. That was why she'd chosen to climb up here in the first place.

Quinn was aware of her strength, and of the scratches and bruises that she'd added to the dozens she already wore. He liked a woman who could take a little pain. He didn't want to see it, of course, but a strong woman was much better than a whiner.

"Really?" Kendle chuckled bitterly. "I'm a screamer."

Quinn knew she meant that in an awful way and slowly patted her hand.

He didn't speak or linger in the touch and Kendle allowed it. Comfort was something many of these people had tried to give her, but their words were all wrong. Silence was better.

Quinn felt her accept his presence and wiped a mental brow. He hadn't been sure that she would want him around, but he'd found himself thinking about her a lot since they'd returned.

"Why?"

"No idea." Quinn shrugged, not upset that she was getting his thoughts so clearly. "That's why I'm here."

Kendle realized he was subtly scenting her and shuddered.

"Are you cold?"

Kendle nodded to cover the reaction. She needed a release and whether he knew it or not, Quinn was giving off subtle vibes of the same.

Quinn dropped his jacket over her shoulders without touching her, and felt her lean toward him curiously. He asked himself the question quickly, as all men did in this situation.

Do I want her?

Sure.

For what?

Not sure.

Not good. Tell her no.

It was a method of self-preservation that men had learned too well for it to be removed by even something as traumatic as a war. If they thought for one second that they might fall in love, they refused to make a physical connection until the woman had proven herself worthy. In Quinn's case, he already knew Kendle was and it scared him to find himself sitting here, breaking rules for a possible future with a stranger. He had Marc's left side. Very few things would be worth risking that. Quinn stood up. "Excuse me."

Kendle let him go. She wasn't confused, just not interested enough to chase Quinn despite the slight attraction. Anyone could give her sex. No one could give her Marc.

3

"Do you think they're okay?"

Marc handed Angela a cup of hot chocolate and then dropped a second blanket over her shoulders. They were in a small cave, with a fire in the

doorway and bedrolls behind it. They'd made love and napped, but when darkness came, she'd tensed again. "Are you ready to go?"

Angela was, but she also wanted the time alone with Marc. She shook her head, smiling softly. "Not yet."

Marc settled down next to her and wrapped up under the same blankets. For a little while, it had just been him and Angie again. He'd loved it.

"Me too." She sipped her hot drink and leaned against his warmth. The fire crackled soothingly as she snickered. "Bet Shawn's got his hands full."

Marc sighed. She couldn't leave it there. He would have to take her back to camp.

Angela realized she was spoiling the last of their free time and surrendered to the pressure from the witch. "Let's stay until everyone's asleep."

"Really?"

"Sure. We'll sneak in when it's quiet and not have to listen to Shawn's rant."

Marc leaned down and kissed her.

His hand slid around to rest on her stomach and Angela felt the tears rise. It wasn't fair. She had Marc and leadership, and now the baby, but in the end, she would only have one of those things and she knew it. Trying hard to fight the depression, Angela cuddled in Marc's big arms and stopped fighting the drowse.

Marc felt her sag and shifted so that she was under his arm. He covered her up again and sat there holding her as the night slowly passed. In his

fantasies, this was most of what they did. Sex with her was as amazing as he'd thought it would be, but when it all came down, Marc knew these stolen moments were what would hold them through. He ran a hand over her soft curls. "We'll find a way."

Inside, his voice was warning that might not be possible, but Marc didn't listen. Even if they lost the war and had to run, at least they would be together.

All around Lookout Mountain, couples were coming to the same realizations of what was important to them.

4

Evening mess started out quiet.

Shawn was the unofficial leader until Angela returned; he walked through the eating people with a sense of pride. It had been hectic, but he'd done it. Marc and Angie had been gone since noon. It was now six o'clock and the camp was still here and alive. He'd done well.

"Just took these messages." Kevin handed Shawn a small stack of notes. He quickly headed back to the radio, not looking toward the mess. Cynthia was there, along with the new group of male fans who were hoping for a shot with her. Kevin wasn't going to be drawn into that mix. He hadn't made a choice yet.

Shawn was busy reading.

We'll be back later. Hold it together.

“Ah, man!” More hours of listening to the men nag and the women brag. Great.

The next note was longer and so was the third. They were instructions for two people here. Shawn followed Kevin to the radio.

“Hey, boss says—”

“I took the message, recall it?”

Shawn snorted and went the other way. Kevin’s tone had been joking, but Shawn knew the stress was finally getting to him. The more Cynthia ignored him, the worse it would get.

Shawn rotated, intending to head for the mess, and drew up in surprise. Kendle was next to him with her hand out.

“I believe that’s mine.”

Shawn handed it over with a friendly glance. “Welcome to Safe Haven.”

“I’ve been here for almost a week.” She didn’t open the envelope. She’d already pulled the words from his mind.

“Yeah, but now you’re one of us.” Shawn motioned at the note. “She put you to work. You checked out. You can stay.”

Kendle walked away without responding. The chances of her staying here and trying to build a life while watching Marc and Angela were zero. She was doing her part for her country, but after that, who knew? Maybe she’d find her way back to Pitcairn. A few of the residents there might have survived and once she burnt down Kraft Manor, she might even be able to sleep.

Shawn got in line at the mess, hoping the coffee was fresh... He noticed silence from the corner. The rest of the fighters were eating and chatting, but that far corner held three people and a tense silence that drew Shawn. He joined them. "Is there a problem?"

Kenn and Tonya were on one side, with Adrian on the other. All three of them were scowling so hard that Shawn could see steam coming from their noses.

"That's your call." Adrian dropped his spoon into the soup. "But I'd keep an eye on the table next to us. There's been a lot of BS over there."

Shawn found that crowded table and sent a nasty glower over the team of rookies. He spoke to Adrian, but he didn't look away from the now listening men and women. "What type of BS?"

"It seems there's a bet on how many soldiers they'll kill. Maybe they've forgotten those men are American survivors who are being forced to fight for the government."

Shawn agreed with both sides, as did the mess of fighters now listening. He waited for more, aware that Adrian had set him up to hand out a punishment.

"Guess how they're proving it?" Kenn was angry enough to start a brawl.

Shawn suddenly didn't want to know.

"They plan to chop off thumbs and count them after it's all over."

Disgust and disapproval filled the area; heads at that table went down.

Shawn knew exactly what to do, thanks to Marc mentioning this yesterday. “If Marc hears that, he’ll rip you all apart with his bare hands.” Shawn normally would have let it go with that. Instead, he drilled in his point, like Angela would have. “I’m going to tell him. I won’t ruin his night with it when he hits the gates, but before you wake up in the morning, he’ll know.”

“And then so will Angie.” Tonya shook her head in mock sympathy. “Bet you guys just lost your runs.”

The people were properly scolded now, with heads down and shame coating them. It was a good correction moment for Shawn, who had never thought to see himself in this position. Shawn went to refill his mug as the table of rookies slowly cleared out, with each of them going in different directions.

Conversations resumed, most of them about what had just happened. Shawn was relieved that the fighters seemed satisfied with how he had handled the trouble. Maybe this leadership stuff wasn’t quite as bad as he’d thought.

Shawn swept the distance, where the faint lights from the Indian camps around them twinkled like a thousand fireflies. It was beautiful.

“Does he look smug to you?” Greg looked at Billy. They were at one of the smaller tables, opposite Adrian’s corner. The center table was empty.

“Later.” Billy nodded. “Check out the hounds.”

Greg casually glanced over to see Cynthia was surrounded again. The single men in camp were hounding her constantly, trying to take Kevin’s place. Cynthia appeared annoyed but not angry. The six men of various levels sitting with her were arguing and getting louder. In another minute or so, Shawn would have to intervene.

Billy returned to his food. “Will it be any of those?”

“Doubt it.” Greg let out a belch. “Who do you have odds on?”

Billy scanned the mess and settled on an Eagle who had guard duty over Charlie and Tracy, though they didn’t know it. “That one.”

Greg saw who it was and chuckled. “He’s on my list. I also thought about...” Greg used Eagle code to send the name.

Billy hadn’t considered that and spent a moment running it through. “Interesting. Are we betting?”

“Sure.” Greg leered. “What are you willing to lose to me?”

The wording drew Billy’s fun side out and he lowered his voice. “If you’re right, I’ll trade you my next watch duty over the showers.”

“That’s good!”

All the males liked that post. They had too much honor to peep through steamy windows, but the sight of women in towels running for their tents was always welcome.

“And if you’re wrong?”

Greg made sure his prize was of equal value.
“I’ll take your next shift over Bingo time.”

“Done!” Billy laughed, surprised at the good feel here despite their leader being out of camp. He’d thought Adrian might have to take charge.

“You son of a...!”

Shawn went flying by them an instant later to break up the fight at Cynthia’s table.

Greg sighed. “Should we help?”

Billy shrugged. “I think he’s got it covered.”

The sound of punching, wrestling, and debris scattering rang through the mess; the two senior Eagles calmly finished their meal.

It took Shawn a few minutes to get the males sent on chores or to their tents; he stormed through the mess, glowering at the other Hounds. Most of the guards had rushed in to help, but Shawn had still taken several swings and he wasn’t feeling like life was quite as beautiful anymore.

As he stomped by their table, Billy and Greg exchanged small grins and began cleaning up their garbage. Everyone wanted the job until it belonged to them.

5

The campfire group was still gathering in the evening and it was no different now, despite so many of their people not being here. A dozen fighters were on buckets and stools close to the

center flames, with another dozen standing or sitting on the cold ground around them. The fire popped occasionally and low laughter rang out, lending to the impression that things were calm. Everyone knew it was an illusion, but the need for one last night of peace was prevalent. Even the camps of soldiers were enjoying their last hours.

The only ones who weren't relaxing were teams who'd been sent out early, and the Mexicans Angela had ordered to patrol their southern perimeter so they could get to their own land quickly if the government sent troops there. It had also been to keep them away from Safe Haven, to please Marc.

As the night wound down, couples began leaving the fire for an hour of intimacy before sleep; their noises rolled across the camps, bringing jealousy and amusement.

Shawn felt neither of those things now. He had a black eye from breaking up the fight in the mess. He also had a pounding headache from dealing with the female fighters who had a constant stream of questions.

“Um, if I need to pee, can I go in my blind?”

“They wear green and we wear black. That's how I can tell who the enemy is, right?”

“I think my compass is broken. The needle only points north.”

Shawn had realized he was being hazed. Shawn shook his head at Li Sing, who'd stayed behind to cook for the fighters. Shawn couldn't take any more coffee. He needed a couple of Tums.

“Shawn to the QZ.”

Shawn groaned, but went that way without dragging his feet. He observed Daryl trailing Charlie and Tracy from the campfire. After the teenager and his chosen female participated in this war, there wouldn't be a need to guard them anymore. Charlie was about to become a man.

The gate guard met him. “We have a group coming up, say they're answering a call from the alpha.”

Shawn viewed the five fighters with interest. All the Eagles had been told to expect more descendants for the fight, but few had come or been found. All five of the men carried kits and were loaded with weapons. Shawn counted ten handguns, seven knives, and even two crossbows—something Safe Haven didn't have many of. These men had come prepared to battle.

“Let them in.” Shawn pointed. “QZ for now. Tell Angela as soon as she gets back. Someone get a tent up for them.”

“The alpha is not here?” one of the men questioned. He was taller, darker, and meaner looking than the others. “We will go to her.”

Shawn glared at them coolly. “You'll wait here for her.”

All of the new men bristled at the tone, but their leader wisely didn't argue. “We will wait where you tell us. We will keep our gear.”

Shawn motioned to where a QZ tent was already being erected. “Stay in the taped-off area. She’ll be back later tonight.”

Vario led his group toward the large tent.

Shawn liked it when the fighters casually took over the setup, freeing the Safe Haven people. Those guards stepped back and observed their newest companions.

Unlike the Safe Haven descendants, these men used their gifts openly. It was fascinating to watch them communicate and get the canvas erected without knowing how. It was clear they’d never dealt with such large tents, but the men had it up correctly only a few minutes after starting. Shawn thought they’d taken the images from the minds of those watching.

“They did.” Adrian had joined Shawn as the show began and stayed quiet, reading their new members.

“Are they okay?”

“That’s not my call anymore.” Adrian sighed. “But I’d tell you if I thought letting them in was a mistake.”

Shawn took that as a good sign. He turned to ask Adrian when he was going to explain everything and found the man gone. He spotted him ducking into the other QZ tent and assumed Adrian planned to stay close to the new people just in case.

Shawn headed for the last of his rounds through the tents; he flushed as he passed the first one and heard what was taking place inside. He hurriedly

moved on, but it seemed like every canvas he strolled by had a couple inside reminding themselves of why they were a couple. For the guards, it was torture.

Shawn stomped through, seeing Tracy's flap was open and the couple was in separate bedrolls. The same was true of Kyle and Jennifer, though that flap was only halfway open. Shawn didn't care enough over the minor violation to react. He made it to the showers without hearing any other couples. He stepped into the dark camper to relieve himself and drew up short at the sight of Dog and Star. The canines were sniffing and growling, set to mate.

"Dog!"

The wolf looked up guiltily. *Sorry. I broke.*

Shawn stormed back out, slamming the door. "It's everywhere!"

Chapter Six BK5
Past Emotions
Labor Day Morning
September 2nd

1

Kendle glared at the large woman in front of her, arms crossing over her chest. “I’m not a cook.”

Linnny glared, holding out the basket of freshly harvested green beans. “We work for everyone, not ourselves. You wanna eat, do it.”

Kendle snatched the basket and stomped to the benches, where a small group of women and men were cutting and cleaning the harvest. She didn’t mind helping, but the people here were treating her as if she had tried to come between Marc and his all-perfect Angela.

“Wasn’t even that good of a kiss.” The memory of it flashed in her mind and she immediately stiffened. It was easy enough to shake off as the talking and laughter floated around her, but at night that was a harder act to maintain. She’d gotten used to sleeping by Marc, seeing him, smelling him, hearing him. No one else was like that to her, no matter how much she tried to develop an interest. If she could find someone to tolerate, then these people would understand she wasn’t going to come

between their leaders and she would be accepted. Until then, her time here would be filled with careful steps and long nights.

Kendle listened to the wind blow. She caught a chill and shivered. She hadn't felt the bite of a sharp wind in a long time. All those months on the island had conditioned her to warm breezes and loving sunlight. Here, it was bitter wind with a sharp edge and a few hours of grudging sun. The layer of grit was an ugly haze that never left.

Kendle found herself wishing for Luke. *He'd know how to make me feel better.*

"Hey, Kendle. You doing okay?"

Kendle gave a grunt and nod to Missi as she walked by. Missi, almost as old and respected as Hilda, was her adjustment partner. They were sharing a tent, eating together, and doing chores on the same shift. Kendle hated it. Having a babysitter sucked. The only thing worse would be having no one to talk to at all.

Angela stopped by Kendle, hating the woman despite her promise to try being friends. She slid onto the bench across from the castaway with a polite tone. "How's the harvesting work going?"

"Fine." Kendle glared. "What do you need?"

Quick study. Long-winded requests and small talk weren't big right now with any of the Eagles. "I have some jobs. No food involved."

"Like what?" Kendle was feeling snarky. "Test for landmines?"

Angela gave it right back with a straight face. “We haven’t put those down yet.”

Kendle recognized the joke, but didn’t respond. She’d felt how dangerous Angela could be, but she also felt how loved her rival was. She had to be careful.

“Not really.” Angela stared at the woman. “I hate liars. So do the Eagles. If you want a life here, the truth matters.”

Kendle had heard it already, but she wasn’t about to argue with the leader of such a massive operation. When she’d heard a woman ran things, she’d been sure the female was cover for a group of men, but Angela really was in charge. Resisting, especially among this tension, wasn’t wise.

“Kendle Roberts!” Angela snapped the brunette out of her thoughts. “If I want you pissed off or happy or out of here, I’ll make it happen. When I tell you I need the truth, no matter what it is, give it to me!”

Kendle withered under the tone. She had no way to challenge, only heartache and a fierce need to...

Angela understood more than she wanted to as Kendle’s ugly thoughts flooded with the past. Some of it matched what Marc had said, but some of it didn’t. Kendle had lied to him about what happened after she landed. If she won the battle for her life, and survived her illness, the final truth would still have to be conquered.

“You said you have work, remember?” Kendle was sure the leader was reading her thoughts. She

hated how it felt here, how unprotected her secrets were.

“In time, you’ll be able to close those doors. Safe Haven heals those—”

“Save it!”

Angela calmly counted to ten and went on as if she wasn’t annoyed. “One of the jobs I have will fill that need a bit, but you have to do the others first, in order.”

“I have no control.” Kendle sighed. “It’s why he said I had to stay here.”

Angela locked eyes with Kendle, forcing away the guilt. “If you do these things faithfully for me, I promise to find a cure, or kill you, when it’s all over.”

“Swear it!” Kendle’s eyes blazed. “*He* wouldn’t! I wanted to die, but he wouldn’t give me that either!” Realizing she was yelling, Kendle dropped the volume, but her desperate tone didn’t change. “Swear it!”

Angela placed a hand on Kendle’s wrist. “My word, as leader of this camp and as a woman, I’ll help you or kill you.”

“Okay.” Kendle slid her arm free. “But don’t touch me and act like we’re friends or that you care. You be honest too. You’d like me dead and gone.”

Right at that moment, it wasn’t true. Angela’s sympathy came forward. “No, I pity you for the pain, and I respect you for surviving what you’ve gone through. I also envy you a bit, for being free to pick and choose.” Angela stood up. “There are a lot

of good men here. If I was single, I'd be sniffin' through, see who happens to be my match. There's a lot of that going on."

Kendle rolled her eyes. She was tired of hearing *fate brought us together* or *it was love at first bullet wound*. "I don't believe in two soul mates. Mine is gone and he isn't coming back, so get off me!" Kendle shoved away from the table and disappeared into the crowd.

Angela, content that her words had done the trick, was subtly scanning those around them. Most of the men weren't interested yet and it wasn't because of Kendle's fading scars. The men were waiting to discover if Marc did have any interest and Angela needed them to get over that. Kendle was fair game. Marc was taken.

Marc put her with Adrian.

Angela didn't answer her witch.

Marc waved as she walked by the parking area. "I need approval for a driving change."

Angela detoured his way.

The paper held one sentence. Angela looked at the trio of stony-faced men waiting for her answer. "You three? Alone in one truck to save gas?" Angela choked back a snide remark. "How does that work?"

From the silence, she assumed it wouldn't. The uneasy calm since Marc's return hadn't mattered. Differences would be settled along the way.

"Fine." Angela approved the vehicle change with her initials, noting Candy climbing into Theo's

truck. Her long purple curl declared her rebellious nature. That might be an interesting mix at some point. “You work it out, but don’t miss a step of this plan or you’ll kill us all for your egos.”

Angela left their sputtered protests. She knew they’d get the job done. She just wasn’t looking forward to the aftermath.

Marc was still chuckling as he opened the rear passenger door of their loaded truck. He couldn’t wait to be alone with the two people he hated most in the world.

Walking behind him, Adrian and Kenn didn’t share Marc’s good mood. He was bound to make the trip rough for them, but leaving the camp, the war, completely in Angela’s hands, was unnerving. Kenn didn’t think she could do it and Adrian now had doubts. This was more chaotic, more complex, than her time during his gunshot absence. It was also exactly what he’d been training her for.

Marc slid into the seat, dropping his kit onto the floorboard.

When he leaned his head against the cold leather and crossed his arms over his chest impatiently, Adrian grimaced. Marc was their boss now. He intended to act like one.

Swallowing a chunk of pride, Adrian closed Marc’s door as if he were a rookie and went to the front passenger seat. The next week would be hell, but he would get through it without breaking.

Already scanning thoughts for problems, Marc yawned behind him. “In less than a week, you’ll

know that was never possible. All men break under me. I've never lost."

Adrian said nothing, but Kenn glared in the mirror from his driver's seat. "Maybe we'll kill you and dump your body."

"Be careful," Marc warned with an icy tone. "That might be *my* plan."

Both men in the front grimaced this time. They'd already considered the fact that they might not return from this run.

Kenn waved at Tonya as he drove through the gate, but Adrian and Marc stayed unresponsive as people shouted words of encouragement. The one person they might have lingered for had said goodbye last night. For Marc, it had been magical. For Adrian, it had been torture. She'd come with three guards who had refused to leave the tent even after he'd asked them to. Angela hadn't insisted. The guards were under orders and no one would disobey them without a direct command to blame. The Eagles would rather suffer an injury than disappoint Marc. It was a reversal of roles that Adrian was struggling to accept.

"Where to?" Kenn listened to Safe Haven's gate close behind them. The camps around theirs were doing the same thing—sending teams out on missions they might not return from—and the truck didn't draw much attention until people saw Marc. Then the shouts of support for the Ghost grew into chants that rubbed fresh salt into Adrian's mental wounds.

“Due west.” Marc grinned, enjoying Adrian’s jealousy.

“Where are we going first?” Adrian pressed tonelessly. Angela’s plan was just that, Angela’s, and she was only releasing a small piece of information on it to each group. Everyone assumed that was to keep the plans safe or to flush out other traitors, but Adrian knew she didn’t trust him specifically. Angela hadn’t even told Marc, so Adrian wouldn’t be able to pull it from his thoughts. He hadn’t told her how to handle any of this, but he was suddenly sure that she could. His concern for her ability faded. He’d spent a lot of time on the notes in his books and Angela was incredibly gifted in planning strategy. He had faith.

“Head for the base we destroyed.” Marc ignored Kenn’s rough driving as he took his anger out on the vehicle. Adrian was the only one it would hurt and Marc was fine with that. “We’re not doing recon like we’ve led the camp to believe.”

Adrian frowned. “I assumed we’re snipers.”

“We’re delivering gear and escorting spies. Once they’re in the enemy camp, we’ll do other things.”

“Spies? Who?” Kenn scowled. “It’s Tonya, isn’t it? Damn Angela!”

Marc grinned again. This had to be annoying for both men. “We don’t open the next envelope until we pick up our spies.”

“You don’t know who she’s sending in?”

“Nope.” Marc enjoyed Kenn’s incredulous tone. “Didn’t ask.”

Adrian made a mental note to discover what Marc was hiding. The man might not know the entire plan, but he had enough clues to make an educated guess and Adrian wanted to hear it.

“You won’t.” Marc’s happy tone changed to cold warning. “And no, even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you shit.”

“Why?” Kenn believed Adrian could be trusted with the plan because it meant Angela’s survival too.

“Because he’ll do anything he can to make sure we lose.” Loathing dripped from Marc’s words. “Adrian isn’t one of the good guys.” Marc stared at Adrian in his mirror. “Are you?”

It had to end sometime. Adrian was almost crippled by fear as he realized what Marc was about to do to him.

“Are you?!”

Adrian sighed, gaze going to the gate, to the camp of followers he’d built. “No.”

Kenn gaped at his idol.

Adrian stared out the window, unable to handle the guilt. “I never was.”

Marc gloated. “It would be easiest to just give up. You can’t stop him from finding out.”

Adrian stiffened at the light prying in his mind.

Marc grinned. “You’ll tell me *all* your secrets by the time this mission is over. I’ll know everything.”

Confused by Adrian's silence, Kenn kept his mouth shut. *What's going on?*

"All in good time," Marc quoted the overused phrase cheerfully. "I'm sleeping now. Wake me in four hours for a route change."

When there was no answer, Marc sent a stiff wave of anger through the truck. "I said, wake me in four hours!"

Two snotty "Yes, sirs," came.

Marc chuckled again. "Yep. Gonna be a short trip into an ugly nightmare. Hang onto your faith, because that's part of what I came for, Kenn. By the time this is all over, you'll be on my side or also out of my way." Marc laughed at Adrian. "*You'll probably be dead.*"

Kenn and Adrian exchanged glances that said they would fight together. The threatening vibes coming from Marc implied it might be needed.

Marc chuckled.

Adrian leaned his head against the seat. He now suspected sleep would be hard to come by later. The new doctor had pronounced him fine, if he quit smoking, but Adrian knew he hadn't recovered fully from his mild heart episode. He certainly didn't feel as strong as he'd been, but that didn't mean an old dog didn't have more tricks up his sleeve. Thoughts defiant, Adrian started to doze.

A short time later, Marc also appeared to be snoozing. His body was slack, moving with the rhythm of the truck, but the muscle in his jaw

twitched sporadically, giving him away to their driver. Kenn was sure Marc was working on their mission. It was the same feel as their times together before the war. It comforted Kenn a bit that he wasn't the main name on Marc's shit list these days, but he didn't want that top slot to belong to Adrian either. Adrian clearly had things to answer for, but what would happen afterwards? If Adrian wasn't in charge of Safe Haven, it wasn't the same and everyone felt it. Kenn's goal was to put his boss back in power, by any means, fair or foul.

"That's why you're here, with me." Marc didn't open his eyes. "So I can watch you."

Adrian didn't stir.

Kenn took the moment to point out something he was hoping that Marc had forgotten about. "The bunker wants him alive. We lose an advantage without Adrian."

Marc didn't answer.

Kenn felt it was a bad idea to continue along those lines. He switched to his other curiosity. "What did you mean? When you said he'd do anything to make us lose?"

Both of them heard the slight shift against the leather seat as Adrian tensed, proving his alertness.

Marc settled into a more comfortable position as the truck bounced down the narrow mountain path. "If you answer that, if you confess, there won't be any need for me to break you while he watches."

Adrian thought about it. He could be free of a lifetime of secrets in a few hours.

Marc didn't want it to be so easy, but he didn't goad Adrian into getting defensive and clamming up. If Adrian laid it all out for them without a fight, Marc would simply take his pound of flesh another way.

"What happens to me afterwards?"

"That's up to Angie, so I'd say you'll live," Marc responded bitterly. "But I wouldn't count on friends. In fact, she may not be able to save you when the camp finds out who you were and what you've done."

"What the hell are you holding over him?" Kenn was frustrated. "Either spit it out or shut up."

Marc looked at Adrian in the mirror. "Well?"

"I knew it was coming." Adrian sighed. The first envelope he'd opened had held one order. *Tell Marc anything he wants to know. The time has come to face your many sins.*

"She gave you an order." Marc had just pulled it from Adrian's thoughts. Respect for his mate went up.

Adrian braced, unable to refuse two alpha commands. "I knew about the descendants, the cover-up, the plan to destroy society if the story came out—all of it."

"What?" Kenn was almost too shocked to drive. The truck slowed as it rolled over the narrow stone path between huge trees and lethal drops.

"I'm on the *other* team. Marc put the pieces together right after he started sleeping with your ex."

“I don’t understand,” Kenn stopped the truck and turned in the seat so he could look at them both.

Marc waited, pushing out that powerful mental order for obedience.

Adrian couldn’t fight it. He’d never felt anything that strong. *Even Angela wouldn’t be able to resist...*

“I can’t be distracted by thoughts of her like you can.” Marc stopped using his gift. “Last chance to do this on your own.”

“Fine!” Adrian glowered at Kenn, his most loyal man. “I work for the bunker. I’m on *their* payroll.”

Kenn’s stunned silence filled the truck. His mind flitted from crime, to trial, to judgment, to sentencing. Adrian had helped kill people. The camp wouldn’t forgive him. If this was true, Adrian had committed treason. He was an infiltrator, a liar, a...a traitor!

“He gets it!” Marc let his sarcastic anger fly. “Yes, the man we’ve all looked to for protection of our lives and our future, is actually one of those who want to take it all away from us.”

“How is? That can’t...” Kenn tried to form sentences, questions, hoping Adrian could defend himself. “Why would... When?”

“He’s a sleeper, Kenn. He was supposed to deliver all havens he found into government hands. I doubt he’s ever been out of communication with someone in the remaining military.”

“But why would he...*you* do that?”

“It’s more like why didn’t I hand over this camp or let everyone die.” Adrian’s guts tightened into a knot. “The answer is currently sending the next team out behind us. I can feel her wishing you’d drive faster and get Marc back to her side. It makes me sick.”

Marc laughed at his rival’s pain. It was great to be home.

Kenn wasn’t amused. “I don’t understand.”

Adrian’s anger fled, replaced with misery. “I...changed. I got distracted. I...”

“He fell for that nice ass and those sweet titties, same as we did,” Marc supplied cheerfully. “She screwed up his plans but wouldn’t screw him! Talk about irony.”

Kenn grunted. Angela was definitely a distraction, but it didn’t explain enough. “You mean you weren’t on the other team?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Kenn scowled. “Which is it?”

“Because I love her, you idiot! I couldn’t have her if I handed this camp over. I knew that as soon as she signed up for my army.”

“And César?” Marc prompted, temper waking. He didn’t know all the details. He’d only been sure that Adrian wasn’t a good guy.

“He was on the bunker’s list for destroying NORAD.”

“And your notebooks, where you wrote that you only found out right after the war?”

“Lies for anyone who found it. I was trying to find a way to reveal the magic back then.” Adrian shrugged. “It worked out well for both sides.”

Marc leaned forward and growled in Adrian’s ear. “She almost died!”

Adrian shrugged again. “That’s the price we pay for defying those who want authority over us. She knew what she signed up for. I carry no guilt for bringing her into *my* Eagles.”

Marc leaned back. “No, you shouldn’t. It’s the one honestly good thing you’ve done for her.”

“I’ve done a lot for her and the rest of the camp.” Adrian gestured angrily. “Don’t get too high on that soapbox. You’d all be dead without me.”

“No, we’d be dead without the people who’ve worked under you. Samantha’s warnings, Hilda’s influence, Kyle’s recons. You’ve had everyone else doing the work, but now, that’s over. You’ll bleed and sweat like the rest of us.”

“I always bleed and sweat with my men!”

Marc was delighted to have already gotten under Adrian’s skin. “Settle in. It’s gonna be a fun ride.”

Kenn scowled when Adrian stopped defending himself. He eased on the gas to get the truck rolling. Kenn had already heard enough of the story to need the rest of it.

Marc was ecstatic at Kenn’s mental choice. “I thought it would take you longer.”

Kenn grunted. “I’m an asshole. I’m not stupid.”

Marc snickered. "I've always thought you were a bit of both."

Silence fell again.

Marc returned to dozing, mood growing steadily better despite the miles once again coming between him and Angela. He'd waited months to expose Adrian. Now that the time was here, doing it in front of Kenn made it perfect.

2

Angela stopped by Kyle's truck on her rounds. He was putting his first load of assigned gear into the vehicle. While she waited for him to finish, she scanned his fares. These females knew their roles so well that they were ready half an hour early. They wouldn't let her or the camp down.

"We're set." Kyle waved to the small group of people lingering near his dark colored van. "We leave in thirty."

Some people began climbing onboard as Kyle joined his boss.

Angela held out the instruction packet. "Make sure it's too late to turn around before you handle it."

"I will." Kyle watched Jennifer and three other shadows vanish into the fog outside the gate. She wasn't going with him. The worry burning in Kyle's gut was constant. "The first time I think about a traitor they'll know, if they're descendants."

“I’m going to give you an advantage over that little girl and all the others, Reece. Are you ready to appreciate it?”

Kyle gave a curt nod, not sure if he should brace for more pain.

“Distraction, denial and defiance. The three Ds are how you handle us, like with the camp. And when that doesn’t work, you block.”

Kyle’s brows drew together. “She can get through any of my walls.”

“Why does everyone always try a wall and nothing else?” Angela sighed. “Hum an annoying song she would know or an old commercial. Say poems or tell yourself jokes. As long as it blocks her, it works.”

“That’ll make thinking hard.” He slid his gloves on.

Angela stared at his scars, his badges. She lingered on the teeth marks. *I put those there, when death almost took me.* “Do you need to think about this one, Reece?”

Kyle tensed for an instant, and then his shoulders drooped. “No. It’s what has to happen now.”

“I agree.” Angela swung around to stop a rookie hand from grabbing the bandana on her belt.

Kip grinned up at her, hoping for a pass since he’d gotten close enough to touch the red cloth. He wanted to shout in victory, but his throat was still stinging despite the pain pill.

“Fail. If you want on a mission team, you’ll be perfect.”

The playboy dentist stormed off.

Angela turned back to Kyle, who was ready to get going now that he had a defense to use. “It won’t work if they gang up on you. And if they decide to do that, my advice is to surrender. You are no match for a descendant.”

Kyle left with the ugly thought in his mind. He still didn’t doubt it was true; he just loathed not being able to deny it.

Angela had four more teams to see off and that list would restart tomorrow. This was a timed plan to get her people into the right areas before it was all mined. She wouldn’t miss a departure because of emotions.

Angela went to the gate on the other end of the quickly emptying camp, where Neil, Jeremy, and their teams were loading up. Few of them wanted to leave at all and the mood was somber.

Angela surveyed the small pile of weapons and gear they had stacked by the rear of their vehicles. The men were currently saying quick goodbyes between carrying loads over. It was sweet to witness these hardened men caring for their women. The fact that some of their women were becoming as hard as they were didn’t matter. They understood their females still needed the emotional care that they always had. In battle, that would sometimes become an issue, but it was unavoidable. Women

would learn to handle it the same as any other fighter had to.

“We’re ready in five,” Neil was checking the kits against what was on his list. Samantha was in the van, and he and Jeremy were staying busy. Kyle would watch over her. They would all do their part.

Angela handed Jeremy the envelope. “Call if you need more men.”

“We will.” Neil frowned. Her hair was going gray faster than Marc could fill her up on energy. What would she do while he was gone again?

“I’ll take what I need, the same as Samantha will.”

Neil held his tongue. He hated not knowing what was going on, what the plan was. He also hated the tension in Safe Haven and the camps that surrounded theirs. The relief to be away for a while was warring with the need to stay close.

“You guys ready?”

The call came from Stanley, their radioman and medic, newly appointed to both positions.

Neither Neil nor Jeremy answered.

Stanley frowned. “I’m sorry I’m late. I had to pack.”

The kit Stanley dropped, as his proof, was clumsily packed and bulging.

Jeremy waved at the neat pile he was loading. “Make yours look like these and hurry up.”

Stanley stumbled forward.

The XO gave his CO an exasperated gesture.

Neil shrugged.

The two men went back to work. Stanley was hopeless no matter what he did. Someone had to take him along for this ride. If he were left in camp, they might not have one to return to.

All around them, Safe Haven was having a busy morning. People were coming and going with serious intent. Neil stopped for a moment to watch the small circus nearest to them. The livestock truck was being loaded for the trip deeper into the mountains. Everyone assumed Angela had found them a cave and this would start getting people used to living inside it. By the time the battle made it to Safe Haven's front gate, she would have them all ready to shelter-in-place. Neil thought that theory was likely. Once the camp was bunkered-in, it would be hard for the government to get to them without blowing up the entire ridge of cliffs, but if they did that, they would end up killing the descendants they seemed to need so badly. Angela was obviously relying on that to protect their mountain shelter. So was everyone else. If the government came in with planes and bombs, Safe Haven would be buried alive.

Chapter Seven BK5
Stirring The Pot

1

Seth slammed his kit into the truck, punching the door when it refused to close. He hadn't gotten to see Becky this morning and now she was gone. Overnight, the babies and younger children had been safely transferred into the mountain den that Angela had chosen. He'd returned an hour ago, gotten his packet from the boss lady, and then discovered Becky had left with Jennifer. How would he get to her when they lost if he didn't know where she would be?

"Faith matters now, Seth." Angela was behind him. "We can do this."

"I'll follow my orders!" Seth slung the next kit into the seat.

"Seth."

He didn't want to look at her. He loved Angela as much as any of the men did, and he was still as loyal to Adrian as he could tolerate, but he'd give it all up for Becky and the baby. The feel of being about to lose it over the edge was too clear to ignore.

"There's only one thing that can ruin my plan, Seth. Please don't be the one to get us all killed."

Seth spun around, but Angela had vanished, leaving him to wonder if she'd been there at all. Her gifts were stronger than the other descendants. Seth thought Becky could reach that level of power in time. *If she lives.*

Seth turned around as gunfire rang out. Eagles flooded the area, but he stayed by the vehicle. He wasn't only in charge of loading gear. He was protecting it. Angela wasn't taking chances that their food would be poisoned or their supplies would be sabotaged. She also had sentries on the mess, the supply trucks, the water, and guards on those guards. Cameras were in place, with a constant crew viewing them, and the mood was one of oppression. Seth missed the freedom, the love they'd shared under Adrian. So did the rest of the camp. "After we win, we'll have it again. The fences will go away and the bubble will return."

That magical sight hadn't come into view in a while. None of the love and hope that had filled it before existed now. Angela refused to reveal the black shroud hanging over them.

Seth scanned the truck, the area around it, the guards on it, before hitting his radio. "We're set. Five minutes."

Seth's hard tone was quickly answered. The entire team was tired, but none as much as Seth. They all knew to tiptoe around him. Many of his men had also returned to discover their loved one already gone, so it was a feeling they understood.

They were ready to rip someone apart. It almost didn't matter who.

“You're stirring the pot kinda' hard aren't you?”

“Yes,” Angela agreed, not looking at Cynthia. The reporter had refused to leave her side for the fighting. Angela had switched her with Heather, who she'd originally chosen to be her personal assistant for today. Heather was one of the click sisters who'd recently signed up to be on the next rookie female team. Kyle would now handle that issue during his ride. “Ready for your stir, Cynthia?”

The reporter swallowed nervously. “Yes. Get it over with.”

Angela chuckled without amusement. “What's the rush? Kevin already left.”

Cynthia froze, furious. “You told me he would be here when you were finished with rounds!”

Angela moved toward the next parking area. “I'm not finished, am I? You wanted me to talk to Hilda and then doctor had a favor to ask about his sons, and then the vet needed...”

“I get your point!”

“Good. When the van leaves, be on it. I don't need a babysitter. I need my teams to do their jobs!”

Before Cynthia could protest, Angela stopped by the main gate and took a minute to view the area around them. The chilly mountains were serene, stunning even, but something wasn't right. She was monitoring a number of people in their camps, but

it wasn't enough. That old feeling of cold dread swarmed over her. Angela hit the button on her radio. "Full alert. Lock us down!"

Cynthia spun round, searching for the threat, and found them surrounded by Angela's personal guards. Chosen by Marc, the seven men stood shoulder to shoulder.

Cynthia unthinkingly climbed up on the nearest man to see better. Her training said to get up high to get eyes on the threat.

"Be still!" Cynthia snapped when Jax started to fight with her, thinking she was the problem. "I need to see."

Angela motioned Jax to pull her down.

He did it carefully, not about to risk hurting the reporter. All the pregnant women were being handled with care.

Camp alarms started blaring to their right; the guards moved with Angela as she ran that way. Marc's orders were protection, not detaining, but the men running along considered grabbing her and keeping her in the middle, before quickly discarding the notion. Considering it was the only comfort they were allowed.

Angela darted between the running people and scaled a water tanker. She tossed herself down, hip taking the tolerable pain. She quickly slid forward on her elbows and knees like a reptile.

Her guards came up in almost identical movements as shots rang out.

Angela racked the slide on the 9mm that Marc had insisted she switch to. In a real fight, her 6 shooter wasn't enough. She wasn't a crack shot anymore, but she could hit what she aimed at as long as she used both hands.

Angela peered over the edge to find a large herd of mountain goats invading their walls. Many of the dingy white animals had been trampled in the rush down the cliff where Safe Haven was camped. The rest were bunched painfully against the fenced walls. Wood groaned, creaking under the strain. More shots rang out as those on watch tried to alleviate the pressure. Aiming at the crippled goats closest to the fence, the sentries were creating a barrier of bodies, as they'd been taught.

Angela was pleased. She stood up, looking around at the guards to let them know everything was okay. Her protection also rose.

Hiss! Thud!

The Eagle on Angela's right fell off the side of the tanker.

"Sniper!" Jax grabbed Angela. He slid her off the tanker and into Daryl's waiting arms, then rolled onto his back and hit his radio. "I saw a flash, Shawn! He's at my noon, high!"

There was about three minutes of tense silence and then one muffled shot rang out.

Everyone waited.

"Sniper's dead. I'm hit. Switch out."

Angela headed for the gate before Jax could roll from the top of the tanker. He had to run to catch up.

Angela met Shawn, healing him before he was in physical reach. The handgun wound wasn't serious, but she needed all of them at full health. The witch, who wanted this baby as much as she did, would let her know when it became a problem.

After he was healed, Angela went to help the Eagles gather the meat that had delivered itself to their front door. She couldn't do anything for Jack. He'd been dead before hitting the ground. Two of the camp's older women would come to direct handling of the body. They were getting too good at the routine.

“Can I talk to you?”

Angela slung her end of a carcass onto the cart, scowling. “I'm not. So don't ask.”

“You're getting good men killed!”

Daryl's accusation wasn't new, but Angela felt the guilt threaten to overwhelm her. She shoved it aside to embrace the anger that she was working so hard to bring out in everyone else. “I'm trying to save an entire country, our future. I can't do that from a covered tent!”

Daryl opened his mouth to make a different suggestion and Angela swung, punching him in the mouth hard enough to make him stumble and almost fall. “I'm sorry, Daryl. I am, but so help me if I hear one word about abandoning these people to save myself, I will shoot you dead.”

The top Eagle clamped his lips shut. She never bluffed.

Angela went back to helping collect the food.

Those who witnessed the ugly moment took some of it with them and wished even more that Adrian was leading them again.

2

“I can’t believe she sent us out alone.” Conner held the bushes for Jennifer to pass.

None of the other team members spoke. They were scared and not in the mood to talk. Conner was excited. It was annoying.

Jennifer and Becky stayed together, with Conner in the front and Charlie in the rear. The guns in their holsters felt surreal. Even the stunted, abnormal ground was harsher than they were used to. Their roles were just as unreal, though all of them had agreed without hesitation. It wasn’t something they had ever thought they’d be sent out to do.

“This is the place.” Conner held up his map. “She said to split up when we reach the bridge.”

Charlie and Becky took the path to the right, while Conner went to the left. Jennifer hesitated, torn. She didn’t know Conner.

A hand pulled on her shoulder.

Jennifer flinched, swinging.

Conner landed on his ass next to her.

Charlie and Becky laughed. For an instant, the bubble around them became visible. Peace settled over the kids as they remembered they could protect themselves now.

Then reality returned. The two inexperienced teams headed down the mountain in silence.

Behind them, two trained teams also came down the same paths and then split up to watch out for the teenagers. The adult teams would split off on their own runs later, but for the beginning of their trek at least, the kids were safer than they thought.

3

“Ladies, I’d like to have your attention for a moment.” Chatter in the van stopped as Kyle cleared his throat. “Each of you has an envelope. Inside is a sheet of paper and another envelope. When I tell you, open it and read the contents of the paper only. Look at the time and date before opening the second set of instructions. Anyone who opens the wrong one, even by accident, will get left right here.”

Doubting him a little, the females waited impatiently for permission.

“Open part one.”

Tearing sounds filled the van; an awkward tension followed.

Kyle brought them to a halt and put the van in park. He tore opened his own instructions before

looking at the passengers. “Mine says to tell you that I have the same message.”

“What message?” Heather was confused. “My paper is blank.”

Every head turned toward the former accountant, expressions shocked, angry.

Kyle filled her in. “Our papers say: One person has no instructions. Ask her why she betrayed us.”

Heather gasped, face flooding with fear.

Tonya grabbed the woman’s arms so Tracy could take the weapons from her belt.

“Start talking!” Crista had her gun ready. “I’ll kill you.”

Heather held up a hand. “Please, wait.”

As Tracy and Tonya stepped back, Crista looked to Kyle for guidance.

Sensing this might be the only distracted moment she would get, Heather swiftly pulled a secondary gun from her boot. She snatched the first person she could reach and held the hostage in front of her. “Drive or I’ll shoot her!”

Kyle shook his head, hands out of sight and moving, body set to react. “Don’t make me do this. Face a trial.”

Heather laughed harshly. “And let those idiots who—”

Kyle spun around and fired over the seat with one quick round.

The bullet slammed into Heather’s shoulder, knocking her backward to free Tonya.

Before Heather could do more than cry out, Tonya flipped around and began punching the woman in her bloody shoulder.

Kyle calmly got the van rolling as the other women hurried over to help subdue their traitor.

4

“You all right in here?”

Peggy shoved hair out of her face and hefted the babbling baby higher onto her hip. “No. Part A is done. Here’s part B: The drafts need to be sealed in the kid’s area, the entrance gets closed one hour after sunset, and yes, that means you’re staying here.” She handed Doug an envelope before he could argue and walked away while he was reading, passing the baby to one of the other den mothers. She knew what his instructions were. He wouldn’t like it, but he was needed.

“Did you do this?!”

“No.”

“Who did this?!”

Peggy rounded on him, furious. “You did, ya big lug! And you had the nerve to lecture me!”

Doug suspected the knowledge she had, but his pride wouldn’t let it go. “Why?”

“You’re sick! You lied!” Peggy entered the bathing area and got busy giving orders to the lingering males who were eyeing the kids as if they were hungry jackals. “Set those buffalos more evenly, hang a thicker curtain, put down the

adhesive mats...” Peggy made a sharp gesture. “Write!”

Doug fumbled his notebook and pen into hand as she repeated the current list, then kept going.

“After the mats, get guards in every area. Make sure happy, loyal men are on shift tonight.”

“I know how to set up security, woman!” Doug snapped, face red.

“Then why do you have to write it down like a rookie?”

Doug paused, mouth moving with thoughts he couldn’t voice.

She made that sharp gesture again. “Get moving, man!”

Doug stomped off, muttering.

Peggy went to the rear of the cave. She stopped to consult her notebook, but when everyone was out of sight or not paying attention, she ducked behind a pile of boulders that appeared to be a dead end. She lifted a rough grey curtain and went under it before she was spotted.

The sentry she bumped into in the darkness put a steady hand on her arm. “Careful there, sexy.”

Peggy snorted, but didn’t snap at the man. They were all tense and using whatever outlet they could find. “Is everything ready?”

Tommy nodded. He loved being in the loop. As a member of Jeff’s team, he always was. “Right on schedule.”

“And the C4?”

“In place. When you call it, I’ll demolish it.”

“It needs to be deeper.”

Troy frowned, leaning on his shovel. “Don’t understand what we’re doing anyway.”

Zack sank his own spade into the pile of loose dirt and wiped at his neck with his already soaked bandana. “Following orders.”

Troy waved at the envelope sticking from Zack’s shirt pocket. “None of this makes any sense.”

“What do you mean *none of it*?” Zack asked, controlling his tone. Since being named fifth in command, he was learning to control himself in many ways. This was one of those moments where he acted cool even though he was furious that so many people couldn’t follow orders even when it mattered.

“Dig this, dump that, shoot here. None of it makes any sense is what I’m sayin’.”

“You opened all of them?”

“Well, sure.” Troy grinned. “Got curious.”

Zack blew out a resigned breath. *Another one. Great.* “Curiosity killed the cat, ya know?”

Troy snorted, starting to realize he was in trouble. “I’m a man. Takes more than that to kill me.”

“I can do it with two sentences.”

Troy sputtered. “I didn’t tell anyone what was in ‘em.”

Zack motioned to the guard on the detail, not responding.

Troy knew what was coming next. He tossed the shovel into the hole they'd been digging. "Don't do this. You need me. I didn't tell anyone!"

Kevin was the team leader of their current guards. He glared at Troy. He knew what the problem was without being told. "Did you break boss's orders?"

Troy's face and protests fell as Zack jerked a thumb. "Here are the two sentences: You are off this mission and out of the Eagles, per Angela's punishment. Pack up and head out."

Troy stormed away from the half dug hole without fighting. Once those words were said, they couldn't be taken back.

Kevin waved one of his team over to take the angry man's place, glad Angela had given him this chore. He couldn't stand another day of listening to static on the radio and watching Cynthia prepare for war. Angela had known he needed a break of some kind and put him on this low security guard detail. "We'll round him up at closing time tonight." It was what he'd been told to say.

Zack watched Troy huff through the working people and women, hoping for someone to get in his way. No one was dumb enough to. "He won't go back to camp."

Kevin wasn't sure on that. Angela had made it clear that any Eagle who opened their envelope

early would be below camp members in rank, but Troy had a woman in Safe Haven.

Zack was thinking about that too. “She refuses to settle down, keeps screwing around. He won’t go back to camp without an intervention.”

“I’ll let the boss know.” Kevin was already drawing on his new mental ability to do so. This was one of those times where the things Angela was teaching them came in handy. He’d been honoring his vow to work hard at it. “She says bring him in tonight, willing or not.”

Zack understood Kevin’s reluctance, but only nodded. Letting their unhappy shooters join the enemy wasn’t something they could allow and Zack wouldn’t, not even for a pal. That was the problem with secrecy done openly. Many people simply weren’t trustworthy on their own, even to follow simple directions. As a result, curiosity was rearranging their ranks again.

Zack thought it was for the best. The camps around theirs held people who were better for those positions; failure to follow orders was going to put them there. The funniest thing was that Zack didn’t think Angela had manipulated it or looked into the future to determine cause and effect on this one. Fate was at work here. Zack took his comfort from that.

“Four hours are up.” Kenn knew Adrian wasn’t going to make the call.

Marc stretched and yawned before consulting his map. “Location?”

“Right where she said to be.”

“Good. I used one of the cabins up here. We’ll spend the night.”

Neither man argued. The tension in the truck, even with Marc sleeping, had been thick. They were curious as to why he was calling it a day so early, but neither Kenn nor Adrian asked. If he wanted them to rest, they were fine with that.

Marc didn’t let out a laugh at their thoughts, but his grin let them know they were wrong. They didn’t realize how badly until they stepped into the over-decorated hunting cabin and found stack after stack of boxes and equipment. Most of the labels were military, but one pile along the wall said *made in China*. Another was marked for aid distribution, and yet another claimed to be fragile computer parts.

In the far corner, an Indian with a single braid and no feathers was sitting against the wall with two guns. A decaying Christmas tree with fading packages sat to his right.

Kenn and Adrian waited for Marc, but let their eyes do the walking.

Marc pulled the truck to the rear of the building, where Grendin and Natoli covered it with netted camouflage tarps that blended perfectly with the

dead and dying trees. He entered the cabin through the rear door, nodding at the rookie on duty.

The Indian holstered his guns and left through the rear door.

“Junit and his father will keep watch.”

Adrian moved toward the nearest box to read the instruction sheet taped to the top.

Kenn did the same with the box from China.

Marc went to the table where a small stack of envelopes and papers were laid out and weighed down with rocks and heavy knickknacks. “Meeting in ten minutes. Try to find the box she had them label with a big biohazard symbol.”

Frowning, Adrian began searching in the front, while Kenn searched the rear.

“When you find it, leave it there. We just need to keep track of that hot potato for now.”

“Over here.” Kenn motioned to a crate under a shelf. It was thick and wrapped in multiple layers of plastic.

“Good. These top sheets are arranged according to danger level. Not sure why, but I imagine we’ll find out as we go.” Marc shuffled through the stack of papers, heart clenching at the script. He missed Angie.

“So do I!” Adrian sighed. “Stop thinking about her.”

Marc glared angrily. He sometimes forgot that Adrian had many of the same gifts that he did. It was natural that the blond would be monitoring his thoughts, but Marc didn’t like it. “Let’s get started.”

Other dangerous men entered the cabin and came to the table.

Kenn and Adrian kept their protests to themselves as Natoli and Atolius also joined them.

Junit closed the door after they came in, rifle now in hand for standing watch outside.

Marc handed each of them a single sheet of paper. “When you get that done, come grab the next one. She has five levels to this plan and all of them are deadly. As you can see, the outer ring starts with complete chaos. She isn’t giving them any merciful hits.”

“Good.” Natoli smiled coolly. “They don’t deserve any.”

“Those are Americans we’re about to wipe out!” Kenn glowered. “Show some respect!”

Sebastian grinned, puffing on his cigar to get it lit. “Touchy soldier boys, eh?”

“Yeah.” Marc snickered. “We’re definitely that. Maybe I need to set some rules of conduct. First, shut up. Listen to the boss. Second, shut up.”

Instant waves of anger and challenge filled the room.

Marc approved. “As I was saying, the first rings are bad. The second ring is a jungle of det-cord and mines. From there, it gets ugly.”

“What are me and my boys doing?” Half of the Mexican army, under Sebastian, had fought alongside the Ghost while coming over 40.

“Same as the rest of this team. We’re handing out supplies, escorting people around, keeping lines of communication open.”

Now all of them were scowling.

“Sounds like rookie work.”

Marc ignored Kenn’s comment. “As soon as the first sheet is finished, come to me for the next. We work in three man teams.”

Kenn was almost foaming with eagerness to rip it apart. “There’s no way six men can supply an entire battlefield.”

“Nope.” Marc smiled. “But those plans are above your pay grade.”

Kenn snapped his mouth shut, glowering instead.

“At dawn, the Safe Haven group will head out. We’ll make it back here around dusk and then Natoli’s group will go. We’ll alternate shifts like that to cover all the areas in our zone twice a day. During those times, we will pick up and deliver supplies, messages, give advice and help, and anything else that’s needed.”

Now that they were getting solid details, Adrian and Kenn began fitting them into their own ideas of what Angela might have planned.

“First runs are crates A-D. No other letters. Get on it.”

The men finished going over the small bits Marc was willing to tell them, planning the best routes to the camps on the map he laid out. Seeing how many

there were again threw into doubt being able to reach them all, but this time, Kenn waited to see what the plan was.

Marc handed out a second sheet of paper. “That’s the allotted supplies for each location on the inner ring. *Do not* go over that.”

“Ten thousand rounds of ammunition, two week’s food and water, three hundred assorted handguns, one hundred machetes.” Kenn looked around at the room, the boxes. “We don’t have all that.”

“This is one of seven stockpiles that we have in this area.” Marc skimmed the notes. “As we empty each one, we’ll move to the next.”

“Ahead of incoming?”

Marc shrugged at Adrian’s question. “That’s what I assume, but we’ll find out together.”

“She sounds like a gem, this woman of yours.” Sebastian grinned again. “I am most anxious to meet my brother’s obsession in the flesh.”

Three cold glares swung his way.

The Mexican blanched, held up a consoling hand.

Two of those heads dropped, accepting the silent apology. The third glared at him for a moment longer.

When Marc finally looked down at the next stack of papers, Sebastian was relieved in a way that he didn’t feel the need to question. Marc was the boss and that was that.

“We’re using standard Eagle code until they jam us up,” Marc answered one of Adrian’s questions before it rolled out of his mouth.

“Then field phones?”

“Yes. She already has the lines run.”

“When do we fall back to our camps?” Natoli needed to know. “We have people to care for.”

“When she gives the call.” Adrian was reading the single sheet on future plans that Marc was allowing them to view. “She’ll be contacting all of us at different times, getting updates.”

Natoli guessed from those words that Angela was also gifted, and felt better about a female in charge. Marc was one man Natoli wouldn’t ever want to cross. It was a comfort that the war was in the hands of someone who was like their Ghost.

Adrian growled. “She’s not like him! He’s like us!”

Marc’s laughter was more salt in Adrian’s wounds. The blond man stood up. “Are we done?”

“For now.” Marc was still chuckling. “You can have first shift, up high.”

Adrian left without slamming the door like he wanted to.

Marc glanced over to see Kenn wearing a confused expression. “Adrian thought he was the only gifted male in our camp, other than Charlie. A teenager isn’t a threat, but me, well…” Marc chuckled again. “I’m more than his match.”

Kenn thought about it. Weren’t there any other gifted males in Safe Haven? There was…Conner,

though a son wouldn't be viewed that way. And there was... "Damn."

Marc nodded, no longer smiling. "Kids, he can handle. Eagles and camp members, he's great with. Our kind? He's on the bottom rung with little power and a whole lot of mistakes to keep him there. It allowed him to overlook people."

Kenn wasn't sure if that was true, but the fact that he had to consider it sucked. The information coming from Marc made it worse.

Marc shrugged. "Sorry about that, but you've earned it the same as he has."

"What about you?" Kenn sneered. "You've done the same shit we have, just at different times."

Marc wasn't going to be drawn into that. "I'm not on trial here, Marine. You and your idol are. It's time to pay for your choices, your lies, and the deaths that came from it."

Kenn was shaking his head. "Name one person I killed who didn't deserve to die!"

"Your unborn son."

"You piece of..." Kenn came over the table.

Natoli and Sebastian got out of the way as quickly as they could.

Marc met him with a vicious head butt that knocked Kenn out. He slid to the floor in a quick movement that scattered papers and cups. Marc rubbed his forehead gingerly. "That's gonna hurt tomorrow, right?"

Natoli chuckled, while Sebastian grinned weakly. “Yes, my friend, but it is much quieter in here now.”

Marc sighed, now wishing he’d chosen to punch. The throbbing headache was already starting.

Take from one of them and it will heal you, the demon reminded.

Marc closed his lids, concentrating, and managed to bring the pain down to a level he could stand, without any help. Controlling pain was a skill that soldiers developed quickly.

Nice, the demon praised.

Marc didn’t respond as a punishment for almost being tricked into drawing when he didn’t need to.

The demon didn’t realize Marc was also monitoring him. It demon withdrew.

Marc looked over with the others as the rear door to the cabin opened. They’d left the jingle bells up, but Marc was already tired of the sound.

Adrian spotted Kenn and then the ugly welt coming up on Marc’s forehead. “Figures.” He stepped inside to pull Kenn’s big body onto one of the pallets along the wall. Once finished, he returned to his post outside, breathing heavily.

Marc leaned back, arms crossing. “You two should get sleep while you can.”

Natoli was honored to be on Marc’s war council. He had no problem taking the order.

Sebastian obeyed without showing any emotion at all. The two leaders crashed in their bedrolls at

opposite ends of the building and were soon snoring.

Chapter Eight BK5
Choices To Make

1

Samantha stood up as the van came to a halt. They'd been traveling for hours, all watching Heather for signs of aggression. And they'd been grilling her, of course. It was still going on.

"Tell us when they're coming! That's all we need."

"I don't know."

"Marc won't go easy on you. Save yourself. Tell us when they're coming."

"I wouldn't even if I knew!"

Slap!

Samantha did a fast check of her gear to be sure she had her two kits and pack, then moved toward the door.

"Hey! Where is she going?"

Samantha flashed her instruction card to their driver, who frowned but opened the door.

As she stepped out, alone, Kyle couldn't stay quiet. "You'll be okay?"

Samantha didn't answer. She'd spent the ride getting set for her mission. She'd known something like this was coming from the remarks Angela had made to her when they were alone. Samantha had

been longing for it, as if it was the air she needed. No one else existed for her now. Not Neil and his macho attitude, nor Jeremy and his whining charm. Not even the twin sons she was carrying. Her duty, her mission, would come first. It was the one thing she'd been denied her entire life because of her gender, but no one could take it from her now. She would either succeed or die.

Samantha vanished into the shadows with her head up and feet carefully moving through the tangle of underbrush.

Kyle closed the doors before the need to follow and drag her back could overwhelm his resolve to follow orders. "Next stop in fifteen minutes. If you have number two, get ready."

Kyle was glad Samantha was the closest stop to their camp. He inspected the remaining females, seeing the reality settling over their faces, and got them rolling. Angela said to stay on schedule, not to be late or early at any of the stops. The windows and avenues of detour she'd given him would cover almost everything that could go wrong, so long as he remembered to do his part.

"What are we supposed to do with her?" Tracy was tiring of the useless questioning between satisfying slaps.

Heather saw a moment of distraction and quickly spat the snot and blood from her mouth. She wiped her face with her sleeves, clearing until she was dry. She didn't act like any of the bruises hurt.

That bothered Tracy. She snagged Heather by her hair and slammed her face against the seat.

Heather screamed as her nose broke.

Tracy let the other women pull her away. “Felt that, didn’t you?”

Heather flung a bloody hand toward Tracy splattering more bloody drops. “Drop dead, bith!”

It sounded pinched and garbled, causing the van of women to snicker.

Heather pulled her scarf off and used it to stem the flow. “Mean whore, hipping from fa back!”

Tracy crossed her arms over her chest to keep from lunging again. “That’s what you’re doing!”

Heather snapped her nose back into place, making everyone in the van wince, including Kyle. He knew exactly what it felt like to do that.

“Dust kill me! Don’t dwag it out.”

“We want information and then you can go free.”

Heather held the scarf tighter as the blood continued to drip. “Swew you!”

Kyle shook his head at Tracy when she would have finished the job, as he’d been teaching them. “Not for us to decide. She goes to Angela.”

The thought of facing that anger sent a wave of silence through the van. None of those pictures were pretty.

Heather stayed quiet about that coming moment and about her shot shoulder, her broken nose. Complaining that she was still bleeding wasn’t smart, but she worried over it a little. Heather didn’t

heal well. She had a weak system, her mom had told her that, and without the government's medicine, she would die. Therefore, she had chosen to come out and betray her fellow man to keep on living. Now that she might be killed, it was still those shiny pills that she cared for. Living without her drugs was not an option.

“Next in line, get set.” Kyle sighed. This would be a long run.

2

“Are we ready?” Neil scanned the team of men behind him. “Cause we’ve got company.”

The Eagles were set. Everyone stilled except for being sure that they were indeed in position. This would be a quick hit and run, but it was also tricky on the timing.

They watched the three jeeps of soldiers roll right up to the cave entrance and rush inside as if they weren't worried over anything or anyone who might be in the area. Neil vowed to change that. He and his teammates had been here for hours, waiting patiently to start Angela's war.

Neil held up a hand as Jeremy's finger settled over the button.

The last jeep of soldiers was expected to remain outside, but Neil wanted as many of them as he could get. He waited until they took up sentry positions outside the entrance to the vast network of caves. It had been a military supply depot at one

point. Neil and his team had gone through it a week ago, cleaned out what they could use before wiring the entire tunnel system. There wouldn't be any fleeing and escaping through a different exit.

Neil nodded.

Jeremy pushed the button.

An instant later, the cave began to blow up.

The Eagles stayed under the cover of the opposite cliffs, protected from the debris, but not the dust as the side of the cliff disintegrated into millions of bits of dirt and stone. The first blow had been struck.

Not far from the Eagles, a large group of soldiers snuck through the woods and rocks, headed for Safe Haven. They heard the explosions, but didn't detour from their mission. Armed with the usual arsenal and hopes for a pass out of this hell, there were exactly forty of them.

3

“We have a report of shots fired at the base.”

“In-fighting again?” Zack was hopeful the soldiers would kill each other and save them the war.

Kevin shook his head. “A plane came today and dropped someone off. A few minutes later there was rifle fire and then a crew digging a large grave.”

“New leader must have come and put his house in order. Guess we're back to the stress.”

Kevin snorted. “I didn’t know we’d stopped.”

Angela wouldn’t like the news, but both men were confident she had this covered. The base sending someone to lead those planeloads of troops had to happen.

“I’ll tell her. Go grab a nap. You look like you need it.”

Zack vanished gratefully into the weeds that lined the fences. They’d been here for a week now and it was starting to feel like a basic settlement. Zack hated it. That feeling wasn’t supposed to come until they were all back together.

Kevin watched Zack duck into the tent and continued on his way to where the boss was supervising trucks being loaded with their special defenses. Only a few people had been allowed a glimpse of Angela’s plans so far and Kevin was as curious as everyone else. If he hurried, he might get a peek at the boxes while delivering the message from the guards still posted near the destroyed base. He refused to spend any more time worrying over his personal issues. There would be time later.

4

“Do it!”

At Marc’s order, Kenn fired on the small group of soldiers below them. It still felt wrong to shoot at men in uniform; he had to force himself to obey the one shot, one kill rule. They didn’t have unlimited bullets and this was now open war.

Marc released the lever as the soldiers came up the hill. He and Kenn ran down their escape path as trees exploded. Shrapnel whizzed through the woods as screams blared into the sky. The thin rope holding the rack of dead trees snapped under the pressure. The entire lot went rolling down the hillside, crushing the soldiers. Those who survived had broken bones and open wounds that would need stitching. The medic who would have performed that duty died when a large chunk of debris slid into his eye and pierced his brain.

Marc and Kenn circled back a short time later to clean the bodies of anything they could use. A lot of the gear had been damaged, but the uniforms were mostly intact once the logs were rolled off and the owners removed. They were in and out in a few minutes, and back at the cabin by the time the sun started to sink.

5

“You okay to keep going?”

“Getting a little tired.” Becky didn’t usually get this much physical activity at once. “Maybe just a short break?”

“Come on.” Charlie steered them into the small cave he’d been scanning while considering when to stop for the night. Late afternoon shadows were deepening around them.

Becky followed Charlie into the cave without fear. Charlie had gifts to use if they got into trouble.

“You have a couple gifts now too. Don’t you?”

Becky nodded slowly. “I haven’t told anyone.”

The cave wasn’t high, but it was wide, with two entrances—one at the top of the rise and the second on the ground. The floor of the cave was rough, but even. Charlie removed his kit and knelt down to dig through it. “Mom knows. She asked me to give you this.”

Becky took the envelope reluctantly, scared of what was inside.

Charlie quickly hung his pre-taped black curtain, then activated the flashlight around his neck. “Can you see?”

Becky didn’t answer. What she was reading had sucked her brain into a zone she rarely ever accessed.

Charlie slipped in to discover what had her so upset, but there was a brick wall as soon as the door opened. Every time he clawed through, there was a thicker wall waiting. He finally gave up when he heard her snicker. “You’re good.”

Becky was pleased. “Yeah, being on your mom’s team adds something to the lessons.”

No longer feeling like he had to be careful not to offend her, Charlie renewed his mental attack on her mental defense.

Becky grinned at first, sure she could keep putting up walls faster than he could break through, but as they stared at each other, she could feel him

gathering a blast that would plunge through more than one at a time.

Becky quickly began throwing up walls in panic, but they weren't as strong without the concentration; they crumbled under his constant onslaught. "Okay. Can't keep that up."

Charlie, lost in the pleasure of a mental challenge, pushed deeper, harder.

"Stop now!" Pain lanced through her head.

Charlie almost couldn't. The feel of invading her mind was better than the kisses he'd stolen from Tracy.

"Please." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Please don't look."

The door opened.

Charlie shouted in horror at images. He shoved himself back, biting his lip to keep the sounds inside.

Becky cringed along the wall, shoved back into those awful moments she'd suffered with Rick.

Charlie stayed still as she cried, wishing he'd been able to stop before that last door opened. He'd only wanted to practice, to be ready. "I'm sorry."

Becky didn't answer. She was in hell.

Charlie slipped in with much less eagerness this time and gently drew her away from the past. "Come on." He offered a hand to the naked, bloody girl.

Becky watched her spirit lift from her body and take Charlie's hand. A minute later, she became aware of sobbing uncontrollably in his arms. She let

it come after that, soaking them both as he rocked her.

Lost, Charlie kept his mouth shut and his mind on good things. He never wanted to see something like that again. If he did, bullets would fly. Or worse.

Becky thought about the message again and burst into fresh tears.

You don't have to do any of this.

“But, I do.” Becky shuddered as the tears finally started to ease. “It’s the only thing I haven’t tried to get him out of my head.”

Charlie had begun calling for his mom mentally as soon as Becky had started crying. He had no experience with this. When Angela didn’t answer, he thought maybe she’d done this to him on purpose. He could almost hear her laughing and saying he had a woman of his own who would have moments when she cried. He would have to know how to handle it.

Charlie hugged Becky tighter. He could do this part. It was when they got mad that he wanted to run. Or duck. Or hide. He was never sure of the proper reaction on that.

6

Samantha had been traveling non-stop since Kyle dropped her off. She was into the thickest part of the woods by dusk. She’d made it nearly five miles away from where everyone in the van thought

she would be. That had been on her instruction card and Samantha agreed with it completely. If Heather managed to escape, the traitor would give bad information on locations, which meant her dates and times wouldn't be right either. Angela was smart. Samantha respected her more now than she ever had.

Rather than oppress her people into searches and threats, with punishments to back them up, Angela had chosen to just limit knowledge. It would allow them to track down their traitors one by one, though the need for secrecy wasn't sitting well with some people. The Eagles were watching those folks closer than the rest. The whiners didn't understand how serious this fight was, so they couldn't be counted on to do what was right for Safe Haven. Samantha wasn't sure what would happen to the rule breakers and rebels among them once the war ended.

Sadly, that was another problem that Angela had to deal with. Even reliable men and women were fleeing, afraid of the future. It made it hard to assign jobs and chores in a normal camp, let alone dole out secret battle plans. Samantha had no idea how Angela was keeping track of it, or keeping it flowing, but she was. The first round of envelopes and instructions had been delivered and were being obeyed, providing some people with opportunities to do more than they'd ever thought they would. When she signed up for the Eagles, Samantha had wanted to go on runs like this with the men, but

she'd known it wasn't likely to happen. Now, here she was walking through the dark Georgia mountains on her way to kill someone. She'd never felt so alive, so needed. Nothing would pull her from this chore.

Samantha chose her spot carefully, exhausted after walking all day. She quickly unpacked her sleeping bag and a meal, settling into both in a kind of tired, relaxed haze. She'd spent the time thinking about her life so far and the choices she'd made. If she died in this final battle, she wanted to be ready to face whatever would come next. Samantha was sure many of their people were spending their waiting and walking time doing the same soul searching.

Samantha made sure the sleeping bag would be hidden under the pine needles and leaves, then curled up in it and went to sleep, uncaring about the bugs or snakes that might crawl across her hiding place. Once again, she had larger worries to be concerned with. She drifted off thinking of the spider bite and how she'd had the strength to do what needed to be done. This time, she wouldn't hesitate to pull a trigger. She'd changed.

7

Adrian and Junit observed the landscape around them, each lost in their own worried thoughts. Junit was concerned over his actions during the upcoming battles; he was praying he had what it

took to make his camp proud. Adrian was trying to contact Angela and beg her to bring him back so they could be together while Marc wasn't around.

Neither man heard the soft rumble of a van until it was at their front door.

Adrian sighed. *So much for being an Alpha.*

"I was just thinking the same thing." Marc was now standing at the door below him. "It's our first protective."

"Our what?" Junit didn't alert Sebastian and Natoli. He wouldn't unless Marc told him to.

"We're running escort details too." Adrian hating it that he was forced to explain. He was used to being the one who held silent.

Marc knew. It made his steps almost carefree as he went to meet the van.

Kyle opened the van doors, nodding to Marc and Adrian. This was one stop he didn't mind making.

Tonya stepped down with a last glare at Heather as Marc handed Kyle a sheet of paper.

"She said to tell you that Jennifer is fine. Conner wouldn't let her make a fire and she's pissed at him. That's why you can't reach her."

Kyle grinned in relief and closed the doors. "Number four, your stop is in twenty minutes. Please get ready."

Tonya looked around for Kenn as the van chugged away. "Where is he?"

When no one answered, Tonya went into the cabin. “I told him to keep his mouth shut. Guess he didn’t listen.”

Marc lingered with Adrian and Junit. “We should give those two a few minutes.”

“You didn’t tell Kenn she was coming?”

Marc shook his head, almost laughing. “No, Angie thought it was better this way. I agreed for the entertainment.”

Adrian wanted to snicker, but the anger wouldn’t let him. *These are my moments to set up and deliver!* He climbed back up to the roof in silence.

Marc smoked a cigarette and waited for the show to start.

Kenn opened his eyes to find Tonya sitting at the table, spinning a lighter on the dusty surface. He groaned as he sat up, carefully feeling his jaw. “What are you doing here?”

Tonya didn’t answer yet. She needed him to be fully alert for this.

Kenn stood up, hand braced on the wall. He felt like hell.

Tonya pushed a travel mug of stale coffee toward him. “We’ll talk in a minute.”

Tonya ignored the cluttered shelter, more concerned with Kenn’s reaction than garbage piled on the wooden floors or clothes hung to dry on a sagging Christmas tree.

Kenn took the coffee and the chair, but he kept his attention on her and not the pain. Something was wrong. It was the only time Tonya was quiet. Kenn rubbed at his face. “Spit it out.”

Tonya heard the tone and knew he was awake enough. “I’m headed in, as a spy.”

“Like hell you are!”

“Shut up!”

“You shut up! Tell him to send in his own bitch!”

Outside, Marc’s grin grew wider. Kenn wasn’t so big on sacrifice when it was someone he loved.

“He doesn’t love her.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Yes, Adrian, he does. You not being able to recognize that is another symptom of your disease.”

“I’m not sick!”

“You are.” Marc raised his voice to be heard over the yelling inside. “Your greed and jealousy have sunk into your soul and caused a cancer. Until you get rid of it, you’re a dead man walking and I can’t stand the smell.” Marc stepped inside as Tonya came out.

“I have to go now. I’m on a tight schedule.”

Marc nodded, not telling her to be careful. He had no doubt that she would. He was also sure Angela hadn’t sent the redhead out here completely alone.

Tonya kept walking until the cabin was out of sight, and then checked her map. When she was

secure in her exact location, she detoured to a nearby grove of trees. It was marked, but only in a way that her team would notice. Men never paid attention to shit like stomped on flowers that had been placed, instead of displaced.

She'd been trained to get up high for a clear view; Tonya snickered softly as she climbed her first tree in delicate boots. Angela hadn't wanted her to wear them at all, but Tonya had given up her fancy clothes and she missed them. Any excuse to wear them now was one she always took.

Tonya reached the fork in the tree and stopped to rest. "You here yet?"

"On your right."

Tonya didn't look at her partner in crime. She recognized the voice. "Oh, great. It keeps getting better!"

Tonya honestly meant that. Kendle knew it from the tone. She stared in confusion. "You're weird. You know it?"

"Sure." Tonya pulled her kit off to rummage through for a snack. "Who else could love Kenny?"

Kendle shrugged. She didn't know Kenn well yet, except by the stories and his short fuse when he refused Angela's orders. None of them were good.

"You all clear on what we're doing here?"

Kendle grunted. "Spilling blood."

Tonya frowned a bit. "If we have to. They might be taken without that."

Kendle shut her eyes and let her head fall against the tree. "God, I hope not."

Tonya was frowning thickly now. “Yeah, and I’m the weird one.”

“Says the chick dressed like she’s gonna suck the enemy to death.”

“It’s my role.” Tonya had flushed. “You’re mean. Shut up.”

Kendle thought about ripping the woman’s red hair out strand-by-strand and sighed heavily. It would make too much noise. Kenn was sure to come running and Kendle didn’t think killing him would win her any friends, despite him being disliked by most of the Eagles. Kenn might be scum, but he was important scum. If that was the case, killing him and his whore wasn’t the best idea.

Tonya could feel the waves of menace, but it didn’t frighten her. She didn’t care that Kendle was like Angela and the others, or that she had Marc’s protection. Tonya was well armed and she knew how to use those weapons. She also excelled at their kai fighting, thanks to Kenn and Seth. If the new woman wanted to scrap, Tonya had until dawn before her role officially began anyway.

Kendle chuckled as she picked up the thoughts. “Peppy, aren’t ya?”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “Sleep or something, will you? I don’t need a friend either.”

That caught Kendle by surprise. “What’s wrong with being my friend? I’m good people.”

Tonya snorted lowly. “If you were good people, you wouldn’t have been sent out here with me.”

Kendle couldn't argue that and didn't try. She'd never felt less good in her life. She expected more of the same. Hope was for people who hadn't lived in the darkness. Once you spent time there, going back was impossible.

8

"Stop number four." Kyle said it tiredly, already exhausted from the emotional battles each time he let a female out into danger. It wasn't what he'd been training for.

"That's me."

Kyle groaned silently as Cynthia moved up the drafty isle. Kevin would shit when he found out how far away from camp Cynthia was. Adrian might too.

Cynthia hesitated at the door. She had spent a lot of the ride deliberating this moment.

Kyle waited for her to speak, sure he wouldn't like what she had to say.

"Tell them both the same thing."

Kyle braced as the perfume-less van of females went silent.

"I don't love either of them and this is what I wanted. I *chose* this part in her plan." Cynthia regarded the remaining women with tenderness.

"My sisters."

"My sister," they echoed back sadly.

The feeling that they knew something about her role that he didn't hit Kyle with enough force to make his stomach twist. Kyle grabbed her hand and

tugged her into his embrace for a quick hug that surprised all of them. “Try to come back! They do need you!”

Cynthia returned the hug. “Remember me. I mattered.” She climbed from the van, ignoring the cries and protests. They knew what choice she’d made.

As the van slowly left her in darkness, Cynthia disappeared into the brush with her kit over one shoulder and a recent meeting on her mind.

“If you were team leader, who would you give this duty to?”

None of the women in the tent answered.

Angela grunted. “We’re not done here until we have that chore assigned.”

“You pick it.” Samantha’s voice was sad. “We know it won’t be easy.”

Angela grimaced. “I can’t. I’ve tried. When I look, there’s only darkness.”

“Because I’m supposed to do it.”

Cynthia’s words drew gasps and denials from everyone except Angela. She stared at the reporter with sadness and resignation. “It just cleared. You know what it means?”

Cynthia snorted. “You’ve gone over it enough. I’d better know.”

Her quip drew no smiles. Everyone in the tent knew that duty was a suicide run.

Cynthia hitched the kit further onto her shoulder and took a minute to reexamine her map. The small, reflective sticker glowing on it was just enough to

read by. She put it away and resumed walking. Moving through the darkness was something Angela had been drilling them on, but Cynthia still loathed it. Right now, however, she was too sad to be scared.

She finally had her dreams. She was accepted by a great group of people who cared about right and wrong. She had the love of an Eagle, even if he didn't want to admit it, and she had a child on the way, something else she'd never thought to have. And here she was, about to get herself killed. "I wouldn't have it any other way! It's worth all our lives to accomplish this."

9

When Troy came to, he was bound, with a gag in his mouth. Three shadows had snuck up on Troy while he stomped toward the enemy to surrender. They had hit him with a dart and tied him up. Two minutes after the assault, he had been in the rear of a truck, rolling through the darkness.

Peggy looked down at him with a scolding frown. "Why did you break the boss's rules?"

Troy saw two Eagles on the other side of the room. He appeared to be in a small shed, but it was hard to tell.

"I'm gonna take that gag out if you promise to be quiet."

Troy huffed against the cloth. He wasn't agreeing to anything.

Peggy shrugged. “Then we’ll leave it in and you don’t need to eat or drink.” Peggy blew out the candle and slipped under the carpet cover that was hiding the area.

The two Eagles stayed where they were, watching Troy and a few other bound shadows. He wasn’t the only one who’d broken the rules.

Peggy took a minute to smooth her hair down and calm herself. She had friends tied up behind the curtain, explosives under foot, and a big, angry bear of a man bellowing the embarrassment of his assignment to anyone who would listen. Calling this stressful was like some horrible joke. Angela had chosen the tourist-like caves that ran along and into the rear of Mt. Lookout. The camp was in the topmost set of caves, but Peggy knew there were miles more below them.

Peggy advanced into the first area, pleased to discover her list had been completed. As she examined each stone room, she found the same, along with other important improvements that she hadn’t ordered. She knew Doug hadn’t done them. He was still too mad. She swept the tunnels and small caves for the workers responsible.

She spotted three men doing things she hadn’t asked for. They were from Marc’s shadow warriors. Peggy understood she didn’t know all parts of the plan for this location. Angela had people in here with her. Peggy stared hard to get the attention of the one closest to her.

The Indian gave her a respectful, knowing nod and continued his work.

Not being alone in her terrible knowledge was a relief to Peggy. She didn't like what she had to do, but it wouldn't stop her. She ignored the padding that was being subtly placed to protect the currently eating people from explosions. She and Hilda had helped to plant this awful idea in Angela's dangerous mind. It was too late for guilt now.

10

Kyle opened the van door and stepped from the seat with a series of grunts, groans, and pops. All he'd done was drive and supervise, but he felt like he had been hit by Marc a few times in the cage. And then run over.

"How'd it go?"

Kyle jumped. "Damn it!"

Angela didn't smile. She'd been waiting on his return, with only Marc's anger to comfort her. She scanned their surroundings while she waited for him to regain his composure.

Angela's den had been shrunk to a quarter mile and placed along the cliff line so their backs were protected. To the north was open air. Anyone who wanted to come up that way had better be a determined climber. The rest of the space was filled with a command tent and other similar structures to protect the fighters here from the rain and sleet that was falling.

“It went fine,” Kyle finally answered, handing her a small stack of papers and envelopes. “All drops were made on schedule and Heather is with the roaming group. She’ll eventually be with our other POWs until you’re ready for her.”

Angela wrote down the time and the information she’d been given.

Kyle frowned. “When did you sleep last?”

Angela put her notebook away and lied. “Going there now.”

“Needed my update first?” Kyle guessed. “I’m opening my next envelope as soon as I grab a cup of coffee.”

Angela sighed. “Open it first. And I’m sorry.” She moved away while he did as instructed.

Thud!

Kyle punching the van was followed by the sound of the doors opening and the engine starting. New boots began to file into the vehicle a few seconds later.

Angela continued on her rounds. Guilt had given her a fresh wind. She checked her watch and headed for the open area to the north of camp. Their next group should be about to leave. Now that the camp members were gone, Safe Haven’s security cameras had come down and men had been relieved of their odious duty of spying on each other.

Ray and Dale had hated it, but there had been little else to do for a few days, and after the wounds Ray had suffered from Little Rock, Angela had wanted him to have a break. She’d gotten far

enough ahead of her plan that she was content she could at least start this war even off the line and not have to play catchup. It also allowed the camp a break, though Angela hadn't bothered with a Labor Day celebration.

She had known they weren't going to get to enjoy it and she'd needed the manual labor used in other areas. Decorations and a feast meant nothing if they were a day late with her plan, except that it would be their last party ever. She had given most of the camp time off beforehand, telling them they needed to spend their last days doing what they wanted to. It hadn't been encouraging to hear that, but they had enjoyed themselves at the shooting contest where Shawn had claimed the title.

They'd passed the evening with food and stories around the fires, and even the wounded had attended. Many of those were heroes in these tales and they weren't about to miss the praise. Only a few people stayed to themselves during the festivities—mostly the Indians, who were now freely roaming in and out of their gates. Marc lived here. His Shadow Warriors weren't going to be parted from him yet. She'd known that when she chose his roles in her plan and adjusted accordingly. She had no problem with such devoted men surrounding Marc at all times.

The Mexicans were fewer in number around this camp. Marc didn't trust them after all the evil Cesar had caused, but they were still coming through the gates more than Angela's personal guards liked.

Marc wasn't worried about having a problem in that area until Sebastian met Angela face to face. If he showed the tiniest sign of having the same issue his brother had, Marc planned to put a bullet in his brain. He'd do that sooner if it were needed.

As far as their spies at the base had noted, the soldiers were grouped in a disorganized cluster along the remaining walls and hills. They'd erected a sea of tents and foldout shelters, then stayed there without contacting Safe Haven. They had been waiting for a leader.

Angela shivered at a gust of wind, joining Ray as he stood sentry duty on the edge of the narrow field. "Are we on time?"

Ray motioned toward the foggy shadows moving toward them. "Couple minutes early. Dog says he's got it timed better than we do."

"Good." Angela watched the large wolf lead his new pack toward the fence line, where Dale and a few others were holding open two edges of the wire. It was big enough for Dog and his ant army to slip through.

Angela was comforted by how the wolf gently nudged Dale's hand as he went through. It did surprise her when several of the ants did the same to Ray's mate. She hadn't realized the ants were bonding with people. It was another sign of the evolution they were currently going through.

The line of ants was huge. More than a hundred of the always-hungry insects followed Dog out of the camp. Angela wished them swift travel. The ants

weren't very important to her plan, but they did matter. As for Dog, Angela could already feel Marc calling on him to protect Charlie. She had counted on it, but she'd made Dog swear to finish his part first. Marc hadn't thought she would assign their son to something so terrible. She'd known he would send in Dog when he found out. *Am I getting smarter or becoming more devious?*

There weren't many camp members still here to witness the insect parade, but those who did, stopped and stared. It wasn't something you saw every day, even in this new world.

"Neil and Jeremy reported in an hour ago." Shawn joined her, pushing a mug of tea into her hand. "Seth is late."

Angela sighed. "He has choices to make, like the rest of us. Leave him alone."

Shawn shrugged. He had enough to do anyway without worrying over Seth going rogue.

"Same here." Angela sighed at the lie. "He'll come through when we need it. What else do you have for me?"

Shawn began rattling things off.

Angela waited until he was gone to record it all in her notebook. Until she got some sleep, she wouldn't count on remembering. Angela's mind switched to Neil and Jeremy, her communications men for this ring of the battle. Those two and their team would relay messages, provide lookouts for working teams, and kill any soldiers they came across. Angela had several groups already out doing

that very thing. Even if Seth took off, his team wouldn't.

They were the adult killers for the area where Becky and Charlie were, though Seth wasn't supposed to find out where Becky was until she sent an update. Angela assumed Becky and Seth would stay together after that; she had included it in their envelopes, but Angela needed time to get Becky so far into the mission that when Seth told her to go hide in camp, she would refuse. From the mental update Charlie had sent, it seemed like Becky was doing okay so far.

Angela was pleased. Not that her kids were now out there killing, but that Becky was finally understanding anyone could hold the power if they had the right tools and training. She didn't have to be terrified when she was alone or keep a man close for protection. In time, Becky would be dangerous, with a limitless supply of rage to fuel it. Then, she would have to be guided the opposite way and taught to respect life again.

It was an ongoing process with any army. Learn to kill, remember to live. It made it hard for a soldier to come home when they didn't have those two lines drawn clearly. The teenagers would be no different. After they'd become killers, they would have to be taught to be kids again. One usually smothered the other, but Angela would try to keep that from happening. It was no good to win a war if the survivors didn't have any light left amid all the darkness.

Chapter Nine BK5
One Lie Or Fifty?

1

“Move out!”

The call echoed down the thousand-man convoy, sending birds into the air in surprise. The rolling wheels and eager shouts also sent foxes and raccoons fleeing down opposite paths.

The soldiers took up a lot of room as they traveled. They carelessly let themselves get spaced out. Men shot at windows of cabins as they passed, angry to be on foot in the cold.

Donner let them vent. Their anger needed a target. He had one for them, but until the battles began, it required loose reins. Donner stood with Philips, surveying the battalion of soldiers marching for the new area he'd chosen as his base. Those bringing up the rear were headed to other locations, but they would all travel together for half the day. Their recon men had gone out this morning to secure the route and their destinations.

“It's all ready, sir.” Philips was marking things off the list on his clipboard. He wisely didn't mention their three missing teams. No one had returned from the ammo mission yet.

“Tell them to push in one hundred miles every week, starting right now. That’s it.”

“Yes, sir.” He rushed off to deliver the orders.

Donner headed for the waiting jeep that was surrounded by a full squad of protection. His driver had the engine running; a man was there to open his door. Donner slid inside the warm interior with a slight grimace. “Kill that heat.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sorry, I was cold,” a voice stated from the back seat.

Donner twisted to look at the two people behind him. One was Louis, a Special Forces man with tattoos running the length of both brawny arms. He had joined their camp this morning. The other passenger was the first hostage they’d captured.

Donner didn’t speak right away. He liked to size up the person before the interrogation. What he saw was a pretty whore about to lie her ass off. He wasn’t picking up anything mentally, though the brick wall flashing in his mind was a bad sign of things to come. The coming lies were in the fidgeting, the averted eyes, and the white knuckles on her handgun.

“If you fire by accident, we will kill you.” Donner watched for the correct reaction.

“Not if I kill you first,” Jennifer stated shakily. “I’m pretty good with this thing.”

Both of Donner’s men snorted. The trembling hands kept the barrel of her 9mm jumping all over

the place. She obviously had no idea how to kill someone with a gun, not like they did.

Donner held out a hand. "Give it here. Keep the two in your belt and the knife in your other hand."

Jennifer swore furiously, bringing laughter from all three of the men. She clumsily gave Donner the gun and slid against the door. "I told her I couldn't do this."

Aware of the game beginning, Donner motioned his driver to get them rolling as he stashed the 9mm in the kit at his feet. He would examine it later for clues.

Jennifer didn't try to hide her fear at being surrounded by these evil men, knowing it would help with her mission. She and Conner had ridden the waiting dirt bike all night to get here.

"Who sent you to spy on us?"

"You know who. I'm supposed to kill you or bring you in." Jennifer slammed her hand against the seat. "I hate being a decoy."

Donner already wasn't sure which part was a lie and which was truth. He didn't rise to the bait. He watched her frown in the mirror, but she didn't say it again or try a different line. Donner was impressed. He had no doubt she was working from a script. He would let her go through it all before rewriting the lines.

"Where are we going?"

"For a drive. You were found on the edge of this campsite with a gun. You've said you were sent here to kill me. You're a prisoner of war."

Jennifer shuddered. “I’ve been that since it happened.”

Donner heard the truth there and immediately understood how he was being played. She wouldn’t have been sent in alone. “Pull over.”

The driver brought them to a fast halt.

Donner got out. He jerked Jennifer’s door open and grabbed her by the arm, ignoring her attempts to get to one of her other weapons. Louis slammed his hands across her arms, bringing a satisfying cry; they hauled her roughly to the side of the road.

Donner shoved her to her knees, then again, onto her back. His man put a boot on her neck to keep her there, grinding enough to get her attention.

Donner unzipped his trousers as the cheers of the men rolling by echoed over them.

“Tell your guard to come out.” Donner knelt down.

Struggling to breathe, Jennifer was helpless as he forced his body on top of hers.

“Call for help.” He watched as real tears oozed down her cheeks. He put a hand on her jeans, tone deepening into need. “Once these come off, you’re mine in every way.”

Jennifer screamed.

Donner nodded at Louis, who assumed a sentry position.

“Again, girl!” Donner slid that hand up her shirt to rip the front of her bra apart.

“Kyle! Kyle! Kyyyyle!”

Donner squeezed greedily, thrusting forward. “Later, we’ll get back to this position.” He rose in a quick move, fastening his pants to be ready for her to run, but she only sobbed as she rolled over.

“Put out word on anyone named Kyle. Sweep the troops with a surprise roll call. Get her secured.”

Louis grabbed Jennifer roughly, yanking her to her feet. As she veered toward the jeep, Donner came around and punched her in the temple.

The Special Forces man caught her as she fell and hefted her over his shoulder as Donner ducked into the jeep.

Louis tied her hands after he dumped her into the seat, lingering on her soft hair before he shut the door. His late girlfriend had been a brunette and about this size. Maybe after Donner was finished, he would pass this one around, like the women in Canada.

2

“Shhh!”

Charlie and Becky stayed silent and still as they woke. The male voices were loud, close.

Charlie eased toward the curtain he’d hung and slowly peeled open a corner. He quickly shut it, moving to where Becky was clutching her gun as if they were about to have a shootout. “A small group, five of them. Probably scouting.”

“What should we do?”

“Wait until they go, I think.” Charlie quietly gathered up their things. “Let’s be ready to run if we have to.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“We’re searching for them anyway, aren’t we? Kinda?”

Charlie got her point and spent a moment considering it. “We are supposed to be hunting... You sure?”

Becky nodded shakily. “Yes. It’s us or them.”

“Okay. Let’s slip out first and come back around. I want this cave to run to if we need it.”

“We’ll leave the curtain up and no one will find it for at least twenty years.” Becky hated her nervous tone; she couldn’t help it.

Charlie understood, as much as he could. “My mom said you don’t have to do this.”

“I know. But I’m good now. Let’s go give ‘em hell.”

“You know it.”

The pair slipped down through the rear of the cave, where the narrow opening would prevent all but the thinnest of adults from getting through this direction, and emerged into the dim, cold daylight.

It took a few minutes to circle around, but it would have been hard to miss the loud male voices comparing life underground to life on top. They weren’t being quiet or careful; they clearly weren’t expecting to run into anyone this far away from Lookout Mountain.

Charlie waved Becky behind him as they came into view.

The five soldiers scanned them. Hands went to holsters and faces turned cruel.

Charlie felt Becky tense behind him. "It's okay. I'll do it. You keep it together."

"Okay." Becky was almost unable to believe they were here, doing this.

Charlie held up his hands, grinning. "Hey! Maybe you guys can help us!"

The soldiers were ignoring him in favor of leering at Becky.

Charlie put his hands down. "We've been alone for a while. My sister needs help."

"Oh, we'll help her, kid." The closest man leered. "Come on over here, baby."

Becky took a step forward.

Charlie yanked his gun from the pocket of his hoodie. The first shot hit the farthest man in the chest, knocking him to the ground. A second quick pull of the trigger dropped the Corporal next to him with a trim along the throat. Blood gushed as he began to suffocate.

The three remaining men started to raise their weapons, finally reacting, but a grenade finished the short battle. The soldiers dove to avoid the explosion.

Charlie managed to shoot all three of them in the chaos.

"Down!" Becky had remembered to count.

They hit the dirt as the grenade exploded.

As the debris settled, Charlie made sure the men were all dead with extra rounds.

Becky watched without reacting. She didn't fear death or pain, only being raped.

Charlie grimaced as he used blood to write the message on the jeep seats, as he'd been instructed. "You can do the next one."

"Okay." Becky agreed. It would be easier now that she'd seen how it was supposed to go. She'd been terrified that the soldiers wouldn't be distracted enough, that she was too ugly to keep their attention while Charlie killed them, but Angela's outfit had certainly done the trick.

The bathing suit top and blue jean shorts made her feel almost naked. She quickly donned her long coat while Charlie gathered the guns, ammo, and a few other items on their list of things to never leave behind. Angela knew they would need these supplies later, but it was also to make sure the enemy couldn't come through and resupply themselves. Without reinforcements or fresh ammunition, the soldiers would be at Angela's mercy and she didn't have any.

Charlie and Becky returned to their little cave long enough to erase their tracks and signs, then continued down the mountain. They were both happy with their first test of adapting to a new situation.

“I’ll let Marc know, if you want,” Becky used her mental grid to make sure they were in the correct place. “We should run into them shortly.”

“I’ll let him know now and give him time to blow off steam before we meet up.”

“Okay.” High on getting justice in any form, Becky giggled. “Good idea.”

The soldiers were the enemy, the same as Rick had been. It felt good to kill them.

Charlie frowned a bit, picking up her thoughts, but he didn’t say anything. Killing wasn’t supposed to be fun... Was it?

3

“Get on there, you son of a bitch!”

Samantha had been fighting with her blind for an hour and still didn’t have it the way she wanted. The sun was getting higher in the sky, a time when she needed to be under cover, and yet here she was, fighting with a straw curtain.

Samantha sighed. She was doing fine with the blind. It was her mental state that wasn’t so hot. She hated waking up alone. She hadn’t shaken off the morning fog yet.

Her fingers slipped the tied wire over the stick frame and she exclaimed happily as the rest of it fell into place the way it had in classes. Her time with Kenn had been a huge help, though he still didn’t know why she’d asked for lessons on it. When she’d

dug the sniper training out of him, he'd assumed she wanted it for one of her boyfriends, not for herself.

The trees here were a mix of healthy and dying. Many of them had mold growing up the trunks, but Samantha didn't mind. Her gear was thick overalls and sturdy gloves that allowed her to scale the trunks without concern. Her only worry up here was hitting wet leaves and falling while trying to get her blind in place. The foliage was getting set for the change of season. Crunching would also be an easy alert that someone was nearby.

Samantha finished setting her cover and got on the next part of her instructions. The escape plan was something she would definitely need. She took her time choosing the correct path through the cliffs. It was rocky and rough here, hard to walk, let alone run up or down.

Samantha was careful as she traveled. There was no way to know who might be in this area with her; she stayed hidden as much as she could, as she'd done during her time after the war. Only now, she had weapons and she knew how to use them. Samantha also kept an ear out for engines. According to her instructions, the supplies she needed would be delivered in the next few hours. She didn't want to miss that. Those long crates were critical.

On the cliffs above Samantha, her secret protection swept their surroundings alertly. If Samantha wasn't able to get under cover in time, he

had instructions to delay whoever was about to discover her. Billy had already decided he would do that by her side if there were more soldiers than she could handle. He'd witnessed her using the equipment that was coming. Angela was right to worry over the success here. This side of the mountain would see a lot of action. Samantha was good, and she would have the element of surprise, but she also had common sense. If they were overwhelmed, she would welcome an extra hand.

Billy used his binoculars to view the land around her, spotting animals, but no people. He then checked the area around himself, hoping for the same. A faint flash of sunlight off someone's rifle glinted. Billy's heart stopped before he realized he recognized the shadow keeping to the trees that lined the cliffs to the left.

The Eagle waved, then motioned.

Billy grinned in relief. He gestured and then pointed to where Samantha was now carefully marking her escape route with natural forage items. Then Billy curled up to grab a few hours of sleep. He'd been wondering how he was supposed to stay awake all the time, but Angela had that covered too.

Jax stared down at the blonde woman now placing a thick rock by a fork in the path before kicking leaves and dirt over it. She knelt down and blew odd patterns in the sand that would seem natural, then swept away her tracks with a crooked branch. After tossing a few handfuls of dirt and leaves onto the path, she relieved herself and then

settled into the blind. She appeared to be fine, but Jax couldn't help the concern. He had no idea what she was supposed to be doing, but if she got into trouble, he was breaking his instructions of no contact and damn the price. No female under his watch could ever be killed.

It was his single biggest goal as an Eagle now. There was no way he could live with that guilt, not after what losing Leslie had done to him. He didn't think he'd ever feel normal again and she'd only been a lover! He hadn't had enough time to discover if it had actually been love. The robbed feeling was a sharp blade that continued to slice him open months after her death.

4

Answer me!

The mental shout was so strong that it felt like someone had fired a gun inside a closed space.

Adrian drove faster, hoping their next stop would cool Marc off, though he did understand the man's outrage. They had listened to Charlie's mental message with horror and anger.

We took out five of them. They stumbled across us while we were sleeping. Tell her we're good and rolling.

"She's using kids as killers!" Marc bellowed, making everyone in the truck jump.

“Yeah, we got that.” Kenn sneered. “Now shut up. We need to think.”

Marc was furious. “She didn’t tell me he was going in!”

Adrian and Kenn both enjoyed that.

“She probably assumed you would try to interfere.” Kenn glared. “So cool down and do what you keep telling the rest of us: follow your instructions.”

Marc controlled his outrage. He would deal with Angie later.

“Can I listen in on that?” Adrian was suddenly worried. “I didn’t know she sent Conner out either.”

Silence fell for a moment and then Marc shrugged angrily. “You will anyway.”

Adrian wisely didn’t agree.

“We should see a mark any time now.” Kenn was reading his next instructions. “Should be a—”

“There she is.” Marc pointed to nothing any of them could make out. “Park under that tree. We’ll have a smoke while we unload.”

They knew that meant Marc wanted to spend a minute checking out the area and verifying Samantha was okay. None of them had been happy to discover who their contact was upon opening the next instructions at dawn. The idea of a woman out here alone, pregnant with twins, didn’t set well with them.

Marc snorted. “I should have known better. She has two Eagles guarding. Samantha doesn’t know about them. We’re all good.”

“You know where she is?” Kenn was searching for the blind that Samantha would have been instructed to set up, but he couldn’t spot it.

“She used the training in lesson Five C.” Adrian had easily spotted her once he remembered her preference for heights. “Though, how she got that blind to stay there, I don’t know. Tell Angie I’d bump her a full level for it.”

Marc climbed into the seat. “Angie already knows how good Samantha is, otherwise she wouldn’t have sent her out here alone.”

“But she’s not.”

Marc scowled at Kenn. “Don’t you ever tell her she wasn’t alone. You hear me?”

Kenn nodded, not about to fight over something like this when he couldn’t care less.

“Good. Let’s go.”

“Where to next?” Kenn took point.

“East for a mile. Charlie and Becky are waiting for us there.”

Kenn scowled. “For what?”

Marc didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He had no idea what the pair was doing. He wouldn’t unless they were allowed to tell him. It was scary, maddening.

“I know what they’re doing.” Adrian stared at Marc. “She didn’t say I couldn’t tell you.”

Marc knew Adrian was using this to cause trouble. “Spill it, then.”

Kenn moved them into a grassy area with a thick tree cover, and listened with half an ear. Neither

Charlie nor Becky interested him much. They were walking over piles of stones that hadn't been cleared from these hiking paths since the war, sometimes climbing over full trees that had come down. Nature had piled up here. It would make it harder on the soldiers who had to come in after them. Kenn wanted a better vantage point to determine if any of those men might be close yet.

“As this fight goes on, we'll be hearing stories of renegade people who aren't following orders. Instead, they're attacking soldiers, taking out patrols and perimeter camps.”

“And the kids are providing support, right? Lookouts or something.” Marc knew better, but he hated to accept it.

“She sent them out here to kill.”

“You knew!” Marc slammed his fist into Adrian's jaw.

Adrian let himself fall backward onto the dirt and rocks. He stayed down. “Worse than that. She took it directly from one of my notebooks.”

“You gave her this idea?!”

“Yes.” Adrian frowned. “And this is one of the nicer plans.”

“Do I want to know the others?”

“Spies, traitors, and killers are how you quickly win a war.” Adrian told Marc what he already knew in an ominous tone. “Do those things with children and you could conquer the world in a month.”

Marc's resolve to remain calm vanished; he used his mind to register his complaints.

Angie!

Yes, dear?

What the hell is wrong with you?

I don't have time to give you that list.

How could you do this?

How could I not? You wouldn't.

It's barbaric! Who are you?!

It's survival. Why don't you know that?

Adrian swept Marc's face, seeing he was delivering blows and receiving them. The blond man grinned. "Gonna be a good evening."

Shots rang out ahead.

All of them broke into a run.

5

"They're all dead."

Marc and Adrian swept the dim scene with expressionless faces as Kenn moved to a higher vantage point. They'd heard gunshots and came on the run. Someone else could have done the same.

Charlie stripped the nearest body of its gun, mags, knife, and vest, dropping it all into the rucksack that Becky was carrying. Both of their faces were flushed, not pale like the adults had expected.

Becky shoved the rifle further into the bag to make room for a second vest and quickly shut it before opening a new bag. "We've got two other stashes of gear like this so far. Our instructions said not to tell anyone except senior men." Becky went

to Marc. “You can add this one yourself.” She handed him the paper, ignoring Adrian’s careful nod.

It was the only response Adrian could form at the moment. He’d never thought to find Becky so calm amid death. He was waiting to discover if she’d participated. Marc was currently replaying the battle in his mind. Adrian stepped closer to him. Had Becky done her share?

“More than her share.” Marc’s tone was choked with horror. “She led this assault. She likes to backshoot.”

Marc waved Kenn down to take his place, fighting to keep himself under control. Angela was more ruthless than he’d ever thought her capable of.

Charlie and Becky continued to loot. There were ten bodies and several tents to explore, and then the vehicles under the camouflage netting had to be disabled since none of the Eagles here had time to drive them back to camp. Their plans were all based on following rules. They wouldn’t deviate, even for two Humvees and a crate of grenades. Those, the entire group loaded up on. Kenn knew to grab a share of them for Marc, who was staying on sentry duty.

Kenn asked the obvious. “Will this make the difference? Having kids out here playing war like it’s a movie?”

Adrian, who now had more hope than when he’d woken, nodded slowly. “If she’s got enough

little side plans like this going, yeah, it could. They won't be expecting this."

Kenn scowled, lowering his voice so that only Adrian could hear. He often forgot about the mental abilities the descendants had. "Isn't it all wrong?"

"More than I can say." Adrian sighed. "And it's also exactly right. It's their future that will be gone if we lose. If they fight with us, they'll care about that future when it comes time to rebuild it."

Kenn couldn't understand how something so wrong could also be right, but he didn't say anything else. Even when he'd been beating his wife or scheming against someone, he'd known it was wrong. How could this be okay?

"It isn't, you douche." Charlie grunted, but without anger. His glimpses into Kenn's dark mind had explained a lot. "It's what keeps us alive, gives us a chance."

"And some of us need this release." Becky was calmer now.

"What happens after the war, little girl?" Adrian used a hard tone. "When the killing has to stop?"

Becky stilled, thinking. She finally turned to them with dead eyes. "I probably won't be here then. That's someone else's problem."

Adrian and Kenn pulled a face, but Charlie understood what she meant. They had the same plans for the future, the same instructions to follow, and they would, no matter what. The only way the soldiers would go past Angela's second ring of death was if they thought half of her army was made

up of women and children. So it was. Angela didn't bluff.

Chapter Ten BK5

Disguises And Reprisals

1

Jennifer woke to a mild pounding in her head and a faint stinging in her arm. She opened her eyes to darkness as memories came flooding in. She'd done her job. She was in the hands of the enemy.

“She’s awake.”

The voice was hard and cold, yet eager for the torture to begin. Jennifer sucked in a tight breath to calm herself. She'd been told this would be the worst part. If she could get through this, she would be okay.

“Remove the blindfold and the gag.”

Jennifer realized she hadn't been able to feel the gag or recognize the blindfold; she felt a tremor of panic. *Was I drugged?*

“While you were out we gave you a mild sedative.”

That hard voice again, controlled, ruthless, and excited by his job. Jennifer blinked to clear the fog. “Will it make me tell the truth?” She could see shadows moving now, but not in clarity.

“It'll let you last longer.”

Jennifer swallowed. “She made me come in. I told her I couldn't do it.”

“I don’t believe you, my sweetling.”

That tone was dangerous. When her captor’s voice became compassionate, pain was coming. “I’m sorry—”

The punch to her gut drove the contents out. She puked harshly, struggling to breathe. “Please!” she gasped out. “Just had a baby!”

The second hit took all the air from her lungs. Jennifer sagged against her bonds, face turning purple.

“That’s enough for the moment.” Donner came from the shadows, unimpressed with the spy sent to kill him. “You’re a decoy? From what?”

Jennifer, who still hadn’t gotten a lungful of air, passed out.

Donner sighed. “Make sure she comes around. No more damage until I’m ready for it.”

“Yes, sir.” Louis slapped Jennifer on the back.

Her lungs expanded as she gasped in air; her color slowly returned to normal.

Louis settled into a chair in the shadows as Donner left, leering at the naked girl hanging from ropes around dusty shed beams. She belonged to the Major right now. When Donner traded up, Louis would be there to have his turn. All these sessions were foreplay, like in Canada.

Jennifer swam through the fog slowly, tending her injuries, strengthening her determination. Conner would come soon and then they would teach these men not to underestimate people based on

gender or age. The young were often more dangerous than their elders because they lacked a fear of death.

Her stomach throbbed from the punches. Jennifer stayed in the fog as long as she could. They'd estimated she would have to tough out at least two interrogation sessions, maybe three before Conner could get to her. If it reached three, things were bound to get uglier than she could tolerate. Angela had told her to destroy them all.

When Jennifer had asked why the descendants simply didn't do that anyway and end the war, Angela's answer had been haunting.

"Because we'll tip the balance again and become hunted creatures by both sides. No one can ever know how powerful we really are."

"But so many of them will die! Wouldn't it be better for the descendants to sacrifice themselves instead?"

"No. There would never be peace after that. Humans will force us to fight for them, to destroy their neighbors. We will all become corrupt."

"I don't understand."

"Imagine two towns. One member has a fistfight with someone from the neighboring town and wins. In retaliation, that neighboring townsman kills the son of the first man. As the first man's neighbor, wouldn't you go to war to eliminate such a person?"

Jennifer hadn't been sure.

“Imagine now that both towns are at each other’s throats over water rights or land for grazing and farming, and someone uses a descendant’s powers. Even for protection, you now have an entirely new war, one where magic is the weapon and domination becomes the goal.”

It was a bleak picture. Jennifer had agreed that letting the descendants go willy-nilly with their gifts was a bad idea.

“I know you can hear me.”

The cold, eager voice brought Jennifer back to her own reality. She grunted in hatred, but didn’t give him words. She was still savoring her breaths.

“You should tell him everything you know, then beg to be his whore. He might not hurt you as much that way.”

Jennifer already understood what drove Louis. She’d spent enough time with a psychopath to recognize one. She let herself cry, but still didn’t talk to him. He might get the chance to rape her that he was longing for. She’d known that could happen coming in. It didn’t stop the terror or the longing to kill him.

2

Donner left the shed to find Philips waiting for him. The rest of the convoy was settling in for the night. Campfires and tents were being worked on for a half-mile in every direction.

“We’re missing a scouting team and a spotter set.”

Donner motioned the cook to bring him his tray and sat down on a stump to eat. “So?”

Philips was confused. “Do you want us to go search for them?”

“No. They’re dead.” Donner dug into the food. “Or AWOL. Either way, we don’t split our forces to search for missing men. Go do a fresh count. Take my jeep.”

“Yes, sir.” Philips went slowly, not eager to tell their teams that more men had been lost under Donner’s command.

Louis had followed Donner. “Is that wise, sir?”

“No, but I need them to understand that I won’t go searching for them. They’ll stick closer that way.”

“What about the girl?”

“What about her?!” Donner snapped. “Got a soft spot?”

“The men want her when you’re done, is all.”

“She won’t be passed around. She’s bait.”

“Sir?”

Donner waved him away and ate his MRE. Jennifer was here for a reason. After he discovered what that was, Donner intended to use her to draw out the man she’d screamed for. When descendants chose a protector, it was almost always someone in a position of power. That was what Donner needed to bring this Safe Haven to its knees. They thought they were clever, but he knew what made the good

ones tick and how to use it against them. They didn't stand a chance.

Philips motioned his driver to get them moving.

The young man did, not quite smirking.

“What's the joke, private?!”

“Nothing, sir. Just happy to be moving,”

Philips frowned. “I though Donavan had this post.”

His driver shrugged. “Couldn't find him at roll call. Captain Louis assigned me.”

Philips made a mental note to verify that and then resumed studying his conversation with the Major.

His blond driver watched him in the mirror, blue eyes flashing excitedly.

3

Samantha adjusted the sight on her rifle, loving the feel of power that came with the motion. At some point during this hell, she would get to fire this weapon at live men and make them dead.

The enemy was unfurling below her, one of a few camps that Angela had assumed would spring up. Samantha watched the tiny men flit to and fro on their chores, unaware that she could take any of them out with a single short jerk.

Sam removed her finger from the trigger it had been absently caressing. She wasn't supposed to enjoy her role. Causing death was awful, but she couldn't wait for it to start. To her mind, the coming

men were Melvin and Henry, Cesar, and more politicians who would destroy the world all over again. Samantha would do anything to keep that from happening, and to ensure that Angela's dream was birthed here.

It was fascinating to watch the insulated aluminum rooms being setup by the soldiers. They unloaded and unfolded the portable military shelters in less than twenty minutes. It would have been faster if not for them being dropped in the center of the road so they had to be dragged into the correct position. The fold out shelters weren't bulletproof, though, so Samantha wasn't worried. The rifle she was using would pierce those frames like a hot knife going through butter.

Samantha surveyed the camp, marking down times for things like meals and shift changes. She would pass the information when she got her next resupply. She expected it to be Neil or Jeremy by then. Word would have spread among the senior Eagles on the locations of their women. Angela had also counted on that. Samantha was sure she'd have company before too long. Right now, she didn't want any. Being alone for the start of this was right.

You're not alone.

Samantha chose to make sure her sights were lined up, rather than to respond. It was odd to suddenly have a voice in her head after all these years, reading her memories and thoughts.

The scope's optics gave her a detailed view. Samantha kept the crosshairs on that larger center

tent, sure that's where the boss would be. She didn't have a name for her target or even a rank; she had no photo to work from or even a hint of who he was, but Samantha would know him when he appeared. No matter how organized, a leader had to come out of cover eventually to do normal leading. "You should have picked our side. You brought this on yourselves."

4

Zack tossed the last shovel of dirt onto the mound. They would be finished with this site in the next half hour and then they could head for Safe Haven, showers, and their tents. Today had been as exhausting as yesterday had.

Zack thought about the future moment that would take place here, but he didn't smile even though his team was currently joking about it. This had once been a depot. Angela was counting on the soldiers coming here to supply their army. When they arrived, they would find more than bags and bullets.

"We good here?" Kevin had his clipboard out. "I'm sending an update."

Zack wiped pungent sweat from his face. "All set on the packages. We're adding the ribbons."

Kevin grinned tiredly. "You guys are doing good work. Four sites in one day should be a record."

“With Kenn out there somewhere doing the same?” Zack snorted. “Bet he has in twice as much.”

Kevin shrugged, still chuckling. “Kenn’s no one here now. You know that, Zackie.”

Zack growled, pretending to be upset about the name, but the truth was that he adored being accepted enough for someone to do that. He had good friends here. *Zackie loves Safe Haven*. “Come on. Let’s get to camp.”

“Heads up!”

All of them looked to the guard, who was perched on the edge of a nearby cliff to have a clear vantage point. He was motioning frantically.

Zack didn’t need to decipher it to know what was happening. “Get them out of here!”

Kevin shouted orders, helping to grab loose parts and pieces as an exodus of the area began. Kevin was glad their black Eagle gear blended perfectly with the gray, white, and black landscape around them, but he didn’t relax as he lingered to translate the message from their spotter. His voice said as much as his words. “Forty soldiers. Five minutes!”

Zack hurried his group as quickly as he could, casting anxious glances at the single access road that came into this area. They would have a few seconds of viewing the enemy before the soldiers would be able to see them through binoculars. If they cut it that close, their vehicles might also be heard.

Zack scanned. He saw fresh mounds that had been dug recently and groaned. There was no way anyone would believe this area was untouched.

Zack spotted a shed and a small garage on the edge of the property and ran to them, hoping for a tool they hadn't thought to bring along.

Two shiny rakes gleamed as soon as he opened the door.

Kevin joined him in scouring the area. They started at one side and zigzagged furiously, darting around workers and ducking equipment being removed.

"How long?" Zack tossed debris around like the wind would have.

"Any second now." Kevin threw his rake into the last truck. "We've got it. Let's go!"

Zack grabbed a hand to be pulled into the truck bed. He swept the area as they sped away. "Stop!"

Zack jumped out and snapped a long branch to run back and erase their tire tracks.

He dove into the truck bed as the sound of engines swelled. Their driver eased on the gas to get them out of sight.

A minute later, they were also out of hearing distance, but none of them celebrated. The soldiers were coming for Safe Haven now. All the groups like themselves were in danger.

"We'll tell the boss."

Zack nodded at Kevin's comment, but he didn't respond. Angela had known it would be like this.

She had guards and spotters on the groups to give them time to get out of the way, but Zack didn't think all of her groups would be so lucky. His had been a minute from ruining everything and they were one of the more organized, trained teams out here. It wouldn't go as well for the others if they were surprised this way.

"We're far enough." Kevin motioned for the driver to stop. He waved at two of their companions. "Get word to Angela. I can't send a message with the enemy so close."

One of the men, a faster, quieter Eagle, climbed from the truck and vanished.

Kevin pointed. "Go find out if they camp there. We'll be a few miles ahead."

Another man slipped into the trees and headed back the way they'd come.

Kevin tapped the driver on the shoulder to get them rolling again, wondering where Cynthia was.

5

"We're here."

The sun was high in the sky by the time Marc's group made it back to the cabin. Leaving Charlie and Becky hadn't sat well with Marc. He'd lingered until they were almost behind schedule. Only a sharp remark from Kenn had gotten him going.

Tonya was waiting at the cabin door. She and Kendle had put in a long morning and then split up for different sleeping sites, as per ordered. Now, it

was time to go meet her partner in crime again. “I’m leaving.”

Junit and Natoli, her escorts for a short while, stepped around her as she lingered. Tonya was hoping that Kenn would come in for a quick goodbye.

Kenn surprised them all. “Just go.”

Tonya did, frowning. Kenn wanted her to go back to Safe Haven and resign her post.

“If I have to give Charlie a break, you have to do the same for her.” Marc grunted. “Go catch up to her, idiot.”

Kenn huffed and stomped into the cabin. “I’ll be sleeping.”

“Not until we sort out what came in while we were gone.” Marc went inside to a new, large pile of taped crates and boxes.

Kenn got his notebook out; the two men settled into it, anxious to be finished.

Adrian lingered outside with the guards as they switched shifts. “Any messages come in with the new gear?”

Natoli nodded. “Yes. Our spies say all the soldiers are on the move.”

“Good.” Adrian lit a smoke. “Right where we wanted them to be?”

“So far, yes.”

Adrian let the Indians work as he sat on the steps of the cabin. Marc and Kenn talking through the open door about the gear was a soft babble; his mind went where it wanted. *Angie!*

Monitoring harder now than before he'd found out Charlie's job, Marc caught the plea for attention and quietly stood up.

Kenn, who had been on the receiving end of that look many times, ducked to be out of the crossfire.

Angie!

Marc picked up the nearest object and threw it.

The half a cup of coffee cracked into Adrian's head, shattering into a dozen pieces. Adrian slumped to the damp ground.

Kenn regarded Marc with resignation. "You are gonna try to kill us, aren't you?"

Marc snorted. "Try?"

Kenn dragged Adrian to the cot he'd woken up on, not happy with the irony.

6

"They didn't like leaving us here."

"I know."

Both teens were dressed in warm gear and were well fed on rations, but the feeling of being in over their heads was still bigger than anything else.

"Why did she send me out here? I know you know the truth."

Charlie didn't think it would hurt to tell her. "She knows you're not as recovered as you pretend to be. She says Seth knows better too, but he wants to believe it, so he accepts the act."

Becky had paled and didn't respond right away. Hearing her deepest secret spoken aloud so bluntly was a bit surprising.

"Sorry about that. You want the rest?"

"Yes."

"She said you need to have justice and to be the one to hand it out. She also said you might go too far into the dark side and that I need to keep an ear on your mind."

Becky wanted to deny that she might become a problem in the future, but Charlie didn't let her. "We know better. It's not something to be ashamed of, only a feeling you have to battle."

Becky understood then. Angela knew she was suicidal. "She's giving me a way out that everyone can live with!"

"Please, don't take it. We love you."

Becky burst into tears.

Charlie left her alone, hoping she would get more of the poison out of her system. His mom said Becky wouldn't do it when it came down to it, but after spending a day with her, listening to the awful voices in her mind, Charlie wasn't sure. Becky had a well of pain inside that was deeper than anything he'd ever felt. It would take a lot to keep her from drowning in there.

Becky curled up in her bag and tried to get herself under control so she could sleep. She drifted off almost immediately. Pretending to be happy was tiring.

Charlie watched her for a moment and then contacted his mom to deliver an update on all that had happened. When he was finished, he also sent a quick message to his dad, not wanting Marc to be angry with him.

Marc sighed deeply in his mind. *Worried is not angry. Get some sleep.*

Charlie did that as the dawn came, waking Becky to stand watch. It had been a long night and there were more of them to come.

7

“Hello in the camp. I’m here on orders.”

Seth’s call brought a shadow from a ledge above them, who pointed toward their feet.

Before he could move, a hand shot up and grabbed Seth’s ankle. “Hey!”

The men burst out laughing as Cynthia sat up with her hands out like a zombie.

Seth sat a large kit by her shallow grave, impressed and horrified. “That’s pretty good.”

“Thanks. Tell the boss it’s ready to go out here.”

“I will. You need anything?”

Cynthia shook her head, not opening the bag. “No. You?”

Seth hesitated. “Yeah. Do you know where she is?”

“Yes. You’ll be with her if you stick to your envelopes.”

It was as if Angela was scolding him. Seth let out a curse before stomping down the ravine. He had two more stops after this one, and then he was breaking for the night. Would Becky's camp be one of those stops? He hoped so. There was no way he would sleep tonight without knowing where she was. All he would be able to imagine was her lying under leaves and dirt somewhere like Cynthia had been.

Cynthia waited until the team was out of sight before opening her delivery. The gear in it was too heavy for her to carry this far. It would be left when she had to run. By then, the weapon would either be out of ammunition or destroyed in the fight anyway.

Cynthia quickly set up the portable grenade launcher in the spot she'd already cleared, reciting the steps mentally. Once she pulled the tall blind over it and untied the tree branch that she had secured, the handheld, gas plug operated, semi-automatic, revolving action M32 was invisible. She'd used one a couple of times during her more recent training, but this part of her job wasn't hard. Aim, fire, reload. It was the dying part that might be rough.

Feeling better than she had when she'd dug this hole, Cynthia carefully recovered herself. If she'd fooled Seth's team, the soldiers would go for it too. This was the main road into Safe Haven, the most direct path. They were sure the troops would be thickest here. Angela had surprises all along this street, like Marc had suggested during the one

female team meeting he'd been asked to join. He hadn't liked giving them those deadly answers, but he had delivered a number of ways for females to be lethal. Angela was using all of them.

Cynthia's post was isolated. It would take the soldiers a bit to reach her. The reporter wasn't happy about being alone on the mountain. She also wasn't terrified of it. Angela's orders had mentioned Eagles were in the area if she had to have help. It was a comfort to know that was true, but she was also heavily armed. Even the wind howling through the branches didn't cause panic as it might have before. She'd faced most of those fears since coming to Safe Haven.

As she closed her eyes, Cynthia hoped Kevin was in a better place than she was. Angela had him on protection detail for someone. Cynthia had recognized the gear he'd been packing from a checklist. She didn't know over who or where. She also assumed she had a shadow, but Cynthia didn't think Angela would put them together. It would risk one of them getting distracted and Angela wouldn't do that. It was why Seth and Becky couldn't start out together.

Faced with too much time to think, Cynthia tried to make herself go to sleep. If she thought about what she was doing, about the life she carried and the future she'd almost had, she might not be able to do this.

“Hold up.”

Seth’s team stopped a few minutes after leaving Cynthia, going still and quiet. Voices came to them.

“I heard something.”

“One of ours.”

“You sure?”

Seth recognized the voices and cleared his throat. “Good thing we’re friendly.”

Zack and his men appeared through the trees.

The two teams greeted each other, glad to know they weren’t out here wandering the dim wilderness alone.

Zack gestured. “What’s next?”

Seth opened his next envelope. “Someone will meet us here and they have the next step. We’re supposed to sit tight.”

“I’m here.”

They peered up to discover Tracy straddling a thick tree branch above them. She tossed Seth a wrinkled envelope.

Seth read it. “You’re kidding, right?” He shoved it into Zack’s waiting hand. “I won’t do it.”

Tracy frowned coldly. “Then get back to camp for reassignment. Boss’s words.”

Seth gritted his teeth as the other men complained.

“No way.”

“Is she nuts?”

“We don’t do that. We’re Eagles!”

Tracy was already tired of hearing it. She dropped from the tree and opened her long coat to reveal an outfit a hooker might have worn.

The fighting ceased.

Tracy smoothed the wrinkles from the dress and brushed at her wild hair. "It'll work, right?"

"Yeah, it'll work." Seth, now disgusted with himself as well as Angela, shoved by her. "Let's go."

The sight of Tracy standing there looking like she was about to film a porno was almost more than he could take. Was Becky out here somewhere doing the same thing? "Does Charlie know?"

Tracy nodded, increasing her pace to account for their long strides. "Yes. The teenagers were the only group Angela didn't have to hide things from. She said it was a relief."

Shamed, the men fell silent.

The group walked to the first location on their list. They were now a roving patrol on the western side of Lookout Mountain. Their instructions were to eliminate anyone who came toward Safe Haven by using Tracy as bait for ambushes and traps. While it was devious, it was also hard. None of the men were sure they could do it. As a result, they were a somber group that traveled through the thickets of pine and stacks of nature-forged stone without speaking.

“That’s our ride.”

The large group was happy to hear those words. They’d been walking for hours and only reached their pickup spot a few minutes ago.

The van pulled alongside the resting Eagles. Marc opened the doors with a grin. “Who needs a lift?”

Low cheers echoed as they piled into the crowded van, grinning and laughing when they spotted friends. Zack and Seth’s team were quickly occupied with refilling their supplies, but Seth stayed with Marc, hoping for an update. None of the groups they’d stopped by or come across had had word on Becky.

Marc held out a small envelope. “This is where she’ll be at noon. Boss said not to be late.”

Seth snatched the paper and slammed his tired body into the seat behind Marc. “This is bullshit!”

It was a feeling all of them had experienced today. Marc nodded. “Let’s go. Everyone in?”

The van pulled into the darkness with a full load of men and supplies, all of them deadly in their own way.

Marc heard Seth crumple the paper up and shove it into his pocket. The anger was thick.

Marc wanted to ease the man’s fears by telling him that they’d talked to Becky earlier, but he didn’t. Angela had said it was best to let Seth get wound up this time. Marc hadn’t argued. Angela saw further than he did. If she thought Seth needed to be strung out by the time the fighting started, it

was no problem to accomplish it. “I’m sure she’s fine. Want a juice box? We brought grape.”

“A what?” Seth stared in fury. “You’re kidding, right?”

Marc shrugged. “Sorry.”

Seth fumed in silence as Marc eased on the gas. The sooner that ticking bomb was out of range, the better. If Seth did explode, he would take out an entire block.

Marc surveyed the teams in the mirror, noting that Tracy was being treated like a member of the group and not a whore. He also saw that she had cuts, scrapes, and a nasty bruise on her cheek. He understood she was another piece of bait. He scowled. Angela had refused to explain what her female team was doing. Marc had assumed it was bad, but he trusted Angela to do the right thing. It hadn’t been hard to let it go then. Now, he was seeing these women being used in ways he never would have approved; the concern was growing. *How far will Angela go to win?*

10

Marc shut the van door and clicked the lock into place. They’d reached their final stop of the night and while he needed rest, he wasn’t eager for the dreams. He’d stayed behind to lock up, stalling the moment when someone would shove him into a tent and insist he sleep.

The Indian camp was spread out, with patrols of braves on and off horses, roaming the perimeter. In the center, a giant bonfire was roaring. Natives were dancing and singing. At another time, Marc would have been in the front circle, taking in as much goodwill as he could. Tonight, the drums were an instant headache.

“We’re all set.” Quinn joined him on the short walk into the Indian camp.

Natoli’s people would be their shelter for a few hours and Marc was glad. The still-decorated hunting cabin was getting on his nerves. If he never saw another Christmas tree with dead bulbs and dusty ornaments, it would still be too soon.

Marc spotted an old woman cooking outside a plain teepee. He was drawn there, shunning the rows of tents his men were using.

The woman was holding out a small wooden bowl before he got to her. Marc took it gratefully. “Thank you, Mother.”

The woman didn’t have any teeth, but her grin was warming. She patted his big arm and pointed toward the teepee waiting behind her. “You stay?”

Marc started to say no, then shrugged. “Why not.” He left Quinn standing there in surprise and sank down on the fur pallet with a groan.

Marc dug into the food with his fingers. He didn’t stop until it was gone. Then, he licked his fingers. Nothing that came out of a can ever tasted as good as what a little old woman with an ancient pot could accomplish.

Quinn went to let the others know, thinking Marc's choice was right to stay away when the men got loud and had to be quieted. Their jokes and chatter drew disapproving looks from their Indian hosts. Quinn had to threaten to send them back to Angela before there was peace again. Some lessons were harder than others. Not making noise, even on down time, wasn't easy for most of these men.

Quinn found a place behind Kenn and Adrian, wondering why those two were acting as if they'd had a fight. The two Marines hadn't spoken more than a few words since they were picked up.

Quinn noticed Kyle was absent and assumed that Eagle was still sleeping it off in the rear of the stinky van. He revised his theory when he saw who had guard over the tents behind them. Quinn frowned. Angela was burning Kyle at both ends. Why?

"She knows he'll need it." Adrian looked at Quinn. "Just like you do, like we all will. This won't be a walk in the park."

"When does it begin?" Natoli knew, but his braves wanted it confirmed.

"Any time now." Adrian sighed, accepting a small bowl of the pungent venison stew. "I'm surprised the peace has held this long."

Natoli's men passed that around; the Indians surrounding them immediately began to pack and prepare. Each camp had duties to perform. No one wanted to be the cause of failure.

Quinn gave Kenn a subtle nod and got a glower in return that was also surprising. Quinn shrugged. Kenn was often an ass to him just because he was Marc's new right hand. Why he would pick now to be one, Quinn wasn't sure.

"You wanna walk and talk?" Adrian stood up.

Kenn thought about it, and shook his head. "You go on. I'm good right here."

That drew more attention from both teams. There was an awkward silence where Adrian left, alone.

"What's up with that?" Seth was drawn out of his worry over Becky.

Kenn didn't want to lie, so he chose his words carefully. "Things may not be right with him. I'm checking it out."

Quinn snorted. "Oh, yeah. Look who that's coming from."

Kenn flushed, but didn't defend himself. It told the men around him that he was serious.

"What are you talking about? Adrian's the shit," one of Zack's team said firmly. "Nothin' he can't do."

"Really?" Kenn watched his idol walk into the shadows and vanish. "He can't quit chasing Angela. I had to, and even our new alpha asshole was stopped by the camp, but not Adrian."

There were frowns and furrowed brows, but no denial.

Kenn went on, sounding confused. "He said he isn't one of us; he told me that during the ride here."

Quinn frowned. “What did he mean?”

Kenn found the choice easier than he’d thought it would be. “I...I think he might be a traitor. Maybe he was one all along and we overlooked it to save our skins and have some glory along the way.”

Zack waved, glaring. “That can’t be true. You’re lying.”

Kenn began to repeat the conversation from the truck almost word for word.

Aware of what was going on, Adrian stayed in the shadows. There were questions to be answered and fates to be chosen.

Do I still want it? I’ve screwed most of it up. But there are others, in other lands. I could be that again.

It wasn’t an easy choice for Adrian, but he made the only one that felt close to right.

I’m staying until the end.

And will you give them the truth they think they want? his demon asked.

Adrian nodded, voice like razors. “As soon as she gives the order, I’ll deal out so much truth, they’ll choke on it.”

Chapter Eleven BK5

Wet Work

1

“**W**ake up!”

Jennifer’s demon couldn’t wait to face what she’d spent so long surviving. Her lashes opened to reveal crimson orbs. “You can’t keep me. Better kill me now.”

Donner grinned eagerly. “Oh, I will, have no doubt about that. Now, where were we?”

Jennifer drew in enough air to spit in his face.

She was rewarded with Louis hitting her too hard and knocking her out again. *Success!* she thought as the darkness slammed into her.

Donner shoved up from the table to pierce Louis with inescapable rage.

The Special Forces man dropped heavily to his knees, clutching his throat as he fought for air.

“She brought the witch out! I had her!”

Louis shrieked as Donner roared, blood trickling from his nose and hairy ears.

Donner spun from the room, growling and snorting like something wild.

Everyone stayed out of his way. Donner was the uncontested leader here. Unless one of Safe

Haven's descendants took him out, it would stay that way.

Louis slowly picked himself up off the cold floor, not sure what he'd done wrong.

When Jennifer moaned lowly, Louis dragged her to the crate Donner had insisted on. He dumped her inside, making sure she was breathing as he reveled in the scrapes, bruises, and dried blood on her body. He'd been getting into punishing her every time she displeased Donner. When she'd spit, the urge to tag her temple had been too strong.

Louis held his head as he straightened up, vision swimming. He missed the shadow near the open door as he shut the lid to the crate and left by the opposite exit. He needed a bathroom. *Donner might have made me shit myself. I need to go check.*

The shadow by the door came into the room and advanced toward the crate as quietly as he could.

Conner opened it and slipped a small bundle inside without looking. He could hear her breathing. It would have to be enough. His job was to arm Jennifer, not rescue her. His instructions had made that clear, but it was one of the hardest things that Conner had ever done. If he looked at her, there was no way he could leave her here.

Conner remembered to leave the door open, reasonably sure he hadn't been noticed. Everyone had faded into the woodwork when Donner melted down. Conner had taken advantage of it.

The teenager returned to the vehicle area he was lingering around during their stops. He had to hope no one noticed he didn't have any military training. He was surviving off the supplies in his kit, items that were quickly running low. He was supposed to have a delivery coming. He hoped so because when they arrived, he was going to insist they help him break Jennifer out against Angela's orders.

2

"Sir?"

Donner didn't answer.

The private took a step back. "I'm sorry, sir. I have a message."

Donner grunted, mostly under control now. "What is it?"

"The other two base camps are set up and getting ready, but they don't know what to do with the hostages they've gathered."

"How many?"

"Three in northern camp, one in central. None so far from our western base."

Donner was glad to hear it. Safe Haven wouldn't be guarding from that direction. "Have them transferred here in one daily transport."

"Where do you want them stored?"

Donner shrugged. "Out in the rain, naked and shivering for their army to see. How does that sound?"

The private had paled. "Cruel."

“Excellent. Get on it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Donner turned to the tree line he'd been concentrating on to calm himself. So far, things were going as he'd thought they would, though there were more spies being sent in than he had predicted. All of these first roundups would be attempts to do to the government, what the government had done to them, but Donner wasn't new to this game. He now had three small camps to launch his attacks from. It was time to make contact.

Donner turned around and caught a jerky movement from the corner of his eye, sensing quick, worried thoughts.

He narrowed in on a soldier who clearly didn't belong among them. After a minute, he grinned sarcastically. “Oh, Louis? Come here a minute, will you?”

Conner was taken before he knew they were onto him, grabbed and hauled to the ground where Donner blew a dart into his neck. As he faded, Conner glared at the enemy. “My dad's coming for you.”

Donner laughed. “Tell that cow farmer I'm right here.”

“No farmer,” Conner muttered, trying to hold on. “Mitchel.”

Donner froze. That name was on the top of every fugitive descendant list. Donner felt the winds of fate glance in his direction as he considered the

odds of success. In the end, it was the challenge that made the choice. By accident, he now had Adrian Mitchel's son. If he was careful, and sly, he might be able to turn this all guts, no glory run into a tale that would become his legend.

After Canada, Donner had decided he was going freelance, with thoughts of taking over in some far southern land or even challenging Benjamin at the big bunker, but with two alphas...

Donner made his choice; he didn't care that it would cost him nearly every one of the nine hundred soldiers he had in his command. This was his chance to improve upon the result he'd gotten in Canada. Adrian had gone rogue himself and according to the rumors, that had happened because of Angela. Donner considered it proof of compatibility. They could be forced to send out a Maker's Call. After that, Donner didn't think he would care about bunkers or power anymore. *I'll be going home.*

Still at Donner's side, Louis realized what had happened. He wasn't surprised that Donovan's body was one of those found outside the campsite. The two ammo dumps were already stripped clean, and the third had been a trap that killed all but two of their men. Those soldiers hadn't been all the way to the cave entrance when the explosions had started. Now, the enemy had come in, killed, assumed a hiding place in plain sight, and Louis had fallen for it. Everyone understood why he wasn't in

command of anything. Jobs like these took men like the Major.

3

“I have your spies.”

The evil in that voice would have stunned the listeners if they hadn't already been shocked by the radios suddenly working. All over the camp, in the trees and across the two hundred miles between them, Donner's ruthless words spilled out in a disruption of every activity that was taking place.

“Some of these hostages are being sent to base. The rest will be executed for treason.”

Eagles quickly turned down overlapping volumes and stood silent in thick dread.

“If you attack anymore of my men, I will kill those being held here and elsewhere. Defiance will result in much bloodshed of your kind.”

All those listening waited for the surrender demand, expecting Angela to pop up at any moment. She would defy this hard, merciless man and more of their fighters would die.

“I demand the surrender of the Safe Haven council, all of them that I don't already hold, anyway. You have ten seconds to reply.”

In small camps and groups, people exchanged terrified glances, hearts pounding. The enemy had made first contact and he didn't sound forgiving.

“This is a negotiation attempt. Would you hear terms?” Angela’s voice was cheerful despite the situation.

“I would, if you’re discussing surrender.”

“Terms to be discussed include that.”

Donner’s voice finally showed some signs of life as he chuckled. “So we can meet face-to-face? No, that won’t be necessary. You’ll surrender yourselves.”

“No.” Now, Angela’s voice was as hard as his. “You’ll send a representative here to negotiate.”

“Or what?” Donner expected trouble from her.

“Or, I will shoot myself and Adrian, destroying your mission, ruining your career, and making sure none of these people ever stop trying to kill you, no matter where you land after this mission.”

Shock, outrage, and determination to make her words the truth filled the survivors. Every one of them was handed a tiny victory when Donner caved.

“I’ll send a chopper.”

“We’re ready when you are.” Angela returned to her cheerful voice, but her words were hard. “One man, one guard, and the pilot. We’ll shoot it down if we see more.”

“At noon. In return for my negotiations, you’ll send Adrian Mitchel back with the chopper.”

“Agreed.”

Angela hadn’t hesitated. Donner read the tone. His voice held a deep frown. “Alive. A dead body will earn you the bombing you deserve.”

“And a bombing will earn you a slaughter! My people are everywhere.”

At an impasse, Donner fell back to the deal they’d made. “Chopper at noon. Mitchel sent back on the bird.”

“Agreed. Out.”

Angela hanging up first, on top of the impasse, gave the Eagles some hope. They talked about how badly it could all go, and whether or not Adrian was being given up so easily because he’d come between her and Marc. A few of them also wondered if he was being sent in as an assassin or a decoy.

In Safe Haven, where only a few people remained, Angela stayed in her tent. Donner wasn’t going to be fooled—not in the ways she needed him to be. He had an obsession that she hadn’t counted on, one that was infinitely more dangerous than a bomb. Their losses would go higher than she’d estimated and in the end, it might not matter anyway. Now that she’d read Donner, Angela wasn’t confident her plan would work. Daryl may have been right that she was about to get them all killed.

Angela stayed in her small tent, working on it. Every cloud came with a silver lining. She just had to find this one before the storm slammed into them and drowned everyone.

“Well, that was a great way to find out.” Adrian glared as Marc and Sebastian tied him up. He hadn’t bothered to struggle after seeing how quickly Marc had reacted to those words. The wolfman had known this was coming.

Kenn was already unconscious nearby. When he’d tried to stop them from taking Adrian into custody, Shane had knocked him out with a rag soaked in chloroform.

“She sold you out.” Marc smiled happily. “And not on your surrender terms, either. Gotta admire that.”

“I do!” Adrian snarled. “My son, for yours. Was that the deal?”

“I had no say in that.” Marc shrugged. “But it’s better if Conner isn’t with us, either. He’s like you.”

“Yes, he is. And he heard that. He’ll come for both of you.”

“No, he won’t.” Marc used his sweaty bandana to gag his enemy. “He’ll spend his life trying to rescue you. I know how this bond works now, remember?”

Adrian was forced to shut up as Marc jerked the bandana tight. He began pelting Angela with mental protests.

Marc grunted. “Yeah, she said you’d do that.”

Shane handed him two items.

Marc quickly tipped the bottle into the handkerchief and slapped it over Adrian’s face until the grunting, fighting man sagged in his iron grip.

The Eagles thought about lending a hand, but Marc didn't need the help; they gawked instead.

"Get the jeep." Marc looked around to find that Sebastian had already done it and was pulling up next to him.

Marc lifted Adrian's heavy body over his shoulder to drop him into the seat. He then slid cuffs around Adrian's wrist and pulled out the dart gun Angela had provided through Kyle. The chloroform wouldn't hold their kind for long.

Marc shot Adrian in the neck, loving the feel and wishing it were real. He motioned to the curious Eagle in the driver's seat. "Get him back to our base camp. Angie will handle him from there."

The jeep took off as Marc went to Kenn, who should be waking soon. Unlike Adrian, Kenn's exposure had been minimal. Marc nudged the Marine with his boot. "You up yet?"

Kenn groaned.

Marc settled down across from him to wait. When Kenn woke, they would have a short talk. Kenn would make a choice and then they would go together on the next parts of their mission or he would spend a few minutes burying the body. Either way, Marc didn't care. The worst of this war was about to begin. He didn't have time for forgiveness right now, only justice and vengeance.

“You’ll go in my place, to negotiate,” Donner stated as Philips came into the room and closed the door. “Now that we have Mitchel’s son, it’s time to meet them.”

“What am I negotiating for?”

“Adrian and the woman, the one in charge. Kill the rest of the descendants after those two are secured.”

Philips stilled. “What did you say?”

“Kill them all.” The Major gave his lackey a sharp glower. “Do you have a problem with that?”

You’ve earned your name. Philips knew better than to give any answer except the expected one. “Of course not, sir. I’ll pass it down.”

Donner studied the man with a cold glare before lighting his pipe. When the silence thickened to uncomfortable, the Major pointed to a photo on the folding desk. Everything they were using right now had come with them. The descendants hadn’t left anything usable at the other base. “She is the only one we don’t kill if things go south. Bring her in alive at all costs.”

Philips glanced at the old photo, recognizing a birth scene at a hospital. “How long have you been watching that one?”

Donner snorted. “Decades. We were waiting for her powers to reach full range.”

“And they have?”

Donner laughed, a short, miserable bark that belied the anger inside. “The destruction of the base

and the soldiers was man-built and delivered. She's the equivalent of ten scenes like that."

"Then why not kill her too? She might be able to hurt us."

"We came for her. The others are relics, including Mitchel. *She's* the future."

"What's so special about her?"

"Our spies said she's pregnant. Any offspring of two alpha descendants is rare, but combine it with the most powerful mother and father that we've seen in a hundred years and you can understand why the scientists are screaming for us to bring her in now."

"You mean you had a choice to get her sooner and didn't?"

"Yes. We wanted to see what she would become, what she could do. It's been fun."

"Fun? She's killed hundreds of us with her orders! Thousands soon! She should be eliminated before she brings that power to our front door."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"Then it's a good thing I'm in charge. Get out. I have plans to make."

Philips slipped to the door and exited with a nasty glare thrown carefully over a hunched shoulder. He wasn't anyone important; he hadn't been before the war either. His life didn't matter, only some pregnant whore's did. That stung.

"Is he the right man to send?" Louis was near the window of the small foldout room.

Donner handed him a sheet of paper. “Get the boys rolling as soon as the chopper is in the air. And cut the radio again.”

“Sure. We attackin’ under negotiations?”

“And putting pieces into place. I want one hundred, ten-man teams sent out. Tell them to kill anything that moves. Oh, and get us packed for a bug-out. She knows where I am. We’ll switch base locations.”

Louis didn’t argue. He’d never seen Donner lose an advantage before. He stared curiously.

Donner returned the look. “They’re descendants. It’s not supposed to be like picking someone up for speeding.”

“Then it’s normal? You losing the edge like that?”

Donner was already tiring of the questions. He turned toward the back room. “Let’s make sure. Wake the girl.”

Louis went in a hurry. He’d been thinking about it all day. Taking her clothes hadn’t done the trick and neither had beating her, but Louis had noted her reaction when she’d thought Donner was going to rape her. That was the trick to bring that witch right out and make up for his earlier mistake. “Want me to get her set for you?”

“Yes. I’ll be there in a few minutes. I want to check on the son and be sure he’s still out. Reports we’ve collected say some descendants are nearly immune to the drugs and wake quickly.”

Louis didn't hear the last part. He was already on his way to the crate. Donner would only give him five minutes, but Louis planned to be finished in three. He'd take it easy on her though, and swear not to do it again if she cooperated. If she refused, he would become...insistent.

“Louis?”

Louis stopped, freezing. “Yeah, boss?”

“Wait for me to bring the boy in to watch your...fun. It'll be more effective that way.”

“You got it!” Louis spun into the room with one hand already opening his belt.

He drew up at the sight of the open crate and the naked girl in front of it holding a gun.

He opened his mouth to shout.

Jennifer pulled the trigger.

As he fell, she began to cackle wildly. “Oh, Boss man!”

Donner stopped as soon as he heard the single shot, immediately forming a different plan. As clear as it was, he had no doubt where it had come from. Either the girl was loose or her protector had come. Probably both.

Donner drew his gun as he stepped into the room where they had Mitchel's son stashed. When she came to release him, Donner would grab her.

“Hiya, Major!”

The cheerful voice was unexpected despite what Donner had told his men about some of them being immune to the drugs. The Major ducked too late.

The dart plunged into his neck as a gun went to his temple.

“Well played, kid. But I’m immune.”

Surprised by the same thing that had given him the advantage, Conner had no defense against the nasty gut punch that nearly knocked him out.

Donner slammed his weight down on the dazed boy and got him cuffed and gagged. He stood up, turning around to find the door swinging open and the barrel of a gun entering the room.

6

Jennifer raked her knife across the last drunken man’s throat without blinking and then moved to the next room. She’d found the officer’s quarters. She was taking out as many of them as she could before the full alarm was called. If she were caught, she would be beaten, raped, and killed before Donner could rescue her. It was an amazing feeling as she stabbed into the next throat with a huge grin on her bloody face.

The soldiers were taking advantage of the lack of supervision and drinking on their shifts. As a result, there were passed out and hung-over men scattered everywhere. *Easy targets.*

The final room was a shower setup. She stepped inside and closed the door as happy male voices echoed from the portable locker room she was advancing toward.

“Remember. Packing first, invisible threats second, everyone else last.” Jennifer put her knife in her mouth and raised the gun. She checked to be sure it was fully loaded, safety off, and that the mag in her other hand was turned in the right direction.

Then she went inside.

7

The gunshots from the opposite end of the compound told Donner that his visitor was friendly. He gave the door a vicious kick. “Get in here!”

Philips came in with a pale face. “What the hell’s going on?”

Donner snarled his rage as he lifted Conner and dropped him across Philips’s shoulder. “Follow me. If he dies or escapes, shoot yourself before I can.”

As the two men took off running toward their parking area, Philips understood the Major was fleeing. He didn’t argue. There were reports of men in the trees behind the base, but those awful screams were coming from *inside* their portable walls.

Gunfire cracked out again, to the south this time.

Donner got them flying toward the gate. As they rammed through it, Conner woke up and started to struggle, but it was too late. The jeep vanished into the thick woods.

Behind them, the small base camp was alive with screams. Donner had kept three-dozen men for

protection. Jennifer killed them herself, stalking through the camp that hadn't even been warned of the breach. Silent and still naked, the moment of surprise during each encounter allowed her success where it would have taken a dozen men who wouldn't have all survived.

8

On the perimeter of the now burning camp, two groups of Eagles waited for the signal. Their inside man was supposed to give a shout or a whistle when they were ready for help, but it hadn't come.

"Should we keep waiting?" Like the others, Zack was listening to the screams and gunfire that was now sporadic.

Based on helping to load the van before they left, Jeff had a good idea who was inside. "It's not safe right now. We had a long march here. Let's sit outside the front gate so we're in clear view."

"You're kidding, right?"

More screams came from inside the building they were behind.

Seth waved his men out into the open, agreeing. "No, he's right. That's one of ours in there causing all that noise. If he sees shadows outside, he may assume we're the enemy as well."

Point taken, all of the men moved toward the front gate in a quick, nervous pace.

The front gate was already wide open, with two bodies sprawled face down in front of it. Puddles of

blood and red footsteps were haunting sights through the blowing grit. It looked like three of the smaller foldouts were on fire.

Zack pointed toward a rear shed. “That’s where we were.”

They all swept the shadows for movement, and were rewarded with the sight of Jennifer, naked except for a blood coat, stepping from the farthest door. She spotted them right away and placed a finger to her lips. She then pointed down at the small porch she was standing on.

Under the porch, a single soldier was cowering, trying not to make any noise. The Eagles could see him shivering in fear.

Zack thought of interfering.

Jeff sensed it. He put a hand on the higher ranked man’s arm. “Please, don’t do that.”

Horried, they watched Jennifer stalk the hiding soldier, herding him to the side of the wood that was weaker, with gaping cracks. When she slithered over the railing to keep him from seeing her coming attack, Zack turned away. “I can’t watch this.”

Seth and Jeff weren’t about to look away with all their men to witness it. They both narrowed in on Jennifer as she leapt at the soldier who’d thought she was gone.

Seth was the only one surprised when Jennifer went for the throat, teeth clamping down with a delighted growl that twisted stomachs. She was already covered in crimson; it rained down her now

like a hose being sprayed. She moaned in delight as the soldier shuddered in her grip and tried to scream through his ripped out throat.

Seth spun away and puked.

Jeff raised his gun a bit, not sure if they were all in danger.

Jennifer glared at him, orbs glowing vivid crimson.

All the men felt scolded for their revulsion when she put her nose in the air and disappeared back inside the main building.

Chapter Twelve BK5
Go For The Throat

1

Kyle came to a stop directly in front of the burning base, not concerned about being out in the open when he saw the large group of Eagles clustered there. He opened the door and stepped from the empty vehicle, glad of the sleep Marc had insisted he be left alone to get. He'd exited the Indian village feeling almost alive again.

Zack met him. "We're waiting for one more."

Kyle looked at his watch and clipboard. "We're already ten minutes behind."

Zack looked toward the burning base. "I know, but we're waiting for one more."

"Who?" Kyle assumed their mission had gotten rough and their one man was likely dead.

Zack didn't want to say. It was in his stony face and averted eyes.

"Come on, man." Kyle smiled lightly. "You're acting like its Jenn—"

Zack pointed.

Kyle's mouth dropped open as the smoke near the gate parted to reveal Jennifer coming through the smoky debris. "Are you kidding me?!"

Jennifer flashed an evil glare that told Kyle his sweet girl wasn't in control. His blood began to boil. "She did this?"

"Had it going before we got here and never called for help," Zack noticed there was gore between her toes and then wished he hadn't.

"She didn't need any help." Jeff wondered if Crista was out here somewhere, doing these crazy things, and found he didn't like it. Usually, he was happy that she was also an Eagle, but not for this.

Instead of the revulsion that Angela had worried over, there was admiration on nearly every other face. Those who didn't admire it were only upset that their chance for glory had been stolen. It was the senior members who understood what the cost could be in the end.

"Okay, people. Time to open our next envelope." Jennifer held out a hand toward Kyle.

He placed the 'spy' envelope in her bloody hand angrily.

Jennifer's witch cackled cruelly as she turned toward Seth. "Major Donner is traveling east. He has Conner. Tell whomever you should and let's get rolling. We're behind schedule."

Zack tried to break the tension. "We wouldn't be if you'd shared."

Jennifer laughed, a hard sound much unlike what they were used to. "Sorry. Got greedy. I will next time."

Kyle stared in horror as Jennifer went behind a stand of trees to wash and change, while the Eagles

laughed and offered encouragement. What had Angela done? Was she letting all the descendants out this way? Didn't she know how dangerous that was? How hard it would be to settle them down?

"What's your role?" Seth wasn't sure who was in charge with their top Eagle here.

Kyle ripped open his envelope and read it aloud. "I'm driving you all to the nearest camp. Jennifer will stay with you."

Everyone waited for Kyle to argue, but he was stronger than he was being given credit for. The mobster stomped into the van. "Let's go."

The men climbed into the van, cramming in to fit. It left the small stool by Kyle for Jennifer. She settled onto it with her legs spread, her kit between them.

Kyle grimaced. This wasn't what he wanted.

"But it is what I want." Jennifer looked at him through her witch's hot eyes. "I need this Reece. We'll talk about you and me later."

Kyle angrily got the van moving. When Jennifer placed a hand on his in comfort, he shrugged it off.

She wanted to let him sulk, confident he would come around. Having a woman who could fight had to be better than one who was a burden, right? But Jennifer also didn't like being ignored. When she was doing it to Kyle, it was almost fun. Now that she was on the other end of it, the frustration was disheartening. Was this what he felt like when she did it? Did he care this much?

Why do I care? He cheated, and I used him to become an Eagle so I can protect my daughter. He'll hurt me in the end.

But when the van hit a bump and their legs brushed, Kyle glanced down at her with a naked need that she welcomed. Talking to Becky about her and Seth had helped, but mostly, it was Kyle who was swaying her. He never pushed, never crossed any line she wouldn't accept, and he asked for nothing in return except for her presence in his life. Jennifer wanted a moment like that now, something to help both of them get through this, but she wasn't sure how to do it. If she were too open, he would think she wanted to be physical. If she didn't do anything, this sullen silence would continue.

Jennifer spotted a rough patch in the road and let the bump carry her instead of bracing against it as she had been. It tossed her against Kyle, who caught her automatically.

As he swung her gently back toward her place, Jennifer held onto his arm.

Kyle stiffened in surprise...then slowly curled his arm around her shoulders.

Behind them, the van stilled.

Jennifer glanced around. "Mind your own Ps and Qs!" She leaned against Kyle's side as he rested his arm against the softness of her braid. He twined his fingers into it almost absently, lost in the feel of her leaning against him. He'd only been close to her like this a few times. It was as good as he'd remembered.

Conversations slowly resumed, but eyes stayed on the couple. The age rules were working so far, but everyone was watching for violations. Now that Jennifer was a cold killer, they weren't sure if she had to be guarded anymore.

Jennifer yawned, lulled by the drive.

Kyle shifted so that she could lay her head on the seat by his leg. She smiled gratefully and quickly fell into snoozing. His fingers on her shoulders were a warm comfort.

"When can we stop watching them?" Jeff clearly meant more than Jennifer and Kyle. He loathed spying on Seth. He often read a book during that shift.

In the next seat, with his feet on the window ledge, Zack shrugged. "When she says so."

Jeff understood Zack meant Angela, but he disagreed, tired of the chore. These were grown men with willing females. They didn't need to be policed. Those who broke the rules would be shot.

Zack's thoughts were on the females who would be hurt by taking the chance. With no one guarding them, the older men would take advantage simply by their levels of intelligence. Angela didn't want to let these men create their own timid, subservient wives. She needed killers who would fight by their mate's side and so far, that's exactly what she was getting. "You hear anything?"

Jeff shook his head. "Didn't ask."

Zack could have asked if anyone on the van had information about Crista, but he didn't. At some

point, Jeff would realize what an idiot he was being by staying away. Until then, Crista would get to see exactly what her man was like when he got upset. Zack was reasonably sure if his wife had gotten that option, they never would have married.

“Be careful, Jeff. Be sure you don’t need it before you throw it away.” Zack stood up and went to the front of the van before Jeff could respond. Zack didn’t think of himself as a contender, but he liked Crista enough to hope she chose a different protector. Jeff was selfish. The thought of him coddling a pregnant woman or a child was impossible to envision.

Jeff was thinking along the same lines. He liked his life the way it was; he didn’t want to make room for a baby. It hadn’t ever been in his plans. Women had put down traps before, but he’d always recognized them. This time, he was lost. Crista was more than he could handle and the thought of a baby too was overwhelming. “Can’t stay though, if I don’t *stay*.” The camp would make him an outcast if he didn’t step up here and do the right thing. So he either did that or left.

You could die, the voice inside suggested heartlessly.

Jeff stared out the window, torn between self-pity and outrage. Intentional or not, he was trapped.

Allan frowned. “He still stewin’?”

“Yeah.” Zack didn’t add more.

Allan shrugged. “He knows the difference between a man and a boy. He’ll own up.”

“I hope not.”

Allan grunted. He and Zack had come to their awareness of the evil inside together, at roughly the same time. The two former abusers shared the same shame and determination to atone, but Allan was surprised by Zack’s comment. He had thought it would take much longer for Zack to admit. “Why would you say that?”

“He’s not good enough for her. She thinks it’s the other way around, but he’s a user. I know the type.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” Allan pulled himself up to scan their radioman. “I was hoping to see you two fighting over her.”

Zack stared in surprise. “I don’t...”

Allan lifted a brow. “Not at all?”

“Kyle and Neil’s team always get first pick. You know that.” Zack sighed. “Plus, I have the boys, you know. No woman wants that type of hassle.”

“Well, maybe you’re right. I’m sure she’ll be fine with Jeff.”

Zack took the dismissal easier than the words. He tossed himself into his seat with a sour expression and confused, scattered thoughts. He didn’t feel that way about Crista. *Do I?*

Allan snickered, wondering if it was wrong for him to enjoy the manipulating so much. Zack had three sons who needed a mother and whether it was Crista or some other Safe Haven hen, that man

needed to learn to forgive himself for the mistakes he'd made and pick a mate. It would give him a little peace and go a long way in taming his wild offspring, something everyone needed. Allan considered his own love interest and fell into his favorite fantasy, not seeing the apocalyptic landscape that rolled by.

2

“Faster!”

Donner wouldn't let his driver slow down until the safety of their secondary base came into view. The cliff walls along this camp gave him little comfort, however. Donner kept his gun out as they moved inside the fold out camp of curious men to unload their prisoner.

Philips came to meet them, surprised at their arrival. He'd only been here a few minutes himself, just long enough to hear about fresh sightings of the wolf called Dog, Indian scouts coming closer, one report of a camp of Mexicans moving toward Safe Haven's location, and a rumor that Marcus Brady was actually alive and running that camp. “I thought we were supposed to bring the hostages to you?”

Donner ignored him, shoving Conner into a shed and slamming the door. He then went to the closest building.

Philips moved aside for the stomping Major to shove his things off the main desk before plopping

down in the chair. He yanked his kit off and dumped it onto the desk, clearly rattled.

Philips left the room, heading for the Major's driver to find out what had happened. In the excitement, he forgot about his update.

“One girl?”

The driver nodded, taking this moment to wipe the blood off his hands. He'd lost two good friends back there, finding them after their throats had been cut. “One witch.”

Philips scowled. “You don't believe that...”

The driver turned away, leaving Philips to gape. How had he missed all the noise?

“Damn mountain and weird echoes.” He swept the crags around them, then glanced toward the shed where their new captive had been tossed, but he didn't go near it. Interfering with whatever Donner did now was likely to get him killed.

Philips settled into his cramped quarters to wait. At some point, Donner would begin screaming out orders. Until then, Philips would rest and pretend he hadn't signed up for this madness. He still wanted everything Donner had promised; he just didn't want to do all the work required to achieve it.

3

“He just rolled in. You ready?”

Becky nodded. “I'll wait five minutes, and then start.”

“Don’t forget to use the mirror to get their attention first,” Charlie reminded the nervous girl. “Keep going until you can hear their boots, then get under cover.”

“I will.” Becky took off her jacket. “You be careful.”

Charlie swallowed, looking away from that mature body. “You too.” He trotted down the hillside, staying in the cover of the trees. He was now sure Becky would draw enough attention. He’d never viewed an outfit with less cloth.

It took Charlie almost the full five minutes to reach the small camp below them. Their envelopes this morning had said to rescue the hostage on this base. Last night’s orders to do recon had told them which buildings the prisoners would be held in, and given them a simple plan. As long as they stuck to it, everything would go fine. Up to the ambushing part, anyway. Charlie wasn’t sure how that was supposed to work, but he assumed his mom meant for them to use magic. Charlie had no problem with it. As he neared the soldier’s camp, voices became clearer.

“Look at that!”

“Is she naked?!”

“What’s going on?”

Charlie eased closer, staying low.

“A girl, sir!”

“You sighted the enemy and didn’t call it in?”

“She’s just a girl. Lonely!”

There was lewd laughter and crude remarks that made Charlie's ears burn, but it also told him Becky was doing well.

“Well, let's go up and get her!”

“Hell, yeah!”

“No! Follow orders.”

“We'll just be a second! Don't snitch!”

Boots ran off.

Charlie slipped inside the perimeter and over to the small shed. He opened the final door to find Conner on his knees, glowering through his gag and bound hands.

Charlie quickly helped the boy up. “Let's go, huh?”

Conner grunted. They didn't pause for more, not even to remove his gag or ropes. As they came around the side of the small shed, Neil was there to wave them into the cover of the trees; they all vanished as if they'd never existed.

4

Donner hadn't thought he could lose control so quickly. It had only been two days. He was still in the beginning stages of his plan. How were the rebels so far ahead of him already? They had a dozen spies among the Eagles, but not a hint had come about the ambush.

Donner frowned. Had it been an ambush or had the girl simply lucked into the opportunity?

“They tried to kill *me*.” Donner’s laughter spilled out into the hall and rolled through the small base camp. “Oh, you little vixen! You wanna play? We’ll play.”

Donner jerked a drawer open and pulled out a notebook. “Philips! Get in here.”

The man appeared in the doorway, keeping his distance.

Donner gestured curtly toward the other chair. “Sit.”

Philips did, but he was already sure he wanted no part of whatever Donner was writing, just like he wanted no part of what would happen to the dancing girl when their now AWOL men found her.

“Act like nothing happened. We have no idea what smoke they saw or what their guard reported. We still have the girl and Mitchel’s son.”

Philips nodded, not saying the Safe Haven people would read his thoughts and know he was lying.

“That’s why Trey and Sergeant Wallz will handle it. They’re members of my personal team. You’ll appear to be their guard and bring me this information about her camp.”

Philips scanned the list, feeling a little better about his role. All he had to do was stay beside the chopper and appear mean.

“These Safe Haven people are honorable. You’ll be safe as long as you don’t open fire.” Donner looked up, sarcastic. “And you won’t without reason, will you?”

Philips shook his head, not sure why it made him feel guilty to make that choice. “No, sir. I won’t.”

“Another reason *my* men will do this job. You keep your gob shut.”

Philips nodded again, waiting for more.

Donner waved a hand. “Go beat that Mitchel kid for a while. I want to hear his pain or you’ll take his place.”

Philips left with glares and clenched teeth. If he argued, Donner might send him back to the bunker. Nothing good waited for him there. Hardening his heart, Philips motioned two beefy men with him and went to where the teenager had been dumped. “I’m a soldier. I follow orders.” Removing his jacket, Philips stepped inside the shed.

“Son of a bitch!” Philips spun back out. “He’s gone! Security breach! We have a breach!”

Donner came running, joining Philips at the door.

Pop! Pop!

Nearby gunfire rattled by them, taking out the radio pole they’d put up, and the communications tent. A jeep exploded; a shed flamed.

Donner realized he’d been driven into a second setup. “You bastards!”

Donner snatched Philips by one arm and a panicking soldier who tried to run, in the other iron grip. He shoved them both toward the nearest jeep that Sergeant Wallz was sliding into. “Get us out of here. Now!”

Philips was a good driver. He had little trouble avoiding the gunfire and the shadowy figures throwing knives and swinging pipes, but he had to hit his own men to do it.

The jeep ran them down and then left them behind as Neil and his team advanced from their cover in that deadly V.

5

Forced to wait in the thicker cover of the cliffs and trees, Conner and Charlie waited for it to be over so they could find out what had happened and who was where. In the chaos, Conner did manage to ask Charlie how he'd gotten to this base, but neither boy could answer it. Charlie wasn't allowed to say and Conner had woken somewhere else. All he could think about was Jennifer. *Did she escape? Did I leave her there to die?*

When the others finally joined them, Jeremy bleeding from a trim along his arm, Conner's patience had run out. "I have to go." He headed for one of the few army jeeps that had survived.

"Hang on. Open your envelope first." Neil had reread his own instructions a few times before believing it. He wasn't about to be the one to deliver that news.

Conner tore it open impatiently, hoping it would set his fears to rest. He scanned it quickly, face growing red. "She did what?!" Conner glared at

them with his demon's hot eyes. "She gave them my dad."

Neil and Jeremy showed no surprise. They were two of Angela's more informed people at this stage.

Conner snapped. "You knew!" He dove at the Eagles, fists swinging wildly. "You traitors!"

Jeremy clipped him on the jaw, stunning the teenager. He spun the dazed teen toward Charlie. "Get your friend under control."

Charlie was ecstatic at the news about Adrian. He shook his head and stepped back. "I was told not to interfere with the hostages."

Neil sighed, seeing Conner was getting set to lunge again. "Fine, but remember that when you get a shift carrying him."

Conner quickly reevaluated the situation and took off running toward the tree line.

Jeremy started to go after him, but Charlie caught his arm. "She wanted it this way."

Neil frowned. "You sure, kid? He's a lot like his old man, you know? Dangerous."

Charlie nodded, watching Conner vanish into the trees below where Becky was supposed to be. "Yes, but I trust my mom. I was told not to interfere. You shouldn't either."

Neil motioned his team to go to their next stop. Behind them, the small base was being set on fire so any soldiers who had survived couldn't use it. The men who'd gone after Becky wouldn't find her. They would return to destruction and no authority. *If* Becky let any of them live. She wasn't supposed

to, but Charlie thought maybe she was starting to like the job they'd been given. The three men who were probably still trying to find her hiding place might not like it if she did come out.

6

Becky was in plain view, sitting on a boulder when they arrived. She was going through the kits stacked at her feet. The Eagles didn't see blood or bodies, but all of them were sure the trio of soldiers was dead.

Becky didn't look up from her looting, voice flustered. "My envelope says to send you all on your way. I'll catch you later."

Dismissed, the grumbling men kept walking, not doubting the orders had come from Angela.

Charlie lingered, not wanting to leave her behind.

Becky glared. "Do your job and I'll do mine."

Sighing, Charlie opened his envelope, hoping his mom said to follow her and keep her safe.

Get to your dad. ASAP!

Charlie shoved the paper into his pocket and looked down at Becky, but she was busy dividing the new items into her kits. He stomped off without saying anything else.

Becky looked up. "He's gone now."

Tracy came down the tree, glad this part of the plan was over. Going around half dressed wasn't

what she'd signed up for. "We're going south. Then we wait for the others."

Becky nodded, suddenly wondering where Seth was. "My paper says to be there by noon. Let's roll."

The two females traveled south with quick, alert steps that took them by a pile of bodies that had been stabbed or impaled repeatedly.

Tracy didn't ask how Becky had accomplished it without getting any blood on herself.

Becky wouldn't have answered. Some secrets were too personal, some gifts too violent, to be talked about as if they were idle chatter topics. Plus, she still wasn't sure herself. She needed to sit down with Angela when this was all over. If there was an after. Despite their small successes, Becky still didn't have hope. Rick had killed that for her.

7

Donner was rattled, but not so much that he didn't understand he was being herded. He slapped the driver on the shoulder shortly after the gunfire faded. "Turn toward their camp. We'll bunk with our men on the front lines."

The driver veered them that way, not arguing. After barely escaping twice in just a few hours, the front lines were safer. The jeep sped up the rough incline.

Donner held on as they bounced around. No one had been on these roads since right after the war from the way it felt. He began to relax. He would

settle among the fighters and spend the night planning a fast attack during the negotiations. He looked at Philips now. “You’ll still go in as... Damn it! Duck!”

Gunfire sprayed the jeep, hitting Philips in the eye and wounding their unwilling private.

Sergeant Wallz hurriedly slid behind the wheel and rotated them to clear a line of rifle fire, but there was nothing he could do for Philips.

“You gonna live?” Donner barked.

Holding his bleeding arm, the private shouted, “I hate you, sir!”

Donner laughed hard, unceremoniously shoving Philips’s corpse from the vehicle. “Didn’t like him anyway.”

Donner again kept his gun in hand as they neared the next base camp, shouting orders before he hit the portable gate. “More security! They’re in the rocks and bushes!”

Soldiers flooded the area; dogs and men barked eagerly.

Donner felt control slip back into place. He assumed the hard stride and tone that had bluffed his own men for so long, wishing his full team had arrived already. Not that they were familiar with these tactics. Descendants always fought fair, always kept their word. Donner now suspected Safe Haven’s leader wasn’t the saint the government files had led him to believe. Unlike Adrian, who’d taken decades to bend, Angela had apparently

succumbed to evil in mere months. The only question that Donner didn't have an answer for was why she was still protecting the weaklings.

Donner ignored the wounded private who was declaring his grievances to the new men. Donner stormed through the camp, calling orders and taking charge. "Come morning, we head for Safe Haven!"

The resulting cheer of bored, restless males drowned out the Private's complaints. It echoed off the walls of the mountain, where it rang into the valleys below and the cliffs above.

8

Samantha adjusted the sight on her rifle carefully, heart thumping. She put her eye to the scope, pulling until she felt the trigger notch. She was ready.

Her target stopped to take a canteen from a passing soldier... Samantha had to fight her nature to follow her orders instead. She aimed for a wound instead of a kill.

Donner grunted as the bullet slammed through his thigh and hit the soldier sitting on the ground. It went through the unfortunate boy's forehead and opened a hole that Donner hadn't ordered put there. It enraged him. "Come down here and fight me, you cowards!"

Another bullet flew toward him.

Donner moved too late, taking a second slug in the same leg. He fell, screaming.

The soldiers rushed to get him into a jeep, as they'd been taught to do with officers. *Brass, then your own ass.*

“Find them!” Donner clutched the jeep with a bloody grip as Sergeant Wallz sped down the hillside.

The soldiers who had been in combat before knew that by the time they scouted the area, the sniper would be gone, but they went anyway. Orders were orders.

Samantha hurriedly put her weapon away and wrapped herself in the blind, not trying to evade them. They would know it had been a sniper, but hopefully they would think that person had fled after wounding the Major.

Samantha didn't let herself gloat over the beautiful shots. It was hard to feel good about letting him live. She was sure it would come back to haunt them.

When the boot steps came, Samantha had almost dozed off from the stiff adrenaline crash. She stayed in that dream-like state as the two teams of soldiers passed right under her without looking up. She didn't think she could have been spotted anyway, but it was a bit like hiding in that dank basement again, except in her favor this time.

As the soldiers faded from sight, complaining about their chore, Sam let herself sleep. She didn't

have to be in the new place until dawn and it had been a long wait to fire those two short shots.

9

“There he is.”

The team of Eagles watched the jeep fly into the large base camp with a clearly wounded passenger. When they saw the soldiers snap to attention and follow the wounded man’s orders, it was proof of their target.

Jeff read from the group envelope they’d opened upon arriving half an hour ago. “It says to sit tight and pass communications until they move on Safe Haven.”

Seth stared at the busy camp in frustration. He’d been told Becky would be here at noon, but there wasn’t any sight of her. They were waiting on a narrow ledge directly above an enemy camp that was lined with trees. They were up far enough to be out of sight and sound, but still view their target.

“Hey, there’s something on the other side.” Jeff was still reading the detailed plans. “When the girl gets here, provide an escort, but do not interfere with her duty.”

Seth knew what it was right then, but Becky stepped from the thick trees and he was too relieved to yell at her.

Becky slid into Seth’s arms and let him hold her too tightly, too possessively. She’d deal with it when the time came, but for now, they both needed

a little comfort. It had only been a short time apart, but she was exhausted.

Seth could feel her weariness. “You got time to eat and sleep?”

“We don’t leave until dawn.” Tracy smiled at Zack when he pointed at his small tent. “Thanks. I’m beat.”

She ducked inside as Seth took Becky to his own canvas, leaving the others to pass a peaceful shift on duty over the enemy camp.

10

“I’m worried.”

“About the baby.”

Cynthia waited for the words she was scared to hear.

Angela delivered them as gently as she could.

“Yes, it will be a danger to everyone around you.”

“How can I—”

“You can’t.” Angela softened her tone, but it didn’t change the answer. “You’re not a descendant. The baby is. You’ll never be strong enough to control him.”

“And will he be...like his father?”

Angela’s witch blazed through with brutal accusation. “Worse. He will fall into government hands and become a plague upon the earth. Kill him now!”

Cynthia gasped, jerking herself awake. She was glad of the military sleep system she was wrapped in as the dirt shifted. The dream had startled her. She wasn't sure if she'd been communicating with Angela or blowing off worry during her sleep.

Her hand went to her stomach, where not even a lump proclaimed her child yet. Was her dream the future to come? Any child of Adrian's would be powerful. Why wasn't Conner bad or even Jennifer's offspring?

Only one of them lived. Nothing could be ruled out yet. She needed to talk to Angela.

Cynthia felt the breeze stiffen, moving dirt. The leaves rustled as if a giant above her had let out a long-suffering sigh. The hair on her neck stood up as she sensed what was coming.

You have talked with me, Cynthia. I'm sorry.

Still buried in the ground, the reporter cried herself to sleep.

The Winds Are Blowing

1

Kyle took the message from Shane to put it with the others. Once he'd brought Jenny's group out here and dropped them off, he'd made two more stops before coming back. With darkness, exhaustion had returned. He'd never thought he could get so tired just from being behind the wheel. "Do you have my next orders?"

Shane handed him a small envelope, feeling almost as run down as Kyle looked. "She's got a lot of us on break overnight. Maybe you too."

Kyle ripped his envelope open. "Be safe out there."

"You know it." Shane left the glow stick-marked van to rejoin his group.

Kyle was parked in the center of three zones that held Safe Haven teams. They would be bringing him messages all night, according to his new orders. He was to stay here and sleep between visits. Kyle immediately made sure he was under good cover, got settled, and went to sleep.

He'd only been out a couple minutes when female voices roused him from his weary stupor. "Jenny?"

“Mail for the boss.”

Kyle recognized Tonya’s voice. He forced himself to sit up. “Leave it with me.”

Tonya handed him the two folders, then climbed into the van. She took up a guard position near the rear windows. “I was told to let you sleep between visits.”

Tonya was ready to sleep as well. She would have to work hard to stay awake. She and Kendle had lured small fire teams into ambushes all day, not actually exchanging gunfire, but being seen enough to lead them toward Eagles. Kendle hadn’t been happy with not being directly involved, so Tonya now had blood to scrub out of her hair from the island woman finding her own targets. “Kyle? You hear me?”

Kyle couldn’t answer. His eyes were glued to the group coming out of the darkness. Jennifer led it, once again covered in dried blood and little else.

Kyle felt fresh adrenaline flood his system and stood up. “You sleep first. It’s wasted on me now.”

Jennifer was braced for Kyle’s anger and arguments, but the sight of him swaying on his feet with clenched fists brought out her compassion. She went to him with a smile. “Where can I clean up?”

Kyle blinked. “Don’t you have...”

“After I’m clean and you hold me for a while. Okay?”

Kyle became aware of the fearful gestures he was getting behind her back. “Fine. Come on.”

Jennifer yanked her arm from his light grip, even though he hadn't tried to pull her. "Tell me where I can clean up!"

Kyle wasn't sure how to react, except to give her what she wanted. "Behind the van. I'll get the water."

Jennifer went that way with her head held high. He wasn't going to push her around in front of other people. She didn't like it. She didn't have to take it.

Kyle watched her go without moving, stunned by the difference. "That's not Jenny."

"Yeah," Zack agreed lowly. "We had the same thought, so we didn't argue when she wanted to keep the...coating on. Good luck."

"What happened?" Kyle assumed she'd been hurt and snapped.

Zack filled in what he knew as he got Kyle moving toward the van to get the water. It was making Zack nervous to keep Jennifer waiting. "When we got to the camp, it was like she didn't need us again. We never went inside, man."

Kyle didn't believe it. "By herself? Against two-dozen armed soldiers? Yeah, sure."

Zack stopped, growing angry. He was also tired. "You believe what you want, but you keep her calm and happy, or me and the boys will tie your ass up and gag you."

Zack left Kyle standing there with his mouth open. *What the hell?*

Zack joined his team as they set up a small perimeter around the van, avoiding Jennifer's

bathing area until she was finished. When she stepped into the van, clean, with only Kyle's thick jacket wrapped around her, few of them bothered to steal a glimpse. She was too scary to be sexy.

"Incoming." Zack watched new shadows break away from the trees with tired movements. "Ours."

Kyle went to meet them.

The two Indians were carrying a struggling bundle, both men panting and grunting with the effort.

Kyle yanked the rear door of the van open when they went in that direction, wincing as a body hit the van floor with a hard thump. *Must not be one of ours.*

The groan that came from under the bag had Kyle reaching out to remove the covering before either of the guards could stop him.

Adrian glared hatefully, gagged and bound.

Kyle recoiled, shocked. He looked around. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?!"

2

"Can you talk about your runs?"

Becky wasn't sure that was a good idea, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings. She settled for shrugging. "Some of it."

They were in Seth's tent, following orders that had implied this might be their last night together. "What do you want to know?"

Seth recognized the moment. He'd used the same tone a few days ago with an Eagle who hadn't cleared Angela's security list yet. Seth didn't think there was a problem, but until the boss gave the okay, Kip would remain outside the loop. He'd been left at Safe Haven, where Tommy had instructions to shoot him if there was reason to. This was the time they were most likely to find out why he'd failed his security check. "I don't like this."

Becky didn't argue. She hadn't liked it either, but after only a couple days, she was feeling stronger and that did matter to her. Instead, she told him about her first mission.

Seth almost couldn't stand to listen. The fear and doubt he'd expected, but the excitement and eagerness to go out and do it again tomorrow was sickening. And he couldn't even tell her that was how he felt. The Eagles were expected to be fully supportive of the females who were brave enough to join and tough enough to make the cut. Those who spoke against it were often made outcasts until they switched their views. Seth wasn't sure he could do it.

"I don't know how," Becky said, drawing his attention back without realizing she'd lost it. "But I didn't even get any blood on me."

Seth didn't know what to say. He held her tighter.

"I'll try to figure it out next time."

"You're sure about doing this?"

"Yes." Becky slid a hand under Seth's shirt.

The Eagle understood what had brought on the desire. “Not now, okay?”

Becky didn’t mind. She curled up on his chest instead. It didn’t take her long to fall asleep.

Seth, however, was still awake come dawn.

3

“I need to sleep now.” There was only one bedroll in his gear. Jennifer crawled inside the mammoth Marine bag without showing signs of being afraid.

Kyle was terrified.

Jennifer scrunched into the corner as Kyle climbed in, realizing she should have let him get in first. She tried not to stiffen when he tugged her into a better position. It placed her against his side, and then his back when he immediately rolled over.

Jennifer caught the flash of him thinking about her hard nipples against his arm and understood he was once again resisting temptation. He was a strong man.

Jennifer allowed herself to lean against him, and then to give in and melt against his heat with a soft groan. It had been a long start to her mission. He felt too good to let her fear stop them from sleeping.

A short time later, Jennifer was snoring and Kyle carefully rolled over. As he shifted, she did too, placing herself the way he’d first had them.

Kyle felt her chest against him, relaxed in sleep, and was able to send his mind to calming thoughts that would allow dozing. He couldn't have done that before.

Stop babying her or she'll leave you.

Kyle jumped, instantly aroused and repulsed to have Jennifer's witch standing so blatantly in his mind, where he wasn't always good.

Should I apologize? the witch asked evenly. *I don't know about these things.*

Kyle opened his mouth and then slammed it shut to respond silently. *What do you want?*

The witch began a slow, revolving dance that Kyle turned his back to mentally, lids flying open to stare at the tent ceiling.

She's not the same. Don't treat her like a child.

It was hard to resist the temptation of thinking about treating Jennifer like a woman, but Kyle shoved the witch out of his mind with an effort of pure will. *I won't betray her that way!* he snarled, big arm blocking the door to keep her out. *And I have nothing at all for you!*

Jennifer's eyes opened. Her head lifted, stunning Kyle with the ugliness he read there.

She is a killer.

Kyle refused to believe that, but the witch shoved by his meager defenses to show him the bloody replay of her day.

Kyle stopped struggling as the awful scenes went on and on, incapable of denial with the proof before him.

The witch continued her assault. *She needs a man to heal her now. She faced Donner and Louis, and came back stronger instead of curling into a corner and begging for mercy. Claim her.*

Why? Kyle demanded. And why now?

She wants you, in ways.

That cryptic answer angered Kyle enough that he closed his eyes and started his sleeping ritual. He didn't have to tolerate this shit.

She has a plan.

That snapped Kyle out of his annoyance and into concern. He'd been watching.

I've shown you proof, the witch intoned. She is not who you would believe. That arrogance will cost you everything.

Kyle felt pain, loss, and fear. He unconsciously tightened his hold on the girl sleeping peacefully on his chest. "Jenny." He was hoping she'd wake and end this conversation before he was told something that he had to react to.

She's remembering the first time she saw you. Leave her be.

Tell me what you've come to say and be gone!

She wants to forget it all and move on. Cesar, her mother, the baby—it's too much. She's torn though, because of you.

She should hate me. If I move in on her now, she will.

Have you noticed that she doesn't need you anymore?

Kyle winced, but didn't deny it.

I see that you have. The place as her protector for the next year is not what she wants. Adulthood came to her over the last months. She wants a future for her child.

We're building that now. After the war, we'll have a home, a fresh start—

The witch flashed an image that forced Kyle to explore one of his biggest fears when it came to Jenny. Her mental state.

The image was of a great victory and a group of females who were bathed in blood. The girl in the front was holding a bloody child, red orbs glowering at the enemy, but when one of her own fighters approached, the girl directed that rage on him. *No more!*

The ground was covered in the dead, in the blood of their fellow American's. Crimson tears oozed from the girl's eyes as she backed away. "You're like them. So am I. We're the evil."

Before the man could stop her, the girl rushed toward the edge of the cliff with her child clutched tightly...

Kyle jerked himself out of the vision so hard that he shifted Jennifer from his chest and startled them both into uneasy alertness.

Jennifer, exhausted and comfortable with Kyle being close, muttered and shifted back into the warm spot.

Kyle was frozen in agony.

She will see what she has unleashed, what all of you have become, and it will be too much. She needs you.

To do what? Kyle forced out. Manipulate her into thinking I'm the sun and the moon, worth living for?

To heal her wounds, the witch filled in. To work through these things with her before the blood overwhelms her.

Her wounds are from being hurt by men. It takes time—

That you won't have, the witch interrupted, getting aggravated that she couldn't explain it so he could understand. She is not a child. She is a woman, a mother, and she has friends. None of those things will be enough to hold her here once she realizes she is corrupt. Only love can bring her through that darkness.

Kyle was adding up clues. You're scared. What happens to you if she dies?

The witch faded at the question, voice a quiver of terror. I end.

One-way ticket? Kyle asked without compassion. He blamed the witch for Jenny's deeds.

Yes, but you're wrong. I tried to stop her. She wanted to kill, to be a part of this war in ways she knew would never be forgotten.

She's afraid of dying?

But not like most of you humans are, the witch whispered. And when she realizes how much evil

she carries, that end will be the only punishment she feels is suitable. You have to stop her.

From what?

Hating herself. Show her how you feel, how you see her. Bring her back to the light.

And if I don't? She'll jump?

Or pull a trigger, swallow a pill. Once she decides she doesn't deserve to live, she'll take her life. It's why so many of my kind have been absent in the world. With that, the witch left Kyle and Jennifer woke up.

Jennifer had been vaguely aware of voices and emotions flowing around her as she dreamed. It had pulled her from that first night of new ownership with Kyle. So much had changed since then.

“Are you all right?” Kyle’s anger was gone. He would have to spend time thinking about things, but he was already sure he would take action. He doubted it would be the recommended plan, but he wouldn’t sit by and lose her.

Jennifer nodded against his chest. “Better after some more sleep. You coming this time?”

Kyle smiled, shifting to hold her more securely. “Yes, ma’am.”

Jennifer giggled and let sleep pull her down as Kyle evened out his breathing for slumber. She felt him dozing, but not coming below the surface far enough to join her, though. Jennifer didn’t insist. She swam off alone through the murk in her mind, trying to sort and make room for the new horrors tomorrow would bring.

“I hate them!” Conner stomped through the woods in a rage that allowed no attention to his surroundings. He didn’t care that he might run into soldiers or wild animals. He had to find his dad before Angela handed him over. He knew Adrian was with Marc. He thudded through the woods, mentally screaming for the man. *Show yourself!*

The shadows behind Conner couldn’t hear him, but the shadowy form in front of the boy could. Marc winced at another loud blast, signaling to Kenn.

Kenn, extremely unhappy with the chore, blew the dart with enough force to send it spiraling toward the angry teenager like an arrow.

Conner slapped at his neck, staggering as the double dose of drugs penetrated his blood stream and began to take immediate effect. He slid to his knees, once again fighting to remain conscious.

Boots appeared in front of him.

With the last of his control, Conner shoved his head up to see Marc standing over him with merciless crimson orbs.

The drugs took over and Conner could only yell silently, trying to protect his secrets. He was terrified that the vet had mentioned him being outside Safe Haven’s perimeter while everyone was leaving. The vet was with the other camp members by now, which meant he might have already told

Angela. Conner tried to keep it all from his mind as he faced Marc, who could also know of his...deviance.

Marc didn't like Conner's protected thoughts, the glowing door of secrets that was surrounded by spells of pain. He waited until the teenager started to relax before blasting into his mind to yank on the handle.

No! Conner shouted, jerking back, but it was too late. Marc saw everything.

To keep from facing what he'd been doing, Conner let the drugs take him. It would only be a short reprieve, but he wanted it.

"Yeah, that's about right, considering who your dad is." Marc grabbed the boy by his thick jacket and hefted him up and over his shoulder "Come on, son. You've had a long day. Time for a nappy-nap."

Kenn couldn't help the snicker. He didn't care much for Conner, only Adrian's anger at their actions. He didn't have a big problem with the kid, but his attitude was too cocky at times and too sullen at others to allow a real feel for who he was. As a result, Kenn didn't trust him.

"It's Adrian's kid." Marc stomped down a path that unsuspecting soldiers would try to follow later. "Of course, you can't trust him."

Kenn got closer, keeping track of their Indian escorts. Grendin made him nervous. He wasn't sure why, but the feeling of unease was clear. "You gonna fill in my blanks at some point? I told you I won't interfere."

“Adrian has one more shot to come clean.” Marc shifted Conner’s dead weight for better balance. “You’ll get to hear it, along with everyone else.”

Kenn realized Marc had been lying when he said he didn’t know the plan. Kenn’s eyes widened. “It’s your plan, isn’t it?”

Marc didn’t confirm or deny. Keeping Kenn out of the loop was still important. The Marine had a habit of sticking his nose in at the wrong time. Marc hadn’t forgotten that. They had a deal in place because Kenn had agreed to follow orders, but that didn’t mean he could be trusted either.

Kenn withdrew a little to provide better coverage. His mind was spinning in too many directions and he shut it down, telling himself he would get into it when he had a few minutes of peace and quiet.

The Indians providing Marc’s escort kept their eyes and ears on the cliffs and trees around them. The winds were blowing gently, but they were not friendly. For the natives, it was easy to hear that something wasn’t right with nature. Safe Haven refugees had figured that out after enough death, but the Indians had known it since before the war. As they walked, they started to hum a soothing lullaby that brought a peaceful feeling to keep them company.

Marc found himself humming along with them. He’d learned that one while they fought together. It called to him in a way that made him feel like he’d

known it for years. It was a deep, rumbling range that reached inside and reminded him this was how he was meant to live. He'd never felt more spiritually fulfilled than the weeks he'd spent with the Indians. It was something he would have to talk to Angela about, if their attempt to live in the mountains after this war failed. He knew she could leave, though it would hurt her, but Marc wasn't sure he could even step onto the boat, let alone sail away. It was the one thing that might actually come between them.

Chapter Fourteen BK5

Time To Go

1

Samantha watched the new base from the fork of another tree; this one was covered in slimy mold. She assumed the soldiers wouldn't expect her to pick a contaminated tree over the healthy ones. She'd set up her blind with that in mind. The soldiers below her had cook fires burning, and were enjoying the end of a day.

Offended by their lack of concern, Sam waited impatiently for her next scheduled part in the plan. She wanted to change their perception of safety right now. She hated only wounding her targets. Not killing Donner was going to be a mistake. In the hours since, Sam had almost decided that when she took aim again, it wouldn't be to follow orders. She could feel the waves of menace from the Major even when he was miles away and under the thick cover of his plentiful men. Angela might have him on the run because she'd attacked first and so quickly, but Samantha felt strongly that Major Donner was a major downer. He would have his revenge.

Sam also agreed that Angela needed him alive to keep his men together while they were slaughtered. One thousand soldiers roaming around

these mountains with no clear leader would have been as bad as the war, if not worse. An army would negotiate. A large group of AWOL soldiers would be a nightmare for anyone they caught. To keep them together, Donner had to be wounded, not killed. Samantha had done that and enjoyed it immensely, but she was torn on a repeat.

Samantha carefully took the thermos from her pack and twisted off the lid. The still warm vegetable soup was a satisfying reminder of the harvest she'd help to provide, the skills she'd learned. She enjoyed what would probably be the best meal she had for a while. From here on out, she was scavenging her food from the land, as she'd been taught. Angela hadn't wanted to agree to that, but Sam needed to do it to know that she would survive on her own, that she'd changed from the weak person she'd been before the war.

And all without my help, the demon praised sadly. I'm not needed. I understand that's why you don't want me.

It was said just right, bringing guilt that caused Samantha to sigh heavily. *Let's get through the next week and then maybe we'll talk, okay?*

The demon's mood lift from receiving that answer gave Samantha an immediate rush of adrenaline that would help keep her alert. She noted that reaction. She might need it later.

Yes, master!

Samantha frowned, but didn't correct the wording. She had no idea what she might unleash

by a name change. When this was all over, she and Adrian or Angela would have to sit down and discuss a few hundred things.

The storm tracker finished her meal and washed it down with a few sips from her canteen. In a bit, she would climb down for a bathroom break, scout her immediate surroundings, and then return for a few hours of cold sleep while the base camp below dreamed of happier times. When the signal came, she would remind the enemy that world was gone forever.

Pausing in her scan, Sam paid particular attention to the wind. It carried smells and feels, and the occasional scream, but she was too conflicted for true concentration. She didn't try to force more.

Snap!

A breaking twig told Sam she wasn't alone. She went still except for the hand sliding toward her gun.

Sam heard a deep sigh in the darkness. Unlike the morons in the slasher films, she clamped her lips together and stayed motionless.

That deep sound of misery came again.

Sam peered into the night, trying to see who it was she was about to kill.

"It's us, Sam."

"What are you doing?"

"We freaked her out. Shut up, will you?"

Tonya and Kendle came through the trees.

Sam grinned in relief.

“Damn twig, right?” Tonya flushed. “I know it was.”

Samantha snickered. She kept watch as Tonya flipped on a pen light long enough to see by while they climbed the two trees adjacent to the one Samantha was hidden in. In the morning, Kendle and Tonya would go their own way. Shortly after that, all of Angela’s teams would start their full assault on the enemy.

The three hens settled into their high perches for the night without the expected chatter, but they were all secretly glad they weren’t alone. Even Sam was okay with it when the predawn hours brought thick, slick fog. Alone, she wouldn’t even have been able to doze deeply, but with a teammate on each side, she had no trouble resting.

2

Troy struggled violently when he woke, straining to scream through the gag as he tossed his body around. He’d tried to take Tommy’s gun.

Peggy darted him. When he hit the side of the cliff wall and knocked himself out, Peggy was relieved. Kyle had just dropped him off, along with a couple others they were having issues with, but Peggy was tired of playing double agent. Now that the cameras and constant observation was gone, the mood of these cave dwellers wasn’t bad. However, Peggy had been with them for the mini-riots. She knew it never took much to bring out the ugliness in

people. If her instructions tomorrow were the same as today's had been, Peggy planned to get in touch with Angela and complain. If the camp members in here found out she was helping to hold their own people captive in the deeper parts of this cave, she might be killed. At the least, Angela's plan would be shot.

"You back here?"

Peggy paled, dropping the curtain just as Doug came around the stack of crates.

"Stealin' a few minutes for yourself?" Doug accused. "Them babies is cryin' for you again. Hilda wants a break. She's working doubles now, taking up that new doctor's slack, you know?"

Peggy tossed him the towel from her shoulders. "Take a turn, will ya? I'm not done being selfish yet."

Doug returned to the baby area with a huge scowl that made Hilda reluctant to let him help. He didn't look like he could handle something so fragile.

Peggy took another minute for herself and then she too rejoined Safe Haven. Angela had made it clear that the camp had to be kept in the dark until the fighting began. Once the blood was spilling, they wouldn't be staying here. Peggy might be able to cover it a bit longer. However, if this peaceful calm held much longer, someone was bound to stumble onto their captive members and then things would get nasty.

Peggy gave a nod to the Eagles on duty, glad of them, and went to help with the infants who didn't like being away from their parents.

3

Safe Haven wasn't alone.

Angela had sent camp after camp to surround hers, to fight and die for the offspring hidden there if needed. Those brave men and women kept guard while the fog rolled down the mountain like a waterfall.

As the fog came in, covering everything known and foreign, another small group joined the others. These new men were accepted simply because they'd arrived and squatted on the fringes, where the fighting would happen first. It was another layer of protection for those in the center; the extra camp wasn't questioned, but welcomed.

Inside this small group, fifteen of Donner's men wearing Eagle uniforms put up Safe Haven tents and settled down to wait—wolves among the sheep. Their recon work had told them each team was required to know every member of their group for identification purposes, but no one could know every team that was being sent out, thanks to Angela's grand plan. It was the only slipup so far, but Donner had capitalized on it as soon as he'd heard. His personal team had been sent straight to Safe Haven's fence, before Donner himself had even touched down. It left him vulnerable, but it put

his pieces exactly where he wanted them—close enough to grab Angela.

4

“I want that update. Now!”

The startled Corporal began stammering, “We’ve lost f-five dozen men in two days. We have three missing patrols, and uh, we found this message... It’s written in blood, sir.”

The Corporal handed Donner the message over the trembling medic kneeling at his bloody boots.

You should have gone south.

Donner sneered at Angela’s blood warning. “What else?”

The Corporal pulled himself together, staring at the tent wall instead of the blood. He’d never been in combat. “No word from either base you... exited.”

Donner glared at the near implication of cowardice. “Get out.”

The man did, leaving the tent flap open for the soldiers outside to hear the screams that they were all hoping for as the slug was removed. Donner hadn’t earned any friends.

Donner shouted as the medic pulled the slug from his leg. Blood was everywhere, with gauze and tubes of medicine spread out on the canvas floor.

“Hold still, sir. This will sting.” The medic dumped the antiseptic over the wound, flinching when Donner’s eyes began to glow a bright,

menacing green. He tried to make himself keep working, but that glare was too hungry. The medic fled the room.

Donner was used to that reaction. He finished the chore himself, cauterizing the wound with the handle of the knife the medic had put on the small burner when he'd first come in.

“Ahhh!”

Donner wiped the sweat away with bloody hands and reapplied the hot blade a second time to fully close the wound. The first bullet had gone straight through. The hole had been filled with a clotting agent. The second had struck his bone, shattering off a piece of it. He might not be able to walk if the fragment shifted, according to the medic, but Donner wasn't worried. He'd told the boy he healed quickly. That hadn't been a lie. The wounds were already starting to redden, but he had clearly underestimated this group of descendants.

“Never fought one who fights like me!” He took another big swig of the whiskey that was already half gone.

Donner began laughing wildly, thinking of the men he'd sent in. There was a chance they'd succeed and survive where he wouldn't. That possibility was always there when he split up his team. Donner knew his protection was in his men and their loyalty to him, but he needed them out there to grab the bitch. Two gunshot wounds were a small price to pay for eventual domination over the world.

Donner cackled again, feeding the evil inside with his pain.

The soldiers listening outside the tent withdrew in concern.

“He’s not right.” Private Benson frowned toward his partner as they stood atop a rickety shed. “We should hit the redline.”

Private Trister shrugged, thinking of the girl they’d chased most of the day before returning empty handed to a destroyed camp. It had taken them all night to reach Donner. “Maybe tomorrow, after we pay a visit to their camp.”

Benson understood what drove his friend, but he liked living more than he needed a woman. He watched the fog line of their camp with a churning stomach. “None of us are coming out of this.”

Trister snorted, waving off the worry.

The two men continued their shift in silence that was broken by animals moving, wind howling, and their commanding officer laughing like a loon.

5

“Everyone ready?” Neil glanced around the small group of men waiting with him.

There were nods and hand signals, but no one spoke except Neil.

“Remember, we’re herding, not killing. Be careful with your aim.”

Busy checking his gear to get set for the next part of their mission, Jeremy ran a hand over the

lump that was his notebook and felt relieved. A laptop he could put together from anything. The record of the codes he'd already tried was now irreplaceable. Adrian's advice of keeping it close was one he intended to follow.

His computer was currently in Kyle's van. Jeremy hoped to work on it each time he got a chance to rest, but he didn't expect much of that. Things were about to ramp up in Angela's plans and his team had a front row role. Few of the Eagles liked the orders, but once the shooting started, they each planned to kill anyone they thought might be a threat later. It was how Marc and Adrian had been training them. They assumed Angela didn't understand that this was war. Wound-only orders made little sense to them.

Neil knew what their plans were, but instead of arguing, he kept quiet and followed his orders. He was supposed to accidentally slip up himself, though how anyone would believe that, Neil didn't know. He was too good to make so simple a mistake, but he didn't think it would trigger the fight anyway. He also didn't understand why they couldn't attack this camp openly. He hoped Angela knew what she was doing.

The ten Eagles came down the cliffs toward the enemy camp that was sprawled out across half a mile. Donner wasn't here, or so Zack's update had stated, but everyone would keep an eye out for him. The bounty for putting a bullet into Donner was an immediate promotion and the chance to lead a team.

Angela didn't care about these soldiers, only their boss.

The sleeping, snoozing soldiers didn't notice the shadows in the fog as the Eagles settled themselves on the ground behind the banks of white fog, waiting for the signal. When it came, they were supposed to flush the entire camp into the woods, killing as few as possible. Neil wondered if Angela wanted to recruit these men later; he wasn't sure that was a good idea.

The fog thickened until the soldiers sounded muffled despite only being a dozen feet away. Jeremy rolled onto his back to watch for their signal. He spotted Crista in the tree above them and froze in shock.

"I'm the signal." Crista gestured. "Open fire."

Neil gave the men a few seconds to recover from finding Crista above them with a rifle, then whistled as loudly as he could. "Now, Eagles!"

The night came alive with chaos an instant later. Grenade launchers and smoke bombs sent barely awake soldiers fleeing in every direction.

"Herd them, goddamn it!"

His team began hitting the ground by feet and walls by shoulders, and slowly, the soldiers began to flee in the correct direction. Few of them thought to return fire. Those who did were unaccustomed to the noise and smoke, and mostly missed their targets. The others simply fired blindly into the fogbank until they were out of ammunition or were

cut down by Eagle rounds. Drafting citizens but not training them had backfired.

As their side cleared of all but the occasional moving target, the Eagles became aware of gunfire and screams coming from the other side of the too-spread out camp. They ran straight through the burning debris, arriving to discover a large group of Indians fighting the enemy. Except there weren't many soldiers left to kill. The scene was gruesome—men impaled, throats slit, some even scalped.

Recognizing Grendin, Neil whistled and spun his hand in the air.

His team didn't argue with the order to leave early. The Indians didn't look friendly at any time, but here, they were intimidating. The Eagles got out of sight with feelings of relief. They were killers and hunters too, but the Indians were more and it showed. All the strength and power that had been stolen from them was returning. Jeremy thought if they won this war, the Indians would become a force again, one to be taken seriously. Their days of assuming the government's ways were over. Now, they would help set the standard for survival.

Crista was forgotten about, like her orders had said she would be. She stayed in the tree, waiting as the others left. Angela hadn't been sure which base Donner would flee to next. Two of them were close by, equally dangerous under an evacuation, so Crista was supposed to stay close in case he chose to stop at this one. If he did, he would discover the

carnage and keep going, but not before she tried to put a bullet into him somewhere. She had a perfect view of all the nearest roads from her perch. Angela had promised a level jump for two in the leg or arm, but Crista was aiming for one in the throat. “One shot, one kill. Anything more is a mistake.”

6

Cynthia woke as the ground around her began to rumble. She was still buried, waiting... Her heart kicked into high gear as the engine came closer. *Friend or foe?* She almost hoped it were the latter. She was bored enough to cry. And starving.

The vehicle stopped on the road, near where she was. Cynthia wondered what the odds were on her being run over. She hadn't considered that part of this crazy plan.

“Cynthia?”

The sound of a familiar voice sent relief through the reporter and brought out her happiness to be alive. She decided Daryl sounded sleepy. She moaned loudly to bring him closer.

Daryl pulled his gun. That hadn't sounded right. “Where are you? I have supplies.”

Cynthia groaned again, stretching it into a breathy whisper.

Daryl paled, slowing. He didn't know where she was, only that he was to actually see her and verify she was okay.

“Cynthia?”

Daryl shouted as a hand closed around his ankle. Cynthia dissolved in laughter, giving away her hiding place.

Daryl gasped, staring. "I almost shot you!"

Cynthia laughed harder at his expression. "You...should see your face!"

Daryl wanted to be angry, but the feel of her amusement was catching. He grinned. "Damn woman."

"That's me." She pointed, still snickering. "Put the stuff behind those bushes. Set it up if you want to."

Cold, Daryl was reluctant to agree until he saw what he'd delivered. The ammunition coils gleamed under his penlight.

He found himself still there an hour later, admiring the assembled toy.

Cynthia had joined him shortly after he started, thinking Angela had been right.

"I can take needed time and teach you to set it up, or I can send you a man who will get a hard-on just for being allowed to touch it and have it together in half the time you can anyway. No brainer."

Cynthia grinned at Daryl's expression. It was better than her prank. He actually had his tongue sticking from his mouth in concentration.

Daryl flushed, yanking his tongue in. "What?"

"Damn man."

Daryl smiled intently, flipping on the charm. “That’s me.” He held her eyes, sending out a vibe she couldn’t miss or ignore.

“I see.”

Daryl shrugged, smile turning into a shy, hopeful smirk. “I always have, you know. Even when you were *that bitch* to him.”

She scowled, but Daryl didn’t stop. “I was afraid of you.”

Cynthia gaped. “Of me? Right.”

Daryl shrugged again. “Imagine that I was a reporter and you were an Eagle. Would you date me?”

Cynthia thought about it. “No. You’re not my type, honestly, but no. That’s too invasive. I don’t know how anyone dates a reporter.”

“Exactly. So I stayed away from you.”

She could see his point, but she knew that possibly also being an outcast with her had been a big fear. Until he admitted that, she didn’t have a date for him or anything else. Not to mention he was providing relief for a few of the camp’s older females. “I have to get back in my grave now.” The joy was gone. “Cover that thing up when you leave.”

“I’m sorry for it.” He suddenly wondered if no perfume had been an order from Angela. He didn’t smell any flowers except the wild ones growing near them. It was one thing he’d always disliked about the reporter.

Cynthia's brows drew together. "For not wanting me digging into your private life?"

Daryl chose open honesty. "For worrying over my place instead of reaching out to you."

With that, he made it onto her list. Cynthia sighed, rolling her eyes. "You guys need to quit ambushing me. Kevin hasn't made a choice and I won't either until he does, if at all. I *can* raise a child alone."

Daryl let her go. He knew not to push a woman, especially one as stubborn as Cynthia. Daryl had spent too many nights dreaming about her to ignore this opportunity. He knew she'd pick Kevin in a heartbeat, but if Kevin didn't want her, then Daryl had a shot that he intended to take. Tonight had been a perfect way to let her know and leave her thinking. Until the action started, there was little else to do anyway.

Daryl vowed to show Angela his gratitude somehow. It was almost as if she'd known and had been giving Cynthia a chance to sniff through other offers without Kevin or Adrian around. It didn't bother Daryl that the baby wouldn't be his. He wasn't in it for the kid, though he did like children. He wanted Cynthia. He planned to have her eating from the palm of his hand not too long after Kevin showed his yellow streak and backed out.

Daryl settled down nearby to keep watch while Cynthia's other guard slept. He felt the menace hitting him now and began to suspect who he would be relieved by come dawn. Daryl smirked, scanning

the dark trees and quiet mountain landscape. He was looking forward to it.

It was hard for Kevin to stay in the cliffs and watch. He could feel the sparks between the couple; the jealousy was frustrating. He wanted to be down there gazing at her like that. But he couldn't and it had more to do with his own mind than it did with Angela's orders. If he went down there, all they would do was fight and she would be unprotected.

Kevin had been watching supply men come in and out of here since just after he'd arrived and all of them were rivals, though Daryl was the most serious competition. He was also the biggest surprise. Kevin hadn't known. He had a lot to thank Angela for. She'd intentionally put him out here so he would understand how many other Eagles were interested in his woman.

7

“Come on, Boss. Time to go.”

Angela acknowledged Shawn's words, but she didn't move. They were still in the old location and not all of the tents and fence parts they still needed had been loaded. She'd spent the day here, against Marc's wishes, insisting that she be brought back at dusk. She hadn't been able to stay away from her command center any longer, despite the odds creeping steadily up on assassins making their way in.

“Leave it for our crews.” Shawn used a firm tone. “We have to go.”

Angela let him guide her over the mess left behind by the exodus. Shawn was her right hand through this. He would stay with her until the end. He knew more of the plan than anyone else, except Marc.

Shawn put her in the passenger seat and then climbed in behind her as he tapped the roof. Their driver, Greg, would also stay with her until the end.

Shawn and Greg were her guards now and while she felt a bit exposed without the usual clan that Marc had assigned, Angela was glad of the privacy when they stopped for the night. She wasn't joining any of the camps. She'd chosen to spend this night alone, to be sure that she had her mind fully in the role. To do anything less would be disastrous.

Angela and Shawn went inside the small cave, while Greg found a place to hide the jeep. They all got settled with food and drinks, removing boots for a little comfort, but the trio didn't speak much. The things they were being forced to do were awful. They were all aware that some of it was going on right now, while they weren't in danger. The guilt kept all of them up until dawn was nearly lighting the sky.

Angela passed the time by going over every inch of her plan, comparing it to what had happened so far, searching for problems. She found too many things that could go wrong, things that it was too late to change, and suffered through the hours until

her next update. Adrian or Conner might pick anything sent mentally up right now. That meant radio silence had been extended to that form of communication as well.

By morning, Angela was a nervous wreck that still found a way to greet her escorts cheerfully when they woke. She would fake it until the end. *I'm female. We excel at faking. It's honesty we struggle with.*

Chapter Fifteen BK5

That Bitch!

1

“**T**here goes Bozo.”

Benson and Trister watched Donner and Sergeant Wallz climb onto the chopper with relief. Having that pale lunatic gone would be the best part of the day.

They both saluted smartly, but the second the chopper was out of sight, all the soldiers in the campsite began cheering. Without Donner here, they could sit back and relax without worry about...

Crack!

Gunfire from the rear of their camp sent many of the men fleeing toward the front. They drew up in shock at the sight of an army of ants invading their campsite.

The ants moved forward in an unstoppable wave that didn't pause or flinch from the shots the soldiers fired. For each ant the freaked out men killed, no less than five came out of the tree line to take their place. In a matter of minutes, the ants were all over the camp; soldiers fled into the woods with whatever they had on them. When men around them began to fall, snatched under the fog by powerful teeth and glowing red eyes, they ran faster.

Those Dog missed hit the next base camp screaming about a ghost in the fog, but with Donner's radio silence order, they couldn't warn anyone else that the colony of ants was coming north.

The camp of soldiers they'd taken shelter with didn't believe the stories, though they saw the injuries. They assumed their fellow soldiers had drunk too much the night before and lost a fight against human targets. They didn't take the requests for guns seriously.

When the ants and Dog arrived, it took those soldiers too long to recover from the shock. Another enemy camp fell. Fourteen camps were now down and the legend of the Ghost had new life.

Hidden by brush, Dog waited for the fleeing soldiers to come along, then lunged. He opened gouges in legs, snapped bones, and bit off fingers reaching for guns. Bullets grazed him and fists landed, but Dog was determined to help drive out the invaders to secure Marc's safety.

Dog lunged at a trio who thought they'd cleared the killing field.

“Lookout!”

“No!”

“Ahh!”

Dog brought two of them down with his weight, jaws clamping around a throat. He felt the spray of blood and then rose to lunge again, this time biting the hand raising a gun.

The third man fled.

Dog followed the man's sobs. As the battle fell behind him, Dog realized he wasn't alone, but it was too late to stop the attack. He dove on the soldier, teeth going into the screaming man's neck.

Crunch!

A howl drew him around to discover a small pack of thin, hungry wolves that were much smaller than he was. Except for the pack leader. She was a huge, brilliant white that beckoned like sizzling meat.

Dog whined at the female, smelling her heat now. He sat down, making hopeful contact.

The female howled again, in clear warning.

Disappointed, Dog watched the pack trot down the mountain, going west, away from the battles. *Too bad I'm on a run.* If he had time, he would run that bitch down and beg a little. *She was stinky!* Dog returned to work as he heard the stomping boots of another panicked duo coming in his direction. *I have places to be and soldiers to make pee.*

There was still a small list of things to do before he could be with Marc. Dog was eager for that. Good at it or not, the wolf didn't like attacking the men in the funny uniforms.

The ants did, though. Dog padded over to them as the insects swarmed his latest kill to drag it to their own hidden den. With the limited communication, Dog had tried to explain that only those wearing green clothes were to be treated that way, but the wolf wasn't sure the ants understood.

He'd mentioned that to Marc, who'd told him not to say anything to Angela about it.

Dog didn't intend to. Unless she was right about all of this and won the war, the wolf didn't expect to ever talk to her again. She would be taken away and his master would never recover. Dog would do anything to keep that from happening. He lunged at the next shadows with an ugly growl.

2

Kyle pulled the van through what was left of Safe Haven's gates as the chopper flew overhead. He rushed his cargo straight to the holding cell they'd left for this moment. They hadn't known it at the time, of course. Angela had; she was the one to slam the door shut and twist the key after Adrian was dumped inside.

Angela didn't ask why he'd been drugged. Her men had followed orders and that was enough. "Everything else set?"

Kyle wanted to confront Angela over the use of magic to cause pain, and over the safety net that she had convinced Jennifer they needed to take, but the hard set of her jaw and the deep misery in her eyes stopped the words. He would complain later.

"It's all set." Kyle watched the chopper circle for a landing. There was one place cleared for it—right in the center. Kyle could feel the pilot's wariness.

“You know what to do now?” Angela sighed. “I wasn’t very clear on this part in my messages.”

“After what I’ve heard, it won’t be a problem.” Kyle was furious with Adrian.

Angela was glad it had worked out the way she’d foreseen. “And Kenn?”

“Yes, he wants the rest of it too.”

“Good. You’ll both get the answers you need, I promise.”

Kyle had more questions, but the chopper landing swallowed all other sounds into those huge whirling blades.

The chopper came down in a noisy series of whines and pops as the Eagles below spread out to have enough room to fight if it was needed. This was supposed to be a negotiation, but their enemy couldn’t be trusted.

The chopper blades continued to spin as a pair of camo-wearing soldiers exited and moved toward Angela.

Dog, who arrived only minutes ago, spotted the men getting off the chopper and bristled. His chore had been to escort the ants here, taking out soldiers along the way. He padded to the corner of the only tent in use, lurking in the shadows.

“Shut it down!” Angela stayed back while Kyle and his team checked for weapons and took what they found. The soldiers didn’t like it, but with two teams of Eagles around them, they couldn’t argue.

“Our pilot will stay ready to leave.” Trey didn’t like going into the enemy’s camp unarmed, but he

wasn't intimidated. He'd been with Donner for a long time. Trey knew how to play this situation. So did Sergeant Wallz.

Angela gestured to Shawn, who slid into the chopper and put his gun to the pilot's exposed neck.

A few seconds later, the large blades slowed and the noise faded.

Angela smiled thinly at Trey's angry face. "Your pilot will stay with you. Your ride will stay with us."

Trey returned her mocking tone, gently patting his chest. "I'll kill all of us in one shot if you try to keep us here. I'm wired."

Angela raked the short man with a knowing sneer. "You're too small to keep."

Trey flushed as those around them snickered openly.

Angela took a quick glance to verify things were as she wanted them, and found her fighters eager. That would change, but for now, she would enjoy it.

"I'm ready to take a seat and hand out the Major's terms." Trey tried to regain control. "He wants this wrapped up quickly."

Angela motioned toward the mess.

Trey turned that way without waiting for her. It was obvious that he expected a man to appear soon to exchange terms with. The insult didn't sit well with the Eagles. Both of Angela's personal guards blocked his way.

Trey drew up, hand floating over his chest. "If I rip off this monitor, they'll send bombs!"

“We thought of that.” Angela smiled sweetly.
“Greg?”

Greg rushed forward and ripped Trey’s coat and shirt open as three Eagles came in to hold him.

Sergeant Wallz stayed still, observing. With multiple weapons aimed at him, there was little else that he could do.

Greg quickly slapped the monitor against his own chest.

Angela sneered at Trey’s stunned expression.
“Simple, right? Who would have thought?”

“You bitch!”

Angela waved her offended Eagles back. “You said you wanted to sit down and talk.” Angela led the way to the mess this time. “Let’s talk.”

Trey jerked loose of the Eagles and followed her with a hand on his belt, telling them he had another weapon.

Angela sat down, waving a hand at the drinks on the small table.

Trey snorted. “Like I’d fall for that. Let’s get this over with.”

Angela poured herself a cup of the warm tea.
“Fine. Pull out. Leave for your bunker and I won’t kill any more of your men.”

Trey was used to bravado. “I don’t deal. I deliver the orders. Where’s Mitchel?”

Angela jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “In a cell behind us. He can probably hear this conversation. He can’t respond.”

“I want him put on the chopper.”

Angela sipped her drink.

Trey felt a shard of concern as she continued to stare. “Load him up.”

“We haven’t finished negotiating.” Angela was busy digging into his mind. “Ready to hear the terms?”

Trey was quickly tiring of the game. “What do you want, lady?”

“Angela.”

Trey’s eyes widened; eager lights flooded them. “Really.” Donner had expected her to use someone else during these negotiations, not to risk being in the open this way.

Trey’s pilot and guard exchanged glances that gave them away as information collectors. Angela waved them both into chairs by Trey.

The men sat down warily, but they didn’t scorn her offer of a drink as Trey had.

Angela studied the man Donner had sent. Trey’s mind was a lot like Kenn’s, dark, but she was picking up enough to make the connections she needed. Trey was a minor talent at best, a hack who thought he was better than he really was. Donner kept Trey around because he was hard for their kind to read, which meant he could keep secrets. She had no doubt that he held many of those. “But you’re expendable to him. That’s why he sent you.”

Trey started to protest, but Angela wasn’t finished.

“You pretend you’re his right hand, but something happened on your last run to...Canada. He’s wanted you gone since then.”

“You’re using my secrets, not Donner’s.” Trey watched her uneasily. “You haven’t even met Donner, and our kind can’t—”

“Our kind.” Angela grinned. “Really.”

Trey snapped his mouth shut.

Angela leaned forward. “He called me. I can access him now, any time I want to, from any place.”

“Nice try. No one can do that.”

“Why do you think they murdered thousands of men for me?” Angela planted the idea, sure it would take root. Donner had made a mistake by sending his weakest link. Trey’s walls were incredibly thick, but she was busting right through them now and he still hadn’t noticed. “My child will be stronger.”

Trey hadn’t known she was pregnant. Donner hadn’t mentioned it when he’d told them about this run. The Butcher had sent them in early, blind. They’d been in place before the first base fell. When Garret had called the last time, Donner had been on his way back from Canada.

Canada. It went wrong there.

What happened in Canada?

Donner made us kill them.

Trey snapped his mind back to the sexy woman watching him knowingly. “Stay outta my head!”

“Fine.” Angela sighed regretfully. “Would you like something to eat or maybe a shave?”

Trey frowned. "I'm not staying that long. Are we done?"

"Not yet." Angela dug deeper. "I need to know that my people will be safe once Adrian and I are gone. Can you promise that?"

Trey slowly took out a paper and placed it on the table. "We only want these people. The rest are free to go as soon as they sign a loyalty form." Trey stared at the corner of the tent, at the enormous shadow of a wolf. Trey couldn't see the animal through the canvas, but he knew who it was. Dog's legend was still growing.

Angela kept tight control of her rage at the thought of her people having to declare loyalty to the people who had caused all this hell. "Will the trials be held here?"

"Utah." Trey confirmed the location of the big bunker without knowing he was doing it.

"I see." Angela kept pushing. "And when that chopper leaves with Adrian, it will also go west to the bunker?"

Trey shrugged, not seeing any reason to lie to someone who would be dead or in custody soon. "Could be. Could also be that Donner has other plans, but that won't affect the deal you make. The government will hunt him, not you."

"He's gone rogue."

Trey had assumed she and her spies already knew. He frowned. "We haven't talked to base since he landed. The radio silence is for *his* sheep, not yours."

Angela stared at him in dawning comprehension. “He wasn’t going to attack us?”

Trey leered. “Nope. He was about to abscond with a thousand of Uncle Sam’s men and all that gear. You didn’t mean anything to him.”

Angela wanted to call him a liar, but she didn’t read one in his mind. He believed Donner had been about to take them south to fight the Mexicans. He hadn’t been aiming for Safe Haven. “Until I pointed him here.” Angela tried to sound stunned by what she’d done, by the mistake. “Oh, shit.”

“Exactly.” Trey smiled coldly. “But now that you’ve drawn blood, he’ll have his turn.”

“Why take Adrian?” Angela asked, trying to recover.

“Safety, I assume.” Trey shrugged. “You know how handy that drawing power can be and not all of us have it.”

“Have you been with Donner long?”

Trey knew what she was doing, but he couldn’t stop it from working. Her voice was in his mind now, whispering things that he normally wouldn’t have put together. He shook his head to clear the buzzing. “Years.” Trey glanced at his watch. “I have orders to keep it moving. We done here?”

“You’d like to examine the prisoner, I’d bet.” Angela stood up. “Step this way.”

“I’d like him loaded and to be on my way!” Trey leered. “I’ll be back for *you* later.”

Angela led them outside, around the sentries to the rear of the tent, where three small cells waited.

Adrian was in the center, still bound and gagged, but bright eyed and alertly listening.

As they went outside, Dog moved around the corner of the canvas, staring in menace at Trey.

The mercenary turned to find the wolf feet away and flinched. “Damn!”

Angela snickered. “Say hi to Dog.”

The wolf growled softly. *Get out. While you still can.*

“Now, Dog, this man is our guest,” Angela mock scolded.

The wolf snorted, shaking his head.

Shocked, Trey quickly switched to Angela’s left, putting her and Adrian’s cage between them. “He’s a descendant!”

Angela didn’t correct him. Dog’s legend would be as infamous as Marc’s was.

“I see Adrian. Let’s go.”

“Go?” Angela smiled as a mixed team of Eagles came from behind the shed and stepped toward them. “You can’t go. We’re just getting to know you.”

Trey started to reach for the spare firearm he kept in his waistband, but Kyle was there to tackle him. Both men went to the ground, wrestling for control.

Kyle was stronger than Trey, but he fought fairly. Trey slammed his head against Kyle’s in a hard thud and kicked him in the balls.

Kyle staggered, hands going down defensively.

Angela waved at Shawn to help subdue the man.

Shawn motioned Greg along. As they rushed him, Angela shoved into Trey's mind. *Baby killerrrr!*

Trey was shocked into stillness at having his worst secret exposed. Even Donner didn't know that one.

The Eagles captured him without any more fighting. Trey had been a boxer, was in excellent health, and was carrying guilt for wartime sins committed during peace. It had taken Angela a minute to break through his melodies and waves, but she had him now. "They were your neighbors! You harmed them knowingly! You'll burn forever!"

With each accusation, Trey shrank down until he was lying on the ground.

Angela stopped suddenly. She straightened up as if insane and flipping personalities. "Get him out of my sight for now. We'll kill him in some special way when it's all over."

The Eagles dragged Trey, who was now pleading for his life, to the chopper and tossed him on.

Angela motioned to his pilot. "Get him out of here."

When the guard would have gone too, Angela placed a light hand on his arm. "Why don't you stay for a while, David?"

Neither he nor the pilot had moved an inch when Trey was grabbed. After witnessing what she'd done to Trey, so fast, Sergeant Wallz didn't want

any part of it. They'd never faced descendants who were like them—ruthless. David didn't like the odds.

“Good man. But not good enough to absolve you. You'll be my guest.” Angela made a short motion to Kyle.

The top Eagle shoved Trey and the pilot onto the chopper.

Dog padding alongside his escorts kept Trey from triggering another battle. He was glad of it when the chopper began to rise and give a clear view of all the armed men who'd been hiding around Angela's camp. He wouldn't have gotten out alive. “You promised to give us Adrian!”

Angela shrugged as the chopper lifted off.

Trey punched the side of the bird in frustration. How had that happened?

You underestimated me. You saw a woman and dismissed her. Big mistake. She shut the mental door between them. She didn't need to listen to know how Donner would react to the news. It would be typical bad guy storms around and maybe even kills the messenger. It would stir him up and force him to honor his words of executing their hostages. He would do it out in the open, hoping her people would see it.

Then the waiting Eagle teams could move in. Knowing which camp or building their people were in was important during a firefight. Angela had sent out a number of spies and saboteurs, but not all of them were accounted for yet. Her plan to flush Donner west had worked, according to the reports

that were dripping in, but she didn't have the first injury lists yet to know if it had saved lives or cost them. "Put the Sergeant somewhere safe."

David didn't resist. He knew better, but he was also curious. Was she worth all the lives Donner was sacrificing?

Angela turned to discover Adrian had managed to remove his gag and his bonds. He was sitting on the dusty ground, lighting a crumbled cigarette.

Angela frowned, ignoring the prisoner in the cell to Adrian's right. "They forgot to search you."

"You'd deny me a smoke?" Adrian frowned. "Small potatoes compared to denying the Major his prizes."

Angela shrugged, lighting her own cigarette. "It's how negotiations work, right?"

"Sure." Adrian snorted. "It was textbook, if you want to get your people killed."

"Do you believe him? About Donner not attacking us."

Adrian didn't want to help her—it was in his tone and on his face—but he couldn't deny her, not even now. "No. We're big fish. Lot of gifts to the fisherman who reels us in."

"And going rogue? That's happening with the bases. Has been all along, I'd think."

"Common story. You read my notes."

"Yes, more than once. It told me how to get under their skin, but why haven't they gone against any bad descendants? There has to be more than *you* out there."

Adrian glared. “Most of them were already employed by the government. No need to fight with your own team.”

Angela waited for more, but Adrian leaned against the bars and shut his eyes. The misery was a veil that swallowed them both for a minute.

Angela was unable to help being flashed to their first meeting. Their contact had been earth shattering, consuming, and she hadn’t forgotten what she’d seen. For an instant, her shell cracked; she stared at Adrian openly.

Adrian felt it. He needed all of his control not to respond. “Go away or kill me.”

Angela blinked at the hostile tone and then turned away. She called Kyle over with an expression that didn’t show her inner struggles. “Give the signal and get out of here.”

Kyle raised a hand and spun it.

A group of Eagles rushed to light the fuses on the line of fireworks that had been waiting under tarps for days. As the rockets burst overhead, vivid colors and sharp sounds echoed for miles; the final war was beginning.

3

Donner waited for the chopper to land, noting the lack of a prisoner and the absence of one man. Seeing that it had been David, who he considered valuable, Donner slammed the door to the small cabin and went to the desk.

“She read him.” That was the only way she’d been able to do it. Donner didn’t need Trey to tell him that he’d lost control and had no idea how it had happened. Unlike the rest of his team, Trey had the ability to block his thoughts, which meant he had no control when that gift was taken away.

“She’s stronger than they estimated. And corrupt or she would have honored our deal and sent Mitchel.”

Donner ignored Trey when he reluctantly pushed the door open and came inside. Donner had never heard of descendants who were corrupt, but still saved their followers or fought for them—not without payment, and that clearly wasn’t the case here. How had those weak survivors convinced Adrian and Angela to care for them? Once descendants became corrupt, they never went back. It was documented. The scientists had tried to reverse the process and failed every time.

It meant the plan Donner had planned to use—threatening other descendants like those she was hiding—wouldn’t work. He could kill them all and she still wouldn’t cave. “What does she care about?”

Trey was trying desperately to think of anything he could that would put him in the clear with the boss. He gestured toward the camp he’d just left. “No kids or elderly at the site, and no animals or living setups. She’s got them all stashed somewhere.”

“In the mountain. We have satellite images, heat signatures.”

“Let’s bomb them, Donner. Please don’t play with her. She’s...you!”

Donner chuckled at the assessment. No woman was his equal, no matter how strong her powers were.

Trey spotted movement outside the window and drifted that way while Donner laughed at him. He hated this run... What was that? “Uh, Major?”

“What is it now, Trey? You know, you haven’t been the same since Canada.”

Trey was too surprised to register the sore topic. “I’ve never seen so many.”

Donner came to the window in time to watch the thickest part of the flock of birds going over the small cabin he’d chosen as his newest headquarters. He was quickly running through alternate sites.

The birds were large and noisy, screaming at each other as they stripped the area of everything alive. A rabbit fell to the horde; the two men watched in shock as the birds covered the bunny and then the chopper.

The pilot, who’d been eating and not paying attention, was also quickly covered. He collapsed under the vicious pecking and scratching, blood running down his arms as he tried to pull them off.

“Help him?”

Donner nodded, mind going to the coming battle. “Yes.”

Trey shoved the window up and took aim with the AWS rifle that he'd had a long time. He fired once; the pilot stopped screaming.

Angry, the birds flew away in disappointed rage, taking the rest of the flock with them.

Trey looked at Donner in a daze. "She sent them."

Donner snorted, going to his desk. "None of us can do that. There hasn't been a descendant who can control nature or even communicate with it in a hundred years. Stop being paranoid. And get out. Now."

Trey didn't bother to slam the door. He was afraid of drawing the big crows back to them. He detoured around the pilot's body with a grimace. "I hate birds!"

Donner heard his newest guards arrive a few minutes later, and let himself fall deeper into planning something that would not only draw blood, but splash it over these cliffs like a canvas. So far, he'd been working with the army soldiers, but he needed more of his team. Four of them should be enough. The rest could continue the mission he'd given them. Once they captured Safe Haven's members, Angela and Adrian would have no choice but to surrender.

If they didn't and all those people died, their own kind would never forgive them, which would be worse than being dead for a descendant. They'd give themselves up. Donner would toss one of them

to the government and be free to flee south with his reward and whatever little part of their army that survived. Donner didn't think many of the soldiers would come through the fight. Angela had shown she was smart. The fights had already been vicious, bloody battles.

Donner glanced down at the file he'd brought along. The last of nearly thirty, he hoped this file held the details he needed to conquer Angela. The cute kid in the photo looked like her. Donner started sorting through the pages with the thought of what he could do to Angela once his team captured her stashing place and brought him Charlie. She would do anything to save her child, as would any good parent.

Donner mentally made a list of everything he would need to pull it off. The reward he was offering would keep his men searching for the boy, but that wasn't enough. What he needed was something Charlie cared about. If he found that, he could get Charlie to come to him. Donner hoped there was a girlfriend, but even a pal would work. Teenagers were notorious for going off halfcocked to save their friends. Angela's boy would be no different. Donner assumed Charlie didn't have much in the way of power or the government would have added him to the *bring in alive* list. That meant Angela's son was expendable.

Eighty teams of soldiers had been listening for Donner's chopper. When it came, riders were sent on the few dirt bikes they had to pass the word. It was time.

Four of these teams were buried alive in sudden landslides triggered by nearby Eagles with explosives. The explosions rumbled through the cliffs and hills like a storm. All forty men were killed, leaving a large hole in the center of Donner's offensive battlefield.

On the southern side, the bases being lost and nature overwhelming their camps also weakened the line and gave the Eagles a chance to dig in as the siege began. In the east, however, the enemy was the thickest. More than four hundred soldiers were working on their orders to push in a hundred miles a week. They ran into Safe Haven people almost immediately.

Tonya and Kendle stayed still and quiet as the large group of soldiers came toward their hiding place.

Grace wasn't prepared for battle. She was panicking. The former slave had only joined them an hour ago, looking like she'd fallen down a lot.

"We have to run! We gotta go!"

The other two women knew she was right, but as soon as they fled, the soldiers would start shooting. They had no hopes of escaping so many. Angela had led them into a trap by waiting until after the negotiations to start attacking.

Fireworks burst overhead, signaling Safe Haven's offensive beginning.

Tonya rolled her eyes. "Little late."

"I saw something!" one of the soldiers shouted excitedly.

Tonya and Grace exchanged panicked glances.

Kendle pointed toward the rope bridge they had been instructed to stay near. "Stay down and get to the bridge. Ready? Go!"

All three females took off running through the high brush, trying to stay under cover even though they knew it was a lost cause.

More fireworks exploded overhead, giving them a few second's cover. Then the soldiers saw their prey.

"There they are!"

Gunfire echoed to the females as they ran. Slugs caught up, slamming into the trees, ground, and stone around them.

Grace grunted, falling.

Tonya kept going, lungs starting to burn.

Kendle swung around to help and spotted the gore on the tree. No one could help Grace now. She turned to run and felt a bullet go into her arm and fly out the other side.

Kendle screamed, holding her arm as she ran.

Kendle's scream got Tonya to turn. She hesitated before returning to grab Kendle's good arm and drag her faster.

When they reached the bridge, Tonya surprised Kendle by going under it.

“What are you—?”

“Hold your breath!”

Kendle sucked in air as she was dragged under the water, and felt her mind go to where it had been when Marc had forced her to endure this.

Tonya registered the slack arm under her hand and shoved them deeper to avoid the bullets now flying their way. She felt the bridge support smack her hip and clawed for purchase, pulling them both above the waterline enough to breathe.

The trees and weeds prevented the soldiers from viewing them. Tonya put them behind the supports when the soldiers opened fire angrily.

Kendle jerked awake, filling with alarm when she realized where they were.

Tonya gave her a rough shake. “Get out of here once we’re gone. Find Kenny and tell him what happened.”

Kendle protested, but Tonya dove under the water and went toward the opening.

“I’m coming out!” she shouted during a lag in the yelling and gunfire that had faded to grunts of angry men.

Tonya shivered as she stepped from the water, short dress clinging to her in ways that she knew could be trouble as the soldiers stopped muttering. The silence spoke too much.

She held up her hands and felt their eyes follow the movement. “Got somewhere I can get these wet things off?”

Kendle listened to Tonya help herself be captured, almost leading the now horny men. The castaway shuddered at the thought of what the red head might have to endure.

“I’ll get her out.” Kendle forced herself to swim through the nasty water to get free. She would follow them and wait for the right moment to do damage. Maybe she could find one of the teams Angela had out roaming.

Kendle remembered her envelope was due to be opened. She pried the wet baggie from her pocket with nearly numb fingers. Maybe she was supposed to meet up with someone who could help...

Kendle snarled in anger when she read it, tossing the paper into the water where it was quickly destroyed. She’d been ordered to save Tonya if her infiltration failed. “It was intentional. That bitch!”

Chapter Sixteen BK5
Not Everyone Can

1

“**G**et the women inside!” Neil shoved Bridget in front of him. The two teams had almost been surrounded near the creek and barely managed to get ahead of their pursuers. They had a minute or so and then the soldiers would be on them again.

Bridget and Tracy were placed in the rear of the cave; the females didn’t argue. Being hunted by soldiers with years of training was terrifying.

Neil and Jeremy stayed at the entrance, both doing a headcount as their team and Seth’s men rushed in. All noise stopped as they waited for the soldiers with fingers near triggers and hearts pounding. There was no way the Army men would ignore this cave. They would expect their prey to be inside.

“We kill them all.” Jeff was standing in front of the women. “It’s them or us.”

“How?” Neil gestured. “They’ll burn us out if we open fire.”

There was more silence, then the sound of running men came to them, along with shouts of excitement.

“We know you’re in there!”

“Come out now with your hands up!”

They were trapped.

“Use me.” Pushing the fear aside, Tracy stepped forward. “That’s my job, right? Distraction and decoy.”

Neil wanted to say no, but a plan popped into his mind before he could. Once there, it was too good, too simple, not to use.

“You saw them?”

Rusty nodded at Jeremy’s question. He was an excellent scout. “Yep. They met up with that other group. Makes twenty.”

Neil’s face darkened. “Dead even numbers, if we count the girls.”

“Count them for what?” Jeff asked, but everyone was forced to go quiet as the soldiers gathered outside the cave entrance.

“Clear that hole!” a soldier called.

Neil’s lips drew into a thin line as he waved Tracy forward and whispered in her ear. He slid behind her and made sure Jeremy was in place before giving her the gesture to go ahead.

Tracy unbuttoned her top two buttons and slowly went to the entrance. “Who’s out there?”

“It’s a woman!”

“Watch out. You know the stories.”

“Come out with your hands up!”

Tracy leaned against the cave wall, shading her eyes with her hands. “Ya’ll are way out of government territory.”

“Get down here!”

“Got time to stay?” Tracy invited. “Girl’s gotta make a livin’, even in these times.”

The soldiers were willing, except for their Captain. That man scowled heavily. “Get out of the way. We’re searching that hole.”

Tracy stepped to the side. “Make yourself a drink, if you like. I’ve got whiskey.”

The soldier’s guns began to lower at the convincing act, along with their levels of alertness.

“You have real whiskey?” That had gotten even the Captain’s attention. “Not rotgut?”

“I’ve been collecting it.” Tonya laughed invitingly. “You boys got anything to trade?”

The Captain waved two men forward as Tracy faded back into the throng of Eagles waiting with their knives out.

Even in the dimness, the two men would have noticed the threat immediately, but Tracy bent over to pick up her rifle, making sure the view was good. They were still staring at her almost bare ass when Neil and Jeremy slit their throats.

Bridget forced herself to giggle so that she didn’t scream.

“Bronx? Klevier?” the captain called from outside.

Tracy returned to the entrance, smiling. “They want to stay with me. Just an hour?”

The Captain’s face reddened. He stomped toward her. “Get out here!”

He stormed by Tracy, pushing her from his path.

Neil took him out with a vicious swipe that sent blood over his hands and feet.

Feeling like she was about to vomit, Tracy went to the entrance one last time. “He changed his mind! Come on in!”

The remaining seven men knew something was wrong, but not what. The first two were allowed to get all the way inside and view the group of waiting men before the ambush was triggered. It gave those in the rear time to be in place for the attack, but allowed those front men to react. A close-quarters fight exploded.

Bridget ran out of the cave as guns fired and men screamed in agony. At this moment, she had no idea what she was doing here.

The sounds didn’t last long.

Bridget was relieved to see all of her people emerge from the cave; when Neil asked her if she was okay, she burst into tears.

Tracy had done her share of shooting and now had a minor trim along one ear. She stayed with the celebrating men. Bridget couldn’t fight. She couldn’t handle fighting. The noises of fighting freaked her out. She should have been sent with Safe Haven’s weaker members, but she’d begged Angela daily to be given a full assignment like the rest of the female fighters. She would have been better off in the den than out here in the wild. Tracy didn’t say so. She didn’t need to. Everyone knew, including Bridget. She would never be on Angela’s team now.

“Hey, Doug! Got a minute?”

Doug was glad to be of real use to anyone. He waited outside the gate for Kip to catch up. Doug was finishing his rounds and enjoying the time away from Peggy. Whenever she laid eyes on him, she gave him something to do, as if she was keeping him busy.

“Hey, did you rearrange Angela’s pecking order for the camps?”

“Marc made an adjustment.”

“You saw them?” Kip’s voice was still rough and sore. “The dozen men in the camp next to Safe Haven’s den aren’t familiar, but Angela’s plan insisted on that. I think we should check it out.”

“I’ll get a few Eagles and meet you there.” Doug was sure it was just an oversight on someone’s part.

Kip headed for Dexter, their messenger for the day. “Go tell the boss we’ve got something hinky here. Not sure what, but it feels wrong.”

“You got it.” Dexter smiled. “Hey, take something for that cold, all right? You sound harsh.”

Kip forced a nod and kept going.

Dexter hurried off on the small bike that had been refueled as soon as he’d arrived this morning from Angela’s camp.

Kip went over his training as he walked toward the strangers. He was a smart kid with a bright future waiting as he stepped into the strange camp.

“Hi. Who—?”

A bullet entered Kip’s forehead. He fell over, dead before he hit the ground.

The infiltrator who killed him, Sherman, cried out in admiration of his own skill as the rest of his rugged companions ran by, firing at the Eagles.

Doug stared at the advancing strangers in shock. He’d been put here as make-work. Angela hadn’t been able to count on him in a fight. *But we’re under attack!*

Peggy appeared at his hip. “Get inside!” She jerked on Doug’s arm when he didn’t respond. “Get our people inside!”

Doug realized she was calmer than he was and it snapped him back into awareness. He spun toward the shocked Eagles with him as he drew his gun. “Get them inside! Take care of our people!”

Peggy spent another minute watching the fight between the strangers and the Shadow Warriors, judging the time. She saw the other Indian camps rushing to surround the men, then she ran inside the cave, pushing through the panicking people. “Get to the back!” She shoved her way through. “In here!”

Peggy jerked the curtain down and forced them into the narrow opening, glad the detained people had been relocated a few hours ago. She didn’t want to have to explain that right now. “How many?”

The two tall Indians were struggling to keep up with the count as they waited for the thickest part of the crowd to get by them before answering.

“One hundred fifty-seven.”

Another group of camp people stumbled through and they updated the numbers. “Seventy-two... five...eight-one.” The men kept a running count.

Peggy took in a deep breath when they reached two hundred. The rest were not in this camp. She climbed atop the crates that had been placed by the doorway for this purpose, listening to the fighting outside the cave as the camps around them arrived. “I have a message from Angela.”

Tommy, whose sole purpose was the defense of this camp, nodded to Ray.

Ray leaned down and uncovered the edge of the det-cord as the crowd slowly quieted.

“Angela left an envelope.” Peggy held it up. She had it memorized. “Angela said there’s going to be a big boom. After it’s over, the men chasing us will be dead and we can get out through the bottom tunnel.”

Peggy saw Ray lighting a fuse and hurried to deliver the rest of the note over the worried mutters. “Go into the tunnel. When you reach the bottom of the stairs, stay by the waterfall.”

“Here they come!” someone shouted from the other side of the entrance.

The camp began moving.

Peggy allowed Doug to take her arm and shelter her against the wall with his big body. He hadn't known what the plan was until he'd seen the det-cord and then he'd understood too much.

Peggy waited for the blast with her eyes shut and a smile on her face. *So this is what my man feels like. Nice!*

The C-4 detonated exactly like Kenn and Marc had told Angela it would. The open side of the cliff disintegrated into a volcanic rupture that blasted Donner's team into bits and scattered them with the ashes. It also collapsed the mountain face and started a minor landslide that wiped out another of Donner's small teams, and an Indian camp trying to join the fight instead of holding their positions as they'd been instructed.

3

Angela heard Dexter's frantic call—he'd been chosen because he was in the group of people who could both send and receive the mental communications—and then the field phone provided the sounds of explosions and screams.

Angela left the crowded command tent and went outside, groping through the tears. She leaned against the first frame she found and let the agony flow. She'd killed again.

Adrian slowly reached out and placed his hand over her clenched fist. "I'm sorry."

Angela moaned in misery. “I wish I hadn’t been the one. I wish you’d given this role to someone else!”

Adrian sent a wave of strengthening comfort, but didn’t say anything. People dying on your watch was an inner horror that liked to surface at the worst possible times for a leader.

“Damn you for it.” Angela became aware of his touch and jerked her hand away. She straightened up to glare at him. “And damn me too, right?”

“Yes. You can’t ever go back now.”

“Then I’ll win. Anything else means they’ve died in vain.”

Adrian stared, always impressed with her quick recoveries, but he wasn’t sure she would make it to the end. He needed to do something.

Angela caught the thought and left the area immediately. The guilt was crushing. She wanted his comfort, but if she took it, her plan would fail. She would make it until the end and beyond.

Adrian sighed, leaning against the wall of his wooden cell. He was aware of guards glowering at him, making threatening gestures, but he also felt their concern and their confusion. They couldn’t understand why he’d betrayed them or even how. Those were the men and women he would keep close when the final days came, if Angela let him stay. If she lost and surrendered to Donner, then Adrian would be darted and shipped off to the bunker before he could even try to negotiate.

Adrian's mind went to what would happen if Angela won, but he stopped himself from exploring it. That was her call now, not his, but common sense said he didn't have an after. Marc would never allow that.

4

"Is everyone okay?"

"If you're hurt, shout!"

"Shout so we can find you!"

The calls echoed through the pitch-black cave as Doug hurried to get his flashlight on, hoping they'd fared better than all the moans and groans implied.

Peggy, still smashed between him and the wall, didn't move.

Doug stepped back carefully, trying not to trip over anyone.

Peggy slid to the hard floor.

Doug's fear was tangible as he began to scream for their medic.

In the chaos, Ray and Dale managed to get glow sticks passed out and start guiding people further into the cave. "Keep following the tunnel!"

There was little trouble getting the camp members to move, but those who were wounded or knocked out had to be helped. They'd been lucky the attack had come right before dinner, when most of the camp had been inside the front cave, but they'd also been protected by a plan that had

foreseen the attack coming and given them an escape.

“I want an update!” Doug bellowed as the medic examined Peggy.

“Three serious shrapnel wounds, no dead in here.” Ray coughed from the dust still shifting down.

“Get them all to the safe spot and open your next orders.” Doug helped their medic lift Peggy to her feet. The smelling salts had brought her around.

“Just knocked out by the pressure change. She’s fine.” The medic went to help the doctor with other patients.

Peggy leaned heavily on Doug, disoriented, as he led her through the darkness.

“Someone go tell the boss what happened.” Tommy wasn’t sure where his team was at now.

No one answered.

Tommy stopped, looking toward the collapsed wall, where there was no noise or movement. As soon as there was time, he and a few of the men would climb around and search for any survivors.

Outside the cave-in, a large pile of rocks and debris blocked the entrance. Bodies lay scattered under this wreckage. Tommy’s team had been killed, but not all of the invaders had.

Sherman held his bleeding arm and limped into the trees to get out of sight of surrounding camps that were rushing to the area. He could hear them shouting.

Sherman dug his hand under torn cloth and grunted as he ripped a piece of his own gun from his thigh. Blood gushed down his leg; he fell, swallowing his moans.

The hurting mercenary used his shirt to bind his leg as tightly as he could and then pushed onto his feet to begin the walk of shame down the mountain. He could go to Donner to report his failure and the deaths of his team, or he could keep walking north until he hit Canada. Ugly things had happened to the rest of them there, but Sherman had been happy with the all-female council. They'd put him up in a nice place, fed him, fucked him, resupplied him...and then Donner had come through in the night and slaughtered everyone.

The Butcher had blamed it on a neighboring house that was in contention for control. He'd eliminated both groups of would-be leaders, which had enabled the US government to send men to help the surviving council by killing them. Sherman was suddenly filled with fresh hatred. He turned west as the blood poured from his leg. He wasn't finished here yet.

5

Tonya waited until she had her dry change of clothes before making the switch. She kept herself covered as much as she could. They'd put her in the rear of the jeep with two men who had tugged on her wet clothes, but failed to check her pockets. She

was grateful for the orders that had insisted she fill them with basic gear. Tonya slid into the pants first and jerked them up, then let go of her wet clothes to arrange the shirt.

Impatient, the two men clawed at her shirt, ripping it free.

Tonya ignored their hands as she drew on the warm sweater and pried it down between their groping fingers. She didn't act coy or pretend she was willing, but she also didn't cry assault. She wasn't sure which way she would have to play this yet.

Two jeeps behind hers stayed close; the yelling, cheering of those men would have drawn attention if not for the explosions they kept hearing. Somewhere near them, battles were taking place. Tonya was suddenly glad she wasn't a part of that. Though she might be raped tonight when this group stopped, they weren't crazy or evil. They were just horny, lonely men who hadn't been with a woman since the war. If she played it right, she might even be able to set up a *protection equals good sex* type of deal with one or two of them.

Before joining Safe Haven, that's exactly what she would have done with any group that had come through Vegas. That was what she'd tried to establish with Kenn at first. Now, she had a child to protect and a future to save. *I've changed a lot.*

"Can one of you boys do me a favor?" She had just spotted her landmark. There were only so many

roads through here and so many places to make a camp or ambush one.

“What’s that, baby?” the man on the right asked, rubbing her breast.

“Tell Donner that first explosion was his personal team—the one he sent in because he had no faith that you guys can do the job. The second was your EOD. Good luck getting past all the mines.”

The hands slid from her chest in jerky movements.

Tonya smiled coldly. “The next one could either be the tank you brought or the camp you’re taking me to. I don’t remember which one Angela said she was hitting today.”

The men on either side leaned away in fear.

“If you’re smart, you’ll tell your driver to take me to Safe Haven’s gates. You’ll surrender, pick up arms on our side, and find a woman to settle down with. Eventually you’ll have a kid, join our army, and vote for your future.” Tonya was surprised she’d gotten it all out without stumbling over the words. It wasn’t her normal conversational topics.

The Captain in the front passenger seat pointed. “Take us to Donner.”

The driver turned at the next fork.

Tonya didn’t argue. She used their fear to protect herself, as she’d been instructed. She began laughing like a crazy person. “Bet you boys bleed real pretty.” She cackled again.

The driver sped up as the two men in the back with her scooted over as far as they could.

The captain glared at her, pretending he wasn't scared. "Shut up!"

Tonya wiped her face of all emotion and sat perfectly still, freaking them out further. Too tense to snicker even mentally, Tonya concentrated. *On my way, boss bitch.*

She yawned, suddenly exhausted. The immediate response made her twitch.

Thank you. Be careful.

Heart warmed, Tonya shook her head. "Don't know how someone so cold can make you want to be so close to her. Absolute bullshit."

The soldiers had little idea what she was talking about and didn't respond. All of them were either wishing they were already safe in a camp or that they'd shot this crazy woman as soon as she climbed from the water.

6

Angela couldn't sleep.

She was wandering the deserted camp in slow circles, checking on people and waiting for updates that were still likely hours away. She had a third of her army in enemy hands or enemy areas, and it was unnerving. There was no way she could sleep.

Her guards followed in silent concern, exhausted.

Angela found herself behind the mini-mess, where they had Sergeant Wallz in a tent with a guard. She listened to their conversation with guilt and bitterness.

“We’re just trying to survive.”

“And I’m just following orders.”

“They could be wrong.”

“So could yours.”

“She isn’t.”

“Because she’s a descendant?”

“Because our lives matter to her. She’d never throw us away.”

Angela couldn’t take much of that. She moved toward another area of guilt, punishing herself. She ducked into the canvas where they were keeping the other POWs, directing her guards to stay outside.

Shawn ignored the order and stayed on her heels; Greg waited by the flap.

Silence fell among the nine men inside.

“I’m here to set most of you free. One of you is suspected of serious crimes and you’ll eventually stand trial. One of you,” She glared at the man by her boots. “will be leaving on the next chopper.” She looked around the room without caring for their disgruntlement. “Those numbers can change, depending on your choices.”

Adrian’s lips thinned as he read more into her words than what she was saying. There was an entire field of walls up in her mind. It didn’t take a genius to figure out she was hiding something big.

Angela motioned the gags and ropes to be removed. “There are no camp members here, only enemy troops around us. The first one of you who screams is the traitor I’m searching for. I’ll get you before they can get me.”

Tension filled the tent as those here for simple rule violations realized they were keeping company with an assassin.

“I still need fighters who obey orders. You’ve been punished and you’re pissed. When I cut you free, you’ll either say something nasty to me and then see Shawn for an assignment, or get out of my camp without a single word. You broke the rules, not me.” Angela waited as men stood up, moved for the tent flap. She braced for silence.

“I’m taking a piss first.”

“I’ll be back to get my job in a few minutes, Boss.”

“Man, you got some nerve, you bitch.”

Angela withstood the nastier comments easily, feeling she deserved every one of them for holding her own people captive. “Half an hour gentlemen, and then get busy with your assignments. We have a war to win.”

As men began leaving the tent, rubbing wrists and glowering at their former friends, Angela frowned. “We have a traitor in this group. Watch out for *him*.”

Satisfied, Angela stared at the remaining captive as she and the witch went to work.

Adrian knew she was tracking each of the men who'd left. It hurt him too when she discovered what she'd been hoping not to.

She gestured.

Greg quickly came to her side.

Angela put her mark on the paper in his hand, one she'd insisted on. "Get both of them, before they can get down the cliff to the first enemy camp they find. Go now. Troy is already outside our gates. His girlfriend killed a sentry to help him escape without being tailed. Due east."

Greg vanished.

The sound of gunfire echoed shortly after. It was her first official execution. She had insisted on it not being a secret, like Adrian had handled these moments. She'd given the order and she would face her people over it, if the time came.

Exhausted, she swayed on her feet, hand going out to grip Adrian's cage bars.

Angela was glad they were alone in the tent except for Shawn as Adrian sent his light over her and she accepted it greedily. The stress was nothing compared to the guilt, but even that faded as his warmth surrounded her in a consoling embrace. Angela filled herself from Adrian's force, the only man she'd drawn from since becoming Marc's woman in every way.

Adrian controlled his thoughts as she responded to his caring. It didn't matter that it might be only for the baby. The moment was perfect in any form.

Adrian's magic sank down into her and warmed the guts that had felt cold and foreign. The muscles relaxed, the nausea settled. Angela sighed gratefully. "Thank you."

"Come closer. Let me help us both."

Angela didn't move.

Adrian withdrew his force. "I have to touch you for the healing to work in full. You know that."

Angela didn't want Adrian to help her, but she needed this baby as much as she now needed leadership or to win this war. She went by, leaving the tent.

His groan of denial was music to her. What she'd allowed would hold her for a while, but there would come a time when she would beg him for help and he already knew it.

Angela saw the camp lookouts signaling an incoming vehicle. She went to meet the van, not sure who all might be in it at this point. They were about to start the part of the battle where things would be scattered and confusing. She was dreading it.

Kyle stiffly stepped from the van, alone.

Angela waved Shawn over to get his report while she went to open the rear door.

The sight of Conner lying there had been expected, but not crying in fear and remorse as he cowered behind the thickly wrapped crate. Angela caught enough of his thoughts to understand why he'd been delivered. "Damn."

She signaled for him to be placed with his father. She'd known he was hiding something, just not what. His mind was hard for her to get into when he was being defensive and that was all he'd been lately. Discovering that he was obsessed with a camp member wasn't what she'd thought to handle with Conner.

Angela wasn't sure what to do. She stayed outside the tent, listening to the father-son talk that began as soon as the pair was alone.

"They found out."

"Yeah, I figured."

"Do you want to know what happened?"

"No."

"Well, I do. Why did she give you up?"

"To save her people, this country."

"But she loves you!"

"Yes."

"Then how can she—"

"You're too young to understand the ways a woman will sacrifice herself for her goals."

"What... What will happen to me?"

"She's standing outside. Ask her."

Angela scowled, but she lifted the canvas flap and entered, not about to shirk her duty as leader in this moment either. It came with the blame, as well as the fame. "I don't know yet. When I do, you'll be told."

"And until then, I'm a prisoner?"

"Yes. You've been arrested for a moral violation."

“And my dad?” Conner shoved over to lean against Adrian’s cage. “Is he under arrest for a moral violation too?”

“No.”

“Then let him go.”

“He’s right, Conner. You are too young to understand the sacrifices, but it’s not just the ones that women make. Men give their lives daily for us now. Your father will be one of those heroes.” Angela turned and left the tent before she could lose control of her mouth or her emotions. She had a plan and she was sticking to it.

“Will she really hand you over?”

Adrian nodded resignedly. “There was a time when she would have killed anyone who even suggested it. Here, now, it was her idea.”

Conner stared up at his dad in concern. “What did you do?”

Adrian’s misery filled the drafty tent. “I didn’t find her first.”

7

Angela paused as an early update snared her witch.

We’re okay. Traveling your way. Dad’s coming.

Angela was glad of the warning. Charlie was helping her control Marc’s anger, but apparently, her time had run out on that front.

He’ll be there shortly. Becky and I are ahead of him by an hour. She refused to quit when Seth told

her to. He stayed with dad. Dog and the ants are with him too.

Angela felt his concern. *Is she okay?*

Uh, yeah.

Charlie's pause said Angela needed to make sure things were going according to plan. She changed her instructions on the fly, like she'd known would happen in places. *Tell your dad that I can't reach Doug. And stay with him. You're not safe here.*

Angela hated it that she couldn't have her family close, but government assassins were sneaking closer even as she was sending these mental messages. The duties she was giving Marc would keep them alive. It was being by her side that was likely to get them both killed. This was a one-day camp she and her two personal guards had entered a short time ago. There were still Eagles at the first site and she would return there, but Marc had insisted she leave each evening for a secure location to sleep. She'd agreed, knowing it wouldn't matter if fate decided to hand her another challenge. It had made Marc feel better and that had been her goal.

Tomorrow or the day after, most of her people would be reunited, with the bulk of the damage done during the next 24-hours. The soldiers currently sneaking up her mountain in the darkness were about to have the roughest day of their lives.

Chapter Seventeen BK5
Make Me Believe It

1

Marc's group was somber as they approached Safe Haven's den in the eerie dusk. The carrion birds circling the gritty sky said they were walking into another scene of death. The ten fighters braced for it to be their loved ones.

Marc had more hope than the others. "They were supposed to leave if this cave was attacked."

Kenn scanned the buried bodies and dried blood. "Were they supposed to blow it up?"

"Yes. And those aren't our people."

"But they're wearing our Eagle..." Kenn trailed off as he realized there were no level patches on the jackets. "Copies!"

"Yes." Marc led them around the carnage and down the other side of the cliff. "Copied before Adrian chose to show rank. Angie was right."

"About what?" Kenn stayed on Marc's right as they moved by the path that led to the buried entrance.

"She said their information will be weeks or even months behind. It will give us the advantage in every trap they try to set, because the details won't be exactly right."

Jeff, who had begun to scour the area the instant they topped the cliff, came to Marc's left in a much better mood. "We lost one back there, down the hill, and all of the other camps are gone—headed the way you are."

"Who was it?"

"Kip. Shot."

"Damn."

Jeff agreed, but silently, out of respect for the dead. Kip had been up for rookie team leader and though he was obnoxious, it had kept Stanley from getting that place. The clumsy medic was unbearable as a boss, worse than Kenn, but he worked tirelessly.

"I'll take care of that after." Marc moved faster now that the fresh rush of adrenalin had woken them all up. He was aware of Charlie frowning as he came up between his dad and Kenn.

"Have you guys heard anything from Tracy?"

"No, but we wouldn't if she was with the rest of the camp."

"That happened hours ago. She should have gotten here right before us." Charlie gestured. "So where is she?"

"Already tracking the camp, like we are." Marc refused to get upset. "If she's not with them, we'll go out looking."

"Can we call mom? Now?"

Marc started to try and was stopped by Jeff handing him an envelope. The brown wrapper was in bad shape, but unopened.

Charlie watched in worry as Marc opened it.
Marc's face tightened, eyes flashing betrayal.
It told Charlie to prepare himself.

Marc handed him the sheet of paper.

Stay with your dad or you'll get Tracy killed.

Charlie tried to pry into Marc's mind, to see if he knew more details, but Marc's demon shoved him out with the flick of a wrist.

Best grow up first, son.

Enraged, Charlie began screaming at his mom.

Marc wasn't able to treat his son the way he had the others who'd reacted this way. He nodded curtly to Stanley.

Stanley had orders to tranquilize whomever Marc told him to; he came forward with a syringe.

Charlie felt him and whirled around, swinging.

Stanley fell onto his back as Jeff and Quinn quickly subdued the irate teenager.

Marc grabbed Charlie's head and forced him to lock eyes. "Look at this, at the future coming for us!"

Charlie couldn't refuse the command of the alpha or the strength of Marc entering his mind with armageddon scenes.

"They're going to bomb us, boy. Between the destruction and the aftermath, we'll lose the entire state. Trust your mom. Trust me."

The boy was in agony at the thought of Tracy being used like the other females had for this terrible plan, but he shook off the men holding him, visibly

calming down. “Both of you would sacrifice Tracy to win!”

“Do you think so?” Marc continued down the hill. “Don’t you think she knows if Tracy dies, she loses you? Wake up, boy! She’s got that type of deal going with every Eagle under her command.”

“And there will be losses,” Jeff reminded them both gravely. “There already have been. It won’t be her fault. She’s done the best she could to keep the dreams alive.”

“Slam the dreams!” Charlie took the point position to hurry things along.

Marc let him go, not sure if Angela had this covered or if she’d set it up to be sure Charlie experienced this feeling. Either way, Marc wasn’t okay with how she was toying with everyone’s lives. If they lost, he wouldn’t be able to put this many pieces back together for her.

Jeff, following orders, waved a smart salute to Marc and vanished down a narrow path into the weeds.

2

This is it. Cynthia went over it one last time as the engines rumbled toward her and the sentries on the area began sounding the alarm by triggering her watch. All of the people going in this way had been given special watches with their orders. Hers had gone off once already and she’d slowly unzipped herself to be ready, like her instructions had stated.

The cold had seeped into her Military Sleep System setup quickly after that.

Cynthia could see the light from her watch, but she didn't move to shut it off. The dirt protected her shallow grave. She needed the time to let her eyes adjust. Until she rose, she couldn't be sure if it was day or night, though Angela's estimate had said it would be a few hours before dawn when the soldiers broke through the camps of dozing Eagles. The cold air coming in through her air straw said the boss was right, though Cynthia was sure she'd never tasted fog before for the comparison.

The rumbling grew louder; she heard male voices. She waited in terrified excitement.

Start counting when you're sure it's them.

Cynthia blinked rapidly, in time with her new heartbeat. *One. Two Three.*

Get your body set; plan the moves.

Muscles flexed a bit, fingers dug into the dirt for a light coating to grip with. She would kick up to loosen the dirt, lunge from her hole, and pause for a two-count to get her bearings amid the men she could feel walking overtop of her now. *Four. Five. Six.*

Prepare yourself by imagining exactly what will happen. Hear it, smell it, taste it.

Cynthia saw herself limping to the waiting weapon, jerking the tree cover rope as shouts of spotting her echoed and possible gunfire came. *Seven. Eight. Nine.*

Keep firing until your guards drag you off or the soldiers are all dead.

That was the suicide part of the run. Cynthia saw herself being careful with her aim so she would still be alive when her guards arrived. It was a relief, now that the moment was here, to know she wasn't alone.

Cynthia finished the count with no thoughts of anything except the plan she'd just gone over. *Ten.*

Give them no mercy.

Cynthia sucked in a calming breath and kicked upward with both legs to loosen the dirt.

Daryl and Kevin were running toward the battle side-by-side, aware of the screams, the explosions, but mostly of Cynthia's almost constant firing. She was shouting one long cry of do or die, and the panic was a shared torment. They stayed behind the trees, coming down to where she was firing from as the entire squad of soldiers flooded toward her.

Another explosion echoed, followed by four more in rapid succession.

The first waves of soldiers were killed with the well-aimed grenades. Bodies flew across the battlefield.

Another line of men came over the corpses as Cynthia reloaded. She paused long enough to slam her hand into the box she'd secured to the tree.

The trigger clicked.

She ducked as the branches flew out and hit the soldiers who were still under orders to take

hostages. Men and guns flew through the air as Cynthia hurriedly dropped the huge shells into place.

“Come on!”

“Let’s go!”

Cynthia heard her escorts arrive, but she wasn’t wasting a full load. She jerked the trigger with calculated pauses between, taking out specific targets—the two front vehicles, a rear truck shaped like a tank, a cluster of soldiers trying to get to their radiophones.

In the distance, a much bigger explosion echoed, impossible to pinpoint a direction on.

Kevin and Daryl didn’t have time to worry over it. They each grabbed an arm and started dragging Cynthia away from the scene as the remaining dozen men came flooding over the wreckage, firing.

Cynthia kicked out at a second black box on the tree, but missed. She struggled against their tight grips. “Hit that button!”

Daryl slammed a hand against it and then used brute strength to lift Cynthia onto his shoulder.

Cynthia twisted to take the blow with her hip, ducking as another line of branches swung out.

Kevin was hit by the tip of the longest branch, and knocked onto his back as it flew by to smack into the running soldiers.

Kevin scrambled up and began firing at the wounded survivors who were trying to do the same.

Still over Daryl’s shoulder, Cynthia also started firing.

Daryl turned so she could get a better aim, raising his own weapon, and the trio stayed face-to-face with their enemy as they killed them. The shock of a dead woman rising from the ground to fire a multi-shot grenade launcher had given Cynthia the advantage.

Trapped in the middle of the convoy, three younger soldiers held up their hands in surrender, begging not to be killed.

Daryl felt Cynthia tense for the next shots and spun her so that the slugs plunged into the ground instead, his ears ringing. The soldiers who were capable of fleeing, did so.

“Hey!”

Daryl swung her down as Kevin came to his side.

Cynthia stopped protesting as she realized what she'd been about to do. She frowned a bit, considering. “I was told no mercy.”

Before either man could stop her, she whirled around and opened fire.

She got all three of the men who had unwisely chosen to run down the middle of the debris-covered street. They made perfect targets among the flames and smoke.

Daryl and Kevin both shouted, but they didn't interfere when she began walking the bloody battlefield, executing the survivors she found. After a minute, both men reluctantly joined her. Their orders had been to keep Cynthia alive and be her support. They had also been told to follow her lead.

Cynthia stopped in the center of the carnage to read the next envelope. She found one sheet of paper.

Stay with Marc until Kenn goes rogue, then get to me at the first campsite.

Cynthia looked up to find Daryl and Kevin on full alert as shadows came in from the north.

Marc stepped over the pile of bodies, impressed and horrified.

Kenn handled the moment, relishing the feel of being in battle. “Donner’s biggest camp is two miles from here, which means machine guns, heavy gates, lots of guards. We’re staying low and waiting on one more.”

Cynthia immediately started searching through the bodies for anything she could use.

Kevin took a place by her side, angry now that she was safe. “Why did you have to do it that way? You could have been hurt! What are you trying—”

“I was supposed to die here, Kevin,” Cynthia interrupted tonelessly. “Please don’t nag me on my Death Day.”

She left him standing there in shocked amusement and revulsion. He’d never been more confused.

Daryl also wanted a word with Cynthia.

She braced for it as he stepped in front of her.

Daryl smiled. “Please don’t kill me for this, okay?” He leaned in, moving slowly, and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Nice job.”

The reporter felt it then, the difference in her attractions, the gaps between all the men she'd ever been attracted to, and then it vanished, leaving Daryl standing knowingly in front of her.

Too enrapt to care about who was watching, Cynthia moved into Daryl's arms and let him hold her. She'd killed again and loved every second of it. Human contact would help bring her back from the cloud she'd put herself under when she'd been facing her own mortality.

A bit surprised, Daryl wrapped his arms around her. His ears stopped ringing; his stomach began settling. He was aware of Kevin's outrage and Marc's approval, but the feel of Cynthia in his arms was too good to miss any part of. He shut them out.

"Thank you." She snuggled against his big chest.

"My honor." He refused to let go yet. When she didn't pull away, Daryl felt his heart shift into a more serious rhythm, one of contentment and determination. "Can I feed you while they're working on things?"

"Yeah, my boy may eat you if I don't feed him soon."

Daryl chuckled and slid a hand to her hip. His big fingers reached half way around her waist.

Cynthia groaned at the feel of the heat on her skin after being in the ground for days.

"Easy, son. I've got her covered."

Cynthia laughed and then went quiet as her stomach and headache eased.

“Wow.”

Daryl felt her relax and grinned wider. “He likes me. Cool.”

She stared up at him in surprise. “How do you know?”

Daryl steered her toward the tree line, where his kit had been left. “He would have hurt me if he didn’t. That’s why I went slow. Descendant babies are temperamental. I’ve been one of the guards over Jennifer’s baby since she was born. Cute kid. Talks too much.”

“But she can’t...”

Cynthia immediately began pelting Daryl with questions as he led her out of the bloodbath.

Marc and Kevin had stopped to watch the new couple, one thinking Angela was smart and the other thinking she was unbelievably cruel.

“Man, I never even got to be inside that!”

“Maybe the fact that sex is your first grief, is why she never spread her legs for you in the first place. Good women can sense it when they’re about to make a mistake.”

“But I didn’t get a chance to think it over! It hasn’t even been a week.”

“She spent days hiding under the ground, waiting to die. She obviously spent the time productively.”

“How can you be so unfeeling?” Kevin was hurting and angry.

“I’m not the one who gave up a dream because he couldn’t swallow enough pride to raise a

fatherless child. That was your choice.” Marc joined Kenn for the salvage, leaving Kevin alone to smother his regret.

3

What am I supposed to do now? What did my orders say?

Kendle and Tonya’s thoughts were identical, though they were miles apart. Kendle was alone, trudging toward her last known location in hopes of meeting up with any of their people. Her orders said to rescue Tonya, but the only way she could do that was with help, so she was trying to find Kenn. It was what Tonya had wanted, though Kendle was counting on Marc being with the Marine.

Kendle trotted faster, hoping Tonya would be okay. Despite the friction, she liked the redhead.

Tonya, now wedged between uneasy soldiers as their jeep flew toward the last base camp, was being as obnoxious as she’d been ordered to. “So, like, how many of you guys are left? My boss said she’d kill a hundred a day once the real shit hit the fan. Guess that means in a week, you guys could be the last soldiers here.” Tonya smiled. “That’s something to look forward to, right?”

“Shut up!” The driver was tired of her, but none of the others supported him. Want to or not, they were listening. Being sent out here had been bad,

but since Donner had landed, life had become a nightmare.

“You’ve been promised passes, or women and promotions, or maybe Donner said you’ll be with him when he’s running things. But I wonder if he can be trusted... Did you know his personal team is dead? They tried to take our den and my boss killed them all. Guess Donner won’t have the backup he’s counting on.” Tonya didn’t know if any of these things were fact or not. Her orders had supplied the details to use while manipulating their fears, but it hadn’t been hard to imagine it happening. Except for the one she was about to use. It was impossible. “The Ghost will come for me, you know? We’re close.”

The jeep slowed as the driver turned to look at her, to judge if she was lying. The other men did the same.

“You mean the wolf?”

“I mean Marcus Brady, the Ghost, who you’ve been told is dead.” Tonya enjoyed their stunned expressions, leering. “He’s very...fond of me.”

“Man, this run keeps getting worse.” The driver hit the gas.

“Yeah.” The Captain next to him brightened. “But hey, we can switch with the next team going out and then get clear of this zone.”

“Not sure the next zone is far enough.” The driver glared at Tonya in the mirror.

The Captain scowled. “We won’t get out of there at all if Red here shoots off her mouth.”

“Me?” Tonya smiled cheerfully. “I think you should dart me when we hit your camp. Then that can’t happen.”

The men liked the idea, but they didn’t trust her. “Why would you help us?”

Tonya’s tone held a genuine note of reckoning. “Because when my man comes, you’ll be bones in the stones. It doesn’t have to be that way.” Tonya had been ordered to get captured during the battle that Kendle was supposed to start. And the island woman had, taking on a team of five soldiers in hand-to-hand combat with her knife. She’d killed three of them while Tonya and Grace had dispatched the other two with rifle shots. That noise had brought the main squad of soldiers, exactly as Angela had predicted. “Do you guys have anything to eat? The baby’s hungry again.”

The men almost whimpered this time.

“She’s carrying the Ghost’s kid!”

“Oh, shit!”

Crackers and water were tossed her way.

Tonya munched contentedly. She was almost enjoying herself now.

The driver suspected the problems they were delivering into Donner’s last standing camp, but the lure of escaping with his life was enough to convince him to agree. “Okay. We’ll dart you, drop you in the cell and go.” Corporal James hesitated, and then forced himself to continue. Once he made a deal, he stuck to it. “Do you need anything?”

The others were staring at the driver as if he was crazy, but Tonya was thankful. She hadn't quite believed Angela's note that it would go this way. "Yes, actually, there is. What's your name? I'll need it to make sure my boss spares you."

Tonya got their names and ranks, secured a weapon she didn't think she would need, and ended up with four new friends—all from the terror instilled by the mere mention of the Ghost. Angela would be proud.

4

Not long after Tonya made her deal, Kendle stumbled across the small team of Eagles who had been told to wait there, but not why. Kendle was grateful to Angela even while hating her. "Hey!"

The men turned her way as Kendle ran to Marc's side, spewing her anger before she was even close to him. "That bitch set us up! Who the hell does she think she is?!"

Cynthia, tired and ready for it to end, stuck her foot out and tripped the island woman.

Kendle went down in surprise, smacking into the ground hard enough to stun her. As she struggled to breathe normally, Cynthia leaned down into Kendle's face. "Shut. Up."

Kendle thought about fighting, but the reporter's rage was as great as her own. It was easy to recognize a bloodlust that hadn't gotten its fill.

“Okay. But tell Kenny they have Tonya. She gave herself up to save me.”

Marc knelt down to hear the details that were now being spoken instead of screamed. “What did she say? Exact words.”

Kendle replayed it in her mind, trying not to miss anything while breathing in Marc’s comforting presence. It was hard telling where they would send her after this.

“What are your orders?”

Kendle frowned. “To rescue Tonya. But I can’t do that alone.”

Marc turned to wave Kenn down from guard duty, bracing for a bad reaction from the Marine. Kenn hadn’t wanted Tonya to be involved at all and he would be angry, with every right as far as Marc was concerned.

“She wanted me to tell him,” Kendle stated as Cynthia kept glaring at her, anxious to be out of the reporter’s line of sight. If that challenge didn’t ease, Kendle would be forced to do something about it and she’d promised Angela to complete her mission before losing control.

Kenn stomped down the hill, dread in his heart and rage in his mind. He knew from the looks on their faces that something was wrong. The only reason Marc would ever be staring at him with sympathy was if Tonya were involved. “Where is she?”

Kendle went to Kenn and told him what had happened, including Angela's orders and Tonya's words. Kenn didn't speak until she was finished.

Kendle wondered if the rage sickness had already made it to the US before she landed, like Carol and Marsha had insisted. These Safe Haven people were always pissed off.

Kenn looked at Marc, then west, toward the camp they'd reconed and skirted around on the way here. He glanced down at the gun in his hand, not sure how it had gotten there.

"Kenn, we'll get our weapons, make a plan—"

Kenn slid his gun into the holster and went west without answering Kendle.

He didn't speak or act angry, but Marc felt the blind rage and sighed. "Whoever has my next orders better give them to me now."

Kenn, only a bit away, took a paper from his pocket and held it up.

Marc shook his head at Angela's cruelty. He ran to catch up and snatched the waving paper from Kenn's grip.

You and Kenn. The others have jobs to do. "That bitch!"

"I know, right?" Kendle had stayed with him.

"I have to go now," Cynthia called from behind them. "Who has orders for my escorts?"

Marc stopped and tossed an envelope to Cynthia, and then hurried to catch up with Kenn again, forgetting about Kendle.

Hurt, the island woman turned into the trees and disappeared, not waiting for any more orders. She would do what she wanted to from here on out.

Daryl and Kevin read their orders while Cynthia stared after Kendle.

“I’m being sent with Kendle.” Kevin realized Angela had known what would happen between him and Cynthia. She was splitting them up.

“I’m Cynthia’s escort to Angela,” Daryl stated evenly, trying not to make Kevin feel worse.

Kevin left them with a feeling of almost relief. Maybe it was better this way. He hadn’t been sure he was strong enough for a woman like her. After seeing her in action, he knew he wasn’t.

Kevin caught up to Kendle without saying anything.

The island woman grunted. “What?”

“I’m supposed to stay with you. Where are you going?”

“Back to camp.” Kendle dug her next envelope out moodily. “No matter what this says.”

Kevin read it aloud with a frown. “*Until you tell the truth about what happened, Safe Haven has no place for you. Our deal is off.*”

Kendle screamed in outrage at the betrayal.

Kevin kept his distance as the island woman spun around and began punching the nearest tree.

Kevin saw fresh blood roll down her arm and noticed her wounds. While she beat on the tree, he got out his medical kit and set things up. She would calm down at some point and he would try to

convince her to tell him whatever it was Angela wanted him to know.

Kevin was sure she'd sent him for a specific reason, but after losing Cynthia, he wasn't sure he wanted to do this. His thirst for adventure was waning.

5

Billy and Jax ran together as they followed Samantha to her next location before dawn. They'd already scouted it themselves after she marked it. They had no trouble keeping up with her but still staying out of sight.

What they hadn't counted on was her also being aware of them. After Tonya and Kendle left, Samantha had spent the morning on the move, picking off small teams of soldiers when the opportunity arose. Her senses were sharp right now. She spun around, rifle lowered, but ready in case she was wrong about who was tailing her. "Come on out."

Jax and Billy emerged with slight smiles and faces that held no mockery, only respect.

"Very good." Neil and Jeremy were lucky to be sharing her. Unlike a lot of their members, Billy understood the urge to go against the norm.

"Thanks."

The trio settled down together behind the blanket of trees that was her next location. She held out her sheet.

Keep your escorts company until your target arrives.

Sam grinned, liking the feel of being an equal more than she could express to even herself.

“How long?” Jax was thinking of snoozing.

Samantha read the rest of this order. “Fifteen minutes or less.” She stowed it in her kit, and got up to explore the weapon already perched above them in the tree line. Samantha hadn’t seen who delivered this one, but she was again aware of how intelligent Angela was. She’d provided a secondary weapon in case Sam had lost hers in the first attack, which she hadn’t. “Man, I wanna be her when I grow up,” Samantha climbed the tree.

When her escorts saw what was waiting, they laughed again, understanding the feeling. Adrian had been good, but Angela was better.

Neither man noticed the false cheer or the distraction technique that had been used on them. Samantha was good at following orders, especially those she agreed with. If these brave men knew what she was about to do, they would drug her and drag her straight to Neil and Jeremy.

6

Donner’s order for the men to push in a hundred miles a week was being followed and then some. These men had heard the rumors of the Ghost being on the outer rings of this invasion, harassing Donner. They’d hurried toward their goal in the

center, hoping to reach Safe Haven before Marc caught up to them. It flushed these unsuspecting men directly into the second and third rings of Angela's trap, where they wouldn't be able to call for reinforcements.

Donner had planned to use field phones too, but Angela's mines and det-cord were buried in the only places where teams of men could make camp with heavy gear. All forms of communication, other than smoke and mirrors, or mental, would be gone between teams until the soldiers could replace the lines. By then, it would be too late to matter. Donner and his men would already be too deep into her rings to withdraw.

Zack's team watched from atop the cliff as the squad of soldiers below them began packing up to start the day's trek. Zack waited until the sentries were also inside the damage path, then hit the button on the box in his hand.

The flat area below them immediately exploded. The det-cord running under the feet of the soldiers left little chance for escape.

Zack and his team waited for the dust to clear before going down to strip the area of whatever remained. Another chore on their list was done.

Chapter Eighteen BK5

What Ghosts May Come

1

“Who is that?!”

Every soldier on the base had heard rumors of the Ghost being alive, but the sight of him striding through the blasted gates behind another glowing-eyed devil was enough to send weaker soldiers fleeing without firing a single shot.

“It’s the Ghost!”

“Get out! Get out!”

“He’s here!”

“Kill him!”

The base alarm began to blare, but it was drowned out by the rear gate exploding in two loud pops that sent bodies and debris flying.

Kenn and Marc strode through the smoke, throwing grenades and firing with intent. The nearest soldiers fled as they recognized the Ghost.

Kenn didn’t care that they were fleeing, only that they were a threat. He fired from the hip like Adrian had taught him, taking savage pleasure in the headshots and splattering gore.

He heard Marc behind him, taking care of the soldiers trying to come in from the rear, but he didn’t turn and help. He knew where Tonya would

be, where anyone being interrogated would be on a temporary base like this one. He moved that way without pausing as shadows scattered in front of him.

“Look out!”

Kenn threw two grenades together, causing large blasts that cleared the path. He used his last one to blow open the rickety door, destroying the front of the main building.

“That’s the main alarm!”

In the center of the base, Tonya felt the entire structure shudder. She looked at her captors with genuine sympathy. “You don’t want to be in this room when he finds me.”

Another round of explosions came, followed by awful screams of men dying.

Her guards fled the room, not bothering to shut the door.

Tonya, hands bound in front of her, picked up the Twinkie one of the soldiers had been teasing her with and tore into it as if she was starving.

Marc guarded the halls as Kenn stepped into the room with Tonya, who was busy swallowing a last bite and grinning happily.

Kenn growled, but the relief at her being unhurt allowed him to start waking from his rage daze. Crashing, he dropped down into the chair across from her and leaned back. “Whenever you’re ready, *dear.*”

Tonya flushed at the sarcasm, but she quickly climbed into his lap and kissed his cheeks until he hugged her tightly in annoyance. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“You are mine, right?” He glared, but his voice didn’t hold the possessive tones that he’d used on Angela. He didn’t feel that way anymore.

Tonya smiled. “Yeah. Thanks for that too.” She snuggled into his arms, stomach quieted as a sense of safety swarmed her with weariness. “You feel good.”

Kenn grunted, becoming aware of her physical state when he lifted her into his arms and stood. “Is this what you’re gonna be like? Cause I can’t take this shit, woman.”

Tonya smiled against his sweaty neck and didn’t make any promises that she couldn’t keep.

Marc led the way out of the nearly deserted base, unable to keep from feeling proud of their talents as he swept the destruction that they’d rained down upon this place in mere minutes. Whatever Angela’s reasons for this attack had been, she had accomplished an important feat here; for the first time, Marc had a real hope that they might win.

2

Donner’s convoy turned to the only alternate route left as fresh explosions echoed across the mountains. There was no way to be sure it was their

recon teams dying, but Donner knew. He directed his driver to go to his next chosen den, a small, one floor office complex that had once sold cabin rentals to tourists.

His driver sped across the rocky road, trying to get them under cover.

Samantha waved four fingers in the air to indicate how many teams were in this squad and then she took aim. Angela wanted Donner pushed continuously.

Samantha hit the tree in front of the convoy instead of the first jeep. Despite wanting to disobey, she had chosen to trust her leader. She had been able to stay ahead of Donner because of the stops he'd made and the routes Angela had chosen. Donner's vehicles couldn't go where she could and it was costing him.

Samantha fired her rifle with glee, hitting mirrors and trimming shoulders as her escorts did the same from the tree above her, per their orders. Billy, on the new rifle, was in heaven.

"There!" Soldiers rushed toward her.

Samantha acted as if she hadn't noticed the soldiers coming up on her right.

Her guards noticed them too late. Her body and several large trees were blocking their view.

Samantha waved her panicking guards into hiding and raised her hands as the soldiers spotted her and began shouting orders.

"Get down!"

“Hands up!”

She eased to her knees with her hands out in front of her.

The first thing each soldier noticed about her was the glaring red and white maternity shirt that claimed to love both boys and girls. The second thing they noticed was her glowing red eyes.

“What the hell?!”

Samantha smiled politely, swallowing her sudden case of nerves. “Can I speak with your boss, please? I’d like to register a lengthy complaint.”

“Get up!”

Samantha let them jerk her up by the arm and cuff her, not answering their demands, but obeying every order. The voice inside was saying these men were on the edge, to not provoke them even by accident.

“Donner wants anyone we catch.” The team leader jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Take her to a jeep while we clear the area.”

“No clearing,” a higher ranked soldier belayed the command. “You heard the explosions. This entire damn mountain might be rigged. Move out.”

A minute later, Samantha was being marched down the small incline. It was hard to keep the satisfaction from her face.

Billy and Jax were on the move the instant the soldiers were out of sight, headed for the center of their zone to contact their teams for a rescue mission. They had no other envelopes.

They flew through the paths and over the stone, not stopping or talking until they were both at their limit and had to slow down. The mountain around them was alive with the noises of life and death, but few of them drew notice from the two worried men. Neither of them said what they were thinking, but it was obvious what they had to do when their contact van finally came into sight.

The two tense guards sitting on top of the van stood up in concern.

“Together?” Jax paled as Neil jumped from the roof and flew toward them.

Billy grimaced. “Yes. Start talking before he reaches us and we may actually survive.”

3

“I’m not in a good mood.” Samantha frowned at Donner as he came into the small room and closed the door. “Neither are my sons.”

She’d been shoved into a jeep, but they’d only traveled a few minutes before reaching this office complex.

Donner took that in with delight. “And they have a father who will be arriving shortly?”

“Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

Donner was prepared for lies and deceit, or even attempts at sympathy considering the quick admission of pregnancy, but when she began to control the environment, forcing wind from nothing, he was unable to halt his interest. Few

descendants had physical gifts. Mental abilities were common.

Sam let go of the power. The air dropped; the papers on the desk stilled. She wasn't an alpha. She couldn't get into Donner's mind as long as he kept his walls up, but he would have little trouble reading hers. Not that it mattered. She didn't know Angela's final plan. No one did.

Donner moved into the opposite chair. "More?"

Samantha indulged him by bringing every object into the air from the desktop and throwing it against the door he'd come in through.

"Excellent."

He studied her with oddly flickering eyes. Sam realized Angela had been right again about the government sending in their kind.

"Why are you here?" Donner was reading the woman's thoughts. She was scared and proud, but mostly tired and wanted to go home.

"To kill you."

Donner chuckled even when he felt the genuine hate behind her words. "Someone's already been trying to do that." He gestured at his bandages, glowing orbs peering through her mind, rifling secret doors.

Samantha gave a sweet smile as she pictured pulling the trigger on him. She laughed when Donner flinched. "Sorry, I missed. I am a rookie."

Donner's anger rushed out to drive Samantha backwards. She managed to keep from being hurt

by landing on her side, but the pain of the blow drew tears to her eyes.

Samantha stayed down. She'd been told not to push him in any way, that he was volatile right now, but she hadn't been able to resist. As she lay there, she felt him ripping open doors in her mind, but there was nothing for him to find. She had no orders now, no specific plan to follow. She was at the mercy of fate and the man at the table.

"Yes, you are." Donner was soothed to discover she wasn't hiding anything. "But even with your gift, you're still not worth passing up two alphas. You'll be traded."

"Good. I've wanted to be back in my tent with a mug of hot chocolate for days now."

Donner read no lie there and frowned. Why would they send in a pregnant woman with orders to kill him, but no plan?

"Good question." Samantha shrugged. "Ask her when you see her, will you?"

Donner felt the wind rise in the room as Samantha stood up. A cold chill settled onto his shoulders. Had he underestimated their abilities?

"No, easy..." Sam controlled, rubbing her stomach.

Donner didn't miss it, but the goal he had was still larger than unborn twins who could affect nature. "I'm an alpha, Ms. Moore. If they try—"

"They're just hungry." Samantha leaned against the wall. "They couldn't give a shit less about you."

Donner snorted and headed for the door. He was gone a minute later, only stopping long enough to order the door guard to bring her something to eat.

Samantha let out the breath she'd been holding the entire time he'd been in the room, but she didn't let her thoughts go to anything more than the immediate care of her children. Donner had been in her head and he was indeed an alpha. She'd had no way to resist his presence in her mind. It had been awful. He would likely monitor her thoughts until something else distracted him.

Samantha stayed back as the door opened and the guard came in with a small pouch. Another soldier stood behind him, gaping at their prisoner.

Samantha smiled at them. "Is it okay if I ask a couple questions?"

"Like what?" The food delivery man set the pouch on the desk.

"If I need to, ah, use the facilities?"

The man rolled his eyes, waving toward a door to the right. "There's also a couch in there."

Sam was surprised. Her happiness at not being held in awful conditions flooded the room.

The two men stared at her, dumbfounded. Her happiness was addictive.

Sam went to the rear rooms instead of making a run for it. She wasn't supposed to escape or bewitch these men onto her side. That was the easiest part of this mission. Samantha had no idea what came next, but after everything she had done over the last few days, it was a relief. She had wounded Donner more

than once, flushed him north, and now she was here, in his camp. Angela would bring her home alive if possible, but no matter what happened during Angela's finale, Sam had accomplished her mission objectives.

She thought about her men, who knew by now that she'd been taken, and controlled her anxiety by forcing her mind to slow for sleeping, like she'd learned in Eagle training. It had been a long run. *I can't break down now. It's almost over.*

4

"How did you beat me here?" Kyle had ducked inside the temporary tent to find Jennifer sitting on a bedroll, pulling off her muddy boots. He'd only been here long enough to give Angela an update on Zack's team, who Kyle had transported multiple times today. They'd been busy beavers.

"I didn't, really." Jennifer gave up on the boots to lie down. "Some of us rode on the back of your van. You never noticed us."

"You did not!"

Jennifer snickered. "Yes, we did." Her smile faded. "Why was Conner brought in?"

"He broke a moral rule." Kyle was shocked that he'd missed her hanging from the rear of the van. He excused it as being tired.

Jennifer was too tired to scan his thoughts or drag it out of him. "Okay."

Kyle knew she wanted answers, but he didn't have them to give. He was glad when she sat up and began fighting with her boots again.

"You look tired." She finally got the first one untied.

"So do you." He was calming down now that they were together. Why did she have that effect on him?

"I have no idea, but it works both ways." Jennifer blushed. "I missed you, too."

"Can I hold you?" Kyle blurted suddenly.

Jennifer knew he meant something different from what they'd already been doing. "What do you mean?"

Kyle swallowed, embarrassed. "Before we sleep I, uh... I'd like to cuddle, with you in my lap. Just for a few minutes."

Jennifer couldn't deny him. He'd never asked for physical contact before and she didn't mind the idea of trying this with him. In fact, they'd already sort-of done this, only lying down. "Um, yeah. Okay."

Kyle removed his boots and jacket, exposing big arms under a black t-shirt.

Jennifer looked away, suddenly scared of herself. Killing Louis and the others had helped her get by a mental block. She wasn't afraid of Kyle hurting her, though she was sure he would without meaning to. Her pain would come when he asked for her to participate, to respond.

Kyle had no idea where Jennifer's thoughts were as he sat on the bedroll beside her and leaned against a tall cooler.

When she jumped, nearly lunging from the cloth, he sighed. "It's okay, Jen. We'll just go to sleep."

"No."

Her sharp tone made Kyle look over, expecting to find the witch, something he wouldn't tolerate when it came to their physical bonding.

Jennifer's beautiful eyes glared at him in fierce determination. "You didn't ask for anything wrong, Reece. Shut up and take it."

Kyle laughed, always surprised when she pulled herself out of a bad moment. Then she slid into his arms and he couldn't breathe.

Forcing herself to face the things she was afraid of, Jennifer straddled his lap and wrapped her long legs around his hips. She rested her head on his frozen shoulder, aware of how hard her heart was pounding. She wanted to get over her fears of sex and men, but mostly, she wanted to be able to trust herself and repay Kyle. If Kyle's touch lit her up and made her want sex the way Cesar had after he forced his drugs on her, then she would learn to accept that she was a slave to her body's needs, but never to the man she chose to fulfill them.

Kyle held her without moving, as usual. Jennifer quickly tired of the lack of response. It was another sign that she was healing, that she could be bored instead of scared as she nuzzled his neck.

“We’re alone and I’m not shaking with fear yet. What would you like to do?”

She hadn’t thought Kyle could stiffen further, but he did to the point that sitting on his lap became uncomfortable. Jennifer blushed again as she realized why that was.

Kyle chuckled. “Sorry.”

Jennifer stayed still. “It, ah...doesn’t take much, does it?”

It was one of the few sexual references she’d made. Kyle grinned. “It’s all you.”

“And it’ll, um, stay that way, right?”

Kyle understood what she wanted to know. He chose to turn the tense moment into a lighter one. “I certainly hope so. There’s no Viagra anymore unless I ask Angie and that isn’t happening.”

Jennifer giggled.

Kyle gently gave her the information she was searching for. “I’ll always want you. But that doesn’t mean I can’t control it.”

“You didn’t before.”

Kyle knew he would be hearing that for the rest of their lives and chose to give her more there too. “I’d do it again to keep from raping you, Jenny.”

She sighed, still not sure why men felt so strongly about her. “Sometimes I wish you’d go ahead so I can stop worrying over it.”

“I won’t as long as you feel that way.”

“I could push you.” She sighed. “I know how.”

Kyle grunted. “Is it what you want?”

She shrugged, embarrassed. “I want you to be happy and I want to be normal again.”

“And you think consummating our relationship will help you?”

“It has with Becky.”

Kyle wasn't so sure, but he didn't argue on that line. “I'm sorry, Jen, but I won't do it. If you twist me up that way intentionally, you'll find me in a whore's tent.”

The girl knew she could push it too far for him to walk away from her, but she wasn't ready to do that here and now.

“Can I talk to you about it? Just questions?”

Jennifer shrugged again, very aware of his hard body under her.

Kyle gently lifted her off his lap and felt her immediate relief. He felt some too, though not from the need for release. He would take care of that when she finally crashed for a few hours.

“What do you want to know?” She lay on her side so that her loose hair would cover her face and make this easier. She'd been avoiding it, but every adult female in Safe Haven that she'd spoken with had recommended talking to him about her fears of intimacy.

“What scares you about it, to start with?”

“Everything.”

“The pain? Humiliation?”

“The lack of control.” Jennifer decided she might as well be honest. “Hilda said if I tied you up, I wouldn't be scared.”

This time, Kyle turned red. “If you...what?”

Jennifer didn't look at him, smiling a little at his dazed voice. “She said to take my cuffs, secure you to a real bed in some shitty little town, and stay there exploring your big body until I know it better than my own.”

Kyle was scarlet from the roots of his hair to the tips of his fingers.

Jennifer dissolved in giggles, forcing the rest out between laughs and breaths. “She said you'd walk funny, but I'd be the man of the house after that.”

Kyle gave in and snorted out his amusement, filling their tent with good vibes.

When Kyle began forming his next question, Jennifer grew serious. Hilda had given her a lot of advice while helping her recover from the birth.

“Are there things you liked, that at some point, you might want someone else to do, without the ugliness?” His heart was pounding. He wasn't supposed to have this conversation with her for another year.

Jennifer slowly shook her head.

Kyle knew she was lying. “It doesn't mean I'm going to grab you and do it right this minute. But we have to talk about these things. You know that.”

She did, but it wasn't easy. She chose to show him instead. Unfortunately, she had no other reference than her time with Cesar.

Kyle's good mood sank through the ground as he watched Cesar shoot her up and then make love to her as if she was a willing woman.

Jennifer ended the memory in shame. *I knew I wasn't supposed to like any of it!*

"Jenny?"

Kyle's tone was ugly; she jerked her head up to see if she should brace for blows.

Kyle grunted miserably. "Not at you, honey. At him. You did nothing wrong there."

"Are you... Are you sure?"

"Yes. He used pleasure to control you. It's supposed to be used to bond with each other, to express our love."

His voice lowered into a type of fear that she recognized as him not wanting to say the wrong thing.

"I'll... I can do those things for you, without the pain or the drugs."

Jennifer wanted to fight the horrors in her mind with good moments until all the darkness was refilled with light; she stepped bravely into adulthood. "Show me."

"Uh..." Kyle blinked. "Now?"

Jenny was almost shaking. "Just a little, to see if I can take it."

Not sure if I can. "I need time to plan it out, but I will when this war is over."

Jennifer knew her age was still an issue for him. "Promise that you will."

"My word on it."

As they settled down to sleep, it was on both their minds enough to keep them from dozing off right away. Their relationship had changed, due to Jennifer pushing herself and Kyle's patience, but neither of them was sure if they were ready for it.

Kyle was only agreeing because she and the witch were asking for the same thing of him, at the same time. And he wanted to! Kyle had never fought so hard to resist anything in his life. It was a constant struggle for him to remain civilized, but he was able to do it because the prize at the end was worth every second of this torture. *She's almost willing, almost mine!* Kyle drifted off with her lips on his mind and a hard-on inside his pants.

5

“Send them in at dawn. Throw everything we have.”

Captain Mayberry stared. He had just informed Donner of landmines being discovered near all their forward camps. The teams were waiting along that dangerous barrier for instructions, watching the sun sink with dread.

Mayberry was Donner's official right hand man now, but he understood that position was like playing musical chairs. The fact that they had served together meant little. Coming into the middle of a run like this was always dangerous, but after Canada, the Captain had needed a break. He'd liked those scrappy women. “Did you say send them

through anyway, sir?” Mayberry was surprised by the order. Donner didn’t usually waste good men.

Donner glowered. “Yes.”

Mayberry read the tone, and shrugged. “If that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get.”

Mayberry left the room to spread the word that they were pushing on. As he went, the Captain made a mental note to find Sherman and the rest of their team. The soldiers who survived these orders would no longer be under the control of anyone.

I’m counting on that, Donner sipped his cold coffee. Thanks to Angela filling the area with traps and ambushes, the men would loot or destroy everything they found. The bloodlust would catch on to the remaining half of this battalion and they would take it out on everyone they came into contact with. It would peak tomorrow evening. During the chaos, Donner and his men would drop in on Safe Haven.

Are you there? Donner called, not pushing the radio button. He was testing a theory on her abilities.

Of course, Angela answered cheerfully. *I’m always in your head now.*

Donner reached for the radio to avoid answering her mentally.

Angela laughed in his mind. *Coward.*

“I want Mitchel and my Sergeant ready to go. I’m coming in for them.”

Angela’s scorn was thick. “This is *my* mountain, *Major*. If I see anything in the air, I’ll shoot it down

myself and I don't need a missile. I'm locked right onto you."

Donner clicked the mike to stop her words from going through, but Angela simply waited, reading his thoughts across a hundred miles. When he let off the button, she smiled into the radio. "Is that office warm enough?"

Donner became aware of his men chattering outside and hefted himself from the chair, grabbing his kit along the way. He knew trouble when he smelled it. "Get the woman!"

He left the radio, fleeing the sudden fire that had come roaring down the hill for him.

Behind the cabin, Crista stayed still, trying to squeeze off one more shot before her target was out of range. The fire was nothing. The rifle was everything.

The jeep flew through the darkness as Crista waited, exhaling. She pulled the trigger gently.

She saw a soldier slump over, but not the one she wanted... Donner had put someone directly behind him to avoid this. "You bastard!"

Anger brought her rifle back up; she took out everything moving that she had time to hit, showing no mercy to the men Donner had left behind. Crista didn't drop from her spot until the wind swirled the flames her way and even then, she moved with her rifle in hand, longing for another shot.

Angela waited a minute and then continued her assault, seeing Donner flip on the radio in the hummer he'd taken. She and the witch were staying close enough to count his nose hairs if they desired. "Did you know you're down to less than five hundred men, *Major*? Is that close to the number you promised them would survive? Because the next mile and a half of landmines should even that difference. Especially since I've eliminated all your EOD teams."

Donner punched the dashboard. "Liar!" He grabbed the mike, brought back into the argument against his will. He couldn't let his men only hear her or they might desert him. "There's no way you had enough mines or time to cover that much ground. I'm calling your bluff!"

Angela's laugh cackled over the waves, sounding like something from a horror show. "I'll prove it, *Butcher*. You have a team of recon men inside my wire, one of your last, by the way. Call surrender or you've killed them."

"I'm coming for you!"

"That's your choice. Listen to what you've caused."

The open radio echoed an explosion and then the sounds of men screaming before Angela took back over. "You also have a tank team waiting inside my wire. Surrender or you've killed them."

Donner quickly realized she was proving she didn't bluff, but he didn't care about any of the

things or people she was destroying. “My chopper will be there in one day.”

“Major, you’re not listening to me and I don’t care for that. I have a gun to your Sergeant’s head right now. Should I pull the trigger?”

Donner hesitated. Sergeant Wallz had been with him a long time. The man had saved all of them more than once. He felt a kinship to the former blacksmith.

“Well?”

“Yes. And then I’ll shoot every hostage I have, including the blonde bitch carrying twin sons.”

Now there was silence from Angela.

Donner was satisfied he’d won this one. “That’s what I thought. One day. Have them ready.”

Angela didn’t answer, giving Donner the uneasy win. She pulled out of his head completely as he directed his convoy to the edge of the outer battlefield, where his chopper was being kept at his final den.

Sitting behind him, Samantha didn’t move or speak. All hell was about to break loose.

“Sir, we have a new report about the Ghost. He’s been—”

“There is no Ghost!”

Donner’s wild shout made Samantha twitch. The dead body slumped next to her wasn’t helping with her discomfort.

“He was killed! It’s a damn wolf.”

“Uh, sir, we have five visual confirmations from the large base camp. And, uh...we don't have a base camp anymore. It's been destroyed.”

The Private was busy reading the Morse code message as he translated it. He didn't see Donner's gun go to the side of his head.

The report in the jeep was awful, making ears ring and stomach's lurch, but Donner didn't tell them to stop, not even to dump the bodies. “Get me to that cabin!”

“Yes, sir.” Mayberry was familiar with this side of Donner. The Major didn't like being argued with.

Samantha avoided making eye contact with her captors. She tried to bring up a wall by thinking of her most hated, annoying song (Don't Worry, Be Happy), and hoped it would be enough to cover her from Donner's prying.

Are you there?

Yes, master

Can you help me?

In many ways. What would you have me do? the demon asked eagerly.

Protect my children.

The demon clucked. *I already am, master, but there are limits. Don't get shot.*

Samantha flinched again, glancing at the shattered hole in the window behind her. *Yeah, that's a concern.*

Chapter Nineteen BK5
The Wildcards

1

It was a relief to find Doug standing outside the torch-lit cave entrance. Marc went straight to the big man. “Did it go okay?”

Doug started to launch into a tirade, but he was interrupted by Charlie’s excited call.

“Tracy! I’m here!”

Doug frowned, drawn from his anger by concern. “She hasn’t been with us at all.”

Charlie heard him and spun to his dad in panic. “I have to go!”

“Try to call your mom, first. She may have this covered.”

Charlie wanted to believe Marc’s words, but a minute later, he went striding into the dusky woods, shouting over his shoulder. “She said to stay here, that she would handle it!”

Marc didn’t argue or drag the teenager back. He hoped Angela would keep both of them with her. Angela was supposed to join him in this den tonight.

And you believed that? Marc’s demon asked suddenly. He’d been absent, searching with the witch for a way out of what was coming. He’d missed most of the fighting.

Marc froze, remembering what Cynthia had told him before they left on their first runs.

She's lying to you, about everything. Don't let her face Donner alone.

He finally connected it; his heart leapt painfully in his chest. "Oh, Angie. What have you done?"

2

"I'm done."

Kyle turned at the words, frowning. Jennifer was reading her final orders. Kyle assumed they were too hard. "What does she want you to do now? Kill Donner?"

Jennifer handed him the paper, not smiling. "That's Samantha's job."

Kyle read the orders in surprise.

You are finished. Take Kyle and go get your daughter. Then head south and stay with Sebastian's people until Kyle can find safe passage to an island. You have both done your duty by us. Now go live for yourselves.

Jennifer was waiting for Kyle's reaction, expecting him to refuse again now that their safety net decision moment had arrived.

"Do you know where she has Safe Haven holed up now?"

"No, but I can track Autumn and find it."

Kyle nodded. "Do it."

Jennifer gazed at Kyle in reluctant agreement. "She's right. We should go."

Kyle knelt in front of her, hating that this moment had to come here, like this. “I need to know if you want me with you.”

“You’d take me south and come back?”

Kyle shrugged. “I doubt I’d return here. Also too many memories for me, you know?”

Jennifer did. Kyle had also lost loved ones here in every member who’d died under his watch.

“Do you, Jen?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. I need you.”

It was enough for him to have hope. “Come on. Let’s get our daughter and walk away.” His wording was intentional; he braced for anger.

“Okay.”

Stunned, he had to be sure she understood. “Are you...?”

Jennifer rose, quickly, and pressed her lips to his. He was willing to give up everything for her.

Kyle had frozen, caught completely off guard. He ended the kiss when he realized she would stay that way until he did. He would always be the lead there.

Jennifer blushed, catching the thought.

Kyle noticed she didn’t seem afraid at the idea, like she had before. “It’s because of what she had you do, right?”

“Yes,” Jennifer admitted, with gratitude. “By making me Donner’s captive, she freed me.”

And me, Kyle thought. There was no way he could ever repay the debt.

“Me either.” Jennifer was still scared, but now she knew how to handle it and she had Angela to thank for that.

An explosion above them came barreling down the mountain.

Kyle gently took Jennifer’s arm and led her away from tomorrow’s battlefield. “Time to go.”

3

“It’s too quiet.”

Daryl understood why Cynthia would feel that way. After the constant noises today, the night sounded empty, haunted. “At least the screams have stopped.”

As if to prove him wrong, a shriek rang out from somewhere above them.

Daryl sighed. “You warm enough?” He had her stashed in the base of a burnt tree, with his thick bedroll between her and the trunk. He was perched in front of her, scanning their surroundings while being warmed from her body heat. Once she’d been inside for a few minutes, she had started baking off heat, like most people did in the colder weather. The human body could provide enough warmth for a small room. It was amazing.

“Yes.” Cynthia sipped the water, crackers long gone, and stared at Daryl’s posterior. He had wide shoulders, lean hips, and glossy hair that needed a gentle wash and brush.

Bet I look like hell. Cynthia wished daylight would hurry up so they could be on the move. Busy trying to smother her true thoughts, she wasn't prepared for Daryl to want to talk about it.

"Do you love Kevin?"

Cynthia grimaced. "Is this the best time?"

"We may not get another chance if we run into a squad on the way."

She was unable to argue that point. "No, I'm not in love with Kevin."

"Were you two...? You know."

"No, it hadn't gone that far."

He looked over his shoulder. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Never felt right, I guess, not after Matt being killed."

"Did you blame Kevin for that?"

"I blame the boss. She made the call."

Daryl understood Cynthia was still sore over that topic, but he had to know what he was getting into. "And Adrian?"

That one was easier to answer. "I love him. He doesn't love me. The baby wasn't planned."

"You two could still raise it together."

"No. I'd never feel secure as long as he's obsessed with Angie. I won't put a child through that."

Daryl slid over until he was leaning against the tree. "So, you wouldn't tell the baby who its father is?"

"Not for a while." She tugged the blanket over so Daryl had it between him and the tree for warmth

and padding. “Later, it would be hard to hide, but I haven’t gotten that far in the plans.”

“And what if a man wanted to... What if I wanted to be his father?”

Cynthia smiled. “I’d already gotten that impression.”

“It’s not because of the power. It’s important to me that you know that.”

“Time will prove it,” was the best Cynthia could give him.

Daryl understood her trust would have to be earned.

“So how does this work? We’re skipping a lot of levels here.”

Daryl snickered. “Straight to the bedroom, then, right?”

The reporter joined the joke. “Only if you lick me clean first.”

Daryl thought his heart might stop.

Their amusement floated out of their tiny shelter and rolled down the mountain. It was one of the few good sounds the area had heard since Donner landed.

Cynthia’s laugh ended in a yawn.

Daryl took a risk by offering his arms.

Cynthia went without hesitation. It was hard to explain, even to herself, why she seemed so close to the level six Eagle so soon, but she was too tired to question it right now.

Daryl settled back with Cynthia lying on top of his big body. He pulled the tree branch over a bit

more to cover the draft flowing through their entrance. He snuggled into the bedroll with her, hands resting on her flat stomach as they drifted off together.

4

“Are you gonna tell me so we can both go home?”

Kendle glared at Kevin across the tree branches they were sheltering in. “No.”

“I’m not giving up what I’ve earned for you. If you haven’t told me by morning, I’m leaving you out here.”

Kendle knew he wasn’t bluffing, but the things she would have to admit with that truth were too painful. She settled further into her bag to keep from having to meet his eyes. She hadn’t even been able to tell Marc. Kevin, she couldn’t care less about. There was no way she could spill her guts to him.

Kevin sipped his hot coffee, loving the solar thermos setups Angela had assigned to everyone. Around them, the trees shook lightly with the cold wind; the occasional animal moved through the underbrush, but that was it for movement. The night was still and quiet. It was an incredible change from the din of earlier. “Is it that bad?”

Kendle grunted, but didn’t give another answer.

Kevin was finished trying to drag it out of her. “I mean it, you know. I will leave you here.” He shut

his eyes, intending to snooze...and heard her climbing down from the perch she'd tied herself to.

Kendle was furious again, needing an outlet. She snuck out the way they'd come, searching for someone, anyone, who shouldn't be here.

Kevin followed reluctantly, feeling like he was responsible for making her mad. He wanted to sleep, but he stayed on her heels, mug still in hand, as she stalked something only she had seen.

Kendle didn't care about Kevin, only a release. Frustration welled when she couldn't find an enemy to take it out on. She settled for stabbing at a tree repeatedly, not stopping even when the wound on her arm broke open and bled through the bandage. "Leave. Me. Alone."

Kevin did. He went back to the trees, wrapped up, and went to sleep.

Kendle continued to roam, mind flying too hard to allow rest. Surely, there was someone around here that she didn't like?

5

"This run stinks."

Trey didn't add his agreement to the complaints going around the fire along with the bottle of Kentucky bourbon. After losing Adrian and Wallz, Trey was at the bottom of Donner's ranks. He'd found out what happened to their team and the anger had been hard to control. Those two-dozen men had been together a long time. Trey now assumed

Donner had decided that was too long. He would probably pick replacements from these rage-filled descendants after he conquered them.

That battle was supposed to come tomorrow. Donner was promising that within 24-hours, Safe Haven would be theirs. Trey didn't believe it, though he had to admit Donner had his pieces in the right places. Even now, a large team was clawing their way to the top of Lookout Mountain and another was sneaking closer to Safe Haven's secondary stashing place. An Eagle who surrendered, not wanting to fight anymore, had given them that location. Donner had handed her over to his men after getting all the information he could.

Her screams were currently ringing through the higher-ranked tent area. If there was anything left, she would be passed down, but Trey wasn't interested in seconds or even firsts. He'd met the leader they were up against. The mercenary was sure that Angela wasn't letting her army get out of control this way. Her prisoners would be safe despite her corruption. "At least until the trade."

Trey wasn't Donner's brightest man, but he was far from the idiot he was treated like. He knew Donner was underestimating Angela. The urge to walk away was strong.

If you're here come daylight, you will die.

Trey spun around to find Dog standing by the edge of a large tree. He thought of shooting the wolf, but Dog's vicious growl froze him.

Do not stay here for the final battle. An ugly end waits for you.

The wolf was trailing Charlie, who was on his way to Angela, but Dog hadn't been able to resist haunting the mercenary. Angela had asked him to scare as many of the enemy men as he could.

Dog flashed the desire to taste Trey's blood, and then walked slowly into the mist coming down the cliffs.

Trey took deep breaths to calm his rapid heartbeat, mind spinning. *Can I do that? Just walk away?*

"Trey! Get in here!" Donner shouted from his unprotected tent. "I can't find my pipe and I want that update now!"

Dog wasn't far away yet. He shoved into Trey's mind. *You could kill him. My master will reward you greatly.*

Trey considered it, and then reality returned. If he killed Donner now, on the eve of success, these men would rip him apart before he could make it to Safe Haven's gates. His fate was sealed. "Long before I ever came to this cursed place." He went to answer the Butcher's shout. "No going back now."

Dog increased his pace as he caught Charlie's scent again, relieved that he didn't smell blood, only anger. The long trot would cool the pup down a little before he got to Angela.

Dog swept his huge head from side to side, seeing nature was staying out of this one. Except for him and the ants, and the flock of birds he'd been

able to overpower mentally, it was just man against man, as it had always been.

A small band of mostly female survivors that Tucker and Anderson would have recognized were also roaming the night. Using rocks and slingshots, the group of fanatics trudged through the thinnest part of the line of soldiers. They'd voted to join Safe Haven for the fight. On the way, they had picked off stragglers and small teams who didn't expect the showers of stones and sliding boulders. Done while the men were distracted or sleeping, it was a rude call to alertness that helped Angela's plan along. Know it or not, the fanatics were now a part of her war.

6

"It's all set, sir." Trey gave his update from a distance, standing by the door. "They'll move out before dawn. Each man will carry two full loads of ammunition for the M32s. They'll pop a single illumination flare per team, shoot a smoke grenade for cover, and still have ten shells left to trigger traps and mines ahead of them. After clearing, they'll move in continuously until they reach the summit of Lookout Mountain. Safe Haven will be ours by sundown."

Donner was satisfied with the plan. He waved Trey out to pass the orders. Their men would also be using hellhound rounds, which were incredibly

destructive. They would devastate this mountain. Donner was eager for the sounds of battle to fill the air.

The soldiers around him felt the same. They were drinking, dancing, playing music and making use of the few women here. It was common knowledge that many of them wouldn't return; their last night on earth was being spent in drunken debauchery that would continue right up until the fighting started. It would mean that not everyone's aim would be perfect, but it would allow for more ugliness than a composed team would produce.

Donner hit the mike in his hand, voice harsh. "All forward posts, move in!"

Outside, the partying went on for another long minute and then chaos ensued. Across the landscape, small teams of soldiers hurried to clean blood from their hands so they could go dip them in fresh crimson. Very few men were thinking of anything except sharing in the spoils. Most of those who did think of running ended up staying. Only a few of the ten-man teams vanished into the night and weren't seen or heard from again. A few Eagles also took that way out of the coming battle.

Angela didn't loathe them for it the way Donner did with his men. She valued their lives more than that.

Seventy miles to the east, she heard Donner's order and heaved a painful sigh. There had been a small hope that the Butcher would stick to his deal

of coming this evening for Adrian, but that was gone now. There would be another fight.

“Cynthia and Daryl came in. He insisted she get fed first.” Shawn nodded to Greg, who had watch duty over the boss.

“Good.” Angela was sure if things hadn’t gone according to plan, the reporter would have already tried to contact her. Cynthia would stay here and defend this site tomorrow during the final battle. Angela expected it to come to her front door this time.

“The boys are pissed, but they’re waiting.”

When he didn’t receive an answer, Shawn joined Greg on watch. Unlike the others, who were still trying to figure out the next step in Angela’s plan, Shawn knew what was coming and agreed completely. If anyone could accomplish such a life-changing goal, she could. He’d never met a smarter woman or man. Even Adrian, with his guiding light, couldn’t match Angela in being devious. If not for Marc, Shawn would have tried to get her attention. His respect was immeasurable.

Angela would have loved or hated his devotion on a different day, but now, she only had time for the plan. One wrong step was all it would take to bring them down; she scanned her tensely waiting camp.

Neil and Jeremy, with Jax and Billy, were in a small tent near where the chopper would land. Angela hadn’t spoken to either man yet. Nothing was clear when she looked to the final battle, but

they would demand answers that she didn't have. To provide a small measure of comfort, she'd had Samantha's last wishes carried out. A letter was being delivered to Neil and Jeremy. It was Samantha's will. Angela was dreading morning, when those two men wouldn't be able to wait any longer without confronting her.

Angela winced at a sharp stomach cramp; she wasn't comforted when the witch delivered a warning.

"A few more days." She ignored the second warning she received. After Hilda's words, it didn't matter. There was no way she could carry this child to term or even close. She couldn't lose the war too. The second miscarriage may or may not make her want to die, but the government taking over Safe Haven would certainly kill her.

Still in his small cell, Adrian caught the thought and finally understood what she planned to do. He started to shout for help, and then snapped his mouth shut as the possibilities buzzed through his mind. If she succeeded, Safe Haven would continue under Marc's strong leadership and Angela would be free to unleash her fury on the enemy.

It was a hard moment for him. He had to decide to trust her or his own visions. It was seeing Cynthia and Daryl arm-in-arm, coming toward them that made up his mind. She had a grand plan, one bigger than what he and Marc had provided, and he would let her carry it out. Cynthia and Daryl was a match

he'd never considered. It told Adrian he had missed things. He would trust her.

"Marc will hate you for that choice." Angela was ready to knock him out with the dart gun on her belt if he started shouting mentally. Marc couldn't come here, not yet.

"He already hates me."

"Not the way he will after this. If I die, so will you, by his hand."

Adrian had heard the threat too many times for it to have an effect. "Will you?"

Angela looked away, voice lowering. "That has not been revealed."

Adrian hated that answer as much as he ever had. He was forced to keep quiet as Cynthia and Daryl came over.

Cynthia didn't look at Adrian. She pushed a cup and snack baggie into Angela's chilly hands, then waited for orders or praise. She wasn't expecting what came.

"You two have a moral violation to judge. I need a solution or punishment before you hit the rack." Angela pointed to the second cell they hadn't noticed. Both Eagles stared at Conner, who'd woken at the words.

"What has he done?" Cynthia wasn't sure she was the right one to judge people for bad behavior.

"If he has any hopes of remaining in Safe Haven, he'll tell you himself." Angela narrowed in on Adrian, who was now making plans based around what he'd discovered about her mental state.

She jerked a hand at the empty tent next to her. “Why don’t you three spend some time talking while his father gets some rest?”

Angela motioned again.

Shawn came forward, jerking the dart gun from his belt.

Adrian saw it coming and tried to shout for Marc in revenge, but it was too late. The call died before it went far.

“Sorry, Adrian, but I can’t have you changing your mind at the last minute.” Angela had seen it happening and was accounting for it. He hadn’t expected that because he didn’t fight fate, only planned around it. Angela met fate in a life or death battle daily. She wouldn’t know how to win any other way.

“Why did you do that?” Conner glowered. “He wasn’t going to tell on you!”

Angela didn’t reply to Conner, speaking to Daryl instead. “I know you don’t understand, but everyone will by this time tomorrow. Can you trust me for one more day?”

Daryl had no hesitation. She’d given him something he hadn’t even realized he was missing. He tucked Cynthia against his warm side and turned her toward Conner. “So, what’s this all about, boy?”

Now facing the camp’s punishment master, Conner floundered in his anger and started spilling his secrets. He didn’t want to go back in the labs. This tiny cell was better.

“Hey, what’s that?” Greg was staring at the marred cliffs to their southeast that they hadn’t been able to see yesterday for the heavy clouds.

Angela didn’t need to look to know. “Our den was breached.”

A new explosion rolled over the mountains, drawing every head toward the sound.

Angela felt fate slide in to start breathing down her neck. Had Peggy and Doug gotten them all inside in time? It was a struggle not to call out, but there was no way Donner would miss anything flying through the air right now. She dug her nails into her palms as she fought for control. If her army had to stick to the plan, then so did she.

7

Chris moved through the darkness not far from where Angela stood, memorizing every detail of her tired stance and the defeated expression on her beautiful face. He wanted to comfort her, and in the absence of that, he needed to ease her pain. It had always been this way for him, even before he’d known what to do with such emotions.

Before the first war he’d survived, the vet had often found a woman he could obsess over. He would follow her for weeks or even months before making contact and then the romance ended. His pattern had climaxed in the same graveyard many times. It wasn’t only pets buried in the Richardson Animal Cemetery.

When his obsession with Angela had begun, Chris had thought it would end the same way, but since his epiphany, the vet no longer viewed her as a future victim. She was his leader, his master and idol unknown. He would serve her well.

And when she finds out?

Chris slid under cover of the weeds as an Indian patrol came by. When Angela tallied up all the evil he'd removed from her camp, she might give him the job permanently. Then he wouldn't have to hide his true nature anymore. *I will become her dark sword of justice.*

8

Angela saw the two Eagles coming toward her through the dawn fog and waved her guards back, sure this wouldn't be a quiet conversation. She led them to the mini-mess tent, bringing up this part of the plan and her chosen words. Now that the moment was here, it was harder to be indifferent than she had thought it would be. Their minds were alive with torment.

During the time it had taken to get here, Neil and Jeremy had calmed down some, but both Eagles were angry and scared, wanting answers. They weren't going to leave until they got them.

Angela sank down at the center table with a groan she was sure they wanted to echo.

They took the bench across from her, ignoring the rookie cook who hurriedly put MREs and hot

coffee in front of them. They were quickly alone in the tent.

“I’m going to fill you in on most of it and you won’t like it, but it’s not over yet, so please follow your orders, gentlemen. If you don’t, it will go every bit as badly as you’ve been envisioning.” Angela lit a smoke and shut her eyes, exhausted. “I had to push Donner here. That was key. Samantha is the best sniper on my team. She’s been flushing him toward Marc and inflicting enough injuries to keep him using his gifts for healing instead of tracking our teams. When he comes tomorrow, all of *my* team will be here—a line of women with a few skills and worlds of determination.”

“Why females?” Neil had to know. “The men are better trained, more prepared to deal with the abuses and hardships. Why did it have to be women?”

“Because of what will happen tomorrow.” Angela shook her head. “I can’t discuss what hasn’t happened yet, so don’t ask me.”

“Will she die?” Jeremy demanded. “Is she dying for your damn plan?”

Angela wanted to reassure them, but there was darkness now when she looked. “I hope not, but I think something’s gone wrong somewhere. I’m searching for it, but I need help.”

“How?”

“What?”

“I need everyone accounted for.” Angela held out a long paper with hundreds of names on it.

“When I know who’s missing, I’ll know what’s gone wrong and be able to account for it.”

“When did you lose track?” Neil began scanning the list.

Jeremy handed him a pen. They began to mark off everyone they knew about.

“A little after dark fell. There was chaos yesterday. I knew I wouldn’t be able to monitor everyone, but this feels like a wildcard.”

Both men groaned. They hated wildcards.

“Use the field phones and start contacting each team for an oral check in. Listen for the tone of voice and missing pieces. Shawn has it ready to go, but he needs two hands ASAP.”

They knew she was keeping them busy, but they also believed her about the wildcard. Too many things had gone in their favor. It was past time for something to go wrong.

9

Tracy moved through the too-still darkness with a cold chill of foreboding. She was supposed to get to Safe Haven now, but these trips through the night were taking a toll on her. She wanted to be almost anywhere but trudging up a mountain path alone.

A shadow moved ahead of her.

Tracy stopped to study it, hoping for one of her own team almost desperately.

“Who’s there?”

The man's voice wasn't familiar, but as he stumbled closer, Tracy saw the outfit of an Eagle and rushed forward. "Are you all right?"

"Not really..." The man nearly fell as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "But it just got a little better."

Tracy frowned, staring into an unfamiliar face.

Sherman brought up a dart and plunged it into her neck. "Don't know which one you are, darlin'." He hefted her over his wide shoulder. "But if they don't want you, I do."

Tracy went under like a rock, not even given time to call out to a protector.

Chapter Twenty BK5
Before The Storm

1

Angela stepped from Shawn's jeep and moved confidently into the site that now held more than a hundred of Safe Haven's top fighters. She'd left a good portion of the leaderless teams with her vulnerable camp members, but concentrated her efforts here.

Angela yawned. This was her last day of freedom; she'd been unable to get enough sleep. She'd insisted her guards sleep in shifts while the witch dream walked to refill the energy she would miss.

"Updates first?" Greg had stayed overnight to make sure it was clear for her return. Shawn hadn't budged the jeep an inch until Greg had sent the properly colored firework into the air.

"In a minute." Angela scanned to be sure things were where she needed them to be. Then she looked down the mountain again, doing the same. It was SOP for a commander, but she didn't know that. Angela's instincts were hot. She couldn't see the exact locations of the enemy teams and assassins who'd snuck closer during the night, but she could feel them holding their breath, waiting to see if she

would stay, if they would get a shot at her. Whatever Donner had promised them was big.

No worries. Angela had given orders to her front line fighters to trigger this slaughter if the soldiers tried to withdraw. It was an intricate web of pain. The fighters had lured the soldiers into the first ring and done enough damage to cause personal anger and ensure they would be chased.

These Safe Haven fighters had then taken the cleared roads, mining them as they went. When the soldiers tripped the first rounds of mine, a two-mile stretch of these mountains would shatter into mines, various grenades, claymores, spikes, tree branches, stacks of logs, and a dozen other clever killing methods that were all connected to at least one damage zone to keep the chain alive. It would circle the mountain in a spiral that ended at the gates she was lingering inside.

The soldiers were likely using the last reserves of the bunker. They would have some of the newer items that had been saved for need, such as the Milkor M32s. Cynthia had one of those, but Marc hadn't been able to find many of the coveted destruction-deliverers. Angela had planned around that. She'd known they would be facing superior firepower, but she'd counted on that margin being small. The enemy had handguns, rifles, grenade launchers, and night vision equipment. She assumed they would also be wearing body armor. They would also be weighed down with extra ammunition. The majority would converge where

the main roads met, hoping to use pure numbers to breach her final walls. So, she'd denied them targets for that rage and laid the death on thickest right at her front door. They had no idea what she was capable of, but they were learning.

Her people should all be clear of the destruction zone by now, but there were a few teams still unaccounted for. She tried not to worry over their safety as much as the time estimate she'd allotted. If they died, that would be where she'd made the awful mistake. It was hard to judge the length of some emotions and as usual, all of Safe Haven's people were going through something personal. That's the way life worked. It stole concentration right when it was needed the most.

“Down!”

Angela and Shawn ducked and spun in perfect time, drawing and firing at three large mercenaries dropping from the tree near the gate. The men had lain in wait for hours, inching through as the fog slowly lifted.

Shawn rose as they both fired again, already sorry for shooting so close to her.

Angela didn't even notice the ringing in her ears until she verified all three would-be killers were down.

Greg was there to hold out a pair of thick foam earplugs, giving Shawn a light frown. He couldn't be too upset. He'd almost tackled her to be sure she wasn't hit. That would have been worse.

Angela didn't tell them the witch was already healing her eardrum, though the plug would help until it was finished. The demon inside had smothered her in layers of protection, but if a noise had gotten through, what else might?

I'll strengthen it, the witch stated, fading away.

Angela stifled her protest, knowing that was the best place for her demon. Angela had allowed that spirit to see parts of her plan. She didn't need the distraction of inner struggles, but she felt naked without both the witch and Marc.

Angela went through the gates this time without lingering; she didn't wince when they clanged shut. It was worth it, even if she never felt the sun again.

Already terrified of going mad in captivity, Angela scented the sky, raising her face to the vague sun above them. She'd hoped to have three months before the battles reached Safe Haven's front gates, but it had come in two.

The sky opened up, pouring down weak acid rain that drew groans and moans of annoyance.

Angela lowered her head, denied even a last fresh breath of free, warm air. "Let's all get set."

Her cold words triggered a flurry of activity.

Angela went to the command center they'd erected overnight. There hadn't been a need for it until now. She ducked under the awning, seeing the sides were folded now. It was plated to form a safety box for her to work in.

Angela waved at the radios, the lights and alarms that were set to notify them when certain

areas had been breached. The Indian and Mexican teams were working on that even now, closing gaps in the paths as they came her way.

Angela was grateful for the brave men Marc had gathered—even Sebastian, who she hadn't met yet. Marc had flat out refused to have the man anywhere near her. Angela hadn't argued.

Angela heard her top men gathering under the edges of her command tent and turned to face them without flinching at the accusing looks or their fear. "Updates first."

Angela paid careful attention to each word they spoke as the rain continued to pour and the silence held.

In a canvas behind Angela's tent, Adrian, Conner, and a few other prisoners of war were also waiting for the battle to begin. Most of them were dreading the end, no matter how today turned out. A couple of them hoped Angela knew what she was doing; they wished they had made better choices so they could also be out there fighting for their freedom.

Adrian and Conner were sleeping. Darts at regular intervals had kept the two males under control while Angela left for the safe den that Marc had insisted on each night. Neither of them stirred when Angela arrived and she was glad of it. Adrian had been adding up clues fast. He was smart enough to put those pieces together if given enough time.

That was a feeling Adrian would have recognized and sympathized with immensely.

2

“I have an envelope for you.” Becky was supposed to wait until they were alone and she had. They were camped in the high fork of a double tree.

Seth didn’t want to read it. He wasn’t sure he could agree to whatever they were about to ambush him with. Angela had even sent his team with Marc to make sure he and Becky were alone for this moment. Seth was suddenly sure of it. He thought of the warning she’d given him.

“There’s only one thing that can ruin my plan, Seth. Please don’t be the one to get us killed.”

He glanced at the same words with a stomach tightening into cramps. Like the others who’d had to make these choices, it was almost hard to believe this was all happening.

“This is yours too. Kenn said wear it while you can.”

The outfit had clearly been taken from a dead soldier. There was blood splattered over the legs of the Private uniform.

“And you know about this? What I’m supposed to do?”

“Yes.” Becky braced for an outburst. “There’s a setup like this with every member of her team.”

“Why? Why would she send in untrained women who are pregnant?”

“To win, of course, and to save our men in the process. We’re tired of burying you!”

“And you think I can live if you’re gone?!”

“No.” She tried to calm them both down. “And neither does Angela. We have to trust her. You have to. A lot rides on *our* part in this.”

Seth knew he didn’t have a choice. He gave a curt nod, but his thoughts were a tornado of conflicting emotions and solutions. In the end, he couldn’t be sure which way he would go.

3

“Who isn’t accounted for yet?”

Quinn handed Marc the list and went toward the mini-mess for coffee now that his overnight shift was finished.

She’s in danger.

Marc knew it without Dog’s warning. He could feel fate shifting Angela’s way, determining her future. “She lied to me. Again.”

Yes. To keep you alive. May I go? Dog was worried.

Marc’s nod wasn’t finished before the wolf took off down the cliff in front of them and vanished into the predawn fog. The wolf hadn’t found Charlie the first time through. Marc was sure Dog would find him along the way this time and keep the teenager safe, though he also thought Charlie could handle whatever might come flying out of the darkness to

challenge him. His gifts were powerful and he wouldn't hesitate to use them right now.

Feeling damned either way he went, Marc decided to take the hour and care for the camp, then go to Angela's side for the final showdown with Donner. It was still hours away. He would still have time to reach her and not have to see the condemnation in her eyes if he told her the camp was safe and sound.

Marc scanned the small sea of tents on the narrow outcropping, then the two cave entrances. If they had...

An ugly growl split the peaceful silence.

Marc whirled around to discover Dog leaping through the air. The wolf landed on the chest of a man wearing all black.

Everyone froze as they realized they were under attack.

"Get in the cave!" Marc sent out the order mentally as well.

The camp members who heard him ran for cover.

These infiltrators had to climb for hours to reach this spot, telling Marc they had another traitor, as Angela suspected. This attack couldn't have come from Heather. She hadn't known where the second den would be. Dog leaving had spooked the soldiers as they waited for Safe Haven to go to sleep. They'd come over the edge early.

Marc saw Doug and Peggy come from the minimes tent and start grabbing people, shoving them

toward the second cave they hadn't used yet, then he was forced to bring out the Marine as the enemy reached the edges of the cliff.

Quinn joined Marc as he rushed toward the invaders; other Eagles fell in with them. The two violent groups met each other with hoarse shouts and angry shots.

4

Seth stopped on the rise and knelt down to survey the small enemy camp below. During the walk here, he still hadn't come to terms with the horrible chore Angela had given him. Becky had helped by telling him the rest of Angela's plan that she knew.

"Angela will need you there, Seth. If you're not, she'll die. She has everything pinned on you."

As he considered all the things that could go wrong, Seth didn't think this was a mental game to get him to agree. Becky had sworn she would be protected, that Angela was the one in danger.

"You ready?"

Seth glanced over to see Becky wearing an outfit that brought his male side to alertness and a huge scowl to his face.

Before he could argue, Becky frowned. "They're already looking for me. I'm the dancing girl. It'll get you in."

Seth wasn't worried about blending in with the men getting set to attack Safe Haven. All he had to

do was let the asshole out. Becky's safety terrified him.

"I'll be fine." She hoped he couldn't hear the tremor in her voice. She actually had no idea if Angela had her covered or not. Adrian hadn't before. She was scared.

Seth felt her waver and gently put his arms around her. "We could—"

"Don't."

Seth met her eyes. "Why do you have to do this? Tell me or I can't help her."

"It will give me my life back. I have to do it. I want to."

"For the power she offered." Seth understood the allure.

"For my soul." Becky sent him the image of her flirting with Rick, accepting the vial of drugs to hurt Neil. She ran through the mistakes she'd made, tears pricking her lids. "I have to atone. Then his voice in my brain will go away."

Seth did the only thing he knew to. He held her close and cursed Adrian. Over the last month, he'd come to understand how many of their lives Adrian had put in danger during their time with the slavers.

Becky didn't let many of her tears fall. As she grew stronger, the need for justice and retribution had been replaced with the longing for mental control. She didn't like being unstable. Her addition to Angela's plan had been to suggest using a chain reaction. She was happy with being proven right. She was also extremely worried about Seth. He had

a dangerous job, more so than hers. Seth could be hit in the crossfire even if his role wasn't discovered. The line they were walking was too thin for comfort.

“Uh, they're about to leave,” a voice above them said pointedly. “If you're going in, now is the time.”

They looked up to see no one there.

“Who is that?”

Crista had to stick a hand from her blind and wave before they found her location.

“Oh, too good!” Becky was impressed. Blending with the tree trunk cleverly hid the hammock. The hammock was horizontally hung, with branches woven into the straps until it appeared to be a part of the tree.

Even Seth was impressed, but he mostly felt relief. Crista was one of the best snipers in camp. He was suddenly sure she wasn't alone here. Seth glanced around, searching. He was rewarded by Zack's face a few trees away. He was using the same setup as Crista.

Seth realized there were hammocks and fighters all through these trees, watching them in relief that the waiting was over.

“Feel better now?”

Seth nodded at Becky's breathless question, realizing she'd been scared. “If you keep lying to me, we're going to have problems, Rebecca.” Seth waited for her anger or a denial.

“I’m an Eagle, Seth. I follow orders. So do you.” She turned toward the camp. In a few seconds, all hell would break loose and Seth would casually join the fleeing soldiers during the chaos, wearing Kenn’s dog tags.

Being a cop was close to being a soldier. Other than terminology, he would have no trouble blending in. Angela had provided close lessons with Marc and Kenn on the guns and gear he was currently carrying, though Seth hadn’t known why he’d been taught those things until now.

“It’s a go!” Becky took off.

Seth controlled himself as he watched Becky vanish into the sudden chaos, covered by Zack’s constant firing and Crista’s careful shots. Those two were a lethal pair.

Seth waited like he was supposed to, even when he saw Becky get grabbed by a huge soldier. The big man dropped her almost immediately, staring down in horror. When he lifted his own gun and put it in his mouth, unnoticed by the other soldiers trying to survive the unexpected assault, Seth realized what Becky had been hiding. She could take over a person’s mind and make them do things. *Bad things.*

5

“I’m leaving now.”

Kendle didn’t look up from her glower at the small camp of soldiers on the rise below them. She

was two minutes from dropping. She didn't need Kevin's distraction.

Kevin went to his team. "Let's go."

His team had shown up during the night to offer protection and deliver the boss woman's newest orders.

"Your people need you. Leave Kendle."

Kevin didn't have anything else pulling him away now. He felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders as he chose to return to his goals of being the best Eagle in camp. He would no doubt spend a lot of sleepless nights after this, wondering what had gone wrong with Cynthia, but he would get through it.

Kendle heard them leave, but didn't care. She didn't want the bonds that Angela and her haven were trying to force on her. She wanted blood.

Kendle understood on some level that Angela had sent her over the edge on purpose, but the rage in her mind was constant. She didn't have the strength to fight it anymore.

Kendle jumped down off the edge, knives out and ready. She saw the two other Eagle teams camped under the ledge, but it was too late to go back. Her mind switched off and the animal came out.

Not far away, Kevin and his team stopped, exchanging unsure glances. They didn't like leaving anyone to die, let alone a woman, and it was obvious

that that's what they were about to do. The sound of men shouting was proof that Kendle had drawn more trouble than she could handle alone.

"She made her choice. Let's go. The boss needs us."

There was nothing else said, even when a woman's desperate screams echoed across the mountainside.

6

"That's one of ours." Jennifer stopped. She and Kyle were doing a fast hike through the paths, but with so many mined places, it was hard to maintain a steady pace. Being able to recognize the Safe Haven equipment was helping them identify dangerous areas, but there were camps of soldiers to sneak around and rain running down the cliffs in furrows.

"Should we—"

"No." Jennifer knew Angela would have their people covered. If she didn't, there was a reason for it and Jennifer wasn't going to interfere. Add that to the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach and it came out in a harsh, demanding tone that Kyle associated with the witch. "We have our orders."

"Down!"

Jennifer dropped to the ground as a branch swung out with spikes meant to impale. She stayed down, catching her breath.

Kyle waited for her to be ready. He'd known she was tough, and she was doing well, but he was still

beyond furious that Angela had sent them all out here this way. Surely there had been a better plan!

Jennifer, who was so strong mentally that not even Angela could keep her out if she wanted in, didn't tell Kyle the result would be worth it. If all of Angela's team died, it was worth this goal, but it was also one the males would never have allowed, let alone supported. Their leader was a clever, evil, problem-solving bitch. Jennifer was suddenly proud to have served her, no matter for how short a time.

The sounds of battles behind them pushed Kyle and Jennifer back to their trekking. The mobster kept her close, sharp gaze picking out holes, triggers for traps, and other obstacles. He hoped the soldiers coming up the mountain were being as careless as they sounded.

"They might be blowing them before they reach it." Jennifer didn't want to get hopes up for a victory. Even if Angela got what she wanted, Safe Haven could still lose enough people to be devastated, including Angela herself.

Jennifer's stomach flipped, hard and fast. She leaned over the faint trail, retching.

Kyle watched their backs nervously, hating the sudden lull in the noise. Jennifer's sounds would carry...

A series of thundering explosions echoed from below them, signaling the onset of Angela's chain.

Kyle grabbed Jennifer by the arm. "Come on!"

They both knew there would only be a short time until the chain caught up with them. They plunged ahead, hoping not to blow themselves up.

Jennifer gagged again, stomach out of control.

Kyle lifted her over his shoulder, ignoring the mess as he hefted them up the last part of this cliff and onto a flatter area. It was covered in tents and soldiers who'd heard the explosions and already started to flee instead of waiting for it to reach them. Until Kyle burst into their campsite.

For one second, none of them moved except Jennifer, who retched over Kyle's shoulder.

Then the soldiers turned to fight, going for their guns.

Kyle ran toward the side of the cliff, knowing he'd never make it.

Jennifer raised her gun, firing wildly as she puked again. Her witch came forward to direct the aim.

Kyle moved faster, picking out the edge. They were almost... Kyle arched as the slug hit him, thrown off his feet. They both fell forward and over the edge of the cliff, with Jennifer screaming and Kyle not reacting at all.

"Get them!"

The soldiers followed their surprise prey to the edge, but the drop was too far to see the bottom. Rain, mud, and debris were rolling down the cliff. It was impossible to see where the bodies had fallen.

“Go down and get them!” the highest ranked man ordered through the storm and explosions echoing upward.

“No way, sir!” one of the men shouted angrily. “I’m heading away from that noise!”

The other men followed the rebel; the officer was forced to do the same, putting it from his mind. There was no way the couple could have survived the fall even if none of the bullets had hit them.

Kyle lay still at the bottom of the ledge, buried in mud and almost unable to move. Pain, hot and sharp, rushed over his spine as if Angela were punishing him again.

Jennifer had landed further down, rolling with the water. She pushed herself up dizzily, blood running down the side of her face. “Kyle?”

She stood up, shivering, and found his still form lying in the thick mud. “Kyle!”

Jennifer splashed to him, and rolled him over, seeing the red water. She screamed for the witch as her hand found his injury and tried to plug the hole.

Let him die.

Jennifer wanted to shout in denial and managed not to. *Save him!*

You agreed with Angela. You know she’s right. Let him die now and save him the pain of later.

Jennifer couldn’t do it. Kyle had healed her in too many ways for her to abandon him like this. In all the leaving scenarios she’d foreseen, he’d still been alive.

Save him! Give him my son's life credit.

He isn't injured badly enough to use your credit, the demon confided reluctantly. She'd been hoping Jennifer would leave him here to die in the explosions that were steadily getting closer. The witch sent power through Jennifer's hand.

Kyle arched again, gaining consciousness as the bullet was forced out of his body.

Kyle's scream hurt Jennifer in ways she had no time to examine as shouts of fleeing soldiers came.

"Get up!" She helped Kyle to his feet, aware of his daze, and got them headed up the water. It would be treacherous, but still better than the areas that were mined. At least the pounding water would have cleared out the traps.

Kyle tried to stay on his feet, barely aware of what was happening as the witch continued to heal his wounds. It was a painful, distracting process that left him breathless and groaning.

"Shhh..." Jennifer led them to a small stand of trees for cover as more voices echoed close behind them. "Get down!" She shoved them both down.

Kyle lay still in the mud with Jennifer across his back as the two teams of soldiers came running through.

"Keep moving!"

"Get higher!"

Fleeing the chain of events, the soldiers were on top of Kyle and Jennifer in seconds, and then gone, leaving muddy prints and relieved hearts.

"Let's go." Jennifer pulled on his arm.

Kyle stopped her, recognizing the area they were in. “Over here.” He led them to a small cliff and began feeling around on the black wall.

Jennifer grinned in surprise when the blackness fell away to reveal a cave that had been hidden by a simple black sheet.

The pair went inside, replacing the cover, and waited for the explosions to stop. As soon as it was over or at least settled down, they would head out.

Jennifer, stomach rolling again, quickly got a drink from her nearly empty canister and tried to think good thoughts.

Kyle was still too dazed for clear thinking. He spent the time counting explosions and marveling over her gifts. He’d worn a double vest set up, but hadn’t counted on being shot in the small of the back. By all rights, he should be dead.

7

On the top of Lookout Mountain, Angela and her small group were the only ones remaining. Everyone else was protected in the dens she’d chosen, or below her, fighting for all their lives.

The morning had come with heavy grit above a layer of nasty black clouds that splattered them with angry drops of acid rain. Weakened by time, the chemicals no longer caught fire, but it still caused discomfort against their skin. The hives and itches spread with the storm, drenching friend and foe alike.

“Anything yet?” Shawn pushed a hot cup of stale coffee into her icy hands. She hadn’t slept.

“Give the weather more time to work,” she answered vaguely, ignoring the steaming cup in her hand. She was peering down the mountain, spotting heat clusters and waiting traps—potential disasters that she now had no control over. Once the mines were triggered, other layers of her hell would be activated. From there, hundreds more would die.

Angela had left herself only a single choice in the plan. She peered down the last ridge now with that moment on her shoulder. She saw too many of her fighters who would be trapped to ignore the small twinge of concern. It would lessen the damage she was about to do, but it would save the lives of her front line. Angela keyed her mike, pleased with Jeff’s ingenuity. The soldiers would also hear the field radios, but her people had extra batteries and orders not to shut theirs off in case of an emergency.

“Wait.”

Angela let off the button, turning to glare at Adrian. She wasn’t sending him anywhere that she couldn’t get to him in mere seconds.

“Give it another hour before you call. It’ll give away too many positions to do it now.”

“Why do you keep trying to help me? I’m handing you over to save the camp.”

Adrian shrugged, leaning against the bars. There wasn’t room to lie down. “The future. You know about the future, don’t you, baby-cakes.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Adrian chuckled, shaking his head. “We would have been fire and brimstone together.”

Angela was now able to recognize the way he was trying to manipulate her. She hit the mike while staring into his nervous eyes. “The area you are about to enter is dangerous. Safe Haven people are already clear. You will kill more than half of your remaining five hundred men. We will outnumber you. Drop your weapons on a main road and go back to your bunker. Do it now.”

Angela let the evil come forward to make sure they understood she wasn’t bluffing. “Or I will kill every last one of you. Please consider attacking Donner instead. A high place in *my* army goes to the man or woman who brings me any piece of Major Donner.” She cackled a bit. “I prefer a whole head, but even his eyes will work.”

“When we take their camp, you can rape any female you want, any age!” Donner’s sharp voice echoed across the radios of his men. It gave away their locations and saved the Safe Haven teams they were sneaking up on.

“He still thinks men can be controlled with sex.” Angela cackled over the radio. “I know it takes blood. I’ll set you to cleaning out our country, cleansing it of the evil that *he* represents.”

She paused to let Donner reply, not expecting him to as he realized she’d tricked him into triggering radios and locations.

Angela hung up her mike, almost able to feel the blood barreling toward her on the edges of the next

black storm cloud. It was about to get ugly. Someone's group had chosen to go forward. It would trigger the others. "Welcome to the One Day War of the new world."

Behind her, Adrian was trying desperately to figure out why she was doing everything she could to stir the pot instead of stopping it from boiling. He knew she had to have an ulterior motive, something larger than defeating Donner, who they both knew wasn't a match for either of them. *What prey are you hunting? And why do you need bait like Donner? And me?*

Angela felt his curiosities and stayed facing the battlefield. She was glad he wasn't shoving into her mind yet for details. If he discovered her true plans, he would interfere and that would ruin everything she was doing. So far, only he or Seth could do that. She trusted Seth to make the right choice when it mattered. Adrian was the sacrifice.

Chapter Twenty-One BK5

All Day Battle

September 9th

1

“**H**ere they come.”

Theo’s team had been in the field since the alarms sounded. The noise of the explosions was something of a relief. They were ready to go home.

The small group watched the soldiers fleeing toward them with little compassion. It was life or death now.

Theo nodded to Candy, who had worked surprisingly well with them on this run.

Candy felt better with time around a solid group. She pushed the button as she’d been shown.

The land below them exploded in a hail of wooden shrapnel as the trees blew apart. Theo had timed it to come in stages. As one group ran by and made it, the next was hit. Those who made it through the gauntlet of exploding trees came toward the ledge; Theo and his team were there to open fire. The shots rang between the explosions of the chain that had nearly reached their altitude.

Theo nodded again. “Do it.”

Candy hit the last button with a small measure of satisfaction. “For Lee!”

The bottom of the ledge rumbled as the charges went off. The entire cliff rattled, groaning, and then gave way to roll down and crush the soldiers.

Theo and his group spun around to flee...and found another group of strangers standing behind them with their hands full of stones.

Theo didn't like the look of them, but they clearly weren't soldiers, so he didn't draw his gun.

"Who are you?" Everett stared at the Eagle uniforms. "You from Safe Haven?"

"Yes." Candy used a soothing tone despite the chaos coming for them. "We are. Are you?"

Everett didn't answer, except to motion toward the faint path that Theo had been leading his team toward.

Theo didn't wait for a second invitation. The stone throwers looked dangerous and he needed to get Candy back to camp before the final battle.

"Tell your boss we'll be hanging out here, catching the strays."

"I will." Theo let all of his team go first. When the strangers disappeared behind the trees and boulders, Theo shuddered a little and got moving faster. The chain would reach this area in the next minute. He had to get them under cover now. "There!" A small cleft of boulders provided a tiny space the five people crammed into. They held onto each other as the mines in their zone started blowing. The ground shook, dirt and mud flew...and then explosions went off right next to them.

The sky went dark with debris.

2

“That’s disgusting.” One of the new female Eagles scowled at the males who were telling dirty jokes.

“What?” Shane had only been back for a few hours, but he was glad Marc had sent him to help keep an eye on the boss.

“Calling it a crotch.”

“What about gap?” Allan grinned from the circle of males.

“No!” Nancy bristled. “Not a gap, slit, hoochie-coochie, or any of those other gross names.”

“What’s your problem with slit?” Shane found the word...erotic.

“It’s so ugly!”

Shane considered it for a second and then gave a slightly embarrassed, half flirting grin. “That’s because you haven’t spent your life trying to get inside one.”

There was a slight pause and then laughter rolled across the group.

Startled, Nancy snickered. “That’s hard for me to argue with.”

Shane took his hat off and stepped forward, hand out. “Hi. I’m Shane.”

Nancy pointed. “I’m not shaking that.”

Shane glanced down to discover he had crushed the cup in his grip and was dripping coffee through his fingers. *How did I miss that?*

Nancy giggled, drawing attention. How could she be happy at a time like this?

Shane wiped his hands down his jeans, chuckling with the witnesses. He looked up to see her walking away, hips swinging in a special rhythm that made his heart thump. “Hey!”

Nancy turned around, brow raised.

“What about sweet spot?!”

The men around him hit the ground laughing, immediately grabbing the term for their jokes.

“He said sweet spot!”

Amusement covered their area.

Nancy and Shane both vanished, going in different directions.

The gate spotter waved. “Incoming! More of ours!”

Men in charge of opening and closing rushed over to allow the large group of Indians through.

The returning team was Atolius and his small group of braves, minus Bridget, Angela noted. That was another dark place that had filled itself in as she watched a pair of lovers vanish into a shower camper. Again, Angela chose to let it play out. Right or wrong, there was no going back now. If she tried, they would only fail and cease to exist.

The hellhound rounds were taking out her traps, destroying everything dangerous and not, but it also made the mountain more unstable. Rockslide noises

were starting to echo across the cliffs. The extremely destructive rounds packed twice the normal punch of a grenade and laid waste to anything in their target zone, including the roads these soldiers needed to be able to reach her. Angela was glad Atolius and Natoli had met up on the way back. Any soldiers they'd come across hadn't lived to make it here.

Instead of going to meet them, Angela stepped to the rear of her waterlogged command tent and listened. Her chain reaction was ramping up now, thanks to the ants. The large insects were triggering the final rings of traps, of pipe bombs, claymores, small chemical explosions, and other indiscriminate killers. The ants only had to walk across the trip wires, but they gave their lives knowingly. It had been impossible to get the chain to meet in some places and still allow her fighters to escape through the damage.

Once Jennifer had given her the idea, Angela had recruited the ants. They wanted future protection. Jennifer's plan had been without compassion and the quickly evolving ants had brokered a truce through Dog. They'd promised to provide soldier ants to die in her plan and in return, the ants would never be hunted in the new society that would come. Angela had made the deal without provisions, but listening to the inner rings blowing sent more horror into her veins. She was killing through other species now. She could never be forgiven.

“The boss looks rough.” Greg frowned as he and Shawn made a long round of the over-guarded perimeter. Angela had sent some of the fighters to help at Safe Haven’s undisclosed dens, but all the others were gathering here, where the final battle would take place when the soldiers made it through her death traps.

“Would you look good right now?” Shawn motioned to the tents of wounded that were full. Angela was only healing the life or death wounds. The moans and screams of the wounded who were under the care of the few team medics was awful to listen to between the explosions. It was too much like a war movie for some of these men, but they wouldn’t ever want to view another one. There was no way a camera and a set could capture the complete lack of normalcy and or the absolute daze of combat and its bloody aftermath.

Neil and Jeremy were protecting a laptop, both men hunched over the blue screen that few of them had seen since the war. Angela went that way before they came to her. She glanced over their shoulders to discover they’d accessed the internet. “Nice work.”

Neither man spoke to her, though both of them stiffened.

Angela didn’t have the time or the patience to have this conversation right now. She motioned Shawn closer. “We have two enemy teams moving up in zone four. What can we do about that?”

Shawn stared in surprise at the satellite images Neil and Jeremy were receiving. “Atolius came in. I can send him back down. He won’t mind.”

Angela nodded. “Do it. We can’t let any group sneak up here yet. We’re not ready.”

All three men had questions, protests, or accusations, but none of them spoke. The sounds of the slaughter going on below them was too real, too important, to distract her.

“This is cruel!”

Both guards stopped at the angry shout, on high alert even though they’d heard the same sentence repeatedly over the last hours.

“Let me out or put me somewhere else!”

Greg and Shawn snickered and kept walking. When the wounded had started coming in, Angela had told them to erect the tents around the cells of their POWs. Their injured men now surrounded Conner. It was killing him to resist healing any of them.

“I hate you!”

A bright light flashed through the camp, one that had every man there turning to protect his loved one.

Angela dropped her personal shields to absorb Conner’s healing blast. She’d counted on the boy not being able to resist the pain of others; she groaned as the energy rushed through her parched body.

As the light faded, the first thing the fighters noticed was the silence. The screams and moans

were gone, and so was the noise they'd grown accustomed to over the morning and afternoon. Was it over?

Angela used her radiophone. "Brace for it!"

It felt like the mountain exploded. The rumble didn't grow under their feet, but blasted through them and spun out of control, scattering debris into the storm. Cliff walls shifted, dropping. The sounds became distorted as the final part of the chain was reached. Marc's last bomb was bigger than the rest, meant to disable any force sneaking up behind them as it climaxed.

Spotters motioned for them to open the gates again. "Two more groups coming in! Mexicans!"

Angela was behind a wall of Eagles before she could move. She wanted to chuckle at their thoughts, but she couldn't summon the amusement. "After what I've done, and what I'm still set to do, Sebastian doesn't even register." She shoved her way through the guards to meet the small Mexican team.

Theo's team had also come in, but Angela didn't glance at them. Theo's chores weren't finished yet, and he would know it if she spoke with him. Hiding was almost beyond her now. She was saving the rest of her mental resources for Donner.

Sebastian stayed by his men, respecting the glowers and threatening stances as Angela came toward him, but he couldn't resist staring at the obsession that had cost him a brother.

Angela stopped at a distance her guards would be comfortable with, searching Sebastian's mind with a frown. Like Cesar, he was dark to her, but in a much harder way to penetrate. It was almost as if she was trying to get into a door with no room attached to it.

She stopped prying and rocked back on her heels, as she'd seen Marc do so many times when he was contemplating something unknown. "Are you a threat to me?"

The sound of her voice hit Sebastian like a bell, ringing into his soul and dredging forward the evil within. It wasn't her shape or looks, or even the delicious smell of sweaty vanilla that drifted over him with the mist. She glowed with power. Her entire form was lit up to him like a fountain of youth and magic that could never be emptied. *I will have her or die trying.*

"Yes." His eyes were glazing. "That may be so."

Angela knew what Marc would have done, what her protectors wanted her to do. She glanced to his men. "You'd spare them?"

Sebastian nodded, trying to fight the daze. "I'd leave too."

Knowing what would happen because of her choice, Angela pointed at one of the empty cells. "You will join the others who cannot choose the right line to walk. Your men can go."

Sentries muttered, but the reaction from the top Eagles was done together, without planning or even eye contact to confirm support.

Shawn and Greg rushed up behind the eight confused Mexicans as Jeff and Neil came in from the front. All of them pulled their guns, locking onto targets as they fired low to minimize crossfire hits.

The Mexicans went down screaming and reaching for weapons they hadn't known they needed. The four Eagles stepped over them and ended the future threat; they all shot Sebastian.

Angela waited for all of her rule-breakers to glance over before giving a nod of approval. Some of Sebastian's men hadn't been guilty of much. She'd needed a group choice on this execution.

To start punishing herself for it, Angela joined the body crew against the wishes of everyone and helped toss the dead men off the cliff. Sebastian's body went first.

"Hey, wasn't Lilly supposed to be with them?" Greg's job was to keep track of the names Angela had given him this morning. He was trying hard to keep up. Lilly had volunteered for that place, saying it was to conquer her fears.

"She didn't go with them." Angela swung another set of legs while Shawn swung the torso. "There was nothing about her in his mind."

Neil scowled, almost out of patience. "When can we start sending out search parties?"

"After Donner comes," Angela answered tiredly but her rough voice said not to argue. She moved toward the tents of wounded men. A couple of them would be able to get out of these awful smelling canvas coffins soon, but many of the three dozen or

so here wouldn't see morning if she didn't help them. Conner's healing bomb had been powerful, but not enough to heal everyone.

And it would drain her to nothing for facing Donner, something they couldn't have. Their healers were Conner, herself, and Kendle, who there hadn't been any word from. Kevin's team was also MIA; the worry had begun to set in for Angela on that link in her chain. She'd counted on the former movie star wanting to live deep, but if she'd been wrong, Kevin and his team were unprotected right now. This was the most dangerous part of her plan for those still outside these gates. The surviving soldiers would be few in number, but they would kill anything that moved without giving time for questions or manipulations.

"Come on, Kendle! Be what I was promised. Rejoin the living and defend your team."

3

"I was the one who snapped and started hurting people. It was *my* messes they had to clean up."

Kevin spun around, startled to hear a female voice from the tiny cave they were crammed into.

Kendle stood in the dusty entrance, shoulders slumped "Luke was teaching me to control it when the others began to flip out. We...killed them. And for a little while, it was just us again."

"And then?" Kevin motioned his team to clear her a place to sit near the dripping water. He was

hoping she would use it to scrub off some of the blood and gore that coated her.

“He got sicker, even when I healed him every day. I couldn’t keep up and he was dying, and I was drained...” Kendle’s voice broke. “I took him. He was begging me not to by the end, but I couldn’t stop.”

Kevin was horrified, but still able to find sympathy for her. Others probably wouldn’t, but he now understood why Angela had put Kendle with him. He’d lost Cynthia, a possible girlfriend that he hadn’t even claimed fully, and he’d chosen to act like a child over it. Kendle had lost her life mate through her own inability to control herself, and she’d still summoned the courage to pick being alive and doing her given duty. It was humbling. Kevin was able to put his arm around her to offer comfort when she started sobbing. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Kendle dissolved in his arms, crying like a baby.

Kevin’s team wasn’t as forgiving. Kendle was clearly a dangerous woman with issues that needed to be sorted out or handled by a bullet, was the consensus.

Kevin also felt that way, but he vowed right there that he would spend time helping Kendle adjust to living with herself after committing such heinous crimes. Safe Haven was supposed to be a place for second chances and none of it was her fault. She hadn’t chosen to be infected, abducted, or

any of the other terrible things he'd heard through the grapevine. He would remind people of that.

Kendle didn't miss it, but she was too upset to respond. She didn't try to stifle the flow. She'd already held it back too long. Luke's death had killed something deep inside that she didn't think could be replaced. She would fight for each day from here. She'd made her choice and would now begin the climb, but inside, she'd died with Luke. Nothing would ever change that.

Boot steps echoed; Kevin blanched. "Get down!"

Kendle darted out of the cave and above it, sliding into a narrow space between boulders as a team of soldiers came up the hill.

"In there! We'll wait it out!"

The soldiers rushed toward the hole where Kevin's team was huddled.

Kendle found herself standing up to draw their attention. Kevin's team was out of ammunition.

"Hey! Get her!"

Kendle took off up the mountain, hoping she could avoid the chain when it returned to this side of the cliffs.

The soldiers took off after her, forgetting for a moment that they'd been searching for a place to wait out the destruction, and the castaway found herself running for her life. These men were angry and she'd just given them a target.

"Did she just do that?" Kevin was shocked. He'd expected her to flee while the soldiers killed

them. They'd been out of ammunition since shortly after leaving her behind. They'd run into a large squad of soldiers and barely escaped. A lucky explosion was all that had saved them.

The cave shook again as another explosive went off nearby. The men hoped Kendle had found another place to take cover as the mountain continued to explode.

Kendle had found a place to hide, though she was already holding her breath to keep her stomach under control as she crawled under the bodies that had been caught by the stream. They'd begun to stack up near a ledge. Kendle huddled under the corpses, trying not to stare at the dead eyes and gory bodies.

“Where did she go?”

“This way! I found a print!”

“That could be from anyone!”

“It's the one we've been tracking all morning. I'm following it.”

The soldiers left together, slowing as the explosions got further away. They continued up the hill toward their goal, sharing stories of near death.

Kendle waited a few minutes to be sure they were gone and then circled back to where she'd left Kevin. She ducked into the cave to find it empty.

“Hello.”

Kendle spun around to find the Eagles behind her with knives, nets, and serious intent.

Kendle chuckled, nodding. “Yeah, you guys will do. Come on. We might make it back to Her Highness before the chain comes around again.”

Map in hand, Kevin took the lead from her.

Kendle brought up the rear, aware of the feeling that was settling over her. She hated it. She didn’t want to bond with these people. She wanted Luke!

4

Cameron Storm held up a hand, making sure his braves waited until the right moment. Their arrows would only travel so far through this wind.

Below them, the explosions were getting close enough to feel the rumbles of the angry mountain, to see the dirt and debris flying into the sky. And to hear men screaming, of course. Despite the fact that the noise was from their enemy, Cameron didn’t enjoy it. His own turn would come.

“Hold!” Linny was also on the front lines, with her young son at her side.

A few of the Indian children were also here, along with the warriors and a couple of the women, all set to die to keep the soldiers from reaching Safe Haven. It was an honor that not everyone had been chosen for. Cameron hadn’t liked leaving half of his tribe in the white man’s camp, but the Ghost had insisted it was the safest place for them. Cameron assumed it was meant to make his braves fight harder, but that wasn’t needed. If the new government was willing to wipe out a huge camp of

white survivors, a few small groups of Indians would mean nothing to them. If they didn't stand together now, they would all fall later.

“Now!”

Linny's shout triggered the fight as the fleeing soldiers rushed over the rise, most of them looking at the threat coming from behind.

Arrows sailed through the air between giant fireballs that slammed into the panicking soldiers to blow them off the cliff. Angela didn't want a single soldier to reach the plateau she was on; the third and fourth ring of her plan was pure death.

“Fire!” Linny blasted three soldiers on the ground. They'd cowered, begging for their lives. It gave her a sadistic pleasure to deny them, as her son's pleas had gone without mercy.

Arrows sailed a third time at Cameron's motion, the leader's lips were drawn back in a savage frown of anger. He felt the power of his ancestors, the strength of being a man, and yet, he felt powerless standing next to Linny and her magic.

Linny, sensing the other men with them were starting to feel the same, slid to her knees as if empty. It gave the braves a renewed sense of purpose. They began firing sharply, hitting their targets the first time.

Linny stayed on the ground, seeing that her young son's magic didn't have the same effect on the braves. They weren't threatened by Ty. *Is it because I'm female or because I'm older and stronger?*

She wasn't prepared to hear an answer.

Both, Cameron sent, still acknowledging his new gifts and his weaknesses. *It is our breeding, our heritage.*

A soldier leapt at Cameron.

Linny quickly lunged, slitting the man's spinal cord through the back of his neck. As the body fell to the ground, Linny raised a hand. *Well?*

It's our pride. Cameron saw the remaining soldiers had chosen to flee back down into the chain of destruction that was slowly winding upward. It would reach this area shortly, but only with nets, not mines. The Ghost had known some of his own would be on these plains and ridges to keep any surviving soldiers from reaching his base. *If you're stronger than we are, you don't need us.*

We don't! Linny rose in a fluid motion, set to throw another fireball to chase away the remaining soldiers. Her boots sank in the mud... She fell forward, smothering the flames and drenching herself from head to toe in goop.

Cameron and his braves burst out laughing, male egos soothed.

Linny spit out nasty mud as she pushed herself up, ignoring the snickers to concentrate on the lesson she'd just learned. She might not need a man, but she wanted one. Cameron's hearty chuckle was sending chills through her soaked body.

Next to her, Ty glowered at Cameron, little face squished into concentration.

Cameron let the boy into his thoughts, but he was unprepared for what the child wanted to know.

Tyson pulled the images as if he were flipping through a magazine, stopping on one of Cameron's most ruthless moments against his enemy. *You'll teach me?*

Cameron was shocked. *Why? That man raped my daughter and caused my family disgrace. Who do you hate that much?*

Tyson put an image into his head that reached Cameron's stoic heart. The image was of Linn being hurt. It was ugly, making the Indian chief hate the soldiers even more.

I will kill anyone who hurts my mom, Tyson growled, the warning ringing in Cameron's head.

You'll obey my teachings, my ways? Cameron wasn't afraid of magic. He respected it.

You'll never hurt her, even when she's mean to you?

Cameron frowned. *Mean to me?*

Tyson shrugged. *I've heard the soldiers say women are mean to men and they have to be controlled.*

Cameron's anger rose. He knelt in front of the soaked boy, aware of the others staring in surprise. "Women are to be protected, loved, and allowed to grow in any way they chose to. It is what gives a society peace. *I will teach you. You will be my second son, but just as loved as the first and any who come after.*"

Tyson held out a hand to shake on it.

Cameron followed his instincts of treating the boy the way he wanted. He grabbed him for a hug. In time, he would blend their traditions. The child would be happy among them.

Ty responded right away, even lingering.

Cameron looked up, expecting to have to convince the boy's mother.

He found Linny waiting submissively at the edge of the flat area. "We should go soon."

Cameron, now grinning from ear to ear, put an arm around the happy boy and led his new family up the cliff.

5

"How many?"

Donner didn't sound worried. Trey made sure to match the casualness. "Three hundred, at best. We can't get into the air until the storm stops."

"Would you like the rain to quit?" Samantha offered from her seat in the corner. Right after the last explosion—the one that had rattled the ground and sent fear into Donner's heart—he'd had her brought here where he could keep an eye on his prize.

Donner shook his head. "Save your strength, Ms. Moore."

Samantha didn't respond to the slight threat in his tone. According to her guards, he was set to trade her for Adrian, but if Donner was pushed too hard, he would snap early.

Donner gazed at her with thoughtful orbs glowing brightly. “Are you still hiding something from me, Samantha?”

Heart picking up a beat, she shrugged. “I can’t block like my boss can. You’ve seen what’s there.”

Donner still stared, searching through her doors again to be sure. It was almost over now. He couldn’t afford to be careless.

Samantha didn’t try to hide or think of something to block him. Donner was an alpha and while she didn’t know much about that mysterious word, she knew she couldn’t stop him.

Donner finally let go of her, turning to the impatiently waiting man in front of him. “Go on.”

“We estimate that half made it to the top, but they’ll have no vehicles and little gear.”

“Where does your information come from?”

“We’ve had a few survivors come in. They’ve described it as hell and refused to go back up.”

Donner rolled his eyes. “All of her traps are gone now. When the dust settles, we’ll have more men.”

Trey didn’t argue or tell Donner about the mini-riot he’d quelled this morning among the lower ranks to save Donner’s den from his own guards.

“I’m aware of the discontent. What else?”

“We have weak lines, but some are still getting through. When our scouts get to the top, they’ll call.”

“How long?”

“A few hours.”

“We’ll be contacted before that.” Donner was almost sure now that Samantha was indeed hiding something from him. *But what? And how?*

“Will Angela surrender?”

Donner shrugged. “If not, I’m prepared. Get the chopper set to take us in. We’ll be collecting three.”

Trey left to carry out the orders.

Donner turned to Samantha. “Let’s have that chat now, Ms. Moore.”

Samantha’s stomach tightened. She didn’t fight it, needing the distraction.

Donner flinched back from the spray of vomit, scowling in disgust. “Keep your fluids to yourself!”

Samantha retched again. The MREs they’d been serving her weren’t mixing well after Safe Haven’s fresher food.

Donner waved a man to take Samantha to her room until they were ready to go, forgetting about that nagging voice saying the blonde woman and her twins were the key to a mystery that he needed to solve.

Samantha was still gagging as she was dragged from the room.

Donner stepped outside while his lackeys cleaned up the mess. He would have to take steps to cover this area. He hadn’t yet, hadn’t considered the waste products. Donner’s mind went to planning how he would hold Angela captive until her child was born. After that, he would head for a different location that was already being stocked with the proper staff. He would add a waste management

professional to that crew. He didn't mind blood, snot, or sweat, but puke screwed his guts every time.

6

“You have brought down part of the mountain!” Red Stone stared, stunned as the clouds of thick smoke covered their view of the cliffs.

Marc didn't have time to give credit where it was due. Soldiers had come pouring through the tunnels behind them as they fled into the final den. They were now locked in hand-to-hand combat while their people huddled, terrified, inside Oglethorpe Base. But they weren't helpless by any means. Inside the den, were three more layers of hell waiting for any soldiers who made it through. When Angela had decreed that every portion of their population participate, she hadn't been exaggerating. Only the infants and toddlers had been spared a role in this war.

Red Stone fired his last arrow, hitting a soldier climbing over the fence before turning to Marc in exasperation. “Why did you do that?!”

Marc grunted, throwing his weight into a nasty hit that knocked his opponent out and allowed him to drag his knife across the man's filthy throat. “Ask the boss when we see her.”

Red Stone stared stupidly. “A woman did that?”

Marc's grin slipped out, showing his pride at her ruthless intelligence.

Red Stone shook his head and went back to watching his section of the high fence around the base. Marc had the men in a thick line all the way around the main building, using arrows, guns, carefully aimed grenades, and rifles. The noise was constant, echoing into the awful headache Marc had found himself with upon waking.

The next wave of two-dozen soldiers came over the front fence at the same time.

Marc rushed forward, using barrels as steps up to knock these desperate men down. This strategy was only going to work for a little while longer and then he would have to fall back into the actual compound until Angela's reinforcements arrived. She'd promised him more help than he would know what to do with. As he knocked another surprised man back over the fence and felt his finger break, Marc hoped she would send it soon. He was getting tired.

Marc moved around the wall of his fighters, helping to dislodge stubborn fingers clamped to the fence in a desperate attempt at survival. Angela's plan had covered the areas around this base well, leaving only one safe path to travel. Outside these fences, traps were springing, shrapnel was flying, and souls were leaving their bodies. He'd helped Angela with these small details; it was sickening to watch even as he celebrated the victory. He hadn't forgotten it was his former fellows-in-arms who were screaming.

“Incoming!”

“Get down! Down!” Marc sent it out mentally too, dropping to the mud as a shell exploded against the fence behind him, raining debris. Wood pierced his leg and his arm, but Marc barely noticed. His ears were ringing too hard to hear anything else. He stayed down, scanning the wall where the soldiers were now coming up faster than he was able to handle.

“Retreat!” Marc was able to send it both ways again, but that command cost him. He crumbled as the pressure in his head increased.

Empty! the demon confirmed, both in terror and ecstasy. *Let me out!*

Eagles and shadow warriors fled for the single door Marc had left unblocked, grabbing friends and companions as they’d been instructed.

During this chaos, Quinn had also been roaming the walls, helping to defend. He found Marc lying on his side, panting. “Help!”

Marc waved him back. “Not safe. Leave me here.”

Quinn had heard the tales from Little Rock, and he’d seen some of the things that Marc could do, but leaving the man wasn’t allowed even if he’d wanted to. “I’ll cover you until you’re ready to go inside.”

Marc had to hope that would be enough because the door to the base clanged shut just as the front fence blew apart. Dozens of furious soldiers charged into the courtyard.

Jennifer didn't slow at the sound of a huge explosion ahead of them.

Kyle didn't interfere. She was merged with the witch, eyes glowing, body cat-like. Kyle knew better than to get in her way.

They ran into the clearing in front of the base that Jennifer had tracked, but she still didn't pause as they sighted the enemy rushing through the destroyed gates of a base.

Kyle saw a Safe Haven marker in the upper window. "There!"

Jennifer already knew. She brought forth her mother's rage to throw at the soldiers starting to turn their way.

The mental blast was harmful to everything it reached, rupturing the eyes and ears of those closest. Soldiers fell, screaming in agony as blood poured down their faces.

Jennifer sent another blast, this one a bit weaker.

A second line of the now panicking soldiers were injured, blood gushing.

A third blast was too risky as Kyle came to her side. They shoved their way through the soon-to-be corpses and broke through into the courtyard.

"Marc!"

Marc was in a struggle for his Colt against a mammoth Marine wearing a spiky vest.

Jennifer raised a hand, lifting the man into the air.

Marc quickly stabbed his knife through the man's stunned eye and started reloading as the body

fell. Despite being one of them, the moment shocked Marc a bit. He reloaded slower than usual.

Moving away slightly, Jennifer sent out another blast, directly toward the gate this time.

The screams began to fade as the surviving soldiers fled.

Damn. Angie was right again. I'd never know what to do with that power. Marc looked up at Kyle, and took his offered arm, staggering to his feet. He'd taken a hell of a beating by Goliath. Marc spit blood and groaned as a part of his tooth came out with it. "Tats gonna hurt, right?"

"Where is my baby?!" Jennifer's scream brought a halt to the relief the fighters had started to feel. "Where is she?!"

Marc scanned the camp members inside the base and felt his stomach drop through his boots. "She's not here."

Jennifer spun on him.

Kyle grabbed her around the waist as she fought to get to a target.

"Maybe you could clarify!" Kyle grunted as Jennifer's arm slammed down on his shoulder.

Marc saw Peggy coming from the den with Doug, both wanting an update. He ran toward them. "Who has Autumn?"

Peggy frowned. "She came and got the baby yesterday, said Angela wanted Jennifer to know that she was caring for the baby herself."

"You didn't think that was odd?" Kyle held tight to Jennifer, who had started to cry and shake.

“Yes, of course, but the den was attacked and I thought she had to stay here.” Peggy looked around. “I didn’t know she left!”

“Who, woman?” Doug demanded. “Who took the baby?”

“Lilly.”

Jennifer’s scream was the worst sound any of them had heard all day.

Chapter Twenty-Two BK5
Unfinished Chores

1

“Can we talk?”

Crista stopped, waiting impatiently. She’d just come in with Zack’s team. She only had a short time to get cleaned up, eat, and head back out to her next site.

They’d all reported to the boss, as much to verify that Angela was okay, as to deliver the news that their missions had been successful. Then she’d been invited to rejoin Zack and his men for a quick meal. Crista had accepted in surprise. Zack was the only one with a full team. Everyone else was split between Angela’s most valued positions.

Jeff swept her, noting the filthy clothes and skin, the hungry expression as she stared at his arms. He felt his remaining resistance give. How bad could it be? “I’m okay with it, I think. The...baby.”

Crista was too tired to give him the hell he deserved for hesitating. “Good. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Jeff watched her go toward the farthest shower camp and water tanker and followed, not on duty anywhere. “You, uh, need some help?”

Crista started to shoot him down and then nodded tiredly. “You can do my back.”

Jeff caught up and ran a hand over her cheek. “Wherever you want it, baby.”

Crista giggled as the pair disappeared into the shower camper.

Across the campsite, Zack saw them and tried to control his jealousy.

“That’s the last of our teams!” Greg waved. “Lock us down!”

Activity filled the small area, but Angela tried to give her full attention to the filth-covered Indian coming toward her with careful footing. The mud had made the entire site a slick trap. “I’m glad you’ve made it.” She was unable to force a smile. The death shroud was almost covering her now. How many hundreds had she killed?

Atolius held out a hand, hoping this gift would be more to the demon woman’s liking.

Angela accepted the gift without a protest, too tired to keep up a full act. She pulled out the machete in surprise, immediately liking the strength it gave her hand. “Thank you.”

Atolius could tell he’d pleased her this time. He inched away respectfully, trying to end the encounter without reoffending her.

Angela turned toward her command tent, sliding the sharp weapon into the pouch. She tossed it to Greg. “Hide that for me, will you? I’ll have Marc show me how to use it.”

Shawn slid the pouch onto his belt, nodding.

Angela continued toward the crowded command canvas.

Satisfied, Atolius raised his chin and spun around to rejoin his men. “My curse has been lifted!”

At that moment, Dog sailed over the gate and landed on Atolius, knocking him backward into the mud.

The wolf, happy with a soft landing, licked the furious man in the mouth and then walked across his chest to avoid the mud.

Angela wanted to join in the laughter she heard, but that was impossible as she stared at the screen Jeremy had just turned her way. It showed their position and the signatures of camps around them. The soldiers had gathered faster than she’d estimated. The final showdown was about to begin, but she wasn’t ready yet.

“I will be.” Angela moved toward the tent that held their POWs. She had a full dozen of those now.

Angela ducked inside the soaked canvas and swept the bound, snoozing men and women. These were traitors, soldiers they’d captured, and Adrian. Conner was still among the wounded, now healing without complaint in exchange for food, water, and a possible second chance at his life.

Angela’s attention landed on Heather, noting the woman’s nose was still bleeding lightly. She’d been fed and watered with the other prisoners, but she gaped at Angela with fear she was right to have.

“What?” Heather back up against the bars.
“Don’t look at me that way!”

It got the attention of the sleeping men. They all jerked as Angela came to the stand in front of her former Eagle.

“Tell me why.” Angela already knew, but it was important that everyone else did too.

“I’m sick.” Heather didn’t expect help or sympathy from the enemy.

“I didn’t have to be the enemy—”

Heather snarled. “Save it!”

Sighing deeply, Angela knelt in front of Heather’s cage. “I could have healed your disease. A weak immune system isn’t like cancer.”

Heather wasn’t going to be swayed by proof of any kind. Her mind raced furiously through escape plans and even murder plots.

Angela reached a hand out. “Let me show you something.”

Aware that Angela could force it, Heather slowly extended her hand.

Angela clasped it gently, voice sad. “I find you guilty and sentence you to be reclaimed.”

Heather screamed, jerking back, but Angela’s hold was like steel. She stole Heather’s life with a vicious, regretful mental yank.

The withered corpse fell over, hitting the bars.

Shouts for mercy filled the tent as Angela stood up. Heather had admitted to revealing Safe Haven locations to the government. She’d followed her traitorous orders and trailed the recon teams. Angela

had counted on someone doing that, but she'd known the government would have them on the satellites anyway as the only thing moving in this side of the country. Heather had sacrificed herself for information the enemy didn't even need. It was pathetic.

Ignoring the screams and her dying soul, Angela continued to the next captive.

Adrian watched her take the lives these men and women had wasted. They would have been shot or hung later. It was better that Angela took their energy, and through her, they would remain in a fashion, finally serving the greater good. He had no worries that he was next, despite deserving it. He waited for her to stop in front of his cage before speaking. She'd spared only one of them.

Next to Adrian, Sergeant Wallz remained silent and grateful that Donner wanted him enough to trade for.

Adrian frowned. "Be careful with Donner. He's not stable."

"We know."

The double timbre of both witch and woman was evidence of the merger he'd suggested. Adrian nodded his approval. "You're right on track. The pieces are in place and you're about to end this ugliness forever. How does that feel?"

Angela's face lit up with the first real smile he'd seen from her in a long while. He noted the gray in her hair still standing out in stark contrast, but he

didn't comment on it. Donner didn't need to know she'd fed recently. That was intentional.

Angela held out a hand.

Adrian placed his in hers with a twinge of nervousness. She was powerful enough to kill any of them now.

Angela searched his mind for last minute details, always suspicious of tricks, then pulled out. She let go of his hand and left the tent. She'd needed a brief second of human contact before she went out to face her people. After this, she might be dead or a prisoner for the rest of her life. She was unable to see that future because there wasn't a future for them until this moment was decided.

Angela hit the button on her belt as she stepped from the tent that was surrounded by her guards and friends. They'd come running to help her when the prisoners began to scream, but they'd quickly retreated from the canvas when they'd discovered the reason for it. A few of the witnesses had fled to other parts of the campsite, but Shawn stayed close to his boss as she walked through the cold drizzle.

"This is Safe Haven. We are surrounded...Do it now!"

Outside the gates, a massive set of explosions went off, circling the cliff and blasting away chunks of stone. Set by Kenn and Jeff, the detonations had been carefully placed to chip away a large part of the flat area, creating a wide gap the soldiers would have to jump across, exposing themselves. Pieces of

debris wouldn't cover it and the enemy no longer had gear or the will to scavenge anything sturdier.

As the dust settled over everything, the radio lit up again.

"That was your last act of defiance. My men will overrun you in less than an hour."

Angela didn't answer Donner yet, waiting for what she needed to hear.

"End it now and I'll spare them."

Angela's mind flipped into the fourth ring of her plan. She answered with loathing. "Come on in and we'll settle the terms."

"On my way."

Angela knew it wouldn't take long. Donner was ready for this moment.

Angela went to the command tent, waving a few of her closest people along. It was time for the part she'd been dreading.

Neil, Jeremy, Cynthia, and a few others followed her in silent disapproval. Neil and Jeremy were first.

"The last two numbers were in her will."

"Why did Samantha leave us her will?"

Angela faced them with the truth. "Because she wasn't sure if she might die today."

Neil and Jeremy shouted, but Angela lost her patience. She mentally shoved them both onto the damp canvas floor. Her gifts were still growing.

Both men stayed down, but continued to demand answers.

"You had no right!"

“She’s pregnant! How could you use her?!”

Show some respect! the witch bellowed. The mental pain sank in, ringing and silencing every activity across the camp.

Angela brought the witch under control. She slowly went to her chair, sat in it. “Get Adrian. Its time he told everyone the truth.”

There was restless muttering as Shawn went for Adrian; the crowd around the tent grew.

Adrian didn’t resist. He took the chair across from Neil and Jeremy when Angela waved him into it. Adrian met her eye. “You’re sure?”

“We’ll win,” she answered tonelessly. “I’ve seen it.”

That was good enough for Safe Haven’s former leader. He used his un-cuffed hand to push the button. “My name is Adrian Mitchel...and I work for the United States government. I have for most of my life. After the war, I was supposed to take Safe Haven to the nearest bunker and hand them over. The government doesn’t want survivors to gather. They want you to die.”

2

Donner listened to Adrian’s tale with frustration. He was unable to get through until Adrian let off the radio transmit button and that man clearly wasn’t going to until the story was finished. The main bunker was controlling the radio waves now, watching and listening. Donner might be able

to get one of his fleeing men at the den to cut them off anyway, but by the time it happened, this call would be over.

After a minute, Donner tried to put these newest pieces together for his profile. It was something that nearly everyone listening was doing. The idea that Adrian—their reason for being together—was a traitor and secret agent, was overwhelming.

“When the bunker made contact, they didn’t like how long I was taking. They threatened my son. When I refused to hand over Safe Haven, they began hunting him to draw me in. It worked. We went into Little Rock and killed them all.”

Donner put that piece into place with a snap of understanding. Something had delayed Mitchel and the bunker had thought he’d turned on them. “Bad choice, threatening his son. Especially when he was already on your side.”

Adrian’s voice had paused. It came again, broken. “I was supposed to die there. I wanted to, for the sins I’ve committed, the trusts I’ve destroyed. I’m... I’m sorry for all of it. I’ll be executed knowing I owe a debt that can never be repaid.”

As if they knew Donner wouldn’t cut them off now, the radio stopped crackling and then Angela’s voice came.

“Why did you work for them?”

“I was born in the lab. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You could have refused when you were older.”

“I was already corrupt by then. I didn’t have a reason to change.”

“You found one, leading Safe Haven?”

“No. I gathered Safe Haven’s flock and guards to watch my ass while I went to Little Rock for my son. They meant nothing to me until *you* came.”

Now Donner understood what the delay had been and how Adrian must have been tortured by trying to earn what he would never have when the truth came out.

“Because with me, you could be free of them?”

“Yes, but not only me. They have our kind enslaved across the planet. I didn’t need to change myself. I needed to change the world.”

“Which is why you didn’t try to stop the war?”

“Yes. The herd had to be thinned anyway, but the weakened governments would have provided us with that opportunity.”

“I thought you said you were corrupt.”

“I was. Because I had refused my destiny, my purpose, until the war came. I chose not to fight when I couldn’t win.”

“So you sided with the enemy until it was convenient to reveal your truth?”

“It’s not just my truth. You all believe in it too or you wouldn’t be here dying for it.”

“But we didn’t help cause the downfall of society and then cover it up!”

“No, *you* would never break that way.”

“No.”

There was silence for a minute where Donner waited eagerly for more, not bothering to look at the destruction below the noisy chopper. He didn't care.

“What was the master plan?”

“To gather enough descendants to fight them!” Adrian was clearly growing angry that she didn't understand. “They have no right to hold us! Experiment on us! Take our kids! That world is over now and I'd do it all again!”

The radio went dead.

Donner contemplated it as his pilot flew them closer to his life-long dream. If he could have produced his own children, none of this would be happening, but Donner was suddenly glad it had worked out this way. Using Angela to eliminate the remaining government was perfect justice for their kind, a neat sentence for her becoming a traitor to her rulers. The child would be his reward. Donner's good mood rose to the surface. He slapped the pilot on the arm, grinning. “Great day for a ride!”

The pilot, nervous, gave a weak chuckle and concentrated on landing where Donner wanted him to. Once he got the crazy Major to the cabin, the pilot planned to vanish into the night. After witnessing the devastation below, he didn't want any part of Safe Haven and the descendants. They hadn't even used magic to accomplish all that! *What could Angela do if she unleashed her full powers?* The pilot didn't intend to stick around and find out.

“Stay away!”

Greg and Shawn were trying to keep the pissed fighters from dragging Adrian from the tent. It took Angela coming to stand behind them to calm the mob down. They had a deep respect for her.

“I’m trading him for our people. He’ll be in a government cell before dawn.”

The small crowd frowned and muttered; Angela raised a brow. “Should I put a bullet in him and just try to buy Samantha and Tracy? What about Seth and the others?”

No one had an answer, but everyone was clearly unsatisfied.

“I want our people returned. I may be able to accomplish that without trading him, if you prefer I keep Adrian to face a Safe Haven trial.”

Again, more mutters and grumbles came, and no satisfaction. Angela led them into the option she needed them to pick. “We could trade him, get our people, and then snatch him away at the last minute. Or kill him while he’s in their custody.”

“We can’t leave him for them to use anymore,” Greg said lowly. “I say we keep him and then dole out Safe Haven justice when it’s all over.”

There was a feeling of stress easing as Angela glared at Adrian. “My justice, if you like. It isn’t gentle.”

They knew that too well from the last days and even from before that, when she’d brought Adrian

out of Little Rock and then kept them alive through nature's fury.

"I agree. Use him to trade and we'll do a snatch-n-grab they won't be ready for. I'll lead it if you want."

Hearing Zack would be going along also helped.

"Same here," Daryl called. Cynthia, under his arm, added her agreement.

Neil and Jeremy were relieved that Angela hadn't made it all about sacrificing Samantha, but they were still terrified she wasn't coming home.

"You'll get another chance for answers. We all will." She moved into the filthy command tent as the crowd slowly broke up.

Angela couldn't respond the way she wanted to. That had been one of the hardest parts of this scheme so far, telling them about Adrian. It was right behind the dozens of men and women they were missing and presumed to have lost.

Angela waved her top men to the table, those who'd surrounded her with their bodies as the crowd outside had gone from tired fighters to mob.

"If I had done this any other way, we would have buried our entire camp and those with us. I started the fight. I drew them here. I reduced them down to the same levels we're at. The playing field is level now. You'll only have to deal with the threats one at a time. React as I would. After that, they'll leave us alone for a long time."

Neil wasn't sure why she was telling them these things, but the other men had already caught on,

including Jeremy, who had noted that same expression on Samantha's face right before she left for this run.

"Things will go fast once the chopper lands. He won't spend extra time or let himself be taken. None of you are to interfere."

"But we could overrun one chopper!" Neil gestured. "And then have Donner to—"

"Do you think the bunker will trade our freedom for Donner's life?" Angela demanded coldly.

Neil wanted to say yes, but couldn't. He shook his head.

"Neither do I." Angela sank further into her depression. "I'm trading for all our lives, including my own. Do as I tell you and let him take us out of here."

"What does it accomplish?" Shawn knew Marc would want that answer.

"I have several things to try when he gets here, but I expect all of them to fail. Going with him will allow everyone a safe pass off this death zone and give Marc time to convince the soldiers on the other side of that gate to join us. When that happens, come get me." Angela waved them out when they would have argued, calling for Cynthia. "I need a few minutes with her, gentlemen."

The males left the tent grumbling, but satisfied she still had their best interests at heart. As long as they could tell Marc it had been for the good of the camp, he would let them live.

“Something went wrong on Jennifer’s end of the plan,” Angela stated lowly as soon as they were alone. “She won’t be here.”

Cynthia frowned. “Is she okay?”

Angela nodded, packing things into a small kit. “Yes, and so is the baby, though the same can’t be said of Lilly. She planned to take Jennifer’s child to Donner and trade for a pass to the bunker, but Autumn had a better idea.”

Cynthia didn’t ask what would happen to Lilly once Jennifer got her daughter back. That scene would be uglier than what Angela had done here.

“I think that too. We’ll proceed without her.”

“But she’s your guard and escort, and then Marc’s right hand.”

Angela glanced up pointedly.

Cynthia realized the duty was now hers. “Yeah, okay. I can do that.”

“Good. Would you like to go over it with me to be sure we’re together?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea.” Cynthia didn’t let herself worry over the change. Angela had told them adjusting would be necessary in places.

“The hardest part is first.” Angela scribbled on a notepad.

“I have to handle Marc.”

“Yes. He has to read this before he leaves these gates.”

“And if I can’t, then I have to handle his duties.”

“And you can. This isn’t the first time you’ve saved lives.”

Cynthia smiled in pleasant surprise as Angela handed her the note.

“Stay with Marc through this. He’ll have Kendle if he wants her, but he’ll pick anyone else if he has the choice.”

“I will. We’ll have work for her. If she returns.”

“She and Kevin’s team are close. They had to wait out the explosions and it’s not safe for them to come out yet. They’ll be in soon, though. It might trigger a new fight at the gate. Make sure you’re ready for that.”

Cynthia took out her notebook and wrote it down, then placed the message to Marc inside. She’d already memorized it in case her book was damaged, but she was dreading that moment. It wasn’t a nice note.

“It has to be harsh.” Angela shuddered, hearing the rumbling blades of a helicopter. “Our camp surviving depends on it.”

4

“I don’t want to go. I request sanctuary.”

Those words drew frowns from Adrian and Conner, who were now in a canvas behind the command tent together, cuffed to the table.

Angela had just come in; the Sergeant didn’t waste a second. “Please.”

Angela was aware of time running faster. “Sell me.”

“Donner has a secret plan to challenge the government after he claims you and Adrian. I don’t want any part of fighting for either side.”

Angela saw no lies in David’s mind, only concern for his own actions. She was forced to adapt her plan on the fly again.

Angela raised a hand and sent a bolt of red light that slammed into the Sergeant’s chest to knock him backwards. He sprawled awkwardly against the bars and didn’t move.

Angela left the tent as the sound of a chopper increased to nearly deafening. The chopper could be blown up at any point. It was on the pilot’s terrified face and in the jerky movements of his landing in the center of her heavily fortified site. More than a hundred men were here and all of them hated the soldiers.

The door slid open before the chopper had landed, revealing Donner, in full uniform, standing there waiting to be executed.

In time, Angela promised herself. He had the advantage right now. If she killed him, the bunker would bomb them and he knew it. For this meeting, Donner held all the cards.

Angela, with a group of protection, moved toward the chopper and stopped a dozen feet away as Donner came out alone. She couldn’t see inside the shadows of the chopper, thanks to his choice of an evening pickup. She stayed still instead of going to meet him.

Donner saw it as an insult and possible trap, but he stepped onto her base with an arrogant flare and salute to the pilot.

It was returned with a shaking arm and a pale face.

Donner spent a few seconds scanning the people, the fierce loyalty he felt, the secrets they held. *The government is right to want you all exterminated. You're too strong.*

“I want to be sure they stay that way.”

Donner chuckled at her brave tone, knowing it was for those people who were suddenly face-to-face with a demon from their nightmares and feeling concern for their immediate future.

“I had trouble with Sergeant Wallz,” Angela stated, tone regretful. She was sorry.

“Dead?”

“Along with Heather and a few others. They thought they'd be forgotten during the trade, left to rot here. They tried to break out. I had mines in place. It wasn't pretty.”

Donner didn't care if she was lying and didn't dig in her mind to verify it. “Where are Mitchel and his son?”

“Conner wasn't part of the deal. He isn't here.”

Donner suspected the lie this time, but again, he didn't care enough to pursue it. “Get Mitchel and let's go.”

“And in return?” Angela kept her distance.

“We'll pull out and depart the state. Your people are small potatoes. They can go.”

Behind Donner, Trey was with Becky and Samantha, knife in one hand, gun in the other. His intentions were clear. If given the order, he would shoot one and gut the other.

“Do I know you’ll keep your word?” Angela smiled coldly. “No, I think we’ll do this a different way.”

Donner tensed to fight, but Angela only held up a small box.

Donner recognized the trigger to what he could only assume was a powerful explosive. He began ripping into her mental walls to discover where it was hidden.

“Not here.” Her witch shoved Donner out as if he were nothing. “It’s in more than one place, but that’s not the part you have to worry about. It’s the weaponized Smallpox virus that will spread across this mountain.”

Donner laughed. “I’ve been inoculated for all that shit. Try again.”

“I accept that challenge,” she intoned, stopping his amusement. “Your vaccinations are decades old and this strain was developed in the good ‘ol US of A, a mere two years ago. Wanna bet your vaccination can stand up to it?”

Donner fell into fast-thinking mode.

Angela blew him out of it. “I want Tracy.”

Donner gaped in confusion. “Who?”

Angela sneered. “Your man took her and you don’t even know? What kind of a leader are you, *Major?*”

Donner's ego wouldn't let him take too many insults. Angela knew that. She would push him carefully.

Donner slowly reached into his pocket and took out a small radio. "Bring this Tracy to the gate. And identify yourself, soldier!"

Awful laughter answered.

Donner scowled. "Sherman."

Angela raised a brow.

Donner shrugged. "A minor player."

"I want her back," Angela repeated. "And then you get Adrian in exchange for letting Safe Haven go."

Donner had decided things had gone too far to change his plans. "No deal. Blow us up or get on that chopper."

It was the moment where time and fate stood still to witness what the choice would be.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want it to be this way." Her finger lowered on the button.

Before Angela could push it, gunfire rang out. They all turned to see Bridget strolling through the camp, shooting at the chopper with a gun in each hand.

"Where is she?!"

Bullets pinged off the chopper, deflected into the crowd. Even Donner flinched at a near miss.

Trey pushed the hostages back, trying to get a clear shot.

Angela grabbed at Bridget as she came by, snatching the gun to club Heart-ass in the temple hard enough to take her straight to the ground.

In the ruckus, the detonation box had been shoved into the hands of the closest person.

Cynthia kept a finger hovering in case Donner tried to grab it, but the Major stayed back. Watching Angela direct Bridget's body to be bound and placed in a cell, he appeared fascinated.

Angela started to take the box and then froze, mind going dark. Something had changed.

"Donner!"

Sherman's drunken shout was ugly and loud, close by. It was a surprise to see that he was inside the camp, next to her command tent. The gun in Tracy's ribs was little compared to her beaten face.

"You want this bitch so bad!" Sherman motioned toward Angela with the gun as he dragged Tracy backward. "I'll kill her for you!"

"If he fires, I'll blow it." Angela glared at Donner, taking the box back. "You won't make it out. There's a charge under your chopper."

Now Donner had to step up and prove his leadership, but the situation wasn't under his control anymore.

As he moved toward Sherman, eyes starting to glow, the mercenary shook his head, gun aiming at Angela. "Not me! Her!"

Crack!

Sherman's body arched. Blood burst from his lips as the bullet went through his chest and out the other side.

Donner stared in anger at the sniper who was no longer under the cover of the overhead tram. Furious to have his man stolen from under his nose, Donner blasted the sniper with all of his pent up frustration.

Angela screamed in denial as the blast went out. She stepped toward the woman falling from the tram as her Eagles pulled Tracy to safety, but it was too late to stop Crista from hitting the jagged cliffs below.

"Die!" Jeff screamed, rifle coming up.

Donner sent a blast over that side of the camp, knocking a dozen fighters into the enraged man. Donner spun around with a kick and sent the box in Angela's hand flying toward the chopper.

Her guards rushed to get between them as the soldiers outside the gate began climbing.

Angela slipped and let Donner catch her as she fell, delaying. His arm snaked around her throat; the courtyard went quiet again except for the mini-battles along the weakening fence.

"I will kill her," Donner warned the circle of men around him. "Get Adrian on that chopper. Now!"

During the chaos, Trey had kept Samantha on the chopper. He quickly retreated.

Angela found Theo's eyes in the panic. *Go get her body.*

Theo nodded slowly, stunned. *I will. My word.*

Adrian was rushed roughly onboard the chopper a few seconds later.

Jeff had found the box. He held it up. “You can’t have her.”

Donner didn’t understand how serious Jeff was. “You’ll be dead in ten minutes. The bunker will blast this mountain off the map.”

“No, they won’t. Weaponized Smallpox will spread with explosions. It will decimate the entire country, including the bunker. You won’t get any reinforcements while I hunt you down. That was my woman. I’ll never sleep again until you’re dead.”

“While *we all* hunt you down!” Cynthia was also furious over Crista. “You can’t hide from us!”

Donner began to understand that striking out at their sniper had been a mistake, but there wasn’t a way for him to back down now. He dragged Angela toward the chopper, grip so tight she was almost passing out.

Jeff, grief-stricken, wasn’t bluffing. Those who knew him fled toward the gate, hoping to escape the coming conflagration. It started hysteria. The entire camp fled toward the exit that Donner’s chopper was blocking.

Donner let go of Angela, lunging for the box as Jeff turned toward Crista’s body.

“Stop!” Alarms began sounding from every radio turned on—loud, piercing waves that halted all activity in the effort to make that one sound go away. When it did, the replacement wasn’t better.

“We wish to speak with Angela or Adrian. Please comply immediately.”

Angela, who'd been pulled to safety behind a wall of Eagles, croaked out the obvious. “It's the bunker, Jeff! Answer them before they bomb us.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
Taken Or Infiltrated?

1

Jeff stayed close to Angela as she answered the call, not sure if he might blow it all anyway. Losing Crista was devastating now that he'd accepted the inevitable settling into kids and a wife. He'd almost convinced himself that he wanted it. Jeff couldn't resist swinging on Donner when he walked by to listen to the call.

Donner hit the ground, prepared to brawl, but Jeff stepped back. He would take his rage out one swing at a time if that was the only way he could get it, but his mind was already telling him that after it was all over, Donner could be hunted.

"I'd help with it." Angela hadn't foreseen Crista's death, though she'd had bad feelings and ignored them in favor of more obvious threats. She also hadn't accounted for Bridget's growing insanity and it had cost them all.

Donner stayed outside the tent, armed and ready to kill. Trey kept the hostages in the chopper, though the two females weren't allowed to come to the door, preventing foolish rescue attempts. Trey knew these two women were the only things between him and certain death. The mob in

Angela's camp was as dangerous as the one he'd quelled in Donner's camp.

"I repeat, put Adrian or Angela on with us. We can see your location, hear your transmissions. Comply now."

The routine male voice was nearly a computer. It added a sense of calm to the situation.

Angela keyed the radio. "You've got me. What?"

The bunker man was startled into a laugh. "Am I bothering you?"

"We are kind of busy right now." Angela rubbed her throat as her men shot glares of hatred at Donner. Having him here went against everything they'd been trained for.

"Yes, we've noticed," the man replied sardonically. "You will get onto that chopper. All of your people can go free, but you and Mr. Mitchel have things to answer for."

Angela's response wasn't what her fighters were expecting.

"I accept your terms. Hundreds are witnessing it here and across the country. If you break your word, the war will resume and the bunker will be first on our list."

"We have no intentions of continuing this war. Nor will we allow you to detonate a biological weapon on US soil. Should you do so, we will target your location and use enough force to obliterate the virus and your meddlesome interference."

Angela didn't have to put a tremor in her voice to indicate being intimidated. The waves of menace were vibrant. "I'll keep my word. You do the same."

"We will. Get on the chopper with no further incidents. We will order our troops to withdraw. When they are gone, your fleeing rats can desert their ship without fear of the big bad wolf."

The mocking was almost too much for Angela. She dropped her head to keep any of them from witnessing her rage. The bunker still had no respect for what she could do. That would change as soon as they betrayed the deal.

"I need a few minutes to collect my things and pass leadership," Angela said over the mutters and protests growing in and around the tent.

Donner wisely and carefully moved toward the chopper, understanding how much danger he was in as the wolf he'd briefly glimpsed padded from the small supply tent to his right. He hadn't fully seen the animal until now.

Dog stopped a few feet from his newest enemy, aware of Angela in his mind. Her warning kept him from lunging. She said Charlie and Marc would be killed if he attacked. It kept the wolf glaring but inactive.

Angela heard the gate opening and feet pounding to get inside. The soldiers who'd survived were regrouping, choosing where to go next. She had little doubt they were being surrounded from multiple directions. She hadn't been able to kill enough of them.

Donner sat on the chopper floor, ready to fire his weapon, but the crowd knew Angela's bluff hadn't worked. She was being taken.

"You have five minutes, then I'm sending the missile. You see, I don't think we should waste our time capturing traitors. And I like explosions. They're so...unstoppable."

Angela clicked the mike in reply and then jerked the wires from the radio. It was the only sign of her anger; no one realized she'd prevented them from easily calling to Marc. The rest of her plan had to have time to work before his vengeance landed.

2

"Faster!" Marc growled. He and Quinn were way ahead of their group.

Marc had left Safe Haven's den right after Jennifer, who had chosen to go straight for Donner's remaining men and threaten their lives to reveal his secret location. Marc hadn't argued, though he doubted Lilly would have gone to the Major. Her vendetta was personal. It was torturing Marc not to be able to help track down the infant, but he had to get to Angela. He'd sent teams out to start searching for any signs of Lilly, but in that time, the awful whispers Dog had heard had returned to haunt Marc. Something was happening with Angela and it wasn't what they had planned. Dog had already left his side, eager to be involved.

“Over here!” Quinn waved. They’d seen a body fall from the tram, but they hadn’t been close enough to tell who it was.

Crista was still breathing when Quinn came into view. She’d been fighting to hold on. She breathed a sigh of pain and relief.

“Marc! Help her!”

Marc was frozen for an instant as he saw who it was. The happy future he’d seen for her and Jeff burst into flames. “What have you done?” Marc rushed to her in desperation and fear. “I can’t fix this!”

“I did the only thing I could,” Crista whispered, life fading faster than she could get her mind to form sentences. “She’s bad now. You have to save her!” Crista’s lids shut; she forced out Jeff’s name and then gave up the fight.

Marc let the crushed woman be taken from his arms, horrified as the meaning sank in. Angie thought she’d turned bad. What would have caused that?

It only took a minute to figure it out. Murder was the only thing big enough to crush Angie this way. She’d killed someone and didn’t feel it was justified.

Marc felt his stomach churn. She wouldn’t want to be around to influence anyone with the darkness it would have brought. That was why she’d stayed away from everyone. She wanted to die, and now,

before she got to feel the baby move and became attached to a child she couldn't birth.

Marc felt his anguish from the rest stop return as the other pieces fell into place. She'd become cold and hard, with no encouragement and little hope. She'd used women and children to fight their war with the government. She'd allowed Adrian to live, time after time...

Marc's guts were acid now. She'd fallen into a horrid depression and neither of the men who wanted her the most had recognized it. What would that cost them?

3

"I had to endanger us, to give us a chance to survive." Angela tried to explain things to those around the command tent as she gathered her gear. "The government isn't producing offspring. We are. If I had killed us all or released Smallpox, it would have wiped out any chance at rebuilding civilization here and in the bunkers, where they have no women."

"But our country would have been gone!"

"Yes. Anything is better than letting them rebuild their world just to destroy us all over again. We were a free country once. If I can't return that, I'll kill us all!"

Neil didn't know what to say, thinking she'd finally gone crazy, but Jeff could appreciate her point now. They were Eagles, from Safe Haven.

Being such avid patriots meant they had to make the ugly choices.

Angela had, and so far, her bluff had worked. Safe Haven was fleeing from the Oglethorpe base to her last location even now and the soldiers who were supposed to stop them were providing an escort instead. Those men would likely join the camp at some point and try to forget they were ever on the other side of it. Others would flee into the shadows of this apocalyptic world and never be seen again. As for the soldiers still outside this site, Angela didn't envy them the future that waited.

Donner didn't let her out of his sight, but he found himself thinking Adrian being unconscious had been convenient. "Why did you dart Mitchel?"

Angela glowered at the bound blond that had been dumped near her feet. "He can't take no for an answer."

Donner didn't respond directly to that, but she could feel him running the clues through filters to come up with the same conclusion that everyone else had. Adrian had come between her and Marc. She had no problem turning him over.

Angela hefted her kit over one shoulder, finally looking at her escorts and guards. "You have to trust me. If you don't, it still falls."

"Do what your boss tells you to," Donner ordered arrogantly from the flap.

He received glowers for his interference, his presence.

Angela let them go, enjoying it when Donner finally tired of the stress and delay he was causing, and turned to talk to Trey. Neither of them was okay with waiting in the middle of the enemy camp like this, but they hadn't expected the big bunker to intervene. That bunker had the power for this moment, but once Donner was out of here and on his own ground again, that would change.

"I need you to deliver my final words." Angela looked at Neil and Shawn. "If you don't, the war will restart. Only this time, we'll all be bombed to keep us from releasing the virus. The rest of the people across the country will survive if the government can limit the blast radius and they know it. They're trying hard to find a way to do that right now."

"What do you need?" Shawn was still willing to trust her after all the positive results and so few losses on their side.

"I need you to escort me out to Donner, then go code Raven."

"Who has the honor?" Neil tried to pay attention. Jeremy had a place outside the chopper to protect Samantha if something went wrong and the trooper wasn't going to argue giving Angela up for Sam. He felt awful about it, but in that moment, there was no choice for him.

"I forgive you for that, Neil. I forgive all acts of self-preservation, and command that you do the same for the others." Angela handed her notebook

to Cynthia. “No one but you, ever, for any reason. Read the last page first.”

Cynthia clutched it to her chest. “Be careful.”

Angela continued to the flap without responding, but her grief was strong enough to let her control slip for an instant. She sent out a blast of power that rose into the sky and revealed the deathly shroud around them that had once been a bubble of protection.

As Angela stepped onto the chopper, the bubble popped like a child’s delight and splattered the entire zone with sadness. Rain fell from the sky in a sudden downpour.

“Marc is gonna fuck us up,” Shawn commented as Samantha and Becky were shoved from the chopper that immediately began to take off.

“Yeah. Should we—”

“No. We’ll do what Angela wanted. She has a plan and I think this was all a part of it. Have you ever seen her be taken so easily in anything?”

Greg shook his head, finding a bit of hope in that. Even if she were giving up to save them all, she still would have fought to stay with them. Angela loved them.

“It was.” Cynthia had been reading the last page instead of watching her boss leaving.

There are exceptions to every rule, even mine, and vengeance will be Marc’s this time. Remember those two things and take control of this mob right now or you’ll lose them. Then give it to Marc and keep him on my line.

It was brief, right to the point. Cynthia felt horror as she stared at the jerky script. Angela's writing looked terrified.

Cynthia looked up to witness Angela staring at them with tears streaming down her face and turned to Daryl, unable to watch. She buried her head against his chest, wishing for this nightmare to be over.

Daryl held her close and kept an eye out for the only person who mattered now. They had their freedom if the government was to be believed, but the cost was so high that it might destroy them anyway. "What have we allowed?"

Cynthia sucked in her anguish and wiped away the signs of it, but it wasn't easy. "Get our men on the fence. Angela expected Donner to break his word."

"But Donner isn't controlling things now." Neil wanted this to be over now that Samantha was safe in Jeremy's arms.

"He is on this site!" Cynthia mirrored Angela's annoyed tones when her common-sense orders weren't obeyed fast enough. "If he cuts the radio with the bunker and takes charge of those men, we're dead. The soldiers outside these fences are pissed about their losses, tired and hungry, and there's a dangerous mountain to go down before they can do anything about those needs. Get on it!"

Few of them had thought about that. Cynthia found herself alone with Shawn and Greg as her first

order was carried out. It was amazing, awful, addictive. How had Angela given this up?

Survivors across the country had been listening to the epic battles playing out in Georgia. When the chopper rose into the air this time, it was immediately tracked. As news spread, calls began to flood in from refugees using any means of communication they could find.

Daryl wrote it down as fast as he could, trying to catch every word. He made a rookie help.

“Why?” Shane whined. “We only need the last known location.”

“Just one, huh?” Daryl snorted, taking a moment to make sure his writing was legible. “Marc should be strolling in here any minute. I plan to tell him I did something productive while I waited. You go stand around and tell jokes.”

Paling, Shane quickly began helping copy down the locations and messages, also making sure his print was neat enough to read.

4

Donner stared at his prize with loathing. Because of Angela’s bluff, he had to be a government boy again for a while. “When did you go rogue?”

Angela laughed, a harsh sound that Marc wouldn’t have liked. “Little Rock.”

“I heard the reports. Also the rumors of the drained corpse. It’s part of the reason I was sent out. The government knew if one of your group had gone bad, others would follow.”

“And if we weren’t on their payroll, we were a threat.” Angela sneered. “I know how it works. I planned the whole thing, remember?”

Donner still wasn’t sure he believed that. “Then why are you here now?”

Angela looked out the window of the chopper, able to see lines of Safe Haven people leaving the battlefield. “For them. You’ve got me. Why would you need sheep?”

“Agreed.” Donner began to understand some of why she was so wanted. “That strength is rare. The government will want you to hunt.”

Angela didn’t take her eyes from the scene below, celebrating even as she mourned. “Is your name on their list?”

Donner knew he should be scared. He’d witnessed her power, but he could only feel excited by the challenge. He leaned over to grab her by the jacket, pulling her forward until their faces were inches apart. “Did you know the alpha can force you to do whatever he wants?” Donner leered down the front of her shirt “Anything.”

Angela’s eyes became fire red as the witch leapt forward. “Yes, we did!”

Donner screamed in pain as the witch shoved into his mind, but he was used to such battles. The

syringe plunged into Angela's neck from his free hand. He'd been prepared.

Angela sobbed as the drugs hit, not fighting as she had the last time. "You could toss me out now. Take a body back. It's all the same to them."

Her eyes shut.

Donner frowned at the feeling of utter need and desolation that flooded his mind. How had she gotten in there at all? He didn't have a weak spot for females. He barely even cared for rape, which was the only type of sex he allowed himself. It prevented bonds from forming.

Angela forced her lids open to beg once more. "You'd be doing me a kindness. Please."

Donner recognized the broken spirit of a corrupt descendant—he'd been one himself a long time ago—and smothered a curse as she fell forward into his lap.

He hefted her onto the seat next to him, trying to ignore her smell, her allure. He wanted the powerful offspring she carried, not her. After the birth, she would be dropped to the government, who would be told she had become ill, causing the delay that resulted in her being the only survivor. He would keep the child for his future protection, the government would have what they'd sent him for, and her little group of merry men wouldn't ever know what had happened to her or Adrian. It was almost perfect. Donner looked at Trey. "Send them in."

Trey hit the radio with a leer. “Move in, men! Take them down!”

And that’s why it all had to be this way. Angela was unable to move as the drugs coursed through her veins in painful beats. Marc was about to arrive. He would want to come and save her, but she’d left clear instructions. He would need to end this last fight quickly. Her team would help him, and if fate were kind, it would all end tonight. At least for her people. Their new lives could begin come morning. Her own life, well... There was only darkness when she searched.

Angela fled toward it eagerly.

5

“Where is she?!” Marc’s fury lashed out, bringing men to their knees.

He stormed through the center of the shocked soldiers blocking the damaged gate. Most of those stunned men retreated in fear. The others froze.

“The Ghost!”

“Get out of here!”

“Where is she?!” Marc screamed, fire blazing behind his eyes. “Where is my baby?!”

Marc now understood Jennifer’s rage and vowed to help her as soon as he’d spilled blood.

The soldiers were scattering from in front of the base, but not leaving. Marc used his fury to blow the remaining piece of the burning barrier open.

The chaos inside didn't calm him down. Parts of the fence had failed and an obviously savage battle had just taken place. Men were still bleeding and screaming as smoke rolled across the site.

Marc saw the Safe Haven side had won. He stormed toward the bloody command tent where a dozen quivering masses of wounds and guilt were huddled. "Where is Angie?!"

Greg waved a bloody hand toward the enemy. "Donner took her."

Marc drew back to deliver a vicious hit and spun out of the tent instead. He didn't have time for vengeance. He had to find Angie.

"She gave herself up." Greg groaned, trying to keep his guts inside his stomach. The gas grenades the soldiers were using were almost debilitating. "She saved us...all." Greg collapsed.

Marc turned to scan the chaos. He'd spent a lot of years in situations like this one, but he'd never felt so much panic. Angie and his child were everything.

"Dad!" Charlie and Tracy, both splattered in the same gore that he was, rounded the rubble, shoving kits at him. Charlie had arrived during the thick of the fighting and remained unnoticed as he slipped through one of the fence gaps. He'd found Tracy fighting with the others and fallen in with their people to win or die. "Get her back."

Marc snatched the kits and was gone before either of them could say anything else.

Charlie hugged Tracy close, grateful they were now free, but terrified that he wouldn't see his mom or dad again.

Standing by the smoldering gate, Cynthia held out the paper, not making eye contact.

Marc snatched it, reading as he went.

Make sure they're all safe before you come for me. Or don't bother to come for me at all.

Outside the gate, a line of soldiers was lingering, still thinking of trying to claim the rewards on some of the people inside. They watched Marc nervously, waiting for him to cross the smoldering threshold they'd blown open as he arrived.

Marc growled at the soldiers, furious and beyond patience. "Surrender now, while you can!"

It was a moment where Marc wasn't sure how it would go. He flashed a demon's red eyes at them as Dog came to his side. *I see every one of you.* He sent it out mentally, causing men to wince. *No mercy.*

David, in the front and sure to die first, took a slow step forward. "You'll let us leave?"

"You'll be POWs that I'll trade for my wife and child. Or you'll become Safe Haven members. No one else lives past today."

"What if we want to go our own way?" The Sergeant had gotten free during the chaos, but he hadn't fought, only gotten to the correct side of the battle line. "Most of us were forced to come here."

Marc saw men waiting for a solution they could live with and realized Angie had been right again.

With the need for blood crying in protest, he gave them a way to live. “Fine. Get out of the state, immediately. Soldiers found here in two days will be shot on sight.”

That was enough for David. He carefully lowered his weapon, placed it on the ground. “I don’t want to die fighting my countrymen. I’m done.” And with that, David left, calmly pushing through the shocked soldiers who’d followed him this far.

Marc still didn’t think that was enough, but the other frontline fighters started lying down or holstering their weapons and leaving.

Marc sent the news in anger. *It worked, Angie. We’re free. Now kill him and come home!*

Silence...

Angie!

6

“Can someone help us for a moment?”

Marc and Cynthia, in the middle of organizing transportation off the mountain for their wounded, turned around to rip heads off at the interruption.

Neither of them spoke for a moment as they took in the four people standing at the gate.

The two women were tall and lean, with bronze skin and glowing red eyes. The men were paler than anyone in Safe Haven and taller, towering over even Marc and Kenn.

The activities taking place slowly came to a halt as a team of Eagles joined Marc.

“There is no need,” the shortest woman stated with a friendly tone. “We were called here by the alphas.”

Marc only understood a little of that. He scanned their minds for trouble. At least, he tried.

“You are too new,” the woman explained. “In time you may be able to read our thoughts. Your gifts are still growing. We have reached our full potential.”

“Why are you here?” Cynthia didn’t like the way the woman was gawking at Marc or Kenn.

“We are answering a call for help.” Dari repeated. “Much has happened here. We are too late?”

Cynthia nodded as Marc resumed loading, letting her handle it. Cynthia was in charge here. Marc agreed with it. The only thing he cared about was getting these people settled with the rest of the camp so he could go.

“They took Angela and Adrian. She gave herself up to let us live.”

Dari considered it for a moment, scanning, seeing how many of their kind were here. “Then we should offer our protection. When you leave on the hunting trip, we shall be your escorts.”

Marc, listening, wanted to deny them out of pride and wariness, but Cynthia’s words stopped him.

“We’ll take your help and be glad of it. Welcome to Safe Haven Refugee Camp. May it become your home.”

Those were Angela’s words to use... Marc suddenly didn’t care if the entire planet joined their camp or even if Angela shared it with Adrian. He just wanted her back.

7

“Are we set?”

Marc’s growl didn’t invite extra information.

Kenn hurried to nod. “On your mark, Marc.”

Unamused, Marc strode through the shattered gate and started down the mountain.

Some frowning, some happy, the fighters followed, trying to keep their stomachs under control as they went by the drying carnage. All of them were ready for it to be over. As they passed wounded soldiers, quick strikes of mercy were given.

The soldiers who’d gone down the mountain in the last two hours hadn’t all fled. Marc led his people by these few groups without speaking or even looking at them. It wasn’t required. His reputation had grown larger than Safe Haven’s had. These tired, regrouping soldiers wanted no part of a fresh battle with him.

Marc was vaguely aware of the thoughts, of the fear and the respect, or even the small group of soldiers who began to follow them down, watching

their six. When he made camp, Marc expected those men to ask to join Safe Haven, but that would be someone else's decision, as he wouldn't be staying there without his heart. "Update me!" Marc needed the distraction.

Kenn opened his notebook while Quinn did the same on Marc's left. "We have four missing people. Everyone else is either accounted for or dead." Kenn didn't have much sympathy for those and it showed in his tone.

Marc thought of punishing him, but realized the Marine had been punished when Tonya was taken. He'd never seen Kenn do that for a woman. "How many did we lose?"

Quinn had those numbers. He consulted the book as they walked. "Um, forty Mexican, twenty-two Indian, fifteen Eagles."

"And how many of theirs?" Marc was already doing the math.

"We estimated five hundred before this final battle. Has to be well over eight hundred now."

Marc was more than satisfied with that. "We outnumber them. Pass it around."

Quinn made a note to do that. Knowing they were the power in their country now would go a long way in getting people to stay together.

"We won't have trouble with that." Marc scanned the new descendants who were walking with them, listening to the awful tales. "We won and lost less than she promised. They'll wait for her."

“And you, right?” Quinn loved Marc being in charge.

Marc shrugged. “They’re scared of me. Without Angie here to balance it, some may leave.”

“Do we send out search parties for our missing?”

“Not yet. Give them time to get off this mountain and find us.”

“What if they’re in trouble?”

“I’d hear them.”

Quinn didn’t say more. There was no denying that Marc was powerful, but Quinn still wanted to know that Kendle was safe. He’d found himself thinking about her far too much on this run.

Marc didn’t tell him that Kendle and Kevin were trailing the camp right now, waiting until they were settled for the night to rejoin. Kendle knew Marc wouldn’t want to see her and be reminded that the one he really wanted wasn’t here. Marc appreciated it.

As for Seth, Marc suspected his run wasn’t over yet. That had almost been confirmed when Becky had told him not to go looking for Seth, that he was fine where he was. Becky’s thoughts had been of Angela. Marc hoped that meant Seth was with her. The thought was definitely comforting.

“You’ll get them settled in when we reach the bottom of the mountain. Cynthia will be in charge.”

Kenn didn’t protest. He didn’t plan to be there anyway. Adrian was with Angela, and that’s where Kenn planned to be as well.

“How many prisoners?”

“None now. Angela’s orders were with Neil on those. He handled it right as we were leaving.”

Marc nodded his approval. He hadn’t noticed it among the chaos of tending the injured and getting them ready to roll. It was still a surprise that Angela had given the order. He’d expected her to be swinging nothing but mercy by this point in their war.

Not in her true plan, the demon pointed out. The one you didn’t want to know about.

Marc sighed heavily, pushing against the guilt. He had known things were different with her, that she was planning something other than what she’d revealed to even him, but he hadn’t ever considered that she’d been corrupted. He barely understood it himself. How was he supposed to be on the lookout for it? *Tell me all of it. I’m ready now.*

She will change the world, the demon stated ominously. And we will not allow any interference in that.

Marc understood the demon was firmly behind the scheme and found that he trusted the spirit inside enough to make the promise. “Even if I don’t agree, I won’t stop her.”

Satisfied, the demon began laying it all out while Marc tried to keep walking without falling down.

Behind Marc, Samantha was aware of her men on her heels. Neil and Jeremy had refused to let her out of their sight since Donner had left.

Samantha wasn't going to argue with it. She'd had moments where she wasn't sure if she was going to come back, not the least of which had been during the firefight around the chopper. She hadn't killed Donner as she'd longed to, though. That wasn't sitting well with her. Angela's plan had needed the Major alive, but Sam didn't like it.

"Are you okay?" Jeremy couldn't stop asking.

"I'm fine."

Neil couldn't stop running a hand over her arm or her shoulder as if to verify that she was here.

"It's only been a few days," she pointed out lowly.

Neither man shouted at her, but Sam winced at their thoughts.

"All right. Just quit yelling!" She was instantly irritable. These mood swings were going to kill someone if she wasn't careful.

Neil and Jeremy dropped back a few paces to give her space, frowning. Both of them were thinking that if Bridget's aim had been any better, she might have succeeded in her goals.

"Why did she do it?" Jeremy looked at Neil. "I don't understand."

"Bridget was weaker than a lot of survivors. After being rejected publicly by Neil, beaten by Samantha, and failing on the mission to be bait, she cracked." It was the only answer Neil had come up with.

"She wanted my life right then." Samantha filled them in. She didn't like the glimpse she'd

gotten of Bridget's thoughts, of how the woman had loathed her enough to pull the trigger. Samantha hadn't even been scared right then. She'd been too shocked. She had no doubt the babies were the reason she had been able to witness it at all. Samantha hadn't adjusted to the new gift. "What will happen to her? I don't know about sharing a camp with her, even if she promises to join our side this time."

"That won't be a problem." Neil blocked the image of pulling the trigger. He'd held no remorse or hesitation about doing it this time. The one he'd lingered over was Conner. That was their only POW now, being dragged along in ropes and cuffs behind a group of merciless Eagles who didn't care for his whining. They didn't know exactly what Conner was guilty of—few people did—but he wouldn't be where he was unless Angela had found proof. In fact, after hearing Adrian's story, it was almost a welcome sight. The teenager wouldn't have free run of this camp to betray them as his father had.

"Okay." Samantha didn't tell Neil she'd gotten it all crisp and clear. Her gifts were magnified with the babies pushing their desires along. She kept quiet, not wanting him to feel bad. Bridget had been the enemy. Now she was just a bad memory. The solution was simple, though not neat or easy.

"Are you hungry?" Neil held out a mostly empty kit. "Might be crackers or something left."

Samantha held up a small kit that had half a dozen packs of snacking items. "Donner didn't want

the twins upset. He thought he could win against them, but he wasn't sure of it."

"Is that why he let you go?" Jeremy still didn't understand that.

"Partly, but it was mostly his obsession with Angela that tipped the scales. He'd been studying her case files for a long time."

"Is she in danger?" Neil knew Marc wanted that information. The man's shoulders had tensed the instant he'd heard her name.

"I'm not sure," Sam admitted reluctantly. "He says he's going to give her to the government after the birth and keep the baby to bargain with, but I doubt he'll give her up. He's like..." Samantha's eyes flicked to Kenn.

Neil understood Angela had put herself into an ugly situation to save them all.

"Yes, she has." Marc gestured angrily. "Go faster!"

"We've got more volunteers for the rescue party than we need." Shawn was walking a few feet behind Marc. He'd refused to be cowed by Marc's rage. He, better than anyone, knew controlling Angela was impossible.

"Yes, I do." Marc sighed, shoving his anger back into the box. "I'm moving hard and quick. I don't need a big group. This camp needs them to resume their posts."

Shawn knew that wouldn't fly, but he didn't protest. "The calls are still pouring in about the chopper."

“Location?”

“Not a final. Last known was five miles southeast.”

“That’s where we’ll start. You and Daryl help Cynthia keep it all together while we’re gone.”

Shawn knew Daryl would be happy, but he wouldn’t. “I’d rather go along, you know?”

Marc’s anger flashed out.

Shawn retreated a step, but he didn’t accept the order. “I’ve been with her the whole time, Marc. I’m going.” Shawn went to tell Daryl what he’d be doing.

Marc returned to scanning their surroundings. It wasn’t Shawn’s fault, nor Greg’s. Marc knew that, but the anger was there anyway. Angie had been taken and they weren’t dead. Neither of them would ever be her protection again.

Red Stone and Natoli, still wearing their injuries and filth as badges, joined Marc’s walk, waiting.

“Go home. I’ve got this covered.” Even though he didn’t and he’d never felt more alone without Angela.

“We will send our tribes to the new lands after your woman has been returned.” Natoli hated Marc’s pain.

“Agreed.” Red Stone stayed on Marc’s right. He ignored Quinn, who still had the left.

“Braves are already tracking her,” Natoli offered in comfort. “She will be found.”

Marc didn’t need their assurances and said nothing. His own grid was already stretched far

beyond what he'd done before, searching, sniffing, begging fate to be kind.

"She is a fire walker, your woman." Red Stone was curious. "The stories are true?"

Marc shrugged. "I suppose she could be called that."

"But what is she really, that the white man's government would let all of us go, just to have her?"

That was a question Marc couldn't answer even though he wanted to. He chose to increase his pace instead. "Go help with the stragglers, both of you"

Red Stone frowned at the insult. "She must be special for her absence to weaken the Ghost so much. May the great spirit give her back to you."

Red Stone went to do as he'd been instructed. Natoli joined him, both men worried. If the Ghost's mate were killed, would he stay and lead his camp? Without the Ghost or the fire woman, the Indians had little faith that old wars wouldn't be restarted.

"The ants are here." Quinn was glad of a distraction to break the tension. The ants were following, being joined by their own stragglers and small groups who'd been cut off from the colony during the chaos. It looked like over half the ants Dog had led into the fray wouldn't be coming back.

"Feed them if we can. They've earned it."

"Cool." Quinn left him.

Marc was relieved to have the minute alone. It was the only time he would let himself feel the pain.
Angie!

“We’re going down, sir!”

Donner knew they were close to his cabin and didn’t respond except to reach over and pull Angela onto his lap. Adrian, he left on the floor at his bloody boots.

The chopper had taken damage during the fight with Safe Haven. It whined harshly as it fell to the ground.

The pilot did a fantastic job of manhandling it to a flat area while keeping the blades from hitting anything that would send them rolling. He brought the huge machine to a hard landing near a thicket of moldy trees.

Donner shifted his prize carefully and brought her out of the smoking wreck, nodding for the pilot to bring Adrian.

Trey led the way into the trees after consulting his map and artillery compass. For this landscape, they needed to be sure of not only where they were going, but also the places they’d flown over. Avoiding a rescue party would be easier if everyone didn’t see them.

“This way.” Trey stored his equipment. “Two miles.”

Donner shifted his load again and stayed on Trey’s heels.

The pilot came more slowly, struggling under Adrian’s weight.

Half an hour later, the pilot finally caught up and dumped his burden at Donner's resting feet.

Donner motioned Trey to take over and they all set off again, almost to their destination. The night was growing around them, swallowing landmarks and causing hallucinations. For Trey, the red eyes of a wolf kept distracting him. For Donner, it was Angela's witch showing up to battle for her host. The pilot was sure the heavy man over Trey's shoulder was going to wake any second and kill them all.

Ahead of them, a light came through the trees; all three men increased their pace. Even if it were an enemy camp, it would still be fighting in the light. Out here in this blackness, anything could be stalking them.

"Stand down!" Donner snapped as they entered the firelight around his cabin. He gave Trey a nod of respect for the perfect navigation and stomped up the front steps without addressing the dozen men who'd clearly come here to wait for him. It made Donner nervous despite him wanting the extra muscle on this run. If this many people knew where his den was, then so did his enemy. "It's not safe here."

Trey glanced at his watch. "Just before dawn?"

"Sounds right." Donner grunted, carefully placing Angela on the narrow couch. "Put sentries up, half inside. Be ready to dart him again."

"What about her?"

“No. She can’t take another dose yet. It might harm the fetus.” Donner pushed off his boots with a groan. He sank down in the recliner by the couch, leaned it back, and closed his eyes. *It’s been a good day.*

9

“Over here.” Jennifer moved through the shadows as if she was a part of them.

Kyle followed closely, hoping to hear a noise of the woman they were tracking. When Jennifer caught up to her baby’s kidnapper, it would be ugly. Kyle wanted it over. They’d heard Marc on their radios during a break and knew their camp was safe. While that was a relief, there wouldn’t be comfort for them until Autumn was also safe.

Jennifer motioned him down.

Kyle realized they’d found their prey. Kyle frowned. *Is Lilly singing?*

“Hush little baby...”

Kyle felt the desperation in the tone. Sweat broke out on his neck. She didn’t sound good.

Jennifer didn’t try to hide as they got closer to the shadow sitting on the log. When the shapes became clearer, Jennifer and Kyle were able to pick out the baby sleeping peacefully and Lilly’s boot on top of a blinking landmine.

“I knew you’d find us.” Lilly didn’t look up. “My arm’s falling asleep.”

Jennifer gently removed her daughter from the former slave.

“Thank you!” Lilly breathed a sigh of relief. “I can’t move my leg. I came over the log and it was too late to stop, and…” Lilly stopped babbling, looking up as she realized Jennifer was walking away. “Hey! What about me?”

Jennifer handed the baby to Kyle and placed a soft kiss to her child’s forehead. She then led Kyle into the darkness, mother’s heart soothed when Lilly began to shout.

“Wait! She would have been safe inside the bunker! Hey! What about me!”

Kyle stayed close to Jennifer, waiting to see which way she would go now. As for Lilly, he didn’t think anything could have been more perfect. She would be tortured with fear and then killed when she couldn’t stay awake or stop herself from getting dizzy with hunger and thirst. It was a punishment befitting the crime.

Kyle hadn’t counted on Jennifer’s rage. He frowned when she stopped not far away and settled down.

I need to hear it!

Kyle didn’t argue. “We’ll wait together.”

10

Angela came to slowly. The first thing she noticed was the splitting headache. The second was the muffled screams from Adrian that were

increasing the headache. She raised her head to see he was next to her, though on the floor and still unconscious. *Stop yelling! I'm here now.*

Adrian's relief was blinding.

Angela left him in the darkness alone, unable to take the glare. She groaned as she moved, hurting neck and spine the next pains she became aware of... The immediate crankiness of a rough morning flooded into her. It might be nighttime, but she felt like she'd had the fun night already and was suffering the hangover.

"She's waking up, sir!"

Angela heard the nervous voice and looked around to discover Donner crashed in the chair behind her. A line of grumpy soldiers were guarding the doors and windows outside. "I need to piss. Where?"

One of the men pointed to a pot in the corner.

"Not on your life!" She stood up, making the five men inside with them reach for their weapons.

"Let her go." Donner didn't get up. "She won't leave Mitchel."

Angela shoved by the men in the doorway and moved out into the chill, rubbing her bare arms. She'd packed her Eagle jacket, but she didn't know where her kit was.

Ignoring the surprised men outside, she went behind a bush and had a minute to herself, but she could feel them staring, waiting for her to try making a run for it despite Donner's words.

He knows us well, the witch stated. Can this still work?

Angela didn't answer. The headache had grown in the short time she'd been outside. The cold appeared to be making it worse. Aware of being stared at by more than Donner's men, she went back inside the toasty cabin, shivering slightly.

Donner was there to hold out a long blanket.

Angela took it without comment, sweeping her temporary prison. She'd honestly expected to be bound and kept drugged.

"I planned to, but our scientist said it wouldn't be good for the fetus."

"It's a baby!" She swallowed her annoyance. "Where are we going?"

Donner chuckled. "None of your business. Why don't you sit down and try to eat something?"

One of the soldiers was busy laying out a cold meal on the desk. Angela did as she was told, hoping the food would ease her headache.

Donner took the seat across from her with the satisfied look of a benevolent benefactor.

Angela tore into the juice boxes first, downing all three in a rush that ended with two loud belches. She tossed them into the garbage pile that had already been started in the corner and moved on to the canned fruit. There wasn't silverware for the pop-top can. Angela took the pocketknife from her bra to eat the peaches.

Donner didn't demand the knife back when she finished, not threatened by such a small poker. Her thoughts were much more dangerous.

"What do you want?"

Donner sensed this might be the only time he could talk to her without the witch guarding her thoughts against the scientists.

"It is." The witch would shut her power down before revealing any secrets to the bunker labs. "What do you want?"

"For you and Mitchel to make the call."

Angela flashed to the call they'd made a month ago, wondering briefly if anything had come of it. Then understanding fell in place; she gaped as if she hadn't suspected that. "You're crazy."

Donner laughed. "No more than you. Once you've made the call, you'll be turned over to the bunker to answer for your crimes."

"And you'll keep me until then?"

"Yes."

Angela shrugged, going back to the food. "Guess the cell doesn't matter much."

Donner wasn't sure if that was an agreement. "You *will* make the call."

"Fine, whatever." She dismissed that topic, waving a hand. "I need a cigarette, something else to drink, and for Adrian to be woken up and fed. I can't do it alone, you know."

"He is too dangerous to—"

"He follows my orders."

“No. I won’t have both of you awake at the same time until you’re in real cells.”

Angela belched again, wadding up the wrappers. “Fine. Give me the smoke and drink, and then I’ll go to sleep on my own. Sick of smelling you anyway.” Angela took the smoke a soldier handed her and used her gift to light it, proving to them that the aftereffects of the drugs were not limiting her power.

“Amazing.” Donner stared. “Do you know why you’re so strong?”

Angela wasn’t alert enough for all the details. She shrugged, inhaling. “Later, okay?”

Donner wasn’t offended. “We’ll have months together, Ms. Hearne. No hurry.”

“Well, then you’d better pick a different name for me. Ms. Hearne doesn’t exist anymore. She died in Versailles.”

Donner had read that part of her file with interest. In fact, it had been the beginning of his obsession. “Did you know government men were spying on you then? That they have been most of your life?”

“No.”

“I’m surprised. Your gifts are impressive.”

“Mostly new developments.” Angela blew thick smoke rings over Adrian. She chanted lightly as she did it, offering her protection.

“Why are you so bonded to Mr. Mitchel?”

“None of your business, Major.”

“John, *Angela*.”

She didn't like the sound of her name on his lips. She turned back around with the witch bleeding through. "I am the leader of Safe Haven refugee camp. I am a descendant, and a coldblooded killer. Do not mistake me for anything less."

Donner laughed again at the chill from her words.

Angela forced the insulted witch back, entertained by the images of him dying that her demon side was currently exploring. "That one," Angela chose, enjoying the irony and the poetic justice.

Donner, worried she was plotting an escape, started to order her to keep her word when Adrian groaned, waking.

Angela was at his side before anyone could protest.

Donner waved his men away, curious.

Adrian's lids fluttered, opening to see her pale face. It was enough to calm him.

Angela didn't try to communicate with anything other than gentle touches and comforting glances. There was no reason for her to hide anything here among these evil people.

Donner was listening hard and didn't hear anything. It annoyed him. He took Angela by the arm and pulled her up. "Time for bed."

Donner snatched his hand away as flames burst from her skin.

Angela went to the couch on her own, letting the fire walk up her arm in warning. Then she drew the

heat into herself and lay down, closing her eyes. “I’ll need a pain pill when I wake up. Once the headache quits I won’t be as grouchy.”

Donner laughed again, delighted by her displays of power. His men had been gifted and able to do some special things, but nothing like this. Donner was now convinced that what he’d risked so much for was indeed possible. He had spent his entire life in pursuit of it and now, the moment of fruition was almost at hand. It tasted like the sweetest ambrosia. All the mysteries of their kind, of their universe, were about to be his.

Chris was full of rage. The vet had been close to Angela’s camp since leaving her gate. He’d spent the time removing threats trying to sneak in. He had killed his share of the enemy, though no one would ever know it. He’d heard the calls on his radio, and listened to her agree in disbelief, but deep down, he’d known she would sacrifice herself. Angela loved her herd; Chris loved her for that.

The vet stayed down behind the cabin. He couldn’t save her alone, and he didn’t need any of the rescue party that would arrive tomorrow to know he’d been here. Chris expected Donner to burn the cabin to keep Marc from reading any clues, but it didn’t matter. Chris planned to leave clear signs for the man to follow. Angela wouldn’t be lost. She would be returned to her flock so Chris could continue to worship her.

Chapter Twenty-Four BK5
Keeping Track

1

Can you get him to slow down?

Shawn snorted at Dari's silent question. Marc hadn't been able to leave until dawn and he was making up for it, almost running the entire way to the first site. Scouts had come in overnight to inform them of the chopper's last known location and now, with afternoon fading, they were almost there. Nothing would slow Marc down at this moment.

Behind the main rescue party, a small group of new descendants was trailing, offering supplies and guidance, but staying in the rear. Shawn was glad. They had enough problems. They didn't need another one.

On Marc's heels, Becky and Kendle kept pace and scanned for anything he might have missed. The two females had insisted on coming this morning, refusing to stay in the truck.

Marc hadn't argued long. That had given many of them leave to come; it wasn't a quiet group that was stalking these woods, but a large, spread out team of vengeance-seeking fighters. Angela would have been proud.

Marc stopped suddenly, head swiveling.

Those nearest also halted, waiting.

Jennifer stepped from the bushes and weeds alone, still coated in her last battles.

Marc was on the go again as she fell in on his right.

Kendle backed off.

Marc had three strong trackers with him now, but he still couldn't get a read on where Angela was. That only meant one thing and he wasn't happy about it. If Donner knew to go underground to avoid their mental radar, then Angie could be in more trouble than she'd planned for.

Jennifer nodded to people, but didn't bother with explanations. She had sent Kyle to Safe Haven with her daughter, then came here to do her duty. Despite her personal choices, Jennifer wasn't leaving Safe Haven until Angela was back where she belonged.

Marc held up a hand to stop the others as they came through the trees and found the wreckage of the chopper. He spent a few minutes examining the scene for clues, then led them southeast, following clear tracks of soldiers carrying double weight. Angela's charred kit swung rebelliously over his arm.

As they moved away from the chopper, Marc became aware of ants on his left and instinctively chose to follow their path. As long as it ran with the grid in his head and the tracks in the mud, he would stay with their trail. He had little doubt that the insects were also hunting for their benefactor.

“Hey, Marc!”

Shawn’s shout drew Marc to the middle of the rescue party that was five times the size of what he had wanted. “What?!”

“A group of soldiers sent signals to the rear group. One of them is named Ivan. Says you promised him a place.”

Marc scrolled his memory and came up with the soldier he’d spared when the man caught him right after killing General Francis in his tent. “Tell him to wait at Safe Haven.”

“I did, but he says he has news for you on Angie.”

Marc stalked to the waiting group of five soldiers who had guns in hands that were pointed downward. “Where?!”

Ivan swallowed nervously. “He likes to use underground trails. That’s where he’ll take her.”

“I know that already!”

“But we know which ones are still open,” Ivan explained. “We were part of the fire team for the battalion. Your...wife missed us in her demented schemes.”

Marc swallowed his rage to let Ivan show him on the map that was quickly unrolled. They marked the places and then Marc immediately went back to tracking. He knew where Donner was going. There was only one government facility near here that might still be operational.

“Put a can on that weapon!” Marc saw Ivan join Kendle as he stored his gun.

That angry woman bared her teeth; the soldier quickly retreated.

Marc didn't care. He had one focus and that was it.

2

They reached the cabin a half hour later, though most of the group took longer to catch up. Marc didn't wait for them. He could feel that he was gaining ground on Donner. He wanted every mile he could get before dark.

The cabin had been left in filth.

It took a second to find a marker outside. Someone had drawn arrows in paint, or blood, Marc wasn't sure, on the trees. He followed them, happy with all the help. Donner hadn't counted on so many people hunting him.

"Marc."

He knew what they wanted, but Marc wasn't able to give it to them. He didn't care how cold it got. He wasn't stopping until exhaustion forced him to.

Quinn didn't try again. The group huddled in their clothes as they hiked, all wishing for a vehicle that would fit between these molded trees. After the week they'd all had, walking for ten miles was the last thing they felt like doing.

If it had been anyone other than Angela, Marc wasn't sure they would have. She'd earned their loyalty, that much was clear, but for Marc, the cost

was too high. He wouldn't let her place herself into government hands as a punishment and he wouldn't let her take her own life. Whatever her mental state was, he would help her straighten it out so they could have that happily ever after they'd been promised.

3

“Donner said for you to get settled in the bedroom.” Trey was using superglue on one of his many wounds that didn't want to stop bleeding. He'd been trimmed twice during the fight at Safe Haven. Donner was outside dealing with the newest group of surviving soldiers to join his cause.

Angela was taking advantage of his absence. “You don't understand what's going to happen when Marc shows up here tonight. I'd better be the first person he sees.”

Donner had taken them through caves that had once been tourist attractions, using trolley cars that he'd forced her to find in the darkness. The jeeps almost hadn't fit through in places, but after some rock removing, they'd gotten through. Angela was sure it was driving Marc crazy. He would know where she wasn't and that she had to be underground. It was one of the only places his mental grid couldn't yet penetrate.

“Brady?” Trey stared. “We were told the Ghost was killed.”

Angela grinned, hiding her pain. “You believed it. Excellent.”

The guards exchanged worried glances, but Angela didn’t take pity on them. “He’ll have Donner to take his anger out on. You boys be still when he gets here and you’ll be okay.”

“You sure?” One of her sentries wanted a promise. “Cause he was pissed before.”

Angela loved the protected feeling she got from knowing her man’s name alone could cause such caution. “I’ll handle him, but he’ll watch you, talk to you, feel you out in every way, so be ready for that. If you’re a traitor in disguise, he’ll know it.”

“But, uh...he doesn’t like soldiers much.”

“He’ll adjust. I went to a lot of trouble to add a few hundred of you wonderful men to our ranks. Once he understands it was intentional, he’ll let some of you live and even join my Eagles.”

Trey swallowed. “And those he doesn’t care for?”

Angela shrugged, not feeling much of anything beyond cold satisfaction and a deep ache. “I don’t ask those kinds of questions when it comes to Marc. I wouldn’t be able to sleep.”

Angela intended to continue Marc’s legend as deeply and as ruthlessly as she could. When they were all crammed onto one boat together, he would be the man who could keep the peace.

Donner came into the room to discover five twitchy men who immediately began to protest about the Ghost.

Donner argued the Ghost was dead and that Angela was playing mind games.

Angela didn't mind being called a liar, because she knew the five men believed her. They would tell the others and the five-dozen men Donner had here would drop to four or even three.

Adrian groaned, waking.

When Donner would have shot him again, Angela glowered at him. "If he dies, I can't do what you want."

Donner didn't trust her. He knew by now that she had something up her sleeve, but he did need Adrian clear of the drugs for the tests. He put the dart gun away. "I'll kill all of us if you push me."

Angela already knew that and didn't comment. Donner's mental stability hadn't been good before, but he was only two steps away from leaping off that wire now. Angela intended to help him with that.

Angela stared out the window, at the light flakes with dread, and spotted movement that wasn't from Donner's men. She recognized the odd feel of the person in surprise. If the vet had stumbled upon her, then Marc wasn't far behind with his grid. She needed more time. "I saw some of my people in the woods around us. You should flush them away."

Donner didn't have an explanation for her help, but he still sent a team to check it out, unable to take any chances. He went to the door. "We're leaving in three hours!"

Donner was amused by the groans of tired men. He could run rings around these soldiers and still get there first. But there was a nagging feeling that her rescuers were indeed closer than he'd estimated. The changes reflected that. He didn't want another shoot-out with her people. He wanted these two locked in cells and working.

Angela sighed in relief, obediently going into the dusty bedroom to rest while Adrian was awake. Marc couldn't come and blow the doors off everything yet. It wasn't time.

4

Safe Haven had won.

They were at the bottom of the mountain, once again surrounded by Indian camps on all sides. A few Mexican camps were also in the vicinity, but Marc had insisted on them keeping their distance as soon as he'd seen Sebastian's bullet-ridden corpse. He hadn't asked what had happened there yet, but he would.

With Marc gone, the Eagles were doubled and the gates were up, but few of them felt safe. All three of their strongest leaders were missing, causing Cynthia and Samantha a long night of keeping things calm. There were fights to be stopped, meals to be handled, kids to be cared for, and wounded to be tended. Those were still coming in steadily, keeping the doctor and his students busy.

Peggy and Hilda had organized the three tent areas and the mess, while Tracy and Charlie had gotten the bathrooms and showers going. Angela had left the barest of instructions for how to deal with the camp after it was all over, but these things were common sense. Charlie was sure that's why she hadn't left more details. She wanted to find out if they had learned enough to help her run this camp. Charlie thought she would be pleased, but it didn't matter to him. He just wanted her brought back so he could scream at her over Tracy's injuries.

Taking a short break at the mess, Charlie scanned those around them. The majority of people here were Eagles and camp fighters. It wasn't possible for them to sleep yet, not being this wound up, so they passed the time together, recalling their battles and scary moments. Now that it was all over, they were allowed to talk about everything, the note comparing had begun. Details of Angela's plan came out that shocked and amazed them. It filled all of the men and women with the same need for Angela to be returned to Safe Haven. Come dawn, a group of them would head out to lend Marc support, even if he didn't need it. Sitting here waiting was too hard.

5

Angela stared in dismay at what would be her home for almost a year if Donner had his way. The tall building had once housed a company that

claimed to make additives for drinking water. As they entered the doors that buzzed open to admit them, Angela caught a glimpse of a biohazard symbol on the elevator and knew it was a cover for whatever lay below.

She and Adrian were herded down three long flights of stairs with Donner's penlight to show the way. Drugged and weakening with the callous treatment, Adrian swayed, stumbling.

Angela used her body to steady him. Her bound hands wouldn't let her do much else.

They reached the bottom floor of the dark stairwell; Donner held a hand to the scanner that beeped and whirled before clicking the door open. They went inside another dark room as the door slammed shut behind them, making Angela's witch mutter about being inside the earth. The witch didn't care for any type of confinement. In this case, Angela found herself agreeing. No one above them would know they were here and even a descendant's strongest grid wouldn't be able to penetrate. Angela began to worry about Marc finding them.

Adrian snorted, still shuffling along in front of her. "Stop it."

Angela rolled her eyes at her own mind. Of course, Marc would find her! He would tear these concrete walls down. All she had to do was call out to him once. He would lock onto her and then Satan would arrive at Donner's weakened doorstep.

But she didn't.

Donner directed them through a series of long, dark tunnels before stopping at a large intersection that was flanked by three cells with glass windows and secure doors. The cells themselves were black, impossible to view into.

“Get in!” Donner shoved Adrian toward the cell on the right as he hit a button on the wall.

Adrian did what he was told as Angela marked which buttons triggered the door.

Donner opened the cell across from Adrian and Angela went inside. She moved to the small cot and lay down on it, pretending not to notice the layers of dust and dirt, nor the pictures taped to the walls.

Donner locked them both in and then hit the master button on the computer. Lights came on, flickering to brightness as machines spun to alertness, waiting for orders.

Donner dropped down into the single chair behind the desk that had a perfect view of both cells, and began typing on the keyboard. He didn't look up for a long time.

Trey, aware of what was expected from him, went to instruct the men waiting topside. They would all come down, bringing gear and food, and remain here under cover until Donner was ready to go. That meant disassembling some of their larger equipment, hauling it down, and then scavenging the surrounding areas for their immediate needs. They would also have to get this facility on a paying basis and that meant long hours of switching,

sorting, hooking up, and improvising. It was the easiest part of what these men did.

As the lights began to illuminate her prison, Angela saw the adjacent room down the tunnel across from her and studied the furnishings. That room was clean and freshly stocked, judging from the lack of dust. There was a crib, a bassinet, a swing, and stacks of supplies for a newborn. Angela realized there weren't any adult furnishings. He didn't plan to keep her with her child.

Across the hall, Adrian saw the same thing and calmed his rising worry. Angela knew what she was doing. He would play his role. But it was hard to do when her entire presence suggested defeat. He was praying it was all an act on her part, because he had no idea how to erase such desperate depression in anyone, let alone someone he loved.

Angela felt the witch exploring the facility and shut her eyes, glad to at least be still. It felt like Donner's driver had hit every bump in the road and her stomach was sore, tight.

Angela sent a calming hand over her belly, sending energy and strength; the muscles relaxed. None of this had been easy on her and the worst was yet to come.

6

“State your name.”

“Adrian Mitchel.”

“Are you a descendant?”

“Yes.”

“Do you work for the government?”

“Not anymore.”

“Who do you work for now?”

“The alpha.”

“And who is that?”

“Angela.”

Donner hit stop on the recorder and studied Adrian. There wasn't much the blond could tell him about their gifts that wasn't already in the files, except for the one thing Donner had longed to know for decades. Now, he would have his answer, but it had to be extracted. Donner suspected he would get results with Angela when he threatened Adrian's life. “Are you obsessed with her, like the rumors say?”

“*You* might call it that.”

“What would you call it?”

“Love.”

Donner frowned and hit the record button. “Tell us where you've been since the war and why you didn't turn Safe Haven over.”

Adrian didn't respond.

Donner nodded to Trey, who leaned over and punched the blond man in the stomach.

Adrian gasped for air, doubled over.

Trey delivered another hit to his ribs.

Adrian slid out of the chair, coughing, as Trey stepped back.

Donner enjoyed his pain. “Tell me why you turned traitor to your oath.”

“Why did *you*?” Adrian forced out.

Donner scowled, nodding again.

Trey came and kicked until Adrian’s hand went up for mercy.

Trey retreated, relishing the feel of the man’s blood. Adrian had once been an alpha himself, with great power. Having him grovel was a powerful moment for the mercenary. Trey had come through his own training while listening to stories of the great Adrian.

Adrian sucked in air to talk with. “I needed...the protection at first. Long trip to the bunker. Then she came...and it all changed.”

“Why?”

“Because she believed in me. And I had...to try to live up to what I saw in her eyes.”

“So you threw it all away for a shot with a woman who didn’t want you. Interesting.”

“She does want me!” Adrian growled, wincing at the pain. He was fairly sure one of his ribs were broken.

Donner chuckled and nodded to Trey.

Angela listened to Adrian’s beating without responding. She knew Donner wanted her to. He didn’t need any of the information Adrian had, but he did need the advantage over her. He was hoping this abuse would get it for him.

Angela sank down into her mind, wondering how her camp was, how her son was, where Marc

was. He had to be close, but she couldn't feel him. It made the sense of isolation even stronger.

“Hit him harder!”

Angela's resolve wouldn't take much. To stop herself from caving, she took the first door in her mind that the witch lit up and left. She didn't usually dream walk, but in this case, anywhere was better than here, listening to Adrian be hurt. The only thing worse would be if Marc or Charlie were in there. She was incredibly grateful that they weren't.

Donner sensed it when Angela stopped paying attention and didn't order Trey to do any more damage. He'd been testing her, seeing what her reaction would be. He wasn't discouraged. She hadn't been able to stay and listen. He would use that when the time came for more important things. Right now, he was choosing how to deal with her while the facility was brought up to full power and the bunker sent instructions. Thanks to Angela's little Smallpox bluff, the bunker had gotten involved and Donner now had to walk a fine line with them until he got what he wanted. Once Adrian and Angela made the call, he could cut contact with the bunker, safe in knowing they didn't have any more troops to send out in pursuit of him.

His career had been spotless, except for Canada, and they thought he was still loyal to their cause. By the time they found out differently, the call would be made and he and Angela would vanish into the sunset. A few of the men with him would go along

for labor and security. The rest would remain here to handle any Safe Haven rescuers that survived. The first group of those should be arriving soon and Donner was ready for them. Unlike before, when he'd needed to capture some of them, he wasn't going to hold back this time. He would wipe them out while Adrian and Angela watched, powerless to stop it.

7

"I'll keep her with me." Hilda took the baby from Kyle. "Get a shower and a meal."

Kyle handed Peggy a note from Jennifer and then moved back toward the gate he'd just entered. Jenny had insisted on him bringing Autumn to Safe Haven. He hadn't argued much after witnessing her attack a small team and kill them all. The soldiers were in danger from her, not the other way around. Still, it bothered him to have her out there alone. He slipped back into the darkness with a renewed sense of urgency. Even if she didn't need him anymore, he wanted to be there and see the new thing she'd become.

Is that how I view her now? As some sort of thing or creature?

Kyle considered that question, aware that it didn't make any difference to his feelings for her. She could be a purple alien from Uranus and he'd still long to be with her. *But, yes. I do see her differently. And so will the camp.*

Safe Haven had accepted the descendants in many ways, but Kyle didn't think that newfound tolerance would extend to those who'd done the fighting in this latest war. Some of the stories would be passed off as fantasy, but the others would cause fear. Jennifer wouldn't be staying in Safe Haven once it was all over. She wouldn't feel safe.

Kyle grabbed the dirt bike he'd left outside the gate, glad to be able to control it with both hands now. Indian camps and Eagles now surrounded Autumn; he could spend the ride back convincing himself that he still held some value to Jennifer.

Kevin watched Kyle leave, then went to his next spot for a check in. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yes." The doctor didn't look up. He had Conner healing patients and there hadn't been any issues with the quiet teenager. "These check-ins are becoming distracting."

"Life's hard. Especially when you're a criminal."

The doctor wanted to argue on Conner's behalf, but he didn't know what the boy was accused of. With his kind, it could be about anything.

Conner had flushed. "I was stalking someone."

"Why?" The doctor paused, surprised. It wasn't what he would have guessed.

"I like her."

"Ah." The doctor wanted to comfort the kid again, but he couldn't. Stalking wasn't a minor

crime here and shouldn't ever have been in the past, either.

"I wouldn't ever do *those* things." Conner shrugged. "I just watch her."

"You might not right now, but later, when the...illness grows, you could," the doctor told him tonelessly.

Conner didn't like the picture of losing his sanity. He stopped helping with the man who'd been shot through the ankle. The soldier was one of the few wounded left; the boy staggered to his feet. "Stepping outside."

The doctor hated his orders, but obeyed them. Marc's wishes had been clear. "Guard!"

Conner glowered as the Eagle appeared in the door, but the doctor refused to show weakness. "He needs a shower and meal before he goes back in the cell. He can't keep helping me if he isn't cared for."

Kevin had no intentions of starving or abusing Adrian's offspring, but he didn't plan to coddle the boy either. Everyone was waiting to hear Angela's choice on Conner. Until it came, the camp would keep their distance.

Kevin trailed Conner as he headed for the shower, where clean outfits were waiting for anyone who needed them. The tables outside the campers were staffed with Eagles who had orders to keep track of people who were here, who they were with, and at what times. Marc's new security procedures didn't seem so unnecessary now that Angela was missing.

Kevin spotted Samantha at the mess with her men and approved even as he swallowed his jealousy. Cynthia and Daryl were in that crowd somewhere too, but Kevin hadn't run into them yet. He hoped to act normally, but he wasn't sure if he could. They would find out together. Her switching mates so quickly was sitting badly with him. When Angela came back, he needed to talk to her about that. Had she known all along that he and Cynthia weren't a match? Kevin had suspected it, but hadn't wanted to believe their leader was capable of such ruthless manipulations. Now, he wasn't so sure, and that was a life-changing confirmation for him. If Angela had played with his life that way, he wasn't staying here. This wasn't his home anymore.

8

“Have you heard of the Master Call?”

Angela acted as if she hadn't read it in Adrian's files. “I've picked up bits on it from you and your men.”

Donner motioned the guard to leave them alone in the interrogation room. Subtly watching, he saw Angela's eyes go to the bloodstains on the floor, the wall, and then the chair she was sitting in. They hadn't killed Adrian, but after six hours of making him scream, she had to know Adrian would die if she refused what he wanted.

“What are master calls?”

Satisfied she understood the unspoken threat, Donner pushed a cup and a pack of cigarettes toward her.

Angela lit one using her gift again, but she let the flame flicker weakly. The continual use of drugs would naturally dampen some of her power. Donner would be looking for it.

“Legend tells of a series of calls that can be made by alpha descendants, calls that go from your heart, straight to the master’s mind.”

“The master?”

“The Lord, our God.”

“Really? Interesting.”

Donner knew she was bluffing again, but he played along. “We can reach God, and beg to be taken home. *You* can.”

Angela’s eyes showed a deep fear. “We’re not ready for that. It’s why alphas are usually kept apart, to keep them from drawing the Master’s wrath upon arriving to find such disappointment.”

Donner scoffed. “How could anything be worse than aging and dying on this miserable little rock?”

Just for an instant, Angela agreed. And then that dauntless spirit slapped him with a view she knew that he hadn’t ever thought of. “Is there a time that it’s okay to make the call? Nothing I read had an answer for that.”

Donner was speechless. In all his studies and experiments, he’d never thought to research it. He hadn’t cared about getting permission. “I still don’t.”

Angela kept quiet, letting him work it out. Like with sex, it was better if both parties were willing. If the requirements were simple, he could have double the chance of success.

For Donner, his entire life had been about this quest. He'd been the only one in his family to have the gift. When his parents had perished, he'd been close enough to feel their pain and regrets, their horror at the empty blackness rushing toward them. *I have to know!*

"And you shall," Angela muttered as Donner left the room, waving her guard in. She'd bought an hour at best while he searched her topic. Despite Donner's lack of interest in the subject, Adrian's notebooks had stated that the government data banks contained a short, but detailed answer. It was there that Angela had placed all her chips. No one knew what any of the calls would bring or what they were for. Angela had hoped the Butcher might have that missing piece, but it was clear he didn't. Over the centuries, the information had been lost. She was going in blind.

9

"I see you planted the seed."

Adrian's voice was thin, like he was barely there.

Angela didn't pull him from the grayness. His injuries weren't life threatening, but the broken ribs and cracked teeth had to hurt.

Adrian's head lolled against the wall. "Not as much as you in that room, alone with him."

Trying to concentrate, Angela frowned, sending a small current. Adrian had been in her cell when the guard brought her back. She hadn't argued.

Adrian jerked and then slid over on the bunk. Angela returned to her plotting, devious mind using the meal and her child's needs as an excuse for her actions. "If you're going to keep him in here, you'd better feed me more. I won't share."

Angela was sure Donner would listen to every word that she and Adrian uttered.

That was confirmed when the guard slid a third tray into the window a few minutes later.

Angela hurried to it as if she was either starving or trying to claim it, hoping to throw Donner off a bit more. She didn't wake Adrian.

Angela was still thinking about the images in Donner's ugly mind. His run to Canada had hidden an attempt much like this between two alphas that he had thought were a match. It had resulted in disaster and the government ordering a full sanitization to bring it under control. Some of Donner's men had been compromised. More than a few of them had committed suicide in the last month.

The Canadians were powerful. Stronger than her and Adrian, and it had gone badly. Would the same thing happen when she and Adrian were forced to do it? A Maker's Call was impossible to fake.

She needed to know what had happened when Donner tried this before. All she'd found was a huge explosion in his mind, with no details or obvious clues. Had the Maker been furious and destroyed the alphas? She was almost sure that hadn't been the case. If the Maker had been angered enough to come back, one country or even one continent wouldn't be enough to avenge all the wrongs that had been done in His name. Humanity would be wiped out when the Maker returned. That could never be allowed to happen.

10

“He isn't going to wait much longer.” Adrian used her hair to muffle the words.

Angela acted as if she was still asleep. During the night, Adrian had turned toward her from their back-to-back position and she hadn't protested, too tired and too warm. Now, with fake light coming in from the ceiling to tell them what time of day it was, Angela didn't like the closeness.

Adrian rose from the cot and moved to the hard chair, sighing heavily. The sleep had done good things for his injuries, but it was far from over. Donner was a psychopath fanatic that had to be eliminated.

“No worries on that.” Angela tried not to picture it. Donner had to know they were planning his death, but he didn't care so long as the call was made and he got his answer. If there wasn't one,

Donner was likely to kill everyone here. She had to get her plan finished before that. Angela spent a minute clearing her head and heart. They would make a call today that might change the world.

“Do you understand what causes the power? What sends the call?”

She shook her head. “That wasn’t in the books.”

“I thought it best to leave that part out.” Adrian sighed. “Sometimes details are too...harsh.”

“Great.” Angela sighed. “What is it now? We have to mind-meld and reveal all our...” Her eyes widened. “Son of a...”

Adrian coughed, hoping to cover.

Angela jerked around to stare at the walls so neither he or Donner could see her expression. She hated lying.

“Yes. We’ll be bonded. Forever.”

“We already are.” Angela forced out anger. “But you don’t know what it will bring and neither do I! That has to be made clear to the Butcher or neither of us will be alive tomorrow. He isn’t the type to take disappointment well.”

“So you don’t think it will work?” Adrian was curious. *Did you foresee the outcome?*

“No, I think we’ll make the call; I just don’t know who or what might answer. It makes me nervous.”

“Donner makes me nervous.” Adrian stared at the hair he’d caressed before she’d woken. “Don’t deny him.”

“I’ll do what I have to,” she answered sadly, but inside, she was celebrating. She could feel Donner coming toward them, confident in their agreement now that he’d listened to them work it out. He was about to get what he wanted and then some.

Chapter Twenty-Five BK5

Limited Information

1

“I had to be sure they knew the target was here, that all of the top descendants were here. It was the only way they were going to get their bunker babies to go past my second ring,” Angela explained tonelessly. “I tried to show them how deadly we were even without our gifts. I gave them every opportunity to make the right choice and leave us alone. I also tried to kill as many of them as I could through that second ring. I needed the odds to be even for the final fight. I came close, you know?”

Donner nodded. “Yes. You did well. They’ll be stumbling over bodies in the mountains for years. Keep going.”

“The final ring had to show what we could do—that we didn’t need the people we were using to fight, that we were more dangerous, more ruthless than our enemy.”

“You succeeded.” Donner’s tone was gloating. “All it did was get you captured and eventually, killed.”

Angela didn't stop explaining, stalling. "In time, it will give me absolution. My sacrifice will be greater than my crime."

Donner threw back his head and laughed. "Don't you get it yet? There is no god or devil in that top room, no evil or good. That was the line we've been fed, but it's all bullshit. *We* are the superior beings, the gods. Your call will prove that when no one answers. You've wasted your life trying to be good, when all you had to do was use your power."

Angela understood his point of view, but she could never accept that. "I'll be forgiven. You'll burn."

Donner shrugged. "One hell is the same as another."

"Three days after the call, I go free." Angela coldly switched topics. She could feel his fanaticism, his lies, and his tortured, twisted mind. "You can tag along and study things, wait for your answer, but I'm leaving here. I'll blow my way out if I have to. *You* can't keep me."

Donner had expected it to come to this, but if the call was successful, he didn't honestly care what happened after that. "And Mitchel?"

"Give him to the bunker instead of me. Tell them I died."

Donner liked that idea even more, she could tell, but she was also aware that he would never keep his word. He would drug her anyway and just hope it didn't harm the baby.

“How about one day a week free, and you come back on your own to be with your child, who stays with me?”

Angela swallowed the growl, horrified and furious to be negotiating her child’s life in the labs. This was exactly what had happened to Adrian’s mother. Angela didn’t intend to honor her deal either. “Three days free each week and you don’t monitor me with anything that has to be implanted. Keep your shit out of my body.”

Donner shrugged, waving at the blank paper on the table between them. “Write it up. I’ll inform the bunker. It will take them a bit to get back to us. The rain is pouring.”

Angela nodded and Donner didn’t cuff her to the table as he had Adrian. He left them alone without even a sentry.

Angela was satisfied that she’d pegged him right. In time, she could probably wrap him around her little finger and keep a government contact, but she had higher goals than one obsessive Major.

“I think you owe me an explanation,” Adrian stated. Turning him over to the bunker had never been a real part of this plan. He still had a lot to offer his Safe Haven.

Angela studied the man across the table from her, not caring that he was busy picking the lock on his cuff with a pen that had been left. Or maybe he’d stolen it.

“Borrowed.” Adrian dropped the cuff and held up his hand, eyes now glowing. “Show me.”

Reluctant to unleash something they had no control over, Angela slowly slid her hand into his. This was it. Once made, they couldn't take it back.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

"So am I." Angela placed her hand in his, shaking.

Adrian opened his mental doors, all of them.

Unable to refuse now, Angela did the same.

The result was a blinding flash of brilliant gold and green lights that swarmed around them in excitement at being free. An instant later, both lights vanished.

Adrian couldn't control his draw with all of her doors open. He pulled her into his mind ruthlessly, groaning at the effort.

Angela surrendered reluctantly, wishing it were Marc. She stepped into his devious, genius mind fully for the first time.

"I see you," Adrian murmured. "I see you well."

Angela was drowning in his love, his devotion, his insanity. "Then see all of me!"

They both froze at the immediate blending of their minds. It was so quick, so complete, that neither of them wanted to move and break their joy at finally being together. There was no one here to get jealous or to misunderstand when they physically gravitated toward each other, leaning their heads together. The images in their minds were consuming.

"What's going on?" one of their guards asked.

Donner didn't answer, too busy listening with them on the other side of the glass.

Trey filled in the blanks. "They're bonding mentally. It's the final mark of life mates. We assumed the Ghost fathered her baby, but this says differently. *These* two are the soul mates. Resisting each other would have driven them crazy."

"They've done this in the labs, right?" the guard wanted to know.

"Not between two alphas. None of the matches the scientists lined up were actually a match. That's why Canada blew. A negative and a positive, instead of two of the same, create bad things."

"I'm confused."

"You would be!" Donner glared. "Shut up."

Light flared from the couple again, blinding to those in the next room. The soldiers slid their glasses on for protection as the glare increased through the glass.

"What's happening?"

Donner didn't answer the soldier. She'd made a deal, but in truth, it was impossible to guess what she might do now that she and Adrian were alone together. Donner casually retreated behind the concrete divider as the hum of untold power filled the facility.

Angela wanted to protect herself, to pull away and stop, but Adrian refused to let her back out now. He sent his force over her in full strength, finally letting her feel how much he wanted her, how he'd

always wanted her. He took them back to that first meeting at Safe Haven's gates, to seeing her and realizing she was the one. His voice echoed in her mind as he showed her what had become clear to him. *I have always loved you!*

The first image was one of Angela in western times, with a handful of kids and a happy husband, but the haunted look in her eyes when she glanced at the ranch foreman gave her away. The foreman, blond and too late to matter, stared back with the same intense longing.

You were always a day ahead of me, out of my reach.

The picture changed to Angela at the stake, burning, as Adrian and her husband screamed in horror from their cells.

He always met you first! Adrian's awful pain blasted them into a deeper level of their former lives, taking them to a stunning, lush continent where bombs were falling and three people were running for their lives. The same men were on either side of the woman, covered in ashes and blood, but it was easy to tell who the woman wanted as they died. Her hand clutched at the blond sentry, instead of her wealthy husband.

Why were you always out of reach?! Why?!

The image flashed to Rome, to Adrian in the arena as Angela sobbed from the balcony while her owner laughed.

Tell me why!

The final vision went farther; Adrian studied it obsessively. He'd never gotten further than this point in time. The next vision would give him answers he'd been denied in all those lives. Adrian tightened his mental grip on Angela and flung them into the past as hard as he could...

The garden teemed with life. Giant rabbits and wolves ran through the valleys, not in a life and death struggle, but both in pursuit of the apple Eve had tossed. She liked how the animals would fetch the food and then quickly swallow it. They could gather their own, of course, but it was fun to interact. The animals and Eve had nothing to fear from each other. They wandered the garden together in peace and amusement.

Nearby, Adam was farming, as he'd been told to do by the Master. His big arms labored under the bright sun. For a moment, Eve wondered what *she* was supposed to be doing. Then the rabbit at her feet ran off, chasing the wolf, and she was distracted from the new thought.

Her sweet laughter ringing across the area brought a smile to Adam's lips. The Maker had promised him a mate and one had come. He was satisfied. When the Lord told him to, Adam would lie with her.

Across the pond, the caretaker sat with his back to the divine couple, pretending to be absorbed in his work. The Maker had decreed that Elliot would spend his life gathering knowledge that was to be

passed along to the offspring of the Garden. Adam and Eve would live and love, and reproduce. Elliot would serve them until their children were able to replace him. During his time in the garden, Elliot had begun to feel that unfairness.

“So pretty!” Eve squealed as she discovered a particularly pleasing flower.

Eve’s laugh sent mating thoughts into the minds of both men, but only Elliot acted on them. Put here to study and teach, the caretaker easily discerned what Eve liked, what made her smile, and what caused her to scold. He chose to use those things to steal her from her mate.

Eve had already begun to notice the differences in the two men. Adam was hard and commanding. He told her what to do and she obeyed without question, even when she didn’t want to. The caretaker was covered in hair and more muscles than Adam, but he was kind and quiet spoken. He gave her gifts of leaves twined into animal shapes and taught her how to swim so she could view the animals living under the waters.

Adam had no feelings of jealousy over Eve and the caretaker. The Maker had given the men jobs. When that work was finished, the woman would be his and the caretaker would tend to their children. Adam had no thoughts of disobedience or free will. The Master had said it would be so. Who was he to question it?

Elliot had become aware of the wrong he was doing and even felt guilt for it, but he would not stop

his conquest of Eve. In the end, he seduced her away from her mate, like the animals he studied.

Eve, filled with love for Elliot, confessed to Adam that she had lain with the beast and would give birth to a child—Elliot's child.

Enraged by the betrayal, Adam struck Elliot down in the garden and brought about the final banishment that included himself, as well as the pregnant Eve.

When her child was born, she called him Cain.

Adam, bitter to have been turned out, cast the newborn from his sight to die, refusing to let Eve go to her child. Cain's cries weakened until both of them were sure he would soon join his father. Then Adam took what had been stolen from him and gave Eve his child, who they named Abel.

Angela struggled to break free of the awful visions. *That can't be. That can't be!*

Easy, Adrian soothed, almost as upset as she was.

But it's us! We did this!

Adrian could only try to comfort her, knowing it would never be enough. He now had the reasons. Despite being the better match, he and Angela had never been destined for each other. Each time he'd tried to interfere with her and Marc over their lifetimes, it had ended in disaster for all of them.

We cursed the world! Angela sobbed. *You did!*

Adrian felt the harsh judgment of centuries weighing down on him and he opened his heart to

the Maker. “Why not me, Lord? Why was I left alone?”

Donner tensed. “The Maker’s Call!”

There was a second of light pressure, of a wistful hand running over Adrian’s brow with so much love that tears burst from his eyes. A voice came, perfect and masterful, with kindness on a level Adrian had never felt.

“You were to lead them gently into my awareness. You were to be idolized by entire civilizations. Love would have been your mate, love of the world. But it wasn’t enough.”

Then the true voice came, thundering down with unequaled rage that terrorized them both into huddling on the floor.

“You are the serpent in the garden! *Banished! Banished!*”

Angela cried out at Adrian’s pain, and then her own emotions slammed into her, stealing the last bit of resistance. *It wasn’t our fault! You made us this way! You let me love him! I didn’t know!*

There was silence now, that powerhouse gone from their souls, but the truth had come out. She and Adrian had loved each other throughout the centuries, and it was wrong.

“I’m sorry!” Adrian put his hand over hers. “Please forgive us!”

Finally bonded, their power merged, creating a blast of energy that shot out from their bodies and traveled the globe. The call was one that had never been used in the world before.

Angela arched. Adrian's grip became iron as the power sent out a second blast, then rebounded, sucked back into its hosts.

Angela jerked her hands away, needing to gain control of her wildly thumping heart.

Adrian held his throbbing chest, not speaking.

"They've done it! They've called for the Maker." Donner turned toward his office. "Separate those two."

Angela went to Adrian as the door opened, aware of the protocol because of Adrian running through it in his head. She leaned down to place a soft kiss to his cheek. "I loathe you."

Adrian felt her trying to sever their new bonds, but he didn't offer any resistance. It couldn't be done.

Angela went to her cell without resisting or being restrained, further proof of her keeping her word to behave. She also took their drugs, swallowing them in relief. Maybe she could sleep for the next 72-hours and pretend it was Marc in here with her.

Adrian slumped to the floor as soon as Angela was out of sight, clutching his chest. Unless he wanted to continue the traditions of Elliot, he could never be with her now. She would never be able to get over this and love him. The truth hadn't set them free. It had caged him.

Marc shifted restlessly in his bedroll. The others had insisted that he rest until daylight. He'd forced himself into it, knowing he needed to remain strong, but the dreams were haunting. In them, he wasn't himself anymore. He'd become greater than he had been, larger somehow. He floated over land that didn't appear to be the country he lived in. The earth below was perfect. From the birds and trees, to the waterfalls and fish leaping from the crystal waves. The only thing he could compare it to was paradise. As he flew over the mountain, Marc saw mountains and jungles, and then a crisp shoreline that invited him to come closer.

Can I?

To his delight, he immediately flew down and skimmed the waves until he reached the sandy beach. It was too narrow for a large boat, but perfect for someone who wanted to be hidden away and forgotten about. Before he could explore further, his demon pulled him back to the edge of alertness.

They've bonded.

Marc knew. He'd felt the power, the forbidden call that he'd read about in Adrian's notebooks. The only way to do that was when two matched alphas made the promise of forever.

Will we sleep now?

Marc wasn't sure what would come from this, but the idea of putting his demon to sleep and taking off into the wilderness wasn't one he could stomach. He would die fighting, as he had in every other life his demon had shown him.

Perhaps it has been too much?

Marc disagreed. He knew more about his origins now than he'd ever suspected. He was a leader of men, of all men, and he would continue to be, even after this war was finally over.

Marc forced himself to wake, not wanting to stay in that heaven much longer. The temptation to take the easy way out was one that every person in hard times struggled with, but he was made of sterner stuff.

Marc's eyes opened to show him darkness and a host of people on the ground around him. His magic was stronger now. The bubble he'd placed over their small camp was still standing. Outside that clear dome, snow was falling. That had been the only thing to get him to call it a night. Traveling through the snow would make it easy to miss any tracks.

"I know where the call came from." Kendle was on his right. "I found it in Ivan's thoughts before you sent him back to camp."

Her tone was rebellious; Marc quickly leaned over, eyes blazing. "I was never promised to you!"

Kendle flinched, wounded. "She's at Mercer Bio Labs. It's the only place near here that could house a government facility."

"Really?" His anger rushed out in thick waves. "I already know where she is, but you should have told me that as soon as you figured it out!"

Marc shoved to his feet. "Stay away from me. You smell like death."

Five minutes later, Marc dropped his shield and strode down the steep mountainside into Dalton. Very few people knew about the bio lab, but Marc had been there before. The high security complex wouldn't keep him out. *Nothing will stop me now.*

3

“We’re leaving now.”

Cynthia nodded, busy with the paperwork that Kevin kept handing her. “Do the normal check ins, okay?”

“We will.”

Neil and Jeremy motioned to their team; the van rolled over to pick them up. The five vehicles slid from Safe Haven’s rear gate, where only a few camp members were awake to witness it. Inside these vans were only a few people, but they were angry and it would make up for their numbers. These men and women had been told this war was over, but they didn’t have their leaders. It was time to remind everyone that Safe Haven wasn’t powerless.

Cynthia heard the gates shut, but she didn’t watch the van fade from view. She had her hands full, even though most of the camp was still in their tents and campers. There were schedules for the next day to write and deliver, meals and caregivers to be arranged, guard shifts and posts to be checked on and rotated, and of course, questions to be answered.

“Are we back on full rations?”

Cynthia wasn't sure how much they had now and shook her head. “Not yet. I need to know where we are on food and water before I lift it.”

Kevin wrote that down and continued on to the next of his ten items. “How many shower campers do you want open?”

“Three.”

“Is that enough?”

“We have to be careful with our water. And I don't have those totals yet, remember?”

Kevin flushed, trying hard to act as if she was Angela so it wouldn't be as awkward. “Right. Um, what about the animals? No one can find the vet.”

Cynthia sighed. “Draft some people for feeding and watering. Maybe the kids can do some of it, or the older people.”

“Good idea. Okay, the last harvest gave us seeds that we're drying. Should we restart the garden or wait for spring?”

“Restart it now.”

“Can I ask why? We'll still be finding stashes of can goods for a while.”

“Because the winter may not let up by spring.” She handed over the last schedule—his.

Kevin didn't let himself read it yet. Camp business came first. “We have questions from the camps around ours about leaving. Many of them have people of their own to prepare for the season change.”

“They can go.” That, at least, was one area she didn’t have to worry over. The Eagles and other fighters in Safe Haven were no longer afraid of magic and the descendants were tired of hiding it. If they were attacked again, there wouldn’t be any hesitating. The problem in camp was how the pieces of Angela’s plan were coming out, showing her to be so totally ruthless. It had shocked and amazed all of them to discover that Angela had planned to be captured all along.

“Cynthia?”

She glanced up to see they had more men standing around, waiting for her last answer. She shook her head to clear the thoughts that were suddenly flying at her faster than she could examine. Had Angela done *all of this* on purpose?

“Repeat that, please.”

“Is it okay to get a mass grave going or should we stick to individuals?”

That was an ugly thing to consider. Cynthia held up a finger, turning to view the camp. These people would want to pay their respects, but with more than two-dozen funerals, it would run into dreaded monotony and not be given the honor that each life deserved. “Mass. And I’m sorry for that.”

The men understood and were glad of the choice for more reasons than just the work that could be done quickly with their heavy equipment. They didn’t want to spend the next four days saying farewell to the deceased. They wanted to celebrate their impossible victory.

Kevin motioned the others to go on and handed her the paper with his final three questions on it. “They’re a bit personal.”

Cynthia read them without a change in expression.

Can you find a replacement for me? I can’t do this job anymore.

If so, can I leave come dawn? You don’t need me.

Please forgive me?

“Yes.” Cynthia felt the weariness, and the guilt, but the relief was greater. She hugged him tightly. “Thank you.”

Kevin understood she wanted him to go. That was the final push he needed. He started to remove his Eagle jacket.

Cynthia shook her head. “You’re always one of us, Kevin. Come back when you can live here. We’ll still need you.”

He smiled at that, glad to know it wasn’t banishment that would follow him. He headed for the gate, where he already had a truck waiting. There was another person in that vehicle who’d also had enough of Safe Haven.

Jeff held out the joint as Kevin slid into the passenger seat. “Hit this, turn up the music, and we’ll forget about them.”

Kevin did as he was bid, but he knew forgetting was impossible. He was walking away from the greatest thing he’d ever done. The rest of his life

would be wasted trying to figure out why he hadn't been able to make it work here.

Fate watched the truck roll quickly into the night and be swallowed by the darkness, but instead of sadness, there was hard, cruel amusement. Just because someone left Safe Haven behind, it didn't mean that Safe Haven would leave them. Magic like that couldn't be erased by time or grief, no matter how deep.

4

“The Maker's Call has been made.” The voice was unfamiliar to most of the soldiers it controlled from the private complex inside the Utah Bunker. There was no reason to be friendly with his subordinates. That philosophy ran these tunnels.

“We've tracked it, sir. Donner has them at the Mercer labs in Dalton. We've prepared a team to intercept them.”

“Good. Keep me posted.” The leader of the bunker had only been a Governor before the war, but Benjamin had outlasted all those above him to claim this position during the chaos.

The flunky left as the man in charge opened a thick, laminated book. In it were symbols of the Freemasons, the Knights Templar, and other mysterious designs that had haunted them throughout history. The truth of it all was in this book.

Benjamin glanced at the orders he'd removed from the safe, as he had been instructed to do upon confirming that one of the forbidden calls had been made. He lifted the orders and the book together, then slowly slid them into the fireplace that the Presidential suite had come with.

In minutes, all paper proof of the conspiracy was only a charred frame that couldn't be used against any of the Masons who had survived. And there were quite a few. Across the world, bunkers like this one still held remnants of the elite who had perpetrated this evil on the world. If anything came from the Maker's Call, there would be no evidence.

It was a bit like shutting the stall door after the horse ran away, but Benjamin didn't refuse the orders that had been written decades ago, when the scientists had started trying to determine what combinations of descendants could bring the Maker home. He wiped the computer files reluctantly. Sad in ways he couldn't express—he'd enjoyed gazing at the images and stories before bedtime—Benjamin pulled up the latest figures for his bunker. He sat stewing over them, as he did every day at this time.

It wasn't good. There was less than four months of food and water to sustain the two thousand people still here. Half of those were draftees that he'd refused to release because of needing their skills, but that would change. Once he let them loose, those men would overrun every town they came to. Benjamin had to be prepared for them to try to do the same to this bunker.

“It’s time for us to relocate.” He reached for the files that explained in detail how to move people onto the underground rail system and get them settled in the next shelter. It would use a lot of time, nearly three of the four months of supplies they had left, but there was no other choice. If there were no other bunkers in reach, the order would have to be made to reclaim topside. He would send his little ants scurrying from their holes to reestablish the government’s hold over this country. He’d kept enough men to do so. All he needed was a bit of time, a little luck for a smooth ride to the next site...and maybe a descendant to guide the way.

Benjamin pushed the personal files button to stare at reproductive stats for this bunker in the nine months since the war.

Live Births: 14

Stillborn: 19

Current viable breeding population: 178

Sterile population: 69%

The next stats were even less encouraging.

Ragonidusin Infection levels: 27%. Increasing by .3% daily.

Deaths: 9,432.

Daily Deaths: 25.841

Current terminal population: 142

Current Healthy Population: 2342

Extinction odds would rise with every month that passed, until people finally began to notice and

panic. He had to get them topside before that happened.

Benjamin hit a last button and leaned back with his drink in hand. The image on the screen was of the Maker's Call. It was blinding even for a fictional representation, with no one able to determine what was behind the light.

Benjamin didn't like surprises. Donner going rogue on them had come as one, and now, the Major had accomplished his life's goal and sent out a successful call. What would come of it?

The scientists had assured Benjamin that it would amount to nothing, but he'd felt the power of the call even while buried a mile under the ground. That sort of force was bound to draw attention from someone. *Or something.*

Donner's obsessions had been tolerated because of his exemplary record of getting the job done. To lose him now, when he was needed the most, was an intentional blow that Benjamin intended to see the Major hanged for. The descendants who'd made the forbidden call would also have to be handled. Two matched alpha's running around the country was worse than a camp of oddball powerhouses. Alphas were a real threat.

Benjamin knew what to do about those. Once he was sure there wasn't going to be an answer to the call, he intended to destroy Safe Haven and all of the magic users there. Two large warheads would remove all traces of that rebellious camp and

Donner right along with them. “You all have one more day. Make it count.”

5

“It’s the Ghost!”

Those words were said with the same fear as the other moments in this war, but it wasn’t enough to make these soldiers flee in terror. They had survived all five rings of Angela’s plan. They had come here to make sure Donner kept his word. He’d promised them Safe Haven and failed to deliver that, but the woman in his custody was worth more. As long as Donner had her under control, they would all be safe and fed. Many of Angela’s gifts were known. These soldiers now had a bloodhound to track food and gear. In this apocalyptic hell, that advantage would keep them all alive.

“Move in!” Marc was first in the wave of fighters that burst from the buildings and trees nearby to attack the men on guard around the lab.

The demon wanted to help, but Marc didn’t need it. His fury lashed out through his Colts and then his knife when there wasn’t time to reload. He sliced through the men and leapt over their useless barricades to charge toward the only door.

Kenn followed Marc, their places now switched except for Tonya being here. She kept pace with them, firing steadily as they ran. When she had to reload, Kenn took up the slack, clearing the soldiers closest to her. These men hadn’t expected a full on

frontal assault after all the sneaky tactics Angela had employed. They'd forgotten who her mate was.

Kendle wasn't using her gifts either, preferring to feel the blood spilling around her fingers, but Becky quickly used her power to hit the soldiers running up on them while Kendle was distracted.

Angry that the brunette was so careless, Becky ran to Neil and partnered with him as they followed Kenn and Tonya into the main driveway.

Kendle barely noticed being left, too busy causing crimson to shoot from the screaming man's eyes with her thumbs.

The soldiers weren't helpless. As the alarms on the facility began to blare, they grouped together, firing rapid shots that forced Eagles behind whatever cover they could find. A wise man among those fighters grabbed his grenades; the sound of thunder lit the area.

Marc was almost to the door, uncaring of the explosions, the shrapnel, the flames. All he could see was the sentry on the door, who would have the code.

Out of ammo, Kenn ducked a swing to lift the soldier into the air. He tossed the shouting man into two soldiers grabbing Tonya's arm. The trio went down together.

Kenn landed on the pile and shoved his knife through two eyes before they had a chance to do the same to him.

Kenn jerked Tonya to her feet. He shoved her after Marc, who wasn't stopping for anything.

Kenn grunted as pain sliced into his arm; he ran faster, almost dragging her along.

Tonya was trying to keep up, but amid the chaos, she was lost. She wanted to help, to fight, but panic was telling her she had no business being here.

Tonya spotted Becky walking calmly through the rubble, waving her hands to deflect bullets and grenades, and quickly looked down, not wanting to witness anymore. She would pretend she hadn't seen that. It was too much to accept right now. Or maybe ever.

Marc reached the door, arm drawing back to threaten.

The Private tipped his cover. "Damn, Marc. I thought I was gonna hafta to do this alone."

Marc didn't spare time for the grin, just looked at the door.

Seth quickly opened it. As Marc vanished inside the dark lounge, Seth was a clear target. A nearby soldier fired at him in betrayed rage.

Neil shoved Seth, hard enough to knock him into the wall and then over the railing. The slug plunged into the wall where Seth's head had been.

Almost to them now, Becky beamed. "Guess we're even now, Neil."

Seth picked himself up and followed the others into the complex, glad they'd finally chosen to attack. He'd felt Eagles out there last night, but he hadn't been able to contact them without drawing attention from the twitchy soldiers. He'd been ready

to trigger the fight himself to keep from hearing Adrian scream anymore. Donner's torture had been continuous until a few hours ago. Whatever Donner wanted, Adrian hadn't wanted to give it to him.

That was proven further when they entered the bottom cells and found the room where Adrian had been held. Kenn collected his bloody Eagle jacket from the corner.

"He ran!" Marc's anger echoed through the complex. The heartbreak underneath it was crushing. "Donner ran. You coward!"

The fighters began stripping the facility, waiting for Marc to choose their next course. Except for Kenn. He knew what Marc would do from here. Kenn motioned Tonya toward a dark hallway. "Come on."

Tonya went curiously, relieved no one had mentioned her lack of fighting skills yet. "What are we doing?"

"Looking for a..." Kenn grunted, forced to use arm strength to turn the handle and force the door open.

Tonya shined her light into what was obviously a tunnel made for a subway car of some sort.

"Go get Marc." Kenn stepped into the darkness. "And then go back to camp. I'll meet you there."

Tonya didn't like being ordered around, but she knew he was right. She would only distract him. Tonya ran a hand over Kenn's filthy hair.

He sighed, tugging her close for the hug she seemed to want. "Jeez, woman."

Tonya chuckled and then went to tell Marc they'd found the hole Donner had fled into.

6

Marc looked down at the wolf, who had stayed on the outer edges of the battle to pick off wounded soldiers rather than to come down into the tunnels. The wolf didn't like the underworld, but he'd been sitting by the door when Marc came out. *Can you track her, like you did with me?*

Dog whined, head lowering. *Yes.*

Marc understood the wolf's reluctance. Being underground was like a cell. *Will you find her? Look after her until I can get there?*

Dog moved through the door without saying anything else. Marc needed him. He would conquer his revulsion to do his part.

Marc waved at Seth. "Burn it all after we're gone."

"You got it." Seth had his arm around Becky's shoulders.

"Kenn's been trimmed." Tonya took the medical kit from her belt.

Marc didn't care. "We leave in ten minutes. Wounded will head for home. Everyone else, get set."

Becky moved out from under Seth's arm. "I'm going with Marc."

Seth understood he was supposed to return to Safe Haven after covering their trail into the

tunnels, but he had no interest in being in camp unless Becky was there. He sighed. “I figured. Kenn?”

The Marine grunted, more at Tonya’s rough handling than the request. “She’ll cover it. I’m going along to bring the other one home too.”

Marc growled, stomping into the tunnel, but he didn’t override the order. Adrian would be brought in alive to stand trial and hang.

7

“There’s a call coming in.” Trey read the instrument panel on the gently swaying train car. They were in the front two, using the rear for storage of the prisoners.

“The bunker finally noticed we’re rolling,” Donner waved. “Put it through to the rear car.”

Trey hit the buttons, telling the person to hold.

Donner moved carefully though the small train to reach Angela and Adrian. He activated the screen on the wall and flipped on the light switch.

The face that appeared on the screen was young. It was something of a surprise to Donner, who had only dealt with leaders his own age.

“I’m Benjamin Harker, President of these United States.”

“You already know who I am.” Donner frowned, evaluating his boss.

“Yes, I do!” Benjamin smiled thinly at the sight of Angela handcuffed to a cot, appearing to sleep

peacefully. Adrian was hanging by his arms in the corner of the railcar. “Double standard?”

Donner snorted, moving to block the man’s view of both prisoners. “Yes. Well?”

Benjamin stared impassively. “You gave away your location. This is a courtesy call before we shut you down.”

“I wanted you to find us. You can’t blow up these tunnels without hurting your own escape plans, so don’t try to bluff me, young man. She already did and my patience is thin.”

Benjamin was insulted. It came through in the darkening skin, the narrowing eyes and thinning lips. He slowly poured himself a drink before responding. “You’re absolutely right, Major. There’s no need to lie to each other. Tell me what you want.”

“Time for it to work.”

“Then the call was successful?”

“Unknown. You felt it on your instruments?”

“Of course. We know of any mass use of power or force on American soil. The sensors miss nothing.”

“Give me time with her to learn what’s coming from it, what we can do to gain control of it!”

Benjamin stared at the Major, one of the few that remained in the entire country. “Perhaps we can make a deal, Major Donner. Continue to your chosen destination. I will be in touch.”

“Wait.”

“Yes?” Benjamin’s voice was a warning all by itself.

Donner began to understand that the young man might also be hard. That could be useful. “What about Mitchel? I’ve gotten nothing from him.”

Benjamin considered. “We’ve been upset with Mr. Mitchel since the war. I think it’s past time that he...retired. Don’t you?”

Donner chuckled. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Alpha bunker out.”

Donner frowned. He had begun to hate that name. Despite what he wanted and all that he could gain, dealing with alphas was hard. Donner felt he was getting too old to continue this line of work. But with a baby who could do things, a retirement in the south with a few loyal men didn’t sound bad. As long as nothing came from the call, anyway. Donner had known when he started this madness all those decades ago that he might not be able to handle whatever came from the contact. He’d accepted that he would likely be killed for the evil in his soul, but he still hadn’t been able to stop himself. Now that his goal had been reached, Donner was confident there would be a response.

He looked over at Adrian’s pale, unconscious form. As soon as they were settled, he would spend some time alone with Adrian and get the answers he needed for himself and the angry little bunker man. All he had to do was threaten Angela’s life. Adrian would do whatever he was told. It was the way alpha pairing worked. Donner knew how to take

advantage of it. Once he got the information, or assured himself that Adrian didn't know it, he would slit the blond man's throat and leave his body on these dark, dank tracks for his precious Eagles to find.

If they even made it this far. The refueling hub they'd just left was filled with soldiers. When Benjamin had said he sent a team, he hadn't been kidding. Thirty heavily armed mercenaries were now in these tunnels, setting traps and watching for anyone who didn't belong down here. Benjamin had told him the team came from a small site in the east that was dying. The bunker leader had appeared glad to have a reason to use those who hadn't starved. Benjamin had told those men the Safe Haven rescue party was carrying a stock of food; that was all it had taken to get the desperate soldiers to agree. It was that way in all of the remaining bunkers. No one wanted to be sent out into hell unless it was for food. Then, there were too many volunteers to use.

There was only one other facility within a hundred miles of here. The Eagles wouldn't be able to miss it. His advantage was that it would take Donner three hours to get there. It would take the rescue party ten. He had the only train in this area. Not many elites had been expected to come from Georgia, Donner assumed. The four train cars were sparsely supplied and would hold forty people, at most. Donner had half that number of men along, making it an almost comfortable ride that rolled

through the tunnels in near silence. The government had spared no taxpayer expense on their private conveyance.

Donner went to the main car, missing Angela's eyes opening, the smile coming to her lips. "Benjamin, is it?" She was already busy trying to track his exact location. Once she had that, she could lock onto the new President and then find him wherever he went. Her powers had grown again, though Donner would never get the chance to explore them. As soon as the bunker called again, she would be ready to strike.

Chapter Twenty-Six BK5
Under The Bus

1

“What is this place?”

“It’s a refueling hub. They’ve got one like this outside the western bunkers too.” Ivan was walking next to Marc, giving details when he asked for them.

The building had come into view slowly, lit by dim bulbs that flickered in reluctant duty. The platform of the small hub was dank in places and held an odor they all recognized.

“Someone’s sick.”

“Too many chemicals.” Ivan pointed. “See how yellow it is? All drugs and no food.”

Those words were met with Marc trying to avoid the ugly pictures of Angela being starved and drugged while she was dragged through this newest hell. “Doors to topside from here?”

“Negative.”

“Closest access point?”

“Ten miles, due west.”

“Great.” Marc sighed. That meant any number of soldiers could be waiting for them. As he had the thought and held up a hand to stop his group, the sound of gunfire filled the tunnel.

Marc couldn't see much once the lights were shot out. He heard the hiss of flares being tossed as Ivan lit up the target zone. Marc followed it with a heavy layer of gunfire that allowed the rest of his fighters to take cover around the edge of the curve before the hub.

“Move in!”

The order came from the enemy.

Marc tossed his grenades into the tunnel in a useless attempt to stop the flood of mercenaries coming their way. Donner's trap was more than Marc had bargained for. The feeling that gave him was as close to fear as he came now when it concerned fighting. Marc let the demon out as he rushed forward to meet death.

He ducked, slicing in the smoky dimness and felt blood splatter his arms. He spun and sliced, stabbing behind him. He kicked out to knock men off their feet.

Marc's Colts had one full load left and he used them now, taking out five of the stunned men who had no idea what was coming after them in the darkness as the flares burnt out.

A vicious growl echoed as Dog joined the fight, able to see perfectly. He clamped down on a man's neck, squeezing until it burst in his mouth. He hadn't been able to track the soldiers through the muck so he'd come back to his master.

“Marc!”

Kendle's shout drew his attention to the flood of soldiers chasing his team, shooting at them.

Marc did the only thing he could think of. “I’m the Ghost! Catch me if you can!”

He didn’t wait to see if they would. The shouts and stomping boots said they knew the bounty for him was huge.

Marc fled toward the hub, hoping his team would come up behind the men to trap them.

At his heels, Dog lunged for another unprotected throat as the soldiers caught up and gunfire echoed again.

Missing the wolf, but not Marc, the gunfire trailed off as the pair vanished into the single door of the small refueling station.

“Move in!” one of the soldiers commanded from the doorway.

Dog was there to leap up and bite down on his face. More gunfire finished the soldier’s gruesome death as Dog darted after his master.

Less than a dozen mercs were left as they entered the dark control room in a quick line, trying to stay together.

Behind them, Marc’s team rushed up and hurried in, leaving no room for anything except hand-to-hand combat in the darkness. Men grunted, women screamed, knives slashed, and blood covered the floor, leaking out onto the tracks.

“Get out! Its gonna blow!”

The warning came from Marc.

Eagles fled the room right before it exploded, providing more light than they needed.

The explosion rushed down the tunnel, catching good and bad alike. The smell of charring flesh filled the air.

Marc struggled to stand up, blown against the wall as he tried to get all of his team out. He still wasn't sure he had, but he didn't see any soldiers stumbling around. He'd had them all over him in a far corner when he'd pulled the pin and ducked, crawling his way out of the main blast zone.

Above them, a jagged hole had been blasted into the roof. Marc sucked in the fresh air gratefully, clearing his head. When he thought he could walk, he searched the area for any of his team who had survived, aware of a small cave-in happening behind them. Donner's ambush hadn't killed him, but it had come close. Marc's hand slid down to cover the bloody bullet hole in his arm as he counted bodies and survivors.

"Spread out, search for people and ammunition. And be careful." His voice sounded like he'd swallowed a chain. Marc pulled his shirt up over his face to avoid the smoke, then tied his bandana around his arm.

Quinn waved. "Over here!"

They dug through the rubble quickly, piling it nearby to find the bodies of Red Stone and three soldiers who'd insisted on following Marc into the earth. They also dug up Ivan, who immediately staggered off by himself. He vanished into the darkness.

“The tunnel’s blocked,” Quinn said too loudly, making himself wince. His bleeding ears didn’t want to work right.

Dog brushed up against Shawn; the Eagle patted the wolf comfortingly, glad the animal had escaped.

“Are we stopped?” Quinn wasn’t sure how they would track an underground train without being able to follow the tracks.

“Maybe we can help with that.”

The new voice was welcome. Marc nodded, then groaned at the pain. “How about throwing down a rope first?”

Neil hurried to get them all out of the ground. He’d witnessed the explosion from his high perch and rolled down to find a gaping hole strewn with crimson splatters. He’d known that was where Marc would be.

Marc sat on Neil’s passenger seat while the rest of Neil’s men tended to the injuries. They also handed them much-needed mags.

“So what’s this idea?”

Jeremy leaned over the seat and handed Marc his laptop. “We broke the code.”

Marc stared at the waiting screen and broke into harsh laughter that ended in a coughing fit.

Neil exchanged glances with Jeremy that said they understood. While Samantha had been missing, they would have driven themselves and anyone around them into the ground during a quest to rescue her. Marc would do the same.

Adrian wasn't doing well.

Awareness slowly came to his mind, along with pain, weakness, and worry. His health hadn't been the best before this. The neglect and abuse was taking a toll. Angela was in charge of this run. She would make the call on when they'd taken enough pain to achieve their goals, but Adrian wasn't as confident of his own outcome as he'd once been. Angela had sworn him to trade his life for Charlie. He had assumed that meant he would remain alive. He had no illusions about her leaving Marc. That bond was unbreakable.

"I should know." Adrian couldn't hear himself through the ruptured eardrum that was causing nausea and dizziness. He hoped Angela planned to trigger their trap soon or he wouldn't be around to witness the result. Even now, his heart was giving odd palpitations that warned of a coming episode that he had no medication for.

"Easy..." Angela soothed from across the car. She'd been sneaking him bits of her food and water when she could, but it wasn't enough. Another full day like this might see him dead and he knew it.

Will you kill him to achieve your goal? the witch asked.

If I have to. But I won't. She sent that to Adrian, along with what little energy she could spare,

wanting... Angela slammed her eyes shut as Donner came into the car, followed by Trey.

“Looks like she’s still out.”

“What about him?”

Adrian groaned, hoping to avoid the usual punch to the ribs to wake him.

“Feed him.” Donner frowned. “Take him down and cuff him to the couch so he can sleep.”

Adrian fell when Trey unsnapped the chain. He struggled to help drag himself over to the couch. His body didn’t want to obey. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d been in worse shape.

“We’ll be contacted soon.” Donner took the seat near Angela’s evenly breathing body. “You’ll answer some questions I have.”

Adrian nodded. He put both hands to his neck, moaning at the sharp lance of agony. “Whatever you want, just don’t hurt her.”

Donner smiled coldly. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Adrian tried to eat everything in the MRE that Trey tossed onto the couch, but his guts wouldn’t hold much. He forced himself to take all of the water in the bottle, then sank down onto the softness with a grunt. “Can I have a smoke?”

Donner gestured.

Trey lit one, then threw it onto Adrian’s grimy chest.

Adrian enjoyed the brain-fog that the first drag gave him, but the pain from the cough reminded him of his waking thoughts. “I’m not doing well.”

“I noticed that.” Donner smiled. “Something in the air down here doesn’t agree with you.”

Adrian’s chuckle was weak.

Donner frowned. “I’d heard you were a hardass.”

“Before Marc came, maybe,” Adrian said bitterly. “I was younger then.”

Donner snorted out laughter as he understood the old bull, new bull reference. “That’s rich. Why didn’t you kill him?”

“I did.” Adrian gestured resentfully. “And she saved him.”

“So you gave up? Unlikely.”

“I sent him to the front lines where he was killed again and brought back by another of his devoted harem!” Adrian spewed. “He can’t die.”

Donner was forced to accept that. What his men had been telling him was the truth. The Ghost was alive. “It’s him on my trail, huh?”

“Yeah.” Adrian dropped his cig into the tray so that Trey couldn’t eat the remaining food as he’d been doing to torture Adrian further when Donner wasn’t around. “It will suck to be you if he catches up before you reach the big bunker.” Adrian rolled onto his side, easing the pressure off his broken ribs. “Thank you for the food.”

Donner didn’t answer. He waved Trey on and returned to the main car, scowling. He hadn’t counted on the child’s father being alive, let alone coming for his family. His hub trap might not be enough. He would have to come up with something

else for the Ghost. Thanks to the destruction Marcus Brady had delivered to the first battalion, Donner knew not to underestimate him. When Marc came for his woman and child, Donner would be ready to give him the welcome he required.

Donner glanced over at Adrian. First though, he would gain some much-needed information and secure his deal with the bunker.

3

“Answer me!”

Adrian shouted hoarsely as Donner sent fire into him again, but there was nothing to tell the evil Major. No one knew what the Master Call would bring.

Donner had tired of playing with his toy, but he wasn't allowed to kill Adrian until there was a response from whoever was on the other end of such a call. Adrian had been insisting there hadn't been a response and wouldn't be. Donner knew he was lying, but he still couldn't break the man.

“I'm not lying!” Adrian gasped. “I don't know what's coming.”

Donner gestured.

The soldier chosen for this duty swung again.

Two cars away, Angela was feigning sleep while Trey ate her lunch and chuckled over Adrian's pain. Trey had turned out to be much more dangerous than she'd thought, starving her,

grabbing her when Donner wasn't around, beating Adrian while he was unconscious. Angela wasn't sure how much more she could take of it.

The monitor near the door beeped.

Trey went to answer it, wiping away telltale crumbs. "What?"

Benjamin stared icily at the mercenary, angered by the lack of respect. "Get Donner."

Adrian's scream echoed through the cars. Trey smirked. "He'll be a few."

"Working on Mitchel?"

Trey nodded, moving aside so Benjamin could view Angela. "Takes care of her, though. You guys got some sort of deal, right?"

Benjamin already didn't like where this was going. "She holds value."

"How much value?" Trey sat down next to her. "Cause she holds a certain...appeal, for me."

Benjamin frowned. "Name your demands quickly, before your master returns and kills you."

"I'll bring her to you and I get to stay. Donner isn't going to, you know. There's a small lab before we cross under the Mississippi River. He plans to stay there until she has the baby."

"And you'll kill Donner, I assume?"

"Of course." Trey ran a hand over Angela's dirty braid. "Is it her or the child you want?"

"Both."

"Figures." Trey rose and came to stand in front of the screen again. "I need it written and sent to me,

with *your* signature. I stay with you. Don't care what happens to anyone else."

Benjamin slowly nodded, noticing a new problem, but not speaking up about it. He hated having to negotiate with the help anyway. "I'll draft it as soon as we're done here. Anything else?"

Trey started to answer and felt the cold hand of fate settle onto his brow.

"I promised you something, Trey."

The mercenary spun in surprise to discover Angela standing behind him. He opened his mouth to shout for Donner and found himself frozen. *I can't move!*

Angela rotated to look at Benjamin, finally face-to-face with her true enemy. "Hello, *Benny*."

Benjamin felt her tinkering. Her witch was coming through the screen! He tried to switch off the communication, but it was too late. Angela sank into his brain as if she'd been born there.

"Stand up!"

On the screen, Benjamin's eyes never left hers as he did what he was told.

"Draw your weapon." Angela could see him trying to fight, to resist what was coming. She increased the force, draining herself. "Put it in your mouth!"

His arm slowly raised.

Angela grinned at him, voice full of ruthless satisfaction. "You have been found guilty of treason against the people of this country. I sentence you to death."

Mentally, Benjamin was panicking. Angela smiled as he opened his mouth and shoved the barrel inside, breaking off two of his teeth as he tried to clench them shut. Tears streamed down his red cheeks as he screamed silently—not begging, but shouting in angry, frustrated disappointment.

“Pull that trigger!”

The body dropped to the floor; footsteps flooded in to find their leader dead.

Angela’s voice and power stunned them. “I find you all guilty!” Angela pushed harder than she ever had.

A blast of energy slammed through the bunker room, causing soldiers to flee. Many of them drew their guns in defense against coworkers suddenly going insane and attacking. Shots and screams echoed as Angela used her gift a last time to capture the nearest female on the screen. “Stay a minute... Marcella, is it? Let’s talk, dear.”

On the screen, the stern woman nodded, eyes wide with terror. “What... Whatever you want.”

Angela smiled, the first real bit of happiness she’d felt since going into Little Rock. “Excellent answer. You may live another day. Those with you will not.”

Marcella waited, unable to move and not completely sure she wanted to. The power in her mind didn’t seem evil, just insistent.

“I want you to do something hard for me. Can you?”

Marcella nodded, getting the images Angela was sending, the new goal.

“I require the lives of every evil soldier in that bunker and across the country. You’re going to see that I get them.”

Marcella nodded again, in a daze but able to think enough to understand a coup was taking place and she was in the heart of the conversion zone.

“Good. Go lock the door and then open the files that control the life support systems.”

4

Adrian screamed again as Donner sent flames up his spine. “What do you want from me?!”

Donner heard the cracking tone he’d been pushing for. He sat down at the table. “Whose baby is she carrying?”

“Mine!” Adrian sagged against his chains.

“Liar.” Donner had been reading descendant faces in the labs for as long as Adrian had been a specimen in one. “The Ghost really is her chosen mate. No wonder she gave you up so easily.”

Adrian was trying to block his thoughts of the Call; it left him open to Donner prying at other doors, witnessing his humiliation by Marc.

Donner chuckled at some of the images, rubbing it in when shots of intimacy flashed.

Adrian slammed that door with a brutal shove.

Donner took advantage of the moment to yank on the other, suddenly unprotected door and

managed to get it open enough to peer inside before Adrian could react.

“You lying scum!” Donner shoved away from the table. “I’ll kill you both for this!”

Adrian ducked the swing as best he could. He let Donner’s momentum spin them toward the wall, where he was able to get his foot on the edge of a shelf and leap up enough to wrap the chains around the Major’s thick neck.

“You know,” Adrian gasped out, struggling to tighten the grip. “You have been a pain in my fucking ass since the moment you landed.” Adrian used his rage and his bitterness to pull out strength that he rarely used. His arms locked in place while Donner twisted and jerked violently, trying to free himself. “The bunker will make contact whether you’re dead or alive, *Major*. You’re now expendable.”

“Never laugh at a witch.” Angela staggered against the doorframe as blood dripped from her nose. She’d come to witness this moment for herself instead of just watching in the witch’s vision.

Angela’s weak voice at the door wasn’t a surprise, but Adrian refused to let go of his victim. Donner was realizing he was about to die here. Adrian could feel him drawing power to send them both up in flames. Those eyes would be glowing bright green right now if he could see them, Adrian was sure. That shade was a dangerous warning. It was how Donner had controlled the power of his

team for so long without any true gifts of his own. He could steal energy.

Adrian wrenched Donner around, and slammed his face into the window, shattering the glass. He jerked him away a bit.

Donner felt what was coming next, but had no way to avoid it. “No!”

Adrian slammed Donner forward again, using the jagged glass as his weapon. The shards punched through Donner’s eye and into his brain, sending blood and spasms down his body.

Adrian, still furious, grabbed Donner’s head and twisted until he heard that satisfying crunch of a broken neck. Donner had escaped justice too many times. Angela would have to change her plan.

“That won’t be necessary.” She was still leaning against the doorframe. Donner had wanted to gaze on the Master’s face so badly that he’d given his life, but Adrian had taken his sight, hopefully denying him even that final reward upon death.

The success was on her face, but Adrian didn’t ask for details. If she wanted him to know the outcome, she would tell him.

Angela didn’t. She motioned at a shaking soldier to unlock him. When she’d mentally grabbed the bunker people, it had also snared the two soldiers Donner had placed in the car to guard her. “See that Adrian is taken care of.” She shut her eyes as the gently swaying train came to a rough stop.

Not ready for it, the soldier unlocking Adrian was thrown through the window and impaled on one of the same shards that Donner had been.

“Guess I’ll have to work on that one,” Angela murmured, going back the way she’d come. “You’ll have to take care of yourself.”

The train stopping brought the remaining soldiers rushing toward them.

Angela placed Trey at the door, forcing him to do her bidding. “She says you can get lost or face the Ghost, but if you come in here, she’ll take your souls.”

Of those three choices, the soldiers still couldn’t make the right one. Well-armed now and fed again, with no slugs or explosives flying by them, their egos refused to believe they couldn’t take her.

“Kill that witch! Fire it up!”

The soldiers also rushed toward the other cars, eager to slip in from the rear. Fighting began there, with Adrian blocking their way.

5

“Are you sure?”

Jeremy nodded, face buried in the screen as Becky led him forward with a tense hand on his big arm. She’d gotten tired of him tripping over things instead of paying attention, but she hadn’t scolded. Jeremy was tracking the only moving thing in this area.

“It’s stopped, half a mile up.” Jeremy shut off the device and stored it in his kit. “We should see it any time.”

Marc motioned the top men to go, indicating the rookies to take the rear. He moved forward in the darkness without a light or guide. Debris under his feet shifted, some squeaking and scurrying away.

Marc picked out a large shadow and then gunfire lit up the tunnel in front of them. It took a second for him to realize they weren’t the target. “Hold your fire!” he called to his team, hoping the fighting ahead would cover his voice.

As they neared the battle, Marc realized the soldiers were firing on their own train and broke into a run. There was only one reason for them to do that. “No mercy, Eagles! Kill them all!”

Marc’s voice coming from the darkness was a nightmare for the soldiers. Most of them immediately tried to surrender.

Marc was having none of it. He sliced and shot his way through to the car that had bloody bodies already outside of it.

“Angie!” Marc leaped into the car. “Where is she?!”

The Eagles behind him followed his example, killing every man who didn’t flee their wrath. They were sick of being hunted by the government. There was no reason to submit to it ever again.

Marc spotted Adrian in the corner with bodies and gear piled on top of him. His hand moved weakly, threatening to pull the pin on a grenade.

Marc was again disappointed that Adrian hadn't died.

Adrian had felt Marc step onto the train and held up the grenade in his own defense. Now was the perfect time for his rival to get rid of him.

Marc ignored the thought. His next chance would come around again shortly.

Marc pushed open the door to the front railcar, aware of a crunching sound that sent urgent warning signals into his brain. He stepped inside, carefully flipping the light switch up.

"Ugg!" Trey gasped, pouring blood. "Elp E!"

Marc didn't even consider it. Not that he could have anyway. The damage had already been done.

Marc turned his attention to the true danger in the car.

The witch was beautiful and terrifying as she lunged forward to sink her fangs deep into Trey's arm. The scream as she tore out the chunk of flesh was awful. Free for the first time in centuries, the witch swiped out to rake a fresh layer of blood from Trey's face. She rubbed it down her cheek, moaning in delight.

Angela turned away from the gruesome scene. She waited calmly for the witch to be done and the battle outside to finish, mind once again on the future. They'd won this war. Their losses were heavy, but they would go on. Where and why was the next big choice, and she hadn't forgotten that. The bunkers were about to experience a true survival situation, but she would always worry

about them recovering. No damage she did to them would ever be enough.

6

Ignoring the panic around her, Marcella locked the door to her tiny room and went to her bed, where she pulled out a small trunk that held all the remaining remnants from her old life. Before the war, Marcella had been an instructor for the Navy. After the war, she had been reduced to coffee girl and pok-ee when Benjamin had needed intimacy that he couldn't get elsewhere. It had been a sad existence.

Angela's words rang through her mind.

"I require the lives of every evil soldier in the bunker and across the country. You're going to give that to me."

Marcella had dreamed of cutting loose on the males here, but the idea of dying had stopped it from being more than an amused smile occasionally playing on her lips. Now, thanks to a voice from across the country, she would live the dream.

You may die doing this. Your sacrifice won't be forgotten.

Marcella found that she didn't care if she died in the next ten minutes or in ten years. The vision Angela had shown her of the future was worth every life she could give, starting with those here.

Marcella strapped on her breathing apparatus, grinning like a loon under the SCBA. Safe Haven

wouldn't be followed. Angela's future would be realized.

Marcella went to the control panel near her door, hearing female screams that implied the men were getting the upper hand. They outnumbered the females four to one. It made Marcella confident in her weapon. She hit the sequence of buttons Benjamin had used once to bluff another bunker, threatening to suck the oxygen straight out of the rooms. Even with the doors shut tight, only a few people would survive. Marcella typed in the reason for the immediate extermination.

Uncontrolled pattern of behavior, of infection, that resulted in damage and chaos that can't be reversed. Infection levels are at 97%. Recommend complete purge.

The computer flashed a verification request.

Marcella took the hand from her bag and cackled as she used Benjamin one last time. Before, it had been for safety and extra supplies. This time, it was to activate the failsafe and give life to her new dreams.

7

“Angie?”

Marc stepped in front of her, being careful not to draw the attention of the witch bathing in Trey's blood. The mercenary had stopped screaming on the last swipe, throat ripped out. Marc didn't think he would be alive much longer.

“She silenced him for me. She’ll keep him awake enough to feel it. Don’t underestimate her hatred.”

“I won’t.” He stared at her blood-covered body, noticing how the layers of it seemed to be growing. Because the witch was coating herself with it? Maybe. There was still a lot that he didn’t understand about their magic. They would discover it in time, he assumed, now that they had some of that.

“Damn.” Angela reached for Marc.

The rumble under their feet was unmistakable. Marc cradled Angie close while the quake ripped through the area.

Unlike the tremors they’d dealt with in the past, this one didn’t stop right away. It kept rumbling, rocking and swaying until Marc took them to the ground to wait it out. All around them, men were being flung down. *A big one—not in the west, here!*

Angela felt the witch return to protect her; they burrowed into Marc’s big arms as the ground slowly stilled. They weren’t meant to die here. Knowing that was a comfort during situations like this.

Marc caught the thought and found himself asking the one thing he’d avoided the entire time he’d known her. “Angie, how do I die?”

She immediately began to sob, tears spilling in thick drops.

Marc forced himself to be quiet and wait instead of taking it back.

“Adrian.”

Marc had already thought of it. He'd only needed confirmation. "Is it a fair fight?"

Angela ignored the clean clothes he dug up and held out. "Yes, but you can still change that future. It doesn't have to be that way!"

Marc smiled softly, no longer bitter, only tired. "Yes, it does. There's one of you and two of us. How could it ever end any other way?"

Angela didn't answer, drained and blurry now that it was truly over.

Marc gently swept her into his arms and carried her from the train. He leaned her against Neil's strong side and moved toward the large, ragged band of survivors who would always have a place in Safe Haven and with him. "We won. We did it! There's just one more thing to handle and then we can begin our new lives."

The fighters cheered loudly, happily.

Kendle had an arm around Adrian, healing him without being asked. "What's the one more thing?"

Marc grinned, tossing an arm around Kendle's gun hand. "This."

Marc drew his Colt and fired into Adrian's chest, five times in rapid succession.

The reports echoed, sending men to the ground and fighters to the train doors for cover.

Marc and Adrian were locked in eye-to-eye combat as the blond slid to his ass in the tunnel, pouring blood. Adrian tried to ask, but the wounds were already affecting control of his body.

“She said it was a fair fight, but that I didn’t have to do it that way. She meant make peace, of course.” Marc leered as Adrian coughed out blood and puked. “You can die now.”

Adrian gathered what strength he could and shoved into Marc’s mind. *You can’t kill me. Only she can and she won’t! This is why!*

Adrian forced Marc to witness what they’d seen during the Call. “It was always me!”

Adrian spared Marc nothing, including Elliot making love to Eve and Eve groaning his name in ecstasy. “Always mine!”

“I should have known.” Marc fired another shot into Adrian’s gut, drawing a scream. “Thank you, Lord. I hope you enjoyed it, too.”

Kendle hurried to help Adrian.

Marc spun around. “No! Let him die!”

Kenn rushed to get between her and Marc, determined to take a beating to buy time. “You don’t get to make that choice!”

Marc growled in frustration, arm drawing back... The ground split open under his feet.

Marc leapt to the side, anger replaced with instant understanding. Angela wasn’t the only one protecting Adrian.

“Damn you!” Marc swore, staggering over to cover Angela. “Why can’t he die?!”

Arching in agony as Kendle healed him, Adrian heard the curse and laughed through the pain. He knew exactly how Marc felt.

“Get them inside!” Samantha’s distorted shout drew enough attention from the guards to get them following. She used hand codes to remind them what to do during these moments. It wouldn’t prevent all the panic, but there were few issues they hadn’t already dealt with. It wasn’t as chaotic as it could have been.

Samantha stayed down, watching for cracks and waiting for the nauseating rumbling to ease off.

It didn’t.

Samantha listened to the growling earth below them, aware of a shift in the air, as if it had gotten ten degrees hotter in an instant. Her mind began calculating possible faults, comparing it to what she remembered. Then the ground under them began splitting open and the time for thinking was gone.

“Shit!” Samantha scrambled to her feet and ran with the rest of the camp toward the carpet warehouse that Angela’s final instructions had sent them to yesterday. People stumbled inside, shoving and shouting. It was a clear moment for Samantha on why they needed to have descendants in charge. Without the proper shelter, they would be dying faster than they could breed. It was obvious that someone among them had foreseen this happening now. Sam had odds on Angela, but it could have come from any number of people. She wished she’d been able to predict today and be more prepared. She never would have let them outside.

“Stop berating yourself and help me!” Cynthia handed her a crying baby.

Samantha felt her body respond. For one second, nothing else mattered but the tiny life in her arms.

“Look out!”

Samantha ducked automatically, covering Jennifer’s baby with her body.

Daryl pulled her away from the falling stone.

The roof above the doorway collapsed, trapping the last of them to enter in darkness as they pushed their way toward the rear door they’d come through this morning. They knew it was there, but with the cloud of dust that was causing constant coughing, it was impossible to see.

“Light us up!” Daryl flipped his on.

Once they could see, things quickly calmed down a level, but everyone was aware of screaming children, muttering camp members stuffed into a huge cutting room, and the rough grumble of the earth under them that still hadn’t faded away.

“Did they bomb us?”

“What is it?”

Confused voices called out for answers. Samantha forced herself to stand up, though she refused to surrender the baby she was instinctively rocking. “Calm down. It was a quake. Take it easy.”

Her words were repeated and sent to those huddled in the rear rooms. The screams slowly faded below the sound of grinding rock.

Samantha had never known a quake to last this long. She wasn't... Her mind flipped her into the zone, showing her what she'd missed. "Yellowstone."

Several people around her frowned at those words. Adrian had mentioned the super volcano more than once.

"Man, when does it end?" Sam wondered what so many before her asked. She received the same answer they had all loathed.

"It doesn't." Daryl repeated what Adrian had told them in Oklahoma. "We still have to survive it."

"When will they get here?" Samantha was tired. She and Cynthia weren't enough to keep these people together.

"At least two days, maybe three."

Sam sighed resignedly. "Okay. Let's get the wounded handled and rooms set up. We'll stay in here until the boss gets back."

9

Marc kept his group by the train until the ground was completely still. The sound of collapsing structures was now the loudest noise. Marc wanted to be out of the ground more than he could say. The concrete tunnels had showered them in dust and pebbles, and thankfully, held up, but for how much longer?

Marc stood up, tugging Angela along with him. He'd spotted a hatch. "Who has rope?"

Marc kept Angela by his side as he directed the fighters on how to blow it open and rig the rope to get them all out the fastest way. They'd been lucky to have no injuries from the quake that were fatal, though the walls could have collapsed on Adrian. Marc would have ordered a celebration right then and there. "What's that sound?"

All of them looked to the west, where the sky seemed to have been swallowed by an early nightfall.

"Bugs or birds, maybe." Becky sent out her grid as Marc did the same, in a different direction.

He suddenly knew what was coming and concern rose. "Where can we go?"

Becky was speechless.

"Bugs and birds. Also dogs." Kendle started to inch toward the tunnel. She had let go of Adrian, who was no longer full of holes, but was still on the edge of death. He slid to the ground unnoticed.

Next to him, Kenn stared at the sky. They didn't have air horns this time. "Can we use the train?"

Angela moaned in protest, but Marc immediately detoured that way. Hours behind those bugs and birds would be an ash storm, and then survivors. Safe Haven would need its leaders there to either welcome or eliminate them.

Kenn was the only one who thought of Adrian. He didn't want Adrian dead, but down here, it could happen. Marc would never forgive the blond.

“Can we make it to camp with him?” Jeremy turned away from the others. “I see a truck you can hotwire.”

Kenn wanted to, but no matter what happened with Adrian and Conner, Kenn had earned his place back. He wasn’t leaving until Marc told him to. “No. No fuel or gear, and no time to collect. He’s not good. Kendle said he had to sleep and eat before he was bounced around.”

Jeremy and Kenn struggled to get Adrian down in the tunnel by themselves without hurting him further. They managed it because of Kenn’s determination to uphold his vow to Adrian. “I’ve got you. Just like always.”

Marc was waiting at the bottom of the rope. He’d sent people to get the train rolling while he settled Angela into the front lounge car. She’d refused to take any of the cots scattered through the train. “He’s not going with us. If you want him brought in to stand trial, find a way to get him there. Make your choice now.”

Jeremy knew what his priorities were even without Neil’s pointed glance at the door to the train. Jeremy let go of Adrian, giving Kenn an apologetic look; he took his place by Neil.

Marc stared at Kenn with an expression that said he knew everything going through his mind. For all Kenn knew, he did, and then the moment was gone. “I won’t leave him, not like this. It isn’t right.”

Marc shrugged. “That never mattered to him. Wise up before he throws you under the bus too.”

Adrian opened his eyes to search for the only one he cared about. He found her leaning heavily against the window inside the first train car. “You knew.”

Angela nodded wearily from the doorway, unable to rest alone. “Of course. It had to happen here, out of view of the herd. When I said your life for his, I always meant *Marc*.”

Adrian’s cry of pain caused Angela to flinch as though she was feeling it.

Marc stormed to the train. He disappeared inside. “Get us moving!”

Kenn stood there with an arm under Adrian, respiration not even yet from the trip down the rope. He watched the train slowly roll away. He had no idea how he would get Adrian back to Safe Haven, but he had little doubt that was where his boss would demand to go once he could travel.

Kenn heard the birds and bugs start to pass over. He hefted Adrian’s body up to get moving. He would follow the train for a while and stay away from the open areas where the fleeing wildlife would try to find shelter. They were safer down here.

“Wait.”

Kenn spun in surprise. He hadn’t known anyone else was still here.

“Let me help him a little more before you drag him around all night.”

Kenn laid Adrian down and watched Kendle send those mysterious orbs into Adrian’s body. The

castaway had injuries too, but Kenn saw they were scabbed. He assumed she'd tried to heal herself, because the stream of orbs was weak.

Kenn put a hand on her arm, trying to help.

Kendle flinched, swinging.

Kenn fell against the tunnel wall, smacking his head, hard. As he faded into the grayness, his last words were, "Don't teach Tonya that..."

Unable to take being down in the tunnels, and fed up with the way things had gone since she returned to America, Kendle stood and detoured to the rope. She didn't care about birds or bugs. Her rage wasn't as bad now, and for the first time since the wave hit her cruise ship, she felt almost normal. She needed to do some hard thinking and determine what her future would hold. She'd made the choice to live. That had been the first step. Now, she had to figure out what came next and the two men at the bottom of this tunnel had nothing to do with that.

10

"Come on out before I get upset."

The vet had lingered, waiting to see Marc carry Angela from the ground with loving care. He'd viewed Adrian's bloody body and Kendle healing him, but he'd only wanted to see one person emerging. The vet had hid his joy as best he could when Marc brought her up alive.

“I could have healed him completely.” Kendle grunted. “But Marc wanted him in pain for the ride and then in the medical tent, out of his hair.”

“And you’d give Marc anything?”

Kendle shrugged. “I understand his hatred. Adrian is a manipulative son of a bitch.”

The vet instantly liked Kendle. He joined her on the logs around the fire. She clearly wasn’t sure being in Safe Haven was what she wanted.

“I didn’t want it before, but Marc was there.”

“And now?”

Kendle sighed, a painful sound of neglect. “Too hard, maybe. I’m not normal.”

“You’re a descendant. You’re not supposed to be normal.” Chris dug in his kit and tossed a pouch by her feet. He opened his own and had a light meal, listening to the sounds of nature cleaning up the mess below them.

“What are you doing here?”

It was a question that hadn’t occurred to her right away. She watched the vet tense and had a brief moment when she felt like she might be in danger. Then it passed and she waited patiently, content with the company.

“I love her.”

Kendle winced. “Yeah, that figures.”

Chris shrugged. “She doesn’t know and she wouldn’t care if she did. I had to come to make sure she was okay.”

Kendle spotted his red fingertips. “You drew the arrows.”

He didn't answer, face sad.

Kendle left him alone. He understood how she felt. He also wanted something he could never have. "Is her whole damn camp like that? 'Cause that's a little much, you know?"

Chris nodded. "Considering I'm eightieth on any list, I sympathize."

Kendle was startled into a snicker.

The vet joined her, allowing the small release of emotions he usually only shared with Ray or Dale. Kendle wasn't like the others. She didn't expect him to be normal because she wasn't. It made it easier to connect with her.

"Because I'm screwed up. Otherwise I probably would worry over you. Be careful with your actions or someone will notice."

He scowled. "I have been."

"What's your excuse for being gone all this time? Or are you not going back?"

"Are you?"

Kendle wasn't sure. "I'll make the choice come dawn, I think. I'll see how tonight goes with the thinking."

"I'll tell them I got lost, fell down and got knocked out. I'll have someone discover me on a patrol."

"Smart." She didn't care that he was a lurker. If he flipped and killed Angela in his obsession, all the better.

"I'd never hurt her!"

Kendle stared in shock. “You’re one of us. You’re a descendant!”

Chris realized he’d given himself away and shoved to his feet. “Damn you!” He stomped into the darkness.

Kendle chose to pretend she hadn’t run into him at all. “I stand by the thought. If he flips out and kills her, Marc will come to me.”

It was almost reason enough to try living there again—that and the feeling of aloneness settling onto her shoulders. Marc wouldn’t notice her absence for days. She could be free now, if she had the guts to break away.

Do I?

Kendle hung her head.

No.

Humiliation was still better than isolation. Her time as a castaway had destroyed her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven BK5
Soft And Sweet

1

“Does this feel odd to anyone else?” Billy looked around.

A small group was in the front train car, watching the tunnel go by, but the sense of traveling backwards was strong. The concrete appeared to do the same.

“Me.” Becky scanned the monitor that showed where they were going. She could feel the worry in camp, the need for Angela to be there, and wished they could make the train go faster. She’d already suggested it, but Billy had refused, saying it wasn’t the same as going forward in a normal vehicle. Becky had no idea what he meant, but the feeling of needing to be in camp was strong for all of them.

“How long?” Jennifer was sitting in the swivel driver chair.

“It took us hours to get here from the hub we blew up.” Billy shrugged. “From there, we have to acquire another ride.”

“And it took a day to get from camp to the hub.” Greg grunted. “So, at least a day and a half.”

Becky frowned. “Damn.”

“Yeah. We’ll need to have a spot picked to sleep.” Greg started to get the maps out.

“Safe Haven isn’t in the same place.” Jennifer came over to point out the new location. “There.” She was locked onto her daughter. Not even the ground kept her out.

“Good.” Billy yawned. “I saw a car dealership about a mile before we found the hub. One of those beauties will have fuel that’s still good. I feel it.”

Everyone except Jennifer snickered at the driver, glad of a light moment. Despite this run being over, they weren’t relaxing yet. That was a bad sign, as if their minds knew there was more trouble waiting for them.

“Something’s wrong in camp.” Jennifer tensed. “They think we’ve abandoned them.”

Billy’s brows drew together. “Is there... Are we able to call them now?”

Dumbfounded expressions circled the group as Billy picked up the mike. “Come in Safe Haven. Anyone out there? This is Eagle team 6. We’re comin’ home.”

The sound of his voice was the answer, but the man on the other end knew to confirm it. “Say again, team 6!”

“We have found the raven and are coming home!” Billy grinned. “She did it, Daryl. We’re free of them this time.”

In the next car, Marc was still evaluating Angela’s condition and trying to figure out what all

to do for her, in what order. Her condition was terrible, but not anything he couldn't fix. What concerned him was the baby. Her pregnancy wasn't far along. He'd been thinking about it since Adrian had ripped his guts out and made him go talk to the doctor. When Hilda had confirmed her life was in danger, he'd made the choice easily. Soon, very soon, he had to bring that up to Angela.

"I've already thought it over." Angela didn't move from the lounge chair where she was snuggled under his jacket and pillows. "I can't."

Marc needed to know why, but he was wise enough now to understand this wasn't a good time for that. He handed her the small tray of food he'd been able to scrounge. He scowled again when she dove into it like there was a steak in front of her, moaning in delight.

Angela frowned thinly. "She's hungry. Let it go."

Marc dug through his kit again, searching deeper, and pulled out a twisted, faded wrapper that crinkled in his hand for an instant and then it was gone.

"Chocolate! Oh, Marc!"

2

"I missed you."

The witch drowsed contently in the demon's arms, fed, loved, and safe again for a while. She had accomplished a dream with Angela that no other

had ever been able to do. The feeling was incredible. “Did you find anything?”

The demon opened a chest, mentally bringing out a small scroll he had gathered while away from her. “Marc found it at the bottom of the halls, under the feet of muck. I wasn’t sure he would come up when he saw all the others down there.”

The witch read it eagerly, sitting up in excitement. “It’s about the Calls! Marc knows what will happen!”

The demon settled back smugly, happy to have the advantage, though not in the cruel way. Marc needed him for the first time in their lives. The demon was proud, satisfied.

“You’ve done well by him. I know waiting until he could accept you was hard. Most of us would have gone mad if we’d had to wait so long.”

The demon puzzled it out for a moment and then shrugged. “He didn’t need me until then. If that hadn’t happened, I’d still be in the sleep.”

The witch shuddered. She would never permit that to happen to her again. Not even if the Maker returned to walk the earth.

3

In the west, Yellowstone exploded, shooting a geyser of primordial material high into the sky. It blasted through the surrounding park with waves of ash and debris that raced over the land like a time-lapse shadow. Above the ground, the geyser of lava

spewed lava bombs and flames that flew for miles before setting a new area ablaze.

Burning embers floated down, bringing the air to a boiling mix of ash and smoke that took away oxygen and smothered all forms of life. Tons of that mix swirled in the atmosphere, rushing with the wind. Escape was impossible; the only option was to take shelter as fast as possible. Few people made it.

Not far from the growing destruction zone, a small group of women were riding ATVs west. They were going to an old government lab that had been used for experiments. It was empty now, but still stocked as a last resort hub for the bunker train that ran below it. They hadn't been able to contact the hub or access those tunnels since the war, but Marcella was sure life still existed there. The experiments had been nuclear in nature. It was probably the safest place they could be.

East of Yellowstone, a huge mob of draftees emerged from the ground and swarmed the only sign of civilization in view—a local town too small to have a name. These desperate men and women ignored the ash cloud raining down them, busy kicking in doors to slice hunger-weakened necks. They were free. After nine months, they no longer cared about the cost of it.

Billy brought the train to a gentle halt, still grinning. He'd had a rough moment when the autopilot hadn't engaged, but he'd found the right controls in time. He now had another driving experience to his credit.

Greg slapped Billy on the shoulder. "Is there anything you can't drive?"

"Not that I've found. Say, what do you think I'd look like with a crewcut?"

"Different." Greg stared in amused surprise. "Decided to go for it, did you?"

Billy grinned again, shrugging. "It's not like it's a secret."

"True. Does the kid know what you have planned?"

"Nope. She's a kid. No reason to talk about those things yet."

"And if she gets older and doesn't want you?" Greg demanded harshly, suddenly forced into Daryl's role.

Billy's smile faded; a lost expression came over his face. "I almost think being her friend would still be enough. She's special that way."

"Is she a descendant?"

Billy nodded reluctantly, knowing that information would only go as far as their leaders. "She hears the voice, sees things that are coming." His voice lowered. "She can make fire."

Greg put his friend at ease, suspecting why this had been brought up. "Cut your hair, go to the

classes, and hope she doesn't fry you in your sleep when puberty hits."

Billy laughed, relieved. He'd witnessed the way everyone treated Kyle over Jennifer, but Billy understood. He had his own...obsession with a girl who was too young for him, though it wasn't a sexual attraction for Leeann. She was like a little sister, or the sister of a dear friend that he'd vowed to protect. Something inside said to stay close to her. The early bonding classes and tests were a good way to do that. Billy expected her to choose someone else when she was older anyway. He was used to being overlooked.

"Things okay here?" Marc was behind them. He'd heard it all, but didn't comment on it.

"All good."

The two Eagles joined Marc and Angela as they left the train and climbed a rubble pile to the surface.

5

Neil and Jeremy took off to the car dealership as soon as Marc got guards posted, both still in good shape despite the long run. The train ride had allowed them a much-deserved rest, allowing them to make the two mile run in fifteen minutes. They had two large vans back in front of their group within an hour. Finding the key to the fuel tanks had been the hardest part.

"Wait." Marc gathered them around to listen. "Night will be here shortly. I'm taking Angie to that

hotel by the lab. We'll be along in a day or so. You guys can all go home now."

Marc led Angela into the van, frowning over her dazed eyes and pasty skin tones. He thought the meal and few hours of rest would help, but she looked worse. It was time to consider following the clues on the scroll. To do that, he would have to discuss it with her witch, who he still didn't like. Tonight, after he settled her into a pleasant evening, he would make contact.

"Whatever you can do, Marc." Angela gagged, dizzy. "Save our daughter!"

Marc lifted her into the seat and began digging for the mylar blankets, wishing he had more. Around him, the group grew serious and quickly divided up with little discussion. Marc had Angela covered, they knew that, but it was still evenly split when the two vans pulled out and went in different directions.

Dog sat down by Marc's seat.

In Marc's van, Shawn drove, Becky and Seth dug through gear to make the five kits they needed, and Jennifer rode shotgun. The atmosphere was calm. Even Angela's breathing was evening out. She slowly drifted off in Marc's arms, leaving the stress for another time.

Marc knew she needed the day to get her head together and decide how much to tell the camp, but he also needed the time for the same thing. He had knowledge about the Calls and other things. He gathered more each time he went dream walking.

There were infinite pools to explore and all he had to do was hold his breath. The demon thought he was being reckless, but Marc had to know his role. After what he'd discovered on this run, he would never stop searching until he found what he was searching for.

What are you digging for? his demon asked curiously.

The meaning of my life. Why were we cursed to this existence where peace can't be had? What is the great plan? Is there one? Where do we go when we die? You know. All the usual.

The demon chuckled, still wrapped around the witch. *We shall help you. Won't we?*

The witch was afraid to trust Marc. She'd done so with Adrian and it had hurt to be betrayed.

I understand, Marc sent carefully. *For a little while, I started to believe in him too.* Marc grinned. *So I shot him six times.*

The witch chuckled, too tired to keep fighting. *Yes, I'll help. As long as she's happy, she allows my freedom.*

It was a lame excuse and both males knew it, but they respectfully kept quiet. The witch loved Angela, the same as Marc's demon loved him. Their hosts had accepted their presence without going mad. At times, life was very good.

"It'll get better." Marc shifted to be able to smoke and scan the area they were entering. The Timbertop was a mountain cabin suburb built on a thirty-thirty plan, where the owners had spent thirty

thousand for a cabin that would last about thirty years, thanks to prefabricated construction. For a rental property that charged four thousand a month, it was an amazing deal to then be pawned off on some unsuspecting retiree or rookie landlord after three decades. It was yet another housing fraud that Marc was glad had ended. “Take us to the top.”

Shawn turned them onto a long driveway that immediately began winding upward. “There’s a lodge on the right. I saw it earlier. It has all glass windows on one side.”

The Rainbow Nest Party Hall turned out to be empty of cars and people, but not supplies. It was decorated for Christmas, complete with a tree, fake presents, and even a rusting reindeer by the front door. The Eagles cleared it together, leaving Marc and Angela in the van with the wolf.

“Wow.” Shawn was impressed. “Nice place!”

“Too bad we’ve got no power.” Becky stared at the room with dual hot tubs. “Wouldn’t that feel good?” Both tubs were empty, waiting to massage sore muscles.

The men groaned. “Stop it.”

Becky chuckled, going to one of the bedrooms. There were eight in total, each with their own bathroom, though only that room in the front had hot tubs.

Becky slung her kit onto the chair by the door and began kicking off her shoes and clothes. She wanted to be clean and naked under the sheets, and sleep for the entire time Marc wanted to stay.

Seth returned to Marc, hoping Becky was going to eat and rest. She wasn't acting tired, but he knew she had to be running on her reserves now, like the rest of them.

Shawn waited for Marc. "Where do you want us?"

Marc considered it, then shook his head. "Go to bed. Anyone who screws with us right now won't survive."

Shawn had to agree. They had four descendants and two high level Eagles here. That was enough to do serious damage. They knew how lethal they were now, thanks to Angela's plan. She'd given them all a new sense of worth and respect.

Jennifer took the room across from Becky, sure she wouldn't be alone in it for long. The trouble with Safe Haven had been chaos over the birds and bugs, but Samantha and Cynthia had things under control now and she had a worried mobster flying toward her in the dusk.

Jennifer sent out a strong call, making sure Kyle knew where to find her, but even as the blast rang out, she heard a dirt bike pull up out front. He'd tracked her down without any help.

Jennifer heard him greet Shawn, who had chosen to crash on the couch by the glass windows so he would be a surprise to anyone who broke in.

Kyle stayed there for a few minutes, checking in with Marc. He saw Angela was already asleep on the master bed with her shoes and coat still on, then he slowly made his way down the hall. Now that it

was over, Kyle was dreading the talks and choices that had to be made. He tapped on the open door softly. “Hi.”

Jennifer motioned him in. “Can you help me with this zipper?” She tossed him the stuck kit. “I have a clean change of clothes in there and it would be nice to be able to wear them.”

As men often do, Kyle flipped the zipper around and made it look easy. He handed the kit back with a grin at her glower. “What?”

Jennifer rolled her eyes, unable to keep from smiling. They’d not only survived, but won! She hadn’t been sure when Angela had first rolled out the grand plan.

Kyle slowly shut the door, waiting to be told she wanted the room to herself, but Jennifer only took her clothes into the bathroom, using her penlight.

Kyle dug out clean duds as well, and then searched the room, coming up with a small bowl of snacks that were still good. He assumed the chips and crackers would be as stale as everything else was these days, but food was food when you were hungry.

From across the hall, small moans came, making it through two closed doors.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

Jennifer came from the bathroom in time to hear them as well and see Kyle’s reaction. She snickered.

“Again!” Becky’s plea rang through the hall.

“Sounds like they’re having fun.” Jennifer was unable to block the images she was getting.

Kyle watched her, able to tell when the thought he'd been hoping for finally crossed her mind. It took all of his will power not to speak up or rush over to her.

Jennifer listened to Becky's pleasure, feeling her body respond and mind flip dark images. Instead of avoiding the new feelings, Jennifer faced her fears. "You can make me feel like that? Without hurting me?"

Kyle refused to move a muscle or even breathe too loudly. "Yes."

Jennifer blushed at the deep tone of his voice. "How does that work? The second you touch me, I'll get the flashes."

"I've thought about that, about you saying even the good will remind you of him." Kyle began his plan as if he were walking on glass with bare feet. "What if you keep your eyes open?"

Jennifer hadn't thought of that. "You mean...watch what you're doing?"

Kyle nodded, almost unable to keep from shifting. He managed with a small grimace.

Jennifer went to the window, mind working on it.

Kyle was able to readjust and then force that side of him down. They were only talking.

"You promised," Jennifer reminded him without turning around. "Don't you back out either."

Kyle sighed heavily, head resting against the wall. "What do you want from me, Jenny?"

“I want to feel like that and not be scared anymore. I want to be able to enjoy that part of my life.”

Kyle stopped his first thought from coming though his lips. *So do I.* “I’ll help you however you want me to.”

Jennifer looked at him. Kyle could see the fear warring with the courage.

“Will you...but only me. I’m not ready for more.”

Kyle swallowed, suddenly unable to think. “You want me to... And then I’ll go away so you can sleep?”

“You can too. You know, but not sex. With me.”

Kyle was confused; the lack of blood in his brain was a serious disadvantage. “Can you say that again?”

It was so cute that Jennifer was disarmed into giggling at his lost expression. “Wow.”

Kyle chuckled along with her and was able to run it through again to understand what she wanted this time.

Jennifer waited tensely for his answer. “You do think about touching me a lot.”

Kyle twitched. He’d thought he was doing a good job at controlling those thoughts while he was around her.

“You have been.” Jennifer moved toward the empty side of the large bed. “I, ah, woke up a couple times.”

Kyle realized she'd heard him taking himself in hand when he was sure she was sleeping. His face flushed dark red.

Jennifer wasn't worried about anger, though she didn't know for sure what his reaction would be. She'd been worried the first couple times she'd woken to discover him curled away from her, rocking and breathing hard, but it had slowly drawn her until she'd begun to scan his thoughts, searching for violence. All she'd seen was a man who longed to touch and taste. It was part of the reason she had the courage to do this now.

"Sorry, Jenny," he whispered as she climbed into the bed and began getting comfortable under the heavy quilts. "I'll try harder."

Jennifer rolled onto her side, facing him. She saw his eyes flick to her gaping top and then find her face. He was ready. Was she? She rolled onto her back and placed her arms above her head, face going pale. "Go on."

Kyle frowned. *Must be the position Cesar required. I hate that man!*

"We're never going to do this if you think that way," Jennifer's willingness was sinking a bit.

Kyle went to the next step of the plan he'd made for this moment. "That's not how it works with me. I like the woman to get things rolling. It helps me to know for sure she wants me. I don't do pity moments."

Jennifer flushed. *Can I do that?* The thought of leaning over Kyle, kissing him, touching him,

brought fear, but also interest. She chose to try being brave again. She quickly rose up and sealed their lips before he could react.

Kyle hadn't been given time to brace. He groaned in need, hands coming up to twist in her curls. Kyle's kiss was all man with no holding back. He tasted every inch of the mouth he'd been lusting for. He kissed her urgently, demanding a response, and felt her shiver. He slid his hand along her neck, deepening the kiss to feel her breath catch. He extended the moment by sliding his free hand down her arm to twine their hands together.

Kyle drew back and ever so slowly put his hands on her hips. He lifted her on top of him, aware of how she'd frozen. He cradled her close. "Move around on me, Jen, see if you like that." He bucked gently under her, rubbing their bodies together.

A moan flew out of her lips that sent Kyle's ego to the roof. "Again?"

Jennifer nodded, breathing increasing. She closed her eyes as a sharp, sweet bolt of pleasure shot through her at the contact.

Kyle thrust again and then kept repeating the movement, breaking into a sweat. "This way, we both cum," he gasped out, hand in her hair, eyes on the front of her shirt where he could see her bra and the tops of the beautiful breasts he'd been dreaming of.

Jennifer was lost. She thrust against him, loving the way his eyes continued to get darker. Every time she responded, he grew hotter.

Jennifer smiled, trying to let him know he wasn't scaring her.

“Ready for a little more?”

She nodded.

Kyle rolled them over with a fast movement that sent tension into the chilly room. Kyle didn't give things time to cool down. He slid between those long legs, picturing her without the shorts as he rubbed against her heat. “How's that?”

Jennifer knew she needed to be scared now, but like before, her body took control and she arched in response, aware of his big arms on either side of her shoulders. It was a flash of the past.

Kyle seemed to know that. He leaned down and kissed her, softly.

Jennifer's lids flew open, eyes locking with his. *Cesar never kissed me!*

Kyle used his mouth to shower her with affection, moving from the corner of her lips, to her jawline and then her neck. His hips kept a steady rhythm.

The sight of Kyle's face flushing with need and control was an erotic addition that distracted her from her ghosts. Jennifer lifted her hand and placed it on his cheek, connecting them. For an instant, she was terrified of the images there. Again, Kyle knew and placed a gentle kiss on her palm.

“Touch me if you want,” he groaned, increasing the pace a bit as sweat rolled down his spine.

Jennifer let her hand go where it wanted...straight to his hair.

Kyle gasped at the sharp, sweet sensation. His hips thrust harder. He felt Jennifer suck in a breath, surprised that harder could be good. Kyle knew he was near his limit and reluctantly stopped, sliding onto his side.

“What are you doing?” Jennifer was breathing hard. “We’re not done, right?”

Kyle laughed. “Just need a man minute.”

Jennifer listened to him talk himself down, not getting all the words, but the general tone. *That’s the difference. Cesar could never keep from hurting me.*

Kyle blew out a deep breath. “Okay, we’re good. What’s next?”

Jennifer flushed, but didn’t hesitate. “More kissing?”

Kyle snickered, rising up on one arm to deliver what she’d asked for. It allowed a free hand, but Kyle kept it on the bed next to her. He tasted her again, deep and sensual, and curled his fingers into the blanket to keep from touching.

“You can.”

Jennifer jumped when his big hand settled onto her knee. His breath against her neck gave her chills.

“I won’t hurt you. Try to relax.” Kyle slid a hand up her tense thigh, groaning at the feel of her. He cupped that alluring heat with his palm.

Jennifer felt him push inward and then her entire body arched upward at the delicious contact. “Mmm!”

Kyle swiveled his palm, being sure to mash that nub on each rotation as he leaned down to kiss her again, loving the wiggling and panting. No other woman would ever be this hot for him.

Jennifer felt his lips on her neck, then the top of her shirt. She arched again as he kept going and settled over a taut nipple through her shirt.

Kyle moaned, rocking against her hip.

Jennifer gasped as he tightened his lips on her nipple. The noise sent Kyle to the edge, but he didn't take a moment to cool down this time. He rocked faster, swiveled a little harder, and let his tongue slide inside her shirt. Warm milk sprayed his tongue. Kyle growled, suckling in a sexual haze of need.

“Ohhh...Mm. Kyle!” Jennifer went over the edge with his hot tongue swirling around her soaked breast. She was vaguely aware of him jerking furiously against her, grunting and moaning.

Their sounds mingled into a short chorus of pleasure that snapped Kyle awake to hear Becky and Seth still at it across the hall. He'd fallen asleep to that noise.

He glanced over to find Jennifer sleeping next to him and realized he'd been dreaming. Kyle winced at the blue balls and carefully rolled over, putting his back to her for privacy, but also to avoid the temptation of touching her.

Jennifer listened to Kyle's muffled sounds and movements, scanning his thoughts. They'd had most of that conversation before going to sleep.

The dream kept her cheeks red and her mind protesting, but her body lit up. She was forced to admit that she would be willing to act out that fantasy with him. If it only went even half as well as his dream, it would be a safe start to their physical relationship.

So you've chosen to stay? the voice inside asked curiously.

Jennifer listened to Kyle making sure he wasn't a danger to her and felt her heart fill with more caring than she'd ever planned on. Kyle was supposed to be a means to an end, but he'd turned out to be so much more. *Yes, for now, I'll stay.*

Next to her, Kyle groaned lowly, mind filled with soft kisses and sweet rocking. It would have terrified her before, but now, she could do that with him and probably not even flinch.

Jennifer wondered if that new coldness inside was from the killing she'd done. Not only had she fought in the war, she'd delighted in each moment, savored it.

I'm as damned as Angela said I would be. Before she'd left on her run, Jennifer hadn't been bothered by the thought of what she was about to do. During the battles and while waiting for the next one, she'd controlled those thoughts with exhaustion and sleep. Now that was over. The crash had come and it was heavy. *I did what I had to.*

That voice in her mind was relentless. *You enjoyed it. You want more. It wasn't justified.*

Jennifer shoved those thoughts from her mind and rolled over, forcing contact between her and the steadily grunting Kyle instead of facing those horrible accusations.

Kyle froze for a moment, then assumed she was just shifting in her sleep. His movements gradually resumed until he was rocking the bed.

Jennifer let it put her to sleep.

6

On the couch alone, Shawn groaned in annoyance and rolled over to stare at the material instead of the empty fireplace and the mud-tracks on the floor. Daryl would have gone in there and broken things up with his fists, but Shawn could hear that Becky wasn't being abused. "Whole damn place can."

Shawn wondered if Marc and Angela might be expecting him to handle Seth, then shrugged. If he heard her yell, he'd go in.

Becky's loud squeal and giggle echoed.

Shawn sighed, putting the pillow over his head. "Maybe I'll sleep next year."

In the rear bedroom, Becky shifted on top of Seth's sweaty chest and got comfortable.

"It scared me, hearing that you didn't expect to survive."

Becky wasn't sure what he meant until he repeated her words.

“I won’t be here then. Not my problem.”

“That was the last of my innocence dying, Seth.” Becky hugged him tighter. “That girl is gone.” Becky drifted to sleep, sore and satisfied.

Seth didn’t. Her words had brought up worrisome images that refused to leave him alone. *She isn’t still dangerous to herself...is she?*

Chapter Twenty-Eight BK5

The Flock

1

“Come, my children.” Everett held the end of the rope. “Come on down. We have the Lord’s work to do.”

The group of stoners went down the knotted rope in silence other than the occasional grunt of effort, but each of them wanted to protest. Monsters lived below ground. Everyone knew that.

“What work are we doing down here?” Simon was bringing up the rear.

Everett lit a torch and motioned the others to do the same. “We are going to make sure those government men can’t bother the Chosen People anymore. You saw what shape they were in when they came from the hole. We have to help them.”

“Safe Haven helps those who help themselves,” the group chanted.

Everett was satisfied that his people understood. “Come, pick up a weapon when you find one, but never forget that the stones under our shoes are the givers and takers of life.”

“Respect the stone,” the group responded obediently. “Love the stone.”

As they moved into the darkness with their torches, all of this group occasionally bent down and grabbed a pretty rock that caught their eye. Within a short time, their pockets were bulging.

“Did you hear that?”

Adrian’s head barely came up. “More of my lost ones. Don’t shoot.”

Kenn still drew his gun while they waited. Light flashed, gradually growing brighter as it came closer. Kenn didn’t like the feeling he was getting even though Adrian was doing a little better after a few hours of rest and a hot meal. Kenn hadn’t told him the food had been a dog or that the bed he was on had mold on the other side of the cardboard. Adrian already knew those things. This wasn’t the first time the blond had been abandoned for his sins. Kenn had confirmed that while they walked. Adrian hadn’t held anything back. Kenn now knew more about Adrian’s mental state than he wanted to.

“Sorry.” Adrian sighed. “It wasn’t our plan to make that call.”

Kenn understood the revelations that had come from the Maker’s Call had caused Marc’s snap too, but it wouldn’t have mattered. At some point, he would have done it anyway.

“I agree.” Adrian struggled to sit up as the lights neared them and the low grumble of worried voices reached their ears. “I’ll try not to do this again.”

Kenn didn’t laugh. He and Tonya would go off with Adrian and restart Safe Haven. Angela and

Marc would control their island, and he and Adrian would find somewhere else to go. *Or maybe stay here.*

“I’m going back to Safe Haven!” Adrian was angered that Kenn still didn’t understand it was never okay to walk. “They need me and she knows that.”

“But Marc hates you, and you’re...”

“Still the leader of Safe Haven refugee camp!” Adrian was now putting on a show for their new audience. He would play this role to the bitter end. “Do not underestimate me!”

Kenn shrugged. “I go where you go. That hasn’t changed.” Inside, Kenn was concerned for Adrian and also glad of the choice. Leaving that camp hadn’t been in his plans yet either.

“It’s not in mine at all. Looks like we drew trouble. You want to shoot them or use knives?”

“You could use your gifts.”

Adrian stared, surprised..

Kenn shrugged. “You’re right. You’re the leader of Safe Haven. Why should you hide who you are? There’s no reason for it now.”

That was absolutely true, Adrian realized. If Angela let him live, he could be himself now.

“We want to know who you two are and what you’re doing down here. Right now!” Everett stepped forward to stop the men from their planning and bickering. “The leader of Safe Haven is...”

“Adrian Mitchel.” Kenn flashed a grim smile. “You can be our friend or our enemy, but make the choice quickly.”

Everett broke into a gaff of laughter and coughing. He had to be slapped on the back so he could continue.

“We hit the jackpot, boys!”

The entire group was smiling.

Kenn tensed to fight until he realized they were dropping to their knees. “What the...”

Adrian stood up and raised his hands, thanking fate for sending him what he needed, even though he hadn’t begged for it like he should have needed to. “Safe Haven has to be protected. You’ve been doing that. I know your actions, your reasons and ripples. Come sit with me. We’ll talk of things.”

Everett took the place across from Adrian with the feeling that big changes were coming.

Kenn listened to the odd, fanatical conversation, but only as much as he had to. This was the type of people Adrian would usually have had Kyle take care of after he culled the few innocent ones from among them. Kenn assumed they would now use these grimy people for protection and then handle them later.

Adrian disabused him of that notion quickly. “You’ve been watching the camp long enough to know they won’t take you. That’s why you won’t join.”

Everett wasn't pleased to have his secret out, but he didn't lie or offer excuses. "I'm keeping my people alive."

Adrian waved at the area around him. "You don't belong in her camp, but there is a place for you."

Everett frowned. "The one we have now."

"Yes. There will always be a need for your kind. Evil will follow Safe Haven. There must be more of us than them, but only the worthy can truly enter."

Kenn didn't think any of these people would be found worthy. Their faces were different, far beyond the normalcy that a camp setup would require, even one as forgiving as Safe Haven. Kenn accepted that Adrian was already up to no good, and meddling with things he shouldn't be. The Marine stood up, heading for the darkness.

"Kenn."

Kenn stopped, but didn't turn. "Yes?"

"I forgive you."

Kenn's rage spewed forth at that. "Me?! You forgive me? How dare you!"

Adrian didn't reply.

Kenn stomped off, grumbling, kicking objects from his path. He was quickly out of sight and then hearing.

Adrian covered the pain with conversation. Letting go of his bond to Kenn was the second hardest thing he'd had to do for this run, but Angela had been right. Kenn had the chance to be a new

person now. That would only happen if he could view people for who they were, including his idol.

Adrian leaned against the damp tunnel wall, dying inside. The plan was a success. Everything Angela had set up had fallen their way. She'd adjusted on the fly with Donner and managed to use it to her advantage. *Other than a few dozen precious fighters, the only thing she sacrificed, was me.*

2

“What is that?”

Jeff was grumbling like he'd been doing since they left camp. Kevin's question took a minute to sink in.

“What is what?”

“Over there.”

Jeff looked toward the west and saw a nasty sky about to shit all over them. “Damn. Pick a spot.”

Kevin didn't like it that they were already being stopped a few hours into their trip north. He pointed at a crumbling office building. “It's either there or the hospital.”

The area was separated because of being medical. Jeff steered them toward the hospital, making Kevin frown again. “Really?”

“Yeah, we're gonna need things for this trip. Might as well start scavenging now.”

Kevin couldn't argue with that. He began checking his weapon like he always did before a run.

Jeff caught it and felt that voice inside complain, but he didn't allow it to trigger his grief. He would have a different life now. "We'll go in the front doors. If anyone's in there, we'll talk first."

"Sounds good." Kevin had no problem with Jeff being the lead between the two of them. Jeff's attitude was laid back and fun loving, not snotty. *Or at least it had been.* Losing Crista would change him, as death was supposed to.

Jeff pulled them straight up to the doors and checked his own weapon. "Ready?"

"Sure," Kevin lied. He suddenly had an awful feeling about this place.

Jeff caught that thought too. He passed it off as rookie nerves, forgetting Kevin hadn't displayed those even when he'd first joined the Eagles. It was why he'd been chosen as Angela's right hand over so many others. "Let's go." Jeff hurried out and to the main doors, holding them open for Kevin to rush inside with his headlamp on.

The hospital was empty. It took them an hour to walk the main floors, carefully pushing open squeaking, dusty doors to sometimes reveal a body. There were no prints in the dust and no evidence that anyone had come through. The supplies they needed were here, along with enough to outfit Safe Haven for months.

The two men paused on the first floor after clearing the hospital, enjoying a drink and a meal. Neither of them said it, but both men knew they'd

call this in. Safe Haven had wounded members and this was a goldmine, just three hours away.

“Look.”

Jeff turned to see rain beating on the front doors. He frowned as he realized he couldn't hear it. He narrowed in on the dark flakes. “Ashes. Something blew.”

Kevin didn't understand.

Jeff spent their break explaining about the ash from a volcano and the tiny bits of glass that were deadly when inhaled.

“How do you know this stuff?” Kevin watched the flakes cover their truck. That would be a good thing if anyone came by.

“I loved the history channel, and any other channel that gave me information on the world's mysteries. Used to drive the wife nuts. She liked Survivor.”

Kevin chuckled. “That's ironic.”

“I know, right?” Jeff was trying to feel normal around the gaping hole in his heart. He'd now lost two women who meant the world to him. Knowing for sure that you were meant to be alone was a heavy burden.

Kevin slapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry, man.”

Jeff nodded, glad of the friend. “Me too. For you, I mean.”

Kevin shrugged, voice twisted. “Not so sure I didn't get the better end of that deal. Those kids are

rough now. What will the toddlers be like? I'm not a fan of boogers and Barney."

Jeff laughed, not expecting the picture, and felt some of his loneliness ease. This is what he needed. In time, he might want to be a part of a group again, but for now, the two of them would work fine.

"I'll call in the morning," Kevin smothered the small part of him that hoped Cynthia would be there to hear it and feel shame. "They can't come through this anyway."

"Okay. You done?"

Kevin was. They cleaned up their mess automatically, following what they'd learned from Adrian. Kevin noticed it this time and met Jeff's eye. "I know I should hate him, but I don't. I still miss the way it was."

"Same here on the way it was." Jeff grunted. "But I'm on Team Marc."

Kevin snickered. "Nice. That was a great story, wasn't it?"

The two males fell into a discussion of fictional characters as they set up a minicamp in the lounge where they could reach the truck in a few steps and still see anything coming toward them. As for the lights they used and the noises they made, neither of them worried about drawing attention. In fact, it might be that Jeff had put them in the open intentionally, hoping for something to take his grief out on. Instead, shiny vampires filled their dreams with the first true peace either of them had felt since Adrian had gone into Little Rock for his son.

“Angie?”

She knew that tone. *Brace for it.* “Yes?”

“Did you know all of this would happen?”

Angela was in the middle of rubbing lotion over her cracked hands. She’d been refusing to think about anything.

She finished rubbing the lotion in before she answered, needing time to find the right wording. It wasn’t a simple yes or no.

Marc was in the chair, looking much like he had back in Nebraska. He pushed his boots off, waiting patiently for her to decide if telling him the truth was a bad idea. Marc was glad when she chose to have nothing else between them.

“Almost all of it. Until I made contact with Donner the first time, I didn’t know about his obsession.”

“And when you realized what he wanted you to do, you chose to take advantage of it?”

This was the part she hadn’t wanted to face yet. “Yes. It allowed me to get to the man in charge of the bunker without having to set foot in that place. It was the only scenario that still gave me and my children our freedom.”

“And in exchange, what did you do?”

“I bonded myself to another man, one you failed to kill, by the way. Don’t think I didn’t notice that.”

Marc was surprised at how fast she'd turned the tables on him. He thought before he spoke. Did he want to do the same and give true honesty? "I would have done the same even if Kendle hadn't been there."

Angela was glad he'd chosen to be honest, as well. It meant everything to her. "I know. I made sure she would be."

"Why do you keep stopping him from dying? I have to know!"

"I love him, Marc. I'm sorry. I won't ever kill him. He'll be banished from the camp, though he'll be around and you'll have to live with that."

"And why should I?" He might not be able to kill the man now, but chances would come in the future when there weren't any healers nearby.

"Because nothing changed."

Marc's mouth opened... "What?"

"Name something that changed between us because of what I did."

Marc took a quick second to think, sure there was a huge list.

Angela smiled as the silence dragged out. She'd estimated it would take him two full minutes. She lit a smoke, deciding she would stop soon. Stale cigarettes tasted like ass.

"You never intended to live up to it!"

"Give that man a cigar." Angela was impressed with the ten-second answer. *He's so smart!* "This is war. Just because I made a deal, that didn't mean I had to honor it."

“But he thought...thinks?”

Her happiness faded. “Adrian thought it would change everything. He didn’t realize I’d gone by corrupt and sank head first into cruel.”

“You sacrificed him?” Marc was trying to figure out the small parts he didn’t know.

“And then some.” Angela flipped her ash into a pot with the dead plant. “He planned to die in Little Rock; then he hoped to turn himself in to avoid them coming for me. Once it was too late for that, he had no choice but to trust that my plan would save us all.”

“It did.”

“Yes. And at a cost.”

“Because he’ll be banished?”

Angela shrugged, not sure if that was part of it. “I’m still working through some of it too, Marc. I didn’t foresee having to actually make the call. The bunker contacted Donner the first time while I was under the drugs and it took a bit to wear off.” She stared at him in regret. “I didn’t plan to make that bond with him. I hope you can believe that.”

Marc wouldn’t have from nearly anyone else, but he honestly had no reason to feel that way about her. She’d remained strong time after time when tempted by Adrian.

“And I will at any point in the future when he slips close enough to try. The bond isn’t what you might think.” She stood, going to him on shaky legs that felt foreign. “It means we can’t refuse to help the other person if they call for us. That’s it. No love

involved. Two matched male alphas can do it in friendship.”

Marc was suddenly relieved, dazed, and tired. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes as she slid by him to go into the bathroom. Knowing that let the hard cover over his heart fade. Marc realized he’d once again been braced for her to leave him for Adrian. *Why am I so insecure? Did I drive her away with that in each lifetime?* It was something he would spend endless hours considering over the next months, he was sure.

Angela leaned on the dusty sink, not glancing in the mirror. She had noticed Marc’s eyes on her hair. She hoped it wasn’t as bad as she expected it to be. Holding her breath, she looked up.

It was worse.

Angela ran a hand over the snowy, brittle strands. The ash had been starting as they came in. Marc had probably assumed that was the discoloration. If he’d known it was her hair, he would have been panicking by now. *What should I do?*

“Hey, Angie?”

“Uh, yeah?” She gently pushed the door to block his view.

“I know what to do now.”

“For what?” she asked, stalling. She knew by the tone he’d figured it out.

“To fill you up.”

His chuckle said he knew she was blushing. Angela shook her head. “We’re too tired right—”

“I’m *never* too tired.”

She could hear him moving around and groaned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes, actually, I am. Come get some sleep. We can cover that in the morning.”

Angela was both relieved and disappointed. She stood in the doorway, frowning.

Marc laughed. “Come on, baby-cakes. I want to hold you.”

Angela hurried. That sounded perfect.

4

“They’re here.”

“Good.” Samantha didn’t rush to meet them, sure both of her men would come to her as soon as they could. Again, they’d only been apart for a few days, but it had felt like much longer.

Daryl finished his update. “The ash is still falling.”

Samantha didn’t expect it to stop for a while. If Yellowstone had blown, the lightest prediction for this far away had still been an inch of the volcanic ash. The heaviest had put it at nearly three inches and Samantha was in the middle of finding a better location for them to shelter for the winter. She had maps around her, but she was stuck with mountain areas for her decision, thanks to the camp voting for these stone cliffs.

Samantha heard people go by her room. She put the pencil and notepad down, too distracted to

concentrate on it. She'd been planning for their return. Now that the moment was here, she was nervous.

Samantha listened to the familiar steps of two tired, victorious Eagles moving her way and stood up, taking a calming breath. "Hey!"

Jeremy came in first.

Samantha lingered in the hug and kiss, body lighting up.

Jeremy looked around as she stepped back. He saw two beds and went to the one that was untouched.

Neil swept Samantha into his arms when he entered, lifting her to get a giggle and to grope her ass as she held onto him. He then went to the bed where she'd been sitting.

Samantha cleared her throat; both men looked up.

"I need a shower. Go with me?" She looked back and forth hopefully, doubting they would take the hint so easily.

Jeremy paused in removing his jacket. "Uh, which one?"

"Do I have to pick just one?"

Neither man spoke as they exchanged glances.

Samantha bent down to pick up the bag she had ready. The front of her shirt gaped open, revealing no bra and all of her skin. "I booked the shower and there's a discrete guard on it. That's where I'll be."

She left the room quickly, not sure if either of them would show. It was something she'd always

wanted to try and there was only one way to find out if they were willing. She had asked.

Neil and Jeremy were staring at each other.

Jeremy hadn't moved, jacket half off. "Did you see this coming?"

Neil shook his head. "No. Guess we should have?"

"Yeah, probably."

Neil sat on the bed to remove his boots, trying to figure out what would happen if they said yes.

Jeremy hung his jacket up next to Samantha's, wondering what would happen if they said no.

After a minute of quiet, Neil stood up. "Does the idea gross you out?"

"No." Jeremy shrugged. "I assume we only touch her."

"Right. And it's not like we'll be staring at each other, right?"

"Right."

Samantha had lingered outside the door, needing to know how against it they were. It was something of a surprise to hear them working it out. Did that mean they were giving in to please her or that they liked the idea of trying something new? The next words cleared that up for her.

"She won't be mad, you know. We can say we'd rather not."

"I know." Jeremy shrugged. "But I hate to tell her no unless it's something I honestly can't give her."

"So you can do this?"

“Yes. You?”

“Yes.”

“Are we?”

“Do you want to?”

Jeremy shrugged, embarrassed. “I’ve thought about it once or twice.”

Neil grinned. “Me too.”

Sam had heard enough. She headed for the shower she’d reserved in case they agreed. Jeremy thought he was an unneeded third wheel. Neil used to wonder if she just wanted him for his by-the-book nature. She’d already proven Neil wrong. Now it was Jeremy’s turn. There were just some things two people couldn’t do.

5

“Where do you want us?”

Samantha turned around, already in the center stall. She grinned. “One in front, one in rear.”

Her words were pornographic, sending blood rushing downward for both men.

Aware that they would need encouragement for a situation like this, Samantha rotated and began rubbing herself while they watched. She heard the sound of clothes being removed after that and relaxed, knowing she’d won. This would be the most erotic experience of her life. She wanted it now, before her body swelled up with the twins and long before she couldn’t sleep this off for a full day. She expected to be sore.

Neil was naked first. He took the rear of the stall, gently turning Samantha when she would have put her arms around his neck. He'd dreamed about having her like this for a while now, though Jeremy hadn't been in those hot images.

Samantha put her arms around Jeremy's neck instead.

He kissed her hard, putting his final inhibitions aside. Every time he crossed a line, he felt more alive than ever. He suddenly couldn't wait to share this with her. "I love you, Sam."

She smiled happily. He didn't usually say it. "I adore you too." She leaned into his embrace. "I always will."

Jeremy kept his hands in front of her, but that was the only rule he gave himself—to stay on his side.

Behind them, Neil was stroking and already close to the edge. He planned to go ahead and then slowly join in for a second round. He'd never done anything like this before. He wanted to enjoy it.

Neil watched Samantha arch as Jeremy did something to her that he couldn't see. The trooper surprised them all. "Turn a little, so I can see?"

Samantha shifted eagerly.

Jeremy's hands were both busy, thumbs stroking hard nipples. Neil felt his need reach the peak. He grunted as he came, aiming for her hip.

"Damn." Jeremy moaned. "Too hot, Neil." He grabbed his own jerking flesh and aimed for her thigh.

Sam understood. She had a hand between her legs, leaning on Neil as she exploded. “Too soon!”

The three of them broke into chuckles and gasping laughter, relieving the normal tension that could have come.

Jeremy used the sprayer to clean her hip and leg, while Neil soaped up a washcloth and then got busy cleaning her cheeks. None of them mentioned leaving yet. They weren't finished.

Chapter Twenty-Nine BK5
Riding The Waves

1

“**A**re you about done? We want to get this over with.”

Zack tossed the shovel out of the grave and climbed onto solid ground. He didn't answer the insensitive rookie. If he opened his mouth, violence would emerge.

Zack left the others to prep the site, too tired to help with the next mass grave. Putting ten to a site, they had about half the needed holes dug, and the rest of the night's work would be the same—opening the earth to swallow the corpses of their loved ones.

Zack went to the huge tent they were using for storage, moving through small clusters of grieving people and medical students. He joined the doctor, who was in a partitioned area getting each body ready. They would all be cleaned and wrapped before being laid to rest.

“You don't look good.” The doctor carefully affixed the last piece of gauze around Crista's forever-pale face. “Guess none of us do.” The doctor had lost much of his bad attitude while treating the wounded. He was beyond arguing.

“I’ll carry her out.” Zack had been on two fake dates with Crista when she was trying to gain Jeff’s attention. He hadn’t thought of her in that way until this week, this run, and then it had hit him that he cared for her. Now she was gone.

“Are you okay?”

Zack shook his head. “No. When will you be ready?”

The doctor sighed. “She can go now if you like, or I’ll keep her here until morning. Your choice.”

Zack drew in a breath and stepped forward to lift the cold, stiff body into his arms. Crista had once told him she’d feared being left on the battlefield to rot. Zack was ensuring what she had feared wouldn’t happen. She was going in the ground that he’d just lovingly turned for her.

The Eagles nearby stared in pain for a moment, then rushed to hold doors and clear a path. They’d expected Jeff to be carrying her out, but no one asked if they should wait. Everyone wanted this awful part finished. The horrors they’d suffered rang in their memories as Zack stiffly walked by them. The loss of any fighter was hard, but this was a woman they’d all known and admired. Crista hadn’t had an enemy in their camp.

Zack took her straight to the torch-lit gravesite, cursing the war, Angela, and even the fact that they didn’t have real coffins to use. Crista deserved better. All of their fallen heroes did.

Zack felt Angela’s swift glance run over her not quite peaceful camp from a great distance and

turned his head, unwilling to acknowledge her in any way. He wasn't sure he could forgive this, no matter what the reasons had been.

2

“Will you tell me?”

Angela was tempted to act as if she was still asleep. Marc would let her wait until tomorrow on the conversation if she really wanted it. She sighed. “I’ve changed the world. At least, our corner of it.”

Marc wasn't sure how she meant that and was glad when she clarified.

“I made contact with the last big bunker. And then I destroyed it.” Angela wanted to say more, but it didn't feel like she should. Marc wouldn't understand why the other part of it had been so important. There was no way that he could.

“The bunker's gone?” He was stunned that she'd been able to do it from such a distance.

“Yes. They may have other holes to crawl around in, but they've been hurt badly enough that it will take half a decade for them to recover and fully retake topside.” *And even then, it will be under different rules.*

“You're sure?”

“Yes. We're free of them.”

Marc shifted so he could see her face. “Then why are you so sad?”

Angela sighed. “I'd rather not cover that right now, okay?”

Marc knew she needed a break from the stress. He flashed a sexy grin. “Wanna get naked?”

Angela groaned, laughing.

Marc felt the witch shove into his mind.

Have you learned nothing?!

“I need to hit the bathroom,” Marc kissed the top of Angela’s head. “I’ll see if Shawn has any chocolate left while I’m at it.”

“Yeah!” Angela played along, perfectly aware of what was happening. It was all expected.

3

What? Marc hated the witch. He blamed her for bringing Adrian into Angela’s heart. He stood on the rear patio, glaring.

Ah, yes. I’m the root of all evil.

Maybe.

The witch cackled briefly. *One day, Marcus Brady, you will remember how you longed to hear me when you pulled up to that rest stop.*

Marc paled, reading the warning for what it was. *Tell me.*

Only because I need you! Your rudeness is unforgivable! I’ve saved her life and the lives of your children. How dare you forget that!

Marc went quiet, but he felt every scratch. It stung badly that she was right. If not for the Adrian problem, Marc might not mind the witch.

I have needs. You won’t satisfy me, so I have to go elsewhere.

What about the garden? Did you encourage that for the same reason?

Yes. You were too busy working to love me!

Marc had no idea how to comfort a tearful witch and didn't think he should have to. None of this was his fault. He couldn't even remember that life!

Neither can she. It doesn't matter.

Marc found himself listening intently for the next words.

In her mind, she will lose the child, maybe leadership of the camp, and definitely Adrian's presence in her life. She has little to live for.

Marc hated it that he immediately understood. He wanted to keep to his plans of killing Adrian, plans that had become solid, step-by-step blueprints in his mind over the last 24-hours. He knew exactly how to do it.

Many feel that way. Including myself, but not her. She can't control her heart or the coming vote.

And she knows what I'll vote for.

"Yes, I always have."

Marc turned to see Angela standing near the rear door he'd come out. She was wrapped in his blanket, sexy and yet thinner, paler.

"I'm not as bad as she's making it out to be," Angela began to defend. Marc's happiness mattered more than the truth. "The witch is trying to save her own skin. She's the one lying this time." The demon faded back in anger as Angela leaned against a damp, ashy tree. "I'm tired."

Marc went to her and gently lifted her into his arms, loving the way they fit together so perfectly. “If you can only have one of the three. Which would it be?”

“The baby. I’ve done my duty by the camp and I can’t change the past. I wouldn’t.”

“What?”

“I’m corrupt,” she choked out. “I took innocent lives. Not the witch, but *me*. I can’t go back. What we saw confirms that.”

“What can we do? Tell me.” Marc knew his demand was impossible to refuse.

Angela’s eyes grew glassy. Her answer came slowly, chilling Marc as the sound of that dead voice always had.

“Nothing.”

Marc refused to accept that; he reached out to the witch. *Tell me.*

The witch came forward easily when Angela was so weak. *You have to accept me, as he did. Love me and that power will be great enough to heal any injury.*

How do I do that? We don’t even like each other!

The witch cackled softly. *I adore your devotion.*

I feel the same way, he admitted gruffly. *She wouldn’t have been able to survive all this without you.*

The witch gently stepped into Marc’s mind. This time, he allowed her caresses, her greedy whimpers of delight when he didn’t refuse. If all he

had to do was submit to save Angie and the baby, he could do that easily.

Never submit to me! the witch roared, lust bleeding over them both. *Take me!*

Marc did.

Afterward, the witch gazed at him, sated. *You have to make a choice.*

The demon had said he wouldn't like it and Marc hadn't, but only because there was so little he could do. Even Conner's gifts couldn't fix this while she was pregnant.

Why him and not me? Marc asked, aware of the irony.

Adrian's gifts can heal her because they are matched alphas—another reason to keep him alive. To be perfectly matched, neither can have an advantage. He sees her as an equal. You don't.

Marc watched the images of the couple making love without rancor, waiting for the witch to explain further. She'd worn him out.

Love heals all. Give them the time alone and never ask about it. No one has to know, not even you.

Marc understood the witch meant for him to give Angela the freedom to do what she wanted. Marc confessed his biggest fear. *I'll lose her to him. You saw them.*

I saw a mistake, one that both of you have overlooked in your outrage and shame. What was Eve's job in the garden?

Marc ran through the stunning, awful images.
Uh, making babies.

Was she told who to make them with?

Not that I saw, Marc said slowly.

Even the Maker preferred her willing. Don't you think he saw the romance brewing? He could have stepped in and banished Elliott or killed him, even. Why did the Maker allow their love to grow? To create a child?

Marc wasn't comfortable with the topic, but forced his brain to work through it. Whatever the witch was trying to make him understand was important. He knew that by the way she wasn't ravaging him again. She'd promised to every time he would allow it and right now, he was too tired to resist her subtle charms.

The witch flashed him a brutal image of Angela and Adrian, snaring his attention back to where she wanted it. *The true sin in the garden was Adam's reaction.*

How can that be?! The Maker promised him!

The Maker promised him a mate. Adam assumed it would be her, as she was the only female there. Perhaps it would have been from Eve's children with Elliot. Who was Adam to assume he knew the Maker's will? But more than that, they were given the freedom to make their own choices. We weren't cursed until Adam couldn't control his jealousy and committed murder.

Marc didn't want to believe that; the witch drove in her point ruthlessly. *Why would the Maker have a grand plan and then give us free will?*

Marc stopped in his mental protests to puzzle that one out and couldn't. *I don't know. Why?*

When you have that answer, you'll be able to understand. I have to let you figure that out on your own. She has insisted.

Marc realized Angela was controlling the conversation without them having to deal with the awkwardness and emotions. He was relieved and offended, though he wasn't sure why.

She fears your anger.

I'd never hurt her.

Every man has, the witch denied. She has made many choices based on that damage. Now, she feels she deserves it.

She hasn't done anything wrong.

No.

Marc's mind cleared of everything except for that. *She hasn't done anything wrong.* She didn't do it. Elliott seduced her, but if the witch was right, they were both blameless.

Yes.

So what did that mean? He had no right to be jealous if she chose to spend time with Adrian? Marc already knew that, but like with her and Kendle, it would kill him to endure it.

Don't ask, don't tell, the witch tried to inject a bit of levity. *Did you notice the peacefulness of the*

Garden? How the animals who are now bitter enemies, once coexisted?

I did.

It was the only time there has ever been peace on earth—when Eve and Elliott were caring for the garden and Adam was working for the future. As soon as Adam was told of their love, he broke and allowed the gates to slip.

The gates?

Between worlds. There are many, and the Maker loves them all, even those that exist solely because of our nightmares.

Marc's mind was spinning. Huh?

Aware that he was near overload for this talk, the witch finished it as gently as she possibly could. Elliot was Information. Adam was Labor. Eve was Love. Those are your destinies. Fighting them will only curse us again.

4

Adrian limped to the edge of the rise, staring down on the lodge with bitterness and longing. The stone throwers had gifted him with their energy without him asking for it. He was almost fully healed. Only the last wound Marc had delivered was lingering. Angela or Conner might be able to finish it, but Angela wasn't going to. If he wasn't sentenced to death at the trial, she would stay clear of him. Marc would see to that.

Kenn came up behind him and draped a thick blanket over his shoulders. Adrian hadn't expected the Marine to be waiting when he climbed from the hole, but he had been there with a truck and he hadn't been alone.

When Kendle pushed a cup of hot tea into Adrian's hand, Kenn approved and moved back to take up a sentry post. The stone people had erected tents and even found extras for them, but Kenn doubted Adrian would use his. He was sorting through everything that had happened, scheming on how to get back into Angela's good graces.

"I was never out of them." Adrian realized he didn't have to hide anything anymore. He also knew Kenn and Kendle were his when it came to loyalty. "It all worked out exactly as she meant for it to."

Kendle knelt down and peered through the ashy rain that was now falling. They were protected by the overhang, but it was still frigid.

Kenn assumed they would both remain here, staring at their obsessions. He slowly moved toward the new people, not able to relax with the stoners around. And if he couldn't, neither would any of Safe Haven's guards when Adrian rejoined camp. Kenn needed to get them ready. He also needed to be distracted from thoughts of Tonya.

Adrian was aware of Kendle's warmth as she let their bodies touch. Her scent drifted up in tormenting waves. She was still using the vanilla.

"Why?"

Kendle glanced up absently. “I want what she has.”

“Marc.”

Kendle shrugged, stare going back to the cabin. “Maybe the power too, and that’s wrong. Right?”

“Of course.” He shrugged. “It’s also human. Besides, she needs women like you. The power will come in time.”

“If I pick Team Marc?”

“Not for her. She’ll be relieved if you stay with me.”

Kendle frowned. “Do you want me to?”

“Only because I’m afraid of being alone,” Adrian answered without meanness. “I’ll care for you as much as I can. Maybe love would come for us in time.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’d be doing it because if you’re good enough for her, then you must be like him.”

“I know that!” Adrian ground out. “He did it intentionally, to hurt me.”

“Did what?”

“Made you fall in love. He could have given you to Quinn or Jax, or even Shawn, but he chose to torment me with another woman who dreams of him.”

“He did a good job.” Kendle had never felt so used. At least with Ethan, she’d known he was dangerous. She’d thought Marc was one of the good guys.

“He is, actually,” Adrian was forced to correct. There wouldn’t be any lying allowed in this relationship. “He always does his duty.”

Kendle recognized the tone. “He’ll demand your death!”

“Won’t need to.” Adrian snorted. “The camp will. Angela will try to stop them. Marc will get the final choice.”

“And we both know what he’ll pick, so why are you going back?”

“Why are you?”

“She might die in childbirth...or choke on a piece of candy.”

“You’re a bitch!”

“Well, yeah. Isn’t that part of why I’ll work so well as a substitute?”

“Yes. And I’d like to tell you now that when you stop shooting flames, we’re done. I need that fire to make this work.”

“That’s fine, since I have more heat than you can work off me in a lifetime. Here’s my caveat: I want to be a real Eagle, preferably XO on that *bitch’s* team. Can you get me there?”

Adrian slowly knelt down and took Kendle’s chin in his cold hand. He studied her openly—not her features, but her mind. It took a moment to see that she had earned whatever she was given.

“No need. She’ll reward all of her fighters.” He dropped his hand, aware of the tingle. They were compatible. “Ask for something you’ll need that she won’t give you.”

“Time alone with Marc.”

Adrian rocked back on his heels. “Yeah, that’s definitely one.”

“Can you?”

“If I promise him to leave her alone, he’ll sleep with you.”

Kendle sighed. “It wouldn’t be enough.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“You’ll try?”

“Of course.” Adrian shoved himself into the future. “As my woman, you’ll be well cared for.”

Kendle also took the window of opportunity, sure if she rejected him here, they would have a platonic relationship. He was reaching out. “Tell me a little about that, Mr. Mitchel. Marc seemed to think you can make me melt.”

Adrian moved behind her without responding orally. He didn’t touch her right away, trying instead to see if they had true sparks or if their longings would drive it all. That would determine how their physical moments would have to go. Did she like him at all?

“I find you...attractive.”

“Only passing fair?” he rumbled in bitter amusement. “I could dye my hair.”

Kendle snorted at that image. “I could get pregnant.”

Adrian’s breath caught. “...would you be willing to go that far?”

“Only if it got me Marc in the end.” Kendle sighed. “I don’t think I’d be a good mom right now.”

Adrian understood. He noted the drooped shoulders and carefully placed his hands on them. “How fast do you want to get over what was done to you?”

“What did *she* pick?”

Adrian didn’t ask how Kendle had known. The grapevine in Safe Haven would always keep people informed. “Fast, of course. She considers her options, scans the future, and then makes the choice.”

“Head-on, huh?” Kendle was becoming aware of Adrian’s warmth behind her and the urge to lean back. “Figures.”

Adrian waited as Kendle considered her options. When she scanned the future, she didn’t seem to have one. That made the choice easier. At least she wouldn’t be alone, and if Adrian could help her over the trauma of Ethan Kraft, it might be enough to hold her for a while. “What does fast mean?”

Adrian was encouraged that she’d asked the correct question. He stepped forward to provide the warm resting place she’d been thinking about.

“Mmm...”

Adrian stiffened. “Is that funny?”

Kendle turned around, brows drawn together. “What?”

Adrian realized she hadn't been mimicking Angela. Their pleasure sounded the same. "Damn, he's good. I hate him so much."

Kendle figured it out as she stared up at him. Would it be the same for her? Had Marc at least hooked her up before he'd forgotten about her?

Adrian felt the request and leaned forward to place a soft kiss to her forehead. "Give me a day and I'll prove that he did."

Kendle allowed him to tug her into his arms, where his body heat immediately swarmed over her. It was disappointing about the kiss, though. She'd agreed without knowing if he would be able to satisfy the itch she had.

Adrian growled as his male side leapt to the front. He tangled his hands in her short spikes and kissed her as if she was Angela.

When Adrian ended the embrace, Kendle didn't move. He could feel her ragged breath against his cheek. He wrapped his arms around her, heart thumping in his chest. "He picked it real well, didn't he?"

"Bastard!" Kendle buried her head against his chest. "God, I miss him."

Adrian sensed she wasn't referring to Marc and led her into his tent. They had a lot to discuss.

5

"Our vehicle won't start." Shawn came in from loading their gear. "Damn ash clogged it up."

Shawn took off his scarf, missing the ski mask he'd left in camp for some unknown reason. "I'm gonna go scout another set of wheels, once I make this." Shawn held up a bag of coffee grounds he'd found in the trunk of a rusting car down the block.

The lodge filled with cheers. Samantha's bean plant had been stripped and used, and was already a memory. Li Sing had been making the coffee with chicory.

Ten minutes later, the smell of boiling grounds had brought an eager morning chat between the seven people. Coffee had that effect, even if it was cowboy style.

Shawn grinned. "Should take us about three hours to get home, as long as we can find a road Angie didn't destroy."

Angela gave the expected smile and let her fighters blow off the steam they had left. She'd given Cynthia notes on doing the same for the camp. So far, she hadn't sensed any trouble there since the quake.

Jennifer took her mug to the big glass windows, sipping carefully. She hadn't cared for coffee before the war. It was another welcome change to discover that it now hit the spot perfectly. "Hot, dark, and bitter."

Kyle heard the comment and began rooting through the cabinets. "Come on. I know you're here."

The others stared in confusion as he tore through the last drawer to come up with a small

yellow box. “Yes!” Kyle took the box to Jennifer and held it out. “How about hot, dark, and sweet? Like you.”

Jennifer grinned, taking the sugar. “Silly.”

“That’s me.” Kyle took her place at the window while she doctored the mug.

“Anyone else?” Jennifer offered.

Becky got up. “Me.”

Everyone else passed.

Marc took the moment to scan Angela’s thoughts. The darkness hadn’t lifted. He was still worried despite bonding with the witch.

Bonding? His demon snorted. *I can’t walk and you call that gift bonding?*

Marc snickered, drawing Angela’s attention.

“Something amuses him.” She hoped he would leave it alone until they returned to Safe Haven.

Marc thought fast. “Cynthia and Samantha might be a bit miffed by us sitting here having a latte like it’s a commercial.”

Angela snickered with the rest of them at the wording. She allowed her lighter side to surface for a rare moment. “You’re too cute for a coffee commercial.”

“That is so true.” Becky didn’t like the speculative glances she was getting from Seth. “How about a swimming spot for the Olympics?”

Marc’s cheeks reddened. “I don’t think—”

“Why not the beautiful cowboy in all those cologne shots?” Jennifer loved Kyle’s mock growl

as much as Becky when Seth tickled her for her comment.

Marc's face was steadily getting darker. Angela shrugged. "I'd need an audition before I pick. Make sure our new ride will fit a casting couch."

All three couples broke into laughter as Marc dove at her, gently tickling.

It was a simple, sweet moment for the pairs, who didn't get many of those. Shawn tried not to begrudge them as he joined in the teasing. He left sooner than he'd planned though, and wasn't surprised when Dog met him outside the lodge.

Shawn opened the passenger door to let Dog into their ride. "I'm gonna pop it in neutral and let us roll. Maybe the bumps will clear it out a bit and then she'll fire up."

Dog leapt into the seat eagerly. His thoughts were still on the strangely attractive female he'd seen. For a brief moment, he thought again about tracking her down. Dog glanced at the door of the lodge, whining. He loved Marc... *But I'm not content anymore. It's almost time for me to go.*

6

The trip back was silent and somber for most of them. Shawn's idea had worked, saving time, but to reach Safe Haven's location, they had to drive through part of Angela's battlefield. It was gruesome. After days in the elements, the bodies were gory.

Kyle saw Jennifer shut her eyes and immediately understood, thanks to the witch. He slid a quick arm over and tugged her into his lap.

His fast reaction distracted Jennifer as she huddled there tensely, aware of half the passengers frowning at him.

You needed something else to think about. Kyle adjusted so she would be more comfortable. *Did it work?*

Jennifer snickered, nodding, and allowed him to settle her under an arm and over a knee, so that he could rock her. “I have a question for you.”

Jennifer didn’t sense anything bad coming and yawned, face still turned into his chest. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Do you think you’re ready to try the camper again?”

Now Jennifer was completely distracted.

The others approved the technique, especially Angela, who had sent her witch out to warn all of the males that her team would need to be cared for after it was over. Men were always better at adjusting than women were. She hoped their non-sense attitudes about war would help her girls understand that serving the greater good in these ways wasn’t an unpardonable sin.

Jennifer frowned. “Will you be there?”

“If you want me to be.” Kyle glanced down, suddenly glad to be doing this in front of witnesses. “We won. You’re safe now, and you certainly don’t need me protecting you anymore.”

All of those things are true, Jennifer realized happily. Other than the deaths of those she loved, life could restart for her now.

“Conner told me he healed you.” Kyle cleared his throat. “If you get cleared first by the doctor, I’ll even try to give us a son.”

“Are you bribing me?” Jennifer demanded, lanced with pain. She could still feel him in her arms!

“Yes.” Kyle admitted it shamelessly. “I’d rather wait on another baby and let you heal, but if that’s what you need to be happy, I’ll try my hardest to make it happen.”

Jennifer blushed at the eager tone, giggling. “Stop it.”

“Whatever you need, Jenny. I mean that.”

“I know you do. Yes.”

Kyle gaped. “Yes?”

She nodded, without meeting his eye. “I want a son. Give me my baby back, if you can.” She dissolved in sobs, emotions finally spewing.

Kyle gathered her into his arms, murmuring nonsensical endearments as he rocked her. Once the poison was out, she would feel better.

Jennifer’s anger rushed out through her sobs. “I meant it! Don’t you b-back out on me.”

Kyle laughed, cuddling her tighter. “Not on my life! I’d give you anything. You know that.”

Jennifer allowed the tears to flow; she eventually fell asleep that way, with drops still glistening on her dark lashes.

Chapter Thirty BK5
Homecoming

1

Angela had instructed Cynthia to take the camp to the carpet warehouse because of the size. It was a vast complex of rooms she had hoped might still be filled with items of use. Before they reached the monstrous building, they had to cross the railroad tracks. Before they could get to the tracks, they had to travel through dozens of small groups that were lined up around their people.

The Indians made up the farthest rings. Marc was glad to see that Grendin, Natoli, and Atolius had survived the battles. He would tell them about Red Stone, though they already knew. It was the proper way, so the Indian's body could be retrieved by his mourning people.

After the Indians, came a surprise to some of those in the truck. The remaining soldiers, now moving away from the road as Eagles rushed toward the convoy, appeared to have been disarmed and were under guard. Angela had vowed not to leave a single enemy alive. Less than one hundred had survived, and only because she hadn't been willing to kill any more of her own people just to have a perfect tally. It was intimidating.

As the small convoy rolled by, shouts of support and cheering began to echo. The wave of sound drew waiting people from their tents; the sides of the road quickly filled with Eagles, Indians, soldiers, and descendants.

Angela tried not to cry. *My people!*

They love you.

Marc stiffening next to her told Angela that he'd heard Adrian's message. She chose to ignore it, but she was surprised when Marc waved a hand at her to continue before falling into a discussion with Shawn on their remaining fuel.

I'll be there soon.

Angela ducked her head to give herself the illusion of privacy. *You should go north. Nothing good waits for you here.*

I'm coming in.

There were survivors in Canada. You heard his thoughts. You could start over.

Not without you.

She sighed again. *Then come home and face what you've done.*

Thank you.

Don't thank me! I traded your life for the sheep and then for Marc, and I'd do it all over again!

That's what I'm grateful for. Adrian relished the feel of her, even the part that now loathed him. *You've reacted exactly as I needed you to and the result is coming into view. Enjoy their love. You're worthy of it.*

Angela felt him shut the door between them and was relieved that he hadn't said more. She had begun to suspect that Adrian had manipulated her into what she'd done at the bunker, but she hadn't allowed herself to actually spend time thinking about it. Now, she added up the clues as they came to her, not enraged like he probably expected. How could she be, when the goal had been reached? Did it matter that she hadn't known her destiny until the grand plan was being drawn up? Did it matter that she wouldn't be here to control the new future she'd started? Only time would tell.

The convoy, now larger from an Eagle escort, rolled across the railroad tracks to find another group under guard. The Mexicans were waiting to speak to her about their leader. The sentries here were thicker than on the soldiers. Most of the Mexican army had gone south after fighting with Marc. Sebastian and his main men had shown up for round two; there were roughly fifty of them left. They glowered at the happy reception with hatred. *Their* leader hadn't made it back. They wanted to know why.

The new groups of descendants were also staying close to the Mexicans. Marc was sure that had kept Eagle guards alert. If the descendants thought the heavily-armed men were a problem, they probably were.

"Don't get out until I clear it," Marc tossed over his shoulder and then went back to his talk with Shawn. Fuel was important.

Angela hadn't planned on it. The rebellious thoughts of the Mexican's were already forcing another choice she didn't want to have to make.

"I can handle it." Jennifer was also monitoring thoughts and didn't like what she was finding.

"No." Angela waved it off. "It's covered."

"You're the boss. Do you need me right now?"

"Not with your daughter yelling that way. You are off duty until morning."

"Nice." Kyle smiled. "Me too, Boss?"

Angela winced, glad Marc's back was to her. "For a bit."

Marc hadn't missed her reaction, but he had other pressing concerns as Charlie stormed from the flag-decorated warehouse with a thunderous face and clenched fists.

Angela's mental sigh was awful to hear. *Leave him alone. I've earned this and much worse.*

Marc scowled, but didn't interfere as the truck stopped and Charlie began screaming.

The accusations were spat with a teenager's lack of caution and tact. Everyone listened in shock as he accused her of sending Tracy off to be beaten and raped so that she could talk the bunker into letting her keep Adrian. He then went on to connect that to her hurting Marc and then getting Crista killed.

Angela withstood it without any reaction, but she took each arrow deep into her heart and held it tight, knowing it would fester. *I'm a monster.*

Charlie had gotten most of the rage out. He stared at his mom in confused betrayal. "Why?!"

Angela swept the witnesses, seeing they too needed those answers. She'd planned on it. Angela was glad to know that the rest of her designs were coming to fruition as well, but it still hurt her deeply to see such wariness in their expressions. "Tomorrow morning, there will be three trials held in Safe Haven. One is for Conner Mitchel, who is accused of stalking and sexual deviance. The second is for myself. It's a leadership vote."

Stunned, Marc turned to her.

Angela quickly finished her last orders. "The third is for Adrian. He'll be here soon. Get three cells ready and get us locked up."

For almost a full minute, no one moved. It was easy to see that her voluntary surrender was likely enough, but her plans required that she play this role to the end and she would.

The Mexicans suddenly began to cheer as the words were passed to them.

Angela glanced at Marc. *Take me into custody.*

Marc almost couldn't do it. In the end, it was the witch and her whispers of the grand plan that allowed him to take her arm and motion for Shawn to get her other side. Angela was lethal and he still had to train his men. Like those who'd come before him, Marc was going to use every moment as a tool.

Marc led her through the silently staring crowd and into the warehouse. He'd already used his grid ability to find the brig.

"Thank you."

Charlie spun around to find Tracy standing by the flap of their tent. She'd chosen to have some time alone. No one had argued once the doctor had cleared her. It didn't seem to bother her that the freshly dug graves were about to be filled in right next to them. Charlie did mind, but not enough to bring it up. They wouldn't be here long anyway. "For what?"

"No one ever stood up for me like that," Tracy sighed "She doesn't deserve it and you're going to apologize and then make it right, but I'll never forget it, I promise."

Charlie was completely confused. He followed Tracy inside their tent, sputtering reasons for his rant.

Forgotten during the show, the rest of the passengers exited. They made their way through the congratulations and into the warehouse behind Marc and Angie. Seth and Becky went toward the mess, using her mental grid to find it. Peggy and Doug exclaimed happily as she and Seth joined them.

Angela heard it and frowned at the changes in Peggy. Her public tune had changed drastically after Samantha had called her out.

Angela swept each area they went through, noting the work that had been done to make it safe. She nodded approvingly at Ray and Dale, who were busy collecting carpeting they would need in the caves when they settled for winter.

Both Eagles started to rush over and then realized she was being escorted, like a prisoner. They stayed back and watched in confusion.

Marc took her to a center room, glad of the location when he realized there might be many people who wanted her out of the way. Now would be a great time to accomplish that goal.

“That’s the reason I told them to put the cells in the center.” Angela grunted. “I’m reaching in my pocket.” She would act like what she was—a suspect awaiting her judgment. She lit a stale smoke that had come from Donner, then handed her jacket to Marc and stepped into the cell.

“Get her out of there!”

They all looked at the angry woman storming into the room.

“Right now!” Cynthia motioned to the men with her.

Daryl had Angela out of the cell and back into her jacket before she could protest.

“She’ll be held in a real room. One with a bed, food, a bathroom, and her man. See to it.” Cynthia’s tone was a set order that pleased Angela. She was obeyed without question.

Angela could feel Marc’s relief. He hadn’t been sure how long he would be okay with her crammed into a small cage.

Behind them, Conner was being brought into the cage room, though he wasn’t shouting the way Angela had foreseen in the beginning of things. She’d put him with the wounded intentionally,

hoping it would bring him a new awareness of life and death. With that, he might be able to recover.

Angela sank down into clean sheets a few minutes later, smelling fresh-baked bread. They were giving her a hero's welcome, doing it in ways the camp couldn't argue with. "I don't deserve this. And I love you for it."

Angela was asleep in the bed a few minutes later, with Marc curled around her. They were home.

2

"Welcome back."

Kenn returned the greeting in relief. He hadn't been sure of his reception after the glowers they'd received while coming through the camps. Kenn had been glad when Adrian insisted that he and Kendle come back together. Adrian wasn't far behind though. Kenn looked at Daryl. "Where's the boss?"

Daryl frowned, happiness fading. "She placed herself under arrest, along with Conner. Told us to do the same to Adrian when he gets here."

Kenn scanned the crowd that was no longer as hostile to him now that he'd been greeted by a top level Eagle. "You won't get him there."

Daryl wasn't sure he wanted to.

Kenn looked around again and saw little support. Those who would help him were flashing gestures, but it wasn't enough to control a mob.

Kenn noted the armed men standing in small groups, the tense air waiting for a spark, and shook his head. “He won’t make it out of the truck.” Kenn spun back toward his vehicle. “If this is now how we handle justice here, tell Tonya she’ll have to come to me.”

“Get back here!”

Charlie’s voice was one Kenn hadn’t expected to hear. He waited for the teenager to reach him. “What?!”

Charlie still found enjoyment from Kenn’s distress, but he had a job to do. Tracy had insisted. He held out an envelope.

Kenn stared at it in hatred. Small and torn in places, the message had obviously survived more than one battlefield.

Kenn opened it with nervous anger, aware that there were hundreds of witnesses.

*Marc is the only one who can get him through.
Use what you have to.*

And below that, in a quick script that Kenn was sure she had added reluctantly:

Ask Kendle to help.

She didn’t want Kendle and Adrian together, but she’d added that note. It meant he would need the assistance. “I have to see Marc.”

Daryl couldn’t find a reason to say no. He led Kenn into the warehouse, immediately relaxing once they were out of sight of the other camps.

“I hope Adrian has a good plan, or we’ll be burying him with the other bodies tonight.” Daryl

was now moving fast and spitting out information. “That crowd is angry and they outnumber us if the soldiers and Mexicans make a deal. We’ve got them separated and under watch.”

Daryl opened a door and took them down a long, dusty hall covered in prints. “If he walks in here, they’ll riot. Some of our people will join them too. They’re all pissed.”

“They have a right to be.” Marc was in the doorway in front of them.

The guard on the room, Greg, nodded to Daryl and headed down a different hallway.

Kenn didn’t get close enough to be easily reached as he tried to convince Marc to save his rival. “Think of—”

“I won’t.”

Kenn held out the last envelope from Angie. “Then follow orders!”

Kendle had trailed them, hating Angela for her new chore. She was ruthless.

Yes, I am. Now do your duty and then go be rewarded with the reception from Safe Haven that you’ve longed for.

Angela’s voice was a deep command of the alpha, but it wasn’t needed. Kendle didn’t want Adrian killed. With him around, there was always the chance that Angela would go to him and Marc would be free.

That will never happen! He has always been mine!

Marc smirked, aware that Kenn knew the females were talking, but wasn't picking it up. Being out of the loop drove all Marines crazy.

"You can't let him be lynched." Kendle dropped a bomb. "Adrian and I are a couple."

Marc, furious at being set up, blasted into Kendle's mind and found each lie she'd told.

Kendle shuddered as Marc dug through all the layers of her torment and then went deeper. Nothing escaped his attention.

Kenn, worried for Adrian's new relief source, put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Just as Tonya walked in.

"You skank!" Tonya ran straight toward the cringing castaway.

Marc barely caught her around the waist, swinging her around.

"Take this!" He shoved Tonya at Kenn.

Kenn caught her and held on, dragging her toward the door as he tried to explain. "Stop! It's not what—"

"I'll rip your eyes out!" Tonya swung on Kenn. "And hers!"

Kenn grunted at a well-aimed blow to his jaw from a pissed elbow. Tiring of it, he pinned her against the wall with his body, straining to be careful but not get hurt.

Listening from her bed, Angela reluctantly put a stop to it. She was enjoying the show. "He's not lying. Be quiet."

It took Tonya a full minute of listening to Angela's explanation before she would calm down. She kept kicking and delivering death threats until Angela finally tired of it and opened the door.

Tonya froze at the wave of menace that ran over her. She stared at Angela in concern and distrust. "Kendle and Adrian?"

Angela nodded; it was easy to see from the pain in her face that it was true. "Marc was scanning her lies. She was scared. Your man showed compassion to her. Real progress for him, wouldn't you say?"

Tonya tried to keep it going. "If it's true."

Angela went back to her bed. As she sank down, she waved a hand and slammed the door shut.

Kenn moved back as Tonya shivered. "She has no reason to lie for me. I don't even like Kendle."

Kendle stiffened. "You're no picnic either, Smurf Balls!" She turned to Marc. "You've seen my secrets. How about we see yours? Are you a good guy or are you hiding scum, like the rest of us?"

Marc was taken aback, despite feeling covered for this moment. "Yes, I am."

Kendle seized onto the short list that Adrian had given her. "What about all those snake women? What about your decades old lie of not being a descendant? Or the way you left Angie to raise a baby when she was a teenager? When were you forgiven for all of your mistakes?"

Marc scowled. "This isn't about me."

"Yes, it is. You can stop them from lynching someone on their way to stand trial."

“And when we vote to hang him? What then?”

Kendle’s anger faded. “Then it’s what he deserves. It has to be a fair trial. If it isn’t, everything you’re building here will collapse. You know that.”

“You’re doing this for personal gains.”

“Yes, but does that change the truth?”

“No.” Marc let out an ugly sound and hit the button on his radio. “I want all level six Eagles at the front door. *Now.*”

Marc strode that way, hating it that he had to keep playing this awful role. He longed for Adrian’s blood and here he was, forced to save the piece of trash yet again. The camp would think any form of punishment was okay if he allowed a lynching. It would undermine all the effort they’d made to be civilized. Angela had known exactly what to use.

Angela shut her eyes. *You can come in now.*

Have you looked?

There’s only darkness.

You don’t have to do this. Let me die.

Not even if I have to destroy all we’ve built.

Your life belongs to me.

3

Jennifer had to stop at the bathroom campers before she could go to her daughter; she hurried, not sure where Kyle had gone. He’d been by her side until she reached the restroom. Upon exiting, Jennifer rushed through the lantern-lit halls, waving

and calling greetings that were returned. She entered the area where the younger children were sequestered, and stopped in amusement at the sight of Kyle already holding Autumn.

The pair wasn't facing the door and hadn't noticed her yet. Jennifer stayed still, observing. She usually left them alone when Kyle spent time with the baby, trying not to push him into being closer with Autumn than he was ready for. Even at her age, she knew kids were a rough adjustment. Jennifer pushed in gently and was shocked by the level of communication.

She's okay?

Yes, darlin'. She just had to pee.

She should get a diaper.

Kyle chuckled. *I'll tell her that.* He leaned down and kissed Autumn's soft cheek, nuzzling her like he sometimes wanted to do with her mother. *Were you okay while we were gone this time?*

Yes. They stayed closer. It was fun.

Kyle marveled at the fast adjustment that kids could make to danger. *Are you hungry or wet or anything?*

No. They're afraid of mommy. They keep changing me even when I don't need it.

Kyle laughed again, feeling the Safe Haven comfort settle onto his shoulders. It was good to be home.

Autumn's hand was busy exploring Kyle's hair and face, as she did with everyone who held her. The mobster kept still so she could get her fill of it.

Autumn's gifts still required physical contact to be effective.

"That won't last long," Jennifer said from the doorway. "We'll have to teach her to control herself when she gets upset."

Kyle smiled at the infant. "We will. Together."

Jennifer had slipped from their minds when she revealed her presence, but she stepped closer as the baby let out a giggle of delight. "What did I miss?"

Kyle was grinning from ear to ear. "She's happy we're staying."

"So am I," Jennifer lied. She'd much rather be alone in the lodge with her baby and Kyle.

Kyle turned to look at her. "So would I."

Jennifer's eyes narrowed. "Autumn, what did I tell you about that?"

Kyle shielded the baby, snickering. "Here in a few days, why don't we go spend a week at the lodge? You, me, and little cute cheeks here?"

"Really?"

"Sure. If things go the way Angela planned, we'll be headed for our settlement next. They can start putting up boards and bags without us for the first week, can't they?"

Jennifer nodded right away. "That sounds wonderful."

Kyle listened to the drowsy baby in his arms, happiness fading. "She said there's trouble coming."

Jennifer sighed. "Adrian."

"Yeah, he's here."

An instant later, his radio lit up.

“I want all level six Eagles at the front door. Now.”

Kyle answered the call with a short click and kept ahold of the baby as he and Jennifer went to the door. He’d missed her.

It didn’t escape Jennifer’s attention, but it actually drew gawkers among the camp members and the Eagles. Seeing a dangerous man like Kyle cradling a baby and cooing to her wasn’t expected. It showed a side to his obsession that few people had thought of. By claiming Jennifer, Kyle also got to be Autumn’s dad.

Kyle met his team at the door. Those men surprised everyone by doing the same thing he was.

“How are you today, Autumn?” Daryl asked in a high pitch voice that drew grins.

He nodded at her answer. “Same here, sweetie.”

Autumn’s face glowed as the group of men turned into babbling fools competing for the best impression. Even Shawn had a moment where he was unable to resist holding his arms out for a quick hug. In mere months, Autumn had worked her way into the hearts of all her protectors.

Her life mate will probably come from that group, Jennifer sent to Kyle. Encourage it. They already love her.

That stunned Kyle, but before he could respond, the hall went cold and quiet.

Marc was here.

Kyle took the baby and handed her to Jennifer, then assumed his place behind Marc as they headed for the door. He didn't want to do this. None of his team did, but if Angela had thought this far ahead, then they still needed Adrian for something.

Marc wasn't so sure, but he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't bring Adrian in and then Safe Haven fell apart because of it. Society had to have rules and people had to stick to them, even when it went against everything they stood for.

Hopefully, he'll put up a fight, his demon suggested. *You can't be blamed for that.*

Marc grinned coldly.

4

Kendle came into the huge room that had been designated as their mess. She froze as the crowd rushed forward.

"It's her!"

"Kendle!"

"Ms. Roberts!"

Quinn reached her first, but Kendle was aware that his expression wasn't that of an adoring fan. He was upset. She knew it because he only stared at her.

Kendle tolerated the well-wishers and welcomes as best she could, thinking she would need a lot of sessions with Adrian to get over this instant flinch from being touched. It was so bad that she didn't think it could be fixed.

Kendle was ushered to the buffet tables, where Li Sing had outdone himself to welcome Angela home. The pig looked like it had been roasted perfectly. Kendle wondered when there had been time for cooking, and then remembered that the main camp had been sequestered with nothing to do except wait and see if the enemy would reach them.

Kendle took her generous tray to the table in the corner, still surrounded by people who wanted to hear every detail of her life before the war. They knew she'd been fighting in this battle, but the old lure of wealth and power was what still held their interest.

Kendle answered vaguely and downplayed her fame, sensing it might come back to haunt her later. People liked stars, but jealousy often caused a distorted view that sometimes ended in violence. When she could, she went to a table alone to eat.

Quinn dropped down across from her without a tray.

Kendle glowered at him. "I didn't even tell your boss bitch about me and Adrian, okay? Get off it."

That was enough for Quinn. He didn't have time for someone who couldn't even be polite.

Kendle let him go. She'd chosen Adrian and it was easy to break these ties. Adrian was as close to Marc as it would get. He was the only one who might be able to help her achieve what she wanted.

Kendle glanced around as the last of the fans faded with the sharp remark she'd given Quinn. Her reputation for being unstable had also spread

through the camp and that was good. It would save her some of the drama when everyone found out who she'd chosen to partner with.

Curious as to the mood of the large group here, Kendle dropped the mental barrier to allow the chaos of dozens of thoughts flying around at the same time to enter her mind.

It's so great to be back indoors! And also creepy.

When are we leaving? It feels wrong in here.

We won! We can have peace now.

We owe her everything.

There shouldn't be a trial. She saved us.

Adrian should be hung. How could he betray us? We loved him.

When is Angela taking back over?

I want Adrian back in charge.

Kendle looked at the owner of the last thought, shutting out all but that single thread. Why would the vet want Adrian in charge again?

Taking a chance, Kendle tapped lightly on his mental wall. *How did it go?*

The vet, aware of Kendle the instant her glance turned his way, kept eating and pretending to listen to Ray and Dale gush over the meal and the work they'd been doing. He normally enjoyed their drama-free conversations, but today, it was causing him to consider spending time in the livestock trucks.

Kendle sighed. She hadn't been trying to pry. She just needed the contact of her own kind.

I'm not your kind, the vet whispered, already deep into her mind. *I hate them both.*

You're keeping secrets, Kendle responded dejectedly. *That's all I meant.*

The vet didn't want this bond and he certainly didn't want to feel the similarities between Kendle and Angela. It would be too easy to settle for second best.

Kendle blanched, stomach twisting. She shoved away from the table. She could be accepted now if she could finish conforming. It should have been easy since the right side of the line was with Marc and Angela. She wasn't so far gone that she didn't know the choice she was making was wrong. But she was too far gone to change it now.

Kendle left the mess, heading for the front door.

My Way Or The Highway

1

Marc didn't hurry to the end of the camp-lined street where Adrian was waiting. There was still part of him hoping the crowd would become a mob and handle it before he got there.

Adrian was sitting on the hood of a green truck, surrounded by a group of men and women who looked as hard as any of Safe Haven's fighters. They wore long, thick coats made from animal hides; pouches around their lean hips bulged with rocks. The shapes were too distinctive to be anything else.

Adrian stared at Marc with open hatred, letting his eyes glow. He'd always controlled his emotions while in Safe Haven. It was a wonderful freedom to stop hiding. Kenn's words had helped more than he knew. Adrian didn't have as many gifts as the other descendants here, but he'd had his longer and he'd studied their kind all his life. He knew how to use his power.

"Guess it had to happen." Marc slowly removed his coat. He had no idea how to battle this way, but he had no doubts about winning. He was in the right. He was also younger, in better shape, and hadn't just

spent days being abused by Major Donner. That did take some of the fun out of it for Marc, but not enough for him to delay the inevitable.

As the witnesses realized what was about to happen, word was sent back and the crowd came closer. Some even began to place bets.

Marc dropped his jacket. “Rules?”

Adrian tossed his butt into the blowing grit and stood up. “Honor.”

“You don’t have that to bargain with!” Marc spat toward Adrian’s boots.

“*Your* honor, grunt!” Adrian responded angrily. “No one expects me to have it. I gave up the luxury when I became their leader.”

Marc unbuckled his gun belt. He’d already tried that method of punishment. “Rules?”

“None. Prize?”

Marc considered that one carefully out of respect for the future. Angela insisted they still needed Adrian. He knew her personal feelings had helped make the choice, but he had no reason to doubt that she was telling the truth. She’d seen something else coming for them that only Adrian could cover, but Marc figured if it were truly that awful, fate itself would step in and save the traitor again. “You’ll make it to your trial, where I’ll enforce the decision. Especially if they choose to end your life.”

Adrian slowly removed his gun belts. “Agreed.”

The men moved toward each other without further words, both drawing upon their demons to battle for them.

Then darkness fell.

One minute they were in late afternoon sunlight, set to kill each other or die trying, and then it was nighttime and they could barely view their opponent.

Marc's anger flipped into concern for the camp at the same time as Adrian's, but neither man moved as the sounds of the panicking crowd faded into a rushing noise that some of them were still haunted by. It reminded them of the dam that had broken and nearly washed them away, but the source was much more familiar.

Angela and her team of females were coming through the crowd, each of them inside protective bubbles that refused to admit the slugs the Mexicans started firing upon seeing her in the open.

Angela motioned to Jennifer and Samantha. "Finish that."

The two females ran eagerly into the middle of the Mexican camp and began to lay waste with fire and wind.

Across the street, Indian camps fled Angela's wrath, but she didn't attack them. Her target was ahead.

Marc and Adrian stood in stunned silence as they watched Angela stride toward them with flaming eyes and fire twining around her body. She

spotted the stone-throwers that Adrian had made deals with, fire blazing higher.

Adrian was forced to watch as she killed them all. It was why he'd brought them here, but it wasn't easy to view. Becky did most of it by forcing Everett to turn his new rifle on his own people. Tracy and Cynthia backed it up with fast blows of icy wind followed by beautiful rifle shots to the head. It was terrifying.

"They, uh... Well, they look pissed." Marc was suddenly without rage at all. He'd thought he was powerful. He'd known Adrian was, but Angela was controlling all of this chaos! He watched her jerk a hand; two cars in her path shoved up into the yards and over tents.

When I give an order, you follow it! Angela's shout slammed into every mind in the area and brought a few of them to their knees when they tried to resist. *He will stand trial!*

Marc and Adrian were both relieved when the females halted near the edge of the battlefield, aware of burning cars, screaming men, and screeching demons.

"Any idea how to calm that down?" Adrian hadn't known she'd become that strong either, but the government had. That's why they'd sent Donner.

"Yeah, but he knew it and planned to use it. Looks like we're the only ones who were fooled." Marc frowned. "What else has she been hiding?"

Adrian shrugged. “Hard to say. Right now, we’d better think of something—quick.”

Angela waited impatiently for them to work it out, forced to leave her self-imprisonment to supervise them. It was beyond annoying after all she’d accomplished, to have to blow her cover for this. Now everyone knew how different she actually was. Even her team, with all their gifts, were no match for her. Taking so many lives had given her uncountable gifts, so many that she was still discovering them.

“Is this a bad time?”

Angela shook her head.

Sergeant Wallz slowly edged closer. He noticed none of her former guards rushed over as they would have days ago, and saw her wince. “You caught that?”

“I catch all of it,” Angela intoned. “Why should I let you join my flock?”

“Because we were forced and we withdrew, surrendered in some cases. We deserve a second chance.”

“Safe Haven offers that. But not freely. You’ll have to earn it. Until you do, I find you unworthy. Leave now or die.”

“And the others?” David’s heart fell as he watched her scan them with glowing eyes that allowed nothing to be hidden.

“All may stay except the three thieves who killed the old woman for her supplies. They will be executed.”

Gunshots rang out as Jennifer caught the images and location, and sent it to Tracy, who was closest to the soldiers.

“There are others here who are not who they claim to be.” Angela began showing their faces to her team of merciless killers.

Those with something to hide took off running, and those without anything to fear did the same to avoid being caught in the crossfire.

Angela didn't control their panic. The Indians would now flee with tales of Safe Haven's power. The few soldiers still alive would have their own stories of battles. Those who stayed and joined would have respect for her rules. As for the descendants, there were a lot of them here. Angela wanted to be clear that this was her ship. She would sink anyone who tried to run her aground. The fear she had over the exposure was from her own camp. She wouldn't be voted out now, though she would resign if she felt they were only keeping her because they feared her retribution. It only worked if they could still love her.

Angela glowered at the two men lingering on the edge of their fight. *Get him locked in one of my cells before I get upset.*

The command was obeyed, though both men dragged their feet. Adrian had planned to go down in a blaze of glory at Marc's hand. Marc had been hoping for the same thing. Turning away from that identical goal was hard.

The walk back to the warehouse was a learning experience. Marc and Adrian observed her team working to calm and clear the area without speaking a single word. Other than Tracy, they weren't even exchanging a glance. Angela had taught them to read each other's minds during battle.

"I also trained them for this moment. It pisses me off that I had to." Angela shoved by them.

Marc was the first one to notice her hair had turned solid gray. There wasn't a single black strand to be seen.

Adrian saw it a second later, and concern spread over his face. He held his tongue because he could feel Marc's rage threatening to spill over again.

"You shouldn't have come back!" Marc growled. "I gave you your life."

Adrian didn't tell Marc that he couldn't do it, that being away from her felt worse than facing death.

Marc knew, and it increased the anger. There were no closed doors now. He wasn't supposed to have to feel the way Adrian's heart was beating faster at being around Angela or see the way she was so perfect in his thoughts. It was awful.

Angela waved her team away from the duties that were mostly finished, silently telling Greg and Shawn to have the Eagles handle the rest of it. She needed her Eagles to be seen as the police, the enforcers. There were too many unknowns mixed in with the surviving camps around hers for comfort, though she wasn't going to kill them. She'd

removed the offenders who made it a habit or those whose crimes were unforgivable. That was her new line. “Get the camp assembled. We’ll hold Adrian’s trial immediately following the leadership vote. If everyone wants to see him hang after we get all the details, Marc will make sure that happens.”

Marc nodded. *You bet that sweet ass.*

Next to him, Adrian shuddered.

Marc began to understand that Angela wasn’t planning to spare Adrian completely. He was going to face the people he’d betrayed.

They had no more trouble getting Adrian locked into a cell next to his son. They were in a room off the same hall as Angela.

Marc locked the brig door and dropped the key into Greg’s hand. “Try to shoot him while he escapes, will you?”

Greg snorted and didn’t meet Angela’s gaze as he began to give her all the updates he’d been holding. “We’re starting the funerals tonight. We lost less than fifty. Here’s a list.”

Angela put it away for later, when she would punish herself in ways that her people couldn’t. “Next?”

“There are four camps left out there now.”

“Good. Which ones?”

“Two Indian, one descendant, one soldier.”

“Have the QZ set up where the soldiers are and put them all in it. Keep going.”

“Level six is taking turns on watch over the...over Adrian. Kenn took the room next to him.”

“Fine. Is that it?”

Greg scanned his list. “Yes.”

“She did well. All of you did.”

“Daryl’s with her. He said she’s off duty until morning, that Samantha is covering this shift.”

“Fine. I doubt there will be any more trouble tonight.”

Leaning against the wall while he waited, Marc snorted silently. People were afraid to breathe right now. No, there wouldn’t be any trouble.

Angela headed for the bed in the holding room as soon as the updates were finished. Kenn would make sure Adrian and Conner weren’t mistreated, and that they were fed. It was more than one of them deserved, but he would be alive to face the camp for the trial. Then he would either live or die and so would she. Their destinies had been entwined since the beginning of mankind. No one could fight something that strong and she didn’t intend to. She would tell them the truth and let fate control the outcome.

Marc climbed into the bed with her after locking the door, vaguely aware that he hadn’t seen Dog in a while. The wolfman twined their bodies into the position they’d gotten used to sleeping in and rested his head against her shoulder. He’d brought her back. For this moment, he was satisfied.

2

“I’d like to use my one request.”

Neil and Kyle turned in surprise. Both men had forgotten that Cynthia had been promised a reward for saving Angela's life.

"What is it?" Neil was mostly willing. He didn't expect her to ask for something he couldn't give.

Cynthia glanced at Kyle.

Kyle nodded, but he felt that cold hand of fate sweeping over his head. "Sure."

"I'd like you to be the godfathers of my son. He needs a strong set of hands from what I've been told and well, you are the two I trust the most."

"I'd be honored." Neil was sure he would be around for long enough to do the job.

Kyle didn't answer, gaze going to the teenager and baby who were settled onto a nearby couch. After their week off, he planned to ask Jenny again and be sure she wanted to remain in Safe Haven.

Cynthia knew where his thoughts were and didn't push hard. She didn't think she needed to. "If you guys stay, will you accept?"

"Of course. And thanks for thinking of me." Kyle frowned. "What made you think of me? I'm still on probation with most people."

Neil listened openly, curious if it was the same reason he'd forgiven the mobster his weakness over Jennifer. He didn't seem to have others.

"I let a kid die. You saved one and love her. Who am I to judge?" Cynthia left them standing there, shocked and a bit worried.

"Should we..."

“Yeah,” Kyle sighed. “But not now. Let it be a future worry for once.”

Neil nodded, in complete agreement after the week they’d had, but he still wrote it in his notebook. It was how Adrian had trained them. That wouldn’t change.

Daryl caught up to Cynthia in exasperation. “I left you in bed!”

The reporter rolled her eyes and continued on her course.

“Cynthia!”

“What? I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s been like...three minutes! You didn’t even try.”

“No, I didn’t.” She sighed, slowing down. “I keep seeing myself in the grave and hearing that my son will be worse than his father, and everywhere I go, people are staring at me, wondering the same thing. I have to take steps.”

“To protect him?”

She lowered her voice as a small cluster of camp woman came through the hall. “I was told he should die.”

“By who?!” Daryl was instantly angry.

“Angela.”

That caught Daryl off guard. He wasn’t sure what to say. Angela hadn’t been wrong. Ever.

Cynthia’s shoulders drooped. “I know.”

Daryl did the first thing he thought of, flashing to the advice he’d overheard her give to Kyle about Jennifer. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.” Her hand went to rub her stomach.

“I’d like to feed you and try to tuck you in again. What if I stay and keep you company, at least until you fall asleep?”

Cynthia was aware of his tactics and approved. “I need a shower first. The hot water will help.”

“Just don’t go over that five minute limit or Hilda will have you dragged out. The den mothers are enforcing it now that you pointed out how low we are again.”

“Will you try to scrounge up a lantern we can see by? My eyes are giving me issues.”

Frowning, Daryl turned her toward the hanging lantern in the hall. He gasped. “Your eyes are red!”

She pulled out of his grip. “It’s been a long day!”

“No, Cyn, solid red. What does that mean?”

Cynthia had no idea where to find a mirror. In Safe Haven, a small compact was usually the best a woman could do. She slid her knife from the sheath on her belt and stared into it, stunned by the glowing crimson orbs in the reflection.

“Should I go get someone?”

Cynthia thought about it and then shook her head. “I know who to talk to. Come on.” Cynthia ignored the camp members who gawked at her eyes, mind racing.

Daryl followed her to Adrian’s cell, not surprised. The former leader seemed to have endless files on descendants.

Daryl hung out in the doorway as Cynthia pulled a chair over and sat down near Adrian's cage. There wasn't a guard here yet.

Adrian had toppled his cell over and was stretched out on the smoothest side, face relaxed. His tone however, was nervous. "When was the last time you fed him?"

Two mouths dropped open in surprise at the obvious answer.

"Go spend some time alone with a friend and feed your son." Adrian didn't open his eyes. "You'll be normal before morning."

Cynthia glanced at Daryl. "Can you give us a minute or is it against the rules? I've never been here while there were prisoners."

"None of us have." Daryl felt more jealousy over the request than he wanted to. The Eagle shut the door and leaned against it, not straining to hear, but aware that he could if he tried.

Adrian finally opened his eyes and met Cynthia's hurt, confused stare. "No, she's not wrong. None of your safeguards will work."

Cynthia was crushed all over again. "Why?"

"Because he's mine." Adrian hated to admit it. "My children are light or darkness. There is little gray."

"And there's nothing I can do?"

"Not unless you find a witch who will break the rules for you." Adrian was sure Angela would be furious with him for interfering. "One with immeasurable power."

Cynthia blanched. “There’s no way.”

“Oh, yes. You just have to have the courage to ask for it openly and then convince her to allow the conversation. After that, you’ll be held responsible for everything that goes wrong.”

Adrian’s words were cool warnings, with little sympathy.

Cynthia glared angrily. “What about you?”

Adrian slowly sat up. “I’m a traitor. Do you think it’s a good idea for me to even try?”

She hadn’t thought about it from that view. “No, I suppose not.”

“You’ll have to save him yourself, Cyn. Do you think you can?”

She nodded slowly. “I’ll figure out how to approach her before I do it.”

“Good girl.”

Cynthia stood up suddenly, pain bleeding into her tone. “Do you have a reason? Something that will clear you tomorrow?”

Adrian sighed miserably and lay back down. “If I did, would she have left me in here?”

Cynthia didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Smart girl, too. You’re making your new man nervous. Why not go spend some time with him? Daryl is a great guy.”

“Yes, he is.” Cynthia went to the door. She wanted to believe that Adrian was innocent, but he was making it hard. She left without asking any of the other hundred and one questions she had. Tomorrow would determine the fates of more than

just their two leaders and one love-stricken teenager.

3

Kenn, Tonya, and Kendle took shifts outside the door to the brig as the evening wore down and late night came. Most of Safe Haven went out quickly, happy with the results and secure enough to crash early with plans to sleep late. The trials weren't set to start until late morning, and it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from their camp. That sense of being dogged was missing.

Adrian had several visitors through the night. All but one of them was turned away. Cynthia had made it in because all three of Adrian's guards had been out scrounging things for him and Conner. Once they were satisfied they'd done the best for them they could, Kenn had refused to let the waiting people in, saying Adrian needed rest. The only other person to make it in was Doug.

"What do you want?" Kenn didn't expect trouble from the large man, but he was prepared to handle things if it happened.

"I want to talk to him."

"About what?"

"Peggy."

Kenn frowned. "What's wrong with Peggy?"

"She has the cancer. John's draughts are gone and she's starting to have symptoms again."

Kenn had gone pale, thinking of all the redheaded den mother had done and continued to do for these people. The camp wouldn't be the same without her.

Let him in, Adrian sent.

Doug stepped inside the chilly room and shut the door.

4

“Will you hold me for a while?”

Charlie slid to her side of the air mattress that he'd scrounged and wrapped his arms around as much of her as he could reach. *Being a little taller would come in handy in moments like this.* “Can I do anything for you?”

“Just this.” Tracy had been hurt while under the drugs and had come to the next morning. Discovering what had been done to her was bad, but she was grateful not to have the memories of it, like Becky did.

“I can't believe she did this!”

Tracy, tired and sore, slapped him in the back of the head.

Charlie jerked, gaping in shock.

Tracy wanted to stay annoyed, but the laughter spilled out of her mouth before she knew it was coming. And then it turned to tears.

Tracy's sobs hurt Charlie in new and terrible ways. If his mom didn't have a great reason for all of it, he was leaving.

Tracy was too depressed to argue with him. She rolled out of his arms and onto her side, shaking as she cried. They'd won and she didn't even remember being hurt. *So why do I feel like I lost something that I can't get back?*

When Charlie stormed from the tent, Tracy didn't notice.

Charlie wasn't expecting to find two Eagles guarding his tent. He immediately misunderstood. "I'm not dangerous to her!"

Shawn snorted. "You're the worst of the lot kid, screaming at her like that."

"Especially when we're here to guard your snotty ass." Billy didn't want to be out in the cold. He wasn't afraid to let it show.

"She let females be hurt!" Charlie protested. "She sent them out there!"

"And you think you're the only one who wants answers?" Shawn snorted again. "Grow up. You got off lucky. Jeff certainly didn't."

Charlie was being hit with their thoughts and their words. He hated them for making sense, for being right when they said each of the fighters had agreed beforehand. His inability to fix things for Tracy was a wound he couldn't heal in himself either. "I don't understand!"

"Tomorrow should bring some answers." Billy tried to be nice. "Until then, do what the rest of us did when we've provided the service you have waiting now. Love her and bring her back. And for Pete's sake, don't leave her alone."

“That’s the biggest rule.” Shawn added his support. “The mind does terrible things when you’re left alone to blame yourself.”

Charlie was calm enough now to begin asking questions about the right and wrong things to say.

The two Eagles helped him eagerly. Angela needed her son. They would try to help the boy see that the sacrifices were steep, but the cost of doing anything less than what she had would have been more than any of them could pay.

Chapter Thirty-Two BK5

Consequences

1

“**M**y name is Angela and I’m a descendant. I’ve always had abilities, though I didn’t know about my true heritage until I came to Safe Haven.” Angela was on a makeshift witness stand, in front of three hundred survivors who wanted Adrian’s death. It was in their minds.

“When I joined this camp, Adrian recognized my gifts and took me under his wing. He started teaching me to be strong, to fight for myself. Like everyone else, I fell for the line that he was doing it all to save our country.” She looked out at the upset faces. “He was exactly what I needed, like he was for the others who came here in bad shape. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for him.”

“Did you know he was lying about the government?” someone shouted out.

The guards moved that way, but Angela stopped them. “They have a right to question their leaders. I’ve always meant that.”

The guards stepped back.

Zack stood up. “Did you?”

“No,” Angela answered without guilt. “I don’t see everything and the future changes with every choice someone makes.”

“But he was a traitor.” Zack glowered. “How could you miss that?”

“How could I miss Cesar shooting me?” Angela sent back. “It isn’t just Crista who paid that price, Zack. You remember the rest stop, don’t you?”

All of those who had been there shifted uneasily. Remember it? They were still having nightmares about it.

“I’m not perfect. Looking into the future isn’t simple. I don’t always see everything. It’s how we’ve been able to have assassins in camp.” She couldn’t help the defensive tone. “Not knowing if I’m a target when I come from my tent each day hasn’t been fun.”

Zack slowly sat down, but his anger hadn’t calmed.

“Adrian hid things well. He used distraction on me, as he did with the Eagles and everyone else. When I would catch little things, he’d deny it or make sure that Kenn was there to stir shit up and take my focus off it. I didn’t actually see his scheming until after I was shot.” Angela took a sip of the water bottle, and lit a smoke. She still had the pack Donner had given her. “I should have died there.”

She paused, remembering the ugliness and the sense of incompleteness she’d been sentenced to end with. “Adrian wanted to save me, to use his gifts,

but it would have exposed him to everyone.” She glanced at some of the most sensitive people among them. “None of you were ready for that. He knew I wasn’t either.” Angela shivered as she recalled that moment. “When I made the call, he knew I had accepted that Marc would probably die while fighting the first troops the government sent out. He connected us and showed me everything.”

“You’ve known he was a traitor since before Marc came back?” Jax was furious. “How could you do that?!”

“How could I not?” Angela responded calmly. “I saw everything that’s happened. The first battle, this one, and then us leaving for the island that Kendle came from. I saw us putting down roots, growing. We were happy and healthy, relearning peace, and then they came for us again.” Angela’s voice broke. “Not even the descendants survived. They came in from four sides of the island and squeezed us into the middle, like I did to them here. You’ve seen how effective that is. I saw us winning this war and dying two years later. I had to stop it.” Angela waved.

Shawn quickly brought Adrian out with a hand on the cuffed man’s arm.

The crowd muttered and stared in confused anger as he took the seat by Angela without meeting any of the eyes trying to catch his attention.

“Adrian didn’t give us his full story yet.” Angela leaned back in her chair. “There wasn’t time

before because I had to keep Donner on his toes. We'll do it now."

Every face focused on Adrian, many praying he could explain what he'd done, that he had a reason they could accept. After all he'd done for them in the beginning and all he'd taught them to do for themselves, few of them actually wanted him dead as much as they wanted him to be able to justify his actions. That was what Angela had been hoping for.

Adrian grabbed the pack of smokes on the table between them. "I wasn't supposed to be here to face this. That's the first thing you need to know. I told her to let me die when we brought Conner out of Little Rock." Adrian lit the cigarette and then reoffended everyone by taking a long swig from Angela's bottle of water.

"My mother was in the same position that Angela was in while she faced Donner. My father was the enemy; my mother wasn't powerful enough to stop him from placing me in the labs. All children from descendant relationships are studied to determine their gifts and by those, their place in our society is assigned. I was chosen to hunt other descendants because I can call them together."

Adrian's tones were too full of pain and anger to deny, but it was hard for him to keep going. This exposure, the answering for every choice he'd made, was his biggest fear.

"You've done this for all of us." Angela wasn't gentle, though the urge was strong. "Every person here has been brought down as low as a soul can go,

and then clawed their way back up to being free of the chains that held them. You're the only one left."

Adrian loved her even more for recognizing that, but he also hated her for it, like everyone else who had briefly turned against the people who were trying to help them. It was always easier to hate the messenger than to face the message. "I spent my childhood learning how to lead a hunting team and being trained for battles against our kind." He glanced at Marc. "Mental battles, where I challenged alphas, took their packs, and then handed them over. I did that for twenty years, waiting for the time my mother promised me would come. At times, I forgot about her words, her goodness. I sank into the evil half and wallowed in it. I was good. My name became known; the higher-ups started sending me in to clear specific groups they thought might go rogue."

Adrian crushed out his cigarette. "I destroyed rebellions that might have challenged the government and forced the truth to light."

"Why?" Angela asked quickly, before the crowd could erupt in shouting.

"Because when the truth came out, the world was supposed to be destroyed. Those in charge were willing to annihilate the United States and go below ground. It was already planned."

"Is that the only reason?" Angela knew better.

"No. I didn't want things to change. And it wasn't because I liked my job. I loathed it! I knew from my mother's stories that I had a hard destiny

ahead of me and I didn't want it." Adrian shoved out the rest like a bad bowel movement. "I didn't want to lead! I never have!"

The crowd gasped. That hurt more than his betrayals. It was the one thing they had been sure of—that he wanted the job they'd gifted him with.

"When the war came and brought society down, I was on my way to my father. I needed to see who he wanted killed next."

"That's where I saw you," Samantha was sitting at the table with the rest of leadership. "I put it together before Angela did, that you had once been on the government payroll. I didn't tell anyone because I was hiding the same secret."

"Except you hadn't been hunting our kind." Adrian wanted to be sure she didn't suffer any of the blame.

"No." Samantha sighed. "But I've been thinking about it and almost any of the sudden storms I told them about could have been from one of our kind. I didn't know anything about descendants then."

"They made sure of that with the special people." Adrian delivered more of the truth. "Those who can control physical gifts are rare among descendants. The government likes to keep them in the dark from childhood."

"Tell us about the future your mother saw." Angela got them back on track.

"She knew the world would end. It was her nightmare. She was committed several times because of the warnings she tried to give."

“What was your role in that future?” Angela kept things moving. These were things Adrian had never discussed with a single soul, and here he was, baring it all to hundreds of condemning survivors. It wasn’t easy; she needed him to get it all out.

“When my mother realized she would have to send me to the labs, that my father wouldn’t exempt me from the experimenting, she tried to run away. We spent time on an island, where she called on the Maker to show her what to do. The vision she received told her to make me a double agent.”

Adrian continued over the immediate protests of a lame scheme to save his skin. “She said if the world didn’t end, I would have committed so many sins that I could never be forgiven. She also said it was only one life and the changes we would make would be worth my sacrifice.”

Angela identified so much with Adrian’s mother. She’d known her son would be turned evil, and she’d found a way to give the world hope because of it.

“She said if the war did happen, the government would send me out to gather descendants who might be trouble. She said I would be surrounded by power that was incredibly loyal to me for helping them and their weaker members survive the holocaust. She was right.”

No one shouted now, but they were furious that he knew of their love and had been betraying them the entire time.

“She said when I gathered enough of you into one group, the government would start to notice and that I should make the choice as soon as they threatened my life. She knew I would need all of you to keep me alive. The government only deals with rogue descendants in one way.”

“She knew you would find enough of us to fight them?” Jennifer was next to Samantha. All of Angela’s team was at this table, waiting for it to be over so they could have that private meeting Angela had promised them when they’d agreed to her crazy plan.

“Yes. She said if the power was too weak, we couldn’t win and to hand you over and keep looking for a stronger group. I was set to do that all the way through the beginning. Even as far back as Wyoming, when we started to draw the attention of the Mexicans.”

“Was that intentional?” Marc was in the rear of the crowd. It was as close as he wanted to be to Adrian for these details.

“Yes.” Adrian had to raise his voice to be heard over the fresh anger. “The government wanted the guerrillas stopped and I had a small army of Eagles who could do it without them having to send troops out. By then, I knew we had Angela’s gift being hidden here and I wasn’t concerned with losing. It also gave me more time to stall.” He looked at Angela. “She had me by then. I’d chosen to try the insane scheme I was given by my mother. Angela was the reason why.”

Angela stopped herself from smiling. “You love me.”

“More than I’ll ever be able to say.”

“And you would have given everything up if I’d been willing?”

“Yes. We would have disappeared and left Safe Haven to die.”

“Because I wouldn’t, you fell into your mother’s plan and started making things happen?”

“Yes.”

“Tell us her plan now.” Angela hated Marc’s wave of self-doubt. He hadn’t done anything wrong; he hadn’t missed anything. Adrian’s mind was a steel trap forged through decades of fighting descendants. There was no way any of them could have gotten through enough of his doors to find the truth unless he wanted them to.

“She said there were two ways to make sure the government couldn’t restart the world and hold it hostage again. The first one was to send a descendant into the bunker to take over. Descendants would lead the country and eventually the world. The other was to battle the government until there were too few of them to recover. That choice allowed the freedom our country was built on and it had higher odds of success. The bunkers used to be heavily fortified with our kind. There was also a chance that during the battles, someone could get to the bunker and end the new war with fewer casualties.”

Angela got a fresh cigarette from the remaining three as Adrian paused. It was almost her turn again.

“The plan was to make everyone here so dangerous that the government would come in force. If they only sent out a few hundred men each time, we would have been in small battles for the next decade, which would have given them time to reclaim topside. We had to force a huge battle that would even the numbers. The next fight would be where both sides sent in everything they had left and that’s exactly what happened. They have no men left to send after us now. Because Angela had the guts to finish my mother’s plan, we’re all free.”

“Is that it?” Zack didn’t hide his loathing. “That’s his excuse?”

“His confession.” Angela gestured. “The only choice we have to make is on his punishment. There’s no question of his guilt. Or mine, for that matter.”

The crowd wasn’t against her now. The shouts of not guilty for her were numerous. The shouts for Adrian’s death were loud.

“In a few minutes, we’ll vote on it. First, we have to decide on leadership.” Angela braced. “Before we do that, I’ll take questions if anyone has any.”

This was the hardest part for Adrian. He’d known that if he was here for this moment, it might color the crowd into condemning her as well.

“Why did you agree to do things his way?” Seth was still unhappy with the things she’d ordered her females to do.

“Because it was the only thing that would work. Men respect strength, power, and little else. I showed them who was stronger.” Angela waited, sure more was coming.

“But we lost so many—”

“More than we would have if I had lined two armies up and let them battle it out to the death?” she asked sharply. “We lost roughly forty irreplaceable Eagles and camp members. Friends and lovers.” Angela sighed, allowing her pain to bleed all over everyone in the room. “It would have been triple any other way and we wouldn’t have gotten this new breeding stock to join us. Did you see that nearly a quarter of the soldiers have already hooked up with a Safe Haven woman or one from the Indian camps? We’re about to repopulate our country with patriots and that’s the only distinction that’ll label them. We’ve started to conquer the race problem.”

“I don’t understand.”

Angela hated to say it so bluntly, but she was too tired to be tactful. “Adrian’s mother understood that if there were no separate races or classes, there wouldn’t be a race problem. It was a mistake to divide us this way. Intentional or not, that era in human history is nearing an end. We won’t see it in our lifetime, but we’ll know it’s going to happen.”

“What about the—”

“They won’t matter in the end.” Angela was growing weary of obvious questions. “When the mixed people outnumber the pure bloods, the pure will fall silent and then out of sight and then out of existence.”

“Is that a good thing?” Neil had to ask. “To interfere with the natural design?”

“Don’t you understand yet?” Angela grunted. “That’s our job as we begin the new world. We’re fixing the mistakes and to do that, we have to go to the root of each problem. Why do people hate each other so much and why are they so prone to killing each other? Because we’re so different. Take away some of the differences, you take away part of the atrocities.”

“And that will—”

“No. Even if we’d all been one people from the beginning, it wouldn’t have solved the issues. We have a lot of work to do to make this happen.” She looked around the room. “Unless you vote me out of here, and I have to tell you, I’m tired already, so we either do it my way, the way that will give us a future of peace, or I need to be banished. I can’t walk that line anymore.”

“How about greed and theft, and other violent crimes?” someone called out in the uneasy pause. “Do you have plans for those as well?”

Angela met Adrian’s eye, ignoring the waves of anger coming from Marc. “Yes, *we* do. I won’t promise they’ll work, but my record is good so far.

If that changes, I'll resign and someone else can take over our great plan."

"Are you saying Safe Haven's goal should be world peace?"

"That's crazy!"

"We can't do that!"

"Why not?" Angela shot back. "Every other group we've met just wants to survive. They aren't working on fixing a damn thing, and while we're waiting for a new government to draft new laws, the old ways are settling right back into us. You know what I mean. The pettiness, the politics, the violence. We have to stop it."

"Why us?"

"Because there is no one else for the next fifty to a hundred years who could do what we have already begun. Wouldn't you like your name next to: Helped give a peaceful future to the world?"

After the bloodshed they'd all been a part of, Angela's vision was hard to resist.

"Any other questions for me before we vote on leadership?"

Most of those gathered understood she wanted the vote on herself first so she could save Adrian if she kept leadership.

"What about your threat to send Smallpox across the country?" It was one of the things that had bothered the doctor the most.

Angela pointed at the crate under her table that had been with the camp the whole time, under Tommy's watchful eye. "I would never do that to

our country. I knew the bunker was going to make contact. If Jeff had hit the button, the rest of the charges would have gone off, trapping the remaining soldiers next to us, where we could wipe them out with our gifts. It was a bluff.”

It was a relief to hear it.

“More questions?”

Marc slowly moved to the center of the crowd. “I have one.”

Angela stiffened. This was the moment when Marc could wreck it all. Though she knew he’d made peace with the witch, Angela didn’t know what choice he’d made.

“What will happen if we hang that traitor?”

“I’ll die,” she answered simply. “And so will you. So will Charlie. There are things coming that we still need him for.”

“You’d save him anyway.”

“Yes, I would.”

“And you’d lie to save him.”

“Yes, I would.”

“Then why should we believe you that he’s still needed? How can we be sure you’re not making it all up to save him?”

“I don’t need to do that!” Angela shouted, surprising them all. She shoved back to her feet, letting her anger be felt. “If I want him alive, there’s not a person here who can take him from me!”

Angela moved toward the crowd; they flinched back in fear, some of them getting up to run.

“I’ll honor all the votes.” Angela spun around and went back to the table, then by it. She headed for the rear door. “If he dies today, I’ll still keep fighting for Safe Haven until the same happens to me. Hold your vote.”

Angela stormed from the hall and ran into a small crowd of Eagles who quickly surrounded her with their bodies as she headed for her room.

The crowd’s panic left with her. Marc was able to get the ballots passed out, aware of the hateful glowers nearly all of them were giving the man who’d been left alone to face their anger.

Marc resignedly motioned a few Eagles that way and continued working the crowd. Like it or not, he had to accept that she wasn’t lying. If she wanted Adrian, all she had to do was let her witch out.

“Pass those up and we’ll start counting.” Marc roamed the mob that was whispering and muttering as they made their choices. He had little doubt they would choose to keep Angela in charge. It was the vote over Adrian that he couldn’t get an estimate on. Most people he moved by still wanted death by hanging, but Angela’s warning about more danger coming was hard to ignore. She’d never been wrong.

2

Angela was only in her room for a couple of minutes before her somber team began arriving.

Angela understood they weren't going to wait until after the vote. They wanted to know now.

"Be patient." Angela glanced toward the door.

An instant later, Peggy and Hilda joined them, followed by Dari, the leader of the new descendants.

Angela waved; the door gently shut. "Dari came for the answer too. She's not one of us, though. Her group is leaving."

Dari nodded respectfully. "Yes. My people and I have voted as well. While we applaud your efforts, we have no faith that humans can be reformed. We wish to create our own laws and cultures."

Angela sighed unhappily. "I assumed that when you voted for my death."

Angela's team didn't need to hear more.

Becky and Cynthia sent out their rage together.

Dari collapsed; blood trickled from her mouth.

"Her group is also corrupt." Angela sighed. "We'll have to handle that."

"We will." Jennifer helped Samantha drag the body away from the door.

Angela took a deep breath and gave them the details they'd been hoping for. "I did it. The woman's name is Marcella. She's the first."

The females cheered, but quietly, aware of the fine line that all of them would now be walking.

"And no one knows?" Peggy was old enough to understand how some of their males might react.

"Those in this room do." Angela didn't tell them there were others. The males who knew of this part in her scheme were the men who'd helped devise it.

“Then we’ve done it?” It was important to Tracy that what she’d gone through had been for something.

“Yes. Women will now get their chance, providing that’s what fate wanted.” Angela tried to listen to the voting while talking to her team. “If we were wrong, then I expect Marcella to be killed quickly. She became rather...obsessive over the idea the instant I planted it.”

“We’re ready!” a guard called from outside the door.

Angela strode that way. “We’ll leave that mess for after the result of Adrian’s vote. Handle her group during the aftermath.”

The women stayed behind to discuss exactly how that was to be done.

Angela went back to face her verdict.

3

Angela: 87%

Marc: 10%

Adrian: 3%

Angela reread the numbers in surprise. She had honestly expected them to want Marc now. She looked up at the quiet, almost grinning crowd. “Are you guys sure this shouldn’t be 87% for Marc? He’s the good one.”

Marc chuckled. “That’s my baby-cakes.” He was relieved at the vote. He didn’t want leadership of everything.

Angela took a moment to wander through the people, seeing that Adrian had been taken back to his cell. Even those who had voted for Marc or Adrian were content with the outcome. Except for Kendle and Kenn, of course. Even Tonya had voted for her, though as a member of her team, Angela wasn't sure how much that had colored it.

Marc went to the front of the room. "We went ahead and voted on Adrian."

That got Angela's immediate attention.

Angela didn't show anger that the moment was already gone, but Marc knew she was upset. "We couldn't do it all your way, not with him. We chose his death."

Angela closed her lids and tried to think of a way to stop it.

"We picked hanging." Marc felt her horrible pain. The witch was making sure he got it full strength. "But we know you have the power to overrule it, as the guardian."

Angela had never loved Marc more. He'd given her a way. "Why would you do this? You hate him."

"That's awfully mild for what I feel. And that's what you'd come to feel for all of us after a while."

"I wouldn't do—"

"We know better."

The crowd thought he meant them, but it was the witch and the demon that Marc was referring to. "We chose to leave his punishment up to you."

"You said your justice wouldn't be gentle and we've witnessed it." Greg's tone was ugly. "Will

you make sure he feels as bad as each of us do over his betrayal?"

"Yes, I will." Angela's eyes glowed. "He deserves the death you all want. I'm sorry I can't give it to you."

"Will you make him pay?"

"Make him hurt!"

"Do it where we can see it!"

Angela felt Adrian listening and refused to allow her pity to interfere with this final stage in their damn grand plan. She hoped to never have to create a new one. "My word on it."

"Then start now." Marc waved for Adrian to be brought out to hear his sentence.

Angela was connected to Adrian in every way now. His torment was almost more than she could take. There were no doors, no walls between them. There never would be again.

It's okay, Adrian soothed over his own anguish. I knew this would come. That's why they have you to guide them.

I'm sorry.

So am I. For everything.

But it had to be this way?

Yes. Now take your place as leader and hand out my sentence. I've more than earned it.

As soon as Adrian came into the room, Angela's voice rang out with horrified finality.

"Adrian Mitchel, you are hereby banished from Safe Haven Refugee Camp. If you ever step foot inside our gates, for any reason, the nearest camp

member is to shoot you down like the rabid dog that you are. Case closed.”

Chapter Thirty-Three BK5

Aftermath

1

“So what happens now?”

At Neil’s question, everyone looked at Angela, confident she already had plans in place for the next steps of their survival.

Angela glanced around and saw the same desire she held in her heart: a peaceful camp settled somewhere for the winter. “Get packed for the trip we voted on before the soldiers came. It’s time to start Safe Haven Settlement.”

A huge cheer rose through the awning; the bubble flashed to life at the emotion. Crimson-killing green and gold swirled through the shield. Streaks of blue mingled with the bright, happy colors of a satisfied population.

Except for the woman lingering nearby, waiting for the moment that Angela would deliver what she had promised.

Angela turned around to stare at her rival.

“You can’t do it, can you?”

Angela didn’t blink. “No. There is no cure for this new sickness. The plan was always to kill you.”

Kendle lowered her head, terrified and glad at the same time. “Please.”

Angela placed a hand on Kendle's arm. "Not even if you had slept with them both. I need you on my team. I'm a woman short now."

The reminder of Crista's death brought sobriety to the mood.

Angela dropped her hand. "Control it, feed it, and learn to adjust. Or kill yourself, because I won't."

Kendle thought of a hundred things to say. "Thank you."

Angela knew it was for saving Adrian's life, not for the place on her team or the welcome that Marc had arranged for her when he'd come back.

Angela's face lit up with deep strength. "It's my honor. I mean that. Now go take your place with my team. You've earned it."

Adrian was being led from the room by a group of Eagles that weren't holding back on what they thought of him. Angela turned away from it. "I want him outside our gates in the next ten minutes. Give him the clothes on his back, one empty gun, and a knife. A true survivor doesn't need more to start out with."

"What about Conner?" Adrian might not be dead, but he wished he was and that was almost enough for now. In fact, the more Marc thought about it, the more this sentence seemed fair. Adrian would suffer constant torment instead of a fast snap.

Angela went to the front of the room again. The crowd slowly quieted as they remembered they weren't finished yet.

“Conner Mitchel has been arrested for a moral violation. Because there is a pattern and because of who his father is, I chose to hold a camp trial.”

Conner came through the door his father had been taken out, face swollen from crying. He looked even younger than he was.

Nice touch. Marc frowned. *Like father, like son.*

“Tell the camp what you’ve done.” Angela gestured. “If you don’t, you’ll be found guilty anyway and we’ll go straight to sentencing.”

Conner had listened to his father’s advice. “I was following Candy around. I like her. I’ve been watching her since Lee died.”

“What else have you been doing?” Angela knew the camp needed a real reason for this trial.

“Playing with myself while I spied on her.”

Now the camp understood all too well. The shouts were ugly.

Angela let them vent for a moment so Conner would understand the seriousness of his actions. She needed him scared. Angela motioned the object of his affection to stand up. “Did you know Conner was following you around?”

Candy looked stunned. “Not a clue. I’m not a... Are you sure it’s me?”

She glanced at the boy and in that moment, there was no denying it. The instant she’d come into view, Conner’s eyes had glazed over and a sickly smile had creased his face.

“Do you want to press charges?”

Candy, who found it creepy and had an idea of what that type of behavior could lead to, nodded reluctantly. “Yes, I do. Make him the first example for other stalkers.”

Angela motioned them to bring Conner over to her. “Is there anything you’d like to say in your defense?”

Conner thought of a lot of excuses and ways to beg, but in the end, his father’s warning was the clearest.

“She’s in a hard spot over you, because of me. Tell them what they need to hear.”

Conner cleared his throat and looked at Candy. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t control it. I’ll stay away from you if they let me stay. If you’re in the mess, I won’t be. When you go to bed, I’ll be on a shift on the other side of camp. I’ll stay away.”

Candy didn’t feel the guilt he was hoping for; she didn’t even respond.

Conner’s fear came through. “I’m not like him. I really am sorry! Please don’t blame me for what he did.”

Angela felt the mood shift and took over. “Unless anyone has more, I will hand down the sentence now.”

No one spoke. She took a second to scan their thoughts for the needed level of punishment. She found that most of them were willing to forgive and forget what they viewed as a minor transgression now that he had apologized and shown remorse. His

vow to avoid Candy had also helped. Angela once again admired Adrian's cunning.

"We find you guilty of a moral violation. Because you took your obsession outside your tent, you are conditionally banished from Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Join your father." Angela left the room amid the shouts of both approval and the opposite, sure that once people thought about it, they would realize his sentence wasn't as harsh as it seemed. Conditional banishment would allow him to still receive some of the benefits of Safe Haven and also give him the time alone with his father that he'd wanted all along. It was a win for both sides on the teenager's trial.

"What does conditional mean?" Marc wasn't willing to let it go.

"Because of his age, in time he can be evaluated for reentry to the camp, after requirements for rehabilitation have been drafted." Angela went to the front stairs, where Adrian was already being loaded into Marc's truck for an escort to the perimeter.

"Will he make it and come back?" Marc wanted to know if he needed to have the Eagles ready to shoot that one too.

"Yes. Conner's love for Candy and friendship with Charlie will bring him around." Angela took a step down as Adrian was shoved into the vehicle by angry men who still thought he was getting off lightly.

“And will *that* one be let back in some day, like Conner?”

Angela studied Adrian, seeing his hope for her answer. She shook her head. “No. What he’s done cannot be forgiven.”

The escort vehicles began to roll.

Satisfied, Marc hit radio. “Those are Eagles in that truck with him. Rocks and bullets will bring out the Ghost. I don’t advise it.”

All up and down the crowded street, rifles and handguns lowered; stones were subtly dropped. Marc’s anger was almost as terrifying as Angela’s.

Angela wanted the last sight of her to be burnt into Adrian’s mind. She slowly turned and slid into Marc’s arms. “I love you.”

Marc knew and approved, dipping his head for a soft, lingering kiss that sent fire into his eyes. *You taste good!*

Angela laughed.

Adrian leaned his head against the truck and wished he were dead. Marc hadn’t even let him have that.

Do it! Angela commanded mentally.

During the chaos of Adrian’s departure, her girls would eliminate the last threat to their camp.

Gunfire rang out nearby. They all turned to watch the female Eagles rushing over the descendant camp, shooting and throwing a final judgment.

Many of the witnesses immediately assumed Safe Haven descendants would be controlling their

own kind as well. It seemed to release the final layer of pressure among those who had remained. The rotten fruits and vegetables people had scrounged began to pelt the rear window, aiming for Adrian.

Angela put a hand on Marc's arm when he would have ordered them to stop. "The Eagles know who it's for and you picked vehicles with the strongest glass we have. Let them vent."

Marc happily twined their fingers. "You're the boss."

2

Angela keyed the mike, sitting in the lead vehicle of their short, crammed-in convoy. "This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We are leaving Lookout Mountain, headed east. We have won the war. Freedom is ours!"

The radio began to light up with emotional responses and questions, but Angela flipped it off, sure Kenn would cover that. He and Tonya had been waiting outside her truck door a few minutes ago. She'd quickly silenced his waiting tirade.

"If I had told you to destroy that basecamp, you would have wanted to make a plan, recon, gather a full level of men, and the best weapons. I got the job done with..." Angela eyed Kenn from head to boot. *"two hand guns, a k-bar, and Marc as your backup. You didn't need all that other shit, so I didn't give it to you."*

She'd sent the couple to cover the dead radio that Kevin's absence had given them. After things settled down, Angela planned to restart the broadcasts for survivors, as well as news reports and the music. After that, Adrian's dream of radio survival classes that would help those in their camp and those not here, could be realized. She would honor his sacrifice by bringing all the other smaller dreams to life. His notebooks were full of ways to repair the damage of the past and she intended to follow through on each one. It would take a lifetime—exactly what she'd sworn to give when she accepted this amazing job.

“I caught something I'd like to ask about.” Jennifer was in the bunk behind her.

Angela nodded, pushing her boots off. “Shawn and Greg know everything. I went to them when I first decided it could work.”

“You told two men?” Jennifer was shocked. She hadn't mentioned a word of it to Kyle. She had waited for this moment to bring it up, while he was busy directing the move. She'd assumed they would have a silent conversation.

“Yes. I had to know how men would react to the news if they found out, so I could account for it.”

Jennifer caught the wording. “You mean there was a second plan? One for if they *couldn't* handle it?”

“There may have been the start of one, but after I talked to Shawn and Greg, I realized something. Men are tired of always leading and then always

getting the blame when things go wrong. If we can do a better job, they'll adjust."

Jennifer was relieved by that. She didn't plan to slaughter Kyle in his sleep, like the images suggested.

Angela chuckled. "Neither do I. I like my men alive when I kiss them."

Jennifer blushed. She'd been thinking about Kyle's mouth.

"Go on with your observation."

It took Jennifer a moment to remember what she'd wanted. "Oh, uh, right! You said we're going to change the world. I know that starts with the people around us and we've now eliminated several groups of survivors who could have interfered. Was that part of the plan too?"

"Smart," Shawn murmured.

"Yes, she is. It's why she's here instead of Samantha or Cynthia." Angela found Jennifer's eye in the mirror. "It was all part of my plan. The only thing that I didn't cover was Donner being obsessed with reaching the Maker. Everything else was in there."

Jennifer stewed on it. "Did you put Kyle in danger so I would realize how I felt about him and stay to help you do this?"

"No. I needed him driving the van. He's meticulous on time and always has been. I did see what could happen from it however, and made the arrangements."

“You did that with all of us, studying our reactions and then planning around them for the best outcome?”

“Yes.”

Jennifer asked one more question. “And now that we’re going around taking out rival groups and the bunkers, controlling the radio, choosing who lives and dies, are we the new government? Did you just assert Safe Haven rule over the entire United States?”

“Very smart.” Shawn snickered. “Kyle is so in over his head.”

Angela chuckled with him. “Yes, he is.” She leaned her head back and propped her feet on the dash. “Get me to our new home by sunset and I’ll tell you which Eagle to ask for a one-night stand.”

Shawn laughed. “What if I get you there an hour before sunset?”

Angela blew him away. “I’ll tell you which one will sleep with you for the rest of your life if you want her to.”

Shawn hit the gas.

3

“I sold us out. You know that right?” Greg looked over at Marc, who was bringing up the rear. “I can’t keep throwing up walls whenever you’re around.”

Marc had been puzzled by Greg’s defenses, but he hadn’t punched through, assuming the man was

hiding good feelings about Adrian not being killed.
“What is it?”

“She came to me not long after Adrian put her on our team. She told me what she was planning and then asked me how I felt about it.”

Marc understood he meant Angela and went into alert mode. “What plan? This battle? Adrian?”

Greg looked over with a frown. “Putting women in charge. She got some of the bunker females to convert to her ideas. They’re out there right now, spreading it.”

Marc sat back, dumbfounded. *That explains everything!*

“Are you...pissed?”

Marc started to laugh uncontrollably.

Greg stayed quiet, worried.

Marc slowly got himself under control, but inside, he continued to roll on the floor at the irony. Angela had hidden it from him because she didn’t think he’d want women in control. It was hilarious.

4

Adrian saw the two vehicles flying up on him and pulled over across the road. He didn’t know if it was someone who might be a threat to the relocating camp. He wanted to check them out.

Adrian stood near his open driver door, grateful to Kenn for providing him with wheels. The Marine had also made sure he had a kit and a radio.

The two small cars were rusted, but seemed to be capable of good speed. Adrian was already considering the possibilities before they came to a stop. The Sergeant in the driver seat was someone he could use.

As the small group of soldiers got out of their vehicles, Adrian had to wonder if Angela had refused them entry so he wouldn't be alone.

"She told me you needed us more than she does," David told him as soon as they were in speaking distance.

I love you! Adrian sent.

Angela didn't answer, but Marc did.

That's your only pass. You've been banished. Don't break it or I'll come back for you.

Adrian growled in fury. He wouldn't even be able to talk to her? "No! No!"

Laughing, Marc finally closed the mental door between them that he'd kept open since the trial decision. He would never again trust Adrian to do the right thing unless he had something to gain from it.

5

"Did we do the right thing?"

Jeff shrugged, reaching down to flip the radio off. "Hard to say." He glanced over. "Do you want to go back?"

“Not really.” Kevin already felt more relieved with it just being the two of them to watch out for. “Do you?”

“No.” Jeff could feel Angela scanning for him and slowly spoke to that voice inside. *Can you make it so she can't find me?*

Yes.

Do it please.

For a brief second, there was a feeling of lost joy and then his ears popped and Jeff couldn't feel her scanning them anymore. *Will she know?*

Yes.

Can she reach us in other ways?

We cannot avoid the calls that she will send out, but that does not mean we have to answer.

Jeff was satisfied with that. He had an awful plan brewing in his mind and he couldn't have anyone getting wind of it until he made his choice. If he did it, they wouldn't see it coming.

“Are you okay?”

Jeff shrugged again. “As much as I can be. You?”

“Yeah, just disappointed. I put in a lot of time there.”

Jeff thought about the high level position he was giving up and managed to keep a snide remark to himself. Being around so many rookies in Safe Haven had given him better control. “I can take you back.” Jeff was almost sure he would later wish he'd done so.

“No, unless you want me to go. And no biggie if you do. After what I’ve gone through, being alone doesn’t sound all that bad.”

Does he mean that? Jeff asked.

Yes. Kevin thinks you’re too uptight for him, that he doesn’t need a grandfather.

That snapped Jeff’s control. He turned to his passenger with a glower. “I’m not that much older than you!”

Kevin gaped in shock. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

6

“There they are!” Marcella kicked her horse, glad of the masks they’d made for their mounts. The grit was so thick they could hardly see. “Get them!”

Marcella drew up a bit to let the other women have a turn. She had killed the last two stragglers from the bunker. These men had wandered too close to the all-female den. When they’d realized it and fled, Marcella had ordered their first hunt.

Two of her women shot the man they could see, while three more of her girls rode their ATVs over the fleeing draftees. Marcella was sure these men had followed them from the bunker.

“There was one more! Find him!” She held up her torch. The fire would become their signal. Nothing else broke through the grit and ash.

Marcella pulled her facemask tighter and whirled her mount around to go back and search for

prints. They could probably let the man leave, but it already went against their fanaticism to let a man roam their turf. That sex didn't belong here now.

“This way!”

Marcella followed the call and found the remaining soldier surrounded by her group. The females jeered at the man, who tried to break through, but couldn't due to the lack of an arm. Someone had recently cut it off. The blood trail was thick.

“End it.” Marcella's tone calmed them down. “We don't enjoy our work that much, ladies. Remember to respect the duties we've been given.”

“Respect,” they chanted obediently.

Marcella nodded.

Her new XO, Stephanie, lunged forward to drive her knife through the panicking soldier's eye.

The women cheered as the body fell, but not so loudly that it would offend the Maker. Marcella had told them everything. As secretary at the bunker since the war, she'd gone through every document and file the base had and even some in other bases when she could access their data banks. She now knew more details about the conspiracy than anyone alive did. Marcella wasn't a descendant, as far as she knew, but she was extremely intelligent and she'd been given a goal that no one else in history had ever achieved. “I'll be the first of millions.” She turned her horse around to head back to their underground shelter. “I will honor her.”

Marcella thought again about that powerful voice in her head, about how it had whispered for long minutes on how to accomplish such an enormous task. Marcella waved the torch to gather her girls around close enough to hear. She would begin step two right now. “I want a camp vote on leadership in the morning. I want women with me, who are with me. If you vote me out, no problem. I’ll go find a group that does want me.”

Most of the females she’d grabbed from those fleeing the bunker were much younger and easy to manipulate. The older woman was Stephanie, who already knew her place in Marcella’s pecking order.

The girls argued about her leaving, promising they didn’t need a vote.

Marcella was confident she could carry out all the steps of Angela’s master plan. Once she found a few descendants to help her, it would go faster than even her benefactor might have imagined.

7

Angela keyed the mike. “That’s our site for the night, ladies and gentlemen. We’re going to stop here overnight. Do not get out of your vehicles. If you were a member of Safe Haven, you already know it’s standard procedure. If you are new, remember it. If you get out of your vehicle before we’ve cleared it, you are on your own to handle anything bad that comes from it.” Satisfied she’d gotten her point across, Angela doled out the

waiting list of orders she and Jennifer had worked on for the two-hour ride here. “Set camp in the clearing. Center fire goes by the boulder shaped like a big pair of balls. Eagle teams six and one will provide a perimeter around our vehicles. All other teams will clear the area by a thousand feet outside the tape.”

The area filled with activity.

Angela took the moment to observe the general moods. They all seemed grateful that they no longer had to worry about the government coming for them. Angela was finally able to release the breath she’d been holding as she stepped from the truck and found herself facing her team. The men were busy; these women had automatically taken up the slack to come over and watch her six.

“We always will.” Jennifer closed the door. “Where’s our new member?”

“Right here.”

They all looked up to see that Kendle had moved to the top of the semi-trailer. She was kneeling down with a rifle in her hands.

“I’m not sure we can trust her.” Jennifer frowned. “She’s not one of us.”

“I know.” Angela waved it off. “But I do trust Adrian with my life. He said Kendle belongs on the hardest team in Safe Haven. That’s this one.”

“He told me something too.” Kendle didn’t look at any of them. “He said if I wanted to be like you, I had to love you enough to pick up the details. I thought I’d give it a try.”

Angela smiled, one of the few she'd had through the entire battle. "There are a lot of adventures still waiting for my army. I'm glad to have you."

Kendle sighed, already starting to feel Angela's pull. "Push me easy, okay? I still think it would be better if you shot me."

Jennifer nodded. "So do I."

Kendle snorted. "If I can come to feel that about you, I might not even want anything else."

Angela's grin stretched. "That is the plan, dear."

Kendle rolled her eyes. "Another plan starting. Wonderful."

"Who said this one has ended yet?" Angela headed for the clearing as her girls groaned and followed. They kept their hands on their unsnapped holsters, as they'd been trained.

The men who'd held those classes eyed them proudly. Female Eagles wasn't just a female accomplishment. A lot of work had gone into the role of teacher and there was more to come.

Angela stayed in the center of the chaos, directing it herself for a change. She enjoyed the feeling of being able to control something like this so easily now. After what she'd done to the bunker, getting camp set up was a breeze. It also gave her the opportunity to watch some of the results of her hard work. Like seeing Theo and his team working with Candy. She'd asked to help them set up the bathrooms. Theo was currently showing her how to make sure the water tankers were ready to dispense what precious liquid that they had left.

Jennifer took out her pen and notebook. “Trip to the spring?”

“Yes, but not until the day after tomorrow. I want us under shelter before the next storm hits.”

“Should be three days...” Samantha concentrated. “Yeah, three days. I’ll watch it.”

“Food supplies?” Angela fell into mini-meeting mode.

“We have one full month, at three meals a day, for three hundred people. Are we sending the teams out tonight for that?”

Angela shook her head at Samantha, lighting a smoke as she watched the Eagles signal for the supply vehicles and bigger campers to be driven in. “No one leaves camp tomorrow after we’re settled. Skeleton crews on everything.”

“Why?” Cynthia frowned as her stomach growled.

“We’re having a party.” Angela forced a smile this time. “We’ve just finished one of the hardest, bloodiest eras of the new world. We need a night to remind us of what we’ve been fighting for.”

That sounded great to everyone who heard it; the camp finished going up in good spirits as the word spread. It was really over. Angie had ordered a party. She wouldn’t have if it weren’t.

Tensions began to fade as the showers and mess opened after the bathrooms. Li Sing hurriedly got cold food laid out while his assistants got a hot meal started. Angela had told them to butcher a cow this time. They’d done it at the carpet warehouse to

leave the gore with the other messes they expected nature to clean up.

The only unhappy people in camp had lost a loved one. Angela left them alone. Zack and some of the others needed time to grieve. Until they wanted to talk to her, she would treat them the same and not push for more than they could give. There was still a chance that a few people here would take off on their own, like Jeff and Kevin had. Angela thought maybe those two would end up coming back, but she hoped it was for the right reasons and not because they had to.

Canada hadn't seemed like a bad idea for her either, when she'd been waiting for the vote results. She hadn't been able to see the outcome of her trial beforehand because Marc hadn't made his choice yet. Once he had, it became clear and then she'd known what to use on the camp. If he had gone the other way and insisted for Adrian's death, Angela would have done exactly what Marc had feared when he thought it through.

She loved Marc, but if it meant Adrian's life, Angela would have saved him and had to leave herself. After all she'd accomplished, she wasn't going to walk away empty handed or even watch someone else lead these people. From there, the future would have collapsed for everyone, but she had known she wouldn't be able to watch him die, even though he deserved it.

The vow they'd made was more serious than she'd led Marc to believe. He was extremely quick

on the uptake. She knew it wouldn't be long before he sent his demon out for answers, just to verify her story. It was the way Marc worked and it was quite effective.

Angela planned to use that brain of his to ensure that she was never alone with Adrian, even if he had information she needed. As long as she had limited contact with him, she could still syphon off his knowledge. She would miss a few of the finer details by handling it that way, but once everyone saw she intended to have no contact with their banished leader, the rest of the bad vibes in her camp would fade—like the government.

“I'd like to make an adjustment to that plan.” Marc was standing nearby. He looked at her guards. “Give us a minute?”

Angela let Marc lead her to the woods on their right, aware of her team trailing them. They expected her to be distracted. Angela suddenly realized what Marc was about to do.

“It's what you need, right?” Marc had made his choice, but he had to be sure it was required.

“It's not required. You'll cover me.” She stepped into his arms. “No contact unless it's needed, Marc. Not mental or any other. I'll honor that.”

“I know you'll try.” Marc held her back so he could see her face. “I also know you'll do anything to help these people. I won't have you lying and hiding things from me anymore, not even for them.”

“So what do you want me to do?” She let a bit of her pain bleed through. “I’ve banished him, stripped him of not only his camp, but of every single person who idolized him. Even now, Kenn’s not sure if he’ll help him anymore. I took everything except his life and I’m the one who will still feel that with him!” She spun around as the tears wanted to fall, finishing his thoughts. “And it’s because you can’t share, yes. I know I can’t have both, yes. I chose you, yes. Don’t make this any harder for me than it already has been.”

Marc was stung, but he could also see it from her point of view. She’d stayed loyal despite amazing odds and she would continue to honor his wishes by not sharing her love with another man. He didn’t think it was too much to ask for, but he was only in love with her. If he had felt this way about Kendle too, he would have found it hard to pick between them.

“Thank you for being able to understand that without hating me. I didn’t mean for any of it to happen.”

“But his love is the reason all of this happened.” Marc pulled it from her mind. “That’s why you care so deeply for him. He gave up everything he needed and wanted, to provide these people with a future.”

“Yes. And now he’s hated. It breaks me to see him so disrespected.”

“He’s bad, Angie. When are you going to see that?”

“He matches that side of me, Marc. When are you going to understand *that*? He fills things in me that you never will because you’re decent. He’s an oozing stack of slime and I need him, or I’m so alone that you can’t imagine.” Angela walked away.

Marc studied those words, trying to understand. It wasn’t easy for him because he still saw her as one of the good guys, even after she’d taken so many lives and begun to change the order of the world. She was still his Angie.

She’ll always need you for that, the witch spoke up when Angela didn’t. She needs him for the other side. There are places you can’t go without being corrupted and she will not let that happen. Instead, she intends to bottle it up and hope no one shakes her enough to blow the top off.

Marc had already made his choice; he sent it with the command of an alpha even though he knew she was strong enough to laugh it off. *Don’t ask, don’t tell.*

Angela stopped and turned around. She looked at him for a long time.

Marc was almost sure she would refuse his concession. He was hoping for it.

“I stand by my word. Keep him away from me.”

Marc let out the breath he’d been holding. “Thank you.”

Angela turned away without answering. Sacrificing her needs for others was in the job description. She’d been doing it her entire life and she saw no reason to change it now, especially not

when she had already seen the future. The next few years would be hard even without Uncle Sam breathing down their necks. She needed Marc's love to see her through it. If fate was kind and the last of her vision could be changed, she would never have to call on this moment and use the free pass he was currently assuring her that she had whether she wanted it or not.

Marc wasn't taking any chances on driving her into Adrian's arms, but he didn't understand how determined she was to stick to the deal she'd made. The scientists hadn't been able to reverse a corrupt descendant and neither had Adrian that she knew of, but that didn't mean it couldn't be done. In time, she might even be able to forgive herself for the awful choices she'd made. When she'd told the jury she hadn't known until the calls went out, she'd been lying.

Her first earthshattering moment of contact with Adrian had taken them through a flash of the future neither of them had fully understood or appreciated then, but it had been clear that Adrian wasn't the good man he'd been pretending to be. Right then, she'd been tempted and bribed with information, power, and eventually, adoration. Adrian had manipulated all of them from moment one and she'd known. He was an evil genius. She'd wanted to learn everything he had to teach.

That hadn't changed.

Chapter Thirty-Four BK5
Coming Home To Roost

1

“Has anyone seen Dog?”

Marc’s query caused Shawn to sigh. “I have.”

Marc made his way through the crowded mess to the center table. “I haven’t seen him since we left the lodge. He said he’d find his own way back.”

Shawn didn’t like his job right now. “Dog wanted me to tell you he’ll be back before we leave for the island, but he has scents to chase right now.”

“He left?” Marc was dumbfounded. “Without saying goodbye?”

Shawn sighed again. “He asked me to give you something.”

Marc leaned down, expecting a whispered message.

Shawn grabbed him for a tight bear hug and then quickly shoved him back. “He said he’d always wanted to do that.”

Shawn quickly left the mess of curiously staring people, knowing the word would spread fast.

Did you know this too?

Angela was just as surprised as Marc. *No.*

Will he come back?

Angela closed her eyes as her table went quiet, realizing they were missing something. Around them, the mess of people continued to mutter and chat about all that had happened.

Yes.

When?

There is snow on the ground, but the camp women do not look different than now. Not long.

Marc was relieved.

Angela rubbed his arm as he came to sit next to her.

Marc knew she wanted updates and flipped open his book. He'd never expected Dog to stay with him forever. He would have to be glad that the big animal would return.

“Room for us?”

Angela forced cheer into her voice. “Of course.”

Everyone at the table knew it was faked and respected her more for it.

Tracy stayed standing. She was on watch over the mess. Her bruised face was a constant reminder of what they'd gone through.

“I'm sorry.”

Angela shook her head. “Your feelings weren't wrong, just how you lost control. I don't hold it against you.” Angela looked at him. “Do you hold it against me?”

“Yes, I do.” Charlie felt the table go cold, but he didn't take it back. “I'll work through it like everyone else who feels you went too far.”

“All 17% of them” Angela shoved up from the table. “It’s an amazing approval rating for any leader.”

Angela motioned Tracy to follow and left a frowning, glowering table.

Charlie frowned. “What?”

“Boy, you need to be turned over my knee!” Marc swore quietly. “I almost had her in a good mood so she’d sleep.”

“I can’t lie to her!” Charlie protested. “I don’t like what she did. And why does 17% make her so mad?”

“She’s not mad, Charlie. She’s hurting. A chunk of her population doesn’t want her as their leader anymore.” Marc felt her pain too clearly. “But she loves every one of them.”

“He’s too young to understand.” Kyle often had the same issue with Jennifer over the deeper layers of adult emotions. “Just keep him away from her for a while.”

“Agreed.” Marc’s tone became set in stone. “Until he can show some respect for her position and her pain, it’s contact by my permission only.”

Charlie started to react badly and then caught himself as he realized that was part of what they meant.

“When you can control yourself, that will change.” Marc stood up to go after Angela. “Until then, how about you spend the evening doing Tracy’s shift? Send her to a hot shower—alone.”

Marc caught up to Angela, seeing she'd already sent Tracy toward the campers.

"It'll help with soreness." Angela tried to smile. "Thank you. She wouldn't have taken the night off if I'd tried to give it to her."

"She doesn't want special treatment."

"No. She's tough."

Marc saw she wasn't heading for an obvious part of camp and slid an arm around her shoulders.

Angela burrowed into his welcoming warmth, wishing she could feel the peace that was settling over the rest of them. Even Marc was calming. He'd already shoved the soldier back into his cage.

"I need permission to leave camp." Kendle had trailed them from the mess, under the disapproving eyes of the guards.

"You don't need it." Angela didn't move from Marc's arms. "Come and go as you please."

"You know where I'm going..."

"Yes. Nothing will change for you here, as long as you walk the line."

"He told me that. I had to be sure."

"Then go. I've already informed the gate guards to let you through."

Kendle left without a single glance at Marc. She wasn't stupid enough to make eye contact in front of Angela after witnessing the destruction she could hand out when provoked.

Marc suddenly felt like a rookie. He held her back to look at her in astonishment. “You knew all along! You planned it this way so he wouldn’t be alone!”

Angela stared for a long moment, considering, and then turned away without a response.

Marc followed her in a daze. Angie had known Kendle was coming. Charlie had warned them. He’d said Adrian would like the island woman.

Angie had planned all of it! To save *him*.

3

“Do you guys want to talk about it?” Samantha asked the question reluctantly. It had been perfect for her; she didn’t want to hear it hadn’t been that way for them. That would mean she couldn’t do it again.

Samantha noticed the silence, and looked back and forth between them. She saw red faces and averted eyes, but no desire to end their new closeness. “If it gets to where you don’t want to, I need you to tell me.” She led them through the camp that was starting to settle in for the night.

“We, uh...discussed it after you crashed.”

Jeremy gave him an encouraging look, but Neil wasn’t sure where to go from there.

Jeremy was forced to pick up the slack. “We kinda figured that this, uh, well it solves the jealousy issues.”

Both men braced for her anger.

Samantha let out a sound of relief. “We should celebrate. Let’s go dance.”

“What?” they answered in perfect harmony.

Samantha grinned, curling her arms around theirs as she walked between them. “We won, you know? We deserve to dance. I hear the music starting.”

Neil and Jeremy allowed themselves to be led to the small dancing area that had been made with gravel and then roped off with the last of the yellow caution tape they’d had since the beginning of Safe Haven.

Jeremy gently pushed her into Neil’s arms, detouring to the lost-looking woman standing near the musicians. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. Why?” Cynthia’s voice was too bright.

Jeremy followed the instincts he’d learned from his time in this camp. “Come on. You need a dance.”

Cynthia went willingly. Daryl was on duty and she was feeling lost.

Jeremy kept a reasonable distance between them, mindful of the surprised glances they were getting. “Tell me what’s on your mind, pretty lady.”

Cynthia rolled her eyes, but couldn’t stop the smile. “I’m okay. It was a long run.”

“Don’t we know it!” Neil agreed. Samantha had immediately inched them closer when Jeremy led the reporter onto the gravel dance floor.

“We care about you.” Samantha meant that. It wasn’t all jealousy that had brought her over. “Lean on us when you need friends.”

Cynthia rested her head against Jeremy’s shoulder where he could feel her struggling not to cry.

Unsure of what she needed, Jeremy was relieved when Samantha took Cynthia’s arm and led her to a quiet area. The two females perched in the branches of a tree.

The men stayed alert below, scanning the shadows. They hoped Samantha could help the reporter, but from what Neil had discovered about her coming child, it didn’t look good. There was one descendant here who could change the natural order of things and it would take a lot to get Angela to agree. Not to mention the timing. Most of the women were due in the same two weeks, but there was no way Marc would let Angela try to help them until after their own child was born. If Cynthia delivered first, without the magic of Angela’s touch, the future couldn’t be changed. Samantha had given them all the details they’d asked for and then a few they hadn’t wanted to hear.

It will curse Angela again. She’s trying to fall back into being good now, but if she has to do this, it will prove she can’t come back. When she knows she’s damned, with no hope of atonement, she’ll cross every line she’s ever dreamed about, including Adrian’s.

It seemed like Cynthia's child was doomed. None of them wanted to imagine what Angela would do if the child was born without being altered. She wouldn't allow evil to flourish here, no matter what the age.

4

"He won't be content with her for long."

Kenn frowned. He was sitting on their sleeping bag, rubbing Tonya's feet. "You mean Adrian?"

"Yes. Kendle isn't enough for him."

Kenn didn't need to ask what would happen once Adrian sent Kendle down the redline.

"Just my opinion..."

"Go ahead." It still surprised Kenn that her opinions mattered. There was a sharp mind behind those hungry green eyes. Kenn found himself listening to her, often.

"That one wants to be the boss. She isn't going to stop there, but Adrian will only be satisfied with it so long as it doesn't interfere with Angela's plans. As soon as Kendle crosses that line, or pushes him too hard, he'll be done."

"Maybe." Kenn couldn't see a way that Adrian would be allowed back into camp. Letting Kendle serve with Angela was as close to it as he would get. Kenn thought Adrian would hang onto that tiny bit of comfort for as long as he could.

Tonya ran a hand up his bare back. "Do you have duty?"

“No. *The Ghost* does.”

Tonya raked her claws this time, drawing a slight flinch. “Want to pick up where we left off last time?”

Kenn’s face lit up as Tonya pulled a dark wig on over her red tresses. With curls and a satin sheen, it was eerily similar to Angela’s hair.

“I’ve been a bad girl.”

Kenn lunged, taking part of the tent stakes up as he landed next to her. “Yes, you have!”

5

Angela opened her eyes to find the tent gone; her bedroll was on top of the cliff she’d gone to sleep thinking about. Facing west, she was able to see across the entire country.

A giant cloud of flames was spreading across the landscape. Angela glanced down to find a volcano spewing a steady geyser of lava and black clouds. Her magnified view could see bright orange streaks below the surface. Another blast of lava shot into the air, making her flinch.

Volcanic ash was coming again.

After a minute, Angela felt the witch pull back to wherever she went when Angela didn’t need her. A minute after that, Angela herself was back asleep.

Marc held her closer. How long would she remain with him and the camp before she broke? How long would she feel like she had to be with him to repay the debt she felt she owed? A few more

months? Half a year? Not a full one, he was sure. He wouldn't be able to pretend for another 365 days. Angela had outgrown him. He had nothing left to teach and that spelled doom. She was running rings around him and everyone else except for Adrian. It was only natural that she would want to be with her own kind.

6

Before dawn had broken the ugly sky, Angela was up and dressing. She began to fill Marc in on her dream as she slid into her jeans and boots, and then her shirt. She knew men liked the look of a woman wearing jeans and a bra, and she wanted Marc in a good mood for this. "I have to take a walk. I need you to go with me."

Marc was busy staring at the skin he could see and nodded absently. "Sure."

"I don't want the camp to know."

Marc's head snapped up. "To Adrian?"

"He has something I need. I wanted to send you, but I have to be sure he isn't lying."

"Why can't you scan him from here?"

"The bubble is interfering because of so much hatred for what he's done. It won't let his thoughts through to me."

Marc liked hearing that and didn't argue further. "How did that happen?"

"I planned on it."

Marc believed her. It worked perfectly with everything else she'd done. There was no way she could be tempted if she couldn't even hear him.

"Exactly." Angela pulled on her coat and guns. "You ready?"

Marc had already been dressed. He hit his radio as they stepped outside. "Mini-meeting in the mess for all team leaders, XOs, and command positions. Fifteen minutes."

The tent area cleared quickly. It was easy for Marc to lead Angela toward the rear of their perimeter without notice by anyone except the tired level six guards Angela had insisted be left on duty. Marc hadn't asked why.

Angela took over the lead as soon as they were behind the cover of the trees, following Adrian's bitter thoughts without needing directions.

Angela found him by the creek. Marc remained at a distance, respecting her for asking him to come along even though she didn't have to.

Angela didn't waste any time. "Can you give us a minute, Kendle?"

The brunette dropped the beer back into the cooler and stomped off, feeling unwanted. "You're the one he'd rather see anyway."

Adrian's eyes never left Angela. *My Angela*. He slammed his walls into place. "What?"

Angela dropped to a knee by his chair, ignoring it all. She had bigger issues. She filled him in on the dream. She showed no surprise when he handed her

the small stack of files and notebook from under his seat. “You had it, too.”

He nodded, sweeping her for signs of empathy. “Weeks ago and then again last night, with you.”

Angela was flipping through the pages, worry easing. “This is great.”

Adrian shrugged, but didn’t look away, though he could feel Marc’s anger growing. “It felt like I missed something.”

Angela tucked the information under her arm and rose. “I’ll work on it.”

Adrian kept his mouth shut, staring until she was out of sight.

In the upper corner, where he was protected, Conner snored in uncaring slumber. After he’d had time to consider his punishment, he’d realized he now had exactly what he wanted—to be alone, with his dad in charge. He didn’t care that their camp only had two real members. This was enough.

7

Angela went to the mess for the meeting, walls tightly in place. The smell of Adrian that floated up from the pages didn’t break her heart, nor did that tight, neat script which warned her not to push the sheep, only the shepherds when she made her preparations. It was the dog tags inside the folder that almost cracked through her shell. He didn’t feel right wearing them without his honor.

Angela's horror swept over the slowly waking camp in a cool chill that sent people to make sure flaps were zipped and doors were shut.

Angela took her place, nodding thanks to Kenn as he sat a cup of hot tea in front of her.

"Honey is all we have now. Sorry."

Angela liked it sweet, as did many of the camp. She nodded to Jennifer. "Add it to the list. We have to keep them in the luxuries as long as we can."

"Keep up. I'm busy today." Angela brought up the list she'd fallen asleep working on. "I want all the tents replaced with thicker canvases within a week. The team who makes that happen can pick their shift for a week. I want a generous digging crew to start collecting soil. If we hit a full dump load, at least 10 tons in our tri-axels, I promise to send the magic users out on gathering missions. They'll find a ton of things we've run out of, like sugar, coffee, and paper towels. They'll scour the land."

Moods were brightening as Angela went on.

Angela wished the 17% would stop staring in dislike. She could feel them. "In two weeks, we're going to get snow, if not sooner. I want those caves cleared, stocked, and ready for us to move in—in ten days. We'll use all manual labor forms available to us."

Angela took the tray from Li with a curt nod and then flashed a smile when she saw he'd brought her pancakes. She took the time to grab one, roll it up and dip it, then snatch a small bite. "Mmm. Damn,

he can cook. Where were we? Oh, yeah, snow. We need as much rock salt as we can get our hands on. A truckload of it would be ideal. That will require a trip north and it should be the strongest Eagles and the best shots. Nothing good waits up there, but we have to have the supplies. Once things settle down, there are a number of items we might get from that run. That team leaves in three days.”

Her two center tables were now busy writing and comparing notes and jobs. Angela let them go while she sucked down a few more quick bites. She felt like she could eat a plateful.

“It sounds like a lot going on for those ten days.” Becky frowned. “Who has your six?”

Marc started to say he did and felt Angela’s head swivel toward him. He sighed. “Looks like I have a different job. Shawn and Greg did a good job before. They can cover it.”

That was good news for the two Eagles who had thought they were still in Marc’s line of fire.

“Great. We’ll have a second meeting on all of this tonight after we’re settled in the permanent area.” Angela took another bite.

“Do you want us to go check it out beforehand?” Jennifer was still a little restless.

“No. We stay together for the move. There’s a blank spot when I look ahead. Keep the guards awake as we travel. Kenn, get on the radio doing those new observation quizzes. And that reminds me. We’ll restart Eagle tryouts and classes as soon as the ash storm passes. Get something drawn up

that includes promotions for every person who fought in this war and pulled their duty.”

Now that it was over, their population had increased through four camps that had requested to merge with theirs and vowed to follow their rules. Angela had all of them in the QZ now. She planned to let them out in small stages that wouldn't disrupt the normal flow she was trying to reestablish. The soldiers would be shadowed for a long time when they were cleared.

“The new rule for the camp is no one goes out exploring alone. If they're with a fighter, all the better. We have less sheep now; most of our camp can take care of itself. We will keep guards and cameras on the supply trucks, the weapons and gear, and the food and water. When we get fuel, then we can worry about guarding our fuel.” Angela ran through her mental list and got on the next set. They would stay like this for all of those ten days and then the workload would ease and some of the living could take place. “Next, is new assignments. We'll do leadership first.”

She dropped a small paper on the table. “This is the new chain of command. I want it posted as soon as we're done here. Someone tell Doug I want him updating the bigger board we brought from the lodge. Once an hour, people will be able to come by and get news.”

“What type?” Cynthia's newspaper hadn't stood a chance under Adrian's leadership.

“You’ll start with updates on amounts for the contest. The amount collected from each site, who has the most hours in for individual lessons, who brought back more than their share of supplies. These are the days that determine the pecking order of every Eagle in my army, regardless of what they were promised by the former CO.”

That was big news. The sound of scribbling became loud.

“After we get into the caves, you’ll be doing that for items found, food grown, animals raised, and other things we need our camp to be excited about. If they have fun shoveling pig shit while racing the guy next to them, it gets done faster, there’s a possible reward for it, and afterwards, there’s camp praise when we’re scarfing down the BLTs.”

Angela got in another bite of her now cold breakfast. “Remember these things I’m telling you. Leadership changes fast during an apocalypse. The next person to fill these shoes could be anyone at these two tables right now. Pay attention to the details as if you already know that you’re going to be cursed with it. Dig for the extra details and every Eagle in Safe Haven will follow your lead.” Angela stood up, wanting a second plate before they took off. She glanced around the table, sending out confidence. “In ten days, we will have this entire camp inside those caves and preparing for winter. If we do it in that time, I’ll allow each of you to ask me for something you know I don’t want to give. And if I can, it will be yours.”

“Must be bad.” Tonya was still scribbling notes.

“It’s worse than that.” Angela’s words finally succeeding in scaring most of them. “Mother Nature just remembered we’re still alive. She’s very unhappy about that.”

8

“This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We roll out in five minutes. If you get out of sight, you will have to be placed in the quarantine zone again, also known as the QZ. While we load up, the boss has asked me to remind everyone of our basic rules. She said now that the time for war has passed, we must learn to follow law again. These are the Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties: Abuse (Mental, physical, and verbal) is forbidden here. Punishable by banishment. Fighting, property damage, and violence for any reason but self-defense is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment. Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment...”

Kenn continued to read the entire list as the camp loaded into their vehicles. It was a peaceful start to what would hopefully be their last time doing this for a long while. They would spend the winter in one place. The relief that came from that allowed for joy even in those who were grieving. It was impossible to hold in that feeling after they’d been literally on the road for nine straight months.

Samantha shifted the truck into the wrong gear and threw her hands up in frustration. “I can’t do this!”

Neil hurried to grab the wheel, thinking of Seth’s explanation on Becky’s wild driving. When he straightened them out, he calmly began to instruct her again. “Hit the brake like we worked on first, but do it—”

Grrr!

“Easy,” he finished, listening to the sounds of an engine almost at its limit. “Good. Now hold that position until I come around, okay? Ten seconds.”

Sam nodded, trying hard to control her annoyance. When she lost her temper, things got out of hand.

Neil slid under her, making her laugh.

Samantha wormed her way out of the seat and moved to the passenger side. She’d told him she was too scatterbrained right now for a lesson, but he’d insisted.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief and got them rolling again, to the approval of their rear convoy guards. He and Samantha were carting an empty trailer she wanted for the next garden setup. He’d thought it was a good time for her to try driving the big vehicle again. *Boy, was I wrong.*

Samantha closed the door, not saying anything. She had been trying to track the coming weather when Neil suggested the lesson.

Neil got them up to speed and left her alone, glad to still have the truck. Samantha had a knack

for endangering that type of transportation. Maybe he'd talk to Jeremy about switching to a minivan or something else as pathetic for top level Eagles to roll around in. She'd be safe with that, right?

Neil watched the rear sentry jeeps fall in and then close the gap to the bumper of the truck. Jeremy stayed so close, the one he was driving disappeared in the mirror.

Neil snickered mentally. He'd suggested that Jeremy drove like an old lady and even now, when they couldn't do more than 40mph on these turns, the computer hacker was determined to prove him wrong. Neil wasn't sure if maybe that's why he and Jeremy were able to adjust to this setup when other men couldn't even consider the idea. Their need for new adventures was an unquenchable thirst that had been held back by the social limits of the old world. Now that there was only the basics of right and wrong again, it was finally okay for them to be curious explorers of whatever they wanted. They were using that precious free will.

"I find you both amazing for being like me." Samantha smiled softly. "We're the Runners."

"Do you think she's right? Can we change things so all that old shit doesn't restart?"

Samantha shivered. "I hope so, Neil. If not, I've sold my soul to the devil."

She chuckled to let him know it was a joke, but Neil knew there was a bit of truth to that as well. Angela was promising them the moon and stars. She would be given time, but if she couldn't produce the

required results, she wouldn't remain their leader. The crowd would always look to the one who could give them the most and everyone now knew there were other descendants out there who might be able to do more or better.

Samantha snorted. "Not in this country. We've got the best of the lot."

Neil heard the slight edge of idolization and shifted his thoughts to a safer topic. "When are you off duty again?"

"I'm clear until dawn, then I'll be at the training tent with the rest of her team while you guys recon our caves."

"She has you girls on something special again?"

Samantha didn't answer his nervous joke. She wasn't allowed to.

Chapter Thirty-Five BK5

Close

1

“**W**ait. Slow down.”

Marc did it carefully, using the radio to notify the convoy behind them. He peered through the blowing grit in the late afternoon dusk, but saw nothing.

“There’s a woman with a little girl.” Angela pointed. “Up on the right.”

Marc eased forward, knowing she would tell him when to stop. Marc was sure she was already trying to communicate.

“Stop here.”

The truck rolled to a smooth stop; Angela darted out and into the grit before Marc could ask who she wanted to go with her.

Marc swore under his breath as Shawn and Greg ran after her. He began issuing instructions on the radio. The cars and trucks behind them were pulling into those two lanes like they’d been taught for an unscheduled stop. It allowed Marc a narrow view where he scanned and caught a glint.

It’s him. He won’t ever stop following.

Marc wanted the conversation with his demon, but he also wanted to keep to his word. He directed

the demon toward their new goal. *Her hair only came back part of the way. How do I give her more? Is there a better time, method of delivery, length of time? Hell, what if I eat something special?*

Like what? his demon asked.

Marc considered and shook his head. He couldn't find a suggestion that didn't sound stupid. There was still too much he didn't know about their kind.

He has to answer your questions, the demon pointed out. She told him to never deny you any piece of information you ask for.

Marc quickly shut the door on the private questions he'd always wanted to ask. He didn't need Angela to learn some of those. Marc concentrated. *Check in or I'm sending in your full team.*

Sorry, I scared her by stopping so close. Had to catch up. Shawn's with me.

Where?

Twenty-five feet to your left. In a garage.

Marc could hear her impatience and let it go. He knew she could take care of almost anything that might happen, but it wouldn't ever stop his need to protect her. Slipping into the role of boss, Marc hit his mike. "Did either of you remember to turn on your radios?" They were short wave, close-range, walkie-talkies—a new addition from Marc.

Greg answered right away, sounding amused. "We're here. We have two new females. We're headed back now."

Marc saw them a moment later and let out the breath he'd been holding. Shawn was carrying a small child while Angela helped a tall, thin woman wearing a long, open robe over jeans that he could see were filthy.

Angela was speaking rapidly, trying to ease the woman's fear. Greg brought up the rear, head constantly rotating. The group went to the small van behind Marc.

He sighed when he saw Angela climb inside and give a motion to get them rolling. A second later, Shawn slid into the passenger seat, shaking his head. "She's gonna kill me yet."

"I know the feeling." Marc grunted. "What's your beef?"

"She told me I'd meet my mate today. She didn't tell me the woman would have a kid and a husband."

"Oh, damn." Marc tried to be sympathetic. "That hurts."

Shawn stared out the window without seeing anything. "You know what sucks the most?"

"What?"

"She's gonna become an Eagle, I already know it. You should have seen her going for the Safe Haven security deal as Angela laid it out."

"So that's good, right? Having the same line of work is easier on a relationship."

"But I didn't pay attention to the specifics when the rest of the guys went through this! She's gonna

twist me around her finger and I'll have to pass in my guy card!"

Marc laughed. "Join the rest of us. We'll do anything for the right set of titties."

The rest of the ride was filled with the type of male bonding that had been going on for centuries and forged some of the strongest friendships the world had ever seen.

2

In four separate vehicles, descendants stiffened in unison.

In the first vehicle, Jennifer turned to Angela with glowing eyes. "Don't take this one. It'll bring us trouble."

"What happens if we don't?" Angela demanded, both of them ignoring their fearful new companions.

Jennifer's witch blended through in ominous tones. "We might be able to save them, but it will always cost the blood of our people."

Angela turned to Tara. "Ask for your justice and we shall consider it."

Tara paled. "I can't pay y-you."

"We wouldn't take it even if you could." Now that the boss had made the choice, Jennifer would do her duty as Angela's right hand. "I'm Jennifer. Who is it you wish my boss to put out execution orders for?"

In the second vehicle, Charlie looked over at Tracy with glowing orbs. “Stay close to camp for a while.”

Tracy nodded, shuddering. “I will. My word.”

Charlie placed a hand over hers, connecting their minds.

Tracy gasped. “You’re not supposed to know about that yet!”

Charlie chuckled, eyes still crimson. “I’m her son. I have a lot of gifts too.”

For a brief second, Tracy wished she had power. Then she remembered how haunted Angela had looked at mess last night and decided her life was okay right now. In time, this run would be a hard memory and a badge of honor. She’d done her duty.

In the third vehicle, the vet perked up, listening eagerly to the woman trying to barter with Angela. He waited almost breathlessly for Angela to make the choice. If she said no, he would remain in the shadows. If she said yes, that would be the start of her sword of justice being sent out to cleanse the land, as she’d promised. He would be able to serve her openly then, alongside her other adoring killers.

In the last vehicle of the miles-long convoy, Samantha’s shoulders stayed tense. The woman and her child were trouble.

Jeremy came to stand by her door during the stop. He started to tap on the window.

Neil shook his head.

A moment later, Samantha let out a sigh of relief. “She said no. We’re okay... Wait.” Samantha paused. “Damn. She scanned the kid and found something.”

“What does that mean?” Neil flashed gestures to fill Jeremy in. He also lowered the heat. Samantha was roasting him.

“Angela’s going to ask us to do something.” Samantha frowned. “It’s as hard as what we’ve left behind.”

Samantha looked at him with the determination he’d come to respect more than her courage. After listening to her tale of facing down Donner, both he and Jeremy had reevaluated their views of her as weaker. Their woman was an Eagle, a hunter, a sniper, and pregnant with twins. It was humbling. “Is it worth it?”

“Only if you kill them all.” Samantha was a bit dazed from the clear connection to the future. Angela was usually the one to experience this; it was terrifying. “If you miss a single target, we’ll be at war again, with *my* kind this time.”

The End of Book 5

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Deleted Scenes BK5

Inside the camper, Charlie leaned over the edge to gently scrub the front of Tracy's over-soaped hair. He was watching the water run down the crack between her damp, towel covered breasts.

Tracy slid under the water and let their hands rub as they rinsed her hair. It was a morning ritual that Charlie had begged her for; she'd found no reason to deny him such a simple turn on. She was covered and there was a wall between them.

"I could be over it in a second," he whispered in her ear, feeling the need for more this time. She'd said she wouldn't let him touch her yet, but the rebellious teenage hormones inside said he could change her mind.

Tracy felt his power swirl over her and settle against her back as she turned toward him to protest.

He closed his eyes and the sensation grew stronger, as if he were standing behind her. He brought those mental arms up and slowly ran them over her shoulders.

The towel slid from her wet body. They both froze as need and fear filled the camper.

"It's okay," she soothed, aware of nipples like rocks. "Breathe, honey."

Charlie laughed, unable to keep the presence behind her as he took in her glistening body without clothes.

Tracy held still, letting him view what he was eventually going to have. “You like?”

Charlie nodded, sweat breaking out on his neck.

Tracy knew she shouldn’t encourage him at all in this moment. “Make it quick or we’ll get caught.”

Charlie’s eyes widened as he picked the images from her mind. He hesitated, not sure if her viewing that part of him was a good idea. What if he wasn’t built the way she was used to?

Tracy sensed his withdraw and understood as much as a female could. She leaned against the wall and rested her cheek against his. “I won’t look, okay?”

Charlie was ecstatic when she turned around and gave him a pose that had been in his dreams for weeks. Matt had explained what would ease that distraction. It had only taken once to understand the attraction. Conscious of time ticking away, Charlie stepped into the stall with her.

Angela motioned a guard over to keep people away from that camper and then headed for the front gate with guilt riding her harder than it already had been. Another piece of the darkness puzzle had cleared. It was heartbreaking.

You could stop it, the witch stated quietly. Save her.

No, I can't. An amazing destiny waits for them, a lifetime of serving the greater good. I won't interfere.

The witch fell silent, worried about her host. Angela's behavior was almost the complete opposite of how she'd been when the war came.

The demon slipped back to resume studying the data scrolls she'd returned with. There was something going on that the witch hadn't been told or allowed to see and it was terrifying. The darkness on Angela's soul was growing; the witch had no idea what to do next. If Marc couldn't help her, no one could. Donner would have her.

Deleted Scene #2 BK5

By the time Kyle made it to his last stop for the night, he was nodding off behind the wheel again.

Marc recognized it and waved Adrian into the driver's seat.

Kyle collapsed gratefully on a rear bench.

"You okay?" Marc moved aside so the next load of supplies could be brought onboard. It was deliveries for tomorrow. They'd be stopping at so many camps that only a van or truck would hold it all.

Kyle yawned. "Well, Marc. I'll tell you something, if you don't get pissed."

Marc already knew, but he held up a hand anyway. "Word of honor."

Kyle opened bleary eyes and locked onto Marc's grinning face. "That woman of yours is a real bitch. You know that? A real, honest-to-god, ball-busting bitch!"

The other men laughed and agreed.

Kyle shook his head in wonder. "I didn't know how hard she is to please. I thought you were a lucky bastard every night."

"He is!" Adrian slammed the plastic-wrapped crate down and left the filthy van.

Marc's laugh followed him into the cold night air.

“Can’t you get off him?” Kenn hated feeling Adrian’s pain.

Marc stopped smiling, becoming the cold, distant leader Kenn had loathed serving. “No. He earned this every time he put his hands on her, kissed her against her will. And you earned it because you made sure they had time alone for him to do it.”

Kenn lifted his middle finger.

Marc’s surprised laughter rolled into the night.

Adrian clenched his fists. Those were his bonding moments that Marc was stealing, his men and women to command! The rage grew hotter inside Adrian. He hadn’t wanted to be attracted to Angela. He hadn’t planned all of it, despite what Marc thought. The feelings were real. He’d tried to fight them.

“Too damn strong.” He started loading the stack of empty pallets into the small shed behind the tiny campsite. “And she feels it too. Not all my fault.”

They were on the move a couple minutes later. They quickly caught up to Tonya, who had orders to walk down the middle of this rocky, bumpy road. All the men assumed someone would meet her, but there was no way to tell if it would be one of theirs or the enemy.

During their argument, Tonya had been forced to tell Kenn her role and show her weapons. He hadn’t been able to argue the plan on merits, only on his emotions. She’d refused to return to Safe

Haven. As a result, Kenn had stopped talking to her. Marc thought Tonya getting a dose of the old Kenn was a good idea. He had little doubt that the redhead would reevaluate her relationship while walking through the darkness, but Kenn wasn't smart enough to know that's how a woman worked.

Tonya didn't raise a hand as the van went by her. Instead of being scared or unhappy with her role, she was extremely grateful to Angela for the chance to prove herself. When it was done, if they survived, Kenn wouldn't be allowed to treat her like anything except an equal and that was all she wanted. If he still whined and acted like a child about it, she would tell him how it was and he could take it or leave it.

After thinking about it, she'd realized Angela was right. Her baby was Kenn's way back in with the camp and the Eagles, but Tonya wasn't going to let him use their child's coat tails any more than she would use his now. That was the behavior of the old Tonya. She didn't intend to be that ugly creature ever again.

Deleted Scene #3 BK5

Shawn stared in surprise at the woman and her daughter. He could see the signs of abuse, desperation, and a long journey of which they were likely the only survivors, but it was the glow around the woman that had snared his attention. He couldn't look away from her.

Tara stared back, also in shock. The stranger was cute and well-built from what she could see, but it was the warmth in his eyes already waiting to greet her that was startling. She didn't know him...
Do I?

Shawn scooped up the little girl without much thought. She didn't weigh much.

The child slapped Shawn lightly on the cheek. "Hello!"

Shawn recoiled, almost dropping her. "What the hell?"

The little girl clung to his arm and managed to kick him in the shins.

Shawn let go, hopping on one foot. "Stop it! No, really! Quit!"

"Missy."

Tara's voice slammed into Shawn like a bullet and he forgot to cover himself. The little girl shoved her knee up.

Shawn hit the ground, still staring into Tara's stunning brown eyes.

Angela bent down to give the girl a short piggyback ride while Greg helped Shawn. He would need a minute to recover from that first meeting.

Place a Review BK5

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

Marc And Dog

Instead of a gritty fire team or squad of angry Marines, Marc's backup is a lethal wolf that likes to attack when his back is turned. If Marc can't make friends with the fugative animal, it may cost both of their lives.

Marc And Dog

From The Author BK5

Dear Reader,

Another LAW book has ended. Sorry about that. You know what Riddick says: “It all had to end some time.” I do hope you enjoyed this edition. In the next book, we’re going to see how Safe Haven gets their shelter ready for the long winter that’s coming, while forging a new place in the minds and hearts of their fellow survivors. Angela isn’t going to be satisfied until she’s improved their lives and if that means killing a few to save the many, we’ve already seen that she’ll do it.

I’m off to format now and find an Advil. I think I dropped my fingers a week ago and I should probably try finding them. You folks have a wonderful week and remember:

“Respect the stone. Love the stone.”

Waving at you,
Angie

Thank you Kim, Carol, Drew, Stacey, Jeanne M, Allison, Charles, Elizabeth, Angie H, Crystal, John M, Jeff, Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline, Diane, Clara, and Holly for all your hard work!

Author's Chalk Map



Book Six



Copyright BK6
Carved In Stone
by
Angela White

Title: Carved In Stone

Life After War Book 6

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Author: Angela White

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Close

Settlement

We came to these mountains in search of
safety,
Desperate for the peace not found below.
We chose a place among the trees and cliffs,
And coaxed our herd to grow.

We carved our holes into the ground;
We took our comforts deep.
But the earth had little welcome,
And her anger, have we reaped!

The brief calm vanished;
The wildcard was outvoted.
Always in our own blood,
We end up coated.

The walls cry for souls,
Again sent out to roam.
Longing for a peaceful sun,
Among the relentless stone.

Chapter One BK6
We're Here
September 5th

1

In the last vehicle of the miles-long convoy, Samantha's shoulders stayed tense. The woman and her child were trouble.

Jeremy came to stand by her door during the stop. He started to tap on the window.

Neil shook his head.

A moment later, Samantha let out a sigh of relief. "She said no. We're okay... Wait." Samantha paused. "Damn. She scanned the kid and found something."

"What does that mean?" Neil flashed gestures to fill Jeremy in. He also lowered the heat. Samantha was roasting him.

"Angela's going to ask us to do something." Samantha frowned. "It's as hard as what we've left behind."

Samantha looked at him with the determination he'd come to respect more than her courage. After listening to her tale of facing down Donner, both he and Jeremy had reevaluated their views of her as weaker. Their woman was an Eagle, a hunter, a

sniper, and pregnant with twins. It was humbling. “Is it worth it?”

“Only if you kill them all.” Samantha was a bit dazed from the clear connection to the future. Angela was usually the one to experience this; it was terrifying. “If you miss a single target, we’ll be at war again, with *my* kind this time.”

“What are you talking about?”

Samantha knew Angela wouldn’t like it if she told all of the truth, so she settled for somewhere between. “It’s a future problem that you’ll either be asked to handle or overlook. I can’t tell which way she’ll go yet.”

“Can you start from the beginning and speak slowly?” Neil didn’t mean to be snarky. He’d just had enough secret plans to last a lifetime. They’d lost a lot of friends during the war with the government. Thanks to Angela’s plans, they didn’t have any missing members, but everyone was feeling the losses they’d taken, like Crista.

“The woman we picked up asked for sanctuary with Safe Haven. She also asked Angela to send out descendants to do battle with her former captors, who are chasing them. When these other descendants come, they’ll see all our power and we’ll end up at war again. This time, it’ll be with magic instead of guns. The camp will have to run or they’ll be crushed between the two sides. If the new descendants come here, you have to disobey orders, Neil. Don’t let them go and gather their people. I don’t think we can win against that.”

“They’ve sent a scouting team?”

“Yes, but don’t be fooled. The group Tara is currently describing to the boss is gifted beyond what we have in Safe Haven. Angela can’t stand alone against that type of power.”

“Alone?”

“These are trained fighters, Neil. The rest of us won’t be able to damage them with magic.”

“If we kill their scouts, won’t they come after us anyway?”

“Angela didn’t search that far ahead, so I don’t have an answer.”

“But you’re confident enough to ask me to go against my orders, my training, and my honor?”

Samantha realized she wasn’t giving him enough details. “They’ll be too far from their own camp to call out. If you take them out, their people may never know we were involved.”

“We do know how to make it appear like someone else did it...” Neil snapped his mouth shut. He loved Samantha and he trusted her, but he wouldn’t make this choice in mere minutes.

“I’ll talk to Angela.”

That made Neil feel better; he reached over to hold her hand. He loved having someone to do this with, to share the warm emotions that she’d woken in him.

Samantha swallowed a moan. She couldn’t get enough physical pleasure right now. Hunger and sleep were second to sex. Sam assumed it was a

hormone thing, but she wasn't about to dig into that. She wanted to enjoy herself. She'd earned it.

Neil smiled knowingly. The heat in the cabin was intense. "Shower?"

"Yes, please!"

Neil laughed, gesturing to Jeremy. "I'll set it up."

2

"She wants me to stay with you." Shawn frowned in the silent truck when Marc didn't answer.

Marc swung the big rig gently onto the final road that they needed to take to reach Pigeon Mountain. He understood Angela wanted him to make peace with Shawn and Greg for letting her sacrifice herself. Marc was still cold about it, but she had lived and come back to him, so forgiveness was possible. If she had died, the two men would have also.

Marc sighed, tossing his rage into that strong mental cage he'd built for moments like this. He hadn't used it upon first joining Safe Haven, but it was as necessary now as it had been on missions. Not paying attention was likely to get people killed. "What's on her list, besides you and me?"

Shawn had been waiting for Marc's quiet hatred; he was relieved it wasn't coming. There hadn't been another choice. Stopping Angela wasn't something mortal men could do and Shawn

was glad Marc had recognized that fact. “You have point, evenings.”

“Already figured that one.” Marc used a stiff tone to let the man know forgiveness hadn’t actually set in yet. “Next?”

“I need to know your preferences for coffee and food, so I can get your trays right. And what time for your wake up calls?”

Marc looked over in wary confusion. “I get my own food and I use my own alarm. What’s going on?”

“They didn’t tell you.” Shawn’s brows drew together. “Figures I’d be hazed on my first time. I feel like one of the rookies now.”

“Shawn?” Marc drew patience and Shawn’s attention simultaneously. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh!” Shawn reddened a little. “I’m your new personal assistant. You get one when you’re the leader or XO.”

“Kenn didn’t have one.” *I didn’t expect a lackey. I’m forever underestimating her. That has to stop.*

“He had Zack. And good thing, cause no one else was going to volunteer.”

Both men snickered. Kenn had regained a lot of the respect he’d lost, but his mistakes would always follow him. Safe Haven gave a pass on most sins of the past, but the effects of transgressions committed in camp lasted a long time.

“Black and strong for my coffee. The wake up time depends on Angie’s schedule.”

“Cool.” Shawn wrote it down. He’d thought Marc would pick Jax or Quinn for his Man Friday.

“What else?”

“She wants you to supervise the setup with Kenn. She said no one else will catch the small details.”

Marc liked that feeling. “Okay.”

“Great. We have a couple more items and then we can get into the Eagle training she wants outlined.”

Marc was realizing being Angie’s XO would be a lot of work and responsibility. After witnessing how gifted she had become, he’d been having doubts about how much she actually needed him. If she had a list this size for him now, that meant there was a lot more waiting.

“We also need to gather all the numbers on food, water, fuel, and the other items on my list. She wants this one done by morning if possible. I’ll get people on it as soon as security is in place.”

“Security’s already up.” Marc increased speed as the dust cleared. “She sent a crew last night.”

Shawn mentally scrolled through the people in their convoy. “Kevin’s team?”

“And the ants.”

“That’s great! Camp will be up quick.”

“I want mess two hours after we land and lights out by midnight.” Marc ended Shawn’s thoughts of an easy shift followed by a night of drinking and

bullshitting. “All patrols are the dual setup Kenn and I agreed on—half rotating, half stationary.”

“And that was the final thing on her list.” Shawn closed his glossy new notebook. “Sweet.”

Marc went over it a bit mentally, but he kept most of his attention on the road. Now that the wind had settled down and the grit wasn't blowing, the drop-offs and narrow, winding roads were too obvious. He reduced speed even though it wasn't a problem for him, not wanting the twitchier drivers to fall behind.

“I want breakfast with her as much as you can arrange it.” Marc decided to test the man. Was Shawn actually his or one of Angie's endless stooges? “I need to keep track of her eating habits.”

Shawn had been expecting that too. “I'll try to cover that even when you can't be there. But I won't put it in the book.”

“Good.” Time would tell if Shawn could be his or not, but that was a good start. “I'm used to government food, so give me whatever we have the most of each day. Save the best stuff for the camp.”

“Got it.” Shawn understood Marc didn't want any preferential treatment; he liked that. “We're all set on her list. We can get into Eagle training now.” Since claiming best gun in camp, Shawn had been looking forward to the next level tests. He had a lot of ideas.

“Actually, I'd like you to talk to Kenn about it first, then come to me. He'll chop it apart and leave you with what I can use.”

“No problem.” Shawn wasn’t offended. He knew they’d served together before the war and were used to coming up with plans like these.

Marc steered around the decaying top of a tree that had collapsed over part of the lane. He wasn’t spotting signs of people. There was nothing fresh that said humans were here, but he felt them. He was suddenly anxious to be camped so that he could concentrate on his grid. If he sent it out now, his driving might suffer. “From now on, I want someone else behind the wheel for me. For at least a few months.”

“We’re camping for the winter.” Shawn frowned. “Why would you have to leave?”

“I’ll still be going out on supply runs and such.” There was an awkward silence where Marc realized Shawn was holding something back. “Won’t I?”

“Uh, maybe you’d better talk to the boss.”

Marc sighed. “Just tell me.”

Shawn unconsciously leaned away. “She doesn’t want any of the descendants out of camp, but she especially mentioned leadership. The Chain of Command has been grounded.”

3

“We came from Canada. We were held there before the war.” Tara stared at Angela.

“Where are you from?” Angela studied the woman’s clothes. Her blue robe appeared clean for someone who’d been on the road with not even a

bag of gear. The black gym shoes on the woman's small feet did have wear-and-tear, however. Angela was betting her heels and ankles matched. Gym shoes were not good for hiking.

"Maine!" Missy blurted before her mother could answer. "We's from Maine."

Tara gaped at Missy.

Angela pushed harder mentally. Missy seemed almost feral, but with time among her own kind and special care, she might recover. "Why did you leave?"

Tara was still stunned, but none of Angela's people were surprised when Missy began answering questions while drawing on the van seat with a red crayon she had taken from the stuffed pocket of her red and blue jumper.

"They took me when the loud bells came. We rode a train!" The little girl dug the crayon into a small tear in the fabric. "They hurt momma."

Angela gently eased the crayon from the child's tight, filthy grip. "Eat this."

The girl grabbed the apple and chomped it into bits that were gobbled as if they were pudding. As she crunched, the pointed ends of her teeth were visible and creepy.

"What's up with her?" Jennifer didn't trust these new people. They were hard to read. She was laboring for every glimpse into their minds.

"She's been in and out of labs since she was born." Tara twisted her hand into the corner of the

robe that covered her clean jeans. “She’s wild. That’s all I ever seem to know.”

“Tell us your story, from the start to now.” Angela glared. *I’m already tired of this.*

Tara shrugged. “I was born in a lab. I didn’t have parents.”

Before any of the other passengers could interrupt with corrections or questions, Angela sent a glare around the vehicle; mouths snapped shut.

“I’m sorry.”

Tara’s meek words drew disapproval and anger, but not from Angela. “Go on.” She settled back to listen, confident Marc had the convoy covered.

And if he doesn’t, we know who’s bringing up the rear, don’t we? the witch remarked snidely. Adrian’s betrayals were an open wound to the demon.

Yes! Angela flung. One in front, one in the rear, and my teams in the middle. Now will you please shut up?!

Stung, the witch vanished.

Angela swept the uneasy witnesses in resignation. “It was a long nine days, for *all* of us.”

Tensions eased a bit, replaced by sympathy. All the fighters in Safe Haven were feeling the effects.

Attention gradually shifted back to Tara, who had clearly picked up a lot of it. Her face stayed red as she explained how she and Missy had come to be here.

“I was created from donors. Descendants created that way don’t have a bond with their

biological hosts and are considered not to have parents.”

“To break the ethical lines?” Angela confirmed one of Adrian’s endless theories while the others muttered in disapproval.

“Yes. Descendants who have contact with free parents often have to be forced into corruption. Those who have corrupt parents also swing toward the light, but cannot resist the temptations.”

“And those who have both?” Angela asked, knowing if she didn’t, Jennifer would. “One of each?”

Tara’s gaze went to Missy, who was finished with the apple and staring longingly at the hole she’d widened with her crayon. The child was humming softly. “Most of them go bad. It’s hard not to in the labs, especially if they get them young, but some kids resist. It changes them.”

“And if they were already...damaged?”

“They become like Missy. They hurt her!” Tara dissolved into tears.

Angela gave her full attention to the child. “I’m Angie. Will you tell me what happened?”

“They made me do things.” Missy’s young countenance glazed over with hatred. Evil rose to the surface, demonstrating dangerous intelligence. “When I wouldn’t, they hurt my mommy!”

“Are they coming for you?” Angela leaned forward. “Tell me when!”

Missy arched. Power flooded the cabin.

Jennifer grabbed Tara's arm before she could interfere. "Let them be. She'll get the truth from your kid."

Missy's eyes turned solid black as she took a clawed grip on Angela's wrist. "A week is all you have. My daddy rides his death train even now."

Angela's mind shuddered at the thought of her time on the train, of being below ground and dependent on Donner.

Missy read the gruesome scene in her mind. "You killed him."

"Yes." Angela patted the child's cold hand. "And I'll do the same to your demons."

"For what price?" Flames twined around Missy's hand to sear Angela's finger fuzz.

"You must be good!" Angela used her alpha gift to be certain she got through. The child's physical magic was weak compared to her own. It didn't hurt. They were the same type of descendant, though. "Corruption isn't allowed, not even in children."

"Being good is easy." Missy smiled. The flames receded until they were gone. "I am good."

Angela lifted the little girl onto her lap, where they snuggled for a hug that filled the cabin with relief and serenity. None of them had been sure if Missy was corrupt. Her wild mind was too hard to read. Even Jennifer couldn't make sense of the images she saw in her mind.

"Missy's father is an alpha," Tara told them nervously in the silence. "He took us from the

complex after the war and went to Canada. There were others like us there. Her father wanted us to help lead, but everyone was scared of Missy's predictions. She told them a big fire was coming. We didn't realize Major Donner was the one coming to deliver it. He showed up a few months after we got there. The others were thrilled to be getting help from any government, but I hate soldiers. We didn't go to the final meeting." Tara's eyes glazed over as she recalled the nightmare. "We almost didn't escape the flames when Donner's men came for Missy. I killed them and took a truck. It's hidden not far from where you found us."

"How many others escaped?" Angela kept Missy on her lap, letting the child play with the necklace Marc had given her. The pendant twirled and spun, twirled and spun.

"Half a dozen? Her father was with them. We got separated by the river."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes. He's not far away. We can feel him."

"He wants me," Missy stiffened. "He has questions."

"Questions?" Greg had been observing until now, storing thoughts and information as Angela had mentally instructed.

"He wants to know about death." Missy tucked Angela's necklace inside her Eagle Jacket. "He wants to talk to my angel."

“The angel of death?” Jennifer was horrified. Surely, she was misunderstanding. This child couldn’t communicate with death... Right?

Angela frowned. “Why does he want to talk to your angel?”

“I told him his death date. He wants to negotiate.” Missy clutched Angela’s wrist. “He hopes to find a way in.”

“To control the angel?” Jennifer wondered if the matching clothes of the people in this van—jeans and jackets—wasn’t allowed where Tara came from. The woman kept eyeing their patches with tiny frowns.

“He thinks he should be the one who decides life and death for the world. He has stolen more lifeforces than any other descendant.” Missy regarded Angela reproachfully. “More than you.”

Angela shuddered. The images Missy was replaying were as bad as the carnage Safe Haven had left in its wake—maybe worse, because the Canadian corpses included elderly and children. Missy’s father appeared capable of killing without remorse. Angela wouldn’t know for sure until he arrived, but as of right now, the tall, sandy blond man in Missy’s memories was on her new list as a priority target. “What’s your father’s name?”

“Jack, but he gets mad when people call him Jackie.” Missy didn’t notice her mother’s flinch, but Angela and the others did. “He likes it when we call him Big Jack Devine.”

There was instant recognition for Angela and Greg.

Jennifer drew the reason from their thoughts. Before Adrian's banishment, he'd given all the top Eagles a list of people to watch out for. Devine had been at the top of it.

"What about Kranten, Stevens, and Vlad?" Angela remembered all the names that had brought a sense of dread to Adrian.

"They're with him." Tara's voice was a resentful mutter. "Always. If not, I might have been able to kill him by now. They're his personal defenders and they're sick. They actually *want* to die for him, for the honor." Tara stopped talking as coldness permeated the air.

Angela controlled her anger. *I hate this part of my job, this part of the plans and schemes. I hate feeling so alone.*

"We're pulling up now. Prepare to stop and make your way into the assigned areas. The map is in the glovebox or with your front passenger. I repeat, *drive* to your assigned place. Vehicles left without drivers will be shoved off the side of this cliff."

Angela snorted at Kenn's radio call. He was testy. The com truck was right behind the lead semi. Kenn was scheduled to hand the radio over to Tonya as soon as he parked it in the proper spot. After that, Kenn would stay with Marc and finish his training for these setups. Marc hadn't dealt with this many people in such a limited space yet, but Kenn had at a bowling alley and a few other locations. Marc needed that knowledge under his belt and Kenn

needed a better role model than Adrian, even if it was someone he hated.

“The area is already secured, but it will take a few minutes to get the bathrooms set up. Stay out of the way and it’ll happen faster.” The new people needed these lessons on procedure and Kenn’s attitude said to pay attention. It would also remind the soldiers of the old world and let them relax a bit. The soldiers who had chosen to stay in Safe Haven were mostly draftees, but they had spent enough time in awful military care to need a firm hand.

Angela made two gestures and immediately received a disbelieving glare. She didn’t change her expectant expression.

Jennifer let out a grunt. “Fine.”

“You’ll tell Kendle?”

“Yes.” Jennifer grunted. “You know how much I adore chatting with the survival queen.”

Angela grinned. “Yes, I do.”

“When?”

“Now would be best.”

Jennifer concentrated on the woman she was coming to consider a rival and future enemy. She didn’t like Kendle one bit. *Hey, killer! Boss wants you on the new arrival.*

Jennifer braced for a nasty response, but didn’t get one at all. She narrowed in on her prey and found the scarred island woman asleep in a rear passenger vehicle. Jennifer wondered what Kendle was dreaming about so deeply that she’d missed Kenn’s arrival announcement. She pried, aware of

the dangers and possible bonds that could come from such contact. She entered Kendle's dream carefully.

Oh, God! Jennifer immediately hit the button on her belt. She had to interrupt that. "Kendle to the boss. Report ASAP!"

"Copy..." Kendle's groggy tone said she'd been nudged awake.

Jennifer thought she also detected a note of gratitude and tried to harden her heart. Kendle's nightmares matched her own and then surpassed them. Cesar had been a cakewalk compared to what Kendle had suffered, but Jennifer didn't want to feel sympathy for the island woman—mainly because of Adrian. As long as that former leader had a way in, he would always be able to cause problems. Jennifer resented that. Kyle should have received orders to kill him. Jennifer had voted for it and she wasn't sorry, though she did understand Angela's reason for not doing it. Adrian was a library of knowledge, but he was also a traitor and they couldn't forget that, or worse, actually forgive it.

Jennifer peered at her newest duty and found the little girl staring at her fearfully.

"What?" Jennifer was suddenly cold to her bones.

"She lied."

Jennifer felt her stomach drop. "Excuse me?"

Missy opened her mouth to reveal more, but the van became icy. Her head snapped toward Angela.

Angela nodded. “I mean that. In time, it’ll be proven, but you have to control yourself. If you’re not sure, ask me.”

Missy’s stubborn expression held for a moment, and then her head dropped and she returned to picking threads from the hole in the seat.

Angela glared at Tara before Jennifer could form the next logical question. “Why doesn’t she know the rules yet? How can she communicate so easily if she’s wild? What are you lying about?”

Tara paled. “She’s not hiding anything! Her gifts are frightening, and she’s never been around people who needed her to act normal. In the labs, they kept her wild to promote her powers.”

“What gift?” Angela already knew. Little Missy was currently predicting the fates of people in this van, and Angela noted each one. Missy had all of the same gifts that she did, and then a few more, it appeared.

“She sees...events.”

“Lots of descendants do. Your group didn’t have a witch?” Like Angela, Greg was positive there was more to this story than what they were being told.

Tara’s head shook. “Not like Missy. She predicts endings, based on shifting choices and changes.”

Tara heard the silence and didn’t think they understood. “She sees your exact death, based on each choice you make.”

Angela gave Jennifer a pointed glance.

Jennifer sighed. “Yes. As soon as we’re set up? Marc won’t like us roaming yet.”

“Now, would be better.”

Jennifer obediently left the vehicle that was already surrounded by the Eagles on Angela’s protection detail. Kyle’s team appeared tense. Jennifer approved. They were safe as long as they remembered there was danger everywhere.

The Eagles on duty around the waiting convoy understood Jennifer was on orders from the boss and didn’t comment. They were all aware of Angela’s rules now, and if she was breaking them, there was a good reason. It did make them nervous, though.

Jennifer smiled at Kyle as she passed by him and got a leer in return. She blushed and continued, aware of the snickering and approving murmurs. The camp had flipped completely since Angela’s rescue. Jennifer suspected her request for another son had traveled throughout the camp, but mostly, it was Kyle and Autumn who were changing minds. Watching him care for her newborn was enough to soften anyone.

Jennifer tapped on the door before entering the noisy living area for the youngest kids. She spent a moment with the happy children, but she didn’t linger to help Peggy get the gum out of the hair of two of them. Both of those kids were sporting vivid red orbs as they sat with their coloring books. Jennifer wondered if Angela had this issue covered yet. Descendant kids were powerful.

Jennifer made her way to the rear of the camper, where Cynthia was on duty, stepping over toys and pieces of food the kids had scattered “Hey.”

The reporter’s shirt was stained, short, dark hair wild, and posture defeated. She didn’t respond.

Jennifer slid into the sticky booth across from Cynthia, wiping her hand down her jeans. “You okay?”

Cynthia’s attention was on Hilda, who was trying to change a diaper on a squirming mass of hands and hair. “Earlier, we hit a bump while she was doing that and a pile of shit actually floated through the air.” Cynthia glanced down. “I caught it with my hands. Ever had a shit shower? It’s lovely.”

That explains the smell. Jennifer frowned. “You don’t sound okay.”

“I’m not.” Cynthia’s tone sharpened. “What does the *boss* want this time?”

“Babysitting.” Jennifer noted the tone that said Cynthia had been pushed over the line and then a bit further.

“I’m doing that.” Cynthia shuddered. “Did you know kids this age never shut up? I swear, the one in the red sweater doesn’t even breathe between babbles.”

Jennifer didn’t snicker. She had sympathy for Cynthia. She didn’t want to make things worse, even accidentally.

“Who is it?” Cynthia had hoped to work on an outline for the first edition of her newspaper, but

that idea had been given up hours ago. “And why me?”

“The new people we picked up on the way. Mother and daughter. You have duty over the daughter.”

“Great.” Cynthia sighed. “Who has the mother?”

Jennifer’s voice lowered. “Kendle.”

“Must be trouble.” Cynthia’s face darkened as she swept the kids. “Thank God. Let’s go.”

“I was summoned?” Kendle was near the door as Cynthia and Jennifer came from the noisy camper.

“Boss wants you on the new arrival.” Jennifer refused to stare at Kendle’s scars. She now knew the source of them and thought Kendle was incredibly strong to have survived. It didn’t make her like the island woman, however. It would take more than pity to accomplish that.

“They must be...special.” Kendle couldn’t find any other reason for Angela assigning her to watch someone. She was dangerous. So must her ward be.

“She and her daughter are descendants. Cynthia here, has the kid.”

“Sweet.” Kendle felt no sympathy for the reporter’s pregnancy problems. “Where are they?”

“With the boss.” Jennifer led the way. “She doesn’t believe most of their story. Store details, both of you. She’ll ask for them later.”

It should have felt odd to be taking orders from someone so young, but Jennifer had proven herself deadly and it showed, even in her stride. She no longer appeared scared of the world or those in it. Only the people she loved could be used against her now and she guarded them fiercely.

“Got a short note here, folks. Some good news.” Kenn’s voice echoed across the stopped convoy. “The Eagles need new rookies. Everyone who fought in the last month is eligible! The signup sheet is at the com truck. Stop by at any point today, *after* we’re set up.”

The van door slid open as the trio of women arrived; the little girl barreled out of Angela’s arms with a wild shout. She leapt straight at Kendle, who was forced to catch the sweaty child or fall.

Kendle staggered, but kept them upright.

Missy cackled happily at the juggling. “Like you! Fun!”

Kendle’s heart melted despite her cold exterior. Her scars usually drew the opposite reaction from children. It was another part of her life that Ethan had stolen. She couldn’t imagine ever having her own now.

“You’re gonna watch over me?”

Kendle smiled at the girl. They had the exact same shade of hair. “Yeah. I could kill for you if I had to.”

Becoming aware of the silence, Kendle shifted the now humming girl to her hip and growled at the

gawking members around them. She hadn't readjusted to the fame yet.

Jennifer and Cynthia cackled.

"Guess we're doing a switch." Angela was glad the more observant, experienced members weren't around. Marc would see through this in about ten seconds. She would have to keep him busier than she'd planned. "Kendle and Cynthia will be Missy's settling partners for now. Kendle has nights."

"What the hell did I do to you?!" Cynthia didn't like Kendle anymore than she did kids.

Angela ignored the tone. "Jennifer will assist Tara until this evening, and then someone else will take over that post."

All the females swallowed their protests as Angela left.

Angela went to Shane.

He took his notebook out as she joined him. The expression she wore said there was work waiting.

"Take Jax to the lumber yard we rolled by. Bring back everything on this list. We'll have a dumpsite cleared for it. Keep good records of what you collect."

Shane took the paper as he peered at the trees around them, then the jagged cliffs above. "Lumber?"

"We're not lumberjacks." Angela zipped her jacket. "We'll use the piles of sorted, pre-cut wood in the stores that are waiting on an industrious person to gather them. It leaves the trees around our base for winter if we need them."

“Which means we won’t have to travel as far in the snow... Good idea!”

“It also gives us time to figure out how to harvest these trees without getting hurt or taking too many.” Marc joined them. He pressed a quick kiss to Angela’s warm cheek. “It was a terrific idea.”

“When should we go?” Shane wondered if Angela was sleeping yet. The bags under her eyes hadn’t faded from her time with Donner yet. Many of the Eagles were watching for signs that she needed a break. They all knew losing the baby would have bad effects on Safe Haven.

Marc knew to let Angela answer that.

“By dawn. Get rolling on it now. You don’t need to wait for Kenn’s clearance call.”

Shane was gone an instant later, suddenly excited. A lumberyard would have more than lumber. This was an opportunity for their team to make a big score and add early points.

Shane spotted Nancy and found himself hoping she joined the Eagles soon. If she could be one of them, he would show his interest. Until then, it was expected that the male Eagles would take strong partners who could fight alongside them. Shane agreed. When Nancy joined, he would make his move, but not a minute before that. He refused to carry anyone, including his woman.

“They’re switching shifts without Dog here to tell them it’s time.”

Marc followed Angela’s line of sight to the ants on the perimeter. They were neatly changing

positions, and then patiently waiting around for the feeding that now came after mess. The ants were still getting scraps, and a portion of actual supplies. Angela had promised them protection and care, and she was honoring her deal. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good. And you?”

Marc pinned her with a dark glare at the too bright voice. “Liar.”

“I’m a little tired, a little hungry, and distracted.” She put a hand on his big arm and let her wall down.

In her mind was the huge construction project he’d glimpsed in Jennifer’s thoughts. Only this was ten times the size, with shiny gold threads stacking into a starless night. It was a massive undertaking. He surveyed the rafters and beams of light. “What is it?”

“The future. Ours, theirs, and those not yet born to us.”

“When will it be finished?” Marc didn’t understand whatever it was she wanted him to.

“It’s complete when we run out of branches.” Angela was aware of his confusion, but he wouldn’t like the detailed explanation of death and the end of humanity. “When nothing else fits, then we’re done.”

Marc was afraid to ask how many years that might take.

Angela didn’t tell him it was more like centuries. These plans would be inherited and added to for generations to come. *If we survive*, she

thought, remembering the last dream of being overrun by victims of a disaster. She assumed it was from Yellowstone, but there had been a clear sense of missing pieces.

Angela pressed a soft peck to his cheek, mindful of his sore mouth. His chipped tooth would be their student dentist's first challenge, but not until after they were in the caves and had the medical bay set up. Marc had insisted on waiting. Angela was sure he didn't want to be the student's first live patient.

"Can I ask you something, boss lady?"

Uh-oh. Marc's tone said he wasn't happy. "What's up?"

"Do you know how old I am?"

Angela pretended to have to count it. "Uh, let's see now. You were born before me..."

"Angela."

She rotated slowly to find him standing with his hands resting on his guns, and afternoon sun melting over him like a honey topping. Angela blinked. *Hungry again, are you?*

Yes, momma.

Angela gasped at the clear communication, a bit stunned. *What am I?*

Marc caught enough of the exchange to be concerned, but Angela's expression said she wasn't ready to deal with this newest horror yet. Neither was he. Marc steered them toward his truck, where he had a bag of snacks stashed. "Do you know how long it's been since I was grounded?"

Angela forced a snicker, suddenly terrified. “A week or so?”

“I’d like to know why the chain of command is grounded. What new hell am I preparing us for, that you don’t want me out of camp?”

Angela hid the wince. “I’m ensuring the future, Marc. Like I’m always doing these days. The people here need to know how strong they are.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’d rather not go into details right now.” Angela was spotting too many people who might pick up on the conversation.

Marc shoved into her thoughts. *Tell me.*

Angela fought her first reaction to vomit and let him remain despite the upset stomach and the migraine. In here, they were alone. *We have to let the rest of the camp have a chance to be shepherds, but especially the ones who are pregnant or fathering a child now. We need them to step up while they can. In a few months, most of them won’t be able to and it will make them feel helpless. Adrian made an amazing amount of progress with the stronger people here, but the weaker people have as much to contribute.*

And they won’t?

Not if they don’t have a taste of the glory that goes with the gore. Let some of the backburner people handle some of these things, so when they’re laid up or on minor duties again, they don’t forget how powerful they are. We can’t survive if the camp

backslides into letting us care for them. They have to be able to care for themselves.

Marc agreed with that, but he was positive there was more to it by the way her answers were so vague. Angela was a detail-oriented leader and she usually had plans already made by the time she shared even a hint of what was coming. Which meant she needed him to be caught off guard by whatever it was. Otherwise, she would tell him.

“Yes, I would. You’re so smart. I love that.”

Marc grinned. “Right back at ya, baby-cakes.”

Marc continued his rounds of the stopped convoy, not worried about missing the lesson on setups as he sent his mental grid out to search around them. Kenn had it covered and Marc wanted to know something he wasn’t comfortable asking anyone about, including the Indians who had chosen to stay. He wanted to know if their traitor was following and who was on duty in the rear. He had to make sure those sentries knew how close Adrian could come before they were required to shoot him. Anyone who failed to pull the trigger would wish that they hadn’t hesitated.

4

Angela waved at the vet as he came from the livestock truck to complain about the wait, dingy white coat fluttering out behind him. “We’re clearing the pet store in town. Go along?”

Completely distracted, Chris was elated to be given work; he stared adoringly. “Yes!”

“Good.” Angela hadn’t forgotten that he’d tracked her down and helped with the rescue. “Turn the animals over to someone you trust and meet a team by the livestock trailers at dawn.”

Chris rushed off before he could do or say anything stupid, mind eased. *This is the start of her using me! My gifts aren’t being overlooked.*

“You have plans for him?” Greg was sticking close as they traveled toward the front gates. One of the Eagles would drive her vehicle when the line finally advanced. Right now, the supply trucks were being guided into place. Angela had given them a new map for Safe Haven, and while Kevin’s team had outlined it with red tape, the ease of setups had been lost. Not that it mattered. They were here for a lengthy stay.

Angela wasn’t concerned over the delay. “I have plans for everyone.” She swept the site, approving of the QZ going up first. The new people hadn’t all been cleared yet, but she didn’t want them out at the same time anyway.

Angela stopped near the gate, where a small jam was blocking the next rig from coming through. She gestured for Logan, the driver of the stuck truck, to switch with Ray, who was on gate duty.

Logan flushed but didn’t argue. He hadn’t learned to handle the big rigs yet.

Angela pointed toward the distant shape of buildings that were a part of the Pigeon Mountain

resort. “I need that area reconned and then the pet store stripped. Tell Billy I’m sending people to him at dawn. He needs to pay special attention to pools and aquariums for fish or plants. Jerry Jones appears to be our resident fisherman. Take him along and have him put his knowledge where his mouth is. We’ll have a dumpsite waiting, but tell Billy to keep good records of what they collect.”

Greg wrote it down, then signaled for a rookie to come over and carry the order, instead of going himself. She had snipers and men within reach, but Marc wanted someone at her side at all times.

Quinn saw Angela’s expression as she approached and got his notebook out. He would much rather be on a run than taking notes, but at least he would be working. He’d been XO on Marc’s team, but now, no one knew what was going on with the tests. Many of the teams had lost someone.

“Take Scott and Josh, and get up on this mountain. You’re searching for a clear, or at least flat area, to set a snow gathering operation. Gear for it is in trucks four and ten. When you find the right area, mark it, leave three sniper kits, and then get home for a hot meal and a good night’s rest.”

Quinn regarded the jagged peaks and winding road that traveled to a nauseating ledge over a hundred feet up. After that, it disappeared from view. Excitement flared. “You got it!” Quinn left his post to his partner and went to gather the other men.

“You have too many irons in the fire.” Peggy fell in step as Angela and Greg entered the gates. “You need to rest.”

“Tell Hilda I’ll knock out six hours a day, no matter what, once we’re inside.”

Peggy left it alone, recognizing Angela’s short temper in that tone. “I came because Doug said Adrian knows how to help the cancer patients. I want to go find out if that’s true.”

“Permission granted.” Angela had been expecting it. “Report directly to me afterwards.”

Peggy left; two other members hurried forward for instructions and information. As Angela walked, a small group of followers formed, all wanting a minute with the boss that was given as patiently as she could. These people needed this. It reminded them of the beginning, of Adrian leading them. Angela also needed it. These moments were a reminder of a time when she’d almost felt like a whole person. With Adrian gone, so was some of her joy at being here.

5

“Rookie Eagle signups are still open, with about a quarter of the slots already filled.” Kenn’s voice echoed calmly across the settling camp. “Don’t forget to stop by and add your name to the list. We need you.”

Marc approved of Angela providing new meat for the Eagles. He settled onto the bed of a truck in

the rear of the convoy, happy with the responses he'd received from the guards back here. None of them had forgiven their traitor.

Marc concentrated on a thinning trail of dust behind the convoy. He sent his mental grid out and found his target within a mile. Adrian and his new faction of soldiers were settling in on a nearby ridge that had a clear view of Safe Haven. He would be able to use his binoculars to spy on them, on Angela.

Marc had other plans. He'd been busy diving through the muck for the old scrolls and he'd discovered several things he didn't care for. One of them was that he'd been lied to—again—about the bond Angie and Adrian now shared. He'd also learned how to access a new hall of doors, but he hadn't had time to explore them yet. With Safe Haven camping for a while, that would change.

Marc made a quick note in his book, then went back to scanning the area. The road going through Safe Haven had two branch-offs, one of which Adrian had taken to get to his site. Marc made another note. The sky was gritty. Samantha had already warned them of a coming storm. They would have to check out the cliffs for a flood path.

Marc stayed in his position, making observations until he felt Adrian glaring at him. That sensation of hatred was unmistakable now, equaling his own loathing and bitterness. While Adrian glowered, Marc gestured to a nearby guard, using Adrian's Eagle code. *I want a shooting area*

set up right here. Have them aim where he's standing. Marc pointed at Adrian.

Whitney chuckled and wrote it down. People would line up all day to take turns, especially his own teammates. With Kevin gone, no one knew if they even had a team anymore and the consensus was that Adrian was to blame.

Adrian also copied the order, as he was meant to. He resignedly stormed to his vehicle to pick a new location. Staying close wasn't going to be easy.

Marc waited for the trail of dust that said Adrian was moving his site, gloating a bit as the man pulled out with annoyed gestures. Satisfied, Marc made his way back to the front of the long convoy to join his setup lesson with Kenn.

Chapter Two BK6

Settlement

1

The ugliness has seeped into my soul. For a small while, I thought I would be able to tolerate this level of guilt and regret, but I will carry it forever and that's a long time. Only death may provide a relief, and even that isn't certain. The only thing I do know is that I have to find a way to shore up my soul. I have to find the light again. If I don't, I can't lead.

Angela didn't reread her notes as she used to do with her entries in Adrian's notebooks, closing the cover instead. She had wondered about his state of mind in some places as she went through them after taking over leadership.

Now, she understood how Adrian's pain could feel so real from mere words. He bled onto the paper, so that his people wouldn't see his weaknesses. She was now doing the same emotional control and she dreaded the day she would hand these books to a successor. Knowing someone else would read her entries and be horrified was ugly, but it had to happen. Without those important notes, the newcomer would have no idea how hard and

serious this job was. They had to respect it, to be able to do it.

Angela left her tent and stayed there for a moment, chin tilted in concentration.

Those around to witness it assumed she was communicating with someone, but Angela was scouring the land around them for trouble. She didn't send her witch far; confident the problems were waiting, as they had been all along. She just needed to be sure that none of those coming battles had advanced further than anticipated during the night.

“Things okay?”

Angela ignored Tonya.

The redhead waited without resentment, still missing being able to twirl her curls while she was idling. She was working on body language and figuring out timing. It was a struggle for her some days, and part of why she'd been lurking in the dawn fog to have a moment alone with the boss.

Angela slowly brought the witch in, aware that her demon needed to sleep longer. The witch had expended an enormous amount of energy over the last ten days. *You've earned it. Rest.*

The witch settled obediently into her place and fell into a thin slumber.

Angela regarded Tonya. “Are you sure? You can't go back on this.”

“Yes.” Dreading the disappointment, Tonya made eye contact, positive it was required. “Please take me off your team.”

“I could never be disappointed in you. You’ve come a long way.” Angela smiled softly, shoving out a blast of light that enveloped the former gold digger. “I couldn’t be prouder.”

“Figures you’d say something like that.” Tonya wiped at her sudden tears in annoyance. “Didn’t you see my makeup?”

Angela chuckled. “Cute.”

Tonya’s shoulders slumped; her hands dropped to her sides. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Cute and a bit lost?”

“You could say that. I know I can’t do what you guys do. I panicked in the final chaos, and I hate the blood and dirt. But I’m an Eagle and I…” Tonya stopped, becoming aware of the whine in her tone. She didn’t want the boss to know that part of her still existed. She was working daily to kill it. “I’m adjusting.”

Angela pointed to where people were slowly staggering toward the mess that would have coffee and toast going, even though the bell hadn’t rung yet. “Go have some breakfast and then draft a few hands to put the pharmacy tent in the front row Kenn will be marking off. After that, you’re on call for the pharmacy and radio during both dayshifts.”

Tonya knew from Kenn’s words that the front row was reserved for the important tents. Her stomach flipped. “Because we’re going to need it, right?”

Angela stared, impressed at Tonya's intelligence. She'd honestly expected gushing gratitude, not eerie insight.

Tonya snorted and then let it go in favor of the answer. "Well?"

"Yes." Angela didn't have to force the approval this time. "Stock it heavy out of each supply load that comes in. I'm giving you and the doctor first dibs." Angela evaluated the woman again and came up with a better summary than she'd hoped for when she'd suggested Kenn try to reform her. "I have work for you. Quiet work."

It was a magic moment for Tonya. She had always been on the outs with authority, no matter the location or leader, but now, she was one of them.

"I can give that gushing gratitude now, if you still want it." Tonya was honored to be on the inside of Angela's plans. That was part of why she'd hesitated to resign. She liked being in on things, and she loved being an Eagle.

Not letting Tonya know that she had just shown signs of an advancing gift, Angela chortled. "Thanks, but no."

"Adrian loved it."

Angela's countenance twisted into something Tonya assumed was pain.

"I actually hate it. But it's what Adrian trained you guys to give and I have to make that type of change slowly. Old habits are hard to break."

"Don't I know it." Tonya sighed. "But it is possible. Kenn and I are living proof of that."

“Yes, you are, and I love you for it. Walk with me. We’ll go over some things.”

Tonya stayed close as Angela listed the items she wanted available at the pharmacy at all times, not needing to write it down. The issues Angela wanted covered came with an outbreak. Of what, didn’t matter. People needed fluids, vitamins, fever remedies, and stomach calmatives. *Along with toilet paper.* Tonya’s mind switched into list mode; she took her notebook out. The items were too important to take the chance on missing anything.

Angela finally left Tonya in line for a tray, still scribbling. She would indeed be removing Tonya from her team, but everyone would know it was because she’d been asked to. Tonya hadn’t done anything wrong this time. In fact, the choice she had made would ease more suffering than her gun could have reached and Angela intended to reward her for it.

2

Marc sensed the Indian behind him and didn’t react, though he wasn’t sure of the intent. Most of the natives were gone now, with only one full group still here and another mixed handful who’d chosen to stay. Most of the braves had been eager to return to their camps and proclaim victory. Others had been concerned over the ash storms and tremors. Marc was confident all of those people would go south. It was another sign of his connection with

Angela and of his gifts working for him, but Marc's brain took it further than either of them had. His heart sank. "Everyone we've found is fleeing! Why didn't I see that? The traveling store people said west, then south. The deer herds were moving north. Max and Lenore had come south. If we found them on the road, they were leaving."

"As are we, my friend," Natoli stated from behind him. "Our stories did not end with the arrival of the Ghost and his final battle."

Marc slowly turned around, dreading it. "Tell me."

"It is the end of days. We must go south, to the jungles, where there is still safe hunting and good ground to farm. This earth is splitting, shifting, and only the north or south is safe." Natoli held out a small hide pouch. "Take this, my friend, as our pledge of peace with the white man."

Marc took the intricately carved pipe, recognizing some of the symbols. "This is powerful."

"Yes. It calls to those far away." Natoli extended his arm. "Until we meet again, my friend, my brother."

Marc clasped arms with him and then the Indian vanished into the trees as if he'd never been there.

I want to go with him. Marc swallowed that pain.

"You can."

Marc found Angela nearby. Her tone was even, but her eyes were showing more emotions than

Marc had thought one personal capable of feeling. He stalled. “What?”

“Go with them.”

“No.”

“I know you’d be hap—”

“Stop.”

Angela did. She knew he would go with her to the ends of the earth, but she needed his light and he had to be happy to provide that.

“I am. I’ll adjust.”

“You’ll loathe every second you’re away,” she intoned, falling into that mental state he hated listening to. “And you may not return at all.”

That was a blow he wasn’t prepared for.

Angela went to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “If you stay here, you will survive. I’ve seen it.”

“I love you.” Marc held her tightly and forced his mind to shut that terrifying door. “I’ll never leave you.”

Angela swallowed her tears. They would take the time fate gave them and be grateful for it. “Thank you.”

Marc sealed their lips, and then tugged her toward the mess. “Come on, let’s get you fed so *my* stomach will settle down.”

3

“What do you feel like doing this evening?”

Tracy scowled at Charlie's cheerful tone. "Nothing."

Charlie knew she was having her period; he held out the chocolate bar he'd traded from Doug.

Tracy accepted it with the first smile since before the chaos.

He took a seat next to her and waited for the candy to vanish.

Tracy enjoyed the treat and felt some of her emotions come under control. It was amazing how chocolate could do that.

"I'd like to shoot better."

Tracy looked over at him, licking the gooey sweet from her fingers. "What?"

Charlie had frozen at the sight of her with a finger in her mouth and she giggled. His innocence was refreshing.

"Huh... Hi'd..." Charlie shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'd like to be better with my gun. Feel like helping?"

Tracy considered it. Shooting something didn't sound bad.

"Sweet!" Charlie answered her thought, not giving her time to change her mind. "Hot chocolate and a steak sandwich at the mess on the way?"

"Okay..." Tracy wanted to hide in her tent and try to find the peace she'd known before, but even she knew that couldn't be found inside these canvas walls.

"Here." Charlie handed her the Eagle jacket she hadn't worn in days. "It's chilly."

Tracy slid into the leather with a blast of pain and a wave of determination. “I can do this.”

Charlie gently put an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll do it together. When you’ve had enough, I’ll get you back here in less than a minute.”

“You promise?” She was suddenly terrified of being out there around people.

“You know it.” Charlie steered them for the flap. “Let’s live a little and see how it goes, huh?”

Tracy allowed him to lead her from her den, hoping he would always be as considerate as he was being right now. A woman wouldn’t even glance at another guy after this type of attention. It showed a soul that was deep enough to drown in and to Tracy, that was ideal. Shallow men were the ones who hurt people. Deep men built and created. They had respect for their power and didn’t use it against those who were weaker. *But when the real man inside him emerges...*

“This is the real me,” Charlie murmured as they stepped under the mess canopy. “I could have gone that other way, but I wanted you more than I wanted to be wild. You saved me.”

Tracy gasped at the pain of that honor.

“Come on.” Charlie tugged her into his arms. “Let’s get you some more chocolate.”

Tracy snickered through her tears and leaned her head against his. “Thank you.”

Charlie wasn’t certain on the correct reply, so he went with what felt right. He kissed her softly and hugged her. “It’s my honor.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet.”

The center table stared in surprise at Candy’s bitter sneer.

“Are you okay?” Theo and Candy had come by to drop off some papers, but Angela wasn’t here yet.

“No.” Candy stared at the couple. “I’m not sure why they can touch and kiss in public. We have age rules here.”

Charlie glowered over Tracy’s shoulder. “Just because you’ve been thinking about Conner, that doesn’t mean we’re all bad, you know.”

Candy flushed guiltily. “I have not!”

Theo studied her red face, disappointed. He’d thought maybe Candy had a thing for him, but if she was daydreaming about Adrian’s demon seed, then that wasn’t the case. Theo spun away from the table and vanished into the crowd forming around Li Sing’s grill.

“Why did you do that?” Candy pointed. “You know I wasn’t thinking about Conner in a good way!”

Charlie shrugged, aware that Tracy had tensed under his arm as if she was about to flee. “You should have minded your own business and then I would have done the same.”

“Asshole!” Candy stormed off to track Theo down and explain.

“Maybe I am.” Charlie shrugged as the eating people snickered. “But I won, so who cares.” He

steered Tracy straight for that center table and settled her between Becky and Samantha.

Samantha understood Tracy wasn't out and about of her own free will. "I have some new magazines and a bit of snacks stashed." She included all of the females at the double table. "Who's up for a potluck, gab-fest, poker game tonight?"

Conversation stayed on that topic for a while and allowed them all time to observe Tracy and a few of the other rookies who'd had rough missions. Most of them appeared to be doing okay, but Tracy had clearly gotten the worst of it. Her flinches came often and everyone approved of Charlie getting her out of her comfort zone. As long as she didn't hide, they could all help her. It was what Safe Haven had been created for.

4

"There are a few things I need to tell you while we enjoy this wonderful meal. You can go on eating, but keep track of the update I'm giving." The radio crackled when Kenn let off his button, alerting those on duty to Angela's coming words.

Not far enough away for Marc's peace of mind, Adrian flipped his radio on, and told David to shut his off. The Safe Haven setup Kenn had given him would deliver Angela's voice as clear as an angel's bell.

“You’ve noticed Doug working on the board, I’m sure, maybe even picked out your name and wondered what new hell I’m assigning you to. You’ve also probably noticed there are teams getting set to roll out. A lot of us have hard work waiting. I’ll explain that as soon as Doug is finished. Please remember not to touch the board or you’ll smear the liquid chalk.”

Adrian settled on the uncomfortable rock, perfectly content to let their dinner burn while he listened to Angela update his camp.

Conner and David shared a confused, slightly concerned glance, but didn’t comment.

Conner took over roasting the wild turkey that Adrian had stalked right after they arrived. Conner was still a bit disturbed at the memory of his father leaping off the side of a cliff. He hadn’t known there was a ledge below at the time, or that the ledge had been a nesting site. They even had eggs for breakfast now, but Conner didn’t think he could eat those without suggesting they grab a few turkeys to raise for food. It was on his mind now, but the smell of the meat was distracting him. In the morning, when he wasn’t starving, he planned to bring it up.

“That’s better.” Angela’s voice was clearly amused. “Stained another shirt, but hey, barbeque sauce does that right? Supposed to be messy. Where was I...? Oh, okay. Tomorrow, we start getting the caves ready.”

A loud cheer echoed to Adrian twice. Once from the radio and then again, from the sound of the large

camp below. There was an empty landing directly to their left. Adrian's eyes swung to it repeatedly as Angela updated everyone.

“There are two large teams of people—a mix of Eagles and camp members. They are the builders and gatherers. Each team is broken into two shifts of twelve hours each. We have ten hard days ahead of us folks, but nothing like the last ten in comparison, right?”

Even David nodded to that. The last ten days had been a nightmare that none of them ever wanted to experience again, no matter which side of the battle they were on.

“After you locate your name and shift, remember it. Be at the assigned place by the time on the chalkboard, no excuses. There wasn't time for me to let you pick the crew or shift you'd prefer. I chose it by where I need you the most, based on the strengths you have. Please don't ask to switch shifts or crews unless you're confident that I've put you in the wrong slot. In ten days, we will be in the cave and then every team will receive a full week off all chores!”

Another double cheer came. Adrian's heart filled with pride. She had learned even faster than his own children had—certainly faster than Conner would. That son needed what he'd been unable to give the other one.

“Builders, you will go in, determine what has to be done, then prepare that area. You will camp outside the entrance to secure our men, our work,

our supplies, and to be right there to keep each shift change rolling. Large common tents and bathrooms will be provided for each crew. At the same time, gathering teams will be out working. As they bring in each load, they will get your new lists and go right back out, with a short stop for sleep and food between each run. And when I say short, you know I mean that. Prepping and gathering is the start. This is stage one.”

Adrian ignored the plate of steaming meat Conner sat by him, content to listen for as long as Angela talked.

“As you gather things, you have to stay organized. Each building crew will be sending gophers to the dump areas. The kids don’t know what these items are for or what harm they can cause. It is part of your duty to help the gophers get the correct materials safely to the cave entrance, in the amounts asked for. If we bring too much up, we’ll clog our work area. If we don’t bring enough, we’ll slow down. You get the idea. To organize this a bit, gathering crews will also camp next to their dumpsite. You will assist the gophers and provide extra security for our materials.”

Adrian could almost see her standing with a plate, picking off bits of food to show calm leadership. His longing to be by her side was overwhelming.

“As for patrols, there will be five per crew—senior Eagles who can assist in labor, provide security, and attempt rescues if there are any

problems. For gatherers, there must be a sixth and seventh man to provide sniper rotations. Each crew is being given a copy of a map we've made that shows the best and worst places to search for the items we need. Any area shaded in red is too dangerous without multiple teams of Eagles. Don't try those. Remember the Safe Haven code when you go into towns and neighborhoods: We don't steal from people and we don't tolerate people stealing from us. Help those who need it, but don't get caught up in drama. We have enough of our own right here for you to work on."

Adrian dutifully snickered like the rest of her Eagles were likely doing, and then quieted so he wouldn't miss her next words.

"As each shift ends, drop off notice of your next run, tally your numbers, and deliver it to the contest box in the mess. Once a day, Doug will go through that box—he has the only key—and update totals on the board. To add protection and even out the contest, descendants will also help. The builders get two and the gatherers get two, split between the day and night shifts to keep things fair. Use them wisely. And to spice that up, there will be another contest for the descendant who helps their crew the most. Betting is encouraged!"

Laughter rolled across the mountain, but it didn't carry far enough to lighten Adrian's camp. His son and new soldiers were sharing glances and staring at him in disappointment. Adrian's soul

decayed a bit further as he realized Angela had set it up this way so he couldn't wallow in his grief.

"*Everyone* else has work. The older folks have lighter chores, like sewing curtains, rugs, and quilts. The teenagers are on duty with their Eagle teachers, learning to take their places. Pregnant women, non-Eagles, are helping with mess, babysitting, delivering meals and messages, and caring for our weaker members."

She'd obviously considered every issue in his notebook and sorted them through to discover a solution. Adrian couldn't have been prouder.

"All rookies, and fifteen senior Eagles will cover our main camp during this stage. I need everyone else out there. This is a level test for many of you. You have to listen, follow orders, and enforce all rules. You also have to keep our Safe Haven running, as in water, waste removal, and food. Follow the lead of the Eagles with you, and hurry. We're fighting nature here and we all know how she feels about us. Let's pull together and get inside that mountain before winter comes."

There was a pause and then Angela's voice came again, ringing with confidence. "Yes, we can take a real break here, if we can get inside. Will *we* do that?"

Cheers echoed again.

Adrian's faction felt left out of that safety, but Adrian knew it was a false promise—which was why she hadn't actually said they would be safe here or given them an amount of time for that break.

“I’ve offered rewards for us doing this quickly and I’ll honor them. I’d like to give out some of that now. Kenn and Shawn are drawing up plans for the Eagles. They’ll also be implementing the new teams list. Be patient while you’re hounding them for your slot, but know that every fighter here has earned the next level.”

This time, the cheering and yelling was enough to startle a small colony of bats from their roost above Adrian.

“I miss my team.” Conner looked at his dad. “Will she still have the Jr. Eagles?”

“How would I know?” Adrian was trying to listen to the rest of her speech.

“Because she’s following your notebooks.” The teen glared. “We all know that.”

“You don’t know shit.” Adrian grunted. “Stop underestimating her intelligence.” He waved off Conner’s next words so he could hear Angela.

“I have a couple of reminders next and then we can relax for the rest of our evening. First, please don’t bother the ants. We have a deal in place. I promised to protect them for their help with the government and for future assistance. Make friends with them. They’re not the enemy anymore.”

Adrian sighed in obvious awed approval.

Conner was confused and disappointed. This wasn’t what he’d envisioned.

“And what was it you envisioned, boy?” Adrian was annoyed with his new crew and their expectations of a fallen idol. “That we would roam

through the wastelands, killing evil and being heroes?”

Conner flushed. That was exactly what he'd hoped.

“Your sister has that honor. You're still a pup.” Adrian sneered. “Now shut up and let me listen. It's almost all I have left now.”

“You have your son!” Conner drowned out Angela's last words. The radio fell silent.

Adrian pinned the teenager with a resentful glower. “Yes, let's talk about that. I have a rebellious, know-it-all, banished, peeping-tom, untrained *child* to care for. Great trade-off there.”

Crushed, Conner left the light of their small fire.

“Was that right?” David was sitting on the other side of the short flames. “He needs guidance.”

“Was it guidance you needed while you were hunting your fellow man?” Adrian shot back. “Was that right?”

David's profile changed to stone.

“That's what I thought.” Adrian grunted again. “Mind your own business until you understand what I'm doing.”

“What are you doing?” David didn't hide his anger. “All I see is a disgraced leader following his old camp like he's waiting for a chance to steal it back.”

“That's because he is.” Peggy emerged from the darkness, flanked by Allan. “That's why I voted for Marc.” Peggy joined them at the fire. “Angela can't recognize this traitor for what he really is.”

Adrian stiffened, switched off the radio. *This won't be pleasant.*

“Get lost, rookie.” Peggy gingerly took a seat on the rock near Adrian.

David opened his mouth to argue.

Adrian jerked a thumb over his shoulder. He didn't need direct witnesses to the coming, well-deserved humiliation.

Also a bit crushed, David vanished into the shadows after Conner.

Peggy regarded her former leader, her one-time hero. In the beginning, she'd been among Adrian's staunchest believers. But he had quickly fallen short and then disappointed her, and now, he was a traitor. He even looked the part with his unshaven face and bloodshot eyes.

“When did I lose you?”

Adrian's sudden question surprised Peggy, but it wasn't hard to answer. She just hadn't thought he cared. “Your game with Tonya. You punished her for killing Joe, who was a useless drunk, instead of helping her change. Angela made her an Eagle and returned her self-worth. The others think you did it, but I know better and so does Tonya.”

Adrian's countenance darkened further, but he didn't respond.

Peggy switched topics. “Doug told me he'd make me come, but he didn't have to. I don't want to die.”

Adrian winced. “I'm sorry. I can't stop that.”

“Can you slow it?”

Adrian understood she had permission to be here because she had an Eagle escort. He was filled with bitterness as he realized who had given that permission and what she expected from him. “For a while. But it will fade faster each time, like when she helped John.”

“How long?” The new doctor hadn’t been willing to give her an estimate, but Hilda had told her it was only a few weeks.

Adrian didn’t want to do it; he hesitated, trying to find a way out.

“Tell me! You owe me that!”

“A few months.” Angela had trapped him with this one. He had expected her to tell Doug no.

“I want them! I want every second you can give me!”

Adrian sighed, suddenly weary. “There are prices for deals such as this.”

Peggy only hesitated for an instant. “I agree.”

“Don’t you even want to know the cost? I could be betraying you again.”

“You wouldn’t do that.” Peggy had thought hard about this visit before coming. “She’d never forgive you for hurting the camp or the dream while they’re in her hands.”

“Got me all figured out, do ya? Be careful, Ms. Kelly. I’m not as harmless as you seem to think I am.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She was still angry, and even more upset that she had to barter with him. “What do you want in exchange for helping me?”

“You’ll have to bring Doug.” Adrian stood. “It’ll take a few hours and you’ll need a day off afterwards. Kenn will help you arrange it when I tell him to.”

Already suffering, Peggy had been hoping for something immediate. Her expression grew dark with fear. What if the cancer did too much damage before Adrian helped her?

Unable to feel her terror and ignore it, Adrian let guilt force his hand. He grabbed her by the arms, jerking her up. He slanted his mouth over hers.

Too shocked to react at first, Peggy quickly realized it wasn’t a kiss. He was sending heat down her throat, warming her insides while connecting their minds in awful flashes that made her stiffen and try to pull away. The life he was giving her had been taken, through deception!

Adrian held on until the entire life had been delivered, not letting her revulsion or her ugly words in his mind break the hold. The last of it rushed from him like a bullet.

Adrian shoved her, not caring when she tripped and landed on her ass. He stumbled to his knees, vision blurring, stomach clenching. He’d forgotten what this felt like, why he had stopped doing it and began using others to do it for him.

Peggy rose to her feet, ready to blast him with her annoyance. She froze at the sight of his body glowing with dull blue light. As she stared in surprise at the beautiful hue, it faded.

Adrian shut his eyes. “I’ll need a couple weeks,” he ground out through the pain in his chest. He controlled his breathing as the squeezing fire gradually subsided. “Get lost, will ya?”

Peggy slowly did as he bid, casting worried looks over her shoulder. In her concern, it took her a moment to realize she wasn’t in pain anymore.

She strolled faster as the tall gates of Safe Haven came into view. She dismissed her shadow as soon as she was inside. She was positive Doug had requested a full report since he hadn’t been free to come with her.

Following the bell that signaled a meal being served, Peggy veered toward the mess. She assumed Angela would still be there, but she hadn’t even gotten under the canopy before Angela’s cool voice echoed in her mind.

He can only do that once more for you. Don’t waste such a precious gift.

Peggy got in line for a tray and tried to act normal as Adrian’s light continued to work on her body and Angela pulled every second of the meeting from her mind.

5

“I’d like to talk to you...about the new people.”

Storing Peggy’s memory of Adrian, Angela motioned to the bench across from her, glad that Samantha had a full plate. She wanted everyone

well fed and with a good night's sleep under their belts come dawn.

“I caught something while you were feeling them out. I think we should eliminate the first group that comes, and maybe we can avoid another war.”

Angela sliced off a small chunk of the rare beef and dipped it in the steak sauce. “Samantha, for a little while, can you just concentrate on the weather, the garden, and hunting? Those three things will save more lives than you're worried about sacrificing.”

Scolded, Samantha wanted to argue, but she was interrupted by the arrival of the ants. Every person in the mess, including sentries and leadership, stopped eating and talking to gawk at the colony.

The line of ants held roughly one hundred workers, led by a huge red Captain who inspected the scrap boxes lining one side of the mess. He then swiveled toward his crew and squealed.

The people winced and cringed from the high-pitched noise, but it only lasted for a brief blast and then the worker ants came forward to create five lines that led from each box to the edge of the mess. From there, a single line of ants completed the assembly. This meal was full of proteins and fats the ants also needed if they were to survive. Later, there would be other, less palatable food options, but Angela intended to honor their deal and even extend it. For now. Safe Haven would get a second, smaller harvest from the garden and the new seedlings she

was having them plant would be a source of mega-vitamins in about a month. By then, the snow would be here and growing topside wouldn't be feasible.

Samantha shifted restlessly, waiting for Angela to focus on her. She had a lot to say.

“Samantha?”

“Yeah?”

“I already have plans running. Do you want to be a part of them? I always need hands, especially ones as good with a rifle as yours are.”

Samantha considered the question, understanding she was being given an option to skip the gardening and hunting, if she was ready for action. “I can do things for you, if you need them, but I'd rather not yet. I thought about resigning, to find out if I like it on the other side.”

“A few people are considering that option. Some have already chosen it,” Angela confided without rancor. “Each person has to do whatever is best for them. I'd be sad to lose you, but happy to hold a place if you go that way. But you don't want that, do you?”

“No...” Samantha sighed. “I still want the glory. I just need the peace too.”

“I understand. When you find your name under the gatherers instead of security, don't stress over it. Enjoy what peace you can get for a few weeks.”

“And then?”

Angela sighed. “Be ready to do whatever you need to.”

“I’ll stay that way forever, I think.” Samantha let a bit of her inner turmoil show. “Once you kill someone, you can’t go back. Ever. You know?”

Angela flashed to Little Rock; her grip tightened on the fork. “Yes, Sam. I do.”

“Good. I’d hate to think I’m the only one who’s damned.” Suddenly eager to examine the board and see who she was teamed with, Samantha stood up. “You need anything?”

“I’m all good.”

Samantha left to join the crowd around Doug.

Angela took a moment to inspect the rest of the camp mentally, even though she knew Marc was on rounds.

And your pet killer is outside on duty, the witch reminded.

Angela ignored the jab, closing her grid. It was amazing how she saw a gift, or thought of one she didn’t have yet, and then the ability appeared in the form of a new door. Her hall of choices was long, but unfortunately, it was all fueled by the same amount of energy. She felt like a gamer with new spells available, but no extra power to run them.

She had asked the witch how to increase her energy levels, but that answer was one neither of them had cared for. Taking more lives wasn’t an option. The witch understood the problems that could come from her host accepting corruption and pursuing it to gain more power. Greed was a fault of many descendants and it had cost too many lives to count over the centuries.

Angela felt worry and intense concern flood the area and realized she was still tied to the emotions of their former leader. Something was happening outside the gates.

“Hey!”

“It’s snowing!”

Angela shivered, snapping into replay mode to determine what she had misjudged. She wanted to be relieved that it wasn’t something more dangerous, but the snow wasn’t supposed to be here for weeks. Enough of it would be extremely dangerous.

“It’s not cold.”

“It’s ash!”

“Get under cover!”

“It’s more ash! Get under cover!”

Around the center table, Angela’s guards and leadership stood, each with a specific job to do. The gloveboxes had contained new instructions for handling the Yellowstone fallout.

Across the mess, Kenn and Tonya marched to the com truck, hitting their radios alternately to spread the word.

“This is an ash storm. Go to your tents. Zip flaps and windows, and hang the blankets like we’ve been discussing.”

“Eagles will make rounds to assist you, and if you haven’t signed up for the rookies yet, let them know and they’ll add your name to the lists right then!”

“People on duty or outside should have their masks and respirators on. Full coverage gear is mandatory. Get suited up or get under cover.”

Angela felt Greg’s hand on her arm as he led her into the mess truck—the nearest shelter—instead of trying to get her across the entire camp during the storm. Angela stared out the truck door as the people vanished and the ash coated everything. She considered ordering leadership to bring up the bubble, but the storm stopped, leaving a faint coating. The winds didn’t abate though; it blew the ash away from her camp.

Greg called for a mask and escorted her to her tent a bit later, aware of the sparks running up his arm from the innocent contact. She was clearly in the groove. He stepped inside with her to make sure she at least sat down and took off her boots.

Angela stopped in the center of the tent, swaying a bit as she searched for something Greg didn’t think he wanted to know about. The Eagle carefully removed her jacket and led her to the rocking chair that Marc had carried in earlier. Greg tugged off her boots. *Now would be a bad time for that man to walk in.*

He quickly retreated when he finished, but he didn’t feel right leaving her alone while she wasn’t aware. Greg grabbed a blanket from the cot to wrap around her.

Satisfied he’d done enough for her comfort, Greg took a second blanket, tossed it on the floor,

and laid down. That meal had worn him out. He hadn't been so full in a long time.

Greg snapped awake a bit later to find Angela sitting on her cot, surrounded by notebooks. Her wild hair and dazed expression said she was still in her own mind. He put his head back down. *If she needs me, I'm here.*

6

Marc removed his mask as he entered the QZ and the light rain began to fall. Thankfully, people wouldn't breathe in as much of the ash while it was wet. Marc noted the alert QZ guards and fastened, dark tents, but he wasn't worried. Angela was being cautious. She would release their new members soon.

Marc nodded to Wade and Morgan, who had point together over the QZ for the first time. He strode toward the center, where the newest people had been stashed. Kendle and Daryl were outside the large tent, backs to each other and not speaking.

Marc wasn't surprised. The camp might consider Kendle a former star to be admired, but the Eagles knew she wasn't all there. They also felt the tension she caused, like now, with her hot gaze locked onto him and not letting go. "Things okay?"

"5-by." They were the first words Daryl had spoken since this shift started. He had little to say to

the mean island woman and he wasn't pleased with Angela for putting him here.

Marc swept the shadows on the canvas wall, showing a sleeping child and her mother next to her, reading a book. *What bothers me about that?* Marc hadn't met Tara yet, but the woman was clearly a threat or Angela wouldn't have two killers outside her tent. "Got a minute?"

Tara emerged from the tent slowly, pale and scared.

"I'm Marc Brady." Marc introduced himself, but didn't declare his title. If she didn't know who he was yet, she would. He held out a hand.

"Tara." Her hand touched his for a brief second.

Marc got a strong flash of Angela before she'd changed. *Another abused female. Great.* Hadn't anyone made it through life unscarred? "Do you have everything you need?" Marc observed her sickly pallor and her quick peeks toward her sleeping child.

"We're fine now. Thank you."

Tara's meek tone made Marc rest his hand on his holster. "If you have trouble here, I'll handle it."

Tara paled further at the double meaning, swallowing nervously. "Okay."

Marc nodded again at her guards and headed for the next row of tents. He wasn't sure why he didn't like the new woman, but he didn't. Once again, his instincts were screaming. He continued to dwell on her as he patrolled the soldier area in the QZ.

“He’s second in command here, right?” Tara spoke to Daryl.

Kendle instantly assumed the new woman had already heard the Eagles talking and had decided to ignore her too.

“That’s our XO and the *mate* of our boss.” Daryl used a pointed tone. Kendle was still staring at Marc like a lovesick teenager.

“He seems...edgy.”

“He is.” Daryl frowned. “And you’re the reason why. He knows trouble will follow you guys.”

Tara paled. “I’m sorry. There’s no one else who can help us.”

Guilt swamped Daryl, but before he could reply, Tara ducked into the tent and blew out the lantern.

Daryl glanced at Kendle, expecting empathy, and found her smirking. “Was that funny?”

“You swallowing your own boot? Sure. It’s what you get for being mean to someone weaker than you.”

“Me? Do you know we call you the Queen of Cruel around here?”

“Why? Because I kill on command? Because I enjoy it like you and your team leader?” Kendle scoffed. “I’m not afraid of the truth.”

Daryl’s face was scarlet; he fired ruthlessly. “You’re cruel in every way, even to Marc. Do you think it’s fair for him to watch your misery and carry that guilt? It’s already eating at him. Angela may not care about your presence here, but Marc does and so do I!”

Kendle thought about leaving her post and also about pulling her knife, but she chose to accept the nickname she'd been given. If they thought she was cruel, she would prove it. "Your sloppy-second is carrying the bastard of a traitor, and you beat on people as punishment for their supposed crimes. You're not better than me. You're not better than any of us."

"Why you snarky little bitch! How dare you!"

"You gave me the nickname. I will now be the Queen of Cruel every time you speak to me. I suggest shutting up."

Daryl's mouth opened.

"Goodie!" Kendle rubbed her hands together eagerly. "Another man who doesn't know when to quit."

Daryl snapped his mouth shut and resigned himself to glowering. *This bitch has to go.*

Marc heard their raised voices behind him, but he didn't stop. Kendle was better now, and Daryl was an Eagle in good standing with everyone. They would learn to work together.

Happy to find security cameras going up around their front gate, Marc strolled through the Indian area next. He noted that the natives had a guard posted even though they were inside the QZ, with Eagles on duty. The soldiers didn't. Marc understood both actions, but he only approved of one. The soldiers felt safe here because the leadership style was familiar to them, but the

Indians were wise. In Marc's opinion, the soldiers were too trusting.

As Marc reentered the main gate, Shawn fell in step. "We're all calm and clear. You have point."

Marc confirmed that he'd seen the board as he went to their rear gate to check in. "Yeah, until four, then Kenn has it."

"Well, I'm yours until then. What do you want me on?"

Marc considered the sizable list in his mind and gave Shawn the top few things. There was no need to rush on most of it. They would have a lot of nights to bring his to-do list under control. Thanks to the apocalypse, disasters and wildcards were now a way of life, and they had to prepare for as many of them as they could. Marc didn't know what was coming next, but he was tired of being caught off guard and he was fed up with running.

Shawn stopped suddenly, turning with a concerned expression. "Can we trust the new woman, Tara?"

Marc shrugged. "It's too soon to tell about *any* of the new arrivals. Watch your six."

Shawn's happiness burst. He nodded, sighing. "I always do."

Chapter Three BK6
Doggone Shame

1

I'm hungry.

Dog had only been gone from Safe Haven for a few days, but he was missing the mess. Out here, surrounded by mountains and wilderness, there was only whatever food he could hunt. He whined. *Marc ruined me. Always scratching my ears and wiping rain from my ass. Made me into a damn house pet!*

Dog stared intently at the small town below him. He'd been studying it for hours and hadn't witnessed a single movement—human or animal. Whining again, he rose and made his way down the street. The farthest building held what he wanted, but he wasn't happy about it.

Dog padded down the weed-dotted street, wincing at the soreness. His paws had been used to the slow shifts and canvas floors until Angela's war; he was still aching from all that traveling. The pads of his feet would build up again and become stronger over the next weeks, but until then, it was easy for him to imagine curling up inside the building he was now facing. A long rest sounded good.

He had taken one so far, during the ash storm, but the urge to catch the wild female was too strong to ignore for long. He'd pushed on even though he knew breathing the ash was a bad idea. He had to catch up. *And I won't if I keep stopping to hunt. It's easy meals from here on.*

Dog went to the main doors of the brick building and scratched with his paw, testing.

The door swung open with a loud groan.

Dog's spirits picked up. Any of his fellow canines would already be dead or gone, and there was little reason for the humans to come here now that the animals had turned on them. The pound was a perfect place to hunt a meal he didn't have to stalk, chase, and then kill while listening to it scream for mercy.

The smell was old and empty; the sounds were the same. Dog eased into the pound with nerves mocking him. He'd spent time in a place like this right after being captured, but the experience had stayed with him.

Dog ignored the many rooms with their desks and cabinets, following his nose down the long hall. The doors at the end swung open at his touch. He padded through.

The swinging door came back hard and fast, and smacked him in the hip.

Dog jumped forward, stifling a yelp. He snorted in annoyance at himself as he spotted the cause. *What am I, a pup?*

The doors continued to swing, stirring the air. Dog caught a whiff of what he was both dreading and anticipating. He followed the scent down another long hall. This one ended at a steel door with a handle he nudged down with his paw.

The odor was powerful—one of rot and abandonment. Humans hadn't been here in a long time. They'd fled and left their animals to die.

Dog almost understood this time. He'd been locked in the bottom of Marc's home, but he'd heard the panic and understood the humans had all been in fear for their lives. It was the first time he'd ever been able to discover an excuse for their behavior.

Dog padded down the row of cages without glancing into any of them. He kept his gaze on the door at the end. It was where the food had come from. During his weeks in that cage, Dog had spent the miserable hours studying the people and the patterns. When he realized the humans weren't evil, just inconsiderate, it had helped him control himself and not attack.

Dog was surprised when the hall ended with a rear door to the outside pound, showing an overcast sky. He had assumed there would be more rooms. He retraced his steps, now inspecting each cage to determine if he had missed a door.

The skeletons bothered him. Caging his kind had been a way of life, and after living with the humans and learning their reasons for such things, Dog even agreed. Nevertheless, to be here and

witness their bodies was another view—one he wished the humans also had to experience.

One of the cages was actually a gate. Dog leapt it in a two-lunge process that balanced him on a file cabinet and allowed him to spot another series of doors. One of those was open. The comforting smell of crunchy food came.

Not used to a slippery surface under his paws, Dog slid as he jumped.

The crash of cabinets was loud as he landed in the office chair and rolled to the ground without being hurt. The cabinet he'd fallen from toppled over and smashed through a side of the gate. It was now possible to squeeze through the bottom. Dog was glad he didn't have to try to jump over it again later. One fall a day was enough.

Dog entered the feeding area with a feeling of pride, counting five full bags, one of which was already open. He plunged in and began to eat. *Not the kind I love, but good! Good!*

Crack! Thunder rumbled a few seconds after the lightning strike. Rain soon followed.

Dog kept eating. He emptied a quarter of the bag before he came up for air, belching and farting as he sat down. *Next?*

A drink.

Dog went to the opposite side of the room, to the deep boxes that smelled like water. He rose up, paws on the edges, and found the sinks dry. He licked the faucet, able to taste the chemicals left from the water. It had definitely come from here.

Dog tried to remember watching the humans gather water in Safe Haven. It had come from big blue buckets with white stems. *They rotated those stems!*

Dog stretched his neck out and pushed on the silver stem by the faucet, but it didn't move. He danced on his hind legs to get closer, then used his front paw to swipe at it.

Water gushed from the faucet, splashing him. The stream immediately became smaller and smaller, but the hole in the bottom was plugged. The basin slowly began to fill with rusty water.

Dog didn't mind. He drank his fill, not stopping even when the trickle of liquid turned to drops and then halted. He hadn't had a good, long drink in days.

Dog dropped down from the sink, listening to the storm beat against his shelter. He had no intention of going out in the rain, especially on a full stomach. He searched for a place to nap.

A pile of empty dog food sacks in the corner was inviting. Dog nosed under a few of them, inhaling deeply. It smelled a bit like home, like Marc's backseat. He quickly fell into a dreamless slumber.

2

Dog jerked awake to the sound of lapping and crunching. The noises echoed through the brick

building, sounding like an army of animals was in the room with him.

Dog stayed still.

The crunching became quieter after a while, as did the lapping. Dog guessed both sources had run out. That would mean at least three animals his size to have cleared the bag of food so fast. *And what else is my size? Wild dogs.*

The wolf tensed, ready to spring out, and then the smell of the mutts hit him. *It's...her! She's in the room!*

Dog stiffened further. So was her pack. He was trapped in the corner by wild wolves.

Unable to remain still with her so near, Dog raised his snout to get a glimpse.

And found her nose inches from his.

The female wolf was resting on the floor near him, waiting for her pack to finish eating. Her startled gaze met Dog's, neck fur bristling.

Dog scanned her pack, counting, evaluating, and then he regarded the female. In that glance, he conveyed his interest and a warning. "I'll kill all of them."

The female's snout drew up, a low growl rumbling.

Dog pushed his alpha power as hard as he could. "You don't see me!"

Stung by the command, the female whimpered and rose, retreating.

"What is it?"

"What's wrong?"

“Where do we kill?”

The female’s pack circled her protectively, not finding whatever it was that she had, but ready to rip apart whatever she told them to.

“It stinks here.” The female wolf lowered her snout in disgust. “Let’s go.”

The pack dutifully followed her from the feed room, none of them understanding there was more. The closed bags didn’t have a smell.

Paws and nails echoed for a moment and then the pack was gone.

Dog stayed where he was, positive he’d gotten inside the female’s mind. He would be okay to finish resting here. Knowing she was near would help. He hadn’t been sure how far ahead of him she was. Now, he would be able to catch up to her within hours.

Dog quickly returned to his dreams of the female. Her scent covered the room.

3

The female took her pack to the cave they’d sheltered in overnight. All of them were eager for sleep in the late afternoon drowsy period. The food would give them needed energy, but until then, they would be sluggish and irritated.

The pack was asleep in minutes, but the female lingered at the entrance. Her thoughts were scattered and that was unusual for her. Even when the Angry Wind had come and forced them to go

north, her thoughts hadn't been this confused. She had never chosen a stranger over her own pack.

He wasn't a threat to us., She excused her behavior, knowing that wasn't true. The big wolf she'd been nose to nose with was a killer. *He interests me.*

The female lay down in the entrance, enjoying the blowing spray that her pack avoided when they could. She didn't have an aversion to the things that they did, and she was capable of questioning the Wind's orders even while following them. Her pack was single-minded. They wanted to go north, join the others, and attack humans. It's all they thought about after food, drink, and mating. In fact, if not for her season being so close, she wouldn't even be with these males.

Her scent had pulled them as she traveled north, but females were the leaders, giving her time to pick a mate from among them. Then they would fight it out and the survivor would be her new mate. The female had avoided it for almost a year now, but the season was closing in on her. The choice would soon be taken away.

Her thoughts returned to the huge male who could have attacked and killed her before her pack could help. Why hadn't he? Surely, he knew there were too many males around. Perhaps he would also fight for her. The thought was a ray of hope. The female went to sleep.

During their rest, the males woke to find her away from them. They joined her at the entrance, shielding her from the awful rain with their bodies in hopes of currying favor.

The last wolf to pile on was a brute. He nosed and bit his way to the bottom until he was covering the female with his body and his scent. She would be his, no matter who she chose.

4

Dog had little trouble tracking the female to the cave. He'd torn open another bag of the food and now had a full stomach again, but the need for a drink had brought him out of the brick shelter sooner than he'd planned. He had found the scents of unclean water everywhere, but the stream near the cave was pristine. It was obvious to Dog that he was supposed to come here. He didn't know why, but he expected it to be bad. His time in Safe Haven had taught him that survival was nearly impossible when you were alone.

The wild female's scent filled Dog's mouth; he opened his jaws to catch a stronger version of it. Alone or not, trap or not, he wanted a taste of that. He wanted to roll in it.

And I will.

The cave was low and wide, too dark for even his vision to peer through. Dog sighed in resignation. *The things I'll do for a bitch.*

He stepped into the cave and waited, letting his instincts tell him which set of appearing red orbs was the biggest threat.

Death appeared in the rear; Dog lunged that way.

Outside the cave, the female waited. It wasn't time for her to choose, but she'd underestimated the intelligence of those with her. Her pack had developed a keen dislike of man's ways and they hated this big stranger.

Snarls and yelps of agony echoed from the cave and spread through the damp woods, making the female whine. She didn't want the stranger driven off or killed. She wanted to get to know him and study his ways. He wasn't going hungry. Watching his big body pad into the cave had been mesmerizing.

Silence fell for an instant and then two bleeding shadows fled the cave, both from her pack. They took off into the town below, but the female doubted they would go far.

Ugly noises came again. The female was unable to stand it. She darted inside, unsure if she would break up the fight or help kill the stranger to have peace in her thoughts.

5

Dog snarled in warning as the last two wolves approached him. The bodies of the others, in various

conditions, were strewn about the cave. “Stay back! Pain will come!”

The big brute’s snout drew up in fury. He lunged with the intensity he’d been lacking before as he let the inferior mutts fight for him.

Dog winced as the wolf’s teeth sank into his shoulder, but the fight in Safe Haven had prepared him for this. He struck back viciously, going for the throat. He found a grip and squeezed.

“Stop!”

The female’s command wasn’t the same as an alpha, but it was still hard to resist. Dog reluctantly let go of the throat between his powerful jaws.

“The Wind has forbidden killing each other!” The female huffed angrily. “You’ll bring her against us. Go away!”

Dog didn’t understand, but he wasn’t about to be run off after winning the fight. He strutted toward the female with light steps. “I’m Dog.”

The female gaped at him. “Why do you take the name of a human pet? Humans are the enemy.”

Dog was already positive he couldn’t win that argument. “I like being called Dog.”

“Why?”

“It takes people by surprise, gives me the advantage.” Dog was aware of the other wolves slinking toward the cave entrance. Except for Brute, who stayed on the ground, growling lowly as he observed them.

“We use that tactic as well,” The female pawed at the cave floor. “Humans are easy to fool. They never expect it when we attack.”

Dog understood he wasn't going to be able to convince her to be peaceful. Her pack hunted humans. If he stayed with her, he would have to do the same. It was disappointing.

The female was regarding Dog with expressions that Brute didn't like. He found his courage, rising to his feet. “This isn't over!”

“He sounds like a human.” Dog was confident it would be taken as it was meant—a giant insult.

Brute lunged forward, aiming for Dog's belly.

The female lashed out in a lightning quick reaction that surprised both males. Her teeth sank into Brute's nose.

He yelped loudly, jerking away to flee the cave.

The other wolves who had survived Dog's defenses also limped out, leaving Dog and the female alone.

Dog sniffed the air. He was able to tell it wasn't time for her to pick a mate yet. Wanting to be in the running, but needing to be loyal to Marc and the Safe Haven code, Dog lingered, torn.

“Will you travel with us?”

Dog snorted. “No.”

The female took a hesitant step closer, drawn to his golden eyes and the power in his body. Even Brute was smaller than Dog. “Wolves mate for life. I can't pick you.”

Dog held still, and swiveled at the last minute to deny her the scent of his breath. It would tell her a lot of things about him and he wanted the same information, from a fresher source.

The female inched by him, tail coming up.

Dog whined eagerly to encourage her. She rubbed against his hip and he spun around, burying his snout under her tail.

The female pranced away, circling, and found Dog padding toward the entrance of the cave. “Wait!”

Dog didn’t stop; the noises of another vicious fight filled the air seconds later.

The female realized he was eliminating the others, driving them off. The voices in her mind eased. Dog could defend her when she swelled with pups, and he was smart enough to keep her fed while she nursed those children. Other males would still join their pack, as would the occasional female, but in the end, Dog would be her choice because at this moment, she was at peace.

Dog was running on pure animal instinct as he struck a smaller male and sent him rolling down the muddy embankment. The Brute tried to come up behind him, but Dog spun in time to resume the death grip on his rival’s throat. This time, he snapped his jaws shut and enjoyed the coppery taste of victory with the scent of a perfect female still ringing through his nose.

The winds picked up suddenly, driven by rage. Dog felt the tree branch coming before it hit, but he reacted too late to avoid it. The heavy wood slammed into his leg, snapping the bone.

Dog brayed in agony, scaring all the wolves, who fled the area.

The female was the last one to go. She stared mournfully, watching as the tree collapsed and Dog was buried. Grief set into the female's heart, thick and deep. She threw her head back. The howl was haunting.

It gave away her location, bringing the surviving pack members to surround her with their licks of condolence on the loss of her chosen mate. While they comforted her, they also used their bodies to get her away from the area, continuing their trek north.

Under the rotten tree, Dog was unconscious. He stayed that way as afternoon faded into dusk.

6

“Can we eat it?”

“Yeah, that's not against the rules!”

“If it will die anyway. We're supposed to eat it, you idiots! Wind doesn't want the humans to be able to find food.”

Dog slowly became aware of the voices, but the pain in his leg almost drowned them out. It took a minute for him to realize his level of danger had increased.

“How do we get it out?”

“We don’t. We’ll chew off parts for a quick snack and then go. We have to get north.”

Dog whimpered, struggling to get free.

“It’s a full meal. I want to pull it out.”

“Go on. I’m going north.”

“I’m hungry!”

The feel of a fight coming helped Dog concentrate; he sent out a sharp blast. “I will take you to food. Enough for all of you.”

“What did he say?”

“Food! He said food for all of us!”

“He lies.”

Dog stopped struggling and used his strength to push out an alpha command tone. “I never lie!”

“We need food! The pups cry all day.”

“He lies!”

“We have to have food!”

Snarls echoed as wet, wiry bodies thumped against the ground and each other.

“Stop!” Dog tried to get their attention, but the fight moved away from his burial place. He groaned in annoyance and pain. Coyotes were known for being unstable.

Dog squirmed around, hoping to discover a place where he could wriggle free, but the pain in his leg limited his mobility. He realized he could die here.

Suddenly cold, Dog shivered and drew his body into as tight a ball as he could. He would warm up and wait for the next opportunist to wander by. He’d

caught the scents of dozens of other animals while tracking the female here. He just had to wait.

“Is it okay to eat it now?”

“If we can get it out.”

The rumbling of branches being pawed away woke Dog. He held in a groan at the jostling.

“Hurry! Hungry!”

“We eat a little. We have to take it to the others.”

“Right! The others!”

Eager paws raked the logs and leaves away to reveal Dog still curled into his ball, but it was obvious that the two coyotes were too weak and too thin to drag his body anywhere. Dog chose his words carefully, not moving yet. “There’s food in the tall building.”

The coyotes yelped in fear, running away.

Dog wanted to laugh, but his leg was flaring into throbs and lances that poked and bit at him from the inside. He was free of his grave, but he now had to find a place to layup that had a supply of food and water. Tracking down his female while hurting like this wasn’t possible.

Dog forced himself to limp to the town, where he at least had a meal waiting and there was a chance that he could find more water from human sources.

It took him a long time to get back into the room and it was a chore to get up on the sink. He was lucky to discover a thin layer of water in the bottom. He consumed it gratefully.

It was gone too soon. He limped to the far corner of the room, unable to make himself take cover under the bags this time. He'd already been buried once today.

7

The sound of paws alerted Dog to company. He tried to gather himself for fighting, but the pain in his leg had increased over the hours. His leg was nearly double in size. Dog swallowed a whimper as he got set to lunge.

“I smell it!”

“He’s here! We will go!”

“We will find out if he was telling the truth!”

Dog recognized the yapping of coyotes and settled down in relief. He hadn’t thought the mangy animals possessed enough courage to follow him.

The first coyote to peer through the door spotted the bags first and rushed into the room, moaning in delight. “Food! Food! We eat!”

The others in the hall came more slowly, but the sight of their pack mate scarfing down crunchy bits was too much to resist; they joined the feast with whines and moans of ecstasy.

Dog snorted, drawing instant attention that turned to terror. He put his head down in a universal sign of submission.

“It lives!”

“He told us where the food was!”

“We must go!”

“It’s hurt. Shut up.”

Dog stayed still as the crunching gradually resumed, actually feeling a bit comforted at not being alone. *How odd.*

Dog studied the large pack as they ate, observing thin, hard bodies and too many pups to feed. The pack was doomed unless they had a strong leader.

Dog waited until the crunching settled down. “I might be able to find more food.”

“The Wind told us to stop eating each other,” one of the coyotes answered between bites. “We’re going north to meet the others.”

“Where is your leader?” Dog winced as his leg throbbed harder.

“She died at the human den. We were there for food, but the woman tricked our breeder into a box. We left after we heard her howls of hurt.”

“The woman might help your leg,” the second coyote stated. “But watch out for the box.”

“I will.” Dog shut his eyes, weary. “My thanks.”

“Where can we get the waters?” Coyote One yipped. “The pups drink nothing today.”

“There’s a stream near where you dug me out.” Dog grunted, joking. “Bring me a bowl.”

The ideas forming in his mind weren’t appealing, but Dog knew his odds of survival alone, hurting this way, were slim. When the coyotes returned, he would discover where the healing woman lived and try to get there. If he couldn’t, then he would have to call out to Marc—something he

didn't want to do yet. In fact, it might be something he didn't want at all.

He'd been reborn to this life to serve a sentence, but a cushy setup in a human camp hadn't been a part of that judgement, he was sure. If he wanted another life, another chance, he had to atone during this one and that couldn't be done while neatly heeling at a human's hip.

8

The coyotes insisted on following him to the human den. Dog had hoped to get there and lay low for a while to check things out. He hoped to avoid the box he'd been warned about, but the coyotes had other plans. After the two long, painful hours it took to get there, they howled wildly and then disappeared into the shadows.

Dog stood there, stunned at their stupidity, and missed the opening of the small cabin's front door.

"Aww. Poor baby has a hurt paw."

Dog spun to discover a tall woman in faded jeans standing on the porch, gazing at him with sympathy. He huffed. *So much for laying low and checking things out.*

"I can help with that." The woman crooned gently, stroking her long brown ponytail in consideration. "But you'll have to go to sleep for a while. Come on, big wolf. Come have a bite to eat and a drink."

Dog stayed where he was as she took things from a basket near the door. He understood the food would be drugged, but he wasn't worried about that. It was the box that he was concerned with. He had to know he could get out of it *before* she put him in it.

The woman set two bowls on the bottom stair and moved toward the door. "I'll wait in here, big boy."

Dog snorted. She sounded like she did this often. That might mean a kennel. It would explain the coyote's impressions of a box, but Dog could get through nearly any gate. It was why he'd been sent away and eventually ended up with Marc. The local pound had gotten tired of replacing the cages he'd destroyed. He'd never attacked people, though. He just hated to be caged.

Dog made his way to the rear of the home, unable to stop a whimper when he jostled the broken leg too hard.

"Well, you're a smart one, huh?"

The woman was in her backyard, a gun in her hand. Dog didn't want to scare her, but he didn't think he could go much further. He chose to allow fate to make the choice and lay down, whimpering.

The woman approached him slowly.

Dog stared at the gun. If she was evil, he was in even more trouble.

Sally wasn't sure what to do. The large wolf obviously wasn't going to eat or drink the drugged

food, but that leg had to be set and casted. She knelt down tensely, gun ready.

Dog didn't budge as her hand came toward him; he groaned as she gently stroked his ears. Dog wagged his tail, trying to show that he wasn't dangerous to her.

"Aww. Poor baby." Sally decided she would help him as much as he would allow. "Hang on and let me get my supplies."

Dog remained laying down as she went into the house, but his head swiveled alertly, searching for the box. He didn't detect a kennel, but he did see a shed and a small barn, either of which he could escape.

The woman emerged a few minutes later with a large kit that she took things from and spread out on the grass next to him. Dog noticed the gun was still in her hand, but it was no longer pointed at him.

"I have to give you shots." Sally slowly put the gun down so she could fill all the syringes she would need. "If we can get by this part, you won't feel the rest." She held out the needle for the wolf to sniff, as she did with all of her patients. "It will sting a bit, but then your leg will feel better."

Dog liked the sound of that. He refused to flinch when she used a fast movement to stick him. The medicine was working before she drew back to protect herself from any reaction. Dog groaned again, body relaxing. *Better!*

Dog's vision blurred. He struggled to stay alert as the woman stuck him again, though he didn't feel

it. He also didn't feel her touch as she rolled him onto his side and carefully arranged his head and leg so he was breathing clearly and she had access to his injury.

Sally worked fast, not confident the amount of painkillers she'd used was enough to keep such a large animal out for long. The fact that his eyes were still open and almost alert was enough to convince her that haste was needed.

The break wasn't bad, but it did require putting the bones back together. She did it with a practice born from years of experience. The most common injury for domestic animals that were allowed outside was a broken limb. She'd fixed hundreds of them during her time as a veterinarian's assistant.

Sally had the leg finished and casted in less than ten minutes, proud of herself for helping another innocent creature. She put away her supplies and cleaned up, gun now in her hip holster. She'd only had to use it a few times, but those awful moments had been enough to convince her to keep it handy.

Sally rotated to check on the wolf and found him on his good feet, sniffing at the cast.

Sally's hand went to her gun, but she didn't draw it. "That might itch a little. Try to leave it alone for a week or two and you'll be as good as new."

Dog was grateful the pain was gone. He slowly limped toward the woman's porch, vision blurry. He curled up carefully under her porch swing, almost hidden by the vegetable plants in pots and bags. He faded off to sleep right away.

Sally glanced from the wolf to her barn, where she had cages for the animals until they were ready to be back out on their own. There was no way she could get him in there if he didn't want to go, but later, when he was hungry and thirsty, she could drug him and use the sled to get him to the barn.

Content she had things under control, Sally went into the house and resumed sewing on the blanket she'd had in her lap when the howling started. Winter would be fierce this year, but she would be ready to last. Let the other survivors fight and die together. She had her cabin, her cellar, and her animals. *I don't need anything else.*

9

"I don't think I can do this, Momma."

"She has food. We need food."

"But she's that sweet lady from the vet's office! She don't mean no harm to anyone."

"She has food. Are you hungry?"

"Aw, Ma, you know I am!"

"Then shut up and do as I told you. Get on up there and knock."

Dog's fur bristled as the pair came from the dusk shadows; the smaller girl was limping, but it drew no sympathy from him. Dog understood it was a trap. He inched from under the swing. The pair didn't notice him.

"Hey! Can you help us?"

“Who’s there?” Sally had been sleeping peacefully, comforted by the thought of a wolf on her porch.

“We need help. My leg is hurt.”

Dog heard the lock click on the door and saw the taller woman’s hand behind her back.

Sally pushed the screen door open, peering through the shadows. “Do I know you?”

“We seen you at the vet!” The younger girl took a step forward. “You were always so nice.”

“I thought your leg was hurt.” Sally flipped off the safety on her gun.

“Down!” the mother ordered.

The younger girl dropped to her knees.

Dog lunged at the mother.

Sally started to aim her gun at the wolf, but couldn’t. He was right and they were wrong. Judgment had been passed.

Dog felt no sympathy for the screaming woman now trying to shoot him. He squeezed his jaws together around her neck, increasing the pressure until blood flowed and she stopped moving.

The younger girl screamed in rage and grief, grabbing for the weapon her mother had dropped.

Sally put her gun to the girl’s head and pulled the trigger.

Dog flinched, but held his ground as the healer holstered and then stepped around the bodies. That was a Safe Haven reaction. Dog found it soothing. When she strode to the shed, he watched curiously.

Sally brought out the large sled and a bottle of bleach, walking by Dog without hesitation. He was like the few others on her homestead that had eventually chosen to stay with her—different.

Sally rolled the mother's body onto the sled and dragged it toward the barn.

Managing his pain like he always had, Dog limped after her.

Sally unlocked the doors and threw them open wide so she could tug the heavy sled inside.

Dog followed, seeing healthy, bored animals in padded cages with food and water. It was indeed a kennel, but much nicer. Dog gently sat down in the doorway, recognizing excitement in the air. He surveyed the cages, noticing intelligence and fear. The ferrets were especially alert, heads swiveling from the human to him and then back in perfect unison.

“Those are the twins!” a loud voice brayed in his ear.

Dog spun awkwardly to discover a raccoon holding onto the cage bars, nose twitching in excitement.

“Oh, yes! Here it comes!” The raccoon's drool hit the wooden floor near his paw. Dog flinched away in disgust.

Sally drew the sled to a rusty concrete area that had a drain. She flipped the bloody body onto it.

The instant it was on the ground, the other animals in the cages peered out, chattering.

“We had another one.” Sally pulled her cleaver and apron from the wall holder. “You guys get meat tonight instead of vegetables. How’s that sound?”

The animals went wild, jumping, banging, and chittering eagerly.

Dog retreated to the doorway as the woman began to chop up the body.

Because of his friendship with Marc, Dog tried to feel anger or even revulsion, but he couldn’t. Man was the enemy to every animal here, including the woman.

“It’s good that you helped her.”

Dog turned at the new voice and found a medium-sized coyote on a short leash inside the barn door.

“She is one of us.”

Dog didn’t doubt that as he watched the woman hack apart an arm to split between two snake cages.

Dog swept the smaller female. “You are almost healed?”

“Yes.” The female shivered delicately. “My pack is near! I heard them today! I can’t wait to be with my boys. I miss their feel and their weight.”

Dog rolled his eyes. *That’s how you got so many pups.*

Sally finished with both bodies and then used the bleach to scrub away the mess, humming to herself. When she finished and went toward the house to clean up, she paused on the way to rub Dog’s ears. She no longer had to guess about his intentions and he knew she would kill him if she had

to. *It should be fine.* She left him loose to monitor the property.

Dog lingered near the open barn doors to eavesdrop on the chatter of the animals now enjoying their dinner. All of them appeared to be going north, like the others Dog had met so far. He listened with growing concern for the humans. The war still wasn't over.

Chapter Four BK6

The First Morning

1

One of the hardest things to handle after a volcanic eruption is the flood of refugees. Thanks to the war, we won't be hit as hard, but we will be hit. I estimated the numbers based on the average total of refugees we've taken in per state. Only 1/100th of those hiding ever came out or were found. We averaged eighty contacts or new members a month. Then, I added the organized people and groups that we didn't pass close enough to, or those who were flushed into the Midwest because of the war we had with the government. As many as ten thousand refugees from Yellowstone may make it across the Mississippi and that, we can't prepare for. We must get the herd out of the way or lose roughly 50% to disease, fighting, and eventual starvation. I pray this never happens, but we know nature loathes humans. What better way to finish destroying us, than to set off a chain of events that will finally lead to our long-dreaded nuclear winter?

Angela let the book shut, slightly stunned. Adrian's notebooks had all been scary, but most of it, she could do something about. This last notebook, titled *Volcanoes*, was horrifying. Ten

thousand starving, sick, desperate survivors? Not a chance.

Is he wrong on the numbers? the witch asked from a distance. She was staying back to help Angela conserve energy.

Angela considered it from her own view. Was 1/100 right? That would mean an average of eight thousand survivors per state, in places where the population had been millions...with no direct bomb damage.

“No.” She moaned, making Marc jump. “It’s too low.” Angela rose from the mattress, pulling on her guns as she ducked out of the tent.

Marc stretched, hand brushing the book. He felt no guilt about flipping to the last page she’d been on. Lying next to her in the dawn chill, he’d already been catching bits and pieces of information for the last hour.

Marc read the passage without rancor or surprise. After she’d gotten the books from Adrian, his own mind had already come up with this problem, though he hadn’t estimated the numbers as high. He’d been out in those places since the war and Adrian hadn’t.

Then why is she concerned? his demon queried.

Marc ran it again and still didn’t see how there could be so many, or how Adrian would have sensed them without Angela’s gift. But she hadn’t known and she’d been searching their surroundings actively after becoming a rookie. *What am I missing?*

Marc followed a guard's direction to discover Angela standing near the new shooting range, staring at the sky to the east. It was cloudy, almost hostile even, but not more so than usual. "What is it?"

Angela was still scanning; she let Marc into the smallest area of her mind that she could close. It took too much energy to let anyone in all the way right now.

Marc groaned in annoyed frustration. "You've got to be kidding me!"

Angela gently pushed him out and felt her muscles ease. It had only been a few days since she'd been below ground with Donner. The effects of that ordeal were hitting her harder than she had expected.

"What's the plan for this one?" Marc gestured angrily. "He's had a plan for everything else."

"Not for this." Angela kept scanning. "He left it for his successor because it was too big for him."

Marc stared at her worriedly. "You've got it covered?"

As much as she wanted to say yes, Angela couldn't. "Not yet." Her thoughts went to the few members who might have the mind for the problems they were about to face, but she didn't think there was anything anyone could do at this point. The reactors were melting down. Even if they had ten trained, equipped teams, they still couldn't reach all of them. The time for generators and final attempts had all been passed before Safe Haven arrived in

these mountains. The remnants of the East Coast were going to be wiped from existence and she didn't have the energy to call out and warn anyone. "I led them into a future radiation zone." Angela's voice shook. "And he let me!"

Marc wasn't positive Adrian had known, so he didn't respond to that part. "You can only cover so much. You have to forgive the errors and go on. You know that." Marc slid an arm around her shoulders.

Angela leaned against his comfort, but she didn't take the words to heart. Marc would do anything to ease her pain, no matter if she deserved it or not.

"Yes, I would, but you don't deserve the guilt for this one. There is nowhere else. The west is heavily contaminated where it isn't destroyed. We barely survived the Midwest and nature's anger. Now we're in the last place we can run to and we..."

Angela's guilt increased at the open pain ripping through Marc. He was quickly reaching the conclusions she had as soon as she realized the numbers didn't include zones from the north, south, or the east. Adrian had known, and let them come here anyway.

"How could he do that?"

She sighed. "He knew it would push them out instead of staying here for the winter."

"What's wrong with wintering here? We all need a break."

“Because then we’d never leave and that will wipe us out.”

“How? If we make it through the winter, we can survive here. We don’t need to leave.”

“We won’t.”

“Won’t what?”

“Survive the winter. We’ll starve.”

“But we have all those new ideas for—”

“For a year?”

Marc knew she’d never been wrong. Now he understood why she was so concerned. “A full year?”

Angela trembled as the wind blew against them. “More by a couple of months. We’ll be reduced to eating our dead. Then, each other.”

“We have to find a new place.”

“Yes, but not here. It’s time to go south.”

Marc opened his mouth to deny that.

Angela walked away without saying anything else. Marc’s instant need to fight the idea was common in Safe Haven. They’d beaten the government and were now at the top of the food chain. Few people understood why they needed to leave and unless she could make them, they wouldn’t budge from US soil.

Marc would have followed her, but his demon brought up another fact. *She isn’t going to tell them yet. She’s taking them into the caves.*

Why? If we have to go, why do all this anyway?

Because it’s the only way these sheep will leave, the demon replied sadly. *She will have to watch*

them die by the hundreds before the truth can be accepted.

She can't take that.

She has to. Your existence depends on it.

2

“We can't do it in that time period. You have to make her understand.”

Kenn snorted, gathering the equipment for the day's labors. “Right. 'Cause she values my opinion.” He was scheduled to mark off tent spaces right now. Tomorrow, he would get their activities and classes running. The medical bay and Eagle training tents were already open for use. It would be a busy week.

Theo's brows scrunched together. “I mean it, Kenn. We can't run the pipes, set up power, and get everyone inside in ten days. No one can.”

Adrian could. Kenn wisely kept that to himself. “Shortest time?”

“A month.” Theo had already calculated it. “We haven't even been in the cave yet and the clock is already rolling on day one.”

Kenn sighed. “I'll talk to her, but don't expect it to matter, is all I'm sayin'. She does as she sees fit. You know that.”

“And normally I respect it, but this time, she's asking too much for the skills we have here.”

Kenn left the building tent without any of it showing in his expression. He hadn't thought it was

doable either, but Angela was forever surprising him. Maybe she had this covered.

Kenn took a minute to survey the area that Angela had led them to last night. It was a relatively flat spot surrounded by trees on two sides. The south was rocky roads and the north was a mountain, right up close and personal. Kenn could see bird nests in the crags and a gaping hole that their men would soon descend into. It was humbling and haunting. He wasn't one of the people who were happy about going underground. He didn't fear the walls closing in. He feared them falling.

Kenn spotted the point man and approved the change from Allan. That man had been switched to radio coverage for the day. Angela had turned the radio over to Kenn and Tonya when they arrived here. She'd told him they needed to search through the Eagles and find at least two more people to cover the airwaves. Kenn liked the idea of being Safe Haven's mouth, as did Tonya. They'd stayed up late discussing how to do it and gotten so involved that they had crashed without having sex. It was a big adjustment that Kenn had never thought he'd be happy with. He liked a knockout at bedtime, but things were shifting rapidly in this new life and he was learning to handle it.

Kenn spent the next hour traversing the camp to make sure everyone knew where they were supposed to be. At lunch, he would have Allan announce schedules over the radio in code. It would

cover all the shifts since everyone was here right now.

Except Adrian. Kenn was hoping Theo was wrong and that it could be done in ten days, because Kenn planned to ask for Adrian to be pardoned. Considering some of the other requests Angela was likely to get for their rewards, Kenn thought his might be the easiest for her to grant. What Cynthia desired didn't even seem possible to the Marine, despite all the proof of magic around him, and Kendle wanted time alone with Marc. Kenn mostly expected Angela to welch on the offers, but he wasn't entirely sure. If it were bad enough, she would give Kendle a night with Marc to save these people.

“You think so?”

Kenn flinched. He hadn't heard her come over.

Kendle snickered and remained by his side. After waiting a few seconds, she repeated her question.

“Yes.” Kenn scowled. “But it would mean something awful is coming for us, so don't wish for it!”

Kendle stopped, shocked, as Kenn strode off. She wouldn't wish it anyway, would she?

Of course, you would, that voice inside replied. *But you would hate yourself even more afterward.*

Kendle veered toward the garden trucks that were in the process of being replanted, soothed by the response. She had enough self-loathing. If she

added to that weight, it would have to be for more than just one night.

Kendle let her feet take her to the rear, where the gate was open for teams going in and out. No one else was supposed to leave, but Kendle walked through the gate without reporting to any of the frowning guards. They knew where she was going.

Kendle followed the rocky, weed-dotted path that had clearly been here before the war. It appeared that it had been traveled since then too. She could tell by the beaten weeds growing around rocks instead of over them, and by how the garbage on the trail wasn't molded into the ground yet. People had been here recently.

Kendle didn't speak as she entered Adrian's small camp. The five soldiers lounging around a small fire regarded her in surprise as she stepped between them, but no one interfered with her progress. Despite her being on their hit list, they all went back to snoozing when Adrian didn't order her removed or shot. She'd killed patrols and teams by herself and led dozens more into lethal traps. She was enemy number three to these soldiers; it offended her that Angela was above even Marc in that pecking order. *Isn't there anything that bitch is bad at?*

“You can't do that around me.”

Kendle found Adrian in front of the flap of his battered tent, smoking and drinking from a bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Gonna be one of those days, is it?” She kept her distance. She didn’t like drunks.

“I mean it, Kendle. Stop hating her for her strengths.”

Kendle sighed, taking a seat on an overturned bucket. “What about her weaknesses? Are those fair game?”

Adrian took a long swig, not answering.

Kendle didn’t follow the remark with another snide comment. Instead, she examined the man she was pinning her hopes on. In the light of dawn, he certainly didn’t look like much.

“Good morning to you too.”

Kendle flushed as she recognized that moment of being too sober to get drunk unless he wanted to go straight to the pass out stage. *He’s in the early stages of alcoholism.*

“Maybe.” Adrian shrugged. “The least of my worries.”

“Will it become one of mine?”

Adrian sat the bottle on the ground. “It’s unlikely we’ll be together that long.”

Kendle still didn’t feel a sting, except in knowing that it would be Angela he went to. “So what’s the agenda here? People are asking. I’ve been told to get that answer.”

“By the sheep, the wolfdogs, or the boss?”

“The first two. Angela hasn’t even mentioned you.”

Adrian didn't wince. Of course, she wouldn't mention him to anyone. She had to put distance between them right now.

"And later? Later, she'll call for you, right?"

Adrian's gaze swung toward the busy camp that was sending all sorts of noise echoing up the mountain. "Not even if her life depends on it. She'll never break her vow."

"Which one is that?" Kendle snorted lowly. "She's made a lot of them."

"And delivered." Adrian evaded the question. He didn't want to talk about how strong Angela's love for Marc would make her. "If you didn't want her man, what would you think of her?"

Kendle didn't want to discuss that. She pointed toward Conner's tent. "What about him? Where does he fit in while you lurk out here?"

"Lurk?" Adrian stared coolly. "I'm in plain view."

Kendle grunted. "Fine. What happens when the winter comes and snow covers your little area? You guys don't have a cave to hide in."

"Don't need one."

"Because you'll be in Safe Haven?"

"Conner will."

"And where will you be?" She was aware that Conner's fake snores had stopped.

"Working. Like you."

"On what?"

“Your former career is about to be used.” Adrian stood up. “Remember your lessons on rappelling and rock climbing?”

Kendle nodded, flashing to scrapes, soreness, and a few heart-stopping moments of adrenaline-laced excitement. “Vividly.”

“Good. Be prepared and you’ll earn points with her.”

“Won’t she know it came from you?”

“Of course. The points come because you were smart enough to follow the advice. She likes anything that helps her goals along. She doesn’t care who they come from.”

Kendle stewed on that as Adrian walked by her, not concerned that he was in his boxers or that he lingered next to her to place a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“Don’t ever call her a bitch around me again. Please.”

Kendle swallowed, nodding nervously. The menace under the request was clear.

Adrian went by her, kicking snoozing soldiers as he passed them. They jerked awake in confusion and annoyance.

“What?”

“We under attack?”

“Where’s the coffee?”

Adrian whistled cheerfully as he disappeared down the farthest path.

Kendle ignored the whining men around her who had mistakenly thought sleeping in would be

their life now. If she could get ahead of Angela on enough things, Marc would like her, but more importantly, he would respect her. If she could pull off something big that way, she could earn real points and Marc would be forced to acknowledge that publicly. It would also settle down some of the more outspoken people who hated her associating with a traitor.

The sky rumbled loudly. Kendle slowly went back to camp, deep into planning lessons that would give her successes. Safe Haven had a number of problems. *How many of them can I fix?*

Adrian knelt by the small creek and fished out the now cool Cokes he'd dropped in last night. It wasn't the same as ice from the mess, but it would do.

He wiped off a stump and flopped down, now feeling the small amount of alcohol that he'd consumed. An empty stomach and drinking were not a good mix.

He lit a cigar, wincing at the thought of how the doctor would react to him smoking and drinking so soon after a heart attack. That lecture would be long and graphic.

Adrian spared a brief moment on the way he'd evaded and manipulated Kendle. She was a babe in the woods, even compared to how Angela had been when she'd come to Safe Haven. Kendle needed a daddy, not a lover. Adrian wasn't happy to have to be both. Marc had known it would take a lot of time,

energy, and focus to help Kendle and he'd also known that if Adrian failed, Angela would be disappointed. She wanted Kendle to settle in and be happy, but Adrian already knew that wasn't possible with him. Kendle needed a mate who would love her. Adrian was confident there were men who could do it, but not until she recovered from her illness. Few Eagles would know what to do with her violence. It was a wonder that Marc had, considering the way he'd coddled Angela.

Adrian listened to the camp, to the voices and the sounds of an existence he was no longer a part of. He'd given them up, like he was supposed to, but this living afterwards hadn't been in his plan. He had no idea what to do with himself now, but he'd also predicted this issue back when he was busy scribbling in notebooks daily. Angela would read those notes. If she cared about him at all, she would cover it.

And if not?

“Then it's over.” Adrian sighed deeply and tilted the bottle up. There was nothing more he could do to influence her. She was the boss and he was a traitor. His life was hers to use, give, or leave behind as she saw fit.

3

“Save us a table.” Tonya motioned to the rookie females she'd chosen from the list in the mess. The contest board was going to be handy for keeping

track of people and locations. “I’d like hot tea with whatever sweetener we’re being offered.”

The rookie females, all happy to have been picked for something so fast, rushed off, each planning ways to curry favor. Tonya was on the boss’s team. She had fought in the war. She had their respect.

Tonya knew they’d eventually discover that she wasn’t on the team anymore, but she wasn’t worried about their reactions. Angela would help her keep the place she’d earned. Tonya spotted Kenn near the entrance to the cave and hurried to catch up. “She has me working on the pharmacy today. Where do you want it?”

“If she sent you to me now, it goes in the main row. Give me an hour and I’ll have the spot marked.”

“Great.” Tonya lingered, staying with him as he measured and taped off a large square of rocky, weedy ground. Angela wasn’t wasting fuel or energy on mowing. She said the weight of their tents and vehicles would keep most of it down.

They both looked over as a silence fell among the laboring people around them. They found Samantha, Jennifer, and Cynthia headed for the training tent, with Kendle a few grudging paces behind. The front females were joking and chatting, while Kendle’s sullen expression screamed worlds. To backdrop this image, Allan’s voice droned through the radios.

“Rookie signups are now halfway full. Get in line soon. Everyone wants to be one of us.”

Kenn and Tonya exchanged glances of misery and annoyance. Kenn knew she was resigning and approved of it. He even sympathized with her, but Allan’s boring dialogue was a concern for them both and it overrode her misery. Getting new people into the Eagles was still one of Safe Haven’s top goals and that lifeless call wouldn’t be responded to.

“I’m on it as soon as the pharmacy is up.”

“Good.” Kenn stood up to view his work, aware of her edge of unhappiness. Now that it was done, the sense of loss was hitting her. “Why don’t you go eat first? Then, you can help me until I get to the pharmacy.”

Tonya smiled gratefully and went to the mess. She wasn’t looking forward to what she would have to do now, but it wasn’t the worst thing she’d done here by far.

Kenn refused to let her carry that. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. You pulled your weight and then some.”

Tonya stumbled at the praise.

Kenn laughed. “Easy there, little momma.”

Tonya continued to the mess in a better mood. Kenn was right. She hadn’t reverted. She’d done well.

Kenn watched her vanish into the crowd that was about to enjoy their first post-apocalyptic breakfast of steak and eggs, then got back to his duties. Kenn wanted to be on the pharmacy by the

time he'd told her. At 4pm, Marc would take over point and Kenn would be free to shower, eat, and sleep. Angela had them all on rough twelve-hour schedules starting today, but the results would be worth it. To combat the fatigue, the shifts began and ended at odd hours. Kenn approved. Keeping people awake from 4-7am was hard.

Kenn noticed Theo's group approaching the cave entrance and didn't make eye contact. He wasn't going to waste Angela's time by passing Theo's message. The boss was busy; she didn't need the naysayers taking up her precious hours.

Kenn glanced upward, toward the cliff Adrian had chosen for his banishment. He would stay there, where he could observe them all and mourn the life he could have had among them. Kenn still wasn't sure Adrian deserved such a punishment, considering the outcomes of his plots and schemes. But the choice had been made and all that was left was to find a way to get him allowed back in. Kenn knew there had to be one. There was no way Angela had left that out.

4

“We're not spending enough time worrying over the future.”

Angela's opening sentence sent concern through the training tent. The females gathered there settled down to listen as she got their meeting rolling.

“Get your notebooks out and don’t leave this tent until you’re clear on what I expect from you.” Angela dropped into the chair behind the small desk she’d had placed in front of two picnic tables. She would be in here off and on for the next two weeks, updating teams and going over new plans. She would need the space.

“I’m assigning some quiet work. Not all of you will be involved in all parts of it, so even though you know the basics of what’s going on, keep your mouths shut. Don’t even talk to each other about it if you can help it.” Angela opened her notebook. “I’m passing around a sheet of items I need you to collect above all others. Pay attention to the notes at the bottom of this list. It will tell you what we’re doing. Keep in mind you already have the perfect cover for it. I promised to send descendants out for luxury items.”

Angela handed the page to Jennifer, who read the notes at the bottom first. Her smile sent relief through the tent.

Jennifer put it between her and Samantha. Both females began to copy it into their notebooks.

“During each of these activities and chores, you will be helping train the rookies. As you do this, do not give special treatment to the females. None of us received it. We earned our place and it has to be the same for them. Someone tell me a reason why.”

“The men will rebel.” Tracy was in the back of the class, away from the teacher.

“Yes. Another?”

“It isn’t right or fair.” Becky’s mind was only able to go so deep because of her age.

“Yes. Another?”

“We’re weak when we’re divided. It has to be the same for everyone.” Cynthia took the paper as the front row finished with it. She placed it between her and Becky, and started copying.

“Yes. I need you to pull in those with the ability to do the things we’ve done, and to train the others to the best of your own ability. Bring the teams together during meals and events; don’t tolerate badmouthing other crews. I want us united.”

All the females were busy writing down her instructions or copying her first paper. Angela handed out a second page. “If your name wasn’t on the board, I have other work for you. This is a copy of it. Once we get into the caves, all of you will be on this, so copy it word for word and keep each other up to date on anything concerning this one—especially security. A patrol team will meet you there, but you’ll have to be able to work and watch out for each other.”

“Who’s in charge?” Samantha’s name hadn’t been on the board under the gatherers like Angela had said it would be.

Angela shrugged. “It could still change, so you’ll have to figure that out when you get there. The guards will keep you alive and help with the labor. You ladies do the same, huh?”

“You know it,” came the reply from each of them. As long as they weren’t helping an enemy, it didn’t matter.

“Next is replacing team members.”

The tent instantly became tense.

“I’m getting a lot of questions and I know you are too. I’ll handle that. Until I do, tell people I’m evaluating every member of Safe Haven’s population for that slot.” Angela sighed. “And that brings me to the next topic. We’ve actually lost two members. Tonya resigned this morning. She’s in the mess now, waiting to give me her Eagle jacket.” Angela knew it wasn’t a surprise to most of her team. She made it clear where she stood. “As far as I’m concerned, it didn’t happen. She’s working on other things for now, direct stuff for the boss.”

“So you won’t accept her jacket?” Candy was curious who Angela might pick for that slot.

“No. Next is last. Here are your personal assignments. If you’re not scheduled for anything when you leave this tent, it’s because you need sleep—whether you want it or not. Go eat and then crash.” Angela shut her book and beckoned to Greg, who had come to the flap but waited for a break. “We’re finished. Come in.”

Greg joined her at the table as the women finished copying the papers and passing around their assignment envelopes. “I’m caught up.”

“Great. Ready for the next list?”

Greg obligingly took out his notebook, barely awake.

“Tell Seth to take Allan, Donald, and three rookies from the a.m. shift to the nearest golf course. Use trucks and load up all the batteries, carts, and the rest of the items on this list.” She handed him the sheet and waited for him to finish writing. “I want Neil, along with these people, sent to a few local power and lighting stores. Locations are on the list. Find one that’s stocked and clean it out—every bulb, every wire, every tool.”

Greg stored the list with the first one and completed the notes, wondering briefly if Angela had even slept. She certainly didn’t look like it.

“I want a complete fence up around the third QZ area, Zone C. It will be finished by morning, no matter what else is on Marc’s list.”

“I’ll make certain he knows.” Zone C was going to become a problem or else Angela wouldn’t have given that order. Greg made a note to also tell the Eagles on duty near there to stay alert.

“Kyle should take Whitney and five members from the pm board to heating and air conditioning stores. Pick one and strip it. Give this sheet to Kyle. It has possible locations and other details. Everyone leaves after mess tonight.”

“Got it.” Greg left while still writing down her orders.

Angela glanced around the tent. Most of the females had already opened their new envelopes and vanished. Only Samantha remained.

Angela sighed. She hadn’t expected any of them to figure it out so fast.

“Why?” Samantha scowled. “I understand the cover is that we’re out gathering, but I have to know your true motives.”

“It’s needed, in more ways than you want details on right now.”

“As long as it’s not for *him*.”

“It is in ways. Adrian will benefit, the same as the rest of us. There’s no avoiding that.”

“So long as you aren’t setting it all up to have him forgiven.” Samantha went to the flap. “I won’t ever forgive him for betraying us. Neither should you.”

Marc entered the tent as Samantha left. Clearly, he’d heard their short conversation, but he didn’t hassle Angela over what he had put together from it. If she wasn’t lying to her team, she wasn’t lying to him either. She didn’t want Adrian in Safe Haven. Marc didn’t care why. “I have those reports you wanted on food, fuel, and water.”

“Great. Stuff it in this notebook.”

Marc put it where she indicated; she snapped the band around the book before depositing it in her deepest pocket. She would go over it later when she had time to run the numbers.

“You ready?”

Angela slid an arm through his. “Starving.”

Marc chuckled and led her to the mess, where he had things ready to go. Li Sing would bring her fresh plate out as soon as they sat down. He’d been instructed to keep it coming. He’d also told Shawn to wake him three hours early tonight so he could

relieve her during afternoon chow. She hadn't slept yet and that wasn't good.

Angela leaned against Marc's heat as they entered the mess, soaking up his presence even though they were only going to be apart for a little while. She hated any time away from him.

"Got a minute?"

Zack sounded like he hadn't slept either.

Angela turned to confront him with stiff shoulders hidden under Marc's big arm. "Zack, I'm going to ask you a question. After that, we'll cover your latest complaint. Ready?"

"Go on." Zack was set to embarrass her in front of the eating camp.

"Do you want me to accept it or refuse?"

Zack paused, stuttering. "I, um..."

Angela nodded. "Check the board, Zackie."

Zack did.

Doug pointed at the name Angela had drawn there last night on the way to her tent after the ash storm.

Head of camp security—Zack

"I have great and terrible work for you. Accept or refuse? Pick now."

Zack couldn't keep playing the emotional game. He caved, shoulders slumping "Accept."

Angela smiled. She hadn't been sure. "Sweet. Come have a steak with us and we'll discuss some of the details for the next few days on basic issues while Marc eats. When he's done, you can escort

him to our tent. Then, go brief the security team now gathering in the training tent.”

Zack was shocked, grateful, and finding it hard to stay resentful.

Angela took her seat and beamed at Li when he placed a large, rare steak in front of her.

“Eggs comin’, Missy!”

Angela made a face and shook her head. “Just the beef, please.”

Those around her chuckled, but Marc worried over it. He would have to find vitamins to give her in place of the things she wouldn’t eat now.

Angela didn’t tell him they were low on eggs. Her new smell aversion was a convenient excuse. Her people came before her, even now.

Chapter Five BK6

One Bright Afternoon

1

“**W**hy are we doing this?”

Quinn was the only one of their crew with enough breath left to answer. “We’ll need water. After it snows, we’ll collect it, melt it, boil it, and be flush all winter long.”

After his trek with Marc, Quinn was now in the best shape of his life. The rocky, treacherous ground was giving him little trouble.

The others weren’t so fortunate, but Josh’s confusion was at least distracting as he continued to push Quinn for an answer he could accept. “I mean now. Why worry about it so soon?”

Quinn assumed his leadership role for this run. “You give me the reason.”

Realizing he was being tested, Josh struggled to come up with the correct response. “Even she doesn’t plan things eight to twelve weeks ahead, so I don’t know.”

Quinn shook his head. “There’s your mistake. She plans things out as far as she can. There is no limit on the future.”

“So why, then?” Josh used the conversation to help him ignore burning lungs and a slightly dizzy feeling.

“Because bad shit happens. If we don’t prepare for it, we don’t deserve to survive. Why wait until it snows to get ready? What if someone screws with our water again? Or if we have a leak? We’re doing it now because we can. There’s no guarantee of later.”

Josh’s mind accepted that reasoning; he trudged along behind his team leader while mulling over the deeper issue connected to that type of thinking. “Do you think she was one of those crazy prepper nuts?”

Quinn scowled, refusing to answer.

Scott, the man next to Josh, stuck his foot out and tripped the rude Eagle.

Josh landed without injury to anything except his pride.

“You didn’t watch your mouth, so I didn’t watch my boot. Wanna go further?” Scott was proficient in kai, often sparring with Neil because he could take a hit and still keep coming.

Josh glared. “What did I do wrong?”

“Preppers are not nut jobs.” Quinn tossed it over his shoulder. He hadn’t stopped hiking. “And we’re all preppers now or we don’t survive. You insulted every member of Safe Haven.”

Josh’s countenance went scarlet. “I didn’t mean to!”

Scott marched around him, still prepared for a negative reaction.

Josh wasn't a slow learner; he followed Scott with new thoughts in his mind.

Scott and Quinn took the lead together as they climbed the summit they'd chosen to recon. The two men shared small grins. They'd gone through these training sessions and life-altering moments not that long ago, but it already felt like another lifetime. Their battles had changed them completely, as it did with everyone who joined the Eagles or labored quietly for the boss. Adrian had begun something that none of them wanted to end. It was a relief to know Angela planned to continue the traditions.

The crew reached the crest of the hill and stood there, gazing in awe and concern as they recovered from the exertion. There hadn't been another way to get up here.

"We'll have to make a road of some kind if we pick this spot." Scott inspected the opposite side of the flat area. It was covered with jagged edges and cliff sides that would crumble under the weight of heavy machinery.

"We'll cause a slide from here." Josh's voice was subdued. "I vote we check a different place."

"I agree." Quinn waved. "But we'll do lunch up here now. It's a great view, and we can use our glasses while we eat to narrow down another location."

All of them were glad for that order. The small crew dug through their kits for the lunches from the mess. Li Sing had tables of boxed lunches waiting

for all of the workers who couldn't be there for regular meals. It was viewed as a nice service for their efforts, but a few of the deeper-thinking people understood Angela was already beginning to ration their food.

2

“Can we eat these?” Billy was standing next to a long, murky aquarium where shadows swam sluggishly through the water. They'd gotten to the resort area with no trouble and hadn't encountered anyone. They had two men on sniper duty on top of the church and were now exploring the buildings to determine how they would cart all this stuff home.

Chris, standing behind them at the long aquatic plants tank, would have come over, but Billy waved him off.

Chris was offended.

Jerry Jones swelled with importance. “Well, let me see here... Ah, minnows. They're good for bait.”

Billy pointed at the next tank. “And these?”

The vet stayed quiet as Billy quizzed Jerry on his knowledge of fish, realizing it was a test. Chris was still offended, but it also made him determined to be the good news on this team. He hoped to find something useful.

Billy quickly tired of asking Jerry to verify his knowledge. He motioned toward Chris. “Do what my XO says. Everyone needs to remember to keep

your hands out of the cages until we get the gloves from the truck. Some of these animals could still be alive.”

Billy left the shocked vet to keep things under control as he joined Tommy outside. He nodded to their snipers and then got his notebook out. Both men spent a few minutes making lists of items they’d discovered inside, and also notes on what they would need to haul it all. Billy was already positive they needed large trucks, but he had no idea how they were going to lift some of these items. Angela wanted every drop of water they found brought in for cleaning.

“We’re gonna be here for a while.” Tommy tried to shake away a hand cramp.

“Yeah. At least a week.” Billy grunted. “Maybe longer if the basements here are as full as the stores.”

“Are we sending two men back and camping out?”

“You know it. This will be an amazing load. Great points.”

The two men continued to write down notes and details to be carried to Angela. The mood was good.

In the pet shop behind them, the small crew wandered the aisles, peering into tanks and cages. The dim store smelled like mildew, but it wasn’t as bad as they’d been expecting. All of them remembered visiting establishments like this before the war.

“Hey! This is a rattlesnake. We could use the poison for something, right?”

Chris frowned from a few aisles over. “No. There are enough poisons on this planet without resorting to killing for it.”

“But it’s already dead.” Jerry slid the screen off the dusty tank. He stuck his hand in and grabbed the coil of skin by what he assumed was its head.

“You’re not putting your hand in—”

“Ahh!”

The rest of the crew rushed to help Jerry.

Chris stayed where he was, examining a long tank on the bottom shelf. “Dumbass.”

When Billy and Tommy ran inside, they focused on the vet in surprise; he shrugged. “I’m not a doctor. No cure for a snakebite now, anyway, is there?”

There was little they could say. They went to offer Dale comfort.

Dale was shuddering and almost crying. “He’s dead! How could he die so fast?”

Billy observed the purple face and the swollen hands. “Allergic reaction to the venom. Probably suffocated.” He gestured to Tommy “We’ll clear the body. The rest of you get to work.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Dale scowled. “One of your crew died!”

Billy and Tommy ignored the upset man as they lugged the body out to their vehicle. It would also be sent to Angela.

“Hey! I want to go back.” Dale followed. “It’s not safe out here!”

Tommy sighed in frustration. “Its fine if you don’t do stupid shit. Jerry didn’t have to put his hand in the tank. Go put the screen on that cage. We don’t need a loose snake in the store while we work.”

Dale, panicked at the thought, ran inside to make sure the angry reptile hadn’t already escaped.

Billy observed the door, where the vet was now using the daylight to illuminate the notebook so he could see to write. “You okay?”

Chris glanced over in surprise. “Why wouldn’t I be? I wasn’t bit.”

Billy snickered, impressed. “Cool. Help us with the body, will ya?”

Chris didn’t mind the dirty labor. He went willingly to help them wrap and tape Jerry’s corpse. He’d done much worse...recently.

Billy clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s good that you finally joined the Eagles. The camp will get off you now.”

Chris didn’t reply. He couldn’t care less about the herd or the precious Eagles. His obsessions were more personal.

3

“I mean it, Angie. You have to sleep.”

“I will, I promise, but not yet.” Angela turned to Greg before Marc could argue further. It was after

four and he'd been trying to get her to go to their tent, but she was busy.

"All the crews have chosen to stay at their sites. Other than Shane's team, everyone else is at the first spot on your list. Shane said the lumberyard they went to had been torched. Nothing was usable. They're going to the next location and will check in later."

Angela could feel Greg holding something back. "And?"

Greg sighed. "Jerry Jones is dead. Snakebite."

Angela winced. "Anything else?"

Glad to move on, Greg held out a paper. "These are the new Eagle signups so far. It's getting better now that Tonya's on the radio."

"Pharmacy open?"

"Yeah. She has a couple of the rookies running things and coming to her with questions about people's requests. Appears to be working."

"Good. Next?"

Tiring of the fight, Marc went to the mess truck, choosing to work the problem from another angle. If she wasn't going to cooperate, he wasn't going to play fair.

"A group of refugees came in about an hour ago. Lot of coughing and runny noses." Greg continued to give Angela the hourly update. When he finished with her, he would go to Doug at the mess so the big board could be updated too.

"Not wearing masks during the ash?"

“That’s what they’re claiming, but a couple of them have awfully red cheeks considering the lack of wind right now. The doctor is checking them out.”

“He’s wearing the protective gear?”

“Yep.” Greg snickered. “Looks like a giant ninja turtle.”

Angela gave the hoped-for smile. “How are we coming with the storm prep?”

“We’ve got most of the supplies gathered into the two trucks you specified, but it’s a mess. We’ll have it organized before our shift ends tonight.”

“Good. We’ll need it ready.”

“Winds?” Greg surmised from the supplies they’d collected.

“Yes, and lightning. Make sure Kenn gets a chance to go over the main den before the storm. I don’t know if he needs to ground anything or even exactly what that means, but he will. If he needs hands for it, give him the best people no matter where you have to pull them from.”

“You got it. That’s all from me. You?”

“All caught up for a bit.”

Greg headed for the mess.

Angela continued toward the QZ before Marc could appear again and nag about her going to bed.

“What do you mean you haven’t tested it today?”

Angela kept going, but also kept track of Peggy yelling at Doug for not checking his sugar levels.

“What do you mean you haven’t done it in days?!”

Angela remained on course for the QZ. Doug deserved the scolding and the public scene. There was no reason he couldn’t still have a good life if he started taking care of himself; keeping track of his sugar levels was the key to controlling his illness.

“The needle hurts? You’re kidding, right?”

Angela tried not to snicker. So Doug was scared of needles. Angela got a flash of what would happen next and snorted in amusement. “You shouldn’t have told her that, Doug.”

Angela spotted Kendle and Daryl, both coming toward the mess from the tent area. They’d gotten sleep and were now set to eat and resume their posts from last night. As she watched, the pair avoided each other, each picking a different mess line to join. Angela sighed. *That’s going well.*

“Angie.”

Angela jumped, and then snickered, hoping to stall the complaining. “You scared me.”

Marc saw through the act. He held up a plate of steaming, rare beef. In his other hand, was a joint and a bottle of water. He grinned as her face lit up, retreating. “Come on, pretty kitty. Come get the food...”

Marc ran as Angela gave chase.

Witnesses cackled at his antics.

“That’s not fair!” Angela cornered him against their tent.

“That’s the idea.” Marc tossed the joint inside.
“Go on, kitty. Get your nip.”

Angela punched him in the arm and then ducked under the flap, deftly snatching the plate from his hands. “Get out there or I won’t stay in here.”

Marc vanished as the shadows of her sentries appeared on the canvas.

Angela laughed and dug into the beef.

4

“She’s finally asleep.” Marc joined Zack an hour later. “Get these extra fences up while you can.”

Zack agreed completely. He was honored by the duty he’d been given. He directed the work personally while other senior men stood guard or helped rookies figure out what to do. It was slightly chaotic right now, but both men knew things would settle down and become smoother over the next week. Teamwork took a little time.

“Damn.” Marc swore as the bell for evening mess rang. “I meant to tell them no bell.”

“Maybe she won’t wake up.” Zack knew there was little chance of that. If the bell didn’t wake her, the sudden rush of voices and footsteps going toward the food lines would.

Marc sighed. “If she comes out, I swear, I’m going to throw the ugliest tantrum she’s ever seen. I may even shit myself so she has to change my diaper.”

Zack needed the laugh; he enjoyed his minute with Marc. He would never let any of them in again, not like he had before Crista's death, but he would still allow himself these moments or there was little reason to go on. "Theo said she can come down in the morning. He'll be ready."

Marc scowled, but didn't protest. Angela had to go in and assign areas, though he had tried to convince her to let him do it. She'd refused, insisting it was part of her job. Marc agreed, but that didn't stop the concern. Not everyone was cut out for being underground. "He give you a time?"

"Said they're cleaning the first areas tonight, while the gatherers are still out. Estimated dawn."

"I'll let her know." Marc added it to his book. It was nearly half full; he would need another one soon.

"Is something wrong?" Zack frowned. "You want the defenses up, and she wants us in the cave ASAP. Is more trouble coming?"

Marc wasn't in the mood to lie or play Angela's games, but he knew better than to tell the truth. "You'll have to discuss that with the boss."

It was still an answer. Zack sighed resignedly. "I kinda knew when she made me head of security. She's trying hard to keep me here."

"Not just for the problems, though. We need you. You're good at what you do."

"So are you." Zack was happy with the praise. "Camp is almost fully running."

“Yeah, I thought it would make her happy to get up and see how much we’d accomplished overnight.”

“It will. She’s like Adrian. She’s happiest when work is being done.” Zack responded to an Eagle who called him over.

Marc stewed on the observation. Was Angie really happiest when everyone was working? Why?

She knows building a future will take all our lives, the demon responded. *Every day of toiling now is a day of living later.*

Marc headed for the QZ, where their new arrivals were being fed. Charlie and Tracy were there, handing trays to guards wearing protective suits. Marc approved. The refugees sounded sick. Coughing was a constant noise from their one tent.

Marc gave the doctor a lifted brow. Doctor Brooke waved him off, indicating it wasn’t anything serious, but Marc didn’t like or trust the man and sent his demon in to check them out.

As Marc walked by the activity row that Kenn had taped off before crashing, the demon returned. *Environmental effects, nothing more. No outbreaks there.*

“And morals? Ethics?”

Little, the demon admitted. *They’ve had a hard time of it. Reprogramming will be required.*

Marc wasn’t overly concerned about that. Most of the people who’d joined Safe Haven needed some changing, including himself. The Marc who’d escorted Angela here could never have stayed while

she led these people; he could never have followed her orders and shared this power.

Tonya's voice echoed over the radio, sounding tired. "Rookie Eagle signups have now ended for the night. A fresh sheet will be in the mess come dawn. Add your name and play our game. Whadda ya say, folks? We need Eagles. Think about it."

Marc was pleased with the messages that Tonya had been sending out. He agreed with Allan no longer being scheduled for that duty. When Tonya and Kenn were busy or sleeping, he and Angie would cover it. She said people liked hearing their voices, that it was a comfort.

Marc shifted toward the tent area, hoping to find Angela's guards still standing outside her tent.

He hadn't reached that zone yet when the ground under his feet trembled. Marc groaned at the timing. She wouldn't sleep through a tremor, no matter who had point.

The earth rumbled angrily, sending strong vibrations through the dirt and rock that brought people from their tents.

Marc hit his button, spotting a long black braid whipping around a jogging shadow. "Just a tremor, folks. Settle down."

Marc saw Angela pause to evaluate the reaction. Marc hit the button again as the ground quieted. "We'll get those off and on for a while. Try not to panic."

There was no distortion of his disapproving voice; people resumed their activities as the rumbling stopped.

Marc heaved a sigh of relief when Angela circled back toward their tent, guards at her side. She had to get more than two hours of sleep at a time or she was going to lose the baby before it grew too big to become an issue.

Marc detoured toward the main gate for a quick walk through to calm people further and check for damages and injuries. He didn't expect to find either. The tremor had only lasted a few seconds. Marc's thoughts went to the prediction of thousands of refugees. He needed to do more to get ready for that. There were some defenses that Angie might not think they needed, so Marc didn't intend to ask her first. The work would be finished before she woke each morning. He doubted she would order any of it removed once she saw how effective his protections would be. With the right fences and guns, Safe Haven would be able to hold off a riot of refugees.

But Marc was already worried that she wouldn't want to hold them off. Like with the ants, she would kill herself to find a way to take them all in. It was a problem he didn't have a solution for, and he was pretty sure that Adrian hadn't either. That was why the blond man had hoped to be dead before now. He knew the things coming were so awful that no one could handle them all.

Marc refused to think about that issue any longer. He headed toward the QZ, taking the opposite path for the roundtrip to be confident he had it all covered. He spotted kids being escorted to the bathrooms, including the descendant children they'd been picking up along the way. There were now more than thirty children in Safe Haven. That was another reason for Marc to have hope.

As Marc went by, the group of kids turned to look at him. Many of the camp children waved and shouted hello, but the descendants nodded in unison, showing their respect for the male alpha in Safe Haven.

A bit shaken, Marc parroted the formal greeting and walked faster. There was a lot he still didn't understand.

The QZ was dark and quiet—a good sign as far as Marc was concerned, but he felt the tension as he neared the center tents. Tara's guards were rubbing each other the wrong way. Marc could tell from the glowers and crossed arms. Clearly, he'd just missed an argument.

Marc glanced at Kendle. “Things okay here?”

Kendle snorted. “Peachy.”

Marc lifted a brow at Daryl, but got a shrug in response.

Marc sighed. “If you two can't learn to play nicely, Angela will stop by for a chat. Do either of you want that?”

Both of them reluctantly shook their heads. No one wanted to be on Angela's shit list, no matter the reason.

"Good. Here's an idea. Teach each other something on every shift."

Dumbfounded silence met the suggestion. Marc's tone lowered into warning, "Then consider it an order." He left them glowering, aware that it was at him now. "Good. They'll be too busy bitching about the order to piss each other off."

Marc saw the poker game going on in one of the soldier QZ tents. The Indian side was now empty. Angela had cleared them this afternoon and spent an hour going over settling instructions with them and their partners. Marc wasn't sure what she had planned, but he assumed it was building or gathering. She might have let the soldiers out first if it was a security or traveling chore.

Marc stopped at the guard station outside the QZ, aware of furious attention focused on his every move. Inside Safe Haven, Adrian's visibility was severely limited, but out here, there was little blocking his view.

Marc, feeling calmer than usual when it came to Adrian, ignored the man and joined the small line of shooters waiting for a chance to hit the red Coke sign that had been hung exactly where Marc had instructed. The line was moving slowly, but the mood was good and Marc soaked it up. His thoughts were never nice and neat these days. It was a relief to be welcomed like one of the pack.

“He’s not asleep yet. Go get him.” Ozzie pointed.

“You got it.” Simon quickly made his way to the entrance of the tunnel. The two men had point in the caves during the evening shift, but Theo was in charge of the entire operation and they had something going on that had to be cleared by him. Neither of them had the experience to green light this one.

Ozzie left the small area they’d set up, not disturbing the sketching teenager. Jennifer had been at the table for hours, churning out the requested blueprints. Until Theo approved her work, they wouldn’t be using those drawings. Ozzie was positive that when she was finished, Jennifer would expect to implement them immediately. As fast as she was drawing, it wouldn’t be morning before that issue had to be handled. Ozzie believed in covering things before they were trouble.

“Poor planning prevents positive performance,” he repeated the saying backwards contentedly, fond of his time in the service. That was why the Eagles had appealed to him so much, even though he could have surrendered to the draft and been useful to the government.

“At least until Angie got to us.” Ozzie didn’t avoid the shadows or feel the claustrophobia that some of their crews were already reporting. Ozzie

wasn't afraid of being inside the earth. Being above it, however, terrified the hell out of him. If they had asked him to fly, there could have been chaos.

Theo wasn't happy to be disturbed. He had just gotten settled into the builder tent he was sharing with his main crew. He was on his cot with a full stomach, freshly showered, and boots off. He'd been about to read over the notes he'd made earlier, and then sleep for ten hours.

"Tell her I have to go over them. In the morning." Theo glared.

Simon knelt by Theo's cot, aware of their audience. "If the sketches are good, we can have it ready for the boss at dawn, instead of tomorrow night."

Theo understood their need to score points and gave in, rising. "Okay. I need coffee. I was already getting sleepy."

Simon rushed off to secure a fresh mug.

Theo pulled on his boots. "You guys get some rest. Even if the drawings are done, we can't roll on it until Angela approves it."

The rest of the crew went back to what they'd been doing, but Theo could tell Simon's words of scoring early points had sent fresh alertness into them. There was always a possibility the boss would rise early, sensing they might have something for her. Angela was spooky that way; Theo respected it. "I'll call if it's good, okay?"

That was welcomed with nods. Calm returned to the tent.

Theo stuffed his laces into his socks instead of tying them and stumbled toward the cave, almost hoping Jennifer did have something good. When she'd said she was supposed to help with the blueprints, Theo had assumed she was like Neil—a map maker—but she'd offered enough ideas and proof of her words that he'd put her on outlining locations of key components like air and power, as well as waste and food setups. He marched a bit faster, wishing he'd thought to grab his jacket. He'd forgotten how chilly midnight was.

Theo was entering the cave when Simon joined him, handing over the mug of coffee. Theo sipped it as he eased into the cave that had gaping holes and razor-sharp edges. There was a center gap that a horse could fall through. They had a lot of work to do to make this livable, but the addition of the hanging lanterns by the night shift was a start. They made it possible for Theo to see that a crew had come in and cleaned these first level areas. Small piles of garbage were in the corners of each cavern, waiting for retrieval.

The smell of bleach was strong. Theo took a mask from one of the many stacks that had been distributed throughout the areas they were exploring. There were also oxygen packs, for those who had trouble adjusting to being underground. Theo wasn't one of those, but he did hate the smell of bleach and increased his pace. He wasn't feeling

good about living inside the earth, but he knew that he could. He was still hoping for a recount on that vote.

Theo stopped short of entering the area Jennifer was in, drawn by the hum of energy. They didn't have a source of power in here yet, but the sounds and vibrations were unmistakable. An engine was running. Theo advanced quietly, approaching the table from the side so she could see him coming.

"You shouldn't be up yet."

Her voice didn't sound right. Theo carefully took the chair across from her, glancing over the blueprint she was laboring on. Her pencil flew across the sheet, adding details, notes.

Theo gaped in surprise at the nearly complete diagram of their air system. It was perfect, exactly as he'd envisioned it.

"I took it from your mind." Jennifer's hand didn't pause. "I wouldn't have insisted. I would have let you sleep."

Theo didn't tell her the others weren't rooting against her. She obviously already knew that and didn't approve of their competitions.

"I actually wanted those hours to go over it before I showed you." Her hand slowed, then stopped. "It's the first one I've done." She gently placed her pencil on the table. "It's finished, I think."

Theo slid the draft around, confident he would have her do the rest of the blueprints. "It's really, really good, Jenny. Honest."

The teenager beamed at the praise, sending good energy throughout the cave.

In response, an odd howl filtered up to them, making both people tense.

“Is that something we should worry about?”

Jennifer studied the sound, and then shook her head. “No, but note it for the boss. The herd might stampede if she doesn’t give them a logical explanation.”

“Is there one?”

“Not one they’ll like. She’ll probably ask you to say its air in the pipes.”

Theo immediately told himself the same thing and felt that hair inside his brain lay down. He could deal with magic. Ghosts? *No*.

“Candy won’t be good for you.” Jennifer fell into that tone of the dead. “Known as the architect of Safe Haven, your legend will be far and long.”

“If I avoid her?” Theo already hated the message.

“Only if you avoid her.” Jennifer leaned away from his upset vibes. “I’m sorry. She’s not one of us.”

“What does that mean? She’s a traitor?”

“She hates men. She’ll worsen with time.”

“Does Angela know?”

Jennifer shrugged, coming back to herself. “I don’t know. Probably.”

“Then why would she put us together?”

“Because you like her and you’re lonely, and you’ll be content at times. Some days, especially since we all almost died, that’s a lot. You know?”

Theo felt his anger leave and nodded tiredly. “Yes, but tell her I don’t want that, will you? Even if I’m meant to be alone. I hate settling.”

Jennifer gave him a sympathetic smile. “Me too. Would you like me to search for you, to determine who else might be a match?”

It was a generous, rarely made offer and Theo knew it. “You shouldn’t waste it on me. The camp needs you.”

Warmed, Jennifer reached out.

Theo reluctantly placed his big hand over hers, thinking she had the bone structure of a delicate bird. He felt like a giant in comparison.

Jennifer jerked as the door opened in her mind; she grinned in delight as a pretty face appeared. “Nice!” She shoved the picture into Theo’s mind.

“Wow, that’s great! She’s, uh, wow. Not here yet. I don’t know her!”

Jennifer shut the door between them and returned to the paper, adding a few more details she’d just thought of.

Theo was busy memorizing the woman’s profile so when he finally met her, he wouldn’t miss her. Not only was she pretty and clearly the shot of wild that he liked, she was also a descendant. He’d been able to tell by her glowing red orbs. “Thank you.”

“Please don’t mention it. Kyle won’t like me doing it.”

“My word.” Theo hoped no one had overheard them.

“We’re alone.”

Theo heard the light tremor in her tone and didn’t try to resist the urge to comfort her. “I wouldn’t. Ever.”

Jennifer forced herself to relax, waving at the entrance. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping now?”

“With this ready?” Theo snorted. “Not a chance. I’ll sleep next week.”

“Well, give me another twenty minutes before everyone comes in. I have another idea for that power system and I think it’ll only take about half the space.”

Theo didn’t argue. He would keep the men at the mess for twice that, talking about the first load of gear they needed. They would also update Doug so he could add their progress to the board.

Jennifer wasn’t aware of the time as she continued to work and the night passed. Food and drinks were put next to her and she consumed those items, but her mind was flying. She barely noticed when the evening faded into early morning. She loved being useful.

Chapter Six BK6
Flying High
Shortly Before Dawn

1

“**S**amantha? Honey? You have to wake up now.”

Samantha responded to the urgency, lids snapping open.

Around her, papers, dishes, and gear dropped to the floor with a loud crash.

Neil rubbed a gentle hand over her furrowed brow. “It’s okay. Go back to sleep now.”

Samantha groaned, realizing what had happened. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries.” Jeremy had already begun to clean up. “Just get a little more sleep while you can.”

Samantha wanted to help take care of the mess, but her roiling stomach said she had more urgent needs. “I’ll be back.” She ducked from the tent, almost running to the bathroom.

Neil followed, waiting while she retched. He was hoping the disruption of the dream was all that had upset her stomach. He didn’t understand much about descendants and even less about pregnancy.

Neil held out the wipes when she emerged; they walked to the smoldering fire can as she cleaned her face and hands. The towels flamed up the instant they hit the red wood in the bottom of the can, bathing them both in fire glow.

Samantha felt Neil's hot gaze, but all she wanted was to brush her teeth. She moved around him to take care of that. Afterward, she needed to eat so her stomach would settle down.

A sharp pain lanced through her side. Samantha winced, but kept going. She'd had a few of those, but she didn't want to alarm her men. The doctor had her scheduled for a visit and she would tell him everything.

Neil's lips disappeared into his scowl, but he managed to keep from nagging her when she vanished into the tent only to come right back out, kit in hand. He trailed her to the showers, annoyed with her and himself. He would have to figure out a better way to wake her from her nightmares. Flying objects were dangerous, but so was this sudden alertness.

Neil stayed outside the door, approving of the heavy security Marc was almost finished with. Not everyone would like the guns on the QZ tower, but Neil was betting the boss would be pleased.

Neil gazed through the shadowy flickers around them, not spotting any members up this early. He wondered if the mess had food going yet. If Samantha wasn't going to sleep, he could at least get her to eat.

Neil was pleased when Samantha came from the shower and headed exactly where he wanted her to go. He finally spotted someone else moving. The large shadow and limp said it was Doug. They exchanged greetings as they entered the mess.

“What are you doing out so early?”

Samantha laughed. “Was gonna ask you the same thing.”

“Had to piss again.” Doug grumbled. “And Peggy was up.”

“Over here.”

Peggy sounded annoyed.

Neil and Samantha joined the couple hesitantly. Neither of them were in the mood to listen to people arguing.

Peggy already had stacks of plates set out. She handed one to each of them. “Li’s got a small buffet set up inside the truck for early risers. Go get something. Coffee’s on the stove.”

The trio followed orders without replying, aware of her bad vibes.

“What’s she upset about?” Neil asked lowly when he thought they were out of earshot.

“I didn’t go back to bed, I guess.” Doug sighed. “I didn’t want her wandering around alone.”

Neil understood that. He didn’t want Samantha alone either.

Samantha wasn’t paying attention to the men or to the sweaty cook who greeted them happily. Her attention was on the stacks of pancakes Li Sing was

packaging for breakfasts for people who wouldn't be coming to the mess. "Can I?"

Li pouted. "You not wait four minutes?"

Samantha grinned. "For fresh?"

Li bobbed his head. "You get 'em hot and sweet."

"I wait!" Samantha groaned and took the stool in the corner, plate and cup still in hand. She loved watching people cook. She'd even enjoyed the shows on TV. That was how she'd found Kendle's program. Her cooking gals had been replaced by Survival Challenge. Samantha had been sucked in from episode one. She'd lost track because of her lack of free time.

Neil took a small plate of the muffins and fruit cups that had been chilled, and left the truck, not wanting anything as heavy as Li's pancakes. They went down light, but hit hard. It was perfect for a mother-to-be with too much acid in her guts.

Neil joined Doug at the table and noticed a small plastic device lying by the big man's plate. It looked like a pen with a needle in the end. Neil winced when he realized what it was for. It would suck to have to poke yourself multiple times a day.

"You gonna do it?" Peggy glared at Doug.

Doug scowled, fork stopping. "Geez, woman! Let me eat!"

"You're supposed to do it before you eat." Peggy picked up the tester. "Get it over with."

Doug's big arm pushed it away, fork coming up. "Later!"

Already pissed, Peggy leaned down and jabbed the needle into his hand. “There!”

“Ow! What the hell!”

Beep!

Peggy eyed the readout and tilted it toward Doug. “You’re okay. You can eat now.”

Doug cradled his hand, gaping at her. “You... You’re not... Ow!”

Neil quietly left the table. It was safer inside the truck. Samantha would protect him.

2

“Tell them air in the pipes causes it, that they’ll hear it regularly. Compare it to the way the corn stalks howl.”

Theo, tired, nodded at Angela’s instruction. The eerie howl would worry some of their people, but most of them would accept that explanation. In time, he would want the truth, but right now, all he could think about was sleep. Even his complaints seemed unimportant; he had accepted Angela’s comments on the impossible not always being so.

“Go on.” Angela waved him off. “I’m good on updates.”

“I should escort you in.” The bad vibes about her going in had lessened as the weariness caught up. “I don’t like not going over it all again when they’re finished.”

“A few hours yet on that?”

“Yes. They’re checking welds and ropes right now.”

“Just have them tell Marc, instead of me.” Angela was already sure Marc wouldn’t go to bed until after she was topside again. “He’ll stay within an arm’s length of me at all times.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Theo knew Marc would keep her safe no matter what happened. “Thanks.” Theo was in his bed in less than a minute, boots still on.

Waiting by the QZ gate, Angela observed the two guards who had just ended their shift over Tara and Missy.

“Boss.” Daryl smiled at her. “New shifts are on duty; QZ is clear.”

“Good.” She looked at Kendle. “Calm night?”

“Uh, mostly. Kid had a bad dream. Both went back to sleep without coming out.”

“What have you picked up?” Angela was trying hard to treat Kendle like any other Eagle.

Kendle frowned, though she’d been warned to be ready for this. “I tried a couple times and couldn’t get anything from either of them. Just...steel doors and bottomless pits. Creepy.”

Daryl’s expression said she should know, but he didn’t speak. He hadn’t said a single word to her during their shift and he planned to keep it that way.

“Why?” Angela demanded, upset with them both. “She’s an Eagle. She fought in our war. Do your duty.” Angela rotated to scold Kendle and

found the Survival Challenge star cringing away.
“What the hell?”

Daryl felt it too, though not as strongly. “Heat!”

Angela immediately forced a barrier around herself that wouldn’t let anything get through without notice. “Sorry.”

Both Eagles recovered, but kept their distance.

Angela wasn’t offended. “It’s an emotion thing.”

Uneasy, Kendle retreated further.

Angela pinned her in place. “If you can’t try, you can’t stay.”

“And I told you to teach her something on every shift.”

Marc’s voice behind them held all the warmth of an iceberg.

Daryl scowled. “I waited until we weren’t on duty because I knew we’d fight and be distracted.”

“Fine.” Marc approved of that. “What lesson?”

“We’re going to the training tent to get her kai lessons going.” Daryl grunted. “You know I wouldn’t abuse my skills to hurt her.”

Angela frowned a bit. “Does she know that?”

“Uh...” Daryl turned to Kendle. “I wouldn’t, you know. No matter how mad you make me. I’m a good guy.”

“There’s no such thing.” Kendle led the way. “But come try to convince me anyway. I won’t be able to sleep yet. Maybe you can bore me into it.”

Angela swallowed a snicker. She didn’t want to like Kendle, but that spunk was hard to ignore. If

Kendle ever settled down, she would be leadership and as much as Angela hated it personally, she also was looking forward to it. Kendle would be a vicious defender.

Of the women, her witch stated, still staying back and quietly taking energy from people to store.

And those women will defend their men and children together. It will all work out in the end. Angela believed that, but she also knew it couldn't happen without pieces falling into place perfectly. She wasn't counting on that, but she wasn't going to interfere with however fate chose to handle that future either. She'd done her part. Now, others would attempt to do theirs.

And when you end up on opposite sides? the witch questioned. Will you regret your actions then?

Never! Never.

“Are you all right?” Daryl asked. Marc was scanning the foggy mountain cliffs and shadows, but Daryl had caught some of the emotions flashing across Angela's face.

“Distracted.” She smiled wryly at the word. Distracted didn't even come close to her mental state these days, but this was a vacation compared to what was coming.

“You know where I'll be.” Daryl left them alone.

Marc took a moment to admire Angela's hair in the sharp sunrays that were beginning to break through. It was like fire dancing on darkness.

Angela swept the defenses that Marc had handled overnight. She assumed he would keep going until she told him it was enough, which it wouldn't ever be if the future didn't change. She wanted him to be sure he understood her views on it. "Can we add another tower, with a few more guns?"

Marc's expression was priceless. "Really? I love you so much!"

Angela let the laughter roll; it brought the bubble over them to life.

Those awake to witness it stared in approval and relief. The shield was brilliant blue, with streaks of green and gold—calm and happy. There were faint tinges of yellow and even orange here and there, but the majority of her people were safe and snug, so the small percentage didn't dent her mood. It was much less than 17%.

Marc was unhappy but unable to protest. "Theo's ready for you. They had a great night."

"Sweet." Angela didn't have to be told that putting Jennifer with them had helped. It was why she'd assigned the girl there. Jennifer's mind was a priceless resource and it would be used for the future. "Let's go."

3

"We're all set." Theo held out a rope.

Marc didn't protest as Angela strode confidently to the cave entrance. She'd submitted to

wearing his gear and the ropes, though none of the men were wearing them. There wasn't anything else he could say to keep her from going inside that cave. Afterward, she was off duty and supposed to eat, then sleep. Still, he was unable to remain silent as he attached the final rope to his belt. "You stay close."

"Yes, dear." Angela understood his nervousness. She had a touch of it herself, but she didn't want anyone to know.

"Clear room!" Kyle and a small crew came to provide her escort. They would be leaving camp afterwards.

Before she could protest, Kyle snapped a second line onto her caving belt, and then secured it to his own harness. "No offense."

Marc laughed, aware of Angela's displeasure. "None taken."

Angela refused to get upset. She drew her personal bubble in tighter. Now that she knew it worked, she would teach the other pregnant women to do the same and cut down on awkward moments. She would also dedicate a new notebook to handling descendants.

The cave entrance was wide and littered with cords and equipment. Only a small path was cleared through the boxes and crates of equipment the building crews had requested first.

Angela walked around them carefully, hoping the teams were establishing a system of organization. Things would go quicker that way.

The cave floor was a nightmare. Angela understood Marc being so paranoid, but she wondered if Kyle had been this way with Jennifer while she worked in here.

Not seeing the damp patch on the sheet of metal that had recently been dragged in to cover part of the gap, Angela's boot slipped and sent her flailing toward the edge.

Marc snapped his rope and caught her as she was jerked away from the danger zone.

Angela clutched Marc's arm, stomach cramping. "Change the belt—now."

Marc realized where the pressure had been centered and swore furiously as he worked the harness links. He hadn't even thought about it.

Angela concentrated on breathing evenly and the drip of the water down the walls. When she was reasonably confident everything was okay, she pulled out of Marc's hands and headed for the next area.

Shaken, Marc motioned Kyle to take her side and tried to get his breathing under control. He and Kyle had agreed that Angela, more than anyone else here, was a target. She was clumsy at times and drew danger without meaning to, and she also had reckless moments they held little control over. Both males had agreed until the cave was safe, Angela would be harnessed to at least one of them, but preferably both. Their caution had just been proven necessary. Marc was incredibly grateful for that

decision. It all could have ended right there in front of him—a simple, agonizing arm’s length too short.

Kyle’s men patted Marc’s shoulder as he caught up to the group, shortening the rope to Angela. They understood his near panic and respected him even more for roping her against her will.

“This will be a main living area. TVs, games, and that list.” Angela refused to think about how near she’d just been to death. “This next one will be perfect for training.”

The crew followed her through the first level of the cave, taking notes and staying close in case she slipped again. When they reached the second level, where a rope ladder waited to transport them to the next landing, Angela felt the tension increase. “If I can’t do this, then the camp can’t do this.” Angela used Kyle’s arm for balance as she put her boot on the first rung of the rope ladder.

Her point was hard to argue with. The males waited tensely for her to reach the bottom, where several Eagles were already standing guard. They had security set up throughout the caves, and all the exits would be on camera as soon as the power was on.

Angela climbed from the ladder, aware of Kyle waiting to drop down by the rope that had been put there for that reason. She got out of the way as his big body came through the hole.

Kyle made contact with the sentries who had come over at the noise, and then took up a nearby post to wait for the rest of the crew.

Angela, tethered to Kyle and Marc, also had to wait. She passed the time by studying what she could see of the caverns around them. This second level held multiple areas, each with their own set of tunnels and caves. She saw the cleaners had been here too, but they hadn't been able to remove the odor. Angela didn't think there was enough bleach to accomplish that. Mildew and mold always lingered in caves.

Once everyone was down and in place, Marc nodded.

Angela went into the first cavern, taking a mining hat from the box before he could tell her to. She flipped on the light and adjusted the angle, then led the way. This wasn't something she needed to be scared of. It was something she needed to learn, to perfect, and then be able to pass to her camp. If they didn't get a chance to try living here, nowhere would satisfy them.

"We'll make this the sleeping side." Angela pointed to natural cuts and crevices in the walls that would eventually be shelving. "Same setup as usual, but I want Eagle stations in each area. One man, one female—one senior, one rookie."

Marc and Kyle were making notes, but the rest of their protection detail was paying attention to their surroundings and not caring for the shadows, the odd groans, and the moans of the earth. It was more than unsettling.

"I want the bathrooms for the sleeping area over here." Angela motioned as they entered an

adjoining cavern and the smell of mold increased. “Once we reinforce that gap, it might be perfect for the composting toilets.” She pointed at a small indent in the center. “Put a washing system there, something for hands and faces for half a dozen people at a time.”

Angela moved to the cavern across from the sleeping side and immediately spotted a ledge they needed. “Use this room for the showers. Have the buffalos put on that ledge once it’s evaluated and supported. Place the showers in a six-cube around an Eagle station—use the same setup for sleep. One male, one female—one senior, one rookie.”

“That’s going to cause some problems.” Marc was thinking of their more prudish and shy members.

“I prefer they’re safe and not raped.” Angela grunted, stepping carefully. “The women will get over it after hearing you say that. Also, it allows the men to be in the next shower over, so they know their female or child is protected.”

“We’re using the new stalls, right?” Kyle scanned his notes. “The ones with the full doors?”

“Yes. The Eagles will be there to prevent problems and because of their presence, there shouldn’t be any.” Angela swept the walls for bugs. She didn’t see anything crawling, but she knew better than to assume insects weren’t down here. “We’ll need something for bugs. A gel maybe, so it won’t be ruined by the dampness.”

“I know the perfect stuff for spiders and centipedes.” Bobby didn’t take his attention from the cavern he was facing. He hadn’t seen anything, but he felt a disturbance. “It’s called Ever Green dust.”

“Great. Add it to the next run going out if we don’t already have it.” Angela assigned the other areas on the second level quickly, then moved to the rear of the widest tunnel, where another large hole and rope waited.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t go down there,” the guard on the hole stated, swallowing nervously. “We took a vote.”

Angela could have argued, but she knew they had counted on her reaction and then accounted for it. She held out a hand.

Kyle placed a small folder in it.

Angela examined the pictures, approving of the lamination. Cynthia was discovering ways to get them using office supplies again and it was wonderful.

“That’s our waste spot.” Angela pointed. “The notes I read earlier said that pit is hundreds of feet deep. As long as we add the right chemicals and exhaust, it’ll be perfect.”

“What about the garbage dump and recycling rooms?” Marc wanted her above the ground.

“Here for the garbage.” She pointed to a place on the picture. “Make that the kitchen area and we’ll put the animals in this corner.”

“That’s good.” Kyle wrote it down in his book. “We’ll have room for the butchering and classes without contamination.”

“Yes. We’ll need a shower or two down there. Use the same monitoring system, but this shower will be open at limited times, and only to the people who butcher and work with livestock.”

Kyle moved on to the next item on his list. “Medical bay goes on the first floor?”

“Second floor, in that cubby next to the communication room. The doctor won’t care for it, but he’ll spend most of his time topside at the QZ anyway, so talk him down when he finds out.” Angela had just given a hint for the future that even Marc missed. She still didn’t like the new doctor, and neither did any of the other women. He wasn’t gentle and the students working with him were starting to complain about his snide comments concerning the descendants and their pregnancies. He didn’t think the babies were human. Angela wasn’t looking forward to Marc discovering that.

“What about training?” Marc wanted to confirm his suggestion to leave that topside for now. He also wanted to be finished; he gently took Angela by the arm to steer them toward the ladder.

“Yes, topside, for now. Along with the center fire, the larger animals, and supply truck crates. We’ll bring it down as we need it.”

Marc didn’t stop when they got to the ladder. He took the pictures from her and tugged her toward the rope.

Angela caught his twitchy vibes and didn't argue. She climbed, trying to go quickly, and felt him coming up right behind her.

They had to wait for Kyle because the ropes linking them weren't long enough to reach between levels, but Marc didn't pause any longer than he had to. The sense that Angie needed to get out of here was too strong to ignore.

Angela read Marc's thoughts and became concerned, but she wasn't picking up anything at all on her own and it was frustrating.

"Damn." Marc led her around the hole she'd almost slipped into earlier. "Adrian spotted a group coming. Says they're trouble."

Angela understood why she hadn't been able to pick up anything. She unlocked Kyle's rope first. "Go check that out. I need to cover the camp if there's shooting. They won't take much of that so soon after what we just went through."

Kyle headed for the QZ, hearing the revving engines of someone not driving calm and careful on these treacherous mountain roads. He paused and looked back. "How do you want it handled?"

Angela sighed, unhappy that her fears were already being proven. "Troublemakers go in paddock C."

None of them were amused by the joke.

Angela pointed to the area that had been fenced in last night. It was near Adrian's site; that wasn't lost on any of them. "That's Zone C. It's for the people we're not letting in or those we want to keep

track of while we make up our minds.” That implied there would be other holding areas in the QZ.

Marc stayed by her side as she went to the mess to check in with Doug. He wanted to be around if Kyle had to handle the new arrivals. The senior Eagles were free to use their own judgment on issues like that.

Angela was confident Kyle wouldn't take any lives that he didn't have to. As for those who needed to be taken, Kyle was no longer the executioner. Someone else now held that terrible, soul-crushing job and he would be better at it than even the mobster had been.

“Once things are clear, I'd like the crews to get rolling on the blueprints.” Angela was aware that Marc's concern hadn't eased. “Actually, I'll get Greg to cover that. Why don't you go—”

Marc immediately followed Kyle.

Angela approved. Both of those men had loved ones inside these gates and their attitudes were *shoot first and question later*. It was exactly what an apocalypse called for.

Greg joined Angela.

She handed him a small envelope with a sticky note on the front.

Greg read it.

Please deliver these notes quietly.

“You got it.” He vanished.

Angela joined the small crowd around the board. Marc would handle the outside and she would cover the inside. Before she could add the

totals of loads that had been brought in so far, Cynthia appeared.

Angela caught Cynthia's expression. It said there was a problem she wouldn't want everyone to hear. Angela read the reporter's thoughts. It only took a moment, and then Angela yawned, showing that calm, almost bored façade again, but her mind buzzed. If Cynthia was right, there was yet another traitor in their midst and she had missed it.

"Getting old." Angela nodded to Cynthia.

"What was that, lass?" Doug leaned down.

"I said I'm getting old," Angela covered as the reporter left. "Letters are blurry to me."

"We have an optometrist now." Ray smiled at her. "Just have to find him the equipment."

To Ray's delight, Angela took out her notebook and wrote it down.

"Great. Now all I need is a count on crews." Angela looked around. "Who hasn't checked in yet?"

4

Marc didn't like the new people even before he had his demon examine them. Reckless driving, tossing garbage out filthy windows, honking horns, shouting—they had none of the signs of civilization most of their new arrivals came with. Marc didn't detect any gratitude that they'd found organized people, but he did see greedy eyes casing the fences and estimating weaknesses.

“This should be fun.” Kyle’s hand dropped to the replacement Glock on his hip.

“Yeah, let’s get some help on this.” Marc signaled for two more teams to be called to the rafters on this gate, indicating they should open fire at the least provocation.

Kyle went with Marc as the gate opened.

Marc signaled for the gate to be locked; he waited with his hands on his Colts for the vehicles to reach them. The demon inside was whispering of all sorts of atrocities, but Marc didn’t need to hear it to know these people were trouble. The feel of them was bad. It only increased when the cars stopped and the people emerged.

“Oh, this is nice!” The leader came to Marc with a glad hand out. “I’m Benn.”

“No physical contact; stay back.” Marc studied the man with a hard expression. “How can we help you?”

Benn lowered his hand, sleazy grin widening. “Sure, sure. Makes sense.” His brown gaze went to the gate, to the Eagles pointing rifles and hostile glowers. “We want to join Safe Haven. Heard your fighting on the radio and knew this was where we should be.”

“The fighting is over.” Marc didn’t want to let these people in. “This is a settlement now and we don’t accept everyone.”

Benn’s bearded countenance expressed a light dismay. “But you guys called for survivors.” He

gestured at the three dozen men and women waiting behind him. “We’re survivors.”

“And maybe trouble.” Marc sighed. Angie wouldn’t like it if he turned them away. “There’s one way to tell that now. You’ll have to stay in our quarantine zone so we can determine what type of people you are.”

“Sure.” Benn smiled eagerly. “Open those gates and we’ll do what you tell us.”

Feeling Angela surveying the new arrivals, Marc glanced up to verify what she wanted him to do.

Angela slowly pointed toward the large, double gated site. “Zone C.”

Benn’s expression dipped into something dangerous. “Up there? Away from you?”

Marc motioned Zack to open the electronic gate they’d finished installing this morning. “Yes. We’ll bring some supplies out, but we don’t have much to spare. You’ll need to do your own scavenging.”

“You won’t take care of us?”

“Survivors take care of themselves.”

“How will we get out?” Benn retreated as all the Eagles on the rafters suddenly aimed at him.

“We’ll open your gate twice a day so you can come and go. If you agree to leave this area, the gate will be opened at any time and we will try to send a few things with you.”

“Is this how you treat people who come here?” A woman behind Benn gestured angrily. “We need help!”

“And you’ll get it.” Marc felt bad for the bruised female. “The doctor needs to run tests; you can tell him about your...medical problems.”

“They do have a doctor!” The woman turned to those in the car next to her. “A real doctor!”

“When more refugees come, you may have to share your area.” Marc was already positive he wouldn’t put anyone in with them if he could help it. “We’ll expect you to share and get along while we evaluate and run tests.”

“What if you say no?” Benn eyed Marc’s guns.

“We’ll ask you to leave.” Marc’s tone hardened. “And you *will* go, one way or the other.”

“We don’t want trouble.” Benn backed up again. “We want in there with you, where it’s safe.”

“You’re safe up there, if you follow our code of conduct.” Marc motioned Kenn over. “These are our rules. The sooner you accept them as yours, the sooner we can let you all in.” Marc pointed. “That road leads to the site. Go there now or keep going. Your choice.”

Weapons cocked, enforcing Marc’s instructions.

Benn quickly stomped to his car. The others with him did the same; the angry people tried not to drive off the cliff as they turned around.

Everyone hoped the group would keep going as they neared the path for Zone C. Instead, Benn led them up the weedy street and drove straight into the gated area.

Kyle and Angela exchanged a glance.

She shook her head, denying him. “Someone else has that heavy chore now. Just take care of your run. Distractions are costly.”

Kyle stayed outside the gate even after Marc slipped in. Angela’s words were a warning, but he wasn’t worried for himself. *Is Jennifer in danger again?*

Uneasy, he paced the perimeter in place of his workout, searching for weak spots where an intruder might make it through. He was about to leave on a run and he wanted to know those inside the gates were as safe as they assumed they were. If he found anything, he would take it straight to Marc.

Marc spoke to Kenn and to Zack. “I want people on Zone C at all times. It’s now a regular stop on all patrols. Make sure the stationary men don’t get bored and forget to watch the rear gate. If something stirs up there, I want it recorded.”

5

“Ready for food?”

“Sure.” Angela let Marc lead her to the mess that had been expanded. There were now two dining areas. One had the usual tables and buffet. The other had tables crammed together with both hot trays and packed lunches. One was for the camp and one was for the workers. Li Sing and his family were already busy filling and refilling each of the bins and trays on both side.

Angela didn't have them on a normal eating schedule right now. She couldn't with so many crews coming and going, but it was important to waste as little as possible. She hoped the pre-packed lunches and breakfasts would help. Marc's numbers on food, water, and fuel had been discouraging. She was being forced to send out more crews for those things and now, instead of later. They couldn't wait. Angela scanned the parking area by the QZ, noting teams preparing for their morning run. They would pack, eat, and then leave.

Seth and Becky were at his truck, along with Neil and Donald, who were helping load the leaving vehicles. The two groups would bring back supplies Safe Haven desperately needed if they were going to make it inside the earth. Being underground would be bad enough. Without having lights and power, it would be a disaster.

The rookies on the two leaving teams were standing together, drawing strength and comfort from each other for their first trips out. These new people had just signed up and hadn't received a moment of training. Their nervous postures revealed their unease.

"Which is why I put them with strong Eagles. Stop it."

Marc didn't reply to her mutter or try to comfort her. He understood how the voices inside could get so adamant that an actual oral response was required to satisfy them. Demons didn't like to guess—about

anything—and Marc agreed completely. Even if it was horrible, knowing was best.

Angela felt his mood shift; she felt that awful question coming. She spun around and kissed him.

Marc clutched her gratefully, letting the passion carry him away from the edge that he didn't want to peer over.

Angela made sure he was rock hard against her hip before she retreated. "You ready?"

"Oh, baby!" Marc crooned. "If only you knew."

They laughed and took the center table in the camp side of the mess that was being called the breakroom by the toiling shifts. Doug had even hung signs to let people know which side they should be on. The atmosphere here was relaxed. On the other side, busy bees were buzzing toward their chores. The noises carried.

"Damn! Ozzie has first place!"

"No!"

"Got the blueprints finished, didn't he?"

"Yep. Jennifer knocked them out last night."

"Explains why Theo's crew has second. Who has third and fourth?"

"Blank, on both. First loads haven't come in yet."

Angela's head tilted. "That just changed."

"We have a crew pulling in," the mess speaker informed them all. "It's Billy's crew!"

Cheers and groans echoed. Those who were off duty hurried to the main dumpsite to determine how big a load Billy's team had brought in.

“There are some items in that load that should be quietly removed and put up for later.” Angela cut into the steak. It was bloody. *Perfect.*

“Will I know it when I see it?” Marc slid the bowl of rolls toward her.

“Think winter and you’ll have it.” Angela dipped one of the rolls into the bloody juice.

Marc grimaced and focused on the moody sky. He liked a good steak, but blood in the morning wasn’t what he enjoyed.

Liar! the demon accused.

Marc hid his smile in his coffee cup. *Spilling is different than eating.*

Angela felt Marc’s good cheer and leaned against his heat as the chilly wind blew over them. It was light now, but that would also change. The storm Samantha had predicted wasn’t one to be taken lightly.

“Preparations are in place.” Marc’s mind had also gone to their next challenge, but he’d been busy last night and would be again tonight.

“Thank you.”

Marc leaned over and kissed her cheek. “We’ll be okay.”

“I know.” She let go of the worry and got back to her meal. “Anyone check in yet?”

“Quinn has. He liked the second spot, but he wanted to stay a night and make certain of it when he could get a better view of everything.”

“Good. They’ll come home light. Have rotating kits ready for them.”

“Guarding the area already?”

Angela nodded, not looking up. “Yes.”

Marc sighed. “Okay. I’ll make sure they’ve got what they need for intruders of any variety.”

“Great. Jerry has been seen to?”

“Yes. We dug the hole last night.”

“We’ll have the service after lunch. Have it announced on the radio.”

“There won’t be a large turnout. He didn’t have many friends.”

Neither of them stated the truth—no one liked him—but they were thinking it. Jerry had been too pushy, too know-it-all without compromise, and he hadn’t fit in.

“Is it wrong for me to feel like that’s a problem solved?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “And no. Death happens too much now for most people to get upset unless it’s someone dear to them. That’s the nature of an apocalypse.”

Marc agreed. He didn’t like losing people, but he had no desire to attend the funeral. “Anything else for me?”

“No. Go sleep. In my mind, I’m climbing in behind you.”

“Other way around.” Marc leaned over to kiss her.

Angela pushed a wave of light as they kissed, needing him to understand how happy she was with him. Marc had turned out to be her partner in every way. It was amazing.

“Wow, is that truck full! Ozzie and Theo will have some competition!” Kenn gushed over the radio.

Angela and Marc parted as the updates continued and the camp began to fully wake. After a day in the mountains, surrounded by so much natural beauty and danger, people were finally taking note. They had their cameras around their necks. Some even had packs for hiking on their breaks. Angela controlled her concern as best she could. Leader or mother, it felt the same most days and it was often a struggle to figure out when to ease off the reins. Letting them grow on their own, even when she knew trouble would come from it, was incredibly hard.

She scanned the parking area again and reluctantly went that way.

Chapter Seven BK6
In The Dark

1

“I don’t like it. You shouldn’t be leaving.”

Becky didn’t tell Seth the chain of command was grounded. He already knew. “I’ll be fine. Neil’s crew is one of the safest teams I could be on, right?”

“Yeah.” If she had to go, Neil could keep her alive. Seth knew that. He still didn’t want her to go.

“And we’re going to a lighting store. Hardly anyone uses that stuff now, so there shouldn’t be anyone around to cause trouble. Right?”

“Yeah.” Seth was unable to ignore the bad feeling in his gut. “Just stay with Neil, huh?”

Becky rolled her eyes, but nodded. “You got it.”

Seth pulled her in for a quick kiss and then forced himself to get into the passenger side of the truck that Donald was driving until they got to the golf course. After that, they would be gathering trucks to use for hauling. Angela’s notes had said they would be passing a truck stop on the way, to pull their needs from there. Seth was eager to do well and help assist with their settlement. But he knew something was wrong.

Becky climbed into the next truck over, taking the backseat. She took out her notebook and

scribbled, waiting for them to leave. Her kit was at her feet; her rifle was lying on top of it and she felt okay. This wasn't hard compared to surrendering herself to the enemy to lure them into a slaughter. She didn't expect problems, but it bothered her to have Seth upset. When she returned, safe and sound, he would be able to relax. Hopefully after each run that would get easier.

Becky glanced at the next truck over, where Kyle's team was prepping his vehicle. They'd lost men over the months, but they were still the strongest team, the one to fear and to beat, the one to be like.

Becky scribbled harder on the page. She wanted that some days, but most of the time, she just wanted to sleep and eat. She assumed it was because of the pregnancy. She was doing both of those as much as their rations and schedules would allow, but her mind also seemed to have a fog over it whenever she woke. She was one of the people Angela had mentioned, but resigning didn't feel right either, so she was going to do her duty and keep being an Eagle. At least, for a while. Once she got big, she would have to discover other ways to be useful.

Why? that voice inside questioned without rancor. *Why must you play their games? You have power beyond their narrow minds.*

Becky didn't like to listen to that voice. It pointed out ugly truths that she had no defense against. She didn't want to be evil. She liked being accepted and she loved being Seth's mate.

Because he's like you, the voice stated. He has gifts like yours.

Becky knew that. Not many people did, but in time, they would. They might resent Seth for not telling them. He would need her help with that.

Walking by the trucks, Angela paused as Becky's thoughts came to her. She examined the girl deeper, not caring for the depressed colors. Becky hadn't honestly recovered yet, but the time for the next stage in that was almost at hand. Becky would make a hard choice soon and then she would be free to recover, or she would be damned and pull others down with her.

Hoping to swing Becky toward the light, Angela went to the window and tapped lightly.

Becky rolled down the glass, face betraying her guilty thoughts.

"Remember to count the cost."

Becky winced, but nodded, aware that she was being given the chance to do the right thing. The problem was...she didn't want to.

"That's a line we all walk, Rebecca. When you count the cost, the choices become easier." Angela left the girl to consider the words, glad no one else had heard. It would be easy for someone to misunderstand. She hadn't given Becky permission to make the wrong choice, but she had given her a chance to salvage her darkening soul by making the right one. Becky had witnessed Tonya's treatment for playing with the men, and the others who had come through here and tried to twist people against

each other to satisfy their own desires were either gone or pariahs. If she took a moment to count the cost, she would be fine. If she didn't, it would force someone else to make the right choice, but Angela wasn't confident Neil was capable of it.

2

“We're ready now.” Kenn stood up. “Tell her we've done everything we can.”

Greg wrote it down and then lingered, waiting for a moment alone with Kenn. They were gathered in one of the huge tents Angela had Safe Haven sheltered in until the caves were ready. The heavy new roofs Marc had insisted on yesterday were perfect for the solar energy system Kenn had put in place. In fact, Greg now almost hoped the tent did get hit by lightning. Kenn's setup would steal some of that power and store it in their battery bank. They couldn't hold much of it without blowing up, but Kenn had installed an automatic cutoff switch and then a release line that would direct the energy into their garbage pile. Extinguishers would be standing by. It was a dangerous experiment. Greg was looking forward to seeing if it worked. So was Theo.

Kenn glanced around the tent, surveying the concrete supports they'd poured. It would take weeks for the pylons to fully dry and harden, but they had roughly thirty-six hours before the storm hit. Kenn thought it would be enough. They'd

already double-tied all ropes, driven vehicles up against the weakest side, and rechecked the stakes they'd driven in. Kenn estimated the tent could withstand 60mph winds without much trouble. Any higher than that and they would have to use the backup—the cave. The trucks around the tents would drive people to the entrance and the crews already laboring down there would help get everyone inside safely. Kenn knew that would be chaos. He spent an extra minute rechecking the support posts. *Maybe I can get them to take another 10 mph if I add a layer of gravel and enclose it.*

Greg cleared his throat. “Um, you got a minute?”

Kenn had forgotten he wasn't alone. He turned around in confusion. “What?”

“I need you for a minute.”

Kenn didn't like the tone or the expression. He joined Greg in the corner of the empty tent. “What?”

“The boss wants a message sent to Adrian.”

Kenn understood he was being asked to deliver it; he instantly worried over what that would mean for him if Marc or the Eagles found out. “So?” Kenn stalled while he ran it through his filters. How badly would it hurt his place if the camp found out? Would it hurt Tonya?

“She said he has work to do. She also said you're the only one who can get him to do it without creating more drama.”

Kenn relaxed. That, he could do. Adrian would accomplish any task that came straight from Angela and she knew it. “What is it?”

“Give him these instructions.” Greg held out a folded piece of paper. He had read it in surprise, but not shock. Angela always had an eye on their future.

Kenn read it. “When?”

“Now would be best.” Angela was in the flap behind them. “And you don’t have to hide it. That part of your life is over.”

Kenn was glad to hear it. “I’ll go after I add a little more support to our supports.”

Angela left the flap.

Greg followed, glad to hear he didn’t have to lie to Marc. He was also relieved that it wasn’t a personal message, but it mattered even more to him that it wasn’t another grand secret. He’d had enough of those.

“So have I.” Angela spotted Kyle emerging from the canvas he now shared with Jennifer. She and the baby were currently sleeping in the builder’s common tent. Angela was sure the mobster wasn’t happy about it. Many of Safe Haven’s couples would spend the next ten days apart, but it would strengthen most of them.

“I’m ready for the next list.” Angela steered them toward the caves where teams with engineers, plumbers, and electricians were about to descend into the earth and begin the next phase of their settlement.

“I’m actually caught up.” Greg stayed next to her. “We had two loads come in, two crews left, and the bell for meals has been changed to a call on the radio. Other than the wind picking up from last night, I’ve got nothing new for you.”

Angela noted the slightly surprised men going into the caves. They’d assumed they had been forgotten all this time. Now, they knew their time to be useful just hadn’t come until now. In Safe Haven, there was work for everyone. “I have things for you. Ready?”

“Shoot.” Greg took out his notebook.

“We need to get the water crew drafted and the gear for them separated. After that, the next fuel crew will be chosen and their locations picked. After that, have more cleaning supplies and tools brought up. Then, have Zack...”

Greg trailed behind her, taking notes. They were about to be living in those caves and that meant her lists were almost never-ending. When they got the caves ready to live in, then they had to get the people inside and that would be no easy feat. It would take long days, hard labor, and any remaining luck they might have.

3

Kenn kept the paper in his hand as he made his way through the crowds of people changing shifts. Angela said he didn’t have to hide it and he wasn’t going to.

Curiosity from the sentries became glares and frowns as Kenn neared the gate and then exited while a new crew was hauling a load inside. When he took the rough, trampled path toward Adrian's site, the mutters were audible. Kenn didn't let the comments goad him into a reaction. He also didn't respond to the shouted questions and complaints of those in Zone C, except to mentally disapprove of their attitudes.

"Lower, boy!"

Kenn followed the voices, recognizing a training session with those two words. Once you'd gone through it, you never forgot it.

Kenn took the next path to lead him into a small wooded area in an alcove of stone. It was so much like where Safe Haven was, just in miniature, that Kenn burst out laughing.

His hard, surprised brays alerted everyone to his presence and told Adrian he was being mocked.

Conner rose from the pushup position quickly, stepping back as his dad's face turned dark. They'd risen to a drillmaster today and Conner was glad for any break.

Adrian frowned. "She shouldn't send you again."

Kenn understood it wasn't because of the laughter. "I can handle the fallout."

"What do you want?"

"There's a storm coming tonight."

"I know. Why are you here? You shouldn't be here." Adrian didn't want anyone around right now.

He had too many mistakes to ever atone for and being near Kenn, who he had been closest to, was salt in his wounds.

“Boss has a message.” Kenn gave him Angela’s note with angry amusement lining his words. “You have work to do, like the rest of us. Get on it.”

Adrian’s eyes misted over as he read the instructions.

After the storm, have Conner and four good men meet a Safe Haven crew at the bottom of the road. Assist and provide security. This is not FND. It’s survival.

“Anything she needs.” Adrian was grateful.

Kenn, repulsed again at Adrian’s weakness for Angela, left without saying anything. How could he have idolized that man so much?

That’s not Adrian, his mind whispered hesitantly. That’s a shell. She’ll fill him back up in time.

Kenn paused, hidden under the cover of a wildly growing tree. He hadn’t heard that voice in a long time. He wasn’t sure he wanted to now. The inside whisper had led him into mistakes that he would never be free of.

I’m sorry. It’s my nature.

You almost destroyed me and everything else, Kenn responded, thinking clearly for the first time when dealing with his demon. *I won’t ever trust you.*

I can try to follow the light, the demon offered apologetically. *You’ll have to help me.*

The wind blew the leaves around aggressively. Kenn got moving. *No. Go back to sleep until you can do better than just try. I won't risk my place again.*

Relieved and disappointed, the demon faded away.

Kenn felt his soul lighten. He was a better person now, a stronger person, and he loved his new life. It had been good under Adrian and he missed that, but serving under Angela was quickly becoming necessary. She was good at it and she didn't hold a grudge anymore, as far as he could tell. The future had never looked better to the Marine. He entered the main gate with a tolerant nod to the guards who glowered at him. "We all have work to do. Get on it."

Behind Kenn, Conner stood under the same tree and gazed at the gates of Safe Haven in confused longing. A team had just come in with three large trucks. It was holding up a line of people on their way to the supply vehicles. One of those people was Candy.

Conner stared, heart hurting. *I'm hers! Why can't she understand that?*

Adrian's hard hand settled onto his shoulder.

Conner accepted the comfort, fighting the need to rush the gates to be with her. At least his dad understood how that felt. They did have one thing in common.

"Come on. We need to get some things ready for our mission."

Conner allowed his father to lead him back to their site, not asking what they were being sent out to do. He was willing to go wherever Angela wanted if it meant he might have a chance to earn his way back in.

4

“We’re all set.” Whitney handed Kyle a paper. “It’s all in there.”

Kyle had understood from their gear list that Angela was sending them out to a dangerous area. They needed the items on her list and he planned to return with them. “Good. Half hour after mess. Tell the others.”

Whitney rushed off to get cleaned up and eat.

Kyle lingered, verifying that the guards were alert and the camp was calm. It was always hard to tell with so many people, especially when whining about sore muscles was so natural, but to his ear, everything was fine. “That’s when this place is the most dangerous.” Kyle wasn’t looking forward to being away from Jennifer for the next few days. Hell, he didn’t like being away for a few hours.

“Then we should go have a nice meal.” Jennifer came up behind him.

Kyle froze when she wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing her breasts into his back.

Jennifer retreated, understanding and yet annoyed at the same time. “Or maybe I should go eat by myself.”

Kyle, frustrated and tired, slid in front of her and delivered a kiss that promised she would never have to eat alone.

Jennifer giggled as Kyle pulled away and stared at her. His thoughts were now complete chaos. It was cute.

“It’s not cute! It’s frustrating.”

Jennifer’s demeanor became cold; she went to the mess without saying anything else.

Not sure what he’d done wrong, Kyle followed, replaying the scene.

Jennifer stopped at Peggy’s table to collect Autumn.

Kyle went to get their trays, still confused. Why were women so hard to figure out?

Jennifer was busy blocking her thoughts from the baby. She missed Kyle’s observation, but it wouldn’t have mattered. She was having a hard night. Sleeping alone was hard. She’d had a bad dream and Kyle hadn’t been there to comfort her. She didn’t like this schedule at all.

“I’m sorry.” Angela joined them at the center tables. “It does matter.”

“It’s okay.” Jennifer smiled tiredly. “We’ll be fine.”

Angela waved at the sleepy baby. “Yes, you will.”

Jennifer took hope from that and allowed Kyle to slide in without giving him the cold shoulder. All she’d wanted to do was share a good moment with him to replace her bad mood, but she needed to

control her own emotions and not depend on her man to do it for her.

“Eagle signups are open folks, but there are only a few slots left,” Tonya’s voice told them over the radios. “Come see me. I have the sheet.”

Angela was pleased with how that was going—both the rookies and the radio. She skimmed the board Doug was currently updating. Theo’s team had been in the lead until Billy’s crew got in today and dumped three semis of stuff in their site. No one knew how they’d managed to do so much in one day, but Angela was more than happy with their ingenuity. The coats and boots would keep them all alive. “You all set?”

“Yes.” Kyle wasn’t sure how much of his run he should talk about in front of other people. “We’ll get in, get the stuff, and get home.”

“Perfect.” The run north wouldn’t be pretty. Neither would a couple of the other missions she had crews leaving for in the morning, but without water and food, they were doomed. Fuel was also a necessity, though most people here wouldn’t understand why for a while yet.

“Have we seen any movement?”

People at the table tensed. All of them knew she meant their old enemy.

“Nothing so far. From either source.” Morgan was fresh off sniper duty with the teens; he felt as tired as Angela looked.

Angela was glad. She hadn't been able to view anything about the remaining government or the Mexicans. It was making her twitchy.

The crowd cackled and groaned as Billy's team was listed in first place.

Angela took the opportunity to inspect her people for problems. She found only the ailments she'd already known about and forced herself to try and enjoy the calm meal she'd stayed up for. If Marc came by and found her moping, there would be hell to pay.

Angela spotted Kendle coming through the crowd and waved her over. Around them, people grew wary.

Kendle joined her at the table with red cheeks. "Yes?"

"I have some things I need delivered. Would you like to take them or should I ask Kenn?"

"Depends on what it is, I guess." Kendle was glad when people resumed what they'd been doing.

"I need a problem handled. You're delivering a few items to make that job easier. I'd like them to arrive around midnight."

Kendle understood who the recipient was and the trouble it might cause between Marc and Angie. "I'll take it."

"Good." Angela drew a packet from her jacket and handed it over. "Thank you."

"No problem." Kendle went to the tray line after putting the package into her pocket, wondering why Angela had asked her. *Make work?* Kendle

shrugged. She'd planned to visit Adrian later anyway.

Angela didn't reveal how important the delivery was. When Adrian received it, he wouldn't be happy. Neither would Kendle when she met with Daryl for her shift later. They made a good team, despite the fact that they hated each other.

5

Evening fell over the mountains in a quick spread of darkness that had Eagles scrambling to light the cans and center fire. They didn't have the timing down yet and the shadows on the mountain cliffs were spooky.

Marc spent time with the huddling groups of people who weren't working, glad Angela had instructed the radio crew to play soft, soothing music. Marc chatted, calming fears as he slowly made his way toward the cave. The constant sound of work was echoing. Marc was curious how much progress had been made since this morning. As he approached the entrance, raised voices drew his attention.

“Don't ever do that again! Do you understand?”

Marc rounded the cliff wall and found Tara. Missy was at her side, crying. The two were clearly having a discipline moment.

Marc joined them, trying to read Tara's thoughts again. “Problem, ladies?”

Tara flinched.

Missy immediately came to Marc's side and wrapped her little arms around his waist.

Marc lifted a brow. "Well?"

Tara frowned, arms crossing over her chest. "She ran off and I found her inside the cave. She could have gotten hurt."

Marc looked down to tell Missy she couldn't be in there, and froze at the fear on her little profile. It instantly reminded him of Angie, as a child. "Are you okay?"

Missy nodded, burying her face against his hip.

Marc patted her soothingly.

Tara scowled. "That's not right. I'm not abusing her. I yelled."

Marc didn't reply, busy trying to dig into the child's mind this time. He hit a blank wall and found it impossible to penetrate.

"Please?"

Marc regarded Tara coolly. "Please, what?"

"Please don't interfere with my rules as Missy's parent. She has to learn to fit in."

Marc agreed, but he knew something was wrong. He just didn't know what it was. "As long as the child isn't being abused, we don't believe in interfering."

"Good." Tara carefully came forward and took Missy's hand.

The little girl smiled up at her.

Tara sighed in defeat. "Okay. I'm sorry I scared you, but the cave is dangerous. Don't do it again, okay?"

“Okay!” Missy shouted, jumping into Tara’s arms.

Marc kept studying them as the woman struggled toward the tent area with the wild child. He’d figured out what it was that had bothered him about her shadow while in the QZ, but it didn’t fit with this protective parental feeling. Whatever was going on with her, Marc was suddenly confident that Angela had plans based around it. To pull off anything in Safe Haven, you either had to have the boss lady’s permission, or you had to be smarter and more alert than Angela—something Marc wasn’t sure was possible at this point.

Marc spotted Tracy trailing the pair and nodded to her. He was confident she would have intervened if Tara had been abusing the girl. Eagles protected people in many ways, and it wasn’t always from outside enemies. Sometimes, people had to be protected from themselves.

Marc saw Kendle leaving by the rear gate, where there were no people in quarantine to shout at her. He frowned. Kendle was walking an ugly line and he was considering an intervention. He wasn’t happy about having to do it, but he’d brought her here; it was his duty to help her if he could.

6

Adrian was waiting for the rest of his instructions from Angela. Her coded message had said there was trouble. He assumed she didn’t want

his pals to know, otherwise Kenn would be more than a delivery boy. “What did I miss this time?”

“I don’t know,” Kendle enjoyed his flinch as she ducked inside the tent. “But she has her own shit-storms brewing. I wouldn’t count on her for more help.”

Kendle tossed him a small package and then waited. She agreed with Adrian that Angela didn’t want some people to know they had more problems, but Kendle wasn’t one of those. She’d already read the note.

Adrian examined the items, wondering who the target was. He read the slip of paper.

You are Safe Haven’s guard dog until I can get them to let you back in. Use these things in hope of regaining your honor.

“She gave me a silent message as well.” Kendle recalled the feeling of Angela in her mind with revulsion. “Another old friend is coming. Get ready for it.”

“Did she say who?”

“Vlad.”

Adrian rose in a blur, intimidating in his fury. “When?!”

Kendle was unable to stand her ground before his fury. She shrank away, taking up a spot by the open flap. “When I asked that, she said now is best.”

Adrian searched the package again and found nothing else, which said the threat was imminent. “Tell her I’m on it.”

Kendle pulled it from his mind. “Which one?”

“All of it. Anything else?”

Kendle swiped at a spider trying to make a web over the doorway. “She wants you to go out alone for whatever you do.”

“I intend to.” He pulled on a shirt. He’d spent the day out with all of his group, gathering supplies for the job Angela had given them. He was tired, but this had to be handled now. Jack and his men were more than a threat. They were gifted hunters who excelled in ambushes.

Kendle waited for him to get dressed and then trailed him toward the small fire, feeling left out. She pushed into his mind and saw their newest enemy as Adrian remembered him.

Ten well-armed men lounged around a concrete room with a single window that marked it an underground structure. On the long center table was assorted piles of cash, guns, and other needed items for the missions they often went on. The rest of the room was empty, with nothing to identify its purpose.

Some large and muscled, some average height and weight, the only thing these men had in common was a few pieces of gear. Unlike the military that many of them had spent time in, being a government hunter didn’t require a uniform or strict conduct rules. It only mattered that they always accomplished their mission. It had earned them more fame and cash, promotions and honors than average fighters would ever have a chance at, but

being out of work, even for a short time, wasn't something they cared for. They were between runs right now and supposed to take a long break; the team of bounty hunters were already bored and expressing their displeasure.

"That Canada run should have gone to us." Vlad paused in sharpening his knife. "Bravo team sucks."

The other men nodded and snickered.

"If I needed a break, I would have asked for one." Jack rotated to view their team leader. "You should have gotten our vote on it."

Adrian didn't respond. He was leafing through the latest booklet on capturing descendants, and waiting for a reason to reply. He had a lot of pent up anger.

Jack slammed his hand on the table. "Are you listening?!"

Kranten was also eager for entertainment. "He don't listen to anyone but the boss. Ass-kisser. That's our CO."

Adrian grinned, nodding. Good enough.

The brawl quickly got wild, with men being slammed through doors and into metal lockers that bent under the force.

No one from the adjoining rooms and halls interfered. Adrian's crew was lethal; they blew off steam like this every time they were forced to take a break. It had become a ritual everyone expected and dreaded, except those rough men.

Adrian let the team get as dirty as he thought they needed and then whistled loud enough to get attention. "We're done."

The men all resumed their positions of confinement, but now they had wounds to tend and punches to groan over.

Except for Jack, who glowered at Adrian in resentment as blood dripped from his nose. "I'm not done yet!"

*Adrian shrugged, turning around. "Matchup?"
Jack nodded eagerly.*

The other men formed a wide circle for the fight. This was another part of the ritual, but it didn't feel the same this time. Jack was truly angry and all of them wanted to know his underlying reason for it. Jack knew the orders for the break had come from higher than Adrian. So what was the problem?

Before the two men could duke it out, a loud siren blared through the compound, drawing them to their gear. A siren here only meant one thing—they were under attack.

Adrian let Jack shove by him, disappointed. He'd been looking forward to releasing more of his anger at being cooped up here. The government didn't like their hunters wandering, so breaks were spent underground.

Adrian was swallowed in running men as he emerged into the hallway; he went with the flow, not needing to check his weapons like some of the men around him were doing. He was always ready. He pushed ahead to find the threat.

The screens inside the lobby of the underground bunker flashed on, showing a topside view of the main entrance that was disguised as a roadside diner. In the diner was a large group of people with glowing red orbs and guns in their hands.

“Looks like some of Canada came to us.” Vlad was on Adrian’s heels. “That’s their hunters—the ones Bravo team was sent after!”

“That’s Bravo team, being dragged behind their cars!” Jack pointed, voice stunned. “See the jackets? They killed Bravo team!”

As they watched, the group fired at the cameras and their view was gone.

“Line up!” an angry voice over a speaker ordered. “Kill them all!”

Around him, fighters and descendants raised their weapons eagerly, but Adrian slowly backed to the rear of the group. A few of his team did the same, following his lead, but most of them wanted the front lines of the battle. That wasn’t the best choice against their kind. Those eager men knew it, but the need for glory outweighed their caution.

Bamm!

The door to the hall exploded and flew into the room. It crushed the two men standing directly in front of it. Dust, screams, and bullets sprayed the front row of government fighters.

Adrian ducked, narrowing in on a shadow he didn’t recognize; his shot went through the man’s ankle.

Adrian aimed again as the man fell and found an unprotected kneecap. An attack like this was insane. Why would...

Adrian spun for a hallway and ran toward the rear of the bunker, where there was an emergency exit for the VIPs. He hadn't made it to that long hall before another explosion split the air, tossing him into the wall. Dust scattered over him.

He coughed, looking up as a group of Canadian descendants came in through the now unprotected exit.

Adrian tried to hit the button on his radio, but the explosion had broken it, leaving uselessly dangling parts. He concentrated, intending to send a mental warning.

He arched as he was hit by a vicious bolt of electricity.

"Leave him!" a voice shouted. "The cells are down here."

Bleeding from one ear, Adrian waited until the footsteps were gone and then struggled to his feet and followed.

The heavy boots were easy to track through the dust. Adrian found the group in a cell where new descendants were held while being evaluated. Adrian followed, certain he wasn't recovered enough to call out mentally yet. That zap had drained him. The cells were just that—metal cages set into the rear of a lab. The invaders quickly opened these cages to grab people.

Rescue party, not an invasion, Adrian realized. Then he remembered the battle going on at the front of the complex and wondered why these few captives were worth all the lives of those front line people.

He hid behind the door, gun in hand, and watched the brief reunions. None of the captives looked that strong or unique, but one of them had to be.

The group reached the last cell, the one with three bodies of guards on the bloody floor in front of it, and Adrian knew instantly this was who they'd come for.

The young boy walked from the cell as if on a cloud, clearly drugged. His thin, bare body was covered in needle marks and bruises from the tests that had been run on him. Adrian's heart clenched. Who is he?

One of the females in the group scooped the boy into her arms while another covered him in a long robe. They all fled toward the rear exit.

Adrian shrank behind the door to avoid being detected. He didn't know why the boy was here, but he suddenly wanted him gone and he didn't care if his boss got upset. They had no business treating children that way.

"But you were raised that way," the inside voice reminded Adrian. "You grew up in these same cells."

"Yes, and I hated it." Adrian carefully followed the fleeing group. "It was wrong."

“Says you.”

“Yes, says me!” Losing Shannon had made him angry, bitter, and uncaring about the wrath of the government.

As Adrian emerged into the smoky hall, Jack and Vlad came running down a different corridor, both firing at the group.

Adrian knew better than to interfere, but he couldn't stop himself from throwing out a leg to send them both sprawling.

Ahead of them, the group turned around, but they didn't attack as Jack spun around and punched Adrian in the mouth.

Adrian didn't fight, trying to buy the boy's people time to get him away.

Jack hit him again.

Vlad gaped at them, not sure what had happened.

“Go!” Adrian shouted, ducking Jack's swing.

Jack realized Adrian was helping a prisoner escape and did the one thing Adrian hadn't considered. He drew his secondary gun and fired a single shot that caught the cringing child in the forehead.

“No!”

Jack opened fire on the rest of the group; Vlad helped him.

Behind them, Adrian slunk away. That's it. I quit.

“What a bastard.” Kendle brought them both back to the present.

Adrian nodded, strapping on his guns. “He should be. I taught him everything he knew back then. Should have advanced some on his own by now.”

“Another one like you. The boss’ll love that.”

“Yeah, my kind’s hard to resist.”

Kendle laughed.

Adrian stopped by her for a moment where all he did was stare.

Kendle felt her body respond; she blushed. His presence was attention getting, to say the least.

Adrian grinned and ducked out of the tent. Kendle needed time to adjust and he would give it to her, but for someone who hadn’t gone without sex for more than a week or two at a time, it was almost a real rush for Adrian. He missed physical contact—a lot.

“I’m out for an hour.” Adrian spoke to David, who was on duty over their small site. “Whistle if I’m needed.”

Conner glanced up from the fire briefly, and then resumed nursing his sore hands and arms. They’d spent a hard day gathering supplies. The teenager was too tired to ask where his dad was going or if he needed help with anything.

Adrian was glad. He didn’t want to explain to his son that yet another mistake was coming back to haunt him. *I shouldn’t have quit that day. I should have put a bullet through Jack’s forehead.*

“You’re kidding, right?” Kendle had just made it back, and had been met by Daryl and Marc. Above them, Shawn and a few of the other Eagles were strengthening their gate and creating platforms. “Is she insane?”

Daryl wasn’t about to say yes, but he did agree. Putting him and Kendle on security together in the evenings sounded insane. She was an untrained rookie and they hated each other.

“Angie said you would work it out.” Marc handed Daryl the clipboard. “So work it out. Zack’s running a double right now, but he’ll need a break soon.”

Marc left them there to examine the packet and complain about how rough their lives were. He was amused. Angie was forever causing bitter enemies to become allies and then friends. Those two would be no different. At some point, Kendle might even come to care about the dreams and goals here.

Marc motioned to Charlie, who was escorting Tracy to her evening post.

The too-quiet couple joined him. Marc knew the problem without using his gift. “She has a job to do. Still. Like the rest of us.”

Charlie glowered, but managed to control himself. He placed a kiss on Tracy’s cheek and spun into the shadows. Charlie had a post with the snipers right now. Marc had already told them to keep the

boy occupied and make sure he understood his job wasn't just to protect his girlfriend.

Tracy waited nervously for Marc to direct her to her next assignment. Her stomach was upset and her throat was dry. She was scared.

"You're not alone this time." Marc hated her pain. "I've got you."

Those words did make her feel better. Tracy drew in a deep breath and pushed herself up straighter. "Where do you want me?"

In your tent, recovering. Marc grunted. "You have duty over Tara and Missy in the evenings. It should be easy, boring."

Tracy nodded. "I think I could use some boring right now."

"We all could. Come on. I'm your escort."

They made the walk to the tent area in silence, each deep in thoughts that had nothing to do with each other except for the need to respect her privacy and not ask if she was okay. If she wasn't, it would soon become clear.

The tent area was mostly empty. Angela had her entire camp working again. Marc approved of the alert Eagles in the center of the tents.

Marc led them to a canvas near that guard station and tapped on the flap. "Got a minute?"

Fresh from the QZ, Tara and Missy had only been in their new tent for a few minutes.

Marc caught a quick peek of a tent floor strewn with their goods and the child's new toys. It appeared normal. *But I know it's not or Kendle and*

Cynthia wouldn't have been watching them for their first days here. They're trouble. “This is Tracy. She'll be your settling partner at night.”

“Hi! Happy to have you here.” Tracy was trying hard to remember that person who had been happy and confident. “Welcome to Safe Haven.”

Little Missy liked the words; she hugged Tracy's leg.

“Aww. Aren't you sweet?” Tracy crooned. “Bet we can find you a stuffed animal that sings or glows or something. Wanna go with me to the trucks and search?”

Missy nodded, still hugging Tracy.

Marc caught Tara's frown and assumed she was ready to have her tent settled down for the night. “Maybe that should wait for morning?”

Tracy realized it was late. “My bad. I can go find her one real quick.”

Marc sighed, realizing Angela had put Tracy here to help, not to guard. Angie knew being around a child would be distracting. “I'll keep Tara company until you two are finished. Go on.”

Tara was scowling now, but Marc and Tracy ignored her displeasure. Tracy held a hand out to Missy. “Are you coming?”

Missy didn't extend her hand; she jumped into Tracy's arms like a kangaroo.

Tracy, not ready, fell over and burst out laughing. “Well, that didn't go the way I planned.”

Missy snuggled into her arms, smiling happily.

Marc pulled them both up, glad their snipers hadn't mistaken the action for aggression. He knew the senior men wouldn't, but the three teenagers on duty with them right now would be eager to fire their first defensive rounds. The senior men needed to keep them on a short leash.

Marc turned around to discover Tara staring at her tent with longing.

"You can go on. I get the feeling you don't want to talk."

Tara flushed crimson and quickly ducked into the canvas.

Marc spent the next ten minutes trying to dig into her mind and failing.

Chapter Eight BK6
Evening Blues

1

Sixty miles from Safe Haven, a long, dusty train chugged through the ash and debris on the tracks, moving steadily south. It had come from Pennsylvania and though most of the cars were empty, what cargo it did carry was lethal.

“We’re almost at the station.” Sitting in the front window seat, Vlad was keeping them all updated as they lounged in the refitted engine car. “Once we offload the horses, we’ll only be a couple hours from the mountain base.”

“Good.” Jack stretched, yawning. “We’ve waited a long time for a shot at Mitchel.”

“I thought he would show up before now.” Kranten thought of their last mission. “Canada finally got what was coming to them and he wasn’t there!”

“Mitchel did some gathering of his own and stayed with them.” Stephens had files open on the table in front of him, doing research for their team. “These files are all on descendants.”

“Not the last few.” Jack had already gone through those files. “They have trained military men

in there. One of them is Kenn Harrison. Another is Marcus Brady. Don't underestimate those two."

"I've heard of them!" Kranten came over to snatch the paper from Stephens. "They took out that drug lord in South America before the war, right?"

"Among others." Jack shrugged. "We also have reports of someone called the Ghost."

The group of men frowned in unison. Ghost was a commonly used title for one of their kind who had turned against the government.

"Is Mitchel the Ghost?" Kranten skimmed the paper.

Jack stretched again, not concerned over the fight that was about to happen between Kranten and Stephens, who was slowly pulling his knife. "We'll find out. For now, check your gear while I go over the plan again. Our boss expects this run to end with nearly four hundred bodies. Let's not disappoint her."

2

Angela froze as menace rushed over her mind. She felt as if giant hands were squeezing her brain. She concentrated, forcing it away. Someone had just reached her zone and they were strong.

Greg joined her at the rear gate. "Jeremy wants a word with you."

"Send him to me. Quietly."

Greg left, frowning.

Angela swept her toiling people. Marc was sleeping—all the night shift people were. Angela hoped the banging that was about to happen wouldn't wake them up, but it had to be done. If things went wrong, they would need that wall. She already had rookies gathering more supplies from the dumpsites to bring up here. A storm was coming, in more ways than one.

Jeremy, who obviously hadn't been far away, appeared at her side with his laptop in a bag over his shoulder.

“They pulled into the station with a light crew. I need to know when the train comes back.”

Jeremy would have protested, but Angela glared at him. “You can help me or get in my way. Pick wisely.”

Jeremy, getting used to Samantha's moods, sighed. “Have you eaten yet?”

Angela was surprised into a snicker. The men here were getting smarter again. When that happened to the women, they would become unstoppable. “No, but I will. Can you track that station and the others around it?”

“Yes, and I will. What else can I do?”

“Watch the north. If something moves there, I need to know about it.”

“You will. You should go...hey!”

Angela spotted the line of ants and climbed down from the rear wall platform to meet them.

Jeremy observed in fascination. Since Dog left, only Jennifer and Angela were left to communicate with the insects. Jeremy wanted to learn how.

“I use pictures.” Angela knelt down in front of the line. “I send them images and they understand. Jennifer is different. She actually gets how they communicate and can replicate some of it.”

“How do you understand them?” He admired her nerve when she didn’t flinch from pinchers near her hands or beady eyes glaring into her own.

“They send images back to me.”

“Oh,” he choked out, wondering if the end of the world for him had already come. Maybe this was the afterlife, where anything could happen.

“Close... But you’ll want to sleep later, so we won’t discuss that.”

Jeremy shuddered and left before he could insist on hearing it anyway. There were just some things he didn’t need to know.

3

Marc staggered to the flap of the tent, drawn by the non-stop sound of hammering. If it was in the caves, it wouldn’t be as loud, and it had pulled him from slumber by never stopping. Angie had a new project going. He needed to know what it was.

He swiped the flap open and found Greg waiting for him.

“She said get a few more hours. You’ll need it.”

Marc grunted unhappily and stumbled out far enough to get a view of the work being done.

Crushingly loud to his tired ears, Marc saw the lines of men passing supplies at both the front and rear of camp and understood she was reinforcing their gates. He approved of the assembly lines and the dozen workers on each site, but he admired the fact that Angie once again had the entire camp working. Even the kids were being useful, carting drinks and small pails of nails.

“She has it covered.” Greg pointed at the tent. “She said you’ll need the sleep.”

Marc didn’t respond except to go back to bed, but he didn’t fall into the deep sleep he’d been in. There was trouble coming and it would be here soon or Angie wouldn’t have them all laboring like dying bees. The pace was almost frantic, despite the mood being calm; he stayed alert enough to respond if the threat arrived sooner than she had anticipated.

Across the camp, Angela sighed in relief and motioned the workers to keep going. Storm clouds were gathering and the wind was shoving in, meaning they wouldn’t be able to keep going for much longer. She wanted this finished before the rain forced them under cover.

She scanned the cliffs around them, but couldn’t feel the heat of Adrian’s gaze. She knew he was there, waiting for her to signal him, waiting to carry out any chore she assigned. It was impossible not to miss him. He’d done more for her, for these people,

than he ever got credit for. He'd known it would go this way; he had planned to sacrifice himself to force his camp off this continent so they would be safe. He didn't deserve this fate.

"Yes, Angie, he does."

Angela turned around to discover Jennifer standing behind her.

"I know you love him, and from your view, I guess I can even understand why. What I don't understand, is how you can be so strong and so smart, and not recognize him for what he is."

Angela glanced back toward the cliffs, letting her XO feel her pain for a brief moment. "He was taken from his mother, trained to kill, taught to betray our kind, and yet he created all of this. Evil can't build things, Jenny. It never creates. You know that."

"Half evil, then," Jennifer conceded. "He would have given us all up, if not for you. *You* know that."

Angela nodded. "Yes."

"Then you do see him for what he is!"

"Yes. I always have."

"And you followed him anyway, let him train you to..." Jennifer fell silent as she realized Angela had taken power, not been gifted with it, as they'd thought all along.

"It was the only solution I could come up with." Angela sighed miserably. "No one else was going to be able to cover everything. Because I'm a freak, I was the best choice."

"You're not—"

“Stop.”

Jennifer did. The revelation didn't shock her, didn't change her opinion of Angela, but it did fill in some of the unexplained parts. Falling for Adrian was a side effect of gaining leadership.

“I wanted it from the moment our eyes met.” Angela kept scanning the dark cliffs. “I knew he wasn't worthy. And now that I have it, I hate being responsible for all these lives.”

“You're good at it.”

“Yes, but it comes at a high price. You'll find that out someday, I think. We'll see what doors open for you in the future. I'm positive *you'll* pick wisely.”

Jennifer was distracted by the thought of leading someday, as Angela had known she would be, and the teenager was easy to distract further with more light chores. Angela had let her in enough to start the bonding process. There would be time for more of those, providing things went well over the next month.

“Heading out!” Kyle waved.

Jennifer rushed over for a last goodbye.

Angela noted the other crews also leaving. Some of them were like Kyle's group—going out to secure a location and wait for the storm to pass. Others would help crews that were already in place, but none of those would make it home before the storm. They would all hunker down where they went. The QZ of people who would be allowed in had been sent to a cave not far away, with a small

group of rookie Eagles to provide protection. Those in Zone C had been sent to a cave below. None of them had been happy to be assigned to the bottom of the mountain, alone. The only people Angela hadn't accounted for were those with Adrian. She didn't know if they even had cover. It burned at her heart as the day advanced and the storm did the same.

Needing the distraction, Angela went to supervise the securing of the livestock trailers. she would help with the tents and vehicles next. The sooner everything was in place, the better.

As Kyle and his team rolled down the mountain, he caught a glimpse of a tall, thin man moving through the trees toward the bottom cave where the people from Zone C were resentfully crammed in. Kyle hoped it was the new assassin. The refugees from Zone C were trouble.

Kyle stewed on them as he drove. Some people had to die and some people had to do the killing. That never changed and thanks to Jennifer, he was beginning to accept his role in that grand scheme.

4

The storm came in loud, powerful waves that made Safe Haven cower.

Lightning cracked brutally, illuminating clouds of rain that swept over and drenched everything. Smaller tents were ripped from their stakes and

slammed into larger canvas shelters where nervous people forced chortles and pretended they weren't scared.

Angela, who hadn't been to sleep yet, and Marc, who had slept late to make up for her deficit, stayed with their camp. Daryl and Kendle also stayed with their people, both curt with the repeated questions. Neither of them had handled this type of situation before. It was a learning experience.

Thunder rolled through the stone as if a quake was coming for them... Angela concentrated, bringing up the shield over the area. She wasn't positive how well it would fare against the lightning, but she wanted to try. This storm was a small preview of what they would deal with when winter came. This was summer and fall saying so long, and while thunderstorms were dangerous, the frozen landscape of snow and ice, combined with winds that could rip up trees, would make for very unpleasant moments. It would feel like they were being buried alive.

Angela lingered near the tied flaps of the tent, hoping the cave workers and those out on runs were okay. Her hair blew wildly from the wind getting through small tears and holes. Angela enjoyed the feel of nature that she was allowed to have. Going out there with all that flying debris wasn't a good idea. They had the animals in the trailers next to them, and the clucks and grunts were a constant noise that echoed each time the weather grew louder or slammed something against their shelter.

She had been getting sporadic reports from their people who were out on runs, but it didn't make her feel better. She wouldn't be able to sleep until the threat was over. Hearing from Jeff and Kevin had been good, though. It had eased some concerns over the two men, but their message of snow hadn't been received well. Most of the people here now were talking of working double shifts to get inside the caves. That was something she would have to fix later. Everything had to stay on schedule.

Nearby, a conversation drew Angela's attention.

"It's not safe there."

"She knows what she's doing."

"I'm telling you, she's gonna get hurt."

Before Angela could spot the people involved, Kendle was at her arm.

"Can you come away from the flap? Missy won't quit harping on it."

Angela allowed Kendle to lead her toward the center, and her usual crowd, clearly in a daze.

Sighing unhappily, Kendle put the boss next to Marc and resumed her post over Tara and Missy. Tara was a reader—always buried in a book—and it left too much time for her daughter to get into things. Like the bucket of white paint that Kenn had left out after marking lines to the trucks in case they needed to get these people to the caves in a hurry. The child had grabbed the bucket and tossed it in the air before Kendle had even realized she was going to pick it up. The paint had taken almost an

hour to remove from both of them; two full sets of clothes had been tossed into the center fire right before Zack ordered it put out because of the high winds.

“We play now!” Missy shrieked, drawing attention. Hilda and Peggy had most of the kids in a far corner, playing with board games and Legos.

Kendle glared at Tara. “If you don’t do something with this kid, I will.”

Tara flinched, dropping her book; those around them stared in shocked disapproval.

“Fine.” Kendle picked the girl up and swung her around for a piggyback ride. “Let’s go see who we can bug, huh?”

Missy grabbed Kendle’s short spikes and tugged. “Go now, pony!”

Kendle hefted the girl into a more comfortable position. “Yes, Master Missy.”

The little girl giggled, tugging again.

Kendle trotted across the tent to please the kid. It was obvious that her mom didn’t give a shit.

Across the tent, people were gaping at the scene. Even Marc was staring, dumbfounded. The feeling slowly turned to awe for his mate. Angela could have hated Kendle, could have hurt her, but instead, she had found a way to bring the crazy island woman into the herd. Marc leaned over and kissed Angela’s chilly cheek softly. “Love you.”

Angela melted against him. “Mmm. You should do that more often.”

“What?” Marc asked, rubbing her arms.

“Realize what a perfect genius I am.”

Marc’s laughter was a balm to the nerves of everyone who heard it. He wouldn’t be laughing like that if they were all about to die.

“It’s going to be a long night. How about a padded chair, with a blanket and your notebooks?”

Angela wanted to say no, but she did need to go over a few things and now, while she couldn’t do anything else but wait, was an ideal time. “Okay.”

Marc blinked. “What?”

Snickering, Angela led them to the area where the other pregnant females had been stashed with comfortable chairs, snacks, and books. “I’d like the Eagle signup sheets.”

Marc veered toward Kenn as Angela joined her team, minus a couple, and their wary mates. Almost everyone had chosen to stay here and weather the storm together, but a few people were in the caves. The new Indian members were all in the trailers with the livestock. Marc wasn’t sure what Angela had them doing and he hadn’t asked. She wouldn’t put them on a dangerous post because of a bias or because they were new. Angela had proven repeatedly that she was fair, so that meant they were doing quiet work for her and that meant something for the future. Marc was already positive it wouldn’t be pretty. He didn’t want to know yet. He had enough on his plate. When he had room for more, he was sure Angela would fill him in. He had already figured out that she was breaking him in easy by not giving him too much to handle at once.

He doubted that would hold for long. There was simply too much work and trouble to account for, to think he would ever be caught up.

Bamm!

Lightning struck close enough to rattle the ground under them and send awful vibrations rushing through the stone. All activity stopped; everyone in the canvas stared at the flaps.

Thunder rattled, booming and drawing noises from the animals next to them.

Angela stood up, feeling something coming.

“The door!” Missy screamed.

Kendle made the connection. “Get away from—”

The bolt of lightning slammed into the stone directly in front of the fastened flaps. Electricity sparked into every piece of metal nearby, causing tubes to explode in fiery shards that landed on the tent.

“Shit! Fire!”

The female team got up, all eager to use their gifts, but Angela shook her head. “We’re not needed.”

Her tone was an alpha command; the females sat down disappointedly as the members around them either panicked or ran for a fire extinguisher.

Marc saw the same chaos that Angela did and realized she was right. He dismissed the other Eagles, allowing only team leaders to give instructions to those who needed it.

The fire in the roof was small, with only a few smoldering holes, but extinguisher foam coated the tent front in thick layers as the men and women went overboard.

No one scolded them.

Angela didn't have to pass the word for the Eagles to congratulate or thank them. They already knew to do that. It was how most of the rookies were trained. Everyone needed to feel like they were contributing and eventually, that led to them actually doing it. The same was true of the camp. Because of this, a few of them might use it to bolster their courage and join the Eagles.

Marc directed the camp members through cleaning up the mess, but he didn't let them go outside the flap. The storm was having its way with everything out there and people were always a target now. Those in quarantine had been warned about the coming storm. Marc had suggested they take cover in the cave at the bottom of the mountain road. It was a wide, dead end space and it would even hold their vehicles. The new people hadn't been happy, but when the rain had come, they'd fled. Marc had insisted on getting them under cover, but Angela hadn't wanted him to. He'd felt that clearly. She hadn't protested aloud though, and he'd gone through with it, trying to convince himself that she didn't want them to be killed. Surely, she'd rather the wilder folks just left, right?

Marc made his way over to Kendle and Missy, who had chosen a stack of coloring books, a large

blanket, and were trying to construct a fort over three chairs. He started to thank the child and then decided to do it in a way that she would enjoy. He put his back to them, arms crossing. “I’m the sentry for your fort.”

Missy clapped happily.

Kendle grinned. “Our own guard. Wow, kid. I might like you at some point.”

Angela sat down, not jealous or proud. She was too tired for either. Keeping the bubble over them during that strike had been draining, but it had also gained valuable information. She now knew that telling Adrian to run from the fire had been the right thing to do. Her shield didn’t keep it out. Wind and water were covered. Fire and lightning were not. Now, all she had left to test was earth and ice.

The temperature in the tent was chilly despite her shielding, and the rumbles of thunder actually stung when they went through her barrier. For all the power here, they still weren’t safe. That thought haunted Angela the entire time they waited for the storm to abate.

5

“This is the safest place we can be.” Theo’s team had voted to stay in the cave and work, but many of them were jumpy and no one was talking. “This cave has been here for a long time and it goes deep. We’re good.”

Most of his team relaxed a bit, but Jennifer's tense shoulders didn't.

Theo joined her at the folding table. "Is the baby sleeping?"

Jennifer nodded, glancing down at the pumpkin seat where Autumn was drooling with half a smile on her little face. "It doesn't bother her."

"She hasn't been told to fear it."

Jennifer's face clouded over. "She'll know if she wakes up."

"Not a fan of storms?"

"No." Jennifer put the pencil down. "This draft is done for now, but once people are using the caves every day, we may have to expand it a little. It will depend on traffic."

Theo was impressed with the bathroom setup she'd drawn. Unless there was an epidemic or outbreak, there would be enough stalls and water to accommodate their waste needs. If there was an outbreak of some kind, Theo assumed the QZ would have to handle the overflow anyway, but Jennifer wasn't finished with those prints yet.

"Thank you."

Theo lifted a brow. "For?"

"Letting me do this without harping and shoulder-hunting. It's nice."

"I almost didn't believe it." Theo smiled. "But I've been in engineering for a long time. You're good. It would be crazy not to have you doing these."

"Still. It's nice."

Theo blushed a bit and cleared his throat. “You’re welcome. Ready for more coffee?”

Jennifer grimaced. “No. I want a Mountain Dew, a Twinkie, and a better eraser. This one keeps leaving crumbs.”

Theo chuckled, fishing in the kit on the stone floor under the table. “The can of pop and eraser I’ve got. The Twinkies all vanished. We’ll hope one of the teams bring some in.”

Jennifer nodded thanks for the can, but kept her hands away from his out of habit. Cesar hadn’t liked her to have physical contact with another male in any way.

That thought made her frown. She tried to shake it off, not sure why she would be thinking of that evil man right now. He was dead and that hell had ended. *But some days, I don’t believe it. I’m still waiting for his punishments.*

Theo glanced around the room they’d chosen, aware that everyone was listening. Most of them had promised to keep an eye on Jennifer, but they were also using each other to hold their demons at bay. Being inside the ground and listening to the groans and creaks of shifting rock above them was unsettling even for the senior men. The only miners in Safe Haven were the Miller family men.

An odd growl sounded from a lower level of the cave; all of them turned in that direction. That hadn’t been the storm or the stone settling.

“You want me to check it out?” one of their rookies asked.

“Nope.” Theo waved. “Stay alert.”

Brent sighed in bored disappointment. He wanted to be doing more than babysitting.

The storm increased in power, rumbling down to make the hair on their necks stand up.

“It’s getting bad up there.” Jennifer stiffened. “I think they’re going to come down here soon.”

Her voice was dazed. Theo got the team going on preparations for that. It would please the boss and fix their boredom issue.

Jennifer joined them in the work, but stayed in the same room so she could still watch Autumn. That cave-dwelling voice might be harmless right now, but Jennifer didn’t want to test it on an innocent soul. It already hinted of too much power and too much time alone. When they finally confronted that obstacle, Angela had to be here.

“Everyone okay?” Zack appeared at the cave entrance. “Boss wants an update.” He shook off the rain from his yellow slicker. “And I’d like to be able to say you’re all alive at least.”

Theo’s crew snickered.

“We’re good.” Theo placed a crate of mats near Zack’s feet. “Getting it set for the bugout.”

Zack grinned. “She’ll like that. Need a few hands? Lots of Eagles up there doin’ nothin’”

“Can I give you a list?”

“Absolutely. We’ll each bring down an armload.”

“Perfect.”

Jennifer wasn't paying attention to the conversation. She had Autumn's seat by her ankle and a handful of bags that held towels the workers usually used for wiping their hands. Tonight, the camp might need them for drying off. She turned around to put them on the table and froze at the sight of the nun in full habit. Jennifer blinked at the premonition, a little freaked out. "What do you want?"

Beth had lost her child at birth; she was paler than the parts of her habit. She lifted her head. Blood dripped from her dead eyes.

Jennifer shrieked.

The sound of it spun through the caves and brought everyone to her side.

"Get to Beth!" Jennifer sobbed, cowering. "She did it!"

The ghost smiled sadly, turning around to deny Jennifer the sight of the rope around her neck. She'd hung herself in the empty garden truck.

Jennifer continued to sob, but the storm prevented radio calls and there was no one who could comfort her. She hadn't realized Beth's depression had gotten so bad since she lost the baby.

Autumn also stared, not upset by her mother's pain. She was distracted by glowing green orbs that bobbed and jumped in the darkest shadows behind Beth's ghost. It was mesmerizing.

The infant was mostly ignored as two guards ran for help and the others tried to console Jennifer.

6

Angela grabbed Marc's arm. "Get to the flap!"

Marc went immediately, convinced by the urgency in her tone. He marched into the pouring rain and found Zack, pale and panicked.

Marc led him away from the tent of curious people, taking him into the nearest truck. Full of turkeys that had been brought in, it was noisy and stank, but at least it was dry.

Zack filled him in quickly, glad to be away from the crying girl. With Kyle gone, they didn't know what to do for Jennifer.

The wind increased again, shoving until the trailer wanted to roll. Marc could feel the hum, the vibration of being on the edge of movement. "We're not staying here much longer."

"Theo was already getting things set in case you needed to bring people down." Zack grunted. "He could use a hand."

"Good. I'll draft a crew for it." Marc's mind stayed on Jennifer. He had promised to watch out for her.

"What about the...Beth?" Zack didn't want that chore. At least not in the dark, during a storm.

Marc sympathized. "Just verify it and then leave it for morning. Put a quarantine notice on the truck so no one opens it before then."

Zack ducked out, muttering. He didn't want to look in that truck and see Beth's body hanging

there, but it was still better than having to cut it down right now, alone.

Marc took a moment to nod to the shadows in the truck. “Very nice. He never saw you.”

Marc left the truck as the Indians chuckled. Angela had asked them what they would like to do in Safe Haven; all of them had told her they wanted to be useful to Marc. The Ghost was their spirit guide in the flesh. They’d come here to live among the white man for him. Angela had seized that opportunity and placed them out here in the trucks to monitor things during the storm. The Indians didn’t mind. They didn’t view it as dirty work. They were honored to be trusted so quickly, to be given such an important post. It was good to be useful, but they also got a thrill from living on the edge that couldn’t be matched in any other way.

Marc returned to Angela’s side, signaling a few men to go help Zack. Only a few of the sleepy camp members paid attention. Marc was in the middle of congratulating himself on handling their first issues quietly when lightning struck the tent directly and all chance at a peaceful night was lost.

7

It wasn’t hard to get the scared members into the caves, but it was chaotic. The next hour was spent running loads of people and gear into the new shelter that had only gotten a few days of preparation.

Angela put guards on the entrances to the other levels and kept everyone on the first floor, aware of bad vibes coming from the bottom of the cave. Something would have to be done about that, but for now, she was busy trying to calm a camp that didn't want to be underground at all, let alone so soon.

“We'll be up and out in a few hours.” Angela made sure her voice carried through the crowd. “Until then, it's good practice for when we move in here. Take this time to conquer your fears. And if you don't have a fear of this, reach out and help those who do.”

Shawn carefully pushed his way through the tense crowd and leaned down to whisper in Angela's ear.

Marc saw her first glaze of terror. Then her cool façade fell into place and the leader of Safe Haven took over.

“Everyone! Pay attention! We're getting snow now and it's going to get cold. Please put on more clothes immediately. Eagles will be around with blankets and sleeping bags in a few minutes, and then I'm sending them out to get all our heaters. Be patient and stay out of the way while they get our heat flowing.”

The camp all seemed to start shivering and noticing the cold at the announcement. Angela immediately wished she had another option, but the people would have spotted the snow on the workers anyway. It was best to have everyone prepared to get out of the way.

Standing outside the entrance now, Angela surveyed the sky.

Samantha appeared at her side, looking exhausted. “Sorry, I missed that one. Not sure how, but I assume nature doesn’t like me trying to predict her moves.”

“No worries. We’ve got gear to cover a day of cold.”

“And if its winter coming now?”

Angela grunted, letting that be her answer. Prepping these damp caves in freezing temperatures would be a nightmare that she hadn’t considered. Angela gave Marc point, then sat down to concentrate on searching the future. They shouldn’t have snow yet. *What did I miss?*

The descendants around her felt Angela probing those halls and doors that connected to their own. It was eerie when they also began searching, but for Angela, it was a boost of fresh energy that allowed her to pry the heaviest door open and peer inside.

Angela’s sigh of relief let everyone else relax. “Just flurries.”

Her words were missed in the tension break. Small conversation attempts began, kids shifted restlessly, and Eagles got busy carrying out their orders. It would be a long night, but they would be okay. They had magic on their side.

Angela didn’t like that common thought, but she didn’t dissuade them of the notion. A few of those here understood how much danger they were all in at this moment. Angela was relieved those people

were controlling themselves and not upsetting others. In this atmosphere, it wouldn't take much to spark the fuse of panic that always seemed to be with them since the war.

8

Zack appeared in the entrance. "The ants are coming in!"

Angela pointed at the clear area in the rear that Jennifer had suggested. The teenager was talking to people and caring for Autumn, but Beth's suicide was obviously weighing on her.

The ants, dusted in snow, marched into the cave without hesitating despite there being more than two hundred people inside. They went to the corner Angela had insisted be left clear and made a spectacle of themselves by curling their bodies into a large circle that their young and larvae were placed inside. More ants then covered their young and all of the insects slept, except for two huge ants that marched back and forth in front of the colony.

The arrival of the ants signaled the end of the evening; the camp settled down to sleep inside the cave for the first time. Burning cans near the entrance provided a little heat, but the light went a long way, as did the lamp glare and penlights people had around their necks. Piles of blankets made large cushions for kids who sprawled out on top of each other, much like the ants. Adults and off duty Eagles

found a spot to sit and lean, and the final hours of waiting began.

Marc was wiped out. He knew Angela had to be feeling worse, but she strolled among the people, chatting and offering positive thoughts with little signs that it was bothering her. *Is she okay?*

For now, came the foreboding reply from his demon. *I wouldn't let her go much longer without a fill.*

Marc felt his body respond at that suggestion. *Yes, sir.*

The demon chuckled; Marc marveled at how quickly he'd become accustomed to that voice inside. It was almost as if it had always been there, helping and guiding.

But I haven't. You locked me away.

You know why. Don't start shit with me.

The demon fell silent.

Marc chose to worry over that later. If the demon was holding onto the past, that wasn't a good sign of things to come and he would need a clear head to deal with it.

Two hours after bugging into the caves, Angela leaned against Marc's big arm and fell asleep almost right away. She had time to think he smelled like she did—tired—and then she was flying west through the snowstorm with a shadowy figure following on her heels.

Angela knew who it was and allowed the breeze to carry her wherever it wanted. Marc had the camp

protected and Adrian had her six. Both sides of the line were covered.

9

Late night changed into early morning with a shift in the winds that blew directly against the boards they had placed over the entrance to the cave. It caused the temperatures inside to plummet and leadership to worry.

Marc woke Angela two hours after she'd fallen out, regretful but unsure what she wanted him to do. He wasn't going to step on her toes in any situation.

Angela sat up groggily, and pushed away the tea. "Coffee."

Marc handed her his mug and quickly lit her a smoke, aware of her morning habits.

Angela struggled to wake up, to return fully from the adventure she'd been on with Adrian. *The island is so clean! So green!*

"It's cold, Angie. I can do some things about that, but you need to pick."

Angela shook off the dream walking haze and focused on the paper Marc was holding out. She scanned it. "Tents."

Marc stuffed the paper in his pocket, glad he didn't have to leave the cave to go get their winter gear. Erecting a few tents and putting what heat sources they already had in here would hold them until dawn. "I've got it now. Lay back down."

Angela did, gratefully. Marc knew what he was doing. In the morning, when her brain and tongue were connected, she would let him know he had permission to go ahead and handle it as he saw fit next time. The calm people around her said he'd been doing a good job.

Angela slipped back into the darkness eagerly.

10

“Have you made a choice?”

Peggy nodded in response to Hilda's lowly spoken question. They were standing at the entrance, pretending to observe the snow like many other people had been doing while Marc got the tents set up.

“So have I. Now we leave them alone, right?”

“Yes, we have to make sure our representatives are worthy.”

Not far away, Doug saw the women chatting and didn't like the sense of wrongness. He was sitting with Maria's sons, enjoying the cooler weather that fascinated the kids, but he knew Peggy was doing something that would get her in trouble. Why else would they be whispering?

Peggy rotated to inspect the area and found Doug's disapproving gaze on them. She immediately left Hilda and came to his side. “You feeling okay?”

“No.” Doug glared. “I've got an ugly feeling and it's your fault.”

Peggy flushed, looking down to find the kids staring at him in surprise. “Later?”

Doug nodded stiffly. “Absolutely, woman.”

Needing a distraction, Peggy put her hands on her hips. “Have you tested your sugar level yet?”

11

Marc got the three large tents set up inside the cave and directed people inside them. They’d found two small space heaters and with the piping already in the cave for tomorrow’s work, they were venting with no trouble. They also had the blankets and sleeping bags. The temperature difference was already noticeable.

Marc swept the slowly relocating crowd, aware of groggy mutters and complaints, but he didn’t feel any true resentment. Everyone was a bit on edge from being forced into the caves before they were ready, but come dawn, they would be eager to get outside and play in the little bit of snow that had accumulated so far.

Marc nodded to Samantha, who had taken up a post near the entrance. She was obviously feeling guilty about missing this storm, but Marc knew she was also worrying over Neil and Jeremy. Neil’s was the only crew they hadn’t heard from yet. Jeremy had also remained topside, swearing he was more useful there. Several people had tried to talk him out of it, but Jeremy had walked into the storm with

tense shoulders and none of them had followed. Samantha was now holding a vigil for both men.

Marc spotted Cynthia inside her personal pup tent with a flashlight illuminating the first edition of the newspaper she was working on. Angela hadn't given her a deadline, but Marc was confident the reporter would have a rough draft ready in the morning. Settled on a ledge slightly above them, Cynthia hadn't come out of her tent once.

Marc made his way through the people to get to the contest board that Angela had insisted on bringing. It held a sheet of paper with the names of those who had signed up for the Eagles, but Marc hadn't gotten to it yet. He wanted to know who the next soldiers in their army were.

Marc ignored the other men standing stiffly in front of the board and began reading. He skipped the females names, positive Angela would weed through those; he frowned when he found Charlie's name. With all the chaos of their freedom fight, the Jr. Eagles had been broken, the same as many other teams. Charlie wanted to make sure his mom hadn't forgotten about them. Marc kept reading, happy the list was long. They needed all the new...

Marc burst out laughing as Kenn's name caught his attention. Kenn was about to be a rookie! Marc's amusement sent calm over the camp that was now getting comfortable. Marc assumed Kenn had finally gotten tired of hearing that he wasn't an Eagle.

The bottom of the sheet held names of the last minute people who weren't confident they had what it took. Marc snorted as he spotted Kendle's handwriting. She already had a slot on Angie's team, but she wanted to officially earn it, like the others had.

Except Candy. She'd also been given a place, to help ease her rage. Marc didn't think either of them should even have a gun. Kendle was doing better and if they were in another war, he would want Kendle with him then, but for this time and place, she was too dangerous to trust. As for Candy, Marc was still waiting for the snap. That cold attitude was a façade that held a pit of grief and anger that Marc didn't want to blow up on anyone.

Marc kept reading, almost at the bottom. The final name to catch his attention caused a disturbance in the force. Marc spun toward the nearest guard and made a curt motion.

When was he here?

Zack, tired and a bit annoyed over it himself, gestured angrily. *She did it while we bugged out.*

Marc wanted to cross the name off the list, but that would be exceeding his authority. If Angela wanted Conner among the rookies, he was in no position to argue. "But I don't have to pass him. And I won't, unless he proves to me that he's not a threat like his father."

"How could ya, when it's been in my pocket?"

Peggy's shout drew groans and grins. Marc waited for the inevitable with everyone else.

“No, it’s morning now. Do it!”

“No!”

“Fine!”

“Oww!”

Marc snickered, anger dimmed by amusement. If Doug didn’t test his sugar every morning, things could get ugly for him. Peggy was determined and when a woman set her mind to something, she usually got it.

Marc paused, mind clicking that into place. Angela wanted Conner to be an Eagle, to be away from Adrian and be saved.

Can I do that? I would have with Matt, though I didn’t realize time was so short. Can I train the son without holding the sins of the father against him?

Marc sighed. *No. I’ll have Kenn and Kyle do most of it. I don’t want to be that person.*

Satisfied with his own character, Marc headed for their small, quickly chosen bathroom area, hoping the port-o-lets were holding up. They didn’t have the pit ready yet and the odor was terrible.

Marc moved to allow Li Sing and his family to leave the bathroom, nodding and exchanging greetings. The nine men, women, and children did almost everything together, as if they feared being alone. Marc made a mental note to make sure that wasn’t the case. If they were having problems with someone, he would handle it. Li and his clan were a wonderful addition to Safe Haven. They obeyed the rules, helped even during their off time, and

remained respectful of each other and those around them. They were model citizens here.

Marc wished the new soldiers were more like them. Those men were loud, crude, and often said the wrong things about people. If they weren't careful, Angela would put them on an Eagle team together and then tell the rest of her army to make them feel what it was like to be bullied. Marc didn't want that to happen; he decided to spend a few minutes with that poker-playing group of men. A few words of advice might save them a lot of bleeding and humiliation. After that, he planned to make certain the ants weren't being disturbed, and then do a complete round of the sleepy people. It suddenly seemed like he might have missed something and Marc didn't care for that feeling at all.

12

As the storm wound down, the shift change came. Those who'd been on duty overnight were too wound up to lie down and sleep right away. Many of them went topside to dig through the debris or find a tent that was still standing.

Kendle and Daryl were two of those. They joined Jeremy in the training tent that had survived the storm because it was along one of the cliff walls that surrounded them. Jeremy stayed in the hay room, occasionally letting out a moan that mirrored theirs as Daryl led her through a second kai lesson.

Kendle wasn't afraid to hit or to be hit. It made her a quick study. Daryl was already using level two lessons. She also hated the one-hour limit and had made him agree to double it so she would be tired enough to sleep.

Daryl didn't think she had it in her, but they were about to find out. After being cooped up in that cave for hours, Daryl was looking forward to the exercise. He hadn't admitted it would be good for him too. He didn't think it was a good time to show any weakness. He had too many plans to let something small like a reputation screw things up.

“Mind if we join?”

Shawn and Greg were by the flap.

Daryl waved them in eagerly. When Kendle got tired, he could advance to a real opponent and not have to hold back.

In the hay room, Jeremy quietly shut off the laptop and stowed it in his kit under his other gear. He'd spent the evening tracking the storm and trying to figure out how to activate the satellite links so he could see the western half of their country. When he got those, they would be able to view Yellowstone and determine how bad the damage was. It was information that he and Neil had agreed was worth hiding from the camp. They were worried if they reminded Angela about it before he found those links, she might shut it all down and then they would never know. However, if they could show her the internet would be useful, she

might not ban it. For Jeremy, that mattered. He'd spent too many years on the net to ignore such a valuable source of knowledge. He'd planned his speech, but she'd cut him off today and revealed that she hadn't forgotten about the Internet at all. The camp had though, and the boss clearly wanted it that way.

Jeremy joined the other four Eagles at the training mat, noticing small leaks and tears in the vinyl. The winds had been awful, but not as bad as hearing them from inside that stone tomb would have been. There was no way he could live in there, but he hadn't figured out how to tell Angela or Samantha that yet. He suspected Neil already knew, but the former state trooper wouldn't give him away. He might even try to help, though Jeremy wasn't sure there was anything anyone could do. If he went inside that mountain, he would die. It was that simple.

Outside, the sky began to lighten with the coming of dawn. Six foggy shadows slowly approached Safe Haven while there were no Eagles on duty along the gate.

Chapter Nine BK6
Watch Your Six!

1

“**I**s everyone clear? I don’t want any screwups.” Jack twisted around on his horse, pausing to look at his men. “Not like last time. Canada got out of control. I know it was mostly Major Donner, but I also know you guys helped things along by not following my orders to the letter. That won’t happen again.”

The five men also stopped, each giving the expected nod without a comment. Jack didn’t like it when other people talked. Everyone knew that.

“Good. If there’s even one survivor, we’re done as a team. I’ll draft a new crew.”

Again, none of the men spoke. When a new crew was drafted, the old one was executed, and Jack had full authority to make such a switch whenever he felt like it.

Jack spent another moment studying his men, using his alpha gift to force his will on any rebellious thoughts he found lurking. Resisting was impossible.

Satisfied he had his men under control, Jack surveyed the area around the large camp. He would concentrate on Safe Haven itself when he reached

those shiny gates, but out here was the more important area. Mountain terrains made for fun hunting grounds and he had brought his men in from the opposite side so they would have the advantage from the beginning. It had also toughened them up from their month of recovery at their base. Canada hadn't gone well.

“But Safe Haven will.” Jack narrowed in on one of the many ledges surrounding his target. Roughly half a mile from where he now sat, the area was covered in tall, thick trees and light foliage that appeared undisturbed. But it felt like there might be someone spying from there and Jack didn't want the people in those gates to have any warning. Jack quickly blasted the area with his alpha power to capture the person. Only one in a million descendants was immune to him—a gift that had provided countless victims.

Traveling mentally with his power as it rushed out, Jack immediately sensed the presence of at least two descendants, though they weren't there now. They had been recently, he knew. Descendants always left bits of their light wherever they went. It faded after a few days or a week unless the person kept using the same area. After regular use, the trail would build up and become blindingly trackable.

Jack also found half a dozen soldiers sleeping inside snowy tents, but no one else; he slowly withdrew without disturbing the men. They were the least of all possible threats, but Jack was

suddenly certain he would end up killing them too. Fate often worked that way.

Jack stored his gift and slapped his horse with his hand. The animal took off toward Safe Haven's main gate, shuddering heavily at the unexpected action.

Reminded of the animal's previous owner, Jack dug his spurs in as he viciously yanked on the reins. "Control your disgust or I'll slit your throat!"

The quarter horse forced himself to obey instead of attacking like he'd done upon capture. The evil human had already taken his balls. Life was all he had left to lose.

Behind him, Jack's men exchanged a dangerous glance and then followed their boss. They kept their thoughts carefully blank, but in their hearts, Jack's death replayed like a broken record. Each of them planned to participate. They had never made the mistake of speaking about it or exposing the goal through their occasional private thoughts, but it was in every look they shared. Big Jack Devine wouldn't be forgiven. He would be consumed.

Adrian shielded himself as the riders went by, able to scan lightly without drawing notice. An old enemy was here and Jack hadn't suffered from time. Power radiated from the riders in ominous waves that traveled outward and upset even the animals. Jack was a lethal force and it showed.

Adrian dug a little deeper into the rear rider, trying to figure out where Jack's usual bodyguards

were, but the shields around the riders were formidable. Adrian reluctantly withdrew to get ready for whatever Angela chose to do. His advantage was that Jack's alpha power didn't work on him; he would be careful with it.

“We have a shadow.”

Jack answered their rear rider cheerfully. “Yes, old friends can pop up anywhere. We'll be covering that shortly.”

Safe Haven's tall gates appeared. Jack grinned. “Let's see how fast we can get an audience with their alpha.”

“Are we attacking now?” Kranten was eager to spill blood for any reason.

“Let's see what type of a hand they've gathered here first. We could use a few replacements to cover us from the last time we took a settlement. Our town is still a bit light on women.”

“And if they're not like us, or if they're not weak enough to enslave?” The rear rider hated the thoughts of Canada that Jack's comments constantly brought up. The fire had been Donner's idea, but Jack had lit the fuse.

“We take them.” Jack's orbs turned crimson. “I want my property back!”

“You'll get it, boss.” Vlad put a hand on his gun. “We'll do it right.”

“What is that?” Kendle paused the long lesson. “I can’t... That’s screaming!”

The sound was coming from the cave where their people were; all of them ran for the flap. They emerged into a dreary dawn over thin slush and ran for the cave.

“Hey, there!”

The ugliness in that unknown voice said Daryl had just been marked for death. He instinctively grabbed Kendle’s arm and swung her around to stand by his side as the others went to help Angela.

The screams grew louder.

Kendle was able to make out the words. “*Daddy! Daddy’s here!*”

It was Missy, trying to warn them that her father had arrived.

“Sounds like trouble,” that ugly voice commented happily. “Maybe we can help.”

Daryl and Kendle stared at the group of riders outside their front gate, instantly on edge. If the glowing red orbs hadn’t given the strangers away, the fiery halos of their protective shields would have. These were descendants and unlike Safe Haven’s people, these were evil. It was obvious in the menace that struck Daryl and sent his heart into a terrified gallop. He didn’t know why he’d already been marked, but the feeling grew stronger as the men stared at him.

Kendle stepped in front of her weaker partner, drawing on her own reserves. She also felt the evil surrounding them, sampling their scents, her gifts.

This was worse than trouble. Aware that she was alone in this fight for the moment, Kendle opened all of her mental doors to be ready. As soon as an aggressive act was made, she would open fire in every way.

“Ah, there’s no need for that, my friend.” The leader of the newcomers smiled pleasantly. “If you give me my property, I’ll even leave without anyone dying. That’s a better offer than I’ve made anyone else.”

Kendle didn’t doubt that, but she chuckled as if she had the upper hand. “Stand by for the boss, Mouth.”

The leader frowned at the insult, eyes glowing darker.

“You can’t use that on me!” Kendle sneered. “I’ll drown you in your own shield.”

The leader’s eyes returned to those pale orbs of death and devious pleasure; Kendle stopped gloating. His thoughts were open to her and the blood in them was tempting. He wanted everyone here dead. Kendle could almost agree with him and felt her rage rising. “Keep pushing those images. It’ll flip me and I’ll take us all out. Been on the edge of it for a while now anyway, but *you’ll* go first.”

The pictures disappeared. A large scowl placed itself across the man’s weathered countenance. “Who are you?”

“More than you can handle. And that’s just me. You’ll meet the real power any second now.”

An instant later, Angela came from the cave with Marc on her right and Jennifer on her left.

Other people peered out, but no one else left the den.

Kendle thought that was wise. If this got ugly, inside the stone was the safest place for their camp. Kendle was surprised at her longing to spill blood in defense of Safe Haven, but there was no time to ponder it as Angela approached the gates.

“Welcome to Safe Haven refugee camp.” Angela nodded politely, hands resting on her guns. “What can we do for you?”

The leader scanned Angela, as did the other five men.

Marc took the moment to return the favor. He found power and problems, but nothing they couldn't handle if they were careful. In fact, Angela's level one females could probably handle half of these guys on their own.

“Do you think so?” Angela asked Marc, intentionally interrupting the newcomer before he could answer her.

“Probably, but it'll cause damage.” Marc lifted a brow. “Is this what you want?”

“No, but it may have to happen.” Angela ignored Jack's growing anger at being treated this way.

Samantha had joined Jeremy topside, taking a place behind Angela. She swept the threats, lingering on the big man by the leader's side. He appeared more dangerous than the others. Samantha

felt the man's leer go over her and knew she'd been claimed.

Jeremy flashed a glower of hatred toward the man. "Over my dead body."

Vlad laughed. "Exactly what I was thinking!"

"This is that moment." Samantha finally understood what Angela had been trying to tell her all along. "And we have to let them go."

Jeremy wanted to know why, but waited. There was too much danger to be distracted right now.

Tara and Missy appeared in the cave entrance, but they didn't come closer. Tara hovered over the child, twitching in agitation as she stared at her ex.

Angela spoke to the leader silently. *You can't have them. I'll kill them both before I give that power to you.*

You will return my daughter! Jack growled. *The bitch, I don't care about.*

Angela shook her head. "Never."

Jack leaned back on his tall mount, contemplating Angela and the others with her. There was a thick shield over the rest of the camp—to hide how weak they were, he assumed—but that wasn't a guess that he was willing to risk his life on openly. Missy's warning to avoid the Ghost at all costs had scared him and that mysterious man could be hidden under that shield. Even if he wasn't, the four descendants in front of him were priceless and he was sure to lose them in a fight. His own crew was recognizing the gifts here and growing eager to consume them.

Jack dug deeper into the man at Angela's side; he didn't like the resistance he found there. He wasn't any happier with the reaction of the teenager or the blonde woman flanking her. "I'm leaving, but we both know it's temporary."

Jennifer had the camp completely covered and Marc was busy digging into their evil minds for plans and weaknesses. Angela needed to draw this out a bit. "How about arranging visitation?"

Jack recognized the ploy, but played along. "I never considered that."

"Will you now? We don't have to destroy you."

Jack laughed, denying the feel of death hovering on his shoulder. That was the image Angela was sending and he was loath to admit, even to himself, that she was intimidating while doing so little.

"I'm so much worse than intimidating." Angela's tone was matter-of-fact. "I'm as evil as you. Your death will come exactly like the nightmares you often cried about as a child in the labs—quick, painful, and unexpected."

Jack paled; then the red bloom of anger came to his cheeks. "I'll see you again, fire walker, and of course, your friends. Your *weak* friends."

Jack wheeled his horse around.

His men followed with sharp jerks on the reins that filled the air with the protests of their horses. They were out of sight before the dust settled.

Angela looked at Marc, hating the order she had to give now, and found him already taking gear

from the belts of those around them. "I'll send a small team to catch up, if you want."

"No, quicker now and alone."

"Yeah." Angela sighed. "Take Kendle."

Marc realized how hard that was for her. He kissed her as if they were alone.

Kendle turned away, anger growing. She motioned the gates to be opened. She suddenly couldn't wait to be out there killing someone.

Marc let go slowly, pulse rapid.

Angela chuckled. "Nice. Hurry, will ya?"

Marc rubbed her flat stomach. "Before you know it."

He was gone a minute later, vanishing into the early morning drizzle with Kendle as if they were about to drop off the planet.

"And in a way, they are." Angela also knew they wouldn't be alone for long. Another descendant around here needed to know where Jack was going, which meant one of her men would have to compromise. Angela hoped Adrian would. Marc wouldn't be in the mood for anything but blood after the images he'd witnessed in Jack's thoughts. Big Jack Devine had come for death and he was going to get it, one way or another.

"Thank you." Tara and Missy came to Angela, both pale and uncomfortable.

Angela studied the woman harshly, letting the truth bleed through for a single moment. "If Marc gets hurt, you better watch your six!"

Those who heard it thought they understood Angela's caution, her warning. People would blame the new woman if anything happened to Marc.

Tara, however, took the warning to heart and quickly got out of Angela's sight. She had read more into it than that. If Marc was injured or killed, Angela would pay it forward.

"Why did we let them go?" Jeremy asked Samantha as they moved away from the others.

"So she can draw them back at the right time." Samantha refused to say more. Angela might not want it known. "So what's the snack today? I'm starving."

3

Marc and Kendle hit the bottom of the main road less than five minutes later, loaded with the basic gear they'd both had on them and a few quick items taken from those nearby. Neither of them worried over it. Pulling their needs from the land wasn't as hard as it used to be when they'd both been alone in their minds. Now, there was power as well. The need to catch up to Jack and his crew was hard to fight. It got Kendle ready to kill, to bathe in Jack's blood to save Marc, who would now be Angela's sword of justice. Kendle hated anyone having that type of power over Marc, but it wasn't as if he was going to refuse. Being allowed to kill, being expected to kill, had to be freeing.

“It is, in ways.” Marc was always scanning people now. “It’s also heavy.”

“Because you’re not a killer. Unless it’s called for.”

Marc didn’t answer that. He would murder several people if the opportunity presented itself the right way. And he wouldn’t ever regret those deaths.

“Do they deserve it?”

“To me, they do.”

Kendle tried to comfort him. “Then, they do. You’re a good man. You won’t kill randomly.”

“Uh, Kendle, I need to tell you something.”

“Yes, Marc?” Kendle simpered.

“You’re making me sick with the hero worship, and you’re giving Angie thoughts about removing you once you’re no longer useful.”

Kendle froze, a bit stunned at the abrupt topic change.

Marc looked over his shoulder at someone behind them. “Can you do something with her? Angie’s patience has limits, even when she has plans running.”

Kendle stared in surprise as Adrian emerged from the lightly wooded cliff directly above them. On foot, he wasn’t out of breath yet despite running to stay caught up. *Marc’s built that way too. Sexy.*

Marc sneered. “This should be a fun trip with you comparing us the entire time. Should we hold still next to each other so you can get some of it out of your system now?”

Furious with herself and him, Kendle swung down from her horse. She strode off angrily.

Adrian took her mount without commenting. Marc had blasted her out of the water and he might not be done firing yet.

Marc snorted. “The *boss* set it up so we’d have to do this together. She’s hoping we’ll work out our differences on this run.”

“We certainly didn’t on the last one.” Adrian didn’t think it was possible. Marc wasn’t the forgiving type.

Marc didn’t respond to the comment or the thought.

Adrian scowled. “Are we in for another Marc run through hell?”

“Her mind was closed, so I’d say yes to the hell.” Marc tried not to enjoy Adrian’s discomfort. “As for me, no. You’re not worth my time anymore.” Marc lightly snapped the reins to catch up with Kendle. He swung her up onto his horse, and then neatly slid to the ground.

It was so Indian-like that Adrian gaped. *Is Marc part Indian?* He got on with them amazingly well. Prying, Adrian caught a glimpse of a forlorn man on a shore as a boat sailed away and he quickly slipped out, hoping Marc hadn’t noticed the slight intrusion.

Adrian shut his mind down, storing the new thread for later. When he didn’t have to protect his thoughts, he would explore that. From a first peek, it said Marc wasn’t leaving with them. Adrian’s tiny heart thumped happily.

Marc knew what Adrian was thinking, but the blond traitor hadn't stayed for the thought that always followed the image of remaining in America. Angie always jumped off the boat and joined him on the shore. She wasn't going to let them be split up. If Adrian thought that was the final plan, he had a huge shock coming. Marc had considered telling Adrian that Angie had made a contingency plan. If he refused to leave, so would she. Marc had chosen to let her have that moment of revelation and enjoy knowing that no matter how Adrian plotted or schemed, nothing would work. *Angie and I can't be split up now. Neither of us will allow it.*

4

“More company!”

Angela turned toward the gate. Marc and Kendle had only been gone a short time.

As she walked, Eagles fell in step with her. Marc hadn't left any specific instructions, but he hadn't needed to. Jack and his red-eyed men had been enough to snap the sentries into full alert. Around the camp, the sense was the same.

Angela knew their unease wasn't good, but there were many types of descendants; her people had a right to know what they were up against this time.

Angela paused at the gate, just out of sight of the newest people, and scanned them mercilessly.

Unlike the morning visitors, these ten men weren't descendants. The clue was their horses. Angela recognized the brands immediately—three small J's. Angela went to the gate, hands again resting on her guns. "Hello. Welcome to Safe Haven."

The ten men all took their hats off at the sight of her. Their leader dismounted. He walked toward the gate, stopping as the guard's guns followed him. "No need for that with us. We just want to talk."

He edged closer; rotating his hat in restless hands that were covered in thick callouses. "I'm Darian. I have some questions."

The leader was tall and thin, familiar to some of them. Angela placed him before he could reveal his identity. "You've come for justice. For Dari."

Darian paled a bit, head lowering. "Maybe, maybe not. We've heard you handle things fairly."

"We do. And your twin sister was no different."

Darian raised a face that was lined in grief. "You found her guilty."

Angela nodded again. "She wanted descendants to rule everyone else. She refused my offer to change her mind."

Darian sighed unhappily. "I can believe you, but my people will want more."

Angela waved a hand at the gate. "You may enter and file the complaint. The rest must leave. They cannot stay with us."

Darian waited for the gate to open. "I accuse you of murdering my sister. I demand a trial."

Gasps and mutters filled their small audience, but Angela smiled as if she'd been expecting it. "I grant your demand, Darian. Please leave your weapons outside the gate. You will not roam freely within my walls."

"But I will receive justice." The man removed his gun belts and gave them to an uneasy guy on a small, branded gelding. "If it isn't a fair trial, my people will come here and attack."

"All trials in Safe Haven are fair. But we don't rush things. You'll be here a while."

Darian stepped through the gate and around angry, armed Eagles with no signs of fear. "Got nothing else to do now. She was my only family."

Angela winced. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"You killed her!" Darian's countenance blazed with the first emotion he'd shown. "Why do you care for my pain?"

"Because you're not like your sister," Angela signaled for the gates to be shut. "I can read that, you know. Your loyalty is misplaced."

Darian took a deep breath and allowed Kenn to lead him into the smallest QZ. "A trial will tell."

Jennifer joined Angela as Darian was taken to the farthest tent from the gate. "Is that another problem?"

Angela was studying their newest guest. "If I get enough time to prove it, no. If he makes up his mind too quickly, then it could become one."

“How about I assign a personal guide?” Jennifer knew they had several people here who needed to be occupied.

“Agreed. Put a list together. I’ll pick from it tonight, if he passes the medical.”

“Yeah, about that. Should his first impression of you come from Doc Savage?”

“No, but he’ll understand that even people who hate me agree I’m fair. Let it go for now.”

“I’ll have the list ready.” Jennifer didn’t follow when Angela left. She hated the thought of Angela being seen as a coldblooded killer. Angela never did that without a reason and this new guy had to understand that.

5

“Let’s hear about our target.” Marc had spent the first hour of the ride deciding how best to handle the situation and the people. Now, he was ready for details.

Riding in the rear, Adrian caught up to be right behind Marc.

Still leading, Kendle fell back a bit to listen.

“He’s what I am.” Adrian lit his last stale cigarette. He didn’t plan to dig through the dead land for more. “We trained together, ran together, hunted, competed. They finally split us up when we started using our men in battles of will.”

Marc’s face tightened at the lie, but he didn’t interrupt.

“When you what?” Kendle didn’t have that self-control. She snapped her mouth shut when Marc glared at her.

“Give me his profile.” Marc wasn’t sure why Adrian was stalling. Because he didn’t want Kendle to know what a POS he was? Probably.

“It’s hard to talk about.” Adrian grunted. “You may think spilling your guts is easy, but you don’t have all these secrets.”

“No, I don’t.” Marc smiled gleefully. “I’m not slime.”

Adrian’s demeanor went from sullen to ice.

Marc let out a sound of annoyance. “Finally! Now get to it.”

With his emotions shut down, Adrian’s voice became the monotone of information that Angela was used to. “He’s an alpha with the ability to control others. He can kill you with his mind, like Becky, but he’s limited on range and strength. He can’t handle too many opponents at once and his focus can be broken that way. He hates normals and has always wanted control over this world so that he doesn’t have any rules. If that’s his daughter, he won’t stop coming until he gets her or he’s dead.”

“His crew?” Marc stored the underlying note of eagerness in Adrian’s words. If Adrian wanted to be the fighter for this one, Marc would let him while studying that fight for his own coming moment with Safe Haven’s former leader.

“They’re the true power. Between them, they have his ass covered too well for an open attack.

There are usually twelve of them. We need to split them up. If we can't, each of us will take one of his men and hope to duck his mental hits during the fight."

Marc didn't correct him on the plan, but he already had his own ideas.

"Vlad is the brute strength and their healer. He never leaves Jack's side. Kranten is the fighter. His spells are deadly. Stephens is the seer; he spends his free time scanning. He doesn't miss much."

"Any others?" Marc didn't like the admiration in Adrian's voice.

"He'll have a few people hidden at a base, but they'll be messengers and supply finders—not fighters."

"But they can fight." Marc was sure of it. "At least a little, or they wouldn't have made it onto his crew, right?"

"That's safe to assume." Adrian shrugged. "But Jack is careful to keep full control of anyone who has real power. Those he leaves behind will be the weakest."

"Tell me how he usually attacks in a large situation."

"Head-on, when I knew him. I doubt he'll use any setup I'm familiar with."

"He knows you're here?"

"He didn't see me when he came in, but he'll figure it out. He's not dumb and there aren't any fresh rumors of my death."

"Stay low until I tell you otherwise."

“You got it.” Adrian didn’t want to confront Jack. He wanted to know the man’s goal for Safe Haven first. Even if they killed Jack and his crew, someone just as bad would be sent to replace them.

“You think so?”

“Yes. Angela removed a group of women that were well liked by their people. In fact, Dari may have even been in the chain of command among Jack’s camp.”

“Have you been to their site?”

“No. They were based in Pennsylvania after the war. Command didn’t want us in the same state during the apocalypse. Jack wouldn’t accomplish his mission if he knew where I was.”

“What was the Canada mission?”

“Gather all descendants, and eliminate witnesses that couldn’t be converted to a military frame of mind.”

“What went wrong?”

“They had survivors.” Adrian shifted for a more comfortable seat on the horse. “Tara and her daughter, maybe, but there could have been others according to the story we got out of Donner. It was sloppy work.”

“And you wouldn’t have handled it that way,” Marc guessed bitterly. “You would have cornered them like rabbits and opened fire.”

“Yes. And so would you, so stop the Mr. Perfect act or I’m not going to be able to work with you.”

Marc's anger flared for a brief instant and then he surprised them both with a chuckle. "Fine. Just remember you asked for that."

Suddenly uncomfortable, Adrian continued his profile of their targets. "They were scouting us. The next move will be to send for more men. They'll surround the site and demand a surrender while waiting for his men, then attack."

"Simple." Kendle was proud of herself for staying quiet so far.

Marc didn't stop her coming questions. Letting her go for a minute might give him new leads. She knew how to fight and to view a battle.

Adrian nodded. "It is simple. Jack can't let his plans get too big because his men would have to be allowed to think for themselves."

Kendle dropped back to ride next to Adrian. "He controls them at all times?"

"Yes, but it has limits. They have to be in range and when he's asleep, the line is broken. He uses mental charms to bind them for those free hours."

"Clever." Kendle followed Marc down the path that held the visible tracks of Jack's crew in the slush. "What about his attack methods?"

"Much like mine. Open and heavy."

Marc snorted, but didn't say anything.

Adrian flushed, waiting for Kendle's next query; the sound of Safe Haven echoed down to them. Pounding, voices, animals, kids—it sounded like a beautiful place for any person to be.

“We’ll always be a target. So we have to stay on offense.” Marc realized he was pondering aloud. “As you were!”

Kendle resumed gathering information at his growl. “Where should we be looking?”

“Behind him.” Adrian was a bit surprised at her insight. “He always thinks he has his ass covered.”

“How can we split them up?”

Adrian frowned in concentration. “We...pick them off from a distance.”

“Is he likely to fall for that?”

“No. We’ll need them to split up.”

“And that might happen if we each have something they want.” Kendle considered it. “What can they be bought with? Women? Girls? Whiskey?”

“They’re not as simple as a drunken pedophile!” Adrian was tiring of answering their questions. “Fear rules them. You’d have to eliminate Jack’s control.”

“Are any of his men willing?” Marc refused to let Adrian stop yet.

“Vlad wasn’t, even when the first teams were put together. Jack’s father had saved Vlad’s family during some ancient turf war and he’s been with him ever since. Rumor says Vlad’s father paid the debt with Vlad.”

“He paid for a debt with his child?” Kendle was stunned by the awful things these supposed powerhouses had done to each other.

“Vlad’s family had too many kids. It helped them more than paying the debt with money would have. Because of it, the boy was able to go to school, be fed every day, and have friends.”

Kendle didn’t want to hear that lifestyle being defended. She shot one of her last few questions at him. “What will happen when he sees you?”

Marc gauged Adrian’s reaction. He’d wondered that too.

“He’ll stop at nothing to collect any bounty on me, I’d guess. But it’s been a long time and Donner is dead now. Jack liked Donner. They were together for a long time before the war. He may order me killed and take my body to base.”

“Why did Angela send you with us? What do you know about this run that Marc doesn’t?” Kendle asked what was on Marc’s mind. “And why didn’t she just kill them at our gates? Why let them reach their people?”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Marc sent a glower. “You said you wouldn’t withhold any information. It’s the reason we didn’t hang you.”

“I came up with two options. You won’t like them.” Adrian grunted resentfully. “I didn’t.”

“I’m listening.”

Adrian shook his head at Marc’s cold tone. He and Marc would never be able to spend time together. He’d ruined all chances of that. “The first is that she wants his men or some of his people. She

wants us to judge them guilty or not, so she can try to add them to the camp.”

Though not awful, Marc didn't like that option. “And the other?”

“Isn't it obvious?” Adrian scowled. “She isn't settling for a small team of killers. She sent us to judge them and draw in their entire camp.”

“We're not capable...” Kendle fell silent. Yes, they were. The two men with her were lethal and she was a killer of a variety that even a descendant could be shocked by. Their people would easily conquer any others. “What the hell is wrong with that woman of yours?!”

Marc didn't respond. He was too busy being impressed. When Angie made plans, she went all in. “What equipment did she send you?”

“A notebook, glasses, and a map.”

Marc recognized it. “Recon.”

“We're letting them reach their people so they'll call in backup?”

Marc nodded at Kendle's question. “Unless the boss says otherwise, we're doing exactly that.”

“When will we know if that's the right choice?” Kendle wasn't willing to trust Angela.

Marc hated the answer, but it was the truth. “Not until we get home and she tells me what the plan was.”

“So we won't know.”

“We'll know when we scan them,” Adrian sensed Marc running low on patience again. “If they're good people trapped by Jack's crew, we'll

rescue them. If they're willing warriors on his side, we'll kill them all."

Kendle gave Marc a hard look. "Some loving wife you've got there."

"She isn't his wife!" Adrian barked.

Silence echoed among all of them for a long moment where Marc enjoyed the awkwardness. He shook his head at Kendle when she would have continued the questioning. "Track them. That's it for now."

Kendle did as she was told, mind flying with ideas for both possible situations.

Adrian also remained silent. Jack and his crew were deadly. So was Marc. It would be an interesting trip at the least; one that would distract him from his misery and might even allow a bit of rest, since he knew Angela would be alone at night right now.

Marc caught the thought and managed to keep himself under control. Adrian's wealth of information would eventually run out. *And then I'm gonna gut you like a fish.*

"We're close." Kendle stopped her horse. "I can feel the edge of a shield."

Marc sent his grid out and found their targets. They were traveling with their protective shields up. Marc stopped by Kendle. He turned to tell Adrian to go dim, and found the man gone. "Good. Stay that way, will ya? It does something for me."

Adrian grunted through his magic, letting them know he'd heard.

Marc was satisfied with the plan he'd put together. "We'll escort them out of here—openly. When we go back, you'll keep following and get their base location. Kendle and I will be waiting."

"You got it." Adrian swallowed the urge to pull his gun and shoot Marc now, while there was a tiny chance of success. Even if he managed to hit Marc, Kendle would heal him. Now wasn't the time. "Take the horse. It'll make noise and give me away."

Marc swung up onto the mount and caught up with Kendle, who had cleared the trees and was now staring at Jack and his crew. That group was aware of her, but all their expressions darkened when Marc joined her. They clearly weren't happy that Marc was part of the escort.

Kendle didn't respond to the man in the rear who beckoned suggestively; neither did Marc. This wasn't a social call. Marc glowered with pale red orbs until the group picked up their pace a little. He wanted these men away from Safe Haven, away from his family. They were dangerous—more so than Donner or any of the troops that had been sent to capture Angela.

"They feel the same way about you." Kendle scanned deeper. "Their thoughts are full of the Ghost rumors they've been hearing."

"Good. Saves me time."

"Time for what?"

"To kill them all, of course. I have no doubts about Angela's wishes. These descendants are a

threat—one that isn't supposed to come back and haunt us later.”

“How do you know that? She didn't say it.”

“Because she sent her pet killer.” Marc jerked a thumb toward where he could feel Adrian. “If she wanted peace, she wouldn't have sent the three hardest people in camp. She could have sent Jennifer and Cynthia.”

Kendle frowned. “But Jennifer's a killer.”

“No, she's a defender,” Marc corrected. “Jennifer still values life. We don't.”

“I value some lives.” Kendle's shoulders drooped. “I've healed people, you know.”

“That's another reason I think so. If this is a peaceful mission, why did she give me a killer that can heal and a ruthless traitor?”

Kendle couldn't argue with that and didn't try. Some people needed to be gone and Angela was wise enough to know that. It made Kendle grateful, but it also made her hate Angela more. *There has to be something that woman sucks at!*

6

“Don't do anything. Let them think we're going home.”

Jack's men knew the ploy too well to make a mistake on this simple part, but no one reminded him of it. Jack's tone said he was offended that these Safe Haven people thought he could be escorted out like a bag of trash. There would be a payment for

that. Then to add insult to injury, they had two escorts for six men. Jack had expected triple that amount.

Jack studied the female, recognizing her as the one who had challenged him openly at the gates. ...Kendle. He already had plans for that smart mouth. If her fighting skills were as good as appearances suggested, he would make a nice chunk of change from selling her to the men in their town. Their warriors needed women who could take a hit or two during the fun. It always improved their will to work.

Aware of being studied in the same manner, Jack delivered a charming smile to their escorts and then rode north. When he was ready, hell would break loose, but until then, this was just a quiet ride through a quiet area. "Maybe we'll make this our base when it's all over. That cave could be a good place to spend a winter."

"Our people won't like it." Vlad wasn't worried over Jack's reaction to his comment. He knew the boss wasn't furious right now, so it was safe for other people to talk.

"They will if we let these Safe Haven people finish it first."

"True." Vlad understood a fully outfitted cave was different from a hole in the ground. "Have to kill the rats already there."

"Most of them are on the list anyway." Jack shrugged. "We'll keep a few to get us through the cold weather."

“Good. I get my pick, like usual?”

“Of course.” Jack promised Vlad. “Any of them, except their leader. She’s mine.”

Vlad nodded. He didn’t like brunettes anyway. The tall, willowy blonde had stood with a guard on each side of her and he wanted that. If two men were protecting her, she had to be worth taking.

“What about their fighters and snipers?” Kranten was eager to have battle plans sorted.

“We’ll try to remove them all in the first control wave I send out.” Jack’s tone dropped into a mutter. “We’ll handle it like my little seer said to.”

Stephens held silent. His vision hadn’t matched Missy’s, but Jack was terrified of dying. He would only believe his daughter when it came to the time and place. Little Missy had told him there was one way to conquer Safe Haven. Stephens didn’t agree, but he knew better than to say so. Calling Jack’s daughter a liar was a death sentence that would be immediately carried out.

“Are you sure she’s wrong?” Jack drawled menacingly.

“No.” Stephens opened his thoughts so Jack wouldn’t think he was hiding anything. “Only worries.”

“Then keep it to yourself!”

Stephens pulled his thoughts in tight, and then found something else to dwell on. Jack’s mood wasn’t good, but it could always be made worse. None of them wanted that.

Annoyed, Jack slapped his horse with his spurs and got them moving faster. He wanted to be with the rest of his crew, where he felt safe. The glowing orbs of their two escorts were a warning and Jack intended to heed it. He wouldn't be caught off guard. Safe Haven would.

Chapter Ten BK6
Team Players

1

“**A**re we ready?”

Samantha’s question was met with nods and grunts as the rest of her team checked their lists against the supplies on their horses. Angela wasn’t sending many vehicles out. They were too low on fuel. Each of the females was looking forward to being on their animal and alone with their thoughts.

“Let’s ride.” Samantha led the team calmly through the gate and then gave in to the urge to kick her mount and fly away. Jennifer was staying here with Angela and that put Samantha in charge.

Grinning, her teammates did the same.

The sentries watched them in concern and pride. Wild women on the loose were a concern for the trouble that their recklessness may bring, but the pride was strong too. If their recklessness did bring trouble, those females were mostly capable of handling it now. The men had trained them well.

“Easy...” Samantha slowed her horse as soon as they were out of sight, not about to risk their mission with a slip in the melting snow.

The others followed her lead.

The four women spent the next fifteen minutes in a calm walk down the mountain. Angela was sending them to the opposite side to meet the rest of their crew, where it hadn't been cleared yet. Samantha intended to get the job done and get home. Despite the excitement, she already felt uncomfortable being outside Safe Haven's gates.

Samantha led the women without stopping or speaking, aware that her girls were confident she knew where she was going. There was no subtle crinkle of map checks like there would have been from male teammates by now, no glinting compass peeks. It was liberating.

Directly behind Samantha, Cynthia caught the thought and found herself agreeing. She liked working with the men, and there were always a hundred things to copy or learn, but there was something special about being alone in a group of women. Maybe it was the freedom, or maybe it was the opportunity to be more without the shadows of the men over them. The reporter wasn't sure what it was, only that she was glad to be here.

Candy and Tracy paid no attention to their leader as they rode down the slippery path. The view was amazing and it held the two rear females enrapt as the sun continued to rise and strike vivid colors. The mountain fog and sweeping vistas were a nice balm to their troubled minds.

Samantha took them around the final bend in the road and spotted a small group of vaguely familiar people waiting roughly half a mile ahead. She

straightened in the saddle, giving the coded wave, and got the same in return from the smallest of the shadows.

Now frowning slightly, Samantha and her girls picked up speed and stayed together as they approached the other half of their team.

Conner gaped at the sight of the females riding toward them. His dad had sent him here with only a basic instruction to do what he was told; he was shocked that Angela had arranged this.

“What the hell is this?” Samantha demanded as soon as she was in range. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Conner held out the slip of paper his dad had said he would need.

Samantha snatched it from his fingers. The other females had stopped as soon as they saw who the workers were.

“She’s out of her mind.” Samantha gave the note to Cynthia, who read it, let out a curse, and then passed it. By the time the note got to Candy, they all knew who had arranged it.

“I didn’t know you guys were coming!” Conner blared when all their hostile gazes settled on him. “And neither did my dad.”

“Yeah. Right, kid.” Candy glowered at him resentfully. “Entire damn Mitchel family is a pocket of trouble.”

Conner flushed. His arms came up to wrap around his waist. “I’ll leave and you guys can handle it.”

“No.” David’s tone was reluctant as he interfered. “You heard your dad. He said to stay and do whatever you were told.”

“They don’t want me here.” Conner stared at the ground. “And it’ll get me in trouble. I’m not allowed to be around her.”

Conner’s concern for the future let the females relax a bit. Samantha gave Candy a lifted brow that asked what she wanted to do.

Candy was tired of the drama. “Let’s just get the work done. If he comes near me, I’ll shoot him.”

“Sounds good to me.” Samantha took out their envelope of instructions. “Let’s see what the boss has planned for the peeping tom.”

Conner spun toward their vehicles, face red. He took a seat on the hood and fought to keep his attention on the ground and off his fantasy woman.

Samantha read it aloud. *“I realize none of you are happy right now, and I understand this won’t be easy for some of you. However, I’m giving you a job that matters even more than the duties being carried out in the cave. You’re clearing our escape route from these mountains and it has to be finished in less than a month. No one can know what you’re doing. Bring in supplies on each run to cover your mission. As you clear, recon the towns and surroundings, list items we need to gather, and try to build up some trust with your teammates. There’s always hope—even for those who don’t know how badly they need it.”*

All eyes went to Conner.

The boy ducked his head. "I'll do my part. I'm not my father."

It was a good moment for him, but it wasn't believed as deeply as he needed it to be for forgiveness. Conner pointed south, to where they could see the first wreck waiting to be cleared. "I can go find us a tow truck, and maybe some fuel to run it."

Samantha considered and then nodded. "Yes. Take your bodyguard along and try to be back in an hour or two. We'll be working on the wrecks."

Conner and David left immediately.

Samantha waved at the remaining soldiers. "You can do guard duty first. When we get tired, we'll switch out with you."

"Yes, ma'am." Justin got his men into place. Laboring for these people would be a way into Safe Haven. When this escape route was finally used, those people would be grateful.

Samantha's team was thinking the same thing, but they weren't as pleased by it. Not only did that mean Conner would be allowed back in, it also meant there were more problems coming. Why else would Angela insist they clear a way out?

"All right. Put 'em in neutral and push them aside," Samantha instructed as the soldiers began climbing nearby trees and poles to have the vantage point. "We'll come through later and collect fuel or anything else we can use, so don't destroy any of it. We might need the parts."

“They shouldn’t be doing that,” one of the soldiers grumbled. “Adrian said most of the women in Safe Haven are pregnant.”

Justin frowned. “We don’t make the rules. Women have been giving birth as long as the world’s been turning. Nothing new now either.”

“But they can’t do...”

The men stopped talking as the sound of a car rolling into the ditch came. Clearly, the women could do it and they were going to.

“These Safe Haven people sure are determined,” a third soldier remarked from his pole position. “We should have joined them sooner.”

“Yeah. Well, then, let’s keep these skirts alive, shall we, gentlemen?” Justin began scanning their surroundings.

It was a reminder to pay attention and each of the men did. Anyone could be lurking out here, hoping for a ticket into safety by grabbing a hostage.

Busy shoving the next vehicle off the road, only one of the females caught the thought and she didn’t feel the need to be upset over the words or the greedy thoughts behind them. People who hadn’t spent time in Safe Haven’s light couldn’t be expected to act as if they had been. Change would come when Angela was ready for them to experience it. Until then, Samantha planned to keep an eye on these hard men, as well as Conner. She considered the boy more of a threat than any of the soldiers. The only one worse was his traitorous father.

“She gave me a message with the supplies.” Adrian stayed out of Marc’s reach as he continued. “I’m the hostage.”

“I assumed it was something like that. You’ll get caught on your own.”

“She wants you guys to go back before dark.”

Marc didn’t have a problem with that part. What he hated was that Adrian and Angela were still communicating. “She used Kenn?”

“And me.” Kendle didn’t want lies between them. “She didn’t tell me to keep it quiet or anything.”

Marc scowled at her. “But you were happy enough to do it. Especially if it might drive a wedge, right?”

Kendle dropped her head without replying.

Marc didn’t let the anger take control. “She’s the boss and you’re both on her shit list. I’d follow her orders to the letter if I were you.”

Adrian was glad Marc had taken it so well. Now that the moment of his capture was closing in, Adrian wasn’t feeling snarky. Jack and his men had been waiting a long time to get their hands on him.

“Does she want us to hang around and rescue you?” Marc wasn’t sure if he would or not.

“No. She said if I die, I deserve to.”

Instantly soothed, Marc stopped, taking the reins of Adrian's mount as he realized they were splitting up now. "Good luck."

Adrian grunted as he went by, but he didn't say anything else. Angela's messages were hard and cruel, and he did deserve it, but the pain wasn't taken lightly.

Marc motioned to Kendle. "Let's make it obvious that we're leaving. Give them the red eye."

Kendle snickered, letting her rage bleed through. She immediately felt the shield around Jack grow stronger. She waited for Marc's cue. When he rotated, presenting his back, she did the same. It would appear as though they were headed home now that they'd escorted the bad men away. "Are we going straight home?"

"Yes, but we'll make stops along the way." Marc kneed his mount gently to increase speed. "We'll set up some disks and alarms. The next time they come through here, I want advance warning."

Kendle was looking forward to being alone with him, but she managed to avoid gushing. "Okay."

Walking by her, Adrian leaned in. "You haven't got a shot in hell. Best stick with me."

Angered, Kendle stuck a foot out and heard a satisfying thump as Adrian hit the ground. "Asshole."

Adrian grinned, picking himself up. "That's me, Sweetheart. And one day, you'll be glad of it."

Kendle kept going.

Adrian headed for Jack's camp. Jack's crew was getting set to spend the night out in the open and Adrian had recognized a good opportunity to sneak in. He was hoping to overhear a few tidbits before allowing himself to be taken hostage.

Adrian eased into the trees around where tents were going up and found the edge of a personal shield covering the area. He took a seat in the weeds and quietly sank down to wait for the right moment to act.

“Now!”

Adrian felt alpha power slide over him in a slimy flash and began resisting. He struggled for a moment, panting. Jack's power had grown stronger than he had expected. Adrian shuffled those thoughts to the rear of his mind, where they would be safer.

“Ah, who do we have?” Jack sucked on the person's power until the shield flickered and the man was revealed.

“Kneeling already.” Jack leaned down to get a better view. “A good start. Maybe you'll—”

Jack leapt away as he recognized his captive and then hard laughter rang out. “This is a day for gifts. Gentlemen, we now hold Adrian Mitchel. Let's have that meal and drink.”

“Do you want him darts?” Vlad jerked Adrian to his feet.

“No.” Jack waved at a spot across their small fire. “I want information first. He can fill us in on the two hardasses that were following.”

Adrian yanked his arm from Vlad's harsh grip and sank down where he was told. "If you'll kill someone for me, I'll join your crew."

Jack cackled in surprise.

Adrian waited patiently for it to pass. Once Jack realized he was serious, he would make the deal, though Adrian expected to be killed when everything was over. Jack wasn't a forgiving master. Neither was Angela and a deal with this lunatic wasn't in her orders.

3

"Where are we stopping first?"

Marc pointed toward the distant light. "The lumberyard. After that, we'll check on the other crews who are out. Then we'll go back for our evening shift."

"She'll be happy that you checked in."

"Not doing it to make her happy." Marc kicked his horse faster. "I care about these people too."

"Wish I could. It would make adjusting easier." Kendle opened her mouth again. "She also gave him a ghillie suit and there was a big red question mark on the map."

"Figures."

Kendle couldn't stop another peek over her shoulder.

Marc caught it. "You can go and babysit him if you're that worried."

Kendle twisted around, reddening. She didn't want to be worried about Adrian. It was just hard not to.

Marc sighed, taking pity. "Lead the way and try to spot anything that will be of use."

Grateful for the distraction, Kendle took the lead and tried to keep her mind on her new mission. Adrian was a traitor. Marc was the light. She needed to remember that or she'd never have peace.

4

"Everything's calm and quiet."

Angela took the sheet of paper from Greg and gestured toward the line. "Go get fed. I'll be here when you're through."

Angela planned to be sitting here, resting, when Marc arrived. He would have questions and updates before she could go to bed; she was looking forward to leaning against his heat the entire time. The chill in the wind said flurries again tonight weren't out of the question.

Greg headed for the food line.

Angela opened her notebook as others approached her. The rest of her evening would be spent this way, but her mind wasn't in it. Her thoughts were with the lone man in quarantine Zone A. The sentries thought Darian might be an assassin. The other descendants couldn't get a read on his thoughts. Angela knew that wasn't good, but she couldn't help the guilt. She had executed his sister.

He had every right to demand a fair trial. He wasn't going to get one, but he had the right to it.

"Everyone is accounted for." Shawn joined her at the table. "Work is going on in all the places it should be and there's nothing new to report other than all the zones have people in them."

Angela took his sheet and put it with the others. "You eat yet?"

"Went back for seconds. That Li Sing can cook."

"Yes. Would you make a round of the QZ, please? See how all our guests are doing."

"You got it." Shawn stood up. "You letting any of them in here?"

"Not from Zone C. Keep the patrols heavy on them."

That was all Shawn needed to hear. He waved a few men to come with him as he left. The group in Zone C was loud, crude, and armed. None of the guards cared for that, but Angela hadn't ordered them disarmed yet. If she didn't plan to let them in, it made sense that she would let them keep their weapons for when they were out in the wilderness again. They would need those weapons then.

Shawn wanted to feel sorry for them, but it was hard to when the men screamed obscenities at the females they saw and threatened the weaker sentries around the area. A few of the Eagles were already talking about removing some of those problems. Shawn had it on his list of updates for Marc. At

some point, those people would become a problem that had to be handled.

As Shawn neared the gate, he could hear the drunken shouts of Zone C. He motioned his backup to take a place along the gate. If Marc heard that, but didn't find a doubled watch, there would be hell to pay.

“Let us in there, you bastards!”

Shawn climbed the gate ladder to the top partition, joining the gate guards. He peered down at the troublemakers, frowning at the broken bottles and trash littering the area. Small fires burned moodily and drunken shadows fought and ran among the smoke. “Not good. Not good at all.”

“Yeah, the boss needs a plan for this area.” Zack had his rifle in hand. “If they storm our gate, we'll kill them all.”

“Good.” Shawn was still scanning the refugees. “She already passed sentence on this group. They're not coming in.”

“Glad to hear it.” Zack was watching the leader of Zone C. He was lurking in the shadows to study the Eagles on the gate, getting set to bite the hand that was feeding him. “That one has to go first or he'll rile the others into attacking.”

“I'll make sure she knows.” Shawn lingered. “I'll also talk to Marc.”

Zack frowned. “If she wants Marc to know, she'll tell him. Don't forget who the boss is.”

Shawn scowled, but didn't respond. If Angela didn't get to rest soon, she would lose the baby and

then nothing would be the same. Marc needed to be running Safe Haven until after she gave birth, and Shawn planned to mention it to him at some point. Then, they had to get Angie to agree.

5

“I’m sorry about Beth.”

Jennifer ignored Theo’s concern as she handed him the blueprint she’d just finished. “This is the last one.”

Theo understood she didn’t want to talk about it, but he also knew Kyle would have forced her to confront the emotions. “Jenny, you can talk to me.”

Jennifer didn’t like his pity. She tried again to get them onto business. “Do you need anything else?”

Theo sighed. “No. Thank you. These are great.”

Jennifer picked up the baby seat, aware of Autumn drooling in her sleep. If not for the feeling of doom, it would have been a good moment.

“I’ll walk you.” Theo’s set tone marked it an order and not an offer. He wasn’t giving her the chance to refuse. He had also instructed his men to escort the women and kids all the way to the gate.

Jennifer immediately understood his concern when they neared the QZ zones. The people in that top area were shouting, drunken, some fighting, and the ground was littered with trash. As they went by, Theo automatically placed himself between them and Jennifer, and his hand rested on his gun.

“That’s a problem waiting to happen.” He hated how the men leered at Jennifer and the baby.

“She has it covered.” Jennifer didn’t like it either. From now on, she would take the longer route that wound around the rear of camp.

Theo waited until Jennifer was safely inside the gate and then returned to the tent outside the cave entrance. He needed to go over the blueprints and the numbers on the supplies for the day, but all he could think of right now was Jennifer’s prediction. He needed to talk to Candy and make sure she knew where they stood. He wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. When he heard the gates open again to admit the female team that had left earlier, Theo stayed in his tent, stewing.

6

Jennifer went to the crowded mess, forcing nods and the correct replies. She left the baby with Peggy and Hilda, noting Tonya was sitting between the den mothers, and then headed for the showers. She looked and sounded normal, but the glaze over her expression would have worried Kyle, who was gone on the run to the north.

She entered the camper and found it empty; Jennifer broke. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stumbled into the farthest stall and sank to the floor to let her grief flow. Out there, she had to be strong or she could lose all the progress she’d made in gaining control of her life. In here, she could let

her pain out so it didn't fester inside like an open wound. She'd missed Beth's depression over the death of her child. It was awful.

Angela lingered outside, giving the teenager a minute of privacy. When she thought the sobs had gone on long enough, Angela climbed into the camper and slowly joined Jennifer on the floor. When the teenager peered at her with abject misery, Angela held her arms out.

Jennifer crawled into them like a baby needing the comfort of a parent.

"It's not your fault. You know that. And you know whose fault it is, don't you?"

"Yours!" Jennifer cried, sobbing harder. "You didn't warn anyone."

"No, I didn't. I hoped she wouldn't make that choice, but it was hers to make. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes, I hate you," Jennifer confessed, still clutching Angela tightly.

"I know, sweetheart." Angela rocked her. "So do I."

A bit later, Angela left Jennifer in her crowded tent with kids who needed to feel safe tonight. The loud men outside their gate were causing bad memories to haunt some of Safe Haven's members and it would provide a good distraction for Jennifer.

Angela shut the tent flap, signaling for the Eagle on duty in the center to monitor the girl. She got a nod in return and allowed her tired feet to carry her toward the front gate. Marc and Kendle would be

arriving soon. Angela was eager to pass the shift. She was exhausted.

On the way, Angela detoured to check in with Tracy, who was on guard outside Tara's tent. As seemed to be her routine, Tara was already in her tent for the night, with her daughter at her side. "How did things go today?"

"Not bad once we all got over the surprise of Conner being there."

Angela didn't offer an apology, but she did wait for any complaints Tracy wanted to give.

Tracy was busy examining her own mind. She didn't give any. Samantha probably would and Candy definitely would, but Tracy didn't have a grudge against Conner. She wouldn't say it, but she thought being around such strong women was a good idea for Conner. Angela knew what she was doing.

"Thank you."

Tracy shrugged. "You've got enough on your plate."

"Yes, I do." Angela headed for the main gate. She didn't ask for an update on Tara and Missy, confident Tracy wouldn't have any information yet. She'd only been on duty over the pair for half an hour. The other three females from today's run had dropped their supplies and went to the showers. Angela expected a visit from each of them at any time.

The noise of drunken men grew louder as she neared the gates, but Angela swallowed her scowl.

After tomorrow, they would quiet down. Fear had a way of doing that to people, even those who thought they were too hard for such an emotion.

Angela beckoned to one of the guards on the gate.

Doug came quickly, hoping for an order about the unruly QZ group.

“I want you to help someone settle in here. Interested?”

“Sure.” Doug hoped it wasn’t any of the troublemakers. “Who?”

Angela led him into the smallest QZ area and took him to Darian’s tent.

Darian came out as they approached.

“Sorry for the noise. We’ll let you in now and you can get a good night’s sleep.” Angela smiled at Doug. “This is one of my highest men, Douglas. He’ll show you around for the next few days. You’ll bunk with him, eat with him, and work together. It’s how we do things here.”

Darian didn’t respond.

Angela could tell the doctor hadn’t had anything good to say about her. Instead of defending herself, Angela left the two men alone. Doug would get through to him without even trying.

The sound of the main gate opening drew Angela. She was with the other welcoming Eagles as Kendle and Marc came in. They were covered in dirt. Angela understood Marc had done all that she’d asked, including leaving Adrian in the hands of the enemy.

Marc swung down from his horse and turned his glowering red orbs toward the noisy QZ.

Silence fell as he glared. "I'll handle that soon."

Angela didn't argue as she went to him. She rested against his heat and let herself breathe again. She hated being apart.

Marc felt her weariness and led the way toward their tent. "You're off duty, as of now. I'll get the next lists while you get comfortable."

Angela sighed gratefully. It had been a long day. "I have a couple of people I need you to talk to and then we're all set for tomorrow."

"Good. After today, I have another list of my own to accomplish."

Angela yawned. "Welcome back."

Marc hugged her again and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Missed you."

Angela blushed at the heat in his tone; the couple disappeared into their tent for a few minutes alone.

Hurt at being ignored, Kendle wheeled her horse toward the gate. "Let me out."

No one argued. The camp liked Kendle well enough, but the Eagles didn't trust her and they wouldn't until she quit chasing Marc like a lost dog.

Darian observed it all without speaking.

Doug led him toward the main tent area, chatting lightly in an attempt at conversation. He didn't know why Angela had put him with the new guy, but he planned to do a good job and stay alert. Troublemakers were everywhere these days.

7

An hour later, Marc keyed the com truck radio mike. “Mission people will move out now. Stay ahead of the storm.”

Shawn handed Marc the latest reports from their spies.

Marc skimmed them wearily. Angela was sleeping now, but she would be up soon to help him carry things through.

“We’re all set,” Shawn yawned as mike clicks came to confirm Marc’s order.

“Yeah. Let’s hit the mess for some hot chocolate.”

“That sounds good.” Shawn followed Marc. “It’s already been a long night and it’s only half over.”

“Tell me about it.” Marc hadn’t been to bed yet at all. When Angie had said he would need that extra sleep, she hadn’t been exaggerating one bit.

8

“Incoming!”

Adrian eyed the men coming into Jack’s camp with sympathy. Without gifts of their own, the nine males were basically slaves who had no choice but to carry out their master’s bidding.

“Sit down.” Jack pointed. “Tell me everything you saw and heard.”

The men took turns giving Jack all the details he asked for, including an update on Darian. It didn't take long.

Jack was satisfied that he now had a man on the inside. "Not that it's needed. But better safe than sorry." Jack glanced at Adrian. "With the information you gave me earlier, things are good to go."

Adrian didn't reply or say that because of his banishment, those details were no longer accurate. He was busy wondering if he would be drugged tonight.

"I want Mitchel on the train before tomorrow's sunset. Vlad will take him. The rest of us will stick to the plan."

Kranten and Stephens said nothing, but Vlad frowned. "Are you sure you want to split up? The kid could be lying."

"Missy's predictions are never wrong!" Jack gestured angrily. "If we stay together, I'm dead. The reaper wants you guys, not me."

Jack's men didn't like hearing that, but they couldn't say much. Missy hadn't been wrong before; it was terrifying to think they were death's targets but Jack wasn't.

"Have a few of the others escort him all the way. They should be at the station in time to meet you. Then join me for the final fight. You can have your pick of their women."

Stephens spoke up. "I want the young brunette. Her gifts will add to mine when I consume her."

“Other than the leader, it doesn’t matter to me,” Jack informed them disdainfully. “You guys divide the spoils, but make sure we win this one. Their leader doesn’t appear to be the type to forgive us if we lose.”

“She won’t.” Adrian smiled in pride. “I taught her to kill her rivals.”

“You trained her?” Jack was surprised Adrian had chosen a female successor.

“Well, all the males did.” Adrian shrugged. “But she’ll strike hard if you give her the chance.”

“I won’t.” Jack motioned to one of the guards. “I also won’t give *you* a chance.”

Adrian slapped at the dart Kranten fired into his neck; he dropped heavily to his knees as the drugs ran through his veins.

“Excellent.” Jack yawned. “Now we can all be well rested for the slaughter in the morning. We leave at dawn.”

Adrian pretended to fall over and sleep, but his dazed eyes followed Jack’s every action. He wouldn’t be the one to kill the evil man, but it would happen and Adrian was glad. Jack was one of the few skeletons left in his closet. The former leader was suddenly grateful that fate was clearing his slate all at once. When this one was said and done, there would be no more surprise blasts from the past to interfere with his progress.

Jack sent a dream charm over his power people and then joined them in slumber, not worried about being taken off guard. The slaves he’d left on duty

were loyal. He had their wives and children in their base town. They wouldn't risk a mutiny that would cost those precious lives.

As quiet settled over the camp, Adrian rolled onto his side and studied his enemy while he slept. There was no point in attacking now. There were too many of them and with his healer here, Jack couldn't be mortally wounded. Tomorrow, when he was split from his protection, death would come on swift wings.

Confident in Angela's plan, Adrian stopped fighting the drugs. Dawn would bring new headaches and solutions. He had to be ready for them.

Chapter Eleven BK6
Take The Shot
September 12th
Midnight

1

“**S**eth isn’t going to like this.”

Becky didn’t answer Neil’s comment. She was busy packing her gear back into her kit—a kit that would remain here. “I’m supposed to be found walking, so keep these.” Becky tossed Neil the keys to their vehicle. She’d been the last driver.

Neil scowled but managed to keep quiet this time. They’d all settled down to spend the night here and then finish loading the stock they’d found. His papers hadn’t said anything about Becky taking off in the dark—alone—a few hours later.

“You can call and check if it will make you feel better.” Becky dropped her kit into the rear of the truck. “There are two others like me, so I won’t be alone for long.” Becky didn’t tell them she was going to be taken hostage before she met up with those other two people. Neil wouldn’t care for that.

“Aren’t you worried at all?” he asked quietly. “What happened to Tracy could happen to you.”

Becky’s profile darkened. “It already has or did you forget?”

Neil winced and clamped his lips together. She had a job to do and he would let her, but when he got to home, keeping quiet would be over. Angela would hear about this.

“I volunteered, so leave her alone.” Becky already knew who he was blaming. She didn’t need a gift to know that everyone would yell at Angela over this. “And make sure Seth knows that.”

Neil let out a tortured grunt and stomped to the opposite side of their camp so he couldn’t protest any more.

The others in their group had stopped arguing as soon as Becky told them she had a job to do for the boss. After all Angela’s deadly envelopes during the last battles, they were just glad not to be receiving one.

Becky took off walking into the darkness.

Neil slammed himself into a seat to keep from going after her. She was armed, she could fight, and she had a deadly gift of her own, but he still felt responsible for her.

Becky understood. Someday she would be grateful for that. Right now, she was happy to be escaping the oppression of Neil’s team. As the only female, she’d been over-watched and it had quickly become annoying. Becky didn’t expect to be treated as an equal yet—her youth wouldn’t allow that—but today had been stifling. Neil hadn’t let her out of his sight even once.

Tim frowned. “You think she made it up?”

“No.” Neil sighed. “We heard the call earlier for mission crews to go out. Something’s happening and we won’t be there for it.”

Donald looked at Neil. “We could still go.”

Tim shook his head. “She specifically said for us not to. We’re the water team. Our message said for water and oil to keep going.”

“Oil is Kyle’s team?” Donald clarified.

Neil motioned. “We’re water, Kyle’s fuel. Don’t know who had salt.”

The group of five was quiet for a moment, contemplating how important all three of those items were. Of the three, water was tops.

“We’ll reach the plant in less than an hour once we’re rolling.” Donald was the map master for this run and proud of the assignment.

Neil sighed, finally offering what he’d wanted to give as soon as he found out there was action happening and they weren’t part of it. “We could leave early, grab the water, and try to be back in camp early for whatever’s going down.”

That was exactly what Donald had hoped Neil would say. The group immediately got set for bed. None of them wanted to be away from Safe Haven if something big was happening there, but going home without the water was against the rules. Water was life.

Cynthia winced at Daryl's loud voice, but she didn't stop on her way through the gate. "Work. I'll be back."

Daryl got a head shake from the guards on the gate when he would have followed her into the sullen darkness. It was an hour before dawn and everyone on duty was grouchy.

"You gonna stop me?" Daryl was filled with fear for Cynthia.

"If I have to." Zack came up behind him. "She has a pass. You don't."

"What is she doing? And why is she doing it alone?"

"She's bait, of course." Angela tiredly joined them. Her five hours of sleep hadn't made her feel better, but time was winding down on this act. "She volunteered."

Daryl let out a curse that Angela turned away from. She hadn't expected any of the males to like it, but they would follow orders. It's what they'd been trained to do.

"Will she be okay?"

Daryl's question was met with a short nod from Angela and frowns from everyone else. That was a question they weren't supposed to ask.

"I can't keep supporting you if you keep putting our women in danger."

Angela did stop at that; she rotated with a chilly expression that caused Daryl to retreat a pace.

"*Our* women." Angela stared coldly. "Like you own them."

“I didn’t say that!”

Those closest to him put space between them, muttering about people who had to learn the hard way.

“She asked me if she could help. I was going to give the role to you, Daryl. And she knew. She went in your place, to protect *you*.”

Angered and touched, Daryl’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Angela was furious. “Be careful how far you take that old world authority you were given. It came from Adrian and I’ve never agreed with it.”

Angela strode to the next ramp, the next ladder of men to check in with.

Daryl stayed where he was. Too confused and emotional to work it out now, Daryl ignored the Eagles who tried to explain his mistake. He’d known as soon as she used it against him, but he couldn’t help feeling as if women weren’t as capable as men and his mind wouldn’t change about that. It was something he and Cynthia would need to discuss.

“Any word from Seth yet?” Angela asked the man at her side.

Marc fought to keep his own thoughts clear. He agreed with Daryl too much and that bothered him. “He’s in place. I have him on my grid.”

Angela didn’t tell him she did too. Marc didn’t need to feel useless right now. Come dawn, he would be vital and she needed him confident.

“What else needs to be covered?” Marc sent her some of his energy.

“Mmm...” Angela leaned against him, protected a bit from the chill in the wind. The higher the gates went, the colder the guards would be while on duty. “Let the tiger out of his cage when the time comes. We’ll need him.”

Marc didn’t like hearing that. He carefully guided her to the ground without replying. The information from Adrian had been vague. Marc was suddenly positive that had been intentional. “Why am I being sent in blind?”

“Damn, you’re smart.” Angela smiled. “That’s so sexy.”

Marc snorted his amusement, but he didn’t let her evade. “Why can’t I know anything?”

“You’re new to fighting this way. If we make a mistake and they get to you, they’ll crack your mind pretty quickly. I’m using your human side this time.”

“The killer, you mean.”

“Yes. We need him more than anyone else right now.”

From that, Marc understood she had kill orders out on Jack; his mental cage opened. “I’ll handle it.”

“You may have to.” Angela led the way to their command center. “As the alpha male, Jack will insist on consuming you if we lose. It’s how his power grows.”

Horrified, Marc opened *all* of his mental doors. “This sick fuck’s goin’ down.”

Angela was satisfied she had her main fighters in the right frame of mind. She entered the small command tent without concern for the few people already inside, despite not having a personal guard right now. There was only one traitor inside these gates and that wouldn't play out for a while yet. This was as safe as it got.

3

“Why are we stopping?” Adrian already had a bad feeling about being alone with Vlad, but he hadn't expected the man to deviate from Jack's orders.

“Shut up.” Vlad dismounted. “Heard too much of your voice last night.”

Adrian realized he might be in trouble, but it was too late to avoid the dart Vlad blew into his neck as he walked by.

Loaded with triple the normal amount of drugs, Adrian sank under the blackness without a last thought and then slumped over on the horse.

Vlad tossed a tarp over Adrian and weighed it down with a few rocks before mounting his horse and taking off after his boss. As he rode, Vlad went dim. He didn't know what surprise was coming, but none of Jack's other men were loyal to him and Vlad was the only healer in their group. He didn't think it was coincidence that he'd been sent away. He wasn't waiting for their backup, who should be arriving by train soon.

Vlad spurred his horse faster while gathering his power. He would miss the main fight, but in the aftermath, he might go unnoticed and be able to help. “Or I’ll kill that bitch. If Jack dies, so will she!”

4

“It’s time.” Angela nodded to the guards. “Bring the girl.”

“I don’t have Adrian on my grid anymore.” Marc was on the next ramp up.

Angela didn’t answer. She focused on the main road beyond the gate, where a dust cloud was forming. “Shields up!”

Each of the descendants on the gate concentrated; the crimson bubble appeared over them.

“Now shrink it to the gate!” Angela showed them mentally how to do it. “The gate has to hold.”

“Everyone from the camp is in the cave.” Kenn joined her on the second ramp. “Jennifer, Doug, and Charlie are on it.”

“They won’t be able to keep our people in there for long. We need to get this over with as fast as we can.” Angela knew the people inside those caves weren’t ready to witness her throwing fire or being hit with it. They had mostly accepted magic now, but not happily or easily. They didn’t need these constant reminders that they were weak in

comparison. It would drive wedges too deep and ruin the future.

“What’s going on!”

“Give us guns! Let us in and we’ll help you!”

The shouts from Zone C had been loud and annoying since the Eagles had begun carrying up guns and ammo, but Angela didn’t shut them down.

She shook her head when Kenn would have shouted at them. “Let them yell while they can.”

Kenn didn’t want to follow that thought. He took a place next to Tonya. “Surprised you’re here.”

Tonya didn’t take her attention from the foggy landscape she was sweeping with her glasses. “Dawn’s almost here.”

“You feeling okay?”

Kenn’s question was unexpected and Tonya burst out laughing.

Heads swiveled toward them. The sound of her laughter even silenced the drunken shouts from Zone C.

“That’s sweet,” she got out between laughs. “Fine, really.”

Kenn noticed the bandolier of knives stretched out in front of her and understood she was here because of her skill. “Can you get through their shields?”

“No.” Marc frowned. “Just like they can’t get through ours.”

“So why the guns and knives?” Kenn asked, spotting Eagles with extra mags and weapons at hand.

“Because we also can’t fire through our shields.” Angela remembered that Kenn had missed all of her descendant meetings while she was becoming an Eagle. “When they lower to fire, there’s an instant of opportunity. Make it count.” Angela regarded the little girl now climbing up to her, with Tara right behind.

Missy stopped as she met Angela’s questioning stare.

Tara frowned. “What’s going on here?”

“You can stop this.” Angela already knew that wouldn’t happen, but she had to try. “Will you change your mind and at least speak to him?”

Tara shook her head, paling.

Missy bared her fangs at Angela. “You promised!”

“And I’ll keep my word. But you have to help.”

“What do you want us to do?” Tara pulled Missy against her.

The little girl winced, but didn’t struggle.

“Tell me how to get him away from his men.”

“Mommy can.” Missy dropped her head when Tara’s hands became claws in her shoulders.

“No.” Tara backed up. “I can’t. You have to do it.”

Angela smiled coolly. “I promised to defend you, not to do your dirty work.”

“He’ll kill me!”

“If you want freedom, you’ll do it. Bring him toward us. As soon as he’s out of range of his pet

killers, Missy will tell me and I'll take it from there."

Tara had been shaking her head the entire time Angela was talking. She stopped when she realized she didn't have to kill him. "Just get him out of range?"

"Yes."

"O-okay."

"Great." Angela grabbed her arm and led her toward the gate. "You can wait for him out there. I'll watch over your daughter."

Marc rested a gentle hand on Missy's shoulder as Angela took her mother down to the gate, still giving instructions.

Missy was enjoying herself now. She leaned against him like she'd seen the boss lady do.

The humming resonated in Marc's mind. *She's cute.* Marc's heart expanded. He swung the child up onto his hip.

Missy buried her head against Marc's chest, little arms wrapping around his neck. "You smell good."

Marc was saved a reply by the gate opening and he frowned as it shut behind two shadows. "Figures."

Angela stayed with Tara as dawn lit up the mountainside and a group of riders appeared in the road.

"He's here." Missy squirmed out of Marc's hold and took a spot behind the ladder.

Her fear angered Marc. He leapt from the top of the gate to land in front of the women. He clicked his radio twice and then drew both deadly Colts.

“He won’t give you a chance to use those.” Tara pressed back against the shut gate. “He’ll attack any second now.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” Angela was glad Marc had come out with them. “Send the signal.”

“We have your people!” Jack’s happy voice echoed up and down the mountain. “I will kill them.”

The three hostages exchanged glances that said to be ready. Becky and Seth had been found wandering, and Cynthia had been captured while trying to sneak into Vlad’s camp to spy on them. They’d done exactly what they were told to, minus the final moment. All three of them began to inch into the right positions. Their captors were occupied with the words being flung back and forth, and didn’t notice.

A bottle rocket exploded. Jack waited for it to fade before shouting. “I want my daughter!”

Angela nodded. “Come in alone and we can talk.”

Jack raised a hand to give the order to open fire. “Coward!”

Marc’s shout was sent with the command of an alpha, demanding his surrender. Jack’s attention was snared.

Behind him, Seth and Cynthia exchanged a look. The bottle rocket was the signal. Both of them began struggling with their captors.

In the rear, Becky also fought, but her focus was on Jack and it was all mental.

Jack felt the pricks at his shield, but he had his hands full repelling Marc's energy. In the battle, his hold over his own men slipped.

"Now!" Tara shouted from Angela's side. "Do it now!"

Stunned, Jack forgot everything else and aimed for his betrayer.

Taking advantage of the moment, Jack's horse bucked him into the air.

Jack flailed, all concentration gone.

Gunshots echoed, a large knife flew through the air, and time slowed; Jack arched repeatedly.

Angela watched Jack's body fly to the ground, blood pouring from multiple wounds. She raised a hand.

Around her, the Eagles ceased fire.

Behind Jack's stunned men, the three Safe Haven hostages began backing out of the line of fire.

Angela and Marc walked toward the group, their shields bright and tight in the early morning. As they approached, they let their eyes glow red and their demon faces bleed through. They didn't look at each other.

No longer under Jack's evil control, each of his men made the safest choice and wheeled their mounts toward the road leading down the mountain.

Angela pointed. "Take the rear rider."

Marc fired once before remembering their shields wouldn't let anything through. Frustrated by the lack of physical fighting, Marc concentrated on capturing his first mental prey.

Stephens stiffened in his saddle, gaze going to Jack's corpse. He turned as if a puppet on strings. He met Marc's red eyes and broke out into a sweat as he tried to resist the order Marc was giving.

Becky came over, not shy around the horse, and placed a hand on the man's leg.

Stephens glanced down, concentration breaking. He didn't see Seth's knife coming as it slid across his throat.

Cynthia, assuming they were supposed to kill them all, sent a blast of icy wind toward the retreating figures. It shoved the closest rider hard enough to make the animal slip and take its rider over the edge.

"Enough!" Angela called it off. "That's enough."

Marc escorted their people back toward the gate. *We should leave the bodies for nature to clean up.* It would be a warning to all who came here thinking they could take over.

The carnage on the road was ugly, but little compared to their previous slaughters. Angela motioned the Eagles to leave it. Marc was right.

They needed a caution sign outside their gates and bones were as good a sign as any.

As they reentered the gates, the Eagles let out a cheer.

The refugees in Zone C kept their mouths shut, stunned from everything they'd witnessed.

Angela ignored the large group as she passed them, not sure why they were still alive. In her vision, one of Jack's men had gotten off a single shot that had lit the entire zone on fire. "Something went wrong." She ignored the celebrating men and women around her. "What did I miss?"

Tara grabbed Missy and scurried toward the caves.

"Someone get Jeremy in my tent and do it now!"

Angela's order ended the cheers. Her tone said they had another problem. Everyone resumed the watchful alertness they'd started with.

5

"Don't do it, boy. We don't have orders for this fight."

"Well, we should!" Charlie snarled, but he forced his finger away from the rifle's touchy trigger. "We should be doing something!"

"We are." Morgan tried to be kind. "We're making sure those gates aren't breached. We're tending the camp. It's a more important job than even Angela has."

Charlie didn't believe that, but a rocket in the air stopped his protest; he watched with the other snipers as the fight started. He'd been happy to be assigned as a sniper, until now. Now, he wanted to be at Tracy's side. He hadn't seen her yet today, but he knew she was down there, ready to fight and die on his mom's command.

The battle below was over quickly.

Charlie was forced to admit that the snipers hadn't been needed. The Eagles on the ground had been more than enough. Charlie tried to control his frustration, turning to survey another part of the camp. He hated this feeling of being left out, and he still hadn't found an outlet for his anger over Tracy being hurt. These days, he spent his time away from his mom and dad because he couldn't stand to be around them. They didn't care that Tracy had nightmares, that she jumped when touched, that all the progress he'd made with her had been wiped out in a single night.

"What's moving behind us?" Morgan directed the sullen teenager to a new path, hoping Charlie would let himself be distracted. He was handling a man's life and doing a good job so far, but it would get harder from here. Morgan had a soft spot for Charlie. He often reminded Morgan of his own son, who probably would have been in the same classes here, had he survived the war.

"The movement is Samantha's team coming in." Charlie turned to look at him. "I didn't know you had kids."

Morgan was glad for the opening and took it. “George was a good boy. A little hotheaded when he found a cause, but good. He was shot by draft soldiers who were stripping our garden.” Morgan sighed. “I was at work when they came. After I buried my family, I set out to kill every soldier I could find.”

Completely distracted now, Charlie frowned. “I’m sorry. I guess we’ve all lost someone.”

“And managed to survive. Some of us had rougher days or nights than the others, but we haven’t given up. Like your Tracy. She’s a good girl.”

Charlie waited for more, realizing this conversation was preplanned. He could tell by the way Morgan kept judging his reaction.

“You blame her? Mad at her?”

“No, I’m not...” Charlie realized that he was. “Well, maybe a little, but she has to tell my mom no. She should have said no.”

Morgan studied the boy, trying to remember what it had been like to be so young and full of fire. “None of us will do that. Your mom is why we’re here, why we’re alive and free. We need you to understand that.”

“I can’t! And I won’t forgive her, so don’t ask me to.”

“What does Tracy tell you when you say that to her?”

Charlie grunted. “She says I’m wrong, that my mom didn’t know it would happen. She’s covering for a liar.”

“You should listen to her. She went through it. She probably relives it every night. If she doesn’t blame your mom, you shouldn’t either.” Morgan wanted to add more, but he knew it wouldn’t sink in. Charlie would have to keep sorting through this one until he concluded what everyone else already had. Tracy’s abuse had served a purpose and Angela hadn’t let it happen lightly. Despite her hard shell, they all remembered the Angela who cared deeply about them, enough to give her life if it was called for. “In time, you’ll see her the way we do. Until then, at least try not to hate her. It solves nothing.”

Charlie refused to answer. He went back to scanning, but in his mind and heart, a battle was still happening that concerned his own desires. He loved and wanted Tracy, but after what she’d been through, he had no right to ask her for more than friendship. It was heartbreaking because he still wanted a future with her and that wasn’t possible now.

6

“Oh, you traitorous bitch!” Vlad watched the gate from the cover of thick trees. “You killed Jack!”

There was no way that Vlad could go to the body and try to heal him without drawing attention.

He was forced to retreat after the remaining members of Jack's crew, with vengeance burning brightly in his heart. "I'm gonna make you pay!" He rode his horse north. "The rest of our men are on the way and you'll die a horrible death!" Vlad's thoughts went to Adrian. "But I'll have a taste of your pain now!"

7

"There's the signal. Move in!" Kyle and his team had been watching Jack's camp since dawn. They rushed in with weapons drawn, even though Adrian was the only one there.

It only took a moment to swing the unconscious man up onto a horse and ride away, but Kyle didn't like it. He didn't want to save Adrian. The traitor didn't deserve it.

The team was quickly out of sight.

Kyle shifted so he could dig a syringe from his kit. He spurred his mount to reach Adrian's and jabbed the medication into the former leader's leg. He then dropped back to watch the effects. If fate was kind, Adrian would wake up off balance and fall under the hooves of his horse.

Adrian jerked into alertness and instinctively held onto the fast running mount he was lying over. Pain squeezed his head; he retched as he hung on, stomach protesting.

"Figures."

The angry voice clued Adrian in to who his rescuers were. He shut his eyes as the ground flew by. When he thought he could, Adrian carefully lifted a leg and straddled his horse, sitting up. Dizziness assaulted him.

He allowed Whitney to keep the reins while he tried to recover. Being hit with triple juice and jerked out of it with a counter drug was rough. Adrian's heart gave a nasty thump in agreement. He fumbled for a nitro pill from the hidden pocket that he'd sewn into every shirt he owned.

Kyle hardened his emotions, not wanting to feel sympathy for Adrian's weak heart or the abrupt waking. For all he knew, it was just another trick.

Adrian waited for his heart to settle into a normal rhythm and then began rooting through the saddlebags of the thundering horse, holding on tightly with his right hand. If he had an episode, the left hand would go numb. He knew that from experience.

Kyle watched Adrian, letting Whitney and the others lead the way. Angela's message had said they would have a short time to grab their target and then reach their destination before the rest of Jack's men arrived. Kyle didn't intend to be late. He urged his mount faster, forcing the others to keep up. Every second saved now was a second that could be used later.

As they rode, Adrian felt his strength slowly returning. He found a moment to be grateful that Angela had provided for him again. She could have

left him there to face Vlad's wrath or be picked off by a predator while unconscious. He owed her more than he could ever repay.

Kyle felt Adrian's thoughts go to the boss. "She has orders for you, if this goes well."

Adrian knew from Kyle's tone that it wasn't good, but he didn't waste his mental energy trying to puzzle it out. "What?"

"She wants Zone C thinned out—regularly."

Adrian blanched. *How low I've been placed.*

Kyle understood the feeling, the awful contempt it would give Adrian to do such things, and let it go for now. He wanted to enjoy this hit before he delivered any others.

Adrian pointed to a long, rusting building coming up on their right. "That's it. Give me the bag."

Whitney passed a heavy duffle bag to Adrian and then split off to the left to allow Adrian room to go by. Kyle's team wasn't staying to help, but each of them rotated on their mounts to watch the former leader jump the gate to the rail yard. If he was successful, they would hear it. If there was silence, Kyle planned to turn around despite his orders not to. Jennifer and Autumn were in Safe Haven. These new descendants couldn't be allowed to get that far.

8

Adrian was placing the final charge when he felt the first vibration through the rails. Hurrying, he left

the explosive area and hoped he was dimmed enough to those on board. Instead of stopping to watch the show, Adrian kept running for the horse now grazing in the small thicket across from the rail yard's main building.

As he jumped on the horse, a new sound came. His heart thumped unhappily. Someone else on horse was flying toward him. Adrian was forced to go west. He disappeared into the thicker woods as Vlad topped the final rise.

Drawn to the approaching train, Vlad dismissed the shadow and headed for the waving men and women.

Out of thought range, the noise of his horse was covered by the squealing of the train's brakes.

Adrian urged his mount faster.

The passengers on the train had no warning as the C-4 was triggered and exploded. The engine rose into the air, flames engulfing it. The fireball raced through the terminal.

Another brick of the explosive detonated, tearing through the passenger car. Bodies flew like screams.

A third explosion rocked the train, causing it to roll slowly backwards. The heavy noise of grinding and ripping metal drowned out everything else. When it finally stopped, there was only the sound of hot debris burning, cracking, and shifting.

Vlad gaped at the destruction. He'd jerked his horse to a stop at the first explosion and now he examined the wreckage for any signs of survivors.

He was a healer, but there had to be at least a little life left for him to help.

Vlad eased closer to the inferno, noting the main terminal was on fire and burning hotly. It wouldn't stay up long.

Vlad dismounted and ran toward the passenger car, swiping at flaming wires and wood that showered him in hot sparks.

“Help!”

Vlad rushed toward the voice. He shoved his way through the flaming boxes to discover a familiar face.

“Vlad! Heal me!”

Vlad did as Jack's son, Jay, commanded while sweeping the area for other survivors.

The boy's wounds weren't bad. Vlad left him coughing to get closer to the flaming passenger car. Thick smoke blinded him. Vlad brought up his shield as it got hotter.

“There!” Jay ran by him to grab the shaking body of a thin woman. Her hair was on fire. The boy slapped at it while Vlad sent a light current of healing power through her to calm the seizure.

The roof over the area was in full blazing glory; pieces began to fall on them.

“Get her out of here!”

Jay threw her arm over his shoulder and stayed with Vlad as he approached the passenger car that was on its side.

“Get in there!” a voice called. “Help them!”

Vlad recognized Kranten's voice and kept going into the burning car. He found one other survivor. He had to drag the bald man outside before he could heal him. As he passed under the archway, the entire roof collapsed in a hot shower of fire, covering the passenger car. Blankets of smoke rolled over them as Vlad used the last of his energy to heal the man he'd brought out.

The survivors gathered around Vlad and kept watch for another attack. They didn't speak or cry, or show any emotion except for the rage-filled orbs that stayed crimson.

Chapter Twelve BK6
One Of Three

1

Loud cheers echoed through Safe Haven as those in the small tent watched the train being destroyed. The Eagles that were around Jeremy and his laptop passed the word that Jack's friends weren't coming. The camp slowly resumed the work of getting everyone settled in the cave.

After being attacked, the camp was okay with sleeping underground while the labor continued. Angela was happy to have them there. It was the safest place they could be, even with constant construction that brought moans and creaks in equal measures.

“Is that it for them?” Marc asked her when they had a moment alone. “Or is just part one finished?”

Angela sighed, loving his sharp mind. “One of three.”

Marc grunted his unhappiness, but he didn't give her static over it. Keeping Safe Haven alive and together would always be a full time job. If it weren't these ass-hats, it would be some other group trying to make a name for themselves. “Is it something I can take care of?”

“It’ll have to play out this time, Marc.” Angela yawned tiredly. “But we now have a break, so that’s something, right?”

Marc nodded. “I can accomplish a lot in a short time.”

“Good. I have lists.”

“I kinda figured that. When will I get them?”

Angela gestured to Greg, who handed Marc a thin notebook. “It’s all in there—all the details on what’s coming and my suggestions for handling it. Do the best you can.”

Marc watched her go to their tent and hoped she would be able to sleep now. The bags under her eyes were more pronounced than after her rescue from Donner.

Eager to chase down whatever it was that she had missed, Angela collapsed on her bed without removing her boots and fell into a thin sleep a few minutes later. When Greg took up his post outside the flap, she didn’t notice. There were train stations to be scanned and survivors to be trailed.

2

“We’re not getting any water from there.”

Neil didn’t answer Tim’s comment. The water plant below was the scene of an ongoing battle and Neil was busy trying to estimate the threat. Safe Haven needed that precious liquid.

“There’s another plant a few miles from here.” Donald was checking the map. “We could try there and leave these idiots to their fighting.”

Gunshots echoed, along with shouts for surrender.

Neil studied the area. These people were on the edge of Safe Haven’s site. Eventually, their battle might spread and Neil didn’t think Angela would be happy with them for letting it sneak up unmonitored.

As they observed, the group outside the plant tried to ram a jeep through the reinforced main gates. It slammed into the sturdy barrier and came to a sudden halt without doing much damage to anything but the jeep. Smoke billowed from the wreck as men stumbled out, bleeding.

Tim snorted. “That wasn’t smart.”

Neil agreed. It helped him make the choice. “These people aren’t intelligent enough for us to leave them alone. How long before they try to charge our gates the same way?”

“But we don’t know who’s in the right here.” Donald didn’t want to get involved. “What if those on the outside are the good guys?”

Neil shrugged. “There’s a lot of brass on the ground. We can’t leave armed combatants on Safe Haven’s hearth. There’s only one way for us to know who has to go. We’ll make contact.”

None of the men cared for that, but they didn’t argue. Being Eagles meant making the hard choices

and Neil was right about armed groups roaming unmonitored. It didn't provide a comforting feeling.

Neil motioned his team to stay close as he led them down the winding road. Thin sunlight glinted off the small town. Neil lowered his shades, wondering if the smoke rising from the west was related to Becky's mission. He wasn't as concerned now. The radio signal for all crews within two miles to quietly come in and surround their camp had calmed him. Angela had found a problem coming and covered it. That was her job.

And this is mine. Neil eased his horse into a slightly faster walk as they reached flat ground.

As Neil's team neared the intersection, the group outside the water plant noticed them and reacted by pointing their weapons.

Neil stopped, hand coming up. His Eagles neatly flanked him.

The tension thickened; Neil gave the expected order. "One shot and we wipe them out."

"Go away! This is our water!"

"We'll shoot you! Get out of here!"

Despite the hard words, the voices were full of dismayed nervousness.

Neil was glad to hear it. He hoped it meant they weren't ready to have a third party enter their struggle. "We're from Safe Haven. Send someone to talk. Now."

The faces of the two-dozen men fell. They muttered to each other. It was clear they'd heard of Safe Haven.

Neil slowly dismounted and walked toward the group, spotting faces behind the fences. “Tell the people inside who we are. If they shoot, we’ll end up killing you anyway.”

“Hey! Inside!” one of the outer men shouted. “They’re Eagles. Don’t fire!”

“Fuck you, man! Liar!”

“Great.” Neil grunted, coming to a stop out of range of the handguns he could see. He hadn’t spotted any rifles yet, but there was a sense of being in a scope. “Inside the gate! Send someone out to talk!”

“No way!” came the reply. “They’ll shoot us!”

“I’ll come and get you!” Neil shouted as his men muttered unhappily.

“Are you really Eagles?”

“Tell your sniper to check out our clothes.” Neil waved at the outside man to pass the word. He was done shouting. “I’m Neil, a level seven Eagle with the authority to order all of you killed.”

The men in and outside tensed, hands tightening on their guns, eyes darting for a safe place to fight from.

“We can all die right here.” Neil spoke calmly. “Or you can send two people out here to talk to me.”

“We’re sending someone out!” the inside man called. “If anything happens to him, we’ll come out shooting!”

Neil gestured for his team to stay put and went forward as the fence inched open.

A thin man wearing a white coat was shoved out; the gate slammed shut.

Neil raised a brow at the outside men and wasn't surprised when the translating man came forward.

"Let's go over here and chat." Neil led the two glowering men to the base of a large tree. His team moved to be between Neil and the rest of the strangers, and they stayed alert. Now would be a bad time to let anyone sneak up on them.

Neil studied the two angry men for a brief moment. He couldn't let them argue or the information would be too confusing. Instead, he used his police training and took the upper hand from the first sentence. "Safe Haven wants this water." Neil let their mouths open and then cut them off. "We'll take it if we need to. In three hours, this place will crawl with Eagles. In five hours, we'll be loading the water and the birds will be eating your eyes."

"Hey! You guys aren't thieves!"

"Yeah," the inside man agreed. "You're supposed to be fair!"

Neil sighed heavily. "Damn. I knew that was going to be a problem."

Confused, the two men stared.

Neil hunkered down between them to clear a line of fire if it was needed. "You can agree to split the water and go your own way, or I'm calling my boss. Any guess what she'll say?"

Neither man spoke.

Neil frowned at them. “She’ll say to kill all of you and bring the water home. She has no patience left for people who can’t get along.”

“We were here first!” inside man argued. “We don’t have to share.”

“We just wanted enough to get to the next town,” outside man explained. “Why won’t they help us?”

Neil sighed, lifting his glasses. He pinned the inside man with a dark glare. “You told them no?”

Inside man winced, nodding. “There isn’t much and we have sick people to care for.”

“So, you turned them away?” Neil shook his head in disgust. “Your fellow man was thirsty and you told them no.”

Before the inside man could protest, Neil scrutinized the other combatant. “So you decided to take it?”

Outside man, feeling guilt now, dropped his head in shame. “Yes. Our vehicles were overheating. We would not have made it to the next town.”

“You could have walked. You chose to kill.”

“We haven’t hit anyone.”

“Neither have we!”

“Okay.” Neil rose. “Give me a tour of the plant. I’ll divide it and send both of you on your way. Safe Haven doesn’t need people like you living here.”

“We have sick people! We can’t leave.”

Neil stood up and went to the gate. “Give me the tour. I’ll decide if you get a house call from our doctor.”

Those words got the inside man on his feet to lead the way. Medical help was rare.

Neil signaled to his team and then looked at the outside man. “I suggest you leave while I’m in there. While I don’t agree with their choice, they were here first and that makes you the offender. In the old world, the law would not be on your side and it’s definitely not now. Walking is great exercise.”

Neil entered the gates without worrying over reactions. Knowing who they were had solved the problem of who had authority. Angela’s master plan against the government had given Safe Haven more than freedom. They were now the reigning power in the country. These two small groups of refugees would likely be in one of their quarantine zones in the next few days.

Neil caught an odor of damp rot and detoured toward it. “Did anyone test the water?”

Inside man was busy talking to his people in low mutters.

Neil dug through his kit for the pack of testing strips that all the Eagles were required to carry. “Wouldn’t it be ironic if you idiots were fighting over bad water?”

“He’s been in there for a while.” Tim scanned the sullen men outside the gate again. “Maybe we should go in.”

“Not yet.” Donald checked his watch again. “He has three minutes left and then we’ll call him.”

Content that Donald was keeping track of things, the others fell silent, waiting. They didn’t like their team leader being out of sight for so long. It went against their training.

“There he is.” Allan pointed at the opening gate.

Neil stopped to talk to the outside men, handing them something his team couldn’t identify from where they stood, and then he marched toward his men, expression disgusted.

“What is it?”

“Are you okay?”

Neil held out his hand to show them three water test strips. “All of its contaminated and the idiots have been drinking it. I think they have a Cholera outbreak in there. Call the boss.”

4

“It’ll take about two weeks to get them all through it.” Doctor Brooke was picking through his supplies to fill a duffle bag. “They need a lot of clean water and food.”

“Doctor.”

Angela was ignored as the man continued to gather supplies and think aloud.

“We’ll have to have a burial crew if they have as many bodies as Neil hinted. We can’t use—”

“Yo, Savage!”

The doctor was snapped into alertness.

Angela didn’t waste time with niceties. “They’re not getting our doctor for two weeks. Not even a full day. Get in, evaluate, then tell them how to medicate themselves and get back here. The limit is ten hours. If you can’t do it in that time, you might as well stay here and pass messages.”

“What? It’s an outbreak. I-I can’t...” He peered at her with squinted eyes. “You pissed at me or something?”

Angela left, indicating Marc to handle it. She still didn’t like the new doctor. He would never handle her medical care.

“If we leave you down there, those people will take you hostage.” Marc frowned deeper. “You won’t make it back in one piece. Try listening to the boss. She knows what she’s doing.”

“So I can be a captive here or down there. Is that it?” The doctor’s protests grew louder. “I’m not your prisoner!”

“No, you’re not.” Marc leaned in. “If you were, I’d punch you in the throat right now and this conversation would be over.”

Marc enjoyed the man’s sudden fear, but he didn’t take it any further. Instead, he repeated Angela’s instructions. “You’ll get in, verify that it’s Cholera, tell them how to dispose of the bad water and the bodies, and how to use the supplies we’re

delivering. The Eagles will set up a quarantine area. When they leave, you can come back with them or stay there—permanently.” Marc went to the flap. “You know how I feel about you, so if you don’t come back with my men, and then change your mind later, I’m not likely to order a rescue.”

Marc left the man thinking about how ugly that could get.

Angela was satisfied the doctor would follow orders and return when the Eagles did. He didn’t understand how dangerous the situation could become if the people inside the water plant decided they wanted their own medical man.

Their radios crackled. “New arrivals at the gate. Bring a doctor.”

Angela and Marc went that way without speaking. If Adrian’s notebook was correct, this was the lightest part of the flow of survivors coming from the west and their only chance to get ahead of it.

Angela surveyed the small group of five men, seeing runny noses and rashes. “Ash effects. Get them showered and fed, and then Hilda will go in to run the tests. Have her take a student in case she needs the extra hand.”

“Add to the security?” Marc swept Zone C, where the drinking and shouting had resumed with dusk.

“Not yet. These new people aren’t a threat.”

Marc didn't question her decision. It was easy to figure out the group of five was just ill and tired, searching for sanctuary.

"Zone A?" That was the area where she was putting people who would eventually become members.

Angela scanned them again, digging deeper, and was glad they cleared. "Yes."

"We don't care about no magic!"

"We just want in!"

The shouts from the large refugee group drew attention.

"What about Zone C?" Marc wanted to know her plans. She'd said something went wrong during the fight with Jack, and implied those people should already be gone.

Angela swept the ledge next to the drunken refugees, where Adrian's cold camp couldn't be viewed through the trees. "It'll be handled. Keep the Eagles away tonight."

Marc understood from that. He didn't argue. Adrian being reduced to secret killer was another blow the former leader would have to deal with and it wouldn't be easy. Adrian was a traitor, but not a true killer. He'd always had other people to do it for him. "In the morning, I need to take supplies in there, while the doctor is out." The boxes they'd tossed into Zone C today had been destroyed in the scramble. Only small pieces of the gear had actually been received. As they listened, a wail rose—one of hunger and grief.

“They didn’t share any of it, right?” Angela was now furious. “The leader kept it all?”

“Yeah. We thought about going in and handling it, but you were asleep and I assumed you didn’t want our guys in there without you.”

“I won’t be going in. They’ll take me hostage and I’ll end up killing them all, in open view of our people.”

“That wouldn’t be good.” Greg joined them. “The camp’s a bit uneasy after today. They thought this camp had all the descendants. Jennifer is helping calm them, but it wouldn’t be a good time for another demonstration.”

“Everyone chose to stay in the caves tonight?”

Greg nodded at Marc. “All but a crew of Eagles. They said they want to be topside, no matter the threat. Jeremy’s with them.”

“Our Indian friends are staying topside too, along with doubled security. It’s fine.” Angela went to the mess, where Li Sing had a light crew keeping drinks and snacks available. She took a mug of hot chocolate, ignoring the upset stomach. As she sat down, her wrinkled arm skin drew her attention. *His light is fading.*

Moans and muttered curses came from the tents as Eagles worked off the day’s stress in the training area. Marc expected to find Kendle and Daryl in there after this shift was over. From the reports he’d been getting, it appeared that routine was helping her control the rage. Marc also thought Angela had

given Kendle her fill during the final battles to hold her while she adjusted to being around people again.

“Damn.” Angela rested her head on her arms. “In about a minute, there’s going to be a fight near the pharmacy tent. If it wakes Kenn up, Tonya’s gonna shout and the entire camp will come running. Head it off, will you?”

Marc rushed toward the pharmacy tent, not sure what he would discover.

Angela took the opportunity to relax her stomach and evaluate her condition.

Not good, the witch warned. A few more days of this and there will be no hope.

I need a week. It can't be done any faster.

There's one way.

I won't go to him.

Then the child will die, so that these people may live.

Angela let the single tear spill over her cheek and then quickly wiped it away as Li Sing approached.

“Please, eat.”

Angela caught a whiff of the stew and pushed herself up, running for the nearest garbage can.

Marc found the new man at the pharmacy tent, without Doug. Not supposed to be roaming without his settling partner, Darian was surrounded by Eagles. Only Marc’s arrival stopped the violent beating the sentries wanted to deliver.

The camp was now aware of why Darian had come here and few people had a welcome for him. Accusing their leader of murder, after the awful battle they'd all survived, was like a new war cry. Darian had been shunned.

Even Doug wasn't as friendly as Angela had hoped, but she hadn't interfered. Time would tell on Darian and on herself. People expected a moral board vote to decide his claim. Darian expected a full trial like Adrian had received. Angela didn't plan on either, as far as Marc knew.

"He's one of them!" Logan pointed. "We saw his men with the others who came here today!"

"Boss said this one's okay, so let him be."

"We're watching you!" Howard told Darian. "Don't prove her wrong. You won't like it."

Marc led Darian back to his tent, not bothering to tell him to stay inside. The man was shaking lightly. He understood.

"Thank you." Darian lifted the flap. "I just wanted some fresh air. I shouldn't have gotten so far from the tents."

Marc knew Angela had plans for this man. "You should be careful. Traitors are hung." Marc left him with that thought and returned to the mess. He didn't like any of the new people. *Is it them or me?*

Li Sing hurried out and told him what had happened with Angela.

Marc listened in anger. *Why can't she just say she isn't feeling well?*

It's more than that, his demon spoke up. She's going to lose the child and she knows it. She's sparing you the details and the pain.

“I hate it when she does that!”

Marc's growl caused Li to flee for the safety of the truck.

Marc went to their tent, but he didn't have the heart to yell at her when he saw the shivering form under the blankets. Compassion and concern rose. He sent a blast of energy into her. *I'll be pissed later.*

5

On the ledge above Safe Haven, a cloaked figure was waiting for the right moment to act. The large, drunken group he was studying hadn't noticed him; the man slowly inched closer, using the weeds and darkness for cover.

When he was near enough, the man removed a blowgun from his pocket and loaded a tiny dart into it. The drugs were powerful. When the man blew it, the dart stuck in the folds of the target's stomach while he had his shirt lifted to urinate.

The man staggered. He managed to get his pants fastened before the lethal cocktail took full effect and then the leader of Zone C fell forward.

Adrian carefully retreated back the way he'd come, making sure not even the Eagles saw him. The feeling was thick and ugly. The former leader

resented every second of it. He'd been reduced to a garbage disposer.

Adrian entered his own camp, removing his cloak and dark makeup. He ignored the tired son and soldiers who observed him in interest, staggering to his tent. It had been a long day and he wanted to eat, drink, and then sleep—in that order.

Adrian froze at the sight of the man in his tent. “What do you want?”

Marc leaned back on Adrian's bed, grinning widely. “Everything you've got.”

Adrian slung his kit down, doubting any of the people right outside even knew he had a visitor. “I'm tired. Speak your piece and get lost.”

Marc chortled at the bravado.

Adrian knelt down to untie his boots, grimacing at the humiliation. Marc knew he wasn't a physical threat anymore.

“No, but you are a mental one, aren't you?” Marc sat up. “I want you gone. How do I make that happen?”

“Shoot me and then kill Kendle before she can heal me.” Adrian glowered resentfully. “Don't know why you haven't already.”

“Yes, you do, you piece of shit.” Marc's bitterness resurfaced. “She's the reason I'm here.”

Adrian read Marc's mind and lifted a brow. “What do you want me to do about it? I'm not even allowed to speak to her, remember?”

“You're a banished traitor who is lucky to be alive.”

“Yeah, lucky. That’s me.” Adrian began removing his clothes, forcing Marc to view the new bruises and cuts, and the old scars. “I’m a tough old man, Marc. A tough, cursed old man. Go away and let me be. You have it all now.”

“I’m going to bring her here. You’ll heal her, fully.”

Adrian gaped. “What?”

“She’s not doing well.” Marc looked away. “She needs help.”

“Whatever she needs.” Adrian regained his composure. “I’ll get ready.”

Marc left through the rear of the tent, like he’d come in, without responding. He couldn’t without attacking. Angela needed Adrian for her health, for the information in his brain, and a few other things. Marc understood why the man was alive and at times like this, he could even be grateful, but it didn’t stop the nearly uncontrollable rage. Adrian deserved to die. The possibility that Marc might go first was hard to swallow.

6

Late night found a large crew of Eagles coming down the mountain to relieve them. Neil was glad. Babysitting a quarantined camp wasn’t going to get the water. “Let’s go. We’re not needed now.”

The team gathered their gear, watching the fresh crew of Eagles roll into the water plant lot and scatter the men who were surrounding it. Those on

the outside had refused to believe Neil's words of an outbreak, but armed Eagles in protective gear would quickly change their minds.

As Neil watched, the outside group finally got the hint and fled on foot. He had no doubt they would be begging at Safe Haven's gates in the next few days. Their kind wasn't capable of fending for themselves. They would always try to take what others had, through force or pity.

Neil led his team three miles down the cracked, weedy road to their alternate water location. As soon as they entered the lot, the feeling of it being empty was clear. "Three miles further and they could have had clean water, without a fight." Neil sighed. "What the hell is wrong with people?"

The team quickly secured the plant and hooked up power so they would have lights, then got to work on collecting the water. Thanks to Samantha's idea about getting water from treatment plants, they now had a routine down—one that included testing and then adding chemicals to sanitize the water. By the time the trucks in the rear of this plant were driven home, the water would already be clean enough to drink. When it reached Safe Haven, it would be tested again and then put into their reserves. Before any of it was used, it would be tested yet again. Angela didn't take any chances with their water supply. Neil approved. One bad barrel getting through would reduce them to bodies littering the ground, like inside the now quarantined plant he'd toured.

As soon as he'd been able, Neil had stripped and scrubbed, not wanting to bring any of the contagious bacteria along. He'd even burned his boots, worried the muddy ground inside might have contaminated them. The good thing about Cholera was that it wasn't transmitted from person to person. As long as none of the infected water got out, the outbreak could be easily contained. Neil didn't envy the doctor or the Eagles on that duty. He made a mental note to shower a few times before he saw Samantha.

"We'll be a few hours here." Tim was unwinding the hoses.

"I'll make the call. Dusk, you think?"

Tim estimated, and then shrugged. "Maybe a bit before. That last tank is cloudy. Like something fell into it and wasn't fished out."

They both thought of a body.

Neil grimaced. "Fine, leave that one for the end and we'll see what we can do about making sure this isn't the next area we have to quarantine."

"This is happening all over the country, right?"

"Yes. Food and water have gained the value of gold in trading now. In six months, you won't be able to get anyone to trade for those things. They'll mean life or death for all of us."

"Unless we go south." Allan had been working and listening. He paused by them, wiping sweat from his brow. "One island, with one happy group of people. It could work." Allan went inside to

attach the hoses to the truck that Jake was pulling around.

Neil stared thoughtfully. Pitcairn Island sounded like a paradise to hear Kendle talk about it, and people were listening to her stories now, including the Eagles. When winter finally came and sealed them in the cave, Neil expected her following to grow instead of dying out. Some people might even want to try the trip before winter set in. Neil had begun to wonder what plan Angela had in place for that. She wouldn't let Safe Haven be split up...would she? Neil keyed his radio. "Water team for a check in."

Tonya's calm voice echoed right back. "Go ahead, water team."

"It's good at the alternate site. We'll be in around dusk with a full load."

"Very nice, Neil. I'll tell the boss."

"Copy." Neil put his radio and jumbled thoughts away, then went to help his team collect the water. Tonya sounded good; the noises had been good. Neil wanted to get done and get home. He needed to see Becky and *know* that she hadn't been hurt again.

7

"Is that everything?" Shane surveyed the last trucks that were overloaded.

"I think so. Unless you want to take the roof."

Shane laughed, slapping Jax on the shoulder. “Let’s get going.”

Shane’s team had been away from Safe Haven for five days, sending truck after truck from the lumberyard. The site was now barren and all of the men were proud of what they’d accomplished. They now had enough lumber to build a small town.

“Hey, is that one of ours?” Ben pointed to a small group of trucks rolling toward the mountain road that they would be on shortly.

Shane used his binoculars to zoom in. “Yep. It’s Billy, and they’re fully loaded too.”

“Come on.” Jax led the way. “Let’s get in their line and make it a convoy.”

His men hurried, but Shane spent a moment examining the area to the east of this lumberyard. They hadn’t felt the need to recon that valley, but Shane was suddenly sure they should have. With dusk coming, he thought he could see the faint glow of a fire. He added it to his notes. As far as he knew, they didn’t have anyone that far east.

Shane joined Billy’s line of trucks, exchanging chatter over a free line on the radio as the teams waited to be admitted to the dumping areas below the cave.

It was a good moment for these men. Marc told Tonya to let the chatter go without comment. All of these people were doing hard work to prepare for their future. They needed every bonding moment they could find.

Marc turned toward the main gate, where the loud refugees had fallen silent. They'd gone quiet an hour ago and it was making him nervous. Come dawn, he was going into Zone C. When he came out, they might be a few less in number and he would be able to sleep.

Marc swept the cave and then the tent area, finding things calm. That also worried him; he headed toward the cave to do rounds there. It had been his experience that when Safe Haven was quiet and peaceful, it was because new trouble was brewing.

8

“Why are we letting them go?” Jay paced in front of the small fire. “We need their gear.”

Vlad frowned. “Go on and attack them. You can heal yourself this time.”

Jay wanted to shout at him, but Vlad's shivering was hard to ignore. Healing three people had taken its toll.

“This sucks!” Vlad wasn't used to feeling these aftereffects. Jack had always tossed him a life when the battle was done, to refill him.

Jay frowned impatiently. “How long do you need?”

“It's been a while since I did this on my own. Might be a couple of weeks. Getting some food will speed it up.”

“We’ll bring you one of their men.” Jay pointed. “They’re all over this mountain right now.”

“It’s not the same as a descendant life.” Vlad glared. “You’d know that if you came out with us more often.”

Jay sank down by the fire, not offended. “I’ll have to now that dad’s dead.”

The pleased tone sent Vlad to his feet. “Disloyal child! Have some respect.”

Jay cackled cruelly. “For Big Jack Devine? Not a chance. I could respect you, though, if you can kill them.”

Vlad snapped his mouth shut. After witnessing these Safe Haven people in action, Vlad wasn’t confident anyone could beat them. They had their bases covered and then some.

“He wants to run!” the bald man observed. His mind reading gift was strong, though none of his other gifts were.

Vlad shrugged. “But I won’t. I have a plan.” He stared at the lights of Safe Haven that were giving off a glow anyone could travel by, even in the gloom. “We have to get above them.”

“How do we do that?”

“We, don’t,” Vlad told Jay. “The rest of us will. You’ll be going to their front gates to beg for sanctuary. We need an inside man we can trust.”

“But the girl—”

“Isn’t on our side or Jack would be here right now.” Vlad was still furious over that betrayal. “Get

inside, discover a weakness, and be ready to exploit it. I'll be in touch."

9

A few miles away, Angela came from her tent early and went behind it.

Kenn was waiting for her. "The bodies are gone. It happened overnight, so the Eagles think predators dragged them off." Kenn handed her a note he'd been given in a quick pass as Adrian and Conner left their site to go hunting.

I burned the bodies. Jack's was missing. Everything is on schedule.

Angela casually dropped the note into the burning trashcan, pleased. "Tell him no one needs to know."

Meaning Kendle and Conner. Kenn nodded and left without promising the same. He didn't need to. Angela already knew he would keep it to himself and do anything else she said to if there was a chance she could get Adrian allowed back into Safe Haven.

Angela sighed, going to the mess. She wasn't positive that was possible, but if it was, she would make it happen.

Chapter Thirteen BK6

Dangerous Distraction

Midnight

1

“Is everyone okay back there?” The terrain and wind had been bouncing the truck all over the road for the last hour.

“Surviving.”

Kyle and Whitney exchanged grins at the answer from the three nervous members in the back of their truck. Being in the rear of the vehicle on a run wasn't fun and often left the men with roiling stomachs and rough attitudes. The doctor had told them it was because they didn't spend as many hours on the road anymore, but Kyle didn't think that was true. In fact, he was under the impression that they were spending more time traveling because they were having to go farther on each trip to find what they needed. It gave the men too many hours to worry. That was causing the queasy guts. *We all need a real break. The stress is catching up.*

They'd spent the day at an electric company, securing it and waiting for their relief to arrive. Once the stripping team had shown up, Kyle's team had come north for the second half of their mission.

“We have another five hours before we’ll reach our target.” Whitney had the map spread over his knees. “You want to switch?”

“Not yet.” Kyle was enjoying driving instead of riding a horse. His ass had ached for days. “We’ll sleep when we get there and start fresh in the morning.”

“Sounds good.”

Thanks to Angela, they were expecting problems; being well rested was a good idea. If there were already people at the refinery, they had orders to keep going to the alternate site. If the second refinery also had people, they were supposed to detour east and check a third site. Either way, they were on a long run. Whitney put the map away and leaned against the seat. “Wake me when you’re ready.”

“You got it.” Kyle was certain he wouldn’t need to switch before they arrived. He was too wound up to sleep. His mind was split between Jennifer and Adrian.

He chose to dwell on the former leader in place of pining for Jenny. Dropping Adrian off on their way to the refinery hadn’t taken any extra time, but it had stolen his concentration. Did Angela plan to keep using Adrian until he did something big enough to be forgiven? There was a small chance that it would succeed with most of the camp, but Kyle didn’t think the Eagles would ever go for it. They’d given up everything to follow him and his ways, only to discover they were being led to a

slaughter. If Angela hadn't joined Safe Haven, Adrian would have handed all of them over to the government. Distracted, Kyle missed the furry shapes in the road until he was right on them.

"Shit!" Kyle jerked the wheel, swerving around the coyotes.

The truck hit a large pothole. It bounced violently, lifting into the air. Kyle fought to straighten it out, heart pounding.

He regained control as cries of surprise filled the truck, sighing in relief. "That was—"

The tree across the road was hidden by an old wreck. There was no time for brakes or evasive maneuvers. The front of the truck hit the tree. The vehicle of shouting men flipped into the air.

When the mangled truck finally came to a stop, there was silence in place of screams.

Sally peered through her black curtains, observing the accident. She'd already doused her lights and gotten her gun out, but the wreck was ugly and she hadn't seen any movement. Had anyone survived? *Do I care?*

Sally sighed unhappily. She didn't trust people. She had waited, hoping they would crawl out and disappear. She didn't want to have contact with strangers. Strangers were always a danger.

Sally reluctantly donned her boots and kept her gun in hand as she eased outside. The night was quiet, still, and cold. She could hear the moans

clearly. Someone had survived. It sounded like a man.

Sally circled the truck in a wide path, using her penlight to view through the windows. She counted five men. At least three of them were dead. Being impaled was a particularly nasty way to go, but at least the trio in the rear hadn't suffered long.

Sally moved toward the front and shined the light on the passenger. He was banged up, but only his awkwardly bent arm seemed serious. As she shined her light on the driver, Sally realized she could smell gas. She peered at the ground, hoping to find it dry.

The puddle was slowly coming her way.

Sally hurried to the driver, not sure yet what she would do.

Kyle moaned as the light hit his face. Hanging upside down and dazed from the impacts, he groaned at the pain. "Please. Help my men!"

Impressed that he would care for his people even though he was obviously injured, Sally tried to open his door.

It swung wide after a few tugs.

Kyle hit the seatbelt button and tumbled out onto the icy pavement.

Sally went to the passenger door and dragged the other man from the wreck, trying to avoid pulling him through the fuel. Quickly out of breath, Sally knew neither man was out of range if that gas caught fire, but she didn't think she could move them further by herself.

Pop!

Sally jumped at the loud bang from the truck. Fear of a spark got her to her feet. She began to tug the passenger a few inches at a time. At least one of them might survive.

Kyle groaned louder, pain everywhere. He screamed as he was grabbed by the arm. More pain flared and he passed out, unaware of being jerked across the rough road.

Dog whined in pain as he strained on his casted leg, causing the plaster to crack. He was sorry for the teeth punched into Kyle's arm, but it seemed like the only safe place to get a hold of him.

Dog lunged backward. The skin ripped; the cast shattered. Kyle's body slid to the edge of the ditch and then rolled down the small hill.

Dog followed him just as the truck exploded.

Sally spotted Dog dragging the driver, and then the gas flamed up and threw herself over the passenger she had gotten into the opposite gully. She stayed covering the man as debris rained over them.

A second explosion sent more flaming pieces of the truck into the sky.

Sally slowly sat up. She saw Dog limping toward her and forced her shaky knees to hold her as she stood.

“Good boy.” She rubbed the wolf's ears. She had lost all fear of him during the week they'd been together. “Let's go get the sled, huh? Neither of us should be trying to move these men on our own.”

Dog followed the woman to the shed, worried. What if she decided to chop them up and feed them to her pets?

Sally retrieved the passenger first; he was closest. She ignored the wolf's low growl when she headed for the barn. She tugged the sled to the rear and slid open a wall panel that Dog hadn't noticed.

The panel hid a small room where she put the man, easing Dog's concern. He had no issues with her locking Kyle and Whitney up, only with her killing them.

Sally rolled the passenger onto the pallet and clamped a dusty leg iron around his ankle, and then went back outside for the driver. That man was bigger.

It took all of Sally's strength to get him onto the sled. As she dragged the sled across the smoldering debris, she noticed the myriad of injuries and assumed she would end up feeding the animals with this one. He'd already lost a lot of blood and she didn't have that here.

Sally put the driver by his friend, but didn't bother to handcuff him. He was too hurt to be a threat. Sally strode toward the house for her bag of medical supplies.

Dog stayed in the doorway, golden orbs shifting between the Eagles. Dog whined. *They smell like Marc. I miss him.*

Whitney came alert all at once. He held in a scream at the pain in his arm. It was clearly broken. He looked around and found Kyle by his side, obviously injured.

Whitney didn't hear the other men. He struggled to sit up. The chain around his ankle clanked, and then held him in place. Whitney opened his mouth to shout.

“Don't.”

Kyle sounded bad. Whitney scooted over to him. “You okay?”

“No.” Kyle coughed, spitting blood onto the pallet. “She saved us. Truck exploded.”

Whitney leaned away as Kyle sprayed more red drops. “Where are the others?”

“Dead, I'd guess.” Kyle gasped for air. “Truck was full of pipes.”

“What happened?”

“My fault!” Kyle groaned. “Hope I die.”

“Damn,” Whitney swore. “Don't say that, man.”

Kyle's eyes rolled backward. He slumped to his side, swallowed by the blackness.

Whitney heard the light steps of a woman. “Hey! He needs help!” He heard a gun cock.

“I'll do what I can. You stay where you are.”

Whitney slid up against the wall as the woman came into the tiny room, followed by a furry figure that made him gape. “Dog?”

Dog whined uneasily, but he didn't approach his old teammate. He'd served many shifts with Kyle and Whitney, but his loyalties had changed.

"You know the wolf?" Sally knelt by Kyle.

"Yeah." Whitney watched her, hoping she had medical training. If not, Kyle could die. "He was in our camp for a while."

Sally frowned as she examined Kyle's injuries. "Your camp?"

"We're Eagles, from Safe Haven."

Sally's scowl deepened. "Never heard of it."

"Can you help him?"

Sally found the biggest problem and blew out a breath. "Maybe, but be quiet so I can think. I'll do your arm after I get this piece of metal out of his stomach."

Whitney blanched. "How can I help?"

Sally didn't want to trust him, but she did need the extra hands. "Move over here and hold these towels. It's gonna bleed a lot."

Whitney awkwardly got up, but he froze when he realized her gun was now aimed at him and she had a finger on the trigger.

"I won't want to, but I will. You be careful."

"Yes, ma'am." Whitney thought fast. "And thank you for saving us."

"Remember that when I set your arm." Sally lowered the weapon so she could help the driver. "It'll mess up your recovery if I have to add a bullet wound."

“Damn! That hurt!”

Sally quickly finished setting the arm. “You think?”

Whitney wasn’t sure why their host was so hostile, but he didn’t intend to ask.

“Here, slip this around your neck and then put your arm through it. I have to make up the cast strips.”

Whitney watched her mix the plaster, wincing as he put his arm in the sling. The awful throbbing had dropped into a moderate ache that he assumed would flare up shortly to remind him that it was broken. *Still better than the others.*

Holding Kyle still so the woman could remove the metal and then stitch him up had been ugly. Kyle had screamed repeatedly, for Jennifer *and* for Adrian. It had been haunting. Whitney had been grateful when the woman shot him full of morphine. Listening to Kyle’s ranting was hard. He’d still been confessing his sins when the medicine knocked him out.

“Is he a killer?” Sally looked toward the small room where Kyle was resting. She’d had Whitney come into the barn and sit on a stool for his treatment.

“Aren’t we all at some point?” Whitney answered vaguely.

Sally didn't want to answer that, but she also didn't want a killer here. "I shouldn't have saved him."

"He's a good man."

"Doesn't sound like it. He kills people, as a job."

"Do you think executioners at prisons are killers?"

"Yes, but even if I didn't, those people were sentenced to that punishment."

"So were Kyle's kills. Safe Haven doesn't execute innocent people."

Sally didn't respond to that. She was happy the apocalypse had come, happy that society had fallen. They'd been marked for destruction and it had happened. Who was Safe Haven to try to reverse that decision?

Whitney examined his watch, but it had broken in the wreck. "Any idea how long we've been here?"

Sally frowned. "Why? You got someplace to be?"

"Yes, actually, but it's rather important that you answer me."

Sally heard the tone and felt old hatred rise in response. She clamped down on it as best she could. He wasn't her father. No beating was coming. "About six hours, I'd think. Sun's up."

"Then I guess I should tell you to expect company soon. We were eight hours away from

home when I fell asleep, so you may have another hour, but I doubt it.”

“Company? Who did you call?”

“Not me. Him. Every scream he let out was heard. Jennifer should be arriving soon.”

Sally relaxed at the female name. “Good. She can care for him. I have stuff to do.” Sally again considered what it meant to let the Italian leave here, eyes going to the gun that she was keeping close. She could shoot both men and dispose of their bodies, in much less than an hour.

“I can guess what you’re thinking.” Whitney stayed still, not making any sudden movement that might trigger the wildness he read in their host. “And I’ll even assume you have good reasons for feeling that way.”

Sally was held by the compassion she heard in his voice.

“I’m sorry you were treated badly, but not all men are evil. Not all men need to die.”

Sally flushed as Whitney swept the bones in the cages, the animals that were staring at him and drooling. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out what happened to unwanted company.

“I don’t blame you for your reactions. We all survived and it changed us. Kyle is a good man. When Jennifer gets here, she’ll help him and we’ll go. If he dies before she gets here...” Whitney was unable to voice that. “Please, make sure he doesn’t.”

Sally felt afraid then and she hated that. “This Jennifer’s a descendant?”

Whitney nodded.

“Shoulda killed you both!” Sally shoved the pan of plaster toward him, taking up her gun. “Get started wrapping it around. I’ll help with one hand.”

Whitney sighed, relieved and disappointed. “Okay.”

A tense silence filled the next ten minutes, broken only by her terse instructions. She didn’t put the gun down, though it wasn’t pointed at him.

Whitney began to realize she had experience with descendants, otherwise she wouldn’t know to be so scared.

“She won’t hurt you.” Whitney sighed in relief as they finished and the woman hastily retreated to a better position to view the open barn doors where a lantern hung. “She’ll be grateful.”

“I’m going in the house now. I’m not coming out until you’re all gone.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whitney let her flee, feeling a coldness coming through the doors that had little to do with the weather.

Jennifer was here.

Sally fastened the door to her home and ran to the window as a bike screeched to a halt in the middle of her yard. Mud flew against the house.

Sally held still as a small figure dropped the bike and ran into the barn. She couldn’t see anything else and though she kept listening, there wasn’t any noise.

After half an hour of the same tense silence, Sally forced herself to clean up and settle in her bed

with her gun. *If they come in here, I'll shoot them. I don't want anything from those freaks!*

“He can't be moved.”

“I figured that, but our host isn't going to like it.”

Jennifer continued to send healing energy into Kyle's feverish body. “I'll handle her.”

She'd gotten a good sense of the woman in the small house as soon as she'd arrived, but out here in the barn, where the animals were unhappily chittering, it was clear what the woman was.

Kyle began to thrash around.

Jennifer dug through her kit for the medicine Angela had shoved into her hands. They'd both been woken by Kyle's screams.

Jennifer injected Kyle's arm and then his hip, not letting her mind go to bad places. Angela had told her he would survive. Jennifer planned to hang onto that promise.

“You gonna live?” It was a wonder any of them had. The wreckage out front was stunning.

“I think so. Broken in a couple places, light concussion.” Whitney studied the doors. “I'll clean up the road later.”

“Good. We'll say something over them.”

Whitney had thought to take the bodies home, but he didn't argue. A long ride with corpses wouldn't be pleasant.

“Not much left to stink. Hell of a fire.”

Whitney winced. He hadn't been that close to the three men—they'd been chosen from the members list—but he had liked each of them. "I'll handle it."

Jennifer sat back, almost panting from the effort. She'd given him all she could spare. Now, she needed to sleep.

Whitney watched her lean her head against the wooden wall and fall asleep. She did love him. It was hard to miss.

Whitney slowly got up and moved to the barn, giving them privacy and getting some fresh air to clear his mind. He didn't know exactly what had happened to cause the accident, but he was certain it hadn't all been Kyle's fault. "I should have stayed awake and helped him navigate."

Dog appeared at his side, Kyle's blood still in his muzzle fur. Whitney carefully rubbed the wolf's ears. "Hi."

Dog didn't linger or answer. He padded toward the house, where he curled up under the woman's rocker and laid his head down.

"Guess you aren't ready to leave yet." Whitney scanned the small farm, approving of the setup. "Can't say I blame ya. Safe Haven is all work some days."

Whitney stared at the house, wondering if the woman was doing the same at her barn. He also wondered how she would react to finding them still here come evening. Jennifer wasn't going to move Kyle until he could survive it and if that meant

taking the woman captive, Whitney was positive Jennifer would. “If she doesn’t kill you. Do us all a favor and make the right choice.”

4

Jennifer spent the next six hours at Kyle’s side, medicating and comforting him. The drugs had a positive effect right away; by the time evening came, she felt confident enough of his recovery to leave him alone. She exited the barn just as the woman came from her house.

The two females stared at each other—one in dislike, the other in gratitude. The moment was broken by Dog whining.

Sally glanced down and realized his cast had broken off. “Poor baby. Let me get you a painkiller and we’ll get a new one on.”

Jennifer watched the woman tend to the wolf. She seemed to have forgotten her human company. Jennifer moved closer. She’d planned to leave Sally alone, but the need to say thank you was too strong.

“Stay back!”

Jennifer stopped at the near panic in the woman’s voice. “I just wanted to thank you for helping them.”

Sally didn’t answer. The sense of evil was all over the teenager.

“I’m sorry you feel that way about us.” Jennifer headed back to the barn. “We’ll leave as soon as he’s able.”

“Good.” Sally wasn’t going to demand they leave yet. She wanted to, but after viewing the girl, feeling her, she’d chosen to keep her mouth shut. “There’s food in the freezer. Use what you need.”

“We will. We’ll also feed your animals so you don’t have to come in here.”

“They all get the same bagged food.”

“I’ll see what I can *chop* up.”

Sally blanched, but she didn’t rise to the bait. She knew what she was, but she also knew pure evil when she was faced with it. The sooner these killers were off her property, the better.

Jennifer was careful not to be bitten or scratched as she fed the variety of animals in the barn. Each one had an injury that had been lovingly tended. The teenager tried not to resent their care. So the woman didn’t like people. Many of them sucked. It was understandable.

After she finished with the feeding, Jennifer watered them from the barrel in the corner, but that was it. The animals didn’t like her, snapping and hissing. She left the cage cleaning for their sullen host.

Jennifer spent a few minutes removing the signs of humans being in the barn, including a finger that had rolled off the chopping area. She quickly tossed it into the garbage can, unable to deliver it to any of the angry animals. She’d bathed in the blood of the soldiers and enjoyed it, but that had been in the heat of war. This felt like a personal vendetta and Jennifer wanted no part of it.

Jennifer gazed out the window and noticed a garden along the barn's rear wall. It was surrounded by chicken wire and appeared well tended. Curious, she went outside and did a slow walk of the property. What else did the woman have? Was there some way to help her? It was obvious that the woman wouldn't be going to Safe Haven with them, but the need to repay the debt before they left was strong.

As she studied the property, Jennifer quickly became convinced that the best thing she could do was leave the woman alone. From the generator and well, to the multiple garden patches, the woman was covered indefinitely.

She was also insane.

5

Jennifer ducked into the small rear area where both men were sleeping. Whitney was comfortable, breathing evenly, but Kyle was tossing, and occasionally gasping at some mental pain. If not for Angela's words, Jennifer would be panicking. "Time for your meds, Baby. And maybe a little more morphine so you can rest."

"He should be able to take it. He's a large man."

Jennifer spun around to find their host in the narrow doorway.

Sally was staring at Kyle as if he was about to lunge at her.

Jennifer let out a sound of annoyance that drew her attention. “You’re making a judgment without knowing him.” Jennifer injected Kyle’s thigh. “It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair.”

“No argument from me on that one. I spent the first half of the war in a Mexican camp. Kyle saved me.” Jennifer ran a tender hand over his hot brow.

Sally frowned. “You two are a couple?”

Already tired of the woman, Jennifer rested her head on Kyle’s uninjured arm. “He loves me. He would do anything for me. And I feel the same.”

Sally’s scowl grew. “Stockholm.”

“Kyle isn’t my captor. He’s my hero.”

Sally left the barn. So far, she didn’t like anything about the man she’d saved.

“She’s been hurt or something,” Whitney stated from his pallet. “I tried a little, but she’s twitchy.”

“She’s dangerous.” Jennifer carefully lay down next to Kyle and wrapped her arm around him. “I’m surprised she helped you guys.”

“Me too. We need to get out of here before she flips on us.”

Jennifer stretched out gently, lending Kyle her warmth. “I’m already listening for it. If she attacks, kill her. That came from the boss. Angela doesn’t like the idea of leaving the woman out here alone to decide life and death. She wants those people gone or in our army.”

Kyle didn't want to wake up. He knew he hadn't died, but horrible guilt was waiting for him to surface. He tried hard to stay below the murkiness; he didn't want to face what he'd done.

Kyle.

He turned away from the gentle voice, refusing her comfort.

Kyle.

No. No.

Reece!

Kyle's lids shot open. He found Jennifer's face inches from his.

"Coward."

Pain hit him in thick slaps. "Yes."

Jennifer's heart broke for him as she read his thoughts of the accident. He'd gotten distracted and lost three men. His pain was hers. She allowed her tears to flow over his arm. "I'm sorry."

Kyle didn't want her comfort or to enjoy her embrace, but it was Jennifer against him. He slowly raised his good arm to tangle it in her long braid. "Get out of here!"

"Okay." Jennifer sat up. "Bet Whitney needs my heat."

Kyle growled, hand tightening in her hair.

Jennifer let him pull her back down. "That's better. Keep fighting, Kyle. I can't handle you being sorry for yourself."

Kyle winced. "I'm resigning. No Eagle would ever—"

Jennifer pushed her lips against his, unable to listen to him. Later this probably wouldn't succeed, but for now, the man under her froze, like he always did. Jennifer lingered, making sure she had his attention. Angela had also hinted about how to handle this. "Kyle?"

"What?" he ground out against her sweet lips. Even in his misery, he wouldn't pull away.

"Do you love me?"

Kyle groaned. "You know I do!"

"Then don't do this to me." Jennifer moved back enough to meet his tortured gaze. "I need you."

Whitney listened with tears burning. *Will someone ever love me that way?*

Kyle swallowed his thoughts, trying to rise through the guilt. He nodded stiffly. Jennifer hadn't asked him for anything. Keeping himself together was the least he could do.

Jennifer kissed him again. This wouldn't be the end of it, but she had to get him home, where Angela could work on him. People made mistakes. Kyle would have to accept that he was no different from anyone else who'd screwed up on the job.

Kyle knew what she was thinking. He would try because she'd asked him to, but he didn't expect to forgive himself. He wasn't even certain he wanted to survive anymore. Their host was right. *No matter what I do, I'm always a killer.*

Dog held still for the woman to strengthen the new cast on his leg, but he refused the painkiller by pulling away from her gentle hands each time she tried to stick him with the needle. Having Safe Haven people around had reminded him of the female he was chasing. The coyotes were in the vicinity and Dog was thinking about leaving with them when Sally released their healing female. He would have to be careful with his paw, but it was almost time to go.

Dog also thought about asking how Marc was. He wanted to let his former master know he was alive, but he also didn't want to rekindle his affection for humans. He was supposed to be living like an animal.

Sally put an extra layer on the cast, smoothing it down distractedly. She didn't want those people here. *They shouldn't be here!*

Dog caught the thought and agreed. If they didn't go soon, she would.

Sally entered the house as Dog curled up under the rocker, golden gaze staying on the barn. At some point, one of them would try to talk to him and he had no idea how to tell them he wasn't coming. They wouldn't understand the call he was receiving.

As if his thought had conjured it, a pale blue light appeared in the weeds by the shed. It spread over the grass as it came toward him, covering the land in a vivid carpet of color. As it reached the porch, it vanished, unable to coat the fabricated object.

Dog got up and moved to the dirt at the foot of the stairs, eager to feel that refreshing power swarming over him. It was a pulse of life from the earth. Addicting and wild, the energy was sent to replenish lifeforms. Dog had never felt it before, even when he'd been living with the wolves. Nature was trying to heal things; the feel of it was amazing.

"Have to leave. They have to!" Pacing in front of the door now, Sally continued to mutter, gun in her hand.

8

"Here she comes!" Whitney whispered frantically from behind the door. She'd saved his life; he couldn't kill her.

"I've got it." Jennifer was ready. Dusk had come with the feel of death. They'd gathered their weapons and ammunition to make a stand, but she'd known Whitney couldn't handle this one.

"Come out of there!" Sally banged on the barn door with her gun. "I want you gone!"

"He can't move yet! One more day."

"No! Get out!"

"Okay! Get out of the way so we can!"

"Get out right now!" Sally was screaming every word.

Jennifer approached the door reluctantly. "I don't want to do this to you."

"This is my place! Get out!"

“I’m going.” Jennifer was at the door now. “Get back.”

Sally had frozen, anger and mental condition not allowing a rapid thought process.

Jennifer kicked the door open.

The door hit Sally in the face and knocked her to the ground, bleeding and nearly unconscious.

Jennifer raised her gun. She’d made her choice and it was Kyle’s life, no matter what she owed this crazy stranger.

A heavy, furry body slammed into Jennifer, stopping her from firing. She hit the ground hard enough to gasp.

Dog took up a place in front of Sally, growling.
Get out!

Stunned by Dog’s action, Jennifer raised her gun again. “He. Is. Not. Moving!” Jennifer screamed the last word.

Dog shrank back. For a brief instant, rage was there and he could have leapt at the girl. But she was the one who’d rubbed his belly. Dog slowly lowered his head.

Jennifer cautiously retreated toward the barn, kicking the woman’s gun inside. “In one day, we will be gone. If either of you come in the barn, I *will* kill you.”

Whitney helped her fasten the doors. They each took up a place near a window.

“I can’t believe he did that.” Whitney had expected Dog to be on their side.

“He’s gone wild, like her. We won’t tell Marc that part.”

Whitney agreed. Marc would be happy to know that Dog was alive. They didn’t need to tell him the rest. “I don’t know what happened. I should have stayed awake. It’s my fault too.”

“You know he doesn’t feel that way.” Jennifer wiped Dog’s saliva from her arm. “And neither do I. Accidents happen. You both have to understand that. No one can be perfect all the time.”

“You descendants seem to be.”

Jennifer snorted. “Not even close. Angela loves Kyle too. They have a special bond from the rest stop battle with Cesar. If she had known this was coming, she would have interfered. She missed it.”

“Do you blame her for that?”

“Not at all. The power comes in handy, but it’s unpredictable, uncontrollable. It has a will of its own and we never get to see everything. It’s actually rather annoying.”

Whitney smiled. Kyle was lucky to have her. “Thank you.”

“My honor.” She sighed. “Now, I need to take my own advice.” Jennifer filled him in on Beth’s suicide and was finally able to forgive herself for not catching it. They weren’t meant to prevent every death. In time, Kyle would accept that, as well. She would help him.

“She got up and went inside.”

“Still talking to herself?” Jennifer was busy changing Kyle’s bandage. Whitney was still watching the door.

“Didn’t look like it. Dog’s in there with her.”

“Hopefully they’ll stay in. I almost like her, you know?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whitney understood, as much as he could. Their host wasn’t all there mentally, but she was strong enough to survive on her own, which gave her an advantage over most of the people they’d met.

“How’s he doing?”

“Better than I hoped for. No infection now. We might be able to go in the morning if we can give him a gentle ride.”

“I’ll do some scouting in a bit.”

Jennifer finished and then rejoined Whitney near the front doors. The medicine was keeping Kyle asleep and she was glad.

“He’s lucky to have you.”

Jennifer discovered Whitney smiling at her and rolled her eyes. “You sure your head’s okay?”

Whitney chuckled. He hadn’t been along for any of Jennifer’s battles, but he’d heard the stories of her being dependable and scoffed. Clearly, it was true. He’d expected a crying teenager to console.

Jennifer snickered at the image. “Thanks.”

“He’s scared of you.”

Jennifer’s amusement faded to concern. “I know. I’m working on it, but I’m scared of him too.”

“We know. It’s why we wouldn’t let him push you.”

“There’s no need for that anymore.”

“Yeah, things will change when we get back.”
This accident would bring the couple closer.

“Sooner than that, actually. We’re not going home yet. I passed a beautiful cabin on the way here and the boss gave us permission. We’re taking a few days off.”

Whitney frowned. “Dropping me off on the way?”

“Not unless you want it. Angela said you can be our chaperone.”

“To appease the camp.” Whitney was certain he wouldn’t spend any of his time monitoring their behavior even after Kyle was up on his feet.

“I assume so, yes. But you don’t have to if you’d rather not. We may only be able to get *one* of the hot tubs going and its mine.”

Whitney enjoyed the teasing, suddenly feeling better than he had in a while. “I’ll take the night patrol so I can watch the sun coming up from the hot tub, with a cigar and a scotch.”

Jennifer laughed. “Deal.”

Kyle listened to their easy banter with gratitude. Whitney was getting to see what Kyle had realized from the beginning. Jennifer was special.

Pain lanced through his side.

Kyle swallowed the groan, not wanting to interrupt their moment. Whitney had been on Kevin’s team and done well. He was respected.

Kyle hoped he continued to earn it. The man was easy to like.

“Temperature keeps dropping.”

“We’ll bundle up.”

Kyle listened to them cover the basics, wrist throbbing. If they were taking time off, he needed to make a stop along the way. Kyle worked on a mental list as the shadows grew longer and the pain stretched into his guts.

“Will we have trouble leaving?”

“I hope not.” Jennifer studied the house where dim lights had come on a short time ago. “I’m getting too tired to be nice.”

10

Whitney eased out of the barn a few hours later to take care of their fallen men and locate new wheels.

He returned driving an old station wagon. It had enough room to slide Kyle inside once they put the seat down. Jennifer rode next to him, fastening belts and covering him while Whitney tossed their kits in the front and then got them rolling. There was no movement from inside the house, but they could feel attention on them. It wasn’t safe here.

As they pulled out of the yard, Sally and Dog came from the house. When the sound of the engine faded, Sally strode into the barn.

Dog expected her to put her property back the way it had been, but she surprised him by opening

the cages of the upset animals she had been helping. Even those not ready to be on their own yet were opened, freed.

Dog stayed clear as the raccoon and the coyote ran from the barn first.

“Free to be with my boys!” the coyote howled happily. “Farewell, strange wolf.”

Dog waited for the snakes to clear out and then joined the woman in the barn, curious.

Sally was in the corner, pulling tarps away from a vehicle Dog recognized. It was an ATV. When Sally got in and brought the engine to life, Dog understood she was leaving.

Sally drove the Gator outside and got busy filling the fluids. When she finished, she began bringing bags from the house and loading them onto the back and sides. The vehicle also had a small trailer, but Dog wasn't positive about staying with her. However, his leg was still too injured for long travel on it and he needed to get north.

“I've got another place. And once the snow comes, *no one* will get in there.” Sally stormed into the house for more gear.

Dog slowly climbed into the trailer and lay down. He hoped she was going in the right direction. If not, he would get out the first time she stopped.

Sally didn't blink at the sight of the wolf, who had obviously decided to go with her. She was glad of the company, though he would have to make room for her two inside mutts. There hadn't been

any fighting among them so far and Sally didn't expect there to be any now. Animals made more sense to her than people; she was going where the beasts could barely roam, let alone man.

Dog tolerated the heat of the small animals that the woman thrust into the trailer, ignoring their excited, yapping descriptions of the place they were headed to. Dog didn't care if there was land to wander or ponds to swim. He was following the winds in search of his mate. He wouldn't stay with Sally much longer. As soon as his leg healed, he would vanish.

Chapter Fourteen BK6

Healing

September 15th

1

“**Y**ou guys did a good job.” Marc kept scanning the newly gated stairs leading up to Zone C. With the sun sinking, it was perfect timing for a visibility test. “Very good.”

They’d been driving up to deliver supplies and medical care to the sullen refugees, but now the Eagles could go up the stairs in protection. The gate was electronic. There were multiple doors for people to go through so they would be separated from everyone else. It wouldn’t stop a bullet, but it would prevent a riot from easily entering Safe Haven. Intruders would have to go over top of the ten-foot, barbed wire fence that was being patrolled day and night. Marc was satisfied that they now had a basic defensive setup in place, but there would soon be more. The towers were going up, aided by all the lumber that Shane’s team had collected. Marc planned to put small bunkers in next, stocked with water and weapons.

“When will we tell them?” Zack studied the Zone C people as they scurried through the open gate and vanished down the hill in the loud gas-

guzzlers. They had no schedule, no organization. The refugees came and went during both gate opening times.

“Soon, I think. They should have been gone already, but plans changed.” Becoming aware that he was discussing a magic issue with someone who wasn’t a descendant, Marc chose not to close off. He dug into Zack’s mind instead, searching for trouble.

“No need for that.” Zack didn’t resist. “I’m not happy with her. I may never be, but I know she didn’t want Crista to die. I’m trying to accept the rest.”

Marc was relieved to discover that was the truth. He gestured toward the training tent. “Want to go spend a few minutes making the rookies look bad?”

Zack chuckled. The new men and women were easy to rile and slow to think, like most of them had been upon first joining Adrian or the service. “Sure.”

The two men headed for the noisy tent.

Angela approved. She was on her way to the mess to have a snack, get updates, and then go to bed. Marc had things covered. Angela grabbed a cold coke from the barrel, remembering to fasten the lid to keep it that way. She took a seat at the empty center table.

“Can I get you a tray?”

Angela shook her head at Tara, frowning. “Li brings them out. Thank you.”

Tara shrugged awkwardly. “Sorry. I didn’t know that.”

Angela scanned the woman and then Missy, who was humming happily at a rear table with crayons and a coloring book. “You guys okay?”

Tara took a breath. “As much as we can be. She didn’t need to see her father die.”

“She said she did.”

“She’s just a baby! She needs her mother to make those choices.”

Angela shrugged.

Li Sing sat a foil covered tray in front of her, frowning at Tara.

Angela stared at the woman. “Are you on duty right now?”

Tara lifted her broom resignedly. “Sweeping, getting trays for the old people, helping with the kiddies.”

Angela recognized the tones, but she didn’t comment on the unhappiness. If Tara wanted a different job, she would have to ask for it.

“Let me know if I can get something for you.” Tara returned to her halfhearted sweeping.

“Uh-huh.” Angela wanted to talk with Tara, to dig down and figure out what her problem was, but she didn’t have the spare time.

Greg dropped down across from her. “Doctor said it is Cholera. He’s requesting permission to stay another 24 hours. He asked that we tell his sons they have a newborn and he’s trying to save it.”

“Fine, but 24-hours is the limit. He can bring the child here, where we can help.”

“Good. All crews have finished their first missions and have left for the second half. We’re working on the 12-volt setups in the caves now. The LEDS are up and running and all of the pipes will go in today and overnight. Tell the camp to expect constant noise for the next two days and then we’ll have the kitchen in place. The bathrooms and showers will be last to go in. We’ll need a large amount of water for the first fills and to check for leaks.”

“We’ll find it or we’ll melt snow. Go on.”

“Vents and fans are running, so the moldy smell is fading. We have detectors and extinguishers on every level, and the battery banks are being put in tomorrow. We had a delay with the cords, but the engineers have all they need now, from Kyle’s first run. The store they found was stocked. Their relief is already loading crates.” Greg scanned his list. “Oh, and the den mothers need their next lists.”

Angela opened her book. “Carpeting, dividers hung, beds and mats set up, bedrolls and all the spare blankets brought in. Racks and baskets of the goods we use every day hung up. Tell them to get it ready to live in.”

“You got it.” Greg was writing it down word for word. “Cynthia’s got a final copy ready.” He handed her the four-page paper with a slight frown, not sure if Angela would care for the underlying

tone of rebellion that Cynthia's words were encouraging in her new newspaper.

"I'll go over it today and let her know by morning." Angela put it in her book. "What else?"

"Kendle's class starts tonight. She has a full roster of women. No males."

"I'll add a few people to it over the next week. They have to see that she's serious before the men will take lessons from her on anything."

"Cool. We drafted a new crew for the oil refinery run. They're leaving any time now."

"Good."

"That's it from me for now. I'm about to make rounds of the topside, then hit the caves for fresh news."

"Marc has point." Angela yawned. "I have a bedroll calling my name."

Greg spotted Samantha coming and doubted Angela would get to answer it anytime soon.

Angela sighed, noticing the newest disturbance. "Okay, I'll be here for a bit yet."

Greg smiled his sympathy and left the two women alone.

"Yes, Samantha?"

"I got a call that said *he* joined the crew and is working." Her team had chosen to stay late. Adrian showing up had been another surprise.

Angela shrugged. "So?"

Samantha frowned. "So, what's *he* doing there?"

“Sounds like he’s working.” Angela dug into her tray. “When are you going back down?”

“Now. We don’t want him there. The *little sleaze* is bad enough.”

Angela looked up, frowning. “If it weren’t for second chances, Sam, you wouldn’t be here right now to complain about my choices.”

Understanding she wasn’t going to get what she wanted, Samantha stomped from the mess.

Angela tried not to snicker, not wanting it to get around that she was enjoying this. *Because I’m not. I just find her hypocrisy amusing.*

Angela spotted Seth coming her way. The good feeling faded as quickly as it had come. Seth wasn’t going to be put off by a few sharp words. He wanted answers about Becky and she would have to provide them or he would make up his own. “Sit down, Seth, and listen to me closely.”

2

“She’s pissed.” Candy watched Samantha manhandle the truck down the hill toward them.

Cynthia shrugged. “Boss must have said no.”

They’d chosen to ask Angela to remove Conner from their crew, but when Adrian had shown up and took a place on sniper patrol, Samantha had left to confront Angela about it instead of waiting until tonight like they’d all agreed on. Conner wasn’t causing problems, but the awkwardness was hard to work through. Having Adrian here had actually

been helpful. It had kept Conner from staring at Candy on their breaks.

Candy looked down in time to find Conner standing nearby, leering at her chest. Again.

Angered, she spun around and bent over. *Pffttt!*

Conner froze; the smell hit him like a slap. Tears welled as he fought not to breathe in more of the noxious fumes. He ducked his head, hoping for clear air and got a fresh blast in the face as Candy farted again.

Conner rolled away and flipped off the tailgate, retching and gasping.

Candy stood up, patting her enlarging stomach. “That’s my babies.”

The rest of the crew busted out laughing, including Adrian.

Arriving in time to witness it, Samantha was slightly mollified. She gestured to the next wreck. “Let’s get to it.”

Adrian studied the landscape and his son, shaking his head at the boy whenever he got too close to the women. Conner had hormones running rampant, but no self-control. It worried Adrian. *I need to pull him in.* Adrian immediately began making plans to do so. Angela would be quicker to forgive him if he was able to save his son.

3

Late afternoon faded into dusk. Kendle repeated her motions for the class, though she’d already

made the fire several times. Some of her students had caught on quickly and were now watching in complete boredom. The rest were struggling with the difference between tinder and wood.

“You have to catch the tinder on fire, and use it to make a larger fire,” Kendle repeated for the two women staring at the piles of material as if they were foreign objects. Would the camp men be this clueless too? Kendle thought they would. Adrian and Angela had been doing everything for these people except teaching them how to survive on their own. Kendle was determined to change that.

Her radio crackled. “Kendle to the main gate.”

“Copy.” Kendle put the small fire out with her hand, not feeling the heat through her scars. “That’s it for tonight. We’ll meet again tomorrow, same place, same time.”

Kendle left them to clean up, certain that they wouldn’t, and marched to the main gate. She couldn’t find a reason to be called. It kept a scowl on her face as she passed fires and trashcans that were supposed to keep the darkness at bay. To Kendle, it added a gloomy, smoky air to the mostly empty areas. The camp was in the caves, enjoying the natural temperatures and avoiding the cold wind that was now biting into Kendle’s exposed cheeks. Winter was definitely coming. It made Pitcairn seem even further away.

“I’m here.” Kendle scowled at the gate guards. “What’s up?”

“Someone needs your help.” Marc came from the shadows. “I’d like you to give it.”

Kendle narrowed in on the vehicle flying up to Adrian’s locale. “*She* wants it, you mean.”

“Yes. She’s close to Kyle.” Marc watched Kendle’s reactions flash across her face. “Will you use your gift to help him?”

“I don’t trust him. I still think he’s wrong for what he did to her.”

Marc rotated toward the shadows. “Ask Jennifer what he did to her before you make up your mind. That’s not asking too much, is it?”

No, it’s not. Kendle didn’t mind the thought of healing Kyle. It was carrying out Angela’s orders like a flunky that rankled.

“Then resign from her team.” Marc leaned against the gate in the shadows where he could study things unobserved. “Resign and go live with *him*.”

Kandle had already considered that. “I can’t. He’s not you!” Kendle stomped to the gate that led by Zone C. Her annoyance with each stop to go through a gate was clear in her mutters. She didn’t respond to the drunken shouts that came from the refugees. She stormed by them and disappeared into the tree line that surrounded Adrian’s camp.

Marc was relieved. He also cared for Kyle and they needed his strength here. He hadn’t been happy to hear about the accident, but he had been glad for the report on Dog. Knowing the wolf was alive was a comfort. Marc still had hopes he would return.

“She won’t come.” Jennifer was already tired of waiting. “She hates me. I’ll ask Conner when they get here.”

“Conner chose to stay and guard the girls.” Adrian came through the trees. “Samantha wanted to get an early start in the morning.”

Jennifer frowned. “We’ll go down to him.”

“No.” Kyle was leaning against the hot hood of the station wagon. “I don’t want it from them!”

“Kyle!” Jennifer scolded. “Don’t be that way. You need help.”

“Not from them.” Kyle was dripping sweat. “Traitors!”

“That, we are.” Adrian dropped down by the dead fire ring to build a fresh blaze. “The reasons why don’t matter.”

“I didn’t come for your excuses!” Kyle avoided Jennifer’s calming hand. “You betrayed us!”

Adrian kept building the fire. “It worked out pretty well for you. You got the high place, the respect, the girl, and the job you asked for.”

“I earned all of that!” His face twisted at the agony from the strain of shouting.

Jennifer slapped him on the arm. “Shut up!”

Surprised, both men fell silent.

“Get out here and help him!” Jennifer was out of patience. “I know you’re listening. Come out!”

Kendle stepped from the shadows to Adrian's right. None of them could read her expression.

Kendle tried hard to keep it that way as she approached Kyle. Jennifer, she ignored.

Kyle tensed as Kendle's hand curled around his wrist and then his body arched as her light shot into him with the force of a train. It lit him up in a shiny blue glow that glinted brightly enough to cause Kyle to shut his lids.

Kendle let go of the connection, panting a bit. She'd shoved it in him quick and hard. It had drained her to do it so fast.

Adrian gently helped Kendle to stand up straight. He kept an arm around her waist when she trembled. "You can stay here tonight."

Kendle didn't argue. She let him lead her into his tent and lay down on his bed, inhaling deeply of his scent. Angela was right. It was intoxicating.

Adrian secured the flap without glancing at any of them, including Kyle, who was quickly recovering his strength.

Adrian pushed off his boots and socks, and then dropped his shirt in the corner before joining Kendle on the bed. He heard their company leave and didn't care.

Kendle felt the power in the air, the need and the concern. She lifted her arms to him, unable to fight it any longer. She needed to feel alive and Adrian could give that to her.

Adrian slid into her hot arms with a groan as their skin met. He lowered his mouth to hers and

sent his hands and magic over her willing body at the same time.

Kendle arched in pleasure. She hung on as Adrian's mouth lowered to deliver a dizzying numbness that sent her flying through the clouds. Each cloud she blew through refilled her energy and lifeforce until she was so full she felt like she might burst.

Adrian pushed deeper, groaning as she climaxed around him. "Yes, yes!"

They came down the hill of light together.

Adrian kissed her gently, wishing it were someone else.

Kendle kissed him and then shoved him off her before things could restart. "I can't take that again yet."

Adrian gathered her against his heat before covering them up. "You'll come to crave that feeling."

Kendle didn't doubt it. Sex with Luke had been satisfying. This was...indefinable.

Adrian lay quietly until she was snoring lightly, and then slowly ran a hand over her stomach. He didn't need a child right now and the spell would keep her from catching pregnant. It wouldn't succeed every time, but it would on first use. After this, he would have to be more careful.

Adrian thought of Marc's words about bringing Angela to him and felt his flesh respond, but his heart cried out in denial. Angela wouldn't allow

Marc to bring her here and she certainly wouldn't submit to his touch. It would never happen.

5

“Don't ever make that suggestion again!”

Marc winced at the shrill snap. He'd told her Adrian was expecting a visit and she'd gotten so angry that Marc had felt the need to take a step back. He hadn't, of course, but the urge had been there.

“Why are you pushing me?”

“I want the baby. I see Neil and Jeremy making it work, and I think about the future. You'll need—”

“Stop.”

Marc did. He wished she wasn't pregnant now, though. It was endangering her and that was terrifying.

“For me too, but I just need a few more days, Marc, and then I can take a break. Just a few days.”

She doesn't even have one. The witch ignored Angela's protests. *It's her or the child.*

“No!” Angela was sorry she couldn't quit shouting. “I have another option.” She sat down in the chair. “Have Conner and Kendle meet me in the doctor's tent in the morning. He'll be gone, so we'll have privacy.”

Marc realized she had opted to try the healing before the baby came and forced himself to agree.

“They'll be there.”

“It might succeed. They're both gifted.”

“Yes.” Marc was suddenly scared. What if he lost Angie and the baby?

“Have Hilda there too.”

Marc would also bring Adrian. He owed Angela for all the hell she’d suffered and if he could help, Marc would insist that Angela let him. Once things were underway, it would be hard for her to refuse.

Angela missed Marc’s thoughts, busy worrying over the choice she’d made. This baby already meant too much to her to lose.

6

“Which one do we want?”

Vlad’s question was met with silence as Melinda considered. They were atop the cliffs, spying on Safe Haven. Melinda was using her gift to determine the best hostage to grab.

Vlad waited impatiently, kicking at mud and flies. He wasn’t worried about noise carrying down the mountain today. The wind was long and loud, and it would cover anything other than an explosion. They’d considered a number of plans and narrowed it down to two. One would have to wait for the weather to cooperate. The other depended on a hostage.

“Her.” Melinda pointed toward a lone vehicle rolling away from Safe Haven.

Vlad narrowed in to discover two men with their target. “Follow them and grab her when you can.

Kill the men and bring their heads as proof. We'll have pikes ready for them.”

Kranten and Melinda left immediately, both eager to have something to do. Neither of them were good at waiting.

Vlad thought to ask why she'd chosen that girl, but decided to wait until they had the hostage, instead of following them to find out. If the girl's gifts were useful, he would have to have another plan ready so they could exploit her afterwards. As of right now, the hostage died.

Vlad began working on a secondary idea. With their numbers so low, they would need all the help they could steal with Jay's alpha power. Being like his father was handy out here and the boy was too young to know he was being used.

Vlad peered down at Safe Haven, trying to spot Missy or Tara. They were also vital to the plan, but he had no way to contact them.

“Won't matter.” Vlad handed a kit of food to the bald man whose name he still hadn't asked for. When the rest of their people in town found out about the train slaughter, they would come here. Vlad planned to send the bald man to tell them as soon as it was light enough to travel by. After that, all Vlad had to do was hold the right advantage when they arrived and Safe Haven would cease to exist.

“Get ready!”

Jennifer had already told them of their tail.

Kyle had also spotted the truck in the distance, but they had all hoped it was one of their people following them after the brief stop in camp for Jennifer to grab the baby while the males grabbed fresh supplies.

Bang!

The gunshot pinging off the hood declared it wasn't one of their people.

“Ram them! She'll flinch!”

Whitney didn't want to play chicken on the winding, one lane road at night, but he obediently hit the gas, hoping Jennifer was right.

The two vehicles sped toward each other, passengers shouting and screaming, and then they were nose-to-nose.

Melinda jerked the wheel, taking her car over the edge.

“Look out!” Kyle yelled as they hit a tree.

Jennifer wrapped herself around the baby seat as glass shattered. The station wagon absorbed most of the impact.

She wiped the debris away from the crying baby, checking for injuries.

“She okay?” Kyle came around to help them out.

“I think so.” Jennifer lifted the baby into her arms.

“What about you?” Kyle looked at Whitney.

“I’m good. But tired of accidents, I’ve got to tell you.”

Kyle understood completely. “Come on. There’s a cabin at the top of this hill.”

The trio walked up the damp road without peering down at the wreckage. The smoke and noises coming up said no one could have survived the hundred-foot fall.

And then Kyle heard a footstep.

“Down!” Kyle spun around to fire.

Jennifer hit the ground as a slug flew over her shoulder, barely missing the baby.

Kyle fired again.

They all watched the man fall over the cliff this time.

Kyle ran to the edge to verify the threat was over.

Jennifer calmed the screaming baby who hadn’t been hurt.

Whitney stared in shock at the scene, unable to believe how fast things could go wrong now.

“Must have jumped when the car went over.” Kyle rejoined Jennifer. “You guys okay?”

“Yes. You saved her.”

Kyle gently turned her toward the cabin, not liking being out in the open. “Let’s get under cover.”

Whitney followed after he grabbed their kits from the smoking car. “Another one bites our dust.” He kicked the wheel as he came around. They would come down tomorrow and drain the fuel.

The trio cautiously eased into the lobby of the filthy Timber Hills cabin rental lodge. The office was covered in moldy papers that had been exposed to the rain for months. The entire place stank.

Kyle reluctantly began erecting his tent near the broken windows. It smelled too rotten to explore the inner rooms. “We’ll go further up in the morning and get something nicer.”

Jennifer was getting used to having her life endangered. “Whatever you say.” She was busy making sure the baby wasn’t hurt.

Kyle let her go, even when Autumn began to protest. Being a mother wasn’t easy.

As night fell, they ate around a small fire that Kyle had built in the lodge fireplace, all of them glad for the feature. The warmth it provided drove the cold back and helped dry out the room, which helped with the smell.

By midnight, the odor was mostly gone and all of them settled down for sleep. Tomorrow, they would set up a perimeter and call base to explain what had happened, but tonight, they needed to rest. It had been a long couple of days; all four of them were sound asleep a short time later, missing their newest problem as it arrived.

Whitney and the baby slept soundly in his sleeping bag on the lobby couch. Neither of them woke when the footsteps came or when hands slowly drugged the canteens. It was a shame that Melinda hadn’t survived the accident, but Kranten

preferred to work alone anyway. His dream charm was almost as strong as Jack's. Capturing them this way would be much safer than trying to fight the gifted teenager now sleeping on her man's chest. When any of them woke, they would eat or drink something, and then be defenseless against whatever he chose to do.

The Italian man had shot him, but Kranten always dressed in vests for moments like this. He marched toward the sleeping baby with only a slight limp.

8

“Should we go check that out?”

Samantha didn't want to, but they'd witnessed the flash and heard the gunshots. That meant it was close to Safe Haven. “Call base and find out if any of ours are making noise in that grid.”

Cynthia handled the call; they all waited uneasily for Angela's answer.

Conner and David were on the opposite side of the fire from Samantha and her girls. Conner had been careful to not even be caught glancing at them. David, on the other hand, made eye contact with Cynthia as much as he could. He liked a little shot of mocha in his women.

The radio crackled with Kenn's grouchy voice. “Boss said that vicinity crawls with trouble for us, to be quick, quiet, and careful.”

Samantha immediately got up and began preparing for war.

The others followed more slowly.

The radio crackled again. “She also says some of ours are in the line of fire.”

That got everyone moving. They rolled up the winding road in two trucks a few minutes later.

9

Jennifer struggled to wake, sensing there was a problem. The fog was thick over her mind. She shoved at it weakly. “Kyle!” She hoped she was yelling, but Jennifer couldn’t be certain as she managed to push a layer of the blurriness from her mind.

“That’s it. Drink up.”

The voice was chilling. Jennifer jerked herself upright and tried to focus on the tent wall. *Who is that?*

“Good, huh? It’s a special brew I made for weak humans. A quick death can be handy.”

Jennifer spotted Kyle on the mattress; eyes open but not alert and realized they’d been drugged. She tried to call out to Angela, but the fog in her mind prevented her from uncovering the door.

“Ah, she’s awake. I knew she’d be strong.”

The sound of a light struggle came and then a man appeared in the tent flap, holding a glassy-eyed baby. “Hello, Jennifer.”

Jennifer screamed in rage at the sight of her child in a stranger's grip, but the drugs overwhelmed her. She dropped to her knees, gasping for breath. This wasn't like the drugs Donner had used. This was fire in her veins—poison. “Give me...my baby!”

“She's perfect leverage.” Kranten smirked. “Your leader will give me anything I want in exchange.”

“What do you want?” Jennifer forced out, fighting with all her will to remain awake.

“Lives. Hers, yours, and many more.”

“You won't get them!” Samantha informed him, swinging as hard as she could.

Kranten had no time to duck the gun butt. He slumped forward over Kyle's body, dropping the baby onto Kyle's lap.

Samantha hurried forward and hit the stranger again, then once more. Blood ran from his nose.

Samantha stepped aside to allow Conner inside the tent to heal the damage from the poison before it could kill Kyle or Jennifer.

“Stop!” Tracy was unable to get Whitney to stop drinking from the poisoned canteen.

Samantha instinctively knew what would free him from the spell. She fired a bullet into Kranten's brain.

Whitney let go of the canteen, blinking... Then he dropped to the ground, puking and bleeding.

Conner rushed to him, forcing his magic in between bouts of vomiting.

The team watched in horror.

Jennifer and Kyle slowly recovered, but the baby being still and silent caused them great concern until they realized Conner had healed her first and then told her to go to sleep. They listened to Whitney's battle for survival, but neither of them left the baby.

Conner was able to get rid of the poisons enough for Whitney to become aware of what was going on. He stumbled to the door to force himself to keep vomiting.

Conner went along to keep him safe and to heal him further.

Samantha waited until it seemed like Whitney would live, then gestured toward their vehicles. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Whitney let himself be loaded into their truck a few minutes later, feeling a little better, but in no condition to be alone. He would be taken to the medical bay, where he would be monitored for side effects.

Jennifer and Kyle also let themselves be herded into the truck. It obviously wasn't a good time for them to be away.

They entered Safe Haven a short time later. The rescue team began providing updates.

Nearby, Marc realized Conner was now empty. There was no way he could help Angie.

Vlad felt Kranten's death, as he had Melinda's. He ground his hand into the fire to keep from screaming his rage. They had underestimated these Safe Haven people again. Too many lives had been paid for those mistakes.

As he glowered toward the scene of the crime, snow began to fall. He didn't pay attention at first, too full of vengeful desire to be alert. When he finally noticed, there was already a thin layer of white covering his camp and making the fire sizzle.

Jay and the bald man stayed out of the way as Vlad approached the noisy fire, expecting him to cover it or kick it out the rest of the way. They didn't expect Vlad to laugh.

Vlad continued to express his amusement as the wind blew harder, bringing more snow. He'd forgotten the first rule of hunting. Use whatever was most abundant.

"Are things okay?" The bald man was ready to flee to their town, or maybe even further. He didn't think these Safe Haven people could be beaten.

"Fine, fine." Vlad waved distractedly. "With the snow, will come new opportunities, my friends. We'll reach out and grab them."

Confused, the bald man put his head back down and tried to sleep through the cold. Maybe everyone had gone insane since the war. That would explain things.

"Get up!" Vlad kicked the man. "You have to go to town—now!"

The man didn't protest, leaving quickly instead. He would find a place to hole up for the night where it was warm, and away from Vlad.

He was quickly gone.

Vlad cackled again. *I'm not beaten yet, not by any means.*

11

Angela slipped from Safe Haven's safety via a weak set of fence links that she planned to have Marc reinforce. Until then, it made a convenient escape route.

Angela slid down the embankment and then took a winding path through the trees that led her up the hillside. Conner and Kendle couldn't help her, and she wouldn't allow Adrian to try. That left one solution and she'd made the choice to take it. She was already damned. There was no reason to resist now, not if it would save the baby.

She stopped in the shadows of Zone C, listening to the shouts, the hatred. *This is so wrong. I can't believe I'm doing this.*

The witch remained silent, also surprised. The demon wasn't positive Angela would follow through, but if she did, everything would change again and forever this time.

Angela let her feet take her to the rear corner of the gated site, zeroing in on ugliness. She didn't need to hear the conversation to know it was bad,

but she listened anyway, hoping it would ease her guilt.

“They’ll open the gates in the morning and we’ll grab whoever it is.”

“They said supplies were coming in this load, so they’ll have too many guards.”

Angela got close enough to peer at the man and woman who were hunkered over a tiny fire to plan their attack.

“We have guns and ammo now, thanks to the daily runs. They won’t be expecting that.”

Angela tried to feel angry that they were plotting to kill her Eagles, but the wrongness of what she was about to do refused to fade.

“We can’t get through their gates,” the man insisted, rubbing his scarred arm. “How do we short circuit their power?”

“If we can get the right hostage, we’ll be let in,” the woman answered.

Angela swallowed a snort. *Why does everyone think I’ll negotiate? Have I been too soft?*

“How about we act like we have an outbreak and lure the doctor in? You heard those sentries talking about the Cholera down in town.”

“Yeah, that might work. Who do we have that’s sick enough?”

“Harvey’s boy, Joel. He had the influenza last month and doesn’t sound healthy.”

“He isn’t,” the man agreed. “We’re studying him for signs that he’s carrying something.”

“So we can spare him,” the woman pointed out. “While they’re killing him, we’ll be grabbing their doctor.”

Angela had heard enough to ease her conscience, but she knew the guilt wasn’t going to leave her after this. “Why don’t you bargain with me?” Angela came from the shadows. “If you have their boss, the guards will open the gates.”

The conspirators recognized her. Not spotting any patrols, both of them came toward her at a fast run.

Angela waited for them to scale the fence, thinking she would have to add that to the security list.

The woman was the first one over. She dropped in front of Angela with a raised fist.

Angela sent a current of heat into the woman’s stomach that took her to the ground. She then faced the much larger, healthier male and began pulling.

Marc forced himself to remain in the shadows. He hadn’t been there for the other kills. He viewed the quick attack in uneasy disappointment. She drained both lives in seconds, not reacting to the woman’s pleas for mercy.

Marc could actually see it helping her. Skin glowing, fullness returning, even her hair was becoming the glossy black that he loved. Marc rotated toward the hole in the fence she’d come through. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it, only that he didn’t want her to know he had witnessed it.

“Too late for that.”

Marc found her right behind him. He waited for the revulsion or disgust that he'd expected to feel. When nothing came, he met her eye in confusion. “Why?”

“I hate him as much as you do. I'd never let him taint our child.”

Marc was a bit stunned. “This won't?”

“No.” Angela sighed unhappily. “She's innocent. I'm the one who's damned.”

Marc followed her. He didn't know how to handle this ruthless stranger—that was clear.

Angela waited for him to be close enough and then slowly reached out to take his hand. His flesh wasn't yielding at first, but he caved quickly and let her place his hand over her stomach. There was now a small bump. Marc was immediately fascinated by the feel of it.

“Would you deny her life, to allow evil a place inside our gates?”

“Never!” Marc let himself be convinced. “Never.”

“They're going to die.” Angela glanced at the zone where the noise had yet to settle down. “This way, they've served a purpose.”

Marc found that hard to argue with, especially after overhearing their plotting. He agreed with Angie's choice, just not her methods.

“I have the same reservations. But I want this baby, Marc. There isn't much I won't do to keep her alive.”

The only life Marc valued more was hers or Charlie's. He tugged her into his arms for a long hug. "Whatever you need."

Angela wiped her tears on his shirt, hoping he didn't notice. He was so much better than she was. She didn't deserve someone so good. She deserved to be with a terrible person...like Adrian.

Adrian studied the couple. Kendle was sleeping blissfully in his tent, but Adrian had known Angela was close. It had drawn him from Kendle's warmth in time to watch her take two lifeforces to heal herself. It was something he'd never thought to witness her do, and while it hurt him—he'd corrupted her—it also gave encouragement.

"She's giving in to the dark side. There's hope."

Adrian reluctantly returned to his tent, telling himself to be patient. She would try hard to abide by the natural laws for a while now, to prove to herself that she hadn't slipped that far. It would be a while yet before an opportunity to bond with her through these mistakes presented itself.

"I can wait. I'll wait 'til hell freezes over to have you and I won't care if you've gone bad. Marc won't take you that way, but I will."

Perception

1

“Go on and print it out.” Angela folded the paper. She would go over it in detail later, especially the interview. Everyone would want to read that a few times.

“You want me to change anything?” Cynthia was a bit nervous. Some of the wording wasn’t supportive of the current leadership.

“Nope. Our people deserve the truth. You’ll give them that.”

“I’ll have it ready to hand out in the morning.”

“Good.”

Surprised, Cynthia left Angela to her stack of papers. She hadn’t expected the first draft of her paper to be approved. In fact, she hadn’t been certain any of her drafts would make it. She’d expected censorship and lies, not freedom to tell the truth.

“I’ve read that draft.” Greg was also sorting through stacks of papers. “It might cause some problems.”

Angela didn’t tell him that sometimes problems were useful. Cynthia would help her push these people back into American values and strength. It

had built the country once and they needed it now, more than ever. Angela opened her notebook. “I think I’m ready.”

Greg lifted the first sheet and got on with the morning updates. “We had another group of refugees come in around dawn. Marc put them in Zone A.”

“The doctor’s home.” Angela could feel his displeasure coming from the medical bay. “Get him on the testing.”

Greg wrote it down. “The ants are making a home in the secondary cave we chose—the one that connects to ours. Is that okay?”

“Yes, but keep them out of ours. Some of our camp haven’t accepted them yet; sharing the cave with them during the snow drew a lot of complaints.”

“I’ll have Jennifer pass the message for them to stay out of sight for a while.”

“Good. She’ll do it without hurting feelings. Have an extra bin of scraps delivered to them each day. That’ll help them to not feel shunned.”

Greg wasn’t sure about ants having emotions, but he didn’t bring it up. He was one of the people who didn’t care for the sight of the mutations, but he did recognize their usefulness.

“Have her ask them about helping take some of our heavier equipment down to the bottom levels. They can carry a hundred times their own weight, so that could be useful.”

“I agree.” Greg stifled a protest about having to work with the ants. If they could carry the heavy machinery down, that would be more than useful. It would be amazing.

“We’ve gone through the first week’s loads that came in. Shane found two wood gas generators at the lumberyard. Theo’s already using them. He said he’ll need a safe place to store the fuel we get from them.”

“That rocks! Have it put in a truck by itself and I’ll send it out to locations that need it.”

Greg didn’t ask for details on that, knowing the answer wouldn’t be one he cared for. If Angela felt the need to stock locations for an emergency, it probably meant that trouble was already verified.

“Not always. Sometimes I’m just being careful.”

Greg didn’t ask any questions. “We’re not uncovering much food. The stores have been cleaned out.”

“I expected that. We’ll do more rationing, quietly. Here’s a list of things for the cook and the garden crews.”

Greg read over it and approved of them. Subtly changing their diet to more bread-based items would slow their supply usage, though it wasn’t healthy. To combat that, Angela was having more vitamins passed out, and releasing their reserve of fish to be consumed now. It would add a couple weeks to their estimates. “No problems on these. Most people won’t notice.”

“Good. I hope it will only be that way for a month or so, and then we’ll have the second harvest from the garden. How are we on animals?”

He checked a sheet. “Not great. And we don’t have anyone free to go searching.”

“We’ll cover that next week. Gatherers will become stockers and we’ll be able to spare a couple of teams then.”

“Good. Next is an update on the settlement in general.”

“Yes, where are we on everything? Any chance we’ll make the morning’s deadline?”

“None at all. The plumbing should be finished today, along with the power. Air is done and working well. A few reports of groans and creaks, but we’ve all agreed that’s normal, considering that we’re drilling, banging, and making plenty of noise while we sweat.” Greg scanned the sheet again. “I’d say we have a shot at twelve days, unless something happens to speed things up.”

Angela wasn’t worried over it. She’d known her deadline wasn’t reasonable, but the cold weather was coming and hurrying these people along had been necessary. “What about sanitation and escape routes?”

“The sanitation will be finished tomorrow if we can get more septic equipment. We’re stuck waiting on loads to come in for that one. However, the escape routes have been reconned, mapped, and we have guards posted.”

“Excellent.” Exiting the cave through those damp bottom tunnels wouldn’t be pleasant and she hoped they didn’t need to use them.

“We do have full loads of wood, gravel, sand, and dirt. Very low on water and fuel.”

“That’ll be better after today. The water from Neil’s run will hold us for the rest of the month. We also have a team collecting from the northern oil refinery now.”

“Okay. Next is...Eagle training. Marc left sheets for you to approve. He said Kenn and Shawn did well on them.”

“I’ll go over it later, with these other things.” She put the papers into her book. “Who do I have meetings with today?”

Greg consulted his schedule. “They’re all covered. Marc handled the doctor, Samantha told Conner he isn’t getting back in here yet, and that’s it.”

“Really? I’ve got a free hour?”

Greg laughed at her innocent pleasure. She was cute when she wasn’t being the boss. “Last thing I have is Tara. She asked for a different job. I told her we need hands in the caves and she agreed to try that.”

Angela’s demeanor turned cold. “Any word from her settling partners?”

“None that I’ve noticed.” Greg quickly scanned his papers again. “She follows the rules and stays out of the way.”

“And Missy?”

Greg gestured toward the kids' area, where a large group of children and their chaperones were lined up to enjoy field trip day. Missy was with Leeann. The two girls were chatting happily and ignoring everything else around them. "Seems content enough."

Angela didn't comment, staring at the little girl. Missy's gifts were incredible, but Angela didn't want her to use them. She needed time to be a kid before being a descendant consumed her life. Angela stood up, pocketing her notebook. "I'll be on rounds."

Greg nodded. She looked better today than she had the entire time they'd been here. It was heartening.

Greg whistled as he strolled to the front gate for a check in with the guards over Zone C. That was the area he didn't have an update on yet and he wanted to have it ready if the boss asked for it.

Angela headed for the female tents, hoping to catch Hilda before she started her day of working in the caves. If Hilda were willing, she would submit to a new exam and discover if she and the baby were out of danger for a while. The lifeforces were capable of healing many things; Angela needed to hear that her horrible gambit had succeeded. She'd already given her soul to these people. She shouldn't be required to sacrifice her unborn child too.

Neil slid into the shower stall with a groan. “That feels good.”

A few stalls over, Jeremy chuckled. “Yeah, hot water will cause that reaction.”

Neil let it beat on his sore shoulders while he stared through the window. He and his team were going back out after lunch mess to supervise the collection of water from the treatment plant. As he stared, he caught a glimpse of Samantha going by. Her pace wasn't the confident stroll that Neil was used to. He frowned. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure,” Jeremy answered, not hearing the tone. He was busy ignoring his body while he washed.

“Have you, uh...” Neil flushed. “Have you and Samantha been... You know.”

Jeremy grimaced. *So much for ignoring my needs.* “No, not since the night we got here.”

Neil felt heat rise at that memory, but the concern overruled it. “I haven't either.”

Now Jeremy was the one frowning as he realized what Neil was getting at. “You think she's hiding something or just not in the mood? We've all been pretty busy.”

“I'm not sure, and I'm out again after lunch, so I can't watch her.”

“I can.” Jeremy finished rinsing. “I will.”

Neil got a rag wet. “I know it's only been a little over a week and being pregnant has to screw with things, but it isn't normal for her. You know?”

“Yeah.” Now that it had been pointed out, Jeremy agreed. Samantha’s sexual appetite was new to them, but it had been voracious from the instant they’d started having contact. For her to go cold turkey wasn’t normal. “I can try to talk to her about it.”

“That’ll go well.” Neil snorted. “Let me know when you plan to do it so I can be there to sew you up.”

Jeremy snickered. “Okay, I’ll let you know if I spot anything we should be worried over.”

Neil hoped that would be enough. He already knew Samantha wasn’t going to want to talk about anything that might be wrong. “Do you think she’d talk to someone else? Like maybe Cynthia?”

Jeremy considered it. “They have gotten close. Maybe.”

“I might mention it to her before I leave.” Neil soaped up. “You’ll have to deal with the fallout if Samantha figures out it came from us.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth it to make sure she’s okay.”

“I agree. I’ll do that when I’m finished here.”

Jeremy didn’t tell Neil that he’d seen Cynthia stomping toward the gates, where the next teams were getting set to leave for the day’s labor out of camp. The reporter wasn’t happy. Jeremy was almost certain it was because Conner was working with them. He wasn’t supposed to have that information, but he’d overheard Samantha and Cynthia complaining about it. Jeremy wasn’t happy

about the arrangement either, but he trusted Angela. If she thought the boy deserved a second chance, then he did.

Jeremy's thoughts went to Adrian; he drew a mental line. That criminal didn't deserve to be let back in and Angela needed to be careful about using him, even from a distance. If people thought she was conspiring with a traitor, she would lose control and that would be bad for everyone. Angela was a gifted leader. Safe Haven wouldn't be the same without her.

Neil's thoughts stayed on Samantha. He'd noticed more things off about her, other than the lack of sex and the weaker body language, but he was hesitant to explore them. Samantha had spent a lot of time in the west, on foot and in compounds that had been contaminated with radiation. Neil was terrified that she was one of the members trying to hide a disease diagnosis.

3

"He'll have another nasty scar." The doctor subtly kept Kyle between himself and Jennifer. "Nothing else wrong with him."

"See?" Kyle gestured. "I told you we didn't need to come in."

Jennifer didn't rise to the bait. She'd insisted the doctor give Kyle a complete checkup and though neither man had been happy about it, she'd gotten her way.

“Your turn?”

Jennifer scowled; the doctor shook his head.

“I have a lot of work today.”

“I’m spending the day with my sons after this.”

Kyle grinned at both of them. “Cowards.”

The doctor couldn’t deny it, but Jennifer slapped Kyle on the arm. “Stop it. You know he’s scared of me.”

“With good reason. You’re a vicious killer.”

Kyle had meant it as a joke, but both of them wincing made him take it to the next level. “I mean, we all know how terrified the babies and animals are of you.”

Jennifer recognized the joke, but the doctor took it as an insult.

“I’m not scared of her. I just don’t like it when people get special treatment.”

Jennifer laughed, unable to help it. “Yeah, special.”

Kyle loved the sound of her laughter. “I think so.”

Drawn into their bond against his will, the doctor was forced to accept that the teenager also had a soft side. She was gentle with Kyle and with her daughter, who the doctor had double checked for signs of abuse.

“You’ll never find any!” Jennifer was instantly angered at the mental accusation. “I’m capable of love and kindness. That may not be true of you!” Jennifer left the medical tent, slamming the flap in a vain effort to express her outrage.

Kyle sighed. “You’ve gotta stop doing that. People here are tired of being prejudged.”

The doctor didn’t respond. He was busy trying to soothe his guilt for hurting Jennifer’s feelings. *She shouldn’t have been in my mind. I hate that!*

Kyle followed Jennifer, pulling his shirt on over the thick scar that should still be a gaping wound capable of taking his life. Kendle had done fast, amazing work. Kyle knew that was part of the reason Jennifer had insisted on the checkup. She didn’t trust Kendle.

“No, I don’t.” Jennifer let go of her anger at the doctor in favor of her anger at Kendle. “She’s going to keep messing around with Marc and we’ll get the order to remove her. I don’t want that to happen.”

Kyle didn’t say Adrian would be the one to get that order. “We need to help her adjust and find someone other than the traitor.”

Jennifer glanced at Kyle. “You have to forgive him sometime, you know. He’s not going anywhere.”

“I won’t. Ever.”

Jennifer thought in time Kyle might be able to understand why Adrian had made those choices, but she agreed with the sentiment. What Adrian had done was awful and it had hurt his men more than anyone else. Those in his army had been believers.

“The puppy is almost trained and ready to come home with us.” Kyle neatly switched the topic. “Next couple of weeks.”

“Nice! I haven’t played with him in a while.”

Safe Haven animals were now put through a training program before being handed over to an owner, and the owners had to know the methods and continue them. Angela had added it to Adrian's program not long after they'd had their dog uprising. So far, the few dogs here hadn't shown any signs of following their fellow canines, but the Eagles were watching for it. Jennifer was going to the weekly training lessons, where she often scanned the animals as well.

"Can I bother you for a minute?"

Kyle and Jennifer rotated to find Sheila behind them. The former slave from Cesar's camp had chosen to remain with the camp for Angela's war and she'd been keeping her head down since then.

"What?!" Jennifer had little forgiveness for any of them.

Sheila flushed, hesitating.

Jennifer turned away. Reading her mind had barely taken an instant. "No, I won't." After finding Lilly with her baby, Jennifer had no sympathy. "My forgiveness isn't for sale, so keep your offers."

Kyle caught up to Jennifer, but he didn't give her the expected lecture on forgiveness. He had his own demons to fight in that area.

4

Tonya spotted her target and beelined for the mess before she could lose her nerve. Dealing with other people was hard for her sometimes. Tonya

dropped onto the bench across from Peggy, smiling. "I have something for you."

Peggy, who was watching for Doug, frowned. "What?"

Tonya slid a large baggie over, glad she'd thought to put it in a sack first.

Peggy realized it was the next batch for the cancer drinks and allowed a small bit of approval to come through. "I'll take care of it. Thank you."

"Welcome." Tonya lingered instead of leaving right away like she had been doing.

Peggy frowned. "You all right?"

"I need to ask you for something."

"What?" Peggy couldn't think of anything Tonya would ask for that was over the line now. Things had changed.

"I'd like your help birthing my baby."

"You what?" Peggy repeated distractedly. She'd caught sight of Doug's big shoulders coming through the line with his tray.

"You're nice and I know you plan to help some of the other women here." Tonya shuddered. "I won't go to the new guy. He creeps me out."

"Creeps you out," Peggy repeated. "Got it."

"Yes, and I could even do a couple of your shifts, if you feel like teaching me."

Peggy wanted the woman gone. "Sure, fine."

"Thanks!" Tonya beamed, standing up. "Kenn was right about asking you. You are nice."

Before Tonya could add anything else, Peggy lunged from the table and stabbed Doug in the arm.

“Son of a...!”

Startled, Tonya quickly backed out of the mess and fled for the pharmacy.

“There you are.”

Tonya jumped, spinning to discover Samantha waiting by the shaded corner of the pharmacy tent. None of her helpful rookies were here yet. Tonya tried not to appear nervous as she opened the tent and stepped behind the makeshift counter. “What do you need? We’ve got a fresh supply of baby wipes now, and toilet paper, but only one per person.”

“I need something that you have to keep your mouth shut about.” Samantha had accepted Tonya on the team because the redhead could hold her own. It didn’t mean she liked her.

“Fine, as long as it doesn’t break the rules.”

Samantha blinked, not used to Tonya being upstanding. She also wasn’t used to the short hair. “I need you to tell Neil and Jeremy that I came in for the wipes.”

“Okay.” Tonya handed her the thin package. “And what am I really giving you?”

“Something to keep me from starting each day by puking.”

Tonya’s quick mind added it up. “You’re having trouble and you haven’t told them?”

Samantha came further into the tent, trying to appear menacing. “No, and you’re not going to either!”

Tonya chuckled, not scared of Samantha. “I will, if you don’t convince me you have a good

reason.” Tonya began digging through her bins. “I’ve got what you need, but take it easy on them. Studies hadn’t determined long term effects on a fetus.”

Samantha was surprised again at how professional Tonya sounded. “Did you have experience at this before?”

Tonya shrugged. “Not legally.”

Samantha took the bottle. “I’m sick and the doctor can’t do anything. He wouldn’t even give me something to calm my stomach. Said it was a waste of supplies since I’m gonna die anyway.”

“Sick with what?” Tonya forced out through the shock.

Samantha leaned in and revealed her misery. “Cancer, John said.”

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.” Samantha shrugged. “But I’m going to have these babies and you can help me with that.”

“I will. I’ll do some reading when I get time and see if there’s anything else we can do.”

Tonya’s quick offer to help eased Samantha’s mind about coming to her. She lingered, waiting for her shift time to roll around. As she hung around, she realized Tonya had a calming effect on people. Her customers left happy, with what they came for, and her trade requests were reasonable. Tonya had become friendly, open. It was a good half hour for Samantha, who needed to believe in miracles. No

one thought cancer was beatable, but no one had thought Tonya capable of this level of reform either.

Samantha slipped out as the next customers came in for Advil and wipes. Tonya had beaten the odds and now had an entirely new life. Samantha was certain she could do the same.

“Hey!” Cynthia had her kit in hand. “Ready for another fun day?”

“Yep.” Samantha grinned. “If we give Candy one of Li’s egg rolls, she’ll get gas again...”

The women laughed at the memory. They were still snickering as they began loading their gear onto the horses the animal crew had ready for them. They were only a few miles from home and they needed to conserve fuel, but Samantha didn’t think she could take another ride down the mountain on a jostling horse. She glanced over at the team next to them. Allan’s crew was piling into a large van that would return with the supplies from the electric store that Kyle had secured before getting hurt. “You guys feel like helping a lady?”

Cynthia stared in surprise as Samantha bartered a ride for them to the bottom of the hill, arranging for the horses to be tied to the rear and the driver to go slow.

“What’s up with that?” Tracy was also surprised. Their first day on horses, Samantha hadn’t wanted to get off hers.

“I think she’s feeling restless and trying not to let herself get out of control.” Cynthia sighed. “Or

she's hiding something. I'd rather believe my first guess."

"So would I." Tracy liked Samantha and had deep respect for her. Finding out she was hiding lies, like some of the others here, would be a huge disappointment.

Samantha didn't answer the glances or raised brows as she gestured to the van. "All aboard, ladies." They would discover it at some point, but for now, Samantha didn't want to discuss her future. All she was concerned with was giving birth to two healthy babies. After that, she could worry about herself.

5

"I think it's selfish. We don't have to eat meat."

Ray turned to find out who said that and clamped his lips shut as he saw Chris and the rest of Billy's crew entering the gate. The veterinarian was staunch in his beliefs that the animals should be protected, not eaten, but the camp refused to listen. Ray agreed. Meat was a key to life. Vegetables and fruits would keep a person alive, but Ray didn't think they actually satisfied the body. Many of his old friends had tried those diets, wanting a more natural existence, but the illnesses that had come afterwards had convinced Ray that meat was important.

Chris nodded to Ray as he came through the gate. Ray gave a bob in return, but didn't take his

attention from the afternoon surroundings. The refugees in Zone C had discovered missing members and then held a fight to determine who would lead them next. The loser's bodies were currently sprawled outside their area.

Ray was waiting for it to draw the ants. Angela had told them not to remove bodies that nature needed. Ray was hoping seeing the ants dragging off the corpses would settle these new people down. Even the other refugees in Zone A and B were afraid of them. Ray thought it was smart of Angela to separate the wild arrivals from the others. Those two-dozen survivors were trouble.

"I can't believe Chris joined the Eagles. I thought he'd always be the veterinarian." Dale had climbed the first rafter to spend the last minutes of his shift together.

Ray didn't send him away. Many of the other men had their girlfriends here at the end or start of their shifts and Ray was tired of denying Dale the same benefit. "He might do okay." Ray scanned the southern border that ran along the road. The street was busy today, but so far, all of the traffic was Safe Haven crews.

The other Eagles who noticed Dale standing by Ray on the rafter turned away from the couple. They no longer beat the gay men, but ignoring them was common.

Dale's face puckered up. "I hate that. Why do they do that?"

“They don’t like what we do, they don’t agree with it. We’ve talked about this.”

“But why do they even care?”

“Because we’re not hiding it. Do you like being forced to watch something you don’t like?”

Dale frowned. “Why do you always defend them? They’re wrong.”

“This is America, Dale. They have the right to dislike it, as much as we have the right to do it.”

“We were changing that before the war, changing the laws to include us,” Dale reminded his lover. “We could do that again.”

The bell rang for shift change as Ray stared at Dale in disapproval. “Didn’t you learn anything from the war?!” Ray jumped from the rafter as his relief exchanged places.

Dale hurried after him, not sure what he’d done wrong. “Wait!”

Ray did, only because so many people stopped to stare. He didn’t want them to know he and Dale were having an argument. They were already in the gossip too often. They didn’t need to add more fodder.

“I’m sorry for what I said. I’ve learned a lot since it all blew up.”

Ray took a deep breath and gently grasped Dale’s hand. “Listen to me, okay? It’s important.”

Dale nodded eagerly, thrilled with the public display of affection.

“There has to be equal protection for everyone and the line is American. Not gay, not minority, not handicapped, but American. We’re all equal.”

“When there are more of us, that won’t be how things happen,” Dale stated firmly. “I’m not an activist, but even I recognize the opportunity for changing things from the beginning this time. Why wait another two hundred years for equality?”

“Because that’s not equal. That’s us being set aside as something other than American and I won’t allow it.” Ray no longer cared about the listening people around them. “When others come, we’ll make them understand or we’ll drive them out of here. Safe Haven is a paradise and it will decide the laws for the entire country at some point. We’ll help with that—fairly.” Ray let go of Dale’s hand and straightened his shoulders. “And just so you know, the others who come here won’t be my kind. I’m an Eagle, a full member of Safe Haven. They’ll have to try to be *my* kind before I can ever spend time around them.”

“Because of the preconceived notions here.”

“No,” Ray refused to let it go. “I’m not just gay, white, Christian, or any of those other labels. I refuse to be a part of the problem anymore. I’m an American. That’s all I need for my identity and I’d bet survivors in other lands feel the same right about now.”

“Do you think I’m part of the problem?”

Ray sighed. “Maybe a little, but everyone is. We have to try harder to be better people. All that other stuff doesn’t matter. It never did.”

A few of the people going by were giving the two men approving looks. Ray realized that was something everyone had been waiting to hear. Knowing he and Dale had no plans to restart the old politics had given them a new level of acceptance. “Let’s get some food and spend the day roaming the new tents they’re putting up. I heard one of them is a movie theater.”

Dale returned the eager glance; the couple walked to the mess without feeling the usual sneers of ignorance. It was a nice moment. Ray absorbed it. He was tired of the constant stress. It had been a long nine months since the war and he needed the break that Angela had told them all was coming. Everyone did.

6

“Break time! Sniper switch.” Adrian had brought all of his camp with him today. They’d been toiling alongside the women until about noon, when Adrian had pulled the men off work detail and spent time on training. He was covering the guard duty over the women, but his ten other men were now just as sweaty and filthy as the females. He’d put them through basic rookie training today, jumping them faster than he had any of his other teams. As a

result, they were exhausted and viewing him with hostile thoughts.

Adrian, also filthy from demonstrations, climbed the nearest telephone pole and signaled Conner down. “Stay away from them.”

Conner intended to. He was still embarrassed about Candy farting on him and making everyone laugh, but he also wanted to make peace with her. The slightly noticeable stomach bump hadn’t changed his interest in her, but it had given him a new respect. She was going to be a mother. Conner had adored his; it was now harder to view Candy as a sexual object because of that.

Conner slid into the truck they’d pushed aside; glad to be out of the wind. It wasn’t cold until the air gusted and then his eyes watered and wouldn’t stop.

Conner wiped his face and lay against the seat, ready to snooze until his dad called him for the rest of his shift. Hoping to get half an hour, the teenager shut his lids and let himself relax. He wasn’t recovered from saving Jennifer and the others yet. He hadn’t ever taken a life force and he wouldn’t. His recoveries would be natural and slow.

Steps crunched outside the door.

Conner refused to look. If it was trouble, his dad would yell.

Samantha knocked on the window, not feeling bad when the boy jumped. “Put it down.”

Conner cranked the window open, frowning. “What?”

Samantha bent down.

The teenager immediately leaned away. Her unstable emotions were easy to read.

Samantha didn't try to stop him as he dug into her mind.

Conner groaned as he understood what she wanted. "This is what he meant when he said I'd never have any peace."

Sam winced, but didn't reply. She waited for him to decide her fate with a mind flashing through scenes of her death and the effects it might have on Safe Haven.

"You guys are gonna use me up." He was already exhausted.

"I'll get you time with her," Samantha blurted, flushing guiltily. "She doesn't hate you."

Conner had stiffened, considering the offer. He reluctantly shook his head. "It can't work that way. I'll help you because it's the right thing to do."

Samantha, relieved, smiled at the tired boy. "Thank you."

Conner shrugged it off. "Can you let me sleep a little now?"

Samantha left him alone. She would make sure he got rest and anything else he needed. She would also try to get Candy to spend a little time with him. Once he saw Candy as a pregnant woman with a nasty attitude, his infatuation would go away and then they might even be able to be in the same camp together.

Samantha had taken Angela's words to heart about second chances. Conner was young and dumb, an excuse she hadn't had when she'd made her own huge mistakes. Holding onto a grudge against the son because of the father wasn't fair. Samantha intended to let it go.

She glared at the sniper above them, face darkened. *But not that one. That's my line.*

7

"I can't see the lines on this road." Shane was driving the crew to base. "I didn't expect the paint to fade so fast."

"Wow, I didn't think about it. Only nine months. That's a riot!" Nathan was one of the kids from Angela's airfield rescue and young. He often said things that his older companions ignored. The pregnant girl from that same rescue was almost the exact opposite. When she spoke, people listened.

"It got dark fast." Tommy yawned. They'd spent the day loading the last of the water. All of their crew was ready for a hot shower and sleep. The trucks had been sent ahead while they finished clearing out a small room of vending machine snacks and toiletries. Thanks to Li Sing's all-day meal packing, they'd been well fed and watered, but none of them had thought to bring painkillers for their sore muscles. They had items in their medical kits, but all of them were reluctant to use those things except in an emergency.

“Hey, is that a light on in that house?”

Everyone peered through the dusty van windows at Nathan’s excited question.

A tremor reached their vicinity at that moment. The road shifted under them, vibrations pounding through the tires, and then the street under them buckled. Shane lost control of the van. It slid with the crumbling pavement, tilting, and then rolled the rest of the way down the cliff.

The van came to a stop upside down, with dust and glass billowing from the impact.

The rumbling didn’t last long. As it faded, the door to the house opened and a small group of people rushed out with torches and guns.

8

Shawn shifted his Colt to a better position so he could lean against the cold cliff. It felt good on his spine. Shawn was on duty outside the Eagle training area and though the tremor had brought a few people from their tents and the cave, things had already quieted down. Marc and Zack were making rounds and Angela hadn’t even come from her tent.

We’re getting used to the new environment. Shawn scanned the far perimeter. The snipers would be on full alert right now, as all the Eagles were, but Shawn didn’t expect problems. Even the refugees in Zone C were quiet. Around 3am, the temperature had dropped into the 40s. Everyone not required to be out here had sought the warmth of shelters.

Shawn was enjoying it. He had long underwear under his thicker Eagle clothes, and the only part of him that even felt the cold was his face. He had the mask in his pocket that all of them had found in their gear yesterday, but he wasn't planning to use it. He didn't like how it limited his vision.

A movement nearby drew Shawn's attention; he quietly ducked into the deeper shadows of the cliff to remain undetected. Someone had come from the large tent area. He could have assumed he or she had permission of the guard on that vicinity, but he didn't. As cold as it was, those two sentries might have gone into the station tent to get warm and missed it.

The person was wearing a long dress and tall boots. Shawn carefully followed as she took the path toward the front row of tents. Those were all secured at this time at night. Anyone needing items from them had to talk to the man on point—Marc—who had the keys. Stock inside the tents was crated and padlocked each evening.

The woman paused near the pharmacy tent, and then kept going down the lane. She took a left at the end, toward the new activity tents that Kenn had been working on all day.

Shawn found Logan in the station tent and waved to get his attention. When the man realized there was a problem, Shawn used the Eagle hand code to give instructions. He told the man to stay where he was and act as if he hadn't witnessed anything.

Curious, Logan did as he was told, trying not to glance at the woman about to vanish into the garden area. There wasn't a guard in there yet since it was still under construction.

Shawn waited for the woman to get out of sight and then gestured for Logan to alert the others on duty. Shawn advanced on quick, quiet feet, drawing his Colt as he entered the darkness. He flipped on his Surefire light and found the woman cowering along the wall next to the bags of seed. "Don't move!"

Tara cringed, hands coming up. "I'm sorry. Don't shoot!"

Shawn eased closer, sweeping her for weapons. Her hands were empty, face flushed. "What are you doing here?"

Tara stood up, trying to smile. "Getting a moment alone with you."

Shawn stared in surprised confusion. "Excuse me?"

Tara took a step toward him, shielding her eyes from his light. "I know what she told you, about us. Can we talk?"

"You snuck out so I would follow you here?"

Tara flashed a brighter smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean for you to think I was doing something wrong."

Shawn indicated the coming guards. "They won't believe that. Neither do I."

Realizing she was in trouble, Tara paled. "Hey, wait. I didn't do anything wrong."

Shawn felt her fear. He believed her, despite his words. “Tell them you got lost. If they hear the truth, I’ll never live it down.”

Tara nodded quickly, coming over to take his arm. Sparks flew at the contact. “I am sorry. Please don’t be mad.”

Shawn couldn’t feel anything but attraction. He led her from the darkness with a curt gesture to the waiting Eagles. “It’s okay. She just got lost.”

The other Eagles, who had been dealing with that same reply since they arrived, chuckled and returned to their posts. The layout would be better when it was finished. The signs were already painted and waiting for the structures to be in place.

Shawn holstered his Colt and led Tara toward the tents, conscious of how it felt to have a woman on his arm. Aware of his distraction, Shawn gestured for a rookie—Joseph—to take his post.

Tara allowed their bodies to brush as they walked, giggling when Shawn stumbled.

Shawn tried harder not to trip over his own feet. He’d had a quick moment with Leslie right after she’d first joined Safe Haven, but he could hardly remember it now. Especially with Tara’s perky breast brushing his arm.

The tent guards hurried out to meet them.

Shawn realized the pair was dating. He quickly added a note to his book while Courtney and Howard watched in dismay.

Shawn escorted Tara all the way to her tent, frowning a bit when he saw Missy’s shadow and

realized Tara had left the girl alone to come find him. *Not good. She'll need the parenting classes Angela wants drafted.* "I'll have evening mess without my friends tomorrow. You can join me and we'll talk."

"In front of everyone?"

Shawn nodded. "I don't sneak around for anyone."

Tara flushed, taking her arm from his. "Maybe I shouldn't either!" She ducked into the tent without giving him time to respond.

Shawn stared at the zipping flap. "What did I say?"

He heard Tara's snort, but she didn't speak and he left. He had no idea what he'd done wrong.

The guards were concerned with the punishment that would come; they remained outside the hut, not chatting and flirting as they'd been doing earlier. The boss wouldn't be happy when she found out they had let someone get by unnoticed.

As Shawn returned to his post, he found more movement where there shouldn't have been any. He hit his radio. "Breach in the training area!"

Eagles and lights flooded the area. Shawn stayed where he was as a man was dragged violently from the training tent.

Marc appeared seconds later and jerked the man up by his shirt to find out who it was.

Darian grimaced, blood dripping from his lip. "I got lost."

Marc gave the man a harsh shake. “Well, you’re found now. Come on. We have the brig ready. Kenn finished it today.”

Shawn watched the man be taken to their new jail, full of new worry and guilt. Tara hadn’t received that type of treatment. *Is she worthy of my protection?*

He didn’t have an answer to that and he vowed to get one. If she was bad, he didn’t want her.

Chapter Sixteen BK6
I'm Everywhere

1

Adrian slipped into his site by jumping from the ledge above. The neat move required good timing and a certain level of physical fitness. It was encouraging to him after all the time he'd spent feeling weak and he enjoyed a moment of pride.

"Where have you been?"

Conner's voice in the darkness was unexpected. Adrian slipped as he spun, landing on his ass in the damp dirt.

Conner couldn't keep from snickering, but he knew to retreat. Making fun of Adrian while in range wasn't smart.

Adrian sighed, picking himself up. *That's what I get for being proud of my skills.*

Conner's chuckles continued, sending a flush over Adrian's cheeks, but he controlled the urge to strike out. It was often funny when someone fell. He wouldn't punish the boy for being human.

Adrian took his shirt off and tossed it over a nearby branch to scrub later. He used the dew on the foliage around them to clean his hands, then headed for his tent.

Conner followed, observing eagerly. Almost all of his survival knowledge had come firsthand, after careful trips into the Little Rock Public Library. His mother hadn't been allowed to teach him things that weren't approved.

Adrian was zipping his jacket over a black turtleneck when Conner peered into the tent. He noticed the missing dog tags, but didn't comment on it. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"No." Adrian slid his gun into its holster. "But you can answer mine. Why did you agree to heal Samantha?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because she didn't shoot you or try to remove your limbs." Adrian thought of Jeremy's Jeepster. "Samantha has a quick fuse."

"How did you know she's sick or that she asked me?"

"She was on John's list of positive tests, and there isn't anything else she would want from you."

Conner let that sink in. His father was smart. He would have a lot to teach.

"Yes, I will. To people who are worthy."

"What do you want from me? I'm trying!"

"Yes, you are."

"But?" Conner frowned as Adrian began gathering things into a kit.

"Unless you prove yourself, those women won't ever trust you."

"So?"

“So, they hold your fate, boy. When they go to Angela and tell her that you’re reformed, she can let you back inside those gates.”

“How do I become *reformed*?” Conner asked sullenly, saying the word as if it were a disease.

“Start by telling me why you agreed to help Samantha.”

“Selfish reasons.” Conner moved to let Adrian through the flap. “Same goal.”

“The methods matter.” Adrian went toward their small center fire. “Do you like her, as a person? Do you like her men? Do you feel bad for her children?”

“That one!” Conner exclaimed, choice of words proclaiming his youth and inexperience. “I do feel bad for the kids.”

“Good.” Adrian lightly kicked the heels of soldiers—some already awake, some not. “It doesn’t excuse using her to get in, but it does show that you’re not totally corrupt. A descendant who has gone bad will slaughter children to attain their goals.”

“I’d never do that.”

“We know you can feel compassion for kids. What else?”

Conner concentrated. “Um... I care about a few people in there, like Charlie and maybe even Becky.”

“Why haven’t you tried to make contact with them?”

“It’s against the rules.”

Adrian sensed the evasion. “You’re scared.”

“Yeah.” Conner flushed unhappily. “What if they tell me to get lost?”

“Becky probably will.” Adrian shrugged. “She’s been through a lot. I’m not sure forgiveness is big on her list.”

“Charlie will too. He likes the good, the right. He might even tell on me.”

“There’s always a chance. But what is life without risk?” Adrian motioned to the soldiers using Eagle code and was pleased when all of them understood and started getting ready for the daily duties he’d given them. They’d clearly been practicing. Adrian sent good vibes to wash over the dozen men. “Excellent.”

Conner also felt the pleasure, but didn’t get to enjoy it, since he hadn’t been the intended target. It was disappointing and motivating at the same time. “I’ll try harder.”

Adrian smiled at his son. “I know and you’ll succeed if you remember to put yourself last in every way, even in your thoughts. The correct solutions are always easier to reach when you remove yourself from the picture.”

The soldiers began leaving.

“Hey, are they headed down to the site?”

“Yes, but you’re not. You’re with me today.”

Conner wanted to protest not being told, but the only thing he wanted in the world more than time around Candy was time with his dad. “Okay.”

“We need to make a supply run. On the way, we’ll be hunting and doing recon. And I’ll give you a few ways to keep up your energy. Our gifts can be depleted if we use them up too quickly.”

Conner ran to get his own kit. He didn’t have much in it right now.

“We’ll eat on the road.” Adrian kicked dirt over the smoldering embers of the fire. “Check your gun.”

Conner was used to this part of a descendant’s life. Adrian was pleased with the smooth motions. “Good. Let’s go.”

Kendle came through the trees. “Mind if I tag along?”

Conner’s face tightened.

Adrian lifted a brow. “You’re on second shift. Have you slept?”

“A little. I’m good for a couple hours and then you can send me back.”

Adrian glanced at Conner. “Next time.”

Kendle had expected it after overhearing Adrian’s last words. “Okay. Maybe I can sleep in your bed. Mine certainly isn’t cutting it.”

Adrian grinned, ignoring Conner’s blush. “In roughly fifteen hours, I’ll join you.”

Kendle didn’t tell him she would be on duty then.

Adrian led Conner down the mountain by means of a side path he’d discovered. He didn’t want to get close to Zone C right now. None of those people were happy.

“Someone came in our gate last night!”

“We want to report a killing!”

Kenn didn't leave his place on the gate. The rookies were getting a taste of a shift here; Kenn already hated it. He used the speaker that echoed into all of the quarantine zones. “The boss will handle it. Stay calm and tell us what happened.”

“Someone came in and killed two of our biggest men!”

“We want justice!”

“We want inside your gates!”

Angela shook her head. “Tell them my decision.”

Kenn hit the button again. “Word just came down, folks. Those people in Zone C will not be let into Safe Haven. Please take your things and leave.”

Shouts and horrible insults began flying. Kenn was glad they had another hour until it was time to open their gates.

“Open it now.” Angela had a tripled patrol here right now if she included all the rookies. She wasn't worried about any of the troublemakers getting inside. She didn't honestly want to kill them in front of her camp either, but if they didn't leave, that's exactly what would happen.

Hoping to forestall it, Angela climbed to the second tier of rafters and let her eyes glow that dangerous red.

The witch surrounded her with protection.

Angela let the bubble around herself be seen. She didn't want to start her day with murder, but none of those people would be allowed in here.

Around the main gates, the other zone people came from their tents to glare and mutter.

“We ain't leavin'!”

“Come out and make us!”

Angela denied the Eagles who would have responded to the challenge. “We have plans in place for this.”

Angela signaled Jennifer.

Jennifer whistled toward the far edge of their circular site, where the ants had set up their colony in the secondary cave. People stopped what they were doing to gawk as a long line of soldier ants scurried from their cave and rushed toward the zones.

Instead of going through the crowd, the insects were able to run along the cliff to get to the zone. The people there began screaming as the ants overwhelmed the opening gate. Being used like farm dogs, the ants herded the people from the zone instead of attacking them. A few of the men refused to be driven out and the soldier ants did kill those, using their powerful jaws to clamp down on tender throats after the men were covered and forced to their knees. It was ugly for those in the other zones.

Angela motioned to Kenn. “Explain this to them.”

“Like anyone could do that,” Kenn muttered, but he dutifully hit his radio. “Those people refused to leave and they threatened us. We will not tolerate that. Follow the rules. If we tell you to leave, then leave.”

The mutters calmed a bit. Kenn looked at Angela. “We’re not doing this to the other people, are we?”

Angela shook her head, though she wasn’t positive about all of the four dozen people they had split among the other zones. “We won’t have to.”

Kenn didn’t like the answer, but he didn’t argue. Angela was capable of determining who was good and who was bad, a needed skill at any time, but one that was especially useful now. *Unlike my own gifts.* His were innate and usually not visible to other people, even descendants.

“Why?”

Zone C people shouted as they got away from the insects and went down the hill.

“Why can’t we come in?”

“Tell us why! We can change.”

Angela stepped carefully around Kenn and hit the button. “You have a killer among you and I can’t tell who it is. You don’t care, you won’t share, and you burned the Safe Haven rules without even reading them. You conspired to take over my settlement as soon as you’re inside. You’ve plotted the death of each man on this gate, and because I don’t *like* you!”

Angela's voice had increased as she listed their offenses.

For a full minute, there was silence. As she waited, she rubbed the deep scar that occasionally ached. She could still feel the wolf's teeth against her skin, hot and hungry. It made her wince as the screams and shouts resumed.

The radio crackled. "Boss, there's a call for you."

Angela left the gate without giving any instructions. If the people didn't go, the ants would continue to flush them down the mountain. Kenn was about to think of the crews waiting there and get on the radio to make calls. Her men were caring and sharing, and they would survive. Most of the camp was signing up for the classes or the Eagles. Weeding through that list had been harder than she'd expected. Self-respect was returning to her entire camp; there was no way she would let in new disruptions without a good reason.

3

Seth and Becky stayed on the rafters of the main gate, both ready to offer assistance. Angela's instructions had said to be helpful to the Eagles in whatever way they were needed. So far, it had simply been giving other guards short breaks, but the people from Zone C were unhappy. Most of them had fled down the road, but a few were attempting to get by the ants and regain the safety

of the gated area. The guards had little sympathy for them. If Angela said they were bad, then they were.

“You okay?” Seth came to where she was standing. Her gaze was on Adrian’s site. Seth wondered what she was thinking.

“Sure. You?”

Seth heard the forced cheer. “Can we talk?”

“Not if you’re about to ask me to resign from the Eagles, and then go hide in a tent or cave until the baby comes.”

That’s exactly what he’d been about to do, but Seth wasn’t going to admit it. He used his backup topic. “Actually, I was wondering how you feel about moving into the caves. Theo almost has them ready for everyone.”

Becky considered the idea, liking that topic much better than the one she’d been chewing on. Her mind had been whispering of Adrian’s betrayal and the woman sleeping with him. “Maybe. I don’t think I’ll have an issue with it.”

“I might... It’s like being buried.”

Becky winced at the reminder of their last battles for Angela. Things had worked out in the end, but those moments had been terrifying. “I understand. I’m okay with topside.”

Seth smiled. “You want to catch the movie when they get the theater tent open?”

“Yes, please.” Becky blushed. They could be alone in the dark.

Seth liked the sparks, but he returned to his post before either of them could get too distracted. He’d

lost his team, except for Tommy, and Jeff had left Safe Haven with Kevin. Distractions were usually welcome. He hated thinking about his missing men.

Becky also returned to her musings, wondering if Kendle realized how much the Eagles were starting to dislike her for keeping company with Adrian.

“She knows.” Cynthia was walking by the gate. “She doesn’t care.”

Becky realized her mind was open and forced herself not to bring down the wall. She didn’t need people studying her more than they already were.

Cynthia kept going, busy handling things for the boss. She knew Becky’s thoughts weren’t all together, but she understood why. Time would remove the sting from the wounds she’d suffered and Seth’s love would heal her heart. They had to be patient.

Cynthia continued on to the path that led to the cave entrance. Large tents with bathrooms and Eagle stations covered the site. Cynthia took note of the progress. Angela would ask.

She spotted Jeremy coming from the large gathering tent halfway down the path and detoured that way. “Got your next run.”

Jeremy took the paper and skimmed it. “Sure, we can do that. When?”

“Tonight, after mess.” Cynthia wrote it in her book. “She said to call for the vet if you find anything alive at the fish farm next door. Have him

run tests and if it's bad, destroy it to keep other people from eating it and getting sick."

"Sounds good." Jeremy was happy to be sent out on another gathering run. Anything was preferable to going inside that cave.

Neil came from the stone entrance and spotted them. Jeremy motioned him over. They hadn't been working together, but they would be now. "Boss has new orders. You guys have a run."

Both men glanced at Cynthia, trying to judge if this was a good time to talk to her, but she was clearly busy.

Neil read the orders. "Cool. You've already got the fine print?"

"Yep."

Cynthia left as Jeremy filled Neil in. She was hoping to be finished and in the mess or her tent before the copies of her newspaper came out. She would stand by every word, but she didn't expect it to go over well. The truth hardly ever did.

"Do you have a minute?"

Cynthia stopped to let Daryl catch up with her. They hadn't seen much of each other during the last week.

Daryl took a risk and gave her a hug.

Surprised, Cynthia hugged him back.

Their small spat was easily forgotten as they held on.

Cynthia sighed. "Nice."

Daryl placed a kiss on top of her head. "I missed you."

Cynthia didn't want to tell him she'd been too busy to miss him. "Me too."

Daryl took it the good way and he stepped back reluctantly. "Free for a meal?"

"Not until evening mess. I still have a list right now."

Daryl understood she needed to go and waved her off. "I'll see you at dinner."

Mood improved, Cynthia continued her rounds.

Daryl was also soothed a bit. She'd ignored him for days; he'd expected that to go badly. He also expected their talk during mess to be ugly, but it had to happen. If she was in love with Adrian, like many of the women here had been until recently, then he would have to bow out. If her heart was free and clear, Daryl wanted a commitment.

4

"You can ask for more." Angela tried to send warmth into the radio. "We'd be happy to send anything you need. You've helped our men. We owe you."

"No shit?"

Angela grinned. "No shit."

Around her, there were shared expressions of relief. Angela could have demanded their men be returned or simply gone in and grabbed them. Rewarding their rescuers was a much better solution, and doing it over the open waves would

encourage others to defend Safe Haven people instead of attacking them.

“You can bring whatever you want, but we voted and we don’t want more than we need,” the voice replied firmly. “Your men are safe with us.”

“Thank you,” Angela answered. “Please give my radioman the location in code and we’ll send a team out immediately. They will not hurt you.”

“We trust Safe Haven. You took out the government.”

“Yes, we did. And we’ll help you in any way we can. Expect a van.” Angela gestured for Kenn to finish the call and headed toward the main activity tents. They’d placed their brig in the center so members and guards could be responsible for them. Marc was there now, dealing with Darian.

Angela wasn’t anxious to join them. She detoured into an activity tent, where groups of Eagles were enjoying a break.

The men spotted her coming and stopped their games and conversations, sensing she wasn’t there to goof off.

Angela went to Joseph, pleased to see he was being treated like any other rookie. Getting minorities into Safe Haven programs was a key to future peace. Everyone, of all races, had to feel the same pride, have the same goal of survival. No one could be set above the others. Angela didn’t have a full solution for that yet. Because of their gifts, descendants would always be viewed as superior. In a few generations, when everyone had descendant

blood, she hoped those perceptions would fade. “But I’m not counting on it.”

“On me saying yes to whatever you want?” Joseph had gotten tense the instant she’d locked onto him.

“I’m sorry,” Angela replied distractedly. “I’m in my own mind. That had nothing to do with you.”

Known for telling the harsh truth, Joseph didn’t doubt her. If it had been aimed at him, she would have told him why.

“I did come here to ask you for something. If you agree, you’ll be going with Marc.”

“Doing what?” Other than the highest levels, no one worked *with* Marc anymore. He was the XO. Everyone worked for him.

“Did you hear the call that came in?”

Joseph nodded. All of them had. “Eagles keep their radios on.”

“I’d like you to go with Marc to collect our men. You’ll help provide security where needed.”

“And the real reason I’m being sent?” he asked snidely.

“I want you to get the people thinking about Safe Haven. They’ll be much happier here.”

Joseph wasn’t sure what to say at first. His race was being used. *Should I be offended?*

Angela frowned. “No. I didn’t ask you to do a dirty deed in a dark alley. I’m asking you to help save more of *our* people.”

Joseph liked the answer and he was able to agree. “Okay. Marc’ll tell me what he wants from me?”

“Yes, I will.” Marc was in the tent flap. It hadn’t been hard to figure out what Angela would do for this situation. “Be ready after mess.”

Joseph gave the popular answer. “You know it.”

Angela scanned the tent. “As you were.”

The men chuckled.

Angela favored Joseph with an approving nod she knew he felt. The bald professor had adjusted a lot since coming to Safe Haven. He was a good man. Angela wanted everyone to know that. His notions were about to be challenged. If he handled it correctly, his respect here would increase and they would have a new group of refugees. If he couldn’t handle the truth, Adrian’s dream of blending blacks in through Joseph might be lost. It was going to be up to Marc to know when to step in and when to move aside.

“I’ll handle it.” Marc followed her from the tent. “You’re positive he’s the one?”

“No.”

Marc understood why minorities needed to be a larger part of their population and agreed wholeheartedly with Safe Haven attempting it. In a hundred years, race wars would sweep the country again and this time, there wouldn’t be laws of society to guide people through it. If they could encourage everyone to get along now, there was a chance that future wouldn’t happen. Safe Haven

held a lot of power to influence the future. Marc approved of Angela using it on this.

Before he could completely distract her, Angela lifted a brow. “What do you think about Darian?”

Marc chuckled. “And I thought I got away with it.”

Angela smirked and waited for the report on his interrogation.

“Show or tell?” Marc asked suggestively.

“Just tell, please.”

“He is Dari’s twin brother. He wants to know why she was killed. He’s gonna keep snooping until he gets the truth or a bullet.”

Amusement gone now, Angela frowned. “Your recommendation?”

“Show him. He’s not like the others from Devine’s group. I was a little surprised to discover that.”

“Did you have to get rough?” She needed to know what to expect for the next time she saw Darian.

“No. He opened right up. Gave me a nice image of their town.”

“Pine Bank?”

“Yes. They have more power than we do.”

“Quality over quantity. You know that.”

Reminded of his ulterior motive, Marc leered. “Yeah, baby.”

Angela blushed prettily.

Marc kissed her.

Kendle came through the tents in time to witness it and she froze, pain filling her heart. She'd slept with Adrian and it had been amazing, but she would trade him for Marc in an instant.

Angela caught the thought and glowered at Kendle with crimson orbs.

Marc felt the waves of coldness and sighed. "She's not going to change. I was wrong to bring her here."

Angela's sense of duty warred with her jealousy. She shook her head, tone scathing. "Give the *princess* a little more time. If she doesn't snap out of it, I'll handle her."

Angela's voice carried. Kendle blanched, realizing she'd created a scene. She spun in the opposite direction, struggling not to cry. *I hate it here! I want Luke.*

Angela's anger faded at Kendle's misery. "She's lost. You're like the man she killed and she's having a hard time separating her grief from the attraction."

"What should I do?" It was uncomfortable. He'd never been one to enjoy being fawned over by multiple females, but this was even worse because Angie's patience was running out.

"You've already tried to pass her around the Eagles. And screwing Adrian didn't fix her. Maybe you should give it a try."

Marc gaped.

Angela burst out laughing.

Realizing she was joking, Marc gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. “I’d do a lot for my country, honey, but that’s askin’ a bit much.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Sex is a bit much?”

“Trying to stay hard while wondering when you’re going to stab me.”

Angela burst out laughing.

Marc enjoyed it. She didn’t smile nearly enough.

Angela caught the next thought and smiled again, this time seductively. “I’ve got half an hour if you do.”

“We could take over a shower.” Marc leaned in, voice dropping into a sensual snare. “I haven’t had my mouth on you in weeks.”

Angela blushed down to the roots of her hair. “Yeah, um. That would be fine. Lovely.”

Marc snickered and steered them toward their tent for changes of clothes. He was supposed to go to bed now, but the hot, dreamy feel of her under his arm was enough to send fresh adrenalin through his system. *I’ll sleep when I’m dead.*

5

Early evening came over the mountains with all the grace of a hippo, splattering shadows and resentments along the stone as the survivors gathered for their meal. Aware of the tension around her that was cutting through the rattle of paper, Angela chose to read the rest of the short edition

first. The newspaper was Cynthia's first, and only four pages long.

Angela skipped the headline article and moved onto the information at the bottom of page 2.

Settlement and Contest Updates

63% ready to transfer into the cave.

75% of materials gathered.

57% of building, installing infrastructure complete.

Top gathering teams: Shane—37% Billy—38%.

Top building team: Theo.

It only took a moment to scan the numbers and Angela continued on to page 3, where she had provided a number of Do and Don't items for the reporter. Distracted, Angela skimmed the advice to boil the water two minutes longer, test expired goods by smelling, feeding animals before people, and the stand-by of never leaving without a radio and gun. It was standard information newer people would require.

Angela dropped to the bottom of page 3, to the short list of obituaries. Her heart clenched. *I should have been able to save them.*

Around Angela's table, mutters and scowls were being directed her way. Lost in her guilt over the deaths, she didn't react.

Angela forced herself to go to the final page, where Safe Haven's rules and code of conduct were printed. Below them were brief instructions on how

to handle crime. Angela sighed. There was nothing left to put off the interview she had given.

Angela flipped the paper to the first page and tried to read it like a camp member, so she could determine their reactions. So far, there were only odd glares and mutters. She'd waited until the paper was released to send Marc out of camp, just in case. After so many of the people not voting for her, she couldn't take the chance on assuming she was safe.

Safe Haven Settlement: Too good to be true?

by Reporter Cynthia Quest

I recently sat down with the Boss and asked her some of the hard questions I've heard people whispering since we arrived in these stunning mountains. The following is a copy of the conversation, but I warn you now—it is not comforting.

Cynthia: I'll start with the questions I've heard most. Are we finally safe? Can we stay here?

Angela: For a while, but nothing lasts forever.

Cynthia: Does that mean you've foreseen something else coming?

Angela: That's hard to answer. I see many things, but the choices people make can change them by the minute. Nothing is carved in stone.

Cynthia: So there is something coming, but it's not certain that we'll be hit by it?

Angela: Good guess. Yes, that's close enough.

Cynthia: Why haven't you told everyone?

Angela: Why should I panic them when I'm not sure it will disturb us?

Cynthia: Okay. How long before you are sure?

Angela: The next couple weeks will tell.

Cynthia: Weeks? That's all we'll get here?

Angela: If things go badly, yes.

Cynthia: What can we do to stop it from happening?

Angela: Nothing that I've found yet. It's not a Safe Haven problem. It's another apocalypse side effect.

Cynthia: Can I interview you again in two weeks?

Angela: Of course, but when I know, I'll make plans to ensure our safety and then put them into motion. You'll know.

Cynthia: Where do you think we can try to settle down and build those lives, if not here?

Angela: South, so far. I'm still searching, but if I had to pick right now, I'd take us to a small island in the south and keep us there until this country has revived itself.

Cynthia: People won't like hearing that. They want to stay here.

Angela: I'm doing everything I can to make that happen.

Cynthia: Will it be enough?

Angela turned the page to finish the article, feeling a chill in the air that had little to do with the weather. The camp had been hoping for better news.

Angela: Ask me again in two weeks.

Cynthia: I will. Another whisper I hear a lot is about how secretive you are. It reminds people of Adrian.

Angela: I've been stabbed, shot, abducted, drugged, and many other awful things. How can I run this camp and keep people alive if I'm always fighting off would-be assassins? And how can I stop that if everyone knows my plans and schedule? Secrets are necessary right now. We still have powerful enemies.

Cynthia: That's the final topic I'd like to discuss. Will Jack Devine's people come here to avenge him?

Angela: Probably, but they can't beat the power here.

Cynthia: You're certain?

Angela: Yes.

Cynthia: And if they come?

Angela: The Eagles have it covered. We won't allow our people to be harmed, but I have no plans to send teams out to attack this other group. We'll have to learn to get along.

Cynthia: The men who came here don't want to get along. I think they should be eliminated.

Angela: Personally, so do I, but Safe Haven stands for the good, the light. We have rules and

laws here, and we'll abide by them. Unless we're attacked, we will not engage the strangers. They have as much right to live as we do.

Cynthia: Have you foreseen them coming? Is that the trouble?

Angela: That is not the possible problem, but considering the luck we've had with nature, the apocalypse, and strangers, it wouldn't surprise me for all of it to come at the same time. *If* that future happens. As I said, the choices people make determine what happens. As long as everyone does their job, and they remember to abide by our code of conduct, we might be able to stay here for a lot longer.

Cynthia: Well, we'll all be hoping for the best.

Angela: So will I, and I'm doing all that I can to give our people time here. In a few days, the cave will be ready for our official moving in. We're so much stronger now. I take hope from that.

Cynthia: Okay. Thank you for the interview. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Angela: Yes. Please remind people that discussing the abilities and skills of the people here will make them a target, both in and outside of our gates.

Cynthia: I will.

Reporter's final thought

As you can see, safety is a matter of perception and, in my opinion, not to be counted on. We were led here under false pretenses by Adrian, and now

we have to blindly follow his powerful, secretive successor. That's a lot of trust for these times."

"You okay?" Marc took the seat next to her. He swept the mess with a hard expression, but found only sullenness.

"Yes." She admired his full Eagle gear. He was sexy, but most of the time, he didn't even seem to know it. He also looked tired, but he would get to sleep while Billy drove. Daryl would cover point tonight.

"They're taking it well." Marc nodded his thanks to Li Sing as the man came out with a plate.

"Better than I expected." She enjoyed his heat. Soon, they would use the rolled up flaps to enclose their main areas for warmth. "Have you read it?"

"From thoughts."

Aware that he was having his crew eat before they left, Angela passed him the paper. "Here. I have a couple meetings."

"Thanks." Marc glanced up from the headline to see Jennifer, baby in her arms, threading her way toward them through the crowded mess. "Good meetings?"

"Mostly."

Marc didn't care for the sound of that. He skimmed the paper instead of allowing it to pull him into a place where he might miss trouble.

"How's that beautiful little girl?" Angela cooed, unable to help it. Babies were sweet.

“Grouchy.” Jennifer slid the baby into Angela’s surprised arms. “Can you hold her while I get a tray?”

“Sure.” Angela stared down at the nine-week-old baby. It was an instant reminder of her unborn child and the danger that surrounded her. It was also a painful flash of the child she’d lost.

Autumn’s lids opened gradually, brought out of her nap by different arms holding her.

Angela tried to force those bad thoughts away. Autumn didn’t need to know about death yet.

I already do, the child answered mentally. *People think of another baby when they hold me. Can you tell me why?*

Angela blanched. *When you’re older.* It felt surreal to send that to a newborn, but Autumn was typical of all descendants. Their minds weren’t hampered by age, only their bodies.

That’s what mommy said. Then she cried.

Angela held the baby to her for a hug-type clutch, and refused to think of anything except resting. After a long moment, Autumn’s young body relaxed in sleep and Angela was grateful.

“Now we know why Jennifer needed a break.” Marc had caught the quick conversation. He hated the truth that Autumn would have to be told one day.

Angela stared at Marc in horror.

He placed a hand on hers. “We’ll all be here for her. And, for ours.”

Angela nodded shakily. The newest vision of the future had been frightening. In it, there were babies who could think and adults who couldn't.

“We won't let that happen.”

“No, we won't.” Angela gently placed the baby back into her mother's arms after Jennifer sat the tray on the table and took a seat. “They get one life; we'll make sure it's full and happy.” Angela glanced over at a small group of soldiers entering the mess. “Watch this.”

Marc did, wondering why the men were marching eagerly toward the table where Kenn and Tonya were sitting snuggled together. The couple was clearly on a dating meal. It was sweet.

“Hey, there, Red!”

“Good to see you again.”

Tonya smiled uneasily at the four men, suddenly realizing she should have told Kenn about that part of her mission. “You guys settling in?”

“Oh, yeah.” Captain Boothe grinned at her as all of the men sat down. “Safe Haven is great.”

“Yeah, man.” Corporal James speared a potato wedge to dip in ketchup. “Steady food, hot water, and even enough females for sex! Great place.”

Tonya grimaced.

Kenn flashed a scowl at the loud words. People across the mess were twisting to stare at their table.

“Well, we're glad you like it here.” Tonya tried to cut off the coming disaster. “Kenn, let's go and have that—”

“Oh, yeah, Red. We didn’t expect things to be so, well, free. I mean, most places wouldn’t be okay with one chick for two guys, but the Ghost doesn’t have trouble with it.”

Kenn froze, replaying the man’s words.

Across the mess, conversations ceased.

“Seems like one chick for two guys is a common setup.” Boothe held his bread around the loaded hamburger. “That’s great, considering there ain’t enough women to go around.”

Tonya nearly choked as Kenn’s fork clattered to the tray.

“No, it’s okay, man.” Boothe smiled. “We know you and Ghost got this one. No worries.”

Kenn was turning red.

Tonya tried to slide under the table so she could vanish. *This is bad.*

Kenn’s hand on her arm stopped her exit. “Whoa there, big momma.”

Tonya froze.

“So, how does it work, man?” James didn’t realize there was a problem.

“Yeah, can we pick one or do they pick us?” Boothe gestured at Tonya. “How did you and the Ghost handle things?”

Angela’s snickers were floating toward them, but not fast enough to cool him off. Kenn glowered at Tonya as he let go of her arm. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Finally realizing something was wrong, the four soldiers fell silent. The entire mess got to listen to Tonya.

She cleared her throat. “I, uh, had orders. I followed them.”

Kenn’s head swiveled to where Angela and Marc were sitting, both snickering. “What kind of orders, woman?!”

“She said she was there to negotiate with the base commander. Told us she was the Ghost’s mistress.” James snorted. “Man, did we help her then!”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you did,” Kenn drawled in an icy tone that spoke of violence coming.

“It wasn’t like that. Marc has always been nice to me and sure, he’s fantastic to look at, but I...” Flustered, Tonya realized she was making it worse.

“Son of a bitch!” Kenn glared at Marc. “Angie and Kendle weren’t enough—you had to have Tonya! Where the hell do you even find the time for all these women?!”

Marc, feeling fantastic after making Angie moan his name twice in the shower, grinned widely and shrugged. “I’m the Ghost, dude. I’m everywhere.”

6

“What do you think about her?”

Jennifer stopped to scan the mess, where Tara and Shawn had joined the food line and created fresh gossip.

Kyle waited patiently, feeling happy with her arm linked through his as they did rounds. While Marc was gone and Angela was sleeping, Jennifer was Daryl's XO as he covered point.

"She's closed off. And the boss told me directly to—" Jennifer snapped her mouth shut, realizing she'd made a mistake.

"To leave her alone?" Kyle had received that same order from Adrian, many times.

"Yes." Jennifer relaxed. She could trust Kyle. "Angela has something planned with her, I think."

"Matching her up with Shawn?"

"That's certainly what she thinks." Jennifer shrugged. "But I'm not sure he likes her much."

Kyle wasn't sure why. Tara was attractive, and obviously able to have kids. She had a job here and she'd been cleared by the boss. She had all the basics of a good Eagle mate.

Jennifer frowned. "Do I?"

Kyle chuckled. "No. You're top grade. She'll have to work her way up to your level."

Pleased, Jennifer beamed at him.

Kyle refused to let her dazing ability freeze him this time. "You're beautiful."

Jennifer blushed. "Thanks."

Kyle kept them moving, aware of the sparks running up his arm from the innocent contact of her hand on his skin. Their intimate moments were

burnt into his brain and they reared up at any tiny provocation to sear him with need.

Jennifer tightened her grip on his hand. “We can sleep together.”

Kyle knew she meant actual sleep, but that didn’t stop his pulse from increasing. Despite wanting her desperately, Kyle planned to take his time claiming her. Sleeping together meant an entire shift of feeling her warm, young body pressed tightly to his. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you to work on your promise.” Jennifer spun toward the gate to do a check there before she got completely distracted. She knew Daryl and the Eagles had things covered, but she’d been given an important role today and she wasn’t going to mess it up.

Kyle followed slowly, mind spinning. She kept pushing him, saying she wanted another baby, and he had no problem believing that. However, he also knew Autumn was young enough that Jennifer didn’t need to get pregnant again right away. Would she settle for the pleasure side of that, without the pregnancy attempts? He wasn’t sure how to broach the subject with her and had chosen not to. He would stick to his plans of slowly bringing them together to ensure her good feelings for him didn’t change. When he took her all the way to being his woman, he would make the final choice then. As far as he knew, that was a long time off.

Jennifer spun around to glower at him with crimson eyes.

Kyle sighed. “Okay, baby. Okay.”

Mollified, Jennifer returned to her rounds.

Kyle headed for the mess, wishing Neil or Marc was here for him to talk to.

Jennifer gave a short wave to the three Indian men who were escorting the ants. Three times a day the insects came to the mess for the scraps. Angela had assigned Marc’s Indian buddies to the chore of making certain there were no problems between ants and people. There hadn’t been any so far. Jennifer didn’t expect any. The ants were useful and the people here now knew that.

The trio of new men nodded to her respectfully. The tallest man sent her a tiny, hopeful smile that said he was interested in her.

Jennifer’s stomach twisted; the clammy feel of fear came over her skin. She hurried toward the gate. Kyle was the only man who didn’t draw that reaction from her. The males here were mostly kind and patient, and even handsome, but Kyle was the only one she could trust.

Safe Haven’s engines echoed as Neil’s crew rolled through the gates. They were headed north—a direction that hadn’t gone well for any of their teams so far. “Good luck, gentlemen.”

The rock salt was already needed, but in a few weeks, it would be the difference between getting off this mountain for runs and being stuck here until a thaw came. Winter in places like this came months before the rest of the country saw it, though Jennifer was certain that had also changed. Between the war

and Yellowstone blowing, there was little doubt about what type of winter they could expect. The only unknown was how long it would last. Jennifer hadn't worked up the courage to survey that far ahead. However, she was positive that Angela had. *That woman is a walking crystal ball.*

Chapter Seventeen BK6

Everything You Expect

1

“**D**id you talk to the doctor?” Neil joined Jeremy as the gates clanged shut behind their truck. They’d chosen to leave at an odd hour to arrive near dawn. Their watches glowed the 2am hour brightly in the dark cab.

“Yes. If you want to call it that. He told me to mind my own business.”

“Same here. And we didn’t get to talk to Cynthia alone.”

“We’ll handle it as soon as we get home.” Jeremy grunted. “For now, let’s get ready for the north. You know what Angela said about these runs.”

“Yeah, and none of them have exactly gone smooth. You got the map?”

“Right here.” Jeremy held it up.

They were both distracted from further talk by the sight of a pathetic shadow wearily trudging up the road toward them. In the darkness, all they could see was a thin man who couldn’t stop coughing.

“You wanna?”

“Yeah.”

Neil pulled over to the man and rolled his window down. "You okay?"

The man coughed harshly and spat, before nodding. "Almost there, I think."

"Headed to Safe Haven?" Jeremy picked out runny eyes and a red nose.

"Yes." The man coughed again.

Neil got on the radio. "Another Yellowstone refugee is coming to the gate. Can you send someone?" They had a full load of men, with no room to run the new refugee to the top of the road themselves.

"Copy that."

Neil gave the new man a sympathetic look. "They'll come get you and the doctor will check you out."

"Thank you." The man wheezed, pulling a thin jacket tighter around his lean frame.

Neil frowned. "Been on the road a long time?"

"Weeks." The man delivered a weak smile. "Name's Jayson."

"Neil. We've got to go now, but it won't be long before someone rolls down for you."

"No problem." Jayson stepped back. He coughed again, bringing up phlegm that he quickly spat toward the trees. "Sorry."

"We understand." Jeremy felt bad for all the refugees who'd breathed in the ash. Most of them would die, according to their doctors. Jeremy thought it might be true of Jayson. As they pulled

away, Jeremy hit the mike. “Looks sick, base. Someone wake up the doctor.”

“Copy.”

Neil and Jeremy studied the man in their mirrors as they rolled down the hill, not speaking until he faded from their view.

Neil could feel Jeremy stewing on it. “Let it go.”

Jeremy sighed. “I can’t, man. I’ve been trying, but each time we have people like that come in, the truth comes out.”

“That Adrian got us out of that zone so we didn’t die? I don’t buy it. He didn’t know, and even if he did, it doesn’t excuse his betrayals.”

“No. It doesn’t.” *But we wouldn’t be alive if he hadn’t.*

Neither man spoke the thought, but it stayed on their minds as they rolled away.

2

Daryl helped to open the gate; he didn’t bat a lash when an extra person exited and headed in the opposite direction of the ride Neil had called for. Daryl didn’t watch the person disappear into the tree line by Adrian’s camp, and he didn’t put it in the report after securing the gate.

Samantha had a pass from the boss, though neither of the women wanted anyone to know about it. Daryl didn’t care. That was a problem belonging to Neil and Jeremy. Daryl’s issue was currently asleep since he’d had to take point for Marc and

miss their planned meal together. Whatever Angela and Samantha had going on with Adrian might even be a blessing. Daryl was scared that at some time, Adrian would remember who had gotten Cynthia pregnant and want to be a father. It was something he wouldn't be able to handle. He wasn't Neil or Jeremy. He was a one-woman man and he needed his mate to be the same.

“Off duty soon, big boy?”

Daryl grimaced as his flesh responded to the usual mating call. He'd been servicing the older women almost since arriving. They liked his pleasing nature and he liked pussy—of any size and shape. It had worked out well. Until now.

Daryl turned around to view the large woman in the shadows of the gate, her eyes wide and shining with need. His body, as always, was willing, but his heart flat-out refused. He sighed unhappily. “I can't. I'm sorry.”

The woman shrugged calmly. “I wasn't sure. Had to try.”

Daryl gave Hilda a soft smile. “Would you like a recommendation?”

Hilda gave a curt nod. She wasn't in love with Daryl by any means, but she had enjoyed their moments together.

“Billy.”

Her expression revived and the twinkle returned. “Would he? I'm not his usual type.”

Daryl thought of the private conversations he'd had with the driver. "He loves the female body—all shapes and sizes."

"Like you?"

Daryl blushed a bit. "Sounds like it."

Hilda stared at him as she slowly retreated. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Daryl's voice dropped into the low growl that she enjoyed. "And *yours*, I believe."

Hilda giggled like a schoolgirl, hand over her mouth as she vanished. The respect of the moment left them both in peace, instead of in pieces.

3

"If I'm going to do this now, you have to let me take it from here." Kyle was tense as he and Jennifer entered the tent at the end of their shift. "We go at *my* speed."

"Just so long as we're going, Mr. Reece."

Kyle grinned, kneeling down to untie his boots. "No worries."

Jennifer followed her normal routine for the end of a shift, removing the dirty clothes down to her bra and underwear. She didn't pause in the stripping, but she heard Kyle gasp and saw his shadow on the wall freeze.

Kyle drew in air and forced his fingers to untie the second boot. He was glad their tent was out of sight behind the new wall dividing the guard station.

Jennifer slid into a long robe and sank down gratefully in the folding chair. She picked up the mug she'd brought from the mess, smiling in relief.

Kyle stared at her in longing, wanting her so bad he ached. He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her until she felt like that from contact with him.

"Is that possible?" She stifled a yawn.

"Very." He also followed his normal routine, stripping down to his boxers. They usually did this part separately, or she would keep her eyes shut as he disrobed and slid into the bed. This time, she watched every move he made. Her cheeks stayed bright red, but she didn't look away, even when he adjusted for growing flesh.

"I always wondered what your knees looked like."

Kyle chortled, taking a t-shirt from his kit. He wasn't ready to be in that bed with her. The t-shirt was a large one that he found comfortable, and it covered him enough to let Kyle relax under her wide gaze. At some point, they would be naked with each other and it wouldn't matter, but right now, her bare feet and ankles were making his pulse race. Kyle increased the temperature on the small heater and sat down on the bed. "Smoking bother you?"

Jennifer shook her head. "I like the smell."

He usually left the tent, but Peggy was keeping Autumn and he needed the nerve calmer before they went any further than being half naked around each other.

“I’m sorry that I’m rushing you.”

“It’s okay.” Kyle puffed to get the cheroot lit. “I understand, as much as I can.”

There was a peaceful silence where they stole glances at each other and wondered what came next.

Jennifer didn’t want to concede her demands, but she was curious. “If I hadn’t flipped over losing the baby, how would you have handled it?”

Kyle was surprised by the question, and by how she’d worded it. He tried to answer more carefully. “I would love you, Jen.”

“Meaning...my pleasure?”

Kyle’s mouth dried up. “It matters to me more than I can say. In fact...” He hesitated, not positive that she was ready to hear it.

“What?”

“I don’t think I want this any other way.”

Jennifer stared at him in shock. “What?”

“I need it together, for us. I’ve used women and not cared. I’ve also loved women with my body and it was nice. I didn’t care one way or the other, but now...” He hesitated again, uneasy.

“Please?” Jennifer could have read it, but he needed to say it and sometimes, hearing it meant more.

“I dream about pleasing you, baby,” he groaned roughly. “Not taking you or claiming you, but making you cry my name in the best pleasure you’ve ever felt. I need you to love me too, Jenny, and sex isn’t that big of a deal. Making you feel

good, making you happy that you picked me—that is a big deal.”

“You know that’s not what I want.”

Kyle couldn’t let it pass this time. “No. You were hurt. It was used against you like a weapon. You only know one side of it, so how can you make that choice?”

“Because I’m terrified.” She sighed. “If you can make me feel that way, I’ll be a slave—like I was before.”

“Other way around, I think.” Kyle blew out thick smoke. “You’re so brave. You’re so young. You’ve been trained to accept a man’s touch so you don’t get hurt, but it’s not supposed to be that way. One day, you’ll trust me enough to let me show you.”

“And until then?”

“We’ll do what you want. I won’t ever push you on sex, but when *you* push me on it, this will come up.”

“Why does it matter to you? Tell the truth.”

“Because you’re mine. And I can’t be yours until his ghost is gone.”

“Can you do that?” she demanded suddenly. “Can you make him leave me alone?”

Kyle hated the tears spilling down her pale cheeks, but he knew they were necessary. “In time, yes, I can. But not your way. With your way, you end up hating me as much as him, because I’m never going to be satisfied with your surrender, Jenny. I

need you, all of you, and if I can't have that, I won't ever be happy."

"And neither will I. It would kill me to think I've made you unhappy after all you've done for me."

"I feel the same way."

Jennifer wiped at her tears, loathing the Mexican man for the mental suffering that she suspected would never give her any peace.

Instinctively knowing what she needed right now, Kyle slowly slid over and tugged on her arm. "Come here."

Jennifer gratefully curled up on his lap and bawled like an infant.

Angela had paused in the shadows behind the tent, listening and approving. She continued toward the main gate now, confident that Kyle was making real progress with Jennifer. The teenager was in a rough period of growing up, where everything was confusing about men and sex. Her abuse would have to be addressed each time the side effects popped up.

Angela slid deeper into the predawn darkness as Samantha reentered camp, obviously much improved. The spring in her step said Conner had been able to push the disease back. Angela was glad.

Hidden from view of everyone except her personal shadow, Wade, Angela leaned against the mountain and lit a stale smoke. They were almost out of the nasty things and she didn't plan to go

searching for more. Adrian had been right when he said they didn't need to worry about drug use because it would eventually run out. He'd been more concerned about alcohol, which was easily produced.

As Samantha entered camp, Kendle exited, now off duty. Angela felt the man meeting Kendle before he came from the trees that lined his small site. He wore no shirt. The exotic tattoos over his thick arms and body cried out to be caressed.

Adrian ignored Kendle as she stopped in front of him. The island woman didn't exist for him, only Angela did. He couldn't see her, but he knew she was near. He scanned, hoping she was outside the bubble, but he couldn't find her.

Kendle hadn't gotten over the last snub from a man. Her rage exploded. She swung with all her strength and punched Adrian.

Not expecting it, he fell on his ass and sprawled in surprise at her feet.

Kendle waited for his reaction, able to hear Angela's laughter in her mind.

Adrian also felt Angela's amusement, but it was a bitter sensation that he had to glean from Kendle's wary mind.

Adrian glanced up, rubbing his jaw. "Now you're acting like her."

Both females winced.

Adrian picked himself up and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'll be right behind you."

Kendle went quickly, surprised at herself. She'd just initiated rough sex. Was she nuts?

No, just angry and horny, she realized, stripping her Eagle jacket as she entered his chilly tent. *Safe Haven brings that out in me.*

Adrian stayed still, staring at the gate shadows where he would have picked to lurk. He hadn't seen her in weeks, hadn't heard her voice even in his mind. It was torture. "I'm doing everything you expect and more. Please don't forget about me."

The sentries on the gate had been smirking, but as Adrian continued to stare in longing, their smiles became scowls.

Not wanting word to get to Marc, Adrian slowly turned away. Kendle was expecting a fight, but he didn't have it in him—not for her. There was only one woman on the planet that he would battle over now and she was currently crying. He could feel the sadness. It was clear enough to make him realize the bubble couldn't stop their emotions from reaching out.

Angela waited until she had herself under control and then stayed longer, smoking and studying the road that led to her mostly sleeping camp. While she waited, Seth and Becky left in a black van. A bit later, gathering crews began to roll in and out to start another day. A while after that, as dawn had begun to illuminate a stunning mountain view, the sound of multiple engines echoed.

Angela headed for the gate. This was what she'd come for. Anger filled her—rage that had little to do

with traitors and their mistresses. She strode to the guards determinedly. “New orders, gentlemen. Pay attention.”

4

“Doctor Brooke to the main gate.”

Angela waited as her men directed the newest group of refugees into Zone A. They were the survivors of the Cholera people. She wasn't concerned over them. She did need to be positive they weren't carrying anything before she let them in, but the group of twelve seemed normal for these times. The other man who had come in last night, Jayson, was also in Zone A. His symptoms were from ash exposure; he had a calm, kind, pathetic air. He had told the sentries that he lost his family recently to strangers and didn't think he would make it far if Safe Haven wouldn't let him join. After their recent suicide, the Eagles were sympathetic. The gate guards had marked him as a Yellowstone refugee and put him in Zone A.

Another lesson to learn, Angela mourned silently as the doctor rushed toward the gate with his medical bag.

“We're checking them out.” Ray waved from his post above them. “Give us a few more minutes to set up a perimeter and then you can go out, since they're asking for you.”

The doctor pushed his chest out. “Young man, there is enough security here to make me think I'm

in a prison. Secure your perimeter while I work.” The doctor shoved by Simon, who was operating the latch today, and opened the gate himself.

The Eagle team guiding the refugees into their gated pen were surprised when the doctor hurried by them to greet the group of people, but they didn’t stop him. Their orders were to cage the people and get back inside so Angela could scan them as they settled in. She and Jennifer liked to evaluate people unobserved, providing a more valuable profile.

The team finished putting the people into Zone A, locked that gate, and then hurried to the safety of home.

“Damn!” Simon scowled. “We had a jam and had to send for a new weapon. We’re not ready to go out there yet.”

“He’s fine.” Ray was also frowning. “And he’s locked in. We’ll cover the perimeter and then escort him back in. Just don’t forget to report the violation.”

Angela nodded to Simon’s raised brow.

The men went on with their usual procedures for new arrivals needing medical care.

“Hey!”

Angela felt that now unwelcome shield of battle fall over the entire area as the guards spotted their huge mistake.

“I’ve got your doctor!”

The man in the center of Zone A, using the innocent group as a shield, was one of the Zone C survivors who had fled. He now had the

whimpering doctor in a tight grip under one arm, and a handgun waving from the other.

“You gotta let me in there now!”

“There’s the killer the boss sensed.” Bobby stared angrily from the top ledge. “We have to stop letting these people live!”

The man had obviously come in with the new refugees, blending with a dirty robe that had fallen to the ground in his struggle with the doctor.

“Agreed.” Angela hated the fear hitting her in waves from Zone A. This moment wouldn’t last long, but none of the new people would ever forget it.

“I’ll count to ten and these gates better all open!” the lunatic shouted, staying behind cowering women and men. The group was armed, but they feared if they accidentally shot the doctor instead of the madman, they would be sent on their way or even killed by the Eagles.

“One!”

Angela looked around. “Who wants to play hostage?”

Kenn quickly spoke up. “That’s me.”

“Get to it.” Angela was proud of how far Kenn had come.

“Two!” the man screamed.

Kenn left the safety of their gate, unarmed, and went to the Zone A gate. After unlocking it, he opened it and waited for the next order.

“All right!” The man wrenched the doctor around to be his shield and dragged him toward the zone gate. “You’ll like me in charge, I promise.”

“Please, let me go!” The doctor was no longer struggling.

“Shut up!” The man slammed his gun into the side of the doctor’s face.

Mistake. Kenn spotted the next problem coming, but there was little he could do about it.

While the madman was distracted, another man came up behind the killer and stabbed his knife deep into the lunatic’s neck.

The doctor dropped to the ground as the arm around his throat let go. The body covered him as it fell.

Jayson dropped the knife, looking horrified as he staggered back. “I didn’t... I had to help...”

Kenn studied Angela instead of the trees, where four new shadows had appeared.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.” The rest of the exiled Zone C men came from the shadows with their guns aimed at Kenn and Jayson. “For you, of course, not us. Nick was the nicest one of our bunch.”

Kenn sank to his knees and put his hands on top of his head. He knew the routine.

The four invaders surrounded the Marine.

“Open those gates and get that bitch out here,” the leader, Degussa, ordered. “Let her tell me no again!”

“If we see those ants, we’ll shoot him!” another of the men screamed, scanning fearfully.

The doctor scrambled to the gate and banged.
“Let me in!”

Angela shook her head at the nervous sentries.
“Let this play out.”

“Where was he on the count?” Degussa called.
“Ah, yes. Three! Four! Five!”

Jayson slowly edged toward the semi-safety of Zone A, but he was grabbed by one of the scruffy men and shoved down next to Kenn.

“Seven!”

“What’s all the yelling about?”

Every head spun to discover Adrian standing in the tree line with a Saiga shotgun. His expression was furiously cold.

Degussa recognized the threat. “Kill him!”

Adrian opened fire before they could. He hit all four of the standing men without touching Kenn or Jayson. Tactical buckshot did slam into the ground near the other gates though. The people there scurried away in terror.

In the silence that followed, there was a new sound—one of scornful clapping.

“Seeing the great Adrian Mitchel in action is so boring now.”

Adrian turned to witness Vlad and half a dozen enslaved men on horses coming from the same trees where Degussa’s group had been hiding.

“You used to have such flair.” Vlad’s personal shield was glowing hotly as he surveyed the gate.
“I’m taking what’s been mine since he slept with

my wife. Stand down.” Vlad dismounted and marched toward Adrian with a dart gun.

Angela was aware of the looks being cast her way, of the immediate expectation that she would rescue him. It was flooding over her in waves from both sides of the fence.

Kenn found Angela through the grates. “Boss?”

“You two! Get up and go inside.” Vlad signaled his men to handle it as he approached Adrian.

Adrian lowered the Saiga, sensing a shifting moment in time. Angela’s choice here would seal their fate. If she let Vlad have him, he would be killed as payment for Jack and it would probably happen right now.

“The great Mitchel.” Vlad approached him. “You won’t walk away this time.”

“Boss?” Kenn questioned again, letting Jayson slowly tug him toward the main gate.

Angela winced, holding in rage and desolation. She was listening for more support, but other than the Eagles, there wasn’t any. Angela slowly rotated to view her camp, and the dozens of faces now trying to get a look through the gate at the action. *Can we survive without him?*

You can, the witch answered tensely. *These people won’t.*

And if I save him now?

You can’t.

I knew. I just had to hear it. She slowly shook her head at the questioning Eagles.

Kenn saw the gesture and dug his heels in. “Don’t do this.”

Vlad ignored him, holding a free hand out for Adrian’s weapon.

Angela winced again, but said nothing.

Kenn jerked out of Jayson’s light grip and glared at the men on the gate. “We don’t allow this. We don’t allow crime on our doorstep. We are Eagles, god damn it!”

His shout took guards by surprise and sent guilt through them.

“We’re supposed to stand for the weak, and to protect those who need help. Where does it say those people have to be worthy first? We either live it, all of it, or we turn into pieces of shit, like these guys.”

“Hey!” Vlad glared. “You can’t—”

“Oh, shut up!” Kenn snapped. “In a minute, she’ll zap your ass like you deserve and I’ll go have a beer. So, just. Shut. Up!”

Vlad gaped in complete shock.

Adrian grinned proudly. “That’s my XO.”

The Eagles were giving Angela hard and uneasy looks now. She shrugged. “He’s a traitor. We know he isn’t worthy. Our men are free and it isn’t happening inside our gates. Someone tell me why I should help him.” *Please! Someone please come through for him here.*

“Because if we change the ideals that Safe Haven was founded on, we won’t have a Safe Haven anymore.” Zack had come at the clicked

code over the radio, as had other Eagles and members. “Kenn is right. The person doesn’t have to be worthy. We have laws of conduct to follow and if we don’t, this all falls apart.” Zack looked at Angela. “I say we save him, but we don’t forgive him or let him in. And we’re doing it because it’s happening right here in front of us.”

Angela appeared to consider it. “Is that what all of you think?”

More support came than she had expected. Angela gestured in relief. “Majority rules. Eagles, go clear our front porch.”

Vlad jerked Adrian’s weapon free, but it was too late. Kenn heard Angela’s choice and lunged. He hit Vlad as the shield came up; both men flew to the ground from the impact.

Vlad scrambled to his feet as the gate opened and two dozen men rushed out, firing.

Kenn and Adrian knew not to budge, but Vlad couldn’t employ that option. He tried to fire a quick blast of magic through the hail of lead and still bring his shield back up in time.

Angela sent a minor barrage from the top of the gate she had quickly scaled.

Vlad’s shield vibrated dangerously. *She can get through!* He froze, terrified for an instant, and then ran for his horse, forgetting he held a weapon that he could have used against the coming men. He’d always relied on power. The Saiga was foreign in his hand.

The men with him took off as soon as Vlad did, but the Eagles kept shooting. They tried to avoid the human targets in favor of the descendant who was a larger threat. Bullets zipped and pinged off Vlad's weakening shield until they were all out of sight a moment later.

Angela whistled and then waved at the Eagles. "Let's get it cleaned up." She left the gate without ever looking at Adrian.

It went a long way in soothing the people who heard about it later and disagreed with the choice.

Zack followed her. "Should I send a team after them?"

"No." She sighed tiredly. "We'll get another shot."

"But wouldn't it be better to eliminate the problem now?"

"Yes, but we can't. We need our teams working. There'll be time for fighting when the building's done."

"You *bitch!*"

Angela and her escorts rotated as the doctor shoved through the gate and began shouting.

"You wouldn't open it! How dare you!"

Angela slowly walked to the man, giving him time to remind himself who he was shouting at. "The next time an Eagle tells you to wait, that it's not cleared yet, what will you do?"

Doctor Brooke blanched. "I'm not going back out there! Ever."

Angela tried to be sympathetic and bring the rude healer into the fold. “You could join the Eagles. After a while, you won’t feel as scared anymore.”

“Join...” The doctor’s profile iced over. “You can’t brainwash me, lady!” He spun toward the medical camper.

Angela jerked him around with an iron grip that declared her shoulder fully healed. “But I can banish you for not following our rules, for not trying to adapt to our ways, and for being an orally-abusive asshole. Would you like to leave, doctor? I know Marc asked you that, but this is the official question. Should I have the Eagles help you pack?”

“Because I went out of the gate?” He was dazed at the fear washing over him.

“Because you don’t like descendants. I’d like to know why. Maybe we can find common—”

The doctor jerked out of her grip and leaned in close enough to make her guards come forward. “Go to hell.”

Angela chuckled disdainfully. “A giant child who’s scared of everything and terrified at even the idea of trying to change. You’re a coward.”

Exposed, the doctor’s rage flared. He got in her face. “I don’t have to take that! You can’t say that to me!”

Angela made a motion to keep her sentries still while she waited calmly for the doctor to be done.

“I’m not scared of you! I’m not scared of anything!”

Angela slowly raised her hand, ignoring his automatic flinch. She gently cupped his cheek, sending calming waves into his mind. “It’s okay to be scared, Jimmy. We all are. Even me.” Angela lowered her hand as he gaped at her and at the sensations she’d sent. “Please join the Eagles. We need that fire and you need the training. In three months, you can erase the shame you’ve been carrying all your life.”

His mouth opened... “Your word on it?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“I...” The doctor’s shoulders slumped. “I’ll think about it.” The doctor became aware of the resentful glowers from Eagles that promised payment. “Sorry about screaming at you.”

Angela snorted. “Sometimes, I wish more people would. Screams and insults are usually honest.” She wiped at her damp cheek. “Then I remember what it feels like.” She glared at him, letting him see how pissed she was. “*Don’t* make the mistake of doing it again.”

Angela left him babbling and went to the target range to pop off a few rounds. “If I go totally corrupt, I’m going to sit on his face until he smothers. Finally have a use for that big mouth.”

On her heels, Greg laughed. “Wonder how Marc will feel about that.”

Angela grunted. “If Marc had been here for this, we’d be short a doctor right now. Let the Eagles know I have hope for Doc Savage.”

“Do you, honestly?”

“Yes.” She joined the shooting line. “I have hope for everyone.”

“Even Adrian?” Greg insisted, causing silence to fall among those closest to them. “Can he be trusted again or forgiven in time?”

Angela checked her weapon before replying, buying time. It was a question that many of the people were silently asking each time his name came up. “That’s up to Adrian’s Eagles.” She shoved the 9mm into the holster until it was her turn. “And Safe Haven does offer second chances....”

“But?”

“I’m not sure either of those things are wise. He’s a traitor and no matter what anyone feels about him, that fact won’t ever go away.”

5

Kyle and his team lingered outside the main gate as the doctor nervously came out to do the blood tests. Kenn stayed with them, loving the front row action he’d gotten, but missing Adrian. That man was back in his tree line, recovered Saiga dangling, expression unreadable as he watched his highest team joke and chat.

Kyle noticed Kenn’s stare and followed it to where Adrian’s pale eyes waited for a sign of recognition, be it forgiveness or hatred.

Kyle spotted Conner and Kendle in the shadows behind his fallen idol. Disapproval flashed across his profile. Before thinking to consult Angela, he

reacted. “You’re either with us or against us. You better make that choice soon or the Eagles will do it for you!”

Kyle turned his back on Kendle’s dismayed expression, ignoring Adrian completely. All the men agreed with him and so did most of the camp. Kendle couldn’t keep living both sides of the line. It was time to choose.

“He’s right.” Adrian went to his tent. “Tell the boss what you need and she’ll set it up.”

Kendle didn’t care for sneaking around, but it didn’t stop her from following him inside the canvas. He’d been right when he’d said she would crave it, but it wasn’t for the pleasure. After he knocked her out, she didn’t dream, and that was more valuable to her than all the orgasms in the world.

A radio in the corner crackled to life. “I have an official announcement from the boss, folks. Tomorrow, we relocate into the cave, and everyone earned a reward, because we’ve really been in it for a week already! We’re moving, folks!”

Adrian was ecstatic at the news. “I knew she could do it. Less than two weeks. That’s amazing!” He spun around and jerked Kendle into his arms, making her giggle as he twirled them around. He’d been waiting for word to come.

Kendle felt the excitement change to arousal and tilted her mouth up as his lowered. He would pretend she was Angela now, and the pleasure would be incredible.

Inside, the old Kendle shriveled up a little more and continued to bleed.

Chapter Eighteen BK6

Lurking

1

“**D**amn tremors.” Billy scanned the wreck site. Shane’s vehicle looked like it had rolled down the cliff with them inside it.

“That’s exactly what happened.” Marc keyed the radio. “Safe Haven is on your doorstep, Eagles.” They were parked at the end of the driveway of a small house that held sullenly twinkling red tinsel in the trees around it.

The front door opened immediately following the call. A large group of black men came outside, loosely holding minor weapons like bats and clubs. Marc didn’t see any guns. He wondered how long the group had been here. Since the beginning?

Behind the strangers, the stranded Eagles jogged down the stairs.

“Thanks, man.” Shane greeted Marc as he got out of the van. “We’re okay here, but they don’t have much food. Felt guilty about eating.”

“They don’t have much of anything here,” Tommy explained before Nathan could start prattling.

Marc gestured toward the rear of the van. “Then you’ll like what the boss sent.”

Shane helped carry the cooler of beef and pork to the nervous strangers. Marc followed, observing the peaceful interaction. It was a nice change from the constant fighting.

Joseph stayed with Marc, not sure what to do now that they were here. He hadn't thought to ask and Marc hadn't given him any instructions. *I don't know how to do this. She knew that. Why am I here?*

Billy remained by the driver door as Quinn went with Marc. Fresh from a shift over the snow gathering location, Quinn hadn't hesitated when Marc asked him to come along as security.

"Oh, shit!" A short teenager standing in front of his mother pointed. "They got blacks!"

His mother quickly shushed him.

Marc grinned. "Kids, huh?"

The woman gave him an uneasy smile in return, sweeping his hard body.

It caused the wide man at her side to twist toward her in surprise. "What just happened here?"

"Where?" the woman asked.

"Here," the man repeated, scowling. "What happened here, woman?"

"What?"

Marc didn't know if she was screwing with the man's mind or not, and hid a snicker. *Women, huh?*

"Was that a crack?" The woman glared at Marc. "You got a problem with women?"

"No, ma'am!" Marc choked out through his surprise. *She's a descendant!*

“Your boss didn’t tell you.” Brittani shrugged.
“I probably wouldn’t have either.”

Marc held out a hand. “I’m—”

“The Ghost.” Brittani shook with him. “We know all about you and your people. We’re fine being neighbors with Safe Haven.”

Joseph felt like he should be doing something.
“Any thoughts of being members?”

The woman glanced around her group.
“Thoughts of the past might prevent that. You’d have to be convincing.”

“Can we stay and share a meal with you?” Marc pointed at the coolers. “We’ll cook and supply the food.”

The wide man glared at Brittani. “You gonna welcome them personally?”

“We’ll just be talking.” Marc could almost hear Angie snickering at this.

The woman turned to Marc. “Why? You don’t think I’m hot?”

She was, in fact, but Marc only laughed. “The boss is gonna love you, lady. Name your terms while I feed my men.”

She smiled. “Thank you for knowing how it had to go.”

“Thank the boss when we get there. She told me I had to know when to ease off. She didn’t tell me you were willing.”

Brittani chuckled. “Yeah, she said you guys needed the drill, but I can tell you’re tired, so I’m cutting you a break.” She wrapped her arm around

the waist of the wide man, who instantly looked mollified. “Come on. Let’s eat and then get moving. Oh, and she said you need to check the alarms on the return trip.”

Marc gaped, both loving and hating how easy this had gone. He saw Joseph had the same expression. Marc shrugged. “She didn’t tell me.”

Joseph wanted to be upset, but it was amusing. He cracked a reluctant grin. “That Brittani’s something, isn’t she?”

Marc went cold, stopping as alarm bells blared. “How do you know her name? She didn’t give it and I haven’t said it.” Marc shoved into Joseph’s mind, digging through weak, hastily erected walls to discover a carefully tended secret. “You’re a descendant!”

Ahead of them, Brittani cackled. She’d spotted it as soon as Joseph got out of the van. She’d known descendants were close by the power she’d felt and the woman was eager to have her people under their full protection in Safe Haven.

2

Samantha pointed. “What town is that?”

They were stopped for a quick meal of Li Sing’s burrito wraps. None of them were in a hurry to restart working. Since leaving after this morning’s excitement at the gate, they had cleared thirty-two vehicles. They’d expanded the cleared road by five miles; all of them were covered in grease and dust.

Even the soldiers had taken turns this time. Samantha hadn't argued when they'd insisted. She and her trained girls had taken up the sniper posts and tried to keep their attention off the sweaty men.

"Cleveland, I think," Conner answered when no one else did. "My dad and I went through there a couple days ago. There isn't much left."

"You guys had a different list, I'd bet." Samantha smiled cheerfully. "I want to go through there and then call it a day. Five miles is good. You'll watch our vehicles."

There was a tense silence where the soldiers frowned and the females nodded.

"Good. Pack it up, gear up, and let's roll."

Samantha's words drew reluctant respect. The soldiers followed her orders and then her as she led them toward the town.

"Wait." Conner got their attention. "We shouldn't go in there yet. Let's wait until tomorrow."

The soldiers stared at him, but the females felt a cold chill. They knew that tone, even if the voice was different.

"Why?" Cynthia sneered. "So you can feel like you protected us?"

"I'm too tired to do anything about what I think may be waiting in there." Conner sat down on the hood. "Do whatever you want. I'll watch the vehicles."

He sounded like Adrian. It sent anger through the women.

“I say we go and do it now, while there’s still light.” Samantha gestured. “Vote on it.”

Enough hands rose to get the win. Samantha signaled for them to follow. The mall she could see was half a mile over cracked pavement and a small wooden bridge. If they found anything useful, she planned to send a pair of the soldiers back for their wheels.

Candy and Tracy brought up the rear, not letting the males surround them for this run.

David shrugged when his men looked to him for instructions. “Follow their lead, I guess.”

Samantha loved the feeling that gave her, but nervousness was also present, creating an ugly mix in her gut. It was a reminder that she was carrying new lives. She slowed their pace a bit. Conner had been able to heal her completely. She wouldn’t waste the gift by getting hurt. He had refused to tell her how it was possible to get rid of the cancer though, and she hadn’t insisted once the pain receded.

Samantha motioned her team to get their weapons out, something the soldiers had already done. The group of nine strolled into Cleveland, Georgia an hour before dusk.

Samantha took them straight to the mall that had two stories encased in brick and a huge entrance sign lying across the wide stone steps. It was dark and felt empty. Samantha led them up the stairs calmly. She had scanned the mall and the town all

day, as much as she could. She didn't feel any danger, despite Conner's words.

The mall had been looted and there were bodies, but both were light. The group took mags and gear from the corpses. The soldiers realized the skeletons wore uniforms of a foreign nation and stored the information. Adrian had said to get a complete account of everything that happened today. He'd obviously known Samantha would go exploring.

The setting sun didn't cast much light. Samantha flipped on her belt light, adjusting the angle so the glare off the shiny floors and walls didn't blind her. Those in the rear did the same, allowing them to read the various signs.

"You are here."

"Wheelchair Rentals at the Office."

"Radio Shack."

Samantha headed toward the big red letters. They would check other stores, but if this one held something usable, it would go with them now. Parts for their radios were hard to come by.

Samantha swept the store with her light. There was broken glass, plastic, and papers, but no bodies. She eased through the propped-open door. Forcing her finger to stay off the trigger, Samantha led her group inside and began scavenging.

"We should clear the rooms back here." David took a position near the rear hall.

"Go on." Samantha pried open a metal cabinet. "Everyone else, grab what you can and be ready to

leave in ten minutes. I want to be back at the vehicles by dark.”

David and two of the men went down the hall together in a neat form that drew Candy’s attention. It made her feel safe and a little curious about how they had been trained. Would she be able to achieve that in time?

Samantha opened a drawer of resistors. They came in many sizes that could be soldered onto circuit boards. “We’ll have to test these before we install them.” Samantha carefully loaded the packages into her kit. “But there’s a chance some of them will be usable.”

“Won’t all of them?” David frowned. “They’re not even opened and the cabinet isn’t damaged.”

“I don’t know if we’re in an EMP radius from the war. I’m not sure it would affect these anyway, since they’re not connected, but it would suck to install them and then find out they’re dead weight.”

“Good point.” David was starting to like these Safe Haven women. They were smart, they were brave, and they were feisty. It was a powerful combination.

The noises of clinks and thuds echoed across the mall, along with their voices and laughter. It made the soldiers nervous. David was forced to say something. If he didn’t, his men would. “We’re making too much noise and our time is up.” Before she could protest, David picked up her kit and slung it over his shoulder. “Lead us out.”

Samantha stood there for a brief moment, considering, and then she spun toward the door, gesturing to her team.

The women followed her while casting resentful glowers at the men.

David swallowed an apology. The blonde was cool; he didn't want her pissed. He'd already heard stories about her temper.

Samantha stormed down the stone stairs, hating the fact that he'd been right on both counts. *He didn't have to handle me like that.*

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Samantha paused on the bottom step, not sure if she would accept his apology or not. She certainly felt she was owed one.

"We have orders to get you back to Safe Haven's gate by dark. I should have told you that when you suggested coming in here."

"Orders from who?" Samantha asked in a dangerously cold tone.

"Our boss. He said you're needed at home."

"You should have told me!" Samantha hurried off. "I owe you!"

"Damn." David took off after her. "That's not what I wanted to hear."

"She means it." Cynthia flew by to take Samantha's right.

"Great." David let himself and his men once again be the filling in the sandwich. "Now they'll never let me in."

“You’re living with our enemy,” Candy told him as Samantha increased her pace and a sense of urgency filled the air. “We weren’t going to let you in anyway.”

Before he could reply to that bombshell, David stumbled and fell. Half of his men stopped to wait for him; the rest of the group kept running.

“Stay with the women!” David grunted through the pain. Something was sticking through his leg. He could see both ends of it. He was almost certain it was a dart of some kind.

Dart? Fuzzy, David tried to focus. *Did someone shoot me?*

“Look out!”

“No!”

“Open fire!”

David heard the chaos from a foggy distance, but he couldn’t stop his eyes from shutting. *Help!*

3

“We came from Atlanta.” Brittani smiled at Marc while everyone was enjoying the burgers the Eagles had prepared on their personal stoves.

Each Eagle had made two sandwiches from their kits and shared with one of the strangers. Li Sing had told Marc of having a custom like this when new people came to his restaurant and Marc had adapted it. Besides showing there was nothing wrong with the food, it also gave the Eagles a new layer of training. They hardly ever had to use the

gear in their kits and that had to change. Marc had spent the time guiding the team through assembling the Emberlit stoves, lighting them, and then cooking the meat. Marc had enjoyed the demonstration.

The new group of men and women had watched in interest and hunger. They'd been cooking over open fires too, but they didn't have the gear that the Eagles did.

"Atlanta?" Marc frowned, swallowing. "That had to be ugly."

"It was. My dad and I grabbed the few people we knew we could trust and came out here to our family cabin."

Marc peered around the neat home, approving. "Nice handmade radio there. You do that?"

Brittani motioned to the wide man she'd been sparring with earlier. "Gus. He usually runs the radio, but when we found out we had Safe Haven people here, I decided to make contact."

"Wise. And you've been here the whole time, listening on the radio to the fighting?"

"Yes." Brittani didn't shy away from Marc's slightly accusing tone. "We're inner city people. We don't know how to fight and I don't know how to train them anymore than I already have."

"You didn't want them to be sacrificed in someone else's war." Marc read her guilty thoughts. "We won't hold that against you. A lot of good people didn't come and fight with us."

“I didn’t know you.” Brittani shrugged. “And I’ll kill for these people. It didn’t seem like a good time to bring them around.”

“It ain’t now, either, girl,” Gus said in a quick rush.

Brittani’s cold frown gave Marc pause. He observed her intently as she pinned Gus with a nasty glare.

“What did you say, *Boy?*”

Gus realized he’d tripped a switch. “Nothin’.”

“*Nothing!*” Brittani gestured angrily. “We’ve spent hours and hours on it and you still sound like some ignorant fuck!”

Gus flushed.

Marc grimaced, but he approved of the lesson. In fact, he had hopes that Angela would create a language class soon to help with those already in Safe Haven. Understanding what someone from across the country was saying got hard sometimes.

Sighing, Brittani put a hand on Gus’s big wrist. “I don’t want them to be mean to you.”

Gus smiled a bit. “I know. I’m sorry I embarrass you.”

“Embarrassed,” Brittani repeated automatically. “If you leave off the ‘e d’, then it means you always embarrass me and that’s not true.”

“Embarrassed.”

“Very good.”

“A teacher!” Marc got it then. “You taught English?”

“English, and some history—even the parts I hate. You have a school?”

“We have a tent that we call a school.” These people would be a wonderful addition to Safe Haven. Smart, willing to learn, and hard workers. Marc smiled. *Perfect.*

“Thank you.” Brittani was relieved. “For me being able to come to the same conclusion about you.”

Marc held out a hand. “Welcome to Safe Haven Refugee Camp.”

Brittani shook gratefully. “It’s an honor. And, a relief. I’m not a strong enough leader for this new world.”

Marc didn’t agree, but he didn’t allow himself to consider where this feisty woman might end up after Angela’s evaluations.

Marc looked at Joseph. “Get us packed up.” He started to ask Shane if he needed to do anything here before they left, and found the Eagle gone. Marc sent his grid out and found that Eagle behind the little house. He immediately liked what he saw in Shane’s hands and directed the conversation back to the topic at hand. “Can we send trucks for you tomorrow or is that too soon?”

“Can’t come soon enough,” one of the older women in a rocking chair muttered. “Then she can make those grandbabies she promised.”

Brittani groaned in embarrassment. “Oh, mother! Why do you do that to me? I hate kids.”

The men all snickered.

The old woman flashed a toothless grin at them, indicating she enjoyed her daughter's distress.

"Tomorrow is great for the trucks," Brittani told Marc, casting hard glares at her mother. "We'll try to be ready on time."

"We'll stay and help if you like." Shane was in the doorway now. "Least we can do for your help."

"Fine by me." Brittani looked around. "Objections?"

There weren't any. Marc stood up. "My team will head out now. Call if anything changes."

Brittani and Gus walked them out while the others finished eating. Marc noticed that the woman stayed close to the large man. Bodyguard or husband, Marc wasn't sure, but he did know that anyone who tried to hurt Brittani would have to go through that mountain first.

"Yes, they will." Gus's dark profile glinted with intelligence that Marc hadn't suspected.

Marc laughed with them. "She got me on this trip."

"She's your wife?" Gus was viewing Angela through Marc's glare of adoration.

Marc wasn't sure how Angela would want him to answer at first and then it was as if her voice was in his mind. *Of course, you say yes. I've been yours since we were kids.* "Wife, soul mate, boss. She's everything."

Gus smiled down at Brittani. "Yeah, they get to you that way."

Blushing, she nuzzled his hand in comfort and then pointed toward the house. “Go make sure your brother doesn’t open that cooler yet.”

When they were alone, Marc stepped over to her so that his men couldn’t hear them either, sensing she wanted a quick, private moment.

Brittani leaned toward Marc. “Gus wants to be an Eagle—already. If that happens, tell your boss I’ll cause so much trouble that she’ll have riots. He isn’t leaving my side.”

“Why? His size and gifts would make him an incredible addition to any team.”

“Because he’s not all there. He’s like a teenager right now. In a few years, maybe he’ll even be an adult, but not if he has to go out and fight. Killing someone will destroy him. He’s that pure. I’ve kept him from being corrupted for the last nine months. You have to do the same.”

Marc could feel her dangerous rage flickering in weakening control. “I’ll tell her about Gus’s mentality. The rest of that, you’ll tell her yourself.”

“Deal.” She chuckled. “Still friends?”

Cute and playful. Marc suddenly suspected Gus would have competition for her love whether he wanted it or not.

“No, he won’t. I love Gus. He worships me. I’d never disturb that for a quick roll in the hay.”

Marc liked her more after hearing that. He held out a hand again. “Until I see you again, watch your six.”

Marc and his team pulled away with waves and a good feeling about the people. Shane and his team certainly liked them. Marc wondered if Brittani knew Shane was interested in her. Marc had noticed the vibes, but knowing Shane had replanted a wild rose near the back porch for her had clarified it. Shane was unhappy that Nancy hadn't joined the Eagles and Brittani obviously would. Marc wondered if Shane knew how desperate he seemed and then decided the man did. It's why he was trying to find a woman and settle down, so he could feel at peace again.

Good luck with that.

4

Billy took them straight toward camp, stopping when Marc told him to. Their one short break was at the place where Marc had put his alarms down. He was uneasy as he surveyed the location from the passenger seat. He didn't go rushing into a possible trap, but he was curious about what had happened to his alarms.

"You want me to do it?" Billy didn't want Marc to leave the van at all. The hinky feeling had invaded the minute they got here.

"Yes."

It surprised everyone that he would let a man face danger in his place. When Marc got out too, normalcy returned. The pair approached Marc's alarm with extreme caution.

“You’ve been a driver for years, right?” Marc asked as they spotted a branch over his alarm.

“Two decades. I raced cars as a child.”

“What do you make of the tire tracks next to us?”

Billy spotted the faint trail in the mud and knelt down to examine it. “I’d guess it was a bike, something light, and there was one person. Maybe a day ago.”

“Keep going.” Marc tried to pick up any lingering trail of the person on his mental grid.

“Light on fuel and water...headed southwest, toward Safe Haven.” Billy surveyed the surroundings. “The road’s way over there. Why would anyone *ride* over here?”

“Bingo,” Marc enjoyed his role as teacher. “No one would have known this was here, unless they were watching us.”

“Like right now?” Billy was getting a stronger wave of that hinky feeling.

“Maybe. Maybe not. If it’s one person, they have to sleep sometime. We won’t count on that.” Marc bent down nearby and pulled up a rock. “I left a camera. It was Kendle’s idea. She felt a disturbance in the force while I laid the discs and I used my horse as cover to put it down.” Marc slid the small black camera into his pocket. “It only had enough battery life and room for about 18 hours, but it might tell us who doesn’t want these alarms up.”

“Any persons of interest?” Billy scanned intently as they went back to the van.

“All the usual, but few motives. Watch your six out here on runs. We may have a lurker.”

“Lurker?” Billy frowned as they climbed inside. “Never heard of that.”

Jax scowled. “You saw a lurker?”

“No.” Marc shifted into drive. “But I feel him.”

“Not good, man.” Jax began to scan the stone and weed landscape.

Billy scowled. “What the hell is a lurker?”

Quinn spoke up from the rear seat. “A lurker is a crazy. They’ve been alone too long and gone nuts, but not in the pathetic way. They’re deadly. They wait for you to sleep and slit your throat.”

“To steal your stuff?” Billy had no trouble imagining a long-bearded psycho running around the cliffs in camo with a hatchet.

“They hunt people,” Marc informed the confused driver. “The old world labeled them as predators or serial killers, but these guys are almost worse. They stalk you for days or weeks, and then snatch you and carve you up while you scream. My unit handled a few of them for a security firm we moonlighted with. They like blood and they’re territorial. Safe Haven might have landed right in a lurker grid.”

“Does the boss know yet?” Billy was suddenly sure she would really ground the command people now.

“Not yet, but I want to view this footage first,” Marc took the chip from the camera and slid it into the fully charged camera that he’d brought along for

this reason. He'd already planned to stop here before Angela sent him. He hadn't needed the reminder from her, but that was her sense of fairness. If the Eagles saw she even stayed on his ass, they would adjust to it quicker. "In a few minutes, we'll know for sure and have a report to give her when we hit the gates."

Respect for Marc went up.

Billy wondered if the man knew it was because he had just reminded them of Adrian. Both men were a wealth of knowledge and ingenuity. They were also both lethal when riled. Billy pitied the lurker, if there was one. Marc sounded nervous about the possible threat and that meant he wouldn't stop until it was eliminated.

5

"You went off mission. And then left a member of your team behind?" Marc was shocked. Samantha's jeep had been flying toward Safe Haven when they hit the road to home. Marc had waved her over.

"Yes!" Sam was frantic. "We have to get help!"

"I am the help, Samantha." Marc turned to Justin.

Justin didn't care about the blame and he told the truth. "David was shot through the ankle and he fell. We didn't see what happened after that. He told us to stay with the women and they were running away."

Marc grunted, motioning toward the jeep. “Take me there.”

The trio of vehicles—a van, a jeep, and a small truck, flew over the cleared road and then took Marc all the way to the place where David had fallen. In the darkness, they hadn’t seen anyone else, but arrows had been flying hard and fast.

“Stay in the van.” Marc waved as they arrived. “Billy, with me.”

“Same bike.” Billy pointed as soon as they neared the bloody tracks. “And it’s heavy. The lurker has our man.”

“He’s not our man.” Marc was considering his options. “He’s from Adrian’s group.”

“Does that matter?” Billy didn’t like the idea of leaving anyone to be carved up.

“No, but I’m thinking a trap would be better than a hunting party.”

“Oh, shit!”

“What?”

“I had a bad thought. What if our lurker is a descendant?”

Marc led them toward the van. “I never assumed otherwise. And I think he’s military. Not many people would have known how to disable my alarm. An average person would have just destroyed it.”

“Was it a trap for us? Leaving the camera intact?” Marc hadn’t let anyone in the van watch the video, and none of them had felt comfortable asking him about it.

“I don’t know, but there’s a message for Angela on the video.”

“Why her?”

“She’s the boss. Sometimes, that’s all it takes.”

6

David couldn’t take his hands away from his waist. It was an odd way to wake up; he opened his lids slowly against the glare he sensed.

Everything was blurry and upside down. He realized he was hanging from a tree by his ankles. Pain lanced through various parts of his body and then centered in his leg. It continued to grow until he began to groan.

“Hold still!”

David tried to see who it was but the pain increased again. He screamed until the blackness took him.

“You hear that?” Billy was covered in goosebumps.

“They aren’t far.” Marc used his grid but found little. “We’ll come back and track it down. You in?”

“You know it.”

Fed up with being ignored, Samantha slapped the seat. “We’re coming too!”

“We’ll see what the boss has to say about that. But I suggest not using that tone with her.”

Samantha flushed and slumped in the seat. This was all her fault and she wasn't even going to be able to go along and try to make it right.

"Is it about your honor or the missing man?" Marc pinned her through the mirror with a hard glare. "'Cause it matters."

"Honor. He's one of Adrian's men. How could I trust him enough to care if he lives or dies?"

Marc understood that sentiment as much as anyone could. "Stay in camp. Do what the boss says."

"Why? Because I don't value life enough?"

"Because you'd only be along to prove you can handle yourself and this time, it could get you killed. Lurkers are not anyone to play around with."

"I'm a good hunter. You'll need me."

Marc didn't tell her he'd been tracking trash for most of his life, but his tone said she should know it already. "I need you to follow orders. It's part of the job."

Samantha gave in then. "Fine." When Marc used that tone, everyone knew he was finished being sensitive to the person's feelings and it bothered Samantha to be on the receiving end of it. She much preferred to be the teacher's pet.

"Don't we all." Marc wondered if Angela had known this was coming. She hadn't acted like it, but that meant little. Still, he didn't think she would have sent him out blind against someone who was obsessed with killing. That was more like something Adrian would have done. "Take us to the

gate. When we get there, send a message to Angela. Tell her I said if I'm not home by dawn, to send her pet killer."

Everyone knew he meant Adrian. The mood went from sullen to tense. Marc wouldn't send for Adrian unless he thought there was a chance he could lose whatever fight might be waiting.

Guilt crashed down on Samantha's shoulders. She clamped her lips shut against the pleas that wanted to come out. Marc wasn't the one she needed to beg for permission to go along.

"No, I'm not." Marc adjusted automatically against the force as Billy rushed them up the mountain in the darkness. "And I'm not waiting for you to talk her into it. Make it up some other way. You're off this run."

7

"Can you repeat that last part?" Shock and anger warred for the top slot in Angela's mind.

"If he's not here by dawn, he said for you to send in your pet killer." Samantha didn't meet her eyes. Angela had met them at the gate, with Greg and Shawn on her heels.

Angela gestured for them to leave.

The group of women dejectedly trudged toward the showers or mess.

Angela didn't have time for their emotions as she scanned the doors in her mind. She'd never heard of a lurker. She'd sent the witch out for

information as soon as she picked it from Samantha's mind. While the witch and Marc went hunting, she needed to scour the halls and see what new doors might have opened up.

Shawn and Greg waited patiently with her, watching the soldiers hurry into Adrian's site to inform him. The people in Zone A had been viewing the activity with concern after this morning's attack, but they were settling back down now. The other zones were empty.

Minutes passed and then Adrian appeared at the tree line. He signaled to the guards on the gate.

Zack scowled as he glanced at Angela. "Do we give it to him?"

Angela didn't answer.

Shawn did what he thought was best. "Marc asked for him. I say we do—because Marc needs him."

"Damn." Zack gestured at Greg. "She'll be searching for a while. Go get him some wheels and one of the girls."

"Samantha," Angela croaked suddenly. "They need Sam."

The men around her hurried to do as they'd been told.

Angela returned to her searching. She hadn't predicted Marc and Adrian working together in the dark. If she'd gotten a vote beforehand, she would have guessed that Marc would tell Adrian to cover his own people. Marc had known she would want David rescued if possible, but asking for Adrian in

the only manner tolerable to him (snidely) meant there was a chance for the two men to eventually co-exist.

Dreaming again, the witch warned from a distance. The only thing that might come from this is a murder. Two men have never been more at odds in this universe.

8

“So why am I here?”

Marc let Adrian’s question hang in the air as they settled into the tall weeds to wait. Billy was in the truck below, left to guard their vehicle. Now they had to wait and see if their lurker was still lurking. Tracking in the dark was nearly impossible and they would make too much noise. This plan was better for their prey.

“I realize you needed someone who was used to hunting this way, but there are half a dozen of those in Safe Haven now. I know. I helped train them.”

Marc scanned the darkness around the truck, thinking Billy might have nerves of steel by the time winter came. As he’d done with a few men over the years, Marc had taken Billy under his wing. The man didn’t know it yet, but he was being trained by the Ghost. Billy had a big future ahead of him and he would need the guidance.

“You want to talk about Angie.”

“I hate it when you call her that,” Marc immediately responded, not pausing in his scans. “You haven’t earned the right to be so familiar.”

“Bullshit. You hate it because you can’t avoid feeling how much I care for her when it comes out sounding that way.”

Marc let it go in favor of the silence he knew Adrian didn’t handle well. The blond had gotten used to people jumping when he spoke, not the other way around.

“Is it because she took those lives?”

Marc winced.

“Surprised me, too.” Adrian shrugged when Marc didn’t respond again. “She wants the baby enough to risk corruption.”

“Risk? It doesn’t mean she already is?”

“No. She chose bad people. No different than the variety of killers she’s got working for her now.”

“Variety?” Marc only knew of two.

“She has five active right now, with three in reserve while they recover or age. As long as everyone sticks to their assigned chores, it could create a beautiful environment when enough of the assholes are gone.”

“And if even one of those people goes off grid?”

“It’s not her killers we have to watch out for. They’ve gotten a taste of that freedom and they won’t risk it yet.”

“But Angie might, right?”

“Yes. Taking a lifeforce is different from taking a life. It corrupts the soul to take a pure force.”

“And the consuming thing she told me about?”

“That’s a myth, as far as I know. Jack and his crew were animals who enjoyed acting that way. They also liked using the stories of their cannibalism to scare their targets. Made them easier to corner.”

Adrian’s words matched what Marc’s demon had told him. He continued with questions that worried voice hadn’t had any answers to. “Did you predict all of this? Is that what’s in your notebooks?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve seen a lot more, all the way to the island and back?”

“Not back.”

“Are you with us on the island?”

Adrian didn’t want to answer that. “It’s up to you, in the end.”

“Obviously, I end up agreeing. Why?”

Adrian sighed. “Do you really want to do this now?”

“No, but it’s too late to shoot Kendle before she can heal you. Tell me.”

“Because what I told you was the truth. She needs more than you can give her. I’ve saved her life. So have you. And it’s not over, Marc, not by a long shot. It’ll take both of us to keep her alive.”

“Did it heal her enough to have the baby?”

“It healed her completely.” Adrian adjusted the scope on his rifle to narrow in on Billy, who appeared to have fallen asleep while waiting for

them to return. “Your daughter will be more beautiful than her mother.”

Marc didn’t like the feeling of bonding that was coming, but before he could break that mood with a snide remark, Adrian cleared his throat.

“David is a good man. Thank you for this, even though it was a cover.”

“Don’t confuse me with yourself. I thought he and his men should have been allowed in. I know she refused them so you wouldn’t be alone.”

“Yes. She has hopes of reforming me.”

“Impossible!”

Adrian didn’t take the bait. Reform was easy. Following through on it was much harder. He would have to have a damn good reason to change and the one thing that could bring it about was forbidden to him and always would be.

“Not when I die,” Marc ground out, unable to leave it alone. Not knowing when and how was eating at him.

“I won’t do it when the time comes. So tell her to make other plans. I’d kill you as fast as you would me.”

Marc didn’t know what they’d seen. It was frustrating, but he was forced to let it go as a shadow below them moved.

“Here we go.” Adrian aimed.

“Take him alive. I at least want David’s body to take back if we’re too late to save him.”

“No worries. The flea’s ass is in my crosshairs.”

The shadow approached the truck with a crossbow in one hand and a large knife in the other.

“Take the shot.”

Adrian fired.

The loud report echoed across the mountains. The shadow by Billy’s window dropped to the ground.

Billy, following orders, remained in the truck.

“You’re up. Go take one for the team.”

Adrian grimaced. “You got it, *Mary*.”

Marc recognized the nervous response. Adrian hadn’t been the one doing the dirty work for a long time.

Adrian approached the vehicle carefully and quickly, hoping Marc was covering his back and not aiming at it. He hurried to the fallen man and used his foot to roll him over.

He gestured to Billy, who flipped on the headlights for illumination. As the lights came on, another shot fired.

Adrian slumped against the hood, gasping at the pain. A double vest had stopped the slug from entering his shoulder, but the impact was enough to stun him. He let the sensation take him to his knees and then to the ground, listening as he tried to forget that he’d been shot.

The body next to him immediately rose up, coming over to take his weapon and point it at Billy. Marc had been right to suspect this.

“I know you can hear me. Stand up.”

Adrian did, not needing to fake the reaction. The blood wasn't there though, and the lurker realized it too late. Adrian swung with full strength and knocked him out with a hit to the temple before he could spin the gun and fire.

Another bullet slammed into Adrian, hitting flesh this time. He fell to the ground, rolling under the truck for protection.

Silence fell.

The Eagles waited for their shooter to come closer.

Inside the truck, Billy stayed down, listening in amazement as Adrian and Marc handled a *pair* of serial killers.

Marc waited patiently for the second man to show, a bit surprised there were two of them. It was rare.

The sound of a bike came and then Marc had it in his sight. He pulled the trigger gently and hit the rear tire of the Yamaha.

The bike skidded sideways and then slammed into the ground, flipping the rider into the air. It came down in a bed of weeds, but not hard enough to have killed the rider.

Marc hurried down the hill as he unslung his rifle and drew his Colt.

The rider struggled to stand as Marc neared. He stopped so the person couldn't reach him with an easy lunge. "Take the helmet off."

The rider faced Marc and slowly pulled off the protective gear. Long brown hair streamed down. “You won’t find them.”

Marc realized this was more than rare. It was unheard of. “Husband and wife?”

The woman glanced at the form on the ground near where Adrian was crawling out from under the truck. “Acquaintance, with common goals.”

“And what would that be?” Marc scanned for weapons, not lowering his.

“To get you out here.” The woman smiled insanely. “Hello, Der Ghost. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“There are more?” Billy leaned out of the window he’d lowered. Marc had told him not to leave the truck at all, and he wasn’t going to.

The sound of bikes echoed. Marc frowned. “Three more coming. You’re not lurkers.”

The woman flashed black teeth and madness. “No. We’re from Benjamin.”

“He died in the bunker.” Marc went cold at the memories. “Nice try.”

“We were sent before your bitch infiltrated the bunker.” The woman sneered as the bikes came down the same hill where Marc and Adrian had been hiding. “She succeeded, but so will we.”

“Why?” Adrian wrapped a bandana around his bleeding arm. “There’s no one left alive to reward you.”

“Oh, we’ll have a reward.” The woman motioned to her team, not afraid of Marc’s guns.

“We captured the Ghost and a Mitchel. All the rebels you’ve denied entrance will flock to us. In a few months, we’ll take over your Safe Haven.”

“You think it’s that easy, huh? We’re gonna go quietly?” Marc asked coolly.

“You will or I’ll tell them to kill the man I’ve got stashed.”

Billy’s weapon appeared in the window. “Now?”

“Fire!” Marc dove toward the woman.

Billy aimed his weapon at the coming bikes.

The three men didn’t have a chance to do the same as blood splattered. The bikes crashed into each other from a careful shot through the tire of the lead rider.

Marc held the woman, glad he didn’t sense any power in her. “It’s over. You lose.”

Instead of the anger or begging he’d expected, the woman cackled wildly. “You gave the code with that action. Your man will be dead in half an hour.”

Adrian grunted. “How many of these assholes are there?”

“More than a dozen.” The woman cackled again. “You screwed up!”

Marc punched her, knocking her out. He hadn’t counted on that many people hunting together. “Get her home.” Marc dragged her heavy body to the truck. “Adrian and I have things to do and people to kill.”

Adrian immediately checked his weapon and waited for orders.

Marc stared around them, not hearing or seeing anything. He flipped on his gun light and headed in the most likely direction. He hadn't planned to hunt in the dark, but maybe it was better this way. Innocent people would be in their dens right now, and wouldn't be caught in the crossfire.

Marc gestured for Adrian to cover him, then studied the ground as they walked. Tracking in the dark was hard, but he'd done it enough to have faith that he would discover a trail. This was about more than their missing man now. It was a necessary thing that had to happen or Safe Haven would be under attack yet again.

"Let's make sure that doesn't happen." Adrian loaded a fresh mag into his 9mm.

"You know it." Marc didn't let anger at Adrian distract him. For this run, Mitchel was probably the best support he could have. *Unless he gets a shot at me in the dark. One of us could die tonight.*

Adrian grinned, but didn't reply. He liked it that Marc thought he was dangerous enough to worry over. *Because I am. Watch your six with me. Despite my many appearances, I truly have no mercy.*

Chapter Nineteen BK6
Are You With Me?

1

“**D**rive her straight to the brig.” Angela signaled for the evening gate guards to open them wide.

“Traitor!”

“Killer!”

The people of Safe Haven were not happy to have been woken with the news that someone had tried to hurt Marc.

“Hope you get a bullet!”

“Die, you traitor!”

Angela didn’t like the ugliness, but her people needed to vent a little and the woman in the van needed to be scared for her life. It was definitely in danger here.

The van threw dust over the small crowd of angry people.

Angela hid a smirk. Billy didn’t like their hang ‘em high attitudes either. As an Eagle, his disapproval was as powerful as hers. She sent a hard look over the crowd that had come at Billy’s radio call.

They sullenly left. That instinct to hurt anything that might disturb their lives was one that Adrian

had encouraged, even though it had seemed the opposite from outward appearance. Angela hoped to calm those fears in time, but as long as they had people hunting them, it was impossible to do it.

Zack stayed close. “What type of security do you want on her?”

“Just you.” Angela swept the waking camp. Dawn had come two hours early. “Handle it like Adrian would.”

Zack’s brows furrowed, but he didn’t protest. He hated Adrian; the fact that their routines and plans came from him rankled Zack. He left her side with a scowl.

Angela waited for the locks to click on the gate. The future hadn’t been revealed to her, again. Angela suspected it was because of what she’d done. Her guilt wouldn’t let her make plans to do it again, even if it was needed. Only for Marc or Charlie’s life would she ever murder and that made her tension worse. She knew trouble was coming. Marc’s demon hadn’t been wrong. *She will have to let them die by the hundreds before the truth can be accepted.*

You could try again, the witch suggested, meaning to convince everyone to flee south now.

I will. Angela made eye contact with each of the men on the gate. “And some of them will listen.”

The ones who matter, will save themselves, the witch tossed out a platitude.

They all matter! Every life matters to the Creator, and to me, so don’t forget that!

I did not mean to—

Stop. Angela sighed, calming down while also finding it troublesome that she was arguing with herself again. *Life is the only thing that truly has value. Evil, good, in the middle—all of them. Some deaths serve a purpose and some are needed, but don't mock their sacrifices. They all matter.*

2

Angela swept the area again, spotting Peggy moving through the darkness without Doug. She was avoiding him, not even stabbing the big man anymore. Doug was confused, but Angela wasn't. If she didn't want to talk to Doug, she was trying to keep him from discovering her other secret.

In the mess, Kyle and Jennifer were enjoying coffee and cocoa for their end of shift time. If they followed the new pattern Angela had noticed, they would go to the sleeping area next and spend time with three families there. The men who'd died in Kyle's wreck had left people behind. Kyle was now caring for them personally. But for his one flaw, Kyle would be a perfect man. It could still happen for him, in time, but Jennifer would have to get him over that obsession and Angela wasn't positive that was possible. People didn't get over their obsessions. They just learned to avoid them, much like children touching fire. It often took the burn, to learn the lesson.

Behind the mess, the sniper shifts were changing. Angela's heart clenched as she spotted Charlie climbing down from the perch the Eagles had built. She wanted to keep staring, to give him the chance to acknowledge her, but she knew he was still furious; she turned away so he couldn't reject her. Her emotions liked to get out of control and while being pregnant had a little to do with that, it was mostly the stress of knowing what else was coming.

In the front parking area, teams were already prepping to leave on new runs, including the men who were picking up Shane's group. All of those men would be placed into Zone B for testing when they arrived, and so would Marc's crew. Enforcing the quarantine laws was important and they'd had contact with multiple strangers. The Eagles were already assigned to Zone B, which had been emptied when new people were brought into the inner adjustment zone last night. None of them had been sent on their way. That had emptied both outside zones. It wouldn't be that way again while they were in these mountains. *Until the snow comes.* Their men would be cleared in time to empty the space for Brittani's group, but still there around when those people arrived, to add comfort.

"Can I talk to you?"

Angela found Cynthia behind her. "What's up?"

"I'm worried about Samantha. So is Neil. Jeremy hasn't said so yet, but he's noticing stuff too."

“She’s been sick.” Angela wasn’t sure who all Samantha had told, but she didn’t think it was her men or her friend. Her methods to keep such an awful secret had succeeded. Much like John and Doug, who had hidden their illnesses, Samantha had gotten better at distracting people from the truth.

“She’s also reckless.” Cynthia was glad Angela already knew there was a problem. “Conner told her not to go in to that mall.”

“She didn’t listen to her protection?”

“Protection?” Cynthia gasped. “You sent him down to protect us?”

“Of course. He’s a healer and it was a group of women carrying our future. The question is, why didn’t you guys know that?”

“He didn’t tell us.” Cynthia hated how Angela always managed to twist it around and come out on top. “Was he supposed to?”

“Yes. He’s young. Probably forgot.”

“Well, she wouldn’t have listened anyway.” The reporter switched back to her original topic. “She’s acting odd. Her guys are going to talk to you about it soon.”

“I know.” Angela waited for more and wasn’t surprised when it came.

“I need to interview Adrian for my paper, but I’d like to take a guard along.”

“A witness, you mean.”

“Yes. I won’t have people thinking I’m like Kendle or worse, make Daryl feel betrayed. I’ll need about an hour, I think, and that’s it.”

“It’s fine. You can take Daryl if you like.”

“Really? Won’t that cause more tension?”

Angela glanced over at Cynthia. “Worse than the questions you plan to ask?”

“No, but I...”

“You aren’t going to stay on business,” Angela finished when Cynthia paused. “Take whoever you trust, Cyn. It’s fine.”

Grateful and yet still resentful, the reporter left, casting long looks over her shoulder. *How can I like Angela and dislike Angela, at the same time?*

I don’t know, but I do, Cynthia answered herself. *There’s something going on with her and I won’t like it when I discover what it is.*

No, you won’t. Angela was scanning Cynthia’s thoughts. *I can’t let you give birth and you’ve sensed the ticking clock.*

That bell was set to go off in a few weeks and Angela didn’t intend to stop it. That baby was worse than dangerous. He was true evil and he already liked to hurt people.

3

“What the hell is wrong with these people?” Samantha was disgusted. Adrian had dropped her off at the bottom of the mountain road. She had made her way on foot to be sure she went undetected. She’d followed the bike trail from David’s capture location while Marc let the chaos happen, and then she’d found the den.

On the front porch, naked men were chained to the railings and dying of hunger, dehydration, and exposure. In the side yard of the wide farmhouse, under a giant willow tree, there appeared to be a bone pile. Samantha was afraid to look in the rear. A large fire in front of the house glowed brightly, illuminating filthy tools lying around the sparse grass and personal effects of victims. Two large people dressed in all black stood on the porch with shotguns, sweeping the darkness.

Samantha stayed down. Marc wanted her to be a surprise and she hadn't spotted David at all. She was hoping dawn, which was closer now, would help her with that before it exposed her.

One of the chained men slumped over. The two guards on the porch nudged each other in obvious happiness. They didn't leave their posts, but one of them banged on the front door.

Are they eating them? Samantha's stomach twisted. She didn't see tools for that, but the rest of the scene fit.

The door opened. Another black clad person came out and dragged the collapsed man inside. Samantha wanted to be glad he was out of the cold, but she assumed their fate inside the house was worse.

Not sure how she would stay hidden when the sun rose, Samantha stayed hunkered down and tried to keep warm. There was little cover here; the icy wind was relentless as it reformed the landscape

into a crystalized quarry. *Come on, Marc. I've never done this before and I'm getting nervous.*

4

“Ready?”

“Yep.” Adrian’s hands were full of Marc’s ammo. *I’ve been reduced to gun boy.*

Marc grinned and fired.

The grenade hit the vehicle behind the house and exploded, taking the old wagon with it. There weren’t any people here, not even guards, and Marc took advantage of it.

“Let’s go.” He took off running, aiming for the side yard.

Adrian followed, slamming a grenade in to reload the launcher on the move. It was another variation of the way he had trained the Eagles to do more damage. The former leader tried not to grumble.

They reached the side yard as the rear door opened and the yard flooded with activity.

Marc opened fire as soon as they were in range, hitting the giant tree. Shrapnel flew over the yard, bringing screams.

Marc ran for the front porch next, aiming at the door as the chained man shouted for him to stop. Marc had no intention of firing, but he let Adrian reload it for the appearance. He wanted the house cleared—quickly—and this would do it.

“Get out!” a man shouted as he saw Marc and the launcher in the doorway. “Breach! Get out!”

“Now!” Marc ordered through his belt radio.

Outside, rifle shots lit up the stillness to compliment the screams as Marc and Adrian dropped the launcher and ammo, and opened fire with their own rifles and handguns.

Taken by surprise, the eight men and women were quickly killed, but it was too late for the naked man on the floor. They’d already begun to chop him up.

A ninth man ran for the rear of the property and dove into a small hole Marc assumed led to an underground area.

After Samantha came to cover them, Marc and Adrian freed the captives they found and then headed for the hole.

Samantha stayed topside, lurking in the shadows in case anyone had been drawn to the noise.

5

The tunnel was made from sewer piping. Once they climbed down, it was tall enough for the two men to stand up. Neither of them flipped on a light that would make them a target in the darkness. Adrian used his night scope and Marc sent out his grid.

Marc spotted half a dozen still warm bodies and only three heartbeats. He’d learned to tell the

difference over the years. He went forward with his gun in one hand and knife in the other.

Adrian spotted their prey. “There!”

Marc lunged forward through the darkness. He was immediately knocked against a dank wall as a bullet went through his jacket and stopped against the triple plates. Marc staggered forward.

His would-be assassin screamed, firing again.

Adrian shoved by Marc to club the man with his rifle.

Marc let him, chest aching. The plates stopped the bullet, but not the force. He felt like he’d been hit by a truck.

“Good to know I’m not alone in that.” Adrian’s shoulder and arm hadn’t stopped throbbing, though the trim had clotted on its own.

“Yeah, but you deserve it.” Marc was feeling good, like always after winning a fight, surviving. “Let’s get our guy and go.”

They found David and another man in the farthest room under the ground. Both unconscious, neither of them looked good. Marc and Adrian each carried one from the cellar.

Samantha hurried to go get their wheels without being told. For all the running around, the house was only a few minutes from the spot where David had been taken. The mall was a trap they’d been using to draw in refugees. Samantha didn’t know what they’d been doing with them, but the survivors they’d brought out would tell the stories. Because

there had been other captives here, Samantha wasn't feeling as bad about David's injury.

Until she returned and found him unconscious and covered in blood. Then the guilt overwhelmed her and she burst out crying as she stumbled from the van. "I am so sorry!"

Adrian caught her around the waist before she could go to David, rotating her back toward the vehicle. "We want to leave now. You drive."

Too upset to notice who was giving her orders, Samantha climbed into the van and started the engine.

Marc gave Adrian a nod of approval that he didn't want to deliver, but felt was deserved. David didn't need her tears. He needed a doctor. The arrow through his leg was ugly enough that Marc wasn't sure he would ever walk on it again. Marc also wasn't sure the leg could be saved.

He knew Sam heard his thought by the way she opened the van door and vomited.

6

"They're back!"

Angela met the van at the gate. She saw Samantha, Billy, and two injured men. "Where's Marc?"

Samantha was too busy helping one of the men to reply.

Angela assumed it was David.

Billy came over to her after waving for Eagles to help the two injured people to the medical bay. A third man from the porch had lived long enough to feel the chains come off; his body hadn't been brought in. "Marc made me stop at the bottom of the road. Said he and Adrian felt like walking."

"Did they? Feel like walking, I mean?" She was instantly worried.

"Adrian didn't." Billy yawned tiredly. "He was looking like I feel."

Angela motioned him on. "Get a report in by evening mess."

Billy vanished toward the showers.

Angela also left, not wanting to be near the gate when the two men made it up the hill. The witch's warning came to mind, but Angela was worried about more than a possible fight or death attempt. She had secrets and both men had clues. It wouldn't take much to put them together. Both of her men were incredibly smart.

Calling them your men, now, the witch observed. *Interesting.*

I don't mean it the way you took it.

The witch refused to accept any excuse for Adrian's betrayal. She stormed off, rattling doors all the way down the hall.

Angela went to the medical tent to ask if the doctor needed any help. She found Samantha with her knife against the doctor's throat. "Well, this is new."

Samantha slowly eased away from the cowering physician. “We had a difference of opinion on David’s treatment.”

David was unconscious. The arrow through his leg was bleeding, with light blood drips trailing across the floor and onto the cot. In the lantern light, David looked bad. Angela glared at the doctor. “You chose not to even try saving the leg?”

“It’ll be awful.” The doctor reddened. “Blood and screams, and it won’t work.”

“You lazy little—”

“Samantha.” Angela’s tone said to get out.

Samantha shook her head. “I owe him. He isn’t losing his leg because of me.”

“It doesn’t look good. You know that.”

“Are you siding with him?” Samantha hovered in front of David’s prone form.

“No, I’m not. He’s going to try or I’m going to relieve him for dereliction of duty. But you have to be prepared to face the truth. Without intervention, the leg might not be savable.” Angela scanned the other man who was slumped in a chair in the tent and awake, but not alert.

“Marc had us give them both a sedative from the medic kits you’ve got us all carrying now. He, uh...” Billy gave the rest silently. *He started screaming while Samantha went for our vehicle. Marc said she didn’t need to hear it, that she would torture herself enough over it.*

“Agreed.” Angela went to check on the man, giving the doctor a harsh glower.

The doctor forced himself to go to David.

Samantha was already busy removing David's gear and pants.

Angela helped the man in the suit onto a cot. He needed a complete workup, but it would have to wait until David's leg had been handled.

"I need help." The doctor stared at the arrow as if it was the plague. "And send someone who can hold him down."

Samantha growled. "You are not cutting off his leg!"

"Lady, I have to shove that arrow through the rest of the way. Drugged or not, he's gonna fight and scream. You can't hold him."

"I'm staying," Samantha stated stubbornly for lack of a better answer.

"You can hand me things. All the other medical assistants are on cave shifts or sleeping. I wasn't expecting new arrivals."

Their radios crackled. "New arrivals."

The doctor jumped.

Angela sighed, wondering if the newest people had passed two brawling men on their way up the mountain.

7

Marc turned to Adrian as they reached the halfway point. "Can you be bought?"

They'd let the small truck of refugees pass them without being seen, but they were now striding up the middle of the cracked road again.

Adrian was surprised by the question and not sure how it was meant. "Can *you*?"

"Everyone has a price." Marc was enjoying the walk in the dark. He didn't get this much privacy often.

"What's yours?"

"Angie and the kids. Your turn."

Adrian realized he'd been led into an oral trap, and sighed at his blindness. *I am getting old.*

"Yes." Marc smiled cheerfully. "You are."

Adrian didn't take the bait this time. Instead, he answered the question with one of his own. "What would you give me to tell her I have to go away and then do it? Because I am capable of that."

Marc didn't doubt it. If Adrian got some of what he wanted out of this humiliation, he would flee and never look back.

Adrian snorted bitterly. "You think highly of me."

"With good reason. Now answer the question."

"What would I be paid to do?"

"Leave the state and forget she exists."

Adrian studied Marc in the darkness, trying to figure out where this was going. "You can't give me what I want."

"We both know that's not true. She'd do anything to erase the guilt she feels."

"You'd do that to her?"

“To get you out of our lives forever?” Marc shrugged. “Maybe. Is that your price?”

“I’d have to think about it,” Adrian stalled, but his decision was already made.

“Fine. We’ll be at the gate in about ten minutes.”

Adrian grunted at the time limit, but didn’t protest. “She needs time out of those gates.”

“It’s not safe out here.”

“My site is safe as it can be.” Adrian added more. “And you could send Eagles along.”

While Marc was enjoying some of Adrian’s eager groveling, the fact that it was time with Angie they were bargaining for made him put an end to it. “It won’t happen unless we make a deal, and even then, I’ll need time to consider your request.”

“*Requests.*” Adrian’s tone hardened. “If I’m being sent away, you have to take responsibility for my son.”

“No. Conner goes with you.”

“Safe Haven needs him! *Angela* needs him.”

Marc didn’t respond. None of this was up to him anyway and they both knew it. Angela would make the final choice and they would all try to live with it.

“Why can’t you just share her?” Adrian asked suddenly. “Others are adjusting to the idea. Can’t you even consider it?”

“I’ve done more than consider it, you self-righteous prick!”

Adrian was shocked. “You told her you would?”

“And she shut me down quick enough to make my balls hide, so save that shit. I’ve always been willing to do whatever it takes to make her happy. You just want to rut like a dog and gloat.”

“I’d never gloat. I’d love her as much as you do.”

“Oh, shut up!” Marc increased his pace. “You don’t know how to love.”

The two men fell silent as the gates appeared, full of life and light.

I miss that. Adrian quickly hid his misery.

Marc could have felt sympathy, but he knew better than to trust the former leader. Adrian was a coiled rattlesnake, waiting for the right moment to infect his prey with poison.

Marc studied the changes that Angela had made during his short absence, approving. The long fences provided a path for new people to follow and Zone B was now the closest to the main gate, indicating that it had now been rotated to be the *good* area. Marc liked that. Strangers couldn’t use that knowledge against them if it was always changing.

Tarps of plastic hung over the long tunnels that would provide shelter for the herd while they waited. The ends were staked into the ground and covered with brush so they would stay down. In a few days, the shifting winds would have sent enough dirt and debris to bury the edges in inches

of thick padding that would also keep in the warmth. It was a brilliant setup, but it implied too many people were coming.

Marc realized she must be ready for the camp to know about the flood of refugees coming their way.

The gates swung open. Billy and Zack came out to escort them.

Marc lifted a brow toward Adrian. *Well?*

Adrian was staring at what he could see of the inside. His voice was like the rock that surrounded them as he answered. “Kill me or share her, but I’m never leaving. I’ll be in your mirror for the rest of your life.”

Adrian strode for his site with his head up and his anger held in check. If Marc thought he could be bought off with a night or two of sex, he was sorely mistaken. *I’m in it for the long haul. When your clock runs out, I’ll be all over that and she’ll be complete for the first time in all her lives. She deserves that and so do I. Not every man on the planet has the strength to accomplish what I have. You don’t and she knows it.*

8

“Safe Haven is a place of second chances...” Zack was already chilled to the bone after spending a short time with the lunatic woman. Marc’s brig had real bars and real cells. Zack had locked her muttering form inside with relief. “If you change

your ways, you could eventually be allowed to be one of us.”

Zack knew that was a lie. Even if Angela wanted this looney, Marc and the Eagles would never allow it. “I’ll ask you some questions and you need to tell me the truth. After that, you’ll get a blood test to make sure you’re not ill. You won’t be mistreated or—”

The woman interrupted him with a long laugh that sent fresh chills down his spine. When she stopped, she turned empty orbs on him and went quiet.

Zack hid a shudder behind an itch and knelt down to be at eye level. “Who was the man underground?”

“Did he survive?”

Her fast question surprised Zack. “No.”

“Good!” The woman spat on the floor. “We were going to eat him, but he swore he was a state governor. We kept him for a bargaining chip with the bunker.”

Zack stared. “There’s a bunker in use?”

“Not now. There were riots or revolts, something like that. We were all sent out ahead of it.” She examined Zack with a sane, pitiful expression. “Could I really stay?”

Zack nodded. “I need to know one more thing. How many of you are out there?”

“We had ten in our group...” She moved away from the bars. “You didn’t say if I follow the rules. You’re lying!”

“Yes.” Zack put his hand on his gun. “You’ve been found guilty of attempted murder, murder, kidnapping, abuse of a corpse, and a lot of other terrible things. The sentence is death.”

She opened her mouth to scream, or maybe to laugh again. Zack quickly shot her.

He holstered the weapon that had a suppressor. All Eagles were supposed to carry one. *Was that right?* He stared at the body. *Was it just?*

“Yes.” Marc entered the brig and locked the door. “Besides all the evidence at that farmhouse, I’m sure you noticed she was bat-shit crazy.”

Zack grunted. “Yeah.”

“She was guilty. You carried out the sentence.”

“Do I...hide the body?” Zack wasn’t sure about Kyle’s methods.

“No.” Marc opened the cell door with his master key. “I’ll take the hit on this one.” He lifted the body over his shoulder and took it outside.

Zack followed.

Shocked expressions and justified shouts greeted him as he marched to the gate. Marc agreed with them. He was tired of being shot at, of being hunted. This was how those people needed to be treated.

Marc went through the gate when Zack opened it. The former trucker was curious what Marc had planned.

Marc dumped the body on the ground near Zone C and then began the revolting task of tying it to the fence. He was glad there were only a few refugees

in Zone A to witness him take a marker from his smallest kit and draw a word on her forehead.

Killer.

It was a warning to those hoping to get inside their gates, and also to those who already had that honor. Safe Haven would no longer show any mercy.

9

Samantha held David's hand as he bit down on the rubber ball. His screams were burnt into her brain; she couldn't stop saying how sorry she was.

The doctor had broken off the shaft and was attempting to drive the rest of the shaft through the leg to get it out.

"Bone, I think." The doctor shoved harder. "Can't cut it out. Has to go through."

"Pull it." Angela helped hold the man in place. "We'll treat the side effects of that."

The doctor reversed his force; the shaft slowly inched out of David's ankle while he screamed.

The wooden shaft popped out with a nauseating sound. Blood gushed from the wound. David's scream cut off abruptly as he passed out. All of them were grateful.

The doctor hurried to pack the wound and control the blood loss while Angela gently squeezed the blood bag. She hadn't trusted Samantha or the doctor to be left alone together for long, but she

hadn't interfered with his choices. He was trying to do his job. She had to let him.

The doctor wiped sweat from his brow and then smeared a gob of antibiotic ointment around the wound. He also shoved a generous amount into it, quickly replacing the soaked packing. "I can't stitch it... No staple would hold it... I'll cauterize it!" Angela nodded when he surveyed her for approval.

"It's what I would do, if that helps you. After you check for splinters."

"That's good." He nodded. "Yeah. Okay." He rushed from the canvas that had been set up behind the main medical tents to give them privacy.

Angela spent a minute observing Samantha. The storm tracker looked healthy despite the events she'd been a part of. In a few weeks, that could matter.

"I'm so sorry!"

David groaned weakly.

Angela placed her hand on his shoulder. She didn't have the spare energy to send out healing orbs, but she was able to dull his pain a little. David was allergic to morphine and they didn't have many other painkillers that would work during surgery.

"Thank you," Sam whispered as David's body relaxed and his teeth let go of the bit.

Angela transferred her hand to Samantha's shoulder. "Sleep for a while."

Samantha's lids grew heavy; she obediently lay down on the bloody cot by David's arm. She faded into sleep while yawning.

Angela looked around and found David also sleeping. Approving even though she hadn't meant to do that, Angela stayed with them. She wouldn't leave them alone with the doctor, the same as Samantha wouldn't have left her if the situation had been reversed. As she stood vigil, Angela listened to her waking people.

A small group walked by, talking about the pancake breakfast with five types of syrup for folks to try. They'd had pancakes a lot over the last couple of weeks. Li Sing was busy introducing new sauces to keep people happy.

Not far from the flap where she was standing, Angela heard Doug and Darian discussing the rules for Eagles. They left easy hearing range too quickly for her to pick up much. She let it go in favor of listening to the next group complain about the colder weather they had today. She had plans to open the winter supply truck next week, but she would do it sooner if necessary. She needed Safe Haven people to stay as healthy as possible.

"It'll be soon. We'll have the new teams list and restart the in-depth training. You'll love it."

"And hate it, right?"

"Oh, yeah. You'll remember it."

Angela recognized the voices of an Eagle and their rookie trainee. Those lists would be going up this afternoon, at the same time they were moving people into the cave.

"They're coming soon," a young voice whispered from the opposite direction.

Working crew, Angela thought.

“And they’ll win?”

Angela narrowed in. Who did that second scheming voice belong to?

“That has not been revealed.”

“You’d better not...”

The pair got out of range.

Angela stored it. She’d recognized the voices. She started stewing on all the possible outcomes of her war. After a little while, there were too many threads to keep memorizing without missing details.

Angela took her book out to make notes. She passed the morning listening to her people and adjusting plans even when the doctor returned and his patient woke. There were important items to be covered and it was a good use of this time. Later, free minutes would be nonexistent for them.

“I need to show you something before we go in quarantine.” Marc joined her in the tent. He ignored the sleeping patients, but waved at the doctor. “You need a cup of juice or something, don’t you? Go see your boys.”

The doctor didn’t argue. He hated it when Angela was here. Having her mate in these close quarters too was too much.

Marc quickly played the video for her.

Angela automatically counted the number of people. *Ten. We’re short one.*

The woman they’d executed was standing where she would be captured fully by the camera. She held up a sign. *Give him to us or die.*

“Meaning Adrian?”

“I would guess so, but Conner is a healer, so it might be him.”

“What do you want done about it?”

Angela sighed. “Nothing. Unless they come to us or attack a crew, we will not engage this enemy yet. We’re not ready.”

10

Moving a camp of three hundred people into a cave was backbreaking, tedious labor. Long lines formed an assembly for most of it and a few hours of work barely saw a dent. Once the small items were inside, the larger furniture had to be lowered with ropes, pulleys, and sweat. Small injuries and constant complaints were the tune of the day; the medical staff stayed busy applying band aides and stitching gashes. Angela was relieved it wasn’t worse. She had the ants on the bottom floors, helping to lug equipment into place, but she’d chosen not to have the strong insects do the lifting up top. It would have distracted everyone else too much.

As the morning became afternoon and the bigger things finally disappeared from their main encampment, Angela made notes for downsizing the topside. With well over half of the camp moving in today, it would clear a lot of room for new projects—like the fuel facility she hoped to have Theo and Jennifer design around the wood gas

generators. Then, there was the solar farm and the winter crops. She wanted those things in place before the chaos hit. There was a small chance that the tide would flow west and miss them, and if that happened, they might be able to stay here, underground, for as long as winter wanted to rage. The temperatures underground stayed at a constant 50°-55° below ten feet, and they could blast a new entrance to accommodate the larger animals and trucks if needed, then seal it up with bricks and mortar. It all depended on the northern runs, and what may or may not come from them.

Her radio crackled. “Angela to level one.”

As Angela keyed her mike to show she’d heard, she could feel Marc’s tension from across the camp. He had only slept for a few hours and then got up to help with the transfer. He was currently supervising the lines to make certain the items coming through were approved for this stage, but also to make sure people weren’t getting too tired to keep hefting things along. He was switching them all out every couple of hours, sending them to have a meal or nap. He had no trouble keeping track of where people were or who was supposed to be doing what, but he didn’t want her in the cave while he was up here.

Below them, Theo and Jennifer had control of the cave, with Kyle on their heels as an enforcer and protector. Angela was positive he would end up being labor instead of protection. The people wanted to be inside and feel safe. They wouldn’t goof off or cause trouble during the move.

Afterward, when the need to celebrate a great day's work came, was when Zack and his men would have to stay on their toes. She had that shift sleeping in a large common tent along the cliff right now, hoping if they were over there, they would be undisturbed enough to rest up for tonight's duty.

Angela made it to the cave entrance before Marc appeared. She entered the cavern without a cord for the first time...

A hand settled firmly around her arm. "Me or the rope?"

Angela grinned. "You, of course."

Marc kept a good grip on her, especially as they went down the metal fire escape-like stairs that now led into the cave. It took them down the first forty feet, past a wooden floor and then another. This was the main entrance and it led straight to their home. To reach floor one or two, you had to take a different set of stairs that ran up to each level from the third floor. The stairs circled down another twenty feet.

Angela beamed in delight at the living quarters. She hadn't been down here since assigning the rooms. "Wow!"

Theo and Jennifer were waiting for her. They both wore expressions that said they needed to hear her gush over their accomplishments. It wasn't a problem; Angela was honestly thrilled.

Marc listened with half an ear, scanning the people. Despite grumbles over the work, everyone was in a good mood and they were right on schedule

to be able to settle them down tonight at close to the normal time—in the caves. It would be a long evening of walking these tunnels to make sure people were behaving and equipment was functioning properly.

All the builders were now fixers and testers. For the next two weeks, that group of people would stay in the cave and do exactly what the job titles implied. As with any new home, the cave would have problems. Marc thought the first one would be the dampness. Drying things out down here was a key to good health. People didn't do well in prolonged damp conditions. Marc would be glad when the vents and dehumidifiers made a noticeable dent in the moisture. They might even have to upgrade to a more powerful setup for that.

Kyle gave Marc a gesture. He had Autumn snuggled securely in a carrier on his chest.

Marc twisted around to find Shawn and Greg waiting by the stairs. He waved them over, not leaving Angela. "What's up?"

"We got the video to clear a bit, enough to be sure in the count." Billy came down the last few stairs to join them.

Marc took the camera and hit play. He saw the landscape where he'd placed the camera and the edge of the alarm disc sticking out from under the rock he'd used for cover. For ten seconds, nothing moved except the weeds in the wind. Then a bike came into view and behind it, a whole group of them. Marc counted ten all together.

“How many bodies from the house?” Marc didn’t say he had already done this with his copy of the film. His men needed the practice.

Billy frowned. “Nine.”

Marc gave him the camera back. “We’ll handle it.”

The men were positive Marc would; each of them put it out of their minds in favor of admiring the huge cavern around them. If not for the tops of the walls and the ceiling, it might have been a basement with paneled walls and carpeting. Everyone had done good work.

“We need a few more hands on level one.” Theo pointedly swept the stationary men with Marc.

The men chuckled and went to help.

Theo came over to Marc. “Can you help me with these blueprints? I want to make sure we’ve left enough room for a few vehicles.”

Theo and Marc examined the papers while Angela and Jennifer walked through the main living area. Along the hard walls were bunkbeds that were three-deep. Each had a rail and a long ladder nailed to it. There would be curtains to separate them soon. Then they would finish the couple’s area. Within a few days, there would also be chairs and shelves of books and games. If they did get to spend winter down here, they would all need activities to keep from going stir-crazy. Angela was hoping they might even get to construct an Eagle training area, but that was too far out to count on. If it happened,

it would be in the dead of the coming nuclear winter, when they couldn't do anything else.

Autumn woke up and began to fuss against Kyle's chest.

Jennifer went to her, cooing softly.

Angela kept going, taking notes and making plans. She dug through her knowledge of setups, wishing she had more experience in this. It was important that they got it right the first time.

Angela eased into the short tunnel off the living area, wanting to see how much they'd accomplished on the bathrooms. Next to the living space, this would be the next most used spot. It had to accommodate hundreds of people, multiple times, every day.

Angela was impressed with the plumbing, the sinks, and the wash area in the center of two dozen small stalls. The Eagle booth next to the washstands already held a guard.

Angela nodded to Brandon.

Brandon returned the gesture, but he didn't take his attention from their surroundings—especially not while the boss was in sight.

Angela approved the room quickly, and gave in to the urge to use the facilities. The stalls were barely wide enough to be comfortable, but it had allowed a well-constructed wall that would have shelves hung on it.

And a toilet paper roll. Angela blew dust from one before gathering what she needed. All these stalls would be outfitted with hooks and racks for

people to hang guns and gear on during their pit stop. Hand sanitizer dispensers would also be installed.

Angela acknowledged the sentry again as she left, listening to the fans and engines that were running. Some were pulling air, some were delivering air, and some were bringing power. Lanterns would remain a common item for a few more weeks, and then the cave would have full power—much like an apartment building.

Angela went back to the living area and made eye contact with Marc, able to feel his unease that she had gotten out of his sight. As soon as he glanced back down at the blueprint, she strolled down to level four. Now that it had been secured, cleaned, and had a guard and cameras, Marc hadn't given orders for the sentries to stop her.

She made her way down to the next level, where there was only a guard and little else besides their equipment. This would be a compost heap if they could get the right venting system set up. Next to it, where the tunnels were unlit, would be a garden plot and behind that, a small pasture. Angela wanted a load of dirt spread down here, grass seed planted, and then their calmer animals brought down. The lamps and constant temperature would allow the animals to eat and get fat in comfort. She had much the same plan for the garden, except everything would be in pots and planters so they wouldn't have to be left behind if there was trouble.

Angela scanned the last tunnel—the one she hadn't even viewed pictures of yet—but she didn't enter it. The sentry near the stairs was frowning at her, hand on his radio; she didn't want to listen to Marc's lesson on security. She shined her light into the tunnel, trying to determine the size of the room it held. She needed a sturdy place to store the gas and water they were collecting.

The cavern appeared to be huge, with a high ceiling and a small stream of water trickling down the far wall. *Perfect.* She shined her light into the other cracks and crevices. *We'll test it and then go from there.*

Angela rotated to leave.

An eerie moan sounded. It came from the cavern she'd just been scanning.

The guard hurried over to take her arm. "Head back up."

"Don't go in there yet." Angela allowed him to guide her to the stairs.

"We won't." Dexter was glad when she disappeared up the stairs. It wasn't safe down here yet.

Angela lingered on the third level, enjoying the time alone. She hardly ever was now.

She spotted a drop-off that should have been covered by now, and took her book out. She spent a moment listing things for this level and then slowly rotated to go up the stairs.

"Boo!"

Angela flinched, dropping the book as she scrambled for her gun.

Marc grabbed her hands. “Damn. Sorry.”

Angela let go of the weapon and clutched his arm. She didn’t speak, letting him know he’d scared her.

“You’ve been doing so well, honey. I didn’t think.”

Angela smiled, a bit sadly. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why does it feel like it?” Marc rubbed her cold shoulders.

Angela hugged him tightly; they went up to level one together.

Behind the couple, bright green orbs glowed from the shadows and then vanished.

Before they reached the next level, two people came down the stairs toward them.

Marc stopped, placing his arm over Angela to make certain there was no chance anyone would be tripped. The rails on these stairs were only the basics right now.

Tara and Shawn continued by them with words of greeting, but neither of them sounded happy. Tara was starting her job down here today, helping to prepare the next levels. She looked disappointed.

“Be ready with a new job for her.” Angela didn’t care if the woman heard. Tara wasn’t the type to labor in a dank cave for long, no matter the reason, and Angela was well aware of it. She had

Tara pegged now; it wasn't pretty. *The outcome won't be either.*

Chapter Twenty BK6

Teams And Schemes

September 20th

1

By evening mess, Safe Haven was half moved in; the good mood made for a calm meal on both sides of the mess. This was likely the last time they would all eat together out here for a long while. Many people lingered after they finished. For tonight, all they were going to do was shower and sleep. Some of the dirtier folks had already chosen the shower campers in place of the meal. Li Sing was scheduled to keep the mess open until midnight so everyone had plenty of time to get hot food. The wonderful cook had made pizzas tonight and the camp was enjoying the topping plates he'd made. Build-your-own pizza was fun.

It didn't take long for Donald and Nancy to bring out their guitars to add the twangs and hums of music. Angela and her long center table group also lingered with the crowd, always surprised that they could have so many people in one place without fights or other problems. Safe Haven truly was a light in this apocalyptic darkness for all of them. For those outside the gates, listening and

longing, it was a beacon that would bring in good and bad alike.

Marc scanned the constantly shifting masses of people, uneasy and proud at the same time. They'd accomplished a lot with and after Adrian, and they would continue to do so. Angela had an inherent talent for bringing progress; she knew who was best suited for each job. She was fair, smart, and they now had more brains here than brawn. It was a good mix of people.

Marc lifted his cup to Neil, who had just returned. His team hadn't encountered any trouble. Everyone assumed Kyle's wreck, the three deaths, Shane's wreck, and Marc's lurkers had covered Angela's prediction and then some. The north had indeed been rough, but they'd gotten many things from it.

Marc spotted Tara and Shawn eating together, and then Missy sitting behind him, humming and happily throwing bacon bits at him. Shawn was pretending not to notice. Tara couldn't see it from where she was sitting. Marc hid a snicker. That kid would need a firm hand, but Shawn wasn't up to the task.

Doug came through the crowd to their table. Everyone was surprised when he sat his tray down and joined them. When the stares got to him, Doug shrugged. "I need some *me* time."

There were confused looks as conversations continued. Across the mess, Peggy was sitting with Hilda and Tonya. Marc wondered what was going

on there. Tonya said she wanted to have medical skills too, but Peggy ignoring Doug was strange—as was Tonya not sitting with Kenn. That man was at the rookie table, waiting for the new teams lists to be posted. Angela had insisted on doing it after dinner so there wouldn't be any slacking by people who didn't like their final placement. When Doug finished eating, he would write it out on the board.

Neil came to their table, but didn't sit down. “Has anyone seen Samantha?”

Tension fell over the command table.

Neil studied the suddenly uneasy faces in concern. “What is it?”

Marc sighed. “Sam went off mission. They were attacked and one of the team was taken. Adrian and I had to go get him back. We took Samantha along.”

“And she got hurt? Is she hurt?!”

Marc shook his head. “She's fine. But she feels responsible for the man's injury and she won't leave his side.”

“But she's okay?” Neil didn't care about the rest until he knew that.

“Yes.” Angela grunted. “But she wants to resign from my team, and she's demanding a trial so we'll punish her.”

Neil was now scowling so hard his forehead had almost disappeared. “Are you? Punishing her?”

“I don't need to.”

“Yes, you do.” Neil knew Samantha. She wouldn't let something like this go. “If you punish her, she can move on.”

“And if not, she’ll keep on torturing herself?”

“Yeah. She’s hardheaded that way.”

Angela sighed. “I thought so too. But I wanted to be sure by talking to you or Jeremy about it first.”

“Treat her like any other Eagle.” Neil was almost glad it had happened. “The punishments aren’t that harsh, but the embarrassment can be.”

“I’ll handle it.” Angela pointed. “She’s in the medical tent with the doctor.”

Neil quickly moved through the full mess of people, waving to Jeremy. The two men left together with Neil speaking worriedly into Jeremy’s ear. They went straight to the medical tent and found Samantha asleep on the cot between two men that appeared to have had a rough time.

Samantha didn’t wake as Neil went to the doctor.

Jeremy waited by the flap to be certain they had privacy.

The doctor grimaced upon seeing them, but not with the usual hatred he often expressed for the high level Eagles.

“Get her out of here. I can’t take the crying anymore.”

Neil held out a hand.

The doctor stared in surprise at the old book.

“I found it on the last run. Thought maybe you could use it.”

The doctor gaped, dumbfounded, at the pristine manual. “That’s a Forbes Winslow!”

Acting as if he didn't care, Neil shrugged. "I saw medical words and thought of you." Neil went to Samantha before the surprised doctor could form a response.

"Samantha?"

Samantha woke quickly and groggily, and immediately surveyed David's leg. She burst into fresh tears.

"Come on. Let's get you settled." Neil gently pulled her to her feet.

Samantha let her men lead her to their tent, where they would care for her.

The doctor stared, forced to admit that he'd been unkind to people who didn't deserve it. He may not like some of the procedures here, but these people loved each other as much as anyone could. He'd become convinced of that while listening to Samantha beg David for forgiveness, even while he wasn't awake to grant it.

The doctor slowly sat down, forgetting about shutting down for the night. He began to thumb through *Obscure Diseases of the Brain and Disorders of the Mind*, by Forbes Winslow. He'd always wanted one, but could never afford it.

2

Former Eagle Teams

Kyle: ~~Cris~~, Daryl, Shawn, Billy, Morgan, ~~Crone~~, ~~Denny~~, Theo, Angela

Neil: Jeremy, Greg, Wade, Ben, ~~Daniel~~, Jake, Tim, ~~Steven~~

Zack: Allan, Donald, ~~Lee~~, Frank, Ozzie, Brandon, Simon, ~~Pete~~

Seth: Jeff, ~~Rusty~~, Jack, Ryan, ~~Bruce~~, Tommy, Joey, ~~Robert~~

Kevin: Ray, Dexter, Logan, ~~Alex~~, Francis, Scott, Josh, Whitney

Marc: Quinn, Shane, Jax, Logan, ~~Paul~~, Bobby, Howard, ~~Dwayne~~, George

Angela: Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, ~~Leslie~~, Rebecca, Tracy, Tonya, Candy, ~~Crista~~

Rookie: Tyler, Nathan, Cody, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Gary, Andrew

New Teams

Eagle Special Forces

Team #1: Kyle, Daryl, Shawn, Morgan, Billy, Shane, Jax

Team #2: Neil, Jeremy, Greg, Tommy, Wade, Ben, Quinn

Eagle Level Teams

Level 6: Zack, Seth, Allan, Donald, Brandon, Jake, Logan, Whitney

Level 5: Theo, Simon, Tim, Ozzie, Francis, Candy, Gary

Level 3: Marc, Ray, Josh, Dexter, Bobby, Howard, Scott, Tyler

Level 1, team #1: Angela, Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Kendle, Rebecca, Tracy

Level 1, team #2: Cody, Nathan, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Andrew

Rookie team #1: Kenn, Joseph, Charlie, Sheila, Conner, Courtney, Julia, Randal

Rookie team #2: Jonny, Kim, Ian, Eddie, Rod, Molly, Harry, Michael

Excitement went up as the new teams were posted, and then came the groans and words about their lost men and women. After that, came confusion.

Angela stood up, getting their attention. “I made a lot of changes. Some people are higher than they would have been. Some are lower. For instance, Quinn was with Marc when he went to take on the government, but he obviously wasn’t at the Special Forces level yet. That’s a huge bump.”

Realizing she was talking about him, Marc’s former teammate grinned widely. “I’ve got no problem with it.”

“Yeah, Neil can train him like Marc has us.” Jax was ecstatic to discover that he had also made it onto a Special Forces team.

“The higher teams took the most losses,” Angela reminded them gravely. “In the spirit that brings us all together, I’ve given those men a few rookies to train as replacements. I’ve chosen those I thought would fit into your groups. Please come to me if that doesn’t hold true.”

It was a warning to those who had gained multiple levels to work hard and keep earning what they'd been rewarded with.

"I've switched people around. Candy fits in perfectly with the tinkers and Tonya has her hands full with the radio and pharmacy. We're not up to pre-government numbers yet, but that will change as our new arrivals settle in and join up." Angela didn't dwell on that part. "We'll start lessons in a couple of weeks. I want us fully in the cave first, but until then, get to know each other. I'd like teams to have meals together and spend time in the activity and training tents. This will be an adjustment for everyone, but mostly for our rookies, who have huge shoes to fill. Good luck!"

There was a small cheer and the meal resumed for some, while others went up to view the board. Angela used the time to scan her highest men and be sure they were okay with her choices. They had to work together or it wouldn't work.

"Hey! Is that Conner's name?"

"No way!"

"What's he doing on there?"

"Is he allowed to be a rookie?"

"Yes." Marc didn't agree, but he hoped his support would make it easier for Angie to handle. "His banishment was conditional. If he becomes an Eagle, he won't be a threat anymore. He'll have changed and become one of us."

There were grumbles, but not as many as Angela had expected. She was grateful to Marc for

speaking up. People here respected his opinion, which is why the fly-ridden body outside their gate wasn't drawing serious protests. If Marc thought something that gruesome was needed, then it was.

A light shower of flurries began, but Angela didn't order them under cover. This was a normal storm and they had to get used to the cold. Come winter, they would have to work in it.

Angela spotted Daryl and Cynthia having a meal together, but the feel of it wasn't romantic. Angela wasn't surprised when Cynthia stormed from the mess a minute later. The couple was having issues in their relationship and it wasn't hard to guess that Adrian was involved. Add in the hormones and tension from her newspaper being released, and the reporter's frustration was understandable.

Angela turned her attention to the small quarantine zone inside the gate, where two dozen people waited for a placement. Jayson was among those. Angela didn't meet his eye as he stood at the fence and studied everything he could see from his location. Tomorrow, Jayson and the other people from Zone A would be blended into the camp, with settling partners.

“Why did you send me out with Marc?”

Joseph's question was one Angela had prepared an answer for, but she chose not to go with it. She used the truth instead. “You don't like white people. You don't trust us, and you have little reason to feel that way. You met Brittani and her group. You saw

how they reacted to us—without animosity. I thought you needed that.”

His hand went to his hip. “So I’m a racist?”

“No, you don’t hate us or wish us ill. Which is why you’re on the rookie team, but you don’t like us because of the past.” Her tone sharpened. “Let go of that.”

He sneered. “Like no one here feels that way about me.”

“That’s true. And they’ll be taught differently, but you’re going to be an Eagle. You have to understand the differences now.”

Joseph sighed. “I still feel that way. The trip out didn’t change anything.”

“I understand.” Angela smiled. “Time will help. Stick with the Eagles. We need you there.”

Joseph left her to her thoughts.

Angela wondered if that was really enough to soothe him. There were actually several reasons why he’d been sent, but his attitude toward other races was definitely the most important. He wasn’t even kind to Li, and that little man was friends with everyone.

Angela tiredly swept the mess again. Kyle and Neil didn’t seem upset with the names on the board, though Neil looked tired. He’d come to her for a sedative that Samantha could take while pregnant. Angela had told him to try a hot shower and a cup of hot chocolate. It had succeeded for two hours and then the evening call for mess had sent Samantha into tears again. She’d stumbled to the medical tent,

refusing to be swayed. Neil had come to see the teams list when she fell asleep on the middle cot again.

Angela was glad the doctor had already left and Millie had taken his place over the patients on this shift. She was also happy that Neil had come to the mess. It showed he still wanted his slot among Safe Haven's army.

Jeremy, however, was curiously absent. Angela made a motion to Marc, who sent out his grid.

He gestured. *Front gate.*

Angela went that way. She wasn't picking up bad vibes, but that didn't mean there couldn't be trouble anyway.

The rest of the camp was deserted; she hurried through the icy wind with her shadows. Marc had insisted on her having two of them after dark.

The main gate was heavily patrolled by curious men who wanted to know where they now ranked among the Eagles.

Angela gave them a curt nod that said to pay attention to their job.

Jeremy was huddled on the middle ledge of the gate, staring west. He was wrapped in a thick parka and still shivering lightly.

She climbed up and shoved her cold hands into her pockets. "Things okay?"

"Fine... For the sheep."

Angela carefully sat down next to him, a bit surprised not to find the ever-present laptop in his hands. "What's eating at you and how can I help?"

Jeremy gave her a pitiful look. “I can’t live down there. I can’t even go inside.”

Angela tried to remember if she’d seen him today, but couldn’t. “Where have you been?”

“I volunteered to supervise the bathrooms up here while everyone moved.” Jeremy dropped his head. “I can’t go down there.”

Angela placed a hand on his shivering arm. “You need to tell Samantha. After she’s over her meltdown, tell her the truth and don’t leave out why. She’ll understand.”

“You think she’ll understand that I killed my fiancé and the guilt of dying like she did is flipping me into a coward?”

“Yes.” Angela hadn’t known, but it wasn’t something they couldn’t handle. She stayed with him a while longer, cursing fate for making life so rough on her army.

3

“I don’t have time for each of you to catch me alone and beg. The time for secrets was before. You’ll all ask me here and now, or forfeit your reward.”

The training tent went cold with tension.

Angela rose from her perch on the center table. “We’re all good, then?”

No one wanted to agree, but everyone was hesitant to speak out in front of the others.

“The secrets will kill us.” Angela gestured. “We are the chain of command. We have to lead by example. That hasn’t been the case in the past, but it’s time for a change.”

Cynthia hadn’t been invited to this gathering. Neither had Samantha, Becky, or Tonya. It was understandable. Those four women weren’t in the top chain of command, even if they did sometimes fill those slots. Seth also wasn’t here, but only because he and Becky were on a run right now. Angela planned to speak with him after their return.

Kenn stepped up first. “I want Adrian let back in. He deserves a second chance. Give my reward to him.”

“I’d like to use mine to block that.” Marc was in the rear corner where he had an eye on Angie and an eye on the camp through the sealed tent window. “Only people who can change deserve a second chance.”

Angela surveyed Kenn as the other people muttered. “Can he be reformed? Does he have a desire to change?”

“He knows he was wrong...” Kenn’s brows drew together. “But I can’t answer those questions. Only he can and he isn’t here to be asked.”

“He isn’t here because he was going to kill us all!” Kyle didn’t like going against Kenn anymore. He assumed Marc had this covered, but his own feelings of betrayal wouldn’t let him remain silent. “If you can’t understand that, maybe you should go live with him.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Kenn admitted without fear. “But that’s no place for a baby.”

Another sign of Kenn’s progress was hard to miss. Kyle snapped his mouth shut. *Marc won’t let it happen.*

“It’s not up to me. And it isn’t up to any of you. The camp has to vote to overturn his banishment.” She pointed toward the mostly sleeping camp. “They have to be convinced that he can change.”

“You’re giving me permission to try?” Kenn verified in front of the witnesses, surprised with the answer. He’d honestly been expecting to be blown off, not given a way to accomplish his goal.

“Yes.” Angela was aware of Marc’s fury and Kyle’s shock. “But it won’t happen. You have to prepare for that.”

Kenn felt the double meaning, but he wasn’t sure anyone else had. He moved on quickly before Marc could pull it from his mind. “I have to try. He’s the only person who ever believed I could be good. And I wouldn’t be here now if it wasn’t for the way he changed me. I have to at least try to do the same for him.”

The fact that Kenn was hoping to reform Adrian went a long way in soothing some of the anger. He was showing loyalty and caring for another person, even though he wasn’t going to get a reward for it. He also reminded them of what Safe Haven was supposed to stand for.

“Who wants to go next?” Angela marked Kenn’s name from her list. “Uh... How about you, Neil? You know what you need, don’t you?”

Neil nodded as everyone got ready to hear a request to have Samantha to himself or maybe even to have Angela peer into the future. He opened his mouth. “How can I help Becky?”

Angela smiled in gentle, beautiful approval. “A pure soul is so attractive.”

Neil blushed, shaking his head. “I need this guilt to go away. I don’t care about her.”

“Liar,” Angela accused without rancor.

Then the warm tone fell away and Neil was facing the witch.

“What would you sacrifice to help her heal?”

“What will it take?” He wasn’t going to make the offer.

“Love. She needs love and time. Give it freely and fully, and possibly destroy your other life. Deny her and watch her fall. The best thing you can do for yourself is to stay away from her.”

Neil couldn’t accept those answers. “Tell me what’s best for both of us.”

“The third choice walks a line that mere mortals cannot maintain. Love and time between friends is powerful magic. And dangerous. Heed my advice. Stay away.”

Neil grunted and got up without arguing further. He left the tent; a cold wave of wind swarmed in to compliment the mood.

Angela braced. “Who’s next?”

“Me.” Kendle stood up. “I can’t take being in here with all of you.”

Angela gestured. “Hit me with it.”

Like you don’t know. Kendle glared. “I want to go home. I hate it here.”

“You mean Pitcairn.”

“Yes. Adrian said you would help me.” Kendle locked eyes with the woman, unable to imagine ever being friends with her. “You want me gone and I want to be gone. Will you make it happen?”

“Yes. But not in the way you mean. I need someone to take a team south and secure something for me. It’ll be dangerous, but if you succeed, you’ll be able to go home.”

“Can I get details?”

“A small crew of people also want to go to that island of yours. They’ll be going along, but you won’t be leading them. You’re too unstable right now.”

“Will Marc—?”

“No!” Angela’s eyes blazed. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Kendle dropped her head before she could accept that hard challenge. She needed to get home. “I’ll go. As soon as possible...please.”

Angela marked Kendle’s name from her list. “A few days. Get ready for it.”

Kendle left without staring at Marc as she went. She wanted him, but she needed peace more.

“Almost finished.” Angela scanned her list. “Let’s have...Kyle.”

Silence fell as attention switched to the couple sitting together near Marc.

“Was Autumn the good twin?”

Jennifer gasped. She hadn’t known what he was going to ask for.

Kyle covered her hand with his, sharing her pain.

Angela hadn’t suspected that either. “Does it matter?”

“Not to me, but to the future it might, and as her parents, we need to know.”

“I’ve sensed no evil in Autumn,” Angela stalled. “She’s a sweet baby.”

“She is the bad one, right?” Jennifer jerked her hand from under Kyle’s. “Just tell us!”

“No. She’s not evil *now*.”

Everyone understood the difference.

Angela’s tone became grave. “The future isn’t set. You can keep her from turning bad by filling her with love and kindness. Don’t let your personal hatreds fill her mind with thoughts of vengeance. Make sure she gets to be a child.”

Daryl was unable to keep quiet any longer. “Is the same true of Cynthia’s baby?”

“No.” Angela sighed regretfully. “We’ll witness signs of it from the beginning, with the death of its mother.”

The tent went icy as Daryl demanded to know what she meant.

“Have you seen the Omen films?”

“The first one,” Daryl answered distractedly. “Couldn’t take the rest.”

“Then find someone who has. You’ll need to fight hard and in the end, some stupid detail from that series might save Cynthia’s life.”

“Why can’t you just tell me?! I hate this!”

“Because you shouldn’t even have a warning!” Angela was extremely tired. “Magic was never meant to be used this way and other than Neil, everyone has asked for something selfish! Ask your reward and do it now.”

“What should I do?” Daryl asked helplessly. “I already want them both.”

Unlike with the others, Angela couldn’t offer any hope here; she told him the last thing he wanted to hear. “Convince her to abort and then refill her with your seed. In time, the wounds will heal and all three of you will be happy together.”

“She won’t do that.” Daryl’s face reddened in shame. “I already tried. I mean, it’s Adrian’s kid. We already know they go bad too easy.”

“They’ve had bad beginnings.” Marc felt the need to defend descendants in general. “If they’d been raised by loving people, it might have mattered, right, Angie?”

“In most of the cases, yes.” Angela shrugged. “But some mixes of DNA will always create monsters. Without knowing it, Cynthia and Adrian have done exactly that.”

“What if it isn’t Adrian’s?”

People jumped at the unexpected voice, some reaching for weapons.

Cynthia fastened the flap and went to a seat by Daryl. “I don’t know. Matt might be the father.”

Angela’s eyes narrowed at the lie. “We can’t test for parentage until after the birth.”

“So we’ll test it then.” Daryl felt like he’d just been given oxygen after almost drowning. “And until then, we hold out hope for good to come out on top.”

“Agreed.” Angela didn’t mark Daryl’s name off yet.

“That leaves you two.” Angela scanned Jeremy and then Zack. “Gentlemen?”

Not wanting his mountain weakness revealed, Jeremy chose to tackle his second biggest fear. “Is Samantha with me out of pity? Would it be better if I got out of the picture?”

“Samantha adores you. If you left her, nothing would be good for any of you.”

“Is it wrong?” Jeremy asked without knowing he was going to. “Our setup?”

“Wrong by whose standards?”

“By camp standards.” Jeremy was glad Neil had left but also curious if he’d wondered this too. “Does the future include couples like us?”

“Of course.” Angela was glad she could ease his worries on this one. “And no, by camp standards, you’re not doing anything wrong because all of you are consenting adults. But what you want to know is more about morals and ethics, right?”

“Yes. The world was going down a bad path with the free love crap and I worry that I’m helping to restart it. We don’t need more problems.”

“You three are committed. We all have the right to pursue happiness, as long as we’re respectful of other people’s freedoms. You’re doing that. Don’t worry about those who might look down on you for it. You’ll be happier than most of them.” Angela glanced at Zack. “You’re up.”

“I have a yes or no question. And it’s for you.”

“Okay.” Angela gestured for him to go ahead. She’d been counting on this moment.

“Marc hasn’t pulled your tent down and there’s no leader spot for it belowground yet. Are you moving into the cave with us?”

She had been waiting for this moment. “No, I’m not.” Angela let the gasps and mutters die down. “In a few weeks, I’m going south, and then I’m going to Kendle’s island. I’m set to tell the camp next week, but I want you all to know about it now. Half the camp will vote to stay here, but I’m not going to be swayed. And if you’re my chain of command, like you claim you are, you’ll all be with me when I go.”

4

Angela waved as the tent emptied of the unhappy people. “Hang around for a minute, Kenn.” Word would begin to spread now, but she wasn’t going to change her mind. Choices had been made,

the future had shifted, and the tide would come their way. She had no choice.

When they were alone, Angela turned to Kenn. “Adrian told you to account for your mistakes during the last bugout, so that when it happened again, you’d be ready for it.”

Kenn hated the reminder of his failures that night.

“Did you?”

Kenn nodded. “I went overboard on it, I think.”

“Good. Please have it to me by evening mess tomorrow. My eyes only.”

“You got it.” Kenn left, not asking for details. Her bombshell about leaving here in a few weeks was still exploding throughout his mind.

As Kenn left, Kyle returned, positive she was ready for their next update session.

Angela took a seat and got her notebook out. “Okay.”

“Cynthia is lying. The dates don’t add up.”

Angela knew most of the things Kyle was about to tell her, but she wrote them down to be able to compare to her notes later and mark them off. Keeping track of the futures of three hundred people required a lot of writing to avoid missing details and effects.

“Neil and Jeremy don’t know Samantha was sick or what Conner did for her.”

“She’ll tell them herself at some point. Next?”

“The first crate of supplies for Samantha’s crew to hide is ready. I’ll make sure it gets into their vehicle.”

“Good. Have your men pack the next crate right away.”

“I will. The vet has left without permission three times. We keep losing him in the darkness.”

“Let me know if you ever discover where he goes.” Angela was certain they wouldn’t. The vet was slyer than the Eagles.

“Kendle didn’t help with the move at all. She stayed in Adrian’s camp all day.”

“She has a huge fear about being underground. The man who hurt her held her underground in a tunnel and then inside a cave. She’ll never step foot in ours.”

“That’s awful!” Kyle had finally got the explanation for what had caused her scars and now, he wished he hadn’t. “I’m sorry the other men don’t like her much.”

“I don’t like her much either. What’s next?”

“Jennifer wants me to get her pregnant—now.”

Angela took in his red profile. “Nervous?”

Kyle nodded quickly. “And scared it won’t go well, terrified she’ll actually get pregnant so soon after Autumn, and well, I’m a bit worn out with all the attacks and action. I may have missed some details.”

Angela wasn’t concerned over that. “I’ll cover it. Take tomorrow off, alone somewhere, and figure

out what you want. When you do that, the drama and choices always get easier.”

“My wants don’t matter now. I have to do what’s best for Jenny and the baby, and I’m not sure this is.”

“Only you can determine that, but I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. She’s coming to you, asking you to heal her. Don’t deny what both of you need because you’re scared she won’t like you afterwards. Make sure she does. Do it right.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah. Maybe you should talk to Marc. The Ghost is everywhere, you know.”

5

North of Safe Haven, a small group of men rolled into the debris littered parking lot of the train station that Adrian had destroyed. The bald man Vlad had sent for help was behind the wheel of the jeep. He pulled to the edge of the damage and unlocked the doors.

A man came from the shadows to climb into the empty front seat.

“Welcome back.” Vlad smiled from the rear. “Good hunting?”

The man held out a Polaroid of two people bound to a tree, both bloody and wearing all black. “Two here, two being tracked.”

Vlad enjoyed the images as the bald man, who preferred to be called Blade, pointed them toward

the mountains. He'd picked Vlad up a mile from here. Now that they were complete, except for the hunters, Blade drove them to the location Vlad had given him.

"When are they coming?" the front passenger asked. He was Marc's loose lurker.

"A week to ten days." Blade leaned back against the warm seat. "The trains have to be unloaded before the troops can roll."

"Looks like snow coming." Vlad frowned. "Keep to the secondary plan we made. If our troops fail, we'll be ready."

Blade obediently rolled them along without giving their informant more information. These lower-level men would be eliminated after the attack. Only their top men would enjoy the spoils of this war, but it was one that Blade found himself dreading.

He and Vlad had decided they would gain a hold over Safe Haven during the winter and come spring, send them out to toil in fields and on farms. They needed those slaves and caves. A new country, one where descendants ruled, wasn't going to build itself.

Other Plans

1

Dog pushed his heavy warmth down on the two shivering mutts, trying to lend his heat. With little fur and no outdoor experience, the tiny animals had no business traveling through a blizzard at night. *Neither do I.*

The engine roared to life under them. Sally shouted in triumph as her dogs whimpered in fear. She had stopped to fill up the gas tank. It had taken a long time to accomplish against the driving wind. Sally lowered her goggles and pulled the large tarp back over the two cars, creating a vacuum of space that would fill with the heat of their bodies. She quickly tucked it under gear to hold the ends down, leaving a hole in it for her head. Then she gunned the engine and drove them straight into the snowstorm.

Once again covered, the three canines huddled together miserably and waited for the endless ride to be finished. It was dark. A full day had gone by without Sally stopping for anything except bathroom or fuel. Dog was positive he'd now passed his female.

The bumpy ride smoothed out suddenly. Dog braved the cold to poke his head out of the hole. It put him in Sally's lap.

She nuzzled his soft fur like a pack mate while studying the house ahead of them in the headlights. She hadn't been here since before the war. It looked exactly the same...except for the missing sight of her mother staggering down the front stairs to greet her as she got off the school bus each afternoon.

Dog swept the log house and then the small pond. Frozen, there were three furry shapes sliding across the surface. The area around the house was a mix of woods and suburbs; the large cabin appeared out of place among the fabricated homes. Dog stayed quiet, hoping Sally's pets would too. They couldn't assume the people or the animals were friendlier in the north.

The snow shifted. Shapes vanished in the darkness. The furry forms reappeared near the garage of the home Sally was trying to reach. She saw three big birds land on the roof. The vulture's aggressive stances suggested they now ate more than roadkill. She swept the other rooftops and found too many shadows glaring toward her headlamps.

Dog whined uneasily, increasing her anxiety.

The storm began to calm as the animals milled around. The wind dropped low enough to hear the sounds of nails clicking and tapping. Animals snorted and huffed; frozen ground cracked. "Not good."

Dog nudged her arm. *Come on!*

Sally slowly took out a small box. Finger on the red button, she gunned them forward. Wind and snow battered the vehicle.

The wolf ducked under the cover, regarding the two shivering dogs. *Stay down.*

The two dogs didn't respond. They'd stopped speaking shortly after the ride started. Dog was positive they were on the verge of vomiting again.

Sally hit the button, hoping the fresh batteries would respond. To her shock and pleasure, the garage door began rolling up. She'd honestly thought she would have to go through it.

Sally slowed, trying to keep them from slamming into the house as they plunged inside the garage. The ATV did thump against the wall of the cabin as it stopped.

Sally winced, hoping it hadn't done real damage. She hit the button again to lower the door.

It didn't respond this time.

Sally climbed from the lightly smoking ATV and hurried to the door to do it manually.

Dog stayed with her, ready to bite anything that came too close, but none of the outside animals reacted to their entry except the vultures that flew away. It was almost as if the other creatures hadn't even seen them, but Dog knew differently.

Sally stared through the tiny garage window for a long moment, noticing the same things as the wolf. The animals out there hadn't reacted to their

arrival, but they glowered at the house. She rubbed Dog's fur. "Let's get fed, huh?"

Sally made sure the door to the house was secured and then set up camp for the night. In the morning, when there was light to see by, she would explore the cabin. For now, the garage was a smaller space to heat.

Sally quickly had a small fire vented through the garage window and a hot meal bubbling in a pot over it. She hadn't been able to bring many of the things she needed, but this home had been setup for survival the last time she'd been here. It was where her father had taught her to hunt, to fish, and to cower in fear of his belt.

Sally curled into a corner in her sleeping bag. The three animals slowly joined her after sniffing and relieving themselves. She didn't mind the smell, though in the morning she would make it clear that only this room would be used for that purpose. If the backyard still had the tall privacy fence around it, this room could be kept clean too.

Sally let sleep pull her under as Dog's heavy body settled onto her feet. The small mutts were already on her chest and stomach.

The woman was more animal than human. Dog found it comforting. Life had been much like this before Marc had started chasing his own mate. The wolf went to sleep feeling safe despite their surroundings. Maybe this could be home while he waited for his female to catch up.

“What should we do?”

Jeff shrugged in the darkness. “Leave her alone. Wait for her to go.”

“She had a remote for the garage.” Kevin was nervous. “She lives here!”

They’d been enjoying a cup of hot chocolate with Musketeers bars melting in them when they’d heard the engine and spotted the headlights.

Jeff was busy scanning the woman, wondering why she felt familiar. “Hang on...”

Kevin stared apprehensively at the garage door from the dark kitchen, trying to recover from hearing an engine and then having it actually come to the one home on the block that was occupied. They’d hurriedly shut off all the lights and noises. Kevin had almost wet himself after two weeks of peace and quiet. With all the snow, neither of them had thought to see people so soon.

“Trouble.” But after Crista’s death, Jeff didn’t have the heart to hurt the woman. He sighed. “We’re having company.”

Kevin’s brows came together in confusion. “Someone we know?”

“One of them. Gather the weapons and take a watch. We’ll make contact when I get up.”

Kevin had no trouble following Jeff’s orders. The man was a survival whiz and he’d already kept them out of bad spots more than once. He had also found this home, which had an amazing setup for

this lifestyle. Once Jeff had added his touches, it had become a good place to lie low for the winter.

Jeff climbed into his warm hammock in the back bedroom, eager to grab a few hours of sleep. He was positive he would need them once the woman discovered she wasn't alone. He examined the pictures on the wall and grimaced as he flipped off his headlamp. He recognized the images. In the middle of an apocalypse, he'd picked a house that still had an owner.

3

Sally woke to the smell of frying meat. She leapt to her feet, startling all three animals. They'd already smelled it and begun to drool.

Sally ran to the garage door as voices echoed from inside the home, but the sight of a huge black bear on the front lawn convinced her she wasn't better off outside. Hoping in vain that she hadn't been noticed yet, or that the people had arrived after her, Sally got her gun and approached the door. She was hoping to listen and determine what to do next.

She wasn't prepared for the door to swing open as soon as she leaned on it.

Kevin quickly snatched the weapon from the surprised woman and pointed it at her. "Who are you?" The tall woman was bundled up in jeans, boots, and a black coat that went all the way to her knees. Her hair was hidden under a mask; all he could see was that she had brown eyes and no lips.

Sally slowly stood up, not sure what the bristling wolf at her heels would do. "This is my house. Who are you?"

When she didn't rush them or even appear angry, Jeff lowered his weapon. He signaled for Kevin to remain trained on her in the dim morning light. "We've been here for two weeks, waiting out storms. When this one breaks, we'll go," Jeff had thought about keeping the place, but it was her home. If they turned her out, where would she go? After Crista's death, Jeff just couldn't do it.

Before Sally could reply, the wolf padded into the room, followed by the two bouncy little dogs that squeaked as they landed. Tiny claws skidded across the kitchen floor and vanished into the rear rooms.

The wolf stopped in front of Kevin, golden eyes on the gun.

Kevin slowly lowered the weapon, gaping. "Dog?"

Dog snorted and followed the two smaller mutts to keep them out of trouble.

Sally's scowl covered what they could see of her profile. "Safe Haven?"

Jeff and Kevin both took offense at the way she spat the words, but neither rebuked her. They had their own issues.

"Not anymore." Jeff didn't like the impression he was getting. Suddenly worried they'd let in a big problem, he ignored the flinch to haul her over to the nearest chair. Jeff jerked her mask off and

dropped it in her lap. “Who are you and what do you know about Safe Haven?”

Kevin thought to protest, but he remembered how many assassins and traitors they’d dealt with and lost people to over the last months. Was the brown haired woman one of the few who had escaped Angela’s justice? Kevin had no sympathy. He wanted them all dead. If not for the government and Mexicans hounding them, Cynthia wouldn’t have shot anyone and turned to Adrian for an outlet. She wouldn’t be pregnant and he would be the one sliding into her at night—not Daryl.

Kevin winced at his thoughts. He’d been trying hard not to consider it at all.

Realizing she needed to be careful, Sally frowned. “I had a home until some of *those* people came through. This is...was, my father’s house.”

That explains the young photos. Jeff settled into the chair across from her, considering their options. He had a bad feeling about letting her stay, but he was also reluctant to send her out to a frozen death. And Dog was with her. Jeff had always found the wolf to be a great judge of character. “We’ll leave after the storm breaks,” Jeff repeated, gesturing for Kevin to close the garage door. “You’ll stay here in the living room, where we can keep an eye on you.”

Instead of the pleading or rage he was expecting, Sally rubbed at her arms and glared. “You have to sleep sometime.”

Jeff lunged forward to place his gun against her temple.

Sally glared. "I'm not afraid of you! Shoot me!"

Startled by the rabid response, Jeff holstered his gun and took out the handcuffs. "I have other plans."

Sally screamed.

Dog came running, followed by the two squeakers.

Kevin drew his weapon, not sure who to shoot.

"The wolf!" Jeff struggled to cuff Sally's hands in front of her. "Damn, lady. I didn't mean it that way!"

Sally continued to scream until Jeff moved back and then the noise cut off abruptly. An eager grin came over her weather-beaten face as he rotated to find Dog snarling, fur in full bristle.

Jeff, running on instinct because there wasn't time to think, lifted his gun. "Tell me she's safe to leave loose and I'll cut her free."

Dog growled again, but couldn't follow through. The woman was definitely dangerous.

Jeff walked away.

Kevin holstered, already tired of the drama. *The last two weeks were so peaceful!*

Dog padded to Sally and sat down in front of her, head swinging between the two men.

Kevin went back to his post at the front window of the house, unable to count all the animal tracks in the light snow that had come in overnight. While Jeff slept, they'd had a migration come through. The variety in it had been astounding. What was more shocking was that the creatures had been going

north, not south like when Safe Haven had come across moving herds. It was as if the animals were being drawn by something.

Jeff resumed their morning ritual of breakfast and music, flipping on the iPad he'd connected to a nice speaker system. With Kevin on duty in the front and the wolf now here, Jeff felt safe enough to increase the volume a bit and enjoy what so many of them had taken for granted nearly every day of their old lives.

The deer steaks didn't take long. Jeff made three plates. The animal migrations provided a steady diet. With winter here and the herds coming through, he and Kevin already had a nice stock of meat. They would continue to add to it.

Sally studied the two men, glad of the warmth in the room and the wolf settling down on top of her cold feet. The trip here had numbed her. When she woke, she hadn't had time to notice how cold the garage had become. Her toes were icy.

Kevin spotted a nice buck and slowly eased the window open. He picked up the Winchester from the window ledge. "Baggin' one." Kevin eased the window open. He quickly took aim and fired.

Sally flinched at the report, as did Dog. The animals outside stared in avid hatred as the body fell.

"Headin' out for it." Kevin pushed the window open to climb down.

Jeff set the spatula aside and came over to cover Kevin from the window. He would take the carcass

to the cleaning area they'd chosen to set up in the backyard. From his position, Jeff could observe him until he shut the gate.

Instantly sorry that he hadn't grabbed his coat, Kevin ran to the buck and grabbed it by the hoof to drag away. He slipped and slid, but it wasn't hard to transport the warm body across the icy ground. He was quickly into the backyard with it and had the gate locked. Too stubborn to stop and go in for his coat, Kevin began skinning and cleaning the deer. He and Jeff had gotten quicker at it. He was confident he would be fine for the ten minutes it would take to get done and hang it up.

In the other corner of the snow covered yard, a small tunnel under the fence glared in unnoticed danger as furious animals studied the man hungrily.

4

Inside the cool house, Jeff hurried toward the kitchen without reacting to the cuffed woman's flinch or Dog's low growl. He could smell the steaks burning. He chose to leave the window cracked to vent the harsh odor.

Sally stuck out a foot as the intimidating man went by.

He tripped, falling into the wide coffee table with a loud crash. Jeff groaned as his head struck the corner; he slid to the floor.

Dog leapt to his feet, startled.

Sally rose, going to the prone man. She slid his gun and knife free, then dug for the keys to the cuffs.

In the front of the house, the black bear returned, coming straight for the front window where the rifle was laying. The smells and sounds of people were not supposed to be here.

Sally rushed to the garage door with the knife in her teeth and the gun in her cuffed hands, struggling to open the door and not drop either weapon. She stumbled into the garage and shut the door to protect her pets, then ran to the ATV. She hadn't found anything in the man's pockets, but she'd brought her own cuffs and her own keys.

She was loose a minute later. The smell of smoke drew her notice. Something was burning. She remembered the cooking food and reluctantly went back to the door. She didn't want her pets to burn.

Sally saw the man on the floor and hurried to shut the propane off. As she spun around, she realized she could hear the other one screaming from the backyard. Guilt slapped her. Terror followed as she saw the huge bear in the open window. The gigantic head was inside, lips drawn back as it scented the room.

Dog was in front of the bear, as were her pets. All three of them were growling but not barking.

Sally hesitated. The Winchester was on the ledge under the window, but she didn't think she could get to it without being bitten or clawed, and if the bear chose to climb—

The bear began to heft itself through the window.

Dog growled harshly; the two small dogs yapped furiously.

Close the window!

Sally rushed forward and slammed both palms into it, hitting the bear in the nose with the glass.

The bear flinched in confusion as Sally snapped the lock in place, lungs burning from the air she'd forgotten to take in through her terror.

The bear roared angrily, rattling the pane as it pressed against the cold glass.

Sally stumbled backward, panting in fear.

A hand wrapped around her ankle...

Sally screamed.

Jeff jerked the woman down as the vulture swooped. It had come in the window while Sally was in the garage. Jeff hadn't been able to see anything for a minute due to the head bump, but he'd heard every noise—including the bear trying to enter their den.

Dog lunged as the vulture dove again.

Jeff covered the woman as the two animals fought for dominance. He awkwardly retrieved his sidearm from her waistband. There wasn't a clear shot, however. He finally had to roll them out of the way and under the protection of the kitchen table.

The two small dogs joined the wolf, snapping and growling, biting where they could reach. The two main rooms were heavily damaged with splintering bookshelves and chairs.

A piercing cry echoed and then silence fell.

Jeff scanned the chaos and found Dog's teeth clamped around the vulture's face. He hurried over to put his gun against its head and signaled Dog back.

Used to laboring with the Eagles, Dog responded immediately; Jeff pulled the trigger.

The vulture slumped to the floor as blood pooled.

Jeff dragged the carcass to the window. He picked up the rifle. "Get over here. When I tell you to, open the window, but swing it easy. I need all the time you can give me."

Sally didn't think of arguing. She took the place nervously, flinching as the screams from the backyard increased in volume.

"Now."

Sally flipped the lock and gave a firm push.

The window swung open, a bit too quickly.

Jeff tried to narrow his aim as the bear immediately crowded into the opening. He ducked in and shoved the gun under the bear's thick neck.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Jeff kept firing even after the animal stopped advancing to make sure it was dead. A 30-30 was light for a bear this size.

Sally retreated from the bloody, damaged room, shocked and angry. *My house!*

Jeff spun toward the backyard, aware that Kevin's screams had stopped.

Kevin kicked at the vulture when it tried to follow him under the picnic table. He'd been swarmed with the birds before he could even draw his weapon.

The big bird lunged forward again, snapping violently.

Kevin kicked, aiming this time, and caught it across the face. He heard a crack and a whine, but he had to spin around in the snow to kick at the other side as a second vulture tried to bite his arm.

Finally able to get his gun out, Kevin scrambled toward the shed that was next to the table and rolled free. He gained his feet as the two vultures gave chase, cawing loudly.

Kevin fled into the shed and slammed the door on the aggressive bird, cracking another part of the hard beak. He didn't want to open fire and bring anything else to his location. He wasn't sure why Jeff wasn't helping him after all the screaming, but he assumed there was a problem inside too.

Kevin put his back to the door, needing to know he was safe here for the moment.

"What...?" He ducked as spiders threw themselves from the ceiling.

Kevin slapped at the arachnids and yanked the door open as two shots rang out. He looked down at the gun he hadn't fired and then at the dead vultures Jeff had handled. "Nice!"

He holstered and began pulling his shirt off as the spiders that had landed on him started biting.

Jeff covered Kevin from two new vultures that had flown to the fence. The men hurried inside the house through the rear patio. As they locked the door, the sound of wood splintering echoed.

“Was that the side gate?” Kevin was trying to remove his clothes between slaps and itches.

“Yep.” Jeff watched a slightly smaller bear charge into the yard. “But there’s a meal waiting, so we’re good for the moment.”

“Uh...” Kevin cleared his throat, fighting the need to scratch. “Maybe not.”

Jeff rotated to find Sally holding a 9mm and the handcuffs.

“Your turn.”

“No.” Jeff grunted in annoyance. *I’ve about had enough of this chick already.* “Shoot me.”

Sally blinked. “What?”

“You’re not cuffing me, lady. Shoot me or put that gun up and work on the mess.” Jeff gestured. “It’ll take the three of us hours to straighten things up.”

Sally examined the mess at her feet and then the two angry men. Reluctantly, slowly, she holstered.

Kevin let out the breath he’d been holding and allowed himself to scratch until he had skin under his fingernails.

Jeff got the medical kit and spent a few uncomfortable moments helping Kevin apply ointment. The arachnids weren’t poisonous, but the

wolf spider venom often caused an allergic reaction. To be sure they were covered, Jeff insisted Kevin swallow a capsule of Benadryl. He wasn't in the mood to perform a tracheotomy.

"I'm gonna fall out." Kevin swallowed it. "Been up all night for my shift and now this. You won't be able to wake me if things go crazy again."

Jeff shrugged, grinning. "So? You won't feel them eating you."

"Oh, man!" Kevin snickered. Jeff was forever popping off with something like that.

"Grab something to eat and go to bed. The woman and I have it covered."

"Sally!" She glared from her stance in the middle of the destruction. "Before he goes, we have to shove this body outside."

"Work around it." Jeff was already gathering what he needed. "I want that hide and a chunk of the meat. We'll store some of the rest for dog food."

"Uh...maybe we should change plans." Kevin stared through the cracks in the boards they had nailed over all the other entrances. "The yard is filling up. We should shut that window and get some cover on it."

Jeff took a moment to judge it for himself. He was astounded by how many creatures were roaming the property. "Yeah, we'll shove it out now. I'll carve it later."

The three of them heaved the cooling corpse out of the window, glad the big bear had only made it half inside. They never would have been able to do

this otherwise. Jeff kept track of the shadows moving through the light snow as they tossed out the biggest part of the gory mess. Deer and wolves were mingling, along with goats, a moose, a whole line of ducks, and a list of other animals. All of them could be a threat or a meal.

Jeff tried to judge the situation from a survival aspect. Unless the moose charged their door, none of the other animals out there could get through to the rear room of the home where he had chosen to make a stand if it was needed. However, they had to eat and the food and the outhouse were in the back. “We have to repair that side gate.”

Kevin shook his head, scratching at his neck. “I’ll fall asleep on you. Take the...Sally. I’ll stay at this window with Dog until I can’t stay awake.”

“Okay. Coffee’s on the stove.”

“Good idea.” Kevin took the rifle along.

Sally gawked at them. “You’re doing what?” She wasn’t as upset over the two men being here anymore. If she’d been alone, the vultures in the yard would have attacked her the first time she stumbled to the bathroom. Sally hadn’t realized how bad things had gotten with nature and the vendetta against mankind.

“I have to get my things.” Sally leaned down to comfort her two shivering pets.

Dog took a seat near the bloody window, observing the front yard.

Jeff watched her from the door, partly out of caution of a stranger and partly because of the feeling that things weren't finished yet.

Sally hefted her bags and kits over her shoulders and wrists, wanting it all in one trip. She let him hold the door open for her, but said nothing—not even thank you.

Sally awkwardly strode to the second small bedroom in the dusty hall, glad to discover the men hadn't been in here. She dropped her gear and went to the oil lamp on the mantle without using her flashlight. She knew her way around blindfolded.

“Can you use that gun?”

“Yes.” Sally pulled on her gloves with the tips missing, loving the mobility. “And that 30-30 you've got.”

“Good. The gate on the house next door might fit. I have to measure ours, then go over and take the new one off the hinges. You're covering me.”

Sally didn't argue. The sooner he got the gate replaced, the sooner she could use the outhouse. She'd needed to since she woke up.

6

Jeff eased through the front door with his toolkit in hand, hoping the woman really could use the Winchester. Despite her height, Jeff doubted she was strong enough to carry the gate.

Sally stayed close, scanning for threats. Jeff had decided only the small pack of wolves was actually

dangerous. He'd told her to watch them more than the other creatures. The tracks in the ankle-deep snow said bigger animals were nearby too; he tried not to make much noise as they hurried to the side of the house.

Jeff studied their damaged gate and saw he'd been right about the fit. However, the frame was severely damaged. He wasn't going to be able to replace it quickly or easily. Jeff swept the block for something to fill the area instead.

Pocketing his toolkit, he signaled at a minivan across the street. "Come on." Jeff knew the battery wasn't going to have power. He was glad the driveway that housed it was atop a short, steep hill. He busted the window with the butt of his rifle, wincing at the noise, and opened the door.

"I'll wedge it in there. You stay back a little, but not too far. When I hit the alley, the vultures will probably be drawn back to us."

"I'll do it." Sally shoved the rifle at him. "You won't fit through that window."

Jeff didn't argue. He'd much rather be the one with the gun anyway. He slung the rifle over his shoulder. "Hold the brake and shift it into neutral. Don't let go until I tell you to."

"Okay." She slid behind the wheel.

"Once it's rolling, don't use the brakes at all. Steer it straight into the street. It'll be going fast enough to roll up the yard and make it to the alley. I may have to push from there."

“Okay.” She didn’t have a problem with his plan. The animals were all around them, but not acting aggressive. What bothered her was the way Jeff’s eyes seemed to glow at times. “I’m ready.”

“Me too.” Jeff braced to push from the rear. “Let’s go.”

Sally forced the van into neutral; Jeff pushed.

7

Standing in front of the reopened window, Kevin kept a steady scan of the area going, already fighting drowsiness. He was glad the itching had faded, though. He watched the van roll toward the house.

Next to Kevin, the wolf and the two small dogs also listened.

Crash!

The house shuddered as the van slammed into the alley between the homes, sending the small dogs into the rear room to hide.

The van jammed into the space, scraping loudly. Sally barely had enough room to wiggle through the driver window. It wouldn’t keep all of the animals out, but it was unlikely that a bear would try to climb over the van.

She joined Jeff at the bumper. He had the rifle ready, but there was no sign of the big birds or the wolves.

Jeff glanced around and realized there wasn't an animal in sight now. That was odd. "Are you okay out here for another ten minutes?"

"Yes." Sally curled icy fingertips into warm palms.

Jeff gave her the rifle and strode determinedly toward the slowly stiffening bear carcass. The block around them was frozen in white silence, with snow coming down again. The wind had faded, but the temperature was falling fast. Jeff tried to hurry as he collected the hide and other parts. Behind him, he could hear Sally shuffling from foot to foot as she tried to keep warm.

It was bloody, stomach-churning labor for most people, but Jeff didn't mind. What sometimes bothered him was the sound the hide made as he ripped it up or the small splash of fluids that often sprayed as it came free. He usually remembered to turn his face away in time, but sometimes, it still splashed up his arm or cheek.

Sally was impressed with how fast Jeff took the hide from the carcass. He was forced to leave the bottom half, as they couldn't roll the animal over, but he managed to claim a long enough piece to fashion a nice blanket or several smaller items.

While she waited, Sally studied the neighborhood around them that she could see through the dark and the snow. She remembered when it had been her house. The one further down had belonged to her aunt. Her father had brought his

sister here to start a new life and in some ways, they absolutely had.

“But the abuse came along too, right?” Jeff flipped on his headlamp. He’d been scanning her thoughts since she arrived.

Sally froze for an instant. Then dismay and hatred flashed. “I can’t get away from you bastards!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Jeff didn’t pause in cutting off chunks of the meat. He’d brought a garbage bag for hauling it.

“What?” Sally was no longer observing their surroundings as she caressed the rifle.

“You’ve got a thing against people.”

“Descendants are not people! All you do is hurt others!”

“Then why haven’t I hurt you?” Jeff glanced up at her, feeling the goose egg on his skull. “I believe you tripped me...”

Sally flushed and didn’t respond.

“If I were evil, you’d be raped and dead by now for something like that.” Jeff bagged his loot and stood up. “You’ve got a few seconds to make the choice, lady. Once I shut that door, you’re out here with the rest of the wild things that can’t be trusted.”

Sally wanted to refuse, but the cold and the sense that the man wasn’t a threat convinced her to follow him.

Around the pair, nothing moved except the snow.

Jeff held the door for her—it was ingrained.

Sally darted under his big arm to quickly get out of the way.

Kevin glanced over at them with glassy eyes. His shoulder was against the glass, window latched. “All sset?”

Jeff gestured toward the bedroom. “Hit the rack.”

Kevin grinned and staggered that way without even a peek at Sally. He wasn’t sure what had happened while he was outside, but it was obvious the woman had done something wrong. He expected Jeff to send her on her way.

Jeff pointed toward the dim hall. “We rigged up a temporary john for use during the storms.”

Sally disappeared down the hall without anything except a frown.

Jeff shook his head. “Some people...”

He went to the door to scan the backyard, aware that she still had the rifle. The yard was empty of pests, though Jeff wasn’t sure when the smaller bear had wandered off. The hole in the fencing was there. Jeff quickly slipped outside to cover it.

The icy ground crunched under his boots. He hurried forward, grabbing the stone planter as he went. A few other pieces of furniture made a decent barrier. Jeff tugged the heavy picnic table over to finish it off. Even a bear wasn’t coming through here.

Jeff locked the shed door, and then made a fast stop in the outhouse. He was relieved not to find any spiders.

After her pit stop, Sally began cleaning the mess, piling most of it into the corner to be bagged. Paper towels were a thing of the past. She reluctantly used a few of her father's old white towels that could be bleached.

The two small dogs sniffed and yapped happily beside her while Dog lingered near the window, uneasy. Nature had given up too fast.

8

By late afternoon, Kevin was back up. The two men reinforced the windows and doors. The feeling that bad things were coming was heavy in the air.

Sally also felt it. She held nails and tools while the men prepared the cabin. She also hated every moment of it and had to fight to keep her scorn hidden. She wasn't certain that both men were descendants, but it didn't matter. The first chance she got to leave, she would.

The two small canines mostly stayed under the kitchen table, shivering and scratching on the rug. Dog wandered the cabin, searching for a way out. If he could find one, then the other animals could get in.

Kevin studied the two layers they'd already nailed over the rear door. "Another board?"

"No. Let's go get a few things from our freezer. We'll use the bathroom setup in here when it gets dark."

The men hurried to the coolers they'd strategically hidden to bring in the food, still not spotting any animals. Jeff had the bear meat in the house, but they also had deer, pig, and turkey out here. They'd spent the first week doing almost nothing but collecting food and gear.

Jeff saw the hole was still covered with his furniture barricade and the fences were free of birds. It was almost as if the migration had shifted in a new direction, which was bad for them. Jeff had been counting on meat for a few more weeks before winter forced them under cover.

“Oh, shit. That's trouble.”

Jeff followed Kevin's line of sight; his stomach dropped. “That explains the animals leaving.”

“Yeah.” Kevin hurried toward the house. “We gotta seal this place up, like now!”

Jeff lingered for a moment, awed. The snowstorm was almost upon them, even though the wind here was at a standstill. Huge, roiling masses were rushing their way, obscuring everything under it. The next block was still visible, but not beyond. It astounded Jeff that nature could fire such a deadly shot, but none of them had heard it. Even a suppressor allowed noise, but this was a vacuum of silence. It was amazing.

Jeff grabbed a few more items and lugged it inside, where Kevin and Sally were sealing cracks and crevices with towels and old clothes from the dusty dressers. He joined them, sure they were wasting time. When that storm hit this house, they

might have to huddle in one tent for warmth and hope it was enough.

Jeff's thoughts went to Safe Haven, He quickly scratched the idea of calling to warn them. Safe Haven had Samantha and a few other people who could sense these things coming. *Why didn't they try to warn us?*

You left, his demon answered. *In her place, would you have warned people who fled?*

Jeff hated that voice. He liked the uses and he'd chosen to accept it in his mind for that reason, but he still hated it.

Why? the demon questioned, hurt. *Because I tell you the truths you don't want to hear?*

Because you can't bring her back! What good is power when it can't bring her back?!

The demon had no answer for that, only more painful emotions from adding another failure.

Jeff didn't care about the demon's feelings. He understood he could control the power, but not be bonded at all. That was how he preferred things.

Dog came to Jeff's side. *There are cracks and holes. We are not safe here.*

"Yeah. We'll be in the main room, probably in tents. I'll try to secure it."

The snow is not the problem. Another herd has come ahead of the storm.

Jeff hurried to the front window and discovered the ground alive with rabbits. Every size, shape, and color was represented. Jeff gaped.

His reaction drew Sally and Kevin; the three of them stood there contemplating what it meant. Witnessing hundreds of rabbits flee northward brought all of them to the same conclusion. When the prey migrated, so did the predators. After the storm, this area would be covered in packs of hungry, cold, desperate animals hunting for anything to eat.

Dog whined suddenly, making the humans flinch, but he couldn't stop the noise as he spotted the female and her pack chasing the rabbits ahead of the storm. Brute was still with her, but that was the only familiar face. Dog studied them intently, almost able to feel the cold on the pads of his feet, the crunch of the hare between his teeth.

The female stopped, her bloody muzzle swinging toward the house. She spotted the people in the window. Her snout drew up in an ugly snarl they all felt. She wanted them dead.

Jeff closed the blinds and the curtains. He motioned to Kevin. "Get the tape. We'll seal this up now."

Kevin retrieved the thick roll of duct tape. He and Sally held the boards and plastic in place as Jeff secured the window. In the center, they left a small hole in the boards to shoot through. They could rip the plastic open when they needed to get to it, but right now, it wasn't a good idea to draw attention.

"We're gonna pretend this is a zombie apocalypse," Jeff ordered, making Kevin snicker.

“No noises, and that means you have to keep *those* quiet.” He pointed at Sally’s two little dogs.

“They’re small, they get excited easily.” She scowled. “I won’t use muzzles!”

“If they bark, we’ll be attacked.” Kevin wished the woman wasn’t so hostile. “Do they obey you?”

Dog snorted, expressing his opinion.

Sally crossed her arms over her chest. “I rescued them.”

“So?”

“So, they didn’t need to be beaten into submission!”

“I don’t beat animals.” Jeff knelt down and snapped his fingers. “Come.”

The two little dogs immediately rushed over with excited bounces and wiggles.

Jeff regarded Dog as he pet them. *Do they understand us?*

Very little. The wolf chuffed. *They have no control. May I suggest a muffled cage?*

When it starts, can you get them into the bathroom?

Maybe. Dog looked up at Sally, who was fingering the butt of the gun in her holster. *I think it would be best if she went in with them.*

Jeff peered at Sally, taking Dog’s suggestion seriously. He didn’t like the vibes he’d been getting, or the crazy thoughts she seemed to keep flowing continuously. If she was lying about being able to shoot, he would indeed lock her up. If she could be

helpful during a battle, he preferred to leave her loose.

Dog whined; his big head swung toward the rear of the house.

The next instant, the storm hit their block. The afternoon light faded as snow enveloped the house. The temperature plunged as wind slammed into the buildings and snow rained down in thick, deadly sprinkles.

“Get more layers of clothes on.” Jeff’s breath streamed out in front of him to prove the temperature had dropped instantly. “Load it up and bring the rest of the winter gear in here. It’s about to get very cold.”

Chapter Twenty-Two BK6

Cold Shoulder

1

“**W**e’ve got snow.” Marc ducked into the warm canvas. He quickly secured the flap, wondering how healthy it was for Angela to be sleeping in a tent in this weather while she was pregnant.

“Women have been doing it for a long time.” Angela stretched out on the bedroll. She’d just woken.

Marc had felt her sight go over the camp and linger on him. She had over an hour before her shift began.

She slowly sat up. “Has Samantha sent a weather warning?”

“Not yet.” Marc handed her a lit smoke and a bottle of water. “She’s still in the medical bay.”

“I’ll handle that soon.”

“We got about an inch of snow. It came in after midnight. I opened the trucks and outfitted the night shift.”

“Good.” She yawned. “Have Greg cover it for everyone else. People will want to play in it and they’ll need good coats. Pass out the Gore-Tex bibs and parkas for the working.”

“No sweat. Billy’s group brought trucks of winter stuff. Almost all of our crews are home now. Did you already know we’d get snow early?”

“Of course.” She yawned again. “I look as far ahead as I can. So will you.”

That implied he would run Safe Haven at some point. Marc frowned. He’d thought of that over the last couple of months and it had even been mentioned, but he hadn’t honestly thought she meant it.

“You’ll have to be in charge when I get further along.” Angela slowly stood up as her stomach insisted she was hungry. “And for at least the month after, but I’ll be there to help. It should be fun.”

Unlikely. Marc held her coat and then her arm as she slid her shoes on. “Size seven snow boots?”

“Yes.” She smiled at his accuracy. “Thanks.”

Marc escorted her to the restroom and waited, scanning the snowy landscape. Most of the camp was sleeping soundly belowground, with security up here being rotated every half hour to help them adjust to the cold. Tomorrow, he would make it an hour. After that, he would add an hour a night until they were able to handle a full shift in this weather without frostbite. The gear he’d passed out would help. The top Eagles would patrol in the extreme winter gear kits from the bases that Adrian had been scouring along their trek.

Marc saw the usual early morning crews—mess, medical, and security—groggily coming from tents and the cave to discover the snow. Many of them

went back in to layer on more clothes, but some people immediately began to play, making snowballs and sliding. Marc let them go despite the noise. Laughter was fine to be woken by in most cases.

They were on normal schedules now that the cave was habitable. The rest of the work would happen while they were inside. Marc saw more shadows coming through the snowy topside from the cave and wondered how many members were already awake. This was the first large test of their bathroom setup and mess down there, as well as the power, water, and security. Marc keyed his mike. “Update in ten minutes. I’ll come to you.”

Marc felt the wave of nervous activity following his call. It meant he would be inspecting areas to see if security was handling things correctly. He’d been down in the cave once tonight to check in with each Eagle on duty. He’d found a tranquil camp that was grateful to be in the warmer environment. For the evenings, he’d put Kyle in charge of cave security and kept Zack topside. Both men were good. Marc had spent the evening planning defenses between handling the new arrivals.

Angela joined him. “Many of those?”

“Two groups. One went into Zone A for you to sort through. The other had slaves. I said no.”

“And sent the message?”

“Yes. I expect a response shortly.”

“Good. We can’t let them go, no matter what the camp thinks.”

“I agree. We do it now, so we don’t have to do it later.”

Angela knew he considered it to be like the sniper work he’d done before the war, but Marc had chosen the targets and sent out their killer himself this time. Was that bothering him? Angela didn’t want him to be ruined the way she was.

“You’re not ruined! Unless you do it again.”

Before she could respond, Marc kept going. “I don’t feel guilty over the call. They had slaves on actual chains. America doesn’t need that in any form.”

Angela winced. Hilda and Peggy were currently alone in the medical supply truck discussing that possibility.

“Angie?”

She looked at him regretfully. “I’m sorry. I am, but it may go that way and I’m not going to interfere if it does. Women deserve the same chance that men have squandered.”

“Do you blame men for the war?” He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“For all wars,” Angela’s witch intoned. “Battles over women were fought by the men who wanted them. Men are driven to claim, to own, and it has destroyed society time after time, throughout history. Men cannot change.”

“I don’t believe that!” Angela was angry the witch had interrupted her answer. “All men are not evil. Go away!”

Marc was more concerned than he let on. “Rough night?”

“She’s bitter over being fooled by Adrian.”

“Aren’t we all?” Marc muttered, thinking of his own short-lived fondness for the leader. It did make him feel a little better that the witch had missed it completely. Angie’s demon had fallen hard.

Their radios crackled with Kenn’s tired voice. “More new arrivals.”

Marc keyed his to show that he had heard, and then kissed Angie’s cold cheek. “Call if you need me.”

Her shadows stayed close as Angela went to the mess truck that was now so deserted it appeared to be just another relic of the war. Angela was a little sad when she compared it to her memories of first joining Safe Haven. The well-lit mess, with great smells and strong company, had been one of the best areas.

Angela entered the truck, latching the door, and found Li Sing and Doug playing Hob Jong.

She grinned at the men. “Good morning so far?”

“Not until I get my knife back.” Doug laid down a faded card.

Angela helped herself to one of the plates marked for leadership, enjoying the biscuits and gravy while watching them play. The plate was quickly emptied.

“Have more.” Li gestured without glancing away from the cards. “We had flour come in. I made extra.”

Angela happily took a second plate and a mug of coffee, starting to feel awake. Her stomach was settled now. She finished the meal in peace, staying until the hand was over. She finally left when Doug's grumbles became shouts and Li's cute laughter echoed. The two men were becoming fast friends. Angela was glad Doug had initiated it. "Wish he'd do that with Peggy."

Angela pulled her coat tighter, buttoning the top one as she went to the gate to determine which refugees would be allowed in today. They would have to rotate the zones again. All medical people would pull doubles. *And it won't be enough.* Angela sighed, shutting down her grumpy morning side. They would do the best they could. Fate would cover the rest.

She joined Marc at the gate. They stared together in surprise at the two Amish buggies struggling through the snow toward them. The buggies were overloaded with people in long, plain coats and plain hats. They waved frantically at the guards when the gate spotlight flashed on from the motion sensors being activated.

The small buggies slipped and slid on the icy hill. Lanterns guided the straining horses. Angela studied the families deeply. It only took a moment to see that they were simply desperate. She signaled for the guards to put them in the empty Zone B that Brittani's people would occupy later. "Wake everyone up."

The call would get the rest of their medical people going early, hopefully resulting in the Amish group being cleared for the inside by the time Brittani's group got here. If not, Shane would explain why they had to wait for an hour or two. Angela didn't think it would be an issue. Marc already liked Brittani and Angela was looking forward to actually meeting her.

"Come along?" Marc held an arm out.

"You know it!" Angela sent a lusty leer his way. Marc snickered.

Angela took his arm as they went to the widened cave entrance that had been temporarily covered with multiple layers of thick plastic. Crates sat outside, holding down the ends while a tarp protected the piles of gear in the center. Before they could go inside, fast steps crunched in the snow, drawing attention from those already coming and going.

Samantha stopped in front of Angela and leaned in to whisper. Around them, cold people went still and quiet, instantly worried.

"We're ready." Angela smiled calmly. "Have Kenn announce it as soon as you're certain of the time."

"Four days," Sam blurted. "I'm positive of it."

Angela patted Samantha's arm soothingly. "We're ready. Go to sleep now."

Samantha scowled at her and stormed back to the medical bay, not sure why she was angry at Angela. She did need to rest, but each time she let

the darkness pull her under, David's screams were waiting. The guilt over his injury was devastating.

"Is she okay?" Marc waved curious people along, including Tara. The new man—Jayson—coughed and followed her.

Angela sighed. "She will be, in time."

"Hormones making things worse?"

"Oh, yeah." Angela entered the cave that still had a slight odor of bleach. "She's coming out of it, though."

Marc held the plastic covers aside layer by layer, hoping that was true. They needed all the warning systems they could get, but Samantha was also a strong fighter and a good hunter. All of her skills would be missed if she flipped out. Not to mention what it would do to the Eagles through Neil and Jeremy, and her team.

Nearby, the parking area was already alive with activity. Marc didn't scan it, positive that Angela had. He didn't need to see Kendle mooning over him.

Kendle now has other things on her mind. Angela snuggled closer to Marc as they got started on rounds. I made sure of that.

2

Bundled against the cold wind, Kendle skimmed the list again.

*Two vehicles will be delivered. Collect:
2 weeks rations.*

1500 rounds mixed ammunition.

A winter gear crate.

There was more, but Kendle was still on the first few items. The tired parking lot sentry, Logan, had directed her to the assigned vehicles. She was happy with the identical, gray Tahoes. Now she needed to find out how much room the crate would take. She already had a list of her own to gather along the way, including sailing manuals. She had no idea how to captain a ship and she doubted any of these people did either. Paddling a canoe down a river wasn't the same as taking a ship across an ocean.

Assuming she should go to the supply trucks to gather the rations, Kendle trotted there, trying to keep warm. The covering of snow was already sinking into her boots as the icy wind chilled her exposed skin. This environment was the exact opposite of Pitcairn.

“Hi!” Tommy was already at the trucks, along with a small group of people who all waved, smiled, or echoed his greeting.

Kendle stopped, not expecting the friendliness. Even the camp members had learned to avoid her. “Uh, hi.”

“I’m Tommy.” He came forward with his hand out. “The boss said you’re my XO.”

Kendle shook hands in surprise. She hadn’t expected Angela to give her authority of any kind.

“I was told to keep you busy. Do you mind?”

“No, I like that.”

“Good.” Tommy intended to follow Angela’s orders to the letter. If there was a person worth saving inside all those scars, he would find it. “I have a list for you.”

Kendle took the sheet and got on it before her bad side could come forward. She didn’t make eye contact with the rest of the people gathered by the trucks. It looked like there were a dozen coming, counting her and Tommy. It gave Kendle hope. Twelve was ten more than she had guessed would show up for a trip like this.

Kendle spotted Kenn and Tonya switching shifts on radio duty, kissing and joking cheerfully. It was sickeningly sweet. Kendle kept track of the Marine. She saw the anger of the gate guards when Kenn pointed to the latch. He exited without insults, but the disapproval was clear. *Adrian won’t have anyone left soon. That should make Marc happy, but I wonder how Angela will counteract it.*

Tommy watched her march away, wondering if Angela was reading it right. Kendle was supposed to be a killer if it was needed, but she wasn’t threatening at all. Her scars made her seem vulnerable, instead of a monster. *Hope we don’t need to test her.* Tommy turned to the others. “Okay. Let’s get rolling on those lists!”

Next to the parking area, other crews were also preparing for their trips out. One large team was going down to strip the mall Samantha had tried to explore. Another crew was going north for more

rock salt. A third team was set to finish collecting the gasoline from the refinery.

Radios lit up with Tonya's cheerful voice. "This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Good morning! We have a weather alert for everyone in the eastern half of the United States. There is a massive snowstorm coming. Take precautions now. The storm will hit Georgia in four days. I repeat: This is a winter weather alert. A massive..."

Kendle tuned it out, instead watching the first fuel load of the day come through the gate near the cave entrance. Kendle shuddered. She had carried updates to the guards there, but she hadn't gone inside and she wouldn't. Ethan had convinced her that hell was indeed below ground.

According to the mess board, the workers would be filling equipment and devices today, meaning the bathrooms would have full water, as would the mess and animal areas. Generators would also be stocked, stoves and all the hanging lamps could be used, and the fire team would act like cats in a room full of rocking chairs as they waited for something to spark or overheat. Kendle approved of having a fire team. She liked Ray, the team leader.

She now suspected that Teddy, another member of the fire crew, had left the bouquet of wildflowers in her tent yesterday. She remembered him being on duty at that time. The way these people patrolled this place, there was no way anyone had been able to sneak by security. She'd thought about asking if he had, but she hadn't followed through. She didn't

care about gifts, flowers, romance. If she couldn't have Luke or Marc, Adrian's roughly knowing hands would fill the void until she could go home.

Crash!

Bang! Bang!

Kendle spun toward the main entrance as the Eagles there opened fire. The sound of a vehicle coming echoed; the ground shuddered as something big crashed into the gate.

Kendle was knocked to the slushy ground. She watched in blurry pain as men flew from the rafters and landed around her, screaming and bleeding. The gate held, barely.

Eagles rushed toward them from every direction as the occupants of the truck began to climb the gate. The barbed wire wasn't a deterrent. The small group dropped into Safe Haven with grins and guns. The six men were from Zone C. They'd gone out last night to find a ramming device,. Now they admired the inside of the camp eagerly, running off in different directions.

"Breach!" radios blared. "We have a breach at the front gate!"

The nearest sentries were dazed, injured, or dead. Only the lack of speed had prevented a complete slaughter. Debris and bloody snow sprinkled the ground as Kendle staggered to her feet and ran forward.

More refugees from Zone C followed the men from the truck, climbing over the semi's smoking cab. Some of those from Zone B also entered

illegally, hoping to be overlooked as one of the previous day's cleared arrivals.

Kendle ducked behind one of Marc's new bunkers, where he'd stored ammunition. She took aim on the men who had made it furthest inside their perimeter. If she ran out of bullets, she would use her knife. Moments like this were what she lived for now.

3

“Kill them all!”

Every Eagle who heard Adrian's command obeyed him. Refugees streamed over the idling, smoking semi, but few of them fired weapons. Until the order came, the Eagles had been reluctant to shoot. Two weeks of relative peace had re-sensitized them.

Kenn and Adrian stayed in the tree line, with Conner in the branch between them. The trio aimed for those by the gate, but the tide of determined people never looked their way. Adrian wasn't certain they even realized someone else was shooting at them. Thanks to the timing of the attack, the Zone C gates were wide open.

In the other zones, refugees stayed still and low, hoping not to be confused with the enemy.

More gunfire came from inside Safe Haven, along with a fresh scream—this one female. Adrian grimaced, but didn't fly toward her. He'd been

banished. It would take more than Kendle to get him to break that.

Kenn kept firing and so did Conner. The wave of invading refugees slowly diminished as the stacks of bodies grew. Down the hill a bit, the ants came to the entrance of their cavern and observed eagerly.

“Behind the medical bay!” an Eagle shouted.

“Over here!” another man called.

Fresh gunfire swept across the mountain, loud enough to finally get the attention of the dozen or so remaining people climbing over the semi. As the shots continued and more screams echoed, many of those chose to drop from the smoking cab and flee.

Kenn and Adrian hit the retreating forms too. These threats wouldn't be left to haunt them later and the two men didn't need to speak it, to agree on it. That was how Adrian had taught his army to handle moments like this. Untrained, Conner did what the mentors on either side of him did, enjoying every second of killing.

Adrian lowered to reload, letting Kenn and Conner finish the chore. His gaze went to the small parts of the camp that he could see through the damaged gate, staring in longing. It appeared that Angela had implemented all of his suggestions and quite a few more. It was devastating that he would never actually get to walk the new Safe Haven on rounds.

“She wants the bugout plans,” Kenn muttered without knowing he was going to.

Adrian wasn't surprised and didn't respond.

"We can't stay here?" Kenn didn't want to leave. "We can't make it work?"

"I'd like to keep lying, Marine, but I don't have the strength." Adrian shrugged. "Safe Haven's time here will be brief and harsh."

Hating fate, Kenn reloaded his gun. "Figures." Kenn trotted to the gate, where the harsh smoke made his nose burn. He climbed into the cab of the truck and got it far enough from the damage that they would be able to work, but he didn't take the truck any further. It would provide a bit of cover while they repaired the gate. Then Angela would want the fuel it was hauling... Kenn wondered where the fuel team was. He hit his radio in the brief instant it cleared from orders and requests for help. "Front gate is clear!"

The radio returned to silence for an instant and Kenn hit it again. "All teams report in person. Send a man to the front gate!"

Clicks came in response. The radio stayed clearer as order was slowly restored. Kenn remained on the outside, keeping watch until Angela sent relief. They were vulnerable to another attack.

In the tree line, Adrian and Conner did the same. The soldiers with them were staring in shock at witnessing Kenn and Adrian in action together. For these drafted men, their heroes had just become legends.

“Please follow the Eagles.” Jennifer raised her voice over the hammering and other noises as she pointed. “They will take you to a larger tent; you will be given full access to the supply trucks and the mess for food. Come along.”

Jennifer led the twitchy group toward their waiting den mother escorts, glad when Cynthia took over bringing the quiet Amish group inside. The repair on the gate was ongoing, as was the QZ rotation that Angela had insisted on after the attack. Outside the gate, three full teams of Eagles now stood watch. After three of their men being killed, everyone was tense. Jennifer hadn’t known any of them personally, but she still felt their loss.

Jennifer waited until her entire group had been herded away from the inside zone, and for Cynthia’s clan to be brought into that area. Then, she went outside to Zone A, where the dozen refugees coming in were lined up with possessions and nervous expressions. The rest had been told it was Zone C or nothing. They were currently walking back down the cold hill, shouting curses. “Your turn, folks! Come on now.”

It was a cold, long afternoon for everyone. Jennifer kept the zone rotation going, aware of Kyle tiredly trailing her as he’d insisted on doing until the gate was fixed. It gave her an extra boost of confidence. She was pleased with herself when the chore was finished. Zone C was also being repaired while it was empty, and a roof was being added. The

chicken wire would only slow determined people, but it was a resource that Safe Haven had an abundance of, with little use due to its weakness. There was also a second gun tower going up. Jennifer hoped it didn't have to be used like she'd dreamed about. Kyle had been merciless, but the flood had been unstoppable.

Jennifer signaled to Shane as he helped the new group settle into Zone B, where they were next in line for testing and admittance. She estimated there were three more groups in trucks and cars still waiting to be evaluated. She beckoned Greg over. "I don't know where she wants the rest put."

Greg handed her a note, profile uneasy.

After Shane's group, tell everyone else there's a two-day wait. They can camp outside Zone A.

Jennifer didn't argue. The people had to be tested, observed, and then questioned. That took time.

Jennifer gave the message to Morgan, who had taken over as point man on the gate for this shift. "Keep repeating it until everyone out there gets the message. Then send it over the air."

Morgan recognized Angela's handwriting and did as he was instructed.

A few minutes later, the outside speakers blared. "There is now a two-day wait to be evaluated for entry to Safe Haven. Please camp around the gates marked with the letter A."

In front of the main gate, three teams of Eagles retreated and raised their guns. The shouts and

curses that came from the announcement were intimidating after the calm behavior of their own people.

Jennifer waited with the rest of the Eagles to discover if there would be a fresh attack; the shouts quickly faded to mutters. Jennifer honed in on some of these.

“They’re gonna stop takin’ people in!”

“Yes. Not enough room.”

“Or food.”

“We got here just in time.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. Survivors have been thinking about coming here, but everyone has to come now or risk not making it in before winter sets in. This place is going to crawl with desperate survivors.”

“Will we be inside before then?”

“I hope so. Camping out in the open like this won’t be safe.”

Jennifer marked the people who had been talking. They were in a small blue truck and had a small child. She saw Kendle standing nearby, also guarding the gate while covered in blood. If not for her own foray into the gruesome, Jennifer wouldn’t have understood the pain the woman was feeling. It was never easy to face what lurked inside.

Jennifer scanned the pile of bodies around Kendle and then the crew coming to carry them outside. Her gaze went to the line of ants already dragging off the corpses there. Feeding them such an awful diet wouldn’t result in anything good.

Jennifer hoped Angela had a solution planned. The ants were getting larger and each batch of hatchlings that emerged was smarter than their parents. It was terrifying, but also fascinating. The earth was undergoing a massive change because of the war. Species were evolving at rates that people rarely witnessed. Jennifer knew of a few insects that would spontaneously mutate during a scarcity of food, but it was unheard of in humans. She didn't think the chemicals released in the war could have produced such extreme reactions. Even the instincts of the animals were changing.

Jennifer kept tugging at those mental threads while she patrolled the area. Marc and Angela were in the medical bay now that order had been restored, but Jennifer didn't want to be there. It still reminded her of giving birth to two babies, but only having one to hold.

5

“Samantha, you're being suspended from Eagle duties for a week as a punishment for your lack of caution, which resulted in the injury of a teammate. Do you accept this decision?”

Samantha nodded stiffly, cheeks bright red. She was standing next to David's cot, fists clenched in her pockets.

Around them, injured men stared in surprise at the punishment. David had refused to tell anyone exactly what had happened to cause his injury,

which usually meant the infraction wasn't officially handled.

Angela knew that and she didn't like it. She never had. "Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Samantha shook her head as tears welled.

"So be it." Angela didn't let herself soften the blow. Samantha had to learn to follow the rules, but she had paid enough without the suspension. It was being used as an example to their new recruits. Angela regarded David, tone not softening. "You've been cleared to remain in Safe Haven. If you go back to Adrian, you'll have to stay there."

David patted Samantha's arm as he carefully stood up on the crutches the doctor had reluctantly given him a few minutes ago. "I'm leaving as soon as I'm cleared here."

"You're cleared," the doctor stated curtly. "Take the medicine, change the dressing, let it heal."

Samantha helped David out, torn between him and her duty to Safe Haven. Maybe Conner could help him too, but she doubted David would ask. The former soldier was more stubborn than even she was.

Angela gestured to Marc and followed him to the brig, where they were holding the man he had rescued from the house of horror. The man wasn't locked up, but there were two guards inside the shelter with him.

Their brig was a long hallway with a row of cells welded and nailed to a wooden frame. It was

drafty and uninviting, which was perfect for its purpose.

Angela let Marc go in first. He sat down on the small stool in the corner of the middle cell. If the stranger tried to hurt her, Marc would handle it.

Angela swept his recovering pallor and empty food dishes. Though he'd been held hostage, he wasn't injured. With Marc's stories of lurkers, she'd expected much worse. "Who are you?"

The man slowly sat up on the cot, aware of Marc's big body in the space with him. He pushed up against the wall and kept the blanket around as much of his thin frame as he could. "Who do you want me to be?"

Angela had no door into his mind.

Marc gave a shake to indicate that he didn't either.

"Not being trouble for me would be a great start."

The man smiled regretfully, stroking his long beard. "I'm afraid I bring that to everyone. It's just your turn."

"Turn for what?" Marc glared. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Keeper." He held out a hand. "My name's Chauncey."

Angela knew Marc wouldn't like it, but she leaned forward and placed her hand in the stranger's chilly grip.

"Ah..." Chauncey shut his bright green eyes and smiled wider. "I didn't know that power was female. I sensed you months ago."

Angela pulled her hand away, worrying over the black void that came up when she tried to penetrate his mind. “Angela.”

Chauncey looked over at Marc. “Then you have to be the Ghost. I wasn’t completely sure. You do an excellent job of dimming yourself, even during sleep.”

Marc grunted, studying and evaluating.

“What is a Keeper?” Angela played innocent. “We’re new.”

“That, you are.” Chauncey chuckled. “A Keeper does exactly that—keeps things. Myself, I track descendants.”

“How?” She settled onto the stool outside the open cell door. Marc didn’t want her inside. She could feel that.

“I scan vast distances and determine where descendants are. In the old world, I kept track of the little red dots on my radar.”

Marc tried to read the man’s mind again. “And now?”

“Now, I search them out and place a name to that red dot.” Chauncey stared at Angela. “It’s your turn to be...recorded, if you will, in the official registry.”

“The what?” Marc and Angela echoed together.

Chauncey chuckled again. “Someone has to keep track of things, you know. That’s my purpose.”

“Who gets the information?” Angela asked before Marc could threaten or demand.

“Why, the highest bidder, of course.”
Chauncey’s tone switched to that of a slick salesman. “If you pay the price, the information is nice.”

Angela’s eyes lit up. “How about I kill you instead? And any others like you.”

Chauncey tiredly leaned against the wall. “I wish someone would. I’m sick of bringing death.”

“How long until it arrives this time?” Angela used the man’s power as she motioned Marc out of the cell.

Chauncey responded gravely. “Four days and your soul. I’m also here to record *that* in the official registry.”

Angela gasped, filled with sudden dread.

Marc locked the cell door, scowling. “What?”

“That Maker Call put you on every radar in the world.” Chauncey grinned at Angela gleefully. “I’m here to witness your fall from grace.”

“Witness for who?” Angela needed to hear it.

“The Creator. My dreams insisted that I get to Safe Haven and deliver his message. I didn’t expect to be giving it to a woman.”

Angela braced as Marc listened in disbelief.

Chauncey’s face became alive with fury!
“Murderers will never be forgiven!”

Angela laughed.

The harsh, bitter sound rang through the small jail and chilled even those outside who heard it.

Chauncey and Marc stared uneasily, uncertain what was going through her mind.

Angela slowly calmed down, wiping away tears. "I'm...sorry, but...it's so funny!"

Marc realized the hormones were helping. He waited patiently for it to pass as Chauncey began to glare.

"It's just that, I was expecting a real threat, like my son or Marc." She was still chuckling. "My soul is already damned."

"What of your unborn child?" the Keeper asked slyly.

Angela lunged toward the bars, letting her rage be seen. She had lost three rookies—three fine men—who hadn't deserved their fate. "Be careful."

Chauncey flinched away from the menace.

She sent a scornful gaze over him. "I'll kill you before I let you sell your gifts to even one more person. Pick a side or die. You hold no power here."

"You'll never know." Chauncey kept his distance as he taunted her. He had already figured out that Marc wouldn't attack unless he threatened Angela. "You can't get into my head."

"Well, I can." Jennifer was in the doorway, personal shield glowing pale red.

The sight of her sent Chauncey into an immediate panic. "That's not possible!" He scurried away from the bars and into the corner, but his eyes never left Jennifer. "There are no enforcers left!"

Surprised by the reaction, Angela called her witch forward. *Enforcer?*

The witch began to cackle. *That explains it! Enforcers ensure that the Keepers stay in line. She's an enforcer!*

Angela smiled a bit at the new information. She swung toward Chauncey with it playing on her lips. "Would you like to change your answers?"

Trapped, Chauncey quickly nodded.

The radios crackled again. "New arrivals!"

Angela headed that way. "I'll want a full report."

"You'll get it." Jennifer glowered at Chauncey. "He'll talk or I'll gut him like a fish,"

Following Angela, Marc smiled proudly. *She got that from me.* Safe Haven's women were not to be trifled with now; all of the males here enjoyed that. It let them sleep without worrying their heart would be ripped out, like Jeff's had been.

6

"Got a minute?"

Shane spun to find Brittani behind him; he stumbled around the tent peg, tripping in the slush.

Brittani laughed, but quietly, so he wasn't as embarrassed. She was trying to get her people settled into the fenced zone as quickly as she could so the tests could be handled.

Shane flushed and quickly picked himself up. "I do."

"The doctor is coming for tests. What happens if he finds something?"

Shane gave her the truth. “Depends on how bad it is. If you’re worried about Gus, don’t be. We only screen for stuff that can spread.”

The woman gave a relieved smile and returned to her assigned tent. Shane had told her to skip unpacking, that Angela had already approved them, but they needed to stay at least one night and it would be cold. The light flurries currently splattering them said it would stay below freezing.

“Comin’ in, base,” the radio crackled with Ryan’s voice.

He was leader of the missing crew. Shane turned with everyone else as engines sounded and five bikes carrying the crew drew cheers. They no longer had anyone unaccounted for.

The gate guards were ecstatic. Safe Haven had roughly a hundred refugees waiting. They needed all their men to provide defenses if things went crazy again. They couldn’t afford to keep sending them out on rescue parties, or worse, losing them.

Kenn came to Angela’s side and extended a small notebook.

Angela placed it in her pocket as Kenn slipped away to join the group of rookie Eagles carrying supplies to the men still repairing the gate. When the others saw him, they would work harder.

“Something good?” Marc was already positive it wasn’t.

Before Angela could answer, Shawn walked by with Tara and Missy on his heels. Their quiet conversation drew her attention.

“If it had been going faster, that truck would have made it through!” Shawn gestured excitedly. “Being at the top of a hill has advantages.”

“But isn’t the den vulnerable to things like explosions and cave-ins?”

“Sure, but we have escape tunnels. I’m sure you’ve seen the guards on them.”

“Yes, I have.”

The trio left earshot, with Missy kicking dust against Shawn’s boots.

Angela sighed. “I love you.”

Marc caught the tone and grimaced.

Angela took his arm and led them to a secluded corner of the chaos, but before she could explain anything, another voice broke the cold air.

“I want justice!” Darian came stomping up to them. “I demand to know the result of the moral board’s vote on the charges!”

“There was no vote.” Marc faced the man coldly. “Your sister was going to create a world of human slaves. We stopped her.”

“You had no right to make the choice!” Darian pointed. “You killed her before she even committed a crime!”

“Did I?” Angela asked icily. “Had she never taken an innocent life?”

Trapped, Darian glared. “Murderer.”

Around them, Eagles and camp members had stopped to gawk in surprise and disapproval.

“I think it’s time you left our hospitality.” Marc looked at Angela. “Yes?”

She grunted. “I had hoped he would realize it’s wrong to enslave people.”

“Humans are inferior!” Darian revealed his true nature. “You’re a traitor to your own kind!”

“That’s enough!” Marc moved forward. “Be out of Safe Haven by morning or I’ll make you go.”

Darian wasn’t intimidated by Marc. He didn’t know that he should be. “Traitors! Both of you.” He stomped toward his tent.

“He feels the way his sister did.”

“Will he come back to haunt us?”

She sighed. “Don’t they always?”

“Do you want me to—”

“Yes, but not you.”

Marc loathed using Adrian for anything, but being the executioner was what he deserved.

Angela saw Cynthia staring toward Adrian’s site. “Have her deliver the order. She’s going there as soon as we’re finished with the repairs on the gate.”

Cynthia needed to do the next interview for her paper and she’d requested that anyone but Daryl accompany her. Marc wondered about the conversations that wouldn’t go on the record, but he wasn’t overly concerned. Nothing Adrian did would earn him forgiveness. If they did leave this country, regardless of the situation, Marc wasn’t going to let the former leader on the boat. Adrian might make it to the island anyway, but it wouldn’t be on a free ride. Those days were over.

More refugees came in overnight, but there was no room in the zones. Brittani's group was inside the gate, and the Amish people had been released into the population with settling partners, but the outer zones had filled up as fast as they'd emptied them.

Marc and Zack got the new arrivals settled as quickly as they could in the blowing snow. Most of the other refugees were asleep as the new group came in. Marc was glad when respectful people emerged from their vehicles and asked for sanctuary. He put them outside Zone B after a scan with his demon, then came into the main camp to warm up. The flurries had stayed through the night, as had the stiff wind. Marc recorded the temperature at 27°.

He and Charlie had also done a workout together where the boy hadn't had much to say. Neither had Marc. They were both too cold and tired for personal drama, so the hour had been peaceful. Tracy had even joined them for the last few minutes. Marc had spent the time studying them. Other than anger over Tracy's injuries, they were okay. Marc had left them alone in the tent without a chaperone. They didn't need one now.

Marc swept the tent area, nodding to Howard, who had point over that location. Since Safe Haven was so big, there were now three supervisors for each shift and one boss.

That's me. Marc hadn't wanted the job when it was given to him, and he certainly hadn't been trying to earn it, but he doubted he'd be satisfied any other way now. He was too good at this. To do less would be wasting his skills.

The hours before dawn came slowly. By the time the sun started to lighten the sky, another inch of snow had fallen. Marc hoped some rock salt came in today. A few more inches and they would truly be dug-in for the winter with no way down the mountain unless they wanted to go by foot or ski. The salt was going to mean the difference between mobility and death. If they couldn't get up or down the main road for a year, they would starve.

Marc spotted movement from his perch on the front gate's top rafter and groaned. "Great. Just what we need."

In the distance, a line of vehicles was coming. There were at least fifteen cars and trucks. Marc could already hear the horns faintly echoing up here. In a few more minutes, it would be loud enough to wake the entire camp hours early, which meant surly attitudes all day.

"Fucking great." Marc beckoned Zack over. "Come on. We're gonna meet some assholes at the bottom of the hill."

Zack saw the coming people and also groaned. "More?"

Marc didn't tell him this was the tip of the iceberg. Safe Haven's population was about to triple and they weren't even close to ready for it.

Chapter Twenty-Three BK6

Hot Flashes

September 22nd

1

“I’m not waiting any longer.”

“You have to. There’s a big storm coming.”

“More snow doesn’t scare me. It’s time.”

“A few more days? Please?”

“No, not even for you.”

Theo rounded the corner of the cavern; the two people broke apart guiltily.

“Is everything okay here?” Theo was on his way to fix an issue with the electricity, but the conversation had pulled him.

“Its fine.” Tara sighed. “I’m trying to convince Jayson to wait a bit longer on his plans.”

“And what plans are those?” Theo didn’t like how many new people were already running loose without a guard.

“He wants to leave. I want him to wait until after the storm.”

It was a perfectly reasonable answer, but Theo didn’t buy it. “What are you guys up to?”

Before Tara could reply, Jayson shoved by them both. “Leaving.”

Theo started to go after him, but Tara put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. He isn't adjusting well."

"Do you know him?" Theo shrugged off her touch. "You didn't come in together. And where's Missy?"

Tara frowned slightly. "We're both new. I made friends. Missy is with the other kids, eating breakfast. What's your problem?"

Theo was uneasy over her attitude. Until now, Tara had been meek. "Are you signing up for the Eagles?"

Tara shrugged at the quick topic switch. "I'm not sure."

It relieved him to hear that. "Maybe next time?"

"Maybe. I need to start my shift on stocking things down here. Can I go?"

Theo waved her off. He continued on his way, but the woman stayed on his mind. She was probably just having a bad day, but he found her responses to be out of character. When he reached his working area, Theo made a note on it for the next shift. He wanted someone to keep track of her whenever she worked down here.

Theo studied the notes left for him by the previous shift, trying to ignore the creaks and shifts, the low moans of the stone around him.

Plumbing is 89% complete.

Power is 73% operational. Battery banks are cool and calm so far.

Two reports of the moaning in the bottom levels by guards. Checked it out. No evidence found.

Theo scowled when he saw the names of the guards. Ozzie and Francis weren't the type to imagine things. There was honestly something down here with them.

Theo made remarks on the paper and then hung it on the clipboard. The sounds of the camp moving to the mess and bathrooms echoed loudly throughout the cave. Down here, that noise was a reminder that he wasn't alone. Theo was glad their people were inside. The doors to the cave would be installed soon and then those living topside would be encouraged to come down and join the rest. Today would be a great test of the cave utilities. Theo expected to stay busy fixing minor issues.

More noises echoed from outside the cave. Theo didn't envy the patrols. Not only was it still snowing, but the number of refugees had doubled from yesterday. The Eagles were busy rotating zones and trying to handle the influx.

As if conjured by his thoughts, the radio crackled with Tonya's slightly harried voice. "This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We are now closed until the storm is over. Hole up where you can. I repeat: We are closed until the storm passes. Please stay where you are and keep warm."

Theo doubted many people would listen. The crowd outside the gates was going to grow and Angela was going to keep evaluating them. Winter had arrived early, coating the land with deadly snow and cold. People would flood to their gates as long as they could travel.

“But they aren’t coming up the main hill.” Their first load of rock salt for the day had been picked up, but it wouldn’t arrive until this evening. That meant more snow accumulating, melting a bit in the brief glimpses of sun they were getting, and then refreezing into ice. Theo wasn’t certain even the rock salt crew would make it up here even though the call had said they were in a city truck. Nature was merciless. Survivors across the country were about to be hit with another blow.

Around Theo, the walls shimmered.

He thought he was imagining it at first, and then he realized an entire section of the wall was shivering like Jell-O.

Dust and debris began to fall, and then the noises caught up, revealing the grinding and pounding of a tremor. The cave wall bulged out from the pressure; a wide crack split from the bottom and began running upward.

Theo clutched at his mike as he fell, sure it was already too late for him. “Cave-in!”

The call sent terror through everyone who heard.

Eagles rushed toward the sound as camp members fled. The panic and chaos made it difficult for them to navigate the steep stairs down to the area. People fell and rolled, knocking others over. The tunnels echoed with screams and fear.

“This is a mandatory evacuation!” The radio blared with Tonya’s terrified voice this time.

“Everyone out!”

2

It took hours to dig through the rubble.

The only section of the cave affected seemed to be this bottom part, but they didn't know for sure how much damage had been done. The pile of stone and debris was huge, and the dust still hadn't settled. Marc and Kenn supervised the digging as the Miller family did the hands-on work. They were used to this sort of tragedy.

“Do we have a count yet?” Marc hated being down here while Angela was outside the gate, handling new arrivals and rotating zones.

“Right here.” Kenn gave him the sheet. “Just Theo's first shift team. They were down here to handle minor repairs.”

Marc didn't need to read it. He knew who was on Theo's crew. They now had five missing people and Marc was determined to recover every one of them as quickly as possible. He stepped forward to help physically.

Kenn followed his lead.

Behind the workers, a small crowd of friends and loved ones gathered to wait for any news. Candy and the other women drew strength from each other, trying to be hopeful, but as the minutes passed with no sounds, it was hard.

3

Kendle didn't want to be here anymore. There was a bad feeling coming over these mountains. She was eager to be on her way. The vehicles were packed, the team was ready, and all of them expected to leave in the morning. The problem was that they were all viewing the massive crowd of refugees on the doorstep and worrying. Safe Haven clearly needed them here right now. What finally tipped it was a comment from Jennifer as she stopped by the parking area on her way to deliver an update about the cave-in.

“Happy hunting. We're gonna need that boat.”

Kendle hadn't realized the boat was important. She'd honestly thought Angela was getting rid of her and a few of the others who wanted to be on the island. Kendle hadn't considered that it was for Safe Haven.

“But I should have.” Angela didn't do anything that wasn't going to help her damn sheep. “What am I walking into?”

Kendle finished loading the rear floorboard, then shut and locked all the doors. Only she and Tommy had keys.

“All set?” Tommy joined her at the front end of their Tahoe. He could smell her shampoo from the recent shower.

“Yes.”

Tommy had witnessed her battling the refugees coming through the gate, and been impressed. When Angela had said Kendle was a killer, she

hadn't been exaggerating in the least. "We'll get the word to go soon."

Greg came over to them with a slight frown. "Boss said to get rolling down the rear path."

Tommy grinned happily. "See?"

Kendle allowed a tiny smile to crack her lips. "Cool. Let's go."

They rolled down the rear road mostly unnoticed a short time later. Kendle didn't glance at Adrian's site or at the cave where Marc was helping free their trapped men. She hadn't said goodbye to either male. She was on her way home. There was nothing here for her now.

4

Angela read the update, then gave Jennifer the next sets of notes to be delivered. There was too much going on for any of them to spend time talking, so the short messages were ideal. The radios were clogged with calls from people begging them not to shut their gates until they arrived—despite the transmissions that Tonya was repeating each hour. Desperation to avoid the cold would keep survivors coming their way and there was little Safe Haven could do to stop it.

The two hundred refugees already here were unruly, angry that they had to be processed, sullen about the rules and requirements for entry. They wanted in. Angela was positive they would try to

get through soon. The Eagles were also certain. They were carrying extra ammunition and wearing double-vest setups. Things were on the edge of ugliness.

Angela realized her plans would have to be sped up. This would be one of the last few days that she and Jennifer could come outside the reinforced gate to sort through new arrivals. With that thought in mind, Angela dug into the evaluations harder, trying to get more of the good people cleared before evening fell. Marc would handle their den. She would handle the door.

5

Theo moaned as he came to. Pain crushed into his legs and continued to build until tears slipped from his eyes. He didn't bother to open them. With the dark and dust, he wouldn't be able to see anything, but it was a small comfort to hear work going on. They were trying to dig through.

The rocks on top of his legs suddenly shifted. Theo screamed.

“That's it! Lift!”

Theo continued to scream as the rock was moved; the sound echoed throughout the cave. It cut off abruptly as he passed out.

The men laboring to free him were grateful. The creaks and groans of the mountain were too much for their nerves. Screams were more than they could handle right now. This area could collapse at any

point. They wouldn't know until the engineering team could come in and evaluate.

Marc and Kenn, exhausted and filthy, were there to help lift Theo's body from the rubble. They'd found Tim and Gary a little while ago. Both men had been rushed to the medical bay. Theo made three.

Marc was determined that number would go higher. He wasn't leaving anyone down here. The fact that all three men were alive gave him hope that the other two would be as well.

Shouts from topside echoed down to them; Marc gestured for Kenn to call in the next crew to dig. "I'll be back."

Marc walked behind the team carrying Theo, noting the empty cave. The camp had been sent to the main tent area topside until it was declared safe. Marc wondered how many of those would now refuse to live below. As he neared the entrance, the noise of a huge crowd was loud enough to drown out everything else. Marc frowned, moving faster. Surely, Angie had come inside the gates...

Greg pointed when he saw Marc. "She went to the medical bay!"

Relieved, Marc went to the main gate first, needing an update on their situation out here. The feeling vanished as he stared at the mob. Groups milled around the area, talking and arguing over space for tents and vehicles. The four zones were completely full, and each of them were surrounded by tents and clans waiting for an evaluation. Behind

those, more people waited on foot and in long lines of clumsily parked cars that would prevent anyone, including their teams, from getting through.

The Eagles were nervous. Each man and woman had a finger ready to pull the trigger as the crowd below shouted, screamed, and fought. Despite Angela's predictions, Marc hadn't thought it would get so bad this quickly. His added defenses were good. They might even hold off this crowd for a few days, but eventually, Safe Haven would be out of bullets and get overrun.

"We have magic." Angela joined him. "We're never trapped."

Marc hoped she was right. At some point, one of these desperate refugees would figure out the rear road existed and then they would have a flood of people at both doors.

"We have to keep them off our ass. We'll need that route out of here."

"What about the cave paths?" Marc leaned in so she could hear him. "That one tunnel is blocked now, but the others aren't. I checked it."

"Good. If we bunker in here, it'll come in—"

"We have the last two!" Kenn's happy shout came through the radio. "Everyone is accounted for and all of them will live!"

Marc and Angela both thought it was early for Kenn to give that notice, but it was too late to worry over. Cheers echoed from waiting members and Eagles, drowning out the gate crowd for an instant.

Angela studied those she hadn't gotten to before Morgan had taken her arm and led her inside. He hadn't asked or given any warning, and Angela hadn't argued. The sense of bad things coming had been hanging over the refugees all day. Assuming she knew what it was made Angela worry about her timeline of events. That feeling said it was coming sooner than she'd anticipated.

"How's Theo?" Marc knew she'd been there when he was brought in.

"Rough. Same for Tim. Gary will be released tonight. He only has a concussion and we need the cot. The medical area is filling up."

"Is that something I need to discuss with the doctor?"

"Actually, no. He'd like half of them to be cleared and out too. It's just hard to get the tests done, treat new people who've been admitted, cover people who had regular appointments, supervise the students, and act like an ass all at the same time."

Marc snickered, but he heard her silent plea. "Maybe you should go help him? The sooner he clears people, the quicker you can get some of the new ones in here, right?"

The idea of her being safely busy in the medical bay below was appealing to Marc as he kept track of several fights that were ongoing. Most refugees disappeared into their tents or vehicles as soon as they arrived, trying to avoid the weather, but the troublemakers were out roaming and causing problems. The safe people were those in Zones A

and B. Zone C didn't have a gate. Angela had ordered it left off during the repairs, but she hadn't said why. Marc knew. She wanted the ants or Eagles to be able to get in there and clean it out as needed.

"I don't like this." Marc hoped she had something else up her sleeve for controlling all these strangers.

"We have three options." Angela pulled her coat tighter as the wind blew harder. "We can run and let them have it. We can open fire and kill some innocent people. Or we can wait and let fate handle it."

Marc didn't like fate any more than he did the government. "What happens with fate?"

"My men and women don't have to carry this on their soul. I do, and I'll shoulder it willingly." Shivering lightly, she scanned the people, picking out murderers, rapists, traffickers. Some of the worst dregs of humanity were mixed into the crowd below and more were on the way. If even a few of those got inside these gates, Safe Haven's light could be lost. "We'll wait. Until after the storm."

"Do you think it will cool them off, make some of them leave?" He gently helped her down from the rafter that he hadn't heard her climb when she'd joined him. Her hands and face were like ice as he checked her out.

"No. But they'll be just as gone."

Spooked a bit, Marc led her to the topside mess to warm her up. As far as he knew, she and Jennifer

hadn't taken a break, which meant they hadn't eaten either.

Angela let him guide her, mind sliding far away. Things were spinning faster; it was almost impossible to keep up with each change as it happened, let alone each ripple that was created. Foretelling this way was fascinating. Missy was going to be amazingly gifted. Shawn didn't know it yet, but he was a lucky man.

6

Missy glowered at the rocking couple from her hidden perch in the bottom of the diaper cabinet. She'd stayed here when Hilda took the other kids to dinner, letting herself be counted before ducking back inside. She'd heard Tara tell Shawn to meet her.

“That’s, um... Could you lift up a little?”

Missy’s anger grew as Shawn resumed grunting. In the dark and with some clothes on, she couldn’t see much but she knew what they were doing.

Missy lit the fuse on the firecracker and tossed it onto the couch with them. She had a small pile, gifted to her by Li Sing’s youngest daughter. Missy lit a second one as the first exploded in a loud crack.

“What the...!”

“That hurt!”

Crack!

“Stop it!”

“Who is that?!”

Crack! Crack!

Shawn batted away the next firecracker, knocking it into Tara, who was trying to get dressed.

The lit fuse dropped into Tara’s blouse. She danced herself out of the shirt, shouting. “Help me!”

Crack! Crack!

“Stop it!”

Shawn flinched from the loud noise by his ear and dove toward the cabinet where he’d glimpsed the spark of a lighter. Holding his pants up, he grabbed the only place he thought someone could be. A small fist slammed into his groin.

Shawn dropped to his knees.

Missy kicked, catching him in the ribs. She ran for the door, shoving Tara aside as she went.

Tara recovered and tried to grab the girl but missed, instead falling down the steps of the camper in her skirt and bra.

Missy ran faster, shoving through the crowd of camp members and guards who rushed over. She ducked, and was swung into strong arms that refused to let go.

“Enough!” Marc used the alpha power to break through the child’s struggles.

Missy stilled, realizing who had picked her up. She instinctively leaned against his chest and began to cry.

Marc had the sudden sense that he was comforting a grown woman. He patted her shoulder awkwardly. Unhappy that something had upset the

child so much, Marc cast a nasty glare toward the couple hurriedly moving around inside the camper door. He noticed Tara's exposed skin and the burnt smell next, scowling. "I want you both in the brig office in five minutes!"

Hidden against Marc's chest, Missy smiled.

7

"I can't live in the cave."

Samantha found Jeremy standing in the drafty hay room behind her. She'd come here to work off some of her anxiety and guilt now that David was back with Adrian. "What?"

"I can't even go in there."

"You haven't been inside the cave?"

Jeremy shook his head.

Samantha frowned at herself, adding more guilt. She'd been so wrapped up in her own issues that she hadn't checked on her men. Was Neil having trouble too?

Samantha motioned toward the bale next to her. "Come and tell me about it."

Neil listened from the doorway, glad to hear Samantha being reasonable. Jeremy had confessed to him a short while ago. Neil had recommended that he do the same with Samantha. Where they would live was a group decision. Neil yawned, not ready for his upcoming shift on the gate. He'd helped unload the first truck of rock salt and spread it around.

“I have some good news for you.” Samantha smiled at Jeremy. “I don’t care where we live. I doubt Neil does either. Try to relax.”

Neil approved, leaving them to work it out. He would prefer to be in the cave for the warmth and safety, but she was right that it didn’t matter enough for him to argue. Not splitting them up or letting petty issues come between them was more important to the former state trooper.

Jeremy figured he might as well unburden himself all the way. “Are you okay now? We know something happened.”

Samantha smiled wryly. “I should have known you guys would notice. Yes, I’m fine.”

“Conner helped you?”

“How did you come up with that?”

“Doug told us that you and Peggy had gone to Adrian. I added the rest.”

“You guys were snooping on me?”

Jeremy grinned. “Yeah. Problem?”

“Considering the circumstances?” She snorted bitterly. “No. And yes, Conner helped me.”

“Because you wouldn’t let Adrian?”

“Because Adrian couldn’t, but yes. I could accept Conner doing it. Not his father.”

“We would have gone with you.”

“I know.” *You two would have fought with Adrian the entire time.*

Jeremy seemed to hear the thought. “I’m sorry.”

Samantha shrugged, leaning against his heat. “It’s done now.”

“And it won’t return?”

Samantha tensed, understanding Jeremy knew it had been cancer. “He couldn’t promise that.”

“Then I guess we should make sure he stays alive.”

“He’ll be here for rookie lessons at some point. He’ll be monitored.”

Jeremy knew that would cause concern. He chose to make sure Samantha’s future health was covered. “Maybe he should be forgiven for a mistake.”

Samantha sighed. “Maybe, but I don’t think that’s what the boss has planned for our powerful peeping-tom yet. I saw him and Adrian’s soldiers preparing to leave earlier. I think he’s headed south.”

8

“I’m not going.”

Adrian didn’t have time to argue with his angry son. His own orders had only come a few minutes ago. He needed to leave immediately.

Conner dropped the kit his father had tossed to him, not caring that the soldiers almost had the camp packed up. “I won’t go.”

Adrian frowned. “Tell Angela. She’s planning to bring you inside after this, so I’d be polite when you spit in her face.”

Conner realized Angela was giving him a way to keep atoning and earning his way back in. His

attitude changed. A smile spread over his young face as he bent down to retrieve the kit.

Adrian grunted. Kids were a pain in the ass most days and this one was no different. Conner would do about anything to be allowed inside with Candy. The women had been fooled so far, but Adrian knew Conner's obsession was growing worse. This time away would either make him or break him.

“What will you be doing while I'm gone?”

“Working.” Adrian slid his rifle over a shoulder. “Tracking down future problems.”

Conner didn't want more details; he let his father leave without saying anything else. All he could think of was getting inside Safe Haven to Candy. She needed his love and his protection.

Adrian stayed to the tree line, glad the crowd hadn't noticed his site yet. Conner and most of the soldiers would be gone in a short while, following Kendle's team. Adrian was grateful to Angela for not leaving them all out here. Anyone around the gates now was in eminent danger.

Adrian spotted his target being ushered from those barely cracked fences and went dim, studying the man. Angela had sent orders for Darian to be removed before he could join another group, but Adrian wasn't certain why. Jobs like these were maddening in that aspect. Adrian planned to ask the man why he had been marked before he killed him. It was the only link into Angela's personal activities that he could get.

Adrian stayed still as the man passed the zones and milling crowd, not answering any of the questions about why he was leaving. No one tried to stop him, but Adrian was confident that would change too. The three largest groups that had come in this week were all gathered together in Zone C. They had physically removed the other people already there. Those angry folks were camped outside that zone. It was ugly and getting worse.

He would have to pick a new location for his site soon. Overcrowding after an apocalypse wasn't an issue that most people ever considered, but Adrian was positive his former camp was doing that now. The sound of so many threats on your doorstep had a way of changing a person's priorities. The *take them all* attitude of Safe Haven was about to shift forever.

Putting everything else from his mind, Adrian subtly followed Darian down the mountain, eager to discover why he'd been marked for death.

9

“So... Who wants to tell me what happened?” Marc shifted the little girl to a more comfortable position. He was in the tiny, chilly office of the brig, with Tara and Shawn sitting anxiously across the small desk. He'd made them wait for an hour while he handled other things.

“Missy had a stash of firecrackers.”

“He was on top of my mommy!” Missy shouted in Marc’s ear, making him flinch.

Tara turned scarlet, telling Marc she’d been willing.

“You two were having a moment...in the kids’ camper?”

Shawn nodded, unable to hedge or lie with Missy curled onto Marc’s chest like Angela might have.

Marc scowled. “With Missy watching?”

“I thought we were alone,” Shawn muttered, staring at the floor.

“She was in the mess, with Li Sing’s children.” Tara was also staring at the floor. The cold draft coming in couldn’t cool her cheeks. “Seems like the kids here can wander off at any time.”

Shawn and Marc both frowned.

“Weren’t you supposed to be helping with the kids?” Marc demanded coldly.

Tara flushed darker and refused to speak.

Marc felt Missy grin against the bare skin of his neck. For some reason, she was enjoying this. “I suggest you do your work and keep a better eye on your child.” Marc was bothered by her being here. He hadn’t nailed down a reason to ban Tara, but he knew one existed. Marc glanced at Shawn. “Suspended. One week.”

Shawn’s face fell, but inside, he was relieved. Being in the kids’ area for something like this was a serious offense. He’d expected to lose rank at the least.

“Is that what you need?” Marc demanded.
“Because I’ll give you that and more.”

“No. It won’t ever happen again.”

“Good.” Marc gestured at Tara. “You can go.”

“Should I—”

“I’ll drop her off.” Marc dared the woman to protest after the scene she and Shawn had made. “I’ll make sure she eats and brushes her teeth.”

Tara stormed out, not looking into the one occupied cell.

Shawn lifted a brow. “Was that right? It’s her kid.”

Marc shrugged. “She doesn’t act like it.”

Shawn couldn’t argue. Tara often handled Missy like an afterthought. It bothered him too. Enough that he was certain it was why the sex wasn’t that good. He’d been having trouble getting into it even before Missy’s interruption.

“You *are* stupid!” Missy pushed herself off Marc’s lap. “I knew it!”

Before either man could respond, Missy grabbed Marc’s coffee mug from the desk and threw it at Shawn.

Shawn caught the metal travel mug easily, snickering. “The lid was locked.”

Marc thought to tell Shawn not to taunt a female of any age when they missed a target, but it was too late. Missy neatly slid around the desk and kicked him in the shin. Then she stomped on his foot, grinding down with her little boot.

“Ow!” Shawn twisted around in his chair to see the child marching toward the door, rubbing his leg. The toe, he wasn’t touching yet. “Why did you do that?!”

Marc dropped his head, trying not to laugh at them. He’d figured it out now and it was hilarious.

“Why are you always so mean to me?”

Missy stopped, putting small hands on her hips as she twirled around in her blue dress. “Because you’re stupid and I didn’t ask for a stupid mate!”

And with that, she flounced from the brig, leaving Shawn in a state of shock.

“Mate?”

Marc’s chuckles filled the cold air.

Shawn stared in disbelief. He had assumed Tara was his future, though Angela hadn’t confirmed it. “But...she’s a little kid!”

Listening from outside the door, Missy stomped her foot, crunching through the ice. “Stupid! Take him back and give me a puppy. You can train *those*.”

Even Chauncey laughed this time.

10

“All teams are now grounded.” The radios crackled with Marc’s tired voice. “Return to base if you’re out, via option B. I repeat, all teams are now grounded.”

Seth and Becky exchanged worried looks, but they didn't stop to discuss it. Angela had told them to complete their mission no matter what.

“Over here.” Seth hated the dark shadows of the Amazon warehouse. This fulfillment center held crates, bags, and boxes of supplies that Safe Haven needed. Seth had been astonished to find it undamaged. The next shock had come at the abandonment of the town around it. There were no kicked-in doors or signs of looting here. The people were simply gone, leaving the clear roads. *Creepy.*

Becky held the light as Seth got the crate open with the mini-pry bar that was standard Eagle equipment. They hefted the lid to the floor instead of shoving it over and making noise. Angela had also said to be as low key as possible. It implied there were people or problems around, despite them not spotting any.

Seth held the bag open for Becky to dump the packages into. They read the labels in concern.

Potassium Iodide Tablets

14 tablets, 130mg

They didn't speak their fears, but thoughts roamed with terrible suspicions as they emptied the crates. Angela had three items on her list, but this one was underlined and they'd decided to procure it first. The other two items were nearby.

It took a few minutes to empty the crates. When the couple finished, they took the big canvas bag of tablets with them to find the next items. In the stillness of the fulfillment center, Seth finally

broached the subject he'd been avoiding. "Are you happy with me?"

Becky paused. *He's going to do this now?* "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Seth shrugged, leading them around by the map he had taken from the front office. "I know you're not. I can feel it. I need to know if it's me or the past."

"Can this wait? At least until we're camped for the night?"

Seth hated that answer. It meant there *were* things to talk about. "Sure."

Becky wasn't relieved. She hadn't known Seth was watching her. She'd thought she was doing a great job at hiding her chaotic mind.

Seth reached out to take her hand for a moment where sparks flew and their hearts calmed. He didn't say I love you or I'll do whatever you need, but she felt it.

Becky squeezed his hand, wishing she had more love to give him. Seth was one of the good men, but her heart was often an empty void or a screaming lava bed of regret. There wasn't much room for anything else.

Outside, light snow flurries whipped against the warehouse. The wind sent drafts of icy winds over the town that chilled even those in winter clothing. The evening sky was dark and dreary, the moon not visible through the clouds, and few creatures were stirring. Seth liked it that way. He had chosen to do their hunting at night and sleep during the day. They

had been able to avoid several groups of people, spotting the fires in time to take cover. Seth didn't want to be seen by anyone if he could help it. Having only the two of them along made for bad odds in a fight.

Becky stilled. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Seth was comparing the crates in front of them with the id numbers on the sheet in his hand.

"Like a...growl, maybe?"

That got Seth's attention. He scanned the area with his light. There were a dozen places for someone to hide. Uneasy, Seth gestured toward the crates. "You open 'em."

Becky got on it as Seth did another slow sweep with his light. If she thought she heard something, then she probably had. He rotated to study another direction, and found multiple shadows behind them. "Heads up!"

Becky pulled her gun as she straightened. The feeling of danger swarmed, making her ease over to Seth's side. Their problems were animals, not man, but the reactions would be the same. Neither of those enemies was forgiving.

Seth motioned her behind him as he grabbed the bag they had filled. Seth quickly walked toward the office where they could make a stand, not sure why the dogs weren't attacking yet.

Seth locked the office door and put the bag in a corner, flying over plans to handle their problem. He didn't want to use guns. It might draw more dogs, or worse, people.

Becky stared through the dirty glass at the small pack of wild dogs that had followed them, wondering what type of life they'd had before the war. Thanks to nature and the apocalypse, animals hated humankind. They attacked and chased, even stalked in some cases, but Becky remembered when they had been best friends with people. Did they? Did the dogs also long for a return of the old world?

She concentrated, trying to push inside the mind of the smallest mangy animal. She found a dark voice and an almost scary shadow in every corner of the dog's mind. Shaped like windy warriors, they whispered awful things about the humans in the glass room.

Becky realized the animals weren't under their own control. It was terrifying; she turned to tell Seth what she'd discovered.

"Shh..." Seth was staring down a wiry dog they hadn't noticed under the desk. Seth had his knife out.

A low growl rumbled from the dog's chest.

Becky watched the dog leap at Seth, saw his knife come up...

Seth fell from the weight as Becky rushed forward with her own blade and stabbed the dog in the throat. Her knife sank through and she jerked on it, hoping she hadn't gone far enough to hurt Seth.

Seth shoved the hot corpse off, slinging blood from his arm. He'd been bitten.

"Damn." Becky hurriedly dug out her medical kit as Seth retrieved his blade from the dog's chest.

She handled the bite on his arm like she'd learned in Angela's class, but her stomach twisted harshly the entire time. The wound didn't want to stop bleeding, even after she'd bandaged it as tightly as she could.

Seth tolerated the actions because they couldn't get a fire going right now without suffocating. Cauterizing the wound was preferable to him over a two-week injury that would require stitches, daily inspections, medication... Seth studied the dogs that were now lying outside the door, then Becky's kit. "Do you still have that vial?"

Becky went still for an instant, then understood what he had thought of. "Very bottom."

Seth didn't ask why she still had it, but the question went to the top of his mental list as he dug the vial out.

Becky got the small jar of peanut butter they'd almost finished with lunch and held out small gobs for Seth to coat in the white powder. She didn't know exactly what it was, but Seth appeared to because he frowned the entire time. Becky didn't ask. She knew what it was supposed to do, and that was too much information.

Seth took each coated peanut butter ball and rolled the drug up tight, then lined them on the window ledge. He wasn't certain what reaction ecstasy would have on the wild dogs, but he knew that when they calmed down, they would sleep. He and Becky would then kill them. After being bitten, Seth wasn't as worried about drawing people. If

strangers came to cause trouble, they would shoot them too, but he didn't want to lose the items they'd come for. Angela had made it clear Safe Haven needed them. However, if the drugs didn't work on the dogs, Seth planned to open fire and handle whatever came from it. The pain in his arm was a hot fire, making him angry that he'd been bitten at all. He hadn't searched under the desk, putting them both in danger. He deserved to be bitten and it pissed him off. Seth nodded to her. "Easy and only a small bit."

Becky opened the door.

The dogs lunged forward.

Seth's toss was good. Two of the balls landed on noses poking through the door. Tongues came out; the two balls vanished.

While those dogs were busy prying their jaws open around the peanut butter, Seth tossed the rest of the balls, being certain all of the animals got at least one.

"What now?" Becky studied the dogs that were no longer snarling in rabid hatred. They were watching the door for more treats.

"We wait. How about a nap?"

"Too wound up. You go ahead."

Seth had the same problem, along with the fire in his arm. He swallowed two Tylenol, but shunned the painkillers Becky offered from her medic kit. He had to stay alert. The Tylenol would knock it down enough for him to function.

The dogs reacted to the party drug faster than Seth expected, whining, growling, snapping. They fought with each other, chased their tails, puked, and forgot about the humans they had trapped. Drool puddled on the floor, mating took place, and time slowly passed.

When the dogs began to lay down, some cleaning themselves, some shuddering, Seth motioned to Becky. "Take the right."

They eased the door open.

Two of the animals were nearby. Seth quickly shot them before they could lunge. The suppressed noise still echoed loudly in the warehouse. The sounds of nails running madly across concrete came to them.

Becky and Seth were ready, easily hitting the wild animals as they scrambled down an aisle of boxes. The three canines fell together, sliding into shelves of merchandise that buried them.

Seth and Becky retrieved their bag from the office and then returned to the crates, listening for anyone who may have heard the shots. Arm now throbbing, Seth held the light this time, staying alert. Five was a small pack for wild dogs. On the ride here, they'd witnessed small herds of canines with numbers in the dozens.

It took them half an hour to gather the rest of the items and then load the truck they'd pulled inside one of the bay doors. As they prepared to go home,

Seth looked over, admiring her fiery hair in the dome light.

Becky felt it coming, but didn't try to stop him.

"Should I give you space? Is that what you don't want to tell me?"

"Not even close." Becky snorted, fastening her seatbelt. "Why do men always assume the worst?"

"Because the vibes you women put off are always bad."

"I hate myself." She knew he needed to hear it to understand where she was coming from. "I'm trying to forgive me, like the rest of the camp, but it's hard."

"Yes." Seth had his own mistakes haunting him, some from before the war. Not being able to save his daughter was always the cause of his nightmares and that was after getting a pickaxe through the leg by people who wanted to eat him.

"I kept the vial to remind me of my mistakes."

"Not to use it sometime, maybe on Neil?"

Becky flushed.

Seth frowned, but he'd known all along that he was a substitute for who she really wanted. He'd just thought he could fill those shoes.

"No." Becky put a hand on his good arm. "I wouldn't betray you that way, no matter what screwed shit is in my head."

"You'll end it with me first, right?"

"Yes."

Her answer broke Seth's heart. He eased them out of the warehouse without saying anything else.

This was what he deserved for falling in love with her. He'd known it when he rescued her from Rick. Becky's heart belonged to Neil, whether that man wanted it or not.

Chapter Twenty-Four BK6
Buttons To Push

Page 1

**Refugee Crisis Hits Safe Haven
Refuge!**

by Reporter Cynthia Quest
September 24th

There are hundreds of them. We can't sleep without hearing the shouts and fights, the gunfire. The flood of refugees we all expected after the war has finally arrived and if not for these mountain walls, we would have already been overrun.

There are too many for our Eagles to go out and gain control, and more people are on the way—hundreds or maybe even *thousands*. Think about that. Daily assaults are already taking place and we can't stop them. Someone has died out there every day this week. Women are being hurt, supplies are being stolen, wolves are trying to sneak in with the sheep, and more are on the way. What are we supposed to do? I agree that we have a duty to our fellow man, but we don't have a duty to killers or anyone who will destroy what we've built. Most of those people can never be allowed in here. Let me explain why.

Reason One: We don't have the room for that many people. Look around these caves and tell me we can fit thousands down here? We're already cramped and our new numbers of official members are at four hundred and ten. Why haven't they set up their own settlement? We did. Why can't they go do that? There are simply too many of them. We will run out of everything and none of us will survive. The majority of these people are scavengers. They have nothing except needs.

Reason Two: Their lack of morals and ethics will bleed into our camp. We will have a crime rate for the first time. There are thieves, rapists, murderers, pedophiles, and even cannibals in these groups. That came straight from the boss, folks. Evil is on our doorstep. Do we want to welcome it with open arms? We're almost safe down here. These strangers will change that.

On a side note, not following rules, hurting, killing, and betraying has resulted in people being barred from our peaceful settlement before now, including Adrian. If we allow these killers in, why did we bother to banish our former leader? If we do this, I say Adrian has to be given the same chance to reform. I also think there's as much chance of that, as there is of these strangers obeying our laws.

Reason Three: Many of them are ill. We haven't experienced the outbreaks that most people have because we're careful about who joins and because we've been lucky, frankly. With so many people coming in, the odds of missing something

deadly are huge. And what about the people who refuse to be tested? We don't have any laws that force them to. We could all die of the measles or even the plague. It could happen. We only have two doctors. Imagine thousands of refugees here. There's no way we can keep up with that many people at once. We'll be out of medical supplies within a month. When we can't help them anymore, our doctors and nurses will be assaulted or even killed. We'll have to run constant foraging trips, even during the winter weather, and it won't be enough. We'll kill ours to save them, but many of these coming refugees won't survive anyway because they've been breathing in the ash. We can't help them.

Reason Four: There is no way that Safe Haven can rehabilitate that many people at once. We don't have the guards or the resources to patrol them. People have been caught trying to sneak in here by cutting holes in the fences. You know of the attempts to get through, the semi that was used to ram the gates. These people are desperate and bad things always come from that. Some of them are innocent and need our help, but how do we tell the difference?

In my opinion, we can't. I want the gates shut to refugees until spring. We've fought hard to get where we are. I say we let them do the same.

What do you think?

Are We Ready?

Winter is coming, and with it—a whole host of new problems. Are we ready? I've talked to our XO, Marcus Brady, about that subject. Here's what he had to say.

Cynthia: Are we ready for winter?

Marcus: No, but we have a little more time to gather what we need. We just have to keep working.

Cynthia: Won't that be hard with all those refugees at the gates?

Marcus: Yes, but we have more than one way off the mountain. In fact, we have several.

Cynthia: That's good to know. How far behind are we on gathering?

Marcus: Only a couple of weeks. The coming storm might add to that.

Cynthia: Are we expecting a lot of snow?

Marcus: Yes, but the wind and cold will be the real issue. We're prepping the cave for it.

Cynthia: Are you confident we can make this work?

Marcus: Honestly? No, not as much as I was when we got here. There are too many people waiting to get in.

Cynthia: So you agree we shouldn't let any more people in here with us?

Marcus: I think we have to be careful about how many come in, but the boss wants our people and some of them are that.

Cynthia: Is it worth the risk?

Marcus: Life is always worth the risk.

Cynthia: That's true. Do you have any advice for people concerning the weather?

Marcus: Keep your feet and hands warm and dry. Frostbite is not your friend. Stay inside as much as you can. We have plenty of work in the caves that needs to be done, including installing the showers and helping monitor the animals that have been brought down.

Cynthia: The animals we're leaving topside because of their size, will they survive the winter?

Marcus: Yes. We'll be building a large barn that will shelter them, along with the supplies and food they need. We'll be melting snow for them to drink, like we'll be doing for ourselves at some point.

Cynthia: Filtered and treated?

Marcus: You know it.

Cynthia: Do you think the cold weather will convince some of the refugees to leave?

Marcus: It might make them more desperate.

Cynthia: Are there extra guards on the gate?

Marcus: Yes. It'll stay that way.

Cynthia: What about the rumor that this winter could last twice as long as what we're used to?

Marcus: Yes, that's been confirmed now. All of our weather trackers agree that this will be the longest winter any of us have ever experienced.

Cynthia: Are we ready for that?

Marcus: Not as much as I'd like to be, but once we're in the cave, we have to tough it out.

Cynthia: That brings me to the final questions. Is this mountain settlement a mistake? Should we have gone south? Is Kendle searching for a boat for us, despite what we were told about making a stand here?

Marcus: Wow. Let's see. No, it's not a mistake. We have to try this. No one wants to leave our country...except Kendle. Yes, she is searching for a ship, but just for herself and the few people who've chosen to go with her. When she returns, we'll have an idea of what things are like along the coast. Eventually, we'll have to go there to gather supplies. It'll be nice to have a firsthand account.

Cynthia: That's all I have for you at the moment. Is there anything you'd like to say?

Marcus: Don't get rowdy at the party. We've put the brig on the bottom floor with the ghost.

Cynthia: Cute. Thank you for the interview.

Marcus: My pleasure.

Reporter's final thought

I feel snowed. We all know Marc can be charming and that he uses it to distract people. We usually approve, but in this case, it could cost our lives. Personally, I trust Marc. I also believe Angela wants what's best for us. But the reality is this: The long winter, combined with all those refugees, could kill us. Safe Haven might no longer exist. Is that worth the risk for a few more good people? We already have enough men and women here to

rebuild our lives. Let the rest of the refugees do the same—somewhere else.

Page 3

Pick up a potted vegetable plant or two!

Food could become scarce if this winter gets as bad as people are worried over. Do your part and grow a vegetable! Pick up a potted plant at the topside garden area and take it to your bunk. The pots are bio domes that you close in the evening to provide protection and hold in warmth. These plants require little light and only a little water, so it will be easy for everyone here to grow their own favorite vegetables. Stop by and get yours today!

*Area will be open from 9am to dusk.

Get your winter gear!

All supply trucks now have winter gear. They will be open from 7am until dusk. Don't take chances with your health. Get set for the storms before they arrive.

Contest Reward Party!

48 hours from now, we are having a party to celebrate moving into the cave. Details will be posted on the boards in all mess areas. This is a housewarming party, so bring a treat and join your fellow survivors in triumph. We made it. We're here. Let's party!

Page 4

Safe Haven Code of Conduct

1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, and verbal) is forbidden.

2.) Fighting, property damage, and violence for any reason but self-defense is not allowed.

*3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense!
Punishable by death, or branding and banishment*

4.) Killing for any reason other than self-defense is a capital offense! Punishable by death.

5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will overrule any decision but death.

6.) Rape is a death sentence.

7.) Treason/ Mutiny is also a death sentence. Leadership will only change by camp vote. When more than half of the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.

Crime Reports

To report a crime, simply tell any Eagle. They will handle things from there.

2

“She’s still letting people in!” With David recovering in a guarded hammock behind them, Justin had stepped up to be XO. He and two of the others would remain here to watch over David. They had orders to bugout if the refugees came up.

“Yes.”

“Is she crazy? Listen to them! Look at it. Those are bodies!”

“Yes.” Adrian’s heart was breaking for what Angela had to be feeling. “She’ll keep taking them in until the camp, or Marc, puts a stop to it.”

“Why would she take that risk?” Justin was getting angrier as bottles and debris were thrown toward the main gates and the more docile zones. “I’d use the Ma Deuce in that tower and kill them all.”

“Those are Americans, soldier!” Adrian snapped at the suggestions of using the .50 caliber gun Marc had installed. “She’ll never throw them away lightly.”

“They don’t have the room or the supplies for that many people. There has to be five hundred refugees down there!”

“Shh...” The masses were staying by the gates right now, but as they got more desperate, Adrian expected them to spread out. He didn’t want their conversation to be what triggered that behavior.

“Does she at least have a way out of there?”

“I would imagine that she has several,” Adrian narrowed in on a fight at the entry to the evaluation area. Most of the scavengers here were armed, but the physical fights were common, whereas the gunfire had been light. Even in the frenzy, the mob was saving their bullets for the guards inside the gate.

“What are we supposed to be doing right now?” Justin needed to vent his frustrations. He was an Adrian supporter, but he was also fond of Safe Haven. He wanted both to do well.

“We have to finish clearing that road.”

“That’ll take months. And it’s making it easier for people to reach us.”

“No. None of these people came from the south.”

“How do you know that?”

“When winter blows in, you migrate. But when you’re already south, you stay put.”

Female screams echoed and then gunfire came as the men guarding Safe Haven’s gate began shooting into the fighting men by the evaluation area. The fight had broken through the first gate and caught a woman in the chaos. Once she was down, the fight had shifted to a gang rape, but they’d forgotten they were in range of the Eagles.

Adrian was proud of himself, proud of Angela, and yet, terrified for both of them. Safe Haven would leave after this, he hoped, and their sacrifices would finally be proven worthy. The flood of misery surrounding his former camp was going to be more than they could handle. Angela would make sure they got to see the worst of it, to convince them that leaving was the right thing to do. It was likely the hardest thing she’d ever done. Adrian mourned and celebrated for her. He understood what it was like to fight this hard, to never relax your strict plans. Because she had the strength to follow through, their country would survive. In time, the ripples would spread out and relight this dark land with fierce hope and pride.

“We’ll go down the rear path.” Adrian went toward the site that had been camouflaged. The road had only been cleared for five miles. That was just far enough to get them trapped.

3

“We have a tail.” Tommy stared in the mirror as Kendle drove.

“It’s Conner.”

Tommy frowned at her calm reply. “He’s been banished!”

“We’re not in camp.” Kendle shrugged. “Angela owes him for helping a member.”

“Conner was in camp to help someone?!”

“No.”

Tommy considered what that meant. Conner was doing good work, probably for the boss. Before it all went to hell with Adrian, that had meant the person was trying to earn forgiveness.

“Does he deserve it?” Tommy held on as she steered around a garbage truck that appeared to have been loaded with furniture when the war came. The mold on the truck was defying the cold to remain alive. “Can he be trusted?”

“For this run, he’ll shine like a new penny. In Safe Haven, around Candy? Hard to guess at.”

Tommy wondered what would happen if he said no to the boy joining them. If Conner was here, the boy would have proof that Angela had approved it. Tommy sighed. If he did, they would accept the

boss's wishes for now and complain upon their return.

"That's what I chose to do. This is important. I won't let Adrian's son interfere in our mission."

That was what Tommy liked to hear from his teammates. "Pull over."

The vehicle behind them also pulled over, driver and six passengers staring curiously until they saw Conner. Then the stares became scowls and mutters floated through cracked windows.

"What is he doing here?"

"Get rid of him while you can!"

Tommy didn't scold his team. The boy had a right to know how people felt.

Conner flushed under his helmet and chose to leave it on. He didn't talk, just handed Tommy a note. He'd read it before leaving his father's site.

Tommy read it. "Says it's up to us. If we can't use him, he'll be assigned to Zone C."

"Wow." Kendle was speechless. She couldn't believe Angela would do that.

"Guess she always knows what buttons to push." Tommy wondered how best to tell the people behind them. His own passengers were remaining silent out of respect, but Tommy could feel their disapproval. "Take the note to the driver behind us. Tell them I said to vote. Then come back to me and wait."

Conner went quickly.

“We’ll vote too.” Tommy twisted around to scan those in his vehicle. “Keep him or send him to his death in Zone C?”

It was a tense ten minutes for Conner. Tommy’s vehicle had all agreed to let him come along, but the other seven people were still arguing it out. If all of them said no, the vote would be theirs and he would be sent to live in the zone for bad people. It meant this was his forgiveness vote. Angela had done it in such a way that no one had known it was coming. There was also no one here on his side to speak for him, which kept Conner a nervous wreck while he waited by Tommy’s open window.

Whitney flashed lights to let Tommy know they were ready.

Tommy jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Go find out.” Another part of atoning was facing the people. The way Conner was handling himself so far was good.

Everyone turned around or observed in the mirrors, curious as to Conner’s final fate. It could all end here.

Whitney glared at the boy. “Take off that helmet.”

Conner removed it to reveal pale skin under scarlet cheeks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone wanted to see me since I look like my dad.”

It was a reminder that he wasn’t Adrian, but Whitney didn’t need it. “We voted to let you come

along, but you'll be watched until we know if we can trust you."

"Thank you." Conner smiled. "I'll be helpful. I promise."

"That's why we agreed, so be sure that you are." Whitney frowned deeply. "But as far as we're concerned, your banishment has been lifted, with conditions. This trip is the first step in your probation. The next part comes when you're in camp and Candy walks by. If we witness one leer, we'll shoot you and pike your skull on the front gate like Marc did that woman killer. Watch your six, rookie."

4

"Have you found out anything about her?"

"No, and I've tried. She's great at deflecting questions."

"I noticed that. Other than Shawn, does she have any friends here yet?"

"She's had lunch twice with that new guy—Jayson, but that's it. Even the den mothers have given up."

Angela listened from outside the door to the main medical bay. They now had three wide canvas shelters connected for their medical needs. Hilda oversaw one, Dr. Brooke supervised one, and Millie and Mandy were occupying the third. Those two females had chosen to work together. The doctor was staying busy moving among the three areas.

In the wing nearest to the main flap, Theo and Candy were talking. Theo's leg had been casted, but there was no sign of life in it. Dr. Brooke had declared it paralyzed. Candy had come as soon as Theo was allowed visitors. Candy was keeping him busy with chatter and questions, trying to prevent him from dwelling on his injury, but Angela expected that to fail soon. Theo wasn't the type to be distracted from the future, no matter how grim.

"It's a chore to keep watching her. I'm always so tired!"

"I wondered if she should be roaming free. I'm glad she isn't, but there are a lot of new people. I don't recognize enough faces at meals."

"Any idea how to keep all those assholes outside the gate?"

"Angela and Jennifer are picking through them. It takes time. How are your shifts with Conner around?"

"Awkward, but getting better. I heard he went with Kendle, so I won't have to worry about it for a while, I guess."

"The boss will feel better when the rest of the teams return."

"They all copied Marc's order."

"Yeah, he still sounded pissed. I can't believe Shawn did that."

"And in the kids' camper. Peggy was furious."

"I heard Angela laughed."

"Well, didn't you?"

Angela resumed walking. She'd gotten an update on a few things and she was confident that Candy would keep Theo occupied for at least another day. After that, life would distract him. As it was, the crowds outside the gate were making Safe Haven people extremely uneasy. Several of them had come to her this morning to express their concern. Angela had explained about the reinforced gates and the patrol that was staying tripled in that area, but her camp wasn't stupid. If she kept pushing them to take the refugees, they would rebel with an emergency vote, which was the goal.

This was how their future would be for years if they remained in these mountains. Some of the people had even suggested she get rid of the refugees through magic, giving her the sign that she'd had to wait for. Her camp was turning away from the idea that Safe Haven could shelter everyone, concluding that there wasn't enough food and water for that many people, let alone enough Eagles to provide security. Cynthia's newspaper had brought the topic front and center.

Right now, she had to supervise the gate while Marc tried to sleep through the noise. Knowing she would be out here with the Eagles would prevent him from resting. He would be up long before he should be to verify that she was okay. Angela waved off her two shadows in favor of both Special Forces teams. This was the first active duty she'd scheduled them for and all fourteen men were lethal. Even the rookies she'd assigned to their

teams would shoot first and talk later—exactly what this situation called for. If the mob chose to attack while she was outside, people would die.

Angela waited for Ray, who had point over the gate, to unlock it, not reacting to his frowns or mutters. She could hear the wildness out there and understood his concern, but this was her job.

Angela entered the first gate and waited to hear the lock click before she entered the reception area. The crowd around this fence was patiently waiting to be evaluated, but the groups behind them were loud and angry that they had to wait in the cold. There were no less than six hundred people here. When Angela scanned them with the witch, she was disappointed to discover that more than half couldn't be allowed to join them and that was just from obvious problems. The bright glow of thievery, abuse, and corruption was unmistakable, especially in the group that had moved up during the night.

Angela read the guards' notes on them, frowning as she found out they'd taken over two smaller camps and forced them to give up locations by Safe Haven's gate. The women in the captive clan had been abused before the Eagles could interfere. The offenders in the large group had been grabbed, shot, and added to Marc's gruesome display, but the notes said he wouldn't do it again. Sending men outside at night was too big of a risk.

Angela sat down in the middle of four Eagles with rifles in their hands, glad of the fencing

between her and the mob. As she looked at the next notes, the noise pushed in on her. This crowd was dangerous. She couldn't let her medical personnel come outside today. It wasn't safe, even with the patrols and fences. As it was, Angela wanted to go back in now, but it might trigger a negative reaction. She needed to appear in control. She signaled the next group of refugees forward through the cold wind.

“No, you won't be able to carry a gun unless you're an Eagle.”

“Then I want to be an Eagle!”

“That'll be a while. We have to make sure we can trust you.”

In the next little cage over, Jennifer sounded like she'd almost had enough of repeating the same answers. Angela understood.

Jennifer sighed, pushing a paper under the small gap between the fence and table. “Fill this out.” She placed a yellow card on the table as well. “You're being assigned to Zone A. If you can follow the rules and prove you're a good person, you'll get into a better zone soon and maybe make it inside.”

Jennifer's words told Angela the man probably wasn't capable of being reformed, but it was clear that the teenager was tired of sending people to Zone C.

Angela frowned. “Take a break.”

“Thank you.” Jennifer rose right away. The tension out here, combined with the noise, had given her a nasty headache that interfered with

reading people's thoughts. She also kept getting snatches of a conversation happening inside Safe Haven, but the words about C-4 made no sense to her. They couldn't blow up six hundred people.

Angela studied the man in front of her without any change in expression at the burn marks and bruises. The wild expression and knife clutched in his grip said whoever had done it to him was still a threat. Angela dug deeper to be certain of her choice. She found no issues with the man that Safe Haven couldn't help, and passed him an orange card. Earl would become an Eagle and then he'd never have to feel this way again. She would see to it. "Zone B. Fill this out."

The noise increased as Angela processed people at a faster rate than Jennifer. Refugee groups moved up as she sorted, but the line behind them kept coming. It stretched down the hill and out of sight. As the groups rotated, fights broke out among those moving too slowly and those who were in a hurry. Vehicles were damaged as inexperienced drivers tried to navigate the small spaces, hitting tents as well as people. It was chaos.

Angela felt the tension increase among her guards as the next group came through the steady wind to be evaluated. The ten men were quiet, alert, heavily armed, and wearing smirks that warned of bad intentions. They strolled toward her in a line that cleared a quick path through the refugees.

Angela's Eagles stood up, glowering.

Angela didn't need to scan the men, but she did anyway to be positive later. Without someone to beat her plans off of, she was having doubts in a few areas. The refugees were a part of that, mostly because of the women and kids. Behind the men, but still a part of that smirking group, were four females Angela hated to assign to the same zone, but she had no choice. The women appeared to be as corrupt as their men. No amount of survival skills or pregnancies were worth letting that type of evil into her peaceful herd. "You'll all be in Zone C or you can leave." Angela got ready to dive for cover if it was needed. Since being shot, she could no longer depend on her own gun to save her life. The arm worked, but not always the way she needed it to.

"Wait." The leader of the men, tall and lean, stepped forward with a pathetic grin. His long coat was tacky with dried fluids that Angela didn't want to identify. "Are you sure? We're good at what we do."

Angela shook her head, denying him. "Zone C or go. We have no room for you."

The man scanned Zone C, where an unruly mob was lining the fences to observe the guards instead of going out to scavenge for their needs like Angela and Jennifer had advised everyone to do. "Maybe we'll stay a bit. See if you change your mind."

The group left slowly, arrogantly. Refugees scrambled out of their way before the killers reached them, but Angela didn't notice. A blond

man with furious blue eyes had just appeared in the tree line across the mob of refugees and she couldn't look away.

Adrian stared in shock at the scene. The noise and cold weather had brought him in early, and now he wished he hadn't left at all. Angela was outside the gate, *without Marc*. There were hundreds of possible threats here and all that stood between her and them was a few dozen Eagles and some flimsy fencing.

Furious, Adrian whistled. Around him, the remaining soldiers came from the trees to take his flank. Adrian marched his men through the mob toward Angela, glowering.

Angela tried to look away then, realizing what Adrian meant to do. She couldn't; she swept him miserably instead. She didn't reach out or even smile, fighting to control herself. She'd missed him in so many ways over the last month.

Adrian knew. It was the mirror of his soul, the other half that was almost close enough to complete him. The struggle she was going through was easier for him because of his fury at her being out here.

"You don't belong here!" Morgan growled from his place by Angela as Adrian approached the gate.

"Neither does she!"

"We don't need you!" Kyle insisted from her other side, though he certainly didn't feel that way.

"I'll go when she does!" Adrian barked, stopping in front of Angela. He wanted to say a hundred things, to touch her hand and tell her not to

blame herself for the coming unhappiness. Instead, he took a sentry position between her and the crowd. His men lined up on either side of them.

Angela immediately felt better. So did the Eagles, though they wouldn't have admitted it. Traitor or not, Adrian was a force that commanded respect. When he only stood with his back to them, the Eagles stopped protesting.

Angela beckoned the next group forward, heart thumping. She was outside the gate. The bubble wasn't between them out here. If she wanted to talk with him, she could.

Adrian felt it. He wanted to lock gazes and fall in love all over again, but he resisted those urges. She was in danger. He had to stay alert.

Angela felt his attention shift from her and return to evaluating the new arrivals. She understood this wasn't a good time, but as the afternoon wore on, she began to sting a bit from his lack of communication attempts. *If he doesn't care anymore, it's for the best. I'll walk this line forever before I betray Marc. I'm not bad.*

Adrian winced at that blow, stomach churning. As soon as he'd seen her outside the gate, he'd shoved into her mind. Hearing her doubt his need actually hurt.

Adrian swept the remaining people, not liking many of them. He listened to their stories and picked out the details they hadn't wanted to speak, but so far, there were only a few good apples here. It was exactly as he'd suspected it would be after

the war, when he'd first started keeping notebooks. The worst of humanity was tough, enough to have survived for almost a year now, and most of it had come upon the backs of others.

Adrian was certain there were good people left all over the country, but they weren't going to come here yet. Safe Haven had defeated the government, but they had also replaced them in ways. Patriots were leery of that type of control. In time, they might realize Safe Haven was good, but for now, only those who were either desperate or hoping for a free ride would continue to flock here. Adrian knew Angela wouldn't let many of the bad apples in, but he had no idea what she planned to do about the others. He hadn't covered this in his notebooks because he didn't have a solution. Truly bad people didn't leave just because you told them to, but Safe Haven wasn't ready to see their army gunning down hundreds of survivors. Nor was Angela, though he assumed he would be busy later. None of those she'd assigned to Zone C had chosen to leave. There were several ongoing fights there now for control. There was no way he could pick them all off, but he would try to get the worst of the lot.

No.

She must have a plan. Good! Adrian's pulse leapt as he realized she was also in his mind, listening. *Okay.*

Angela didn't send more.

Neither did Adrian. It was enough that they knew they were connected. The feeling was as incredible as they remembered.

Angela winced at fresh screams from Zone C, but she didn't order her army to interfere. Only the worst of the worst were being sent there. Even slightly innocent people were being loaded into and around Zone A. Those Angela wanted were going into Zone B, which was next to the main gate. The mob had noticed the placement quickly. It was clear by examining the zones what type of people were in them. Zone B was quiet and happy, cleared for entry. Zone A was nervous, but also quiet, hoping to be found worthy. Zone C was chaos as those who'd been denied refused to leave. Angela had only mentioned the chance of reform to a few of those rough souls and Adrian approved. None of them deserved to enter.

Gunshots rang out from Zone C.

Adrian retreated a bit, providing a better shield for the cage. He gave Kyle a harsh glare that the Eagle responded to with a curt nod. It was time to go in.

When Kyle sent a signal to the men on the rafters, Angela didn't interfere. The sun was setting, which meant she would have only had time for a few more evaluations anyway. Once the crowd realized the day's assigning was over, it would get unruly—more so than what it already had been. Angela made a note for the Eagles to remind people over the speakers to lock their gates and doors, and

to post patrols against the crowd of men and women in and around Zone C. Eagles were not coming back out here. Neither was she.

Another gunshot echoed, drawing attention and fear.

Adrian raised his rifle and took aim. He no longer had to worry over his camp's approval or wait for orders. He opened fire at the group now charging toward the gate; the soldiers around him did the same.

The other Eagles followed Marc's strict instructions for a possible moment like this—they tackled the boss and waited for him to arrive.

Angela was yanked from the cage and shoved down, then covered with heavy bodies. As they piled on top of her, all the vests provided layers of protection that she accepted gratefully as more gunfire echoed. Even muffled, she recognized the sound and stayed still under her guards as that distinctive noise grew louder. Her arm was curled over her stomach bump as she smiled. *Daddy's coming.*

5

“Leave it open and watch your line of fire!”
Marc and Kenn hurried through the gate.

Marc did a fast scan and found a body-pile of firing Eagles, with Adrian and his men surrounding them. Marc went that way, shooting at the advancing group of refugees he assumed had been

refused entry. He shot the closest man and then did the same to the woman behind him. The bodies fell together as Marc aimed for another charging, shooting, screaming target.

“Get inside!” Kenn fired at two women aiming for Adrian. He got them both, but missed the man behind them who fired. The bullet tore into Daryl’s shoulder and punched through to slam into the gate.

“Son of a bitch!” Marc’s face was splattered with Daryl’s blood. He shot the offender in the throat as the man charged forward.

“Get inside! Everyone inside!”

Their outside team did as they were told, rising from the body pile as Eagles on the inside helped Daryl down from the rafters.

Angela was yanked up and shoved into arms she had never thought to feel again. Even in the din, her skin came to life at the contact, trying to draw from him.

Adrian held her tightly, spinning so that he was between her and the gunfire that continued to blast across the area. Another large group she’d denied had chosen to join the battle and more were doing the same. The other two zones had locked their gates, but tents were little protection from bullets.

Adrian stepped inside the gates and put Angela on her feet. His hand clutched hers in a jolt of energy that soaked in for a brief second and then he was gone.

“Hey! He can’t go back out—”

Adrian slid out as the gate was slamming shut, ending Kenn's protest.

Gunfire continued to echo as Angela hurried Daryl toward the medical bay. She hadn't expected things to go crazy so quickly. She was glad Jennifer had already been inside.

"Nice!" Kenn was now watching from the rafters. "They're leaving!"

The Eagles cheered as Adrian and his men continued to pick off the people who had started the fight.

Others who had considered joining the fray now cowered at Adrian's fury. He was astounded that Marc had let her outside the gate alone. He took his anger out on anyone he considered a threat, including firing into Zone C to lessen that remaining population as well. He wasn't a member of Safe Haven. He didn't have to play by the rules.

The Eagles observed the slaughter in admiration that would have bothered Adrian and Angela had they been aware of it. The war had changed everything.

Angela led Daryl to an empty cot to sit down while she and the doctor worked on his arm. She expected Marc's reprimand at any point. He'd been on her heels since Adrian set her down in the bloody slush. She could have let one of their medical supervisors handle Daryl, but her guilt wouldn't allow that. She'd known having people outside the gate wasn't a good idea, but she couldn't refuse everyone who came. *Some of those sheep are mine!*

“Angie.”

Marc’s tone said he was livid. She lowered her head as she cleaned Daryl’s wound. “I’m sorry.”

“You told me you wouldn’t be out there long. You said the Eagles would keep everyone away. You said you’d viewed the entire day and nothing happened!” He glared. “So what happened?”

“I needed a good reason to bar our doors to new people for a little while. I didn’t see the shootout, though. I also didn’t see Adrian coming back early. Darian must have been an easy target.”

A few cots over, Chauncey began laughing. He had been brought here, under guard, until Angela decided what to do with him. She hadn’t had time to go over Jennifer’s report yet, but spending time in the drafty brig wasn’t healthy and she hadn’t decided what would happen to him.

“What’s so funny?” Marc glared at the Keeper, noting the books near his side. The man liked to read about the ocean...or he’d heard of Angela’s plans and assumed he would be along.

“It’s amusing that she trusts the one who is out there killing so many, but not the one he was assigned to remove.”

Angela froze.

Marc’s fury filled the tent. “Are you saying Darian isn’t dead?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Chauncey chuckled. “I have him on my radar, bright and hot.”

Angela’s rage swarmed over the man, effectively shutting down his mirth. He went still

and quiet as she pinned him with a harsh glare.
Where are they? Tell me right now!

Suddenly terrified that he wasn't going to survive captivity, Chauncey spilled his guts without more prompting. Safe Haven people were truly ruthless. *It's too bad they insist on being the good guys. They excel at many of the skills the other side requires.*

Chapter Twenty-Five BK6
Population Boom

1

Safe Haven wasn't happy.

There was a mob on their doorstep. It was cold, but they were afraid to go back into the cave. The Mickey Mouse boots and fleece layering was protection, but not comfort or security. Daryl had been shot. They'd had a cave-in. Their gate had been attacked repeatedly. It wasn't the peaceful mountain living that they had envisioned; with every negative thing that happened, the camp grew more uneasy. They'd been waiting for Angela to take care of things the way she had been since assuming the mantle of command, but now, the camp had had enough. As soon as they stepped from the medical bay, Marc and Angela were surrounded by angry members demanding that she do something.

Angela knew what they wanted, but she denied the renewed requests to use magic. "Some of those people belong here. We have to try to get a few more."

"I say we take a vote!" Li called from the rear of the small crowd. "Let camp decide."

Yes! Angela gloated inwardly. Outwardly, she shrugged coolly. “That’s the right of every person here. During lunch mess okay for you?”

Surprised by her acceptance, Li tried to apologize. “It’s just, there’s so many! You know? Barely have enough to feed those here.”

Reaching a population limit was a pivotal point for any refugee camp, but it was also heartbreaking to realize there wasn’t enough of everything to go around—not until a true settlement could be built, anyway. Once that happened, Angela planned to expand their numbers as much as she could, but the masses outside their gates right now were almost useless. From constant killing over food and ammunition, to rapes and fanatical control, they were trouble she couldn’t allow in. Tonight’s meeting would cover it. *And more. I have yet another bombshell to drop.*

Marc led Angela toward the cave, knowing that’s where she wanted everyone to be tonight. So did he. If the gates were overwhelmed, the cave was where they would make a stand. Marc agreed wholeheartedly with closing their gates to more people. They’d already taken in over two hundred refugees since coming to these mountains, and each day, the food portions had shrunk. Things were tight and it would only get worse.

As they went to the cave, a few people followed, including guards. They also knew the camp needed to get below; they began telling members to collect their things and come along. It wasn’t a hard choice

for most when they saw Marc and Angela heading down. The sounds from the zones were loud and ugly. Before long, there was a steady stream of people going into the cave with their gear.

The radio lit up. “There will be an emergency meeting during lunch mess. Attendance is mandatory. Those on duty will turn radios off to keep this meeting private. You will be filled in at the end of your shifts. Use the alarms if there’s a problem. Everyone else is required to attend.”

Tonya’s words had a calming effect on Safe Haven’s people that would allow Angela time to reconsider what she wanted to say. She already had her lines picked, but there was always the chance of a wildcard being tossed in. That had been one of Adrian’s most common notes in his books.

Watch out for the wildcards. You can’t plan for them, but they can destroy everything.

Angela had taken that to heart and developed secondary plans for the meeting. She was controlling hundreds of people now, manipulating them into doing what they should have already known to do and it was exhilarating. It was also exhausting. She was looking forward to a long, quiet boat ride where she might have time to straighten out her personal life. She was tired of being avoided. As soon as this mountain farce was over, she would try to repair her relationship with Charlie. She’d come across this country for him and that love hadn’t diminished with leadership. In fact, it had made her more determined to take these

people to a place where he could finish growing up in peace. That wouldn't happen here. The United States was now a death trap that few would escape.

2

“You're up.” Angela gestured for Kenn to go to the front of the meeting area that now held the majority of their camp. The tables had been traded for holding plates in hand as they all stood around, listening to the angry refugees shout and fight above them.

Kenn scowled. “I don't know what you want me to say.”

Angela stared coolly. She assumed Adrian had given him details, but she didn't think it mattered. Kenn was the mouthpiece of Safe Haven. He knew what she needed.

Kenn slowly walked to the front of the wary crowd, now able to hear his steps echoing on the rocky ground. He had limited information, but he knew he didn't want to be the one up there taking the heat.

“That was mean.”

Angela shrugged at Jennifer's comment. With Kenn, she preferred to use what did work, not what might. He wasn't someone she could give leniency to most days.

Kenn took the microphone from the stand; the softly muttering people quieted expectantly. He cleared his throat, thinking the acoustics down here

were awful for being a cave. He'd always thought they echoed no matter where you stood, but that wasn't the case. "This is an emergency meeting. We have more trouble coming our way. The boss has insisted everyone be informed so they have time to make their own choices."

"Must be something big." Peggy didn't look at Doug as he stood security duty near Kenn. She was still avoiding him. She would until the next step in her plans with Hilda had been taken.

Kenn nodded, sighing. "That's what I figured too when I heard emergency meeting. Seems like we can't ever get a break, you know?"

Some of Angela's council frowned, but she approved. Kenn knew how to get them venting before his boss took center stage. That was what a mouthpiece did—manipulated the crowd into the right mood to hear the news, whatever it was. "We've survived all of it so far. We'll survive this."

Many people added their agreement; the tension went down a tiny notch. Knowing they had so much magic was indeed a comfort...as long as they didn't think about it too hard.

"We'll hear it from her in a minute, but I think we all know this meeting is related to all those refugees." Kenn pointed upward as the sound of gunfire echoed again. "We're not safe here."

"Then we'll go further east," someone shouted from the rear of the four hundred people crammed into the largest cavern on the second floor. Later, it would once again be the mess, but right now, it held

enough people to make even the coal-mining Miller boys feel the claustrophobia that many of their builders had been complaining about.

“No, north!”

“East!”

Kenn resumed control. “The boss will tell us the safest places and then we’ll vote like we always do.”

Angela walked to the front; the crowd went still and quiet, waiting. Some were tense, a few were glaring. Her mind went straight to the 17%.

“Always a margin of error,” she muttered, making those who heard it worry more.

Kenn stayed by the table as Angela hopped up to stand on top of it. Her other guards came closer.

Marc subtly gestured for the snipers mixed into the crowd to stay alert.

Angela held up a thin stack of paper. “Neil and Jeremy printed these from the satellites. They’re images of Yellowstone. It did blow. We were right.”

She handed the pictures to Kenn, who studied each one before he passed them around. The last graph showed a curving, narrow plume of something reaching from the volcano all the way to Maine and beyond. Kenn assumed it was a volcanic cloud.

“We’ve been getting the ash mixed with snow. That’ll hang around for a couple more weeks, but that’s not the problem. The problem is the effects.” Angela gave them a minute to view the images, studying thoughts. Even those who hadn’t voted for her were confident that she had a plan. “In the areas

around Yellowstone, they can't grow food or raise livestock. They had to get on the road to survive. We know how that was for the last nine months. There is another wave of extinction happening across our country and starvation is leading it. Now, all those desperate refugees are coming to the only light left in the darkness."

Angela stared at their shocked, dumbfounded expressions in sympathy. "I've estimated we could get as many as five thousand over the next three months. After that, we'll all starve together."

The camp erupted in a loud clamor to deny entrance to any more survivors. Some calls were for mercy, but the majority could predict how ugly things would get. Safe Haven couldn't support one thousand people, let alone five times that.

Marc wondered why Angela hadn't told them the number could be much, much higher. Was she afraid of the camp fleeing now?

"We'll hole up in here!"

"We're fighters. They don't know who they're messing with!"

"Those are our people!" Samantha's suspension was forgotten as she scolded them. "Stop being selfish!"

Angela put a hand on her gun. Marc came to her side; the crowd gradually quieted down. The small reminder of authority eased some of the concern. Safe Haven had descendants. These other groups didn't.

“Some of them may have their own special people,” Angela warned, removing that myth. “Not all of those who were called came to us. Some of them couldn’t, and others chose not to. They’re not all our kind, but we’re being careful of those we do take in.”

“Close the gates!”

“It’s murder to leave them out there!”

“We don’t have the room or the food!”

Angela held up a hand to stop the shouts. “We’ll get it all out now. We have three problems from this. The first one and the largest, is too many people for this shelter. The second is possible starvation. This first winter isn’t going to be over in March or even June. It’s going to be cold, and it’s going to snow. Even without all those new people, we’d still have to be careful with our rations and the hunting teams will be tripled. We’ll use seed vitamins and everyone will grow food, but in the end, it may still not be enough. There’s no guarantee our plants will grow underground and even the thought of carting a thousand pound cow into this cave makes *my balls* shrink up.”

The levity wasn’t just for them. Angela was intimidated by the chore. “The third problem is location. Anyone can spend a few months in a cave and survive with the right supplies. We’re talking about a year. That will lead to a new list of illnesses we can’t treat right now. I’ve estimated only half of this camp will come out of these mountains alive next year.”

In another part of the cave, the new refugees that had been admitted listened in concern, unsure if they would be ejected even though they'd been cleared. Among the hundred people, were the Amish group and Brittani's clan. Shane was lingering in the tunnels between them and the mess hall, still hoping to catch her attention.

The crowd continued to argue and worry. Her predictions had never been wrong.

Angela denied the Eagles who would have stepped in to settle them down. Everyone was right to be scared. "When we come out next year, we will no longer be the power we were and there will still be thousands of refugees from the west surrounding us. As soon as they realize how weak we are, we'll be overrun and there won't be anything I can do about it. Descendant gifts will be too weak to use. We can't take energy from you once we're dug into these tunnels. You'll need every bit you have. Living underground is no easy thing that you've chosen."

Now the fear was almost visible. Many people had assumed they were about to get a long, peaceful rest. Few had considered farther than that.

"I'm going south."

Angela's statement froze people. It stunned Marc, who knew what came next, and brought terror to the throng.

"I'm going to find a ship and leave. Adrian was right. I'm going as soon as I get the rest of you bunkered in here."

Panic swept the crowd.

Angela sat on the table to wait it out. She didn't glance at Marc.

"When will the next refugees get here?!" someone shouted, obviously not caring about her bombshell.

There's one of my haters. Angela didn't lie. "Every day. We won't get another break."

The crowd grew more upset.

"That's not enough time to get ready!"

"We need more guns!"

"We have to leave too!"

"We can't be without your magic!"

The shouts went on for a while.

Angela waited patiently. Her choice had been made a while ago, but it hadn't been any easy one. She loathed few things more than the thought of abandoning her homeland.

Zack caught her eye. "Are we having a vote on leaving?"

Angela shook her head. "This isn't a majority rules choice. We will get these tunnels and caverns set up for those who are staying. We'll split supplies and other items, and do our best to make sure the cave group has a fighting chance."

Her wording implied she already knew what choice Zack would make. He frowned at the realization.

"Can you see that future?" Peggy asked from Doug's side. She'd automatically gravitated toward him for comfort. "Will we survive here?"

Angela splayed her fingers, letting them see the energy force. The witch was drawing from the crowd's emotions to keep her filled.

They all stilled to watch and listen.

“That has not been revealed.”

More panic flew at her.

“That’s why I can’t stay,” Angela drew them back. “I won’t give birth here if I can’t predict the outcome. I won’t give my child up for people who refuse to believe, or who simply don’t want to travel anymore. Survival doesn’t stop just because we’ve reached this mountain. Survival is making the hard choices, again and again, until you get to true safety or you die. I haven’t forgotten that. I didn’t call a vote on it because we don’t need to. This will be a full settlement before I leave. You can stay or go, and each individual will have to make that choice. There is no *we* on this one. Do what’s best for yourself. For me, that’s Pitcairn Island. I’ll create a settlement there and hopefully feel safe, but I won’t assume that, ever, until I’ve made certain of it.”

Zack frowned deeply. “What about leadership?”

“Same as now. People will vote; the winner will do their best to make sure everyone survives, as each of Safe Haven’s leaders have done. Talk to each other, figure out who can do the job, and then get them on it.” Angela got down from the table, now trying to send comfort and common sense through her terrified people. “I believe we have to leave. There’s a tropical island waiting for us and

that's where I'm going. I hope all of you will join me, but I understand that it's your choice to make."

And with that, the meeting was over. Angela walked up the stairs to the cold, topside tents, leaving everyone stunned. Their leader was fleeing. Marc would go where she did, as would most of the Eagles and many of the people who hoped to become Eagles. She was taking the best of her camp and leaving the rest of them to die.

3

"I need a minute."

"Okay." Angela held the flap on the chilly training tent for the man behind her, then strode toward the chilly hay room where several punching bags were waiting for her abuse. She stripped her coat as she went.

"What are you doing?"

"Splitting the herd." Angela didn't remove her guns.

"Why?" Zack glared at her. "Haven't you done enough already?"

"Apparently not," she muttered, pulling on the thin gloves Marc liked her to wear when she used the bags. The gloves didn't do much to pad her, but she didn't mind making him happy.

"Angie!"

"Zack, what are you?"

Zack was confused. "What am I, what?"

“You were an abusive trucker when you joined Safe Haven,” she reminded brutally, swinging.

Thud. Whap.

“Now, you’re a leader. You got there because you work hard and you follow the rules.” Angela swung again, judging her readiness for the hitting she really wanted to do.

Thud.

“So?”

“So, either group will be lucky to have you and *both* will want you. Stop worrying over what won’t happen.”

Zack flushed, but didn’t deny that his future was his biggest concern. The camp could take care of themselves better than they’d been able to before the war.

“Yes, they can.” Angela swung again.

Zack lingered, positive there was more. “Why are we leaving without a vote?”

With that, he’d declared his intention to be with her as she rolled out. Angela didn’t respond to the sign of loyalty. “You heard the meeting.”

“Some meeting.” Zack gestured. “We’re used to having choices and votes.”

“You can’t vote on death. And it’s coming for us again.”

“More people would go if you told them that, if you explained everything that will happen.”

Angela swung again. *Thud!* “I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Are you giving up on them?”

Thud! “I’m covering the future, like I’ve always done.”

Thud!

“Theirs or yours?”

“Neither. There has to be a camp still here, Zack. Not all of us can go south. Some people have to stay and face the ugliness.”

“Why? Why do we have to have people here?”

“For those who come after. We need to be here for them to join or they’ll die. We’re their salvation.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about family, Zack. Some of these people have family still out there. There has to be a place for them to go.”

“Then why not stay and wait for them, tough it out with strict security and rationing?”

“We have the same question.” Marc was in the flap, with Neil and Jeremy right behind him.

“Because I can’t plant half of you! I can’t kill any more of my army. I can’t watch them die. I won’t.” *Thud!*

“You’re leaving others to do it?” Marc knew it was eating her up to make that choice.

“Worse than that. I can’t see an outcome. It could all be for nothing. They may all die.”

“Who are the people?” Neil didn’t mind leaving so much, but he had to know who they were missing. “Who’s worth you doing this?”

“All I know is there’s a group of travelers fighting all the things we have and more. When they

reach this area, things are bad and they die. As soon as that happens, darkness covers the land like nothing I've ever seen. We have to leave people here or the future will be lost."

"We have to tell them everything." Marc tried not to be angry with her for the bombshell. "Including the other dangers."

"Yes, you should. Make sure it spreads. Everyone needs to know this place is lethal."

Marc scowled. "You want me to tell them?"

"Yes. If I do it, they'll think I'm trying to talk them into leaving and that will just make them want to stay even more. It has to come from someone they actually trust."

Thud! Blood splattered the inside of the thin glove this time, making all the men wince.

"How long are we staying?" Jeremy was aware of Samantha standing nearby, trying to listen. She'd already made her choice and it hadn't taken long.

"One more month, at most." Angela swung again. "Any longer and we'll stay forever."

4

"It's here early."

Samantha's mutter brought activities to a halt in the topside training tent that had warmed up. There were dozens of Eagles here now; they went silent together, giving Angela chills. She had remained, nursing her guilt and her knuckles while a few of the high level people tried to calm the camp. Safe

Haven would go to sleep late tonight. Angela wanted to be down there comforting them, but it would have been counterproductive, so she'd stayed to listen to the wind instead.

"The storm's almost here." Samantha slowly came out of the daze. "Less than two days."

Angela sighed as the mutters came. *Almost there.* "Tell Marc." He was one of the people below. He was sticking to his role admirably, especially considering his fury over Adrian disobeying her orders and his shock at her news of leaving. Deep down, he hadn't really thought she would do this.

"We have to tell the people outside." Samantha looked at Angela from the corner where her men had stashed her a short time ago.

"Kenn and Tonya will cover it on both shifts while they do the hourly messages."

Samantha stared, not understanding why she wasn't hurrying into action.

"Are *you* ready to get back into it, Sam?" Angela met her eye. "The time has come."

Samantha flashed to the choice she'd made when Angela asked her the first time. Since then, she'd made another huge mistake. Was this yet another in that growing list? Was she damning herself by aligning with Angela's plans?

"I understand." Angela said it kindly. "But you're either one of mine, or you're not. Please make the choice now."

The tent went silent as everyone waited for Samantha's answer.

Samantha slowly shook her head. “I’m Adrian’s. I’ve never trusted you.”

Angela smiled to cover the sting. “I understand that too. What would make you happy?”

“I need peace. You can’t give that to me, to any of us.”

“No. All I can do is try to keep you alive. Peace was never promised.”

“Adrian promised it.”

“He’s not here. He betrayed you.”

“No.” Samantha was finally able to accept the truth. “He sacrificed his future to take a chance on building a new world.”

“Explain that.” Angela let the open wound in her heart soak up the words.

“We would have been rounded up anyway. He gathered us, taught us, and then refused to hand us over. He tried to give us a fighting chance. If he hadn’t, we wouldn’t have the Eagles. He made us strong enough to carry out the plans he knew you would come up with. He saved us.”

“And?”

“And it doesn’t matter.” Samantha sighed as the next level of understanding hit. “They think he refused to give us to the government because of you.”

“Yes. His obsession has colored everything. When he crossed that line, he lost respect, trust. No one will ever give him the benefit of the doubt again.”

“Should they?” Samantha was now questioning her own motives and anger at Adrian. Had she been unfair to him? It suddenly felt like it.

“I’m much too biased to make that call.” Angela spotted Marc coming toward them. “There’s only one person here who could convince people that Adrian deserves a second chance and it won’t happen. Marc believes Adrian is as corrupt as they come. Nothing will ever convince him differently.”

“But Adrian created an army to fight the government.” Samantha finished her train of thought aloud. “He could have handed us over at any point and probably arranged it so only you and he survived. He didn’t have to handle any of it the way he did, but because of it, the results were our freedom and the chance to rebuild. Doesn’t Marc get that?”

Angela shook her head, troubled. “Marc only sees his own obsession. He won’t be satisfied until Adrian is dead.”

“But why? Over you?”

“No. Adrian fooled him, made him feel inexperienced. Marc won’t stand for that. He had faith in Adrian for a short while—long enough to create a life-long hatred when the truth came out. Marc doesn’t ever forgive that type of lesson.”

“I usually don’t either, but...”

“But you’ve been talking to David and because of your guilt, you’ve also been listening. He’s telling you that Adrian and Conner are special, that they’ve both suffered enough for their mistakes—

like you have. He's mentioning words like calm and the old days, swaying you. That's not how true choices are made."

Samantha flushed. Angela had just rattled off exactly what was happening. "I know."

"But you want it to be like it was when Adrian was here and all was right with the apocalypse."

Samantha flushed darker. "Yes. So do a lot of the others. They're afraid to face Marc over it, but they've had time to consider the facts. Adrian refused to hand them over and he made certain they were strong enough to fight back. That's not a traitor. That's a patriot."

"It's not going to happen." Angela kept her tone even as Marc joined them. He would get an ear full from everyone who'd overheard the conversation. "We can have one or the other inside our walls, not both. If we try, their rage and jealousy will destroy us all." Angela smiled, placing a hand over Marc's snowy glove as his defensive nature started to rise. "We've got the best of the two."

Samantha grunted. "At some point, the camp might want a vote on it."

"We'll deal with it then." Angela yawned. "Kenn's about to do the hourly messages. You can go make sure he stresses the danger of the storm."

"Thank you." Samantha disappeared, taking her shadows along. Neil and Jeremy were constant companions since finding out about her illness.

"Things okay?" Marc was aware of the dirty looks being tossed his way.

“Hindsight can be a curse or a blessing,” Angela stood up. “She’s having both effects at the same time. She’s cooling off now, though. Things will get better for her.”

“Even though she wants Adrian cleared?” Marc’s ears were working overtime now, trying to spot possible assassins. With all the new people, the odds on that were high.

Angela nodded, not worried. Adrian would spend the rest of his life laboring for people who would probably never allow him back in. When she’d said he would pay, she hadn’t been lying.

Marc felt the need and carefully hugged her. “I love you.”

Angela snuggled into his embrace as best she could through their coats. “Right back at ya, beefcake.”

Marc’s happy laughter floated across the camp, but the shield didn’t come up.

Only Angela noticed. *My misery is blocking it.*

5

“Snow team, this is base. Check in.” There was a pause before Kenn’s voice came again. “Base to Snow team. Do you copy?”

There was no response.

Quinn frowned, stomach a ball of nerves. “When’s the last time we heard from them?”

“Yesterday.” Kenn skimmed the daily reports. “Nothing unusual in the notes.”

They were standing in the small cavern the builders had turned into Safe Haven's communications center. It was filled from wooden wall to wooden wall with radio equipment and wires.

"I'm going up there." Quinn turned toward the supply trucks. "Tell the boss, will ya?"

"You got it." Angela had them on lockdown. Kenn doubted the gate guards would open for anyone, even Marc, after today's fiasco. He returned to his radio calls, putting Quinn from his mind. "Snow team, this is base. Do you copy?"

6

"Come in Snow team!"

Half a mile above Safe Haven, Vlad grinned at the frustrated tone of the radioman. Safe Haven was about to discover they weren't the power here.

Vlad swept the sky, seeing how huge the coming storm was. He and his men had their artic tents ready inside the small cave behind them, with two hostages already stashed inside one of them. When the storm came, it would add a fresh layer of death that Vlad was now prepared to send down the mountain.

"The charges are set." Darian came through the snowy darkness in a thick Parka he'd been given upon his exit from the camp below. "I passed Blade on the way up. He said to tell you it's a go."

“Excellent.” Vlad waved toward the small fire they’d made inside a tree stump. With a white tarp as an awning, the fire was protected and the heat was continuous as it burned through the stump. It was a lot easier than chopping wood. All it took was carving out a furrow down the center of a thick stump. “Warm up and tell me everything you saw in there.”

Darian pulled off his new gloves, stuffing them into his pocket. “They have power, supplies, and an outfitted cave that we need for our people. Safe Haven thinks the winter will last twice as long as usual. If they’re right, our town could be wiped out.”

“Sounds like it’s a good thing we came.” Vlad waited for important details. Darian had been Deputy Mayor of their town and that’s where his priorities remained.

“They have the place sealed from the top.” Darian dropped down onto an icy boulder. “But there are ways through. One is from the cavern where they’ve got those damn ants living. Another tunnel comes out about three miles beyond the mountain road, behind the camp. A smaller one comes almost straight up here. This is definitely where we can strike from.”

“And our inside man?” Vlad wiped snow from the Coleman stove.

“Isn’t going to wait for the time to be right. Expect action *soon*.”

“Figures.” Vlad wasn’t surprised. Jay wasn’t the hardened character his father had been. Still, it was better than nothing. If Jay could cause enough problems from the inside, it might create an opportunity for those waiting on the outside.

Darian rubbed his hands together near the fire. “Can we use that mob of refugees somehow?”

“I have plans.” Vlad ended the conversation. “You should get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day of waiting out the storm. After that, none of us will sleep until we’re in that cave, enjoying those lives.”

Darren nodded. “Sounds perfect. I can’t wait to wipe that smug smile from her face with my fist.”

Inside the tent behind Vlad, two Eagles listened furiously. They’d been taken off guard during this morning’s chaos, too busy observing the shootout through their binoculars to realize trouble was sneaking up on them. Scott and Josh exchanged glances that said they needed to get free and show these people who they were dealing with.

Panther Piss

1

“Can you believe this?” Kevin stared through a crack in the boards. “Three feet!”

The storm had been a monster that brought them brutal temperatures and evil wind, but the tents in the large living room, combined with their efforts to seal up the house, had kept it tolerable. The problem was the snow. The hard packed white crap was now feet deep across the entire block. They couldn’t see any further than that for the glare. Both men hoped the view would improve once they were outdoors. If not, they would have to listen harder for people. Snow was excellent for muffling sound.

“Have you seen this?” Kevin was still trying to get a better view of the neighborhood.

Jeff grunted in response. He was preparing their meal. He was also trying to listen for trouble. The storm clearing should be a good thing, but he’d woken with a ball of concern in his gut and it had only grown. Despite all the snow, the animals were already gathering again. Jeff wasn’t certain Kevin had noticed that yet. “How much ammo do we have here?”

Kevin flipped into Eagle alert with the question and went to find out.

Sally, busy feeding her dogs, frowned. "I've got a few hundred rounds."

"For that .45?" Jeff clarified. They'd given her the gun back only because of fearing another attack from nature.

"Yes... Also a few sticks of dynamite and some hand grenades."

Jeff chuckled in surprise. "Nice."

Sally didn't want to feel anything, but Jeff's praise sank into her anyway. When you pleased a descendant, the urge to do it again came on strong. Sally resisted, instead resuming her chores. She didn't need to impress these men. She needed them to help her secure the house until the herds passed on. When the beasts were gone, the men had to go too.

"We will."

Sally slapped her rag on the floor. "Stop that!"

Jeff shrugged. "I will if you will."

"I can't read your thoughts!"

"But you are wishing we were gone or dead. You stop that and I can stop stalking your mind for trouble."

"I'm not the problem." Sally turned toward the garage to clean in there. Jeff had insisted when they woke to the smell. "You are. You and all the descendants. Abominations!"

She disappeared into the garage, leaving Jeff to continue worrying. At some point, he and Kevin would have to handle her.

Kevin came back into the room “We have seven hundred rounds of hollow points for your sig. Also five hundred for my nine mil and a dozen boxes of bonded hunting rounds. The rest is in the house on the corner, where we stashed it.”

“Okay.” Jeff scanned the first floor of the house, pleased. They’d done a good job of sealing the home up, though they hadn’t been on the second floor yet. Jeff didn’t have a reason to go up there. Once they’d locked the door to the stairs and sealed around it, the drafts had mostly stopped. He and Kevin had cleared the attic upon arrival, but it was empty of anything useful. All it contained was an old claw foot bathtub and a few mirrors.

The propane heater kicked on, echoing loudly; the men tensed. They were running it sparingly, but the temperature outside was in the single digits. They’d needed to bring up the temperature inside overnight, and the Mr. Buddy had worked perfectly.

“It’s drawing attention.” Kevin had gone to the window to check. Jeff asking how many rounds they had was a reminder they were in the middle of an apocalypse.

Jeff flipped the heater off and did the same with the stove since the pancakes were done. “We need to bundle back up. The wind died down and blew our cover for the noise.”

Kevin went to get more gear, wondering if Safe Haven was in the cave yet. Were they ready for this weather? He and Jeff would do fine on their own. He had his doubts about the camp, especially after the radio broadcasts Kenn and Tonya had been putting out. It sounded like Safe Haven was being overwhelmed.

Jeff's thoughts were along the same lines. *Would us being there make a difference?*

The two men exchanged looks that asked the same questions, but neither of them spoke. Their wounds hadn't healed yet.

Sally came back into the main room, rubbing on hand sanitizer. "There are mice in the garage."

"Drawn to the heat." Jeff assumed it was also the smell. "We'll lock that door and seal it up until the animals need to use it." Jeff was unhappy to have Sally's two dogs here. Using the garage as an outhouse was disgusting. It was unsanitary and it stank. He wouldn't let it continue for long.

Sally ushered her dogs into the house so she could shut the garage door. The pair scrambled for purchase on the wood floor, sending fresh noise through the house.

Jeff and Kevin glared. Both of them were about to complain when yet another sound broke the stillness.

Woooooooooooo!

Dog's ears snapped up. He knew that howl. *She's here! She's calling me!*

Dog went to the door and studied Jeff expectantly. *Let me out.*

“No. They don’t know we’re here. If we open the door, they’ll attack us.”

Dog understood the problem, but he didn’t care. He wanted out.

Jeff knew better than to grab the wolf or try to touch him. He thought fast and offered a compromise. “I’ll let you out of a door or window when there’s nothing around.”

Dog followed Jeff much like the two small dogs did, eagerly and without caution.

Jeff peered through the boards over the back door. The wolf could find his own way from there. Seeing nothing moving, he slowly slid the lock back and opened the door.

“Wait! My dogs will—”

The wolf rushed through the opening, making a deep furrow in the snow. Sally’s two dogs followed behind him, yapping happily at being released. Icy wind slapped them all.

“Shit!” Kevin hurried after them, with Sally right behind. Jeff drew his gun, silently cursing himself, the dogs, and the woman.

Dog didn’t care about the unfolding drama or the snow. He took off jumping wildly through the drifts and then leapt, clearing the fence to land lightly in the side yard. He sank to the bottom of the snow and immediately leapt again to reach the packed layers that were frozen to the sidewalk between the homes. Making big jumps, Dog hurried

to where the howl had come from. *Let the humans fend for themselves for a while. I have things to do.*

Jeff and Kevin helped Sally retrieve the two snow covered dogs. Neither man spoke, but the mood was ugly. As they all came inside, sloshing wet and shivering from not having coats on, the smell of feces smothered them. They hadn't noticed it while inside with it. Fresh air had allowed the men to smell the difference.

Jeff gagged, hearing Kevin do the same. Through the watering eyes and a twisting stomach, Jeff felt his patience snap. "Yeah, that's it for me. I'm out of here. You comin'?"

Also fighting not to vomit, Kevin nodded. "I'll have us packed in an hour!"

Sally stood still, processing the information. She was about to be alone. *That's what I want, right? For it to be just me and the animals?*

Sally glanced toward the covered front window, seeing signs of the bear they'd fought. She wouldn't have been able to handle that on her own. "Wait."

Jeff already knew, but he wasn't changing his mind. The gagging had stopped, but only because he was breathing through his mouth. "You can come if you leave the dogs. That's why we're going, remember?"

Sally scowled. "I can't do that."

"Don't expect you to. I expect you to protect them even as you're being eaten. Have fun."

Kevin winced, but didn't argue since Jeff was certainly right. The woman had been here for days

and they still didn't know anything about her, other than the fact that she put her dogs first in every way. They even ate before she did; she finished their scraps. She clearly had mental issues. It had been official for Kevin when she'd gone to the garage with her dogs to urinate, instead of using the bathroom setup that he and Jeff had constructed. If she wanted to live like an animal, that was her choice and since this was her house, it was fair that they were the ones to leave.

The men gathered their gear and equipment quickly. They'd made sure nothing was too permanent unless it would be left behind. They went about the chore happily, talking about where they might go next and how they would get through the snow. Kevin still thought their truck could make it, at least to a dealership where they could get something better.

Jeff didn't give his thoughts. He wasn't as optimistic about them making it out of the house to reach the truck that they'd been forced to store a few homes down. The garage here had been too small.

Jeff took a moment to scan the yard, uneasy at the delay in the action. He'd been certain the fight would come as soon as the weather cleared. Maybe they'd been quiet enough to go unnoticed by the predators that had plenty of fresh game, but it was unlikely. With Sally's dogs yipping, the wolf's whining, and the smells, Jeff was positive every animal in a two-mile radius now knew there were people nearby.

“Don’t forget your vest.” Jeff started on the cooking setup he’d enjoyed building. Connecting a tank to the old gas stove had allowed him to prepare some great meals here. All he’d had to do was replace the jets.

“Good idea.” Kevin dug his vest from the kit that he hadn’t touched, except to bring it inside wherever they sheltered.

Jeff tossed a box of ammunition onto the broken coffee table by Sally. She hadn’t moved since they’d decided to go. “I’d leave more, but we can’t spare it.”

Sally was surprised to be leery at the thought of being alone again. She didn’t like the men, especially not Jeff, but she’d gotten used to them in only a few days. It was odd for her, considering that she suspected all people of being corrupt. She hadn’t bonded with another human being in years.

“You sure?” Jeff read her reluctance. “Not all men are bad. Not all animals are good.”

She hated the reminder that he could get into her head; it made the choice. “Yes. Please go.”

“You got it.” Jeff was annoyed. “There’s meat in the backyard. Too much for us to carry. Don’t let it go to waste.”

Sally didn’t respond, moving aside as Jeff came by with his arms full. He struggled to open the door and she sighed, advancing to assist him.

Jeff didn’t thank the woman. Her arm was up, holding the door while surrounding him with yet more noxious fumes. Jeff quickly stomped through

the drifts, not caring if he was attacked by an animal. Anything was worth getting fresh, crisp air into his lungs.

Kevin came out right behind him, inhaling deeply. “Yummy!”

Jeff snickered as he swept the few animals in sight. The wolves weren’t paying any attention to them, but a small bear cub glowered from across the street. Jeff hoped momma wasn’t around as they hurried through the drifts to the garage sheltering their wheels.

Kevin held things while Jeff fought to unlock the icy door and then went inside to lift the main bay. It took a couple of minutes that Kevin spent with his back to the building, studying his surroundings as he’d been taught to do. Eagle training was more than handy now. It was a lifesaver.

Jeff helped Kevin into the wide garage with the load and began packing the rear of the truck. He did it quickly, but he tried to be quiet.

“Bloody hell!”

Jeff climbed down and unslung his rifle. Kevin wasn’t running yet, so the threat might still be far enough away to pick off before a handgun was needed. He liked to be hopeful that way.

In the distance, the sky was a brilliant red, but it wasn’t from the sun. That dim ball of light was almost topping them, magnifying the glare effect of the snow. The eerie view to the east was from

something else. With the shape of the clouds, it was hard to come to any other conclusion on the source.

“Nuclear?” Kevin was stunned. How was that possible? They had destroyed the government. Angela had promised they were done with that enemy for years.

“Looks like it.” Jeff went over to heft another bag into the truck. “Let’s get rolling.”

“West?” Kevin asked hesitantly. Jeff didn’t give out many details on their destinations.

“North. We’ll bag our cooler on the way.”

Memories of shooting from the passenger seat during Jeff’s insane driving spread a grin over Kevin’s lightly bearded face. That was a real challenge. He was already a better shooter than he had been upon leaving Safe Haven. “Deal.”

They hurried back to the house, still watching out for the various animals around them. They didn’t spot Dog anywhere, or the wolves that had attracted him with the howl.

Jeff doubted Dog would return. All the animals seemed to be heading north and he would be no different. They probably wouldn’t run into him again at all. He had his freedom.

2

I missed you!

Dog was nose-to-nose with the female, breathing in her thick scent. Her bloody muzzle was

the sweetest perfume; he licked the wound gently. The last hare she'd grabbed had scratched her.

The female allowed his comfort, trembling with joy. She'd thought he was dead. After being split up, Brute had killed the other members of their pack. When these new males had discovered them, they'd been too big for him to do the same.

Around them, the female's new pack, plus Brute, observed angrily as another male was added to the competition. These newer wolves were larger due to hunting the herds that were also traveling north. The Wind had forbidden it, but this new pack didn't care about orders. They were going north to kill man. On the way, they were hunting everything else for strength and practice.

Dog nuzzled her neck, hoping for a sign of her interest. He wasn't going to fight for her again if he wasn't going to get the prize in the end. *Do you still want me?*

My mate! Natalia exclaimed, snarling at the others.

Satisfied, Dog snapped at her to get back.

Natalia whined in warning as Brute charged through the melting snow.

Dog reacted too late to avoid the jaws clamping down on his neck. His thick fur saved him as he ducked, not allowing Brute's fangs to drive through.

Dog lunged at his rival, snarling wildly. "Mine!"

"Die!" Brute advanced.

Dog was tired of this threat. He slid low through the slush from their warm bodies and came up under the big wolf. He snapped to part the fur, and then dove in for the kill.

Brute tried to yelp and draw back, but Dog locked his jaws and started squeezing. Using his full strength, Dog bit through and felt blood burst over his teeth. Bones crunched next, and he tightened the grip, slinging his head to ensure death.

Around them, the other wolves let out howls that chilled the humans nearby.

Dog waited to be certain there was no life left before letting go. Brute dropped to the snow, blood melting through the drifts as he landed.

Dog regarded the rest of the eager wolves. “Go away!” He lunged forward, bloody teeth snapping.

Half of the pack fled, tails tucked.

Dog faced the other three with low growls and a bushed tail. “Leave us!”

The female joined him for the fight this time. She came in low, growling in warning that Dog was her chosen mate now. As the fight began, a loud whistle sounded, but the five wolves didn’t pause in their battle.

3

Jeff and Kevin stared, forgetting about the glare, the wolves fighting, and the bear cubs edging closer.

“That’s a train!” Sally came to the window, gawking in surprise. She hadn’t viewed a train in almost a year.

“It’s heading south...”

Jeff understood Kevin’s concern. He tried to count the cars on the train and then realized it didn’t matter. One car or fifty, they had no way to know how many people were in each one. “Get out of sight.”

He and Kevin swiftly took cover, motioning Sally to get away from the window. When Jeff thought he was in a good position, he took out his binoculars and zoomed in on the train. As he did, it ended, only to be followed by a second.

He wasn’t able to spot any of the people on either of the long trains, but he did get a clear sense of menace that sent his mind straight to Safe Haven. It appeared their former camp had drawn more than just the government and the Mexicans.

Five minutes later, a fourth train finally finished passing them. Jeff hadn’t moved, mind spinning. They needed to go home, but they had no hope of beating the rails through this snow.

“What should we do?” Kevin was aware of the woman listening from the cracked door.

“We can be the other slice of bread,” Jeff murmured. The snow melting into his clothes wasn’t noticed as he plotted the future.

“What?”

“We’ll squeeze them in—follow and block.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Maybe.” Jeff continued to work on the plans. “We just need the right equipment. Let’s finish packing and roll. We can’t let them get too far ahead.”

“Can we run on the railroad tracks?”

“I plan to try. Come on. It’s time to slide out of this frozen cemetery.”

Kevin groaned, snickering. “Oh, man!”

As they pulled away, Sally came out into the yard to watch. They hadn’t tried to convince her again and she hadn’t changed her mind. As the truck tried to turn at the end of the snow covered block and skidded into the sidewalk, she hoped they didn’t make it in time. She didn’t wish for Jeff or Kevin to get hurt, only for them to be too late to prevent whatever fate was heading for Safe Haven on those trains. The people there were as bad as the government. They had to be eliminated before the entire world was covered in atrocities.

Sally returned to the pungent home and locked herself in, allowing the relief to come. She was alone, alive, and free. It was perfect.

4

Dog and the female took shelter for the night in the house next door. Dog’s leg was hurting after the fights that had broken off the cast. His mate was hurting too. Her injuries were minor, but blood was still leaking from her muzzle.

Finally alone with her, Dog was too tired to encourage her or to even communicate. He dropped down in the corner of the cold room, between her and the door they had nudged closed.

The female—Natalia—circled the spot next to him and then huddled against his haunches, shivering a bit from the stinging in her snout.

Dog whined lowly, eyes shutting.

When he opened them again, full night had fallen and Natalia had wiggled under his big body for warmth. His jaw was resting on her shoulder.

Dog took the next logical step. He mounted her.

5

Sally and her dogs had gone up to the attic. The number of animals in the yard was incredible. She was suddenly sorry she'd sent the men away, but she didn't belong in a camp of people—of any kind. She was too broken to be rehabilitated.

Sally's dogs slept in the bed with her, uncaring of the personal or environmental drama. They didn't hear the wind or the woman. Both of the dogs were half blind and half deaf. Sally had taken them in when no one else would, saving them from being euthanized. They were completely loyal to her and the Wind's orders weren't being received.

The rest of the animals heard the demands for the woman's death loud and clear. They gathered around the house, sniffing for an entry.

Dog also felt the order, but he and his mate were locked in the ages old position of love; neither of them responded.

Furious, the Wind called for the attack, including the two rebellious wolves as targets. Disobeying her commanded a terrible price.

6

“I feel bad for leaving her behind.”

Jeff sighed in the warm truck. So did he, but he refused to live that way. If he wanted to worry over his safety at night, he could have stayed in Safe Haven.

“Can we...”

Jeff grunted, turning the wheel to spin them wildly through the drifts as he rotated the truck on the wide street. He’d known as they left that he hadn’t seen the last of her yet.

Kevin was relieved. “Thanks, man. We’ll drop her somewhere, but it’s wrong to just leave her, you know?”

Jeff didn’t agree, but he was tired of women dying, so the choice wasn’t a hard one.

They had only been gone for an hour, but the sun had already set. Night came quicker now, as if the earth didn’t want people to receive more light than it absolutely had to give.

“Did you get through on the radio?” Jeff sped up a bit.

“No. The storm must be over them right now.”

“Angela saw it all coming, I’m sure,” Jeff replied bitterly.

“Yeah.” Kevin still reached down for the mike. “Kevin to base. Come in, Safe Haven.”

There wasn’t even static.

“How long do you think it will take—”

“A couple of days, at most,” Jeff interrupted, tiring of the tension. “Tell me why you left. Was it because of Cynthia and Adrian?”

Kevin was surprised at the fast topic change. “Partly. The rest was feeling it all ending. Nothing was the same.”

“Yeah.”

“What about you? Crista’s death or Adrian?”

Jeff winced at the words Kevin hadn’t hesitated to speak. He had all the tact of a bull. “Both. Also because of my failures. I saw no reason to fix them if I was going to be unhappy there anyway.”

“And now?”

Jeff wiped at the windshield, disliking the old Ford. It had been the only thing left at the lot. “I’ll defend them. I still believe in the dreams. But I won’t stay. Once this is over, I’m out.”

“Same here.”

Jeff doubted that would be true, but he didn’t say so. After a month away, Jeff was betting Kevin would realize how civilized it was compared to the way they’d been living. For Jeff, their trek was perfect. For Kevin, it had been an adventure, but if Cynthia gave him the slightest welcome, Kevin

would stay. The warmth of a willing woman was hard to resist after not having one for a while.

Jeff winced at his own thoughtless phrasing and forced his mind back to issues that were more important. “How can we get her to leave those damn dogs behind?”

7

“Help!”

Dog tried to ignore the woman’s screams, but she’d done a lot for him. He would likely be dead right now if not for Sally and her love of animals. Wounds and stiff body protesting, Dog reluctantly stood up. “I have to go.”

“Why?” Natalia yawned. She was perfectly content to remain in their nest.

“I have to help her.”

“The human?” Natalia was shocked.

Dog knew she wouldn’t like it, but he refused to lie. “I have a bond with humans. I won’t ever hunt them.”

“You traitor!” Natalia growled, rising.

Dog limped toward the door, hurting. “No, that’s you. The Wind commands and you follow like the woman’s pets.”

The female remembered a time when she hadn’t hated people, but the voices in her mind were insistent that the humans had to be eliminated to restore the balance. “We are of the natural world. People do not belong!”

“Maybe animals don’t either.” Dog thought of how he’d become a wolf. Natalia may have also been born that way, but he’d seen no signs so far that she remembered her previous life if she’d had one.

“I won’t aid them.”

Dog pawed at the door, letting in a rough draft. “Just don’t attack them. And be here when I come back. I like the scent.”

Natalia’s tail wagged, ears perking up. “You like my scent?”

Dog grunted tiredly, wishing he could mount her again and then sleep for a week. “Enough to follow you north, but don’t expect me to act like you. I have no grudge against people.”

Dog hefted himself through the drifts, not hearing the screams of the woman now that he was outside. He waited to hear Natalia shove the door shut. He finally understood Marc’s intense feelings for Angela. The need to have a mate had also driven him hundreds of miles into a harsh land that had tried several times to kill him.

His bond with Marc lit up, bright and shining in his mind. Dog wondered if he could send a message so far, but he didn’t try. He needed all the strength he had to save Sally. The sense of her death being near was impossible to miss, as was the scent of something big. She was being stalked by an animal that even the other wolves were letting go first. The tracks were clear in the snow.

Dog padded through the animals surrounding the cabin without drawing notice. He was simply one of many who had come for the fight. Despite the Wind's command for the two wolves to be killed, nature couldn't change the rules. The animals had already been given a target.

Dog edged to the door that was open, smelling something large, like a lion. He'd been near one of those a few times, and knew to be careful.

He tracked the scent into the kitchen area that was filled with animals he normally would have eaten. Dog followed the stairs to a door that he hadn't been able to get through earlier. He went up the final, narrow flight of steps to find danger already waiting for him.

Without a single noise, the huge cat lunged at him.

8

Jeff slid the truck onto the street, letting it go where it wanted until he felt the tires gain a bit of traction. Then he steered them across the dark, frozen tundra that had once been a playground. A swing set was yanked up, crashing into them.

Jeff cackled madly. "Hold my beer and watch this!"

Kevin tried to grin as he hung on to the seatbelt, praying they didn't die.

Jeff slid back into the street, bumping them off a small car to straighten the route. He gunned the

engine to clear the hill in front of the house. “Hang on!” Jeff charged them through the front door of the house, where it was most vulnerable. The wood splintered easily, letting them go all the way in. Wood and debris fell, but the frame of the house held.

Jeff opened his door with a hard shove to move the rubble and corpses of the animals that had been in front of the house and inside it. He rushed up the stairs, confident of where Sally would be.

Kevin shut both doors so their escape was secure, then followed.

Jeff ran up the last stairs, rifle ready. They’d viewed Sally’s wild shadow through the top window, but Jeff hadn’t expected to find a wolf and a panther battling it out in the narrow space. The attic had been destroyed by a massive fight.

Sally, clutching her two snarling dogs, was on top of a cabinet in the far corner.

Jeff tried to get the panther in his sights, but there wasn’t enough room. The fight was moving too fast. He couldn’t rush up to fire or he would be knocked down in the melee, and who knew where the bullets might go then. He settled for trying to get to Sally without interfering in the fight. If he could get her down to the truck, maybe Dog could run after them and jump in the bed.

Dog had never had a fight like this. The panther was his match in speed and ruthlessness, but she was more than he could handle in strength. Her jaws tried to snap his neck repeatedly, long claws

swiping away patches of skin and fur. He wouldn't be able to hold her for long.

Jeff skirted around the snarling, snapping animals, and ran to Sally. He jerked her down into his arms, not caring if she kept ahold of the mutts. He was actually hoping she wouldn't. The panther might eat them while the people escaped.

Sally cried out, dogs yelping, but she tried not to struggle as Jeff carried her partially over one shoulder. He was almost to the stairs when the fight rolled their way.

Standing at the top of the steps, Kevin was trying to figure out which dark mass to shoot when he was hit from behind by a furry form that knocked him to his knees. The heavy body leapt over him, and hit the floor. It immediately lunged again.

Jeff also jumped, leaping over Kevin to hit the stairs at full slide. He let them fall, using his coat for padding as they slid down to the truck.

Dog was at his limit as Natalia shoved between him and the panther. She managed to land a sharp bite to the panther's nose, something he hadn't been able to gain the advantage to do. He was forced to back off as Natalia bit down.

The big cat jerked away, slinging her aside.

Dog faced the angry panther again, aware of Jeff taking the woman downstairs. Natalia lay in the corner nearby, whimpering.

Dog leapt forward, furious.

The panther's fangs sank down into his shoulder as Dog's teeth broke through the tough skin of her jaw. Blood fell as they both let go for a better hold.

Down! Jeff used his mental gift as hard as he could to reach Dog. He'd come right back up with his rifle. "Get down!"

Dog and the panther ignored his minor nudge, both clamping down on flesh and bone.

Jeff knew the wolf was about to die. He also wasn't certain of making the shot. Left with no choice, he knelt down and tried to be as cool and calm as he'd always been before. Everything had changed for him when Crista had fallen.

Dog dropped to the floor as the panther's weight pushed on him. The last bite had been too much.

Bang!

Jeff fired the rifle again and then rushed forward to place his sig against the big cat's twitching head. His shot to the throat hadn't killed it cleanly. The panther's neck was bigger than his own.

With Sally safely inside the truck, Kevin returned to help Jeff.

"Grab his bitch!" Jeff scooped Dog into his arms. The wolf didn't even whine.

Jeff staggered as he stood up with the weight, seeing flying shapes outside the attic window.

The female wolf wasn't conscious either. Kevin didn't check her for injuries as he lifted her over one shoulder and jogged down to the truck.

"In the bed!" Jeff followed him down.

Jeff slid them down the icy street, hitting furry shapes along the way.

“Are you okay?” Jeff scanned Sally’s stiff form between them. Her dogs were in the floorboard, shivering and whining.

“Yes,” she answered stiffly. “Thank you.”

“Yep.” Jeff manhandled the truck toward the side street they’d used earlier. The roads had grown slicker, but he could use their ruts.

Kevin shifted around to open the narrow rear window and slid through it, avoiding the smell. He hung onto the side of the truck, trying to settle the wolves deeper into the gear so they wouldn’t be tossed out during Jeff’s wild driving. He and Billy were the Safe Haven wheelmen; they were a little crazy once an engine fired up.

Inside the cab, Jeff handed Sally a spotlight on a cord that was plugged into the truck’s lighter. “Keep this pointed at the road. Out in front, but not too high.”

Sally did as he instructed, wondering if Jeff knew he was bleeding in several places.

“Yeah, I noticed.” He grunted. “It’s what I get for being a Samaritan.”

Sally flushed, tilting the light to where he needed it. Without streetlights to aid them, the lamps on most vehicles weren’t strong enough for driving at night anymore, even in the snow.

Civilization had contributed a lot more than people had realized, especially the big cities.

“Do you need stitches or anything? I can do that.”

“You’ll have to take care of Dog when we stop. And we forgot your bag, so you’ll have to use the supplies we have in our medical kits.”

“Okay. Do I...” Sally was afraid to say it in case he’d forgotten.

Jeff surveyed the shivering dogs, finally having a little heart about the crippling disabilities that would have earned them death in man’s old world or any other. “No. But we’ll have to work some things out.”

Sally was relieved. She tried to do a good job of holding the light. After the house being attacked, all she could feel was relief that Jeff had agreed to come back for her. She was certain it hadn’t been his idea.

Jeff saw that Kevin was hunkering down, using their bedrolls and a few of the emergency blankets from his kit for warmth. He was practically lying across both animals to keep them in the truck. Jeff hoped the female didn’t wake up yet. Dog’s mate was stocky and not the least bit friendly. She’d almost attacked Kevin instead of the panther when she came up the stairs.

Jeff settled the truck into their refreezing ruts on the road and carefully lit a smoke. His nerves were good, but he was about to broach a subject he suspected he would need patience for. *That*, he was

always low on these days. “So, why do you hate descendants and all other forms of human life?”

Sally stiffened in the dark truck. “I don’t hate all forms of *human* life.”

Jeff heard the tone, but he didn’t let her off that easy. They had nothing but time to kill while he drove. Conversation would help him stay awake. “I can read it from you if that’s easier. But I’d rather not.”

“Why?” Sally frowned sullenly. “You’ve been in my head since I showed up.”

“I like to mind my own business. When I can, I do.”

Sally crossed her arms, trying to find the words to explain her mentality. It was impossible.

“You were abused by one? Taken captive? Witnessed atrocities?”

Sally glared out the window. “All of those.”

Jeff slid into her thoughts, staying shallow so he could still navigate the treacherous road. Everything was icing over.

Sally flipped through an awful childhood, where animals were her solace. The images were terrible, like he’d expected. When she flashed to her marriage, Jeff eased off the gas to stare in disapproval. “Your father was a descendant. So are you.”

She cringed against the door. “I am not!”

“If your father was, so are you. You may not have an active gift, but the blood is the same.”

“My father was an abomination. I’m clean!”

Jeff didn't respond. The quick flashes of her life said she had every reason to hate and deny her heritage. It was a surprise to him to discover yet another descendant surviving out in the wilderness. At moments like this, it was hard to deny Adrian's words about fate bringing them all together. The urge to get home hit harder. Jeff shifted restlessly. "I don't think you'll like it at Safe Haven. Is there someplace else you want to go?"

Sally considered. "I'd like to stay with you for a while."

Jeff eased on the gas, glad to discover she did have some common sense after all. "It'll take a while for us to get there. You can let me know when you're ready to be dropped off."

"That's fine." She calmed down. She knew what she was because of her father; her isolation was a direct result. She wasn't safe around people. She wouldn't have gone to their camp, even if it hadn't been full of descendants.

Jeff picked up the mike. "Jeff to base. Come in Safe Haven."

Sally listened to him try to reach the big group that had been broadcasting regularly until yesterday. She felt his concern, but all she could feel was dread. She was now traveling south, without any of her gear. It was exactly opposite of how she'd wanted things to happen.

"I understand." Jeff shrugged. "But life doesn't go by our plans."

Sally stared out the window, wondering what fate had in store for her now. She was the slightly unwilling guest of a descendant. They had two injured, wild wolves along for the ride and they were headed toward a viper's den. *Lovely.* Exhaustion finally sank in. She rested her head against the seat to snore softly.

Even falls out like an animal. Jeff grimaced at the odors, letting the glass down a bit. If she was going to stay with them for a while as she'd requested, then both her and her pets would need to be scrubbed. This was the last time he would tolerate that smell.

Jeff scanned the truck bed through the mirror. Kevin was now under the tarps with the wolves, probably starting to get drowsy.

Jeff sighed, driving slower. He hoped they all slept until he got them to some place they could hole up until morning. Kevin had to rest now, because when they landed, Jeff knew he'd be out for at least six hours straight.

The wind slammed against the truck, rattling the passengers, but Jeff kept it on course, pointing them south. They were going back and it was scary.

*What if Safe Haven isn't home for me anymore?
I don't have anything else.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven BK6
Life Or Death

1

“**W**here’s Quinn?”

Angela didn’t scan the small meeting for him as the others expected her to. She’d spoken with Quinn yesterday on matters of utmost importance. She had chosen him because no one would miss him until right now. All anyone was talking about was the weather, her bombshell, and the refugees.

“He’s on a different chore.” She motioned to Greg, who began unrolling a long map on the table in the topside training tent. “Greg will be his substitute for this.”

“What are we doing?” Kyle was positive it was related to the screaming masses outside their gate. The cries were loud enough to be heard over the party Safe Haven was too anxious to enjoy.

“We’re going to lose our front door. When that happens, we’ll be swarmed. I want Special Forces to be the wall between them and our people.”

“Oh, thank God!” Jax grinned. “Waiting sucks.”

The other Eagles scowled at him.

Morgan coughed behind his hand. “Rookie!”

The other men in the chilly tent snickered.

Jax flushed. “Sorry, but we’ve been waiting for the call for days, right?”

Neil sighed.

Kyle grunted. Neither man had readjusted to having rookies. Jax and Quinn had been on Marc’s team, but they hadn’t made it through level three before Donner came. To the level six and seven men, who’d been through all the lessons so far, these two were green.

“He’ll learn, gentlemen,” Angela stated without amusement. “They both will—later. Right now, I need a choice on this mission. I consider it self-defense and I have to know that you do as well. Please vote.”

“We did that!”

This time, Kyle stood. “Shut up or get out.”

Jax opened his mouth again.

Neil punched him in it, since he was closer. “Vote!”

“Yes!” Jax glared up from the cold canvas floor, rubbing his jaw. “Kill them all.”

The vote was unanimous, as Angela had known it would be or she wouldn’t have called this meeting. A few days ago, when the guards had secretly decided, not everyone had been on the same page. She’d told Kyle to keep working on it; he obviously had. Doing doubles over that screaming mob made it hard to ignore the fact that the refugees were a serious threat.

“This is where I need each of you to be.” Angela pointed to spots on the map of Safe Haven’s gate

that Jennifer had drawn upon her request. “We are vulnerable on the side by our den, so dig in there if you have to. Use the little bunkers.”

“Who else will be out there?” Neil heard someone outside coughing. It sounded like the guy they’d met walking up the main road, but the cough wouldn’t have improved that much already.

“No one. I can’t tell anyone else yet. Neither can you, even with your thoughts. Go get in place now, quietly. It won’t be long.” A minute later, Angela was alone in the cold training tent. She’d fended off the questions about what was coming, as she wasn’t totally sure and wouldn’t be until it was too late to provide them with orders. The echoes of rage and desperation from the gate were overwhelming even at hundreds of feet away, but Angela let it build. This was it. As soon as she made the call, there was no taking it back.

I wish I could have told you everything, Marc, I’m sorry that I couldn’t.

Marc never would have approved these plans, but this would ensure that their people survived. Safe Haven had reached its limit. Angela slowly hit the button on her radio. “All topside guards are to leave their posts and take cover below immediately. The storm is getting too bad for people to remain up here. I repeat: Safe Haven is closed. All topside shifts are relieved of duty and ordered to bunker-in until the storm is over.”

Angela slid on her thickest coat and balaclava, but it didn't hide the tears. *How many innocent people did I just sentence to die?*

2

Outside, a cheer went up from the mob as the guards began to vanish from their posts. Safe Haven's gate was going to be unprotected!

A jeering, determined group of men immediately seized the opportunity, gathering refugees as they strode through the storm toward the barrier between them and imagined safety. By the time they reached the fences, frantic refugees were coming from their tents and other zones. It formed an army of a hundred that kept adding warm, angry bodies.

Kyle stood on a nearby ledge, waiting for all their men to be clear. When the mob started climbing up the gate and fences, he slammed his palm onto the button, lighting it all up.

The electrified fence snapped and crackled in the snow, sending bodies flying. The smell of burning flesh wafted through the icy wind. Invaders bounced off the barrier like flies until someone realized what was happening and began screaming at the others.

Kyle kept hitting the button until the fence was completely clear, grateful for Marc's idea of the capacitor for these big bursts. They had a dual setup that provided a softer zap too, but this wasn't the

time for second chances. Marc had saved them with these latest defenses.

3

“Blow it anyway.”

Jennifer looked up as the lights in the cave dimmed from the power Kyle was using on the fences. “Did you hear me? The ants are still in there.”

“I heard you,” Angela answered tonelessly as she dropped down behind the small desk that Marc had placed in here for her. The small room was a leadership command area, but she might not be the one who ended up using it. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, *boss*.” Jennifer keyed the radio angrily. “Blow it, boys.”

A few seconds later, a huge rumble echoed through the cave, raining dust throughout the tunnels and making the lights flicker again. It brought cries and shouts of concern from their people.

“Why?” Jennifer turned on Angela as the rumbling and cries faded into mutters of concern. “The refugees attacked that cave and the ants followed their tunnel to get here. Now you’ve blown it up on our end and trapped them! They’ll be slaughtered. That’s *not* protection!”

“No, it’s not.” Angela marked the ants off her list. She looked up at the confused, angry teenager. “Did you think I was keeping them? That we’d have

them as pets to replace the dogs that have turned on us?”

Jennifer shrugged uneasily. “Something like that, I guess.”

“They’re truly an abomination, Jenny. We can’t allow them to keep growing. If we do, at some point, humans will have to fight them.”

“But you told them we were friends, that we would protect them!”

“Yes. I lied.”

“What? How can you do that? How can you be so heartless?”

“How can you not understand how wrong it is for them to be so big, so smart?” Angela shot back. “Through poisons and evolution, the ants have been given the chance to rule the world—along with every other species that stalks the land!”

Jennifer was saved a reply by a second large boom echoing through the cave system. Angela sighed heavily at the grinding noises. Even if she hadn’t made the call, this would have happened anyway. When vengeance was the motive, the actions were usually unstoppable. *I capitalized on the event.*

Jennifer froze. “We had a charge set to blow the one tunnel. And we were careful about the placement so it didn’t trigger anything else. What was that?”

Angela stood up, hearing the distinctive sounds of panic. “Go find out.”

Jennifer didn’t hesitate.

Angela stayed still as the chaos increased and then moved away from her. She felt Marc sweep with his grid and center on her for a second in relief before sliding on to the next level. Any second now, she would get a—

The radio lit up. “Angela to the garden site. Medical issue.”

The garden site was on the fourth level, away from where the second explosion had come from.

Angela went without revealing how nervous she was to any of the guards or members hurrying around her. Anything could go wrong from here and she couldn’t get rid of the feeling that she’d overlooked something important.

4

“Cave in!” The radio blared repeatedly. “We’re cut off!”

“Copy that,” Marc’s calming voice came. “We’re gathering equipment to dig you out. Injuries?”

Angela listened to the radio chatter as she headed to the level that was closed for the party. Around her, camp members either stared at each other in concern or went to help Marc. Few of them noticed Angela in the far tunnel, heading for the stairs that led down. Everyone else was going up.

The sentry on the level—Wade—didn’t stop her, but he did lift a brow to ask if things were okay.

Angela delivered a nod, then went down the final stairs into the gloomy under-cave they were still outfitting. Boxes and crates littered the rough ground, along with cords, lamps, and bags of soil. Angela was sorry to walk by the unopened supplies. There was a chance they would stay this way.

“Part of the stairway fell!” Kenn called over the radio. “We need the engineering crew!”

Static interlaced the transmission as Angela went further into the ground. A bit more and she would be out of range of the radios.

“We’re on the way,” Ozzie answered.

In the background, Angela could hear running men and knew Theo was also listening from the medical bay. He was probably cursing the injury that was keeping him from being there too. He might even try to get below now that the doctor had casted his leg. Theo had refused the surgery and the morphine drip. He’d also told Candy not to visit him anymore, that he felt like he was leading her on when he didn’t intend to get serious. Candy had left the medical bay in anger, but Angela hadn’t scanned Candy’s thoughts any further than that. She already had too many threads to keep track of alone.

Angela reached the garden site, not bothering to use the few lights they had rigged down here. She could see a single lantern glowing and knew that’s where she was supposed to go. The rocky ground under her feet swayed for a moment. Angela realized Marc already had the power equipment running.

“Good.” She stepped around a large gap in the ground to enter the vast cave they’d chosen for gardening and composting. “Right on time.”

“Yes, you are,” a female voice answered immediately. “Welcome to your last hours.”

Two people came toward her from the shadows of the tunnel that led from the garden area and went further into the mountain.

“Hello, Tara. Jayson.” Angela smiled coolly at the waiting pair, ignoring the gun. “Lovely afternoon for dying, isn’t it?”

A bit surprised at her response, neither of them spoke.

Angela held her wrists out. “You’ll want to bind me, right?”

Tara nudged Jay forward, not taking her attention from the woman she hated. “Do it!”

“I made other plans.” He stepped forward, placing his gun to Angela’s head.

“Stop!” Tara grabbed his arm. “Vlad’s waiting. I want her taken up the mountain.”

“Sorry, but you’re not the boss anymore.” Jay glared madly at Angela. He shrugged off Tara’s hand. “She killed my father. I’m going to kill her.”

Tara realized he wasn’t going to be swayed. She shrugged. As long as Angela died, it would be enough. Vlad wanted her for bait, but they could always lure Mitchel in with her body. “Fine. Use the suppressor so we have more time to get away. They might not hear the shot over all that equipment.”

“I did good, right?” Jay gushed, thinking of the training area on the first level, where people were hopefully dying. “Right?”

Tara nodded in annoyance. “It was perfect.”

Jay beamed at the praise, cocking the gun. “This is for my—”

“Uggggggggggg!”

A guttural moan came from the other dark tunnel behind them, sending chills over everyone—including Angela. It didn’t sound human.

Jay spun around to face the unknown, but before the gun light could illuminate the source of the noise, something ran toward him.

“Hey, what is that?” Tara leapt out of the way as a thin shadow lunged from the dark tunnel and tackled Jay. She didn’t wait to discover what it was. Tara hurried over to Angela and jerked on her arm. “Come with me.”

Angela rose docilely as Tara’s gift shoved into her mind again.

Jay and his unknown attacker rolled on the ground, struggling and grunting as they fought for control of his gun. Jay’s strength allowed him to shove the shadow off and pull the trigger as she leapt again.

She? Jay watched the woman fall to the rocks in shock. “Who the hell are you?!”

The noise of the shot drew instant notice from the nervous guard Angela had passed on her way here. Radios crackled with panic.

“All hands!” Wade shouted. “Shot fired on level four!”

“Who has the boss?” Marc demanded.

“No guard right now!” Greg radioed.

“Does anyone have eyes on the boss?”

“Angela, answer your radio!”

The calls continued as Jay marched over to Tara and jerked Angela away. “Where were you going?”

Starting to panic as the radio calls became clearer, Tara pinned Jay with angrily glowing orbs. “Stay here.”

Jay stilled, obviously trying to fight Tara’s control, but she shoved down on him harshly. “Stay here. Tell them you threw her body into a hole. You didn’t see me at all. I’m with the rest of the herd!”

Tara left him standing there with a dazed expression, pushing her gun into Angela’s spine. Tara had been practicing her gifts on guards and the camp alike. She now had twice the range, even while controlling more than one person at a time. Jay’s father would have been proud.

“Turn on that belt light and start hiking.” Tara shoved Angela again as she dominated her thoughts. “Make it a fast trot.”

Angela did, profile a copy of Jay’s blank facade.

5

Marc dropped down the emergency rope to the fourth level, rushing toward the awful moans. His gift was strong, breaking through the rocks and

stone, but Angela wasn't on it. The only way that was possible was if she were dead. Marc refused to accept that as he ran to where he'd last had her on his grid. She'd blinked off while he was rushing toward her. Marc shined his light, motioning for Kenn to get the lanterns lit.

He spotted a body and ran that way. "Angie?"
"Uggg!"

Marc was grateful to discover the fallen woman wasn't Angie, but he had no idea who she was. He knelt down. "Gunshot." Marc recognized the casing nearby. "One of ours. Get a guard on her. Take her to the medical bay."

He followed the signs of the fight backward as the men with him obeyed. He quickly found Angela's pocket alarm and followed her boot prints into the dark tunnel without hesitation.

Behind him, Kenn took charge. "Top two teams here now, go with him. Everyone else, get us secured. The new procedures we've been studying are what you should be doing. Zack has point."

The Eagles were glad to have something specific to do; the rattles of paper echoed as the unused plans were taken from their kits. There hadn't been time to practice securing the cave. The disorganized mess would keep all of them busy.

The camp had panicked, but the guards were happy to find out that meant getting weapons and hunkering down in the living quarters. The camp hadn't been told what to do this time. It was nice to

know the sheep no longer deserved that title. Safe Haven had learned hard lessons.

“Hope we’re not about to get another one.” Kenn led a group of Eagles to secure their stock of weapons. Much like when Angela had been taken by Donner, Kenn had a bad feeling.

Marc shined his light, following three sets of footprints. He recognized one in relief. Angela was walking on her own, proving she was alive.

“I killed her.”

Marc froze.

Ahead of him, Jayson was standing in the center of the dank, widening tunnel with a flashlight in his hand. Marc hadn’t noticed him until Jayson flipped it on. He still didn’t have the man on his mental grid even though they were only standing a few feet apart.

“I threw her body down a hole.”

Thanks to the angle of Jayson’s light, Marc could see the drop off behind the man and the lack of tracks continuing around it.

“She didn’t suffer long.”

Marc didn’t pick up the dazed tone. All he heard were the words.

When he snapped, the men behind him didn’t interfere. Jay deserved whatever Marc handed out.

Marc slid his gun under Jay’s throat, not noticing the man wasn’t fighting back. “You *will* suffer.”

Marc fired, trimming Jay’s ear.

Marc also didn't notice the man's screams or the loud report of the gunshot in the cavern. Angela's body tumbling through the void and crunching on the rocks below was repeating in his mind. The gap behind Jay was over a hundred feet deep.

Allan and Brandon exchanged uneasy looks as Marc fired again, trimming another body part. They understood and agreed with his judgement, but the need to grieve for Angela was hitting them in thick waves that pulled sympathy instead of hatred.

Get some rope, Allan told Brandon in hand code. He was sure they would be sent down to retrieve the body.

Hatred came as Jayson began to cry uncontrollably.

"Please don't! Please."

"Did she beg you for mercy?!" Marc fired again.

As Jayson's screams rang out repeatedly, reality sank in. Angela was dead. They'd lost their very gifted leader.

6

"Who is that?" Theo moved closer as a team came into the medical bay carrying a bleeding female. He recognized the sound of her moans. He'd been listening to that noise in the cave for weeks, and blaming it on a ghost. He was relieved to discover it had been a person.

“Marc found her at the scene.” Donald cuffed the woman to the cot as the doctor hurried over to examine her.

“What scene?” Theo stared at the woman in concern. There was only one person not accounted for right now, as far as he could tell from listening to his radio.

“Angela’s missing. This woman might know what happened.”

Theo studied the filthy female, unable to discern her race, true hair color, or anything else. It was hard to believe that she was the person Jennifer had shown him mentally. This woman was covered in blood and dust, and a thick layer of grime that would take more than soap to remove. She also had a gunshot wound in her arm. The doctor was trying to stem the flow of blood and be certain the slug had gone through, but the woman wouldn’t be still. Her hands flew up and down, making her cuffs clink loudly.

“Quit that!” the doctor snapped tiredly, trying to unbutton her shirt to get to the injury. He’d been treating refugees all day.

“Uggg Ug!”

Theo’s mouth dropped open as he studied her. “That’s a code!”

“Sign language!” Zack had also escorted the woman here, hoping she would tell them where Angela was. “Does anyone know it well enough to translate?”

“I do.” Mandy came over to and knelt down by the woman. The pregnant college girl flashed a hand gesture... Everyone felt the wounded woman’s joy at being understood.

Mandy tried to keep up as the woman gestured frantically. “The angry lady took her...into the cave...and left the angry man...to take the blame.”

“What angry woman?”

Mandy signed Zack’s question.

When the deaf female answered, Mandy cursed. “Son of a...” She signed again while everyone waited in fear and frustrated impatience.

The ghost female shook her head.

“She says the woman with the little girl who hums all the time took Angela. They were alone.”

Chills went through the cold canvas again. There was only one child who hummed in Safe Haven so much that every adult was tired of hearing it.

“Missy. Tara!”

“Get on the radio! Find Tara!”

7

“I found her in the mess, at one of the tables,” Shawn carried Missy through the flap that Hilda held open. “She’s been darted. I can barely feel her breathing!”

The doctor hurried to the new patient, with Hilda and Peggy on his heels. Shawn stayed with them, holding the little girl’s hand in comfort.

“Has anyone told Marc?” Kenn had stopped by to verify things were good here before he went to his next stops—the front and rear gates.

Everyone exchanged horrified glances.

Theo paled. “We were too busy trying to figure out what happened.”

“I’ll go.” Donald headed for the exit.

Kenn knelt down in front of the little girl who was having trouble keeping her lids open even though the doctor was using smelling salts. “Missy?”

“Huh?”

“Missy, can you tell us where your mommy is?”

“Uh...”

“Missy!” Kenn snapped, sorry when she flinched. “Where did your mother go?”

Missy cringed from the tone, causing Shawn to glare at Kenn.

Kenn ignored him, leaning in. “Where is your mommy?”

Missy focused blearily. “Tara is not my mommy!”

Kenn and the others gaped in shock as Missy began to cry.

“She killed my mommy. She’s the major’s wife.”

“Major Donner?” Kenn gasped, reeling.

Missy nodded, falling back under the drugs. She managed to slide onto a cot before her eyes shut. “She’s very mad at my friend Angie.”

Panic filled the tent as people ran to find Marc.

8

Unable to get through the din, Adrian listened to the radio calls with fury and fear fighting for room in his guts. Very little information was coming out, and because of the bubble and his banishment, Adrian couldn't pick up any details that might allow him to help. There were no guards on the gate to pull thoughts from and the screaming refugees were still there to keep him from going over to yell across. He hadn't seen Kenn or Cynthia yet and there was no way Marc would answer him right now, even if he could reach the man. There was only one other thing he could try.

Adrian concentrated, searching for the door that he and Angela had opened together. It had remained after their connection was broken, but it had been locked each time he'd tried to access it. *Please. She's in danger. I know it.*

There wasn't a reply, but Adrian could feel someone or something on the other side, listening to him.

I'll make whatever deal you want. Just tell me where she is!

Death comes to us all, a slobbering voice whispered through the door. She is no different.

Adrian shuddered. *Please!*

No. The voice laughed cruelly. But only because you have nothing I want!

The door refused to budge as he pounded on it. Adrian spun toward the gate in fury. Before he could reach the ledge and start clearing a path, he felt a dangerously cold draft go over him. It lingered, surrounding him with the sweet scent of vanilla. A second later, his radio crackled.

“All teams to the fourth level!”

Adrian knew instantly that was the wrong call. He glanced upward, toward the snowy peak where he had seen Quinn a few hours ago. This felt familiar... *My notebook! It's my plan!*

It all snapped into place. Adrian took off running for the path Quinn had used, mentally shouting for Marc to go up, not down.

9

“Do it now!”

“She’s almost here. Be quiet.”

Shivering, Angela heard the voices and realized they’d already arrived at Vlad’s campsite. The hike up the mountain had been grueling because of the pace. She and Tara were both out of breath, but the gun in her back had remained constant.

“I heard something.”

“It’s me!” Tara shoved Angela into the light from the small fire Vlad had going in the entrance of his small cave. “With the prize.”

“She’s not the prize!” Vlad spat, but without anger. Angela would bring him Adrian. All he had

to do was make her scream. “You have her under control?”

“Of course. Easy as pie.” Tara finally lowered her weapon. She’d taken it from Wade. Angela had gone right by him without noticing he was absent his firearm. *Some leader.* She’d removed all of Angela’s defenses.

Vlad grabbed Angela’s unresisting arm and dragged her to the entrance. He took her out into the icy storm, pointing toward Safe Haven. The view was amazing. “Watch this!” Vlad hit the button on a small box he’d taken from his pocket. For almost a minute, nothing happened.

Angela’s eyes watered, exposed skin stinging from the cold.

“There it goes!” Vlad clapped happily.

The explosion was small—so small that barely any sound of it traveled up to them through the storm, but the sight of it was mesmerizing. Right below their ledge, part of the mountain was sliding off.

Vlad watched Angela instead of the destruction as the layers of snow and ice were blown free. The avalanche would bury Safe Haven. He waited eagerly for her screams.

Angela waited, praying she timed it correctly. As the avalanche gained strength, picking up more and more of the snow and rock it was sliding by, it went faster. Adrian’s notebook had told her how to do this, but the actual moment was always different. As the wall of icy death passed the halfway mark

that she'd had Quinn light with a campfire, Angela screamed. "Now!"

Seconds later, the wall of snow shifted, blown off Vlad's path by the explosive charges Quinn had set. The avalanche thundered down a new route, straight for the stunned refugees who were staring up at the mountain in a daze of fear and fury. Around the gate, Eagles ran for their cave, shouting warnings.

"Thank you." Angela smiled in relief as the snow crashed through the gate, but left the rest of her camp untouched. It buried most of the refugees as they tried to flee. "Thank you."

Vlad screamed. "No!"

"Kill her!" Tara realized Angela had only pretended to be under her control. She knew what came next.

Enraged, Vlad spun toward Angela. "Did you see this coming too?"

Before Angela could bring up her shield, he punched her in the stomach.

10

Adrian ran faster through the wind and snow, feeling Angela's pain. Now that she was outside Safe Haven's perimeter, he had no limits again; her agony was awful. He didn't know what had happened, but he increased his speed again as the sense of urgency smothered him. Whatever it was, she needed help and he wasn't there. Had she tried

to enact his plan alone? Where was Marc? Where were the Eagles?

Adrian spotted Quinn's frozen boot impressions in the snow, not glancing down at the devastation. His own campsite was partially covered in tons of dirty snow and rock, but the soldiers had been in their hammocks when he left. He assumed they were out of reach, but it wouldn't have mattered to him even if they were in danger.

Adrian ignored the cold as he shoved himself forward and up the last rise to reach the ledge above his camp. He saw a melted area where Quinn had spent some time, noting the wires and debris, and then kept going. Whatever was happening was close to him, but not near enough as gunshots rang out.

I'm coming! He used their old line, hoping for an answer. *Hang on!*

Do you have her? Marc demanded in his thoughts.

No, Adrian realized Marc was also out of the perimeter to be able to monitor him. *Where are you?*

Coming from the cave they went through. They left me a decoy. Where are you?

A few minutes from the top.

Meet you in the middle.

Adrian allowed his reserve strength to be used as he went even faster through the miserable weather and the pains in his chest. He was closer than Marc. He might be able to help somehow if he could just get there!

“Down!” Quinn fired from his place behind the snowy boulders that lined the site. He’d chosen it for snow removal because of the cramped quarters. He was now cursing himself for it. The driving wind had reduced visibility. He was trying to hit the enemy while missing their captive people. He could only hope that luck was with him as he fired again.

Scott and Josh stayed down in the open tent, trying to untie each other while their captors were busy fighting with Quinn and Angela. Between groans, she was sending balls of fire and curses in languages they’d never heard before. Her orbs were crimson. The noises she was making were scary. It sounded like she’d let the witch out. Blade and Darian were already dead, burnt from Angela’s amazing fury.

Angela groaned as her stomach clamped down again, harder than before, but there was no time as Vlad charged again. The witch lunged forward to meet him, breathing flames that melted his shield and then shot into his eyes.

Angela wanted his lifeforce. She wanted to enjoy every second of it, but penetrating agony slammed into her belly and the witch retreated.

Vlad dropped to the ground, screaming wildly as his mentally captive men fled down the nearest snowy path. He couldn’t hold them now and neither could Tara, who was behind a big boulder by the cliff’s slick edge. She’d darted there when Quinn

attacked. Angela had been hampered by her cramping body and missed Tara on the first shot.

“Come out here!”

Tara stayed down at the shriek, realizing the huge mistake she’d made in assuming Angela was under control. Even in the midst of a miscarriage, Angela’s power was far beyond her own.

The loose lurker everyone had worried about ran toward the small cave entrance to escape Angela’s wrath. Her flames shot over his shoulder and caught on his hair. Slapping at the growing heat, he tripped, sliding, and went screaming down the side of the mountain as a human torch.

Angela focused on the last target, able to feel the child inside her dying. There was nothing she could do now except extract justice. Angela dropped to her knees as she struggled to bring forward more power through the pain radiating in sharp, tear-bringing cramps.

Waiting for that, Tara stood up, firing. “For my husband!”

Angela ducked in time to take the bullet through the upper arm instead of the chest. Blood sprayed the snow as she cried out.

Tara laughed cruelly. “How’s that feel?!” Tara hurried forward. She kept her gun trained on Angela as Quinn also rushed forward. “Get lost!”

Quinn followed his training instead. He took the shot.

Tara fell backwards from the impact, shocked and dazed. Her shield had caught the slug, but she hadn't expected him to fire at all.

It gave Quinn and Angela a few seconds they wouldn't have had otherwise. Angela used hers to gather the last bit of power she had, along with all her horrible fury at her mistakes. Quinn used his to recall how many bullets he had left. *One.*

Boot steps crunched through the snow, hurrying toward them in angry determination. Quinn wanted to see who it was, but he couldn't take his attention from Tara as she scrambled to her feet. He wasn't able to get through her shield, but Angela could.

Quinn saw Tara's finger tighten on the trigger. He lunged, dropping the gun.

Tara fired, hitting Quinn in the metal medical box he preferred to carry. It spun him to the ground, where he slammed into the snowy stone with a dull thud.

Angela forced herself to her feet, feeling warm wetness slide down her thighs in gooey clumps. The chill of the wind sank in, making her shiver, but she held her chin up as Tara placed the gun against her cold skin.

"I'm going after your other kid next!" Tara leaned near enough to make sure she was spattered in blood upon pulling the trigger. She wanted a souvenir. "I'll suck him dry."

Angela shut her eyes, terrified to hear herself ask if she even wanted to survive now.

Have we had enough? the witch mocked. *Pain too great?*

Angela nodded, tears rolling down her frozen cheeks. "It hurts."

Tara thought Angela was speaking to her and laughed. "Good!"

Then let go and join the darkness, the witch advised. *You wouldn't survive the future anyway. Marc and Adrian need a strong woman.*

I'm taking her with me...for my baby.

Why bother? Let Marc have the justice.

"I deserve it!" Angela screamed.

"Oh, yeah!" Tara agreed happily. "Here we go."

Safe Haven dies with you, the witch shouted. *Fight for your life!*

Fate can make this choice too, Angela responded wearily. *I'm done deciding who lives and who dies—including me.*

Adrian emerged through the snow and rock. "Angie?"

His voice was a light in the darkness, but there was no time. He didn't slow down. Adrian leapt as Tara fired again.

Thanks to the impact of his body, the bullet went off course and plunged into Angela's other arm, drawing a fresh scream. Tara had been aiming for her heart.

Adrian rolled clear and hit his feet, staying in front of the lunatic who began shouting. He already knew he couldn't draw in time to shoot her.

"Move! She has to die!"

Adrian didn't answer, but his shield came up, making it impossible for Tara to reach Angela until she had dealt with him. Because she wasn't firing, Adrian suspected she was low on ammunition.

Angela's groans and moans brought cruel happiness into Tara's reddening profile. "I love that sound!"

Vlad stopped screaming suddenly, but neither of them looked. If Adrian moved the wrong way the next time Tara fired, Angela would be hit again. Adrian assumed she was too injured to bring up her own shield.

Tara cackled madly at his concern, retreating to the cliff's edge to be out of his lunging range. "Mexican standoff!"

Adrian didn't understand why the old joke was so funny to her, but he felt the moment of truth arrive as her face lost all trace of human emotion. Her arm slowly raised, eyes going blank.

Adrian tensed, preparing to jump. He would take her off the cliff.

"Yourself!" Angela grunted furiously from the ground. "Shoot...yourself!"

Tara's eyes widened as her own arm began to shake.

Adrian watched in proud horror as Angela forced the woman to put the barrel of the gun in her mouth.

Angela strained, feeling something in her abdomen give. "Die!"

Tara pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Eight BK6
Carved In Stone

1

“**A**ngie!” Marc rushed forward, followed by the two teams of men who quickly realized the only threat left was from Angela’s injuries and the weather. Some of the men took up guard posts, while others went to Quinn.

“He’s alive!”

“Get him to the cave!”

Three of the guards quickly took Quinn down the open path, trying not to drop him.

“Two more survivors!” Billy waved for help as he found Scott and Josh, who were still gagged and tied. Their fingers were nearly frozen from working on the knots. Their knives and guns had been removed upon capture.

Adrian gestured the Eagles to take their men down the mountain.

No one argued. It was obvious Adrian had saved Angela’s life, though none of them was certain she would keep that gift. With all the blood around her, it definitely didn’t look good for the baby.

Finished binding both her arms, Adrian stepped aside.

Marc dropped to his knees at her side, ignoring everything else. “Angie?”

Angela groaned, crying as a fresh gush of liquid heat soaked her lap. “I miscalculated the time. I thought...I had it...all covered!”

Marc wanted to hold her, to rush her down the cliff, but he was also scared to move her. She was covered in blood.

“I was arrogant; fate took the baby!” She clutched her gut.

Marc jumped up and grabbed Adrian’s arm. “Help her!”

Staring at the gruesome scene, Adrian jerked out of Marc’s grip. “I can’t.”

“Help her! Do it now!”

“I can’t! It’s too late and it’s your fault!”

“What?!”

“This is your fault, always making her hide what she is. You caused this!”

“You’re insane!”

“She has to hide her plans from you! You can’t accept her for what she is—a leader who has now sacrificed everything for her people! I never would have done this to her! Your insistence on the bars being up drove her to keep secrets. I should have been here with her for this!”

More blood pooled around Angela’s legs. Adrian jerked a hand toward the path he’d come up. “Go get shit ready. I’ll bring her in.”

“Don’t you touch her! I’ll carry her down!”

“You have to get things ready!”

“You do it!”

“I can’t. I’m banished, remember? I’ll be shot on sight—another of your bullshit attempts to get rid of someone she loves. Jealous bastard!” Adrian bent down and slid gentle hands under Angela’s limp body. She had passed out while they argued and Marc hadn’t even noticed. “Come here, baby. I’ve got you now.”

Adrian stood up.

Marc winced as blood dripped.

“Get moving! She needs help!”

Billy and the other Eagles, along with the two freed captives, surrounded Adrian, expressing more disapproval than Marc was used to. Left with no choice, Marc spun toward the path and took off running. None of the Eagles could clear Adrian for entry. Only he could, thanks to his own rules.

Adrian had no time for the support of the men he’d once bonded with daily. He cradled Angela, face against hers as he breathed what little energy he had left into her. “I’m so sorry.”

Billy got them moving, trying to clear an easier path for Adrian to manage. Scott and Josh helped navigate, supporting her legs when needed, as the rest of the honor guard tried not to notice the trail of blood they were leaving. Together, the somber males slowly brought their leader’s body through the storm and down the mountain.

At the bottom of the hill, gunfire rang out in loud waves that said the chaos wasn’t completely over. Kyle and the rest of the Special Forces men

were still defending the gate from the refugees who had survived the avalanche. People were coming from the cave to help; the battle continued to ring across the mountain as the storm raged around them.

A few minutes into their treacherous hike, Marc's Colts also began thundering as he vented his anger on the few remaining refugees.

The escorts didn't speak to Adrian, busy examining his accusation. Had Marc caused this somehow? What were they missing?

Adrian didn't try to convince them he was the hero this time. Besides being exhausted, he hadn't said those things to Marc to make the man feel bad. He'd spewed the truth in a moment of rage. He and Angela would have been a perfect team because he could accept the awful choices she had to make. Marc was too good for her—literally.

2

Marc watched Adrian lovingly place Angie's unconscious form onto the gurney the medical team had waiting inside the shattered gate. They rushed her past the bodies in the snow and into the drafty tent where some of the doctor's equipment was still set up. People ran back and forth at his calls for supplies that he didn't have here, shouting updates and rumors alike. After proclaiming Angela near death, the word that Adrian was back came next.

Marc suffered it all in silence, using hand signals to direct the Eagles. With so many people topside to wait for Angela, they needed a perimeter. He got Kenn on it, hating the sympathy he read for Adrian in the Marine's expression. He also hated all the curious and concerned camp members viewing his humiliation, but he didn't send them below.

Adrian followed the gurney through the snow. At the flap to the medical tent, when Zack would have stopped him, Scott and Josh stepped tiredly between them. After not being able to assist Angela, both the men were at their limits on patience.

"What's he doing here?" Zack demanded angrily. "He should be shot!"

"He kept her from being executed," Scott informed his superior coldly. "This is what he deserves."

Zack scowled at the bruised man, focusing on Marc. When Marc didn't reply, Zack reluctantly stepped aside to let Adrian enter.

Doctor Brooke stared at the bloody woman in shock. "Angela?"

Josh slapped the doctor on the shoulder, making him flinch. "Get to it!"

Hilda and Peggy came to help, along with Millie and Mandy. Adrian stayed out of the way, studying everyone else in the large drafty tent. He wouldn't be sent away from Angela yet unless someone wanted to die. He had enough energy left to take a lifeforce if he needed to, though he expected it to be Marc, not an Eagle. "She'll have a notebook for

this.” Adrian jerked a hand toward the flap, not caring who heard the information. That wasn’t his job to cover anymore. “Someone go search her mattress.”

When the guards looked at Marc, he spun angrily toward their tent, silently cursing. He didn’t know if Adrian was right. That was a huge problem.

Is he? Marc demanded of his demon. *Is that what caused this?*

The demon refused to answer.

Marc found a notebook under her pillow, along with a single sheet of paper that he read with a breaking heart.

I’m sorry. If you’re reading this, I wasn’t able to come back and destroy it. I know there’s a chance I’ll get hurt, but I’ll do anything to protect our future. You know that. The choices I’ve had to make were awful. If my plan works, the refugees will be dead and Safe Haven can stay here a few more weeks. I’ve bought us some time, but it won’t last. You have to get these people south, Marc. That’s my last wish.

If you’re asking yourself what you could have done to prevent me getting hurt, believe me when I say that you couldn’t have. I didn’t tell you. That isn’t your fault. I’m sorry I couldn’t, but you’re one of the few pure souls left and I won’t corrupt you with this pit of damnation that I’ve willingly signed up for. I love you because you’re good. Please, whatever happens to me, don’t change that about yourself. Charlie needs you to be strong.

In my bug-out vehicle, there are more notebooks. I've left plans, instructions, and notes on what you'll need to lead in my place. I'm passing you command with this letter. Take our people south and keep as many of them alive as you can. I'm with you in spirit, if not in person. I've always loved you. Even death won't change that.

Angie

Marc wiped away tears, grateful she hadn't died, but able to imagine the pain he would be feeling as he read this if she had. Her words were proof. If she had told him, he would have stopped her. She couldn't trust him to support her choices like the Eagles did, or like Adrian would have. Marc faced the truth. Adrian might be right.

Next time, you'll do better, the demon tried to soothe. You've protected her from herself all your lives. It takes time to change.

Marc thought that was also true, but it didn't ease the sense that the wall between him and Angela wasn't from Adrian or her leadership, as he'd thought for a while now. It wasn't that she was female and it wasn't because she was smaller or that he honestly feared for her life. The problem might not be with her at all. *I've never been the type to follow blindly. I never will be. I'll always try to protect her from the consequences... So, she'll always hide her plans from me until it's too late for my interference.*

Marc dropped his head, hating Adrian even more than he already had, but this time, it was

because Adrian's sleazy nature would allow him to accept whatever she chose, where his own honor wouldn't.

Marc opened the notebook, wondering how much of it she wanted released to the public. After a few seconds of skimming, he angrily slapped it shut and took it to the medical bay. It was addressed to Adrian.

3

Adrian took the notebook without looking at Marc, sure the man was on the edge of snapping. If the situation had been reversed, Adrian didn't think he would be able to be in the same room with his men. He certainly hadn't been able to face them after his banishment. It gave Adrian a good idea of what Marc would do next. "Don't. You should stay. She'll want you here."

Marc didn't answer.

Adrian didn't repeat it. He preferred that Marc took off for a while, but Angela's needs were always going to come first with him now.

Marc gestured toward the woman Theo and Mandy were still interrogating. "What's the story with her?"

Theo frowned at Marc's curtness. "In a minute."

Marc sighed as the feeling of disrespect and anger hit. The Eagles were thinking about what Adrian had said.

Marc went to Angie, nearly growling when the doctor started to protest. He took her hand, lighting up the connection between them. *Angie?*

Angela was in a dark place, alone. The rocky peaks surrounded her with jagged tears, making it impossible for her to reach Marc's voice. Too tired and desolate to fight, Angela sank further into the cold void.

Marc placed her hand on her freshly gowned lap. "Someone bring her clothes. She hates these."

"No, the gown is..." The doctor stopped as Adrian glared.

"She'll also want a bath of some type, and for Charlie to be here when she wakes up. He'll distract her." Marc hated the bandages, the blood splattered across her hair and skin. The doctor was still stitching the first side of the wound in her arm where the bullet had gone through. It was the only one still bleeding. She wasn't going to die, but the same feeling from the rest area was sinking into Marc's heart. "I'd like to see what happened."

Adrian stepped closer. "I was only there for a minute before you were. I don't have much."

Marc linked them, flinching at the first sight of Angie in the snowstorm, bleeding, with Tara pointing the gun at her. Angie wasn't fighting back.

"No, she wasn't." Adrian sighed. "I'm not sure that isn't the case now either. The gunshots are minor compared to the miscarriage."

Marc finished examining the memory, and then went over it a second time, picking out Vlad's death

as he crawled too close to Angela's claws. He also noted Angela's coat. She only used that one when she planned to be outdoors for a long period. Another brick slammed into the wall. She'd planned it all out and hadn't told him anything or even acted differently to give him any clues. She had left the note, put on her coat, and calmly walked off to what might be her death—for the people who were currently viewing him as if he should have known and helped her.

Marc looked at the doctor. "She shouldn't be alone at all until we know her state of mind."

"You shouldn't go!" Adrian insisted.

Marc left the tent.

Adrian grunted in tired annoyance. He took a chair from the stack along the wall. "Can someone check on the soldiers from my camp?"

Zack gestured for Allan to do it, shocked.

"Okay, someone please tell me what happened." Daryl sat up in his cot, arm in a sling. "And make it quick before anything else explodes, caves in, crashes through us, or slides down the mountain."

4

Marc joined Kyle near the gates that were buried in tons of dirty snow and rock. The Special Forces teams were currently trekking through the drifts in pairs, handling survivors. Kyle was supervising and keeping track of the cave entrance

to be certain no one snuck in as a member. They'd had enough of it happening.

Kyle already knew Angela's condition, thanks to the Safe Haven grapevine. He clapped Marc on the shoulder in commiseration, but didn't speak. He'd also heard about Adrian's accusations, but he didn't put faith in that. Angela would set them all straight when she recovered. Kyle had faith that she would honor the banishment.

Kyle motioned three members to stand outside the entrance, glad the storm had passed them during the shootout. The camp members had come from the cave to help secure the area, without being called. It was wonderful. "Make sure no one goes in there unless you know them. No more spies or assassins."

The three men were eager to be sure of that as well. They rushed off with their rifles slung over thickly-coated shoulders. They'd learned a lot during their time here. Most of these people had. *Because of Adrian too.* Kyle forced himself to acknowledge it. *He trained us. Now, we're training others. The system works.* That was as far as Kyle forced himself to go. Forgiving Adrian wasn't possible, but tolerating him for the good of the camp might be.

Kyle waved at two more camp members trotting through the drifts toward them. "Go to the rear gate. No one gets in or out unless they're ours. I'll send more hands as I get them."

Marc was confident Kyle had it under control out here. He headed for the cave, aware of Shawn trailing him. After being suspended for a week like Samantha, Shawn had been quiet, careful, and useful. Now that it was confirmed Tara had kidnapped the boss, Shawn had no idea how to redeem himself. Marc didn't blame him for any of it. Tara's power to control people was part of why Angela had allowed her to stay here so long, Marc assumed. He was still hoping Theo would get some details from the deaf woman.

Marc went level-by-level, checking and calming people who had heard the first rumor of Angela being taken, but not of her rescue. He fended off questions about Adrian by not replying. He didn't have the patience.

He reached the first cave-in area, where Jayson had placed enough charges to bring down this side of the cave. If he'd been more knowledgeable about where to put the C-4, he might have succeeded. As it was, ten Eagles had been injured. None of the wounds were serious, but it was still infuriating that they couldn't have peace anywhere they settled.

Marc was glad to discover the injured had all been removed. The area was taped, and had two guards standing a nervous watch as they fended off wandering camp members. He went to the next level, where the party had become a vigil for Angela. People rushed over to him for news, surrounding Marc with kindness and sympathy.

It took a while to get through the crowd who wanted to express their well wishes, but Marc gave them his full attention, needing the distraction. He only had two stops left and then he had to return to the medical bay.

Marc made his way down to the fourth level, where the real drama had begun. He went over the scene again, slower this time. He easily discovered the tunnel the deaf woman had been using as a den, but he found no weapons or signs she had aided Jayson and Tara. Theo clearly believed her story. Marc chose to accept it as well, once he got the details. If everything fit, she would be welcomed into their fold as a hero.

Marc retraced his steps into the cave, not upset to view the mess he'd made. Once Tara's mental hold was gone, Jayson had crumbled. Marc assumed she'd gotten out of range, but he didn't understand why Angela had allowed herself to be taken. Had Tara really been able to overpower Angela mentally? Marc was hoping that was the case. It would explain why Angie hadn't been fighting at all when Adrian arrived. Marc heard steps, recognizing them as Kenn's heavy clomp.

"The storm picked up. We'd like to roll in the camp."

"Good idea." Marc knelt down to check Jayson's bloody clothes for papers or items he could glean details from. "Make it a full roll in—all the way to the cave."

Kenn left quickly, not needing the scene to be burnt into his brain any more than it already was.

Marc felt Shawn still lingering and waved him forward. “I want to walk it and blow it at the other end. Gather what I need?”

“Right away!” Shawn hurried off. He was happy to be helpful at all.

Marc grunted, still digging through the pockets of the coat. It was in shreds, making it harder than he’d expected to pull the items out.

Marc opened the nicked papers with a chill, remembering Angela’s words about protecting their future. Jayson had a picture of his father—Big Jack—standing in front of a small town courthouse with a large group of men Marc thought Adrian would probably recognize. The looted doors declared it after the war, but Marc counted roughly a hundred people scattered throughout the town, which meant there was a lot more he couldn’t see. These people had bigger numbers, more descendants, and Safe Haven was their prime target. Jayson had confirmed that as he bled out.

Marc took the picture, leaving the gory mess. This cave would be sealed up at both ends, after he’d collected every bit of information it contained.

5

“We’re all sealed up,” Zack told Adrian stiffly. When Adrian had begun issuing orders, most of the men here had gone along with it because the things

he wanted were for Angela's good. If he overstepped in any way, they would throw him out.

"Did anyone get her the clothes? She won't like being dressed in this when she wakes. She'll try to change it herself. With a gunshot in each arm."

"I just finished stitching those!" The doctor scowled. "I'm not doing it again while she's awake."

"Jennifer went for those." Now that his duty with Neil's team was over, Greg was once again Angela's right hand and guard. "I also sent for Charlie."

"Good. Marc will want a sentry in here with me at all times. You should assign someone now."

Greg motioned Jax forward. "We covered that."

Adrian nodded at Jax, remembering when the man had joined his army. Jax had been a quick-tempered hothead. Now, he radiated patient strength.

Jax didn't return the gesture, glowering. He was pissed that Adrian was here. His loyalty to Marc was why he'd volunteered to take the first watch over their former traitor.

Adrian swept the large tent; glad they'd closed the other wings as he'd told them to after the other patients were taken below. Theo and the deaf woman had gone right after Daryl had been released.

"Where is Marc?" Jax scanned the canvas. He'd expected Marc to stay with Angela. It had been a surprise to find Adrian here instead.

“Making sure the cave is safe before we take her down there.” Adrian pointed at a corner that was coming loose in the wind. “Set something heavy on that. When Marc gives the all clear, we’ll get her into your new medical bay.”

“I’ll have it ready.” The doctor zipped up his heavy parka. He waited for the flap to be opened and rushed toward the busy cave entrance, glad to be away from the tense men.

Zack zipped them up, shivering. The temperature was plummeting, and the winds were once again beating against everything. It wasn’t comforting, but at least the gunfire and screams had stopped. Some days, it seemed like that was the only sound they were allowed to hear.

“What are we going to do about him?” Billy asked hesitantly. Kyle had insisted on having top-level men in here, along with Adrian’s guard. “Unless the camp votes, he can’t go down there with us.”

Half of the men here were holding a grudge over Adrian’s betrayal. The other half were willing to forgive and forget because Adrian had rescued their leader. None of them spoke, unsure of the procedure for this since it hadn’t happened before.

“I don’t think it’s fair to call a vote before they learn the whole story.” Billy wanted Adrian gone, but he was grateful that Angela was alive. “Or us, for that matter. *We* don’t even know what happened.”

“I agree with that.” Zack looked around. “Hands?”

All of them raised except for Jax.

Zack glared at Adrian. “Don’t leave this tent until one of us says you can.”

“I’ll be right here,” Adrian retorted sarcastically. “Until Marc calls all clear and then I’m carrying her to the medical bay in that cave. I suggest you get the full story soon.”

Everyone frowned.

Adrian dropped into the chair by Angela. “When she wakes up, she’ll want me.”

Jax sneered. “How do you know?!”

“Because she told me so as she passed out!” Adrian was fed up with their concerns and grudges. “You want me gone? Do what Marc can’t and put a bullet in my brain!”

Challenged, Jax stepped forward, hand going to his gun.

“Get...out!” Angela rasped.

Her order was met with cries of relief. The command was ignored as all the Eagles rushed toward her, forgetting about Adrian.

Angela felt nothing, not even the IV she assumed the doctor had inserted. Her entire body was numb.

He sedated you and gave you a painkiller. Adrian had been pushed aside, but he was in her mind, like the old days. The bubble had collapsed when Angela left the perimeter, but no one had noticed that yet.

Angela weakly scanned the profiles around her, expression unreadable except for the endless sadness. “Marc is in command of Safe Haven. You guys do what you’re told.”

Fake chuckles came.

Angela waited stonily, needing time alone with Adrian.

Adrian jerked a hand. “She wants you guys gone.”

Angela stared at Adrian, waiting as the Eagles angrily left. All except Jax, who Angela knew was Adrian’s guard, and Greg, who waited just outside the flap.

Angela shut her eyes. “I’m still not safe.”

Both males moved closer.

“I’ll stay with you.” Adrian patted her hand. “Marc will handle the camp.”

Angela felt the sadness waiting for her, but the darkness was more inviting. “You know what I need. Make it happen.”

Adrian did know, but he doubted Marc would be able to give it to her, even after all this. “I’ll try, baby. My word on it.”

Angela floated into the abyss gratefully, hand going slack from the fist she’d clenched.

Adrian gestured toward his guard. “Let Marc know she woke up. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jax did as he was told, not worried the former leader would disappear. It was obvious Adrian was going to be even harder to get rid of now.

6

“Marc and Shawn are back.” Greg entered the medical bay. “Get ready for her.”

They were inside the cave, with all the other patients mostly settled for the night, including the woman Theo was staying close to. His casted leg and pain wasn’t keeping him immobile. The woman was currently behind a curtain, sponging off some of her grime.

The camp was finally calm enough to start going to their bunks, but many people were remaining in the center of the living quarters, waiting for news on Angela. The doctor had refused to make an official diagnosis yet. He’d shuddered at a mention of giving the address over the radio.

“We are all clear,” Marc’s voice echoed over the multiple speakers. “We are locked down for the night and the *Ghost* has point. Sleep well.”

Marc’s call sent calm through the camp, allowing another group of concerned citizens to go to bed. As the minutes passed, the areas slowly emptied of people.

Marc appeared in the entrance to the medical bay, scanning the patients. Daryl had been released with Cynthia at his side, but everyone else was still here, observing in concern. Except for Missy, who was still sleeping. The doctor had said she would be fine once the drugs wore off. “All set?”

“I want her here in the middle.” The doctor pointed, tone arrogant.

Marc swept the rocky, dim cavern they'd tried hard to make sterile and pointed to the rear corner. "She goes over there, so *you're* between her and the door."

The doctor flushed as the other medical personnel went to prep the spot.

"Should we..." Greg hesitated, then pushed on reluctantly. "Should we tell them about Adrian?"

Marc moved aside for a pair of Eagles who had obviously been sent to ensure it was clear. "No one will bother him yet."

Greg wasn't so positive. He went to provide an escort, thinking Marc should have gone. What Greg didn't understand, was why Marc wasn't bringing her down. What the hell had happened up on that cliff? Inside, Greg felt a little resentful toward Quinn, who was still unconscious. If Quinn had been with his new team, where he belonged, Greg would have been with Angela.

Outside the cave, the snowflakes grew thicker and the wind beat down on the mountain as if it were trying to crumble it. The people below barely noticed. Except for the occasional cold draft, they couldn't even hear the wind. The only noise inside the cave, once below the first level, was the same creaking and groaning of the stone that they'd already been slowly adjusting to. All the fans and generators were providing a cushion of static noise.

Marc waited silently with everyone else, gut a tight ball. It was impossible to describe the emotions he was holding in check. Angela

disappearing, being shot, losing the baby—it had all happened so fast! He had no idea how he was supposed to help her through this. *But Adrian would.*

Angela would need help, but Marc had his own grief and regrets. He still wasn't certain who was responsible, but until he was, he had to stay back and keep digging. Some of it might be cleared up when Theo finally got the full story.

Marc felt Angela scan the cave, but she didn't linger on him. She was scared and searching for danger. She didn't trust any of them now.

Not fair! he cried silently, but didn't push it at her. She'd lost the baby. She'd almost been killed—again—and he'd barely known she was missing before it was all over. Her caution was understandable.

So is his. Marc could feel Adrian's forceful scan going through each crack and crevice. He had been sent away and she'd still been hurt. For Marc, that part of all this was humiliating. It kept him from ejecting the bastard from their sanctuary. *I screwed up somehow.*

"I think I have most of the story now." Theo hobbled from the partitioned cot on his new cane.

Hilda hurried forward to put an arm around his waist so he didn't fall. The sweat on Theo's forehead said the pain pills weren't strong enough for what he was currently putting himself through by dragging his dead leg around so soon.

"Wait for Angie," Marc ordered tonelessly.

Theo sank down into a chair gratefully, glad of a few minutes to catch his breath and organize his thoughts. The entire story had been a shock for him, as had the attraction he now felt for Debra. Despite Jennifer's prediction, Theo hadn't believed it would be instant, but after getting half hard even while she stank, he was convinced. Debra was his foretold mate. She'd saved the boss, so she would be welcomed by the camp and the Eagles once the story got around. All he had to do was accept that his bachelor days were over. And then convince her of it, of course. He didn't expect that to be an easy feat. She'd been alone for a long time. Even now, he could feel her nervousness at all the people between her and an escape tunnel.

Silence fell from the few people still waiting for word outside the medical bay and then Adrian appeared, carrying Angela carefully through the wide opening. He lifted a brow at Marc, who pointed.

Adrian waited for the doctor to finish with the sheet, then gently placed Angela on the cot.

"Is this the best you've got?" He glared at the doctor as he straightened. "This is your leader. Have some respect!"

Marc didn't say anything. Adrian would make sure Angela was treated the way she deserved.

Before the doctor could protest, Adrian glanced at Marc again. "What do you want?"

"Handle it like I would," Marc answered without betraying his boiling keg.

“Thank you.”

“You’re not the least bit welcome!” Marc hated it that Adrian was getting the time with her, even as he used the man to avoid this ugly chore.

Adrian lowered his eyes, only caring that he was inside Safe Haven. He knew it might only be for a day or two, long enough for the storm to finish clearing, but he was savoring every second. The cave was littered with lines and cords that went to repeaters, antennas, and narrow pipes that ran the length of every room, distributing water or venting air. It was amazing for less than three weeks.

Marc didn’t begrudge the former leader his awe of what they’d accomplished. It was the inevitable bonding with Angela that Marc resented.

“I have a list.” Adrian wasn’t sure how far he could push the small authority he now had.

“Your guards will handle it.” Greg motioned to Jax and Shawn, who had volunteered when he returned. “Come daylight, Neil and Jennifer will relieve them.”

“Perfect,” Adrian praised without meaning to. Before Greg could spew the thoughts that came to mind, Adrian got busy. “She needs a better bed, sheets without dust on them, a female assistant to help her wash...”

Adrian went on for a long moment, where Theo waited for the attention to swing his way. He was as ready as he could be.

“Get it over with,” Angela croaked groggily. “I’ll try to keep up.”

The Eagles started to rush over to her side.

Adrian glowered at them. “Get back!”

“She’s been stalking Angela since she got here,” Theo spoke up before a fight could happen. “Tara, I mean.”

People settled down for his story instead of the violence, and Theo continued. “The woman, our cave ghost, is Debra. She’s been hiding here since before the war. She was a runaway. When we came, she stayed in the bottom tunnels. She knows them well. It let her remain hidden, but she’s deaf. She couldn’t hear herself moaning. She didn’t even know we’d heard her. She thought Missy was the only one who had spotted her following Angela.”

Theo’s words held the room spellbound as everyone picked out the details that mattered most to each of them. For Marc, it was personal. For the Eagles it was their honor, as in what had they missed. For Adrian, it was awe at how Angela had handled everything.

“Debra saw Angela when she came down to assign rooms. She knew Angela was the boss. She spotted Tara following Angela whenever they were down here together. She said Tara used her powers to keep her guards unaware. She was almost able to hurt Angela several times, but she was always interrupted by something. Debra was too scared to come out and tell anyone, so she followed Angela around too, to be certain Tara couldn’t get another chance. That’s when Tara finally signed up for the

Eagles. Debra thinks she wanted access to a gun, like Jayson got for helping us that day at the gate.”

Adrian frowned. “Jayson?”

“Devine,” Angela clarified, still a layer below full alertness. “Son.”

“Jay?”

“Yes.” Theo scowled deeply. “He joined us under the name Jayson. He’s the man who was with Kenn. You saved him.”

Adrian winced. “I’m sorry. I’d never met the son.”

“His gift is like his father’s and Tara’s—his mother.” Theo grimaced as pain shot through his hip. For being paralyzed, it sure hurt a lot. “Jayson forced people to gather things, to sign his gun permit, to allow him access to the areas that even Eagles don’t go into without permission. He’s even been in the communication cubby. He took cover there during one of the tremors. He and Tara were supposed to take Angela up to Vlad, but Jayson changed his mind and wanted to kill her on the spot. Debra attacked Jayson and he shot her. Tara used her gift on him, to make him take the blame.”

“Her own son?” Shawn was horrified that he’d slept with someone so evil, that he’d allowed himself to be blinded by her.

“Yes. She was evil. Tara grabbed Missy right after the war and forced the girl to pretend she was her daughter while they infiltrated surviving groups.” Theo glanced at Marc. “Debra said Angela wasn’t under Tara’s power when they went into the

bottom tunnel together. Tara just thought she was. That's all Debra has. It took a while to sign it all out."

The only one who could tell them the rest of it was Angela. Attention turned her way, not positive she was able to. She was barely even conscious.

"Unless Marc has something, the rest can wait." Adrian took a seat on the paneled floor by her cot.

Angela's lids closed in relief.

Marc left the room without glancing at Angela. She didn't want to do this now and that was enough for him. He had most of the information he needed. Tara and Jayson had tried to kill her repeatedly, and he'd been blissfully unaware. It was hard to swallow.

The Eagles slowly cleared the room, casting confused, leery glances at Adrian. His guards called for the things Angela needed, but they didn't leave.

Adrian didn't care. Angela was alive, he was at her side, and the herd was safe for the moment. The rest was trivial in comparison. He leaned against the rough stone as the room finished clearing. Soon, it was only the medical team remaining and they stayed busy with all the injuries that had come in.

Adrian looked down, loathing her defeated, sickly pallor. He could feel her trying to remain awake. "Just sleep for a while, baby. Sleep."

Angela took the advice gratefully. She would rather feel nothing at all than face what was waiting. She shut her eyes, fingers reaching out.

Adrian clasped her hand joyfully, lending his warmth, his hope. He didn't speak the meaningless words that she wasn't ready to hear. He just held her hand; they both gradually fell asleep.

7

The next time Adrian opened his eyes, Charlie was sitting across from him in the dim, quiet cavern, glaring hatefully.

Adrian sighed, relishing the feel of Angela's warm fingers curled around his. "Not now, okay? Wait until it won't wake her up."

Charlie nodded curtly. His mom being hurt again was an open wound. He hadn't spoken to her in weeks. Finding Adrian here had been a shock. Being told his dad was okay with it had been another.

"I wouldn't say he's okay with it."

"Good!" Charlie started to rant, and then caught himself like he'd been trying hard to do at all times. He snapped his mouth shut, glaring.

"Very good," Adrian praised, goading.

Charlie didn't rise to the bait, making Adrian grin. "I mean it. You've done a lot of growing up since joining Safe Haven."

The good feeling of respect from Adrian was still just as powerful, but Charlie managed to keep his expression the same by sheer will. He didn't want Adrian's respect. He wanted the man gone.

Adrian swept Angela, no longer required to hide his adoration. She was the same—pale and still—and he scanned the bay, wondering where his guards were.

“I gave them a break.”

Adrian approved of the boy tracking his thoughts, but didn’t say so. He wasn’t here to make friends.

“Why are you here?” Charlie asked without some of the hatred that he’d meant to put in his tone. It was clear Adrian loved his mom.

“She’ll need me to help her through this.” Adrian sighed. “When she wants it, I’ll leave. My word.”

“Your word—”

“Means shit. Yeah, I know,” Adrian finished bitterly. “Do us all a favor and grow up some more. Think of your mom.”

Charlie pointed to the bed and gear that had been brought in. “I was. It’s ready for her.”

Adrian immediately got up.

Charlie helped him transfer Angela’s limp body to the softer, thicker bed, thinking he wasn’t certain he even remembered what it felt like to sleep on a real mattress.

“Me either.” Adrian tried to break the tension as they covered her up and moved the other cot over. “I dream about using air valves to blow things up.”

“Lung power,” Charlie responded against his will.

Adrian chuckled lightly. “Indeed.”

“I heard you helped Peggy. Doug wanted me to thank you.” Charlie gave more information reluctantly. “He’s busy helping guard the living area right now. My dad wants monitors on all entrances.”

“It’s a good idea. Tell Doug it wasn’t my doing. Peggy insisted.”

“Conner helped Samantha? Because Neil and Jeremy want to talk to you about it.”

“Again, she insisted.”

“You’ll talk with them?”

“Tomorrow, if they still want it.”

“Why wouldn’t they? Conner cured her.”

“It isn’t about Conner. They want to make sure I understand I haven’t been forgiven, that I’m still banished. It can wait.”

“That’s what my dad told them. There are a few people who want to yell at you.”

“I’ll let them. Tomorrow. Tonight, I deserve the first good night’s sleep I’ve had in a month.”

“Because you’re finally inside our gates?”

Adrian crawled into the cot they’d moved Angela from, inhaling deeply of her scent. “No.”

Charlie figured it out, frowning, but he didn’t scold Adrian further. He was feeling extremely guilty about the way he’d been treating his mom when she’d had so much going on. He hadn’t known people were still trying to kill her. Tracy had told him to cut Angela some slack, but he hadn’t been able to because of his anger. Mad at her or not, she was his mom and Safe Haven’s leader. He should have been able to keep her from getting hurt.

“Wow.” Adrian was impressed. “You *have* grown up.”

Charlie suddenly felt drained of anger. “I’m trying. It sucks.”

“That it does, my former friend. That it does,”

Charlie winced at the title, not correcting him. The anger at Adrian was still there, but sympathy had also taken up a place against his will. The man was head over heels for his mom, but she only had eyes for his dad. That had to be rough.

“Thank you.” Adrian grunted coolly. “I’m gonna cry any minute now.”

Charlie scowled, understanding Adrian was trying to maintain a distance between himself and everyone except Angela. “Fine.”

“It’s better this way, boy.” Adrian let his eyes close as his hand reached out to make contact with Angela. “I’d disappoint you again and neither of us can take that. Worship your dad. He’s the saint. I’m the bad guy your mom scared you with as a child.”

Charlie now had his doubts, but the anger still sent him to the bay door that was propped open. “I’m done. Get in here with him.”

Adrian chuckled as Jax and Shawn came in, looking as bad tempered as Charlie had as he left. It was amazingly easy to get under the skin of young people.

“I’ve missed that sound.”

Angela had woken while they moved her, but she was in no condition to deal with her rebellious son. In fact, his presence reminded her of what she’d

lost. She was glad Adrian had angered him enough to get him to leave.

“I knew you needed more time. It was intentional.”

“Like everything else,” she confirmed without malice.

Her lashes fluttered, but Adrian quickly put a hand over hers. “Don’t. Not yet.”

Angela wanted to be strong, but the misery waiting was easy to put off. “You’ll stay?”

“You know it,” he answered immediately, sitting up as his guards scowled. “What can I do for you?”

Angela slowly held up her fingers. Her arms were too bound to try moving them. “Hold me? I’m alone in here.”

Adrian didn’t try to stop his tears as he carefully moved her over and climbed into the bed to hold her. She didn’t cry or speak. Adrian rubbed her dirty hair, wishing she would go back to sleep. She wasn’t ready for this yet.

Angela finally let her head fall against his chest. His scent drifted to her nose and she felt nothing. Numb might be her existence now. She wouldn’t be certain until she faced the waiting pain. Once the tears and self-recriminations stopped, she might curl into herself and wither away. *At least I have that to look forward to*, she thought, meaning it. The agony from this would follow her forever, worse than the first miscarriage had. That tragedy hadn’t been her fault. This one was.

Angela's tears began to soak into Adrian's shirt. He stroked her hair, crooning nonsense that he knew wasn't going to help. There was nothing else you could do for someone who had lost something so dear. All he could do was hold her and try to make sure she didn't sink into oblivion without a fight.

8

Once Angela stopped crying and fell asleep, Adrian slowly dislodged himself and got up. The last thing he needed was for—

Adrian sighed, spotting Marc leaning against the tunnel wall, watching with glowing red eyes.

Marc didn't speak. He wasn't positive that he could. The sight of them in a bed together was one he would never forget.

Shawn and Jax were behind Marc, not wanting to be in the line of fire if the man decided to snap. They'd both seen the mess in the tunnel below.

"She was upset." Adrian didn't move. "You can still see the tears."

Marc had been here for almost the entire scene. He didn't respond.

Adrian finally dropped down onto his cot and stretched out. "It could have been anyone. She didn't know the difference."

"When I return," Marc began, voice full of alpha that he was barely controlling. "I'll either accept things the way she needs them or I'll kill you and be done with it. If I go the way I feel right now,

she won't be able to stop me. I'll pick you off the first time you leave her side."

"I respect you for warning me." Adrian knew not to get his hopes up. "But I don't want your side and I don't want to be *with* her anymore. Not in the way you mean. I'm here to serve. You fuck her. I'll love her."

Marc growled, coming forward.

It woke Angela. "Marc?"

Marc stopped. He wanted to go to her, but the hours of Adrian's words ringing in his mind were too much to handle. He wasn't sure how he felt about everything yet. "There was a call. I need to make a run."

"From Jeff and Kevin?"

Angela sounded alert enough to make Adrian glare at her for faking sleep to listen to them. He should have known she would wake the instant he moved. After what she'd just been through, it should have surprised him if she hadn't.

"Yes." Marc stayed where he was. "They saw a line of trains coming. You were right."

"You'll use the notebook?" Her heart was breaking all over again at his remote responses. It should be Marc helping her, not Adrian.

"Yes. It's perfect." Marc spun away. "But you already knew that. You know everything."

Angela's sobs stopped Marc; he slowly turned around. "Did you know you were trading our baby for Safe Haven?"

“Hey!” Adrian shoved to his feet. “Don’t do this!”

Angela froze, smothered in grief and shock. Marc thought she’d known the baby would die. He thought she was cold enough to do that.

“You’re not,” Adrian told her. He swung back toward Marc. “Tell her you don’t think that!”

“I don’t know what to think,” Marc answered honestly.

“She wouldn’t do that.” Adrian glared. “Deep down, you know it. She wanted the baby more than she wants you!”

“What about you?” Marc’s red eyes glowed. “Did she want it more than you? Because this will get you let back in. Maybe she chose you and Safe Haven over our child.”

Angela tried to talk through her sobs, but the words wouldn’t form. Instead of continuing to try, she let the coldness rush over her limbs and stopped fighting the pain. “I wish you had let me die.”

The words haunted Marc all the way through the cave and out into the cold dawn where he tried to be certain he was right to feel such anger toward her. He had all the notebooks in his kit. He planned to read them and run it through his mind as he dealt with the last of Tara’s people. If he could believe Angela hadn’t knowingly sacrificed their daughter, he would try to sort through the rest of it. If he still thought she was guilty when this run was finished, they would be done. She could go to her bastard traitor and find happiness while he mourned the life

they could have had together. Eventually, he would kill them both and be hung. Some things were indeed carved in stone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine BK6

Close

1

“**H**e shouldn’t be here!”

“He saved her life. Again!”

“That doesn’t give him a pass.”

“I agree. He can’t be trusted.”

“Marc let him stay.”

“He was already in the bed with her! One of his guards told me!”

“So? Neil and Jeremy have that set up, as do a few others.”

“It’s wrong!”

“It would solve the drama problem we have, in case you hadn’t thought about it. We can use both men.”

“We don’t need anything from that traitor.”

All three of the loud men glowered at Adrian as he came through the acoustical tunnel and moved toward the mess line, even the one who had been defending him. He was followed by two sullen guards who had just switched shifts for the morning. Neil and Jennifer were both unhappy to have Adrian in their sight and not be able to shoot him. They both knew what Marc and Angela needed.

Adrian got into the mess line; too busy admiring the setup to care about the mutters and whispers or the pointing fingers of surprised members. Angela needed a tray and he needed to be out of the room while Hilda, Peggy, and the doctor performed an exam. They'd mentioned words like scraping and DNC, and he'd gotten out of there, glad that Angela had told him to. He would have stayed if she needed him, but Samantha had shown up and taken Angela's hand in support.

Li Sing's face pinched up when Adrian told him he was there for Angela's tray.

"I did not hear the routine had changed. Only I give her tray or men on my list." The little man glared. "You no more on my list!"

"Li." Adrian only needed to say the man's name for the spell to break.

"Fine." Li shoved the plate at him. "You better not hurt her this time. Li put kuso in your pie."

Adrian was startled into a chuckle, thinking of a movie that had employed that type of warfare.

Li smacked a mug of tea onto the thick counter that he was still marveling over. It had been nine long months since he'd had a true surface to serve people from. "Go away. You bad for business." The cook jerked a hand toward the exit.

Li couldn't allow people to think he was sympathetic, but Adrian knew the man was. He'd always had Li's loyalty for treating him and his family as equals. In Adrian's heart, they were. Being a descendant gave people a disadvantage, as

far as he was concerned. People were forever blaming you, thinking you could control fate.

Adrian went back the way he'd come, being careful not to trigger any of the angrier people who had stopped eating to glower or mutter in shock. He had expected to have to fight his way through some of the camp, but he now had the feeling that those persons were waiting for a chance alone with him so they could spew and swing uncensored.

"I need to make a brief stop," Adrian informed his sentries.

Assuming he meant the bathroom, the two Eagles didn't protest.

Adrian followed the signs to the medical bay, but stopped before he reached it. He set Angela's food on a small rock outcrop and rapped on the billboard by the entrance to the next cavern. He read the names of the men on duty for this level while he waited.

Kenn came out, frowning when he saw who it was. "What?"

"Any news on my men?" Adrian saw the ingenious high-powered communications center that was using a cell tower battery.

Kenn shook his head, tone uninviting. "We haven't sent a team yet. The winds got bad again. Even Marc is still waiting to leave."

Adrian had thought Marc was already gone and he nodded his thanks. He was positive that being around the communications area wouldn't be accepted.

“Hey, have you heard from Kendle?” Kenn asked suddenly. “Some of the camp’s been asking.”

“They’re halfway to their destination,” Adrian answered. “Conner sent me a message last night.”

Kenn didn’t say more and neither did Adrian, but their expressions spoke volumes. Adrian had missed Kenn being there for him. Kenn was still stinging over the betrayal.

Adrian retrieved Angela’s tray, hoping enough time had passed for her exam to be over.

Samantha came through the tunnel ahead of him, approving when she saw his hands were full. “Good. Now get in there and pull your weight or we’ll toss your ass out as soon as Marc leaves.”

Adrian let it slide. He had disappointed and hurt a lot of people. He deserved every insult or threat they felt like throwing. “I will.”

Samantha gave a hard glare, but Adrian was already by her and didn’t witness it. Samantha stuck out her tongue for lack of a better, legal alternative.

Neil and Jennifer both grinned. They knew exactly how she felt.

Adrian noticed the somber mood as soon as he set the tray and cup by her. Angela was asleep again, but the tears on her cheeks were still glistening. “What is it?”

Peggy still couldn’t speak to Adrian; she stormed from the medical bay. Hilda followed her, muttering. Even the doctor couldn’t bring himself to say it again.

Adrian turned to Theo, whose cot was nearby.

Theo sighed heavily, staring at Angela's pale profile. "Vlad punched her. It did a lot of damage. She can't get pregnant again."

Adrian's stomach dropped. She had to feel like the world ended again.

"It gets worse." Theo hoped Angela would sleep for a while. Her sobs had been awful to hear. "She's bleeding, on the inside. She needs surgery."

Adrian understood Samantha's hidden meaning now and grunted. "Leave us."

The doctor didn't need to be told twice. The others thought Adrian would be able to help her, but the doctor didn't care at this point. He'd been up for almost 36-hours. He had to sleep.

Theo closed the divider, letting himself relax. Adrian was a bastard, but he loved Angela. If there were anything that could be done, he and Marc would handle it.

I need you.

Marc appeared in the dim cavern a minute later. He obviously hadn't been far. His expression was grim, telling Adrian he suspected Angela's condition.

Marc read it from Adrian's mind, grunting his agreement as he took the place on the opposite side of her bed. Her pale face and all the bandages sent fresh waves of guilt through Marc. He should have been here when she got the news. "She needs to stay out for a while." Marc was still reading Adrian's thoughts. Upset and confused, Marc loathed

Angela's misery. He hadn't realized how badly she was injured.

"Would it have mattered?" Adrian tried to pull energy he didn't have yet.

"I don't know." Marc gently took Angela's hand in his, aware that he was being cold, but unable to help it. The guilt was crushing. He didn't know any other way to handle it.

Adrian strained, trying to open the doors to zones that were forbidden. "If you can't accept it, let her go. Don't make her feel worse with your doubts and silent accusations."

"I don't just blame her." Marc shoved into Adrian's mind to help pry open the forbidden door that held Adrian's captured lifeforces. It contained too many to count, Marc was certain. "I blame *you* for bringing her into this."

Used to Marc's hatred, Adrian didn't respond to the jab. "She's an amazing woman. Get over yourself and be here for her."

Marc yanked on the door angrily in response and it swung open, mentally knocking him to the ground as power swarmed out.

Adrian directed the stream toward Angela, taking her other hand. Her body lit up with brilliant colors of every shade as the men concentrated.

The souls screamed as they were forced into a new holding cell to be used as their host deemed fit. Marc winced, while Adrian rejoiced at their use. Very few of the captured essences had been innocent. He'd only chosen to use one that was for

Peggy so she would understand the horrible favor she'd begged of him.

Adrian let go first, slumping to his knees. His heart thumped wildly in his chest, squeezing. He couldn't do that again, for any reason, or it would all be over for him.

Marc sighed as the last of the force rushed through him and into Angela. He staggered backwards and dropped into the nearest chair, watching Adrian clutch his chest. "You gonna die now?"

"Maybe." Adrian forced out words through the odd thumping, the tightening muscles that made it hard to breathe. "You?"

"Good as gold," Marc retorted, not wanting to feel any sympathy for his rival.

"Yeah, that's you." Adrian tried to control his ragged breathing as the pain receded. "Last fucking boy scout."

Marc grinned. The lights were still swarming over and throughout Angela. His smile faded. *How do we go on from this?*

"Put her first."

"I've always done that!" Marc snapped, but it held no heat. He was too tired.

"No. You've tolerated, followed orders, and killed for her. That's not the same."

"I've given everything I have. Everything she demanded. It's never been enough."

Adrian had a hundred insults he could have tossed. Instead, he chose sarcasm. "Yes, I'm sure

it's rough, being her soul mate, the only man she ever loved. Hard life." Adrian leaned his head on the mattress as Marc prepared to fire back. "Maybe you're right. You're not man enough for her. You can't keep up and she knows it for certain now."

Marc lunged from the chair and left the cavern before they were brawling over Angela's body.

Adrian didn't move. He wasn't confident that he could.

"You shouldn't push so hard."

Adrian's hand found hers, clasping it loosely. "I'm sorry."

"The bleeding stopped. I can feel it."

Adrian didn't ask about the other repairs, content that she would survive. Even dark magic could only do so much. There was a limit to everything.

Angela allowed the darkness to reclaim her, comforted that Marc had been here at all. *I need him so much!*

Adrian caught that thought, but he didn't have the energy to send it to the man. He drifted off still slumped on the rocky floor with his head on the mattress.

2

"I need a complete update." Marc had waited a few hours, then brought leadership topside for this meeting to be sure they had privacy. The lower level men and rookies were currently flexing their muscle

below, but carefully. No one wanted to lose that authority so soon. “She left me her notebooks, so I already know, but you’re going to tell me anyway. No more secrets!”

Relief went through the drafty tent; the two dozen men and women got out their own books.

Marc was a bit surprised by the reaction. They all had something to contribute. How had he missed so much? *I thought I was doing well.* “We’ll go from back to front.” Marc took out a fresh notebook.

The tent flap opened, admitting Adrian. He quickly zipped it up as the meeting exploded in shouts.

“Get lost!”

“Shoot him!”

“You’re not leadership!”

Adrian held out a brown envelope, effectively silencing the noise, but not the hatred. “She sent me. I didn’t want to come.”

“Good!” Zack was furious all over again. “We don’t want you here!”

“Your boss does,” Adrian replied tiredly. “Tell her.”

Adrian’s lack of fight stopped Zack’s next words. He snatched the dreaded envelope that had caused everyone else to fall silent.

When Zack brought it up, Marc quickly ripped it open. He wanted this over. “He’s going to take notes. He won’t speak unless spoken to.” Marc let the paper fall to the cold table, sitting down as the rest of leadership protested. Adrian’s freshly rotated

guards being outside the flap, in the cold, made them all even angrier.

“Send them down.” Kenn waved. “Someone from this meeting will escort him.”

Adrian nodded in approval.

“Not me, you asshole!” Kenn snapped as he noticed the response. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Adrian lowered his head and took a seat in the far corner as Kyle told the two men to take a break. He made sure Marc would have a hard time seeing him through the small crowd. He wasn’t trying to hide. He was trying to be considerate.

If you were considerate, you’d blow your brains out in front of MY army!

“I told her this was a bad idea,” Adrian stated stiffly, flushing. “She insisted. I’ll gladly go, right now. Just say the word.”

Marc shut his eyes, fighting for control of the tiger. He was almost at his limit for all of this. “Doctor, you first.”

“Finally! I do require sleep, you know.” The man stood up, reading from his book. “We have nine patients. I examined all of them myself. They’ll survive. Some of the wounds are serious and they’ll need recovery time, but even Angela’s prognosis is now positive.”

The doctor wasn’t being as hateful toward Angela as usual. He looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head. He didn't want more details than that. "Is there anything you need down there? A list of things, maybe?"

"I'm still putting that together. It's been a busy few days in case you hadn't noticed."

Marc's tone grew colder. "You can go."

The doctor stood up. "As soon as I tell you one thing, 'Mr. I'm the leader' now. If you leave without seeing her first, I'll call for a leadership vote. The way people are feeling right now, *anyone* could be elected."

The doctor stormed out of the chilly tent as attention swung to Adrian.

"He's optimistic," Adrian muttered. "I'd be hung long before the vote."

"Yes, you would." Marc moved on. "Jennifer?"

"Our team, along with *the help*, has been clearing a path out of these mountains. We've also done some scavenging. The crates are in Angela's private semi."

"How far have you gotten?" Marc noted the route on the map Angela had included in the notebook.

"Five miles."

Seven, Adrian sent silently.

Jennifer glared at Adrian. "Make that seven miles. *The help* kept working during the beginning of the storm."

"Don't do that!" Marc shouted. "No more secrets!"

“I have information,” Adrian responded calmly. “I have no idea how you want me to do this.”

Marc violently scratched the next item off his list. “Seven miles. Anything you need to tell me or need from me?”

“I’d like to second the doctor’s parting request,” Jennifer tried to joke. “Don’t go without talking to her. She needs you so much more than she does some *outsider*.”

Marc controlled his rage. “Duly noted.”

Jennifer gave Kyle a warm look as she left. She flashed Adrian a glare of hatred. Jennifer still felt he should have been executed for his betrayal. Escorting him around like a privileged rat was enough to make her blood boil.

Marc skipped Cynthia, who was only here to take notes for her next edition. The newspaper was already extremely popular because of her accusing tones. It said she was on the inside and still watching out for them. People liked that. “Zack?”

Zack cleared his throat. “The front gate is an entire loss. We have guards posted again now that the storm has let up, and the snipers are doubled. I think we should keep telling everyone we’re closed to refugees until we get the gate repaired—at least a week.”

“Anything I need to know? Anything you need to get it done?”

“I think we have everything we need, except for plans. The engineering crew is working on it. Ozzie has that information. I do need to tell you that the

camp is unhappy you let Adrian in here without a vote. You'll need to give them something on that to finish calming them down. Otherwise, people are relieved the avalanche took the bad guys this time instead of us."

"Let me know if that changes. You're going to take over topside point now?"

"Yes."

Marc marked it off his list. "I'll stop by in a bit."

Zack left.

Marc looked at Dexter. "How are things below?"

Daryl had been assigned to point in the caves. Dexter had been doing a good job as his right hand.

"Running smoothly, considering all the action. We have the Keeper in the brig down there, with double patrols, and two guards are following our traitor. No crime reports during the chaos and all members are accounted for."

"Consumption numbers yet?" Marc was reading from Angela's notes now.

"In the next couple days. She said we have to send out the food crews the second the storm clears."

"You've talked to her?" Neil hadn't known Angela was awake. Sam hadn't mentioned it.

"She told me before she was taken. We assigned people." Dexter shrugged. "They'll need a day to prepare."

"We'll handle it." Marc grunted. "Anything else?"

Dexter didn't want to get involved in more drama, but he had certain loyalties to maintain, like everyone else here. "When is he leaving?"

Marc placed his hands palm down on the table, pinning Dexter with a harsh glower. "Do you think I want him here?"

Dexter shook his head.

"Do you think I'll have him gone as fast as I can?"

"Yeah, sorry. I had to ask."

"No, you didn't. Daryl's jealousy over Cynthia is unfounded. He hasn't glanced *her* way in months. Tell him I said that."

Dexter flushed, leaving the cold tent.

"Who's next?"

Greg stood up. "I'm sorry."

"She wasn't assigned a shadow down there." Marc waved it off. "She sent you out to protect the gate. You're not in trouble."

"Well, I feel like it! I'm so sorry."

"I can't absolve you from something you haven't done," Marc stated as kindly as he could. "Go see what she wants you doing now. I don't have any notes on it."

Greg's exit was quick and quiet as the few remaining people waited for Marc to pick the next update.

"Oswald?"

Ozzie stood up, expression hurt. "What did I do to you?"

Marc grinned. “Not a damn thing, I’m happy to say. Fill me in.”

Ozzie laughed. “Cool, man. Okay. We got, like, a huge amount of damage, but not in structural places. Give us a week and we’ll have it all running again. The idiot had no idea what he was doing.”

“Good thing,” Neil muttered.

“As for the gate, we do have enough supplies, but Angela told me last week to come up with a better design and like, Jennifer helped. We drew this.” He held out a paper.

Marc gestured for him to keep it. “I have a copy here. It’s good—nice and tight. Two weeks for this one, right?”

“Yes. We’ll try our hardest to have it finished in ten days, but two weeks guarantees we will.”

“She isn’t going to close the gates for two weeks.” Kenn waved toward the buried zones. “You saw her, still taking in people even after the attacks.”

“They’re *our* people, grunt.” Adrian was unable to remain silent. “If you were out there, you’d want in too.”

“You have no authority here!” Kyle glared at Adrian. “Don’t speak unless spoken to.”

“I’ll make the design choice today,” Marc interrupted the coming argument. “Anything else? You guys need anything?”

Ozzie shrugged. “Just time, man.”

The former surfer left the tent, forgetting to zip it behind him.

Kyle glared at Adrian.

Adrian got up and zipped it with a face like stone. Angela had known he would be treated this way. She'd told him he owed it to these men to face them, and so he was, but it wasn't easy.

"You're up." Marc looked at Kenn.

Kenn winced at the wording. Angela's voice echoed in his head, reminding he'd sworn to never cross her. "She had me deliver messages, keep track of plans, and encourage people to stay quiet. Cynthia and I handled it for her during her shifts. She used Kendle sometimes during the evenings."

Marc's profile darkened. "Kendle was part of this?"

"She carried messages, supplies. She hated it."

Marc believed that. Even though it had caused trouble, Kendle would still have loathed taking orders from Angela. The boss had been paying Kendle back after all.

"The radio is mostly quiet," Kenn continued. "We're waiting for orders there. Until then, we've gone to ground."

Marc motioned Kenn to leave. He couldn't stand to hear either of those voices right now.

"Aren't you going to ask if I need anything?" Kenn demanded. "Because I served my time and I'm legal again!"

Marc glowered at Kenn, sending the thought none of them needed to hear to know. *You shouldn't be.*

Kenn flushed and spun for the flap. “I hope you don’t go down and talk to her before you go. That’ll seal it up for her and then we won’t have to put up with your shit anymore. She’s the power here. It’s certainly not you!”

The words filled the tent with awkward silence as Kenn left.

Adrian zipped them up this time without the glare.

Marc read the last few notes, and then looked at Cynthia. “You should go now. Anything I need to know?”

The reporter had already been gathering her papers. “I want to go with you.”

“For yourself or for the paper?”

“Both.” She didn’t elaborate.

“I’ll let you know.” Marc marked it off his list. Of course, he would let her come along. She was carrying a child that Angela had deemed too evil to be born. Cynthia had more rage than he did and they both had a perfect target for it.

“I agree with Kenn, by the way.” Cynthia went to the flap. “Angela was much nicer before you two became a legal couple. You’re not good for her. Let her go so we can all have peace again.” Leaving them shocked, Cynthia exited, zipping the flap.

“What the hell?” Neil spun around to face Marc. “This whole camp has flipped!”

“Stop,” Adrian advised. “He’s hanging onto his control by a thread. Finish this so he can do what he needs to.”

Neil glanced up to find Marc's eyes burning with a hot fire that even sex couldn't extinguish. Neil had never seen his friend so furious.

"Do either of you need to tell me anything?" Marc was able to force out past the fury. He agreed with Neil. Everyone had gone insane.

Neil stood up quickly, swallowing his rant. "The trains have stopped. We assume the storm slowed them down."

"How far away?"

"Two days at the speed they were going, but they could reach the station right down the mountain in a few hours if they roll faster. Train is a point A to point B type of travel."

"Anything else?"

"Not from me." Neil headed for the flap.

"Stay?"

"Sure." Neil obediently sat back down, expression curious.

Marc looked at Kyle.

"We killed roughly three dozen refugees that survived the avalanche. The bodies were put outside the gate, but the ants didn't come out of their cave for them. At last sighting, the majority of the colony was wiped out in the tunnel collapse. We're considering them threats again."

"They are." It had been a big surprise when Angela had adopted them, but he now realized that too had been a ruse. Angela had used the big animals to keep smaller predators away from them, and once here, she'd used them to dispose of

corpses and scare the first waves of refugees to buy time. She'd planned it all.

"Not everything." Adrian refused to let it go when Marc's thoughts went to the baby. "She wouldn't have made *that* choice."

Marc stood up, ignoring Adrian. "I'm taking two teams with me to handle the rest of Tara's people. I can pick or you two can volunteer."

Neil and Kyle exchanged grins.

"We were hoping you'd say that." Kyle started to turn to those pages in his book. "We've been working on some ideas since we found out."

"I'll listen to them on the way." Marc checked his watch. "I'd like to go soon. How long?"

Neil and Kyle compared. "An hour or two?"

"I'll meet you at the rear gate. Her notes said you two have been in charge of loading what's in her private semi. I'd like to know the inventory."

"Presents," Adrian stated when neither of the Eagles could answer. They'd been told not to look and they hadn't. "Gifts for her people for the Christmas she isn't sure we'll get to enjoy. She has hope for everyone." Adrian knew the meeting was over for him with those words and left without being told. Angela had taken over his place and done a better job than he'd predicted. The men in that tent owed her more than they would ever admit.

Adrian stopped as he noticed Zack running toward the canvas shelter he'd just left. He stayed by the flap as Zack went to Marc, certain Angela

would want to know whatever it was that had Zack so excited.

“We have company at the rear gate,” Zack wheezed out. He’d run all the way through the cold and snow. “Indians. Natoli.”

Marc and Kyle exchanged dismayed looks. If Natoli had returned so soon, it only meant one thing.

“The Mexicans.” Neil stared in horror. “Cesar and Sebastian’s people!”

“I hate to add bad news.” Jeremy came into the tent behind Zack. “But I have movement on the radar and it’s not the trains. There’s a swarm of heat coming from the northeast. I have no idea what it is, but it’ll be here in a few days at the rate its traveling.”

“Seth and Becky are back with a truck of crates and bags,” Tonya’s voice came over the radio.

Marc held up the notebook for the men to view, heart thumping as the prediction he’d read fifteen minutes ago was proven.

It comes in threes, but with Seth, is salvation. Get to those crates.

All of them fled toward the rear of the snow covered camp. Except Adrian.

3

Do you need me? Marc asked for the final time. For a long moment, there was only her pain.
Do you still feel the same?

Marc didn't know what he felt. It was too much to process all at once.

I didn't trade the baby. I didn't know.

Marc winced, wanting to believe her. He felt Angela's misery increase, hurting emotions reaching out for comfort that he couldn't give.

Fine! As long as you believe that, no. I don't need you.

Marc now had his excuse to walk through the gate without facing her. He knew it to be the coward's way, even without all the opinions he'd heard on the subject, but those people had no idea how this felt. He hadn't respected Angela's evil side. After the battle with the government, he should have, but in the back of his mind, it was still the witch and Adrian controlling things.

Marc spotted Adrian going toward the destroyed front gate, a kit over his shoulder, and then the sound of clapping and cheering came. Angela had sent him away, back to his banishment.

Does that matter to me?

Marc studied the fully loaded vehicles and the snowplow they hoped would clear the road. Two dozen men glowered at him as he came their way. "I need a minute. Save the fuel."

Engines were happily shut off as Marc put his gear inside the lead truck and headed for the cave. Adrian being evicted from her side worried him. He'd felt okay about leaving her alone because he'd assumed Adrian would be there.

The cold air he'd been treated with vanished as Marc came back into the cave, going to the medical bay. He passed Charlie and Tracy, arm-n-arm and smiling.

"Wise choice." Tracy let Charlie lead her to the living quarters, happy with the days in the cave due to the storm. She'd had a little time to think things through and she was feeling better now. Not good and certainly not safe, but better was a step in the right direction.

"...for that filthy whore? You're kidding, right?"

Candy's voice echoed throughout this level of the cave.

Marc hurried in, growling.

Candy backed up against the rocky wall as Marc marched over to her. "Sorry!"

Marc waved her out, and then everyone else. The bay was crowded with people who wanted to speak with the boss now that she was mostly out of danger. Marc didn't look at her until they were alone.

Angela was still numb. It was terrifying to be this cold and have no one to lean on. She'd sent Adrian away and faked calmness for those who visited, but inside, she was icy. Marc thought she'd traded their daughter. She'd lost the baby and her mate. Her head dropped as tears slipped out. Even while crying, she felt nothing but cold.

The medical team that wasn't needed also exited the area, leaving the couple alone.

Marc sat down in the chair by her bed, studying her bandages and bruises, the frostbitten fingers and cheeks. She was forever being hurt for these people or for one of her goals. He would never be okay with that, but this time, her choices had cost them a child.

“Yes.” Angela tried to stop crying in front of him. She didn’t want him to think she was on a guilt trip. She forced herself to swallow the pain and be strong. He didn’t deserve this. She did.

Marc couldn’t deny the truth as he read her thoughts, her agony at overlooking the small details that would have told her she’d calculated the time wrong. What he didn’t find, was regret for not telling him.

“I have one question.”

“Shoot.” Angela knew what it was. If he asked, then everything would change.

“*Would* you have traded our daughter for our country? Or Charlie?”

Her heart broke. He honestly thought she was brutal enough now to trade kids off as if they didn’t mean anything to her. Nothing would ever be the same between them again.

“Angie?”

Angela knew he expected her to say that one child was a small price to pay for the future of their country, but it hadn’t been one life and she loved her children. *How can he not know that?* “No. That’s why she was taken. Fate knows if I ever have to make that choice, they’ll come first. My kids will always be a target. I’ve sentenced them to this.”

Marc felt his anger finally fading. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Angela didn't answer.

"Why did you do all this alone? Was it because of me?"

"Yes. It would have been a betrayal of my promise to you. I couldn't ask him to help."

"There were Eagles...and me."

"Not like us." Fresh tears ran unchecked over her cheeks. "Even Jennifer was affected by Tara's gifts."

"But not Adrian?"

"I couldn't be found with Adrian at the scene of a slaughter!" Angela tried to explain, feeling her coldness grow as Marc interrogated her without showing any compassion for her wounds—mental or physical. "Neither you, nor the camp would have forgiven that."

"We still won't forgive him! He's a traitor."

"I'm going to bring him back in," Angela told him tonelessly. "You'll need to accept it."

"Even when we work this out, I still won't share you!"

Angela slowly lifted her head, revealing a face that Marc had never seen. She was beyond bleak or desolate.

"I'm corrupt." She shuddered. "I'll have what I want now, including the traitor. Be certain you can accept me all the way when you get back. My days of respecting *your* limits are over!"

Marc recognized the hatred staring at him. She thought Adrian was right.

“Right and wrong no longer mean anything to me, Marc. Only survival does.” Angela turned away as the tears suddenly dried up and exhaustion swarmed. “There isn’t a line I won’t cross now.”

“I can’t support it, if it’s not right.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t bother.” Her head swiveled toward him, revealing that endless sorrow again. “That’s what you’re thinking about anyway, right?”

Marc slowly nodded. “For a little while.”

Angela laughed bitterly. “Good.”

“What?”

“Good! I can’t have another child. I lost my baby and all you can think of is how you weren’t included on things or what it all means for you down the road! Adrian told me a childhood obsession isn’t love, but I refused to believe him. It turns out he was right.” Her harsh laughter quickly switched to thick tears.

Marc realized his own feelings should have at least been put on hold until he knew her prognosis. He hadn’t even waited for the doctor to finish checking her over before he began handing out coldness.

Angela glanced down at the thumb she would probably lose the tip of due to frostbite. “I’m going to recover. I’ll lead most of these people from our homeland and settle them in some foreign place. I’ll do my duty to the dream until I’m dead. That’s my

line. You need to figure out yours because everything changed.”

“For us or for the camp?” Marc was now getting nervous. She sounded like she was ending things. He’d thought space was a good idea, but the pain said it wasn’t what he honestly wanted.

“Both.” Angela hit the button on the morphine drip as pain sank deep into her abdomen. “You’re either with me or you’re not. When you get back, I’ll need an answer on that.”

Marc stood up, heart thumping. “I can give it to you now.”

Angela nodded, tears coursing again as she braced for his exit. “Go ahead.”

Marc slowly took off his Eagle jacket and placed it over her exposed feet. He took his gun belt off and placed it on the small utility table. “I’m resigning from your army.”

“Resignation accepted,” Angela choked out. She hadn’t predicted any of this. They were both running on pure emotions.

Marc sighed heavily, not needing to listen to his demon or his brain. There was only one thing he could do here.

Marc carefully climbed into the bed with her, wrapping her up gently when her tears became harsh sobs of regret. Corrupt or not, he would always want her.

As she calmed enough to hear him, Marc leaned his head against hers. “I’m not giving you up that easy, you cruel bitch!”

Angela couldn't pick between crying or laughing and chose to do both, face buried against his chest.

"Obsession or love, it doesn't matter, does it?" Marc asked quietly a few minutes later.

Angela shook her head, voice muffled. "Not to me. I've always wanted you too, in any way I can have you. That won't *ever* change."

Marc held her as she drifted off, the morphine making the choice for her. He was still as upset as he had been, but now, he also felt like he could sort it out while he was gone. She was worth the effort. Adrian was right about that. She was amazing. She was also incredibly cruel. *But is he right about the rest of it? If he is, how do I change that part of me without becoming corrupt?*

You can't, his demon stated, enjoying the physical contact. *You have to be the knight in shining armor who continues to slay the dragons. Without your light, she'll fall and take everyone down with her.*

Why?

Because fate is a fickle bitch who delights in tormenting humanity. That also, will never change.

And Adrian?

Will get what he deserves. This was his plan. Do you think she'll let him off after the death of her child? He'll pay more at her hands than you can ever dream.

Guess I'd better be around for that, Marc decided, shifting slightly but not getting up. He'd missed her in his arms over the last weeks.

Her heart is a bitter void that will lead these people through the second half of the journey. Stay close. She has enemies everywhere.

Marc tightened his hold on her instinctively. Mad or not, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to keep her safe. After all she'd been through, he didn't think he could stand to witness her hurt even one more time.

Then don't leave her alone too long, the demon stated ominously. *Fate has already flipped a new wildcard and she's terrified of it. She can't handle this alone anymore.*

"She won't be alone." Marc leaned back to view her profile. Even in sleep, the tears were still oozing out. "We'll help her. That's what Safe Haven does for people. It knocks them down as low as they can go and rebuilds them. I think it was her turn, like the Keeper said."

In the brig above them, Chauncey laughed silently. *Your day will come, Marcus Brady. And so will your son's. I can't wait to record it.*

The End of Book 6

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes BK6

It took hours to get things arranged according to Angela's new layout, but by mealtime, Safe Haven was up and running, and many people were already noticing the difference. Three bathroom stations, two parking areas, and the garden near the livestock made things easier, but each area now having water and supply trucks would also reduce time spent on chores. People assumed it was for conservation of energy and it was. Angela wanted her people to pick up a little weight, while it might be possible. Once inside those caves, they would ration everything, down to the very last seed.

No one noticed there was no space slotted for games like football and baseball. Angela had counted on the evening meal to help with that. Who wanted to run around and shed calories after a giant steak? Tomorrow, everyone would be too busy and tired for games.

By nightfall, the bright center fire was surrounded by the usual group and the mess was crowded with laughter and relief. They were home, at least for a while.

On a cliff much smaller and more isolated than he had planned on, Adrian observed his peaceful camp without the clear view he'd first had. Marc was erecting the walls around Safe Haven, sweating

and joking with the other men as if he'd been born for it. Adrian wanted him dead.

The banished leader spun toward his tent, ignoring David's shadow and Conner's concerned questions. Everyone would have to fend for themselves for a bit longer. He had plans to finish.

Conner got up and made their fire. At some point, Adrian would come out fighting, right?

David studied the father and son, awed to be with the infamous Adrian, but also disappointed as well. He had clearly missed out on the best of the Mitchel family ride.

Deleted Scene #2 BK6

“Can you help me?”

Kyle rolled over to ask what she needed help with and found Jennifer holding her top up so he could reach her bra clasp.

Kyle swallowed nervously as his big fingers slid over her ribs and gently unhooked the soft material. Kyle sucked in air as his vision blurred. He’d forgotten that he needed oxygen.

“Will you rub right where it meets? I can’t reach it to do that.”

Kyle knew what she was doing. They’d made camp in the lobby of the lodge, wanting daylight to explore a cabin, and Autumn was with Whitney. Jennifer had sworn she was tired and suggested a nap together and now here they were, about to get...intimate.

Kyle realized she planned to push the issue and groaned.

Jennifer waited until Kyle sat down to pick up a stack of gear and then dove at him.

He fell backwards onto the air mattress and had no time to brace as she slid her body up his in full, delicious contact.

Jennifer didn’t stop when she got to his waist. She leaned down and pushed her lips to his, nervous and excited at her own bravery.

Kyle wouldn't have pushed her away in that moment for any reason. He kissed her like he'd always wanted to. He tasted her, sliding his arms around her waist.

Jennifer reveled in her success. She shoved the fear down when his hand slipped to the small of her back and pressed their hips together. His hardness was a steel rod against her thigh. She followed through with her plan. She bucked against him.

“Oh, yeah,” he moaned against her cheek. “Whatever you want, baby!”

Emboldened, Jennifer adjusted their position until hard and heat were lined up. When she bucked, they moaned together, exactly like in his dream.

Damn.

I'm dreaming again. Kyle snapped awake.

Jennifer was facing him on the bed, curiosity and nervousness on her face.

Kyle flushed. “Mornin’.”

Jennifer slowly reached out and cupped his neck, tugging.

Kyle surrendered without a fight, wanting her.

Jennifer mashed their lips together, trying not to freeze or panic, and felt his hands come up to tangle in her unbound hair.

Drawing on her courage, she took his hand and wrapped it around hers. Then she put it on the bulge she'd been fascinated by while he dreamed.

Kyle bucked as she touched him, lost in sharp, involuntary spasms of pleasure.

He obviously liked it; Jennifer molded her hand to him and waited.

Kyle struggled to think and breathe. When he figured out what she wanted, he groaned. “I gotta stop now. I—”

Jennifer kissed him, letting her lips remain parted.

Kyle was lost. He hadn’t had his tongue in her mouth yet and he wasn’t passing up this opportunity.

Jennifer felt the tension grow and then he took over, moving her hand in short, hard jerks that ripped guttural groans from his lips that she caught with her own. His pleasure wasn’t scary like she’d expected, but it was a turn-on. Her body was throbbing in time to his.

Kyle stopped as the line between frustration and pain was reached. She knew what had to happen next. Her hand went to the button of his jeans and popped it.

Kyle’s hand covered hers, stopping the fingers on his zipper. “I’m not ready yet.”

Jennifer ignored him and tugged the zipper down. She pressed her lips to his again as her hand curled around him. Kyle’s hips rose in time to her strokes.

Jennifer knocked him out quickly, as she always had when Cesar wanted a hand job, but with Kyle, she wasn’t scared of anything coming next. He would be perfectly happy with this.

Jennifer increased the pace, listening to his tortured breathing and sexy groans telling her how sweet she was, how he liked her being sweet. It made her nipples harden against his chest.

His free hand slid up her hip and brushed her breast. Timing it, Jennifer switched into those brutally vicious, short jerks.

Kyle groaned loudly as his climax came.

Jennifer rode the waves, almost wishing it wasn't over yet. She'd enjoyed doing this for him.

Kyle was gasping and groaning, unable to believe how fast he'd lost control of the situation.

Jennifer rested on his chest, listening to his wildly thumping heart. Before, she'd cowered by her pole. Now, she snuggled against Kyle's chest and felt the world become right again as he hugged her and whispered how much he loved her. She fell into a light doze quickly, leaving Kyle to question if he was actually awake.

The uncomfortable position of his arm convinced Kyle that it had happened and he vowed to be stronger. She wasn't ready for this, wasn't old enough, and he couldn't let it happen again. If he did, he would crave it every time they were alone together and she deserved to be treated better than that. Full of guilt he had no room for, Kyle drifted into an uneasy slumber.

Deleted Scenes #3 BK6

Marc spotted Hilda striding briskly toward the supply trucks and hid a grin. She'd been trying to get a moment alone with Billy for the last few days. Marc had been in earshot when Daryl warned the driver what was coming. Billy had remained mysteriously absent since then. He did have duty on the trucks that Hilda was nearly at, but not until dawn when his reward week of easy labor started. Hilda was about to be disappointed again.

Marc yawned. He'd be happy when they had a third person trained to handle these overnight shifts. He and Angie covered things the entire time they were awake; they needed a good third to give them both a break here and there. Adrian was the only other person who could do it right now, but Marc knew the camp wouldn't go for it even if he and Angela would. That meant long shifts apart until Zack was stronger, Kyle was less distracted, or another trustworthy person with leadership skills joined them.

Marc gravitated toward the darkest part of the topside—the supply area—and saw Billy escort Hilda into one of the unused trucks.

Marc grinned in surprise. “That liar!”

Billy had insisted he wasn't going to service anyone anymore. Marc considered interrupting them for the fun of it, but chose not to. Hilda's quick

walk had been from more than the cold. She needed a release and Billy was obviously willing. *I'll tease them later.*

Place a Review BK6

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Marc And Angie

Marc And Angie chronicles a forbidden love that brought down a crime family and crushed them all in the process.

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Eagle Teams

Former Eagle Teams

Kyle: Cris, Daryl, Shawn, Billy, Morgan, Crone, Denny, Theo, Angela.

Neil: Jeremy, Greg, Wade, Ben, Daniel, Jake, Tim, Steven.

Zack: Allan, Donald, Lee, Frank, Ozzie, Brandon, Simon, Pete.

Seth: Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy, Joey, Robert.

Kevin: Ray, Dexter, Logan, Alex, Francis, Scott, Josh, Whitney.

Marc: Quinn, Shane, Jax, Logan, Paul, Bobby, Howard, Dwayne, George.

Angela: Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Leslie, Rebecca, Tracy, Tonya, Candy, Crista.

Rookie: Tyler, Nathan, Cody, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Gary, Andrew.

New Eagle Teams

Eagle Special Forces

Team #1: Kyle, Daryl, Shawn, Morgan, Billy, Shane, Jax.

Team #2: Neil, Jeremy, Greg, Tommy, Wade, Ben, Quinn.

Level Eagle Teams

Level 6: Zack, Seth, Allan, Donald, Brandon, Jake, Logan, Whitney.

Level 5: Theo, Simon, Tim, Ozzie, Francis, Candy, Gary.

Level 3: Marc, Ray, Josh, Dexter, Bobby, Howard, Scott, Tyler.

Level 1, Team #1: Angela, Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Kendle, Rebecca, Tracy.

Level 1, Team #2: Cody, Nathan, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Andrew.

Rookie Team #1: Kenn, Joseph, Charlie, Sheila, Conner, Courtney, Julia, Randal.

Rookie Team #2: Jonny, Kim, Ian, Eddie, Rod,
Molly, Harry, Michael.

Book 7



Shattered Dreams

1

“Fire in the hole!”

Marc waited for the rumble, sure a few others were doing the same. After three days of Adrian blocking and blowing roads to their den, the notification didn't garner attention from the Eagles. In fact, it was mostly ignored. People in this mountain had more problems than a former leader hanging around.

Marc had told the camp what was coming. He'd also assigned Samantha and a few others to monitor the situation. The result was a twitchy council who needed reassurances from their boss, but none were coming. Angela wasn't in any condition to comfort others. All she did was cry when she was awake, so the doctors were sedating her. Even when Marc was with her, the tears were constant. That man wasn't certain how much more of it he could handle. He wanted *his* Angie back, even if she was a cruel, self-centered bitch.

They'd talked a little more and he understood why she'd made the choices she had, but it didn't stop the anger or the guilt. If she had told him what she planned, he would have helped, not interfered. She had no right to exclude him that way and then blame him for what went wrong. At the same time, if he had been able to follow her plans in the past, instead of always second-guessing her choices, then maybe she would have confided in him. The gulf between them could now hold entire towns.

The camp also ignored the rumbling from the new explosions. Marc had informed everyone they would be hearing those noises regularly while Adrian sealed up the mountain. Angela had sent him out to handle that chore alone in the dying snowstorm, with dazed, angry refugees and betrayed ants roaming everywhere. Marc wasn't sure if she was trying to kill Adrian, though he was rooting for it. He did hope she let the traitor get the roads and paths blocked first.

There were too many threats in range for Marc's liking, and then there were the three items that Seth and Becky had brought back: iodine, water purification tablets, and military-grade dosimeters. He didn't want to know what horror would cause them to use the personal patches. He had his hands full with the current problems. It was infuriating to Marc that yet another group wouldn't let them have peace. He wanted to challenge them all, but nothing would get him to counter Angela's plans and plots right now. She'd only given a few orders since being carried down the bloody mountain, but Marc was making sure they were followed—against his own wishes. He didn't want to bunker-in. He wanted to rush out and meet Vlad's populace with his fury. Safe Haven had fought for ten months to keep it together. They had sacrificed and suffered enough. *When do we get a break?*

According to previous words from their seer, no break was coming until they reached true safety. People now assumed that was Pitcairn Island. Kendle had no idea how popular she would be when she returned. Some of the Eagles worried that she might keep going on her own, but Marc didn't. Kendle was terrified of being on the ocean again, alone and helpless. She wanted to go, but the method of transport was going to keep her with them.

Marc wondered how she would react when she found the cruise ship. There was no way she would deal well with that. Marc was glad they would be

pulling other boats that would need a skeleton crew. It would allow Kendle a different type of ship for the journey that Theo had calculated would take over a month. Instead of traversing the country again, or worse, dipping into foreign coasts as they tried to slide through on their way to Pitcairn Island, they were going to sail all the way around South America. They planned to stay in the open ocean until it was time to ride the deadly currents around the tip and be spit out near their destination—if they survived. Marc was forever impressed with Angela’s courage and ambition. He also thought she was nuts.

Marc leaned under the hot water. After everything the world had gone through, it was a wonder all the survivors weren’t lunatics.

The radio on the rocky shower ledge crackled with Billy’s excited voice. “Ants are clear from all levels above three.”

The ants, angry about being betrayed and needing a new home, were now digging into Safe Haven. They were finding cracks and crevices, but worse, old shafts that had been covered by years of debris. There were a lot more tunnels down here than anyone had realized. As the ants came through and the newest branch-off was discovered, the security risks were being plugged or collapsed. Theo’s team was doing that carefully from the inside, while Adrian did the rest from outside. Marc hoped it went well. He would be glad when it was finished. If this cave system started to fall in, there

was no way he would be able to get everyone out alive.

“We’re clear of ants, all levels!” Morgan called cheerfully.

The Eagles had obviously had another battle with the large insects. That rush of happy adrenaline came from surviving, from being successful in a mission. Marc knew it well. He still craved it some days, but the apocalypse had already given him plenty of action and there would be more. There was no danger of his skills becoming rusty.

Already scrubbed, Marc lingered, enjoying the intense steam of a scalding shower. He still hadn’t gotten used to having the wonderful convenience again. His showers, unless Angie was along, had been quick to save water and let him get on to the next duty or challenge. Now, they were sheltering in place for a month. He could take all the time he wanted.

The bottom floor shower was empty around him, with a set of guards who had snapped to when he came in and still hadn’t relaxed. Knowing their attention was on their job allowed Marc to sink down on the seat beneath the ledge that held his guns and radio. He adjusted the water so it was a hot trickle on his shoulders, then leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. Kenn and Zack, with Kyle and Jennifer over them, were policing the top level of their cave.

Neil’s team was covering the second floor, with Daryl and Cynthia supervising two rookie teams on

level three. Ray and most of Marc's old team were down here on level four. Things were being handled like Angela had instructed. Marc suddenly wished she was here with him so he could hold her in this cloud of peaceful air and promise her things would get better, that the doctor was wrong.

Her injuries were healing quicker than the doctor was comfortable with, but even he was following instructions to document descendant medical facts to share with the other personnel. There were only a few differences, but they were huge. Future generations would need that information. To conceal his nervousness, the doctor was now traveling in a pack of students, using them to bolster his courage. Marc approved of the coping technique and the training. He'd thought the doctor would have to be run out of Safe Haven because of his attitude, but Angela's injury had revealed the doctor's attachment to her despite their love-hate relationship. He was giving her excellent care, according to Hilda and Peggy, who were always nearby.

The radio echoed again, this time with Tonya's calm tone. "Power has been reestablished in the gaming area. You may resume your free time there."

They were still repairing Jayson's treachery. They were also fixing minor issues that would have come up anyway. Marc was satisfied with their shelter. If not for the other problems Angela had

predicted, he would never consent to leave. These mountains had been perfect.

Marc wondered how much time they had before the next crisis hit, but quickly shoved the thought away. This was his downtime to contemplate and restore his faith. Later, there would be runs and guns, and then deals and steals. The snowstorm had finally let up, allowing them to send men out again for food and water, and some basic gear. The lower level Eagles would make that run while Marc took Angela out of the mountain. The storm had slowed the train people, but they were arriving now. He expected to hear from them within the next few hours. She had to be moved. She wasn't safe in camp.

Marc turned off the water and tugged his towel down. Draping it over his lap, he remained in the steam, enjoying the sensation. He hadn't been in a sauna for a long time. The stone walls and floor in here made this a similar experience. It reminded him of the days he'd stolen for himself over the years. He had liked going to a ski lodge where no one knew him, or an isolated park, if he felt like roughing it.

Life after war was much like how he had existed before the bombs, except that the stress levels were always through the roof and the supplies weren't sent out all neatly packed and ready for his use. He'd held a theory that an apocalypse would make things easier in some ways, but he'd been wrong. The old world of convenience was gone, but it

surprised Marc to still be mourning it. He knew some of the camp was also feeling that way. It was hard not to, especially with running water and electricity in the caves, but knowing they were leaving again had brought on this retrospective mindset.

None of these people were eager to go. Even those who believed this place to be cursed were enjoying the TV room, the game cubby, the hot showers, and the activity floor. Despite the chaos that had taken place, Safe Haven was calm and relatively happy right now. Angela had lived, Vlad was gone, and there were no more refugees screaming at their gate. If not for overcrowding and her predictions, things would be perfect.

Marc winced as the image of her bloody body on the mountain ran through his mind. *Maybe not perfect.*

She'd told him he was in charge. The camp already assumed he was, but she'd known it had to be official. Their witnesses, the doctor and students, had approved. They knew his leadership would be enough to get them through until she recuperated, but it bothered Marc to hear the rest of that thought. *We hope.* Agree with her methods or not, everyone knew Angela was the best person for the job of keeping them alive.

It made Marc need to do better, grow stronger. He had believed things were covered before the chaos wiped away his delusions. This time he wouldn't make that mistake. He was double and

triple checking his plans and decisions, trying to glimpse further ahead like she and Adrian were able to do. He didn't know if his shortsightedness could be unlearned, but he was determined to try. He was also determined that he wouldn't be corrupted the way their former leaders had been. He hated to include Angie in with that, but the proof was undeniable. She'd known the avalanche was coming and let it happen to kill hundreds of desperate refugees, and she'd taken lifeforces. It didn't hurt him to be with someone who could do those things, but it was killing him to know that she'd fallen. She'd been full of light, despite awful childhood events and worse things as an adult, and he knew she was torn apart over it. *His* Angie had always been good. For that to change meant she wasn't at peace with herself anymore. She would need help through this.

"But not from me," he muttered, anger and pain rising. There was no way he could be unbiased. Intentional or not, her choices had cost him a child.

Tears that no one would ever witness slid down Marc's cheeks. His dreams of a happy family with Angie shattered and ran over his cheeks in torrents. He had no idea how they would go on from this.

"Rock is secure. I'm in for the night."

Adrian's message over the radio reminded Marc that he'd been in here long enough to draw attention. He quickly wiped away the evidence and began drying off. It would be a long night, but hopefully also a quiet one. Marc had a tight rein on

his emotions now, but it wouldn't take very much to send him into the Marine and no one wanted that while Adrian was locked in the mountain with them. Everything would collapse during the fight, including Safe Haven.

2

"I need to talk to her."

Shawn glared at Jennifer, not caring that the mess was crowded or that Kyle was a few feet away. "I won't let you guys interrogate her again. She's just a little kid."

"Stop saying that!" Missy complained loudly, making Shawn wince.

Jennifer took a minute to evaluate the situation before responding, a bit stung that Shawn would think she was a threat. If anything, she was a defender of the kids here. He should know that, but the coldness he was being treated to was making him defensive. Jennifer was sympathetic, but she also agreed with his punishment. It would keep the other Eagles on their toes about letting relationships distract them from their jobs.

Shawn felt the weight of Jennifer's study, but he didn't dig the hole any deeper. A lot of the guys had come by to talk to Missy, not caring that they would scare her or bring up bad memories. Shawn didn't want to be bonded with the child, but he was. Everyone would just have to accept it.

“They might, in time.” Jennifer joined them at the table. Missy didn’t stop coloring the giant pumpkin on the page.

The child’s skill with the crayons was impressive. Jennifer spent a moment admiring the outlining, the shading and blending the girl had done. All the hues of orange were represented. *Does that mean something?* Jennifer was trying to hone the instincts and skills that made Angela so effective.

Shawn dropped his chin as a group of Special Forces men strode by to their usual table in the rear of the wide area. They didn’t glance at him.

Missy looked at Jennifer, orbs glowing red. “I’m going to make them stop doing that. I don’t like it.”

Sighing, Jennifer whistled to get Greg’s attention. It drew everyone.

Jennifer cleared her throat. “She says it’s enough. He’s being punished by camp rules, but if you don’t stop being mean to...her man,” Jennifer choked out, “she’ll pay you back.”

Missy’s red orbs were a warning and a threat.

Morgan spoke to the child, still ignoring Shawn. “This is what he deserves, what we’d all deserve if we had done what he did. If you protect him from it, he’ll never be one of us again.”

Missy didn’t like that either, but her irises faded into soft brown confusion. “Why?”

“A man admits when he’s wrong and accepts the consequences,” Shawn stated firmly. “Leave them be.”

Missy’s lips thinned into a line of anger. “Fine.”

Jennifer, and others, hid smirks at how much she sounded like an adult female.

Shawn sighed. “Don’t be mad. It’ll fade in time.”

“They’ll let you back in?”

Shawn shrugged. “If I earn it, yes, but I’m not sure that’s what I want any more anyway.”

“You’re letting this drive you out?” Jennifer was surprised. His bond with the little girl was stronger than she’d judged.

Missy snorted. “He’s worried over his strength and intelligence. It has nothing to do with me.”

Shawn couldn’t take any more humiliation right then. “I’ll be back when you’re done.” Shawn marched angrily to the coffee line where the people there fell silent in condemnation.

Missy regarded Jennifer in desperation. “He can’t quit! I lose him if he quits.”

Jennifer was a bit stunned at the emotion in the child’s words, despite knowing descendants were advanced beyond their physical years. She dug into Missy’s mind, scared she was being hurt.

Missy let the woman explore her mind. She had nothing to hide.

Relieved that her first notion about Shawn wasn’t true, Jennifer leaned forward so they

wouldn't be overheard. "I'll help you. Will you help me?"

Missy grinned. "That's easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Helping you is easy. You only need two things, and you already have them both."

Autumn and Kyle.

Missy beamed. "They feel the same way."

Warmed, Jennifer placed a hand on the little girl's thin wrist. "I'd like to view everything that happened, everything you saw and overheard. May I? I'll stay with you through the pain."

Missy had paled, peering around nervously. "Here?"

Jennifer nodded. "We all need to know what happened. It will give this camp some of the peace that Tara stole from us."

Missy slowly put the crayon down. "Okay..." She put her free hand under the table and shut her eyes.

Jennifer relayed the images and conversations that were important, storing the rest to give to Marc or Angela. Few people would ever know the fine details of Missy's abuse. That privacy, small though it was, would help the girl adapt. "Tara and Donner were sent here by the government. He attacked directly. She was supposed to become one of us and wait for Jack and the descendants on the train to arrive. Missy convinced Jack that he wouldn't survive unless he split up from his protection. She convinced him that *they* were the targets of death."

Around them, Shawn and many camp members moved closer. They wanted to hear the details. Shawn wanted Missy to be giving the information willingly.

“She knew if he came to Safe Haven, Angela and the others here would be able to kill him and Tara for what they’ve done...” Jennifer forced herself to continue, heart breaking. “For killing her real mom.”

Murmurs ran through the mess which was now quiet enough to let Jennifer’s voice carry to the sentry on the entrance to the mess—Zack. Pity for the girl hit him in hard waves.

“Jack’s men, some of them, were passive descendants—meaning their gifts are dormant so they aren’t picked up on mental grids. They are called Invisibles.”

Across the tables, Kenn kept his profile blank. *That’s what I am. I’m an Invisible.*

“Safe Haven was always a target, even back as far as the bowling alley. The government has had satellites tracking this camp since January.”

“Was Donner or Tara working with Adrian?” Jennifer demanded before anyone else could. “Did he help Tara get into Safe Haven?”

“Who is Adrian?” Missy asked innocently.

Jennifer frowned, catching the girl’s manipulation. “The man who was boss of Safe Haven then.”

Missy stared blankly.

Jennifer knew the child was lying, but she was about to get to the information they needed the most and let it go. Later she would ponder why the girl felt a lie was best there. “Keep going.”

“Jack and Tara were supposed to wait for the trains.” Missy frowned. “Jack couldn’t. Jayson almost did, but he got scared. Safe Haven’s light was eating at him, trying to sway him to be good. He triggered the trap too soon and Tara had no choice but to get on board right then or be exposed anyway.”

“Tara didn’t want to do it?”

“Oh, she wanted it, just not right then. She wanted to wait for her sister on the train.”

“Go on,” Jennifer encouraged over the muttering.

“Tara used her gift to confuse the few who might have figured things out. She took energy without permission from everyone who guarded her, except for Tracy. She was scared of the Ghost. She wouldn’t mess with him or his family while she waited. She only had one target.”

Charlie, pausing while escorting Tracy to dinner, was glad to hear it even though he was furious that Tara had been able to use others.

Missy showed Jennifer the images. “She tried to kill Angela. A lot. See?”

Jennifer absorbed the mental pictures in horror. “She got the job at the mess so she could poison Angela.”

Li Sing scowled. “Evil woman quit when told her no, only I serve the chain of command. I taste each dish too.”

Li received calls of approval and respect from the crowd.

Jennifer kept going, getting angrier. “Tara tried to give Jack signals when he came, but the code was too similar to what Adrian had taught the Eagles so she couldn’t give him any information that mattered. She...” Jennifer’s head snapped around to Missy. “She tried to sabotage the cave. Theo interrupted her before she could.”

“Did anyone know all of this was going on?” Doug demanded from the next table. “Did she have help?”

Almost everyone immediately thought of or looked at Shawn.

Jennifer was still exploring the girl’s memories. “I don’t think so. Jayson and Tara had done this before, in Canada. They went in pretending to be refugees, like they did here. Angela knew what was coming and stopped it. Canada wasn’t as lucky. They burned alive in their bunker.”

“So Angela did know?” Marc was at the entrance. He’d come in a moment before, drawn by the waves of anger and disappointment.

“Yes. She stopped Missy from telling us the truth that first day we picked them up.”

“Why?”

Jennifer would have answered, but Missy stopped her. “That’s not for us to say.”

Jennifer sighed. “As much as I understand, kid, not this time. Tell him. He has the right to know.”

Missy focused on Marc with sympathy and sadness. “You were going to die in that fight. She didn’t want you there.”

“She saved you.” Jennifer grunted in anger. “She didn’t know Vlad would punch her in the gut.”

“No one could have known that.” Missy shrugged. “Even my details aren’t that fine.”

Jennifer understood what the girl was trying to do, but she didn’t concur. Marc deserved to know the truth. Angela had gone up that mountain alone to save him. The price had been their child.

“And why do I have to know that?!” Marc spat, furious. “Why does it matter?”

Jennifer glared at him. “Because you can’t help her if you don’t understand how much she loves you. She went up there to die for you if it was needed. She didn’t know the baby was going to be his target. You have to help her. You’re the only one who can.”

Marc knew that to be a lie. He spun from the mess, mind chaotic again. He hated this shit. When did it end?

Jennifer looked at Missy. “Ready to finish it?”

“Yes.” Missy sighed, sounding so old and tired that people moved away from her table. “I’ve had enough of secrets.”

Shawn, pulled by her unhappiness, went to the now empty mess line and began making her a cup of hot chocolate.

“Tell us the rest.” Jennifer allowed her gift to come forward. “Tell the truth and be accepted into this camp in the ways that Tara never could be.”

Missy shuddered. “They’re coming. Tara’s killers are coming.” Allowed to say it now, Missy’s fear bubbled over. “They’ll kill you all! They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Shawn was there to pull the girl into his arms, hoping to forestall her screams. When she got wound up, it got ugly.

Missy curled against Shawn, shaking. Her pitch lowered to an uneasy whisper. “They’re almost here. They want my friend Angie.”

Shawn comforted the child, glaring at those closest. She’d only been out of the medical bay for one full day.

It was clear that he wouldn’t let the conversation continue, but it didn’t need to. The truth was out.

Before it could cause more chaos, Jennifer looked at Kyle. “The boss has it covered.”

“You’re sure?” he replied on cue, thinking he was lucky and cursed to have a mate who was so smart. She could outdistance him so easily.

“Yes. I trust her with my life.”

Kyle smiled at her. “So do I. What can we do to help?”

Jennifer stood up. “Keep this camp together, follow the rules, help the new arrivals...survive. That’s all she wants for us.”

Kyle smiled again as Jennifer came to him and slid under his big arm, forcing him to embrace her publicly.

Eased, some of the camp went back to eating, while others went to spread the word about what they'd all learned. None of them were terrified despite Missy's chilling warning. They'd been reminded of Angela's wisdom and her goals—their survival. There was no need to panic as long as she was still looking out for them.

“Is she?” Kyle used a quick hug to disguise the question.

“Yes.” Jennifer didn't elaborate. What she'd picked up from their leader's mind was so bad that it was almost unforgivable. It was also perfect and Jennifer wasn't going to risk anyone interfering, not even Kyle.

3

“Good morning, Safe Haven,” Kenn called over the radio, eager to have the daily address finished so he could prepare for the list of work Marc had assigned. “I have two short announcements for you. The first is we have extra clothing in the shelter rooms now. You can take three full outfits, plus blankets and sheets. Isn't it great to have to make your bed again?” Kenn waited a moment for any chuckles to die out before continuing. “The last notice is a reminder that gardens are mandatory for every family and couple. Stop by the garden area to

pick up a small dome with your choice of fruit or vegetable. As you know, the small domes have venting holes and can be opened and closed to retain warmth. Please remember to sit them under the grow lights that are being installed along the shelves. We need to do our share, especially since we all like to eat our share.” Kenn waited again, judging the mood, before adding, “That’s it for now, folks. Have a Safe Haven day!”

Listening from the small research room she’d convinced Angela to add before they entered the cave, Tonya rolled her eyes. Some days Kenn was great on the air and then there were days like this, when it was obvious that he didn’t want to be doing it.

Tonya smiled politely at the man who appeared in the doorway. Green was shy, but fast with his fists when in the cage. “Was the doctor in?”

“Yeah.” Green gestured, tone bitter. “He said no.”

“He said what?”

“No.” Green waited for the explosion.

“Why?”

Green lowered his voice. “The doctor refuses to turn this camp into a bunch of potheads.”

Tonya’s rage lit up her entire face. “Did he even read the research that I sent?”

“No.”

Tonya snatched the folder from his hand. “Get somebody on my post for a little while, will you?”

She stomped out before Green could answer. He sat down in her chair without resentment. Being a level two was easier than being a level one, and it was definitely better than being a rookie. He didn't mind running messages and working duty slots. That was easy. Dealing with fiery redheads who didn't know when to quit? That was hard.

Passing fans and various detectors, Tonya stormed through the damp, chilly cave. She didn't whine about the lack of warmth. She also didn't grumble about the dim lights or the bugs slithering along dank walls that never seemed to dry up. She had bigger complaints. The research she'd been doing was conclusive enough to be tested, and someone was going to do it or she was going to raise enough hell to bring these stone walls down.

Everyone who saw her got out of the way. Tonya didn't have descendant powers, but she had a nasty temper and a quick punch. That was usually enough for most people. Add in the fact that the only time she acted this way was if there was a serious problem and the result was instant alertness in every area that she passed through. Guards snapped to attention and began sweeping for trouble.

Tonya shoved her way through the medical tunnel, where half of the doctor's little assistants were busy running back and forth. She jerked the curtain open into the main area, not caring who was in there or what was going on. "I want to talk to you!"

The doctor didn't glance up from the blood pressure dial he was monitoring. "Get out of here."

Furious that the man refused to follow orders, Tonya marched over to the table. She shoved Millie out of the way, using the camp name for the doctor's students. "Move aside, duck!"

She leaned over Angela's unconscious form, trying to ignore how awful the woman looked. "She gave you an order before all of this happened. She told you to follow John's plan for the cancer treatments. How dare you disobey her when she's not able to enforce the rules!"

The doctor unfastened the cuff and recorded the numbers on the chart.

His refusal to even discuss the matter infuriated Tonya further, but unlike in the past, she was able to handle it in a way that got her point across. "She's hearing everything that's happening, doctor. You may not understand how it works with her, but I do. When she wakes up, the first thing she's gonna ask is how the treatments are going. If you don't have an answer, you might be tossed out."

The doctor snorted. "I'm much too valuable to be pitched out like a common refugee."

All around the room, little ducks pursed their lips in disapproval.

"We'll see what the boss thinks when she wakes up!"

"That may be." The doctor wasn't scared of the bobbed redhead. "But for now, get the hell out of here."

Tonya had little choice but to do as ordered. She exited the cave, muttering under her breath.

Millie came to the doctor. “She’s right. Angela will be very upset.”

The doctor stared down at Angela’s pale, bruised features. “She’s not the leader here anymore. She doesn’t make the rules.”

“We have a fight on level one! I repeat, fight on level one!”

Tonya didn’t answer the call, but she did hurry that way. There were too many others doing the same for her to be able to get through on the radio. With Marc out of camp on a food run to get Safe Haven stocked up before the next winter storm hit, things were tense.

As she reached the stairs, Tonya nodded to the Eagle on duty and hurried up to the next level. It would take her a minute to get there, but she had no doubt that her authority would be able to calm things down with the rookies—especially if it was who she suspected. Angela’s order to have the soldiers integrated as Eagles wasn’t going over well.

Tonya rounded the corner and found a small crowd already trying to get to the stairs for level one. A hard hand grabbed her as she stumbled, keeping her from falling.

“Thanks,” Tonya told the ugly-dressed male as she hurried on her way. *Was he wearing a gunnysack?*

Tonya hurried up the stairs and shoved herself in the middle of the struggling Eagles and soldiers.

Behind her, the ugly-dressed man continued on his way. Philip had been a social service worker before the war. He moved down the stairs without drawing attention from the guards. He had been brought into Safe Haven not long after they had reached the mountains. He had been cleared and vetted by the leadership, though not Angela herself. The teenager, Jennifer, had given him his pass with a warning that whatever he was hiding behind his wall would have to eventually come out for him to become an Eagle.

Philip ignored the other bored sentry on duty at the bottom of the stairs and walked toward the medical bay. The walls in his mind had been up for many reasons. He'd been surprised when Jennifer hadn't dug deeper, but also relieved. It had allowed him to spend the last five weeks blending in and working hard, just to have these two minutes.

Philip slid aside as the doctor and all of his little ducks, as they were being called by the camp, came out of the medical bay and waddled toward the testing lab on the floor below them. The only one in the bay was Hilda and she would be sleeping in the chair next to Angela, the way she had been for the last three afternoons. Philip had made note of the schedule.

Fanatical attention centered on the unconscious woman in the cot at the far end of the room. Next to her, Hilda was dozing in a chair with her cheek

against a stone ledge that held medical supplies. Philip moved closer without making any noise. He wasn't here on behalf of the government. He hadn't come for revenge or payment. He wanted power.

Angela didn't stir as Philip placed his hands around her throat. Neither did Hilda.

It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.

Angela came awake to that reasoning, struggling against the hazy darkness of drugs and pain. She opened her mouth, gasping for air and realized death had come for her yet again.

Angela stopped fighting.

In a hurry to grab what he had forgotten, the doctor almost didn't understand what was going on as he entered the medical bay. The sight of the stranger's hands wrapped around his patient's neck was an immediate shock. The doctor had never witnessed violence before the war; he still hadn't adjusted to how much of it happened inside Safe Haven's gates.

Hilda, woken by the sound of the doctor's footsteps, jumped up to shove the man off Angela.

Without pausing, Philip lunged forward and slammed his head into Hilda's chin, knocking her out.

Her big body slid to the floor.

Philip continued to strangle Angela, eyes locked onto hers. *It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.*

The doctor rushed forward, grabbing a fire extinguisher from the wall. He slammed it into the man's skull as hard as he could, not thinking, just reacting.

Phillip dropped heavily. He slumped across Angela's legs, blood trickling from his nose.

Angela drew in air sullenly as the doctor came over, staring in horror at what he had done.

The doctor realized Angela had been awake the entire time, that she had been allowing it. "Why?"

"I could have been at peace." She shut her eyes as fresh tears began to roll down.

Drawn against his will, the doctor reached out and brushed one of them away. "Please stop. I can't stand it when you cry. It hurts me."

It made her cry harder.

"What's going on here?!"

Eagles rushed into the medical bay, forcing the doctor to step back and explain what had happened.

Angela pretended she hadn't woken at all.



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