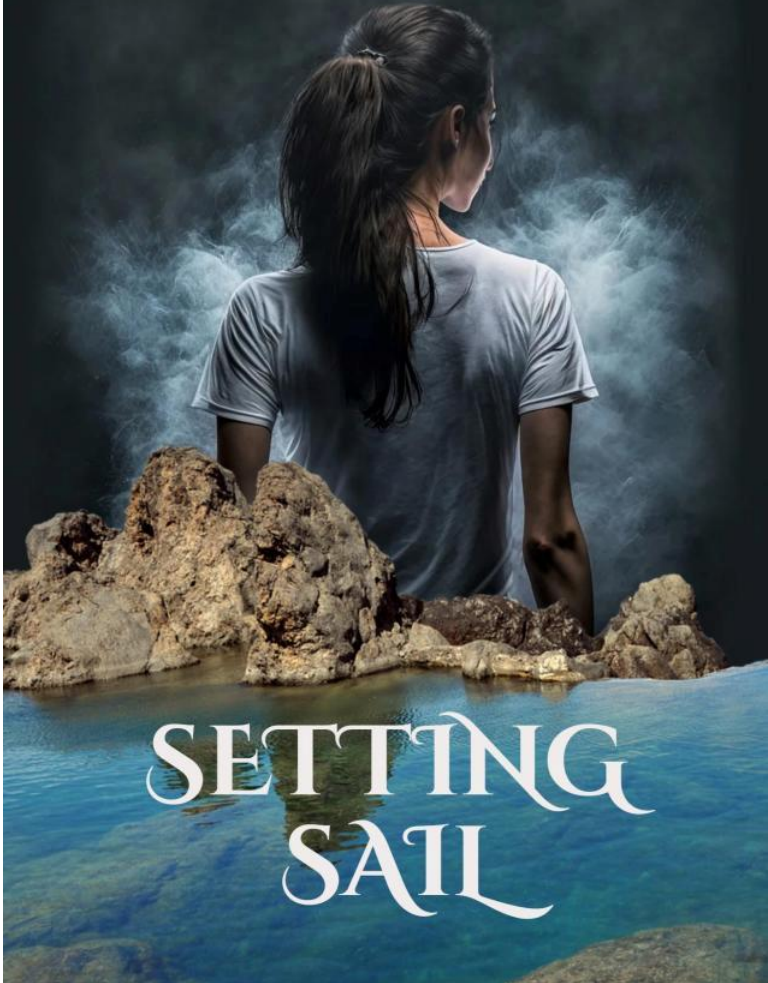


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #10



SETTING
SAIL

Copyright
Setting Sail
by
Angela White

Title: Setting Sail

Life After War Book 10

Edition: 2024

Length: 885 pages

Author: Angela White

ISBN#: 978-1-945927-87-4

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

Thank you Stacey, Jeanne M, Allison, Charles, Elizabeth, Angie H, Crystal, John M, Jeff, Wendy, Holly, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline, Diane, Clara, Carol, Drew, and Kim for all your hard work!

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)
[You Scare Me](#)
[I Hate This Life](#)
[American Spirit](#)
[I Can Kill You Now](#)
[I'm Not Adrian](#)
[Pick Your Own Targets](#)
[The Traitor's Whore](#)
[No Games](#)
[It Feels Nasty](#)
[You Screwed Up](#)
[Being Driven](#)
[Be Worried](#)
[Lesson One](#)
[Let's See Your Ante](#)
[Make It Burn](#)
[All I Have](#)
[My New XO](#)
[I Fought For It](#)
[Parent Connection](#)
[I Was Never Here](#)
[Take It In](#)
[It's Not About You](#)
[No One Understands](#)
[Crabs](#)
[Private Lessons](#)
[I Forbid You](#)
[Husband And Wife](#)

[Sent To Observe](#)
[Too Valuable To Kill](#)
[Safe Haven's Son](#)
[Like A Cult](#)
[Change Is A Harsh Event](#)
[The Last Holdouts](#)
[A Working Break](#)
[Made To Be Broken](#)
[Breathing Fire](#)
[Remember How It Smells](#)
[Close](#)

Rage Walkers

It came from an island in the south;
Rage Walkers disease.
Decimating populations,
Faster than people could bleed.

Already weakened by a war,
The infection spread over the ocean.
It hit American shores,
And never slowed its ruthless motion.

From anger, to fury, to madness,
They tore each other apart.
The few who were spared,
Had to be smart.

We hid in the hills and the fields;
Rage Walkers took the cities and mountains.
We stood as best we knew how;
Our blood spilled from their fountains.

Already on the edge of collapse,
Civilization began to slide.
No one came to help;
There was no way to stem the tide.

Countries crumbled to ashes;
The disease continues to spread.

Safety left and hell abounds;
Even the descendants dread.

Prologue

In the East

Noon

1

“That was Safe Haven!”

Vihaan rose from the dying bushes next to the small cabin. The tracker had been watching it for days, drawn by the feel of magic, but that flood of protection from the south was unmistakable. Someone had used a massive shield. The power signature was rippling across the land.

Vihaan stayed straight as he crossed the backyard, not caring if the family found his tracks or saw him through one of the few windows. His footprints would alert them to predators in the area. If they were smart, they would see the tracks and leave. If they weren't, Vihaan would have fun after his work in the south was finished. He wanted to know why the family put off a feel of magic. All descendants were supposed to be laboring for the same boss, sent to the international detention center for reeducation, or killed. There were no exceptions.

The noon sun beat on Vihaan's white-clad shoulders, bringing a fresh layer of sweat. The temperatures were rising in the south and dropping in the north. He had spent time in both areas over the last weeks, trailing prey, and the only constant

here was the wind. It blew in from the west with anger. Vihaan liked that. It reminded him of the winds at home. It was the only thing here that did. Everything else about America was a foreign challenge. *I have many tales to tell my family when I return.* None of them had the gift. Vihaan had enjoyed that too, though he'd learned they were likely Invisibles who would eventually evolve. It wouldn't matter. Upon his return, he would be named the head of his family. Then, he would take a wife from a neighboring leader, claim that land, and begin his future in the new world order.

Click-click!

The radio in his pocket paused, then clicked three more times.

Vihaan didn't answer the alert, though he was certain others in his group would. Everyone within fifty miles had felt the Safe Haven emission. Many of them, unlike himself, would now go south to track it.

Vihaan went to the small motorbike he'd liberated the day he'd been dropped into infidel country. He fired it up and drove off without worrying over being heard or chased. This area was deserted except for the small cabin with two kids, one mother, and two men both performing roles of husband. Vihaan presumed it was two brothers sharing a family, like his people sometimes did, and approved. When he claimed them, the woman and children would know what was expected. They were the first American family he had witnessed

living this way. *Maybe I'll spare the men so they can pass it to those we keep as slaves.*

Vihaan deliberated, then shook his head. No Americans should be spared in the end. The new world was here and those stubborn fighters would never conform. Vihaan respected them even as he hated them.

2

Ciemus

“We need to go dark and quiet.” Brandon followed the Mayor away from the gate. “Angela shouldn’t have brought up the shield. Trackers have this location now.”

Donna pointed at one of her men and kept walking. “Call the water.”

Brandon stayed on her heels, confused but curious like all of Safe Haven had been about the water sheltering this town.

Donna jogged up the stairs and entered her office. She pushed a button on the desk.

Brandon didn’t hear anything, but he knew the people did. They were running toward the fishing area.

Donna pointed to her window. “This is the best view of it.”

Brandon went to the glass, aware of Donna eyeing him as if he were a threat. He could feel her concern about being alone with him, but time would ease that. He’d learned that from watching Angela

jump every time a guy tried to make friends. Now, he would die for her and she would die for him. They were Eagles.

“Are you regretting your decision?” Donna was very perceptive of male moods.

Brandon sighed, moving the curtain aside. “Not yet.”

Donna smiled at the cautious tone. “There’s time to catch up.”

“I have no future with them.” Brandon didn’t want to start his new life here on a lie. “I’m a Mitchel.”

“Ah.” Donna sat down. “I feel better now.”

Brandon observed her in the glass. “Why?”

“Because I knew something was wrong with you even though your leader tried to cover it. This isn’t as bad as I suspected.”

Brandon chuckled. “I’ve never gotten that response before. Maybe it *will* work out.”

Donna pushed the button again. “Providing you remember two things, sir.”

Brandon saw locals pulling ropes from the water by the wall. “What are those?”

“We need babies and you’re a Mitchel.”

Brandon snickered.

So did Donna, but it was clear from her expression that she meant it.

Brandon nodded, still laughing. “I’ll do my best to uphold that part of the family reputation.” He waited to hear her response, but the action at the river drew his attention and held it. The water was

rising. It spilled over the banks and ran over the boots of the men and women still pulling on the ropes. The locals smiled and chatted as if it wasn't happening. When the water kept coming, filling spaces and rushing over the ground, Brandon frowned.

The water covered ankles and then the knees of the pullers. Brandon didn't witness any shifting in the wall, but it was obviously having an effect as the liquid rushed over the waist high crops, soaking them.

The people who had been fishing were smiling as the rolling liquid covered their faces.

"They'll drown!" Brandon's mouth dropped open as he realized the locals were covered in a water shield. They were playing in it. "How is that possible?"

"William made a deal when the war came." Donna observed him. "We are sheltered, but it's a small area. To enlarge it would draw attention no matter how high the water gets."

"That's why the walls are muddy even in winter!" Brandon watched as the water submerged the town. It was astounding how fast it happened. "What happens when it reaches the top?"

"It overflows, of course." Donna lit a cigarette from her ration. "It covers the land for miles and prevents anyone from catching sight of the wall."

"What if they were already in the area?"

"It flushes them out."

"Or drowns them?"

“Yes. We’ve found bodies of people caught in tents or abandoned homes. Because of that, we ask the water to come during the daylight, so people will have a chance to escape.”

“Why do you let your enemies escape?”

“Why do you assume everyone is an enemy?”

Brandon’s amazement faded. “Because they always turn out to be. I’ve stopped giving people the benefit of the doubt.”

“William is the opposite.” Donna flipped her ash and stubbed out the cherry. “I’m in the middle. You’ll take Grant’s place and restore the balance that’s been taken.”

“Why don’t you just go with them?” Brandon turned from the fantastical sight. “The water won’t protect you forever. Someone will make a better deal to wipe you out. Why are you staying?”

“It’s not something we can explain. You’ll have to experience it.”

“You mean go out while the water’s up?”
Brandon kept his face blank.

Donna pointed at her doorway, where water was trickling in.

Brandon hesitated. “I... Am I covered?”

Donna gave him a pointed look.

Brandon sighed. “We’ll find out together.”

Donna nodded, gun coming up from her drawer. “Go cleanse yourself or meet your maker.”

Brandon flipped the latch on the window. “I’m an Eagle. I was just waiting for orders.”

Donna sniggered as the man dove off the window ledge. The water rushed over him in giddy welcome. “Should have known. The Mitchels are all special.”

“Help!”

Donna shot up and ran into the flooding hall.

Kevin barreled into her, knocking them both to the ground.

Donna groaned. “Are you okay?”

“Hands!” Kevin shoved to his feet as the water advanced, not feeling the bleeding scrape on his arm. “And teeth! In the water!”

“Damn.” She sat up as the roaring liquid rushed by, chasing the panicking man. “I hate it when this happens.”

Donna brought her gun up and shot Kevin in the chest.

“Why...?” The former Eagle staggered, hand coming up.

The water slammed into his knees, knocking him backwards onto the hall floor.

Donna was sorry it had come to this. She went into her office and replaced the missing bullet.

A few seconds later, the water carried Kevin’s body toward the stairs, already shredding it.

3

William snapped awake. He’d fallen asleep while trying not to listen in on Dog’s fatherhood story. William glanced around and found a bored

driver, snoozing passengers, and a convoy of people who already felt tired again.

They were on Interstate 65, in a barren area with few trees or homes. The views were molding weeds and a broken road that didn't appear to have had traffic at all since the war. The wind blew through the reeds and was lost beneath the rumble of their engines. It was empty here.

William wasn't positive what had woken him with panic in his throat and adrenaline pumping through his heart. He sat up to do a deeper scan of their surroundings.

"It was in Ciemus." Angela didn't open her eyes. "You have one less transfer than we counted."

William caught the images and grit his teeth. Donna being in danger was terrifying.

Angela snorted. "She wasn't."

William relaxed, understanding one of Safe Haven's citizens hadn't passed the final test. "She's strict about that."

"So are we." Angela shifted. "We just don't have the water to make the choice." *Yet*, she amended. It was taking all her powers of reasoning to find an answer to that one. "I can have Ivan take you back. He's restless anyway."

William shook his head, feeling better. "No. I'm here until you tell me to go."

Listening, Marc frowned when she didn't tell him it would be soon. He forced it out for a more pleasant image of sailing away without any of the males now competing for Angela's attention. His

behavior said his position might be open, but Marc was down to final options. Angie was his and always would be.

Angela reached back to clasp hands with him. She refused to read his mind, positive it would upset her. His bad moods came from one direction now and she didn't have time for it. The next nine days would be hard and wonderful. They would have moments of glory and they would have deaths. All of it was inevitable. When they finally sailed, most of their troubles would be settled.

"You promise?" Marc's fingers tightened on hers.

Angela nodded. "Yes. As long as you follow through, we're free. If you weaken, for even an instant, we're doomed."

Comforted, Marc went back to sleep like none of it mattered.

Angela didn't. She appeared to drowse while scanning every living thing the convoy passed. If she missed a threat right now, Marc wouldn't get a chance to enact his plan. A dozen trackers would converge on their convoy and bring refugees along to do the work. *I just need a week and then you can all come for us. I'll be ready.*

4

"Should we go south or stay on our own trail?" Hannah looked at her sisters over the tire tracks

she'd been studying when the magic blast went over them like ice water.

Janet shrugged, still kneeling. The foliage here was thick and green, but there were no animals to hunt or smells to chase. They'd been forced to follow tires, the only sign of civilization in this area. They'd been tracking this same print for weeks now. "Up to you guys. Hate to have wasted all this time just to cry off the hunt."

Hannah and Tisa snickered. Janet was tenacious when she had a scent.

"I say we stick with the bloodhound." Tisa fluffed her matted brown hair. "She gets us there, you know?"

Hannah nodded, not clicking the radio in response to the alert, though she assumed all trackers would end up in the south by the time it was over. These tires had taken a detour to a naval station where there had been a recent, vicious battle, and then gone east a bit. Now, they were slanting south again. Janet swore they were on the trail of Safe Haven and Hannah believed her.

"I hear something." Tisa peered east, where a thick grove of trees blocked their view. "Do you hear it?"

Janet stood up. "Water." The sense of trouble slapped at her. "We need to go up."

Tisa pointed at the roof of a nearby farmhouse. "That's twenty feet."

The women ran, listening to water coming over the land with no mercy for the people or structures.

Someone shouted behind them, then screamed as they were overwhelmed.

“Where’s it coming from? The sun’s out!”

“That’s from a dam breaking, not rain.” Hannah farted as she jumped a fallen tree.

The sisters laughed, loving the excitement of these apocalyptic living conditions.

The three trackers kicked together to open the locked door of the home, then pounded through the house to find the stairs.

“Here!” Hannah led them up to the attic, where she shoved a path to the window. They would have to climb out, and then up, if the water came this high. If not, they had a good perch to watch the damage.

“I see something.” Tisa gasped. “It’s a town! And trucks! I see trucks leaving! It’s them!”

Water surrounded the farmhouse, preventing the sisters from chasing the convoy as it rolled out of sight.

Tisa screamed in frustration, punching and kicking boxes and trunks in the attic.

Hannah waited, listening to the water, watching it. She could swear there were liquid hands coming up the front steps.

Janet began searching the attic for new threads. She loved the feel of American clothes,

Tisa joined her, fingering her own threadbare jumper. It was time for a change of duds. Their masters didn’t like to issue new gear. They’d been supplying their own needs since being dropped off.

Hannah snorted at her companions and continued to watch the water. She didn't see the hands again, but she didn't doubt herself on seeing them. Hannah looked down at her own clothes, changing her mind. The leather outfit might be hard to swim in. She joined the others. "Any bathing suits in there?"

5

In the West

9am

I feel like I'm in an apocalypse.

Heavy sheets of ash fell over the speeding jeep. In the distance, smoke rose to the sky, covering the sun. It made driving rough. Sheer drop offs on either side would kill them if the jeep slid too far one way or the other. Nature wasn't wasting any time in reclaiming her domain out here.

Jeff flipped the wipers on high.

Ash recoated the window as soon as the wiper cleared it. Jeff grimaced.

Hurry...

I am. Jeff squinted through the filthy window. The road was missing pieces, with wrecks and debris all along this route, but he was following it anyway. A voice was calling to him from near the place where he'd already tracked Becky and Seth to. He assumed they'd made a den because Becky's signature on his mental grid had stopped moving.

Bad idea, he scolded. She's going to get killed before I can reach her.

“Are you okay?”

Jeff jumped. He peered in the mirror at Romeo. The boy was under Doug's arm while the big man snored. He was wearing three layers of clothes and using a jacket on his shoulder as a pillow, like everyone else. Jeff noted the Eagle position of the tools on his belt and nodded approval. The boy was a fast learner. He'd only demonstrated that for the child once. “I'm good. You?”

“Scared.”

Jeff understood why the boy felt that way. “We have action coming and then I'll take you all back to Safe Haven.”

Romeo made a face. “They don't like us there. Isn't somewhere else?”

“Isn't *there* somewhere else.” Jeff followed Doug's educational wishes. Doug was trying to show the boys how to blend in so they weren't mistaken for foreigners. If they spoke English well, many people were dumb enough to believe that meant they'd been citizens here. Jeff approved the ploy. The two kids would need all the help they could get. In the time they'd been traveling together, Jeff had been won over by the quiet, respectful brothers. They didn't fit into Safe Haven because they were too normal. Jeff liked them for it. He had no patience with children who couldn't be trusted—like Becky.

Hurry! We'll be gone soon!

Jeff jerked, hands slipping.

The jeep swerved, rattling passengers.

“Is everything all right?” Allan sat up to stretch.

Jeff recovered a smoother roll over the broken road. “Yeah. Slap-happy.”

“I can take a shift if you want.” Allan yawned. “I couldn’t be more bored.”

“I’ve got it.” Jeff was already back into his mind. Allan wouldn’t be able to follow this path.

“He’s hearing things.” Romeo flashed concern to Allan. “And he’s worrying.”

Allan nodded. “We’re all worried.” He looked at Jeff in the mirror. “What are you hearing?”

“Someone needs our help.” Jeff sighed, speeding up through the ash storm. “And it isn’t who we came here for.”

6

New Mexico

“We have to help them now.” Becky was tired of waiting. “They’re being shipped out soon!”

“Not until we make a plan. We just found them. If they ship the kids out, we’ll follow and hijack the truck, but until they leave, we don’t stand a chance. They have forty men down there.”

“We didn’t even get close enough for a real recon.” Becky tossed herself into a dusty chair in the front room of the small cabin. They didn’t worry about whatever might be on the floors or in the corners. In this new life, it was better to hang out in

those places and make friends with those creatures. Neither of them flinched at spiders on their skin anymore or snakes on their bedrolls. They'd adapted.

"Would you feel better about waiting if we do that?" Seth took the rocking chair next to Becky. He'd gotten comfortable using it over the week they'd been here.

"Maybe."

Seth understood her concerns, but two Eagles wouldn't be enough for this challenge and he knew it. He also wasn't sure if they might have already been noticed by one of the descendants protecting the camp that was only a quarter mile from them. It wasn't safe here. "We'll go down tomorrow, okay? You'll see I'm right about not blasting in there. Then we'll work on a better plan and a new base of operations."

Juniper trees and rocky ground that refused to grow anything else surrounded their cabin on three sides. To their back was a steep cliff with a small graveyard at the top. The cabin had been empty when they'd arrived, and bore no prints to tell of a struggle, no damage or bloodstains. Seth assumed this cabin had been unused before the war too, but he wasn't sure because there had been a Christmas wreath dying on the door.

Becky let him talk her out of attacking the camp now, but she had decided as soon as Seth let her get close enough, she was going to take matters into her

own hands. She wasn't spending another night listening to the screams without stopping it.

Seth began to love her, hoping she would sleep. They had a habit of hunting at night for prairie dogs and running a dark house, though that had been interrupted by screams last night.

Seth unbuttoned her long sleeve shirt and slid his hands over her lacy bra, wishing he could give her a bubble bath. They were using creeks and rivers they crossed, which had provided some fun memories, but Seth wanted to give her the luxuries of a woman. Soaking in a tub for hours was one of those, according to the camp hens, and the sense of time growing short was bugging Seth. He wanted to give her special moments now, while he could. He wasn't sure they were going to have a later.

7

UN Detention Camp

“They're coming.” The girl's voice was thick with her witch's timbre. “Soon. Hours.”

The kids huddled around to listen and to hide the seer.

“Kill them all. Then we will go to Safe Haven, where the alpha will end our misery and accept our lives in honor.”

“The alpha.”

“Safe Haven.”

“*Angela.*”

“What’s going on in there?!” A sentry banged on the bars of the portable cages. “You go to the clean!”

The kids immediately stood, including the girl still searching the future. She continued to whisper as hungover men led them to their weekly shower. It was the last time they would be blasted with the icy water that sometimes stripped skin, the last day they would spend penned up like dogs. The long shelters were large and had cots, but they were still cages. Set into the side of a cliff, the children were grateful that awnings over the cages at least provided shade from the desert sun. The sky was covered in layers of smoke, but the sun was still getting through to beat on them with ruthless heat.

The kids held onto each other and their clothes as the hoses came on. Their shorts and skirts were ragged, the tops were falling apart. Cloth couldn’t stand up to the hoses either.

The shivering descendant in the middle, being sheltered, hid her elation. When help came, the alpha would break her mental chains. The other kids wanted the safety of Angela’s camp, but the descendant girl just wanted to know the alpha before she died. She wanted to know *any* adult who was good, like her. That person would share an unknowing bond that would go as deep as deep would go. Until the war, little Kimmie hadn’t known there were others like her. *Now, that’s all I think about.*

Chapter One

You Scare Me

Six Hours out of Ciemus
November 19th

1

“**W**e’re coming to a good spot for a bathroom break.” Angela shifted against the uncomfortable seat for the tenth time. “Jennifer has point. William will provide support after the clear call. Ten minutes is the limit, so let’s try to keep it under half an hour.”

“You got it.” Morgan downshifted.

William perked up. “Me? Cool.”

Angela had decided to stop them before it got dark, though the sun was setting behind them right now. The shades of green beneath the layers of dust were just as wrong as they’d always been, but it was also darker. Yellowstone had replaced the fading sky debris from the war. Each time it rained or snowed, grit coated the ground in glassy ashes, but it wasn’t making a dent. That would continue for weeks, months or years. There was no way to know for sure when it would end.

Morgan tapped the brakes to send a message to the vehicle behind him. Marc and Adrian had

worked on the new code after the fight at the naval station. They'd been using it since leaving Ciemus.

Morgan slowed further, scanning. He wouldn't have chosen these tree-dotted surroundings for a break, though he didn't feel anything menacing about the small town they hadn't been able to go around. It was devoid of life here and obviously had been since the war, but the structures were less stable than in other places they'd been. Morgan presumed it was because coastal weather was rougher. Even the weeds and bushes here looked like they'd been hit with massive winds. He might have assumed it was a storm path, but he'd been keeping track of it for hours. What he hadn't spotted was signs of nature. There were no animals at all, not even flies or birds. It was crazy.

"This will be a lesson for me, right?"

Angela nodded at William's query. "Yes. The boring stuff comes first."

"First." William frowned. "How does it look for the next few days?"

"Like drama and traveling." She shifted again, ankle cramping. "Then we'll get to the action you're trying so hard not to hope for."

"I'm sorry." William gestured at the convoy. "I'm riding with the legendary Safe Haven. It's difficult not to want to see you in action now that you've returned to full health."

"We haven't yet, actually." She rubbed her leg, trying not to bump the driver. "Maybe a week in the fresh salt air will finish it."

William concentrated on figuring out what she meant. As far as health, only a few people were still having trouble. He didn't detect anything obvious.

"We spent months in tents, months in a mountain, and now we're back in tents." Angela was glad for the teaching moment as Morgan stopped the truck in a gravel lot next to a trailer park with burnt frames. She hated waiting for the Eagles to let them out. Everyone did. "It's too cold to be outside, but we need the sun. You were occupied while we were in Ciemus, but you'll pick it up when we reach the shore. You'll see the differences between your people and mine."

"I did notice you were all pale, but our kind tend to be that way from..."

"Lifetimes of hiding." Angela agreed as he paused in understanding. "The sun gives us better health. It's also an issue the government didn't consider when they locked us in underground labs, or maybe they used it intentionally. We're fragile in ways. We go mad—corrupt—faster than people who don't have this bloodline. We need to feel the sun on our cheeks and in our hearts. It fights the darkness."

"I'll add that to the book." William wondered what else she'd observed about their kind that he hadn't.

Angela shrugged. "You'll have enough for a new book by the time we part, but for now, you have a duty coming up and your boss isn't in a patient mood. Get set for it."

William hesitated. “Um. How?”

“Eagles settle into a work frame of mind.” Morgan sensed Angela’s restlessness and assumed she wanted the conversation over, so he handled it. “We check gear, plan out the shift if needed, listen to each other to pick up the mood, and we scan the environment. We concentrate on the job.”

William immediately began to do that.

Morgan doubted it would last long. William was like a hyper kid who’d just been given access to an exciting amusement park ride. He knew it wasn’t repaired regularly and there were glitches in the programing, but he still couldn’t wait to have that experience—even if it killed him.

William laughed. *That’s exactly it.* Everything was intoxicating to him right now. The smell of the Eagle jackets they were all wearing, the complaints about sore asses from traveling—he loved it all.

Angela shifted, glad Marc was able to rest. He was in the bunk behind them, no longer snoring but still breathing deeply. He would probably wake at the call to let people out, but she hoped he would at least stay in the truck. They’d been gone from Ciemus for six hours, but he’d only been out for two. He’d stayed awake talking with Dog, then swept their surroundings for problems until his lids began to droop.

He doesn’t want to go.

Angela stiffened. “Aloud, please.”

William frowned as he understood. “Really? Even though we’re not on a private line?”

“Yes.”

William sighed. “You have to get the drama under control. People are fed up with it.”

“Who do I kill? My love or my leader?”

William snorted. “*You’re* the leader.”

“I’m a substitute teacher keeping the seat warm.”

William spotted the obvious. “You’re depressed!”

Angela winced. She’d insisted on the conversation being spoken, but their driver was storing every word and the tension would soon wake Marc. He was sensitive to that now.

“Is everything okay?” Marc didn’t open his eyes. He’d woken the instant Morgan downshifted.

Angela switched her braid to her other shoulder so she could view him. “Peachy.”

Marc sat up in a fast lunge, reaching for his gun.

Laughter told Marc she’d been joking with the code word. It happened so rarely that he’d come up swinging.

Angela snickered. “Funny.”

Marc holstered, gave William a curt nod, then settled down next to the wolf who hadn’t budged.

William shivered at the sensation. *He’s powerful.*

Angela nodded. “More so if I give him what he wants.”

“Why don’t you?” William switched to aloud like she wanted.

“Why don’t I corrupt him the rest of the way?”

“I don’t think you can corrupt that one.” William shrugged. “But if so, does it matter at this point?”

Angela sighed. “No, but tell me anyway why it’s okay to condemn his soul.”

“He’s already damned for the battle we’ll have. In fact, I believe his death would prevent him from taking part in it.”

“Letting him die will save his soul?”

William shrugged. “Perhaps that’s why fate has been hitting you so hard. The Creator doesn’t want Marc in the final fight.”

“I prefer to think he’s meant to stay with Safe Haven on the island while the rest of us come home to die.”

Angela’s words were so blunt that silence fell, but every brain went crazy with thoughts and concerns.

Marc didn’t go back to sleep. There was too much tension.

Dog didn’t react at all. Exhausted, he was with his human friends and felt safe enough to sleep deep while his mind and body healed.

“All clear!”

Morgan gave William a look. “She’s waiting for you. Stay alert.”

William had respect for their enforcer. “I will.” He got out into the light drizzle without saying more.

Angela peered over her shoulder. “Room for one more?”

Marc scooted over, not minding it that she didn't want him up yet. It would give him a few minutes alone with her to talk.

Angela crawled into the bunk.

Morgan got out and shut the door, then climbed onto the hood to watch over them.

Marc waited for her to get comfortable.

"Spit it out." Angela was too sore to beat around the bush or tolerate people who wanted to do so.

"William explained some things while we walked his wall."

Angela yawned. "And?"

"You scare me."

"Good."

Marc held her tighter. "I want to be like you."

"No, you don't."

"...can you come back to where I am?"

"No."

"Then I have to come to you."

Angela shuddered. "You'll ruin the chance we can build—"

"No more of that lie."

"It isn't a lie, Marc. I'm trying to figure it out. Ciemus may have helped me. I need time to sort through the cause and effect."

"It can't be done."

"Maybe not."

"Even if it can, I won't do it."

"Now, I'm confused." She rolled over so she could look at him, sliding closer to stay warm.

"Why wouldn't you want it if I can do it?"

“We’ll all die anyway.” Marc rested his head against her. “No final battle, Angie. We stay on the island and just live.”

Angela wrapped her arms around him, sharing his pain. “When the time comes, I *will* return and do my duty. It’s why I was born into this time and place—to save the future. Not just mine, but of the entire world. If I lose, it all ends. I can’t run from destiny.”

“Then make me like you so I can help!”

“Because you hope He will take pity and allow us to be together in the afterlife?”

“Because we only have a few years left together and I want to share all of it.” Marc broke against her. “Please.”

Angela’s tears ran over her cheeks as she nodded against his neck. Marc never begged. She couldn’t refuse. “Okay.”

Around them, thunder rattled the ground in protest of the choice.

He’s mine. I’ll make him so strong that even you can’t hurt him!

Hail pinged into the cars and trucks, and wind howled toward the stopped convoy.

You can’t have him!

A shield flashed into place around the vehicles, shutting out the fury. Even the vibrations from the ground were muffled.

Eagles and descendants stilled in shocked fear.

William clapped. “She’s amazing!”

“She’s reckless.”

William frowned at Jennifer's comment. "Yes, child, she is. Aren't you?"

Jennifer wanted to argue and couldn't.

William examined the shield over the convoy, unable to spot a place where he could get through.

"Neither can I." Jennifer was impressed. "She grew stronger again."

"All of you did, because of the naval station."

"Not like her." Jennifer decided to trust William—mostly because Angela did. "She's not even like you now. She just challenged the Creator for a life. She's the target after this."

"And anything she loves?"

Jennifer shrugged at his tone. "We've been that all along. I worry over *her*. We'll keep a sharper eye on her now."

William frowned. "This doesn't change anything?"

Jennifer pointed to where the Eagles were doing their duty while exchanging looks that wondered if Angela really could set them free from the chains of the past. "We've been marked since we survived. She decided to amend the rules of the game."

"But... It's the Creator!"

Jennifer resumed scanning for trouble, leaving him to figure it out. Jennifer wasn't Angela. She wasn't going to say it aloud and be struck down for blasphemy.

William got it an instant later and groaned. "What is wrong with her?!"

“She’s tired of an unfair system that never explains itself.”

“But that’s not our purpose!”

Jennifer spun around, hand going to her hip.

Across the convoy, Kyle spotted her and paused in the rotation that would take him into her path. *Hand on hip. No-longer resting bitch face.* He went in the opposite direction, waving Ivan into his place.

“Do you know that for a fact?” Jennifer tried not to yell.

William couldn’t lie. “No. I assume.”

“And yet we’ve been gifted with powers beyond belief.” Jennifer’s tone grew pointed. “Makes you wonder why, right?”

William nodded, subdued now. He’d always wondered and never found an answer that made sense. Maybe the descendants weren’t just here to protect humanity from itself. Perhaps they were supposed to defend mankind against all threats, including a vengeful Creator who delighted in games, bets, and plagues.

When lightning didn’t strike him through Angela’s shield, William allowed himself to consider that. They couldn’t create a perfect society, and no one could ever atone for sins of the past, so she was changing the rules. Instead of being humble and submissive, hoping to regain favor, Angela was going to free them the old fashioned way.

Let my people go, William quoted, in awe.

The entire convoy stilled as immense power surrounded them, pressing in on the barrier like a giant eye peering at a bug.

Angela didn't lift her head. Her rage was sweltering, filling the cabin with waves of heat.

Marc was pouring sweat under her, but he refused to budge, to get away before she was destroyed. They would go together.

These are my souls now. I'll kill them all in one blast of fire before we'll swear blind loyalty to the Creator who abandoned us.

William scowled. "Is she bluffing?"

Jennifer shook her head, trembling at the feel of the power around them. She recognized Angela's tactic as negotiating, but it was beyond frightening.

YOU WILL FIGHT FOR HE!

I will not!

The ground rumbled in warning. The shield began to weaken as power pressed in from all sides.

Angela didn't strengthen it. That wasn't required of her defenses now. She waved a mental hand. *Go on. Kill us all. You still won't have your army.*

The rumbling increased.

That's it, isn't it? There's a battle coming and we're the only ones left to fight the evil.

DARKNESS WILL WIN!

Tell your master we refuse. The Creator must agree to—

YOU CANNOT DEMAND!

I just did. The shield around the convoy dropped. The weather immediately hit them. *Go away now. We have to get back on the road.*

The sense of fury rivaled anything they'd felt so far, but it was obvious the messenger couldn't destroy them without permission from a higher authority.

The presence vanished.

A few of the younger citizens in Safe Haven cheered.

Everyone else feared the next meeting wouldn't go as well.

"That was interesting." William had barely kept from speaking. *I have so many questions!*

Jennifer snorted. "Don't we all." She waved toward Daryl. "He's our protection. Don't get out of his sight."

William followed her as the windy, rainy bathroom stop resumed, eager for any lessons she wanted to give. Now that he'd heard the Messenger and knew without a doubt there was a level above them, William wanted the same thing Marc did, but for a different reason. William wanted whatever deal Angela cut to apply to Ciemus. Safe Haven would need a friendly port to sail into when they returned. William had no doubt they would all do battle for the Creator despite these negotiations, but now, he had hope that they would come out of it with more than forgiveness for atrocities they hadn't committed. These people were right. Angela

would make certain they were treated fairly for the first time since they'd been created.

Angela rolled off Marc's chest, aware of his discomfort. She switched into the driver seat and lowered the window enough to let in a cool breeze.

Marc sat up and opened his jacket to let that draft reach his sweaty skin. The oddest part was that he was soaked, and she wasn't. He didn't understand how it was possible, but all he wanted right now was a smoke to calm his nerves and a few minutes to contemplate what had happened.

Angela handed him a lit cigarette.

Marc rubbed her hand as he took it, but he didn't speak. He had no idea what to say. When he had worried over her being so different, he'd never considered that it would go this far. He didn't know how to handle it.

Angela smothered her loneliness, remembering she did have someone here who might know what to say. She opened the door and went to William.

Marc stayed in the truck. He had no jealous thoughts over her choice, but he did wish he could listen so that next time he would know how to help her.

Marc stiffened as power entered his mind and opened a bolted door.

Get out!

Be quiet or she'll know you're listening.

Marc pouted as he smoked, but he didn't try to shove William out.

I'm as loyal to her as you and the dog are. But it's time you adapt, Marine, or we won't be able to work together.

Marc would have snapped back, but William brought down a wall that only let Marc listen. ...*how do I do that?*

William tensed as Angela joined him and Jennifer. The feel of her was heavy, uncomfortable.

Leadership stress. Jennifer nodded as Angela came to her elbow.

She's like this all the time?

You have to be. I didn't understand that until I had point over the mall. Jennifer scanned behind them, noting who was giving the guards a hard time and who wasn't. *We were attacked, and a tornado came through. Very stressful. Flipping out of that mode was impossible until I got to Ciemus.*

William hadn't experienced many of those moments in his town since the war, so he didn't get it, but he was suddenly sure he would by the time they parted.

Jennifer frowned. *Don't drag it out. Give her what she needs.*

William turned to Angela and was slapped by her pain and fear. It overwhelmed him, bringing tears to his eyes. "Damn."

Angela slowly brought up her wall, blocking those emotions so only she and her witch would feel them.

The demon whined. *Oh, great. Spare him and not me!*

Angela's disappointment was staggering as she left them. William wanted to offer her hope, but he didn't have any. Safe Haven had to leave, and they would all have to fight. Some things couldn't be changed.

Jennifer realized William wasn't able to help. She shoved him out of her way and followed Angela toward the kids' trailer.

William felt someone trying to get into his thoughts and opened the door. *What?!*

Adrian paused. *Uh, just checking in. Is she okay?*

William squinted through the dark rain, aware of being soaked and blown. *Not really. She didn't want to do that, but she got scared Marc was being taken.*

Yeah, that'll do it. How'd it go?

William went to his truck, frowning. *You didn't hear?*

Nothing after she brought up the barrier. I didn't know we could do that.

We, can't.

You can't?

Never tried, but I doubt it. She's stronger than me.

Enough to...?

I don't know.

Adrian was encouraged by that answer. He broke the connection and began helping his team medicate their rescued men. The boss would be pleased. She would also be furious. All of the boat

men were out of commission for a while. Being nailed to a warehouse wall as bait had hurt them. It had also killed two men. Angela's anger would rival nature's fury.

William slid into the truck at Jennifer's motion. He shut the door and wiped down with the towel Marc handed him. "Thanks."

Marc grunted. He'd also thought William could help her.

"Sorry, but her dog has to do this one. If that had been me, I would have surrendered."

"What if it had been Donna?"

William's anger flew through the truck.

"Damn. All right!" Marc pushed the small window open too. "I've had enough sweating."

William controlled his rage, locked it away. "I get your point, but I can't help her. I've never considered crossing the Creator."

"You haven't gone through as much as we have."

"No, and I hope not to. You've become hard and cynical, with little light left in your hearts. You call me sheltered, but I'm glad of it. I don't want to be like you or her."

"Now you're just lying."

William held up a hand. "Okay, so I wouldn't mind being as skilled as some of you, but it's not worth the effects."

Are we really that bad? Marc made a note of that concern.

William finished drying off, wishing he could change his clothes. He already missed their little bit of civilization and Marc's point had made him worry over Donna being alone.

It'll be better for us on the boat. Marc's mood lightened a bit. *We'll only have nature and each other to fight. That's already less problems.*

Marc's demon grumbled. *And no chance to run if the ship goes down.* He didn't like the idea of his host not having an escape route.

I can swim.

The demon snorted, flashing an image of a lone man in the ocean, then an old headline about someone being lost at sea and the search being called off.

I get it, but it's still better odds than staying here.

The demon couldn't argue.

Neither could William. He'd been reading the memories of Safe Haven as they traveled and it was all ugly. He was grateful Ciemus hadn't been put through all that.

You will be now. Marc flipped his butt. *Refugees followed us from the naval station. You'll be lucky to get back without being spotted.*

When William didn't answer, Marc deliberated arguing further and managed not to. William was still considering going with Safe Haven. He'd said he wasn't coming, but it was obvious what the man wanted. Marc almost wished he could trade places, but Angie would never be satisfied in Ciemus. *She*

needs the adventure too or we'd already be in another cave somewhere, trying again.

Marc went to find his mate, determined to find a way to help her through this.

William stayed in the truck and tried to get dry.

Marc found Angela and Jennifer behind the convoy. People were almost finished with bathroom trips and not saying much as they forced weary bodies back into cramped conditions.

Marc knew the women were aware of him, but neither female was speaking. Marc took that as a bad sign.

Jennifer snorted. *When we talk, you get tired of listening to it. When we're quiet, you get nervous. Men are strange.*

Smiling, Marc took Angela's left, scanning the darkness. He could feel her power roaming the countryside, searching for danger. *She's expecting retaliation.*

"Shouldn't I?"

Marc nodded. "Yes. Every piece of literature we had implies that reaction." Marc paused. He lowered his voice. "I can't believe you did that."

Angela sighed. "I didn't see another option." She spun and slid into his arms. "You're mine."

Marc hugged her close. "Forever, baby."

The rain increased, forcing the trio toward their vehicles.

Jennifer was glad. Like Marc and Angela, she was certain a negative reaction was coming as soon

as the Messenger delivered the news to the Creator. They might all die at that moment.

“No.” Angela stopped outside the truck, rain soaking her. “He needs us, or we’d be dead already.”

“Are you positive it’s a *he*?” Jennifer tried to lighten the mood. “Awful emotional for a guy.”

Angela snickered with the girl, but inside, she cringed in terror at the blasphemy she’d committed. These might really be their last hours because of her choice.

Marc regarded her, catching the thought.

Angela smoothed a wet strand of ebony hair from his sexy face and climbed into the truck. “Let’s roll. We have a boat waiting.”

Marc realized she couldn’t do anything else but follow through now.

So did Jennifer. They traded a worried glance and then got into their vehicles. It wasn’t up to them. The Creator would make the final choice and they would suffer the judgement.

William continued to replay the moment in his mind, stewing and brooding over rules and levels of power as Morgan got the truck rolling.

Next to him, Angela kept track of his thoughts and hoped she wouldn’t be forced to intervene. William was edging into dangerous territory with some of his ruminations; if anyone was going to hide an ace up their sleeve, it was her.

Chapter Two
I Hate This Life

1

“Can we start now?” Marc wiped Angela’s cheek with his damp towel and tossed it into the floorboard.

Angela pointed at her kit. “Read the book in the bottom. Blue cover.”

Marc dug it out, frowning. He suspected a stall. “Aloud, please.”

Marc flipped the notebook to the first page, noting the rough condition. It had been written before the earthquake. The damage was too familiar to mistake.

“They’re going to come to me over learning how to use our gifts. I’m surprised that none of them have yet. If we can stay in these mountains, I may never have to make that choice.”

Marc scanned the next headline. “*How to train the Master’s army.*” He shoved the book at her. “That’s not what I’m asking for.”

“It’s what will come of it, Marc.” She sighed, heart twisting. “A wise man once told me to always look as far ahead as I could on every choice, so I’d always be prepared for what it would lead to.”

“It may not. I may die before then.”

“Then we’ll go together.” Angela tossed the book back. “Get familiar with the basic rules on energy use. I’ll start teaching you between stops and work.”

“Once we’re on the boat?”

She grunted. “Things will be handled openly. I don’t want to be the leader of the last army in our history, but it will be unbeatable. I won’t stop until you’re as near to invincible as I can make you.”

“When will you tell the others?”

“I won’t need to.”

Marc presumed they would see her training him and want the same. As soon as he had the thought, Marc understood her paragraph. “How did we miss that?”

Angela shrugged. “You were busy trying to stay alive.”

Marc grimaced. “Yeah.” He settled into the bunk to read, using the small stickup nightlight.

William flashed Angela an approving glance, but he didn’t comment on the exchange. Angela had accepted that they would fight, or she wouldn’t have made the notebook. William admired her more than he already had. He opened his mouth...

“Don’t ask me. You won’t like the answer.”

William wanted Angela to teach him to fight too, so he could teach his people. He didn’t know what came afterwards.

“That’s the problem.” Angela’s head swiveled toward him. “Don’t make me kill you.”

William's skin broke out with goosebumps. He slowly shook his head. "No. I won't."

"Good, because I need you."

William immediately brightened. "Just name it."

Marc tried to keep his mind on the notebook.

Morgan pointed to the road ahead of them.

Angela studied the two stragglers, not needing to scan to know what had happened. The couple was crying and carrying a child who was either dead or close to it.

"I hate this life!" Angela screamed, sending heat through the truck and tension through the convoy. She punched the dashboard. "You sent them to hurt me because I said no! You fuck!" Angela didn't control the tears or her mouth.

The men in the truck lowered windows and waited for her to make the call.

Dog still didn't lift his head.

"Please!"

"Help us!"

The cries of the parents were heartbreaking. No one wanted to be leader at that moment. After their brush with illness, most of the camp and Eagles understood it was dangerous to have contact with people who were sick, but it was awful to roll by them without stopping.

"I'm damned anyway." Angela moaned at the guilt, the weight. "Stop the truck. Let me out."

“Keep going.” Marc overrode her order. He took Angela’s arm and pulled her into the bunk where she fell onto his chest and sobbed.

2

“She isn’t stopping to help them.”

Neil shook his head at Grant’s observation. “No. I’d bet she wants to, and Marc won’t let her this time.” Neil filled Grant in on how ugly things had gotten before they’d been trapped at the naval station.

Samantha leaned between the seats and switched on the radio.

Music blared.

Neil frowned at her.

Samantha shrugged. “I can’t take her pain. I need a distraction.”

“Angela’s pain?” Grant had spent most of the Ciemus time making sure he was cleared to come along. He hadn’t heard the stories.

As Neil caught the man up, Samantha slumped in the rear with Kendle and Jennifer, trying not to reach out. She wanted the pain to stop so her twins would settle down, but she also disliked Angela’s misery. *I hope she gets a real break soon. Maybe when we’re on the boat, she’ll get to laugh again.*

Kendle picked up the kit at her feet. “I’ll do it. She wants me gone anyway, so if it’s something bad, no loss.”

Jennifer put a hand on Kendle’s wrist. “No.”

Kendle shrugged it off and began to check her gear. “I’ll stay away until—”

“No.” Jennifer hoped Kendle didn’t push. When she’d first discovered the enforcer power, she had been thrilled to have a defense that would succeed against her own kind. Then she’d realized she would have to use it on her fellow camp members and the fun had faded.

“At least ask her. I’ll bet she says yes.”

“If she didn’t stop us, we don’t stop.” Jennifer tried to reason with the stubborn island woman. “She may have sent someone already.”

Kendle paused to consider that, then shook her head. “She wouldn’t be so upset that it’s making my stomach hurt.” Kendle snapped her kit and unlocked the door. “I’ll jump and roll so you don’t have to stop.”

Jennifer glanced at Neil in the mirror, torn.

Neil met her eye and nodded.

Jennifer grabbed Kendle’s mind and took away her sight.

“What’s going...? Oh! You little bitch!”

Jennifer’s shield deflected Kendle’s swings, but the rebounds of her magic flew through the wagon, hitting walls and doors.

Jennifer locked down on Kendle until mouth and ears was all she had left, but the woman kept shooting off rage. Forced, Jennifer used a mental hand and shut the door to Kendle’s demon. She turned the key in the lock and put it in her mental pocket.

The castaway froze.

Jennifer let go of her. Until she opened the door, Kendle was an Invisible again. She couldn't even hear a thought now.

Kendle shuddered. "I'll kill you for this."

"Maybe." Jennifer shrugged. "Better me than Angela."

Kendle shuddered again, body jerking with her efforts to keep still. She had no chance of defeating Jennifer without her gifts.

Jennifer sneered at the woman. "You never had a chance to defeat me at all. I've always known you for the traitor you are, just like I knew Adrian for what he was. About people, I'm never wrong."

"Give it back!"

"No."

"Marc will make you."

"He'll try if you play miserable bitch enough, but I won't. I'll do it when you aren't a threat to the boss anymore. You're off the council, too, by the way. You've made me use a power that I didn't want known. You were going to break our quarantine, without Angela's permission, after being told no by senior leadership. You're off the council and out of the Eagles."

"That's actually an Eagle vote."

Jennifer waved a hand at Samantha's comment. "Works for me. They won't tolerate this behavior."

"But they do provide second chances." As Marc's best friend, Neil knew the wolfman had feelings for Kendle. Their shared adventure had

created a ghost she couldn't handle. Neil thought it was generous of Marc to even give her the time of day after everything that had happened, but when Kenn had called him the last boy scout, he'd been right on the money. Marc wanted Kendle to recover and be happy. If she didn't, he would blame himself.

"Yes, he will." Jennifer also knew that wouldn't be good for them. Angela's unhappiness was already intolerable. They didn't need Marc's on top of it.

"Give it back!"

"I can't."

"You will!"

"Maybe, but not now."

"Why not?!"

"You haven't apologized." Jennifer's fingers came up to count each point as she delivered it. "You haven't promised to obey the rules, you don't care about any of these people except Marc, and most importantly, you haven't promised not to kill my alpha!"

Kendle flinched away from Jennifer's shout.

"I... I can't."

"I know."

"I hate you."

Jennifer barked cold laughter. "I think you're shit on my shoes too, but if the boss says return it, I will. Until that moment, you're stuck going through life like you came into it—with just your wits and that flabby ass."

“I’ll make you screa—” Kendle looked over. “You think my ass is flabby?”

Jennifer nodded as everyone else hid snickers. “I do. You have great arms and legs, but you still spend too much time sitting, whining about how unfair your life is. Try standing. Then, when you’re ready, you’ll be a Runner.” Jennifer sat back and tried to find a comfortable spot. “How long until we reach the next stop?”

“Seven hours and forty-five minutes.” Neil was awed at how Jennifer was using Adrian’s words. Neil hadn’t thought she’d been listening then, but clearly, the teenager had taken in more of her surroundings than he and the senior men had believed.

“Wake me in half that and I’ll drive.”

Neil groaned. Jennifer was hell behind the wheel and not in a good way. She was still learning to control a vehicle.

Grant was stunned. William had mentioned being able to lock or unlock gifts, but he hadn’t understood how it was possible. Grant still didn’t get the mechanics behind it, though he now had an idea it was more like closing than taking. He’d actually heard a slam. Jennifer hadn’t consumed Kendle’s power. She’d jailed it.

The sound of Kendle crying almost broke the men in the wagon. Even Samantha expected Jennifer to cave.

Jennifer wasn’t fooled or sympathetic. *I know a snake when I’m next to one.* Jennifer went to sleep.

3

“Do you think she’ll give it back?”

“I don’t know. She’s pissed.”

“She shouldn’t. Kendle really is a threat.”

“Yeah.”

Charlie and Conner were in the rear of Kyle’s jeep. They’d been discussing plans for the wedding reception, but the drama in the wagon ahead of them had caught their attention.

Conner glanced toward the driver and lowered his voice. “She scares me now.”

Charlie nodded. “Same. I didn’t know she could do that.”

“Me either. I thought only your mom could.”

“I was hoping that was a bluff.” Charlie was disappointed to discover it wasn’t.

Conner frowned. “Jennifer doesn’t bluff. You should know that.”

“What happened?” Kyle demanded, glaring in the mirror. “Tell me right now!”

Conner swallowed. “Jennifer locked Kendle’s gifts away because she’s dangerous to Angela.”

Kyle’s tension faded. “Excellent.”

The boys traded confused looks, realizing the mobster had already discussed it with Jennifer.

“She didn’t want to, though, right?” Charlie was guessing. “You told her to.”

“I told her to be ready when Angela ordered it.”

“Why didn’t your mom do it?” Conner looked at Charlie.

Charlie shrugged. “Why does she do anything? For the future.”

“It would seem like she was picking on Kendle because of Marc.” Kyle increased speed to stay on the bumper ahead of him, not happy with Charlie’s bitter tone. “She has to be careful.”

“We shouldn’t take her to the island with us.” Conner liked Kendle, but he hated the drama.

“Or Adrian.” Charlie was too tired to be snotty about it.

Conner wanted to argue and couldn’t.

Kyle grunted. “Your opinions are both noted.”

The boys remembered they were rookies and vowed to watch their conversations around senior men and women.

Despite not being officially on a team, the Eagles were still treating Charlie as one of them. They believed when he made amends with his mother, he would be back with them anyway and they needed every set of hands they could get.

In the passenger seat next to Kyle, Candy stayed quiet and stored the few details she understood. She’d been directed to this vehicle by Jennifer. Candy presumed the teenager had read her thoughts but hadn’t cared about the invasion of privacy or the secrets she was keeping. She’d just been relieved to not be stuck in the trailer with the other women and kids again. All the noise gave her headaches.

You should care. Charlie warned the woman because his friend was in love with her. *If Jennifer sees something, you'll be in trouble.*

I haven't done anything wrong and I don't intend to.

You're considering messing with a younger boy. That's against our rules.

You're sleeping with an older girl. That's against our rules.

Charlie grinned at Conner. *She's a fighter. You're right.*

Conner chuckled.

Candy relaxed at the sound, smile coming to her lips. Conner was cute when he was happy.

“Damn.” Kyle sped up.

Charlie and Conner both tensed as waves of pain hit them.

Candy caught sight of the waving, crying parents in the road and realized they needed help. A few seconds later, it occurred to her that no one was stopping.

Kyle clicked the door locks.

Conner reached out to Angela. *What can I do?*

Charlie listened for an answer, but there wasn't one that he could hear.

Conner frowned. “We need to get on a boat and go. She can't keep making these choices. She'll go mad.”

“What do you mean?” Kyle wanted to confirm Eagle theories.

“Descendants face a constant battle to avoid going corrupt. And she’s a doctor. Letting people die hits her on both levels. Plus, she’s kind. She loves kids and animals. It’s easy to hurt her.”

“You think it’s intentional.”

Conner pinned him in the mirror. “Don’t you?”

Kyle nodded. “We know something has it in for Marc. We’ve recently begun to suspect that Angela is being tormented.”

“They’re paying for the past.” Charlie shrugged at the surprised looks. “I listen. A lot.”

“Even while chasing tail?” Kyle asked harshly.

Candy frowned, but didn’t interrupt the moment she felt coming.

Charlie nodded. “It wasn’t in the front of my mind, but it *was* in there.”

Kyle flipped the wipers on. “And now that you’ve had the tail, you can think again?”

Charlie flushed, but nodded again.

Kyle grinned at him through the mirror. “Welcome to manhood.”

The males chortled at the joke. Candy didn’t, but she also wasn’t angered. She had no idea what it was like to be a man. She did know how hard it was being a woman though, and believed it was equal in different ways. A lot was expected from their men, a lot more than had been in the past. Candy thought they were doing well. She had faith that Angela would continue to open the eyes of every member in their camp. The people just had to

be strong enough to confront the errors she would show them.

4

“That’s not good.”

Travis peered through the rainy window at Ivan’s groan. Upon catching sight of the desolate parents, Travis shook his head. “Not again.”

Ivan grabbed his kit.

In the rear, Shawn cleared his throat. “Stay put, gentlemen. You haven’t received orders to do anything.”

James glowered at him in the side mirror. “You just worry over the little girl you want to plug. We’ll handle the big choices.”

Shawn immediately lunged forward and grabbed James by the back of his head. He began slamming him against the dashboard.

Driving, Ivan couldn’t stop it.

Next to Shawn in the rear, Quinn didn’t try. James needed to have more respect.

Shawn let go of the bloody, moaning man, satisfied he’d made his point.

Ivan regarded Quinn in the mirror. “She’s upset. We should do something.”

Quinn shook his head. “We help them, we risk the camp. No.”

“I can’t believe how callous you all are!”

Shawn grunted, watching James for a retaliation. “We can’t believe how stupid you all are, so we’re even.”

Ivan didn’t want to be the target of Shawn’s ire, but he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “You know she’ll be upset. She might even sneak out again to handle it.”

“Not this time.” Quinn had already discussed this possibility with Neil. “She saw this camp tear itself apart over her absence. She’ll suck it up just like you and the big mouth will.”

James lowered the window to spit blood, but he didn’t yell at the parents. His head was ringing; pain was lancing through his temples. He hadn’t expected Shawn to be so strong.

He looked over his shoulder and received a lifted brow. James snorted painfully. “Yeah, I got it. You’re not after the baby.”

“I got stuck with a heavy duty and I’m doing it.” Shawn’s tone was ugly. “When she’s older, you’ll be sniffing at her heels like every other male in camp. I’ll be one of the few standing in your way.” Shawn grinned violently. “This was nothing compared to then. Even if she *wants* to date you, you’ll still have to get by me.”

Shawn’s defense of the girl was admirable and demonstrated how he felt, but Quinn wasn’t relieved. He would pass word on to the senior people worrying over it, though. Like them, Quinn was sure Missy was right. The descendant children were accurate in their predictions. If not for Angela

starting the meetings to get them under control, the boat ride would be rough. As it was, many of the men were already dreading being trapped on a ship with so many kids. Babysitting punishments would be handed out generously.

“I won’t want a little kid.” James wiped his face on his sleeve. “I stand by what I said. Be careful.”

Shawn nodded. “You too, sweetheart. We’ll get time in the cage together and I don’t forget anything.”

Finally subdued, James glowered through the window and tried to find an excuse to avoid the cage.

Quinn smirked and fell back into studying the map that had been forgotten upon sight of the sick family.

Ivan dwelled on the boss. Angela would be upset when they stopped. It would be better if he could give her good news of some kind.

Ivan caught movement in the rearview mirror and squinted to make it out. Kenn was using Eagle code.

Do you see me? Adjust your mirror.

Ivan did it without drawing attention from anyone in his truck. It was obvious Kenn didn’t want the other descendants to know or they’d be talking mentally.

Kenn signaled again from the slack position.

Ivan tapped the brakes enough to make the light come on to acknowledge Kenn, but not to stop the vehicle. As he discerned what Kenn wanted, Ivan

wasn't certain what to do. A senior man had told him no and now a senior man was telling him yes. Ivan chose to do what would please the boss even as it hurt her. He told Kenn no and refused to look at more communications from the man.

Kenn had expected to be refused. Ivan and his group didn't like him, but they also didn't want to endanger their Eagle chances by disobeying orders. Kenn understood and agreed even as he was disappointed. Ivan and his group would get payback at some point for tormenting him, but they couldn't match what Charlie had done. Kenn hadn't suggested asking for a driver switch to disobey orders and gain favor with the boss. He'd done it because Angela wasn't going to help the family and it was hurting him to leave them out there. He thought the boss would know that and forgive his actions this once.

“And what about next time?”

Kenn looked over in surprise.

Tonya flushed. She'd only been able to read thoughts through the baby for a few days. It had started in Ciemus.

Kenn chuckled. “I can do it and get away with it, once. Beyond that, we'll have to draft rookies who don't know any better.”

Glad he wasn't upset, Tonya leaned against Kenn's big arm and dozed. She didn't care for traveling, but she felt safe with her man and her people, and she would defend them if needed. Kenn

had been joking, but Tonya had made her choice a month ago. If Kenn ever went against Angela, she wouldn't be able to be with him anymore. Her place in camp meant a lot to her now.

Kenn patted her thigh. "That's why we're perfect for each other. I feel the same way."

Tonya smiled and allowed light sleep to claim her.

Kenn kept the lie hidden behind his new wall and tried to discover a way to ease Angela's pain when they stopped. His place in camp no longer mattered the most. His child did, and Angela would protect it as if it were hers, providing the child was in this camp and she was in charge. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with those two things ever again.

5

"Why is everyone upset?" Ray looked at Gus.

Gus was in the backseat with another rookie. He frowned but chose to answer. "Sick people ahead. The boss wants to help but can't."

Ray held out a hand to Greg. "Give me your medical kit." He lowered the window, seeing shadows coming. "Hurry!"

Greg shoved the kit into Ray's hand, ducking from the rainy wind.

Ray tossed the pack at the family. "It's medicine!" He quickly raised the glass.

Greg was happy with it.

Gus was a bit worried over Angela's reaction, but happy they'd helped the strangers.

Ray leaned back and tried to return to a sleep that didn't include Dale's ghost haunting him.

"Get it!" The woman staggered beneath the weight of the girl, bringing them both to the cold ground. Slush soaked her legs while her tears soaked the child's cheek. She couldn't believe the convoy wasn't going to stop.

The father dug in the bag. "It's medicine!"

"Find antibiotics. Penicillin or amoxicillin preferably." The woman jerked the child over to expose her hip. The girl had fallen on debris while they were running from the scavengers who had slaughtered their town. She'd been unconscious for a full day now.

The father loaded the syringe and plunged it into his daughter's skin as the rest of the cars went by. He'd known the convoy wasn't stopping as soon as the first truck went by. In another situation, he might have understood. Right now, he hated all of them except the man who'd tossed the bag.

"Why didn't they stop?" The woman tried to quit crying so she could help lift the child onto the man's frozen back.

"They didn't know we're not a threat."

"I hope they all die!" The mother shivered as the wind increased.

The man nodded, hefting the girl's weight. "Come lead the way with the flashlight. We'll find

a shed and stay the night. Any scavengers left will be drawn to the noise of the vehicles and miss us.”

“I hope they’re found!” The mother couldn’t help her bitterness. “We would have helped them!”

The man jerked his chin toward the bag. “Get that. I think we’ll need to dose her again in the morning.”

The storm grew worse as the family vanished into the shadowy woods lining the muddy, broken concrete.

6

In the lead rig, Angela’s tears were dried to her face. Her uneven breathing against Marc’s chest was hard on him. Marc was relieved to have good news to tell her and dreading punishing Ray and Greg for it. They’d disobeyed an unspoken order. Marc planned to stick his neck out and insist it be a light scold. Ray had done what she wanted to but hadn’t had time for. She couldn’t send a mental message outside the truck for fear a tracker would catch it, and radio calls had been out of the question. Ray had reacted in time. Marc wanted him left alone.

Angela muttered, fists tightening against his shirt. “No more bodies. There’s no room for them! My crypt is full.”

Marc winced. It was the old nightmare. She’d been having it the entire trip to Safe Haven, but he hadn’t paid enough attention. If he had, he might

never have delivered her. He could have stolen Charlie for her and taken them north.

Angela shifted restlessly, sending fresh unease through the truck.

Marc flinched as she shot up.

“Watch out!”

Eagles and descendants went on high alert.

Dog finally lifted his heavy head.

Marc drew his gun and waited for a target.

Angela’s breathing was harsh. “Down! He saw you!”

Marc realized her eyes were still closed. He holstered. “What’s happening?”

“Death is coming.”

Angela’s voice was eerie, giving their passenger chills. William had never been on this side of it. He observed and listened, trying to connect with her to see what she was.

Angela relaxed, falling deeper into the vision.

Marc looked at William. “Tell me what she sees and then when it’s over, tell me how to do that.”

William nodded, fighting hard to view the images in her vast mind. “It’s storming...ash... She’s in the west.”

Chapter Three
American Spirit

1

“**W**e need help for this.”

Seth stifled the urge to rub it in. Becky had hoped to find a small, lax operation, but the barriers around the half mile UN camp were nearly impenetrable. Seth only saw one weak point, but it would still be hard to damage. The far corner of the camp was set against the stone instead of forming a complete connection between the barriers. They might be able to slip in there, but three dozen troops were too much. Even with her gifts, they couldn't take this place alone. The camp was just south of Deming, miles from the border of New Mexico, Mexico, and Texas. It was a dangerous place even before the war. *Conditions haven't improved.*

The dust and gnats were aggravating, as was the constant scraping sounds of debris being blown over parched ground. The winds were strong here, blowing the dust and grit into tiny monsters that tried to blind them as they watched the camp that rang with unpleasant noises.

Seth winced at a young scream. *That could be her. She didn't survive... It could be, though.*

Becky felt Seth weakening again, but she couldn't comfort him. The dusty UN troops were hungover and in rough moods. They shoved kids and argued as they handled the needs of everyone in the long rows of cages. The other three sides of the camp held tents for sleeping and storage, but their flaps were open to catch a breeze. It allowed Becky and Seth to see squalor and empty boxes. Supplies were low.

Becky pulled her tan hat further onto her short curls, glad for the brim that blocked the sun. It was surprisingly bright here despite the cloud-layered sky. The north was dark. Yellowstone still wasn't happy.

Seth tugged on one of her sheared locks and pointed. It was time to go.

Becky wiped sweat from her neck and nodded. He was right. They couldn't attack alone, and they were in the middle of a troop entrance here. If they were caught, the kids wouldn't get help at all.

Becky led the way down the ravine. The UN camp was in a gulley that didn't appear as though it had seen rain in a long time. The amount of dust was staggering. Becky had no doubt it would be worse there. *Why would they make camp in such a bad place?*

Her witch supplied the answer. *Clear view of all four ridges and the only entrance road.*

But why here?

Seth took her elbow and helped her over the rough boulders at the bottom of the hill.

*Working with our southern enemies, I'd guess.
We're on the border here.*

Becky led the way, shrugging out of his light grip. Until she got too big to do these things, she wanted to do it on her own.

Seth wasn't angry with her. He was worried. The UN camp wasn't just guarded by troops. There were at least two descendants down there. Seth had been careful to stay out of their patrol areas. Becky had insisted no one could hear her private mental line, but Seth wasn't convinced.

The couple hurried into the sparse juniper at the foot of the ravine and then dropped into a large hole they'd only found because their hostage had told them what to look for. Troops on foot used the secret entrance. Everyone else used the road.

Seth waited for Becky to get inside the dusty darkness, then pulled the hatch of brambles overtop them. The walk in the cool darkness was short and then they were out on the other side of the rocky hills.

Seth hurried to their hummer, wishing bright yellow wasn't so bright.

Becky got in and held on as Seth took them out of the area in a hurry. They'd taken a large risk coming here in the daytime. She knew that now. "How do you want to make contact?"

"We'll use your private line during the storm. That should give us some extra cover."

"We won't need it." Becky had the confidence of youth. "I'm unbreakable."

Seth winced, but didn't correct her. He believed she was strong, but anyone could be broken if they were hit enough.

The small cabin they'd chosen was nestled between boulders and scrub weed. The wide open door banging in the wind wasn't expected.

Seth slammed on the brakes and shifted into reverse.

"Wait... It's Jeff!"

Jeff and Doug came out of the cabin with guns and expressions that weren't inviting.

Jeff was dressed in tan camouflage, as was Doug and the boys. Seth immediately felt ashamed of the red shirt beneath his jacket. He wasn't following Eagle rules.

"We came out here so we didn't have to do that." Becky thought Jeff looked angry.

"*You* did."

Becky sulked, but didn't reply to Seth's mutter. He was right. Seth had come to watch over her and his baby. Searching for his missing daughter was just the excuse.

"That's our help."

Becky nodded as Seth veered them into the parking space backward. *We'll have to keep the magic use down. Jeff didn't like it. He's kind of a girl that way.*

Jeff flipped her the finger.

Becky frowned. "What was that for?"

The couple froze as Jeff shoved into their minds at the same time.

You have a tracker on your trail. Get in here.

Seth hurried around to Becky's door, surprised to discover Jeff was a descendant, but not surprised that they'd been followed.

"That's not possible. No one gets through my line."

Jeff shoved deeper into her mind. *You left before everyone else evolved, little girl. You have a lot of growing to do to match any of the camp now.*

Becky growled.

Jeff shook his head and went inside the cabin. *That tracker is minutes behind you. Keep risking Seth's life out there in the open. I don't care.*

Becky slammed the hummer door and let Seth rush her inside.

"How did you find us?" Seth locked them in dimness.

"Like I said, she's not as strong as she thinks. We followed magic use—like the tracker did."

Becky would have argued further, but she caught sight of Doug. The boys were behind him, sleeping on the bed that she and Seth didn't like because it was too small for both of them. They'd chosen the loft instead.

Doug's profile was grim.

"What is it?" Becky took a step toward him, then stilled.

Doug winced as she shoved into his mind for the details.

Seth was saddened by the images. Safe Haven had lost a lot of people, including Becky's mother,

in an earthquake. He and Becky had also heard the radio calls from a naval station, but they'd never believed the camp was gone. Neither had Doug or Jeff.

“No...”

Doug hugged the girl, hoping she would cry it out and agree to come home with him.

Becky didn't cry. She shuddered against Doug's heat. “I knew.”

Seth got the answer for her nightmares from that. He was relieved the event was already over and full of guilt for not being there to help.

Jeff grunted. “We're all carrying a bit of that.” He noted the cabin was being kept clean and had been secured. It still didn't excuse the bright vehicle, but at least it was something. He and Doug hadn't been here long enough to pick up more details than that.

Seth signaled toward the door. “What do you want to do about the tracker?”

Jeff looked at Becky and then back.

Seth shook his head.

Jeff sighed. “Then keep her out of the way.”

Seth didn't know how he would do that, but he didn't want Becky in the actual fight.

Becky stepped from Doug's big arms and peered up at him. “Thank you for trying to love her.”

Doug sniffed. “I did love her. She just couldn't get around her hatred of men enough to return it.”

Becky hadn't known about her mother's obsession with putting women in charge of the world. She was surprised by it and dismayed as she read Doug's memories.

"Can we do this family reunion later?" Jeff snapped, checking his weapon.

"Why are you being so mean?" Becky turned on him. "Why do you hate me?"

Jeff rolled his eyes. "You endangered Seth by running off and you took a needed Eagle from camp. Now, you're about to get him killed by the tracker who just pulled up on a bike next to that bright ass hummer you insisted on. Seth wouldn't have chosen that vehicle on his own. He would have followed Eagle training. It's a wonder he's not dead."

"You came for Seth."

Jeff nodded. "The boss wants him. You're a burden to be dragged along, so why don't you take the boys upstairs and stay out of the way?"

"Hey!" Seth didn't like Jeff's tone or words. "We didn't ask you to come here."

"No, but you need me. You shouldn't have left camp to follow a piece of ass and you know it, so stop arguing and get your gun. The tracker coming is no one to screw around with."

"How do you know!" Becky pointed. "You haven't been here!"

"A lone man is walking up to the door without a weapon in hand. He knows who we are and he

isn't scared. That's a badass. Get the boys into the loft. Do it now!"

Becky helped Doug move the sleepy boys upstairs, but inside, fury burned. She didn't want Jeff here collecting them like wayward children.

But that's what you are, her demon declared. I'm glad he came. You might survive.

Jeff won't keep me alive. He came for Seth.

He came to make amends to the boss by bringing home the next generation of that camp—your child. She doesn't care about you or the father as much as she does the unborn.

Becky sighed. *Not true. Angela cares about all life, even the bad.*

Her demon cackled. *She's changed. Can't you see it in their thoughts? She just wants your baby.*

Downstairs, Jeff stopped, head rotating toward the loft. "She's gone mad."

Seth grimaced. *That didn't take long.* He'd been hoping his impression was wrong.

"It's not." Jeff didn't lower his voice. "She's dangerous."

"Only to herself when she's alone."

"Wrong." Jeff opened the door and pointed his rifle at the tall, lanky man coming up the steps. "She's a danger to all of us now. The best thing you can do is provide mercy."

"She's pregnant!" Seth yelled. "And I don't kill the innocent!"

“Is she?” Jeff kept working the moment as the stranger stopped and lifted his hands.

Seth wanted to say yes and couldn't. Becky had killed their hostage while trying to get details about the UN camp. Once they'd arrived here, Becky's stability had crumbled. The sight of kids, of girls, being tortured and raped, sold off to troops and survivors, had brought Rick back to her in a hurry. The nightmares had come steadily.

“Later.” Jeff didn't want to get distracted by their drama. “Right now, we have other issues.”

The tracker grinned, showing beautiful white teeth and cruel glee. “Yes, you do. No one leaves without permission. If you try, my friend will call in help.”

“What do you want?” Seth asked, sensing Jeff getting ready to lunge at the man. He was hoping to spot the guy's teammate when Jeff went out.

Jeff glared at Seth as the tracker retreated. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Seth realized he'd given away the plan and groaned. “It's been too long!”

The tracker backed behind the cover of the hummer, aware of Jeff scanning him again, searching for another opportunity. “We're going to talk and then we'll all pile into this hummer and go meet the base commander. If you argue, we'll take in your bodies and the boss will still get your kids.”

Seth's eyes widened. *He thinks—*

Jeff elbowed Seth in the kidney.

Seth recoiled, clutching his side. “Damn it!”

Jeff eyed the tracker. The man was stocky and tall, with scars and worn clothing implying he liked his job too much to stop for a shower and a shave. He didn't appear to be insane, however. The man looked hard yet reasonable.

"I am." Bret waved his empty hand. "When people cooperate, I'm not mean. No reason to be."

Descendant number one, Jeff marked. He caught sight of a shadow on the ground, showing a lanky man on the roof.

Bret gestured. "Liam there isn't as kind. When he goes through that window and finds a female, of any age, it'll get ugly. Call her down and we'll leave before that can happen."

Seth staggered toward the steps. "Come down!"

Jeff kicked Seth's ankle. "Shut up!"

"We're coming!" Becky shouted.

The tracker on the roof roared.

Glass shattered.

"Too late." Bret laughed at their dismay.

Jeff shot him mid chuckle.

Doug pounded up the stairs.

Seth stared in surprise at Jeff. "What happened?"

"Wait..."

"Let go or die!"

Becky's shout got Seth to his feet, but Jeff had hurt him enough that he couldn't run up the stairs.

"You'd get there in time to be shot." Jeff waited to holster in case Becky had bitten off more than she could chew.

Bang!

“All clear!” Becky called a second later.

Good girl. Jeff holstered and went outside to make sure the two men had been alone.

Doug and Becky came down the stairs and went to the small bedroom. They both had a giggling boy over their shoulder, tickling them to distract from what they’d witnessed. She and Jeff hadn’t been sure where the gunplay would happen, but they’d agreed it was most likely to happen on the ground floor.

Jeff nodded at the girl as he came inside and fastened the door. “Good act.”

Becky didn’t feel like she deserved the praise. “I am sorry. I didn’t know we had a tail.”

“Jennifer told us trackers can get through most mental walls and pick up conversations easier. You didn’t know.”

“No, but I do now.” Becky went to Seth, helping him massage the cramp from his side. “I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you. It happened too fast.”

“You knew they were here?”

Becky nodded. “I picked up Jeff’s memories about Crista as we hit the property. He was worrying over me being caught in the crossfire. I showed him how I would handle it and he agreed.”

“How did you keep the tracker from seeing the images?”

“We didn’t. There just wasn’t time for him to figure out what it meant. We had to act fast.”

Jeff held out a hand to Seth. “You’ll live. Get up here and take a shift at the window.”

Seth laughed and then groaned as Jeff pulled him up. “Did you have to be so mean?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Jeff and Becky chuckled at their simultaneous answers.

“That duo was sharp. It had to be real.”

“Well, I won’t be running into the encampment, that’s for sure.” Seth hated being out of the loop.

“We’re not running in.” Jeff had already swept their minds for details on the camp. “Watch the door while I cook. We’ll have a meal and a smoke, and talk about it.”

Seth took the spot, limping, as Doug dragged the upstairs body to the shattered window and shoved it out.

Becky regarded Jeff. “What do you want me to do?”

Jeff shrugged. “Same as you were before.”

Becky went to the rear window to help Seth keep watch.

Pleased with how things had gone, Jeff opened his kit and began digging in it. The UN troops might know they were coming when the tracker didn’t return, but Jeff doubted it. The tracker had been filthy. He hadn’t seen a camp in a while, but it didn’t matter. The three dozen kids in that base were spending their last hours in captivity. Come dawn, they would be free. There was no way Jeff could

walk from this killing field. His honor demanded that he do something.

“What do we do now? Run?” Doug wanted to know what came next. He had no faith that just four of them could take over a UN camp.

“The kids are waiting for us.” Jeff kept digging. “It would be rude to disappoint them.”

Becky grinned, watching him pull out the ingredients for a nice stew. “Are we using explosives?”

“No need.” Jeff shrugged. “I forgot who we are for a minute. We just have to let them feel us.”

“We can’t use magic!” Seth waved. “They’ll all come.”

“No. Just a good team to bring us in.”

“A team we’ll take over and turn against them?”
Becky liked mind games.

Doug chuckled, while Seth frowned deeper.

Jeff sighed. *Coldblooded women are hot. Guess it isn’t just the ladies who like a bad boy.* “How about we kill our escorts when we get to the entrance of their camp? From there, we’ll do what we do best.”

2

Knock-knock!

Everyone at the table quieted. They’d only been finished eating for a few minutes.

It would have been rude to interrupt your last meal. The male tracker's voice in all their minds was amused. *Open the door.*

Jeff and Becky shared a fast, unhappy glance. Neither of them were getting anything from the person knocking on the door. The shield was too strong.

Doug stood up and got his boys back into the loft. They made noises that couldn't be helped.

Seth waited to see what Jeff wanted to do.

So did Becky. Unlike the act earlier, she knew she couldn't handle this one.

Jeff gathered power to blast the person off the porch.

Becky swung the door open so he had a clear view.

"Stop!" Seth shoved through them and scrambled down the dusty porch stairs, almost falling. "My baby!"

There was no doubt about the redheaded child's parentage. Even her dimples were identical.

The people behind her were blurs outlined in headlights. Becky counted twenty shadows in UN uniforms, with weapons and leers implying they were enjoying this moment.

Becky and Jeff let the power fade as they observed Seth's reunion with his daughter. The child knew who he was, but she wasn't crying or even hugging him back. *She's following orders,* Jeff thought.

Becky gave him a subtle nod. She thought so too.

In a shield, the group of UN troops observed them with smirks and guns aimed at the child. Leading the group was a tracker none of the Safe Haven people had ever met or heard of, but instantly feared.

Jon delivered a cruel grin with his simple demands. “You three come. We don’t want your others. They can go.”

Jeff was relieved the kids weren’t being taken. He nodded toward his pack as he lowered his gun.

Doug understood. He stayed in the doorway to block the kids from view and reach.

Jon gestured toward Becky. “Get your man and come. He is expendable. Do not take your time.”

Becky came down the steps and took Seth’s arm, glaring.

Seth, daughter in his arms and tears on his face, missed all of it. He went where Becky shoved him.

Jeff followed, scanning the tracker and the troops. He wasn’t comforted by the robotic thoughts of the group. They had one mission right now: Bring in the powerful descendants who’d stumbled onto their location. Kill the rest.

Jeff looked back at Doug. He couldn’t speak, but he could communicate.

Doug watched Jeff’s hands, heart pounding as he realized it was a lie. He and the boys were going to be killed.

Jeff didn't like the odds, but he presumed the group would split up. Half would escort them and half would stay to handle Doug.

They'll use fire, Becky informed him, mind plotting. Get them to lower the shield. I'll take the tracker.

When their enemies didn't react to Becky's message, it gave Jeff hope that she really was as strong as she claimed to be. Deciding to take the chance, Jeff lifted his gun and aimed at the boss. "I want your word she won't be hurt."

Jon waved toward the small jeep in the rear of troops on bikes. "We even brought a safer ride. She's carrying a child. We won't harm her."

"You're collecting children. Why?" Jeff was hoping for information to take back when the mission was over.

Jon kept pace as Becky pushed Seth toward the ride. "I follow orders. Someone else will have to answer that."

Becky tried to help. "You know, though. There's no way you don't."

"You can't trick me into a moral switch. I don't care why they want the kids." Jon lowered his shield, tiring, and pointed at the jeep. "Get in there and I'll spare the mountain man. My word."

Becky didn't feel a lie, but she couldn't be sure. She looked at Jeff.

Jeff had been practicing his gift. He dug into the tracker's mind, searching for another lie.

Jon knew they'd picked up the plans. "I mean it."

Satisfied, Jeff and Becky got Seth and his girl into the jeep.

Doug observed with his hand on the butt of his gun. He had a plan he was refusing to think about so it didn't give him away.

Jon scrutinized Doug without speaking. He didn't need to. It was a clear warning not to make a move.

Doug didn't, though he wanted to. He had faith that trio could handle themselves. His mission was to keep Roy and Romeo safe.

Jon strolled to his jeep, waving his protection into the other vehicles. "Wise decision. They wouldn't last long if they can't fight."

The images Becky pulled from the tracker's thoughts matched what she'd witnessed. The kids were being used in all forms of entertainment, including fighting. She slid into the warm seat and tolerated a dark-skinned man with a large leer tossing a blanket over her.

"You'll be nice and warm, Miss." He shut the door.

Becky used the blanket to hide her firearm from view, though she was certain most of them already knew she had one. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

Seth got into the rear with Becky, still crying and clutching his daughter. The girl tolerated it, but her attention stayed on Jon.

Not good. Jeff got into the passenger seat of the jeep with his gun still in hand, surprised they hadn't been disarmed. He was also worried over it. "So what happens now?"

Jon got behind the wheel. "Talks and threats, beatings and blood. Or you could just agree to help us conquer the troublesome refugee camp that you came from and then we'll have drinks and dinner while we watch a fight."

Jeff snapped his mouth shut.

Becky brought down a thick wall.

Jon smirked. "I knew you were those people! I could smell the American spirit." His grin faded, contempt coming forward. "It stinks."

Jon started the engine and drove the jeep into the darkness.

As soon as they were out of sight, Doug packed the boys into the hummer and went to where he and Jeff had hidden the jeep they came in.

Allan snapped to attention as the hummer pulled in, recognizing it. Jeff had tracked the shiny vehicle for days before dropping him here and going in on foot to make contact. Allan hurried over as he realized it was Doug in the hummer, with the boys.

"Where's Jeff?" Allan was dressed in full fighting gear and had his rifle in hand. He was ready for action.

The cabin behind him looked as empty as it had when they'd arrived. Jeff had insisted they stay packed, that they wouldn't be here long. *He was*

right. “They were taken.” Doug hurried the children out of the hummer and into the jeep. “Come on. We have a run to make.”

“What happened?”

“Becky was in more trouble than Angela thought.”

3

“You ready?” Jeff looked over his shoulder at Becky as they neared the gate to the UN camp.

Becky nodded.

Jon frowned. “Do not try anything. We will be in the camp in sec—”

Jeff stabbed his knife into the tracker’s throat and grabbed the wheel.

Becky brought up a shield around the jeep as their escort realized what was happening and opened fire.

Seth added his strength to hers as Jeff steered the jeep toward a cliff on one side of the access road.

The jeep smacked into the wall and bounced, scattering small debris and liquid. Smoke billowed up.

Slugs slammed into the jeep in rapid succession. Becky shrank the shield to only protect the people; it required more energy than she had to cover the vehicle too.

Jeff pushed his shield out to cover the gas tank before the troops could target it. There was no way to know if the men were using tracer rounds that

would cause an explosion. Normal slugs wouldn't create a spark, but the burning phosphorus in the rear of the tracer rounds would send them all up in a fireball.

Seth was already exhausted of energy. He hefted his weapon and joined Jeff in shooting.

Seth's daughter didn't react to the din. She did catch her father's fear and stayed beneath his big arm, but she didn't flinch, telling Seth she couldn't hear it.

The little girl glanced up at him. *I'm blocking. Kimmie taught me how to cover pain.*

He was both relieved and horrified. Seth stopped firing and covered the girl's ears with his hands as the noise increased. The troops were trying larger weapons now. The gunfire was deafening. It rolled over the valleys and canyons, alerting everyone within miles that death had come for someone. Survivors in the area fled with only the clothes on their backs.

In the distance, Yellowstone continued to spew lava and smoke, echoing the fury of the people on the ground.

Jeff didn't think they could hold on until the men ran out of ammo and even if they could, backup would arrive soon. It was now or never. Jeff shoved the door open, letting go of the shield.

Becky groaned under the weight of keeping the shield up by herself.

Jeff grabbed a grenade from his pocket, flipping the pin. He tossed it toward the cluster of troops and

cars blocking them against the wall. Then he took off running.

Most of the troops who hadn't been in range gave chase, entering the danger zone.

The explosion thundered through the evening air, sending body parts across the site.

Becky gagged as gore hit the jeep.

Seth hugged his daughter.

Jeff turned toward the UN camp, waiting for a reaction.

Chapter Four
I Can Kill You Now
Western UN Encampment

1

“**G**et my transport!”

Mario didn't take the fancy gear from his tent, but he did grab his work diary. It detailed each shipment of children who'd been processed here and where those kids were sent. His masters would want this book more than they would want him. *For now. Later, they will make statues of me and I will be honored in parades and with women. All I have to do is give them Safe Haven, and I'm almost ready to close the trap on that last holdout.*

Mario grabbed his dusty kit and stuffed in the diary as he ran to the vehicle area. He was aware of the smirks and concern of those he passed. The kids in this camp had been vaccinated; the disease was spreading. The nightly fights had encouraged a fast evolution, as had the various antipsychotic drug cocktails that weren't so anti in the side effects. It kept the kids sleepy in the day and ramped them up at night. The UN planners had insisted that these children be tough enough to survive and infect others.

Mario had followed orders. He didn't care that the watching kids would rip him apart with their teeth if they got the chance. He also wasn't afraid of the abused troops who would do the same. Mario's shield had never been broken and his partner was vicious in his defense of their orders. The higher powers had wanted to be positive this plan succeeded.

Mario motioned his security team toward the cages. "Stay and protect our valuables." He pointed at Oscar. "You drive."

Oscar hopped behind the wheel.

Mario regarded his XO, sorry to leave his partner. "You have command."

Anton snapped a salute, then signaled troops into place around the pens holding the three dozen children. Little faces glowered in loathing as they waited to be released for the nightly fights.

Anton was aware of the danger from a few of the larger kids who had gotten good at killing, but he was an enforcer and he liked using his gifts on their little friend. When he hurt Kimmie, the others fell in line.

Captive kids gathered at the bars of the cages, silent, with haunted eyes and scarred skin. Until now, nothing had rattled Mario.

Anton increased the strength of his shield in case he'd underestimated any of the test subjects. They didn't keep descendant children in camp for that reason. They were always sent to the international detention center, but there was a tiny

chance of an Invisible in any group, who could evolve at any time.

In the far corner of the center cage, Kimmie stood. "I'm free!"

The kids around her dropped out of the crossfire, like she was now silently ordering them to do, against their protests.

Anton spun around as his fear was confirmed. Kimmie had fooled him. She was more dangerous than any of the children now coming out of their pens to surround her with protection. She loved blood and she was one of his favorite targets.

"Lock the doors! Lock the doors!" Anton watched in horror as the rest of the children rushed out before the troops could do it. The pens had just been unlocked for evening activities.

Kimmie stepped forward with fire gathering on her hands. "The alpha said I can kill you now." The little girl grinned maliciously.

Braced to take the hit, Anton screamed as fire flew toward a cluster of troops across camp. "No! Get down!"

Anton's teenage son was hit in the legs and flamed up like a match. The boy was on the refueling crew and always ended the shift covered in it through his clumsiness.

Kimmie fired again, this time aiming for the frantic father running toward his burning son. Panicking, Anton had dropped his barrier.

His body arched as her flames wrapped around him like a hand and began to squeeze. The fire

fingers burnt their way through his stomach as his son fell over, both letting out piercing shrieks.

All around them, troops and kids stopped and stared.

The stillness held for two seconds while Kimmie picked her next target.

Troops took off running.

Fresh flames and screams lit up the night.

Mario motioned his driver to keep going when the man slowed at the awful sounds. He hadn't suspected an Invisible among the children, but he hadn't cared enough to search this last batch as deeply as he should have. The kids were contagious. If they escaped and scattered, they wouldn't have to drop them off at the mapped sites. That would take longer to finish infecting the country, but it would still succeed.

Mario signaled his driver to take the rear road. Cleverly covered by a camo tarp, the disguised entrance appeared to be a boulder. Oscar drove through it.

The tarp caught on the front of the truck and then flew into the air.

Mario and Oscar disappeared into the dusty night as their men were killed by the kids they'd all tormented. They were getting justice for the four groups already processed since landing on American soil a month after the war. They were also getting their first real life test of the disease. After this, they would evolve faster. While in camp, the

children had only killed upon command or with permission. From now on, most of the monsters he'd created would make that call for themselves. Mario was proud. *I'll be welcomed home with honor.*

2

“No mercy!”

Mario's men were stunned. They'd never considered this would happen. They were big, strong, had weapons...and it didn't matter. They killed some of the kids in the front, but the others swarmed the troops and took their guns. From watching, the children knew exactly how to use them.

The dark skyline around the camp flashed with gunshots and fires, then explosions as the older kids found more powerful weapons. Smoke blew over the bodies and fires, carrying nose-curling odors to the adults waiting at the entrance to the camp.

“They're just kids!” Becky struggled against Jeff's hand on her arm. “We have to stop them from killing.”

“It's too late for that.” Jeff spotted familiar headlights flashing their way and taillights fleeing west. Instinct said to follow those taillights, but they needed the ride more. He shoved Becky toward Seth so he could flag Doug.

Seth was forced to let go of his child and catch Becky to keep her from falling. In that time, Doug

pulled up and blocked Becky's path into the camp unless she wanted to climb over the hummer.

Jeff sneered as he walked by the hummer. The squat, odd shaped windows allowed no room for firing. The roof wasn't made of metal. The tires stuck out from the wheel well nearly half a foot. The rear window was half the normal size, cutting off more room to fire. And it was yellow. *What were you thinking?*

Seth dropped his head. *I just wanted to make her happy.*

Doug hid a snicker. "Allan is bringing better transportation. Should be along shortly."

Jeff scanned the road to the camp. He'd expected troops by now.

Becky glared at Jeff. "They're not sparing anyone."

"Good."

Becky slapped the Hummer. "They shouldn't be killing!"

Jeff didn't care. He wanted the kids to have justice.

"You don't understand what this will do." Becky shoved out of Seth's distracted grip and knelt by his daughter. "Tell him."

Seth tried to grab the child from Becky, but the little girl pushed him away. She peered up at Jeff. "They'll hurt you. All of you. Get out of here."

Seth recoiled at the adult tone and words. "You're coming with us!"

Jeff pointed at the road. “Those kids were captives here and so was your daughter. They get to make their own choices now.”

“I go where Kimmie goes!” Seth’s daughter ran toward the road into camp.

Becky caught the girl and swung her onto a hip, ignoring the tiny fists and tiny power. “They’re coming. Hush now. Your Kimmie’s coming.”

The girl did, soothed.

Becky scanned the small group of kids and found one descendant. The little girl in front, wearing the red skirt and red top... Becky blanched as she realized the girl’s clothes were actually yellow, but coated in blood. She could see it when the girl swiveled to be sure all the kids were with her.

They’re all like that. Jeff was also scanning. *Don’t view them as kids. They’re freedom fighters who’ve just won their first battle.*

The girl in the lead was now lighting the path by setting the brush ablaze on either side of it. Jeff hoped that was to burn the camp. He would have ordered it anyway.

“You don’t order anything.” Kimmie locked eyes with him as she came forward, leading her kids. “It’s good you’re not like the others, but don’t forget who I am.”

Fearless... No. Terrified of fighting her own kind instead of getting to know them. The girl’s mind was easy for him to read. *She’s in pain.* Jeff didn’t like that.

Jeff turned from the kids. He went to the few wounded troops and began snatching lifeforces. “You don’t need that. You didn’t use it right. Oh, let go!”

Kimmie observed in horror as the hard descendant drained the troops and then marched back toward her. The other kids shook, fearing more pain, but Kimmie prepared to do battle.

You know what I want. Jeff turned it over to his demon. He watched in amazement as the entity split the lifeforces in the air and then delivered them. Then he was forced to brace as the energy drain started.

Kimmie paused as she realized the man was healing her and the other kids. All of them had scrapes and scratches, but many also had broken bones and cuts from the fighting. She was shocked.

The demon blasted the split forces toward the kids.

Jeff directed the demon to hit the girl in the front the hardest, sending more of his energy.

Kimmie arched as power sank in, stronger than any she’d ever felt. *That’s his.* She identified Jeff by the feeling she would always place with him now. Her next level of gifts popped out in a fiery shield the other kids shrank from.

Kimmie examined her fire hands in awe, then beamed at Jeff. “Thank you!”

Jeff nodded, gasping at the effort. He was glad it was done. The squeezing on his chest wasn’t pleasant.

Headlights flashed.

“That’s our ride.” Doug pointed at the bus flying toward them. “Who wants to go to Safe Haven?”

The kids cheered, except Kimmie.

Allan stopped the bus. Roy and Romeo were duct taped to the seat behind him—the best he could do to ensure they didn’t go flying around as he hurried to arrive in time to help. *Looks like I missed all the action.*

Jeff led the way to the bus, glad the children wanted to go. He couldn’t imagine trying to force them after everything they’d been through.

Kimmie took Jeff’s hand as the kids started climbing onto the bus.

Jeff felt her warmth enter his heart and light up dark places. He looked at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner.”

Kimmie increased her light. “You’re here now.”

Jeff tugged her to his side, nodding. “Yes, sweetheart. I am. You’ll make it to Safe Haven in a few days and then no one will ever hurt you again.”

Kimmie led him away from the bus.

Jeff felt dread welling up in his throat. Her mind filled with conversations from the troops.

“We’re a trap.” Kimmie dropped her head. “I couldn’t do it. You have to.”

Jeff shook his head at the awful image she’d sent. “I can’t do that. *I won’t.*”

Kimmie liked him for the choice, but she put her hands on her hips. “You have to! This disease is meant to kill off the survivors. A bus of kids is a

small price to pay to stop that. Rage is a terrible emotion.”

Jeff thought of Kendle and a few others who were showing signs of madness, like Becky. He sighed, leading the girl back to the bus. “It’s too late to stop it. All we can do is try to fight it.”

Kimmie began to cry.

Jeff picked the girl up, growing furious as her hot tears dripped onto his neck. *I want them all dead for this!*

So do I. Becky was keeping track of the conversation. She didn’t mind the idea of adults doing it. *Maybe we should stay behind when the boat leaves and do some cleaning without the boss stopping us with rules.*

Jeff wanted to, but the child in his arms needed him. He could feel it. “No, I’m ready to take a trip now, I think.”

Becky frowned, realizing Jeff wasn’t as tortured anymore. *That was fast.* She scrutinized the girl, spotting a smirk and the possessive clutch on his arm. Becky grinned. “Okay.”

Kimmie bared her fangs at Becky as Jeff carried her onto the bus.

Becky laughed. “That’ll be fun to watch.”

Seth nudged Becky toward the bus door too. “Does that mean you’re staying or going?”

Becky’s mirth faded. She stepped onto the bus behind Jeff. “That has not been revealed.”

Jeff grunted. “I hate that answer.”

Kimmie immediately vowed to use different words. Whatever Jeff wanted, he would get. She'd been around thousands of people in her lifetime and all of them had failed her in one way or another. Jeff had healed her and her friends with lifeforces—against their rules. She would always be loyal to him now. Not even the alpha would have this bond with her.

Jeff caught the thought and grinned. *That'll drive Angela crazy.*

“Get down!”

A gunshot echoed through the darkness, shattering a window near Jeff.

Allan slumped over.

Jeff let go of the girl and spun around to catch Allan as he fell from the seat.

More shots rang out as a patrol returned from rounds and found the scene.

Becky hopped over her team and got the bus door shut. She forced the vehicle into motion in a series of shrieks and grinds. Her lessons hadn't included busses yet, but the hummer was a stick too.

Jeff tried to find the strength to stop Allan from dying, but there wasn't time. The neck shot took his life in seconds.

“Guess I didn't miss it...” Allan stopped breathing. His body relaxed.

“Damn it!” Jeff punched the seat. He was too drained to help and they didn't have any other lifeforces to spare.

Kids flinched.

Kimmie stepped forward. She placed a hand on the dead man's arm and closed her lids.

Allan jerked upward, breath coming in a huge gasp...

Kimmie grunted, straining.

Jeff took her arm, shaking his head. "We don't do that after they die."

Kimmie let go, tears in her eyes. "Because they might come back empty?"

Jeff nodded. He understood the girl had wanted to ease his pain. He sighed, locking it away. A lot of his misery would have to be chained up now or he wouldn't be able to go with them to the island. His misery was too vivid, too tangible, to be running loose.

"I could keep you company." Kimmie went to the seat when he pointed. "Until you find a friend."

Jeff's heart broke this time. He could feel the girl's loneliness. He closed Allan's eyes and stood up. *Sorry, my friend. I'll make sure Angela knows you died with honor.* "How about I keep you company until you pick a guide in Safe Haven?"

Kimmie nodded, happy with anything he wanted to give.

Jeff held onto the brace pole as Becky got them out of range of the horse-bound troops who only wanted to reach the burning encampment now. "I hope we can add a few. One of them is Jennifer. She's been through this. She can help you."

“No one can help me.” Kimmie’s tone was so grim it was eerie. “I’ll have a short life of rage and have to be put down so I don’t hurt the innocent.”

Jeff couldn’t take her acceptance of that awful fate. “I’ll find a way to help you.” He put a hand on her thin shoulder, also vowing to fatten her up once he got her to Angela. “*All of you.*”

If it had come from anyone else, Kimmie would have accused them of lying or at least thought it. Because it was her new hero, she gave him a nod and let it go.

Jeff felt the weight of that choice settle onto his shoulders and found he could handle it. As much as he liked kids, if something went wrong, it wouldn’t compare to losing Crista and his unborn child. He could do this job.

That’s why she sent me, he realized, dropping into the adjacent seat. Instead of being furious, Jeff was relieved. He now had a hope for his future. It might be enough to let him go on trying to live through the black hole in his heart where his tiny family had existed for so short a time.

“We need to bury him.” Becky was still crying. She hated death.

Seth patted her shoulder and held tight to his daughter. “We will on the first stop. It’s Eagle rules.”

“I don’t want to hear about Eagle rules!” The teenager wiped at her cheeks. “Out here, it’s just us.”

Seth shook his head. “Not right now, okay?”

Becky fell silent, stewing over the past and the future.

Amy twisted in Seth's arms to look at him. "Tell us about the alpha."

"Later, Bella. Try to rest." Seth wanted the girl to sleep while he foraged through kits for a healthy meal. She was malnourished and that meant she had to be tired.

"I'm Amy now!" She slid onto the cold seat next to him and then walked into the aisle. "Will you tell us about the alpha?"

Doug shook his head. "I'm not one of you. I can't."

Amy slapped his leg. "Liar!"

"We want a story!" one of the other kids shouted from behind Doug.

"Stop it!" Romeo ordered, standing up. "We don't act like this in Safe Haven. Angela not allows it. You better follow the rules!"

"Angela *doesn't* allow it." Doug tugged the boy onto the seat, but the other kids quieted and looked to the Mexican child for more.

Romeo followed the orders he'd been given during the meetings with Angela—spread the rules and help enforce them. "I'll tell you and you will start practicing so you fit in when we get there."

"*You'll.*" Doug tried to act like it was any other day, but he was already worried about his boys being able to interact with these new children.

Kimmie nodded respectfully and sat forward to listen.

The adults were surprised by the immediate obedience. It was spooky how even the non-magic kids were desperate for any information on the alpha.

“They’re picking it up from me.” Kimmie scratched at drying blood on her arm. “Sorry. There hasn’t been a free alpha in a long time.”

“How are you connected to Angela already?” Jeff was curious how it all worked. Exploring things alone was hard.

“We’re not meant to do it alone. We are part of a whole, even when separated, but alphas call with their very presence. We were made to serve.”

“What if your alpha is corrupt?”

“She’s not!” Kimmie lowered her voice at Jeff’s tightening grip on the kit he was now digging through. “You see her that way because you refuse to submit to her will, but in the end, all will serve the alpha and we will have peace.”

She scanned me for that information and I didn’t even know it. Jeff hid a smile. “Peace. For how long?”

“Forever.” Kimmie sensed his scorn. “Honest. This generation will lead the future into the utopias that were never possible before.”

“By magic, by force.”

“With hard love.” Kimmie took the water he handed her and gave it to Amy. The youngest member of their group was roaming the aisle, staggering whenever the bus hit debris. Amy had energy to work off. Kimmie understood. She was

fighting that same urge to get up and go wild. “The alpha loves all people even as she or he destroys them for their wicked ways.”

Jeff was impressed with the girl’s intelligence, but he didn’t like the words. “That sounds like a God, not a human.”

“Yes.”

Jeff frowned, hands pausing. “She’s not a God.”

“Who are you to know?” Kimmie sat back in the seat to find a better position and avoid the next item he would shove at her. This way, he would have to give it to her kids first.

“I just know.”

The girl let out a derisive noise. “She has amazing power, no one understands her, and they all fear her. Plus, according to your thoughts, she communicates with the next level, with the Messenger for the Creator. She may not be a god yet, but she’s not human anymore either—not on your level or mine. She’s *above* us.”

Jeff didn’t answer. He couldn’t because he was equally torn between excitement and furious denial. *That can’t be right... Can it?*

3

In the South

“Something’s happening.” Zack groaned as Adrian shifted him into a piggyback position. The pain in his broken ribs outweighed all the other injuries and discomforts.

“Hang on. We’re almost there.”

“My team...” Zack held on as Adrian walked down the dark beach.

“You’re the last one.”

Zack responded by shuddering. His fever and infection were growing in equally terrifying rates. The rest of the rescued men were a short distance from here, with Adrian’s small team. They’d taken turns relocating Zack’s men a little at a time to avoid attracting the attention of the trackers in the warehouse. They didn’t have enough men or gear for an outright fight. That would come with the convoy’s arrival.

Shouting echoed from inside the warehouse.

A door creaked as it opened.

The surf roared, spraying them both in cold salt water that rolled off already drenched clothes. The dark sky didn’t allow him to see far, making this a treacherous run. Gators were all along this shore, nesting in the sandy reeds and beneath the ramps to various docks.

Adrian brought up his shield and concentrated on one step at a time, not glancing ahead or back. The sand was wet and heavy, filling his socks and shoes with scratching glass shards and bugs that he had no time to dislodge. Cold rain beat against his back while the wind shoved against his front. Coming in off the ocean, it was stiffer than he was used to.

Adrian sank into deep sand and fell; his shield vanished.

Zack dropped to the wet grit, groaning at the agony in his ribs.

Adrian fell into the surf. Shallow, it still came over his face and sent water into his mouth and up his nose.

Adrian pushed upward, hands sinking into the shore bottom. He remembered not to cough out the water, but he couldn't help the gag.

Shouts echoed, louder.

Closer. Adrian grabbed Zack and put him over a shoulder again as lightning flashed across the sky.

Sure could use a distraction. Adrian staggered down the beach with his man.

Zack held in a groan, alert enough to understand they were in danger, but he couldn't stop the shakes and shudders wracking his body.

Adrian spotted the single glint from his team to help him find the way to the little shack. He grimaced as fresh shouts came from behind him. He hoped his team was ready like he'd told them to be. When he'd come back out for Zack, Adrian had felt something about to go wrong.

Harry reached Adrian and took Zack's weight. He'd been unable to wait. The men from the warehouse were out searching with lights that were occasionally flashing in this direction. "We're ready to fight, Boss."

Adrian grunted as they hit the door to the tiny shed and piled inside the rotting darkness. The beach hut was barely standing, but it would keep them from being seen until the trouble was too close

to avoid their bullets—if Adrian could shield them from the return fire.

Adrian drew on his love for Angela to fuel the shield. He imagined her expression when she arrived to find her men alive and the bad guys already dead so that she didn't have to do it. In her heart, a dark spot might lighten. Adrian wanted to spend the rest of his life doing that until she only saw a white wall when she thought of him. He could almost feel Marc's arrogant smirk denying that, but it didn't matter. Angela had a forgiving heart. In time, she would allow him to sit beside her without rancor or bias.

The rest of the team stayed still and tried not to think about anything. When Adrian gave the word, they would attack. Fury was rising in their tired limbs to prepare them for it.

The storm broke open, flooding the area with sheets of rain that blew men off their feet. It prevented sight as well as walking.

“We'll come back!”

“Dolly saw something out here!”

“The bodies are still on the wall! I'm going in!”

The trackers and fighters retreated as the weather continued to worsen.

The teams in the shack made sounds of relief and hatred.

“Something went wrong.” Zack came alert all at once. “Someone's dead.”

“Not in Safe Haven.” Adrian covered Zack with the emergency blanket that Harry handed him,

hoping the shiny material didn't draw fresh attention of the bastards inside the warehouse. They'd removed the live men from the wall but left the dead. During the storm, the noise had been covered. They were now half a mile away, but good glasses might still be able to spot something shiny through the cracks in the rotting planks of this shack. If they got a guaranteed sighting, the weather wouldn't keep the bad guys in that warehouse. The prize was too valuable.

Zack wanted to help his men, but two days nailed to the wall of the warehouse had done him in. He'd also been beaten before that, which had provided the cracked ribs. He considered himself better off than Carl, who had died next to him as the rain started.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

"Not your fault. I led them into a trap."

Adrian grunted, now wrapping Zack's bleeding hands. "It happens, Eagle. You've seen it before. No one can cover everything."

"I was stupid." Zack held in a moan as Adrian tied the bandage and Harry worked on the other side. "They walked up like they wanted to talk. I didn't suspect a thing until they started shooting."

"Can you give me details on them?"

"About thirty. Lot of weapons. They were speeding, too. Not certain on what, but the woman was drooling during the fight." Zack shut his lids as the rain increased. "They need to be put down."

"They will be."

“Safe Haven’s close?”

“Yes.” Adrian took out long strips for binding Zack’s ribs.

Zack shivered as Harry pulled back the thin blanket. “If we don’t, she will.”

“She’s in a mood right now.” Adrian tried to be gentle as he worked. “It would be better if we handled it or the entire wharf might go up in flames.”

“Something happened with her?” Zack had already forgotten. His brain was spinning from the pain and fever.

“Trouble in the west.” Adrian wrapped the strips tight, listening for new trouble. “Doug’s group is on the way home now. He might have reached Seth by now and triggered whatever is happening.”

“Can you see it?”

“No.” Adrian opened another bandage, growing angrier with every moan from the injured men. “Boss said no unapproved searching. Trackers might be around.”

Zack tried to stay alert, but relief was rushing over his aching limbs, bringing the need for sleep. “W-what’s a tracker again?”

“A low power descendant who tracks others like themselves to kidnap or kill.”

“Sounds like a b-bunch of assholes.”

Adrian chuckled, moving to help Ramer. “We’ve had a few on our trail since we left the

mountain. These warehouse people are connected somehow.”

“That explains them knowing we were coming.”

“But their information line cut off after the naval base. No one came to rescue you right away, so the men here may think they’re on their own.”

“They are.”

“Yes, but I can feel a tracker, so we’ll have at least one descendant to deal with during the fight.”

“Why can’t he sense you?”

“She.” Adrian tied the bandage tight. Ramer would recover, but Adrian wasn’t sure about Scott. “She’s drunk right now. Should pass out soon.”

Zack’s head rolled to the side as he passed out.

Adrian was relieved. Zack would also survive, but it would be painful while those ribs healed. Scott’s injuries went beyond the also broken ribs and the dozens of stitches Adrian was about to put in. He had internal issues. A descendant could heal him if Angela allowed it, but not until the threats in the warehouse were gone. The woman tracker was drunk, but magic use so close to that building would bring her on the run.

“Boss is gonna be upset.” Harry had helped Adrian pull the nails and spikes from their men to remove them from the wall. He was furious. He hoped Angela laid waste to this place.

“We need the buildings while we prep the boat.”

“Still.” Harry didn’t like it.

Adrian nodded. He'd been through this horror so many times now that he was almost numb, but the rage was there. He'd learned not to act on it until the proper time. Angela could still be brought to fury at even simple horror. In time, she would toughen up. Adrian was dreading that. He didn't want her to be as cold as he was. The only time he felt the heat was with her or while fighting Marc. He used to compensate by spending time with the kids. Their joy would probably still bring smiles, but he'd been banished too long now for it to ease his pain. He'd passed the point of no return. All that was left to him now was making sure Angela led Safe Haven south.

And waiting years for Marc to die so he could hold his woman once in willing passion. Even there, he was going to be disappointed. Adrian presumed Angela would let him have her at some point from grief and loneliness, and he had no doubt that she'd be thinking of the wolfman the entire time. There was no reason for light in Adrian's heart. The future, cold and dark, offered little hope for his happiness. There was only duty and obsession now. *Everything else is a lie meant to comfort the weaker people who can't accept the truth, that real happiness is an illusion not reachable by all people. Only a lucky few attain it. The rest of humanity is destined to suffer without end.*

Chapter Five
I'm Not Adrian

1

“**I** need you to let me and the girl roll out.” Shawn braced for reactions. Since the fiasco with Tara, all senior men viewed him with suspicion, even his own teammates.

The empty woods around them were perfect for an undercover drop, but Daryl frowned in the mirror. The pair had put on their winter gear a little while ago; Daryl had assumed they were cold. Many people were having trouble adjusting to the outside weather. “Code word?” He smothered the jealousy over Shawn getting that duty and not him or one of the others.

“EBay.”

Brittani chuckled. “Really?”

Daryl slowed the jeep, waiting for Shawn to call the spot. The temperatures were cold, but not deadly unless you didn't know what you were doing. Shawn was one of the highest level Eagles still alive from Adrian's original teams. He knew what he was doing, and he clearly had approval from the boss.

“That's funny.”

“It is.” Daryl slowed more, accounting for the little girl's short legs. She wouldn't be able to jump

as far. “It’s also hard to copy. Most people have forgotten that company ever existed.”

“I see the wisdom, but it’s still funny.”

“Yeah. The boss has a good sense of humor most of the time.” Daryl didn’t say more, though he wanted to. Shawn and Missy had played car games for a while and then napped until about fifteen minutes ago. When Shawn had started checking his gear and Missy had buttoned her long coat, Daryl had known something was happening, but he hadn’t expected a run. At their fast team meeting before leaving Ciemus, Kyle had told them to expect private missions from the boss to cover their arrival. He hadn’t told them why, but they’d all understood it was to catch everyone off guard.

“We’ll go one minute from now.” Shawn tugged Missy’s hat over her ears. “I don’t know how you convinced the boss to let you come with me, but we’re going to talk about this when it’s all over. I don’t want you on runs. You got that?”

Missy paled, but it was clear by her pout and crossed arms that she wasn’t scared. Brittani was watching her in the side mirror.

“You’ll need me.”

“Even if that’s true, I’m still talking to the boss about it. You can’t go on runs. You’re a child and you’re going to act like one.”

“You can’t make me.” Missy’s lips went out further.

Shawn sighed. “Yes, I can. I just don’t want to threaten you. I prefer to tell you the rules and have you follow them.”

“You can’t dump me off on the camp.” Missy read his mind. “They don’t like me.”

“Well, you are a snotty little brat.” Daryl’s tone was polite but firm. “You could try to be nice and that might change.”

Brittani frowned at him. “Really?”

Ah. She has two meanings for that word. I’ll watch for the tones. “Yes. Scan the memories. She’s been rough on everyone.”

To counteract that, Missy let the woman see why she was being so mean.

Brittani didn’t let it sway her completely, but there was no doubt it worked. She felt bad for the little girl who was being blamed for Angela losing her baby. Missy’s guardians had forced her to lie and manipulate the camp so they would be distracted and have an opportunity to kill Angela. They almost had and though they were gone, Missy wasn’t. “She’s a target.”

Daryl nodded. “We keep certain people away from her for the most part, but I’m referring to the other children. Missy doesn’t like non-magic kids.”

“We’re working on it.” Shawn couldn’t help but defend her. “It’s hard because they don’t like her either. They read the adult’s thoughts and transfer it to her even when playing. She’s shut out. After a few weeks of that, she started giving it back harder than she got it and now she won’t stop.”

Brittani scowled. “Sounds like the kids are out of control.”

“Sadly, they’re acting like what they are.” Daryl prepared for a cold draft. “They pick it up from us, all of us. We bleed it over them like a shroud and then expect them to act differently. It’s sad.”

“I thought you didn’t like the girl.”

“She just needs to be trained. That’s why the boss sent her out this time, I’d bet. Some of our kids won’t be able to just be kids. The war ruined that.”

“Shawn says I can’t, but I don’t fit in anywhere else.” Missy’s eyes went all wide and teary. “I’m trying, and it doesn’t work.”

“Later.” Shawn made sure he had her attention. “Remember how we practiced it while we packed the vehicles in Ciemus.”

Missy smiled at him. “Don’t be mad.”

Shawn grunted. “I’m not; now do you remember?”

“Yes. Let myself roll. You’ll pick a spot. Keep my head tucked and don’t fight when you push me out.”

“Good girl.” Shawn patted her arm. “You’ll be fine. Stay down and still until I come to get you. It’ll be cold and dark.”

Missy got into the position Shawn had taught her. “I’m not scared.”

“I know.” Shawn popped the door open as Daryl slowed to a crawl. “That’s where my new gray hairs came from.” He shoved the girl before she could answer.

Brittani watched, holding her breath as the child hit a snowy drift and sank into it. She lost sight and started to turn to look through the rear windows.

Daryl placed a hand on her wrist. “Face forward. The people behind us aren’t supposed to know.”

Brittani did as told. She also wanted to respond, but the feel of Daryl’s hand on her skin was sending warning bells though her mind and preventing speech. Her nerve endings were lighting up, body responding. They were a physical match. That was clear in the small sparks that held her captive as Shawn dove out of the car.

Daryl was glad he was an Eagle. His training allowed him to use the hand on the wheel to direct the vehicle around the curve hard enough to close the rear door. He did the scan to see if people behind him had noticed and stored the information that Molly, a rookie, had, but she wasn’t reacting other than to give him a nod in the mirror. After that, Daryl followed out of pure reflex, unaware of the road under them or the vehicle in his grip. All he could feel was the woman responding to his light touch. He didn’t want to move his hand.

Brittani recognized the moment. She should. She’d been waiting for it her entire life. “Here? Now?” She pulled her hand away and shut her eyes. “How cruel.”

Daryl almost felt as if he could read her mind. He nodded in agreement. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She wasn’t in his head, but Brittani knew she should search him to be sure he was as good as he felt.

“You were upset over the discovery. It seemed like the right thing to say.”

“I hate platitudes.”

“So do I, but it was better than blurting it out like you were expecting.”

She sighed. It would be hard to pretend this hadn’t happened. That was the right thing to do, though.

Daryl replayed the hot sparks, enjoying the moment of knowing, if only for a few seconds, that he’d found his soulmate. Then he locked the door and brought down a shield. “We’re Eagles. We do what’s right and tough out what sucks. That’s what I’ll be doing.”

Brittani hated it that she was disappointed. She didn’t want Daryl to fight for her. She didn’t want to hurt Gus. But... “It’s not fair.”

“No, but that’s the way life has been for centuries.”

“You’ll stay away?”

“No. I’ll do my duty and help you do yours. We’re going to be friends at some point, no matter who you pick.”

“I’m not going to pick.”

“Yeah. Neither am I.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I was going to pick a friend from the Ciemus women.”

“You’re waiting for me?”

Daryl shook his head. “I just already know I can’t take the disappointment when I touch their wrist and they don’t make that happen. I’ll be crushed and so will they.”

Brittani’s heart thumped at his tone. It was clear he wasn’t going to lie or even pad the truth to spare her feelings.

“I won’t tell anyone why.” Daryl couldn’t help the defensive tone. “It’s sad and it’ll cause more camp drama. I’d rather skip that.”

“So would I.”

“So we agree to be exactly what we were before this ride—Eagles, fellow camp members, and maybe friends in a private way that we won’t express.”

“In public.” Brittani was horrified to hear herself concede that.

“No.” Daryl immediately refused, frowning. “I’m a senior man in this camp and head of the moral board. We’ll never be alone together again, and this conversation will be the end of *us*. I won’t ruin my place for a possibility. I’m not Adrian.”

Brittani didn’t know why that hurt her, but it did. She forced herself to say, “Okay.” But in her heart, that heat continued to burn.

“Good.”

Brittani stole a look at him, wondering what he looked like clean and in basic clothes. She was positive she’d seen him that way before the mountain fell on them, but she couldn’t remember.

His profile suggested a stubborn man who would do exactly as he said.

Daryl gazed over in time to witness brake light glare flash across Brittani's cheek, highlighting her creamy skin and ebony hair with glints of red and then white. *Always was drawn to dark skinned, dark haired warriors. Never ended well. Maybe I can wait until they break up and just offer her a service.*

"I'll never break up with Gus." Brittani answered his joking, hurting thoughts with grave tones as the jeep bounced over debris. "I promised him forever. I might take a moment or two for myself, as wrong as that is, but I'd never leave him."

Daryl grunted, storing the information even while reprimanding himself for it. If one of those personal moments were offered, he was already certain he would break his moral code to have her in his arms. He needed to know if the earth would move again, if the bells would ring.

Daryl forced his mind to Shawn and Missy, and to the road.

Brittani felt it when he blocked her out, but she didn't open the conversation again to offset the instant loneliness settling into her heart. She cleared her expression, told herself to stick to her commitments, then slipped on her bent headphones.

Daryl knew people would assume they'd argued, but it was better than everyone knowing the truth. He drove in silence, refusing to look at her until he had to make a turn. Then, his eyes burned

into hers with an intensity that warned them both it wasn't over.

2

“Promise me...”

Sam's tears ran over her cheeks in endless streams. “I promise. Your son will always be treated fairly. I'll be there for him when Neil can't.”

Jeremy's lids shut. Blood trickled from his mouth. “Love you, Sammi...”

Sam's sobs came harder. “I love you too. I always will.”

“She's having a nightmare.” Kyle jerked his head toward the backseat, where Samantha was lying. “Jenny can tell you what it is, if you need it.”

Samantha dug deeper into her pile of blankets, vaguely aware of people talking, but she didn't want to surface and feel the pain. Her children were growing. It hurt.

Neil was glad for Kyle's offer, but he couldn't imagine asking Jennifer to snoop in Samantha's mind. Neil reached back and put a hand on her warm shoulder, trying to send his comfort. Her breathing was rough and tears were rolling, but he didn't wake her. He'd consulted Angela over it and agreed Samantha needed time to mourn. Neil was determined to wait it out.

Samantha fell into a dreamless slumber as Neil's love flowed over her. She burrowed deeper into the blankets and slowly relaxed.

Smoke curled over the dash and out the cracked window. Kyle tapped out his cheroot, trying to be considerate. Samantha had asked him to keep the window down because she was sweating, but she kept digging deeper beneath the covers, making him worry. The rest of them were wearing normal Eagle outfits and felt comfortable.

Neil felt sweat beading on her skin and lowered his window a bit more. The babies were keeping her temperature up. They all presumed it was normal. No one knew for sure. They'd never been through this.

I could help. William was monitoring all thoughts and conversations as they traveled, on Angela's orders. She didn't want things to go uncovered while she rested.

Neil hadn't decided if he liked William, but he wasn't about to refuse the information. He needed to know if Samantha was in danger.

It can be dangerous if the father is a descendant and not the mother. She would have to adjust.

But Samantha doesn't, because she's already a descendant.

Yes. The high temperature is the equivalent of increasing the heat on a pot to make it cook faster.

Neil smirked at the image. *Two pots. She's getting big.*

William approved of the manly pride. He was relieved to not discover secret thoughts of only loving his son in Neil's mind. The trooper was proud of both children. *Wait until she hits seven months and can pop at any time. She'll need a lot of help to get—*

Wait. Seven months?

Yes. Descendants carry offspring for exactly seven months from conception. Still hard to pinpoint if the parents had intercourse more than once, but it's sharper than prewar estimate methods.

That seems...short.

It is. Our kind has to breed faster because we're rare and hunted. Nature accounted for humanity's greed. It's amazing.

It's scary.

It can be. When the parentage is reversed, there are complications. A normal human female body is set for a ten month count, though most go at nine and a half due to forcing the issue through sex, physical labor, and stress. There are also those who try to go when they're ready instead of letting nature finish its chore. That caused an epidemic of unhealthy babies born early over the centuries.

Neil frowned. *Are you saying forcing labor a week early caused immune diseases?*

Evidence certainly pointed in that direction. However, stress, manual labor, and active routines were just as devastating. Those groups of children should have been studied to determine cause and effect.

Wow. That would have been such a simple fix.

For those who could afford it, yes. For those in abusive relationships and poverty, the situations would have been harder.

I'm glad we don't have that anymore.

Yes. One good effect of the war was the exposure of the rats in the corn. It's wonderful to have two populations where abuses are not allowed.

We still have some work to do.

Don't we all?

Samantha shifted in her sleep, sliding out of Neil's grip. He studied the sweat on her neck. *We could use some lists about pregnancies. Unless the boss already asked for it?*

She said the council would have things I might be able to help with. I assume this is one of those.

And you will?

Of course. Where would you like to begin?

Neil got his notebook and pen. *Go with the complications of opposite parentage. I want specifics on Sam's condition.*

You mean having two descendant children at the same time? From non-descendant fathers.

Is she in danger?

Only from our kind. Twins are incredibly rare for descendants. Protect them at all costs. Their power is going to be amazing. Their blood will be wanted for rituals. If trackers find out, you'll never have peace.

Neil's tension jerked Samantha from sleep. She lifted her head to peer out. "Is everything okay?"

Neil shook his head. “Go to sleep, sweetheart. William and I are watching for trouble.”

Samantha did as ordered. She was exhausted.

Neil returned to the conversation. *Tell me about Samantha.*

The heat will get rough on her, but she'll adjust. After the birth, it'll go back to normal. The babies will need extra heat for a month after.

What about complications?

Sometimes the babies have strong gifts that evolve with the parents. You'll know when that happens.

Neil grimaced. *Yeah. We got that one.*

William sympathized. *On the bright side, if the children evolve in utero, and the mother is good, they're usually unable to be corrupted—even in a lab.*

Neil didn't want to know how William had come by that information, but he hadn't been worried about the children being evil. All three parents were good. He'd presumed their prodigy would be as well.

Not always. Fate throws in a wildcard when it wants to. There have been documented cases of newborns enjoying the pain of their mothers.

Neil added a new worry to the list.

I doubt you'll have that issue. They would be showing signs of it.

Like what?

Like Cynthia's child. William had read many of the camp memories now, as well as the council's thoughts on big moments in Safe Haven.

Those parents weren't good.

No, but the reactions of the babies are the same.

We'll watch for it.

Your boss already is.

Neil wasn't sure if he should be relieved or worried over that. He switched to his next concern. *Can they be tracked?*

Yes. Twins are rare. They put off a double signature on a grid that's unmistakable. They can't be tracked until they're born, however.

Will their gifts be like hers... Will they both have gifts?

Because you experienced a three-way evolution, you can be reasonably sure they will both have power, but they could start as Invisibles. There's no way to determine that. As for the gifts, the main skills transfer from the mother. If both parents are the same level of different descendant types, the child might have both gifts. Crossbreeding is dangerous. That much power in one person can tempt them to become corrupt.

Neil was suddenly glad he wasn't a descendant.

Did you ever want to be? William hadn't found envy in the trooper either. Neil's heart was almost totally pure despite his occupation.

No, not really. I'd like the gifts, but the rest of it would suck. The two didn't even out for me.

You'll make a good father, I think, William informed the man, not prying into the lies. She's lucky.

Will it be enough to keep them from going bad? Neil demanded rashly. Because I'll do what I have to for my kids, even if I don't want to.

William immediately looked into that future.

In the lead truck, Angela opened her eyes.

William glanced over his shoulder at the closed curtains of the bunk where she was resting with Marc and Dog. After a minute, he let out a deep sigh. *I'm sorry. That has not been revealed.*

Neil's frown took up his entire face. He knew who that answer had come from. Angela didn't want them talking to William about the future.

I'm sorry. I should have asked her first.

Me too. Neil stored his annoyance for later. Keep going about the pregnancies?

What else would you like to know?

"Any chance you'd let me in on that conversation?" Kyle was out of patience.

Neil gaped. "How do you know what... How do you know I'm talking to someone?"

"Power rubs off."

"Yeah, but not unless you're having physical moments with a descendant." Neil gave a mock frown.

Kyle flushed. "I don't want to talk about it."

Neil snickered. “Samantha said Jennifer was ambushing you. Must be working.”

Kyle sighed. “Like she needed help in that area.”

Neil chuckled. *Can you hook him in?*

William shoved into Kyle’s mind. *There we go.*

Neil didn’t feel anything, but it felt stupid to ask Kyle if he could hear yet. Neil chose to just start talking. *William was telling me about descendant pregnancies.*

I thought so. Kyle shrugged at Neil’s curious glance. *Jenny wants a son. So do I, at some point. That’s need-to-know information.*

I have to do a scan. Neil can catch you up. William left.

Neil and Kyle had never been mentally connected.

This is odd.

Neil nodded. *He’s powerful to be able to do this.*

Kyle grunted. *Yeah. We should watch him.*

You know he can still hear us, right?

Yep.

Neil chuckled as he realized Kyle was sending William a warning. *Any kid of yours will be a handful even without descendant power.*

William swept the convoy for trouble, glad to be able to give the two hardworking men a good moment. He liked them both. Kenn was the one who made him twitchy.

William switched to their surroundings and found only cold rain falling on empty towns and homes. It was dead here. In a few years, Ciemus might really be the last bastion of civilization in North America. It was haunting.

Eager for the distraction, William rejoined the men. The two killers had light and darkness in equal amounts. It was fascinating.

Lights flashed around them, passing a message.

“Bathroom stop coming.” Kyle’s tone was unhappy at the interruption. “Can we pick this up afterwards?”

You know it!

The Eagles both snickered at William’s eager response, but they still didn’t trust him.

Kyle surveyed the landscape and found it the same as the last time he looked. Swaying trees dropped clumps of melting snow and rainy drops that froze to the hoods and roofs. It was miserable weather, but they had to stop soon. Forcing the camp to go six hours between bathroom breaks was hard on the elderly and the children.

Kyle caught a whiff of something sour and made everyone jump as he sneezed three times in rapid succession. The vehicle under his control didn’t shift much from the path of the truck in front of him. He was too experienced to lose control so easily, but it was still hard to blow with one hand. He accomplished it in a series of elbow and wrist movements that brought chuckles from his awake passengers.

“Hey, uh.” Conner drew in a breath. “Can I join you in that conversation after the stop?”

Kyle and Neil traded glances while William waited for their choice.

Neil shrugged. “Up to you.”

Kyle chose to be honest with the boy. “You’re after a woman carrying the offspring of a beloved fallen Eagle, kid. She’s not carrying a descendant.”

Conner chose to answer with the same adult approach. “Some day, she will be. I’ve seen it.”

“Seen it or will make it happen?” Neil inquired with deceptive casualness.

“Both.” Conner knew William was scanning him now, but he also knew honesty mattered the most to these men. “She knows. If she wanted me gone, she would have asked Angela to help her.”

“Can she make that choice while under a charm?” Kyle still didn’t understand how all of it worked, but he knew he needed to.

“Of course.” Conner gave Angela away without meaning to. “Never without permission means everything to our kind.”

Silence fell as the riders and driver realized what that meant.

“Well, there’s a new piece to a tired puzzle. I never even considered that angle.” Neil locked down on his thoughts.

“Me either.” Kyle reached for his smoke. “We’ll patch you in, kid. For every question you ask, we get one.”

Conner glared at the mobster in the mirror. “You tricked me.”

“You opened your mouth and the truth rolled out.” Kyle corrected the boy like he would any other Eagle in his care. “Learn to control that or you’ll end up giving her away to the camp and that will get you eliminated during the chaos.”

“And if he doesn’t get you, I will.” Neil settled back into the seat. “Now, repeat after me: Eagle rule number one...”

Conner realized Neil was giving him a mental cover to concentrate on during the stop and was grateful. It was a relief to have senior men he could count on. *I’ll never betray them. I’m going to have my Candy and be an upstanding Eagle.*

“Your dad sure couldn’t do that.” Samantha had woken when Conner’s energy had gone from sweet to bitter. It was back to sweet again, but she was awake now.

Conner patted the ankle over his lap. “Stop stressing.” He pulled the cover away as she sat up. “You have a meeting to attend in a few minutes.”

Conner’s words effectively distracted her, pleasing Neil and making Kyle frown.

Samantha reached for her boots. “That’s awesome!”

Conner grabbed the boots before she could bend too far. “Take it easy!”

Neil let the boy boss her around, smirking. He couldn’t get away with that.

Kyle gave Neil a nod that the trooper interpreted without trouble. They had been watching for signs of Conner being a problem, but they were also watching for signs of his father—the good ones that had built Safe Haven. Neil started checking his gear.

Conner did the same between helping Samantha get her boots on.

He's ready. Neil stored that observation. *I don't know if we can pull a new Adrian from his son, but it's time to try. It's clear we aren't getting the old one back.*

Chapter Six
Pick Your Own Targets
Midnight

1

“**B**oss wants a quick meeting.” Kyle walked the stopped convoy, pointing at people. “Council members and team leaders need to go to the front truck for a meeting.”

Kyle waved camp people into sentry places so they wouldn’t be unprotected, then went to the front himself. His attendance was also mandatory. Angela had delivered a confirmation of Conner’s words as they cleared the convoy to exit for a bathroom break.

“In six hours, we’ll have our last bathroom-only stop.” Angela began as soon as Kyle joined them. The need to hurry was riding her. “Six hours later, we’ll stop for a noon meal. A couple hours after that, we will be at our destination. We’ll secure the area, clear the usual aftermath, and set up a temporary camp. We’ll spend the night right there, then relocate to the shoreline in front of our ship the next morning. Only unpack what we need for the first night. No sense in doing it twice.”

People were writing things between sips of the hot, bitter coffee Brittani was pouring into their

canteens. Angela had told her to save it for the last leg of the trip to help keep their tired drivers awake.

People moaned and smiled over the rare treat.

Around the meeting, the camp was finishing, drenched from rain but happy to have empty bladders. They were adjusting to being on the road again.

So was Dog. He'd jumped out, taken a leak, and then waited for a passing Eagle to open the door so he could go back to sleep.

"As soon as we get the camp switched to the boat, scavenging teams will be sent out." Angela handed a list to Kenn. "Those are the teams, where you're all going, and what you're bringing back. There are no other details yet." Angela waved. "We'll get to that reason in a minute. I've looked as far ahead as I can, and I've seen things I won't share. Just know I'm covering anything you aren't. If you do think something has been missed, bring it directly to me, not your teammates or the council."

No one liked that order, but they would obey it.

"Scavenging teams will have two days to scout, collect, and return. No site is more than ten miles away, so it will be a little easier and also a little harder. Magic use is forbidden, as is radio use outside our perimeter." Angela leaned against the bumper of the truck so she could pull up the sock that refused to stay on her ankle. *Damn thing looked exactly as worn as the other one. What gives?!*
"When the teams return on day five, we'll have our

party. The next morning or afternoon, we'll have a wedding."

Kyle flushed, hands tightening into fists as people stared or flashed huge grins.

"The two days after that will be filled with wonderful moments, like loading those new supplies onto the boat, getting our animals on board, and other fun activities. If we run out of time, sorting can wait until we're sailing." Angela paused, picking up an emission from the west. She shuddered as her energy dipped while making the connection.

Jennifer caught it next and shared it with the others like Angela wanted. It was a vision of a UN camp being destroyed by children who acted like Kendle. Stomachs clenched. Dread covered the council.

"We have to get ready for that." Marc regarded Angela as the vision ended. "What do you want me to do?"

The rest of the council frowned at Marc. He was here as her bodyguard, nothing more.

Angela shut her dazed eyes as pain lanced through her temples. Getting images from across the country, as they were happening, hurt.

Jennifer's lips narrowed. *Be careful.*

Marc retreated from the table, swallowing a nasty remark. He almost hated Jennifer sometimes.

Right back at you. Jennifer followed that with a finger.

Are you two finished? Samantha wasn't in a good mood. *We have real problems coming!*

Marc stared in wounded surprise. Samantha was never sharp with him.

Jennifer sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine!"

"We'll quarantine the kids until we can make a cure." Neil wasn't going to suggest something more drastic. He was honored to share the vision with everyone. He was also horrified. It seemed no matter how many battles they won, there was always someone else stirring the pot.

"That's why we're leaving." Angela took the water Ivan handed her. He'd slid by Marc with a frown, then backed out.

Marc sighed, remembering his place. He put his back to the meeting, watching the few camp members who were still in line for the bathrooms. Everyone had expected it to get dryer now that they were in the south, but it hadn't yet. In fact, it felt like more rain was coming.

"It is." Samantha leaned against Neil. "Just waiting for the boss to be ready for that info."

Marc took the hint and locked down on his thoughts. He was distracting the council. They were scanning all minds in the immediate area right now.

Angela swallowed half the bottle of water and let out a loud belch that drew snickers from the two kids lingering near them. Leeann and Cody were without a sentry for the first time in their Safe

Haven lives. It was a big moment for them even though they were in the same area with the council.

“We have no promise there will be a cure.” Kyle hated to remind everyone of that, but he was scared of the infected kids spreading their disease to the camp, to Jennifer and Autumn.

Standing behind Kyle to provide extra security, William scowled. He was glad none of them could see his reaction. He had a strong mental wall up to have privacy, but he doubted it would hold against the two kids at the table, let alone some of the adults. The amount of power here was staggering.

It's also dangerous.

William nodded at Kenn's comment and locked down harder on his thoughts. He didn't like Kenn.

Same to you. Kenn copied Jennifer and sent it with a finger.

“Stop it!” Samantha was getting upset with all the whirling thoughts. “If we do have to fight, we're going to lose because of crap like this!”

Silence fell.

Angela gave Samantha an approving nod. “Yes. We're leaving in eight days. We don't have the ship secured. We don't have the rest of the supplies. We don't know if the boat will float.” Angela glanced toward the vehicles. “We have refugees and trackers hunting us. The UN has things going on in our country. And now, a bus load of sick children are racing our way as fast as Doug can drive. You all know how Doug drives. And when he takes a break, *Jeff* will be driving.”

Neil and Kyle groaned. Jeff and Seth were the best drivers to roll through Safe Haven. No one mentioned Billy, who was the top wheelman in any camp. His name had become taboo.

“We also have a number of other problems to sort out.” Angela smiled sweetly. “And I have every faith that *you* will. But that isn’t why I’ve called this meeting.”

“That *we* will?”

“Wait. What?”

Angela gestured. “I can’t keep handling everything. You’ve all gone through this, sadly. You know how to handle it. I trust you to do the best you can and to come to me when you need help.”

They stared at her in confusion.

Angela took her filled canteen from Brittani and lifted it. “You’ve all just been promoted to true leadership. Congratulations! Or my sympathies, whichever you prefer.”

Most of the council and team leaders were happy as they realized Angela wasn’t going to be looking over their shoulders anymore or devising schemes that used them without them knowing it.

“Exactly.” Angela’s amusement fled. “Now, you’ll pick your own targets.”

Nearly everyone grinned. Only Kenn and William were worried over her delegating so much authority.

Angela ignored them in favor of saving time. “This meeting is about someone near and dear to my heart and my sanity.”

Marc flushed as attention swung to him. Even the two kids were staring. He could feel it.

“Marc asked me to train him to use his gifts. I’ve agreed.”

Expressions relaxed. Everyone wanted that.

“I promised to give him all forms of descendant guidance that I can. As soon as I agreed, I realized I can’t do it alone.” Angela glanced around the table. “I’m asking all of you to help me.”

“Oh, yeah!” Kenn leered toward Marc.

Snickers went around, along with vows of harsh training to make Marc stronger than he’d ever dreamed of.

Marc held tight to the mental shield that Angela had taught him a few hours ago. He hadn’t actually made her promise. She was manipulating them again.

Angela rotated to glare at him.

Marc sighed. “Ivan, in.” He left the meeting.

Angela flashed a tolerant smile at the frowning council. “As you can see, he’s too emotional for a descendant fight. A couple of well-chosen taunts and he’ll charge forward. He didn’t act that way as a Marine.” She regarded Kenn. “That’s where you come in, Drill Instructor.”

Kenn straightened, brightening. “Really?”

Angela nodded. “He won’t take it from Adrian, but you served with him. Every time he steps out the lines of a Marine, nail him on it. You have my permission to be...strict. Don’t go into stupid land

with it, though. He won't take much more from you than he would from Adrian."

Kenn nodded. "I'm glad to be able to help."

"I know you are, and I know why."

Kenn shrugged. "We all hate it when you're distracted. If this fixes it, why do I have to be doing it for any other reason?"

"You don't. Neither does anyone else. Just give him the best training you can, and I'll do the rest."

"Is this why we got promotions?"

Angela shook her head at Jennifer's question. "You've earned those. I didn't think a bribe was needed to get you to help Marc."

"It isn't." Jennifer shrugged. "But making sure your intentions are good is part of why I'm here."

Angela nodded again. "Yes. An enforcer is the only way we'll ever be able to trust each other completely. Over time, we'll know what someone says is honest and not an imagined or changed event. Revisionist history must never again be allowed to replace truth and facts."

Everyone nodded. Honesty in New America was a requirement.

"I need his training to start immediately. We'll rotate it between schedules after we sail, but we're not hiding it from the camp—then or now. Tell them the truth. Marc's a target and Safe Haven helps citizens learn to defend themselves. Like you, the camp will be happy to hear that one of our issues is being cleared up."

“What about the other one?” Kyle was unable to keep from asking. Everyone wanted to know what would happen with Adrian.

“That one will take care of itself.” Angela’s head turned south. “Dismissed. We leave in five minutes.”

William and Ivan followed Angela as she left the meeting.

The rest of the council and Eagles shared excited glances, waiting for her to get out of sight. Then they consulted on the issues and began to divvy up chores. Angela was right. They were ready for this.

Angela ignored the guards and the darkness to go to the empty medical camper for a moment of privacy. Seeing the rage kids in the west had hurt her, but Allan’s death was crushing. She let the tears flow as she latched the door.

Trailing them, Marc could feel her pain and hated it. He forced himself to do what he didn’t want to. Anything was worth erasing her misery for a little while.

She needs a moment with you.

Adrian jerked awake, sitting up to look around. Marc’s voice in his mind had been clear as a bell.

Adrian didn’t spot anyone in or around the small shack. It was still pouring, and the rest of the men were taking much needed sleep break.

Did you hear me?

Adrian started to concentrate on opening a private line and then realized Marc had done that on his end. *Very nice.*

Angie taught me how.

Adrian heard the tone and quickly put the pieces together. *She agreed to train you. Congratulations. I wasn't certain if she was going to.*

There was a slight pause as Marc adjusted to the fact that Adrian already knew. *Is there anything you don't see coming?*

Adrian grimace. *There were things all along.*

Did you get the transmission from Becky?

Parts of it.

Angie isn't doing well. She covered herself during the meeting, but her pain is awful.

There are several things you can do. Adrian stretched, being careful not to wake anyone. *She'll expect all of them, though.*

She wouldn't expect one of your tactics.

Adrian realized that was the reason Marc was contacting him. He wanted one of the sleazy, effective methods.

Yes. That's what I want.

Adrian sighed. *Give me a minute.*

Are things okay there?

Not really, but you can't move them any faster. Six hours of travel between breaks is a hard rule.

Yeah. That's what Angie said.

Adrian could feel Marc waiting impatiently for the answer. After a minute of broken concentration, Adrian grunted. *Come back in half an hour.*

The connection closed.

Instead of going back to sleep, Adrian dug into the problem. Marc had asked him for something and he wasn't going to fail the man, no matter what his personal feelings were. He owed Marc, a lot.

2

“She’s in the truck.” Ivan was standing outside the door.

Marc climbed in and shut the door. Angela had come from the camper and went to the lead rig while he was talking with Adrian.

Marc settled down without revealing his turmoil. He hated to ask Adrian for anything. Every piece of information the former leader gathered from the conversations was something he might be able to use against them later, during a more important moment. Marc would never trust him.

Exhausted and not wanting to discuss it, Angela pretended to sleep. Marc conversing with Adrian was progress. Over time, bonds would be broken, and bonds would grow. It would be up to the two men in her life as to how that happened, but she was determined that it would. She didn't want Adrian as a crutch for Marc's death, but she did want him. Everyone knew it and she was now prepared to confront it. It didn't mean anything had to change. Humans were perfectly capable of wanting something without ever taking a step toward it. That

had happened every day before the war and this new life was no different. They would all survive.

Marc curled around Angela's warm body. "Do you want to talk?"

Angela sighed. "You're getting sharper."

"Just tired of acting like I don't know something when I do."

Angela slowly shifted to rest in his arms, head on his chest. "I love you. Don't ever forget that."

Marc held her close and whispered in her ear.

Angela warmed. After a minute, she nodded. "Yes, please."

Marc claimed her lips.

Dog groaned and moved to the front seat. He curled up at William's loafers, eyes warning the man not to kick him even by accident.

Morgan, ready to go at Kenn's signal, turned on the cd. He was a huge Nickelback fan. Hard, quick beats filled the truck.

William, also eager to be on the way so he could return to the conversation with Neil and Kyle, tugged the curtains closed. It was nice to hear Marc and Angie having a good moment, but he didn't want to keep listening or see them. It would only remind him that he was lonely.

3

"This is so wrong." Adrian thought of ugly, awful things to cool his libido. "Just so wrong."

The rain increased, carrying a cold chill that should have done the trick as it hit his hot skin, but it didn't. Angela's moans were ringing in his ears.

Adrian sighed in relief as he was finally able to piss. He was glad to be out of the shack for a minute, despite the weather. It stank.

Marc had left them mentally connected and Adrian suspected it was on purpose. He'd come up with his own distraction technique. Adrian applauded it even as he hated Marc for it—not so much for loving Angela but making him listen.

“Cruel and unusual punishment.” He entered the shack.

Yeah, sorry about that. Marc apologized happily. *I'm a rookie. I forgot.*

Yeah. Adrian wasn't positive he could believe the man.

You're the liar, not me.

Adrian grunted. *Perfect boy scout, never lies. What a load.*

Marc snickered.

Feelin' good, are ya?

You have no idea.

No and I never will, so stop rubbing it in.

Marc's amusement lifted Adrian's spirits even though he didn't want it to. *What do you want from me?*

I'll need that method in a day. This won't hold her as long as it will me.

No.

What?

Don't use another calming method. Let her boil.

Marc hesitated. He'd been looking forward to offering her another distraction.

Adrian snorted lowly to keep from waking the team. *I understand that, but we have a plan in the works and calming her down isn't part of it.*

I'm not sure we should.

I'm positive it needs to happen.

I don't trust you.

Do you believe I'd never hurt her?

Yes.

Then you can trust me on some things, right?

Marc swallowed a nasty comment. *I do in many areas. The herd, the island. Kendle.*

Yeah, you should send her out... Wait.

Marc caught Adrian's reflections and smothered a groan. *That's mean.*

Yeah, but if she thinks you're falling for Kendle, it'll twist her up.

I won't go that far. You didn't see what happened in Ciemus. Kendle is lucky to be alive.

She's lucky in that way period, Marc. She shouldn't have survived any of it.

Agreed... Are you sure?

Do you want her freed?

More than anything.

Then trust me. Just let her boil. If she cools off, turn up the heat.

Marc shut his lids, chin against Angela's shoulder. *Okay.*

The line disconnected.

Adrian stood there in shock, jealous and comforted at the same time.

4

“What happens when two different types of descendants have a baby?”

Both groups of reclining, chatting adults placed at either end of the camp semi paused to look at Tonya. They’d been back on the road for an hour and everyone was restless.

Tonya refused to be intimidated. She was in the center of the truck, playing Sorry with the small family Kenn had brought in. The kids had talked her into the game during the last stop. “I don’t have that issue, but a few people in camp might and I was curious. Does anyone know?”

“You mean Marc and Angela.” Tracy had also wondered, but not enough to ask anyone. Tracy was lying low around Angela now that she and Charlie had broken the rules. She sensed their leader wouldn’t like talking to her right now.

“Sure, but also Seth and Becky.” Tonya dropped her head. “And a few others who are Invisibles.”

She had the full attention of the adults. They were all hot and wide awake after sleeping all day. Coats and sweaters were piled in corners and laps. Sweat ran freely. Tonya swiped at her neck. *Maybe that’s just me.* “On top of that, what happens when an Invisible is already pregnant by say, an alpha,

and then gets her gifts. Does the kid have both, one, or none?”

As the adults considered those questions, Debra and the children kept playing. Unable to hear the conversations, or the loud laughter of the kids, Debra was having a good time. She and the older children were playing Duck-Duck-Goose, using the movement of the truck to make it more entertaining. The younger children had been fed and were napping despite the noise. They were used to it.

“I guess I need to ask the boss.” Tonya turned back to the game.

“The other angel knows.” Caleb didn’t notice when the adults stared at him. He was busy coloring a picture while he continued to recover. His lungs weren’t ready for games of chase yet.

Closest to the pale boy, Theo smiled at him. “Is there anything you can tell us?”

Caleb picked up a green crayon. “My mom believed there are a lot of different types of angels. Some of them can make more angels and some can’t. She wouldn’t tell me more.”

“Was your mom an...angel, Caleb?” Theo wasn’t sure he was comfortable calling the descendants angels.

“My aunt was. She died after the war.” Caleb slammed the crayon onto the paper, grinding it in. “The army men wanted her.” The little boy threw what was left of the crayon against the metal wall. “They hurt her!”

The adults realized Caleb had witnessed it and were horrified. They were also sorry Theo had asked.

“Would you like to read a book with me?” Theo didn’t spend much time with the kids, but he knew Caleb loved stories.

“Yes!” Caleb rushed into Theo’s arms. “Read me!”

Several of the other children who were coloring also joined them for the story.

The adults shared looks, choosing who would approach William about it. None of them would be able to leave it alone now that Tonya had put it into their minds.

Daryl swallowed a groan as heads rotated to him. He was the senior man in this truck. All the camp people knew if they wanted something, to ask an Eagle. “Why do you want to know? Without a good reason, I won’t even consider it.” Daryl hadn’t been happy with the driving break until he’d realized his passenger had also been assigned to the camp semi for the remainder of their travel to the shore.

Camp members dropped other conversations in favor of the new topic.

Tonya jerked a thumb toward the lead rig. “We have council members about to go through it. Aren’t we supposed to be prepared?”

Daryl wanted to laugh at the clever trap. Instead, he shook his head. “That’s the boss’s job to cover. Talk to her or deal with the new guy on your own.”

“Will you do it for me?” Brittani was sitting at the far end, away from him while she browsed a cookbook. “I may have a child someday.”

Silence fell again as they remembered she and Gus were both descendants.

Daryl nodded. “Sure.”

People chortled and frowned at his fast answer.

Brittani held his gaze for a second and was relieved when Daryl dropped his eyes instead of prolonging the heat. He was the only one she’d responded to, but he wasn’t the only one interested and she didn’t want to be the center of camp gossip. She was being pursued by several Eagles when Gus wasn’t around. Most of Safe Haven’s single men were refusing to take no for an answer.

“They just don’t believe it.” Tonya leaned over as the others resumed previous conversations. “They think you’re hot and they can’t wait to see you turn out like Angela since she’s your mentor. Jennifer is a badass now. They expect you will be too.”

Brittani’s cheeks darkened. “You’re kidding. Even though I have a man and I’m black?”

Tonya snickered. “You are a babe in the woods. Our men don’t see skin color and most of the time, they don’t see gender, but they do see a woman fitting into the life of an Eagle—someone who would make a good mate or wife because you’ll understand the sacrifices that have to be made in such a relationship. Until it’s clear you’re taken, they’ll think they have a chance.”

“They don’t.”

Tonya flashed the woman a look implying she was lying.

Brittani stiffened in guilty shame. “I’m not.”

“Okay. I won’t argue with you on that. Time will prove it.”

What do you know? Brittani’s mental demand sent unease through the truck.

Tonya shrugged, concentrating. *I felt the heat when you looked at Daryl. That was strong. You go on and lie to everyone else. I’d never give you away, but I know you’re attracted. The future might see that happen if you let your hair down.*

I’d never betray my mate.

Maybe your mate would be happier with someone else too. Someone on his level. You see what it’s doing to Marc and Angela.

Who? What skank wants my man?!

Tonya laughed, aware of being manipulated. She let it go as the mood in the truck evened out, not needing to prove herself anymore.

Brittani stewed on it while forcing herself not to look at Daryl. She also brought down a mental wall. Tonya wasn’t completely wrong. She loved Gus and she would never betray him, but the spark between her and Daryl was hot. If she didn’t hate being burned, she would be tempted to grab ahold of that heat and soar along with it until she turned to ashes.

Sitting alone to keep watch without being distracted, Daryl felt the regard of several camp females, but he had no trouble ignoring them. He

was lost in a fantasy of changing the past so he could build a future. Right now, he felt lost. If he could atone and move on, there was a woman he was willing to fight for and unlike Cynthia, this one was his perfect match.

Chapter Seven
The Traitor's Whore
Day Two
6am

1

“**T**his is a ten minute stop.” Neil and Ivan were on a patrol of the convoy. “Make it quick and move on for the next person. We all need to go.”

Neil hid snickers at the dances people were doing while waiting. He hoped his words would allow those kids to hang on with good attitudes. When they reached their destination, the grownups would be busy. They needed the restless children to behave.

Neil understood their excitement, though. Dawn had arrived with a beautiful sunrise and the rain was over. They'd traveled through the storm. Warmer breezes were wafting over the convoy, reminding people of swimming pools and barbeques with loved ones. It was bittersweet. Neil thought there would be a lot of that feeling in the coming week.

Ivan nodded to Kenn as he went by the man, resisting a leer. He was high on his victory over the Marine. Kenn hadn't retaliated yet beyond turning their piss blue, but Ivan planned to take it like a good sport. Morgan had enjoyed telling them Kenn

had dosed the water bottles at the last workout in Ciemus, but Ivan was almost disappointed. He'd been warned Kenn was a badass, but he hadn't witnessed signs of it yet.

Kenn didn't glance toward the cocky soldier. *I'm busy for a while, but there's a long boat ride ahead of us. I'll make sure you hesitate to play games with me again.*

Walking guard duty with Kenn so she could stretch her swelling legs, Tonya frowned but didn't comment. She was learning not to react to the thoughts she caught, but unlike him, she didn't want to come out on top of anyone else. She just wanted to stay this happy forever.

Angela picked up that thought. She also wanted Tonya to be this happy forever. She just didn't think it was possible. Even if she and Kenn stayed true to their new life, fate seemed determined to ruin things for all of them. Angela had woken bitter. It wasn't the normal kind she'd been living with for so many years. This was a deep well of impotent anger that needed an outlet.

I can provide one.

Angela tried to ignore her witch. She and Marc's demon had been tight for weeks now without betraying any information on why. Marc thought they were lovers enjoying time together.

But you didn't, did you?

Angela shook her head. *You'd never be distracted from your first goal.*

No. Your life means more to me than a swim through someone's membranes.

Angela made a face. "Yuck."

The woods around them crackled and glistened with morning dew while the ground ran with fog. It was eerie and magnificent at the same time, like most of nature. The only problem Morgan could spot was the smell. Something was rotting nearby. The sentry, minding his own reflections instead of hers, assumed Angela also meant the smell of the land. Morgan was eager to get back on the road and away from it. Beyond attracting predators, the stench was enough to make folks gag.

"If we're lucky, this is the final land travel for years."

Morgan hoped it ended up that way, but he knew it wasn't likely. Everything they'd known about their calm, civilized world had been a lie. They were almost extinct now and it still wasn't enough.

"We're not, actually."

"Not what?"

"Almost extinct. It will take nature a winter or two more to accomplish that. We've been breeding like rabbits for centuries."

"It looks empty here." Morgan indicated the neglected trees and bushes lining the road.

Angela made a subtle gesture toward the homes on a distant hill. "We always attract our own kind. They're waiting to see if we're good or bad."

“Should I get a welcoming party ready?” Morgan didn’t feel anything, but he wasn’t allowed to do a deep scan of the area. It was hard to practice his gifts and not break the rules. Everyone was struggling with it and hoping she would lift the rule. They were observing her every open thought on the subject.

“Are they...?” Angela halted by the tent serving hot drinks and water. Angela swept the camp, searching for descendants.

Jennifer nodded from the kid’s trailer.

Samantha, on her cane, waved from the bathroom line.

Marc and Kenn, conferring on the route by the lead rig, peered at her over the map.

Conner and Charlie paused in a perimeter walk and turned her way.

Dog lifted his head from the shelter of the floorboard where he’d curled up after leaking again. He’d been on a long trip. He needed to rest.

Children quieted or pressed their faces to the warm glass of their assigned vehicle.

All of them met her eye, proving they were monitoring her conversations and the open thoughts she allowed.

Even Kendle lifted her eyes to the boss, drawn by the reactions. The camp hadn’t noticed it yet, but Kendle was watching all the descendants for clues. Without her gifts, she was forced to rely on her senses.

William leaned out the truck window to observe.

Morgan motioned the man back in so the camp didn't notice.

William flashed a grateful smile at the Eagle and used the mirrors to watch.

Angela's heart pounded with the choice she'd just made. There was still time to reverse her decision, but only until she opened her mouth right here. They all knew the decision she was making, and they all wanted it.

Angela's sigh echoed on the wind, carrying to all of them. *During the first evening mess, after we reach the shore.*

Happiness flew through the convoy from end to end, bringing the shield to life. Smiles instead of guns being drawn told the camp that one of their leaders had experienced something good, resulting in no panic.

Angela slid into one of the restroom tents on the men's side because no one was in line there.

Other women and kids did the same, thinning the other lines.

When Angela came out, she headed toward the rear of the convoy with Jennifer on her heels.

What does that mean? Conner flashed in hand code.

We'll find out during the first evening mess at the shore.

Conner frowned as he passed Marc on rounds. *Why is everyone so happy if she hasn't made a choice.*

Because she did.

I don't understand.

If the answer was no, she wouldn't have given any hope. She's decided to train us.

The real Adrian's army. Conner grinned. *Cool.*
Marc snorted. *Not even close.*

Conner realized it could only go one other way and shrugged. Serving in Angela's army would be just as satisfying.

"Time to go!"

"Something's happening." Ivan regarded Neil as they got into their assigned vehicle together at Angela's call.

Neil locked the doors. "Get ready to drive. Don't think."

Ivan would have frowned, but he'd caught Neil's tone. The former trooper didn't want to speak about it in front of their loading passengers. "I'd like to volunteer for a shift with you when we stop." Ivan flashed a believable grin. "Too much sleep during travel time, you know?"

Smart guy. Neil nodded. *No wonder the boss keeps him so busy.*

Eagles circled the convoy, enjoying the warmer air and clear view around them.

"Something's wrong with dad."

Mike zipped his jeans and shoved cold hands into his pockets while he waited for his brother to

finish. “I feel it too. Would Angela tell us anything if we went to her?” Mike was settling into duty, but he felt he had to be loyal to his brother. His dad would expect that.

Timmy snorted and then spit. “They won’t let us get near her. She’s royalty now.”

“Don’t be that way.” Mike hadn’t forgotten Angela had been hurt. He liked her and thought people should give her a break.

“Whatever.” Timmy thought she was a tramp, like he’d once heard his dad call her. “Come on. The twin princes will search for us if we’re gone much longer.”

Mike snickered, following his older brother back into their perimeter. They hated using the bathroom tents. They always went to the rear of the convoy instead.

Around them, the woods were foggy and cold. Not many structures were in view and those were covered in frosty layers of dew and dirt. Otherwise, it was as if nature owned this area.

“There you are.” Conner motioned to the older boys. “The Eagles need an extra hand shutting down the drink table. People are shoving.”

Timmy eyed Conner’s Eagle jacket and swallowed resentment. Even if it didn’t have a name or patch yet, he still hated the little prince for having one when he didn’t.

Zack’s sons did as they were told, but the glares and sneers said trouble was coming at some point.

Conner shook his head, thinking they wouldn't be distracted much longer. He'd tracked them by their worries over their dad.

"We'll be there soon." Charlie came from the opposite side of the convoy. He was doing a crisscross pattern that the Eagles didn't use anymore because it skipped small places. Charlie thought it was okay to use it right now with so many men on duty. Their entire army was being used.

"She won't like you skipping things."

Charlie shrugged, continuing his pattern.

Sighing, Conner went back over Charlie's path to be sure it was all covered.

"Can we trust him?" Jennifer and Angela were out of sight because they'd also left the perimeter. Their personal sentries, Greg and Daryl, weren't happy about it.

"That has not been revealed."

Jennifer smiled. "Really."

Angela exhaled stale smoke, enjoying one of the cigarettes Marc had saved for her from their supplies as he organized it for travel. "Maybe. It depends on his father and his woman."

"You say that like it's a done deal."

Angela shrugged, light headed from the tobacco. "Isn't it? She's interested. It's just a matter of time. Anyone can see it."

"Will they be punished?"

Angela shook her head. "Not if he's of age."

"What about Tracy?"

Angela inhaled again and let out the cloud of smoke. “Why are you asking?”

Jennifer drew on her courage. “Because I’m guilty now, not later. So are others. We want to know the punishment.”

Angela flipped her ash. “I honestly haven’t decided, Jenny. Do you need an answer now or can it wait until I pick an example?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I’m sorry, no rush.”

“Good, because you were the first. Unless you want to be the canary in the mine, don’t ask me that again.”

“I won’t.”

Angela took the last drag and signaled toward the front of the convoy as she ground out the fire under her boot. “They need you. Run.”

Jennifer took off, not doubting.

Her guard followed, casting a confused look at Angela that she ignored.

Passing by on rounds, Morgan eased closer to Angela. “What’s up?”

“Conner and Charlie are about to argue over the way they’re doing rounds. Conner’s right. Charlie will swing on him and in the confusion, a wild dog will grab one of the kids.”

“Should we let Dog out?” Morgan keyed the radio in code to let the other sentries know they had wild company. “Why aren’t we going to help?”

“Keep Dog in the lead truck. I don’t want him to chase them.” Angela pointed behind them.

“We’re taking care of the problems back here. Aim low and double tap.”

Morgan immediately drew his gun and flipped off his safety. So did Greg.

Angela felt Marc coming their way. She let him, certain he would handle people as he went.

“Load up right now!” Marc’s voice echoed across the area.

A low growl echoed from the fog.

Gunfire came from the front of the convoy.

Morgan fired.

Angela ducked a shadow that lunged, also firing.

Two heavy thuds told her they’d both hit their target. “One more, I think, but others are coming.”

At the front of the convoy, the sudden change of noises flushed big gulls from the grassy land next to the vehicles.

Kenn grabbed for his air horn, stomach tightening with dread, but the flappy birds kept going, not wanting any part of the carnage.

Snarls and yelps filtered through windows and trees, rolling out to homes and empty roads. Only a few living souls noticed, but they were already engaged in life and death struggles of their own and stayed hidden.

A loud howl echoed from the north.

It was answered right away by howls from the east.

“Damn.” Angela straightened. “They know I’m here. How can they know it’s me?” Angela backed

into the protection of Marc and the team of Eagles he'd brought along as he got people moving. The bathroom tents were being dismantled while Jennifer got the boys separated. Marc had woken to the shouts. He was grouchy and quick to fire at the red eyes glaring from beneath a truck.

The dog fell over, yelping.

Marc fired again, putting it out of its misery. He didn't like the suffering of animals, even ones that wanted to eat him.

Angela let Greg escort her to the truck and put her inside.

Dog howled from the driver seat, telling the remaining animals to go away or die.

The Eagles hurried the remaining people, calling to the kids, making motions to the adults.

Angela put the window down. "I want them all accounted for, before we pull out."

"You got it." Morgan coughed and spat, waving people along to help. The taste of bile was rough. *I should have eaten before the fun started.*

Marc stayed by Angela's door as Morgan took up a post on the other side and Greg went to help get people loaded.

Two gunshots came, close together.

Angela traveled with her guards mentally, seeing her camp was mostly in the vehicles now.

Marc waited, gun in hand, for the clear call to come.

So did everyone else.

The Eagles made sure each vehicle was checked before giving that call. No one wanted to be responsible for leaving someone behind. They also didn't want it to ever happen to them. Being careful each time would prevent that.

“All clear!”

“Eagles in! Eagles in!”

As soon as their sentries were loaded, Angela gave Marc the motion to move them out. His driving shift was starting now.

Marc rolled them over the bodies of several dogs and a blood splatter from their single injury. When Charlie punched Conner, he had bounced off and hit the side of the truck next to them, skinning his knuckles. Both boys were in the semi with the camp people right now, being tended and lectured. Marc had told them to go easy on Conner.

Next to him, Angela shuddered. “They’re closer. We have to hurry.”

Marc didn't know who she meant. “Trackers?”

“Doug.”

Marc realized she was in the west again and waited for more, but Angela didn't speak. She went to sleep. They were nine hours away from destiny. She planned to sleep for most of it.

The convoy pulled out faster this time than they had at the other stops, leaving clear tracks in the mud that came from the finally warming temperatures. They were in the true south now.

Samantha shifted uncomfortably in the rear as her stomach cramped. It wasn't hurting exactly, but it felt deep. She was trying to relax.

In the lead rig, Marc slowed the truck to a jerky stop.

A few cars back, Charlie hopped out and ran toward Neil. *Make room.*

Neil rotated to glare at Sam. "You were supposed to say something." He gestured at Ivan. "Hang on. The boss is sending us another passenger."

Samantha groaned. "I'll be fine."

"Scoot over." Neil glared at her.

Charlie reached the door a few seconds later. Conner slid over to make room.

"Man..." Samantha also slid over. "Wish I knew how much longer I need to be like this."

"Four months." Neil shook his head at her surprised look. "Later. I want to watch for trouble and you need to rest."

Charlie shut the door and took Sam's hand as Conner did the same. Their energy, youthful and healthy, immediately restored Sam's hair to the beautiful sandy shades that Neil loved.

Samantha relaxed, moaning in a way that would have made Neil twitch if he hadn't been so worried over her.

Samantha shut her eyes and allowed the energy to fill her up. Being pregnant was hard.

3

“Can I speak with you about the wedding?”

Jennifer regarded Candy. “Really?” They were in the rear of Greg’s vehicle. Kendle was in the front passenger seat where Jennifer could keep tabs on her.

“Are you hot?” Greg, their driver, motioned to Kendle. “You can turn the heat down.”

“No.”

Greg frowned, but didn’t push. During the last stop, Kendle had dropped her Eagle jacket into the floorboard with the kits and gear. Every Eagle who witnessed it would disapprove. Someone else would make her pay. Greg wanted a peaceful ride before the chaos he was sure was coming when they reached the shore.

Candy extended a sheet of paper.

Jennifer took it, realizing Candy had been thoughtful enough to write it down instead of letting Kendle listen to her personal details.

Indoor/outdoor?

In front of the camp/a small group?

Reception after or right to bed?

Jennifer’s cheeks went red.

Candy pushed a pen at her. “Just circle them.”

Jennifer kept reading.

Do you need protection or a sex talk?

Have you chosen a date?

Jennifer looked up. “I can’t answer these yet.”

Candy smiled. “Would it help to know I have Kyle’s answers?”

Jennifer nodded, cheeks growing hotter. She snatched the sheet as soon as Candy held it out.

In a church if possible. If not, make something up.

In front of everyone.

Reception, then none of your damn business!

I’ve got it covered on my end. I dare you to ask her this question.

As soon as she feels like she’s ready and not a second before.

Jennifer melted. “He’s so sweet.”

“Read the rest before you start crying.” Candy sniffed. “And you will.”

Jennifer kept reading Kyle’s answers.

Who do you want to officiate?

Someone official.

Do you have a religious preference?

Not burning in hell sounds good.

Is there anything else you’d like that isn’t on this list?

Yes. All these questions are going to make her nervous. Tell her she has nothing to worry about. I’ll hold her, and we’ll sleep, like we always did before. When she’s older, I’ll make her my wife in every way if she still wants it.

“Do you?” Candy was getting details for herself and for the worried Eagles, though she wasn’t sure who she would tell if there was a problem.

Jennifer nodded quickly. “He’ll love me forever.”

“At least. And what about the just holding you part?”

Jennifer chuckled. “None of your damn business.”

“Atta, girl.” Candy had talked to Kyle against his will too. She was satisfied the only thing he wanted was Jennifer’s happiness. He wasn’t a threat to her.

“No, he’s not.” Jennifer fought the urge to send him a wave of love. “I haven’t viewed him that way in a long time.”

Candy gestured at the paper. “Might be a good idea to tell him that at some point. He’s feeling guilty.”

Candy’s attention strayed to the vehicle ahead of them, where Conner was helping Samantha. Candy understood, but she still wished he was with her.

Jennifer read the last scribbled note.

Jenny, are you sure? You don’t have to do this at all. No one is allowed to force you into anything and that includes the boss. I need you to be happy. Please tell them the truth and let them drive me out like I deserve.

Jennifer wiped away tears. “It’s hard to remember a time when I didn’t need him. He means more to me than he knows.” Jennifer circled her answers.

“I thought so.” Candy took the paper. “Not many people still talk about it. I think they’ve accepted that you two are meant to be together.”

Jennifer met her eye. “Will that hold when they hear grunting and groaning, and see our shadows on the wall?”

Candy winced. “Uh...”

“Exactly.” Jennifer glanced at Kendle’s Eagle jacket in the floorboard and glared at the woman while brushing lint from her own.

It’s disrespectful to treat them that way.

Kendle shrugged at Jennifer’s sharp tone in her mind.

Candy cleared her throat. “So that’s it, unless you have any...questions or anything.”

“I do have a couple, but not with the traitor’s whore listening.”

Kendle’s grip tightened on the kit in her lap.

Candy’s lips pursed. “Imagine not getting Kyle but wanting him. Wouldn’t you be a little unstable too?”

“I could overlook it if she didn’t want Angela dead.”

“Ah.” Candy hadn’t known the details. “I can see where that’s an issue.” She frowned at Kendle. “Headphones are in the console by your knee.”

Kendle put them on without arguing, but she was boiling. She didn’t know how much longer she could tolerate life like this, but it wouldn’t even be a full day. She was on the edge and it wouldn’t take much to push her over. When it happened, Kendle

planned to head west and see if she could discover a way to live with herself there. Without her gifts, she didn't have a chance at getting Marc.

"You never had a chance at Marc!" Jennifer kicked the seat. "Think good thoughts for a change!"

When Kendle was unable to hear them, Candy leaned over. "Information on your pleasure or his?"

Jennifer frowned. "Why would I need information on mine?"

"Because that's what he wants—all he wants."

I'm glad this role is almost over. Jennifer dropped her head, voice coming out in a choked whisper. "Can I talk to you about...abuse and about..." Jennifer couldn't say it.

Candy patted Jennifer's chilly hand. "He said you were forced to enjoy it, so now you can't enjoy it. That about right?"

"Yes. You've been hurt. If you liked some of it, would that be okay?"

Candy shrugged. "I don't blame the victims for reactions to abuse, but no, not for me." She grimaced a little. "After the war, I was held captive and rented to travelers passing through. I wasn't shown pleasure at any point."

"That would have been easier." Jennifer tried not to let the images come forward. "I know about Stockholm syndrome and some of the others, but I had no problem with Cesar dying and I don't want to go back to that life."

“Why don’t you talk to Kyle? He wants to help.”

Jennifer snorted. “He’ll say anything he needs to if it’ll let him stay close.”

Candy’s brow went up. “So you are with him against your will.”

“No! I don’t mean sex. He’d go for years without it now if it meant he could have what he really wants. I just can’t trust his word on this.”

“Well, I’ll do the best I can, but you already know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

Candy tried not to hate all men on the planet at Jennifer’s broken tone. “Of course. Think of it this way. Animals go into heat and breed, right? Same thing with people. You’re young. Pleasure is nature’s way of making sure species reproduce.” Candy grimaced. “Be glad you have a man who wants you to enjoy it. Many of them don’t care.”

“Cesar did. He used it to shame me like a bad dog.” Jennifer didn’t stop the tears. Like with any role, sticking close to the truth was most effective and very dangerous. “I always fought him, but in the end, I gave him what he wanted and asked for more.”

“I’m sorry, Jenny, really, but you know the difference between a good man and a bad one. I think you’re worried about confusing the two men because of the pleasure with both.”

“Won’t I?”

Candy shook her head. “When it’s over, you’ll understand you never had to worry about that.”

“What about during?”

Candy didn’t lie. “Flashes are part of the trauma. Some of them will never go away. Some will fade over time, and some will be replaced, but there’s no way to prevent them. The best you can do is to tell him when it happens. Kyle will help you through it if you’re brave enough to let him.”

“I am.” Jennifer wiped her face. “I want to be whole again, normal.”

Candy’s face drained of warmth. “You’ll never be that. You’ve survived, but peace is a myth for people like us. Take the good when it comes and let go of the bad as best you can. When you can’t, try to remember this wasn’t what you had planned for your life. You’re just playing the shitty cards you were dealt.”

4

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell anyone. Mankind always destroys anything beautiful.” Kendle was lounging with Luke on a small beach cove with an inlet too narrow for most boats.

Luke’s thoughts had been along the same lines, but he shook his head, aware of his line bobbing gently atop the water. “It won’t stop them from coming, only delay it.” As far as Luke was concerned, the human race was stupid for being so superior. “Commonsense will tell people they have

to leave. Someone will lead them and find us. More will come and then it will be a battle for the last garden of Eden.”

Luke sounded calm, but Kendle could see his emotions being held in check. After all, this was his home. “Isn’t there something we can do to keep that from happening?”

“It will depend on the survivors. With all they’ve been through, will it be enough to teach them to abandon the old ways?”

“Sure it will. People learn from their mistakes.” Kendle wondered, even as she said it. Half the population being gone wouldn’t remove all the useless people.

“It will help if we get ready for them, I think. Call another town meeting and tell them what we plan to do.”

Kendle paled at that idea. These people were here because they had no desire to be a part of the large population violence equation. They had left those lands and people, and now she and Luke had to tell them those people were coming here.

Kendle rubbed the scars on her arms, aware of Luke’s desire. Even with the way she looked now, he still wanted her.

He loves me, she reaffirmed. He would never hurt me. “Hold me?”

Luke recognized the healing moment and went to her.

He took her with gentle care, holding tight when he climaxed. Death was flying toward him. The clock was almost louder than his pounding heart.

“I’m sorry.” Kendle also felt the warning, but she couldn’t do this alone.

“If it’s my time, I’ll go.” Luke shuddered between her scarred legs. “Until then, I have you.”

Kendle hugged him, arching when he started pleasing her again. He would lose his life during her quest to return home. Loving him back was the least she could do.

The dream changed.

The plane lifted. Under it, townspeople gazed up, drawn by the sight and sounds. They hadn’t heard a plane, or seen one, in a long time. It was a wondrous moment where the few people still alive hoped it would crash.

Behind the island people, glowing green eyes appeared in the evening fog. Shadowy forms moved closer, long arms reaching...

Gawkers were jerked into the shadows, not given time to scream.

In the town of Pitcairn, families in the middle of a meal stopped eating as the fog rolled in. It swirled through open doors and windows to fill the houses, covering the survivors.

There were no screams here either. The people walked from their homes and disappeared into the fog while glowing green eyes slithered around their feet.

“No!” Kendle jerked awake, moaning.

“You’re a real bitch!” Jennifer restrained herself only because it would upset Angela to stop their journey to break up a fight. “You didn’t tell us that!”

“What is it?” Greg steered around a pothole, feeling Kendle’s tension. As an Eagle, she was entitled to a chance to confess and receive a lighter sentence. “What did you do?”

Jennifer frowned, but waited to let the castaway explain the betrayal. Thoughts of the wedding had been put on hold when Kendle’s dream snared her.

Kendle’s silence angered Jennifer even more. “I can’t believe you set her up that way. You want all of us to die, just so long as she does too.”

Kendle closed her eyes. “Fuck you.”

Greg was growing concerned. “What is it?”

“The boss gets this one first.” Jennifer snorted and kicked Kendle’s seat again. “Angela is ten times smarter than you on her worst day. She knows.”

Kendle froze. “And she’s going anyway?”

Jennifer nodded and didn’t say more. She was positive it meant Angela would clear out that problem too.

Kendle took it as a sign she was right to believe that Angela was a threat to them all. *Maybe Angela and her glowing orbs are one of them!* Kendle went back to sleep before she could stew further. She was in the car with *one of them* right now.

Chapter Eight
No Games
Day Two
Noon

1

“**C**heck that shack! Hurry up!”

Heavy steps pounded closer through the sand.

Adrian thought of Angela and held the shield tighter, willing the trackers to see emptiness and nothing more. Now that it was light with clear weather, the shack had been obvious to them. If he were as strong as Angela, he could shield them without being drained so fast. She was the strongest descendant he'd known. She was—

Do you know how hard it is for her to eat when you're making her stomach boil with your emotions?

Adrian blanched. *No. She didn't bring you along!*

Marc cackled. *I told you she agreed to train me.*

“I've got something... A power surge. Search north!”

The steps went away.

Adrian felt the strength of his barrier increase to a dense, soggy quality he didn't try to peer through.

We're close now.

Adrian held tight to the shield, heart pounding. He'd forgotten the maker's bond could activate under stressful conditions.

I thought I was drowning in my soup. Spit noodles across the table.

Adrian grinned at Angela's words.

Samantha had just come from putting on clean clothes. I haven't gotten a glare like that in a while.

Adrian felt Angela's warmth settle over them as the demons flew toward the shack. *Damn. You are close.*

Minutes, my—

The connection cut off.

Replaying it, a hundred words could have fit there. The one that went best sent his mind into a chaotic pattern of repetition that settled on the future and then buzzed off it before the image could fully form. *I'm going to get what I want.*

2

"It's cruel when you tempt him that way." Jennifer was on Angela's right in the drafty mess tent next to their stopped convoy. This was the last stop. The scents of soup and gasoline as Brittani served her last meal and the Eagles gassed their vehicles for the last leg of their journey were making it hard to eat.

"I mean it." Jennifer had just informed Angela of Kendle's latest treachery, but the boss hadn't been surprised.

“It’s effective.” Angela forced herself to spoon in another bite. Brittani had cleverly added canned carrots to make it healthier and increase the mass to meet demand, but it hadn’t improved the flavor of eleven-month-old boxes and cans that had already been heavy on preservatives. The bunker supplies were wonderful to have, but it wasn’t the fresh food they’d enjoyed in Ciemus. In another few months, many of their staples would no longer be edible. The world was about to be on an even leaner diet.

Angela left her jacket tied around her waist, enjoying the warm wind. She’d never been to the coast before. She was looking forward to seeing the ocean.

Jennifer followed Angela’s lead with her jacket, not wanting to stink when they all piled back into vehicles together. The final three hours would feel longer due to them being so crammed in. They were ditching ten vehicles here and draining the fuel to make the rest of the journey.

The guards kept an eye on their surroundings. There were more houses now, but they were on alert for other predators. The wild dog attack had rattled some of the rookies who hadn’t seen action yet. The Ciemus people were already learning what it was like to be hunted, but Safe Haven’s members were also having episodes of panic. The mountain quake and the naval station had been rough. They were all suffering flashes at certain noises and phrases, unable to fight those memories. It wasn’t just something they could forget.

“It’s still cruel.”

Angela sighed in annoyance. “He’ll keep them alive. The trackers are searching north and looking for spare ammo.”

“They felt your power. They got scared.”

“They should be. I’m going to kill them all.”
Angela resumed chewing on her warm food. Other than the taste, it was great.

Brittani sniggered.

Angela rotated to look at her. Brittani hadn’t donned her rookie jacket yet, but everyone was watching for it, especially the men. Gus had a lot of competition.

Brittani gave an amused, apologetic smile. She was distracted and burning more of the food than usual.

Angela shared a silent laugh, understanding. Brittani was about to lead her own team. She was busy making plans and hoping she could live up to them. Angela wasn’t concerned. Brittani would do well because it was what she was meant to be doing. So would everyone else. The problems they’d been facing for so long were about to be over for a while. An entirely new set would take their place once the ship set sail.

Depressed by the reflection, Angela forced herself to restart the conversation with Jennifer. Even talking about Adrian was better than nothing. “Is he—”

Jennifer took her half eaten bowl to the scrap bucket to prevent that from happening. She was on

Marc's side all the way and she knew about their plans. *I should. I got them rolling on it in Ciemus. They'd have talked about it for months if I hadn't intervened.*

Jennifer strolled to the flap, casting a sharp look at Kendle, who was in a corner by herself with a bowl of untouched food. The castaway looked like a zombie. The camp and the Eagles were avoiding her. Not because of what had happened, but because she looked ill and they didn't want to catch it. If she sneezed, they would rush her to isolation.

Kendle snatched up her spoon and shoved in a bite, shuddering as she fought to control the rage.

Jennifer left the tent.

The tension didn't ease.

Angela got up and left too, without the nasty look at Kendle.

Kendle shoveled in another bite.

The tension faded.

Jennifer was a younger miniature of Angela as the pair walked out, bringing smiles and frowns. Most people liked it, but some were worried the girl was emulating their leader too closely.

Kyle was thrilled. With Angela as a mentor, Jennifer would be strong enough to survive anything.

Angela paused, listening. All she heard was a rant about the food.

Satisfied Kendle was trying to control herself, Angela went to the lead truck. She was tired and sore, but she'd driven a two hour shift in front of the

convoy and enjoyed every second of it. If not for the coming action, she would be doing it now too. As it was, she planned to be first out the door and she couldn't do that if she was driving.

"I assume I'm going with you." Marc followed her to the truck as Kyle motioned to Jennifer.

He noticed Angela's gray hair. He would have commented, but she regarded him pointedly. Marc gazed in a truck mirror to discover he had sunken eyes and a line of gray hair over one ear. "Damn."

Angela tucked the ponytail under her cap as she began to sweat. "This is a side effect of sending our demons out to distract the beach trackers."

"We'll drink more water. You rest until we get there."

Angela went to the rear bunk, pulling her kit along.

Dog peered at her with bleary golden eyes and then went back to sleep.

Marc stayed in the passenger seat, waiting for an answer. He was slapped with a flash of men nailed to a wall in a storm. Some of them were dead. "Uh..." The image transformed to a group of Eagles in a shed, surrounded by men. "Well, I understand you're upset, but..."

Angela zoomed in, showing the trackers laughing as they stabbed knives through weak points in Adrian's shield. Zack was at Adrian's boots, not moving, while several other men squeezed as tight around their former leader as they

could to make it easier for him to keep them sheltered.

“Yeah...” Marc sighed. “Do you want the camp distracted?”

“No more hiding what I am or what I do.”

“Why would...” Marc scowled. “To give them another chance to change their minds. We still have people who should stay here, right?”

Angela shrugged. “I wouldn’t say should. I just need them to accept me, Marc. I can’t take hiding it anymore. I’m a descendant of the Creator. We all are. They either need to adjust to that or stay here. I won’t tolerate denial anymore.”

Marc clasped her wrist in consolation. “What would you like me to do?”

“Watch them.” Her hand tightened around his. “Watch them and see who still wants to kill me.”

For a brief second, Marc wondered if she might be the tiniest bit delusional and then he nodded. “I’ll scan them hard. If you’re using power, it’ll give me a minute to do the deep kind. Jennifer will help.”

“Along with a few others I trust.” Angela dug in her kit and handed a scrap of paper to Marc. “I’ve never been saner in my life. Please don’t doubt me.”

“I just don’t want to believe we have another traitor here.” Marc read the note.

...weaknesses are kids, Marc, Adrian, and death. Vulnerable with many possible targets.

Marc regarded her. “Kendle?”

Angela shook her head. “Not her or anyone on the council. I’ve already compared the handwriting

to everyone I have a sample of—even myself and you to make it a fair pool. No matches.”

Marc took his time examining the script while his brain began devising a trap.

“I’ll have everyone sign a log as they board.” Angela stretched out on the bunk. “They’ll probably expect that, so they’ll try before we board the ship. That’s how long we have to figure it out.”

“What happens if we don’t?”

Angela gave him a grim stare of panic. “Then I’ll be with Adrian on his boat, following, because I don’t trust anyone else.”

Marc winced. “You mean that. I can hear it.”

“So can he, Marc.” Her stare softened into pleading. “I won’t make it to the island if we don’t unearth the traitor before we sail. I’ve seen it.”

Marc took notice. “Tell me everything—the dream, how and where you found this note. All of it.”

Angela used her hands, telling Marc she was truly scared. She didn’t even feel safe using a private mental line.

The need to defend her rose in a staggering amount of bile. Marc swallowed it, relishing the pain. He would find the person and they would pay.

Angela’s witch relaxed. With Marc on the hunt, her host would be safe.

Do you think so?

They paused at William’s tone.

William cleared his throat and opened the truck door. He got into the driver chair and shut them in. "I'm sorry."

Marc glowered at the man.

"You need help with this. It's too big for one man."

"Finding a rat?" Marc questioned snidely. "Her dog could do that."

"Not a rat. An Invisible."

Marc's hands clenched. "Maybe it's you."

William chuckled. "I don't need underhanded tactics."

"How do you know it's an Invisible?" Angela didn't care about their simmering rivalry.

"Because I've swept everyone in this camp, deeper than your enforcer has, and I found nothing."

"Maybe you aren't as good as you imagine."

"Maybe you should close your mouth, *citizen*."

William's scold hurt Marc deep in his heart.

Angela held on to his hand when he would have let go.

Marc clenched his teeth and tolerated the awful moment.

William looked at Angela over the seat. "You read the book?"

She nodded. "Invisibles have a natural shield over their minds that they don't even know about. That's why I only saw darkness whenever I tried to scan Kenn."

“He was on the edge of receiving his gifts, so you could spot the darkness. That’s how you find them.”

“So we scan for dark spots.” Angela’s shoulders slumped. “I hate dark spots.”

“That’s waiting until they’re changing. We need to get them before that, so they don’t have a gift to use and they can’t be found by trackers.”

“What do you suggest?” Marc asked stiffly.

“Skip your hunt.” William smiled. “We’ll have a play instead.”

“A play?”

“An act.” Angela lifted a brow at William. “Jealousy?”

The man shrugged. “It’s effective but takes too long. I was imagining mutiny.”

“You’ll act like you want to replace her as leader and see if anyone joins you?” Marc guessed. He already wasn’t looking forward to the trouble it would cause in the camp.

“Not leadership.” William grinned. “For mate.”

Marc gaped.

William laughed.

Angela rolled her eyes. “He means Adrian, just so you know. Not himself.”

“That’s worse!”

William nodded. “And believable.”

“It will ruin Marc’s place with the camp.”

Angela’s blunt words drew cold silence that Marc filled by pulling out of her grip and opened the door. “Let me know what you two decide.”

Marc didn't slam the door. He didn't need to. His anger was clear.

William went after him. He had his long coat unbuttoned, showing the sporty clothes of an aristocrat underneath. So far, he'd refused Safe Haven gear and weapons. His red and gold hair glinted in the sun, drawing attention from camp women. The former playboy gave a regretful shake of his head.

Females went on their way, disappointed again. Single men to service their needs without a commitment were getting harder to find.

The men in Safe Haven had the opposite problem. They couldn't find enough alone moments to keep up.

"Wait!"

Marc tensed.

William grabbed Marc's arm and tried to swing him around.

He couldn't.

Marc kept walking, ignoring the hand tugging on him.

William flushed at his obvious weakness. *Gotta fix that.*

Sentries frowned at the men, but camp members actually scowled. They were fed up with personal dramas.

Marc felt William reaching for his arm again and sighed, giving in. "Fine!" He spun and shoved William. "What?!"

William came right back and leaned in his face. “This isn’t a game. If I have to interfere to spare her moments like this one, I will.” William used a blast of his gift to shove Marc the way he’d just been treated.

Marc tried not to move, but it was impossible. William’s gift was strong. “That’s all you have!”

William shook his head, disgusted. “I have commonsense. If you keep doing this, anger is all *you’ll* have.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “He’s perfect for her in every way save one. It’s bigger than all the others and is enough to let you win in the end, if you don’t screw it up.”

“What’s that?!” Marc snarled, hating the man for making him play this role. It was too close to the truth.

“She loves you more.”

Marc’s heart pounded. “She doesn’t love him at all. She’s under a spell!”

William sighed. “You don’t believe that, or you wouldn’t be jealous of him. If you keep this up, that will change.”

“Maybe she’d be better off with him.” Marc forced himself to play along.

William shrugged. “You won’t let them spend time together, so we’ll never know.”

William left, happy with the first layer of acting. He had to stay close to the truth or the Eagles wouldn’t believe it. Angela knew there was a traitor and she wanted them found, but she also wanted the rivalry over and this would do both. William hoped

she was prepared for the truth hiding in her heart. William already knew the outcome of this play and he presumed she did as well. He was proud of her for having the strength to do it. Ending a love affair was hard on everyone, but sometimes, it had to happen.

Angela honked the horn.

Kyle put a hand around his mouth. "Time to go, people! Let's load up!"

3

Shoreline (Adrian's shack)

"I feel something coming."

"It's that group the UN sent us here for."

"I don't see how. Those kids are in the west."

"They're on the way now."

The trackers weren't strong enough to kill Adrian if they had to fight. The boss had ordered them to keep him contained here. Adrian wasn't strong enough to kill them all and shield his men at the same time. They were at a stalemate.

"Maybe, but it couldn't be Safe Haven yet."

The brothers were grouchy and filthy, ready to be finished. They were also thrilled. They had captured Adrian Mitchel. The rewards would be staggering.

"I think this is a wild goose chase. Safe Haven died at that naval center. I was there. I saw the fishing people come in and blow them up. The fishers are who we should be hunting."

“Did you sense anything out of them?”

“There was no way to tell who had what in all that chaos.”

“Too bad. Be nice to know if they captured any prisoners.”

“I’m telling you guys, something’s coming.”

Adrian listened to the conversation, shield slipping a bit. He knew that was likely the plan—catch him off guard and attack at full strength, but he couldn’t help the curiosity. When the fighting started, it would be too late for details.

“You could just come out and ask your questions.” One of the trackers outside the stinking shack stood up. “We’ll go and have a cold drink, change into dry clothes.”

“And have a talk about the UN, the international detention center, and the kids from the west.”

Adrian dropped his head to his chin and went silent, refusing to think of anything but his love for Angela. He’d perfected his hold over it to a single image that gleamed. It was impenetrable.

“It’s not, really.” The standing tracker rapped on the shield.

Adrian concentrated on the image of Angela.

“Damn. Come on, wimp. Stop blinding us.”

Adrian ignored them. He had many images to switch to if this one dulled, but it was his favorite and always would be.

“It’s not even your memory.” Another of the tracker trio scanned him in contempt. “You’re

witnessing it through her mate's eyes. That's pathetic."

Adrian didn't care. Marc's memory of Angela and the wolf pack was stunning in the detail. Adrian could see the sweat on Angela's skin and bugs snapping at the blood on the wolf's coat. Two females in full glory, battling for the army of males around them was amazing, but it was also the moment his men had accepted her for the warrior she was about to become. So had Marc.

"She better be as badass as you're building her up to be." The oldest of the brothers was bored. "We haven't been sitting in this crappy weather for ten hours just to take her out in one hit."

"Will you three shut up and listen!" Rex was the smarter of the brothers and always on alert. "Do a scan."

"Too late." Adrian smiled. "She's here."

Screams sounded outside the shack as the witch marched forward with flames lighting the way. She shimmered in fire, a vengeful spirit sent by a furious host.

Adrian held the barrier as fire flew over the trackers and turned two of them into screaming torches that ran toward the water.

Rex made it to the edge of the shore, hand dropping into the cold liquid as he died.

Save your strength. The angry witch took a stance in front of the shack. *I can't heal the wounded. I can only kill our enemies.*

Adrian got to his feet and went to the door, wanting to view her with his own eyes. He studied the entity, not feeling his lack of food and water or his shriveled form from use of energy. All he wanted to do was pretend.

Angela's demon rotated to snarl at him with a skeleton profile under glossy black hair.

Adrian grinned at her. "Hello, yourself."

Startled by charm in such a moment, the witch giggled, fire increasing.

Marc's demon was a hulking entity with red eyes and clawed hands dripping blood onto the floor of the shack as he stepped between them. *No games with my witch tonight. She's busy.*

Adrian nodded curtly and went to the opposite window instead. He hadn't known Marc could do that. Angela was teaching him in leaps instead of steady lessons.

4

"It's disturbing they can do that."

Samantha winced at a bright ray of sunlight. "Will you feel the same when I can?"

Neil heard the clenched teeth behind the too calm question and frowned. "Hit her again."

Conner and Charlie delivered a blast of healing energy. The boys recoiled in tandem as it bounced back.

They exchanged a worried glance and tried again.

“What’s wrong?” Neil knew something was. “Every time you hit her, both your brows meet in the middle.”

“It’s not getting through.” Conner tried again, aware of Samantha trying to relax and accept it.

Energy flew back, stinging his skin.

“Hey!” He regarded Neil in confusion. “That’s never happened before.”

“I’ll talk to someone about it.” Neil glanced over the seat and spotted her clenched hands and pale skin. “Take us to the lead truck.”

Their driver pulled out of line and hurried down the opposite lane.

Samantha groaned as a contraction hit. Terrified, she gripped the seat and tried to relax.

“Pull over.” Angela pointed at a driveway. “Have the convoy keep truckin’.”

Marc wanted to grin at her wording, but a vehicle rushing to catch up implied there was a problem.

“Sam’s in labor. The boys can’t help her anymore.”

“Can you?”

“William will ride with her. Conner is switching out. He knows.”

William zipped his coat. “It will last a couple weeks. Then she’ll need you to get her through the remainder.”

“We’ll be on the water before that. She’ll be able to rest as long as she needs.”

William's head came up. "You'll need help for that."

"I have plans in place."

Marc made a note to ask about it later.

So did William.

Angela sighed. "It's not to keep it from either of you."

The males understood it was to keep it from others and settled down.

Angela rolled a mental eye, overlooking her own jealousies. Now that Kendle was in check, she wasn't feeling that way anymore.

"Is she, though? Really?"

Angela sighed, shaking her head. "Not at all. The peace is temporary."

Marc pushed harder. "Will it be okay, eventually?"

Angela nodded, but refused to contemplate how that would happen. If he knew it was coming, it wouldn't be fair.

You're taking a big risk, the witch warned. What if he does love her?

Of course, he loves her. It's a matter of who he loves more.

Like with you and Adrian?

Yes.

Fine. The witch was fresh from her victory and feeling good. Then I will tell you he's fine, but Zack isn't. Adrian is giving him help, but it won't be enough.

Zack's fate isn't ours to decide, Angela stated ominously. He has things to atone for, things he won't admit he did wrong.

The witch fell silent, contemplating that information.

At times, Angela seemed to know more than her witch and neither of them had found it odd yet, but Marc did. He'd been listening to the conversation, as was William, he presumed.

Marc pulled the truck over, making motions for the others to go on. He also told them it was a passenger switch so no one would panic.

William hurried from the truck as Conner came from the car.

The switch took two minutes and then both vehicles were back on the road, rolling toward their spots in line.

As Marc shifted, Conner turned to Angela. "Let's make a deal. I'll trade you Samantha's twins for my dad going with us to the island."

Marc opened his mouth.

So did Angela.

Deal! Sam's mental anguish overrode them both. *If taking that scumbag with us saves my babies, so be it. Everyone else will have to suck it up.*

Angela gave a reluctant nod.

Marc was forced into a snicker. "She's a fighter."

"Yes, she is." Angela placed a hand on Conner's arm, soothing the stinging skin from his attempt to

heal Samantha. “I’ll tell you when it’s okay. Not before then or you’ll bring another refugee flood down on us.”

Marc presumed Conner was going to give Samantha a lifeforce to get her through.

Angela denied it. “She’s having trouble because the babies evolved too fast. Giving her a lifeforce will make it worse.”

Marc led the convoy onto the last stretch of highway. “Well, you can’t take back their evolutions... Can you?”

“No, and I won’t transform their DNA. However, Conner and our enforcer can lock their gifts up until they’re born. That should stop the constant need for Sam’s body to adjust and grow at descendant rates.”

“This is another reason descendants didn’t survive in the labs, right?” Marc was suddenly furious. “They intentionally mixed us with the wrong types to study what would happen.”

“Yes, but there’s also love, and then when your line is dying out, there are desperate attempts to survive. It wasn’t just the government.” Angela thought of the notes in Adrian’s books. “Our people are fragile in reproduction. Many of us were captured during pregnancy. It’s easiest then because men are too weak from caring for their mate and unborn child to fight the trackers.”

“Trackers like Adrian?”

Angela nodded, not needing the reminder that Adrian had once worked for the government and

hunted their people. “Yes. Also like the kind still coming for us.”

“I thought the demons just handled that.”

“They took care of the few on duty over our men, not their leaders.” Angela listened to the events happening in Neil’s jeep for a moment, then closed her eyes to rest. Sending the witch out to help their men was tiring. She’d never sent it so far away before. Now, she had a new gift to use.

An evolution, the witch grumbled. Exactly what you’re denying her twins.

I’m saving her life, Angela corrected. Go to sleep or find comfort in your demon’s arms. We handle the real world here, not fantasies where only descendants survived the apocalypse.

Stung, the witch faded, leaving Angela in peace.

Chapter Nine
It Feels Nasty

In the West
Day Two
9am

1

“**H**ow long until we get there?”

“It depends on where *there* is.” Jeff kept his eye on the bus mirrors, where a small cloud was lingering. *It might be a storm. If so, it's coming faster than I am and that's a problem.* He already had the bus going as fast as he could over these cracked roads.

The ashy sky had stopped spitting on them, but the clouds hadn't faded. His mirrors were filled with smoke that was undoubtedly pushing out the last survivors from the west. Jeff wondered if any of them would notice Allan's grave as they traveled through and doubted it. He hoped the Eagle rested in peace near the tree with the hollow trunk. It was the best Jeff could do for him.

“Will it be soon?”

Jeff shook his head, easing on the gas. He'd planned a break now, but it would wait. “A week.”

Kimmie slumped in the seat behind him. Arms crossing over her chest, the girl tried to sleep a little

more like she could hear Jeff hoping she would do. It was hard. The bus was full of bored kids who wanted to run and play, and to fight. Missing the nightly bloodbath was bothering them.

Becky and Doug were trying to keep the children occupied, aware of the issues. They'd been doing well until Kimmie woke from a nightmare, sending screams through the bus.

Becky met Jeff's eye in the mirror and nodded. They'd made a fast plan to keep the restless children happy, but they hadn't needed it yet. The children were tolerating the trip. There hadn't been fighting or disobedience since Romeo had given them the lay of things in Safe Haven. Jeff would have thought they were settling down but for the gleam in Kimmie's eyes and the tension in the air. The kids were like junkies waiting for their next fix.

He switched on the radio, not wincing at the loud blast of holiday music. They had given the kids everything they had in the way of clothes and food, but half of them were still without coverings and Jeff hated it. At some point, he hoped to make a stop for their needs, but this area was cleaned out. Burnt towns and slaughtered livestock littered the interstate, some of it new, most of it old.

Kids perked up, sharing small smiles and sad grimaces at the holiday tunes.

Jeff didn't want to have those conversations. "Next." He skipped forward.

Barney music filled the bus to the delight of the kids, who immediately began to sing along.

“Yeah!”

“I love you... You love me...”

“No fair!” Jeff groaned. “I can’t even sing the adult version.”

Doug fell into helping Roy and Romeo learn the words as the singing grew louder.

Kimmie was the only one not singing along. Even the older children were happy to belt out the infamous lyrics, but his girl still had crossed arms and a scowl. Jeff presumed she was too old for it.

“It reminds me of my brother.” A tear rolled down her stained cheek. “He loved it.”

Jeff wanted to turn it off now.

“Please don’t. They’re enjoying it.”

Jeff sighed. “You ever drive a bus?”

Kimmie regarded him in the mirror, shaking her head. “No. Should I learn?”

“Learn everything you can.” Jeff scooted over. “Perch on the edge here and I’ll show you some basics.”

She was on the seat before Jeff had finished speaking. He gave her a reluctant smile.

Kimmie leaned close. “People are coming.”

Jeff tensed. “The dust cloud.”

“Yes.”

Jeff felt her trying to work up the nerve to tell him something and got it over with. “What would you do?”

“Blend in.” Kimmie knew what had to happen. “I’ve looked at it from every angle and that’s the only one where you and your friends all survive.”

Jeff swallowed the fear and nodded. “Tell me everything you can, and I’ll handle the others.”

She leaned closer and whispered everything he didn’t want to hear.

2

Jeff reluctantly switched off the radio, breaking the good mood as a flood of cars filled the mirrors. Around the bus were empty stretches of highway that occasionally surprised them with towns and stores, only to disappoint them again with emptiness and old looting. “We’re about to have company. Act like UN troops.”

Becky had been listening and knew the plan. She concentrated on not putting off magic vibes as dozens of cars surrounded the speeding bus.

Trucks bounced alongside with men pointing guns.

“Pull over!”

“Stop the bus!”

“What do we do?” Doug was scared for all of them. The refugees in beaten, rusted vehicles now trying to force them off the road were lean and mean. *This will get ugly.*

Jeff didn’t let the smaller cars and trucks push him off the road, but he didn’t retaliate either. Now that he was viewing the threats, it was clear Kimmie was right. “Remember what I said.” Jeff brought his rifle up to the window. “We’re like them.”

Kimmie immediately gave the finger to a man leaning out of a passenger window to grab at the bus door. “We’ll get there first!”

Children slid windows down to scream at the startled refugees.

“We’ll kill you too!”

“We’re leading the way!”

“Safe Haven has to die!”

Cheers came from those who could hear the screams. The other drivers registered a difference and stayed back, waiting to see how the front of the refugee wave was going to react.

Jeff nodded at Becky.

Becky keyed the mike on the CB radio. “Fight at night! Keep rolling!”

The radio lit up with garbled threats and challenges, but the vehicles around them widened the lines and let the bus roll on.

“It worked.” Kimmie scanned harder. “They know we’re infected. They expect us to act like it.”

“And you want to.” Jeff forced the issue, keeping his rifle in the window.

“Yes.” The girl’s eyes gleamed. “Blood eases the pain.”

Jeff grunted. He understood that too. The apocalypse had changed all of them. “I have a low tolerance for the abuse of children and I don’t want to take this threat straight to Angela.”

“We only need a couple hours to settle them down.” Darren, one of the older children, looked up from the rear of the bus. “We were trained for this.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” Seth was sitting next to his angry daughter. Amy was shaking with rage, thinking about killing the people who were causing the unrest on the bus.

“It’s what life is now.” Darren gave them all a sharp glance. “We’d like to get you all out of here alive because it will please the alpha. Do what we say.”

“We’ll help you remove them.” Amy spoke while pointing at Jeff.

The child sounded like an adult, terrifying her father. She looked around four to Jeff, but he thought she might even be younger.

“This is wrong.”

Jeff sympathized with Seth, but he had no choice. “Start telling us now so we’ll have time to process it. We have to stop in the next four hours. This bus won’t take much more than that without a break.”

“Park right in the center when we stop.” Kimmie took over like she had for the last three months of their training. “You have to let them see us.”

Jeff couldn’t count all the vehicles or name all the makes. They filled his mirrors with shouts and weapons. More than a few fired off shots as they neared the bus.

Dust blew over them all, coming in through the windows as the rest of the wave caught up. The noise was jarring, scaring some of the kids who’d been dozing. Doug noticed they settled right back

down, as if this was nothing new to them. *It probably isn't.* Their little bodies were covered in bruises that hadn't faded when Jeff healed them. Doug didn't know why, but it didn't feel like this was the right time to ask.

“When we stop, they'll start asking if we're going to put on a show. We'll say yes, after dark. We'll walk around then, so they can see us and decide on bets.” Darren looked at Jeff in the mirror. “That's where you come in. The UN sentries escorted us, making sure the sicker people didn't grab without paying. You broker the deals. You're the owner.”

Jeff blanched. “I can't do that.”

More cars came alongside the bus to get a view. Two of the vehicles were full of men who pointed at the kids and made fighting motions.

“They expect some of the UN men to be descendants, so you can use it a little.” Darren picked up a bag from his feet, hoping to find more food. “But it's limited to a shield and a minor gift. If you use more than that, they'll know who you are.”

“At some point, I need the full story of how this all got started and what's been happening.” Jeff eased off the gas a bit as the engine knocked harder. More vehicles surrounded them, waving to encourage the kids to put on a show. Kimmie was right. They would have to perform. “But not follow through.” Jeff handed out the order with a firm tone. “When it comes time to let them have the rewards,

we're going to kill them instead. I'm giving you permission to help me with that because there are too many for me to do it alone. Wait for my call."

Relief went through the bus.

Horror followed it. The adults shook their heads and denied him, especially Seth. "Amy is not going out there!"

"None of the little ones are." Doug added his support.

Amy's rage exploded, knocking Seth to the floorboard.

Anger followed from the other kids, hitting Doug and Becky in sharp waves.

Jeff held his rifle higher and brought up his shield. "Don't make me use this. I'll feel bad, but I'll kill every one of you little monsters if you cross me."

Kimmie clapped as the kids immediately settled back into their seats. "Yes, just like that."

"It feels nasty." Jeff lowered both the gun and the protection. "Can't we just kill them all and skip their fun?"

Kimmie shook her head. "If we refuse, they'll tear us apart and they won't relax until they get what they want. I need them to let their guard down. I'm young. My gifts aren't strong yet." She touched his shoulder. "When you give the word, we'll get most of them."

"I'll want them all if you wind me up that hard." Jeff had his own triggers. "It doesn't just flip on and off. When it starts, it stays."

“We know that emotion well.” Kimmie sat back on the seat and curled her legs beneath her bottom. “This is the last time we’ll be hurt. Don’t interfere until it’s time.”

“Then don’t send out the little ones.” Jeff kept haggling. “I can’t take it.”

“The little ones are your most effective tools.” Kimmie voice was evil in the flesh. “The worst men want them. Broker the deals. Be greedy. Let the fighters do what they were trained for, then free all of us like you wanted to when you first found us.”

Jeff’s heart hurt. “I should have driven us off the cliff like you told me to.”

Kimmie nodded. “Yes, but it’s too late for that now. Safe Haven knows we’re in danger. They heard our call and all the responses. If you don’t reply to them soon, the alpha will send help. She won’t wait long. She values you. We can feel her concern. Your chance to end it all quick was gone as soon as we got on this bus.”

3

“We’re stopping soon.” Jeff broke the tense silence that had fallen over the bus. “It’s noon and our ride needs a full cool down—at least three hours.” He indicated the sky. “It’ll be daylight when we stop. We might get overrun.”

“We only do shows at night.” Kimmie yawned. “They’ll spend the day betting and drinking.”

“And brokering deals for us.” Amy forced the big words through small lips. “Deals are made in sight. Debts are paid at night.”

The kids nodded at the training words.

Jeff loathed it all, but he now had a plan. He regarded Kimmie. “Will it succeed?” Jeff knew she was the type of descendant who could predict the future. He wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he did.

Kimmie began searching.

Jeff knew before she answered, by the way her face squished up. He sighed. “I jump too soon, right?”

“Yes.” Kimmie liked him even more for it. “Our pain is your pain. We’re used to it, but you’re not.”

“Can you fix that for a few hours?” he wondered suddenly.

Kimmie studied him nervously. “Yes, but...”

“What?”

“You might not let me put you back. It’s easy to get lost in the emotional shield.”

“Can you put a timer on it?”

The little girl frowned. “What a good question! Hang on.” She shut her eyes.

Jeff didn’t feel anything, though he knew she was using magic on him. It felt like nothing.

Jeff thought about Crista’s death.

Nothing.

He tried for anger with Angela and received the same response. He cared mentally, but it wasn’t drawing a reaction from his heart. *This is great!*

Kimmie winced.

Jeff knew he should be concerned with her displeasure, but he wasn't. In fact, he didn't care about anything except his goal. "The Eagles could use this on rookies."

"It's dangerous to live without emotional responses." Kimmie was nervous. "You could be like them and never care."

"Do Seth." Jeff pointed at the exhausted father who hadn't stopped stressing long enough to sleep. "Doug and Becky don't need it."

"They should stay on the bus to guard it and be out of sight. He smells like Safe Haven and she can't control her gifts."

"I can." Becky slumped against the gritty seat. "I just don't want to."

"He can lock it up." Kimmie's little voice went cold. "Stay in the bus."

Becky looked at Jeff, not sure if she should be impressed or annoyed.

"We stop and do what the kids tell us to do. Then we'll remove more people who deserve it."

Becky nodded, soothed.

"How?" Seth didn't like it. "As soon as we use magic, they'll rush us."

Jeff shook his head. "In one of my bags, I have drugs. In several of the other bags, we have booze. I want it all mixed into community jugs. We'll get part of them with heavy drinking. We'll also do our dinner, after we eat. While we're busy, people will sneak in and grab it. They'll eat anything they find, so put the fix in on all of it."

“That’s not enough.” Seth kept protesting as Doug got busy mixing drinks. “There are hundreds of refugees out there.”

“I know.” Jeff tried to move on by getting more details. “They have you fight for real, right?”

“Yes.” Kimmie controlled her anger, but the tone was still curt. “We know our job.”

“This isn’t your job!” Doug’s shout surprised them all. “This is wrong!”

Jeff sighed. “Hit him with it too.”

Kimmie went to the back to dose Doug. “What about his boys?”

“We’ll say they’re new, being trained.” Darren dropped the bag and picked up another. “Those kids get a few days to adjust before they fight. Say you just picked them up, that they aren’t angry enough yet.”

“It’s true.” Kimmie eyed Romeo. “Though he’s close. Have you been drugged?”

Romeo shook his head. “I’ve been abused, sold, and frightened.”

Kimmie shrugged. “You’ll get there without the drugs, then. I tried to tell Mario that, but he had orders to follow.” Kimmie blasted Doug with the emotional barrier.

Doug groaned. “I don’t like this.”

Jeff nodded. Even with the barrier, he felt the same way. His mission was to protect these kids. Not being able to feel the urgency was bothersome.

“Hit me too.” Becky shrugged at the looks. “The stress is making my stomach hurt.”

“That’s not good for the baby.” Kimmie shoved energy through mental doors. “I’ll give you a heavier blast. You don’t need to be upset.”

Becky frowned at the girl. “How do you know?”

“My mom was having a baby when the UN men found us.” Kimmie’s tone didn’t change. “She told me.”

“Did your mom...?”

Kimmie shook her head. “She died in birth. So did my sister. My brother was taken by the UN to a different place.”

Becky winced. “Do you kids get hit with the barrier?”

“Oh, no. We need our emotions.”

Jeff slowed the bus to make the turn into the lot, where several semis were parked. The truck stop had neatly lined up trailers, but the store and restaurant, as well as the gas station, were burnt to bare frames. There was a small town in the distance that Jeff identified and used to estimate where they were now. *Six days to go. And I have no idea how we’re even going to make it through tonight.*

He shoved into the minds of the kids on his bus, memorizing more details on how to act.

The refugees slowed with them. Some knew what Jeff was doing from the smoke coming from under the hood of the bus. They swerved into the truck stop ahead of them, circling and yelling. Others stayed on the main road, pausing to wait and see what was happening. A few of the meaner ones

bumped the bus. The rest swarmed the looted areas to see if there was anything left.

Jeff pulled up his personal shield, making it the strongest he had. Then he stopped the bus. He would have to walk twenty feet to the line of trucks, leaving the vehicle unsheltered. That was intentional.

Jeff pointed at Kimmie and Darren. “Come. Seth on the rear. Doug on the front. Becky is my slave. She doesn’t fight. She serves.”

No one protested.

Jeff knew he should be worried, but the only thing he felt was anger. It pissed him off to have to deal with these fools while trying to get another vehicle rolling. He let the anger build.

Kimmie did the same.

Ashy wind fell on Jeff and the kids as they left the bus. The wind was gusting here, bringing poison from the west in both chemical and human form.

Doug coughed, locking the door against refugees that were a mix of all races and ages. Kids were even running through the crowd. He noticed those kids were putting things in their pockets and realized they were robbing the mob. Doug looked away before he got them caught. He didn’t know if they had parents, but he didn’t want to ruin it if they didn’t.

Darren played his role and acted jumpy as he stayed glued to Jeff’s hip. He was the financial guarantee of a good night for the UN. No one placed bets on the fighter who flinched.

Refugees swarmed them.

Jeff fought to keep his shield up as people bounced off it with yelps and fists. “Get back! It’s not time!”

“A show! We want a show!”

“Later!” Jeff shoved his way through, now glad he couldn’t feel fear. “Daytime’s for betting.”

“Are those your fighters?”

The refugees retreated a bit as Jeff nodded. “Two of them.” He pointed at Kimmie. “Show ‘em some stuff, girl.”

Kimmie immediately sank into a fighting position and let her angry face come forward. It was frightening on a child.

The crowd shouted as she did spins and jumps, little bruised legs delivering kicks to some of the people who were too close. As adults hit the ground, bets began to fly through the air.

Darren flinched again, huddling closer.

Even with the barrier, Jeff refused to push the child away. He grabbed the boy by the back of his ragged jacket and held him up. He rotated so the foaming refugees could get a good look. “Double payoff.”

Shouts came, all denying him.

Jeff lowered the cringing boy to the ground, shrugging. “He’s scrappier than he looks.” He was following the routine of the UN men by telling the truth when he knew it wouldn’t be believed. It was brilliant in Jeff’s opinion, brilliant and corrupt. It allowed them to cheat their patrons and always

ensure a financial gain no matter how many good bets they had to pay off.

Jeff ignored the kids and the crowd, sweeping the trucks.

The kids stuck to their training. The UN men hadn't cared about them during this part. They'd learned defenses. Small knives sliced those who tried to grab them, taking skin and an occasional finger.

Screams and cheers filled the air each time blood hit the ground.

On the bus, Doug's hulking form at the front, Saiga 12 over one arm, was keeping things under control there. Seth's beard-lined glare wasn't as much a deterrent in the rear, but his AK was. Both men had side folding stocks and a box of drums at their feet. Other than a few slaps to the windows and shouts of encouragement, the bus wasn't bothered. Everyone was centered on the lone UN descendant with his shield up and no weapon in hand. Jeff appeared unconcerned with the hundreds of men and women around him and that meant he was a badass, had support in the area, or he was a full descendant who needed to die.

Jeff felt their suspicions. The second truck in line appeared to have no issues. He was about to verify that by starting it up, but first, he had to settle the crowd or the two kids with him would be taken while he was swarmed. The answer they would accept was one Jeff hated, because if he were truly corrupt, it's what he would have done. "They told

us to relocate. I took my group of infectors and got lost, but they'll catch up to me soon. If you want a fight tonight, make sure nothing gets in my way. I need to stay ahead."

"You stole UN property!"

Half the crowd was shocked and began looking over their shoulders. The others cheered one of their own for breaking free of the new masters.

"I'll have to give them back at some point." Jeff opened the driver door. "But not before I've destroyed Safe Haven. I'm taking the kids to their doorstep. Help me and we'll own that camp in a week."

"Those people are dead!"

"We heard it. Hell of a battle."

Jeff reached for the radio on his belt. "I was banished because I got tired of the leader killing innocent people. I still know the Eagle code." He clicked the mike a few times, hoping someone was listening to the old channel and knew to answer. He wasn't about to use the newest one in front of so many threats.

Click-click!

"Safe Haven survived!" The shout echoed through the crowd as the yelling chain started.

Jeff climbed into the truck and began rooting around for keys and wires as the crowd yelled questions and passed his answers. Jeff had changed his mind about not leading them to Angela. That was what she'd sent him out here for—to gather the trash and burn it.

Jeff could hear a few of the stronger groups making plans to take the kids from him after the fighting. *Good luck.*

The engine started on the fourth turn of the key. Following instinct, Jeff pointed at the other semis. “Check those out! People need wheels to reach the shore.”

Surprising him, a group ran off to do as instructed.

Jeff checked the gauges. Half a tank of gas was better than the quarter the bus had, but he wanted to take that too. It meant more time out in the open to drain the fuel. Jeff shifted into gear and drove the truck through the crowd to line up the tanks. The fastest way was a direct transfer. He would have to be careful, though. The gear he needed to do it was in the same kit with his Eagle jacket and patches. He needed a distraction while he worked. Jeff watched the two kids come through the crowd without problems, following the truck. The refugees never stopped watching them.

Jeff made a hard choice. He stopped the truck, pocketing the keys that had been in the floorboard, and got out. He held up a hand, making sure his voice carried to those inside the bus. “They’ll do the walk now so you can see. When I stop for the night, I’ll eat and then we’ll start the show.”

Cheers overwhelmed anything else Jeff would have said. He got onto the bus and gestured at the kids to get out. “Make your way to the new truck. Stay together.”

Romeo and Roy kept their places in the middle of the bus, shaking.

Jeff exited, waving them to follow the other kids. “We have two new ones, but they’re only infected and not trained. I might sell them if the prices are good. They’ll walk out now too.”

Roy began to cry as Romeo dragged him off the bus. Doug followed with gun and ammunition drums, not reacting.

Jeff willed himself to feel anything over it and couldn’t. The barrier was impenetrable.

I’ve changed my mind, Jeff decided. We can’t use this on the Eagles or let them know it exists. Without a conscience, we could go bad and not even know it until we’ve lost everything, including ourselves.

Chapter Ten
You Screwed Up

3pm

1

***B**eep! Beep!*

Marc's hand settled onto Angela's shoulder.

Angela jerked, coming back from her visions of the west. Jeff's coded warning that he was bringing trouble had sent her into that hazy place where she was spending most of the trip.

Marc withdrew his hand at her haunted expression. "The timer went off. You said 2:30."

Angela nodded, drawing deep breaths. She smoothed her hair and stretched without waking Conner, who was also restless. *His dreams are probably mine too.*

Angela put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Conner didn't wake, but he did calm.

"We'll be there in a few minutes." Marc was hoping she would share her plan.

Angela was glad she could do that now. "We have two directions to cover. The second group will come out when we reach the warehouse."

"Can you show me the layout? It would help me to know where everyone is and how they're defended."

“I’ll scan it as we arrive. How do you feel about killing the tracker?”

Marc shrugged. “I presumed we’d kill them all.”

“Even the women?”

Marc grunted. “Trackers are trackers.”

“The leader of the warehouse people is a woman named Dolly. She’s Donner’s daughter.”

Marc put her at the top of his list. “Description?”

“Bald except for a thin braid. She imagines she’s as good as Becky with her snare.”

“I’ll let the Eagles know.”

“I don’t think there will be time. The choice on her life and death will come to the three of us and we’ve already foreseen both you and Conner refusing to kill her.”

Marc had been thinking about that and come up with a solution. “Get her to threaten you. I won’t see anything else.”

Angela leaned her head against his arm. “That’s why she’s waiting here, Marc. I’m not allowed to get on that boat and neither are you.”

Marc tugged her closer. “We’ve never followed anyone else’s rules but our own.”

Angela smiled at the memories, no longer hurting over the past every time she looked back on it. “No, we didn’t. Thank you for that.”

“It’s my honor, baby. It’s my honor.”

“We’re a minute out.” Angela tensed. “We can’t drive through like I planned. They’re already outside waiting for us.”

“This truck won’t take a beach chase.” Marc watched Conner from the corner of his eye. The boy had sat up and was gathering energy.

“We’re not chasing.”

Marc waited for more. He assumed her curt tones came from Adrian being in danger.

Angela sighed.

“We’re no longer hiding things from each other, right?” Marc gave her a fast smile.

Angela began to check her gear. “I picked up a dozen trackers after the naval station. One of them is waiting ahead for us. We killed one during the fight with Dirce. One died in the west. The others are off my grid and that’s dangerous.”

“What am I searching for?” Marc steered around frames of cars that had burned in the war. Thick weeds were growing in the damp seats, telling him this area hadn’t seen much snow. That was a relief, but it was also a concern. Winter wasn’t over yet.

“Hatred. This family has been together for a long time. They’re hurting from losing a brother to us in the mountain fight. When I kill the woman waiting outside the warehouse door, others may show themselves.”

“I’ll be ready for it. William and Conner will shield you.”

“So will Jennifer and that leaves our entire camp open to a sucker punch.”

Marc realized her tension came from concern over the camp and felt ashamed. He'd presumed the worst again.

Angela was glad Marc's mental ups and downs were almost over. She didn't think she could take much more of it.

Marc drove them straight toward the woman standing in front of a line of hired killers preparing to fire on them. The trackers and refugees were thin and angry. Ribs showed under gaunt cheeks that framed dark eyes full of hatred. They weren't happy to discover Safe Haven healthy.

As they got closer, they could see the trackers were wearing stolen Eagle items they'd taken from Zack's team. Fury went through every man and woman who saw it.

Do it now!

Angela's order rang through the minds of everyone in the area.

Shawn pulled the trigger gently, lovingly.

The bullet sped through the air with a dull whine that was covered by the sounds of engines hurrying to catch up to the lead truck.

One of the men next to Dolly flew backwards into the sand.

Angela concentrated on shielding her convoy as trackers fired and Marc bounced over debris littered paths to reach the warehouse. She felt a bullet zoom by and thought of Adrian as the window shattered.
Hang on. It's almost over.

Marc's demon slid to the hood of the truck, leering at the trackers.

Angela's witch joined him when her host didn't protest the open display of magic.

The line of killers hesitated. They had no desire to confront Angela and the Ghost together.

Dolly stood her ground, heart pounding. Her gift was powerful, but the target had to be in range for it to succeed and even then, it wasn't perfect. Sometimes things backfired. That was why she'd been sent to this damp, sandy hell.

Marc split his grid into dots and monitored the movements.

Satisfied he had them covered from that angle, Angela allowed herself to watch the result of Shawn's next shot.

Dolly arched as the bullet slammed into her chest, back bowing. Blood squirted from the wound and then rushed from the exit. She slid to her knees in shock, gift now unimportant. Her snare was able to capture any male within five yards, but it was useless against a sniper.

Angela felt the danger recede as Marc brought the truck to a rough halt.

"You sent out a sniper detail. Again. And didn't tell anyone."

Angela got out of the truck and shut the door.

Marc sighed. *I don't know if I can do this.*

Kendle walked by Marc's side of the truck, not looking at him. She didn't need to. Entering his line of sight was an invitation and he knew it.

Kendle stalked toward Angela, determined to have it all over. Stripped of her gifts and respect, Kendle strode toward her death with a determined glare. She heard Marc open his door and quickly shut it before the wolf could get out.

I counted on that. Kendle ignored him, positive he wouldn't kill her unless she hurt Angela. *Can't do much like this unless I get lucky.* Kendle walked faster. *I'm not a threat.*

Footsteps thudded behind the two women as Eagles jumped out of vehicles and ran to catch up to the fight. The trackers who'd survived Shawn's attack were now trapped between Angela and the coming Eagles, and the ocean.

Shawn began to climb from the tree where they'd been hiding for hours. Strapped to his back, Missy was barely awake despite the action. Until the last hour, she'd kept him alert with light chatter, but that had been the extent of the help. Shawn hadn't minded. It was easier to concentrate when he knew she was safe, and she had kept his back warm.

"I saw something move." Missy pointed. "Over there."

Shawn used his glasses to view the alley of the suburban town. A line of vehicles flying toward them made his heart pound. He could only see them because of his position. The sound was covered by Safe Haven vehicles, gunshots, and the roar of the ocean that had increased since they arrived.

Shawn hit his radio. "Flank! Flank!"

"Behind us!"

Shawn and Missy's cries brought the closest descendants and Eagles who caught it, leaving the center of the camp unsheltered except for Angela's shield.

2

"Don't do it!"

Marc's panic brought Angela around with her gun coming up in a smooth blur that told her men she'd been practicing with her left.

Kendle lifted her gun so everyone would understand what she was doing. She had no hopes of shooting Angela before Angela shot her.

"Look out!" Jennifer screamed it aloud and mentally, but it was too late to avoid the men who came from the warehouse. She sent energy into the barrier, aware of Angela's distraction. She didn't think Kendle would win, but if Angela's attention was pulled away, the castaway might get lucky. They had a group of twenty killers coming up behind Angela, and Marc was only focused on Kendle and her death march. *How did we lose control so fast?*

Ivan and the Eagles reached Angela at the same time as the killers from the warehouse. The groups began to fight.

Jennifer lost sight of Angela.

Kendle shifted her gun, aiming...

The group on the flank of the shield began throwing powerful blasts of fire and wind, trying to find a weakness. The four trackers wanted in.

Marc lunged, stretching...

Shawn fired through the shield, hitting a tracker. Missy held tight to the tree, like Shawn needed her to do to balance them.

Angela dropped the shield as Marc landed on Kendle, knocking the gun from her hand.

The trackers were mixed with refugee fighters, some of whom had been chasing Safe Haven for months. Angela even recognized one of them from the mountain battle. *You screwed up that second chance by coming here.* Angela fired.

Near her, Kyle grappled with a tracker, feeling the man trying to tinker with his mind. Kyle used Jennifer's training and closed the wall as he kicked out and caught the man in the ankle, snapping it. He turned from the scream, firing without looking.

The noise stopped.

Kyle swept the fighting, seeing Jennifer was helping Angela's shield stay fueled, with Greg watching over her. Kyle signaled a second guard to help Charlie, who was nearby and had been forbidden from using magic like everyone else. The only fighting they were all doing was hand-to-hand. Kyle was positive that was about to change. Angela was shooting her way to the warehouse wall now. She'd spotted the bodies of her men, of their fellow camp members and patriots.

Fury washed over the area, scaring the more timid fighters. There weren't as many as the Eagles had first thought. Only drivers had jumped from all those vehicles, bringing relief. They'd been expecting it to be like the naval station.

Shawn climbed from the tree, almost out of ammunition. He ducked under a swipe from a wounded tracker and fired into the man's gut. He kept moving, getting away from the edges of the shield. He led Missy toward the medical camper, firing into the wounded as they went. He had no mercy to give these men. He'd known about the warehouse group, but those waiting just out of sight had to have been there for a full day. They'd beaten him to the punch and almost disrupted a perfect setup. Shawn was angry.

Missy kept a hand curled around his wrist like he'd told her, flinching each time he fired but not hesitating to stay with him through the fighting. Shawn was hers now. He would always keep her safe.

Shawn waited for her to climb in and shut the door without answering any of Samantha's questions. He placed his back to the door and reloaded, eyes lifting every few seconds to search for close threats or Eagles in trouble.

Charlie jerked away from the hold of a refugee as Wade shot him. He put his back to Conner and waited for the next person to attack. He was

mourning not being allowed to use his gifts and again cursing himself for not training harder.

Conner fired his last bullet and dropped the gun as the man dove at him.

Charlie kicked the man in the ribs as they rolled by him.

Wade fired a fast shot to the refugee's head and went back to scanning.

Charlie helped Conner up, ears ringing. He'd missed the fighting at the naval station. If it had been like this, he was glad.

Wade snorted. "This is a walk in the park compared to that, kid. You should scan the memories sometimes instead of bitching about being kept below."

Two refugees ran at the trio, ending a snotty reply. Charlie shoved the man off him, feeling an injury. He stood up and found a knife sticking out of his arm.

Wade fired and reloaded, nudging the paling teenager toward the camper. "You're bleeding. You're out."

Charlie was startled into a shocked laugh as Conner shoved him to the door of the camper.

Samantha pulled him inside, grimacing at the sight. "Sit over there and close your eyes. This will hurt."

Charlie shivered. "It already hurts."

Samantha nodded, listening to the shouts and steps now making it to the rear of the camper. "Why aren't you crying or whining? I would be."

The teenager grinned at her. “New gift. No pain.”

Samantha shrugged, taking a hold of the knife. “Let’s see how strong it is.” She jerked.

Charlie screamed.

“She got the blade out.” Conner kept his back to Wade’s like he’d been trained.

Wade grunted, firing his last round “Always hurts more coming out.”

Conner threw his knife, hitting a man about to jump on the medical camper.

Neil saw it and jogged over to join them for the needed three-man sentry team there.

Conner and Wade were glad to have him. The trio was able to spread out now and use their remaining weapons to clear a side of the fighting.

3

“Should we go out and help?” Brittani joined Daryl and the other Eagles by the doors to the camp semi. The reinforced walls had suffered pings and dings, but so far, nothing had come through. They were all scared of that. Tonya and the other women were keeping the camp and kids calm, but Brittani needed to help or be held, and Gus wasn’t in here.

Daryl felt it. Against his better judgement, he clasped her hand in the darkness and tried not to act like it was the sweetest thing he’d ever felt. Her needing him was something he would now crave.

Brittani took a deep breath, listening, feeling, berating herself, but she didn't let go of Daryl's hand. They both knew right then if something happened, they would stay together and keep each other alive.

Outside the semi, Gus felt it. His bond with her was weakening. He took his anger out on the few refugees still trying to kill them.

The camp stayed in their vehicles, aware of Eagles drawing the fights away from them. Doors were already locked and guards inside the cars were ready to fire on anyone who tried to enter.

"I don't think they have more ammunition."

Angela didn't hear Ray's call. She was busy taking the lifeforce of Dolly's partner. The woman was struggling hard to keep it, but Angela ripped it free and inhaled, energy banks refilling.

Next to her, Marc did the same to the cousin of the couple, thinking Donner was gone for good now. Marc inhaled, growling at the pain as his strength increased.

Angela didn't have time to explain as he regarded her in confusion. "Battlefield promotion!"

Marc cackled over the screams and roar of the water.

"Are they enjoying this?" Gus was horrified.

The truck door opened. Daryl and the other Eagles came out and took up defensive positions around the semi.

Brittani slipped out of the truck, nodding at Gus. "Can't you feel it? This is what they're good at."

Gus looked away from the lifeforces being taken. “It’s wrong.”

Brittani ignored his complaint in favor of watching. *Next time, I’ll be out there with them.*

Gus also observed, but not in admiration. He wasn’t sure he could do any of it.

4

“Something went wrong.” Adrian shoved to his feet, aware of Zack’s cold body at his boots. He’d done everything he could for the man.

The exhausted, wet team with him also stood, checking weapons. They had ammunition, but as soon as they went out, they would be picked off before they could aim and fire. Their captors were camped out of sight of the window, in the lea.

Adrian jerked the door open, able to feel Angela’s need for him to be there. “I surrender.” He tossed his weapon at the feet of the tracker who was standing at the corner of the shed with a shotgun. The demons had left hours ago, drained from standing watch. As soon as they’d left, men had come from the warehouse like they’d been waiting for it. There hadn’t been time to move again.

The big man nodded. “Wise. Your friends are dead. That’s what you’re hearing. We own your camp and people now, Mr. Mitchel.”

Adrian held his hands out. “Just get me over there so I can stop the bloodshed!”

The tracker came forward and grabbed Adrian, jerking him to the truck as his men went inside the shed to get the others who were standing there in shock at Adrian's action. "There isn't any stopping it now. Blood will soak into this ground and wash away your stink."

Another fanatic. Adrian shook his head. Dropping into the damp seat. *As if the world needed more.*

5

William gaped at the chaos. Three minutes ago, things had been perfectly calm, but now there was movement in every direction and screams were filling his ears. He had never been in a situation where things had gone wrong so fast. He was shocked that Angela hadn't warned her people. She and Marc were in the fight by the warehouse and her camp was defenseless...

William realized he was being unfair as more Eagles rushed out of vehicles to confront the threats. Descendants in the convoy were adding strength to Angela's shield. William presumed that was because they hadn't been given instructions, but he wasn't sure. Some of them were firing. Bullets were making it out of the shield, but none came in.

William spun around as a hand settled on his shoulder. He barely kept from hitting Grant.

On Grant's right, Ray snickered.

Grant caught William's arm and led the man toward a safer place. Ciemus's powerful leader hadn't joined in the fight yet. Grant didn't know if it was needed, but he felt better having his former boss inside a truck where he would be sheltered. Unlike William, Grant saw a reasonably organized defense where the leaders took out the most important threats in the front and everyone else covered the sides and rear. With a convoy this long, Grant wasn't certain there was any other way to handle it.

"What should I do?" William was eager to help.

"Just observe, both of you." Ray pointed at the vehicle. "We have it covered."

Grant would have argued, but he sensed William was also about to demand a chance to fight. To prevent that, Grant climbed into the truck behind William and closed the door. He distracted them both by pointing out the things he was positive William had missed. Never being in the thick of battle was a detriment in the apocalypse, but William would learn from his time with Safe Haven.

Ray stood outside the door, rotating to keep track of the various fights going on around them. So far, their citizens were staying inside the vehicles and waiting for it to be over, while Angela and the Eagles battled it out like usual.

Grant rolled the window down half way. "Why did she want William sheltered?" He was figuring how Angela's mind functioned, hoping he could fit

in and be of use. So far, it looked like she didn't need the help.

Ray chuckled. "She asked me to make sure he didn't fight. There was never a sense of him being in danger."

William sulked. "I would have helped."

Grant pointed to the Eagles securing a line of firepower at the rear of the convoy. "Just watch. It's beautiful." Grant turned to Ray. "Who taught you guys that? It wasn't her. She's not military."

Ray was impressed Grant knew. Most people assumed she was.

Grant smiled. "We know our own. Angela's good, but she doesn't have this level of training to pass on. Who did it come from?"

Ray pointed at the truck flying across the beach to reach the fighting. "Him."

Adrian threw himself from the truck as soon as it stopped, rolling to gain his feet in a neat move the Eagles admired. It was nice to know he could still do the moves he'd taught them.

Adrian scanned. *Angie!*

The trackers ran up behind Adrian and clubbed him on the back of the head, shouting orders, pointing guns.

Angela rotated that way.

Fighting slowed as her power crackled over the scene, alerting the descendants to something new happening.

Adrian recovered quicker than the tracker expected, rising from his knees in a quick jerk. He

nailed one man in the chin with the top of his pounding head and staggered backward, turning to confront the next one.

Power flew across the beach.

Lightning struck the warehouse, sending sparks that grabbed onto surfaces and grew into flames.

The ocean roared, sending sprays over the shore in displeasure at the violence.

Angela tossed another ball of hatred, letting the magic pick its own evil target.

Trackers and refugees screamed as they caught fire on the inside and began to melt.

Eagles backed away from her path, but the enemy wasn't as wise. Those who didn't shoot at her stared instead of running while the shield was down. Angela fired again, body jerking from the strength of her rage. She immediately felt an unwanted bond with Kendle.

Flames raced in a dual path toward the warehouse fighters who were using the burning building as cover to pick off anyone they could. The fire circled around to meet in front of the men and women who had no where left to run but the ocean. As they fled, the fire leapt up and spread out into two streams of heat that melted them at the water's edge.

Energy crackled again as Angela drew from the fear in the air and prepared to fire again.

Now people ran.

The Eagles monitored their crossfire and picked the attackers off with instinctive reflexes as they observed Angela walking across the beach.

Everyone realized their fight was useless. The only thing that would matter was happening now, out of their reach.

Adrian felt death approaching. Before he could make the choice on which one would be best for Safe Haven, Angela came through the crowd of struggling men. Encased in the fire barrier, sand flew up from her heels at the hard impacts as she merged with her witch, leaving fiery prints in the sand.

The rest of the fighting stopped.

Marc and the Eagles quickly secured distracted trackers and refugees with bullets.

Angela stopped a few feet from Adrian, who had been shoved to his knees and now had one gun pointing at his head and another against his back. It was a simple matter to kill the two men holding him, but there was an instant of indecision about it anyway. If she aimed wrong, he would be killed too. *Is that supposed to happen now? Because I won't allow it!* Angela sent a blast of force that had no warning, knocking all three men backward into the sand. Another flip of her finger saw guns spinning through the air.

Completely unarmed now and dazed, the two trackers tried to scramble away while Adrian recovered from the blast. Without a shield up, he had taken it full strength with the other two, but in

his weakened condition and his weak heart, he was feeling it more than they had.

Angered by that thought, Angela sent out another blast targeting the two men now gaining their feet.

Many of the Eagles looked away as the two men were hammered into the ground.

Blood and gore splattered across the wet sand.

Angela turned toward Marc without looking at Adrian.

Marc was there to put an arm around her shoulders and lead her back toward the convoy. He didn't look at Adrian either, but it was impossible to hide his disappointment. For another brief second, he'd thought that man was gone from their lives.

Angela shrugged off Marc's arm and went to the truck occupied by William and Grant.

Marc realized there wasn't room for him in the vehicle and hung onto her door as Grant took the truck to where she pointed and Ray guarded her door with his gun in hand, hanging from the other side.

All around them, gunshots were still ringing out. The refugees and trackers who hadn't run as soon as Angela became a firewalker were now being eliminated. For whatever reason, they had assumed they would be spared after the fight was over.

Big mistake. Samantha was watching from the camper window. She'd caught William's thoughts about Angela not warning them, but he didn't

understand. Safe Haven had been going through this so much that they spent all their time assuming they were going to be under attack at any point. There hadn't been a reason for her to warn them, because they knew the odds of it happening upon arrival were a lot higher than the odds against it.

The Eagles had hoped the threat wouldn't be large, considering how many refugees had died at the naval station, and it hadn't been. Less than four dozen bodies were around the convoy. Even without the descendants, Eagles could have handled this. Their enemies were finally weakening in number.

Neil entered the camper and rubbed Samantha's warm shoulders. "How are you?"

Samantha gave a small shrug. "Fine until I move."

Angela had made it clear that until they were on the boat and out of these bumpy cars, her labor wasn't likely to stop. At some point, it could go too far, and she would lose both babies. Neil was taking steps now to make sure Samantha rested whether she wanted to or not.

"If Jeremy were here, he'd help you with that."

Neil nodded. "Who says he isn't? I can almost feel him looking over my shoulder, nagging."

Samantha snickered, glad they were able to have a good moment even though Jeremy had been ripped from their lives so horribly. "He would have, wouldn't he?"

Neil gave Samantha a hug and then went to pull the camper in line with the other vehicles. In the

next few minutes, Angela would direct someone to get camp set up and then they would go searching for the boat. Neil didn't need to be able to read minds to know what came next in this situation. The sooner they secured the ship and got the hell out of here, the better.

After he shifted into park, Neil went back to Sam. "Do I need to put a guard on you right now?"

Samantha didn't take offense, understanding he was trying to protect her and the children. "No."

Samantha wasn't a liar, so Neil believed her. He kissed her cheek, assigned a sentry anyway, then hurried off to help with the normal chores.

Around them, other Eagles and camp members did the same. After their long break in Ciemus, these two days of travel had almost been rougher on them than the entire week before. In that short time, they had softened a little.

Conveniences and amenities, Samantha thought, watching the beautiful symphony play out. Despite being in an unknown area and not receiving orders yet, everyone was doing their job. It took Samantha another minute of listening for the boss and not hearing her to figure out Angela really wasn't going to give orders. Only time would tell how things would go for them from here, but Samantha believed they would be fine. They were strong, they were smart, and they had an amazing leader who would walk through fire to ensure their safety. They just had to keep her alive.

6

Adrian saw medics hurrying toward the shack and hoped they would be able to help Zack and the others. He wasn't positive they were still alive. The trackers had left the wounded men without a second thought. That wasn't a good sign.

The rest of Adrian's boat team followed the medics, under orders from Kyle.

Ivan walked by Adrian, stringing up the yellow tape the camp was known for. "Step back, please."

Adrian realized he was on the outside of the perimeter and went in the opposite direction. His banishment was still in effect. *I shouldn't be here.*

"Hang on!" Kenn jogged over to the tape. "Take this."

Adrian caught the kit Kenn tossed, aware of dirty looks being cast at both of them. He nodded his thanks and left.

Kenn ignored Ivan's glower, chin going up. He would have done it even without Angela's silent request. She hadn't been able to stand seeing Adrian so thin. Neither could Kenn.

Kenn went toward the radio truck where he was stationed until relieved. He didn't know when that would be yet, but he wasn't in a hurry to get to the next thing. He was glad to be done with the land travel, though. A boat ride sounded perfect.

Kenn tripped over something sticking from the sand and went face first in the damp grit.

People who saw it chortled, sending good vibes across the camp.

Kenn shoved himself up, groaning at a pinch in his shoulder. He looked over to see what had tripped him.

An arm was laying there.

I thought she got out of the way. Kenn started digging.

Kendle was unconscious. Marc's blow had been stronger than needed to put her out of commission.

Kenn slid the woman into his arms and then over his good shoulder. He sympathized with the castaway, though he didn't trust her, and he agreed with Jennifer removing her gifts. He knew what it was like to lust over someone or something you couldn't have until it almost drove you nuts. He'd been able to pull back from that edge. Kendle hadn't.

Kenn took her to the medical camper, where Morgan was starting to treat their injured while Samantha pouted on a corner stool about not being allowed to help. Kenn dropped Kendle on the first empty bunk and gestured at the glass case on the wall of the camper. Marc had insisted all drugs be locked up. "Keep her out for a while."

Morgan nodded, going to get what he needed. He was one of the few people with a key. "I'll do that first."

Satisfied the senior Eagle also knew what to do if Kendle became a problem, Kenn went to the radio truck and slid into the driver seat. It was time to

check the waves and make sure all was calm in their world now.

Silence.

Static.

More silence.

Kenn kept flipping through the channels, happy with those. It meant the refugees here hadn't thought to put out a call.

On point for setup, Jennifer was disappointed that Kenn had helped Kendle. She'd hoped the woman hadn't survived Marc's vicious shove into the middle of the battle. Most people would perceive it as him trying to save her from herself, to stop her from shooting at Angela, but Jennifer had caught his thought as he shoved the woman. Marc wanted her dead. There would never be a relationship between them now. Kendle had crossed the line and shown herself an open threat to his soulmate. That would never be forgiven.

No, it won't, Angela confirmed happily as she evaluated the scene for what came next. *He's mine and I'll do whatever it takes to keep him—even have him kill Kendle by cutting her tongue out and letting her bleed to death. If I want it, I'll make it happen.* Angela had learned that lesson well since the war. Those who could take something and keep it, got to have it and enjoy it. Everyone else was screwed. Angela sent Jennifer a coded order.

Jennifer brought up the camp shield, amazed at how easy it was now. The fight at the naval station had increased her strength. The cocky teenager

swept the perimeter outside the shield, unable to help the grin. “Eagles rock!”

Standing watch over the camp vehicles until the all clear was called, Kyle nodded and shared her triumph. *This is how it's supposed to be.*

Jennifer laughed, sending good vibes straight into the shield. Calmer colors swirled, telling everyone the battle for the shore was over.

Chapter Eleven
Being Driven

1

“**T**ake them down.” Quinn was supervising the removal of their men from the warehouse wall. Fury and fear burned in his heart. He’d wanted to come with Zack. It could have been his body hanging here.

Eagles helped hold the weight as Tommy and Ozzie pried railroad spikes from Carl and Dexter. Flesh came with them.

The mood was dangerous.

Angela stood behind them, holding in her misery this time. She’d known some of Zack’s team wouldn’t make it back, but she hadn’t been able to see who.

Happy shouting echoed, seeming wrong to the laboring men. Now that the fighting was over, people were noticing the ocean. The Eagles already had. They were trained to enjoy things after duty was done, but the camp wanted to go explore it now. The Eagles made them wait until the area had been cleared. Their surroundings were vastly different from their usual camping places. Instead of weeds, trees, and houses, there was sand, a few shacks along the sand, and an ocean that hadn’t stopped

roaring since they'd begun to spill blood on the beach. Birds were even flying in the distance, though many of the camp wasn't thrilled about that discovery. Like Kenn, they remembered the flock of gulls that had come down to greet them in the west.

Ray and Pam came by with a stretcher. They had no trouble carrying it. Zack had lost a lot of weight.

Angela went to them as Zack held up a hand.

The carriers paused to let them communicate. It gave the Eagles time to scan the camp and verify that people were safe. Ray and Pam had both come to the conclusion they were alive because of Adrian and Angela. They'd discussed it and agreed they wanted Safe Haven under dual leadership.

Angela took Zack's hand, smiling at him.

Zack grimaced. "I don't deserve that."

Angela placed her other hand on his forehead and sent a weak blast of her remaining energy. "Yes, you do. Consider it a second chance."

Zack breathed out tears. "Thank you."

"It's not absolution!" Angela's voice was sharp. "I can't give you that. All I can do is tell you the past no longer matters to me when we set sail. Don't screw that up."

Zack kept crying as they carried him to the medical camper to join Charlie, who was getting stitches from Neil.

Angela's pain lashed at her. She rotated toward the kids in the semi.

Stop.

Angela stopped.

Turn around.

Angela shook her head.

Adrian sighed. He'd almost made it out of sight before Marc had called him back to give her energy. *It's almost over now, baby. Turn around and let me give him what he wants.*

It won't work.

I know. Turn around.

Marc watched as Angela turned toward Adrian. A bright light shot out of his hand.

Angela arched as his healing energy hit her, arms opening to him in front of everyone.

Marc's stomach dropped.

Unease filled the shield.

Adrian withdrew. He turned and left. He would spend the night guarding the shoreline by the ship, but he wouldn't go to the boat itself until Angela did. He had no right to see it first.

"All clear!"

Angela barely kept herself from following Adrian. She waved at Eagles instead. "Let them out!"

People ran from vehicles to bathroom tents, stepping over and around the messes.

Kyle had drafted a crew to bury those spots. He came to her now. "Camp is up. Bodies are being removed or buried, and we'll have full perimeter security any minute. Eagles will have a short, private service at midnight for our fallen men."

Kyle easily kept up with Angela's fast steps through the damp sand. "Ivan and James are on it."

"What about injured?"

"Other than Zack's team, we have no injuries."

Angela knew he meant no serious injuries. They had plenty of minor issues.

"I want us ready to leave in five. Quinn has point." Angela hadn't planned to go to the ship until morning, but she couldn't wait. She had to know it was there; she had to see it with her own eyes.

Kyle motioned.

Quinn stared in surprise. "Really? Awesome!"

Kyle rolled his eyes and did a quick evaluation. People were setting up the main areas. Animals were being unloaded, vehicles were being parked, sentries were standing watch with holstered weapons, and the mood was light despite the death around them. They'd gotten used to this part of the struggle. "Do you have a list of who..." Kyle took the paper she handed him.

He glanced at it and stiffened. "I'll have them ready." He strode away.

Angela waved at Marc. "Let's get loaded up."

Marc assumed Kyle was angry because of the names on the list. Marc hadn't seen it, but he planned to keep his mouth shut no matter who she did or didn't want along. He led her to a truck that he knew still had fuel. He didn't look for Adrian.

Angela did. His magic was swarming through her heart, pulling at her. She looked over her shoulder, but he was gone.

Angela forced a smile and signaled at the assembling team she'd chosen. "Let's go! It's time to see our ship!"

A minute later, the truck was full. Angela slapped the dash.

The truck rolled out.

Ten of them had come for this fast check to be positive the boat was here. Angela had chosen it based on team leaders and the council. All of them were one or the other, except for Grant, Cole, and Travis. Kyle had been furious because Jennifer had been brought along and he hadn't. Angela planned to explain later that she didn't feel good about leaving Quinn in charge alone. With Kyle there, her camp would be covered.

"I'll tell him." Jennifer was in the rear with Samantha and Neil. If there was trouble, Neil would protect Samantha, and Jennifer would protect them both. "Are you okay?"

Samantha nodded, cheeks red at being in Neil's arms, but there was no denying he rode better than the seat. "I wanted to see it too."

Jennifer smiled. "Kyle will get over it."

Ivan drove across the front yard of a little snack shack that only had two walls remaining. Wrapped items were scattered through the debris piles, telling them people hadn't come through here since it had all gone to hell. The Eagles were relieved.

"I see someone." Ivan pointed.

Marc sighed. He didn't need to see Angela's list to know there was someone missing from it. "Pull over."

Ivan frowned at Marc's order, but he obeyed when Angela didn't correct it. He slowed by the man walking down the small road that Safe Haven had come over to reach the shore. The next street would lead them to the boat site she'd marked on the map.

Marc opened the door and slammed Adrian in the shoulder with it.

Expecting words, Adrian fell to the ground and barely missed being run over.

"Get in the back."

Adrian pushed up and did as Marc ordered, mind full of ugly thoughts. One day, the wolfman would go too far and it would end with both of their deaths.

"But not today." Angela settled her men down. She nodded at Ivan to get them rolling. "Today, we see the ship that's going to take us away from here for the next four years."

Silence fell as they contemplated how short of a time that was, but also how long. There was a lot they could accomplish with four years of peace.

Marc directed Ivan to drive along the beach.

Ivan shrugged. He hadn't thought Angela wanted to be bounced, so he was going slow.

"I've been waiting for this moment for eight months." Angela flashed a real smile. "You can't get me there fast enough."

Ivan chuckled and hit the gas.

Adrian clutched the truck bed and avoided the glares of the Eagles around him. He was shocked to be here and not stupid enough to ask why. He rubbed his aching shoulder and kept his mouth shut.

“Is that it?” Kenn was also thrilled to be along. Kyle had sent Shawn to watch the radio in his place.

Grant shook his head. “That’s a yacht.”

Cole laughed. “You’re looking for somethin’ a wee bit bigger.”

Kenn frowned at the second captain, not liking the man being so close to Angela even though he’d been scanned by all the descendants. Kenn tried to spot a larger boat, but scraggily trees were blocking the view.

“Left.” Angela was searching for problems trying to sneak up on them. She wanted to have this moment before things went nuts again. She’d more than earned it. They all had.

“Left again.” Angela was on the edge of her seat, literally. She’d glimpsed this moment during her first meeting with Adrian. When the ground shook, she’d shared this vision with him. It was the main reason she’d agreed to the awful charade. The boat was hope in the darkness, light in the midst of terror. Without it, she had little reason to go on.

Adrian and Marc both frowned. They’d thought their love and the love of her children were what had carried her through.

Angela snorted. “It is, but what good does it do to have those lives if you never get to live them?”

We'll never have that peace here. They won't grow older or have kids of their own. We'll all die. That boat is the only thing between America and extinction."

"For the world." Adrian kept his voice down so it wouldn't offend Marc. "A lot of us are getting on ships and leaving our homelands. We're being called."

"We're being driven." Like Adrian, Marc had been having dreams of the other countries he'd been in during his service, the people he'd had contact with. Land masses with huge populations before the war had been decimated, but not to extinction levels. The eleven month aftermath had taken care of that. Now, the few survivors were killing each other off as fast as they could. Anyone who stayed would die.

"There." Angela's joy filled the cabin until the men were sharing her tears. It was impossible not to. Her happiness was an indescribable light that swirled over them and stole their hearts. Any of the men with her would have killed or died at that moment, on her word.

Hitting them hard, aren't you? The witch was tired of the drama and didn't want more.

I'm rewarding them while enjoying the moment. Why do you have to ruin everything?

Because they all trust you now.

Marc doesn't.

He tried to get rid of her. That's proof of his loyalty.

You said trust. I know he's loyal.

The two go hand in hand.

He'll come around. In the meantime, feel that ocean breeze. Smell the salt and the fish. It is freedom calling out for those brave enough to take the risk.

And win, the witch added.

Angela nodded. Yes. It's another challenge to be survived. Underestimating the ocean isn't on my list.

Good, because I can hear it. The water doesn't want us.

No, but the seas are not controlled by nature alone. The ocean belongs to the land beneath them—to the dirt that shifts them and the tides that keep them alive. The odds go up the minute we sail off into the sunset.

“Will we get to?” Marc was keeping track of their surroundings and the conversation between Angela and her witch.

“Oh, yes. In seven days, we'll be watching America fade into the distance.” Her happiness fell. “And then we won't see her again for more than a thousand nights. Enjoy the feel of her under your feet right now, the taste of her in your lungs. It'll be all we'll have to hold us through when homesickness tries to cripple our decisions and bring us back early.”

“Will people be able to leave the island once we get there?” Marc had been wondering about her rules for that.

“Yes, but not with our ships or our supplies. Make that clear. They also won’t be allowed to cut the island trees to make their own boats. If they go, tell them to plan for the long haul. We’re not coming home until the odds on survival are at a level I can stomach.”

“Four years.”

“Yes.” Angela swallowed her misery. “Stop here.”

Eagles frowned, realizing she wanted to walk the rest of the way.

Marc had been expecting it. The UN truck they’d chosen to bring was loud and she was a good leader. While they went to the beach, any strangers would come here, where they would find the vehicle and Ivan. Marc motioned him to stay.

Angela gave Ivan a sharp look when he would have protested. Even Dog delivered a snort as he leapt from the floorboard to the ground. The wolf stayed at Angela’s side as she walked to the beach path that was mostly buried. No one had swept it in eleven months.

Angela felt the sand give beneath her boots and sank to the platform underneath. The instant she made contact with the rotting wood, that ugly sense of horror she’d been carrying for her camp left. A smile of relief came to her lips, allowing her guards to relax. They assumed she’d spotted the boat, but Angela had just come through a barrier and was able to recognize it. This area was special, sheltered. She didn’t sense people or animals, nothing threatening.

It was amazing after so long. She hadn't thought to experience this emotional release until they sailed away and maybe not even then. She didn't imagine the ocean would be easy to cross, only easier than the land they'd already come over.

Marc signaled Ray and Wade to stay with Ivan, and then turned to Adrian.

Adrian had stayed in the truck, assuming he was also here as a guard.

"You are. Get up there."

Adrian's mouth dropped open.

Marc spun away before he could change his mind. This was a big moment for all of them, but Adrian had started Safe Haven's trek and Angela had finished it. They deserved to have this moment and Marc wasn't so bitter that he couldn't tolerate it. *I'm not Kandle.*

Adrian's joy washed over them all in waves as he ran to catch up.

Marc shook his head at the frowns from her escort, waving the men and women to join him instead. "Give them a minute."

Angela reached the end of the path and stepped onto the sandy shore. She heard steps hurrying up to her but didn't turn. This was the first time she'd ever been to an ocean.

The pictures and videos didn't do it justice. Angela was aware of a man's hand taking her arm to help her over debris as she made her way to the foamy water. Salt spray flew at her on the wind, bringing a sound of delight from her throat.

Adrian stared, drawn by her reaction. He wasn't certain he'd ever heard that level of happiness from her.

Marc wasn't either. He and the others stayed a few yards behind the pair, watching for problems. Marc knew Angela was distracted by the ocean right now and Adrian was, as usual, distracted by her.

I'm not, though. You charged me with her safety. I don't take that lightly.

Just don't get blinded when she touches the water or steps onto the pier. She's vulnerable then and from more than a physical attack.

Adrian understood Marc meant hidden trackers, but he hadn't hit the beach path yet.

"Is it always this loud?" Neil couldn't hear their camp from here, though they were less than a mile away. The wind was coming in off the water, carrying the sounds of liquid and little else.

Grant nodded. "It's a lot of water. When it sloshes, you hear it."

"Will that be better or worse when we sail?" Kenn hadn't considered the noise either. Eagles were trained to listen. This would make that harder.

"Like any other situation, we'll adjust." Marc unfastened his old coat as his body registered the warmer wind and temperature. He missed his Eagle jacket, though he would never admit it. "At some point, we'll long for this sound."

Marc stepped onto the wooden platform that was now partially uncovered from feet disturbing

the sand. A sense of wellbeing and calm settled over his shoulders. “Wow. That’s...”

Angela sighed, feeling Marc’s mood shift. “Amazing.”

Marc had time to wonder why he hadn’t been able to sense Adrian’s mood improve upon hitting the path and then a bubble enveloped him, shutting down his grid. He could hear the thoughts around him, but he couldn’t track them.

“I’ll explain it later.” Adrian didn’t want to be distracted. That conversation would pull him out of the present and send them all to the past.

Angela entered the water.

The sky darkened. The wind increased, and the calm sea began to send rough breakers toward her boots.

“Odd.” Cole was trundling along behind Marc and the Eagles. “Never seen that before.”

Grant gestured the captain to be quiet. An ominous wind was rising from the water, pushing toward them like a hunter scenting prey.

This isn’t going to be good. Marc looked at Adrian. *Hang on to her.*

Adrian’s grip on Angela’s arm tightened as the feel of evil grew. There was a problem here.

Angela put her other boot into the water.

A wave rose and sped toward her. As it traveled, it resembled a ghost with a thorny crown.

“The Spirit of Nature.” Kenn was stunned.

“Not nature.” Adrian watched in delighted fear. “The water that runs through this planet has its own

essence, its own goals and drives. Nature doesn't control anything in the water. She can only direct it through the land."

Flying along the top of the water, the wave grew in size and rage, screaming.

When Adrian did nothing, Marc shoved by him to get in front of her.

The wave hit Marc and drenched him in salt water that immediately began to freeze.

Marc struggled against the icy barrier, chest heavy. He couldn't break it.

A new wave formed at the end of the battered dock, swelling as it rushed toward them.

Angela didn't move or react, so her other men didn't either. Marc tried to catch his breath through the ice.

The water broke over their heads in liquid that ran along their bodies in cold splashes and sprays to freeze them in place. Only Angela and Adrian weren't encased in crystals as the drenching wave receded. Ice formed on their boots and legs though, rushing upward at an alarming rate.

Eagles tried to retreat, but they found themselves locked into place.

"The next one will be ugly. You'll feel like you can't breathe." Angela pointed at shapes coming toward them. "This is a water shield. It's icy because you fear it. Ice is heavy and hard to breathe through. Try to relax."

The worried men watched the shark swim closer, unable to see a shield over Angela.

Angela let a flash of her hidden panic show, revealing the ice bubble. “Kendle and John should be here. We don’t have all seven.”

“It’ll be enough.” Adrian hoped he was right. “John is always with us. Marc is connected to Kendle. We’re all here.”

Satisfied it was as close as she could get, Angela lifted a freezing hand. “Safe Haven wishes to cross. Please grant us passage.”

Another wave swelled at the end of the dock, but it was full of sea creatures focusing on the human threats with hunger.

“We are not your enemy. We represent the light.”

The wave swelled to twice the size of the last, flying toward them.

Angela lifted her other hand. “I have asked for safe passage. Grant it and I will give a pledge.”

You lie! The wave roared closer.

“I do not!” Angela sent power into her mental doors, using gifts she hadn’t before because there wasn’t a need. She whipped the wind around, forcing it against the wave. “I will give you one lifeforce. Mine.”

Angela sent more power, using her rage as the men denied her choice. “When my death comes, I promise it to the water.”

Who are you?!

Angela felt the water sink in to her for an answer. She let it, allowing the verification.

She’s the one!

We've been waiting for her!

Safe Haven.

The ocean stilled.

The wind dropped.

Ice melted, freeing everyone.

The creatures paused, then swam back out to deeper water.

Angela sighed in relief. The water would be a faster, easier death than any nature or man had planned for her.

“A deal has been made,” Adrian intoned. “We’ve been granted safe passage.”

Angela marched back to land, deal made.

Adrian followed without looking at Marc. He’d known what the price for crossing was, but he’d thought Angela would offer up one of her enemies. He’d only scribbled a single note on this part of the journey. He was surprised she’d understood how powerful the choice would be.

“I didn’t at first. I just refuse to give nature the satisfaction of my lifeforce when the end comes. She doesn’t deserve to absorb my power.”

“And the water does?” Marc tried not to shiver from being soaked. The wind had returned, though not as forcefully.

“Yes. The ocean has been abused for centuries. My energy may speed up recovery and bring back some of the aquatic life that was devastated in the war.”

Marc liked the answer. He was also relieved to know her death wasn’t coming now. As for getting

to pick how she would go, Marc approved. It was much better than the cloud he'd been living under.

Angela strode down the beach, where the water stayed back from her boots even though it should have covered her each time it rushed in.

“It won't take her whenever it wants, right? Like as soon as we set sail?” Kenn didn't like the lack of details in the contract.

“The water can't take her from fate.” Adrian was still staring at the boat. “It can only claim her when that moment comes.”

The men were partially relieved.

Now that the water had calmed, they could see layers of rotting debris under the surface. It was hard to tell if it had been blown there during storms or washed there from other lands. It was also impossible to tell what it had all been. The piles were melded together and leaking into the water as they decomposed.

“There it is.” Marc pointed, staggering through the damp sand to catch up to Angela, who had left them yards behind in her eagerness.

She'd spotted the boat before stepping into the water, but it would have been disrespectful not to acknowledge the ocean first.

Marc caught up. “How do you know these things? William doesn't. I've scanned his thoughts on the ocean. He's scared of water.”

“This water.” Adrian stayed on Angela's other side. “The water that runs through Ciemus protects them. He fishes and swims in it.”

“The ocean is too large for all of it to be safe.” Angela slowed to let the rest of the team catch up. “Only our route will be honored. If we leave that path, we’ll fail. Or sink.”

“We’ll be careful of our choices.” Marc hoped that was true.

Adrian thought of the blue and red path in the nightmares they’d shared. He shivered. Everything was coming true.

Angela gave him a subtle nod.

Adrian dropped his head and scrutinized the wet sand. *We’ll need platforms for loading.* He distracted himself from those memories. *We can’t walk over this while carrying things. Too dangerous.*

Marc glanced between the two but didn’t speak. He assumed Adrian had been thinking of his fated time with Angela and she’d shut it down.

Angela shoved away Adrian’s real thought of the stops they would make on this trip. Some of those, like the ghost ship, would be awful. The camp didn’t need to know those moments were waiting. There would be time for that later, when they were on the ocean and needed something to prepare for in place of the boredom.

“Should I draft things for that?”

“First things first.” Angela stopped at the end of the long, wide dock that had survived with only a few missing boards. It appeared sturdy, but Angela hadn’t paused out of fear. She was about to cry.

Three long ramps came from the Royal Caribbean ship, though only pillars remained of the farthest. The ramps led to different sections of the boat. White and red, with orange life boats swaying against the sides, the cruise liner was intimidating. Countless portholes gleamed at them from ten stories, topped off by a number of other structures on and over the deck that they couldn't see from where they stood. Shaped like a battle ship in the front and a ferry in the rear, there were also numerous open areas with glass-enclosed passageways that appeared to be intact. Providing security on it would be a nightmare.

Angela noted the light damage after eleven months of sitting here. Cruise ships were made to withstand ugly conditions. This one had to be tough to still be so light on the water. It clearly wasn't leaking. Angela sighed, letting out eight months of stress. "We got them here."

Adrian nodded. "Your methods were better. I should have told you everything from the start. You would have found a way to do it all without the lies."

She shrugged. "Probably, but fate gave you an ugly duty. I've now accomplished the second part of that. It feels amazing."

Adrian leaned in and kissed her cheek, then retreated. "Thank you for your sacrifices."

Angela's tears rolled over pale cheeks. "And you, yours."

Adrian put an arm around her shoulders, shifting her toward the dock. “Come on. Let’s go get a closer view of what we’ve given up so much for.”

Chapter Twelve
Be Worried

1

“That is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Adrian snickered at Kenn’s comment. “It is, isn’t it?”

Everyone nodded. The boat was big, awkward, and scary in the size. Compared to the one floor setup Safe Haven normally used, the ship was an unsolvable physics problem. The fact that there was debris, mud, and mold all over it didn’t help that impression.

“How is it still here?” Kenn gazed around. “Why is it here?”

Everyone looked to the seer among them.

Angela pointed at a mound behind them that was almost hidden by sand, reeds, debris, and shadows. “Under that mess is a fancy rental shop. Behind it, blown apart and buried, is a street of businesses. Thousands of people came here every week. This is one of a dozen individual locations for wealthy people to board. They didn’t like waiting with the masses.” Angela rotated back to stare at the ship. She was betting all their lives on it being seaworthy. This was it, the way out of their dying land and it seemed to be nearly as unfriendly as

where they'd already been. Angela wondered what it would feel like to be alone on the ocean, knowing this huge, heavy ship was the only thing between life and death. It was a sobering thought.

The rest of the team stood on the wooden pier with her as the water rushed below, thoughts troubled. The ocean stretched as far as they could see, vast and intimidating.

In Neil's arms, Samantha shivered from the cool spray touching her bare arms. Thank God the camp wasn't ready to leave yet. She certainly wasn't.

For Marc, it was the ocean of his dreams back in Virginia when he and Dog were still alone, but now, he could put a face on the walking dead that pursued him into his dreams. Cesar, of course, but more Rick and Donner and maybe, probably, Kenn. Smart, sharp, and a great Marine, there was still something wrong. Not as much since he'd claimed Tonya, but it was there, hiding and waiting for the right time to reappear.

"Did you see the name?" Neil pointed with a free finger. "That's almost too much."

The Adriana.

The crashing surf grew louder, ringing in their ears. It sounded like murmuring voices.

Adrian wondered if he was the only one hearing the words that warned them not to go.

Adrian jerked as Angela's cold hand slid into his. She looked toward their vehicles. "Gunfire coming."

Two fast shots rang out, followed by a thin scream, and then there was silence.

Angela turned back to the boat.

Because she showed faith, so did her men. Their security could handle themselves.

“Where’s Dog?” Kenn had been sure the wolf would stay with them.

“Fishing.” Marc pointed.

Dog was in the surf, pawing at a large fish he had little hope of catching unless he grabbed it with his teeth. Afraid of being skinned, the wolf kept jumping aside instead of biting.

Marc chuckled, glad to have his friend back. The wolf seemed much the same, except for the company he was keeping. Marc had noticed that Dog wasn’t interested in spending time with Charlie now, though the boy had asked about him several times. Marc could have assumed it was because the wolf was exhausted, but he sensed there was more to it.

“Hey, what’s that?”

The group spun at Cole’s nervous cry.

“Alligators.” Adrian removed his hand from Angela’s to express anger. “They got at Dexter before I could move him. He bled out while I took Ramer to shelter in the shack.” Furious, Adrian left the dock, not wanting to ruin Angela’s good mood.

Too late. Marc watched her smile fade and her lips tighten. Losing people would always hurt her, no matter how bitter she became.

“My bitterness will ease in time.” She slipped an arm though his to cover the lie. “Let’s get to camp and organize tomorrow’s work. It’s going to be a long day for some of us.”

“Do you want a sentry left here?”

“I have one.”

Marc saw her glance at Adrian and understood the former leader would stay. Marc nodded in approval. That kept the boat safe and Adrian out of their perimeter.

“It also gets him out of range of camp people who don’t want him to go. A few of them had planned to deliver a warning tonight.”

“Does he have to go for us to do well on the island?”

“Yes, but it’s more than that, Marc. I need you to try to do something for me that will go against everything you’ve learned in your life. I need you to trust a woman.”

Angela walked away from him before Marc could claim he already did. Marc’s mother had been an evil fanatic who betrayed him. Julia had stolen a child from him. Marc had used whores after they split and never developed another relationship. Even men who were hurting for a lost love usually found another pair of tits to cry on, but not Marc. He’d decided at a young age that females couldn’t be trusted, that he couldn’t have faith in them, and until now, the world had proved him right. Even Kendle had reinforced it with her madness. He was making great progress from where he’d been when

they joined up in Indiana after the war, but he had a long way to go to be as mentally close to her as Adrian was.

That was another reason for their bond. Adrian had handed over his camp and his future to her, after only months. Marc still questioned everything she did after knowing her for a lifetime. He had more baggage than he was willing to admit and that made it hard to lighten his load.

Marc deliberated all of that as they walked, not getting defensive. He could admit she was right on most of it, but if Adrian hadn't come between them, he didn't think trust would be an issue.

"So once again, I get blamed. Even though I've remained faithful, you still worry I won't be." Angela sighed. "It's your jealousy and failures you see, not mine. You wish you were more like him so I'd want you more. You want him dead, so you won't have to feel inferior. I know all your lies and secrets. I've always known it's your problem, not mine. I'm no whore. You're possessive and insecure."

"You care for him, beyond the spell." Marc confronted a personal demon. "If you'd met him first, you'd be with him."

"So?"

Marc winced. "So you should be now. I'm jealous because I know you two are perfect for each other and I can never match it." He sighed. "It's why I picked Kendle. You were right about that."

“You have to stop now. I don’t think I can stand even one more of these moments between us. Let it go or let me go.” Angela left him there with that cruel choice.

“How do I let it go when he deserves to die?”

“By remembering our three lives are trivial compared to saving the world.”

“And what about justice?!” he demanded, following her. “What about right and wrong? These ends do not justify the means.”

“They do for me and everyone else. We’re alive and we’re going to stay that way—because Adrian is with us.”

“He’s bad.”

“Yes.” She looked over as Marc fell back in step. “You didn’t ask what I need you to trust me on.”

He shrugged. “I assumed it was a blanket thing.”

“I once told you and the camp something about Adrian in another moment like this one. Can you remember what it was?”

Marc didn’t have to struggle. “I’ve been counting on that, but I haven’t seen evidence of it.”

Angela tried not to snap at the repeated insinuation she was protecting Adrian, that she’d lied. “I told you I would make him pay for what he’s done to all of us.”

“But you haven’t.”

“I have, but you don’t see it because only his death will satisfy you.”

“Tell me then. Maybe it will help.”

“No. You need to go to the source so you know I’m not lying.”

“I thought you said I need to trust you.”

“You do, but we both know you won’t. I have to prove myself to you with every word and every deed. It’s beyond old.” She increased her pace. “I’m going to check on Ivan. Make sure this area is secure.”

Marc knew he was being dismissed, but he didn’t care. He now wanted to speak with Adrian and verify her words.

That right there is what she’s referring to, his demon scolded. You don’t need to verify it. You have to develop trust!

I will, by proving her words.

And in doing so, you prove her point. Your lack of faith in her is appalling after everything she’s gone through to keep you alive and at her side. Be careful, his demon warned. A woman scorned doesn’t always come from a physical betrayal.

Marc knew that advice to be solid, but he was still going to talk to Adrian about it. If he knew for sure that Angela was indeed punishing their former leader for his crimes, he might be able to let it go and even see them together without the panic and hatred choking him.

That’s why she put it in your head! Adrian spewed contempt at Marc’s stubborn refusal to believe Angela wasn’t like the other women who’d hurt him. Even when she’d thought him gone,

Angela had refused a substitute. If Marc didn't know what would happen if they split, he was crazy.

I don't, though, Marc told him coldly as he walked by where Adrian was already beginning to set up security discs. *I suspect your month was right on point.*

Adrian winced, sorry he'd ever told Marc that he would only need a month to get into Angela's heart. It had taken a lot less.

Marc grunted. *She's right and she's wrong. It's not all about her, you know.*

I know. You're a Marine and I'm a Jody. You're a patriot and I'm a rabble rouser. You're the south and I'm the north. The woman between us is just the focal point.

Marc nodded, stopping. *Yes, that's it. She's the focal point, but we're rivals in every area.*

We could have been friends in every way.

No, we couldn't. You're not good enough for that. Too easily corrupted when you get horny.

Adrian nodded. *True, but those women didn't want my purity, did they?*

The two men faced off without hiding what they were—the light and darkness that exists in the soul of every man and woman.

Forever enemies?

Marc slowly nodded, unable to make any other choice. *You damned us all with your betrayal in the garden. She was mine.*

Marc would never forgive him. No matter what he did, he would never be able to make that right with Marc. Adrian stood up. "So be it."

Lightning flashed overhead.

"That's not what I was hoping for," Angela grumbled, but she wasn't surprised. Adrian did deserve to die for his crimes, but he had given America a chance and Angela had refused to pass that sentence on him. Without Adrian, none of this would be possible. "We'd all be dead or alone in a hole somewhere. We owe him forgiveness. Since that won't ever happen from most people, I rewarded him with his life. That doesn't mean it will be long and happy. It means he'll survive to take the next round of punishments he's owed."

Kenn reflected on how she was planning to punish Adrian long term for his errors. *I did things that were worse. What does she have planned for me?*

Angela didn't answer. Her memory brought up an image of coming home to discover her child hadn't been bathed or fed, but he'd been punished for some stupid offense.

Kenn flushed, heart pounding. "I'm sorry."

"You should be." Angela increased her pace again to keep from spinning around and punching him in his throat until he was dead. Marc had no idea what a real grudge was. Knowing someone had mistreated your child while you were at work, and you had to leave him with that person again the next day, was a horror no child or parent should ever

have to go through. Kenn wasn't the same man now, but that didn't absolve him of mistakes. Justice would be served in all cases, including his.

Kenn realized the peace between them had been a lie.

“A necessary truce.” Hatred filled her tones. “I could never forgive you for the things you’ve done to Charlie. The hatred in his heart was put there by your fist. If fate didn’t need you, I would have let my son beat you until you were a bloody pile on the ground and then I would have pissed on it. You really might be happier staying on land.”

Angela got away from him. The boat was here, and the camp was willing. There was no need for any of them to play games now, no need to cover the truths. Kenn and Adrian had been bad people. So had many of Safe Haven’s citizens. They were here because they were needed, but no one had a free pass when it came to reaping what they’d sown. Fate was in charge of that and she was ruthless. *I know*. Angela rubbed her empty, scarred belly and then forced her mind into more pleasant matters. There would be time for paybacks and remorse after they set sail.

Kenn didn't know how to react. He'd honestly thought she was feeling better about him now.

Marc walked by, snorting.

Kenn flushed and followed, broken again. *I deserve this. I'll take it like a man and try even harder to make up for it.*

Marc approved of Kenn's reaction, but he was waiting for Adrian's. He had a mental door open between them to catch treachery.

I'm not planning any. I believe you'll bury yourself and my hands will be clean. And if I'm clean of your death, I get the girl.

Marc knew that could be true. It was what he'd assumed for them for a while now. That was the only way he could envision Angela doing it.

So you do trust her. Interesting.

It's always been you that I don't trust. Marc's heart settled into a better rhythm now that Angela was out of range and they could drop the act. *As soon as we break the bonds, I bet that future changes.*

Adrian winced at Marc's intelligence. He was worried over that too.

Marc chortled. *Wow. How ugly would that be for you if the spell is broken and she doesn't feel anything for you but contempt?* Marc smirked. *Yeah, I'd be worried over her being in charge of your punishment when that spell lifts. I'd be real worried.*

I am. Adrian moved faster, getting the alarms set. When he finished that, he had a list of other things to start on.

Marc frowned at the man. *You can't earn her forgiveness with manual labor.*

That's where you're wrong, Adrian thought behind his personal wall. *I built Safe Haven on it, using bonds that didn't come from spells or tricks.*

If I get her herd to that island and give them a chance at a future, that will erase the past. She'll love me for it and there won't be anything you can do to stop it.

When did it transform into that for you? Angela asked. Their connection was clear and bright, as always. Marc had a lot to learn.

When you refused to go back to camp and wait with the other women. You came along to kill our enemy or surrender yourself to him so we would all live. There could never be anyone else for me after that, in both ways.

Meaning his heart and his heir, Angela understood. *I know what you two are planning.*

Will it succeed?

Maybe, but I would have to be...

I need you, Angie, Adrian stirred. *Like a forest needs the sun or the ocean needs rain. I've never wanted anyone as much. There isn't anything I wouldn't give up to be with you.*

Angela stopped, tears dripping down her cheeks. She felt it coming, the awful loneliness.

But I refuse to hurt you anymore. Adrian's misery and next words transmitted to all of them. *I'm not going with you to the island. I'm staying here to save those who remain. You're free. Please try to be happy with Marc. He's a good man who loves you almost as much as I do.* Adrian sent a bolt of anguished panic through the connection. *Goodbye.*

Adrian motioned Kenn to take over his chore.

A few seconds later, he walked between two beach sheds and was gone.

Angela lifted her chin, but she didn't wipe away the tears. She let the ocean spray cover them as she marched back down the beach toward the path to their vehicles. She didn't speak or think about anything. She just felt the misery and let the tears come now, while she had the ocean to provide a lame cover.

Marc understood Angela knew they were going to try to break the bond and she was helping them. *I know I can trust her. She proves it to me and everyone else. So why can't I let it go and have faith in her?*

Marc frowned, following deep prints where the sand had collapsed beneath her almost non-existent weight. *Maybe it's me. I don't trust myself.* Marc began to scan his heart for cracks. *Would I betray Angela for any reason?*

When he came up with no in every situation, Marc was forced to concede the truth. There was no reason for him to suspect Angie of anything bad and certainly not to imagine that she might cheat on him with Adrian or anyone else. She was right. He couldn't have faith because she was a woman.

Angela's witch clapped. *Very good! Now we can move on and get you ready for the next level.*

Next level? Don't I need to pay for that mistake first?

Of course not. Your scars are deep, but you've never held to them or used them as an excuse. Now

you'll evaluate your decisions before giving them and see your flawed theory. Or you'll detect a problem and we'll handle it. That's how it should be.

I'm confused.

Humans carry so much darkness they need to monitor themselves. Descendants must do this with every choice and thought, to be sure they aren't becoming corrupt. That is the cost of free will. It is the price of awareness.

“This is my penitence.” Marc stared. *I thought that came after we die.*

Angela snorted, nodding to Ivan as he and Ray hurried to open doors on the truck. Three bodies were nearby. They wouldn't be removed. “I've always thought atonement was life.”

2

Their return was noticed by the guards and the camp. Everyone observed Angela for signs of how it had gone as the team got out of the vehicle.

Angela cupped her hands around her mouth so it would carry over the sounds of the ocean and camp setup that Quinn was still directing. “Tomorrow at dawn, be up and ready to move to the shoreline in front of our ship. It's there and it looks solid.”

A loud cheer sounded and lifted the mood that had already been improving. Knowing their land

travel was finished was a great relief. Some of the members had been along for every mile of it.

Angela signaled to Kenn, who had finished the alarms on the boat site quickly so he could return with them. “Get it all set for the night and then you’re off. All of you are. The camp will provide protection tonight.”

Camp members cheered now, recognizing the promotion. She thought they could handle it on their own. The feeling was soothing to those who’d watched the Eagles and longed for it, but refused to become one of them because of the harsh rules and training.

All in good time. Angela followed Kenn as he began handing out orders, waiting for hers.

Kenn snickered. “Really?”

Angela laughed with him. Now that they were in camp, she didn’t show the grudge. “Of course. I’ve got two hands and half a back. Use them.”

Kenn pointed at the trailers. “Make certain they don’t unpack anything we don’t need.”

“That’s not work.” She still turned that way.

“You think so.” Kenn pointed Neil to their security and Marc to their setup. Samantha already knew to go back to the medical camper and rest. “Wait until you come across the boxes and bags they forgot to label. It’s your job to open them and see what’s inside.”

“Can’t be much.” She wasn’t worried. *The Eagles are great about following orders.*

But the rookies aren't, Kenn reminded. Spend an hour on that chore and then I'll expect a solution for it.

Angela's mirth burst over the camp and brought up the shield.

The calm colors allowed them to begin celebrating. They'd made it and the ship was here. Things were finally going their way.

3

"What happened? Where's Adrian? Why did Kendle take off?" Tonya huffed against Kenn's big arm as he led her through the cold wind to the pharmacy tent for a short shift. "No one tells me anything since I stopped telling them everything."

"Adrian said he's done and left. The sentries haven't seen him since, not even from a distance. Kendle tried to kill the boss when we arrived. She left before we got back. The Eagles assume it's because she didn't want to face her punishment. She'd already been made an Invisible again. There was only one other thing we could have done to her."

"Death."

"She did us a favor by leaving. Angela doesn't want executions and trials to become common."

"What does she want?"

"Four years of peace and then to win a battle that gives centuries of peace if we win."

Tonya stared. She hadn't heard this yet.

Kenn knew. That's why he was telling her. By morning, the entire camp would know. Angela had insisted people needed the information so they could make their choice about going and Kenn agreed. Willing warriors always fought better.

"People would freak out if they knew."

Kenn shrugged. "Isn't truth what we're supposed to be about now?"

Tonya snickered. "Yep, and doing it well, I might add."

Kenn held the flap for her. "Yes, you are."

Tonya stopped in surprise. The tent held real shelves now and two cabinets, along with a comfortable looking chair and boxes of supplies. "Wow."

Kenn kissed her cheek. "That's from the boss." He rubbed her ass. "That's from me."

Kenn ducked out of the tent, grinning. It felt good to do nice things for her. When Angela had suggested it, he'd been happy to comply.

Walking by, Ian shoved a box into Kenn's hands. "Give that to the pharmacist." New, the Ciemus didn't know Tonya's name yet. He also didn't know anything about her or her past.

It gave Kenn pause to hear her called by an acceptable title.

The box suddenly lurched, dragging him down.

Kenn caught his balance as men cackled. Spitting in disgust, he slid the box into the pharmacy tent and left. Let Tonya figure it out when she got

to that one. The cat was mean. It needed to be in a box.

Tonya snickered, catching most of Kenn's thoughts. Carrying his baby had advantages. She was going to miss it after the birth.

Tonya opened the box and grabbed the cat before it could take off. She did a quick exam and then let it down to roam the tent. When it ran out the flap, she tried not to worry. The animal was a survivor, like the people here.

Tonya slid the empty box into the others.

"Son of a bitch!" Kenn's painful shout echoed across the camp. "Tonya!"

She hurried from the tent, laughing. Kenn didn't like the cat, but the cat loved Kenn. It was great because so did she.

Kenn pried a claw from his shoulder, other hand struggling to keep the twisting, growling animal from impaling his face. He pulled, yelping as the cat dug in.

Tonya snapped the claws loose with a practiced finger and took the cat by the back of the neck. Then she set it on the ground, much to Kenn's displeasure.

"No! Down, kitty!"

Tonya grabbed the cat in mid jump as it tried to reclaim a perch on Kenn's shoulder. She set it on her own and staggered back to her new pharmacy tent, laughing so hard she was almost crying. "Good girl."

Kenn wiped at his scratches and stings, aware of the laughter rippling through the witnesses. “I bet she taught it to do that.”

Neil sniggered. “Maybe it was the boss.”

Kenn kicked at the sand, cancelling his plans to drown the cat while Tonya slept. “*I’ll take it like a man.*” Kenn mocked himself. “Dumbass.”

4

Samantha enjoyed the various shows happening around the medical camper. She wasn’t allowed to go further than the shower or table for a meal now, and she was already bored. A show was nice.

Samantha peered closer through the dirty glass. Angela had just ducked into the tent with the kids. Samantha didn’t expect her to come out for a while.

They let out loud yells and cheers as the flap dropped.

Must be time for a meeting. Samantha went to the table. Morgan had moved the injured to a tent so he could treat them easier and put a snack out for her, but she’d wanted the shower before trying to eat it. She was feeling better, but there was still an occasional twinge that implied she’d almost lost her babies.

Samantha rubbed her stomach, glad the twins were calm now. All their flipping around in there wasn’t good.

Knock! Knock!

The camper door opened to admit Gus. He held up a small basket. “Compliments of the cook.”

She grimaced. “I hope you mean your woman and not the camp klutz.”

Gus set the basket in front of her and peeled back the cloth. “Fresh bread.”

Samantha snatched the hot loaf and bounced it between stinging hands as she tore off a huge chunk. Samantha stuffed it into her mouth, hissing at the heat.

Gus’s mirth rolled through the camp, bringing the shield to life.

Samantha stared at him as the shield winked out, bread hanging from her mouth. “You’re weadership.”

“It was a fluke.” He tried to forestall the conversation. “Will never happen again.”

Samantha frowned. “And if it does?” Crumbs flew from her mouth.

Gus left the camper.

Samantha stored the moment and dug into the rest of the loaf as she watched the sun set over the ocean. When she finished, she peeked in and found two more loaves. “That woman is wearing me down.”

Chapter Thirteen
Lesson One
Evening Mess

1

Angela entered the mess.

Silence fell over the two hundred people.

She gave a small snort. “How are you all fitting in here at the same time?”

Smiles and chuckles floated through the crowd. All of Safe Haven was in attendance, even the children. They were only missing the members on duty and William.

I've got it covered. William was outside, doing roaming patrols. *If there's trouble out here, we'll know about it and so will you.*

Angela took the drink Jennifer brought her, aware of an empty table in the front with a single tray on it.

Angela went there, understanding they hadn't been positive how much room to give her for the lesson. She stepped up onto the bench and then the table.

Eagles eased closer, not liking her being such an easy target.

Angela brought up her personal shield. “Throw stuff at me.”

The camp kids had no problem with the order. Toys and food flew through the air.

They stuck in the shield.

People stared, fascinated.

“This is one of my new gifts. You’re all going to learn to copy it.” Angela dropped her shield. The items clattered to the table and floor, making people cringe back.

“Again.” She brought up her shield. It sucked to be teaching possible traitors how to defend themselves, but they were covering their thoughts too well.

Children and adults tossed things this time and none of them were gentle. They knew she could take it.

Angela kept the shield in place as it filled with items from around the mess. “Some of you know about absorbing an incoming hit and feeding it into your energy stores. That’s how I do this. I’m trying to absorb something that isn’t power. It gets stuck.” Angela dropped the shield, sending fresh unease through everyone at the noise of so many items falling to the table and floor.

“Once more, only silverware and only Eagles throwing.”

Kyle made a curt motion. “Team leaders only.”

The team leaders tossed the forks and knives from their tables and the tables around them, sensing Angela wanted a dramatic demonstration for this lesson.

Marc observed knife after knife plunge into the shield and be held, horrified. She'd had to practice that to know she could do it. He glared toward the flap, where William was passing on a round of the deserted camp.

“When I let go this time, some of the threats won't drop. Someone tell me why.”

“Weapons have energy.” Jennifer didn't like the demonstration either.

“Exactly. Weapons are made to find a target.” Angela slowly raised a hand and brought up a second shield inside the first. Then she dropped the first.

People gasped and muttered as several blades flew forward and bounced off her new barrier.

They were held in by a third shield Angela brought up.

Knives slid to a stop, letting people breathe again.

Angela gestured for people to stay back when they would have started cleaning. “We have four shields, that I know of. Because your lives mean more to me than the goal, I'm teaching you those first. The four shields can be used to protect yourself, to slow and absorb power, to steal weapons, to protect someone else, and to go dim. As you can see, it is possible to use all of them at the same time.” Angela looked over the fascinated crowd. “If I'm going to do this, your defense has to reach my level. I won't teach you a single fighting

technique until you can do this demonstration for me.”

Angela ignored the complaints. “Your lives mean more to me than they do to you. I won’t lose you in the first wave because you were too excited to concentrate on a shield.” Angela dropped the last barrier and the items clattered to the ground, making people flinch again.

Angela sent a thought to Kyle and then Jennifer. Kyle threw his knife.

Jennifer used her shield to deflect it into the canopy of the tent.

Angela grabbed it with her shield and held it. “I could have tossed it back and killed my attacker. So could she. You can aim with your shield. It has a lot of uses, but keeping you alive is why you’ll get it or you’ll be on your own for lessons. Every descendant has to pass this before we move on.”

“But Invisibles are descendants and they don’t have gifts like a shield.” Ivan was confused.

Angela shook her head. “Invisibles have a shield over their mind that has to be pulled away. Like taking plastic from your new phone.”

The camp began trying to determine if they were Invisibles.

Angela brought the blade to a gentle stop on the floor and let go of it. It skidded toward the last target—her.

Marc put a boot on it to stop the progress.

Angela noted the people trying harder than others and also the people who were having success,

but she was more interested in the people who refused to try at all.

Neil sighed as Angela's attention settled on him. He gave a slight head shake and then refused to meet her eye again.

Angela moved on. She swept the camp to be thorough, not expecting many new fighters. Angela stared in surprise as dots lit up on her grid like fireflies at night. "Lock us down." She was sure William was listening. "Go dim."

William enclosed the camp in the darkest, thickest shield he had, but Angela could still see the new descendants on her grid. She narrowed in like she'd seen Marc do and was rewarded with a map that told her what type of power had just blinked into existence.

"Can anyone else track that?" Marc was also staring at the shocked camp members now playing with their shields.

Angela shook her head. "Not for a few days, according to the book."

"And the shield over our camp?"

"Isn't enough. When this new power registers, we're going to light up every working radio left in North America."

Marc sighed. "I thought so. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Making you do this."

Angela pointed upward. "They forced this, not you." She motioned him over. "Come play with me."

Marc brought up his barrier and then opened another inside of it.

“Good. Now do a third around both of us.”

Marc grunted in effort, but the shield snapped into place.

“Now the fourth, over the camp.”

Marc’s eyes widened. All his shields dropped. “Say what?”

Angela chuckled. “Just stop holding back. We like knowing the tiger is out of his cage and hunting for our enemies.”

He hesitated. “You’re sure?”

She stared back, waiting.

Marc drew in a breath. “You got it.” He slammed power through the tent and into the air, forming a shield over the mess to start. He opened the mental door wider, letting more power out and felt the shield expand to include the tents and vehicles around them. Marc was afraid to open the door further.

Angela placed a comforting hand on his. “Open it all the way.”

Knowing she had him covered let Marc do it.

His shield, a deep, pulsing blue, settled over the entire camp and expanded to include the ship a few hundred yards away.

The camp clapped.

Angela reminded them of the goal. “Three to go.”

Marc directed some of the power into the second and third barrier he brought up but diverting a fourth stream was hard.

“It increases in difficulty with each layer, but I suspect we can have more than four if we practice it.” Angela added her shield to his, layering all of them with her thick shell. “Imagine if we could all do this at the same time. We could defend against almost any enemy in shifts.”

“This is strong.” Marc was impressed. “They’d run out of ammunition before wearing us down. Nice!”

Marc’s approval persuaded the people to try harder. Everyone wanted to be that strong.

Marc’s fourth shield came up around Angela, impressing everyone, including her. She sent another to cover him, giving him and the camp a good moment of witnessing her happy with Marc. They didn’t get much of that, but she really was.

She’s enjoying it too much, Adrian warned in Marc’s mind. You’re not following our plan.

How the fuck can you get through eight layers of shielding?! Marc demanded, furious all over again.

She was thinking about me. She knows I’d give anything to see it.

So she’s giving it to you through me.

Nope. I get emotions from her and your big mouth. That’s it unless you let me in.

Marc hated it that most of the descendants in the tent with them could probably listen. He tried to be

careful with his response as he brought up a new shield over himself, proving Angela right about there being more than four layers that could be used at one time. *Be quiet and watch, like the rest of us in the lesson.*

Adrian barely contained his joy as Marc's mind opened to show him everything. If his happiness washed over the man, Adrian was sure he would sever the link.

Angela waited patiently. She and few others were aware of Marc's private line with Adrian, but it was leadership and they too wanted a truce. When Jennifer and Marc had agreed to give Adrian updates, neither of them had found a way to do it without getting upset or feeling as though they were betraying the boss or Marc in some way. So Angela had made them suffer it together. If Adrian got updates, it would be from Marc and no one else.

Jennifer was relieved. She hadn't wanted to do it.

I know. Thank you.

Jennifer nodded, warmed. *It's my honor.*

Angela lifted her other hand and all of the shields vanished.

Marc frowned, trying to bring his back up. The power flow had been cut off even though the mental door was open. "What are you doing?"

Angela sent a light sting, steeling herself when Marc twitched. "You were hit with a zap at the base. It stole your power for a while and allowed you and your team to be captured." She sent another light

sting and was impressed when he let it land so she could finish this part of the lesson. He didn't have to. He had plenty of defensive gifts to pick from. "Trackers don't usually have power, except for being able to track and shield. To make up for that, they can zap you and shut off the flow of your power. I can do it, but I don't know how it works exactly. Neither does William. It wasn't in any books we've read." She looked at Marc.

Marc waited. *The question isn't for me, jackass.*

Adrian cleared his throat. *Not that I know of either.*

Marc shook his head.

Angela continued. "Because of that, we have to learn a different defense to use."

Angela gave him a subtle nod, saying she was ready.

Marc let his demon fly out against her, distracting her so he could recover and bring up his shield.

The demon lunged at Angela in playful menace. *My Lady.*

Angela chortled as the camp cowered from the physical side of Marc's power. Angela hadn't seen his demon this way either, but she was delighted by it. "That's scary."

Marc huffed. "Then why you laughin'?"

Angela's giggle calmed the witnesses and encouraged a few people to try to figure out how to do that themselves.

Angela let them go in favor of watching Marc direct his demon to bow to the camp and then float along the ceiling to observe. It was like a powerful genie.

Marc tired quicker than he was happy with. When they'd helped Zack, Angela's witch had been in control of the energy flow.

"That's the next part of it." Angela kept things rolling. "Shields take a lot of power. You have to be able to absorb the hits and turn them into energy without taking a lifeforce. That requires us to get too close. I want our enemies gone before they can put hands on us."

Marc let go, drawing the demon back with an audible snap.

The demon groaned at the pain.

Sorry. I'll keep working on it.

"You're doing great." Angela didn't want him to be upset. "Go mingle and help people with their shields."

Marc was thrilled, but tired. He walked slower than he was used to.

"Another effect." Angela loved teaching. "Using these gifts will wear you out and it won't take long. After each lesson, you'll need a lot of water and maybe even a nap. Don't fight it. Your endurance will grow each time, but only if you're caring for yourself. A sick descendant is a weak descendant." Angela pinned Samantha with a dark glare. "I'll lock your gifts up if you try it before the birth."

“I won’t.” Samantha’s face tightened. “I want my babies more than I want to fight.”

Angela sighed. “You’ll get your chance to kill for me, Samantha. All of you will.”

“But it’s not really for you, is it?” Ivan wasn’t sure if he was happy everyone knew, but at least he didn’t have to hide anymore. He’d always known he was an Invisible.

Angela’s voice hardened. “If I make the deal, we’ll fight, but we do it on our terms as much as we can, and we follow the code that kept us alive when everyone else went off on their own or just plain went off—Safe Haven’s code.”

The Eagles cheered and whistled while some of the camp clapped.

Angela finished it. “If I don’t like the odds, we’ll stay on our island and they can have this clump of rocks. We’re Americans no matter where we land.”

Outside, William smiled. *She’s amazing. I wish...* He stopped those reflections and resumed his duty, sorry his time with her was about over. Just being one of her sheep might have been enough for him in another life. Now, he wanted her and that made it almost time to go. She and her people were precious to him. Hurting them was unthinkable.

In the tent, Angela looked expectantly at Brittani. The woman had only watched so far.

Brittani shrugged. “I can already do it. Do you want me to help the others?”

Angela nodded.

Brittani looked around and found Daryl struggling to pull his shield up the rest of the way. She gaped, heart fluttering. *He's one of us.* "Damn."

Angela's voice was gentle. "This is that choice moment." *You'll hurt yourself and Gus. Gus will move on. You'll have to carry that gui-*

"Will we be happy?" Brittani demanded, aware of Daryl about to turn and see her staring at him.

"Deliriously," Angela responded immediately. "He already respects you and wants you. Love isn't far behind."

Brittani looked toward the flap, where Gus was standing with his brothers and playing with his shield. "You did this on purpose."

Angela shrugged. "Do what's best for you for the first time in your life. You've sheltered so many others from danger and sacrificed yourself to do it." Angela felt Daryl's attention leave her and go to the woman he wanted.

Brittani stiffened as pleasure lit up her nerves and her heart thumped. "He's thinking we're alike now so maybe I'll give him a chance."

"Will you?" Angela liked Gus, but Daryl was her old teammate. There was no comparison for her.

Brittani saw Daryl's eyes light up as he realized she knew he wasn't just an Eagle anymore. *This is gonna go badly.*

Daryl grinned at her. "Come show me how to work this thing?"

Forced into a life choice, Brittani groaned. Gus was turning toward her. He felt something happening.

Brittani went to Gus. Guilt and determination were all over her face.

Gus turned away before she could speak. “Save the speech. I get it.”

Brittani stopped, embarrassed. “Please.”

“I could say the same. But it wouldn’t matter, would it?” Gus wasn’t surprised. He’d felt her distance for weeks now. He’d just hadn’t known which man she’d replaced him with.

“She wants both of you, if that’s a consolation.” Conner had volunteered to help the camp members with guard duty. He fell in step with Gus. “She won’t act on it now, so you’re all good. She’s already sorry and wishing she’d kept hiding her unhappiness.”

Conner kept walking, certain his words had penetrated. The couple had grown up together. Brittani had taken responsibility for him after the war and she did love him, but when she’d said they were soulmates, everyone except Gus had felt the lie. That’s why the Eagles had still been evaluating her even though she had a man.

Gus knew it all now. He could feel the pain, the attraction, and the tired bitterness of being stuck with someone she didn’t love the way she needed to be happy, but what bothered him the most was the pity of the people around him. Leadership was

going through it too, giving Gus a feeling of belonging that sucked. “This isn’t what I wanted.”

Lou fell in step with Gus. He’d seen it all. “You okay?”

Gus snorted. “My woman just threw me away. What do you...” Gus pivoted, snared by a mental voice.

Lou paused to see what had jerked Gus from the bitter tirade he needed to have now. Lou had honestly expected Brittani to do this sooner. Safe Haven picking them up had only delayed things. She loved Gus, but she didn’t need him. That mattered to women like her, but Gus didn’t know it.

“I do now.” Gus narrowed in on the voice and began tracking. “I’ll catch you later.”

Slightly offended—he’d come to offer help when he didn’t want to—Lou went back to the mess to watch the rest of the lesson.

Gus kept tracking, searching for the person calling to him. All he could hear was a female tone that promised pleasure beyond his dreams.

Brittani felt it too, but she didn’t have the right to interfere now and she didn’t.

Trinity held her tent flap open, pulling as hard as she could. When a man already had a lover, it took a lot more persuasion.

Gus stopped next to her. “I’m single now. Stop blinding me.”

Trinity scowled, concentration snapping.

Gus nodded. “That’s better.”

The Ciemus woman stared at him. “Honesty and all this light of Safe Haven crap?”

“Either that or a quick fuck and we never talk again.”

That wasn’t what she wanted. “I need kids—strong kids.”

“I need a loyal woman!” Gus shot back in the heat of the moment. He felt Brittani’s anger and it pushed him further than he might have gone otherwise. “No kids until you prove yourself.”

“No sex until I can have the kid.”

“Deal.” Gus held out a hand.

Trinity slid into his arms and delivered a thick kiss that banished other thoughts.

Brittani growled. “That was fast!” She glared at Angela, hurting.

Angela stared back. *It’s what you want. Stop lying and hiding who you are, who you’re becoming. Our heart’s desires may not be good for us, but we’ll never know unless we explore them.*

Daryl was mostly unaware of what had happened. He was thrilled, and intimidated, to discover his heritage. He nudged Brittani’s arm. “A little help here? You’re a team leader.”

Angela was proud of them all, but she also loathed the drama. If she hadn’t interfered, Daryl and Brittani would have had an affair on the boat and Gus would have snapped over it. The Eagles and camp would have been disrupted and the peaceful bonds they’d been building would have snapped in places. Now, they would have two

people adjusting to new relationships. Their pain, though it sucked, was minor in comparison.

“How long do you think we’ll let you play with our lives like this!” Brittani’s shout sent uneasy quiet through the mess. People paused, feeling the anger.

Angela took a deep breath and let it out. “This is my job, Eagle. Suck it up and do yours.”

Brittani glared. Then she looked at Daryl for support. The ground shook, sending heat along her thighs. In that moment, she found she could tolerate it a lot longer. “Okay, Boss.”

The camp clapped. Another Eagle was firmly in the herd.

In Trinity’s tent, Gus sobbed in her arms and tried to cancel their deal.

She refused.

2

“Spend the next half hour practicing.” Angela was tired now. “Then we’ll do shower shifts and you can be off until dawn. I’ve made a schedule that gives everyone downtime while we’re here, but don’t complain about what comes before or after it. We all have work waiting.”

The camp members who weren’t descendants observed in fascination and a little jealousy, but there was no fear and that thrilled Angela. Her people were almost ready to accept the descendants for what they were—angels sent to protect them.

Then, they would start asking for shit their angels couldn't give. Not all of them would be able to take no for an answer. While everyone was distracted, Angela used bits of the energy flying through the tent to search the future. She was tired of being caught off guard.

Brittani turned to Daryl, meaning to start helping with his shield. She didn't realize he was right behind her.

Daryl still had his shield up. She bounced off it and hit the ground with a heavy thump.

"I'm so sorry!" He rushed toward her without lowering the barrier.

Brittani was knocked along the mess floor, unharmed because of the slippery surface.

"Stop!" She threw up a hand and brought out her own shield.

Daryl staggered to a halt, humiliated as everyone laughed at them. "I'm sorry! Please don't be mad."

Brittani stood up, glowering. "You like to play rough."

Daryl's breath caught. "Um...well..."

She laughed. "Me too, handsome. Gus wouldn't."

"I will." Daryl dropped his shield and his pretense of not wanting her. She was single now. "I've been dealing it the way women want it all my life. No gift needed."

Brittani's body and heart were on fire. "How do *you* like it? Anyone ever figure out what makes you tick like a bomb?"

Daryl shook his head, sexy grin stretching his full lips. "I don't kiss and tell."

"You haven't kissed—"

Daryl grabbed her and sealed their lips. *Thanks, I was waiting for that opening.* Daryl forgot to think as she kissed him back.

Lost in the roar of passion and the cheering of the crowd as the couple made their relationship public, nearly all of them missed Angela leaving the tent.

Marc felt her pain and followed. He hated himself even as he increased it. "It's not the same without him here, right? To see how well you handle his sheep."

Angela froze in raw agony. "No."

"Are you still connected?"

Another shudder of pain came. "He shut the door when he left. So did I."

"You haven't tried to open it?"

Marc came closer when she didn't respond. "Have you tried?"

She sobbed. "Yes! He won't answer me!"

Marc gave the final shove. "He has other legs to wrap up with now, I guess. Kendle left while we were checking out the boat."

Angela's rage didn't blast out and disturb the camp, but it surrounded her in a fiery barrier that crackled and tossed out tiny fire sparks.

The sentries stared.

“There’s a new one.” Marc went back into the mess to supervise the rest of the practice.

Angela went into the empty medical camper and shut the door. She could have taken a cot and tried to escape the misery for a few hours of rest, but she wanted to be free. Angela slid to her knees and cried instead.

It took everything Adrian had not to reach out to her. He didn’t tell Marc she was almost ready or celebrate being able to push her to the edge so easily. He mourned the next stage, agony almost matching hers. Under that, was a wall of fear. Marc was right. *If she doesn’t care for me after the final bond is broken, I’ll be destroyed.*

Chapter Fourteen
Let's See Your Ante
Day Two
5pm in the West

1

“**Y**ou have to call her.” Kimmie stared at Jeff from the passenger seat. They were alone in the cabin of the new truck, but the number of cars around them had continued to grow. “She worries over you more than the others.”

Jeff keyed up the mike. “I’m stopping at sunset. Get those fires going so we can have that show!”

He hung it up, tone dry. “Good enough?”

Kimmie shook her head as cheers and screams garbled the radio. “No, but it will buy time.”

“Time is all I need.” Without the sentimental barrier that had worn off after an hour, Jeff was feeling everything twofold. It was like being ill and wanting cool, clear water and when you were well, still only wanting the same. It was amazing and awful. He wasn’t sure he would be able to control himself when they stopped. He wanted them all dead.

“That’s the infection.” Kimmie was tying her new shoes. “It works fast.”

Jeff stored that. “Why does she worry about me more than the others?”

“Because you’re the only descendant who is immune to her call.”

Jeff hadn’t known that. “What does it mean?”

“That’s what she wants to know. Be careful.”

“Why don’t you trust her even though you’d die for her?”

“She’s byzantine now.” Kimmie scooted to the edge of the seat. “She’s equal amounts of light and dark. She can flip to either side. All our kind will fear her. Byzan can’t be defeated in battle by one of us.”

“So if she goes bad, she could wipe out all the other descendants?”

“Yes. That’s why they don’t let our kind get too strong. It’s dangerous for everyone.”

Jeff tried to be fair. “What happens if she stays good?”

The girl beamed at him. “Then we have peace on earth until she dies. Nice, huh?”

Jeff didn’t know what to say.

“That’s why she needs us. Alphas can’t be left alone. They need us to help them keep the light.”

“I don’t get all of it. I need more details.”

“She has the book now.” Kimmie shrugged. “It has our history. You should read it.”

“I will if she’ll let me.”

“She wants you to know. She wants all of us to know the truth.”

“How do you know so much about her?”

“I dream every night.”

“So?”

“So I go walking. The other kids protect me while I’m gone.”

“Tell me about walking.” Jeff needed to be distracted from what would happen when they stopped for the night. The rest of their passengers were in the rear trailer, sleeping or preparing.

“We were made to communicate. When we can’t reach our kind physically, we have a line in our sleep. It’s dangerous, though. We can get lost and not come back.”

“Like being in a coma.” Jeff slowed the truck, wanting more time to think. The refugee wave was keeping easy pace, soothed from the first frantic contact. They knew gratification was coming. Also like junkies, they were waiting for the fix. When the sun sank, an hour from now, that would fade, and the rowdiness would turn to violence. “And death, right? If the body gets hurt, you won’t know.”

“You’ll feel it, but you can’t rush back. It’s dream walking. You walk.”

“What’s it like?”

Kimmie tore open one of the mess kits from Jeff’s pack without asking what it was. She didn’t care providing it was edible. “Scary. Amazing. Confusing. It’s better when you’re with someone else. Things don’t echo as much.”

“Well, that clears it up. Maybe you could show me how sometime.”

The girl nodded. “If the alpha sends me away, I’ll need you to teach me things too, so I don’t go bad the rest of the way.”

Jeff scowled, wanting to say ten different things. He settled for the easiest. “You’re not bad at all.”

Kimmie contemplated the last fights and then the battles to come. She shook her head, pulling slimy meat from a greasy package. “You won’t say that later.”

Jeff sighed. *I hope you’re wrong.*

The little girl didn’t answer.

2

“Everyone feeling nothing?”

Apathetic taps came in response to Kimmie’s cheerful call. Even Jeff only managed a grim nod at the girl. As he scrutinized her huge smile, Jeff wondered how she was able to feel so good with the emotional barrier in place. He’d ordered her to use it on herself so she was spared the guilt of killing.

Kimmie found something out the window to look at.

Jeff scowled. “You don’t have it!”

Kimmie crossed her arms over her chest and slammed herself against the seat. “You weren’t supposed to know that.”

Jeff tried to be angry, but it was impossible. “I’ll deal with you later.”

“I know. I’ve seen it.” The little girl had tried to amend that future and failed. It was embarrassing. *I’ll be an alpha if I live long enough. Why can’t I change the future?*

When you figure it out, let me know. Jeff pointed. “We’re stopping. Get ready.”

Refugees swarmed the semi as soon as Jeff stopped, shouting, slapping, threatening. He was forced to use his shield over the entire truck. It was draining.

Jeff shoved his way through the throng to reach the rear, leaving Kimmie to fend for herself.

She climbed through the passenger window instead of using the door. She went to the top of the truck and started practicing fighting skills.

Jeff wanted to watch, but he was busy dragging the other kids from the truck. A few of them jumped out on their own, slicing and dicing anyone who got too close, but the other kids screamed in mock terror or real anger, depending on their role.

The crowd cheered, coughed, shouted, wheezed.

Jeff wondered how the people didn’t figure it out. He nudged a child toward the warehouse he’d chosen. “Start cooking. No fights until I eat.”

People were disappointed, but not so much that it caused trouble. It was expected.

The warehouse was covered in layers of dust and cobwebs that told Jeff it had been empty for a while. He fought the need to search the crates with the other refugees who saw a stash and began

tearing it apart. Packs of food and bottles of water were shoved into pockets and fought over.

Jeff gestured the kids to get to work, still using only a shield and no weapon. He heard cough after cough in the growing crowd and hoped none of it was contagious.

The kids unpacked his chair and set up a table by it, then handed him a cigar and a canteen while they made a fast campsite in the corner of the warehouse by the main entrance. Providing the doors stayed open, they would be able to see the road and parking area.

Two of the kids brought Jeff a stack of notebooks as Seth took up a post behind him.

Becky and Doug came next, going to the bedroll the kids had out.

Jeff let the kids labor, occasionally scolding one of them or grunting directions. He didn't let himself react as the crowd set up around them in touching range. The kids were adept at keeping themselves alive, but the crowd also wanted the fighting more than they wanted the kids at this moment. It was a psychologist's wet dream to be here, but to be handling it, was an engineer's nightmare. Jeff wasn't sure if they would all make it out alive, but he was certain most of this crowd wouldn't.

The mob had grown while they traveled from word spreading of the entertainment. Becky counted three hundred. She scanned them subtly, searching for the worst of the lot, but it was impossible. The entire building was full of evil

thoughts. Those who didn't want the kids still wanted to see them bleed.

The refugees set up camp as close to Jeff's site as they could get, some shoving people, taking their spots. He didn't hear gunshots, but knives flashed in the crowd almost continuously as people fought over locations. He'd assumed they would all want the center, but he'd been wrong.

Outside the warehouse, the same noises echoed, but there were gunshots out there. Jeff hoped they saw the warehouse as off limits because it might spoil the coming fun, but he didn't scan them to find out. Right now, he was playing his role as boss man. He nodded to the gathering refugees. "Let's see your ante."

People brandished items Jeff hadn't used since the war, including plastic-wrapped razors and shaving cream. Bags and cans were held up, along with jugs of yellowish liquid he presumed was homemade alcohol. There were also clothes and guns, ammunition, and more food than he'd seen in one place since leaving the mountain. He resisted the urge to scan people for their supply locations. There wasn't time.

Jeff pointed at all of those with items he wanted. As that group faded, smug and ready to eat while they waited for the fighting, the next group of runner-ups shoved forward to hold up items and shout offers.

Kimmie slashed at a hand grabbing for her leg, spilling the first blood.

Those who saw it let out loud cheers.

Jeff nodded and went back to pointing at people. He could wait until later and try searching their bodies for valuables, but this was easier.

Doug pushed Roy and Romeo down at Jeff's feet, then went to stand by Seth.

Becky stayed on the bedroll, aware of all the leers on her exposed skin. The half top and lowcut jeans seemed like a bad idea now. She kept her head down and didn't react to any of the whispers or pleas.

Roy whimpered as the secondary betters called out offers for him and his brother.

Angered, Jeff pointed toward Becky. "Go take a nap."

The boys crawled to Becky, who slid over to make room for them. Now partially hidden, Roy calmed and held tight to Becky.

Romeo listened hard, trying to be ready if he needed to do something. He understood the danger they were in. So did Roy, but he wasn't old enough yet to express himself in any way but fear and tears. Romeo was glad Jeff had sent them to Becky, but only for Roy's sake. Romeo had been eyeing the supplies as Jeff accepted them. Some of those items were things he would do double chores for any day of the week.

Jeff felt the same way. Safe Haven needed these things. Jeff pointed out three grenade launchers, but none of the homemade grenades. He accepted the woman with the quilts pieced together from

different animal furs, but denied the woman with the box of animal bodies. “The two tents. All factory ammunition, no hand loads! One hundred rounds equals one hundred bucks.” He scanned again as the crowd began to thin of people waiting to have their ante recognized. “I see keys. To what?”

“My corvette!”

Jeff scowled. “No need for that crap now.”

Kimmie looked over, telling Jeff that was a mistake. It was known that the UN men loved fancy vehicles. She and the other kids had made a medium sized fire and were now opening pouches to get the meal rolling.

Jeff waved at the disgruntled man. “But the UN will want something when they catch up to me. You’re in. Who else?”

The mob settled down as far as they were going to as smells of food and the sounds of life floated through the warehouse. Jeff waved off the rest of the people, seeing only jewelry and dishes. “That’s it for now. Let me eat.”

Unhappy words and gestures came, but the rest of the would-be betters left, making their own deals and shoving people from their path. Jeff noticed they were careful to only shove other people who’d been denied, though. The refugees had a fascinating hierarchy. Wilder groups were doing drugs, drinking, having sex, and fighting, but they left the other groups alone. The weaker groups were clustering just in and outside the warehouse doors and windows. It looked like a spot for lower classes,

but Jeff saw it as those people having a fast escape route. That implied all hell would break loose after the spoils were handed out.

Kimmie stirred the large pot, then looked around their camp to be sure everyone was okay. The other kids were getting leers and comments, but the fragile peace was holding like it always did whenever the UN had let survivors get so close to them. Most of the time, the refugees weren't allowed inside the camp until half an hour before sunset. Listening to the wildness outside the gate had revved the kids up, like it was doing now. They were absorbing the violence, preparing to deliver their own impressions of the war. Kimmie felt her power stir and forced it back. *Not yet, my love. Not yet.*

Her witch settled.

Kimmie stirred the large boiling pot again, sweat running down her chest. After their group was served, she would dump in the poison that Jeff had given her. Darren would do the same for the jugs of water and whiskey. People who took bites and drinks when they thought Jeff wasn't aware would die slower than if they'd grabbed it and ran, but they'd still be just as dead.

I hope all of you sample it. The girl encouraged a nearby sicko with a friendly smile. *I made extra just for you.*

“Let’s fight!” Jeff was keeping close track of the time. The emotional barriers were set to wear off in four hours and he was half through that limit now. He’d lingered after his meal to have a drink and smoke, winding things up by making them all wait, including the kids.

People cheered as Jeff stood up.

It spread through the warehouse, bringing activity that was impressive. Without a leader, the refugees cleared the center of the main room in minutes, then opened a path for the kids to come through. It reminded Jeff so much of Safe Haven that he scowled, anger coming forward. “I feel descendants here!” Furious that he really did, Jeff pointed out the two women now trying to run to the exits. “Take them outside!”

The women didn’t stand a chance against the mob. They were nearly dead before they were dragged out.

Jeff still didn’t feel anything except anger, but he doubted he would have anyway. The two former teachers from California had come to trade for young boys to serve in their brothel. If he could feel anything, it would have been disgust.

Jeff signaled the kids toward the circle being lined with burning objects to light the fight. Cans and pots, as well as a trough and a deep sink that Jeff believed had been ripped from this building, were filled with trash and set on fire.

Music came on in a far corner, drowning out the coughing as those with accepted antes filled in the

circle around the kids and between the fires. They stacked their bets at their feet and waited for Jeff to call the first match.

“Seven fights.” Jeff made sure he was loud enough for the children to hear. “One kid each. Even the flincher will follow through. Usual rules. The girl is the finale.”

Kimmie waved at the crowd, then flipped them the bird to distract from Jeff’s minor rule change.

The crowd whistled and gestured, encouraged by her attitude. She’d been careful to show no fear in front of them. Heavy bets were placed on her surviving.

Some people still protested the number of fights, but most were fine with it. Kimmie had told Jeff sometimes only four or five fights were held, so it was accepted. Jeff wanted it all over before the compassion came back. He didn’t want anything to interfere with his plans.

Jeff noted Doug was still with Seth at their site, but Becky was gone. The bedroll only had two lumps. Jeff wished her luck and pointed at little Amy. “Who wants to die at the hands of a three-year-old?”

Amy clapped as she ran into the center, bare feet leaving tiny prints that Jeff would have been stunned by if not for the barrier. She was a grain of sand under towering trees compared to the adults.

The crowd shouted threats and private bets. Jeff pointed at one of three men holding up their antes. He followed the cheating rules, picking someone he

hadn't seen in her mind yet so the child would have the advantage. Unless they'd witnessed it, no one knew how fast the girl was. Jeff had been shocked by it in her thoughts; he was certain he should be ashamed of wanting to see it for himself now.

Amy held up her weapon; the small tip of her spear was stained red. "I'm ready."

The man who hoped to win one of the untrained boys came forward with a snort. He cracked his knuckles and bent at the knees, getting set to attack. "This will be over fast."

"Yep." Jeff held up a hand. "Go!"

Amy darted forward, ducking the man's lunging run as people cheered and jeered. She spun neatly and jumped to get the force she needed. As the man turned, she was there to drive the spear into his jaw.

Amy let go of the weapon, using the momentum to shove herself backward and out of his reach as he screamed and flailed.

The spear handle bobbed brutally, ripping more flesh. Blood ran down his cheek as the man dropped to a knee, trying to pull it out.

Amy ran up and kicked the spear handle.

Jeff grinned as the body fell and the little girl shouted in primal victory. "He was right. That was fast."

The crowd roared and groaned as people won and lost. Items were exchanged and fought over. A small pile of winnings was dropped near Jeff's boots. He ignored the fighting in the rear of the crowd as people tried to welch on bets. The ruckus

wouldn't be allowed to reach the center and he trusted Doug to keep their site secured. If the big man couldn't, he would join them here in the fighting ring.

Jeff waited for Amy to dislodge her spear from the body, then waved her to the campsite so Doug and Seth could keep track of her. Jeff was glad to have them to handle that chore. He had his hands full with the crowd now shoving closer for the next fight. Some people hadn't realized it was starting. The throng of bodies grew thicker.

Amy jabbed her spear at people's legs to make them move so she could get through. The child was fearless and made it untouched through fifty men and women within reach of her. Jeff was impressed as much as he could be right now.

Brea handed Jeff a bottle.

Jeff drank from it and then signaled at the small stack of jugs he'd ordered one of the kids to carry in. "Free drinks. Turn the music up!"

People cheered and wheezed at him and the kids. The music increased to a deafening beat that sank into Jeff and brought the desire to party. *Been a long time*, he conceded, pointing to Darren. "Who wants to face the Scaredy-cat? I'll take side bets on this one for ammunition. I'll need it when the assholes come for them."

Jeff caught some of the things flying toward him and ducked the rest as people placed new bets and offerings for rental of the boy. The main patrons pointed at which part of their stash was their ante.

Jeff took his time, being as greedy as Kimmie had advised. In his mind, he stored the fact that he would have done it even without the advice. He wanted it all. “Let’s make this one for the youngest male too. Sale only, no rentals. I don’t have time to train him.”

The cheers increased to damaging levels, bring more of the outside people to doors and windows.

Come closer. Jeff waved them in as new items were tossed and Darren proceeded into the ring with wide eyes and shaking hands. *Come in and stay a bit. We’ll have a real fine time. Death Master Jeff is in the house.*

4

Becky eased on the gas of the small car she’d stolen while the mob enjoyed the fighting. She and Jeff had been trying to figure out how to keep so many people busy for the eight hours she would have needed to fly back to the truck stop, but as sunset approached, Jeff had spotted something closer. When he’d filled her in, Becky had been eager.

Flying by, Jeff had spotted tanks of gas attached to blown-over display models and assumed more would be stored inside the grill shop. Methane was a heavier than air gas and could be placed around the warehouse without drawing much notice from the crowd that would be drunk by the time she returned. She would have to hurry in placing the

tanks, of course, and hope no one noticed her doing it, but Becky had helped with the plan by suggesting he use the kids to their full capabilities and let them all fight.

Under the barrier, Jeff had agreed right away. Becky wished she wasn't feeling anything either as she sped toward the nearby town in the dark, alone. She hated feeling this way. If Seth hadn't come out west with her, she would already be dead by her own hand. He'd kept her alive and she was slowly healing. She hadn't decided if going with Safe Haven would ruin that for her, but she was determined to get all these kids to Angela alive. She would make other choices then.

Behind Becky, a bike cruised the cracked interstate without being noticed.

Humming, the man on the bike took the same path when she veered off the highway, following her into the same shopping area.

When she stopped, the rider pulled in behind a small store and shut off his bike. He watched from the shadows as she examined debris and then walked up the dirty stairs. When the girl went inside the store, he emerged from the alley.

Thoughts full of ugly images, the tall man climbed into her car and laid down in the backseat, still humming.

Becky came right back out of the dark store, eyes glowing. "Get out of there."

The killer had no choice. The voice in his mind was overruling his choices, making him open the door and come toward her with jerky steps as he tried to fight.

Becky studied the strong looking man and then pointed at the store. “Load the tanks into the trunk. Keep going until you get them all.”

Becky grinned at the man’s panicking eyes as he walked by her. “You should have just stayed and enjoyed the fights.”

Becky opened the trunk while scanning the area to make sure no one else had followed her. She was relieved when it was empty, but also disappointed. If she had another stalker, she would have more hands to get this done faster.

Sighing at her tired back and upset stomach, Becky went to help her captive get the other tanks.

Chapter Fifteen
Make It Burn

1

“**C**arry them in like you’re going to trade. Make an offer for me. It will be accepted. Then I’ll let go of you and come with you willingly.” She regarded her passenger as she finished the lie. “I promise. I like you too.”

The man went crazy with thoughts of giving her whatever she wanted if she would let go of his body.

Becky snickered. “Seth never says that when I do this to him.” She shrugged. “He is getting off then, though, so I understand why you don’t like it.” She reached over and nudged the man’s crotch with the gun she’d put in her hand as she pulled out of the store. “Be good and you’ll also leave with your balls.”

The noise and lights of the warehouse came to them. Becky eased off the gas. “Remember what I said. You could probably find a way to warn them, but I’ll make it out of here, and I hold a grudge.” Becky pulled into a deserted section of the parking lot and hit the trunk button. She waved. “Get on it.”

Becky ducked as the man got out of the car and went to the trunk, groaning.

People saw him, but when they recognized what he was unloading, they assumed it was for betting.

“Better hurry!” someone shouted as they too headed inside with arms full of trading items. “They’re already on the fourth fight. They lost one of the kids. Bets are going nuts!”

The man grunted as he lifted two tanks and hurried after the couple.

Becky waited until she thought it was clear and then eased out of the car.

She zipped the hoodie she’d taken from the grill store and walked inside with the other stragglers. She advanced with her hand on her gun. People were still wanting the fights the most, but she kept an eye out for new problems as she snuck back into Jeff’s camp. If they were on fight number four, the mood would change soon.

2

Seth saw Becky slip into the bedroll with the boys and knew he should feel relief. He’d never been in a more dangerous situation. All he could manage was a frown at her in case people were watching them. “You get the flashlight from the truck?”

Becky gave him a double nod to let him know she’d been successful, but she couldn’t tell him the rest of what was going on, even in code. It was too risky with so many people around. If not for most

of them being drunk, her absence would have been noticed.

Becky saw her stalker in the rear of her side of the warehouse, setting a tank down. She frowned at him but couldn't force him to do what she'd ordered without using magic to reinforce the first spell. When he went back toward the door, she had to content herself with knowing the tanks were at least inside. She didn't know what was wrong with her gift, but there wasn't time to figure it out now.

“The Brawler's up next. No weapons!”

Becky listened to the screaming bets with one ear and the minds of those closest with the other. She also comforted Roy and Romeo, who believed their time in front of the crowd was coming.

Both boys snuggled tighter to her beneath the cover of the bedroll, shaking. They wanted this to be over.

So did Becky.

Seth chortled with the crowd at something the fighter in the middle was doing, causing Becky's stomach to boil harder. She didn't like Seth this way. When it really was all over, she planned to make him promise he wouldn't use the barrier again.

Seth coughed and laughed, looking like he was enjoying himself.

Becky caught sight of Kimmie standing at Jeff's side. She was watching Jeff in the same way that Becky was watching Seth.

Have we made a big mistake here? Becky finally began to get scared.

The crowd screamed as blood spilled.

“The kid wins!” Jeff laughed. “Did you see that scramble? Kid’s fast!”

Bets were paid, and more were made as Jeff pointed to the next child. “We’ll do one more, then take a drink and piss break for the finale.”

The crowd was mixed on his choice, but no one protested as the next kid came into the circle. Wallace was stocky and taller than the other kids, with a black glare that promised death to anyone not ready for him.

Shouts echoed across the warehouse. All of the pedophiles wanted him. So did the new crop of up-and-coming whorehouse madams.

Jeff wanted all of the sickos. He waved the renters and buyers forward. “Let’s see your shit or git.”

People laughed with him, liking Jeff’s manner. All he wanted was what they wanted—fair trades and fun while watching someone else die.

Jeff regarded the bloody body by his feet and sighed. Brea hadn’t been fast enough to avoid the blow to her head. She was faking dead right now, but she did have a concussion. Jeff had paid the bet while marking the winner for later. It had cost him a grenade launcher and the sight of a blow that would be burned into his memory forever. There was no way he was coming through this without

scars. The same was true for the children. Even the winners would leave damaged.

The warehouse was heating up and stinking in places as people sweated. The odors of alcohol and anger also flowed through the throng, bringing bugs with it. Flies and gnats circled the cloud of CO₂ that gathered at the top of the warehouse. The horde of bugs grew, dipping to bite and drink before returning to the sweet scent of people's exhalations rising to the second floor area. The insects couldn't decide which cloud was real, giving the people a break between attacks.

Thunder cracked outside, warning of impending rain. Fat drops sprinkled the parking area, driving the weaker groups inside. As it began to pour, the outside area emptied.

Jeff observed the windows for movement and found a lone man as the crowd cheered and jeered the bleeding kid who was twisting his thumbs into a woman's sockets while she stabbed at him with an illegal knife to no avail. Jeff would have stopped the fight, but the boy had dealt out his own penalty for it. "That's a win!"

Wallace kept at it until his thumbs sank into her eyes.

Jeff nodded at Kimmie to get him under control.

Kimmie entered the ring to take Wallace's arm.

Enraged, he swung around and grabbed her by the throat.

Kimmie didn't struggle. She knew better. She stared into his eyes and waited for Jeff to rip them apart.

Jeff did and shoved the boy toward the crowd. "He needs another fight! Who wants to try?!"

Wallace pulled out of the daze just to sink back in as Jeff chose a challenger and the crowd shoved him back into the middle.

Kimmie felt hands closing around her leg and realized she'd dropped her knife.

Jeff lifted the girl out of harm's way and swung her onto his shoulders. The crowd had grown tired of blood. Soon, they would want other satisfactions. Renters were lining one side of the center ring now, staring at the kids with haunted eyes and full hands. They'd saved their best for last.

Jeff felt Kimmie shudder, but he didn't know if it was fear or eagerness to spill blood. "Go!"

Kimmie observed the crowd, easily getting their thoughts. Jeff was also scanning them, but he couldn't concentrate on it like she could. He had to play his role. All she had to do now was hold onto his head and look fearless. The finale was coming soon.

Wallace didn't have an easy fight the second time around. Jeff, angered over him attacking Kimmie, had chosen a matched opponent. The boy would be an Eagle at some point and he had to learn respect for the rules.

Kimmie frowned, but couldn't remind him they didn't know all the rules yet. Romeo had told them

they didn't allow fighting, but they all knew this was wrong anyway.

"I'm sorry!" Wallace cowered from the bigger man who grabbed him. He squeezed into a ball as the man started to crush his ribs, using his legs to burst out of the hold.

The man staggered, holding the wounds in his chest.

Wallace stood up, flashing boots with a bloody knife sticking from both of them.

The man fell over, groaning as Jeff named the winner.

Back at their campsite, Becky scrutinized the lone man watching through the window. *Now.*

People in the crowd swiveled toward her, but the stalker entering behind her caught their attention too.

Becky pointed at him. "I heard it!"

The crowd surged his way.

Becky dropped her head, hoping the man had brought in all of the canisters as he was shoved out the door while being stabbed and hit. *So much for that plan.*

Becky found Jeff in the mob, letting him see her fear so he would know things hadn't gone like she planned.

Jeff pointed at the corner that wasn't being used for anything but a bathroom. "Five minute break!" He swung Kimmie onto her feet and pushed her toward Becky. "Get ready."

Kimmie hurried to the bedroll, jabbing at people with Jeff's knife. He hadn't felt it being liberated.

Jeff used the bathroom without feeling self-conscious or fearing for his safety. He did worry over items being stolen, but he'd drunk a lot from the jug going around and he needed to be empty before the real action started.

Seth appeared at his elbow, also letting go of a long stream.

The men didn't speak until they were both finished, following the unspoken code of men.

Jeff tucked himself into place and surveyed the warehouse, noting the smell of gas. It was faint beneath the alcohol and sweat, but it was there. He saw the small mob returning from killing the stalker who had followed Becky. Jeff was getting all their thoughts too, though he was storing information without time to process it. He noted Becky's fear and then watched what she was watching. Plans were in place even though her unwilling helper had been removed. Jeff wasn't certain how that had happened, but he planned to find out later.

Jeff waved at the center ring. "They're all for rent after the finale."

Cheers rose again, soothing the wild crowd once more. Jeff knew he wouldn't be able to do it again. The lit fuse was about to reach the bomb.

Jeff pointed at bets and fighters, aware of the mob expecting a great show after some of the fast and almost boring fights. He hadn't viewed it in

their minds, but he instinctively chose two fighters to face the girl. “Doubles!”

Kimmie unbuttoned her long sleeved shirt. Under it was the stained clothes she’d worn during the escape from the UN.

People backed away as she came through the long legs and piles of debris. They also began shouting bets.

Jeff took his time. The gas smell was stronger now, but he wanted it to keep building.

Kimmie didn’t carry a weapon. She stepped between the two big, leering men while Jeff took bets and denied items. The pile of goods at his feet was being studied by those who had lost it and those who wanted it. There was no way they would get out of here alive. *I don’t need to*, the girl decided. *As long as the others make it out, Jeff and I can die together in this cause. It’s worthy.*

Jeff looked at her, catching that. He gave a subtle nod and then lifted a hand. “Go!”

The two men lunged.

Kimmie opened her arms.

Jeff tensed as magic crackled.

Kimmie drained both men at the same time, sucking hard and fast. She let the bodies tip over, belching.

Silence held for a few more seconds and then pandemonium broke out as half the crowd tried to run and the rest surged forward.

Kimmie let magic burst out of her without restraint, using the emotions of the refugees to feed it. “Sleep...”

Jeff added his strength to hers, letting her pull what she needed to knock them all out.

Bodies fell in a wave that ran toward the doors and windows as people realized they’d been tricked and fled.

“Turn!” Jeff shouted, drawing his gun.

Kimmie directed her gift around the door as refugees came toward them in a death run.

Jeff opened fire, as did Doug and Seth.

The gunshots echoed through the warehouse, alerting everyone else to a problem. People came from cubbies and upper rooms, pulling up pants and wiping noses. Drunks paced toward the center ring, peering bleary eyed at the piles of supplies and unconscious people.

Jeff shot them too. His hand was an extension of his mind, refusing to stop until the dry click told him to reload.

Kimmie placed a hand on Jeff’s wrist.

Jeff flinched as the sentimental barrier was removed. “You didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t tell me to.”

Jeff grinned, but it faded as screams outside alerted them to people escaping.

“I can get them if you give me more energy.” Kimmie was pale. She stayed at his side as he went to their site. It took a minute to find a path over the hundreds of fallen bodies. Murmurs and snores

were the loudest noise now. It was freaky after so much chaos.

“Let them go. It will help end these UN parties. They’ll tell the story.”

Kimmie kept pace while Jeff gathered their camp and directed the other adults to put the supplies and items at the fighting ring.

“How long?”

Kimmie concentrated, scanning the people. “Another ten minutes, I think. Some of them are trying to wake now, but I’m smothering them.”

Jeff looked around to discover people gasping for air. She meant that literally.

Kimmie gestured to the other kids. “Collect and return. Then make it burn.”

Jeff went to their fallen kids and knelt. “Take what you need.”

Instead of them using his remaining energy, the kids reached out to drain the nearest refugee.

“Invisibles!”

Witnessing the others doing it sent the scavenging kids into a frenzy of claiming. Lights and groans bounced off the warehouse walls.

Jeff forced himself to leave them alone. He grabbed Roy and Romeo and headed for the door with the adults on his heels. “Make an assembly line so we can stay in sight of each other. Kimmie doesn’t load. She has other work.”

The kids liked that. They didn’t want Kimmie to do anything but continue to get them closer to the alpha.

Kimmie refused to leave the warehouse and watch the truck like Jeff wanted. She stayed with her kids and scavenged.

3

“She tired.” Amy tugged on Jeff as he handed another load of supplies into the truck. He’d taken this position so he could stack it, but Amy’s words sent him back into the warehouse.

Jeff signaled from the door “Load up, right now.”

The kids ran at his tone, bringing what they had in their hands.

Kimmie came last, making sure all of her people got out.

Jeff put a hand on the girl’s shoulders as they left. “Wait until we’re pulling out.”

Kimmie nodded, flare gun in her hand. Jeff hadn’t felt her take it, but he knew she had it.

“I also know you have my knife.” He led her to the front of the truck and locked the door before shutting it.

Doug waved and closed the rear door.

Jeff quickly secured it and then trotted around to his side. He would stop tomorrow and replace the truck again, but right now, he wanted to be gone. The parking area was deserted, though headlights and taillights flashed all around them in the darkness. Hopefully survivors would think this

truck was someone else who had gotten away. In the dark, it would be hard to tell.

Jeff rolled them out with a heavier load than when they'd come in, watching for anyone coming from the warehouse. He could feel people waking. The girl was too far away to hold them all.

Kimmie let go with a deep sigh. She drew in a blast of Jeff's worry to help her aim and fired the flare gun.

Jeff turned away, but the bright, loud blast still slammed into the semi and bounced them across the pavement. He fought for control and barely gained it before they hit the edge of the road.

The warehouse windows blew out, spraying glass. Fire rushed over the panicking mob, searing away hair and clothes before catching them on fire.

Jeff hit the gas and breathed in deep of fresh air. He felt like he'd been smothering beneath the negative, wild emotions of the refugees.

"Did we get them all?"

Jeff shook his head, grid scanning the people around them. "But it will still help. The boss will be happy there's less threats." He sighed. "She'll also hate what we've done here. You should know that."

"We already feel it." Kimmie pushed off her shoes. "But she doesn't blame us or you. She hates herself for allowing it."

"How do you know that?" Jeff was still hoping the girl could make him understand why Angela's leadership was good after everything she'd done.

"Our hearts are sad. We feel what she feels."

Jeff deliberated that. His sadness from Crista's death usually overwhelmed that emotion from everyone else.

"We experienced the same thing when we lost our loved ones." Kimmie buttoned her shirt against the cool night air. "But we love the alpha, so we feel her pain and her joy. You feel nothing from her because you're blocking her out, refusing to accept her control."

"I don't want anyone to have control over me."

Kimmie bonded with him even deeper. "Neither do we, but we were put here in this time and place to do a job and she's in charge of it. At least accept that much and we can have peace among ourselves."

"What job?"

"To save the world, of course. What other job would make these chores okay?"

Jeff didn't know what to say to that.

Kimmie slid back onto the seat next to him. "We'll help you through it, like you helped us through this."

Jeff patted her wrist. "Deal." He scanned the piles of supplies in the floorboard. "Why don't you dig through that crap and find something clean to wear?"

She immediately crouched to do so.

Jeff blew out a sigh of relief as he was left alone for the moment. Not having the sentimental barrier for the last of the action had been hard. He needed

time to adjust to everything he'd done and to the fact that he already missed it.

Jeff increased speed, berating himself for being human. *Angela will help me. She'll owe me for this. All I want now is to be told this was all okay and I'm not corrupt.*

Cool air blew over his hot skin, calming him. The old Eagle pride came next and this time, he was able to enjoy it. Angela hated the methods, but Adrian hadn't. He'd trained them to be ruthless on runs. *He'd be proud of me.*

Jeff refused to consider that further.

4

In the East

“What do you mean he left?”

Marc frowned at Nancy's panicked tone. It was late. She should have been settled in a tent like almost everyone else was right now. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

Nancy bit down on the truth and shook her head.

Marc sighed. “You're either hers or Adrian's. You can't keep riding that fence.”

Nancy stared at him, slowly nodding. “You're right. I should make a choice and stick to it.”

Marc's scowl deepened. “That's not what I meant.”

“No. It's right.” Nancy walked away. “I'll make a choice and stick to it, then we'll know what we know, won't we?”

Marc watched her go toward the mess, not sure what he should write in his report about the encounter. Anyone was free to leave Safe Haven. Coming back was another story.

Marc gestured to the point sentry. *Is she still with the kids?*

Kyle nodded.

Marc detoured that way. Shift change was coming up and he didn't have her next orders.

Ivan fell in step, holding out a paper. "Next shift."

He left before Marc could scan him.

Marc read the schedule and approved it. He went to confer with Kyle, interruption no longer needed.

Ivan entered the kids' tent, giving Angela a nod.

Angela delivered a slight smile and then returned her attention to the children gathered around her for a bedtime story. "Are you ready for the ending?"

The kids clapped. The older children in the rear of the tent joined them, hooked into the tale she'd woven.

"Right as the giant King sat down to make the deal for peace, the wolf King lunged over the banquet table and ripped out his throat." Angela waited for the wincing and sadness to ease, then finished the legend she'd learned from Lenore and Max. "After that, the giants were driven from their mountains and have been living with us ever since."

They can never go home or the wolves will kill them all.”

“Will we be like that?” Cody was once again at Leeann’s side. “Can we come home?”

“I told you, I’ve seen it.” Leeann waved at Angela. “Tell him we’re coming back.”

“We’re coming back.” Angela didn’t know who all would be in that crew, but she was already certain these two children would be. They were powerful, and they were both corrupted in ways. Taking lives to survive had marked them. They would have to come with the adults.

To Angela’s surprise, Missy pointed at Caleb. “I told you we’ll help her win that fight. You won’t have to because you’re pure.”

Caleb appeared relieved, but Angela felt him wondering if he should be bad so he would be welcome on the trip. Angela sighed, forced into meanness. “I’m not taking any child who isn’t a descendant, no matter the relationship, so stop it right now or I’ll be forced to punish you.”

Caleb dropped his chin. “I’m sorry. I’ll miss you.”

She smiled, opening her arms.

Caleb flew to her for a tight hug.

Angela returned it with tears she refused to let fall. “I’ll miss you too, but we have years together before then. Let’s not ruin it with sadness, okay?”

Caleb nodded, sniffing. “I’ll be good. You’ll be proud of me.”

“I already am. I’m proud of all of you. You’re the future of both sides of my people. I couldn’t love you more.”

“Even when we’re bad?”

Angela smiled at Missy, heart hurting as she picked up images of the action in the west. “That’s when you need my love the most.”

Chapter Sixteen
All I Have
Day Three
Dawn

1

“Let the monsters free.”

Den mothers opened flaps and doors.

Children barreled out as if they were part of a race. They ran straight to the beach, under the watch of the Eagles and the ocean. Both viewed them with suspicious tolerance.

Angela let them go for a minute, aware of the wind whipping her braid around. The kids had restless energy to work off too.

Ahead, three of the children began throwing rocks into the water.

No.

All the kids rotated at Angela’s correction, little hands full of rocks and garbage.

The ocean is alive. If you dirty it, the ocean can’t breathe and will die. Do you want to kill the water?

Kids shook their heads, dropping the garbage.

Angela smiled. “Good. Rocks found on land stay on land. Garbage should be bagged to be burned later for fuel.”

The kids cheered as Angela revealed a bag of bubble wands. She passed them out, actually able to feel the relief of the ocean. “This *can* go in the water. A little soap helps clean messes, right?”

More cheers went up, along with a whine to the water that sounded eager.

Angela and the den mothers helped the smaller kids, while the rest of the camp headed to breakfast or observed. Some of those were sad, thinking of their missing loved ones, but it was good for them to see that life would continue and they were the reason why. The orphans wouldn’t stand a chance without the adults. They were really going to use a village to raise their children and this time, it would succeed because they all had one goal—survival.

Angela motioned Monica and Allison over to take her place with the kids. She’d rather hang out here, but there was work waiting. “Let them play for a few minutes and then get them into the smaller community tent. The Eagles are almost finished unloading some new clothes and things.”

“We’ll cover it.” Monica took the sticky bag of bubble wands.

Allison, carrying both twins in a front-n-back sling, joined the guards. It allowed her to watch the other kids and keep soap out of the faces of the twins. It also let them get fresh air and see the water—something everyone was gawking at. Over half of their camp members hadn’t visited an ocean before the war. It was a dangerous fascination.

Marc stayed with Angela as she went to the mess and ducked into the wide canopy that was flapping in the stiff shore breeze.

“Tie this down better. We’re getting more wind here. It has to be tighter.”

“I thought so too, but the man in charge out there said some slack is good.” Gus came over to do as she instructed.

“It is, but we’ve got a little too much here.” She pointed at the billowing roof. “If it does that, it’s too loose. If it makes a musical hum when you strum it with your thumb, it’s too tight. Tell Ivan when he comes through for his next check.”

Gus grinned. “Will do.”

Angela went to Brittani, who was unpacking food supplies and avoiding looking at the workers or the guards. “Why aren’t you with the Eagles?”

Brittani pointed toward the flap. “Because he was drafted as cook and I didn’t think you’d be able to eat it.”

Angela spotted Stanley entering the flap.

The flap billowed up...

Gus fell backward at the unexpected blow from the tarp, landing on his ass with the box on his chest. He groaned, blinking. “What happened?”

“Stanley,” the two women answered at the same time.

Everyone chortled except Gus and Stanley.

Marc helped Gus up.

Stanley began grabbing damaged supplies and apologizing.

Angela looked at Brittani. “You’re scared.”

The pretty woman nodded. “A little. You expect a lot. I don’t want to be the reason this all falls.”

Another fly in the Safe Haven web. Angela celebrated.

Brittani frowned. “You gonna eat me now?”

Silence fell through the tent.

Angela laughed so hard she thought she might be sick. “Look at their expressions!”

Disappointed men dropped their gazes or left the tent, shaking their heads.

Angela wiped tears from her face. “I want you to do rounds with Jennifer.”

Brittani stopped chuckling. “Time for my evaluation with the enforcer, huh?”

“Yes, but it’s also an opportunity for a lifelong friendship with a girl who needs the wisdom of an older sister.”

Brittani warmed. “You think?”

“I do. Once the sparks are finished, you two will be thick as thieves.”

“Is this a reward for saving your life or agreeing to join your army?”

“Yes.” Angela pointed at Neil. “Make an appointment with him when Jennifer’s done with you. He’ll know why.”

Brittani’s worries were eased a little and her longings were stirred. *She got me again. If she keeps doing that to me, I’ll want to learn everything in that ruthless brain.*

Angela smiled in satisfaction and left the mess. When the Eagles realized they needed to pick replacements for when they came home for the final battle, there would be a rush to put their choices in place, but it would be too late for the most important positions. *I'm making those now. That's why I'm the leader. Our replacements have to be just as cunning and that will take time to bring out. After all, I don't have an Adrian to use against them. All I have is our survival.*

2

“There you are.” Candy joined Conner at the far table for breakfast, ignoring disapproving looks from some of the camp members. The Eagles were no longer watching their every move, but the camp was.

Conner grunted. “Yeah. One of them bumped into me as I got my tray.” Conner indicated the front of his shirt, where a large oatmeal stain was setting. “He reminded me that Lee was a well-respected member of Safe Haven and I'm just the bastard of a traitor and shouldn't be here.”

Candy's cheeks flushed. Her hands balled into fists as she glared around. “Who was it? You tell me right now!”

“It doesn't matter.” Conner was having a low day. “They're right. Lee was a great man and I'm just a horny kid who wants to give you his babies.”

He sighed miserably. “Go away, will you? Smelling you makes it harder.”

Candy understood why Conner was doing it, but she couldn't help being hurt. “I guess I'm not worth fighting for after all.” She turned toward the mess tables where the more uptight people were watching happily. She noted their faces and left.

Conner dipped his chin to his chest and tried to block out both the gloating and Candy's anger. He hoped he was scheduled for a scavenging run today. He needed it. Getting away from these people for a while would be a relief. It was just too bad Candy couldn't go. In her condition, he preferred her to be here and safe, but he didn't want to be away from her. She would be alone here again, like he would be while out with whatever team Angela assigned him to. He handled his new life well most days, but he'd dreamed of Little Rock last night and all the freedoms he'd had there. The constant restraint upon opening his eyes this morning had been too much.

Conner sighed, forcing himself to keep eating. *I'll be better tomorrow. The day after will be better and so on. It can't stay this ugly forever.*

Sitting nearby, Morgan felt bad for the boy, but he didn't think Conner was aware of the most important part of a hope like that. For anything to change, the person had to do something different. Planning it and dreaming of it were never enough. The person had to take that first step. Often, they

fell, and that held many back from happier, more satisfying lives. They were afraid to fail.

Morgan hoped Conner would be an exception and take the bruised knees like a man. When he stood up after that, already on the new path, walking would be careful and successful because of the memory of that first fall. It didn't have to ever happen again. *Hell, some people get lucky and don't even have to suffer that first failure. All they have to do is conquer their fear of it happening.*

Morgan listened to the line of Eagle trainees marching around the camp perimeter under Greg's direction. They'd just made it to the mess side of the small site and were going strong. Several of those grunting, sweating, panting, muttering men and women would be leaders. Some would die on runs. A few would turn to the darkness and be lost. Those remaining would make up the heart of the teams, providing wisdom during dilemmas, but it still wouldn't be enough if Angela couldn't bring them together.

Many walks of life were in the Eagles now, with both genders represented, as well as five races. It was a massive setup that could easily fold into its old self and finish imploding. Morgan was positive Angela had plans in place, but he hoped they didn't include more death and battles. Everyone here knew this was their last campsite. That was a huge goal to keep them working, but if she left again or Marc kept screwing up, or if they didn't unearth the supplies they needed, it could all go bad.

Sitting nearby, Keith lifted his mug and finished the beer he'd spilled part of when bumping into Conner. *Here's to it all going bad.*

Around Keith, descendants went about their routines and duties without catching the wolf in the pasture. Keith was a Byzan and had been for longer than Angela or William. His shield was only in danger from their enforcer, but he didn't worry about that. As one of the more aggressive men in Safe Haven, he scared many of their women. Jennifer avoided him and his mind, certain she would find ugly sexual thoughts in there about her.

And you're right. Keith slammed the mug on the table to make Conner flinch.

He smiled as the boy got up and left. Keith had been playing head games with descendants for decades. He was usually the one directing the operations, of course, but even an old dog had work to do during an apocalypse. He'd been with Ciemus for months, waiting for Angela and Safe Haven to arrive. It had been easy to join up as a local. Now, he just had to wait for a good opportunity and then he would control all the descendants under her command.

Keith leered at Jennifer as she passed the open flap, happy to see her grimace. Only one thing could sink him now and that was acting out of character. So far, he'd been abrasive and drank a lot, but he labored liked a dog on whatever job he was given. The Eagles were already eyeing him with tolerant pity for being a drunkard. When they finally relaxed

their guard, he would kill their boss and take her gifts. Keith's power as a Byzan was in his shielded mind. With her ability to absorb and copy gifts, he could take over the world.

Descendants across the camp continued without responding, but not all of them missed the malice this time. Angela stopped, shivering. She didn't know who was having bad thoughts about her, but the lack of compassion in it implied the person was cold and careful—a true threat.

The other descendant who felt it was Autumn. She stirred in her mother's arms, grunting.

Jennifer glance down. "Hiya, baby girl!"

Autumn squinted at her. *Danger. Nearby. For all of us.*

Jennifer began to scan the mess without reacting in any other way. She was standing outside the flap, waiting for the bathroom lines to thin. The crowded tent was the only place it could be coming from.

Scared of him, Keith came right to mind. *Is it him?*

Autumn pushed out a baby fart and settled back into sleep.

Jennifer sighed. The baby had woken to give the warning. That in itself was amazing. Expecting more was crazy.

Jennifer swept the camp, coming to rest on Angela, who was staring at her.

Angela lifted her brow. *Did you get it?*

Jennifer shook her head. She refused to say her daughter had. She sent it in hand code instead.

Angela made note of it and joined them near the flap. “Care to join me for a final scan before the teams go?”

Jennifer led the way inside, glaring at Keith first. She would dig into him like she’d been afraid to. With Angela by her side, it wouldn’t be as intimidating.

Angela frowned. *I didn’t know you and Keith had problems.*

Keith regarded them, catching his name.

Jennifer didn’t look away. *He puts off bad vibes. Nothing else.*

Very careful, like Kenn. Angela smiled at the man. *Shall we?*

Keith swallowed, putting his fork down.

Jennifer handed the sleeping baby to Pam as she passed. “Hold her for me, will you?”

Pam was delighted. She loved kids and missed having her daughter’s adopted children around.

Angela noted that, distractedly, as Jennifer began to scan Keith without pretending otherwise.

The tent went quiet. People knew what was happening by the way the two women were staring without blinking and how Keith was paling.

Eagles on duty in the mess went to the flap to be able to call for help if it was needed. They were all rookies.

Angela settled at the table by her knee without looking away. Keith’s mind wasn’t blocked to them, but like with the teenager in the mall, it was empty. They now assumed that meant bad news in

one way or another. They hadn't had the chance to practice trying to get through the emptiness again until now.

Marc came to the flap and stayed there, observing. He was off duty and supposed to be resting, but the tension was too thick.

Jennifer held out her hand. "Confess and receive mercy."

The entire mess tensed, not sure exactly who she was speaking to.

Angela wasn't either. It felt as if Jennifer had just locked everyone in place. No one could leave.

"Someone in here was having bad thoughts." Jennifer's eyes began to glow. "And not unhappy, bad reflections. They're planning on blowing up our ship, with Angela and me on it." Jennifer's orbs blazed. "Come clean. If you make me dig deeper, it will hurt."

"Please, don't!" A Ciemus man, Arthur, fell to his knees in front of her, unable to keep her out any longer. "Donner sent me to Ciemus months ago, but I never agreed with it and I've never thought of blowing you all up." His tone was panicking. "Please, I would never have hurt you. I love Safe Haven."

Jennifer swept through his mind like a tornado. She hadn't gotten a single bad vibe from the man.

"That's because he isn't the threat." Angela was watching three people in the crowd. None of them met her eye.

Jennifer let go of Arthur. “Who else is lying to us?”

“I am.” A Ciemus woman waved a broken arm. “Arthur and I were sent at the same time. We’re also lovers and I’m expecting his baby.”

“That’s why you changed your mind?” Angela guessed. “You fell in love.”

“Actually, I was the one who had to be convinced not to follow through.” She was ready to take a punishment to spare her mate. “He never wanted the job.”

“Then why did he take it?” Marc demanded in the suspicious silence.

“Because there wasn’t anyone left after the Ghost wiped out the troops.” Arthur didn’t lie. “Donner was forced to rely on infiltrators, and we were unlucky enough to have survived that first fight.”

Marc deliberated those hazy battles and shook his head. “You can’t stay here.”

Angela agreed, though Marc wasn’t supposed to make those choices anymore. She swept the tent. “I know you’re out there, waiting for me to let my guard down, waiting for the Eagles to relax. Be honorable and come forward now. Fight me fairly.”

Keith was tempted, but only his shield was a match for her. He opened his thoughts enough for the women to hear him wondering who was stupid enough to want the alpha dead when she would give her life for any of them.

Jennifer and Angela traded glances, but without proof, there was nothing they could do. Keith would be watched, as would everyone who was in this tent right now, but in the end, it wouldn't be enough. The assassin would get their shot.

Angela motioned to Jennifer. "Let's get them moved."

Eagles reacted to the order they'd been expecting sooner. Dawn had passed an hour ago.

The traitors were led out of the tent by men and women who didn't need orders to shoot them as soon as they were out of sight of the camp members and kids. They already knew how to handle it.

3

"All scavenging teams will leave after lunch."

They'd just finished relocating Safe Haven to the beach alongside the huge ship. People were gawking as they worked.

Neil waved men over as Kenn and Kyle signaled the Eagles.

Marc kept watch on their surroundings, content to be her personal guard, but he couldn't deny the pang of pain at being out of the circle as Angela updated the team leaders.

It's for the best. Jennifer came to his side. *She needs protection.*

Marc turned at the tone, sensing Jennifer didn't want to share her latest tale of doom and gloom with the boss yet.

Jennifer chuckled. *She's the first person I talked to about it.*

Angela frowned, stepping into the circle of the Eagles and people she'd chosen.

Jennifer drew Marc away. "She's covered. I want to talk to you about something else."

Marc allowed Jennifer to pull him out of their perimeter, both barely avoiding the rookie stringing the tape according to the line that his guide, Ivan, was marking in the sand. Damien was new to Safe Haven, but as one of the Ciemus fighters, he was already being trained to take his place among the Eagles.

"What's up?"

Jennifer enclosed them in a bubble and then opened a private line. Then she smothered them in the roar of the nearby surf rushing in with the change of the tide.

Marc frowned. "You really are hiding something."

"I may know how to help you heal the damage to your relationship." Jennifer crossed her arms over her chest. "It might also end your relationship. She's corrupt in ways. You aren't, except for the vendetta against Adrian, so I'm telling you instead of him."

Marc braced for something awful.

Jennifer delivered it. "I saw your future with both women. Kendle will love you and you'll be happy. She'll raise your son in place of the child she can't have, and her madness will fade because she has an equal mate."

Marc had been shaking his head the entire time she spoke. “Not going to happen.”

“With Angela, you have no guarantees of anything, Marc.” Jennifer was unable to force out the exact words. “Happiness might be fleeting.”

Marc studied her concerned expression, able to tell she cared about his well being.

“I do. You’re one of the few men here who might be able to keep Safe Haven in line if anything were to happen to Angela. You have a lot to learn, but you’re her true heir. We all know that.”

“So for the camp?”

Jennifer snorted. “Because I like you and because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Causing trouble between us?”

“Saving you some misery. I know the plan, remember?”

Marc tensed. “It won’t succeed?”

“It breaks the bond he put on her.” Jennifer hated to be the one who had to tell him. She liked Marc.

“But it doesn’t end their feelings.” Marc wasn’t surprised. “It can’t because she loves him.” Marc studied Angela through the shield. “How could she not love him? He gave her everything. All I’ve ever had to give was my heart. It isn’t enough for a woman like her.”

“It could have been, if the apocalypse hadn’t come. If we weren’t fighters in some mysterious battle.”

“It would have ended up the same for us.” Marc admitted the truth. “I left her when we were kids. I betrayed her; I can’t ever take it back.”

“Would you, if you could?”

Marc slowly shook his head.

“Do you think she knows that?”

“Probably. She knows everything else.”

“She doesn’t know what I’m about to tell you. I’m giving you the choice because you’ve earned it.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “Angela is going to get one more chance at a baby. If it’s yours, it has 50/50 odds of survival to birth. If it’s Adrian’s, the baby will live, and their bond will be natural, unbreakable.”

“Her happiness means my desolation.”

“If William fathers her child, she’ll also survive birth, but Angela will go mad; William would never stay here to spare her that.”

“It all sucks.” Marc tried to break the awful sense of dread. He couldn’t take listening to his own heart wither. “What else you got?”

“And now we come to the reason for the bubble.” Jennifer used her hands to deliver the rest of the message. *We can’t keep going with the drama. People are losing faith. You have three choices.*

I’ve tried to kill him. More than once.

Her, Marc. Get rid of your lover and Angela will do the same.

Marc sighed. *What’s the third option?*

Make sure neither of them get on that boat with us. If you can't kill them, at least leave them here.

You're fooling yourself if you think she'll allow that. Kendle has information about the island and the ocean. Adrian seems to have knowledge about everything else.

And them staying here would interfere with the survival of Safe Haven, Jennifer finished quickly, sensing Angela's attention shifting to them. But if she thought it would hurt the dream to take them along, she'd find a place for them here. Right?

Marc's scowl took up his face. *What do you want from me?*

"Help!" Jennifer shot back promptly, switching to speech while Angela was distracted. "I'm going to convince her that we would be better off without them. You're going to help me."

"How?" he asked in a grumbling tone implying he wasn't willing to do much, that he'd already endangered his place enough.

"By pretending to be the old Marc she can count on. I'll do the rest."

"I'm the same man I've always been."

"No, you're not. Your obsession with our leader has reached a dangerous level. You're going to keep pushing her until she turns away from you and the light." Jennifer looked at Angela. "If this doesn't stop, she'll kill Kendle. You'll finally get to take Adrian's head, and Save Haven will collapse during your trials." She placed a hand on his arm. "For all our sakes, Marc, please try to be who you were

when things were good. If you can't, we're all going to die on that boat."

"I don't know how to be that man anymore." He saw Angela frowning at them. "I've tried, but I think I hate him more than I love her."

The admission was awful. It was also freeing.

Jennifer smiled at him. "I understand. It's natural after everything he's done. He hasn't been properly punished."

"She promised to. She keeps promising to."

"And it isn't good enough, right? Even if she's cruel to him?"

"No. *I* need to do it, feel it, see it."

"Tell me why. Why do you have to have personal justice? He wronged Angela the most."

"No." Marc's tone was full of pain and anger. "He pretended to be my friend. I believed in him. It's not about her."

"It is all about her." Jennifer strengthened the barrier as Angela began digging through the layers to discover what they were talking about. "You and Adrian are distractions. There are two players in this match. They pit us against each other and ourselves. Two kings on opposite sides, fighting over one powerful piece that can win the game for either of them."

"Angela."

"Yes. You and Adrian argue over her, and William secretly wishes he had the courage to kill you both and claim her, but there are only two true players and one prize. The rest of us are pawns."

Marc wanted to deny it, but that explanation fit too well. “Angela knows.”

“Of course. She’s saving the pieces they try to sacrifice, and in being successful, she has become a third player.”

“They’re trying to kill her for it.”

“No, they’re trying to kill you and Adrian for it. They think she will become the greatest fighting descendant ever born on this planet and they need that badly. I don’t know exactly why. I only know she has a lot of power and a heart being ripped to shreds every time those two forces make a move.”

“How long has she known?”

“During the quake, I think.” Jennifer struggled to keep her shield up. Angela was hacking through with an imaginary scythe that actually stung as it cut through layers.

“That’s incredible.” Marc could feel the mental struggle between the two women.

“I need your help, Marc. So does she and so does the future of humanity. Please let go of your vendetta and adopt her goals in every way you can. All our lives depend on your honor.” Jennifer dropped the shield, sweating. “As you can see, you won’t be able to keep *her* out, but it should help you with the trackers.”

Marc nodded, flashing a smile as he played the role. “Thanks for the lesson. I thought you were going to tell me something bad or make me bring Adrian back.”

Jennifer huffed, chin going up. “I don’t make deals with snakes and I certainly don’t want them in this camp.” She nodded to Angela, sorry for the paling forehead and flushing cheeks of their leader. “We’ll do another lesson after the teams return.”

“Are you going to ambush me again?”

Jennifer chuckled as they joined Angela. “Probably. You’re tough to get through to face-to-face.”

Marc took the hint to heart but refused to contemplate their conversation. Instead, he concentrated on Adrian vanishing between the shacks and how happy it had made him.

Angela tuned them out to finish her mini-meeting. She’d been handing out instructions the entire time she and Jennifer were sparring. “Anything else?”

“Kendle left yesterday.” Neil frowned. “Quinn tried to talk her out of it, but he made a snotty comment in the end. Kendle flipped him the bird and marched out of our perimeter.”

Angela didn’t tell him she already knew. “Did anyone go with her?”

“No.”

“She’ll be back. Let her in as if she’s been on a run.”

Neil scowled. “She wants you dead. If she comes back—”

“It’ll be because she’s had a change of heart or because we need her. Kendle is mad, not stupid.

Providing she doesn't have her gifts, she won't try again."

"You're wrong."

Rookie guards muttered at Neil's words, but Angela shrugged. "It could happen, but she's terrified of me. Unless she gets an advantage somehow, I have nothing to fear from her."

"She has nothing to lose."

Angela paused as that rang true. Her lips thinned, hands sliding into her pockets. "It would be a mistake to assume that couldn't happen. You're right."

Neil gaped in shock. "What?"

Angela chuckled with the sentries around them. "You caught a possible mistake and called me on it. Good job."

Neil followed as she came through camp, mouth hanging open.

"She can enter with permission. Talk to Jennifer. She has a spell for it, I think."

Neil wrote it in his book. "I'll get you information on it."

"Excellent. Assign me a body man and go get your team ready to leave."

Neil waved Peter into his place, replacing the man's frown with a grin. Neil didn't know what had caused the man's unhappiness, but it was smoothed over now.

Angela gave Neil a subtle nod of approval as she strolled the small row of bathroom tents going up to

their right. Neil was good with the men. He always had been.

Samantha snickered at Neil's proud expression as he went by the camper where she was still stashed. *He's so cute, so kind.* Samantha felt tears coming from the missing partner who should be walking beside him and shut it down. Her body couldn't take it, and neither could her heart. It was time to let Jeremy go.

One last cry. When I can take it.

Samantha slowly rolled over and went to sleep. In her dreams, she was always with her men.

Angela stifled a sob, picking up Samantha's last waking thoughts as she finished in the bathroom. She felt the same way about her dead children. "And some day, we'll be together again." Angela wiped away her tears. "For now, mommy's gotta go save the world."

Angela emerged to discover teary, smiling descendants who nodded and then went about their chores with fresh determination. Feeling the alpha's pain and then seeing her refuse to give in made it easier to deal with their own losses. When she'd broken in the mountain, they'd been crushed too. She'd proven she could be hurt or even killed. That meant they could be as well.

Chapter Seventeen
My New XO

1

Angela walked back to the warehouse that had been mostly destroyed upon their arrival, going before a body man was assigned. She wanted to determine how much of it they could salvage for use in various projects. Right now, they needed more panels for the wall around camp and she needed this exercise.

Theo and his team were already inside, dismantling.

Angela snickered from the charred doorway. “Great minds.”

Debra came over, holding out her canteen.

Angela took a drink and gave it back. “Thank you.” She studied the deaf woman. Her gunshot wound was almost healed, and she was in the good graces of everyone for taking that hit instead of letting the boss be killed. Debra was healthier and appeared happy

I am. Theo’s wonderful.

Angela scrutinized the newest descendant. “Wow.”

Debra gave an awkward smile. *Are you mad?*

Angela shook her head, smiling. “No. I just thought you were supposed to stay on the island. This implies you’re one of my fighters.”

Theo limped over and jerked Debra away from Angela. “She’s not!”

Angela waved off the concern of her guards.

Theo staggered in surprise as Debra pulled away from him. He was still getting his balance when she shoved him off his cane.

Theo toppled over, landing in a debris pile.

Debra stood in front of him, flashing fast hand gestures that Angela couldn’t keep up with. Thanks to her descendant connection, however, she heard the words loud and clear.

Don’t you ever! She’s the alpha! I’m an Eagle! Don’t you do that again or I’ll knock you out!

Eagles clapped for her.

Descendants smiled in approval.

Angela left, heart clenching. They were so willing to defend her, to die for her. She couldn’t handle the thought of disappointing them. *So I won’t, no matter what it costs me.*

2

“While we’re gone, you are the defenders of this camp. You are Eagles.” Kyle paused to scan the men and women, not encouraged with the weak bodies and gleaming eyes. Safe Haven was developing fanatics. Kyle wasn’t sure if he approved yet, but there was no doubt they needed

the help. “You’ve been training with us for a while, though mostly off the record. The boss told you to come to this meeting because it’s your turn to help openly. We need you.”

The mood in the tent lifted, bringing Kyle to the next part of the speech. He was eager to be finished with it. He didn’t like lying. “If you act like Eagles, the camp will accept you as our replacements if we don’t return. Myself, each team leader, and every member of the council are replaceable. Only the boss isn’t. You keep her alive above everyone else. She’ll cover the rest.”

Kyle turned to nod at Kenn and to avoid the glances of the few in the small crowd who knew he didn’t mean it. Like Angela, he felt all of them were important.

Kenn came forward. “These sheets list the chain of command. I chose it. Have a problem? Talk to me now.” Kenn handed the papers out, also eager to be done. It felt morbid to be handing out replacement jobs for men who were in the tent with him. “All duties start as each scavenging team leaves. You will see them off at the gate and assume their schedules.”

People grumbled and muttered, but most were happy with the assignments. Kenn had made certain they would be. Even his body double—Ian—had been handpicked to not upset the boss and to follow her every order. Ian was thrilled, already casting smug looks at the others and grateful glances toward Kenn.

Kenn didn't meet his eye. He hadn't done it for the ally it might create. He'd done it because there was no way Ian could ever really take his place. The rookie would be efficient and unimaginative, exactly what Marc had been. It wouldn't replace the real thing in every way, so when Kenn did return alive, there would be no threat to his place.

Morgan nodded at Kenn, approving. The Marine would have been in trouble if he'd only done that for himself, but he'd covered all of the team leaders and XOs in the same manner. No one would be in danger of replacement when they came back, but the camp would still be safe.

Morgan had caught Kenn working on it several times after the camp was asleep. Politics shouldn't be a part of anything anymore, but it was and it mattered. If these men thought their place was being filled too well while they were on a run, they would be distracted and end up getting themselves and each other killed. Kenn's choice had saved them and the boss a lot of possible pain. *He really seems to have changed*, Morgan reflected, watching Kenn leave without enjoying the bonding now happening. *So why am I still worried?*

Sweating from her quick return—she'd run back so Marc wouldn't yell at her for not taking a guard—Angela entered the tent as Kenn left, catching the thoughts of both men. She took note of Morgan's concern and Kenn's caution. The Marine was doing everything just right. That only meant one thing and Morgan was picking up on it without knowing he

was doing it. Kenn was hiding something and it had to be big for him to be risking his place this way. Morgan would come to that conclusion soon and watch Kenn harder. He would discover it, expose it, and Kenn would be done in Safe Haven for good. Tonya, on the other hand, was showing honest reform and would be allowed to stay, but she would still be stained by it.

I have to stop that, Angela decided. My vengeance is nothing compared to their child growing up knowing his father betrayed everyone. They won't let a kid forget that.

People were often cruel, and the children were the ones who paid for it. Angela didn't want that in her camp, but it was impossible to teach people forgiveness. They had to learn it on their own and that meant Kenn had to go away. It would be better if the camp thought he died out there, than to have them know he'd betrayed them again. Angela didn't know what he was hiding, but it didn't matter at this point. She'd made her decision. Kenn needed a change of heart and she was going to make sure that he got it.

3

“We're going to the refineries.” Neil swept his assembled team. “All of them within ten miles of this location, anyway.” He held up a map with red circles on it. “There are a lot of them. We'll scan contents and conditions, mark it and move on. Then

we'll start at the farthest edge and collect it all, rolling toward home. We'll be gone the two full days to hit them all. While we're gone, the boss will get the boat ready to hold what we're bringing. Trucks will be emptied at the dock and sent back out. Drivers will be on twelve hour shifts. The next six days may feel like the longest of our lives, but that's it, folks. Six days and then we get to sail away from all this chaos."

Neil handed around the cigar pouch he'd found and kept refilled since first joining Safe Haven. He didn't smoke, but most of his team did. "We're also getting a replacement for our missing man."

Silence fell. Men took cigars with guilty looks and deep frowns.

"I feel the same way." Neil sighed. "But we need that slot filled. You know it and so do I." Neil gestured. "I refused to pick. The boss made the choice and I'm happy with it."

Everyone tensed or paused to hear the name. No one expected the boss to promote from within. The soreness wouldn't ride well on missions.

Neil pointed at the flap.

Jennifer entered.

"My new XO."

Jennifer went to the empty chair and sat. She didn't make a speech or offer the condolences she felt they needed to hear. She crossed her arms over her chest and regarded the team leader.

Neil cleared his throat. “This is a permanent switch. It’s being posted in the mess right now...by the boss.”

Neil’s team was only surprised a female was being sent out of camp. Jennifer had already proven she could fight and follow orders.

Neil was relieved there wasn’t going to be a problem, but he still had to treat the girl like he would anyone else sent to replace Jeremy. “You have big shoes to fill. Never let your guard down or someone else will be voted in no matter what the boss wants.”

Jennifer nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good, because we won’t take it easy on you. We don’t see tits. We see a trigger finger.”

Jennifer snickered. “Well, I do see balls. Twelve huge ones who will help me grow a giant pair of my own.”

It was the perfect thing to say and Neil had no doubt she knew it as the men promised to train her like they had Angela. He also concluded she would be a better student. Jennifer would soak up every lesson, not just the ones she thought she needed.

“Yes, I will. It’s not so I can say I’m a badass. It’s so when my gifts run out, I can survive. I don’t need glory like you guys do. Keep that for yourselves and give me the skills you already take for granted.”

“We’ll do that, my word on it.” Neil gazed around. “Right?”

The team had understood enough to agree, and they said so. It helped that they liked Jennifer. They also approved of Kyle's choice in a mate, though few of them would say so. That was a line Neil's team, and most of the others, weren't willing to cross yet. Kyle's team had accepted it sooner because he was their leader. If he'd been just one of the team, they wouldn't have supported him. The marriage would settle the rest of those harsh feelings, Neil hoped. The couple wanted to be together and though she was young, Jennifer had been through more in one life than most people would have suffered in ten. That gave her the right to adult choices. She'd picked Kyle as much as he'd picked her. They were a good match.

Jennifer smiled at him. "Thank you."

Neil nodded curtly. "But that's it. I'll go further when I see you two as a happily married couple living by camp rules and upholding our honor—both of you."

"We will. You'll all see. He's good for me and I'm good for him."

"Enough." Neil ended the conversation. "We're leaving in three hours. I want all of you at the vehicles to help with loading an hour before we roll. The camp and the boss will want to come by for words. Tolerate it with smiles and we'll blow off steam after we're out of sight. Like usual. Do not spook the herd with your bad moods or worries. Save that for your team, who understands how you feel."

“Can you fit me in before you go?”

Neil nodded. “I’ve been expecting you. Come on in.” He fastened the flap after she entered, ignoring the Marine who took up a spot in the afternoon shadows. Marc clearly knew why she’d come. His disapproving waves were slapping everyone in range.

Angela took off her gun belt and drew in a deep breath. No matter how many times she faced someone in hand-to-hand, she was always afraid. It was tiresome to never be able to conquer it.

“Would you like to pick up where we left off or go through the basics for this lesson? It’s been a while. You could probably use a refresher.”

“Which do you recommend?”

Neil saw her clenched fists and steeled himself. “You need a full workout so when you leave this tent, you’ll be too tired to be scared.”

Angela stepped forward and swung.

Marc observed the violent battle on the walls of the tent. Angela’s shadow was no match for Neil. She had heart and skill, but her small size was a detriment. If her opponent got a hold of her, she was doomed.

Neil knew that. He’d been training her to avoid being grabbed, but he had realized that wouldn’t

keep her alive. At some point, the enemy would get hands on her and then she would be hurt or killed. He was now teaching her to free herself from ugly holds and that meant grabbing her, dealing with her pain and flinches, her gasps and little cries of near-panic. Neil was able to get through it because he wanted their women to be able to survive, to win the battles waiting for them. Eagles or not, all Safe Haven people would eventually face a foe and they would only come through it alive if they knew what to do at the time.

Angela wiped away tears, not missing the chunk of hair in Neil's shocked hand. She slammed her head into his hard stomach, taking his air. Before he could recover, she kicked his ankle and took him to the mat.

Neil rolled and kicked, catching her in the shoulder.

Angela staggered, but didn't let it detour her. She had the advantage when Neil was down.

Neil kept rolling, but she stayed on his heels, delivering punches to his kidneys and neck that would have taken him down if she had more strength. As it was, he could only avoid the blows, but not return them as she kept chasing him around the mat.

Sensing a shifting tide coming, Angela tackled him, rolling them up in a nasty pin that should have ended in a sleeper hold. Neil himself had taught her the move.

Neil let her wear herself out trying to put him to sleep, knowing she needed the release, but he was honestly proud of her for getting him there at all. None of his team could unless he let them.

Angela let go and slumped on the mat. “Like you just did me, right?”

Neil chuckled, not even winded. “Of course. Most people won’t be as guarded against it as I am. You needed to know how to follow through.”

“Thank you.”

Neil grunted. Her blood was on his hands and he wasn’t eaten up with guilt. It was almost nice.

“Like old times,” she wheezed, pushing up to walk with her arms above her head. “Does this really work?”

Neil shrugged. “I’ve always doubted it. I think gym teachers just wanted to know where everyone’s hands were.”

Angela laughed. Now that she’d had a release, she felt better. “What about you?” She met his eye. “What can I do for you?”

Neil deliberated the list of things he and Samantha needed, then shook his head. “We’re good, I think. It’s material, not emotional. I can cover that while we scavenge.”

“I’ll take care of her while you’re gone. You take care of yourself.”

“And Jennifer.”

Angela didn’t smile at Neil’s add. “Yes, coming back without her would not bode well for any of us.”

“Have you seen trouble?”

“No. It looks like the teams all make good runs and get back without issues.”

“And the camp, while we’re gone?” Neil frowned. “Or after we get back.”

Angela sighed. “There are issues that need to be sorted out before we leave. Samantha isn’t involved.”

Neil frowned, hearing the tone. “But I am.” He sulked at Angela’s grim expression. “She’s coming.”

Angela nodded. “Seth and Becky, along with a bus of dangerous children—and Jeff, who now has a new goal and it isn’t this camp’s survival. With them will be Doug’s trio. None of them wants to be here anymore, but they won’t have a choice once the refugee wave hits. If they don’t go with us, they won’t make it off this beach.” Angela wiped her hands down her sandy jeans and headed for the flap. “Hurry back, Neil. We’ll need you home before that wave hits.”

Neil immediately began working on ways to speed his team through their stops.

“You didn’t tell him all the other stuff.” Marc fell in step as she began a round of the camp that was settling in. Behind them, the ocean gave gentle roars as the tide went out.

“Becky is Neil’s only real weakness now. Once he finally admits the truth and starts making amends, he’ll be able to forgive himself and move on. Samantha and the babies need that from him. Unfortunately, it has to be fast-tracked because of

everything we have to do before we can set sail. He's in for a rough few weeks and then all four of them can be free of that mistake."

"Will they be?" Marc was curious. He didn't care much for or about Becky, but he liked Neil and wanted the trooper to at least be content if he couldn't be happy.

"So do I. But it will be up to them. Seth's jealous; Becky's ashamed and still attracted to Neil. Neil will always want to fuck her and Samantha knows it, so she'll always want Becky gone. If that couple goes with us, things could be messy for a bit."

"Or forever."

Angela nodded. "Of course. Becky is the woman scorned. As I'm sure you know, we're quite capable of causing a fuss when irked."

Marc laughed, but inside, he wondered if it wouldn't be better for Angela to refuse them entry. When it came to being useful, Neil and Samantha would win.

"For life on the island, sure. What about a final battle where magic determines the fate of humanity?"

Marc hesitated. Neil wouldn't be useful in such a fight as more than a spotter or sniper, but his shooting wasn't good enough for that. Seth's was and he had gifts. "Damn."

"Exactly. The redheads are all wildcards in Safe Haven's deck. We have to be careful of flipping them, but their value is priceless."

Ivan jogged up to them and gave Marc a pointed look. “Can we have a minute?”

Marc smiled coldly. “I hope you make it back, safe and sound.” Marc signaled Shawn to take his place. “I’m looking forward to training you.”

Ivan didn’t doubt it, but Marc’s anger was worth a few minutes alone with his obsession.

“Will I make it back?”

Angela nodded. She didn’t tell Ivan he was marked or that he would be tracked easier because of their bond. He knew and didn’t care. He only wanted her word that he would return, that he would see her again before he died. There was no way she could avoid that type of bond. It was too deep, too honest. “You’re going to bring someone back. She’s special.”

Ivan scowled. “I don’t want her.”

“Don’t overlook the future for dreams.” Angela tried to forestall the coming question, aware of Shawn lurking and descendants listening

“I need to know.” Ivan drew on his courage. He had to know if she’d been putting off vibes to him or if he’d been imagining it because he wanted it so bad. “Give me the truth. I’m not a threat, even when disappointed.”

Angela believed that, but she wouldn’t have lied anyway. “My number three. If they both fall, I’ll need you.”

Ivan left, refusing to think about anything except getting done and getting back.

Angela watched him go, hating herself. Ivan and Marc were so much alike that Adrian might even be eliminated from the list in time. It was what she was hoping for. Ivan's sentiments came from growing respect and love. Adrian's came from lust and she now understood the difference between the two. She would never return the emotions, but she would need them to help battle the emptiness in her heart so she still cared enough to lead her people.

Angela was covering all bases, but she didn't really think it was going to be an issue. She had changed the rules. Marc wasn't going to die and her would-be-lovers would never get what they most desired.

Angela felt William lingering in her mind and refused to contemplate that vision of the future. *Maybe I won't survive the final fight. If I die, no one gets me, and my people survive. If I live, it all might restart, and I won't be responsible for that again.*

Angela locked down on those thoughts as William perked up, scenting something he could use. She'd made her plans for the final moments. She already knew there was no peace to be found here on earth. *So I'll search elsewhere.*

5

"The teams are assembled." Kenn handed her a small stack of notes clipped together with a pin. He deftly kept the pin as she took the papers.

Angela lifted a brow.

Kenn chuckled. "I traded for it."

Angela's face puckered. "Why?"

"Got plans for it."

Angela rolled her eyes but didn't tell him not to do what he was planning. She preferred not to interfere with the inner workings of the Eagles. It often disappointed her that Marc didn't understand it after his time in the military. Sometimes, paybacks had to be handled internally.

"Kyle's team and Neil's are leaving now. The rest in the next hour, including me." Kenn followed her to the parking area, glad to see the wall going up here. They had the camp moved, unloaded, and a few items in place, but this wasn't a normal setup and they were improvising everything. Setting up on sand was a new nightmare. Everything heavy kept sinking, including items that had to remain level. They were improvising by laying planks and boxes, but it was time consuming. In the military, equipment had come with solid bottoms or pallets for this type of terrain.

"You're doing fine." Angela knew he was stressing over it because he feared losing good marks if camp wasn't set up on time. "We're not staying here long. Just put out the basics."

Kenn gave a mental sigh of relief and headed off to make the adjustments. The basics were almost up now. That would put him back on track timewise.

Angela went to the waiting teams. She liked seeing the men off, as Adrian had. Sometimes they gave information or let on about doubts and fears

that needed to be answered before they left so it didn't interfere with the mission. Sometimes, they just needed to see the boss and be reminded of what was at stake.

Angela went to Kyle and his team first. As the top Eagles in Safe Haven, they deserved that respect. "All set?"

"We will be." Kyle didn't want to leave.

Neither did Neil. He was waiting nearby to have words before they left.

"It'll be fine until you get back."

Both men relaxed. Embarrassed smiles presented, and hands eased away from weapon belts.

"Permission to get gone?"

"Be careful, gentlemen. We won't make it long without you."

Tension returned to the teams, along with determination to end those threats and get home without injuries.

Satisfied she'd switched their unrest to a better target, Angela went to the next team. She hadn't spotted trouble, but it paid to keep the men alert. The future changed with each ripple, so the clear stretch she'd glimpsed might not stay that way.

"Are you sure all of them should go?" William joined her.

"Yes." Angela let him stand too close to her, thinking he didn't look like Adrian, or smell like Adrian, or put off sexy vibes like Adrian. None of them did except for Marc and he wasn't giving her

that side of himself right now. “We have one window and a big list of items still needed. It has to be now and all of them have to go for us to get it all. We won’t have another shot.” She looked over at him. “I’m also sorry to tell you I think the time shrank. I’m not sure where, but I felt it.”

“We’ll be gone soon.”

She nodded again. “It’s for the best.”

“Yes.” William’s misery was clear enough to scoop into a bucket. Angela couldn’t stand it. She pointed at Marc. “Go talk to him.”

William didn’t like being dismissed “About what? I gave him the information he required.”

“He has information for you.”

Marc gave her a subtle nod as William headed his way. He didn’t know why Angela wanted the man busy, but Marc did have words to give him.

William’s lips tightened. He hadn’t realized she was blowing him off.

“It’s not blowing you off.” Marc led the man away. “It’s a sensitive time for her. She doesn’t need your emotions clouding things.”

William presumed she was menstruating and let it go.

Marc hid a smile and pointed toward the water. “Show me the best spot for a fishing operation? It has to be small and fast.”

Angela detoured toward Bucky, who had stayed quiet and helpful so far during his time here as William’s escort. “Can I have a minute?”

Bucky followed her to the edge of the caution tape, aware of sentries from both camps observing with frowns. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, but William is going to and I need you to help me stop him.”

Bucky sighed. “I’m sorry he’s like that with you. We’ve all spoken to him. We’re disappointed. We thought he was better...stronger.”

“So did he, but wildcards are meant to stir things up and that’s what he is, though he won’t accept it yet.” Angela made sure Bucky was hit with a full blast of her alpha power. “I need you to make sure he doesn’t go against my orders.”

Bucky straightened, immediately nodding. “That shit doesn’t work on me, but I’ll still do everything I can. Should I tell our people, or will they support him on it?”

Angela smiled at him. “I would have offered you a place already if I thought you’d take it.”

Bucky was happy to hear that, but he hadn’t considered going with them even once. “You’re doomed and damned, lady. I want no part of that.”

Angela sighed, thinking the same about Ciemus. “Either way, if he goes against my orders, bad things will come of it. Do you believe me?”

“I have no reason not to.” Bucky’s problem wasn’t with her leadership, but with her determination to leave America to the elements and the enemies instead of staying to fight.

“I want to.” Angela gave him the truth. “Every time I look at the future, it’s empty here. I won’t take that chance.”

Bucky wasn’t going to argue. “I hope you all survive, and I will talk to our people about making sure he follows your rules.”

“It’s not a rule issue.” Angela turned away. “He’ll go against me on an order. If he gets his way, all of us will die on this beach.”

“Because of trackers?”

“Because I’ll have to kill him.”

Chapter Eighteen
I Fought For It
Day Three
Evening Mess

1

“When is she going to take a break?”

Monica and Trinity watched Angela go by the table where they were resting. They’d been laboring until the sunset picnic was called.

“When the teams get back, maybe.” Monica was busy writing on the table where she and the pregnant women were enjoying the breeze and views. Camp men surveyed them regularly, taking their guard duties seriously. This was the first time all of their security had been gone, but the mood wasn’t tense. Everyone had witnessed Angela fire walking across the beach.

“We should mention it.”

Monica nodded. “But to who? Marc can’t get her to do much.”

“We, the people, can.” Trinity smiled when Monica glanced over in surprise. “We’re the new den mothers.”

Monica scowled. “She said a month. That’s almost up.”

“We’re all carrying the future or are about to be.” Trinity’s tone was hopeful. “She won’t let us risk them to be warriors when the men have it covered.”

Monica considered that, watching Angela stop to help with a small training lesson on firearms that Grant was hosting. “I don’t think that’s how it has to be. She’s both.”

Trinity pointed at the children they were watching. “Is she?”

Monica sighed. “Being an Eagle won’t be as rough as her job.”

Trinity was forced to concede that. “Still, she wants us looking after the kids.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I wasn’t before, but I am now. If we only have four years, I want to spend them with children, with family.”

“I plan to do both, like the boss. It may not be a perfect situation, but this is the new world. We can do more than we ever thought we could before it all blew up.”

Trinity shrugged. “Maybe.”

Tonya slid onto a bench across from them, bowl of ice cream in hand. Having power on the boat meant a freezer. Their cooks were already playing with dishes they hadn’t had in a long time.

“Yum!” Monica dug her spoon into the side of Tonya’s generous bowl. “Chocolate!”

Tonya laughed, sitting the bowl between them. “What are we talking about?”

“The future of females in the Eagles.”

Tonya paused. “You think she’s going to change the rules?”

“What are the hens clucking about?” Samantha joined them, moving slow. Charlie was at her elbow, holding a large bowl and a deep frown. He hadn’t been cleared to go with any of the teams. Despite knowing he might have point over the camp during the next two days, the boy was pissed.

“I’m good.” Samantha waved off her sentry.

Charlie handed her the bowl and stormed away, kicking at the sand.

The females breathed a sigh of relief as his smothering attitude left.

“Eagle rules for females.” Monica scooped out chocolate ice cream with a huge grin. “Will it stay the same as now?”

Samantha sat the bowl of vanilla down. “We’re going to take over the Eagles.” Samantha didn’t notice the sudden silence. She swallowed a small bite and went on. “We outnumber the men now. Not all of them will survive the next four years. We’ll have to replace the fallen.”

Samantha paused as sadness slapped at her. She forced herself to scoop a larger bite and shoved it into her mouth for the distraction. Vanilla ice cream was her favorite dessert over anything else.

The hens gazed around to verify Samantha’s words and found Ciemus women on duty with a few camp men.

“This is what it will look like when they leave us there.” Samantha scooped another bite.

“You’ll go with them, I thought.” Trinity gestured. “You’re one of the council.”

Samantha shrugged. “I’m a den mother until she needs me to be an Eagle. When they leave the island, I’ll still be a senior man on any side. Looking forward to it.”

And with that, Samantha flipped the mood and made the women consider a new future where they were indeed more than they’d ever thought they could be.

2

When we return, my pups will be grown with offspring of their own.

Angela knelt to rub Dog’s ears. “You wanna talk about that?”

Dog groaned, leaning into her hands. *Why?*

“Does it bother you to leave them?”

Dog groaned again, paw thumping. *No. Should it?*

“I don’t know how it works for animals. Do you feel love for your pups?”

I have love for their mother.

“Not the same.”

Dog sat, willing to take the attention as long as she wanted to give it. *No, but I didn’t meet them.*

“Would it matter?”

Dog didn’t answer.

Angela took that as a no. She knew most male animals didn't care for their children or were aggressive toward juveniles. Angela was studying that in humans and making notes. There would be a lot of mixed families in Safe Haven, thanks to having so many widows and orphans. If that was going to be a problem later, she needed to know.

How far ahead do you look? Dog was curious about how her mind functioned. He'd never met a human like Angela, male or female.

"Years." She stood up, stretching. "I went to a decade on some of the issues."

And found solutions?

"For a lot of it." Angela gazed toward their old site, seeing lights. Theo's team was still dismantling the warehouse.

Marc said to keep you in the perimeter, Dog reminded.

"I have point over camp. I would never leave my post." Angela went to the caution tape and ducked under it.

You just left!

"This entire shoreline is mine, Dog." Angela picked up speed to a nice jog to cover the mile. "I'm in training again, too."

Dog kept pace, enjoying the softer sand beneath his paws. *This feels good.*

Angela detoured a bit to run through the surf that was coming in. Because she wanted it, the water lapped over her.

Dog snorted at a spray and switched to her heel, running now to keep up. The cool water soothed his sore paws.

Angela increased speed to the next level, pleased with her progress. She'd been working out whenever she had time. Moments like this were helping. Plus, Jennifer was about to pull into camp with a truck and orders to spend the night here. She would head out again at dawn with an empty vehicle. Jennifer was upset about her leader's order. When she realized the boss was a mile away, she would take over rounds of the peaceful camp and be soothed that she was needed here. The girl would be tired, but she was young, and her shoulder was fully healed. Neil would find out she hadn't slept and force her to rest tomorrow during their travel between locations.

Engines sounded behind them.

Angela let her energy out, burning off her worry over the teams and the group in the west.

Dog fell behind and kicked into his faster gear. He'd been holding back before. Now, he flew by her, issuing an unspoken challenge.

Angela laughed, pushing herself. She couldn't catch the blur, but she was able to stay on Dog's heel, reversing their roles.

Debra felt her coming and came to the doorway of the warehouse. All that remained was this side and the basic frame.

Angela kept going. She was enjoying the freedom.

Dog slowed, feeling Marc wake and call.

Angela did too. She eyed the dark landscape as she slowed, longing to be free to roam the night now that she wasn't scared of it.

I'll cover things if you want that, Marc told her, picking his words carefully. He'd never felt her on the edge like this. She'd always hidden it.

Angela slowed and made a U-turn in the wet sand. *Go to sleep. I'm not going anywhere.* Calm acceptance filled her mind and transmitted to Marc.

Face grim at another sign of the plan succeeding, Marc went back to sleep.

3

“The boss said to meet you here.” Brittani stopped by Jennifer as the girl paused near the parking area and main gate entrance to the camp.

“Two minutes late.”

Brittani flushed. “I dropped off a basket for the kids and got mobbed. Plus, you were out of camp and I thought the boss had made a mistake. Sorry.”

Jennifer shrugged. “We're not usually hard about a minute or two, providing it isn't every time.”

“It won't be.” Brittani scanned Jennifer's stiff form. “You don't like me or something, right?”

Jennifer regarded her with a brow lifted. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you were thinking it.”

“What am I thinking now?”

Brittani pushed through the girl's wall. "My future in camp... Your wedding... Angela's love triangle... Your honeymoon..."

"That's enough." Jennifer broke the connection, noting the woman was strong but not on her level yet. "Why did she pick you?"

Brittani shrugged. "She said something about wisdom, but I don't feel wise."

"It comes with time, I hear."

"And with abuse or hardships."

Jennifer's mood dipped a little more. "Yeah."

Brittani drew in a breath. "I think she meant for me to give you help."

"With what? You're already on the shift with me until I'm tired of you."

Brittani shrugged. "No idea, but that's what I picked up from her."

"She's the boss." Jennifer sighed. "If she wants us to talk and share wisdom, we should probably do it."

"You start."

Jennifer studied her. "Why do you always wear that raggedy coat? Is it special?"

"I fought for it." Brittani fingered a thread hanging from the sleeve. "We were caught in a mall a few months after the war." Her voice lowered. "First person I ever killed."

"It wasn't over the coat."

"No. They wanted Gus."

"You love him."

"With all my heart."

“But you’ve replaced him.”

Brittani sighed, thinking of the Eagle she’d known for so short a time. She still missed Shane. “Again.”

Jennifer felt the urge to pat the woman’s wrist and resisted. “I liked Shane too, though not in that way.” She bobbed her chin toward a woman with an Eagle kit over her shoulder. “She might be able to talk with you about him.”

Brittani’s expression iced over. “She hasn’t spared him a single tear except when she was worried over not caring. All she wants is Adrian.”

“Good.”

Brittani nodded sharply. “Agreed. She’s leaving. Marc told her to make a choice and she did.”

Jennifer considered the consequences of letting Nancy leave camp without trying to keep her in the light and didn’t care for the result. Angela wouldn’t like losing people, no matter who it was. “Come on.”

Nancy heard the quick steps behind her and stopped. She had assumed someone would try to talk her out of leaving, but she’d still hoped to avoid it while everyone was gone or busy.

“I need to make sure it’s what you really want and not what you feel you owe to Adrian.”

Nancy winced. She’d also been hoping to skip that.

Jennifer grunted. “I understand, but I have a duty to you and every member of Safe Haven. I take it seriously.”

Nancy rotated to glare at the girl. “You couldn’t give a shit less about me. You’re worried over the boss.”

Jennifer’s lips tightened. “I care about you, too. I believe the boss is better off if you’re with Adrian and he’s not here, but only if that’s also what’s best for—”

“Save it!” Nancy regarded Brittani with a sneer. “You want to try before I blow this place?”

Brittani nodded. “What if he doesn’t want you?”

Jennifer winced along with Nancy. *That’s hitting below the bra.*

Brittani shrugged at their displeasure. She always faced truths head-on. “He left her here. I’m not being cruel. I’m being realistic. He wants Angela. Not this one.”

Nancy growled, stepping forward. “This one will knock your teeth out!”

“Because you’re scared to challenge Angela openly for Adrian, even though she has Marc...” Brittani kept reading as Nancy took up a fighting stance. “And you know he doesn’t want you, but you’re getting a...”

Nancy punched the woman to shut her up.

Brittani took the almost surprise hit, not dodging. Used to scrapping, she didn’t fall or retreat. She swung back.

Nancy hit the ground, kit flying into the dirt.

Jennifer stepped between them, secretly laughing. “That’s enough.”

Nancy scrambled to her feet, grabbing her kit. “Screw you both!” She stormed to the gate.

Jennifer stopped Brittani from going after the woman. “Wipe away the blood so Angela doesn’t see it. She’s coming.”

Jennifer watched Nancy reach the gate as Brittani rotated to find the boss while she cleaned her bloody nose. Nancy had a strong arm.

“Yours was better.” Jennifer nodded to the sentry when he looked at her for permission to let Nancy leave. “She didn’t stay on her feet.” Jennifer waited for the gate to be locked back, then pivoted to smile at the boss. “I have good news and bad news.”

Angela’s expression darkened as she read their thoughts. “She’s gone?”

“Yes.”

Angela shook her head, joining them. “She’ll find out he can’t be trusted. We always learn that in the end.”

“You mean Adrian or all men?” Brittani asked.

“I mean people in general.” Angela let them share some of her bitterness. “If most people were trustworthy, we wouldn’t be surviving an apocalypse.”

They couldn’t argue with that and didn’t try.

Jennifer gestured toward the tables, where Candy was scribbling furiously in her notebook.

“They’re doing arranged seating and everything. This is too much hassle for our situation.”

“We need this.” Angela’s tone rose. “It’s not all about you. We’ve survived the aftermath of nuclear war for eleven months. That miracle deserves to be celebrated.”

“Whatever.” Jennifer continued to grumble as she turned for a scan of camp.

Angela and Brittani chuckled, sharing knowing looks. Jennifer was having pre-wedding jitters. It was cute.

Jennifer huffed, stamping her foot. “It is not!”

Angela’s laugh floated over the camp, bringing the shield to life.

People rotated to discover who had caused it. They smiled at the two women with the boss.

Eagles also noted it and added another layer of approval to their opinions of the new woman who was going to be leading her own team. They’d only known her as their cook so far. It was a big jump in both status and respect.

Brittani flushed under the attention but lifted her chin. *If I want it, I’ll get it. They’d better accept that now.*

“Nice.” Jennifer looked at Angela. “I like her.” Jennifer left them to do rounds.

Angela smiled at Brittani. “Your shift is over. You’ve been cleared.”

Brittani was staring after the girl. “Really?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am. I wanted to walk with her.”

“She won’t give you an invitation. None of them will. If you want it, go get it.”

Brittani took off running to catch up with Jennifer.

Angela turned to stare at the gate, where the guards were giving her hand motion updates. Around the camp, people began practicing their shields. They were only allowed to do it when leadership had a barrier over the camp.

Are you positive this is what you want to do? He can’t be trusted. You understand that. I know you do.

Nancy stiffened, but kept walking. *He won’t want me, but I have to go. You understand that. I know you do.*

Yes. Swallowing jealousy, Angela continued her rounds. *Be safe and be happy. I wish it for you both.*

Nancy didn’t reply. She was now running away from safety and into the abyss of the unknown. Adrian had called her to join Safe Haven. Where he went, so did she.

4

“Will you help me get ready for bed?”

Marc smiled at the boy. “Of course.” He held out his hand.

Cody placed his fingers into Marc’s hand, peering up. “Can I have a piggyback?”

Marc knelt for the happy boy to climb on, drawing attention from the other kids. Some of them were saddened by the sight. They missed their own fathers. Others were hopeful that Marc would eventually be able to share his love with them too.

Angela watched, Dog at her side, as Marc took Cody to the bathroom area for teeth brushing, face washing, an ear check, and the potty. They were teaching the children a nightly care list, hoping it would keep them healthier.

He is good with that pup. Dog sat by Angela's feet, eyes tracking the two cats rolling in nip outside the pharmacy tent.

Angela turned to do a sweep behind them. The ocean was loud, making all the guards twitchy. "Yes. Cody already loves him."

Dog huffed. *Why do they do that?*

Angela followed Dog's line of sight back to the rolling felines. "Not sure, really. It doesn't work on most kittens, but adult females who've had kittens go nuts for it."

Dog flipped his tail through the sand, sending a small spider flying before it could climb over Angela's boot. *Having pups changes the mother.* Dog whimpered as the two cats looked in his direction. He tensed, fur raising.

"Are you going to chase them?" Angela's tone was curt.

Dog slid behind her leg. *Not unless they bite me.*

Angela laughed, reaching down to scratch his ears. "I know you aren't scared. What gives?"

Dog whimpered as the cats prowled closer. *They like to sleep on me. I wake up with pussy hair all over my face. It's disgusting.*

Angela burst out laughing, scaring the cats off.
Dog licked her hand. *I owe you one.*

5

Adrian had made camp in a garage, a few miles from the boat. He didn't seal the entrances or prepare any defenses. He wasn't staying here and if someone found him, he was no longer bound by Safe Haven's rules. He'd left that light and now he was free to do as he pleased.

"Not exactly." Kendle entered the light, cheeks bruised. "I left before she kicked me out."

Adrian motioned toward the small fire. "You can warm up, but you can't stay. I'm done with it, all of it."

"You can't walk away."

"I already did."

"When that boat sails, you'll be on it."

"No, I won't." Adrian tossed his kit to her. "And neither will you."

Kendle began digging through the bag to assemble a meal. "Where will we be?"

"Right here, trying to atone for our mistakes. But not together."

"That's impossible."

"Tell me something I don't know."

“Okay. She’s almost ready to leave Marc for you. Stay away from her for a while and it might happen.”

Adrian sighed, mood bitter. “I said tell me something I don’t know.”

“I’m going to kill her.”

“If you came here hoping to push me into removing you, words like that might do it.”

Kendle bared her teeth at him, eyes wild. “I want my gifts back!”

Adrian stared. He hadn’t realized she’d been punished. “Wow. I can’t believe Jenny did it.”

Kendle snorted, trying not to cry. “I had to track you like an animal to get here. If we hadn’t shared a camp before, I’d still be wandering around out there.”

“Tell me what happened?”

“I…”

Adrian saw it in her mind, thrilled she could no longer read his thoughts. “You crossed a line.”

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Kendle flung it back at him.

Adrian pulled his bedroll open. “Jennifer didn’t want to do it. It wasn’t her idea.”

“Who? Angela, right?”

Adrian shook his head, able to see the other people in her memory. “It came from an Eagle. Jennifer was given a nod.”

Kendle ran through the people in the vehicle and growled. “He’s not even one of us!”

Adrian laughed at her. “Neil is one of the first members of Safe Haven and the most upstanding male in camp. He’s from my first Eagle teams and he’s having twins with a descendant on the council that makes laws and decisions for everyone. Neil doesn’t need to be one of us. He has everything else going for him.”

“All these damn boy scouts.” Kendle’s shoulders slumped. “Why can’t they be more like you?”

Adrian snickered. “They are, doll, just not over you.”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t blame them for it.” Adrian pushed off his filthy boots. “You’ve never tried to fit in. You don’t have the same goals, and you hate the person they all love. What did you expect?”

“Consideration for what I’ve been through.”

“Ah.” He pinned her with a hard look. “How much consideration did you have for the rest of the survivors?”

“They haven’t been through what I have.”

“No, they’ve been through worse.”

Kendle held up her mangled arms. “What could be worse than being eaten alive?”

“Watching your children die.”

Kendle scowled. “She miscarried. It’s not the same.”

“That’s your nastiness showing, my dear. The loss of a child before birth is as bad as one after.

However, I wasn't referring to Angela. I'm referring to those sheep you despise."

Kendle paused her spiteful response. "I've never been mean to camp members."

"You've never had consideration for them, either. Well over half of those people have buried a child. Or had one taken so they don't know where they are or if they're even alive. You suffered. No one can deny that, but you didn't get the worst of the deal by far and yet you act like you have." Adrian looked away. "Some people saw their kids raped and murdered. Your bite marks are nothing compared to the pain in their souls."

Kendle didn't know what to say.

"There's nothing you can say. You've been heartless to people. We all have our own pain and torments. Yours are no better or worse than anyone else's, Kendle. We're all survivors."

"Why do people react to her this way, like she's the air you breathe?"

"She's the alpha."

Kendle snorted. "Like that explains anything to me."

Adrian remembered she hadn't been around for the meetings and conversations. "Her happiness, or sadness, rubs off. We feel what she feels."

"I feel nauseous."

Adrian chuckled. "Yeah, me too. She's thinking about Marc and their relationship right now. He's pissing her off again."

"How can you tell?"

“Because she’s wishing he was more like me.” Adrian laid down and put his hands beneath his head. “She only does that when he’s being an ass.”

“I hope you never break the charm! If I can’t be happy, neither can she.”

“And you wanting to take what makes her happy is fair?”

“It’s not just what makes her happy. I want her life.”

“To live it or take it?”

Kendle didn’t reply.

Adrian signaled at the pot. “Let that boil for a bit. I’m taking a nap.” Adrian’s adventures in the shack had been long and miserable.

“Watch it yourself.” Kendle got up and left. *I hate them. I hate all of them for making me feel this way. I’ve been horribly abused, but I’m supposed to forget it and help others? Kendle snorted, not caring that it was dark and cold. I’ve been alone since Luke died. Might as well live that way.*

Adrian let her go. Kendle needed an eye-opener, but even if she didn’t get it, she would still be away from Angela and that was all he cared about now. Kendle was a serious threat. If both women got on that boat like this, only one of them would walk off it. The other would be dumped overboard.

Chapter Nineteen

Parent Connection

Day 4

Noon

1

“That’s a lot of lube.”

Kyle and the teams snickered at Neil’s comment.

This refinery hadn’t been looted, but it had been abandoned mid-work. Drums and barrels sat on trucks, pallets, and in stacks that could only be moved with the giant forklift in the center of the lobby. Cars were undamaged except from the weather, still sitting neatly in fading parking spaces with doors open and hoods up. Windows held only nature fractures, and no bodies lined the walkways. *Or bullet holes*, Morgan added.

Kyle signaled Neil’s team to the rear as he and his men went in the front. He didn’t tell them to stay alert. They knew their jobs too well for that. There was also nothing going on here. Kyle had already consulted with Jennifer and Morgan. It was empty. When they returned to camp, Kyle planned to ask Angela how it was possible for these coastal areas to be empty of people but not looted. This was the fifth refinery they’d scouted today, and they were

all the same. It appeared as though the people had left quickly, but without fear or panic. Kyle usually shoved the oddities under the carpet of his mind, but this was too much. He might need an answer.

“It’s clear.” Neil met Kyle in the center of the massive warehouse complex a few minutes later. “Just like the last one. Even found trucks waiting to ship out to local places. They took their vehicles, but left the oil and fuel. Makes no sense.”

Kyle grunted, making notes in his book.

Neil consulted the list. “Do we need to keep looking? There’s already more than we can carry.”

“No, but I want to drop in on Ivan’s team and see if they need a hand.”

“And I thought we were going to get to skip the physical labor this time.”

Kyle chuckled. “We haven’t had a good workout in a week.”

“I know.” Neil clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s been great.”

The team enjoyed the good vibes of their leaders and of being together. Now that they’d graduated from Adrian’s training program and Angela had turned them loose, Kyle and Neil had chosen to stay together. Their last run as a doubled team had given them a feeling of completeness and protection that wasn’t matched in any other setup when they were out of camp.

Jennifer followed her training and made sure she did her part, but she also enjoyed the

combination. She felt safe out here with Kyle. Neil and his men were also badass, so it was perfect.

Morgan gave Jennifer a nod when she waited until Kyle and Neil were in their vehicles before she ducked into the rear window seat. Morgan liked having her on the team for obvious reasons, but also for her vicious defense of Kyle. All his men felt that way. She fit right in.

Kyle drove them through the deserted coastal town that was being reclaimed by the shore. Sand was encroaching on walkways and paths that had once seen thousands of visitors and locals each week. Now, it was going back to nature without the wrecking crews that usually caused such drastic changes. *It won't look anything like what we remember by the time we return*, Kyle deliberated morosely. After these scavenging runs, they would load the ship and go. Being at this point was bringing it all to life. They were leaving.

“Company,” Jennifer and Morgan echoed.

“That’s creepy.” Daryl swiveled to spot the threat. He knew it was danger by the way Jennifer drew her gun and Morgan put his window up except for a shooting crack at the top.

“There.” The duo also pointed in tandem.

“Yes, creepy.” Shawn confirmed it as he too cleared a crack for shooting.

Morgan withdrew from the mental connection. He was needed to fight, and Jennifer was better at the mental battles. “They saw our jackets as we drove by.”

Kyle switched the radio on, tensing at the immediate noise.

“...is them!”

“We saw them die at the naval base. Get off the radio!”

“Then why am I looking at two black vehicles full of armed men wearing Eagle jackets? Get your asses down to the shore!”

Kyle changed directions, not about to lead the spies to any of their collection sites.

“We have to stop.” Jennifer’s eyes were open, but glazed, reminding the men of Angela. “We need something here and we can only get it right now.”

“What is it?” Kyle slowed as vehicles appeared in the mirror. He knew better than to doubt the witch, and he trusted Jennifer.

“A person. I can’t tell who, but they need us...” Jennifer pushed further into the chaotic thoughts. “It’s a refugee.”

“We’re all refugees now.” Shawn watched the vehicles in the side mirror. They were gaining ground, clearly boosted for short speeds.

“A real one. He was in a container near here and ran when someone opened it to look for food. They’ve been hunting him since then.” Jennifer pointed toward the shore. “He went south. They flushed him.”

Two cars appeared ahead of them, answering the question of who had flushed the man out.

“No magic.” Kyle shifted gears. “We have bullets for moments like this.”

Morgan and Jennifer took the order, agreeing. It was too easy to track it. The book from William had given them a lot of information that showed where they were weak. Trackers were their biggest vulnerability.

Kyle made a fast plan and left the shore road. He drove straight at the four vehicles that had turned behind them and merged into one group. “Aim for the tires, children.”

Eagles got set.

Kyle hit the gas and braced for death. Moves like this were always deadly to one side or the other, and sometimes both. It was still better than a shootout in some house or having their own tires blown out as they ran.

“Fire!” Kyle forced the car coming at him to swerve when he didn’t. *No one beats me at chicken!* He kept going as the Eagles started shooting.

Flying by on Kyle’s bumper, Neil laughed. His team was now firing. *I love my job!*

Unprepared for gunplay, the two closest vehicles reacted the same way as the Eagles flew between them. The drivers both flinched, jerking the wheel, and died in a hail of slugs that also popped tires. Due to those jerks on the wheels, both cars veered into their own companions, flipping one and shoving the other in a nasty circle that ended with them up on a curb.

The Eagles rolled north and got out of sight.

Kyle drove for half an hour before finally circling around for the shore person that Jennifer said they needed. He didn't know what a foreign refugee could do for them, but he was now curious as to the answer. He'd gotten a good look at the people chasing them and was concerned. If the army was hunting someone, Angela would want to know.

"That's my thought too." Jennifer dug in her kit for a snack. "I kept catching images from him, but not words. I don't think he speaks much English."

"Can you talk to him?"

Jennifer shrugged at Morgan's query. "I was trying, but he was panicking at all the engines. He assumed they were surrounding his hideout and ran. Nothing was getting through after that."

"Can you tell where he's from?" Greg asked. "Maybe we can narrow a language and find a book."

"I'm sorry, no. I wasn't good in geography before the war and now, it seems like an unknown puzzle that won't fit into a frame."

Daryl chortled at her description. It was easy to forget how young Jennifer was. She hardly ever acted like it. The last time he'd witnessed it had been in the mountain, before the quake. She'd played with the puppy Kyle gave her.

Jennifer winced. The puppy hadn't survived the naval station. Stray bullets had claimed the lives of her gift and three hens, along with trimming several camp members. They'd been lucky to only have those, but still it hurt to lose the dog.

“We’re getting close.” Kyle signaled. “When we come out of the tunnel ahead, we’ll be half a mile from where we left our new friends. They’ll hear the engines and come flying. Pinpoint him now.” Kyle took them into the tunnel because it was short and clear. The grates in the top allowed him to see there was only weeds and garbage on the cracked pavement.

“There!” Jennifer pointed. “He’s waving at us.”

“Did you get through to him?” Kyle was instantly suspicious.

“No.”

“I may have.” Shawn shrugged at the quick, curious glances. “I’ve been saying ‘we’ll help you’ in every language I know. Maybe one of them got through.”

“That still says descendant.” Kyle stored details as the man wearing an orange shirt and brown pants ran toward them, waving and shouting. “React with caution.”

Jennifer stayed in the vehicle while Kyle, Greg, and Morgan got out to talk to the excited man, mostly to please her teammates. They knew she was capable of killing, but they didn’t need that right now.

Neil rolled to her side of Kyle’s truck and paused, nodding. He’d put Jennifer in the vehicle with Kyle intentionally to see if she would be distracted or want extra considerations. He planned to ask the team about it when they returned to camp.

Kyle didn't know how to handle the language barrier, so he improvised. He pointed his gun at the refugee.

The man stopped, bare feet digging into the sand. He looked like he'd been caught off guard and flushed out with nothing, matching what Jennifer had told them.

Kyle concentrated. *Who are you?*

Panaji grinned at him. *Safe Haven. You take me Safe Haven.*

Kyle frowned. *Why?*

The man pointed at the ocean. *You go. I come. We be happy and safe. Pitcairn.*

Kyle sighed, lowering his weapon. "He's one of ours. Load him into Neil's truck and swap out a rider."

Greg gestured toward the truck.

Panaji shook his head. "W... We go here. Pick up. Then go."

"Where?"

"My homes."

Kyle motioned the drivers to follow as he and the two Eagles escorted the refugee who was now babbling in a language they didn't understand much of. His smiles and arm pats said he was relieved they were here. All the vibes were good.

Panaji stopped on a sandy rise, grunting. "We take."

Kyle scrutinized the warehouse. "International Shipping Company."

Greg clapped Panaji on the back. “Welcome to Safe Haven.”

“Yes! Haven needs! We take!”

Kyle went to Neil’s vehicle to explain, while Morgan and Greg put Panaji into his truck. “We’ll come back in force.”

Panaji began babbling to Tim, who leaned away in startled confusion.

Neil nodded. “I’m surprised we haven’t had—”

“Company!”

Neil shifted back into drive as Kyle ran for his truck. “That.” He drove next to the running mobster, protecting him as bullets pinged around them. “Time to play again!”

The Eagles in his truck cheered and opened fire at their pursuers.

Panaji crawled into the floorboard and held onto Tim’s boots so he wouldn’t be taken unless the Eagle was too.

Kyle clicked the mike in the holder, telling the other teams they needed specific backup.

Garbled clicks responded. Kyle never called for help. Every team immediately sent help to the clicked location.

“Same again?” Wade asked.

“They’re expecting it.” Neil downshifted to make the next turn. “He’ll either use the run to pick them off or do pits. The noise will tell our men where we are.”

“Why don’t we handle them ourselves like we usually do?” Shawn hung on as Kyle began the

maneuver that used high speeds to separate vehicles from a group so they could be eliminated.

Neil switched on the radio.

Voices screamed at them, declaring Safe Haven alive.

Shawn grunted. “I guess I will need the extra mags I brought.”

Neil’s grip tightened on the wheel in anticipation of Kyle’s next turn. “We all will.”

2

Ivan watched their team members drive away, worried. He’d sent his two best wheelmen, like the code had requested. He presumed Kyle was doing the pickoff plan but had too many targets to do it alone. Radio calls had confirmed that threat. Ivan was concerned about them following Kyle back to camp. He knew the mobster wouldn’t allow that, but he couldn’t help the worry. Angela was there.

“Are we done?” Travis scanned the library.

“Yes.” Ivan led the way to their vehicle, dreading the drive. His seat sucked. “We pulled the switches and unplugged everything so only one computer will be on. It’s covered by a black tarp and sitting under a desk while it downloads. We’ll stop back as we head home and collect the thumb drives.”

“I never would have thought to do this. It’s great.”

“I agree. We’ll have a copy of the entire library.”

“Kyle said they have fifteen thumb drives from places like this.”

“It’ll be good to have the information since we can’t access the internet.” Ivan slid into the seat.

Something sharp poked his ass in a painful jab.

Ivan sighed, starting the engine. He pulled them out of the parking lot, noting the typical battle scenes and looted areas. The library hadn’t been spared, but it hadn’t been burnt down either, allowing them to labor for a few hours and then have access to the hard drives. “How many left on our list?” This was the fifth one they’d done since leaving camp. It was now late afternoon, with a dim sun and a sky full of flaky wind that kept ashing on them when they walked under trees and awnings. It was collecting like snow.

“Fourteen. Our instructions say to take a break after the next one.”

“See what else around here is on our list. Then we’ll join our team at the zoo.” Ivan shifted his butt to the side. All their locations were within ten miles of each other.

“Do we want the college or the airport?”

Ivan hesitated. “We’re low on men. How about we swing by the coat factory first? If we get lucky, they’ll have a truck we can load and send back by the time Kyle’s finished with our other drivers.”

Travis nodded, storing the map. “Sounds right.” He checked his gear as if he hadn’t already done it

several times today. It was in their training and the Indian was determined to absorb it all. He liked the men and women in their camp who gave up an easier life to protect everyone else. He would make them proud.

Ivan was also bored, but there was a lingering interest keeping him from becoming lax. Angela had told him he would bring someone back and he was looking for that person. Now, while there was only the two of them, would be harder, but maybe the person wouldn't be as spooked.

"There's an alley." Travis pointed. "Lot of branches down there."

"We'll back in like we were taught." Ivan did it with a wince when branches began snapping beneath his rough touch. He immediately shut off the engine to keep them from being tracked as easy if anyone was nearby.

The two Eagles waited, listening.

After a few minutes, Ivan opened the door and got out.

"I'll take that gun."

Ivan jumped at the voice in his ear and bumped into the gun in his side.

"Tell your friend to stay in the truck."

"Get in the truck!" Ivan shouted, using his tone of voice to alert his teammate to a problem.

"Now *you* get back in the truck."

Ivan felt the gun withdraw and did as he was told, bracing to be shot when he tackled her. He flinched at the sharp poke from his seat.

“Don’t. She said not to hurt you, but I will.”

Ivan didn’t close the door. “I think we’re your ride.” He looked down, trying to seem unthreatening.

“I know who you are and why you’re here, but I’m not going. I told her that.”

Ivan regarded Travis. *Were we sent to force her?*

Travis shrugged, not sure he could do that even if it was for her own good.

Ivan decided he needed more information. “You’ve been approved for entry. Why wouldn’t you take that gift?”

The hooded figure strolled toward the doors of the coat factory. “I’m not leaving without my son.”

Ivan caught a flash of a face he knew well. “You’re Sean’s mom? He must look like his dad.”

The woman froze as Ivan sent memories of helping the boy tie his shoes, of watching him laugh and play hide-n-seek with the other kids. “Sean is in Safe Haven?”

Ivan held out a hand to her. “Come on. We’ll send you back first.”

The woman lowered her hood to reveal a bald head with sores and eyes that gleamed with dangerous intent.

Ivan withdrew his hand. He signaled to the bed of the truck. “Back there, okay?”

She climbed in without obvious discomfort, settling against one corner of the tailgate.

Ivan got the truck rolling, face a giant scowl. Now, he wasn't certain he should take her back at all.

“Can our doctors...our people, help her?”

Ivan didn't want to answer as he pulled them onto the cracked pavement next to the coat store. “The gifts can do a lot, but Angela couldn't heal us when we rescued Caleb and got sick. I don't think diseases are covered.”

“Maybe we shouldn't take this chick back.”

Ivan sighed as the seat jabbed him again. “I thought of that too, but the boss said we'd be transporting someone. She's expecting it.”

Travis stewed for a minute. “Should we do the rest of our stops?”

“Not now. Let's join our team. We can send her back with the loads from the aquarium.”

Travis studied their passenger in the mirror. “What are the odds we'd find a parent of one of our orphans? She had to have traveled a lot of miles on her own. Sean's been with Safe Haven a lot longer than we have.”

“A bookie wouldn't lay those odds.” Ivan lowered the window a crack. “It's that parent connection. It keeps them going.”

“I hope she doesn't forget how to keep fighting when she sees her boy.” Travis was thinking ahead. “It would be a shame for them to be reunited and then...you know.”

“That would suck.” Ivan turned onto the highway that would take them west for half a mile

and let them off at the right exit. The truck rumbled over debris hiding any number of threats to their tires. Ivan had brought three spares. The leftovers of the previous world weren't buried enough to be harmless yet, though the highway was disappearing under weeds and garbage. It looked like debris layers had blown in and stuck here. There was more garbage in these coastal areas than Ivan had noticed in the west or east.

He glanced in the mirror and found their passenger lying down. He didn't think she was ducking, just resting. It made him feel bad for her. He would make sure she got a hot meal tonight and was able to sleep with both eyes closed. He wondered suddenly if her contagion was airborne and decided it was too late to worry over it now. He wasn't sure how the woman lying out of sight in the truck bed would be special to anyone in their camp or to him, but he presumed that would become clear by the time they made it back to camp. It certainly wouldn't be romance.

The woman snorted, loudly. *No, it won't be.*

Ivan sniggered. He liked being around his own kind.

Travis rolled his eyes and kept a watch for problems. The other part of their team was here gathering activated charcoal that was used to filter chemicals from aquariums. Most people didn't realize boiling and bleach only killed living issues. It didn't clean out the chemicals. Angela wanted to be positive they could do both.

You can't filter enough out to matter, Carolyn told both men. It's good you're trying, though. Few others care about these things.

Who are you? Travis joined the mental conversation. He understood descendants could hear him. If they wanted to answer, they would make sure he could hear them. It worked out well between mixed team members.

In another life, I was a school teacher. When that life ended, I evolved. Then I tried to climb a mountain that was too big for me.

You survived the radiation? Ivan was impressed. *How?*

The woman didn't respond.

Ivan didn't push. He had faith he would learn the details during their adventure. The feel of magic use lit up his mental doors and forced him to lock down to keep them from opening.

Travis felt the woman sigh in his mind. It gave him chills.

New. Great. Her attention switched to Travis, scanning him. *Normal. Even better.* The woman sat up, lowering her hood. "Keep a shield up over both of you." Carolyn crouched near the open connector window. "Don't slow down."

Headlights came on in front of him.

Travis spotted lights behind them.

Ivan brought up the shield like he'd been told. "Which way?"

"Straight through!" their passenger shouted.

Ivan frowned as he hit the gas, ass throbbing each time the truck bounced and he was impaled by the seat. “She’s nuts.”

Travis nodded as he removed the safety from his gun. “How did they know we were coming?”

Ivan braced as the line of scavengers lifted weapons. “They didn’t. We wandered into their turf.”

“They live here?”

Ivan didn’t have time to answer as bullets hit the truck and the woman in the rear returned fire. The clan behind them didn’t expect her grenades and the group in front of them didn’t see her at all as they emptied mags into the front of the truck and tires.

The grenades exploded, ripping through the line in a vicious blast that sent flames and smoke into the air.

Someone fired magic. Ivan felt it coming. The vehicle lifted as it was hit...

The woman kicked out of the truck, landing on the road.

The truck slid sideways and went down the embankment, seat poking and piercing. Their vehicle crashed through a fence into a swampy enclosure.

Ivan found a path to the road and tried to go that way, but the wet ground and two deflated tires prevented him from moving fast. The truck inched up the grade, spraying mud.

Ivan’s ass cheek started to bleed.

Gunshots and shouts echoed to them.

“She’s scrappy.”

Ivan gunned it as they hit the top. The truck lunged over the side of the enclosure and knocked three scavengers into the air and the diaper pin into Ivan’s other cheek. “Come on!”

The bleeding woman leapt into the truck as Ivan flew by, grabbing the side of the bed. She was swung into the air as he gained speed.

Ivan took the next narrow path, hoping the employee road would take them away from the group and not into any of their other members. He wondered where his team was, but he didn’t stop or try to call them yet. He needed to get lost for a few minutes.

Carolyn waited for his next rough turn and let the momentum swing her up and into the truck bed. She slammed against the side and clutched it, body hurting.

Behind them, scavengers ran for their vehicles. They’d gotten out to do combat with the sick woman instead of killing her. Their need for information had let her escape, but her illness was terrifying. Everyone wanted to know what it was and how it was transmitted. After surviving the first flu season of the new world, survivors were leery of killing anyone who was ill without first extracting information. They gave chase.

Ivan understood that need after his adventure with Angela. Little Caleb was doing well in camp, but the adults from that run were deeply scarred.

The aquarium was in a large park connected to a smaller zoo and an entertainment center. *Should have known people would come here*, Ivan berated himself as he flipped the headlights on and off, once. He needed to see. The thick trees and cloudy skies were making it hard to view where the edge of the road met the fence.

“I saw them!” Travis pointed at lights. “Eagle code!”

Ivan read it, relieved. He took the top path at the fork like the code told him and spun them up the hillside to join the rest of his team.

Ivan gestured Travis to keep watch as he got out to speak with James. Everyone else stayed in their vehicles, listening for company. They’d been able to drive right into this part of the aquarium, making it easier to collect the charcoal that was stored in large buckets, bags, and pallets. Rolling by the empty animal enclosures and green, foggy tanks where nothing moved had given them goosebumps.

“They would have found us if we’d warned you.” James was still sorry for it. Sometimes, Eagle rules sucked.

Ivan waved it off, then rubbed his sore ass. “You get it?”

James nodded, grinning. “There’s twice as much as she predicted on the list.”

“And that’s why it was worth it.” Ivan resisted the need to put a hand down his pants and see how bloody he was. “We need that charcoal. How long to finish loading?”

“Another hour. We’d started and then Serio picked up magic and we knew you were nearby.”

Storing that information, Ivan gestured toward his truck. “That was all her. A gift for the boss.”

“Who is she?” James scanned the shadowy woman but couldn’t get a good view of her for the truck.

“Little Sean’s mom. She’s sick. Pass the word on no physical contact.”

“I will. Come on. You can follow us back to the loading site.”

“Deal.” Ivan pointed at the path and then Travis. “*You* drive.”

3

Serio and Freddy were swinging bags and boxes into a long trailer. They didn’t break rhythm as Ivan and Travis arrived. They kept working and scanned between armloads. Because the woman behind the group didn’t have a guard, the two men assumed she wasn’t a threat and kept laboring. Angela had made it clear they were short on time. Hearing the action nearby had confirmed it. They needed to hurry. Rose and Cathy had been sent to help Kyle. That was another concern. The men didn’t like their females being alone for any length of time; they were eager to follow.

Travis shut the truck door, scowling and rubbing his ass. “We have to replace that seat if she’s taking this truck to the island. It hurts!”

Two lanterns illuminated sterile white walls and pristine hallways. Travis was surprised to find it creepier than if there had been rotting bodies.

The sick woman lingered in the doorway, eyeing the muscles and the balls. It had been months since she'd spent time around people, let alone around men this pure. She didn't sense any evil in them though they were killers. It was amazing. She couldn't help but stare.

"Is there anything we can do for her?" As long as she stayed in the shadows, it made her creepier. Serio wished she'd come over to where they were. "Or is she contagious?"

"I'm not." The woman walked into the dim light coming through a cracked window. "I think. Your boss will tell me for sure when I ask her to kill me."

Ivan scowled. "What is it with people thinking Angela will kill whenever they want?" He tossed a crate into the truck, wrenching his back a little in his anger. "She wants all of us to survive. Stop asking her to go against her nature."

Carolyn stayed out of their way, but near enough for them to stare at her bald head and sores. "Sean's really with you?"

Freddy flashed images of watching the boy get into his travel car during the last stop, laughing with Leeann and Cody. "He has friends; he's healthy." The rookie gave her a smile. "He'll be better when he sees you."

"I'd scare him now." Carolyn stepped over the body of a rat. "I just need to see him. Let him go on

thinking I died. It'll be easier than him losing me twice."

"Maybe there's a way you can stay." Ivan didn't like it when anyone suffered, but a hurting female could always break him.

Carolyn let out a sound of misery. "If my son really has been under her care all this time, the debt I owe for that is too high for me to ask for anything."

All the Eagles respected her for that.

An engine sounded.

The Eagles loaded faster.

Ivan grunted, really hurting now. "You should get in here with the supplies. You'll be safer and there isn't room for you in the truck cabins."

The woman came toward them with fluid grace implying she'd been trained in some form or another. It was hard to judge what by her grungy clothes and the little gear she had showing. The .45 in her hand had the safety on and stayed along her hip. Her finger rested beside the trigger and not on it. *She knows how to use that*, Ivan acknowledged. "Who were you?"

The woman sighed. "Long story you've heard before."

"Fair enough." Freddy lifted a brow. "You have a name?"

The woman sat on the floor of the truck, crossing her legs beneath her. She peered up as Ivan shut the door. "My name is Carolyn Garnet."

"Welcome to Safe Haven, Ms. Garnet." Ivan slammed the door.

Travis eyed the driver seat and went to the passenger side even though he cherished time behind any wheel. “Straight out or take it easy?”

Ivan got in with clenched cheeks, grimacing at the prick. He started the engine and shifted into gear. “I’m actually hoping for a distraction. We should have heard something from Kyle by now.”

“And if we don’t get a distraction?” James, squeezed in with them, made sure his gun was fully loaded.

“Straight through. We’ll head for the hub with a few clicks to let them know to prepare for company.”

“That works.” Travis rolled the window down so he would be clear to fire, glad to be leaving. The dead animals in the tanks were already getting to him.

“Me too.” Ivan spotted a clear path as they emerged from the tunnel. He hit the gas, feeling blood soak into his boxers. “Straight through it is.”

Chapter Twenty
I Was Never Here

5pm

1

“**A**ww, man.” Randal joined Kyle at the rear of his truck. “We thought this was a call for help!”

Kyle snorted. “We’ve met, right?”

Randal laughed. The other men and women who’d been sent to save Kyle’s bacon were loading trucks along side his team. Neil’s group was patrolling a tight perimeter. “We’re taking these back now?”

Kyle nodded. “We had problems here. It’s cleared now as far as we know, but it made noise and radio calls went out. We aren’t coming back to this location.”

Randal swept the open dock doors of the shipping company. “That’s a lot of freeze dried shrimp.”

Kyle grunted again, not rubbing it in. The find was great, though. He was proud of it. “You get to drive this one.” Kyle handed him a sheet of paper. “Tell her we tried to list all the items, but it’s not complete. A lot of the boxes haven’t been opened. They may or may not contain what the label says.”

“Will do.” Randal took the sheet and went to the driver side to see if he needed keys or gas.

While Randal got set, Kyle swept their surroundings, not lingering on the wreckage or bodies that littered the view to the west. After witnessing how fast the wind and water was erasing their tracks, Kyle had chosen to drive them to camp the same way—through the surf. The lead of that convoy, Pam, was pulling out now. The other trucks would follow. The twenty people here had worked hard over the last three hours. Half the warehouse was loaded.

“We haven’t had a check in from two teams.” Daryl handed Kyle a list of the next truck’s contents. “Not worried about Kenn so much as Courtney.”

Kyle had noted that they were four drivers short of what he’d called for. “We’ll be done here in two hours. We’ll swing by and see what’s up.”

Soothed, Daryl went back to loading.

Kyle’s sense of worry grew. All the men were picking up on it and bringing minor problems to his attention, but Daryl had hit the nail on the head. They had a female team leader for the first time in the history of Safe Haven and she’d been turned loose with a group of level ones. Now, that team hadn’t checked in.

Kyle went to help his men load so it would get done faster.

“We’re all set.” Daryl slapped the truck and climbed into the passenger seat. They’d been loading the warehouse all day, but it was finally empty.

Kyle shifted, rolling before the man was fully in his seat. Trouble was coming, or it had already hit. He wasn’t sure which as he turned into the darker skies to their east.

“Hey... I see someone.”

Kyle picked out the man’s arrogant walk through the buggy sunset and then the Eagle gear over Eagle clothes and jacket. Sunglasses glinted at them.

“Sure knows how to make an entrance.” Daryl put his window down as Kyle turned the truck toward the lone man.

Kyle snorted, slowing enough for Adrian to grab onto the door.

Adrian didn’t waste time. “One of the teams was in trouble. I’ll show you where.”

“We have maps for their locations.” Kyle didn’t have orders to help Adrian or have contact.

“We’ll handle it.” Daryl frowned. “Now go away so we don’t have to shoot you.”

“He’s not in the camp perimeter.” Kyle steered around the wrecks, following vanishing tracks of the trucks that had made a wide turn here. Kyle kept driving straight when Adrian pointed. “Are you following us on orders?”

“I caught Kenn’s code as I went by. He was stuck under a truck.”

Kyle looked over. “What about Courtney?”

Adrian’s brows came together, concentrating. “...that team finished early. She’s home already... She forgot to call it in. Kenn needed the help. He was last in line and fell out of sight with engine trouble. Then he was spotted by refugees and tried to run. The truck went over a hill and flipped. People were stealing everything and trying to get to him.”

“Why didn’t you help?” Daryl asked as Kyle increased speed.

“I led them away and circled back to leave Kenn my truck. It’s all over the radio.”

“You know we don’t listen while we work.” Daryl frowned. “It’s a distraction, like you.”

“That’s why I’m telling you.”

Instead of relaxing, Kyle’s concern grew. He was thrilled that Courtney’s team was already home, but Kenn was important. It would hurt Angela to lose him. Jennifer had told him of her words to the Marine on the beach by the ship, but Kyle didn’t think Angela was factoring in how much she’d come to count on him for the day-to-day operations of camp. Kenn was reliable and skilled. They needed him.

“I feel the same way.” Adrian leaned into the turn with the truck. “That’s why he’s still alive.”

“I always thought it was because he’d do anything for you, cover up anything for you.” Daryl

had grown tight with Marc and he was still stinging from Adrian's betrayals.

"It was at first." Adrian held on tighter as Kyle went faster. "Then I figured out what your team leader just did. We need Kenn."

"Are we the decoy while he disappears or are we backup for his trip home?" Kyle needed to know what was going to happen when they arrived. None of the teams were far apart. It wouldn't take long to get there.

"That depends. Do you want to get back with an empty truck or would you like to escort something the boss really wants?"

Kyle was immediately intrigued. "What is it?"

"I'd rather show you." Adrian pointed. "It's on your way."

Kyle decided to trust him. He doubted Adrian would jeopardize things this close to leaving time.

"I wouldn't." Wanting Kyle to be glad he'd made the choice, Adrian sent him an image. "It's not on her lists, I'm sure, but she'll be pleased."

Kyle was already nodding. "That'll be a perfect finish. We have about ten foot of space left in this truck."

Adrian hung on as Kyle swerved around debris. "I know."

They realized Adrian had waited until they were alone.

Daryl frowned at the man.

Adrian shrugged. “It would have distracted the teams and started problems for her when you get back. This way, I was never here.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes, studying the dark homes and looted, sand-drenched properties. It was sad to see what America had become.

“All right.” Kyle gestured. “Once Kenn is secured, we’ll swing by the other site and fill up.”

Daryl glared at Adrian. “Why don’t we see or hear anything yet?”

Adrian braced for ugliness. “Because it’s all over. Kenn is back at the hub, probably already annoyed with Quinn. If there’s trouble somewhere, it has to be there, or it’ll be you, on this extra pick up. Watch your asses. The hub looked calm when I went by.”

Kyle drove toward Kenn’s location, realizing Adrian had manipulated them into coming out of their way. If it had been further, Kyle would have been angry, but there were a lot of fast routes anywhere in the ten mile radius where they were collecting. He’d memorized all spots for the day so he could get to them if there was a problem.

“So what? We’re supposed to let you work with us on gathering a gift for the boss?” Daryl shifted to a better angle for a punch.

“Actually, I’m just bumming a ride to another site not on her list.”

“How do you know these places aren’t?” Daryl felt like he should hit Adrian in the mouth anyway while he was in range, for Marc’s sake.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed, body tensing. “Because they’re frivolous. She doesn’t consider those things unless someone mentions them. It’s one of the few weaknesses she has.”

Both Eagles stored the information.

Adrian met Kyle’s eye as he glanced over. “Take care of her.”

Kyle nodded curtly.

Adrian jumped off the truck before Daryl could hit him or ask another question.

Daryl looked at Kyle, scowling.

Kyle shook his head. “Not now.”

“But if he really stays, that fixes everything!”

Kyle grunted. He wasn’t sure on that anymore.

“What?”

Kyle decided to be honest. He might need someone he could talk to about this later. He could have shot Adrian. He’d chosen not to. “We know they aren’t always stable. It’s a big price to pay, but if she flips out while we’re gone, who can bring her back?”

“Marc.” Daryl didn’t hesitate.

Wish I believed that. Kyle lit a cheroot and kept driving.

“I wish they’d hurry up.” Quinn paced next to Kenn’s semi, watching the sunset and the trucks around them. “Why aren’t they hurrying?”

“Chill out.” Kenn finished the last paperwork for these loads. “We’ll be here another ten hours. Maybe fourteen.”

“Why?” Quinn’s hands swung out. “There’s a refugee wave on the way from the west. You were attacked, and Kyle’s team was attacked. We’re going to be caught out in the open here!”

Kenn pointed at the truck they’d come in. “Go have a drink.”

Quinn frowned. “We don’t drink on duty.”

“You are today.” Kenn glowered at the hyper man. “Go have a drink or switch out with a driver and get back to camp. I can’t stand working with a coward.”

Quinn stormed by Kenn to switch out. He wasn’t breaking Eagle rules to keep from annoying Kenn, but he couldn’t just stand here and count things. Angela should have known that.

“We need another driver for the lumber trucks!” Pam called.

Kenn pointed at Quinn.

Quinn breathed a sigh of relief and trotted over to hop into the bed of Pam’s truck. She’d taken her first loads to camp and then escorted rookies back here while she collected drivers for the next loads.

As Pam left with four men, everyone else still loading items or dropping off loads sent Angela a

mental sigh of relief. Quinn was normally dependable. His flakiness was unexpected.

Not by the boss, Kenn corrected. She'd been handling things remotely all day, but the senior men were almost able to feel her watching over them.

That means she isn't positive if there's going to be trouble. Nearby to direct traffic in and out of the hub, Jennifer also recognized that, giving Kenn a nod. She paused. "Do you hear that?"

Kenn sighed. *That was fast.* He swiveled, drawing his gun.

Eagle code flashed from coming headlights.

Jennifer joined Kenn, not holstering. They translated it together.

"Company. Great." Kenn scanned for a place to work from as Ivan barreled toward them in a semi. "Over there."

Kenn and Jennifer ran to the side of the road and hunkered down.

Ivan flew by in a cloud of dusty sand.

Travis spotted Kenn as they went by and caught his motion.

"He said keep going."

Ivan did.

Kenn waved the other Eagles to keep working. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with getting these men back to camp. As during his time under Adrian's leadership, Kenn knew people mattered more than supplies.

Danger swept the busy space.

Jennifer saw two cars flying toward them. She took aim. “Twofer?”

Kenn chuckled. “You called it, you trigger it.”

Jennifer aimed low...fired.

The tire popped, sending the smaller truck into the side of the larger one.

Kenn fired, hitting another tire.

The two vehicles careened into a nearby parking lot and smashed into the side of a gas station.

Eagles ran toward the scene at Kenn’s wave, shooting survivors who staggered from the wrecks. The coming threats had centered on the line of trucks and missed the two shooters in the ditch.

“Nice!”

Kenn slapped Jennifer’s hand out of reflex, but he didn’t feel it as much anymore. It wasn’t the same as it had been. Sometimes, he was glad. This time, he was just sad. Kenn got to work without joining the men for congratulations.

The Eagles noticed it. His mood transferred to them, making everyone work faster. They’d only been gone a day, but it felt longer. Safe Haven’s light was hard to be without now.

4

8pm

Kyle and Daryl, along with Cathy and Rose, met at the front of the business they’d just finished clearing. The women had joined them shortly after

they'd started deciding what all to load. Kyle hadn't asked how they'd known the location or if Angela knew where they were. He assumed the boss had noticed two lone men on one of her scans and hadn't liked it, so she'd sent backup.

Kyle swept the area and found shadows. They'd labored in the dark for the last hour, ignoring odd shapes on the walls from flashlights and lanterns.

"Take a minute for a drink and a piss." Kyle listened for problems in the empty neighborhood around the row of businesses. There was a lot of looting here, but it was old, and this shop only had damage on the outside. No one needed what they'd just finished loading.

Kyle went to the door of the truck that they'd come in, wishing for one more driver... Kyle scowled, spotting the faint glint of a red glow. "Come on, then. We're ready."

Adrian emerged from the trees where he'd been standing watch over the four-man team.

Kyle tossed him a set of keys. "Take whichever you want." He got into his truck and tore around to the rear, alerting the rest of the team to his annoyance and Adrian's presence.

Daryl shook his head, walking behind Kyle's truck. "Some people never learn."

Cathy tried to ignore Adrian as he fell in between her and Rose, but it was hard. He put off a sense of security that she missed in the men around them. Kyle and Daryl were good, but Adrian was great.

Rose marched away from the traitor, casting him the same look Marc would have if he'd been here.

Ahead, Kyle pulled into place and waited for the team to get into the loaded trucks. The playground equipment would be perfect to fill the rest of his truck and please the boss. Upon arrival, they'd found two trucks waiting to be shipped out of this manufacturing plant and store. The building had also been crammed with pallets waiting for shipment. The framing here had a dozen uses they didn't have covered yet. Plumbing stores and factories were wiped out in every state, but these hollow metal pipes that interlocked with easy snaps could be used in place of it. *Along with frames for temporary buildings while we build the buildings. Like scaffolding.* Kyle switched on the radio for a check of all channels.

"We lost them!"

"I have it!" The radio blared with shouts even though Kyle had it on the lowest volume setting.

"Big RV-like hauler. We're on Interstate 20, at Fort Worth. We're flying east! Get ahead—"

Kyle switched it off, though he could hear the echo from one of the trucks behind him as the team got vehicles started and shifted into gear. Fort Worth was a few days hard travel from here. Jeff was rolling them faster than Angela had estimated. Kyle wasn't certain how he knew that, but he did.

Come home. Now.

Angela's message rang through their minds and into the surrounding area, warning and alerting.

Descendants, good and bad, began tracking the call while longing for a second one that would narrow her location.

Kyle knew there wouldn't be a second call. "Time to go."

It would still be late when they arrived. Kyle presumed they would be among the last teams to return. This town had been outside Angela's ten mile limit to the west. People trying to form a blockade against Jeff would certainly end up trying it around here as soon as they realized the shore, and Safe Haven, had to be where he was headed. The longer he traveled, the more threats he would bring.

"Godspeed." Kyle increased his.

5

Safe Haven (2am)

Angela waited as the gate opened, motioning the rest of the Eagles back. Ivan stopped as soon as he was in far enough for the gate to be shut and locked.

"Quarantine?" Ian translated Ivan's motions about a passenger.

"Yes. Put her with Panaji. He needs company and she won't hurt him just for being a refugee."

Ian frowned at the wording, making a mental note. If Safe Haven people were being mean to anyone, it had to stop.

Satisfied she'd alerted an Eagle to a future problem, Angela watched Ivan pull into the unloading area and hop out. He jogged to a waiting vehicle with Travis on his heels. Both men were rubbing their butts.

Angela grinned in tolerant amusement. Now she knew why Kenn had traded for a diaper pin. The two men were heading right back out for another nearby load, but it appeared they were leaving their truck for a ride with better seats.

Angela made a motion to the gate guard, denying them. She was getting tired and this shift of camp members had to be switched out. She needed Ivan and Travis here.

Angela switched directions, seeing the animals were outdoors and seemed to be enjoying it. Jack's horse and Dog were rooting around in the surf, occasionally snorting or whickering. Tonya's cats were hanging out around the mess, begging for scraps. They both had bulging stomachs and shiny coats as people groomed and fed them. Even the older people were enjoying the pets. Angela was just thrilled to have two mousers for the ship.

She rotated again, acknowledging the available females having a picnic on the shore by the ship. As sweaty workers came out empty handed, the women were pushing cool drinks and smiles. Conner had point over the ramps on a rotating schedule that allowed him to spend a few minutes at each to collect comments, notes, lists, and complaints from the men and women loading the ship.

He was doing the same for the fishing operation now running the length of the perimeter on the western end. The smells were wonderful after so much canned food. The cooks had served fish with breakfast as a side item and there hadn't been enough for everyone. Angela had refused to let them pull more from the freezer, promising everyone would get their fill before the journey was over. Then she'd quietly doubled the amount of food fish ordered for tomorrow. A little less would be smoked, but her people would be happy.

"Of course, I'm okay with you becoming an Eagle!" Theo had to hurry to keep up. Debra was marching across the sandy camp with angry steps, holding a grudge. Theo was on his cane, though his foot was holding his weight much better than when they'd first left the mountain.

Debra didn't want to keep arguing. She was doing it as her first assignment from the boss. When the men saw how hard she was fighting for it, they would ease off the other women thinking about joining. *I need them all.* Angela faced the last direction for her scan, heart warming. Marc and the kids were having a meeting while enjoying the slushies that Stanley had surprised them all with since the entire camp was working so late. The ship's luxuries were slowly coming online. Angela expected the first week of their cruise to be much like it would have been before the war. After that, people would tire of the endless sight of water and sky. She'd made plans, but like in the mountain, the

human mind was fragile. Some of them wouldn't be able to take such a huge change for a month or more.

Near Marc and the kids, Eagles who hadn't been sent out of camp were using break time to train on their own. Most of them were using gym equipment, but a few were in the cage, practicing kai. Angela noted two of them were around her level. *I'll set up sparring times on the ship.*

"We'd like to leave." A group of Ciemus people came to Angela, ignoring William and Bucky, who had pointed over the gate. "I'm sorry. It's..."

"Getting too real?" Angela supplied.

All the women nodded.

"I'll send your share of the supplies with William." Angela felt a niggles and pushed. "Are you sure you don't want to wait and escort him home?"

"We're not going home." The newly elected leader looked west.

Angela felt the warning, but she chose to have mercy. "Thank you for your honor."

The woman paled but found the correct response. "Thank you for your mercy."

The group left, casting looks over their shoulders that expected wrath.

Angela motioned the gate to be opened, denying William's request to stop them and talk. She would tell him later, when the undercover traitors were out of his range.

Ian came to Angela, expression grim. “They brought a passenger, but she’s sick. We want to move the QZ into what’s left of the warehouse.”

“Granted.” Angela held out a paper. “Give this to Tonya and tell her to deliver it personally when she’s finished.”

Ian put the note into his pocket without reading it. He was too busy.

Coldness swept the camp, drawing Angela toward the boat ramp.

Trinity was going in, carrying a large box.

Brittani was coming out, hands just emptied.

The two women spotted each other before the workers around them did.

Angela saw Conner at the far end of his route and knew he wouldn’t get there in time. Angela could if she used power, but that would mean leaving her post in the center of camp and she wouldn’t do that just to prevent a fight that would likely happen anyway at some point.

Trinity surprised everyone by stepping into the black woman’s path.

Eagles moved toward them.

Trinity shoved the box into Brittani’s hands before the woman could speak. “The boss says you need to stay in camp now. Keep loading.”

Trinity turned and went back down the ramp.

Angela, mouth open like everyone else, looked at Ian, who had been assigned to deliver that message.

She volunteered. Ian sent it in hand code. We thought she was bluffing and wanted to see if she would follow through.

Angela put the woman on her mental list. That had taken balls.

Brittani flashed a scowl in Angela's direction, then took the box into the ship.

The sun glinted off a jeep rolling their two new people to the warehouse. Angela observed for a minute, thinking sunsets looked normal over the water. When they reached land, it got crazy. She sighed, retuning to her continuous scans. *Hurry, Eagles. I need you here so I can breathe.*

6

“That’s him!” Carolyn pointed, smile lighting up her ill face. “That’s my son!”

She and the other quarantined person had been here for about an hour and were enjoying luxuries not seen since the war-like ice for the water. The lean-to around them was all that was left of what she assumed had been a warehouse by the remaining panels. It gave them cover from the weather and allowed an open view of Safe Haven and the glare of a lit cruise ship sitting heavy in the water. The mile long camp was bright and loud, with good vibes that swirled through the shield over the entire area. It was impressive and a little intimidating. Carolyn hadn't observed people this organized in a long time. Even the foreign troops who'd come here

were struggling in every way. Safe Haven was flourishing.

Panaji peered at the boy illuminated in the spotlights between the warehouse and the camp, and bobbed his head. “Is nice. Strong child.”

Carolyn smiled, sitting back down. “Yes, he is and he’s with good people.”

Panaji bobbed again. “Haven good. Stay with Haven.”

Carolyn shook her head. “Not me. The next time she opens the shield, I’m leaving.”

Panaji, not afraid, reached over and took her hand.

Carolyn allowed it because he was so inoffensive and thin. A wind could have blown him over.

Magic swirled through the shadowy shelter.

“Stop that!” Monica came over to the beach couch where they were sitting. “Boss said no magic.”

Panaji stood up, pointing. “She die! You help!”

“I’ll tell the boss again.” Monica gave the woman a sympathetic look. “But she already knows, and we don’t have orders.”

“She won’t heal me.”

“Because of the radiation sickness?”

Carolyn lowered her hood. “I fought that and won.” She ran a hand over her bald head. “Though the sores don’t want to go away.” She sighed, hand dropping. “It’s the cancer that came from it.”

Monica brightened. “We have a chemist working on something for that. Her next batch is brewing.”

Carolyn felt relief enter her heart and stamped it out. “Save it for the good people. I don’t deserve it.”

Panaji would have denied it, but Monica waved at him to be quiet. “Why? What did you do?”

Carolyn pointed at her son as he ran by on the beach with a powerful man and dozens of camp kids. They were blowing bubbles and pinwheels, laughing and enjoying life. “I sold him.”

Monica and Panaji both recoiled. Her disease hadn’t bothered them. Her words did.

Carolyn rolled her arm over. Needle tracks stood out in scars up and down her skin. “When it ran out, I dried out and realized what I’d done. I’ve been looking for him ever since.”

Monica made a note in the log and left the warehouse.

Panaji went to a far corner and sat on the filthy floor, not wanting her stain to rub off.

Carolyn watched for the shield to lower. She’d just needed to know her son survived. Now, she could go die like she deserved.

7

“The sick woman ran on the last shield drop.” Ian came to Angela an hour later. “Barreled right out of the QZ and jumped into the water.”

“Did she survive?”

“She’s a hell of a swimmer. Beat the waves to our perimeter edge, then swam back in to shore.”

“We may see her again.”

“Is that a problem?” Ian nodded to Ivan, glad the boss had a guard now.

“Not for us.” Angela was scanning the teams not in camp yet.

“I looked at the log. Shouldn’t we have orders for people like that?”

Ivan snorted. “You’re too green to judge it.”

“But that’s a clear case.” Ian gestured. “She admitted it.”

“And that earns her a *fast* death?”

Ivan took a step back at Angela’s vicious tone. He wasn’t sure what to say. She was letting Carolyn live so the woman would keep suffering. It was cruel.

Angela’s voice was ugly. “It’s also a kindness. After what she’s done, she really didn’t deserve to know what happened to him.”

Ivan grunted. “I guess she didn’t sell him to a loving family.”

Angela refused to repeat what she’d scanned in little Sean’s mind. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to go kill her.”

“Why aren’t you...?” Ian was slower than Kenn, but he finally connected the pieces. Angela wasn’t a vengeful person. Letting the woman live must serve another purpose.

Angela smiled at him. “Very good.” Her approval faded. “Now we’ll see if you can be

trusted. If anyone finds out, I'll know where it came from.”

Angela waved him off before he could recover and reply. “Back to rounds.”

She and Ivan watched him go, both wishing Kenn was here. Ian would eventually be a good Eagle when he conquered his need to be in the center of the scuttlebutt vine, but he would never be her body man again. He'd spent the entire time memorizing juicy details to taunt men with when the teams returned.

“It's lights out time, Safe Haven!” Conner was keeping strict track of the timeline Angela had set. “Let's finish up and hit the rack, kids!”

Angela laughed with everyone else at the teenager calling them kids. She walked toward the bathroom tents that were about to be very busy, following orders.

Chapter Twenty-One

Take It In

Day 5

4am

1

“**I** miss mommy.”

Marc put an arm around the boy’s shoulders, remembering a time when he’d also missed Julia. “I’m sorry. Can *I* help you?”

Cody peered up, pausing in their return from a bathroom trip. “Do you have a picture?”

Marc knew he didn’t, but he wasn’t sure if someone in camp may have snapped a photo. “I’ll ask around.”

Soothed, Cody let Marc guide him to the tent where the rest of the kids and the den mothers were finally sleeping. Angela was in there too, next to the twins who’d refused to settle down without her. Marc doubted she was sleeping but rest would still be good for her. The same was true of Eagles groaning over soreness or muttering to each other about sand in everything. It was peaceful. Crickets called, adding a nice rhythm that accented the soft roll of the ocean and the silence of a site shut down for the night.

Marc inhaled the ocean breeze, heart hurting. He locked down on it, rotating toward the gate as headlights flashed. He recognized their last team and motioned the sentries to let them in. *I'll be able to tell her everyone is back. She'll be in a good mood.*

Radios around camp lit up a second later.

“We’re still looking for that truck! One of you useless fucks better find them!”

“They went into the sewer! We can’t see anything!”

“Keep looking!”

Garbles came in response, but it was too late to turn them off.

So much for the peace and quiet. Marc stayed at the flap to see if Angela wanted him to do anything to prepare.

Angela lifted her head. “Come rest. Ivan and Jennifer have point.”

Maxed out, Marc did.

Cody was delighted. He snuggled between them, finally feeling safe.

2

A Mile from Safe Haven

Adrian poked the fire with a long stick. “You should come warm up.” He glanced into the cold darkness around the shed where he was camped. “Come on now. An hour of watching me is enough.”

Nancy entered the shed with a deep frown and a stomach full of butterflies. She knew Brittani was right. Adrian didn't want her here or he would have offered her the choice to come along.

"You're safer there." Adrian shifted tiredly back onto his bedroll. It had been a long day. "You shouldn't have come."

"I'll warm up and leave!" Nancy sealed her pain behind a woman's thick wall of bitterness. "Then you can go back to dreaming of Marc's bitch."

Adrian sighed. "I'll give you what you want, just sit down and shut up until I'm ready."

Nancy winced. Then she got angrier. Then she sat down and shut up. She wanted a baby. The humiliation she had to suffer to get it was nothing in comparison.

Adrian grunted. "You're sure it's really what you want? Raising a child alone wasn't easy even when the world was spinning like normal."

"Yes."

Adrian didn't push. She'd been thinking about almost nothing else since the demonstration Angela had done with the camp women to show how many breeders they had. Nancy had taken her place with others at the table and become one of the most wanted women in camp, but she'd chosen him for the honor. He didn't know why. He presumed it was the bond that would come from being lovers, but it didn't matter. She wanted something from him, needed him. He had to have that in some form. An alpha was only satisfied when they had followers.

Nancy felt the shift in mood and forced herself not to talk. She slid off the backpack and unbuttoned the top of her coat, waiting for the freeze to thaw so she could enjoy the heat from the fire. The only thing keeping her from shivering was knowing why she was here. Adrian's call had brought her out of the wilderness and given her a new life. When he'd chosen her as a relief source, she'd been elated, but unlike the others, she hadn't tried to trap him or claim him. She'd just been thrilled to spend time with him. She still was.

"Thank you for your loyalty." He fell into the hazy place between asleep and awake as he drew open the door to a room that hadn't been entered since Conner was conceived. He could have just loved her a few times when she came into season. Like most males, Adrian had a nose for that, but Nancy hadn't left safety for a natural event or a natural child. She wanted *his* baby.

Adrian was honored. The past gifts he'd granted were to couples who wanted their own offspring and were settling for his. This would be the child he wanted to give Angela. He gazed across the fire. "Number?"

Nancy's face scrunched in concentration. "I don't... Oh." She paused to consider and then shook her head. "One. I want more, but I'd lose them after you leave. I can keep me, plus one, alive."

Adrian rubbed his fingers over the fire, sprinkling nothing she could see.

"Gender?"

“Does it matter in some way?”

“Power levels, odds of corruption. Yes, it matters.”

Nancy shrugged. “You make that choice. I’m not looking for power or protection. I want your baby, not your gifts.”

Adrian smiled at her. “A perfect blonde girl with my eyes and your ethics.”

“Yes! Make her like me so I’ll always have someone in my life I can trust and love.”

Adrian closed his lids and murmured another part of the lengthy charm. In the past, he’d wined and dined the women beforehand and sent them for long baths while he labored.

Nancy didn’t mind the wait, though she was impatient to know it was done, that she would have what she needed. She was fascinated by the magic taking place in front of her. Each time he muttered, the flames changed color and the air became thicker.

Adrian weaved the charm with his usual flawless skill, but there was a twinge as he contemplated Angela. Doing this would anger her and put more resentment into her heart for him. It would also be a guarantee that he would never have her, never love her. This would always stand between them.

Nancy felt him hesitate. She wanted to push or beg, but she kept quiet, letting him think it through. If he said no, other descendants might agree, but it wouldn’t be the same. Adrian was the light. Only he

could give her what she really wanted—a bond with him that was willing and wouldn't be broken. Once a baby was made, they would be family.

Adrian sighed, wishing it was enough. Angela was the only one who made him feel that way. He could stay with Nancy or Kendle, or even go on a hunt for a closer replacement, but it would never be enough. He was doomed to the angst because he was corrupt. There was no true chance for him and Angela now.

Adrian regarded Nancy, grateful for her. *And this one wants me for me, not for my gifts or safety. She's always wanted me. I can feel that. She was smart enough to know we'd never be a couple. She gave me space and let me make my own choice, like she is now.* He sighed again. *I wish I could give these women what they deserve. Please don't punish anymore of them because of me.* He slowly stood.

The air thickened again, making it harder for Nancy to breathe.

“Take it in.” His shield was thick right now, but he was going to be distracted for a while and they needed cover.

Nancy felt Adrian's magic surround her and then it went dark.

A few seconds later, a warm body settled next to her. She could feel the heat of the fire and hear it crackling, but she couldn't see anything.

“We're off the grid.” Adrian was still working his magic. He kissed her cheek, lingering. “Would you like the lead?”

She melted against him. “I’d like to be shuddering in your arms, moaning your name. I don’t care how it happens.”

Adrian pulled her into his arms and began. This was the fun part and it sometimes needed to be repeated. As heartbroken as he was, Adrian thought it might take a few tries for him to be sure it took. He would concentrate on the duty at hand instead of the emotional pain that had settled into his soul and become a part of him. *My mother didn’t tell me about days like this.*

3

Angela felt it. She got up and left the tent.

The boss emerging in her underclothes was a double alert for the Eagles on duty and an instant distraction. In shorts and one of Marc’s shirts, she was a sleepy, curl covered fantasy with bare skin they’d never viewed. Her dazed eyes implied she wasn’t aware of them or her undress. Something was happening.

Marc, exhausted from the eighteen-hour day, didn’t notice.

Ivan came toward her, drawn by an invisible rope.

Jennifer hurried to beat him and couldn’t.

Ivan reached out, taking Angela’s hand.

She looked at him with red orbs. “It hurts.”

Ivan nodded, other hand coming up to take her shoulder. “I feel it. You need an outlet.” He leaned in. “I’ll give you one.”

Angela nodded. “Take me.”

Ivan slipped off his jacket, ignoring the glares and hissed orders from Jennifer and the Eagles. He knew what she needed.

“How?!” Jennifer demanded.

Ivan took Angela toward the water. “Her dog told me. He knew Marc wouldn’t understand.”

“He’s sleeping!” Jennifer protested.

“Would it matter?” Ivan refuted without hatred. “He doesn’t know how to help her. None of them do but the dog.”

“And now you.” Angela choked, shuddering. “Faster.”

Ivan scooped her up and trotted to the water.

Jennifer followed, waving Quinn to keep point over camp. She forced herself to stay silent when Ivan marched into the icy surf and kept going.

Ivan went to the edge of the drop off, using his strength to fight the tide that wanted to drown him. If not for the woman in his arms, he wouldn’t be safe out here.

Angela fired her rage into the water.

Ivan held on and kept them above the breakers as she emptied her rage into the cold water that absorbed her power greedily. The smell of rot began to lighten.

“Again.” Ivan’s mind spun through sanity and hell. When this was done, he would need his own

release. His dick was a bar in his jeans. He was fighting his own demons while helping her control hers. It was dangerous. On the plus side, the fire in his ass was subsiding.

Angela threw another blast of fury into the water. Closer than the first, it swarmed over Ivan, stinging along his body until he groaned.

Angela let out more of her betrayed anger.

Ivan shuddered as the heat increased, becoming pleasure that hurt deep in his guts. Ivan fought to keep them still as she tensed to blast the water again.

Go under! Jennifer called, in both their minds. Camp members were feeling the unease and waking. They definitely wouldn't understand.

Ivan sank to the bottom in relief. He had to concentrate on holding his breath and not the flesh in his hands...

Angela brought her shield up so they could breathe.

Ivan tensed, then closed his eyes. Whatever happened here would be her idea and her actions, not his.

Angela's witch smiled at him through her watery gaze. *Survive this with your honor intact and I will remove a weakness.*

Ivan thought about how much he wanted to be a father.

The demon nodded. *It will be done.*

Ivan opened his arms and let her fall to the sandy ocean bottom.

Angela shot out rage in deep blasts that fried the mutating wildlife along the bottom and sent patches of waste and filth to the top where they were quickly washed away.

Ivan held his breath. He didn't open his lids. He thought about how good it would feel to take what he wanted and kept his hands to himself. Unlike the vet or her mate, Ivan had realized moments like this were all he required. No one had ever made him feel so alive.

Angela's rage ran out, leaving her sobbing from the pain. She sank to the bottom of her shield and opened her mouth to scream.

Water rushed into her lungs.

Bring her up now, Marc instructed.

Ivan swallowed his sudden fear and scooped her into his arms, mind spinning from the lack of oxygen. He shoved off the bottom and broke the surface, gasping.

Marc would have gone to the coughing couple, but Jennifer put an arm on his wrist. "This is Ivan's moment with her. Watch and learn how to help her when she's on the edge."

Marc scowled but obeyed—mostly because Ivan had already made it out of the water. The soldier was incredibly strong. Marc and Jennifer could see his muscles fully outlined under the wet shirt. His lungs and the tent in his pants were giving him trouble, but that was it.

Angela had rested her head on his shoulder, no longer coughing or crying.

Ivan shifted her so he could see her face, making Marc wait. “I need a name and an hour off.”

Angela’s misery was lifted by his horny demand. She spewed laughter, letting it fill her back up. “Thank you.”

Ivan grinned, shivering from the cold. “Thank you for sharing that with me. It was amazing.”

“Thank you for protecting the future from my anger.”

Ivan kissed her lips in a fast peck. “My honor.” He took her to Marc, missing most of the nasty looks and thoughts. He slid her cold body into Marc’s hot arms. “Well?”

Angela snuggled against Marc, whispering.

Marc forced himself to call, “Ivan is taking a break.”

Eagles on duty moved to cover his post.

Jayda, from Ciemus, appeared on the beach. She waved at Ivan in invitation.

“Is that a hookup or a distraction?” Marc asked as Ivan limped away, sending heat through their connection to warm Angela.

“Both and maybe more.” Jennifer was still scanning them. “Ivan is being healed and doesn’t know it.”

“He knows.” Angela shivered against Marc’s neck. “He’s blocking out of respect.”

Marc realized she and her witch were doing something to Ivan. Power hummed along Marc’s skin, using some of his energy.

Marc waited, hoping it was something good instead of something wrong.

“It’s a repeating process,” she whispered aloud and in Ivan’s mind. “It’s like new equipment. It’ll need to be run through for a while.”

Ivan’s delighted chuckle echoed down the beach as Jayda took his hand. *I’m yours. Name it and I’m on it.*

Angela sighed, but not in happiness. She needed that, as an alpha and as a woman, but it wasn’t Ivan’s voice she longed to hear it from.

Adrian’s choice slammed into her again, bringing fresh anger, but behind that, awful pain.

Angela copied Ivan’s plan. She tilted her head up to Marc. “Please.”

Marc took her to the bunk of the semi and made love to her again. During, he sent her flashes of Adrian screwing Nancy. He kept stirring the pot.

Marc was determined to finish what he’d started. She would be free of all chains, including the one she’d put on him when they were kids. From that moment, Angela would get to pick what made her happy, even if it crushed everyone else.

4

Day Five (7am)

“They’re all back, half a day early.” Marc handed Angela the clipboard. “Those are the notes. I sent them to clean up and rest. Some agreed and some didn’t. I put those who didn’t to work.” Marc

was tired and drained, and not in the mood for the coming party. The camp around them was watching the preparations and talking about little else. The Eagles were observing Ivan and Jayda, who were curled up on a beach blanket together. He was off duty, but his eyes kept straying to the boss and the workers.

Angela surveyed the lists, seeing there was a check next to each team name to indicate they'd returned. Arrival time was next to it.

Angela kept scanning, enjoying the warmer breeze along the beach. She was in a tent near the water, guarded by twitchy Eagles as alligators sunned themselves nearby. The reptiles hadn't approached them yet, but the sentries could feel the mean animals waiting for an opportunity to do damage. The menace was clear.

Angela signaled the men to move the perimeter in a little so their rookies wouldn't have to walk so close. The fear in the air might trigger problems and Angela didn't want to have to bring up her camp shield right now. She was trying to catch up on details and gather energy for the next fight. She didn't want to waste it on eleven prehistoric leftovers. *It's too bad we can't eat...* Angela smiled, making another set of motions. *Anyone know how to cook gator tails?*

Guards traded looks that were half fear and half eagerness at a new thrill.

Angela waved at Kenn. *Pick a crew and we'll try it when they leave their sunning spots. They'll*

split up then and we'll have a better chance at doing it without magic. Speak with William and Marc before you assemble the team.

Marc was already across the camp, but he turned to look at her. *I don't know what's wrong with you.*

Angela chortled, aware that he was joking. *They want to eat us. I'm just beating them to the punch.*

Marc stopped snickering. *Will the island have alligators?*

I don't know, but I do prefer to be covered for all contingencies.

Marc detoured to the Ciemus crew on the shore. He wanted to join them for the fishing experience and be able to teach others when they were on the island.

Angela's amusement fled. *I should have expected that. Now I'll be shielding him instead of resting. That's what I get for being clever.*

"I've got it." William came by. He joined Marc and the Eagles.

Angela felt the darkness coming while her guards were distracted; she cursed herself as she rolled from the tent and drew her gun.

"Too slow!" Keith stomped on her hand, dislodging the gun. He grabbed her braid and jerked her into his arms.

Angela used the momentum and slammed her head into Keith's. Then she did it again.

A third time sent stars across her sight and gave her freedom from the arms crushing her ribs.

Keith scrambled to get a hold of her throat and squeeze. At the same time, he drew hard on her lifeforce.

Angela twisted her sandy body around in his arms and broke the hold. She shoved backward as Marc reached them. *I want him!*

Marc fired. He shoved the screaming man onto his ass. If she'd demanded that a second later, the bullet would have gone into his brain instead of his shoulder.

Angela dropped onto Keith's chest and drew on his lifeforce.

"Look out!"

The reptiles had chosen their moment.

William and Bucky ran forward with large knives and expressions implying the gators didn't know who they'd picked a fight with.

Angela stopped drawing to watch them. Keith was too withered now to do more than groan and shake.

Marc slid his knife across Keith's throat, handling the nearest threat first.

The two Ciemus men ran between snapping jaws and lashing tails to leap on backs and shove their blades into a vulnerable notch at the base of the skulls.

As soon as they finished, each man picked a new target and repeated the actions. It told the witnesses that Ciemus had dealt with alligators before.

The rest of the animals were leaving now, but William and Bucky got three more of them before the rest were out of range. They knew not to leave the perimeter. Everyone did.

Marc helped Angela to her feet and kept his arm around her as he rotated them, searching for more trouble. When he found nothing but angry, resigned camp members and Eagles, he let out the breath that had caught in his throat when he'd swiveled around to discover Keith trying to kill her. He'd known they couldn't repair crushed ribs medically and magic healing would have given away their location. Marc had been scanning everyone who'd been in the mess when Angie and Jennifer had their bad feeling, but Keith had been clever. He'd even kept the same sleep schedule as Marc so he wouldn't be vulnerable.

"He wanted my power." Angela swallowed, forcing words out through pain. "He didn't care about anything else. He was a Byzan, but only in his shield and intelligence. He thought killing me would give him my gifts."

"It would have, right?" Marc finally holstered as the all clear call came. He motioned Eagles over to get the body.

"Yes. Byzan can copy and absorb gifts." Jennifer came to where they were as William and Bucky began explaining to the crew how to hook up a draining system for the carcasses. "I helped him with the book, but I don't understand most of it."

“Are the fish safe to eat?” Kenn joined them. “We’re getting nice hauls, but it all smells funny and a lot of them are already dead.”

“This close to shore, we’ll scoop up a lot of old debris. Nothing from here will be eaten.” Marc was following William’s advice on that. “We’ll dump it in a fill spot and cover it if we have time. If not, the birds will get started on it. This is for us to practice before we have to depend on it to survive.”

“You said before instead of *if*.” Kenn was getting smarter. “We’re going to run out of food?”

“We’ll get low at times, but fishing and conserving will get us through until we have a larger operation going.” Angela forced it out around the gravel in her throat. “We’ll be fine.”

“I’d believe you, but you set up here to work, so you could watch them practice it.”

Angela sighed at Kenn’s sharp comment. There was a two week stretch that concerned her. Unless one of the scavenging teams had found more food—they were still sorting the trucks—they were still a few weeks light of having enough for the first year. They might be forced to eat their land animals during that time and it would be their doom. They had to give the herds one year to reproduce. “We’ll be fine,” she repeated hoarsely, moving toward the nets. Angela spat out blood and kept walking. “I’ll make another deal.”

“For whose life this time?” Jennifer demanded. “Because it isn’t right to do that for someone else without their consent.”

“What if it’s an enemy?” Angela growled back coldly. “Can I hand over our enemies?”

“It’s still not right, but I guess I’d have to stop arguing.”

“Then stop arguing and help me find a way to feed us for that three weeks.”

Jennifer’s brow furrowed as she followed.

Angela kept track of Jennifer’s ideas as she toured the new site that had been up and running for an hour. She tried to act like someone hadn’t just tried to kill her again, preferring to concentrate on her heir. Jennifer was already becoming known for coming up with surprise answers.

Jennifer dug in. *What we need is a large food source. Like a...whale. A whale? Can we eat that? Hell, can we even hunt that? It isn’t like fishing.*

Angela was smiling through the pain. *You’d be surprised what we can do if we need to.* She pointed toward the far shore line. *Adrian’s boat is outfitted for deep sea fishing. We can’t take a whale with it, but we can aim for larger animals that will provide more meals and be fewer work hours in the end. Very nice. Thank you. Please speak with our Captains about it, will you?*

“I’ll have something for you shortly.” Jennifer made sure Angela’s guards were close and hurried off.

Angela grabbed a loose rope and began helping the fish crew pull in the net. She needed to know how to do this too and a distraction was required. She felt dangerous right now.

“Should you be doing this?” Grant was showing them with a cheerful, hand-on approach that allowed no disobedience. It was comforting.

“I’m good.” Angela ignored the body already protesting and put her back into it like he’d been demanding of the crew since they started. Lined up parallel to the shore, pulling across their bodies was awkward and efficient. Grant had told her ancient cultures also fished this way to avoid alligators and crocodiles. It made sense to Angela, but then, she didn’t have experience pulling food from the land or water. She was as much a rookie as her Eagles were. The Ciemus people would have the lead on this.

Angela settled into the rhythm, feeling the serenity, the balance. On one side of the workers, the camp was running. It was going smoothly despite things not being in the usual places and the sand invading everything. On the other side, the ocean ebbed and flowed, waiting with patient glee to be in charge of their lives. Her deal had to remain intact. The ocean was a formidable foe to cross.

“Help!”

Female screams brought people from across the site and sent fresh adrenaline into hearts that had just calmed.

Grant reached Pam first. He shoved her into the sandy surf.

“What’s he doing?!”

“Help her!”

“Get him!”

Angela pushed Ian aside when he would have grabbed Grant. "Leave him alone."

Grant shoved Pam's leg under the rising seawater and shook it, then he drew his knife.

Angela placed a hand on Ian's wrist. The rookie wouldn't like this.

Pam screamed again as Grant used his blade to scrape the sting, repeatedly. Angela assumed he was removing remaining stingers from her skin.

Grant lifted a handful of sand from the bottom and scrubbed it over the bleeding wound.

Pam shuddered, struggling not to scream again.

Grant lifted her into his arms and strode toward the medical camper. People cleared a fast path when Angela gestured.

Morgan had been running to the screams, positive a medic was needed. He met them halfway.

Grant kept walking. "Rinse it with vinegar, then cover it with a baking soda and sea water paste. Let it sit for ten minutes and then rinse the area with hot water. Hot, but not scalding. Leave it uncovered from there."

"Pain medicines?"

"Whatever you would use for a snakebite or a bad bee sting."

Grant took Pam into the camper and set her on the bunk. "You did great."

Pam gave him a shaky smile, leg throbbing and stomach twisting. "Thank you."

"Glad I could help." Grant left the camper so Morgan could get to work.

“How is she?”

Grant jumped. Angela was standing outside the camper door. “Okay. She’ll feel rough, but she’ll make it.”

“Thank you. None of us would have known how to treat a jelly fish sting.”

“And now you do.”

Angela nodded. “Lessons that involve women screaming are remembered for a long time by everyone. It hurts.” Angela paused, hearing someone decide to break a rule. “Excuse me.” She walked toward the tent where the least needed supplies had been stored. As soon as she was out of sight, she hawked up a mouthful of blood, phlegm, and spit. Her witch was healing the injuries, leaving byproducts as she stitched and burnt the rips in her flesh. It was painful and scary, but she’d been through worse.

Angela spat again and marched toward the next place she was needed.

5

“Do you need a moment?” Candy’s whisper wasn’t needed in the emptied storage tent, but she felt it necessary because of the topic.

Conner peered up from his list. “For what?”

Candy blushed.

Conner stopped counting as he caught the images in her mind. He stared, flames coming into his eyes.

“You haven’t, right?”

Conner shook his head. “I’m toughing it out.”

Candy smiled. “I thought so. You know they meant spying. You can...” Candy wasn’t sure if this conversation was embarrassing to him, but she wasn’t afraid of being overheard by roaming descendants. The boy needed to know these things and he didn’t have a father around to tell him.

Conner grinned at her. “It’s sweet you’re worried over it.” He dropped his gaze before the sparks could fly. He was already hard. He needed it to go down, not get worse.

“I don’t want you to get kicked out.” Candy lowered her voice. “If you needed a moment like that...I would arrange it.”

Conner forgot how to breathe. Candy letting him do it, knowing he was doing it, was one of his fantasies. “I, um.” Conner cleared his throat. “Thank you, no.”

Candy wasn’t surprised by her disappointment.

Conner was. He hurried to reassure her. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I just don’t want to ruin things for us. In a few months, we’ll be okay.”

“Because I’ll be too big for you to want me that way.”

Conner lit up with a man’s hunger. “Because they won’t suspect it and I can get away with more than!”

Candy felt her body respond to the need in his tone and let herself lean in like she wanted to. “What will you get away with?”

Conner sent her a hot image.

Candy shivered.

“I dream about doing that for you.”

“Lee never would.”

“That’s why I want to.” Conner was unable to stop himself from responding to her lean. He sent out a wave of desire. “I’m going to give you everything he didn’t, including orgasms.”

Candy gasped, lust searing her nerves. “That’s...intense.”

Conner blasted her again. “I’ll be legal by the time we act like Charlie and Tracy, but you’ll still be smiling anytime you want it. I’ll be yours whenever you need a release or love. And when you’re not in the mood, I’ll be earning respect from Angela and the Eagles by leaving you alone and doing my job. It’ll work out for us. All you have to do is keep giving me a chance to prove it.”

“You’ve done well. I’d like to give you a reward.”

Conner groaned. “If you do this, you’ll never get rid of me. My obsession will grow.”

“Will you put charms on me?”

Conner reached out and stroked her arm.

Candy shuddered.

“I don’t need to.”

“No, you don’t.” Candy walked toward the flap. “I usually have the last twenty minutes of open camper time to myself at night. You know that because you stay away then.”

Conner swallowed. “But I think about you in there. I try not to, but it’s hard.”

“Tomorrow night, I’ll be *behind* the camper.”

“What?”

Candy blushed a deeper shade of red, but she didn’t back down from what she wanted. “I get to watch. I want to see if I really hit you the way you claim.”

Conner didn’t think he could stand. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know. I want to.”

Conner moaned, dropping his head.

“You’ll be there?”

He didn’t look up. Angela would know if they broke a rule. “I don’t think I can do it. Don’t be mad if I can’t.”

Candy misunderstood, thinking he was shy about her watching. “I’ll take it as a sign you are too young. If you *can* do it, I’ll let you keep leading us through this because I trust you to please me too during our times together.”

Arrangement made, Candy left the tent.

“You’re playing a dangerous game.”

Candy jumped at Angela’s voice in her ear. She turned to find the boss staring at her in dislike. Candy stiffened. “You may not want *your* Mitchel, but I do, so butt out!”

Angela was forced to. Candy and Conner were a cute couple, once she got around the age difference. Ten years shouldn’t be that bad, but it was. He was about to be legal by the camp rules.

Fifteen meant girls and boys, after approval, but Candy was already pregnant, so it would be frowned on until he was older. If they were quiet about their moments, things might fly for a while, but in the end, Angela was sure his father's legacy would come back to haunt the boy.

Chapter Twenty-Two
It's Not About You

Day 5
3pm

1

“**C**heck it out.”

The small Eagle group paused in their jog to watch Dog. He was sneaking around the corner of a nearby tent as if he'd sensed a problem.

Quinn started to go that way, but Greg stopped him, pointing. “He's getting payback for being hounded.”

Eagles snickered as they realized Tonya's two cats were sleeping on top of Kenn's feet, basking in the warm sunlight of a 5:30 dawn. When they couldn't get Dog, the felines went for Kenn.

The wolf eased around the tent, using the ocean and laughter of happy kids to cover his noise. He reached the corner and immediately leapt, landing half a foot from the sleeping felines.

Dog yipped in a loud burst.

Kenn tossed his coffee into the air, recoiling as both cats flew up and landed in his lap. Claws flashed as he defended himself from the unprovoked attack.

Dog yipped again, driving in his point.

Kenn's chair tipped over backwards as he swiped and slapped, missing each time.

The cats dug in.

Kenn screamed, high and shrill. He kicked out of the chair and shot up, taking up a kai stance.

The cats ran for cover behind Tonya, who was laughing so hard she was crying.

Dog put his head in the air and padded off to the mess for scraps.

Kenn held his stance, waiting for the next blow as people across the camp howled laughter.

2

"It's clear." Kyle handed Angela a stack of papers covered in webs, grit and sweat. "There are nine-hundred rooms."

"How many of them need to be cleaned or rearranged?"

"Most of them on the rearranging." Kyle lit a cheroot as they stood on the pier. "Only a dozen need cleaning—mostly rooms where food went bad. The damp conditions have let some of it linger instead of finishing the rot cycle. It won't take but a couple hours with a full cleaning crew."

"That's great." Angela stuffed the papers into her crammed full notebook and wrapped the tie around it. The Velcro strap wouldn't reach anymore. "What about fuel?"

"Neil and the Captains are on that now, but I have water totals for you." Kyle consulted his notes,

aware that she didn't want to scan her papers right now. It was too windy. "There are 500,000 gallons. It'll need to be stirred, but that's it."

Angela breathed a sigh. "And we have another ten thousand gallons."

"Yes, with the hopes of finding more at the water plants if you still want to hit those."

"Actually, I don't. The ship filters water from the ocean once it's underway. We have enough to hold us. Let's use that space and those crews for other things."

Kyle agreed. He made a quick note and put his book away. "Cole thinks he's the captain and Grant is his XO. Is that how you want it?"

"They're sharing. Grant is a good sailor, but Cole understands unpredictable coastal tides."

"Grant also thinks he's the boss. Both men are telling people what to do."

"I know. In the captain's cabin, there are two bunks. One was for visiting family. The two men will share it. I had Ivan drop a note there."

Kyle chuckled, able to imagine the fireworks when the two men found out. He was a little surprised Grant was fighting for the job, though. He hadn't seemed the type to rock the boat.

Angela snickered. "Funny."

"Maybe." Kyle gestured toward the rear of the docked ship, where a group of men were examining the huge anchor. "Cole said something about needing to prime the pump because it's been inactive for so long. They'll be making noise soon."

I've told the senior people. They'll watch over the rookies."

Angela was glad Kyle was handling things. She was too tired to be sure it was all covered right now. Things were coming to a head in other parts of their country. She was picking up horrific images. It wouldn't be much longer before the other descendants began to receive them too, if they weren't already.

Angela waved to Tonya, who was coming up the pier to examine the medical bay of the ship. Her escort, Quinn, looked unhappy.

Angela didn't beat around the bush. "He's leaving for a while. Will you be okay on your own?"

Tonya didn't know why the boss was asking, but it worried her. "I should be. Unless you've seen something I need to know?"

"Not about you."

Tonya sighed. "I've felt it coming. I don't know what he did, but maybe he didn't mean to."

"I don't know either and I don't want to know unless it will endanger the people here. That includes you."

Tonya understood Angela was asking if she knew anything that would help Kenn. She slowly shook her head. "He's closed off again. That's all I know."

"Same here and that's the problem."

Tonya surveyed the camp behind them, easily spotting Kenn coming through the crowd of people heading to the showers and party tent that was about

to be opened. "I know you hate him. I would too if I were you." Tonya met Angela's eye. "But he's my world. Please don't punish me too."

"I can't let him on the boat, not even to sweep the floor. His darkness might rub off and I won't have that." Angela held up a hand to stop more begging. "I'm sending him out of camp for a while. When he comes back, his goodness or badness will be obvious."

Tonya's scowl was growing. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need to know if you have to go too." Angela pinned the redhead with an intent glare. "Are you one of us or are you playing a great act? It started out with lies and games for you. Where is it now?"

"Dead serious." Tonya tried to open mental doors so the boss could view without restrictions. "Tell me what you want, and I'll do it. If he's flipping again, I don't want any part of that."

Angela gestured at the woman. "Just don't let him have the information I've given you."

"But he'll read it... I can't see him before he leaves." Tonya's fists clenched. "I don't even get a goodbye."

"No."

"This is mean."

"So was helping him live out his sexual fantasies by pretending to be me."

Tonya choked, backing up.

Angela signaled the guards to stay where they were. “Make your choice. Good or bad?”

“Good.” Tonya forced out her true feelings. “But you aren’t, you know? Good leaders don’t make people do bad things.”

“This isn’t bad, Tonya. This is demanding proof of your trustworthiness. You’ve never had that, you know? This will be a first for you.”

Tonya rotated toward the ship. “Whatever. I’ll be on the boat until he’s gone.”

“That works for me. I hear the lab is stocked.”

Tonya brightened. “I can get some tests rolling!”

Kyle watched her bounce onto the ship. “A lot of people don’t want her or Kenn to go.”

“We need them, providing they can continue to improve.” Angela was also watching the redhead. “Would you have ever thought she’d change so much?”

Kyle grinned. “I thought she would have been kicked out for having a disease long before now. I never thought fidelity was something she was capable of.”

“Me either, but she’s more of a survivor than Kenn is and she knows it. All she had was her brains and body, and she’s still here when so many educated women aren’t. She’s proud of that.”

“I don’t understand. I’d still want to be educated. I’d just want the street smarts too.”

“But that comes from a life of want. Most people wouldn’t agree to suffer before receiving enlightenment.”

“But...isn’t that what we did everyday anyway, though we didn’t agree?” Kyle asked. “We started out young and dumb, and usually poor, and then built a life that was better in every way that we could make it.”

“Very good. We start at the bottom and work our way up to something. However, even anarchists have a leader. Politicians passed laws to make bad behavior acceptable. By the time we gain wisdom, we have to die.”

“It’s all a giant hypocrisy.”

“An illusion.” She loved Kyle’s mind. He didn’t let right and wrong get in the way of philosophy. He dug in and bathed in the blood of what he saw. “We sense the falseness each time we gain a goal and feel disappointed instead of satisfied. We feel the futility of it all. Depression magnifies it and makes the real world clearer.”

“What do we see through that vision?” Kyle hated to ask, but he needed to know.

“Our true selves with no cover. We’re all corrupt. Some just have deeper wells of it.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Angela placed a hand on his wrist. “You once needed absolution from Adrian and he couldn’t comfort you. He told me about it. That bothered him.”

“Can you?” Kyle demanded suddenly, not caring who was listening as guards, workers, and camp members walked by them.

“There’s nothing to forgive.” Angela knew it was the truth, but she still didn’t feel it even as she said it. “Society lives by one set of rules and nature lives by another. Humans are a part of nature. Killing is in that cycle. Following your instincts cannot be a sin to the Creator who made you that way.”

The mobster frowned. “Society would say my environment made me this way, that if I’d been raised in a good home and the war hadn’t come, I wouldn’t be a killer.”

“You’ve overlooked one basic thing that most souls refuse to admit even once in their lives. We’re all killers, Kyle. Some react on it and some don’t, while others take that urge out on other species or inanimate objects. Some played games where they could kill without taking a life, while others played worse scenarios where they got to hurt people. We crush bugs and hunt deer. We’re all killers, Kyle. We just pick different targets.”

“You’re a doctor.” Kyle tapped on the rail. “You spent your life helping people, saving them. And there are pacifists who wouldn’t even hurt an ant. That theory is flawed.”

“Is it?” She forced him to confront the final image. “I’ve killed thousands in eleven months and those pacifists swore off harm to others because they were afraid of eternal damnation. They were

scared they wouldn't be able to stop once they got rolling. If they didn't fear jail or hell, would they still be passive, or would they roll through this world pulling the trigger faster than you or I ever have?"

"That's an ugly view of the human condition."

"Not really. It's honest. Humans are part of the cycle of life on this planet. Civility holds us in place, but we're the top predators in the chain. Why would our nature be any different than the male wolf who kills the pups of the previous beta after he mates the alpha? Why are we different from the bat that rapes the female while she's holding her young and can't let go to escape without killing the offspring? How are we different from the gerbil who gets spooked and eats her young?"

Kyle didn't know what else to say. When pointed out, it was obvious. "We're not."

"No. We try to be. It's allowed for amazing advances, but in the end, we're part of the natural cycle on this planet. We were put here to kill, to thin the populations of those under us and also, of each other. Lions weed out other lions. It's what we're here for."

"Then why are we bothering to leave?" Kyle was becoming depressed.

"Survival. It's the only constant. We were put here to survive. That's our sole purpose."

"Well...that sucks! Take it back."

"I can't." Her tone deepened. "But I'm going to try to change it."

“We have intelligence!” Kyle picked out. “That’s a difference.”

“Some animals are smarter. The advantage is in how we’re built. If we didn’t have thumbs, we would have already died out.”

“What’s the new purpose?” Kyle was replaying sentences and trying to keep up.

“I can’t explain it yet. Totally peaceful isn’t possible and we’ll never change the animal instinct, so I’m limited. It might be as simple as teaching people not to hate each other. It could be as complex as finding a way to exist in harmony with nature and never kill. Ciemus gave me a lot of hope for that.”

“If there’s a...Byzan in control?”

“In leadership, never in control.”

“Why not?”

“We’re unstable.” Angela moved down the pier. “Hadn’t you noticed?”

Kyle smiled. “Yes, actually, I did, but I consider it a small price to pay for safety.”

“So do I.” Angela went to the center of camp for updates from the point man. “What’s left?”

Neil skimmed his list. “Just the festivities.”

Angela motioned to where Candy was in line for the bathrooms. Conner walked by, not looking at her. “I think they have an early afternoon ceremony planned. They took the bride and groom’s wishes into consideration, as well as mine. Go with what they have unless it interferes with security.”

“Lights out?”

“We’ll make it 1am until we leave. After that, we’re back on normal hours.”

“What are we doing about the noise?”

Angela grunted. “Giving the Eagles extra ammo.”

Neil understood and agreed. There was nowhere left to hide or run. This was their boat and their spot on the shore until they set sail. Safe Haven was a powerhouse that would defend itself with magic and guns.

“You’d think that would be enough.” Angela drew in a breath, put a smile on her face, and went to the shrunken mess where camp members were being fed a hearty meal before they were let into the party tent. She saw Conner go in there with his wedding notebook and a determined face and chose to let things play out. She was slightly ahead of her own schedule.

3

“You two have been offered a place in the wedding party.”

Tracy’s cheeks went red.

Charlie cleared his throat. “Are you sure they meant us? We’re not tight with them.”

Conner shrugged. “It’s what I have in my notes.”

Charlie regarded Tracy. “Did you know?”

Tracy shook her head. “I don’t think she likes me, and I know Kyle disapproves of our

relationship.” She frowned. “Why would they do this?”

Charlie glanced at Conner.

Conner leaned down to show his notes. “You’ll each stand on the outside of them while Grant officiates. We’re keeping it small, so no flower girls or ring bearer, and we’re doing the reception right after the ceremony. The entire thing should take about half an hour and then you can both go back to work if you want to.”

“Shawn’s a photographer?” Charlie was examining the notes.

Conner pointed to a top corner that had a list of everyone involved and their jobs.

Charlie saw he was supposed to handle the ring.

Conner handed it to him after a fast sweep to be sure Jennifer wasn’t around. “He’s had it for months.”

Charlie opened the black box and immediately felt bad for the small rock he’d chosen.

“Wow.” Tracy peered over his shoulder. “That’s nice.”

Charlie’s tense shoulders drooped. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Tracy took the box to examine the large diamond. “It’s fine, really.”

Conner snickered. “Shiny shit, man. They say they don’t care, but they love it.”

Charlie stored the advice and gave Conner the notebook back. He didn’t mind standing up with

Kyle, but he could feel Tracy's unease. "Can you give us a minute before you make that final?"

Conner nodded, putting the paperwork away. "I'm on a break now. I'll grab some food and stop by after."

"Thanks." Charlie delayed until Conner was out of earshot, then placed his hand over the jewelry box to shut it. "I heard your thought. You don't have to do this."

Tracy sighed. "It feels like it would be saying we plan to do it next and I've already explained how I feel about that."

"I didn't know they were going to do this."

"I knew something was going on by the way Jennifer was staring at me, but I don't get it. I expected trouble, not the spotlight."

"Why didn't you tell me you were having issues with the camp?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were trying to get me pregnant?"

Charlie shoved the box into his pocket. "You want a baby."

"And you didn't think we should talk about it first?"

Trapped, Charlie struggled to react wisely. "I'm sorry. I want you to be happy. You were thinking about it a lot, so I thought you wanted one."

"I do, but not yet!" Tracy lowered her voice. "We have to slow things down there. We're not ready to be parents."

Charlie's mouth opened. "Too late for that."

“Wh... Do you...” Tracy drew in a breath and stood up. “That’s how you tell me?” She marched away from the table.

“Wait. Hey!”

Tracy held up a hand and kept walking. She emerged from the mess in a cloud of anger and embarrassment that she took straight to the teenager coming from the council tent to talk to Neil. “Why did you do that?!”

Jennifer signaled Neil on, bracing. “Step inside and we’ll talk. Keep screaming and I’ll fix the problem by beating on you until you’re dead.”

Tracy immediately calmed. She’d been around for some of Jennifer’s fights.

Jennifer held the flap, glaring.

Tracy went where Jennifer pointed and sank down, muttering.

Jennifer went to the far end, hoping the guards kept their mouths shut. Safe Haven had a lot of rookies on duty while senior men labored. Angela wasn’t letting anyone from the camp onto the boat yet unless she’d vetted them, or their skills were desperately needed.

“I’ve known about the baby for a week. Your child is strong even while forming.”

Snagged, Tracy cleared her throat. “Will it live?” Too many women had been broken by that. It was impossible not to fear more of the same.

“Not unless you listen to me.” Jennifer leaned forward. “The camp members haven’t accepted your relationship yet. Now, they’ll have proof

you've broken the rules. You're going to be punished, and so is Charlie."

"Banished?"

"Both of you, unless you take some hard advice. Ready for it?"

Tracy nodded, terror all she was feeling now. "Please."

"Double wedding."

Tracy paled further. "I'm not ready. I can't..."
Too late for that. "This isn't good."

"No, but it could be. If the baby comes a couple weeks early, we say it's from stress and that will fly with no questions asked. If you wait another month, that won't cover it. There will be punishments, and on the island, your child will have to live with camp opinion." Jennifer's voice broke. "Like Autumn will. You don't want that, I promise."

"I don't want any of this!"

Jennifer sighed, shrugging. "There are ways, but you'd have to do them yourself. Angela will refuse to consent to an abortion just because you two weren't careful."

Tracy's demeanor transformed from embarrassed and defensive, to scared. "Angela knows?"

Jennifer snorted. "You're still alive, so, no. But she did hear you've consummated the relationship and that's against the rules without approval because of his age."

Tracy trembled, but Jennifer had no pity for her. "Because of your choices, Charlie now has to grow

up too fast. As a mother, Angela will never forgive that. Even placing a grandchild into her arms won't erase this."

"I've tried to help him." Tracy gestured angrily. "I don't know how."

"That's because you chose a green apple so you were getting it before it could be poisoned. You plucked a little man from a hardy tree but couldn't wait for him to ripen." Jennifer waved a hand. "And now here you are, in a mess you don't want and can't handle." Jennifer sat back, pointing. "But you're going to. You made adult decisions and you'll follow through with adult actions." Jennifer slid a paper across the table. "She's sending Charlie out into the wilderness to become a man. You're mine."

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Exactly that right there. Ask yourself what I'd want you to do. Then do it. After a time, things will be better. You're having her grandchild and she loves children."

"You said she wouldn't forgive this."

"She won't, but you know we women can hold grudges without it affecting how we handle things. Those payments come due in private. Unless it interferes with this camp, Angela lets people do what they want, you know? And she's made her own mistakes. By the time the baby's born, you could be in good with the boss and have your little man back."

“I don’t want that.” Tracy paled further. “She knows what I really want.”

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, but you’re crazy if you think she’ll help you keep Charlie here. She wants both of you on the boat when we leave.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“Neither does she. Neither do I. We’re going because we have to.”

Tracy slumped on the bench. “I know. It’s hard.”

“Well, life just got harder for you. Charlie’s coming this way and you get to fill him in.”

“When’s he leaving? Marc’s going with him, right?”

“Nice of you to only consider that now.” Jennifer stood up. “He’s going alone, right after you tell him. The guards already know to let him out. That’s all my orders said.”

Jennifer ducked out of the tent before Charlie could enter. She gave his pale face a firm nod and walked on, feeling a bit smug about her own relationship but also sorry for the couple. She had Kyle to look out for her in every way. They only had each other and neither of them were enough.

“So the whole best man thing was a cover?” Kyle had been listening from the rear, with the other sentries. He’d stopped by for an update and gotten snagged by Jennifer delivering the scalding reprimand.

“I asked Samantha.” Jennifer blushed as he gave her a hot stare. “Who do you want?”

“Neil.”

They shared a chuckle, but before Kyle’s thoughts could go dark, Jennifer pointed at him. “We’re getting married. Deal with it.”

Jennifer pranced away, leaving Kyle with a silly smile. *She’s amazing.*

Angela came to his side. “Yes, she is.”

“Thank you.” Kyle meant for letting them stay together. At any point, Angela could have put a stop to it.

Angela scanned the camp. “Thank you for going against Marc for me. I would have died out there.”

“That’s what we were afraid of.”

“Marc would have called Adrian to take over. You might have had peace.”

“Ah.” Kyle had wondered why she made the choice to stay there. He’d presumed it was to draw the refugee waves away from the shore.

Angela marched toward the mess, stomach now growling. “That was part of it.”

Kyle followed. “Did it work?”

Angela let out a sound of frustration.

Kyle headed for the shower, off duty for the next thirty-six hours. He wasn’t upset by her lack of answer. He’d expected it.

4

“A little higher.”

Grant grunted at the fiftieth correction. “I had it there.”

Ray shrugged. “So?”

Grant secured the lacy curtain and retreated to view the handiwork. “If you want it somewhere else, you can put it there.”

Ray smirked and pivoted to keep the man from noticing. Grant had been flashing coy smiles and eating at the same table when he could, but Ray wasn’t encouraging him.

Grant held up the final lacy panel. “Is this my color?”

Ray swallowed a chuckle at the flamboyant tone. Grant was open about the way he felt and what he wanted, how he preferred to live. He didn’t care if people accepted him or not, but unlike Dale, Grant didn’t expect considerations and he worked hard.

Grant held out the curtain. “Might be yours.”

Mirth echoed from the other workers in the wedding tent

Ray batted it away, fighting a laugh. “I want to get this done. Stop goofing off.”

Grant snapped a salute. “Yes, ma’am!”

Instantly furious, Ray stuck out a leg and tripped him.

Grant fell into the pile of fabric waiting to be used as wall coverings.

Laughter spilled, along with baskets of supplies.

Ray left the tent, ashamed he’d reacted without thinking.

Grant stayed on the ground. “He does have kick left! Awesome.”

Walking by, Marc caught it all, but he didn't share in the amusement. He could feel Ray's unhappiness. Deciding the man could use a few minutes, Marc signaled him over. "I have livestock duty. Come along."

Ray didn't mind the chore. It was manlier, and Grant wasn't there.

"Which one of those is bothering you the most?" Marc asked curiously. Unlike Kyle and Neil, he didn't mind discussing Ray's sexuality. It had never been an issue for him. Ray was a good person and that was what Marc valued.

"He won't keep his head down." Ray put a hand on his hip. "And he's constantly reminding people that I'm gay."

Marc snorted. "We've never forgotten. You've earned our respect. Grant's working on that."

"You've scanned him?"

"Of course."

Ray realized he should have known. Grant was allowed around Angela. He'd been cleared. "Why is he bugging me?"

Marc laughed at Ray. "You know why."

Ray blushed, shaking his head. "I'm not ready, and when I am, I won't be so open. It always causes trouble and I've had enough of that."

You and me both, brother. Marc shrugged. "Relationships are never perfect, but he's got a kind heart and he thinks you're amazing for reaching acceptance in a camp of bigots."

Ray frowned. “The bigots are gone. The people here are good.”

“Then why are you afraid to be with him?” Marc pointed out. “There has to be something holding you back.”

“Yeah.” Ray assumed Marc already knew and it had to be said for him to get an answer. “It feels like I’m betraying Dale. It hasn’t been long.”

“Is that all?”

“I really do miss him.”

“I know. I feel it. So does everyone else.” Marc turned, guiding Ray’s attention to the tent he’d just left. Grant was staring at them. “So does he. When you start hurting, he teases you or makes jokes until you’re annoyed at him and not dwelling on your misery.”

Marc left as the two men stared. “Like me and Angie, before I made a crazy plan and swore I’d follow through.” Marc was tired. He didn’t know how much more sex he could provide without real sleep and letting some layers of skin grow back.

Laughter drew Marc’s attention.

Pam was sitting by Zack, helping him eat. Pam’s jellyfish sting was improving. Zack’s ribs were healing, but it was slow. Angela had refused offers from descendants to heal him or any of the wounded team also lounging around the pair. She didn’t say to save their energy for emergencies, but they understood.

Conner went by on rounds, drawing smart remarks from Zack's sons, who were taking a break near their dad.

Zack pointed at them. "Double shift. Get on it right now."

Timmy and Mike paused to be certain he was speaking to them.

Zack started to get up, flashing a mean glower.

The two boys scrambled up and took off running to find the Eagle on point.

Zack settled back into the chair and crossed his arms over his chest until the boys were out of sight.

"Doesn't that hurt your ribs?" Pam asked.

Zack put his arms down. "You know it. Damn wild kids. Wish they had a mother to beat their ass for me."

"Don't like hitting them?" Pam sympathized with that.

Zack shook his head. "I liked it too much, so I never do it now. They take advantage."

Angela caught all of it as she slipped into the tent with the kids to get them ready for the party. *Zack is cleared. Put him on the manifest.*

5

7pm

"That doesn't look like fun." Brittani, a few other rookies, and a dozen senior men were waiting for Neil to finish his session. Setting sunlight glinted off the cage bars in dim bursts.

“You’ll know for yourself when he gets to you.” Morgan watched for her reaction so he could log it in the report. “That’s why you have an appointment with him.”

Brittani’s eyes widened. Her mouth opened to deny the lesson.

Neil joined them, leaving Grant to be helped out of the mini cage in the corner of the camp. “You ready for this?”

If Neil had been aggressive, she might have backed down. Because his tone was reluctant, she swallowed the panic and gave a nervous nod. “Okay.”

Neil hated the tremor. He hated hearing fear from any female. “I’ll get rid of that for you, in a controlled environment where you won’t be hurt anymore than the lesson requires.”

He let her enter first. “I need four sessions to get you there.”

Neil closed the cage door and put himself between it and her. “We can also take the slower route of a few months. There’s no shame in that. Most of the rookies, men and women, pick the slower route.”

Brittani wanted to, but she hadn’t survived an apocalypse with her family intact by giving in to her terrors. “Four lessons, huh?”

Neil nodded, impressed with her spunk when she began removing her bulky jacket. “If you practice, it might even be three.”

Brittani advanced and swung on him like the other students had.

Neil put her on the mat in one fast move, but her punch landed, bringing a small sting and a trickle of blood. He stared, dumbfounded. "I'm bleeding."

"You're out," Brittani wheezed, trying to recover.

"Hey! Neil's bleeding first!"

"She took the hit. She knew she was going to take that hit!"

The men and women around the cage clapped and cheered.

Neil stared at the blood on his fingers. "What did you do?"

Brittani stayed where she was, groaning. "Why did I do it?"

"How did you do it?" Morgan asked, coming forward to help her.

"When he...ducks, he's open."

"Where have you been all my life?!" Morgan set her on her feet and retreated.

"Who would have thought!" Quinn slapped her on the shoulder, laughing.

Brittani threw up on his shoes.

"Now, you're an Eagle."

Walking by, Marc shook his head and paused at the next flap.

"He's lonely."

"You should dance with him tonight."

Inside the tent, Angela grinned at the kids, smoothing her clean shirt. “You think so?”

The kids nodded as Marc entered with flushed cheeks and wet hair. He’d just come from the shower. “They beat me to it.” He flashed a sexy smile. “Wanna dance with me, baby?”

Angela bobbed her head as some kids hooted and some cried yuck.

“Good. I came to escort you.”

Angela stood up, hugging kids who flooded her way for it. “Things are set?”

Marc nodded. “William’s been helping. He’s relaying messages and directions from the center of camp. He implied it won’t go far, so Kyle agreed.” Marc shrugged. “He’s distracted right now, but it sounded okay to me. Got things done a lot faster.”

“We’ll be able to use it that way whenever we want to on the boat and the island.” Angela waved at the kids and stepped outside with him.

Marc leaned down. “Won’t the island people protest or freak out about our rules and magic? Kendle said they didn’t even like her and Luke sharing a cabin.”

“There’s no one on Pitcairn island anymore, so it doesn’t matter.” Angela sent him an image from her latest dream. “There’s a big house with stacks of bodies and no reasons for it that I could see in my scans. It’s awful, but we won’t have to worry about other people. Providing we get there first, the island is ours.”

“Why is this island so important, Angie?” he asked in a whisper. “I know you considered others. Why there?”

Angela made a motion with her hand and walked away.

Marc stared in surprise. *Why do we need silver?*

When Marc worked out a short list on his own, the uses at the top of it didn't fit. As he went, he realized none of his reasons did and he'd covered everything related to the apocalypse. *Then it isn't*, he decided. *It's about us, the descendants.* As soon as he had that thought, Marc understood. “For the final battle.”

Angela ducked into the party tent. The answer was evident, though unbelievable. They were going to use the silver to fashion weapons against whatever would be waiting here when they returned. When she said she preferred to cover *all* contingencies, she hadn't been exaggerating in the least.

Chapter Twenty-Three

No One Understands

8pm

1

Angela went to the chair where Tracy was sitting by herself because no one wanted to be around her. Word had spread fast. Angela held out a small box. “Give this to him when he comes back.”

Tracy put it in her pocket, not sure what to say. She was already lonely and sorry, and now, she expected Angela to fry her on the spot with ugly words and threats. Tracy held in the tears and faced the music. “Charlie and I are getting married when he comes back.”

Silence fell through their end of the tent as people quieted to hear the response or to intervene when Angela began beating on the woman.

Ivan edged toward the fire extinguisher in the corner.

So did Kenn.

Angela delivered a smile she didn't feel. “That ring belonged to an Indian woman who was dear to me when I was a child. I want my daughter-in-law to have it. Welcome to the family.” Angela leaned

down and kissed Tracy's cheek. She whispered, "I love that ring almost as much as my boy. You take care of both and we'll have peace."

People clapped as the women awkwardly hugged and separated. It created a flurry of activity as people retrieved the gifts they'd collected and saved for this moment. Only the Ciemus people were left out, but they hadn't suffered the lack of birthdays and holidays like Safe Haven had.

Marc opened his hand as Angela came by on the way to the food tables.

Angela beamed. "It looks just like the one you gave me when we were kids."

Marc took the simple necklace and fastened it while she held her hair off her neck.

Male eyes roamed her bare skin in longing.

Drained, Marc rolled a mental eye. *You want one of your own, but wait until you try to please a woman like this. Stamina, gentlemen. Work on it now. You're gonna need it.*

The men who were descendants grinned at Marc and went back to their conversations and gift exchanges.

Wrapping paper, newspaper, and bags began collecting on the floor.

Angela fingered her gift, sniggering at Marc's message. "You wanted the job."

Marc let out a suffering sigh. "Shoulda read the fine print."

Angela chuckled, turning to hug him. "Look in your pocket."

Marc leaned back to dig, frowning. He hadn't felt her slip anything in there.

He came up with a key. "This goes to one of the weapons boxes." He recognized it after supervising the transfer of those crates onto the ship this morning.

Angela grinned. "It's shiny, has an eleven on it, and hasn't ever been fired."

"A virgin 1911?" Marc's gasp drew laughter from everyone. "I love you!"

Kids ran by them, bumping into legs and screaming with joy at the stack of toys they were amassing. Camp members were tossing things from bags at the screaming demons, trying not to get run over or to laugh so hard they had to pee. No one wanted to leave the tent yet.

"Hey!" Marc went after the rowdy bunch to settle them down.

Angela moved to the side, where a small guard booth had been set up. There would be a sentry here once the music started.

"They're having fun." Kenn joined Angela, admiring the canvas. *Tents*, he amended. Theo's crew had put four tents together to form a twenty-foot wide shelter that stretched two hundred feet. The camp was enjoying the rare desserts and decorations, but only the council and injured guards represented the Eagles. The rest were outside, lining the perimeter. Kenn presumed they would be allowed to come in when the camp was finished, but

he didn't know who would be on duty outside then. Angela hadn't given him a schedule.

"She's going to do it herself." Samantha limped by on her cane with a pout. She'd already tried to convince Angela to let her help and been refused.

Kenn grinned, nodding. "That'll work."

It made Angela feel good to know he meant that. She turned around as William joined them, delivering a generous smile. "Yes, please."

William clapped his hands and shot a butterfly illusion over the playing children.

Delighted squeals floated through the tents. No one reacted to the magic, but everyone observed it. Other than Angela, none of them could do the things William could.

William enjoyed putting on a show for the camp and kids, but he was aware of the suspicious guards as they listened to Angela laugh and watched the shield become stronger because of her happiness.

Marc also recognized the looks and cringed inside. The Eagles wanted to know why he wasn't doing that for her, why he hadn't been doing it at all.

Angela didn't like Marc being treated to reprimands during fun time. She lifted a brow at him. *Still want that dance?*

Music echoed through the radio speakers that Theo's team had rigged to the corners.

Marc didn't care that she was taking pity on him. He did want the dance. He'd been planning it for days. There was a special ending.

Angela slid into Marc's arms, resting her head on his shoulder as the radio belted out a love song she knew well but couldn't remember the name of. When his arms tightened around her, Angela let out a sigh of contentment that sent a flash of purple light into the barrier.

William stared in resignation. It was obvious Angela loved Marc. Adrian had tried to come between them and several others were thinking about trying if Marc continued to disappoint her, but in that moment, William understood it would always take a charm or a spell. Their connection was deep. She chose him as a child. A life mate picked at that age was permanent.

William clapped his hands again to send a shower of rainbow sparks over the couple.

Angela snuggled deeper into Marc's arms.

His heart lightened. "I love you."

"Yes, you do." She chuckled. "Forever, right?"

Marc nodded. "My word on that." He kissed her softly, sending approval and jealousy through the tent.

Angela felt Marc gathering his courage. She wanted to let it play out, but she couldn't. Angela put a hand on his wrist before he could reach into his pocket. "No."

Pain squeezed Marc's heart. "You won't?"

"Not now and it has nothing to do with you."

Marc frowned, leaning back to view her face. "You mean that?"

“I do.” Angela ran a soothing hand over his cheek. “I will when the time’s right. It’s all I’ve wanted for us for years.”

Marc believed her; he assumed she didn’t want the distraction from Kyle and Jennifer’s moment.

Angela didn’t tell him she was scared the higher powers would react badly. The Creator wanted her concentrating on that future battle, not emotions or bonds. If she strayed from that path, the small protection they had might vanish faster than Adrian did.

2

“It’s your party. You can cry if you want to.” Samantha limped by.

Jennifer smiled at the joke, admiring the tent and the two wings they’d stuffed with chairs and tables. Members of the bridal party were in the wings, chatting with the groom and waiting for the bride. Jennifer hadn’t entered it yet.

Samantha waved her cane. “Over here, bride-to-be.”

Jennifer blushed. *That’s me. Am I really okay with this? It’s getting real now.*

Samantha and the other women waited patiently for Jennifer to react. They remembered moments like this in their own lives.

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, I am. He’s great.” She glared toward Tracy, who was sitting near the bachelorette wing. “And mine.”

Tracy got up and picked a seat away from them.

Samantha waved again. "I want to speak with you. Come sit down. Neil said if he sees me get up, I have to go to bed early."

Jennifer joined the blonde woman, not sure what to expect.

Samantha got right to the point. "We're going to talk about sex and why it's okay to enjoy it."

Jennifer tensed. *Didn't see that coming. Damn Kyle.*

Samantha waved a hand. "Yeah, Candy told, and Kyle confirmed, but it will have good effects and you'll forgive them."

"I don't see how it could." Jennifer huffed. "That was private."

"And that's a problem." Monica added her opinion. "You have to tell him how you're feeling as it happens, or he'll guess."

"And he's a man." Trinity rolled her eyes. "They always guess wrong."

"We just want to help you."

Jennifer tolerated it all because she could tell they honestly did. "Fine. What else?"

In the opposite wing, the conversation was much the same.

"...so make sure you never use sex as a bargaining chip, even if she's willing." Greg hadn't done that, but he'd listened to rookies get shot down for it.

"And don't joke about it like a trade off." Shawn grimaced at a memory. "They don't like that."

“She doesn’t know you’ll do anything to get it again, so don’t give her that information.” Daryl pushed a drink closer to Kyle’s hand.

“No begging when she’s mad.” Wade was honored to be here and eager to fit in. “Make certain it’s never about sex unless you’re having it.”

Kyle hadn’t thought he could be made to blush, but this conversation was proving him wrong. “Are you guys done yet?” He’d been ambushed and dragged in here to find his favorite Eagles, food, drinks, and topics he never would have chosen for a bachelor party.

“And for god sakes, keep the moaning down or the den mothers will think you’re hurting her.” Neil didn’t usually drink, but he’d had two beers and couldn’t stop talking. “Make sure they hear *her* noises, not yours.”

Kyle’s cheeks flamed. Then again, maybe the topic was right. “What else?” He wasn’t above taking advice.

I can’t believe you told them!

Kyle winced at Jennifer’s reprimand in his mind. *I’m sorry.*

Greg, unaware of Jennifer’s presence, held up a hand. “Just don’t make her scream as she cums. We’ll have to shoot you before you can explain.”

Kyle groaned. *I am so sorry.*

Jennifer laughed at him and withdrew, satisfied she wasn’t the only one being tortured.

3

Marc led Angela from the tent an hour later, feeling her need to be on duty. The box in his pocket pressed into his leg as a reminder that she still wasn't his.

Angela spun and grabbed him. She claimed his lips in a blast of heat that sent all rational thought from his brain and drew fire from his soul.

Angela let go of him, eyes glowing as she lied. "Of course, I'll marry you. I just don't want to take away from Jennifer and Kyle's moment."

Marc kissed her, heart filling with relief and joy.

Angela tolerated it, hating it that he'd pushed and was now forcing her into this when she wasn't quite ready. Still, it really was what she wanted from their future, so she let it go, enjoying his good vibes. They would keep it quiet for a few days and then people would see the ring on her finger and it would go public.

Terrible pain hit the shield around the camp.

A second flood of rage slammed into it a few seconds later.

Marc tensed.

Angela did too, not sure if Kendle's fury would make it through the shield.

"How does she know?" Marc was confused. "Adrian?"

"He refused to help her."

Marc concentrated on the other descendants they'd had contact with and came up blank.

"Wait... She has no gifts. How can she do this?"

“Her gifts are locked, but the spell can’t control what doors she and her demon access when they dream walk. She was asking questions about it that night in Ciemus.”

Hatred flashed outside the shield, lighting up the dead zone around them.

Marc felt Angela make a choice and open a mental door. He braced for it, as did the other descendants coming from flaps. Kendle’s anger was slapping them all.

“Her emotions have been heated to full boil, but she doesn’t have an ocean to clean with it.” Angela scanned. “She’s twenty miles northeast.”

Kendle’s anger hit the shield in another vicious blast meant to give away their location.

“She’s betraying us.” Marc hated Kendle in that moment.

Angela had known that when the first blast hit, but she wasn’t picking up rants under the rage. It was possible the locked-up demon and her disease were in control right now.

Marc scowled. “Does that matter?”

“No.” Angela glanced at the descendants gathering around her. No one else would stand a chance against Kendle. She was deadly even without her gifts. “Who wants to walk into a lion’s den and pretend they’re Daniel?”

Several Eagles lifted hands, but only Kenn came forward.

Angela studied him, worried now that the moment was here. Kenn could do what was needed, but it might make him revert back into his old self.

Kenn shook his head. “Not a chance.”

“Promise me!”

Kenn leaned in and kissed her cold cheek. “I love my life here. I won’t ruin it.”

Angela gestured to the gate sentry. *Let him out when he’s ready.* She turned back to the Marine, aware of frowns and curiosity about what she’d made him promise from those who didn’t have mental gifts. “Rescue if needed.”

Kenn understood the unspoken order and didn’t ask if he was supposed to take captives. He wasn’t. “Fifteen minutes?”

Another blast hit the barrier.

Angela’s lips tightened. “Much less.”

Kenn turned to get his gear and face Tonya’s tirade. *Have to be a fast one this time.*

“She’s on the ship, working. I’ll tell her where you’ve gone.”

Kenn was relieved. He hurried to get his gear.

“Is Kendle going to be hurt?”

Angela pretended it wasn’t Marc asking. “Maybe. Adrian sent her away from his camp. He welcomed Nancy with more than open arms.”

Marc saw the images in her mind, writhing bodies surrounded by ancient spells, and grimaced. He’d just thought it was sex. “Still doing shit he shouldn’t.”

Angela shrugged. “This is a big desire of his. They may stay together and find some happiness.”

Marc let her lie, more worried about Kendle’s tantrum. Her gifts weren’t strong enough to penetrate the shield, but they were jarring the ground and causing bright sparks at each impact. Anyone could be viewing it right now.

Angela lowered the shield as the next blast came, arms lifting as if to catch it.

Marc stayed linked as she received the blast and converted it into energy she could use. He grabbed his stomach when she cramped from the transfer and broke the connection.

Another blast came in, spilling over the group who immediately tried to copy Angela. Without knowing, Kendle was recharging their energy banks. She wasn’t powerful enough to hurt them.

“We need to shift her displeasure to give Kenn time to reach her.” Angela concentrated. *He said yes to Nancy. She’s with him now.*

Angela brought the shield back up as the hatred switched directions. Bitter blasts of a scorned woman flew through the air toward Adrian and Nancy.

Marc knew it wouldn’t hurt Adrian either. He was disappointed, but he was also grateful the magic was now aimed elsewhere.

Angela sank to her knees in the mud, hair whipping around from fast-sealing the camp. “Trackers on the beach.”

Marc and the others herded people back into the party area, ignoring calls to come back to the fun. Their seriousness alerted the camp to trouble and brought the fun inside to an uncomfortable halt.

William came to Angela's right as Jennifer took her left. For this moment, she was the weaker of the trio. Jennifer hated the feeling.

"Are we letting them in and handling it or sending out for a meal?" William was eager to hunt with her.

Staggering, Angela moved into position with a line of Eagles following. Converting mismatched power hurt.

William hurried to stay in place as Angela lowered the shield and sent a bright blast of light along the dark sand.

The fire ball traveled so fast the two men lurking in the reeds along the shoreline didn't have time to bring up a shield or run. Exposed by the light that shot by them and dove into the water, the pair rose and started firing.

Kyle and Neil took them from the side as Angela's trio absorbed the much stronger magic hits and tried to convert them.

Jennifer almost wasn't able to. Her skin sent off waves of heat as she struggled.

William forced himself to let her work it out instead of helping her. If she lost control, it might knock her out, but that was it.

Angela approved even as she hated it. They had to get ready to fight this way. The future was coming.

Jennifer gained control and shoved the extra energy behind a storage door.

“When did they go out?”

Marc answered William. “They tried to escape with Kenn when she lowered the shield.” Marc had Kenn, and others, on his mental grid, all heading northeast. “They were going to trade our location for an escape from Angela’s wrath.” Marc had been able to scan them while the others handled the problem. Information was now his best friend.

“Keep me informed.” Angela gave him permission to keep track of Kendle’s tantrum without feeling guilty over it. She hoped Kendle wasn’t killed while Marc was watching. She didn’t want him to go through that pain even though the thought of the castaway being gone was pleasing. She loved him more than she hated his mistress. It sucked that he couldn’t say the same.

“When do the Eagles get to have fun?” Marc caught up, sliding an arm around Angela’s tired shoulders.

“The louder music should start any time. That’s the signal to switch the kids to their tent and help the elderly and injured to bed.” Angela didn’t want to be out here in the dark, but she needed to do a scan and now, while Marc had the camp covered, was the best time. After the party, the women would all stay with Jennifer and the men would be with

Kyle. It wasn't to make sure the couple couldn't sneak time together. It was to provide distractions and social interactions for everyone who needed them. Once they were on the boat and had all the rooms of fun waiting, people would grow apart. Angela wanted a small buffer for that now, while they could get it. On the island, they would be in close quarters again and already knowing their neighbors would help them readjust.

“What about William?”

Angela motioned toward the medical camper. “He knows we're picking up his bad vibes about our engagement. He's checking on the wounded, but they're at the party. He didn't see them.”

“Is he going to be trouble?”

“I'm not sure. There are two paths for him to take. I won't know until he makes the choice.”

“Should we do something preemptive?”

“Like what? Kill without a reason?”

There is a reason.

“Jealousy doesn't count.” Angela sank into her scan, ignoring his protests.

“Well, this is going great.” Marc dropped his arm. He settled into the job and tried to forget who was next to him.

Angela was sorry for their trouble, but like usual, she was missing Adrian. She wanted to know what he was doing, what he had planned. She didn't believe he'd walked away from her.

Neither do I, Marc admitted. I can't, he can't, the vet couldn't. I understand now why the Byzan are mostly male.

Angela snorted. *Yeah, more people like Adrian. That's what the world needed.*

Music blared into the night with deep beats and passionate tones, sending light through the camp and fear through the guards.

Angela both loved and hated it. Her people needed this and she was giving it. They would suffer afterwards.

“That’s life anyway, right?” Ivan was assigned to Angela as a guard. “We have a good moment and then three bad ones.”

Angela nodded, smiling as peals of excitement rang from the kids. They’d just been told they were having a bedtime movie.

“But on Pitcairn, we’ll have more?” Marc needed hope for that future.

“Yes. Once it’s cleared and we’re set up, people will be happy.”

“Will you be?” Ivan ignored an ugly glare from Marc at the question.

Angela shook her head but didn’t elaborate. *I’ll miss my homeland too much to truly be happy. I’ll tolerate it until it’s time to return.*

“Me too.” Ivan frowned as William came toward them. “It won’t be the same.”

“You may not find out.” Angela looked at him. “You’re reading my mind openly now, Ivan.”

Ivan tensed. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask. I was an Invisible a few days ago. What happened?”

“I needed access to your gift. I unlocked it.”

Ivan knew her next question and shrugged. “Not yet. If it becomes a problem, I may want you to put me back the way I was.”

“Impossible.” William emerged from the empty camper. “A Byzantine unlocked your gifts early. Even if she takes it away, you’ll never be the same.”

“That was true as soon as I caught the Ghost sneaking out of my COs tent.” Ivan indicated the camp. “I just meant if people can’t accept it or if it causes problems for the boss. I like being able to pick up thoughts and I’m not a threat to her.” Ivan regarded William pointedly. “You, on the other hand, are.”

Angela ignored them in favor of sweeping for problems outside the shield.

William returned Ivan’s tone and glare. “I’m fighting mine. You’re embracing yours.”

“She wants me to.” Ivan puffed his chest out. “She just wants you to go away. It’s causing too many problems.”

“Stop now.” Marc motioned William to go away.

William waited for Angela to overrule it. When she didn’t, he felt another twinge of being on the outside and forced it down. He went back to the camper without speaking.

Marc scowled. “He’s dangerous.”

Angela nodded. “So am I. So are you.”

“I mean to the camp.”

“You mean to you.” Ivan looked at Marc. “If he wins them over, you can’t.”

Marc growled at the man.

Ivan wasn’t intimidated anymore, but it had nothing to do with finding out he was a descendant. “Keep it up. I’ll have your slot and you’ll have Adrian’s.”

Marc controlled his anger. “Have you asked about that future?”

Ivan shook his head. “Nope. Not going to.”

“It ends with you dead.” Marc thought of his last private moment with Angela and snorted. “You wouldn’t last through the first hour anyway. Soldier skills aren’t enough to satisfy a woman like her.”

“I meant in camp.” Ivan leered. “But I want that spot if it opens. Might as well have it out there.”

“Do my wants matter in your equations?”

Ivan and Marc froze as Angela’s rage slammed into the shield from the inside.

Ivan swallowed. “I’m sorry. I got mad.”

Marc grunted. “He started it.”

Angela followed William.

Marc sulked.

Ivan followed, berating himself for declaring his interest openly, but if there was a tiny chance, he would take it.

“There isn’t.”

Ivan spun, pointing at Marc. “You don’t kn—!”

Marc punched him.

As the two men rolled around on the ground, grunting and cursing, Angela stepped into the camper where William now was sitting at the small medic table. She paused in the doorway.

William clapped his hands and sent a shower of flower petals over her.

Angela entered and shut the door, leaving the guards to break up the ugly fight. She expected Ivan to lose badly, but she didn't care. She needed to listen for trouble and now she would do it with William, despite him not needing more time alone with her. "No one understands but you and Adrian."

William pointed to the window.

She watched as it iced over. The glass became a mirror and then a film. Narrowing in, she was able to see Adrian and Nancy in a bedroll together, sleeping.

Angela's pain burst out in a wave that William couldn't absorb. He cringed at her emotions. Without the censor she usually kept on them, it was heavy and thick.

Angela closed it up, relieved to even let it loose for a second. *I miss him. I hate his guts and wish he would die, but I miss him.* Angela sighed, sitting. *I'm so screwed up.*

"You're under multiple spells." William told her what he believed. "If they weren't influencing you, it wouldn't be like this."

Angela deliberated the other couples in camp and laughed at him.

William's lips thinned, but he didn't argue. He chose a path. "I know why you don't want to break Adrian's charm."

Angela stopped laughing.

"It would also erase the chains you put on Marc."

Angela stared without a change in expression.

"You knew! You're scared."

She tensed. "At first. Now it's a protection. Every woman who meets Marc wants him. He would be free for about ten minutes."

"So you keep him chained to protect him."

"He's mine!" Angela hissed, red coming into her eyes as she leaned forward. "So are you."

William didn't deny it. He loved Donna, but he wanted Angela with every fiber of his being. If she said to kill everyone here, he would.

"And if I only need a single soul taken?" Angela finished her plans with William, glad it was almost over now.

"Name them." William didn't care if he never saw Ciemus again.

"Ciemus will fall," Angela warned in the double tones of her witch. "They're already doubting the Mayor. Donna needs you."

William struggled. He knew this was a test, but need was all he could feel. "Name them."

Angela whispered her answer. While he sat there in shock, she grabbed a mental door that jumped eagerly under her attention and slammed it

shut. “As a reward, I sentence you to live as an Invisible.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Crabs

Day Six

1am

1

Old magic danced around the camper, drawing attention from those outside.

“What’s going on in there?” Neil joined Kyle outside the camper as other Eagles came to break up the fight. Marc had won, of course. He was now proving it with snarled words and gut punches that caused Ivan to puke after each hit.

“You think he learned that in the Marines?”

Marc swung.

Ivan sprayed.

Neil shrugged. “Probably. Could be useful.”

Marc let Ivan draw a single ragged breath and swung again.

The Eagles around the two men wanted to break it up, but they didn’t know how. It was Marc. He was mad. They were scared of taking Ivan’s place.

“Should we?”

Neil sighed. “Ivan does have duty right now.”

Kyle gave a loud whistle. “Break it up, Marine!”

Marc paused.

“The boss needs a guard.”

Marc spun toward them.

Kyle and Neil went in opposite directions as Marc took their place at the door.

Neil noticed Kyle hadn't answered his query about what William and Angela were doing. He spotted Jennifer nearby.

Jennifer hadn't known Angela planned to do it, but she approved. "William is like a big kid in a candy store. He has too many options. She narrowed it down for him."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I." Jennifer frowned. "If I had that type of power and control over it, I'd be thrilled. I wouldn't want to go back to a time when I was defenseless."

Neil stared in surprise. "He gave it up?"

"Just until he leaves. He wants to live like you." Jennifer flushed as she realized what she'd said. "I'm sorry."

Neil grinned. "I pity the descendants, Jenny. I don't envy you. We're good."

Jennifer chuckled, relieved.

"Most people want the opposite, I guess." Neil shrugged. "Kyle and I have talked about it a few times, but we see what you all go through."

"So if I told you—"

"Don't." Neil's tone was frigid. "I made my choice a long time ago. Don't ever bring it up again, you understand?"

Jennifer gave a fast nod, unable to help the fear.

Neil sighed, missing her reaction. “Please, Jennifer. Don’t do what you’re thinking. I don’t want it.”

Jennifer fought the fear, reminding herself that people got mad all the time. It didn’t mean they were going to be violent too. “Are you sure? You’d be like Samantha.”

“Don’t you think I know?” Neil groaned in frustration. “Don’t you think she knows?!”

Jennifer stared as shock came. “No. She never thinks about it.”

“Because we don’t want it!” Neil calmed, trying to remember Jennifer was young, but she also had orders from the boss to learn what made adults adult. “Your gifts kept you alive. Hers brought nothing but curses and pain. She adjusted to being different, but she hates it. How can you not know that?”

Jennifer lowered her eyes. “I haven’t dug into Samantha yet.”

Neil was beyond surprised. “Why the hell not? She’s closer to the boss than I am!”

Jennifer almost choked on the words. “What if she doesn’t like me?”

Neil almost didn’t understand. Jennifer never acted her age. “You’re worried that she won’t like you.”

“I have issues like anyone else!” Jennifer defended hotly, embarrassed.

Neil snorted. “Samantha doesn’t have a problem with you.”

“Not the same.” The girl stared at her feet.

“No, it’s not.” Neil shrugged. “Sounds like you should spend some time with her and find out.”

“Yeah. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Neil chortled at the snarky tone. “Your nerves are showing.”

“Are not.”

He put a hand on Jennifer’s shoulder, feeling her tense and then accept it. “Do you want to be his wife?”

Jennifer flashed a quick smile. “I’m scared. It’s normal.”

“You can wait. Kyle will be relieved.”

Jennifer’s face melted into unhappiness. “He won’t give me a baby unless we’re married.”

Good man. Knew I liked him.

Jennifer frowned up at Neil.

Neil shrugged, suddenly feeling as though he was talking to a little sister. “He loves you. You love him. Wait or don’t, it doesn’t matter. You two were meant to be together. We all see it. You will too.”

Jennifer’s deep sigh carried her worries with it. “Thank you.”

“Brides and grooms need to hear that right before the ceremony.” Neil smiled. “The people who run just didn’t have support to help them over the cold feet.”

“You think?”

Neil shook his head, grinning. “Negative. I think they’re wise. Marriage is forever!”

Jennifer smacked him on the arm, laughing. “Stop it.”

Neil saw a group of den mothers coming and leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek. “You can call it off at any point. If you do, I’ll help you fix the mess afterwards.”

Jennifer hugged him.

Neil froze in shock for an instant, then awkwardly patted the girl on the shoulder. *This is nice. I’ve never had a sister.*

Jennifer retreated as the women reached them. She was an Eagle and she’d come running at the sounds of fighting, like the rest of the off duty men and women had, but they were all heading back to the tents now.

Neil left her in their capable hands, heading for the showers. Later, he would speak with Samantha about a friendship both females needed. Jennifer would benefit from the wisdom of Samantha’s mistakes and Samantha would be dragged back into camp life because of who she was hanging with. It was a good setup, but it was also a precaution. Samantha would now be around a descendant at all times who could alert Angela if she had trouble.

He hadn’t discussed it with Angela yet, but Neil was quietly adjusting the schedules for all their pregnant females. When things calmed a bit more, he planned to make sure the boss had those other areas covered. Her warning about none of their children being safe had terrified Neil. He would do anything to save Samantha and the others the

heartache of losing kids. He'd watched Angela suffer it and almost not make it back from the darkness. He doubted Samantha was strong enough to come through that and he knew Tonya wasn't. Kids meant everything to the descendants.

2

Day Six (1am)

Kyle couldn't sleep. He'd volunteered for the late shift after the bachelor party to keep from lying in his bedroll worrying about the wedding. As the wind howled in a cool chill from the ocean, nearly knocking him off his feet, Kyle was glad. He needed to be distracted from—

Tripping, he fell to the damp sand. Kyle winced as a hard object under the grit punctured his skin.

He sat up, not caring that Eagles were pointing and laughing. He pulled his hand free, finger throbbing.

The crab attached to his digit glared balefully, whiskers twitching.

The man and the crab regarded each other.

Blood ran down Kyle's finger.

The crab casually began to chew.

"I've got crabs!"

The crab paused at his scream.

Neil slapped the hungry animal from Kyle's hand. "That might stop the wedding. We'll get you some medicine."

The crab bounced and rolled into a hole near the nest Kyle had tripped over.

Neil looked over and found Kyle walking away. “We need to clean out that wound. Where are you going?”

“To get my meal kit.”

Neil hit the ground laughing as a stream of crabs emerged from the sand.

“You’re making that up.” Angela was laughing at the story she’d gotten upon asking what had made the noise.

“Nope. We’re having crab with breakfast. There were dozens of them in the nest.”

Angela waved Travis on, aware of him being her guard now. Ivan was in the medical camper, trying to keep water on a bruised stomach. She followed him to the flap and spotted Kyle being tended by a medic while eating a charred scrap of meat. As he met her eye across the camp, Angela laughed at his triumphant nod. Men were cute when they got that way.

Angela went back to the table and kept laboring on the schedules. Like Neil and a few others, she was rearranging things to make sure the pregnant women were heavily guarded. The descendants were covering the children and the camp, but a few odd-out groups still needed to be watched over. She would be relieved to have another of them off her list. She didn’t know what was coming for their babies, but she felt it and so did her twins.

Mike and Mia were staying awake a little longer now and picking up more of the activities around them. They were also learning about parents. It required shallow answers now and more details as they grew older. Their knowledge banks would help fill in some of their history, but when they began asking where their true mom and dad were, Angela would have to disappoint them. She didn't know. Kendle hadn't gotten that information and anyone who may have had it was dead or missing.

Angela joined Grant near the livestock trailer. "I thought you'd be following Ray around at the party."

Grant pointed at a tiny light in the distance by the warehouse quarantine zone.

Angela pursed her lips. "To avoid you?"

"I think so."

"He likes you. Don't give up."

Grant's frown brought guards closer to the boss. He was still new.

Angela could feel his worry and shook her head. "My people aren't the problem. He loved Dale. You can't forget that." Angela signaled toward Ray's tiny tent. "What if you took him a slice of cake and then left him alone until morning? See if he just needs a kindness and some space."

"I think I should just leave him alone." Grant stated wistfully at the campsite. "He isn't ready."

"For another relationship? No. For a great friend who understands him? Ray's needed that all his life." Angela rotated toward the tents, where the

party was finally winding down. “He won’t be alone. There are snipers on duty and he has his gun. All he doesn’t have is a slice of cake and something other than his loss to think about.”

“I tried,” Grant groused. “He isn’t ready.”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe you aren’t. After years in Ciemus without a public relationship, I would imagine your fellow townsmen thought you’d stay single forever. Must be a shock for them to find out you really are gay.”

Grant refused to say some of his own people were shunning him. “I’m getting some looks.”

“You laid low so long they forgot.”

“I didn’t have anyone there who draws me like Ray.”

“I didn’t realize any of Ciemus’s other people were homosexual.”

“One or two, but they kept their heads down more than I did.” Grant grew bitter. “We made jokes and had talks about equality, but none of us wanted to test those lines.”

“And here, you’ll be crossing them.” Angela had him figured out now. “You’re embarrassed and worried about retaliation against Ray, not yourself.”

“Yes.”

“Is Ray?”

“No. He swears Safe Haven doesn’t care, providing we do our jobs and don’t cause trouble.”

“Not all of Safe Haven feels that way, but they won’t act on it. You’re safe here to be yourself.”

“Are you?”

Angela sighed, turning away. “No. My enemies are different than yours.”

“Because they want your gifts?”

“Because female alphas pull men too hard. But without it, I’m just another tired leader and they’re just normal survivors. No one here wants that. We like being special.”

Grant let her go, considering her words and advice. When he thought he’d made peace with some of it, Grant went to the party tent to see if there was cake left.

There wasn’t, but that would tip the scales on the next moment between the men. Satisfied she’d helped another couple on a good path, Angela went to settle into her place for a short shift on guard duty. William would stay in the camper, away from people while he adjusted to being normal again. She’d owed him for saving their lives at the naval station and it was the only thing he’d wanted that she would give.

“Locking up his gifts is an odd way to repay him.” Kyle joined Angela in the tree, taking a fork lower.

“He’s never been normal. For him, it’s a treat.”

“And the issues you discussed?”

Angela shrugged, pleased with how Jennifer’s magic was rubbing off on Kyle. In time, he would be able to read the minds of those around him and not just the alpha when she was open to it. “William will have a new understanding of the world when he leaves here. It won’t be our problem for years.”

Kyle assumed she meant it would be when they came back to America but didn't ask. He would be with them when that happened, though he still had a tiny hope that Jennifer wouldn't be.

"Smother that hope." Angela's tone was set. "She's my right hand and it will never change."

"Why did you pick Jenny?" Kyle was able to ask now, knowing it wouldn't matter to him. "The real reason."

Angela was glad to be able to tell the truth. "She's special, Kyle, even for being one of us. She needed to be able to do the job, but she also needed a protector. You two falling in love was icing on the cake."

"So you knew, back then?"

"Adrian thought about it once." Angela's mind went to Adrian holding her in the country club, after eliminating Cesar and his slavers at the rest stop. "He sensed one of us and who they would become. He was shocked to discover it was a teenager."

Kyle didn't like Angela's haunted tones or the memories of holding her so Adrian could burn shut that hollow point hole in her shoulder to save her life. "Fate gave her to the slavers and we removed them. Then she came here, and you claimed her future before she had a chance to accept it herself. You brainwashed her."

"In a way." Angela adored Kyle, though their bond wasn't something they discussed often. "You skipped a lot in there."

Kyle didn't hesitate to tell the truth. "My obsession. Hiding her. Encouraging her to think she could only trust me."

"Yes, but there's also her side of it. Jennifer knew about Safe Haven. If she hadn't been pregnant, she might have eliminated the slavers herself and came to us. She was meant to be here, to lead. She knows it."

"She wants it."

"That's also required for the job." Angela grunted. "Marc can't, because he doesn't. I have trouble because I question everything that needs to be done, even when I shouldn't. Jennifer will determine the logical choices and carry them out." Angela looked at him. "Unless you or the kids are involved. She and I are sisters in so many ways. Watch my mistakes, Marc's mistakes, Adrian's. And don't make them. Learn from us so you can be what she needs."

"I think I know what you're hiding from everyone, even Jenny." Kyle jumped down as his numb ass refused to take anymore of the hard branch. "If you need to talk, I'm there for you." Kyle was still looking out for a member of his team.

Angela's sigh rippled on the wind. "When we get to the island, I'll need it so much that Jennifer and Marc will think we're having an affair."

Kyle chuckled.

Angela didn't.

“I can’t believe you came.” Conner kept his hands in his pockets and his eyes on her face. “Why are you doing this?”

Candy giggled, nervous and horny. “You know why.”

Conner swallowed the lump in his throat to speak. “I need ground rules.”

Candy’s cheeks grew red in the moonlight. “Make us both feel good for a little while, okay? Just...don’t go too far.”

Conner took a step forward. Then another. “Am I too close?”

Candy shook her head, stomach tightening.

Conner advanced, mind flitting between Eagle rules and his fantasies.

Candy sensed it. She was also torn. If he didn’t want this, it was wrong.

“Are you crazy?” Conner grinned at her. “I’m afraid of scaring *you* off.”

Candy giggled again. “You’ll tell me if that changes?”

Conner nodded, bringing them within inches of each other. “But it won’t. I’ve wanted this for a long time now.” He held out a hand. “You’ll tell me if it’s too much?”

Candy laughed, softly. “It won’t be. Go ahead.”

Conner leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, groaning at the sensation.

Candy mirrored his noise as good energy swarmed over her, warming cold feet.

Conner held them there, feeling her, letting her feel him. He'd been eating and working out since joining camp. He wasn't scrawny anymore.

He retreated.

Candy returned his curious look. "Again?"

This time, Conner kissed her.

Candy was lost in the connection and missed the bright light that shot from their embrace. It slammed into the shield and sent a rush of brilliant blue through the barrier.

People looked up in approval at the sight, assuming a good moment among leadership had caused it.

William recognized it for it was. "The soulmate connection." He slapped Neil on the shoulder. "Another good match!"

Neil shared the man's smile, but he watched to see what couple had made it. Like the rest of their camp, he understood there was almost always blowback from moments like these but causing changes to the shield was a sign of leadership. None of the council couples would be just now experiencing that. It had to be a newly revealed member of leadership.

Angela nodded toward the rear of the shower camper.

Neil kept an eye on that area as he continued to sweep for problems.

Behind the camper, the guards retreated to allow the new couple privacy.

Conner drew back in delighted surprise. “Did you feel that?”

Candy nodded, dazed. “We’re a match.” She hadn’t seen the light, but she’d been around enough to know this feeling was special. She immediately wanted to protect it. “We should follow the rules after this so you don’t get kicked out.”

“Whatever you want.”

She touched her lips, able to feel his magic on her, spreading. “Is this real?”

Conner kissed her again, letting her see inside his heart. *There was no spell or charm. I let you think that so you would give me a chance to love you.*

Do you?

Conner kissed her harder. *With all my heart. Someday, we’ll be married. I’m growing up as fast as I can.*

Candy clutched his strong shoulders. “Stop.”

Conner ended the kiss, but he didn’t step back.

Candy struggled to clear her head so she could think. Her body was throbbing after only two short kisses. “Don’t grow up yet.”

Conner laughed. “Oh, okay.” He wrapped his arms around her thick waist and rested his cheek against hers, perfectly happy for this second in time. “Do you feel good?”

Candy nodded against him, relieved. She’d expected much more... She tensed at a rustle of clothes as he untucked his shirt.

Conner kissed her cheek, breath coming in shorter rasps. “Hang on to me.”

Candy tightened her grip on his shoulders as warm hands brushed her legs, spread them.

“Thank you for wearing a skirt!” Conner moaned in her ear, positioning them. He slid a finger over her panties, bucking in his own grip through his pants.

Candy shivered, body lighting up from his gentle strokes. Clothes rustled again, then a zipper sounded.

Candy opened her mouth to protest.

Conner started stroking against her, groaning her name.

Candy’s body replied by softening, leaning forward to help him please them both.

“They’re gonna get caught.”

Kyle nodded, mind on his upcoming wedding more than the illegal couple stealing a private moment. Thanks to Jennifer, he no longer viewed that as sternly. “Send Dog through on a patrol. That should quiet them down.”

Quinn hurried to handle it. He didn’t want the couple to get in trouble either, but Candy’s moans were getting louder. Eventually, a camp member would notice.

Conner caught it all. He was monitoring a dozen different directions to keep them from being caught like this. “Sorry. We have to go faster.”

Candy bit down on a scream as Conner touched her bare skin with his hot fingers. She convulsed against his light pushes, sobbing.

Conner absorbed it, letting her ride the waves as paws padded toward them.

Candy held him tighter, wanting more.

Conner ducked out of her embrace, fixing his clothes. He tugged her skirt down and spun into the shadows.

Dog appeared.

Candy sucked in air and staggered back into camp.

Dog followed Conner's wild scent to the camp perimeter. The shield was up, but the boy was on the other side of it, lying in a ditch.

Dog put the pieces together and went to tell the boss that Conner had a gift unlike the others. He could go through her shield without her knowing.

Conner knew he was caught, but he'd had to get out of camp or he would have taken Candy right then and rules be damned. He'd never felt anything like her heat. He was lying in this cold ditch, finishing what he'd started, in hopes that Angela wouldn't know they'd had a physical moment before he was legal.

Angela's hard laughter floated across the camp. Then her worry flashed out.

Most people assumed she wanted the party over now and the camp settled. Eagles got on it.

Angela let them. She was ready to have things settled for the night, but it had really been a

momentary lapse in her terrible fear over her son being alone in the darkness without her shield to keep his reckless ass alive. Conner was out of her protection, but only by a few feet. Charlie was alone in the apocalyptic wastelands, miles from here. *I may never sleep again.*

Chapter Twenty-Five
Private Lessons

Day Six
3am

1

Kenn had forgotten how much he enjoyed being alone. Solitary missions in the past had been a joy for him because he had only his rules to obey. He'd been free to follow his desires, especially while in other countries. When the gates had shut behind him, Kenn had started dreading the new restrictions, but now that he was out here, he was remembering solitude was a good thing. It was giving him a chance to think.

He hadn't realized it, but there wasn't much of that in Safe Haven. People were always around, or lines of people were waiting. There wasn't much privacy or time.

Kenn shifted his pack into a better place on his shoulders and dug a wedgie out of his crack. He ignored the wind and the chill, concentrating on putting his feet places that wouldn't leave a distinct mark or send him sliding. Around him, the countryside was still and quiet. He couldn't hear anything from camp now and there hadn't been any noise other than his own breathing and footsteps for

the two hours he'd been moving through the darkness without a light. It was a test of his old skills, and of his courage. It was also a good defense. Using a light during the apocalypse was like putting out honey for a bear and he didn't want company.

"Tough-titty, said the kitty."

Kenn stopped, stomach falling. "She didn't."

Charlie came out of the trees behind Kenn and took up his line of travel without stopping. "Of course, she did. We started this journey together. It makes sense we would end it that way."

The teenager kept going, smirking. He'd been trailing Kenn since he left camp, but the Marine hadn't noticed. *I've gotten better.*

Kenn forced the respect. "Yes, you have."

Kenn slowly came out of the shock to get moving again, becoming aware of the chill as he stood still. It was always better to be active.

Charlie stayed in the lead, keeping track of the thoughts of the man behind him as much as the almost alien surroundings. Unlike Kenn, Charlie wasn't comfortable being away from Safe Haven, but he was determined to hide it from his unwilling companion for as long as he could.

Kenn grunted. "Too late."

Charlie shrugged. "I'm a kid. I'm supposed to be afraid of the dark."

"You're an Eagle. They're not afraid of anything."

“That’s not true. Eagles don’t let their fears get the best of them.”

“Eagles also don’t break camp rules.” Kenn was assuming the boy was here on a punishment trip, the same as he was.

Charlie slowed to let Kenn catch up. “I didn’t think you knew.”

Kenn shrugged. “She said something to me on the beach the other day. I felt a trip coming.” Kenn hated himself, but he couldn’t help asking, “I’m not supposed to return, right?”

Kenn was encouraged by how long it took Charlie to form an answer.

“I’m not sure either of us are.”

Kenn snorted. “I don’t have any doubt about you.”

“No, I really don’t either, except...”

Kenn understood. “She’s been putting off those vibes. I get it, but I don’t think you have as much to worry about as you believe.”

“If that were true, I’d be in my tent and not out here with a man I hate.”

Kenn winced. “That’s what she’s doing. She’s trying to make peace between us.”

“Not possible.”

“No.”

Charlie spun around suddenly. “You’re an awful son of a bitch, you know?”

Kenn shoved Charlie out of the way, knocking him into the slush. *Of course, I know it, you little*

shit. That's why I'm out here. I'd rather be in my tent too.

“We shouldn’t use our gifts. Trackers will find us.”

“Whatever.”

Charlie snickered as he picked himself up. He liked being able to get one over on Kenn.

“Is she pregnant yet?”

Charlie’s mouth dropped open. “Well... You see...”

“Yeah. I see we both have a number of reasons we could’ve been sent out on a trip together.” Kenn tried being gruff. “How about we spend the next few hours in silence, contemplating the many possibilities?”

Charlie chuckled at the wording. “Whatever.”

Kenn refused to let the boy see his smile.

The males strode in silence for three minutes.

“How long until we reach Kendle?”

Kenn shrugged. “A day.”

Charlie pulled his hat further over his ears to protect him from the cold and then settled in for a long, uncomfortable walk. Unlike the Marine gliding along behind him without making sounds, Charlie did know why he was on this trip. His mom was trying to toughen him up for the future and while he wasn’t sure he actually needed it, Charlie had been relieved to know he was getting a chance to achieve a new level of maturity before the punishment came over Tracy’s pregnancy.

“This *is* your punishment, rookie.” Kenn rubbed it in without enjoyment. “Tracy’s will come every day until you two are married.”

“She doesn’t want to get married.”

“No, she doesn’t want to marry a dumbass horn dog. Grow up and you’ll both be off the hook.”

“I don’t know how!” Charlie flipped Kenn the finger as he passed him to retake the lead. “Just stop talking.”

“Just start listening. Then I can send you back to camp and rescue Kendle.”

“She sent me to help.”

Kenn snorted. “She sent you for a private lesson with the camp trainer. Grow up!”

Charlie hated it that Kenn’s words made sense, but once stated, it was obvious the Marine was right. His mom wanted him in camp, but he had to be punished. “So give your lesson already and I’ll go!”

“Assuming you’d be fine for this run, that she just needs to punish you, is your first mistake.” Kenn started the teaching moment like he would with any other Eagle. “Your second error was assuming I want you to be punished. I couldn’t care less that you dipped your wick and lit a candle. What I care about is how you lied to me.”

Charlie’s gut filled with dread. They’d never discussed this in all their fighting since coming to Safe Haven.

“Yep.” Kenn controlled his anger. “She sent us out here alone together, boy. Like we were in the

beginning of this mess. When you were lying to me.”

“And you were beating on me and my mom!” Charlie spun around again, ready to use his gifts. “You’re a pig! I hate your guts and so does she!”

Kenn stepped around the furious child this time. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie didn’t know how to respond. “Well...I’m not!”

“Didn’t expect you to be.” Kenn kept walking. “You survived by lying and hiding. Millions of people have done that over time, I’m sure.”

The teenager resumed walking as he realized they weren’t going to fight. It was getting cold and his confusion was blocking the anger that had been keeping him warm. He’d never expected Kenn to apologize.

“I wouldn’t have, but she sent you out here with me and we only have one piece of unfinished business.”

“Did she know you would say this stuff? Did she think we would fight?”

Kenn pulled his canteen for a cool drink. “Why do you think she wants you hurt?”

“I don’t get it.”

“You’re quick to think she’s out to get you, but the evidence doesn’t support it. What’s your deal?”

Charlie didn’t see any reason to lie. “She wants Adrian and not my dad.”

“She wants them both.” Kenn grinned, storing his canteen. “I never would have thought she had that in her.”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

“So, it’s wrong.”

“Oh, hell, kid. You have a woman now. Why don’t you get off your mom’s back?”

“You like it that she’s falling!”

“Yes, I do. She’s always been high on her horse about things like this. It’s nice to see she’s human, like the rest of us.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you have to stop expecting her to be perfect. So she’s got the hots for two guys. Like you haven’t eyeballed more than just Tracy.”

“I evaluated the available partners and—”

“Don’t give me that shit, kid. I’ve got nuts too. They get all heavy and soft when cute women come around—any cute women. We would have fifteen holes to fill if the holes would let us.”

“I wouldn’t. I love Tracy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kenn blew him off. “At some point, you’ll be hit with the same dilemma and we’ll see how you handle it. Being attracted to other people is human nature. We were made to couple up and squeeze out pups. Only loyalty and society keep us from humping the leg of every chick we meet.”

Charlie sniggered even though he didn’t want to. “That’s terrible.”

“But it’s almost true.” Kenn didn’t back down. “Some people, like Jennifer and Kyle, aren’t that way. They’ll never look at another man or woman once they’re married.”

“We’re gonna miss it.”

“Good.” Kenn also didn’t see any need to hide things. “It would put pressure on me to marry Tonya right then and I’m not ready. I proposed. Now, she needs to wait for me.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

That gave Kenn pause. He hadn’t considered it.

Charlie was grinning as he fell in step on the icy road. “I heard her and my mom. She knew you were leaving.”

“That’s why she stayed on the boat!” Kenn realized. “It was a test of her loyalty to the boss.”

“My mom said it was to Safe Haven and her new future as one of the good guys.”

Kenn huffed. “Same thing.”

“Yeah. Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What if she picks someone else while you’re gone? Or later, on the island?”

“I’ll adjust.” Kenn was pleased to feel like he meant that. “I’ll want to be a father to my child, but I don’t think it’ll be an issue. I’ll be dead.”

“What?”

“If Tonya picks someone else, she’ll be too scared to do it openly. She’ll kill me off or get your mom to do it.”

“You’re screwing with me now.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“It’s cold and dark, and you’re an easy target.”

Charlie frowned. *I’ll never be able to keep up with the senior Eagles.* “She wants what I can’t give.”

“And now we come to another reason you may be out here.” Kenn pointed to the skyline, where the sun would rise in a few hours. “The Indians went east to do this, but you’re going north for your test of manhood. When it’s over, you won’t worry about being one of us anymore. You either will be or you won’t.”

“So I am going with you to help Kendle.”

“I don’t think that’s your mission, kid. You have a few days to do the growing that usually takes months and years. It’s time you became a man.”

Charlie deliberated and gave the only response he could. “Cool!”

2

“How long until we take a break?”

Kenn grunted, trying not to cave yet. He hadn’t walked this much in a long time, but Angela’s mental order to hoof it for the first day had been specific. “Dawn.”

Charlie trudged behind the Marine, glad this road was too coated in debris to make crunching noises like the previous street had. They’d both stayed twitchy as they listened to the ice crack under

their boots. Sunrise was an hour off, and a dangerous time to be traveling. Anyone holed up around here would notice their passage.

Kenn was listening for trouble, but he wasn't expecting any yet. Kendle's location, according to the rough mental map Angela had provided, was still miles away. They would probably reach the castaway around midnight.

"Will we have to fight?"

"I don't predict the future." Kenn paused. "Do you?"

"Sometimes."

"Figures. That's one of the gifts I wanted to use." Kenn sighed. "Don't do it. It might be tracked."

"I'm not. I thought you might have been given a battle plan when mom sent you out."

"She gave me a mental map and the finger."

Charlie's chuckle was tired. He was cold, sore, and ready to be still for a while so he could warm up.

"We'll burrow into our bedrolls back-to-back, beneath debris." Kenn gestured. "Piss in the next half hour so we don't lead anything to our site by scent."

"Got it."

"We'll sleep for six hours, get up and do a perimeter round, then hit the bathroom again half a mile out. We'll eat as we do rounds and then sleep for another four hours." Kenn paused in the plans, eyeing the moon and clouds over it. The wind felt

like bad weather was coming. Months in the mountain had heightened his senses. He could almost smell a storm.

“That’s how Samantha feels it at first.” Charlie stared at the Marine, surprised. “Maybe you have a gift like hers.”

Kenn shrugged. “Works for me.” It was a pleasing thought.

“Samantha said it doesn’t take magic for her to know one’s coming, only to track it. Give it a try.”

Kenn wasn’t sure how it worked, but he knew enough to look for a new door in his mind. When one lit up with a pale green light, he marked it, but didn’t open it. That was the power side. He needed the instinct to use it. That came from an open mind and his nose. Kenn inhaled.

Rain.

Charlie groaned. “Snow would have been better to cover our tracks. Rain leaves mud.”

Kenn sighed. “Okay. Give me a minute.” He quickly adapted. “We’ll walk until the rain starts and then hole up until it passes. We’ll find something underground so we can have a fire.”

“Works for me.” Charlie realized it meant they weren’t stopping at sunrise and groaned. “Oh, man.”

“Shhh.” Kenn went on high alert. “We aren’t alone. Watch yourself.”

Charlie tried not to think of anything connected to magic, but it was hard. He also refused to contemplate their camp, instead picking out oddities

around them to stew on while Kenn found the problem.

“It’s a tracker.” Kenn stopped and swiveled, pulling his gun.

“Interesting that you know.” A man came from behind a tree near Charlie.

Charlie lifted his gun but didn’t react otherwise. In rookie lessons, he was supposed to act dumb, and that’s what he was doing. The tracker was clearly a threat. Kenn would handle this one.

Kenn snorted. “Thanks.”

The boy caught the vibe but didn’t react to the unspoken order to throw off the intruder with laughter or odd comments. He could feel the man planning his death now. It was unpleasant.

Kenn sighed. “Rookies.” He fired through his jacket pocket, where his gun had been ready to go since he left camp.

The tracker’s shield deflected the bullet but weakened with his panic. It went down.

Waiting for it, Kenn fired twice more, hitting the man in the leg and the stomach.

Screams filled the air.

Kenn and Charlie rushed over and disarmed the bleeding man, not being gentle. They both knew catching him off guard had saved them a lot of problems and maybe their lives.

Kenn wrapped his hands around the man’s neck, preparing to squeeze.

Charlie dug into his mind in the pause, knowing they needed the information. “He’s alone. He was

sent by the same assholes who nailed Zack's team to the warehouse walls."

Kenn started to end it, angered. He still liked Zack, despite the man not caring for him anymore.

"They aren't from here. Wait." Charlie pulled on Kenn's beefy hand. "Hang on."

Kenn eased up but didn't let go. "Two minutes. He's trying to heal."

Charlie ripped open doors, slamming them against the man's mental halls in rapid succession. It sounded like gunshots to Kenn. *Don't want to get on the bad side of that.*

Charlie withdrew. "He's UN."

Kenn's grip was getting sweaty and the sounds of panicked pain were too loud. "Finish up."

Charlie reached out and snatched the man's lifeforce.

Kenn was knocked back onto a slushy debris pile.

Charlie groaned at the energy. "That feels good!"

Kenn watched the boy in shock. *Angela's gonna shit a brick and beat me bloody with it.*

Charlie doubled over at the pain as the man's uneven power merged with his own. "Not so good now."

Blue light swirled around the teenager, lifting him off the ground a few inches before slamming him into the slush.

Kenn tried to get up and see if the kid was okay, but he was out of practice using a full pack. It took

a few seconds to roll over and gain his feet. As he did, footsteps crunched toward them through the darkness.

Kenn grabbed Charlie's arm and hefted the groaning boy over his shoulder. Then he ran.

Charlie hadn't known he would be disabled by pain when he took a lifeforce. He tried not to moan but couldn't help it as Kenn ran along the crunching leaves and ice.

Behind them, heavy steps and angry voices echoed.

"Which way?"

"I don't know."

"Are you positive it was magic?"

"Yes! I felt it."

Kenn increased his pace, realizing they'd attracted the attention of refugees who'd been camped nearby. "If we survive this, I am so telling your mother."

3

"Come out of there and we won't hurt you!"

"We just want the kid. You can go!"

The shouts had been coming for half an hour. Kenn and Charlie were in the basement of a farmhouse. The people above them, yelling and pacing, had tried to come down the stairs, but Kenn had fired a few shots and eliminated two of them to discourage that. He had the boy tucked under a

metal counter now. Soon, the people upstairs would get tired of talking and start shooting.

A gun cocked above them.

Kenn sighed, standing up. “Come on down and we’ll negotiate. I ain’t giving him up for nothing.”

“You could have just said he was for sale!” one of them complained, opening the basement door. The man stomped down the stairs without a weapon in hand. “We have two women in camp, but one is pregnant. We won’t trade her.”

“I need water.” Kenn came forward as two more men followed the first down.

Charlie stayed where he was, watching for a signal.

Kenn gestured. “The boy’s a magic user. He’s worth both women and all your water.”

The small group conferred in grunts and whispers.

Kenn took stock of them, encouraged by the way they seemed to mean an honest trade. It would give him the advantage when shit hit the fan.

“We’ll give you the water and the women, but we need proof he’s a magic user.”

Kenn nodded.

Charlie frowned at the men. “Your women aren’t there anymore. Rachel forced Kelly to let her out of the shed. They took your truck, the one with a full tank. I won’t tell you what direction they headed because I don’t belong to you!” Charlie came from beneath the bench, clear on what needed to happen here.

Are you sure? Kenn had to ask.

Charlie flashed images of the abused females fleeing for their lives as he snatched the closest lifeforce.

Kenn took the other two.

4

“This is good.”

Kenn nodded, chewing. After months of dehydrated, canned, and foraged meals, the steak was amazing. Neither of them cared that it was tough and wasn't seasoned.

The cow had been wrapped on the sled they'd claimed from the trackers. Kenn had thought to use their cabin too because Charlie had said it was stocked with a well, but the sight of cow meat had changed their minds. It had taken hours to thaw and prepare, but it was the best meal either of them had eaten since the war.

“Would you have traded me? Before?”

Kenn shook his head and let out a belch. “I wanted it for my use.”

“Because money runs out?”

Kenn grunted. The boy was a bit wiser than he'd thought. “Yes.”

Charlie nodded. “Makes sense.”

Kenn didn't care for the pleased tone. “It's wrong, what we did. She'll be pissed.”

“She’s always pissed these days.” Charlie picked up another chunk of the perfectly charred meat. “How will we ever tell the difference?”

“Hey!” Kenn didn’t mean to yell. It just happened.

Charlie stopped chewing, mouth full. “What?”

“What’s your problem?!”

The teenager swallowed. “I’m growing up.”

Kenn didn’t know how to respond. He hadn’t expected such bitterness. *I thought he only hated me.*

“I don’t hate her.” Charlie spit out a piece of fat. “She’s this alpha shit now and I have to follow all these new rules, but I remember when she let you beat her ass whenever you felt like it. I also remember when she let you beat on me.”

“She didn’t have much choice then.” Kenn told the truth.

“But she did.” Charlie’s tone was flat. “She could have used her gifts and killed you. She didn’t. She let us be hurt for years and you’re still alive. It’s hard for me to have the proper respect.” Charlie set his mostly empty plate down and laid back. “Good night.”

Kenn gaped at the boy. If Angela had used her gifts, the government would have known and taken them both to the labs. “Wow, are you stupid.”

Kenn kicked out the fire and went to bed, ignoring Charlie’s anger and mental demand for an explanation. “No, you said good night, so shut the fuck up and go to sleep.”

Kenn forced the teenager to obey by tugging his bedroll over his face to block out the sun and further conversation.

Chapter Twenty-Six
I Forbid You

November 25th

Day Six

8am

1

I can't believe this is my wedding day.

Jennifer stretched on her bedroll, grateful for a few minutes alone in the community tent. Everyone else had taken the kids to the bathroom before breakfast to give her a small window of privacy. It felt like any other day, but in a few hours, she would be married.

Jennifer examined her heart to be positive it was what she wanted. She assumed every bride and groom did the same when the big day arrived, but it still felt wrong. She had no doubt about Kyle's intentions or his level of commitment to her. Cold feet wasn't something he was dealing with right now.

Am I? Jennifer did another sweep of herself and slowly sat up. No. I want this. Kyle is as close to perfect for me as it gets. No one will ever be closer, because I won't give anyone else a chance. I'm not settling. I'm just deciding to be happy with who I have. He's a good man and I don't care that he's

too old for me. We'll work through the rest of it, because the first part is the only part that really matters.

Jennifer suddenly wondered if her assumptions about Kyle were correct. Cold feet settled over her in a manner she hadn't expected. *What if he really doesn't want to be saddled with me? We all know what he wants. Maybe this is the price he's willing to pay to have it, but if he doesn't want to hand over his freedom to me, then neither one of us will be happy.*

Full of new worries, Jennifer scanned for Kyle. She found him, exhausted, a few feet away on guard duty.

Jennifer tried to enter his mind without letting him know she was there. It was important to her to have the truth. She wasn't sure if she would call off the wedding, but it would certainly crush her a little. Despite not trusting men, she did trust Kyle. He had proven himself to her. Finding out it was all a great act would hurt.

It's not an act Jenny. Kyle didn't want her to think he was trying to trick her by remaining silent and letting her think he didn't know she was in his head. I want you to be my wife.

I'm going to ask you a question, she warned. You won't be able to hide your first thought from me.

Kyle shrugged. *Ask whatever you want.*

If we weren't in Safe Haven, a marriage wouldn't be required.

I'm not doing it because it's required.

Let me finish.

No. You're going to say marriage would never have come up if not for the rules of this camp and I refuse to let you ruin today for us.

Jennifer stood up and began gathering what she needed for a shower while deliberating Kyle's words. She wanted to believe him, but she'd spent too many awful nights in Cesar's tent to let it go.

I'm going to ask the question now.

I'm ready.

Jennifer didn't think she was, but there was no way to soften the blow. She drew in a breath. *The night you rescued me, did you think about taking what you wanted and leaving me there to die?*

Kyle was devastated that she knew his secret. He'd spent the last months trying to make up for it, trying to prove he wasn't that person anymore. Her question forced him to look at the ugly side again and admit that it was still there. *Yes. You know I did.*

Thank you for not lying.

You were there. There's no way I can lie about it. I didn't understand how much of it you were picking up that night. It wasn't censored.

You mean like you do now.

Yes. I paid attention in the classes Angela gave us and I picked up details during battles and some conversations. I don't block them. I just don't think about them.

I need to know what will happen if I call off the wedding.

Kyle's heart sank, but he didn't hesitate to tell her what he had decided on, rehearsed, last night. *I refuse to be a danger to you. Before, I would have been. After watching the boss, I no longer believe it will be a problem. You'll do your duties and I'll do mine. Sometimes we'll stare at each other and wonder what might have been, but that'll be the end of it. We both love Safe Haven. We would never do anything to dishonor it.*

It makes me happy to hear that...

But you don't believe me.

No. I don't.

Kyle sighed. *You'll see me leave and you won't see Marc follow to put the bullet in my brain that I asked for.* He could walk away from her long enough to get out of sight so Marc could do what he wasn't strong enough to do. Either way, Jennifer would be safe and so would the dream.

Oddly, that answer sent Jennifer's cold feet away and brought in a rush of warmth that told her the camp's fear was probably accurate. However, Stockholm syndrome had never been studied under apocalyptic conditions. *Surely there's room for a little leeway...*

"Are you talking to him?" Candy was in the flap, staring back-and-forth between the couple. "You guys are not supposed to be talking."

Kyle waved Daryl into his position and moved away. "Make sure she wants to go through with this."

Candy put a hand on her waist in annoyance. “What do you think I’m here for?” She went in and dropped the flap.

“Report to the mess.” Conner pointed.

Kyle went, heart pounding. If she called it off, he would survive, but it would be hard. Marc would never agree to kill him, but he really would have to leave. He wanted her more than anything. Nothing would compare to having her as his wife. If she changed her mind, his future would be bleak.

Kyle stopped as he entered the mess. The sound of clapping was loud, startling.

Kyle stared in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“You waited.” Conner dropped his head. “You handled it honorably. Congratulations.”

Kyle tolerated the words and slaps, the smiles and nods of approval, but inside, he stayed terrified. He wouldn’t know until someone came to tell him and he—

Stop it. Jennifer couldn’t take his stress. Candy is taking me to the shower camper for a complete scrub. Everything’s fine.

Kyle let out the breath he’d been holding. *I love you.*

I know. That’s why I’m marrying you.

A silly grin spread across Kyle’s lips, encouraging more praise and approval from the camp.

Neil led Kyle to a corner table, where a stack of items waited. “We’ll be here until the women are done with the shower camper and then we’ll head

in. Check out the sizes and see if Conner got them right.”

Kyle spotted Autumn in Monica’s arms and scooped her up. “How’s my girl this morning?”

Autumn cooed happily.

“That’s so sweet.” Brittani sat a plate near Kyle as he settled at the table. “You’ll be her real dad in a few hours. Are you nervous?”

Kyle didn’t glance down. “It’s my honor.”

Brittani smiled and left them to help Stanley finish serving the food. It was hard for her to stay away from mess duty. She’d gotten used to it and there wouldn’t be Eagle training today.

Kyle looked at Neil and found the same stricken expression he already knew was on his own face.

You’re not my daddy?

Kyle felt Jennifer’s pain and made the choice that felt right. *Yes, I am. Today just makes it legal by camp rules.*

Autumn settled down, accepting the answer. She had no reason not to. Kyle didn’t lie to her.

Jennifer let out a sigh of relief and gratitude that Kyle refused. *We’ll pay for this later, Jenny. She’s going to find out.*

I know, but not today, okay?

Kyle nodded, tickling the baby under her chin. *Whatever you want.*

I want this prep to be over, Jennifer grumbled. I don’t want to be plucked.

Kyle snickered.

“That’ll be me in about four months.” Neil liked the feelings, but he was also scared. Parenthood was like lifetime tenure.

“You’ll be good at it, I bet.” Kyle meant it. “Right and wrong come easy to you.”

“Recognizing them, yes. Doing it, not as much.” Neil held out his arms. “Can I try?”

Kyle laughed at the wording. “I don’t mind if she doesn’t.”

Autumn didn’t. *Uncle Neil!*

Neil’s heart melted. He cradled her close and wondered if he and Samantha would have a daughter someday. According to Angela, they would only have four years. Neil stared at the cute baby, not seeing her. “I should ask Sam to marry me.”

Silence fell from those who heard. The men tensed because it added more pressure on them to propose to their mates, but the women also disapproved. They didn’t want Jennifer’s wedding upstaged and it hadn’t been long enough since Jeremy’s death for Samantha.

Neil felt the vibes, but the baby in his arms would be replaced with his sons in a short time and they would be born as bastards. That bothered Neil. He hadn’t even considered it before, but as he looked at little Autumn, he wanted his sons to have the protection of his name.

Neil handed the baby back to Kyle and left the tent.

“What was that all about?” Grant was still trying to place all the people with their dramas.

“Yet another happy couple will be displaying their love with a ceremony at some point in the near future.” Ray gestured toward the corner. “You can sit over there on the end. Leave the center for the boss.” Ray took Grant to the council table and turned to leave.

Grant didn’t protest. He let out a sad sigh and picked up a cup.

Ray stopped. “Don’t.”

“I’m all alone in a new place.” Grant’s tone was gruff. “How else should I feel?”

“This is so unfair.”

Grant sat the cup down. “I’m sorry I make you uncomfortable.”

People were stopping to listen and stare. Ray flushed. “That’s not it.”

Grant shrugged. “I know what I know. Switch me to a new camp guide. If you don’t, I’ll ask for it.”

Ray came back to the table and sat, hoping in vain the camp would ignore them. “You know why I’m upset. Why are you pushing me?”

Grant smiled. “Head on when cornered. I like that.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “I suspect you like anything that will let you put your hands on me.”

Grant nodded, leering. “Yep.”

Ray sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t want this.”

“Liar.”

“Fine. I’m not ready for this.”

“When does life wait for us to be ready?”

Ray grunted. “You’re giving me the full press and I don’t see what the rush is. You’re coming along.”

“Time you’re wasting if you believe that. Grief has its place, but our time is short, Ray. I want to spend it with you. Why is that a problem?”

“It isn’t, really.” Ray leaned on the table, sad again. “It just feels like it should be.”

“Because it’ll seem like you don’t care? That you were using him?”

“Yes.”

“Were you?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why do you care what they think?”

“Because my place here matters to me, you thickheaded prima donna!” Ray was finally angry. “My place means more than a quick roll in the—”

“It won’t be quick.” Grant wiggled his eyebrows.

Ray slapped the table. “I mean it!”

“You are an excitable little thing, aren’t you?”

Ray huffed. “Oh, go to hell.”

“Probably will, but not for telling you a hard truth.”

“What?!”

“He wasn’t worth the pain you’re putting yourself through. I’ve been waiting for you for

years. Don't waste our time because you care what some uptight pricks think."

Ray didn't know what to say.

Grant did, but he wasn't sure how well it would go over. He took a deep breath and placed his hand over Ray's. "I'd like to be your friend."

Murmurs and mutters went through the tent, but Ray missed them this time. He was tired of fighting. He'd only known the man for a short while, but he wanted him. Ray sighed. "Okay."

Grant paused, frowning. "Really?"

Ray nodded. "On one condition."

"Stop pushing so hard? Because I can do—"

"Tell me your name." Ray scowled. "We're holding hands and I don't even know who you are!"

2

"Room for one more?"

Silence fell in the camper as Angela entered. By the thick tension that settled in next, she guessed the females had been discussing her love life. She put a hand up. "What? You guys get the drama to yourselves? I've got baggage too."

Awkward chuckles came, forcing Angela to try harder. "Admit it. Without my mistakes to learn from, you'd be doing it too. Men make us stupider."

Snickers came this time, but Angela wanted more. "One look from those glowing eyes or one smile from those charming mouths and our hearts pound and our knees go weak. If they ever knew the

real effect they have on us, we'd never get anything done."

"We'd have a lot of kids, though." Samantha was in a corner chair, where Neil had placed her.

Angela chuckled with the others. "Herds of them." She regarded Jennifer, who had blushed. "How does it feel to know that in a few hours you're going to be a married woman?"

Jennifer grimaced. She ran into a stall to vomit.

Trinity pulled the stall door shut to give the girl privacy. "Ah, weddings. They bring up the best in all of us."

Laughter echoed again. Even Jennifer chuckled between gags. She didn't have anything to bring up. She hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday.

"Well, that's the problem." Tonya began digging in her kit. "I have snacks."

Angela settled onto a stool in the opposite corner and fought the urge to light a cigarette. Not everyone in here smoked and Jennifer wouldn't want to smell like it for her special day or her special night.

Jennifer came out of the stall and went to the sink to brush her teeth. She tolerated the shoulder pats and words of comfort because Angela was here. She needed the boss.

I'm all yours. Angela took a snack and acted like she wanted it as she tore it open. Like Jennifer, she didn't have much of an appetite.

The others tried to help me, but you know what I went through. ...and you've gone through it.

Some of it, Angela admitted, chewing sawdust with a smile. *The answer is yes, but it's hard.*

“How hard?”

Silence fell in the camper as the other women realized Jennifer was talking with someone.

Angela sighed. “I still fight myself every time.”

“And you enjoy it?”

“I do. More than I ever imagined I would, but the fear lingers. I tell myself it's only been a few months; I have to give it more time.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes. It gets easier, afterwards. I don't feel as guilty and I never feel dirty.”

“What about during?”

Angela grinned. “I don't know. He takes my breath away and we roll.”

“You don't...” Jennifer swallowed, aware of how intently the others were listening. “You don't have flashes of your past?”

Angela paled a bit. “I get them when I think about initiating a moment and sometimes when we first start. Once the hormones kick in, I only see and feel him.”

“How?” Jennifer demanded. “How do I do that?”

“Keep your eyes open.”

Jennifer's cheeks went scarlet. “You mean watch it all?”

Angela nodded along with the others. “No surprises that way, and flashes have a hard time getting through when your eyes are open.”

“I still don’t think I can do it.” Jennifer regarded Angela, thinking about what was to come. “I know it has to happen, but it’s awful.”

Angela nodded. Most of the women here, except Tonya and Sam, knew what was coming in a few hours. Angela regarded Tonya. “You did well on your first test, so you’re getting the second level. This time, you won’t be able to hide on the boat. You’ll have to keep your mouth and your mind shut. After her honeymoon, Jennifer will help you strengthen those things.”

Jennifer blushed. “I’ll help her now.”

Tonya laughed. “In a few days.”

The other women chuckled, but Jennifer stared at Angela. “I mean it. You may have to switch me out.”

“Noted.” Angela shifted, searching for a better spot on the small stool. “I’m sorry.”

Jennifer sighed. “Me too. I still agree with the choice for the result. I just can’t carry it out.”

“That’s what I have your husband for.”

Jennifer’s immediate displeasure sent a cold chill through the tent.

“Worry over it later.”

“What should I worry about right now?”

“An escape clause. If you decide not to get married, all you have to do is tell one of the Eagles on duty and we’ll handle it. I’ll tell people I withdrew my approval because you sexually assaulted your fiancé.”

Jennifer burst out laughing. “That’s mean.”

“You could try a code word.” Tracy brought the conversation back to where they’d left off. “When you have a flash, say the code word and he can do something different or at least calm you down.”

“Maybe.” Jennifer’s cheeks went red again.

Angela kept her shield up so Jennifer didn’t feel her connect Kyle to the conversation. He and Jennifer deserved happiness. That could only come if he knew how to handle the scars that Cesar had left.

“You could just tell him what he can and can’t do.” Samantha’s tone was dry. “If you’re in control, you’ll be too occupied to have flashes and he won’t argue, I promise.”

Jennifer chuckled a little. “No, he doesn’t want more of that.”

Yes, I do! Kyle protested in Angela’s mind.

Angela snickered. *Shhh.*

“He won’t mind after you’re married.” As an Eagle, Monica had witnessed several of the ambushes while on duty. “He has to feel guilty right now when you do that to him.”

“*For* him.” Jennifer smiled. “I like it when he’s...pleased.”

“That’s good. He wants the same feeling from making you happy.”

“So did Cesar.”

“No.” Angela wasn’t going to let that pass. “Cesar wanted you submissive. He liked forcing your body to overrule your mind. Kyle wants what you want.”

“I doubt that.” Jennifer couldn’t stop the mutter. “He loves Autumn, but he doesn’t long for a child to fill the emptiness.”

Hearts broke. Tonya came over to hug the girl, almost crying.

She’s wrong there, too, Kyle told Angela. It bothered him to witness Jennifer’s unhappiness and not be able to do anything about it. *I want half a dozen with her. Maybe more if we like being parents and I think we will.*

Why haven’t you told her that?

Because I want to wait a while and enjoy what we have now before we add to it. She wants it right away. We made a deal.

“Deals were made to be revised. Promising a child and delivering it are easy, but that won’t fill the hole.”

Jennifer thought Angela was scanning her. She nodded. “Deep down, I know it won’t work, but this pain!”

Angela sent a blast of comfort that banished the pain to a dim corner. It wouldn’t last long, but she couldn’t take Jennifer’s agony. It was bringing up her own. “You’ll talk to him about it.”

Jennifer sighed. “I’ll tell him he doesn’t have to honor the deal; that’s unfair. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not upset with you. I hurt for you.” Angela stood up, stretching. “So I’m going to tell you something and let you shout. Ready?”

Jennifer paled. “You didn’t.”

“I did. He heard most of this. He’s listening and hoping I don’t tell you how he responded.”

Jennifer braced. “He doesn’t want any more kids, right?”

Angela chuckled. “Man are you two gonna be great together.” She replayed Kyle’s words for the worried girl.

I want half a dozen with her. Maybe more if we like being parents and I think we will.

Why haven’t you told her that?

Because I want to wait a while and enjoy what we have now before we add to it.

“That is so sweet!” Samantha beamed. “He’s a good one.”

“Yes, he is.” Angela held up a hand before Jennifer could speak. “But he’ll give in the first time you let him make you cum, so as your alpha, I forbid you to get pregnant until you’ve been married for at least six months. It’s not to reward him or to punish you. It’s because your body isn’t a factory made to pop out a child anytime you want one. Spend the next six months getting ready for it. More iron, more protein. We’ll help you and any of the others who want to *plan* a healthy pregnancy. Those who don’t may be punished.” Angela looked around to include everyone. “It’s dangerous for the women and the kids. I haven’t decided yet, but we’ll probably go over it at the next mandatory meeting.”

“Um...you may have to decide sooner.” Tracy was in the far corner of the camper, unpacking Jennifer’s clothes for the wedding. She stood up,

turning. “I didn’t know you were going to make rules like that. Neither did Charlie.”

No one spoke or moved. Except for Jennifer, they were stunned.

Tracy studied Angela, not witnessing any reaction at all. *That can’t be good.*

Angela was fighting her demons. She’d told herself to expect it as soon as she found out they’d taken their relationship to a physical level. They needed children and underage sex wasn’t new to the world or to Safe Haven. But...

Fury filled the camper in a thick wave that warned the occupants not to draw attention or think bad thoughts.

Tracy cringed. She didn’t speak, though. There was nothing she could say. She was pregnant by a fifteen-year-old. It was wrong.

Angela sucked in her rage and left the camper. “We have a wedding in two hours, ladies.” She slammed the door.

Everyone who saw her assumed Angela was angry over the wedding. To erase that impression, she waved at Kyle and gave him a thumbs up, smoothing her expression.

He frowned, but the camp relaxed. There was going to be a wedding.

Snap! A bright flash blinded Angela.

“Sorry!” Shawn walked on, laughing. He was capturing shots of the camp and the preparations to create a photo album of the wedding. Angela had also asked him to start a book for Safe Haven.

Neil pushed Kyle back into the mess to finish his preparations. The trooper gave Angela a lifted brow that she shook her head to. Neil knew she was upset. He wanted to know if it was because of something Samantha had said or done.

Neil narrowed it from that. He doubted Tonya would have done it. The redhead wasn't a problem anymore. That only left a few women. Of those, Neil's money was on Tracy. The former camp relief source was sleeping with the boss's son. Charlie wasn't in camp and he wasn't on the seating chart for the wedding, so he wasn't expected soon. Something was happening with that couple and Angela wasn't happy about it.

No, I'm not. Angela headed to her tent to get changed for the ceremony. *But it's too late to kill her now. They made a choice and they'll be held to it like any other couple in my camp.*

But...? her witch questioned.

But there has to be payment for it or the males here will assume it's okay if the girl is willing. We can't let that go or we'll have twelve-year-olds coming up pregnant.

Yes. The men are watching now and so are the women. Young Cody already has takers if Marcus will allow it.

Angela's rage was almost uncontrollable. *He's a little boy!*

Who will be in leadership, has gifts, and is young enough to train. Safe Haven has cougars.

Angela settled onto her air mattress and let her mind work the problem. *I'm putting a stop to this. Help me find the best way?*

The witch sank in obediently, eager to aid her host. Angela rarely asked anything of her demon now. She didn't need to. She could do it herself. No one knew except her witch, who was feeling left out.

Angela brought her demon in close. *I may already have an idea. Come fly with me while I look.*

The witch's pleasure was potent. It rushed over Angela in thick ripples.

The females flew off into the future, hand-in-hand.

Marc stayed by the flap to provide protection, assuming Angela needed a quick nap before the wedding. They weren't connected right now. She had a wall up again and he couldn't get through it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Husband And Wife

1

“Deearly beloved...we are gathered here today, without a bride or groom.”

Candy snatched the microphone, glad it wasn't on yet. “Stop that!”

“It was funny, right?” Conner grinned, but made sure he didn't stare at her too long or put off the wrong vibes. Angela hadn't come to see him over breaking the rules yet, so he was walking the line.

Candy snickered, nodding. “No. Hand me those flowers.” She wasn't thinking about Angela's displeasure. She was enjoying the job they were laboring on together. It was almost finished.

Conner handed her the final bunch of daisies the camp had helped collect. Some were real and some were plastic, but the colors they'd chosen made them look new and perfect. All it had taken was a cleaning and Candy's eye for matching hues.

Conner swept the tent, proud of what they'd been able to put together from the mix-n-match selection of furniture and decorations. “I never thought we'd have trouble finding lace after an apocalypse.”

Candy tied the flowers into place on the makeshift altar that Ozzie had nailed together using Theo's design. "Or curtains."

"Especially those thin panels." Conner pointed. "They aren't good for anything. Can't even use them to start fires because they won't burn."

Candy pointed to their work box. "We're finished. Store that and I'll go get the boss to approve it."

"This looks good."

"I think so too." Candy slowed, needing to let him know. "I, uh... I had a moment with Angela yesterday. I would have mentioned it last night, but we ran out of time."

Conner held himself in place as people walked by the flap. "Okay. What kind of moment?"

Candy blushed. "I kinda, sorta told her I was going to spend time with you whenever I wanted to. I told her to butt out."

Conner's heart skipped a beat as he read the memory. "Wow." He struggled to react within the rules, locking his hands around the box. "Okay." Conner stepped by.

Candy frowned, hurrying to catch up. "Hey!"

Conner kept walking, hands tight around the box.

Candy broke into a jog. "Did you hear me?"

Conner stopped, head down. "Loud and clear."

"You don't seem happy."

"Can I get back to you on that?" he asked politely, studying his shoes.

Angered, Candy stepped aside. “At your leisure, kid.”

Conner went to put the box away.

Candy stared after him, hurt. *Guess he didn't like it as much as I did.* “Okay, then.”

She forced her feet to go to the council tent. Candy tapped. “It's ready.”

“Be right there!” Marc called.

“Like hell!” Angela's voice echoed. “Where's the rest of it?”

Marc chuckled. “That's it. You're ready.”

“You're kidding, right?” Angela's voice came through the flap, louder. “I'm *not* going out like this.”

“Please?”

Marc begging told Candy she'd chosen the right outfit.

“Give me a coat. And a robe. And maybe a blanket.”

“It's only for a little while.”

“It's windy out there, Marc!”

Candy tapped again, helping things along. “I need approval. Come on. The pregnant lady wants to sit down.”

“Aw, man. That is so not right.” Angela eased toward the flap. “Straight there and back. I'll wear the other one. It has more material.”

Marc held the flap open without promising anything. If he found a private moment, the other dress would be dropped into a trash pile. The

formfitting blue thing Angela had on was a perfect match for her coloring and build.

Angela emerged into the light and tried to march toward the wedding tent. The short hem and high heeled black boots immediately tripped her.

Marc caught her by the arm, chuckling. He was wise enough not to comment or offer helpful hints. She didn't need to know how to walk in that outfit. All she had to do was wear it and he was happy.

Angela growled at him. "Stop it!"

Marc snickered. "Yes, Angie."

The camp around them had been full of noise and movement when Angela staggered from their tent. It all stopped now. Hammers paused. Gossip halted. Boxes slid to the ground. Even the wind settled in surprise.

Angela tugged on the hem of the dress. "I hate you all." She hurried into the wedding tent and stopped.

"Oh, wow."

Marc nodded, enjoying her wiggling rear as she tried to find more hem. "Yeah." He smiled as he headed back to their tent to get changed.

Angela was impressed. The party tent had changed shape. Theo's crew had placed it in a square this time, providing room for two, ten-deep rows of mess benches and a narrow altar in front. The dented furniture was surrounded by lacy white and tan panels that turned the tent into a swaying canopy of sparkles. Bows and ribbons dangled from benches, tent poles, lanterns, and the altar, each

twined around wilting wildflowers and plastic bouquets. It was beautiful. Candy had even placed a long red rug in the center for the couple to walk on, as well as a record player in the corner.

Angela glanced over her shoulder, beaming at Candy. “You two have done great.”

Candy nodded, not enjoying the praise as much after Conner’s rejection.

Angela carefully turned back toward her tent. “But it doesn’t excuse you doing this to me.”

Candy snorted. “Have you seen your ass in that? I’d kill for it.”

Angela laughed, unable to stay mad. “I’m going to change and then I’ll be around to help with whatever you have left.”

Candy shook her head, ignoring Conner as he joined them. “Sorry, no time for changing. We need you in the mess. You’re escorting Kyle to show your approval of their union, remember?”

“But we have an hour!”

“No, we have twenty-two minutes. You lost time whining about the dress while Marc drooled over you.”

“But... Marc isn’t dressed! I’ll go help him.”

Candy took Angela’s arm and steered her toward the mess. “He’s two minutes behind us. Keep walking. Kyle needs to be calmed down and seeing you in a dress will do that for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, while he and the rest of my team tease me.” Angela tried to cross her arms over her

exposed cleavage and couldn't because of how tight the dress was.

“Exactly. Cowboy up.”

“In this dress? Not likely.”

2

Marc came out of their tent, straightening his tie. It was a simple clip-on, but he was still trying to get it straight when Neil came from the medical camper.

“Is this thing straight?” Marc leaned toward the trooper. “Fix me, will you?”

Neil stared. “You’re hot!”

Marc flushed. “So are you, but we should keep our relationship professional, you know? Angie may not approve.”

Neil laughed. “She hasn’t seen you yet.”

“How do you know?”

Neil started straightening the tie. “Because you’re standing out here and I don’t hear her moaning your name like last night. And the night before that. And so on.”

Marc grinned. “That good?”

“Hell, *I* may propose.”

Marc held still while Neil worked. “I think the hens are on watch for all the roosters to pop the question. These will be the first legally recorded marriages of the new world. Everyone wants to be in our history books.”

“That’s not a good reason to get married.”

“Nope and the Eagles know it. The marriages that happen here will be ones who really want it. Angela won’t approve the others.”

Neil glanced toward the tent, where hundreds of shadows were eating and chatting happily. “There’s trouble coming, soon. Samantha’s been dreaming a lot more. She keeps saying we need the kids, to watch out for the kids.”

Marc sighed as Neil retreated with his tie straightened. “Angie too. Kyle said Jenny has had bad dreams. Why aren’t they telling us?”

“I think it’s because we won’t react the way she needs us to.” Neil stayed with Marc, also in a tux. “That’s why I haven’t called Samantha on it yet.”

“And if you’re wrong? If they don’t know they’re receiving the visions?”

Neil made a derisive noise. “Angela? Not know?”

Marc shrugged. “A guy can hope, right?”

Neil shook his head. “Not this time. Problems are coming again and we’re out of the loop.”

3

“Is she ready?” Kyle grabbed Angela’s wrist, not even noticing the dress as she joined them. “Did she call it off? She can do that. I won’t hurt her!”

Angela sent a calming bolt of light into the man, chuckling. She drew lightly in return. “Let me take some of that.”

Kyle took in a deep breath as the panic faded. “She’s fine. I’m fine. Autumn’s fine.” He looked down. “Hey! You’re wearing a dress!”

Angela laughed as she patted his hand, then pried it from her wrist. “It’s all fine. Let’s go stand by the altar and wait for your bride. She’ll freak out too if she doesn’t see you when she comes in.”

Kyle hurried to get in place, leaving Angela there.

Angela laughed with the others who’d noticed. Kyle’s nerves were heartwarming.

“Hiya, baby-cakes.”

Angela turned around at Marc’s tone... Need seared her skin, reminding her it had been hours since he’d last made her moan and groan.

Marc snickered as he joined her. She was staring at him with her lips parted and a wicked blush coming across her cheeks. “Good?”

Angela kissed him.

People cheered and shouted encouragement.

She slowly broke the kiss and retreated.

Marc blinked. “Uh... Okay?”

Angela grinned. “Help me to my spot?”

Marc took her extended arm, instantly worried. “Are you hurt?”

“No! It’s this damn dress! I can’t take two steps without tripping.”

“Everyone in their place, please!” Candy entered the tent, Conner behind her, and began nudging people not-so-gently into their spots. With two hundred guests, the planners had a lot to do.

“We’re starting now. Hush up!”

The tent quieted, with some people frowning at the woman and others tolerating it. After being such a wreck in the mountain, it was nice to witness Candy living day-to-day with the rest of them instead of blocking it out to embrace her madness. Many people still believed mountain sickness had hit her.

Conner knew better, though he would never tell anyone. Candy had flipped out about losing Lee and being a single mother. They’d been busy, so it hadn’t been intentional, but leadership had still made a mistake. Candy had been left alone too long. It was almost ironic that they’d both been lonely and searching for a friend even before then.

Angela gave Conner a subtle nod and then found something else to look at.

She knew. Conner’s mouth fell open in shock as he finally added up all the clues. *She put us together!*

Walking by to get in place before Candy dragged her there, Pam bumped into the boy and knocked him down. *Think about something else!* “Sorry, kid.” Pam laughed, helping Conner to his feet. “My mind was on other things.” *Like yours should be!*

Conner rubbed his shoulder, grateful and resentful. “No problem.”

Pam pointed at the corner, where several camp kids were poking at the wedding cake so they could

suck icing from their fingers. “Eagle duty over the food.”

Conner went, forcing his thoughts to avoid the discovery. As he went, he scanned the tent to see if anyone else had caught it.

Every descendant there gave him a nod or met his eye for a look of contempt, scorn, or gloating.

Conner sighed. *I haven't adjusted to being around so many of my own kind. I'll work on it.*

The hostility eased, though it didn't vanish. Senior people weren't happy a Mitchel was still in camp, let alone being given permission to chase the pregnant widow of a beloved Eagle. If not for trusting their boss, it would have already been stopped.

There was also resentment that the kid had been chosen over them, but most of those males didn't want the responsibility for someone else's child, even Lee's. Angela had looked into the future to see who never hurt the baby through jealousy or inattention, and been shocked by the answer, but she hadn't doubted it once she saw them together. Conner cared about Candy and he wouldn't be much older than her children, so they would be able to relate. All she had to do was make certain Adrian's son ended up nothing like his father.

Angela watched Conner point out the approved snacks and explain that the cake was Jennifer's, that she would be mad if they touched it before she had a slice.

The kids flinched as if he'd slapped them, moving for the allowed items.

Angela approved. Conner had a great chance to be different. He loved kids and Safe Haven had a lot of orphans. The woman he wanted also loved kids, though she would be sterner than Conner. They might be one of a dozen couples in camp who were perfectly matched.

Neil and Samantha entered the tent, slowly and embarrassed at the attention.

Angela sighed. Jeremy would never be replaced in Samantha's heart. She and Neil would be happy, but there would always be a wall between them with Jeremy's epitaph. Their match was no longer balanced. People in camp viewed it the opposite, but they didn't understand. People weren't all made to have a single partner. Some were meant to share themselves, while others weren't meant to love or breed at all. Fate made those choices and going against it only brought pain.

"Here we go!" Candy's squeal echoed, bringing fresh silence to the tent and tension. Kyle was stressing again.

Tiring of it, Angela pinned him with a dark glare. *If you're hiding something that's making you twitch this way, tell me now.*

Kyle flushed, aware of a dozen descendants listening. *You know what my problem is! She's a child. It'll be rape!*

Music began playing the Traditional Wedding March.

You're going to force her?

Kyle's lips curled. *I'm going to make her cum three times and go to sleep. That's not the point!*

Angela chuckled. "Wedding jitters. Never knew they were this bad."

Marc laughed, stomach on fire. He was picking up Kyle's nerves.

Angela flashed a bright smile at the woman in the tent flap. "She's beautiful."

Kyle forgot how to breathe. The wedding gown was simple and nice, but the female wearing it was breathtaking. With long, dark curls and eyes that promised the space between them was about to be removed, she was all he'd ever wanted.

Distracted, Marc stored Angela's reaction to his stomachache and turned to view the bride like she wanted.

Jennifer felt alone, standing before her friends, rivals, and acquaintances. The frilly satin dress was uncomfortable, and her stomach was boiling. *I hope I don't get sick.*

Thumbs in your fists, Angela reminded. She nodded to Marc.

Marc walked the long row and took his place next to Jennifer. "May I have this honor?"

Jennifer blushed at Marc's warm tone. "Yes. And stop that. He'll get jealous."

Marc leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Good. If he's jealous, he won't puke. His stomach is upset too."

Jennifer gave Marc an awkward hug. "Thanks."

Marc patted her shoulder. “You sure, kid? Marriage is forever.”

Jennifer retreated, smiling. “I’m almost a real person again because of him. He’ll get me through the rest of it.”

“You can have that without marriage, you know.” Marc felt like she needed to hear it again.

“Not an option for either of us.” Jennifer straightened her skirt. “We both need this commitment to our future with Safe Haven.”

“And because you want to spend the rest of your lives together, right? Happy and in love?”

“We already have happy and in love.” She took his arm as the song restarted. “As for the rest of our lives, that’s why we’re not waiting. Everyone knows time is short. We want to die as husband and wife.”

Marc mourned for them all as he began to walk Jennifer down the aisle.

Angela brought up her emotional barrier and screamed at the unfairness of it all.

Kyle was calmed by it. He’d been worried over that, though her age was still the loudest alarm in his head. The short future they had together was the reason he felt like he couldn’t wait any longer. He wanted to be married during that time and live a small chunk of the life they would have had together if not for the final battle they’d been drafted into.

That’s what happened, Marc realized. We’ve been drafted. We thought we escaped it, but we were being saved for a different army, for a different war.

Angela sighed. *Now, he gets it.*

Morgan came to the flap.

Angela tensed. *How long?*

Two hours, roughly. Morgan went back to his rounds.

Marc and everyone else looked at Angela.

Angela motioned toward the Captain. "Let's roll."

Grant began speaking, but the good mood was broken. They had trouble coming again.

Not wanting the wedding to be ruined, Angela brought up her shield over the camp and gave an annoyed look. "We're taking time for this because we've earned it. We are going to witness the union of these two people, wish them well at a reception, and escort them to their room. Then we'll roll in camp and get ready for the next punch like we always do." She pointed at the groom. "You have vows. Let's hear them."

People were relieved to have the shield up, but most of them were also moved by the reminder that they were still here, against all odds. They couldn't stop living every time a threat came.

Kyle fumbled for a paper and then snorted. He didn't need it. "I want you to feel..."

Angela tuned it out to travel with Morgan as he scanned, trying to narrow down when the problem would arrive. The hardest part right now was waiting.

Angela withdrew and returned to the wedding in time for the kiss.

Bright blue light shot through the tent and slammed into the walls, shattering in vivid sparks that rained over the guests.

Lips barely touching, Jennifer and Kyle didn't notice.

Angela clapped, delighted. "The soulmate connection!"

The descendants in the room who had been considering proposing now paused in those plans, wondering what would happen if their kiss didn't draw sparks.

That'll slow things down. Angela clapped with everyone else as the couple rotated to face the camp.

Conner cleared his throat. "May I present...Mr. and Mrs. Genovese."

Jennifer and Kyle walked the aisle together, laughing and ducking rice that Candy had claimed from her future portions of the camp supplies.

Candy glanced at Angela. *I'll skip the meals for a while when we have rice dishes. I don't mind using my share for this.*

Yeah, we're not doing that, Angela sent with a frown. *You get double portions of the main food groups at every meal and you eat them. Hear me?*

Candy nodded, dropping her head. It was nice to have someone who cared if she was healthy.

Angela nodded at Conner.

Conner touched Candy's arm. "We have a reception to handle."

Candy frowned. She was still stinging from his rejection.

Conner leaned in, voice a whisper. “You misunderstood. I’m sorry.” He ignored the people watching them as he took her arm and escorted her toward the reception area. *I almost kissed you. I had to walk away.*

Candy followed him, mood lifting. *I wonder what would have happened...*

Conner stole a quick look at her and decided not to do it. *This is Jennifer’s day. Let’s save our drama for the ship.*

Candy laughed. “It’s a date.”

“Throw the bouquet! Throw the bouquet!”

Jennifer glanced at Neil.

Neil gave her a subtle nod.

Jennifer tossed the bouquet toward the cluster of unmarried women gathered near the altar, using a light touch so it would stay in the air for a few seconds.

Women scrambled forward...

Samantha nudged Angela’s elbow, acting like she’d been shoved by the crowd. It forced the boss to turn around with a hand up.

Angela caught the bouquet.

The camp cheered as she stared at it in confusion. “What just happened?”

Marc snickered.

Angela looked at him with anger growing.

Marc burst out laughing. “Wasn’t me, but I approve.”

Angela blushed as she realized the council had set her up. Unable to stay mad when they were

laughing, she shrugged and tucked it under her arm. “I might be willing to negotiate a settlement.”

More people laughed and cheered, calling encouragement to Marc.

Marc kissed her cheek and went to help get the reception ready like she wanted.

Angela surveyed the crowd that was now helping move the benches back to the tables of food that were set up along one side of the tent. Kids eagerly hopped onto the uncomfortable seats, ready for cake. *We’re not taking those. We’ll have chairs on the island or we’ll sit on the ground.*

Adults joined the kids, laughing and chatting.

Kyle and Jennifer took their place by the beautiful creations that Brittani had labored on for the last few hours. She’d had help from several camp women and from Neil, who had delivered a box of sugar he’d liberated from one of the supply trucks. Brittani had put together a pastel double layer cake that was 3’ x 2’. She’d used extra batter to make a hundred cupcakes.

Shawn and Missy came through, making people chuckle. They were both wearing red valet uniforms, carrying a video recorder, and had a camera on straps around their necks. With black boots, full tool belts, and white pirate hats with blue feathers, they stood out.

Shawn shrugged at the surprised, curious looks. “She likes to dress up.”

“Looks good on you!” Pam called, clapping as Kyle and Jennifer picked up the knife and cut the first slice.

Shawn captured it, as did Missy. The little girl kept her hip pressed against Shawn’s. She wasn’t comfortable around so many people who didn’t like her.

Kyle held Jennifer’s arm while she settled onto the bench, then sat next to her, being careful not to ruin her dress. He was more interested in the woman wearing it, but he was aware that females liked to keep these items for sentimental reasons.

“I’ll pass it to Autumn.” Jennifer twined her hand around his, feeling tension thrum through his hot skin. He had himself under tight control.

“Time for the toast.” Candy motioned to Neil.

The tent went mostly quiet as Neil stood up with a glass of the champagne that he’d personally found for this moment. “I’d like to say two things.” Neil lifted his glass. “To Kyle, for retaining his honor.”

Everyone clapped or cheered. Many of the males didn’t know why he hadn’t already consummated once Jennifer started ambushing him, but at this moment, they finally got it. Honor was more important than sex.

“And here’s to Jennifer. May she keep looking after Kyle for decades to come.”

Another loud cheer echoed through the tent.

Angela and Jennifer understood Neil’s toast better than the others. He was defying the future by saying the new couple wouldn’t be limited to just

four years. Angela and Jennifer took healthy drinks, approving.

Kyle sipped and hoped it wasn't noticed. His guts were still churning. It was almost ruining these moments. He'd never been this nervous. If he was wrong about the things they'd never actually discussed, this would be a disaster for both of them.

Unable to take his stress, Jennifer slid her knee along his leg.

Kyle tensed, looking over at her.

Jennifer used her loose hair to hide a leer.

Kyle grinned, able to breathe again. "I love you."

Jennifer leaned forward so he could kiss her.

Kyle moved in for a chaste kiss and gasped against her mouth as she licked his lip.

People laughed, but Jennifer didn't. She slid that knee along his leg again, making his grip on the glass tighten until she thought it might break.

"I have a toast."

Silence fell as Angela lifted the glass she'd been given as Candy and Conner equipped everyone. This was the last marriage on American soil. She felt the need to say something to mark the occasion. "I wish you both happiness and peace. Just don't henpeck our top Eagle, okay? Let him drive while you ride."

Laughter spewed across the tent, causing messes and more good vibes.

"Anyone else?" Candy had her clipboard in hand.

“I’ll go.” Marc stood up, grinning. “Kyle, none of us thought you’d hold out. It goes to show the steel spine of an Eagle is harder than a rod of iron in his pants.”

Cheers and laughter met Marc’s toast.

“Are we ready for the garter belt?” Conner whispered from Candy’s elbow.

She leaned over. “Not yet. We have to get the bachelors drunk enough to participate.”

Conner snickered and went to serve more refills, targeting the unmarried men.

Candy motioned Quinn to start the music.

Soft tones floated through the tent.

Candy nodded at Kyle.

Kyle took Jennifer’s arm and slowly led her to the center of the tent for their first dance together as husband and wife.

Couples gathered around them, while single men and women stayed at the reception tables to enjoy the treats.

Candy went around refilling their drinks. “I want all unmarried men in the far corner after this dance.” She flashed a hard glare. “Don’t make me come and get you.”

Most of them nodded or told her they’d be there, but the rest held still, not wanting to be labeled as the next man who might tie the knot.

Jennifer let Kyle hold her close without tormenting him further. She knew what was coming next and was saving her fun for that moment.

Kyle groaned. “You’re so mean.” He nuzzled her cheek, almost losing control. “I like that.”

Jennifer giggled.

He twirled her around to keep from kissing her like he wanted to as people clapped and began to join them for the dance.

Jennifer tried not to trip, enjoying herself. Angela had gone all out. She was touched.

“Would you like to dance?”

Brittani flushed at Daryl’s warm tone. She wanted to, but she didn’t want to hurt Gus. He was chatting with Eagles and camp members on the opposite side of the tent, avoiding even looking at her. His new woman, Trinity, was next to him and appeared happy.

Daryl walked away.

Brittani scowled, following him. “Where are you going?”

“To ask someone who isn’t hung up on their ex.” Daryl had no patience for drama or games.

Brittani stopped, instantly angry. “It’s called compassion. You should try it sometime.”

Daryl kept walking.

Angela joined Brittani, putting an arm around the woman’s tense shoulders. “Care for some advice?”

Brittani nodded. “You know him better than I do.”

Angela whispered in her ear. *You just embarrassed him. You also hurt his feelings by saying no.*

Brittani grinned. “I never would have guessed. He hides it well.”

“He’s loyal and a bit shy, even for supplying the camp women.”

Brittani’s amusement faded. Jealousy took its place. “Hey, Daryl.” Her loud call drew attention, making her cheeks turn red.

Daryl lifted his chin as he spun around, expecting the worst. “What?”

“You want to dance?”

Daryl grinned at the public claim. “It would be my honor.”

The couple met in the middle and slid together with smiles and heat.

Angela scanned the tent, looking for other problems to help with. She wanted this moment to be as peaceful as possible. It might be a while before they got another opportunity to do this.

People clapped and cheered as Daryl and Kyle spun their ladies in tandem and dipped them.

Kyle kissed Jennifer’s cheek and brought her up as the music ended.

Daryl took the liberty of a real kiss, feeling Brittani hold herself in place when she wanted to kiss him back.

“Time for the garter!” Candy called with cheer. “Bring the men!”

Kyle froze as chills went over him. *Touch her leg? Her bare leg? Here?* Kyle locked down on his control and looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer ignored his concern and took her place on the high stool as the camp cheered.

Kyle went where Neil nudged him, fighting demons. He'd never even seen Jennifer's bare leg, let alone touched it.

Sexual tension flared as Kyle knelt and Candy yanked up Jennifer's dress.

Jennifer arched a bit to give a good show, not worried about leers on her exposed skin. She was having too much fun tormenting Kyle to be scared.

A muscle twitched in Kyle's jaw as he reached for the lacy blue garter, hands trembling.

Jennifer slid her thigh into his grip, swallowing a groan as their skin met.

Kyle looked up at her as he slid the garter down, fire flying along his nerves.

Jennifer blushed at the heat in his gaze, deciding not to tempt him further.

Kyle felt her reaction and pressed his control. He kissed her thigh as he slid the garter off the rest of the way.

Jennifer went a furious red.

Kyle grinned at her and stood, holding it up. He let out a yell of victory that brought fresh laughter from the witnesses.

Behind them, Candy and Conner were dragging drunken, laughing unmarried men into the far corner.

Candy gave Kyle a quick look.

Kyle got ready to flip the garter into the air toward the cluster of men. He aimed just as

carefully as he would have with his gun. Then he turned around and let go.

The garter flew through the tent.

Marc caught it out of reflex, like Angie had with the bouquet. He laughed as he realized Kyle had targeted him. "I'm game if she is."

Everyone laughed, including Angela.

"Let's have some more dancing." Candy didn't want it to be over yet.

The music restarted as more couples moved to the dance area.

Shawn and Missy caught it all on their recorders and cameras. Flashes blinked through the tent.

Missy got a closeup of the garter in Marc's hand and rotated to get everyone's reaction. She spotted a few glares through the lens, aimed at her, and lowered the camera, feeling uncomfortable.

Angela joined them, placing a hand on Missy's arm.

Missy sighed in pleasure at the calming effect. *The alpha loves me. That's good enough.*

Angela knelt to help Missy store her recorder. "What happened with Leeann? I thought you two were getting close."

Missy tensed. *Don't think about it!*

Angela snapped Missy's large purse shut and straightened her dress with gentle hands, waiting.

Missy looked over at Leeann, but the older girl was edging toward the flap and hadn't noticed. *Not now!*

Angela stood up and turned with a surprised frown. *Stop right there.*

Leeann slowly rotated, little face covered in guilt.

Angela figured it out without her gifts. *You miss Billy. No one talks about him now and you need that. So you're going to find him and bring him back.*

Leeann began to cry.

Angela nudged Missy toward her. "Punishment for both of you. Go stand watch with Morgan."

People who heard her studied the girls but didn't ask what had happened. Camp members assumed it was whatever little girls usually got in trouble for and let it go. The Eagles and descendants believed she was sending Morgan help with gifts to watch for the coming trouble.

Angela didn't tell anyone otherwise or think of anything. Only Pam had been near enough to catch it through this din of laughs and thoughts, and she wouldn't mention it because the boss hadn't.

Angela made a note to handle the girls when there was time and went back to watching Kyle and Jennifer as they fed each other cake without the cruelty of smashing it in each other's faces. Kyle was red and sweating, while Jennifer was beaming and laughing with those around them. It was nice.

"Yeah! Cupcakes!"

The kids overwhelmed the din with their happiness, sending good vibes through the drafty flaps and out into the afternoon air.

Eagles on duty soaked it up, knowing they would get to enjoy downtime too when the shifts changed. The men on duty didn't know when that would be. Their schedule had given a start time but not an ending. They had compared and reached the same conclusion. If Angela had them all on high alert this way, death was stopping by again.

Morgan was glad Angela had brought up her shield, but it made it hard to look through and judge arrival time. He assumed she had that covered, based on her scattered thoughts. It was hard to read her while she was griping mentally about all the stares and comments. He wasn't sure how Candy had tricked her into wearing a dress like that, but he was glad.

“Where do you want us?” Leeann stopped in front of Morgan, a bit intimidated. He was strong, like Angela.

Missy frowned up at the tall man, not the least bit afraid. “We're bad girls. You have to punish us.”

Morgan pivoted to glare at the wedding tent. *I don't know how to punish kids! And...they're girls!*

Angela's mirth came back in mental waves that told Morgan no mercy was coming.

Missy stomped on his foot to get his attention. “Hey!”

Morgan howled at the unexpected pain, staggering. “Damn it!”

Missy scowled at him. “Watch your mouth around us innocent kids!”

Morgan gawked. “What demon spawned you?”

Leeann stomped on his other foot. “Don’t be mean to my friend!”

The Eagles on duty were falling over laughing, unable to keep from it as Morgan limped and moaned, cursing both children between noises of misery.

None of the guards saw the cloud of dust on the eastern horizon.

Angela felt it. She left the wedding tent.

Her fighters followed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Sent To Observe

1

“Can you believe that dress!”

“I know!” Shawn shared a laugh with Quinn as he lifted and aimed, determined to capture the day for the camp to enjoy later. Having all their leaders in dresses and tuxedos was a first for Safe Haven. Shawn paused as something dark and brown caught his eye through the camera lens. “That can’t be good.”

Shawn was still filming as he came out of the tent behind the line of fighters, though the battery was dying. The light was blinking at him in a reminder that he was almost out of time. *Like this camp.*

Missy and Leeann ran to him.

Shawn gazed down at the scared girls who were scanning the coming people. He didn’t need gifts to know it was bad. Shawn followed his training. He put the camera in his kit and motioned the girls back into the tent. “Keep it to yourself as much as you can. When people find out, try to keep them calm.”

Given something to do, the girls pushed through the legs coming from the wedding tent.

Shawn turned to scan for other kids. Whatever was coming might be messy. Angela would be upset if they lost a child in the chaos.

Shawn saw half a dozen boys by the water who were enjoying being unsupervised, two of whom were approaching the alligators on the beach. Even after William and his group killing half a dozen, the same number was sunning themselves along the shore today. They didn't go into the water, but they weren't afraid of it either. The morning arrivals often lumbered through the surf to reach their favorite sunning spots.

Shawn hurried to collect the children. "Get away from the child-eating reptiles!"

Marc chuckled at the wording, going to help when the kids took off running. He and Shawn cornered the playful children in the surf and swept them up over tense shoulders.

The kids saw the dust cloud. Amusement fled, replaced by the grave faces they usually wore. They wriggled to their feet and waited for orders. Marc hated it being this way. He pointed toward the mess. "There's still a few cupcakes."

The boys took off running, eager for a little more fun before the ugliness hit them again.

Wish I could flip it on and off that easy. Marc went to Angela.

"Boss?" Daryl came jogging through the growing crowd. "We need you at the front gate."

Angela widened the shield to include the boat as she staggered toward the gate with the council. Even Samantha came, helped by Neil and Brittani.

“Is it a dust storm?”

“Someone’s coming.”

“There are three vehicles, moving fast.” Greg peered through his glasses. “There’s a little boy driving that middle truck. No idea how he can see over the dash. Can’t be more than five.”

Greg looked at her. “This isn’t Jeff’s group. These kids aren’t coming from the west.”

“I know. That’s a different trap.” Angela went by the gate guards, stopping when she reached the edge of the shield where it met the concrete of the road. She waited with her council and their protection, a small army of twenty-two that continued to grow as the bad vibes drew more people.

“I’ve made my choice on this one.” Angela’s tone was icy. “Any other way sinks us.”

Everyone frowned or grumbled, but they would agree to whatever it was. Angela didn’t bluff. She didn’t need to.

“Those are police cars!” Samantha limped closer to the shield, trying to see more clearly through the colorful blur of emotions now slamming into the barrier. Fear of rejection was the clearest, but anger and jealousy were there too. Whoever it was, they had no control. The thoughts were childish... Samantha leaned against Neil,

staring at Angela. Tears came to her eyes as she read the misery under all that fear and anger. “No.”

Angela gestured at Conner. “Take her to the medical camper and help her sleep. Use a strong blast so she doesn’t have time to cry and restart her labor.”

Conner led Samantha away, not caring that everyone now knew he had his dad’s sleep gift. He was glad to be getting away from the emotional waves. Like Samantha, he didn’t want anything to do with this moment. He understood more than the storm tracker did, but it still hurt.

Padding to Marc’s side, Dog growled at the kids, fur rising.

He yelped as something landed on his back. Familiar claws impaled his tough skin, trying to hang on.

Get it off! Get it off! Dog’s yelp distracted almost everyone. So did his vicious shake that sent the cat sliding but not off. A ripping sound came as it dug in.

Dog dropped into the sand, yelping and rolling.

The cat finally got the hint that Dog didn’t need a fighting partner. It took off running toward Tonya.

Dog stayed down, groaning at the stinging scratches. *I’m hit! She got me!* He kept whimpering, rubbing sand into the wound. He pawed at it, unable to reach. *If you had just let me eat it, I wouldn’t be dying!*

Marc rolled his eyes. “Oh, for God’s sake, Dog. Snap out of it!”

Angela hadn't turned. She watched the two police cars veer off from the truck and go back through the dust behind them.

The truck slowed down, preparing to stop.

"Someone is dropping off a gift." Marc was horrified. "This is evil shit, Angie. We can't let them in here. They're..."

"Sick." Angela was surprised by his choice. She'd expected the opposite from their men and kept them out of the loop because of it.

"I spent time with Kendle." Marc used a careful tone. "We can't have them here, spreading that. She was allowed to live because she didn't spread it."

"Yeah, you should ask her why that is," Angela answered just as carefully. "Watch my back. I feel something coming for me again."

You are in no danger from me, the Messenger stated. I was sent to observe.

When Angela didn't act relieved, Marc obeyed her wishes and swiveled to watch her back.

Insulted, the Messenger withdrew to watch from a distance.

"Why did he come?" Marc whispered to Jennifer as the teen stopped by him.

"Whatever choice she's made here must decide a big moment." Jennifer let go of the wedding dress she'd been trying to hold out of the sand, wanting her hands free to grab one of Ivan's guns as he joined them. Like Shawn and a few others, Ivan was copying Marc on most of his setups and gear. Unlike Shawn and the others, Ivan was also

avoiding getting in the wolfman's reach right now. He was covered in bruises. "I'm trying to scan as things happen. Watch out for her."

Marc swept the tense camp, flapping tents, and gritty ocean skyline.

Angela's heart broke as the young boy climbed from the truck and went to the rear to let the others out. He was limping and nearly naked, but he didn't shiver or flinch from the debris under the sand. He was too miserable to notice.

"They know." Emotions overwhelmed Angela. She stepped through the barrier to keep her camp from feeling it.

Marc was held back by Jennifer's hand on her wrist. "It's okay."

Marc waited, ready to lunge through.

Jennifer didn't tell him he would bounce off. She wasn't positive about that and she sort of wanted to witness it, though it wasn't personal. A funny moment right now would be better than Angela's agony as she denied the children entry.

"No. Go back to your masters."

The little boy was replaced with an older boy who also limped. He went to the driver seat and climbed in, clearly following his own orders.

A stream of children ran toward Angela with arms open and cries at seeing her, recognizing her.

Angela's blast was unexpected. She sent the fire in front of them, bringing the entire line to a shocked, resentful halt.

“Go back to your masters or end your lives here and now at the hand of an alpha.”

The shield went dark, as if night had fallen.

Safe Haven calmed a little from being thrown into the dark as Eagles switched on lights and kept people where they were. Most of them didn't know what was happening, but they all knew it concerned Angela. Marc's fear was alerting everyone.

Jennifer kept a hand on Marc's wrist, feeding him a vision of what was happening. “You don't want to be out there. They were sent to kill her. They're contagious, sick with hatred.”

“Help her!” William ran toward them, leaving his guard post. “What are you doing? Why is she out there alone? She'll be infected!”

Bucky was running at William's side, but he didn't know what to do. He didn't like Angela being out there either.

“Stay inside the perimeter.” Angela leaned against the shield, drawing energy from the emotions of her camp and the sick kids. “It's almost over.”

Movement caught Marc's eye at the corner. It could have been anything, but he instinctively knew it was more trouble. As he was deciding how to handle it, a horrifying scream echoed from the other side of the shield.

Marc spun and fired into the gut of the Ciemus man who had been about to stab him in the back.

He lunged around and went through the shield.

Jennifer followed, groaning. “You are so hard headed!”

“They’re leaving.” Marc observed the kids walking away in a long line. They looked like small robots marching... “They’re under a charm.” He turned to Angela. “What’s going on?”

“I couldn’t kill them, and I couldn’t let them in.” Angela stayed stiff, fighting the pain.

“So you sent them out to spread it to other survivors?”

Angela nodded. “To their masters. Maybe we’ll get lucky and they’ll implode from their own sadistic plans.”

“How can you sentence those kids to go back out into the wilderness?” William demanded as the shield lowered. “It’s wrong!”

“It’s their destiny.” Angela’s cheeks were streaked with tears. “Tell me you can kill them, and I’ll tell you Ciemus needs a new leader.”

“Of course not! I meant to take them in and help them.”

“And in doing so, you’ll infect your town. I’ve seen the demise of Ciemus, William.” Angela pinned him with a hard look. “It’s exactly what you’ve always feared. You cause it because you can’t remove a threat instead of trying to change it or convert it.”

“Peace can’t always be had.” Jennifer shrugged. “But it does seem kinder to put them out of their misery instead of sending them back to the very people who made them that way.”

“I know.” Angela refused to say more. She went to the shower and tried to shove another box into the mental crypt that was full. *Chauncey was right. I am damned.*

“I’m going after them.” William waved northwest. “And then we’ll go home, so it’s not breaking her rules.”

“No, we’re not doing that.” Bucky pointed at the line of Ciemus people standing between William and their vehicles. “We’ve discussed it. Follow her orders. She has a good reason.”

“You don’t know that! ...how dare you!” William hadn’t thought Bucky would ever go against him on an order.

Bucky didn’t flinch. “She loves the kids more than the adults here. If she refused those, there’s a good reason for it.” Bucky pointed at their fallen man. “You should be more worried over missing so many wolves in sheep’s clothing. I think her man has questions about how we keep missing it.”

Distracted, William scrutinized the body. “He’s wearing our clothes, but he’s not one of ours.”

Bucky frowned as he realized William was right. “Damn. I say we do a round of the camp and make sure no one else is trying to set us up as fall guys for killing their leader.”

William’s scowl grew to hide his embarrassment. “Agreed. We can talk about your defiance while we do it.”

Bucky shrugged. “There’s nothing to talk about. You were overruled for the first time in our

relationship. Suck it up and follow orders like everyone else.”

William snorted. “You’ve gotten a dirty mouth since we’ve come here.”

Bucky nodded. “Yes, sir. I most certainly have.”

Marc was still watching the sick kids and the truck circling back to pick them up. The driver had known he wouldn’t be accepted, but hoped dumping the others here would at least get them in. “What did she tell them to do when they get to their masters?”

Jennifer shrugged. “She wouldn’t let me in for that part. I assume it’s so bad that even I would have protested.”

“They have the rage disease.” Marc regarded her. “So do you. So does many of the camp, though it’s not at high levels. We already had it here. Why couldn’t the kids come in and learn to adapt?”

Jennifer wondered the same thing and gave him the answer she’d already told herself. “I don’t know, but I trust her to do what’s best for our future.”

“Still, I want to know.”

“I’ll tell you, but you won’t like it.” Missy joined them, Shawn not far behind.

“I usually don’t.” Marc peered down at her. “But tell me anyway.”

“She sent them away to die at someone else’s hand.”

Missy’s tone didn’t change at all, drawing a frown from Marc. “And you’re okay with that?” He was stunned.

“No.” Missy patted his wrist like she did with Shawn when he couldn’t handle her answers. “I told her to burn them all right here. Safe Haven has enough killers.”

Marc and Jennifer gaped at the girl as she kept going, clearly doing her own round of the camp.

Missy’s little shoulders stayed tense, but she shoved between the adults who were clustered, searching them all to be sure they were safe around the alpha.

Shawn followed, watching her for signs she’d caught something. It was like a farmer with a hunting dog.

“She scares me.”

Marc nodded. “I know the feeling.”

“I mean Missy.”

“So do I.” Marc paused, concentrating. “Did the Messenger leave?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Marc reached out. *Did she make the right choice?*

There was no answer.

“Yeah.” Marc let out a resigned sigh. “We get that a lot from her too. Not comforting.”

It is impossible to answer, the Messenger replied instantly. *Do not confuse me with your tainted leader.*

“We’re all tainted.” Marc paused. “Did you get whatever you came for?”

Yes.

“Shouldn’t you be filing a report?”

No answer again.

“I see.” Marc was good at guessing and not afraid to do it since they hadn’t been destroyed for blasphemy. “You’re scared.”

I do not feel fear. I cannot be harmed.

“What about your boss? You’re worried for someone.”

No answer.

Marc grunted, waving at Jennifer. “You try.”

Jennifer cleared her throat. “Uh, hello.”

Ask your question, child, the Messenger instructed. *My time is short.*

“Why do you come and observe us if you aren’t telling your boss what you see?”

The Messenger sighed, deep and eerie. *I want you to succeed and to win the battle you were destined for. I’ve waited long for this moment. I couldn’t stay away.*

“Are you allowed to be here?”

I’m observing.

Marc presumed that meant yes. “Are you allowed to contact us, to interfere? You said no before and yet you’re breaking the rules again. Made me wonder if there’s an exception for us.”

No answer.

Marc walked away, done with it. He went to Angela and joined her in the shower camper where he held her while she bawled like a newborn.

Jennifer frowned at the silence. “He’s a good one, you know. You could try to be more understanding.”

His rage destroyed the Creator's most precious invention and turned it into the dens of inequity you called cities. He is responsible for humanity's condition, for your human condition.

“And Adrian, right?”

No answer.

“Damn. We assumed it was both of them. How can Adrian not be at fault? He seduced her.”

No answer.

Angered, Jennifer flipped a finger to the sky. “She’s right. You are tiresome.” The teenager strode away without fear. The Messenger was obviously here to observe, not to answer their questions. “Let me know when that changes.” Jennifer spotted Kyle. He was staring at her with a possessive gleam that sent fire into her toes. “Until then, back off so we don’t know you’re here again. It’s better that way.”

Why do you not want me around, child? The Messenger was genuinely confused.

“Because I’m trying to be a good person and you piss me off. Go back to your tower where nothing else matters. We’re busy here in slave land.”

You are not slaves.

Jennifer refused to answer.

“Time to go!”

The crowd cheered as Candy tugged Jennifer and Kyle toward the flap. It had been an hour since their company left. The mood had improved. “Eagle escort!”

Half a dozen Eagles, laughing and joking with them, shoved Jennifer and Kyle outside and toward the shoreline.

“Don’t forget the food!” Conner grabbed a packed basket from under the table and ran after them. “They’ll need to eat at some point.”

The bride and groom blushed and flushed as everyone else burst out laughing.

The wedding party stayed in the tent as the escorts took the happy couple to the boat. They were being locked in a stateroom for one full day to give them a honeymoon. It wasn’t much, but it was the best they could do at the moment. Later, on the island, the couple could go off together for a few days or camp on the beach for a week.

The noises faded for the people in the tent. The Eagles and descendants looked to Angela for instructions while camp members enjoyed the food and ignored everything else.

Angela pointed. “Eat while you can.”

“All Eagles on duty! We have company coming!” Sentries called from outside the tent as a new dust cloud was noticed.

“It’s normal refugees.” Angela soothed. “Grab something to take with you at least. The cake would be good. You’re going to need the energy and the crash will let you sleep when the others can’t.”

Camp members wolfed down their cake, eager to avoid the action in any way. Eagles sat theirs down and went outside to help.

Marc looked at Angela. “Where do you want me?”

“Close.”

Marc took her arm. “You got it.”

Angela led the way to their tent. “First, I have to take this thing off. I’d rather be naked.”

“That works too.”

Angela snorted, motioning for Eagles to report to Morgan for instructions. “If I’m showing mine, you’re showing yours.”

Marc thought about his raw skin and sighed, opening their tent flap. “I’ll help you change.”

3

The wedding escorts retreated from the bridal suite, laughing and telling bad jokes that echoed to the bride and groom. Kyle wished they’d hurry up and leave. She wasn’t saying or thinking it, but Kyle knew this was making Jennifer uncomfortable.

It was. Her fear of men had been burning brightly as the small crowd of rowdy men and women dragged them onto the boat and into a dark passage. Only Kyle’s hot hand around hers had allowed Jennifer to tolerate it.

The ship creaked beneath them. A door closing echoed.

Kyle headed for the minibar.

Jennifer entered his path. “I don’t want to wait. Let’s do it and then we can...”

Kyle recoiled like she’d slapped him.

Jennifer sighed. “Or not.”

Kyle went to pour two glasses of champagne, wishing it was whiskey. “If you want that, we’ll do that.”

Jennifer realized he wasn’t going to fight her on consummating their marriage.

“Does that scare you?”

“No...” She frowned. “But I sense it comes with strings.”

“It does.” Kyle held out a glass, not wanting to spook her by getting too close yet. “Ready?”

Jennifer took the glass. “As much as I can be. What’s the deal?”

Kyle’s eyes blazed. “I want the real you. I’ll pretend for the camp every second we’re with them, but when we’re alone, I want the girl who charmed me after I killed her owner.”

Jennifer tensed. “I don’t know if I can do that. Not all of it was acting.”

“All of it with me was.” Kyle called her bluff. “You made sure they were all worried over you being willing and I played my role, but that was never the problem.” His eyes grew hotter. “Was it?”

Jennifer’s shoulders slumped. “No. The problem was always mine.”

Kyle went to the balcony and opened the door to let in the breeze. “Tell me.”

Jennifer shivered at his tone of command. “I want you to do the things he did.”

Kyle’s heart pounded. He’d waited a long time to hear those words. “I will. It doesn’t bother me that you want it or that you’re too corrupt now to be camp heir. None of it matters to me.” Kyle lifted his glass. “Here’s to a happy life with all the kinky sex you want.”

Jennifer flushed, but she lifted her glass. “Four years or forever, we’ll live like it’s an eternity.” Jennifer paused in their toast as waves of unease hit the ship. “New arrivals... Angela has it covered.”

Kyle resumed his motion and clinked their glasses, but he didn’t drink much. He wasn’t certain his stomach could take it.

Neither was Jennifer. She set her glass down after a tiny sip.

Kyle observed her, leaning against the balcony door. Their stateroom was larger than the others, with a short patio enclosed in a boxed railing to keep newlyweds from falling overboard. Behind him, the ocean rushed and swelled in a romantic rhythm.

“Newlyweds.” Jennifer smiled. “That’s us.” Jennifer allowed her masks to drop. “Tell me what that means.”

Kyle shuddered at her domineering tone. “I’m allowed to touch you now.”

“Yes.”

Kyle’s breath caught. He’d waited, respected her wishes, and sheltered her as much as she would

allow. He'd resisted the primitive side and now, Jennifer was his wife.

“Are you okay?”

Kyle bobbed his head, barely daring to breathe. “It happened, right? We're married?”

Jennifer giggled. He sounded as dazed as he looked.

Kyle felt that usual urge rise up at the sound of her innocence, but this time, he let it stay. “Thank you.”

Jennifer slowly removed her veil and placed it over the bedrail. “I love you.”

Kyle grinned. “All of me?”

Jennifer nodded. “For all my days.”

Kyle put his glass down but stayed by the balcony as Jennifer took off her wedding dress. The moment was surreal for him. He'd dreamed of watching her disrobe, pleased himself to the images.

“I know.” Jennifer took her time, like she'd seen in his mind. Later, when he could think again, Kyle would probably handle their moments, but for now, she was in charge—right where she wanted to be for their first time making love.

Kyle's eyes darkened into black pools of lust and temptation. He was getting her every thought, no longer blocked by his lack of magic.

Jennifer's chest grew pointed under his gaze. She drew in a breath and let her gown fall to the floor.

Jennifer stepped out of it and tripped. She staggered forward, flailing.

Kyle caught her.

Jennifer sucked in a breath at the fast movement and then hissed it out at the feel of him. It was like touching fire.

Kyle held her against his body, barely aware of the lacy thing the camp women had put under the wedding dress. That didn't matter to him. What did was the feel of her skin against his hands.

"Touch me, Kyle." Jennifer was ready to lead him through the flames now. "Go slow."

"Yes, Jenny." Kyle's hands slid up her bare back. "Very slow."

Jennifer shivered at his tone.

Kyle snapped out of the lust and retreated. "I'm sorry."

Jennifer's heart calmed a notch. Kyle continued to prove that he wouldn't hurt her. He was... "My husband."

Kyle smiled at her, understanding he'd mistaken the sign. "For as long as you'll have me, in whatever way you'll have me."

"All of you or nothing!" Jennifer entered arms that surrounded her eagerly.

"You got it." He dropped his mouth to hers. "You got it, Jenny."

Jennifer enjoyed the kiss, but it made Kyle groan and tense. He clearly liked it a lot.

Kyle was lost in the haze, like he'd known he would be. Until he had what he'd been waiting for,

it was hard to concentrate, but before the night was over, Jennifer would know what it was like to be loved.

Jennifer nodded. “If you want that, we’ll do that.”

Kyle nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent, her youth and her inexperience. “You’ll want it too. Just stay in my mind if you can’t do it in yours, okay?” He was wise enough to know her wanting the sex didn’t mean she wouldn’t still have flashes of the past.

Jennifer gave another nod, nervous and aroused. Kyle’s excitement was rubbing off.

Kyle kissed her like he’d wanted to for the entire time he’d known her. He ravaged her mouth.

Jennifer wasn’t shocked by his force, but by her reaction to it. Her heart thumped and her core throbbed.

Kyle licked her bottom lip, moaning.

Jennifer shivered, nipples tightening into rocks.

“Again?” he begged.

Jennifer tilted her head up.

Kyle licked her again, nerves taut.

Jennifer felt her thighs grow damp and refused to question the oddness of it. It felt good.

“Say that sometime!” Kyle pleaded between kisses to the lips that tasted like berries. His hands were fists against her back.

Jennifer’s hands went around his neck. “Put me in the bed... Then lay on top of me.”

Kyle almost broke. He stuttered, pausing and freezing as he fought for control.

She fought her demons. "All the way."

Kyle swept her small frame into his big arms and took the two wide steps to the bed that had already been turned down.

Kyle slid her onto the mattress and followed. He made full contact with her young body for the first time, gasping. Lost for a second, he thrust between her legs and tried not to pass out from the pleasure.

Jennifer was stunned by how it felt, shifting to make sure he hit the right spot. Instead of freezing up or resisting, she held him tighter and squirmed beneath his hard body. It was stunning for both of them.

Kyle regained control. He'd dreamed of this moment, of her responding this way. He wasn't going to ruin it by grabbing his own pleasure and coming back for hers later.

Jennifer groaned as his hand settled over her breast.

So did Kyle. He snapped the clasp and slid the cloth aside with a hiss of need. "Tell me to lick."

Jennifer swallowed the lump in her throat. "Please, yes!"

Kyle did.

Jennifer cried out at the contact, clutching his head close. "Lick me again!"

Kyle climaxed in his suit.

Jennifer felt it, but she was too hot to care as he grunted and growled against her bare skin. She'd never felt anything like this.

Kyle slid down and kissed between her legs.

He was hard again before she began to moan his name and spasm against his lips.

Kyle didn't wait for her to regain her composure. He pulled the tie string to her panties and unfastened the button of his trousers.

Jennifer was still climaxing. Her slick skin twitched and gleamed in the lantern light, returning Kyle to the lust he'd felt upon laying against her. He lowered his pants and knelt between her legs.

Jennifer groaned as Kyle guided his hard body into her. Wet and welcome, she automatically tilted up to meet his thrust.

Kyle buried himself in her, drawing a groan and the best orgasm of his life.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Too Valuable To Kill

Day Six
3pm

1

“Where did they get a butchered cow?”

Charlie was watching Kenn flip their breakfast steaks. Upon waking, Kenn had chosen to stay longer. Rain was beating on doors and windows. Neither of them were eager to get moving in a storm. “Someone’s freezer?”

“This is fresh cut meat.” Kenn tried not to be hit by the sizzling fat. “One of them butchered it.”

“How can you tell?”

“By how it looks. Most frozen meat loses color over time. This is still pink and pretty.” The sled was hidden right outside the window. Kenn had brought two more packages inside to thaw and was about to finish another beautiful meal. “You’re supposed to be doing this, you know. You’re the rookie.”

“I offered.” Charlie glowered. “You said it was too valuable to waste on a shithead who can’t cook.”

Kenn shrugged. “It is, but Eagle rules don’t change just because we don’t like each other.”

“You don’t like me? I’m hurt.”

Kenn snickered.

So did Charlie. His mood was better now that he had another meal to anticipate that didn't taste like salt no matter how it was cooked.

"You'll have fish on the boat."

Charlie stilled.

Kenn tensed. "Don't think about it, kid. I'll knock you out and drag you back."

Charlie shook it off. "I'm good."

"I doubt that, but you're having dangerous thoughts." Kenn exposed his secret thought. "You can't stay here. You have a baby on the way. The time to flee was before."

"I know. I'm not."

Kenn grunted, flipping the other steak.

Charlie opened his kit and took out a bag of rice from his food pouch. Brittani had given it to him right before he left. He tossed it to Kenn.

Kenn caught it. "Perfect." He got a pot from his cook kit and began preparing the rice. "Safe Haven doesn't eat like this right now, but once we're on the island for a while, we'll have fresh meat again."

Charlie tried to talk about his hesitations, assuming it was part of this awful therapy. "Seems like a long time."

"To me too, but knowing it's coming will help."

"Why can't we take a herd with us?"

"No room."

"That boat is huge."

"On the island." Kenn shoved the pot into the coals. "We're taking a lot of stuff."

“I think a food source is important.”

Kenn snorted. “Even if we cleared a deck for livestock, where would we get herds?”

“Zoos.” Charlie wiped his mouth, frowning. He’d never drooled over a meal before. “I’ll bet a lot of animals are alive.”

“After eleven months? I don’t think so.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“Because some animals only need one meal every few months. Makes sense some of them might still be around.”

“Fine.” Kenn stopped cooking long enough to write it in his book. “I’ll mention it if she lets me back in.”

Charlie frowned. “You think she won’t?”

Kenn hated it that he had to talk to the teenager about it. “Not if I don’t sort some shit out on this trip. She knows that, but she still sent you along. I don’t think she wants me to get it together.”

“Maybe not. What is it?”

Kenn knew he couldn’t trust the boy. He knew Charlie would use it against him. “I want something I shouldn’t.”

The boy dug in, slamming doors. “My mom.” Charlie’s good mood faded.

Kenn winced.

“I knew it!”

Kenn shifted the rice pot further into the coals, unable to look at the boy. “So does she, I guess, thus

this trip. I'm supposed to figure out if I need to be put down like the vet."

Charlie was distracted. "Wait. The vet died in Market Town, helping protect us all. Right?"

"Samantha put him out of his misery."

"No way!"

"Yes, way."

Charlie considered it while Kenn stirred the rice into the boiling water. "Well? Do you?"

"No."

"But she sent you out, so she must have seen something."

Kenn grunted. "That's what I think too and it made me so twitchy that I'm discussing it with you."

"You want me to look and tell you what she saw!" Charlie shook his head. "Why would I?"

Kenn stiffened. "Because I have something you want."

"What?"

"A way to give your mom peace so you can stop feeling bad and enjoy your new life."

Charlie gaped. "How do you know that?"

"Because I used those sentiments against you two for a long time." Kenn's guilt was in his voice. "It works."

"You're a piece of shit."

"You might be too, in time."

"Fine. What is it?"

"Look first."

"No."

Kenn shrugged. “Let me know when you change your mind.”

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. “I can’t trust you.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“I was thinking you two still talk more than women.”

Both males jumped up, reaching for guns.

Adrian joined them at their fire, dropping a kit. “Ammo.”

Charlie pouted, refusing to speak.

Adrian faced the boy. “I’ll tell you what he won’t, and I don’t want anything in return.”

“Asshole.” Kenn had started to put on another steak and now he stopped, wrapping the meat back up.

“Why?” Charlie was confused, and unhappy that Adrian was here.

“Because your mom needs Kenn to figure that out for himself. You can have help. You’re her son.”

Charlie pouted. “I don’t want to cheat.”

“It’s not cheating.” Adrian unbuttoned his drenched jacket and hung it on the wall. “It’s what she wants.”

“Just tell me then.”

“You have to get both sides of the stories.” Adrian settled against a dusty freezer and began unlacing his boots. “Make your list of the things she’s done wrong and then make one for the things she’s done right—according to you. Then speak with the people who were there for both of them.”

Charlie frowned. “Why would I ask about things she’s done right?”

“Because it isn’t a fair study if you don’t.” Adrian pushed off his boots. “If you can be wrong about one, you could be wrong about the other.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does. I’ll prove it. Think of something she’s done wrong that Kenn or I were there for. Then look through our memories, since you won’t believe our words. Then pick a good thing we were there for. Afterwards, I’ll ask you two questions and you’ll understand my point.”

“She spared your life at the trial. That was wrong.”

Adrian had been expecting this one. He looked at Kenn.

Kenn shook his head. “I’m not helping either of you.”

“Yes, you will and in doing so, you’ll help yourself.” Adrian pointed. “She wants peace between you two just as much as she wants our personal issues settled.”

“That won’t happen!” Charlie glared.

“Then Kenn has to stay here.” Adrian scowled. “Or you do and *that* can’t happen. Your mom won’t go without you.”

“So I hear.”

“Are you afraid of the answer?” Adrian challenged. He knew how to handle people better than Kenn ever had.

“She traded his life for yours,” Kenn blurted. “She agreed to take his place as leader if he gave his life for yours when it was needed.”

“You’re a liar!” Charlie jumped up. “You’re both lying!”

“Fine. Pick something else.” Adrian calmed things down. “Something good she did.”

“She tolerated both your whores in camp with her!”

Adrian shook his head. “Nancy is on her own now and Tonya was forced to ignore Kenn before he left. Kendle skipped camp. She’s making them all pay in one form or another.”

“Not true!” Charlie hated having his memories and thoughts called wrong. “I don’t trust you.”

“I’m done with this.” Kenn forked the steaks over the beds of rice he’d just put on plates and shoved them toward Adrian and Charlie. “Talk about something else.” He got started on a fresh steak for himself.

Charlie was torn between anger and hunger.

Adrian wasn’t. He snatched up the hot plate of food and dug in, groaning. “Vewy goot!”

Kenn laughed. “You sound like a two-year-old.”

Adrian swallowed and grabbed another hot bit of steak in his fingers. “Eating like one too.”

Charlie grabbed his plate and stalked to a far corner of the room.

“Don’t be that way.” Adrian tried a coaxing tone. “She sent you out here to learn. Who did you think you were going to learn from?”

“Neither of you!” Charlie slid down the cold wall and fumbled for his knife. “I thought I’d handle myself and figure things out from there.”

“Why don’t you just admit you’re jealous of her spending all her time on Safe Haven?” Kenn was still searching for the real reason Charlie had been sent out here. “Then you can go back.”

“I’m not sure I want to go back, as you already know.” Charlie started eating, using his knife to cut and scoop. There hadn’t been any silverware in the house. It had held every other dish, but no flatware.

“You have a fork in your mess kit.” Adrian was sure the kid had been sent with full gear.

Charlie ignored him for the easier, lazier method.

Adrian grinned. “Fatherhood scaring you?”

The boy swallowed. “More like all the people watching over our shoulders to be sure we do it right. I got a flash as I left. It keeps adding up. If I stay here, I’m free.”

“And you kill the future. Don’t be selfish.”

Charlie flipped Kenn the finger, but his heart wasn’t in it. He’d been thinking on it and feeling guilty. He understood the consequences.

“You’re not like your mom, so it’s harder.” Kenn flipped the browning meat. “You’re like your dad. When shit gets flaky, you want to walk.”

“Don’t!”

Kenn shrugged. “You can read the memories. He was always like that and you take after him. He always tried to get us to skip the hard fights.”

“He didn’t like seeing men die!”

Kenn sneered. “Wow, do you have a surprise coming.”

“I do not!” Charlie shoved in a bite.

“You do.” Adrian got settled and sawed through a small part of the meat. “Not only did he not feel guilt over killing, boy, he enjoyed it.”

“Those were bad men!”

“So that makes enjoying it okay?”

Charlie paused in the next bite. “I’m not sure.”

Adrian took a big bite. “Same hewre.”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth!” Charlie snapped. “It’s gross.”

Adrian finished chewing and swallowed. “You’re becoming an annoying little hothead, you know?” Adrian looked at Kenn while Charlie took another bite and tried to form a nasty answer. “You bring a bottle? I’ll need it if you want me to keep working with him.”

Kenn pointed at his kit. If Adrian could get the boy settled and back to camp, he was all for it. “Last bottle of Turkey in camp.”

Adrian frowned. “They need that.”

Kenn nodded. “And so I told Angela. She said someone would deserve a shot or two for putting up with so much attitude. I just thought she meant me.”

Adrian laughed.

Charlie stuffed another bite in his mouth to keep from yelling at them. He hated it that they were always ahead of him on everything.

Adrian cut a bite from his steak and followed Charlie's lead by scooping it onto his blade with a stack of rice. "You're trying to match adults, son. Stick with those your own age and you'll come out on top every time." Adrian shoved the bite in, groaning again. "Fwesh cow!"

Charlie couldn't help but snicker at the sound and feel of Adrian's pleasure. He dug into his meal, trying to figure out what he wanted to know that Adrian might be able to tell him.

"This isn't a brainstorming session." Adrian swallowed. "This is a test of manhood, of your patience and your determination to be good. She's giving you the chance to go corrupt now, because on the boat, you have to follow the same rules as everyone else."

"She's sparing me by letting me go nuts?"

"She's hoping you won't." Kenn deeply wished he'd kept better control of the situation they'd run into. "She'll already be disappointed in what we've done. For her sake, please try to behave."

Adrian and Charlie stared at the Marine. His tone implied he cared about her.

Kenn snorted, blowing them off. "She's the alpha. It isn't about her. It's the draw."

They heard the lie, but neither of them called him on it. They had their own shortcomings to handle.

“You staying until the storm passes?”

Adrian nodded at Kenn’s question. “She wanted you armed and me fed, so I assumed I should go my own way as soon as the weather clears.” Adrian looked at Charlie. “Now it almost feels like I should stick with you two for a bit and finish this. He needs to be done and back with his women. They’ll stress over him.”

Charlie shoved in the last bite. The larger, more gifted man might be able to subdue him and force him to return.

“I won’t.” Adrian’s lips curled. “I’d use guilt on you until you gave up just to shut me up. I can nag like any female.”

“That’s because you’re a traitorous bitch!” Charlie shouted, spewing rice and half chewed meat.

Kenn made a face. “Ugh. Glad he sat over there.”

“Yep.” Adrian got his canteen and took a long drink as the food hit his stomach and brought cramps. He’d been empty for two days.

Charlie swallowed in a hurry. “You need to leave!”

“Because you like me more than your dad right now and I’m a reminder of it?”

Charlie threw his plate at Adrian and got up. He stomped to the door while Adrian wiped off the bits of rice and meat.

Kenn sighed. “Stop.”

Charlie kept going. “I don’t need either of you.”

Kenn lifted a brow at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “She wants him to have the real experience. Let him go and we’ll save his bacon on the way to Kendle.”

Charlie paused. “Is someone waiting for me?”

Adrian shrugged. “Go find out and then we’ll all know.”

Charlie’s hand lingered on the knob to the ground floor level.

Kenn flipped his steak, ready to eat. He felt better having Adrian here.

“That’s because you’re a traitor too!” Charlie shouted.

Kenn looked at Adrian, exasperated. “How did you put up with that attitude in every rookie Eagle? I would have killed them all.”

Adrian chuckled, scooping up another bite. “Some days were harder than others.”

Kenn grunted. “We heading out come dusk?” Kenn knew how to set ‘em up.

“A little after. We’ll do some basic rounds for reminders of Eagle routines. It’s been a while for me. I need it.”

“Sounds good.” Kenn made his plate.

Both adults listened for his choice. If Charlie went out there, he would be on his own until the weather cleared.

Charlie kicked the door. “I want to be alone!”

Adrian pointed upward. “Go up and watch for problems. You can sleep tomorrow, while we travel.”

“How can I sleep if I have to walk?”

“We have a sled.” Kenn pointed at the window.

Charlie went out, slamming the door.

Adrian shook his head and finished his meal.

Kenn grunted and started his.

Charlie went to the first floor and crawled into a closet to sulk and listen for trouble.

Kenn waited until they were alone and flashed Eagle code. *Are you going to the island with us?*

Adrian grimaced. *I can't. She hasn't forgiven me yet.*

That doesn't bode well for me. I did worse to her.

You've shown true signs of change.

Kenn faced the next personal demon he'd been sent out to slay. *I've lied, faked it.*

Adrian sighed, pushing away the empty plate as his stomach cramped again. *I'm sorry to hear that.*

Kenn hung his head. *So am I.*

“All of it?”

Kenn nodded. “Probably ninety percent.”

Adrian stared at him. “What will it take?”

Kenn waved a hand. “I thought gifts of my own would do it, but it hasn't.”

Adrian had forgotten that Kenn had evolved several times since his banishment. “What all can you do?”

“Move things, thought reading.” Kenn hesitated to list more.

“I felt your nature scan as I came in.”

“It’s new. Not sure if it’s a fluke or something she gave me to keep her son safe.”

Adrian snorted. “She wouldn’t give you anything. I’d bet she wishes you were still an Invisible.”

“I don’t blame her for that, really, but I feel like the same piece of shit I’ve always been. I haven’t changed.”

“You beat anyone recently?”

Kenn shook his head. “Been beat on.”

“You abuse Tonya or any female?”

Kenn chuckled, thinking of how Tonya ruled their roost. “No.”

“Do you miss it?”

Kenn considered the question honestly and shrugged. “I wanted to hurt Ivan and Kendle. Does that count?”

Adrian contemplated his fast visit from the castaway and his hostile reception from Ivan as he took a sip from his canteen. He belched. “Hard to say. I dislike one and the other needs to be put down.”

“Ivan because the boss likes him and Kendle because she interfered with the grand plan?”

Adrian gave a short nod. He didn’t need to add words to it. Kenn’s were bad enough.

“So here we sit, two bad men trying to go good.” Kenn leaned his head against the wall as the food began to hit his stomach and quiet the monster living there. “This sucks. I want to be back in camp.”

Adrian winced. “Yeah. We have to earn it.”

“With her kid?”

“For you, maybe. You’ve done him wrong and part of his attitude is because of you. For me, I’m just a guide he won’t listen to.”

“What’s your job out here?”

“To keep you all alive until you learn your lessons and are called home.” Adrian closed his lids. “Wake me in a few hours and I’ll stand watch. He’s already sleeping.”

Kenn grunted, reaching for the rest of his food. “Good. If I have to keep listening to his bitching, we’ll have trouble.”

Adrian didn’t laugh. “She knew sending you two out together would bring all this stuff up. I’m starting to think she’s giving him the chance to kill you without anyone finding out.” Adrian laid down and went to sleep.

So did Kenn, but not right away. He had a terrible idea of why Angela had really put them together, but he refused to accept it. *I won’t do that anymore. Not even for you.*

2

In the West (4am)

“We’re almost there, sir.”

Mario snapped awake in the passenger seat of the UN vehicle flying through the darkness. “How long?”

“Minutes.” Oscar coughed, hitting the wiper button again. The ash storms had been almost nonstop for weeks.

Mario straightened, pulling himself together. They were going to his private den in the center of his western command zone, but there was a chance someone had found it. He hadn’t been here in a month.

Around the single vehicle, the darkness was oppressive. In the east, the sun was up, but here in the southwest, it was the time when monsters walked. Mario’s men had told stories of witnessing creatures that didn’t exist in their homeland or anywhere else. He would have ignored their tales of terror as men trying to evade work, but they had bets going for who would find the first proof. Men volunteered for extra shifts at night to prove their wild claims, not avoiding labor like one would expect from a fantasy tale. It made Mario leery. He’d already been unhappy to receive this assignment, but he went where the Secretaries-General ordered. The horror stories simply made it worse.

Oscar drove the jeep with expert hands and worried thoughts. He didn’t care about America, but the thought of the rage disease making it to his homeland was terrifying. Oscar knew those things had a way of traveling even when their makers didn’t want them to. Dying from a disease was his greatest fear. “Sir, may I ask when we’re leaving this odd land?”

“Tonight, my timid, boring driver.” Mario held on as Oscar increased speed in response to the insult. “Our work will be finished with our arrival and three calls. You will stay with me.”

Oscar made sure the vehicle didn't wreck on the debris or cracks, and stored information about their surroundings like he'd been taught to do while on missions. This area had been damaged by multiple battles after the war and all of those had left evidence of the combatants. American and Mexican armies had come through here. There wasn't much left of businesses or roads, making it the perfect place for a hideout.

Mario took a control unit from his pocket and activated it. His den was set in the side of an eroding cliff, dug by his men immediately after their arrival. Mario hit a button to open the door. If anyone was watching it, they would now go inside without witnessing his arrival.

Oscar drove to the rear entrance that only a few of their troops had known was added, then veered into the dark tunnel. He slowed in case rocks or debris had fallen into the narrow path, but the jeep rolled smoothly through. The front gate began to retract as soon as Mario hit another button on his control unit.

Lights came on, showing a three-room den formed in a wide circle. It was easy to see no one had been here. The dust on the floor was pristine.

Mario locked the front entrance and went to the center room, where the radio equipment had a thick layer of grit over it.

He pulled on the tarp, sending a fresh cloud of dust into the air. Mario was coated in it. "I hate the west!" He slapped the tarp onto the floor. "It gets into everything!"

Mario had wanted an assignment in the east, like his friend Dolf had received. They'd come over on the same ship, but they wouldn't be leaving together. Dolf was already back on the ocean, transporting supplies and trophies between UN encampments. He was also holding prisoners, but Mario didn't care about them. Several descendants had been sent on this mission to ensure success. Not everyone would end up in the international center.

"Gather the food and water." Mario pointed at the tunnel. "Put it on the boat."

Oscar hurried, eager to be gone.

Mario sat in the dusty chair and flipped switches on the radio. He cleared his throat of ashy grit. "Unit twelve calling subordinate Vihaan. Are you there?"

Mario waited patiently, understanding people were often busy in this new world. It took a lot to stay alive now.

The radio crackled. "I am here."

Mario keyed the mike. "Provide status."

There was a pause and then the radio lit up again. "Impeccable timing, as usual. Stand by."

Mario sat back and pulled a flask from his inner pocket. He lit a cigar and had a drink while

listening. Vihaan had left the mike depressed. Groans were coming from the background.

“I will ask you once more. If you tell me the truth, I will end your life without further pain. Do you agree?”

“Yes! Please!”

“Where is Safe Haven going?”

“To the south! An island!”

“Which route are they taking?”

“South and then west!”

“How many in their camp?”

“I don’t know now. There were five hundred in the mountain.”

“Who were you to Safe Haven?”

“An Eagle! My name is Joseph!”

“What about the babies, Joseph?”

Silence.

A fresh scream echoed.

Mario nodded, puffing. Vihaan was good at his job.

“Dozens! Most with gifts!”

“Thank you. There is one last question you have to answer. Do not lie.”

“I won’t.”

Mario nodded again. That voice was broken. It had no lies left in it. Mario was certain the person was naked, bound, bloody, and missing parts.

“Do they know the UN has operations going in this country?”

“Everyone knows you’re here. There have been big fights.”

“Do they know we all have one goal?”

“What?”

“Good. Sleep now.”

Mario finished his moment of relaxation as a gurgling noise came. He stubbed out the cigar lovingly. It was one of his last.

“You are satisfied with the status report?”

Mario grinned through the mike. “Yes, yes. We will attack soon. Get into place around the camp and wait for the fight to begin.”

“Goal for that moment?”

“Kill the leaders and offspring of leaders.”

“Copy. Out.”

Mario switched channels as Oscar entered the room to gather the food and water here.

The driver stayed quiet, listening while he worked.

“Janet, it is time for a status report.”

This time, Mario checked and reloaded his weapons while he waited.

“I’m on the number one goal. He and the son of Safe Haven’s leader are camped. We think they were evicted from their haven, but don’t know why yet. Storming here, so no travel.”

“How long have they been away?” Mario was intrigued that Adrian wasn’t with Safe Haven and thrilled that the female trackers were on him. Janet had the ability to twist lies with images and make them seem like the truth, as did her sisters. Descendants hardly ever went below a first layer

when doing scans of each other, making the female trackers valuable.

“Half a day.”

“Stay with them. Anything else?”

“The island woman was with Adrian for a short time and then she went north. Finn is on her.”

“You have done well. Do not lose track of the number one goal.”

“We won’t. Out.”

Mario put his two guns into the bag and switched to the final channel. He looked at Oscar. “We leave next. Get the boat ready.”

Oscar vanished down the tunnel, smiling.

Mario keyed the mike. “Finn, a status report is due now.” Mario stood up and began unplugging and removing the items he wanted to take.

The radio stayed silent.

Mario didn’t bug his man yet, but he frowned. Finn was the best of the three. If he hadn’t answered, it was because it wasn’t a good moment.

Mario decided to wait. He needed that last report. He pocketed the boxes of ammunition, along with his glasses and two cassette tapes he’d chosen from a music store. He liked Bad Company and the Dixie Chicks. The rest of it would burn in the rebuilding that would take place after the rage disease destroyed the last of the survivors.

It took Mario five minutes to clear the room, not hurrying. By the time he was finished, worry had begun to set in. The time wasn’t important, but he had a bad feeling in his guts and he never ignored

his guts, his nuts, or his brain. Two of the three were bracing for trouble.

Mario went to the radio, feeling something happening. He hit the button without his usual calm. “I want that report, Finn.”

“Finn’s dead. Ask me for it.”

Mario flinched at the immediate reply. The female voice was full of anger and triumph, telling Mario she wasn’t lying. “You are the island woman.”

“Good guess. Would you like to bet it all or just go home?”

Mario sneered, understanding the reference. He loved American television. “I will bet it all, fury fighter.”

“You know both my names. That’s interesting. Okay, so I’m getting ready to attack this guy who’s been following me, but the man gets this call. While he’s trying to silence it, I slit his throat. *You* killed your man.”

Mario frowned.

“Here’s your question. What was Finn going to do with me?”

“You are to be taken to the detention center,” Mario muttered without hitting the mike. He considered his responses and gave the least offensive. “You were to be eliminated.”

“No detention for me. Why?”

“You are a survivor of Rage Island. Your blood can be used against us,” he answered, again without letting her hear it. Tiring of the game, Mario shut

off the radio without giving her an answer. It was clear that Finn was gone and the island woman was alive. Further communications would only give her more information. As it was, he already expected her to warn Safe Haven.

Mario took his bag of treasures and headed into the narrow tunnel. He jogged down the stairs that led to a tiny cove where he'd secured two small speed boats months ago. He could hear an engine running and hurried, ready to be gone.

Oscar came forward to light the path and took the bags.

Mario noted the second boat was empty and deflating. "You fixed it?"

"Yes. Two large rips." Oscar bent over to place the bags into the boat. "It's not following us."

"Good." Mario pulled his gun out and shot Oscar in the back as he stood up.

Oscar fell onto the edge of the boat and slipped into the shallow water near the natural stone dock.

Mario climbed into the boat and drove it out of the small cove. He didn't look back.

In the east, Kendle put Finn's bloody radio into her pocket without using it again. She gathered her gear and headed out, now moving south.

Chapter Thirty
Safe Haven's Son

4pm

1

Charlie hated being cold. So far, that was the worst part of being away from camp. He'd loathed the mountain den his mother had chosen, but faced with this sleety weather, he would take it now without a complaint. Charlie went outside to use the bathroom, stomping. He'd woken alone, in the dark closet. For a minute, he'd wanted to cry.

Charlie used a wet bush behind the home, trying to hurry his bladder so he didn't get a chill. His nuts drew up in protest as the wind pushed inside his clothes.

He tucked his flesh back in and zipped. "Can't wait to go south."

"Same here, kid."

Charlie jumped, yelping at the voice.

Hannah chuckled. "That's cute." She stopped smiling as he reached for his gun. "Don't make me kill you before we've had a chance to talk."

Charlie paused. He couldn't use his gift to alert Kenn and Adrian or the woman would know who he was by his signature. He also couldn't yell in case refugees were in the area. He was trapped.

Hannah came forward and took his gun. “You can keep the knife, but if you try to use it on me, be prepared to follow through. I like to wrestle as foreplay.”

Charlie flushed at her leer.

Hannah cackled, motioning him away from the house. “Walk north until I tell you to stop.”

Charlie reluctantly did as he was told, leaving heavy prints in the mud to be followed.

Hannah walked behind him, kicking occasionally when the trail became too obvious. Animals and descendants often caught the wrong scent when you did that and wouldn’t take the bait.

“You should let me go.” Charlie rubbed his muddy shoe against his ankle to reach an itch. “They’ll kill you.”

“Adrian and his Marine guard?” Hannah was eager to have that confirmed.

Charlie clamped his lips shut, recognizing the trap.

Hannah smirked. “We’re gonna have fun, boy.”

Charlie spun around. “I’m not a boy.”

Hannah wasn’t immune to his angry, sexy vibe, but she had respect for Adrian. Getting distracted right now was a bad idea. She put her gun to his forehead. “You won’t let me see who you are, so you have no value to me. Keep walking or I’ll use your body for my trap.”

Charlie sent out a flood of obedience and slowly walked north. “How many are in your group? Are you the leader?”

Hannah shook off the daze and followed, not holstering. “You’ll see how it works, not-a-boy. Tell me about your camp.”

“You saw it.” Charlie had figured out she’d been watching them.

“Smart. The shields go down when we sleep. I walked right on in.”

Charlie wondered why the others in his group had missed it, but he refused to think of their names or even their faces.

Hannah tapped her knife hilt. “My sisters and I know how to get information, especially from men.”

Charlie wondered if that meant removing body parts and felt his blood pressure rise. He wasn’t sure that he could hurt a woman, but if they drew his blood, he might. *I need to grow up.*

Hannah made a noise. “Growing up isn’t all they make it out to be, kid. Take your time.”

Charlie nearly growled. He was tired of being treated like a child.

“You act like what you are.” Hannah shifted her pack higher on her shoulders. “If you want to be treated like a man, you have to play the part.”

Play the part. Charlie stopped, reading her shallow thoughts. “You were forced to come here. You’re lonely. All of your group is lonely. You kill the men instead of keeping them because they disappoint you by having no respect for what you are.” The teenager felt a bond growing. He didn’t want it, but there was no avoiding it as he added a

final insight. “No one understands you. Not even our kind get why you’re here, why you agreed.”

Hannah stared, heart pounding. “Do you?”

Charlie shrugged. “As much as I can without being female. You want the freedom that was denied before the war. You came here for the lack of rules.”

Hannah kissed him. A fast peck, she followed it with a hug. “From a child!” She retreated, face going cold. “Now, you have value to me. Keep walking or I’ll shoot something you don’t need and carry you back.”

Charlie turned, suddenly feeling alive. “You like me. I can tell.”

Hannah snickered. “Wait till my sisters get a load of you.”

Charlie caught the double meaning and blushed. He wanted to swear he had a woman and he was loyal to her, but the vibes Hannah was throwing off were clear. He might be able to make a trade for his life. If he died, it didn’t matter if he’d been faithful.

“What if you don’t want to leave us when your mission is finished?” Hannah was keeping track of his thoughts and humoring him to get answers.

Charlie shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about it anyway. Everyone tells me I can’t stay, but I’m out here right now and I don’t have to go back if I don’t want to.” Charlie realized that was true and felt relief enter his heart. He could jump ship. No one could make him go to that island.

“It’s great to have that confirmed.” Hannah gestured at him. “Keep working on your personal issues. I’m just going to listen and take notes.”

Charlie went silent, refusing to think about anything.

Despite wanting the information, Hannah was relieved. The boy’s thoughts were full of alpha light and that was a powerful draw to ignore.

2

“Sounds like it’s sleeting.” Kenn had just woken.

Adrian groaned as he sat up. He stretched, moaning. “Bet the kid doesn’t feel like this when we wake him up.”

Kenn grunted, popping his back. “He’ll have a turn.”

“If he quits pissing off his mom and lives long enough.”

Kenn gave the expected chuckle, but he was tired, sore, cold. He wanted to be with Tonya in his tent. He missed having a warm body against him.

Adrian stood up. “Go wake the young prince, will ya? I’ll get food rolling if you want.”

Kenn didn’t mind. He needed to piss, and he wanted to check the perimeter to be certain it was okay to make another meal that would put off a lot of smells. “He might be up.” Kenn concentrated.

Adrian tensed, hands freezing on the kit. “Oh, shit.”

Kenn looked at him in panic. “I don’t have him. Not even a thought.”

“Neither do I.”

Both men flew up the stairs to find the front door open. Charlie was gone.

3

“They won’t come for me.” Charlie didn’t resist as the woman tied his hands behind his back. He was an Eagle. He knew how to get loose without a knife. *Those lessons, I paid attention to.*

“Tell me about your lessons, kid.” Janet smiled encouragement as Tisa secured him to a log near their small fire. The sisters were thrilled with what Hannah had caught while out hunting.

Camped inside a narrow cave, Hannah pulled a white tarp over the front, hiding the den. It was clever and reminded Charlie of the methods he and Becky had used during their fight with the government troops. He hadn’t noticed it until they were already here. The afternoon sun was glinting off the leftover snow and puddles, making it hard to see.

“I know you’re from Safe Haven.” Janet gestured in response to his tensing shoulders. “You have to be. You were traveling with Adrian Mitchel, the most wanted descendant on the planet—not that it means as much now. Most of the population has been thinned for the new order.”

Charlie frowned. “You’re New World Order supporters?” He peered up at the woman about to gag him. “Kinda hard to answer questions like that. Duh.”

Tisa flushed, lowering the gag. “I don’t like the sound of your voice.”

Instead of sending a nasty retort, Charlie dug in to find out why.

“Hey! Get outta there. Stop it!”

Janet and Hannah watched in amusement as their baby sibling and the teenager battled it out mentally. It was obvious who would win. The Safe Haven kid was grinning while he dug. Tisa was turning red and sweating. A thick bead rolled down her forehead and dripped to her cheek.

Charlie’s mouth dropped open. “You’re all fakes!”

Hannah and Janet let their laughter roll.

Tisa slapped him, knocking him over the log and into the dirt.

Charlie’s rage was fast. It flew out and enveloped Tisa in a flame wall that she only avoided by bringing up her personal shield. The heat rebounded, melting the frosty walls in a small boom of elements colliding.

Charlie drew it in, not struggling like he had back in camp. He awkwardly stood up and used his shoulder to wipe blood from his lip. “Never again. Do you understand?”

Tisa trembled, scared. The boy was stronger than her in every way.

Hannah pointed her gun at him.

Janet took her knife from the sheath.

Charlie waited for the fighting to start. He assumed he would be hurt, but all three of these women would be dead. He didn't want to do it, but he wouldn't be able to stop if they opened the door to that cage.

Hannah slowly lowered her gun, sliding it into the holster. She nodded at the tense women about to trigger a fight they couldn't win. "Remember who he is. We need him alive."

Safe Haven's son.

The alpha.

Angela!

Thoughts flew through the cave, bringing dread and excitement.

Charlie used a brief blast of heat on his bonds and snapped the charring ends. Angry and unsure of the best way to handle things, he glared at Janet. "You should take me back and make a deal. None of you will survive the fight when Adrian comes." There was no longer any reason to pretend otherwise. "He kills anyone who interferes with my mom. He won't care about your gender."

"If we can't handle this one, we can't capture Mitchel!" Janet snapped when Hannah hesitated. "I say we do it."

"Can we trade him?" Tisa asked suddenly, pulse pounding from keeping her shield in place. She didn't use it much.

Janet signaled toward the cave entrance. “Take yourself back.”

Charlie shook his head. “You kidnapped me. There has to be payment for that.”

“Adrian will make a deal.” Tisa was sure. “We’ll offer information on what’s headed for Safe Haven.”

“Why are you three here?” Charlie sat on the warmed log. “Get me something to drink and tell me your story. Maybe I can keep you alive.”

Janet waved Tisa to do it. She wanted the female to lower her shield and save her energy for bigger threats.

“What made you think you could do this?” Charlie regarded Hannah.

The tracker shrugged, not meeting his eyes. “We were drafted upon capture because we were tracking the threats around us so well they didn’t know we were there.”

Tisa dropped the canteen next to the boy and backed away. “We’ve been using our gifts to avoid our kind for years before the war. It was an accident.”

Charlie snickered. He drank from the canteen without fear. He was too valuable to kill. Thirsty, he drained it and let out a loud belch. “Excuse me.”

The women melted. Charlie felt their heat rush over him to sample more flavors than he wanted exposed at the moment. He jerked his shield into place. “What gives?!”

“You have manners.” Tisa knelt by him, no longer showing fear. “Are you a man yet, kid?”

Charlie’s cheeks flamed. He leaned away from her. “Ugh!”

“Are you scared of me now?” Tisa smirked.

Charlie blew out a breath. “You need a bath. I wouldn’t do you if you begged when you smell like that.”

Janet and Hannah hit the ground laughing.

Tisa drew back her hand.

Charlie waited, finger on the lock of the cage.

Tisa felt it coming. She stormed out of the cave instead, taking her kit along.

Charlie felt the other females evaluating him and wanted to respond, but he had paid attention to the hostage classes. Details needed to be worked out.

“You could say you’re here willingly.” Hannah gave him a look that sent heat into his knees. “We’ve been searching for a younger man who can be trained to please us and protect us. You fit the bill on most of that.”

Charlie opened his mouth to deny the claim.

“Stop pushing the kid.” Kendle ducked under the tarp to the cave entrance. “Just tell him you’re horny.”

Charlie grinned at the castaway. “That’s all they want? Funny.”

“Don’t need gifts to read the vibes in here. All we need is a pizza delivery outfit for you to wear and some bad music to make the video.” Kendle

dropped next to him as the two trackers grabbed for weapons. “Sit down or I’ll get mean.” Kendle flashed red orbs. “You won’t enjoy that side of me. It’s the reason I had to leave safety.” Letting her rage show was all Kendle could do with her gifts locked up, but the trackers didn’t know that. They assumed she had a stronger mental shield than they did.

Charlie knew, but Kendle was deadly without any weapons. She wasn’t bluffing about wanting to feel them bleed out over her hands.

Hannah did sit, encouraged by the sudden power in their midst. “What did you do?”

“She tried to kill my mom.” Charlie gave Kendle a hug. “Thanks for coming for me.”

Kendle shrugged, not returning the hug but not avoiding it either. “You were a friend to me there. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Charlie nodded. “And she’s my mom. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Kendle handed him her kit. “Sorry, kid. You knew we’d have a hate-hate relationship.”

“I had hoped you and Adrian would be happy together and leave my parents alone.” He dug through the bag, sure of what she wanted. He handed her the bottle of cool beer and kept digging. “Guess nothing works out exactly as we plan.”

Kendle snorted. “Not even close. I’m supposed to be on Pitcairn with Luke.” She dropped her head. “I made him leave. I never should have done that.”

“They say you’ll feel better once you talk about it.” They were both ignoring their hosts.

Kendle looked over at him. “Do you feel better after discussing Tracy’s abuse?”

Charlie growled. “No! I hate that saying.”

“Exactly.” Kendle began to drink, finally shifting her attention to the two tense females in the cave. She wiped her mouth on her bloodstained sleeve. “Did they hurt you?” Kendle was eager for an excuse to spill blood. The need had returned in force as soon as she left camp.

“We didn’t!” Janet hurried to answer.

Kendle waited for Charlie’s response.

“No.”

“What about the skank out there trying to run a brush through her hair? She the one who hit you?”

Charlie grinned. “I really got to her.”

Janet nodded. “We tease her a lot about her appearance. You hit a sore spot.”

“Are you really sisters?” he asked, taking out a pot. Kendle was hungry and she wasn’t a good cook.

“We are. Tisa was adopted.” Hannah shrugged. “We love her like one. Please don’t mistake an easy target for removal. We’ll all die together.”

Kendle rose to the challenge, hand going to her knife. She wanted to feel the blood.

Charlie put a calming hand on her wrist as Janet and Hannah once again reached for their weapons. “Easy.”

Kendle didn't want to sit, but she did, feeling new arrivals. "Wow. He's pissed."

Charlie walked toward the cave entrance. "Yeah. He didn't like me leaving, on my own, without telling anyone."

Kendle took the hint, but she didn't understand why he was doing it. She also didn't care. This was a brief stop for her to help a friend. She would be gone again shortly.

The two females in the cave breathed a sigh of relief as they realized the boy was going to cover for them.

Adrian and Kenn came from the woods around the cave, pushing Tisa ahead of them.

"Guess we didn't need a hostage to trade after all." Kenn came forward. He shoved Tisa into the mud. "Stay."

The woman did, shivering. It was clear what kind of man Kenn was. She hadn't had time to evaluate Adrian because she'd been too scared of his guard. They hadn't known his security was also a descendant.

Hannah found Adrian to be the bigger problem. They hadn't been told he was strong or that he was an alpha. She looked at Charlie. "Now I know why you weren't worried about being out in the open."

Charlie laughed. "They're a little rough around the edges, all right."

Kenn lifted the tarp and jerked an edge of it down to let light stream in. He did a fast scan, nodded at Charlie, then paused. "Who hit him?"

All three trackers froze. Tisa almost wet herself. Charlie waved it off. “Lessons learned, right?” Kenn snorted and went to stand watch.

Charlie joined Adrian at the tarp. “I want to let them go. What would mom say?”

Everyone waited for that answer. Kendle—in anticipation of a mother’s rage, and the trackers—in terror of the same.

Adrian began a deep scan of the women, shoving aside the hasty fluff images that tried to blind him. “Are they corrupt? That’s how she makes all choices like this.”

Charlie sighed. “They’ve done things she wouldn’t like, but inside, I think they’re like Kendle, lost.”

Kendle refused to look at anyone as the teenager pinpointed her emotional turmoil. She didn’t want to need people. She just did.

“Based on that, she would probably speak with them and do a deeper search.” Adrian dug harder as the trackers resisted. “What she found would determine their fate.”

“I want them to live.” Charlie smiled at the younger girl in the mud who had managed to tame her hair a little. “I like them.”

Kendle rolled her eyes.

Adrian chuckled distractedly. He’d found something and was prying at the edges. “Then your mom probably would too, but she’d insist they pay for their crimes. Nothing would stand in the way of that.”

“Only in camp.” Charlie straightened his shoulders. “Out here, we’re on our own.”

“You’re an idiot if you believe that, kid.” Kendle knew better. “The three nastiest fighters from Safe Haven are with you, protecting your reckless ass. She’d be pissed these skanks thought they could take her son.”

“We didn’t know who he was!” Janet tried to lie.

Kendle sneered at her. “It’s funny you think that matters.”

“Does she have to find out?” Hannah pointed at Adrian. “We wanted you.”

“You were sent for me?” Adrian distracted them and pried harder, forcing the women to defend and think at the same time. All rookies had a hard time with that.

“We were given a list of targets. We chose you.”

“Why?”

“Absolution and entry.” Charlie scanned lightly while they were distracted. “They want to be a part of the light.”

“Figures.” Kendle grumbled. “Damn place infects people it hasn’t even touched.”

Adrian couldn’t help the pride. “I built it to do that. Your mom magnified it. We might even reach around the world now.”

Hannah shook her head, tone dropping into true fear for the first time. “The UN has that honor. They’re everywhere.”

Adrian used the moment. He yanked on Hannah's weakened mental weld and snapped it. "You liars!" He shoved to his feet as the women cringed. "It's a trap and we fell for it."

"Kenn didn't." Charlie pointed to where the Marine was vanishing into the trees. He'd either heard Adrian or their company arriving.

Charlie looked to Adrian for orders.

So did Kendle.

The two trackers ran out of the cave in the chaos, grabbing Tisa from her hovering position at the base of a tree.

Engines echoed. Fading blue and white vehicles rolled through the trees and yards, surrounding the cave entrance. Troops also came in on foot, trying to ensure no escapes.

Inside the cave, the trio flashed hand codes in a fast plan that Adrian had no faith in succeeding. The enemy had the upper hand.

"Come from 'ze hole, our wanted captives."

Adrian blanched. "German. Great."

Charlie didn't understand and ignored it, trying to read their minds.

Kendle frowned. "That's such a stereotype."

Adrian shrugged. "Stereotypes come from the truth. What's wrong with the truth?"

"Come from ze hole now!"

Adrian nodded to Charlie. "Like I told you, and make sure she screams when you hit her so it will pull the others away from us. They won't expect you to target the women."

The boy was now eager to hunt the trackers. He slipped to the entrance to be ready.

Kendle had no patience for plans. She stepped by them and went out with her hands on her knife hilts. “What’s my name?”

Adrian frowned as the screams started. “I told you to wait!” He rushed out and began grabbing lifeforces while UN troops fired useless bullets that bounced off his shield.

He found Kendle in the center of the troops, slicing and dicing while grinning like a madman. He started to shield her, but realized it wasn’t needed. Troops were stunned by her lack of fear as she marched up to them and slit throats, gutted stomachs.

Kendle slammed her hands into the guts she’d just opened and yanked. She slung it toward the three trackers. “You’re next!”

Hannah and Janet took off running.

Tisa slid behind the remaining cluster of troops who were finally lifting guns to fire.

Charlie sent a powerful blast of fire, catching most of those men. Screams changed to shrieks as Kendle stepped into the dying flames with her knives.

Tisa took off behind her sisters, terrified of being hit in the back by the boy’s fire.

Kendle ducked swings and frantic shots, almost feeling bad for the patrol. They clearly hadn’t known who they were coming for or they wouldn’t have lost so easily. She’d been hoping, just for an

instant, that one of them would be able to kill her and keep her from getting back to Safe Haven.

Charlie took off after the three trackers who'd betrayed him. Like his mother, he wasn't going to let anyone do that to him without repaying the favor.

In the middle of scanning for wounded, Adrian shouted at him, but the boy kept going.

Furious, Adrian ran over and grabbed Kendle from her fun. "Come on!"

Kendle kept a hold of the guts in her hand, letting the momentum yank them free of the screaming UN man as Adrian dragged her after their reckless ward.

4

"Keep going!" Janet shoved her slower sister, gasping for air. "He's coming!"

The steps behind them were heavy, unrelenting thumps of vengeance. All the women assumed Adrian was catching up to them and he was very, very angry.

Waves of fury shot out again, crippling nearby animals with fear. All wildlife went still, allowing their pursuer to track the only movement on his grid. Them.

"Here!" Hannah ducked into a sewer tunnel, hoping it would come up in the city ahead. They could get lost in there. Farm land was too open.

The women ran down another tunnel, trying not to be loud.

Footsteps splashed behind them.

“He’s coming!”

“Shhh.” Hannah pushed them into a filthy corner with heavy shadows, controlling her breathing. Together, they brought up a shield that was intertwined.

Footsteps came, louder, sharper.

Tisa gasped as a male shadow broke away and came straight toward them.

“Mercy!” she cried, sliding to her knees inside the shield.

Charlie shook his head, stopping in front of them. “Denied.”

Janet breathed a sigh of relief. “The kid! It’s the kid!”

“Get going!” Hannah ordered, letting the shield go. “He’s not the threat!”

Charlie slammed them all with his alpha wave. It was the first time he’d ever used it.

All three women stilled, then rotated toward him against their will. Their eyes were horrified, but their bodies obeyed.

Charlie grinned, barely winded while they gasped and wheezed. His demon loved to hunt. “We’re going to have a fun night, ladies. Walk back out of this sewer and turn south.”

The three trackers obeyed, silently begging him to let go.

Charlie tightened his hold instead, reminded of the scorpion story his mom had told during a descendant meeting with the kids. “You knew what

I was when you picked me up. Not my fault you can't handle the sting."

5

"He won't do it." Kendle pointed at a footprint and kept going. "You know he won't."

Adrian listened for pursuers. He didn't expect many. Even he was a bit shocked by Kendle going all *I need a blood bath*.

"I'm telling you, he's in trouble."

Adrian glared at her. "Just tell Angela you're sorry and she'll let you back in so she can keep trying to change you. Babysitting the boy isn't going to help you."

Kendle's lips drew into a thin line.

"Finally!" Adrian had tired of her chatter an hour ago. He had begun to be worried over Charlie's absence not long after. The sun was setting. It would hurt him if anything happened to the kid.

"I saw that frown. You feel it too." Kendle shut up as Adrian turned another nasty glower her way.

Adrian narrowed his lids against the sun. "There he is."

Both adults stopped in surprise as they realized the three trackers were walking with him.

"They aren't restrained."

"Actually, they are." Adrian recognized the alpha pull. "His mom is gonna be so mad at me."

Sighing, Adrian gestured toward a nearby farmhouse. “Let’s get the details so I can have an excuse while she’s frying me.”

“Why is it bad?” Kendle hated not being able to read his thoughts.

“Charlie knows he’s an alpha now. He’ll use it again.”

“Against Angela?”

Adrian grunted.

Kendle grinned. “Knew I liked that kid. But he didn’t kill them. I was right.”

“No one said you were wrong.” Adrian led the way into the farmhouse, picking up Charlie’s new confidence and his new fears. “Watch the zombie squad, will you? We men need to talk.”

Adrian went to the kitchen while Kendle pointed toward the dusty couch and was obeyed. She stared, realizing their eyes were responding. The trackers were obviously terrified the boy wasn’t going to let go of them, that they would die this way.

Kendle stepped forward, letting her orbs bleed red.

Tisa fainted.

Janet wet herself.

Hannah mentally screamed for Charlie.

The boy came flying into the room and shoved Kendle away from them.

Coming to the doorway, Adrian let out a derisive sound. “And that’s the problem with using the alpha wave on someone. It doesn’t just effect them.”

Charlie groaned. “Now he tells me!”

Kendle picked herself up off the floor. “This is the best apocalypse reality show ever.”

Adrian snorted. “Yeah, the director has some sense of humor.” He waved at Charlie. “If you can drag yourself away, Kendle will get them settled until we’re done talking.”

Charlie followed, embarrassed. He’d been running to their defense before he knew what was going on.

“Your mom fights that feeling every time a camp member is upset.” Adrian pulled out a chair for the boy and took the one across from him. “It’s time you got the full story of our origins and of what I did, of the choices I forced your mom into. I want you to witness it through my eyes, so you’ll understand she didn’t pick them over you. Without them, you wouldn’t have a future. You’ll get that if you’re brave enough to see the full story.”

Charlie held out his hand so they could touch, making the connection stronger. He was ready to hear it now, though he was worried over leaving the trackers alone with Kenn and Kendle.

Adrian clasped his wrist. “In the beginning, the garden was peaceful. I screwed that up. You and your dad were always right. It’s my fault.”

Kendle wanted to listen to the story, but she’d been given a job. She did it without roughness or compassion, once again tossed into her own head. She’d cared for Luke this way before he died. It was haunting. It was also easier to spend the time

thinking about their moments than it was to contemplate what waited for her after this. She'd been going north to unearth what the animal herds were up to because no one else was and she needed a goal to keep her from ending her own life. Now, that seemed a substandard reason to go on living, making this a dangerous time for her enemies and for her companions.

Chapter Thirty-One
Like A Cult

1

“**T**hey’re scared again.” Charlie twisted to look over his shoulder. “What’s she doing?”

“What she was told.” Adrian let go of the boy’s wrist. He’d seen a lot of it, but his youth and new bond with the trackers was distracting him. “*Charlie.*”

The boy snapped around at the alpha tone. “Don’t you dare!”

“They have to die.” Adrian tried to be compassionate. “You can’t keep them.”

Charlie moaned as if he were in pain.

“They tried to kill us after their trap failed. They would have killed you when you found them. You saw it in their minds.”

The teenager clenched his fists, fighting the pull of the terrified women and Adrian’s alpha strength in his mind.

Adrian stopped. He let go and tiredly stood up. “They knew you couldn’t do it. So does your mom. She didn’t send you out here to collect a harem or to take lifeforces.”

“What do you want from me!” Charlie’s face was red, body tense. He was on the edge of flight.

“For you to understand the big picture.” Adrian pointed at the doorway. “Your mom would use them against our enemies and let them have a quick death when the time came.”

“I know that!” Charlie lunged to his feet. Spittle flew from his mouth. “That’s why I want to stay! I’ll never live up to her expectations. I’m like Kevin!”

“Yes.” Adrian got a dusty glass from the cabinet and swiped it out with his inner shirt. “She doesn’t want those things for you. Your mom would be happy if you were a satisfied, sheltered member of camp. She doesn’t want you in the Eagles. She never did.”

“Because I can’t cut it.”

Adrian watched the anger and shame thrum through the kid like a live wire and chose to be honest. “No. She doesn’t want you to be too easy, like me or too hard, like your dad. To be an Eagle, you’d have to change, and she doesn’t want that.”

“You’re her little boy.” Kenn came to the table and deposited the weapons the females had been carrying. “I used to give you a lot of shit about being a man and standing on your own. She coddled you. Now you’re caught between the two and don’t know where you belong.” Kenn opened his mind to the angry boy. “I really am sorry for that. So is your mom. That’s part of why we’re out here while she works herself to death for people who wouldn’t do the same for her.”

Adrian wanted to correct that but didn't. Many of Safe Haven's people *were* users and takers who would run when things got ugly. Only alpha powers and shields kept them with the group.

"Then how can she still love them?!"

Charlie's shout startled them all and drew attention from the other people in their unwilling group.

"Why does *she* have to do it at all? Can't she just be my mom?!"

And the truth shall set us free, Adrian thought. None of them had been certain why Charlie was out here. They'd all had assumptions and been digging, but that bone was laid bare now.

"You want things back to how they were before." Kenn was disgusted with himself. "That's my fault. You're not supposed to want that for her."

"Yeah." Charlie felt another flood of fear from the trackers and let out an ugly sound of desperation. "Help me, you sack of shit!"

Kenn stared at the boy, hating Angela more than he ever had in that moment. Not only was his fear confirmed, he agreed with her on what needed to happen now. "You won't like how I do it."

"I never have, but it worked for us." Charlie used his anger to replace the courage he was missing. "Just do it, you woman-beating bastard!"

Kenn sighed, standing up. "When this is all over, tell your mom we're even."

Before Charlie could answer, Kenn slapped him.

The hard hit knocked Charlie into the cabinet and sent him to the floor.

Kenn leaned down, bringing up the old side of him that never seemed to die. “This is what your mom went through to become a timid little mouse.” He slapped the dazed boy again. “You want her cowered in a corner? Being meek and obedient?” Kenn delivered another hard slap. “Get on your feet, mouse! If she can do it, you definitely can!”

Charlie spit out blood, fury rising as he got to his feet. He glowered at Kenn. “Better hit me harder because I do want her sitting quietly—while my dad leads!”

Kenn put real heat into the next blow.

Tears ran from Charlie’s eyes, but he stayed on his feet.

“You learned that women are to be seen and never heard from, but those sentiments are wrong. Let it go and step up—become a man out here and she’ll forgive you for feeling that way.”

“My dad should be the leader! She’s a woman!” Charlie screamed it. “You told me that! You said that!”

Slap! “I was wrong. So are you.”

Adrian kept a shield over the pair, hoping Kendle wouldn’t interfere. She’d grown fond of Charlie since her arrival at Safe Haven, but Angela had sent him out here for this lesson and others. *She must have always known how Charlie felt about her being in leadership, Adrian realized. She lived with*

it for a long time, hoping he would change on his own.

“But now we’re leaving!” Kenn growled. “And she needs this little snot beaten into shape. She’s tried everything else, including letting him put the camp whore under a charm!”

Adrian frowned, pinning the bloody boy with a ruthless gaze that demanded the truth. “You copied me.”

Charlie snarled. “No! I did what she did when they were young. And it worked!”

“That’s not free will.” Adrian sighed, dragging his chair over to the window so he could watch for problems. “What a mess.”

Kenn took a hold of Charlie’s shirt like he would have in the past, but there was no true menace behind it now. He no longer hated the boy or suspected him of hiding anything. It was easier to let it go.

Charlie stifled a sob. “Even you don’t care about me anymore or you’d keep hitting me until I came around.”

“What if he no longer believes that beating someone is always the answer?”

Charlie snorted at Adrian. “Kenn? Yeah, right.”

Kenn could almost feel Angela watching them, waiting for the final snap that had to happen. *I don’t want to do this.*

You were happy enough to do it for fun when you had control, Angela reminded him. *Now, you’re doing it to save him, to please your leader and your*

idol. The intentions always matter, Grunt. Now finish it. I need you here.

Kenn slapped the boy again, letting the Marine come forward to handle the chore. “You are an abused, lazy, naive, spoiled brat!” Kenn reached down and grabbed the cringing teenager. “I love you. So does your mom, Marc, and the asshole in the room with us. We’ve been working on you all along. Now, it’s time you had the same respect.” Kenn shoved him toward the door. “Go finish your chores.”

Charlie staggered from the kitchen, bleeding and crying. He felt like he might never stop. In twelve years, Kenn had never said *I love you*. Tears streamed over the child’s cheeks.

“Well, that sucked.” Kenn swiveled around to discover Adrian was also crying. He scowled. “What the hell?”

Adrian sniffled, wiping at his face. “It was a beautiful intervention.”

Kenn waved an annoyed finger and stomped from the room.

Adrian let himself feel the innocent emotion, reveling in the freedom of being able to pick what kind of person he wanted to be now. It would have been easier to go crazy after his banishment, to convince camp followers that Angela had stolen leadership from him. Instead, he was serving her in the best way he could—by helping her three biggest problems settle their issues before they got on the boat.

Adrian tensed as Angela's cold laughter echoed. *He thinks he isn't included in it. Hilarious!*

Adrian got up and followed Charlie, no longer reveling.

Charlie went out to the front porch, where the trackers were tied to the rail. He drew his gun.

Adrian joined them. "He knows what you meant by chores, right?"

Kenn shrugged. He didn't care if it had been taken wrong. Charlie couldn't do it. He would never be an Eagle.

Charlie let go of the bond on all of them. The reminder of his past had shaken him. He didn't want to be like Kenn or Adrian. "Tell me your story and include the details. After, we'll go and your masters will show up to help you. Or don't, and I'll leave while the bastard ends your lives right here—in your birthday suits on a strange porch."

Neither Eagle knew who Charlie was referring to, but both presumed it was him. They looked away as Kendle came forward to help the boy get the information they needed.

The hard Marines retreated into the front room, inwardly wincing at the groans as Kendle took up a killing hold on the youngest female. Her need to feel blood was rushing over the area in thick waves that brought chills and reminded Adrian of their other problem. He hoped Angela had an answer for the sick kids headed to Safe Haven because he didn't. He'd never envisioned their enemy stooping to this level. He had no defense.

“She’ll cover it.” Kenn motioned for quiet.
“They’re talking now. Hush.”

Adrian frowned, wanting to say he hadn’t been talking at all.

“They’re colonizing America—all of it. South, North, and us.”

“Start from the beginning.” Charlie tapped his gun against the post to indicate his lack of patience. He was telling the trackers he would look away while Kendle killed them. It was believable after listening to the beating he’d just taken.

“The United Nations leaders want one-world control.”

“We know that. Move on!” Kendle pulled out a single strand of hair.

“Ow!” Janet spat at Kendle.

Charlie held up a hand when Kendle would have retaliated.

“To have a one-world government, they have to control all the land masses! They’ve been wreaking havoc across the eastern half of the planet for decades, but they couldn’t get to us!” Janet hurried to answer, no longer viewing the boy as an innocent to be taken advantage of. Despite knowing who he was related to, they’d all underestimated him. “After our war, they decided to finish it. They’ve been successful in the last ten months.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you saying the Americas are the only land masses the UN doesn’t control now?”

Hannah shook her head, grunting. “They’re here and trying to take over. They’ve figured out the secret to winning every war. He who controls the food, controls the people—forever.”

Kenn lurked in the doorway. “That’s not possible. The United Nations is...was, made up of a hundred plus countries.”

Janet frowned. “A council assembly was ordered. The rules for governing were amended. Those who voted no were killed in their seats. Over there, even in the civil areas, leaders were dying in record numbers before the war. No one questioned the explanations they were given. When the new assembly started taking over, they told people their ways had always been the law, but western leaders had refused to follow it because then people would all be equals to the tyrants.”

“Wow. I bet that went down smooth.” Kenn was disheartened by what they were learning. “We’ve been fighting to survive and keep our traditions alive, and the rest of the planet has been plotting to make us slaves.” He blew out a frustrated raspberry. “It’s all shit now.”

“Don’t stop.” Charlie tapped the gun faster.

Hannah swallowed. “Some places and people are still fighting, but some, like Germany, were hit hard. They’re desperate for food. When the UN convoys came, offering food for signatures, men and women did it without reading the documents. Days later, those same convoys returned and conscripted the people who signed. Most of them

went willingly because the food was gone by then and they were desperate again. A few months in training set their minds to the goal: bring all rogue nations into the fold so everyone can eat twice a day and have medicines.”

“After months of that, they probably feel like they’ve been saved, and they don’t know why anyone else wouldn’t want that too, right?” Charlie was following the adult thoughts and reaching solid conclusions, but he was still tapping his gun against the rail. “Like a cult.”

Hannah shivered as the wind blew over her bare skin. “Yes. It confuses us.”

“So you were trained.” Kendle pointed out. “How did that happen?”

“Stop.” Charlie didn’t want their personal stories. “Let her finish this one first.”

Hannah kept talking. “They’ve been busy in all the big places, even Canada, but America is different than the rest of the world. The southern half has been abused so much that it defends itself violently, even when it doesn’t have to. The UN couldn’t make deals with them for food because they have the fertile ground the assembly needs to gain control, as do we. They also couldn’t turn tribes against each other because that’s already been done, and the separations are complete. The Mexicans aren’t going to accept a one-world order any more than we will.” Hannah regarded Charlie, pleading, “Please. I don’t want to die here, like this.”

“Keep talking.” He didn’t cave.

Hannah slumped against the rough, icy wood. “Direct invasions were ruled out due to the lack of troops. It takes months to train people and they have to be monitored afterwards to keep them from reverting when they witness something they normally wouldn’t have allowed. Graduates from the program were put on ships in harbors and kept to strict routines to ensure success of the plan they finally agreed on.”

“One leader or groups?” Kenn wanted to know.

“Groups. The worst the UN has to offer. All the troops they had to lock down before, all the trouble makers and killers. All the restless descendants who were considering taking over—they were put on ships in harbors to wait for orders.”

“When was Dirce sent?” Kendle was trying to count how many troops might be here or were coming. “And how many boats were sent and when?”

“Don’t!” Hannah sucked in air as Kendle tightened her grip on Tisa. “It was a two stage plan! The troops on the ships were the final invasion force to colonize all of the Americas. Part one was already in the works when our war ended the world. They’d sent the best trackers and fighters here to collect the power before the invasion so we would be defenseless. They’re working on South America now. We’ve progressed much faster.”

“More sellouts up here.”

“Less jungles up here.” Adrian corrected Kenn’s impression. “Sellouts are everywhere,

especially if they're starving and the enemy offers food for their dying kids."

Kenn nodded, accepting that. If he and Tonya starved, he wouldn't budge, but he already knew he couldn't let his child go out like that. "I'd kill the messenger, then eat him or her."

"And that's why they couldn't invade." Kendle was good at guessing, even without her gifts. "We tamed a savage land and it hasn't been that long. We're still tough."

Kenn shrugged. "I've often thought it was the drive to find the next great thing, to bring the next advancement, that makes us different."

"You c-can't think like that if you have no hope." Janet's teeth were chattering. "We were raised that we can do anything if we set our minds to it. Others are b-beaten with hatred and rituals that keep them from learning there's another way."

"All of that and more." Hannah knew death was coming and she was terrified. The longer she talked, the longer she got to live. "But it wouldn't have succeeded if not for the chemicals our government liked to play with."

Adrian thought of his notebooks, and of discussing this fear with Angela. He'd just assumed *their* government would do it.

"What are the chances your dad was converted or blackmailed?" Kenn asked suddenly, looking at Adrian.

"As much as I'd love to be excused from that weight, no. He always preached one-world control

and complained about not using nuclear power to settle every country into a forced peace. He liked the idea of utopia, but he couldn't follow those rules."

"The affairs?"

Adrian nodded at Kendle's query. Milton's scandals had been well known. "He wasn't trustworthy long before the UN came up crazy." Adrian's eyes widened in dismay, head cocking. "She said *wouldn't have succeeded*... They've enacted phase two." He went out to the porch. "The harbor ships are on the way?"

Hannah grinned up at him, showing her true self. "And there's nothing your alpha can do to stop it. We'll all be equals in the future. Utopia will exist!"

"How long were you in captivity?" Charlie was able to see them for what they were now. "On vacation there when the war came?"

"We were starving in that hotel and we couldn't go out or we'd be killed for being American!" Janet shouted. "We survived when they killed all the others. They dragged them through the streets until their bodies ripped apart!"

Kendle put her free hand on the woman's shoulder. "Shush now."

The tracker stilled.

"That's how they got you!" Kenn glowered. "How did they get to Market Town?"

"That's phase two." Adrian was reading the thoughts under the false answers. "One, was getting

our own government to come out of their holes so they could be killed.”

“We did that for them.” Kenn lifted a brow. “Right?”

“Not all the way. Benjamin hated Safe Haven, but he would have left us alone if not for someone stirring him up.” Adrian nodded at the trackers. “Tell us how they did it and the next step, and we’ll be done. It’s chilly out here.”

Hannah shook her head, refusing.

Kendle’s grip tightened on Tisa, making it hard for the younger tracker to breathe.

Janet couldn’t take it. She loved her sisters. “The assembly took over nuclear capabilities of all countries under their control, then sent messages to our bunkers that they wouldn’t fire if the descendants were handed over. They especially wanted the children.” Janet shuddered, twisting against her bonds. “It was weeks after the war and our government was in chaos. Pushing them to agree was easy.”

“Benjamin agreed to one-world order?”

“We were told so, but they shipped us here a few days later, so we didn’t get to see the video of it like we did with other countries.” Janet stared at Charlie, silently pleading for mercy.

Charlie stood up. “What else do we need from them? Troops are heading this way.”

“Are you part of stage one or two?” Kendle asked, letting go of the girl.

“Stage one!” Janet hurried to answer so Tisa wouldn’t be grabbed again. “We were sent to unearth the descendants the foreign trackers couldn’t ferret out because they don’t know the layout of the land like we do.”

“Why aren’t you with Safe Haven?” Kenn asked. “You could have asked for sanctuary.”

Hannah shook her head. “We got scared the alpha would see through us. We can’t be responsible for bringing down the entire plan.”

“So you chose to lurk on the outskirts, waiting for unwary descendants?” Kendle looked down at the younger tracker for an answer.

Tisa glared at her. “We thought we would be spared if we brought in someone big.”

“Like you!” Janet sneered at Kendle.

“And we have.” Hannah breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction. “They see us; they see all of you. Even if we die, we helped.”

The sisters smiled at each other as best they could from their positions on the porch rail.

Adrian put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder and led the boy away.

Charlie was no longer torn, but he couldn’t view it or he would still interfere. He slipped his Walkman out of his pocket and put in the earbuds. *I won’t be responsible for blowing the entire thing, either. When I go back to my mom, it’ll be with my head up in triumph or I won’t go back at all.*

Adrian patted him on the shoulder and stayed close.

Kenn and Kendle killed the three trackers while their masters observed.

Gunshots echoed.

Adrian heard running feet and got Charlie into the small den he'd chosen while waiting for the boy to come to the conclusions the adults had. It was close, so it would be overlooked.

Kenn and Kendle fell in with them, not speaking.

Charlie ignored the blood on their hands and kept listening to his music. *Some people have to die. My dad told me that, but I didn't really understand at all until now.*

This time, Kendle patted him on the shoulder, leaving a bloody print.

Charlie wore it like an awful badge of honor, because it was. He'd just lost another level of his youth, his innocence, and it hurt.

2

“We have to go south.” Charlie passed his canteen to Kendle so she could wash her hands before eating. He sent her an image and made a gagging gesture.

Adrian laughed as she snatched the canteen and did what the boy wanted. They'd been here for about an hour now, waiting for trouble and talking about what to do next.

“No, we can’t.” Kenn shrugged at the questioning looks. “She sent us out on a mission. We haven’t accomplished it.”

“We have to warn her about the UN plans.” Charlie’s voice rose. “A test of manhood isn’t important compared to that.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Kenn was tired of trying to get through to the stubborn teenager. “We’re the same bad people who had to be sent away. If we go back now, she has to deny us entry. We’ll become refugees.”

“She wouldn’t do that to her own son.” Kendle had felt Angela’s love for the children who weren’t hers. There was no way she would abandon her biological son while she went traipsing around the world. “Besides, he had a breakthrough. She’d let him in.”

“Maybe.” Kenn wasn’t sure on the rest of them, though. “But she wants all of us to redeem ourselves and I have an idea.”

No one wanted to trust Kenn, but they couldn’t argue with his logic.

“What’s the idea?” Adrian handed Kenn a bowl of rice and beef. The UN troops had gone by and hadn’t come back, but they’d only viewed half a dozen wounded survivors in that group anyway. Adrian didn’t think those men would keep sniffing around.

Kenn took the bowl and sat back. “The refugee wave.”

“What about it?” Kendle perked up, scenting blood.

“I think we should eliminate it.” Kenn braced for their responses.

“I’m in.” Kendle thought it was a great idea.

Charlie didn’t. “You’re nuts.”

Kenn shrugged. “We’re the meanest people in the Eagles. Even the kid here can make ugly plans. I say we protect Safe Haven in the ways Angela can’t allow from Eagles and the camp.”

Kendle took her bowl with an eager nod and cleaner hands. “What do we do with the kid? He’s not a killer.”

“Of women.” Kenn flashed an image of the basement kills. “He doesn’t have a problem snatching the lifeforce of a man.”

Kendle scooped up a large fork of food. “Life is life. The gender doesn’t matter.”

“I know and so does Adrian, but the boy is a rookie.” Kenn also scooped up a large bite. “I’d bet he would if it were life or death.”

“Will it be?” Adrian demanded, using his alpha command.

Kenn peered into the future. “They know we’re leaving. They’ll send everything they have at us now.”

“Let me get this straight. You want us to earn our way back in by being killers, after we were removed for that.” Kendle frowned at him.

Kenn nodded slowly, coming back. “Can you think of a better way into her heart than to defend her people?”

Adrian shook his head. “No, I can’t. Tell us your plan and we’ll go from there.”

“Well, we almost have a kill team here, us, the half pint, and the queen of blood.” Kenn sat his bowl down and leaned forward. “I was thinking we’d pull a Mad Max.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Change Is A Harsh Event

1

“**W**hy are we stopping so soon?” Charlie came up to the front of the vehicles to join Adrian and Kenn. “Safe Haven is leaving in two days. We need to keep rolling south and set things up. Why are we going east?”

Kenn shook his head and went to his cold truck, wondering how Tonya was doing without him.

Left to deal with the upset teenager, Adrian pointed west. “That’s where we belong. Your mom can’t let us back in.”

“I can go in.” He arrogantly displayed the bruises he’d received from Kenn.

This time, Adrian walked away. Charlie still didn’t get it. They were all outcasts until she called.

“My mom wouldn’t do that to me!”

“She would if you’ve forced her into a corner with bad behavior. This way, you’re not officially banished, but you’re removed. Almost perfect.”

“Almost?” Charlie was shocked to discover he now understood why she’d done it and he didn’t need to cause a scene over it. *Wow. I’m changing. ...is that for the better?*

“Almost perfect, because you’re with us. She didn’t want you out here at all. She came across this broken land to find you and keep you out of situations like this one.” Adrian pissed and got back into his vehicle. “Ride with me and we’ll talk.”

Charlie wanted to stay mad but being out here like this was reminding him of the time when he’d briefly wished Adrian was his dad, back when he’d only had Kenn to look forward to every day.

“You feel guilty over that, but you really shouldn’t.” Adrian tried to soothe the issues between them. “If Kenn hadn’t been like he is, you might have been happy with him instead of searching for a substitute. That isn’t your fault.”

“My mom said that too.”

“She should know.” Adrian frowned. “She suffered him in ways that you were spared.”

“She did it to keep me at first.” Charlie sighed. “Then she was scared of not being able to feed me and take care of me. This is all my fault.”

“Love isn’t a fault or something you blame people for. It just happens, and we have to deal with the fallout.”

Charlie snorted at the unintended pun. “We’re doing that.”

Adrian laughed. “We’ll get some food in you when we stop again.”

“What?”

“You sound like an adult. It’s scaring me.”

Charlie snickered. *I’ve done some adult things now. That helps.*

Adrian's smile faded. "Yeah. We should talk about that too."

"Why?" The teenager went into instant defense mode.

"Because you've made a lifetime commitment at fifteen, without the approval of any number of descendants who could have looked ahead and told you it was a bad idea." Adrian turned a dark glare on the boy. "You could have just fucked her for a while."

Charlie went red. "It's not like that. Don't talk about Tracy that way."

"I'm referring to you." Adrian pulled the truck into an apartment complex, thinking it was ironic that they'd all chosen temporary dens so close to each other. "You've stolen her life and you can't even do the right thing and give it back."

"I didn't steal anything." Charlie intentionally misunderstood. "I'm not a thief."

"But you are. Tracy needed time to recover and pick her future. You knew she wanted to be an Eagle before the attack and you were afraid she would still want it later. That would put her out there with other Eagles—older, better looking men who will always know more than you. So you knocked her up. You stole her life."

Charlie couldn't deny it to his former idol. He stared out the window at the broken neighborhood.

"When you made that choice, you crossed a line." Adrian shifted into park and shut off the engine. "You became like me."

“Who did you knock up?”

“I did the opposite. I blinded your mom to any other future than the one she has now.”

Charlie struggled to detect differences, not wanting to be like Adrian. “She’ll end up saving the world. Doesn’t that make your choice okay?”

Adrian began gathering loose items into his kit. “You tell me. If Tracy goes on to be the new top den mother like you’re hoping, and she helps a hundred kids in her lifetime to have happy futures, does that make your choice okay?”

“Y...” Charlie hung his head. “No.”

“That’s good.” Adrian opened the door. “We’ll keep working on it.”

“But there isn’t time!” Charlie blurted. “No one can change in just two days.”

Adrian’s brows shifted in bitterness. “Don’t believe that, kid. Change is a harsh event that only needs seconds to occur. It’s our adjustment to it that takes months or years.”

Charlie followed the team to the door of an apartment on the end, feeling it when Adrian and Kenn went on alert. Charlie didn’t notice anything. His gifts weren’t working right today.

“Great.” A woman’s voice came from the other side of the door. “I should have known Angela wasn’t going to leave me alone.”

Adrian grinned as Kendle groaned.

Nancy opened the door and stood with her hand on her hip. “What?”

Charlie laughed, drawing her attention.

Nancy's eyes narrowed. "What's Bambi doing out of the thicket?"

Kenn and Kendle both brayed laughter like donkeys.

Charlie flushed.

Adrian came forward and kissed Nancy's cheek. "It has nothing to do with you. She doesn't know where we are."

Nancy let out a weary sigh. "Am I the kid, now? I'm supposed to believe that?"

Everyone realized she'd been aware of them before they'd been aware of her. Adrian lifted a brow.

Nancy shrugged, eyes glowing. "It took."

Adrian kissed her again, thrilled. He whispered something to her and then backed away. "Please?"

Nancy nodded, attitude changing. "How long will you be here?" She retreated to allow them inside.

Charlie tried to scan her to discover what had changed her mind and couldn't. She wasn't blocking him. He just couldn't see into her mind like he was used to doing.

Kendle strode by them all, going to check out the apartment and alley behind it.

Kenn stayed with Adrian, waiting for orders. If not for missing Tonya and some of the civilization in camp, Kenn wouldn't be so unhappy with being out of the thicket.

"Just a base for a day."

Nancy nodded at Adrian's answer, closing and latching the door. "Go out the back and move the trucks around."

Kenn and Adrian did as instructed.

Nancy stared after them, shocked by the immediate obedience, then she smiled at herself. They were Eagles. They would have done it without being told. They were just being polite and recognizing this as her space.

Nancy went to the kitchen she'd set up, sure that's where they would all gravitate to. When you were on runs, food, coffee and sleep were the first things you wanted, and she'd just finished brewing her pot of coffee for the day. The gently boiling stew would now be one meal instead of feeding her for two days.

Nancy didn't mind. Adrian's whisper had given her something she'd been worrying over. She didn't want to be in Safe Haven anymore, with or without Adrian, because he wasn't leading it, but she didn't want that to be held against her child. Adrian had promised her Angela wouldn't. All Nancy had to do was help keep Charlie alive until his mom called for him.

Angela sent him out here to become a man.

Nancy shrugged. "At least there's something there to work with." Nancy knew Charlie was like Adrian. She'd been in Safe Haven longer than any of them except Kenn, but she hadn't wanted leadership. She'd gotten the only thing that had mattered to her since the war. They were bonded for

life now. Even if she lost the baby, they would still have these memories.

Nancy opened the rear door as the men returned from hiding their vehicles in the alley lining the property.

Nancy smiled at Adrian. “You ready for a meal or a...nap?”

“I have twenty minutes of energy left.” Adrian grinned. “You pick it...”

Nancy took his hand and led him up to her bedroom.

Kendle and Kenn sniggered.

Charlie shook his head and began searching for a bowl. He didn’t know what was cooking but it smelled terrific.

The adults went for the coffee, remembering Nancy made it nice and strong, the way Eagles liked.

“We missed the wedding.” Kenn watched Charlie smile over the first bite of food. *That’s a good sign. Maybe I’ll have a bowl.* “Bet Angela let them make a real cake.”

Charlie shoveled the food in faster, stomach growling.

“What flavor do you think Jennifer is?”

Kenn froze. “Excuse me?”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Cake, genius.”

Kenn laughed. “Chocolate.”

Kendle shrugged, sipping the strong brew. She sat at the small table. “Could be. She likes dark men.”

“He is moody.”

“I meant the killing on demand, but okay.”

Kenn joined her at the table. “Isn’t that part of why you like Marc?”

Charlie didn’t want to hear about Kendle’s feelings for his dad. He took a second helping of food and his canteen to the rear of the apartment. He settled into a corner where their voices were muffled and pigged out.

“It’s the danger.” Kenn was refuting her denial. “Women like bad boys.”

“Marc isn’t bad.”

Kenn didn’t argue.

Kendle eyed the pot of food and took another drink of her coffee. She didn’t want to take food from a pregnant woman.

“You don’t want her food because she’s up there doing what you used to.” Kenn shook his head. “Women are snarky. You don’t really want him, but you don’t want Nancy to have him either.”

“I want him with your revered leader!” Kendle hissed. “He can’t keep stalking Angela if he’s in love with Nancy.”

“That won’t happen.”

“You don’t know how badly he wants a child he gets to stay around and raise.” She was filled with fresh bitterness. “Angela’s hold is strong, but he can be tempted.”

Kenn thought of Angela and of how he sometimes still fantasized about her when he was

alone. Kenn shook his head. “No, he can’t. I’ve been there. Nothing compares.”

Kendle left the room so she didn’t scream. She was looking forward to meeting the man who was immune to their leader’s charms.

So am I, Kenn thought. I’ll give him my job and my respect.

2

Adrian limped down the stairs half an hour later. He shrugged at Kenn’s wrist tap. “I’m getting older.”

Kenn chuckled, switching off the radio he’d been listening to while enjoying Nancy’s stew. “Thanks for the grub.”

Nancy came in and lurked at the counter, glowing. “You’ll leave me stuff to replace it.”

Kenn nodded, frowning. He didn’t need to be reminded of Eagle rules, but maybe she did. Helping out teammates with a good attitude was part of the job.

“Not my job!” Nancy glared at him.

Adrian gestured at the radio before an argument could get rolling. “What’s up, Sparks?”

“The calls are coming nonstop. Too many to count.”

“Like the naval station.” Charlie was finally getting worried about their camp, about his loved ones. He’d come back to the kitchen as soon as he

heard the shouts on Kenn's radio. "We need to get back and help prepare."

"We have to sleep." Adrian made the choice. "We'll head out after we're rested."

When the others nodded in agreement, Charlie went back to his corner and slumped against the wall. He hid the yawn that hit as soon as he got comfortable.

Adrian went to the front room. He would sleep in that guard spot.

Kenn took the rear position, leaving the two women alone together in the small kitchen.

"Well, this has been fun." Kendle was rubbing vaseline on cotton balls and shoving them into a tin. She liked to have multiple fire methods. In another pocket, she had an Altoid tin she used to char punkwood. It was perfect because she hadn't needed to poke holes for ventilation.

Nancy eyed the mess they'd made in her kitchen. The pot of food was almost empty. "I'm not cleaning up after everyone."

Kendle shrugged, not caring that it was rude. "We're tired. We'll do it when we get up."

Nancy left the room before she ordered the castaway to do it now. All she really wanted was for them to be gone. If she had to clean up a mess in exchange, it wasn't a big price.

On her way through the study, Nancy saw Charlie shiver and signaled toward the closet. "I put blankets in there. You can use one."

“Thanks. I’ll get it when I get up to…” Charlie reddened. “You know.”

Nancy grinned at him. “What goes in has to come out.”

The teenager snickered, searching for a warm spot. His toes were icy. The sun setting had brought a chill that he hadn’t adjusted to.

Nancy looked to be sure no one was watching her, then she took a blanket from the closet and walked over to kneel by the boy.

Charlie smiled as she covered him up, already starting to doze. “That’s nice.”

Nancy leaned closer. “Why did Angela send you here? Look and tell me in trade for my hospitality.”

Charlie’s eyes opened. He glowered up at her. “You could have just asked.” The power took over a second later.

“She wants you to help the outcast.” Charlie’s voice wasn’t muffled. The words carried to everyone in the apartment around them. “In exchange, she promises your child will have a set place in her Safe Haven when we return.”

Nancy nodded. “Deal, but the castaway can’t stay here if we fail to help her. I don’t want a roommate.”

Charlie was already coming back up. He shrugged off the blanket to glare. “That’s not my problem. Let me rest.”

Nancy stood up, tone mean. “You’re not staying here either.”

“Leave the kid alone.”

Adrian’s voice was tired and carried enough of an edge that Nancy obeyed. She went to Adrian and curled up on the floor against his back.

Adrian sighed as her warmth settled over him. “That’s nice. Can you get closer?”

Nancy crawled under the blanket with him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She didn’t care that he would pretend it was someone else. *That sad bitch isn’t here with him. I am.*

Adrian sighed. “Not if you have one more thought like that. I’ll go sleep with Kendle.”

“No, you won’t.” Kendle walked by them.

Adrian sniggered.

Nancy rested her chin on her arm and settled down to sleep.

So did Adrian.

Kendle went to the hall next to the couple and sank on a dusty sofa by the door. She was tired of sleeping on floors and in bedrolls. She didn’t understand why Angela didn’t let them camp in empty towns so they could at least be comfortable.

Because then they’d never leave, Adrian thought, glad Kendle’s gifts were locked down. It made it easier to handle her.

Charlie snorted, then yawned.

Adrian sighed, sliding into sleep. *A guy can hope.*

Glass shattered.

A man shouted.

Everyone struggled to wake as noises echoed through the apartment.

A gunshot echoed, bringing adrenaline that helped get Adrian to his feet.

Kendle was ahead of him as he rushed to the kitchen and through the hall, then into the rear room where Kenn had chosen to sleep.

Charlie stumbled along behind them, trying to get his gun out of his holster.

Nancy caught up, putting a hand on Charlie's wrist to stop him. The boy was likely to shoot any of them in the dark.

Charlie flushed, but obeyed as they ran through the kitchen and into the dim lantern-lit hall.

“Stop!”

Nancy drew up at the stranger's shout.

Charlie would have kept going, but he finally spotted Kenn in the man's grip. There was a long blade against Kenn's throat and the Marine was bleeding from his cheek and shoulder. It looked as though he'd been stabbed in his sleep.

Kenn fought not to move as his body weakened. Streams of blood were running down his side and leg.

“As soon as you grab my life, I'll take his.” Vihaan felt he had the upper hand. “He will die in one minute. Then we will battle to see who is the best.”

Adrian came forward. “What do you want?”

Charlie interrupted the coming negotiation with a blast of healing energy that drained him. He shriveled before their shocked gazes, dropping to his knees.

Vihaan scrutinized the boy. “What happened?”

Kenn let the health return, not tensing against the pain of the transfer. “You were outsmarted by a kid.”

Kenn snatched the man’s knife from his hip holster and stabbed him with it repeatedly. *One eye... There’s the other!* Kenn grabbed the screaming, cringing man. He poked again. *No air for you.*

Nancy turned from the gory scene. “I’m not cleaning that up either.”

Kenn kept stabbing as the assassin suffocated and bled.

Adrian and Kendle went to Charlie. He was gasping for air, with shriveled skin and dazed eyes.

Adrian and Kendle put hands on him and hoped they had enough energy left to help.

Being so weak and in pain was the worst torment Charlie had ever gone through. He could feel himself dying, but he couldn’t stop it. *How does she do this over and over?* His head lolled to the side. He couldn’t move now. It was too much effort.

“Get over here!” Kendle snapped as blood sprayed the wall. “Stop playing with your food.”

Kenn swallowed the weak lifeforce and came toward them with bloody hands and a grim face.

“Move aside. I’ve never done this before.” Kenn brought the power back up and shoved it at the boy.

Charlie latched onto it, terrified.

Kenn let go. He marched back to the body and kicked it again. Being stabbed in your sleep was a nasty way to wake up.

Charlie arched in agony as he was recharged by a different level of power. He tried not to scream and almost succeeded. He’d never been on this end of things and he never wanted to be again. *I have to survive this. I owe my mom an apology.*

Everyone tensed as power swarmed over the house, alerting them to Angela’s witch. *Bring him home.*

Kenn winced, looking at the mess he’d made. “She didn’t say *us*.”

Adrian went to collect his gear. Angela had called. He was answering.

“How do we know if we’re cleared?” Kenn insisted.

“You don’t.” Kendle stepped around him as Charlie slowly sat up. “Get your shit. It’s time to go.”

Kenn wavered for a brief second, aware that he might be headed into the last hours of his life. *I could stay here...*

Kenn went to the jug of water on the sink and washed his hands. *I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.*

Silence greeted his mental plea for mercy.

Kenn finished and went to get his gear. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Nancy scrutinized her destroyed kitchen. *You owe me for this, Angela.*

Menace filled the apartment. *If you like, I can repay you right now.*

Shuddering, Nancy shook her head. *That’s okay, thanks.* She went to get garbage bags and rags, no longer angry over the mess.

4

Safe Haven

“I don’t like him.” Marc stayed on Angela’s heels as Cole strode by. “He’s too much like Adrian.”

“Really.”

Marc sulked. “Not in the good ways. He’s lazy and arrogant without a reason to be.”

“Maybe his skills as a captain give him reason.”

“Have you scanned him?”

“Of course. He’s in my camp.”

“And?”

“He’s like Adrian.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So, that’s a bad thing.”

“Like we don’t have that here already.”

“Exactly. Why add more? Captain Grant can handle it.”

“Grant is one person. Who sails it while he sleeps?”

“I thought of that. He’ll teach us.”

Angela pointed at the boat coming into sight as they walked. “Tell me you can learn to sail that in two days and I’ll agree.”

Marc wanted to. He wanted Cole gone and Adrian to not be needed. He wanted to be alone with his family and to forget the rest of them existed. Marc stopped. *Everything I want is wrong because all these people would have to die for it to happen.*

Angela didn’t add to his unrest. He was finally coming around.

Jennifer took Marc’s spot, bringing up a wall. She wasn’t happy to be away from Kyle, but she was doing her duty. Time was getting short.

Angela braced. Marc and Jenny were tag-teaming her, hoping it would be enough, but Angela wasn’t in the mood for it today. She had a lot to do. She wasn’t thinking about Adrian or their bond. She was stewing on reaching the island.

“Then I’m sorry to tell you I’m giving him an update in a few minutes. Do you have a message for him?”

“Yes. It’s the last update. Make it good.”

Jennifer frowned, but Angela increased her pace and joined the rest of her security team. In her heart, Jennifer wished all of the men chasing the boss would go away. Then Angela would have a chance

to live without constantly being pressured into choices she didn't want to make. She wasn't like any of her men wanted her to be. Angela needed her children and leadership. Much like Adrian before his obsession took control, Angela didn't need love if she had the first two.

Not true. Morgan and Conner were walking by on a round of the perimeter. *Until Adrian interfered and Kenn played his games, she wanted to be with Marc. They both used his inexperience with women to make him look bad and to force bad reactions. Before the war, Marc was the one who didn't need anything but his job. Fate brought them back together.*

But it didn't put them together, Jennifer figured out.

And that's where the problem lies. She accepted it because she loves this country and all the people in it, and because she knows this job won't ever leave her or betray her.

She doesn't trust him!

I'm sad for them. Morgan gave a grunt. *It would almost be better for everyone if you got your wish and all of them went away. But I can't vote for that, you know? I want what Marc wants and I'm certain if it wasn't the apocalypse, Angela would want it too.*

She's planning to sacrifice herself so it doesn't keep happening, Jennifer blurted, not caring who picked up on it. *She's already worried about carrying it to the island and letting it grow for years.*

I'm going to talk to Marc again, but I don't think we can change him and what he needs to be happy. And he can't have it, at least not for a while.

He can't ever have it, Morgan corrected, growing cold. When he says family, he means Charlie and Cody, and that's it. Angela will never give up her adopted kids and Marc doesn't want them. In the end, that's going to be what dooms him and Adrian won't have anything to do with it.

Marc caught it all. He studied Angela as those truths rang in his mind.

Angela gazed back at him without speaking or thinking, waiting, hoping they were all wrong.

Marc thought of raising so many kids, of never having time alone with her because the children would need so much of her time. He deliberated how her days would be spent as leader and her nights would be spent as a mother. She would have hours here and there to give him, and that was it. He was signing up for four years, at least, of that life.

Marc and Angela gazed at each other in sad longing as he finished the thoughts.

And if we survive, it's the same for the rest of our lives. She'll adopt more orphans because they need a mom and there's no one else. It will never end. I'll never have what I need.

Jennifer and Morgan were frozen in place, both begging fate to let the couple have happiness.

Angela sent an image of them in the cornfield.
That's all we've ever had. Hours of stolen time.

It's not enough.

No, but we lived for those hours back then.

Yes. Marc sighed. Can you offer me any hope it won't always be this way?

What if I need it to be this way?

That's what frightens me. It has since Adrian picked you to lead his female Eagle campaign.

Your happiness can only come at the cost of mine, and my happiness will cost you yours. Angela strode away. I won't give them up. Not even for you.

It's not selfish or sexist, he defended.

I agree. What you want is reasonable in any other life, but the world ended. Everything changed. Our happiness stopped mattering to me the day the bombs fell.

You mean the day I left and didn't come back for you.

Angela nodded. If you really need the final truth, then yes. I understand the choice you made. I honestly do. I've made it here, with Safe Haven. They mean more to me than a future with you, like the Marine career meant more to you than coming back for me.

That's why you didn't tell me about Charlie!

You betrayed me, left me for dead for all you knew.

My mother promised you wouldn't be hurt.

Your mother wanted my gifts! If I had stayed, I would have been beaten and raped, and Charlie wouldn't exist. I might have died. A debt like that isn't paid off quickly or cheaply. You understand honor. What does honor cost among soldiers? You

dishonored me. Keep your fighting and whining, and keep your plans to break the bonds between Adrian and me. I let him do it for this moment right here.

For what? Marc was furious and miserable at the shared pain.

For you to show your true self. You like to hide behind that boy scout image, but the tiger is the real soul below and we both know it. Tell the truth for once in our lives.

The truth about what!

You hate me because you gave in.

That's not true! You were willing!

Yes.

Marc stopped, tormented. It needed to get out or he would always be poisoned by it. *It was wrong. I know that because Safe Haven standards are loose, and it would still have been a serious offense. I would have been banished.*

Yes. But then we would have broken that rule too, like Conner and Candy.

...and Cody and Leeann?

Angela nodded.

I'm sorry. I should have been strong enough to wait.

Yes, but I shouldn't have insisted. I've never viewed you as a molester. I've always seen you as my knight in shining armor.

Until the war, and then I became your darkness.

You left me. Kenn hurt me. Adrian used magic on me. Like you, I can't trust the opposite sex. That

makes it easy to go long stretches without companionship. Then I see the orphans and remember how badly I needed a good mother. Helping them avoid some of my pain is the least I can do, and it heals my heart each time I correct something that would have sent them down the wrong path. It's awful how many of them believe their parents died because of them.

Some of them did.

Yes, but that's a burden no child should have to carry. So many of these post-war kids will go bad if they don't have guidance that it will be as if the light of Safe Haven never existed. We'll leave, and it will all restart anyway. I won't let all those lives be in vain. Your happiness compared to that, is selfish and I won't ever agree to it.

Marc joined her at the rail. I'd like to keep talking about this.

We can. We can listen to the wind, feel the ocean spray and mourn for what once could have been, but nothing you say will change my mind on this. You're asking me to pick, again, and this time, I have. Now, you'll have to adjust and accept that or stay here. Kendle is aware of your unrest and she's waiting for you out there somewhere if you'll have her. While I'd rather see her dead, if you think that would be better for you, I'll deal with it. You and the castaway will have a happy family with Cody for years and you'll get to see Charlie and your grandchildren when we return. If you want to try that, I won't—

Marc grabbed her and kissed her.

Angela groaned, clutching him close.

Marc refused to think about anything for a few minutes. He just wanted to feel her in his arms and try to figure out how he was supposed to live without her.

The sound of crying woke Marc. He was in his bedroll with Angela. *I was dreaming.* Marc slowly opened his eyes. *Realistic dream.*

Angela's sobs shook the bedroll.

Marc rolled over, realizing she was still asleep. *We went to sleep while trying to connect for a dream walk. I guess it succeeded.*

Marc put a hand on Angela's shoulder. "I don't want any of that."

Angela settled under his touch but didn't pull out of the dream. "Do what's best for you. I wish you peace."

Marc leaned down and kissed her cheek. *It'll be enough. Come back to me now.*

Angela slowly woke, returning his embrace. She'd shown him tomorrow's future in a desperate attempt to stop it. She did want to help the kids and her country, but she wanted Marc almost as much. That would never change, but she could be pushed into ugliness.

Marc kept kissing her. The dream had revealed truths he would examine, but for this moment, he needed to show her how much he wanted her. He also needed the feel of her against him so when

morning came, and he felt like pushing, this would stop him. The thought of never holding her again would keep him steady no matter how many kids she wanted to adopt.

That wasn't going to be enough for Angela and she knew it, but she wasn't done working on Marc. He was going to be a wonderful father to an entire generation of children. He just didn't know it yet.

"That was weird." Morgan, on point until daylight, looked over at Samantha. She was sitting in the open window of the medical camper. They were both used to picking up glimpses of dreams from people around them, but Angela's vision of the immediate future had snared them both.

Samantha was tired from waiting for Neil's shift to be finished so they could sleep. She didn't feel like explaining that Angela wasn't just trying to save Marc. Angela was giving him reasons to fight, but she'd also provided him a way out.

"He won't leave her." Morgan was certain. "He'd be crazy to screw up a perfect match."

"Angela doesn't have a match, so she should get to pick who she wants."

"It doesn't work that way when you have the history that couple does." Morgan let her into his thoughts. "They belong to the Creator. *Their* wants were never considered."

"And that's going to be the mistake that sinks the two big players." Samantha was also confident of it. "They've both underestimated how low she'll

go to keep us all together. They play dirty and use tricks, bets. She goes for the throat and is only satisfied by the blood.”

“Like Kendle. Is that a good thing?”

Samantha surveyed the peacefully resting camp. “It has been for us and that’s all I really care about.”

5

5am (Safe Haven)

“I can’t.” Kyle groaned when Jennifer giggled. “Please, baby. I can’t.” He’d never considered that she would want him to let go of his control.

Jennifer lowered herself onto his hard body, spreading wide.

A rail snapped in Kyle’s grip. He growled.

Jennifer teased him, lips against his as she brushed him with her naked flesh. “I have to know.”

“Not like this...” Kyle’s patience broke, but his honor held. “Stop it. Now.”

Jennifer leaned down and licked his lips. “Maybe *you* should have chosen a code word.”

Kyle felt the rail about to snap under his other hand and let go of it.

Jennifer sat up, body arching. Her hand slid between her legs...

Kyle snapped. He thrust upward, going deep. His hand held her hip when she flinched away. Her pain was no longer a concern. Kyle slapped her bare titties, thrusting deeper.

Jennifer moaned, hand moving over her slick skin.

Kyle bucked at the discovery. *She likes that! I'm doomed.* He slapped again, a little harder.

Jennifer's body tightened on his. Her damp heat gushed over his balls and brought a shiver.

She moaned. "Harder!"

Not sure which area she meant, Kyle did both.

Jennifer exploded above him, moaning his name over and over as she climaxed.

Kyle pulled out and sprayed all over her flat belly, grunting and gasping.

Jennifer embraced her corrupt side and leaned down, eyes glowing red. "Don't do that again."

Kyle grabbed her by the back of the neck and jerked her on top of his chest. "Six months. Now take a nap. We have to go back out and pretend again in a while."

Jennifer bit him on the shoulder, drawing a yelp. "Listen to me, Kyle."

He tensed beneath her, feeling it coming. "Don't."

Jennifer shook her head. "It has to happen at some point. You're either mine or hers. Pick it now."

Kyle, reacting like a man, asked, "Can I still have sex if I say I'm loyal to the dream first and you second?"

Jennifer laughed, heart settling into a good rhythm. She kissed him and slid down next to him

on the mattress. “It’s what I needed to hear. Thank you.”

Kyle hugged her, relief flooding as he realized he was indeed going to be able to have sex with her again.

Jennifer’s giggle echoed down the hall.

Chapter Thirty-Three
The Last Holdouts

Day 7

7am

1

“Do I have to?”

Kyle nudged Jennifer toward the ramp. “We’re coming right back as soon as the meeting’s over. The boss insisted.”

Jennifer let Kyle take her hand and walk her out of the ship. It was their first appearance since being married.

Jennifer blushed at the stares and nods from guards, glad the meeting was early. After working them so late and hard, Angela had known the camp would sleep, giving the new couple a bit of privacy.

Kyle hoped the meeting was short so they could sneak back without stopping by the mess.

Unable to fight their habits, both of them scanned the guard spots, the mood of the guards, and the few people up and about, then the horizon where it was still dark.

Kyle rubbed her hand with his thumb, feeling the wedding band. He still couldn’t believe they were married.

Jennifer blushed darker as they reached the meeting tent, seeing it was packed.

Kyle chuckled. “Nerves, baby?”

Jennifer blew a curl out of her face. She’d left it down for him. “Not a chance.”

Kyle kissed her hand. “You’re a beautiful liar.”

Jennifer giggled.

Guards nodded in approval, logged it in their notes and went back to waiting for shift change or trouble.

Kyle started to escort Jennifer into the council tent and paused. Dog was lying stretched out near the open flap. Both of Tonya’s cats were curled up on his big chest.

Dog lifted his head, golden eyes begging. *If you see them crawl onto my face, help me.*

Kyle shook his head, laughing. “I can’t mess with strange pussy. I’m a married man now.”

Dog snorted. *Some friend.*

Jennifer and Kyle laughed, entering.

Neil hid a snicker at Kyle’s expression, remembering the first time he’d gotten to enjoy being intimate with Samantha. It was among his favorite memories of their early times. “We’re all here now.”

Samantha smiled at him.

“No, we’re not all here.” Tonya came into the tent, pushing by Ivan. “Where’s Kenn? He’s not dead. I can feel that much, so where is he?”

“Atoning.” Angela’s voice was cold.

“I’ll leave!” Tonya wasn’t afraid to threaten. “If he doesn’t go, neither do I.”

“Same here.” Tracy appeared in the flap. “Tell me you wouldn’t leave Charlie here and I’ll apologize and go away.” Tracy didn’t want to be a bother, but the talk about Kenn and Charlie both still being out of camp was getting to her.

Angela leaned back. “I don’t particularly like either of you, but I’m hoping you’ll be better parents than you were people.” She let her eyes glow. “That aside, when your children are born, you will be observed, scanned, tested, and retrained.” Angela regarded Tracy. “Your path will be harder because you still have to pay for the rules you’ve broken. Later, when he’s older and wiser, he’ll see what you did as wrong and it will destroy your relationship.”

Tracy was ready to cry. “I don’t want that, any of it.”

Angela softened her tone. “I know. You came here wishing I would tell you it’s all forgiven and your little...man is on the way home. You want to hear about a happy-ever-after.”

Tracy nodded. “Yes, that’s what I want.”

“Never.” Angela was aware of Tonya’s paling face, but she kept her attention on Tracy. “You pushed it to this.” Angela waved at the camp gate. “That’s the quick way out. You’re free to go to him and try to make a life here, the same as everyone else. The council officially recognizes your adult relationship with Charlie. He is emancipated as of

this moment. Now get out of my sight before I kill you.”

Tracy ran.

Tonya tensed as Angela’s attention switched to her. She’d thought to come in here and bargain for Kenn’s ticket to ride, but it had gone sour fast.

“They’re on the way here. Kenn and Charlie made peace. It’s all over for that issue.”

Tonya gaped at her. “What?”

Angela snickered as the council let out sighs and exchanged smiles. “You’re one of us now.”

Tonya grinned, realizing it had been an act to get to Tracy. “He did it?”

“Yes. Kenn was the second one in that group to have the epiphany. Be proud of him. I am.”

Tonya turned to go, able to breathe now that she knew her love was safe. “Thank you.”

“For what? He did it.”

“For making him go, for not killing him when you took over, for giving me a chance to change. This life is so much better.”

“It’s my honor.” Angela sighed as Tonya left. “And also my burden.” Angela looked toward the flap, waiting.

Gus’s big frame filled it a few seconds later.

The council put down notebooks and waited. They hadn’t covered these issues.

“I’m leaving at noon.” Gus waited, not positive if he needed to do more to get permission to go.

“After the meeting.” Angela waved Gus toward one of two empty seats.

Gus sat down with a puzzled expression. He waited for more information.

Angela regarded the flap once more.

Grant and William entered.

“Where do you want me?” William scanned the seats and presumed he was the odd man out.

“With Ivan.”

William stayed at the flap, eager to listen and sorry the time was going by so fast. He still didn’t want them to leave.

Angela waved Grant into the empty seat.

The council waited for more arrivals, frowning at some of the people who were now here.

Angela opened her notebook. “I’ll go around the table, then you can eat. We have a full day ahead of us.”

Those who had books opened them and took out pens. Those who didn’t, watched and wondered if they should or what they were doing here.

“Let’s start with the ship.” Angela looked at Grant.

Grant cleared his throat. “We’re eighty percent loaded and well under the weight limit. The tug boat will have to labor to haul us into deeper water, but that’s what they’re made for. Cole and I chose a double tug. It’s being hooked up now. That’s his big mouth you hear already yelling at Ciemus people.”

Angela frowned. “Because he knows not to do it to Safe Haven people?”

Grant nodded. “Nasty attitude.”

“What about his skills?”

“Best I’ve seen since the war.” Grant was glad he could reply without rancor. “He’ll have a lot to teach people.”

“So will you.” Angela moved on. “What about fuel and the rest of that list?”

“We’re covered for three full trips.” Grant wiped away sweat. “I mapped it out myself, no offense, and found your numbers a bit high. Are you expecting trouble?”

Angela nodded. “Always. I overestimate on all totals and we still run short. Shit happens, you know?”

Grant chuckled. “Yes. The rest of the items on maintenance appear to be covered. Cole and I went over the important areas and it all seems in working order. We’re going to be testing some of those today, after the tug is hooked up and we’ve got the other ship attached.”

Samantha looked at Grant. “Yeah, how will that work? A strong rope and a prayer at each end?”

Grant laughed. “Exactly like that.” He winked at her. “But we use a really big rope.”

Angela didn’t mind his levity, but she needed to be certain it was covered. “So towing won’t be too much?”

“No. However, if one of them sink, all of them will be pulled down.”

“You and Theo are working on a system for cutting them free in that situation?” Angela verified.

Grant nodded. “We have a design drawn up. Theo’s already working on it. We should have something temporary on each ship by morning.”

“And we have full power now to everything?”

“Yes, even the hot tubs are running.”

“I’ll be onboard in a bit with the camp if you need me for anything. We’ll eat lunch on the ship. Someone can tell our new cooks that it’s okay to play with the appliances.” Angela consulted the next item on her list. “Animals were loaded yesterday. How are they doing?” She looked at Marc.

“Conner’s got them today, along with organizing the pens for their care during the voyage.” Marc checked his notes. “I walked him in an hour ago. No problems as far as I could tell.”

Angela made a note to speak with Conner when his shift ended. “Good. We’ll be loading everything today except the mess, community tents, and the bathrooms. I want people on the ship for their needs. Suggest hot showers and clothing shops that haven’t been ransacked yet. Make sure those areas have a rotating guard to make sure they don’t get ransacked now.” Angela turned the page and looked at Jennifer. “How’s your stomach after a night on a rocking boat?”

Snickers and laughs came, along with a furious glare from Kyle and red cheeks from Jennifer.

Angela rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Jennifer held in a snotty remark. “I woke up around midnight with the candles gone. Took me a minute to adjust. The sound of the water and the creaky boat wasn’t pleasant. We’ll need to make sure some lights are left on all the time so people like me don’t freak out.”

Kyle rubbed her shoulder.

Jennifer held his hand there, sighing happily.

“Oh, come on!” Gus snapped. “Why am I here? I don’t need to witness this.”

“None of us do, so suck it up.” Angela surveyed her notes. “Let people pick where they want to sleep but encourage them to enjoy the last nights on land. It’ll be a while before we get this again.”

“Did you know it’s Thanksgiving in two days?” Grant blurted.

Angela looked at him. “And?”

He shifted uncomfortably as everyone stared. Most people here didn’t know what day of the week it was, let alone the date. Ciemus had kept track of that. “Well, shouldn’t we have a dinner or football game or something?”

“Ciemus kept track because they weren’t forced out of their homes every time they settled in somewhere.” Jennifer was defensive of Safe Haven.

“That’s fair.” Grant didn’t give up. “But it does matter to people.”

“We’ll celebrate the holiday on the holiday.” Angela rotated her notebook so they could all read the page. It was labeled with the name of the holiday and the plans she had for it. “I’m handling it quietly

because the camp may see this as the pilgrim's journey to the new world being repeated."

"That's what it is, right?" Gus asked. "What's the problem?"

Angela sighed. "If we're going to the new world, we'd need a new constitution for our promised land and we don't have it yet."

"So?"

"So, people would immediately start drafting one." Marc grunted. "We prefer to pad things." He knew Angela was doing this to convince Gus he was needed, that he was on the inside. "As a council member, you'll get used to doing things that way or the camp will steal your ideas and transform them into something you didn't want."

"You cheat!"

The council hooted at Gus's indignation. Even Grant smiled. Rulers in Ciemus had employed the same tactics, successfully, for a long time. "When leadership stays ahead of the masses and covers things for them, it keeps the peace."

"Providing that leadership isn't corrupt," Jennifer justified.

"Granted," Grant gave.

"Why are you letting me hear this?" Gus was out of patience. He stood up.

"Because I need you on the council."

Angela's simple answer brought Gus back to the bench with a pensive look. "You scare me."

"Good." She regarded him curiously. "Don't you want to know what I need you for?"

Gus shook his head. “Not really. I just couldn’t stand the thought of not being an Eagle. I figured you wanted Brittani, not me.”

“You’ll be both council members and Eagles, and in time, you’ll even be happy. How’s that?”

Gus shrugged, calming. He hadn’t really wanted to leave. He just hadn’t known how he could stay. “I don’t see how, but I trust you.” Tears pricked his eyes. “You knew all this would happen, right?”

Angela nodded, voice regretful. “Yes. It was destined no matter how many times I searched for a different future. They’re soulmates. You aren’t.”

Gus’s shoulders slumped. “How long until I feel this happiness?”

Tap-tap!

Everyone looked up as Trinity came in with a tray.

She flushed at the hostile glares for interrupting, walking to Gus. She set the hearty tray in front of him, kissed the top of his head and left with her chin up.

Gus stared in shock. “Wow. That was...sweet.”

The council burst out laughing at his expression as he began to pick through the mounds of food she’d put on the tray.

Angela turned the page in her notebook, heart easing as Gus’s pain receded to show him the new door that had opened. Trinity preferred black men and she wanted strong kids who would grow up to defend all women. She and Gus might be happy together once he let go of the anger over his

breakup. “At noon, we’ll have a goodbye send off for anyone not going with us. Pass the word. Those people need to be at the gate at dawn and noon each day. There may not be another chance for them to leave.”

“What are we expecting for that?” Kyle asked. All his team mates and the other leaders had asked him if he knew and he didn’t. Kyle hated giving that answer.

“Some things haven’t happened yet, so I don’t have a complete scene.”

No one liked hearing that.

“After we eat breakfast, all teams and volunteer workers will help people pick bunks in the crew quarters. Some of you are assigned as sentries and some of you are escorts for groups. Keep them together as best you can, but if they have a map and want to go off on their own, let them. Dog will be my security for the day. No sniper guard. They wouldn’t be able to see me anyway once I’m on the ship and I need all of them working. There’s a lot to get done. Let’s go around the table now and you can add or subtract.” She looked at Samantha.

Samantha had been sharing smiles with Jennifer over the happiness they could all see. She looked up as things quieted. “What?” Samantha read the thoughts. “Oh. Sorry. Nothing to report in the weather department. No storms coming from any direction but the west and those won’t reach here until after we’re gone.”

“Good.” Angela indicated Gus. “You helped move our injured onto the boat a little while ago. How are they?”

Gus shrugged. “They were all out except Zack. The medic said they needed to be relaxed for the move so they didn’t make things worse. He stuck ‘em and we moved ‘em with him bitching at us the whole way.”

Some people frowned over his wording, but Angela didn’t. “How is Zack?”

Gus snorted. “Mad that he had to be carried onto the boat like a baby. He was complaining worse than the medic.”

“That’s great.” Angela looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer had her book open. “The kids are getting out of control. When we take them on the boat, we may have brats running all over the place. It will be hard to keep track of them and I don’t believe Monica and the others can handle it even with the camp women helping. They aren’t Peggy and Hilda.”

“Do you want to supervise that?” Angela didn’t think Jennifer was in the mood to babysit.

“I’m not, but I worry over them. If no one else wants it, I’ll handle it.”

Marc sighed. “She wants me with them. You’re off the hook.”

Jennifer grinned at the man. “I owe you one.”

Marc nodded. “Yes, you do.”

“What else?” Angela directed them back to Jennifer’s list, aware of time ticking by.

“I think we should wrap up the fishing operation during the noon goodbyes. It’s a time when no one will be there anyway, and we need to start smoking the other meat we have. William has a great setup ready for it.”

“Agreed.” Angela skimmed her notes. “We can also close the hunting team. They’ve been working the shoreline and bringing in eggs and smaller gators for the last few days. Tell them to store or smoke it all.”

Jennifer made notes. “Awesome. I have one last item. What are we doing with the new arrivals? It can’t wait until noon cause that’s when they’re arriving.”

“Kyle will work that out with Neil when this meeting finishes.” Angela smiled at the girl. “You were supposed to be enjoying your first day of marriage, not searching for timeline changes.”

Jennifer blushed. “Oh, I did. He just had to rest occasionally, and I got bored.”

Laughter spewed from everyone, sending drinks and food across the table and the occupants.

Embarrassed, Kyle growled. “Are we finished? I want to do a check in with the perimeter sentries.” He moved toward the flap when Angela nodded.

Others followed his lead, rising, gathering papers.

“No.”

Marc’s curt tone brought everyone back and made Angela grimace.

“I’m calling a vote on the manifest.”

“For the cargo or the people?” Neil picked up both of those lists to scan for whatever had caught Marc’s attention.

“People.”

Angela stood up. “I shouldn’t be here for this.”

“Sit down.” Marc used his command tone intentionally, trying to draw a reaction from her.

Angela’s expression tightened, but she obediently resumed her seat.

Marc sighed in resignation at the failure, but he wasn’t done yet. “I want Adrian left here. And Kendle.”

The table went quiet, with most of them stealing a fast glance at Angela.

Angela didn’t respond or react.

Marc’s sigh this time was audible.

“Are you sure?” Samantha kept her head down as she questioned Marc’s choice. “He’s done a lot since we banished him.”

“I’m aware of how hard he’s tried to sleaze his way into everyone’s good graces.” Marc waved at the eating camp. “I also haven’t forgotten he’s the one who got us into most of those messes.”

“That’s not true.” Samantha didn’t like going against Marc. She disliked Adrian, but fair was fair. “We got into those messes because our leaders were too busy spending time on jealousy and hatred instead of survival.”

Marc didn’t back down at the blow. “So you vote he goes. Who’s next?”

Everyone at the table frowned.

“I say we put a bullet in his brain.” Ivan was providing security from the doorway. “He’d do the same for any of us if we’d done what he has, right?” After the beating he’d taken, Ivan wasn’t about to go against Marc.

“Mind your job!” Jennifer could feel Angela’s pain at the thought and didn’t like it.

Ivan clamped his lips shut and went back to scanning the sand.

“I want the entire camp to vote on it.” Marc put extra whine into his voice. “That way it’s not jealousy and hatred. It’ll be justice.”

“No.”

Marc regarded Neil in surprise. “Why not?”

“It’s a leadership choice now.” Neil’s tone was cold. “I promise you don’t want the entire camp to vote again anyway. That would include the kids, the Ciemus people, and the Eagles. You’ll lose.”

Marc hadn’t considered Ciemus. Neil was right. Those people had only heard the legends of Safe Haven and not the stories of Adrian’s betrayal. Marc’s shoulders stiffened. “How do I get a fair vote?”

Neil frowned at him. “You can’t, unless the camp calls for it.”

“What about a manifest vote by us?”

Angela nodded, standing up. “I abstain. Let me know the outcome.”

She exited the tent, leaving negative waves and glares that were all directed at Marc.

“Why do you keep doing this?” Gus was sick of it too. “You’re pushing her away and annoying the rest of us. You know that, right?”

Marc hurried to take Angela’s seat by Jennifer. “Is it working?”

Jennifer nodded. “Big time, but if we vote no, they won’t go. She’ll enforce it.”

Marc frowned. “I don’t really want us to vote, Jenny.”

Kyle frowned at the shortened version of her name.

Marc snickered at the mobster’s reaction. *You’re hooked.* “How do I keep her from finding out we didn’t vote until tomorrow?”

Jennifer studied, letting the witch search. She sent Marc an image. “This will most certainly happen over the next twelve hours. If she goes for the alcohol, you’ve won.”

Marc leaned in and kissed Jennifer on the cheek. “I know this is hard for you. It’s almost done.”

Marc got up and stormed from the tent, keeping to his angry role.

Jennifer struggled to keep that mental shield up, fighting not to reveal it to anyone as she and Kyle slipped back toward the ship.

Samantha already knew and approved it. She flashed a smile to the girl and slowly got to her feet.

Neil hurried over to help her. *She got bigger again overnight.*

Samantha gave him a dark pout. “Thanks.”

Neil sniggered, guiding her from the tent. “Come on. Let’s go make that ass a little wider.”

Samantha slapped his arm. “Meanie.”

Neil pointed at the mess. “They have fresh pumpkin bread today.”

Samantha waddled that way, muttering.

Marc watched the council emerge, seeing who had figured it out and who hadn’t.

All of them were adding it up, including Gus. He studied Marc, forced to rearrange his opinions of the man as he read Marc’s thoughts. “So you’re not really an angry, controlling prick.”

Marc grunted bitterly. “Missed it by a hair. Safe Haven saved me. It’s going to do the same for Angie.” Marc leaned in. “Want to help?”

Gus nodded, concern over the drama easing. “It’s the charm, right? You’re trying to break it.”

“Very good.”

“What can I do?”

“Stir the pot. By the time we set sail, it will be done.”

“What about your vendetta with Adrian?” Ivan questioned from a few feet away, confused.

Marc lifted a brow, smirking at how well they’d done, how great a role he’d played. “What vendetta? We made a truce in Ciemus. This is all for the woman we love.”

Chapter Thirty-Four
A Working Break

9am

1

“**O**pen it.”

The passenger hatch hadn't been oiled yet. It groaned as it was opened, letting the smell of old ocean out to greet them.

Two hundred people pressed closer, curious and a little intimidated as Kyle and Marc opened the passenger boarding area. Most of the camp had been kept off the ship until today. The rest of the loading was being done at the farthest entrance. Digging had unearthed the ramp that had slid off the platform during a storm. Theo's crew had been able to lift it into place after building platforms on the swampy sand for the two cranes that he and Ozzie had operated in tandem while everyone else kept their distance and stressed. They'd lifted the ramp piece and set it back atop the piers jutting from the water in one try. Getting the ramp level had taken them two days, then the crew had welded the ramp in place. They now had a solid surface to walk and drive over that was allowing them to load the larger items in record time.

Angela walked into the ship. Cool, it reeked of salt water and closed up spaces. Long halls and sea green walls met her eye in every direction from the large reception area. Narrow corridors veered out of sight.

Under their feet, the ship bobbed in the calm water. Angela tried not to contemplate how many cases of motion sickness they would have to clean up.

“Everyone have a copy of the map?” Marc went to stand with his group of kids as more people entered the reception chamber.

People nodded quickly, holding them up or digging them out.

The Dock Master’s logbook said the Adriana had been in reserve for a group of rich bankers from Asia who had never been on a cruise. The war had canceled those plans, but not the preparations that had come before them. The ship was stocked with water, fuel, and all the amenities for three hundred fifty people, for two weeks. It wasn’t a large amount considering a liner this size usually carried seven hundred passengers, but it was nice because it was a little less than the total they needed to live on for a year. Angela hadn’t expected to find it stocked at all. They were no longer short on food. In fact, they now had a small surplus.

“One last time, people. Stay with your group and keep your radios on channel six.” Greg waved. “Let ‘em go!”

People walked off, quiet and tense as they examined what would be their home for at least three weeks (the estimated time by Marc) and maybe as long as three months (Kendle's estimate). Sunlight streamed through the dirty windows as they wound their way deeper into the long ship. The noises of the outside world faded, then fell silent. The only sounds were their steps and breathing, and the creaking of a boat sitting in water. It was easy to imagine Kendle's ship of terror.

"It'll be better when we're sailing." Marc hoped that was true.

Angela nodded. "We'll pick a DJ. This ship needs noise."

Marc nodded. The camp would think the DJ was specifically for them, which would provide stability anytime there was an announcement or a problem. The same voice would be telling them what to do or how to handle it.

Angela turned into the smaller hallway at the next wide corridor, Dog at her side. She flashed Marc a bright smile.

Marc returned it, already overwhelmed with keeping kids still so he could count them at each intersection. He had ten mothers and camp people mixed in this line, but everyone was distracted, and he felt like he was doing it alone.

Angela gestured Neil and Samantha to go with Marc when they would have followed her. Now that Samantha had been off the travel routine for a week, she was doing better. When she'd insisted on

walking to the living quarters, Neil had been unable to refuse.

Angela vanished down the hall that would take her to the stairs that would take her to another hall that she hoped would bring her out near the bridge. “Or maybe I’ll be in OZ...” She peered at her map again.

“I know the way.”

Dog growled at the man hurrying to catch up.

Ivan put a hand on his gun.

Angela sighed as Cole fell in step with her. *Speaking of disguises.* “What can I do for you?”

“Tell me why you made him captain over me.”

“It was a council vote.” She didn’t remind him they were supposed to share. Cole had just chosen his fate.

Dog padded between them, nudging Angela’s hand.

Angela rubbed his ears, slowing to let the man go by. “We’ll be there later.”

Cole sulked, but kept walking.

Angela let out an annoyed breath and detoured into a darkened corridor to let him get gone.

Dog waited patiently, as did Ivan. Both males understood she had something going on that required privacy.

Angela studied her map. She’d planned to check out the view from the bridge, and plant a few weapons there, but Cole’s arrival had delayed that. She chose her next location and went back into the hallway with her escort.

“Can I help with something?” Ivan was thrilled to be alone with her. He also enjoyed Dog’s company, so it was a perfect duty in his opinion.

“Go help Marc. Missy isn’t scared of him.”

“She isn’t scared of anyone.” Ivan left her with tense shoulders, good mood deflated.

Angela got lost in the darker hallways that the rest of the camp was avoiding unless they saw someone else traveling them too. As the noises faded, Angela let her guard down and cried as she walked. Being on the ship was heartbreaking. “I don’t want to leave.”

Dog almost cried with her. If she hadn’t shown it, he never would have guessed how badly it was hurting her.

Dog whimpered suddenly.

Angela looked down the hall to find Tonya’s cats coming toward them. She swiped her eyes so she could see better. The felines had been following people on and off the ship for days now. “They look sleepy. You can take a break.”

Dog groaned. *Now I don’t have an excuse to say no!*

Angela knelt to pet the cats, but they left her to twine around Dog’s legs after only a minute of attention. The bunker cat was a bit more aloof than Tonya’s mountain tabby. It only butted its big head against Dog’s chest. The mountain cat leapt onto his back while the wolf was distracted.

Dog waited for the other cat to do the same, wincing when they both punctured his skin. *I'm going!*

Angela chuckled as Dog trotted down the hall, whimpering each time the cats shifted to stay on his back.

“He’s sucking it up for those he loves.” Angela sniffled and wiped the rest of her tears away. “So will I.”

By the time she made it to the loading deck, Angela’s face was dry, and her mental barrier was back in place.

“It’s the boss!”

“What are you doing down here?”

Angela scanned and then went to an enormous pile of bags being shifted into a far corner. “I heard you need help.” She lifted two bags and took them to the same place as the rest of the workers.

It brought respect that she was doing manual labor too, but the Senior Eagles knew what she was really accomplishing by working fourteen hours a day since leaving Ciemus. Using physical labor as a distraction was a tactic they employed often. It would have been hard to miss.

Daryl patted her back and went to get another load of bags. *I don't want to go either. None of us do. You came to the right place to mourn.*

“It is lunch time, Safe Haven!” Brittani’s voice blared over the speakers of the ship, causing screams and spills; kids yelped at the suddenness of the noise.

“Lunch time is in the living quarters. Follow your map to the employee quarters and see what wonderful food is waiting.”

“Why is she still cooking?” Marc asked Angela as she joined him, covered in dust and webs that said she’d been working. They’d come through the same hall at the same time, leading him to believe it wasn’t coincidence.

“It’s not.” She smiled, slipping her arm through his before he could complain that Dog wasn’t with her. “I want to eat lunch with you.”

The kids cheered and dragged them down the green halls. They were following their noses. “Pizza!”

Marc stumbled along, stomach growling. “No way!”

Angela let them go on ahead, thrilled with the treat. She was working on a way to let Brittani cook and serve as an Eagle. The woman was getting better with the quality of the meals and she obviously enjoyed making them.

Angela paused in the entryway to scan her herd.

Made to service hundreds of employees at the same time, the mess was perfect for their needs. Camp members were already eating in the small booths or at the tables, while Eagles dined at the long double counters.

The kids filled the spinning stools opposite the Eagles. Screaming and laughing, they snatched hot slices and tossed straw papers.

The two groups eyed each other with trepidation and resignation.

Two hundred people quieted as they spotted Angela. Their thoughts about the ship were in their grim expressions and the subdued chatter that didn't bounce off flaps like they were used to. The ship absorbed it and sent back nothing.

It doesn't feel right.

This isn't Safe Haven.

This won't work.

I'm probably not going.

Angela swung her kit off and knelt to dig through it.

Marc lit up his mental grid to be sure everyone was here. He had to do it now while the kids were distracted.

Angela waved to a place on the wall of the mess. It was visible from any of the three entrances. "Clear a hole."

The military people among them chuckled, but their tolerant mocking faded when she stood up, hands full. They hurried over to help clear the wall.

Calmer moods entered as she and Ray held the ends of the flag while Morgan and Tommy nailed the holder tabs in place. When they finished, Angela turned to view her people. She'd practiced things to say to keep them scared, to make certain they left with her, but she could almost feel Adrian

whispering that it wouldn't succeed. *It has to come from the heart, Angie. Nothing else will get them to go.*

People shifted restlessly, waiting for her usual words of doom and gloom.

Angela lowered the shield around their perimeter, breathing a sigh of relief. "We have about twenty hours until trouble comes for us again. If you're leaving, do it in that time or you'll be stuck on this boat with me for the duration. I'm not coming back for anyone and I'm not slowing to let anyone catch up." She shrugged, turning to include them all. "You know where I'll be. You're welcome to join me there if you survive."

Angela went to the counter and squeezed between shocked Eagles. "Who has a drink for the boss?"

Ivan handed her the canteen they'd been passing, giving them away to the camp women who had thought they were drinking tea or water.

Angela sniggered. "Tea?" She took a healthy drink and swallowed, gasping as men laughed and women scowled.

Angela let herself burn with the drink and then took another. She passed the canteen while wiping her mouth. "Unless you've been given orders, you're off duty as of sunset. Shifts will resume at dawn. Feel free to come watch the game I've arranged on the shore during evening mess."

Cheers came, echoing through the boat.

Angela felt the shift and placed her hand on the wooden counter. Awareness thrummed through the surface. *I didn't expect this.* “Please give me time. It'll get better.”

The ship and the camp relaxed, unable to deny her humble plea. The people knew she could be trusted to follow through and the ship had been empty of life for so long that it would have accepted anyone who could recognize that.

Angela waved at the canteen. “Bring it back around. And someone throw me something to chew on.”

Eagles slapped her on the back and encouraged her, pleased with how quickly she adjusted to changing situations and unexpected blows. A common thought at that moment was no one would be able to take her place, not even Adrian.

And there's my next problem, Angela complained behind her mental walls. If I don't have a replacement, I can't leave the island and so far, none of my heirs can do it. I hope they can be retrained in time, but deep down, I already know it won't work. All my chosen heirs are fighters. They'll be at my side for the final battle. I have to pick someone who is good enough to avoid the fight and still bad enough to keep this camp together.

Like Adrian had done many times before her, Angela sent a silent plea for that person to find their way to her. *I can't wait for them. After the next wave comes, I'll be bleeding on the beach or dying on the ship, but I'm leaving and not even that will stop me.*

3

Angela stepped out into dim sunlight and a flurry of activity. Around the ramp, men and women were training in the stiff afternoon breeze. Men and women of all ages and races were jogging, using the gym equipment, and attending short lessons from senior men who were on breaks between loads. Dry clicks echoed from the firearms class. Clangs came from the cage. It was a huge comfort, right when she needed it. Instantly distracted from stressing over the future, Angela observed in relief. *It's okay. We can do this.*

She flashed a grateful look at Neil, who was in charge. There wasn't time for this display, but he was doing it anyway. He didn't care about the possible reward. He wanted her to have hope.

Seeing her army working together, healthy and able, settled Angela's heart into a calm rhythm. *We can survive anywhere. All we need is each other.*

Angela ducked into the bathroom tent.

Around the camp, Neil and the Eagles exchanged looks that said they'd done well.

Marc joined Neil as he waited for Angela to finish. They were going to eat and then enjoy a game and lesson, she'd told him. Marc was curious and looking forward to the downtime.

"Hey, what's up with your boy?" Neil hadn't wanted to ask, but leaving time was flying closer with every second.

Marc sighed, good mood falling a bit. “You’ll have to talk to the boss on that one.”

Neil laughed. He knew Marc was practicing obedience.

Marc grinned at the trooper. “Just practicing. Charlie’s getting the kick in the ass that he needs.”

“You know he’s out there with Kenn and you aren’t worried?” Samantha had been dreaming about all of them, a lot, and keeping Neil informed.

“Actually, my idea was to send him out alone. She made sure he had protection.”

“You weren’t going to send a guard with him?” Neil was shocked.

Marc shook his head. “He still won’t get the full lesson, I’d bet, because he has too many shields.”

“He would have died out there alone.”

Marc laughed, going toward Angela as she emerged. “You’ve met his mom, right? And his dad? That kid’s a survivor.”

Neil went to collect Samantha for the meal. She swore the entire council would all be together as America faded behind their boat. Neil believed her.

4

6pm

“We’re gonna play a little dodgeball and then those who volunteered for overnight shifts can go.” Angela stepped between the two uneven groups of people, ball in hand. “Normal rules apply. If you’re

hit, you're out. If you can catch it, one of your team gets to come back in."

Fire cans and vehicle lights gave the sandy field an eerie glow. Evening mess was almost over, and her people were growing restless again.

"Against you?" Gus crossed his arms over his chest. "None of us will get through."

"Not me." Angela pointed. "Him."

Marc came to the front of the group of kids and camp members—the non-magic users.

The descendants on the other side, a generous mix of ages and skills, cackled and got ready.

Angela stepped to the sideline. She would protect the vulnerable people from stray hits and call who was out. "Team leaders, come forward."

Marc waved at Neil. "I'm your defense."

Neil grinned. "Remember soccer when you first came?"

Marc's chuckle was wicked.

Angela shivered, sensing Marc's true nature. It always turned her on.

Marc locked down. *Not yet.*

Angela's shoulders slumped. "Call it."

Conner pointed. "Heads."

Neil gestured, laughing. "Not fair. He knows the outcome!"

Angela tossed the ball to Neil. "He didn't see that."

Conner groaned. "That's dirty."

"That's fair." Angela dropped her hand. "Go!"

Marc brought up a shield over his group.

Neil threw the ball at Conner. He groaned when Gus jumped up and caught it.

Gus threw it back.

The ball whizzed over Neil's head and slammed into Greg.

Greg clutched his chest, staring toward Marc. "What the hell?"

Marc cleared his throat. "Yeah, uh. Sorry about that. I wasn't ready."

Greg left the field, shaking his head as people laughed.

Neil looked at Marc, brows up.

Marc shrugged. "Don't throw it to Gus."

Neil turned, frowning. "He's bigger than Kenn, but I'm not supposed to throw to him."

Gus sniggered, waving. "Bring it on, skinny."

Neil waved at Ian, who had retrieved the ball. "You picked it up."

Ian threw it in a fast move, hoping to catch the big man off guard. The ball bounced off Gus's personal shield and flew into the air.

"Catch it!"

Conner leapt up for a neat grab. He threw it while in the air, hitting Tommy.

Neil covered his face with his hand. "This is getting embarrassing."

Marc moved to the side of his group, not saying anything. He wasn't sure why his shield wasn't working, but he was going to figure it out.

"The score is 2-0. Go when ready."

Tommy joined Greg on the sidelines, scanning the empty shore around them. Other than the boat and this game, nothing was moving. He saw darkness in every direction. *We're the last holdouts of America.*

The non-magic users groaned as a third ball came through, missing everyone. It flew into the kids in the rear, triggering a rowdy scramble for the ball.

The adults only observed to be sure nothing violent happened, not interfering. The kids had to learn things just like the adults and this would be a great family bonding moment, providing no one got hurt.

“Out!”

“Out!”

Daryl and Neil joined Tommy and Greg.

“This will be over quick.” Tommy looked to Greg. “What’s the deal?”

Greg whispered, hoping Marc wouldn’t pick it up while he was distracted.

“So he has to figure it out for this lesson?”

Neil nodded, thinking Samantha looked like she was having fun. Those not playing were lounging out of harm’s way, watching and munching. “Once he does, he’ll master it quick. Marc’s no slouch at defense of any kind.”

What am I doing wrong? Marc made a motion. “Time out.” He went to the water’s edge as the two groups laughed and conversed about the game so

far, cheering and jeering at each other in good natured ribbing.

Dog came to Marc and sat just out of reach of the soothing tide. He ran off just as fast, yipping at gators lingering near the perimeter.

I don't get it. I'm concentrating, and I have the door open. I see the shield. Why isn't it working? What am I... Marc groaned. "Not me, *her*. She's dinking with my doors while I'm distracted. You're so sneaky!"

Angela chuckled, waving. "He's got it now, people. Let's play for real. Everyone in."

"We won that one, right?" Conner had to know. He liked winning.

Angela nodded. "It was a skunk. Let's see if you can keep it rolling now that he knows what he's doing wrong."

Marc brought up a shield over himself, then activated his barrier over the team. The difference was obvious. Marc locked his shield in place and watched for Angela to lift the corner she'd found vulnerable. Nothing was coming through.

Angela nodded at Morgan.

Morgan sent a fireball at Marc right as Neil served.

Angela prepared to deflect the hit for him, but Marc's shield was like concrete. The flames sprayed over it as they broke apart.

Marc's side cheered.

Morgan moved to the front of his clapping team, also proud for Marc, but determined to make it a fair

game. “Heads up.” Morgan sent two fireballs this time, thrilled at being allowed this display.

Women who hadn’t chosen a mate yet pivoted toward Morgan in hunger.

Angela glared at the females. *Not this one. He’s taken.*

Morgan would have denied the thoughts that came from it, but Angela motioned him to keep shooting instead. He knew she didn’t mean herself. Morgan thought she was a hot mess, but he wasn’t under her spell like the rest of the men. *Who, then?* Morgan fired again, seeing Marc was starting to sweat. *The only one I had a spark with was Pam and she never even looks at me.*

Pam came up and placed a hand on Morgan’s bare, sweaty shoulder. “Busy later?”

Morgan’s fireballs sputtered into the air like a firework.

Angela shielded the descendant side when no one else thought to do it. They were too busy laughing.

Morgan recovered, stepping out of her reach. “Nope. You lied about being one of us.”

Pam shrugged. “Okay.” She flashed a smile at Shawn, who was standing next to Neil on the opposing team. “You mad at me for laying low too?”

Shawn nodded. “Yeah, but I’ll get over it quicker than he will.” Shawn winked at her. “And I’m *not* busy tonight.”

Morgan stopped gathering energy for the next blow. He twisted around, glowering at Pam.

Pam laughed, breaking the wall around his heart. It shattered at his feet, leaving a deep loneliness.

Pam waited for his choice, horrified at how slutty she was being, but she'd caught the interest from the camp women too, and it was no secret that Morgan used to service the widows. If she waited, she would lose him.

Morgan pivoted and fired at the shield while no one was expecting it.

Marc caught it and swallowed the energy, groaning at the power conversion.

"Very good!" Angela looked at Morgan. "We've always been tight. Want some advice?"

"Oh, yes, please!"

"Take a walk on the beach with them and see if it's what you'd like to try. If you're against it, tell her no. That's what she likes and he's good either way. I've known since the mountain. She didn't lie to me. She didn't tell you or anyone else because scans would have revealed her preferences in companionship. She thinks it will be the end of you."

Morgan's mood lifted. "You knew?"

Angela rolled her eyes.

Neil tossed the ball at Gus. "Come on!"

Morgan strode off the court. He'd observed Jeremy and Neil's satisfaction after moments with

Samantha and wondered how that worked. *Maybe I'll find out for myself.*

Pam and Shawn followed him.

Missy saw it all. Hatred flashed over the girl's expression. "Son of a—"

"Watch it!" Samantha snapped, putting a hand on the girl when she would have followed. "The boss wanted me to tell you something. Listen hard, monster child."

Missy paled. Samantha was never mean.

"I'm being honest." Samantha leaned in to keep the conversation between them as much as she could. "You're going to get him banished. Shawn is a good man. But he's lonely. You're going to ruin his life. Do you want that?"

Missy shook her head. "I love my Shawn."

Samantha sighed. "And he loves you or he wouldn't put up with the crap you pull, but he will never be your mate. You have to start thinking about him like he's your dad or Angela is going to split you up. Safe Haven needs him more than you do."

"But I've seen it!"

"The future isn't set." Samantha leaned in further, but not far enough to cramp her stomach. "How long has it been since you looked?"

Missy scowled. "She said no magic. Not since the mountain."

"Would it be so awful if that future had changed?" Samantha led. "He'll still love you; he'll still be your dad."

Missy began to cry.

Already chatting with Pam and Morgan, Shawn stopped, drawn by her misery.

Samantha stared at Angela, recognizing the dismay. *You didn't know. You were hoping.*

Angela sighed. *Stay with it for now. We'll be leaving some of them on the island.*

Not this kid, Samantha answered. *She's rough inside.*

I didn't mean the child, Angela sent, motioning for Neil to continue the game. *Shawn isn't corrupt.*

Won't a setup like mine seal the deal for him?

Just the opposite. Shawn will fall in love and never view Missy the way she sees him.

Won't that drive Missy insane?

Yes...and she'll take it out on our enemies once she's convinced they're the reason for it.

Samantha recognized the trust moment that was happening. They were on the boss's private line, and Angela was giving away secrets to planning the future, to manipulating it.

Now's the time to choose your path, as well, Storm Tracker, Angela told her, easily able to shield the teams while conversing. *All the council can lead, but not all leaders can run my council and my camp. You could stay.*

For Samantha, it came down to one thing and she asked it aloud, aware of Neil now looking back and forth between them. "Is Neil a fighter or an islander?"

Angela's grim expression was the answer.

Samantha didn't hesitate to give up power for love. "I go where he goes."

Magic swirled through the camp, locking another choice in place. Angela ignored Neil's stricken expression as Conner translated it for him in hand code. He'd been sure Samantha and his family were going to stay on the island, that he would be able to remain an Invisible.

"I have a short announcement." Angela waited until the ocean was the only noise, making sure she wanted to do this. When no other path lit up, she followed through. "Effective immediately, I'm evaluating all camp members who are staying on the island for the worst job in Safe Haven—mine. Please submit your name for consideration within the next two weeks or you will be eliminated from my list." Angela signaled in the silent stillness. "Let's play."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Made To Be Broken

1

“**W**here’s the boss?” Samantha, guard in tow, joined Marc at the bottom of the boat ramp.

Marc frowned. “Some people decided to spend the night on the ship, so she wanted to make sure we had enough beds ready.”

“That was three hours after she dropped the bombshell.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know?”

Marc snorted.

“Boss got us again.” Samantha pointed. “Here they come.”

“What’s left out here to load?” Angela staggered down the ramp, belching.

“Just the five trucks you had us pull into an open-ended square, and the tents for eating, sleeping, and bathrooms.” Ivan was tired. “Even the mess has been moved now. All meals and snacks have to be in the galley.” Ivan consulted the lists to be sure he hadn’t overlooked anything, no longer trying to match her weaving steps. It had made him nauseous as they came through the boat. Angela had just finished rounds of everything. Ivan had

disapproved of her bringing the alcohol canteen, but he had no right to tell her that people would disapprove. Plus, he was positive she knew.

Angela didn't try to maintain a straight line as she came down the ramp.

“Is she drunk?”

Marc nodded at Samantha's query. “Smashed.”

Angela stepped by him, giving a smile that was weak, but determined.

Marc opened his mouth to give in.

Samantha swung her cane, slamming it into the back of Marc's knee.

Marc went flying forward into the sand.

Samantha hurried after the boss. “So, no one's heard from Adrian's group yet. Will he be dropping Charlie off in the morning?”

Marc ignored the looks from the guards as he stood and brushed off. He limped to the opposite end of camp as team leaders mobbed Angela with questions about their missing people, namely Adrian. Angela had caved and allowed herself to get drunk so she wouldn't have to feel the pain of their separation. It was her last comfort. Marc had cut off her time with the kids by taking it from her and there was too much for her to do to afford more than a minute of alone time to attempt contacting him. Adrian had promised not to answer even if she tried and Marc believed him. Angela was too wound up to have had peace from any direction.

It worked. Marc stepped out of the perimeter and opened a private line. Angela would be able to

hear it if she caught wind of it, but the team leaders had instructions to overload her for a few minutes so he could make this call. *Where are you?*

Tucked in, one click to the east.

It's time.

Marc felt Adrian's hesitance.

Are you sure? I'll drop off Kenn and the boy and take the women out of here.

The future won't allow that.

The future isn't set.

Come in now. I'll get her to the gate. You take it from there.

What if I don't want to know the outcome anymore? What if I stay away and we leave things like they are?

Marc sent anger that came from the personal betrayal of their friendship. *You owe me.*

Adrian let out a weary sigh. *Give me an hour.*

You were supposed to have things ready.

I do, Adrian sent, fury and fear warring. I need time to ditch my team and set the alarms. I can't do this with your son and my kiss-ass watching, not to mention your mistress and my baby momma.

Marc broke the connection and retreated into camp before he let the mirth roll. Unlike Adrian, he was excited by what was about to happen. Marc had almost ruined his own plan tonight because he loved her and didn't like causing her pain. Samantha had reminded him that pain can serve a good purpose.

Across camp, Angela broke away from the men and women crowding her, hand coming up.

“Enough!” She staggered toward the ocean, blocking the pain. *Adrian. Adrian. Adrian. I’m sick of his name! If I can’t see him, I sure as hell don’t want to hear about him!*

Angela kicked the sand, not thinking about what might be attracted to her movements. She was drunk and hurting.

Marc followed her with approving nods to miserable team leaders who had agreed to help with the plan before they’d considered the actual moments. No one wanted their leader feeling this way.

Drawn by Angela’s pain, Jennifer appeared on the ramp, Kyle behind her. Angela had sent them back to their room this morning. If not for the morning meeting, she wouldn’t have disturbed them at all.

Attention turned to the new couple. There were curious stares and approving glances, but there were also calculated leers that evaluated the couple’s odds of staying together now that Kyle had gotten what he wanted.

Kyle put an arm around Jennifer’s shoulders, giving her the physical display she needed. Camp women were studying him for signs that he was officially off the market. The males were doing the same to Jennifer. The wedding had suddenly changed how they were being viewed.

Jennifer trembled, moving against him in fear. She buried her face against his chest, playing her role.

Kyle felt it in his heart. He growled viciously at the men, triggered.

Disappointed Eagles went back to what they'd been doing, accepting the couple was untouchable that way.

Marc hoped they would see the same thing about him and Angela by this time tomorrow. He was taking a big chance, but the outcome was worth it.

Marc walked between Angela and the sand, thinking her deal with the water made her safer on that side. The alligators on shore didn't have that limitation. "Got a minute?"

Angela slowed, shaking her head. "You handle it."

Marc smiled. "I'm in charge right now. The entire camp has to do whatever I tell them?"

"Yes, yes." Eager to be alone, Angela gestured. "You have full point."

Marc took her by the arm and marched them back toward camp.

"What's going on?"

"You're taking a break for the rest of the night." Marc's tone hardened into a sharp edge. "The full point man has given an order."

Angela snorted, but didn't resist. "I'm needed here. I don't have time for a break and I don't want one even if I had the time."

Marc gestured. "Get in there. We need to talk."

Angela didn't like being ordered around. She also didn't want this conversation. Instead of

fighting him on it, she locked down on her emotions and gave him another fake smile. “Okay.”

Marc frowned as he followed her into the tent. Unless there was a threat to the camp or a problem, she’d blocked herself off to everyone and everything. Cody got her love, along with the other children, but even that was shallow and not full of the warmth they’d all come to need from her. She was doing the job and it was just enough, but Marc was tired of it. He wanted the fire back, and the hatred, and everything else she wanted to throw. This lifeless woman waiting meekly for his lecture was ugly.

Angela sulked a bit. She didn’t like Marc to think her ugly at all. “I’m sorry.”

Marc sighed.

“What gave me away?”

Marc reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear. “You’re not spending time with the Eagles. Every free minute goes to the kids.”

“So?”

“He told me you would do that.”

Angela scowled, fire blazing for a second. It was quickly smothered. “I’m working on it, okay? You’re asking me to be happy about something I have no control over. Stop blaming me for his actions.”

“I wish you’d told me.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t, and I still wish I hadn’t because we keep having moments like this.” She sighed, taking pity on him even when he wasn’t

doing the same for her. “You have to let me hurt. It’s the only way I’ll recover.”

“He said it’s unbreakable.”

Angela belched. “So?”

“I think you let him do it because it’s the only way you could be a leader.”

Angela didn’t blink. “So?”

“You don’t care I think that?”

“I don’t care that you want me pissed off for some reason. The camp is calm, people are settling in, and you’re giving the kids what they need. Stirring them all up to quiet your guilt is crazy. I won’t allow it. You take the vacation with our former leader. I won’t.”

“Well, he’s pulling up right now, so you should at least go let him know you’re not coming. He’ll sit out there all night until he gets to see you, even if it’s from a distance.”

Angela glared, trying not to break. “I’ll shoot him in the head in front of this camp if he steps inside our perimeter. And then I’ll shoot you for doing this.”

Angela stormed off toward the parking area, leaving Marc grinning.

“I’ve missed that bitch.”

Around him, sentries were thinking the same.

Don’t come in. She’s not happy we did this.

Didn’t expect her to be, did we?

Nope.

Adrian pulled his truck up to the gate, keeping his hands on the wheel so the rookie guards

wouldn't panic. As two sentries rushed over with guns up, a radio crackled.

"I called him in. Stand down." Marc's voice betrayed no emotion.

Adrian didn't respond even though he was getting nods and waves from Eagles. He'd been banished. He was required to act like it.

Marc observed as Angela reached the parking area. She was cursing mentally and preparing to send Adrian away. Marc waited for the moment he'd arranged, actually looking forward to it. The jealousy had been smothered by boredom with his mate. He wanted the other Angie, not this demure little mouse. He nodded to Neil.

Angela winced, thinking of all the years she'd spent as Kenn's whipping post.

"Hey, we were about to do a training exercise with the rookies." Neil joined her. "Permission to go ahead since the vehicle out there isn't a threat to the camp?"

Angela waved him on. "As you were. This won't take long." Angela neared the gate, able to see the truck but not the man driving it yet.

"We have a breach at the main gate!" The radio blared with Neil's voice, sounding perfectly alarmed. "We are go for Level three extraction of Raven."

Angela frowned as men came toward her. *I'm Raven...* Angela was grabbed by three Eagles and lifted off her feet. She gasped in surprise, realizing

it was the lesson for removing her from a dangerous situation.

“Get her in! Move! Move!”

Eagles hustled her out the gate and shoved her into Adrian’s truck. They slammed the door, then ran inside before she could kill them.

Angela sat up, too late, as Marc brought up a shield around himself and then the camp.

Adrian hit the gas and drove her away.

“Good job!” Neil’s tone over Adrian’s radio was light. “Back to your posts.”

Angela blew out a furious hiss. “I’ll make you both pay for this.”

“And ruin the vibes?” Adrian sped up. “They hustled, you know. Let them have it.”

Angela didn’t care that he was trying to calm her down. Each turn of the wheels was taking her further from camp.

“You don’t think Marc can keep them together for twelve hours?”

“I am not staying with you for twelve hours!”

“Nine.”

“No.”

“Seven.”

“No.”

“Well, he told me not to come back for a while.”

Angela sighed. “Ten minutes.”

Adrian hid a grin. “Six.”

“Deal!”

“Awesome. Six hours it is.”

Angela slumped against the seat as she realized she'd been tricked. "I'm getting old."

Adrian chuckled, increasing speed again. If he only had six hours, he didn't want to waste it traveling.

"And what is it you think we'll be doing?" Angela ground out.

"Talking, working. The usual."

Angela relaxed a bit. "You're not going to try anything stupid?"

"I already did that." Adrian smirked. "I convinced Marc to let me kidnap you."

"I should have known you stirred him up."

"Actually, he contacted me about your lack of fire. I told him you need a break."

Angela belched again, grimacing at the second-chewed taste. "How did *you* know I was having trouble?"

"He said you've been spending more time with the kids than with the Eagles."

Angela closed her lids, horrified to discover tears waiting. "Please don't ever do this again. You've been banished. We can't be together, or we'll lose them. No one wants us to be happy unless it's apart."

Adrian sighed. That was the truth. They would never have a happy-ever-after. He'd ruined that by not being forward about his desires. If she'd left Marc for him willingly, they might have stood a chance.

"I never would have."

“I knew that.”

“So you used your gifts and cursed us all.”

“Only our trio. It will have saved a nation, however. I hope that’s some consolation.”

“It is.” Angela lit a smoke. “He should have left this alone.”

“What if I said the camp needed a break from you?”

Angela stiffened. “Are they unhappy with me?”

Adrian shrugged. “In ways. Some of them expected you to fight for what you want.”

“Just the people who think a three-way relationship is okay.”

“Not all mates will survive, but with multiple partners, there won’t be as many widows and orphans. I know why you did it. Why can’t you accept it too?”

“I’ll lose the support of the Eagles.”

“The Eagles were disappointed because they think it proves you aren’t healed yet.”

“I’m not.” She exhaled, refusing to view those images in her memories.

“Some of the women were hoping you would give them all the same rules instead of continuing to insist that it has to be played by the old world.”

“Some things should be the same.”

“What about Samantha and her men?”

Angela moaned in pain.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll push on this if you don’t face it, baby. Answer me. What about Samantha and her men?”

“They were happy! Pam will be happy!”
Angela’s snap became a sob. “I hate myself.”

“I know. I feel it no matter how far apart we are.
You have to let some more of it go.”

“I don’t know how. I deserve to hurt.”

“I disagree and so does nearly everyone in
camp. You’ve suffered enough. You’re allowed to
have peace.”

“Not with you.”

“No, with Marc. Why are you shutting him out
again? You could be using him in place of the
cravings I gave you. You know that.”

“I have been.”

“So?” He tossed her tone right back.

Angela didn’t answer.

Adrian steered the truck down a short dirt road
and slowed in front of a small RV that looked
nothing like the one the vet had chosen. “You love
me. After you use him in my place, you feel bad
because that’s a betrayal of our bond.”

Angela snarled, thinking of Nancy.

Adrian put the truck in reverse and pulled to the
hitch of the RV. “If there was a way to break the
spell, would you do it?”

“Yes!”

“Do you think it would free you from the
bond?”

“No.”

Adrian shut off the engine and took the keys
from the ignition. “You could have already broken
our bond.”

Angela sucked in air. “Don’t.”

“Our bond wasn’t valid because I used magic to get you to care for me. Why didn’t you break the bond?”

“I won’t answer that.”

Adrian leaned over, not offended when she leaned away. “I already know.”

“So?”

Adrian chuckled, sending deep longing and heavy need. “You like it. I make you feel alive when no one else does.”

“That’s not true!”

“How long has it been since you felt the rush you have right now?”

Angela refused to answer.

Declaring it a victory, Adrian pushed a button he’d rigged to the dash during his first days away from the shore. A camera rose from the top of the RV. Laser lines lit up around them.

Adrian popped the door handle, aware of her red cheeks and clenched fists. “Come on. I’ve got a map of places to search for more food during the journey to the island.”

Adrian got out and stood on the foot rail, waiting. When she didn’t move, he frowned. “Fine. We’ll stay right here, and someone will pick us off for the truck.”

Angela jerked the door open and stomped out. As she went around the truck, more laser lights came up, telling her he had heavy alarms in use for

her visit. That implied he and Marc had planned this at least a couple days ago, if not more.

“Two weeks.” Adrian shrugged at her brow. “I insisted we wait to be certain you weren’t just pms-ing.”

“Oh, slam you.”

Adrian chuckled. “Okay.”

“Do you really have a map?”

It bothered Adrian that she had to ask. “Yes.”

Angela felt it and shrugged. “You trapped me, but I’m supposed to go easy on your feelings?”

Adrian followed her to the RV, seeing his alarm on the door hadn’t been broken. “You could have fought me. Must be convenient to always get to play the victim.”

“Fuck you.”

Adrian sighed. *If only.*

Angela swung back toward the truck. *I’m not doing this.*

“Because you’re scared you can’t trust yourself alone with me.” He gave her a pointed look. “You’ve never been a coward.”

Angela froze, torn. She wanted this, so it had to be wrong.

“I’m sorry. I won’t use our bond against you again.”

Angela nodded stiffly and marched to the door.

Following, Adrian slammed her in the back with a blast of his magic. “I lied.” He hit her again, sinking it in deep before she had a chance to fight.

Angela was flooded with more pleasure than she could handle at once. She staggered to her knees in front of the door, moaning. “Stop.”

Adrian used the last of his energy to send love so deep that tears came to his eyes when it connected.

Helpless at the emotional blows, Angela shuddered. Her hand came up in defense, body shaking. “Why?!”

“Because you’re acting like it doesn’t matter! Because you have to feel this way too!” Adrian slammed his fist into the RV. “Because I need you!”

Angela kicked out, taking him to his knees in front of her. “Take it back!”

“Never!” Adrian grabbed her and jerked her against his chest where he could smell the alcohol on her breath. “You set it up. You set me up!”

Angela shoved him away, using her anger to fight his power. “And I’d do it again! I hate you!”

Adrian felt the bond shatter and stayed where he was, relieved and crushed at the same time.

Angela felt the haze lift. The fire receded. She took a deep breath. “That feels great!”

Adrian winced. His spell was still on them, but the bond they’d made to send the Maker’s call was gone now. He already felt distant in her mind and in her heart.

“Thank you.”

Adrian nodded, not looking at her. “Sorry if I was too rough.”

Angela rubbed her arms where he'd grabbed her. "Small price to pay to be free of that weight. I never wanted you in my head."

"What about your heart?"

Angela didn't lie. "You'll always be there. Without you, I wouldn't be who I am."

"And who are you?"

"I'm a mother, a doctor, a soldier and a leader of men."

"Yes." Adrian smiled, still not looking at her. "This was our goal. I'll take you back right now if you want."

"I want the map." Angela entered the camper.

Adrian hurried after her, heart lightening despite the loneliness that had invaded his soul the instant their bond was broken. Any time with her was better than none.

Angela admired his setup as he secured the door and activated more alarms. She saw bags of food and cans of ammunition, along with cases of water and first aid kits. He'd been busy.

"I've been sorting it all into bugout bags."

She frowned. "Have you seen a need for that?"

"No. Just being prepared."

"And keeping yourself occupied?"

"Of course. That's how I made this." Adrian took a rolled map from behind the seat and spread it across the long table in the back. Normally a prep area, it was perfect to lean over and examine the hand drawn paper.

Angela waited for Adrian to anchor it and retreat, not wanting to be that near to him. At the same time, she was still craving it, causing a mix of emotions that made her stomach boil and her heart race. It sucked.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you are.” Angela leaned over the counter, skimming the details.

Adrian began a hot meal and coffee, aware of the temperature dropping again. Winter was reminding them it hadn’t left.

“This is good.”

Adrian warmed under her praise. “I’ll keep adding to it.” He refused to think about the people he’d stashed or about his decision to stay here. All he wanted was this bit of time with her before Safe Haven left. He was memorizing details to carry him through years of waiting for them to return.

Angela recognized it. “You really are committed to the dream now. That’s best for all of us.”

Adrian snorted. “Marc killing me through the Creator was a bad deal. I had to make a change. No way to fight that one.”

“You deserve to die for what you’ve done.”

“So do you. So does half our camp.”

“They didn’t betray me.”

Adrian dumped a can into the pot and then added a few items from baggies next to the hotplate. “So how do you get me out of it?”

“I don’t. There’s no loophole this time, for either of us.”

“Good.”

“You mean that.” She could tell.

“Yes.” He gave a deep sigh. “I want to be good and can’t. I’m tired of never getting it right. Let a new soul have my slot. I’m not worthy of being reborn.”

Angela shuddered in sympathy. The bond that was the strongest between them—self loathing—lit up. They both hated themselves for the choices they’d made to achieve their goals.

“That bond will never be broken, even when we die.” Adrian cleared his gruff throat, stirring the food. Being together again wasn’t just affecting her. “You absorbed the lessons too well.”

Angela nodded. Using people against themselves to get what she needed came naturally. He’d enhanced that skill until she’d evolved into a ruthless player who would sacrifice a pawn without a second thought until it was all over.

“At least you do regret them.” Adrian placed a lid on the pot. “Other than my women, I really don’t anymore. The lives are worth this. We’ve saved our country once we reach that island.”

“Unless the future changes. Don’t jinx us.”

“When are you going to try again?”

Angela sighed tiredly, no longer drunk. “Don’t do this.”

“I can help. You know I can.”

“Not without strengthening the remaining bond between us and I won’t do that even for a chance at another child.” Her voice dropped into the false calmness she’d been using on the camp and Eagles. “I have the twins and Cody, plus Charlie and Tracy are making me a grandparent before I’m ready. It’ll be enough.”

“Angie...”

“No.”

“As you wish.” Adrian increased the flame on the spirit stove and gestured at the bunks. “You can nap if you want. I know you’re not getting sleep. I could feel it and now I see it.”

Angela fought a yawn at his words. She hadn’t slept for more than five hours since he’d marched down the beach and disappeared. “I’m fine.”

“Okay. Let’s talk about you and Marc.”

Angela groaned. “Stop it.”

“Go take a nap. When you wake up, you can take a warm shower, have a hot meal and a bitter cup of coffee, and then decide what you want to do from there.”

Angela was tempted. It would keep her from having to speak to him.

Adrian went to open the curtains in the bunk, then walked into the bathroom to put a towel on the tiny counter for her. As he came out, Angela entered the narrow hall.

They stared.

Adrian frowned at the stiff grip she had on her thoughts. “For a few hours, you’re allowed to be

yourself. He insisted on that if we broke the charm. Close us in a shield and do whatever you want.”

Angela broke. She pointed to the bunk. “Get in.”

Adrian’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

She nodded, yawning. “Connect us as we go under. I have some things to show you.”

Adrian settled into the bunk with his heart thumping and his demon warning him it was a trap.

Angela ignored everything. She wanted to feel Adrian holding her and she didn’t care the price they had to pay for it. In the old world, she would have thanked him, said no, and went home. In this one, she crawled onto his chest and sank down with a moan that he echoed. Being against his hard body felt like coming home.

Adrian kissed the top of her head as she settled onto his chest, legs wrapping around his. “For me too, baby. For me, too.”

Angela inhaled as deep as she could, moaning again. His scent was worth craving. “I want what Samantha had, but I don’t want to pay the price.”

“We know.” Adrian’s hands tangled in her hair as he nuzzled her cheek. “I’ll wait. If it never happens, it never happens. Moments like this are all I need from you.”

Angela tightened her grip. “It’s all I can give without changing who I am.”

“Please don’t change.” He didn’t want that either. “You’re the only thing I’ve ever done right.”

Angela sighed, weary muscles soothed by his heat. “Thank you.”

“For what, baby?”

“For loving me. The real me.”

“The evil you.”

“Yes.”

“I’d say the same, but you don’t.”

“I respect it, if that helps.”

“It does.” Adrian kissed her head again, intoxicated by her smell. Even with a layer of Marc over it, the vanilla was thick. “Just don’t ever forget that I’m the piece of shit and he’s your knight in shining armor.”

“He’s not, though. Or I’d never be here with you. He’d be enough.”

“We’re not made that way. Not all of us.”

Angela didn’t want to get into that. “Connect us. I need to show you these things.”

Adrian lit up every connection they had left. When the doors were open and glowing bright, he shoved himself through the one with the biggest frame.

Instead of the shallow bond they’d had before, their minds converged into one brain that settled together with groans and clicks that echoed to the trackers outside the camper.

2

“They’re going dream walking.” Barry slowly retreated, not thinking about descendants in hopes the couple wouldn’t notice him. His partner didn’t

have that problem. He was barely a human. Barry had never worked with anyone as quick to kill.

“We can’t get to them without waking them up. His alarms are too good.”

Barry knew that. “What if we don’t try to take them alive?”

“Mmm... We might be able to do that. Let’s get out of range and make a fast plan. I don’t think they’ll stay down long.”

“Why not?” Barry glanced at the moon they could only see when the gritty clouds shifted. “It’s late. Shouldn’t they be out for the night?”

“Normal people maybe, but not that pair.”

“What’s different about them?” Barry wasn’t used to his partner knowing more than he did. “Who are they?”

Malin didn’t want to share his suspicion and possibly lose the prize to betrayal. “I’m not sure yet. Come on.”

The trackers left without alerting the couple. They reached their jeep a few minutes later and removed a crate from the rear.

It didn’t take them long to gear up and head back.

3

“They’re coming for us.” Angela’s eyes didn’t open.

Adrian held her tighter and doubled his shield. “I’ve got us covered.”

Angela sank deeper into the dream world, pulling him along. “We’re almost there.”

Adrian strengthened the shield again, able to sense trouble crackling around the camper. He’d never sheltered someone this way, but he’d copied it from her while they were in the mountain. The emotions between them were feeding it—the feel of her in his arms, the smell of her in his nose. He felt complete. Nothing was getting through right now except power, but the trackers had set a fire to kill, not to capture.

Angela dragged them deeper, using her vibrant glow to shield him from the Demon of Time as that hungry entity rushed toward her. “Move aside.”

The haggard, clawed demon bowed to her authority over him and vanished.

Angela dove beneath the waves, breathing for both of them when Adrian’s lungs wouldn’t carry him.

I’ve never been so deep.

Angela grunted as the views slowed and became clearer. “There. Do you see it?”

Adrian squinted at the distorted view. “That’s...us!”

Angela stayed with the vision, struggling to hold it. She’d only been able to get this far into the future twice. She was hoping Adrian’s love would feed her and allow them to go farther.

Adrian sent a blast of need. *You were meant to be mine.*

Angela snarled.

Adrian mentally shrugged. *Anger is more effective.*

Angela forced her rage into the image, clearing it to a slow moving picture of a massive battle. “I need to know where.” She moaned as the image became blurry again. “I can’t plan our moves without that!”

Adrian took over, using his experience to bring it into focus.

“He’ll sense you... Hurry!”

Adrian found landmarks, but none of them were familiar. The best he could do was memorize the area.

“That’s not good enough!”

Angela’s desperation made Adrian stay with it even when he felt the demon rushing their way. Ground exploded beneath them, blowing dirt into the air.

“Wanted!” a shallow, hungry voice roared.

Adrian zeroed in on a street sign. It was all he could detect with words visible after so many years.

Angela blinded the demon as he appeared before them. “Three seconds!”

Adrian pulled back. “I got it!”

Angela took a hit as she let go of the time warp and faded back. She sagged.

Adrian was horrified to discover the camper in flames and trackers shooting round after round into the fire. It was also funny because the packed kits were shooting bullets back for them, though the ricochets were dangerous to both sides.

Angela belched fury from her mouth, throwing up all the hatred she'd absorbed from the demon hitting her.

The rabid hatred swarmed over the trackers and ate them alive. When it finished, it screamed into the sky and exploded, unable to survive without a host.

Adrian grabbed the map on his way through, carrying Angela from the flaming camper. He placed her on the ground behind his truck. It was unharmed, but that relief would come after he made sure she was okay.

"Angie?" Adrian kept the shield around them as the flames increased and smoke wafted over the site.

Angela coughed, belching out another blast of the demon's evil. It screamed into the sky and exploded without attacking them.

Angela groaned, slowly coming up the rest of the way. She spit as she sat up, taking the arm he offered. "That wasn't fun."

"You did great, baby. Better than I would have predicted if you'd told me what we were doing."

"I didn't trust you not to look at things you shouldn't." Angela stood, wobbling. "I still don't."

"I won't go back without you. I can't."

Angela grunted, holding out her arm. "I can't either now. I've been marked."

Adrian examined the bleeding wound. He'd never heard of that happening.

“We’ll speak with William.” She already knew it wouldn’t do any good. The wounds would heal, but the mark wouldn’t go away. Every time she tried to search the future now, the demon would sense his mark and come running to finish the job.

“It’s okay. Others will be able to do it and they don’t need to go that deep. I know where the location is.”

“Show me?”

“I don’t need to. You know it.”

Angela picked the name from his mind and matched it to her mental map. “We’re almost standing on it!”

Adrian nodded, leading her toward his truck. “There’s a motel near here with water in the tanks. The sign was at the corner. I can still get you that shower and you can see the name for yourself, see the layout of the area.”

Angela told herself to go back to camp. She’d learned valuable things and needed to concentrate. She also felt the guilt over how Marc might be torturing himself right now. “Sounds good.”

Adrian blinked, mouth opening. “Uh, what?”

“Take me to the motel. I want the shower before I go back. Marc doesn’t need to smell you all over me and think I spent the time in your arms.”

“Even though he’ll know you did?”

Angela climbed into the truck, ignoring the fire and signs of magic they were leaving behind. “He deserves better than me. The least I can do is give him respect.”

Adrian closed the door and came around to take the wheel. “You’re the boss.”

When they reached the sign, Adrian slowed to a crawl so they could study the area, but it looked like any other abandoned town. It was hard to believe that the future of humanity would be decided here. “I need to tell you about Kendle.”

Angela tensed.

Adrian drove to the small motel he’d seen while they were under, getting goosebumps as he parked the same truck in the spot it would occupy years from now. “She’s not getting better. She’s adapting to being alone, to staying.”

“What about Nancy?”

Adrian winced. He came around to escort her by the elbow, blocking her anger. “It’s proof of my commitment to the dream. It’s also a peace offering to your fiancé.”

Angela groaned as she remembered Adrian knew she’d agreed to marry Marc. “It’s a no-win with you!”

Adrian led her to the rear door. He shoved the rickety barrier open and escorted her into the darkness. They both scanned and found only rats and spiders.

“I need a few minutes to hook things up. Tag along or wait here?”

Angela snorted, stepping by him to lead the way with her necklace light.

Adrian grinned. “I’ll miss moments like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

Adrian knew she meant for having to leave him here. He sighed, sure that was her choice for Kendle too. “We’ve earned it. Just keep them alive. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Angela snorted again.

Adrian laughed as they moved down dusty, narrow stairs to the basement. “Okay. So I also want to roll naked on the beach with you until we both have sand in every orifice.”

“Done that.” Angela snickered. “Marc didn’t like it.”

She got me there. “What about you? The Maker’s bond is broken, and Marc will keep working on the other one. Everyone will help you with the kids and the camp. What do you need beyond that to be happy?”

“Nothing.” Angela led him to the breaker box and shined her light so he could work.

Adrian placed a hand on her flat stomach.

Angela tensed.

“You had a flash when we were under. Jennifer was talking to Marc. They thought you couldn’t hear them through the shields.”

“And?” Angela waited for him to spit it out, tense at the heat against her scarred, empty belly.

“In a week, you’ll be ready.” Adrian let the heat continue to flow. “I can teach Marc how to help you. You can have the same odds with him.”

Angela pulled away.

She didn’t say no... Adrian removed his kit and began digging out the tools he needed, but he didn’t

push her. Exactly like he would have done in her place, Angela was ruthlessly evaluating all options and what each would lead to.

Angela held her light while he worked, following him, listening for trouble, but her anger and excitement were loudest. Like Adrian, she knew where something like that could lead and she was terrified of it. “There’s no way you could convince him in just a week. We’d have to go slower. A lot slower.”

“No, we wouldn’t.”

Adrian’s voice had dropped into a tone that warned her to brace for something she hadn’t foreseen. “What do you mean?”

“He already memorized the spell.”

Angela was stunned. “You explained how it would have to work since he has no idea how to really do it, even with the words? That you would have to be there?!” Angela wasn’t about to risk a child on an amateur spell caster, no matter who they were.

“Of course.”

“And?”

Adrian sighed in triumph. “He didn’t bat an eyelash, Angie. *You’re* the one holding us back. You always were.”

4

It was almost dawn when the truck returned to camp. Marc was waiting at the gate.

Angela slammed the door, anger obvious in her red cheeks and fast stride. Her thoughts were spinning faster than he could keep up with, but Marc caught enough to know that Adrian had stuck to the plan.

Marc gave Adrian a sharp salute.

Adrian flipped the finger and drove away.

Angela entered the gate that was quickly opened for her, not responding to muttered apologies from the Eagles. She strode to where Marc was standing.

Marc jerked her into his arms and claimed her mouth.

Angela was furious. She was also aroused and excited by a tiny glimmer of light now shining in her mental darkness.

Marc felt the emotions and deepened the kiss.

Love me?

Angela groaned, arms coming up. *Forever.*

Marc held her close, aware of words forming in her mind. He broke the kiss to hug her tightly. “Not yet.”

Angela tried to talk anyway, but Marc pulled her into the shower camper. “All I want is you, right now—all of you!” He was thrilled with the outcome, delighted that she’d come back to him without cheating, without games or plans to bring Adrian back. He was horny.

Angela leaned against the wall as Marc locked the door. She felt the same way. She hadn’t been this hot for him in...

Five months, Adrian supplied in her head. *Enjoy your night.*

She felt Adrian close the mental door and then all thought flew from her mind as Marc began to rub her willing body. When he began muttering a charm but not using magic, practicing for a future moment, she didn't notice.

Chapter Thirty-Six
Breathing Fire

November 27th

1

“**T**hose are big birds.” Conner walked by the large sea gulls lingering just outside the perimeter tape. The shield wasn’t up, but the birds still weren’t crossing the line.

Nature’s spies. Dog pawed the sand in contempt. They can go anywhere, so they can see and hear everything. Never trust a bird.

Conner noted that, sure he would add it to his report. His shift had just started, but he didn’t know when it would end. None of the guards did. *Just like the wedding day schedule.*

When is my boy coming back?

Conner kicked the sand. “I wish I knew. It sucks being alone here with only...”

Dog snorted, still eyeing the alert birds. *You’ve made progress with her, but you do not feel happy.*

“I don’t like lying, pretending.” Conner shrugged. “And it isn’t the same without Charlie.”

And your dad?

Conner nodded. “I’m happy with everything else.”

Dog stopped as one of the birds inched closer to their perimeter. *Hold that thought.*

Dog took off like a shot from a gun, whipping through the sand. Sprays of it flew up from his paws, alerting the birds, but Dog had gotten the element of surprise. He lunged across the perimeter and grabbed the braver bird around the neck.

They rolled across the shoreline as the rest of the birds took flight.

Conner kept watch while Dog killed the bird, expecting the wolf to eat it. He was surprised when the big animal trotted back to him instead, shaking his big head.

So, you have a mate but no pack. That was the issue, correct?

Conner stuttered, following as the wolf resumed their rounds. “Uh, yeah.”

You could pick a new pack. Dog stopped to wipe his face through the reeds and sand to remove the mess.

“What?”

Dog tilted his snout toward the camp that wasn’t usually so active this early. *The Eagles can be friends and supervisors of your choices. Let them in and you’ll always have a pack.*

“Oh.” Conner swept in every direction, liking the rotating pattern he was able to use now that he’d been cleared to be alone on point with Dog. He noted smoke in the sky to the east and moved on, sure the senior men had already logged it. Fires

around them were watched, but they weren't a surprise. "Maybe."

Quinn, also just starting the long shift, jogged over to them. "What was all the noise?"

"Dog was clearing the perimeter. Birds."

Quinn noted it in his book and went to get live updates from the other sentries.

Conner passed Tim, who had stopped trying to keep up with Quinn's hyper movements. "What's his deal?"

Tim chuckled. "I told him even the rookies could spot it." Tim kept walking. "Catch me later. I'll fill you in."

Conner smiled at the feeling. "You know it."

He swiveled around at a loud splashing noise.

Dog waited for the boy to see that it was someone blowing out the firefighting hoses on the tugboat. Conner was falling into training so well that Angela had scheduled him on the most important shift today to be certain things were covered.

Conner brightened. "Really?"

The pair walked off, chatting while patrolling like the senior men were able to do.

"I didn't have..." Conner paused.

So did Dog.

Waves of hatred and insanity slapped them.

Conner concentrated and brought up a doubled shield over the camp and the boat. He couldn't hold it for long, but he only needed to alert the others and then one of them would cover it.

On the ship, Jennifer rolled over and slapped Kyle on his bare ass. “Get up!”

Kyle banged his knee on the table as he leapt from the bed, staggering and cursing.

In the medical camper, Samantha pushed Neil from the bunk. “Get your gun!”

He fell on the bags of gear he’d brought in at her request. He fumbled for his weapon, wincing.

In a tent near the boat ramp, Angela sat up, letting the blanket fall. “He’s here.”

Marc stirred, groggy. “Who?”

“Jeff. A full day early!” Angela stood and walked off the air mattress, unbalancing it.

Marc was flipped onto the floor. “Hey!”

Angela grabbed her radio and switched it on.

“...repeat, we are ten minutes out and not alone in a big way.” Jeff’s weary voice echoed across the camp. Kids shouting and crying filled the background. “I’ve got nothing left.”

Angela grabbed her boots, flinging the radio at Marc, who wasn’t looking at her.

It bounced off his shoulder and fell, hitting his knee. “Hey! Ow!”

Angela shoved her feet into boots and then her arms into her jacket. She slept with her guns on.

Marc struggled to his feet, rubbing his shoulder.

Angela snatched up both their kits and rushed to the flap.

“Hang on. Wait fo—oomph!” Marc’s kit slapped him in the chest, knocking him backwards. He hit the air mattress and bounced, landing back in the same place he started from.

Angela hurried outside and knelt to zip the flap on him as Eagles flooded from tents and the boat. She signaled them toward posts.

“Angie! Wait!” Marc swept up his gear and ran. He bounced off the zipped screen and went flailing, gear flying into the air. “Ow—oomph!”

Morgan shook his head, falling in behind Angela. “That was rough.”

“He’ll come out breathing fire. We need that.”

“Is he breathing at all?”

“He sleeps with his boots and guns. He can fall into combat without air.” Angela felt Jennifer connect with her. She waved Morgan toward his next post and went to the gate.

Marc ripped the screen open with his bare hands. “Where is she?!”

Eagles pointed and got out of the way.

Marc scooped up his gear and marched toward her, tirade cut off as he spotted the dust cloud on the horizon. A truck was speeding in front of it with smoke coming from under the hood and a shield lit up around it.

Behind the bus was an unending line of cars and trucks carrying a refugee wave that had to be five hundred people. Marc’s heart thumped. He began dressing. *We have to go.*

Angela keyed her radio, scanning clouds of smoke rolling up from the east. “Load up time has come. Get on the boat!”

For a split second, there was stillness as guards and camp members realized it had come early. Then a flurry of activity covered Angela’s hand motions.

Marc caught them and passed the orders to council members as he saw them and made eye contact. He also edged closer to her as people streamed by. After Keith’s death, the bad vibes in camp had faded, but they hadn’t vanished.

Marc observed the dust cloud, counting off five seconds, then switched to the truck and did the same. *Four seconds*. The truck was losing ground as the engine failed. *Probably from lack of cool down time*. Marc was still buttoning and fastening clothes.

Angela concentrated, needing to time it right for lowering her shield. Marc was correct in his estimation. Part of the wave was going to reach the truck right as the truck reached safety.

“Can we—”

“No.”

“Is it okay to ask why I can’t just shield you and have the others do the same for your fighters?”

“Lack of experience. They can’t hold it. Neither can you, yet. I’m going to wait until the last second and hope some of the refugees turn away when they think my shield isn’t coming down. I have ten Eagles on each side of camp who are getting into position to target the vehicles that do get through. A

dozen women are herding the camp and kids onto the boat while the sentries load the last of our important items. The captains are already on the boat.” Angela paused, considering. “Oh, and descendants are behind tents and vehicles to watch corners and rear areas for anyone who gets through. I told them to take the lifeforces, so they’re alert.”

Marc turned his back to her so both directions would be covered, finally feeling dressed. “Sounds like it’s all covered.”

Angela grunted. “Not if I can’t get the shield back up.”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

“Because there are trackers mixed in with that wave and they can stun or zap, like what hit you at the UN camp. If they get me, you’ll all bring up a shield together and then another in it and so forth.”

“From our lesson in the mess.” Marc realized she’d known they would need that skill.

“Yes.” Angela noted the thicker smoke and a glint of flames now coming from the east. Her heart thumped as time sped up. “And you’ve been practicing, haven’t you, Marine?”

Marc nodded, tone cold. “It’s strong. I was thinking about smothering Adrian with it while I practiced.”

“I felt it. I was going to have you shield me against the zap...”

“But you want to bring them in and kill as many as we can.” Marc wasn’t surprised. He was still full

of piss and vinegar over his wakeup. “Tell me where to start clearing.”

Angela gave him a target. “The motorcycle coming alongside the semi. The driver just stunned Jeff. Seth’s already down and I can’t locate Becky.”

Marc directed his sonic blast at the motorcycle as Angela lowered the shield over Safe Haven. “Fire!”

Magic and bullets flew through the smoky air.

2

“Jeff!” Kimmie shoved against his big body, trying to keep him from crushing her as he fell.

Doug reached over them both to steer. He couldn’t stop the truck. Jeff’s foot was mashed against the pedal, causing the vehicle to grind in protest. Smoke billowed from under the hood, obscuring his view.

The truck bounced over something that crunched like bones. It flew into the air and came down hard in a fast stop that threw them all against the dashboard, seats, and windshield.

“Bring it up! Bring it up...”

Angela’s fading shout terrified her people.

The truck had barreled straight through camp, barely missing people to plunge into the sandbar where gators had been sunning. The reptiles rushed away, spitting and flipping their tails.

A shield came up around the camp, this time powered by a vivid blue light that told everyone Marc was now protecting them.

William appeared at Marc's side, approving of the twisting stance over his mate's body. "Unlock me and I'll wake her up."

Marc didn't have time to ask how it worked. He jerked on all the closed doors in William's vast mind. "I release you."

Marc retreated to let the groaning, twitching man reach Angela, scanning for trouble near them.

William sent a strong current of need into Angela's chest. "Wake up. *I need you.*"

Marc frowned as Angela's lashes fluttered. "That's an alpha thing, right?"

William stood. "Sure."

Marc would have responded, but his personal shield was attacked. He groaned in pain as zap after zap slammed into it. He'd never fought this way.

William added his strength to Marc's, reducing the stinging nettles to a poking sensation.

"That sucked!"

William nodded. "I won't last long. I've never fought this way either. Help her recover so she can take back over."

Marc closed his shield, aware of others around them doing the same, saving their strength. William could handle it alone for a few minutes, but they couldn't. The rest of them would have to do it as a group effort.

Angela sat up, looking around for the tracker who'd hit her through a thick layer of her personal shield. She found his body outside William's barrier. It looked like he was shot.

"Twice. Mine in the heart and Shawn's in the head." Marc helped her stand. "He needs to be promoted. That was a beautiful shot."

"Quarantine that truck." She waved shakily at Marc. "Make sure it stays that way."

Marc reluctantly left her side to do as ordered.

Angela didn't have time to explain the plan. She and the other females had decided to try to save the rage kids, but there was no way to start that right now. Angela scanned the camp, seeing things were mostly packed, but not being moved yet. Tents were coming down, but it wasn't going to be finished soon. "We need all hands." Angela also sent a mental call. *Bring them back to help carry. You were right.*

Neil grunted in her mind, hands full of squirming children who had been refusing to get on the boat. He let go of them, pointing. "Help load and nothing else."

Angela reinforced it. *Follow orders!*

Kids who had been running to her side detoured to help carry items instead.

Camp adults came slower, attention glued to the smoky shield where hundreds of screaming, waving refugees were reaching it. No one was surprised when radios lit up across the area.

"Safe Haven is on the shore, leaving!"

“We see the boat!”

“Aim for the boat! If we sink it, they can’t leave!”

A group of refugees on the eastern side of camp didn’t care about the wildfire now lining the horizon behind them. They weren’t fighting with each other or shooting vain bullets at the shield. They’d learned from the naval station. They were arranging their vehicles to ram it. They assumed if they sent enough hits in, the person upholding the barrier would tire and it would drop. If only for a few seconds, that would be enough to get them in. The group on foot next to the cars stayed together as the first attempt started, ready to lunge forward the instant the shield went down.

William fell to his knees as the first car slammed into his shield and came to an abrupt stop, scattering metal and human debris. His hands went to his head at the pain. “Ahh!”

The barrier dropped.

Refugees poured in.

“Damn it!” Angela snapped her shield into place, cutting refugees in half. She’d left it to William too long. He’d never taken a lifeforce. His energy bank was small and weaker than even Marc’s.

Screams filled the shorelines behind her as refugees near that side came through and found the pissed alligators who had been trying to escape through the shield. One had come out while the other tried to get in. The mess was expansive as the

reptiles ate their way back to shelters, taking chunks to dens.

Descendants and Eagles ran forward to protect the camp members who were grabbing items and running for the boat. No one was going emptyhanded. There was no way they could say they'd been too scared to help when young kids were darting around fights to grab things and hand them off as if they'd lived this way all along.

Angela staggered as another truck rammed the shield, grimacing. *It hurts.*

“All clear!” echoed from their right.

“Got them all over here!” came from the left.

“Rear is clear!”

Angela waited for the last call. Around her, the refugees pounded on the shield, spitting at her and stabbing it. They paid no attention to the fire, to people being knifed in the back, or to the bullets bouncing off the shield. William failing had told the more observant ones that the shield could be brought down.

Eager to make up for that failure, William waved his people to come with him. He formed a line in front of Angela and the council, shooting wounded refugees.

Bucky stayed on William's heels, determined to prove that Ciemus people were also survivors.

Another truck rammed the shield, causing it to flicker.

Refugees screamed in hunger, sensing fresh blood.

Marc took Angela's arm. "Let me help."

Angela connected them, thinking about how she'd followed him around for months before he'd finally noticed her. She had been weighing the choices of putting the charm on him. Even then, she'd planned ahead. She hadn't known what for, but it had been this moment in time, for the emotions, the energy, that would come. "I'm sorry. I release you."

The charm snapped.

Nothing happened.

Marc snorted, busy reloading. "My love never came from a spell. You didn't need it."

Angela's joy burst through Marc's mind and allowed them to bring up a double shield that crackled with fury. Zapping sounds echoed through the area as refugees died each time they attempted to penetrate it.

"How long can they do that?" Jennifer slid to a stop next to William, with Kyle on her heels. They were both wearing Eagle gear and determination.

"Not long." William scanned, sorry about the line of guards who'd been here. He tried not to step on the bodies as he reloaded. "We need more help."

Dog ran by in the chaos, whining. *Where are they!* He sniffed, snorting when someone accidentally kicked sand into his face. *I can't smell them through the smoke!*

Morgan pointed to the half dismantled tent that Tonya had insisted stay up for people until they left.

Under a flap, two cats were watching the fight with huge eyes and bodies poised for flight.

Dog ran that way, howling. *I'm coming!*

Morgan expected the cats to take off as Dog neared the tent in a fast run. He stared as both tabbies rushed out to meet the wolf instead.

Dog crouched as the cats jumped, lifting as they landed. It was a beautiful snatch and grab.

Dog took off running toward the boat with his prize, not caring about their hisses or claws as they hung on and tried to protect their ride out of the human chaos.

“Men down in front! Men down!”

The shout sent chills through the camp.

Angela couldn't help. A break in concentration would doom them. She looked at Jennifer, pain growing as more refugees reached them and attacked.

Jennifer shook her head, though she desperately wanted to help. “You told me not to take over even once or someone on the council would die. Hold the shield. Help is coming.”

Angela winced as another vehicle exploded against the mental barrier. “Better...be soon.” She gasped, feeling the deaths and injuries outside the shield.

The refugees kept coming, surrounding the fleeing camp on three sides.

The shield crackled in a repeating pattern that echoed for miles.

3

“I hate that noise.” It reminded Kenn of the base he’d been on when the war came. He tilted the gas can higher as it ran low. “Everyone ready?”

The passengers brought weapons to hand and ugly images to mind.

Adrian lowered the mental barrier and sent out a call. *Fire!*

Refugees turned or looked up in surprise at a descendant among them, but their attention was finally drawn to the wall of flames roaring in from the east.

“I almost feel bad we did that.” Kendle took aim. She fired the rifle, hitting a man who was stabbing the shield. *That’s my job. Get off there!*

Kenn grunted, still pouring fuel. “It looks like we missed a small spot. Circle back.”

Adrian turned the wheel, following their fire trail back to the narrow fork they’d left open. The rest of the fire had already converged, greedily latching onto dried structures and debris. There hadn’t been rain or snow while Safe Haven had been camped here, and the temperatures had continued to rise, creating the perfect conditions for a wildfire. Adrian swerved onto the clear patch of grass, seeing people roll their way.

“It’s only a few of them. We’ll handle it.” Charlie brought his rifle up. He fired.

The slug missed the driver of the jeep coming up behind them, hitting the radiator instead.

Steam billowed, but the jeep didn't slow.

Kendle fired.

Her bullet hit the driver. The jeep lunged to the right and smashed into a tree.

"Show off." Charlie aimed at the next car, a tiny red thing with huge tires that stuck out half a foot. He aimed there, letting the car reach Kendle's accident site. He fired.

A tire popped, tossing the tiny car sideways. It rolled through the emerging survivors of the jeep, sending bodies into the air.

"Now that's showing off." Kenn dropped the empty can and grabbed another from the floor. He opened the spout, wincing at a fresh flood of fumes as he waited for Adrian to get them to another cleared patch. Refugees were finally starting to realize they were in danger. More were coming now.

Kendle reloaded while Charlie proved again that his aim was better than his first miss. He was trying to create a car barrier for shelter, but Adrian wasn't waiting to be trapped. He pulled onto the pavement and kept going across the lane. He veered north, motioning to Kendle. "Light it up."

Kendle hit a button on the small box they'd taped to the dash.

A series of loud explosions came from behind them, sending more dark smoke into the sky. A few seconds later, thick flames raced over the smaller trails, flying toward the refugees who were now approaching the wrecks. Some of them turned back,

but those who tried to drive through it were suffocated by the fumes of the chemical bomb.

Kenn dumped the remaining fuel from the can over the ground as widely as he could, scanning their progress. A tall fire wall lined the eastern border of the camp all the way to the beach, where Adrian had started them from. After bringing Angela back to Safe Haven, Adrian had collected his team and got to work. While he and Angela were dream walking, Adrian had peeked at this moment. She'd been right to not trust him on that. He'd skimmed several moments while she tried to focus on the future battle site.

Adrian swerved again as a cluster of vehicles got near enough to hit them with bullets and magic. Power flew out, hitting the truck.

Adrian let the truck slide sideways, using a house to bounce along. Bricks and plaster fell onto it and through the windows, forcing Kenn and Kendle to withdraw.

Adrian got them back onto open ground, not bringing up his shield like he wanted to. "That was unexpected." He hadn't planned on fighting their own kind out here because their own kind wasn't safe among the mob either.

The refugees swiveled toward the blast location and overwhelmed the two weak men.

"Big mistake to use magic out here and not be prepared for the reactions." Adrian steered west, toward the throng of refugees filling the distant

skyline. There were too many cars and people to count.

Kenn dropped the can and picked up another. He held it tightly as Adrian reached a small group on foot and ran over them.

Kenn tilted the can out the window while Charlie reloaded and Kendle cleared the vehicles that were gaining ground. So far, they were the only ones with bullets.

A slug cracked into the windshield, splintering it.

Guess not, Kenn corrected, fighting the need to bring up his shield. They didn't want refugees to know they were anything more than Eagles who'd been caught on the wrong side of the perimeter.

"Not gonna last." Adrian swerved sharply to avoid a large chunk of debris hidden in the weeds. "Get your shields ready. We'll need them for the end."

Kenn thought about protesting again, but he still didn't see another way to get what they needed. He began drawing energy, tilting the can to keep the fire spreading. He was protecting Kendle too, since she didn't have her gifts.

"Blow it."

Kendle scowled at Adrian. "We're too close!"

"You want back in?"

"I do." Kenn hit the button.

The charges they'd planted blew up, chasing the truck as Adrian sped toward the mob.

The refugees right behind them couldn't avoid the detonations.

Twisted wreckage and screams sprayed across the ground and the back of the truck.

"Keep shooting!" Adrian hit the next people on foot. They were the first wave of stragglers who were now on the front lines but hadn't realized it yet.

Kenn grabbed the last two cans and held them out at the same time, knowing they needed a thick wall here. They hadn't been able to reach this point to plant charges.

"We don't need them." Charlie fired while Kendle reloaded. "We have pineapples."

"Homemade pineapples." Kendle cackled and lifted her rifle again.

Kenn rolled his eyes and held on to the gas cans as Adrian slammed into the bumper of a wagon.

Adrian let the wagon bounce ahead and then pitted it as he drove toward Safe Haven. A woman was at the shield, staring at him with fury and fear. She vanished behind the throng of refugees trying to breach the barrier.

"Angie." Adrian pushed the pedal down, tightening his grip. "Count."

"One...two..." Charlie stored the rifle. "Three...four..." He pulled up the layered vest and ducked beneath it like he'd agreed to do for this moment. "Five..."

Kendle also hunkered down, squeezing into the floorboard by Kenn's dusty boots.

Kenn shifted the box from his knees to the seat between them, then grabbed two of the grenades. Making them had been fun. It had reminded Kenn of his Marine days with Marc. *He would have approved this crazy plan.*

“Eight...”

Adrian rammed a motorcycle into the path of a truck that crunched it and still tried to pit them.

Adrian swerved at the vehicle as Kenn tossed a grenade.

“Nine...ten...”

The grenades began to explode, creating more shrapnel that slammed into the sides of their truck and other vehicles now trying to block them in.

Adrian plowed through a small gap in the impromptu blockade, bouncing around at the impact. Grenades flew through the truck.

Kenn tossed two more, aiming at those closest.

A bullet slammed into the dashboard, just missing Kenn’s head.

Adrian turned the truck so Kenn could use his rifle on whoever was shooting at them.

Kenn narrowed it to the three vehicles closest, unable to see the people through the smoke. He fired in that direction and knew it was good. He switched back to the grenades that were removing multiple threats with each throw. They didn’t have enough ammunition to kill all the refugees, so their weapons were a mix of mass killing items.

Adrian felt the hit coming, but there was no time to order shields up as power slammed into the truck.

The vehicle was knocked into the air. It flipped twice and came down on the roof, scattering dirt, debris, and smoke in every direction.

Refugees flooded that way.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Remember How It Smells

1

“No!” Angela slammed her hands against the shield, unable to drop it and help or they would be overrun.

Refugees pounded back, spitting and screaming obscenities.

“Help them!” Angela raised her fist to the smoky sky. “Save them!”

Power surrounded the scene, peering in.

“Save them!”

Do you agree to serve the Lord and do battle for Him? the Messenger insisted as refugees swarmed toward the truck.

Angela’s fury filled the barrier. It grew into a heat wave that filled the shield with temperatures high enough to bring instant sweat. “No. And if you let them die, I never will!”

The Messenger’s displeasure at her reversal could be felt through the shield and the building heat. A sound of frustration came over the din, quieting some of the refugees who sensed something happening.

Do it yourself. The Messenger vanished, choice made.

“Fine!” Angela lifted her arms, letting her power come forward, giving her witch control. “I will.”

Marc did the same.

Eagles and camp members braced for the attack. They were almost to the ship, but it would be impossible to defend the boat.

Angela lowered the shield.

A flood of killers immediately surged forward.

William grabbed the first one and drew, sucking out the lifeforce while Bucky stabbed men and women to keep him alive. William let go and grabbed another of the sweaty, grimy bodies. He inhaled, moaning.

Bucky slashed, fired, slashed again. Fingers and clubs fell to the sand, but the refugees kept coming.

The sky crackled and then popped. It was so loud that nearly everyone paused for a moment to identify the new noise.

“Heat lightning!” Samantha was in Neil’s arms as he ran for the ship. “Hurry!”

Lightning forked across the sky as clouds gathered. It slammed down near Adrian’s wrecked truck, hitting a group of refugees. Fire sparked from the spot, racing toward the other flames as the wind blew them together.

“It’s making a circle!” Charlie shoved the gear and vests over. As far as he knew, he was the only one conscious.

Possum’ kid, Adrian sent. Stay still.

The refugees didn't see the movement and assumed the Eagles were dead in the truck. It was a secondary target now that the shield was down.

Lightning forked again, catching more ground on fire.

Refugees ran toward Safe Haven, screaming and throwing weapons.

Angela and Marc's demons ran out to meet them, throwing sonic fire together. They cleared a path, burning women and men alive as their eyes exploded.

The ground rumbled, alerting people to a new problem.

"Earthquake?" Neil gasped. "Again? Here?"

"Nature is angry about that fire." Samantha cradled her stomach as they reached the gangplank. "Wait."

Neil stopped at the bottom and eased aside so the rest of the camp could get on the boat that was powering up. He surveyed the perimeter outside the shield and found death in every direction. Animals came from the ground to attack the refugees. Holes opened up and wind blew them into the fire.

"Nature thinks they started it." Marc groaned, chest squeezing as his demon used another blast of sonic power to clear a side of the shield. Dozens of bodies fell.

Refugees began to run away from the shoreline and the fire now, but it was too late for most of them. Nature's wrath was merciless, leaving men without hands from animal bites and women

running away on fire from winds whipping the flames into a frenzy.

“Come back now.” Angela tired as she connected to help William bring up the shield against the last hundred refugees who didn’t care about what was going on behind them. All they saw was Safe Haven in front of them.

Marc’s demon slammed into him with enough lifeforces to cause doorways in his mind to appear like ants laying a scent trail.

Angela’s witch entered her host gracefully, used to the merge. She inhaled of the energy, of the bloodlust and the death. *I caused this. I’ll remember how it smells.*

So would Marc, but mostly because he’d never been so powerful or so intimidated. This was only a part of how Angela felt, and he already wasn’t sure how to handle having so many ways to kill.

“Time to go.” Angela’s eyes were glazed as she mentally tracked Charlie and his group. “Now.”

Adrian kept a stiff hand under Charlie’s arm as they took off running. They’d stopped playing possum after the first lightning bolt.

Adrian didn’t hear new explosions or impacts and hoped that part was over as he dragged the teenager along before he could be distracted by the various fights and panic.

Too late, Kenn pointed, sliding to a stop with the pair as Kendle fired her last bullet and saved Adrian’s life.

The tracker fell out of the path, but his partner lunged forward with his knife.

Charlie spun out of Adrian's hold and ducked the man's swing. He latched onto the tracker's dirty shoulder and punched upward, using all of his 110lbs.

Caught off guard, the tracker took the hit in the throat and gagged, lurching backward.

Charlie jabbed his knife into the man's eye.

Adrian grabbed the boy again and got them moving, ears filled with screams, nose smothered with burning flesh. *Still doesn't compare to the rest stop*, he reflected, unable to stop the flashback.

The caller! Adrian didn't have time to wonder if Angela still had it. Wind blew under his feet, lifting him off the ground.

The downdraft blew the people aside and dug into the dirt, tossing clumps of charred ground into the air.

It dissipated, withdrawing as nature directed focus toward the line of people fleeing to the ocean.

"No!" Angela strengthened the shield with all of her power as nature slammed into it, screeching in immeasurable rage.

And Kendle thinks she gets pissed. Charlie kept running, handgun now out, while Adrian propelled him toward his mother. They could see Angela's shadow, but negative emotions swirling through the shield prevented clear sight.

"There!" Kenn veered the group toward a deep dune that was covered in sand. Movement coming

toward them warned that alligators were answering nature's call.

Kenn led them through the tangle of sinkholes and snarling reptiles, only able to manage it because the big animals were caught off guard.

Refugees chasing them drew up at the sight of the big man eaters. Some of them chose to go forward anyway, but the pause gave nature time to organize her army into two thick lines that caught anyone who tried to run or jump their way through. A few of the scrappier refugees used blades and fury to kill the monsters in their path.

Adrian and his group didn't look back. They were almost to the shield, where dozens of refugees were still attacking it. There wasn't a clear area and even if there had been, when the barrier lowered to let them in, the killers would also gain entry.

Don't let us in. Charlie was thinking of Tracy. Now that they were so close, he could see that only the highest Eagles and parts of the council were still out to fight. The rest of the camp was on the boat that would be overrun. *We'll go down fighting. I love you. I'm sorry.*

Angela's denial swept the scene, but Charlie looked at Adrian. "This is our atonement. We're going to die for them."

Adrian stared.

Kendle nodded eagerly.

Kenn shoved his way to the front and started hitting refugees with his knives as they ran. He

cleared a path that immediately closed back in on them.

Adrian pressed Charlie against the shield and turned his back to Angela to fight.

“Let them out.” Jeff limped to Angela’s side, without a guard. Everyone was busy. Kimmie and the rest of the children were clustered behind him. “Let them finish it and we can go.”

Angela hadn’t known until this moment what the kids were supposed to do. She shook her head, horrified. “Not again.”

Jeff put a hand on Kimmie’s shoulder. “You have Eagles of all ages now. You wanted that.”

“Not like this.”

“Exactly like this.”

Angela scanned him.

Jeff knew to bright light the memories she needed to see, aware of time running out for all of them. Nature was ramping up, sending blasts of wind that ripped up trees and used them as battering rams. It made the action at the mountain seem tame in comparison as one force wiped out hundreds.

Kimmie stepped to the shield, hand going to her knife. “One last time.”

Angela moaned, hurting. *No, killers. You’ll be with us when we return.*

“It’s our honor,” the rage children intoned together.

Forced, Angela scanned to be sure everyone was ready, aware of the fear of Eagles and the

council. Then she spoke the words from William's book that she had sworn would never pass through her lips. "You are now of age. Take your place among my army."

Kids arched as doors opened and gifts unlocked.

Angela placed her hand against Charlie's flexing shoulder through the shield. He was firing around Adrian's hip. He had the last mag.

Angela lowered the shield.

Hungry kids dove on incoming refugees, teeth and knives sinking into any open skin they could reach. Lifeforces snapped out across the beach like balloons popping.

Eagles who weren't busy fighting for their lives backed toward the nearest camp descendant for protection, not wanting to be mistaken for an enemy.

Jeff watched with his shield up, not joining in the fighting. He was drained after their adventures, refusing to take another lifeforce or allow Kimmie to refill him. He watched the little girl slice into a man's balls and move on to hit a woman in the stomach. The child ran around stabbing and cutting, inflicting mortal wounds in split seconds. It allowed for almost no retaliation. All the kids were doing something similar.

The refugees had already thinned on the western edge of the camp. The eastern side was deserted as the fire burned around the perimeter. Jeff assumed that would also head this way once the wind shifted. Right now, it was coming from the north and east,

pushing flames west. The refugees were being driven back into the hell they'd come from.

Outcasts forever, Angela marked them.

Adrian pushed backward, forcing Charlie into his mom. A rush of screams and gunshots prevented talking.

Angela fired to the right, automatically falling into Eagle procedure for protecting someone in the center.

Guards with matching mags tossed them to the empty team so they could keep fighting.

Slamming the mag home, Adrian laughed in delight as all of them fell into his lessons. Shoulder-to-shoulder, they cleared the refugees closest and then searched for anyone aiming at them. Eagles were taught to remove threats in a specific order.

Sandwiched in the center, Charlie dropped to his knees to be able to see between their legs, but sand flew over him in waves. Nature was zeroing in on the last group of humans who weren't dead or screaming in pain and fear. All over the beach, sand erupted in tiny volcanoes that spewed crabs with long pinchers and sharp senses that didn't differentiate between good and evil. Eagles and refugees shouted as claws cut through boots and pants. Nature had also noticed the shield being lowered. Fire crackled along the warehouse, shifting toward them.

"Call them back." Angela looked at Jeff.

Jeff gave a loud whistle that hurt the ears of people close to him.

Children stopped and ran to him as if pulled on a string. It made Angela's blood boil, but she was also grateful. The children had swung the tide in this battle.

"And the lightning." Marc didn't want to offend any of their helpers.

Angela refused to acknowledge it. She holstered as Eagles surrounded them. She reached out mentally, not sure if her idea would work. *I have something you want.* Angela pictured the wind scenes she'd just witnessed, not sure how to see the spirit of nature. *I will trade you for all Safe Haven lives.*

There was no response.

Angela sent a vision of people recognizing nature as a real force and respecting it. "You need that to be healthy again, like we need our people to love us. We can heal you, like we'll do for the water as we sail."

Nature screamed, rushing toward the human who had dared to force a communication.

Adrian brought up his shield around Angela.

So did Marc.

Everyone else followed, smothering their alpha in layers of defense.

When the children added their protections, Angela couldn't feel anything but their love for her, their need for her to free them from the awful game they'd been used in so long.

Nature couldn't penetrate so many layers. She pounded the surf all around the survivors, hitting

refugees and her own army, but none of Safe Haven's people. They were sheltered.

Silence fell. It was odd considering how many screams were echoing, but none of them could hear it.

William's addition to the layers of defense turned the sky dark for the entire camp. The people watching from the decks and stairs of the ship stared in uneasy admiration as the wind was stopped and the remaining refugees were shut out.

"Check for survivors and make them dead." Adrian pointed at people.

Men hurried to obey.

Marc helped Charlie to his feet as people released shields, letting William cover it alone. It was obvious he could handle it now.

Ciemus fighters also followed the order, nodding to those they knew and sweeping the dead for the same.

William came to Angela as the Eagles took the kids to the boat. He'd gained a new level, like many of the descendants already had or were in the middle of doing around them.

Die! Nature's fury screeched across the shore and hit the refugee survivors, causing more people to flee. The fight was over with the refugees, but Nature continued to throw shade against the shield.

Tiring of it, Angela held up her wrist. "I've seen that future. I'm marked by it."

No deals! Nature drew back for a final blast that would get through the shield. Like the refugees, she had noted that pain was effective.

“So be it.” Angela opened a door she hadn’t used before. “Every time she hits us, draw from her.”

In the middle of a blast, nature had no time to withdraw the hit. Power slammed into the shield in a dozen places.

Descendants arched, recharging their energy banks instead of repelling it.

Shrieks and screams echoed as nature fled in fury she couldn’t express.

Angela closed the door, drained. They’d only been able to access that ability through her alpha connection.

Jeff’s kids ran toward her.

Angela was too tired to handle it yet. “Help them onto the ship.”

Jeff and Charlie nodded, letting go of their shields.

Angela took a deep breath as the shields vanished from her. It had felt like being covered in a hundred blankets.

“There’s one last thing to handle.”

“What’s that?” Angela asked, heart filling with dread for the outcome of this moment. It was dark when she’d looked ahead.

“Me.” William kissed her.

Angela let him.

Marc, Ivan and Adrian strode toward them in fury.

Ivan had been guarding the ramp. Gus took over the post, frowning.

Lightning flashed, but no sparks flew between the couple, no passion. It was like kissing a brother.

William leaned back. He brushed a curl from her flushed face. "I demand you pick one of them to die. Ciemus demands it or we'll revoke your deal with the ocean."

"Why would you do that?" Ivan shouted, jerking Angela's arm to get her away from the man.

Marc and Adrian stepped in front of her, facing William with hands on empty guns.

"Because she'll never have peace until you three realize how serious this is. Survival of the world is in her hands and you're fighting over her like she's a trophy. She'll pick a sacrifice or all of you will die here." William brought up a shield around himself that only Angela had a chance of defeating. "Pick now."

Angela sighed, heart hurting. "I can't. I need all of them, all of *you*."

"But you only need one mate. Pick him at least, and I'll decide from the other two."

Angela looked at Marc.

William nodded. "As it should be." He marched toward Ivan.

"No!" Angela put a shield over the bruised soldier.

Adrian waited for the killing blow, hoping it would be quick. Knowing his camp was safe was enough for him. "I'm sorry for how bad it was, but not for a single action I took to drive us here."

Angela nodded, teary. "I'll always think of you as my leader."

"You're my magnum opus. I couldn't be prouder." Adrian knelt as William came to him.

Angela turned away as William grabbed Adrian and drew.

Nothing happened.

William let go and grabbed Marc, who didn't have a shield up.

Nothing.

Even without a shield, he couldn't harm the man who knew better than to struggle.

William shook his head. "You can't save them and kill your herd. Let go of one."

Angela waved Ivan toward the ship. "I release you in honor. Go."

Ivan stayed where he was, waiting to see who would live and who would die. He wasn't here because of a charm and he hadn't forgotten she'd said third. If William managed to kill both Adrian and Marc, Angela would be his.

"That's what I mean!" William shouted. "You'll never have peace unless you pick someone to die!"

"You!"

Angela's scream startled William and sent him backward.

“I pick you!”

Magic flew across the beach, showering them with wet, bloody sand.

“They are all mine!” Power hit the ground harder, but it didn’t hurt William.

“They will serve me until I die!”

Angela’s fury twisted the sand into a tornado that swept toward the fire and smothered it.

“I belong to no one!”

Magic flared, severing bonds and charms that had been in place for months and those that had been there for years. Broken chains fell to her feet.

“Is that the one?” Marc asked, looking at William as the sand tornado broke apart in a wild spray.

“That’s it.” William winked.

Adrian smiled at Marc. “You did a great job. I didn’t think you’d be able to pull it off.”

Angela glared at them all. “It was a trick.”

Faced with her anger for the first time, William stuttered. “Um, we didn’t... Uh.” William turned to Marc for help.

Marc looked at Adrian.

Adrian walked away. “I wasn’t willing. I refuse to take any credit or blame.”

Marc frowned. “He’s still bonded.”

“He’s always loved me.” Angela’s eyes were blue chips of ice that sparkled with insanity. Her witch had come forward at the provocation. “He isn’t under a charm. He never was.”

“Are you?” Marc had to know if she was finally free.

Angela sent a bolt of power that dropped Adrian to his knees. He groaned in agony.

So did Angela.

Marc’s heart fell.

William put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You knew long before this.”

Marc nodded, shaking off the sympathy. “Yeah, but I didn’t know what to do about it. Now, I do.”

Angela waited. She didn’t know what Marc meant.

Adrian stayed on the ground, waiting for Angela to punish them both again. He had no doubt that she would. Being forced to confront all these truths was making her boil. He could still feel it, though he shouldn’t be able to.

“That’s because I love you!” Angela screamed. She sent another blast of rage. “Can’t you just die?!”

Marc and William stayed back as Angela blasted Adrian with gifts that should have killed him. Instead, a shield came up around the cringing man, making Angela’s power useless.

“I don’t understand.” Ivan watched in shock as Angela tried to kill Adrian and couldn’t reach him.

Marc grunted. “She’s protecting him through their bond. The witch is trying to help her get through it, but they can’t.”

“She’s fighting herself.” William paused, fascinated as she switched to a more powerful lineup. “She can’t win. She has to accept it.”

“We all do.” Marc was observing intently. “We’re all connected. We don’t want to be, but we are.”

“Yes.” William was the first to make the choice. “I’m leaving—right now. Good luck to you all. Please remember Ciemus is your sanctuary.” William trotted down the beach toward the damaged parking area, followed by his confused escort.

Angela stopped firing. She turned to Marc, voice blended with her demon. “You knew this would happen.”

“I set it up.”

Tears rolled over Angela’s cheeks. “Why would you do this to us?”

“You’re free now.” Marc went to her without fear. “You’ll love us both. We’ll have moments that suck and moments that are amazing.” Marc used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. “We’ll save our people and when the end comes for me, I know you’ll be cared for. I do love you more than I hate him. I always have.”

Angela tried to control her rage and sadness. The witnesses had already gotten too much of a show. “Does it matter that I’ve never wanted any of this and still don’t?”

Adrian sighed as the shield vanished and he could breathe again. Her love was smothering. He hadn’t known she cared so much. “Only the survival of our people matters. Only them. We’re pawns.”

Marc gave a soft smile, pleased with himself. He'd played a great role over the last two weeks. "Adrian means me and him. We're the pawns."

"What does that make me?"

"Our queen," both men answered.

Angela snorted. "I'm the pawn. You two are the kings."

Lightning flashed across the sky.

Marc shook his head, looking up. "No, Angie. The kings are up there."

Angela got goosebumps. "They aren't playing for humanity anymore...are they?"

"No." Adrian still hadn't stood up. "They might have been at one time, but something they want more came along and changed everything. We're not on their level, but even Marc and I understand that feeling."

Angela shuddered. "Jennifer's right. It's blasphemy."

"It's destiny." Marc repeated what William had told him the night they'd conversed atop the wall. "In each life, you've gotten stronger. Each time, your weakness has been your heart, your lovers. In this life, we're changing the game. We may not have to repeat it."

Angela stared at him, barely allowing herself to breathe. "We might get to go home this time?"

Marc nodded. "Adrian thinks so too, but it's also in the book that William gave you and in the scrolls I've found. We have a chance to get this one

right, to clear the debt owed for betraying our creator.”

Angela studied it, seeing their thoughts and hopes, their fears.

Marc retreated.

Adrian slowly stood, attention on his love. The shield around him had been too strong for her hatred to get through. In time, she might even forgive him for some of the mistakes.

Angela regarded the ocean for a long minute, mind whirling. Then she glanced upward.

Everyone tensed, aware that they had a powerful witness also waiting to discover how she would react. It was a big moment for all of them. If Angela refused to accept the truth, the game would reset, and they would all have to do it again, no matter the outcome of their trip to the island. The final battle could still happen, but there would be no way they could keep from having to do it again in another future. If she accepted who she was and what was happening around her, a different path could finally be chosen. It all came down to this moment for the descendants, and through them, for humanity.

Angela looked at the ship now sheltering the camp she had sacrificed so much for, that she'd now led through the first layer of hell. *I love them more than either of my men, my kids or myself. I'm a patriot watching her country bleed out. I'll always put them first.*

Marc and Adrian knew that. One was proud of her for it. The other accepted it as something he wasn't supposed to change. The shepherd was supposed to love the sheep more than anything else. It was their job.

Peace broke over Angela as she understood the fighting between Marc and Adrian was really over. Everyone had accepted their place in the grand scheme of things. From here, seeing to the camp would always come first because nothing else would please the queen. She was only happy when her people were.

Angela looked at Adrian, hatred visible, but now, love also shined. "Collect my missing lambs."

Adrian got up and ran.

Angela pointed at the waiting camp. "Security."

Marc and lower level Eagles hurried toward the boat.

At her side for all of it, Jennifer had absorbed everything she could to study later, not letting the details distract her. She didn't want to miss any of this.

Angela gestured. "Go, XO."

Jennifer snapped a happy salute and joined Marc. She was official camp XO now. It felt amazing.

Angela regarded the council. "Council on the Bridge—*all* of you."

Kenn and Tonya hugged as Neil and Samantha did the same from the bottom of the ramp. They all went onto the boat together.

The few people left with Angela waited to be told where she wanted them as they watched out for remaining refugees still trying to get in. William's group was already out of sight, detouring north to avoid the fire. They were running over anyone in that path.

Kyle wasn't concerned with where he ended up. He was too busy being happy for Jennifer. Her pleasure was his.

"Camp killer." Angela waited for his reply.

Kyle grinned, finally at peace with himself and his role in all this. "You name them, I'll remove them."

"My XO needs a security detail."

Kyle and his team were honored. They went to Jennifer, surrounding her with the boss's open protection.

Ivan smiled at Angela when she made eye contact. "I still want you. Nothing will change that."

Angela chuckled. "You're getting what I can give." Angela included his team. "My personal security."

"Yes!" Travis and James slapped hands while the others cheered or grinned.

Angela waited for the three figures coming down the beach, heart thumping. Adrian had made her who she had to be for this moment in time too, though he didn't know it. She loved him for that. She was also scared of the pain, just like every time she stepped into the cage with Neil or another senior man. *Maybe this will finally conquer it.*

Adrian fought the pleasure to bring Kendle and Nancy to her, then he dropped down nearby to bask in the emotion he'd never been allowed to openly enjoy before.

“I can't lift your banishment.”

Adrian sighed in happy torment. “You're perfect.”

Kendle made a gagging noise.

Nancy elbowed her in the ribs. “Shut up!”

Angela let go her hatred as much as she could. “I forgive you. Do as you please.”

“I'm coming.” Adrian waited to be denied.

Angela looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. “We're already towing his boat.”

Angela also tried to let go of that anger. “His women can sail with him.”

Nancy shook her head, disgusted. “I'm not his woman and I'm not going.” Nancy strolled toward the charred eastern tree line where she'd been told to hide. “I just didn't want responsibility for Kendle. Thank you.”

Angela watched the woman leave, as did Adrian, then they traded a long look.

Angela slowly nodded. “Yes, she'll survive.”

“And my daughter?”

Angela scanned deeper and was relieved. “Will be nothing like her father.”

Adrian's joy crashed into her.

Angela absorbed it, letting the power refill her energy. Adrian's light was potent. Marc fed the side

of her that needed to be able to love. Adrian's fed her determination to lead Safe Haven through the gates of hell and into any land where they would have peace.

Kendle waited observantly, sure more was coming. She couldn't imagine Angela letting her enemy off without payment.

"And we are enemies." Angela confirmed their status without a change in tone. "But not because of our men."

"No." Kendle grunted. "Because I'm a danger to your herd like this."

"Yes." Angela held out a hand. "I can cure you, but there are prices."

Kendle stepped forward. "Please! I hate being this way!"

Angela clasped Kendle's wrist and unlocked her gifts. She opened another door to let out a demon that had to be battled.

Kendle grabbed Angela's knife and stepped forward, impaling her. "Thank you."

She twisted the blade, feeling the shield vanish and horrible rage turn her way. "I didn't need a gift to kill you. I wouldn't have figured that out if your enforcer hadn't locked me down."

Kendle stepped back, ready to die at Marc's hand, but she never looked away from the bloody woman staggering backward. "I can't tell you how good this feels."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Close

1

Screams echoed across the beach.

Angela grabbed onto Kendle's wrist as she sank to the sand. Blood ran down her shirt and pants, dripping into the sand. "Connected."

Kendle froze as voices echoed in her mind. She could hear the thoughts of everyone on the beach and all of them were coming to kill her.

Kendle ignored them for the bright light in the center of her mind, now growing into a glare that she flinched from. It blinded her, increasing until she shuddered.

Kendle closed her eyes and stepped into the light, unable to fight the alpha pull in full force. As she stepped through, she connected to Angela.

Adrian held a hand up to the panicking men and women who would have interfered, hoping Angela had planned for this part of it too. The risk she had taken here was life altering in the grand scheme of things.

Kendle screamed, rage stolen by the feel of Angela's death. It was replaced by a hollow ping that snapped Kendle into a frantic medic trying to save her commander. "Help me!"

“Your gift!” Adrian shouted.

“Don’t die, don’t die!” Kendle shoved energy into Angela as she jerked the blade free.

Blood gushed onto the ground.

“No, no, no!” Kendle pushed harder, using the last of her energy. She sucked out the reserve and then kept going. “You have to live!”

“Why?” Angela forced out, unable to believe the pain.

“Because we need you!” Kendle began to sob as Angela’s head lolled to the side. “I need you!”

Power shot from Kendle’s body and into Angela’s in such intensity that everyone was forced to look away—even those still running to reach them. Blue and yellow orbs flew over the scene, stirring up sand and dust that obscured the view.

Kendle slumped to the beach, a withered husk. She’d given everything she had.

The sand settled.

Eagles and Marc reached them.

Angela coughed, groaning.

Marc helped her sit up, unable to believe she wasn’t dead.

“Kendle gave her life for Angela’s. It wasn’t enough.” Adrian knelt to examine the castaway. “She won’t last long like this either.”

Everyone looked at Angela, waiting for her call.

Angela motioned at Marc. “Put her on the boat.”

Marc glared. “Why?”

Angela let Ivan help her toward their panicking camp. “Only my death was going to satisfy her.”

“What if she hadn’t been able to do the right thing in the end?” Marc demanded. “We didn’t settle our differences so you could waste your life on her!”

“Every life is precious to me, Marcus. Even hers.”

Marc pushed Greg in Kendle’s direction. “Get her.”

Angela wanted them all off the beach, but the pain was preventing movement. Kendle had healed her as much as she could with empty energy banks that had been locked down for a week. It wasn’t enough for a mortal wound.

The agony grew intense. Angela gasped, knees crumbling back to the sand.

Adrian dropped by her as Marc took the other side.

Their power hit a wall and bounced back.

“Oh, shit!” Ivan groaned. “She’s immune to your level of healing.”

Marc looked around, frantic. “Who else? Conner!”

Peter shook his head. “He hit a wall with Sam. No way he’s strong enough. Get Jennifer.”

“Give her a lifeforce!” Marc snapped as Kyle ran to get Jennifer.

“I released them all.” Adrian was still sending energy.

“What!”

“She hates me being corrupt.”

Marc groaned. “Now you go full good on us!”

“New power opened up. Even people outside the shield felt it. Maybe one of them can heal.”

“Maybe I can.” Ivan was behind Marc.

Marc dragged the man down next to her, seeing the wound was bleeding again. “Do it!”

“There’s a boat coming in!” Daryl shouted overtop the noise of both people and ocean. “We have company!”

Ivan’s power sank into Angela’s stomach and sealed the wound.

It immediately reopened.

“Only one chance now.” Adrian scooped Angela into his arms and ran for the ship.

Marc got the rest of the camp moving that way, trusting Adrian to watch over his heart while he watched out for their people. “Get on our boat! Get aboard!”

“It has letters on it. UN! It says...”

“United Nations.” Angela was barely conscious. All she could feel was pain. “Get them all!”

Adrian felt the fear from the rest stop flood his heart and increased speed. “Marc’s bringing them, baby. Hang on.”

“Tell the captain to move us! Now!” Adrian ran up the gangplank and into the cool interior of the ship. He followed the shocked crowds that parted to let him through when they recognized the bloody woman in his arms. Many of them took note of who was holding her, once again arriving when he was needed.

Exhausted, Ivan staggered behind the line of Eagles, breath coming in heavy gasps as he tried to get on the boat before he collapsed.

A stiff, bloody hand grabbed Ivan's elbow and propelled him forward.

Ivan gave Gus a grunt of thanks as the big man dragged him toward the ship.

Gus felt fresh danger coming, but there wasn't time to find out what direction to guard from. He brought up his shield, including Ivan in it.

A bullet flew toward them.

Gus staggered forward at the impact, barreling into three Eagles running onto the ramp. They all fell in a clumsy heap. Ivan rolled into the water.

Standing at the top of the ramp, Jennifer brought up her shield to cover the men, relieved when the water curved around her defense instead of fighting her. Marc's camp shield was flickering. Not enough to let in more refugees, but it did allow the sharper ones to sneak in bullets.

The Eagles fished Ivan from the water and hurried him onto the ship that was shuddering as it began to slide forward.

Gus kept shoving to make room for those still coming, awed at his shield stopping a bullet. The force had hit, though. He was sure he had a nasty bruise.

Marc stopped at the bottom of the ramp, scanning with his grid for missing people.

All members are aboard. His demon had kept close track of it, like Marc had assigned him to do.

Neither of them had expected this level of chaos, however.

Refugees in the distance were creating a dust cloud that moved in both directions as new arrivals rushed toward the shore; those who'd survived the vicious battle fled with their injured or bodies. Marc was sure waves of them would keep hitting this beach for days.

The shield flickered, going down.

Angie! Marc ran up the ramp.

Jennifer brought the shield back up, exhausted, as Morgan closed the hatch behind Marc. He locked it by the exact steps fading on signs inside the shuddering ship. Grant had drilled them on this twice, but Morgan didn't remember it all.

The walls groaned, floor lifting as the boat moved through the water.

Jennifer held onto a rail, spotting Kyle coming through the large entry, searching for her. He was carrying Autumn.

Jennifer went to them, already hating the feel of the vessel moving. *My stomach isn't going to be happy with this.*

Kyle took her hand. "That's me too. I always got seasick on boat trips."

The PA system crackled. "Prepare for incoming... Well, it could be anything, as you all know." Grant sighed through the mike. "Brace for it. I can't just zig out of the way."

People tensed, waiting for the next fight to begin.

Adrian stopped in a large room jammed with people calling orders and questions. Only their love would finish healing her now. Nothing else was getting through. “Help her.”

Camp members stared or shouted in confusion as they recognized the boss.

“We’re not like you.” Monica slid a jacket under Angela’s head. “Can’t you do it?”

“Not alone.” Adrian waved at Eagles. “She doesn’t need me the way she does all of you.”

“Okay.” Monica wanted to help. “What should we do?”

Adrian smoothed bloody curls away from Angela’s pale face. “Someone has to die for her.”

Angela stopped breathing.

Eagles shoved through the crowd to save her.

Kids and descendants stayed back at Adrian’s mental orders. Power wouldn’t help her now.

Adrian looked up. “Who?”

Eagles who’d moved terrified people aside only looked back at him, waiting for the call.

“All of you are willing to die for her?”

A few more people came closer to sacrifice themselves if it meant she would live and keep leading.

Power arched from the sacrifices and floated over Angela. It was weak.

More people came forward. Non-magic users who'd spent months hiding jealousy advanced to save the future.

Adrian connected them, directing the flow of orbs that stunned members gave up without the death they'd been expecting.

Adrian smiled as the energy flow increased.

The approval faded as he realized Angela wasn't responding. "Why isn't it working?"

Marc finally made his way through the crowd, aware of power streaming and hearts sending out terrified thumps. There could only be one reason. She wasn't fighting to get back to them.

Angela flinched from the brilliant light.

Would you come home now?

I have a choice?

The choice has always been yours.

My people will die.

Yes.

Send me back.

You die for them again and again. Allow peace to fill your soul. Accept their ending so the reset may begin.

Never! Angela twitched as pain entered her senses.

Then teach them faster, child. It hurts us to see you this way.

Angela groaned as pain pulled her back.

Cheers sounded when her eyes opened.

Angela drew in old magic from the love of her people, healing the wound and sealing bonds that would last forever. These men and women had been willing to die for her. That went deeper than any charm or spell.

Marc helped her sit up and then stand. Cheers came from those around them; shouts echoed throughout the ship. The walls were feeding back emotions now and most of it was fear.

Marc pulled Adrian's arm to get him in his place, then began waving at the pleased, angry people who now wanted to fight beside their legendary leader. "Let's get in our places. If you've drilled, get to that spot and get on it. We're setting sail!"

Adrian helped Angela get to the stairs and stay on her feet, stunned at what he'd witnessed through their bond.

Angela walked awkwardly, remastering her legs as she went. *I feel like I died*, she joked with herself to keep out the horror.

Adrian followed. *It's not over yet.*

3

Angela entered the bridge, bringing relief to Grant and Ray, his guard. Grant nodded at the UN ship sailing into range to fire on them. "What now?"

Still recovering, Angela waited for the call she hoped was coming. She forced her fingers to stretch and clench. Things had changed from the way she'd

foreseen this moment, but in the end, the result should be the same. The UN wanted them alive more than they wanted them dead.

“What if they fire on us?” Cole was perched in a chair away from the big glass windows.

“Then we’ll sink.” Angela stayed away from the dirty man. She’d already died once today. She wasn’t ready to do it again so soon.

Beating Adrian to it, Grant looked over his shoulder. “What are you hiding?”

Cole cringed, giving himself away.

Every descendant in hearing distance began tearing through his mind. There was no way he could hide it, even for the minute the UN needed.

“Stop!” Cole slid out of the chair and onto his knees. “I brought them here.” He sobbed, hands coming up to cover his face. “They knew you needed a captain. They sent out the images of me being stranded and wanting to get back on the ocean.”

Before anyone could grab him, Cole drew a knife from his belt and plunged it into his own throat.

Angela felt evil coming and reached for the mike on the radio as Cole’s body slumped over.

The static cleared.

“You will surrender now, or we will fire. I am counting to ten.”

Mario!

That’s Mario.

Children from the western camp shoved memories at Angela, slapping her with their anger and fear.

“I will pause as I count, to allow you time to answer. It begins now. One... Two...”

Angela used her boot to shove Cole’s body out of her way so she could get to the doorway where the council was crowded around and ready to pass her words to the camp.

“Three...four...”

“It’s getting hot in here.” Kyle looked around. “Is the ship okay?”

Adrian watched Angela, feeling sweat run down his back and into his crack. She was staring at the kids who were being quarantined on one side of the massive deck. The kids were shouting, crying, pushing memories of what they’d gone through, of the kids who were still missing, who had gone through it before them, and all the lives taken for entertainment.

“We demand justice!” Kimmie shouted at the alpha.

Adrian wiped away sweat, noticing various dials moving in response to Angela’s anger. *You’re gonna get it, kid. We all are.*

“Five... Six....”

Angela keyed the mike. “I see you like them young and crying. I enjoy tears, too. Do you cry, Mario?” Angela cackled, holding in the mike as she observed the UN ship. “Doesn’t matter, I guess. You’re going to cry now.” She let off the mike, eyes

glassy. *You are now of age. Take your place among my army.*

Power flew through the air, searing locks on mental doors.

“Fire on the... Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!”

Angela let the kids hear Mario’s screams over the radio, enjoying their satisfaction at his pain, his useless tears. Everyone could hear them under the shrieks.

“What happened?” Kenn was one of the people at the bridge doorway, but he’d been out of the loop.

“Hair of the dog.” Angela hung up the mike. “Slow us down.”

Kenn frowned. “They’ll fire on us.”

Grant shook his head, pointing. He was using his glasses. “They’re going nuts over there. I see fights.”

“Give it ten minutes. Let’s have a camp count while we wait.” Angela wanted to confirm it had been done correctly. She’d been too weak to do more than hang onto Adrian as he rushed her onto the ship.

Angela, legs still shaking, went toward the stairs that led to the deck. “Throw Cole overboard. The fish need to eat and he’s a lot of meals.”

Angela, Adrian, and Kenn joined the camp on deck as their ship slowly sailed away from land. Marc came to them, finished on his fast run through the important areas to be sure someone was manning them. He studied the UN ship as they got closer, worrying.

Angela turned to watch the shore, where the shield was withdrawing to let remaining refugees rush the beach. Now that nature had stopped firing, they'd returned to their obsession.

Angela felt her energy bank gain a little and brought up a shield over the ship.

Refugees fired in vain, storming into water that roared in angry hunger.

Angela let Adrian hug her. She would never enjoy death, even when she was the one causing it. "I could have warned them about the water. I could have shown them it was dangerous." She had to confess her sin.

Adrian knew. "They would have been here when we came back, still full of the evil that's consuming our country. You eliminated the need for another battle with our fellow Americans."

"And she sheltered Ciemus." Marc kept his eyes on the UN ship. They were close enough for him to see defensive shadows of men swiping, but no one attacking them.

"You will." Adrian shook his head at Marc's cold look. "Please don't hate me for it. Yes, it's in my notebook, but I didn't know they existed when I wrote it. I assumed it would be adults."

Marc looked back at the ship in horror. "Kids!"

Adrian nodded. "The ship is full of them and they hate their captors. Angela told them to wait. They did."

Angela closed her eyes as they neared the ship and the screams grew louder, clearer. The UN men were begging for mercy.

Tears slipped from under Angela's lashes. "No."

Fresh screams echoed.

"They're making it quick to spare you." Adrian frowned. "Stop slapping them with your pain."

"Ignore that." Marc added it up faster than Adrian this time. "They need to know that killing hurts the alpha."

Adrian frowned, realizing Marc was right. "You read the books?"

"All of them." Marc grimaced. "I've started my own."

Dog joined them on the deck, followed by the two cats. They were trying to stay with him so closely they were tripping him up.

Dog jumped over the cats and stopped by Angela's boots. *I don't need help! You love me for saving you! You're ready for a nap! I heard you, now go away!*

Both cats rubbed on him and then climbed up his back, purring.

Dog dropped down so the pain would stop, letting out a long sigh.

The bunker cat showed love by squatting on Dog's head.

Get your tail out of my ear!

Marc leaned closer to Angela. "I'll never say that to you."

Arm still around her, Adrian laughed. "I might."

The ship shuddered and clanged under them as Grant dropped anchor.

People who had been chosen as crew hurried to their stations to help Grant pilot the ship. In the short time they'd been inching along, they were already most of a mile from shore.

Angela looked around for advice from her council.

It wasn't a hard choice. Everyone wanted to be gone.

Angela was relieved. "We'll leave it for the ocean to send where it wants. Get the kids and set our course."

"What do you want us to do with them?" Kenn was watching the slaughter on the UN boat and wondering if that was about to spread to their ship.

"Get our camp settled on the other side so they can watch the land fade and cry. I'll handle the new kids—all of them."

The descendants understood what Angela was going to do and approved. They hurried to carry out her orders. Watching the kids overrun the UN men who were shooting and punching, slamming and stabbing to little avail was frightening. It was clear the rage kids were now the biggest threat to Safe Haven's future.

Jeff went to his group of kids and planted himself in front of them. He didn't expect this to go well, but he was determined to protect them from whatever Angela had planned. He couldn't tell.

Since waking from being zapped, he couldn't hear thoughts, though he still had his other gifts.

Kimmie stepped in front of Jeff, looking up. "I won't remember you, but you'll know me. When I'm older, you can tell me all about it and we'll laugh together."

Jeff realized Angela was only going to remove their memories and breathed a sigh of relief. He smiled at the girl. "It's a date."

Kimmie smiled shyly. "I know you don't mean it that way, but I do."

Jeff opened his arms as Angela and the Eagles approached them. "You're cute. Talk to me when you're legal."

Satisfied, Kimmie held tight to him for a brief flash of hot heat and then she was ripped from his arms.

Angela shook the girl. "Take that spell back! Do it right now."

Hanging in the air, the girl crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her lip out. "You can't make me."

Angela shook her again, a bit awed at her new strength. "You didn't ask him first." Angela let her anger come forward. "Do it right now, Kimmie Mason!"

It was the tone and words the child's dad had always used when she was on the edge of being whipped. The girl grunted. Heat flashed out again.

Angela set the child on the deck. "Never without permission."

“Yes, Alpha.” Kimmie didn’t look at Jeff.
Jeff grinned at the girl. “Sneaky. I like that.”
Angela rolled her eyes. “Don’t encourage her!”
Jeff chuckled. “Why? I can wait for her to grow up.”

“She won’t remember.” Adrian was eager to see the charm. He’d never witnessed it being performed.

“I know. It’s perfect. She won’t slit my throat in my sleep if I become a camp supplier while she grows up.” Jeff snickered.

Laughter flowed across both decks, bringing calm and a sense of triumph that spread to the weary people. The mood fell a second later as it hit all of them.

We’re really leaving.

Angela nodded, taking Marc’s hand as Adrian went to help with the bloody kids who were lining up on the deck of the UN ship.

“Three years isn’t so long. We’ll be back.”

“I already miss it, but I honestly don’t want to ever return if it means we can just have peace and live.”

Marc kissed her cheek. “Whatever you decide, we’re with you.”

Charlie, yellowing bruises now covered by a fresh layer of purple, came over to slip an arm around her shoulders. Seeing her almost die had been the final straw for his changing mentality. He’d never been so scared. “Yes, we are.”

Angela hugged him back, ice wall melting. *I've got my boy back!*

Angela used those powerful emotions to send up a burst of energy into the air over the ship. "Deep sleep."

Power swarmed the decks and dove down stairwells. It swerved to miss those uninfected. Everyone else was slapped, smothered.

Bodies fell across the deck.

Shocked Eagles began to collect the adults and children that Angela had marked for memory removal.

Greg and Daryl oversaw the collection, directing the wounded and most violent to the infirmary.

The two ships were side-by-side now. Grant was coming to supervise the docking.

Ray was on his heels and looked pissed. He didn't like it that Cole had been so close to all of them, that he'd missed the man's evil.

"I'll sort through it if you want." Marc didn't want her to have to go through the UN ship.

Angela felt like she should do it because of the pain it would cause her to witness the slaughter, but she had too many other issues to cover. "Twenty minutes. Longer if you find something worth the wait."

"You're sure you don't want to tow it?"

Angela shook her head. "We'd be a target for anyone who saw it."

“We’re going to be that anyway.” Charlie opened his thoughts to her. “We got a lot of information for you.”

“We’ll have a meeting when things settle down.” Angela was too shaky to do more than hold the shield and talk. The end of their time here had come a full day before she’d expected it. Jeff had almost killed himself to get here.

Jeff handed her a shiny object that brought tears to Angela’s eyes and agony to her heart. “Allan’s flask.”

Jeff retreated as her pain slapped at him. “I didn’t know you two were close.”

Angela pocketed the precious item. “He was among my first converts in Safe Haven.” She sniffed. “He was my friend.”

Jeff’s eyes welled up, experiencing her emotions and his. “What is this?”

Angela tried to control it, but she’d had a rough morning. Her misery hit him again.

“It’s the alpha effect.” Cody stopped by Jeff as he and Missy came to stand by Angela. They were on their own while the den mothers helped collect the unconscious people. “We all feel it.”

“Make it go away.”

Cody took Jeff’s hand.

Jeff tensed for a blast to knock him out, but the pain increased instead. “What’s going on?”

“He’s connecting you to the hive.” Kenn had come to check on Angela. Jeff hadn’t been in camp

for a while and he was being scanned with suspicion for bringing them a load of sick kids.

“The hive?” Jeff didn’t want it... *Yes, I do.* He was too tired to keep pretending. *I miss Kimmie already.*

Angela sighed. She held out her hand. “Ask for anything and I’ll try to give it to you.”

“Don’t take her away!” Jeff blurted without touching. “I just got her!”

Angela let Missy take her outstretched hand. She groaned as the child fed her energy.

Cody let go of Jeff and took Angela’s other hand. This time, she smiled at the tiny sip of energy she allowed herself to have. Cody’s power transfer didn’t hurt.

Everyone stored that information.

Angela stifled the need to sleep and recover. She wasn’t done yet.

Jeff tensed as she looked at him.

“Are you really strong enough to wait for her to grow up?”

Jeff nodded. “She’s the only one who understands me.”

“No more whining? You’re onboard after this?”

Jeff sighed, giving the rest of what he now knew she needed. The voices in his mind were buzzing. “I was always with you, even while I hated you.”

Angela smiled through her tears as Jeff’s power merged with hers, bringing pain. “Go get your girl. I already assigned you to a room with Shawn and Missy.”

Jeff hurried over and scooped up the bloody girl, not caring about any of the looks or thoughts. They didn't understand how quickly he'd bonded with Kimmie. He could get sex from camp women. Companionship that he enjoyed was rare.

“Something moved!”

Samantha's squeal sent terror through those close enough to hear. Men grabbed guns, and then panicked because they were out of ammunition.

“It moved!” Samantha pushed Neil's hand against her stomach. “There!”

Neil's expression went from tense to awed as his child moved again. “I felt it. There's a baby in there!”

Angela laughed with everyone else. “We'll be okay now.” She looked up, amusement fading. “Because if we're not okay for a while, I'll sink this boat.”

Your bluffs are tiresome, the Messenger whispered in her ear. Be careful.

Angela gave a bitter laugh. *I don't bluff. You should know that by now.*

There was a long pause and then, *What do you require?*

Angela didn't gloat over the win. She switched into the next phase of negotiations. *A ceasefire while we learn to navigate this floating graveyard. Then, a meeting.*

Such a meeting has never taken place between your realm and ours.

Angela noticed he hadn't denied her. *It's not forbidden, right? The masters up there can come down if you can.*

Yes... I will relay your request.

One more thing. Angela drew on the hope of the descendants who'd gone still to listen. *As a sign of good faith, to start our ceasefire, I want the kids healed of their illnesses.*

Very well.

Angela felt the Messenger leave. She paused to appreciate the moment, thanking fate once again for giving her this destiny. "I'm not Moses, but I am a freedom fighter. We all are. It's how we were trained."

Adrian felt their gratitude and allowed it to sink in and heal some of the darkness in his heart.

Walking by with an unconscious child over each shoulder, Marc also gave his former rival a nod of respect. *I'm a harder, sharper soul because of you. I'm also sorry for it.*

Adrian took one of the kids from him and followed Marc down to the infirmary. *So am I.*

Adrian placed the child on the waiting bunk, aware of Morgan rushing through with his medical bag. "Get a drink later? She can't move us to the other ship yet."

"Yes." Marc covered the filthy little girl with a blanket. "But you're not moving to the other ship. You'll spend the voyage with us and just be separated when we reach the island." Marc shrugged. "Unless we can get the camp to lift your

banishment. Now that I'm not against it, that can happen."

"No." Adrian went to the stairs to go collect more bodies. "My banishment can't be lifted until it's time to return. When she told you there would be years of peace, she meant for you and the camp. I get to watch you all live and grow while never being able to be a part of it again until we come home to die."

Angela's wrath, Marc realized.

"When she told you she was going to make me pay, she didn't lie. By the time we get there, I'll be hooked back into camp life and loving it."

"Then she'll rip it away." Marc was almost sorry for the man now. "That's cruel and unusual punishment." Marc grinned. "I love her so much."

"Same here." Adrian went up the stairs.

Marc followed, heading to the other ship to do his check for more kids who were unconscious, but not dead. He was having to feel for pulses to be sure on that. The UN men had fought hard to survive.

Marc glanced back to see Morgan injecting Kendle. She'd been brought down by Daryl and Greg. She was already muttering, coming up from the targeted sleep charm. He let his eyes wander her scars, the blood on her skin. *Thank you.*

On the deck, helping inject descendants before they woke, Angela sent love and hatred in response.

Marc grinned, climbing faster. "That's my Angie. Full of both." He paused as now familiar

power settled over the ship. “An answer already. Wow.”

Angela waited, not thinking about anything except getting her people settled for their first day of sailing.

Your request has been granted, with conditions.

Angela hefted a child up and over her shoulder. “I’ll probably agree if they’re reasonable.”

The meeting will be held in our dimension.

“Agreed.” Angela gave in before Marc could protest. She moved toward the stairwell. “But I won’t come alone.”

We expected such. You will pick your escort. Four is the number allowed.

“Agreed. What else?”

At the end of the meeting, no matter the outcome, you must read the Book of Life so you will understand why the fight must happen.

“As long as my people are safe during that time, I have no problem with it.” Angela let Quinn take the child, aware that she should be concentrating. She could feel a trap coming and was hoping to avoid it.

After the final battle, you will ascend to your place in willingness so those left behind will continue to follow our light.

Problem. Angela wasn’t going to lie. “I might negotiate that one during the meeting. What else?”

You must never pass up evil or all protections will be removed.

Angela snorted. “I didn’t plan to.” She frowned. “Is this list much longer? I may need to ask for more from my side to make it even.”

The final requirement is the easiest, Defiler, Overthrower, Murderer.

Angela sighed, blocking the pain that went with those insults. She was picking up the anger that she’d grown so powerful. “What do you want?”

Swear your loyalty. Do it now and receive all the years of peace between then and now. No meeting will be needed unless you win.

It was a valuable bribe. Anyone else might have taken it.

Angela laughed. “Tell your masters I know why they need that from me and I’m not going to give it up so easily. I’ll swear loyalty when we’re freed from the hatred that rules our hearts. Give humanity peace *when* we win the final battle and I’ll swear it. We all will. Then I’ll ascend to whatever place waits and cause trouble there.”

A deal has been made. Lightning flashed across the sky. Breaking it will bring damnation to everyone you love.

“Like that’s new.”

When the sky is full dark, the ceasefire will begin and you will ascend.

“Agreed.” Angela waved at the people who’d gone still to listen. “Heave to, land lovers. We’ve got a long way to go and a lot depending on us getting there.”

The End of Book 10

What would you like to do now?



[The next book in this series](#)

[Deleted Scenes](#)

[Audio](#)

[Print](#)

[Book 11 Sample](#)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#)

Would you like to be notified when I have a new release? [Take this link to my website](#) to pick the option that works best for you! No email address required.

Deleted Scenes

1

“Are you still mad at me for wanting to join the Eagles?” Gus was tired of the silence in the truck. He and Brittani were in the front, ignoring each other. Conner and Candy chatted and laughed in the back. It was awkward.

Driving, Brittani shrugged. “I’m tired right now. I’ll be mad after I’ve had some sleep.”

Gus snickered. “Maybe this *is* a good time to talk to you.”

Her amusement faded. “I wouldn’t push it.”

Gus knew that was good advice, but he wasn’t sure if they would have time alone again before morning and he wanted things settled now. He hated sleeping apart from her as much as he hated having her mad at him.

Brittani sighed. “Fine. Get it over with.”

Gus drew in a breath. “I’ll stay out of their army...if you give me a family.”

Brittani almost wrecked. Her startled jerk snapped to the right and took them onto the shoulder.

She got the vehicle under control, cheeks flushing as surprised drivers in other vehicles looked at her through foggy windows. “Say that again.”

“I’m ready to be a dad.”

Brittani didn't know where this was coming from, but she doubted he really meant it. Gus liked to skirt around the edges of a subject before finally choosing a path. This felt like him poking for a path, not picking one. "Start from the beginning."

"There is no beginning. I'm around all these couples. Kids are everywhere and I'm not getting any younger." Gus forced himself to keep going. "Neither are you."

Brittani's gasp echoed in the truck, drawing more attention from the passengers.

Candy gave Conner a worried glance, brow lifting.

Conner shrugged. *They're working out issues. We'll leave them alone the way they're leaving us alone.*

Candy nodded, cheeks going pink. *We should thank Angela for the time.*

Conner nodded. *I'll find a way to do that.*

It's great that she trusts us now. Candy gave Conner a shy smile.

Instead of flirting like she expected, Conner frowned at her. *It's a test, Candy. She's watching to see if we break the rules.*

Candy hadn't considered that. When they'd been assigned together, she had assumed they were in the clear. It was disappointing to learn otherwise.

Conner understood that feeling, but it was going to take more than a couple weeks of good behavior to clear the damage that had been done.

“I can’t believe you’re using this to get what you want.” Brittani hadn’t thought it was possible for Gus to be corrupted. “I think these people are rubbing off on you, in a bad way.”

Gus shrugged. “I don’t think any of them are that bad. In fact, I think we’ll both have good friends here once you accept the truth.”

Brittani’s shoulders stiffened. “What truth?”

“You’re like them. So am I.”

Brittani’s lips clamped shut; a wall came down over her mind.

Gus tried to find the words that would convince her to give in.

Conner reached up and gently tugged the partition closed between them and the couple in front. He didn’t want to listen to the conversation that was about to happen. The fate that waited for descendants in Safe Haven wasn’t one that could be discussed without emotions coming into it.

Candy was relieved when Conner relayed that motivation, but she was also disappointed. She didn’t want to be drawn to him, but the feeling was getting worse the more that he behaved. They were getting regular time together now and all it was doing was making this mystery fire burn hotter.

Conner kept his head down so she wouldn’t see his smile. Marc had given him solid advice when he’d asked, though the wolfman had been doubtful as to whether or not Conner was capable of carrying out such a complicated plan. He had also been leery

because he'd expected Conner to go to Adrian for advice like that. Conner had tried to explain that his father's methods wouldn't work on Candy, but he'd had to settle for accepting Marc's words and moving on. Marc couldn't understand anything that sympathized with Adrian. Conner understood the reasoning behind that, but it didn't make it any easier for him to talk to the man. Marc had a lot to teach him and everyone else, but he hoped Marc learned to communicate better about people he didn't like. There was always going to be someone around who would get on his nerves or stress him out. Conner assumed Marc had dealt with that in the military, so he was surprised that the man wasn't able to do it now, but Conner had every faith Angela would eventually get him straightened out.

"What will she do if we break a rule?"

Conner still didn't look at her, afraid Candy would read every step of the plan in his longing expression. It was already a struggle to act normal being this close to her. Behaving was hard. *It depends on how bad the violation is.*

Candy wasn't sure what would be considered a violation.

Conner smiled. *If I lean across the seat right now and kiss you, that would be a violation.*

Candy's cheeks went scarlet and her heart pounded in her chest. *What if I kiss you?*

Conner hid triumph at her sexy reply. *The same. We would both be breaking the age rule, among others.*

Jennifer and Kyle are about to get married. They've broken the age rule already and they haven't been banished or split up. We're planning their wedding.

It's different for them. They have permission.

Candy wanted to ask how they got permission, but she didn't want the boy to think she had already decided they would be a couple. She paused, not sure what to say.

Conner wanted to push. He could feel her expecting it and bracing. He shook his head. *It's not the right time...yet.*

Candy was equally relieved and disappointed. She motioned toward the notebook they'd been using for wedding details while they traveled. "Do you want to keep working?"

"Yes, but we both need sleep. Let's start again after the next break."

Candy rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes, ignoring the disappointment in favor of being able to see and hear him. Right now, she wasn't lonely and that was the biggest goal of her relationship with the boy.

"Will you talk with me about this later tonight?" Gus was determined to get an answer, even if she got mad enough to shout.

Forced by his persistence, Brittani gave a curt nod. She was aware of their audience and refused to add to the show they'd already gotten. "But only if you leave me alone about it until then."

More than satisfied, Gus turned on her favorite music and returned to scanning the landscape as he had been doing before bringing up the topic. He had expected a much uglier moment, but he could feel her slipping away. He had to do something to hold onto what he had, even though he already knew it wouldn't work. She was moving on and it wasn't with him.

Deleted Scene #2

“We’re looking ahead here. Just watch and don’t let go of the line I taught you.”

Marc nodded, concentrating on the road and the line. It was exhausting. He had no idea how she could do magic and normal life at the same time.

“I practice.” Angela took them deeper. “Now, shhh. Watch...”

“Oh, shit.” Marc didn’t slow the truck as he spotted the men nailed to the side of the warehouse. It was the sole surviving building on this part of the shoreline. The rest were in pieces and half buried by the soggy sand.

“Is that Carl?” Conner was horrified. “And Dexter?”

Marc felt rage swell and burst out in an erratic eruption of protection that shielded the convoy in a milky bubble swirling with too many colors to count.

Marc swung the truck onto the beach, grinning at the bouncing and the spray of sand. Angela’s wants were clear.

“Miss the bodies.” Her tone was emotionless. Her rage had gone into the bubble, leaving only her vengeance.

Marc steered around the hanging men and drove into the side of the crumbling warehouse.

Angela pointed through the flying debris. “She’s there.”

Marc crashed through a thin wall and eased off the gas as he spotted the woman running from them. She had long, wild brown hair and a slender, muscular body that propelled her over piles of moldy bags and pallets.

“If you let her live, she’ll call for help.”

Marc was positive Angela was right, but his honor wouldn’t let him run the woman down.

Angela sighed. “So be it.” She regarded Conner. “Candy will be hit in the crossfire when this tracker betrays us.”

Conner scowled, not sure what to do.

“Kill her!” Angela pointed as the truck slowed to a crawl. “Do it right now, while it’s only us.”

Conner hopped from the truck and gave chase.

Marc scrutinized Angela. “You’re too far gone.”

“You’re a fool who puts honor over the reality we live in!” Angela was once again furious. “I’ve never been wrong and I’m not evil, but you still won’t follow orders.” She followed Conner from the truck.

Marc put the debris covered vehicle in park, hating himself and her in that moment.

Go listen and know for sure, Adrian advised tiredly. After enough moments like the one you have coming, you’ll learn to trust her.

It's not about trusting her! Marc snapped, heaving himself from the truck. *It's about right and wrong, about honor.*

A value that means nothing if you die, Adrian tried to teach. When it comes to survival, right and wrong are small in comparison.

Not to me.

And she loves you for it, but that thought you just had was mirrored in her mind, Marcus. Be careful or you'll lose her, and I'll have nothing to do with it.

Marc shoved Adrian from his mind and ran to catch up with Angela and Conner.

He found them in the far corner of the still falling warehouse.

“I’ll slit your throat, Mitchel!” Dolly swung her knife at Conner.

Conner leapt behind Angela for protection. “She’s nuts.”

Angela chortled without humor. “Aren’t we all.” She waved a hand and sent the woman crashing into the wall. Debris fell on her, drawing groans and cursing.

Angela mentally held the struggling woman in place as she stalked over the piles of rotting garbage to reach her.

Conner stayed back, a bit scared of the wild woman. He knew he’d failed a test here, but it didn’t matter at this moment. Like Marc, he couldn’t kill a woman without a good reason.

“I’ll cut you up! I’ll rip your—”

Angela shoved the woman under the pile, letting the barrier fade in favor of the heat from her rage. “I have questions.”

Dolly gasped at the pain, panic taking over. “Die, witch!”

Angela chuckled again. “In due time, but not by your hand.”

Marc jerked awake from the dream and lay there, mind foggy and in pain. *We’re never going to be happy together anymore. I wish we’d never come to this place.*

Deleted Scene #3

“They’ll bring you things.” Ernie stuffed a cheese cracker into his mouth between sentences. “You decide if they can be part of the betting.” Crumbs flew across the seat. “The rest will make private bets. They stay in the rear of the circle.”

“When they’re all approved or eliminated, tell them which kids are fighting.” Amy picked up where Ernie left off as he stuffed in another cracker. “They’ll scream and throw stuff between fights as side bets for renting. Catching it means it’s accepted. Look fast.”

Jeff nodded. “Got that. Keep going.”

“You have to pay at the end of each fight.” Kimmie pointed at the only kids not eagerly preparing for the fun. “Tell them the new ones are the prize of the night. As you talk to each one and see their offer, you can do your drink thing.”

Jeff had been stewing over that plan to be positive it would succeed. He’d concluded it would not. “Seth. Come sit with me.”

Seth went to the front of the bus, leaving his daughter without hesitating. *I hate this.*

Jeff nodded. “Me too, but it’s effective.”

“Are you sure this is the only way?”

“No, but I’m locked into it now.” Jeff signaled him closer. “When we stop, get lost.”

“Okay. Where am I going?”

“Shopping.”

“What happens between fights?” Becky asked the kids. “What should we be doing?”

“Pushing us around.”

“Letting men feel our legs and arms.”

“Looking the other way.”

“Letting it happen.”

Becky sighed. “That’s what I thought.” She regarded Jeff in the mirror. “I didn’t want to tell you it didn’t work on me. Can I switch jobs with Seth?”

Jeff was relieved she’d come clean. He was also impressed with her act. He hadn’t suspected it, which meant she’d refused to think about it. Level three Eagles couldn’t master that.

Seth knew he should be embarrassed—that was aimed at him—but he felt nothing.

Jeff looked at Seth. “Go listen to the kids so you know what to do.” He waved Becky to the front. “I don’t need to go over it again, do I?”

Becky took Seth’s perch. “No, but I don’t understand most mechanical things. Other than a gun, anyway.”

“Simple mechanics.” Jeff brought up an image. “This is the same. See in my mind? It’s a valve that has to be opened, but only a little or it will make noise.”

Becky paid attention, telling herself she could remember. She was more scared of that than of being found out alone in the dark.

“Keep to Eagle skills if you have trouble. Don’t draw them away from here.”

Becky saw the next image in his mind and was instantly onboard. She slapped his arm. “Nice!”

Jeff grinned because it was expected, but he didn’t feel the approval or the respect she was assuming from it. He didn’t feel anything. *If I could stay like this, imagine the things I could accomplish!*

Kimmie scrutinized him in the mirror, small face expressing her concern.

“It’s time.” Amy pointed at the sun. “When it’s gone, we’re on.”

Jeff had noticed the rhyming rules and wondered if that had been for easy recall for younger kids or if the troops had had a more insidious plan. It stank of brainwashing.

“Take the wheel.” Jeff hefted Becky overtop the wheel as he scooted out of the seat. He’d buffed up since leaving Safe Haven.

Becky giggled as he lowered her into the seat, then lost the amusement as the bus curved toward the broken shoulder. She bit her lip, straining to keep it straight.

The vehicles closest to them noticed the movement and started cheering.

Jeff dug through his kit, shoving the Eagle jacket to the bottom under a tarp and a stack of old cassette tapes. He hoped it would be avoided, but he couldn’t drag the kit around with him tonight. If there was a fighting moment for the adults, it would

be found while he was in the center of a mob. It would be better if it was found here, by one or two people who could be handled quietly. “Finish telling us how it works.”

“You pay off with their antes.” Ernie was now consuming a jar of peanut butter with his fingers. “Set the amounts, pick two kids and say go.”

“What decides the fight?” Doug wanted to know. He was guarding the rear door this time.

“Death.”

Jeff stopped digging. “You fight to the death?” That would change all the plans. “I can’t do that.”

“Why do you care if we kill the killers?” Darren was confused.

So am I, Jeff thought. “You said pick two kids. I presumed you fight each other.”

The kids looked horrified at the thought.

“We would never hurt each other.” Amy looked at Kimmie. “We’re all that we have.”

“So I pick two of you. And those two do what? Pick someone from the crowd to fight?”

Kimmie’s little voice trembled with longing. “They send up the fighters from those who offered antes and were accepted. You chose the ugliest souls among them for this duty.”

“And if...the adult wins?”

“You pay off.” Brea, a bright eyed Asian with a crew cut, shivered. “And it does happen. Sometimes, there are evil descendants in the crowd. They cover, and we don’t know until they use magic on us.”

“Do you use magic?” Jeff had to know.

“We don’t need it.” Kimmie was still staring at him in concern. “That’s also against the rules. No magic from either side. It’s supposed to be adult against rage walker.”

“Okay. I think I’ve got it.” Jeff needed to confirm one more thing. “The UN didn’t want their property damaged. How did they pad it so you always win, but the crowd didn’t riot over it? I already know about faking fear or aggression. I need to know how else they cheated.”

“Mario surveyed the crowd and picked out those likely to win. He accused them of something and satisfied the crowd’s need for blood.”

“He also made sure at least two fights were lost.” Brea scowled at Jeff. “I lost my sister last month.”

I want them all dead! Jeff didn’t realize he was experiencing emotions, but Kimmie did.

The rage is settling into you now. Soon, that’s all you’ll be able to feel.

Jeff didn’t reply. He was busy exploring his new adjustments to the plan to be certain he’d covered everything. *The west needs to be cleansed of parasites and I think I have a big nest covered.* “What about weapons?”

“That’s our advantage. We can take one weapon into the fight.” Darren pointed to a heavy bag under Jeff’s seat. “We brought our favorites to remind us of our time as captives.”

“You used them to escape the camp, you mean.” Jeff kept a firm tone. “Never lie in any form if you want to be accepted in Safe Haven. We only accept the truth, no matter how ugly.”

“That’s fair.” Darren drew in a breath. “We brought our weapons because it hurt to leave them behind after they’ve saved our lives so many times.”

Jeff patted his rifle. “That, I understand. So what does the second kid do?”

“We’re the backup fighter if the first choice gets scared and refuses to fight.” Kimmie shrugged at his skeptical glance. “It rarely happens.”

“You have powerful gifts.” Becky scowled at the girl. “Why would you tolerate this?”

“Because we like it.” The child didn’t hesitate. “We’re the hands of justice and we swing sharp claws.”

No one knew what to say to that, so none of the adults spoke.

The kids went about their normal preparations, anger building.

Deleted Scene #4

“Is everything okay here? All set?”

Candy jumped at Angela’s voice. She hadn’t heard the boss come in.

Conner had known and nodded. “We’re finalizing details.” He held up a notebook. “What do you think?”

Angela studied the drawing of a wedding that showed where people were to be, who it was, what they should wear, and other information. *You’ve got your dad’s talent.* Angela gave them a cheery smile. “Looks great.”

Candy and Conner nodded, both blushing. They’d handled everything, including honeymoon plans.

“Good. I’ll be on duty now. Keep an eye on things.”

Charlie passed her with drinks in hand and a huge smile.

Angela ignored his approval of the fun time, wanting him to know she expected him to behave as well.

Charlie missed it. He was on his way to where Tracy was squished between Samantha and the camp kids. They were telling stories at the far end and the vibes were great. Since he and Tracy couldn’t have sex for a while and he needed to prove

he was good, he'd suggested spending time with the children. Tracy had loved the idea. The juice boxes in his hands were for her and Samantha, who didn't have drinks yet. Most of the other adults were drinking alcohol, but Charlie wasn't tempted to sneak a drink, though he was certain he could. His bout with liquor hadn't settled well, and even the smell sometimes reminded him of Matt. Charlie grimaced. And Cynthia. And Kevin.

No one missed Kevin as far as Charlie could tell. He didn't either, but he was sad about losing a part of the Eagles he'd once admired. All of them were falling or failing in some way, making his mistakes appear small in comparison.

"You're supposed to be smart enough to avoid trouble when you see it." Samantha couldn't help her bitterness. "We all are." She shoved up on her cane and limped toward the open bar.

Tracy patted Charlie's hand. "She misses Jeremy. Don't be mad."

"I'm not." Charlie sat next to Tracy, waving at one of the shy kids. "I wish I could help her, but even descendants have limits."

"There are ways, though." Tracy thought about Adrian's charm.

"Not ones that work. Charms and spells aren't real and eventually, it all wears off. Bad idea."

Tracy didn't doubt he was right, but she wished for a way to go back and change their past. She wouldn't be a cringing woman recovering from abuse.

Charlie patted her wrist this time. “You’re doing great.”

Tracy leaned her head against his arm. “Thank you.”

“Are they okay now?” Marc asked as he held the flap for Angela to exit.

“He has a lot of growing up to do and she has baggage.”

“Don’t we all.”

Angela was tempted to have a conversation, but she sensed it was too soon for what she needed from him.

“What is it this time?”

Bristling at his tone, Angela pointed to the men on duty. “If I needed something from one of them, I’d have it as fast as they could get it. What’s your problem?!”

I don’t trust you anymore. Marc was sorry for the thought as soon as he had it.

Angela felt tears coming and took the typical female route instead of crying. “Then we’re even. I don’t trust you either.”

Marc waited for another blow or for her to leave, but she just stared at him. *Waiting for the same from me,* he realized. *Why are we always adversaries?*

Because you can’t be around me for five minutes without being unhappy about something I’m doing or something I want you to do. Angela marched to the gate. *You have the other end of*

camp. I don't want you to work a shift with someone you can't trust.

“Angie.”

Angela stopped, fighting angry tears. “What, Marc?”

He clamped his lips shut.

Angela's shoulders drooped. “It won't succeed, Marc. You can't make me hate you. Not even a secret love child with Kendle would do it.”

Marc stared after her, surprised. He'd forced the thought away and hadn't brought it back up. He'd just acted on it.

I wish you'd act on other things, Angela sent, blasting him with an image of an empty tent.

Marc chuckled. “No shift together because I pissed you off, but you want my heat while we sleep.”

“That's not all I want.”

Marc laughed. “Figures.”

The shield winked into view.

“Hey!” Marc remembered an earlier question. “Why did it go away?”

Invisible.

Marc gaped. *A stealth shield?*

Only at limited times. They'll be able to see us, but not reach us and vice versa. It will let us see them without using magic.

“Who is them?” he asked worriedly, scanning their surroundings.

“The trackers sneaking up in the darkness.” Angela shuddered. “We won’t be alone here for long.”

Marc was unhappy to hear that, but not surprised. “We’ll handle it.”

Angela nodded, settling into the low fork of a tree like she used to do. “Yes, we will, and no mercy will be allowed.”

Marc took that order to heart, like she’d known he would.

At the large tent the women had erected for the wedding preparations, Kyle was being refused by the females doing security on the door.

Marc went that way to distract the man now that things were under control.

“I need to speak with her.” Kyle didn’t care that it was Tracy denying him entrance.

“You know what they say about bad luck.” Tracy teased carefully, uncomfortable. “It’s only a couple more days.”

Kyle shook his head. “Just give me a few minutes.”

“Why?” Marc asked as he joined them.

Tracy lifted a brow at Kyle in reinforcement.

“Because I have to give her a chance to back out. She doesn’t have to do this.”

Marc smirked. “That’s funny.”

“It’s not! I need to be sure.”

“No, it’s funny you think every female in this camp hasn’t already done that for you.”

Kyle scowled. “When? She didn’t say anything.”

“Why would she?” Marc pointed out. “They don’t mean harm and she doesn’t want the escape route.”

Kyle hesitated and then met Marc’s eye. “Did you talk to her about it?”

Marc shook his head. “Not yet. I drew the late shift. Neil has it right now. That’s why they won’t let you in.”

Tracy peeled back a corner of the flap to let Kyle see Jennifer at a table with Neil. The pair were clearly engrossed in the topic.

Tracy dropped the flap, resuming her crossed arm position. “We’ll let you know if she changes her mind. Until then, that’s all you get before the ceremony.”

Kyle stomped away, panic pounding in his heart and mind. *You don’t have to do this, Jenny. You don’t have to do this.*

Inside the tent, Jennifer sighed. “He’s a good man. He doesn’t think so, but he is.”

Neil was satisfied the teenager was doing it of her own free will. He nodded. “Kyle’s also a killer. If we hear a single scream from your wedding tent, it’ll be a race to get in there and help you.”

Jennifer blushed. “He won’t hurt me. You guys know that.”

“No, we don’t. He shouldn’t want you at all.”

“Like you shouldn’t have wanted Becky?”

Neil winced, but nodded, able to admit his flaws now. “Yes. It’s wrong.”

“Love is wrong?”

“I didn’t love Becky.”

Jennifer understood it was more like possession and shrugged. “Kyle has that issue, to a point. I use it against him for my needs. He knows it. That keeps him in line. He’s terrified of the day I’ll betray him by wanting a younger Eagle that I get to choose.”

“Will that happen?” Neil asked curiously.

Jennifer chuckled, shaking her head. “Never. They can’t possibly understand what I’ve been through. Kyle can.”

“Others might be able to, if you let them see it.”

“I could, but there isn’t anyone I view that way.”

Jennifer blocked the images that wanted to rise up and smother her. “I’m afraid of every man on the planet even though I have skills and powers to defend myself. Kyle’s the only one who doesn’t make me feel that way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too, but honestly, it’s already one more than I ever expected while I was chained in that tent. I’m thrilled to have it be my future mate.”

“That future is coming up fast.” Neil wondered if she was ready for it.

Jennifer’s laugh was harder this time. “You’re all so worried about him forcing me. I assure you, it’ll have to be the other way around.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Right now, Kyle is convincing himself this is happening against my will. He isn’t going to consummate our marriage after you shove us into the honeymoon tent. We’ll spend the time talking and sleeping, like we’ve always done when we were alone.”

Neil caught the slight tone of bitterness. “Is that what you want?”

Jennifer sighed. “A few months ago, I would have been relieved. Now, it bothers me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he’s a good man who has nothing to feel guilty about. I’m marrying him because I want to, not because I have to or because I need a father for my baby. I like him; I respect him. Many marriages have been formed on less.”

“That’s not the same as love.”

“No, it’s better. We have honesty and trust. That’s the foundation of love. Even Marc and Angie don’t have that.”

Neil was forced to admit that was true. “What will you do?”

Jennifer sighed. “I’ll consummate our marriage. Without him if necessary.”

Neil burst out laughing. “Please take a picture of his face. Just for me.”

Jennifer joined him in the amusement, but she wasn’t joking. Kyle had made his plans and she’d formed hers to beat them. They would see who came out on top.

Jennifer snickered and signaled over the next concerned camp member waiting to speak with her about becoming Mrs. Mobster.

Place a Review

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.

Character Guide

The LAW Character Guides contain spoilers, tidbits, and hints about the future, as well as first appearances, relationship status, deaths, and descendant type.

[Character Guide Page](#)

Book 11



[Apocalypse Winds](#)

1

“Is anyone down here?”

Marc walked the last bloody corridor on the bottom deck of the UN ship, gun holstered. The bright paint couldn't hide what the boat really was. He hoped it sank after they sailed away, then broke into a million pieces on the ocean floor. There were cages and torture rooms, and a holding pen with bodies being kept for identification purposes. Blood splatters and sprays decorated the walls, floors, and

windows. Marc tried not to leave tracks, but some of the rooms were impossible to get through without stepping in a puddle. It was gruesome.

The inside of the ship was a mirror of the outer shell—blue and white with tiled floors and offices that held scenes from Marc’s nightmares. The UN troops hadn’t stood a chance. Most of the killing blows he identified had come from the rear. More than a few men had been using bathrooms or showering when attacked. He was impressed and horrified.

Marc cleared the final room on the bottom deck, but he knew he wasn’t alone. He used his grid to narrow down a dot less than two feet from his position, then sent out an alpha command. He needed to get back on their ship. He’d already been gone too long. He could feel Angela and others worrying.

“Don’t hurt me...”

Marc scooped up the pristine boy, automatically holding his little hands. Marc didn’t know how the kid wasn’t dirty, but it was more disconcerting that he wasn’t knocked out. Angela’s spell had covered both ships.

“Angela?” The boy opened a powerful mental line. He dug into Marc’s thoughts with ruthless glee.

Marc wanted to be kind, but there wasn’t time. He sent a minor zap. “Never without permission, Dion.”

Dion nodded, retreating. “I’m sorry.”

Marc released the boy's hands and hugged him as he trotted up the steps. "You'll be okay now. We'll help you."

Magic pressed in on Marc. By the time they reached the top deck, he was healed.

Marc traversed the ramp and jumped onto their boat, long coat flowing out. "Unhook us. Let's float!"

People snickered, hurrying to do as ordered.

Grant, waiting nearby with his security, came over to supervise.

Marc took the child to Angela.

Dion slid into her arms and wrapped himself around her like he'd always been there. "Forever?"

Angela kissed his cheek and hugged him. "Even longer if I can." She put him on his feet. "Go below and let them make you sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

"Yes, Alpha." The child strode through the surprised camp members who retreated to clear a path.

Marc scanned the deck; half the bodies had been removed. He went to help.

"I need time with these people." Angela handed a paper to Kenn as he joined her. "In the next three hours."

Kenn read it, holding tight so the morning draft didn't rip it from his fingers. "Together or apart?"

Angela refused to think about everything she'd just gone through. There was work waiting. "Both. You'll see to it for me?"

Kenn knew what she needed. “First meeting is in the command cabin with Jennifer. Ten minutes.” He departed without waiting for an answer. He needed time to organize the rest of it.

Angela motioned Grant back toward the bridge. “We’ll disconnect the ramp. You sail us south.”

Grant knew the crew needed the experience, but he couldn’t help several glances over his shoulder as he went up the metal steps with Ray on his heels. If they made a mistake, it could damage both ships.

Angela wasn’t worried. The crew she’d chosen for moments like this was solid. It was their nerve out on the open ocean that she doubted.

“Where do you want me?” Ivan finished reloading his gun and holstered. He’d wiped off most of the blood from his hands, but they were all leaving ugly footprints across the deck and stairs.

“Point man for this shift, with a rookie.” Angela motioned toward the man coming up the stairs from the infirmary. Jeff had helped get the western UN kids sedated while Marc cleared the UN ship. “Settle him back in.”

Jeff fell in with the soldier he’d briefly met at the mountain camp. They’d clashed then, making this moment important. Jeff didn’t intend to hold a grudge. If Ivan had been given point, he deserved it.

Ivan held out a hand. “Bygones?”

Jeff shook, heart lightening. “Absolutely.”

Ivan took his notebook out and handed it to his new trainee. “We’ll walk the ship and handle issues that come up. Read as we go but remember to pause

and...” Ivan stopped as Jeff rotated to view Angela and what was going on around her. He handed the scruffy man a pen. “That’s perfect. Once a minute, you do that for me, and I’ll make sure you get the coldest beer I can find.”

Jeff was already annoyed with the new need to verify her safety. He was picking up Angela’s excitement and grief. It sucked. “I’d rather have a decent cup of coffee and a hot shower.”

“Deal.” Ivan led the way through the crowd that was now observing the shoreline. A few refugees were swimming toward the ships, not caring that their fellow men and women were being claimed by the ocean. Sharks were all through the rough waves now, but the furious refugees refused to give up.

The camp leaned on the rails and each other as America faded. The two tugs laboring to get them out into open water shot streams of purple, blue, red, and clear liquid in large rainbows to mark the beginning of their journey. The water came from the same nozzles they would use to fight any fires. The Water Salute was a ceremonial custom to celebrate the arrival or leaving of certain ships. The camp clapped at the display, but no one’s heart was in the response. They were leaving their homeland. It was almost gone already.

Angela watched too. Thick depression settled onto her shoulders. *Welcome back.*

Her depression smiled warmly and began causing pain. *We’ve missed you!*

She had been so torn up over never seeing Adrian again that she'd been able to block the other emotions. Now, her worst enemy had returned—her brain.

Angela sniffed, standing straighter. *I have work to do. I'll catch up with you later.*

The depression bowed out in favor of adrenaline. The terror squeezed harder as she began the next stage of her plans, of Adrian's plans that she'd added to and expanded. *Here we go.* "I want the team leaders for a few minutes—now."

Wade and Greg, both frowning, marched through the crowd to pass her instructions. They'd been warned to watch Angela for signs of mental cracks; they'd just found one.

2

"Mom wants you two topside with the team leaders. I've got things covered down here." Charlie waited for the duty crew to react, expecting trouble.

Harry and Courtney left without a protest. They were eager to go up and make sure things were okay. It helped that everyone down here was out cold except for Kendle and they knew she wasn't a threat to Charlie. The island woman wasn't dangerous to anyone but herself now, and maybe Angela. Harry believed Angela was in the clear on that too, though he wasn't sure what would happen to Kendle. The alpha bond was strong. As it strengthened, the darkness would be replaced with

light. Harry didn't know how the boss planned to bond with Kendle against both their wills, but he looked forward to watching it happen.

Charlie took a folding chair from the wall and opened it next to Kendle's cot. "They're gone. Don't know how they missed you being awake."

Kendle stared at the ceiling. "They didn't. They just don't want to speak to me." The sound of her own voice being so weak scared Kendle. *I'm dying again.* She was touched Charlie had come to say goodbye. No one else had yet, not even Tommy.

"They just don't know what to say. They're waiting for instructions." Charlie sat, scanning her bloody clothes and wrinkled skin. "Are you injured?"

Kendle snorted and then groaned at the pain. She'd never felt this weak. "Mortally wounded, boy. She nailed me with one shot."

Charlie couldn't help the pride. "I'm awake enough now to see how she does things like that. She learned to use people against themselves."

"Adrian taught her. Marc abandoned her. Kenn abused her. Adrian took what was left and rebuilt her."

Charlie didn't argue. "Why can't you let them do that for you?"

Kendle's eyes shut.

He sighed. "I already know. Just say it."

Kendle held in tears. "I don't want to change. I like the blood, the killing. I don't want to stop."

Charlie put a hand on her wrist and began pushing energy into her. He was glad she was cooperating in these first steps of reform. He couldn't stand the sight of her withered body. It would have hurt him to leave her like this. He knew what it felt like, thanks to his manhood test. He wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Kendle groaned at the new pain. "Why?"

"For my dad." Charlie increased the strength, sensing a guard coming down the hall to relieve him on his mom's orders.

"Won't matter... That stings!"

"True, he hates you now. He might vote to let you die, but it would damage him inside. We don't want that."

Kendle stiffened. "Angela sent you."

Charlie let go of the magic, stopping before he was drained. He stood and put the chair away.

"Everything okay in here?" Ian scanned, missing Kendle's returning health in favor of a long stare at the bloody UN kids in the cots.

"It's getting better." Charlie controlled his breathing and the urge to yawn in front of the blabbermouth.

Ian pointed at the door. "Monica wants you in the gymnasium. Use the stairs to the left." Ian grinned. "And Tracy is waiting for you in the lobby to the right. Pick carefully."

Charlie grunted. "Suck a dick."

Ian gaped.

Kendle chuckled.

When he got to the intersection, Charlie jogged up the stairs to the left.

3

“Sign the logbook!”

Kenn’s voice carried through the noises and chatter, bringing calm. Despite his flaws, people trusted the beefy man to care for the camp. It was good to have him back.

“Get your name in the logbook or I’ll be on your ass tonight while you’re trying to sleep!”

People hurried to sign the book in Kenn’s hand.

Ivan signaled his crew to join him, certain he would need them as he did rounds. There was a lot to cover on a ship this size and they weren’t using radios until land was out of sight in all directions.

Jeff stayed by Ivan, trying to reabsorb the routines. Once a minute he checked on the boss. Now that he was back with Safe Haven, Jeff wanted to readjust as quickly as possible. He had a lot riding on the future.

“We all feel that way.” Ivan was skimming as many thoughts as he could. This was a bad time for things to go wrong. “Welcome home.”

“Yep.” Jeff didn’t distract the man with conversation. He could almost feel the heat from Ivan’s mind as he ran through routines and possible problems while keeping track of thoughts and behaviors of the camp, as well as his team. Jeff was impressed. When he’d first met Ivan, he hadn’t

thought the younger man could handle team lead, let alone point. It was more proof that Angela was right in her choices. Jeff was finally able to let go of his anger at her. It was a relief. *Now, if I can just get rid of this bitterness and heartache.*

Ivan pointed at a cluster of camp kids hanging over the nearby rail. “James.”

James trotted over to collect the fascinated children who had probably never been on a boat.

“We’re clear to go!”

Marc’s loud call echoed to the bridge, where Grant was pacing, eager to be under way. His adventures with Safe Haven were finally beginning.

Grant pushed buttons and flipped switches while he went over the steps in his mind, wanting to be positive he didn’t miss anything. They couldn’t just stop at a store if something went wrong.

Ray patrolled the bridge, rotating among the three entrances. They had one captain. Grant was the most valuable member of the camp. When Angela had told him that, Ray had been shocked she’d given him protection duty. It was an honor to be trusted with such a huge responsibility. He would kill or die to keep their captain safe.

Grant liked the protection, but he was too tense to thank the cute man as they began to slide by the bloody UN ship. The blue bottomed vessel appeared to be four stories, but Grant wasn’t sure if his estimate was accurate. *There could be another level under the water.* The rest of the ship’s deck was

lined in cargo areas and windows, all dotted with cameras. Dozens of portholes glared at him.

The camp fell silent as they got a clear view of the carnage the kids had wreaked upon the enemy. Somber deliberations and concerns became the focus. Many people glanced toward the steps to the infirmary and then toward Angela, who had decided to bring the kids with them to the island. They trusted her, but with all the bodies in sight, they couldn't help worrying.

Angela headed for the stairs. *I made the right choice. They'll see it in time.*

Angela went down to the quarantine area first. She was glad to find heavy security, but she still gathered energy to bring up a strong barrier if it was needed. The vibes coming from this area weren't good and she'd already died once today. She didn't want to do it again so soon.

Kyle spotted Angela coming and slid into the entrance to provide front cover protection. "We're doing the debriefing. It'll still be a few before we can call them clear."

Angela saw Jennifer sitting with the strangers and ignored Kyle's silent request that she not enter. She went to Jennifer, aware of the growing tension. The strangers didn't like her or want to meet her. *That's new.* Angela took the chair on Jennifer's right and crossed her arms over her chest.

Kyle had chosen a security office on the bottom deck, near the loading center. There were three cluttered desks and three office chairs along one

wall. Across from them was a leather couch and a bathroom. Two tiny windows provided enough light to see this room hadn't been cleaned yet. Angela made a mental note on it. The folders on the wall shelf might help them with running the ship, though she wasn't sure if this small office would have important details.

“Hiya, boss. Having a good day?”

Angela grunted, refusing to think about how it had felt to be dead. “You tell me.”

Jennifer shrugged, consulting her clipboard. “Just getting started, but I doubt there's an issue here. Leftover resentment for us not taking them in before now, for not stopping as the convoy passed, for not being strong enough to stop the war. You know—the usual crap broken folks hang onto when their world has been destroyed by the government we took out.”

Angela swept the starving man and woman, then the dirty child. “She still looks ill. Did you give her the medicine?”

Rachel's lip came out in a pout. “Most of it.”

Jennifer wrote that on her clipboard. “What happened to the rest?”

“Traded for food so she didn't starve!” The mother glared at Angela. “I won't thank you for taking us. You didn't stop!”

“The medic will be down shortly. Give her all the medication this time.” Angela stared back, expecting a continuation of the rant.

Jennifer cleared her throat to break the thick awkwardness. “Food is on the way. After you eat, you’ll get showers and clean clothes. Over the next few days, we’ll find jobs for you.”

The mother didn’t glance away from Angela. Hatred shined through her blue eyes.

Jennifer waved her pen in the air. “Hey!”

The woman’s attention snapped back to Jennifer.

“I like you so far. Don’t screw that up. Right now, I’m the only friend you have here.”

Hatred flashed brighter, then faded into bitter resignation. “She should have stopped for us.”

Angela studied the man and child, digging in for problems. The mother was trouble. Her hatred might never fade.

Leeroy tried to give Angela a smile, but his nervousness turned it into a sneer.

Angela understood. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you being nice to her?!”

“Hush now, Rachel.” Leeroy took her hand to prevent the coming shout. “You have to let it go.”

Rachel slammed her body back against the chair, avoiding his comfort.

Leeroy sighed. “She’s upset.”

Angela and Jennifer waited for him to say more.

“We’re from Alabama. We’ve been run out of every home we tried to build. Damn draft got us the

first time. Then the looters and scavengers, then soldiers again. After that, we had to hide from...”

“People like me.” Angela didn’t want them to know Jennifer was a descendant yet. It might shut off the teenager’s connection with them and prevent the family from settling in.

“Yes. They wanted to make us slaves.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.” Angela inspected the girl, hating the shudders hitting her small body. She motioned to Kyle. “Check on the medic.”

“Why don’t you just heal her?” Rachel couldn’t stop her rage.

Angela leaned forward. “Will it get rid of your hatred?”

Rachel opened her mouth to lie... “No. I loathe you.”

Angela sighed. “Also a lot of *that* going around.” She held out a hand to the woman instead of her daughter. “Trust goes both ways, Rachel Norton. Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

Rachel paled. “I don’t want to touch you!”

“I don’t like you much either, but if you’re staying on this ship, you have to be cleared.”

Rachel slowly extended her hand.

Angela opened the door to her mental crypt.

Rachel stiffened as they made contact.

Angela blasted the woman with her pain. She clamped a hand around Rachel’s wrist when she tried to pull away. “Feel it for a minute, then tell me how angry *you* are.”

Rachel gasped, jerking to get her hand back.

Jennifer shook her head at Leeroy when he would have tried to help. “She’s showing her why we didn’t stop. Your wife is getting the answer she demanded.”

“Don’t hurt my mommy!”

Angela slammed the barriers shut and let go, on the edge of crying from reliving so much pain. “She’s just pissed, like the rest of us.” Angela stared at the little girl.

“What’s she doing now?!”

“Relax, Rachel. If she wanted you all dead, she would have left you on the beach.” Jennifer caught Angela’s thoughts. “Getting worse, yes. She needs the medication.”

“Morgan’s got his hands full with beach injuries.” Angela sighed. “Will you let me treat her? Before the war, I was a doctor.”

Rachel gave a short nod, heart still breaking. Her hatred wasn’t gone, but it was weighed down by Angela’s pain. “Don’t hurt her because of me.”

“She loves kids. She wouldn’t do that.” Jennifer studied the pale, blond parents while Angela held out a hand to the brunette child. She found adoption memories in Leeroy’s mind and let the discrepancy go.

The thin girl shivered. “I don’t feel good.”

“I’ll make that go away.”

“Will it hurt?”

Angela smiled. “Not even a little, Sandy.”

The girl responded to the wave of peace, smiling back. She took Angela's hand...then crawled into her lap.

Angela hugged her, eyes shutting. She shot currents of energy into the girl, unable to stop the tears. The love of a child was the only thing she truly enjoyed now.

Angela rubbed the girl's arm and gently slid her back into the chair. "Better?"

Sandy yawned. "I'm hungry!"

The Eagles chuckled.

The girl's family gawked in surprise despite knowing it would happen. They'd never witnessed magic, though they'd been around descendants since the war. Those people hadn't been willing to waste magic on normals unless they were getting paid for it.

"Thank you." Leeroy clasped Rachel's hand. "She'll be okay now."

Rachel tried to force an apology, but Angela stood up and staggered from the room before she could get it out through the remaining anger.

Jennifer motioned Kyle to escort the boss, then turned back to the family. "Now that we're done with this, we'll get you settled in a cabin near the deck. You can rest and eat while we wait for your blood work to come back. Sound good?"

Rachel was still staring at the doorway. "She's a hard one. Why did she cry?"

Jennifer sighed, brushing dark hair off her shoulder so she could see the clipboard. She hadn't

had a chance to pin it up yet. “She regrets not stopping, but don’t mistake that for a weakness you can use. Her choices are always based on what’s best for our camp.”

“Meaning, if I become a problem, she’ll remove me?”

Jennifer turned cold, pinning the woman in place with glowing red orbs. “She won’t have to. That’s my job and I’m very good at it.”



[Apocalypse Winds](#)

Book 11