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# Boxset Copyright

The Bachelor Battles Box Set

by

Angela White

**Title**: Bachelor Battles Box Set

Books 1-3

**Edition**: 2021

**Length**: 1695 pages

**Author**: ©Angela White

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# Book One

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# Copyright

**The Change**

A Novel

by

Angela White

**Title:** The Change

**Length**: 442 pages

**Author:** ©Angela White 2011

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Thank you Karen, Crystal, Kristi, Jacqueline, Drew, Jackie, Jim, Elizabeth, Clara, Mike, Candace, and John! You make everything better.

-Angie

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# Prologue

**Recovery Zone 12**

Southern Ohio

494 AW (After War)

**1**

**“N**etwork riders!”

In an apocalyptic landscape framed by early summer, the single road into town became obscured with dust from the three dozen horses. On these foaming animals were some of the most intimidating Defenders the Network employed. The cold banner, a glaring red arrow outlined in black, was held high in warning of who they represented. Behind the riders was a line of bound men and boys on strong leashes. Forced to run or die, the slaves were barely getting enough air.

“Network riders!” Heavy hooves and harsh coughs echoed to the town, where the single sentry repeated a late warning. “Network riders are coming!”

As the horses cleared the trees to enter the farmland, locals laboring there were showered with dust. They winced at the cruel treatment of their crops and of the enslaved males being dragged behind the riders, but they didn’t interfere. The citizens of New America had learned not to challenge their rulers. The price was usually more than they could pay.

“Network riders! The Ring is coming!”

In the three street town, doors locked and windows slammed shut, echoing like hammers. Young boys cowered behind pink-eyed women, trembling. In some of the salvaged homes and barely surviving shops, terrified males were hurriedly shoved into clever slots behind wall panels to keep them from being taken. This was the yearly roundup, a month early.

As the riders advanced, their leader, Rankin, waved the crew into a defensive formation. Always sent on these runs, the team had earned the nickname The Ring because of the circle they made over Network lands to collect new slaves. They were also called demons. That whispered insult was well earned. All of the women were ruthless. Their leader worked directly for the Network–both in the pristine dome and out here in the wastelands. In her matted red hair was a braid for each male she’d broken. They covered her back in thick, dusty proof of her brutality.

The riders formed a V as they reached the town, weapons ready in case the females here chose to fight for their sons. The Ring had a list of males to bring in, but Rankin would take any appealing targets they ran across to account for the percentage who didn’t survive the trip. She always made her quota.

“These slaves will be surrendered immediately, by order of the Network. It’s roundup time!” Rankin began calling names from the list, pointing at homes. Most of the women here owed a son in payment for a debt or fine, but a few were also being punished for their lack of financial or public support for Network causes.

Rankin’s riders went to the residences and dragged the males out, not letting goodbyes be said or pleas be voiced. Few of the mothers fought, but those who did were cut down. It was against the law to refuse an order of surrender. The penalty was death. Screams and wails began to echo across the tiny town.

While the riders gathered the newest lot of slaves, the males already on leashes dropped to their knees, grateful for the break. Fathers comforted sons and exhausted men bound bleeding foot wounds with what remained of their shirts. Those were the luckier ones. Some of them didn’t move at all, but they weren’t cut loose. Rankin would still receive a half credit for each of the mangled bodies.

“Runners!” One of the hulking Defenders pointed. “We have runners!”

A small group of teenaged males had made it through the tall crops to the west of the town. They were almost to the trees.

“Dogs!”

The waist high brown hounds padded forward at Rankin’s shout. Canines had suffered the same biological changes as humans after the war, making them larger, angrier. Their eyes flamed when triggered. Some of them could even snort fire and they would attack any target, no matter how big or small. Menacing, the fire hounds ran at the rear of the slave line to keep them from escaping, unless there were runners. Spotting the fleeing men, the hounds gave chase without being ordered to do so. They’d been bred for this purpose.

Fresh screams echoed as the large dogs caught up to the teenagers. Those who stopped, the dogs escorted back with slobbery nudges and growls. The males who kept fleeing or tried to fight, the dogs ate. The system was designed to keep their animal escort fed without the extra weight of carrying their nourishment. It worked out well for everyone except the slaves. Despite the law against killing men for any reason, the Network let Rankin do as she pleased so long as she made her quota.

“That’s all of them from town.” Lena was second in command. She wiped her bloody hand down her filthy pants and then shoved her hair from her face. She always grew it out at the beginning of each roundup and cut it when they were finished. The frustrations of long hair kept her angry and on Rankin’s crew. Only those with fire stayed. Rankin was a hardened, harsh mistress.

Nearby, four of the crew were binding crying boys to leashes as the townswomen reluctantly brought them out. All of the boys were thin and unattractive.

“We require one more male!” Rankin spun around on her horse. “Give me a gift and we won’t torch your homes.” Rankin scanned the shacks eagerly. Last year, she hadn’t asked for a bonus from this town. It was their turn to pay homage to her mercy.

When no one came forward, she grew angrier. “I can smell them! If I have to come in and sniff, I’ll kill every one of you and still take your males!”

A door was jerked open across the street, revealing a stern lady in a dirty jumper. She shoved two trembling boys onto the dirt walk with huge arms. “Took me a minute to catch them.”

Other townswomen scowled at the orphanage keeper.

Rankin was happy. “Two! Nice.”

She made the motion for her riders and dogs to hurry. “Thank you for your cooperation. May you all have a Network day.”

The orphanage owner, and the townspeople, gave the muttered, expected reply. “Same to you.”

It was a dismissal. The women who had been waiting for it left Rankin’s sight. Those hiding males in cramped, mousey slots tried to remember how to breathe.

Rankin frowned as her stomach suddenly tightened. Trouble might be coming. “Next?”

“The next location is…” Lena scanned their sheets. “Hey, a blond. That’s a double credit!”

Rankin snatched the paper, annoyed at not getting the exact answer she’d requested. “Daniel: blond, paid for, priority.” Rankin kept reading, unease growing. “Owner provided address for pickup. Approach location with caution.”

Rankin recognized the address. “Pruetts!”

Her riders sat up straighter, scanning the town. Pruetts meant blood.

“Not here, you idiots!” Rankin waved. “They have the boy. Get ready while we wait for the dogs.”

One of her newer riders spoke up hesitantly. “Do we fight them? We have the same boss.”

“We’ll eliminate them if we need to.” Rankin ignored the instinct demanding that she mark the boy’s name off as dead and go. “They’re only bounty hunters. We’re Network killers.”

Her crew snickered in agreement, reminded that they alone of all the Network employees had permission to kill anyone. Even the legendary Pruett family had to get orders first.

The shabby street had become deserted around the waiting Network troops. Peppering the shops were lists of items people were forbidden to have (radios topped every single one), prices to be charged, and Wanted posters that covered entire front walls. One in particular, a tall male with blond hair and a scar over one hand, was shown more than the other escaped males. Simon was the current leader of the rebels who were trying to oust their rulers. There were also advertisements for the Bachelor Battles game on these walls of death. Each laminated photo featured a bloody, victorious female clutching a terrified man as her prize.

Near the edge of this oppressed town, a thin blond boy barreled from a slimy home put together with toothpaste and fishing wire. He slipped painfully down muddy rock stairs.

“They know where to search, boy!” His mother didn’t leave the safety of the makeshift home. “Pruett bounty hunters can’t save you!”

Heart pounding, Daniel ran awkwardly through the piles of rubble that edged the road, then detoured into the thorn trees bordering the adjacent property.

The poison branches reached for him, but the boy ducked in perfect time to their swipes and made it through untouched. He’d made this run many times, though never in panic.

Weapons clanged over grunts as Daniel neared an opening in the trees and burst into the front yard.

The four black cloaked people there were working on a fighting routine, moving in tandem with beautiful knife slashes, spins, and leaps. Their long, black cloaks flared out together in a stunning, unintended visual effect.

“Candy!”

The sweaty family stopped and lowered their weapons, staring at Daniel with sympathy as more screams sounded from town. The Ring was moving again. They could hear the heavy hooves and chilling cries of individual slaves.

“You know the law!” Candy’s mother, tall and thin, stared at the boy fearfully. “We can’t hide you.”

Daniel ran to Candy, his friend, in terror. “Help me!”

“Get out of here!” Candy shoved him back toward the tree line. “Don’t let them see you!”

“My family sold me!”

“Sold?” Candy repeated in horror, young mind spinning into a hazy rage. It was her worst fear.

“We have company.” Candy’s father pointed from her mother’s side.

Defenders were reaching their driveway. The thorn trees lining it were poisonous and carnivorous, with vivid red and green coloring. Thick limbs reached hungrily for the excited riders, but they weren’t in range.

Candy scanned the homestead, already knowing there was no place she could hide him. Her home was a white dome buried in the ground. There were sheds and a storage building, and two heavy-duty Mopars for traveling these apocalyptic lands. The Pruetts were better off than most, but none of it could save Daniel.

“Mother?” Candy asked for help in that one word, dazed with the pain. *They sold him!*

Candy’s mother winced, but didn’t answer.

“I’ll be alone now!” Daniel moaned brokenly, shaking. “They’ll hurt me.”

“You’re mine!” Candy hugged him in useless comfort. “I will find you!”

“Promise me!” Daniel demanded, panicking.

Candy kissed him, stealing his first taste. There was no doubt she would lose everything else.

Her eyes were red when she pulled back, sent into the first stage of the rage disease early. “On my life, Daniel. I will come for you!”

“There he is! Release that male.” Rankin scanned them all arrogantly from atop her horse. “His family has transferred ownership to the Network.”

“You can’t keep him, Candy.” Her mother tried to shake them apart. “You can only die and kill the rest of us with the attempt.”

Candy’s anger became more pronounced as her mother forced them apart. Both kids struggled wildly.

The thorn trees fought harder to reach the observing riders, drawn by the emotions.

Tiring of the drama, Rankin kicked her horse forward to drop a leash around Daniel’s neck.

He reached up to take it off and she grabbed his wrists to expertly tie them to the waiting straps on the rawhide tether.

“No! Candy!”

Candy raked her new claws down her mother’s arm to get free. She ran after Daniel.

Rankin spun around and kicked the girl in her shoulder. She didn’t like kids.

Holding her aching arm, Candy determinedly rose back to her feet, glowering with teary red orbs. “He’s mine!”

Angel, Candy’s cousin, rushed to help. The two girls fell into their training, spinning and slashing the air with their knives.

Spooked, Rankin’s horse reared up and almost unseated her.

Trying to calm the tall mount, Rankin got too close to the hungry thorn trees. A branch slipped eagerly around her neck.

Fighting to keep from being punctured or thrown, Rankin snatched the knife from her belt. She sliced through the thorn going for her throat. It managed to scratch her hand before she used her fist to snap off the branch.

“It figures Pruetts would have these...things!” Rankin sneered, flushed as she manhandled her horse into submission.

Her riders smirked, but when Rankin told them to advance, they obediently surrounded the small family while Rankin retrieved the end of the leash.

Candy’s mother wrapped her up tighter this time as the family slave, Candy’s father, grabbed Angel.

“If you weren’t so useful tracking down trash, I’d slit all your throats!” Rankin waved at her riders to proceed, viciously yanking Daniel’s rope to make him stumble and fall.

“Help him, mother!” Candy kept fighting to get free. “Help *me!*”

“You can’t take over this family if you’re dead.” Her mother held her with iron strength. “Pruetts never openly oppose the Network.”

Candy realized she wasn’t going to get help from her parent. The full change of Rage Walker’s disease spiraled through her small body.

Her muscles swelled, ripping her clothes. Her black hair shot out. Her claws extended and her black eyes became crimson flames as she attacked her mother.

The thorn branches in the driveway withdrew to their proper places in shocked disapproval.

“Help! Candy!”

Candy spun from her mother’s bloody face as the riders left. Daniel was being pulled behind Rankin. She took off running, executing an amazing jump to grab her fallen weapon and clear half the distance. Knife ready, she leapt again.

Rankin sensed it coming and shifted. She kicked the child in the head with the heel of her boot.

Candy dropped to the ground in a heavy pile of pain, puking. The other signs of the disease faded, but her eyes remained crimson. They ran with red tears.

Candy’s mother and father hurried toward them as Rankin glared without compassion. “He belongs to the Network now. If you want him, come fight for him in the games.” Rankin gave Candy’s mother a knowing sneer as the couple reached them. “Just don’t wait too long. You’re a changeling now, stage one, and Pruetts burn out fast.”

Staggering to her feet through the misery, Candy pointed. “Pruetts will send you all to hell!”

Startled at the words from a child, Rankin kicked up dust to coat the family as she turned toward the driveway. “Heaven and hell don’t exist, child. There’s only been the Network for four hundred years.”

“That’s going to change!” Candy vowed. “Someday, I’ll take the power from them, the same way they’ve taken something I love! I won’t stop until you’re all gone!”

Her family gasped at the open defiance, expecting harsh retribution.

Rankin snorted, but didn’t stop. On a slow day, she might have executed them all for such blasphemy, but she was busy and even a burnt-out Pruett with her slave and whelps was dangerous. It would interrupt the roundup and their rulers wouldn’t tolerate that. Another time, however… Rankin dragged Daniel through the gate, indifferent to his pleas as she mentally added this family to her death list. If she got this chance later, she would certainly take it.

Candy hissed at her mother as Daniel was torn from her life. She didn’t speak, but her expression screamed.

Candy’s mother lowered her chin in shame, causing the four ugly gashes on her cheek to resume dripping blood over her neck and chest. “No.”

The façade she would become known for settled over the young girl in a sheet of ice that would never completely thaw. She turned from her mother without giving the expected forgiveness. She wasn’t capable of it.

Back on the road, the thundering hooves and screams of the roundup echoed in a haunting chorus that Candy knew she would hear forever now in her dreams. One of those voices belonged to Daniel.

“I will come for you!” Candy promised, heart breaking. Daniel was already struggling to keep up and breathe through the dust. “For *all* of you.”

**Eight Years Later…**

# Chapter One

**A Death Wish**

New Network City

**1**

**“H**ello! Welcome to the first interview segment for this week’s episode of...the Bachelor Battles!”

The ticketless crowd of citizens gathered around the huge dome responded wildly to the start of the Network’s most popular game. Cameras atop giant screens rotated to show adoring viewers in all directions beating on each other, spilling drinks, kissing. Tonight’s party in New Network City would be massive.

“We are talking by com-link with Candice Pruett as she arrives at the gates of our fair city. Already famous for legendary bounty hunting successes, the Pruett family is worth a whopping seven hundred million UDs! Wadda ya say, folks? Let’s make her welcome!”

The audiences cheered as an average looking teenager flashed onto the enormous view screens. Sunken black eyes lined in deep shadows only hinted at the pain that she, like all females, spent every minute battling. Dressed in a high collared black cloak, the girl’s harsh, eager grin and deadly stance said she was anything but ordinary.

“Tell us, Candy. Why did you sign up for the Bachelor Battles at such a young age? As most of our viewers know, Games contestants are usually in search of a breeding pass or a slave. So Candy, why are *you* here?”

Silence...

“Miss Pruett?” The reporter cleared her throat and a low mutter came over the speakers. “Did we lose her? Hello? Miss Pruett, are you there?”

“Don’t ever. Do that. Again.”

Softly spoken, the words rolled over the audience in menacing waves.

“Um...” Not expecting it, the surprised reporter stumbled. “Do what, Hun?”

“Call me *Candy*.” *Click!*

“Hello?” The speaker faded to another mutter the microphone wasn’t meant to pick up. “Pull me off this one.”

Pause…

“Why? I’ll tell you why! She’s that Pruett changeling, the one the Network fined a million UDs for hurting a relative! That whole family is ruthless and I’ve already paid my dues! Pull me off this one. I don’t have a death wish.”

**2**

*“Welcome to New Network City, Candice Pruett.”* The annoying computer voice echoed from the security monitor. *“Please enjoy the scent of roses that we have genetically rescued from the ashes of our past.”*

Candice ducked the sprayer as she was waved through the gate, but her all-terrain vehicle wasn’t as lucky. The front of her Mopar was coated.

Entry to the dome housing the games complex was a series of checkpoints with ever increasing security due to rebels who regularly snuck into the city to create havoc. The first station, where she had hung up on the reporter, had sported large guns and stern, muscled sentries.

Candice drove slowly, taking in the sights while trying to ignore the smells. Thousands of people lived in the protection of this city. Thousands more came in each day for work, trade, or entertainment. It made for an awful combination of odors that she’d forgotten about. Candice sighed. “Should have taken the spray.”

New Network City was all around her now, vastly different from the green, lush valleys of Ohio. Gilded dirt paths among apocalypse rubble couldn’t compare to the Pruett family homestead and Candice was wise enough to recognize that. The debris left from the war had been removed or hidden by nature in most places, but not here. This city belonged to the eastern half of the Network council and they wanted these constant reminders of the past. It kept everyone in fear.

After the nuclear war, their country had split into three sections. Directly in the middle was an unknown area called the Borderlands, where the Wild West had returned in a new version of hell. The sides of New America were each controlled by a division of the Network, though the west coast outpost was as foreign to most as the mysterious states in the center. People from the west preferred to stay there, but it was hard to imagine them attempting the weeks long trek anyway, considering the odds of death. Few places beyond this city were safe, and that was also deliberate. Life, liberty, and happiness were myths in this new world.

Ruled by a well-protected council of ten secretive, vicious women who stayed isolated from the rest of society in their fortified dome, almost everyone had been beaten into submission. New American citizens existed in terror and anger, secretly loathing the leaders who used blood as a distraction. Even while fighting a disease that was sending humanity into extinction, nothing ever changed. It still only took bread and circuses to control the masses. With those, you could even steal a country’s sons.

Seeing a clear stretch before the next sentry station, Candice clicked the recorder in her hand, staring at her destination without fear or the nervousness she had expected. Unless everything went perfectly, she would die in their shiny dome. In case that happened, Candice had chosen to leave a recording of the things she knew to be true. She had been working on it since leaving the Pruett homestead. She considered it her will.

“What if…the male population was going extinct, and behind them, women, the world? How far would you go to save humanity? As far as it took? That was the reason the Network had given for the laws that decreed all men must have an owner, someone to be responsible for their care. They insisted enslavement was the only way to protect our species, and women had listened.

“After the war, when the population fell below seven million worldwide, less than five percent of all births were male. Damaged reproductive systems made girls by the hundreds for every boy born, and those few males were weaker, more susceptible to diseases and deformities. In small, scattered clans, this was more proof that *the meek shall inherit the earth*, had meant women.

“Within decades, the number of men had dropped drastically, and there were new wars, where whole towns of survivors killed each other for their sons. Huge groups decimated the smaller ones, absorbing the useful people and disposing of the rest. Cities that had begun to rebuild, fell again to unchecked violence as the remaining scientists confirmed the fears. Unless something was done, the human population was likely to die out. That’s when the Network emerged.

“It must have been horrifying at first for all those who’d gone without contact for eighty years to suddenly hear life coming from the devices that still worked. When the radio station blared to life on July 4th, 085 AW, it was anthems for all the nations. Played over and over, it was a call that people answered. When words finally came, the first signs of a civilization about to try again, they were spoken by a woman.

“Within ten years, the radio station, called the Network, had drawn nearly five thousand refugees from all corners of the planet and returned New York to some of its former glory. Renamed New Network City in 099AW, it became the first beacon of light in the darkness that hung over the new world. Two decades later the United States was officially renamed New America, but there was little new about a world cursed by ghosts of the past.”

Candice paused the recorder to do a sweep. The streets around her were filled with people going about their daily routines, but there were also city guards and hunters watching for rebels. It paid to be careful no matter where you were, but this city was a nest of vipers. Candice continued her recording, traveling slowly to give herself time. “From the very beginning, the Network hid from their subjects, ruling through cameras and audio devices. No one really knew who was on the Council, only that it had ten members. There are no records or photos. From our history books, it seems like no one cared. Rules, laws, and the foundations of society that had existed solely inside the debris laden walls of this city spread around the globe and were duplicated by other lands, other leaders. It’s easy to see why it succeeded.

“The Network is strict. More so than any of the previous democracies on American soil–but really, it wasn’t that, even from the start. The Network council imposed the bans and the punishments, and we obeyed even though the big war had been caused by the very same indifference. Why would we consent to it starting again? Didn’t the death of billions teach us anything? There could have been a world of hope, remade from the ashes of the pain. Instead…we got the Games.

“History books tell our female children that the Games came about because there were no jails for criminals. This is supported by the first ten years rolling by using all convicted criminals as the contestants. Mates hadn’t been the prize–just the return of their lives if they were the last one standing. All those who fought and died in the first decade, were men.

That’s the part that has kept the rebels fighting. If those in charge were genuinely trying to protect the population by enslaving the men, why kill them? They could have been set up as donors. Instead, the Network declared pregnancy to be illegal without a breeding pass, further cutting the number of male births. To the rebels, it seemed that the Network was intentionally letting the male population be wiped out.

“The Network tells our female children that enslavement was necessary to protect our species from free men who spread death with both hands. Deep into struggles with Rage Walker’s disease, females flocked to the Network’s enslavement campaign and the men refused to submit. Another war began, this time between genders. Male-controlled suburbs that had survived the war became bathed in blood, and the churches, where females often sought sanctuary, were the scenes of slaughter. There was no place for either side to find peace, but thanks to the wars taking the able men, the female numbers were high enough to give us the advantage. We kept breeding in huge numbers and the men kept dying for a cause they couldn’t win.”

Candice paused again as she reached another checkpoint. The big guards there recognized her and waved her through without asking for identification. Candice assumed it was to curry favor with her, but she didn’t respond like they’d hoped. *It takes more than that to win a Pruett token.*

She continued her recording, aware of time running out. She was nearing the main dome now. “It took thirty years for males to accept that they could not rebuild their armies without women. They refused to take hostages for breeding purposes and the enemy capitalized on their honor. In that time, the Network grew strong enough to take control of our broken country. When the final battles ended, the men were slaughtered upon surrender to rid the future of their genetic predisposition to bloodshed. The boys were enslaved. The few survivors went into hiding and slowly birthed the rebel forces we’re still battling today.

“In spite of the awful violence of the rage disease that females were inflicted with, and despite the slavery that came after, it was a brief opportunity for humans to attempt rebuilding a world of peace and happiness. We could have been taught to learn from the past, and by now, we may have even been that enlightened society that so few of us have read about in forbidden books. Instead, the corruption of the Network was given free rein.”

Candice scanned the huge dome in dislike that didn’t show on her face. She hated everything it stood for. Recording their true history was bringing those feelings to the surface and increasing her rage. “The rebel males managed to come near to their goal of overthrowing the Network a number of times in those first decades, never bending on their demand for freedom. They were hunted for large bounties. Their determination drew women to their cause, however, and by the year 125AW, the Network was in real danger of losing control. Few of us believed the stories of protecting the males; it was too lucrative for the Network, and it was being done too openly. Men had been picked up for the smallest transgression and thrown into death battles as their wives and daughters watched in helpless fury. It might have gone on that way forever if not for the Change.”

Revealing a bit of her strength to discourage possible assassins right now, Candice controlled the heavy Mopar with one hand and the recorder with the other, putting her illegal version of history into the machine. Her grandmother had done the same, and passed the chore to Candice. A public death for conspiracy would come swiftly if any of it were unearthed. History was taught by Network programs, where details were lacking and the truth was rare.

“The first known cases of the disease were from a small pirate island in the south. Their entire population was decimated by a mysterious illness that transformed the residents into lunatics with a taste for blood. It was called Rage Walker’s disease when it migrated to America and no female was immune. Cursed with painful needs and a streak of violence, humankind could have been wiped out again, but the disease hadn’t finished mutating. It became common for someone to suffer with it for decades instead of a few years. For a while, it was like other incurable illnesses in our history–avoided and ignored.

“But the post-apocalyptic birthrates didn’t rise from that horrible number of only 5% male, and then another, more dangerous pattern began to emerge. The Rage Walker children were violent. Three years after the first one entered kindergarten and slaughtered an entire class, a decree was put in place for all infected girls to be homeschooled to protect the rest. When it was ascertained that victims were surviving with the awful disease from puberty until death, our rulers took drastic measures.

“Understanding that their population was becoming too aggressive, the Network began forcing citizens to swear loyalty and labor for them on building the dome. And they kept the games rolling. Only then, it was all convicted women in the matches as the violent children grew up and the Network had to do something with them.

“By 200AW, a good portion of the Eastern lands had been cleared and returned to use, providing homes and farms that the Network controlled. As their power grew, it became almost impossible to get a breeding pass, and the impotent fury of childless citizens may have driven the Network’s next decree. They began to allow innocent women to enter the games. If they won, they would have their choice of prizes. If they lost, it was one less violent person on the streets…and it was incredibly popular!

“Everyone was tired of living in the dark and the games were vivid, brutal, attention keeping entertainment. When the first non-criminal female won, she asked for what all of our population wants–a mate, a family–and our rulers seized that opportunity. They already owned most of the males on New American soil and charged outrageous prices for the purchase or use of one. When that bloody winner asked for a mate, the Network changed the rules, making the prize a man. After that, our government could pass any law they wanted.”

The next checkpoint appeared in the distance. Candice slowed the Mopar to have time to finish the recording. Someone had to keep an honest account of their history or it would all be lost under the Network’s mountain of lies.

“The riots of 230AW were really all about the men. We were told it was over food, but the disease was still changing women, making us angrier, vicious. Our rulers, now safe in their dome covered complex, sweetened the deal. They gave pure bachelors at special times and held games with all twins as a double reward. They changed the prizes, the rules, the arenas, and the lighting, blinding us with swirling violence as they took sons from nearly every family in the first annual roundup. Confident in their control through the ugliness that offered a small hope to the females, what they were really doing was culling the female population while adding to their male stock.

“By 300AW, the Network had complete control, reinventing many of our old terrors to get the rebels in line. Always worried about women joining those few brave men, the Network cut off direct communication between towns and censored all broadcasts. It became illegal to own a radio and the few media reports people saw were scripted.

“Changelings can’t resist blood and there are gallons of it wasted daily in the Network Games. The crimson spilled there calls to us like the heat of a man, because we’ve *changed*. Through that ugly form of control, our rulers snatched our freedoms until there was no unapproved music, no recovered technology, no art or literature, and never any news of the outside world–just a constant parade of death that has kept us savage.”

Candice scanned the tall, flashing buildings around her with an intense dislike that was only hidden by her hood this time. *I hate it here!* “Now, four centuries after the fall of men, after the apocalypse that collapsed all societies across the planet, the games are on every wall screen, in every home across Network lands. We kill each other, living and dying for the chance, for the mere possibility, of an end to this pain. We are no more civilized than the barbaric men who came before us. The Network feeds us a vision of a peaceful future, but I suspect a lie in that promise. We’re not capable of it.”

Candice sighed heavily as she finished. “Unlike the other females who sell everything they own to make the journey to this complex, I don’t fight who I am, who we all are now. Humans have been cursed for the atrocities that we’ve allowed, committed. Until we are gone from this planet, women will rule the world and men will be what we shed our blood to possess. There is no cure for that, no absolution the tyrants in charge can offer. All we can do is hold true to who we are, to what we’ve become.

“My name is Candice Marie Pruett. I came here to spill my share of the blood, to commit my share of those atrocities under the guise of recovering something very dear to me. This game will likely determine the future of my family, my town, and maybe even my country, but I’d rather be dead than to have my sons born into slavery. I’d rather see us *all* dead. If they don’t kill me while I’m here, they’re going to regret it.”

Candice put the recorder away, controlling her emotions as the checkpoint loomed. She was one of the rare citizens who loathed their rulers. Some days, it was a struggle to pretend otherwise. Candice had become skilled at hiding her thoughts, at controlling her violent emotions. There was no cure for the disease, merely moments of calm between the slaughters. Achieving a stage of the illness that allowed some measure of control was all that had kept society from disintegrating again. Over the years, four stages of the disease had emerged. Candice was in stage two. She didn’t expect to live to reach the next level.

Around the checkpoint, bored troops stood up straighter. Some of the two dozen Defenders recognized the markings on the approaching Mopar. The others responded to the wariness of their superiors and began scanning for trouble.

Candice waited at the final gate for the suspicious sentry to check her identification. She spotted a rare, live interview happening on the stairs of the Justice Building nearby. Candice had been in there on several occasions to bear witness for her family, but she didn’t like the cold, gray marble or the pretentious gold accents. In her mind, such a richly designed monument had no place among the rubble still left from the end of the previous world.

A seldom glimpsed member of the Network Council stood before the small group of reporters, wearing a fur robe with the hood up. Behind her a line of intimidating guards who provided security inside the complex scanned everything that moved. Called Defenders, in their downtime they were the personal protection for wealthier citizens, and of course, for the council. Surprised to see a bat out of the cave, Candice lingered as long as she could, storing details.

“Is there any news on Rage Walker’s? Has it mutated again?”

“As you know, Rage Walker’s disease has finally stopped killing the host, but it inflicts them with so much torment that they wish for death.” Tall, with a wide nose, Riana spoke in clipped bursts of indignation. “Many women *do* kill themselves to be free of the pain! It hurts on the inside, burning and stabbing, jabbing at our control until only blood can pacify it. That’s not an improvement. We need a *cure*.”

A front row reporter leaned in, dangling multicolored braids over her notepad. “Scientists still claim a mate can ease the symptoms, but birth numbers don’t appear promising for that option. Does the Network plan to use illegal programs to try increasing the male population?”

“It won’t be illegal, my dear.” Riana’s smile was charming, but her painted eyes glinted with cold warning. “If we agree it could help us recover from the terrible tragedy of our history, the council will clear those programs. There is no conspiracy.”

Another reporter picked up the questioning as Candice was waved through the gate with a slightly threatening stare that she ignored. Pruetts were always treated that way. *We encourage it.*

“Can you tell us if the disease will mutate again?”

“No one knows.” Riana’s grave tone now matched the solemn mood. “Scientists refuse to guess if things might get better or worse. That worries everyone. You can’t blame them, considering the annual population report has just revealed male births to be at less than 7%. The Network understands it’s time to increase our efforts.”

Candice refused to let her thoughts show as she drove by the interview. She also refused to ogle the reporters. The last thing she needed was to be recognized. Their rulers wouldn’t like her stealing airtime, but her family was always a popular fluff story with the media because they brought in so many fugitives. The public tallies made the Network appear as if they were keeping crime controlled, which was ridiculous. The Network inadvertently caused most of the crime and arranged the rest of it personally. Their subjects just tried to survive.

*Or bring them down*, Candice corrected, spotting a shadow on the next building that didn’t belong there. Assassins were also common in New Network City, though none had been successful in her lifetime. That one wouldn’t be either. The red of his shirt was a bad mix with the bright blue sky and the tan walls below him. When he was discovered, he would be executed or put into one of the games as an example to the rest.

Finally at the dome, Candice pulled into the tall garage to leave her vehicle for the week she would be here. Her family, who was on the way, would take it with them when they left. If Candice did manage to walk out of this nightmare, she and her prize would take the train back to Ohio.

The parking garage was immense, but the damp, concrete walls sent Candice’s thoughts to the gossip she’d overheard on her last train ride. Where was the water coming from? The lands around New Network City spent most of the year parched, and the small river she had crossed to get into the city was too far away to provide moisture in this garage. Rumors had speculated on an ocean border, but the wall around this zone prevented anyone from confirming it. No one protested. They’d been told the wall was for their protection from the savage world outside.

The sentries on the garage whispered and murmured, staring as Candice gave them her identification card. The girl who handed it back didn’t look at her. “Go on through.”

She had little to fear, but Candice didn’t say so. She had a family reputation to uphold.

All around the dome, women with leashed slaves went about their tidy lives of shopping Network stores, trading Network credits, and using Network brothels. Those cheery red buildings lined one full block of the dingy, tan apartments that boxed in the dome. Sentry stations were scattered around this ten mile area, except for the stretch behind the complex. No one was allowed back there, but rumor said it was where new slaves were brought in. Dozens of billboards and flashing signs advertising males for rent, rules of the city, and entertainment encased the wealthy, surreal town sitting at the base of the dome. Vulture Run and Bachelor Battles were the two most popular of the bloody shows. Scenes from those episodes flashed continuously on the annoying advertisements.

As if it was perfectly normal to be holding another person on a tether, the Network junkies chatted and argued while their slaves stood docilely behind them. To Candice, the collared men and painted women were part of a nightmare she only saw while awake. In her dreams, this awful indifference didn’t exist. While she was here, she would try to determine if she could make that the reality for everyone.

Candice walked up the glittery main stairs, not glancing around when howls of hounds and then screams rang out. If the rebels wanted to stand a real chance against the Network, assassins like that wouldn’t do it. With the security here, it would take hundreds of fighters, not a few solo missions.

*“Welcome to the New Network City Dome*.” The computer voice came through the nearby speaker this time as Candice entered the warm building. *“Players must register for their game upon arrival. Please drop your ID card into any of the eight convenient slot boxes.”*

Already hating that simpering computer, Candice did as instructed.

*“Please report to the main stage by 5:30. Those not signed in at The Block will be disbarred from this episode and fined. Remember, there is no battling until the official start at sunrise.”*

The doors locked behind her with an audible click, and for Candice, there was no renouncing her choice. There was a short pause and then an airy chime came as the gate on the center of the five arched entrances slid open to admit her to the games section of the dome.

Following the neatly lettered signs, Candice quickly reached the big gateway to The Block. She entered the lavish waiting area with eyes that stayed black despite the pink glints and growls that came her way upon recognition. Instead of getting angry or rising to the bait of the other contestants, she grinned.

The growls doubled.

These females didn’t want to be here, but they were driven by the disease. Candice, on the other hand, was eager to pay someone back for her torment and it showed. She was *allowed* to kill while here. The freedom was indescribable.

Candice took a spot along the wall to study the competition while waiting for her name to be called. This area was full of Defenders to keep players from fighting before the cameras could catch every drop of blood. Candice evaluated them with the contestants. Depending on the outcome, the information could come in handy.

Candice had made it a habit to gather knowledge since changing. It had helped her master some of the rage. She had already made it further into the disease than many females who flipped so young, but her family still couldn’t believe she had signed up for something as deadly as the Bachelor Battles. So what if the thing she wanted, *needed,* the most could only be found here? What she was doing was crazy, her mother had said, and maybe even suicidal. She would be extremely lucky to come out alive.

Candice honestly couldn’t wait for it to start.

“Welcome back!” the announcer blared through the speakers. “If you are just tuning in, we’ve been learning about this week’s players as they take their mandatory stroll of The Block. Are ya ready for the next contestant?”

The large crowd cheered as the red curtains on the stage opened. The wall screens in the waiting area revealed jeweled stars made of gold flashing in barter for supplies, weapons, rooms, and slaves. Visitors and residents, most employed by the council, shoved through the rowdy crowd in tight, tan pants and flowing leather tunics adorned by worn weapon belts and scarred skin. The silver and black jumpers of the Defenders were a vivid contrast as they tried to keep control over the sprawling audience.

The Block, a protruding stage in the direct center of the complex, held viewers on three sides and the prizes in a small, shielded pen on the fourth. There were thousands of faces crammed into this arena, enthusiastically betting on who would die first. Candice suddenly loved them all. They were her kind.

“We’re at contestant number seven, who has just arrived. Let’s meet Candice Pruett!”

The crowd cheered again as her image appeared on the gigantic screen above the lavish stage.

Candice padded forward, ignoring the roaring noise and glare of the flashing lights. It had been long, bloody years, but she was finally here. The relief allowed her to step into view with confidence. She wasn’t a little kid anymore. She was a grown changeling with the fury of almost a decade to drive her. Their rulers had no idea what they’d done by allowing her to sign up, but they would learn. When you took something from a Pruett, there was a price to be paid. The longer the wait for payment, the harsher the penalty, and forgiveness was not an option. Candice grinned. *Neither is mercy.*

# Chapter Two

**The Block**

**1**

**S**creaming fans in the center of the vast Network complex shoved forward to get a better view as Candice emerged onto the main stage, far below the shiny cages where she would battle for her prize. Set up like a honeycomb, they called this part The Block and she stepped forward to walk it.

“At almost twenty, this intimidating bounty hunter resides in the recovery zone of southern Ohio...” The announcer took a breath and continued to read the profile. “Carrying a criminal record for excessive force, she was fined over one million UDs for injury to a family member. This brutal changeling has no mercy. Her rank at the start of this competition is fifth.”

There were hundreds of faces around the main stage and then thousands more behind and above those. The arena like rafters rising to the sky gave an impression of being endless. Candice didn’t flinch.

“A top-rated hunter, Miss Pruett excels in fifteen types of weaponry. Her crew is also one of the few permitted to carry firearms. However, as you know, guns are illegal at these games for everyone.”

Pulling on the mental shield she had developed over three thousand hard nights of waiting, Candice circled the stage. She hated being on display.

“This isn’t the first time Candice Pruett has been in the dome, folks. At fourteen she was caught trying to enter this very game and sent home!”

Troops around the bachelors aimed their weapons at the crowd as hungry women slapped and clawed to reach them. Candice used the distraction to scan those prizes, finding a familiar profile. *Daniel!*

A snarling woman with red eyes shoved through the guards and lunged for the bachelors.

She was hammered into a bloody pile with the butts of multiple guns.

Daniel cringed away from them all in fear.

Candice saw his ankle chain. A fast examination revealed all the males were bound. If there was a stampede, they would be defenseless.

Sweeping the audience, Candice picked out pink eyes littering the stands as women tried to sneak closer to the prizes. The crowd was betting and arguing, lovers were embracing, vendors were roaming the churning mass, but each changeling repeatedly scanned the small group of enslaved males. The women watched the bachelors as much as the stage, sniffing and wiping drool. *Why does the Network put men in danger this way?*

Hoping to settle the crowd herself, Candice let her eyes change to light pink—a new strength that had come with stage two of the disease. She held more control over herself now.

“Wow!” the announcer broke through Candice’s mental spin. “She has the Network patch on her wrist, which means she won the time trials in Adelphia and received half a million UDs! Bet we’ll see a lot more of her.”

Candice hid a sneer. The reporter had no idea*. I came to win and I’ll stoop to any level.* After forcing the information from her mother, Candice had chosen an old technique she hadn’t witnessed a contestant use during her lifetime.

She walked toward those deceptively safe red curtains, tugging a string to let her cloak fall to the floor. Under it, she wore a laced outfit of thin, black strips that left her backside gloriously bare from ears to thighs. Most players displayed their weapons at this point, trying to prove their level of threat to earn those much needed ratings, draping themselves with killing tools to flaunt their power. Candice had chosen to achieve the same results using her battered body.

There was silence for three full seconds, allowing the cameras to zoom in on her badges of honor. She had been shot, stabbed, bitten, broken, and beaten for years. Candice was covered in proof that Pruetts were hard to kill.

“That might boost her ratings enough to start the competition with both food and medical credits!” the announcer gushed. “Will you check out those scars! Oh! And nice tattoos!”

The massive crowd yelled and whistled as Candice rotated, revealing black strips that spiderwebbed over her entire body. She appeared almost nude except for pale scars gleaming like jewels and detailed ink that circled her taut skin as if it were a giant snake.

Pausing near the microphone, Candice grinned at the audience. “Never bet against a Pruett. You’ll lose your ass.”

The crowd roared laughter and agreement. Her family had a reputation for being good at what they did.

Candice bent over to retrieve her cloak, giving a view of her rear end that sent the laughter to new levels and caused the bachelors to shove forward against their own protection. The Network wanted their guys to act willing for the cameras, but Candice knew they were drugged, tortured, brainwashed. She was using it and earning points from the audience at the same time. She had interrupted these boring introductions and made it fun. They would be generous with their votes.

Candice slid the cloak back into place over her tattooed, battle scarred body, letting her eyes flash into the dangerous shade of pink that changelings were known for. When their irises phased into red, it was usually too late to avoid violence. Now the main story, Candice was sure she had bumped her rank. It was embarrassing, but she had handled it flawlessly...except, she couldn’t glance away from the bachelors. They were standing against the Defenders in a rare display of courage that drew the women around them like sizzling blood.

Candice was suddenly in too much pain to use the rage. She’d waited almost a decade, fearing every night that he was being hurt and she’d been right. His face was harder, still as pale, and it appeared his nose had been broken, but she couldn’t be positive.

Candice fastened her cloak and retreated, trying to recover her emotionless façade. She registered a presence waiting in the curtains as she stepped through. Something sharp went around her throat.

*Not flawless.*

Cries of delight spilled through the arena as the viewers realized it was an assassination attempt. Fresh squads flooded the stands in brutal control. The people pushing to get a better view were hit, hurt, killed.

“That’s my patch!” a sweaty woman snarled in Candice’s ear, blade pressing against her throat. “You stole it!”

Candice struggled to breathe, to think around the rage. “You should have been glad I only took the patch.”

Opposite hand shoving up to break the hold, Candice snapped the wrist around her neck with a vicious twist. As they spun, assassin screaming, she brought her elbow in from the other direction and slammed it into her attacker’s unprotected throat.

The crunch was grotesque, delighting the audience.

The assassin began to suffocate, sliding to her knees.

Candice aimed for the chin, kick snapping her head back and knocking her flat.

“Please…don’t…”

Candice took two fast steps and stomped.

Blood sprayed from the woman’s mouth, speckling the floor. She stopped breathing.

Candice spun, searching for the next threat, and all the while, the audience studied her every move.

Taking tight breaths, she pulled the rage in, but it went slowly, reluctantly. She loved blood.

“As you know, that’s illegal!” the announcer reminded everyone, happy to have the excitement happen on her shift. “Players are not supposed to attack until the official chime at sunrise. Candice will not be fined for defense.”

Eyes flickering pink and red, Candice waved at a twitchy, neutered medic. “Send her gear to my parents.” With a cool nod to the camera, she exited the stage.

The announcer began to repeat the action in brutal detail.

Candice ignored the heart screaming not to leave Daniel there. By morning, the hype would have grown so large that she would be one of the main contestants to beat, to ambush.

Good. The sooner they attack me, and I kill them, the sooner I’ll have what I came for.

“What a terrific start to this week’s show! Okay, our next contestant is…the Ex-Defender! Fresh from losing fugitives in the deserts of Nebraska, this former guard seeks to make amends by donating her prize to the breeding program if she wins. Baker, the dangerous rebel male who escaped under her watch, is still missing. It has lowered the Ex-Defender’s rank to seventh...”

Candice took her ID card from the scanner as she left the stage area, noting the first golden star on the top of it. Each star meant a Defender for protection, though they were usually only given during the games, not before them. She grunted in satisfaction, ignoring the disappointed troops that had to have been bribed to allow her assassin’s attack. Less than two hours in the city, with half of it spent checking in and she’d already earned her first star. *Nice.*

Coming from an employee gate, the sentry fell in step with a menace that Candice admired. All Defenders wore the same black and silver jumper with a red arrow over the right shoulder and a wide belt with an array of tools meant to cause harm–tools they enjoyed using. Defenders were former winners who were too old to keep fighting, but too driven by the disease to get out of the action.

As Candice walked, she swept her competition. The Network ran an episode of this show every week, featuring ten brutal females who fought to the death. The single woman remaining at the end won her choice of the prizes. Candice grinned fiercely at the thought of spilling so much blood.

The others in the hall flinched. There were five fellow contestants in the long corridor, marked by their wary, on the edge of dying posture. Candice evaluated, searching for flaws. She found them–from an awkward step that could be tripped for a quick deathblow, to a hair vanity she could exploit.

She grinned again, more confidently, and they recoiled further. Apparently, they hadn’t found the same weaknesses in her. They ducked their heads and scurried out of her way.

This warm passage had white tile floors, with red and black walls covered in glossy photos. Each picture displayed a bloody and battered female in a wild victory shot. Candice tried not to linger on the one who was familiar. So far, no one knew her for anything more than rounding up New American garbage. They’d forgotten the other Pruett who had come to these games three decades ago and left with a prize.

Candice took in more of her surroundings with attention to detail that she was known for. She’d been on the family crew for more years than her mother had reported to the Network, as had her cousin, but this was only the second time she’d been in this dome. She wanted to remember every detail.

Powered by massive generators, the annoying hum was a constant sound that kept this complex bathed in flickering yellow light. Most of the surrounding populations still made do with candles. Candice loathed the hum for the class separation it represented. The drafty halls she now walked were neat and free of apocalyptic debris. In contrast, the city still had entire blocks crumbling into centuries-old decay. In those dark alleys and shadowy graveyards, rebellion lurked.

The complex, covered with a clear dome, stood as a gleaming beacon in the distance meant to entrap victims. The streets further out were lightless paths through hell for those forced to live there, but their rulers were apathetic at best about the condition of their subjects. In here, they were protected from the misery they caused.

The Network had built a lavish palace of apartments outside to provide shelter for important employees and visiting persons of value. They knew how to pamper those they needed, but the average citizens… There were always lines at the few stores, often stretching out of sight, and the two churches allowed to operate in the city limits had front lawns hidden by the tents of widows and orphaned girls. Cats, along with rats, were eaten upon sight. The people were thin and jumpy, always in fear of torture or execution. Anyone suspected of being in league with the rebels was shown no mercy. Candice had passed these signs on her way into the city with no change in expression, but her heart had hardened. She’d vowed to come for all the slaves. She hadn’t forgotten a single second of that awful day and she never would, but she also wanted to help the poor people who were forced to exist in such conditions while their rulers lived in luxury.

Candice found her room easily, but before she could open the door, her guard did it and then vanished inside to verify there were no assassins waiting. Candice scanned the hall. Her attention was quickly absorbed by the studio across the neatly tiled floor.

Several naked males wearing tight collars were servicing a woman in scarlet robes. They were feeding her, brushing her hair, singing. Bruises didn’t mar their skin and their flesh didn’t hang from their bones, but they were still slaves. This was proven when the scarlet woman shoved one of the men against the bedpost and ran claws down his bare chest.

Blood welled, drawing a frown from Candice. The prizes went through harsh training that was supposed to turn them into harmless mates. She’d been around these captives her entire life and yet, she didn’t understand how they could refuse to fight for their freedom.

“Would you like one of them for an hour, Pruett?” the woman across the hall offered arrogantly. “They’re well trained, even the newest.”

Candice listened to the male grunt in pain, vision going pale pink. Hoping to confirm the blonde’s identity, Candice shrugged. “I’ll have my own to abuse shortly.”

“That’s *my* title, Pruett.” The Bombshell sneered. “You’ll win death.”

“Death is what we’ve all come here for.” Candice pointed at her. “This episode has *your* name on it.”

“Not me. I want the job of head Defender and I’ll kill as many of you as I need to in order to have it.” The woman stood up, showing a body covered in scars. “The job will ensure I’m obeyed and feared, two things I require in all my subjects. Once I make Boss, then I’ll get on the ruling council. I won’t be just the Blonde Bombshell for long.”

“All lies. You came here hoping someone might be able to end your agony.” Candice called the bluff. “I *can* do that for you.”

The bombshell glowered.

Candice stared at the beauty. Her name wasn’t unearned. The woman had delicate cheekbones set under thin, hard skin that had clearly seen a better life than most. Platinum hair hung to her hips in neatly brushed strands of gold.

The Bombshell hissed dangerously. “There are easier ways to die!”

“Care to step out and learn one you may not know yet?” Candice delivered the words with cheer. The woman was trying to be menacing, but Candice was a bounty hunter. Words didn’t frighten her. Hardly anything did.

The Bombshell chuckled scornfully. “Come dawn, Pruett. Come the dawn.”

Another sound of pain came from the trapped male.

Candice’s nails began to grow into nasty claws. She didn’t like that.

The Bombshell knew and hurt her slave again, goading.

“Dawn came early.” Candice let the Bombshell wind her up. Her muscles began to swell, preparing. “Unless you’re scared of a Pruett whelp...”

The Bombshell growled lowly at the direct challenge, the male forgotten. She advanced.

People in the hall froze in eager attention, waiting to see the blood.

Candice took up a fighting stance. Goading a Pruett didn’t work. *We never back down. Someday, that may kill us off.*

The guard came out of Candice’s flat. She recognized the tension for what it was and hurried between them in firm denial. “You’ll be disqualified, no matter who wins.”

Candice inspected the Bombshell, who had paused. “Dawn, then?”

“On my life, Pruett!”

*She doesn’t sound as controlled now.* Candice smirked as she entered her room. “Remember those words.”

Before shutting the door, Candice did another solid sweep of the hall, noting the barriers and cameras, the disappointed people moving by. She marked the exits and the sense they were being observed from multiple angles. She was in danger every second she was here. The agony was a terrible force, but it wasn’t why she’d come. She had hoped that difference might give her an advantage. As Candice stored more information, like no windows in these halls either, only walls, photos, and sentries, she realized it didn’t matter anymore. During the solitary trip she’d insisted on to get to New Network City, Candice had worried about not being good enough, about surviving somehow even if she lost, but she didn’t want that now. *If I can’t go home with my prize, I’d rather be dead.*

She shut the door–on the outside world and on her previous doubts. She was here. She would complete the mission and struggle with the cost later. Her humanity was a small price to pay to end centuries of tyranny.

Candice’s room was just that–a narrow flat with a couch, a wall screen, a kitchenette, and a washing cubby, all of it an ugly green. It held scurrying shadows and questionable smells, but Candice pushed it aside with her usual attitude of ‘whatever it takes’. She had spent the night in worse during runs, and at least this den would stay stocked with whatever she needed as long as she won each match. If she lost, she would be dead and it wouldn’t matter anyway.

Candice pushed the volume button on the wall screen as she went to the tiny wash area, wincing at the reporter’s loud, scratchy voice as it blared from the Network equipment.

“The Blonde Bombshell legally changed her name from Kassandra Rowe after winning her first episode at eighteen-years-old. So far, she has survived five of the sixteen shows the Network offers. It’s rumored that she’s shooting for the job of Head Defender. Ironically enough, the former owner of that title is one of the contestants the Bombshell will face in this episode.

“In other news, a family of rebel sympathizers was stoned on the steps of the Justice building yesterday. Found guilty of helping a rebel evade custody, they will also forfeit all property, accounts, and assets. Baker, the dangerous rebel male, is still on the loose.”

After a quick stop and wash, Candice hit the couch, vaguely aware of the reporter still talking. It had been a rough, cold ride on the Mopar to get here. She was beat.

“In a long expected move, the Council voted today to unanimously outlaw renting to those infected with leprosy. Commonly called Desert Glowers, those inflicted with the disease have already been banned from most public places. Many towns already have such a law, and now, New Network City will also be protected. Please be a good citizen and report those who do not belong here.”

Candice took out a bandolier with rows of blades and spikes, and began filling the empty belt around her hips. She hadn’t wanted her rivals to see her weapons during the introductions, but at dawn, the chime would ring and the battling would start. She needed to be ready.

After her belt was full, Candice refilled the bandolier from a pouch in her cloak and then placed it into a more conveniently reached pocket.

“Now, a clip from one of last month’s Bachelor Battles episodes. Roll it, Phyllis.”

The screen changed to the rusty bridge Candice had crossed upon arriving. On stilts to avoid spring flooding, the bridge had swayed and shuddered as she rolled over–much like it was doing on the screen.

Candice leaned against the buggy couch as she studied the two women. They were battling the rocking bridge as much as each other. She recognized the musclebound blonde immediately. The Bombshell was the first contestant in more than two centuries to claim a mate and then sign up to defend her crown. Candice had heard a rumor that she was doing this one as a bounty for the Network, who wanted their former Defender out of the way.

The champion on the screen used her elbow to land a vicious hit to the taller female’s throat. She went careening off the bridge and vanished under the icy sludge below. The Bombshell screamed in triumph. Kassandra wasn’t very intimidating at all–just those emotionless eyes and that was worrisome. For Candice, it was like staring into a mirror.

Out of the contestants Candice had researched, only two were real competition–the Bombshell and Ex-Defender. Candice forced herself to remain calm, feeling the drive behind her every action for the last eight years. It didn’t matter. Soon, she would have an end to this pain, and she planned to enjoy all the blood along the way.

Candice took a small box with a pair of oddly shaped glasses from her cloak, stowing the container. She put them on, changing her view to infrared. There was one more thing she wanted to gather information on before she slept.

Candice peered through the tinted window behind her, acutely aware of the bars over it. In the pitch black shadows behind the dome, there was a building she’d never seen before. It couldn’t be viewed from the other three angles. Using the zoom feature on the glasses revealed a whip being used on slaves in chains as they carried boxes from what appeared to be a boat dock.

Candice pulled the glasses off and shoved them onto her belt, casting a discreet glance at the camera in the corner. Her pink irises, she hid. The abuse of slaves was well known and it had tormented her for years. Seeing proof of it everywhere she looked was getting old. Something had to be done.

“Now for an update from the Vulture Run Nursery!” the announcer yelled. “The predators are still protecting the son of a rebel traitor who was added to the game as a punishment last year. The child seems to be doing well, unlike the criminals trying to survive in the Undead Fields. That small group lost two more overnight and the odds are high for all of the in-game convicts to be dead by morning…”

Candice was jarred out of her ugly thoughts by a beep from her wrist communicator. She hit the button to read the message.

*“Soon.”*

Candice stretched out on the tattered couch without sending a reply. She didn’t want her family here, but they weren’t safer at home while she was in the games. Assassins could show up anywhere.

Candice pulled her knife, tugged her thick cloak over herself, and curled up with the blade resting against her cheek. The Pruett family crest on the blade–a rose winding around a dagger–was comforting against her skin.

As she drowsed, rain began to drum on the rubber roof of the complex. Candice realized the dome must be open. She hadn’t heard it and that concerned her a bit. How much technology did the Network have?

*Enough to have built a wall around the entire country to fence us in, without most citizens ever realizing,* she answered herself. The rest of the world was rumored to be worse off than New America, but Candice wondered if that was true. After using some of the technology their rulers hoarded, she wasn’t convinced anyone should still be struggling to recover from the apocalypse. The Network had a lot of explaining to do. To have a chance at getting those answers, she just had to kill seven innocent women and two vicious Network lackeys.

Upon recalling Daniel’s scars, chains, and his fear, Candice didn’t think that would be hard. *This rage has to go somewhere, and I now have nine very unlucky targets.*

# Chapter Three

**Luck of the Draw**

**1**

**“W**elcome to Round One of the Bachelor Battles!”

There was a pause for the crowd to settle down. It was clear this game was a favorite. Still in her flat and standing on a platform that had slid out of the wall, Candice studied the screen where live shots of the contestants were featured in small squares around the edges. The center of the monitor rotated between the fighting cage and packed stands of restless changelings waiting for the blood to spill.

“While the numbers come up, let’s go over some of the basic rules.” The announcer skillfully distracted the crowd. “As you know, ten contestants will fight to the death for their choice of the prizes. Attacks and battles are forbidden in the halls or private studios. Everywhere else is fair game, and as usual, anyone can kill a contestant, including friends, family, and outsourced labor. A single tour of the bachelor cells will be provided to each player, with light sampling allowed.”

The crowd roared laughter, forcing the announcer to wait for them to quiet. Candice could hear it from her flat, as could the others who’d signed up for this suicide. Games like the one she was now in were running simultaneously throughout this complex. Some women signed up to outrun the hounds or to fight the walking dead, but it was the battles against other changelings that held the post-apocalyptic audiences spellbound. Outside these walls was a different struggle, not controlled or neatly regulated. It was one they couldn’t bet on or enjoy. Out there, people were killing each other for their sons and the council did nothing to help. In fact, families who fell out of favor with their rulers were denied access to their credits so they would have to sell their children to survive.

“Our Luck of the Draw fighter will face three contestants in a row for the first round of matches. Viewers will vote on the challengers each morning. If our Luck of the Draw winner is defeated, the Network will pick a replacement. No other battles are held during this time, but attacks and assassination attempts are encouraged.”

In the corner of Candice’s flat, another platform rose from the floor as a dial slid out of the grungy green wall. *“Please step onto the scanner and remain motionless.”*

Candice did and saw herself flash onto one of those small squares lining the edges of the screen. It wasn’t unreasonable to think people might underestimate her because of her size. She was shorter than most of the contestants and her slightly chubby frame implied she spent time watching these shows instead of training for them.It was a lie, of course. The heaviness came from the disease, an effect the vain Network females never acknowledged. It gave all women a fuller, rounder figure that the socialites loathed. As for the small size, if they saw her like her family did daily, thick arms straining while blood dripped unnoticed, they might take more care. She was glad the media hadn’t shown any of those images. Surprise was a good tool on bounty runs, but here, it was a necessary defense.

“The contestants are now being evaluated by a Network computer specifically designed to determine which of our players has the best chance to win. Sending them against three fighters in a row is meant to take away the edge of the fittest over those who’ve had less training.”

The center of the screen flashed to a dial that began spinning between the names of the players. Candice didn’t feel anything as the laser light went over her body in slow revolutions. On the wall screen, numbers and stats began to pop up. The figures were familiar. When her name had been announced, Candice’s mother had dug into the computer. They’d discovered what the estimates would be and made sure she fit. There wouldn’t be any luck involved if they had done it right. She would be chosen and not have to spend the next two days waiting. She wanted to be on the offensive and when you were a Pruett, there were ways.

*“Thank you. Please step off.”*

Candice did and watched herself disappear from the screen. The results would take a few minutes to come in. She studied the half dozen contestants still being scanned. This was the time when the world placed their bets. It was also the time when players sized each other up according to what they had read and noticed, but for Candice, it was time to pass impatiently. She’d done her homework before coming.

“We will have our Luck of the Draw fighter in a moment, but before that, here’s a reminder on the protection our contestants can earn from their matches. Stars are given for each kill, for high popularity, and by council decision. Each star will gain the contestant one Defender in the halls and private rooms, and maybe even a fresh cache of weapons, food, or medical credits. Stars cannot be lost, but during Round Two, they can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family.”

There was a pause where Candice’s nerves started to get the best of her. She wanted this to be over and the fighting to begin. Her vision flickered to pink.

“And the results are ready! We’ll hit the button here, and okay, we’ll have the name when the dial stops. Let’s watch the screen now…”

The audience waited as impatiently as the players. The mob of spectators outside the complex was made up of those who couldn’t afford a ticket and they were loud enough to be picked up by the Network speakers as the announcer called the name.

“Candice Pruett!”

*“You have been scheduled for a match in one hour. Please report to the main arena on time.”* The voice came from the console in her flat.

At the same time, the announcer filled in the listening viewers. “Our Luck of the Draw contestant is Candice Pruett! Will this vicious bounty hunter survive the first three matches? The computer thinks so. Wadda ya say, folks? Wanna place a bet or two?”

Candice waited to see who she would kill in the first match, thinking of the harsh training she’d done with her lover to get here. When she’d met him, Baker hadn’t been a convict, but he had been a tool she’d used to improve her chances of surviving.

“And the first contestant our bounty hunting changeling will face is…Diva, Queen of the Bronx Club! This street fighter likes to use her bare hands and has a passion for singing. She has been known to belt out a tune while bashing her opponent’s–”

Candice flipped off the screen. *Finally!*

**2**

“Cage Match One!”

Candice didn’t arrive early and expose her impatience. She was already suffering like an animal that had been boxed up too long and gone insane. It couldn’t be known. She arrived with just three minutes to spare.

Candice walked down the fenced area with even steps, coldness settling into her chest at the sight of the Diva. The Bronx woman waiting in the cage was enormous. She wondered if that had also been rigged. If so, it wouldn’t matter. She wasn’t going to lose to this slave trading gang leader.

The arched cage was a small steel dome with a center bar between the players that slid down as Candice entered. The bars held deep scratches from claws that hadn’t waited for it to go all the way down and the floor mat was forever stained with specks of blood. The sides of the 12’x12’ fighting area were fenced, as much to keep contestants in as to keep the crowd out. It was also lined with tiny, durable cameras for those zoomed shots the masses craved.

Candice let no expression give away her thoughts as the hulking female in front of her cracked knuckles and leered. Nicked and scratched, the big woman’s scars were numerous but light, telling Candice the Diva was good at ending the fight before her opponent could get close enough to deliver a serious injury. Dressed in white shorts and a half top to accent her size, it was clear the woman was a brawler.

*I’m a killer*. Candice stepped forward eagerly, goading and testing. “You want out?”

The Diva sneered. “I’m more than you can chew, little girl.”

Candice grinned, positive it would anger her opponent.

The entire arena streamed with vivid flashes of brilliant blue light meant to make the battle harder, more entertaining. The sound of the audience screaming was overwhelming as the match began.

Candice didn’t wince at the roar when the bell came and she didn’t move when the Diva charged. What she did was get set, mentally running through the best reaction in an instant. As the Diva reached her, Candice ducked, leaning forward to drive her palm into the woman’s large nose.

*Crunch!*

Blood splashed over Candice as she gave the final killing shove to the woman’s nose to silence the howls of agony spewing from her mouth.

The Diva dropped to the mat with a damp, meaty thud.

Candice added the Bronx gang to an already long list of enemies.

There was silence at the swift execution.

“Match to Pruett!”

More silence...and then chaos. Cheers and shouts erupted, contestants and viewers screaming in disbelief. These were the city residents and favorites of the ruling council. They lived for the shows and the blood, and they only valued the favors their masters doled out to keep a wealthy following. *Useless*, Candice thought. She especially despised those who modeled for the Network or acted in their promo clips. Starlets had no place in this new world, except as bones under Pruett boots.

She spoke to the cameras with an arrogant lilt. “Next?”

The roar grew hungrier.

Shaking the Diva’s blood from her hand, Candice exited the cage without a thought for the lumbering giant she’d defeated. The Diva had been a replacement contestant for the assassin Candice had killed after her stroll on the Block. The gang banger had been dead before her name was chosen.

Candice grinned, using the responding shouts and jeers to satisfy the need to spill more blood. As she walked up the fenced cage length, ignoring those pleading on the other side for mercy for their family member, she felt the tingle of being glared at in hatred. It was so strong that she spun around to discover which contestant it was.

The Bombshell was cloaked in vivid scarlet, standing with two weaker females on the balcony above the cage. Long lashes framed cold, golden eyes and hand-arched brows added to the sense of menace. The Bombshell waved.

Candice gave her the finger.

The crowd laughed with Candice as the Bombshell flushed.

Guards shoved her out of the arena.

Candice was in the protection of her two sentries as soon she entered the hall, tucking the double starred ID card into a bloody pocket. She disliked the Bombshell immensely for willingly playing these games. Why would anyone want to work for such brutal masters? Only the heartless were loyal to the Network. Candice suspected the Bombshell would fit the job. *I need to kill her just to save the lives she’ll take during her reign*.

**3**

“Next, we have Candice Marie Pruett, a brutal changeling from Ohio whose family fills their credits by bounty hunting for the Network, as well as for independent clients. Her antics last night at the opening ceremony definitely stirred up those lonely bachelors. Tell us, sweetheart, why the stunt? Are babies so important to you?”

The reporter was a snarky little twit with sarcastic green eyes. Candice smiled coolly, returning the sentiment. “Not really, no. You understand right, after being denied a breeding pass because of your lack of height?”

The reporter flushed.

Candice waited. She’d just made a bitter enemy with her perfect guess. Without a breeding pass, the only way to get a male was to steal one. The reporter had obviously chosen to keep her career and forgo a family. The reporters were supposed to be unshakable, but Candice had never witnessed anyone try to rattle their nerves. She was determined to prove them all liars and stooges. This game would be played on as many of her terms as she could get away with.

“Moving on…umm, your ratings went through the roof, up to number three, and there’s a picture of your rear on every morning paper. How does that make you feel?”

Prepared for the attack–it wasn’t so much an interview as a stabbing for weaknesses–Candice shrugged. “Loved.” She smirked when the reporter made a curt motion for the cue card change.

“Um... What about the woman you brutally killed? Even though it was before the official start of the episode, do you think it was fair of the council to draft the Diva as a replacement contestant?”

“It was great. I came for the fights.” Candice leaned in. “You wouldn’t wanna have a go, would you?”

The reporter flinched out of reach as if Candice had slapped her perfectly made up face.

Candice chuckled. “Guess not.”

“Back to you, Dana.” The reporter recovered quicker this time, but the shaking of her toga gave her away to Candice and the watching world.

The reporter exited the lavish set the second the light went to red, not sparing Candice another glance or word.

Candice doubted that reporter would be the one to interview her after she won the next match. Not then, and probably not even after she’d won it all. She was still smirking as she headed for her next fight. The Network reporters were indeed shakable. It meant their bosses probably were too. Everything she’d seen and heard so far implied treachery beyond belief and more lies than she would be able to count.

**4**

“Cage match two!”

Candice was impassive to her opponent’s hissed threats as they met at the dividing bar in the center.

As the girl came through the fenced area, she had performed an impressive set of crowd pleasing kicks and flips that revealed where she was unprotected. That misshapen nose and crooked chin said the Karate Teen’s training to get this far hadn’t been easy; she took it seriously. Candice expected to take a hit or two, but no more. *She is in the way of what I came here for. She will move!*

Candice took the Karate Teen off guard from the ring of the bell, twisting as if to grab the mercy rope above them. The girl was in the air for a nasty kick when Candice spun around, clawed hands reaching out.

Karate Teen struggled against the iron grip Candice took on her throat and thigh, but Candice slammed her down on a bent knee as hard as she could.

*Crack!*

The girl went limp, head lolling.

Candice let the body slide to the mat as she stood.

“Match to Pruett!”

The rage was a red haze over her sight, wanting more. Candice growled in fury as she saw the menacing blonde in the balcony again. *She* would be a real fight… “More!”

Candice hadn’t meant to offer a challenge, but she roared in anger when the Bombshell walked away. Her disinterested attitude was enraging.

Candice struggled to control it, to keep from flipping in front of the whole world. When she glanced down, the dead teen’s profile blurred, features becoming her own.

*“You killed me!”* The Candice ghost smiled. *“Thank you.”*

“My honor!” Candice responded hotly. Emotions overwhelmed her. The cheering was so loud! Her skull thumped painfully as she grabbed her ID and shoved her way into the quiet of the hall. She escaped the noise and the bloodlust of the crowd, but not the guilt. Candice had prepared for everything–the death attempts, the schedule meant to weaken, to distract. She had even hardened herself enough to ignore *him*. She hadn’t counted on shame.

Candice’s guards gave her space. Perhaps they understood, but it was unlikely. She didn’t feel bad for killing. She felt bad for *enjoying* it so much, for being so good at it.

Candice went to her couch and tried to sleep. It was the only time she got a break from the pain and anger, and she needed that right now or she would snap and end all her grand plans right as they’d started.

In her dreams, the real world didn’t exist. Nuclear war hadn’t happened. Men hadn’t been enslaved for their own protection. There hadn’t been centuries of fighting for control of them or for survival of the disease ravaging their population. In her dreams, there was no shortage of mates. There was no need for a global list women were placed on at birth to win a mate from the lottery, and certainly no cause for Network programs where baby hungry women fought to the death. She had always known which way she would go, but Candice still longed for an end to it all.

Her dreams flashed through deadly lessons and skills being perfected until they were razor sharp, shadowed by a completeness she hadn’t appreciated until it was gone and replaced by this...this *hunger*.

*“I will come for you!”*

*He trembled, only a boy (my boy!) at his parent’s mercy. My grip tightened. He was being sold. I couldn’t stop it.*

*Daniel was pale, slender from not getting enough to eat, and his weak arms and legs weren’t shaped quite right. It was the reason his family had kept him beyond the usual age of eight and the reason we’d had these years together. Now, they were over. I was about to be desolate.* *“I will find you!”*

*Daniel’s blue eyes were full of panic I couldn’t ease.*

*“You promise?”*

*I pressed my lips to his, tasting my new fury, his tears. “On my life, Daniel!”*

Candice jerked upright on the buggy couch.

Daniel had been taken a long time ago, a childhood friend and companion sold into slavery. Now she was here, in the very game for his papers. He would be hers in a week, if she was strong enough, if she could win. Everything that might come later hinged on Daniel being returned to her side. *Without him, I’m not whole.*

**5**

**The Network**

“Why didn’t you tell the council a Pruett was in the lineup?”

The two members were alone, with the microphones off. They had observed the last match together while the most nervous member of the council had gathered the courage to speak.

“I assumed they would read the sheets, like I do.” Juli didn’t like being questioned, but patience was required right now.

“What if she wins?” Terry lingered by the glass windows. “The others sent me to find out.”

“Tell them plans are in place.”

“I hope they’re good.” Terry gestured. “Because *she* is.”

Juli huffed dryly, also observing the outside crowd through the windows. “She’s a Pruett. Did you expect less?”

“Yes, frankly, I did.”

There was silence for a minute as they studied the chaos on the screens. Two sisters, rebel sympathizers, were being burned alive in front of the Justice building. The noise outside the dome was almost as loud as that of the crowd still celebrating the last match. Death, in person or on the screens, was captivating to changelings. The council had been using it since they’d taken control.

Terry pushed. “The others want answers. I have to tell them something. No one likes her being here.”

“Tell the Bombshell to hire help if it eases their panic.”

“We need Rankin. The Bombshell isn’t good enough for this one.”

“Rankin is busy. But the reporters aren’t.”

“Those spineless scabs–”

“Are under our control, are they not?” Juli interrupted stonily, tiring of the questions. The rest of the council might interfere if they actually knew what those carefully laid plans were. They would only be told details as they needed to know them.

“Mostly.” Terry calmed. “I’ll dig into it. What about the rebels and the leadership meeting? The deadline from the UN? How can we get all of that to go our way?”

The boss gave a grin Candice would have recognized for the violent warning it held. “Plans are in place.”

Terry didn’t argue further, recognizing the line of patience at the repeated answer.

Juli remained at the windows, mind racing as the subordinate left. With the big meeting coming up, anything could happen. The east and west coast got together once every fifty years. The next generation of rulers was supposed to be chosen in two months, but the east had a surprise for her sisters in the west. Sharing control over this wild land was no longer an option.

“What did the boss say?” Riana fell in step as Terry left the meeting room. “Did you make it clear how upset the rest of us are?”

Terry kept walking, getting them out of earshot of the door. “Plans are in place.”

Riana snorted, but kept her voice to a low mutter. “That’s what we always hear.”

“Yeah.”

The women took the private elevator to the top level, where all ten members had large suites stocked with everything they could think of. The squeaky floors warned security of their arrival, keeping them quiet. These guards reported directly to the boss. No one spoke in front of them.

Riana led her lover into their apartment and flipped off the recording section of the security system. Now free to speak, she held out a comforting hand. “We have to make plans for our future.”

Terry let Riana embrace her, knowing they needed to whisper. It was possible Juli was watching them on the cameras. Those couldn’t be shut off.

“We need to hire someone.”

Riana tensed against Terry’s perfectly coiled hair. “It’s time?”

“I believe so. It’ll take months to set up.”

“Do you want me to handle it?”

Terry shook her head, letting go. “I want you to behave and follow the rules.”

Riana smiled submissively, body lighting up. “Can I offer you a service?”

Terry chuckled. She began unbuttoning her robe. “Make it quick. I want to be in the control room before our evening updates on the power meeting.”

Riana dropped to her knees and moved closer over the plush blue carpet. “Have you ever been to one?”

“I provided security there, before I began fighting for a higher place. It’s a month of non-stop booze, slaves, and food. I must have gained twenty pounds.”

“Well, you sure look good now.” Riana got to work.

Terry leaned against the glittery wall, enjoying the attention, but her mind was in other places. She needed to find someone more ruthless than their boss, but the only name coming to mind was Pruett. Anyone else would die in the attempt or give them up upon capture. The Pruetts were legendary for getting a job done, but more importantly, they could be hired anonymously. All it took was a token Terry didn’t have. Pruetts gave a favor for a favor, but Terry didn’t possess anything they needed. She would have to find a way to push Candice’s family into a corner without her boss knowing.

“Easy…careful…” Her claws shot out, digging into Riana’s shoulder as fire flew along her nerve endings. “Stay low… Go slow…”

Riana was used to Terry using their physical moments for planning. She didn’t mind. Terry had gotten them this far. Riana couldn’t imagine trusting anyone as much. They were soulmates.

# Chapter Four

**The Games We Play**

**1**

**C**andice’s next interview was at dawn on day two, with a man this time. He was one of the rare former prizes who had earned good favor with their rulers and been given the honor of being a reporter. Candice had observed a few of them during her trips to New Network City and thought their gentle clothing and painted faces made them too feminine to draw the fire of changelings.

“So tell us, Candice. What’s it like to know you may be dead before the dawn?”

His tenor immediately woke the flames. Clearly, she’d been wrong to think him safe.

“Thrilling.” Candice leaned forward, curious as to what his reaction would be. “How about you?”

“Me?” the man asked, confused.

Candice sniffed the air, vision phasing to pink. “How does it feel to know I can spill your blood before they can save you?” She put a hand out…

He scrambled from the chair so fast that he tripped and went sprawling at her feet.

His big shoulders flexed as he shoved himself up.

Candice let her fingers trail along his arm as she followed him. He was bigger, stronger, but he froze under her touch, trembling in fear.

Need crackled.

The audience held their breath as she leaned in and the sentries rushed their way.

“You smell like chocolate.” Candice flashed red orbs she had to pull in before she did lose control. “I *like* chocolate.”

He paled more under the makeup, but he knew not to run. If he had, she might have really snapped. He did smell good.

Candice stepped away and gave him a sharp gesture he couldn’t mistake. *Get lost!*

He was gone a second later.

She rotated toward the cameras in the high corner. “When do we fight?”

The audience roared.

She’d gone through their supposedly indifferent reporters so far and enjoyed it. She walked fearlessly into the crowd as a small cheer rang out.

Candice grinned at them.

They laughed…then retreated.

She went toward the other end of the Block, where the actual view was distant but made vivid by giant screens set into the walls. There were Defenders scattered over the stands, and in the corners, medico slaves who used to be bachelors. The males had been returned by their owners or had hurt a woman. Killing a male was illegal now, even for the Network, so they’d come up with the solution of making them doctors–after removing the section of their bodies that made them hunted. They also took the tongues of some or cut their ankles so they couldn’t try to escape again. The Network denied such brutal tactics, but the pale man in front of Candice *limped* toward a hand calling for attention.

She saw the heavy-duty suture kit on his hip, then the protective gloves, and wondered which of the animal games this shift had come from. Their boots were dotted in crimson. The sight of a brown feather clinging to one of their pant legs gave her the answer. They’d been in Vulture Run. Another weekly game, the winding path through a vulture nursery was no easy task, especially when there were only bare hands to survive on. The prize for making it the full length was a pardon for whatever crime the person had committed. The game was popular because there had only been a dozen winners in a century. Twelve, out of thousands.

Candice scanned the stage, but stayed alert. She had no protection while viewing the matches, making an ambush likely.

Candice had no sooner settled onto a hard seat than another blade slid around her throat.

Breaking the wrist as she had last night, Candice flung her attacker over the benches in front of them, following with a neat roll that had her assailant sprawling and Candice on her feet.

“We have a fight in the stands! It’s that Pruett again!”

Made strong by trekking the apocalyptic wilderness for criminals, her thick leg delivered a kick hard enough to break ribs as her boot connected. Candice quickly slammed her other foot down onto the broken wrist, crushing it.

“Aahh!”

The knife went sliding across the floor.

Candice leaned down to deliver the deathblow, but she had to dodge a flying shard meant to sink into her neck. *She has a partner!*

Candice spun again, snatching the smaller woman into a tight grip that didn’t ease when she sagged, unconscious in Candice’s thick arms.

“Stop! Don’t!” an older female, the girl’s mother, pleaded.

Candice answered the only way she could. She broke the girl’s neck and let the body fall to the benches.

“No!” the mother shrieked in agony, the sound piercing.

She and Candice threw their knives at the same time.

A blade sank deep into Candice’s shoulder, sending an unwelcome rush of heat into her arm as blood ran down.

Candice’s blade stuck in her attacker’s throat.

Candice didn’t stare at the stunned face as the mother fell. Nor did she pull the knife from her arm, choosing instead to stride to an unstained bench and sit down.

A wary medico came her way.

In the corner, Candice heard the scanner whirling out a fourth star on her ID card.

She grinned.

Those watching cheered and kept their distance. When she finally left for her next match, they were relieved.

**2**

“Cage Match Three!”

The round was called as Candice came through the gate. She held herself under tight control as she evaluated the opponent. Muscles rippled like a cat as the dark-skinned woman flexed for the crowd. Candice placed her as the contestant from the jungles of southern Georgia. On a belt around the woman’s thick waist was a studded club. Candice also noted the pointed edge of her boot, which probably contained a blade.

The bar slid down.

Candice didn’t react as the jungle woman drew the spiked club and stalked toward her. Candice preferred hands-on killing. She had always been good at hiding her emotions, her reactions, until the last possible second. The thick club was inches from her skull before Candice ducked and slammed her hardened fist into the woman’s abdomen with a vicious upward twist that snapped something inside.

Georgia grunted, spiked club falling from her grip and into Candice’s eager fingers.

She hit Georgia with it, caving in her skull.

Blood and gore splashed from the spikes as Candice ripped the club free, sending her into the rage she couldn’t always control. Candice began to swing repeatedly.

“Match to Pruett!”

Snapped from her lust, Candice was prepared for both the rush of fury and the guilt this time as the crowd went wild. She grinned, giving the audience what they’d begun to look for.

Candice was almost halfway through the contestants now. The luck of the draw had been with her. Now, the public would vote on the next matches, or maybe the Network would rig them. From Candice’s gory view, it was hard to tell the difference.

“Now, our Luck of the Draw winner will take a tour of the prizes!”

Deafening screams emanated from the speakers as the watching world waited for Candice to reach the male apartments. Glaring flat black and still covered in gore, she opened the door.

The Den Mother on duty stared in concern.

Candice sneered at her beehive of blue hair as the door shut, leaving the reporters to watch the screens like everyone else. They weren’t allowed in. Their rulers didn’t want the men to have a voice, and especially not one in the media.

“You have one hour.”

Wearing the usual uniform, the tall, blue bun of hair gave the Den Mother an alien appearance. Candice could tell the live in guard cared for her charges from the way she hovered, but it obviously wasn’t enough to keep them from being hurt. The first cell Candice passed held two bloody prizes who refused to look at her for fear of triggering a new attack. Candice wondered how much the Den Mother had taken to rent them. It happened at every game, but that didn’t mean the sight of it wasn’t souring Candice against the Network even more. She glared at the lady.

“Sampling is allowed.” The Den Mother’s voice was toneless.

The bachelor cells were nice, luxurious even, but still cells, and without chemical enhancers, the group of slaves barely noticed Candice. This was her tour of the prizes. She was also free to sample them if she desired, but Candice was repulsed. *I’ve run over happier animals on the road.*

Daniel was in the fourth cell.

Candice couldn’t prevent the pause in her step when she reached him. Curled onto his side, that thin profile was one she’d envisioned every night for years. *My boy!*

It was hard to move on, but she did. The other bachelors, she couldn’t remember much about afterward. She paused at a couple of other cells for appearance, hoping she hadn’t marked her mate for kidnapping or worse. Taking something the favorite contestant loved was a common tactic. Her mother and Angelica would be shielding her father against it.

Candice marched toward the exit wearing the same black glare she’d entered with. They wouldn’t know for sure which one she wanted. She had told herself repeatedly that her current lover bore no resemblance to Daniel, that she hadn’t chosen along that line. Now, Candice was forced to admit it wasn’t true. Their similarities were in the golden flashes scattered around the tips of Baker’s short, black hair and in the exact same curve of their jaw. Had she studied her lover in profile and pretended it was Daniel? Candice didn’t want to think herself capable of that cruelty, but she couldn’t be positive. After all, she was here, playing one of the Network’s bloodiest games. She’d told the reporter she came for the fights, and that was the impression she sent to those watching, but it hurt her to leave Daniel in that cell. It also sent relief into her heart to confirm that he was indeed one of the prizes. She wasn’t killing innocent women for nothing. *I’m doing it to give everyone else a possible future.*

**3**

Daniel remembered to breathe once the Pruett was gone, but he knew he was on her list. He was terrified.

Before she’d arrived, Daniel had been listening to the muffled cries of the rented males in the next cell, sorry for them, but grateful it wasn’t him begging to be spared. Even free men, the rare few, were treated this way, earning their living in the brothels or breeding programs.

*Freedom*. Daniel shuddered. He wanted no part of it. He desired a loving owner to take him away from here, away from Rankin. Using her authority as Head Defender, Rankin tormented the other bachelors, too, but she was Daniel’s nightmare. He was dreading tonight, when she would return from her latest mission in the west. The best future he could hope for was to be won and removed from her reach.

*But not by that one!* Daniel had observed Candice during her first match and then hurried to his cot in fear. That one was not a bit loving. She was nothing like the girl he sometimes dreamed about. It used to be every night, but for the last year, it had come whenever he was in fear of Rankin’s visit. Well trained, Daniel hoped to use his skills on a female who was gentle. He had little hope that it wouldn’t be a changeling–who else could survive this world? But he wished for a bit of compassion. Daniel’s reflections led him back to Candice, to the woman who had paused at his cell. She terrified him with her very presence. He would get no sympathy from her. He knew it and couldn’t stop trembling.

Daniel had been in this complex for a long time. He didn’t remember his life before. He’d been told a fever erased his memory. He’d had to accept it. Even when he kept having the dreams of a childhood friend, he had believed the story. Now, though, he had begun to wonder. Over the years, Rankin had let too much slip. Daniel suspected there was more to his being here. He wasn’t trained for the outside world–something no one knew. His education was in sensuality and that added another layer of worry. If he were taken home by someone, she would have to train him…except, being here was just for show. The Network didn’t want him free and Daniel believed he knew why. It was because of his kids. He hadn’t learned what the scientists discovered, and he had never been allowed contact with his two children, but he’d been pulled from both the renting and the breeding program right after they were born. For the fourteen months since then, he’d been left alone except for Rankin.

Daniel shuddered again. At some point, Rankin would push him too far. She’d broken him in upon arriving at the complex. He had a full memory of her and there was no one he hated more. To be free of her hold was a dream that ran second only to being allowed information on his children. Behind those two, the anguish riding him the hardest was the need to know how he’d come to be here. *Didn’t anyone ever love me?*

“The Pruett wants you.” Jason came in and sat on the cot next to Daniel. Also a prize, Jason had the next cell over–on Rankin’s orders. He was her favorite. “She can get you to the rebels.”

Daniel answered quickly. “It’s not my war. I’m not trained to fight.”

Jason scowled. “You’re a man. It is your fight. If we can’t warn Baker that the Network knows his safe zone location, none of us will ever be free.”

Daniel thought of Rankin overhearing them; the fear rose. “I’m a twenty-year-old bachelor with excellent relief skills and no memory of any life before being sold.” He repeated the litany passionately. “Calm and unaggressive, I have been trained to be the perfect, harmless mate, and now hope for a loving owner to take me home.”

“Then leave the Pruett for someone else!” Jason insisted angrily. “She doesn’t know love. None of them do. They’re killers. The rebels need them more than you do.” He bent down and shook Daniel by his shirt. “What’s wrong with you?!”

Daniel wrenched out of his hold, heart aching. “I watched those women and I felt afraid. I wanted to be back in these drafty cells, Jason. I can’t be a hero. I’m a coward.”

Jason left in disgust.

Daniel got up as his ankle chain unlocked. He lurked by the door of his cell in fear and confusion.

A minute later, the gate opened again and his nightmare strode through.

Rankin laughed when she saw him, instantly thinking he was waiting for her. She fingered the scar she’d received upon rounding him up. The poison thorn trees were weak, like their owners, but they’d left a mark.

Ignoring the protesting Den Mother, Rankin stripped her weapons, eyes phasing into red. “I missed you, too!”

Daniel cringed pathetically into the corner of his cell as Rankin laughed again and grabbed a syringe from the tray.

**4**

“He won’t do it.” Jason joined the other bachelors in the narrow bath, ignoring the smells of nightly bodily functions. “He’s terrified.”

With the water and fans running, they could whisper without being overheard by the microphones. They just had to appear as though they were doing other things so the Network didn’t believe they were colluding. Jason snorted mentally. That was exactly how it was phrased in their training–colluding. *As if we’re the threat!*

Jason pushed away his ugly thoughts, aware of the six men waiting for his decision as they brushed their teeth and applied lotions to old scars so the game show makeup would go on smoother. Their masters insisted all men look their best in public and on camera.

A thin cry of pain from the cells caused the mood to intensify. Another bachelor was being abused. The sound was one they either heard, or made, every day of their lives in this complex.

The men glanced at Jason and each other in misery and anger that was revealed by tight grips on brushes and loudly snapped caps on skin cream tubes.

“We have to do something!”

“We will.”

“Jason will think of something.”

Their faith was heartening and stressful at the same time. Jason had been chosen as their leader shortly after he’d been witnessed fighting Rankin instead of submitting. He’d lost, of course, and learned to never do it again, but the story had spread among her victims and followed him for years. Rankin was the most hated Defender the Network employed. All men were terrified of her, so anyone who resisted her was a hero.

Jason turned on the faucet to start his nightly list, mentally infuriated by the constant reminders of their status as slaves. The bath walls were covered in colorful declarations of ownership, turning the entire area into a physical manifesto of horror for those living in it.

*Males are* ***no****t permitted to loiter in washrooms.*

*Males must perform ALL daily hygiene functions or loss of meals will be implemented.*

*No* ***singing*** *around* ***women****!*

*Men are enslaved for their protection. Owners* ***are******safety****. Love and obey without question.*

Jason stopped reading. He had them memorized, as did all bachelors. Breaking those rules held stiff penalties no one wanted to pay, but what they were doing right now–whispering about helping the rebel males–was punishable by death. The Network told the world they didn’t kill males, but the men here all knew bachelors who had disappeared for refusing to obey. With no public oversight, it was easy for their owners to accomplish, but Jason doubted those men had been killed. He believed they had been put into public service on the train.

Train males had it worse than breeders or bachelors. Thanks to Rankin’s obsession with him, Jason knew more about the real world than the other males here did. Even if they managed a miracle and escaped the dome, they still didn’t stand a chance of getting to the safe zone, let alone to arrive in time to warn Baker. They’d agreed to trick a player into taking them so they would have protection, but Jason remembered his life outside this complex. Even legally owned males were in constant danger. They didn’t need just any escort. They needed someone everyone else feared. “We’ll try again after Rankin finishes her visit with Daniel. He might agree by the time she’s done.”

The others paled as a harsh scream echoed overtop their noises.

Visible shudders went through the men. All of them, including Jason, were glad they hadn’t been picked to welcome her home. Those were the worst times to service the head Defender.

“What about the other Pruett? The younger one?”

Jason shrugged at the muttered question. “Maybe. One of us will have to sneak out and run into her.”

“You could do it.” The man next to him stared at Jason’s scars. “Say you need a medical visit.”

Jason considered it. The acid wounds on his legs were still fresh enough to hurt when he bent down. A refill on the pain medications would be good and he might get lucky and be able to slip off while the tech retrieved the pills. “I’ll need a cover for why I left sick bay.”

Daniel’s screams grew louder.

Jason sighed. “Never mind. I’ve got it.”

The others realized he would use Rankin as his excuse, but they didn’t protest even though it meant he would have to service her. The Network knew where the big rebel hideout was located. They had to warn the men there or their only chance to end slavery would die in the Borderlands without any of them ever firing a shot against the enemy they all loathed.

**5**

Not scheduled for anything until the vote results came in the morning, Candice reluctantly chose to spend some time with Angelica and her parents.

Thanks to her cousin, Candice had no trouble detecting their apartment. She pulled the candy cane down with a tolerant sigh. If Angelica’s parents weren’t more careful, she’d have them here in a year or two. Eighteen months younger, Angelica had a fire, an edge burning, that even Candice didn’t. She doubted her little cousin would rent a male when she blew her top. Angelica would come here and hunt her own.

Her parents both jumped as Candice entered the studio. Her guards, after sweeping the three people waiting, leaned against the walls outside.

Bruce and Mary wore their best cloaks and boots, with nothing else showing. Candice admired their aloofness as they waited for her to speak. The traditional braids, one for each year of adulthood, hung in shiny black waves around her mother’s scarred profile, providing a halo-like glow. The gouges on her cheeks, by comparison, should have been on a demon’s face and Candice had put them there.

Angelica smirked from the couch in front of the big screen, telling Candice nothing had changed for her despite the harshness of the fighting so far. Candice appreciated it. Angelica’s parents and older sister were on a call in the Borderlands or they would have been here, too. That side of the Pruett family was even harder than this one.

“Hey, Candy.”

Angelica was the only one brave enough to call her that, but even she was careful about it. Angelica was also a changeling. She understood the endless urge to spill blood. It made women dangerous, changing them into people even their families didn’t know.

Due to the lack of male births, the female body craved a mate. It was being driven to continue the species. There was no other way to stop the rages, the awful hatred of those who’d caused future generations to be so cursed. It came with puberty and left with death. The years between were agony. To be called by the name you had used before the disease hit was to be reminded of relief, of wonderful times when there was no burning under the skin and no blood behind your eyes. It hurt, and changelings often lashed out violently at the sound of it. It had the same effect on Candice as the rest, but she also had a stronger reason to loathe the nickname. It never failed to remind her of what had been stolen.

“Angel.” She returned the jab.

Angelica frowned, clenching her fingers into tight fists that, with her short, black spikes, made her appear capable of more than human concerns–as did Candice. Nearly all families resembled each other now. Genetics were limited, making slaves with blond or red hair worth more. They were often prizes in these games. *Like Daniel.*

“It went well. The crowd likes you.”

Candice raised a brow. “You think?”

Angelica was a bit shorter than her cousin, but she was a lot lighter. Candice planned to strengthen Angelica’s body. If she meant to enter the Games, she would need more weight to throw around. Candice had waited the extra time for Daniel to be a part of the prizes, but her cousin wouldn’t need to.

“Sure.” Angelica ignored the sarcasm. “It didn’t hurt that you have a great ass.”

Candice laughed, but her father turned a harsh glare on the teenagers.

He was ignored.

“I was nervous before, but you’ve got a solid chance.”

Bruce grew purple from wanting to silence her, but he held it in, knowing that would make Candice unhappy. She liked it when Angelica expressed herself openly. No one else would. Even her parents, during the row about her signing up, had been careful. *Because I’ve changed*.

“Mom. Dad.” She had known they would come, but they hadn’t been confident of her welcome, she could tell. Her mother had obviously witnessed the performances on the wall screen. She hovered in the kitchen area, leery. Her blue cloak trembled delicately as she observed her daughter’s every move.

Her father was braver, forcing himself to give the customary hug. Candice stood still, allowing it so her mother would know it was okay to be so close.

When Mary finally worked up the courage to touch Candice with light, trembling fingers on her wrist, Candice remembered then, she did *love* her mother…

Candice smiled, patted the hand with her own.

Mary gave a hesitant smile in return as Candice finished the contemplation.

*…sometimes*. She was always furious anyway, but to see Mary daily, this sparkless vision of her own future, was something Candice vehemently denied.

“It’s not too late to–” Mary stopped as Candice tensed.

Candice turned away before her rage could frighten her mother further. She had only lost control once, but Mary had never forgotten it. “When the complex gates sealed shut, withdrawing ceased to be an option. You know that better than most, since this is where my father came from!”

Everyone flinched at the shout.

An awkward silence fell.

Candice loathed her mother’s weakness, partly because she envied the happiness, the peace. Mary was still the scarred, muscular parent Candice had been in awe of as a young child, and those were still her black eyes, but the rest of those features–the smiles, the kindness–belonged to a stranger. Mary had still been burning while Candice grew up and it had been ugly. Now that she had her own fire, Candice could have forgiven, but she had expected her mother to help save Daniel. That was the real source of their problems, of Candice’s hatred.

“What’s next?” Angelica broke the tension.

Candice waved at the silent screen. One of her competitors, wearing a traditional martial arts uniform, was being interviewed. “More.”

“The…cage again.”

Her mother’s voice shrank into itself. It was as if all the fear and anxiety Candice should have been suffering was her mother’s burden to carry. Mary had been amazing on the computers, but once again, she was now spineless. Candice sighed, not calm, but far from panicked. “I should go.”

Mary nodded at once, lips quivering from restraining more words that would anger her daughter.

Candice scanned her father’s naturally pale face. “You’ll have to be on guard. There may be attacks.”

“I know firsthand what you’ve sentenced us to!”

His harsh words were shocking, but before Candice could consider a reply, his tenor became urgent with worry.

“Be careful!”

He was across the room a second later, leaving Candice a bit stunned at his display of emotions, but not so much that she didn’t see the calculating glowers following as they stepped into the hall. The sharks were already circling. Her family wouldn’t have any protection, not here or at home, until she made it to the next round.

The entrance across from her parent’s apartment was dark, ominous. Candice could feel sharp attention on both her and Angelica. Candice did what any loving Pruett family member would have. She motioned Angelica into the hall to stand watch and firmly shut the door. Angelica was more lethal than she appeared. She should be. They had been training together before Angelica had even been sturdy enough to hold a rail. Now, she was known for a beautiful two-for-one shot and an aggressive fighting style that was lethal. Her little cousin would follow her example, Candice was positive. The Network also had something Angelica needed more than her life and this was the only place to get it. For both of them, dying was nothing compared to that knowledge.

# Chapter Five

**Deadly Living**

**1**

**C**andice was happy to find darkness under the door to her flat as she arrived. She’d left the light *on* for this reason. Someone was inside.

Candice swung the door open and ducked, rolling in. She kicked the door shut, throwing the room back into darkness as something flew over. Her vision went to pink as she adjusted and reacted.

*Plink!*

Candice registered the suppressed shot in surprise as it hit the concrete wall. Guns were one of the few weapons contestants were forbidden to use. Candice hadn’t brought hers. Improvising, she snatched the first thing her fingers landed on, tossing the object to the right to draw fire. Then she lunged at the flash point.

The next shot missed by inches as Candice slammed into a heavy body and found a throat with her clawed hands. The gun rotated against her chest.

Candice jerked the assassin over and into the stove, knocking dishes to the floor. She instinctively grabbed one of the heavy pots as the woman sprang up, eyes glowing bright red.

Lunging, Candice swung the pot against her skull, causing the assassin to drop to the floor with an awful moan that said the fight was over. Instead of retreating, Candice used the attack for an outlet and hammered the body mercilessly with the pot she’d used to make her meal. She didn’t stop even when the door was finally kicked open and light flooded the bloody scene.

“Halt there!”

Candice hammered the corpse a few more times.

“Hands up!”

Candice grunted, dropping the gory pot onto the body. “Send it to my parents.”

The sentries recognized Candice under the blood. Behind them, two lucky reporters walking by shoved into the entrance to snap pictures.

“Hey, Candice! Are you worried about your family being kidnapped now that they’re here?”

“Hey, Candy!”

Pain snapped part of Candice’s control. “Don’t do that! You only get one warning.”

A smirking guard slammed the door shut as the assassin’s blood pooled thickly at her feet.

The dead woman was another of the contestants who hadn’t wanted to face Candice in the ring, but she’d failed to understand that players had rules to follow in the cage. Out here, Candice was guided by one instinct–survival–and she excelled at it.

The next attempt to eliminate her came a few hours later as Candice slept–through the vents and making so much noise that she had no choice but to let the guards in. It counted if a player died in an assassination attempt, but if they were caught doing it in an illegal area, a replacement was drafted. Not wanting to give the impression they were shirking their duty, or maybe not paid off this time, the sentries handled the woman. Candice would rather they had let her kill the assassin so she would have been one fight closer to Daniel’s freedom, but she said nothing as they clubbed the woman unconscious and dragged her body down the hall. They were all on the Network’s dime here and Candice was painfully aware of what was being held over her head. She could only hope that they weren’t.

**2**

Candice’s early morning nerves tightened another notch as the voting percentage on the screen went up for the Ex-Defender and the Bombshell, but not for herself. The crowd had had enough of her. They wanted someone different spilling blood, but Candice already hated the wait.

“We’re about to get the results of your votes, folks, and good morning to you!” the announcer blared. “It’s warm here in New Network City, almost 73° to start spring off right. And our first name for match one is…the Korean Killer!”

Candice’s nerves loosened a bit. The Korean would be a decent fight.

“She’ll be facing Mutt Girl!”

Candice sighed, stepping over hastily mopped floors to grab a quick meal while she waited to hear the second match. The first one would be held a couple hours from now, but the second wouldn’t be until this evening. It was scheduled to please the working crowds who gathered around their screens to watch while they ate dinner.

“And for the second match…the Ex-Defender!”

Candice’s nerves went back to taut. If she wasn’t chosen, she had no idea what she would do. She really wouldn’t mind a crack at the Defender when she was in this rough mood. It would make the fight quicker, easier.

“The challenger is…that bounty hunting Pruett!”

Candice grunted in relief. She didn’t mind being a tool to get rid of the former employee. It was one of the benefits.

“This should be a highlight fight, folks. Known for being merciless, both of these second match females are extremely good at what they do. Neither of them has indicated a preference among the bachelors, but both have had their tour, as I’m sure you know.”

Trying not get upset at the unfairness of it–the Defender hadn’t won a match yet and shouldn’t have been given a tour–Candice wondered briefly if the woman had noticed Daniel and now wanted him, too. That concern sealed the deal for Candice. *The Ex-Defender isn’t going to walk out of that cage. They’ll drag her body out, maybe in pieces.*

**3**

Candice didn’t want to observe the match between Mutt Girl and the Korean Killer. She already knew the ugly chick wasn’t coming out of the cage alive. Too wound up to sleep or eat like she should have been doing, Candice wandered the halls that she had access to and found herself on the aquatic floor. All of these games involved surviving in water. She chose the one labeled with a shark fin and entered.

The stands for this game were empty. Candice understood why as soon as she saw the bloody waves. A survivor wasn’t coming from that water, merely parts of a body. The churning red liquid rose up to reveal a fin. Large and black tipped, those jagged edges told Candice this was an apocalypse shark. She stifled a shudder. The toxic chemicals on land were mostly gone now, except in isolated places. They’d rinsed from the land and gone into the oceans to create awful mutations.

Candice studied the shark as it sped toward a floating chunk of debris with laser-like movements, noting how the fin operated as a rudder to allow sharp turns that the dangerous predators hadn’t been capable of before. Apocalypse sharks were stronger, bigger, and liked the taste of people. The days of swimming in open water were long over.

Candice exited as the cleaning crew came in carrying a steel chain and a long steel bar with a large needle attached to the end. Once they knocked the shark out, it would be guided along a watery tunnel under this floor and put back into the aquarium.

Curious as to the other specimens, Candice strode to the attraction that drew people twice a year for birthing displays. Unlike humans and land animals, there was no shortage of males in the water populations. The oceans and rivers had flourished with aquatic life and most of it was bloodthirsty.

The aquarium was off limits to the public except for the birthing weeks, giving Candice the pavilion to herself. Designed in 3’x3’ cubes that magnified the view, each partitioned pane held something that both fascinated and repulsed her.

The first was a seahorse pen. Candice watched the tiny lifeforms tear apart a fallen sprite with teeth half the size of their curved skulls. The water turned red.

She went to the next window. Inside were a dozen crabs, the big kind with long claws and remorseless features. They were trundling on the bottom, no longer able to come out of the water. To make up for it, their pinchers now contained lethal poison that delivered a type of wasting sickness. One of their victims, a carp with gills over a flushed tail, was hovering in the corner. It shrank up as she watched.

Candice moved on.

Behind her, a door opened. This area wasn’t completely deserted. She could hear the occasional voice and step. She stayed alert as she peered into the third window.

*Squeak!*

Candice chuckled. The octopus had lunged forward and latched onto the glass. Big and yellow, it was like the pictures in schoolbooks, except it had ten extending arms searching for the prey it had sensed.

“They’re one of the few animals that can see through the distortion of the glass.” The Bombshell now stood a bit behind Candice.

Candice rotated to meet her opponent with eyes flashing to pink. It would be the only warning.

Kassandra held up a hand. “Wait.”

The hesitation to battle threw Candice off, giving the Bombshell a chance to speak.

“We’re much alike, you know?” She leaned against the wall so she wasn’t blocking the exit. “We both stand on the graves of others.”

“Those under my boots deserve to be there.” Candice was surprised that the woman wanted to talk.

“Ah, that infamous Pruett moral line. Have you crossed it here, whelp?” Kassandra asked. “Have you taken an innocent life yet?”

The question was unexpected. Candice flashed through her easy kills, but didn’t respond.

“See? You came to win and you’ve already shoved your family honor into the dirt. Don’t come at me from a tower. You’re down here now.”

“Why do you hate Pruetts?” Candice asked suddenly. “I don’t have you on the family list.”

“It’s not about your *family*, whelp. It’s you and your cousin. Neither of you should be here.”

“Why?” Candice wondered if other players had conversed this way before going on to shred each other like she and Kassandra would do if they met in the cage.

“Because it’ll get you both killed.”

Candice wanted to laugh, but the woman had the expression of someone set to give up valuable information. The bounty hunter remained impassive, waiting.

“The bounty on your cousin went to triple the norm two minutes after the vote came in with tonight’s matches. If you love her, make sure she’s protected.”

Candice stared for a moment. She couldn’t think of many reasons the Bombshell would warn her, except that it would prove Angelica was her weakness. Because she’d attacked her mother as a child, everyone assumed Mary wasn’t valued, and her father was just a slave. Candice’s little cousin was the prime target.

Candice walked through the exit without responding. Angelica was in trouble. That was a priority.

The Bombshell watched Candice leave.

A sense of gloating came, but all Candice could do was make sure her steps weren’t hurried. The more she appeared to care, the higher the odds would go on her enemies killing Angelica to hurt her. Candice did wonder at the Bombshell’s motives, though. If Kassandra believed she would get the head Defender job by being generous or compassionate, or even sly, she was in for a shock. Their rulers didn’t play that way.

Neither did Pruetts.

It took her a minute to reach the rented studios. The staff paled and hurried away as she passed, recognizing her. They were carrying two slender body bags, both too tall to be any of her family. Candice grinned. Pruetts were survivors–all of them.

The flat was trashed.

“It was amazing. She sent two of ‘em out in bags!”

Her father’s excitement was unexpected as she entered. Candice gaped in surprise.

Angelica grinned. “You missed the fun.”

“Who handled it?” Candice assumed the assassins had broken down the door to get in.

Angelica shot an awkward glance at Mary. “I did.”

Candice sneered. “Figures.”

“She was so fast!” Bruce continued to gush over Angelica’s newly revealed skills.

Candice confirmed his unspoken question. “She can hunt with us now.” Angelica had already been doing light work on their crew for years, receiving a share they all donated from each run. If the Network had known, they would have all been arrested.

“Please...”

Mary’s distress pulled Bruce to her and drew a comforting hand on her cheek that made Candice’s heart clench with fresh grief and anger. *If the Ring had come for your mate, you would have fought back, mother!*

Angelica shrugged at the praise, studying the outside through velvet curtains as she calmed her rage. These rooms had windows with narrow iron bars, but the view of New Network City was blocked by hazy smog from the factory operations allowed to operate under the dome. The Network had a hand in about everything.

Angelica glanced at Candice before turning back to the window. “Good practice.”

Her mutter was too low for the parents. Candice quelled a remark of encouragement. Angelica didn’t have a childhood friend to rescue, but she did have something that had served other winners of these games well–the change. “You’ll add her gear?”

“Whatever your mother wants.” Bruce smiled happily. “It’ll be good to have four on the crew!”

Mary hissed. “One more word!”

Everyone turned to find her glowering at Bruce with pink irises. His excitement was winding her up.

Bruce dropped his chin in submission.

Candice shoved to her feet. “I have to go.”

She stopped at the egress and glanced back to see her mother lay a comforting hand on her father’s shoulder. He lovingly nuzzled the scarred fingers. As Mary sighed in contentment, her wild eyes returned to normal.

Next to them, Angelica clenched her fists and moved away from the barred window.

Candice knew exactly how the girl felt. She waved her guards into place outside the family apartment. They needed the protection.

The halls were crowded as Candice strode toward her new room. Incoming females were being set up for the next game, but she ignored their curious stares and fearful glares. *None of you are my enemy*, Candice reflected, *but the Network...*

**4**

Candice’s next interview was with a part-time guard who was trying to become a fulltime reporter. With those broken nails and shaven scalp gleaming in the neon lights, Candice thought she had the lady pegged.

Candice leaned forward as the camera flashed to green, catching them in what she hoped seemed like an intimate moment. “You smell good. Like honey and cherries, the ripe kind.” Her pitch was a caress. “Does the council know you rent yourself out on their dime?”

The reporter cringed in shock, her secret brutally exposed to the world.

Candice blew a kiss as the crowd laughed and murmured, and the reporter stormed from the stage without doing the interview. “Next?”

**5**

“Welcome to evening three of this episode! Which of these two bachelor battlers will be in the final round?”

Candice stepped into the cage with the Ex-Defender, letting the rage build. Unlike the others she had confronted, this fighter didn’t show off. The Ex-Defender stood calmly near the bar that was now sliding down.

When the Defender got set with the good stance of a lifelong fighter, Candice had a moment of unease that quickly faded. She had rage from years without her mate. It was more than enough. Candice grinned for her fans. The prizes in the guarded pen, she continued to ignore.

“Cage Match Five!”

The roaring jeers increased. “Kill the bitch! Kill the bitch!”

The Defender’s profile hardened into ugliness as the crowd displayed their dislike for her, their need to see her pay. At one time, she had been a favorite in this city.

Candice waited, not about to rush in and give her opponent the edge. She sort of owed this former guard a favor, but there was no sympathy evident as she stared at the woman’s hawk-like profile. “Baker says hello.”

Those who heard laughed at the tactic, but the Defender didn’t. She answered. “Tell him not to forget his promise. My son deserves freedom too.”

Candice stared stupidly as the bell rang and the woman lunged forward. The harsh blow to her forehead knocked her off her feet.

She smacked against the fencing as the Ex-Defender charged forward again and kicked her in the stomach.

Gasping, Candice also kicked, hoping the Defender would jump it. As she did and landed, Candice lunged upward to deliver a staggering punch to the guard’s throat. This one had to be taken down hard.

The Defender fought for air as Candice started to do it again, then dove forward swinging with sharp talons. She grabbed Candice’s arms to lift her off the mat.

Candice kicked again, nailing her opponent in the chest over her heart.

The Defender grunted in pain and let go.

Candice scrambled to her feet, sucking in a tight breath. The fighter had caught her off guard, but Candice was paying attention now. She couldn’t wait for the attack to come; it left her blind to those lightning quick blows. Neither could she waste her energy chasing what she had no hope of catching. Determined to locate a weakness, Candice dropped into her training style and began forcing the woman to retreat with blow after blow that didn’t land, but shoved her toward the fencing as she blocked. Candice was trying to get the Defender into what passed for a corner, but it was hard.

The Defender ducked a swing and delivered a hard hit to Candice’s ribs.

Hissing, Candice let the rage out, swinging faster.

The Defender caught her hits with heavy hands, bouncing them back to cause real pain that flipped Candice’s vision to dark pink.

She tried to jump over the woman for a rear attack and took another nasty punch to the ribs. She gasped in frustration.

Above the bloody cage, cameras zoomed in, capturing it all to be replayed for the council.

Stuck using dirty tactics, Candice cowered away from the next swing only to lunge up and nail the Defender in the chin with the top of her skull.

The guard staggered, blood pouring from her nose.

Candice went in for the kill while she could. Dazed herself, she blocked an automatic, defensive swing and sent the *changed* talons of her other hand in to rip out the Defender’s throat.

Crimson gushed over them both.

Candice jerked her claws free to stunned silence from the watching crowd.

The Defender’s mouth opened as she slid to her knees.

Candice focused on her with no remorse. “You underestimated me. That’s how it happened.”

“Match to Pruett!”

There was no controlling the crowd. They broke through the barriers to swarm the cage. Climbing over Candice, they screamed obscenities as troops zapped them in vain. The bloodlust had peaked. Many of them had bet their life savings on the Ex-Defender. Candice was stung repeatedly by the things they managed to hurl through the fencing.

Water hoses began blasting women off the cage and into the air, drenching her in the process. She struggled to remain standing.

Three full squads of Defenders burst into the arena to escort her out with brutal blows to anyone who got in their path.

Candice wore her ugly grin the entire time.

**6**

**The Network**

In the room at the top of the complex, the leader of the Network council studied one of the many monitors intently. On it, the Bombshell and a reporter with a gleaming scalp were in a secluded corner of an employee hallway under the main stage. The audio was being drowned out by the match results above them, but Juli knew what was being discussed.

When Candice found out her cousin had been kidnapped, it would either throw her off her game and cost both their lives, or it would kick in the infamous Pruett determination that made them so hard to beat. If that happened, the next phase of the plan could take place. Juli was ready for either outcome, unconcerned despite the time it would take to find another wayward Pruett family member to use. History was fuzzy for the council, as well as for the people, but they’d found enough evidence of Pruetts supporting male freedom after the post-apocalyptic law was enacted to believe the family had ways in to those dangerous males that other hunters didn’t.

The files had also suggested councils of the past had tolerated such behavior out of fear, but that was going to change. This current generation of wild Pruetts was smaller, making it the perfect time to eliminate them all–from the burnt-ups to the newborns. Plans were in place to make it happen. *If I can just keep all the wolves at bay for eight more weeks, nothing will stop me.*

Juli switched to a different screen showing a large military and civilian presence growing on the Canadian side of the wall. Built during the last two centuries, there were only three gates into this entire country. To get through, the Canadian military would have to bring in civil engineers to blow a hole, but it would constitute an act of war. The United Nations had been trying to broker a peaceful solution between Canada and New America for a while now.

“Damn rebels!” After hearing voices, an escaped male had thrown letters over the wall. A friendship had begun and information had slowly filtered, capturing the Canadian public’s attention. That had grown to include the United Nations, and now, they were insisting on inspections and proof that the Network was abiding by the new world laws concerning males. The council had delayed as long as they could, but the UN had recently given them a deadline of eight weeks for compliance. After that, they swore the inspectors were coming through, with the Canadian military. Such an invasion would topple the Network and the society they’d spent centuries and endless lives to build. “I’ll never let it happen. I’ll destroy us all first.”

**7**

“I can’t be seeing that.” Angelica straightened, observing the hooded man coming down the hall without guards. He was dressed as a woman, but the furtive stares and jumpiness gave him away.

Angelica was on guard outside Mary’s rooms, making sure no one used the family against Candice. It was tedious work, but she’d stayed alert.

Fascinated at the thought of males having enough courage to sneak out, Angelica stayed where she was and tried not to give him away. Wondering where he was going, she noted that he’d waited for a late hour when these halls were mostly empty and approved.

Hoping he made it to wherever he was headed, Angelica turned to check the opposite direction and found a pair of furious red orbs right in front of her. *Mistake!*

Angelica crumpled to the floor from a vicious blow.

Jason ran. He hadn’t planned to be a part of an assassination attempt. Dismayed, he hurried to the sick bay. The Pruetts would be too busy now to help anyone but themselves. He would have to find another way to warn the rebels.

The two kidnappers didn’t notice the man in women’s clothing fleeing down the hall. They’d been waiting for a chance to grab Angelica. They didn’t care what had distracted her.

The girl was hefted over a shoulder and gone seconds later.

# Chapter Six

**Winner Takes All**

**1**

**“W**elcome to the Final Round of the Bachelor Battles! As I’m sure you know, we’re down to just three contestants and the blood has been flowing.”

Clips of the matches flashed on the giant screens as the massive morning crowd roared, pushing against the sentries and barriers in front of the Block.

“For this round, the Network will pick our elimination challenge. Let’s see what they’ve chosen…”

Their rulers liked to mix games for this part. The crowd quieted as they waited to hear what brutal testing tool the council had chosen.

“Our challengers will have to…run the Tunnels of Time!”

The speaker in Candice’s flat came to life. *“Please report to the Tunnels of Time auditorium on the fourth floor. Follow the signs.”*

She flipped off the screen. Then she switched it off.

The Tunnels of Time wasn’t life threatening from what she’d read, but it was designed to put the remaining contestants on even footing. Aware of what was coming, Candice winced at that thought and went to the second floor. She didn’t get far before her wrist communicator beeped.

*Angelica is missing. Waiting on ransom note.*

Candice kept walking. Mary would notify her when the note came. She couldn’t go searching for her cousin. It would cause her to miss this match, and that would cost her Daniel. Even for Angelica, she couldn’t do it. She could use the fury in her heart to help get her through this horror, however.

“Here comes our next player…”

The contestants entered through a separate area, but Candice could hear the waiting crowd as she neared the door. Did their rulers hate how popular she was becoming? Candice hoped so.

The Tunnels of Time was a run through three synthetic caves set side by side. Littered with sharp stones and shards of glass, it was a race to see who could endure the pain to come out first. Candice stepped through the neatly marked gate, always grateful for the training she’d done. If they had let her fight the first time she’d come here, she would have been slaughtered. Candice was thankful they had sent her home on the train. Because of that mistake, she now had a chance to change the future.

As the cameras swung to show her entrance, Candice saw the other contestants were already at the gates. *Good*. Waiting for her might have made them impatient, which could lead to recklessness. These tunnels weren’t the fast dash the announcers liked to imply. They were a mile long, pitch black, and contained surprises that the former winners weren’t allowed to discuss. Someone always did though. Candice was as ready for the bolts of fire and bloodsuckers as she could be.

*“Please remove your weapons and shoes before entering.”* The computer activated as Candice reached the open slot in the middle. The run was done barefoot and barehanded. Candice grinned for the cameras as she pushed off her boots.

The crowd roared in response.

A cheerful announcer filled the speaker this time. “The first contestant to emerge from the Tunnels of Time has a guaranteed slot in tonight’s feature match! The other contender will be chosen by Network decision.”

*The mob of people watching must be huge,* Candice reflected, stepping into the cage where a small bar held her away from the dark entrance. The cheering and jeering echoed through the arena and rolled down the tunnels. Candice hadn’t observed an episode of this game, but she had trained for it the same as she had the others–intently. Walking on hot coals had burnt the bottoms of her feet and provided a layer of scar tissue to pad them. She’d had a lot of years to torture herself before she was allowed to be here.

“Ready… Go!”

Candice shot into the tunnel.

At first, she could hear the other players on either side as they made the same sounds she did–grunting at a particularly painful step, a wild stumble and swipe at a flying shape that dodged it and took a layer of skin in return, mutters over the insanity of their choice to be here. Candice was positive all the players in these bloody games went through moments of doubt, but she refused to let her demons win and pushed herself harder. Noises echoed loudly through the darkness, telling her they were all running even. Candice smothered her automatic need to slow down and feel her way through. She wanted this to be over… *No. I want blood.* Candice went faster, sprinting through the darkness.

The glass cut into her ankle as Candice stumbled over the rocks. Pain brought her pink vision to the front. She wondered if the Network knew it provided a limited version of infrared.

“Ugh!” Candice ducked a second swipe of angry talons. Blood ran down her spine from the first gouge. *Damn the Network!* Her stride lengthened again, anger causing her muscles to swell. Silence had fallen, other than her own steps…

A spray of flames came out of the darkness, blinding her.

Candice dropped, rolling over the rocky ground. Singed hair implied she’d had a narrow miss, but Candice didn’t pause. She wasn’t afraid of fire. She’d spent too much of her life battling the heat to be afraid of it.

Candice ducked a second flame, but slid into the third. Her ripped cloak blazed.

She pulled it off and beat it against her hip, but she didn’t stop running. The fire blasts were random, blinding sparks that ruined her vision. Yes, their rulers knew about changeling vision and they’d compensated for it. Candice wondered how the others were doing and pushed her body harder, breath coming in short, even draws.

It went still and silent suddenly. Candice tried to be prepared for anything.

*Zzzzz!*

The blade flashed up on her right, barely missing as she twisted to the left. Skin fell from her hand.

Heart pounding, Candice scooped up a painful palm of glass and rocks to throw. The blood rolling down her wrist, she had to ignore.

The rocky floor sharpened, shredding the edge of her foot as she slid, but the motion put her under a hip level grinder that spun from the wall and saved her life.

Candice stayed lower, tossing a higher path of stones that bounced off the walls as well as the floor.

Another blade whirled from the ceiling, slicing through her hair.

Candice felt the betrayal, the conspiracy, keenly then. The Network didn’t want her to come out of this alive. It was an ugly feeling. As she sometimes needed to do on a bounty run, Candice let the changeling mutation take over her body. The disease was an eternal torment, but it did have useful effects. Being able to move like a monkey combined with a big cat made her a hard target to hit. The increased speed and agility had saved her life numerous times, and they did so again as a beam of steel appeared at stomach level.

Candice contorted into a ball, rolling.

The edge of the spear missed her skull, but ripped through the lobe of her ear.

No longer thinking about anything except survival, Candice got up and resumed running through the darkness.

When she saw the tiny prick of light ahead, she began to force the changeling heat to retreat, hoping her ripped clothes appeared shredded from the run. She wanted the Network to think she had made it through without needing her changeling abilities.

Still not hearing the other contestants, Candice twisted and then ducked, rolling under a final saw. She quickly gained her feet to dart into the center and break the stupid pink ribbon.

“That’s our winner, folks! Candice Pruett, the bounty hunting teenager, will be one of our contestants in tonight’s feature match!”

Candice controlled her breathing, thinking of the coming event where the council would choose her opponent. *If anyone else lives from this one*, Candice consoled herself. But they wanted a feature event, so at least two of the tunnels would have to have been clear of death causing dangers simply to allow survivors for that. Likely, only the center cave had been rigged. Had her position been random? Candice hadn’t paused on the way, despite the call from her mother, and yet, the other contestants had beaten her there…and neither of them had emerged yet. Nothing was right about this.

The crowd was deafening as the announcer gushed, but Candice didn’t stay to witness who placed second. She also didn’t wave to a medico. Winning was all she cared about now. The Network could rig the matches, torture her, take her family, but she would never break, never quit. When faced with possible defeat, Candice only got angrier. She would have her prize at any cost…even Angelica’s life. Candice accepted that fact with a snarl of pain.

Everyone scurried out of the way as the bloody bounty hunter strode through the halls to her studio on shredded feet. She left puddles and heavy swirls across the tiles, hoping the camera caught each gush of crimson that came from her battered body. Their rulers had interfered with the game. They’d tried to kill her and failed. When they replayed this video, the council would know they’d made her list. There would never be a truce between them now. *Betraying a Pruett is a death sentence.*

**2**

**The Network**

“Why isn’t she dead?!”

“Get Rankin!”

The entire unhappy council was in the command room. Candice’s win had drawn shouts and threats from the large table.

“You set this up. You brought her here!” Terry accused.

“Yes.” Juli watched the replay again. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“She’s going to win!”

“Yes. This will give the Snakes time to eliminate the entire group, without the cameras.”

“No one could have survived that center tunnel!”

“She did. She wants Daniel.”

“But he’s valuable!” Riana shouted angrily, openly supporting Terry. “Did you put him in the games on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“Why play with her? Why not kill her and keep the male?” Terry interrupted, always hoping to claim an empty seat of power for her relatives.

“Only one of their own can infiltrate the rebels, and only someone in need of saving can earn the true trust of a Pruett. Daniel is both.” Juli flashed an ugly glower around the table. “Don’t you all have work to do?”

The warning was taken. The lower ranked members exited, grumbling. Their aging council leader was no one to push lightly. But then, neither were the wild Pruetts.

**3**

“Are you worried about your cousin?”

“No.” This was the first interview since Angelica’s kidnapping. Candice dangled bait. “She wasn’t taken. It was a misunderstanding. She went home early.”

The bald reporter she’d recently humiliated gaped at her. “But you got the note…”

“How do you know?” Candice glowered as the audience gasped. “We didn’t release that information.”

Candice saw those beady eyes narrow and knew instantly what had happened, who had targeted her. She had wrongly assumed it was just the Network council.

“Traitor!” Candice growled as the reporter paled, not caring that they were on open air with the world and more importantly, the Network, listening. “I’ll wipe out your whole family and I’ll do it quicker than *they* will.”

Candice stood up, sight flickering pink.

The reporter jumped from her chair. When she turned to run, Candice spun the woman by her toga and took a tight grip on her throat. She jerked the reporter off her feet as the audience went crazy and guards flooded the studio.

“I’ll come for you. The Network couldn’t care less about your life, but I do!” Candice shoved the reporter to the floor, then retreated as the Defenders drew weapons. “If Angelica isn’t returned, unharmed, there won’t be anywhere you can hide. I’m the best hunter in my family.”

Candice hadn’t realized the reporters could be hired, but this was personal. She had been heartless to them, so they had retaliated by taking something they thought she held dear. If they’d been smarter, it might have worked. A knife to Daniel’s throat would have ended all of this.

Candice stopped at the curtains, still ignoring the tense sentries now gathered around the stage. She grinned cruelly toward the cameras. “Who else wants to play with a Pruett?”

The roar in response was deafening.

**4**

“The note came.”

Mary’s happy voice echoed Candice’s secret sentiment of relief. Some captives were executed instead of being ransomed.

“They’re asking for two hundred million UDs and amnesty from being hunted.”

When situations like this came up, the family handled it their way. Together, the Pruetts were hard to beat. Her mother was sparkless most of the time, but when her family was in danger, Mary was merciless. Candice much preferred that version of her, but either way, she could now concentrate on her opponents. She’d been pitted against the Bombshell for tonight’s feature match. The Korean Killer would battle the winner in tomorrow’s final show.

Candice paused in rewrapping her damaged feet and gave a short nod, regarding her mother. “Take care of it the way we agreed to before we came here.”

Angelica, along with her captor, would be somewhere in the throng of drunken, bitter women who had bought passage to tonight’s match. Mary would make certain the exchange was set there, and risk the Network’s wrath for not telling them what was happening.

Her parents didn’t argue.

Candice was glad of it. The reporters had given her a way out, a way to have Angelica’s life and still leave with what she’d come for. Her parents would handle family duty from that side of the cage, freeing Candice to do what she did best. Kill.

**5**

“Feature Cage Match!”

The scarlet clad Bombshell waited in patient stillness. Her platinum hair hung to her hips in wild strands that Candice doubted drew any reaction when pulled. The need for blood climbed another level. *I’ll draw a reaction.*

Playing on any possible fears the Bombshell might have, Candice grinned in welcome of the coming fight.

Maybe the Bombshell paled, but Candice was too far away to be positive. They were standing at the gated entrances to the cage, waiting to be let in to spill each other’s blood. In the stands around the stage, the crowd roared in anticipation. The packed audience was screaming, red-faced and drunken, some being beaten for being unruly. Candice turned her attention away from it. There were no bachelors here for the match; she shoved that relief away as well.

“Players will now enter the cage.”

As the first bar went down, Candice dropped her cloak to the floor. Deep blue lights flashed as she strode confidently toward her life or death. She was as ready for either as she could be.

The gate locked them in as the center bar slid down into the mat.

Before Candice could move forward, the bar immediately rose back up.

“Halt!” The piercing shout echoed through the confusion.

“The feature match has been stopped! Let’s find out why…” The announcer tried to fill the unexpected moment with an explanation, scanning the audience.

“We have a fight in the stands!” the announcer blared triumphantly as she spotted the chaos unfolding in a front row.

Candice looked over to see her parents facing off with the remaining contestant as the crowd around them scurried out of the crossfire. The Korean Killer had Angelica wrapped up with a knife to her throat.

*They underestimated us*, Candice thought, a bit surprised to find out how many people were in on the attempt to hurt her. The bald reporter, very dead, was on the floor at Mary’s feet.

“Tell her to lose!” the Korean demanded, digging the blade into Angelica’s skin.

“Keep the cousin!” Candice shouted. “I never liked that one!”

Distracted, the assassin glanced toward the cage.

Mary jumped forward and plunged her claws into the woman’s throat. Her other hand tried to keep the Korean from killing Angelica with her own clawed hand as she suffocated.

Bruce jerked Angelica’s unconscious body into his arms as the Killer let go and slumped into one of the seats. Blood gushed over her chest.

“Halt there or we’ll open fire!”

The guard’s cry froze everyone this time.

In the cage, the gate slid down without warning.

The Bombshell advanced toward Candice with a snarl of hatred. “Damn you lucky Pruetts!”

“That makes this the final match, folks!” the announcer blared in delight. “Are ya ready?!”

Candice realized she’d been wrong. The Bombshell had been in league with the others… Rage blasted through her mind and she lunged forward with a primal scream. *No one double-crosses me! No one!*

Candice swung with hatred, catching the Bombshell’s jaw as the blonde kicked her. Candice took the boot in the stomach, but still managed to hold it through the pain.

Caught, the Bombshell was dragged off her feet and swung around the cage like a doll as Candice tried to twist her ankle into breaking.

Desperate to get free, the Bombshell plunged her knife into Candice’s thigh. She hit the mat hard as Candice fell, letting go.

Candice jerked the knife free and immediately threw it.

The blonde managed to duck. A thick coil of her platinum tresses stuck in the blade, pinning her to the bar it pierced.

The crowd shoved forward, screaming hungrily as death flew nearer.

Suddenly confident of her win, Candice pretended to lunge forward.

The Bombshell jerked free, ripping out a large chuck of hair as she fled to the other end of the cage.

Candice laughed.

Unable to take both that and the tittering of the audience, the Bombshell flipped into the change. Her scarlet jumper ripped down the legs as her muscles swelled, hair shooting out in rapid growth. Her claws became talons that clutched the bars hard enough to bend them as the pain of the transformation tore through her body.

Candice felt her own rage coming, but she didn’t stop it this time. Teeth grew into fangs in an instant, new strength flowing into her hands, enlarging her body. Candice flashed crimson orbs, still laughing. “Let’s play!”

The Bombshell dove forward wildly, but Candice met her with enough power to drive the woman back. Using the strength of her changeling legs, Candice drove the Bombshell into what passed as a corner, shoving harshly.

Candice tripped the fighter as she staggered for balance, slamming her into the bars.

“Ahh!” The Bombshell’s arm popped as it broke. Right by a microphone, the snap echoed under her scream.

Candice pinned the injured woman with her weight and beat her with repeated blows to the chest and neck. Her claws dug in with every swing.

The Bombshell’s knife sliced into Candice’s hip in a last, desperate attempt to live.

Candice grabbed the wrist, twisting viciously. *Snap!*

It was over, but Candice couldn’t stop. She delivered repeated slashes that sent gore across the cage and stage around it. When the Bombshell’s body sagged against the bloody poles, she barely noticed.

“Match to Pruett!”

“She’s won it all! Did you see that?! Candice Pruett has won this episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

**6**

“Bring out the men! Bring out the men!”

The chanting roar of the crowd made Candice pause; their lusty shouts for the prize to be awarded returned her fragile control. *Daniel!*

Candice exited the cage and walked up the stairs to the Award Block, blood dripping from her changeling fists. *I earned my slot. I won him. Who cares that it was too easy or that I’ve never felt less human? Daniel is mine!*

The dazed prizes, who hadn’t expected to put in an appearance for another night, were herded into the arena in their underclothes. Terrified, the cowering slaves were slapped and pinched by the unruly crowd as they were hustled up the stairs between twitchy Defenders in a squad that was twice the normal size.

Candice saw Daniel and was instantly hurt by his horrified stare as he saw the winner. Under the blood, her face was as pale as his (She’d shared her own food for years before her parents had discovered her obsession), but she appeared indifferent to his terror.

Troops lined the males up in front of her, even pushing them to kneel at her feet.

Candice struggled to complete the plan. The Network couldn’t know she’d come for him. “No black hair!”

At her call, the crowd screamed in ecstasy. Half of the bachelors were led away through the caged walk Candice had come down to start the match.

She waved a hand, fighting the disease as the mob struggled to reach the stage. “No green eyes!”

Another group was cut from the herd, removed among laughter and drunken insults from sore losers.

Blue eyes begged Candice silently for mercy.

“That one!”

Daniel’s expression crumpled into terrified dismay.

The crowd bellowed approval at the choice. Flickering between crimson and onyx, Candice gave them what they wanted one last time. She grinned.

“Well, that’s it, folks!” The loudspeakers drowned out the mob as sentries rushed Daniel off the stage and took him toward the winner’s suite. “That concludes this exciting episode of the Bachelor Battles! Tune in next week for another...”

Suddenly without the need for protection, Candice made her way into the hall as the guards tried to restrain the crowd that was congratulating each other and her on gaining the prize, winning the bet. Her patience was a threadbare blanket. The disease was impossible to keep caged the way she’d been doing. There was always a price to be paid.

Candice went to her new room. She didn’t have anything in the other flat to collect. She’d brought everything with her so if she died, her parents would get it all with her body, instead of a picked over pouch weeks later.

The apartments for winners were a complete contrast to the deliberate, camera-ready décor of the games halls. These upper walls were a blank gray slate that her changeling rage wanted to splash with blood. There were also no carpets to soften the steps of her boots; the noise drew instant notice from the guards at each intersection.

Candice didn’t need to flash her ID card. They knew who she was. She ignored their hulking forms and lethal tools. She had her own fire hidden behind these glassy floors and identical doors.

The farthest apartment, the Bachelor Battles Suite, was hers while the council verified the win. Candice swung the barrier open as if in a dream…

Daniel stood by the wide couch, pale and bruised. He was filthy, scent overpowering, and yet, there was only *need* for her as she entered.

The door locked automatically, throwing them into dimness.

Daniel had been on the edge of manhood when taken, body recuperating with the extra food she’d been able to provide. His thin profile had haunted her dreams, but that image shattered now. *The boy I love is gone.*

Candice was stunned by the differences. She had taken a short glance into his cell, but there was no way to mistake it here. Daniel was still taller than she was, though not by much, and the hands clenched at his lean hips were big. *Flames*, hot and hungry, crept through her mind. Rugged, wild, Daniel’s mouth gave him a secretive, sexy look, but Candice couldn’t ignore the misery in those stunning blue eyes. This wasn’t her childhood friend. This was a man–one she *would* play with, just not in the same manner.

“I’ve missed you.”

Daniel flinched as if she’d threatened him.

Candice understood in a blinding wave of agony. *He doesn’t know who I am! He doesn’t remember us!*

The pain came again, sharp and fierce, delivering agony that killed the bloodlust. She’d known he was being hurt, but she’d been sure he had her promise to comfort him. It was crushing to find out otherwise. He had been completely alone, like he’d feared.

Candice walked to the washroom to keep from scaring him further. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. It had been eight years and she in no way resembled the girl he’d known. Still, the bond had been strong enough for her to spend all that time training to rescue him.

Candice scrubbed away the filth from her last match with an aching heart that she soothed as best she could. He was hers now, bought and paid for in blood. She had a lifetime to remind him of how loving they’d been despite the callousness of his family. *And mine will help him adjust,* Candice thought, letting the hot water beat away her pain. Pruetts had been playing these games since before she was born, but Candice was determined that her children would not. This nightmare had to end somewhere, sometime. … *Why not with me?*

# Chapter Seven

**A Loving Owner**

**1**

**D**aniel didn’t know what to do when his new owner turned away. Previous renters had attacked the instant they were alone and those red orbs declared her a changeling. *Why isn’t she easing her pain at my expense, like the others?* *I’m braced to take it.*

Daniel stared in confusion, vaguely noticing her hair was so dark it shined blue in the flickering light. She was dripping blood, covered with it in places. Part of her hair was gone, burnt away. She’d obviously gone through hell to win her choice of the prizes. *Why me?*

Candice suddenly spun around, almost as if she was reassuring herself that he hadn’t disappeared.

The bachelor froze as old ghosts swept over him.

*“When we grow up, you’ll be mine?”*

*“Sure. I’ll love you and the change will go away.”*

*“I’ll love you, too. Not just for the painkiller.”*

*“I know. We’ll always be together.”*

*“Yes.”*

Daniel blinked and the memories faded as they always did. Why would this violent, blood and tattooed covered woman trigger a flash of the life he couldn’t remember? *Do I know her?*

Candice shut the door between them, but Daniel didn’t move. He’d dreamed of being chosen, of finally having a loving owner and a true home, but deep down, he hadn’t believed he would be released. It was a shock to be here.

Hoping she wasn’t one of those who liked to punish, Daniel ignored the throbbing of his new ownership mark and tried to make sure she found things okay when she came out. He couldn’t do anything about the way he smelled until she gave him permission.

Without knowing what she wanted from him, Daniel had to settle for remaking the linens on the couch where he’d been sitting. There was nothing to do after that. The scent of his fear began filling the apartment.

**2**

It appeared he hadn’t budged when she came from the washroom. Candice paused in the doorway.

Daniel was fragile. He needed to be gently loved back into who he’d been, but Candice didn’t have it in her. Knowing that would make things both easier and harder. Not ready to tackle his retraining yet, Candice continued to evaluate, starting at the top. She didn’t think she had the control to work her way up.

His hair wasn’t long, but it was obvious that he’d never had a real cut. The shaggy, uneven locks fell over his forehead and ears in a golden mane that fit him perfectly. It was darker, not nearly the bright curls she’d been so fond of watching blow around in the apocalypse winds. Now, it was streaked with dark brown. She wondered if he’d had to dye it for a renter.

Candice swallowed the revulsion, the absolute fury. She would stay away from those painful thoughts or they’d spend all their time together in misery. She wasn’t wasting it now that she had a future. Candice knew she wasn’t the only one who’d suffered, though. Daniel was scarred, physically as well as mentally. Some of it was hidden under his hair, but she’d picked out the nail marks along his scalp, the tops of his shoulders, his wrists. He’d been hurt so much. Would he ever be able to trust or accept what she had to give?

Daniel wore a Network jumper, dirty and reeking, but it clung to his wide chest in a way that outlined the swells of thick muscles and accented the slight bulge waiting for her use. Saliva flooded her mouth, helping Candice swallow the lump in her throat. She saw the mark on his big arm next, the one proclaiming him to belong to her… Fury filled her mind.

The Network had the ability to power this city, keep food growing indoors, and to run the labs where scientists were currently working on a cure. It wasn’t a city of light, but it was way beyond the wild setting of the Borderlands, and they’d branded him! Her hatred of their rulers, which had already been growing, took a sudden leap. If she ever came face-to-face with the bitch who marked him, the woman would die–just doing her job or not.

Daniel filled with worry at her expression.

Candice went to the small kitchen area. “Join me.”

He came slowly, warily.

Candice kept her distance as she prepared their first meal. After a minute, he perched on the edge of a stool, observing her every gesture and expression.

When she cracked the eggs, Candice saw him flinch. They’d taken him, hurt him, and left her with this trembling shell instead of her soulmate. What was she supposed to do? She’d never considered that he might not remember her.

Anger rose again. Her grip on the wooden spoon snapped it in half with a loud crack.

Daniel flew off the stool and across the apartment.

Controlling her emotions, Candice dropped the ruined utensil into the garbage bin and got a new one, saying nothing. It was good that the apartments were equipped with double and sometimes triple of everything regularly used. It came in handy when anger was the most common emotion in their population. As for Daniel, Candice decided she would do the best she could with what they’d left her and that meant dropping the past. If his memory returned, wonderful, but she wasn’t going to sit down and explain their history. It was too hurtful, too complicated. She would fill him in on where he came from and what had happened to him when she thought he was ready for it.

The eggs were done before Daniel found the courage to retake his seat. Candice set his plate and cup on the counter, then stood with her own a few feet away.

Seeing she wouldn’t be as close as right over the narrow ledge, Daniel sat down again, staying tensed for flight.

Candice ate and drank in silence, not appearing to be aware of anything but her own food as she subtly watched him start shoveling the scalding eggs into his mouth as if he was starving... *Is he?*

Daniel stared at her while he enjoyed the treat. Without the blood to hide her beauty, he was shoved into a situation he’d never experienced. He had expected to submit to his new owner, as he’d been trained to do, but the sight of that tattooed body was making him uneasy for reasons he understood all too well. He might enjoy this one and the unknown factors made him nervous. Never once had he been attracted to the females he’d been forced to satisfy. Daniel thought he might have met Candice before and wondered if the breeding program was where. There was something about her face…

Candice met his stare with an intense longing that made him quickly drop his eyes.

The action drew a deep sigh that also surprised the slave. Most of the others hadn’t wanted him to make eye contact. It was a Network standard for males to be submissive, but this changeling was different. He needed to know to what extent. Did she want a mate, children, a family, as he did? That was what the Den Mothers tried to sell, but it wasn’t true of those Daniel had met. Males were used by the masses, with death as the alternative. *Does the outside world know how awful it is to impregnate a stranger and then never get to love the child or even know if it lived? Does this brutal woman? Do those things matter to my new owner?*

The heavenly scent of eggs overwhelmed the soap and dirt from their bodies as tension thickened. Daniel loved eggs. They were his favorite, and always on his list when he received a meal of choice. Had she known? Daniel stared, trying to puzzle it out. *Did she research the bachelors? Is that how she picked me?*

This violent female was exciting and terrifying. The gentle hands that could break an egg without shattering the shell could also snap his neck. He respected her for it, for the lethal strength in her slender body, but he wondered at her reasons for playing. From the reports, Pruetts were rich. *Why didn’t she buy a man?*

The second batch of eggs finished cooking. Candice got a clean plate from the cabinet. Daniel had scraped every morsel from the one in front of him as he studied her.

He tensed when she rotated toward him, but he stayed on the stool as she carefully removed the first plate and replaced it with a larger pile. His face wrinkled in suspicion and then confusion, before his mouth opened. “Thank you.”

Candice resumed her sawdust tasting meal with need flaring. *His voice*! It was the sound of angels and devils in perfect harmony, tempting her.

Daniel abruptly shoved the plate away, grimacing.

Candice gestured toward his untouched cup. “The milk will settle your stomach.”

He didn’t notice the too sweet taste as he gulped it down. The drink contained a very mild sedative to keep him from jumping so much and maybe let him sleep.

“You’ll be on the couch.”

The words brought instant relief, and in its wake, more confusion. She could tell he wanted to ask why they wouldn’t share a bed. She both longed for him to and hoped he wouldn’t. It might all be over if she had to explain it.

Daniel didn’t question her.

Slightly disappointed, she gestured at the steamy room she’d come from. “Clean up if you like. There’s a robe hanging on the door.” Her timbre lowered into an edge of anger. “And a medical kit in the cabinet.”

Daniel immediately went to do as she’d said.

Candice watched until he was out of sight, thinking of all the times she’d envisioned this. Reality was a patch over a small section of the gaping wound in her heart. She’d won him. *I kept my promise.*

Leaving the mess, Candice crawled onto the apartment’s couch bed. She slid to the seam of the cushions, making it clear where she wanted him, and fell into a light doze almost immediately. It had been a long week.

*She’s on the couch. I assumed too much.*

Wearing the silken blue robe, Daniel felt very unprotected. He stayed in the doorway. After witnessing her matches, he held little hope that Candice wouldn’t wake up when he climbed onto the secondary bed with her.

Daniel tried to be reasonable. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t done this before or been hurt before. He just didn’t like the fear and the pain, the *dirtiness* he knew was waiting for him afterward. Under it all, the familiar longing to know why he’d been given to the Network, why he was forced to live this way, burned brightly.

*It’s too quiet.* *She’s awake*. A shudder went through his legs. He made them move toward the couch. *If I had real courage, I’d drop the robe before I got there and push her over the edge, make her use the drugs when I can’t satisfy her*. Those hated black boxes with the loaded syringes were always scattered around the apartments.

He’d done that with renters when he wasn’t able to stand what they wanted to dish out, but he sensed it might backfire with this one. In the two minutes it took the drugs to make him willing, she could snap. It had happened a few times–changelings bought or won a mate and killed them during the claiming. Would she be one of those? Next to Rankin, Candice was easily the most violent woman he’d ever met.

“Daniel.”

Her timbre said he was wasting her patience. The scared bachelor slid onto the couch, but stayed on the edge, as far from her as he could get.

The milky drops would work soon, but Candice wasn’t going to wait*. She couldn’t*. Being careful of his now bandaged arm, Candice placed a hand on his damp skin and pulled him over as gently as she could manage. The sensation of his tense hip against hers made it final. She had what she’d come for, and it hadn’t cost her life or even a limb. *Only more of my humanity.*

Candice rolled over to enfold his terrified frame into her arms. Daniel would hold back the fiery darkness threatening to consume her and she would return his identity. Together, they might even have some measure of peace.

Daniel never thawed against her; he just went out all at once. Candice allowed herself to stare. In a few days, they would travel to the Pruett homestead. Due to the mandatory verification period, they couldn’t leave yet. Not that it would have mattered. Daniel wasn’t ready to be in public. Candice drifted off wondering about his reaction to her home. It was his now, too, but it had been before, as well. Would he recognize the neighborhood or the evil people who had sold him into these brutal games? Candice was asleep before she could venture a guess.

**3**

Waking suddenly, Daniel flinched from the feel of female heat, but he quickly stilled when he realized Candice was already awake.

They’d shifted closer during sleep. She could feel his erratic breath on the arm she had curled over his wide chest. The couch under them trembled as he waited in fear.

“I won’t hurt you.” Candice was proud of the calm, even tones that didn’t hint at the hunger beneath as she saw him fresh from sleep. “You’ll figure that out in time.” She reluctantly withdrew her arm.

Daniel’s indecision was clear. It was a long time before he gathered the courage to move from the couch.

*Thud!* “Sorry!”

His fast apology for the noise made Candice frown. She would have to shove some spine back down his throat. Slaves had that torn from them by the Network, but the true soul of a man could never be erased. *Her* Daniel was still in there somewhere.

*Slam!* “Sorry.”

Need, sharp and sweet, flooded Candice. She forced herself to sleep instead. He was hers. There was time.

A bit later, Daniel listened to her thick snores in surprise. She had been so quiet during her matches and interviews that the harsh sound had made him duck for cover before he’d realized what it was.

*“Snort!”*

Daniel flinched again. It was easy to tell he hadn’t been around women recently. He straightened his shoulders as he walked to the washroom. While he showered again, Daniel went over his rules for surviving a changeling.

*One: Don’t make eye contact*… Except, she wanted him to. Daniel struck that from the list.

*Two: Be careful of smells.* Changelings were drawn to good scents. He moved his hand away from the sweet smelling soap to use the plain bar on the rack.Candice had left a hair on it from her own wash.

Daniel quickly picked it off and rinsed it down the drain, shuddering. *Gross*! *Okay, where was I?*

*Three: Keep skin hidden.* He’d broken that one last night, but he didn’t have any other clothes. He wasn’t wearing the jumper again until it was clean.

Daniel frowned, moving on. *Four: Keep them well fed and in comfortable temperatures. Five: Never refuse any order. Six: Try to distract them when their irises flicker. Seven: Attack them before they can attack you.*

That one made him flush as he rinsed off. Changelings had a short fuse. If he could get it to burn down quickly, she would be blasted with relief and not be such a danger. He’d even once witnessed a changeling cry, but the easiest way to cool the fire was through physical contact. Daniel’s body stirred at the thought. Candice was familiar to him for some reason and she had amazing control. As long as he followed his own rules, he would probably be fine.

Daniel stepped out to grab his jumper and toss it into the suds for a wash. *Eight: If the pain gets too bad, make them snap by responding as if willing. The medicos are very skilled. Nine…*

**4**

“She can go now.” The frumpy medical technician handed Angelica a bottle of pills. “She just needs to rest.”

Mary was relieved. “Should she visit a medico for anything later?”

The nurse shook her head, a bit annoyed at how fast Pruetts healed. “You can pull the stitches in a couple of days.”

Mary and Bruce helped Angelica off the examination table, one on each side to offer protection and support. Angelica wrapped up in her cloak, pulling the hood tight for privacy. While Candice and Daniel spent the mandatory three days in the penthouse, the rest of the family was going home. There was still a chance of being attacked, but it would come from grieving families taking revenge for Candice’s victory. They needed to get out of the city without drawing attention.

Angelica let Bruce help her to the door of the small medical bay, but as it opened, she shrugged off their hands.

Mary attributed it to Angelica’s need to uphold the family reputation, but Bruce studied the teenager in thoughtful contemplation. Angelica had barely spoken since being rescued, though the medic had declared her fine other than a minor concussion and a gash in her shoulder. She had accepted Candice’s message to go home and recover without comment, but there was a glaze over her eyes that said she was trying to adjust to what had happened.

Angelica walked in front of Mary and Bruce, head up. The fury radiating through her was almost palpable, keeping people at bay. Even reporters who wanted an interview maintained a safe distance as the trio entered the lobby of the games tower and were recognized.

“Are you okay, Angelica?”

“Mary Pruett? Can we have a minute?”

The family didn’t want to stop and answer questions. In an attempt to duck the awkward moment that would plaster their faces all over the news, Mary flashed red orbs at the reporters. “Don’t you have criminals to expose? We get tired of doing your job.”

Shocked gasps and worried glances toward Network cameras allowed the family to slip around the gaggle of reporters and get outside. Mary hoped the clip wouldn’t be shown at all now. The reporters knew the Network didn’t really need them and that clip would be a reminder of it.

The family moved quickly toward the garage to retrieve their Mopars, hoping no one else was waiting. No one was in a good mood at this point, except for Candice, and she was too far away to lend help. Despite their relief at her survival, it had made their family a bigger target.

Mary worried the Network had now been tipped off to how strong her line of the family was.

Bruce worried that Mary would be punished for Candice’s victory.

Ahead of them, Angelica wasn’t thinking about the Network at all. She was stewing on the bachelor she’d seen sneaking down the hall before her kidnapping. It had given a new hope that her fantasies of remission stood a chance. If there was even one bachelor who had the courage to disobey his masters, she needed to meet him, and there was only one way she could do that.

Angelica waved Mary toward the Mopars, noting the crowd around the dome had thinned a little. She was glad. Her control was a bare shield. If people rushed her right now, they would get more than they’d bargained for.

“We should stay together.” Mary didn’t want them split up again.

“I need air.” Angelica’s tone was rough.

Mary and Bruce exchanged frowns, but didn’t argue.

As soon as they were out of sight, Angelica walked out of the damp garage. Mind spinning and heart on fire, she strode back up the glittery complex steps and reentered the dome.

Angelica was waiting on the front steps when Mary and Bruce rolled from the garage a few minutes later, towing her Mopar. They’d had to show IDs to the guards, and then Mary had performed a fast check to be certain their transportation hadn’t been sabotaged.

Angelica secured her ride without speaking, heart still pounding. *I’ll tell them later.* She fell in line behind Bruce to provide protection from the rear. *Candy’s game just finished. They don’t need more stress yet.*

The trio was quickly gone from the dangerous city, leaving Candice alone with her prize. It was the safest place she could be.

# Chapter Eight

**Waves of Change**

**1**

**C**andice woke to a studio softly lit against the darkness, fragrant with smells of cooking meat. A genuine smile came to her lips. *Our new lives can begin soon...* That second, familiar grin curved her lips into the merciless expression she was now known for. *Right after I take care of one little thing.*

“Would you like to eat now?” Tremors shook his voice.

Candice stretched as she stood up, then checked her watch. She’d slept for twenty hours. “I’ll wash first.”

“I ordered a new robe for you.”

“Have you bathed?”

He nodded quickly, worried she would be upset at his waste of water by showering twice.

“Good. I like cleanliness.”

At her words, a relieved expression came to his face. She placed it as she scrubbed off another layer of the battles. She had told him something he could use to please her. Did he want it for his survival or did he yearn for the life everyone believed they would have now? There were other questions she also needed answers to, but today, Candice wanted to find out what Daniel knew about the Ring–the one their rulers paid so well to keep a fresh supply of slaves flowing through the games, the ones who had taken what was hers. Even after all these years, Candice still wanted that redhaired bitch dead. It had been number two on her to-do list, right after reclaiming her mate.

The sight of Daniel in the robe replaced her anger with a flare of need that Candice knew was terrifying. It sent him stumbling into a corner of the apartment, but she couldn’t help it. *He’s so beautiful!*

Anger came again, as violent as any she’d felt during her matches. Candice controlled it even as she fed it. Someone would pay. Blood would spill for what had been done to him.

“There are clothes for you in my kit!” Candice winced at her sharp tone, but she didn’t explain it. The anger would keep her steady and allow her time to *reach* him before she took him.

Candice spun back into the washroom at that thought, eyes no longer black. The disease was a torment dealt with daily. It had five stages, though only three were common. First was the start, the uncontrollable need to spill blood. After, learning to master the violence as it intensified was stage two. Few got to that. The third stage was where her mother was now, burnt-out.

Candice shoved the image away in revulsion. *That, I will never be!*

The fourth stage was burn-up. It usually consisted of snapping and killing whoever happened to be around. Candice almost liked that one. It was infinitely better than having no fire left at all, but there was also a fifth, legendary stage no one she knew had achieved. Remission.

No one knew what combination of environment, diet, and daily life might achieve that, but it was the goal for her future. *Not the sparkless female who calls herself my mother! But for our bounty runs, I would have no use for Mary at all.*

Daniel was dressed when Candice emerged, but the trousers and sweater were no better than the robe. The soft material clung to his body, outlining thick arms she needed to use.

Her expression must have been bad because Daniel raised a hand to protect himself.

The need and rage slapped at Candice, but for once, the side that hardly ever saw the light of day anymore flew out of her mouth first. “You look very nice. Blue suits you.”

Daniel blinked, not expecting the compliment.

Satisfied with their new beginning, she went to the set and waiting table. “Let’s eat.”

*She doesn’t like the way I’ve been treated*. Knowing that was another relief. Daniel smiled shyly as their gazes met over the candlelight. He wasn’t ready to be taken, but what was a good dinner without good atmosphere?

“Do you pray?”

Daniel stared in shock. “Of course!”

She indicated for him to do so.

Daniel dutifully bowed his chin. “I thank the Network for the food, and the air, and the…”

Daniel felt her wave of rage and froze, waiting to be punished. He’d said it so many times that the words often rolled out without feeling. *Maybe she doesn’t think I mean* *it*.

“Do you know of God?”

Now he was confused. That was who he’d been praying to. Daniel instinctively kept that information to himself. “What?”

Flames flashed across her expression. Daniel watched her shove them down with a determination he admired.

“We’ll cover it later.” Her eyes went to the camera in the top corner of the apartment.

Daniel understood it was something the Network wouldn’t like. He slowly resumed eating, not sure why she’d gotten upset. Who was this God? Was she like the Network? He had no idea how the real world worked. *I wasn’t trained for that.*

Candice hadn’t realized their rulers denied the bachelors even a basic knowledge of their possible origins. It was a struggle not to set him straight. The Network was far from God and she was morally offended by their insistence to these men that they were. Once they made it out of this bug infested place, she would make sure his retraining included the wonders of creation. When the Pruetts sat down to a meal, they offered no thanks or requests, merely an apology for the sins of previous generations. God was clearly angry.

The food was excellent, but the way Daniel kept checking for her approval made Candice scowl and him cringe. So far, he’d done little in his own opinion to please her, but until he could help her control this heat, his emotions would have to wait.

“I need to know some things you won’t want to talk about.”

He nodded fearfully.

Candice dug into her big bowl of stew. It was good, which meant they wouldn’t starve. Cooking wasn’t her skill. “What do you remember about your life before the Network?”

“Almost nothing.” His handsome face scrunched up in concentration. “Just words I’m not convinced are true.”

Candice spooned another heaping bite into her mouth and tore off a large chunk of the bread he’d baked. It was something the kitchens here couldn’t stock enough of, but she also needed a defense against the sound of his voice. She couldn’t fly over and bite him with her mouth full.

“I was sick for a long time.” Daniel reluctantly kept going. “The fever took away the parts I can’t remember. They say I was sold by my family.”

*True, so far*. As he spoke, Candice kept her eyes on her bowl to prevent him from reacting to her rage, her pain. “Go on.”

“They used to talk when they thought I was too ill to listen.” His timbre became a low rumble that made her grip bend the spoon into a foreign shape.

“They said I’m supposed to do something.” He hesitated, dropping to a lower pitch that Candice wanted to taste. “I’m special.”

“Special how?” She raised a brow as if she hadn’t known, but of course, she had. Daniel was hers. How could he not be unique?

Daniel flushed. “I have a genetic marker that’s different. They studied me, a lot.”

There was a sneer to the words, a hint of true emotions beneath. Perhaps there was more to him than just fear.

“What do you plan to do now that you’re free?” Candice asked, tackling her biggest fear about him first.

Daniel stared at her in panic. “Free?”

“Yes. You’ll hold your own papers.”

She was letting him go. Daniel had heard of that possibility from other bachelors, but he hadn’t believed it. *Freedom.* What would he do out there? He had to have an owner, a protector. The Network had made that clear, and he wasn’t sure what to say.

Candice had returned to her food, but Daniel stared at his bowl in distress. She had done all this to release a prize from captivity. He’d looked the worst off, so she picked him. It explained everything and sent hollow suffering into Daniel’s stomach. *I don’t want to be free,* he mourned with a familiar ache. *I want a loving owner.*

Daniel swept her scars and angry wounds, the burns and missing chunks of skin. *All of that to free a slave?* It was unlikely. He studied her harder. Daniel saw the tension first, the stiff set of her thick shoulders as she waited for his choice. The grief hit next. She was upset at the thought of being away from him.

Confused, Daniel ran through his stores of information, but nothing came up about women needing their slaves willing, outside of mating. He was suddenly positive though, and wondered if she would like him to beg to stay with her. Daniel was adept at giving a woman what she needed. Wants, however, he had to guess about. His shoulders went down in frustration. He might be reading those things in desperation to keep from being out there alone. *I won’t survive freedom.*

Drawing in air to keep calm, Daniel stole glances at his owner and tried to decide how to respond.

It was hard not to ease his concerns, but Candice couldn’t let him see how much pain it would cause to let him go. She waited, observing the gambit of emotions. Didn’t Daniel want freedom? After everything he had suffered, she would give it to him and keep burning to make him happy.

“You don’t really want me, right?”

His simple response made the choice for both of them. The pain-laced words blasted through Candice’s layers of ice as if they didn’t exist. She shoved the table aside and pinned him against the cold wall, fighting the blood behind her irises and need tickling her spine.

Daniel trembled.

Candice leaned in. “I want you more than my own life, Daniel!” Her kiss was a hard press to his clenched lips, urgent and intense as waves of change rolled through her stiff body.

Daniel’s first thought was only to survive and he stayed as still as he could, shaking. His mind went to his rules, but he hesitated to push Candice in any way. His new master was deadly. He’d noticed it in the first introduction, when she’d had no mercy on her fallen assassin, but she wasn’t drawing blood now. Though, she was affecting it.

His body was recognizing the match and approving. Except for Rankin’s torture, where there was never any relief for him, Daniel hadn’t been bred in over a year. He couldn’t stop from hardening against her slender hip. He had expected a beating, not an embrace, and he was unprepared for his own response. In the past, only drugs had gotten his cooperation.

Candice’s lips were soft and hard in equal measures, iron hands around his wrists, but then she *changed*. Her body melted against his, tugging at pent-up desires. Horny and anxious to please, Daniel hesitantly returned the kiss.

*Control.* Candice softened her touch, eased her grip. Instead of trapping him, she leaned against his hard body and felt the truth pressing into her hip. He might be scared, but he wanted her! Daniel’s lips moved against hers in confirmation, and she groaned at the sensation. The stubble on his skin was a delicious torment sliding across her cheek.

She retreated, flames crackling. “Are you registered?” *Have you done this before?*

The thrill at his hesitant nod came from her need, but the fury at his violation made her grip tighten again.

Daniel tensed for a blow.

“Shhh. Just a taste….” She soothed him as best she could.

When Candice claimed his lips, Daniel met her with a shudder of fear and want.

In her delight, Candice let go of that infamous control a bit, running her fingers down his arms to wrap him in an embrace he came to willingly. *I can have him, now if I want!*

The fire grew hotter. Candice gasped as his lips went to her jaw, her neck. His body leaned against hers with baking need, hands trailing her arms. She’d planned to wait, to give him time to remember, but her control was flying away in thick chunks. Soon, she wouldn’t be able to stop. Candice pushed away the caution, sliding her hands down his lean hips.

Her nails dug into the soft clothes, making Daniel tense, but he only felt more shaky desire when she slid warm fingers under his shirt and up the bare skin of his waist.

It pressed him close. Daniel tried not to rock against her hip, but was suddenly positive he would before much longer. She was too hot, too *ready*, to ignore. She was also dangerous, but he was bracing to bleed in order to be fully bonded with his new owner. He wouldn’t be out there alone. He would be at her side, where she could make use of his talents. *I’ll be a grateful mate.*

Steeling his nerves, Daniel dropped his hands to her waist. Candice drew in a sharp breath, and Daniel tightened the hold, now sensing what she needed. Most of his renters had wanted to be in charge, but a rare few liked a bolder partner. Before he could make the choice, she rubbed against him, and Daniel was dazed with fresh waves of need. *Without* the drugs, he was ready to finish a complete session. It was exciting. He’d never had a woman his body wanted. More of his fear slipped under the heat.

His breath caught as Candice rubbed against that iron bar again, grip tightening… Daniel jerked her off her feet and spun them around so that Candice was now the one pinned by the wall. His mouth slanted over hers, demanding surrender.

“Yes!” Candice shuddered as the heat rose to an almost unbearable, perfect height of pleasure and agony.

Daniel’s hand slid into her shirt, the hot skin under *his* fingers now trembling.

Candice arched as he squeezed. Another chunk of control was blasted away. She tried to stop then, but the lust was stronger and so was Daniel. His grip tightened.

“Just a taste. Shhh…”

His throaty copy of her words cracked the remaining ice. Candice writhed in his knowing embrace as his hand slid into her pants. Not giving her time to hurt him, he was clearly no virgin to handling the needs of a changeling. Lightning flashed as his fingers touched her skin, body reaching out. Candice sobbed against his mouth. The flames rose as he began to stroke, carrying her into a world where only they existed.

Daniel used his most reliable tactics, bringing her up so fast that there was no time for her to flip, but this! He wanted to slow down, to explore her silken and rough skin until he exploded.

Daniel shifted, rocking against her in short, quick jerks that had her groaning in the start of release. His body throbbed at the image of her climax, his own needs rising up to carry him into a haze of shocked lust. He stroked harder, hands and hips in perfect time.

Searing ecstasy consumed Candice at his mating motions against her hip. She felt the snap coming…

Daniel knew and pushed harder, sending her into pleasure she’d never felt before. The change was banished to a dim corner as brilliant light exploded.

Candice wanted to do the same for him, but even as she shattered, she felt his release arching against her thigh, drenching, scalding. They groaned and pulsed, holding onto each other for support.

Candice tried to smile. “I’d start every day this way.” During the game, she’d had no fear any weak emotion such as love drove her, merely the return of a beloved possession. *Oh, how wrong I’ve been!*

“I’d still give you freedom, Daniel.”

He tensed against her cheek, teasing the need into scenting the musky air again. Candice grimaced as the flames flickered back to life. *So short a relief!*

Daniel shifted away from her, easy to read. He was worried he’d gone too far by taking the lead and dealing pleasure with no permission, that it hadn’t been good enough. And there was confusion.

Because he’d enjoyed it? That certainly wasn’t the norm. Registered breeders could be had. Their willingness didn’t matter, but as timid as Daniel was, Candice doubted he’d had many good moments while pleasing the public.

Daniel stood stiffly with his hands at his hips.

Candice remembered her next question and distracted him with it as she fixed her clothes. “What is it the Network expects you to do?”

“They won’t tell me.”

“Who won’t tell you?”

His face became distorted. “I can’t see!”

Candice longed to provide the answers and ease his anguish. Because she couldn’t yet, she distracted him from that, too. “We’ll finish eating now.”

He went toward the kitchen, and then stopped, reddening. When he detoured to clean his hands, Candice hid her approval and the unhappiness. When the Network said trained to adapt and please, they weren’t kidding, but the price paid for that obedience was too high.

Candice thought about how quickly he’d responded to her sexually. Maybe deep down he did recognize her, or was it the self-preservation instinct males had? She’d been in the cubicles where the drugs forced reluctant bachelors into hard readiness in minutes. They were trained to please.

*And, he did,* Candice thought, shivering. The question, was why? She knew as soon as she asked herself what he would gain from it. If they were bonded before leaving, she wouldn’t trade him for a different prize. He was using the heat to manipulate her.

Candice felt her heart thump. That was the old Daniel, *her* Daniel, and she was ever so grateful for the proof that he still existed.

Daniel had learned something valuable that he examined as he switched on the hot water. His enjoyment was not only allowed, she *liked* it. It would have been hard to mistake. He’d shown her he knew something she needed. All he had to do was be certain her needs were taken care of and she would keep him. In time, he might still have that loving owner.

It wouldn’t be as easy to satisfy her before she flipped next time, though. The fear returned when Daniel came from the room to see her pink gaze. He knew from his training that temporary methods wore off quickly. Then the female was constantly hungry for her man to put out the fire. From now on, he would have to get her to the bed so he could use the cuffs.

Aware of her flickering irises and his own surprising interest, Daniel tried to distract them both with some of the thousands of questions he had. “How long will we be here?”

Candice pushed her empty bowl away, shrugging. “Would you stay a while?”

His look was all the answer she needed. He couldn’t wait to go. “In the morning. The council sent notice of the win being approved. Our passage is already booked for the train.”

His expression darkened.

Candice understood, but said nothing to comfort him. Transportation of prizes was done like livestock, even down to crates. It was a humiliating Network rule, but she wouldn’t break it. The Pruetts were careful to appear loyal.

“How long will it take?”

“Three days.” *Seventy-two hours where anything can happen*. “I’ll be on the train with you, one car away.”

Discounting the expensive ride that they were about to take, foot and horse were the most common forms of transportation. Even hunting held more lure than the odd stores that popped up. There had been little advancement under Network rule. Candice was positive that was due to the lack of ambitious men with strong bodies, and of course, Network hoarding. The only people with access to the remaining bits of technology were the council.

*And their hired labor*, she contemplated with a mental sneer. The Pruetts always used that Network connection to pad their stocks.

“What will I do there?”

Daniel’s fears were endless, and some, a surprise. Their rulers claimed males had no real desire to be freed, but Candice hadn’t believed it until now. “You’ll help my family clear the old roads.” *And help me control the change.*

He was satisfied with that answer, but Candice wondered how deep into their mix Daniel would fall. Would he be with her when they were on bounty runs or would she be forced to leave him at the homestead with the other men? Would his childhood home make him remember her?

Needing space to avoid demanding a repeat performance, Candice went to the master bedroom she hadn’t used yet, still exhausted and sore. “I’ll sleep in here tonight. Do what you like, but don’t leave this apartment without me.”

Daniel was horrified at the thought.

Candice settled into the large bed a couple of minutes later, filled with an emotion she almost didn’t recognize. She was happy.

# Chapter Nine

**Fragile**

The Recovery Zone of Ohio

**1**

***W****e’re**home.*

The area hadn’t changed much in the decade since Daniel had been stripped from her arms. Even the apocalyptic zones surrounding them were the same. Only the cleared road was different. That commitment to the Network, for which they were not paid, was a source of pride. They added miles a year to the streets, just the six of them. Candice swallowed a smile of victory. *Now, there will be seven.*

The slums were behind their property. To the south, the main road was alive with farmers working the birthing season. To the east, the Network-controlled cities with their larger populations lurked. And to the west? The other end of the country was a mystery to most; a rare visitor ever came from the western outpost. During all her runs, Candice had never met someone from that side. The news claimed it was uninhabitable. Angelica’s sister had told them differently. There were rumors of an entire city of males hiding in the west, but after winning the Bachelor Battles, Candice no longer had faith in that. If there really were such a city, it would be controlled by the Network. Male freedom was a myth.

Candice studied the crate being unloaded from the hauler, discerning tense, blue eyes through the cracks of boards sealed with a Network weld over the top. The seal read: *Property of Candice Pruett, winner of a Games Challenge.* Candice hated him being penned like an animal, but until that box was set on their land, she didn’t make the rules.

The delivery guards were enormous. Few women would interrupt a cargo transfer with these big females to confront. Only previous winners could deliver prizes. Knowing they’d killed at least three contestants was a strong deterrent to those without the courage to enter the games and earn a mate for themselves. A transport job was waiting for Candice if she wanted it, but the thought was revolting. Still, prizes did occasionally go missing or arrive damaged, so she was relieved when Daniel stepped unharmed from the large box.

Daniel carried the kit she’d had ready for him, no doubt neatly repacked. He was a bit neurotic about being neat, something Candice liked. He was definitely different from what she’d expected. His education was a good example. Most slaves weren’t given one, but Daniel was literate. She was curious how many of the books he’d gotten through on the ride here. Reading was a treat in any world and she had been delighted that he knew how. She had actually brought the novels for herself. Candice sighed in tired satisfaction. She had wanted to ride in the same car with him, but she couldn’t afford the distraction while they were so accessible. As a result, she hadn’t spoken to him in days. It wasn’t surprising that she had been miserable the entire time, flashed to all those terrible years alone.

“Anything else?”

Candice shook her head at the guard, signing the paper with her usual careless scrawl. Daniel was legally hers–signed, sealed, and delivered. The feeling was indescribable.

Daniel waited patiently for instructions, determined to do well in his new life. He still wasn’t positive why she’d chosen him, but he was finally out in the real world with an owner and that was enough to make him hopeful. Candice was intimidating, but she was also vibrant and he was drawn to that. She was a lot like the owner he’d envisioned as the game for his papers began, but better. She didn’t like the Network! He hadn’t dared to hope for that. He would have a home now, with Candice. Where she went, Daniel already wanted to be.

He watched her flex a scarred shoulder, marveling at her fast recovery. Her feet had been the only area still bothering her by the time they’d left. He had tended them right before they took the train out of New Network City. The sight of her scarred, charred, sliced skin had reminded him of her sacrifices and allowed Daniel to walk to the crate instead of being sedated as most prizes were for transport. It had also let him relax a bit during the trip, enough to read between considering the future. He belonged to a bounty hunter who lived in the wilds of Ohio, where their rulers didn’t even have a hub. Despite his sentiments about the council, that complex had been his home. He was certain being away from there would make him uneasy at times.

Trying to banish another flare of nerves, Daniel studied Candice. Unlike the fighting clothes she’d worn at the complex, here at home she sported jeans and a button-up black shirt under a new black cloak. The cloak had a high collar that protected her from the sharp winds while adding an exotic flair to her alabaster skin and ebony spikes. She came his way, moving with grace and determination.

Daniel stared. *The feet must be better*, he thought dizzily.

“Come on.” Candice waved Daniel to her as the truck rumbled away.

He responded quickly, blue cloak flashing behind him. She wasn’t surprised when he tripped over the rocks and caught himself with a tempting flush. Outside activities were forbidden to the bachelors at the complex. When they were taken out of there, they had to learn to walk. The real ground of the earth was nothing like the smooth, flat tiles in the complex.

“This is your home.” Candice wondered what Daniel was thinking as his wary gaze went over the small, crumbling white dome where they would live. The mostly underground den had looked the same before. Would it trigger a memory?

“Just us?”

Candice swallowed disappointment and pain. *He may never remember.* She had to accept it and be content that she always would. She’d kept her promise. In time, that would temper the pain. “My mother and father, along with two cousins and their parents, share this space.”

Daniel stared in surprise. Starting to realize how lucky he was or worried that he would be shared, Candice couldn’t tell.

“You have males here already?”

She turned a sharp gaze his way, one he cringed from. “Fathers and mates with *changeling* children.”

His profile relaxed a bit. Clearly, he’d been expecting worse. In other families, Daniel would have been right to worry. The average home held five or more changelings at any given time.

“Do I…speak to them?”

Candice wanted to comfort him, but his fear hurt her again. He was terrified that she would slave him out to her family. *Damn the Network!*

“If you like.” She could have told him of their bonds, their differences from most citizens, but Candice strode across the yard instead. He would see it for himself.

Daniel hurried, making her hunger increase another notch. When he wasn’t tripping over his own feet, he had a swagger that he wasn’t aware of. It made his shoulders seem wider, his face more attractive. Had he been this beautiful as a child? Candice couldn’t be sure.

Daniel stayed on her heels as she skirted the row of thorn trees to enter the rear yard. From here, they had an open view of the slummy street where he had lived. They were only a few hundred feet from his former home.

Candice watched his troubled gaze go over the shacks and the grimy children playing in the rubble that lined them. Did he feel anything?

“Who are they?”

Should I tell the truth? These are likely sisters, cousins.

He looked to her, full of confusion and something else as he waited for her answer. Awareness?

“*Poor* people,” Candice finally answered.

She could tell he didn’t understand her scorn. He assumed she held them in contempt for having no financial value. Candice let him. It was better to take the blows in succession, than to be nailed with them all at once. Finding out your family had sold you and then gone on to have more children was a vicious blow. The Malins were poor *on honor*.

As if he read the thought, Daniel shuddered. “I know that place!”

He studied the street they’d run on, hidden in, looted for treasures. He’d never been allowed in her home. Not because he was a slave, but because his family had always known *his* value. They’d taken no chances on losing him to the Pruetts for something as unimportant as a mate when there were millions of UDs waiting as soon as he fit the sale rules.

“Have I been here before?”

“Yes…with me.”

That admission made him forget his place again. Daniel’s tenor rang with delicious emotions. “That’s why I feel like I know you. I do!”

Candice willed herself into submission, but it was hard.

Daniel stopped, flushing. “Sorry.”

Carefully controlled, she pushed him back to the awful memories waiting just below the surface. “That’s where you came from.”

Daniel scanned the plastic covered shacks and snotty children. “I’m very angry right now. Is that allowed?”

She snorted, realizing he had put the basic frame together. She could see pieces slamming into place in his mind with hurtful blows. “If anyone has the right to rage, it’s the males of New America.”

“I want to go down there.”

She waved a hand in answer and trailed him. He was having flashes. She could tell it by the sudden pauses and stiffening of those wide shoulders. The memories couldn’t be easy. Born to sell, the Malin family had done it for centuries. It was how they paid for so many daughters, Candice assumed. Though, after seeing how the offspring lived compared to the adults, she suspected that wasn’t out of love either. Candice had always believed they were a breeding farm, trying to have male births. What they were doing to ensure such a success rate was a mystery, but they’d managed to produce a boy in every generation as long as their rulers had been keeping records. To achieve it, Candice had little doubt they were doing something illegal.

She smothered another harsh snort. Not that the Pruetts stayed on the Network side of the law all the time either.

“I played there.”

Her heart thudded. Played, laughed, *cried*.

“There was a girl…”

*Come on!* Her entire being was centered on willing him to remember her on his own. It stole her attention.

“You’re a man. You’re not allowed to be here!”

The warning came from a small, dirty girl with bright blue eyes and golden hair.

Candice scowled at her as Daniel tensed. “Get lost!”

Her growl sent the child fleeing into her home, but the damage had been done. He knew who the child was, what had happened to him. Memories of their friendship would have to wait behind the betrayal of his family.

“Sold?” He choked on the words. “By them?”

Candice didn’t lie. “Yes, as with every male they have.”

She had an idea of what to do for the depression or grief she’d expected, but Candice hadn’t considered the fury flashing across his face.

“I’ll understand if you send me away for this,” he stated almost calmly. “I am sorry.”

Before she could guess, he darted down the embankment.

Debris began to hit the shack in hard thuds, bricks slamming straight through the plastic over the roof. The missiles rained fast and heavy, full of anger she hadn’t suspected.

“Slam you!”

Daniel’s enraged scream sent need, clever and hungry, up her spine. That was completely her Daniel and it had been so long!

*Thud! Thud! Crack!*

The last one came from a beautifully hefted concrete block slamming into a support pole. The frame shifted and then collapsed in a spray of dust and debris. It was merely a corner dry out room, shielded from the acid rain, but to have done it with his bare hands impressed Candice.

Daniel kept throwing.

She let him go until he was spent and a hard anger had replaced the hurt.

All the occupants of the street were hovering around their filthy windows and doors now, but none of them approached Daniel when they spotted a Pruett standing tolerantly nearby. As for his cowardly family, there was no sign, but Candice was certain they were huddled in rear rooms, wondering if she would now come in and punish them in the ways he couldn’t. Candice wanted to. If she stuck to the females, she could easily pay the fines. Still, it would tell the Network more than she could afford them to know yet. It also wasn’t why she’d brought him here. Candice smoothed her expression. “Come along.”

Daniel followed without question. He didn’t glance back.

Now unclouded by the discovery that had lain in wait, Daniel noticed the differences as they walked. The rubble faded into a row of thorn trees, shielding the street, protecting them–from his owner. She wasn’t an upstanding member of this community. She was a bounty hunter who had to be tiptoed around because of her affiliation with the Network, because she was dangerous. “Will there be a fine?”

Candice shrugged, enticed by the tiny hint of defiance lingering in his tone. “Don’t let it worry you.”

He sighed miserably. “Even if I need to do it again?”

There was the pain she’d been expecting, but Candice knew how to help him now. She could afford to pay for every brick he felt like throwing. “You’re mine, Daniel. Nothing you can do will change that.”

“You won’t sell me? Ever?”

Her snap came fast. They were on the ground an instant later, with Candice reminding him how much he was wanted.

His anger let him return the kiss. Candice felt another dark section of her soul lighten.

“So, this is Daniel, all grown up.”

Daniel tensed.

Candice reluctantly retreated from his lips. “This is my family.”

Daniel was mortified. He jumped to his feet the instant she rolled off him, cheeks flushed.

“He grew up.”

Mary’s approving tone encouraged Daniel to ask questions. Then he remembered his place and glanced at Candice for approval.

Her scowl snapped his mouth shut.

Candice grunted. He was so reactive to her expressions, so wary of displeasing her. What would ease that?

“Time.” Reading her, Bruce’s answer was comforting.

Candice nodded at her father’s comment. They had that now.

“Um, Candy?”

Heat flared at the name. “Yes, *Angel*?”

Her cousin’s fists clenched. “Have you done much since getting here?”

Candice flashed over their side trip. “There might have been a tense moment. Why?”

“No reason. Just wondering about the squad of troops coming up our driveway.”

Battle mode fell into place. “Have they spotted us yet?”

“In about ten seconds.”

Candice picked a plan and then threw herself at Daniel. “Grab me!”

Angelica understood right away, leading the others. “Don’t hurt him! He’s new!”

She jerked on Candice’s arm, trying to keep her from the cowering male as the adults rushed to help.

“Stop! You’ll hurt him!”

“Halt there!”

The family ignored the order, pretending to struggle as Candice gradually let them pull her away. Daniel stayed on the ground with Angelica’s leg blocking his confused expression.

“You, there! Halt!”

They all turned, showing surprise.

“Who speaks for this family?”

“I’m Marion Pruett.”

Mary’s voice, the one Candice had come to loathe since the change, was perfectly annoyed.

“We’re sorry for the disturbance.” Mary grew resigned and a bit frustrated. “She brought her prize home today.”

The guards scanned Candice, wanting to smirk, but they knew better after observing her matches.

“We have a report of property damage. Witnesses said it was a male.” The captain’s stern gray gaze raked over Daniel. “Fitting *his* description.”

“That coward break something?” Candice snorted scornfully, playing her role. “He’s not worth the ticket I paid to get in. I made the mess. Tell the Malin family to keep better track of their kids! I’m tired of them throwing rocks at our windows.” Candice strode toward the house angrily. “Send the bill here.”

“Go on, now.” Angelica waved at Daniel. “Try to calm her.”

Mary distracted the sentries. “We had hoped she would settle down.”

Angelica completed the performance. “Maybe another episode of the Bachelor Battles?”

Mary cracked a weary smile. “Perhaps.”

Candice listened to the troops chuckling as she and Daniel disappeared. *It’s almost like we’ve done this before.*

Daniel followed Candice inside, staring at the luxury of his new home in surprise while Candice shut the door. She continued to listen, timing the moment the sentries would come around this end of the house to get on their Mopars.

Her home was different from what Daniel had expected after viewing the outside. The few changeling quarters he’d visited were luxurious and full of conveniences the rest of the country lacked. Those apartments had been set up for uncaring, lazy people who just wanted the latest in what was popular. Candy’s home was the opposite. It was like stepping into the past.

There were paintings and sculptures, some vaguely familiar. The one over the table, Daniel recognized right away, but he couldn’t remember the name of the awkwardly smiling lady. He spotted a shiny laser washer for the dishes and a newer wall screen that was first class technology for sure, but everything else was a rustic version from history. A massive stereo system, complete with stacks of discs and speakers placed carefully for surrounding sound, drew his attention. *That alone would get them arrested.* Unapproved music from the old world was a hanging offense.

He quickly turned away, not wanting Candice to see that he’d noticed. On the other end of the round room, Daniel picked out archaic tools and exotic decorations he knew not to touch. Some were so old that they would probably crumble into dust under his clumsy fingers. His new family wasn’t what they appeared to be, that was obvious. Most employees, even as far down the chain as bounty hunters, were strict about following rules, but the Pruetts didn’t abide by that line. Daniel considered the three pale relatives. How did her family view him? Was he the foundling she’d adopted or an intruder to be watched for betrayal?

Candice was observing the situation outside, but she was aware of Daniel’s fascination. The Pruetts didn’t flaunt their wealth. Despite having more UDs than everyone in their town combined, their family home appeared destitute. Stepping into it had forced Daniel to revise that impression.

Plush gray carpeting and well-tended walls surrounded expensive furnishings that included an art collection they would all be executed for if the Network discovered it. They had ventured into dark, dangerous places for these forbidden treasures. The Mona Lisa hanging over the table wasn’t one of her favorites, but it was easily worth as much as their entire savings and no one knew they had it. The rest of the world had only glimpsed it in old books, but the Pruetts were collectors of such things. Their underground storage vault held all sorts of blasts from the past, like the tattered document declaring this a free country. Their rulers would kill anyone caught with something like that, but their family understood history, good and bad, needed to be preserved.

Candice studied Daniel while she listened to her family manipulate the guards. He was shocked, unable to place this well stocked, pleasant interior with the crumbling white dome outside. “Welcome to your new life.”

Daniel gave her an uneasy smile.

Candice went to the window, certain he would follow. The blinds allowed a limited view into the house, but she doubted the troops would pay much attention to it. As the squad began to pass the house, Candice spun Daniel toward the window. The embrace was light, allowing her to see the nudges and mirth of the troops. Then he moved against her in response and Candice was lost. His taste was enough to make her drunk.

“Well, this may get old.”

Angelica’s slightly jealous voice made Daniel tense again, but Candice refused to let go this time.

“Did he really do all that damage?” Angelica asked as everyone came in. “The fine is huge.”

Candice stayed against him as the sentries rolled out of sight. “Some overdue justice, don’t you think?”

“Yes…” Angelica answered thoughtfully.

“Not yet.”

“But we need another hand.”

When Candice spun from the room, Daniel knew to follow. “I’d like to help if I can.”

Candice didn’t respond to his softly spoken offer; she didn’t need to. She’d given her answer.

“Can I come up?”

Angelica’s voice was full of humor, something Candice relied on at times. She said nothing, granting permission. The upstairs, all five rooms of it, had been hers for as long as she could remember. Other than the cleaners, no one was ever allowed up here. Candice was free to be her true self up here–*changed*.

The family home was arrayed in a circle. Old wood framed it into a spiral of chambers that all had adjoining egresses. They were Pruetts. They liked extra exits. The second floor was reached by steep, rounded stairs. The dark paneling helped keep it cool despite the height. It also held in heat and made the house warmer in the winter than most of the aboveground homes of their neighbors. On the walls downstairs were art and family items. Up here were the dark, mysterious collections Candice had gathered for herself during their bounty runs. Her favorite was the black Jesus on the cross. Had the old ones really believed God was like a man? How could anything so complex, so completely self-sufficient as a planet, be created by a being like humans? People didn’t create. *We only kill.*

Angelica had missed their daily workouts. They had no sooner entered the upstairs hall, than Candice had to shove Daniel to the side so she could deflect an attack from the girl. Angelica slammed against her hip, sending Candice into the wall with her new strength.

“Rough week?” Candice teased as she caught herself.

Angelica answered with a wild lunge that Candice caught and used to throw the girl into the wooden wall.

“Slam it!”

Candice laughed at her cousin’s very real frustration, causing Angelica’s profile to tighten.

Candice watched her pull the rage back in. Angelica hadn’t been able to do that before she left. “Very good.”

She wondered what Angelica had suffered during her time with the Korean Killer, but the doctors at the complex had proclaimed her fine, so Candice wouldn’t ask. Pruett women were like that. If they had a problem they couldn’t handle, they gathered help. Until then, their business was their own.

Angelica grinned, a harsh mirror of Candice’s matches.

Candice held out a hand, then yanked her cousin to her feet. “Come on. I want to get Daniel settled.” She slung an arm around Angelica’s thin shoulders and turned.

Daniel was cowering where she had shoved him. His entire body screamed fear.

Angelica observed him. “He’s kinda jumpy.”

Candice shrugged as Daniel flushed. “He just needs time.”

Candice came toward him slowly, making sure to control her expression when he flinched. She held out a hand. “Come?”

He responded carefully, taking the light grip she offered.

Candice’s skin tingled, sending more heat into the furnace as they walked into her bedroom. She fastened the door behind them, ready to start his retraining. The first thing she did was leave him alone. “We’ll share this bed on my good nights. For others, you’ll have the adjoining chamber. You should go there now and put away your things.”

He was out of her sight an instant later.

Candice frowned at her flash of concern. His actions today proved the fear was weaker than his anger. She would use that to pull him out of his misery. What the Network had destroyed, she would patiently rebuild.

Daniel was almost unable to believe Candice wasn’t beating him for what he’d done, for the fine she now had to pay. She was so different from the females he’d had contact with at the complex. If not for the physical gratification that he knew how to hand out, he would have no idea how to survive her ownership.

He scanned the rounded bed, and then the small egress indicating a wash area. He stared in surprise. *This is all for me?*

It had been set up for a man, from the dark blue walls to the plain blankets on the enormous bed. Braced with tall pillars, it wasn’t as large as the bed in Candy’s chamber, but it was more than Daniel was used to. He found himself fearing it a little. *How alone will I feel in that empty space?*

Daniel glanced around from where he stood. There were enough clothes and personal gear to outfit him for a year, he estimated, and felt his heart begin to relax from the hard ball it had clenched into upon seeing who had won his papers. Candice didn’t have plans to sell him if she had spent this amount of UDs on his future care. She intended to keep him. It suddenly occurred to Daniel that she was more faith based than he’d first thought. To gather so much, she’d been certain she would win. It was something he hadn’t expected from the brutal fighter.

Remembering she wanted him to unpack, Daniel got on it, admiring the soft textures she’d chosen. At the complex, new outfits were given every six months, with no exceptions. After repeated washings, the jumpers became threadbare. The clothes he now had would allow him the decency of being well covered, no matter how many outfits his owner tore up. In his heart, holes began to heal.

Daniel got lost in exploring the gifts, but exhaustion soon had him stretching out on a corner of the bed, surrounded by his new possessions. A week ago, he’d been cowering in his cot, waiting for Rankin’s heavy service call. Now, he was…home?

*Yes.*

Daniel already knew he would come to love it here, but could he break through Candy’s fire and ice to give them both peace? Considering who she was, the odds weren’t good, but he owed it to her to try. She’d nearly died to win his freedom. The least he could do was put the same effort into their future.

# Chapter Ten

**Network Run**

**1**

**I**t was quiet.

After the days they’d spent at the complex, Candice wasn’t sure Daniel was capable of that unless there was a problem. She stepped toward his door with a nagging sense that she’d forgotten something. She hadn’t searched the room before he went in, but Angelica had been here…

Her hand turned the knob before she stopped, remembering these weren’t just her chambers anymore. Smirking slightly at the satisfied sentiment, Candice knocked.

“Come in.”

His tenor sent that familiar ache into her heart. She pushed it away, frustrated with her lack of control.

Candice entered, but didn’t go any further. She wanted him to believe this, at least, was his so he would have a sanctuary. She had dens all over their hunting grounds.

“Thank you. I’ll try to take care of it all.”

Candice was glad he was aware of the cost of replacing things, but she needed him to understand that it didn’t matter to her. With a deliberate move, she flipped the window open and shoved a box out.

Candice started to explain…

“What the hell?” Coming from the ground below, Angelica’s voice was angry.

Candice snorted laughter at the image of a box suddenly falling from the sky as Angelica walked under the window. Talk about timing. She snapped the window shut with an honest chuckle and finally took in Daniel’s reaction.

“Why did you do that?!”

*He’s mad!*

To her shock, Daniel stomped to the exit, hand reaching for the knob… Then he remembered who he was yelling at.

Daniel expected her to be angry, but she was amused!

Not understanding, but determined to reclaim the gift, he stomped from the room without permission. On the way down the stairs, a sound rang through his head and stuck there. Candy was laughing. It sent flashes of that dream girl into his brain, bouncing around, opening doors.

Daniel stopped on the stairs, rotating toward the sound like a hunter scenting prey.

He wasn’t the only one it drew. Her parents came to the bottom of the stairs to stare in shock. Daniel also felt her furious little relative nearby listening, and it took away the anger, replacing it with curiosity. “I guess you haven’t heard that much.”

His comment pulled a snort from her father and a pointed look from her mother.

“When you were taken, she changed. We haven’t seen or heard from *that* girl in eight years.”

The parents resumed what they had been doing as Daniel’s mind flew over the newest piece of his puzzle. He’d been Candy’s friend. *Before the change, she wanted me.*

It was a powerful moment, knowing he’d had at least one person he trusted enough to get attached to. The rest of his memories were ugly enough to make him wish the flashes would stop. He didn’t need to know everything that had happened, but he did yearn to have those images of Candice in the proper order, rather than the choppy pictures he worried might always be there.

Daniel went outside, spotting her cousin still by the clothes. He gathered the items into the box quickly. He wanted to say something: *Sorry they fell on you,* but he knew better. Changelings didn’t handle the sound of male voices well. Even the Den Mothers had insisted on silence. Candice was the single exception he’d ever known.

As Daniel turned to go, Angelica stepped in front of him.

He instinctively glanced up to the window, already viewing Candice as his protector.

Angelica noticed. She grinned at him.

Daniel was leery of her, but Candice clearly trusted the smaller woman, so he decided to give her a chance. Angelica didn’t seem to be hateful, just in pain. “Sorry if it hit you.”

Angelica paled, sight flickering to pink.

Daniel hurried around her, worried again over the new rules he needed to learn. He had no idea what was expected of him, and he was so tired! He’d only allowed himself a few minutes rest. Veins were throbbing in his temples.

Daniel entered her open bedroom door with a quick glance that confirmed Candice was still in his. Daniel kept his steps steady. He had to stop tiptoeing around her. It was embarrassing, but worse, it angered her and that wouldn’t help his plan to bond.

Daniel came into the chamber and set the box where it had been before, then focused on his new owner. A small smile played along her lips. She was warmer, more relaxed than he’d witnessed so far*. She likes being at home,* he realized. How nice that must be.

“Are you done for now?”

He nodded at her amused question, unable to miss the way her shirt clung to her hips. Clothed, she was a dangerous foe to be recognized on sight. Clad for bed, Candice was an exotic, tattooed temptation with fiery skin and sharp needs.

Candice saw the bags under his bloodshot eyes, the wild hair he liked to be neat, and took pity. “Get in bed.”

Daniel flinched.

Candice sighed. “*You*, not me.”

He flushed again, but moved toward the bed as she took up a seat on the wide ledge. She’d often laid here as a child to stare out the window at his house. Now, he was in *her* room, pushing his boots off to climb into her bed. The moment was intense, but Candice kept her heat to herself. He needed to sleep.

Despite her good intentions, the sight of him removing his cloak and tossing it over the headboard like a man getting ready for a fun evening made Candice stand up. *I can use a nap.*

Candice took off her cloak and weapons belt, then boots, before dropping heavily onto the soft bed. She turned away, letting her lids shut. She had dreamed of sharing this bed with him, but she wasn’t sure she’d really believed it would happen. She had bought supplies and made her plans because that was how she was wired. She wouldn’t accept anything less than what she wanted, but she had felt fear. Now that he was here, she could breathe again.

She listened to him get settled, wondering if the short conversation with her parents had given him a flash of their past. She’d listened to them with changeling ears, hoping.

Daniel realized she was tired and relaxed. Other than a few ten-minute droops when his eyes refused to stay open any longer, he hadn’t slept on the train. He was grateful for the books and the light she’d provided, and still surprised by the size of the crate he’d been shoved into. It had even held a port-o, which kept him from arriving in a humiliating state. She obviously cared about him…

Daniel didn’t remember dozing off, but he came awake to the sensation of a woman lying on his chest. Candice was snoring softly.

He guessed she’d been there for a while from the wide drool spot on his shirt. She was open in this moment, no longer a hardened killer, but the little girl he’d loved, all grown up. The past snagged him. Daniel went willingly into the grayness this time as a new memory rippled over his mind.

*“I won’t eat them.”*

*“Yes, you will.”*

*“You can’t make me!”*

*“Wanna bet?”*

*Daniel was under the concrete slabs, one of his favorite hiding places because of the graffiti the runaways had left. The girl had tossed the apples into his hideout. “I didn’t ask for them!”*

*“If I come in there, I’ll make you eat them all right now and get the shits.”*

*“Go away!” He was still crying from the awful words his older sisters had beaten him with and the sight of a Pruett blocking his escape route made Daniel strike out like a cornered rat. “I don’t need your charity!”*

*“Fine, starve. Don’t know why I tried.” The girl moved away.*

*Daniel waited, not sure if it was a trick. His family hated the Pruetts, called them killers of the worst sort, but the apples, well…he hadn’t had an apple in his whole life and there were five of them!*

*It took Daniel until dark to finish the gift, sitting in that fly-infested shade with apple juice all over his chin and seeds littering the apocalyptic rubble. He even buried a few of them in the gritty sand, not thinking they would grow, but in his heart, the boy needed something to hope for.*

Daniel woke again at a louder, uneasy snort from the changeling on his chest, but the memory remained vivid. He had been slapped for the stains on his clothes and the carpet the next day, but it had begun a friendship that he’d never completely forgotten. He had tracked her down on her own turf a week later, sitting in one of the deadly thorn trees outside this very house. Candice had smirked when she came out for school and saw him. After that, they’d been together every day. The friendship had held him, given him strength to cling to, but it was still hard to place adult Candice with his little friend. In his concentration, Daniel didn’t realize she had stopped snoring.

Candice’s normal process upon waking was to examine the chinks in her control and shore them up before facing a day among her family. She never relaxed around them. She feared it would also be that way with Daniel. She was so afraid of doing it again! The injury she’d given Mary was unforgivable some days. The only way to cope was to ensure that she was in complete control at all times. With Daniel, that would be a struggle. Candice began the day as she did any other. She took a deep breath.

Daniel’s smells swirled into her nose and set fire to everything they touched. Musky and sharp, she wasn’t ready for the change, but it was coming. Her fingers tangled in the blanket as she struggled to keep from flipping into an animal.

“I still hate apples.”

Those words told her he was remembering how they’d met. She snorted, distracted from the rising need. “You shouldn’t have eaten them all at once.”

“You should have told me.”

“I kind of did.”

Daniel chuckled, but sadness and anger were clear in his answer.

“I’d never had one.”

Candice hadn’t known; her heart clenched. She rose up to stare at him. “You’ll never be neglected again.”

Daniel slowly smiled. He reached out a big hand to smooth a lock of hair behind her ear. “Thank you, for not forgetting about me.”

“I’ve needed you my entire life.” Candice leaned into his caress, dazed from his simple touch. “There was no choice to be made.”

She felt him shift, but she waited to see what he would do at her admission. Did he know of true emotions…of love?

Daniel gently drew her closer. His lips pressed to hers, but he only lingered for a second of fire before retreating.

Wanting a real kiss, Candice dropped her head to his chest. When he sighed lowly, the noise rumbled through his body and into her heart like a bullet. *He sounds happy. That’s better than a kiss.*

Daniel was surprised by every new thing he learned about her, but even more, by her control. It made him bolder. She hadn’t snapped once and the only blood she’d drawn was from light nail wounds that were already mostly gone. He was remembering their past, starting to relax with her. Would she take him soon? He couldn’t stop the tensing of his arms or the rising of his trousers.

Candice noticed both. Her breath caught, nostrils flaring.

Daniel heard her nails rip into the sheet next to his hip and chose to confront his fear. He pushed the rules into a mental file, locking them up tight. From now on, he would play this game by instinct.

“Candy…” He knew what it did to her, to hear his voice, but he was guessing about the name. Daniel sensed he had the right to call her that and more.

It was confirmed when she merely tensed further. “Yes, Daniel?”

“It’s the start of a new day.”

He knew she understood his meaning by the way the sexual tension, already sparking between them, flared up hot enough to burn. Daniel wasn’t positive which way she would go or even which way he was rooting for. She was so dangerous…so sexy.

“As you would.”

Daniel’s heart thumped as delight spread across his lips. It seemed he *had* been rooting.

Daniel wasn’t as careful as he’d intended to be when he slid a hand around her waist and pulled her fully on top of his hard body. His other hand went behind her tattooed neck and tugged her down for a taste of that sweet mouth. He wanted her. Now was as good a time as any to make certain she knew.

His tongue dipped inside her mouth, catching her groan. It shot through his body like the drugs as Daniel rolled them over, pressing his hardness against her with a sharp thrust that sent blood pounding into both heads.

Daniel deepened the kiss, automatically protecting himself from her razor-like claws as she writhed beneath him. He stroked her sleepy skin, full of her taste, her sounds.

Candice mewled, driving him into sliding a hand under her shirt to cup a full breast. He squeezed, thrusting.

“Candice…?”

Candice ignored the call, but Angelica’s voice made Daniel roll away.

*Damn it!*

“Candice?”

“We’ll be there!” Her annoyed shout killed the rest of the mood. Sighing, Candice stood up. “Get a shower if you like and then come downstairs. I’ll be waiting.”

Daniel went to the washroom right away, glad she was giving him instructions to follow.

Candice tried not to think about the flames or her charring skin as she laid out what she hoped he would wear. *He looks so good in blue.*

**2**

Daniel sat where she pointed, keeping his chin down as her mother handed out heaping plates that smelled better than anything he’d scrounged from the Network kitchens. The council didn’t want bachelors to get too big or too strong.

Daniel slid his hands under his legs to keep from reaching for a spoon before anyone else did. He felt like he was starving again. That was how Rankin had gotten under his skin at first. Regular meals were hard to come by, even for a games prize. When she’d offered deals, he’d taken them.

Daniel bobbed thanks as a drink was set down.

Mary smiled. “You’re welcome.”

The friendly tone made him stare. It took a moment to understand Candice’s parent was in stage three. *How does a meek woman run a bounty hunting family?*

The wooden table was wide, leaving plenty of space between Daniel and the younger female to his left. The bags under Angelica’s eyes said she had passed a rough night. He wondered why she didn’t have a mate yet. *Maybe she does,* he amended. He turned his attention away before it drew hers.

The light from the window was a pretty mix of orange and purple. The soft breeze and the scents of nature caught his attention. Daniel hadn’t been allowed outside after being taken to the complex, so every minute around nature was now fascinating to him. He frowned, thinking he might–

*Squawk!*

A large black shape with broad wings landed on the window ledge and croaked again*. Squawk!* Beady orbs stared intently at the family.

Daniel watched it hop around in delight. He’d only viewed birds in books. “What is it?”

The silence made him glance around the table to find everyone observing him, trying not to be affected by his reaction.

Daniel flushed. He wasn’t supposed to speak unless spoken to. He waited nervously for a punishment. Would her mother be lenient?

“It’s a raven.”

The tone was warm enough to get Daniel to look up. He didn’t see any anger and immediately pushed his luck. “Are they pets?”

That drew a frown from Candice.

Daniel cringed.

“No.” Mary’s tone was grave. “Nature turned against mankind. Pets are not safe.”

Daniel nodded as if he understood, vowing to keep his mouth shut unless he was asked a question.

“A fresh contract came this morning.”

Not expecting a call, Candice glanced up from her bowl to see her mother’s frown.

Mary added more details. “They want four of us on this run.”

Candice gestured in response to the raised brow directed at Daniel. *Do you want him to hear?* “Go ahead.” Better he saw what they did for a living now, so he would understand the life he would lead.

Mary slid the disc into the wall screen. They all listened to the computer-generated voice as they ate.

*“Hello and good wishes, Pruett family. The Network sends their regards. We hope to employ your services once again. Your successful record with this particular convict will earn you the standard fee of two million UDs. Full stock credits will be provided upon your acceptance, as usual.”*

Mary pushed another button; a familiar profile appeared on the screen.

“Baker!”

Angelica’s growl echoed the exasperation Candice felt. It was odd that a contract for her lover had come on the same day she’d brought her mate home.

“Can’t they build a slam to hold him?” Angelica complained.

“How many kills does he have now?” Bruce was already certain of his daughter’s choice. He was able to guess at her intentions. Mary had chosen not to go against their rulers. Candice would pick differently.

Mary hit the information button with a resigned sigh. “Thirteen.”

“What extras are they offering?” Angelica asked, letting Candice eat.

“Rations, weapons, a bonus for being fast… Oh, wow.”

Hearing such a fiery emotion as surprise from the burnt-out woman drew everyone.

“If we make the time limit, they’ll throw in a breeding pass. The same if he’s brought in dead.”

Candice winced. Dead or alive had finally been called. What had Baker done while she was away?

“For a male child right?” Angelica wanted that clear. “A female would have to be aborted.”

“No. Even for *twin* girls.”

Candice’s heart skipped. She could have a family! *But I won’t get the pass,* she realized. It would come in her mother’s name. Mary would have need of it when she and Daniel moved into their own home. Mary might want to refill these rooms with life. *For her then*, Candice decided. *A small payment for the damage I’ve done, and for the chance to tell Baker goodbye in person. I owe him that.*

“I’m in.” Candice dug into the remaining stew. She slowly became aware of the horrified attention on her. *Daniel*.

He was pale, almost ready to panic. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes.” Candice hoped he wanted to come, because she wasn’t positive she could stand to leave him here. “You’d go along?”

“Yes!”

His eagerness pleased all of them.

Candice raised a brow at her father. “You’ll see to it while we get things ready?”

“Of course.”

There was no hint of how much Bruce was looking forward to easing the younger man’s fears, but Candice knew. They all did and approved. Angelica’s parents had been away for a while now, tracking down a fugitive for a high bidder. Bruce missed their company. With Daniel around, his needs would be met, too.

Candice could tell she had pleased her mother with the choice. Daniel however, still appeared scared. She distracted him. “Has the fine come yet?”

Mary nodded. “Yes. It’s paid.”

Candice assumed it was a surprise for Daniel to realize their household reported to her. Mary was the legal ruler the council preferred to deal with, but she had been grooming Candice to take over since she was born. Shortly after Candice *changed*, Mary had gladly passed the reins. She didn’t have enough rage left, no edge to rely on to ensure their survival. She’d found her happiness with Bruce.

“What about the meeting?” Angelica asked.

“Contact along the way.” Typing on the keypad, Mary was making the arrangements. She’d also been certain that Candice would accept the run.

Candice grunted. Last time they had captured Baker quickly, only to have her take him and hole up for a month of blissful relief. Candice had surrendered him afterward, but she’d also given him a knife as they parted, so maybe she didn’t agree with their rulers on that one, either.

“Do you want to listen to the clip?”

Candice glanced at Daniel, seeing he’d gotten the courage to ask her father quiet questions. She nodded.

Mary switched it on, then took her seat as the computer voice floated through the kitchen.

*“Richard Baker is responsible for thirteen murders. He recently escaped by slitting the throats of the transport guards while being taken to the Network’s underground compound. With Baker, are two other fugitives: Cowan James and a female, Sammi Moores. Both have separate rewards. Last known location is Jericho. Network forces were ambushed and suffered heavy losses there. The council prefers none of the trio be brought in alive, but they will still pay for captures. Please contact the representative for your zone with further questions or supply requests that are not already on the Pruett family lists. On behalf of all the citizens in New Network lands, thank you and happy hunting.”*

Silence filled the warm chamber as the others waited for Candice to sort through it. They usually hunted non-stop and then spent a day resting before setting the ambush. With Daniel at her side, she would be distracted. Plus, a four man crew for Baker was light. “We should bring in the trackers.”

“I agree.” Angelica had been thinking the same thing. They both focused on the person who was legally allowed to make the call.

“In the morning.”

They could tell by Mary’s tone that she wanted to do it this time, and again, it surprised Candice. Mary hated the Snake women.

Candice gestured. “We need to add up the total payday so we’ll know how to record the split.”

“I’ll do it.” Her father moved gracefully toward the wall screen.

Candice pushed herself away from the cluttered table.

The instant she got up, Daniel began cleaning it. He put things where he’d seen them taken from, neatly stacking the dishes for washing. At the complex, bachelors always did the cleaning.

No one spoke as they studied his practiced, involuntary movements. It had been a while since they’d had a trained male around. The family had forgotten how deeply the former captives had also been *changed*.

“Daniel.”

He turned at once, worrying over their stares.

“Leave it. We have a cleaner.”

He flushed. “Sorry.”

Candice felt sympathy, but she said nothing else, though she could feel her parents hoping that she would. Daniel had been broken. It would take time to repair.

“Seven even is 1.4 million Universal Denominations each.”

That was a good haul. Candice turned to her father. “Do a quick weapons evaluation with him while Angel and I sort the gear. We’ll leave early.”

Angelica fell in on her heels, waves of fury radiating at the use of the name.

Candice waited until they were almost to the egress before spinning around. “Now pull it back in!”

It was a command from a level two changeling, harsh and penetrating. Angelica’s red eyes flashed, fading to pink as her fists clenched in effort. A snarl, tighter fists, and then black glared.

Impressed, Candice strode to the door. Only three years into the disease, her control was remarkable. *Even I wasn’t able to master it so fast.*

“Thanks.” Angelica hadn’t wanted to attack, but the fire was consuming.

Candice slung an arm around her shoulders. “I know what it feels like to be called by the old name. It hurts.”

“Yeah.”

As they went out, Daniel’s concern burned into them. Candice didn’t have to see the worry to know it was there. Fear of being sold or left behind, worry about not being able to keep up, but more, worry over her safety against a hardened killer. *He may have observed a few matches, but he hasn’t witnessed what I can really do. Neither has the Network.*

She’d had a fresh look for the last week–views of abuse, cruelty, and humiliation. Shouldn’t something endangered be handled carefully? Shouldn’t it be gently encouraged to repopulate? Was there any excuse for the brutality that Daniel and others had been subjected to over the centuries?

These contemplations had kept her company on the train and left Candice with a single conclusion. Something needed to be done and she was one of the few people who could pull it off. Her vow all those years ago rose to mock her.

Candice shuddered, unhappily accepting the shift in her plans for the future. She’d hoped to let go of her hatred and retire with her mate. Instead, at the end of this run, she might be tracking through Gatlinburg or even the Borderlands with her ears to the ground. There had always been rebellions against Network control, pockets of resistance lurking.Another mental shudder came. *I could lend assistance to them.*

“What are you thinking about?”

With anyone else, Candice would have lied. “Taking them down.”

“Nice.” Angelica knew exactly who her cousin was referring to. “I’m in!”

Angelica’s eager answer sent heat rushing into both their bodies, making Candice chuckle. Never mess with the Pruetts. When you challenged one, you ended up facing them all.

**3**

**New Network City**

“It would have been better if she had died.”

“Yes.” Riana led the way as the pair walked through the tunnel to their living quarters in the top of the complex.

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Terry asked. Riana was ruthless, not reckless. Terry was surprised her lover was supporting Juli on this.

“As much as we can be. The boss didn’t give me a chance to interfere.”

“The Pruetts took the run for Baker. It seems like the grand plan, whatever it is, is working.”

“Yes.” Riana was deep in thought on bachelors and tests, trying to figure out that grand plan in time to mold things to her will. She hadn’t made it onto the council by being submissive.

There was silence in the lavish halls of the upper complex, but outside, the streets were alive with chaos. A bomb had destroyed half a block this morning, taking out a row of food shops. Guards were currently searching apartments and executing suspected traitors. The blast had shaken the dome around the complex. The rebels were growing bolder.

“I don’t trust them. The Pruetts aren’t loyal.” Meaning they weren’t in debt to the Network, and therefore, controllable.

“But they are good at what they do.” Riana was hopeful. “Baker could be ours in mere days.”

“I still can’t believe he’s alive after all the trouble we went to with the last ambush.”

“I told the boss to use the Pruetts a long time ago. I didn’t think anything would come of it until I saw Daniel’s old file and the pickup address.”

“Well, we’re doing it now. You’re sure they’ll find him?”

“Yes. Baker needs help getting the other escaped slaves to the safe zone.”

Terry was still worried. “If they make it into the Borderlands, we’ll lose him.”

“We’ll follow the Pruetts right to the stronghold where the rebels are all gathering.”

“What if they join the rebellion?”

“Plans are in place for that contingency,” Riana repeated mockingly.

“Does Candice know he’s a rebel?”

“Not that we’re aware of. Baker inheriting it from his father happened while she was at the Time Trials in Adelphia.”

“Won’t the rebels get suspicious if the Pruetts show up and then there’s an attack?”

“It won’t matter if we take out the current leader. We have moles trying to get in from a dozen different sources, but these games are always the best draw because they’re so popular. It’s the perfect place to dangle bait.”

“What’s so special about these prizes that the rebels want them?” Terry asked. As the council’s current go-to for information, Riana was the best one to ask.

Riana confided that answer in a low whisper so they weren’t overheard. “With these breeders, the male population could recuperate enough for them to become a common element in society again.”

“We can’t let that happen!”

“No shit.”

“Have you seen the crowd out there?” Terry opened the gate to their plush apartment.

“Yes. Twice the normal numbers and they’re all changelings. We’ve doubled the guards around the dome.”

“Good. I doubt all of those females are under our control.”

“They came to root for the Pruett.” Riana locked the barrier behind them. “They’ll leave soon.”

“I hope so. If we shut the dome, it will interfere with the games. That would be very, very bad.”

“Yes. The breeding programs could be hurt, too.”

“Why don’t we do a series of reruns, like the short clips we use during equipment failures?” Terry suggested.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll add it to the list of preparations for the power meeting. We might go off the air for a few hours during the action. It’ll be good to have clips ready.”

“You think the west will fire on us?”

Riana shrugged. “Maybe, but we have our bunker. Try not to worry over it. Plans really are in place.”

Outside the complex, screams of the poorer viewers rose to drown out the inside audience of the current game–Water Land.

“It’s getting more violent. We’re losing control.”

Riana nodded. “We’ll be fine once the Pruetts take us to Baker. He’s the only leader the rebels have had with the strength to get them to work together.”

“I wish the serum was ready.”

“So do I. Being unable to lie would make it to our advantage to capture Baker. Since it usually kills the subject before they can talk, we’ll have to be content with his death. We’ll clear the other groups, the other problems, the same way.”

“And the power meeting?”

“It’s all set. Everyone will be there.”

“Good.” Terry’s voice twisted with greed as they discussed the conspiracy. “One or two blasts will take care of them all.”

“No more sending trains of supplies and no more threats.” Riana picked a meal and went to the table. “The west coast has had us under their thumb long enough. Now, it’s our turn to rule the country.”

“What about our other plans?”

“No progress yet. The Pruetts are too careful to be caught and too smart to be tricked. I haven’t found a way to get a token of favor.”

“You’ll keep working on it?”

“Of course. Our council needs a new leader. Letting one of these wild Pruetts handle it will be poetic justice.”

# Chapter Eleven

**The First of Forever**

**1**

**“A**ll done?” Mary asked from the entrance of their underground storage garage.

Angelica was tightening down the fuel cap next to the Mopars. “Locked and loaded.”

Mary’s face looked younger. Candice’s mood eased into something resembling peace. Baker alone was a challenge. With two other killers to capture and her mate along for the ride, it would be stressful. Mary was preparing for it. Candice knew she should do the same by soaking up all the good moments that she could now, while there was time.

“He can shoot.” Mary braced as she finished the update. “He asked to join us.”

Candice let out a growl that quickly faded. Daniel had to be near her. If he could be helpful, that was better. “His split goes in *his* name.”

Mary went to sign Daniel onto their crew.

Angelica’s voice came, curiously low. “What odds would you give me in the games?”

It wasn’t as if Candice hadn’t been expecting the question. She gave the girl a full blast of her changeling grin, but only Angelica’s nostrils flared at the direct challenge.

“Better than mine were.”

Angelica’s pale face held a secret.

Candice shrugged. “We’ll start working on it at your word.”

The younger girl spun from the shed before her mouth could betray how bad the agony was, knowing she could take a little more.

Being in the house with two males would be more than many changelings could stand. The sound of their voices alone was torture, one of the reasons Bruce spoke so rarely. Candice held little doubt he would teach Daniel to do the same. They would all help Angelica adjust.

Finished with the preparations of their vehicles, the sound of steady firing drew Candice against her will. She didn’t want to frighten Daniel, but the sounds implied he was doing well enough that her presence may not matter. Her father would never allow him to waste so many rounds. The council was generous, but not endless and the Pruetts had stocks to maintain. Daniel must be hitting what he aimed at.

Candice came around the shed to observe.

Daniel instantly seemed too young, too vulnerable to have a gun in his hand, but there was no denying the fit was nice. It gave him another level of attraction that was hard to resist. His cloak was pushed aside to allow access to the holster he’d been given and the thick muscles of his arms flexed against the material of his shirt with each gentle pull of the trigger. Daniel, with one of her guns... *Heat.*

Daniel felt her watching, but he tried to keep his attention on the targets. Her father, Bruce, was nice. The lesson had been fun so far.

“That’s enough.”

Her timbre was laced with that edge of hunger again, the one Daniel was coming to think of as her control line. He carefully handed the gun to her observant father. “Thank you.”

“Sure. We’ll do more lessons.”

Daniel secured his cloak and felt the heat in her gaze ease a bit. She’d been leering at him. *Good*. That was one of the three things he’d been advised to do, though he wasn’t confident about flashing his body. Bruce thought once they bonded fully, Candice would burn down and be safer, like her mother, but Daniel wasn’t certain he wanted that either.

“I’ll be inside.” Bruce left them alone.

Daniel stayed facing away, thinking about all she’d done for him. Had Candice known her father would answer his questions? Every word had brought him closer to full memory.

“Daniel.”

Of course, she knew. The tremor of worry in her voice made him offer comfort. “I’m not mad that you couldn’t stop me from being sold,” Daniel guessed, accurately from her flinch. “How could I be? You came for me.”

Her face slowly melted into the girl he’d dreamed of.

“I’m sorry it took me so long.”

Those words broke his heart, but in a good way, as well as bad. His family had sold him. Candice had held to her promise*. I can trust her.* “I’m sorry I haven’t remembered everything.”

Candice melted. *“I remember!”*

Instinct said she wanted to be held. Daniel came toward her carefully, but without the fear he usually carried. He slid his arms around her and felt the heat of her changeling body burst into flames at the contact.

His willingness to comfort her was more than a spark or a fire, or even a blaze. It was an eruption, but not of lust–of caring. It smothered the furious rage, bringing a sense of peace that made Candice clutch his shoulder in a sob of relief. *I’ve missed him so much!* When his big hand rubbed her arms, Candice melted into his embrace.

They stayed that way for a long moment. She had her soulmate, and though he didn’t remember her exactly, he was here. It was incredible.

Around them, the dusk turned black and they faded into shadows. A romantic aura of being alone invaded the row of slumbering thorn trees, but Candice forced herself to let go of him. Daniel had been severely mistreated. She had to give him space to adjust.

His grip loosened reluctantly, not wanting to let her go.

Candice sought to ease the sudden tension with the brush of her hand against his cheek, but he turned his head at the same time to place those full lips directly under her fingertips. Then he kissed them, pushing both their limits.

Unable to resist, Candice locked their mouths as heat raged. Every sign of his willingness was relief and torture.

Taking advantage of the privacy, Daniel surrendered to the passion and let her lips carry him into that vivid world of pleasure only she induced. In his eagerness to be bonded with her, Daniel forgot the other two things he’d been told, distracted from who she was and where they were. When the ground suddenly pressed into his spine, all he could do was arch at the sensation of her body lying across his.

“Oh, get a room!” Angelica snarled as she went by.

The couple laughed as the girl disappeared into the house. The sound of their combined amusement sent Daniel into a fresh flash of the past.

*“You do it.”*

“*I’ll get punished.”*

“*Not if I tell them it was me. Go on now, take a turn. I know you want to.”*

*Daniel raised his arm to throw the egg at the window and lost his grip. He squeezed…*

*The egg cracked open on top of his skull, splattering them both in goo.*

*Candy laughed at his expression, hand coming up to swipe at the yolk. “That wasn’t what I had in mind.”*

They’d been friends. Knowing he’d had one was still something of a shock after all the isolation of the complex. Daniel pressed his lips to her cheek. “At least there’s no egg this time.”

Candice chuckled, sharing the memory with him as they stood and walked toward the house. “Don’t give Angelica any ideas. She still owes me one for the box.”

Daniel kept an arm around her as they walked and was glad he had when he felt her approval of the boldness. He’d decided if he was going to bounty hunt with her and her family, he’d better try to gather some courage. Daniel wasn’t positive he was cut out for being brave, but if he could be with Candice, the bachelor was willing to try. It was amazing how fast his bond to her was growing. He was in awe, with a fading fear that she was breaking through every minute they spent together. It was wonderful. The bachelors in the complex wouldn’t even recognize him now.

**2**

Three hours later, Daniel couldn’t wait to be in bed. He wasn’t used to this schedule. The Network always had them in bed by dark, but he and Candice were sitting on the couch adjacent the kitchen, listening to a collection of music he’d never heard. The soft tones were dragging him into sleep against his will. The Pruetts were still going over the details of the trip and Daniel had no resistance to the comforting sensation of being with them. Candice was against his hip, where she’d settled them upon coming in. Daniel inhaled deeper as a draft blew her scent over him. *I could get used to this*. Daniel smiled.

He failed to notice the sudden silence until her hand slid to his arm. Her fingers were gentle, a caress. Daniel shut his lids at the contact. Affection was foreign to him and he absorbed it like a sponge. This was what he’d hope for as he lay in that buggy Network cot–not an owner, but a *lover*. As the conversation resumed, Daniel let the feel of her hand carry him to a place of warm comfort.

Candice didn’t look away as the others left the chamber. It was later than they usually stayed up on the night before a run, but the atmosphere had been good for everyone. It was a drastic change for the family to see her being tender with someone. Their thoughts were easy to guess. They were glad she’d been strong enough to bring him home, but they were even happier to find out that he was what she needed. They were noticing the differences, too.

“Daniel.”

His eyes snapped open, fear flashing across his sleepy face as he realized they were alone. “Sorry, I didn’t mean–”

Candice stood up before he could finish the apology. “You’re allowed!”

Daniel paled at her mood flip.

Suddenly very tired, Candice drew in a deep breath. “I get upset easily. It’s not at you.”

She could tell he didn’t understand. Candice stayed away from him as she struggled to explain why she was always angry. “What happened to you hurts me. When I see signs of it, I…”

“Want to spill blood.”

Candice gave him the games grin. “I want to *taste* it.”

“I’d be there for that!” Daniel swore.

His face was twisted in the hatred she’d begun to suspect lurked in all slaves. Satisfied he understood, Candice held out a hand. “Maybe you will.”

They went upstairs with an awkward silence between them. Candice could feel him wondering about the sleeping arrangements, worrying over it.

She let him off the hook, despite not knowing how she would sleep without him. “You can stay in your room, if you like.”

She smothered her disappointment when Daniel chose the second door, pulling him back for a fast press of her lips to his that sent need flaring into alertness.

Candice searched his flushed face for some hint of what she needed. “Good night, Daniel.”

“Good night.” He trembled, waiting.

Candice spun away, aware of her thin control. *It will be safer for him not to be in my bed yet anyway*, Candice consoled her wounded heart. *We have plenty of nights to spend together. I don’t have to rush.*

**3**

Daniel huddled under the blankets of the huge bed an hour later, no longer sleepy. He was determined not to be a coward anymore, but it was so loud here! There was no layer of rubber to muffle sound or provide fire protection, and he kept his mouth tightly shut to hold in the groans as the noises increased. Why had he chosen to be alone? He wanted to be with Candice in her chamber, her bed, her safety.

Outside, the storm picked up. Daniel heard every noise. The wind howled, shoving at the Pruett family home as if it was made of gel.

*Whooo!*

The animals were another thing to worry over. He’d never heard the hoot of an owl or the call of a wolf. It terrified Daniel to realize he was now sharing a life with those uncontrollable creatures.

The walls vibrated, shifting as the storm increased. He pulled the blanket over his head.

“Daniel.”

He shouted, startled.

“Come to my bed.”

Daniel’s feet hit the cold floor an instant later. He entered the dim room and climbed into her bed before he noticed the blanket on the window landing. She’d been having trouble sleeping. It was another surprising discovery. He had assumed Candice fell right out like other changelings, but the twisted blankets said that wasn’t true.

Candice stood up, now torn about where she should go.

Daniel knew where he wanted her. He slid over with a pointed glance as lightning glared through the windows.

It felt so odd to be following his lead. From their first days at the complex, Candice had been expecting a timid male who would have to be encouraged to ask for his needs. She was prepared to deal with it, to try to replace what the Network had taken from him, but it was a shock to learn so much of *her* Daniel still existed. How had he managed to retain these manly instincts? Network methods were brutal, total… Did the others have this fire? Was it possible these enslaved men had been fooling everyone?

Candice dropped heavily onto the bed. After sleeping with his big body last night, she’d found it impossible to drift off tonight. She had moved to the window and managed to doze a bit by staring at his old home and telling herself he was safe now, under *her* protection.

Daniel shifted, rolling onto his side. “Are you okay?”

Her breath caught at his concern. It had been so long! Candice was horrified to feel warm tears sliding from her eyes. This was their first night of forever.

“Candice?”

She rolled away, embarrassed by her emotions, by her lack of control.

Candice stiffened when he slid that warm body against her and wrapped a big arm around her waist. He buried his chin against her neck, melting against her as if he’d always been there.

“I’m here now. That’s what matters, right?”

Candice nodded, crying for the first time since he’d been stolen from her life. When Daniel tugged on her arm, she surrendered, rolling over to let him hold her while she sobbed against his chest like a baby.

Daniel didn’t say anything, just rubbed her and held her. Right now, this was all she needed.

Candice fell asleep in his arms before the tears stopped.

**4**

They were woken by the sound of cursing.

Angelica was trying to get the gear loaded onto the Mopars and it sounded like she was having trouble. It was like this on normal days, but the extra strain in her voice said seeing Candice and Daniel getting to know each other again was hard. Downstairs, Mary and Bruce could be heard securing the house.

Candice rose up to find Daniel already alert.

“Good morning.”

Fighting need, Candice shrugged. “Woulda been better without the four letter words.” Daniel was sexy with sleep still on him. It gave a woman the relentless urge to kiss away his fears, whether he was willing or not.

“Was she a sailor?” he joked.

Candice’s snort turned into a chuckle. She’d felt more alive in the last week than she had since he’d been taken. “Stay close to me.”

He knew she meant for the bounty run. “I will.”

The lust was tempting her to allow another moment, so Candice pushed herself up instead. They were about to go on a run for her lover and marked convict, Richard Baker. There would be plenty of time for heat and blood later.

**5**

Daniel observed in silence as the family got set for the run. He was trying to stay out of the way, but when they opened the larger of two sheds, he forgot his vow to be quiet.

“Bikes!”

“Mopars.”

His brow wrinkled in confusion.

Candice favored him with a tender glance. “They’re mini urban pacification vehicles. They’ll pull almost any grade with a two-ton load. They’re called Mopars.”

They looked like the wide wheeled bikes Daniel had read about while in the complex. He was suddenly eager to ride one.

The Pruetts loaded the three Mopars with quick movements that told Daniel they’d done it a lot. He didn’t know much about bounty hunting. That side of the Network was one that the bachelors had no contact with. He saw Candice give her cousin a gesture and tensed when the shorter version of his owner stomped over to him.

“She wants you in a vest. Come to the little shed.”

Daniel followed Angelica with uneasy steps. The smaller building was out of sight of everyone. Would he be in danger from Candy’s family? That was a common reason for signing up for the games–to eliminate family members and take their mates. Not just contestants were killed during those battles.

Angelica yanked the door open and waved a hand. “Pick one from the racks. It needs to be snug, but not tight.”

The walls of the shed were hidden by weapons and other gear, surprising Daniel that they had this building in the open. Then he remembered who they were. Daniel felt it then, all the people studying the family. Locals were peering from chipped, broken windows and blinds, waiting for Candice and her crew to leave. Daniel realized that was why they left the shed unprotected. He respected the intimidation technique. Their rulers often employed similar methods. It said, *Mess with us at your own risk*. Were their neighbors glad the Pruetts were leaving or did they worry for their safety while this dangerous family was gone? They had to know they were protected by being wherever these bounty hunters were. Pruetts had morals and ethics. The Network didn’t.

Daniel entered the darkness of the shed without looking at Angelica and felt her heat lash out to sample his smell. It wasn’t attractive to him like it was when Candice did that.

Daniel shut the door on her in relief. He wasn’t certain about the cousin yet.

The first vest was a bad fit over his wide shoulders. He put it back on the hanger and surveyed the shed. The other racks held larger sizes. Daniel quickly strapped one on, not wanting to keep his owner waiting.

He tripped over the frame and caught himself awkwardly as he came out.

“I need to ask you something.” Angelica gently shut the door. Her eyes were slightly pink, but the control of her speech was good. “About the other bachelors.”

She scanned to verify they were still alone.

Daniel believed he understood, but waited. She had that glaze… He didn’t speak, but he could see her wondering if his voice would hit her as hard again.

“Are they all…scared? Like you?”

She was hoping for a mate with more courage than he had. It should have been degrading, but Daniel pitied her for the agony she was suffering, and he respected her attempts to control it. “Mostly, yes.”

Angelica shuddered, small hands clenching. “What do they want? I mean, really want? To be left alone? To be free?”

*Oh, how I want to give her the truth!* If anyone could help the enslaved males, it might be this tough family, but they were bounty hunters on the Network’s payroll. Daniel hadn’t forgotten that. “A kind, loving owner.”

To his surprise, Angelica laughed at the scripted answer–a hard, bitter sound suggesting she was on the edge.

“Well, I can’t help them there.” She spun toward the Mopars.

Daniel followed. He only knew the world from a male point of view. Until being closed up with Candice, he hadn’t considered what it was like to be a changeling. How awful to be so afraid of hurting a mate that you couldn’t love them.

“Daniel.” Candice waved him to her bike.

Daniel slid excitedly onto the seat. He had remembered enough now to know that he loved being outside. He mentally cringed at the thought of all those years spent without the sun. *No wonder I’m so pale.*

Candice slid onto the cold seat in front of him, pulling her goggles on. When she handed him a pair, Daniel did the same.

She motioned him closer, patiently directing until he was hugging her small waist and leaning on her shoulder. They both tried hard to ignore the contact and failed. It felt too good.

The hunters wanted to make it deep into Kentucky by dawn the next morning and Daniel was eager for the ride. Other than right behind them, Daniel hadn’t viewed much of the neighborhood. He still hadn’t remembered exactly what it had looked like when he’d lived here as a child.

As they left, taking a different road than the one the truck had arrived by, Daniel wasn’t expecting to see neatly maintained cabins. Behind the opposite side of the town, where he’d lived, were homes and even a few businesses. Daniel read their names.

The Zapper.

Si-Shoo’s Shoes.

Flo’s Floozies...

*What?* He stared at the shack in concentration as his stomach rumbled uneasily. Floozies? He’d heard that name before. The memory came without warning.

*The noise from the next room made him cower in the corner of the closet with the other boys. They’d been thrown in here after the women from the crossing checkpoint had picked out their fee. It was being taken in blood.*

*Daniel waited for his turn with shaking legs.* *His parents had sold him into this life. He was at the mercy of people who saw him as property! His young heart yearned for Candy.*

*“Get two more. Flo wants them.”*

*The door opened, blinding Daniel and the other boys with the light. A rough hand grabbed his arm, but he didn’t resist as he was jerked out.*

*“Not that one! He’s already paid for.”*

*Daniel was shoved back into the comforting darkness, but not before seeing the evil behind the order. Her red hair was in braids as long as her cloak and she was covered in scars. Daniel recognized her from the visits paid to his family during breeding time, and from his pickup. That awful woman owned him until he was delivered to who?*

*Daniel huddled in the corner as other boys were chosen. He shivered. Already paid for. Who could afford the price his parents had charged? Only one source came to mind.*

*Daniel felt a tear slide down his cheek. The Network could afford it. He was about to become a games prize.*

Daniel returned from the memory as they passed the front of the rental shack. He understood what those other boys had been sentenced to now. He saw the hungry, red-eyed women snarling with need while they waited by the egress with their tickets. Floozies was a brothel. Males were the product being sold.

On his right, Angelica’s Mopar slowed.

Daniel tensed, scared they were going there. He comforted himself when Candice didn’t do it for him. *I belong to her. She’ll never sell me.*

Daniel turned away from the shack of doom. Renting went on in the Network complex, but to witness it happening so openly on the streets of the outside world was a hard blow. He had hoped conditions were better on this end of the chains.

Daniel’s contemplations were heavy, but when Angelica’s Mopar disappeared from the spot next to them, it snapped the bachelor back to where they were. He glanced around to find Angelica getting off her ride.

Candice turned her Mopar, but didn’t follow. Her parents flanked her as they watched Angelica walk up to the woman at the gate of the brothel. She handed the shopkeeper a heavy looking bag. The clerk was clearly a changeling, sneering in a way that Daniel was convinced would cause a fight.

The shouting did get ugly, but Angelica finally added a second bag of money.

The woman took the bags angrily and went inside.

Was Angelica buying relief? Confused, and a bit angrier than he wanted to be, Daniel watched as the gate opened again.

An extremely young group of males was shoved out by the owner. These were innocent–it was on their terrified faces.

Daniel felt horror rise when Angelica began pointing at women in the line. Seeing the kids given away to these dangerous women was awful.

The women didn’t attack as he’d expected. Instead, they drew the young boys forward with black eyes and gentle smiles.

Now beyond confused, Daniel rotated to find Candice twisted around, studying him.

Mary explained, “These are our neighbors. They stay away as long as they can, but the need is overwhelming. If they have their own mate, they’ll have a chance at peace.”

Daniel still didn’t understand, but he was happy when the women took the frightened boys away with gentle touches and kind words.

Candice filled him in with pride. “She’s giving them gifts of hope. None of them will forget that Pruetts have honor.”

As he understood, Daniel realized Angelica was much kinder than he’d thought. He kept his voice low, but had to ask, “Why doesn’t she keep one for herself?”

To his surprise, Candice flashed the harsh grin that scared him. Daniel couldn’t stop a flinch.

“Because she can’t wait for them to grow up like the women she chose will. She’s burning faster. She needs relief, a mate, *now*.”

Meaning those boys would be taken into homes and eased into manhood rather than being drugged and raped tonight. Daniel gave Angelica a look of respect as she returned.

He felt her surprise and knew she hadn’t done any of it for his benefit. She didn’t like it being this way, and she didn’t like her friends and neighbors going through agony. Why couldn’t their rulers be more like the Pruetts? The other bachelors had been wrong. Not all changelings were animals. Some of them were good women just trying to survive an awful disease. Daniel’s sense of being lucky increased. He held tight to his owner as they left the recovery zone of Ohio, head up.

**6**

Candice found out right away that Daniel wasn’t a natural born adventurer. To get into Kentucky, where the trackers had set the meeting, they needed to cross the old Ohio River. It was dammed further up from where they would cross, so there was no problem with driving the Mopars. If nature ever reclaimed it, they would have to locate a new route, but right now, it was a shallow creek winding through a lush oasis of greenery and wildlife.

After a light splash that made Daniel cackle happily against her shoulder, Candice crested the rough banks of the creek to see a large buck and doe foraging.

Daniel noticed them. He let go of her waist, twisting around as they went by. On the next turn, he toppled from the bike like a sack of potatoes.

Candice spun in a wide circle, spraying dirt and gravel with a harsh grunt as she struggled to keep the vehicle from tipping at the sharp change of direction. She slid to a quick stop next to him, worried.

Daniel peered up at her with exasperation. “You scared them off!” He swiped at the dust now coating his clothes and frowned deeper. “My ass hurts.”

For the second time in as many days, Candice heard the sound of her own laughter and felt complete.

# Chapter Twelve

**Trackersss**

Kentucky Petrified Forest

**1**

**D**aniel was in pain. They had traveled straight to the Petrified Forests with a single ten-minute break. Fifteen hours of riding, when he’d never done this before, was rough. As he pried his body from the Mopar, Daniel slid to his knees from the aches and cramps.

“Walk around. It helps.” Bruce clued him in to finding relief while Candice and Angelica secured their site.

Daniel did as Bruce suggested, trying not to groan. Hoping the surroundings would distract him from the discomfort, Daniel scanned the area. Sore or not, he loved being outdoors.

A few of the trees surrounding them were small, and green enough to have been planted after the war. Daniel wondered who would have done that in the aftermath of an apocalypse. The petrified trees in comparison were staggering in their size, and so bland from death that they seemed more like walls left by man than nature. “Why are there no animals?”

Candice sighed.

Mary snorted.

They’d both been waiting for something like that from him. Daniel was so gentle that it was amazing he’d survived so long in captivity.

Bruce answered, “Animals won’t live where people do. They’ve gotten smarter. Hunting meat is a lot harder now than it was in the olden days.”

That pulled a chuckle from Daniel. “Around then, were ya?”

“Ancient, that’s me.” Bruce snorted happily at the joking, telling Daniel he’d pegged him right. Bruce was lonely.

Daniel turned toward Candice, hiding another groan at the soreness. The bikes rode so easy that he hadn’t expected this, but he had enjoyed the beauty of the areas they’d driven through. Nature was uncontrolled out here.

*Like the Pruetts,* he realized. The Network had them compliant, but under control? Not this family, and Daniel wasn’t the only one who knew it. The homes they’d rolled by held people, but none of them had come out or even waved from a window. For some reason, he had believed the Pruetts were upstanding members of lower Network society, but what he had witnessed so far suggested they were a dangerous necessity to be shunned unless needed.

Daniel inspected the towering trees and the thick underbrush lining this secluded site. He wasn’t scared of the dark, but he had never stayed outdoors. Should he offer to help? Daniel chose to follow the lead of the other male. When Bruce began unpacking Mary’s Mopar, Daniel went to Candy’s bike to do the same.

Bruce flashed an approving nod, but didn’t speak. Daniel would need a lot of training. With this family, it would be easy for him to learn. In other homes, Daniel already would have been beaten for his lack of skills.

The next half hour was gone before Daniel knew it as Bruce showed him how to set up a temporary camp. It was sweaty work, but satisfying to witness the results and know he had done it. Daniel glanced up with a smile of welcome when Candice and Angelica returned from their sweep.

When he smiled like that, Candice’s heart opened up and became a gnashing, wailing pain that demanded she kill someone. He had been hers and then he had been taken, and no one had paid for it yet!

His happiness faded into confusion at her anger, but she couldn’t explain that every smile, every tender moment they shared, was a reminder of all the years they’d lost. It was a slap in the face to have him so *changed*. Daniel wasn’t the only one who was adjusting.

Angelica checked her communicator. “The trackers have verified Baker’s trail in Jericho.”

Bruce immediately started to repack the camp. They always hunted without pause until they caught their man.

Candice shook her head. “They’ll meet us here.”

Mary and Angelica stared, but Bruce’s pleased expression was the one Candice cared for. She and Daniel would be bonded, but her father was the other male here and he would be aware of Daniel’s needs in some areas before she was. “We’ll have a hot meal now.”

Candice came to where Daniel stood, seeing he was doing exactly what he’d been trained for–following. Angry again, she grabbed his hand and tugged him away from prying eyes.

Candice could feel his tension, his worry, as she stopped them out of earshot and let go of his warm hand.

Candice leaned against a brittle trunk, smelling centuries of decay and wild growth. To her, it was heaven compared to the stench of New Network City. She suddenly wondered if Daniel missed it there. Had he held friendships to mourn?

Sighing, Candice tried to let the serenity of the forest soak up her concerns. With a population of less than ten thousand, Kentucky was untamed country. She loved it here. Someday, this is where she would build a home and raise her family. That thought made Candice focus on Daniel. If they were going to have a future, they had to get some things straight. She slid to the ground, waiting for him to do the same.

Daniel didn’t speak, not sure what he’d done wrong.

Candice tried to comfort him before they got into the details. “We need to talk before you go any further with me.”

She winced, as he did, upon hearing how ominous that sounded. “It’s just about our future.”

Again, not the words she’d wanted. Candice realized she was nervous. Why? *Because I need something from him*. Daniel could help control the change, but she had to know where they stood. The fact that it had been less than two weeks didn’t matter. She would see Baker tomorrow or the next day and the convict would know she and Daniel weren’t fully bonded. Baker was content to be her lover. If he believed she held any doubt about Daniel, he would do what he could to remain as such.

“Are you…unhappy with me?”

She stared stupidly. *Is he kidding?* “No.”

Candice could tell Daniel wanted more and the lump in her chest eased a bit. She hated emotional talks, but she was glad he was willing. “I find you very pleasing.” As his handsome profile flushed, Candice grinned, a soft one reserved only for him. “Not just in *that* way.”

Daniel smiled as he understood it wasn’t a bad talk she wanted, just an awkward one.

“And what of you? Are you unhappy with me?”

His stare grew intense. “Quite the opposite.”

There was a charged silence while they stared, exchanging smiles. It felt so odd to be flirting! Candice had believed those things were beyond her. “You know I’d give you real freedom if you ever want it.”

Daniel frowned, bobbed quickly. “But I won’t.”

Candice shrugged. She wanted to believe that, but hadn’t she hurt her own parent? Who was to say the same thing wouldn’t drive him from her arms? He was a trembling mass most moments, but she had her own fears to handle as well. Candice tried to conquer one of them now. “Do you want kids?”

That shocked him. Daniel nodded, unable to speak. He’d been certain she didn’t after the way she’d yelled at his little sister. Daniel couldn’t picture Candice as a mother, so the idea that she wanted children sent many of his theories up in flames. *She must like them*, he thought, seeing a flash of her after she won the final match. A mother with blood on her hands, murder on her soul… Candice was clearly evaluating his reaction, making Daniel wonder why it mattered so much to her. Candice owned him. If she chose to register them for breeding, who was he to argue?

“Do you have children, Daniel?”

*Raw pain*. “Yes.”

She read his face for what he didn’t say.

Daniel could tell she wanted him to open up, but those ghosts he shared with no one. He stayed silent, trying to mend the rift in his heart again. He had to every time the thought of being a father and never getting to love the child tore him apart.

“I might be able to locate them for you, if you have any details on their mothers.”

Stunned again, Daniel gaped at her with his mouth open. *Why would she do that?*

“How many?”

“Two.”

“It was recorded?”

“Through the Games.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Her offer came with a gentle tone that said he’d misjudged this violent female in many ways. It allowed him to form a question of his own. “If you find them, will I… Can I see them? Even if they don’t know I’m there?”

Candice studied him with that unreadable facade, but Daniel had picked up things about his new owner. He sensed she now held a deep sympathy for the torment he’d revealed.

“If I can arrange it.”

She didn’t make a false promise or a claim she couldn’t support. It sent the hope he’d denied into his heart and spilling out of his mouth. “Please! I have to know if they’re–” Daniel stopped, scared to let go of a secret he’d been hiding.

Candice raised a brow. “If they’re what?”

He dropped his chin. Daniel didn’t want to feel like a coward in front of her anymore, but he was suddenly very scared. The Network would have him removed for what he was about to say. “If they’re suffering like you and all the others… Or if they’re immune.”

Candice stared at him in shock. *Immune*. She’d never heard of any female who was.

The pain in Daniel’s voice was more than she could take, but Candice instinctively knew how to ease it. Some of the horror would fade when he had a child he was allowed to keep. *Mine*, she thought, warmth running through her body that was stronger than the rest of the fire he drew. His words slammed through her brain again. *Immune*. Their children might not suffer this agony.

Was he lying? No. There was too much open hope in his expression. How did he know of it? Were there others? Questions flew through her mind, and she took a minute to organize them. When she finally responded, Candice kept her voice even, not letting him see how much hope she wanted to have. “Why do you think they might be?”

“The scientists experiment on males. When my results came in, they put me into the breeding program. Men are drugged so we won’t remember most of it. I have a high tolerance and they talked a lot.”

She instinctively knew the Network would hide his answer at any cost. “You’ve remembered being taken.”

“Yes. During the ride here.” His rare anger flashed, laced with bitterness. “I remember what they did to me.”

Candice knew he was thinking of his family’s betrayal, but her mind was on immunity. Was it possible? She had a hundred questions to ask.

“It’s me.” Angelica joined them in the clearing.

Daniel stared at Angelica.

“What are you thinking right now?!” the younger girl demanded. She couldn’t take the pity in his gaze.

“They could have stopped your pain.” His tone was unsteady, but his words stunned them both. “They’ve had a vaccine for a decade.”

“We have company!”

Mary’s call drew Candice toward the campsite, after motioning for Angelica to shield Daniel. As she went, the word *vaccine* exploded repeatedly in her skull like a bomb. Their rulers held a vaccine, but they hadn’t told anyone. That might be enough to bring them down.

Daniel followed Candice back to camp, able to feel the rage and the confusion of the younger Pruett trailing him. Angelica wanted to ask questions, but she kept silent as they joined the others. Now wasn’t a good time.

Their company was the Snake trackers. Daniel stared in fascination. He’d heard of odd females, but this! Shrouded in scales that had to be from real snakes, they were vibrant shapes that flashed and glinted with every movement. A foreign mystery, Daniel studied them without a thought of rudeness or his lure to all the females. They wore animal hide clothes, with their weapons and gear strapped to their tattooed skin like shirts. The three women were tall and lanky, with cruel eyes that lit up in hunger at the sight of him.

Daniel stayed in the rear as the Snakes entered camp. Like the women, the horses were also covered in scales, even their manes and tails. Daniel realized the crew would blend perfectly into the natural surroundings*. How clever!* He continued to stare as Candice stepped forward to greet their trackers.

“Congratulationsss are in order.”

“Yessss. How does he tassste?”

There was a round of nasty laughter from the serpent-tongued scouts. Daniel felt Angelica tense behind him. She obviously didn’t like them.

“Where is Baker?!”

The tone was hard, snapping attention back to Candice.

The tracker females bowed to it. “He is still in Jericho.”

“And the others?” Candice didn’t like them inspecting Daniel. Danger filled the fresh air.

“Nashville a week ago, but there have been storms. No traveling there when it floods. They’ll be trapped until the watersss go down.”

“You’re journeying there now?”

“Yes, with a quick sssstop in Cumberland for suppliesss.”

“Good. Notify us when you make contact. If we have Baker by then, we’ll meet up and you can ride in for the exchange.”

The four Snake females immediately blanched and shook heads. The one Daniel assumed to be their leader spoke with fast words.

“We’ll take our cut from you, like alwaysss. It isss a bad time to deal with the Network.”

“Why?” Candice wanted to know.

“They have a new group coming in for training. Many of the old people have been executed. These new rulers are filling the top ranksss with their choices.”

“Yesss. One of their henchmen is particularly loathsome.” Another of the Snake women offered more details. “Rankin offers high bounties to hunters and then sends in the hounds to steal the prey from them.”

Daniel froze at the name. He loathed Rankin more than any of the others. The old dream of killing her was vivid.

Candice glanced toward her mate, drawn by their common hatred.

Mary snorted. “No need to pay for what you can take. Rankin’s always been that way.”

The other Snake females waiting for the meeting to finish were busy feeding their mounts handfuls of something from pouches on their saddles. Daniel saw the animals were well cared for. Horses were rare, no matter what land you were in, unless you worked for the Network.

“Exactly. Be careful you don’t meet the sssame fate,” the Snake leader warned. The slithering tattoo on her thigh revolved as her muscles flexed to shift her body in the saddle. “We will ssstill expect to be paid.”

Candice scowled. “My coffers are not so low that I can’t handle my expenses.”

“Just so, it is good business to have things clear up front.” The Snake swung the black horse around as if it was born to obey her.

Daniel flinched when she stopped next to him instead of leaving. Aware of Candice tensing for battle, he peered up at the Snake woman’s weary profile. For a moment, he was able to see the tired female underneath the rage. Compassion had him opening his mouth even when he knew it wasn’t a good idea. “Would you like a drink?”

The offer, or maybe his voice, made the woman lean over to stare intently at him. Daniel felt Angelica step up to flank him as the Snake shook her scaled head.

“No, but you have my thanksss for asking…” She inspected him for a moment longer, sweeping the brand on his arm that was revealed each time the gusting wind blew his cloak around. “Perhapsss, I will return the favor.”

She kneed the horse and the Snakes left, all of them kicking up dust that coated Daniel in a layer of grit. *What is it with women ruining my clothes?*

The Pruetts regarded him.

Daniel flushed. “I’m sorr–”

“You did nothing wrong. In fact…”

“You might have gained an admirer,” Angelica finished Mary’s observation. “Trackers are shunned, even by their own kind. To be offered a drink is to be shown acceptance. Most people won’t.”

“She’ll understand you didn’t know. If you don’t repeat the offer, she’ll see you’ve changed your mind and withdrawn your acceptance.”

“I won’t.” Daniel was positive of it. “It’s not their fault that their tongues are that way.”

Candice shrugged. “But they are responsible for their actions. Be careful, Daniel. There is much you don’t know yet about this world.”

It was true, and he settled, with a slight frown, into the place she liked him on the Mopar. She was right. There was so much to learn. Where did he begin? Who did he ask?

Not ready for the hard contemplations, Daniel tried to find a position on the bike that didn’t hurt as he listened to Candice and her family discuss going into the city of Jericho. Before the apocalypse, it had held a different name. Now, it was a Network-controlled lion’s den of barbed wire and gun nests. Why would a convict go there? Candice and Angelica were talking as if they knew this Baker person. Daniel remembered what they’d said at dinner before leaving home. They had hunted Baker before. Would he surrender or would they have to fight? If the Pruetts had brought Baker in before, it meant he had gotten away from the Network. The council didn’t like that rare occurrence. They never stopped hunting a fugitive. Daniel had seen a runaway brought back to the complex just to be placed into the very game he had fled. Their rulers forgave nothing.

“Let’s go.” Candice slid onto the bike.

Daniel held tight and continued to sort through his mind and heart.

**2**

Daniel knew they’d left Kentucky by the increase in homes and people. It was so much like the photos that he couldn’t stop staring as they drove by row after row of newly constructed cabins. In New Network City, trees and lumber were rare. Everything was made of durable foam or plastic, and then wrapped with concrete and rubber for extra protection. Out here, natural materials were used for building and it was remarkably serene.

Daniel studied the people around these simple cabins, surprised by what he saw. They were in as much need as those in the city! Everyone he saw instantly developed a pink tinge upon noticing him.

Daniel tightened his grip on his owner’s waist, sensing the danger. These women were desperate.

Candice stopped them at the Tennessee Crossing checkpoint a few minutes later. The sense of menace grew as they pulled into the long line. There were dozens of women here, all staring at Daniel and Bruce with glares of madness.

Candice and Angelica stood on their Mopars and drew their guns.

Daniel began to understand the trouble it caused to have men along on bounty runs.

At the quick display of force, the wild women returned to what they’d been doing, but their stares grew hungrier the longer they were forced to be around the males. Daniel tried to shrink into the seat and disappear. They were so far back in line that the river was out of his sight, but he could hear a motor of some sort. He wondered how they would cross. In the past, there had been clever boats to shuttle travelers. Those days, along with bridges, were gone. As far as Daniel knew, a sinker line was most commonly used now and he wasn’t looking forward to getting wet.

Daniel froze as a lanky form in grime-plastered clothes slid toward them.

“How much for an hour?”

Daniel cringed, grabbing for his new weapon.

Candice’s hard hand on his shoulder stopped him. “No.”

Her steel tone sent the filthy female on her way with ugly mutters.

Daniel waited anxiously as more women came toward them. He had no idea what to do.

Candice was tense. Almost all of the citizens around them were Roamers. Roamers would steal you blind and then slit your throat while you slept, if you were dumb enough to do so around them.

Candice took the safety off her gun.

Angelica did the same.

Roamers preferred to work in packs, attacking together to grab the male or coveted item during the chaos. One would take off and hide the treasure, while the others slowed the owner or killed her. The Pruetts had the only males in sight and the wild gazes of these desperate women weren’t leaving them. The sense of blood about to spill was impossible to miss.

“Move on!”

The call of the guard allowed Candice to roll them closer to the water, but it didn’t break the tension.

Daniel was distracted by the sight of the river. Crystal clear, it was nothing like the dingy bodies of water he had studied in faded magazine pages when the Den Mothers were busy. This was beautiful, uncorrupted. “It’s so clean!”

At the sound of his excited voice, time slowed, highlighting the lethal error.

*I thought he knew not to speak!* Angelica’s shock mirrored Candice’s as they turned to defend their males against three dozen Roamers.

Candice jerked Daniel from her Mopar and shoved him toward her father as Angelica and Mary tightened the gap.

Bruce knew to get in the middle of the three angry Pruetts. He yanked Daniel down next to him as their family opened fire.

Unlike the Pruetts, the Roamers weren’t armed. They lunged at the males in vain, clumsy attempts that only gained them death.

Four bodies fell on the right, three on the left.

Two more hairy women shoved Candice’s Mopar out of the way and dove forward, only seeing Daniel. She pulled the trigger with little remorse.

The gunfire lasted for a full minute. When it stopped, a dozen Roamers lay on the ground, the rest fleeing as the Pruetts stopped firing. Even during the rages, self-preservation still existed.

Candice verified Daniel and Bruce were unharmed and then scanned the battlefield as Checkpoint troops rushed their way.

The remaining changelings around them vanished.

“Halt, there!”

At her nod, Angelica and Mary holstered, but didn’t move out of the formation. They wouldn’t until Candice told them to.

“Hands up!”

Candice slowly put her gun away. “My ID card is in my top pocket.” She gave her games grin, hoping to be recognized. “With payment for the mess I’ve made in defense of my new prize.”

The guards scanned the men cowering between the three females. The sentry in the middle came forward. She wore the uniform and gear of a Network warrior, but Candice sensed sleaziness. It stopped her from attempting to sway the river guard to her cause. Gathering friends and contacts was a natural part of this career, but Pruetts didn’t align themselves with snakes unless they had to.

The guard looked like she’d already had a rough day. Candice forced the rage down to give a half-apologetic tone. “I can have my males roll the bodies into the water for–”

“Shut up!” The guard was staring at Daniel with clear intent.

“I enjoyed the games!” Candice returned fire without hesitation. “You’d better be fast. *I* am.”

That garnered an instant response from the troops behind her.

“Pruett.”

“She’s a Pruett!”

Candice pointed at her family. “We’re *all* Pruetts.”

The sentry became businesslike, pink eyes fading. One Pruett was a challenge. Three was suicide.

Candice allowed herself to breathe again. There were a dozen guards here. In the chaos, she would likely lose either her mate or father and she couldn’t tolerate either. Guards were much better fighters than Roamers.

As Candice was identified, she began to have more of those disturbing contemplations about their rulers. They had just killed a dozen women to keep their men. Both the attempt, and the defense, was legal. There were no laws against kidnapping or killing. If someone could take a slave, he was theirs for as long as they could hold onto him.

*It shouldn’t be this way.* Candice held no animosity toward the suffering females who only lusted for a relief from the torment. And then there was Daniel. She had felt safe bringing him along for the run because of the strict training bachelors received, but he knew almost nothing. Why hadn’t he been taught these things? It was as if the Network had never intended for him to be out in the world. For Candice, that was proof of his words about immunity. They’d never intended to let him go. Her winning had been an accident or a conspiracy.

She pushed those ugly thoughts aside to finish dealing with the mess.The bounty hunters had been as careful as they could to hit targets, not civilians. As usual, their aim was good, but their luck hadn’t been this time. Two shots had taken innocent lives.They paid the farmer in UDs for both hogs. The extra bit of gold dust Mary pressed into the older lady’s hand gained them another ally. Now, the farmer could justify eating the two dead animals and still have something to show for it. Here in New America, surviving was the best that most people could hope for. Getting ahead was only for those in New Network City and the Pruetts tried hard to never forget that.

Candice motioned Daniel onto the Mopar Angelica now had upright, without the punishment he probably felt he deserved. None of this was his fault.

Daniel was too shocked to enjoy crossing the wide river on the ferryboat. He didn’t care that it was his first ever or that the feel of it could have been incredible. All those women were dead because he’d made a careless mistake. He wanted to hide. Daniel kept his cheek against Candice as he struggled to keep from crying in shame. *More lives lost, just for me. I’m not worth that.*

**3**

Candice knew Daniel was upset, but she didn’t realize how badly until she stepped from the Mopar hours later. Daniel didn’t move, just stared, waiting for the blows to begin.

Her heart broke. “Come with me.”

Candice led them into the shadows of the trees, choosing her words. He didn’t mean to be reckless, and until she had time to train him properly, she wouldn’t blame him any more than he deserved.

Despite it being so chilly, small areas of the eastern country were already in bloom. This was one of them. The western half was a desert with little to recommend it besides the leftover tools of their nuclear ancestors. Neither of them admired the contrast in views. As soon as they were out of sight of the others, Daniel went to his knees at her feet, trembling.

With her father’s training to pull on, Candice understood Daniel might torture himself over this if he weren’t punished. Not about to deal with that drama as Bruce and Mary often did, Candice handled it differently once again. “What would the Network have done?”

“Speaking is a serious rule.” His eyes shot to her, voice carrying a tremor she loathed. “I’ve heard they use a whip.”

Candice scowled. There was no way she would do that. “If you break a rule and need to be punished, do you believe I’ll do it?”

He nodded quickly, forehead wrinkling.

“Speaking is not against *my* rules, Daniel.” Candice struggled to sound angry when she really just wanted to comfort him. “Those women could have controlled themselves. *We* do.”

Candice was noticing fresh signs of her Daniel daily, like the way the middle of his forehead squeezed together when he was frustrated or when he was hurt. There was no way she would let him regress back into the shaking form she’d first been given. “In my household, you are a person, not a slave. *My* rules stand before Network laws. If you plan to stay with me, you’ll accept that.”

Candice left him kneeling there, waiting for pain that wasn’t coming.

Daniel didn’t understand why she wasn’t upset, but her veiled threat to give him away if he couldn’t follow her rules sank in deeply.

Candice had known it would. She didn’t like using his fears against him. She would only do it when she felt it was sorely needed, as it was now. He didn’t need to carry the guilt of those deaths. He had an owner who already did that.

Daniel was able to put it out of his mind because he knew she wouldn’t like it if she caught him dwelling on it. The images he’d witnessed, the snarls and the screams, wouldn’t go away anytime soon, but he had gotten good at hiding his thoughts from the other bachelors and from Den Mothers. He would use that skill now. *I won’t be separated from her. Not after all she’s done for me.* He quickly got up and followed.

The hunters had chosen to take an energizer and get this run cleared up instead of resting. It had already become worthless in terms of UDs. The council would have huge fines waiting for them now. Killing in defense was legal, but it was still costly.

Candice watched Daniel stare at the stars, the moon, and even the blowing leaves as if in a trance. She gestured no in response to Angelica’s quick glance at him. Daniel wouldn’t get an energizer. He would sleep, tied to her this time, while they rolled to Jericho. Tomorrow would be a better day for all of them, she hoped. This one had been rough.

**4**

“I want the Pruett male.”

Silence fell around the companionable campfire of Snake women at Anna’s declaration. It had been hours since they’d given the Pruetts information and left. The four woman Snake crew was eating the horse stew their cook had made and using grease from the meal to re-seal the scales on their bodies and gear. The technique was a defense against the stiff winds and downpours they often traveled through on jobs.

“Cross the Pruettsss?!” Brea was the worrier of their group. “No one will do that.”

“I will, if the price isss right.” Gracie was up for anything that ended in chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

“Pruetts fight too well to face head-on.” Gale considered, also adventurous. “We’d need an ambush.”

The leader let her crew talk, but all of them knew the choice had been made. Their other option was to leave before the run, but then they wouldn’t get to share in the plunder.

“I don’t mind following them.” Gale was also their scout. “I can provide information on locations.”

Gracie began packing up her gear. “I’ll go with you.”

The Snakes fell into setting up the attack. This wasn’t the first time they had spotted an appealing male and decided to take him, and it wouldn’t be the last.

“Report every six hoursss,” Anna ordered.

“If they get Baker in Jericho, they’ll head for the nearessst hub to drop him off and claim the reward. After, they’ll go home.” Gale had been thinking about it for hours. “We could be waiting for them at their homestead or along the way.”

Brea snorted, distorted tongue giving the noise a soft rattle. “We need to sssplit them up. I’m telling you, there are too many for usss to handle.”

Anna agreed with Brea. “I think the Network needs a hand capturing Baker in Jericho. Don’t you?”

The women around her laughed as they realized they were going to ambush the Pruetts and make it look like the Network had ordered it. Their leader was a genius.

The petrified trees around them groaned and creaked as the wind increased. It was common for large branches to fall during storms, but the Snake women were used to this lifestyle and didn’t react. Very few people traveled the wilderness as much as they did.

When the wind continued to build, warning of an imminent storm, Anna motioned for the fire to be put out. Petrified trees didn’t burn well, but the dried debris along the ground did and Snakes were always careful not to reveal their presence. Their kind was hunted even without Network warrants.

Unlike most of the Snake clans who spent their time fighting among themselves, Anna’s crew was organized and obedient. They all came from ruling families that the Network had destroyed during anti-mutation campaigns over the last century. As surviving daughters of powerful Snake leaders, it was their family duty to reclaim past glory. Stopping to grab someone’s male on the road to that glorious ending was just one of the benefits of not having to follow anyone’s rules except their own.

This crew had been together for a long time. Most of their kind preferred solitary lifestyles because they couldn’t trust each other. Anna’s crew didn’t have that problem. She was the boss and she made the rules. Anyone who didn’t follow them was eaten. Out in the wilderness, food was hard to come by. The tradition of eating their males after using them had come about because the females were starving. The Network had made sure the Snakes had no support, no matter what town they passed through. The locals wouldn’t serve them, brothels wouldn’t let them in, and weapon shops barred their doors as soon as Snake crews hit town. Forced to do whatever it took to survive, the clans had become mercenaries and black-market security. In another thirty years, they wouldn’t exist unless something drastic happened. Anna was determined that she and her crew would be involved in the change. There was a sense of urgency and a need to reach New Network City–a place their kind usually avoided as much as the Borderlands. Something was about to happen. Anna didn’t want to miss it.

“We’ll have to make sure she’s dead.” Brea was still stressing over betraying the Pruetts. That family was infamous.

Anna shrugged, flipping another chunk of meat toward her nervous companion. “Pruetts and Snakes have never been friends.”

“They’ve hunted Snakes for the Network.” Gale packed a kit as she prepared to leave. “I have no problem with this plan.”

As they discussed the details, Anna considered the possible loot. Not only did the Pruetts have two males, they also had Mopars and weapons. Everything they needed in one hit was a good run. Anna just had to pick the right ambush site. If she chose wrong, all four of their family lines would end in the attempt. The Pruetts wouldn’t forgive this betrayal. There would be no survivors.

# Chapter Thirteen

**All the Walls**

Jericho, TN

**1**

***T****here’s a wall around the city!* Daniel gawked in fascination as they crested the hill, unable to see any gaps in the ten-foot-high barrier. Made from planks and slabs of concrete, the barrier around Jericho was speckled in faded graffiti. Almost all of it was anti-Network.

“Looks like they’ve fixed the hole in the south wall.” Candice peered through a pair of expensive binoculars. “But not the one in the north. We’ll slide in through there and sweep toward the Square.”

The Square was in the center of the city, where Baker had a den. Bruce had informed Daniel that this had been one of the first Midwestern towns to be rebuilt after the war. The citizens had erected the wall to keep others out. The Network had put a quick, harsh stop to that, but left the wall and turned the city into a final outpost before the Borderlands started in Arkansas. Everything south and west of there was ruled by the West Coast, sister to the Eastern council that the Pruetts served.

“There he is.” Angelica pointed through the dusk shadows covering their presence.

Candice stared. Baker was still here. *What the hell is he thinking?* He knew she would accept the job, so what was he doing standing outside his hole-up?

Candice studied the surrounding area, finding too much debris and stacked furniture to be certain that he was alone. She gave the signal for her parents to send in a sighting alert to the nearest hub. Then they would all move in and snatch Baker. It was a simple plan, but thanks to their hunting skills, prey often thought they were much farther away. Right now, the Snake trackers were passing word that they’d stayed the night in Kentucky. They shouldn’t be expected so soon, but the convict shouldn’t be out in the open, either.

Baker rotated suddenly, hand dropping to his lean hip. Candice stared at his body. She’d used it many times, in many ways. She had found Baker hiding under a house a few weeks after Daniel was taken, too exhausted to pay the local gang leader for a night’s bed after evading guards all day from the orphanage where he’d been marked as a runaway. Their friendship had come easily because of a common hatred of adults and authority. When the disease was first starting, Candice hadn’t cared that Baker was male. She only saw his strength and his friendship. As the pain grew out of control, he’d eased her into the cool relief that came after one of their sessions. Those first few years were awful. Daniel hadn’t been gone a month before the heat came, making her feel as though she was burning alive all the time. To survive, she’d adopted a substitute.

Baker wore an earring in one thick lobe, an onyx circle with an indecipherable symbol in the center, and a silver chain around his neck that she believed might be made of titanium. In all the times they’d slept together, it had never snapped under her changeling strength. Baker moved with an arrogance that said he was on his own and surviving. Even as a homeless teenager, he’d been confident. Candice had needed that for what she was planning.

They’d spent time working on her strength nearly every day. He was the reason she’d won the game. By the time Baker had made the council’s Wanted list, they’d already been lovers for half a decade. She’d turned him in before, but it was something Candice didn’t think she could do now, despite accepting this assignment. Their rulers would get other hunters when she let him go. She hadn’t agreed for the UDs or for the chase. She needed to see him…feel him. She had to know if he still hit her as strongly. She had to let go of Baker to have a real future with Daniel and after the month they had spent together in the very den Baker was standing in front of, she wasn’t certain that was possible. Before she’d signed up for the games, Candice had feared she might be falling in love with the convict. She needed to know if it was true. If she loved both Daniel and Baker, there were different choices to be made.

*I’ll have to shoot myself,* she joked mentally. *Sometimes even the one is already too much to handle*. *Imagine the chaos a rebel would add.*

Putting away her amusement, Candice joined Angelica and Daniel at the Mopars they’d left by the wall.

Bruce and Mary were guarding from nearby.

“You ready?”

Angelica’s snort in response said she was jumpy.

Candice gave her a look of recognition. “Why don’t you hang back, have a ride ready?”

Angelica understood what Candice wanted. If there was trouble, she would get Daniel out of harm’s way.

Candice would rather have the girl with her, but Mary would be concerned with her own mate and Candice was the leader. Daniel had to be protected.

Candice waved her crew forward with a sense of things about to go wrong, but she didn’t call it off. Besides needing closure, she was hoping Baker would have information on the Ring. That fury was still burning hotly.

The bounty hunters spread out in a V formation with Daniel in the center as they walked into the city with hands hovering over their guns.

Minutes after easing inside the walls of Jericho, they entered the alley where Baker had been standing. Crates and old garbage littered the narrow dimness. The apocalypse debris was a foot deep and flattened down, but not lifeless. Tension crackled in the smelly air as rodents ran from their light steps.

Candice waved them forward with a shiver. Was Baker setting her up? He had to know she would never allow that to pass, lovers or not. Candice wondered briefly what Baker would see now when he looked at her. She’d asked him once, what he was drawn to when he could have had his choice of changelings in the breeding program. He’d surprised her and won a chunk of her affection with his answer.

*“You represent freedom and strength that I would do anything to have. When I’m close to your fire, I know I’m still alive and there’s hope.”*

Candice believed he would see her differently now. She was no longer his tattooed mistress. She was someone’s legal mate.

Baker’s voice floated down the alley. “Stop there.”

Candice shifted so Daniel was by her hip, picking up the waves of male menace aimed his way. Baker wasn’t happy that her new man was along for his capture.

“Comin’ in.”

The timbre failed to stun her. Candice was relieved. They would be on equal terms this time.

A shadow broke away from the wall with careful movements.

Daniel stared in surprise. He hadn’t known anyone was there.

A big hand raised black goggles. Glinting silver orbs regarded everyone coolly.

Candice nodded to him. “Baker.”

His shined orbs flashed intimate warmth. “Candy.”

He wasn’t expecting her reaction, and really, neither was Candice. Her blade spun by his ear and sank deep into the molding wood that had camouflaged him. “No more!”

Baker nodded, not taking any offense. “I had to be sure.”

“This is Daniel. *My mate*.”

The two men took an instant dislike to each other.

“Mate?” Baker’s voice rumbled insultingly. “That weakling?”

Daniel’s hand dropped to the new weapon on his belt. “Can I shoot him now? It said *preferred* dead.”

Okay, maybe it was more like instant loathing. Candice kept quiet as her men glared at each other.

Daniel hated Baker on sight. The rebel was unkempt and wild, a smirking threat to Daniel’s place that he wanted gone. This heathen had been with her! Baker knew *his* Candice intimately. The jealousy, the absolute fury, made Daniel fearless. “She’s mine!”

“Not likely. You’re just a new toy.” Baker’s laughter was salt in an open wound. “She’ll break you the first time out.”

Baker had already sensed that they weren’t physically bonded and he was using it, testing the limits.

Daniel didn’t stop to think. He followed the anger and yanked a weapon from his belt. Aware of Candice moving to stop him, Daniel threw the six-inch spike as hard as he could.

Not expecting a trained prize to be a threat, Baker spun at the last second, taking the blade to his shoulder instead of his neck. He slid to the ground in a spray of blood. “Ugh!”

*Crack! Crack!*

Angelica ducked out of sight as bullets flew through the moldy landscape, slamming into anything in their path–including Baker.

Candice grabbed Daniel and shoved him into a corner before returning fire.

Bruce and Mary darted out of sight to come out behind their attackers, as they always tried to do when ambushed.

“Aim low!” Baker tried to stem the flow of blood. “It’s not my people out there.”

“Can I shoot him now?” Daniel demanded, drawing his gun.

Candice fired at the moving shadows. “Later.”

Together, they swept in the pattern Bruce had started teaching Daniel, and were able to drive the dark forms back a little. Behind the attackers, fresh gunfire sounded as Bruce and Mary tried to even the score.

The roar of a Mopar coming was a relief to Candice. As Angelica slid to a stop, Candice spun Daniel that way. “Get out of here!”

Angelica dragged him onto the ride as Candice put down another spray of cover fire so they could escape through the alley.

“Low!” Baker’s tone was urgent.

Candice caught the rest of his meaning this time. As she pulled the pins on two pineapples from her belt, the second half of the trap was sprung. Hounds came from the sewers.

Candice rolled the grenades in three directions as she ran toward Baker. He wasn’t preferred alive. Apparently, the council meant it.

*Ping! Thud!* “Ugh!”

Another wave of slugs slammed into the ground and people. Candice stayed over Baker as much as she could, getting him onto his feet.

*Kablamm!*

*Boomm!*

The third blast didn’t come from the dud, but the first two cleared a path. Full changeling now, Candice hefted her wounded prisoner over one shoulder and got out of sight before the smoke cleared. She darted through the debris cloud with Baker clinging to her waist.

“Get them!”

Baker tensed at that voice. “Rankin!”

Candice didn’t waste her breath, but she remembered the Snake tracker’s words. They’d been betrayed.

Candice wasn’t used to carrying so much weight. Blood dripped from them both as she leapt over piles of unrecognizable junk, traction boots catching her on even feet. She darted across the deserted roadway to vanish into the deep shadows of a different alley. There were no sounds of pursuit, but with those hunters, there wouldn’t be. Network hounds were almost impossible to shake once they caught a scent. The single thing that threw them off was deep water.

Candice waded into the reeking muck in the center of the cracked sewer tunnel and kept moving. Their followers would know they had come this way.

“Go faster!” Baker demanded, grip tightening.

Candice stepped up the pace, mind flying. There was one choice–a fast exit from this city. “Hang on.”

Above them were few signs of the quickly coming night, merely more haphazardly piled debris. This area was a dumping ground from those living above the chaos.

Candice tensed, pulling on her changeling strength. She lunged and caught her footing on a metal beam as they landed. The makeshift bridge creaked but held.

*Men are heavy!* Candice sucked in a fresh lung of air. “You okay for a hard ride?”

She felt his grip tighten in response.

“Here we go.” Candice ran along the soft wood, dripping muck and blood into the cesspool below. The beam ended suddenly and she jumped, landing crouched on the edge of the crumbling wall as she searched for their escape.

She got moving again, hunting for the right tunnel as bullets spun through the air.

“Coming low!” Baker warned urgently, neck craned to see behind them.

Candice didn’t look, only pushed herself harder. She’d found what they needed. She just had to reach it.

Candice flew across a gap, landed awkwardly, and sprang away.

“There they are!”

“That’s the watershed!”

“Cut ‘em off!”

*Too late, ladies!* Candice dove into the churning mass a second later.

It had to be a nightmare for Baker, taking it upside down. His grip was like iron around her hips as they went under.

Lungs full of air, Candice yanked Baker upward. He resisted at first, confused, but her force went with the water and she was able to wrap his big arm around her neck as he came upright.

Half a minute later, her lungs were getting tight. Baker’s grip was painful as he struggled to hold out.

Candice groped for the trigger on her belt, getting it on the second try.

The raft inflated, pulling them through the churning water. They broke the surface together, gasping.

Candice clung to the fragile boat, attached by her belt rope. As soon as she could breathe, she secured Baker’s heavy weight the same way. Where the raft went, so would they.

Unable to see or hear any signs of pursuit, Candice sucked in more air and gathered her strength. There was still work to be done.

It took a lot of effort to get both of them onto the floater without tipping it over. It also made a lot of noise that concerned them both, but there was no avoiding the squeaking noises of wet skin and clothes sliding over the sides.

Under their weight, the raft immediately rode faster through the mucky water. They stayed still for the first minutes, shivering in the breeze, but glad to be alive as the walled city fell behind them and the sky darkened. The watershed was unusually clear of debris as they moved steadily west, both bleeding.

Candice finally sat up and leaned forward. “Let me see how bad it is.”

She snatched her hand back as his knife glinted in the moonlight.

“You, first.”

She shrugged at his wary tone, confident she could take the blade from him if she needed to. “Feels like one in the arm… No, two. That’s a double tap. And one in the thigh. Now yours.”

The rebel wasn’t certain he should let her, even though she’d saved his life. Candice saw it in the way his usually bright demeanor was so dark. What Baker did when he was away from her, Candice didn’t know. He had never volunteered the information and she had never asked. She also hadn’t visited him before her game, hadn’t told him about it before she left. He’d found out the same way as everyone else–by the official announcement of the contestants. Even her family hadn’t known. When she’d passed her eighteenth birthday and didn’t enter the games, her mother had thought she’d let Daniel go, but Candice had been waiting for the game with his papers. She had infinite patience for a good plan.

“Relax.” Candice shoved his hand down. “If I wanted you dead, you would be.”

With a few quick twists, she had wet strips from her cloak wrapped around the wounds that she could reach. Candice moved away from his temptingly bloody scent the instant she was done. She settled carefully on her end of the small raft, sharp ears straining to hear anything.

“He’s changing you already.”

She sighed, nodding. “More the game, than him. It was…rough.”

“It’s awful!” Baker agreed. “No woman should ever have to do that for a mate, and no man should ever be treated that way. It has to stop.”

With those words, Baker became what Candice had least expected–an ally against the Network. She didn’t answer, but she agreed. After what Daniel had been through, how could she not?

They spent the rest of the ride in silence, staring at the darkness and each other. It was impossible not to compare Baker to her new mate. Baker was thick, but in the hard, dangerous way that had drawn Candice to him before she’d known what to do with a friend like that. His sideburns came all the way down to meet in a light goatee of black shadows and mysterious allure. He liked her tattoos, but had only gotten one of his own during the time they’d been together. On his neck was the green rose and sword she’d put there herself.

Now, he was sporting a new tat on his upper arm that made his muscles stand out. Tanned and rarely shaven, Baker’s good looks screamed from an unforgiving chin and deep-set silver eyes. He’d told Candice one of his clients was a medico. She had done it for him in place of money for his rental. He’d had those eyes when they met...

How long had Baker thought of her as a friend before he saw her as a future user of his services? Had he ever doubted it? They had used each other for their own reasons, but against her will, a bond had grown. It wasn’t the same as what she had with Daniel. Baker was too independent for that, but it was still enough to make her mourn a little for the life they might have had together if they’d met in a world without Daniel’s ghost between them.

**2**

“Turn around! We have to go back!” Daniel was frantic at the thought of leaving Candice behind. “We have to go back!”

Busy guiding the Mopar out of range of whoever was still firing at them, Angelica grabbed his leg as she made a sharp turn.

“Why are you doing this?!” Daniel began to struggle to get free, not caring if he fell off the bike.

Mary brought her Mopar up to speed so that she could pull even with Angelica. “Stay on that bike! Do what you were told!”

At the shout, Daniel stopped struggling. He’d forgotten that this was Candice’s wish. Now forced to obey, he held onto Angelica’s waist and muttered in her ear.

Everyone knew that Daniel was upset, but there was little they could do about it as they followed orders to get him out of harm’s way. As far as they could tell, they hadn’t been followed, but that wasn’t always good enough in these surroundings. Even if they didn’t have a tail, they might run into more problems. Gunfire often drew problems.

As the city of Jericho fell further behind them, Daniel’s depression was expected. His angry mutters, however, were a surprise.

Tiring of listening to his complaints, Angelica slowed the bike and then stopped in the small cover of an old building that looked as though it had been used for target practice. It was littered in bullet holes, marking it as an old neighborhood.

Angelica turned around to Daniel, ready to shout at him for his behavior, but she was unable to follow through upon looking at him. His wide, frightened eyes said he couldn’t help his reactions.

Shaking her head at the cruelty of the Network, Angelica turned off the bike and moved away from him. She didn’t have the patience to offer comfort, but Bruce and Mary would do that for him. While they handled his emotional state, she would keep a watch to make sure that they weren’t in danger.

Daniel waited for the yelling and possible beating, shaking.

Mary gave him a soft pat on the shoulder. “She’ll be fine. Come have a drink and walk around for a few minutes. We’ll be traveling nonstop again.”

Distracted by the thought of fresh misery, Daniel grunted and limped off the bike.

Mary and Angelica stood watch while the two men walked around the bikes, waiting for Daniel to adjust. While they waited, the women discussed their current situation.

“We’re going to need fuel. We have enough to get there, but if she needs to make a fast exit, we’ll run out.”

“There’s a Network refueling center near the tracks. We can make it there.”

Angelica nodded at Mary’s decision. Fuel was often hard to come by. “Do you want to start towing now?”

Mary shook her head. Bruce was enjoying driving Candice’s Mopar. She wasn’t going to take that away from him until she had to. “We’ll wait until we reach the tracks.”

A few minutes later, the family was back on the road. The situation was much calmer outwardly, but inwardly, Daniel was still just as upset as he had been.

**3**

Candice and Baker drifted for hours before the land around the watershed became familiar. Sleepy and cold, Candice slid into the icy water and propelled the boat toward the steepest edge of the watershed. “I have a den near here. Can you climb?”

“One handed.” Baker sighed ruefully as she guided the boat. “Your mate hit a muscle.”

“Slide over here.” Candice couldn’t have been more pleased, despite the inconvenience. “Seems like maybe he’ll do.”

“Maybe so.” Baker lowered himself into the water and slid onto her back.

Candice swam to the bank, relishing the strength of her changeling body. Without it, this wouldn’t be possible.

She got them to the edge of the crumbling outflow pipe without trouble, but labored up the rocky bank. It was an ugly, graceless climb where she scrambled for a hold while Baker’s big hands did the same. They were both relieved to be lying across the top of the watershed wall a few minutes later.

They peered down on row after row of barbed wire barriers where occasional shadows shifted in the darkness.

“You ready?”

Baker bobbed weakly against her shoulder.

Candice understood he was about done, but her body was already healing. None of her wounds were life threatening. His, she wasn’t sure about.

Candice moved slowly through the tangles. She’d chosen to come here because only one other person on the planet knew where it was. She always made sure her cousin knew how to reach her in case there was family trouble.

“Down!”

Baker’s hiss put Candice on her stomach in the debris field, where rats and who knew what else scurried under them.

Lights swept the barbed wire, searching.

They stayed motionless, letting centuries of apocalyptic rubble be their disguise. It helped that they were coated in muck.

“Send in the hounds!” a guard ordered.

“It was just an animal.”

“Send ‘em in!”

Candice tensed, sweeping the shadows of the alley they needed to reach.

“They’ll come straight for us. You should leave me beh–Ugh!”

Candice took off, stopping his words. They both listened for the pad of chasing dog feet.

“Down!”

Candice dropped, dismayed to see a shadow break away from the barrier right in front of them. The orphan ran with a noticeable limp.

Baker could feel Candice getting ready to react. “Don’t do it.”

Hounds flew by, running over them without registering a scent.

The hounds got the orphan before Candice could help. Her rage went up another notch.

The fire hounds were menacing with their red eyes that mirrored female fury. The contamination had destroyed the females of all the species that humans had depended on, befriended. A cat was a rare sight in New America, but toads were abundant due to their ability to shift genders*. If only people had the same skill.* The hounds certainly didn’t. The disease did to them, what it did to the women. They’d grown larger, angrier, and desperate for a mate. Candice hated them even as she understood what made them so bloodthirsty, but she blamed the Network for the deaths caused by the hounds, for the small girl she may have flushed from a hiding spot without knowing until it was too late. Someday, this would all end. *The Network will end.*

“We gonna be food too?” Baker inquired lowly.

Candice smirked, moving. Was there a way for her to combine her two lovers? She had forgotten how alive Baker made her feel.

They slid into the alley without being noticed, and Candice hurried through the darkness with her prize. She was relieved to be here. Even for a changeling, this was too much effort to sustain.

Baker kept a tight grip as she climbed a stack of wooden skids.

Candice stumbled as the skids shifted under their weight, regaining her balance right as she reached the top. Almost an entire warehouse of pallets had been in this alley when she’d found the den. It had been simple to rearrange them.

The wood on the roof gave easily under her hands, sliding over to reveal a hatch.

“Hey, wait. We don’t…”

Candice dropped into the hole, jerking the rope to close the hatch behind them.

Ignoring his yelp, Candice slung Baker into the single chair. His sound quickly became a moan.

Baker slid to his knees, in agony, Candice thought.

He lifted his goggles and kissed the dirt floor. “Land!”

She hid a chuckle, knowing he could see every detail of her expression with those shined eyes. Candice went unerringly to the table and lit the lantern to break the sparks.

She took stock quickly. There wasn’t much to work with. It had been a while since she’d been here. This storeroom was in an old Network warehouse that included a bomb shelter. The warehouse had collapsed, but the rock chamber behind it had stood, buried, until she found it. Now it was stocked with a cot, a chair and table, and a few other basics for when she needed space. It was the first time Baker had been here and it would be the last.

“Let’s get your wounds taken care of.” She drew her knife.

Baker swallowed, gesturing at the blade. “You still prefer full credits for captures instead of halves for bodies, right?”

Candice snickered. “Your body is too useful to kill. Stand up and hold still.”

Baker gripped the chair as she knelt behind him to dig out the slugs. He stayed silent the entire time.

He was so different from the males she knew, so tempting. It was no wonder she had given him first honors with her body, but things had changed. Their bond wouldn’t be easily broken, but the only man she wanted in her bed now was Daniel.

“You gonna turn me in or what?”

Candice recognized the pain distraction. She was no one’s gentle anything with a knife. She shrugged. “I’ll vote to go after the others.” Candice felt him tense as the blade went deeper. “Sorry.”

She flipped the metal out with a brutal jerk. Blood streamed down his leg. “There we go.”

His wounds weren’t as bad as Candice had feared. He had taken a number of hits, but only the leg wound and Daniel’s surprise blow were serious. After rest and food, Baker would be able to travel. She would medicate him along the way if it became necessary.

Candice settled Baker in the cot. Sparks flew each time their gazes met. This would be their last night together.

“You should take the bounty on me and settle down with him.”

Candice grunted. “Yes, I should.”

He smiled. “Or you could join us.”

“Us?”

Baker twisted to watch as she flipped a slug from her leg and wrapped the wound with another strip from her battered cloak. “The rebels.”

Candice paused. “That’s why the Network sent hounds, Snakes, and Pruetts for you.”

Baker’s mood lightened at her quick calculations. “The council knew you’d find me first, but they also knew I would be alive when you handed me over. They don’t want that anymore. Their trackers have been onto me for a week. I’ve been shot at twice.”

Candice’s mouth dropped open. “Then why come out? Why stay here at all?”

“I knew you would be the one they sent.” Baker’s silver eyes flashed dangerously. “And I wanted to see the new man.”

He didn’t say, *the one who replaced me,* but she felt it. Despite the casual arrangement, bonds had grown.

Candice grunted, not anticipating Baker knowing the truth, but willing enough to give it now. Before, when it was a cool dream in the fiery darkness, she’d been afraid to share her plan. “I knew Daniel before he was sold.”

“They put us into the training programs before we’re ever prizes. You would have been…”

“Twelve.”

The convict understood then what she’d done. “That was why! To learn from me so you could get to him. I was nothing to you!”

Unable to take Baker’s pain, Candice shoved over to the cot. Her voice was a harsh whisper. “You were my saving grace, my light in the darkness. So much more than nothing!”

Baker kissed her.

Candice allowed it, but the violent spark had been replaced with a vague flicker.

Baker shoved her away, understanding they were done. “You smell like shit!”

Candice caught herself, laughing. *That* was the Baker she knew. “Will you try not to kill him?”

Baker grinned, almost a mirror of her games leer. “Does he know about us?”

“Not until today.”

“You’ll tell him the rest?”

“Of course.” Candice began cleaning up some of the mess.

Baker blew out a sigh and pulled his goggles over his eyes so she couldn’t read him. “Better make the same deal with him, I think. He’s got a fuse like yours.”

Candice was fiercely proud of Daniel. Later, when there was time, she would show him how much.

“I meant it, my offer. Not just anyone can get you in.”

That implied Baker was more than just a member of the rebels. He was important to them. Candice nodded. “I’ll pass it on.”

The convict snorted. “*You* make the choices for the Pruetts.”

“Not this one.” Her cold tone implied she was seriously considering it. Candice slid onto the floor pallet she’d made and tried to sleep. She wasn’t used to being confused or hesitant. She liked to take action to attain her goals. Knowing she wasn’t free to do as she wanted was displeasing. Women had multiple lovers; it was accepted, but it was wrong by her standards. She could feel Baker’s pain, but Candice didn’t go to him. They were finished.

The temperature quickly dropped over the next few hours. The wind howled through the cracks in the nook, pushing frigid air into the damp chamber.

Candice didn’t have clothes stored here, and ended up revising her choice not to share a bed with Baker. They huddled together in the cot, sharing heat.

Baker understood without being told when all Candice did was let him wrap her up tightly. They rested, drowsing, but sleep didn’t come for either of them until the dim rays of sun said a new day had arrived. Night was a lethal time in Network lands.

**4**

**New Network City**

“That’s it. Switch on the tracking device in his brand and fire the missile!” Terry had just heard the reports from the Snake trackers. “They’re all together.”

“Not yet.” Juli was timing things carefully. “Give them time to get to the others. Baker won’t have a base so close to one of our hubs.”

The screens behind the council members showed a variety of locations–the swamps of lower Georgia and Alabama, the Arkansas Borderlands, a crumbling bridge over the dry Ohio River. Most of the screens showed areas the council monitored for possible or known trouble. Like Atlanta, where nature had taken over completely. There was little to see but twisting vines and insects the size of hands. The Network didn’t control that area. No one did.

The next small screen showed the deserts of Nebraska. Once covered in enough crops to feed a country, the breadbasket had been smothered with volcanic ash during a post-apocalyptic eruption. It still hadn’t recovered. The ash, which was actually tiny bits of volcanic glass, was slowly spreading east on the winds.

Another monitor showed a dilapidated nuclear power plant in the Missouri quake zone. They were forced to keep a continuous watch on the high radiation levels caused from a minor meltdown in 299AW, when temperatures had stayed below freezing for six months and stopped the flow of river water to the reactor.

Another square screen revealed a section of the wall dividing New America from Canada. On the other side of that armed barrier, the mob of protestors grew daily in number.

One of the oldest council members, Lauren, waved a hand. “We don’t have long before it all blows open.”

The monarch gave a pacifying grunt. “The meeting is two months away. Vaccines are being shipped to other countries, slowly. It’ll hold them a few weeks and then it won’t matter. But let the rest of our hounds out. Clear the hiding places we know of. It won’t help us to be caught unaware.”

“Do we capture the Pruetts if we find them at one of the dens?”

“No. Accept their lies and let them go.” Juli instructed, protecting the grand plan. “Their duty to the Network isn’t over.”

# Chapter Fourteen

**Network Rider**

Frogtown, Alabama

**1**

**“C**andy?”

There was that hated name, followed by a painful flash of the girl who had been too weak to stop Daniel from being taken. “What!”

“Remember the deal we talked about?”

Candice didn’t come fully awake at the concern in Baker’s tone, but she registered it. She was comfortable against his heat. She wanted to sleep. “What deal?”

“The one where you tell your new man I’m off limits.”

Candice struggled to think, groggy. “What about it?”

“*Now* would be a good time.”

Baker’s tone finally sank in. *Daniel*.

Candice’s lids snapped open to find Daniel glaring at them. It was easy to feel his fury and reason warring for control as he pressed his knife to Baker’s throat.

Candice sighed, flipping into alertness. “It’s gonna be one of those days, I guess.” She could tell what Daniel was thinking and why not? She was wrapped in the convict’s arms. They’d clearly passed a long night. “So do it.”

“What?”

“What?”

Candice yawned sleepily at their reactions. “I’ll tell you once, Daniel. I do as I please. It’s not *his* choice any more than it’s yours.”

Everyone was stunned at the callousness, even the parents waiting near the door. Mary had been able to sneak in here from the opposite entrance, allowing them to avoid the climb and drop Candice had done.

Candice snuggled deeper into Baker’s tense embrace to prove her point. “Get a body transport ready. We leave in half an hour.”

Candice wasn’t sure if Daniel might do it anyway. She was ready to take a wound for the rebel to make her mate understand his place. She was the lead, always.

Daniel couldn’t help the jealousy that had drawn a blade to his hand. Finding out he would have to share her was a blow he hadn’t expected. His hand trembled, wanting to do it…but then she would be done with him. Even sharing was better than not being with her. Daniel lowered the knife in misery, heartbroken. *I thought she was mine!*

Broken again, he trudged to a far corner and waited for instructions, as he’d been taught.

“Damn. Remind me of that the next time I invite you over.”

Baker’s tone was condemning, but his body said he was hers if she wanted him. Should that level of servitude be required, Baker would happily pay the price.

“You fit for a trip to Atlanta?”

Baker wasn’t surprised to learn Candice had chosen to escort him home. “I’ll be good as new in a day or two. We rollin’ or glidin’ in?”

Candice chortled against his big chest. “Neither.”

“More water.” He scowled. “Great.”

Candice reluctantly pushed herself up and out of his arms, sure she would be sore. And she was, but not so much that it would get in the way.

She bobbed thanks when Angelica held out a small pouch of supplies. Pruetts were fast healers. Within a day or two, only scars would remain where she’d been shot. It was one of the few benefits of this agony. It was also another way they differed from the average citizen, but not from the other changelings. *They* also healed fast, making kill shots a necessity.

Candice dug through the pouch and tossed a small jar onto Baker’s lap. “After you use it on the places you can reach, Daniel will do the rest.”

“Like hell he will!”

Daniel’s gasp echoed through the den at Baker’s blatant refusal of an order.

“Fine. Angel?” Candice triggered the heat intentionally. It would be a test of Angelica’s control.

Recognizing that, Angelica nodded tensely.

Baker straightened, tensing. “I’ll do it myself.”

“You’ll do as you’re told!” Bruce’s tone was commanding.

Baker pouted. “Whatever.”

The childish response made even Mary crack a grin.

Candice sat at the small table and waved Daniel to the chair beside her. Bruce joined them as Angelica went to Baker.

“I’m taking him to Stone Mountain.”

Mary wasn’t surprised. “We’ve already sent notice of an assignment withdrawal due to injury.”

Candice watched Angelica extend the jar so Baker could dip his fingers into it. She was holding her breath. So was he. *Maybe Baker can help her*, Candice thought. She scanned Daniel. “How was your first night without me?”

As his mouth opened, Candice willed him to fight, as he might have with Baker.

Daniel’s chin dropped. “Rough.”

Instead of giving into the urge to comfort him, Candice fell into making plans with her parents. What she was about to do–crossing the Network to help this rebel get home–could result in all their deaths. She needed to be certain all the angles were covered before they left. She didn’t have the patience for another ambush unless she was the one setting it.

Once plans were made, the bounty hunters moved Baker from the den to the medical cart. They towed his chained body behind as if it was a corpse. Bodies were worth half a credit. Few people would cross a Pruett family team for such a tiny amount. Under the shield of a heavy fog and the noise of water rushing from the watershed, the small group left the area unnoticed.

To Candice, Frogtown was as ugly in the daylight as it had been in the damp darkness. The council had declared Martial Law here in response to riots over the height restriction for a breeding pass. Their rulers only wanted perfect specimens to reproduce, and the short, squat females of the Bama swamps weren’t happy about it. The nearby hub that oversaw the single train to the western outpost had been under citizen control for a few days during the rebellion, but the Network still hadn’t let up even though the muck-dwelling females had been conquered for years. The hounds had taken care of it.

As if her contemplations had conjured them, Candice saw three sets of ears rise up over the stacks of cut hay lining the road.

“We have company.” Hoping there weren’t more dogs coming, Candice ordered, “Males in the cart, on my order.”

Tension thickened as everyone understood there was trouble.

Angelica gasped as a slobbering hound bounded from the trees to their right.

“In the cart!” Candice shouted.

Daniel scrambled in with Bruce as Baker slid over to make space.

The cart was attached to Angelica’s Mopar. As soon as they were in, Angelica sped up.

Four large hounds came together, red-eyed and snarling. They were hungry.

Candice fired, hitting one of them in the shoulder, but the angry animal barely paused.

Daniel cringed in horror at a hound running alongside the cart. “Candy!”

“Down!”

Daniel ducked as Candice fired. This time, the slug went through the dog’s eye socket and into its brain. As it fell, a second dog lunged overtop the dead one to snap at Daniel’s arm.

He jerked backward and the hound followed, knocking them both from the cart with the heavy weight.

Dazed, Daniel scrambled to his feet.

“Don’t move!”

Daniel stopped. The hound’s face was inches from his. He was aware of Candice trying to get a clear shot, but at that moment, staring into the creature’s vivid irises, he could feel its pain. Unlike changelings, he sensed these animals needed comfort and attention instead of sexual relief. His hand only shook a little as he reached out to touch it.

The hound didn’t react beyond those red orbs. They flared hotter as his scent filled its nose.

Daniel slid his fingers through its chin fur without flinching. *Soft!*

He murmured the same and felt the animal relax a bit under his attention.

“They sometimes obey commands…”

Daniel understood Candice’s meaning. “Go home now. Take your friends with you, please.”

Before he could cower, a huge tongue slid over his jaw in affection.

Daniel chuckled as the hound left, wiping away the slobber.

The other huge dogs followed, all of them taking curious sniffs of their merciful leader.

Daniel regarded Candice and her family, who were sharing surprised glances. He could tell they believed he should be dead. Daniel let himself open up a bit. “It’s one of the ways I’m different. I don’t think the Network knows or they wouldn’t have let me out.”

In the stunned silence from her family, Candice felt relief and shame. She’d almost lost him again. Her heart still wasn’t beating correctly. She’d been angry most of her life, but fear was an entirely different emotion. *I don’t like it at all.*

**2**

As they cleared the city limits, Angelica and Candice took the road that would lead them to the train. Her parents took the wilder path north so they could pick up the other fugitives and appease the council’s anger for failing to turn in the convict who was currently bumping along behind Angelica.

Daniel’s grip was a warm comfort. Now that a few hours had passed, Candice was stunned by what they had witnessed. She’d never heard of it before, not even when civilization had been at its most evolved. The hounds didn’t bond with people. They ate them.

There was no line to wait in for boarding when they arrived at the hub. The train was ready to go as they rode up to the cargo car. Candice was glad to see light security. She didn’t expect trouble on this ride, but if it came, at least there wouldn’t be a flood of troops to get in her way.

A short haggle with the tall redhead minding the wide bays of the hub got them the three rear compartments of a fancy car for half price. There were few reasons for people to come here, making the sentries short of funds and lax from boredom.

*Not wise*, Candice reflected. This area was as dangerous as the few people who dared to venture through it. Towering trees and winding paths branched off in every direction, requiring a continuous crew to keep the tracks clear of debris. The reason she’d chosen to take the train was lurking within that dense forest, discouraging direct land travel for the rest of the journey. Pythons in the southern areas had even taken over the crocodile population.

Candice scanned their surroundings as they boarded. This hub was at the center of three states–Tennessee, where they had captured Baker, Alabama, where Candice and Baker had denned, and Georgia, where they were traveling to. It should have been a busy place, but it never had been, as far back as she could remember. It was as if the Network didn’t want people to settle the Borderlands.

Daniel loved the train as soon as he saw it. He remembered not to say so at the last second. Unlike the crate ride to Candy’s home, Daniel thought he might enjoy this trip. Black and sleek, the train had silver edgings and a feeling of luxury enhanced by bright crystal chandeliers above the windows. He saw only Network women here, but he still felt their attention shift to him in instant need. It was clear that they hadn’t seen a new male in a while. Daniel was careful to avoid their leering gazes.

The train rumbled around them as it began to power up, but it wasn’t as loud as he’d expected from such a massive machine. Daniel followed his owner, eager to begin this newest leg of their adventure. He was no longer worried for his safety. Candice was adept at reclaiming her property and these women knew it. She’d been recognized by at least three of the black and silver clad females. He could tell by the way those guards were now studying his owner instead of him.

As soon as Candice got Baker’s body secured in the storage area, the train departed. Later, she would bring him to her quarters. When the Pruetts rode the rails, they were known to waste an hour or two with the rentable men. That would provide a distraction for him to sneak in. There was still a lot that their rulers didn’t know about the Pruetts. The family had always tried hard to keep it that way, but things would change soon. Candice’s growing rage wouldn’t allow her to keep playing these games much longer.

The railcars were lined in silver and black paneling, with red carpet and delicate velvet draperies to match those fragile fixtures. The chairs and couches were thick and plush, the kind that encouraged sweet sleep. Each seat came with cute pillows in all three of the themed shades. After the thick green of the isolated wilderness that they’d traveled through, it was overwhelming.

Candice pointed. “In here.”

Their sleeping car was large, but the bed still took up half of it. Daniel swallowed a lump in his throat and began putting away things he believed Candice would want for this overnight stay.

Candice remained in the doorway as Angelica secured the other two rooms.

Daniel put away her clothes and personal items. As he slid cuffs into the top drawer, Daniel could feel her eyes burning holes into him. He’d packed them from her things at home and received an approving gesture.

Daniel finished with his chores, then glanced toward the small washroom. When he glanced at Candice for permission, she only stared.

It took a moment to understand what she hadn’t said. His choices, his freedoms, would be as many as she could give.

The cubby was small, but well stocked. Daniel took advantage by using some of the samples. He liked to be clean, to smell good. Before, being dirty had been a tiny defense. Now, that wasn’t necessary. He wanted to be taken. *Then she won’t need Baker.*

**3**

An hour after boarding the train, they were all gathered in the dining area of their car. Baker was lying on a couch in the far corner. Angelica was by the exit, not eating or talking and Candice understood why. The smells in this car were tempting. Both males had showered. The scent of freshly washed meat was making changeling nerves tingle. It wasn’t as bad for Candice. She was noticing the subtle differences between the two men, but being around them was torture for Angelica.

Candice could feel the fire, the heat, as Angelica waited for this run to be over. She didn’t realize Candice was doing it to her intentionally. Angelica could have been sent with Bruce and Mary, but she needed this. Candice’s success at the games had convinced the younger girl she stood a shot, but being around Daniel had made the final choice. She wanted one of her own. Angelica would probably sign up when they got home and Candice was determined that her cousin would survive.

Daniel was staring out the window at the darkening landscape flying by. The light draft coming from the cracked glass was pulling his scent directly toward the door, where it swirled around Angelica before wafting to Candice.

Angelica’s hands clenched at a fresh wave, irises flickering from pink to red.

Candice recognized the moment. “Get out.”

She waited until Angelica was gone before looking at Daniel. “You, too.”

He walked stiffly to the exit, assuming she wanted time alone with Baker.

Candice clamped down on comforting words. Daniel would learn to trust her. If she wanted them both, she would have told him. As it was, Baker’s clean skin held an appeal, but there was little heat behind it. She’d made her choice long ago.

As Daniel quietly shut the barrier to their bedroom–Candice could see through the mirror on the railcar door she’d left open–Baker sat up.

“You’re a real bitch to them, you know?”

Candice ignored the attempt at conversation. When it came to their safety, yes, she was. Angelica couldn’t be so distracted. It would get one of them killed.

“What’s it like?”

Candice focused on Baker, who was now staring at the muted wall screen in loathing. A new episode of the Bachelor Battles was playing.

“Are they safe?” He had escaped before being put into a game.

Her mind flashed to the cells, to the blood and bruises. “No.”

Baker wanted details, but more than that, he wanted help. It was a surprise to discover. Candice reacted like a true Pruett. “Let’s get this straight. I owe you for the training, and I’m paying for it by delivering your injured ass to Stone Mountain. Anything else will have to wait until I see who you’ve drafted to replace the Network that you’re hoping I’ll destroy.”

“We’re good men, Candy. They’re dying so fast!”

Her grip tightened on the chair. His tone implied she would find so much desperation in his rebels that not helping would hurt her more than facing the Network. “Why were you there?”

“You won. You can get us in.” His honesty demanded her assistance. “*We* have a right to live as free men.”

The conversation had gotten more emotional than Candice had expected from him. She understood this wasn’t one of his many challenges for fun or a service that he needed handled. He cared for them. Her eyes widened. There was no stopping the shift to pink vision. “You’re more than just a rebel.”

Baker leaned against the seat and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ve been leading them since the Network murdered my father during a live broadcast.”

Candice placed it. A tall, sandy blond fugitive had broken into the complex during an episode of Vulture Run. As his punishment, he was forced to become a contestant right then. It was the most brutal of the Network’s entertainment. The ragged, starving male hadn’t made it ten feet into the birdcage. “Why did he go? He had to know he wasn’t coming out.”

“My brother. We heard rumors that he was a prize for that episode.” Baker’s eyes shut. “He was left in the nursery.”

His voice, the tone of confident power that she’d always depended on, broke her with the anguish.

That was a common punishment for rebels and sympathizers, but her heart filled with fury. Candice had pictured Daniel for the last years, and felt her own torment, but there were countless others like the tortured man across from her. They needed help…

Her mind swam with contemplations of the secrets she suspected he would reveal. This tattered, jealousy-hiding convict was her way into a new game if she wanted it. He was a free ride to twist the hand of fate and maybe save an entire world as she played the Network for all their lives this time.

Candice reflected on her matches and the interviews she’d given, dominated. Maybe she’d been planning things even then, going through their reporters one by one to prove she could. Maybe she’d been plotting. The angry side had never intended to go home with her prize and settle down without handing out justice to those responsible. Daniel’s family would have been an easy target, but the Network made all of these horrors possible. She’d always known who the true enemy was.

Irony prompted a harsh laugh to spill from her lips. No wonder Baker had come to her. For a duty this big, the one doing it had to be fearless, and she was as close to that as it came. Her terror had always been Daniel’s absence. Now, she didn’t have that weakness to stop her from joining their cause.

“Would it help to know there are more of us than the Network admits to publicly?”

Candice’s lips drew up as she pushed her buzzing mind into concentration so she wouldn’t miss any of the details. “How many?”

“Enough to fill every car on this train–twice.”

**4**

Daniel was angry. Candice and Baker had been alone for an hour. Then she’d helped Baker into the middle car and shut the door while she talked to Angelica in the hallway. She hadn’t even looked at Daniel.

Baker was surprised that Candice had left them alone together. Daniel clearly wanted him dead.

Daniel glowered as firmly as he knew how. He and the convict needed to get some things straight and it had to be now, while they had this minute alone.

“You can stop. She made her choice.”

Daniel hadn’t been expecting that. He waited, trying to figure out if Baker was a threat.

Baker shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t understand it either. What the hell does she see in you?”

Daniel growled at the insult, but there was no denying the pain in Baker’s voice. Candice had obviously told him they were through. It went a long way toward soothing Daniel’s wounded ego, and he stopped the words he’d been mentally rehearsing.

“You better be what she needs, *boy*!” Baker growled, showing some of the menace Daniel was positive had attracted Candice.

Daniel leaned forward, showing he had picked up his own version of her rage. “I’ll still be holding her when the Network shoots your ass.”

“Slam you, playboy!”

“Right back at you, convict!”

The door slid open, forcing them to stop as Candice entered.

She read the tension, letting out a deep sigh, but Daniel sensed she actually liked it. He puzzled over that impression.

“I see you two are getting acquainted.” She waved a hand at her mate. “Come along.”

With a last gloating glare at Baker, Daniel followed. It was time for bed.

# Chapter Fifteen

**Rebel Charms**

**1**

**C**andice had put Angelica with Baker for the night, but when she and Daniel came through the hall, the girl’s gear was outside the door.

Candice scowled, jerking a hand toward the car that held Baker. “You can’t keep track of someone like him from so far away.”

Angelica growled, the change flickering.

Candice shrugged, moving around her stiff stance. “He’s healed enough. Ask him for a service.”

Another of those nearing violence snarls echoed, and then Angelica grabbed her gear and stormed into the middle car. She slammed the door.

Candice doubted Angelica would take the advice, but being together would keep them from stewing on their own miseries. She and Angelica were enough alike that Candice believed they would pass the night talking.

The motion of the train was usually steady, so Candice wasn’t expecting a rough shudder that ran through the metal in an earsplitting shriek before straightening out. She assumed they’d hit debris on the tracks. She was glad the walls were thickly padded for privacy. Screams might carry, but not conversations and that was good. Candice sensed her new mate had a tirade waiting. Daniel had been silent since she’d put him in his place, but Candice was looking forward to setting things straight. She’d made the choice. She could take him with a clear conscience. She didn’t plan to rush it, but the only thing holding her back now was timing. Candice wanted to be able to remember it forever.

As the couple entered, that creak of agonized metal came again, this time without the shudder. Candice didn’t let it worry her, but she saw Daniel’s shoulders tense. “There are escape hatches in all the cars.”

Daniel’s mouth opened.

Candice braced for his jealousy.

“Why didn’t you claim Baker?”

Without a rehearsed answer waiting, Candice gave the truth. “He’s not you.”

Daniel’s happiness lit up the darkest places in her heart. Candice sighed. “Nothing happened last night. It was cold. That’s it.”

“But you care for him.”

She didn’t lie. “Yes. He helped me through the worst years of my life.”

Daniel’s beautiful face darkened. “While you were *changing*.”

“No.” Candice pulled the string on her battered cloak. “While I was without you.”

That eased his jealousy, and she finished it off. “Baker and I are over.”

“Why? You’re allowed to have both.”

His quick response made her wonder what he and Baker had talked about when she’d left to do a security check before settling them all in for the night. Had they discussed sharing her? Candice snorted again at the thought of trying to live that way. “One at a time.”

Daniel winced at her choice of words.

Candice cursed her thoughtless mouth. Instead of explaining her meaning, she pushed off her boots and sent her hands to the long shirt she always wore over her normal clothes on runs.

Daniel watched her like it was a show. He wasn’t sure, but he may have stopped breathing as her silken body began to emerge. She had muscles tattooed with roses, stars, animals, names of the places she’d been during her runs. He couldn’t look away.

Her peach swells glowed in the flickering train light, causing jealous contemplations to fade into desire. She had that effect on him. Daniel suspected she knew and was using it. Candice obviously wanted him willing, but Daniel didn’t think she knew how well her plans were working. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Where do you want me?”

The heat in her pink gaze made him flush. He hurried to remove his own overclothes. It would be perfect if she took him with Baker in the next car. Hoping she didn’t notice the gloating attitude, Daniel folded his cloak and laid it on the bed. Her gaze burnt holes into him as his hands went to the buckle of his jeans. The bachelor had the sudden intuition if he pushed, he could snap that famous Pruett control. Candice had spent the night in Baker’s arms without seeking relief. She had to be ready. Daniel took off his shirt and then started on his pants.

When he took his time instead of scurrying under the blankets as usual, Candice understood what he was doing. On another day, it might have made her angry or forced her to teach him a strict lesson on trying to manipulate her, but right now, there was too much heat. The time with Baker, smelling him for those hours, had given her a wall of fire she’d stored behind the rage. The sight of Daniel now trying to push her into what she wanted anyway made her wait to see how far he would go. If it was as far as she hoped, the cuffs were in the drawer.

His pants were neatly folded and placed on the stand. Bare skin winked at her, saluting.

Candice gave him the games grin. It was only fair to know when you were pushing a changeling into an attack.

Instead of a flinch, Daniel nodded. “I’m ready.”

*Heat. Lightning. Flames*. Candice pulled down the sheet and delivered a single warning. “I can break most cuffs.”

“I hadn’t planned on using them.”

Candice paused, body hardening into pointed peaks that drew Daniel. *She is so sexy!* He felt a tremor of worry as her nails shredded a hole in the top sheet. She didn’t seem to be aware of it. Hoping he wasn’t about to make a mistake, Daniel dipped the mattress with his heavy body and rolled toward her.

She was lying stiffly with her hands clenched at her hips. Candice didn’t move as Daniel slid his thumb along her cheek, her lips. She was beautiful to him, so different from before when he couldn’t stand to look at a renter. Daniel traced her shoulder scars–her badges of honor. He was awed by her resilience. She’d been sliced, stabbed, shot and beaten, but little slowed her down. *What I wouldn’t give to be like that!*

Daniel slid carefully over her, bracing an arm on either side. As their bodies met, Candice growled.

Scared again, Daniel froze.

Trying to remember this was his idea, Daniel held still as she slowly leaned forward. When she only pressed her mouth to his, moaning, Daniel responded.

Candice let the kiss linger, lips sliding, breath mingling. When she broke it, her orbs were almost solid red. “Any farther and I may not be able to stop, Daniel.”

“I don’t want you to.”

Her nostrils flared as if she was scenting prey. Her lips rose to his again, but this time, her mouth was demanding. His grip tightened on her arm as he slid his tongue over those sweet lips. She tasted good!

“Mmm…”

Her moan dazed Daniel. He kissed her like he’d been wanting to since they left the complex. He threaded big hands through her short, silky hair and held her still as he stroked her tongue, teasing. He was well trained in pleasure. She would be clear on that when he was finished.

Daniel heard the sheet rip again. It was incredible, sending his need into a new level.

She shuddered.

“Easy...” Daniel dipped to her neck, nose full of her exotic scent. He pressed a kiss to her throat, feeling hunger rise. It had *never* been like this. “Kiss me?”

Candice met his mouth with a snarl of lust.

His hand slid up her ribcage to cup a breast as her legs went around his hips. She thrust against his hardness with no thoughts of stopping…except maybe long enough to put on the cuffs. She could already feel blood dripping from her clenched fist.

He shifted, bringing their bodies flush.

Candice groaned against his mouth when his member twitched against her thigh, seeking entrance through her shorts. The kiss deepened, electricity flowing.

Candice was aware of a noise beyond their groans and breathing, but the need to finish was driving at her control. He was more than willing, and she…was about to be attacked! In their passion, Candice hadn’t noticed the train stopping. She saw the door inch open with red sight, fury exploding at the interruption. *This will be bloody.*

Candice rolled Daniel toward the wall and shoved him off the bed as the door swung open and multiple shadows darted in. She followed him over, snatching her guns from the table.

“Get the lamp!” someone ordered.

Candice shielded Daniel’s body with hers as the lights were shot out. The hall outside their car was already dark.

Candice pressed Daniel into the corner as she fired, but there was only a brief glance of shiny forms in black to aim at.

“Don’t killsss the male!”

The shout startled Candice more than the recognition. Changeling fights were usually quiet except for the grunts and growls. She swept the car with gunfire, hitting one of the five. She should have known the trackers would come after him. Daniel had shown them acceptance. That was as rare as winning Vulture Run.

Catching movement, Candice aimed high and took out a second slithering bitch. She switched to the other gun as the remaining Snakes lunged for her.

“Candy!”

They hauled her away before she could finish reloading.

Daniel was snatched by rough hands that tried to throw him over a shoulder, but he shoved backward, forcing the female to follow. It was the woman he’d offered the drink to. Daniel instinctively spun them toward the wall while slanting his mouth over hers. It was all he could think to do.

She froze.

Daniel deepened the kiss. Touching her scale-coated form was disgusting. He struggled with fear and the need to survive as she rattled against him. Daniel didn’t want to know what part of her made that sound.

The tracker had frozen at first, but it was becoming something dangerous now. Daniel tried not to gag as her forked tongue hesitantly met his. Determinedly envisioning Candice in his head, Daniel pressed against the revolting woman and willed his owner to hurry. The Snake’s control was weakening, her grip tightening. Much more would get him killed when he couldn’t give what he was promising, but Daniel kept at it even though he’d never been so limp. He had to buy Candy time to deal with the others.

Daniel was suddenly jerked away from the Snake and spun over the bed. He hit the floor with a heavy thump, skull slamming against the wall.

Rattled, he sensed more than saw Candice kill the Snake with her bare hands.

Candice sent her nails into guts again, delighting in the screams. She jerked on warm organs, ripping upward to make sure the Snake was hurting before she lifted her other clawed hand to slit the traitor’s throat. The blood haze had fallen over her when she found Daniel in the woman’s arms.

Candice rotated toward him in raw fury.

Angelica burst into the car, weapon drawn.

Candice snarled a warning that the younger girl heeded instantly, stopping.

Candice pulled the rage in the same way she was always demanding of her little cousin, but it was hard.

When she believed she could, Candice jerked a hand toward the doorway, where Baker was lurking. “Get him out of sight.”

Scanning the scene, Baker grunted in amusement and looked down at Daniel. “I knew she’d break something the first time out. Just thought it would be *you*.”

“Go on!” Angelica shoved Baker toward the other compartment as troops entered the hall. Their flashlights made ugly shadows on the walls and bloody bodies.

Candice’s red orbs kept the big women in the doorway of the car. Their attention went over Daniel, who was naked and still on the floor, and then the bodies. The ranking female gave a short bob. “We’ll report it and send in a crew. You’ll need to clear the area.”

Candice gestured at Daniel to leave.

When he stood, the sentries leered at his exposed skin.

“I’m good to go, if you’d like to try me!” Candice was speaking to them while fully changed. Blood still dripped from her claws.

These guards clearly hadn’t run across a changeling who could think and battle the fire at the same time. All of the big women began retreating from the car.

“Wise choice.” Candice pointed at the bodies. “They’re all Wanted. Make sure I’m not attacked again and this shift can split the bounty.”

Her generosity surprised them, gaining allies that Candice wasn’t certain she would need, let alone use. Still, it was good to have people on the inside.

The leader of the shift, Pamela, brightened at the thought of more funds to use on her personal projects. “Thank you, Miss Pruett. Please rest assured that your remaining time on the Network Rider will be uneventful.”

Rage slowly fading, Candice glanced at Daniel as they left. She understood he was trained to handle horny females in only one way, but it didn’t stop the pain.

When he began donning fresh clothes from his kit, she waved at her cloak. He was splattered in blood. “Wear that, too.”

Candice felt his need to apologize, but she refused to listen to it. He’d been saving himself. If they’d gotten him off the train, he could have been lost again and in more ways than the obvious. When Snake women finished draining their males, they ate them. That was the council’s most convincing reason for exterminating them. The Snakes were barely surviving the Network’s attempts. Forced out of the cities, the scaly tribes were mainly concentrated in Frogtown and the swamps, but ones like these had left their people to come north for a different life. Most of them ended up being trackers. With their new tongues, they could find anything. This time, it had been death.

As soon as Daniel was dressed, Candice switched them to the other car so the waiting crew could clean up the mess. She pointed to the empty couch between Baker and Angelica.

Daniel went, miserable. He wished he had done anything else now. He had no idea how to make it right.

Smirking, Baker took in the swollen lips Daniel could feel, then Candy’s half naked body.

Daniel’s misery deepened. *All I do is cause trouble.* She’d have been better off renting him out at Floozies. Daniel curled into the corner of the soft couch and ducked inside her cloak. The comforting scent filled his nose. Daniel tried not to cry. *I’ve ruined everything.*

Angelica was talking to Candice in low tones he couldn’t make out. Daniel heard Baker stretch out on the other couch. What would happen now? He’d shown her disloyalty and that wouldn’t be forgiven. Would it?

Scared of losing the first real home he’d had, Daniel listened to the sound of the train starting up and let the jerky motions hide his struggle to find a solution for the mess he’d made of things.

“You should take him in the other car and finish it.”

Baker’s challenging pitch sent the flames into Candice’s mind, but she snorted. “They don’t make cuffs that strong.”

Baker’s face said with him, she didn’t need them; he never created this type of chaos. She knew that to be a lie however, and raised a brow. “Maybe you and Angel should take it.”

By the way his profile darkened, she knew she’d guessed right. She ignored her cousin’s gasp of anger. “She’s generous, too.”

Not wanting to kill anything that might grow between them, Candice gestured toward the door. “We’ll stay out here.”

“So will I.” Angelica’s voice was strained.

Candice shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She gave Daniel’s huddled form a heated look, implying she wanted this car for her own purposes.

Angelica jumped to her feet. “Fine!” She stormed to the exit with a hard glare at Baker. “You touch me and I’ll rip your head off after it’s over.”

Baker chuckled. “Might be worth it.”

The door slammed behind her.

The convict gave Candice a worried glance. “She’s burning hotter than you.”

Candice nodded, not upset by his interest in her cousin, but still wounded by Daniel’s attempt to save himself. It was clear who she valued more. “Be gentle. She won’t be able to resist.”

Baker gave her another of those searching looks.

“It isn’t a test. If you can help her, my approval is there.” Even Baker understood to ask first. It was how males were trained and Candice loathed it. She wanted a soulmate like those she’d read about, someone to stand beside her, not a man who would sell himself out for protection.

Now that she had herself almost under control, Candice finished donning clothes and then went to Daniel. She pulled the edge of the cloak down, not surprised to find tears.

He regarded her in utter dejection, pale skin glistening with his misery. “I didn’t know what else to do!”

In that instant, Candice let go of the pain. He was so fragile, so vulnerable… She sighed, running a hand along his cheek as her heart broke. He may never revert into the Daniel she’d loved as a boy, but she still wanted him–in any condition. “I forgive you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Candice dipped to his lips without another worry over his loyalty. He hadn’t wanted to be split from her and had relied on the single skill he’d been taught. It was enough.

When his arms tightened, Candice gently pushed him away. He’d had enough trauma for one day. So had she. “Try to sleep.”

Daniel stared at her in worry, not convinced that things were okay between them.

Candice leaned forward to place another easy kiss to the mouth she was beginning to think she might be addicted to. “I’ll be right here the whole time. Sleep now.”

He obediently laid down.

Candice stretched out on the other couch. She would miss having him next to her, but with blood still drying on her hands, she was dangerous and not just to him. Even a trip to the wash room would have to wait until she was seeing through black eyes again. Someone had tried to take what was hers.

After the betrayal with the hounds, Candice wasn’t entirely certain this hadn’t been a case of the same thing. Had the Network paid the Snakes? She reflected on the bullets they’d taken as she found Baker. Maybe the trackers had been the ones shooting. When they got home, she would check into it. No one double crossed the Pruetts and lived to tell the story. Not even the Network would be excused from that strict rule.

# Chapter Sixteen

**Kudzu Karma**

Georgia Jungle

**1**

**M**orning brought another tense hour of riding in the train car together as the hunters waited for their stop. Angelica and Baker seemed to have worked some things out. They were playing Hob Jong at the small table, exchanging threats that weren’t so hostile as to hide the sexual tension flaring between them.

Did it bother Candice? Daniel couldn’t be positive. She was stealing glances at them the same as he was, but her expression was blank. He couldn’t guess at her thoughts. Daniel knew she was fond of her cousin, and sharing one male among a household was an accepted practice in most families. Daniel wondered if the Pruetts did that.

*“Atlanta, five minutes to Atlanta. Please prepare to disembark.”*

The cheery computer voice made Daniel peer through the blinds in anticipation. He’d read articles on the Georgian city, but he’d never dreamed he would actually get to visit it. Last night’s horror was locked away with the rest of the ugliness in his life. Candice had forgiven him and it would never happen again. Next time, he would fight.

Daniel studied their destination. The city had once been a beautiful southern vacation destination backdropped by magnificent mountains and majestic blue skies. Daniel had once glimpsed it in an old magazine that one of the other bachelors had swiped from a renter. The image had been in his mind every time the Pruetts said Atlanta, but it wasn’t like that now. Every inch of the city was hidden in green vines. Daniel stared in amazed disappointment. “What happened to it?”

Daniel felt everyone rotate toward him, but he didn’t understand how this city could be so overgrown. None of the others he had observed on wall screens or in books was like this.

“They used to keep the vines in check by trimming them.” Angelica was slowly getting used to the sound of Daniel’s curious voice. “It grew a foot a day. When the apocalypse came, this area was abandoned and the Kudzu plant took over. It now grows a foot an hour.”

Baker stared at the greenery in pleasure. “Makes it the perfect place for all of us.”

“All of us?” Angelica glared at him. “Are there a lot of males here?”

Candice shook her head. Daniel assumed that meant Baker shouldn’t answer the question.

Baker ignored the silent order. “Yes. Dozens and dozens.”

Angelica groaned. “Oh, shit.”

Candice threw a glare at Baker. “Thanks.”

Baker held his ground. “Like she wouldn’t have noticed.”

“She didn’t need to spend time worrying about it!” Candice snapped.

Daniel was gratified when Baker flinched from her anger, but he also hated it. The rebel might be a harder class, but he was still just a scarred, scared man looking for a loving owner. The Network had robbed them all. Daniel kept his attention on the jungle of vines as the train rolled to a gentle stop.

Candice reluctantly filled her cousin in. “I wasn’t going to tell you until we arrived.”

“Figures.”

Daniel heard the younger girl shove to her feet, and then Baker grunted in pain. Daniel guessed Angelica had hit him.

“What was that for?” Baker questioned in surprise.

“Don’t go against Candice again. Ever.” Her loyalties declared, Angelica’s steps took her to the exit. “I’ll do a security sweep.”

The door shut behind her.

Daniel listened to the rest of the conversation with an intensity he was glad they couldn’t see.

“Where will we pick up a ride?” Candice asked.

“Two miles in. Already there and stocked.”

“Quiet?”

“Unlikely.” Baker grunted. “They’ll want to talk to him, to see if he wants to stay with us.”

Daniel spoke up. “I don’t.”

Candice nodded. “He’ll talk to them.”

Daniel stopped another protest. *Candice won’t let them keep me.*

“What about your cousin?” Baker asked. “Will we need to lock her in a cell?”

“Not unless you throw in a male.” Candice snorted in amusement. “She’ll rip the bars off to get to them if she wants one.”

After witnessing Angelica’s compassion, Daniel knew that wouldn’t happen. Candice was joking. It was another discovery.

Baker grinned widely. “We have titanium cuffs.”

“Really?”

Daniel felt her attention swing to him, and heard the convict’s amused grunt.

“Yeah, they might hold you.”

Daniel flushed at the contemplations the comment brought. He was glad when the train alert sounded again.

*“We are arriving at Atlanta Depot. Please check your cars for items before disembarking. Thank you for taking the Network Rider.”*

Daniel’s face was still red as they moved toward the exit.

The weather had been unusually calm for the last few days, but the hunters saw that had changed as they exited the rickety platform. The wind was gusting heavily and the gritty sky was alive with dangerous shades of purple and green. A storm was coming.

Hoping it missed them, Daniel stepped closer to Candice. Then he registered their surroundings again and forgot about his fears.

The Kudzu plant was everywhere. It wound up the trees, choking them until the trunks underneath were as petrified from lack of water and sunlight as they had been in the forests of Kentucky, but this was worse somehow. Instead of dead trees, these were dying trunks with their killers living around them like a shroud. The Kudzu had enveloped every inch of ground and area. How did Candice plan to travel through there? Daniel doubted he was much of a hiker.

Daniel glanced over to find Baker staring at the greenery and vines with a slight smile. Daniel shrugged as he realized the convict considered this home. Maybe there was something valuable underneath, but from where Daniel stood, it was just a jungle to be conquered. The only cleared area was directly in front of the platform. It led to a small row of shacks that held empty stores. The other few passengers who were getting off at this stop moved that way as Daniel studied the signs he could read from the platform.

*Enter at your own risk. Unguarded.*

*Stay on main path and turn around at the marker. Those who go further will NOT be searched for.*

Daniel’s attention lingered on the last one.

*People who’ve gone off the beaten path to never be heard from again:* ~~198~~ ~~200~~ ~~211~~ 234.

The number clearly wasn’t finished growing, but before Daniel could wonder if he might be the next statistic added to it, Candice let out a low snicker.

“Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you?”

Baker chuckled. “Gotta keep them out somehow.”

“How many of those missing people really exist?” she asked.

“Ten or so. All but one chose to help us.”

Daniel wanted to ask what they had done with the one adventurer who’d found the rebel base hidden in this dense jungle, and chose not to keep the secret, but he managed not to. There were other people around, one even staring at Baker as if she recognized him. Daniel now knew better than to speak and draw more attention while guards were surveying them. It was the crew from last night. They would report the rebel sighting, but maybe not exactly where Baker had gone or who he had been with. That sent Daniel into another level of panicked worry. What would happen when the Network found out the Pruetts had aided Baker?!

Angelica joined them.

Daniel listened to her words, but his mind was on the future. If the Pruetts were arrested, would he be able to help them escape somehow?

“Your parents already have the other two convicts in custody. They’re exchanging them at the nearest hub.” Angelica’s dark eyes switched to Daniel before returning to his owner. “I’ll take him home if you want.”

Daniel clamped his lips shut, worried.

Angelica’s offer was tempting, but Candice made the only choice she could. If he was away from her, she would be distracted. “No.”

Angelica took drag, while Candice took point. With Daniel and then Baker behind her, it made a neat little sandwich. The guys might not like it, but Angelica would keep things under control while Candice led them into breaking a dozen rules. Helping the enemy, not reporting rebel sightings or locations, lying, falsifying papers, requisitioning supplies for personal use, evading capture, trespassing. Candice sighed. If they were caught, she and Angelica would be executed on the same stairs as Baker.

As they ventured under the naturally formed green archway, Candice felt her mental clock start ticking. The council would be told, but not for another day. The sentries currently holding heavy pockets had her to thank for it. Candice rotated suddenly to give them a hard look.

One of them grinned.

Candice returned the gesture, then advanced toward the jungle. “Let’s go.”

The group openly moved off the path, drawing shocked murmurs from the few tourists.

“Won’t the sightseers call it in?” Daniel asked in concern, slapping at a bug hovering around his neck.

Candice let out another sigh. “Yes, but they won’t know exactly where we went.”

“What about your parents? Won’t the Network detain them?”

Angelica gave him the comfort he needed this time. “They’ll be questioned, but they’re turning in two of the marks. They have a perfect alibi. The Network won’t hold them responsible for our actions.”

“But they track all messages and–”

“Stop.” Candice included Baker as she laid it out. “The Pruetts are for freedom. We always have been and we don’t consider gender a deciding factor. If I choose to help the rebels, we will and we’ll handle what comes. Do you understand what I mean?”

Baker was grinning. He obviously did, but Daniel shook his head. “You’re putting your family at risk for him.”

Candice gave Daniel a warm gaze, meant only for her mate. “Some things are worth dying for.”

Daniel flushed in pleasure. “Whatever you want to do, I’m in. You know that?”

“I do.”

**2**

It was hard to walk and the bugs were annoying. Thick vines kept tripping Daniel even though he was trying to move like the others. Candice took high steps that got her where she wanted to go, but when he tried it, the clingy plants still wrapped around his boots and jerked him down. After ten minutes, Daniel had fallen twice.

Angelica came over to him through a cloud of gnats. “You almost have to bounce when you land or they tangle you up.”

When she demonstrated, Daniel picked it up easily, but his lack of knowledge about the outside world made Baker smirk.

“Thanks.”

Angelica gave Daniel a curt nod as she went back to her spot in the rear.

Daniel sighed. He had hoped to settle into his new life and be happy, but adjusting was harder than he’d expected. Daniel swiped the sweat from his brow and followed his owner deeper into the jungle. Maybe next time they could go to some place easier, like a beach. He’d never been to one of those either, but from the pictures, it would be better than this.

The jungle thickened as they walked. It wasn’t until Daniel tripped over a thick patch of purple flowers that he realized they were already in the city. It was so overlaid with vines that he hadn’t noticed. Daniel stared, bringing their little convoy to a halt once again. The thick masses he’d believed to be trees were actually walls, pillars, and relics of the past that had withstood the test of time, but not nature. Considering the level of growth here, he imagined even these remains would be gone but not for the covering that kept them from crumbling. If the vines died, what was left of the city would probably collapse into piles of rock.

The tips of arched roofs jutted out from the green leaves, hinting at decaying frames and thickets of surprises. There would be skeletons in those overgrown walls, graying bones with no owners, only ghosts. The thought gave Daniel a deep chill. He turned back to the path and flushed at the hard looks.

No one spoke. They didn’t need to.

*I have to stop doing that!* Daniel scolded himself as they got moving again.

Candice held in a reprimand as they reached the river, sensing danger coming. One second, they were deep in the jungle, and the next, she was pulling her mate away from the edge of a steep incline overlooking a crystal blue river.

Daniel clutched her thick arm. “Thanks.”

Painfully aware of how fascinating Daniel found water, Candice rotated to give him a sharp warning, but found him already absorbed in the glistening ripples. She sighed. “Ten-minute break.”

Baker grunted behind them.

Angelica snorted in cynical amusement. Thanks to the convict’s loose tongue, Angelica was now stewing on having to control herself around a lot of males. It was a fun trip they had going so far.

“Can I–”

“No.” Candice hadn’t meant to be so curt with him and added, “It’s not safe.”

And yet, they were about to ride the river. Candice could see the edge of what was probably a scavenger boat waiting around the bend. She gave Angelica a quick wave.

The girl moved off to meet the passage Baker had secured while on the train.

Daniel stopped at her side as Candice studied Baker, who was leaning against a leaf-hidden pillar. His goggles were down, making Candice wonder what he was thinking as he stared at them. She knew Baker well enough to be certain that he would recover. She had been worried about having feelings for him because of it. Baker wasn’t a one-woman man, or at least she hadn’t thought so.

Ignoring the bugs, Candice surveyed the river that they were about to use to delve further into the city. They could stay on these paths, but they would have to hack their way in. Candice had chosen a route that was easier and faster, but more dangerous. She felt Daniel’s attention shift as the boat slowly rode the waves into full view.

“We’re sailing?”

Sweat dripped from his brow; her need flared hungrily. Candice found very few things sexier than a man working up a sweat. She used a soft hand to push the hair from his damp brow. “For a bit.”

He beamed. “Cool.”

Candice spun away before she could kiss him. She waved Angelica toward the former captives while she went to inspect the boat.

Daniel studied the hard lines of his face, those wild, shined eyes. This had been his substitute, and in many ways, still was. How could he get Baker out of her mind?

“What’s she waiting for?” Daniel hated himself for asking, but Baker knew. He’d lain with Candice, loved her. No one else had ever gotten as close, Daniel was positive. Did Baker regard him as a weakling because he didn’t know any of these survival things? Was he a threat for the good looks or a joke for his clumsiness? *Is Baker as confused about me as I am about him?* Daniel thought it was likely. Candice seemed to have that effect on people.

Baker raised his goggles, voice bitter. “When I met her, she was determined to do one thing–reclaim something that had been stolen from her. I didn’t know it was you. Until she signed up for the games, I believed we might…come to love each other.”

“Candice? In love?”

Baker rolled his eyes as if Daniel had said something stupid. “She’s always been taken. I just didn’t know it. She won’t mate with you until she knows you’re willing.”

“And after?” Daniel forced out through the hope, the fear.

Baker scowled again, this time with sad hatred that Daniel instantly pitied him for.

“You’ll never be sold, never be alone. She’ll love you so completely that your past will vanish into those happy dreams the Den Mothers tried to sell us on.”

Angelica advanced to break up the fight she assumed was coming, but the two guys ignored her.

Daniel asked, “What about you? She cares. You can’t deny it.”

To Daniel’s surprise, Baker laughed. “You really are a rookie. She used me, *kid*, to learn enough to save your ass.” He slid his goggles back into place. “I always knew it wasn’t for me, so save your pity. I enjoyed every second of servicing her needs.”

Jealousy seared Daniel. He could imagine Baker using those heathen arms to pleasure his Candy. Daniel turned toward the river, but he listened as Angelica picked up the conversation.

“So you’re not in love with her?”

Baker chuckled. “Why? You wanna rent me? I do make my living that way, you know.”

Daniel ignored the flirting, understanding Baker was trying to hide his emotions. Daniel didn’t understand that reaction. Why lie? Baker’s pride would get in the way of any relationship he tried to have. Daniel suddenly realized it was intentional. His anger faded. Baker was trying to keep from appearing hurt or even interested any longer. That was a tempting tactic, but Daniel couldn’t use it. He’d already revealed his heart to her. *Didn’t I?*

Unsure, Daniel followed his owner from the land and onto the water.

Their driver, Drea, was tall and wiry, wearing camouflage clothes and black paint over her hands and cheeks. With a small boat decorated the same way, she appeared exactly like the images that Daniel had seen of old world soldiers. She even had a weapon on the front that he assumed was a machine gun. The neat coils of ammunition gave him a flash of their kamikaze captain loading while eating dinner from a can.

Daniel peered over the edge of his seat to spot what could have been the dried husk of a bean. He turned away to hide the smile.

Daniel didn’t see males around yet, but once they got underway, he understood the crazy pilot had a death wish that only these debris fields could satisfy. A man would never be enough for her. The ride on the flat bottom boat was one Daniel would never forget. It was scary and wild, and he loved every second of it.

Candice sat behind him with a rope attaching him to her belt in case he flew out during their driver’s frantic plunge down the river. Despite the water being so crystal and pretty, there were blocks of debris from the apocalypse in their path that had to be avoided. Instead of a slow, careful pace, Drea flew in and out of these death traps as if it was a race. Under hulks of concrete slowly crumbling into the waves and then around bobbing chunks and swirling floaters, the boat zigged and zagged wildly. They were all soaked by the time she stopped.

“Again!” Daniel laughed, leaning against Candice. “Can we do it again?”

Delighted, she shifted for a sharp kiss.

Daniel clutched her arms. In that moment, it was only him and his owner. It was perfect.

They parted slowly, eyes locked. Daniel gently touched her cheek. His fingers slid along that sensual jawline. He felt her tremble.

The need was raging, but she shifted out of his reach to stand up.

Daniel followed her back onto the land with a small smile of happiness that he couldn’t have hidden even if he wanted to.

“How much farther?” Candice asked.

Baker’s tone was unreadable. “We’ll be met right here in five…four…three…”

The jungle narrowed to a thin path behind the small, wooden dock where their crazy captain was tying up the boat. The single path into a thin canopy that formed a living archway made Daniel think of old ghosts again. The deepest shadows of this archway moved, becoming the forms of three people dressed in green. Daniel stared in appreciation. As they advanced, he could see the green clothes were actually streaks and swirls of paint on their skin, allowing them to blend perfectly.

Baker came forward. “It’s good to see you.”

The stiff posture of the three shadows relaxed.

“Baker!”

“Welcome home!”

To everyone’s shock, each of the males bowed at Baker’s feet.

“It would seem we haven’t been told the full story.” Angelica’s comment pulled no response from Candice. She frowned, realizing her cousin had already known.

“Oh, get up!” Baker ordered in embarrassment.

Candice understood the rebel leader was trying to revive male instincts and not having much luck. She flashed a games grin.

All of his men flinched, proving her observation. Didn’t he know it took a woman to bring out the drive of a man? Her sight flickered pink, testing them again.

“What the hell?”

“Are they changelings?!”

Baker led the trio away to explain.

Candice gestured to her crew. “Stay close.”

Angelica and Daniel were clearly hoping she would give them the careful words that Baker was delivering, but she didn’t run her ship that way and really, they knew it.

Angelica gave her a nasty glower and then grunted. “Thanks.”

“You’re dealing with enough. I *know*.”

“You ready?”

Baker’s call brought them to the path, where Candice studied his guards. The only marking that set them apart from their surroundings was a tattoo she recognized. It matched Baker’s new ink and finished selling it for her. He hadn’t lied about his importance. He was a hero to these weak men. Compared to them, Baker was probably a legend for surviving on his own, and for killing women to do so.

Candice smothered praise and need at the sight of their bare skin under the camouflage. They were wearing tank tops and jeans, but the coloring had fooled even her a second time. *Ingenious*. She pinned the smaller one with a hard look. “Are you the artist?”

“I’m Greg, in charge of security,” the rebel answered nervously. “Eric makes things pretty.”

His wide brown eyes went to the beautiful male on Baker’s right. Candice understood these were more than rebels, but wasn’t certain what that might mean yet.

Eric smiled. “I like pretty things.”

Eric’s timbre was sweet to her, Daniel could tell. This one wasn’t shy, wouldn’t jump at her touch or fear her embrace. *That prissy whore is a former prize and likely a renter too, from the way he’s studying my Candy.* Daniel pushed out his chest. *I’m already tired of these people.*

The new males stayed on each side of Baker while a third man, a hulking shadow with gigantic hands, kept watch over the path they’d come down. Each of the new guys had a thinly supplied tool belt and a small kit, but of weapons, all Daniel spotted was knives. If someone came here, what did the men plan to do? Paint their way out?

The hunters followed the rebels deeper into the jungle than they’d ever been. The sense of being on camera began to fade, allowing Candice to relax. She placed a gentle hand on Daniel’s arm to give him the comfort of a casual walk before they hit the tension again. She was aware of how hard he was trying to fit in, but she had decided he would stay at home with the other men for the next run. She spent too much time worrying with him here. The problem was, she knew she would worry no matter where he was. Daniel had a way of getting into trouble without even trying.

She’d no sooner had the thought than Daniel tripped and fell, rolling down the incline to their right.

“Damn it!” Candice dove after him, going under the vines. She snagged the edge of his boot.

“Something’s got him!” one of the rebel males shouted, retreating.

Angelica’s boots bounced down to them. “It’s the vines. They’re not exactly dead, you know!” She began swiping at the greenery with her blade.

They were all shocked to witness the vines retreat a foot.

Candice was impressed. *She’s been studying on her own again.*

Daniel was huddled in a ball under the dewy plants. Candice jerked him up. “Can’t you be more careful?” She gave him a slight shake, needing the shock of the vines to fade from his mind. He already feared her. That was enough.

Daniel snapped his head up, voice tight. “I was!”

The anger in his response immediately sent her mouth to his.

“Help him!”

“She’s gonna hurt him!”

Baker laughed. “She’s the one who better be careful. Come on. They’ll catch up.”

Candice heard the retreating footsteps and then silence, but it wouldn’t have mattered. When these moments happened, it was as if only they existed.

Candice rose with flames licking her spine. She ran her thumb across his bottom lip before pressing her mouth to his again.

He tensed, hands tightening on her hips, and then they were falling down into the sweet smelling Kudzu in an embrace that could have melted icebergs. Candice wasn’t planning to shore up her control before they went in, but when he slid a hand toward her heat, she considered allowing it. Just as quickly, she chose not to and drew him to his feet. The next time they got so intimate, she wouldn’t stop and their first physical moment wasn’t going to be in the middle of a jungle with a skeleton city buried beneath them. This new world called for more respect than that.

# Chapter Seventeen

**Inside Information**

The Rebel Base

**1**

**A**s soon as he saw the cave entrance and realized they were going into the mountain, Daniel panicked. “I can’t.”

His endless worries and fears were something Candice preferred to handle with tolerance, but the Network might know where they were by now. They needed to get under cover. She swung Daniel up over her shoulder and strode forward.

He was still struggling lightly as they entered the rebel base.

Made of smooth stones for the seats and rough rock floors, the circular chamber was a spacious area with four exits. The stone seats were terraced from the top of the round, high walls, ending in the center to leave a “10x10” ring. It reminded Candice of the posters in the Network complex that glorified the ancient Roman challenges. The architecture was remarkably similar.

Lines for power ran along the walls, chiseled in to disappear and reemerge like the roots of a mighty tree. The tunnels weren’t wide, but they were long, and the floors in them were covered in soft, tan sand that was out of place among so much grey. Natural torches made of jungle plants woven into cone-shaped handles lined the chamber. The light smoke and heavy aroma of flowers was drawn out through cracks in the stone.

Candice glanced around, senses triggered. The shadows were deceiving, telling her they were alone when she knew otherwise. She was impressed that Baker had been able to teach his men to blend in.

They were met by a group of rebels who looked like they were teenagers. Candice snorted at their shaky attempts to stop her with old guns that she doubted would work. “Baker told you we were coming. Clear a hole!”

The rebels flinched at her order.

The shout brought Angelica and Baker into the tunnel.

Candice shook her head at the timid response to a possible intruder. “This doesn’t look good.”

Baker motioned toward Daniel, who was still over her shoulder. “That doesn’t either.”

Candice heeded the warning and swung Daniel onto his feet as Angelica took their flank.

Candice steadied him. “You can do this. You will.”

Daniel was glad to be upright. “Yes, Candice.”

Candice entered Stone Mountain with her own timid male following. It would seem that both she and Baker had a lot of work to do.

They traveled through the dim tunnel for a full minute before reaching a heavy metal door. The five males around Baker helped open it.

“We don’t have electricity connected to this exit.” Baker swiped at cobwebs. “We usually take the long way.”

That would be directly through the heart of the jungle. Candice hoped they wouldn’t explore too much more of it before leaving. When they next boarded a boat, she hoped it would take them out of Georgia, not deeper into this overgrown state.

“Welcome to my base.” Baker opened the door to reveal another enormous stone compartment and more males than Candice had expected.

Behind her, Angelica growled.

The sound of her changeling fury sent rebels into halls and corners even though Angelica hadn’t moved.

Once again, Daniel did what he wasn’t supposed to. He stepped forward and tried to calm them down. “They’re not like the others.”

Candice grabbed his arm and shoved him behind her, making his words a lie.

The former slaves panicked, grabbing weapons from wall racks.

“Stand your ground!” Baker ordered.

“It’s Baker!”

“They’re with the boss!”

“Baker’s home!”

Rebel males flooded into the chamber at the calls. Daniel understood they loved him by the way they flocked to him, touched him. Their reaction was like that of the bachelors and the Den Mothers at the complex. Daniel relaxed a little. These men were his kind.

Baker was busy. Daniel took the time to observe Candice and Angelica. Being around so many males usually sent changelings into a frenzy, but Daniel was expecting better from his new family. Despite her first reaction, Angelica stayed behind them, watching the rear like she was supposed to do. Candice was listening to the hurried conversations with a bored expression. Daniel straightened his shoulders and tried to pretend he belonged with these strangely wonderful women.

Baker came their way with five guards. Daniel did a quick count of the faces behind him. Roughly fifty. How many more were in the tunnels leading from this room? Baker had a small army here. *What the bachelors at the complex wouldn’t give to know about this!* Most of the males Daniel had been bullied by dreamed of a place like this. And he was welcome to join. Daniel could feel the automatic assumption that he needed to be rescued.

“Do you want to talk to them first or eat?”

Baker sounded different, more powerful somehow. Candice shrugged. “Either is fine.”

The convict gestured toward the largest tunnel to their right. “How about a short tour and then we’ll talk and eat?”

“Agreed.” Candice followed Baker.

Daniel stayed on her heels, surveying everything in fascination as they went through the first tunnel. They noticed the noise right away.

“What do you use for power that makes so much noise?” Angelica asked.

Baker laughed. “That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”

Angelica swept the rebel tattoo on his arm, then the one on his neck that Candice had put there to declare him protected. It was a Pruett symbol and their coat of arms.

“You want it?” Baker asked sexily.

“Yeah.” Angelica’s hands went into her pockets as she moved away from his slight smirk. Baker knew what effect he had on women.

“We use the river.” Eric used the silence, trying to tempt Candice with the sound of his voice.

She didn’t respond, busy scolding herself. They had a natural source of power and it made no noise to draw attention. Baker was smarter than she had given him credit for. Candice accepted that with the shame she deserved.

“We have nine areas. Three are cooking, washing, and laundry. Two are dorms for sleeping. The others are like this one.”

Candice didn’t stop a harsh grin as she scanned his training setup. There were rope bridges and rock walls with blue grips gleaming in the natural light. The ceiling of this chamber had a huge, jagged hole in the center, probably the result of a tremor that had cracked this section of the mountain. Candice saw Baker had left the vines alone and approved. Why try to deny the plant what it would eventually have anyway? The effort was better spent on other, more realistic goals.

On the uneven floor were obstacle courses and workout mats lined with crates of stolen equipment to mark off each individual spot. There were knotted ropes hanging from the craggy edges, and wooden stairs that went up for thirty feet to curve around an entire wall before coming down at an incredibly steep incline. Her need flared into a thousand tiny pricks of heat. All over these training tools were men*, working up a sweat*.

“I’ll be in the hall.” Angelica spun from the room in a fast movement.

Candice let her go. There were fifty dressed men out there. In here, there were eighty half naked targets with slick, tempting skin. The scent of it was enough to make even her own sight flicker.

Baker tossed an amused glance toward Daniel. “We keep cuffs for guests.”

Candice saw Daniel flush. She gestured toward the egress. “Distract Angelica if you can.” She delivered a pointed gaze that said to do it carefully.

Daniel moved out of her sight with a snotty glare at the rebel leader.

*His spine reappeared with Baker*, Candice thought, delighted. She scanned the watching rebels. They were staying close to each other and to the weapons lining the walls. She couldn’t help flashing them another pink-eyed grin.

Now they rushed for knives and chains.

Baker stepped forward, sighing resignedly. “She’s with me.”

“Who is that?”

“Baker?”

“Baker!”

A few of the males had the courage to approach, but they didn’t run to Baker the way the others had. She understood these former captives were more careful. They were being trained. Candice also noticed how quickly he was separated from her. *Maybe he has made some progress with them*.

Baker spent long minutes talking in low tones, where those listening darted quick, disbelieving glances in her direction. Candice scanned the chamber again. There were no photos or anything that could be mistaken as personal, but a small area in the corner held a stack of books. When they weren’t eating, sleeping, or training, Baker had them reading. *Interesting*. What did he think they needed?

She inspected the small, well-worn stack; her lips curled. They were all romance novels. He was trying to reteach them to be men. He considered that more important than a normal education. *Very interesting*.

Leading by example, Baker was trying to exude a sense of calm and control over the situation and it impressed Candice. She’d known Baker when he was a rebellious teenager bent on finding a way to take down their rulers, so this image didn’t fit… Yet, in some ways, it did. He was fulfilling his dream of freedom for all men. *And he wants me to help him the way that he helped me. Even if I don’t want to, I already can’t say no.*

**2**

“Is there anything I can do for–” Daniel stopped as Angelica spun around, expecting the worst. He still didn’t know her that well. Daniel wondered if she appeared as dangerous to the other males as she did to him. Angelica was smaller than Candice, with shorter black spikes and paler skin, but there was enough heat boiling in her to rival anyone.

“Yes.”

Daniel blinked. “What?”

“There is something you can do for me.”

“Name it.” Daniel was confident that Candice would help him if he got into trouble.

“Tell me how you do it!”

“Do what?” Daniel asked, confused.

Angelica fought to master her impatience. “Help her control the fire! She spends time around you and she’s suddenly this rock of indifference.” Angelica leaned in, drawing attention from the rebels around them. “When I pick a mate, he has to be able to do that for me so I don’t hurt him!”

Daniel gestured sharply at a trio about to interrupt, noting the hulking forms of those they’d chosen for security. “I’m not sure.”

Daniel glanced toward the door, trying to explain what he had no real words for. “Candy feeds off my happiness, I think. Knowing I’m here, that she was able to rescue me, helps her when it gets bad.”

“How do *I* know the right bachelor?”

It hit him then that she’d already gone far beyond thinking about the games. Daniel’s voice went up a level. “Angel, what did you do?”

Angelica shoved him against the wall, but the name wasn’t the cause. “Tell me!”

“I’ll try.” Daniel suddenly wasn’t afraid of her. She was terrified. He had to help her. Ignoring the rebels running to get Baker, Daniel pushed at the arm across his throat.

Angelica immediately eased her grip. He doubted she realized how strong she was. Most changelings didn’t.

Angelica slowly retreated, neither of them responding to the yells, the doors opening, or feet moving their way.

Daniel made sure she could hear him over the din. “They’ll feel it, too. There’s no hiding it.”

She blinked, not expecting such a simple answer. “Then…they want …?”

“To be loved. As much as *you* do.”

Hurting, she spun away.

“The legends say a perfect match will cause visions, but I can’t verify that yet.” Baker was amused as Angelica stormed by. He waved impatiently at the near panicked males who had come to get him. “They’re just talking. Stand down.”

Baker focused on Candice, making Daniel frown. What did the rebel leader want from her?

“Maybe we should stay together for a while.”

Candice gave a short bob at Baker’s suggestion, but her attention was on Daniel.

Daniel wanted desperately to know what Candice was thinking as the tour continued.

Baker pointed out their room. Daniel noticed the handcuffs on the wall with red cheeks. Next to the cuffs was a wide bed with no less than eight thin poles welded to the edges. Spaced a few feet apart, he understood what they were for and flushed darker.

*“They’ll feel it too and there’s no hiding it.”*

Daniel’s words were repeating for Candice as they settled on the hard stairs of the small arena to eat. At another time, being here might have sent Candice’s thoughts to the matches she’d won, to the blood she’d spilled in other places like this, but all she could think about was what she’d just learned. *“There’s no hiding it.”*

The look in his eyes as he said that! Daniel cared for her. It was just a beginning flicker. With the short time they’d had, there was no way it could be more, but Candice planned to encourage that tiny glimmer into a fiery explosion. She would spend the rest of her life trying to make Daniel love her the way she did him.

“Stop drooling and listen!” Baker growled.

Candice let out a hiss of need, scattering those closest. Roughly fifty males were in the chamber with them, all dressed in t-shirts and jeans that didn’t hide what they were–men. Everywhere she looked hard, nervous males met her assessing stare. *They’re certainly healthy.* She stored the thought. Baker had strength in these men. Would he be able to give them the courage they needed to go with that brawn? Compared to these free men, Daniel was happier. Most of them were bigger than he was, but his face also held a contentment that Baker couldn’t give the rebels. They needed women. Her orbs flashed pink.

Men flinched.

She sneered. “When I snap, you’ll know it.”

Baker chuckled again.

Daniel surprised them both by joining in. He was starting to relax.

“Candy…” Baker frowned when she didn’t react. “That’s it then. You’ve fallen in love.”

Candice nodded. “Years ago.”

“You gonna go sparkless on me?”

“Never!”

“Then listen!” Baker shouted at her, shocking most of the rebels with his gall.

To their relief, Candice calmed down. “I am.”

“There are *five hundred* of us.”

Her mouth dropped open.

Angelica froze.

“Most are at the safe zone.”

“You’re gathering an army.”

“No.” Baker’s silver eyes flashed. “I’m trying to *train* an army.”

Candice knew then, what he wanted from her. She opened her mouth to say no… “Sell me.”

Even Candice was surprised. When Baker had said Daniel was changing her, he’d been wrong. The Network had opened the door to this other person and she was eager to explore it. For this new world, she might be a leader of a rebellion, of men instead of women! The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating. Candice began to listen with an intensity she’d been lacking.

“My father escaped from an auction and took refuge here. After he realized the Defenders wouldn’t come in, he began gathering other rebels. He was still in his twenties.”

*That explains the high number of* *men here*, Candice noted. The rebel who had been ripped apart by vultures had been at least double that age, maybe even triple.

“He spent his life in hiding, organizing areas for others like us. When slaves escape now, most try to reach a safe zone. We put them in places the Network won’t go.”

Candice’s mind spit out a fast list of possible locations for a bunker with over three hundred males. The Borderlands topped it. Candice confirmed her guess. “Yeah, I guess guards don’t like fighting dust, bandits, and mutations all in the same place.”

Baker grunted in satisfaction. “I knew you were the right one for the job.”

Candice frowned. “I haven’t taken it yet.”

“You will.” He waved at two of the timid rebels. “Join us. She has questions.”

Eric and Greg, from the first meeting in the jungle, joined them. Without the paint, they were both beautiful, but it was clear they’d been abused. Candice loathed the defensive scars across their arms and shoulders. She had little doubt that their pants and tops hid more of the same.

“Eric and Greg were both rescued right after they were won. We grabbed them from a transport truck. They spent their lives in the dome, from birth, until six months ago.”

Candice studied the pair, collecting more information from their appearances and reactions than she believed they would be able to tell her. Eric’s expression held a shadow she recognized as need. It was hard to miss when she spent so much time battling it. “Tell me about the training, in as much detail as you can manage.”

Her order pulled a twitch from Greg. He was scared to talk in front of two uncuffed changelings.

“She won’t snap. My word on it.” Candice didn’t need to look at Angelica to know the girl was emanating waves of menace while the fire tried to take over. All things considered, her strength was amazing.

“You’re sure?” Eric asked.

Candice had to shut her eyes at the sound of those bell-like tones coming from that pouty mouth. It made her want to sink teeth into his skin and bite until the blood soaked in as if it was hers.

Candice turned to survey Angelica, but the girl was moving toward the main tunnel.

“I’ll be around!”

Candice gave a deep sigh and then drew in a tight breath. It filled her lungs with the scent of the male at her side. Heat flared. Daniel was almost ugly compared to Eric, but only her bachelor could flip the change on and off with a simple glance.

*“They’ll feel it too. There’s no hiding it.”*

The same was true of a changeling.

Candice saw Daniel’s lips curl upward as he realized the effect he was having on her. She gestured toward the tables of food. “Go eat something.”

He was too thin in her opinion. Candice was glad when he strode toward the sweets trays. Any fat he put on, she would turn into muscle. At that thought, the lust was unstoppable.

Baker waited impatiently, but he was also storing information about the new couple. Even though they weren’t fully mated yet, the regression was already starting. Candice had been tempted and simply switched her attention, allowing the heat to fade. It was more proof that he was on the right track with the retraining of his timid male counterparts.

Candice suddenly snapped another piece into place. “Where are the women?”

Baker’s gaze was smug as she continued to prove her intelligence, declaring herself worthy of the job without even trying. “We don’t have them here very often. There are none right now.”

“Not without you here?”

“Never. They wouldn’t handle it well on their own if one of the Defenders was strong enough to feign normalcy and sneak in,” Baker let his voice show how much he cared for his men. “They would be wiped out. I won’t let that happen.”

“Do you bring women in for experiments or relief?” Candice questioned.

“Mates.”

Candice raised a brow as though she’d misunderstood, but she hadn’t. It reinforced her earlier impression about the reading material. He was matchmaking in the middle of a rebellion. Beyond interesting, it was now downright exciting to her. Baker was trying to repopulate the earth right under the Network’s nose. Candice suddenly respected him a lot more than she ever had. Courage was something she found irresistible. “A little more details would be good.”

Baker refused the offer of a second helping of food from one of the men.

Candice gave him a sharp look. She didn’t say if he thought to do all this, he needed more weight, too, but he knew.

Baker took the plate of dried staples. He took a bite and then continued. “There are women who help us. In return, we help them. The males who truly want a loving owner are allowed to pick from the few friends we have who can protect them, or at least keep them out of sight.” His tone grew proud. “This Stone Mountain compound has placed more than eighty former captives with good homes over the last thirty years–good homes that have already produced two dozen illegal *male* children.”

Storing that piece of gold, Candice gestured at the timid man on his right. “And the ones like this, who have no wish to be owned or loved?”

Greg flushed, lips clamping shut.

Candice frowned. Was this another case of great acting to be left alone until he made his own choice of a mate? She hadn’t believed bachelors could be this clever until rescuing Daniel. It was delicious.

“I get them to the main safe zone after I give them a few months training here to help them survive the trip.” Baker’s voice lowered. “There are no females there, ever.”

“You realize that will have to change?”

“I’m counting on it. After we take down the Network, my men will all need to be placed with mates so we can rebuild the world of light that my father foresaw.”

Candice was stunned. Baker had more faith and bigger dreams than she did. How had she missed that?

Stewing, Candice sat quietly for the next few minutes and wasn’t disturbed. She assumed Baker was giving her time to process the new information, but she was actually putting mental puzzle pieces into a solid frame. She’d been working on it for half a decade, trying to build a trap that their rulers couldn’t escape. When she hadn’t been training, she’d been studying the thousands of possible variables, hoping to find one small chance of success. Now that she had, all the other ideas she’d been forced to discard were back on the table for finishing the puzzle.

Candice began gathering pieces for a bottom corner. “Tell me how you know Daniel.”

# Chapter Eighteen

**There are Ways**

**1**

**G**reg flinched. He was scared, but the other male leered. He was a temptation to be resisted. Eric had decided he wanted to belong to her. His beautiful face said he was busy searching for anything that he could use to pry his way into her service.

“How did you know?”

“You can’t stop looking at him.” Candice pointed, steeling herself against their voices. “Tell me.”

“The scientists pulled DNA from the immortality drive that was on the international space station when it fell to earth in 308AW. It contained markers without mutations. They’ve been working on it ever since.”

Instead of lust at the sound of Eric’s voice, the information kept Candice focused. “You know about the vaccine.”

Eric grew bitter. “They created it by using the blood of bachelors who produce male offspring. There are twelve of us. They also use our children.”

Her eyes swung to Daniel. *Produce male offspring.* She instantly knew he was one of those. It explained him being pulled from the renting and breeding programs. “How long have they had the vaccine?”

“Ten years, that we know of.”

Candice listened in furious silence as they filled in the rest of the ugly picture.

“They don’t want the women cured or the male population restored. If that happens, men might regain their former power. There isn’t anything the Network won’t do to stop it.”

Greg picked up where Eric left off. “They figured out if the mating is willing, with one of the twelve bachelors who have male children, then the offspring will be immune. They’ve managed to create the mix a dozen times. There’s a certain spark that’s needed.”

His sweet tone rushed over her skin like a wildfire. No wonder he was so scarred. The feel of it! Candice forced herself to focus on Baker. “How many of the twelve have you gathered?”

“Six or seven.”

*No wonder they want him dead!* Candice continued to sort and organize the new, deadly information as they dealt it out.

Baker delivered another surprise. “They’ve known for a long time and hid it to keep things in chaos. They sell these secrets to other governments, and their sister Network in the west. It lets them control our world.”

Candice thought of the discovery they’d made years ago. The Pruetts knew about the wall around the country they’d accessed so far. Candice was positive the west was the same. *To keep us in or others out?* “No one knows.”

“*We* do, and we’ll die to take them down.” Eric’s determined vow sent fresh hunger through Candice. She liked a rebel. Her relationship with Baker proved that.

Greg added another piece of the puzzle. “They use those dozen guys for a lot of things. Most of the time, it’s a breeding tool for those rich enough to buy a child. When it’s a boy, the scientists passed it off as luck, but when the male children get old enough, they take them back to use them in the program.”

Candice’s grip tightened on the spoon. “Studying and controlling the next generations.” Daniel was right to be worried for his missing offspring.

“Yes. They have our kids in the complex… Where the *games* are.”

Candice knew what she would want, what she would do, if it were her children. “You’re not going to the safe zone until you can take them with you.”

Baker nodded. “We can still do it from there, but it’s farther away, so the information trickles in. We’ll be blind in too many ways.”

“The Ex-Defender said not to forget your promise.”

Baker sighed in regret as Greg blanched. “I haven’t.”

Candice didn’t ask how he planned to get the children out of New Network City once he rescued them from the dome. Only one method of transportation would put them near the Borderlands within days and she admired his sand. She wished Daniel had a bit more.

Daniel understood they wanted her to get into the complex to rescue their missing children. Would his sons or daughters be among those?

“We need to know anything you can tell us about the complex security.” Greg didn’t mind begging. He was almost certain she was going to be able to help them. Her intelligence and compassion was easy for him to see.

“You’re one of the twelve.” Candice’s attention shifted to Eric, the one Daniel already hated for the way she stared at his pretty face. “So are you.”

“Yes, but it’s not about us.” Greg gestured. “We want this to end for all men.”

“You need someone on the inside.”

Baker lifted a brow eagerly. “You offering?”

Daniel’s heart was pounding. To get in, Candice would have to sign up for another game.

“What the hell would I do with a second mate? I’d be too busy keeping them from killing each other to get any relief!”

Laughter spilled out.

Daniel tried to relax. Candice had won. If anyone could find a weakness, it was her.

*Groan…*

The hunters glanced upward in concern.

The rebel males exchanged amused glances at the nervousness.

“It’s solid.” Greg flushed when Candice locked onto him.

“The stone shifts with the weather.” Baker was proud of their den. “It’ll hold. The council would have to send in a plane, but the storm won’t let them do that right now. Even if they knew where you were, they couldn’t get in.”

Daniel noticed Candice’s frown at the statement. Did she know something the leader didn’t?

“Are you okay?”

Daniel found an imposing man on his right. The slave had been beaten so much that his nose had more ridges than the mountain around them. “Yes. Thank you.”

The big man stared, seeing Daniel’s lack of fear on their level. Daniel was getting used to being with a changeling and it showed.

“We’ll help you get away. Baker will.”

Daniel pushed for information carefully, ignoring the offer. “He doesn’t seem like a hero.”

“He is, though.”

“How did that happen?” Daniel noticed others listening to them, hoping it might be okay to talk since Candice hadn’t stopped him from doing it yet. *These are rebels?* *Grind…* Daniel ignored the sound of the walls to listen to the story.

“Baker tracked us down.”

“Was his dad glad to see him?” Daniel hated the tremor in his tone, but a loving father was something he’d never had.

“Not at first. Baker was a convict. His father was afraid it would expose us. When he found out Baker had forged a good relationship with the Pruetts, he changed his mind. We never knew why, but I’ve always thought it was for their Network connection. Pruetts have been bounty hunting for them for centuries.”

“Were they tight after Baker came to live here?”

“Not really. Baker had a brother they were searching for when his father got caught. Other than his missing boy, Baker’s father only cared for taking down the Network.”

“What about him?” Daniel asked, meaning Baker.

The big man’s gaze swung to his leader with devotion. “He cares about us and rebuilding the world. We stayed with Baker’s dad because it was safe and there was nowhere else to go. With Baker, we stay because he’s our leader and we love him.”

Daniel was having a hard time placing the convict with this level of caring. Was there something of value in Baker that he was missing? Daniel resumed listening to the conversation between Candice and the small group around the fire.

“So what happens when you get them out?” Candice asked. “You make it to the Borderlands in time to be trapped between the two Networks?”

“We wage a final fight for freedom.” Baker clenched a fist. “We take them *all* down.”

Daniel heard it then, and responded to the tone of command by standing up straighter.

The hulk knew. “He’ll give us what he promises, if he can get enough help.”

“What do you want from me?” Daniel demanded.

Hulk laughed. “Not you, *her*. She’ll train his army.”

“Daniel will help, too.” They were joined by a tall, slim man with a purple streak in his hair that came from being the prize in an animal game. He wore the same clothes as the others here, but Daniel sensed more wildness underneath. Baker’s little group of rebels might be worth more than their jumpiness implied.

“You’ll help repopulate the earth.” Animal smiled at Daniel. “As one of the twelve, your success is important.”

It was a lot to take in. Daniel stored that information while trying to act as if he had known all along. He had two sons. Pride filled him, and then pain. “I’ll do my part.”

Both of the rebel males swept Candice in appreciation.

“Bet you will!”

“With her to work on, I would, too!”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at their teasing. They didn’t mean any harm and he happened to agree. Making babies, sons, with Candice would be his dreams come true.

Candice observed Daniel joking with the former prizes as if he’d known them as friends. The bigger of the two was staring in a way that implied he might be like Daniel and eventually overcome his fears. The purple haired male clearly hated women. Candice doubted that would change. She rotated to the abused shell on Baker’s right. “How do they train you to please us?”

Eric flushed, eyes dipping to her chest.

Candice felt Daniel’s growl more than heard it. He was keeping track of her, as if he was jealous. That was attractive.

“Drugs.”

“Once you’re trained, you’re rented?”

Greg nodded. “Half of each bachelor cell is donated to the breeding program, but the babies are always female. They only allow a male child when it’s bought by a rich family or for the immortality program.”

“And then they come and get them…” Her mind went to Daniel’s sale. The Network had been planning to take him back all along. “Why is the Malin family on the list?”

“Their bloodline. The females in that family have no signs of the disease.” Baker took over again.

Candice was glad. The sound of Greg’s timbre was wearing down her control.

“They’re naturally immune.”

It all fit. That was why they’d never fought with the Malin clan. Except for having no emotions toward their children, the Malin family was free of infection. Their rulers had been using that miracle as a breeding tool to keep a careful number of unique male births to supply their experiments.

“Why are they still experimenting if they have the vaccine and know how to create immune offspring?” Candice asked.

*“Immortality.”*

She frowned. “Say it again.”

“The children are special. They don’t get sick very often and they heal faster.”

Eric had clearly been the partner of someone high up to have such detailed information.

“They’re trying to give that to themselves?”

“They want to rule forever.” Eric glared. “With our kids, it might be possible.”

Stronger kids, a different future, and a conspiracy to rival that of the nuclear war they still didn’t know the exact cause of. So many thoughts, so many possible directions to go in. Her mind went to Daniel first. She took a quick glance to verify his safety, then turned to Baker. “Pruetts have been around since the council was formed.”

“And always stayed on the same side.” Baker studied her. “Until now, maybe…”

*Except we’ve never been as loyal as we appear,* Candice added silently. “Tell me about being a bachelor. Run down an average day. Maybe I’ll spot a place where you can slip someone in.”

Across the large room, Daniel also kept digging for information. “What did this place used to be?” He’d been wondering that since they arrived.

Animal man sneered hatefully. “Another arena for those who liked to cause death.” He clearly included Candice in that opinion.

“We’re not sure where it came from. It’s old, from before the apocalypse even, but we couldn’t find any records on it.” Hulk hoped there wouldn’t be a fight. The animal prizes were exactly that–prizes for animals. They didn’t know any other way to act. “It was already rigged for electricity. These tunnels were used before we took over.”

“What relics did you find?”

Hulk shrugged. “Only empty benches set up for people who no longer exist.”

Candice took another of those quick scans to verify where he was. Daniel felt his pulse increase.

Animal man directed the conversation back to a subject that was more important to him. “She’s very possessive.”

“Protective,” Daniel corrected. “I like it.”

“Why?”

Daniel gave the truth as he saw it. “The change is hard on them. I think most of them don’t want to hurt us. They just can’t help it.”

“They’re beasts!” Animal man insisted.

Daniel couldn’t let that slide without defending his new owner. “So were men, before. The apocalypse flipped everything around. It’s not their fault.”

They had questions for him. Daniel leaned against the rocky wall and gave a short bob he thought Candice would have liked. “What do you want to know?”

“How do you…make them gentle?”

“How do you get them to not attack you?”

Daniel thought of the moments with Candice and flushed. “I don’t know. I like that, too.”

They were staring as if he was crazy. Daniel gave them his truth, but he doubted they were brave enough to accept it. “Changelings don’t want cowards. They need courage. Accept their embrace, willingly, and they change.”

“Does she?”

Daniel smiled toward his loving owner, thrilled to say he had that now. “Even when she flips, she remembers who I am.”

“She hasn’t hurt you?”

“No.” Nail marks were not injuries where he came from. “I don’t think she can.”

“What’s it like…belonging to her?”

Daniel grinned, letting them see how happy he was. “Amazing.”

“Not the sex, the relationship!”

Daniel joined in the laughter without correcting their impressions and felt the last of his worry over their mating fade into anticipation. He wasn’t one of these trembling bachelors. He belonged to Candice Pruett, winner of a games challenge. *When she wants me, I’m finally ready.*

“What happens then?” Candice pushed harder, not caring for the sudden worry of those who were listening. If the conversation sent her need into a dangerous zone, the man she wanted to put out the flames was in reach.

“They bring in level three and four changelings who don’t have a mate. They tell us what to do to them. If we follow the instructions and films exactly, we’re rewarded.”

*That’s it. That’s how they get in.* Candice didn’t tell Baker yet. She wanted to know one more thing about this group of men–did they have the sand that this plan would require? “What happens if you fail to please a woman?”

Eric’s chin went up, face transforming into an exotic lure. “*I* wouldn’t know. I was always top of my class.”

It was a subtle advertisement of his skill, an offer if she wanted to take it that way. Candice could feel Daniel’s anger. Testing it, she gave Eric a smile that she usually reserved for her mate. What would her timid male do? Anything? She doubted it, but here in this nest of rebels, her action was more likely to draw out that primal spark if it still existed. “What if I want proof before I buy?”

Now there was complete silence. Candice felt their desires, those carefully caged male instincts lurking behind uneasy expressions. Baker might not be able to bring that out in them, but she could.

The rental man stood up eagerly. “I have a bed across the hall, but leave *him* here.” Eric had already placed her type and was taking control. “I’ll kill your slave if he interferes.”

Daniel had watched her flirt without showing a response to the pain of it. If she made the move, it was her choice, but to hear that ignorant little speck threaten his place was more than the stunned bachelor was willing to take. These males would find out right now that she was his! Daniel’s hands clenched into tight, angry fists for the first time in his life.

When Daniel shoved away from the wall, Animal man tugged Hulk out of the way. He knew what was coming. He just didn’t understand why.

Busy trying to secure a higher place, Eric didn’t hear Daniel coming.

To Daniel’s surprise, neither did Candice, which infuriated him. *She might really want that slick whore!*

Eric’s nose crunched under Daniel’s first blow, but he didn’t stop swinging. For a change, it was *him* drawing blood instead of Candice, *him* wanting more of it.

When they finally pulled him away, the little speck wasn’t even conscious and Daniel had crimson running down his fists. “Kill that, you little bitch!”

He jerked away from their loose grips. He glared around at the shocked men. “Anyone else want what’s mine?!”

Baker laughed aloud, clapping. “I give you the final proof of my words, gentlemen. That’s what you’ll be when we’re finished training. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Disgusted, Daniel moved toward their chamber with no fear of being punished, full of an anger he couldn’t place. Was it because these former captives were free to become more than they had been? Candy would give that to him if he wanted it. *Do I?* He was full of confusion.

Candice followed Daniel in and fastened the door, but he didn’t face her yet*. What do I want?* Daniel had spotted the titanium cuffs welded to the wall when they were brought in. He stared at them now. That was the answer, wasn’t it? He wanted to be hers and there were ways…

Daniel was thinking of doing something she wouldn’t like. Candice knew it, but the sight of blood on his fists had her observing with open lust. She had never witnessed two males fighting. She only wished Eric had been more sporting. The rush from it was incredible!

Daniel tore off the cloak, wiping his hands on it. Before she could recover from that surprise, he tossed it into the corner! She hadn’t understood how the women of the old world had let their men get so out of control, but with Daniel storming around, sending out waves of anger, Candice was…*hungry*.

His boots went sailing against the wall, socks following. He moved toward the wash curtains without asking her permission.

*Sexy!* Candice spun to block the way, not about to leave him alone and let that delicious rage cool. “What?”

Daniel stopped, mouth opening.

*Come on*, she rooted, *don’t stop now!*

“I don’t like it, what you did.”

Candice couldn’t stop the laugh. *Finally!*

His face darkened and those big hands came up. He jerked her against his hard body. “I’m not kidding, Candice. I...I don’t want you to do it again!”

Daniel glared without flinching as Candice gaped, unable to believe it was her timid mate sending out these piercing waves of authority.

He saw her body respond, how her chest was suddenly pointed and her irises were pink. “I mean it.”

Candice inhaled of the lust in the air, feeling the change sweeping through her body.

“If you do it again, I…I won’t please you anymore.”

Did he know what that sounded like to her? The challenge was sizzling meat hot from the pan. As soon as he opened his mouth to continue protesting, she lunged.

They rolled as they landed, Candice hissing in need when his body pushed her against the floor with his weight. She wrapped her long legs around his as she jerked him down to meet her eager lips.

Daniel had been goading her, but he hadn’t expected it to work so fast. *She likes it that I demanded her fidelity!* Daniel allowed her to claim his mouth while he chose the next move. Unless she got totally out of control, he wasn’t stopping. *I’ll fix this match!*

Instead of the gentle treatment she’d gotten from him so far, Daniel tangled hands in her hair and delivered a punishing kiss that left him breathless. The taste of her was intoxicating. He deepened the kiss as he thrust forward, holding her in place, and was rewarded with a low moan that he immediately wanted to make louder. She wouldn’t be thinking about renting a male when he was through.

Daniel snagged the corner of her cloak and lifted the string. The black material fell aside and he nuzzled the perky breasts he still hadn’t viewed. *That’s about to change.*

Daniel used a hard finger down the button line to rip her shirt open.

She sucked in a tight breath that made him thrust against her heat. Daniel liked her pleasure. He couldn’t wait to taste her. He’d loathed it with the others, but they weren’t his Candy.

Her bra was black, as he’d fantasized. Daniel slid the straps over her shoulders with hot hands and a thumping heart. She was watching. When he released the clasp between those tattooed swells, her pink eyes filled with crimson and her nails began to grow. The change was here. He would have to cuff her, but first, he wanted to *see* her.

Daniel jerked on the button of her pants, causing the bra to fall open. He throbbed at the sight of those perfect breasts. She had tattoos over her ribs and hips, the erotic kind with spiked, attention catching details that said the person who had inked her had enjoyed the work. Disappearing into her snug pants, the intricate green and black design ran up both muscular hips and came out to encircle bright pink nipples that he had to lick.

Daniel’s tongue lashed over a taut tip.

Candice cried out, claws ripping into his wrists.

He rose up, noting the muscles in her arms were swollen and her breathing was harsh. He flicked a rough thumb over the rocky nipple he’d just had his mouth on.

Her body shuddered, lips parting. “Get the cuffs.”

Daniel had blushed earlier at the thought of using them, but he wasn’t embarrassed now. He wanted her locked up tight so he could explore that exotic body. How far did the tattoo go?

Candice took in another ragged breath when Daniel moved off her, staying still as he got the metal and snapped it around the nearest pole.

Luckily, they’d landed by the bed, but he didn’t think of stopping to get them onto it. She extended her arm for the first cuff that Daniel quickly snapped into place. On the second, Candice hesitated.

Worried that he might hurt her? It was a surprise. Daniel dropped the other cuff to the cold floor. “That’s enough.”

Candice shook her head as he carefully lowered his hard body back to hers. “Not a good…oohhh…”

His kiss silenced her moan. Daniel quickly fell into the haze of lust as she arched under him*. If not for our pants, I would be in her now!* The image made him rock harder, squeeze tighter, kiss deeper.

He’d lost control of himself. Candice recognized it. Fire spread through her body as he ground that steel bar between her legs, groaning into his mouth again as he roughly pinched a rocky nipple. Her free hand threaded through his silken hair and held him tightly, already at that golden edge. Even through clothes, he knew exactly what spot to hit, how hard to squeeze… Candice stiffened in his arms as hunger seared her. She trembled, fighting for air as he slid a hand down her stomach and inside her pants.

*He isn’t stopping*.

The thought made the fire flare back to life before it had even burnt down. She hissed in agony when he pushed that big hand against her, fingers dipping in to stroke her molten flesh. She cried out again as he hit it just right.

Candice was aware of him shifting, of her pants being jerked off, but all she could feel was the raging inferno he’d brought to life. The cool air on her skin was another delight to be savored. She kissed him without a concern for safety as the pain-like pleasure swept her up again.

Fingers moving in light circles, his mouth traced down, skimming her jawline, her neck, her chest…

“Umm…” She felt his bare leg against her hip and shivered, on that edge again as he moved on top of her.

The thick muscles in Daniel’s arms clenched as he lowered his naked body between her legs, stiff erection finding her slick skin…pushing into her.

Her control snapped. She changed.

Daniel refused to stop. Her nails ripped into his arm as he shoved forward and buried himself in her tight body.

A scream of ecstasy echoed off the walls before he dropped his mouth over hers. He’d never felt anything like this furious heat. Daniel slid his tongue into her mouth as he thrust forward, sinking into her perfect flesh like it had been made for him. Her legs came up, nails taking more skin from his arms.

Daniel ground his mouth against hers, taking everything that she wanted to give and more. Her breasts pressed against his chest in silken peaks; he ripped his mouth from hers to suck on a tip. Her heat clenched around him…the handcuff split apart with a loud shriek that they both ignored.

Candice rolled them over, pushing down to take him deeper, and then Daniel was the one arching, thrusting upward to accept what she was offering. Her nails sliced into his chest.

Daniel jerked her down for a punishing kiss as they mated. The pain was distant, but this need! He used his hands on her naked breasts as he shifted, thrusting upward.

The door opened as Daniel’s grip on her hot body tightened. He held her when she would have looked up, craving another taste, and felt her nails sink into his shoulders to draw warm drops that matched the ones still on his fists.

Daniel rolled them over as he slid forward. Candice shuddered, grip on his hardness tightening into pleasure that sent *him* out of control. He pinned her wrists to the floor and thrust into her again, hard enough to draw another cry. She stiffened, clamping down as she exploded.

Her tattoo flashed as she arched and Daniel shoved deeper. He’d never felt so good, so alive! He pulled out of her slick body and pushed her over. The tattoo ran across her back and the cheeks of her ass. Daniel jerked her into the position he wanted so he could rub against the ink while he gave her a son. The thought finished him off. He thrust deep as he held her by the hips and groaned in ecstasy.

“Now, that’s what she needed.”

Baker’s comment came through a haze of pleasure that had Daniel locked against her slippery body.

“Let’s go.”

“But he needs medical…”

“She’ll handle it. She always did with me.”

It was amazing how fast those words drove the need to claim her again back into Daniel’s body. Groaning, he leaned down to taste her tattooed skin.

**2**

Angelica stormed from the cave, unable to take the sounds of passion echoing through the stone. She was happy for Candice and Daniel, but she was also burning. It was worse now that she was surrounded by men.

Pain lanced into her temples, turning her eyes red.

Men hurried to open the main door and let her out.

It locked behind her just as fast.

Angelica wasn’t concerned about being in the jungle alone. It was more dangerous for her inside the mountain with all those easy targets.

The cool wind blew over her fiery skin, but it provided no relief from the jabbing agony or the blood that felt as if it was boiling in her veins. She needed a release or she would snap. She’d never felt so close to losing control.

Movement snared her attention, triggering her hunting instinct. She gave chase against her will.

The deer was no match for the changeling teeth and claws that ripped it to shreds in seconds.

Following her, Baker paused at the sight. He’d seen changelings get like this, but none with the skills of a Pruett. If he weren’t careful, she would attack him.

“Stay away.”

Her bloody gargle warned Baker of the danger and sent a shiver down his spine. Candice was lethal. Angelica was worse. He’d forgotten about her when he’d decided to involve Candice with the rebels, but he should have known she would stay with her cousin. It was an oversight on his part–one that he needed to handle now. “I’d like to offer you a service.”

Angelica’s head snapped up, brilliant red orbs all he could see in the darkness.

“Not a full service–just a quick moment to help you regain control.”

Angelica sniffed the air hungrily, feeling as much the animal as she knew she looked. It was easy to tell Baker was scared, but she could also smell it. Everyone was scared of a changeling on the edge. *Where’s the man who isn’t? ‘Cause that’s who I need.*

“Go away.” Angelica took off running to leave him behind. When she came to the river, she dove in without hesitation. The cold water would help her regain control and erase evidence of her minor snap, but she wouldn’t forget it. The disease was getting worse. Soon, she would burn up.

It was almost a relief.

# Chapter Nineteen

**Falling Hard**

**1**

**“G**ood morning.”

Her vision was already tinted pink as she took in the hardness against her hip, the sights and smells of their pleasure. “Daniel, about last night, I’m–”

He didn’t let her say anything else. He wrapped his arms around her naked body and sent his mouth to her neck. He knew the truth. She didn’t want the rentable guys. She lusted for her mate and the feeling was mutual.

His hands slowly slid down her arm to her tattooed breast. He ran a rough finger over the hard tip with a chill. *She’s mine!*

Daniel nuzzled her neck, pressing against her cheeks. She shoved back frantically as he slid a hand between them to adjust, entering from behind as she arched.

Daniel growled low in his throat as he pushed deeper, spreading her thighs. She twitched against him, nails out and searching. He pulled her against his hard body as he rubbed her from the front.

“Oooohhh.”

Knowing their morning noises would echo in the tunnels sent his lust up a notch, and he thrust slowly in and out of her stunning heat, feeling her hips responding, keeping pace. Her core was soaked, sucking on him. Daniel pinned her in place with his hand and body as he took what he wanted–her. Shoving harder, he drew a gasp from those lips that nearly sent him over the edge. When her body began convulsing, he tightened his grip, pushed deeper, and exploded.

In that chaotic moment, Daniel saw how she’d bound him, how any other woman’s pleasure would never affect him the same way. Candice was the one for him, owner or not, and Daniel shot seed into her with every thick wave of piercing pleasure.

When they exited the room, sharing gazes of satisfied desire, a low cheer sounded and then swelled. It came from the bachelors who were gathered for the morning meal.

Daniel flushed. He was a hero to them for standing up for himself and for surviving it, but also for doing it so well. None of them, not even Baker, had the sand to *take* a changeling.

Candice gave Daniel a gentle push toward the rebels he’d been talking to last night. “Go spend a few minutes with your new friends before we leave. And eat.”

Instead of rushing off, Daniel ducked to her cheek for a gentle kiss. Then he walked proudly to the food, leaving his loving owner with a smile that felt foreign.

Lurking in the corner, Angelica growled in agony, but she wouldn’t touch one of these meek males. She wanted what Candice now had.

Candice walked toward the food line with soreness and a satisfied feeling that allowed her to swing her arm around Greg’s thin shoulders. He froze, like the rest of the room, as she leaned close enough to lick his ear if she had a mind to. “Send in your spies as the level three training changelings. Try to wait until the final match when they bring out the prizes. Do it while the winner is picking.”

She watched his face flood with happiness and discovery, already falling into the planning with his inside information. Candice inhaled deeply. *Nothing*.

Her happiness drew Daniel toward her. Her mate wasn’t happy to see her so close to another man.

Candice delivered a glare.

Daniel stopped.

Greg flinched. He was within range.

Satisfied she’d made her point (She was still the leader, no matter how much his defiance pleased her.), Candice focused on Greg. “You’ll have to leave the adults and you’ll never be able to use that plan again. They’ll figure it out after they examine the tapes.”

“What about the sealed gates?” Greg asked. “They don’t open until days after the win.”

“You take them out the same way they took you in.”

Greg paled. “The Ring…”

Candice flashed a games grin as she dropped her arm from his stiff shoulders. “Can be bought. Their profession says it’s true, but there will have to be sacrifices.” She scanned the rebels. “A few of you will get hurt to distract them enough to not watch the monitors or tunnels.”

Greg looked back with more courage than she’d given him credit for. “If it gets my sons out of there, I’d service all of them myself–without the cuffs.”

Candice snorted. “You’d better take a lesson from Daniel then, because they won’t use the cuffs, it might not work, and you may end up dead.” She softened. The differences in her were obvious as she showed caring for a stranger. “Send in someone who can take what they dish out and ask for more.”

Greg looked at Daniel.

Candice growled. “Win your own!”

Now there was fury, but it was defensive, striking out merely because being away from Daniel had crossed her thoughts. That wouldn’t be allowed, *ever*.

Candice took a plate from the stack and slapped a few rolls on it, vaguely wondering which one of them could bake. She hoped they didn’t send him in. Someone gentle enough to make bread this flaky had no business trying to infiltrate the Network.

When Candice had glared, all of Daniel’s fear returned…and vanished. It was a simple correction. He was able to tell the difference after being so close to real danger. When he studied her for a moment, he also realized she wasn’t putting off the furious waves of need like she did with him.

One of the rebels at his side praised him in a shy lilt. “You’re lucky, you know?”

Daniel lifted his chin. He’d never been looked up to. It was wonderful. “She makes me this way.”

And she did. He’d been a massive coward before Candice had come for him, but she’d changed that in just weeks. What could she do for these males in a few months or a year?

*A lot*, he contemplated. *And I’ll be with her for all of it.* They wouldn’t be separated now unless he asked for that. He’d become certain of it this morning when she pulled him into her arms right before they stepped through the door and hugged him. Candice! Hugging! He had no illusions about who was in charge, but when it came to helping her control the rage, he was the lead. In return, they would all be influenced by this incredibly hard woman. She would set his kind free and deliver the cure to the rest of the world.

What a way to live! No fear of each other, no death or pain. Even their ancestors hadn’t known such an existence, but they hadn’t had his mate to teach them. Daniel was positive her idea of training and Baker’s would be different, but he was looking forward to watching them clash over it now. His life had gotten so much better. There were only two things, other than his missing children, still bothering Daniel. One was the feelings he believed Candice might still be carrying for Baker. He hoped that would fade in time. The other was sitting in the corner by herself with an expression of dejection that subdued Daniel’s happiness. Angelica was like Candice, but burning hotter. Renters had come and gone at the complex, and it was always the ones with that glaze over their words and gestures who snapped and hurt the males. For Daniel, it had been while he was still in the care of the Ring.

That took his thoughts to an ugly place. Daniel moved toward the corner, battling it in his mind. He didn’t think of his slavery in terms of the pain very often. He’d learned to ignore it and let it emerge in his nightmares so he could get through the days. Witnessing how hard Angelica fought to control the violence made Daniel sorry for her and even have a little pity for the woman who had raped him. He was supposed to be unbroken when brought in, but he’d been changed forever in one session of pain and humiliation. Three years after, he was enrolled in the breeding program and selling his favors outside of it to survive captivity. He had all of his memories back now, but most of the time, he wished he didn’t.

“What?!”

Angelica’s snarl was on the edge. They needed to get her out of here soon and give her a break from all of the scents and curiosity. With the stories of Daniel *taking* Candice circling the rebels, the glances being cast toward Angelica were enough to bring an attack from an average changeling, though it was clear she was more than that.

“Can we talk?”

Angelica latched onto the distraction, as he’d hoped she would. “Sit. Down.”

Her cruel tone, however, made him pause. He wasn’t stupid.

Angelica glowered up at him. “When you stand over me, it’s like I’m…”

Daniel quickly sat down. “Burning up?”

She nodded, clenching her hands into fists when he accidentally brushed her leg. “Careful!” She leaned away.

Daniel made sure his voice wasn’t any louder than it had to be. “Do they know yet?”

She flinched, drawing more attention. “No.”

Daniel did what usually got him in trouble. He reacted without thinking and patted her hand in comfort.

“Get…back!” Angelica’s command was a razor.

To everyone’s surprise, Daniel didn’t move. He had a plan, though the outcome was unknown. “Look at me.”

He’d used the same tone of command with Candice last night.

Angelica snapped open blood red orbs. Her body trembled as she fought for control.

Daniel pushed his luck, tightening his grip on her hand. “They need you to be yourself.”

“Daniel…” Candice wasn’t certain either.

Daniel was. “They’ll love you, whichever one you pick.”

Angelica struggled to talk. “You…you’re sure?” A tear splashed from her changeling eye.

He opened his arms as those red orbs flooded with black misery. “Yes, Angel. I am. You’re special. They’ll sense it.”

Candice observed in shock as her brutal little cousin collapsed into Daniel’s arms, sobbing. She’d known Angelica was planning something–entering the games eventually was what she’d assumed–but clearly, the girl had already signed up. And Daniel knew! He’d been aware of Angelica’s true fear of not being wanted. He had risked her rage to offer the comfort he knew no one else could. *And he thinks he’s honored!* Candice had a mate filled with courage and warmth that didn’t stop with his needs or hers. He would enrich all their lives.

*I can’t love him more than I do right now.* Candice started to join them, eager to let Daniel know how thrilled she was… The floor rumbled under her feet. It swayed, dipping in a violent tremor.

People froze. *We’ll be buried!*

Candice took off toward her family.

Daniel lunged her way.

*Booommmm!*

Amid the harsh screams and crashes of shattering stone, the mountain began to collapse.

**2**

“Candice!”

“Again!” Her voice drowned out the other awful noises.

Daniel drew in a lungful of gritty air. “Candy!”

She grabbed his arm seconds later. Daniel clutched at her in the darkness. “Candy!”

He was so glad she was alive that the panic around them receded. He shoved his mouth against hers in desperation. *I almost lost you!*

She returned his emotion with the same fierceness, letting him feel her terror, her relief.

Candice ended the kiss abruptly, but kept a tight grip on his hand as they moved through what remained of the rebel base. The blast had hit the mountain right over them. If not for the natural strength of the main chamber, they would all be dead. As it was, half the ceiling had cracked and sent giant slabs down to crush people. Blood now stained the neutral stone.

Daniel glanced away from the sight of Eric’s now forever-shut eyes as Candice pulled him through the debris, going to the corner where he’d been sitting with Angelica… He suddenly understood and tried to move faster through the death and destruction.

The rebels were stunned, shrouded in grit, tears, and hatred. They knew who was responsible. The Network had found them.

“Angel!”

She was lying face down, curled over the top of someone they couldn’t identify yet, but Daniel was positive who she had tried to protect. Angelica was willing to give her life for Baker. Daniel realized he wasn’t the only one who’d felt something special from being around the rebel leader for just two days.

He and Candice started clearing the mess as the others gathered around. Above them, there was another grinding noise.

*Crackkkkk!*

A thick chunk of the ceiling broke away across the room and hid Eric’s body. It sent a fresh cloud of dust over everyone, bringing more coughs.

“Angel!”

“Stop yelling!”

Angelica’s snap drew an immediate response. The rebels who were closest–Hulk and Greg–began to help. Daniel gave them a grateful nod; more men joined in.

“You okay?” Candice wanted to keep her cousin talking, but Daniel thought she was worrying over nothing at this point. If Angelica could growl like that, she wasn’t at death’s door.

“Peachy.” Angelica’s hand shot up through a gap in the debris.

The sight of those bloody fingers brought the rest of the males forward. Daniel watched in surprise as they crowded Candice out to take over the rescue.

Candice didn’t care about their motives or their lack of fear. She let them move her aside with careful shoulders and hands. Their bodies were much more suited to this task.

The debris pile quickly vanished.

“Step off,” Hulk ordered as they got to the larger pieces.

Candice did, hearing his furious undertone. She’d misjudged on her first impressions. She had believed these men had no fire, but the rage was unmistakable. Fury was rising in these shattered walls and it wasn’t coming from the changelings. Their rulers had gone too far. The former captives wouldn’t stand for more.

Candice saw Angelica stand and then lean down to help pull Baker from the floor. Candice shoved her way through to grab her cousin for a fierce hug.

“Damn it!”

Candice jerked back to find Angelica’s arm hanging at an odd angle. She scanned for other injuries. *Broken or maybe dislocated arm, bleeding gash down her hip, blood running from her forehead*.

Changeling fury was in Angelica’s red orbs, but her anger was aimed at their assassins this time. None of the males flinched away as Angelica came forward. The disease had little to do with this awful sense of betrayal.

“How did they know where we were?” one of the rebels asked in bewilderment.

Candice didn’t want Daniel to hear the answer yet. She went to Baker to assess his injuries.

“I’m good.” The convict knew, but there was no way he could keep it hidden for her.

Candice delivered a curt nod. “I’ll handle it.”

Baker turned to Angelica. “Shut your eyes.”

“Just do it!” Angelica snarled, in agony.

The rebel leader hesitated. “I can’t with your eyes like that!”

Even Baker was scared of her. Angelica snapped her lids shut in frustration.

Baker’s rough touch quickly put Angelica’s arm in place, sending a scream through the wreckage that chilled the other males. They had never witnessed a man causing a woman pain. They didn’t like it.

Candice let Baker swing Angelica into his arms and carry her toward the clear tunnel. She was far beyond any of the previous rage she’d felt, except maybe for the moment she’d lost Daniel. Angelica’s blood was literally on her hands. The feel of it was enough to shove Candice over the edge. She’d been hurt repeatedly by the Network. They all had.

Her heart filled with ice that always came before she battled. This abuse of power would be stopped. The Pruetts would see to it.

None of the other chambers were accessible, but the survivors knew the fate of those inside by the lack of sounds. Banging on the stone only drew groans from the wounded mountain. Baker reluctantly made the men stop. Due to the round construction, the outer walls collapsing had held it together with that force. If it had been anything but a direct hit, the center would have fallen, too.

Using the moment to teach them, to distract and calm his army, Baker tended the rest of Angelica’s injuries.

Candice was glad to know they were mostly minor. It could have been so much worse.

“Candy…” Angelica was furious.

Candice intended to give her an outlet, but not yet, not here. “Pull it in!”

Angelica did with almost no visible effort this time, flipping from solid red to black.

Candice delivered what her cousin needed–approval of her decision. “Remember this moment when you’re at the dome. Use it to feed and control your rage, and you’ll come out with one of your own.”

Angelica sagged against Baker’s hip.

He hugged her gently, impressing Candice. They were already learning from her brave mate.

“How did they know?”

Daniel hadn’t been distracted, she realized. He’d just known to wait. Candice sighed. She couldn’t protect him from this. The fact that it wasn’t his fault wouldn’t matter to him. “They probably have a tracker in you. I didn’t check. I was distracted.” Candice planned to take as much of the blame as she could.

Daniel was horrified. “They followed *me*?”

Candice turned to comfort him, and to make sure the others didn’t hurt him in their grief.

Daniel jerked his knife free. “Get it out–right now!”

Impressed again, Candice was forced to deny him. “As soon as I do, they’ll lose the signal and send in troops or another bomb. Right now, they can’t be certain how many of us survived because even dead bodies put off heat for a while and satellites are unreliable here.”

“If his beacon suddenly disappears, they’ll know we’ve figured it out,” Greg clarified, clearly the brains of Baker’s outfit.

Candice confirmed his next words. “You have to go to the safe zone. Now.”

“We won’t leave our kids!” Baker protested.

“Then give up your new lives and join them in slavery! You can’t stay here. They’ll firebomb it next, just to make sure no survivors are hiding here.”

The chambers filled with mutters.

“How long?”

Candice considered Greg’s question. “If I were them, I’d wait a few hours to track movement on the satellites. If there were positive readings, I’d send in troops to round them up. If not, I’d blow it up so no one else could use it this way again. I’d say six hours from the first blast, at most, before even the Kudzu plant no longer exists here.”

Baker surveyed his rebels. If the Network took out the vines with their chemicals or fire, all of their hiding places would be gone. It was an awful choice to make.

Candice felt more sympathy than she normally would have, but that clock was ticking louder. The Network knew she was here. They assumed she had gone rogue. It was time to go.

Around them, the males were now gathering gear from bodies and not being gentle about it. The apathy over the deaths, now that the rebels were about to do something, was disheartening to Candice, though she understood. Most of these men had come from the complex. They’d learned not to get attached to each other so it couldn’t be used against them.

“Candice…”

She could hear Baker hoping for her to volunteer as escort. Candice was far too angry to let this go. He would probably get what he wanted.

**3**

Ready to leave, the males stared in horror, stunned at the sight of what had been their home, their shield against the brutal world. Baker would help them, but would it be enough? Would these vulnerable slaves make it to the safe zone with only the convict to lead them? It was a duty that Candice was reluctant to accept, but really, her choice had been made when the Network tried to kill her in the Tunnels of Time. She’d needed to be sure the rebels were worthy of the sacrifices she might have to make to ensure their freedom. In the end, even they might not be happy with how it all turned out.

“We need you,” Baker stated awkwardly from the exit. He was trying hard not to beg.

Candice looked to where Daniel stood, with Angelica at his side. Her loved ones were battered, but alive. Would these males be in a week? Even if they did manage to get to a safe zone–which would be no easy task with the Ring or troops following–they would be entering the gates of hell. The Borderlands were two states wide and six states deep. It split the country in half, and because of the shift in the Jetstream, had become the most dangerous place in New America. Even on a good day, the weather was challenging, but there were also annual dust storms that ran for weeks. There were bandits and huge pythons that came out of the ground without warning to swallow a horse or a Mopar. Even their rulers had no control there.

“Will you at least meet us there?” Baker asked curtly.

After everything that had happened, it was hard for Candice to refuse. The Network wouldn’t stop until Baker was dead. He needed protection. Candice remembered the way the males here had been before their enemy had extinguished those lives. Baker’s quiet leadership had been changing them. He could return a lot of what had been stolen, but these males needed someone who could teach them to fight.

“Please…”

She’d never thought to hear Baker beg for anything. Candice let herself ask a foolish question that mattered only to her. “Why Pruetts?”

Baker’s mouth opened, but Greg answered, “They’re scared of you. The council has no hold over the Pruetts. With a family like yours around, they know these truths will eventually be discovered and revealed.”

Her family was in danger, but not just the few who were bonded. Their entire bloodline had been targeted. Candice reacted the only way she could. She grinned.

Baker’s profile melted into relief.

“I’ll send some others to help, as well.” Candice was thinking of Angelica’s sister. Sam was on a bounty run in the Borderlands. She knew it better than anyone. Candice was positive Sam and her parents would agree to help. After everything Candice had unearthed, she actually believed they might *have* to include Sam and her parents in the plans. They were also Pruetts who had been betrayed. They would want a say.

**4**

A few minutes later, Daniel stepped out of the entrance behind his owner, chin high and mind in tatters. Baker’s safety mattered to Candice. She wanted to go with them. Daniel assumed she was taking him home and then joining the rebels–her and a few of the friends she’d been gathering. Daniel hated being a hindrance. As they cleared the tunnel, Candice stopped, expression spilling secrets that Daniel was guessing she’d held for a long time. Baker had been her friend, his stand-in. If Daniel wanted her to let go, he had to have trust.

“Go with them.” Daniel used a firm tone. “Send me back with Angelica.”

The few rebels within hearing distance flinched away from the couple at his words. Men didn’t tell women what to do!

Behind them, Baker stopped to stare with the same surprise that Candice had.

“I’ll just hold you up and cause trouble.” Daniel took a dejected step toward Angelica. “Leave me.”

Daniel found himself on the ground under a changeling a second later.

The males didn’t yell this time, but all of them watched in worry as Candice pinned his arms.

“We will never be parted!” Candice slowly lowered her lips to inches from his. “I’ll make you the strongest man in his safe zone. You’ll be at my side while we help him rebuild our world. Together.”

Beyond thrilled, Daniel rolled them over and claimed her lips.

Baker laughed in satisfaction at the confirmation of her plans.

Daniel slowly drew back from her mouth, still finding her taste exotic. “I love you, Candy.”

Candice had never thought to actually return the foreign emotion, but it came to her lips as if it had always been there, waiting for her. “I love you, too, Daniel. *Nothing* will ever change that.”

He kissed her again, harder this time, and heard the others move back inside to finish salvaging whatever they could for the trip now that the exit was clear.

Candice held him tighter, feeling him tremble. She’d woken the instincts that Baker would need in the others and Daniel was already learning to use it. His hands roamed freely, without any fear of her rage now. Candice didn’t protest when he began to make love to her right there under the tunnel archway. He’d earned the right.

# Chapter Twenty

**Pruett Tokens**

**1**

**T**he jumpy boat driver was relieved when they emerged from the jungle, but that quickly faded as she realized it was only Pruetts.

“Baker? Eric?”

“Baker made it out.” Daniel didn’t care if his voice triggered anything. An hour of trekking through that jungle, after being bombed, had left him entirely without patience.

Drea’s eyes welled with tears. “Eric?”

“Gone!” Angelica snarled, arm hurting. She’d refused painkillers.

Drea covered her mouth to hold in a sob. As Candice boarded the boat, the wild woman caught her arm. “Are you going to help them now?”

Candice sighed. Apparently, the rebel males created bonds everywhere they went. “Yes. I need to get home. We’ve lost our transportation.”

Drea let go to wipe away her tears, anger coming next. “I can have you at the Kentucky, Ohio line in one day. The channels are clear enough.”

Candice was grateful. “Keep us as quiet as you can. I don’t want you to lose your boat.”

The woman sniffed, hoisting the anchor. “I’d give more than my boat to see the Network taken down. If I’ve got something you need, it’s yours.”

**2**

**New Network City**

“Why did you order that?! Have you lost your mind?”

Every head at the table rotated toward the west coast attaché in surprise at her rudeness.

“I saw the alerts!” Greta accused. “If you’ve killed them all, we’ll never find out where the bigger safe zone is.”

The door slammed shut as a late arrival entered the meeting. The lower ranked member hurriedly took a seat as attention returned to the ruler of the table, the biggest seat.

“It will demoralize those in that zone,” Terry supplied in the silence. “It was a group vote.”

“I wasn’t here!” The western woman dropped her fancy shawl onto the table.

“It was unanimous.” Riana tried to console the outsider. “You would have been outvoted.”

“But we needed them to lead us to the other safe zone!”

“He still will. Daniel’s tracker is moving again. As long as he’s with Candice, she’ll keep him alive.” Terry supported the council’s choice, too. “The Pruetts forgive nothing. It’s why we’ve always worked so well together.”

“I don’t understand.”

A tolerant chuckle came from the boss. “That’s because you’re new. The west may align itself with untrustworthy dogs, but we prefer a higher class of servitude. When they figure it out, the Pruetts will join the rebels and fight for freedom.”

“Why the hell would you want that?” Greta insisted, plopping into the farthest chair.

“Because they’re stronger than most of the animals under our rule. They’re smart enough to figure things out. If they stay on our side much longer, we’ll be too busy fighting them for control to accomplish any of our goals. Knowing they are an enemy is infinitely better.”

“Why not just kill them?” Greta asked. “I handle things like that for the west. I can do it before I leave.”

There were snickers and snorts at those words.

“What?” she asked, not used to scorn. “I’m sought after for my killing skills.”

“You obviously haven’t seen the Bachelor Battles recently.”

“I don’t watch any of the shows.” Greta sneered. “I have better things to do.”

“Make an exception.” Juli gestured. “Before you try to kill a Pruett, you should know what you’re up against.”

A hand moved over the console. The recent episode of the Bachelor Battles flickered to holographic life in the center of the table. There was a blur while it ran through each clip of Candice–from sleeping to fighting. Every move she’d made after entering the city was on tape.

Enjoying the technology here, Greta leaned forward to view her prey as the video slowed and stopped on a zoomed image of a cage with two fighters. One was a former Defender anyone would have recognized for letting Baker escape. The other was a teenager with flat, black eyes and a hard, lean body. Under her image was the name C. M. Pruett.

The video played at normal speed, council watching as the wild teenager sent her claws deep into the throat of her opponent, ripping upward. As the body fell, her ugly grin promised more blood.

Juli froze the video there as the regulars at the table discussed it.

“Her parent was just as violent.” Riana couldn’t help her nervous tone. The Pruetts, all of them, scared her.

“Her mother burnt out when we let her have a mate. We would do the same with this one, if there was more time, but the rebels are gaining ground. They have seven of the twelve now.”

“If we can follow them to the other safe zone and bomb it, too, we’ll take care of both problems at once.” Riana wanted them all gone, but even a few was better than none. “I still agree with the original plan.”

“You know it’s in the Borderlands?” Greta interrupted angrily. “You haven’t told the west!”

“We don’t report to you!” The boss’s chair squeaked as it was vacated. “And you haven’t told us what hits you’ve taken from them, so don’t think you can come here on a tradeoff for information and not give any. If you want our secrets, you’ll share some of your own! Have respect for the freedoms we allow.”

Greta shifted nervously. “We’ve got the same problem as you–the rebels, and behind them, the rest of the world. It’s getting bad. We’re no longer taking calls from the UN.” There was a deep sigh. “Where do you want to start?”

Before the ruler could respond, a lower member’s voice echoed in shock. “Look at the new list for the Bachelor Battles!”

The name at the top drew smiles and nods as some of the members saw how it could be used. With another Pruett in the games, the Network now held another advantage.

**3**

We’re home.

Daniel had a hard time believing it had only been four weeks since Candice had come for him at the complex. Traveling by boat was faster than even the train and already, much of the trip felt surreal.

Mary and Bruce were surprised by the story they’d been told, but they had accepted it without comment. It gave Daniel the sense that they had known what would happen as soon as Candice had agreed to take the run for Baker. Daniel believed her father had been rooting for her to get involved. Her mother, he still couldn’t figure out. Mary was sparkless, as Baker had called her, and other than her strength on the runs, Daniel didn’t understand why she was a hunter at all. Why would she want this for her family? Was she still a bit more dangerous than Candice thought? Daniel held his suspicions to himself. If he could help that Pruett female in some way, he would. He owed them all so much!

When they left Pruett land a month ago, there had been concerned attention on them from the neighbors, but now it was intense, dangerous. Did Candice feel it? Daniel moved a step closer. He had a long way to go before he could protect her from their enemies, but he was determined to learn how.

Candice turned from the mail slot, profile saying whatever was in it would firm her choice as to where they went from here. Daniel waited as patiently as the rest of the crew who followed her in. Whatever she chose was fine with them.

Candice knew what it was as she slid the disc into the wall screen. Arrest orders.

*“Candice Marie Pruett! You are under investigation by the Network Council. The charges include murder of trackers, treason against the Network, aiding and abetting rebels, hijacking a train. Your personal account has been frozen to prevent flight. You must turn yourself in immediately! If you do not comply within 24-hours of this message, Defenders will come for you.”*

Except, Candice had cleaned out her accounts the instant they hit civilization. Computers were lightning fast, but they still depended on people to put in the information. The Pruetts were traveling heavy now.

Bruce flipped on the news.

“…rebel base hidden in the vine-wrapped jungles of Atlanta was destroyed by Network forces. We have reports of over a hundred dead, including the escaped convict and suspected rebel leader, Richard Baker. Cleanup crews at the scene have removed his remains. They are being routed to New Network City for identification.”

“Trying to hurt the other rebels who don’t know he’s alive?”

Candice nodded at Angelica’s question and resumed listening, but underneath, she was topping off another corner of the puzzle. What happened when they walked outside a few minutes from now would have the final say. If she were wrong about their neighbors, they would have to run for their lives and they might not make it.

“…surviving rebels managed to overtake the Network Rider. That fast train has been found abandoned on the outer edges of the Missouri Borderlands. The group of wanted males swarmed from the Kudzu covered jungle hours after the blast, arriving in such numbers that they were able to overpower security. The guards and passengers were removed without injury, though shots were exchanged when the sentries tried to reestablish control.

“The Network considers these men dangerous. Troops have been dispatched to deal with the growing problem. This group of rebels is rumored to be led by Candice Pruett and her new mate, who she recently won from the Network during an episode of the…”

Candice switched off the screen. Their rulers knew she wasn’t part of the hijacking, but they had made sure she would have a hard time catching up to help. She was well known. It was only a matter of time before someone with a grudge grew a spine and tried to claim the reward the council was certain to offer when time ran out. In fact, most bounty hunters didn’t wait for an official call when they were confident one was coming.

Hearing engines, the family followed Candice outside. They flanked her as she ran through the plan one more time. She couldn’t miss anything now, not when it was all starting so suddenly. Every Pruett would be suspected of involvement. Did it matter if all of them left town for a while? Candice didn’t want to confirm the Network’s assumptions about the rest of her family, but it wasn’t safe for them without her and she wouldn’t forsake the cause to stay. They would come.

They felt it, standing behind her as Candice planned a future that might be the end of them. The Pruetts had been on the Network side of the line for as long as they’d been around. *Until now.*

Candice glanced at her parents. “Maybe you two should get out of here. We’ll catch up when we’ve gathered things.”

Bruce nodded, but Mary didn’t. Candice hadn’t expected her to.

“We’ll go together and stay that way.”

It was an order from the legal ruler of their household.

Candice bowed to it reluctantly. “You’d be safer.”

“But *you* wouldn’t be.”

Candice smiled at the usually sparkless parent she believed she could learn to love again now that she understood the urge to fall into Daniel’s arms and never come out. If Mary had saved Daniel before Candice could fight their rulers, they would have all been lost. This moment would never have come.

The engines grew louder.

Candice gestured to Angelica. “You can’t be spotted with us. After your game, come to the safe zone. I’ll send an escort.”

Angelica paled a bit. “You’re kidding, right? Me, in another bunker, with five hundred of them this time?”

“Four hundred.” Candice’s voice was a shard of inner agony she took out of her hiding place to stab the girl with. “The Network already took a cut.”

It burned her, as Candice had meant it to. She pushed the pain in deeper, where it would eat the girl alive unless she found a cure. “They’ll have us next. You, me, Daniel, Baker. We’re all dead. If you don’t get one of them now, you won’t ever. The games are on borrowed time.”

Angelica could have her pick of the rebels from most of those waiting in the safe zone once they got to know her, but she wouldn’t settle for buying a cow from the market. Angelica needed to hunt and there was only one place to do that. While she was there, she could also gather information the rebels needed.

Angelica’s irises shuddered into full red as she flashed a games grin that Candice would have been proud to wear. “To the death!”

“Yes. The Pruetts have been manipulated long enough. Now, we’ll be the ones to fix the show.” Candice gently shoved Angelica toward a Mopar. “Get out of here.”

Angelica didn’t say goodbye to any of them.

When the girl pulled into the woods, not taking a main path from the beginning of her journey, Candice was relieved. She glanced at Mary, glad when her mother took up a defensive stance.

“You did well to get her out of here. They can’t blame her for our actions.”

Candice nodded at Mary’s confirmation as Bruce and Daniel stayed close. “You’ll have to guard them both.”

Mary placed a hand on her daughter’s arm, swallowing her own fears. “I’ll protect him this time like he’s my own.”

Candice shrugged off the warmth. She had no time for compassion. “If I die, he will be. He’s never to be rented or sold, even if he starves to death because of it.”

“My word.” Mary was filled with a mother’s terror. She’d foreseen this moment all those years ago and hoped it would be successful, but she’d forgotten the sweating palms and the lump in her throat. They might lose everything right here.

The squad of troops came over the rise. Their foamy horses and the cloud of dust implied they’d ridden hard to get here. Behind the line of riders were fast bikes with troops already snarling in anticipation of drawing blood. Apparently, they didn’t plan to ask for surrender.

Candice waved the males toward the house as Mary flanked them. She had no idea how she would take down four dozen Defenders, but she had to try. This was the part she’d been dreading. If she were wrong in her assumptions, Baker’s rebels would have to find a different trainer.

Candice stood at the end of their driveway, illegal radio in hand. “This is Candice Pruett. You all know me, and you know my family. Defenders are coming to arrest us. When they finish here, they are going to loot the town and take every slave they find. I’m calling on all those who can to join me in defending our homes and families. The Network doesn’t belong here. *We* do.”

Candice paused as the troops spotted her and advanced. They were moving fast. “Pruetts stand for freedom. We also long for the blood of our enemies. Sweet red death waits for us right now, ladies. Come end your torment, if only for a few moments, and be rewarded with a Pruett token if you survive.”

Candice stored her radio before the Defenders got close enough to witness it. She was already in trouble. She didn’t want those on the other end to be searched. She hoped whoever showed up, if anyone, would have the advantage of surprise.

“Candice Pruett!” Greta grinned at her.

Candice instantly disliked the loud woman with the strange accent. “I’ve got half a day left to turn myself in.”

“We’ll escort you!” Greta had been happy when Terry told her the council had chosen to take her up on the offer to kill the Pruett.

Knowing she needed to buy time for any help to arrive, Candice kept her hands in sight and stayed still as she talked. “I wasn’t on the train.”

“You *were* in Georgia.” Greta pointed. “We have it on tape. Your equipment, with your mark on it, has been taken to the confiscation depo.”

Candice frowned. “I liked that Mopar. Any chance of me getting it back?”

Greta frowned, confused. She’d been told these Pruetts were dangerous, but all this one seemed to care about was her ride. “If they let you live, maybe you can make a deal. I hear your family is famous for negotiations.”

“We’re actually known for getting our man,” Candice corrected.

“You let Baker go!” Greta accused in angry revulsion. “You’re a criminal now, like him.”

Candice didn’t like being called the name she felt her enemy wore so well. Her lips thinned into a sharp sneer. “I may be a traitor to the Network, but you have a vaccine the public doesn’t know about. *You’re* a traitor to this country and every woman in it.”

“You’re not supposed to know that!” Greta’s eyes flickered pink. “Candice Pruett, you are under arrest.” She swung down from her ride and stalked forward. “Come easy or I’ll kill you here and now.”

“Without a trial?” someone shouted.

“Have you been vaccinated?!”

“Traitor!”

“How long have you had it?!”

The shouts continued, causing Greta and her Defenders to swivel around as angry changelings emerged from all sides of the property. From their weapons and red irises, Greta understood she’d made a mistake. Instead of denying the vaccine, it was now public knowledge. The council wouldn’t be happy.

Believing Greta had been sent to kill them all, Candice and many of the others didn’t wait for the Defenders to give an attack order. Candice tossed her first spike, hitting Greta in the neck, and then it was chaos as the neighborhood came together to vent their rage.

Daniel hadn’t witnessed her full fury until now. He thought he had, but the controlled matches in the cage couldn’t compare to this. Candice was in the center of the fighting, using her long knives for bloody, up-close combat that covered her in gore and put her in the most dangerous part of the battle.

Daniel saw a silvery flash and then another crimson spray. A hand followed it, then another. She was slicing off limbs as she tore through the crowd, leaving their crippled forms for the next fighter to finish off. It was the bloodiest battling he’d ever seen. The complex games were tame entertainment in comparison. *No wonder that can’t keep them satisfied*, he thought as he stayed behind Mary and Bruce. Calm, controlled matches weren’t enough to ease this. Right at that moment, Daniel didn’t think anything would be.

The troops, without a leader as soon as Greta went down to Candice’s spike, kept fighting even when it was clear they were outmatched. The Network had no love for losers. If they survived, the council would likely execute them for failure. It was all or nothing and the sweet sleep was the final reward.

Candice tried to send them all there by her own hand. She ducked and darted through the crowd, slicing tendons and stomachs to give her townswomen the advantage in their ugly battles. She loved her neighbors. The same couldn’t be said of their rulers. Candice wanted them gone, and this was the first blow in a war that would give them lasting peace or see humanity pushed into extinction. Either of those was fine with her.

Candice spotted the orphanage keeper fighting a monster Defender and got there too late to save the woman. She killed the huge Defender with a swift spike in her eye, then kept going. The orphanage keeper had rented Baker and abused him so much that he’d run away. Their town didn’t need her.

Candice scanned the bloody scene, searching for anyone else who needed to die in the crossfire. It was time to clean house–all of them.

Unprepared for the ambush, the Defenders were in shock at an entire town turning on them. They had believed their Network jobs made them safe.

Mary guarded their males and observed the fight. It was ugly, satisfying. She’d sacrificed as much as her daughter had to have her mate, and then she’d had to witness her offspring go through the same hells that she had. Now, watching Candice duck under swipes and slit throats was gratifying. *I made the right choice. Candice will liberate our country or die trying. I couldn’t be prouder.*

**4**

Ten minutes after the troops came into sight, the few survivors were fleeing toward their masters and all of them were injured. The neighborhood women had also taken losses, but not as many as Candice had expected when she’d envisioned this phase of the plan. All around her, fighters caught ragged breaths and wiped the gore from their hands, arms, faces, eyes.

Candice realized it was time for the next stage. She raised her voice to be certain it carried to those who had already started to go to their homes to pack. “The Network will come here in force and it won’t take them long to arrive. Stop at our sheds and take whatever you can carry. Keep it to prove who you support. Then get out of here.”

“Where should we go?” one of the bloody women inquired.

“New Network City would be my suggestion.” Candice flashed her games grin. “Pruetts will be there soon.”

Nods and murmurs swept through the fighters as they realized there might be more blood to spill. Changelings were always eager to know where the next fight would happen.

Candice marched toward the sheds to outfit them as much as she could for the journeys some of them would now make. “Thank you for your help, and for your loyalty. Come take what you can carry. Collect your tokens.”

Daniel watched as the line of gory women formed behind Candice, noting the rage eyes were gone. Worry and impatience was the most evident emotions in these females now. Daniel studied them in fascination, but none of them even glanced his way. Their lust had been satisfied with blood.

Daniel spotted movement in the distant trees and recognized Angelica’s Mopar. She couldn’t come out and fight, but she’d stayed in case she had to do just that to protect her family. They needed all these witnesses to say she wasn’t here so she could still sign in for her game. Daniel understood how hard it had to be for her. He turned away before the urge to wave took over. She would probably fall in with them as soon they got away from here. Her episode hadn’t been scheduled yet. She would want to be with her family until it was.

“There’s no erasing this.”

Mary didn’t answer Bruce’s lowly spoken worry. She’d known that the minute Daniel was taken. The council had no idea what they’d unleashed with that one choice.

“Can she do it?” Daniel asked, staying in the shadows of the house as the changeling fighters streamed by with arms laden. They still didn’t glance his way, though. Daniel was grateful.

Mary stared at her daughter, expression both proud and terrified. “Once a generation, a Pruett comes along who is so strong she can either destroy the family or raise it to a new level. I knew who Candice was going to be when she claimed a mate at such a young age. The disease hadn’t even set in, but she was already preparing for it. Then, I overheard her talking to you about remission. She’s always been special, different.” Mary brightened, scars disappearing into the wrinkles. “She’ll free the men.”

“I don’t think she’ll stop there.” Daniel confided in them. “She wants everyone cured and people to have a chance at peace. She’s going to free the entire country,”

“Or die trying,” Bruce mouthed in concern.

“I won’t let that happen.” Daniel clapped Bruce on the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get her out of here and into the Borderlands, where she’ll be safe for a while.”

Mary trailed the men, happy to see Daniel and her mate getting along, but it was more than that. Both men had changed. Mary couldn’t wait to witness the rest of their progress as Candice led them all toward independence. As a parent, she’d never been prouder. Maybe someday she could find a way to express it to the one who needed to hear it the most. Until then, Mary would follow and support Candice in any way she could. After all, this was what she’d been training her for. Daniel and her daughter being allowed to bond hadn’t been an accident. It had been the first step in a revolution. Now, the first battle had happened.

Candice and her family headed west together, towing what remained of their supplies and vehicles. Around them, a few of the townswomen followed for a bit, then broke off to vanish into the Borderlands. The rest of the female fighters packed their gear and headed for New Network City. It had taken four hundred years, but the next war had finally arrived and everyone wanted to take part in it.

Candice increased their speed as the last of the followers fell out of sight. She could feel Baker’s need for their protection. *I’m coming as fast as I can. When I get there, we’ll organize a battle plan that might draw in fighters who haven’t been heard from yet in this new war.*

Daniel tightened his grip on her bloody waist and rested his head against her back.

Candice let his warmth ease her heart, but this time, she didn’t let it put out the heat. *I’ll need every bit of fire I have left to see this through, and so will my family.*

Angelica’s Mopar slid into view through the thickening dust. Candice moved over so the girl could have the lead for a while. Rage was still flowing from Angelica in thick waves. Anyone who crossed their path with bad intentions wouldn’t survive the confrontation. Candice fully expected it to be the same way when Angelica went to the dome for her game. *We’re Pruetts. We help the needy and kill everyone else. It’s just what we do.*

**End of Book 1**

## Deleted Scenes Book 1

“**T**here they are!”

“Get down!”

Hiding in the hollow of a lightning struck tree, the two thin fugitives stilled as riders crested the adjacent hill. If they were caught, the teenage boy would be added to the yearly slave roundup. His father, wanted for crimes against their rulers, wouldn’t be taken back alive.

Full of fear and impotent anger, the fugitives in the mossy trunk couldn’t challenge the riders, but the father kept a scarred hand on the boy’s thin shoulder to prevent him from trying anyway. The emotions of youth didn’t always allow for logic and the man wasn’t going to risk his last son in a futile battle they couldn’t win. However, he would risk both their lives in a fight for freedom with different players and different odds. This was the first step in that plan.

The fugitive males in the trees eased from their hiding place a few minutes later and resumed trudging toward the town. The group they had traveled with before this had been slaughtered by Snake women last week while they were out scouting for water. The wilderness was rough.

“Come on. We have to talk to the orphanage keeper.”

Baker understood leaving him here was a kindness, but he still felt abandoned. Why couldn’t his father love him as much as he loved the missing brother?

Simon knew his child’s torment, but he had to get to the Borderlands and locate a safe zone. He couldn’t do that with a son along. He would have to blend in, to act as if he was a slave running errands. At other times, he would have to be able to make a fast escape. The boy would be lost in one of those struggles and Simon was tired of sacrificing his sons to the cause. He knew the Pruetts and he knew this town. The boy would survive here.

Simon fingered the small tattoo on his neck. They had protected him once. Now, they would do the same for his last son while he tried to find a way to rescue the captives. Simon stared at the Pruett property as they passed it. With their help, he might even be able to build a different future–one where the Network no longer existed and men were free. *I’m betting on them with everything I have. I just hope it will be enough.*

“Those are our people! We have to help them!”

The man tightened his grip. “We’re not ready to fight the Network, son. We have to build a haven and learn to survive on our own. We’ve been cared for our entire lives.”

“We were slaves!” the boy refuted.

“And now we’re fugitives. I’m not sorry. Brothel work is too bloody.”

The riders had hit the main street now. The boy clenched his fists. “There won’t be enough of us left to fight for freedom if we wait!”

Simon sighed wearily. “I worry about that, too, but without a safe zone or a way to get through the dome, we won’t win.”

“We’re going to try anyway, right?” the boy asked, voice breaking. “To free them all?”

“Yes. I’ll go south or west, and search. There has to be somewhere we can hide and learn to fight.”

“We have to hurry. This yearly roundup is wiping us out. We have to do something for them!”

“We will. We’re not the only ones who want this. There are still a few strong families left.”

“You mean the Pruetts, the reason we came here?”

“Yes. In the future, they’ll be powerful allies.”

“How do we get in with them? They work for the council.”

The clever man scanned his naïve son. “We’ll use the games…and you.”

The boy realized his father had plans, but he refused to let new anger enter his heart over it. He didn’t have room for more. “What are you making me do this time?”

Simon dropped his hand. “Something dear to the Pruetts has just been taken and there won’t be anything they can do about it for years–years you’ll have here to bond with them. In any way you can.”

“That’s why we’re here!” Baker shook with anger.. “You’re leaving me. Like you did to Cain before he was taken.”

Simon knocked him to the ground. “You mind your mouth!”

Baker climbed to his feet, once again corrected and full of seething hatred for all authority. “Am I the runaway or the service provider?”

“Both. There’s a reason that family has survived since the apocalypse. It may take a decade, but they always come for what’s theirs. They won’t expect a bill from you for a long time. Pruetts like to build up the favors and then cash them all in at once. When they do, be on their team.”

“Are they really that dangerous?” the boy asked sullenly.

“Yes. They never forget and they never forgive. They’re lethal. I want you to learn everything you can from them. The future depends on it.”

“Don’t we grow weaker while we wait?”

“We do, yes, but the future doesn’t need ashy fighters with no real spark left. It needs the next generations, *while* they’re burning, and that will take time.”

“What will you be doing while I live on the streets and sell my body to accomplish your goals?” Baker demanded, braced to take another blow for the insolence.

His father stiffened, timbre hard. “Gathering every slave I can find. By the time the Pruetts can help us, we’ll be ready for it.”

Baker grumbled, wiping his lip. “These people had better be something special. Not just anyone can fight the Network.”

“You’re right about that, boy. Come on. We’ll slip you into town now and meet with the orphanage owner. She buys boys your age and she’s now short two. The Ring will keep their attention on the Pruetts, like you should.”

Baker dutifully followed his father. At some point, there would come a time when he wouldn’t have to obey and the child was already looking forward to slaying all of his demons–including the one taking him into Pruett Town to be sold.

**Deleted Scene #2**

**1**

Candice tossed restlessly in the bed, nightmares not frightening, but still ugly.

*Bang!*

Outside, a lightning storm had begun. The loud strikes were rattling the complex.

Daniel tapped on the door. “Can I come in?”

Candice sat up with shadowy images of blood still spilling behind her lids. “Yes.”

He had stripped down to the trousers she’d brought, a size too large. Her gaze went to that bare skin. She wanted him and it wasn’t all from the disease. He was beautifully built.

“Are you okay?” she asked. His face was full of fear that was almost desperate. He didn’t like to be alone during storms or maybe not at all. Candice cursed herself for not thinking of it. During his *stay* with the Network, he had probably been around other males at all times.

“I’d be where you are,” Daniel answered in a rush.

*Hunger*. It took Candice by surprise so quickly that she couldn’t speak. She forced a curt gesture, trying to recover.

The bed dipped under his weight as he lay down.

A minute later, Candice was back under the edge of sleep, certain it would be more restful with him at her hip.

Daniel waited until she was snoring softly and then inched onto his side to run his curious gaze over her exposed skin. Like most changelings, Candice didn’t use a blanket. The inner heat was more than enough to keep her warm. Studying her would keep him from waking her with his groans as the storm grew worse. Daniel hated loud noises, always had.

“Stop...”

Thinking she meant him, Daniel quickly put his head down before realizing she was still asleep. Fear of her was something that he couldn’t help. The lust in those eyes implied she liked blood–spilling it and seeing it–and as the winner, she had control. He’d heard of slaves who were taken from their owners, but that was only when the male had connections to those in authority. Daniel had none. If he made a claim of abuse, it would be ignored. The Network wanted Candice out of here. Even *he* felt that. They wouldn’t keep her around to investigate the claims of a slave.

*Crack!*

Daniel jumped, wondering what had been hit. Not the games complex with the rubber-like roof, but close enough for fire to be a concern. Daniel told himself those running this awful place were aware of the danger. After the incident where half a cell of bachelors had burned to death, there was now constant weather monitoring by Den Mothers. New Network City had lost a hundred citizens to the blaze, but only the rare males had been cried for by the public.

*Crash!*

Daniel yawned, then stilled, not wanting her to wake. He didn’t think he would be able to... Seconds later he was drifting, unconsciously comforted by the presence of his new protector.

**2**

Candice snapped awake in the darkness, instantly alert.

The shadow by the door froze.

Outside, thunder rumbled.

“As you were.”

Daniel went, but Candice didn’t shut her eyes. Light rain was still drumming against the complex in hard drops of liquid acid that burned through anything except rubber and concrete. It only eroded those. Lightning flashed again, vivid blast glaring off the tinted window.

Something thumped against the building as the wind gusted. Candice watched Daniel scurry in as if he were being chased*. The storm sent him to me, not fear of being alone.*

*Crack!*

They both jumped at the next blast. Her lips curved. “Nature’s fury.”

His shadow paused, hesitating as thunder rolled. “I know.”

Candice wondered if he would have the courage to rejoin her in the bed. If he didn’t, she would insist. As Daniel finally came toward her, Candice studied him without violent need, but when his weight dipped the bed, it sent a curl of desire through her.

He settled onto his side, and the storm, as if responding to her lust, intensified.

*Crack! Booomm!*

Daniel flinched at the brilliant burst.

Candice shifted to be ready for the next hit. While she waited, she sent pink sight over his body. Lean and hard, he was made to survive in this harsh world and to produce children. Her lips stretched harshly, glad he was facing away from her. In time, she would have all he could give.

*Bam!*

Daniel jumped again and Candice caught him with her palm before he could roll against her.

He immediately froze.

She tugged on his arm, willing the weather to help. “Come here.”

Silence… *Crack!*

He shifted, sliding his big body along her hip.

Candice ducked under his arm. Her cheek went to his tense chest, groaning in bliss as his scent filled her nose.

It took Daniel a while to realize she wanted to be held and even longer for him to slide an arm around that black clad waist. It made him lean fully against her, and drew a sharp intake of air that sent blood rushing through his body.

“This is nice.” Her breath whispered along his chest.

Daniel wondered if she knew there were freckles on her nose from sun exposure or that her hair glinted with blue tints in the flickering storm. He wanted to embrace her warm body, to give her the relief she wasn’t asking for, but he was a coward. She only came to his chin, but she towered over him with her muscular arms and her careful control.

*Crash! Bang!*

He tensed again.

“Easy.” Her hand rose to stroke the bare skin of his arm.

He trembled under her touch. Lightning flashed, then darkness. What would she do now? Was this the time? Fear blossomed in his throat.

Pushing her control, Candice allowed her thumb to brush his shoulder, seeing the next flash through red tints. His skin was hot, smooth, and hard against hers. She swept a light nail over his neck, shuddering. Not certain how far she might go, Candice eased onto one arm to look at him. She waited for the next flash before moving again, letting him view her face. It was only fair to know when you were playing with fire.

*Crack!*

The flare of light was short, but Candice saw his face fill with as much desire as worry. She leaned down. “Kiss me?”

Candice was unprepared for the way he lunged forward, rolling them over. His mouth crushed hers, demanding, and filled with need that matched her own. His scent rushed over Candice again, musky and sharp. She moaned.

When her lips parted, Daniel dipped in to taste her, body tight. Each sensation was intoxicating–her tremble, the sensation of her nails digging in to make shallow grooves down his shoulder. Daniel dipped into her again, licking. *So sweet!* Without much thought, he held her hip with a big hand and thrust against her.

Candice shuddered again, control gone.

*Crack!*

Her eyes flickered in the light. At first, Candice thought the change was what she was seeing. Then she realized it was blood.

Daniel felt her withdraw and nervously tried to hold them in place. “I’m fine.”

Candice broke his grip easily, moving from the bed to switch on a light. Blood had already stained numerous places on the sheet, dripping from nail grooves in his chest and shoulders. Two of them were oozing freely.

“Why didn’t you say something?!” Candice hadn’t even known she was hurting him.

“I’m sorry.” His voice trembled, full of confusion. “I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

Candice glared. “Now you do!” She saw the nail marks darken with fresh blood as he stood. “Tell me *before* you bleed!”

“Yes, Candice.” It was an order received.

Her brow lifted. “Do you need help with it?”

“No!” Daniel cringed at the thought of calling a medico. “I’ve got it.”

He hurried to the washroom as Candice berated herself. She’d drawn his blood. That could never happen again.

Daniel wore a white shirt when he returned. He was trying to blend the bandage in so she didn’t notice it as much, but that only made her hunting gaze narrow in on it harder. She was a real threat to him, even for a lingering kiss. If she couldn’t learn to control this fire, he would have to be sent away for his own safety.

**Deleted Scene #3**

(This is from the very first edition, where the book was in the first person pov.)

**Daniel**

I knew what she was thinking. I had only belonged to her for a day, but I knew. She wasn’t going to get close to me again, not until she could be sure I wouldn’t be hurt. There should have been great relief, but all I could feel was crushing disappointment. I’d just lost something special without knowing what it was.

“I’m sorry, Daniel.”

It stung her, the changeling, to say that to me, and my own concern rushed out amid a stiff jumble of secrets that I didn’t want her to know. “It’s only scratches. Please don’t send me back. I’ll be more careful.”

**Candice**

But he wasn’t being that now. The sound of his begging was sending flames into my eyes to war with the regret. There were ways… “I’ll think on it.”

He nodded, headed for the bed, and I allowed it, telling myself I could do this much without hurting him. I wasn’t sure I believed it, but later, when he rolled against me in his sleep, I was able to relax in his embrace by remembering the way he’d taken control and smothered the fire. It was something even Baker, my lover, hadn’t been able to do for me, and I drifted off knowing the future now held hope.

**Daniel**

I hadn’t wanted her to stop.

It was a shock to realize, and not even the storm’s fury broke through the delighted haze. I wanted her. Hidden by the change, she might be exactly what I’d been hoping for. The urge to force her into taking me was another surprise, especially since it wasn’t being used as a defense. I wasn’t trying to soothe her anger, only her pain. How had I come to care for her in only one day?

I knew her. That explained it, but I couldn’t place her. I thought about her reaction to hurting me. Had I found my loving owner? I would know for sure when we mated, but I was also watching for those other things I needed. Patience, retraining, compassion. It was a lot to ask and I drifted off while hoping my new master was up to that challenge.

**Candice**

Instead of the instant fear when he woke, Daniel met me with a question I didn’t want to answer.

“Why are you waiting?”

There were too many reasons to list them all, but only one mattered.

“Is it because I don’t remember anything?”

I winced at his accuracy, and felt him tense. “Yes.”

“You know it doesn’t matter?”

“Yes, it does.”

He wanted to push. I willed him to.

“Please tell me?”

I sighed. He’d pushed, but too easily. I denied him access to my inner thoughts. “I worry for your safety.”

So did he, I was sure. The change would take over, and I was trying to build immunity first.

“It’s a risk I’d take!”

*Daniel’s tempting me*, I realized in surprise. I had hoped he might relax a bit without it hanging over his head, but his tone! It said he feared I didn’t really want him, that I might cast him out if we weren’t bonded fully. Would he admit it? Did I need him to?

No. I only needed him to be sure it was what he wanted and after a single day together in the winner’s apartment, there was no way he could be. It was too soon. I started to move from the bed, pain flashing up my spine. And then he tackled me.

We landed with him on top, between my spread legs. I slammed my eyes shut and tried not to let his actions anger me, or trigger anything, but I was unprepared for how far he’d chosen to go.

“There are ways, changeling!”

Again, he snapped my control like it had never existed.

With a fast move, I rolled him under me, straddling those lean hips until I could feel his hard heat. And then I rocked. Head buried against his chest, I pleased myself on his body, groaning and shuddering as he held still and let me have my way. He would learn I was no one to push.

My climax tore through and I cried out in release, body shattering in weak pleasure. It would hold me for a bit and give Daniel time to think.

I could feel his excitement as he stayed still under me, but I rose indifferently and headed for the washroom. “You’re right. There are ways.”

I left him lying there, hating the embarrassment I was causing, but confident in my plans. He had to obey. Anything else might get him killed.

**Daniel**

I stayed still until I thought she was busy, and then took myself in hand. I’d been sure she would follow through and my body was on fire for it. Mentally though, I was relieved, even when I felt her return in time to observe me buck in my own grip and explode.

I opened my eyes to see solid red orbs staring back.

“That would have done it.” She turned back toward the washroom.

I stored the information for next time. I didn’t understand why she hadn’t used a set of cuffs if she was that worried about my safety, but I wasn’t brave enough to call her on it. However, I was determined to be hers. The Network wouldn’t take me back if this didn’t work out; they never gave away the same bachelor twice. I would be sold to another changeling, and through the last hours, I’d made my choice. Candice didn’t want me hurt, I didn’t need drugs to please her, and she was deadly. There was no one else I’d be safer with once we were bonded. I just had to survive it.

# Book Two

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Copyright Book 2

**Changeling Winds**

Book Two

by

Angela White

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Chapter One

**A Change in the Wind**

**1**

***“W****elcome to the Network complex. Please place your hand on the scanner.”*

“Is it her?”

“Is she the one? She looks like them. She’s covered in tattoos.”

*“Processing...”*

“This part takes so long!”

The other three bachelors glared at the fourth man for being too loud. If not for the hall of waiting changelings and all their noises, the sound might have carried. The bachelors were out of their cells without permission, watching players sign in for the games. If they were caught, they would be punished.

A fifth rebel bachelor ignored them all, listening for the computer response. The short, stocky woman signing in right now was a Pruett. Jason knew it, but he still needed it confirmed. Sneaking down here had been his idea.

*“Welcome to New Network City, Angelica Pruett. Please place your ID card into the slot and choose your game.”*

“It is her!”

“Even the other beasts are scared of her. Look how they’re staying away. She’s too dangerous. Pick someone else.”

Again, Jason ignored his fellow captives to study Angelica. The Network was cracking down again. They would only have one chance to get this right, but Jason had other things hanging over him. To pin his hopes on this lethal changeling, he had to be positive she was like her cousin. He needed her to be honorable.

*“Confirm your choice...”*

Angelica pushed the button and spun around, mirroring her cousin’s gloating sneer.

The women waiting around her frowned or subtly put space between them, but it didn’t frighten Jason. Unlike the other bachelors, he wasn’t searching for someone to love him.

*“Please report to the main stage by 5:30. Those not signed in will be disbarred from this episode and fined. Remember, there is no battling until the official start at sunrise.”*

There was a short pause, and then an airy chime echoed as the gates at four of the five arched entrances slid to the side. From what Jason knew, that far left entry never opened to the public. It led back here, to an employee entrance that was usually deserted unless the changelings crammed into the reception hall snapped and guards needed to reach the area. Jason and the other prizes had studied the matches for months now, waiting and hoping for the right changeling to come through. Candice had been the perfect candidate, but she’d been so violent that the other bachelors had refused to try getting her attention. This time, Jason was getting out, no matter what it took.

Casting wary glances at each other, the players began to exit the wide-pillared reception hall, but Angelica waited, letting the rounded antechamber empty.

It would have been safer to travel the corridors in the pack where the guards would be the thickest, but Jason sensed she was waiting for stragglers. Her need to know all of her competitors was a comfort to the secret rebel. To help him, she definitely had to be careful. So did he.

Jason scanned the empty room that he and the others were spying from, confirming their safety. He didn’t like some of the slaves here in the Network complex, but he loved them all because they went through hell together. Their illegal book and magazine collection held stories of men in the past who’d fought together and been bonded like family. Jason believed captives also felt that. A fight for survival, no matter the enemy, was powerful.

“Hey, isn’t that the Bush sisters?” one of the males whispered. The hall was mostly empty now and sounds would carry easier.

Jason inspected the family in disgust. The trio had once been powerful in their wealth, but they were the kind who wore a pair of quartz gravity boots once and threw them out instead of donating them. They were the kind who flocked to food shelters to dole out holiday meals, but threw orphan girls off their stoops during the rest of the year. They were the kind who would do anything, pay anything, to get what they wanted.

Jason almost knew the last female to select the Bachelor Battles game. Chelsea Bush’s father had been held here for a few days after he’d been caught aiding a group of rebels who missed the train ambush. After a search of their massive home, the family had been charged with ten violations of the gravest laws. The sentence for their mother, the legal ruler of their household, had been death. The father had been sold to Rankin. He hadn’t lasted long. His death had been marked as a severe cold, but Jason knew better. Rankin liked to starve her victims.

The sisters were outcasts now, and poverty stricken from the heavy fines. They’d probably been sent to regain favor and refill their credits. It was a final deal for the families and a very lucrative scheme for their rulers, who would use the famous sacrifices to keep the games popular. There had been a few recent calls from foreign elements brought in for the shows to have the violent programs outlawed and a more fair system of male distribution created. Few citizens were listening to the protestors, and the protestors didn’t stay alive long, so Jason hadn’t thought the Network was feeling pressured enough to do something this drastic to secure the future of their games.

Angelica stayed in the wide hall until every contestant had checked in, and the main doors slammed shut, locking. No one would come in or out of this section of the complex until the episode was over.

She paused at the archway, turning back. *Someone’s watching me.*

Her stare seemed to penetrate the walls, making the AWOL bachelors freeze in near panic. Angelica squinted as though she knew someone was there. Maybe she did.

The prizes fled their spy room, except Jason. He lingered even after Angelica strode down the photo-lined corridor to enter the first hall of player flats. He was the top Defender’s favorite toy. If caught roaming, Rankin would punish him with the lack of food, but he’d gotten used to that over his years in this complex. He wasn’t resuming his proper place until he had to. *Every second of freedom I can steal is precious.*

**2**

Angelica knew which way to go in the drafty halls, unlike some of the changelings who were still wandering around in search of their flat. She was pleased to be next to the cubicle where her cousin Candice had been during her week of battles. Angelica had been here then. She’d been kidnapped from another corridor. That had been the last straw. She’d signed up the same day she was rescued, picking the new rush, double-or-nothing version of the show that required players to promise not to withdraw from any matches. If she won, she would receive a bachelor and a nice chunk of bonus cash. If she lost, her bank accounts and property would belong to the Network. Angelica was worth almost a million UDs now, money that had been hard earned, but she hadn’t hesitated over the choice. It was immaterial compared to the murders she was about to commit.

*Fun.* Unlike her fearsome cousin or her wild sister, Angelica wasn’t hard and dangerous. Yeah, she had a skill for picking out weaknesses and yeah, she had a trick or two that they’d been perfecting over the years, but what mattered was nerve. Did she have enough sand to do this now that she knew her worries on the ride here were valid? Not all of the matches were a given.

Angelica slung her kit onto the chipped green counter of her flat while listening to that angry mental voice. Until the sunrise chime, she was allowed to withdraw, though she would pay a large fine. *Should I get out now? Can I live with myself if I tap out?*

Angelica scowled bitterly. *No.*

Even without the family reputation to live up to, or the need for information to pass to the rebel males, there was still the cold bed waiting for her return–the painfully empty bed. The change had come and turned her into something else, something that hungered and burned endlessly. She didn’t want any of those frightened bachelors, but she *needed* one. Even death would be better than this constant agony. She had come here to earn one or the other.

Angelica clicked on the viewing screen in the flat in time to hear the announcer explaining the new rules that had been implemented since Candice won. She listened while having a fast meal of pemmican. Besides providing fourteen females to kill instead of nine, unlimited visits with the prizes were now included in the competition. The world was enjoying the new, intimate moments almost as much as they did the fighting. It drove up the ratings when replayed, as would each violent cage match that Angelica needed to survive to earn the visits–all while dodging attempts by the other contestants to kill her while she slept. *More fun*.

Out of the mix, she had spotted two contestants who made her heat flare–partially by the way the crowd had parted so quickly for them. The first had been a tiny woman named Kim Lee. No more than 5’, she wore the Network logo on her bracelet, telling everyone she’d finished the Time Trials first. Angelica knew the small female was someone to be careful of. It was in her walk and her relaxed stance. It said she wasn’t scared of much, let alone any of the contestants in the hall. It was the same impression she’d given while they had raced in the final heat at the time trials. If not for that sharp Pruett intelligence, it would have been Angelica wearing that patch instead of Kim Lee. She had originally set out to get it, but realized she didn’t need the extra attention it would bring. Angelica had taken a dive and kept that Pruett mystery cloak around herself like an old friend. It would come off during her first match, when she revealed she was just as angry as her cousin.

The second contestant who’d drawn Angelica’s attention was of average height and weight, with just her dangerous, unreadable eyes to give away the lurking threat.Those eyes declared she’d come to win, but Angelica hadn’t backed down or flinched from that hard changeling glare the way others in the hall had.

Outside, arriving Mopars and horses were a constant noise as more citizens came in for different games, for a chance at the prizes. A rare few could afford to ride the Network train to their match, making the noises of the city loud enough to overpower the murmur of hundreds of voices in these thin flats. The braying of hellhounds and the cries of their victims were lounge music to changelings. A small explosive had been detonated in the eastern edge of the city yesterday and now, people were being questioned. Rebellion from any source was a growing threat to the hold their rulers had over everything. Innocent blood would decorate the streets until the guards got answers.

Four females that Angelica had already discounted were huddled nervously near the guards on the screen as the afternoon news report began. They were already having trouble with other players in the halls. Angelica grinned at them as she headed to The Block to complete the signup process. *I’m here. It’s not Candice this time. It’s my turn!*

All attention swung her way when Angelica entered the lavish lounge behind The Block. Some of the women saw her young age and light layer of scars and instantly discounted her despite the famous last name.

Angelica continued to give that impression, nodding politely at those who stared or glared. Of the latter group, there were half a dozen. They scanned her new cloak and perfectly calm expression, and recognized Angelica for what she was–a threat.

“Chelsea Bush!”

Not bothering to watch the graceful trio of sisters glide toward the velvet curtains, Angelica concentrated on discovering if any of the sturdy players lining these walls might really be able to kill her when the official chime sounded at dawn.

“Danielle Bush!”

Sighing inwardly at how long this would take, Angelica tried to narrow down a suspected weakness in each contestant. She thought of anything but the performance to come.

Ice had settled over Angelica by the time they announced the fourteenth fighter and summarized her skills. She exited the stage with a short glare.

Angelica recognized the woman as a diva gang member by her white clothes and braids. Candice had killed their leader during her game. *There’s the family name again, helping things along.* Angelica gave a short wave. “I don’t bite. Don’t be frightened.”

The woman fled the empty waiting room with a quick glower.

“And the last Contestant is...”

The moment stretched into eternity before the speaker blared again.

“Angelica Pruett!”

Angelica felt a hush come over the live audience of bachelors and viewers.

“From sisters to cousins, this is Angelica, the 18-year-old Pruett family tracker. As a member of one of the most brutal clans in the history of the games, I wonder what we can anticipate from this changeling teenager.”

Angelica walked forward. She was the third of her family to come through these curtains to claim a mate. Would she live up to expectations? What about the audience? What did they want most? A good show? For her to be as harsh as the other players hadn’t been? Angelica hoped both were true as she kept her gaze from straying to the small glass box at the top of the honeycomb-like complex. Before all was said and done, a Pruett might walk into that room, too.

Angelica emerged below the first cage where she would battle tomorrow, a bit stunned by the audience. The constantly shifting mob was already violently drunk and peppered with guards trying to strike them, repeatedly, into obedience. It wasn’t working.

Angelica came forward as her image flashed onto giant screens spread among the triangle-shaped walls. The tension thickened with each light step she took. Even the announcer was silent.

Angelica faced the cameras at the end of the stage. In this version of the game, the contestants were allowed to give a short statement. “I’m so happy to be here. I’m sure it’ll be a learning experience. Thanks soooo much to the Network!”

She’d memorized the exact tones of those who had come before her, so much that it was eerie. “I love the complex and I can’t wait to meet all the bachelors!”

Angelica’s sarcasm held the crowd still and silent until she snorted, making those in the front row jump. She pointed at the camera, gravelly voice dropping into a dangerous level. “The others are fluff, but you can bet your ass on a Pruett.”

She spun toward the curtains, pulling the string on her cloak to reveal netted cloth outlining her stocky body in thin nude strips. It was designed in the same spider web Candice had used for her match, except it was the color of skin and gave the impression that Angelica was naked.

Chaos erupted as catcalls and yells exploded from the crowd and drugged prizes.

The stunned announcer tried to recapture the moment and control the disorder with laughter. “Well, that is a Pruett butt!”

Another round of yells came in response.

Angelica didn’t have her cousin’s body of scars to be intimidating, though she did have a nice collection. For now, she still needed surprise, so she had chosen to forego showing her weapons. It was also Candice’s successful tactic. Her challengers had been so busy worrying over what weapons she might bring to the matches that they’d forgotten a Pruett didn’t need any.

When Angelica left The Block, the waiting room was empty. *Damn! Candice was ambushed as she left the stage. Why not me?*

Angelica sighed in disappointment, taking her starless ID card from the console before heading down the hall. *Maybe there’ll be an assassin in my flat.*

**3**

Angelica’s empty apartment held a long green couch, a green kitchenette, and a washing cubby with a single green towel and half a bar of melting soap. Their rulers didn’t care for comfort or cleanliness. She brushed dust from the chipped counter before setting her cooking kit there. These flats weren’t cleaned often, but at least there were no bloodstains on the walls. The small apartment was far from the digs that Angelica was used to, but her family’s wealth had brought her here. Unless you were a criminal, the entry fees were exorbitant and her parents hadn’t given their support. Angelica had been forced to use her share of the bounties she’d collected over the last two years. If she had been caught on the payroll before she was eighteen, the entire clan would have been arrested. Instead, Angelica had helped bring in a number of high-profile targets and earned her place, but it hadn’t mattered to her parents.

Despite all the successes, her parents doubted her ability to survive here. Angelica understood. Before the disease, she hadn’t been rebellious like Candice or even outspoken like her sister, Sam. She’d been *nice*. They didn’t understand. That part of her life was just a vague blur. All Angelica could think about, all she could feel now, was pain. And there was only one cure.

Angelica’s dreams the first night were foggy, shifting worries interrupted by wakeful periods where she sent pink eyes around the darkness, poised to react. She did that for hours, savoring every thirty minutes she was able to steal. Being a family tracker had toughened her up**.** The next few days would tell if it had been enough to keep her alive.

**4**

Angelica woke in time to hear the view screen in her flat click on, signaling the start of the episode. All over this floor, other changelings were being brought to alertness the same way. Their growls pleased Angelica. She didn’t mind rude awakenings and she preferred to be up early. Both were part of her job.

“Welcome to Round One of the Bachelor Battles! We will begin by choosing the Luck of the Draw contestant who will have three fights in a row. Viewers will vote on matchups as soon as we have a name.” The reporter paused for the required follow up. “The Network will pick a replacement if our Luck of the Draw winner is defeated. No other official fights are held during this time, but attacks and assassination attempts are, as always, encouraged.”

In the corner of the apartment, a platform rose from the floor and a thin control device slid out of the puke-green wall. *“Step onto the scanner and remain motionless.”*

The announcer tried to fill the time and keep the audience interested. “Contestants are now being evaluated by a computer designed specifically to determine which of our players has the best odds to win. It’s meant to take away the edge of the fittest, over those who’ve had less training. Their pictures and stats are now showing up.”

*“Please step off the scanner.”*

Thunder cracked outside the dome, sending a line of fuzz through the monitor that gave all the contestants an evil glare on the screen. Angelica’s was particularly menacing, pleasing her.

“We’ll have our Luck of the Draw fighter in a moment, but before that, a quick reminder on what our contestants can earn from their matches. Stars are given for each kill, high popularity, and by Network decision. Each star will gain the contestant a guard while in the halls and their flat, along with a fresh stock of weapons, food, and medical credits. Stars cannot be lost, but at the start of round two, they can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family. Okay, the results are ready. We’ll hit the button. Now, we’ll get the name when the timer counts down.”

The crowd on the screen was unruly despite the early hour, mirroring Angelica’s impatience. Tired guards marched into the mob with clubs.

It began to rain, making Angelica think of the trip waiting for her if she won. The dust storms currently raging across the Borderlands would be followed by a month of steady rain that killed more of those trying to survive there than even the pythons did during breeding season. At the height of the rains, the pythons placed their eggs in the ground, allowing them to populate the southern lands in staggering numbers as the eggs washed downstream during the floods. Angelica would become very intimate with that hostile land if she survived this game.

“Angelica Pruett!” the announcer shouted wildly.

*“You have been scheduled for a match in one hour. Please report to the main cage on time.”*

A small map flashed on the wall, but Angelica didn’t need it.

“Our Luck of the Draw contestant is little Angel Pruett! How’s that for a coincidence? Will this 18-year-old bounty hunter survive the first three matches like her cousin did? The computer thinks so. Wadda ya say, folks? Wanna place a bet or two? Booths are open!”

The crowd went wild, making the announcer wait to be heard.

“And the first contestant our bounty hunting changeling will fight is…the Diva Brawler!”

Angelica flipped the screen off. There was no way she was the most likely to win. Someone had tampered with the computer for this match. Candice had told her it was easily done, but Angelica had chosen to run it fairly. Obviously, someone had other plans. If she had allowed any of them to come, which she hadn’t, Angelica would have told her family that it was just the enemy covering both bases, but it was obvious that they wanted her dead. There was no way to mistake the feeling. *I’ve been marked.*

**5**

Interviews were done two ways. Angelica much preferred screen conversations that she could respond to from the privacy of her booger-green flat. The other way required her to show up on the press floor. It meant padding through the cubicles while enduring shouted questions as she searched for the reporter that she was supposed to answer. It was like a circus. She’d been to one of those rare events as a child and hated it.

As Angelica shoved through the door, all the reporters in the long hall of smoky, hutch-like setups fell silent…and then they swarmed her.

Behind the shouting throng, a single reporter remained in front of her hooch. When she held up her mike, Angelica pushed that way. As she went, the bounty hunter wasn’t gentle.

After two reporters went sliding roughly across the slick, ashy floor, the rest gave her space, but they still hurtled questions like spit.

“Has the…”

“Did you…”

“How long...”

Angelica reached her reporter and spun around with pink eyes. She was gratified when the others all flinched back. “Get lost!” She let red irises come to the front, marveling at her on-the-edge control.

They resumed their places with fearful stares and twitchy glares. Angelica remembered the way Candice had used them while she was here, intimidated them. Maybe they could be put to use for her, as well.

Angelica’s reporter hadn’t rushed over, but she could feel the woman hungrily memorizing every move she made. The reporter had a sharp smirk, knowing she and her toga clad body got the Pruett first. Angelica instantly disliked her.

Toga woman gestured her inside, arrogantly presenting her back as if she held no fear.

*I can change that.* Angelica sank down into the uncomfortable chair, noting guards standing stiffly in the corners. When Candice had been here, the interviews were done on the main stage. After her cousin’s encounters, their rulers had changed it to the prepping floor and made enemies among the Fourth Estate. These TV-minded gals needed to be in the spotlight to be satisfied. Angelica planned to keep that in mind as she dealt with them.

“Ready?”

Despite the reporter’s reasonable tone, Angelica didn’t expect this to be anything like a calm chat. “You know it.”

It was hard to remember some things, especially when they’d never meant much to her anyway, but the first interview was uncomfortable as she struggled to walk the line between the new and old Angelica–the good and the evil. She was trying hard to give a harmless impression so when she let it out, when she snatched the Diva by the throat, surprise would give her a first easy win. Before the change, snarky comments and snide remarks were ignored, shrugged off. Now, they were a direct challenge and if not for the steady blink of the camera light to concentrate on, Angelica thought she may have exploded before the first match.

“So, we have Angel Pruett here with us…”

Angelica recognized that voice now as the reporter from her wall screen (*strike two!*) and made another mental note to handle it.

“As you all know by now, Angelica’s cousin is suspected of being a rebel sympathizer, but I think Angelica wants the world to know she doesn’t share that lawless attitude. What better way to uphold the family honor than to come here, right? Let’s give her a big welcome.”

After the applause and shouts, the smirking reporter went through questions about her family and then the competition. Angelica assumed she answered as the other players had.

“How does it feel to be related to such brutal women?”

“Good.”

“Are you trying to prove that you belong in the family?”

“I’m trying to get laid.”

A pause and a frown. *Hmm…* “You’re ranked ninth at the moment. Does that worry you?”

“Yeah, it’s what keeps me up at night.”

There was a longer pause to her scorn, and a deeper scowl that Angelica was betting she could make worse. The reporter wore fine, caressing fibers with stunning style and no wind resistance, making the bounty hunter snort at the mental picture of her in the real world. Without the dome, these soft people would freeze in their elegant attire and indifferent social mindsets.

“Why did you enter the games?”

“Sex and blood.”

“No, really.”

“Yes, really.” She’d been right. The scowl nearly encompassed the reporter’s face now.

“The change! Does the anger make it hard to focus?”

“Yes, especially when I’m forced to answer stupid questions.” Then again, maybe her tones weren’t so similar. Maybe she was a bit faster, a bit sharper than the others had been. Angelica wouldn’t know until the rankings came out. She needed to jump a level every day to keep a full stock of food and medical credits.

“What do you think about your odds of winning a prize?”

Angelica couldn’t help herself. She was going to like continuing her cousin’s traditions. “Better than yours, I’d guess, since you spend your day in a chair instead of a cage.”

The reporter flushed. Not a gentle rise of color, but a bloom of red fury, and again, Angelica couldn’t help herself. She grinned.

Chapter Two

**The Bachelors**

**1**

**“W**elcome to the first match of this week’s episode!”

Blue lights flashed over the arena as the crowd roared. The fighting cage was a 12’ x 12’ dome with a fence frame and dozens of small, sturdy cameras. To reach it, Angelica had to come down the same fenced in walkway that Candice had strolled. She tried hard to emulate her cousin’s unshakable façade. Candice had reminded her of two things before they split up. The first was to react to each situation exactly as it deserved, which had always been necessary when training with Candice, but the second piece of advice would be most helpful.

*“Use the media. Spend the interviews blending the old and the new into something on the edge. Then set it loose in the cage.”*

Angelica slid her cloak to the floor as she entered the ring. Still wearing the netted outfit from the introduction, it made even her opponent gape and gave her the instant advantage. Angelica was the unknown, the high odds wild card, and she met the Diva in the center with fury burning in her gut.

The brawler came forward like a boxer when the gate slid down. Angelica was tempted to duke it out. She excelled at hand-to-hand combat, but she couldn’t wait. She needed blood.

The Diva rushed forward, swinging.

Angelica ducked, leaning in to plunge her blade deep into the Diva’s unprotected belly. She ripped upward as she spun, wrist blade slashing again.

The huddler’s hands came up to stop the gaping flood of crimson now streaming from her neck.

“Match to Pruett!”

The crowd roared, some screaming her name.

Angelica inhaled deeply, struggling not to slice the body again. She already loved it here in this small ring of death. Unlike her cousin, Angelica felt no guilt. During the worst moments of the disease, she believed spilling blood was what she had been put on the earth to do and she did it well.

Angelica let the body hit the mat, waiting to let the tension thicken before giving the audience what they expected.

Her grin was ugly.

So was their roar.

**2**

Angelica’s first two battles had been scheduled back-to-back. She left her bloody clothes on as she traveled the mostly empty halls that displayed thousands of images of females who had suffered through these games, shown at their worst moments. The Network surrounded their citizens with violence. There was a different arena-like cage set up for each of their games. The episodes with multiple matches alternated between the unused cages to allow for cleanup, Angelica assumed. She found it all very orderly and awful. They kept the death flowing, with no pause for even the removal of bodies to be caught on camera and frowned over.

No one shrank from her yet as she sauntered along the hall. She only had one star, one menacing guard, but the frowns of those she passed implied they’d soon be researching details from the safety of their wall screens.

Angelica pushed the entry gate open and strode down the walkway, stepping into the identical cage without sympathy for the bone thin female. It was one of the four huddlers. Her panicked brown eyes and those shaking, unflawed hands declared she wasn’t a changeling, but Angelica tightened her control. She would not allow compassion to ghost her. She was a Pruett. *We aren’t that weak.*

“Cage Match Two!”

The dividing bar went down, and Angelica came forward as the blue lights glinted blindingly.

The huddler sensed her lack of compassion the instant they locked gazes. Huddler flinched toward the withdraw rope.

*No mercy!* Angelica lunged forward and slammed her against the cage.

“Nooo!”

Bloodlust in control, Angelica sank her teeth deep into the huddler’s neck. Her growl of delight was overpowered by the loudspeaker and screams from the live audience.

Blood squirted, spraying crimson to complement her eyes.

“Match to Pruett!”

Angelica let the warm body fall as she pulled her teeth in, now a hideous mess. She waited for the crowd to quiet, knowing this image would grace the front of every daily edition across their nuclear-torn world. The thought drew a harsh smirk.

The crowd thundered approval. “Pruett! Pruett! Pruett!”

On her way out of the cage, Angelica slid her knife into the air and cut the withdraw rope. She wanted it clear that she would give no quarter.

The screams grew louder, hungrier at her action. Laying low had been the plan, but that wasn’t possible now. She already lusted for the legal violence of the next match too much to pretend anything else.

**3**

For some reason, Angelica had three guards when she entered the halls and three flickering, golden stars on her ID card. She went to the bachelor cells with only a fast wipe of her sleeve over her face. It was better that the males saw the Angelica who basked in the blood of her opponent. The male she chose would have to be able to accept it. Once *changed*, there was no going back.

Her security trio waited outside the cells.

Angelica didn’t miss them. The bachelor dorm was only open to one contestant at a time to prevent injury to the valuable prizes. As far as she knew that rule hadn’t been broken in the history of the games.

Angelica studied the blue haired female standing stiffly by a chair, clipboard in hand. The woman was the supervising Den Mother. Her bushy brows and pox-marked skin was hard to read, but her body language implied she was fond of her charges.

The woman saw who it was and waved at the other Den Mothers to come back from break early. Then she nodded to Angelica. “You have one hour.”

Angelica wondered how deep the bond was between these big guards and the prizes. Did they depend on the women for everything? She thought the answer was yes and that meant the one she chose would need the same support. The Network trained them to obey and to please, not to think. *Daniel is the exception to that rule.*

There were three more enormous Den Mothers lurking in the large flat and each of them scrutinized her like the threat she was. They wore the usual uniform of silver on black, but each hairdo was a different, vivid color that might have made Angelica snicker if not for knowing it was how the males told them apart. Names were not a big thing here, where the faces changed weekly.

As she swept cuddle chairs and candlelight, Angelica identified the smell littering the air. *Italian food*. She grimaced, thinking of the blood drying on her skin, but she didn’t wash. To do so now would be taken as a sign of weakness to those viewing them live, but without sound.

Unlike her flat, the bachelor cells were neat and clean. Half the reception hall was taken up by a long table with fifteen settings. On this wide table were tall, white candles and red cloth napkins in front of highbacked chairs*. Probably softer than anything my ass has ever sat on.*

The other half was a complement to the dining area. There were long silver and black curtains, and small pillows to match the elegant red and black sofas. A number of floor bound reading lamps threw a gentle glow over the room, but as a final addition, there was an enormous stone fireplace in the far corner, keeping the chill away from the valuable males. It was cozy. She assumed their rulers liked the idea of the world believing these men were pampered, but she had been at Stone Mountain. She had spent time among Baker’s escaped males. She knew better.

“Evan, Christen, Alec, Mike.”

Angelica didn’t bother to learn their names as they were introduced, instead judging their reaction to her as they came out.

*Fear. Worry. Fear. Fear. Near panic.* Almost all of them reacted badly, some freezing in their practiced entry as they spotted her. Even the man with the purple stripe in his hair was afraid of her and he was normally an animal games prize. Candice had told her those men were supposed to be harder, able to take more abuse. Angelica narrowed in on one standing behind the others, drawn by shiny black hair draped over thick shoulders. That one wasn’t wearing a cloak of fear.

The bachelor met her searching study with a slight lift of his chin. Wide chest, thick arms, big hands resting against lean hips… The image of being touched by those big fingers lit her up like a torch.

He dropped his head and the spell broke, heat receding. Interesting. Would the rest of them make her experience that with only a look?

The males were pretty. Their pleasing facades and flowing, black cloaks reminded her of the sexless dolls she had played with as a child. If not for their stiff stances and terrified expressions, they might as well have been. Was there no real spark in these guys? No hidden desires?

The main Den Mother was eager to get this over with. “May they sit?”

“Have them remove their clothes.” Angelica observed reactions.

More fear, touches of panic, and then finally, a bit of reluctance, the mother of rebellion. It came from the male she’d already noticed.

“What?”

Angelica ignored the woman. “Remove your cloaks.”

The men complied without argument, revealing shirts tucked neatly into soft trousers that she judged to be new by the way the men fidgeted as they undressed for her.

*Bam!*

Lightning struck outside the covered windows. Most of the bachelors flinched violently. Candy had told her about Daniel’s fear of the weather. It came from not wanting to burn to death like others here had.

Another Den Mother spoke quietly from nearby. “‘Tis just a storm. We’re monitoring.”

Her words had an instant, calming effect.

Angelica vowed to remember to do that for her mate when the weather was bad. She didn’t have many fears, but for those that existed, she wanted comfort while conquering. She planned to extend the same courtesy to her prize. “Leave us.”

Not a request, all but the blue haired Den Mother disappeared.

The woman thought she wanted to take a stand on it. Angelica sighed. She hadn’t planned on a third match today, but she would be alone with these men or thrown out–one of the two.

Angelica padded her way and was satisfied when the woman immediately retreated. She jerked a hand. “Go, while you can.”

Blue mother fled.

Angelica concentrated, trying to control the rage. She didn’t want the bachelors to be terrified of her. She needed to be welcome.

She rotated to find all of the men as far from her as they could get, faces lined up in panicked rows. She locked down on her disappointment and gestured toward the long table. “Let’s eat.”

The last one to sit, Angelica lingered, letting her hunting instincts send her in the right direction. It was the same skill she used on runs and she employed it now to single out a few of the more promising from the herd. Her need was rising fast in the tension. What would it be like to love one of them? To hold them during the cold, painful nights?

Angelica let the Pruett come forward. She sniffed the air like an animal.

Sweet flowers and heavy cologne were strongest, but one of them had a thick, coppery scent that pulled her like blood. Another was throwing off odors of sugar and sulfur. Those last two smells would please her senses. What about their attitudes?

Most of them were sitting perfectly straight in their neat clothes, but two had unfastened the top buttons of their shirts, leaving crooked ties and a slightly off-center impression. She liked that.

Chins were down, eyes submissive…except a few of them were stealing subtle glances of confused fear and hope. It was so tempting to have all those ways to relieve this fire now sitting docilely at her fingertips. If only one of them would show a spark!

The males relaxed when the Den Mothers came out carrying heavily laden trays. The heaping bowls of pasta and meat filled the air with hunger, but the men waited to be given permission.

*Slaves.* Angelica waved a filthy hand. “Eat.” She dug into her bowl and enjoyed the sweet milk being served with it. Hard to come by, real milk was a treat. She pretended the stains her bloody hands and clothes left on the table and chair were from the meal.

The men ate quietly, carefully, eyes darting to hers in brief seconds of concern.

Angelica did her best to ignore them at first, but she observed every move, every expression. *They’re too thin.* Perhaps the generous meal was for the benefit of the cameras? Were they not fed properly unless on display? Anything was possible in this apocalyptic hell.

The guy on her right, seat subtly inched away, was adorable. Perfect teeth, clear skin, and his smell! Like a fresh rose, but meatier. Aware of her attention, he was precise in his movements so he didn’t trigger her instinct to hunt. Angelica knew aggression was erased in slaves by denying them testosterone. She wondered if the same was true of the prizes. According to the Network, these males were pure of chemicals, and felt privileged to be here where each week brought the hope of a kind owner.

*And then there’s me*. She smothered a Candice-like grin at the notion and continued. To the right of pristine male, were three more pretty faces–two blonds and a sexy brunette with stunning gray eyes. He was the one who had lifted his chin to her. Next to those were more perfection–seven unblemished profiles. *What do they do with the ugly ones?* There certainly weren’t any of those here.

She turned to the man on her left. Their curious gazes met; he flushed. He’d been ogling her nearly naked body. *Sweet!* She had to hide yet another snarling grin. The change was zinging her hormones now, opening the flood valves. Some women snapped when it became too much, attacking before the drugs could take effect. Because of the disease, men were now the ones afraid to submit and be hurt or even killed. Full of these thoughts, shivers of need slid up her thighs to curl around her spine in a surge of agony. Angelica’s grip tightened on the table. *Damn!*

The males tensed, sensing her reaction.

Angelica forced a bite of food into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. *Control.*

After another minute of breathing calmly, Angelica was ready to take it a step further, testing herself. Part of the reason for slaves to be so dependent on the Den Mothers was that it eliminated the need for them to speak. The sound of a male voice was like a match to kindling.

“I have questions.”

Angelica’s declaration sent a fresh wave of tension through the group, causing them to glance at each other for protection. None of them spoke.

She took another drink of the sweet milk, then gently picked up her fork. “Do you sing?”

*“Yes. We all sing.”*

The confusing jumble hit her ears, making Angelica blink. She scanned the table. She hadn’t been positive any of them had the courage to respond, not even the one she’d caught ogling her, and so it was something of a surprise that *all* of them had answered, at the same time.

She motioned. “Do it again.”

They were confused, but dutifully echoed themselves.

*“Yes, we all sing.”*

Slightly out of harmony this time, Angelica was able to understand the illusion that had distracted her. It was a defense they’d obviously developed to temper changeling reactions to their voices. *Clever*. She could order them not to do it, put a stop to each thin shield they tried to employ, but why would she? She liked games. Wasn’t she a contestant in one even now? Angelica grinned.

The males shrank away.

Angelica reached for her cup instead of snapping her teeth at them like the need was advising. *It would feel sooo good to lose control!*

Angelica shook her head at the green haired Den Mother, glad when she and her shit-shaded dreadlocks retreated to resume hovering in the shadows of the next room. *Wise,* Angelica thought. *I’m on the edge.*

She took a last bite, savoring the meal.

The bachelors resumed their own barely touched bowls. Not wanting them to miss the good food, Angelica lingered at the table, letting them have their fill as she kept testing, pushing them and herself. “Are you all registered breeders?” They couldn’t answer that question as one. She braced.

“I am.”

The pristine man on her right sounded ashamed, but Angelica couldn’t help his pain. She was in shock at the waves of change spiraling through her. *So beautiful!* Like a bell, the rolling tone of his voice slid into her guts and twisted the need, sending a vicious flare of lust through her body. Angelica shivered, slamming her eyes shut. If she focused on him right now, *so close!* she would be lost.

*Breathe. In and out*. And she could, a bit, because of the fear. It was so thick that she could smell it radiating from his perfect body. Angelica inhaled deeper of it. *Better*. It bothered her for him to be so scared.

In. Out. *Much better.* She eased her grip on the fork as she braced again–harder this time. “Who else?”

The males shared twitchy, darting glances up and down the table in surprise.

“I am.”

“So am I.”

Seated across the table, both of their voices pierced her and then sank into that bubbling mix and caught fire. But she’d been ready this time. It was easier to handle. “Anyone else?”

There was silence where she could feel them all wondering if that now made those three safe or more wanted. “I am not.”

Her words sent mutters around the table that teased, tempted. It was a surprise at all for her to have told them that. It was drastically different from the treatment they were used to, but Angelica was after other ends than most of the females they’d had contact with. “It makes control over myself much harsher than what I would be with a mate.”

Another round of shocked murmurs brought blasts of sweet pain. Tenderness coming from a warrior bathed in blood was a rarity in any world. “If I’m too frightening, switch out.”

None of them left to trade places with the few males she hadn’t seen yet. Angelica would have been surprised if they had, but two of them were now off her list. Their relief was clear. “If you already love someone, I’d also have you switch.”

Again, no words, but another bachelor was eliminated by the indecision in his expression. It was common for slaves to fall in love with their regular renters and try to avoid being awarded so they could make it to the 25-year-old age limit for prizes. After that, they were listed for sale to the public and could be bought by their lover.

*Booom!*

Thunder crashed, almost loud enough to make Angelica flinch. It sent one of the bachelors from his chair to crouch on the floor. Terrified, the shivering skinhead missed her frown, but the others took note and leaned away so as not to share his fate.

Angelica waved a hand. “Go back to your cell if it eases you.”

He and his clean scalp were gone an instant later.

Angelica met pink Den Mother’s surprised expression with a hard frown. “Aren’t they allowed to have a spine at all?”

“No.” The woman’s tone gave nothing away. “Switch?”

“No.” Angelica wasn’t ready for a new temptation yet. She was still working through these.

Angelica continued with her questions as the hour passed, throwing surprises in forms that the men had to answer for themselves. With each stunning blast of their voices, she grew stronger.

“You have five minutes left.” The blue Den Mother retreated back into the other room, not as worried now that Angelica had shown she had control over herself.

Angelica leaned over her empty bowl, keeping her voice low. Like her infamous cousin, Angelica was always one to encourage dissension among the ranks. “Singing has a calming effect. All of you together might be hard to resist, even for a changeling.”

Satisfied they would figure out the new defense, if they hadn’t already known it, Angelica slid her chair back and stood up.

Desire flared from some of the bachelors as they stared at her nearly naked body. It was obvious the males had needs, even when they weren’t drugged. *Interesting*.

Angelica returned their gawks with desperate longing that all but two of the prizes shied from. She let the huntress out again, scenting.

That chocolate over hot coals aroma drifted into her brain again and burnt. Angelica inhaled deeper. It was intoxicating. “Good night, bachelors.”

*“Have a nice evening, Angelica.”*

Even with all their voices together, hearing her name from them took her straight into hell. Angelica narrowed in on that scent again, breathing deeper. Which one was layered in the delicious odor? Was it natural or a spray? It was powerful enough to twist her brain into complete confusion. “No cologne next time I come.”

“I’ll handle it.” The Den Mother with orange hair appeased her from the darkness. She had no doubt that the Pruett would win another match to earn that visit.

Angelica swept the males one more time, counting those she hadn’t mentally marked off the list, lingering on gray eyes and silken black hair. She liked that one. She would make him speak next time so she could judge the level of heat he brought out. If none of them showed an interest in her, whichever male drew her the hardest was the one she would choose.

It was hard to leave, but Angelica did, proud that she could. One of those bachelors would be hers, after she executed more women who were suffering like she was.

Angelica lingered outside the cell with her guards, still searching for threats while she regained full control. She’d known it would be hard, but it was… Angelica grunted bitterly. *It’s like sitting at a buffet and not being allowed to eat anything. Damn the old ones who caused this torment!*

**4**

“She’s the one.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s gonna win it all.”

“Remember, we do whatever it takes to get her to go to the rebels–even if the Pruetts really aren’t helping them.”

“Right. We know how to provide a service and the Network gives full medical care to bounty hunters. Get listed as a member of her crew, be friendly, and locate Baker.”

Standing in the shadows, Jason didn’t add a comment to the conversation happening among the other prizes while the Den Mothers cleaned up the mess. He was still thinking about how controlled Angelica had been. They’d agreed to try to warn the rebels as soon as they heard there was a Pruett listed again. They all hoped to manipulate a new owner to accomplish their goal, but Jason didn’t think this one would let a mate out of her sight long enough to attempt an escape.

She was burning too fast, which meant a lot of service time, and then there was the clear impression that once bonded, a man might not *want* to leave her and her infamous family. Jason was instantly terrified of that impression. He already had one ghost who rarely left his mind. He didn’t want a new one. On his own, there was only one thing he could do–run. It wouldn’t be enough.

The other males in this lot wanted to be free, to fight in the growing rebellion with Baker. Jason did too, but there was another reason he had to get out. He would be 25 in another month. If males in these shows weren’t chosen by then, they were put into the renter program or sold–usually to a brothel. Those were the same things in his mind, but Jason had something even worse hanging over his head. Rankin, the top Defender, wanted him and it wasn’t casual. He had been surviving her visits since he hit puberty. Each time, her rage grew worse. Nearly all of the scattered, drop shaped scars on his legs and hips had come from her fondness for screams, for blood. Some nights, he hadn’t been certain he would survive.

Despite the Network’s unforgiving hold on his body, his life, they had been unable to erase the memories Jason had of loving *parents*. His father and mother had cared deeply for each other. He longed for that future. Most males were kept away from their children, but his mother had encouraged their relationship.

Jason had mourned when Rankin ripped out his father’s throat. That was right after Jason had found them in the barn and started screaming. He’d assumed her lack of control over the disease had caused his dad’s death, but it hadn’t mattered. He had attacked Rankin in his grief and she’d taken him. After that, the complex and Rankin had been his life.

Jason had gone through the normal bachelor training under Rankin’s supervision. He knew how to please a changeling, but he’d never been fully taken by one. He was listed as pure, something the other males here disliked him for. He was spared their required time in the renter cells, he was exercised better, given more medical care, and he was defenseless against Rankin whenever she wanted him to practice his newly learned skills while she wore the cuffs.

She was so cruel! Jason often suspected she had more than one whore-in-training and he pitied those other males on the nights that she and her bloody claws left his cell unsatisfied. Rankin had gotten the promotion to queen of the guard food chain by being careful. She wasn’t going to break the rules by taking Jason fully, but if he wasn’t picked in the next four episodes, they would list his number and Rankin could buy him. He looked a lot like his father now and she’d waited a long time to have that.

The other bachelors in this lot assumed one of them would be chosen by the Pruett. Their pretty features and submissive demeanors were obvious, but in Jason’s heart, he hoped Angelica Pruett would be different from the rest of the women who blew through here with their bloody fists. He was hoping she was like her cousin.

Jason was terrified of the duty waiting if he was picked, but he was desperate enough to lie to his new owner or service her needs for as long as it took to escape. He had secrets that the rebels might need to know, and in exchange, he hoped they would let him stay with them until he was stronger. Jason hated their rulers. The goal of gaining his life back would give him the courage to follow through with his plans.

Watching through the small window in the door, Jason was enrapt as Angelica ran a blood crusted hand through those short black spikes. He wondered what her thoughts were right then. Was she wishing she could come back in and snap? Did it matter to her if the bachelors were abused slaves? Would she kill him when she found out what he was doing?

It would make things easier if the Pruett lived up to the rumors he was about to trust his life to–that they were an honorable family who hated slavery as much as the men did. The odds on something that wonderful were slim to none in this New Network world, but the restless fire in Jason’s heart had already made the choice. He’d lived another life once, a *free* one, and he still missed it with everything he was. All he had now were the memories of a mother’s warm hand on his brow and the vague, haunting notes of his sweet sisters giggling in the next room. The fierce determination he’d nourished through the years of Rankin’s cruel abuse would be enough. *I’m going to take my chances with Angelica Pruett. God, help me.*

Chapter Three

**Medic!**

Day 3

**1**

**A**ngelica entered the stands for her required viewing and found Chelsea Bush standing over her sibling, face wild in grief.

With dawning horror, Angelica wondered if she could still battle the starlet without showing mercy. She was forced to admit it might be a problem. Angelica settled onto a bench for her one public attendance, hoping someone else took care of the woman.

But now that she’d seen it, she couldn’t *unsee* it. Having sisters kill each other for an opportunity at redemption was twisted, but there were also the half-changed weaklings who should have never been put into a cage with someone like her. Why would the Network make such unbalanced matches? Why hadn’t these weaker women prepared for the fights?

Candice and Angelica did a daily workout to keep in shape for their runs, but they’d been doing it for years. She’d been barely out of rubbers when Candice had dragged her to the shed and began teaching her how to fight. Now, Candice’s patience was teaching her to be careful with those she loved. Her cousin lived with that guilt, and to witness the effects of it was to be ever so careful that it never happened with her.

These thoughts and more ran through her mind without pause, but Angelica never let her guard down. When the last Diva gang member snapped the neck of her opponent, Angelica felt sick enough to glare in her direction. Their rulers liked being in control. Whatever the final answer to all these oddities, she was certain the quest for more power would be the reason behind it.

**2**

“How does it feel to know you’ve been deemed the most bloodthirsty of your family?”

It was one of the reporters who had rushed at her the last time she was here. Hunger was thick in the smoky cubicle. Angelica answered honestly. “It’s great. My big sister usually gets that title.”

After her cousin’s week of intimidating the reporters, all of Angelica’s interviewers so far had been stocky and armed. This one was no different. The thought that she was a threat to the Network was a heady feeling for the teenager.

“I sense some sibling rivalry there.”

Angelica had her own lies ready to use. “Yeah, she doesn’t know I’m here. When she finds out, she might sign up next!”

The reporter was relaxing as she continued to be reasonable, but Angelica was just waiting for an opening. The other newscasters were lingering nearby, listening to the live broadcast. She hoped to be able to give them, and everyone else, a new topic of conversation, but she also hadn’t forgotten that a reporter had been in on her kidnapping.

“Do you believe your cousin Candice is aiding the rebels?”

That was a blunt question. Angelica forced herself to sound uneasy. “I don’t want to…”

The reporter pointed. “It would be hard not to, considering her absence. You were here for her games challenge. Funny that she isn’t for yours.”

Angelica pegged her then and chose quickly. The rules said she had to give one interview. They didn’t say how long it had to be, so she ended it in true Pruett style. “Maybe she didn’t think she could stand the smell of your perfume. It’s Eau de rat, right? You work for the Network, ferreting out little secrets like a good rodent.”

Exposed as an undercover spy, the woman’s value dropped to zero. Her doomed expression said she knew it.

Angelica smirked. “Next?”

**3**

“Cage Match Three!”

The cut withdraw rope still hung in place, reachable only by a high lunge. Angelica’s opponent, another of the huddlers, stood directly under it, trembling. Over half the women in this episode were not going through the change yet. They could withdraw because they had no overwhelming desire to feel their opponent’s blood, to smell it, and taste it. They weren’t lethal.

Angelica smirked, triggering a fresh round of screams from the crowd. The same could not be said of her.

The Frogtown girl had a rounded profile set in lines of panic and a large, heaving chest that was perfect for feeding babies, but she wouldn’t get a pass. She was too short.

Recognizing Angelica’s eagerness, the girl lunged for the remaining piece of rope.

“A contestant has withdrawn.”

Angelica was supposed to leave now and wait to be rescheduled… *I can’t*. The scent of fear and the last match’s blood hung heavily in the air, reaching out to twist Angelica’s fury.

When the little rabbit tried to dart around her, Angelica lunged, driving fists into her neck with both wrist blades extended.

Big chested huddler hit the mat with a damp gasp, sending the audience into fits of snarling delight. When Angelica began to stomp, no one stopped her.

**4**

Anticipating arrest, Angelica quickly went to her flat for her gear, trying to decide if she would go quietly. *Damn this fire!*

She shut the door and bolted it. Pain shot into her stomach! It ripped upward, flooding her with incredible heat.

Angelica slammed herself to the left, stumbling in the darkness. Blood hit the floor as more heat exploded, this time in her hip. She stumbled again, ducking instinctively, and felt the slice of a blade fly over her. *Three of them.*

Angelica *changed*, her sounds ugly. *I’ll give the trio what they came for!*

The feel of the razors from her belt were a comfort in her hand as she threw them with the speed born of practice. The sharp, metal objects whizzed through the air as she spun around, returning pings as they sank into walls and soft, wet thuds when they tore into flesh.

“Ugh!”

Refilling her hands, Angelica aimed lower this time and heard two fleshier splatters as her weapons found both remaining marks.

*Silence.*

She waited, crouched in the dark.

*Crash! Splinter!* The door to her flat caved under the guard’s insistence.

“Halt, there!”

When the lights flooded the room, Angelica counted three less contestants for her game. One of them was Emily Bush.

**5**

As soon as the guards identified her, Angelica retrieved her weapons, jerking each razor thin, 6-inch spike free with a satisfying grunt. “Send it all to my sister.”

One of the guards shouted for assistance over the muttering people in the hallway. “Medic!”

The doctor had no trouble with the shallow wound on her hip, but the gash in Angelica’s gut was harder to repair. She held herself frozen, listening to the guards outside the door as the medic tended her wounds.

“Why was Emily here? She wasn’t even a changeling yet!”

“Family duty. Their father was captured with a group of rebels. They’ll win their mother’s freedom if *none* of them survive.”

“What?”

“I keep forgetting you’re new. The Network has a three-for-one rule. If three family members will die for the one accused, then that person gets to go free.”

There was a brief pause where Angelica hoped to hear an answer to what she was suddenly wondering between waves of revulsion.

“What if one of them actually wins?”

“A lot of them do. Many of the three-for-ones are trying to eliminate familial competition. They get the usual prize and glory, plus they gain control of their household.”

“I’ve never heard that. Sounds like it makes it more fun!”

“Yeah, the audience loves it. Last year, we had an episode with a whole family of rebel sympathizers on here. It was a hell of a rush. I had front row seats when they snapped on each other. I won two hundred UDs!”

Another part of Angelica’s soul began crying on behalf of people she didn’t know. What kind of enlightened world let this happen?

She grimaced, making the white coated healer flinch. It didn’t. Their world wasn’t better than the one that had preceded it. They hadn’t learned anything from the war, except to be more brutal and self-serving.

Pain came as the needle sank into muscle. Angelica concentrated on the silent images of the wall screen over the medic’s shoulder, breathing slowly in and out. The neutered men were harmless. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“Miss Pruett!”

“Hey, Angelica!”

The reporters arrived in a group, staying beyond the open door and out of reach in case she wasn’t in the mood to talk to them.

“Will you withdraw now?”

“How serious are her injuries?”

If she didn’t fight, Angelica would miss the prize visit, but it was unnecessary. She healed fast, and thanks to the disease, pain was with her all the time anyway. She wasn’t immune to it. She just didn’t care enough to react.

“Me? Quit?” Angelica smirked harshly at the cameras. “Only when I’ve won it all.”

Silence…and then the mobs cheered. The sound was so loud that she had to control the urge to locate a window. From the noise, Candice had been right about their kind coming in droves. The females their rulers had always feared for the strength they could add to the rebel males were finally crawling from their holes and caves. Things might get ugly in this city soon.

More than just the Pruetts and the Network were observing this show. Her wall screen flashed the front of the dome, highlighting the spectators surrounding the outside screens. She hid her thoughts under a blank expression. It had grown to near a thousand instead of the couple hundred that had lined the dome on her way in. The brutal matches were growing in popularity, something their rulers had counted on, but this was a different threat. If that many changelings attacked the complex at once, there could be a breach. She hadn’t counted enough Defenders or ground guards to cover a riot. Angelica, like her cousin, suspected the Network wasn’t as heavy on troops as it liked to imply and she stored the newest information while trying not to snap the neck of the medico sewing her guts back together.

Outside the dome, the crowd continued to grow.

**6**

After the reporters and medic exited, Angelica waited for the Defenders to arrive and arrest her for killing after a withdraw call. It made no sense when the computer relayed a message. Apparently, it wasn’t against the new rules because the notice was to confirm her rankings were high enough to restock her food and the medical credits she’d used.

Her mind went to the gates, to being locked inside these walls until all of the others were dead. Angelica picked up another of those details the Pruetts were known for spotting. Usually, no less than two full squads stood tensely along this entrance, and it was the same around the complex. Contestants were constantly reminded it was to keep the dangerous rebels from getting in. Angelica no longer believed that. The dome was indeed to keep the council safe, but the enemy was the mob poised on their stoop. There was already an army here, just waiting to be led.

**7**

Because she’d survived Luck of the Draw, a braver reporter found her way to Angelica shortly after the ambush. This kind didn’t have a crew, just a hard face and a camera girl who didn’t speak.

“Miss Pruett, can you tell us what it was like to kill a celebrity?”

Angelica shrugged. “Blood’s the same.”

A long pause, a choice to push on. “Did you honestly come for the fights? Don’t you even want a bachelor?”

Angelica’s vision flickered pink. *So much that it hurts.* “They’re cute, who wouldn’t want one? Wish they all weren’t so thin, though. I worry I might break them.”

She threw in a chuckle, and felt the interest pick up instantly. In one answer, she’d declared a problem with the cherished males. Would there be a response from the public or the Network? Angelica was rooting for the mob outside.

“So you assume you’ll win?”

The reporter knew better than to follow the tip live without researching it, but she wanted to. It was in her tense grip on the microphone.

Angelica finished the rest of the questions as politely as she could force herself to, hoping the reporter would come back for more. Angelica had figured out how to use that angry Fourth Estate.

This reporter, Dana, was dressed in a simple sweater and jeans, unlike most of the others who were constantly trying to outdo each other with the next big fad. Last year, it had been contacts that gave them glowing red eyes while they interviewed. The Network had quickly banned the contacts after one of the changelings mistook a reporter as a contestant because of it and ripped her throat out on live waves.

Still, Angelica thought she could see the woman’s own attempts to create a fad with an artfully spiked tattoo that ran from her wrist to disappear under her tan sweater. Angelica narrowed in on it. She’d spotted something like that before, hadn’t she? *On a man’s arm…*

As the reporter and her crew strode down the hall, Angelica heard a lowly spoken order to the short, bald girl on her flank

“Get a copy of that to the zone and be quiet about it.”

That was where Candice and the rest of her family had headed, where she’d be going too, after she collected a prize. Was the reporter a threat? Was she in contact with the rebels? A spy for them?

More of the tattoo was visible as Dana twisted up the microphone cord and Angelica was able to place it. One of the convicts they’d tracked last month had sported matching ink on his arm. That convict had been Baker, the leader of the rebels. He was the one who’d told Angelica the drill noise was the sound of a rookie being inked. It surprised her to find a rebel sympathizer in this complex. The stories of salaries being low had always existed, and payoffs were hard to keep track of, but reporters were notoriously pro-Network.

Angelica didn’t know yet how far she might sink into the rebel cause, but she’d had two strong faults even before the change. She’d been nice, and she’d been protective of those who were weaker. Both of those old traits might be heard from and it wasn’t because Candice was with the rebel males now, trying to retrain them and she needed help. Angelica had witnessed too much injustice, felt too much human suffering, to keep ignoring the tyranny. When this was over, she would settle fully into the cause and do her family duty.

**8**

Upon entering the cells this time, the bachelors were already seated at the long table. The Den Mothers reluctantly withdrew.

It was the same group of males as the first visit.

Angelica searched each of them with such intensity that they couldn’t hide their worry. Only two of them didn’t flinch when her chair scraped the floor as she sat.

Feeling heat in thin, shaky waves, she found the pristine man from her last visit staring at her body again. She made her voice as inviting as she could. It was time to thin this herd too. “You’d be mine?”

He hesitated for an instant, but it was enough. No, not if he had a choice.

“Of course.”

The meek answer displeased her, causing a slight frown.

He quickly corrected himself, obviously terrified. “I’d be honored to be your mate!”

Angelica wanted to recoil from the incredible need that was shocking her with its strength, but the voice was all he had. He was too tame. “Shift.”

She surprised them again by offering a bit of comfort. “And good luck to you.”

He stared, shocked at the friendly tone. As he left, the male sent a searching glance over his broad shoulder, asking one question–had he passed up a good owner?

His replacement, a cute, young redhead, took the seat warily as Angelica gestured at those she’d mentally cut on her last visit. “Shift.”

That left three here, with eight total remaining to pick from. She saw their relief and confusion as they went, and then she was sucking oxygen into lungs that had none.

There had been five bachelors she hadn’t inspected yet–the redheaded replacement for pristine male, and now four more men came into the room with such harmony that she scarcely breathed for fear of breaking it. *So beautiful!*

Angelica swallowed as they sat, dropping her head. *Breathe. Control.*

When the Den Mothers brought out the sweet-smelling steaks, she finally glanced up. Some of the men were subtly inspecting the plates with anticipation. Her guess had been right–they weren’t usually fed this way. She thought of her next interview and gestured toward the food. “Eat.”

The silence wasn’t quite as thick as during her first visit. She felt more in control, but she desperately longed to stroke them. Angelica let her pink vision roam their perfect skin instead. *One of these might be mine!*

Angelica lingered on the last male to come out. Even compared to the others, he was impressive with those thick arms and perfect skin. Long blond hair flowed in a ponytail over his shoulder and matched the yellow outline of a neat beard that she instantly wanted to rub against her fingers. “Are you a breeder?”

He flushed, shaking his golden hair. The color sent heat flaring into her gut without the sound of his voice. *Nice*. Angelica mentally put him into second place.

“I’d hear how long each of you have been here and of your life before.” She didn’t say, “*and if you do this willingly”*, but it was clear to her ears. “We’ll start on the right.”

It took most of the hour and their hesitant answers bothered Angelica. Since birth was the most common answer, but sold by their family was second. One had been nine, torn from his family’s murdered bodies. Another had been stolen from a farm near an old city that he didn’t remember well enough to name. A third, with a voice that cut her in half, claimed he’d been won in a card game before being sold. He’d been so young that he had no other memories. Angelica sensed that part was a lie, but his pain had been clear enough. Enslaving men had been done for the good of all humankind. She agreed the war made securing them necessary, but was all this?

*“Can we ask you a question now?”*

Again, their voices together distracted her from the heat.

“Yes.” What was it they were concerned about?

*“Have you ever snapped?”*

“No. My cousin did–the one who was here last month. When it was my time to change, she taught me how to control it.”

“And does it work?”

The last to come out asked her the question cautiously, knowing she would react to his voice alone.

She slammed her lashes shut. *Definitely in the top.* “Yes.” They couldn’t argue. If it wasn’t true, she would have already snapped. “Any more?”

“Who do you battle next?”

This was the chin lifter from her first visit, and Angelica evaluated him as she answered. “I never know until the match.”

His rugged face grew torn with indecision. Almost unpleasant to look at right then, her stomach growled, encouraging her to dig deeper. Chin lifter wasn’t as widely built or as tall as the others and that half sneer was a deterrent that she suspected he used intentionally to avoid being picked. It gave him a cruel appearance. Angelica wondered what he would be like with a smile or a laugh to light up his darkness. Then, he hit her with a full blast of his voice.

“I could probably tell you, if you ask me nicely.”

The sound of his voice! That tone of intimacy!

Animal man glared at chin lifter. “What are you doing?!”

There were also surprised mutters from the others at the table. Angelica sensed if anyone else could have heard him right now, the violet striped man on her left wouldn’t have spoken.

“Well?” Purple glared harder.

Purple stripe was clearly the leader among this lot. Angelica wanted to offer assurance, but she couldn’t. Hearing them and their carefully controlled tones was an amazing agony to be battled. Their voices raised in emotion were simply to be survived and she remained frozen as each word sank into her lust and spun it harder.

“It’s against the rules! You can’t seduce her!” Purple was almost shouting.

He was on her right, with his sweet, dark skin, close enough to grab. *Fire*. Angelica’s grip tightened on the fork.

“You don’t want one of the others in here do you? At least we know we’re safe with this one.” Chin lifter had a sarcastic ring to his voice that bumped him to the top of her list. He was no cringing male.

“You know what we’ve all read in the files! Being a Pruett doesn’t mean anything!”

The leader’s hissed fury pelted her with white-hot gravel that stuck to her skin and burned. She’d been wrong about there being no spark in them. They were as full of rage as she was.

Chin pointed. “See?”

There was a brief silence with their attention solely on her. Angelica held very still, wishing she’d listened to their names.

Purple shrugged. “Maybe.”

“She should have snapped already!” A snort of scorn came from Chin, along with a waved hand that swirled his scents–delicious burnt chocolate–into her brain, where it began searing her alive.

An angry shrug came from their leader “Maybe she just doesn’t want us!”

Angelica’s chin jerked up at that, flames in her red eyes. The fork in her grip snapped, digging into her palm.

They all cringed and because of it, she managed the impossible. She stayed in her seat.

The fork clattered loudly, pieces sliding along the china. Breathing harshly, Angelica concentrated on the slow drip of her blood. After a moment, the conversation, the torment, resumed.

“None of the others we’ve been in here with have that kind of control. We agreed. She’s the one.”

Angelica wondered about that, but didn’t ask, aware of her last minutes with them flying by.

“We want a new vote.”

“You’ve been there for her matches! She’s brutal!”

“It’s the change.”

“Exactly–a constant danger! We’d never survive the trip.”

“It’s not dangerous to a true mate.”

Chin sounded like he was familiar with it. Angelica stared at his cleanshaven face. “You know how it works?”

His beautiful gray gaze almost glowed with something she identified as hope.

“Not really, but I’ve heard there’s a bond, that it’s impossible for a mate to be hurt, even in a rage.”

Angelica had heard the same from Candice, but like the bachelors, she wasn’t positive she believed it. “Precautions should still be taken.”

He shrugged in obedience, sending that powerful scent over the table. *Mmm…* He was the one layered in the intoxicating scent that she was betting was natural. He wasn’t the type that spent time primping before a mirror. There were too many calluses on his big hands for that, too many tan lines that declared he sometimes left the dome. That was something he had to be doing without the Network’s approval. Males were never alone in public. Because of that, Angelica suspected he had a lover.

“I’m Jason.” There was no way to miss the deliberate lure that made her guts churn harder. He wanted her to notice him, remember him. His scent washed over her again and she found herself bringing it into her lungs as if she’d been denied air for a long time. As she smothered a groan at the flames, Angelica snorted mentally. No problem there. She wasn’t likely to forget a *smell* that made her feel out of control. It wasn’t something she had ever encountered before.

Jason wasn’t shying from her regard and Angelica held his eye as the heat sparked. “Are you registered?”

He still didn’t look away. “No.”

She realized they were having a conversation in surprise. *He isn’t afraid to talk to me!* It was another sign of what she needed–courage–and it gave her hope. “Are you willing?”

He gave an eager smile that made her heart rate increase.

“I’d make someone a good mate.”

Angelica let a bit of red bleed into her eyes. “I don’t doubt it, though I suspect she’d better stay on her toes around you.”

He flushed, not answering and Angelica immediately began to suspect him of keeping secrets. *Sexy!*

She slowly stood as the green haired Den Mother appeared.

“Five minutes.”

Angelica was glad when the woman exited, nose in the air. She needed a match right now, somewhere to put this burning ache.

“Can I wrap that?” Jason was waiting calmly to be answered.

The others were shocked into a frozen silence. Was it another test?

Angelica nodded, answering both. “Slowly.” She braced. “One of the Den Mothers will stand nearby to be a target.”

The blue haired mother immediately came out to take Angelica’s right. Her expression was unreadable, but the bounty hunter felt the surprise and ignored it. She wasn’t taking any chances with her control.

*I won’t hurt him. I won’t hurt him*. Angelica repeated the words silently as the perfectly scented prize knelt at her feet with a medical kit. She stiffly lowered herself into the chair.

A bit above her 5’7”, Jason was lean, hard. The muscles in his arms flexed under the shirt as he opened packages and her mouth went dry. No, he wasn’t as beautiful as the others were. She was certain there would be times his face would twist into an ugliness that mirrored his mental pain. Her need increased.

The image of easing this torment with a breakable doll held little appeal. To think that it might be with a pure mate, who had courage, sent fresh flames over her charred skin. Angelica wanted a man raw, unkempt, and uncringing most of the time.

“It might sting a little…” His hand trembled as he reached for hers.

Angelica opened her clenched fingers to allow him access, the first unrelated male to be allowed such a liberty. His big fingers slid across her skin...

The room spun! *Changed!*

Jason was surrounded by a wall of fire, dark hair flowing, gray eyes glowing for her, for her touch, and then they were alone in the cool darkness, burning bodies entwined! She arched as he thrust heavily against her, mouth demanding.

The vision vanished as she shoved the chair into the wall to leap up, hissing with hunger like she’d never felt*. I will have him!*

Angelica’s red sight went over his tensed body, still kneeling at her feet. She clenched her fists as the Den Mother stepped between them. *Breathe.* In. Out.

“Told you.”

The gloating in Jason’s tone sent a shiver of dangerous flames through the harsh grip that Angelica had on herself.

Purple stuck his chest out in challenge. “If you’re so sure, ask her to claim you when she wins!”

Thrown tauntingly, Angelica wanted to answer, to agree, but she stood still, afraid if she did any more, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

“Yeah, Rankin will like that.” The blond man’s tone was sarcastic.

The Den Mother moved at that name and Angelica took note of it even as she burned.

Purple nodded. “You’ll both be dead.”

Another of the bachelors sneered. “He’s too scared.”

“I’ll be hers…” Jason spoke slowly.

The words hit her hard, burnt deep into her gut.

“If she’ll love me.”

Without a touch this time, the images came again, their bodies resting in the aftermath. As strong as the first, this image filled her with a sense she recognized with desperate longing. *Peace.*

The choice had been made.

Angelica forced it out with a gentleness that she didn’t know still existed in her. “I can, in time.”

The happiness emanating from him was a spark. Her claws dug into his arms as she yanked him to his feet and urgently pushed her lips to his, breath catching, grip tightening at the feel of him, of his whimper of fear. She held them there, willing him to feel the crush of lust that she was, letting the flames lick up her body with a tongue of cruel fire. The moment stretched out into an incredibly agonizing bliss as she waited, felt, shivered from the heat.

And then he responded! His lips pressed ever so slightly and she was almost lost!

“Uumm!”

The sound, rough with eager delight instead of fury, broke the moment and saved him. She’d never heard that from herself.

Angelica released him and spun away, but as she opened the door, Angelica locked gazes with the blue haired mother.

He was hers. He was not to be brought out to the other contestants. The woman knew all of it without being told. Angelica saw the edge of the familiar tattoo on the woman’s arm, and made the connection.

*“That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”*

That beautifully detailed swirl was indeed a rebel symbol. There were more of them here than their rulers might suspect.

As Angelica left, passing near enough to some of the shocked males to pinch them if she wanted to, she felt no overwhelming need. She had made the choice. Now, she had to win Jason’s papers.

Angelica was back in her flat before she replayed the conversations and realized she also needed to discover who Rankin was. The Den Mothers were more scared of her than of the Pruetts. Angelica didn’t care for that at all.

**9**

**Jason**

*I manipulated her by using courage.* It was rumored the Pruetts were drawn to it and he’d remembered. He now had a potential owner and it wasn’t Rankin! He wanted to brag, but Jason strode by the other stunned bachelors without revealing his joy.

Angelica was fierce. He had hopes she could handle Rankin, but even if she couldn’t kill the Defender, she would take him out of the complex and give him a chance to be free. Rankin couldn’t challenge them until then because of the possible scandal, but once they were out of the city, another game for survival would start. Jason would have to warn his new owner about the coming danger.

Jason pushed off the too tight new clothes and settled into his threadbare robe, content that Rankin wasn’t here to hurt him tonight. The rebel elements in New Network City had set off another explosive and Rankin had been sent to investigate, interrogate, brutalize. It was what she excelled at.

Angelica did, too, Jason knew, but he believed in the rumors about her family. When she heard his story, she would be honor bound to take him to Baker.

Jason already felt bad for tricking her. It was obvious that she needed him for the pain relief, but Jason wanted the life that had been stolen from him. Angelica might be strong enough to fight the fire. He was amazed at her control, but he had a list of things he needed to be happy and few women would be able to satisfy them all. Until he found the one who could, Jason wanted to be free to help the rebels take down the Network and to be there for Rankin’s death. That was what he needed the most.

Chapter Four

**Heaven and Hell**

**1**

**“I**t is day two of the second round and we are down to eight contestants to start the morning’s matches!” the announcer blared.

Not scheduled for a battle, Angelica had spent day four of the games in her larger studio apartment on the next floor, studying information on the wall screen while trying not to think about her prize. She’d never had a day stretch so long, but she had learned a great deal about Rankin.

The top Defender was known to the world as a protector of the complex males, but according to rumors, Rankin liked to take advantage of that position by abusing them herself. When Angelica offered a generous amount of UDs, she was informed that Rankin had a small stable of men she visited regularly. Angelica’s personal guards had whispered small details that burned in her brain.

*“She’s got one now, in your lot.”*

“*She gets them young, grooms them. Sometimes she spends hours with them in their cells or her den.”*

“*She hurts them.”*

“*Yes, and more than most changelings do during a rental session.”*

“*They’re given favors to make the other males hate them and isolate them, so she has complete control.”*

“*She’ll kill to keep her favorite.”*

Angelica had also found the file for her choice, and confirmed that’s who he was. She suspected he’d been trying to force her hand in order to escape Rankin. *It worked*.

All of these things were in her mind as she settled into the plushy chair for round two and got ready to be inoffensive. She wanted something this time.

“So, we’re chatting with Angelica Pruett! The newest rankings have placed you in second, solidly behind the favorite, Kim Lee. Do you believe that’s fair since you have more kills?”

“I’ve never thought it mattered.”

It was the reporter she’d tipped off. Angelica wondered if the woman had been a Defender. It was in the way she sat so alertly, sweeping the corners and employee gates behind the rows of reporters. *She definitely has the shoulders for it.* In the cage, Miss. Reporter might be a real match.

“And your opponent’s comment? Does that bother you?”

*Yes, so much that I want to taste her swampy blood.* “Not anymore. I gave away my stars.”

The reporter gasped as mutters went through those who were listening, betting on her, playing with her life. She had no personal security now.

“You sent him your protection?”

“And matched their pay from my personal account. When someone says they plan to attack, I take them seriously. I won’t have him or the other bachelors hurt, and I hope the Network won’t either.”

*Easy, careful.* The reporter’s expression cautioned Angelica, but her excited body language said to keep going.

Angelica did. “The Den Mothers are good, but against a changeling, there’s not much they can do and we know it.” Her voice rumbled lower. “And some of us use it. Maybe there have been threats.”

“I’m positive our rulers have everything under control.” Dana’s eyes were bright pools of glee, but her tone was perfectly offended. “Back to you, Phyllis.”

As the camera light flashed to red, Dana nodded once in recognition before stepping from the neat little booth.

Angelica had made an ally. It felt strange. Normally, Pruetts only collected enemies while in the complex, and stacked up grave fillers.

**2**

“Cage Match Five!”

This would decide another of the final four. Angelica observed the two fighters eagerly as they stepped into the ring.

Chelsea, dressed all in blue, was the favorite over the last Diva member, who she’d mostly forgotten about.The fury was coming in thick waves from that woman though, and Angelica found herself rooting for the underdog so she wouldn’t have to fight the sister. She still hadn’t erased that haunted expression.

It was a shock when Chelsea blasted her opponent with that very look, causing the gang member to stumble the way Angelica was worried about doing. *It isn’t real!*

Chelsea lunged forward with a brutal throat punch, catching her prey unaware. Bones snapped, quickly smothering the other woman.

“Match to Bush! We have a Bush in the final rounds!”

The audience was on its feet, blocking her from view as they cheered and jeered. Angelica exited the stands, hoping Chelsea hadn’t noticed her. *I need to think.* She would do it while spilling blood in her next match.

**3**

“Cage Match Six!”

As Angelica spotted the female in the ring, Network logo flashing for the cameras, she was relieved. Her last battles wouldn’t be as hard as this one. Ratings discounted, she had judged Kim Lee to be her main competition; she was glad to know it was mostly in the bag after this one.

Unlike her cousin’s match, there were no pleading relatives along the ramp as Angelica walked down. Pruetts didn’t give mercy. Everyone knew that now.

Thanks to the monthly lottery, only one family member got a male from the global mate list and that was usually a spent rented male with only a few years left to live. The others had to gather the funds to buy one, something socialites could afford. Or they could enter the games and fight. For some, the disease was the drive, but for others, it was a more subtle effect that they were searching for a cure to. Without a mate, there was no child, no happy-ever-after. Kim Lee’s expression implied the ache for that future was worth her life. Angelica understood completely.

Her opponent stood away from the withdraw rope, the new one that replaced her statement of intimidation. Angelica allowed herself one human moment of unease. The woman had the big, rough hands of someone who had trained on nature. It was easy to imagine her in the swamps of her hometown, swinging through the trees and wrestling pythons. Angelica had heard that was popular in the swamps.

Then she considered her waiting bachelor, and how it had felt to have him touch her willingly. *Rankin will buy him if I die here.*

Rage exploded into fury as bright as the blue laser lights that threw the crowd into delighted chaos.

Kim Lee waved her hands, crouching as the dividing bar finished going down. “Come on, then!”

Angelica immediately lunged forward, tempting her.

The woman knew better and shot around her instead.

Angelica spun, keeping Kim in sight as the woman danced around the mat. Designed to make her dizzy and confused, Angelica put a quick end to her running by timing and executing a nice leap and tuck that dropped her directly into Kim’s path.

Angelica jumped again as Kim kicked out, sweeping for her legs.

Missing angered Kim. She pulled a handful of blades from her belt in a fast motion and let them fly.

Angelica ducked, hand rising to catch one in her forearm. Then Angelica threw her own spikes and Kim was the one dropping, evading, being trimmed.

Kim Lee snarled furiously. “Slam you!”

Angelica recognized the fear. “No babies, here, sweetheart–only blood.”

Kim knew she couldn’t beat Angelica, that death waited, but she never considered the withdraw rope as she lost control, finishing the change in a quick evolution. Her vision darkened to crimson, hair growing out of the holders, and her body expanded, muscles straining against her clothes. The Network favorite screamed at Angelica in rage as her pupils burst into red flames. She flew forward with vicious snarls ripping from her throat.

Angelica braced to meet her, still in control.

Kim’s arms slammed around Angelica, teeth going for her neck.

Angelica used her momentum to roll and send Kim flailing with a knee to her gut.

Kim crashed against the cage wall in a heap, but recovered before Angelica did, lunging again. She landed on her back, nails seeking flesh.

Angelica immediately let their combined weight cause a collapse. They slammed into the mat with an audible crunch as Angelica snapped the wrist around her throat and drove an elbow into the woman’s chest while Kim clawed. There was no logic to the attack, simply the rage. It was easy to roll, shove her other arm forward, *slice.*

Kim grabbed her stomach with one hand, holding up the other as she slid to her knees. Blood trickled from her mouth as she held out a red palm, the fury fading. “Mercy?”

But it wasn’t Angelica’s to give. Kim’s brain made the choice. She slumped to the bloody mat.

“Match to Pruett!”

Items rained over the cage, some making it through the gaps in the fencing. Angelica saw keys, cards, trash, and gold star bracelets as the crowd exploded with fresh screams. Another squad shoved into the unruly throng as she scooped up a few of the gifts.

When Angelica stood, the blue haired Den Mother was lurking in the entrance to the fenced tunnel she’d walked down to get to the cage. Waiting for her, confident the Pruett would win, but she wasn’t happy with the information she needed to deliver. Her wild hair and tired profile said Angelica wouldn’t like the news.

**4**

This time when Angelica strode into the cells, there was only her chosen male and the sentries, who she’d insisted must stay inside the room to protect her chosen male.

Jason let her see how unhappy he was with all the security. Instead of controlling his expression, he glared through the dark bruise on his cheek. Rankin had come by to express her anger at his televised boldness.

*Fury*, so much hotter than what Angelica was used to, exploded in her mind. Rankin’s death was now a matter of time.

Angelica sat next to him on the couch. When he flinched, she kept space between them. “Have you changed your mind?”

Jason turned to her in immediate denial.

She thought he was manipulating things, but she wanted him, no matter his intent. “This is what you want?”

“Yes. I’d be yours!”

*Scorching flames of panicked heat…*and then control. She glared at his cheek. “Did Rankin do that?”

He cringed from her as if *she’d* hit him, and Angelica knew her suspicions were right. “You need protection.”

To her surprise, Jason leaned closer. “I need to reach Baker!”

Angelica froze.

Jason was aware of their audience. He rested his silky hair against her shoulder like a lover. “Please, we need your help. The Pruetts are for–”

“Freedom,” she finished, barely breathing as she understood he was begging for sanctuary. He’d lied. Honor, the powerful kind she’d inherited, flooded Angelica to war with the pain of his betrayal and the feel of him against her. *I chose wrong.*

Angelica shoved him away and lurched to her feet. She wanted to tear things apart in agony, but the commitment to the family, to their values, wouldn’t let her renounce the choice. The flames vanished suddenly to be replaced with misery. *My torment isn’t over yet.*

“Wait.” Jason feared she would switch him for one of the others. His pupils shrank into pinpricks of terror. “Please. I know things…”

To the listening world, it might sound like a sexual line, but Angelica doubted their rulers would read it that way. Was he trying to get himself killed? “You’re playing with fire.”

The enslaved male stared back in open desperation. “I’m already burning. I have been for a long time.”

That was another misery she understood. Angelica came back to the couch as she sealed up the disappointment, the anguish. Jason wasn’t one of a kind. Eventually, she would locate *her* bachelor, her cure. Right now, she had a duty to handle and she went about it like any other Pruett would have. She lunged for his throat.

Angelica’s hot body slammed him against the couch, long legs straddling his hips. He cowered away before he realized she was talking.

“Tell me–now!”

“The Network knows about the safe zone.” He tried to breathe past the fear as she ran warm, rough hands through his hair. “As soon as Baker gets there, they’ll bomb it.”

She jerked back, maybe to determine if he was lying, and then pressed her mouth to his! Jason froze again, trying to listen through the panic…the *interest*. She smelled good, like a fresh wind through the service tunnels.

“How do you know?” She spoke against his lips.

Jason struggled to talk as her musky scent filled his nose. Her legs fit around him so well… “Rankin let it slip.”

Angelica tensed at the name. It gave him the courage to wrap a gentle hand around her neck. Her hair covered his words from the cameras. “I’ll give you anything you want. Please don’t let her buy me.”

Angelica’s heart clenched in jealousy and pain. “You’ll be with me when I go.” Angelica couldn’t stop from sealing the promise with another kiss. The feel of him under her was incredible torture.

The heat blazed up when he responded. Angelica knew it was just to confirm that he would uphold his end of the deal and give her whatever she wanted. The notion had her crying inside, even as she smoldered.

“Five minutes.”

The Den Mother’s voice implied she’d get a word or two if she had time for it. Angelica tore herself from his sweet lips. “I’ll get you there and then you’re free.”

She stood up, instantly missing his heat.

Jason held her gaze. “Whatever you want.”

She snarled in hurt and spun from the room. What she wanted had already been denied.

The Den Mother was waiting for her near the music shelf. Angelica made a good show of handing her a UD slip to cover the warning she suspected the mother was waiting to deliver. Angelica didn’t mind it as much as she appeared to. This weird woman was one of the rebels. She would keep him as safe as she could.

As Angelica neared the shelf, she read the cleverly hidden words written in dust behind the stereo.

*She’ll come for her property.*

Angelica tossed the payment slip on top of the message so the woman would be able to erase it when she picked up the money. “Good.”

As Angelica shut the door to the prize cells, she evaluated the guards she’d earned. They weren’t naturally loyal, but she could pay their price.

She uttered low words that brought the big women close to her.

By the time she reached the end of the hall, the unease had lifted. With what she’d paid them, those big women wouldn’t even let council members in to rent her prize without immediately calling her. Angelica couldn’t stop anyone from visiting him, but she would know about it even when the Den Mothers weren’t around and hopefully be able to intervene before Jason got hurt again.

On one layer, Angelica was busy going over how they would get to Baker. Under that, she was burning. After all she’d done and would do, she still couldn’t put out this fire. *I guess I’ll be picking through the rebels at the safe zone, after all.*

**5**

“Welcome to Round Three of the Bachelor Battles! Now that we’re down to just four contestants, all the matches will be held here in the big cage! Come bet on these man-hungry women as they fight to the death! Who’s ready to play? Who wants to play? Do ya? Do ya, really? Well, come on then!”

There was a brief pause where Angelica smothered a snarl. How had Candice stood the wait between matches? Clips of the week’s fights flowed along the tall screens as the enormous crowd screamed and pushed against the lines of sentries and barriers in front of The Block.

“Let’s talk about another of our fabulous fighters. Angelica Pruett is now in first place and has caused much the same furor at these games that her cousin Candice did nearly a month ago before going on to win. From stirring up rebellions in the Den Mothers, to ripping out throats with her teeth, she’s certainly living up to that brutal family name.”

Angelica hit the button, switching channels before she lost patience and used her claws on the screen.

“...refusing to let other contestants visit the prize Angelica has a fondness for. Rumors speculate if she wins, she’ll defend her title next week in an attempt to claim another of her favorites.”

The bounty hunter stopped on the next channel, studying the image. It was Stone Mountain. The charred, bare rubble sent her to the night it had been bombed. She still bore a scar from the destruction. She’d met the rebel leader there and spent a night in his compound with Candice. It had been full of life then. Now, even the jungle that had hidden them was withered and brown.

The station switched to a group photo of the ten most wanted rebels. Those faces were angry–even more than she was in the heat of the change. Their ready expressions and hard stances declared they were coming for the Network at some point. Angelica silently rooted them on before switching programs again. She hit the button, got the Network station.

“…are investigating a contestant’s claims that the bachelors are not safe. Changes to the system may already be in the works.”

Satisfied, she returned to the station for her coming challenge, ignoring the sounds outside the door as reporters and players prowled the halls. She’d planted a seed and it was growing.

“For the start of this round, the council will pick the exhibition for the remaining contestants. These elimination challenges are lethal. At least one of our contestants will not be with us when this is over. The top two finishers will feature in our elimination match. And our challengers will have to…climb the Wall of Death!”

**6**

“The Wall of Death is a fifty-foot granite cliff with deadly weapons and no dividers between the contestants! This should be wonderful!”

Angelica studied the wall as they waited for the announcer to finish, picking out places to hit and spots to avoid. She’d watched a few of the games, but the Wall wasn’t among them. She’d heard of it, of course, and the billboards upon entering New Network City were impossible to miss, but staring up at that unflinching challenge was enough to kick in her survival sense. Deeply anchored in the floor, it was as if part of a mountain had been set into this complex. She couldn’t even see the peak from where she stood.

“Our four challengers are allowed full contact in their race to be the first to reach the top. In order to make it harder, there are weapons hidden in the crags and ledges. How many will make it? Will this episode end right here, folks? It’s happened before!”

The gate slid open.

Angelica walked the fenced aisle to the line without responding to any of her opponent’s glowers. She was in the far right of the four lanes, but she already planned to take the farthest path and zigzag her way up.

High above them, camera crews waited patiently to capture every drop of blood.

“Are ya ready? Then go!”

To everyone’s surprise, Angelica stayed still as the other three fighters made a mad dash for the wall. They clawed at each other, drawing blood before the first foot of fifty was reached. Angelica waited until all of them were scaling the cliff.

“What is that clever little Pruett doing now?”

Angelica had an advantage over the others in one way. It would be enough to earn her second place–first, if she’d chosen the right dangerous path, but either spot would do. She wasn’t fighting for a mate now, but for family honor. It was a stronger drive than the change.

With that in mind, she ran forward to lunge up the wall, snagging a ledge that the others had avoided because of the height. She grunted at the sharp stone under her fingers, the unforgiving feel of the rock.

Angelica hefted herself up, feet catching a small crag to push from and then she lunged again, springing up four feet to snatch a wild hold on the edge of a weapon.

The claw hammer snagged the stone and caught her weight…it held. Angelica hung there long enough to secure a foothold and then she started climbing, using the claw edge with lunging swipes that would either advance her large distances or kill her when she fell.

Hungry edges tried to grab her, already tacky with blood from this week’s regular episode. The stone sliced into her wrist, her arm, her leg.

The other three contestants were bunched above her, set to get to the top first, but fighting was about to slow them down. Angelica kept moving.

Chelsea reached a knife and immediately threw it at the changeling athlete directly below her.

The blade sank into the weightlifter’s throat; she clutched at the hilt, falling.

The crowd roared drunken approval all around the wall. Those rafter-like seats gave them a bird’s eye view of the climb.

The other player acted in commercials, but in her free time, she liked to climb mountains. Angelica followed Chelsea’s lead. Her hammer slammed into the actress’s neck with a dull thud.

The starlet let go and fell.

The noise was deafening as Chelsea and the Pruett advanced toward each other, blue lights streaming, bloodlust flowing.

Angelica ducked the wild leg kick and punched, hitting Chelsea in the chest.

Gasping, Chelsea kicked violently.

Angelica took the boot to her shoulder, and grabbed the leg, using the momentum to yank Chelsea off the cliff.

Angelica swung her out and tried to let go, but Chelsea wrapped both legs around Angelica in an iron vise and dragged them both off the wall.

**7**

Angelica woke to find her off-limits prize standing next to the bed she was in, coated in concern. She swept his healing bruise, then the room. She was in the medical bay. The gated cubicle next to her held the final battle, judging from the sounds.

The medical bay was set up much like The Block, with a small center post for the doctor, surrounded by seven partitioned booths. Each one was gated and shaded by a thin curtain, allowing knowledge of each other, but no contact.

The bed was softer than the couch in her new studio and the equipment was well cared for, but the bright, white walls were a vivid contrast from the green Angelica had been waking to all week. There were no windows here either, but this time, she doubted it was to keep them in. It was more likely that their rulers didn’t want anyone to know what was on this side of the honeycomb complex. The secret was probably staggering.

In place of an eighth bay, a small walkway led to the main door. Less than ten feet from where she was, the shadow patrolling that entrance was unmistakable.

“What deal did you make to come here?” Angelica was full of bitter jealousy and rage that needed a target.

Jason looked away from her snarl. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me!” Angelica growled. “Don’t ever do it again.”

He bowed to the order. “I won’t.”

By the tone, she suspected the price was high. She admired his courage. “Will you be okay?” There was little she could do, but she had to ask. Want her or not, she already felt like he was hers.

“Yes. There’s only so much she’ll do right now.”

Her hand shot out to capture his wrist.

Jason didn’t flinch, but he stiffened.

“You can use my name. I give you permission.”

Jason smiled sadly–a small glimpse of the man she thought he might eventually become.

“I already did.”

Angelica didn’t ask what he had used it for, fading as the medication jerked her under. She released him. “Why did you come?”

“I had to make sure you weren’t…dead. I had to *see* you.”

His tone told her as much as his words. She was his single hope. That was why. Angelica closed her eyes to hold in the disappointment. “It takes more than that to kill a Pruett.”

*“Good!”*

For an instant, fury blazed hotter than the medication and her eyes became solid red as they flashed open. She hated the sound of his fear. “This will never happen to you again!”

Jason gave her another of those gentle smiles that she knew she could become addicted to.

“It’s worth it. Get better. *I need you*.”

She wanted to examine the tone, the words, but the darkness pulled her under.

Jason fastened the door to the gated compartment and locked it. He then waved the guards over and gave them a sharp glare that Rankin observed with interest. She’d been waiting for him to do exactly what he was now. Showing courage was rare.

“If the Pruett dies and there’s no feature match, the council will replace every one of you. Taking payments is fine, but not when it interrupts their scheduled programming. You know?” The worry from the hard sentries allowed Jason to turn to Rankin with an even tone despite the dread. He’d invoked Angelica’s name to get the Defender’s attention, to make her bring him here. Rankin hadn’t liked agreeing one bit and now, he would pay the fine. “I’m yours until dawn.”

Rankin’s evil blazed. She grabbed him by the arm, claws digging into his skin, stinging as she dragged him down the dimly lit service halls toward her den. He’d done the best he could to guarantee Angelica’s safety while she recuperated. If she won tomorrow night, she would protect him for a while after that. If she lost… Well, tonight would be a small sample of what he would suffer when Rankin bought him next month.

“Are ya ready?” Rankin cackled eagerly as she swung the gate open to march them into her foul scented room. “I know I am!”

**8**

**The Network**

“We’re all set for the meeting.”

“Good.”

It was just two of them, the Commander and the XO, enjoying the quiet.

The tower lounge was a large triangle-shaped room with an oddly formed desk in the center, surrounded by even odder chairs. Each armrest held a hand scanner, a note writer, and an alarm button. In the center of the desk, suspended with thin, durable chains, was a three-sided monitor showing darkness. Earlier, it had revealed a mob of thousands on the border with Canada.

Along these oddly shaped walls were doors for the council members. Each had their own entrance, providing ten total exits to be taken advantage of. Access to anything they wanted existed in those luxury residences, from hand served meals of tender veal and sweet fish that could only be had here, to stacks of intricate jewelry that many of the denizens liked to use for wagering on the games. The monarchs enjoyed their lifestyle immensely.

“Send word to the coast. We’re ready for them to bring in the leaders now.”

“What if they won’t come? The last meeting only saw half their council for the power exchange.”

Juli snorted. “We’re offering a double train of supplies and males. It’s twice what they usually ask for. They’ll show.”

“Sometimes those bought through desperation do not remain loyal. There may be alliances.”

There was a small silence. “That would be bad.”

Glad their leader understood, the XO spelled it out eagerly. “Yes. If the rebels convince the west to join their cause, we could be facing the very weapons we hope to gain. The bothersome Pruetts have to be dealt with soon. We can’t keep using them this way.”

“Rankin will handle it.”

“Yes, about our head Defender–perhaps she has already outlived her usefulness.”

The main chair squeaked as it was emptied, followed by a gentle swish of tailormade clothes–the kind their wealthy subjects would never be able to afford. Even council boots were made by the sweat of a person, instead of a machine. Animal pelts had never touched their unmarked skin. “Considering the fuel she added to the media fire by putting a mark on one of the bachelors, I’d have to agree.”

“She could be caught in the crossfire.”

“That sounds exactly like what will happen. Do it as soon as she gives us the location.”

The XO proceeded toward the exit, and then stopped. “Communication is almost nonexistent. What if Rankin can’t get a call through?”

There was a thoughtful pause… “Activate her locator beacon so we can keep track. As soon as she stops moving hard, we’ll send in the plane.”

“You know we only have five rockets and three warheads left?”

“Yes. Two are for the meeting.”

The XO leered. “And one for Canada?”

“If it comes to that.” Juli studied the monitors, mind flying. “We’ll use something a bit larger, then. The west is still littered with dangerous toys. After we kill the leaders at the power exchange meeting, we’ll control it all. The UN needs to be very careful with me. I never bluff.”

Chapter Five

**Are Ya Ready?**

Day 7

**1**

**A**fter twenty-four hours in the medical bay, healing and listening to her opponent growl in the next booth, Angelica was doing better. Unlike Chelsea, she didn’t mind solitude. She spent it deciding where her true loyalties were. She was a changeling and this disease might end her in time, but she was also a Pruett and before she went out, she wanted justice.

By all rights, both she and Chelsea should be dead and this episode over–with no winner. To keep that disappointment from ruining their game, the Network had used technology to heal broken ribs, punctured lungs, and snapped bones. They were both as good as new and she hated the enemy for it. If they had let her die, she would be free of this pain. Lying there with the Network’s unknown chemicals restoring even the missing finger that had been severed on a crag as they smacked into the wall on the way down, she’d had time to think. The conclusion she’d come to was staggering, especially to her Pruett mindset.

*I didn’t think I would win!* That was why she’d been able to ignore Jason’s betrayal so easily. Remission was a myth, and deep down, she’d always known*. I really did come here to die.*

It was a truth and a misery that she would hold close, but a newer, sharper edge had settled over her as she listened to the nearly incoherent ranting of the celebrity next to her. She loathed Rankin. They would meet outside these walls if she had her way, but Angelica hated the Network more. By keeping them alive to finish the episode, they had pushed her into the place where her cousin was. She had no choice now but to fight as hard as she could. When she won her new mate…

Angelica winced. When she got hertemporaryward to Baker, she would let Candice know she’d made the choice. *The Pruetts are for freedom, and until I burn up or out, so am I.*

**2**

“Welcome to the final match of this week’s episode of the Bachelor Battles! It’s certainly been one to remember, folks. Don’t forget to order your copy after the main event. Just twenty-eight UDs will get you every brutal fight, every prize visit, and every interview with all the vicious contestants. Order yours tonight!” There was a brief pause and then the reporter continued. “Let’s go live to the cage with Dana, the only reporter to successfully speak with a Pruett more than once. Tell us, Dana, what did the changeling have to say?”

Angelica gritted her teeth, sharpening the edges of her rage as she listened from a small, partitioned booth behind The Block.

The big cage was different in size and it lacked a withdraw rope. Located directly below the main stage, they were fighting in the center of another floor of those humiliating reporter shanties. Smoke and bitterness coated the air in equal amounts as Angelica waited to confront her last opponent.

“Good evening, Reggie. Yes, Miss Pruett seems to tolerate me, but let’s be clear. She has no weaknesses.”

“Ahh. It sounds like you took the odds and bet on her.”

“I probably shouldn’t admit it, but yes, I did. Go Pruett!”

Angelica smiled, one of the happy stretches of her lips that had no place here. She wiped it from her lips with the thought of Jason. She hadn’t seen him since his unexpected protection visit.

“Seriously, Dana. How did she feel about the council sending someone to investigate her claims?”

“Reggie, the bounty hunter didn’t think it would cause this uproar, that’s for sure, and she regrets making trouble for the Network. She firmly believes they’ll handle any issues they find. She’s a Network player.”

That sounded strange to Angelica, like it had a double meaning, but the fury was distracting her as she let it build.

“What about this bachelor she’s chosen? Will he get to attend the match?”

There was a soft chuckle. “No. He’ll be viewing on a wall screen.”

“Surrounded by all of her earned guards, no doubt.”

More laughter came and the rage sharpened. She didn’t like being called Angel, but she loathed being laughed at.

“Well, the bell is up. Enjoy that front row seat, Dana.”

“I will, and don’t forget folks, get your copy tonight for twenty-eight UDs!”

**3**

“Match Three. Winner Takes All!”

They entered The Block from opposite halls, both striding confidently. Angelica was careful not to look at her opponent as they entered the cage. With their big hair and manicured nails, these celebrity females had done nothing on a regular basis, other than making conquests of their fellow socialites. Their weak, soft bodies proved that. This oldest sister might have the change on her side, but her nails were jagged, bitten down to the quick and her neck was covered in bruises. Angelica wasn’t the only one who’d had trouble sleeping through the assassins.

If not for Jason’s words to her guards, the latest attacker may have succeeded in poisoning them both. Guards had shown up in time to plunge the syringe into the older woman’s throat, but the funny part was, neither of the final players knew the assassin. That was just New Network City–deadly.

Angelica still hadn’t officially met Rankin, but she’d observed the relaxed shadow, how *satisfied* she’d been after a night with Jason, and the fury had grown. She and Rankin had things to settle after she smeared this cage with blood.

Angelica could feel Chelsea’s rage simmering like hers, waiting to boil over, so she did what any Pruett family member would have done. She grinned.

The roar from the crowd was immense. They knew what was coming, and they were eager to see if Angelica had discovered the trap. If not, her death would happen in this match. Angelica briefly wondered how many in the crowd would be poor women by dawn because of that bet.

“Go!”

Chelsea delivered that powerful gaze of wounded agony as the bar slid down.

Angelica laughed openly and loudly. “Pruetts have no sympathy! Fight or die!”

Angelica could see Chelsea’s snap coming, and felt her own rising. This time, she surrendered that infamous control and let it happen, fury at everything now on display for the world. Heat ran up her legs, hair shooting out as her body swelled. Pain beat in her temples, rushing through her blood, stinging and gouging. The female across from her was going through the same evolution of flips. Their sounds mirrored each other in violent echoes.

The crowd was uncontrollable in their delight of simultaneous snaps. The players’ screams of agony were nearly drowned out by the mob’s excitement as the bloodlust burst into their eyes, turning them full crimson.

They advanced at the same time, two lethal fighters in full form. The crowd held its breath as two fists rose into the air.

Both landed, staggering each of them.

Angelica swung again, faster than Chelsea, and sent blood flying from her mouth.

The returning hit jerked Angelica’s head, blood running down her cheek...then she reacted as the situation deserved.

*Thud.* Angelica’s brutal swing of both hands together sent Chelsea to the mat.

She leapt to her feet, missing at least one tooth, but Angelica wasn’t done. Blood flew as she slammed her wrist into the starlet’s jaw, making her cry out. She’d had the advantage in every fight until now, but without the sympathy she relied on, Chelsea’s hits came as no surprise and did less damage. Angelica’s swings were brutal, and she delivered one after the other without a pause.

Angelica struck out again, catching Chelsea in the temple.

The starlet stumbled and fell, unable to think, to control herself while changed.

Instead of moving in for the kill, Angelica’s rage slowly began to fade. *Why don’t they train before coming here?*

Angelica hit Chelsea again instinctively as she struggled to get up, landing a harsh blow to the back of her neck.

Chelsea stayed down, bleeding, waiting to be finished off. And the Pruett hesitated.

“Do it!”

Chelsea’s words quivered with fear and hatred as the disease faded from her, too.

Angelica hesitated, unable to take her relief this way after all the conclusions she’d come to. It was wrong.

Chelsea glared. “What are you doing?!”

There was still plenty of fight in her. Angelica could hear it. She wanted to stop the battle, to demand answers about the Network.

Chelsea forced her hand. “Rankin had him last night. I heard them. I’ll bet he tasted sooo good!”

White heat flooded Angelica, rage instantly flaming back to life in an inferno of bloodlust.

Chelsea’s lids closed over teary black eyes as Angelica’s boot lifted, mouth opening. “I miss you, Momma. Good luck.”

The boot came down hard, snapping her neck with a perfectly delivered heel hit.

“Match to Pruett!”

**4**

*It’s over. I won. So why do I feel so empty, so lost?* Chelsea had wanted to die and Angelica hadn’t been able to stop herself. The starlet said the one thing she knew would snap Angelica into the killer that always lurked inside now.

Ignoring the crowd around the cage that was trying to shove through the rows of guards, Angelica exited the arena without waiting for the announcer. She had to see Jason.

There were small islands of people behind the curtains, most of them staff. Angelica strode to the door without responding to any of the reporters, including Dana. They followed determinedly, calling sharp questions.

“What did she say?”

“Were you about to offer mercy?”

Angelica heard another voice nearby, echoing over all the others.

“That’s our little Angel, folks!”

*Strike!* *You’re out of passes.* Angelica moved that way.

“…and so the littlest Pruett upholds the questionable family name, brutally executing more than... Hey! What are you doing? Give me–”

*Slap!* Angelica glared. “Don’t ever. Do that. Again.”

The reporter peered up in hurt surprise. “Do what?”

“Call me Angel.” Angelica exited the cubicle before the rage could slip out of the tight hold she had on it. She had to talk to him. She had to know he wasn’t hurt. *What if he has been?*

Her feet traveled faster through the corridors where they all shrank from her now. She wasn’t sure what she would do, but Angelica kept the change close in case she needed it to kill the head Defender while the Network and the world watched.

**5**

The episode champion was required to spend two days locked up with her prize while the Network verified the win. Angelica went there now. She didn’t care about the lack of luxury as she stalked toward the winner’s suite. So what if her steps echoed on the carpetless floors and drew the attention of the big guards at each end of the hall? She’d already proven she would kill for him. Her harsh profile would now grace a wall somewhere in the complex, along with Candice and Mary. They had become legends in the Bachelor Battles, but that wouldn’t send fans toward them like with some of the games champions. Angelica was glad. Groupies were the last thing she needed. A stalker would be more useful.

The blue haired Den Mother stood outside the winner’s apartment, wary, but determined.

Angelica didn’t want to talk.

“It’s not true and you’re smart enough to know it.”

Angelica pinned the woman with a harsh glare she didn’t flinch from.

“‘Twas just a lie meant to make you finish.”

Angelica knew it was the truth as soon as the woman said it, but the rage didn’t fade.

“The Network wants to control the power of some citizens.”

Angelica listened with growing revulsion.

Blue Mother explained in a fast rush of lowly spoken words that confirmed all of Angelica’s suspicions and then some. “They approach celebrities who are popular and offer them high credits to enter the games, or they blackmail them into it. They pay double for each contestant killed. Triple to the families if they die. Chelsea freed her mother and gave her a new life with a large amount of credits and no disgrace. She also weakened the Bush family. They’ll be consumed within a few years.”

Angelica reeled. Hadn’t she thought of the sisters as sacrifices and she, their executioner? How awfully right she’d been! The Network had rounded up a group of weaker females and killed them all through her and the other changelings. And it was happening every week, in every game they ran.

Angelica began to calm. “What about the winners?”

“They never know.” The Den Mother’s voice was kinder than Angelica felt she deserved.

“But the episode is always rigged, filled with uneven matches and death contracts?”

Instead of confirming it, the Den Mother changed topics. “What you did for the males was good. Fresh food came today and yesterday. They look better already.”

Angelica didn’t answer, too dazed. She’d been used, betrayed in ways totally different from the ones they’d all accepted. So had Candice, and maybe even her mother. Had it been going on longer? Willingly signing up was one thing, but being lured to death in order to send food and medical credits to your family was as wrong as it got.

Angelica ignored the Den Mother observing these thoughts spreading across her face, considering what it all meant. When she finally asked a single question, the woman was ready.

“Can I count on you in the future?”

“Yes. You’ll try to kill her?”

Angelica returned the gravity, giving this strange woman her promise. “I’ll do better than try.”

She went to the door. Her family had connections to be called upon, methods at their disposal that no one, not even the Network, knew of. Until then, she had a prize to claim–an untouched male who would stay that way.

Angelica opened the apartment door, hoping she had even half the control that Candice had shown by not hurting Daniel when he hadn’t recognized her.

Satisfied that things would soon change for them all, the Den Mother slipped into the bowels of the complex to whisper sweet nothings to the other Den Mothers who were enjoying their single off day for this month. All the bachelor caregivers had bet their life savings on the Pruetts. They were now wealthy women, but they still had to continue their servitude to avoid the Network suspecting fraud. Their boss didn’t like it when employees tried to go their own way. It usually spelled doom for their entire family. In this case, the money was a pad for when the Network fell.

The Den Mothers had been in this complex long enough to sense even the smallest vibrations in attitude towards their tyrannical rulers. This year, the Changeling Winds had brought ripples that were still slamming into the dome. The next stage in their evolution was coming. After this, humanity would flourish or die out in a quick, horrid spiral that couldn’t be halted.

Blue Mother didn’t care which one happened at this point. She just wanted the suffering to be over for all of them.

**6**

Angelica shut the door.

Jason gawked in horror at his new owner. She was streaked in blood, clenched fists leaving crimson drops. Without the usual cloak, her sleeveless shirt and thick arms were also covered in gory splatters. Under all that mess were tattoos and muscles.

Pink became crimson as Angelica scented Jason.

He instantly recognized she was wound too tightly from keeping control. The brutal cage match hadn’t been enough to quell it. This was his end of the deal now, to offer the relief she needed, but he was terrified.

Jason wanted to warn the rebels, and to be free of this place for the first time in fifteen years, but it was also his home. Now alone with this brutal changeling, warning the rebels that the Network knew where the safe zone was suddenly seemed trivial compared to surviving what he’d willingly agreed to. And Rankin? Why had he feared her? *This* one might actually kill him.

Now that the deed was done and his future set, Jason couldn’t move. He could talk though; he forced the required submission out through quivering lips. “Anything you want.”

*“Anything you want.”* Lust slammed through Angelica. She’d won him. He was hers... *No, he isn’t.*

The rage increased, threatening to flip her into an animal in her grief. Angelica marched to the washroom at a quick clip. She wasn’t safe to be around and he couldn’t help.

Angelica slammed the door, flipped the flimsy lock. She now had a mate who didn’t want her. What had she gone through all of that for? Her heart clenched as she dropped to sit on the floor, shivering in torment. She’d won the game, but lost herself. All she could feel was need and hurt, and she stayed where she was as it burned through her like flames racing across dry grass.

*I’m safe with her.* The stories about these strange Pruett women were true. Jason was delighted to discover it. He wouldn’t be hurt, but she would be. He’d tricked her, drawn her to his scent with no thought for her pain, and her honor wouldn’t let her accept the service he’d been trained to deliver.

Jason waited for the sound of water or any noise, but the tense silence made him worry. She was suffering and he had a low tolerance. Hadn’t Rankin’s begging broken him as much as her anger? Last night had been no different. She’d taken him to the brink and then held him there until he was the one pleading for relief. At least he hadn’t bled this time. Jason suspected the Network was to thank for that. They hadn’t liked being embarrassed by his bruise on live waves.

*Silence…* Jason nervously swept the flat. All three rooms of the winner’s apartment were covered in the most basic of drab furnishings. The walls appeared wooden, but Jason was positive it was something more durable. They were smooth and neat, without much wear and tear. He’d often wondered how the Network managed that without constantly having a construction crew up here. Changelings were notoriously violent.

*More silence…* Against his better judgment, Jason went toward the door.“Would it help to eat?”

Angelica’s breath caught at the sound of his voice. In her misery, she hadn’t heard his steps.

“Yes.” *Anything to get him away!*

Angelica had confronted her future, but she’d been ignoring the desolation. She had no idea how she would spend the next two days (*nights!)* shut in with him.

“What would you like?”

“Anything!”

There was a pause while he realized she didn’t care. “Angelica?”

“What?!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know this would be so bad for you.”

Angelica squeezed her lids together so tightly that spots swam across her vision. “I’ll live.”

And she would, though she already knew the next weeks would bring her to her limit.

She felt Jason reaching for the doorknob.

Angelica slammed her fist through the bottom panel. *Crack!*

Her claws curled around his ankle in an iron grip.Flames shot through her skin at the contact; she snatched her hand back. “You come through this door and you’ll be mine, willing or not!”

Angelica listened to him flee and dropped her head, taking deep breaths that gave her pink tints instead of red. She used an image of Candice’s superhuman control, concentrating. *Better*.

Flat black snapped into place. Other than the newest torment she was being cursed with, not much had changed. They would still meet her sister, Sam, and she would escort them to where Baker and the smaller group of rebels were pinned down. From there, they would all travel to the larger safe zone.

Heat rushed over her again at the thought of being in a base with more than four hundred males like Jason, but Angelica shoved it away in frustration. She would have to build up a tolerance. To survive this without hurting anyone, she had to be able to make it to the safe zone where the majority of Baker’s males were waiting for him. Surely in all those arms, would be one *willing* to have a mate like her.

Angelica stood up to get the shower running. In the safe zone were males she hadn’t met yet. One of them would hit her in the way Jason did. *I don’t have to have this one.*

**7**

Angelica came from the washroom. “I’ve decided to take you up on your offer of a service.”

Jason froze with a knife and fork in his grip, more surprised by his reaction than by her giving in. His body had twitched. Jason assumed it was a result of being left unsatisfied last night and the drugs lingering in his system. He shifted uncomfortably.

Jason had to revise his theory right away. It wasn’t the drugs. He’d never seen Angelica without blood on her. She was beautiful. Golden muscles covered in tattoos gleamed with water still falling from her wild hair, and the soft material of her black shirt soaked up those drops to outline breasts that grew pointed under his interest.

Jason dropped his attention lower and felt that forbidden male half wake further. Her black shorts stopped midthigh; her legs were long, curved, rippling magnets that he didn’t want to look away from as she came toward the table.

Jason swallowed. Maybe it wasn’t so bad that she’d changed her mind.

Knowing he did want her, even if it was just her body, went a long way in keeping Angelica under control. It also soothed her ego to know he was drooling over what she’d chosen to show. She gave a snort.

Jason flushed, reading her amusement. “You’re better now.”

“I’ll live.” Angelica pulled on her robe as she came to the table he had set. “I need something from you. We’ll deal.”

He instantly became the fearful slave whose wide gray eyes drew whitecaps of pity and lust.

Angelica wanted the rules set. “You won’t serviceme.” Pink. *Control!* Black again. “You will help me build up a tolerance to males.” His brow wrinkled in confusion and a little disappointment? Yes. *Good*.

“How?”

Angelica drew in air and revealed a plan she knew to be solid. “Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits. Enough of it will either kill me or cure me.”

*“Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits.”* He craved that life and she was offering to let him practice on her! “Why would you do that?”

“I have to.”

The good mood went out of her voice to be replaced with a fear he hadn’t suspected her capable of.

“There are hundreds of males where we’re going.”

Instead of relief or shock, jealousy rolled through Jason’s gut. “You’ll pick one of them?”

“If they *want* me.”

Jason winced at her pain.

“Will you help me?”

“Yes.” Jason tried not to let her read his thoughts. Angelica might make a good mate; he’d begun to realize that already, but he’d blown that with his desperate lies. Hadn’t he? “What are the rules?”

She gave him that sharp smirk, but her fingers bent the spoon into a foreign shape. “There are three. One–this will be real to those we spend time around. I expect you to act like it at those moments.”

Jason assumed she didn’t want them to know she was bargaining with her new prize. “Two?”

The spoon broke in half, making Jason wince. If he’d suspected this level of pain for her, he might have made other plans.

“I’m pure. I’ll stay that way for *my* mate. You will not force things because you pity me.”

The snarl in her tone was ugly.

Jason managed to keep himself silent by sheer will. She really wasn’t a breeder. He’d believed she was lying to ease the bachelor’s fears. He pushed away the picture of those perky breasts that had never known a man’s hands, mouth. “Three?”

“This deal isn’t over until I pick a replacement.”

Meaning he would stay with her until she chose one of the rebels. Weeks with her, maybe even months of getting to know her…*and making sure the other males don’t.*

Jason didn’t know where that thought had come from, and he wondered again if she would kill him when she found out what lengths he was going to in order to be positive...of what? His safety? No. His children. His sons wouldn’t be ripped from their mother’s lifeless, burnt-out arms or witness their father die from a changeling snap. “I agree, with a condition. I need to be retrained.”

*Retrained*. “Where did you hear that?”

“Rankin. She said that’s what Candice had done to Daniel.”

Her vision became pink, but Angelica willed it away. The rage was easier to banish than the need. She picked up the second spoon and dipped it into the bowl without caring what he’d made. “Explain what you mean.”

“I want to be like Daniel.”

*That’s what I want, too*, Angelica thought. Jason had those big arms resting on the table, leaned forward slightly in a manner that made her want to leave the chair and seal their lips. “How do you know about him?”

“I was part of the prizes last month.”

“Was Daniel brave here?”

“He was a massive coward, like the rest of us. Apparently, your cousin retrained him into a legend in weeks.” Jason snickered, stealing her breath. “One of the rebels was caught and returned to the cells. He said Daniel *took* a changeling and made her fall in love without burning out!”

Angelica nearly growled in her agony. She’d been there for enough of it to ache for the same. Daniel was something of a legend to her, as well. “So, you want more courage?”

“And strength. If the rebels fight, I want to be able to help.”

Angelica reflected on Candice and Daniel, on her words to him as they’d exited the destroyed base.

*“I’ll make you the strongest man in his safe zone. You’ll be at my side while we help him rebuild our world. Together.”*

Angelica pushed away from the table. “We’ll get on it in the morning.”

She fled to the safety of the master bedroom with red sight and a hardening heart. She wanted Jason, so she would give him what he’d asked for. During the heat, she would pick out the traits that drew this harsh reaction from her, so she would know what to search for in another male.

Angelica sighed, dropping onto the well braced bed. The rebels already had big shoes to fill.

Chapter Six

**Working It Out**

Day 8

**1**

**J**ason doing pushups stunned Angelica. Whenever it was possible, she started her day with a set of muscle building exercises, and suggested he do the same. They’d done it this morning, starting nice and slow, but Jason didn’t need the concession. He was in great shape, not breathing harshly even after running in place for ten minutes.

They hadn’t conversed, just worked side-by-side, dripping sweat from pullups on the doorframes. Angelica had almost lost it when those arms hefted that rigid male body into the air. She’d turned before he caught her drooling, but she was mesmerized by those pushups, by the way his body dipped, rose, flexed.

*I want to be under him!*

“Angelica?”

She tried to think beyond the need, the smell of him. She hadn’t regarded scent as important until Jason had filled her brain with burnt chocolate and begun burning her alive.

“I’m good.” Her vision was pink, like it had been most of the day, but she wasn’t in danger of snapping yet. He had drops of sweat rolling down his chest and from his hair. Angelica felt her heat flip up another notch.

She dug into her own sets. Up, down…up…*damn*. What would she do around fifty of them sweating this way while Candice whipped them into shape? She wanted to be with her cousin for the rebellion, but like this, Angelica felt useless. She dug in harder. *Up, down, up, down.*

Jason’s breathing was finally growing rough and she stole another peek at him.

Up, *flex*, down, *ripple*…

Up, *heat*, down, *flames*…

Aware of him swinging her way as if he could feel her obsessing, Angelica shoved to her feet. “That’s enough for now.”

He stood up, within touching distance.

Angelica’s hand rose.

Fear and curiosity warred in Jason as Angelica lifted her fingers. She gawked at his sweaty chest with intent flames, but her eyes were only pink, so he pushed his luck. “Tolerance, remember. Go ahead.”

“I won’t need to…” She stopped, realizing she would want to touch whichever male she chose.

Jason held still as she thought it over.

“I don’t believe this is what I meant by tolerance.”

Jason knew instantly she’d never done this. He liked it that his chest would be the first she’d ever touched.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Jason knew what she needed and gave the lie easily. “I trust you.”

Her lips quivered and there was a sense that she might cry. Instead, she placed her hand over his heart.

Ready for fondling or even a swipe of her claws, Jason stilled under her touch as tension crackled. Her hand was heavy, a bit rough, and hot. Jason slowly brought his own up to cover hers.

Jason’s body responded to her touch on its own, drawing a current of electricity that made her nipples harden. *Hmm…* “We’ll probably have to get you used to a bit more of this.” Jason felt the skin next to his heat up another degree.

Their eyes met, sparking violently.

Angelica gently pulled out of his loose grip. “Slowly, Jason. I’m not made of iron.”

He tried to push away the daze. “There’s no way anyone will believe we’ve mated.”

That cooled her off, and sent her away from the delicious temptation of touching him again. “They don’t need to think it. They only need to know I’m content with you.”

“But they won’t. They’ll see you holding back.”

Sam especially would notice it, but Angelica didn’t know what to do about that. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You could tell the truth–you’re freeing me and you haven’t picked a mate yet.”

“That will get you claimed before we can get to the compound!” Angelica growled. Her voice lowered. “Sam’s Runners would love to make use of your services.” Horrible jealousy flooded her stomach.“Get us set for lunch! I’ll have a shower.” She turned away. “A cold one.”

**2**

“You could draw a list of requirements.”

Angelica looked up from her duck and wild rice. It was the first words spoken between them since she’d fled this afternoon. “Requirements for what?”

Jason tried to keep his voice casual. “A mate.”

Her grip tightened on the fork. “That’s a good idea.”

“Sure. It’ll be easier to narrow it down with some interviews.” Jason led her carefully, looking forward to her list. Once he fulfilled his duty to the rebels, he would have his own life and Jason was curious as to how well he and Angelica matched.

“Now or should we work out some more?”

Her face darkened at the memory of him half-naked and dripping sweat. “The list!”

Jason hid a smirk at the growl, surprised by his bravery. He was manipulating a changeling–successfully. It was exciting. “Okay. I’ll write, you pick.”

She dropped the silverware and shoved away from the table. “Yeah, done a great job there so far.”

His guilt rose, but Jason wisely kept his mouth shut.

Angelica pulled a note writer from a drawer and tossed it onto the table by his hand. “We’ll do it based on a set of personal questions once I get a batch narrowed down.”

She’d clearly been thinking about it, about how to sort through the hundreds of rebel males. Jason didn’t like that. “Okay. Let’s go with something easy. Do you have a preference for hair color?”

Her pink gaze went straight to his shaggy mane.

Jason hid a prideful smirk as he wrote it down. “Long or short?”

Her fingers curled into fists. “Long is good.”

He recorded it, trying to remember the next question. Angelica had a sexy undercurrent to her voice that made it hard to think. *We’ve all assumed only male voices are special!*

“Okay.” Jason cleared his throat. “How about height? Do you like ‘em big?”

She flushed and dropped her chin again, making Jason wish he could read her mind.

“Size isn’t important.”

*Now why do I think that’s a lie?* “What about facial hair?”

Her gaze traveled his freshly shaven jaw, and Jason prepared to write down neat and clean.

“I don’t mind a beard.”

Jason tried not to protest as he wrote it down. *I mind.* “And weight?”

“Healthy.”

Now he did frown. Her tone implied he wasn’t. “Healthy?”

She glanced over Jason’s body. “Another twenty pounds, maybe thirty.”

Jason blanched. She wanted a fat mate? He wasn’t sure he could do that as he copied it–*heavier is better*. Rankin had drilled the current weight into him so that he didn’t exceed what she wanted. It would be hard to go against it.

“Okay, any other features you prefer? Lips? Hands? Teeth?”

She snorted. “It would be good if they had them.”

Jason stared in surprise. A sense of humor was something he hadn’t expected her to have because she was so ruthless. He continued with an awakening sense that this might be even more insightful than he’d first thought. “Okay, must have lips, hands, and teeth.” He leered and her lips curved upward in return. She was relaxing, showing her true nature without meaning to. He quickly asked the next question before she could realize it and shut down again. “Any special skills you’d like your mate to have?”

“There are a few…”

Jason was ready to take them down. He already knew she liked it that he was educated and had good house skills. What else did she want in a mate?

“Courage.”

Jason’s head snapped up, aware that he was scowling at a changeling, but right then, fear wasn’t foremost in his mind. She’d demanded a quality that he wasn’t positive he could embody. Manipulating her was a level of bravery he was faking. He didn’t think he could take it much further. “In a man? Naturally?”

She gave a curt nod.

He wrote it down with a sinking mood. “That’ll thin the group.”

“Exactly. If they can’t even speak to me, how could we ever build a life together?”

Jason relaxed a little, understanding she meant it in smaller ways. “So, not scared to talk to you.” He looked at the list instead of her. “How bold should they be?”

There was a moment of thick silence where the bachelor knew not to look at her or it would spark another hot moment between them.

“If we both enjoy it, in private there are no limits.”

His heart thudded at the image. He wrote it with a shaky hand. “You said there were a few things...”

“Smell!” Angelica’s voice roughened, sharpened with need. “They have to *smell* good to me.”

The image of her sniffing rebel males made Jason react quicker than he wanted to. “Should you be cuffed for that?”

She could have been angry at the tone, but Angelica only shrugged. “Maybe.”

Jason scowled. “Next?”

She rotated toward the window and he waited while she gathered her thoughts.

“No kids–ever. I won’t curse a child with this pain.”

*No kids.*

Jason hadn’t been prepared for that. He underlined it as his heart lurched. That was something they couldn’t work out.

“How do the bachelors feel about the breeding program?”

Knowing she hated the Network as much as he did allowed Jason to give the truth. “We hate it. It’s a different level of rape than the renting rooms.” His tone lowered into fear he couldn’t hide. “I would have been in it if not for Rankin.”

Angelica was starting to really hate the top Defender. What would she feel when they actually met? Angelica had no doubt that they would, not after spending this short time with the male Rankin wanted. Jason was special, impossible to resist. She could understand how a female would become obsessed; she now held little doubt that blue Den Mother was right. Rankin would come for him. “I’d also like him to be able to hunt with us.”

“Like Daniel does?”

*Was that jealousy?* *Interesting.* “Yes. I don’t want to have to leave my mate at home for weeks or even months while I’m on a run.”

Jason clearly wanted to question. Angelica followed up on it when he stopped himself. “He wouldn’t have to kill. That’s *my* job.”

His face relaxed, confirming one of her theories about why he was so willing to do this. Jason wanted to be retrained, by Pruett standards. Why?

“What do you want, after the rebellion is all over? To run your household and settle down?” He pretended to be absorbed in the list. “Keep bounty hunting? Something else?”

Angelica wasn’t anticipating such an insightful question. She opened her mouth to say something Candice would have slapped her for. “I don’t expect to live that long.”

Jason didn’t like it either. She knew by the way his lips thinned into a hard line. Angelica shrugged as if she wasn’t terrified. “It’s just a matter of time before stage three or four ends me.”

He stared. “You do know.”

“Yes.” Desperation had her uttering the next words. “Unless one of the males can help me, I’ll snap.”

“How can they help? When changelings find happiness, burnout takes over. Up or out, it’s no good.”

“Remission.” Angelica’s hands clenched into tight fists. It was the first time she’d ever spoken it.

“But that takes a perfect match!” Jason protested. “It’s only happened twelve times in hundreds…”

When her expression changed, he assumed it was the sound of his voice and fell silent.

It was, sort of. Angelica was fighting the breakers of misery at his disbelief. Even the bachelors knew how unlikely remission was.

“We’d better be more specific on the questions, then, if that’s what you need.”

The pity was hard to tolerate. She shifted away. “Later.”

She heard him get to his feet, felt his concern.

“Angel…”

*That name! The peace I can never have again!* Angelica punched the door, growling when her fist went straight through it.

“Wait.”

“Later!”

But he wasn’t getting the message, not cowering from her anger. Angelica froze when his big hands settled on her shoulders.

“We’ll find your match.” Jason turned her rigid body around and didn’t flinch from her brilliant pink stare. He did drop his hands, though. “We’ll find it. I won’t leave you until we do.”

It was too much, *him* offering to stand by her except in the way she needed most. Angelica shuddered with the urge to spill blood.

“How did your cousin do it?”

She found enough control to force out words. “Do what?”

“Keep from burning up until she retrained Daniel?”

Angelica thought of Baker and the base they’d stayed in, and felt another chill of hatred for the Network. They’d taken their cut. Had her match been one of the bodies they’d been forced to leave for the Network’s cleaning crew? “She had a friend. Baker.”

“Wow.”

His surprise helped her draw that dangerous anger in. “We all believed she would keep them both, but…”

“Pruetts aren’t built that way?”

“No. We’re for freedom.”

“Why don’t you have a friend?”

That was harder to explain. Angelica leaned against the door, marveling over how he’d unknowingly calmed her. Had it been unknowing? “I don’t want to waste what time I have on a friend.”

“Would he stay with your family?”

She thought he sounded a lot different than the trembling slaves in the cells–different than he had been then to her, as well. “If he wanted to.”

“Would he…belong to one of them, then?”

Jealousy stole her compassion. “Yes. Pruetts don’t waste men!”

The notion of going from this well controlled changeling to one of her brutal relatives was bad, but her pain kept Jason pushing. He had to get that desolation off her, even if it was replaced with lust. “That should be on the list. Males want to know their future will be secure.”

Angelica studied him as if she suspected the dangerous game he was playing with her emotions. Jason opened his mouth to distract her again.

She was faster. “Do *you* have a list?”

“Yes.”

“Is it long?”

“No.”

“Is there anything you would be comfortable sharing?”

She was reading him. Jason gave her a minor detail, hoping she’d stay with it. “Not loyal to the wrong people.”

Angelica frowned. “That’s too easy. We have a deal, Jason. You’re learning a great deal about me–and comparing, I’m guessing. It’s not fair that I can’t do the same.”

“I’m not picking a mate.”

“Aren’t you?”

Caught, he flushed, and then snickered ruefully. “I might be noticing a few things I’d like to have at some point.”

“Such as?”

There was the heat again, from *him*.

Jason’s gaze went to her chest and she laughed!

It gave him the courage to ask the question he wanted to know the most at that moment. “Why does having a friend make a changeling burn slower?”

The flare of electricity was instant. He retreated at the red flicker.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask my cousin.”

Jason acted as if he wasn’t dying to get to the next question. “So, you’ve never–”

“No.”

The image of Angelica under him, pleading for him to take her, was one that had–

“The list, Jason!”

He flushed darker, turning toward the note writer to copy the things they’d covered and to collect some air. *She has such an odd effect on me.*

Jason determinedly sent the conversation to the things he needed to know. “The males there are probably damaged, in one way or another. Do you have a line for handling that?”

Angelica let out a tortured sound. “I’d help them all if I could, but I’m burning!”

Her shoulders drooped. “They have to be able to provide a service when it’s needed, but more than that, they have to *want* to.” Angelica veered toward the bedroom. “None of this matters if they aren’t truly willing, and I can tell the difference.”

She felt his response coming, but didn’t turn. “I can’t take you that way, Jason. Please stop dishonoring us both by offering.”

That hurt him a little. Jason let her go. He didn’t like these games, but he had to protect himself. He glanced over the list they’d made.

*Black hair–long*

*Size–big*

*Beard*

*Bigger is better.*

*Sense of humor*

*Courage–follow instincts when alone*

*Smell good*

*No kids–big problem*

*Hates the Network*

*Knows she’s burning up. How can I help when she won’t take a service?*

*Hunt with them–check out family. Who gets me?*

*Remission*

*No friends–Pure!*

It would seem he’d crossed her list with his own. Jason contemplated the many ways they matched. In one short conversation, she’d shown nearly half the traits and emotions he needed. The two biggest he’d been positive that few would ever get by, she’d already passed–the ruthlessness to stand up to Rankin and a loathing of the Network that matched his own. Even if she didn’t meet the rest of it, Jason already doubted he’d find a better match for his vision of the future.

*Drugs not needed*

*Kids, a family*

*Strong enough to resist the burnout or willing to train me before we mate, so I can protect us.*

*Must hate the Network.*

*Has to want me for more than sexual relief.*

*Can kill Rankin.*

It wasn’t a long list, but he wouldn’t budge on any of it. Not even for the chance to match with a Pruett.

**3**

*Kablammm!*

Angelica and Jason were woken by a deep, shattering explosion that sent them off the bed and couch, and onto the floor.

Angelica hurried for clothes, waving a sharp hand as Jason came to the master bedroom. “Stay in here. Don’t make me hunt you.”

She knew he would, but she had to say it anyway. He was already important to her.

Ignoring the other panicking residents of this floor, Angelica left the apartment with a hard glare at the sentry on the hall. The big woman was supposed to secure all of the males behind these doors whenever their owners were away, but Angelica’s glare warned the Defender to do more than her duty over Jason.

Angelica took a minute to look out the window instead of going downstairs in the crush of the mob. Up here, there were slits in the shades that allowed limited glimpses of the main half of New Network City. What she saw was a shock.

The Justice Building, where the Pruetts had done so much business, was gone. In its place was a twisted, burning pile of wreckage that had been caused by a powerful explosion. The buildings on either side had serious damage, but the leaning tower of authority the Network liked to show their logo on was now a smoking pile of rubble.

Less than half a mile north of the gates that she and Jason would exit through in a few hours was the train station. Behind the large, dome covered platform that was lined with durable foam and security, were tracks and the long black train they would take all the way to Ohio. Troops began to pour from the sleek transport.

Angelica instinctively counted them as big women flooded the streets, grabbing the gathering citizens, hitting them with electric clubs. Her mind went to the prize she had stashed. They were set to depart shortly. If something big were happening, she would be contacted. Leaving Jason up here alone would be a mistake.

Another swift glance through the next dirty window gave her the unthinkable sight of two hounds tearing a woman to shreds while her young girls screamed in horror from the nearby church stairs. Homeless shanties around the chaotic scene began to disappear as locals fled in panic. The hounds were mutated dogs controlled remotely by thick, spiked collars around their melon shaped heads. Bred for security and sport, the hounds ran in large packs to guarantee no survivors. It was still a fight that changelings might have won, if not for the mutated dogs also being infected.

*Run girls. You’ll be next*. Angelica twisted away before the urge to help them took over.

The console alarm on her wrist sounded with an incoming message as she returned to their apartment and secured the door.

Jason was in the shower. Angelica forced herself not to picture him standing in there naked, dripping water.

The message was short. *No change in plans.*

Angelica deleted the words and then flipped off her wrist device. It was hard to track what wasn’t putting off a signal.

Assuming the increased security would include searches of everyone who boarded the trains, Angelica packed carefully. Some of these things, like the camera with images of entrances and alarm consoles, would be hard to explain and she tucked them into hidden pouches. She’d been busy during her time here.

The winner’s apartment was identical in space to the grungy green flats she’d had below, except there was now a small bedroom connected by a set of mismatched wooden doors. Hanging oddly, they left a crack. It was depressing. She couldn’t wait to be outside. Even the windows were tinted black and covered in bars, but it didn’t matter. From this high up, there was nowhere to go but down.

The apartment was old, almost musty even after the fresh scents they’d put into it during their time here. It was the smell of people long gone–the ones who’d left their ghosts to haunt the Network. Winner or not, there was no way to come away from these bloody halls undamaged. Angelica was no different.

She rubbed the pinky finger she’d lost and regained during the Network’s Wall challenge. It didn’t feel right now, sort of like her soul. It was there and it worked, but it would never be the same.

Jason studied Angelica, coming out to stand in her doorway with dripping wet skin.

She could feel his near panic. It was heavy, clearly, but also something he was used to carrying and she offered no comfort. He’d chosen not to be hers, not to accept her full protection. She would do the best she could, but in the end, it might not be enough and she was certain he already knew it. “We leave at noon.”

“I’m ready.”

Yes, she could hear that. He’d been here most of his life, trapped in hell. This must be like a new life about to begin. *How terrifying*.

Against her will, Angelica’s voice was soft. “We’ll work something out for you. Baker will be able to help you find whatever it is you need.”

Jason didn’t answer.

Maybe he already doubted Baker’s influence even though he’d never met the rebel leader, but more likely, he was pondering what it would be like to be out there alone. Her mouth opened again. “I’d have you know you can come to me, later. If you get in trouble and need help. I’ll give you the mark when you ask for it.”

His shock was obvious. She realized he didn’t believe she would free him. Instead of trying to convince him, she resumed packing. In time, he would understand her family was always trustworthy, even when it hurt.

“Thank you–for everything.”

Angelica snorted harshly, but didn’t respond otherwise. She didn’t want Jason to feel like he owed her, though of course, he did. She wouldn’t ever collect on such a debt. She was better than that. She was a Pruett.

Chapter Seven

**A Smooth Ride**

Day 9

**1**

**T**hey had the fire out by the time Jason and Angelica departed for the train. Smoke still lingered in the gusty air that was scattering ashes across the city like it was the aftermath of a new war. Angelica didn’t turn from the bodies the way Jason did. Those were a common sight for her, though usually not in the streets of this city.

Inside the dome were neat paths made of star shaped stones and clean citizens going about their lives under the Network’s protection. They were well fed, safe to shop and eat, and even sing at the new theater that looked like it hadn’t been open long. They were able to get their paints and rent a man when the need came. Their water flowed and their children slept through the night. What did they care if another bomb site had been quickly covered by Network flags and tarps? When it hit their day-to-day lives, when those expected benefits didn’t come, so would their loyalties. Until then, the Network flunkies wouldn’t budge on their views.

Outside that bubble, however, were thousands of desperate, starving wretches who received nothing from the ruling council that kept them hungry; thousands of angry women who could be swayed to any cause with the proper encouragement.

The wind gusted hard, blowing Angelica’s cloak open to reveal the gun she’d been holding ready since they left the complex. Those who noticed it stayed out of her way.

Angelica sent a hard glare around to drive in the point. She caught Jason’s glance back at the dome they’d just exited. What did he see?

Angelica saw an impressive palace of dark glass triangles and smoky steeples. Would he miss it? Now was not the time to ask. She turned toward the train.

As the walkway grew more crowded, Jason hurried to catch up.

Angelica let him fall in closer than he should have been for their arrangement. Anything could happen out here.

The sight of five elite Defenders standing at the ramp to the platform didn’t worry Angelica, but their expressions drew a flutter from that Pruett instinct. Extra security was pouring into the city after the morning’s blast, but these five large females were zeroed in on her and Jason. She followed her instincts. “If something happens, go underground. Leave me a trail.”

Jason’s wave of fear said he’d heard. Angelica marched toward the sentries with a hard glare. Mentally, worry flared hotter.

In front of the uniformed team was a wide woman with scars scattered over her exposed skin. She’d had the pox. A hundred and fifty years after the war, the disease had surged, decimating surviving populations. The high fevers that came with it hadn’t helped the birth rates, and it was only after the vaccine was distributed that the pox finally came under control. Many towns still experienced small outbreaks.

Scars held out a clipboard. “We need your signature.”

Angelica took the pen with a steady hand. As she did it, she noticed the next form was Jason’s papers. She understood they were checking her signature, but she wasn’t sure why. This wasn’t standard procedure. Whoever held those papers held Jason’s freedom. That copy should be in the files. The original was a carefully folded square secured under her left breast.

All around them, residents of New Network City and visitors went by, gawking at her and her prize, pausing to window shop. Most on foot, the occasional horse also padded slowly by, being led. Considering the morning’s activity, things were calm.

“It matches.” The guard signaled them forward.

Angelica walked up the ramp, relieved. She’d expected worse.

Jason slowly followed, drawn by the hustle and bustle of the city. He didn’t see the woman on horseback swerve toward him.

The big changeling clubbed Jason on the head. As he fell, another set of arms was there to catch him and toss Angelica’s prize over her shoulder as if he weighed nothing.

*Damn it!* Angelicahefted herself up the side of the train, using the handrails to climb. As her feet hit the rubber roof, she aimed her gun.

Jason was over the saddle now, hanging in front of the cloaked rider like a slab of meat. Angelica aimed carefully. After the morning’s blast, she knew gunfire was a bad idea. Two shots would probably have troops opening fire in reflex, but she wouldn’t let those thieves take him out of the city. *Those are my balls!* Angelica pulled the trigger.

The horse reared as its rider was blown from the saddle.

Jason’s body thumped heavily to the dirt next to the two filthy women.

She’d gotten both scavengers with one pull of the trigger. As a Pruett family tracker, it was a shot Angelica had become known for. One was a painful chest wound to allow interrogations, and one was a kill shot, to prove who she was. In this case, she hadn’t bothered to spare one of them. She was already sure who’d arranged the kidnapping.

All around her, fingers were tightening on triggers, guards were spinning, and well-fed necks were craning eagerly.

“Halt!”

Angelica raised her hands. “I’m Angelica Pruett, winner of a games Challenge. That’s *my* prize.”

Scars had already identified them. She had no choice but to stick to it or her team would discover she’d been responsible for the attempt. Angelica wasn’t sure how she knew this Defender was the one who’d paid the scavengers, but she was certain. Maybe Scars had wanted Jason, but more likely, Rankin was pulling her strings.

Instead of snatching Scars by the throat like she wanted to, Angelica didn’t make eye contact when she climbed down. The enemy couldn’t discover the Pruetts had learned their secrets, their weaknesses. Not yet.

Angelica ignored the fear and anger of the mob gathering around the site for a dead body show and souvenirs. She would collect Jason and continue onto the delayed train. The medics there would tend him and she would keep a weapon in hand the entire time.

Jason slowly sat up, eyes finding Angelica striding toward him with fury and triumph lining her face. *She saved me!*

Angelica scooped him up onto his feet and got him moving toward the train, but she didn’t speak. She wasn’t sure that she could. *I’m already a mess at the thought of being without him. I have no idea how I’ll ever let him go.*

**2**

Jason had taken the train with Rankin once and memorized the layout while doing errands for her. He came through the compartments now to where he’d heard the conductor tell Angelica her rooms were. He didn’t feel hurt, just tired, but even that was fading. Rankin had often called him hardheaded. She’d been right about something. Who would have guessed?

Angelica walked behind Jason, ignoring the passengers and their surprised, hungry expressions upon seeing him and the blood splatters on his clothes. Jason wondered what she thought of these Network people. They were almost the only kind who could afford this ride. He strode faster through the next compartment, where those they passed flinched away from his owner in fear.

The Network Rider was a sleek, black and gold train with fifteen long cars. The front end was control cars and guard quarters. The center was passenger cars and services. The end was for those special people who could afford the privacy. It pleased him to pass Rankin’s room. The Defender had her own den here, though Jason didn’t know how she had managed that. His heart eased. If only for a little while, he’d left his terror behind and her empty den was proof of it.

On the way through the service stalls, Angelica gestured at the medics. Two neutered males fell in behind them, making Jason feel protected, cared for. What a dangerous sensation!

Angelica had rented the two cars near the service area. Jason typed in the code he’d heard the conductor rattle off, then held the door for her as he’d always done with Rankin.

“Tend to him.”

Angelica’s voice was menacing. Jason quickly sat on the edge of the couch. He listened to the medic’s conversation while they examined the shallow gash behind his ear. Angelica had killed for him, again. Jason should have been scared or upset, but he was only grateful. She was strong enough to keep him. If only he knew more about her; if only he didn’t feel so weak! Jason sighed. He couldn’t allow himself to sink into being cared for, or worse, being pampered. He suspected Angelica was capable of that and much more.

“Amazing shot.”

One of the medics muttered it as he placed a bandage on Jason that the bachelor planned to remove the second they were gone.

In the corner, Angelica stood with a gun in her hand and the same unreadable façade that had accompanied her wins in the games.

Jason gave her a soft smile as the two medics left. “Thank you.”

She didn’t respond in any way, but a feeling of safety swept over him. She was imposing, intimidating, and in no way easy to ignore. When she was near, there was an electricity he had no resistance to. Jason found himself thinking about her lips, recalling the taste of her. She was a violent, sexy, tattooed, muscled mystery. Jason liked it that she wanted him so much. Before, it was just a means to an end, but after this, he suspected they would bond quickly. He could trust her to come for him if anything happened, and to be lethal while doing it. That went a long way toward assuaging his fears. Jason gave her another smile.

The heat in her returning glance brought him over to her.

Angelica tensed, eyes flickering as he raised a slow hand to her cheek.

“Thank you.” Jason stroked fingertips across her skin, not flinching when her fists clenched. He wasn’t as afraid of her now. It was another delightful discovery that made him bolder than he’d planned to be. “I’d like to repay you.”

Her body tightened, flooding with need.

Jason admired her as that rigid control snapped into place before she spoke.

“Not for any reason, would I ever accept you that way.” Her breath caught; voice like gravel. “It will be hard to let you go, but don’t mistake my need, for greed. When the time comes, I will walk.” She walked stiffly toward the next car. “And I won’t take a second chance on you then. It’s how the Pruetts have survived.”

Jason let her go, torn. He believed her, mostly, but he couldn’t give up this dream of freedom. He’d had it for too long to throw it away for a woman he’d known less than two weeks, no matter how interested his mind and body were.

**3**

**The Network**

“Is the tracker in place?”

The voice would have shocked the citizens it ruled.

“Yes, working too, but we’re out of range once they hit the Borderlands.”

The answer also came from a surprising source, but the two council members were alone again in the spacious upper tower of the complex.

“Like the other one.”

“Yes. When we attack, we’ll know it’s the right place.”

Ground troops would be sent then. These two, and the rest of the council, hadn’t abandoned the safety of the complex in more than three decades. Not since the last power meeting that had given them control and responsibility for the final stages of this plan. Knowing it would come to fruition during their rule was incredibly exciting.

“What’s the distance on the tracker?”

“Two hundred miles beyond a hub.”

“Impressive. The scientists have been busy. Today, they gave me a report on the latest cure. It’s been successful eight of ten times.”

“You sound happy about it. When they’re all cured, we’ll lose control!”

“I’m not happy that they’ve been successful. I am, however, overjoyed to have something to use against the west. As long as we hold that secret, our sister complex will not revolt.”

“That’s brilliant. It solves the ambush problems for our soldiers when we travel to the Borderlands for the meeting... Wait. How soon will it go public?”

“Never, though a few trades are already in the works with Canada. We need them to understand who holds the power. They’ll never get the cure, just a limited supply of the vaccine. That will give them control over their citizens, and give us a reprieve.”

“One that we’ll use to get our new toys in working order?”

“Yes. There are hundreds of weapons under the ground in the west. Even bad odds say a few of them will still work.”

Far below these two remorseless leaders, the timed utilities flickered on, spotlighting an enormous billboard of the last episode’s final match. The tattooed woman on that canvas was dangerous.

“What about the Pruetts? When do we stop playing with fire?”

There was an amused chuckle and a shrug. “They’ve served themselves through us for a very long time. When our generosity finally runs out, we’ll get rid of every last wild Pruett in New America.”

“Until then?”

“We’ll be careful. There’s still time before the power meeting. Track them and keep in contact with Rankin, but leave them alone otherwise. We need to take them by surprise. If they suspect a double cross, we may lose everything we’ve built.”

“Would they come here and attack the complex openly?”

“Yes.” Now the leader’s voice held a tremor of unease. “It’s what *I* would do.”

“Is there a contingency plan in place, in case they do?”

“Of course.” The head of the council moved away from the window. “You know how to run, right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good. They won’t give you that opportunity, but it’s great that you know how.”

**4**

The scene out the window was depressing. Jason turned away. The train was traveling through the fuel zones now, the kind that kept the Network in control. The people were pathetic in their despondent starvation. According to Rankin, the workers were paid well, but the conditions were lethal. Only one of every ten drillers survived their years underground to get those full benefits.

The motion of the train was soothing. It meant they were getting farther and farther from Rankin. Jason’s cheer returned. He resumed the questions as soon as Angelica joined him. “Have you worked out your interview questions yet?”

Angelica stopped, shoulders tensing. “No.”

Jason stood up, drawing attention to his body. “Would you like to–”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Angelica wore the same clothes out of the complex that she had during the games. Jason already loved watching her legs in those tight black pants. They weren’t as nice as Rankin’s clothes, but Angelica’s fit better and were more useful. There were pockets and pouches all along them and along the inside of her thick cloak. The shirt was a long sleeved button-up over a half top that exposed her flat stomach and made his brain heavy as she adjusted her clothes.

Jason found something else to stare at.

The buffet car on the train was one to rival the live meals at the complex. It held nearly everything a wealthy traveler might want. Expensive pastries and chocolates, along with succulent meats and cheeses were spread out on long tables that never emptied. But his new owner didn’t splurge on the luxuries. They ate from her packed supplies before showering off the ashes from walking to the train. The dried meat and hard bread were filling, but the tension while they ate made the food stick in his throat. When she sent him off to shower, Jason was relieved.

Angelica waited for the sound of the shower, and then gathered a few of the things she’d scrounged. She had a quick delivery and update trip to make, and now, while Jason was busy, was best. He didn’t need to get involved with the family business any more than he already was. As her mate, he would have been welcomed. She wondered what type of partner he might have become, and then stopped herself from taking that painful dream any further.

As Angelica shut the door, she did a slow sweep to verify the five guards she’d hired were on duty. The time for dreams might come again if she could locate a replacement among Baker’s rebels, but either way, now wasn’t the place for it. She had a small window of time before the Network hunters would catch up and she didn’t plan to waste it. There were contacts to be made and dragons to be slain.

Drawn by the sounds Angelica made as she packed the small kit, Jason had finished his shower quickly and came to the door. He watched her slip out uneasily. She’d left her gear, meaning she would return. There were rentable men on the train. Was that where she was going? *I certainly didn’t give her any relief.*

Shower still running, Jason cracked the main compartment door, and was a bit hurt to see her enter the rental car after a short haggle with the guards.

Jason slipped into the hall with scared excitement beating in his chest. This part of his personality had to be hidden from Rankin, but also from the Network. Males who showed his levels of independence were often castrated.

The five guards on their door trailed him, but they didn’t tell him to go back inside. Jason wondered if Angelica had arranged it that way so he was free to come and go as he liked.

Jason didn’t spot anyone but guards in the drafty hall. It was normal for the train to carry a few dozen passengers who usually spent the ride in one of the service cars, getting their hair (and other things) blown or bloated.

*Whirrrr…*

Jason grabbed the wall for support as the train shuddered, picking up speed. The experience of flying along inside it wasn’t one he cared for, especially in the heavy wind. It rattled the cars, sending tickles of unease through his stomach and chills down his spine from the added draft.

Jason walked up to the guards on the renting car, and donned a timid expression. “She told me to follow.”

They knew better than to argue, but their hungry curiosity trailed him as Jason slid in behind his new owner. Belonging to a Pruett had its advantages.

Just inside the rental car was a long banister with thin poles and hanging coats. He stayed behind it, peering around cautiously. Consoles and computers on one end, each rental car was filled the rest of the way with a wide, well padded, bench seat that ran the length of both walls and provided numerous spaces, *positions*.

On the walls above these benches, were titanium cuffs welded into the frame. More cuffs clinked against the edges of the long bench, muffled a bit by the plush covering that allowed for comfort while enjoying the allotted hour.

Another inspection of the car revealed drawers under the benches. Jason assumed it held the day-to-day necessities for these slaves. As far as he knew, the train males were never allowed out of these cars unless they were with a renter and most renters were desperate changelings. Walks in the sun between stops would be a rare treat.

Couches and pillows overflowed with nearly naked slaves, and used, fragile skin. Their eyes were hollow. Jason’s stomach shifted at the thought of Angelica renting one of them.

Angelica walked to the front of the car, where another small team of guards lurked. She held out a slip of paper.

The guard stared in shock. “You want to rent all of them?”

Angelica grinned.

“Pruett.”

“She’s a Pruett.”

“Guess her games prize isn’t enough.”

Jason cringed back as the snickering females went by, leaving his owner alone with the six rentable men.

The door slid open again. Jason lunged for the corner, yanking a hanging cloak over himself as heavy steps entered.

“We’re all full here!” Angelica’s voice was hard.

Jason heard a snort.

“All of them?”

“I’ll only be an hour.”

There was a heavy pause where Jason felt the newcomer deciding if she wanted to challenge Angelica. *Familiar voice*, he thought distractedly.

“Fine!”

The door opened again, heavy feet leaving.

Jason peered through the cloak to see Angelica still standing in the center of the room.

“We’re alone now.”

At her announcement, the men came to life!

“How is Baker?”

“Did the rebels make it to the safe zone?”

“Any news of the West Coast?”

Angelica punched in a series of choices on a small wall screen. The males hurried to serve her as the food dinged and she answered their questions. They joined her for the meal without permission, digging into the whole chickens as if they were starving.

Jason listened, realizing they probably were. The Network doled out one meal a day to males and that included the games prizes. They never let men forget that they were at the mercy of their masters.

“He lives. That’s all I know at this point.”

“And the Network?”

Angelica scowled bitterly. “As strong as ever.”

Their eager happiness fell and Jason realized these males were like some of the bachelors–careful information exchangers.

“That was the head Defender’s personal guard you sent out.”

“What’s Rankin doing on this ride?”

Angelica sounded as surprised as Jason felt.

“On the way to meet up with troops, we heard.”

“Or to reclaim her property...”

Jason tensed. He’d waited too long to tell Angelica all of the truth. Now these strange men would expose his shame.

“He looks remarkably like his father.”

“Does he?”

“Yes. His father was one of us. His mother found him pleasing and bought him. They had a good life together, but she burnt out. When Rankin found them, she was in no position to defend her property.”

“Rankin killed the entire family. Jason was the only survivor.”

“But because she knew how he would look when full grown.” Angelica’s intelligence was scary. “Her second chance to have what she hadn’t meant to kill.”

“We all believe so. It’s no accident that she keeps him so thin. If he were bigger, she might confuse him for a ghost and snap before she can legally buy him.”

Angelica knew now. Shame filled Jason, the kind he understood he didn’t have to carry, but he didn’t know how to get rid of it.

“That explains a lot.”

“She’s a hard one; she likes them begging.”

“Explain.”

“When she chooses one of us, there’s never satisfaction.”

“She makes her men suffer our torment?”

“Yes.”

Angelica turned toward the corner Jason was hiding in. “And she’ll come for him, no matter if it goes against the Network.”

“Oh, yes. We’re out of New Network City. She won’t rest until he’s hers again and you’re dead.”

Angelica gave them a harsh, fighting smirk, making the train males flinch. “I’ve played this game before. Now, I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“But your new mate–”

“Will be freed.”

“Ahh.”

They patted her in sympathy, not drawing any of her heat or tension like he did. Jason wondered what it was about them that killed the need. Was it because they were used already? More likely, it was because they were so thin, so hungry. All the food was gone. Jason wasn’t surprised when she gestured toward the console.

“Another full round and then some dessert.”

They spent the entire hour eating, talking, and exchanging information. Jason had almost forgotten where he was as he listened, learning things he never would have suspected.

“Yes, we can confirm that. People have already begun to come in for the power meeting.”

“Male or female?”

“As many of each. There are more men in the west.”

“We even heard a tale of an entire city of them. Such is likely the dream of a drunken fool, but nevertheless, we’ve heard it.”

Angelica chuckled. “I’d give a lot to see that.”

“Yes. If the Network knew and didn’t tell anyone, it might cause their downfall.”

Angelica snorted. “It’ll take more than that.” She gestured toward the mess they’d made.

The men hurried to clear the evidence.

She reluctantly stood up. “Would you like to pass messages?”

“Would you be going west from here?”

“That could be.”

“We’d tell Baker there’s something bigger going on than the power meeting; too many troops have been sent out.”

“We would tell him a new safe zone is a good idea.”

She nodded. “I’ll make sure that falls on the right ears.”

“Will you also tell him now is the time, if he plans to attack them? We’ve never seen more confusion as the new generation is brought in for training.”

“Training?”

“Every two generations, the next set of rulers are brought in and updated, so they can take over. It’s how the Network passes control.”

Jason realized he was in trouble. Angelica was still turned toward his hiding place. How would he get back to their car without her knowing he’d followed?

As if she read his thought, Angelica moved toward the door. “I’m sorry to leave you all here.”

*“We’re sorry to see you go.”*

Jason ducked lower, holding his breath.

Angelica walked by, reached for the handle. “Come along now, Jason.”

His mouth dropped open as she stepped through, but he hurried to do as he’d been told, worried over a punishment.

Behind him, the conversation of the train men went on.

“She’s a sharp one.”

“She’ll keep Rankin away. You remember her cousin with the Snake trackers last month?”

“She took out five of them, and during mating! You can’t distract a Pruett when there’s danger around.”

Jason stepped into their car quickly when Angelica held the door, and then stopped, waiting.

“Did you learn anything useful?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, I think so.”

“As did I.” Angelica went toward the main bedroom. “Good night, Jason.”

“Good night, Angelica.”

Not sure what he’d expected, Jason listened to the door shut with a slight smile. These Pruetts knew how to throw a guy off and make him feel as though he didn’t know anything about women. *I kinda like that.*

What Jason didn’t like was Rankin being on this train. Because of his abduction delay, the train hadn’t departed until almost dark. They still had another full day and night on the Network Rider, and Jason wasn’t happy about it anymore. The top Defender might try to kill Angelica now that they were away from the city.

Speeding relentlessly through the darkness toward the future, Jason settled onto the couch where the smooth chugging quickly lulled him to sleep against his will.

Chapter Eight

**Just a Service**

**1**

**T**he sound of the shower woke Angelica, sending her mind to the layered plans she’d been working on when Jason’s snores told her he was finally sleeping, so she could too. Angelica had expected to have a tail, and she hadn’t forgotten about the tracker hidden under the Pruett crest branded into Jason’s arm. She would remove it when they got to the Borderlands, where the Network would naturally lose the signal anyway, but those two threats paled in comparison to having the head Defender on this train.

Angelica walked toward the small washroom with plots and possible outcomes flying. She needed more information. She didn’t change into more covering clothes, forcing herself to keep working on tolerance. They would have a week at most, and she needed all the shoring up she could get.

When Angelica eased into the small, steamy shower, Jason immediately noticed. He grabbed the towel slung over the bar.

For an instant, she saw him again in the vision, with the naked skin of his chest beckoning to her from the flames…

Angelica turned around so she wouldn’t be so distracted, but what she’d already seen was repeating in slow detail behind her eyelids. The thin, red shower curtain hid nothing. He had a beautiful body. “Tell me about Rankin.”

Angelica listened to his jeans come up without drying, the towel being draped around his neck. She stayed facing the wall.

“She’s been waiting for me to go up for sale.”

Angelica grunted, already looking forward to killing the woman for the pain she heard in his voice. Rankin might have been waiting for him to reach selling age to take him, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t played with her toy. Angelica switched to a safer subject. “How do you know about the rebels?”

“We all know.”

That got her to lean against the door. Set up to match the rest of the train, after the sink, john, and shower, there wasn’t much space between them.

Jason’s long, wet hair hung over those bronze shoulders in wild disarray, and his big body made claims he wasn’t even aware of.

He stepped from the shower, sending his delicious scent over her.

Angelica forgot how to exhale.

His skin glowed in the light, sparkling with dampness from his shower that stunned her with the fiery need it sent into her already boiling gut. Had she really believed he wasn’t as attractive as the other bachelors? She’d been blind. The man stopped by the sink, waiting for her attack, was incredible.

Angelica stayed against the wall. That was an understatement. Jason was perfect and there was fire in her mind. “Give me the details.”

She heard his sound of relief, and the undertone of disappointment.

“Prizes pick up gossip from their renters. One of us discovered things the rebels need to know.”

“Other than the Network knowing where the safe zone is?”

“Yes.”

“Is it about the kids or one of the twelve experimental bachelors who produce immune offspring?” Angelica could feel him gaping, and reigned in her torment with a sharp warning, “Close that mouth, Jason, or I’ll have to do it for you.”

There was a challenge to the words that Jason was surprised to find himself wanting to accept. What was it about this brutal bounty hunter? How could he be so scared and yet so attracted to her? “I have to get to Baker. He’s in danger. They all are. Please.”

“I’m taking you.”

Jason let out the breath he’d held. “And our deal stands?”

Her shoulders stiffened.

Jason felt the ripples of heat radiating from her body. There was only one thing she needed right now.

“Pruetts don’t charge for good deeds. I’ll retrain you because you need that to survive.”

Her voice said differently, though. It rang with hesitation. She wanted his service desperately, but she didn’t like the idea of taking it out in trade, even though it’s what she’d basically come to the games for. *What a paradox she is!*

Jason came closer. Once he got her in the cuffs, more of his fear would ease. Angelica was obviously one of the good women they’d heard of, and he liked the idea of being able to give her something in return for taking away the loving mate she’d hoped to gain. If she wanted to build up a real tolerance, he could help. “Can we make an amendment to the deal?”

The small room was thick with steam as she sensed his ambush. “No.”

“You don’t know what I’m offering.”

She pinned him with flaming eyes that stripped him naked. “Don’t I? Be careful offering yourself up as stock, Jason. It’s dangerous with a Pruett. We like to *own*.”

Jason knew she had herself under tight control despite the curt warning. He’d spent most of the night thinking about what he wanted and how to get it. He proceeded with that plan now. “Not livestock.” He smiled invitingly. “Just a friend when you need one.”

*A friend when you need one*.

That’s what Baker had been to Candice at one time. She’d suggested it, but Angelica had snarled in frustration, expecting her cousin to understand that she didn’t want one night here and there with a friend. Now, she wanted Jason.

“You can trust me.”

She flinched, afraid of hurting him, of snapping, of falling for a man who didn’t want her.

Jason stopped, thinking of the cuffs that were even on the walls of the washrooms.

She turned to go before he could gather the nerve to try again. If he touched her, she might not be able to resist taking the service. The pain was excruciating.

“Angelica.”

She didn’t want to snap*. I won’t snap!*

His big body moved behind her, hot hands settling firmly on her shoulders to send lightning through her skin.

“You’ve given up so much for me.” His arms curled around her rigid waist and tugged her against his hard heat. “Let me ease your pain a little. I’m well trained.”

She was holding her breath, afraid that his smell would make her snap*.*

*She’s scared.* Jason could feel it and he didn’t like it. She had killed to win a mate and ended up with nothing to show for it except a man she was unable to use. He suddenly couldn’t stand it. There was no reason for her to keep suffering.

Jason advanced, forcing her against the wall. It was the one with the cuffs, but he didn’t think they’d need them this time. Angelica was already on the edge. She just needed a little shove.

When she stiffened, ready to scold him, Jason dropped his mouth over hers for the kiss he had secretly wanted since she’d filled his mind with her wet, perky body.

Angelica froze, hands clenched between them in an effort to resist. Jason pressed a second, softer kiss to the corner of her lips. “Let me help you.”

He brought his hand up to cup her tense neck. Her eyes burned into his, almost full red, but Jason pressed his luck by moving in for another kiss. He wanted one she was willing for, into, craving. *A taste of the future.*

Angelica didn’t move as Jason stroked her lips again. She wasn’t sure she could–her grip on herself was that tight.

Jason leaned against her with his hard body, delighted to discover he was eager to render her a service.

Angelica tried to say no, but the sensation of his lips was enough to halt her power of speech. She stood there, unable to speak, afraid to think.

*“Let me help you.”*

It was a fiery caress that sent her into a level of hell she’d never felt before. She was burning alive, with no way to put out the blaze.

Jason shifted, pushing her until she was pinned between him and the wall. He arched, stroking her nape.

Angelica felt one of her mental bolts snap. His lips pressed against hers in a sweet rub that made her claws extend, cutting into her palms.

“Please?” His voice lowered into a nerve-searing tone. “I want to, Angel.”

A second bolt went flying as his lips came toward hers. “No.” She raised a hand to push him away and found it against his bare skin. Need, hot and heavy, settled into her groin and stole any rational thought.

“I won’t hurt you.” Jason covered her hand with his own, moving it up his satin skin to his shoulders…his neck…his hair!

Heat flooded her as he tangled their fingers together in his silken locks and slowly leaned toward her mouth again. He knew what she wanted, how she was fighting the urge to crush him close. He pressed harder this time, trying to draw a reaction. His mouth went to her jaw, cheek, the corner of her lips, pressing light, agony filled kisses. His hips shifted, rubbing.

She groaned as a third bolt snapped like old wood.

His grip tightened at the sound of her desire and his hips ground against her in an instinctive thrust that she was helpless to resist. Liquid heat flooded her thighs. And Jason knew. He was remorselessly taking advantage of the lust, the weakness. *Sexy!*

“Will you kiss me?”

He wasn’t playing fair, but she surrendered this match, full of fire she had no outlet for. If he could help her regain control *this one time*, she would carry the guilt afterward. Angelica slowly extended her free hand toward the wall. The other wasn’t moving from his hair. “Cuff me.”

Her rough words sent a rush of blood into his stiff length that caused Jason to move quicker than he’d intended. He rubbed against her chest as he snapped the cuff in place.

Jason would have taken her other hand, but she captured his neck in an iron grip and dragged his mouth to hers. There were no rigid lips beneath his now, only flames as she slid that tongue into his mouth and gave him the kiss of his dreams.

Angelica arched as he thrust forward, and Jason stretched the moment, confident in the cuff. He’d never known of a changeling who could break titanium.

Angelica wrenched away, gasping for oxygen.

Jason didn’t give her a chance to change her mind. He sent both hands up her small waist to capture hot, rocky tipped breasts that made him twitch against her thigh. He flipped the nipples with rough thumbs, then ripped the material open.

She had breasts that a man could spend hours on. He bent down to get his first taste.

*He ripped my shirt off!* The last bolt snapped, and she clutched him, directing him to which aching peak needed his attention the most.“Oohh!”

He suckled, hard enough to pull her against his body, hands sliding to her hips, the waistband of her shorts. His lips pressed rough kisses to her nipple and then dropped lower.

“What are…?”

His mouth slid to her thigh as his hands pulled away her clothes.

Angelica felt the change sweeping over her in waves. “Jason…”

“Shh...” His breath on her skin was followed by a press of those lips that ripped a cry from hers. He did it again and she groaned in torment.

The train began to chug up a slight incline, forcing her to lean against the door as the motion took her balance and Jason stole her ability to think. “Please!”

*The taste of her!* Jason stroked his tongue against her nub and drew another cry. He lashed her again, lingering to swirl, and felt her claws rip into his shoulder.

The change was coming; he needed to get her other hand cuffed, but he began sucking on that sweet nub as she jerked violently.

More pain came as she clenched a tight fist into his skin, and then she melted against him, filling his ears with noises that made him thrust against her leg*. I want her!*

Jason took her up the levels quickly, but the urge to slow down and make it good for her was unexpected. She was silken under his tongue, rough groans sending heat into his gut. When she raked him again in her climax, Jason groaned at the sensation. Rankin had forced that reaction from him with drugs and threats, but she’d never been able to get it willingly.

Angelica had frozen, realizing he was swept up in her lust.

Jason braced for a punishment. Rankin only let him enjoy things on her terms.

“Stand up.”

Hearing that tone, he was suddenly uneasy. Had he gone too far? Jason wiped a fast hand over his chin, and straightened with his pants jutting against her stomach.

“This wasn’t our deal.”

His chin shot up at the gravelly tone, realizing she wasn’t satisfied despite the orgasm. The change was still there, glinting at him. How could she even talk when she was like that? “It is now.” His desire and her lack of anger made him reckless. “This is a part of my retraining.”

Jason leaned forward to press a soft kiss to her cheek, movement bringing them chest to chest. He sucked in air at the chill of desire. His body was still tight, a condition he was usually forced to tolerate.

*“Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits.”*

Jason swallowed his fear and did as he’d been instructed. He slipped arms around Angelica’s bare skin.

His lips went to that spot under her ear and she started to protest, unsure of his intentions. *Wise*, Jason reflected, sliding forward to rock their bodies together. Rankin sometimes snapped when he did that, but Angelica stayed still and let him have his way. Encouraged, Jason thrusted faster, hoping she wouldn’t make him stop yet.

His lust was an impossible lure. Angelica held as still as she could, absorbing it. He was getting rougher as his own desires grew. She did a fast evaluation of her control and found the flames had been replaced with a deep ache that she could manage. Except, now she was extremely curious. The fire was still there, but distant. How far could she shove it back without breaking her own rules? Did she even care about rules right now?

Jason moaned against her neck, big hands working on her bare breasts. “Yeah, that’s good.”

Angelica shuddered. No, she didn’t care about rules. She liked his pleasure, a lot. It was pulling those flames back around her now and she arched toward him. He could go as far as he wanted as long as he didn’t stop yet. Afraid of scaring him, she kept her hand at her hip, eyes shutting again as he used her body for *his* needs.

Jason was on fire. Her musky scent was in his nose, her taste in his mouth. He wanted her and there was no fear of what might happen afterward. Rankin had driven him crazy some nights, left him without the final piece of the puzzle. He’d been relieved when it was over, but it would kill him to stop this time.

Angelica’s body shuddered as he sucked on her neck, hips thrusting harder. He knew that level of need and faded into sessions of lust where relief hadn’t come. With each one he’d become more aggressive, until he was earning a punishment every time.

That memory cooled him off a bit. Jason ripped his mouth from Angelica’s hot skin.

Her lashes fluttered to reveal piercing shades of red. “Don’t stop.”

Jason’s hands went to the buckle of his jeans before he could think. He came closer as she spread those long legs.

Jason dropped his jeans, hand curling around iron as he stepped between them. Her features flooded with hunger as she gently caressed the rigid part of him that instantly snapped up harder at her attention. Scarred, razor clawed fingers slid carefully around him, tightening... *Air. Where’s the air?*

Her leg came up as Jason placed his hand over hers, showing her how to please them both.

She caught on quickly, beginning long strokes with her hand that rubbed their bodies together in perfect flares. Jason sent his fingers to her pointed breasts without asking.

“Mmm…” She groaned, stroking faster.

Jason’s mouth returned to her neck, suckling, and she tightened her grip until he couldn’t find the oxygen again. Each stroke of her hand rubbed him through her satin wetness and put him closer to impurity than he’d ever been. Rankin had never let him get this close to that particular area for long.

He felt Angelica’s body tightening, going over that edge again, and he arched forward. Her heat opened to him and Jason slipped between the folds and over the cliff, too, joining her.

He bucked against her tightness, already wishing it wasn’t over. They’d cum together, making it a powerful moment for him. He’d never willingly given a woman a release, nor had her return the favor. *What I wouldn’t give to be free to do this whenever I want!*

Angelica used a quick twist to rip the cuff from the wall, drawing shock. “Get a bandage on!”

Those lightly bleeding claw lines mortified her. The lack of control was humiliating. Jason was defenseless and she’d hurt him, taken advantage. She was no better than the hunter on his trail or the Network that had enslaved him. He wasn’t safe with her.

“Why…did you play the game…instead of…buying a mate?” Jason gasped out, still recovering.

She stared at him, chest rising and falling in quick inhalations. Didn’t he know blood eased it? “The change.”

“No.” Jason pulled up his pants, breathing rough. “Why go through all this? Don’t you know other males?”

She held in a sharp remark. She knew hundreds of them if she counted the rebels, but she wanted what Candice had fought for and gained. How did she explain that? “I’m a Pruett. We aren’t like the rest.”

He clearly didn’t understand. She tried to put it in terms he might be able to accept. “I don’t want a mate to service my needs.” *What a lie!* “I want that ideal match. For me, it’s remission or nothing.”

Now he didn’t know what to say, but that beautiful face was easy to read. He was still keeping secrets.

Angelica dropped her head, vision flat black. “This is not a necessary part of our arrangement, Jason. Service is not....” She choked, still pulsing with the powerful relief he’d given her. “The service was *amazing!*”

She lunged for the exit. Daniel had said they would feel it, too, but she’d chosen wrong. She didn’t have a mate and now the fire would increase. Too much longer in the flames and she would snap.

She slammed the master door, grabbing her kit to get her extra clothes. She’d lost control and taken advantage of a male under her protection. Angelica couldn’t stifle another angry noise. She’d lost more than that. He wanted to be free and she was taking it out in trade. The Pruett family honor slapped her repeatedly as she paced in satisfied, sticky shame.

Chapter Nine

**Danger**

**1**

**A**n hour later, Jason was still listening to the silence in confusion. *What did I do wrong?*

By the time he’d finished bandaging her claw marks, there had been complete silence and it was worse than noise. The wounds stung a bit, but he was a fast healer, and didn’t consider himself hurt. In fact, there was a small amount of pride that he’d made an infamous Pruett go against her own will.

Jason shifted on the couch, mind blazing with new and dangerous ideas. What did he know about her clan?

*Not enough*, Jason realized. Maybe it was time to do some research.

With a quick glance at her closed door, he went to the wall screen and typed in Rankin’s account code with shaking hands. When she found out…

Information from Rankin’s personal files flashed onto the screen, and Jason fell into reading.

More than surprised, Angelica observed as she silently came from her car. Jason was breaking the rules. She could tell by the way he peered over his shoulder, and it kept her still, waiting. What was so important that Jason would risk a punishment to know?

Angelica’s pulse increased as images flashed onto the screen. He was doing homework on the Pruetts, flipping through the pages of information as if he’d been using a wall screen all his life. What happened to the Network’s meek, well-trained male? Was Candice right about them being smart enough to fool the entire world? If so, then she had been manipulated into a service call.

As she observed him access a classified file, the bounty hunter could easily believe it. Why was he trying to learn where she lived and her relationship to the Network? To determine if he could trust her? Anything he found in there would make Pruetts appear loyal.

“…mutter…”

Angelica strained to make out his low words, glad there were no cameras in these cars like there had been in the winner’s apartment.

“…one in every generation.”

She assumed Jason had just found out about Candice and Daniel, and the way the Malin family had been able to breed a male child to sell in every generation. It wasn’t an accident.

She decided not to interrupt him yet. If Jason was into classified files, he might learn something they could use. Punishing him for the offense never occurred to her, not after he had gifted her with this dim place where there was no fire. She strode casually into the kitchenette.

Jason jumped as the floor squeaked, scrambling to turn off the connection.

“If you shut it down, security will prevent it from being reopened. They probably already know someone is into it.”

He shifted to find Angelica in the kitchenette, pulling things from a drawer. He hadn’t heard her come out.

“Let me know if there’s anything I should read.”

Jason gaped at her. She’d caught him using a wall screen without permission. That was a whipping offense!

“Close your mouth, Jason, or I’ll have to do it for you.”

He snapped it shut at the repeated warning, still fighting the urge to challenge her on that.

“I would guess you’ll have another minute, maybe even two, before they cut the feed.”

Jason caught the hint and didn’t ask if they would come to arrest him as he resumed digging. He was deep in Rankin’s personal files now, discovering her plans, what her orders were. “She’s supposed to follow you and verify when the rebels are all together.”

That brought Angelica to read over his shoulder.

Jason knew better than to speak when her grip on the chair caused it to start fracturing. *Never run from a changeling, it triggers them*. The rule went through his mind again, but he had no intentions of it.

“Move.”

Jason got out of her way.

Angelica slid into the chair and sent those brutal hands over the keyboard with lightning speed. “The eastern half wants total control, and has made plans to eliminate the west coast leaders at the power meeting. They’re also planning to send in troops to clear the entire Borderlands of rebels at the same time. That’s why there was almost no security at the complex.” Angelica began closing files, deleting codes.

“What are you doing?”

“Covering our asses.”

Jason didn’t question again. If the Network didn’t know they’d found the plans, they would stick with it and the rebels might be able to ambush them.

Apparently, the concept made his new owner very happy, because she grabbed him and pulled him onto her lap for an awkward kiss that sent them both onto the floor.

In her clumsiness, she also knocked the screen off the wall. It crashed onto the desk, scattering sharp debris.

Landing on him, Angelica giggled.

Jason stared at her in surprise as the main door to their car was kicked in.

It was one of those moments that made Angelica grateful for her chosen career. Thinking on your feet was mandatory for a bounty hunter. She played the role she was actually hoping to live someday. She simpered like a sated female, and then gasped in shock as security broke in.

“Halt!”

Angelica lifted her hands without a protest, but she pushed Jason down with her knee when he would have run from the first person through the door. His reaction would have told Angelica who the woman was even if she hadn’t recognized the threat on her own.

The two electronic clubs the woman wore delivered a nasty shock and sometimes even killed. They were a security favorite, but the small can of acid on her belt gave Angelica a real glimpse of why Jason was so afraid. Not meant to kill, the acid spray was designed to cause screams. It exactly matched the drop sized scars on Jason’s legs. This was Rankin and from the glare of changeling rage, Angelica guessed Rankin already hated her. *The feeling is mutual.* “What’s the problem? I’ll pay for the screen.”

“Someone accessed–ugh!”

Without looking away from them, Rankin delivered a quick punch that took the guard to her knees and stopped her from speaking further.

Angelica recognized the pox-marked guard now gasping at Rankin’s boots. It was Scars, from the attempted abduction as they’d boarded. Rankin had been responsible for it. Her mind exploded with fresh hatred for both of them.

The sentries in the rear had taken in the mess first, but the one coveting what Angelica now legally owned was studying their entwined bodies. The top Defender was tall, lean, and mean. Angelica had recognized the cruelty in the choice of tools on her belt, but it was also in the tight weave of the hundreds of intricate red braids that hung to her knees in ponytails.

“She used him.” Scars pointed at something as she stood up, drawing Rankin’s attention.

The top Defender’s brows drew together in fury as she spotted the bandage on the floor, and then traced it to the marks that Angelica had left on Jason’s shoulder.

He shuddered under her, breathing harsh. Angelica felt nearly uncontrollable heat rise up to turn her sight crimson. “Do you want a quick death or a slow one?”

The challenge tugged on Rankin with the surprise at the openness

Angelica shoved harder. “I’m a better challenge than a burnt-out homesteader or her defenseless mate.”

Rankin’s eyes flew to Jason.

Jason cringed into the carpeted floor. “I didn’t tell!” It wouldn’t be believed. Rankin would make him bleed for this. No one was supposed to know about her obsession, but more, she’d killed a male and never been charged for it. This was beyond danger. Jason trembled uncontrollably.

Angelica stepped in front of him, blocking Rankin’s furious glower. “I wonder if the council knows you killed his father.”

Jason heard the scornful mocking in Angelica’s tone as she gave a shove meant to make Rankin snap.

“Bet they’d give Pruetts your place if we asked for it. They know we always get the job done.”

Jason waited tensely at Angelica’s threat, hoping for the fight, but also dreading the violence. If Rankin attacked without provocation, she would lose her job and maybe her freedom. From the files they’d read, he was certain she was supposed to be undercover, but killing a male was a death sentence.

Rankin also sensed the trap. “Slam you, Pruett!”

Jason peered up Angelica’s braced leg to find his owner grinning eagerly.

“Anytime you like, Defender. *Anytime* you like.”

Jason assumed Rankin would attack anyway, but she stormed from the car with her guards. It was the first time he’d ever seen her back down, and it gave him a new level of worry. When she came for him, things would be ugly.

Angelica fixed the sliding door. Designed to withstand the abuse of changelings, it snapped back into place under her insistent pressure, but it didn’t hang right.

The silence was thick as she turned around.

Jason opened his mouth to spill everything he’d kept from her.

Angelica jerked a hand. “Not a word.”

She was hot. Her vision flickered in that red tinted shade she was keeping around Jason, but this time the need demanded blood. Her thoughts were flying. Rankin wasn’t going to wait until they made it to the safe zone. *She wants Jason worse than I do.*

Angelica studied him, wondering what he was thinking, but she wasn’t in control enough to withstand hearing his voice. He looked terrified and she loathed it. *If he’s going to fear anyone, it’ll be me!*

She instantly hated herself for that thought. She stormed into the darkness of the next room. That was another problem with Jason. She was already becoming bonded. When it was all over, she would be crushed like Stone Mountain, but she doubted she would survive this time. She didn’t want to use him or force him into servicing her because he needed the escort to Baker or because he felt pity for her pain. She wanted *him*. She also hated him a little for being able to pull that out of her without experiencing any of this fire in return.

Jason’s shadow paced under the door.

She wanted to tell him he was safe, but she wasn’t positive of her control. She needed an outlet for this bloodlust.

Angelica stayed in her room.

After reading the file, Jason understood a lot more about his new owner.

*Very territorial and possessive of their males–will not rent them out.*

That was clear to him by the way she’d stood up to Rankin, but he could also foresee Angelica being jealous. Jason admitted it then; her edge of danger was part of what made her attractive. It said with her, he’d always be safe.

*Make life matches.*

*Often seen in the company of males, but rarely use their services.*

*Home [17325 Harris Rd.] has multiple exits on every level, and a secondary armory on the ground floor. Many doors were unable to be accessed.*

Rankin had been in their home. Why was she keeping track of the Pruetts? There hadn’t been time for a more detailed study, but Jason had seen the name on the file. The Network suspected them of something, beyond being rebel sympathizers. Why had they even let Angelica live?

Jason had many questions, but the one he lingered on was why Angelica hadn’t snapped once in the entire time they’d been together. In the labs, when their eyes got like that, changelings were at their most dangerous, but she’d kept the pinkish red shade most of the time that they’d been alone together. She was much stronger than the women he’d had contact with, and in more pain. She was burning up. If she flipped while they were running from Rankin… Would Angelica run?

*No.* The warrior he’d glimpsed in the cage didn’t run unless it was a ploy designed to draw her prey into the death she’d chosen for them. They would be dealing with Rankin, probably before they made it to the rebels. The image was bad enough to send the nervous bachelor back to his pacing.

Angelica knew he was worrying. She wanted the hard details, but she might snap and go hunting if she heard them right now. She was trying to give herself time to cool off, but his pacing! It was driving her crazy. Didn’t he know she’d protect him? She was busy plotting it out now, if only he’d be still!

Angelica heard the sound of glass clinking and realized he was cleaning up the mess. *Men!* Why did they always have to be moving?

She swung out of the bed, maybe to take up pacing in his place, and heard a low grunt of pain.

“Ugh!”

Angelica was next to him in an instant. “Are you hurt?”

Jason had taken his shirt off to wrap the wound. He pulled the sliver of glass out with a grimace, immediately putting the shirt over it so she couldn’t spot the blood. “It’s just a scratch.”

She pulled on his arm, ignoring the flare of heat from touching him. The wound was small, but she ran a rough finger over it to be positive all the glass was out.

He flinched automatically, then chuckled. “I did that already!”

It made her want to hug him, so she stood up before she could. “There’s a kit in the cabinet.”

“Will you do it?”

She stiffly went to get the medical supplies, taking an extra minute to steel herself.

He tried to smile as she came back out. “It stopped bleeding.”

Angelica handled him as if he was just an injured prisoner to be tended. She wasn’t gentle, but it allowed her to keep pushing away his scent. It was that searing chocolate, thick and tempting.

“Thank you.”

She grunted, not looking at the brand on his arm–the one marking him as hers.

She retreated as they both stood up, but he followed. Bracing, she stopped to see what he wanted. As he smiled at her, she understood his intentions in time to spin under his arm and flee back to the bedroom.

Jason was reading her. He obviously wanted to knock the rage down for her like he’d done earlier, but Angelica couldn’t take the shame. If she was still this on the edge when they reached the rebel base, she would take Baker up on his offer. *At least he was willing!*

**2**

“Can I come in?”

“Yes.” Angelica thought she was under control now, but she braced anyway as the door opened.

“I’d like to talk to you, about after.”

“After?”

“After I see Baker.”

“Okay.” Angelica sat up. “What about it?”

Jason advanced into the darkness, enough for her to see that he was wearing jeans and nothing else. Heat rolled, sending her straight to his hands, his tongue on her body. Behind it, came fresh shame. “Baker will find a loving home for you, if you want one.”

“What if I don’t?” He settled onto the corner of the bed, making it sink with his weight.

“I’ll free you.”

Jason smiled, making her pulse race. “I meant a different sort of home. I’d rather stay with the Pruetts.”

That cooled her heat. Angelica cocked her chin in sharp pain. “You’d stay and be the family whore? My big sister would love that.”

Instead of the denial she was hoping for, his countenance saddened.

“If that’s the only place you have for me when it’s all over, yes.”

Did he know what she took from that? Angelica studied him, picking out the worry and the interest. “You’d be my…” She didn’t know what words to put there.

“Your friend, offering an arrangement.” Before she could respond, his big hand slid onto her bare thigh. “You’d be my first owner.”

*Hunger*. It took her by surprise; she leaned toward him.

She stopped inches from his lips, struggling with her needs and her morals.

He planned to make it easy for her. “I’m willing.”

But she wasn’t, and he understood why now. She was a Pruett. They didn’t force males into servitude. They freed them.

She shuddered. “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Jason didn’t consider the wounds serious and he opened his mouth to tell her so, but she cut him off.

“Keep your excuses and your deals, Jason. I’ll get you to Baker, but I’m out after that. I won’t use you again.” She dropped down to roll away from him. “I don’t want your services in payment, no matter how amazing it was.”

*She’s so different.* He followed her onto the bed. She wanted to be loved, and so did he, but could he trust her not to betray him later? He couldn’t stand to get attached and then be sent away or sold. Just as bad would be her burning out and their children being defenseless. It was an ugly future no matter which way he spun it. Jason curled onto the other half of her bed with a mind full of confusion. *Do I want freedom or a loving owner?*

Angelica listened to him get settled like he’d done this hundreds of times with someone else and the rage grew brighter. She didn’t mind him being here. In fact, she was craving it, but she didn’t need the flashes of what his time with Rankin might have been like. Had he stayed still and quiet to drift off into a peaceful slumber or had there been violence and lust in equal measures?

It was tormenting, but there were hours to kill before morning. Angelica let her mind picture them anyway it wanted to keep the rage close and prevent herself from reaching out for what she couldn’t honorably have.

**3**

Jason woke with a hot body curled against his, and a heavy arm slung over his hips. *Angelica.* The image of her body was enough to bring his to life. He tried to keep his breathing even as she shifted against him. Snoring slightly, she wasn’t aware of how close they were, but her body was. Those hard nipples and extended claws said even in sleep, she needed him. What an addictive craving! Less than four days ago, he’d been in Rankin’s bed, painfully hard and begging for release. Now, *he* held that power.

Angelica muttered something unintelligible against his skin, warm breath giving him chills. Jason had believed lack of fulfillment was keeping him so sensitive, but Angelica against him in sleep forced him to accept that he was attracted to her. The legs tangled in his, the soft breasts against him, that silken hair on his shoulder were all things he was responding to in the early morning darkness.

She would take him now against her will if he woke her with this need on him. He tried to remain motionless as desire flowed in a waterfall of sensations. Would she hurt him when she finally caved? Deny him like Rankin? It was something he wouldn’t know unless their future changed and he was a bit surprised by the sense of loss. What was it about her that drew him?

Jason sighed and felt her breath catch as she woke. He heard the growl rising, low groans of lust he still had ringing in his ears from Rankin. Her claws extended further, pressing into his hips with a delicious twist of pain and lust that brought him to full hardness. He was now capable of providing a service.

“Are you awake?”

Her tone was madness in the dark, greedy, needy, demanding.

“Yes.”

Her claws tightened further. He shut his eyes. “It’s all right… Just don’t hurt me, okay?”

Jason felt the tension slide from her body as her claws withdrew from his skin. She dropped her arm, but didn’t move away from him.

Jason smothered his disappointment. He wanted her to keep going.

“Are you okay?”

Jason nodded, body moving against her in the process. They both drew in a surprised breath.

“Just dealing with a bit of your pain.”

Tension crackled as she realized what he meant. He was almost openly tempting her now and the control–the strength–she showed, was impressive.

“Can I help?”

His chuckle came before thinking. “That’s my line. I’m supposed to offer comfort to you.”

“I’d accept a little of it, if you offered the right way.”

Angelica’s tone sent fire into his veins. The right way? He’d stated it, tossed it out casually, but he hadn’t insisted. Could he? Did his steel run that deep? “What do you mean by a little?”

Her hand slowly came to his hip, nails raking him lightly, lovingly. “When I have these moments with my mate, I have to have control. Touching you will help.”

*“Touching you will help.”* Her words echoed in his mind and spread down his legs. Jason shuddered. “Okay.”

She didn’t proceed despite the agreement and he realized he hadn’t seen to the requirement. As soon as he wondered how to handle it, he knew. *Willing*.

“Will you touch me?”

“Jason!”

The tone was so jarring that it snapped him awake. He groaned in the darkness. *I was dreaming.*

But the ass he was pressed against wasn’t a dream. Nor was the breast in his hand or the neck his lips were locked against. Angelica’s body was rigid, breathing harsh. He understood she was close to snapping, but the haze of lust hadn’t faded with the dream. He wanted to please her and he wanted her to please *him*.

“I can be still for exactly three more minutes. Finish up and then get away from me.”

*“Finish up.”*

It was as if he was back in the dream; Jason struggled with himself.

“Stop wasting time!”

She was almost growling and he felt the need rising up to take him to that place where Rankin had complete control. His body thrust of its own will, sliding through their moisture to make contact with her bare skin… Bare? *Yes. Her pants are bunched under my leg.*

“Two minutes.”

Her reminder had his hand tightening on her breast, his hips moving forward. She felt so good! Jason rocked faster, pushing between her cheeks and felt her shiver. The urge to hurry made the choice and he let his tongue taste her tattooed neck as he used her frozen body. The edge neared. He jerked forward as he squeezed that satin breast, straining with the sensations. “Oohhh…uuhh….”

He rode the crest, stunned that she’d allowed this, given him this. He would return the favor!

Jason slowly, reluctantly, let go of her taut nipple. He used a light hand on her hip to roll her toward him and tensed at the glowing red eyes that lit up the bed. He swallowed, then eased a hand down her waist.

“Get. Out.”

There was no arguing with that tone. He fled in sated fear. The door closed between them and he leaned against it, listening. Was she okay?

Jason heard her shift on the bed, the noises echoing clearly and then a sound came that he hadn’t anticipated.

“Damn.” Angelica’s low groan sent a shiver through limp flesh and kept him at the door. When he heard the rustle of clothing and then her sharp intake of air, he knew what she was doing*. I would have handled that for her!*

His hand went to the knob, but before he could turn it, he heard the distinctive groan of climax. It was thick and piercing, driving in the truth. It was more than attraction. He felt something for this changeling and it was strong enough that the sound of her pleasure almost had him hard again. How strange!

He listened to her finish and then shift in the bed.

“Shoulda let him go ahead. My control might have lasted ten more seconds.”

The knowledge that she worried over stamina gave him another glimpse of changelings that he’d never had before. Jason settled onto the couch, pleased with himself and not sure why. He drifted to sleep with an afterglow that was better than any he’d ever dealt himself following a session with Rankin.

Chapter Ten

**A Family Matter**

Day 11

**1**

**J**ason waited submissively for his owner like a proper slave, sweeping the Ohio station they’d chugged into half an hour ago. He’d never seen so much green!

Trees dotted the region, and lined the one road in and out of this hub. That narrow dirt path wound upward, toward a set of rolling hills covered in small yellow flowers. It was beautiful.

Around him, women were turning his way, drawn to his excitement, but Jason couldn’t help it. He’d missed being outside.

From the way the station’s tracks were laid out, Jason assumed this was as far west as the Rider went on this part of the route. The wide rails made a neat oval at one end of the platform, allowing the train a smooth turn for the return trip to New Network City. As far as he knew, this was the only train the Network had and it ran continuously, only stopping for supplies or maintenance.

Directly in front of the car where Jason was, a group of warmly dressed women lounged on and around heavily packed Mopars with wide, mud caked tires. There were at least two dozen of these big, wild females and he felt the heat in their joking words as they appraised him.

“Does that seem like fresh games meat to you, Sam?”

“Yeah…and he is still fresh. Interesting.”

These loud, frightening women wore goggles raised over short, chaotic hair and weathered faces. Their animal skin cloaks were vivid shades of green, brown, and orange that rippled in the stiff wind, and drew his attention repeatedly. If not for their wide, leering grins, Jason might have thought them beautiful.

“Maybe his owner doesn’t know what to do with him.”

The big women hooted.

His gaze darted away as he realized what they meant. Jason wasn’t certain how they could tell so much, but they intimidated him with their large guns and loud voices.

“Five minutes until departure.”

Distracted, Jason automatically glanced toward the engine car at the call over the speaker. He’d never actually heard the whistle of a train, but he’d read about them at the complex. They weren’t used anymore. A variety of predators were drawn to high-pitched noises like that, but the main reason the whistles were banned was the snakes. The pythons resided in all the southern sectors of New America–large numbers of mutated, fearsome reptiles that were in the height of their breeding season right now. He’d never heard of one of them attacking a train, but he wasn’t anxious to test that theory.

Jason spotted a second group of riders waiting near the rear of the train. All three dozen were on sleek horses. Rankin was getting off here, too. Other than her group and the loud women, Jason didn’t see anyone except guards. He guessed this wasn’t a wealthy sector or the train would have more business.

Jason hated all the attention on him. He wished Angelica would–

“You ready?”

He jumped half a foot at her voice in his ear.

It sent the first group of women into another round of lewd teasing.

“We’ll help ya settle him in!”

“If you need instructions…”

Jason tensed, waiting for his new owner to defend him from the wild Ohioans.

“If I need help, *Candice* will be who I rely on.”

There was another round of chortles, these friendlier.

She knew them. Dismay flooded his face.

The women cackled again at his discomfort.

Sam grinned at her sister. “Guess you didn’t tell him about the wilder parts of the family.”

Angelica scowled. “He’s obviously frightened enough. Why torment him?”

Jason realized one of these loud, wild women was Angelica’s sister–the one he would probably be given to if something happened. *What would that life be like?* The bachelor shuddered.

“Jason?”

He turned toward Angelica, whose mercy he was now at, not sure what he expected or what he needed. Panic was the clearest emotion.

Angelica’s eyes were calm, safe black. “Who are we?”

“P-p…Pruetts,” he forced out.

“What do we stand for?”

It was easier this time. “Freedom.”

One of the loud women cackled. “Yeah, the freedom to share, enjoy, trade…”

Sam lifted a brow. “Will he be in the *family* service?”

Another round of harsh laughter made him shake harder.

“Stop now. It’s enough.”

Angelica’s voice held no real tone of order that he heard, but each of the big women fell silent. She didn’t need to follow it up with anything else. It was a strong moment for him to witness his much smaller owner controlling these wild females.

“Anything I should know?” Angelica walked by Jason, who scurried along on her heels.

“The bill came for your stay in the winner’s suite, and for the train ride.” Sam paused. “I took care of it, but I have a question.”

Angelica sighed. She knew what was coming. “What?”

“Why did you buy so many doors?”

Jason flushed dark red, sending the riders into a new flurry of cackles.

Angelica’s tone sharpened. “Anything *important* I should know?”

“Nope. We’re ready to roll.”

There was an empty bike being towed behind one of the front row jokers. Angelica flipped the heavy connector loose with a short swipe that made him gape. Jason had viewed some of her matches, but seeing it up close was fascinating. *She’s so strong!*

“Get on.”

Jason slid awkwardly onto the cold seat, instinctively moving to the front.

It drew yet another round of taunts and teasing.

“Oh, hell. That’s something new!”

“*He* wants the lead!”

More hard brays echoed and drew attention.

Jason flushed again as Angelica got on. Her hot body surrounded him despite her smaller size, nudging him into keeping the front. She had no problem with letting him try to drive. She expected to take over shortly, though. Sam’s Runners were hell on wheels.

Jason held still while she attached them with a short rope. She leaned in to bring it around his stomach, chin against his shoulder, and her soft hair brushed his cheek. Those perky globes he was so aroused by pressed into his back as her scent wafted over him with the breeze. He was outside now, getting his fill of that forbidden, fresh wind, but her smell was better.

As Angelica retreated, Jason wondered if she might be making the same observations about him because her eyes were tinged in pink. He followed his instincts this time. He beamed, showing a gleam of happiness that he hoped would make her feel as good as he did to be out of the complex. “Thank you.”

Her grip on the rope tightened, but she responded curtly. “You know how this works?”

Jason didn’t know what she meant at first, struggling to think past the newest discoveries. “I’ve driven a few times around the complex.”

Rankin had taken him, demanding a hefty fee beforehand. That memory was enough to trigger the fear. “She’s getting off here.”

“She already did. That’s where I went.”

Jason understood Angelica had left him in the open, knowing Rankin would believe that’s where she was, too. Rankin wouldn’t have known about their escort. She did now, though. What did she think of their heavy escorts?

“Jason?”

He squared his shoulders at the tone, doing it for himself this time. “You’re a Pruett. I’m safe.”

Angelica’s expression was hot pain and intense longing. “You’re a Pruett as well…”

*Until we reach the rebels*. He finished it mentally, not listening to the heart saying freedom might not be as wanted anymore. “Thank you, really.”

This time, she was clearly sad. “It’s my duty, and my honor.” She settled herself the rest of the way, and gave him a wave. “Stay in the middle and do the best you can. They’ll keep up.”

Jason turned around to get them going and caught the expressions of surprise from the two front women. Because their brutal relative was being kind to him?

The lead woman of their pyramid gave Angelica another of those respectful looks.

His owner tapped him on the back. “Middle is straight. Right is right, left is left, you understand?”

He nodded. Rankin had used a more *hands-on* approach for direction changes. Jason brought the engine to life and settled against his new owner as if he belonged there. He wouldn’t let ghosts of the past ruin this moment. He was out of the dome, protected, and on his way to the rebels. Jason gunned the bike into the lane that the others quickly cleared for his wild lunge.

The sides of the road were lined in tall grasses, with thick woods beyond that as far as he could see. Jason crested a hill eagerly. He reined it in after the low jump and shot them forward again, laughing. This bike had real power; he bounced over the dirt road leading away from the small station. *This is great!*

Jason went a bit faster, not sensing any protest from his owner.

The others caught up quickly, but they stayed clear of his wild driving, giving space all around. Their long animal skin cloaks flared out behind them, providing a camouflage that was amazingly good. With hoods drawn tightly around goggles, their identity would be hard for even satellites to distinguish.

Jason pushed the bike faster and felt the approval of their escorts. He remembered they were wild and let himself go. The bike was smooth under his hands, responding to the lightest pressure…. Jason veered toward the grassy path next to the road.

The speed needle hit the red mark, and he kept it there as they flew along the Recovery Zone of Ohio.

Angelica wouldn’t have slowed them even if Jason couldn’t control it. Neck breaking speeds were a thrill that all Pruetts enjoyed. She clung to his waist, grinning. She’d expected him to be scared of this, had even wondered if he would have to be drugged for the trip. It was a relief to know his small glimpses of courage would continue out here in this new life.

Jason swerved them onto the road as a clear patch came up and she felt him hesitate. He wanted to go faster, but he didn’t want to wreck.

She rewarded his caution by slipping arms around him to place hands over his. She didn’t take control, simply let him know she was there to do so if it was needed. His joy slammed into her like bricks.

Unable to keep from it, she leaned in to place a soft kiss on his jaw.

His quick intake of air had her heating up again; she kept her cheek against his as his gentle hands took them to nearly the limit of the Mopar. He liked to travel fast. That was good*.* There would probably be more of that before they reached the rebels. They were entering the Borderlands through the Missouri Quake District, then they would turn south to join Baker. She anticipated a rough trip.

Their escorts were keeping pace. Even these wild speeds were not too much for Sam’s Borderlands Runners. Against her will, Angelica gave her sister a raised brow.

Sam grinned, shrugging.

Sam’s response implied she approved of Jason so far. It allowed Angelica to relax and enjoy being with him while Sam had them covered.

She flashed to him stroking her (willingly!) in the darkness, his thick body rocking against her in powerful need… She shivered and held on tighter. Setting Jason free might cause her final snap. She couldn’t think of a bigger challenge to her control.

**2**

**Rankin**

They went west, as Rankin had hoped.

Two dozen Borderlands Pruetts fell in around her prize as Rankin glared. Now that they were off the train, the Network’s control over her wasn’t as strong. She had plans for this troublesome clan.

Rankin narrowed in on Angelica, loathing her. She was clinging to Jason as if she was the one who’d had him all these years, as if they were already lovers!

Rankin’s stomach burned with impotent rage that would never ease. *Even if the Pruett only took a service, I’ll still taste her blood. That male is mine!*

“Let’s ride.” Lena, her second in command, got the others moving.

Rankin trailed them as she always did when she was brewing death and destruction. She’d been furious when Jason was relisted as a prize for the games, but until he was of age, she couldn’t legally take him. Rankin had made the choice to steal him if he was picked, hoping the way she’d terrified him would keep him from trying to escape with any female. It had worked until the Pruett whelps came to the games.

Her crew got their mounts moving faster. Rankin’s horse kept up without any direction. They had lived this way most of their lives. It had become routine. Some of the girls were getting a bit restless, tired of always being sent on runs, but most of them wouldn’t survive any other lifestyle. Rankin had handpicked each of them, making certain her crew was the strongest one ever formed at the complex, but mentally, she loathed them for the very skills that she took advantage of. Each woman riding with her was a threat to Rankin’s place with the Network.

Lena glanced at Rankin with a speculating expression the leader didn’t care for.

Rankin flashed pink eyes that made her XO swiftly turn around. She ran the crew with no mercy or compassion. Those things were as foreign to Rankin as the honor of the Pruetts that she wanted rotting under her boots. She was a product of those who pulled her strings.

Ahead of them, Angelica’s large group took the main path, the one that would take them to Rankin’s first surprise. Her changeling sight narrowed in on Jason’s happy facade as he took the Mopar up to speed. Miss Hard-Ass believed she was getting a trained, submissive mate who would be obedient. The Network projected that image of their bachelors, but it wasn’t even close to the truth. The men were sly, manipulative creatures that had to be handled firmly or they sank their greedy claws in and wouldn’t let go. It was a lesson Rankin had taken into her cold heart and stuck to as she trained the harem she’d amassed over the years. Those she took relief from received no gentleness, no soft kisses like Angelica was now pressing to Jason’s cheek! Rankin’s rage flared brighter.

Her crew took the opposite path the Pruett Runners had. Rankin nudged her mount a bit faster. If there was gunfire, she would cut over the hills and join in. If there was silence, they would continue to parallel the Pruetts until they hit the Borderlands and her next surprise.

Rankin waited eagerly, unable to stop wanting him, needing him. She considered how Jason was able to twist her emotionally–something none of the others had ever been able to do…and she still obsessed over his father. Rankin’s work in those early days had placed her on the Network Rider weekly. The service of the train males was included in her contract, but it hadn’t taken her long to grow bored of their used, meek demeanors. Much like the Pruetts she hated, Rankin needed courage, a fire to be conquered.

Once a year, the train males were replaced. The old ones were put on buyers sheets and a new batch came in. Slightly used, they were the males who hadn’t been chosen during a game, but still had too much value to be sold outright. The council took a year of service from the lightly damaged men and Rankin had been there for each switch. She hadn’t been important enough to access the renter halls yet and need was keeping her violent most of the time. The Network usually approved of that, but not when it interfered with their orders. When she’d spied William, with that ebony hair and those glowing gray eyes, she’d been lost.

She had used his blissful services for the full year, planning to buy him when his time was up. Thanks to her bloody conversation with the conductor when she refused to take UDs, William was kept on the day shift and didn’t become as used as the others. He had full access to her credits for food and supplies, and he’d spent long, intense hours in her personal car–the one the Network was providing without being aware. Lena had been great at forgeries even then. Now, she was a pro at handling whatever Rankin demanded–yet another threat to her control.

Their year together was a hot, erotic memory that Rankin had dreamt of whenever she wasn’t with William. She was positive he was growing to care for her the same way. Back then, she’d had hopes of a mate to bring this rage home to. That had ended a week before the yearly switch, when William vanished from the train.

She’d searched it for hours, hoping he was scared and hiding. When she got to the service car, Rankin had discovered the truth. The train males told her he’d had a regular renter during the day, a Kentucky homesteader who took the train to New Network City once a week to report for probation meetings. William had been servicing her the entire time. She and Rankin had been his only renters.

Rankin had begun to realize how smart he was before that, but to fool her for an entire year! The Network’s image of male submission was a complete lie.

She’d learned the renter’s name and tried to track her, but the woman had gone to ground as soon as her probation was over. There was silence for ten years.

In that time, Rankin collected a harem of males to vent her rage on, but she never lost that need for William. The bachelors she chose paid for his betrayal, and were still paying. She had several left from those first few years, copies of William that she didn’t use much now. They were beyond broken, but occasionally the bitterness grew too high and she would pay them a visit–like after this run if she didn’t get Jason back.

Rankin had studied Jason’s young image on the yearly contract runs and knew without a doubt who his father was. Too many nights had been spent tossing and turning, dreaming of their year, for her to ever mistake those features. She’d taken that run with fury in her heart and butterflies in her stomach. William!

He stayed in the barn as she negotiated with his owner, using the form questions to find out the woman had bought him in a private sale and legally owned him. Rankin even had her prove it by showing the paperwork. After ten years, she had good control and exited the cozy little house with peaceful words despite the refusal of the contract for their nine-year-old son. Rankin was happy in her new life, as much as she could be, and she wanted the head Defender slot. If she stole a male, though it was legal, the Network would be embarrassed and deny her the position she’d already killed so many to get. She was determined to hold on and come back later, when she had the full power of that title.

But William came from the barn.

His owner had come out with Rankin. Their two girls were enjoying the cool shade of the porch rocker. All of the females froze when he smiled.

Rankin came toward him in a daze. She’d missed him more than she’d ever believed possible.

He opened his arms…

She embraced him with tears. He was happy to see her! She hadn’t expected that. Maybe the woman had convinced him to leave the train? Maybe she’d forced him.

Rankin leaned back to ask and saw his glance go to his owner and their children in a series of panicked, regretful glances. He was pretending, protecting *them*. Her dreams shattered again, this time while she was within reach of his heart.

“Please, don’t!”

*That voice!* She didn’t have to... She could control it… *But I’ve waited so long!*

The snap came fast. It sent her into the change and she released the fury of the past ten years on his new life. It was a regret now, but at the time, all she’d cared for was their blood. All three females were dead minutes later.

*I held William by the throat, dragging him into the barn. Now that I’d killed for him, I would have a service from the betraying bastard who’d caused me to hurt this way.*

*I threw him into the straw, mentally counting the two minutes it took for the drugs to work. I’d shot it into him while he was begging me to spare the child still cowering on the bloody porch. Unlike the girls, the boy hadn’t fought and my rage hadn’t been triggered.*

*“Please!”*

*I shredded the skin over his arm, taking it for the first weeks I’d spent alone and bewildered.*

*William flinched, a coward to the end, and I jerked my cloak open.*

*He paled as he understood what I was doing.*

*“No. I won’t!”*

*I adjusted my clothes and then took his, tearing them from his beautiful body with hard swipes that drew furrows of blood. I leaned down and licked the ones on his stomach, catching his leg when he tried to kick me. He still tasted sweet!*

*My mouth settled over his hardening flesh, helping the drugs work faster and he struggled under me. Bigger now, he succeeded in rolling us over, but not in dislodging my mouth and I held on, knowing the chemicals would have their way. I’d given him twice the normal dosage. When it kicked in, I’d get all I asked for and then some.*

*He tried to stand up and I punched the back of his knee viciously.*

*“Ugh!”*

*He collapsed and I released the steel in my mouth long enough to pin his hand–the one reaching for my knife.*

*Lust had me now and I showed him no mercy, using my claws on him as I did with my harem at the complex. His hip and leg became red from the deeper cuts and I growled, shoving him over.*

*I straddled him, punched when he would have kept fighting. “Take it!”*

*I drew back to deliver another blow and he cringed, submitting. I hit him anyway, a solid swing that dazed him. I quickly tilted my hips for the conquest. A tight hand in his hair forced him to look at me with bloody, teary, hate filled eyes. “You were mine!”*

*I raked my claws down his cheek, making him scream. The sound of it sent me into a frenzy of lust.*

*I took his mouth as I took his body, absorbing his screams as I shoved, forced him to impale me. I locked my thighs, groaning against his twisting lips. So good! My William!*

*He bucked again, trying to roll and I opened my legs, letting him sink in deep as he took the top position.*

*William shuddered, the drugs now working against his hatred. I spread my legs further, the way he used to like, and lifted my shirt.*

*“Damn you!”*

*His dilated vision went over our pulsing, slick bodies in desperation, fighting with himself now.*

*I tightened my body around his length and began to grind. Around and around, teasing him, no longer needing to hold him physically. The drugs had a metal grip that was unbreakable.*

*I felt it in my heart when he surrendered. It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard.*

*“Roll over, Rankin. I can’t stand to look at you.”*

*The bliss.* Rankin still had no words for it.

Afterward, examining the mess she’d made, Rankin chose to abandon her plans for power and run. She would take him and have this relief at her disposal. Then Jason had found them and screamed at the sight of his dad’s bloody body. She’d forgotten about the boy, but if they were to get away clean, there couldn’t be any witnesses. Rankin had marched toward the cowering child with that thought in mind.

William had attacked. He hadn’t demonstrated grief over the others, but the son, he loved. If she had known, Rankin would have taken them both to get him to do what she wanted, but there wasn’t time to puzzle it out. There wasn’t a wild struggle like during his rape. William fought with her like a woman, using a strength she wasn’t prepared for. Killing him with the brutal throat rip had been defensive instinct. Taking the son to replace the father had been quick thinking self-preservation, but the emotions she’d carried for his father had begun to overwhelm her as Jason grew older.

Instead of a cold object to be used, he’d become her guilty obsession, her hidden treasure. As he aged, his features became more defined and she was rewarded for the patience. Every time he responded to her, the old dreams of having a loving mate resurfaced against her will. Rankin had found herself bringing him gifts, taking him out of the complex, bonding with him. They were both fascinated by animals and war relics, so she made him dependent on her through those things and others. There was no doubt that Jason hated her, but he also needed her and it was a powerful hold. Of the fifteen years he’d spent in the complex, half of those had been spent untouched and gently cared for. The other half…

Rankin forced her mind from the long, bloody nights of breaking him in. She’d had others before and since, but the memories of Jason’s first sessions were the ones she held dear. Until the Pruetts, she’d been everything to him.

And then he’d betrayed her, taking the first escape to come along, like his father had. *There will be payment for that!*

**3**

They didn’t travel long before Angelica’s gentle grip on his shoulder slowed them. They were coming to the intersection of a small town. He slowed further at the sight of all the women going about their lives.

The town was only a few streets by a few streets, but the number of homesteaders was surprising. Almost all of the small, cleared lots along the road hosted cabins or the beginnings of one, and he could hear a cutting crew taking trees in the distance as they slowed to a crawl. This region was growing when few others were. Jason wondered suddenly how much of it could be credited to his owner’s family. Tales of their generosity were abundant, but he thought it was also an honor to share the hometown of such lethal women.

The crew turned right onto the wider street at the intersection. Jason began browsing the businesses. There were a number of shops offering day-to-day items, but there were also a few he would have given a lot to be allowed to walk through–especially the bookstore. Did they make them using the trees, like in the old world? As far as he knew, the Network had outlawed books and reading unless it was their approved material. Jason thought the shelves here would be stocked with propaganda, but maybe underneath or–

*Flo’s Floozies.*

Jason winced as he spotted the whorehouse and the long line of females waiting for relief. He stayed facing forward, afraid of recognizing someone he had known from the complex. If he did, he might beg his new owner to save them.

At the end of the street, their escorts veered right again. Jason kept pace as dozens of people shifted their way. To his surprise, some of these changelings raised a hand in greeting that Angelica and the Runners returned. He hadn’t expected them to be friendly to anyone.

They rolled to the edge of a driveway next to a crumbling white dome with a rounded, rubber coated white roof showing from the earth. Behind it, he could see the edge of the neighborhood and a long pile of debris he was guessing hadn’t been touched in a long time. It reminded him strongly of the slums surrounding the complex. Their citizens still lived in the aftermath of the war.

Jason turned to the small house, warily inspecting the dark windows and tall, rusted doors. The yard around it wasn’t any more encouraging. It was lined in thorn trees, the deadly kind that came to life and ate anything they could reach. He tried to imagine raising a family here, but couldn’t. Happiness only went so far.

Jason felt Angelica’s tension as they slid to a stop. There was a thick silence where he adjusted carefully to see her. He couldn’t read anything, but he paid attention to the mood.

The largest of their escorts offered another option. “We could stay for a day.”

Angelica didn’t look away from Jason’s features. “No. We roll straight through.”

One of the drag Runners shrugged. “Probably a trap waiting, anyway. I’d lay odds on it.”

“Wendy, you’d lay odds on anything!”

Jason understood from their banter that Wendy liked to gamble. It also meant she liked to drink and be in areas where a service was available. He studied the ground so as not to draw her attention.

Angelica’s regard returned to the crumbling homestead. “This is where we would have lived.”

Jason winced at Angelica’s sad words, more from her pain than the state of her home. As long as he was out of Rankin’s control, he could live almost anywhere.

Jason scanned the area again. The thickets of evil thorn trees running the length of the property, created a hedge that screamed, *danger, beware of residents*. Jason tried not to shudder at the notion of being shut in that small dome with all these women.

“The inside is far different.”

Jason shrugged at Angelica’s mutter. “Do you need anything from in there? I’ll go get it for you.”

She shook her head, not looking at him now. “What I need couldn’t be found here, either.”

Jason opened his mouth to offer comfort, and she took her hot hand from his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Puzzling over it, Jason got them moving. He didn’t understand, but he was glad she wasn’t going inside. Rankin had been here, she knew the layout. An ambush was likely and Jason got them rolling faster. He wasn’t ready for that confrontation yet. *I don’t think I ever will be.*

**4**

A short time later, trouble came up on the right flank in the form of two wheeled bikes that the crew had little chance of outrunning. Their small numbers and large weapons also told Angelica who was after them. People out here called them demons. The Pruetts knew them by a different name.

“It’s the Ring!”

Sam’s shout wasn’t worried. Jason didn’t think that one could be rattled.

Angelica signaled that she would cover Jason while Sam and her Runners did their duty.

Angelica leaned in to his ear, ignoring the automatic flinch. “Keep us moving!”

Jason swung around to find the faster bikes of the Ring catching up. Angelica pointed the direction that would take them into the Borderlands and to a number of places where they could make a stand.

Jason swerved as she drew her weapon.

She wasn’t as good as her sister, but she would be careful and make each shot count. Gunfire rapped out behind them, sharp and hungry. The bounty hunter got set.

Jason didn’t feel like a rebel. He was flying down a dirt path as if the hellhounds were on their trail. He had a changeling behind him and the Runners were exchanging gunfire with the Ring, whom he’d only met one time but never forgotten. Bullets slammed into the ground around them as Jason instinctively kept weaving through the ruts. He should have felt like a rebel in every way. Instead, he felt like a marked man about to be recaptured.

Fear got Jason to increase speed until Angelica was forced to turn around and help control the Mopar. The bikes chasing them sounded closer, but there was no turning around to verify it as they flew down a steep incline.

Jason thought they were going to tip, but Angelica yanked on the handlebars with her changeling strength and kept them balanced enough to allow momentum to carry the bike down the steep grade on its rear wheels.

They hit the bottom with a breathtaking thump. Angelica pointed as she rotated around. “Go there!”

Knowing how vulnerable they were while the bike got back up to speed, Jason concentrated on hitting the gas correctly and not spinning the tires. The Mopar shot forward smoothly, and he increased their speed again, aiming for the crumbling wall of stone that ran the distance and beyond.

*Bang!*

Angelica had finally fired, telling him their pursuers were close. He pushed the bike up to the red line, knees molded to the hump. Behind him, Angelica held onto his waist with her free hand and fired repeatedly with the other.

As they neared the stone wall, Jason picked out the gap that she wanted him to take and steered that way. The rocks lining it were dangerous, hidden traps that he avoided as best he could. In places, he couldn’t at all.

They hit a small pile of these rocks, bouncing up into the sky to land with another bone jarring clang. The closer they got to the gap, the more rocks there were, and he had to slow further. As he did, he realized the rocks were missing stones from the wall.

Angelica’s movements told Jason she was out of ammunition; he listened for instructions but only heard her grunt of effort. The sound came again. Throwing those deadly spikes on her belt, he guessed, spinning tires as they hit a patch of dirt before the gap.

It slowed the bike enough for him to make the turn instead of wrecking them like it should have. He gunned it again, shooting through the entrance.

“You can stop now.” Angelica’s words were calm.

Jason immediately spun them around in a cloud of dust to see their trail of death streaming in vivid detail.

Half a dozen Ring members lay between the wall and the hill they’d bounced down. Those closest had spikes plunged into their uncovered limbs and throats. Twisted metal hulks and smoking debris made up the rest of the path, completed by the Runners now cresting the hill. There was no sign of any surviving Ring members. Jason twisted around to Angelica.

“Don’t scare them.”

They were being studied by a thick row of darkly clad, hooded people holding unlit torches and swords. Behind them lay the ruin of a city, but Jason was too busy staring at the glowing yellow eyes and open sores*. Lepers.* Oh, shit.

Chapter Eleven

**Ancient Demands**

**1**

**“D**on’t scare them?” Jason quipped lowly. “What about them scaring me?”

Angelica’s soft chuckle told Jason she was no longer in kill mode. He was relieved when the glowing people lowered their swords in response. He’d never been around lepers, but Jason had listened to stories of their scarred skin and running wounds in horror. He was unhappy to find out the tales weren’t exaggerated, but there was also a quiet sense of menace around these silent outcasts that he was certain Angelica wasn’t ignoring despite her calm demeanor.

“We’re sorry to have crossed the wall.” Angelica reloaded her weapon and holstered. “It wasn’t our choice to make.”

The Runners all stopped their Mopars at the gap in the stones, but each of them raised a weapon, telling the colony they wouldn’t stay there if Angelica was threatened.

“We do not hunt your kind.” Angelica wasn’t completely sure on that one, but she hoped it was true. “Nor did we wish to bring trouble here.”

“You may go or stay in peace, Pruett clan.”

One of the darkly cloaked figures came forward, a man as far as Jason could tell, though the voice gave no clue. All he heard in it was suffering.

The leper’s cloaks were longer than most, coming down to camouflage sore riddled hands, hems stopping at the ankle. Jason was a bit shocked that they were barefoot with exposed skin as dark as night.

“Wonderful. Perhaps we could provide something you need in return for such hospitality.”

Their faces lit up. Jason sensed the leper colony got few offers like that. *They do feel more than pain.* Were they curious about the world that had shunned them? What did they need?

The man gestured in sarcastic respect. “Yes. Anyone who kills on our hearth is welcome to trade with us. Such openness is needed among our kind.”

“Agreed.” Angelica’s tone was grave. “There are many enemies to be slain.”

“That could be, young Pruett, but you’ll have to sell it.” The man’s sore peppered facade broke into an ugly sneer. “The future means more to us than it does to you.”

“Those are fair words.” Angelica studied them, noting what Jason was and more. “The hunting of lepers will stop and scientists will search for a cure. Do those terms suit you?”

Her tone was firm, set. Jason doubted she’d give them anything else.

“Aye, it does indeed–mostly because you’ve eliminated our biggest killer.”

“The Ring.”

“My people are sport for them.”

“Not anymore. Who are you?”

“Jonah. These are my people, the lepers.”

It was stated with a hardness that declared he was bitter.

Their leader was Jason’s size, average, and the only one wearing shoes. They were woven from corn stalks. Unlike the others, Jonah’s cloak was decorated with glittering yellow specks of a shiny bead that ran down the seam lines of the entire garment.

Jason wondered suddenly if that was a sign of Jonah’s status. Why else would he have a staff with those same designs carved and painted into the wood? He clearly wasn’t old enough to need it, though Jason guessed death might not be far away. The blue and black patches were endless on Jonah’s exposed skin. *Does it itch?*

In the distance, Jason could hear a loud noise, one that was coming their way. It was a wild buzzing; he opened his mouth to ask.

Jonah gestured. “Perhaps we should continue this belowground.”

“Yes.” Angelica motioned to the Runners, who lowered their weapons and rolled slowly through the gap to flank her and Jason as they followed the contagious colony. The lepers of this buried city were akin to a legend and ghost story combined.

As Jonah traveled, Jason saw he did indeed need the staff to help him get across the threshold. Despite his young age, the disease was eating his body, weakening him and stealing his life.

Now unblocked by the glare of the setting sun as they neared the city, Jason didn’t understand what he was seeing. There were a few edges of dust covered buildings, but where were the rest of them? This had been a major city before the war, connecting multiple trade routes along an incredibly determined river. How could this be that place?

Nature had reclaimed most of its property, filling in the riverbed and the city with hundreds of years of harshly blown sand and grit. The gap in the wall had once been a bridge, Jason realized. The stones had been laid against the arched frame of it and then cemented with mud-like glue. Across the fifty-foot span that now held who knew how many feet of dust and rubble, was a wall of sand with a metal block sunk into the side of it.

When a small group of the lepers began pulling on the ropes, lifting the metal block, Jason understood it was a lifting booth. He’d toured them in the museum at the complex, but this one had been reinforced–many times from the chunky, uneven appearance of the welds. It would probably keep a bullet out though, explaining why the Network had been unsuccessful in their quest to exterminate the lepers. A city buried in sand with only one or two entrances was easier to defend.

Jason rolled through the narrow gap and then stopped as the booth came down, snapping into place with a loud, metal clank.

Angelica led him from the bike with a wave of her hand.

Jason followed as the Runners surrounded them, taking in the buried city. Sand walls created chambers and corridors that had been cut out around relics of the old world. Parts of cars and edges of homes glared balefully, preserved under the ground like an ancient tomb. A lot of the organic matter was gone, but there was enough of a frame for him to recognize a fire truck in the other half of the wide, rounded room.

Every few feet held something more unreal, like the bars with a silently screaming skeleton peering through them, or the statues of dragons engraved in what might be gold. In the center of these artifacts, was a wooden platform that led down a set of spiral stairs with a thin banister. They continued as far as Jason could see when he leaned over the edge, drawn by all the lights below and by the relics he could see down there. Jason wanted to examine the fountain to discover if the swing still worked, or maybe even stand on the small footstool that was overturned near a charred bicycle frame…

“Easy.”

Angelica’s hand on his arm reminded Jason of where they were. Taking calming breaths, he followed her into the abandoned city of St. Louis with lepers as their guides and the buried city as a shield against hordes of bugs now flooding the area ahead of the storm. Most were harmless, but some, like the cicadas that lived and bred aboveground every year, were deadly. When they attacked, they blinded and poisoned their prey.

Angelica hadn’t realized the bugs were so close. They were trying to travel between squalls while the troops would be holed up and waiting it out. She was glad her family had made contact with this leper colony a long time ago. It was convenient. She hadn’t ever sheltered with them, though, so she stayed on full alert. They would wait until the swarm of bugs was past and slip out between them and the coming dust storm. Until then, she would converse with these shunned people and try to sway them to the Pruett cause. The Network may have yet another surprise coming from those they’d been abusing all these years.

*This may help the rebels.*

Angelica nodded at her sister’s hand delivered comment. It could also help them tonight. If they used an unknown exit, Rankin might be lost long enough for her and the Runners to get ahead and set a trap.

The group traveled deeper into the city. She kept Jason in her line of sight as they reached the living quarters.

Draped in dark brown shirts, pants, and dresses, their wool clothes still carried a heavy scent of its origins as the group of twenty escorted them, surrounded them. Angelica supposed they might do a bit of trading for cloth, but she doubted these people managed enough to outfit the entire colony. They were using their own animals and gardens. It was smart.

Lights flared in the darkness as more torches were lit. Jason’s gasp echoed through the courtyard where they’d emerged. Full of giant, ape-like statues with glowing yellow eyes, it was a bit menacing.

Angelica swept the lepers again, this time in appreciation. Having them for the coming battle might make all the difference. The Network wouldn’t know what to do at first and the rebels could use that time to their advantage.

“This is one of our worship halls.”

Angelica started the conversation. “Is it all right to ask about that, or would you prefer we stayed on business terms?”

The man leading them gave a gentle snort. “We’d speak to you of many things, Pruett. Ask your questions.”

“What do you consume that makes your eyes glow?” She didn’t care about the color, but the glow was one she’d studied during previous visits. Candice had been too polite to ask.

“It is an effect of the desert dust that blows over our farms from the North.”

“Because the Network would locate you if you farmed anywhere else?”

“Yes. We’ve implemented underground growing and managed to feed our children that way, so at least they can remain free of our curse.”

“And what of your disease? How do they avoid it?”

“Some are born immune. We learned if they are handled carefully and not fed from their mother’s sickened milk, they stay that way. The amniotic sac protects them.”

“Does the Network know?”

“Yes, of course, they do!” Jason’s anger erupted, making him forget his place. “They just wish you didn’t.”

His beautiful voice made the entire group stop and turn toward him.

Jason flushed. “Rankin said they also have a vaccine to keep themselves from getting it if they ever accidentally have contact with you. The last I heard, their test cure was 90% effective.”

A stunned, angry silence fell after his words.

Jason instinctively leaned closer to Angelica’s heat. Had he made a mistake? He was trying to help the cause, to enlist these people because Angelica wanted it. He wasn’t positive what she planned to use them for, but he trusted her.

“It would seem that you now have friends here, ones who can be counted on so long as it includes our conditions and immediate distribution of that vaccine the second the dome falls.”

Angelica held out a hand, making Jason tense.

“As long as your conditions are not unreasonable, we have an arrangement in place.”

Surprised, the man shook with a fast, light grip. Jason was glad his hands were sheathed in gloves, but he wasn’t sure that would have mattered to his owner. She didn’t fear them at all, not backing away or avoiding brushes from people as they got moving again. Jason wondered why that was, but he wasn’t so brave as to ask in front of them.

The lepers moved quietly, exchanging low words and curious glances that went over the Runner’s clothes and equipment, but especially Angelica’s unreadable face. They were sizing her up, taking her measure… What else did they want from her? What were the conditions?

As they came by, a woman held out a hand toward the young girl next to her, except their skin didn’t touch. *The child must not be ill.* Jason instantly approved of their caution, their determination to save some of their future. The Network wouldn’t respect them for that, but he did.

“We had other visitors recently who took shelter with us from the storms.”

Angelica knew who he meant and it relieved a part of her even as it increased a different worry. “They were well?” Sam had left their parents near here to escort Angelica to the trials in Adelphia. The adults had already begun the hard task of gathering help for the cause. They were planning to meet in New Network City when they were all finished. Pruetts were calling in all owed favors, hoping it would stack up to the battle ahead.

“Yes. Mary and her party were helpful to us, as well.”

Angelica heard the tone and shrugged. “You need only ask.”

Pleased expressions went around the lepers at her accepting attitude, but she wasn’t fooled by their peacefulness. She knew they were anything but.

“We have a slight problem, in one of our neighborhoods.”

With that statement, Angelica understood this was a city in use. How many people were here?

They emerged into an open area that angled down to another set of wide, wooden stairs that disappeared into the darkness. Below, hundreds of torchlights glared up. There was an army of lepers here. Why hadn’t they revolted on their own? “Perhaps you’d care to explain why we’re fighting without your people. No one has more reason to fight than you.”

“Don’t you know our history?” Jonah turned to Angelica with an ugly sneer that she knew wasn’t directed at her personally. “No.”

Jason, however, knew no such thing and he stepped closer, hand almost touching hers.

“You should. The Pruetts were responsible for it!”

“After the Network came into power?”

Jonah nodded savagely at her question. “Pruetts have always worked for the Network. They cleared us out and forced us into the abandoned cities of the old world. When we reached this place, the riots of 230AW had flourished and we were forgotten in the panic to regain control. Now, we wish to depart this place, but before we can, there is a small matter of post 51.”

Angelica jerked. That name was well known for the horror stories, but wasn’t that a different section of the Borderlands? Her confusion was evident, but the lepers escorting them didn’t explain further. She wondered how much of that forbidden post the lepers had brought with them on the journey… *Son of a bachelor!*

She had realized what that meant. She had assumed the lepers were chased into the Borderlands from the east, but if they’d been at post 51 first and brought things along, then they were from the opposite direction. “What do you know of the West Coast Outpost?”

Jonah gave a small, bitter smile. “Very little, now. Like I’ve stated, when the Pruetts came, we were run out.”

Her mind raced. What were the odds that a line of the Pruett family still existed there? It was more information to store as they reached the bottom of the first wooden landing.

Jonah gestured toward a wide, stone door near the end of the long corridor. “We do not expect you to win against such a creature.”

Feeling trapped, something that would make her ruthless, Angelica untied Jason’s rope and handed the end to Sam. As she marched toward the rusted cell entrance, the bounty hunter pulled the disease tight around her hurting heart in case it was needed. The feeling of loss had come the second she and Jason weren’t attached anymore; she let it sink into the rage and bubble.

“What is it that you expect me to accomplish?”

“Talk to him.” Jonah’s expression was desperate. “Bargain for our freedom, in the ways that we cannot!”

As soon as she opened the door and scented wild musk, the change ripped through her in immediate defense.

As Angelica disappeared through the door, Jason’s tone quickly became frantic. “What’s in there? What is it? Why is she going in alone?!”

The big Runner she’d given his rope to kept a firm hand on his arm. “Something we need, I’d guess or she would have come right back out.”

The lepers were gathering in the halls and on the stairs, silently scanning them with hopeful, diseased faces.

“What is it? What does she have to do?”

The Runner jerked on his arm, trying to quiet him, but Jason wrenched away from her unsuspecting grip to grab Jonah by the arm, the danger forgotten. “Get her out of there!”

Jason was on the ground an instant later without knowing how he got there. The man hadn’t moved!

Jason glared up at him warily.

Jonah glared back. “For me to send my people out to die in her war, I will have what I need for my survivors!”

Instead of the fight his actions could have caused, the man’s answer defused the Runner’s instant need to strike out. Sprawled against her leg, Jason felt her arm tense and then lower.

The big Runner Jason had jerked away from helped him up, this time keeping a locked hand around his wrist. “Mary Pruett could not give you this?”

“She *would* not.”

The Runner grunted. Jason saw her fast signal to the women around them. If Angelica chose to say no as well, they may have to fight these people.

*“Slam you! And stay outta my mind!”*

Everyone tensed at Angelica’s angry shout.

*Thud!*

*Crash! Bang!*

The sounds were not encouraging. Jason knew he wasn’t the only one worried.

“What’s in there?”

His Runner’s question was asked in a tone only a fool would have denied. Jonah clearly wasn’t one.

“It is a horror from our past–one that we cannot be shed of.”

“Why don’t you kill it yourself?”

Jonah’s answer was simple. “Because it cannot die, and without it, we cannot live.”

More crashes and awful sounds of fighting echoed. Jason noticed the number of lepers around them had grown from twenty to nearly fifty. “Exactly what does she have to do?”

Jason’s question was ignored until his big Runner glared at the leper leader with pink vision.

Jonah let out a resigned sigh. “Survive.”

**2**

Angelica couldn’t win.

It was a test of her strength and of her loyalty, but it was also a centuries old power struggle that she wasn’t going to be able to fix. It was the last thing she’d expected to find here.

Angelica was careful to stay ahead of those violent swings as the creature tried to determine who had disturbed its slumber.

A piece of familiar cloak lay in the corner, telling Angelica that her aunt Mary had confronted this loathsome thing as well during her time here. That knowledge made her determined to win, to discover whatever terrible information Mary had earned.

Angelica ducked an enormous gray claw as giant yellow slits narrowed in on her new location. She didn’t know what type of animal it had been, but the creature was easily twice her size, with all of her changeling fury. It had slung her away from the door as soon as she entered, preventing her from leaving, but Angelica wasn’t positive she would have anyway. The Pruett blood that drove her sister to survive in the Borderlands wasn’t exclusive to Sam. Angelica had never faced a challenge like this.

She jumped another swing, wondering vaguely why the sloth-like monster didn’t just break free. Dozens of thuds with those enormous fists would bring these walls down.

As she lunged for the corner, buying time, Angelica began to understand.

***“Be still.”***

She heard the voice in her mind, as well as through her ears, and she lunged upward in awkward shock as a huge claw swung in from the left.

Now perched precariously on rotting debris, her feet automatically kept the balance as she stared intently into the creature’s face. “Slam you! And stay outta my mind!”

Used to servitude, the creature slowed its next swipe; those piercing, ugly eyes swung around until they found her face. ***“Who are you?”***

In her mind and ears… This creature wasn’t a prisoner. It was the master. “Angelica Pruett.”

The creature slowly lowered its arms. She was able to see that it had once been a monkey or an ape of some type. Its ancient gray hair hung in tattered mats that had never been brushed, giving it the appearance of a Bigfoot from old books. She’d found those eerie descriptions too bizarre to believe, but the creature in front of her wasn’t a myth. It was as real as she was and twice as deadly.

Angelica noted human and animal bones on the filthy floor near her, and then more under those, and understood the ape was a flesh eater. *Wonderful*.

***“Why are you here?”***

Her thoughts were chaotic, but not so much that she couldn’t make connections. This monster ruled the lepers and they’d sent her in here to end their slavery, figuring if the Pruetts were already doing it for the males… “The rebellion needs your help.”

The ancient Ape slowly hefted itself toward a cave-like entrance that she hadn’t noticed.

***“We do not give aid and succor to friends. We have none of those.”***

Angelica took in a breath, grateful but curious as to why her name had stopped the attack. “Maybe it’s time that changed.”

***“Would you challenge my leadership, then?”***

She contemplated faster. “If I have to. It seems much easier to just give you something you want.”

The creature heaved itself into the gory stone chair near an entrance littered with old fur. When it sat, the city rattled and she shifted from foot to foot to keep her balance on years of debris.

Wizened palms turned up in agreement. ***“And what is that, unsatisfied Pruett?”***

She hadn’t been prepared for sharp intelligence that could read her. She wasn’t dealing with an instinct driven animal. She was facing a primitive being whose brain had kicked on hundreds of years ago. She wondered briefly what had caused the flip, and then frowned at herself. The war, of course. What hadn’t that dark day caused? Nothing was the same.

Angelica met the ape’s morose sneer with understanding as she made the final connection. “I’ll provide the single thing someone as ancient and tormented as you could possibly long for–an honorable death.”

**3**

Jason listened to the quiet, beyond worried. There hadn’t been a single noise in almost five minutes. He rotated to the big Runner on his right, hoping his voice didn’t trigger her heat. He tugged on the rope. “Will you check?”

The woman’s eyes flickered pink, making him retreat toward the wall. It was as far as he could go with her hand still locked tightly around his wrist.

“Yes.” She released Jason.

Jonah shook his head. “You may not enter, no matter what.”

The Runner’s glare in response implied she would make her own choices.

The woman peered through the door after cracking it and paled, sending Jason’s heart into a faster rhythm.

The Runner secured the cell and turned back with a much calmer tone than he’d expected. “They’re talking. Where can we get some food?”

There were surprised mutters and cheers that told him the lepers had also believed Angelica might be dead. Jason glowered as the Runner took a fresh, sweaty grip on his wrist.

The lepers led them through the maze of wooden stairs, but Jason dragged his feet. He didn’t want to go anywhere without Angelica. Beyond needing her protection, he was growing used to it, and it felt wrong to leave her in there with whatever it was. He tugged out of the Runner’s grip and stopped.

The woman reached out to take his wrist again and Jason ducked it. If she beat him, he’d survive. “I go when Angel goes.”

It was assuming a lot, but he’d heard Jonah call them the Pruett *clan*. He was hoping the same leniency Angelica had shown would be given to him by her relatives.

The Runner stared at him, wild hair and filthy goggles adding to the impression that she was a hardass. Jason was counting on the other half of her existing as well–the Pruett part that didn’t like slavery and respected courage.

His Runner motioned to Jonah. “He’ll wait here.”

Jason wouldn’t have refused that tone, and he was suddenly certain the leper leader wouldn’t either.

Jonah’s facade was ugly as he studied Jason. His distaste was obvious. It gave the sense that he was barely keeping himself from striking Jason.

*Does he hate me because I wasn’t infected? Does he long for the protection that I now have?* If he knew Jason was about to give up protection for the freedom to pick his own future, would the leader mock his stupidity?

“As long as he does not leave this floor.”

Jason flashed another grateful look at the big Runner. When her nostrils flared, he couldn’t stop the instant flinch.

She turned to Jonah, eyes flashing in warning. “He’ll stay right here, but if she comes out and her property is damaged in *any* way, she’ll take it out on your people and we’ll help.”

Jason held still as the leper leader approached.

Jonah held out a small cord with a yellow pendant in the shape of a tear. “Keep this visible. It tells the others you are allowed to be here.”

Jason slid it over his covered wrist and strode toward the door. He desperately wanted to see who or what Angelica was talking to.

“Keep it closed. A *fresh* male has never escaped once sighted.”

Jason swallowed his fear and settled across from the door.

Next to where he was standing, a grayed set of bones protruded from the sand wall like an omen.

Chapter Twelve

**Riding the Wind**

**1**

**“A**re we going in there?”

Rankin snorted at Lena’s question. Hadn’t her heavily scarred XO noted the bodies of the Ring spread out like a bloody fan? “Not without a death wish.”

Rankin had been the leader of the Ring during the beginning of her career, only giving it up when she was promoted. Since then, the new Ring crew had supplied the complex with males for all the years that Rankin had labored to get to the top of the guard food chain, and the Pruetts had taken them out in a single encounter. It made their level of threat rise in her estimation. She would get this dangerous family against a wall, where she could trap them and demand Jason’s return. Then open fire.

“Why aren’t they worried about being infected?”

Her second in command was full of questions. Rankin shut her down with a scornful tone, “Pruetts don’t fear anything–least of all the walking dead.”

Silence fell.

Her orders were to confirm a rebel location and call in the strike, but she would get her property back first and her crew should already know that. She hadn’t groomed him for all those years to give him up to a Pruett. Rankin thought maybe the Network had known that as well. Maybe it was why she’d been sent. They knew her relentlessness would eventually give them what they wanted. Her vendetta against the Pruetts would never end now that she’d been crossed.

Rankin knew of the infamous family from the recent games, but she’d also known their mother before she burnt out and she hadn’t liked Mary’s haughty ways, either. The fact that the whelps resembled Mary–from their tanned, tattooed bodies, to their thick, rounded features–didn’t help that impression.

Rankin’s crew waited restlessly on either side of her as she worked it out. Some of them had been with her when she’d flipped and killed Jason’s family. They were aware of her obsession. If not for the value of being on her team, these women would have turned on her long ago. Rankin was careful to reward them well. Or kill them. She’d replaced a few of them not long after lying to the Network about Jason.

“They’ll exit somewhere else.” Rankin made the choice. “We’ll get up high and wait them out.”

“And the storm that’s coming?”

Rankin kneed her horse without answering, reminding her XO that she didn’t fear anything, either.

But Lena knew that to be a lie, didn’t she? Rankin feared what they all did–losing her place within the Network hive during the time they were out on runs. Tensions had risen since the Pruett women started winning the games and Rankin’s behavior during the match had put her girls on edge, but not so much that they wouldn’t follow her. There would be big rewards if they could locate the rebels. After the mob at the northern border, free males were the biggest enemies the Network had.

“Someone get a call through before the bugs arrive.” Rankin picked a crumbling section of the wall that was out of sight from the city entrance. She began making a nest to shelter in.

Around her, the hardasses did the same. It wasn’t the first time they’d sheltered in the open, and her crew knew what to do. As they got started, bugs came over the southern landscape, turning it dark.

Knowing they had only a few minutes before the horde reached them, their pace increased.

Thick tarps and spikes provided a flapping shelter that became sturdy when packed with a hard bodied horse and gear. Once lying, the animals kept the tarps in place and allowed for a heat source. The mounts would also make a softer pillow than the ground.

In the lea of the wall, most of the storm would miss them. The coming insects were what they had to handle right now, and Rankin felt her hatred of the Pruetts, of Angelica in particular, grow. They were safe inside, likely enjoying food and exchanging information while she was stuck out here in hell.

Rankin thought about her and Jason sharing a cozy corner of the ruins and smothered the rage until her vision was black again. Her harem of males was her weakness, but Jason held the power. She’d taken the others, not needing them as more than a way to relieve the disease, but with him, she felt something. She didn’t want to, and she loathed herself for having such immaterial cravings, but there was no fighting it. She wanted him more than anything and she needed him willing. It was why she hadn’t taken him fully yet. Her crew believed she was waiting to buy him, and that was part of her plan, but she’d been lingering for some sign that he was bonding to her. She’d been patient with him compared to the others. She had hopes that their time together had marked him as well.

These women with her also assumed she kept him thin so he didn’t appear so much like his father it made her snap again. They didn’t understand it was so he would be safe when she finally took him. His father had fought back and the size of him, his strength, had been what triggered her rage. He’d wanted her dead and she’d reacted accordingly to that threat. With Jason, that wouldn’t happen. Her control was solid over the change now, but she still didn’t want him hurt and he would be if there was a fight. Once she got in the mood, she could spend hours making them bleed.

“I’m through! Main complex line!”

Lena’s shout over the increasing wind had the others feeling better, but Rankin didn’t deliver a rebuke for the lack of discretion. Out here, there was only nature to hear.

Rankin took the satellite phone, hating the texture of it, the stench of the old world it sent through her mind. “Get me a member of the council. Now.”

As she waited, the bugs arrived.

Mutations of the grasshopper, these new bugs were the size of shoes and always hungry. Harmless before the war, they were now omnivores. Not even people were safe from them if they were hungry enough.

The tarp sagged as the bugs landed, screeching wings enough to make the rider next to her growl in dislike.

Rankin put a calming hand on her mount’s nose when it snorted. “Easy.”

These particular hordes were being driven ahead of the dust storm, unable to stop and eat for more than a few minutes at a time. They were ravenous.

She pulled the edges of the tarp tighter, and tied herself to the horse. If it spooked and ran, she might have a chance at controlling it. At the very least, she would end up wherever it did. Being on foot in this land was costly.

*“Hold for Council member eight.”*

Rankin didn’t like that. She’d never been handled by anyone lower than five before and it sent ugly ideas into her mind. If her value had dropped so low…

“Aaahhh!”

It was on her right. Lena.

*Unsecured edge of a tarp.* Rankin shrugged. Lena wouldn’t get to repeat that mistake.

The annoying screams were still coming when the council member’s rough voice tore through Rankin’s ear.

“Where are they?!”

Rankin spilled her location with an uneasy sensation. *The Network won’t betray me.* She was their top hunter, their top Defender, and she always got the job done. They showered her with gifts and freedoms that few women had, but as she gave her coordinates, Rankin began making new plans. That rocking stomach said something was wrong. *And I never ignore that. It’s what keeps me alive.*

**2**

Angelica spotted Jason as soon as she emerged from the ape’s den. He was alone in the dark tunnel, waiting for her.

That wouldn’t have been Sam’s idea, but upon spotting his pendant, Angelica understood Jason had insisted on waiting for her. It made her more positive that the meek males the Network had tried to sell everyone on didn’t exist. Oh sure, they were scared and scarred, but willing to risk pain for your wants wasn’t meek. It was brave.

Angelica didn’t speak, too full of emotions she wanted to puzzle through for the cause of. He was so complicated. Warm and eager one minute, cold and calculated the next. She sighed. It was another part of his charm. A normal, well-trained male would never have pleased her.

Angelica held out a hand.

Jason slowly let her pull him off the floor, both of them tensing at the contact. It sent them right to the train, to the fiery moment they’d shared.

Angelica let go, but didn’t retreat.

Jason swallowed, found his courage. “Are you okay?”

She’d never been cared for by a male. Even her father’s love was remote because she wasn’t safe to be around. The sudden emotion of being the center of someone’s concern was indescribable. She nodded, unable to speak.

His eyes lightened even further, becoming those glowing gray orbs that she saw in her dreams now.

“Good!”

Angelica controlled the fire, but not her hands as she reached out for him. *Just a taste...*

“All finished?” Jonah was in the tunnel entrance.

Angelica flinched, dropping her arm. “Yes.”

The leper had returned upon the sound of the ape’s door opening, Angelica assumed. She indicated for Jason to go ahead of her. His attention lingered as he walked by.

Angelica tried not to stare at him and failed. Would he have allowed her kiss? Returned it?

Jonah watched them both. “We will feed you now, and hear of your conversation.”

Angelica enjoyed the descent as they went down the dank, wooden stairs. The breeze coming from the bottom rose up to smother her in Jason’s burnt chocolate scent. She didn’t believe she would ever get tired of it.

Angelica directed Jason to the place on her right.

He sank down obediently. He hadn’t liked them being split up. Jason slid over until there was less than a foot of space between them.

This chamber was made of sand walls held in place by neatly layered debris that no longer had identifying marks. In the center was a neat, narrow fire that stretched roughly four feet and provided heat for warmth, cooking, and light. It was soothing compared to the other areas they’d been in so far.

Jonah was unable to hide a painful grimace as he dropped awkwardly to the floor. Made of stone or perhaps metal, Jason suddenly realized how hard this environment must be for the Glowers, how much it had to increase their suffering.

The lepers knew their guests wouldn’t take any food they handled. They went to great lengths to show that the teenage children who were not infected were doing the cooking. Hoods began lowering then and Jason averted his gaze from the bald heads and sores, suddenly queasy. He didn’t think he could eat, but when Angelica accepted her bowl without complaint, so did the rest of her crew. Jason felt better when a few of the Runners avoided the sights as well, but no one protested Angelica’s choice to eat the food.

There were half a dozen lepers sitting with them, but ten times that number lined the various tunnels and peepholes, listening. Jason hoped they wouldn’t have trouble when it came time to leave, but none of his protectors seemed worried. The Runners were already busy shoveling in the food. He realized hot meals were probably hard for these tough women to come by while on runs.

“What did our captor say?”

Jason’s head rose in surprise at Jonah’s question*. They’re prisoners?*

He was relieved their scalps were once again covered, and he was sympathetic. Now that they were still and seated, he noticed most of the lepers around them were female and heavily scarred from their battles with the flesh-eating disease. What agony these people were enduring while the Network withheld their cure!

Angelica was also sympathetic, but it didn’t show in her answer. “The world will become a plague if we free you.”

“The answer is always the same.” There was no surprise and no anger in Jonah’s tone, simply resigned sorrow.

“You know it to be true.”

“But we have no choice!” Jonah protested her calm fact. “This curse wasn’t ours. Why must we suffer so?”

“Would you destroy the world again, just to have a few years of freedom?”

Angelica’s tone was gentle. Jason was glad. The Runners were all tensing, subtly setting down warm bowls in favor of cold weapons.

“No. But, I’d have more than this!”

“And so you might. Listen well.” Angelica’s words drew every ear to her. “Your master says if the Network comes here, to this place, that you will join the fight. He also says if a contained sector is found, you may leave this place for good, after the dome falls and the vaccine is distributed.”

Cheers and happiness echoed, then Jonah’s harsh voice followed it. “What did you promise in return for such generosity?”

“Death, of course. It’s all he wants after centuries of holding you, of witnessing you rot without being able to stop it.”

The Glowers erupted in mutters and cries of protest that Angelica hadn’t expected. They loved their captor as much as they hated him. *Very interesting.*

“Calm down.”

Jason got the sense that the others heard it differently by the way they scowled at Jonah, but immediately resumed their silent alertness. He’d had a bit to think while waiting on Angelica. Jonah had thrown him to the ground–mentally–before Jason could touch him and possibly be infected.

The leper leader stared at Angelica. “Our captor cannot die. Many have tried.”

Angelica’s tone firmed into Pruett stone. “He can.”

No one argued, but the doubt was clear.

In the silence, the smell of garlic hit Jason. He realized how hungry he was. He hesitantly dipped the wooden spoon into the yellow soup and took a small bite. It had a creamy corn flavor with a potato-like crunch, and he dug in, letting the heat warm him. The strong-smelling wine cups, Jason shunned in place of the water flask that Angelica had placed between them. He reached for the canteen, and found her hand still there. For a single second, he let it stay…

Angelica tensed in surprised heat.

He jerked back.

She didn’t respond.

After she took a long drink, Angelica wiped the spout and held it out to him with her fingers set in such a way that he had no choice but to touch her again.

Desire, sharp and unexpected, slid into his stomach as he took it. Jason felt her wishing things were different.

Angelica distracted them both with another question to Jonah. “Who, or what, was he before the war?”

Jason hadn’t thought of that, but he immediately wanted an answer. He’d gotten a fast glimpse as she came out of the cell. Those glowing yellow eyes and the size of those hands would visit his dreams.

The leader of the lepers lit another torch. “He is an experiment we found in post 5, one with more intelligence than any living thing should have. When we fled, it tracked us and held us in these ugly lands to keep us from spreading our disease to those who survived the change’s unforgiving rampage.”

“He saved the future.”

“We believe so, yes.”

“And yet, you hate him.”

“How can we not? He has kept us prisoner here for hundreds of years, never letting us live in the light. There must be hatred for one such as that.”

Jason was confused, but he assumed Angelica had it figured out as she set down an empty bowl. Wow. *Did she even taste it?*

Jason started to set his own bowl down, but Angelica waved a hand. “Finish it.”

He considered her list as he obeyed. *Heavier is better.*

“You’ve grown accustomed to living by his rules because it’s easier than thinking for yourselves. You’ve stayed as much as he has held you because you fear the world, as well as long for it.”

Jonah bowed his chin in shame at Angelica’s words.

To Jason, the lepers resembled any other group of people trying to survive. There were light touches and pats, and even a careful hug between what Jason thought was a mother and son. It sent him to his own childhood, making his sympathy grow. He understood why they were avoided, but he suddenly wanted to change it, to help them. He glanced at his owner, thinking that was probably her loyalties rubbing off.

“You’ve been isolated.” Angelica belched lowly. “Some of that can be over now.”

“What if the fight doesn’t come here?” one of the lepers called from behind their leader.

Everyone looked to Angelica first.

She shrugged. “Make sure it does. You know how to draw their fire, don’t you?”

“Of course, but we can’t. We have a deal.”

“Some deals are made to be broken.”

Jonah glared. “We will not!”

“They’re desperate for freedom, but they won’t fight for it. What cowards!” Jason tossed the pendant toward the leader’s feet, drawing attention before he thought about the consequences. “Maybe your people deserve to be enslaved. Even the games prizes have to be drugged!”

Jason was angry. How dare these people expect Angelica and the rebels to free them while they did nothing to… He paused. Everyone was gaping at him in shock now. *Damn*.

“I’m sorry for my rudeness.” He didn’t sound apologetic, though.

“You let him speak freely?” Jonah stared in surprise.

“Yes.” Angelica’s tone said to be careful about that line of questioning.

Jason was once again grateful to be under her protection.

Jonah let it go. “He says the truth, but it changes nothing. We will not draw the Network here to involve ourselves in your war, not unless we are free to live in your world.”

“That is your choice to make.” Angelica stood up, hand sliding to her belt of weapons. “But mark these words, my selfish friends. When that dome falls, there’s going to be a mad rush to the vaccines. With those, you wouldn’t be a danger anymore and he wouldn’t need to hold you here.”

Angelica led her group toward the stairs. “Perhaps you should deliberate again. Those fighting with us will be in that first mad dash, and guaranteed a shot at being normal again. I believe that’s worth breaking your deal for, don’t you?”

Silence followed her, and then the leader’s thoughtful voice came. “That is a life we’ve never dreamed of. We aren’t prepared for it.”

Angelica went up the dank stairs that groaned under her firm steps. “The Changeling Winds have arrived. I’m sure you already know it’s best to bend, rather than to try standing against them. They tend to destroy anything that doesn’t surrender to their will.”

Angelica led her group away from the main chamber when they reached the ground level. Jason realized the lepers weren’t escorting them. *She must know her way around.*

Angelica took them by more relics of the old world–part of a thick rod and rail that could have once belonged on an arch, the wide metal bottom of a boat–but Jason didn’t stare as he had when they’d first come in. Already, the constant reminders of the past, the death scenes enshrined here, had lost their allure.

Jason was soothed by discovering their bikes lined up neatly next to a stone entrance. They’d left the Mopars inside the main entrance when they arrived. Jason wondered how the lepers had transported them. He was positive he would have heard the engines if they’d been driven. Did the mental powers of their leader extend to the other Glowers, as well?

Angelica directed him toward her bike, where he settled onto the rear, hearing the wind. He didn’t think for a minute that he was ready to drive through a storm.

She handed him a pair of goggles and then donned her own before bringing out the rope he was beginning to hate. Jason did like how close she had to get to bind them together, however.

Angelica shook out a poncho-like tarp and brought it down neatly over him. While she secured the edges to his legs and then the bike, he quickly discovered he could duck beneath the end if he needed to.

Angelica surprised Jason with the black mask that was jerked over him so fast that there wasn’t time for more than a quick flinch. Soft and thick, it had small holes camouflaged by a patch of cloth sewn on in such a way it could be uncovered for eating. *Ingenious!*

Angelica ducked under the tarp, sliding into the rear position.

Jason scooted forward, admitting to himself that it was where he liked to ride. All warm and well cared for, he held still as she adjusted, feeling those perky breasts push against his back. He was suddenly very glad that they weren’t spending a night here.

She leaned forward to secure them the rest of the way and Jason couldn’t stop a hand from dropping to her leg, holding her against him.

Angelica froze, breath catching as tension flared.

Jason slid his fingers along her lean thigh… He stopped, face flaming.

When Angelica gently tapped his shoulder instead of delivering a deserved punishment, Jason gunned the engine to life and beamed under his mask. *I could get used to this life.*

Jason hadn’t felt like a rebel during the ride in, but as he rolled them out into the dust storm, he realized that had changed. He knew where an outlawed people were living. He’d listened to a conversation of rebellion, and he’d shown his hidden nature in standing up for what he believed in. Satisfied with his progress on this stop, Jason gunned it faster and enjoyed Angelica’s approval.

**3**

As the purple dusk began to fade into night, Jason fell asleep in her arms. They’d been riding for six hours, leaving the storm behind as they used their changeling sight to drive by. Some of the effects of their torment were convenient.

Jason’s scent washed over her, fire and sugar mixing in a spray of temptation. She wanted him too much.

He didn’t stir as the Mopar slowed. He was exhausted, mostly from craning to observe the large bugs as they’d flown through patches of wounded stragglers.

His hands gently slipped from the controls as he melted against her. Cold fingers still near his so she could rest against his body, Angelica guided the Mopar to a gentle stop.

The Runners slowed, returning to put the couple in a circle of protection as Angelica shortened the rope to secure him more fully. She wasn’t taking the chance of him sliding off like Daniel had done with Candice.

Their escort waited patiently, but Angelica could sense her sister’s intent stare through the goggles. The group of Runners were dressed the same to keep the Network from knowing exactly who was leading them, and they rotated the point position regularly to maintain that confusion. These females would bow to her wishes if Angelica needed them to. With Rankin on their trail, she hoped they would already know what to do, but she was prepared to take over. These might be the more wild relatives–distant cousins and years long companions of her sister–but they understood strength came in many sizes.

Jason woke, looking up groggily. “Are we there?”

“No.” She shifted a second poncho over them and tied the ends to her belt. It would get coldest before dawn when they hit the edge of the Borderlands. “Go back to sleep.”

“I wanted to drive you in.” Jason yawned, stretching against her.

Angelica felt her need grow as his heat flowed out, returning circulation to her toes. *Nice*. “You still can.”

He reacted happily, snuggling against her like a sated lover, and she forced the flames down. She was doing a good thing for him, giving her ward these liberties. Enjoying his warmth along the way was a benefit she was entitled to. She had heard the stories of using a mate for that, for emotion control, and other, more farfetched things like mind reading, but sharing body heat was a common practice when the snows came. Would Jason be in her life for the season switch this year?

It was a painful thought as she curled around him and felt his rumble of contentment. Did he have any idea how enticing that was to her? Angelica plugged the hole in her heart as best she could and got them rolling again.

On the far right, her sister was still evaluating the situation. She was closest to her cousin Candice, but Angelica adored her sister, though in the past, Sam’s wild ways had intimidated her. After winning the Bachelor Battles, Angelica didn’t think that was a problem anymore. She sensed her sister had questions waiting, but Angelica didn’t want to tell Sam or anyone else the truth until she got to Baker and set Jason free. If she revealed the truth before then, Sam and her Runners would all try to convince her not to honor her word and Angelica was desperately afraid she would listen.

**4**

“Snnooorr…”

The noise was an irritation Jason fought to ignore. *I’m so tired!*

“Snort!”

Jason jerked awake to find himself in a bedroll with Angelica. Not sure where they were, he froze in the darkness. If not for the sounds and smells of his owner, Jason might have panicked.

His hand slowly went to the rope around his waist and followed it to her belt. Satisfied that they were still connected by it, he concentrated on figuring out where they were. He knew she’d planned to drive straight through, so that must mean they’d made it to the Borderlands.

Jason didn’t hear anything other than sleeping noises, but there was a rough draft coming along the uncomfortable wall that he was pressed against. It was sharp enough to bite; he slowly shifted onto his side to absorb more of Angelica’s warmth.

Now that he’d moved, Jason could see a pinprick of light. It revealed all but two of their escorts between him and the small, cracked entrance of the collapsed shelter.

Jason couldn’t wait to be aboveground again as the sensation of smothering came, but he also wanted to see it from there. Except in photos, he hadn’t experienced many relics of the old world until leaving with Angelica.

The wind sharpened, flowing directly down his neck this time and into the wrinkled cloak. He carefully edged closer, pressing his cold hands between them. Changelings ran hot. It didn’t take long for his fingers to warm.

In sleep, Angelica was gentle. Jason wondered if the rebel males would react to her the way he did. Would they be scared and abused, but still hope for protection? Did they want true freedom? He did, but to be able to pick his own future, not to take down the Network. Why were those men so different? Why did they care so much when he, who’d been tortured almost nightly by Rankin when she wasn’t on a run, didn’t feel enough hatred to fight?

As he pondered his strange mind, the den slowly lightened, allowing him to make out more features. He shivered again as the wind pushed around them.

“Come on.”

Jason jumped.

“Warm yourself against me.”

He felt her approval when he slid fully against her hip.

Angelica wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him gently into her embrace. Her cloak settled over him, adding delicious heat.

As the heat swarmed, Jason moaned. “That’s nice!”

Angelica tensed, sending out an intense breaker of need. “Yes.”

Her eyes locked onto his, searching silently until he felt naked under her regard. What was she thinking? Did she know how sexy she was, or how shocking it was that he felt these things for her at all?

Angelica slowly shut her eyes as if she couldn’t stand to keep them open but hated to let him out of her sight. “We won’t leave until almost nightfall. You should sleep some more.”

Jason shifted an arm up next to his head, content to let the day lighten their surroundings to give more clues as to where they were.

It didn’t take long for Angelica’s breathing to even out and tell him she was back asleep. They were on the run from deadly predators and he still felt safe. It was wonderful.

With her heat baking into him, the temperature of his body came up and Jason tried not to fidget against her and disturb her rest. As he became warmer, he drowsed. When he jerked awake and felt her breath catch, he finally laid his chin on her shoulder.

Angelica curled her arm around him, increasing that sensation of safety, and he dozed off in her arms.

Angelica had never slept with a male.

Sharing a bed on the train didn’t count, though the erotic sensations he’d given her from his unknowing sleep movements were ones she would never forget. Those few moments of temptation were nothing compared to the sensation of holding him while he was melted against her. It brought the memory of what she’d seen when they first touched, the sated aftermath of lovers. She blew out a soft sigh.

“You okay?”

Her sister had been observing, nonstop, since she’d picked them up. Angelica was surprised that Sam had waited this long to ask.

Angelica responded using their childhood hand code to keep from waking the beautiful male on her chest.

*Fine.*

*Liar.*

Silence.

Sam tried again. *Talk?*

*No.*

Sam shrugged. *When you’re ready.*

*Yes.* Angelica stopped her mind from following the hundred paths it could have taken. Instead, she forced herself to rejoin Jason in sleep. They had one more day before reaching the place where Baker was hiding and she suspected it would be a long one.

**5**

Until the train with Angelica, Jason had never woken in a woman’s arms before, not even with Rankin. She liked him gone before daylight. It was a powerful moment, one that he didn’t have to rush or fear.

Angelica’s chest rumbled under him as she shifted. Jason took advantage of it to rise up on his arm. When he chose a mate, this was what it might be like.

She was so relaxed, so attractive to him. She had many of the qualities he wanted in a match. He even held hopes now that she and these big girls could handle Rankin. He was on an adventure, with Angelica guiding them through the wilderness, but he wasn’t positive about his plans anymore. What were the chances he would ever find another female like her?

*Slim*, he assumed, but the fear of her burning up, and the terror of these wild relatives, couldn’t be ignored.

*“Pruetts are for freedom.”*

Her words in his memory rang clear. Jason recognized the instinctive urge to accept her ways, her teachings. Allowing himself to do as he pleased was tempting. He couldn’t help but wonder if she’d meant it in every way. He wouldn’t settle for less.

*“Who are we?”*

“Pruetts.” Jason studied her beautiful face. In another world, they would have a home with carpeted floors so he’d never have to listen to bootsteps again and be afraid. There would be a swing in the yard and another on the porch, and they would sit there while their children played. It was so simple…so out of reach.

His dreams were not reasonable and he knew it, but he couldn’t stop them from forming, growing. When he stole a fast glimpse at that forbidden vision now, it held black-haired children with fighter’s bodies and that frightened him. Just this short time around Angelica’s strong personality was already marking him. When she dropped him with the rebels, he wasn’t certain how long he would stay. Before getting out of the complex, he’d wanted strength and freedom. Now, the urge to hold his mate was staggering. He knew as much as anyone about the effects of the war changing things, but he still didn’t understand the mating fever that took over. He’d felt it enough with Rankin to fear it though, and to want more. Jason had never been bred and he wondered if that might be a part of Angelica’s problem–why she burned so hot. He was also curious about her reaction to the rebel males. Was something about him special to her or did all guys hit her the same way? Would all females with compassion attract him?

That was another worry he had. Angelica aroused him in the ways that Rankin never had. He didn’t want to lose that incredible sensation, the magic heat that had sent him out of control. It was addictive and he craved more of it. Just the memory made him flush in the dimness. *If I were really free to do what I wanted, I’d kiss those cherry lips.*

The idea surprised Jason, but the next one took his breath away.

*I might anyway.*

He was fairly certain Angelica wouldn’t be mad enough to hurt him, not after the liberties he’d already taken. He leaned in before he lost his nerve.

Once it was too late, Jason asked himself what he was doing encouraging her, causing her more pain. Then the feel of her lips took over, and he chose to enjoy the moment since he’d already crossed that line.

Need swirled through the chilly air; he shifted for a better position as her lips parted. His tongue slid along her lip and she tensed. She was awake–probably had been all along.

Jason’s hand came up to her waist, sliding under the stiff material to her tattooed skin.

Angelica arched into his hand as he rubbed it over her breast. “Damn, that’s nice.” Jason stroked a hard nipple.

“Mmm...”

Her sound did something to him. His control weakened as his leg slid over hers. It was heat like they’d shared on the train, but thicker, more consuming.

Jason started to slide her shirt up, wanting to see what he was touching. His body throbbed, sending hot, slick fire through the darkness.

“Jason.”

Remembering where they were, Jason drew back to find her eyes were flat black with misery.

“If you change your mind…”

His heart pounded, body tight. “You’ll be the first to know.”

Angelica gave him a hurting look. “Once more?”

He flushed. “Yes, please.”

This time, she met his kiss with a sharp motion that slid them onto their sides. Her tongue slipped along *his* lips and Jason claimed her mouth roughly, caught up in passion. It was stronger this time. He wondered how far things might have gone if they’d been alone.

Angelica remembered it at the same time he did. There was a last second of soft, yielding lips against his and then she was gone, getting up.

Left with no explanation for the sudden feeling of desolation, Jason remained silent as she stiffly walked into the darkest shadows and blended in until she vanished.

After a minute, the increased draft told him she’d gone out. He sighed unhappily. *I shouldn’t have pushed her like that.*

“Are the others at the complex like you?”

One of the big females sat up, the one who’d kept him safe in the leper colony. Without the goggles and tightly drawn hood, the dim light let Jason pick out that sensual Pruett jaw line and those flat, black eyes. This one was Angelica’s sister.

He stiffened. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Sam didn’t react to his voice even though it hurt her. “Brave, think for yourself, go after what you want.”

Those examples told Jason she’d been studying him. He tried to be as honest as he could. “There are a few I’d be proud to bunk with if they let us pick our cellmates. They don’t.”

This one didn’t show a reaction to the sound of his voice and Jason was glad. She let the silence stretch out, testing his nerve, Jason realized. He waited for her next question, positive she had more than a few.

“What deal did you make that keeps her from taking your offered service?”

Jason cringed from the exposure and her gloating expression.

“I thought it was something like that, and yet, you kissed her on your own. *Interesting*.”

Jason spent a moment trying to get his heart to settle, not sure if he should say more. These Pruett women knew how to ambush a guy. Sucking up his courage, Jason leaned against the wall and attempted to find out some information of his own. The other women spread out in here were still snoring, some annoyingly loud. “Will she stay and help the rebels?”

His question caught the Runner by surprise. Sam revealed it in her answer.

“I don’t know.”

Now Jason was the one unprepared. “But you’re her sister, right? You should know.”

The big woman shifted her shoulders. “Before the games, I would have said no. Now?” She shrugged again, sharp gaze going over him as if she could tell everything that had passed between him and her sibling. “Now, she might stay and fight for what she wants.”

The big woman also leaned against the wall, willing to converse if he was. “My turn. Why did she insist we keep going? Is it part of the deal?”

Jason gave the truth reluctantly. “We’re being followed.”

Sam snorted. “We knew she’d have a tail. What else has her so alert? Are *you* in trouble?”

Jason didn’t know what to say, but again, the intelligence surprised him. He honestly hadn’t believed any woman could be as smart as Rankin was, but here were two of them, in the same family.

“She’s protecting you.”

“Yes.” He didn’t think it was funny at all, but the Runner let out a bray of mirth that made him wince.

“Well, it should be a fun ride, then. Your turn.”

Jason tried to recover. “What does she want, from the future?”

“That is a very good question. You should ask her.”

“I will, at some point.”

“What do *you* want?”

“Freedom.” It came to his lips automatically.

The Runner gave him another of those hard, insightful questions. “Will you stay with the rebels?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then the plan would be…?”

“It’s my turn.”

“Answer it.”

He opened his mouth and told this frightening woman what he hadn’t shared with another living soul, including her sister. “I need my happy family returned.”

Angelica froze.

*“My happy family returned.”*

His words buzzed in her mind like angry little bugs that pinched and twisted. He wanted the one thing she could never give him.

*My happy family.*

Angelica spun away from the entrance where she’d been listening and waved a Runner in to take her place. Of her sister’s big friends, Angelica knew five of them. Three were distant cousins that she didn’t like much. After them, Rosa was the hardass on Sam’s right, a place the loyal miner had held for ten years.

On Sam’s left, was Wendy, a twitchy, hard-faced gambler with lightning fast hands. Of the two, Angelica trusted Rosa more, but it was Wendy’s bald form she had gestured toward the crumbling shelter. Wendy wouldn’t hesitate to kill, and since Jason wasn’t blonde, he was safe from her. Golden haired boys were all Wendy fancied.

It hit her again. *Jason wants children.*

Angelica’s heart cried when she refused to let the drops fall. All he wanted was what had been stolen from him by Rankin, and it turned out that she couldn’t provide it. Some other woman would hold him as he filled her with life, would feel his children growing inside her body. They would share everything, and she would be alone, missing him.

*I need my happy family returned.*

The pain was crushing.

Angelica wasn’t surprised to hear her sister come out. She resembled Sam in the thick body and the short, black spikes. From there, Sam’s greater height, her loud voice, and the restless urge for adventure marked them as different, but she knew Angelica needed her.

“So, you’re setting him free.”

Angelica didn’t answer, but Sam was aware that she was struggling with it.

It had been so different for a brief moment, listening to Jason and her sister getting to know each other. *In another world,* Angelica thought, swallowing the bitterness with a harsh shudder she didn’t try to hide. *In another world, we could have all been happy together.*

“No one would blame you…”

This was the conversation Angelica didn’t want to have, the one where she let Sam convince her to keep Jason against his will. Angelica sent her a sharp glare. “That’s not what he wants.”

“Since when do *his* wants matter? You won him. He’s Pruett property now.”

“Pruetts do not own males!” The shout surprised even Angelica. She snapped her mouth shut.

“Yep.” Sam grinned. “Gonna be a fun trip.” She resumed scanning the hazy landscape.

Angelica did the same, not letting herself be drawn into one of their sisterly fighting moments. Besides being on duty, she was in too much pain to be distracted so easily. Jason wanted the one thing she would never give him.

Angelica’s dream of remission shattered on the rocks around them.

Chapter Thirteen

**Hounded**

**1**

**J**ason emerged to discover their shelter was a red brick building set into the side of a wide hill that was littered in sticker bushes. Crumbled into decay, the building was camouflaged by sand and weeds. He couldn’t tell what it had been. Someone’s home was most likely.

Angelica handed him a roll from her kit and the canteen from the holder. Around them, the Runners were also consuming water and hard rolls.

Angelica watched him. “They’re energy balls.”

He’d heard of those. They were like the drugs for men, increasing a changeling’s blood flow for stamina.

Still charged from the wakeup together, Jason took a large bite. It was sweeter than he’d anticipated. He grunted in approval before taking a second mouthful. It was gone a few seconds later. “That was good.”

Angelica held out another with no comment.

He devoured it the same way he had the first. As he finished, he realized the Runners were cackling yet again.

“Two! That should stiffen his upper lip!”

Jason flushed as he realized what it meant, but Angelica wasn’t laughing. Her attention was on his mouth. Electricity sparked between them, turning flat black to brilliant pink.

Jason dropped his chin at the fresh brays of amusement.

Angelica stepped by him, words toneless. “Five minutes.”

Jason studied the area, searching for war relics, and found himself alone with Angelica’s sister. The others, Angelica included, began repacking the bikes that were hidden under tarps the same color as the sandy ground. Nervous, he waited for Sam to speak, but there was only another assessing glance and silence.

When she stayed on his hip, Jason realized she was guarding him and felt flattered. This big woman was the leader of her crew. Why would Sam bow to a younger sibling’s wishes? Clearly, he didn’t have these Pruetts figured out yet.

“You have a tracker in your arm.” Sam eyed his brand. “Do we need to sedate you to remove it?”

Jason rotated toward the woman in horror. “Get it out of me!”

The big female didn’t get Angelica’s permission first, but Jason sensed his owner standing tensely nearby as her sister drew a large knife.

It didn’t hurt nearly as much as some of the things Rankin had put him through. Jason was able to remain silent for it.

The Runners were impressed as Sam dug the locator beacon from his arm and then handed him a bandage.

Jason didn’t ask what they would do with the tracking chip.

“Incoming!”

Sam gave a sharp whistle at Angelica’s call.

In seconds, Jason was surrounded by armed changeling Runners with red eyes and long claws. In front of them, Angelica joined her sister.

When Jason saw their company, he cowered in the middle. His nightmare was here. Rankin rode up slowly, openly searching for weak spots in the ring around Jason. There was no doubt in his mind that they were about to be attacked.

The Runners agreed, allowing their bodies to change openly in a display of intimidation that Jason was sure would be lost on Rankin. She didn’t fear fighting or death, only losing her place with the Network.

“Tie him in.”

Angelica’s order had more female hands reaching for Jason than he thought he could stand. He cringed away only to be held mercilessly in place, moaning his fear as they attached numerous ropes to his belt, his ankles, and his wrists.

As they spread into a tight circle around him, Jason understood Rankin would have to kill every Runner here to take him, but he wasn’t relieved. She would.

Angelica walked forward to meet Rankin.

Jason hurried toward her with no further thought of his own safety. She didn’t know who she was–

The Runners jerked him back and shoved him to the ground, where the view between their legs was gritty. He stayed there as the confrontation that he’d been dreading since leaving New Network City played out.

“If I don’t lose one woman from my crew, I won’t call the hounds. It’s the single concession you’ll get from me, Pruett!”

Rankin’s tone implied she’d witnessed many of Angelica’s moments with Jason. She wanted the Pruetts to pay for that jealousy.

Angelica subtly got closer to Rankin and to the sleek black horse the Defender was towering over everyone with. “What if I refuse to surrender him?”

“I’ll kill you!” Rankin snarled, hands clenching around the saddle horn. “No survivors will be allowed!”

Angelica liked those terms. She’d rather be dead than for Jason to be under Rankin’s control again. “Agreed.” Angelica turned long enough to meet her sister’s gaze, and then they both reacted as the situation deserved. They jerked spikes from their belts and threw them.

“Attack!”

Rankin’s painfilled voice told Angelica at least one of their throws had been good, but she didn’t waste time verifying it as she ducked into the protective circle of the Runners and got set to fight. *She can have him over my dead body.*

The women on the outside of the circle flipped their heavy cloaks over one shoulder, holding them up for shields. The inside line hurried to bind the cloaks together with the attached strings. When knives and bullets slammed into the vivid cloth, they were held!

Jason heard Rankin scream in rage, and cowered as the Runners began to return fire. With the cloaks attached, they had a wide circle of protection that freed hands to shoot riders from panicking horses.

*Rankin underestimated the Runners. So did I.* Jason felt the Runner next to him, Wendy, tense. She’d just calculated the new odds and didn’t care for them.

“Here they come!”

Jason twisted to discover a large pack of hounds running full speed toward them through the dusty distance. *We’re trapped!*

The hounds snarled furiously, zeroing in on the scent of blood and the sound of gunfire. Their enormous paws shook the ground as they pounded toward the fighting, and saliva flew from their lethal mouths.

*Welcome to the Borderlands.* “Fall back!” Angelica placed the crew against the wall of the crumbling shelter so they could dive in if needed, but Sam and her girls were too good for that. Half of the Runners kept firing, forcing Rankin’s crew to seek cover. The other half pulled long, thin red cords from their pockets, lit them, and gave hefty throws that landed the objects near the hound’s relentless path.

The slobbering dogs approached the first one.

*Kabblllammmm!*

The explosion evaporated the nearest three hounds in a geyser of debris and sent the others veering off their straight-at-the prey course.

The pack quickly remerged.

*Boommm!*

The second impact took two more of the collar controlled dogs from the battle and split the pack in half, but neither group changed direction. They were coming.

Sam tossed two of the red cords together, buying time for her girls to reload and be certain of their aim.

Given cover by the arriving hounds, Rankin and her remaining Defenders moved behind the crumbling stone wall, firing sporadic shots that tried to slip through Pruett defenses. When the Pruetts came up to fire at the fast approaching hounds, Rankin and her crew tried to pick them off with clever shots.

“Down!”

The Runners all dropped at Sam’s shout, just in time to avoid the first hound that sailed over them from the roof of the building they were against.

Uncovered, bullets began slamming into targets.

“Don’t hit the male!”

Rankin’s shout got Jason to stand up. He was scared, but he was hoping the Defenders would stop shooting the Runners if he was in the way. Two of the big women were already down and he didn’t want anyone else to die for him.

“Ahhh!” Jason screamed.

Angelica rotated to discover Jason’s ankle in the grip of the hound that had jumped over them. She fired without thinking, blowing its rage filled brain out of its skull.

Gore splattered, but the teeth didn’t release his ankle.

She fired again, taking out another red orb; the furious dog gave up her prize as it died.

Angelica jerked Jason behind her as the other Runners closed the gaps in the shield.

“You sure know how to make friends.”

Sam didn’t sound anything but perfectly pleased.

Angelica snorted, firing as she directed the circle away from the dog’s corpse. “You know me. I like a challenge.”

Jason listened to their banter as if they were from another planet. How could they be so calm while under attack from both Rankin and the hounds? Didn’t Pruetts fear anything?

Pain flared in Jason’s ankle as Angelica jerked him behind her. Rankin was aiming, smirking… He instinctively yanked Angelica down, and felt a Runner in the rear sag against his rope as she took the hit.

A second hound reached them and leapt directly into the circle of ropes and cloaks, forcing the Runners to leave the outside unprotected as they turned and fired.

Rankin drew down again.

Jason did the only thing he could think of. He snatched one of Angelica’s spare guns from her belt and fired at his terror in the darkness.

Angelica wasn’t tied to him. Jason was horrified when she jumped out of the protective circle of Runners. She drew her bow and let an arrow fly. Not pausing, she grabbed the next and fired again.

Three more and her quiver was almost empty, but her gun wasn’t. She continued the same lethal aim, cutting through half of the remaining Defenders like a swift, bloody blade.

She marched toward Rankin’s hiding place as she fired.

Jason opened his mouth to shout a warning. She didn’t know what Rankin was capable of.

Angelica launched a handful of spikes, drawing the Defender’s full attention as the sharp projectiles drew more blood.

Rankin fired ruthlessly, gun trained on Angelica.

“No!” Jason lunged forward but the Runners shoved him down.

Jason shoved back to his feet, searching frantically… *There!* Still firing, Angelica was standing in the middle of the chaos with no care for her safety. It was impressive...and annoying. *Doesn’t she care if she gets hurt?*

“Now, Angel!”

Mental flames came from Sam’s call, but Angelica pulled the arrow from her quiver with steady hands, aware of Jason still trying to use one of her guns. *Good!*

The arrow slid into the notch; she drew down on Rankin without stopping to aim.

Rankin sensed it coming at the last second, dropping to the side of her horse as Angelica’s arrow and Sam’s bullet reached her. Both plunged into the guard behind her. As the body fell, it slammed into Rankin’s horse.

The head Defender woke at the impact, realizing most of her crew, her security, was gone or pinned down. The Runners were still firing steadily, throwing det-cords, and the hounds were almost all dead. The Runners had adapted fast, holding the explosives until they were at the end of their fast burning wicks. Rankin had come awfully light to handle a crew like this.

Understanding failure might be an option if she stayed, Rankin spurred her horse back the way she’d come without helping any of her fallen crew. If they didn’t follow, that was their choice. She hadn’t gotten Jason, but she had injured a number of the Runners and reminded them who they were dealing with.

The hounds, however, knew no such fear or compromise, and they hadn’t received a signal to stop attacking. The four remaining animals staggered at another explosion, but they had figured out if they avoided the cord when it landed, they would be clear of the explosion. The hounds also adapted fast, avoiding the rest of the explosives that Sam tossed.

“Prepare to fire!”

Sam’s shout had them all aiming together.

“Wait!” Jason dropped the spare gun, almost frantic. “You don’t have to kill them!”

Rosa snatched him by the shoulder, but he wrenched away from her grip to grab Sam’s wrist, ropes jerking. “Please, you don’t have to–”

Sam shoved him into Rosa’s arms before one of her crew hit him by accident, but her quick glance was questioning.

Angelica wasn’t positive, either. She considered the way Daniel had saved himself from the hound when they’d been attacked outside the Bama Swamps. She wanted to give Jason the same opportunity to prove himself. “How?”

“Sing.”

She snorted in disbelief. “You want us to sing to them?”

“They can’t help it, either!”

“Fifteen seconds. Make the call.” Sam’s tone was half-amused, half-impatient, saying she knew they would win, but to hurry up.

Angelica wanted to trust him, but there wasn’t enough time if he was wrong. “Open fire.”

The Runners did as she ordered.

Jason jerked away from Rosa with hatred on his face.

He clearly had sympathy for the hounds. Angelica vowed to make it up to him even as she did her share to destroy the remaining mutations.

**2**

Jason stayed out of the way as they tended their wounds and cleaned up. He didn’t dwell on the dog carcasses or the freshly dug graves, instead staring in the direction Rankin had gone. This was her fault. She’d called the dogs here to be distractions, sacrifices. When did she pay for the awful things she’d done?

Behind them was a rolling hill covered in yellow flowers and bloody bodies. They’d lost four of their big females. Jason stayed clear of the graves that each of their escorts was spending a few minutes at.

Ahead of them was a lightly wooded path with overgrown debris on one side, too molded in nature to be recognized. The signs of the war he’d longed to examine were barely visible, but after the deaths he’d witnessed here, they now screamed at Jason in accusation. They said until he was a real rebel fighting against the Network, he was as guilty as the others who ignored the sins of the past. What they’d done to the world was unforgivable. All their lives should have been spent fixing, repairing, and rebuilding–not surviving the apocalypse just to die at the whims of the Network’s tyranny.

“I’m sorry.” Angelica had come up beside him.

Jason shrugged tightly. “There probably wasn’t time. You have to get their attention first.”

“And they were already on the blood hunt.”

“Yes.”

“How do you know so much about the hounds?”

“Rankin sometimes took me out. We would ride or walk, but we always finished the trip at the pens. She loves them. As much as she can love.”

It didn’t mean she wouldn’t sacrifice them, but he’d known that already. He’d been there when she drowned the runts and intentionally got packs to fight over her handouts for wagers. Jason felt Angelica studying him, worrying.

“Are you okay?”

Jason nodded again, not sure if he was. “She’ll make me pay for every one of them.”

Angelica’s hand on his arm was gentle. “No, she won’t.”

The changeling knelt to examine his ankle.

Jason stayed still, not caring about the minor pain. Terror was all he could feel and it was icy.

His wound was no more than a scratch and he was male, so there was little fear of him being infected. His mind was what worried Angelica as she wrapped his leg. His fear even had Sam’s crew being quiet so they didn’t make it worse. Sam and her Runners hadn’t met Baker’s males yet, but Jason was a good example of what they would be like. Angelica didn’t interrupt their reactions to it.

When she finished, Jason stayed sitting against the edge of the crumbling brick, staring despondently at Rankin’s prints in the dust.

“Give him this.” Rosa was holding out one of her most cherished possessions, a relic of the old world that she never parted with.

Angelica took the taser in shock. Rosa’s town had been destroyed by the Network after refusing to mine against their contract. Her family hadn’t survived and she’d been with Sam and her crew ever since. It was Angelica’s guess that Rosa was still hoping for revenge. If so, she had found it.

Rosa patted her cloak pocket. “I’ve got a few battery packs. Let him practice while we get set.”

It was a good idea. Angelica gently led her ward away from the carnage and into the old den.

He didn’t resist the lesson, but it was easy to see that he didn’t believe a taser was enough against Rankin.

Angelica agreed. She slowly drew her main weapon and held it out. “Try this.”

The feel of Angelica’s main gun in his hand was incredible. Jason was certain no one else had ever used it. He was honored. The instant he wrapped his hand around the grip, the rage he always carried flared to life. Jason began pulling the trigger with little thought of adjusting for the power.

Angelica’s light touch on his hand controlled that, and allowed him to vent the rage. Slugs and brick chips flew in a wide array as he let out some of his pain.

*Click! Click!*

Jason handed the empty gun over reluctantly.

Angelica reloaded in a blur, then put it into her holster and stepped in front of him. “I need to make an amendment to our deal.”

Jason was unprepared for the emotion in her words.

“Until she’s dead, you can’t be without protection. I’ll make that clear to Baker.”

It was what he longed for, what he needed. His mouth opened of its own accord. “You…”

Angelica drew in a sharp breath, hands clenching. “If you prefer.”

“I do.” There was no one else he trusted. That realization had him moving toward her, forgetting where they were, *who* they were. “I want an amendment, too.”

Now she stiffened, and he frowned. “I don’t like your pain. I want you to accept my services.”

Even saying it now brought a chill and a twitch from his body, signs that she noticed and responded to even though she didn’t like being weak.

“I’ll think on it.”

It was more than he had hoped for. Jason wanted her to know she’d pleased him. He darted in for a quick peck to her warm cheek. Fighting the temptation, he backed away. “Thanks.”

Angelica’s jaw tightened, but those eyes remained black with misery instead of the heat he’d been trying to draw.

“It’s time to go.”

Jason turned obediently toward the light, where their escorts had come at the sound of the gunfire. Not paying attention, his foot tripped over the debris.

Angelica grabbed his arm to keep him from falling, but Jason’s weight pulled them over. They landed in the dusty rubble, with her on top.

They would be at Baker’s hiding place by nightfall. From there, they would sleep a bit and then start out for the safe zone, where the rest of the males were waiting, training, preparing. Two days after that, Angelica would be free of Jason. Her heart would never be the same.

Looking at his sooty facade, she thought she’d never wanted anything more than for him to care in return. She would never be able to settle for one of Baker’s meek rebels. She likely wouldn’t even try. Once she got Jason to safety, and Rankin was dead, she might take off on her own for a while.

Jason’s expression darkened as if he’d heard the thought. “Why do I care if you go?”

Angelica pulled them to their feet with hands that shook slightly. She had the same question. Unable to resist stealing one last moment, she leaned in and pressed her mouth to his.

Behind them, their escorts discreetly moved away from the entrance.

Jason’s grip tightened, hard body leaning to meet hers.

Angelica spotted desire and confusion, but no reluctance, no resistance. Her pink tints fell to his lips, control and need raging. “May I?”

His cheeks darkened, breathing uneven. “Yes, please.”

This time, Angelica kissed him with her heart.

It was different. He felt it instantly. The magic flare of heat was there, but also the completeness. There would never be anyone like Angelica.

She broke the kiss, surprised in the dim light filtering through the rubble.

She didn’t say anything, but he could feel her wanting to. What was she holding to herself? A plea for him to stay with her? Jason hoped not. He wouldn’t be able to resist it right now. She’d already gone through so much for him. He owed her.

“Freedom?”

Jason ignored the heart crying out for him to wait, to think about it a little more. “Yes, please.”

Angelica winced at the words, but she didn’t protest. Her touch was gentle as she guided him over the debris and out into the light.

Sam’s facade held sympathy that Angelica tried to ignore. He’d made his choice. Now, they would both live with it.

Jason settled onto the Mopar in front of her without being told, remembering her words of letting him drive in. He didn’t mind as she tied them together.

“Let’s roll.” Angelica rode with a gun in each hand in case Rankin was set to try again.

Behind them, crumbling brick remained, but the gritty shell was covered in fresh blood and gore. In the sky, fat vultures circled restlessly, waiting for them to be gone. What nature gave in such generous amounts, she also took back ruthlessly. It was a lesson the old world had forgotten, but here in the Borderlands, it was the law.

Jason gunned the bike up to speed. For the first time in his adult life, he now held hope for the future and it had come to him here, in this hell. The horrid conditions suddenly felt like home.

Chapter Fourteen

**Rebel Feelings**

Day 13

**1**

***W****e’re here.*

The sight of all those males instantly put both of them on edge. Jason understood Angelica’s reaction, the need was thick, but his own harsh burn of jealousy was unexpected. It grew when the males began to recognize her.

“They’re here!”

“Angelica’s here!”

“Someone tell Candice!”

Hard bodied men wearing excited faces began to pour from the wide cave entrance. Clad in tightly fitting brown and gray breeches with long shirts, it was clear that the rebels were learning to hunt for their needs. The duds were too vivid to be anything other than freshly made. Jason’s fingers tightened on the wheel. *They’re independent. Uh-oh.*

Angelica stood up, exposing the rope between them.

A striking man walked confidently from the main cave entrance, accompanied by an infamous female who looked too much like Angelica and Sam not to be related. The man had to be Daniel, but Jason hardly recognized him from their captivity at the complex. That male had been a sniveling coward. This man was stronger, stood taller, and he was happier.

Daniel and Candice came toward them with their cloaks streaming out in the gritty wind. Their hands were clasped, faces full of welcome. Jason felt Angelica breathe a sigh of relief.

*She loves them.* It was good to know. Jason still wasn’t certain what terms she was on with her sister. For being related, Sam and Angelica acted almost nothing alike.

Blond, black, red, brown, platinum. There were now men of every shade moving toward them like sweets on a train car buffet. The heat of the Runners flared out around Jason like their cloaks had during the ride.

“Sam! I’m off this one.”

They all turned to the Runner on Sam’s right. Wendy was focused on the emerging males with eyes on the edge of crimson.

Sam quickly agreed, waving the woman away. “I’ll send for you when we’re done.”

Wendy grunted in return, but she continued to glare at the rebels with savage need. “Are they… Do you think we could–”

“No!”

Sam’s voice was harder than Jason had heard from any of them. He cringed at the sound of a true Pruett command.

“It’s okay, I mean, we’re on a run, I know, and we don’t do that.” Wendy continued to ramble instead of leaving. “But, I could…”

Sam’s hand slid toward her weapon. “I’ll kill you, Wendy. I don’t want to, but I will.”

Sam’s warning was ignored.

“It’s okay. I’ll… I can…”

The snap came fast.

Wendy lunged from the bike like a wild animal and sprinted toward the nearest blond as the change ripped through her big body. Hair shot out in thick waves, claws thrusting through nails, and her chin tilted to scream as she sprinted toward the fleeing men.

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

Angelica lowered her arm as the body slumped to the sandy ground.

Jason felt her holster and heard Sam doing the same next to them.

Sam scanned her angry crew. “Judge it now. Fair or not?”

“Fair.”

“Fair.”

Each of them agreed, but Sam resisted as the vote came around. “Not fair. I didn’t want to kill her.”

Rosa pushed her goggles up over a tight ponytail of shining red hair. “Overruled by a majority vote.”

Jason peeked at them in small glances, still cowering against Angelica. He could hear Candice and Daniel talking, getting the males to come back out, but the comfort of his owner’s heartbeat kept him from shaking.

Angelica slowly shifted, hand gently making him look at her. She didn’t speak, but he felt better as she stared at him, calmer. He was with a Pruett. He was protected and she reminded him of that silently.

Around them, a small group of the somber Runners went to collect Wendy’s body. She would still be buried with respect. All of them were fighting her snap. They understood she just hadn’t been strong enough.

Ahead of the storm now, the winds were pushing, dust caps coming, and the sky was black in the direction they’d come from. The wind blew cloaks open, letting Jason see the guns and knives, and even a few electronic clubs on the tense rebels. It was encouraging.

“Did he fall, too?”

Angelica snorted at her cousin’s joking question as Candice and Daniel reached them. “I didn’t give him the chance.”

When Daniel flushed, Jason understood why he was bound. Another fear vanished. He’d thought he was chained to her because she owned him. He hadn’t realized it was also for his safety.

Angelica turned toward him. “Good luck, Jason.”

*That tone!* His heart thumped as she drew her knife, but not in fear. He knew what was coming; he opened his mouth…

Angelica cut the rope between them before he could say anything.

Jason felt it deep down. She’d just released him, in her heart as well as by the rope.

Angelica studied him, face unreadable. Jason gave her an uneasy smile of gratitude, pushing away the sense of loss. He hadn’t wanted to be paraded among these free males while tied to an owner.

Angelica turned away.

Jason stumbled after her as quickly as he could through the cramps and aches of riding the bike for so long.

The rebel males all waited respectfully while Candice and Sam talked quietly, but they were taking in every detail of Angelica and Jason, and their escorts. They worried over the big Runners with expressions that Candice ignored, making them adapt. Jason assumed she’d told them the women were coming, but these males hadn’t been prepared for it.

For some reason, Jason had assumed the Runners and the rebels already knew each other. His stomach tightened. They were taking wild changelings inside a cave with rebel males. He hoped Wendy’s snap was a rare event.

The hero of the bachelor cells gave Jason a casual nod that he returned with recognition and relief. Deep down, Jason had believed Rankin would reclaim him before he could get here.

Daniel was clearly happy to have him here, but that pretty skin and golden hair made him so bright that Jason shifted his attention to the man’s owner.

Candice Pruett was nearly the mirror image of his Angel, even down to the thick, muscular, tattooed body. Jason observed their reunion in surprise.

“Welcome.”

“We’ve missed you.”

Angelica’s happiness flew over him in thick waves as she hugged her cousin. Jason hated that even though he could become addicted to it. He wanted the chance to make her feel that way and it was frightening. He was about to be free. He needed to break his dependency on her, if that’s what it was. He wasn’t sure.

Angelica surprised most of the audience, Jason included, by delivering a gentle kiss to Daniel’s cheek.

It caused him to turn a shade of red that made his owner turn toward him. It was obvious that Candice and Daniel were bonded. He didn’t want freedom, though Jason supposed Daniel had a great deal right now, considering the attention he was receiving.

*That could be me.* Jason pushed away the notion. He didn’t want to be owned.

Candice scanned Jason, then turned to Angelica. “Any word on my parents?”

“They made contact with the lepers, and then went southwest from there. Sam’s got my report and the gear.”

Jason wondered if Angelica meant the cameras she’d hidden in her pouches and pockets before they’d exited the complex.

“We did run into a slight delay.”

Behind them, Sam bragged. “They weren’t even a bump in the road. I told you my Runners were more than a match for the Ring. *We* don’t like survivors, either.”

Candice grinned again, wider, and Jason was glad he knew the story. Most of the bachelors in New Network City did. They were adept at prying information from the renters.

Candice had wanted the Ring gone for a long time, and it soothed her to know a Pruett had handled it, even though the crew that had taken Daniel had moved on to other jobs years ago. Candice wanted the yearly roundup stopped and this would at least interrupt it.

Angelica introduced him. “This is Jason.”

The bachelor straightened his shoulders as everyone began to appraise Angelica’s prize. It was an ugly emotion, causing him to react more sharply than he’d intended. “Where the hell is Baker?”

The rudeness made Angelica turn to him in surprise, along with everyone else. She could sense the rebel males expecting a reaction, a punishment; she delivered one that hurt them both. “Jason wants to live as one of you. He is now free to do so.”

Angelica ignored them all, leaving him standing there to handle the mutters and murmurs. He was officially free and she was alone again. She’d done the right thing. She was a Pruett. Angelica marched inside to surround herself with a different type of pain so she could keep breathing.

The cave entrance was wide and led into an enormous open area with multiple tunnels leading from it. Angelica was drawn to the personal touches, like a wooden rack for coats and a stack of books in a far corner.

From the main chamber, there was a perfect view of a dining area filled with stone seats and long, rocky tables that had once been road dividers of some sort. Males filled those seats. As she walked through the tunnels that were set up much like Stone Mountain, she almost expected to hear a drill.

*“That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”*

What had Baker meant by rookie? She hadn’t thought to ask then, but now, she needed any distraction. Angelica had assumed it meant a rebel who had just joined them, but she was noticing a few of the males here had one of the detailed tattoos. As she thought of those she’d met at Stone Mountain, Angelica realized that was true of there as well. Did Baker have a secret group inside his rebels, doing special work? She found the notion exciting and stored it for yet another thing to figure out later.

As Angelica neared the next tunnel, she realized these males weren’t flinching from her the way they had at Stone Mountain. Their expressions were hot, intent as they tried to figure out why she hadn’t kept Jason for her own and if that slot was now open. *Was it?*

Angelica stopped to take a deep scent of them, but her head automatically rotated, going to Jason.

He was still observing her retreat, full of his own battles. She let out a miserable breath as she spun around. Surely one of these, or the hundreds at the safe zone, would draw the same attraction.

“Welcome back.” Baker came toward her from the largest tunnel.

She read it all in his grateful expression. He was lonely and full of rage. Apparently being around Candice and Daniel as they bonded hadn’t been fun. It was easy to embrace him like family. In her heart, Baker already was.

He returned her short hug with a surprised chuckle and Angelica felt a bit of her loneliness ease. At least here, she had someone who understood.

Baker sported the same clothes as the rebels, the furs and hand cleaned leathers, but it was clear by the sturdy construction that he’d been making his a lot longer than they had. Over his long shirt and pants, he wore a long black and gray cloak with the hood lowered to reveal a bald crown that bulged with sexy muscles. It was easy to understand why Candice had been attracted to him, but Angelica didn’t experience any of the heat that she had during their Stone Mountain time. Now, Jason was all she could feel.

Baker’s shined eyes flashed. “Let’s get you and your new mate…”

Her wince stopped his words and shifted his attention to the group now coming in. He picked Jason out, voice disapproving. “You know not to leave them alone when they’re fresh out of the dome.”

“He makes his own choices, like the rest of *your* males.”

Baker’s face swung to hers. In that moment, all of her secrets were laid bare. “You freed him.”

“It’s what he wants.”

Baker’s voice was low. “And you?”

Angelica wanted to say she’d be fine, that she had a secondary plan, and was horrified to hear the truth fall out in a desperate groan. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give to have him *willing*.”

“Damn, little girl.” Baker tossed an arm around her slumped shoulders. “Let me see what I can do.”

She sighed dejectedly. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

Baker studied her, getting more details than she wanted him to from the silence, but he was like that. They’d had a long conversation on the train before Candice had agreed to help him prepare his rebels. Angelica trusted this hard, twitchy leader.

“Does he know you care?”

“No, and I don’t want him to. Willing, Baker, not convinced or persuaded.”

Baker wanted her to be clear. “He’ll assume it’s just for relief if you don’t tell him otherwise.”

Silence.

“You’re definitely a Pruett.”

“And then some.” She moved over to allow the approaching group to join them. “This is your newest member, Jason Parker.”

Baker came forward to shake as Jason did the same, awed at meeting another hero. Baker was a legend to all of the bachelors in the complex. “I have to talk to you–alone.”

“Okay.” Baker didn’t ask for permission as he directed her prize to a quiet corner.

Angelica’s heart cried out as the final chain snapped. That was it. She had to let him go now.

Angelica turned toward the lined walls, searching the interested faces of the rebels, hoping for any spark, but there was only pain. She met her cousin’s gaze without shame or censoring her private hell. She loved Sam, but Angelica and Candy had grown up together. She appeared older, stronger since Angelica had spent time around her. Being here was good for her lovestruck cousin. *Daniel* had been good for her.

*Why didn’t I pick someone like him?* Angelica veered toward the entrance. She estimated there was enough time to make a place to guard from before the storm hit. If Rankin came in on its heels, she would know. And after this was done, she would travel on alone–whatever it took to get Jason’s scent out of her thoughts, her dreams.

That intent stride caught Jason’s immediate attention. Before he could call her name, Angelica glanced back. There was so much longing, so much pain in her expression, that he took a step toward her.

Angelica stopped him with a single shake of her head. Jason watched those emotions get hidden behind her wall. As a free man, he didn’t have the duty, the honor, of comforting her.

She held his regard for a moment longer, searching him, and then she walked out.

“She’s leaving!”

Baker had been observing. “She’s kept her end of the deal. This is what you want, isn’t it?”

Jason gave a quick nod, but mentally… “Will she come back?”

“Yes, but probably not until she can handle your freedom without interfering.”

“But I don’t–” Jason snapped his mouth shut, aware of Baker studying his reaction.

“Don’t want to be away from her?”

Jason flushed. “She’s different than other women.”

“She’s a Pruett.”

“And they’re for freedom.”

“Yes. Even against their own needs. It’s a rare family you’ve turned down being a part of.” Baker saw the silent agreement, and pushed. “It’s not too late.”

Jason considered his dreams, and then Angelica’s rule concerning children. “Yes, it is. We don’t want the same things.”

“Ah, the future.” Baker grinned. “It’s never better for the rebels.”

Jason remembered then, why all of this had come about in the first place, and began spilling his secrets.

As he talked, Candice and Daniel came over to listen.

Jason tried not to miss any details, but his ears were waiting for the sound of a bike engine. How long would he go without seeing her? Would he be able to stand it without begging someone to take him to her? And what about Rankin? Jason confessed that nasty secret with a shamed voice. “Our tail is the top Defender.”

All of them knew by the tone that there was more. He gave the information in a muttered rush. “She’s upset that Angelica picked me!”

“Another plot twist.” Candice focused on his bandaged arm. “And here we all thought this would be a relaxing vacation.”

A sarcastic snort of laughter from the group made Jason control a flinch. Dust coated the uneven floor around them in thin ripples that would soon form piles. He shivered at the notion of Angelica being alone out there in that violence.

The sky rumbled in warning. The dry crack of the coming dust was the same as a thunderstorm to these males. He wasn’t surprised when a few of the rebels cringed.

Daniel’s voice rumbled. “That explains where they went.”

Candice ran a loving hand over his, drawn.

Daniel flushed in happiness.

They were perfect for each other. Jason was willing to bet their children would be immune. The magic was hard to miss.

“Some of it.” Candice’s sharp gaze went to Jason. “Still, it’s odd that she would leave so soon.”

“She’s gone already?” Jason’s worried interruption drew surprised attention from her family.

Once again, he flushed. That was all he could do. He wasn’t comfortable around people, men or women. “She was good to me. I wanted to say goodbye.”

Candice gave him another of those appraising stares. “She may rejoin us after she finds your admirer.”

“Just her?” Jason gaped in shock. “That’s not enough against Rankin!”

He was surprised by the fresh snorts and scornful laughter.

“With you burning in her guts, Angel doesn’t even need Sam with her.”

Jason was relieved to know she wasn’t alone, but the rest of the conversation and plans to get him settled were just vague voices. Angelica had gone to handle Rankin. *I might never see her again!*

**2**

It felt good to be on guard duty. Angelica had missed it during the last months. She used her sharp senses to pick out any sign of human movement in the roiling caps of dust that surrounded everything. They’d spent a few hours combing the sector before the storm got bad, but hadn’t found anything. They knew they still had a tail. They’d spotted too many ground level clouds even before the Ring had attacked to assume otherwise, but Rankin was slick, staying out of sight. Now that they’d reached the first stop and joined Baker, another attack was likely. Even if Rankin couldn’t get a call through, it was only a matter of time before the Network chose to handle things remotely. Angelica was hoping they still had a few days before the council ran out of patience. She had plans of her own. When Rankin came in to make the verification, Angelica was going to grab her and dole out a fast match of justice. *Rankin will come. There’s no doubt of it.*

Angelica wondered what secrets Jason might have told Baker by now, but it didn’t matter at this point. The problem was bigger than just Rankin. Once this tracker was off their scent, trouble would come anyway. The Network was unpredictable, and she’d never known of a family to go against them the way hers was doing. Guessing what might happen was impossible.

“It’s time we talked.”

Angelica and Sam were sheltered against a stone wall, roughly half a mile from the cave. Once the storm let up, the rebel den and the rocky ground around it would be visible.

She let out a sigh. “Get it over with then.”

Sam did, bluntly. “He doesn’t really want to be free, and I know what *you* want. What’s the problem?”

That image of another woman being filled with life, loving his children, came to her tortured mind. Angelica winced at the sharp pain. “The future.”

“Your kids might not be infected.”

She and Sam weren’t similar in personality, so it surprised her that Sam knew her deepest fear. Angelica didn’t answer. They both knew the odds on it.

“So, what will you do?”

“Pick a replacement.”

“From Baker’s rebels?”

“Where else?” Angelica spat. “I took the best of the Network lot!”

Sam chuckled. “I knew this trip would be worth the ride.”

Angelica snorted at Sam’s optimism as they both did another quick sweep. Finding nothing but howling sand, Angelica let herself ask something she’d always wondered. “Don’t you feel it, Sam? Doesn’t it burn you up, too?”

Angelica was gratified and shocked when her sister’s countenance blazed with pain for a brief moment before she smothered it. Angelica expected something sharp, or even a fight to distract her. What she didn’t expect, was more honesty.

“So much that I travel out and spill blood to keep from taking them against their will.” Sam frowned bitterly at Angelica’s shock. “We’re Pruetts, right? Willing matters to all of us.”

Angelica had never thought of her sister having a conscience. To know for sure that she didn’t rape males made Angelica view Sam in a new light. She’d always assumed Sam took what she wanted. What an act she’d played! “It helped a little, being at the games. I had a place to put it.”

“Yeah.” Sam’s expression was one of guilty obsession. “But a service is better than the pain.”

Angelica knew the way Sam relieved it would never be enough for her. It eased the fire to spill blood, but the cure against this torment was Jason.

Angelica resumed studying the barren landscape with a heart that refused to stop bleeding. She kept the conversation going for the distraction. “Do you think you’ll ever settle down?”

She wasn’t positive Sam was going to answer, and that was another surprise. The wild sister she’d known before the games would have quickly denied such a future for herself.

“Maybe someday.”

Angelica gawked and received an embarrassed shrug.

“It’s hard to be around you guys and not want my own.”

Angelica knew that all too well. She grimaced bitterly this time. “The games are open.”

“I know...”

Again, Angelica was surprised by the hesitation in her sister’s low tone. “Or, you could stay and help with the rebels. You already know Candy’s hoping for it.”

Sam smirked at that challenge, seeming more like the sister Angelica knew than she had since meeting them at the train. “Do I get to sniff the rebels, too?”

Angelica chuckled, grateful for her family. “We’ll hunt through them together.”

Sam returned the leer, but there was a serious note to her next words that caught Angelica, held her.

“What do you hope to find with him that the others can’t provide?”

Angelica knew the answer mattered. “Remission.”

“I thought so.”

Angelica was braced to take surprise or even scorn, but not more pain from her rock hard, wild-as-hell sister.

“I used to believe in that, too.”

Despite their usual habit of leaving each other alone, Angelica probed. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Sam gestured toward the cave. “I’m more bonded with those women than with my own parents. I pay for a service when it gets too bad for the blood to push it back. I’ve lived this way for twenty years, and never once in all that time did I find a male I *hurt* to be away from.” Sam’s face tightened into the hard mask they all expected from her. “I lost hope.” Sam swung around to sweep behind them. “He’s drawn to you.” A clever switch of topics to keep Angelica from questioning further, it worked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Sam snorted.

Angelica wallowed in her misery while Sam protected her, as she’d always done.

“One of my Runners wants him, if he chooses to be a renter.”

“No!”

Sam’s harsh mirth brayed out. “Those games must be something.”

Angelica didn’t answer, but she suspected right then what Sam might do. With any luck, Angelica would be there to cheer for her from the stands and protect her from assassins. That’s what family was for.

**3**

“Where is he?”

“Outside.”

“Still? It’s been five hours. Should he be so upset?”

“No, but I believe they bonded on the trip here.”

“Owners are our safety net.”

Daniel’s words to the Runners drew Jason’s interest as he listened to them eat, bond, and talk about him. He was easily able to hear them from his perch outside the cave entrance.

“Without an owner, a bachelor is defenseless.”

Daniel’s voice held shame that Jason recognized. Didn’t he have his own?

“They make it so that’s all you want. When you don’t have it, the sense of being lost is hard to handle. It’s why most bachelors are sedated when they leave the complex.”

There was pride in his words now. Jason assumed Daniel hadn’t been drugged either upon leaving with a Pruett. It was another thing they had in common.

“We’re leaving in the morning. Should I help him?”

Candice snorted at Daniel’s question. “She won’t let him travel alone. Free or not, he still has a protector. I’m betting she’ll return at dawn with the rest of the guard crew. Bachelors aren’t the only ones who get attached.”

They walked to another area of the cave as the meal finished. Jason realized she’d said it to make him feel better. Had it?

*Maybe.* Knowing he might be with Angelica again as soon as morning had him weighing his plans again. Could he change what he’d always wanted if it meant he could stay with her? He hadn’t expected being away from Angelica to bother him. They’d only had a short time together, but there was no denying that he felt abandoned.

The other males flinched from the storm that was full on them now, following Daniel further into the cave, but Jason didn’t share their worries about the whipping wind. He had a small lea where he was sitting and Rankin was still his only single terror in the darkness.

Jason had come out here to be away from the sound of Angelica’s name on everyone’s lips. Many of the rebel males were interested in his former owner. If she wanted one of them, willing wasn’t a problem, and after spending time with her cousin Candice, Jason understood. She was so kind to Daniel, so loving! They were a reminder of his parents, of that happy family he wanted returned. It had hit him hard while being around them, that even if he never had a child, at least he would have that caring bond with Angelica.

They’d been in enough uneasy situations for him to know she wouldn’t ever force him, wouldn’t take his heart and use it against him. She would become his obsession, like Candice was for Daniel. Those two hadn’t been more than fifty feet apart the whole time Jason had been here and it was both encouraging and awful. He wanted that life, but he’d also spent years dreaming of what he needed from freedom. Having a family mattered to him. He had to hug his own sons, feel that connection, the sense of love that no anger could ever break… But now, he also wanted Angelica.

Chapter Fifteen

**Resistance is Futile**

**1**

**J**ason couldn’t ignore the sound of the returning guard crew. He followed a small group of males through the wide tunnel to the main entrance. Everything sounded fine; he scowled over the relief he felt. He’d been terribly worried for her safety–a *changeling*!

The incoming Runners were coated in thick desert dust, heavy layers that fell to the floor as they shook themselves. Jason hung back as they came into the morning-brightened cave with Sam in the lead. Where was *his* changeling?

Angelica came through last and found Jason first. Her expression immediately lightened, saying she’d been worried for him as well. It was so odd that they would feel this way already.

Jason gave her an uneasy smile.

She sensed his reluctance, expression growing shuttered. He wasn’t surprised when she looked away, but the need to recapture her attention was unexpected. Why was he so drawn to her? No other females had that effect on him–not even Candice and she was incredible as she helped the rebels. They’d finally distracted him with that last night while he’d snoozed in the corner, refusing a bed.

The storm was almost gone, but dust coated everything. It was in hair and on shoes, and even on the tables. It would take a lot of sweeping, but Jason could already see places where it appeared someone had tried to conquer the dust and given up. Once the wind finished settling, it might be possible.

Jason ignored the boasting of the louder females, instead straining to hear what words were being exchanged between Candice and Sam. He made out a few parts–no signs of Rankin, two day wait on the storm, not leaving in the morning–but the noise grew as more males came into the tunnel from workouts and chores. He had to settle for trying to read their lips.

“She likes you.” Angelica had come up behind him, gravelly voice in his ear. “If that’s what you want, Sam would take a service. So would any of her crew.”

“I don’t!” Jason flushed at his quick denial of her coming offer to arrange it, but he didn’t censor the next words. “She’s not you.”

Angelica flashed pink eyes, and quickly pulled it in. “There might be females at the safe zone, ones who would give you children.”

Instead of another protest, Jason swept the large group of rebels now walking to the dining hall. As they came by, their attention was on Angelica.

Jason felt jealousy again and didn’t like it. “Have you chosen one of them?”

He knew she frowned by the sudden rush of hard bodies moving away from where they were standing.

“No.”

“I’ll still help if you want.” Jason wasn’t positive he could stand much of it, but the image of her being alone with them didn’t sit well, either. Why? *Because I want her*, was the obvious answer, but he wasn’t sure in what way. She refused to take a service or have children, while he didn’t want to be owned and longed for his family returned. What did that leave?

“It’ll have to wait until we reach the zone.”

“We could do it on the way.” Jason was surprised to hear himself offer that. “Narrow it down a little by your list.”

That sent her mind to the questions, to the moments on the train. Jason knew because it did his, too. He felt the heat already coming from her body increase.

“You don’t have to. I’ll…” Sounding tortured, she spun away from him.

Jason reacted without thinking. He grabbed her arm and jerked her around. “You’ll what?” He didn’t care that men were rushing for help, worrying that he was about to be hurt. Jason knew better.

Angelica didn’t pull away from him, but she didn’t lean into his arms either. She had herself under that relentless Pruett control again. “I’ll pick one later!”

Jason shifted his balance so they were flush, and felt her breathing grow rough. Need flashed out, sharp and hot enough to burn him. *Damn. Now, I want to kiss her again.* “Am I still… Are we…” Jason drew in enough oxygen to allow a full sentence. “Can I stay with you until we get there?”

For an instant, he thought he’d gone too far. Angelica’s eyes faded to deep, full red and the muscles against him swelled, vibrated with tension. Prepared to accept what he had drawn, Jason waited as calmly as he could, determined to get what he needed–time alone with her.

After a few seconds, Angelica shut her lids and he felt that dangerous heat recede.

“Yes.”

He’d predicted the opposite answer and reacted instantly, blasting her with an emotional voice. “Good! I don’t feel like myself when you’re gone. I don’t want to eat or sleep, and I…I’m sure it’s because I missed being with you!”

A harsh shudder went through Angelica; she shifted them, moving their bodies into the darkest shadows of the corner. “I’m sorry!”

Her tone was guilty, *greedy*. Her mouth slanted over his an instant later, searing him with the heat that he’d missed. Need, hot and heavy, settled into Jason’s legs and began moving upward.

His tongue slid along hers, and his pulse increased, the blood rushing. No, Sam wouldn’t be able to make him feel this way, and neither would Candice. *This* was the Pruett he wanted.

Jason jerked Angelica against his chest, throbbing when she moaned lowly against his lips. He liked the sound of that–a lot.

Angelica returned to herself all at once, ending the kiss. Her vision flickered dangerously. “What game are you playing?”

Jason honestly wasn’t sure. He just couldn’t leave her alone.

“Tell me what you want.”

“To be…” He hesitated. Thanks to Baker, he’d realized Daniel was free to do as he pleased, even though he was owned. Was that enough for him? At least for now?

“You don’t know!”

Her lowly growled discovery made his cheeks flush darker. “No.”

Angelica retreated. “I don’t want a–”

“I haven’t offered one!”

Angelica nodded tightly. “Until we reach the safe zone, I’ll keep you. After that, you need to make a final choice.”

“Between you and freedom?”

Angelica gave him a sad look. “Only you can answer that, Jason.” She turned toward the hall where Baker had lingered, listening. “But I need you willing and there’s little I won’t give in return.”

Did that mean she was weakening on her stance against kids? Could he treat her that way, knowing he’d worn her down?

Angelica stepped past Baker with a warning glare, meaning he wasn’t supposed to comfort Jason or explain. The bachelor was glad when Baker disobeyed her and joined him.

“If you plan on staying with her, then make it clear to the other males. Right now, she’s considered fair game.” Baker walked around Jason to get to the main chamber.

Jason realized he hadn’t gone against Angelica at all, but he had managed to rile the male inside. Had Baker known it would or did the rebel leader want Jason to give the other males his approval?

Jason’s attention turned to the dining chamber, to where Angelica was being handed a plate and cup by Greg, who was glowing with admiration as he spoke to her. Greg wasn’t afraid of her reaction to his voice or the stroke of his scarred hand along her wrist as he gave her the items.

Something inside Jason twisted angrily. *That’s my liberty to be taken!*

He started to move their way, but realized Baker had stopped in the main entrance. His silver gaze read it all.

“Do you know how to make a changeling snap?”

Jason nodded, flushing as he waited for Baker to tell him he should try it with Angelica.

Instead, Baker’s glowing eyes went to the line, where there were now no less than five rebel males falling all over themselves to attract Angelica. Not one of them was hesitating to hit her with their scents or sounds.

“So do *they*.” Baker joined his men as Jason tried to remember how to breathe through the anger.

The rebels knew she wasn’t satisfied. Her pink eyes and tense body proved it to them.

Angelica’s hand trembled as Greg leaned in to say something, but Jason felt her waves of need flow out to find him.

Their eyes locked over Greg’s shoulder, sparking. In that moment, Jason knew what she was thinking. Could one of them erase the attraction she felt for him? Would one of these willing males ease her pain as well as he did?

His feet were moving before Jason could growl in protest. He turned into a tunnel at the last minute, forcing himself to leave her alone.

*He’s a fire in my blood.* Angelica listened to the rebel males chattering, hearing their unspoken offers, but all she wanted was her ward. There was no denying the lust could be slaked with one of these eager-to-please men, but it was Jason’s fire she craved.When he turned away, her need flattened into a disinterested throb. Angelica knew the moment for what it was. The end.

*Remission*. What an impossible dream that had been! There was no magic cure. Sam was right. The relief was in blood or a service. *That*, Jason would give willingly.

Heat flared again and two of the males advanced eagerly. Angelica felt their offers coming and wanted to stop them, but her mind was too full, already spinning in the new direction she’d just allowed. If she agreed to let Jason service her, she could keep him.

“Can we offer you anything?”

“Many here would be honored to provide a service.”

Those words, from these two, meant little more than the constant agony of their bell-like voices. “No, thank you. Have you asked my sister?”

Distracted, they both turned toward the corner where Sam and her loud, crude Runners were enjoying the meal. Freshly roasted rabbit and ears of tall corn graced the table, along with an assortment of baked goods that Angelica recognized from Stone Mountain. She assumed the rebels had traded for the corn, but she could tell from the proud countenances that the meat had been hunted. As she recognized the color of the husks on the corn, Angelica realized someone among the rebels had been trading with the lepers for their carefully tended crops. It was a large risk to take, but the colony had been careful about their food handling, so she didn’t protest. For now, it was needed. When they hit the safe zone, she would insist on their own gardens to eliminate the possible contamination of their males.

*Our males.* Angelica resumed her horrible, dangerously tempting notions. Candice and Baker had been happy during their time together and she would have Jason as much as he would allow. Could she settle for that? Wouldn’t it be easier to flee for the worst section of the Borderlands and spill blood until she couldn’t taste him on her lips anymore?

Angelica veered away from the rebel males while they were still shakily pondering her words. She set the plate and cup down on the way out. She didn’t want food or drink. She wanted Jason. She would never be free of this pain, but for some of her dark, agony-filled nights, he would be hers. At least it might be enough to ease this new, empty ache that nothing cured. She’d thought the pain of the disease was the worst agony she would ever know, but to have such a determined desire for someone who had so little for her was a level of hell she’d never imagined.

Angelica instinctively ducked out of sight as Baker and Jason returned. Their voices were low, but her changeling ears didn’t miss a word.

“You’re positive?”

“I’ve witnessed it.”

“It’s a legend.”

“It’s a fact and right here.”

Jason was surprised. “You mean Candice and Daniel.”

Baker didn’t react to her cousin’s name. It told Angelica that Candice had been right when she implied the rebel leader wasn’t as attached to her as he’d let people believe.

“Yes. In love, without burning out or up. What would you call that?”

“Remission.”

Angelica’s heart thumped. Jason had gone to Baker about her.

“Now, you understand?”

“Yes.” Jason’s voice was full of discovery. “I never knew a changeling could be so strong.”

Baker turned toward her lurking place, and then back to Jason. “The scientists think it takes two willing partners who have an attraction. What they don’t realize is they’ve missed a part of the equation.”

“Love.”

“Yes. There’s no true match without it, no remission, no immunity.”

“But with it…”

“A whole other life, one where the children are normal and this ugly world begins to heal. It’s a future the Network will stop at any cost.”

As they came into the dining hall, Jason swept the room and didn’t locate her. His face crumbled into disappointment.

*Bang!*

All through the tunnels, rebel males cringed, but not Jason. Angelica remembered Candy’s warning about storms, and realized he didn’t have that weakness to be conquered. She’d been ready for it during the dust storm, but all she’d sensed then was surprised excitement and assumed he was too distracted by driving to be scared.

Baker also noticed it and gave Jason a pleased nod that made his chin rise in pride.

Full of their words, Angelica went to her room. She’d been missing that piece. For remission, there had to be love, but if Jason wasn’t willing to be hers, there wasn’t any hope.

The heaviness settled back into her chest. Angelica swallowed her rage, hatred brewing. This was all the Network’s doing. *Instead of spilling blood in the Borderlands, maybe I’ll splash crimson over New Network City.*

Jason followed her carefully, slowly, trying to give her time to get ready for bed. After the trip to get here, and then standing duty all night, she had to be tired. He was and the thought of sleeping with her was the clearest thing on his mind when he tapped on the dusty door flap.

“Come in, Jason.”

Not sure how she’d known who it was, he stepped inside. Angelica’s chamber was curved around a waist high wall of stone, providing a measure of privacy. He wondered if Baker had given her this one intentionally.

Angelica was standing by the fur bed in her half shirt and shorts, sexy muscles glowing in the dim candlelight as she studied him. Jason swallowed. *Where’s the air?*

“There’s another stack of furs in the corner. They didn’t know if they should set it up for you or not.”

Jason flushed at the thought of those free men discussing his personal life.

Angelica frowned tiredly. “Make your choice, Jason. I need to sleep.”

He couldn’t say it, not with those slightly pink eyes on his. Jason dropped his head. “Together?”

Instant, sparking heat flooded the chamber.

“Yes, please.”

Her throaty whisper sent him to the kiss in the brick shelter on the way here. He heard the same excited, sad longing in her tone, and stayed where he was. “Just to sleep?”

Angelica grunted in annoyance at his slightly disappointed tone. “Yes. Now.”

Jason didn’t wait to be told another time. As he curled his body around hers, the sensation of her skin against his and the sound of her low groan ringing in his ears broke off another chunk of his desire for freedom. There was no longer any denying this was where he wanted to be. He just didn’t know how it could work out for either of them to be happy.

Jason held her tight, like she needed, and Angelica let his scent pull her toward sleep as her mind flew over sudden, unwelcome truths. She would surrender to keep him. First, her honor for agreeing to a service arrangement, and then probably her hard line over children not long after. She wanted him too much, needed him too badly now, to refuse anything he was willing to give.

Jason tightened his grip, as if sensing her pain.

Angelica let out another low rumble of contentment. For this moment at least, he was hers, and she drifted to sleep with him securely in her embrace.

**2**

**Network**

“Rankin got a call through. We have a location.”

“Great!”

“Send the bomb now.”

“Wait.” A lower ranking council member had been studying the radar while the others examined the weekly reports. “There’s another squall moving into that sector.”

The storm flashed onto the main screen, causing mutters around the council table. Even the protestors at the border would take shelter from that monster.

“I’ve never been around anything so big!”

“It’s the Changeling Winds.”

“If those winds are strong enough, it will deflect too much of the blast. Sitting for five hundred years hasn’t helped the strength of our weapons.”

There was silence as they waited for the leader of the council to make a choice.

The walls behind the members weren’t adorned with the same bloody images that graced the lethal halls below. In this sterile room, there was one picture–the original ten founding members of the Network in hand labored detail. The rest of the walls were still as naked as the day they’d been built.

“Tell her to contact us after the squall. As soon as it lets up, send the explosive.”

“Are you positive about crossing Rankin?” Greta, the west coast representative hesitantly spoke up, drowning out the beep of an incoming message. “If she survives, it’ll be another enemy to fight.”

There were scowls at the continued questioning, but the head of the table paused to mull it over. This coastal observer wouldn’t be taking any information away from here–plans had already been made–but she was right. Rankin’s reputation for paying it back double was half the reason she’d been given the job.

Juli frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps we’d better send two hits, just to be sure that doesn’t happen. Our hands are full enough without adding more loose ends to be handled later.”

The member at the far end of the table gestured tensely. “There’s a call waiting for you. It’s the UN representative.”

“Transfer it to my private residence.” There was no mistaking the anger under the calm words. The leader hated answering to outsiders of any kind. This was the second call from the negotiator. They were about to be given an ultimatum for surrender.

The meeting cleared, but each council member was curious about the private conversation. They’d handled the first call together, though it hadn’t gone well. New America was now a target. If the inspectors made it through the wall, the rest of the world would be right behind them.

Chapter Sixteen

**Training Time**

**1**

**T**he rebel workouts were interesting.

Jason had woken alone and wandered until he found the group of men and women training in a rear tunnel. Once he’d witnessed the lessons taking place, the fascinated bachelor hadn’t been able to leave. Candice and Baker had two completely different methods of training and it was amazing to have them here, employing both techniques during the same lesson.

“Lean in. Use it!” Baker demanded as the woman’s eyes turned pink.

“But she’ll snap!”

Candice tried to reassure the rebel. “No, she won’t. The Runners are often hired to escort males to their new owners because of their stamina. Now attack her!”

Greg lunged forward, invading the big female’s space.

They all tensed as Rosa’s tattooed hand swept out.

“Now jump!” Candice kept him moving, following her orders as he evaded the fast swipes and swings.

Behind her and Daniel stood the two guys who had flanked them as they’d come to greet Angelica. Jason recognized them both as games bachelors. The size of the one and the purple hair of the other marked them, but he’d also passed them in the halls and the renters’ cells when Rankin had taken him for lessons. He’d been across the hall, listening to their screams as they did the same with him. Jason shuddered.

“Now! She caught your scent! Do it now!”

Baker’s words sent Greg in to press his mouth to Rosa’s clenched lips.

The Runner, and the audience, froze.

Greg pushed his advantage, using his voice. “You taste nice.”

Rosa shuddered, flipping to pink.

“Now!” Baker ordered.

Using a gentle move, Greg slid a foot behind Rosa’s leg and took them to the ground. He landed on top, with a knife at her throat.

The bachelors erupted in cheers.

Candice and Baker began directing the rebels into a line to take a turn. It was obvious Greg was determined. He had his freedom to fight for and the sons being held by the Network. His profile was untouched, but his hands! They had so many scars that Jason might have guessed he was a hide that had been damaged by repeated axe blows. He assumed some of the scars had come from helping dig out wounded rebels at Stone Mountain.

Still on the floor, Greg’s attention stayed on Rosa. If he ran, he could be in danger.

Jason wondered if Candice was strong enough to stop Rosa if she snapped.

Greg tossed his knife away and delivered a brilliant smile. “You do taste nice.”

“You had coffee this morning. I like coffee!” The big woman groaned. “Get up. I’m at my limit.”

They all expected Greg to scurry away from her. The others were certainly retreating. It was a surprise when Greg laughed.

“Lightweight.” His teasing broke the tension, and helped the big Runner regain her control.

Rosa’s eyes slowly slid into black as Greg stood up.

“Maybe we could do it again sometime.” Greg took her hand to pull her up.

The big woman flushed when he tried to keep her hand.

Encouraged, Greg leaned in and whispered something.

Whatever it was, it made the big female reach out to jerk him up against her body.

She growled at him. “Be sure. I own. I don’t rent!”

Thanks to his time with a Pruett, Jason was able to read the fear under her anger. Like Angelica, Rosa had hopes of a match, not a moment.

Greg’s eagerness didn’t cool at the warning or the hands-on treatment. “Pruetts are for freedom. As long as I still get to fight, that’s good by me.”

Everyone was silent as they realized they were witnessing a domestic arrangement…or maybe something more, judging from those flickering pink eyes.

“If I accept, how long will you honor it?”

Greg finally showed reluctance. “Until I no longer please you. When that time comes, I’m to be set free, not sold or passed to another owner.”

Rosa smiled in shocked joy, large hand coming up to gently stroke Greg’s cheek. “You want to be mine?”

Greg chuckled, hand coming up to keep hers against his skin. “As much as you want to kiss me right now.” The playboy leaned forward, invading Rosa’s personal space without hesitation this time. “You can, if you want, to seal our arrangement.”

Rosa’s eyes deepened to red; she led his thin frame from the room amid laughs and approving words. It was a successful match.

As the next female came toward the center of the circle, Jason considered what he’d witnessed. Greg was smart and courageous, things the Runners respected. He was also attractive with his curly brown hair and those chocolate eyes. Even his scars went in his favor, proving he was tough, but Jason thought the speaking was what had swept Rosa off her feet. Male voices wore away a changeling’s control, something few of them were brave enough to use openly. It made the other rebels eager to claim a female for themselves.

Tension sparked as the men saw the Runner who’d replaced Rosa while they were distracted.

Sam swept the men and lifted her chin arrogantly. “I’m no lightweight, gentlemen. I’m a full Pruett.”

Candice and Baker laughed with the rebels as Jason chuckled in admiration, leaning forward. *This should be good.*

They were going through the Runners quickly. Two others had already fled in defeat before Rosa, fighting different levels of need. Baker would be busy supervising agreements tonight and hoping the cuffs held.

Angelica came into the room, drawing Jason’s instant attention as she walked to a far corner. He didn’t think she’d noticed him yet. He wondered if she was a trainer for this class. Jason smothered dark jealousy.

Angelica tried not to gawk at Jason, studying the training equipment instead. It was bare except for what they’d managed to salvage from Stone Mountain. Only the mats were familiar. Compact and inflatable, they would provide the males a little comfort, as would the bulky clothes. Homemade candles lined the walls and tables, and rebel guards stood stiffly at the main entrances and exits. The Changeling Winds were moving through the Borderlands, making everyone uneasy.

Some of the males sat in groups, conversing quietly or playing Hob Jong as they attended the lesson. Others were reading or writing, something she found unusual and wonderful. Few of the slaves in New America knew how to do both, but the rebels would have that advantage. Angelica had begun to notice the other differences, too, like the strength of these males. While some of them were inept and as apt to flinch as to fight, the rest were harder. They went about their lessons and they learned from each other, building on it to get what they needed or wanted. *They’re like Jason.*

Jason could feel Angelica stealing glances at him as the hour passed, and he wondered again why she was here.

Sam was still in the center of the circle–over half the students defeated and sent to view from a distance as she lashed out and rocked her newest opponent off his feet.

The male thumped to the mat and scrambled back as she stepped forward, laughing. “Next!”

Her eyes had never once flipped into a shade other than black. Sam was stronger than Jason had given her credit for. How could she resist so many males tempting her? They hadn’t been gentle about it. One of them, the animal man with a purple stripe, had even tried to force a kiss. Her slap had sent him to his knees and roused anger in the hall. With that, Sam had turned the session from a lusty frolic into the scene of a battle.

Candice and Baker were staying mostly quiet, occasionally offering an idea or switching out males. Their pleased attitudes declared they’d been counting on this.

*Thud!*

Another man went to the floor. No one else stepped up to challenge her.

One of the beaten males delivered a hateful glare toward Sam. “She’s like Rankin.”

Sam leered back. “Maybe she and I will cross paths again before this is all over.”

That notion hadn’t occurred to the males. They immediately began to view Sam as their champion, the one who might be able to accomplish what all of them wanted to do–kill Rankin.

“Who wants to go next or is this lesson over?” Sam’s tone implied she had more to dish out.

“I’m the last one.” Baker took a moment to shed his shirt, revealing a thick, tan chest with scars running the length. Under those badges of courage, were hard muscles and cool control.

Jason leaned forward eagerly to observe.

“Wild women require more determination. Some changelings are harder to judge.” Baker came a bit closer, circling her.

Sam held still, allowing him to teach while admiring the way he handled himself. Baker certainly wasn’t a timid slave.

“We all know there are ways to make them snap, but you don’t want that.” He stopped suddenly, voice dropping into a tone that made even Candice and Angelica tense. “You want them enthralled, mesmerized by your tone.”

His leer went over Sam from hair to toe; her lips tightened into a thin line.

“At this point, you have the advantage. She doesn’t know what tactic you’ll pick, but she’s not concentrating on forming a plan against them. She’s being slapped with your voice.” His tone lowered into a bass that promised relief. “She wants you. *Use* it.”

Baker lunged, big arms wrapping Sam up tightly around her throat and chest. Instead of struggling, she let him ease her to her knees.

“If I tightened my grip, I could put her to sleep or even kill her. Distraction is a valuable tool.”

As Baker released Sam, Jason narrowed in on the rebel leader’s pounding pulse. He recognized that reaction.

Sam rose to her feet, sensual Pruett lips curving into a challenging grin. “What if they’ve lost the element of surprise?”

“Then they fight or submit. It’s their choice to make.”

“Meaning males experience this fire as much as females do?” Sam was trying to show the men they were like the lust driven women.

Baker’s face tightened. “We don’t turn into animals, but yes. We feel it.”

Sam stalked toward him, now the one on the hunt. “So, they should be careful not to fall for the same tricks, right? Like if I did this…” Her hand slid along the bare flesh of his tattooed arm and came up his shoulder, raking lightly.

Baker shivered at the chill it delivered. *She knows how to use her nails! I like that.*

Baker’s hand caught hers in a tight grip. “While the woman is so close, use the moment to distract her further, so you can use a weapon.” Baker demonstrated by jerking Sam up against his chest and slanting his mouth over hers.

Sam didn’t resist. She also didn’t respond, but when he retreated, everyone saw her pink eyes.

“Every changeling has this weakness.” Baker’s tone was compassionate, a contrast to his words as he examined Sam’s weathered profile. “All it takes is the courage to use it against them.”

“I have a question, Mr. Rebel Leader.” Sam’s tone was unreadable as he let her go.

Baker was still near enough to kiss her again. “Yes, Sam?”

“I’ve been told your name is on the renters list and the private sheet. Is that true?”

Jason listened intently, curious. Renters could be had here for a price if they were willing, but private sheets were exclusive arrangements. How could Baker do both?

“Yes, my services are available.”

“How much?”

As heat sparked between them, Jason sensed Baker wishing they were alone.

“I’m a provider, not a whore. I prefer to service a select few.”

“Pruetts make service contracts so they don’t have to share.” Sam’s expression grew arrogant. “I’m no different.”

“They also become attached to their males to the point of obsession..”

Sam lifted her chin. “Not this one.”

“Then, I’m sorry. We can’t be exclusive.”

The disappointment from Baker was a surprise to their audience.

It was a shock to Sam. “You hope for remission, too! What the hell is it with everyone here?”

“My services can only be claimed by someone who wants the same.” Baker’s tone held no shame. “Until then, I stay on the renter’s sheet.”

“Fair enough. Do I meet the requirements for that?”

Baker leered openly, no longer pretending to be anything other than what he was–a man. “You’ll wear the cuffs and I’ll do what I think you need.”

Her eyes flashed again, deeper pink this time, and Baker swept her up against his bare chest in response.

Sam’s arms went around his neck in a slow movement that made Baker lean in invitingly “Are you positive? I’d make a good match.”

Sam smiled softer than any of her family had ever seen. “You’d make a great match, Baker, and you know it. But that’s not my market.” Sam slowly retreated from his big arms. “I want the Network gone from the future. Right now, that’s as far as I’m willing to go.”

“And after we take them down?”

He was pushing her again, making his scent wash over her. Jason realized Baker was still teaching, showing his rebels how to get what they needed.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Sam was clearly on the defensive.

Baker made an educated guess. “You wanna shop through the other bachelors before you make a choice.”

“Yes. I have my own list of requirements.” She turned from him. “So do my Runners.”

Implying the other girls were hoping for matches as well. It was an interesting setup that Baker and Candice had going here. Is this what it would be like at the safe zone? Jason’s flare of jealousy was instant.

Baker nodded meekly. “Thank you for considering me.”

“You’re sitting comfortably with me right now, Baker.” Sam laughed. “And you know it, so get on with the next lesson already.”

There was laughter all around as everyone realized there was something growing between those two. The pair may think it was all sexual banter or teaching, but the emotions had been clear to their witnesses.

Angelica met Jason’s eye, hers lightening a bit. He felt his pulse increase when she came to take her sister’s place as the next teacher.

Candice waved at the few rebel males still willing to try after being humiliated by Sam. There were three. One of them was the tall man who had been attached to Daniel’s hip since they’d arrived. He kept his chocolate gaze on Angelica’s, a welcoming expression on his lightly scarred face…

Jason stood up. “Can I try?”

The hall went silent as they stared at each other. Angelica’s face glazed over with control that Jason was suddenly determined to rip from her in front of all these men. He wanted them to know she already had a provider.

Baker waved the other male off.

Jason slowly entered the fighting ring with his changeling. *Mine?*

*She could be*, he contemplated, now trying to ease into her space as he’d witnessed Baker do to Sam. If he gave up the dream of a family, Angelica would make an agreement with him here and now, one he doubted she’d ever break.

“Have you enjoyed the lessons?”

“It’s been educational.”

Angelica gave him a challenging smirk, a short mirror of her games grin. “You ready to learn something new?”

She was fast, dipping in to slide against his hard body, and then darting away. He’d felt her hand moving, but didn’t realize what she’d done until his shirt fell to the mat.

“Sometimes, you meet a changeling who knows her limits and uses them.” Angelica was still wearing that slight smirk.

As her hot gaze went over his bare skin, Jason couldn’t stop the pause in his step. Not a bit of that leer was faked for the class. She was letting him glimpse the half of her that she’d always hidden with her relentless control.

Angelica circled, padding closer.

Jason reacted as if it was Rankin. That was the only way he could fight with Angelica. He lunged for her, dragging them to the mat.

Not above fighting dirty, Jason let their bodies rub, let his hands touch places they shouldn’t. He was rewarded by being able to flip her onto her back and straddle her hips. With his hands holding her wrists, there was little he could do but hold on as she bucked.

“Use those legs!” Angelica snapped.

Jason did, tightened his grip on her body, and was able to free a hand by using his entire torso to pin both of her hands between them. He brought an imaginary knife to her throat.

“Very good.”

Jason was instantly addicted to the praise. He tried to stand so they could do it again and Angelica rolled them, pinning him in place. Realizing the lesson wasn’t over, Jason struggled wildly.

“Legs!”

He brought his up to her waist, and then went higher, aiming for her chest. As Jason wrapped around her, he rolled, taking that top position again.

Angelica shoved upward with her hands, knocking him away.

Jason gained his feet quickly.

Angelica was already on hers, stalking toward him.

Jason tried a move one of the others had used before she got here. He slipped under her arm and lifted her up.

Before he could slam them to the mat, Angelica spun out of his hold and flipped over his back. Her hands came around to put the tips of her fingers against his throat. If this had been a real fight, he would be dead.

Jason didn’t wait. He shifted and lunged, taking them to the mat again.

The hall was quiet as everyone observed the lesson Angelica was delivering. Jason absorbed as much of it as he could, still trying to picture Rankin in his mind. Close to the same weight, they struggled against each other and Angelica’s eyes remained flat black the whole time. Everyone knew she had a spark for Jason. It was impressive to witness her put it aside where even her wild sister hadn’t been able to.

It also made Jason more determined to draw a reaction from her. He didn’t realize he already had until the lesson was over.

Chapter Seventeen

**Compromises**

**1**

**B**y the time Angelica was done with him, Jason was winded, bruised, and bleeding lightly from a few scratches. Her claws were hard to escape when she brought them out. Her eyes hadn’t flickered once. He examined her as Candice and Daniel took over and began demonstrating more moves.

Angelica went toward the exit, but twisted back to find him staring after her in confusion. The bachelor was glad for the lesson she’d given, but didn’t she have that spark for him anymore? He’d blasted her with many of the things he *knew* had an effect. How had she managed to resist without even a pink flicker? Had she chosen one of these males to be her mate? *Am I replaced?*

Angelica knew what Jason was thinking and she didn’t like his pain. Her eyes slowly lightened to a brilliant shade of pink that he hadn’t caused yet…and then kept going. It was mesmerizing as she let those levels of heat show. Vivid red streaks flared through the pink, changing, merging it with full crimson.

The other males were waiting for her to snap now, realizing, as Jason was, that she *had* been affected and strongly, but he also understood she was trying to show them something.

Her muscles expanded, slowly growing, tearing the clothes, and the mutters became louder. Jason was fascinated by Angelica gradually flipping for him, letting him view her in all her changed forms. Her hair shot out, racing down her spine… Jason had the sudden urge to grab her and see if it was still as soft.

Angelica noticed his lack of fear and gave him a soft smile that didn’t fit with her changed body or those glowing crimson orbs. “I couldn’t do this before. You make my control stronger.”

Her eyes faded to black as she sank back into the Angelica they all knew. She turned toward their audience as she finished the lesson proudly. “I’m a level one, or maybe this makes me a level two now, I’m not sure, but the point is, if I can do it, so can the rest of the changelings.”

Her gaze returned to Jason, went over his features with a caring he was surprised she let them witness. “If we want to, we can learn not to hurt men.”

She wanted him to help these cringing rebels, to add another layer of the encouragement they needed to keep growing. Jason gave his support willingly. “We have to teach the women they do want it, that we’re worth it, even if they have to give up some of the things they’ve gotten used to–like making us bleed.”

Knowing that story would spread fast, Jason followed Angelica as she left the room. He didn’t know where she was going, but it didn’t matter. He was in awe of her. She’d used her curse to show him he would always be safe with her and he was almost desperate to give her something in return. After a few more lessons like these, he might even be able to hold out against Rankin long enough to kill her! He owed Angelica so much for the things she’d already given, but even more for what the future might bring. “Angel.”

“Will you still help me pick through the rebels?”

Jason wasn’t prepared for the desperation in her words as she stopped. His heart dropped. He forced words out through the confusing pain. “When do you want to do it?”

“Baker’s getting a group of them together now.”

Jason saw it suddenly, how she would lean in while they froze, scenting them in hopes of finding someone who drew her as strongly as he did.

Jealousy, fierce and stabbing, shot out of his mouth. “You don’t need me there for that!”

“I need you there for comparison.”

Jason was furious, but her tone was almost pleading. His fury grew tighter, but instead of refusing, he considered all the control she’d just shown in order to provide something he needed.

“Fine!” Jason ground out. It would be an hour-long reminder that these men would give her an arrangement without kids or anything else she wanted. They would deny her nothing, and he still withheld the one thing she seemed to need most–him. He thought of the Runner’s words to Greg: *“Be sure. I own. I don’t rent!”* and then of the impression that the woman wanted a match and not a contract. Despite her words, Jason already knew she would end up being Greg’s willing slave if he wanted it. The Runner was infatuated; their agreement would likely stand for a long time.

“Jason.” Angelica knew his thoughts. She kept an even tone, but pink eyes flickered at him in heavy, pleading seas. “If you’d still speak of a compromise, I’d listen tonight.”

She turned for the next tunnel and was out of sight before his mouth could betray him. Footsteps came, Baker’s, and he just stood there! Why didn’t he give in? In time, like with Greg and his new owner, he could convince Angelica to have kids… But it wasn’t the same if she was forced to give him that and he felt the difference keenly. He should since he’d spent their time together on the other side of it.

Baker stopped by Jason, understanding the freed bachelor was having a revelation. “After that demonstration, she is now the most wanted Pruett here. They *asked* me to set up another line before we go, if she doesn’t pick someone from this first group. What is your problem?!”

His tone demanded the truth, and Jason spilled part of it with one word. “Rankin.”

Baker studied him for a long moment before finally confirming the fears. “Angelica will kill her. Don’t you know that?”

Jason shook his head, admitting the root of that terror. “She can’t die for me, Baker. You have to stop that from happening.”

“It’s not for you, Jason.” Daniel, with Candice trailing him, had entered the corridor without Jason noticing. He was learning a lot from his loving owner. “It’s for every one of us who Rankin tortured. Many of those here were also her picks, like you.” Daniel’s chin lowered in shame. “And me.”

Jason stared in shock. He hadn’t known Daniel hated Rankin. He and the others had always thought Daniel was willing.

Daniel wasn’t bitter over that anymore. “We all think about killing her, but it’ll take a changeling for that. *Your* changeling.”

Jason would have denied it to anyone else, but Daniel knew the same terrors in the night. They’d held the same hopes of escape and the same fears of becoming attached to their captor. He could feel it on Daniel. Even after his time with Candice, it was still there, lurking. Did she know? Did it make Candice eager to fight the Network, so she might have a shot at killing Rankin?

*No*, Jason realized. They were depending on Angelica for that. And they were positive she would win. He didn’t catch a hint of doubt, of worry for their youngest family member. All he saw was confidence in a fellow Pruett.

“She’ll do it because they’re for *freedom*.” Baker cheerfully went around him to go moderate Angelica’s interviews. He was eager for this to be settled, for Angelica to be at peace. “That is what you asked for, wasn’t it? Freedom?”

“How can I be free if she owns me?”

“Considering the brand on your arm and your current state of no rules, I’d say it would be a lot like it is now.” Baker paused, gesturing curtly. “Do you think she’ll be different? Chain you? Beat you?”

“No.” Jason quickly denied that. “She wouldn’t.”

“Plus, you’re worrying over a future that can’t ever happen unless we take down the Network. After, we might have the vaccine that allows your children to grow up normal. Then she wouldn’t have to be convinced.”

The trio left him standing there with those words beating in his brain. It was something Jason hadn’t considered, even though he’d been there for the negotiations with the lepers. When the Network fell, they would control *all* of the vaccines. Their kids would be born immune. The life he wanted with Angelica was entirely possible if they conquered the Network. If they lost, they’d all be dead anyway and it wouldn’t matter. It was a terrifying revelation, but also liberating. He had nothing to lose by spending time with Angelica, bonding with her, and everything to gain by staying close and fighting for their future.

Jason moved away from the mate picking area. He felt her in there, waiting for him to do as he’d said, but with these dangerous notions beating in his brain, he needed to confirm a final doubt first.

Jason proceeded toward the tunnels, wondering if being here would put him in danger from the few Runners who’d chosen to rent a male. None of the tunnels had any light except for corn candles set into carved holders spiked to the walls, and the mood was eerie. The cloth flap was open on the room he wanted, as were most of those around, providing a variety of sights that sent heat into his cheeks.

Jason tapped gently on the stone. “Anyone in?”

There was a giggle, followed by a low growl. Jason peered around the corner reluctantly.

“Why did you pick me?”

Usually the males asked that question. Jason ducked out of sight to listen. He respected the pretty boy. Greg had chosen his mate. Jason wanted a confirmation from him.

Greg cleared his throat. “You’re different, you make me feel things I never have, and…I don’t need the drugs.”

Jason eased out as sexual tension flared. He would have believed Greg would be bleeding by now, but it sounded like they were taking the time to get to know each other first. That was what he needed with Angelica, to know her better and to let her know the real him.

*“And I don’t need the drugs.”*

Neither did he. That one tiny thing, the physical reaction, was what made the choice in attraction, in immunity. How frustrating nature was to hide something so complex inside something so simple! It was amazingly hard to know if that reaction was lust or the awareness of something more hoping to be given the chance to grow.

Jason traversed the tunnels with a mind full of discoveries, finally accepting that the future he wanted most was possible. Baker was right. Angelica would never chain him or hold him against his will, and he would be loved. She might not believe she was capable of it, but after everything he’d witnessed from her and her strangely wonderful family, Jason knew better. She would be his slave if he wanted, as Rosa would be in time to Greg if he needed it from her.

“But I won’t ask for that.” Jason ignored the reactions of those few around to hear the mutter, no longer caring about the danger. These were Pruetts. He was safe.

Baker and Greg, along with his own examinations and experiences, had given him the last of the clues he needed to be able to agree. They didn’t have to be apart anymore.

Jason swung the curtain open to the matchmaking session, ready to declare his intentions.

**2**

Angelica swallowed a groan as the curtain opened and yet another male came into the room. The smells of them were torment. Just because she wanted Jason didn’t mean their interest wasn’t flaring along her nerves like flames. She was sitting in the center of the floor, with the note writer Jason had recorded the list onto. She opened it with steady hands and a hurting heart. “If you hear something on my list you don’t like or fit, please go.” Angelica understood Jason wasn’t going to help her with this and didn’t blame him for it. In his shoes… She sighed, scanning his notes.

*Black hair–long*

*Size–big*

*Beard*

*Heavier is better*

*Sense of humor*

*Courage–follow instincts when alone*

*Smell good*

*No kids–big problem*

*Hates the Network*

*Knows she’s burning up–how can I help when she won’t take a service?*

*Hunt with them–check out family–who gets me?*

*Remission*

*No friends–Pure*

She started with the one he’d underlined, knowing that only for him, would she ever budge on it. “I won’t have kids. Ever.”

There was a small exodus, where she let out the breath she’d been holding. She was afraid they were all so determined to be with a Pruett that they would sacrifice their own desires and she couldn’t have that. “I…I like black hair.”

Now there were disappointed mutters and a large number of feet leaving. She didn’t raise her chin, thinking it would be so unfair to find one who resembled him–to pretend she had him when she didn’t. “I’d like to have someone who will hunt with us.”

As she went over the list, the number of males slowly lessened and took her small hope with it. At this rate, she would exclude all the rebels and never pick a mate.

Angelica glanced up for the first time since realizing how many of the rebels wanted to belong to a Pruett. Jason was standing by the entrance.

She couldn’t read anything in his expression, and didn’t assume he had changed his mind. She sealed up the misery and sent her attention to the remaining males. They were waiting eagerly for the next qualification. She made a rough count of thirty. All that black hair to roam and her hot gaze still went to Jason first.

Angelica stood up, slamming her mind shut to that pain. “I’d like a pure mate.”

Baker consoled the disappointed renters as they departed.

Angelica saw Jason’s smirk from the corner, his clear satisfaction that only five males remained now. He didn’t want her to have a replacement, but he wouldn’t be hers, either. What did he feel as she did this? Was it clawing angrily at his heart the way it was hers?

Angelica believed that unlikely as she trudged toward the nearest of the remaining males. She would survive. “Can I… I’d like to smell you.”

There were chuckles and one flinch of worry that narrowed the list further. She hadn’t mentioned that she needed courage. All of them assumed they had it, but this first male, standing tall and steady, did. His scarred hand went out to hers.

Angelica let him take it.

“I’m Troy.” He placed a soft kiss on her skin and pink tints came into sight. “I like you.”

Troy was versed in dealing with changelings. Angelica sensed he wasn’t pure by the same standards as Jason. This one had loved before and knew how to use it to his advantage.

Angelica drew her hand back. She didn’t like his boldness, even though she needed the courage. *How strange!*

Angelica leaned in quickly, placing her cheek against his. She wasn’t at all surprised when Troy shifted his head.

She hesitated. If she let him kiss her, she would have to allow the others…but there were only four more and Angelica thought she could take that much to be certain none of these would do in Jason’s place. She met Troy’s eager lips.

It was like kissing a wet slip of rubber and Angelica quickly went on. Maybe he could be taught not to slobber? She scrubbed a sleeve across her mouth in revulsion.

The second male was the one who’d flinched. She slowed her movements, trying not to scare him further. He was darker skinned than the others, all satin, sexy and stocky, but he shied away before she even leaned in.

*Next!*

The third male resembled Jason more than the rest. The shade of that hair and skin was similar, and those pale blue irises were close to gray. She studied his patiently waiting profile. *Yes, I can pretend with this one.* “What’s your name?” Unlike during the game, she didn’t brace, hoping the sound of his voice would give her heat.

“Brian.”

It did, but it was the kind that made her stomach crawl. She proceeded onto the last man without scenting.

This man was more than the others in about every way. He had more height, more muscles showing, more sexual appeal. His ebony hair was in a long ponytail, and she liked the way the stubble made him appear fresh from bed. Ready to be disappointed, Angelica stepped closer.

“I’m Nathan.” He extended a hand, sending out a sharp, sweet smell that immediately had her heat flaring.

He leaned toward her, showing his boldness. “It’s nice to meet you, *Angel*.”

Angelica heard a low growl echo as their hands touched, but she was pulled into a hazy desire that had a sense of calm boredom.

She jerked her hand back, sensing the fate that waited with this one. Yes, they were compatible, but only enough for her to burn out.

“I’m sorry.” She started to leave, humiliated.

Baker’s amused voice rang out. “You got one left.”

For an awful instant, Angelica thought he meant himself.

She turned around to the perfect male she now dreamed about almost nightly, considered first as she woke, couldn’t, no matter how hard she tried, get out of her mind.

Jason waited patiently, hands shoved into his pockets. “Want to check me over?”

She slowly shook her head. “It’s too much, Jason. Don’t do this.”

His face flooded with guilt and she knew what he had planned. Thanks to her flipping for him, he knew how much control she had, how far he could go. He wasn’t afraid of her hidden changeling anymore and he wanted her enough to force things this way. He would lay down a time frame and she would be honor bound to stick to it. Heat blasted through her cold heart as she took a few steps closer. “For how long?”

“A year. More if we still feel the same way then.”

His quick answer said yes, he needed a time limit to be safe in his future, his freedom.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Why are you giving in?”

“Because if we take the Network, we’ll have the *vaccine*.”

Angelica was smart enough to add up those clues, and instantly furious with herself for missing it. Another world opened in front of her, one where *she* carried Jason’s growing child.

He took the steps that brought them within a foot of each other. “It’s a hope, right?”

She nodded shakily, not bothering to ask what would happen then. After a year, if he didn’t want to stay with her, she would let him go. Until that time, there would be no children unless they took the Network.

“Angel?”

Her flames blazed, but Angelica pushed reality into his plans. She had to be positive she understood what he needed. “When we get the cure?”

He flushed, but didn’t hesitate. “Once a year, you have to ask me if I want to be free.”

She waited. Surely there was more? It hit her then that he was searching for a perfect match. She’d been a part of too many moments here to miss it. He wanted the freedom to pick his own mate. Even the way he’d handled this moment proved it. So long as it was his choice, he would stay with her, Angelica was suddenly certain.

She dropped her chin, afraid he would read the eagerness and change his mind. “There isn’t anything you can ask for that I won’t try to give you. Once we take the vaccine, that’ll include a family.”

Angelica observed from under lowered lashes, adoring Jason’s happiness. He’d needed to hear that and she vowed to reassure him more often. If that was all it took to make him content in her care, she would tend to it devotedly.

Jason’s hand came up to slide behind her hair and cup her neck. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

She knew what he meant, what he wanted to be allowed to do for her. She gave a short, nervous grunt. “From this moment, you don’t have to ask.”

His mouth came toward hers. “Thank you for taking what I can give.”

Angelica groaned as their lips met. “Thank you for trusting me.”

It was the right thing to say.

His hands tightened and she held still while he sealed the service contract, but inside, she hurt. She would never have remission from an arrangement like this. She needed love.

Chapter Eighteen

**All That Heat**

**1**

**“T**his is yours.” Angelica sat a small box on the table next to their empty plates.

Jason recognized the train logo. It was the most expensive chocolate sampler the dessert car offered.

“I can get you something else, if you don’t care for these.”

Jason was delighted. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Sure.”

It was hard to chew and grin, but Jason managed. They were all gathered for a warm lunch of rabbit soup. The first half of the long day had been spent foraging the land around them for their needs.

The chocolates were even better than Jason remembered. He gave Angelica a thick blast of happiness as he chose another from the layered box. “Would you like one?”

“No.”

Jason got the sense she liked observing him as he enjoyed the treat. He eagerly sucked the gooey chocolate from his fingertips.

Her cheeks became red as Jason cleaned himself that way, body responding. There was no doubt they were a match.

Around them, the others were going about the evening as usual. Before each sentry change, the males painted themselves to blend into their surroundings. Jason compared it to Sam’s big Runners as he ate the treat. The rebels had done a great job, but those stunningly painted hands and profiles paled in comparison to the perfect camouflage of the animal skin cloaks on each of the big females. They rippled, blending into the stone almost perfectly as the females came in for the meal. The cloaks were two-sided. One was slate, the other lush nature. Jason marveled at the cleverness of it.

“We have some new guests.”

Greg’s words switched everyone’s attention to the four men who came into the tunnel behind him. Thin and wild, the two in the front stayed frozen in front of the main entrance, scrutinizing the females here as if they were contagious.

Baker came toward the new men. It drew recognition immediately.

“It’s him!”

“I told you we were here!”

Baker held out a hand. “Welcome to freedom.”

He shook with them, offering comfort in short words and tones.

The newest rebels were Wille, Stephan, James, and a fourth man that Baker hadn’t gotten to yet. These guys were jumpy, but the fourth man loitered in the corner. He swept the center group with a gleam of satisfaction, lingering on Candice and Daniel. Did Baker know them? It instantly made Jason nervous.

“Welcome. I’m Baker.”

“Keith.”

“So, where are you from?”

Jason listened to the fourth man’s answer, not caring for him. The other newcomers were raggedy, two of them barefoot and one in moccasins, but this man was fully dressed and not starving.

“From the complex. I was a prize.”

Now Jason frowned openly, drawing Angelica’s attention.

He’d been under the Network’s dome for fifteen years. He’d met or at least heard the name of every bachelor who was a part of every prize lot and this man, with his unscarred hands and calm attitude, hadn’t been among them. Jason had vague memories of the other three, though Stephan–the bald one–he hadn’t placed to a game yet. The other two were from the aquatics floor.

“Come have a meal and meet everyone.”

Keith was directed to Baker’s table with the other new males.

Jason’s heart thumped. *Did we just let in a spy?*

Angelica knew of Jason’s unease. She’d felt his tension, and picked out the cause of it not long after. As she studied Keith, she understood. The man with the purple stripe hadn’t been a bachelor. There was no way he could have been–not without flinching at the female growls of approval as he and Baker walked by Sam’s area.

The animal games were the most brutal that the Network offered. No one ever came out of those cells with normal emotions intact, and certainly not manners. All of the others fit that part more than Keith did, with their fearful glances. One of them, Stephan, was even resting a hand on his belt knife as the Runners cackled loudly about fresh meat.

Angelica squeezed Jason’s arm, knowing what he was about to say. “You’re sure you’ve never seen Keith there?”

“Yes.” Jason kept his voice low. “He’s dressed as an animal games prize, but the rebel by Daniel has the same purple stripe and no welcome. No recognition, either. Those men go through hell and they bond. There’s no way they wouldn’t at least know each other.”

Their animal man’s gaze kept returning curiously to the newcomer, as if he was trying to place him and couldn’t. Angelica stood up. “Stay here.”

“Yes, Angel.”

Jason triggered her heat intentionally, as Sam had during the hound attack. It told her that he was worried and wanted her alert enough to be safe.

She turned toward Keith.

Stephan lunged for Baker with his knife.

Angelica gaped. *Wrong one!*

The knife plunged toward Baker’s chest.

Angelica jumped forward.

*Bang!*

The single shot came from across the room. As the assassin fell to his knees, blood gushing from his mouth, everyone turned to find out who had saved Baker.

Sam didn’t lower her gun until the infiltrator slumped on the hard floor. Blood, thick and red, rolled from Stephan’s wound as she slowly holstered.

Jason wondered what had tipped Sam off, if anything had at all. Was she shielding Baker? Was it good instincts? It was what she and her crew were here for, but Jason had the sense that it was more.

Baker gestured a hand toward the closest chamber. “Let’s finish our meal in there.”

As they all left, Keith and their Animal man removed the body and talked. Keith was new. He’d been sold to the Network only a month ago, and hadn’t been in the renter cells yet. He was one of them, just luckier.

**2**

The next chamber was comforting, the tension gone. In its place, was pride. The Network had sent a traitor and they’d thwarted the attempt. It also made Sam and her big Runners more welcome among the rebel males. Some of the glances now flying toward them from the two rear tables were hot enough to make Jason avert his gaze.

Upset, the three new men were lingering near the entrance and viewing the Runners with trepidation. Daniel was with them, trying to calm them, Jason assumed. In a far corner, Greg and Candice were working with their animal man on something he couldn’t hear from where he was. Whatever it was, they weren’t letting anyone else hear it either.

Jason caught a raised brow among Sam’s Runners, but couldn’t spot which man in those two rear tables it had been aimed at. Her big face was soft with hope. He wondered suddenly if the Runners now expected to be rewarded for their protection… How had Candice gotten the Runners to agree to all this? Had she promised them a pick of the males? Jason hadn’t been with the family long enough to know how it all worked, but he quickly reminded himself the Pruetts were for freedom–all of them.

Baker sat with Daniel and the new males, talking to them in quiet tones of persuasion. Jason knew why. The Runners were every bit as picky as the rest of that mysterious Pruett clan, and it was the scared ones, with their scarred hearts, that these women would want to spend time with. Jason assumed it was that strict sense of honor, the need to aid their fellow man, that was pushing things in the meeker males direction.

“Hey, Baker.” Sam leaned back with a full groan, stretching. “Which ones are renters? We don’t know how to tell.”

Silence fell. Sam was sitting in the center of her crew.

Baker’s eyes lit up with devious schemes. “Willing renters have a red bracelet.”

A few hands ducked for cover, not wanting to be chosen, but most made sure theirs were visible.

“Got any we can just play with tonight?”

Sam’s crudeness had always been embarrassing, but now, it was angering Candice. Angelica could tell by the flare of heat in her cousin’s expression.

“Sam.”

“What? Those three in the front row keep leering at us and giggling!”

Baker relaxed. He jerked a hand in their direction. “The ladies are willing if you are.”

There was a small stampede as no less than a dozen of the rebel males came closer to Sam’s group.

Angelica snickered in admiration of Baker and his matchmaking. He’d made sure that even the men were satisfied. It was heartening when the males made choices based on their own needs. Angelica wasn’t surprised when all of the Runners let the men have the lead. Over the next few minutes, some of the women and males began being a bit friendlier than was acceptable for public, while others conversed or exchanged shy glances. Through it all, Baker was there to make sure no one got hurt.

When the couples began leaving in search of privacy, Baker’s voice grew sharp. “Use the cuffs.”

There wasn’t any argument. The women didn’t want these precious men hurt, either. Thanks to the rebels taking shelter in the Borderlands, the Runners now had a new relief source. They would protect it.

The group had thinned to only a few of the women left now. Sam was among them. She had turned down half a dozen offers before the males made a second choice. She didn’t want them. Sam subtly swept Baker, flashing hunger.

His face immediately lit up in response.

“I notice you have the red bracelet on tonight, first time since we got here. You must be feelin’ lonely.”

Sam’s comment sent another round of quiet through them and a sensation of heavy need that made Angelica’s sight try to turn pink.

Baker delivered a generous smile. “I’m a guy. They can’t change that.”

His shined eyes were beautiful in the darkness, but also hard for Angelica to look at for long now. It gave Baker the sense of being an emotionless drone that might get them all killed to serve his purposes. Angelica doubted Sam saw him that way as she smirked.

“Been a while, has it?”

Baker swept the tunnel where Candice and Daniel had already disappeared. His tone dropped to a low growl. “You could say that.”

“You still got a thing for her?”

That whipped Baker’s head back to hers.

Sam raised a brow, waiting.

Baker stood up, clearly not liking the question. “Would I want to rub you, if I was thinking about her?”

“Yeah, probably. You’re a guy, remember?”

There was a round of amusement, but not from either of the two people staring intently at each other.

“Ask me.”

Tension sparked at Sam’s demand. She was on the hunt and Baker knew it. He didn’t hesitate. “I’d like to spend the night with you, Samantha.”

The bass in his voice flooded every cell in Angelica’s brain with heat. *Damn. Sam has her hands full, too.*

Sam gestured at the empty bench next to her.

Baker answered the request for service with a smug eagerness that was incredibly sexy. He dropped down next to her. His arm went around her shoulder, pulling her against his chest with no sign of fear.

Sam laughed, curling close. “Mmm… Always did hate to sleep alone.”

“You won’t have to tonight.”

Baker’s low rumble turned Sam’s eyes red–a brilliant shade that sent a shudder of fear through Jason.

Baker immediately swept her up and took her from the chamber with her laughter ringing in Angelica’s shocked ears. Her sister hadn’t sounded that happy in…well, ever.

Angelica caught Jason’s worried expression. She would have given about anything to know what he was thinking right then.

Jason was thinking about the night they were going to spend together. Much like Sam and Baker, and the others, he and Angelica would be discovering the same joys tonight. It was enough to keep the heat in his cheeks and the heavy flush of need in his body. He wanted her.

She gazed back nervously… *Nervous?* It was an interesting notion. He hadn’t considered her that way.

“Are you getting tired?”

Jason nodded, flushing. “I need to wash up first.”

This time, *her* cheeks went red. “I’ll meet you there.” She walked stiffly through the tunnel.

Jason watched her with a full sensation in his gut. How different would he feel after it was over and he belonged to her?

Jason couldn’t wait to find out. He went to the wash area with eager feet.

**3**

Angelica wasn’t ready when he knocked.

“Who is it?” Stalling to be certain she could live with this choice.

“Jason.”

“Come in.”

He read it all on her face when he shut the flap and turned around, how vulnerable she was, how little it would take to push her into doing whatever he wanted. His expression grew concerned. “Are you okay?”

She was afraid to speak. She was scared of this choice and for a male who’d spent his life in fear, it was easy for him to recognize. “I won’t push you. We’ll…talk?”

It wasn’t nearly enough and Jason read that, too. Angelica wasn’t positive about the choice, but she’d made it.

“You have no limits with me.”

“And the others here?” He couldn’t help the jealousy. “Will you make an arrangement with them when I’m not available?”

Angelica considered how this raging fire had shrunk to a tolerable throb in the hall at his absence. “No.” Her heart raced as her blood heated up. “Will you seal our arrangement?”

“Yes, I will.”

Instead of the fierce bonding kiss she’d been expecting, Jason gently pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. “I want you, Angel.”

That name, from his lips, sent the flames higher, but also pulled a spark of emotion. She didn’t mind the sound of it from him and he knew.

Jason glowed with desire that she was defenseless against. More than lust or loneliness, this feeling had spread through her cold, hidden heart and driven her into a new level of nervousness. He now had the power to hurt her, even if he didn’t realize it yet. If he walked away, ever, she would be crushed.

His hand came up to glide along her jaw, easing behind her neck to gently pull her mouth to his.

*I want him so much! Enough to take what he’ll give and be strong enough to let him go when it’s over.*

Angelica met his mouth with a blast of heat. It sank into her gut, her legs, melting her against Jason’s hard body like she’d forgotten how to stand. He was sealing the contract, and there wasn’t a part of her body not straining for his when he ended the embrace.

“Should I stop, or go slow?” He wasn’t sure what she wanted–most service calls didn’t involve actual mating a lot of the time–and he was hoping she would set the rules.

“Free. What you want.” Angelica wasn’t capable of coherent speech.

Jason understood what she was allowing and gave her another searching glance she deflected by closing her lids.

He would make his own choices and she wouldn’t interfere or ask for more if she could help it. Angelica felt his hand brush her arm, then his thumb on her bottom lip.

“They said all changelings crave it afterward, that the *lust* drives them then, not the need for blood.”

It made sense, considering the fire and lava he was brewing in her gut with his voice and light strokes.

“But not you. You never caved.”

Angelica wanted to deny the claim, but he shifted against her as he pushed off his boots and she forgot how.

“You’re so different.”

“Unbroken!” She reminded in a sharp gasp as his large hand slid down her shoulder to brush a taut nipple through her shirt. He did it again and she shuddered.

“I have a condition to this arrangement.”

She struggled to pull out of the feverish spiral, to think. “Whatever you want.”

Jason snickered. “You’re not allowed to hold back.”

Angelica was shocked. Not control herself? Do whatever she wanted? Was he insane?

“Angel.”

She growled in frustration, in surrender.

He slid in to seal their lips. This time, he was rough, demanding… She was lost.

Her hand snaked around his neck, pulling him close as the change swept through her. His mouth went to her shoulder, hard body rubbing against hers, and she groaned, feeling the blood red of her eyes, the swelling of her muscles.

A fast swipe of her hand removed his shirt, baring that bronze chest. He was hard, smooth, and hot.

His hand slid between them, adjusting.

Angelica allowed him to push her legs open, trembling.

She felt his hands undoing clips, buttons, and she moaned at the cool air on her skin as he yanked her cloak off and then her shirt.

His mouth went to the center of her bra and Angelica clutched at his silken hair, vaguely aware of her claws digging into her palms to keep from hurting him. On one hand, it fit perfectly into the creases remaining from the first time he’d lit her up this way.

He dropped lower to kiss the ugly scar on her stomach with loving care. Her body was covered in them. Angelica was glad to know he wasn’t bothered by it. She shuddered again.

Jason used a fast movement to strip her of pants. He swept her into his arms and dropped onto the bed, holding her close. His skin was baking against hers, body thrusting along her bare hip, and she sank light teeth into his shoulder, arching. That beautiful edge flew her way the second his big hand slid between her bare legs, but she shoved it back, determined to enjoy these moments with him for as long as she could stand it.

Jason swept her body with a muscle twitching in his jaw.

She realized he was fighting for control. The flames yanked her up another level and her hardening nipple drew his attention. As his mouth settled over a peak, his thumb pressed down, and she cried out, shattering.

Gasping, Angelica held him tightly, not about to let him think they were finished. As she pulsed, he slid against her in shaky lust and she pushed back, feeling the need roar back to life. His hands roamed her naked body, rubbing, squeezing, exploring. Her claws extended, ripping into his shoulder.

She jerked her hands away from his flesh.

Jason stopped, scowling.

Angelica reluctantly sent her nails back to his hard skin.

An instant later, there was a smooth hardness stroking against her thigh and she struggled to breathe. Her claws slid into his arm…and that hardness jumped eagerly in response.

His fingers were still moving, but that other part of him was also thrusting against her slickness, hitting pleasure points as it pushed in further each time. She arched to meet him, instinctively tilting her hips to line them up.

Jason’s hands encircled her waist, holding her in place as he jerked forward feverishly.

Angelica met his movement, opening legs to give him access. They both groaned as that hot, smooth bar slipped between the folds.

Fear, bright and unexpected, swirled over her, dampening the fire. Angelica tensed.

“Should I stop?”

There was pain in his voice, waiting to be told *yes, that this was way too far.*

Besides not being positive the act could be completed from this side-by-side position, the feel of that mysterious hardness had her body softening against it, welcoming him. “No.”

Jason didn’t give her a chance to change her mind. His lips lowered to her mouth and his fingers resumed that incredible matching rhythm on her swollen nub. His hips rubbed them together and she met his thrust when it came.

Able to be completed or not, there was enough contact to make her cry out, and to cause Jason to freeze at the sound. “Angel?”

She buried her chin against his neck. “Please.”

Angelica didn’t know what she was begging for, but Jason did. He shifted and then jerked forward, locking their hips to shove an iron bar into her cringing body.

“Oh, Angel!”

He trembled against her as she gasped at the strange feel of him. The pain was minor, easily forgotten, but Jason struggling to be still was enlightenment. This was what it felt like from *their* side.

Eager to learn more, Angelica gently pushed back.

His hand slid around her thigh, lifting as he thrust again, and she couldn’t stop the scream as he slid fully in, ripping, tearing.

“Should…should I stop?”

Before she could say yes, he trembled, ready to withdraw at the request. His pain was a mirror.

Angelica blinked away the tears that had formed. “I was promised a service.”

Angelica felt him twitch, the small jerk stealing her breath, as it did his. He was all hard, manly body and sweet, burnt sugar scents in the dimness. She memorized the sensation as the fire leapt.

Jason leaned down to kiss her gently, body still, and those flames surged into a wall of need. But it wasn’t quite the same. This desire was fuller, less frantic fire and more baking heat. She realized it was the feel of *his* need.

Jason’s arms trembled as he tried to control himself, breathing in short rasps, profile twisted in a delicious mix of agony and ecstasy.

Suddenly, Angelica wanted him out of control, released from whatever mental prison Rankin had him in. She wanted his thoughts of this moment to be of her, not of a ghost! Ignoring the discomfort, Angelica moved a leg up to rest on his hip, letting him have full access.

His eyes snapped to hers.

She stared through reddening irises. “No holding back. Please…”

She was begging him to let go and rut between those sweet legs like an animal. And he wanted to. Now he understood what Rankin had been denying him and he was alive with a raging need he’d never felt before.

Angelica’s body tightened around him, hot skin sliding against his. Jason shivered at the chill of lust that sank into his stomach. Her fingers pulled him closer, mouth on his, and his already weak control snapped.

Now *he* was the one changing, turning into a lust-crazed animal that wanted to get deeper. His body shoved into hers, lungs aching from the jagged breaths. He arched as piercing lust smothered him.

Angelica unlocked their bodies and Jason groaned at the loss of her heat, but couldn’t keep from exploding.

As he shuddered, chin on her shoulder, Jason was disappointed with himself. Hoping she wasn’t angry, he raised his head.

Her eyes were crimson flames. “Again?”

His lips curved upward as he tried to control his breathing. “I’ll need…a little help.”

Another, darker shade of red flooded. “You like being touched?”

His body thrust against her, providing the answer.

Her breath caught, nipples hardening against his chest, and Jason felt his body returning to life before his breathing had evened out. Amazing!

Her hand rose, brushed his hair back. “I’ve wanted to do this since we met.” Her fingers tangled gently in the locks. “So soft.”

Her enjoying his body had that sense of pride waking, needing to be fed. Jason wanted her thinking about it all day tomorrow, so when he took her tomorrow night, she’d enjoy it more.

His body swelled to life at that thought and Jason pressed against her hip in renewed want. He planned to do this every night, but right now, he needed to hear her moaning as he sent her over that cliff again.

Thanks to the Network, he knew exactly how to position them to be positive he was making full contact with the outside of her body, as well as the inside. They were taught there was little pleasure for the woman without that extra stimulation, though the training models certainly hadn’t cared one way or the other.

Jason used a free hand to be certain. Only able to reach her with his thumb, Jason timed his strokes so either his length hit her on the in stroke or his thumb rubbed on the out.

“Oohhh!”

Her low groan sent heat flaring through his body. Jason thrust faster, recognizing the delicious sensation this time. He would have to build up control so he could last longer. That thought, of practicing this repeatedly, made his hips and thumb stroke faster.

Her body arched, claws ripping into his shoulder, and Jason grunted, jerking forward. “Yeah, uh!”

Angelica was keeping pace with him now, mouth locked against his shoulder to hold in those noises he wanted to hear.

Jason stopped moving, struggling to get what he wanted before he exploded again. “Look at me.”

She flashed crimson, body swelling around his.

Jason held her glassy gaze as he stroked a thumb over her nub.

She arched again, lips clamping down.

He stopped.

She growled at him, understanding what he wasn’t saying.

Jason leered. “That’s right, baby*. I* *wanna* *hear* *it*.”

He was rougher this time as he rubbed the most sensitive part of her, and she allowed a low groan to escape.

The sound of it almost broke his control.

“I like that!” Jason thrusted forward as his thumb pressed down.

“That’s…I…” She shuddered, head tossing.

Jason smirked. *When I told her I was well trained, I wasn’t lying.*

Jason did it again, and her eyes bled into a shade of red that was entrancing.

His speed increased as she trembled. He tightened his grip, didn’t gentle his movements. He wanted to see it and feel it, but he needed to hear it.

Her body tensed, muscles straining, lips parting…

Jason jerked forward, mashing down on that nub to make her cry out.

Searing, burning heat rolled over him again and Jason pulled back from that sweet edge by a hair.

Her lids shut, chest arching tight nipples, and he slid an extra finger between them to squeeze that slick nub.

Her body clenched around him, claws digging in.

*Yes!* He rolled his fingers, making sure she got to ride each crest, every one drawing a sharp, gasping moan the bachelor felt in his soul. She was his now.

Her tense body relaxed against him and her claws withdrew from his skin, but she wasn’t done shuddering and Jason locked onto those lips, silently begging her for one more groan to send him out of control.

“Mmmm…”

“Ohh, yeah. That’s my Angel!”

Chapter Nineteen

**Two for the Road**

Day 17

**1**

**A**ngelica left Jason’s warm embrace reluctantly. She had guard duty, but she wanted to wake him up and remind him of their new arrangement one more time. She rotated toward her kit, her clothes, instead.

They’d passed a sweaty, sticky, perfect night, and she couldn’t wait to do it again. In the beginning, he had been a beautiful dream she would never get to live. Now, he was the reason she burned.

Angelica twisted back for a last glimpse before slipping out. He was hugging her pillow now. *Sweet*. She didn’t know exactly where they went from here, or how it would all work out, but anything was worth the hours he’d given her. They were seared into her mind and her heart.

Angelica tugged the curtain closed, glad they were leaving after breakfast. The sense of time running out was clearer. The storm had pinned everyone down, but she could hear nothing outside now and that meant Rankin would be sniffing around. If they got a head start, they might be able to come around and hit on *her* flank.

Full of serious, progress-making thoughts, Angelica joined Sam at the far table. There were only a few people around, male or female, and no need to censor their words.

Sam laughed at Angelica’s dazed happiness, spotting it right away. “Feeling better?”

She couldn’t hold in the blush or the teasing leer. “You know it!”

A similar flush crawled up Sam’s cheeks. “Yes, I do.”

Sam’s attention wasn’t on her. Baker had just entered the room. He found Sam for a second of intense eye contact that made her cheeks brighten further.

“Guess we both feel better.” Angelica refused to add more.

Candice breezed in a second later. “Good morning, everyone. Isn’t it a beautiful day?”

Behind her, Daniel wore mussed hair and a love mark on his neck.

Sam’s glance met Angelica’s.

Angelica snorted to keep from laughing aloud. “It’s that family thing again.”

Their loud brays echoed through the cave.

**2**

“Are you okay?”

Daniel’s quietly asked query was met with a small leer. “Oh, yeah.”

Daniel smiled, relieved.

So, he hadn’t been positive that she wouldn’t hurt him. It implied he still didn’t trust his loving family. Jason wasn’t the only one Rankin had damaged.

Jason remained with Daniel as he proceeded toward the main tunnels, wondering where Angelica was, what duty she was performing for Baker. That she would stay and help now, he had no doubt.

“Will we win?” Jason hadn’t meant to ask, but he didn’t take it back.

Daniel turned with a face filled by fire–Candice’s fire. “Yes. The Network will fall and *all* males will be free.”

He believed because she did. Jason understood. It was an impossible dream that the bachelors shared, but rarely ever spoke of. It was nice to know that here in the Borderlands there were no listening ears to carry tales.

Jason realized he felt safe here. It let him extend the friendship he hadn’t been allowed to give while under Rankin’s control. “I’m Jason. Lot #21207.”

The former bachelor smiled again, a bit sadly. “Daniel. Lot #21198.”

They shook hands even though they knew each other, both a bit self-conscious. They let go quickly, and kept walking.

After a minute, Daniel asked the question most of the men here wanted an answer to. “What is it, do you think? That draws the Pruetts to us?”

Jason shrugged, voice low. “Rankin’s mark, maybe. The need to get rid of it or cover it with their own scent. After that?” He snorted. “I have no idea.”

“It’s courage.”

They both rotated to find Baker a few feet behind them. He’d been so quiet they hadn’t heard him.

Jason viewed the rebel leader like the other males here, but also with an extra respect that came from knowing Candice believed him strong enough to train them. Jason didn’t care so much about Baker’s past with her…at least he didn’t think he did, but it was hard to imagine liking him less because of it. In fact, it sort of gave them a bond. These Pruett women were hard to resist, with their rough, bloody hands and their kind, generous hearts.

“Courage means everything to them.” Baker’s tone revealed his amusement. “You have to have big balls.”

All three of the men stood a bit straighter, chuckling proudly. They were all servicing a Pruett.

**3**

Standing guard again with Sam, Angelica was glad the dust wall was fading into the northern distance, but it also made her nervous. The dust storms were followed by the rains that concluded the animal breeding season, both of which lasted a month. Anyone still sheltering in the lower sectors of the southern Borderlands would be washed away by flash floods or eaten by the hungry gulls that followed each storm, knowing it spit out fish and worms alike along the way. Bald horrors, the gulls were the size of old world vultures and much faster. People and livestock caught out in the open were unlikely to survive. It was time to get these males to safety. It was also time that she knew the truth about Rankin’s hold on Jason.

“I need you to clear something with Candice for me.”

It hadn’t drawn much reaction when she’d given Sam her report and other things from the complex to pass them on, but this time, Sam’s expression said she didn’t know what Angelica would want that she couldn’t ask for herself.

“I need to talk to Daniel. Alone.”

Sam’s brow wrinkled in understanding. “About Rankin.”

Angelica nodded, but didn’t add details.

“I’ll let Candy know.”

Angelica waited for more, but the Defender’s name had triggered Sam’s thoughts.

“She’s close. The males were jumpy when we left, as if they can smell her.”

She and Sam were positive that Rankin would try something now, so they’d made a hard choice an hour ago. As soon as they saw even a hint of where she was lying low, they were going to attack. They were on alert for the next bloody battle, except this wasn’t about the change. It was revenge.

“She won’t wait much...” Angelica narrowed her lashes against the rising glare, finally seeing what they’d been waiting for–that telltale, mostly stationary dust plume of a group making camp. In this rough wind, it was too contained to be riding or fighting. Their chance had come. “Let’s go.”

They slipped off the ledge where they’d been on duty and hurried toward the next match, the next fight she had no doubts about winning. Rankin didn’t stand a chance against her fury. She and Sam both had a male in those caves. Rankin wasn’t getting anywhere near them.

The Network troops had chosen to shelter under a small grove of twisted, petrified trees with broken branches that resembled the creature in the leper colony. Sam and Angelica kept low as they got closer to the sprawling camp, but a fast sweep verified they were alone. Rankin wasn’t in the camp. No one was.

The tents were there, but not the horses, and the wind had already obliterated the tracks. They’d known Pruetts would hunt if they saw signs…

Sam and Angelica realized their arrogance had tricked them.

*Jason!*

Angelica spun toward the cave with Sam on her heels.

**4**

“You’re better.”

Jason snickered up at Greg from his perch near the cave entrance. “Yes.”

The scarred playboy studied him. “Those Pruetts are something, even the cousins.”

Jason was proud of himself. “Yes, they are.” He could tell Greg was happy, too. Rosa’s ownership suited him.

Jason was a bit surprised when Greg lingered.

“Did it change anything for you?”

Jason considered how he and Angelica had held each other all night, and then the way they’d woken twice, frantic for each other. “Maybe.”

“As long as you’re happy, and she’s satisfied, it’ll be enough.” Greg smiled. “Daniel told me that when the Runners first came. I understand now.”

Jason chewed over the words as Greg went back inside, realizing he’d been worried about being owned too. After his bravery when he’d let Rosa claim him, it shouldn’t have been a surprise that Greg had played the role so well. Doubts and damage were things the Network had given men in abundance, but they had developed shields.

An abrupt movement at the end of the guard line pulled Jason’s attention. He watched one of Sam’s big Runners fall from her post in a bloody heap.

A second Runner followed.

Jason started screaming for help. He didn’t plan to stop until his owner told him to.

“Angel!”

The sound of Jason’s shout tore into Angelica, bringing true panic and the change. It ripped through her in a few seconds of furious snarls.

Her bigger body shoved her along faster. Angelica leapt up the edge of the gritty cliff. She didn’t stop, lunging again, and went over the edge and into the clear yard in front of the entrance of the cave in a sprawling leap.

A fast sweep revealed troops and horses filling the yard, Jason being swung over Rankin’s saddle, and other rebel males being brutally snatched up as they fled.

*All the work we’ve done!* Angelica screamed.

The sound of a changeling’s fury was attention getting for most people, but for animals, it was terrifying and apt to cause a stampede. Horses immediately shied from their overloaded burdens, rearing up.

Angelica didn’t wait to see if Rankin’s mount did the same. She flew toward her enemy with more anger than she’d ever felt in her life.

Rankin sensed it coming. She pulled Jason in front of her body and held him as a shield against Angelica’s justice.

*Doesn’t she know I’m beyond that? She isn’t leaving here with him, even if it means his life!* Angelica flung herself at Rankin, knocking them from the panicking horse.

Jason knew she wasn’t stopping, but Rankin didn’t. He tried to help by ducking under the leap, but it didn’t matter. They flew off the snorting animal and landed in a breathtaking heap on the ground.

The horse stomped, hooves slamming down in fear.

Jason rolled away from the chaos as Angelica and Rankin tried to tear each other apart. Blood sprayed as claws ripped into flesh. He cowered under the noise, their fury.

More horses stomped around him, snorting as their riders tried to keep them under control, and he shuddered, clenching his eyes shut.

“He was mine!”

“Now he’s free!”

The sounds of the fight were loud as two hard, changeling bodies slammed together. Jason imagined the winner, his new owner dead at his feet soon, and loss flooded his heart. No more Angelica. Not gone, but dead! *I’ll give myself up! Rankin will leave her alive if I’m willing.*

Jason chanced a fast peek through the clouds of grit.

Rankin’s claws tore away a chunk of Angelica’s flesh, the arm pouring blood. He cringed lower as his owner retaliated viciously.

Rankin screamed in pain as Angelica’s hit broke something. Jason heard the crunch and rolled away from them.

“What’s that?”

“Get down!”

“Get them out of there!”

Jason turned to where people were pointing…and then the cave exploded.

*Woooossshhhhh!*

Brilliant white light slammed into him. Jason felt his skin baking as he sank into the grayness. Noises faded, as did his sense of touch. He tried to fight. *Where’s my Angel?*

In the next instant, a heavy form landed on him.

Jason heard a scream, but it didn’t sound familiar. Blissful coolness smothered him.

*Bbbaaaaammmmmm!*

Something else exploded. Jason knew by the shudder of the ground they were on. He screamed in agony as more heavy shapes piled on top of him. The scent was familiar, guiding him into the darkness.

**5**

“Jason?”

He moaned, full of pain.

Angelica forced herself to keep waking him. “Jason.”

His lids fluttered before flying open to reveal wild, bruised gray eyes. “Who won?!”

Angelica placed a light hand on his shoulder to keep him still and felt him cringe.

“Please! Say something!”

Her heart thumped. “You can’t see me?”

“Angel?” He groped out. “Angel?!”

Angelica swept him against her body in grief and sorrow. “I’ve got you. She’s gone.”

He let her keep him close, but he didn’t return her embrace. She hurried to offer comfort that was likely a lie. “It’s the flash. It’ll wear off.”

A single red drop rolled down his burnt cheek. “I’m blind.”

His tone declared he wasn’t going to be able to handle it. She jerked an arm at one of the surviving medics.

Jason flinched again, listening to the steps. His voice grew into full panic. “Please don’t leave me here. Please! Don’t leave me here for her!”

Angelica swallowed her awful hell and held him still while a weeping medic shoved the needle into his arm.

“Who–” She gathered herself, knowing he needed this. “Who are we?”

“Pruetts.” The drugs worked quickly, but he never lost that wild tone. “We’re Pruetts!”

“Hold onto that, Jason. I’ll be close.”

He sagged in her arms, more bloody tears falling. She kept him in her grip as they traveled to the other shelter near here. Angelica was grateful to be a changeling for the first time in her life. It let her carry him all the way.

As the small, broken group walked, another storm began to flash and rumble, but none of the surviving rebel males flinched from it. The Network had cured them of that fear with two harsh blows in broad daylight.

Those around Angelica appeared exactly as they had after the enemy had sent one of its bombs to Stone Mountain–covered in soot and angry, shocked fallout. For an instant, she was there again, trying to keep the rocks from crushing Baker.

*Baker!*

Angelica verified he was leading their small group and was glad, but her pain didn’t ease. Jason had been hurt because of her arrogance.

She ducked into the mucky storm drain as Sam’s remaining Runners secured it, moving to a far corner. She hated to release him, even for a minute. She forced herself to lay him on the filthy ground so she could dig through her pack for the medicines that might heal his burns, and a cloth to bind his eyes.

She wrapped the bandage around Jason with anger so severe it would have flipped her into the disease if she hadn’t already been there. Her claws were light as she smeared the ointment over his arms, those blistered shoulders and neck. If not for his hands automatically coming up for protection, he might have been burned beyond recognition.

Angelica let out a ragged breath. She’d been so busy with Rankin that she hadn’t protected him. The broken bounty hunter scanned her fellow survivors, spotting those she was closest to and only a handful of the rebel males. She realized those missing were probably buried in the cave, forever.

The need to make the Network pay flamed into a dangerous new level. They’d hit the rebels twice now, and taken more than a cut this time. Out of the seventy total people they’d had in the caves, Angelica counted less than twenty here now, and there was no way they could try to dig out any survivors yet, not with Rankin’s riders all over the place, opening fire on anything that moved.

“How did they know Baker was there? They didn’t get close enough to spot him.” Sam was furious, her normally loud voice subdued with tight control that Angelica recognized. Sam was on the edge of flipping. *Good*. They would need every angry fighter they could get.

Candice’s quiet tone belied the rage she was feeling. “They probably picked us up on satellites after the storm cleared. We’re only about ten miles in.”

Next to her, Daniel’s mane of golden hair was catching the dim light, drawing her attention repeatedly. Not for the beauty, but because half of Daniel’s hair and neck was covered in tacky crimson. The fact that it wasn’t his blood was a painful, guilty relief. Keith had given his life for Daniel during the battle, catching a bullet. Their other animal man sat on Daniel’s other side, muttering under his breath.

Candice’s eyes became full red without her body flipping into the change. Advancing another level at almost losing her mate? Angelica had never known of a changeling to make it to total control, but if it could happen, her cousin would likely be the first.

Daniel added a piece of the puzzle. “They had to know Rankin would get caught in the blast.”

Angelica added the clues. “She’s expendable, too.”

“They’re done following us.”

Baker agreed with Candice’s comment. “They’re probably hitting the safe zone right now, but it won’t do ‘em any good to bomb what they can’t reach.”

They all stared in confusion.

The rebel leader’s tone matched their fury as he answered. “I knew this might happen. I got them underground months ago. As for us, we’ll have the clothes on our backs, but we will survive. Our anger will carry us.”

“And we’ll win!” Greg’s scarred hands were shaking, but his voice still drew attention from the closest females.

Rosa snarled in warning at her fellow Runners.

They quickly turned away.

Angelica didn’t smile as Rosa gently wrapped her two-sided cloak around Greg’s shoulders. She was too worried, too furious, to be happy for them.

Relieved, agreeing voices came as Angelica turned to the blinded male she couldn’t imagine ever being apart from now. So many of the things that she’d promised him wouldn’t happen, had. There was no end to her guilt.

**6**

Jason hated waking up in the pitch black. If not for the sound of Angelica’s rough voice nearby, he might have screamed. *I can’t see!*

It hit him in waves as he tried not to let anyone know he was awake. He needed time to figure out what he was going to do. Would he still be able to help the rebels? Be a father and mate?

*No.*

He was now a burden to be cared for. His dreams of a happy family charred violently in the ashes. He’d never *see* his children, even if he had them. He’d lost everything in one blinding flash.

“Jason?”

He cringed from the hot hand that settled gently onto his brow. “Go away!”

“Please listen.”

Jason refused to answer, suffering in his private hell.

“I’d like to adjust the terms of our deal.”

“Just leave me here!” He couldn’t stop the hurt reaction. “I don’t need you!”

Jason felt more of those thick tears roll down his cheek.

A trembling stroke wiped them away. “But I do need *you*.”

It was so unfair, not to be able to look at her when she said that! “For what? So you can care for me like the baby you won’t willingly have?”

Jason cringed under her pain, instantly wanting to take it back, but he was in too deep. *Gone. It’s all gone!*

Jason heard her move away and knew what she intended. He snarled. “I don’t need to be sedated!”

The needle sank into his arm an instant later, and he yelled at her–the first time he ever had. “Get out!”

“Not until you listen.”

The drugs weren’t dragging him straight under, but he felt calmer against his will and realized she’d lightened the dosage.

“I need to adjust the terms.”

“Our deal ended with my sight!” Jason snapped, but a small pinprick of hope was shoving its way into his darkness. Did she still want him?

“Then I’d like to make a new one.”

Now, he struggled against a larger light. “Why?”

“Because I need you. I have since you touched my hand and…I’ll agree to any terms you want.”

Because he was blinded, helpless. She was willing to be burdened with him out of pity! The drugs couldn’t drown his anger. “I’m not a train male like my dad! Keep your pity! I don’t need…”

Her lips slammed against his with a growl of lust that distracted, pulled. She was burning against him, baking heat and rippling passion, and he understood she meant it. Even blinded, Angelica would take him and on his terms.

But he didn’t have any of those now. Jason slumped under her rough caress.

Angelica drew back with a sob of shame. “I’m sorry.” For being drawn to him even when he was injured.

His mouth shot open in challenge. It, at least, was working fine. “What about children?”

“If they’re yours…yes.”

A stunned silence came from Jason.

“I’ll help you get settled somewhere, if you don’t want to be with me.”

He listened to her stand up.

“I’ll come for your answer…” She paused. “When I think I can stand to hear it.”

Jason wanted to tell her he’d already made up his mind–he didn’t need her pity!–but Angelica’s next words sent light flooding into the deepest shadows of his desolate mind.

“The medic said your sight will return slowly. Don’t take the bandages off yet.”

There was the sound of a flap shutting, of soft voices coming from a distance.

*I’m not blind.* And Angelica wanted him enough to bring children into this world, so long as it made him happy. It was too much to roll through his rattled brain at once. Jason surrendered to the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

**Plots and Plans**

Day 24

**1**

**“I** agree. If we travel to the safe zone now, we’ll get them all killed.”

“What if we stay underground while we travel? There are other exits from these tunnels.”

“They couldn’t track us, but you know what it’s like down there.”

“So does the Network. They won’t send in fresh troops. We’ll still have to fight Rankin and her survivors, though.”

A thoughtful silence went around the dank room.

Angelica was glad Baker had known this storm bunker was here. The seven large chambers made of concrete would keep them shielded and hopefully allow them time to make a new plan and recover from their injuries and grief.

They had trudged through the rats and inches of water carefully, but without loathing. Buried thirty feet under the ground, it was wet and stank of mildew here, but a dangerous shelter was better than none at all. They would make it work.

On the second floor, closer to the surface and the pressure, the old building was slowly caving in, with gaping cracks running along the walls, but the ceiling was intact. They’d begun settling into the bottom five rooms while waiting for their injured on that top floor to heal or die.

Even though the rebel males had taken the biggest loss, there wasn’t resentment toward the females, but there had been an effect. It brought them together. Before the blasts, they’d been learning to accept each other. *And doing a bit of scheming to get what we each wanted.* Now, the Runners and the rebels were sitting together, lending comfort. They were bonded in a common goal now and the enemy couldn’t break that.

“What should we do?”

“There’s only one thing we can do, isn’t there?”

They all turned to Angelica, still unable to believe she hadn’t returned to herself. She was a snapped changeling, firmly controlling the rage through solid red vision.

“We take them down.”

Her family liked it that she was finally declaring her loyalty to the rebellion. Angelica gave her games grin. “Hard and fast, and they won’t know we’re coming until it’s too late.”

Baker hesitated. “We have to have a plan.”

Candice was eager, but Baker wasn’t about to risk more of his males. Of the large group he’d emerged from Stone Mountain with, less than a dozen were here now. Angelica didn’t recognize many of them.

“How do we do it?”

Before Angelica could answer Baker’s repeated question, another voice rang through the large chamber where they were meeting. This one was angrier than Sam had been.

“We capture Rankin. She can get us in.”

The room erupted into a half-welcome for Jason and half-disbelieving protests at the suggestion.

Angelica studied the lightly scarred man now moving slowly toward her. Jason had made a remarkable recovery in the week they’d been here. Daniel’s instructions had helped. At the complex, her cousin’s mate had helped in the advanced medical bay instead of attending the normal bachelor lessons.

When Jason veered for Angelica, the small crowd of people quieted to hear what he might say. His vision was still blurry, but it worked and Angelica was grateful for that, too. She met him, unable to stay away from him a second longer.

Everyone had been keeping clear of her, trying not to trigger her rage while she was still *changed*, but Jason didn’t hesitate. He moved into her dangerous embrace as if he belonged there.

*I’m complete again.* That was all it took. The bloody red chill faded, leaving her a black-eyed, trembling mass to be comforted. The others hadn’t understood she was keeping the change tight around her as a shield in case Jason had died.

Noise levels rose again, but Angelica didn’t leave his warm embrace, even when he tugged them down onto the bench. Having him away for all this time had *hurt*.

“So, grab Rankin and make her take us in, huh?” Sam was in the corner, her big friends lurking near the exits. Half of her Runners were gone and so was the carefree lightheartedness–maybe forever.

“We get in, grab the kids, and get out.” Jason’s voice was hard defiance.

Sam’s was cool logic. “Dig deeper for a bigger picture. Would you abandon the males they’ll bring in as replacements if we steal those? What about the children born next month? Or next year?”

Jason clearly hadn’t gotten that far into his thinking, but Angelica had. Icy Pruett courage laced her words. “What if we got in…and stayed there?”

There was a pregnant silence where they all contemplated what that meant. They would take over the New Network City complex and control of everything.

“Now that’s taking in the bigger picture. I’m proud to be her sister. I’ve mentioned that, right?”

Angelica gave Sam a grunt as she tightened her grip on Jason’s arm. She knew Sam’s sudden cheer was a good act, but Angelica refused to go that way. She would confront her darkness now, and embrace it.

“We’ll need help.” Baker stared pointedly. “And it can’t be male.”

“I’ve got a list of credits built up. If I reach out, we’ll have plenty of hands for a quick, ugly ambush. But an invasion?” Sam shook her head. “We’d need an army to attack the complex and win. Most Defenders are hired right after they dominate an episode.”

Angelica wanted to ask Sam where she’d gotten that information–she hadn’t thought Sam knew anything about the games–but Jason’s voice demanded her full attention.

“What about the west? Maybe we could get an army there.”

Even Angelica shifted toward him, but she didn’t let go. “What do you know about the West Coast Outpost?”

Jason’s healing face flushed. “A lot more than I should. Rankin liked to brag.”

At his wave of fear, Angelica concentrated and brought the change back out to surround him with her fierce protection.

Comforted, he relaxed against her as the plotting continued.

“Tell us what you can.” Baker needed details. “Anything might help.”

Angelica had figured out the rebel leader was working on a plan. She also noticed Sam looking at him with an odd expression and filed it for later.

“They were banished right after the dome went up, for not supporting slavery. They’re also power hungry tyrants the council worried might grow strong enough to challenge their control. They sent them away to establish a western hub.”

“Do they follow the same leadership and report to the east?” Angelica cursed herself for not picking his brain long before now.

“No...”

“Keep going.” She rubbed his cold arms with her clawed hands as he pressed closer to her heat.

“Unless there’s a big meeting, they don’t have contact except through the head Defenders, and the wall screens–and that’s only when the weather will let them through. Sometimes, they go years without contacting each other.”

Sam shouted over the sudden flood of questions.

Everyone quieted, realizing how important that was. “How are they getting to the meeting?”

“Troops were sent out to those important enough, to escort them to the nearest hub. They’ll take the Network Rider from there.”

Approving mumbles went around the musty room.

Angelica wondered how many different plans had just started. She currently had three, depending on what else Jason knew. “Who goes to this meeting? How many?”

“The entire council, plus heavy security. This is a transition of power year.”

Angelica needed more to finish any of the three plots she was brewing. “When is the meeting?”

“It was three months from your cousin’s match.”

More muttering. Five weeks away. Was that doable? There was a lot of traveling required, but they were used to non-stop flights and the remaining Mopars were sturdy.

“We’ll need a good distraction to keep them from sending in troops now.”

“Yes.” Angelica understood she and Baker had at least one crossing scheme. “We’ll have to split up. Half of us will travel to New Network City. The others will travel west.”

“But they still serve the east!” Daniel was worried.

Angelica revealed her hope on that. “We’ll all gather our allies, like Sam said, and maybe we’ll find out they still don’t approve of slavery.”

Baker was following her line of thought. “Enough to help us fight?”

She shrugged. “I hope they’ll be as furious as we are when they find out all the lies we’ve learned, but with that mob already around the dome, I think we’ll be covered both ways.”

Baker nodded. A slim opportunity was better than none at all. “What type of a distraction?”

Angelica shrugged. “Not sure yet. Bombs don’t take them away for long.”

“What if there was another Pruett about to go into the lion’s den?”

Everyone turned to Sam as the implication became clear.

She flushed like none of them anticipated, crossing her arms over her chest. “I signed up six months ago.”

“Is it scheduled?” Angelica was beyond surprise or even shock. Sam had broken and they hadn’t known, never saw a sign despite being infamous for their observant nature.

“No, but I bet if Rankin advised it, the Network would speed it up, like they did yours.”

Baker picked up her line of thought now. “They don’t know you’re with us!”

“Nope.” Sam’s tone was smug, telling them she had planned it this way from the beginning. “They probably think it was our parents, or Bruce and Mary who met Angelica at the train. They believe I’m on a bounty run in the west. Sightings are currently rolling into the complex.”

*My sister, the genius*, Angelica thought in admiration. Likely, one of her big Runners was on a vacation and playing the part at the same time. “That’s the last place they want you, especially if the west is sympathetic to the rebels.”

“Exactly. They’ll schedule it to pull me in, to know I’m under their roof and not out here planning revenge.”

“We’ll need to take in prisoners if we’re gonna play it like that with Rankin.”

Daniel had been shaking his head while they worked through it. He stiffened now at Baker’s comment. “You don’t know her. She can’t be forced to do this.”

“But she’d do it for him, right? Her pet?”

Angelica’s arms tightened on the male in them as Greg, still scratched and bruised from his dive out of the exploding cave, gestured toward Jason.

It was his nightmare. Jason cowered at the image.

“Perhaps you’d like to explain?” Angelica rumbled.

The playboy used a low tone and didn’t meet her eye.

Jason didn’t blame him. The threat in Angelica’s tone was ugly enough to make the big Runner next to Greg glower in response.

“If Jason asks her to, she’ll make a deal to–”

“No!” Angelica stood up, towering over them in her changed form. “I won’t let that happen!”

Understanding it might be the only option, Jason tugged on her clawed hand. “Sit down.”

Angelica snapped her mouth shut and dropped down to surround him with her heat.

The others were all surprised, but Jason wasn’t. The change was here to protect him now if he wanted or needed it. He wasn’t afraid of her anymore.

Greg was no longer afraid of the changeling now curling a clawed hand into his scarred grip, either. They weren’t scared of any of the females here anymore. But Rankin was their terror, always Rankin.

“What do you mean by a deal? I’ve spent fifteen years as her…*pet*. I won’t do it again, not even for the rebellion.” Jason hated to say that, but he knew Daniel understood.

“We’d never ask it of you.” Candice spoke up for the first time. “Nor would Angelica allow it.”

Everyone quieted. Baker might be the rebel leader, but with Candice, they all knew to listen. He was good; she was lethal, and perfect for his wise right hand.

“I want to be certain I’ve covered every possible thing that could go wrong and get those kids hurt.”

Silence came as they understood Candice had a complete plan.

“If the kids are immune or the parents are vaccinated, they can produce both sexes. Use that as a bargaining chip with the west coast and perhaps they can be swayed to fight with us.”

Angelica clarified that. “In exchange for helping, we’ll guarantee they get a fair share of the vaccines that I’m positive the Network has stockpiled somewhere.”

“And if they won’t, there’s a mob already waiting at the dome.” Baker wasn’t as anxious to go west now that he knew Sam was going into the games.

Sam straightened proudly. “We’ll be gathering Pruetts. We’ll take them down as a family.”

Greg looked between them. “So…we’re going to attack the complex and overthrow the council?”

Candice flashed the harsh games smirk that intimidated everyone so much. “Oh, yes. We’re going to take it all. Every single chain they’ve enslaved us with is going to shatter.”

“And Rankin?” Jason was unable to help the fear in his voice.

Candice’s tone firmed into that deadly Pruett stone. “Doesn’t have long to live.”

He slowly nodded. “As long as she dies, I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

Jason felt Angelica shudder at his words, controlling her urge to shield him with another protest she knew would be useless. She wasn’t willing to let him be the bait, but if it ended this terror of Rankin and got her out of their lives while helping the cause, he was.

Candice drew in a deep breath. “Pick the details apart if you can.”

Once it rolled out, Jason understood this was a plan she’d been working on for a while. He settled against Angelica’s warmth and listened to the details with respect, knowing whatever the setup they picked to coerce Rankin, it wouldn’t involve his sacrifice. These were Pruetts. They didn’t do that to males. The Network did.

**2**

As the room cleared, Jason was slumped against his owner, drowsing.

After being without him while he healed, Angelica didn’t want to move. They’d made a trip back to the cave during that time. It was collapsed, with only a small entranceway left, but it had been enough to let Runners in and a surprising three wounded males to be brought out. Only one had survived, but at least they hadn’t died alone, abandoned under the rubble.

Supplies had also been collected. Out here, it was a risk that had to be taken. Fresh food and water would be hard to locate. The small hideout had been nearly perfect with its self-sufficient setup. Angelica was positive Baker was mourning the loss.

The last one to go, Sam gestured toward her corner bunk. “You can use mine. I’ll be on duty all night.”

Jason stirred, yawning. “We don’t have a bed?”

Sam’s snort didn’t draw a flinch. “She slept outside your room and even the medico had to be searched before he could go in.”

As Sam went out, Angelica caught Jason’s surprise, but didn’t comment. She was waiting to hear which part of their newest deal he would agree to.

“I still want freedom…sort of.”

“Sort of?” The burn scars on his cheeks and arms would never leave his skin, but his sight had returned. It was the best they could have hoped for.

He gazed at her with those glowing gray eyes she was so addicted to.

“I want to be free to fight with you, like with Greg and his owner. This is my war, too. I know that now.”

And it was a war. The Network had declared it. Now, they would defend themselves. But what about Jason? Could she protect him during the chaos?

“Angel, I…” His face darkened with frustration and loss. “We won’t have kids, not until there’s a vaccine available to us, but I get to fight!”

How could she deny him? “I’ll train you, keep you close, and you’ll stand the rope when we go in.”

“Deal.”

But before that, they had to get Rankin. She could tell Jason was scared of the path he’d chosen, and she lifted a gentle, clawed hand. Her touch was soft as rain against his cheek. “When you’re ready for true freedom, I won’t hold you.”

He gave her a sad smile. “When your heat for me runs out, I’ll let go.”

“*That* will never happen.” Angelica leaned forward to place a soft kiss on his rough cheek. “And you know it.”

He came closer, and the rippling muscles under those tight pants snagged her attention. She traced upward to a bulge that twitched under her needy intentions, breathing faster. *He needs more time to heal. He needs more time to–*

Jason slid against her, arms going around her neck. “Can I kiss you, Angel?”

They were on the floor an instant later, her arms carefully cushioning his landing.

**3**

They brought Rankin in through the main chamber. Dragging her bloody form forward with each jerk of the chains, the males erupted into panic.

Except for Jason. He stayed in his assigned place, trying to calm his rapid heartbeat. Seeing her had slammed home the gravity of his choice.

“Jason!”

He froze as Rankin spotted him, face ugly with scratches, burns, and a slowly healing broken nose. Angelica’s injuries from that fight were already gone.

“That’s *my* male!”

The big Runners on the other end of the chains yanked her back when she lunged toward Jason.

Angelica delivered a nasty punch to Rankin’s temple that sent the Defender to her knees.

“Slam you, Pruett!” Rankin slung blood in a wide arc as she screamed.

Angelica nodded cruelly. “Oh, I’m gonna give you what you need. Don’t doubt it!”

Jason hadn’t believed they would capture her. Candice had assumed Rankin would stay close and try again, but Jason had been positive Rankin was on her way back to the complex for fresh troops.

“Put her on the top floor. If they’re still tracking her, she’ll be the first thing blown up.” Angelica’s voice was merciless.

Jason stayed clear as the big females and his smaller owner took Rankin toward the crumbling stairs. Her furious glower never left him.

Jason drew in his courage, not ready to play the role, but eager to have it done. “I want to talk to her–alone.”

“No!”

Angelica’s growl brought a cruel sneer to Rankin’s lips and Jason knew they’d chosen right. When he made the offer, the Defender would deal.

Jason gave Angelica a snotty glare. “You said I’m free!”

Those changeling eyes became red as Angelica struggled to control the rage he knew was real.

“After we get her locked up!”

Rankin’s harsh laughter filled their ears as they took her, now unresisting, upstairs.

So far, so good. Now he just had to live up to his end of the deal.

“No matter what happens, I will see you dead!” Angelica snarled it as she snapped the double cuff into place around Rankin’s arm.

Still wearing that triumphant countenance, Rankin didn’t lower her voice. “I knew you’d give him what he wanted.”

Sam–still in disguise–cuffed her other wrist.

“I give him what he needs!”

Angelica’s hand went around Rankin’s throat without any prompting. It was so hard not to squeeze! “When Jason runs from you, and he will, he’ll come straight to me. He’ll never be yours now that I’ve branded him a Pruett!”

Rankin’s facade twisted in disbelieving rage. “I’ll kill you! Rebel whore!”

Angelica smirked cruelly as Rankin struggled against the chains. Jason wasn’t pure anymore, and it pleased her greatly to see Rankin’s grief at the loss. She’d been certain a Pruett wouldn’t take advantage of him.

Angelica strode arrogantly out of the crumbling hollow with Rankin’s growls echoing in her ears, but it wasn’t nearly enough to tamp the worry as Jason came down the hall. She wanted to offer him comfort, but if she did that, she would put a stop to all of this.

As they passed, Jason brushed her hand with his, soft voice floating by her ear.

“I’ll be thinking of you.”

Angelica spun around, clutching him close.

Jason met her rough kiss with a desperate grip of his own. Emotions, the ones she had never wanted to feel, overflowed and she sobbed against his mouth. The tears she was shedding were the first to fall on behalf of another person.

His big hands held her back to view his panic. “You’ll come for me?”

“I swear it!”

He kissed her again, hard and quick, and then shoved out of her arms to go barter with Rankin.

**4**

Jason spoke before the improvised door was shut, not certain he could take the silence of her stare. “We want you to join the cause.”

Studying him, Rankin didn’t laugh as he came slowly closer. She was attached to a wide center support, with chains around her waist, ankles, and wrists. It had to be uncomfortable. He smothered the fear of how she would make him pay as he scanned her clawed, bruised features. “What would it take for you to join us?”

Rankin had been his nightmare, but she’d also been his protector at one time, not letting him be put into the rental program. She’d snuck him out and given him a taste of the joys he’d had as a child. How he loathed her for being able to inspire his compassion! Jason made his hand move, using her obsession to have him willing. “Let’s make a deal.”

He slid soft fingers along her pointy jaw and felt her shudder.

Madness without mercy flared at him in rage and jealousy. “You! Nothing else!”

It was what they’d hoped, but the sound of it was enough to make Jason pale. He gave a fast nod. “For one month to start. After, you have to set me free.”

He could sense her searching for the trap, the edge.

“How do you know I won’t kill you the second these chains are off?”

Jason lunged forward to press his reluctant mouth to hers.

Rankin stiffened, heat flaring.

He drew back, meeting her dark pink gaze. “I’ll spend one week a year with you, for every bachelor you help us rescue.”

He kissed her again, pushing a drug-induced hardness against her thigh. “I’ve missed you.”

His soft whisper caused Rankin to snarl. “If this is a trick!”

“It’s not. This way, I get the Pruett family protection and you, in small doses that I can stand.”

“And during the time you’re not with me?”

“I’ll be with her.”

Rankin grinned, a harsh one to rival Angelica’s. “She’ll have to share you?”

Jason added the final layer of the trap. “I wouldn’t let her rent me until she agreed.”

Rankin’s face tightened greedily. “Who gets first call?”

Jason couldn’t stop the tremor in his tone. “You do.”

Rankin stared, working it.

Was she thinking about how to double cross them and regain favor with her employers? Likely. She was also probably weighing that heavy Pruett family honor, though. Once they made this deal, Jason would stick to it. Which was more important now–her conquest or continuing to work for the people who had tried to kill her?

“When can we leave?”

Jason should have been happy, but there was only fear. “As soon as you settle some things with the others and work out a plan to rescue the kids.”

Jason was giving her information, proving that she would be a real member of the group.

Rankin straightened into the powerful master he was so scared of. “Send them in. I’ll deal.”

Jason left, body tight and heart pounding. He was going back to New Network City with Rankin as her reclaimed property unless Angelica came for him. Talk about a trust verification.

When Jason came out, Angelica shook her head. His fear was so thick, she could taste it. “We’ll do it by the secondary plan.”

Jason ignored her to glance at the other rebels waiting in the hall. “She’ll deal.”

“For you?”

He nodded at Daniel’s question.

Angelica spun toward the door where Rankin was chained. She had a few things to say that she’d forgotten.

Jason jumped in front of her, grabbing her arms. “Stop.”

His order was clear; the rage cooled enough for her to listen.

“She’ll never have me. Not the way you do.” He looked over at Candice and Daniel, Baker. “Get her now, before she can think it through.”

As the family went in to play for all their lives, Angelica saw Jason’s lip tremble. He was just as terrified as she was, but he would do it anyway. And he believed he had no courage!

“Can we be alone until its time?”

Angelica immediately guided them toward the isolated stockroom she’d chosen, not sure how she would let him leave with Rankin. They’d grabbed the Defender while she stood guard over her own surviving camp, but now they needed her to be accepted again, so they could go to the train. What better way than for Rankin to arrive with her property retrieved and a rebel location? After, a group of males would attempt to hijack a train at the first refueling station. They would then go with Rankin, as prisoners, into the complex. The rest would follow, ready to pull Jason out at any point, but it wasn’t enough. Angelica wanted the Network gone. She would give anything for that to happen.

*Anything except Jason.*

Candice had her plans, but Angelica did, too. She would cause the end of all their lives to save his. She’d promised Jason freedom, and it was a duty she intended to honor.

Jason was shivering by the time Angelica got him to her den and guided them toward the cot. They didn’t bother with comfort, just collapsed together on the furs and held on. Maybe morning wouldn’t come.

*I’m now a pawn in the revolution.*

It was hard to believe he’d agreed to it. Rankin didn’t know what they were planning, but she wouldn’t believe they were being honest. Candice only expected it to hold until she got to the train, and then Rankin might torture him for the truth.

While he’d lain in that bed, healing and crying with joy at his blurry, pain-laced sight, Jason had confronted some hard truths. The first was that he craved Angelica and it didn’t matter if she refused to love, to take the chance on burning out. He wanted to be with her.

The second hard truth was that he now belonged to the rebels first, and her second. The Network had to be stopped. He’d felt it strongly, the debt to be paid for the future, and it was still as clear now. The life they were all hoping for had to be earned.

The last hard truth was the decade-old fear that he was attached to his tormentor. It had to be conquered. He hated Rankin, but they’d spent too many shuddering moments of searing need for him to believe there wasn’t a bond of some sort. His fear was she would never leave his mind, even if she were dead. He’d see her in the shadows, laughing at that tiny part of him he’d hidden, the one that still wanted what it had always been denied–her.

Except it would be giving Rankin what she wanted and he’d spent hours examining that ruthless part of him that implied honoring the deal might not be so bad as long as Rankin could learn not to hurt him. Jason didn’t know why he held these cravings for a woman he should loathe without reservation, but he knew he didn’t want her satisfaction from it. His bitter heart was taking revenge by claiming what had been withheld.

**5**

**Network**

“They survived.”

Members of the council swiveled toward the monitors.

“Perhaps you’d like to be more specific?”

The lower ranking member didn’t flush under the scornful tone of their leader, too worried to be embarrassed. “Baker, the Pruetts, some of the males. Rankin, too.”

“She called in?”

“Yes. The rebels have severe injuries. She and her crew were able to go in and round up some of them. She wants to know if they should be executed now or brought in.”

There was silence as the one leading them contemplated. Apparently, Rankin hadn’t been close to the rebels when the explosions came. If she didn’t know she’d been betrayed... “Tell her to only bring the leaders. We’ll send out a regiment to meet her at the nearest hub. They can take the train in from there.”

“What about the rest?”

Juli shrugged. “Tell her to reward her troops with the males, and make certain there are no other survivors.”

There was a pause as the lower ranking member scanned the notes again. “Rankin says all but one of the Pruetts are now accounted for.”

“Who’s missing?”

“Samantha. She’s been spotted in the west recently.”

The words caused another round of mutters. The west coast was the last place they wanted a wild Pruett.

“That won’t do.”

“She’s the hardest one of their lot. Too bad we can’t get her to come in on her own somehow. It’ll be hard to catch her if she knows we’re holding them.”

“Maybe we can get her to.”

“How? We’ll never find her before she hears the news.”

“The others signed up. Maybe she has, too.”

“It’ll take a while to check the sheets for the last year.”

Juli gestured. “Don’t bother. Just sign her up for an episode and announce it. Pruetts don’t refuse an open challenge.”

“And if she wins?”

“She won’t.”

There was a thoughtful pause as they all understood what that meant. Rigging round one and two matches was standard practice, but the final battle was supposed to be an honest fight. Apparently, that was about to change.

“What if she doesn’t take the bait?”

“How long do we give her?”

“If we haven’t heard anything in two weeks, we’ll use a secondary plan to get her in. We’ll threaten those we’re about to hold hostage.”

“About that.”

“Yes, to have all of those in this complex.”

“Perhaps we should send them elsewhere?”

“The bridge into the city is weakening. Perhaps that train might fall as it crosses?”

The leader sent a pleased wave down the table to the lowest ranking member. “That very thing could happen. We’ve seen it before.”

The bridge being down would also stop the influx of changelings to New Network City. Strangers were still arriving–thick bodied women with harshly tanned skin that made the council nervous as they monitored from their tower windows.

“Raise the dome to the highest security level.”

“That will interrupt the renting programs, the tests.”

“Keep those open, but double the security. The programs are not to be stopped. We’re five weeks away from fifty years of planning coming to fruition. Let’s not screw it up now.”

Chapter Twenty-One

**Ghosted**

Day 26

**1**

**L**etting Rankin take Jason was the hardest thing Angelica had ever done.

“We’ll be an hour behind.”

Sam’s words were little consolation. Rankin could hurt him in much less time than that.

“Have you considered that she loves him, too?”

“I don’t…” Angelica’s throat closed up. She did and it was past time he knew it. “Jason.”

He turned immediately, soothing her wounds a bit. She ignored Rankin’s smirk at her pain. “I love you.”

Angelica turned for the rear tunnels without giving him a chance to respond. It would be worse on him if he gave her what she needed.

“I love you, too, Angel. I think I always have.”

Angelica spun around as Rankin grabbed him by the throat, set to kill the Defender.

Jason shoved Rankin hard. “No more!”

It was a powerful moment for her other pets, the ones witnessing him be sacrificed, but Rankin’s glee was cruel. When she gestured Jason toward the exit, everyone knew he was in danger.

Angelica advanced, not sure what she meant to do. The fury was overwhelming.

Jason pointed at her. “Stay.”

Growling lowly, the Pruett bowed in obedience.

Rankin’s harsh laughter stung them all. “The great family, brought to its knees by a bachelor.” She motioned toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Sam held onto Angelica’s arm, her remaining Runners ready to help.

Rankin’s laughter swarmed through the tunnels like lava. In her wake, she left rage and a determination to get Jason out of her cruel reach.

“They’re gone.”

At the call, Sam’s Runners released Angelica and she straightened, falling into the plan. It was a good act they’d all put on, but for her, it hurt. It was also her strength. Knowing Jason was at Rankin’s mercy put her own plans front and center. She moved for the exit they’d agreed on.

The males and her family observed in concern. They were right to be worried. It wasn’t their heart being ripped out and maybe sacrificed for the rebel cause. Candice had said she wouldn’t do that to him, but Angelica knew better. Their family did whatever it took to get the job done.

Angelica jumped the Mopar to life, not caring that it would echo through the tunnels like another blast. Where Jason went, she followed.

Sam and Candice stood in the entranceway, beyond reach of the dust cloud.

“She’ll hate us if it goes wrong.”

“If it goes wrong, it won’t matter.” Candice began reloading. “We’re going to get one chance at taking down the Network. If we fail, we’re all dead anyway.”

**2**

As soon as Jason felt the horse slow, he knew he was in trouble. His head swiveled, searching for his owner…

*Slap!*

Jason hit the ground with a heavy thud.

When Rankin followed, the blows came, but Jason didn’t flee. This was the punishment he’d feared all these weeks.

Rankin didn’t say a word as she beat him, drawing groans and grunts with her well-aimed punches. They kept coming as the past descended over him in thick waves.

Jason considered Candy’s words before they’d brought Rankin in.

*“She’ll need to mark you.”*

And his own trembling response.

*“I should let her, right?”*

“*Yes, as much as you can, but be careful. Changelings get carried away when there’s blood.”*

Jason felt warm liquid roll down his arm from a swipe of Rankin’s nails. She could kill him now and complete the rampage she’d started all those years ago.

*“Who are we?”*

The voice was distant through his fear, but there was no refusing.

“I’m a Pruett.”

Rankin screamed at the words, drawing back to strike again.

*“What do we stand for?”*

Jason sucked in air. “Freedom!”

He swung his foot, hard.

Not expecting it, Rankin tripped and went sprawling.

Jason staggered to his feet, barely able to see her through the blood running over his face, but he could feel the menace. She’d flipped. He was defenseless.

*“Who are we?”*

Except, he wasn’t defenseless anymore. He’d learned things in training. He knew he was bigger. He was a man, naturally as strong as any changeling. He struggled to think, to decide. Could he hit her? Would his compassion, his terror, allow that?

Rankin swung as she stood, catching Jason in the stomach.

The angry bachelor struck out before the fear could stop him.

*Thud!*

Rankin staggered, blood flying from her lip. She raised a hand to it, glaring in shock. “You hit me!”

Jason waited, regaining his breath. He could keep hitting–he’d enjoyed it enough–but it didn’t sit right with him.

“Do it again!”

Jason gaped at her. *She likes it!*

Disgusted, he twisted away.

Rankin delivered a painful blow to his knee.

Jason slammed into the ground, panting.

“Fight like a woman!”

He rolled over in time to miss her boot to the chin, and grabbed her leg, pulling her down. They struggled, claws and fingers harsh.

Jason grunted as she aimed a knee for his groin, shoving her away, rolling over. As she lunged eagerly to her feet, he realized there was no way he could win. She was a Defender. She’d been in more brawls than he’d ever dreamed of. How did he get her under control?

Rankin kicked at him, spraying dust and blood as she laughed. “More!”

“This is why you killed him!” Jason finally understood the missing piece. “He fought and you couldn’t stop.”

The rage left her in a sudden flare of agonized loss. The words brought her back to where they were, what she wanted from him. It wasn’t his death.

Jason breathed a sigh of relief when she stayed where she was. They glared at each other with his gasps for oxygen lingering between them.

“I’m sorry I killed your family.”

Fresh grief came mentally, but Jason held her stare. She’d tormented him most of his life. Forgiveness was out of reach.

Realizing he wouldn’t give her what she was asking for, Rankin motioned toward the horse. “Get on and try to act properly punished.”

She waited for him to obey. “I don’t trust you or their deal, but I know my place with the Network.”

Jason sneered. “Yeah, you don’t have one. They tried to kill you.”

She began wiping the dust from her clothes. “If not for the Pruetts passing a bunker hole, I would have been. I lost half my crew.”

Jason limped toward the restless horse as the Defender cleaned up. He knew she wanted him to stay bruised and bloody. “You won’t betray us?”

She raked him from head to toe with a heat that rivaled Angelica’s. “Not as long as I’m getting what I was promised!”

With those terrifying words, Rankin swung herself up onto the horse and held out a hand.

The beating over, she was once again cool and calm. Jason let her pull him up in front. When she held out the rope, he allowed her to bind his hands. Angelica had supplied him with a number of hidden weapons. He wouldn’t be bound for long unless he chose to remain so. His owner had known he would need them.

Rankin’s hands held his for a moment, letting electricity flare along his skin like she used to do when she took him out of the complex. It usually bothered him to feel anything for her, but Jason had accepted that they were bonded. He had come on this crazy run for the chance to break it.

Rankin hated his new calm. He could feel her jealousy flare up between them, and he narrowed in on his previous thoughts. *If I could just teach her to not hurt me…*

Maybe suspecting he was about to try to reach her compassionate half–if she had one, Jason wasn’t positive–Rankin kneed the horse and the opportunity was lost.

As they rode, Jason realized his injuries weren’t serious. Rankin had beaten him, marked him, but he wasn’t hurt. Properly punished so it would be convincing to her riders and allow her to stick to the rebel plan? To mess with his mind? From the tone she’d used, Jason was guessing it was all of that and more.

Still, he couldn’t think of a reason for her to uphold her end of the deal. Once she had the rebel leaders in custody, she could order the rest killed and return to New Network City triumphant. “What do you know about the west coast council?”

When Rankin’s grip tightened, Jason understood she wasn’t giving information like that without more in return. Whatever went on there, *whoever* went on there, she valued the secret of it more than she did that yearly month of owning him. Jason was instantly curious and began dreaming up various fantasies, all of them violent.

Now that he could make out the area they were riding through, he was glad they weren’t on foot. While driving the Mopar, he’d flown through here ahead of the dust storm with Angelica guiding him. Jason was suddenly glad he hadn’t been able to make out the huge, dark shapes. The boulders were nearly as high as the horse he and Rankin were on, and twice as wide. They covered the landscape like giant eggs. One small mistake at the wheel would have killed them both.

Network tents came slowly into view. Rankin leaned in. “Follow my lead carefully, Jason. If they don’t believe it, they’ll challenge me.” Her nails sank into his shoulder. “If I have to kill them for you, I will, but my plans of waiting until we’re on the train will end. I’ll have you in their blood sprays.”

Jason shivered at the image, not doubting. “What should I do?”

The sentries on duty were turning, spotting them. They reached for weapons… They didn’t trust her! Rankin’s behavior had helped turn her own crew against her. Candice had been right.

“Behave as if you are any other runaway being returned to custody.”

Jason obediently lowered his head. He hadn’t tried to see things from Rankin’s side, but he began to understand how thin the line was as her small, battered crew came toward them with weapons aimed. They needed a distraction.

As if conjured by his thought, Angelica rode into view. She was on the rise to the left. Jason felt her studying the situation. She drew her gun, aiming at Rankin…

“What is she…” Rankin grunted, spurring the horse. “Clever bitch.” Rankin pointed at Angelica. “Kill her!”

Rankin’s confused riders spun to find Angelica taking aim.

To be certain it looked real, and to let out a bit of the rage at Jason’s bruises and cuts, Angelica picked off two easy targets.

Seconds later, Rankin and Jason were surrounded by security.

Angelica veered off as the sentries fired, a few of their shots getting too close. She glanced back as Rankin shoved Jason from the horse, but she couldn’t stop herself from firing again.

The bullet trimmed Rankin’s hand, the one she’d used to shove him.

Angelica grinned at the piercing scream of pain.

More gunfire came from Rankin’s crew.

Pain flared in Angelica’s hip. She turned away reluctantly, but confident that Rankin’s riders would now believe whatever story she told.

Angelica crested the rise, out of range, and turned back one more time. Jason was staring at her. Too far away to make out his expression, she settled for a long, hard wave of heat that she willed him to feel, to hold onto.

Angelica dropped out of sight and immediately began searching for a place to hide the Mopar. Until Rankin left, she would do her observing on foot. Without a dust cloud from the bike, they wouldn’t know where she was–just the way Pruetts liked it.

Jason watched Angelica roll away with a lump in his throat. What if she didn’t come back for him?

She became small, clearly out of range, and Rankin pulled her riders back with a sharp whistle. Scattered among the large boulders, silver and black tents flapped in the stiff wind, anchored by long spikes on one side and tall, tired horses on the other.

“Fall in and set up a tighter perimeter.”

There was no hesitation, no hostility or suspicion now. These dozen females were once again in awe. Rankin had been openly dragged away from her post and escaped to return the next morning with her prize. It was impressive.

“Get in the tent. Stay there.”

Jason walked toward the dusty vinyl his captor pointed to with his chin down, eyes on the ground. The riders were evaluating his injuries, giving their approval of his punishment. He hated them for it.

“We leave for the Depot at dawn. Get us set.”

More activity came at Rankin’s next order.

Jason let the flap drop with a pounding heart. He was the top Defender’s whore again.

Jason spun around when Rankin entered, scared again but no longer in terror of her. Then he saw the anger, the true pain she couldn’t wait to cause. He ducked too late.

Her fist slammed into his forehead and he staggered, dazed.

“When you wake up, you’ll belong to me!”

She swung again, this time from the hip.

Blinding pain came and then darkness rushed over his mind.

**3**

The train chugged over a rough stretch of track.

Jason woke abruptly to find it was night. The tiny light from the hatch window said it was cloudy, preventing the moon from peeking through, and he felt panic rise. He was alone, on the train, with Rankin…and he was bound by both wrists to the rails.

He had that realization an instant before the one telling him his body was painfully hard. Soreness in his arm confirmed he’d been injected with something, and from that heavy, familiar throb in his groin, Jason could guess what it was. Rankin had gotten him ready to provide the service he’d promised.

For a brief moment, Jason wondered if it might already be over. It would be hard to tell. Once the chemicals worked, they kept going for hours, even after climax was reached. The Network wanted to be positive their renters were satisfied.

Jason took stock of himself. Had the Defender gotten her a pound of flesh before he woke?

No. She liked his panic, the loss of control. She would wait until he was fully awake.

*Scratch…*

His head spun, searching the darkness.

*Scratch…*

Glowing red eyes appeared in the far corner.

“Angel?”

The answering growl of rage confirmed his fear as those angry orbs came closer.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble.” Rankin’s cold hand slid along his leg, tugging the sheet down to bare him to her changeling gaze.

Jason shivered at the hatred there. He scanned her recent scars and wounds–the nasty knife line in her shoulder, the trimmed hand, broken nose, clawed face–all caused by the Pruetts, and tried not to panic.

Much like the bachelors she had a fondness for, Rankin knew how to manipulate the human body, to make it turn against itself in quivering sessions of hot lust and painful denial. Her hands had been able to draw reactions and drug his brain with need like he’d never felt. Now, she had to work for it.

He wasn’t being denied sex anymore. Her frustration was clear as she growled, mouth on his, hand between them. This was the position she liked to torment him with the most, but after being with his Angel, it held no power over him now.

Without thinking, he opened his mouth. “I don’t feel you anymore.”

Rankin snapped in a matter of seconds, snarling, foaming in rage as the disease took over. “I’ll make you feel me forever!”

She sliced into his shoulder and Jason locked down on a reaction. This was how it always started.

He felt her body swell, nails fully extending against his chest as she straddled him. When he began to struggle, her claws slid into his thigh, near the groin. Jason hissed at the pain as it blossomed into warm heat, but he managed to keep from twitching upward.

He thought he had himself under control despite the drugs, though his physical condition was beyond that, but his fantasies, his secrets, weren’t his own. Rankin knew them.

Rankin leaned in, soft braids falling over his naked skin. “You can have me tonight.”

*Those words!* He’d begged for them for years.

Rankin quickly raked her nails over his chest while he was wounded and Jason shamed himself by responding. His hips went up in that instinctive thrust.

Her lips curved. Her tone became crueler than usual. “Oh, honey. We can play as rough as you like!”

Her hand traced a painful, fiery path down his arm that didn’t break the skin but still stung enough to make him grit his teeth. *I won’t break. I won’t–*

Her mouth moved on him, and stole any rational thought. The drugs were always his curse. He jerked angrily on the ropes.

Rankin’s laughter was full of heat. “I’ve always known what rings your bell, Jason.” Her hips slowly began lowering against him.

“I know because it’s what your father liked. He wasn’t bleeding just for *my* enjoyment.”

That sent Jason into a rage like he’d never felt. He swore if he got the chance, he would kill her. It was something he’d wanted his owner to do, but now, that could be his joy.

Rankin’s fast swipe took a layer of skin from his hip, and drew a shudder. “Does she know your weakness for pain, how it sets you off?” Rankin punctuated her question with a tight fist in his hair and hips poised above his throbbing length.

Jason refused to answer as she tilted those cheeks to slide him between them. It was another flash to their sessions, where she never let him in but made sure he rubbed every inch of her slick heat.

“Does she?!”

“Yes!” Jason ground out, trying hard not to react. All he had to do was thrust up and he’d have her!

Rankin didn’t like the answer. She leaned down to lick at his lips, hands holding him in place with stinging grips on silken hair. “You were supposed to be unbroken!”

She lunged for the fresh tattoo on his neck, biting, and lava flooded his stomach.

She felt the spasm of need and ground against him.

It pushed his throbbing length against her damp folds and Jason lost control, arching upward, thrusting into her.

“Aahhhh!”

Her growl of pain and triumph was a vague shame as he got in as deep as he could. Jason had wanted this for a long time, too, and as long as he was here, he would have his fill.

“Oohhh!” Rankin was nearly incoherent above him. Apparently denying herself had backfired. Jason used his knees to spread hers further. It made her drop onto his chest and gave him a smooth thrust line. He used it ruthlessly, the lust and drugs firmly running the show. As the hormones surged, the frantic pace increasing, Jason broke free of his ropes…to grab her hips and thrust deeper.

Her smug laughter burned him, but he wouldn’t stop. This time, he would get what he needed!

As he stroked harder, jerking her down to meet him, Rankin struggled, maybe sensing his determination to win this battle. Jason rolled them over, grip on her hot body unbreakable. He shoved forward and arched in sharp waves of lust. *I took her!*

Those claws he loathed slid down his leg as they struggled, and raked brutally over his shinbone, spilling scarlet drops.

Using his other training, he put his hands to work to bring Rankin up the levels with him, but there was darkness in his heart.

“Stop now!”

Jason dropped his full weight on her instead, hands pinning her wrists. Lust seared them both at the motion. He tightened the hold. *So close now…*

“No!”

Rankin’s scream set him on fire. How many times had she gotten him to that point? He thrust harder.

“Ugh!” Her body arched as she flew into the abyss.

Jason used the distraction to yank the knife from her belt. Leaving it on had been a mistake.

He put it to her throat, hips still shoving in, straining to get deeper. “You move, you die.”

She snarled but didn’t fight as he flipped his hips harder, sliding into that tight little notch where their bodies were matched perfectly. Her claws ripped into his shoulders as she cried out.

“Yeah!” As he reached that forbidden summit, Jason then did something he’d dreamed of in careful fear. He stood up and used his hand to finish without permission. As he exploded, standing over her, the blade didn’t leave his other tight grip.

Jason gasped for air as Rankin’s pleased laughter filled his ears.

“Again, Jason, but this time, we’ll use the cuffs. You’re bleeding too much.” She held her wrists out in submission.

Jason shuddered. The drugs were in full effect as he jerked her blood-smeared body off the bed. She was cuffed seconds later.

**4**

Rankin’s screams kept Angelica outside the door.

During her conversation with Daniel, she’d learned too much about the Defender’s methods to believe Jason would ever just get over it. There was still a note in *Daniel’s* voice that Angelica didn’t care for. She’d spent long, hard hours trying to figure out how to free her mate.

*This*, had never come to mind, but now that it was happening, she saw it for what it could be–the key to his chains. She hated it, but she hated Rankin being between them even more. If Jason never got what she’d withheld, he would always want it, wonder about it. Maybe he would even think of Rankin when they were in bed together and Angelica couldn’t stand the thought of it. This was easier. It was also justice.

Rankin’s desire wasn’t quiet. And later, when her hoarse shouts came again, telling him it hurt, to stop now and let her go, Angelica shivered but still didn’t interfere. Rankin deserved whatever he wanted to dole out.

Rankin trembled against Jason, almost sobbing as he finally let her have the orgasm.

He was done now, though the drugs would have given them another session if he wanted it. He didn’t. Rankin softening under him was revolting compared to his Angel, and the Defender’s smells! *Yuck.*

He dislodged their bodies. If the rebel plans for the refueling stop went badly, Jason would have to kill Rankin, but now, he wasn’t terrified of the notion. Whatever poison she’d marked him with was gone.

“Unlock me!”

She sounded angry. Jason was surprised not to be terrified as he did it. Had a few hours of bad sex really freed him?

Jason watched her dress by the dim light of the moon now peeking through the clouds, naked and thinking hard. She held no power over him. What did that mean? Eager to test it, Jason met her sated black eyes. “From now on, you’ll ask for a service and I’ll make the choice.”

“And if I don’t?” Rankin snarled. He’d clearly won this round. All she wanted to do was sleep.

“Then you’ll have a cold, empty toy to ride, but not a speck of the fire we’ve shared tonight. You get me when I’m *willing*. Understand?”

The club from her belt slammed into the wall by him. “Yes! I understand, you lying, backstabbing traitor!”

She stalked toward him, but drew no response. Jason braced to shield the part of himself that was still hanging freely.

Instead of a blow, Rankin’s hand went to his hair and curled into it. Her face filled with an emotion he knew well–fear.

“You’re going to kill me.”

Jason jerked, giving away the truth, but her fingers held his arm tightly.

“Make it quick?”

Jason hadn’t thought she’d been affected by the Network’s betrayal, but Rankin had learned she was nothing to them, that her life’s work had no value. And Jason didn’t care enough to give her the secret to happiness…did he?

“She’s on the train.”

Jason was thrilled to have a mate he could count on to follow through. “I know.”

Rankin scowled as she understood. “You have a different plan than the rebels.”

Jason didn’t smirk the way he wanted to. “Angelica has a plan, one that may also save your life.”

Rankin paused, head tilting. “Whose is better?”

“Too soon to tell.” Jason turned toward the washroom. “But they are Pruett plots, so I’d bet on both of them working.”

**5**

Rankin didn’t taunt Angelica as she came out of the compartment and walked down the hall.

*Good thing.* The jealousy was endless. Not taunting was smart, but it only delayed the next fight. Rankin was the enemy. Angelica wouldn’t ever forget that or forgive her for this.

It was a while before the door opened again–long enough for her to wonder if Jason was all right, and weigh the consequences of knocking. What did he make of the gift she’d given? Did Jason understand why or did he think she would hate him? …perhaps he no longer wanted her now that he’d had Rankin.

That secret fear vanished as soon as their eyes met. The longing she read eased her heart. The sight of the bandage on his arm that no doubt covered a needle mark was a comfort to her wounded ego. With her, he was *willing*. Angelica opened her arms to him, sure of what he needed now.

Jason flew to her.

She wrapped him in a loving embrace. “I forgive you.”

He shuddered at the words, grip tightening. “Thank you, for knowing I needed this and for still wanting me!” His hand cupped her cheek, pulling her gently toward him. “I love you, Angel.”

She wanted to believe that, but she didn’t push. Instead, she sealed their lips, hating the smell of Rankin that rose from his bruised skin. He’d already had an owner when Angelica chose him. She hadn’t known it, but she was still so grateful to have him willing that it didn’t matter as more than another layer of the pain she’d been surviving with for most of her life. She could handle this one. The agony of a life without Jason was the one she couldn’t face.

Chapter Twenty-Two

**Brace for It**

**1**

**F**rom Jason’s spot in the engine car, the refueling stop was boring, windy, and cold. The sky was dark with clouds, and the rains were coming soon. He swept their surroundings in nervous exhaustion as a small group of guards refueled the tanks.

The engine car they were in was designed for keeping the train rolling no matter what. It had a roof window and two wide doors, one on either side. With pale brown panels and bright furniture, it was a nice contrast to Rankin’s darkly shaded car. This one held the complete controls, along with a wide space lined by two chairs and a wide couch. A shelf held blankets and other boring items. He swept the outside.

The station consisted of two concrete shacks sporting large, remote-controlled doors. Without the train code, no one could get to the fuel. Even Sam’s Runners hadn’t been able to bypass the lock. Alongside these two shacks was a brick building for troops and a thick path of walking stones shaped like stars.

Around the hub was a valley of short, ugly grass and rocks from the stone wall running the length of the distance in front of them. Another matching wall ran along the hill. Jason realized this had once been a homestead. The border fence led into a livestock pen. During an attack, those coming down the hills would be as vulnerable as their targets. That was why Rankin had picked it, he began to realize in horror.

Rankin sneered hatefully, “Now, we’ll see who gets to keep you!” She made a curt motion, and troops ducked out of sight–a lot more than what she’d told the rebels there would be.

Rankin had lied! Why would she do that? Was she double-crossing them? How could he warn the rebels?

Bikes and horses began to appear on the horizon like a swarm.

Beside him, Rankin stiffened in anger. “They lied!”

Jason couldn’t stop the laugh. It was supposed to be half a dozen rebels. Five times that had come. Angelica was in the lead to bring them down the hill; his admiration grew. He’d assumed she was still on the train. He’d left her in the hall to shower, but Rankin had collected him a short time later, keeping him close.

“I’ll teach them to double cross me!” Rankin moved toward the front of the compartment. “I chose this stop with that possibility in mind!”

Her hand went toward the thick rope that controlled the engine’s whistle. “It’s breeding season.”

*Breeding season…* Pythons.

Jason flung himself at Rankin’s feet, duty to the rebellion not done. This was the real reason Candice had sent him into the lion’s den–to help them in moments like this one. “Please, don’t.” Jason grabbed at her arm. “We’ll go back to the way it was.”

Rankin shoved him hard enough to slam him against the train. “They’ve taken my life! It was never about you!” She reached for the whistle with an ugly snarl. “With them dead, I get it all!”

Jason jumped at her again, but she sent a vicious boot into his chest.

*The pain!* He was no match for her strength or her fighting skills. But that wasn’t what he was supposed to rely on.

“Whhhooooo…”

The train whistle wasn’t loud, but it gave him another boost of courage. Jason stood up and came toward Rankin again, slowly, showing her he was calmer now.

“Stay back.” She tensed to fight. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. You know that.”

Jason nodded. She would kill him for what he was about to do. “I want you.”

Rankin’s eyes instantly turned pink. “What?”

“This is hot.” He took a step closer. “When you’re done here, I’d like to offer a service. Right here, in this car.” His fingers went to the cloak covering him, removing it.

Rankin’s hand paused on a second pull.

Jason came by her as he took the garment off, letting her scent his freshly washed skin. He slid onto the small couch. “I’ll wait here for you.”

His fingers went to the buttons of his pants.

Her hand released the rope as a shudder ripped through her stiffened form.

Sensing how far he would have to go, Jason began to stroke those areas she craved. He had nothing for her without the drugs, but it didn’t matter. Having him willing was something she’d dreamed of, why she’d let him live, and he used her weakness against her ruthlessly, trying to buy time.

He gave her the smoldering glance the Network had taught him so well. “Can I touch you while I do this?”

Rankin advanced eagerly. But she didn’t caress him. She swung her swollen fist and hit him in the mouth. She did it again to daze him, and then she went back to the whistle. “I know your game, Jason, but I’m playing my own!”

**2**

*Whhoooo!*

The whistle made Angelica jump, sending fear rippling through her changed body. There was only one reason to blow it. Rankin had betrayed them. Jason was in danger.

“Get to the train!”

Sam’s shout got them moving faster, but a low rumble in the distance declared they might not make it that far. The snakes were coming.

They’d known Rankin wasn’t to be trusted, but the sight of that first python was a horrible reminder that the head Defender wanted all of them dead.

Angelica gunned the Mopar, bouncing roughly down the hill. Jason was probably doing something stupid right about now and he would need help.

Half a mile from the train, a large python split the ground, rising up in a flurry of dirt and rocks that their few horses shied from.

Bodies hit the ground. Rebels immediately gained their feet and ran for the metal safety of the train.

Angelica spun wide of the snapping horror now giving chase. She was sickened by the screams behind her, but she didn’t stop. They’d openly attacked a Network regiment and transport. There was no going back now.

Pulling alongside, Angelica lunged for the steel ladder and hefted herself onto the train. The Mopar crashed into it like a small bomb blast.

She turned from the debris, ignoring the pain as shrapnel sprayed her. They had to gain control of the main engine cars or they didn’t stand a chance.

Against her will, she took one fast peek over her shoulder and was glad she had. Angelica ducked.

*Thud!*

The bullet slammed into the train above her. The guard who’d fired it from the ground aimed again…

Angelica saw Sam coming and resumed climbing. There was an awful crack behind her, followed by a thud as Sam both shot and then ran over the Defender.

Angelica pulled herself on top of the car and hurried toward the front, where the whistle was located. She had no doubt about who had pulled it.

All around the train, rebels and troops were battling, firing, dying. The ten-foot pythons had reached the train now. They were being battled by both Defenders and rebels. The guards were aiming at the snakes, understanding they all needed to work together to survive, but the rebel males only had hatred for the women who’d enslaved them so cruelly. Angelica mentally marked that group of bachelors from her list of survivors as the snakes helped to kill the females and then turned on the men. Sometimes you had to work with your enemies or neither of you survived. It was a shame those males wouldn’t get the chance to learn that lesson.

“Whhoooooo!”

Angelica didn’t stop in her run over the cars. She jumped across the gap, ducking low to avoid the gunfire.

The engine car was one of the few with a glass sunroof. Angelica jumped through the glass like she was an avenging demon sent to claim Rankin’s soul.

“Whoooo!”

“Watch out!” Jason screamed as Rankin clubbed Angelica in the head the instant she landed.

Now being held by one of Rankin’s guards, Jason shoved her into the wall and flew to his owner.

“Whhooo!”

Rankin stood with her electronic stunner at the ready, smirking.

Jason understood in that instant. Her defeated air had been an act. He’d been tricked. So had Angelica.

Angelica was dazed; he helped her lean against the car. He didn’t know what to do now. The noises outside the car said the rebels and guards were still fighting, but in here, there was silence except for the whistle.

“Whhooo!”

From where they were, with the guard he’d shoved now pointing her gun at them, Jason had too clear a view of the horror about to hit this train. Rankin didn’t realize what she’d done, but he did. He’d met her pets, the ones she kept in the hound den but hid from the Network. She’d been breeding them, using them to kill her enemies in their homes, but this time, she’d called wild pythons to do her bidding. They would all pay for that mistake. These snakes were hungry from the breeding heat and angry to be interrupted. They swarmed toward the stopped train like an army of brown and black soldiers. As they got closer, their size became clearer. Roughly as long as a Mopar, even the smallest among them was double the size of their biggest fighter. Guards and rebels began lunging for the safety of the train.

The snakes traveled stiffly, unable to manage those lightning fast turns of the past, but their speed had increased due to size. They chased the rebels with a series of winding slides that ate up the rough ground as if it wasn’t there. Even uphill, they didn’t slow, powered by thousands of tiny stubs on their bellies. Stubs that, in time, might even evolve into feet. Jason shuddered at the notion.

*Whammm!*

The train lurched, tipping violently.

Angelica lunged for Rankin.

They rolled, struggling, as the train slammed down, both sliding toward the open door.

*Whamm!*

The pythons attacked the train, probably thinking it was a giant intruding snake. Jason scrambled toward the fighting females.

The guard he’d forgotten about fired.

Jason was saved by the train’s awful shuddering as the huge reptiles began to rip it open. The woman’s slug slammed into the wall by his shoulder, and he changed direction, lunging for her instead.

Like with Rankin, Jason used the ploy he’d learned. Her new second-in-command melted against him the instant he touched her lips, and Jason slid his hand between them. Thinking he was trying to remove her clothes, she lifted her arm to give him access.

Jason grabbed her knife. But he hesitated.

“I’ll taste your blood, Pruett!”

*Angelica!* Jason sent the knife into the guard’s stomach and shoved her away in revulsion as she twisted in agony. Blood spread over the floor when she fell, following him as he scrambled back.

“Die!”

Angelica’s scream got him on his feet to find them both covered in blood and fury.

Angelica darted in to run her claws down the same lines she’d put on Rankin’s face during the bombing.

The Defender snarled, slashing out to catch an unprotected stomach.

Angelica grunted and then returned the favor, making Rankin sink to her knees, gasping for air.

Rankin struggled to her feet as Angelica came in for the kill, knocking her down with a vicious blow. Jason recognized the moment from her matches and felt that last rope binding him to the evil woman snap. Angelica had been able to handle her. He had the perfect mate.

Angelica stomped on the hand she’d trimmed and smirked at the hoarse shout. “It’s all over.”

Rankin lunged for Jason. “He was mine!”

Angelica threw herself down and swept out with a brutal leg, catching Rankin at knee level.

The Defender fell heavily, smashing into the metal train car. Blood sprayed again as Angelica drew her own blade. “I’ve had enough of you.”

Unable to take anymore, Jason grabbed the microphone and started to sing.

Rankin and Angelica both froze at the sound of his voice. Changed or not, the effect was instant. They released each other, turning to gape at him.

He was gazing out the shattered window; they both saw the pythons responding. The snakes began to withdraw from their various attack points to slither his way.

“Shit!”

Angelica nodded at Rankin’s expletive. They were all going to be lucky to survive.

Angelica reached out to grab the mike from his hand, but Rankin’s next words stopped her.

“You’ll get them killed!”

Angelica didn’t understand what he was doing, but Rankin did. The bounty hunter shoved Rankin away from him instead, not understanding but determined to give him a chance if he could help.

“When the last eagle flies over the last crumbling mountain… and the last lion roars at the last dusty fountain…In the shadow of the forest, though she may be old and worn. They will stare, unbelieving, at the last unicorn...”

It was an old, mournful tune that brought tears to Angelica’s flat black eyes. All around them, it was having the same effect, calming fury and bringing sadness.

Then the hounds arrived.

Angelica understood what he’d done then and applauded his courage even as she mourned his humanity. The war they were waging with the Network would have many casualties.

They hunkered in the car as the pythons and the hounds met. Jason was quiet now, observing what he’d done with dejection. Angelica wanted to offer comfort, but she kept her attention on Rankin.

Rankin rotated toward Jason, glowing red. “You’re damned.”

“Yes.” He didn’t glance away from the awful view. “From the minute you first rented my father on this train.”

“He betrayed me!”

Jason opened his mouth to say she’d deserved it, but he never got the opportunity.

“Ahhh!”

The scream was right outside the open door.

Angelica shoved Jason behind her as a pair of gleaming red slits rose up to study them all in rabid hatred and hunger.

“Hisss…”

The sound made Jason’s stomach drop and his balls draw up.

The python was covered in wounds. Its blood, nasty green and acid-like, seeped from more places than he could count, but those beady eyes and long fangs showed no sign of weakness.

Rankin jumped backward, drawing the snake’s attention.

*Mistake.*

It lunged.

Rankin managed to spin and avoid it, slamming her knife into one of its nostrils.

The python hissed in pain and rage, striking again. It caught Rankin on the arm she used to shield herself.

“Aahhh!”

Angelica would have gone toward her, but Jason gently pulled his owner back, heart like ice. “Let fate be.”

“Hisss…” *Strike!*

“Ugh!”

Angelica stared at him, but Jason absorbed every second of Rankin’s death. The python had no mercy, striking her repeatedly until the Defender was a pile of bloody rags. Numb, Jason watched her struggle to breathe, remembering the death of his family.

“Was I as good as my father?” Jason muttered, hoping Rankin was still alert enough to hear. “I’ve never hated anyone as much as I do you.”

The python’s fangs sank into Rankin’s leg again, barely drawing a shudder, and then it released her, content the meal was immobilized.

Hissing hungrily, it turned toward the next meal.

Angelica stepped in front of Jason, nudging him toward the window. The python couldn’t reach them unless it came into the car, where it would lose the space it needed for mobility. It was reluctant, and she kept them moving slowly, hoping it was happy with the blood spreading under their feet.

As they inched away, Angelica compared Rankin to their first real meeting on this very train. Those laboriously woven braids were now a wild mess, charred and tacky with blood. Her neat fighting clothes were ripped and torn, covered in poison and scarlet drops. Her bruised face was cut, clawed, smudged in filthy desperation, and those eyes! The lights of her obsession had been replaced with the knowledge of her coming death and Jason’s true emotions for her. It was better than any of the scenes Angelica had imagined for this moment.

“Hiss….”

The scent of the blood was too much to ignore. The reptile slithered into the railcar with them.

*We have to go up!* Angelica quickly hefted Jason onto her shoulders and shoved him toward the broken roof. He grabbed the frame, pulling himself through as she turned to confront their uninvited guest.

Angelica immediately jumped. She was struck by the snake’s heavy body as it slammed by her and hit the train car. She used the distraction to leap through the roof hole after Jason, dropping an explosive as she went.

*Kaablamm!*

Not large, in the confined space it still blew the python and Rankin’s body all over the railcar in a loud, wet bang.

“Whhhooooo!”

Angelica twisted in concern.

This time, it wasn’t a whistle. It was the howling of the hounds.

The sound of the pythons battling the hounds was something else from his nightmares. Jason stayed with Angelica as they observed the carnage from atop the battered train. The snakes had destroyed all but three of the cars, and there were few survivors. Stiff, damp smelling wind gusted smoke around the battlefield like a shroud.

The snakes and the hounds were natural enemies; the few fleeing humans were ignored as the two mutated species fought. Fangs sank into thick necks, drawing horrible yelps, and snarling hounds wrestled hissing pythons to the ground in death grips. It was harsh, almost too incredible to believe. More firedogs charged down the hill from their right.

Near the center of the chaos, two hounds were working together against a large python. The snake was currently using its flipping defense, rolling violently in an attempt to knock the dogs off their feet. One of the hounds darted aside too slowly and was sent flying as the reptile barreled into it. The dog yelped as the fangs went in deep.

The second hound used the distracted moment to plunge its own fangs into the snake’s neck.

In the distance, survivors from both groups limped and slithered into the cloudy distance. Angelica noticed the snakes were going south. It gave her a mental map that might come in handy during their final showdown with the Network.

When the remaining medic hurried toward the carnage, Baker gestured for a Runner to go along and protect him. Bodies, human and animal, lay strewn about the stones in grotesque positions. Smoke and small flames rolled across the battlefield, leaving the groans of the wounded and dying to echo on the wind. Bloody smears and deep gashes marred even the usable cars of the train, and bodies littered the tracks. It would have to be cleaned off before they could go, and now that the rain had come, their time had shrunk. Within hours, this valley and the station would be ravaged by the coming floodwaters, as it was every year.

Angelica spotted the main members of their group–Candice, Daniel, Baker–and knew from their bloody faces that their fight to survive had been just as ugly.

Jason felt Angelica searching the smoky shadows around the burning car. He knew when she found her sister by the way her body relaxed.

Sam made a motion.

Angelica turned to him. “Try giving the hounds an order.”

Jason obediently went back down into the bloody mess they’d left. If he could get the hounds to leave without killing all of them, that would be great.

The car was a disgusting mess that Jason tried not to touch any more of than he had to as he dropped the outside rope ladder and climbed down.

The explosive cord had destroyed everything in half of the car. Glad the radio was still intact, Jason passed the orders on with a voice that didn’t shake. When he began singing again to get the attention of the hounds, there was pride in the tones. He’d helped the rebels take the Network Rider. He’d had a big part in the death of Rankin. He couldn’t have been happier with the way things were.

*Scratch…*

Jason turned slowly, almost expecting Rankin to be standing there, brought back from the dead by her fury at the betrayal.

Instead, it was a hound.

He stopped singing.

Angelica hurried, cursing her lack of alertness. She leaned through the hole and shuddered. *I assumed it was over!*

“Sing!” Angelica whispered urgently, snapping the hound toward her.

Judging her too far away to be a threat, the big animal looked back at her mate.

Jason slowly lifted a hand.

Steam puffed from the hound’s nose, warm exhales blowing Jason’s hair back as it panted angrily.

“No!” Angelica dropped through the hole.

“Stay!” Jason’s loud order had an instant effect on both of them.

Angelica froze and so did the hound.

To her astonishment, Jason rubbed the dog roughly on its neck as if it was a common thing to do.

“Good girl.” He lingered, scratching the animal where the ugly Network collar was cutting into its skin. “Slide me your knife.”

Angelica did it with fear in her heart, positive the dog would turn on him as he knelt to pick up the blade.

The hound did flinch.

Ready to jump between them and give her life for his, Angelica held her breath as Jason retrieved the knife, leaving his neck exposed. He straightened with the blade in hand, causing the hound to give a low, menacing growl.

Jason shook his head. “Not to hurt–to *free*.”

And then with no hesitation, Jason stuck the knife against the hound’s huge throat and jerked.

Angelica expected a wild spray of blood, hoping he was killing it, but the collar fell to the floor with a wet thud.

The hound shook its huge head, likely free for the first time in its life. Angelica was shocked again by Jason’s next words.

“We need you.”

She snapped her gaping mouth shut as he began to talk to the hound like it was a person and the animal stared intently like it was listening.

Chapter Twenty-Three

**Close**

**1**

**“W**here’s Rankin?”

“Dead.”

Candice smiled in satisfaction, but Daniel actually grinned. Despite witnessing the effects, Angelica hadn’t realized how much Jason had loathed Rankin until he stopped her from helping the woman. Daniel obviously felt the same.

The rebel males were thrilled with victory, but the pale train slaves expressed it best. They went around hugging everyone, male or not. They also brought out supplies from the train and helped carry the injured inside. It was strange to see them in normal clothes, but also to witness their random skips and twirls. They were no longer lifeless.

Jason and Angelica stayed by Candice and Daniel as Baker and Sam walked the battlefield. They were hoping for survivors to help, but the fangs of both mutations were deadly. Angelica doubted they’d find many.

Drawn by blowing debris, she noticed the waterline marks on the refueling sheds that were now being used to fill the Mopars. The access codes had been on the train. Angelica took a fast glimpse at the darkening sky.

Daniel scanned their captives. “What do we do with them?”

Four guards had been captured. They were currently standing together near the middle of the train, with one of Sam’s Runners guarding them.

Candice made the choice. “Send them back to their masters.”

Her decision wasn’t questioned.

The four big women didn’t flee the scene as fast as expected, but they did move quickly, surprised at the generosity.

Baker came back toward them, scanning the Network Rider. “What about the train?”

“I’ll let you know in a few minutes.” Greg and his owner stepped into the second car.

Angelica’s explosive had destroyed the main engine, but all Network rails had extra engine cars. They just had to figure out how to hook it up.

Jason leaned against Angelica’s arm and felt her grip tighten in response. When they left here, they would travel to the safe zone and get the rebels moving toward a new haven. After a bit of gathering, they and a few of the others would join Candice’s group in New Network City for the final showdown.

Angelica waited as Baker and Sam came toward her, both with red cords in hand in case the pythons returned. As the hounds attacked, they’d supported them with well-thrown explosives, aiding the huge dogs when they could.

A few of those large animals were still nearby, playing in the grassy rocks that lined the hill. To them, rolling on rough terrain would be like having their backs scratched. Jason wondered where they would go now that he’d freed them. Would they take his suggestion of escorting the rebels? He’d know shortly.

“Gotta check out the other car.” Greg came down the train ladder as if he’d done it all his life. “That one’s trashed.”

“Wait.”

They all turned to find three of the train males standing nearby.

“The renter car has no damage.”

“It does, however, have a remote set of controls.”

“So those renting us can still drive the train.”

Meaning most of their clients had been guards. Jason felt great sympathy. He had an idea of what their lives had been like, but knowing his father had been one of them gave him a deeper compassion.

“Will you show us?” Jason gave them a choice, showing respect. It was something they’d been denied for so long that one of them actually began to cry.

Jason slipped his arm around the man’s shoulders, turning him toward the rental car. “What’s your name?”

Angelica watched Jason lead them, marveling at how easily he’d fallen into being a rebel. It was who he was now, who he’d wanted to be all along. Was it enough?

She shrugged, thinking again of the way he hadn’t let her help Rankin. Jason now had that painful, hard shell to shield him while they fought against the Network, but she wouldn’t let the blood consume him. She understood how it sucked you in until the rage was all you could feel, all that brought you out of your own private hell.

Jason stopped suddenly, turning back to locate her. Angelica read everything he was thinking in that moment, how glad he was that she’d chosen him. It sent her heart into a rough rhythm.

He grinned, a flare of happiness that drove heat into her toes, and then he turned back to the train males with his clever questions. Jason would make a perfect mate. She was lucky to share his life. She’d known that all along.

Angelica slowly followed them, aware of Baker and Greg deep in discussion nearby. They would find a way for the rebels to use the train to get to the dome. They didn’t have Rankin to lead them into the complex, but maybe that was for the best. This way, they had gained full tanks of gas, eliminated a squad, and disabled the train so it would limp into the city. They would also be off the grid, the way Pruetts liked it. They needed time to work their magic on the mob lining the complex. Once they were done making friends among the denizens on their own turf, the Changeling Winds might shift into Pruett favor, as they had here.

Angelica heard the happy chuckle of the man she now loved more than even her family, and stepped into the car. Candice was talking to Greg and Jason now, so she went to flank Daniel, showing him she’d missed their friendship.

Daniel slung an arm around her shoulders.

Angelica leaned against his heat.

“You’ve got a good one.”

“Yes.”

“He loves you.”

She didn’t respond. She knew that. She also knew the place Rankin had held in his heart was gone. They could accept each other without reservations now. “I made the right choice.”

Daniel patted her shoulder as he withdrew his arm. “Yes, you did. I’ll bet your kids are immune because of it.”

Those words should have meant everything to that part of her still mourning remission. *But, I don’t want that anymore.* *How can I fight the Network without my rage?*

She couldn’t, which meant she’d sacrificed nothing and gained everything. She was so grateful to Jason, and so desperately worried about making him happy. There wasn’t anything on the planet she wouldn’t try to give him if he asked for it.

Daniel gave Jason a grin of respect that Angelica recognized as a bond they now shared. Not all of the twelve experimental bachelors had the ability to calm both animals and Pruetts.

“There’s a feed coming in.”

The games logo flashed onto the bloody screen as Greg’s words faded. The damage in here was indeed minimal, but whoever had been renting them when the snakes attacked had paid the price.

“...the final contestant in next month’s episodes of the Bachelor Battles is…Samantha J. Pruett!”

“What day is this?”

Angelica identified the note in Baker’s voice as panic. “The twentieth.”

*“*Damn. We didn’t count on them scheduling it so soon. We estimated a few weeks, but we have to have her at the time trials in ten days.”

“This is what we were hoping for, right?” Sam reminded Baker. “That they’d schedule me now if Rankin suggested it.”

Baker didn’t answer.

Sam’s frown faded. “I’m glad it worked. I didn’t want to go west. I hate the people. They’re always making me kill them.”

Few people were surprised when a wide games grin slid over her face.

Sam waved. “Let’s go.”

The split was quick and painless, with all of them refusing to admit they might never see the others again.

Baker was the leader. He had to be the one to travel west, but Sam wasn’t letting him do it alone. Her remaining Runners would escort him to the western outpost, where he would try to convince them to join the cause.

She and Jason would secure the males at the safe zone and then take over protecting Baker. Angelica and Jason would miss most of the action at the complex, but that suited her fine. She’d been given the duty of securing the rebel males and she would do it with honor.

**2**

**The Network**

“The train is late.”

Those in the tower exchanged worried frowns.

“Any word?”

The messenger read the screen reluctantly. “A static-filled call with screams and noises that may have been explosions.”

“Damn it!”

“Do we have crews on the way to check it out?” As usual, the leader of the table was cool and calm.

“Two full teams, but it will take them a week or more to get there.”

“Not if we send out the other rail car.”

“What other?”

“We have one other, right?”

The leader contemplated the suggesting member for a long, hard moment before nodding. “Yes. Let’s make sure our guests for the meeting are not delayed. Christen the sister of the Rider and get her rolling. I want a report in two days.”

The screens went dark, signaling the end of their weekly meeting. Ten seats emptied, but only eight pairs of feet exited the room.

The two remaining members were similar, so much that their movements often mirrored each other.

“Should I make plans, in case they come here?”

“That would probably be best, but don’t give us up yet.” The leader gestured absently. “We only need to hold out for another thirty days. After that, their chance to stop us vanishes.”

“And the wall issue?”

The leader snorted. “Pay them off, of course, and kindly remind our Canadian friends that the protestors were on the wrong side of the wall when they were shot.”

“The hole is being closed now. I’ve sent another team to the sector.”

“Good. Are we certain there were no survivors?”

“As much as we can be, but it won’t matter. A Canadian reporter in the Borderlands would survive about as long as a whistleblower in a python’s nest.”

**3**

There were no lies between them now, no fears or ghosts. Angelica held Jason tightly as he stiffened against her, groaning her name. He would always be this happy. She would see to it.

Jason drew back, trembling, but she stopped him with a bare leg behind his.

She didn’t speak, but Jason understood what she was giving him–hope of his happy family returned.

He shuddered, body tight and hard, covered in that hazy glow of lust.

Her fire blazed to life and Angelica grunted. His desire did that to her. She was unbelievably grateful. Burnup might still happen in time, but with his fire surrounding them, burnout didn’t stand a chance.

“I don’t…we haven’t...damn!”

He was in that place where normal thought was almost painful. Angelica was proud of his strength.

As his body slid free, her gaze went to his jutting length. Drops of their pleasure glistened in the flickering sunset. *So sexy.*

She peered up at him. “I love you.”

Jason stared openmouthed, body on fire.

“Close your mouth, Jason, or I’ll have to do it for you.”

*Finally!* He’d been waiting for her to say it again now that he didn’t have to restrain himself. Jason rolled them, shoving forward. He ground his lips against hers, kissing her until she was growling in need.

He smirked. “You mean like that?”

Seconds later, they were too involved for amusement. Desire, sharp and perfectly fiery, heated the small den until they were sweating, groaning, straining in the darkness as if only they existed.

As Jason emptied his pain, his past, into Angelica’s willing body, he let go of Rankin for good. He had no doubt that the scars she’d inflicted would occasionally show, but that mysterious ache he’d had for her was one he would never feel again. Thanks to Angelica, he now knew love–the real kind that wasn’t an obsession. He had his chosen mate and there was quiet in the halls of his heart.

“Happy Birthday.”

Jason groaned, still locked in spasms of ecstasy and joy. “Thank you, for noticing me.”

Her hold tightened to a searing embrace that made him pulse harder.

“There was never another choice. You had me with the first clever lie and the smell of your burnt sugar skin.” Her lips pressed to his cheek. “I’ll never let you go now.”

Jason grinned, rolling them so they were on their sides, facing. “Are you making a permanent contract with me?”

She smiled, love shining, warming him. “I’m stating a fact.” She blushed. “Will you sing?”

Chuckling, Jason settled them into the position they’d enjoyed last night as he sang her to sleep.

They hadn’t realized the hounds would still be so drawn until they had come out this morning to find a pack of no less than thirty, all waiting to have their collars removed.

Jason considered how the dog on the train had nudged his hand when he’d stopped rubbing its bloody ears, how the animal had looked through the wreckage to make contact with him one more time before dropping from sight. Then it had returned with a small pack and actually walked with them! They’d cut off the collars, and even now, the dogs were all around the crumbling brick shelter they’d chosen to take refuge in. Once a cannery of some sort, it had been opened after the war, but the Network had destroyed it to keep a population from growing here. They’d discovered a lot of evidence of that in the Borderlands. It told her the enemy had something else going on out here.

Jason was already contributing to the cause, proving himself worthy of being a Pruett and a rebel. She wondered what other abilities her experimental bachelor might have.

They’d gotten a message from Mary and Bruce, Candice’s parents. They’d made contact with the wild Nevada Nomads of their rugged family and were now traveling toward New Network City. Along the way, they would continue to gather the friends they’d made over the years.

“Will you marry me?”

They were words she’d never heard spoken. She twisted toward him in shock.

His mouth opened, maybe to convince her.

“Shhh...” Marriage, a sign of old world loyalties, was more forbidden than music or art. No one she’d ever known had gone that far against the Network.

Angelica couldn’t stop the scornful snort, or the harsh, games grin that made Jason seal their lips in happiness. Somewhere along the way, they would find someone with the authority and courage to unite them. So far as she knew, they would be the first couple to marry in five hundred years. It was a perfectly Pruett thing to do.

**4**

Baker and Sam spotted the lone person at the same time.

Sam slid a hand to the gun that felt so perfect in her grip.

Baker was too tired for more fighting. “Let ‘em go. We’ve doled out enough death for one day.”

Behind them, the sky was gray and foggy with the battle aftermath. Ahead, the clouds were lighter and the sun was warmer. There were no signs of shelter, only hills and rock walls, but Sam wasn’t worried. They were Pruetts. They survived.

She assumed the figure coming toward them was a stray sentry who’d been smart or lucky enough to escape the carnage, but as they got closer to the weaving woman, it became clear that wasn’t the case.

She was dressed oddly, wearing a type of pants they’d only read about in old books. Sam thought they were called blue jeans. The stranger carried a square device on a strap around her neck, one that resembled a camera, and her brown jacket was made of a material Sam didn’t recognize. The light drizzle ran off it, rather than sinking in. Her hands were covered in bright red cuts and scrapes, implying she’d recently fought for her life.

Sam scanned the rocky crags. What lay over that horizon? The glazed horror in the woman’s weaving progress implied they might not want to know.

“Are you real?”

Sam came forward, shielding Baker as her remaining Runners came up to flank them. “As much as you.”

“Are you okay?” Baker’s question was met with scorn and fear.

“Unless I mistook the shells and the screams, no, not really.”

Her way of talking was odd, the accent foreign, and Sam studied her harder. The woman wasn’t from the east or the Borderlands… So, where was she from? The west?

The woman studied them in return, finally noticing the blood and the smoke in the distance behind their escorts. “You must be the good guys.”

Her skin was pale under that fresh burn, and Sam scratched the west from her list. Coastlands didn’t encourage the gentle shade of creamy skin. It gave the weather-beaten camouflage of a desert, complete with matching shades and textures. Sam should know.

“May I offer you a drink and talk?”

Sam hadn’t heard that form of speech from Baker before. Impressed, she stared.

The woman, however, nodded right away, coming to life. Her nicked hands went restlessly to that strap around her neck, to the small square device it was holding.

“Please do.” The Canadian reporter stared at them desperately. “I know a horrible secret and I really should tell someone before your Network Council succeeds in killing me.”

**End of Book 2**

**Note from the Author**

How do you like my apocalypse adventure trilogy so far? Does it make you wonder how this type of future would actually work? Have I made you consider things from the male/female perspective? Are you eager for the wild ride waiting in book three? All of those were my goals.

This episode of the Bachelor Battles came from the rage I saw in the short glimpses of Candy’s fearless little cousin. I wrote eighty pages of this right after finishing the first episode. I knew Angel had needs of her own, but the rebellion growing as I rewrote both books was a surprise. Though, to be fair, I wasn’t happy with the Network from the beginning. Beyond their obvious cruelty, something wasn’t right about them. When I figured out what it was, the rest of the story fell into place.

The Bachelor Battles connects to my popular series, [Life After War](https://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/book-1.html), which takes place right after the bombs have fallen. In the Bachelor Battles, the world has not become the enlightened society of peace and hope Adrian sought to create. In fact, you could say this reality is the opposite, but the Pruetts are far from finished. In time, maybe this brutal family can conquer the Network and free all the enslaved males. We’ll have to hope that the power doesn’t go to their heads.

In book one, we saw the top layers of life under Network rule and we met some strange, wonderful people. During book two, we’ve developed a keen like and dislike of many of those characters. With book three, I’m going to take you through an emotional spin of love, lust, and death that will stretch from coast to coast.

Who’s ready to play with the Pruetts? Are ya? Are ya really?

Then let’s roll.

-Angie

**Deleted Scenes Book 2**

**“H**ow far into the Borderlands did Baker get?”

“Almost ten miles.” Candice scanned the darkness around their campsite, but she didn’t feel danger. “They’re hiding in a cave. The dust storms are bad right now. They can’t move.”

Mary wanted to know what Candice was thinking and planning, but she didn’t dig for details yet. “We’ll try to slip in between the squalls?”

“Yes.”

“How many of the males did he lose?”

“The message doesn’t say. Sam found it in the abandoned train that Baker and his rebels hijacked. She got to it before the Network did.”

Angelica listened to the conversation between Candice and Mary without letting them know she was awake. Around them, the apocalyptic darkness was full of death and danger. *Like my heart.*

“Will Sam help us get Baker and his group to the safe zone?” Mary hated the wild land around them. “She’s the best escort they could have.”

“Yes, but she said there’s a family matter to be cleared up first. She’ll be here around noon. She headed for us two days ago.”

Angelica heard Mary groan. It mirrored her own silent noise of misery. Sam knew she’d signed up for a game. Little else would get her big sister to delay the challenge of escorting rebel males through the lethal land where she spent most of her time.

Mary paused in stirring the fire. “Sam knows?”

Candice nodded.

“But, how?” Mary didn’t like it that spies might be reporting on them already.

“The Network scheduled Angelica’s episode and announced it, along with some amendments to the rules. She has to report to the time trials immediately.”

There was a stunned silence where Angelica could sense them rearranging plans and worrying, but all she could feel was relief. A week from now, she would be in New Network City, battling to the death for a prize. *Finally, a place to put all this hatred!*

She’d been dreading the normal wait it took to be scheduled. Months in the rebel safe zone around five hundred tempting men would bury her. *Four*, Angelica amended, still feeling the slashing burn of their deaths. They’d lost a cut in Stone Mountain–beautiful, skilled, enslaved males whose murders hadn’t been avenged, but they couldn’t strike the Network openly. They weren’t ready for that yet, though the war had started. As a Pruett, Angelica was both relieved and frustrated.

Mary made the connection. “Sam wants to make sure she sees Angelica one more time, just in case.”

Candice knew Pruett nature better than Mary did. It was the reason she was the leader and that sharp intelligence showed as she answered. “More likely, she wants to escort her and cheer from the stands. You know how Sam is.”

Angelica certainly did. Her sister wouldn’t like the choice, but she would understand. Sam was the wildest Pruett in their family. Watching her go through an episode would be a thrill.

“So, the Network has succeeded in splitting us up.” Mary tried to fight the ominous sense of doom. “It gives them the advantage.”

Candice responded with her usual no-nonsense attitude. “They’ve always had it. Sam will escort Angelica. We’ll help Baker.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Mary was glad she wasn’t in charge.

“We’ll cover it when she wakes up. No need to ruin a good night’s sleep.”

Angelica thought about rolling over and telling them she hadn’t been to sleep yet, or even trying to frighten Candice like she used to when they were kids, but she didn’t. Candice was already worried. So was Angelica, but for different reasons. Candice didn’t want to lose her new mate or the very special males they were risking everything to help. Angelica didn’t want to lose herself.

The change had swept her away as it had nearly every other teenage female in the world, but Angelica was burning faster than the rest of her friends and family. Candice had been close to this heat before she’d won her mate from the Network, and she told Angelica what slowed it, but Angelica couldn’t do it. She would never rent a male or have one around just to provide a service when called. If she did, she would lose her chance at a real cure, because she’d never leave his arms long enough to search for a match. It would be hard for her to give up any form of relief from this torment once she experienced it.

Due to the lack of male births, her changeling body was demanding a mate, was being driven to continue the species. There was no other way she could stop the rages that had come with puberty and would leave with death. The years between would be an agony of burning under the skin and blood behind her eyes as the disease progressed through the levels. The Changeling Winds had come, twisting her into someone she hardly knew. She would never be the old Angelica again, even if she accepted her ruthless instincts and took what she needed. A service might slow the progression, but that wouldn’t stop it. Eventually, she would still burnout or up.

Mary was a frightening example of burnout. Her aunt was so happy with her male, so in love, that she had no fire left. The only time she got riled was when he was in danger. If not for the family reputation, and the protection Candice made sure they all received, Mary would have been killed long ago and her mate stolen. That was the most common form of finding relief from this hell. Stealing a man wasn’t a crime in their world, only killing one was.

Both were fates Angelica abhorred. She couldn’t stand the thought of winning one of those timid, cringing males for herself and retraining him, freeing him to live beside her as an equal, and then not be able to defend him. Or worse, maybe she would snap and kill him by accident. It was awful how the sight of blood, the feel of it, could send the rage down a notch. Every time she took a life, her control grew stronger.

That was the method her sister, Sam, used to battle her rage into submission, and why she stayed in the lawless Borderlands. Their family had ways to maintain that iron Pruett control, but they were still burning. In time, stage three or four would claim them. They’d chosen to accept what relief they could find until it happened, but Angelica had sworn none of those would be her fate.

*Remission*.

The word terrified her. The fifth stage of the change was one that few of them reached. Remission had only occurred a few times in history when two compatible, willing partners came together. It didn’t sound hard, but *willing*… Males were slaves. They did what they were told and most changelings did exactly as her family–took relief where it was found. Angelica was determined to be stronger, but this fire! Because she denied her body the contact it craved, she was burning faster. Angelica could feel the evil part of her soul growing faster than her control. It wanted blood.

To keep from spilling it out here, she’d signed up to do it in the legal confines of the Network’s complex. It would give her a male of her own and a possible chance at remission, if she could pick a brave bachelor–something Angelica doubted existed–but it was mostly to satisfy the endless need. At the Bachelor Battles, Angelica was required to spill blood. She was praying it would knock the fire out long enough for her to get to know the mate she chose, so he would come to her willingly. Angelica was afraid of the time they would spend alone together. She didn’t have Candy’s iron control.

It was hard to remember how happy Angelica had been before the change. A part of who she was had begun to fade. Nothing was the same. Angelica loathed the Network and wanted Baker’s enslaved males freed, but she wasn’t sure of her place in the rebellion yet. It was the fire she sought to ease by fighting to the death–live–on wall screens across the world.

“What type of amendments?”

Angelica had almost forgotten Mary and Candice were talking, it had been so long since either of them spoke. She wasn’t the only one deep in thought.

Candice scanned the darkness again, ignoring the men standing guard, but it was hard. Daniel’s pride at doing guard duty was thick, attractive. “More contestants, no limit on visits with the bachelors as long as she doesn’t give mercy. They’ve added the withdraw ropes again. She can withdraw from two matches.”

“She won’t, and I pity the one who tries it with her.”

“Same.”

“I know she’s burning hotter, but are you sure she can do this?”

“Yes. Angel will get her own mate now, and their rule changes won’t make a difference. The broadcast said the amendments had been in the works for a while, but I doubt the timing.”

“They don’t want her to survive.”

Angelica couldn’t stand the thought of her family worrying about it. She rolled over, shrugging off the chills she’d gotten from thinking about unlimited visits with the bachelors. The Network had sweetened the honey pot. “I think they’re just shoring up chances of success, like we do.”

Candice and Mary both turned in surprise, drawing attention from the guards. Bruce and Daniel were standing watch over the small campsite, but they weren’t as sharp as a changeling and someone always stayed awake while they pulled their weight, in case there was trouble.

“They’re covering both ends.” Angelica punched the scorpion scurrying next to her leg, squishing the deadly animal into the hard ground. She wiped the gore off on a rock. “Make it harder and maybe kill off another troublesome Pruett, or follow her straight to the rebels.”

Mary gawked. “How can you know that?”

Angelica’s mind flashed to those dead males, remembering how full of life they’d been. “Because it’s what I would do. They killed a hundred with the last episode. Why fix what’s not broken?”

“They’ll use the same tactics?”

“Yes. We’ll play it like we don’t know.”

“And while you’re inside?” Candice’s frown drew Daniel to hover at her side.

Angelica didn’t hesitate or warn them that she would use her own rules. She said the only thing that mattered. “I’ll act like what I am–a Pruett.”

**Deleted Scene #2**

**“C**ome here, boy!”

Jason cringed against the wall as the changeling woman stomped toward him.

In the bloody straw behind her, the boy’s father rose. Scarlet drops ran down his body like rain.

“Run!” William lunged at the woman to keep her away from his son.

Rankin, still in the throes of lust, rotated from the child to meet the father’s attack. Unlike their earlier battle, William didn’t restrain himself this time. He fought like a woman.

Jason was horrified as his last surviving family member struggled with the changeling who had come to buy him for the Network.

“Run!” William shouted again, using his weight to gain an advantage. He pinned the snarling, kicking, swiping demon to the wall of the barn, hands coming up to her throat.

Rankin felt the danger to her life and flipped into the uncontrollable animal that always lurked inside. She ripped his throat out with her claws.

“No!” Little Jason ran forward, slamming his fists into the woman’s hip.

Rankin kicked, catching the child in the stomach. He flew backwards, hitting his neck on the doorframe. He dropped heavily.

In the courtyard and on the porch, Rankin’s crew gaped in disbelief.

The most timid of their group watched the child, but he didn’t move. “We’ll all go down for this. Killing males is forbidden, even to us.”

“We could report her, but I doubt it would matter.”

“So long as we don’t get sacrificed, I can stick to whatever story she tells. I suggest you do the same.” Lena, second in command, got them in line. “His chest is moving. Get a medical transport ready.”

“He’ll ride with me.” Rankin came to the door and scowled at her crew. She would get rid of these witnesses as soon as she could.

Rankin picked up the boy who resembled his father, her obsession. She headed for the horses they’d tied to the porch upon arrival. “Burn it.”

“What do we put on the report?” her XO asked evenly.

Rankin handed the limp body to a lower member while she mounted her horse. “We found a survivor of a fire and brought him in to the comfort and safety of the Network.”

After a fast glimpse around to verify there were no neighbors to have witnessed the savage attack that had left three citizens and a slave dead, the crew agreed. It would be easier to say little, than to try to invent a story to cover this mess.

Rankin cradled the boy in her bloody arms, mourning his father. She’d wanted William, but his son would do. Jason would belong to the Network legally, but Rankin’s promotion to top Defender was coming next year and then he and every other slave in the complex would be at her fingertips. She planned to train her harem accordingly. Over time, one of them would become enough like William that she could finally have peace. She planned to concentrate her efforts on his son.

# Book Three

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Copyright Book 3

**Forever Changed**

A Novel

by

Angela White

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**Prologue**

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**1**

**“I**s it working?”

“Yes. Any radio within fifty miles should be able to pick up the broadcast.”

Jody paused, worried. “Can they hear us talking right now?”

Lucas smiled comfortingly at the younger man. “No, not until you push that red button. It opens the connection.”

The two rebel males were surrounded by dark equipment with dials and levers coated in seventy years of dust and rust. Under the debris, bloodstains also remained to mark the end of the world. Around the cluttered room, microphones and panels hung from the crumbling ceiling, some with letters still visible. *On Air* was the most common, but several screens also held mysterious combinations of numbers and graphs that only one of the rebels fully appreciated.

“How do you know this stuff?” Jody was nervous and excited. What they were about to do was forbidden. “There hasn’t been a working radio station since our grandfather’s time.”

Except for this space, the station had been cleaned up by their group. Lucas had insisted they keep this space the same as it had been when they arrived. It would serve as a reminder of the past and drive them on when their emotions or physical needs became a strain. “My family always said we shouldn’t forget the old ways.”

“Mine said the old ways were the reason the world ended.” Jody’s voice lowered into misery. “Both of my grandparents voted for slavery.”

“Doesn’t matter now.” Lucas stopped the coming excuses and argument. “Make the call.”

“Do you really believe anyone will come?” Jody was the youngest of their crew; he still had faith in the future. He was only here because his mother had sold him to a brothel that had been liberated a few years ago by these rebels. Jody had been glad to get the break, at first.

“I think we’re about to scare the hell out of anyone who hears us, but eventually, yes.” Lucas grinned. “If *you* call for them, they *will* come.”

Snickering at the brothel joke, the young man pushed the button. “Hello, America! This is Jody, coming to you by radio from New City. If you don’t know what a radio is, it’s okay. Most people don’t. A radio is a way of communicating. If you’re hearing this, you have one nearby and are a part of our new Network! How’s that for amazing?!”

Jody let off the button, waiting in case there was a response. Unlike his friend, he didn’t think anyone would hear the transmissions. Radios were highly sought after for their replacement parts in black market computers and screens. Jody doubted survivors would give up that resource just to listen to strange voices.

“Do it again, then repeat it a few times each hour.” Lucas opened a notebook to record the time and date of the first call. “We are online, my friend. Only good things can come from this.”

Jody was willing to try even though he had doubts. Lucas had rebuilt the radio and then used spare parts to get solar powered electricity flowing through this old station. Their group only had ten members; power had made everything easier. Now, Lucas wanted other survivors to join them. They all knew ten men alone couldn’t stand for long, even if their main population hadn’t been fighting mini-wars over slavery. Men could remain free here in the north if they could handle the brutally cold weather and occasionally defend themselves. Most of the fighting was in the south, where some towns were still trying to follow the constitution.

Lucas listened to the wind beat grit and debris against the building as the storm grew louder. Jody had doubts about this plan succeeding, but Lucas knew who would win this war in the end. Women outnumbered men and they controlled the armories and complexes with the weapons. There was little that men could do in a battle against those big guns, but worse, men like Jody supported the slavery law because as a brothel worker, they got all the sex they needed and then some. Lucas loathed it and them, though he’d never let that show. He signaled for Jody to try again.

“Does anyone copy? This is Jody, coming to you over the radio network from New City. We are in the northeast. You can follow these broadcasts to us. We have power and food. All survivors are welcome, no matter their gender.”

Jody wasn’t sure that last part was such a good idea, but they had all agreed it was what people would need to come out of their holes. Humanity only existed in small pockets that were constantly tearing themselves apart. They needed hope for a brighter future without all the fighting.

“Keep going.” Lucas gestured to the script they’d written. “Word for word.”

Jody pushed the button obediently. “This is Jody, broadcasting from New City in the northeast. We have food and power here. You will be cared for and safe. All survivors are welcome.” Jody released the button to peer up at his new idol. “How long before we hear anything?”

“We’ll see them before we hear them. Radios are out there, but answering would reveal their locations. They’ll come check us out and then chatter will start. From there, we’re golden.” Lucas strode confidently toward the door to the warmer lounge that had been intact except for the front glass. “I’ll be around.”

Jody returned to the script, scanning to be positive he hadn’t missed anything. He liked the idea of being their public voice. It would make him popular with the females who came in.

In the lobby of the station, a dozen nervous men cleaned their weapons and repaired gear that had already been patched dozens of times. Crashed on old pillows and cushions, these men weren’t as hopeful about the transmissions or the plan. They’d agreed because they were desperate. Lucas was certain they would have eventually joined even without the promise of sex and food. Pockets of resistance were getting harder to find, and at least as a slave, these rebels assumed they would be fed. Lucas didn’t care if that was true. He had come to seize the opportunity his grandfather had told him of after they escaped captivity. His father had died in custody, but Lucas wouldn’t. In fact, he was counting on the disease to help build a future that never would have been possible without the female hatred of his gender. *Women will rue the day they betrayed men.*

Lucas gestured to one of the more gullible men, Noah, as he went through. “Let’s get security set up.”

No one argued despite Lucas being new to the group. He had joined them eight weeks ago with a small stock of food and water that he’d given them in payment for safe shelter. When he’d told them his plans, the group had agreed to stick with him and provide protection and manual labor.

For payment, Lucas had promised women to care for their needs. That was the only thing they couldn’t provide for themselves. Their entire group was male. The few lone girls they’d found hadn’t lasted long. Lucas had vowed to find tough fighters who were useful, claiming his radio calls would bring those and many more. The thought of having their pick, as their grandfathers had, had allowed all of the escaped males to agree and keep to the deal. Lucas was thrilled.

*Wait ‘til you see what else I have planned!* He gloated silently as he and Noah stepped out onto the rubble covered street that had sported only animals for the last seventy years. *I’m going to build the world that past rulers dreamed about and the masses are going to worship me for it. All I need to get it rolling is one group of strong women who hate men.* According to his grandfather’s calculations, nearly all women should now fit that profile.

Lucas brushed his black hair out of the way and braced against the harsh wind that tried to knock him off his feet. Lucas scanned the devastation that was being reclaimed by nature. He hoped Jody was able to send a few more transmissions before the coming storm overtook them.

Everyone was angry, but the rage disease was still spreading and mutating. Lucas was counting on it to bring the monsters to these apocalyptic roads in a matter of days. If he handled it right, the women would become the first converts in his new society. If he handled it wrong, he would become a slave to one of the violent new females who had inherited the earth. The weak men in this station were dead either way. They didn’t know he’d been searching for a group like theirs to use as bait. The sound of a male voice was one of the things that triggered these new women. Most survivors hadn’t figured that out yet, but Lucas was very observant.

His grandfather had constructed breeding charts and predicted the behavioral jumps the world was about to suffer. As he lay dying from a changeling snap, he’d confided in Lucas and then sent his only grandson out into the dystopian world to reclaim their honor. Lucas was just insane enough to be sure it would succeed and to not care if he died in the attempt. Anything was better than slavery.

Lucas returned a wave from their group suck up and thief, Wesley Malin, who was watching from the safety of the front lounge door. Everyone called him Weasel.

Lucas continued through the double front doors that had been repaired using clear plastic, two car trunks, and a rusty welding tank. Sporting thick beards and tattered, salvaged clothes, this small group wouldn’t have lasted much longer. Lucas didn’t feel guilty as he subtly studied Noah’s backpack. It held the keys to the man’s truck and to their stockroom, where the guns were kept. Lucas had insisted it would scare the girls off if they saw weapons. He smiled encouragingly as Noah fought the stiff winds to climb up and watch for signs of anyone coming. Lucas was always careful to act like what they thought he was–a kind, caring leader. To accomplish that, Lucas just pretended that the world was watching him. In time, it would be.

In the parking lot of the station, a giant antenna glowed with bright blue lights that barely cut through the haze still lingering over the city. The war had devastated New York, sparing only a few people and relics. This station was behind the skeleton of a large stadium that appeared to have taken part of a hit, providing protection somehow for the radio building and tower.

Until tonight, when they’d switched on the lights, his group had been free to work without interruption because they’d laid low. That had been step one. The station coming online was the beginning of stage two. The final step would start as soon as the first group of angry women arrived. Thanks to the war that killed so many men in every fighting nation, females had inherited the earth. Upon learning they were the majority, women had taken over all government facilities and claimed control of the country. Shortly after, male slavery had been voted into law and recovery had ground to a halt. Seventy years later, there were almost no free males left to resist in the south. Lucas was certain his group was one of the last in the north or east. He’d been searching for the right bait for almost a decade. The only area he had no information on was in the west, but even he wasn’t crazy enough to go there.

“In the absence of true leadership, citizens will follow a grain of sand.” Lucas waved to Noah, who had reached the roof. “I’m a grain of sand right now, grandfather. In fifty years, I’ll be a desert. In four hundred years, this will be an ocean of my ashes. All I need is one clan of heartless changelings with the new physical mutations and no wisdom to recognize my treachery.”

“Lucas!”

He twisted around at the shout. “Yes?”

Jody’s words came out in a quick rush of horny eagerness from the front door. “We got a response on the radio already! Women are coming!”

Lucas clapped the man on the shoulder and went to help with the preparations. Mentally, he gave thanks that his prayers had been answered. His grandfather had made it clear that females couldn’t be beaten physically. The disease was mutating every thirty years so far, once a generation. In the next decade, stage four would kick in. His grandfather said there were seven stages coming, but by the time they reached the fourth, the human race would have transformed drastically.

The conversation had terrified Lucas with images of women becoming monsters who had to have blood from men. That was the final mutation. There was no going back from it. Men would be hunted until there were none left, and then the species would evolve into mammals that could fertilize their own eggs. Or they would all vanish. Both options were unacceptable to Lucas. He’d promised to carry out his grandfather’s plan to combat that future, but he’d also added his own twist. Instead of finding the cure that had to exist in a lab somewhere under this broken land, Lucas had chosen to let the disease run its course. When the final evolution came, his heirs would have such a grip on this land that nothing could break it. He was going to pit these women against each other in every way that he could, forcing them, unknowingly, to kill each other off. A few hundred years of it would see the female numbers cut down.

Those left would be the strongest of their gender, unfortunately, but the breeding programs would modify the males and give them the disease so they could *change* as well. By the time it was accomplished, there wouldn’t be enough women left in America to fight it–exactly the situation that had allowed male slavery. Instead of continuing to fight when they couldn’t win, Lucas was sentencing his gender to horrible conditions for four hundred years and then they would have control that couldn’t ever be broken.

He considered it a fair trade. Everyone knew without pain, there was no gain. He just didn’t think it should have to be *his* pain. He’d been joining groups and turning them in when they failed to meet his bait parameters, but this setup was different. These men were cute, with sweet voices, strong bodies, and no brains. They were half of the proper ingredients. If his relative had been correct, the first signs of this physical mutation should be emerging right now, creating miserable females who didn’t care how much blood spilled as long as they got physical relief. Through that self-serving nature, women would die by the millions and become vulnerable. *We’ll never give you another chance to betray us after this. Four centuries of male abuse will guarantee it.*

**423 Years Later**

Chapter One

**Troubleshooting**

New Network City

**May 12th**

**1**

**“T**he cameras are working again!” Terry swallowed against a sore throat and wiped away sweat. She’d been screaming at subordinates for the ten hours that they’d been without visual confirmation on the Network Rider.

The ruler of the council lowered his hood to reveal male features that immediately drew the eye of every female at the table. He strode over to Terry’s station, leaning against the woman’s sticky shoulder.

Terry tensed, controlling the need to grab what she couldn’t have. She, along with other members, had been promised the cure for the rage disease once they’d proven their loyalty. Until then, it was an internal struggle the females had to be strong enough to conquer. The normally icy meeting chamber was warm and muggy, adding to the misery, but Julian’s voice was the worst part. The other males here had feminine tones, but not Juli. It was clear what he was as soon as he opened his mouth.

“Zoom in.” Juli enjoyed their discomfort even as he mentally vowed to increase electricity production. Rationing power meant no air conditioning for anyone except their guests and certain games, which had to be done to keep the masses from knowing how close the dome was to shutting down every day. It had been this way for a while, though they usually diverted the power from local shops. With so many out-of-towners visiting the city this month, they couldn’t do that without raising suspicion. If their subjects thought they were weak, his plans would be in danger. Their control depended on violence and fear.

Around the table, the rest of the sweating members leaned forward to observe as the biggest screen went from static to a fuzzy view waiting to be focused. As it became clearer, the images brought fear and anger.

“They broke our deal!”

“The Glowers are coming!”

“Do we have anything to hit it with?” Juli wasn’t as calm as he preferred to be, but he also wasn’t panicking like his henchmen. He had hoped the rebels didn’t know about the tribe of desert Glowers and their big captor. Upon discovering that they’d sheltered Angelica and her crew, Julian had ordered troops to kill every Glower found out of their hidden city. He’d hoped it would drive them back into that hellhole they called home, but it had obviously had the opposite effect.

Terry pointed at the screen, where their arsenal flashed up in a short series of lists that had been crossed off. They’d already used most of it to keep control over the centuries. “We could use the smaller rocket and still carry out your plans to hit Canada and China with the larger warheads.”

Julian realized everyone knew about his plot to strike strategic parts of the world. But it wasn’t common knowledge. He glared at the only one who could have told them.

Riana had the wisdom to run for the door, hand reaching for the handle.

Julian’s blade slammed into her spine.

She hit the door and bounced off, falling in a bloody heap.

Members scattered around the room as gasps circled the rest of the table.

Terry ran over to help the fatally wounded woman, but Riana was beyond that.

Julian ignored Terry’s flinch as he retrieved his knife. It was a silent lesson on betraying the oaths that people took to keep his secrets. He wouldn’t allow that, ever.

Juli cleaned his hands and blade on the towel by his seat. The fading rag had once been streaked in blood daily. *I don’t use it often enough anymore.* Julian placed the knife on the table and glared at those who had fled their stations.

Rusty motioned the women to retake their seats. Terry and Shelly were their public faces. To lose them and Riana, would mean a large hassle to find quick replacements for the media crews to fawn over.

Blood pooled around the oddly shaped white chairs, running into the cracks of the white tile floor. Shelly was careful not to ruin her pink shag boots by stepping in it as she returned to the table. Julian’s rage was too much even for a changeling. Others had flipped and tried to kill him, but his body was bigger, stronger, and his anger was deadlier.

Unlike the guards, the council dressed in what they wanted, giving the sterile meeting room an ugly mix of shades that made odd shadows on the windows. Julian especially hated their scarves, which were bright and glittery. The mess on the floor had to be swept nightly. That meant an extra ten minutes before he could be alone with a control method. The council didn’t appreciate how on edge he was, not even Rusty. If they’d known, none of them would have eaten complex food or slept in complex rooms.

Terry lingered by the body, heart ripped apart by Riana’s murder.

Julian pinned the teary woman with a dark glare, deciding her fate. The moment was tense and silent.

Terry remained crouched by the body, terrified that she’d just lost everything. Being Riana’s lover was more than enough reason for Julian to kill her now.

“Sit. Do it right now.” Julian did the same, impatient to address their problems outside the dome. There were more than a thousand people in the crowd around the complex now, all eager to view Sam’s game. Her popularity was disconcerting.

Juli glared as Terry rose. He would kill her later, when they were alone and he could extract a more satisfying pound of flesh on behalf of her lover’s betrayal.

Terry knew it wasn’t over. She slunk to her sweaty seat and tried to avoid Julian’s line of sight.

“Send the smallest rocket we have. Calculate where they’ll meet and blow it up. Send half our troops to round up survivors, half by land, half by sea. No public warnings to tip them off.”

“What are we telling the reporters?” Rusty grinned at Terry. She had rejected him for Riana. Her misery was pleasing.

“Tell them the rebels rigged the train to blow up when it hit the city. They didn’t know what they were doing and it went early, saving thousands of lives, including ours. The public will eat it up.”

“In the meantime?” Shelly wrote down the orders so they wouldn’t miss anything. Julian sometimes went for complicated schemes that required attention to detail and she wasn’t going to be caught slacking or lacking while he was in this mood.

“We keep going with the plans that everyone here obviously knows. We’re going to bomb the leadership meeting, which will devastate the power structure in the west, allowing the remaining half of our Defenders to take over during their power fight. On the way, they will wipe out all known rebel strongholds in the Borderlands. Thanks to an insider in their group, we have two new locations of their dens. Then, we’ll tell the UN the meeting was hit by the rebels as an example of why we can’t sign the Recovery Treaty yet. Our rebels are too violent and have to be captured first. As for the remaining Pruetts, they will be hunted down or lured in. After that, we’ll let the UN inspectors enter. They can watch from a game cell while we destroy their homelands.”

The deep bass of his voice had the miserable women mesmerized, shoved into a place where there was only heat, voices, and the fight for control. The rest of the secretive council immediately began drafting their parts of the plan to complete the world takeover now that Julian had laid it out. He didn’t do that often.

Julian exchanged glances with Rusty, his right hand man. Rusty would supervise the evacuation efforts here, in secret. He was loyal, but it wouldn’t be much longer before the others figured out they had to leave the dome. Julian had hoped the Glowers and their ape master would never be found, but now that they had, another awful part of their past would be eliminated. The contagious tribe wouldn’t be missed. The only deaths that might stir public support against Network control were the troublesome Pruetts, but once Sam died during her game, it would demoralize the rest. From there, they could be squished like insects or rounded up for his use.

“Do it soon.” Julian didn’t care about the sweat dripping from his big arms onto the table. He was studying the screen again, where the giant ape and the Glowers, along with a dozen known rebels, were running alongside the train. The Network Rider appeared to have been seriously damaged, but it was chugging northeast at a steady pace. Julian estimated it would reach his city within two days. In the front car, where the broken glass provided no shield, were several Pruetts. Candice and her valuable prize were clearly leading this charge, but there were half a dozen other wild members of that clan standing behind them or hanging from the handrails–including Chester, Horace, and Sophia.

Julian felt a second tremor of unease. *They went south for help from the Nomads.* Known for their inability to work together, those enemies hadn’t been heard from in twenty years, and only sporadically before then. Everyone assumed the Mexican population had died out. The ruthlessness of the south had become well known during the first two hundred years after the war, but regular trains of poisoned food and diseased slaves had gradually conquered them. It should have done the same for the west coast, but it hadn’t yet.

“Is that Chester Pruett?” Beck, one of the lower ranked members, leaned forward to adjust the screen.

“Yes.” Robert was reading the files. “He hasn’t been heard from in ten years. Chester vanished after blowing up a hub in the swamp that killed three dozen Defenders and four rental males. Our notes say to kill them.”

“Yes, I know.” Julian’s attention went to Shelly, who was typing quickly. “I wrote it.”

Shelly felt his impatience grow. “Predicted area of destruction holds three hundred settlers, four wheat plantations–”

“Just do it.”

“Yes, sir.” Shelly didn’t care about the losses, either, though she might mourn the wheat if the kitchen ran out of bread. She hit the warm buttons carefully, not trusting the old technology they all enjoyed. It didn’t always work the way they needed it to.

“Another wave of refugees are heading for the city.” Shelly switched the view on the monitor. “It’s very close to where we’re aiming.”

They’d known something was going on in that sector by the panicked citizens flooding in. Multiple reports had been filed, claiming battles were happening on their property and squatters were carrying off their slaves. That entire zone was chaotic right now.

Julian reclined, staring intently at the screen. The rebels and their ape weren’t far away now. “No public warning.”

Shelly didn’t care one way or the other. *“This is a control command for all sentries in the east. Those without orders will immediately report to the nearest hub for instructions. Those with orders will carry them out now, effective immediately. I repeat: this is a command communication, coming from the control room of the dome…”*

Around the table, the men shared glances of approval.

The females kept their expressions tolerant, positions precarious at best. They’d sold out their own kind for these power seats, if they could keep them. The males up here didn’t resemble the fragile creatures kept in the cells below. These men were every bit the monsters of the past. If the vaccine or cure went public, this was the future, so these women secretly rejoiced each time Julian delayed any release that might heal their society. At least while they secretly ruled here, females openly ruled the rest of their world. It was immensely better than the alternative. “Launching in three…two…one…”

Julian didn’t watch the screen as the rocket flew into view. He shared a lengthy look with Rusty, his XO and best friend, while everyone else was distracted.

Rusty nodded subtly, telling Julian he would speed up their private plans. They didn’t believe a small rocket was enough to kill the creature and even wounded, their Defenders would be less than effective against it. Leaving the dome was a foregone conclusion. They hadn’t told the others it might happen because Julian hadn’t decided if the other council members were going to be killed by the rebels. Rusty expected his boss to eliminate a few, but not all. However, he didn’t mind the thought of it being just him and Julian again for a while. The last time they’d done this, they’d gotten six months before having to replace the others by using premade clips. It had been great.

Rusty made a subtle sweep of the keyboard and began recording all their voices. He would start making short promo clips now for use during the transition so it would already be done when Julian told him to do it.

In the corner, another screen had been running continuously. Still waiting for word that Sam Pruett had checked in for her time trial, hopefully with her sister there to support her, Julian scanned the information being relayed to the observing world. Sam had twelve hours left to check in. If she didn’t, she would be another wild Pruett unaccounted for–something that would cause him to lose sleep. Julian wanted to know where his enemies were, and what they were doing, at all times.

“Where are you, my black sheep?” He would have to make adjustments soon unless she showed up. If Sam and her sister had gone off grid together to get the weaker slaves to the UN delegation, four hundred years of work was in grave danger.

“It missed!”

“How did that happen?!”

“Now they know what we’re doing!”

“Old missiles are hard to control.” Shelly was already typing in the order that would send the next one. She knew what their leader would order.

Juli controlled his rage and forced himself to wait while the rest of the council complained and muttered. *If I don’t get a direct hit soon, I’m going to kill every woman in this room.*

Chapter Two

**My Flavor**

The Northern Borderlands

**1**

**“Y**ou don’t have to do this.”

In the middle of sliding to her knees, Sam peered up. “Why? Do you stink?”

Baker chuckled, holding still. Her eyes held glossy tints of red that implied she was very tired. He knew better than to trigger her with sudden movements. “You always know what to say.”

Sam laughed, rough hands running over his strong, chilly legs in quick swipes to clear him of any ticks. They’d come through the bramble fields last night and couldn’t light a fire to check themselves or cook a meal. Now that they could see, she was doing a better search. Ticks were the same as they’d always been–nasty, dangerous, bloodsucking parasites that carried any number of diseases.

Around this small valley set among the hills, Network troops were on the move. Coming and going from every direction, it had forced the rebels to take cover. Apparently, the enemy had learned of their ambush and theft of the train. Sam hoped her family was careful. It had been three days. Defenders could have reached them by now.

“All good.” She stood. Heat flared as she stared at Baker’s bare chest. They’d stripped down to almost nothing when they took shelter, hoping any ticks they’d picked up would stay with the clothing. She and Baker had spent the night in a corner of this hillside cave. Her heat had warmed the walls so much that he’d had to switch positions with her. Outside, their escort was enjoying the remaining cool drafts of the Changeling Winds. The dust had finally settled, but it had left gritty traces everywhere. Sam tried to shake some of them from her hair, knowing it was a lost cause. As soon as she got on her Mopar to drive to Adelphia, she would be coated again. The Borderlands were constant battles with nature that few won.

Baker tried not to respond to her standing in front of him in black shorts and a tight black top, but he had to clench his fists to keep from making a sexual advance. They didn’t have a pair of cuffs along. She also had to be at the trials in a few hours and though they were close now, they didn’t have time to waste unless she had another method of transportation lined up. “I mean it, Sam. You don’t have to play their games. Come with me. You’re more useful *alive*.”

Sam refused to travel that road with him, though she wanted to. When she’d told Angelica she hadn’t found a man she hurt to be away from, she hadn’t been lying, but she sensed splitting from Baker might test that. She both yearned for it as a confirmation of her feelings for him, and dreaded it for the same reason. Had she really fallen for this sexy rebel? Now, when they couldn’t be together and she was about to have her pick of the bachelor prizes? Talk about irony.

Baker growled as he stepped on a sharp rock, missing his shoes. They’d trudged through mud on the way here and left them outside last night after clearing the small cavern.

Sam finished her own tick check, and then went to the rear of the cave to collect the bedding. Almost completely round, the cave would have held them and their escorts, but her Runners had insisted on watching for problems. Sam assumed they were giving her privacy, but she hadn’t used it. She had the fight of her life coming up. She had to get set for that.

Understanding she wasn’t going to renounce the choice, Baker sat on a cool rock, wishing he could at least feed her before she left. “Anything I should know about the women in the west?”

Sam’s gut churned, making her frown at the emotion. She didn’t like being jealous. “Meaner, faster, more instinct driven. Just be yourself.” She couldn’t stop the flare of heat between them as they locked eyes. The pleasure she’d experienced with Baker during their two nights would never be forgotten even if she did find a more suitable match in the complex.

*Unbroken.* She flushed at her own snobbery. She wanted a mate who hadn’t been passed around her relatives.

Baker had brushed off enough renters after sex to recognize the moment. Humiliation flooded him.

Sam sighed. “If you keep reading my mind, we’ll have to make an agreement, Baker.”

He snorted at the half-teasing, half-yearning tone. “You don’t want that. You’ve tried my flavor and now you want to taste the new stuff. I get it.”

Baker stood up, anger drawing her like his flirting never could.

“Just remember, Miss Hardass, anyone can make you cum. It takes a mate to keep you satisfied. Those boys can’t do that for *you*.”

“How would you know?” Sam hated to be put into a corner over something a slave wasn’t even supposed to discuss.

Baker angrily jerked his pants up. “I just do. Mark my words, Sam. You’ll be bored after the first visit.”

Sam refused to deny that. It was definitely possible. Just because Candice and Angelica had gotten good men, didn’t mean she would. It was especially true when she considered how hard the enemy would try to kill her while she was in the dome. She might not even get to the first visit.

Sam paused for fear or the urge to withdraw, but the eagerness didn’t fade. She wanted to fight for her life. It was a challenge that she hadn’t conquered yet, but most of her current family had. It was pride and honor, need and heat, adventure and danger–she needed all of that to be satisfied.

Baker didn’t speak on the subject again, but Sam feared he was right. The rebel boss had already given her all of those emotions, had satisfied her enough that she’d been able to sleep next to him for a few hours–a big no-no in her past. Sleeping with a rental was a bond she wasn’t ready for and yet, she’d broken that rule, but the worst part was she’d been thinking about the bachelors at the complex while lying in his arms.

Baker gestured to the rebel who had come to the entrance of the cave. “Everyone set to go?”

Greg nodded happily. He’d spent the night squeezed between Rosa and another Runner, listening to their snores and mutters. It had almost felt like he was in the bachelor cells again. It had been nice. “Rosa said half an hour to let the rest of the fog lift. She doesn’t like the smell of it.”

Baker frowned in confusion. “The smell?”

“Beetles sometimes travel with the fog. They eat their food as they go. It stinks.” Sam wasn’t happy with the delay. It meant another half an hour of trying to avoid the conversation Baker wanted to have.

“I’ll be around.” Sam ducked out into the cool wind. He wanted a commitment, but he wasn’t going to get it yet. If he was right, he would be the real winner. If he was wrong, one of her Runners would be lucky enough to earn his attention. Baker might not know it yet, but he wasn’t ready to settle down. Her crew was. They were all sick of being on the move, of never being at peace. Now, that was possibly over and she was happy her girls might finally have those years of normal life, but Sam wasn’t expecting much for herself. Helping to bring down the enemy would be enough. If she won a nice prize while doing it, that was a bonus for a job well done.

Greg sensed the conflict, but wasn’t sure what to say that would help. Rosa had answered his questions about the mysterious Pruetts, except the answers hadn’t cleared anything up. Despite trusting them with his life, Greg was scared of Candice and her cousins, with Sam being the most terrifying.

Greg helped Baker clear the cave of evidence that they’d been here, both aware of two hulking women guarding the entrance. At the complex, it would have made them nervous and prevented conversations. Here, it was a relief and a temptation. Anything they said would be repeated to Sam or Rosa.

Baker resisted the urge to plant information.

Greg had no such qualms. He wanted to help his friend. “I’ve heard the west has families like hers.”

Baker blanched at the idea. “Won’t be Pruetts.”

“Is that all that matters to you?” Greg scowled sharply. “I know your dad was big on them, but they aren’t that special. There are other families.”

Baker didn’t reply. He knew Greg was right, but he didn’t want anyone else. He’d never really viewed Angelica that way, despite offering her a service that she’d refused, and Candice had never been his in the first place. With Sam, there was the sense that she was perfect for him. He wanted time with her to prove or disprove the theory. However, the family name did give him peace of mind. Was he intentionally marking off all others because the Pruett name meant honor? Unhappy with the revelation, Baker grunted. “Let’s get out of here. They might need a hand on guard duty.”

Greg hid a frown as they joined the Runners. The guards would tell Sam and she would believe Baker was only after her name. *That could be the problem now.*

Greg decided he would ask Rosa to help. He wanted Baker to be as content as he was, and Sam was a terrific match for their rebel leader.

Baker avoided Sam’s post, walking quickly to their bikes to help clean debris from the tires and compartments. He felt Sam’s eyes boring holes into his stiff spine, but he didn’t acknowledge her. She’d ended it, was moving on. He was a man. He would accept her wishes and search elsewhere for his needs.

Sam understood she’d hurt him, but until she was positive of what she wanted, she couldn’t claim him. It wouldn’t be right.

“Fifteen minutes!” Rosa called over the wind.

Sam twisted around so her attention was on their surroundings and not the males. She demanded it from her crew and she followed the same rules.

Rosa saw both of their attempts to fight fate. She couldn’t get Sam to reverse her decision–they’d ridden together long enough for her to know Sam well–but Baker was innocent in so many ways that Rosa was sure he would be receptive to her plan. She leaned over the bike, ignoring the immediate tensing of every other female, including Sam. “You smell good.”

Baker blushed, staring in surprise. “Uh. Thank you.”

Rosa’s hand reached out to stroke Baker’s big arm, honestly experiencing the heat, but not the terrible fire that was so dangerous. Being with Greg had already helped her control. “You and Greg get along...and I’m almost a Pruett.”

Baker realized she was offering to claim him. He hesitated, torn. He assumed she was doing it to keep him from being harassed during their trip west. Now that Sam had ended things, he was once again single. “Can I think on it?”

Sam’s growl echoed across the dusty campsite. She marched toward them with an expression Rosa immediately ducked. She’d known what it might do, but she couldn’t take Greg being upset over his friend.

“You little bitch!” Sam grabbed Baker by the arm and dragged him toward the cave. “Let’s talk!”

As she disappeared inside with a meekly obeying Baker, the Runners and Greg gave Rosa grins and approving nods. They all wanted the black sheep and the rebel leader together. The combination was perfect.

Baker stayed standing when Sam released him and stalked to the opposite end of the cave. The anger coming off her immediately began warming the stone.

Now that she’d shown signs of Pruett possessiveness, Sam didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t going to claim him, but she also didn’t want him free to be claimed by anyone else.

Baker waited as patiently as he could, eager to hear her offer. She had to give him something after displaying emotions in front of her crew.

“Why?”

“It’s not for your name. Other families are strong.”

*Not like mine.* She studied him. “If we were at the complex, how would you convince me?”

“I’m a man, Sam. They’re all boys. I wouldn’t need to do anything.”

Drawn to the confidence, Sam came a few feet closer. “And if there were other *men* there?”

Baker scowled, hands clenching. “When you left, I’d make it clear who I am.”

“What if they refused to get out of your way?”

Baker grunted. “I’d kill for you, Sam.”

She grinned, giving him that harsh games expression. “I feel the same way.”

“Then why won’t you claim me?”

She sighed, forced into giving him the truth. “Because it may not be enough. I’ve always needed more than the rest of my relatives. I won’t put you through that. You deserve better.”

Realizing she was trying to protect him, Baker slid forward and captured her lips.

Sam allowed him the liberty, shivering at the need a simple kiss could bring. She wanted him. There was no denying that. “Will you wait for me?”

“And be your secondary source if you find one you like more in the complex?”

Sam dropped her chin in shame. “Yes.”

Baker slowly retreated, voice sad. “Then I have to give the same answer as back in the other den. When you decide I’m the one, come find me. Until then, I’m a renter and I’ll make my own choices.”

When he turned away from her, something in Sam snapped. *That hurt!* A tear rolled over her cheek and fell to the dirt. *I do love him.* *How did that happen?*

Baker felt her terror, but he kept going, proving he was strong enough to do so if that’s what she wanted. His heart might never heal, but it was a small price to pay for the freedom of his gender. The Pruetts always marked a man in one way or another. He’d known that when he agreed to play with them. Now he had to live with it. “Rosa, I’m considering your offer. I’m under your protection until I choose not to be. Let’s roll.”

When Sam’s growl came this time, Baker and everyone else ignored it.

Chapter Three

**Spooked**

New Network City

**1**

**“T**he missile is in the air, sir.”

The council waited silently for the rocket to reach its target. An equipment malfunction had given them a long hour where the most exciting thing to happen had been viewing Terry’s agony as Riana’s body was dragged away by the robotic cleaner. At least the air conditioning had come back online. Julian had ordered the hound pen cooling to be diverted to this tower. The old equipment couldn’t take so much heat.

“Sir?” Robert, the man stationed over the city monitors, got Julian’s attention. “Sir, we have a minor security breach in sector five.”

Julian came over to peer at the display, still annoyed but no longer on the edge of his control now that the room had cooled off. He did a quick evaluation. The group that had overrun the security post appeared to be more settlers who lived around the city. They were trying to avoid the troops and the coming rebels. “Put them with the other refugees.”

Julian moved to the next monitoring station. He focused on Shelly. “When?”

“But sir!” Robert didn’t want to let them go. “Two of our Defenders were killed. The group who came through was too big for us to handle in that area. We have a lot of fighters out of the city right now.”

Julian twisted around to regard the subordinate, causing silence to fall again. When he didn’t reach for his knife, all of them were relieved.

Julian gestured curtly at Shelly, who was running the monitor over the nearby countryside. “How long?”

“Any second, sir.”

Everyone studied the largest screen intently.

“There!”

The blast hit the train in a perfect shot, sending metal and debris flying. Wildlife took off, fleeing in vain from the explosion that smothered the area with a gray and black cloud of smoke and dust. As the shockwave reached the cameras, their view of the scene abruptly cut off.

“Yes!” Julian pounded his fist on the table. “We got them!”

The rest of the council was relieved, but they didn’t enjoy it as much as their leader. Until the smoke cleared, they wouldn’t know for sure how many of the rebels had been killed.

Rusty concentrated on the static covered display, hoping the camera would come back online soon. If it didn’t, they would be in the dark about the rebels until the team Julian had sent out reached the area. Their leader had also sent Terry out on a mission, but refused to say what it was.

“I wish to address the public. Get me a channel.”

Robert began hitting buttons on the monitor, doing as he was told even though he didn’t believe it was a good idea. He knew what Julian was about to do. Robert thought it would have been better to wait until they had confirmation that the threat was actually gone before announcing it. Details like that had a way of coming back to bite when it was least expected and could be least afforded.

Robert motioned to Shelly to read the script Julian had written.

*“This is a control communication!”* The computer announced it over the New City Radio Network, as it had first been called. *“Pay attention!”*

Those outside the dome quieted, peering up in suspicious fear as the giant screens switched from clips of old episodes to static. Seconds later, the monitors came to life with Terry’s victorious face and cheerful voice. “There have been developments in our battle against the resistance. A short time ago, we launched a counteroffensive against the rebels who hijacked the Network Rider. We have won! Sentries are enroute to collect survivors and bring in bodies for identification. I repeat: the threat in the eastern country is over. Citizens may return to their homes and resume resource production.”

In the hot crowd of muttering, murmuring, constantly shifting citizens, a small group listened to the recording with smirks.

Candice didn’t gloat with her crew. She motioned Daniel closer. There were a lot of hard females around them. Some of those closest were supporters, but with their disease, deals often came second. She wasn’t about to lose her mate in this battle for freedom.

Daniel kept his chin down, almost hidden by the cloak Candice had given him as they arrived in the city an hour ago. Wearing Bruce’s old clothes, he blended with the other slaves who were obediently following their fleeing masters. All around them was heat. A lot of it came from the changelings pressed in around the dome so tightly, but there was also rebellion in the air–supported by hatred for the rulers who had allowed all of this to happen.

Candice felt the warm air shift into something dangerous, but it was too late to hide in the crowd as three large Diva gang members came up behind Daniel. Before she could switch to a safer position, another half-dozen leather wearing slave traders approached from her side.

Aware that things could get ugly, Candice glanced to where the rest of their group had blended into the crowd. Although she didn’t spot them, she felt their response to her need and knew they would protect Daniel if things went crazy here.

Candice quickly pinpointed who she thought to be the main fighter of the gang. She locked a hand around Daniel’s wrist and turned to confront the family enemy. “Can I help you?”

Before the Diva could answer, screens around the city switched to the view of a missile hitting the Network Rider. The destruction increased the tension instead of dissipating it.

As the camera went out and the view switched back to the council woman, Candice controlled her expression. *It looks real. Mary did a great job doctoring that film.* By the time the troops got there and discovered they had been tricked, it would be too late to prevent all those fighters from entering the city. Quite a few of them were already here.

In a moment of Pruett judgment, Candice held her free hand out to the Diva in front of her. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll take down the dome and I won’t kill you afterward.”

To her surprise, the woman immediately shook her hand.

“I’m Naomi. That was what we wanted to talk to you about!” Naomi frowned a bit. “We don’t have a leader anymore. You keep killing them.”

Candice snickered. “So you think I should replace them? That’s funny.” She dropped her hand, openly wiping it down her tattered decoy cloak. The Diva’s sweaty, slightly charred skin was layered with weeks of grit and grease. That came from eating food around cook fires, implying they had been traveling for a while.

*“Anyone caught aiding the rebels will be placed into Vulture Run.”* As the council woman continued to expand upon the consequences of helping the rebels, the crowd grew louder with muttering and comments, snickers, fighting, arguing, and growls. Normally, the shops in this city saw steady traffic during the day, but with this many citizens in town, all of the stalls were being overwhelmed with shouts from those trying to bargain for supplies and entertainment.

Candice scanned the rental clerks, particularly loathing those big females. They had no sympathy for their slaves, only greed. Even their clothes, made of fine fabrics and bright colors, stood out from everyone else. *I’ve never understood that*. *Shouldn’t the product look as good as the owner does?*

In the crowd around her, finery was absent. Most of the locals wore shirts and pants sewn from animal hides or long cloaks that hid threadbare jumpers purchased secondhand from the Network. Few of them were armed, but with changelings, that wasn’t necessary for them to be a threat.

*“Refugees are being given a two-day pass for the work they’ve missed. Do not use the new train to return to your homes. It is off-limits to the public.”* The hooded council woman glared at them all sternly through the monitor. *“No loitering calls will be answered during this time. Anyone caught in illegal areas will be brought in for questioning. Civilians are required to report rebel sightings immediately.”*

As the crowd continued to swell, so did the odors. Blood, feces, and sweat were the strongest, but there were also tempting aromas of males walking through the crowd and fresh food being offered by vendors.

Naomi gestured toward the old subway system. “You can stay with us until her train arrives.”

Candice signaled her group to follow. “All of us?”

The Diva scanned Daniel, and then Candice’s companions who were revealing themselves to be all around the Divas. She paled, nodding. “Yes. We’ve been waiting for this moment for centuries. We’re not going to lose it to internal fighting.”

Almost convinced, Candice followed the Diva through the hot crowd. She almost recognized the woman. Candice hadn’t been here for Angelica’s matches. She and Daniel had watched those from the Borderlands, rooting and worrying.

Behind them, more of Candice’s group faded into the crowd and trailed them without revealing their presence.

The clip of the train explosion was being replayed again, but Candice didn’t try to find flaws with the tape. She had little doubt that the Network would do that when they found out there were no bodies. Not even the ape was there. That furry relic was enjoying the rivers on the trip. He hadn’t been free since being captured shortly after birth and his enthusiasm for nature was causing ripples. Locals were fleeing ahead of him, horrified by the monster splashing through to chase meals that usually hunted the human anglers.

As Candice and her group vanished into the old subway system, screens around the city switched back to shows that had been interrupted. Most of the crowd was satisfied the ape had been eliminated, but they didn’t leave. There was still a sense of something about to happen here, and no one wanted to miss it–especially not if it meant Network control might weaken.

**2**

“Why aren’t they leaving?”

Julian didn’t answer, though he knew. Before Alex could repeat the question, the buzzer sounded, signaling an incoming transmission.

Instead of taking it in his private chambers as he usually did, Julian gestured for Rusty to put it on speaker. As the connection went through, Julian’s anger returned. “What do you want now?!”

There was a brief pause where it was clear the person hadn’t been expecting such a hostile greeting.

“This is Claudette Fife from the United Nations delegation assigned to your country. We have recorded an explosion of minor magnitude in your eastern sector. Are you aware?”

“We’re handling our rebel problem and it would be easier if I wasn’t constantly distracted by calls like these. We have four weeks. Mind your own damn business!” Julian gestured for the line to be cut off.

The delegate continued brusquely over the speaker. “The UN has a responsibility–”

The line went dead.

Julian stormed from the room. The UN was a problem. Plans were in place for it and he needed to be patient, but the rage was consuming. Experimenting on himself had given Julian a mental black hole. He wasn’t stable.

Council members shared uneasy glances of concern–all of them. Though Rusty was firmly in Julian’s corner, he often wondered if he would be found dead from one of Julian’s rages. It was almost as if the disease had mutated again and was now affecting men. Rusty wouldn’t know. Only Julian had access to those records.

Rusty shuddered. If that was the case, he would rather be dead. Watching the women suffer through it was bad enough. He certainly didn’t want to experience it firsthand.

**3**

**The Canadian Border**

Claudette disconnected the dead line with an annoyed scowl. Julian and the Network council had been stalling the UN for years. The rest of the world was recovering, but they had no idea about the conditions in New America–except for the small tidbits they’d been able to glean from timid lads who swore they had escaped slavery. The rest of the world, with the exception of two Middle Eastern nations, had outlawed the practice decades ago.

Claudette increased the volume on the screen that was currently highlighting a rare connection into New America. An episode of the Bachelor Battles was starting next week and the time trials were being run for it. Feeds like this one were almost impossible to hold onto. The Network had a sophisticated communication system based on the old world internet. After the war, the rest of the world had lost access to that precious resource when it was locked down by the American military. The Network was using it to evade broadcasting proof of breaking international laws. Despite the technology, some clips had been transmitted by locals, unknowingly providing a feed for bordering countries to pick up. This one being so clear meant there was someone on the American side of the wall observing the Time Trials on a Network device.

Claudette narrowed in on the line of players waiting for their run. *Is that another Pruett?*

Chapter Four

**Be Careful**

The Adelphia Time Trials Stadium

**1**

**“W**elcome to the final episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

*The war changed all of us in one way or another, and some of us in every way possible.*

“Here’s a happy surprise! We’ll have another of those infamous, bounty hunting Pruetts with us for this episode!”

*We’ve had four hundred years of complete Network rule.*

“Has there ever been a family so merciless, so mate-hungry?”

*It’s past time for someone to challenge them.*

“Samantha J. Pruett!”

Sam didn’t respond emotionally as her name was announced. At this moment during the Time Trial introductions, Candice had probably glowered at everyone. Angelica might even have waved, but Sam didn’t do either of those. She wasn’t going to waste herself in any way during this experience. They were only going to get as much of her as she wanted to give and right now, she didn’t want to give them anything. She walked onto the time trials field amid roars from the crowd. She hadn’t come for the taste of blood or the need to claim a mate, though she was looking forward to those rewards. *I came for the Network.*

Enjoying the cool winds that preceded a storm, Sam took the front spot for a brief moment while the crowd screamed and the other contestants swallowed jealous snarls.

“Samantha has been a Borderlands bounty hunter for more than a decade. Without a mate or children, she prefers to spend her time challenging the harsh environments left by the war. She and her crew, the Runners, are the most feared group since the Ring was killed. As I’m sure you know, Sam’s little sister, Angelica, is one of those wanted for questioning about those murders. She is still on the run.”

The players behind Sam grew nervous at the family reputation being displayed. When Sam considered how it might give her the edge, she let her eyes phase red before rotating to glare at them.

The announcer quickly tried to capture the moment for the crowd. “There’s no fear in that one, folks! Don’t you love her black and blond hair?”

The opponents in the line behind Sam tried to answer her challenge. More than half of them began changing or advancing. The damp, cool air couldn’t put out the fires she would start while here.

Sam smirked as guards rushed over with clubs and electronic batons. She faced the laughing crowd, the citizens who were about to bet their fortunes on her, and slowly opened her cloak to reveal her fighting outfit. It was what she wore on runs. The plain pants and unimpressive top were overlooked for the full belt of Pruett weapons that no one else had gotten to view during the other games.

“That is a lot of killing tools! I’ve never seen so many on one waist. How did she fit them all?”

Sam rotated as the announcer gushed, giving the camera time to capture it in detail. Some were still stained with blood from the train fight. Under these killing devices, Sam’s muscular skin was tanned, beaten, and scarred with more damage than her relatives carried. It was obvious that she’d earned every blemish and knew how to handle each tool.

The players behind her stopped fighting with the guards and began thinking of withdrawing.

Any player could do that until they signed in at the dome, but almost no one ever did. For most of them, coming here was the last straw. They either wanted a cure or to die. *That’s why we usually come here.* Sam closed her cloak. She retook her place in line. The other players were now using the troops between them as a shield.

The time trial stadium was gigantic. It held fifty thousand seats and contained too many entrances and tunnels to count. Most of the stands and booths were thick with guards and citizens who were fighting, stealing, stabbing, and doing all other sorts of activities that Pruetts frowned upon in public. It was like being in an animal den, making Sam’s stomach flip eagerly. She liked the way the field was in an oval lined with concrete barriers to mark the lanes. She assumed personnel used the lack of night races to set up for the different runs. She also admired the top boxes of the stadium, where the rich and the reporters enjoyed 10’x10’ glass booths that allowed them to catch every minute of the excitement.

As the other racers in this set were introduced, Sam kept studying her surroundings. It was rumored that the town behind the stadium was controlled by a branch of the Divas. Sam had never been there. As far as she knew, none of her relatives had. As enemies of that gang, they hadn’t felt it wise to invade their turf unless on an official run. Sam studied the mysterious skyline, suddenly eager to gaze upon something she hadn’t before. Until now, Pruetts had left eastern explorations to their enemies, but that could change during her time here. She wanted to know why the town was off limits.

Sam scanned the racers last. The Snake and the Diva were going to be solid fights, but there was also a rare swamp fighter and a mountain brute waiting in the tunnel to be introduced. Sam had walked by the pair without reacting, but she’d been aware of them and they’d been aware of her. Everyone in the corridor had felt the tension. They just hadn’t known exactly where it was coming from.

“And here is our next group of potential players!”

Sam exited at a wave from the guards. The others hung back to give her a clear path. As they reentered the cool tunnel that led below the old stadium, four large guards approached them.

The other racers scattered as if they knew Sam was the target.

Sam also assumed she was and stopped. She kept her hands still, not wanting to provoke a fight that she couldn’t win. Four guards were no trouble for her, but this zone housed and transported more than four hundred troops. She’d never make it out if she fought them.

“Come with me.” The shortest sentry waved cockily as she walked by Sam. “Run and die.”

“A Pruett run?” Sam snorted as she followed. “You must not know my family.”

“I saw them both at the complex. Great games. Terrific ratings. Will you be as entertaining?”

Sam wondered if the guard wanted a scoop for a favor. That could be arranged. “More so.”

The sentry chuckled, lip curling. “Good, good. It’s been boring at home since your sister took her prize and fled.”

It was a reminder that sometimes Pruetts did run.

Sam was offended by it as she was taken to a lower corridor. From what Angelica and Candice had said, potential players were kept in the bowels of the stadium. Used to communal living with her girls, Sam wasn’t concerned over having to sleep in the same cell as those who were going to try to kill her. In fact, she thought that might put her at ease. Life in the Borderlands was no bed of exhumed roses.

Aware that the escort wasn’t normal, Sam stayed ready to react. They walked by racers waiting for their introduction and other players who should have been resting until their run was called. The crowd thickened into a mass of angry, snarling changelings standing around a dank tunnel that reeked of sweat and rage.

The guard pointed. “In here.”

Sam went first as the Defender opened a rusty door.

“Miss Pruett!” A cheery, familiar voice called a greeting. “How good to finally meet one of you in person!”

Sam listened to the door shut, shocked to find a council member standing in the center of the dirty, bunk lined basement. She scanned for exits first, then evaluated her visitor.

Sam and the tall woman were dressed much the same, with long cloaks that covered the tools and gave only a hint of the muscular form underneath. Sam assumed the brunette was as armed as she was. The theory was confirmed when Terry came forward and her cloak shifted, revealing three knife blades in the front of her belt.

Noting the same details about Sam, Terry beamed graciously. “So attentive to survival. You are a credit to all who have died trying to accomplish what you and your family have with the rebels.”

Sam tensed further. *How can she know I was there?*

Sam cautioned herself. *She doesn’t. She’s bluffing like a Pruett would. Be careful.* Sam walked to an empty bunk along the wall and dropped her kit. Dust flew up. “What do you want?”

Terry frowned. “So abrupt. Is there no time for politeness?”

“Not if you want me to die in the dome instead of here. You know how hard it is to keep the disease in check in a place like this.”

“I do understand.” Terry had fought her way up instead of inheriting a seat. She was the only person who ever had. “But we really don’t want you to die. Just the opposite.”

Sam heard the tone and braced.

“We want you to work for us.”

“My family has been employed by the council for centuries.” Sam was hedging. Candice hadn’t expected this when they’d sat down with the rebels and finished their plans.

“We would like a tighter relationship with your wonderfully talented clan.” Terry still wore a huge smile that looked out of place on her. “We’d like you and your girls to take over the yearly round up.”

Sam stared in disgust. “You want a Pruett to lead The Ring?”

“Yes.” Terry shrugged, voice cooling. “It was your girls who killed the last crew.”

“That hasn’t been proven.” Sam allowed her voice to sound unsure. “I still can’t believe it. I was only away for a couple weeks on my last solo run.”

“Perhaps there doesn’t even need to be a trial for your sister and cousin. If we knew you were loyal to us, Samantha, there wouldn’t be a need for us to wipe out your family like the annoying bugs you all really are.”

Sam grinned harshly. “Honesty! I like that. In return, I’m going to give you some advice. You ready?”

Terry nodded. Her face was now a wall of ice as she braced for bad news. “Do tell.”

“Get out.”

Terry frowned. “We’re not done talking.”

“I mean out of the city and out of Network control, you twit!” Sam sneered. “They sent you to deal with the black sheep because you’re expendable. They knew their messenger might not survive the conversation, but you didn’t, so there’s no way you’ll survive whatever else they have planned. If you value your life, get out now.”

Terry would have argued, but Sam went to the bed she’d chosen and curled around her kit, not worrying over bugs or the new layer of dust that flew up. “Have a nice trip back.”

“Same to you.” Terry reluctantly considered the concern Sam had put in front of her. *Did Julian send me out of the dome for that reason? He said I was forgiven for not telling him Riana was spilling his secrets, but am I really?*

*No. And that’s why I came with my private security team and not complex troops. The Pruett is wrong. I do know how much danger I’m in.* Terry strode to the door. *I’m going to have to do something about Julian.*

Sam smirked as the woman left and angry players began pushing in to claim a bunk. The council was scared. That was the only reason they would offer her relatives a pardon and better jobs. They knew the Pruetts could take them down. That made this game even more dangerous than it already had been. The enemy knew she was coming for them. They would be ready.

*So will I!* Sam appeared to be resting even though she was tensed for defense. There would be a few hundred diseased fighters in here with her over the next few days. Sleep would come later.

The drafty bunkroom continued to fill until all of the beds were taken. There were two minor fights during the time they had to wait for the first races, but troops outside the door shut them down quickly. The Network wanted blood to spill upstairs, not down here where they couldn’t get much from it in the way of ratings. There were cameras in each corner, but only the main guards in the control chamber could view them. The cameras down here weren’t live to the public unless something big happened.

After a few minutes of waiting for problems, Sam realized word had spread of the visit. Some of the racers probably assumed she’d been offered a job or a threat, but everyone knew not to interfere with deals the Network had going. If you screwed something up for them, it could very well be the last thing you got to do before you were tossed into Vulture Run. With that knowledge in hand, Sam went to sleep.

A short time later, her snores echoed loudly through the area, drawing snickers and annoyed frowns at the arrogance.

She wasn’t disturbed.

Chapter Five

**Good Times**

New Network City

**1**

**T**he Diva den stank. It muffled the sounds of the speakers and screens, and the enormous crowd of citizens waiting for the action to begin, but the sewer also held in the smells. It was enough to make Daniel gag.

Candice didn’t scold him for the weakness. Her own guts were flipping. She didn’t understand why the Divas had chosen to remain in the city if this was how they had to live.

Grateful for their thick cloaks and good attitudes, the rest of Candice’s group was unaffected by the garbage or odors. The insects, however, were another matter. No one was happy to spot bedbugs and roaches crawling along floors and walls.

As they wound further into the ground, the temperature rose and the bugs increased. Only vague sounds from the world above them made it down this far. Candice estimated that even if it was storming, the noise wouldn’t be bad.

The ground was damp and squished under her feet from centuries of leaks, but other than that, the route was clear. It was obvious this was a well-traveled path. Candice scanned for guards and threats, but saw none of either. She considered that a mistake on the part of their hosts. She wondered how many other entrances and exits there were to this den.

“We already have some friends of yours down here.” Naomi smiled at them. “From the south.”

Candice wasn’t surprised by that, but she was eager to visit with relatives she hadn’t been around in a long time. The Pruett family was wild and unpredictable, which often caused them to split off and spend most of their time with their immediate kin. The only time they all ever came together was for funerals and fighting. There hadn’t been either since before Daniel was taken.

The bottom of the sewer was dank and chilly, with crumbling concrete walls decorated in graffiti–most of it anti-Network. Despite being enemy lackeys who disposed of bodies and listened at keyholes, the Divas obviously didn’t like their masters. That had given them a common goal, allowing an alliance that never would have been possible otherwise.

Daniel scanned their surroundings with trepidation. Everywhere he looked, slave traders gawked at him hungrily.

As they followed their escort down chipped, filth covered steps, Candice kept a tight hand around Daniel’s wrist. She also memorized which tunnels they took and the easiest way to get out of here.

Daniel was distracted as they hit the next plateau and entered the open area of the subway. Rusting turnstiles and damp walls greeted them, sporting more graffiti and brittle, ancient posters encased in cracked glass frames.

Everyone in Candice’s group wanted to stop and examine the relics, but their escort led them straight to a room next to the dusty tollbooth.

“In here.”

As they went by the booth, they saw the dusty remains of a skeleton that had been preserved. It was obvious the glass doors had never been opened. Candice wondered what kind of germs it would release if that were to happen and then pushed the thought away for the more entertaining image of locking the entire council in there. *We could make it part of a history lesson*. *These were the tyrants of the olden days...*

Their escort shut the door behind them and latched it, then went over to a counter to where an illegal radio sat on a filthy, garbage covered shelf.

Candice’s group settled into dirty chairs after shoving debris aside. Either the Divas didn’t care about hygiene and health or they were using it to discourage trespassers. Either way, it made for an awkward atmosphere where the fighters were leery to touch anything.

Daniel settled for using his sight. He examined every bit of writing on the walls–graffiti and otherwise. There were a surprising number of metal signs explaining employee procedures.

Candice spent the time listening to their escort contact someone on the radio to report they had been collected.

The other rebels listened to the comings and goings of those around them, ready to fight their way out if it was needed.

Naomi hung up the mike and shoved a layer of garbage over top it, not waiting for an answer. “We don’t get many locals down here, but sometimes the young ones want to explore. We’ve had items stolen.”

Candice wasn’t worried about rebellious teenagers, considering that she was one. She gestured toward the door. “Are you collecting an army? I’ve never heard of so many Divas in one place.”

Naomi took the dusty chair across from her. “Since you Pruetts began killing our leaders, again, we have to band together. Our membership ranks have also dropped. People believe if they join us, it’s a strike against them with the Pruetts.”

“It is.” Candice stored the knowledge that her family had targeted Diva bosses in the past. “Why do you want to make a deal now?”

Naomi shrugged. “You can’t take them down without us, so that doesn’t matter.”

Following the usual Pruett strategies, Candice decided to agree. “What do you want?”

“We want you to replace the Network.”

Candice didn’t smile. “I already planned on that.”

Naomi corrected her. “No, you don’t understand. We want you, Candice, to replace the council.”

Candice stared in surprise. “You want me to take over.”

“Pruetts have always been fair, and the Divas are dying. It’s time to stop fighting those who are stronger and join with them, so that we’ll be around in the future.” Naomi sneered. “We’re not stupid.”

Candice recovered quickly. “I wouldn’t have agreed with that in the past, but if you’re honest in this deal, Pruett opinions could ease on the Divas. There’s no reason for us to remain enemies.”

“We agree. But there is one condition that has to be met, otherwise we will join with the Network and tell them you’re coming.”

Candice scowled. “Threats are not the way to get my cooperation.”

Naomi shrugged, unafraid of the glares now coming her way. “It’s not a threat. It’s a promise. If you don’t fulfill your end of the deal, we will be just as much a torment to you as we ever were to the Network. There are still enough of us around for that.”

Candice reclined in her chair, curious. This wasn’t what she had expected. She studied the short-braided brunette. “What’s the condition?”

Naomi glanced at Daniel and the other male members of Candice’s group. “You can’t free them. Ever.”

Over the instant outrage, Candice stared at their host. “You understand that if the males were free, there would be more of them?”

“Yes, and that is the problem.”

Candice assumed the woman didn’t like men. Many of their kind didn’t, despite needing them. The history books were ugly. No one wanted to go back to that. Candice also guessed that because the Pruetts allowed their males more freedom than was normal in their society, and now the Pruetts were about to challenge the Network openly, everyone was worried that men were going to be freed. Candice hadn’t put that together until now. She hadn’t realized the population knew the dome was about to fall. She hadn’t imagined the citizens were paying that much attention, let alone to be rooting for real changes to their society.

“It’s no secret, the way it was before. We have the old tapes and the old broadcasts, the books and the historical graveyards. Men were animals; that hasn’t changed.” Naomi scanned Candice’s companions without mercy. “Just because you’ve managed to tame a few of them doesn’t mean the rest will follow. As soon as we give them freedom, they will rise up against us to retake control of the world. The Divas will never agree to that.”

“Neither will I.” Candice nodded. “Tell your people I will consider the condition.”

That was almost as good as a yes as far as Candice’s group was concerned, which dismayed some of them and relieved others.

Daniel was hurt.

Naomi became angry, clearly not understanding that Candice had agreed. “We mean this, Pruett. If you try to free the men, we will kill every one of them we find.”

“You would endanger the future of everybody to keep us in chains?” Daniel was unable to stay quiet. He was horrified by the deal they were discussing.

Naomi examined him without sympathy. “You are not like the others. Many of the rental slaves also wish for peace, but as soon as the others are freed, the rebellion will be fed. Men will ask for reparations, and claims to families. Kids will be ripped from their mothers arms, and men will shed our blood again.”

“Isn’t there some way we can meet in the middle of all that?” Daniel was suddenly miserable. He hadn’t considered what it would do to the mothers when the men took their children back.

“No. The only way the Divas will support Pruett leadership is if you are all still slaves after it’s over.” Naomi stood up. “I was told you’ll need time to consider your answer and there are others arriving who must also hear my words. I’ll be back to get you in the morning. For your own safety, don’t leave this space.”

When Naomi left, a lock on the door clicked.

Candice swept her group, not surprised to find outrage and concern in every expression. She did the only thing she could in the situation, certain that their hosts were listening through the radio Naomi had left active. Candice could see the green light on the console. She leaned against the buggy wall and tried to sleep, not comforting or explaining. They already knew not to expect it. Pruetts didn’t do life that way. They held their best cards close until it was time to raise, call, or bluff.

Chapter Six

**Something to Chew On**

Adelphia Stadium

**1**

**S**am woke an hour before she’d estimated her race would be called. Trial heats were run alphabetically by family name, so she’d had time to kill. Her jarring afternoon alarm was unexpected by the few changelings trying to doze. Many of them jumped up while fumbling for a weapon, or actually crawled under their bunks for protection.

Most of the racers had stayed alert, doing stretches or workouts in the limited space. They all paused to gawk or laughed.

Sam shut off the obscene racket and sat up. Grouchiness invaded when no cup of cold, stale coffee hit her hand. She dug in a pocket and came up with a large, shiny ingot. “I need coffee and something to chew on. Who wants to cover my needs while I’m here and be considered for my crew?”

Sam didn’t say which crew she meant–her Runners or the Ring–but it didn’t matter. A dozen warm bodies sat up or moved closer.

Sam flipped the token toward the center of the narrow aisle, where it pinged off rusty bunk bars and spun in a neat circle. “The winner is whoever has that after the guards break up the fight.”

A vicious battle immediately ensued.

The other racers laughed and placed bets. A few of them also blocked the doors to delay the guards as noise levels rose.

Sam stretched happily, grouchiness easing. Her Runners often woke her with snarls and fights. Without that noise, the world didn’t feel right.

Sam walked to the tiny washroom while people were occupied, ignoring the sorry state of the facilities. She’d used worse.

When Sam emerged, the bloody fight was over. Troops were pulling two changed females apart as they continued to spew threats and swings, but neither of them had the token.

The gold ingot was in the thick grip of another rare contender and past powerhouse. The dockworker’s webbed grip declared her a mutant. In twenty-eight years on the planet, Sam had never known of one to be allowed to enter the games. *She must be special.*

Sam scanned the damage and the guards.

One of the guards met her eye. “Sorry for the trouble.”

Realizing the guards thought she was about to outrank them, Sam waved a hand. “Then let them go and come join us for the second round. I’m missing a few bodies on my crew if you care to try. We’ll place some bets, have some fun.”

The troops snickered as they understood, releasing the fighters to join them.

“Excellent. Now I just need what I asked for.” Sam glowered at the mutant.

The woman took off to find her coffee and something to chew on.

Sam sat on her bunk as the crowd began to place bets and fighters lined up in the center of the bunkroom to wait for the next token to be tossed.

**2**

“This is the one, folks!”

The sound of a screaming audience rang through the stadium in constant waves as Sam lined up for her first race. Some of the seats had triggers that over-excited fans could fill with ammunition packs if they could afford them. The grenades contained anything from fire to acid water. Sam didn’t care. Her cloak was made for moments like this. So was her body. In fact, her entire life had been.

“This is the Pruett heat, folks! It should be good.”

The speaker crackled as the announcer began to detail the run. Sam ignored the tired speech to scan the corridors in and out of this open field and then the rest of the facility. The stadium sat on the edge of a giant crater that ran for miles. Leftover from the war, this arena and the four block town behind it had been spared. No one understood why.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as Sam stepped to the starting gate. Around her, the other four racers were securing items or staring at the referee holding the flag so they wouldn’t miss the exact start.

Sam waved energetically at the crowd.

Laughter rolled over the arena, along with shouts of encouragement and support.

“Pruett traitor!” The player on Sam’s right spat at her boots.

Evat was a fighting legend from the Alabama swamps, but she was older now and those citizens had been broken by the Network. Angelica had also killed one of them during her show, so the hatred was understandable. Sam grinned. “Was she your kin? Went out pretty fast. Must not have trained her yourself.”

Enraged, the changeling began to flip, drawing boos from the crowd and reprimands from troops stationed near each of the five lanes.

“No fighting!”

“She’s flipping! Get a hound!”

A panel slid open behind them, revealing a dog pen. One of the cage doors slid back and a large hound obediently padded forward.

Evat calmed at the sight of the huge brown and black dog. As it stopped, inches away, her eyes faded to brown fear. “I’m sorry.”

“The hound has her in line.” The announcer got them back on track. “Is everyone ready? They’re starting!”

Evat didn’t breathe until the dog moved. It retreated far enough for her to reach the starting point, which she did with trembling steps. Her rage was gone, leaving only burning misery and awful depression to hold her steady. She took her place without glancing at the traitor again. Evat was the last of her family. She had nowhere to go and no way to survive. She’d come to earn a future or join her relatives, but being here was more real than she had understood. The scent of possible blood–hers–had wound the audience up. They were screaming and fighting, throwing items. The Network might need to kill her to keep control.

Lightning flashed over the stadium, arching in a brilliant display of vivid, forking power that struck something in the distance. Thunder clapped right behind it, dampening some of the feverish excitement. Rain wasn’t a problem, but lightning storms were deadly.

“We’re going to finish this heat of racers and then take a break for the storm to pass.” The announcer sounded relieved. It made sense, considering the reporters and announcers were all crammed in the top observation booths on either end of the field. They were four stories up in glass shacks with antennas, but no rubber on the roofs.

“There goes the flag…and they’re off!”

Sam ran hard and fast, pulling her cloak over her body as she flew through the barrage of non-lethal grenades that exploded across her lane. Dust flew in her face, coating her in time for a blast of acid water that immediately started smoking through her hair where the cloak wasn’t shielding it.

Sam jumped when the ground shifted, spotting the edge of a pit door opening as the dirt fell in.

She cleared the hole, but hit the next pit. She fell through, legs scrambling as her clawed hands did the same.

She caught the edge as she slid and was able to stop falling.

Above her, the audience screamed hungrily.

Below her, an animal of some sort lunged upward, grabbing her ankle with scaly tentacles.

Sam dug her boot into the wall of the pit while she pulled upward, dislodging the hold as she scrambled from the hole.

Sam took off running again, spotting the players on either side of her, but none of the others. The barriers blocked her view.

On her right, Evat hit the same trap of leaping too hard over the first pit to find another one waiting. She disappeared from view, unable to snag an edge.

Sam leapt over the next hole in her lane, aiming diagonally to avoid that particular trap. She jumped again and was able to miss the next opening pit, but dirt grenades slammed into her arm and hip, knocking her against the concrete rail. In the lane to her left, Sam heard a distinctive grunt of death and pushed herself to her feet. The roar of the crowd, combined with the screaming of the announcer over the lightning and thunder, was disorienting.

The huge lane divider provided a small ledge of shelter from the grenades, but not until halfway through the race. Sam struggled forward against the next barrage of hits to reach it, wondering if she was the only one left. It felt like all the seats were aiming for her as dirt, burning water, and small stones pinged off her body in a hail meant to drive her into the next pit.

Chilling screams echoed from the path to the far left, telling Sam to brace as she neared that part of her lane. There was a choice of two tunnels she could take. One was a black opening. Dim light came from the other.

*Let’s take the path less traveled.* She darted into the darkness. As a grinder spun down from the ceiling, she ducked. *Bet the author of that phrase bled a lot.*

The tunnel was short, but it curved sharply several times to keep it dark. Sam’s sight had strengthened from tracking through storms and dark nights to find her prey; she darted through the darkness like a cat, taking a small slice down her shoulder as she neared the exit.

Another grinder spun out of the wall, slicing a large chunk of clothes and skin from her forearm as she rolled under and back into stormy daylight.

Sam tried to gain her feet, but she was immediately knocked into the railing by a chunk of debris she couldn’t identify as it shattered against her body.

Used to taking blows, Sam wished she was getting to deliver them as well. She shoved away from the wall and jumped, rolling upon landing. She broke the finish tape, drawing both loud cheers and ugly boos from the crowd.

Sam stood up, listening for the official call over the rain that suddenly burst open to drench them.

“That’s a record, folks! So, only the Pruett comes out of this heat. Place your bets! We’ll finish today’s sets after the storm lets up. Until then, may you all have a New Network day!”

Sam waved off the medic despite several wounds, then smoothed her burnt curls. She had the start of what she needed. The record, combined with being the only one to finish this heat, would give her good odds. By the end of these trials, she needed to be the favorite. It would stock her credits, but it would also keep citizens flooding into New Network City to observe her game. The council could close down the complex, but they couldn’t stop the blood from flowing. One tyrannical choice was going to sink them. Basing their control on death was a huge mistake.

Sam remembered to wave at the audience before she went into the cool tunnel, bringing fresh cheers. Over them, the roar of coming wind echoed dangerously. The brunt of the storm was almost here. People with phobias would be groaning, screaming, and fighting. Smart folks stayed away from large crowds at moments like this. Sam went back down to the packed bunks. She couldn’t afford the appearance of fear, but she also wasn’t scared. After that run, her adrenaline was flowing thickly. She might not be done performing yet.

Sam entered the bunkroom to find a Diva gang elder sitting on the stone stairs near the center bunks. All the beds were filled with alert gang bangers. Other players, witnesses, were lined up around the grungy walls, obviously hoping she would be killed. Sam had time to wonder if any of them had bet on her survival and then she was grabbed and dragged toward the older woman on the stairs. The elder was covered from hair to toe in leather armor and fury.

“They can’t give you my job if you’re already dead!”

*It’s just one of those days.* Sam brought her rage forward. *Might as well embrace the suck.* With that final sarcastic thought, Sam changed.

Chapter Seven

**Guts and Glory**

The Borderlands

**1**

**I**t was almost full dark before Rosa and the Runners took a break. With Baker and Greg tied securely to the waists of a protector, the wild women had reached the edge of the Borderlands by traveling nonstop. It caused discomfort to the bachelors who weren’t used to spending so much time on a bike.

When they finally stopped, two of the big girls secured the small area Rosa had chosen. Baker and Greg staggered around after being untied, trying to ease their aches and pains without whining. They’d stopped attempting to wipe away the dust hours ago.

Rosa had picked a small valley that was surrounded by big boulders and scraggly trees. Considering there wasn’t anything else in the distance to use for shelter, this was as good as it got in the Borderlands most days. Very familiar with the odd weather and even odder wildlife, the Runners set up alarm poles around the perimeter and then attached cloaks to them to provide a modicum of camouflage as well as a warning.

The two escaped slaves instantly felt better as Melissa made a fire against one of the larger boulders. They didn’t like the dark, though Baker wasn’t as scared of it as Greg was.

Aware of their inexperience in these areas, Melissa took the time to show them how to make a cooking fire. “We dig down a little, so we get underneath the edge of the rock. Then we place these branches over top so the flames are not touching them. The flat edge of this rock can be used for cooking in a bit.”

Melissa began to pull items from her pack, glad of the stiff breeze carrying their scents away from her. She was a strong woman, but Baker’s smell was intoxicating. If Sam really didn’t want him, she did. “This will not hide odors and it will not hide the light. You should only use it when you’re safe or you have enough womanpower.”

In the distance, something howled. Long and sharp, it cut off abruptly.

The men traded amused, intimidated glances. They couldn’t understand how anyone wouldn’t be scared out here, even if they weren’t alone.

Greg and Baker were confused when the big females placed their Network issued sleep rolls on top of boulders and behind trees instead of near the fire where they would get warmth. As Baker studied their nightly routines, he noticed a lot of the gear had come from the complex, despite these Runners being bounty hunters who didn’t work directly for the enemy. As he studied them, he figured out that was what the stolen stashes had been used for and once again applauded the genius of the Pruett clan. When they were in charge, life would be better.

“Over here.” Rosa motioned to Baker and Greg. She got them settled on rolls between two of the Runners, aware of their grumbles at the uncomfortable positions on the rocks.

On guard, Barb signaled for them to keep the men quiet.

Rosa and Melissa put a hand on the shoulders of the men. Greg was cute and Rosa was bonded to him, but the women knew he was only along to keep Baker company. The rebel leader was who they would protect the most if they were attacked.

As tension invaded the air, the bachelors realized there was a problem. Shrugging off the hands, both of them hunkered down on the sleep rolls, scanning the darkness.

Barb’s voice dropped to a whisper. “From the south. Mopars, not horses.” That implied it wasn’t troops, who preferred to use the faster, two wheeled bikes out in this terrain.

It took almost five tense minutes for the Mopars to reach their location. Baker was certain their campsite was gleaming like a jewel in a dark desert. They had the only light in any direction.

As the Mopars finally entered the outer perimeter, the Runners were able to see their company.

Melissa spotted white turbans and flowing tan pants. “Nomads! Aren’t they supposed to be with Candice?”

“Plans sometimes need to be adjusted. We’ve all learned that since changing.” Rosa gestured Melissa to stay with their wards while she and the others went to greet the arrivals.

Greg slid closer to Baker. “Who are the Nomads?”

Baker kept his voice low. “Southern Pruetts. *Wild* ones.”

Greg frowned. “Wilder than Sam?”

“They’re Wanted by the Network, dead.”

Greg and Baker studied the newcomers as chilly desert wind blew across their bare skin. Both men were looking forward to being snuggled in the warm sleep rolls.

Barb studied the Nomads as they arrogantly strode by her without acknowledgment. She recognized the Mopars, the concealing clothing, the weapons and the scars, but not the people. She assumed the Nomads had come on Candice’s orders, but she still treated them like she would any other possible threat. “Let’s see your proof of loyalty.”

It was a shock when one of the Nomads stepped forward and unwrapped the turban over his face. “Right here.”

Barb was still gaping at *his* cruel leer when a knife slid into her stomach.

“Help!”

“Snakes!”

Baker and Greg shouted, but it was too late to avoid the three Snakes behind them in the darkness. The kidnappers had blended in perfectly.

Baker struggled wildly as fighting broke out across the campsite. Swinging, he was hit by something that slammed him against the stones. He collapsed, grunting in pain as he rolled down the rocks opposite the fire.

Right as darkness swam over him in tiny flickers, Baker wondered how Sam was doing in her fight for survival. *Mine isn’t going so well.*

**2**

“It’s okay. Don’t sit up.”

Baker woke to Greg’s comforting voice. He slowly opened his eyes, moaning at the awful pain in his temple. “What happened?”

“It wasn’t Nomads. The Runners took care of it.”

Baker slowly looked around. He found himself in a small cart, much like the one Candice had used to get him out of Alabama. Greg was sitting next to him, presumably keeping him from bouncing out as they chugged through the Illinois darkness. “I heard a male voice.”

“Yeah, they’ve never used our own against us directly before. It took the Runners time to react when they realized all the arrivals were men. It was over fast after that.”

Baker was impressed that the women hadn’t abused the men before killing them. “Where are we going?”

“Rosa wouldn’t say.” Greg’s profile was blurry in the darkness. “She was pissed that Barb let them through. She says it means anyone can sneak in.”

*That explains the tension.* Baker knew handling discipline in a group was always tricky. It was also always necessary. He had learned that the hard way.

The bouncing of the cart behind the Mopar was making Baker’s stomach roil. He slowly sat up, hoping that would help.

The Runners seemed to take it as a sign that he needed to stop because Rosa put her hand up, bringing them to a halt. Baker was disabused of that notion as he spotted the small creek bed. It was dry, probably for a long time from the condition of the bank and bottom as the Runners used lights and torches to verify it was a good location to cross. Behind the creek bed was a small culvert with a high stone top that almost formed a full ceiling. Leaving a sky hole, it would provide shelter for all of them and maybe even hide a fire if they wanted to try that again.

Baker glanced behind them and was surprised to spot a fire glowing in the distance. He quickly figured out the Runners had left the first one burning as a decoy.

Greg unknowingly filled him in. “I hope the wind doesn’t blow the smell of the bodies toward us.”

Baker understood they had burnt the fake Nomads. He knew he should be revolted, but the light would keep predators away while they got a few hours of sleep. He had an uneasy sensation that wasn’t fading despite surviving. Sam was in trouble. That was the only thing that could make him worry this way… “Hey! What about Barb? She was hurt.”

Greg refused to answer, telling Baker he didn’t want to know.

The bad feeling grew worse.

The Runners cleared the cave and made camp slower than they had earlier. Even these big women had their limits and they were getting tired. Baker and Greg were exhausted. Traveling for fourteen hours on Mopars before being attacked and having to travel for another hour was too much. Both of them were asleep in the cart by the time Melissa said it was okay to come into the shelter.

Baker helped Greg out of the cart, both of them sore and stiff.

Yawning, Greg scanned the area and frowned. “This is worse than where we were.”

Baker nudged him toward the entrance of the small cavern, smiling a bit. Now that they were out here on their own, Greg was slowly developing a spine. It was great to hear him complain. When he’d first rescued Greg, the boy had been a timid mouse who shook and curled into a ball when confronted. It had been hard to imagine him ever speaking up for something he wanted.

Spotting danger, Baker tugged on Greg’s arm, stopping him. He pointed toward the edge of the dry riverbank where Greg had been about to step.

Greg freaked out at the sight of the small snake. He dropped the torch Melissa had given him and took off running toward the Mopars, causing Rosa to stop what she was doing to go comfort him.

Baker snickered as he picked up the torch and joined the other Runners. While hiding from bounty hunters, Baker had discovered real snakes weren’t nearly as dangerous as human ones were. Greg would also figure that out.

A short time later, they were all settled in the culvert, enjoying a small fire with a cup of water and a bowl of soup. Neither of the bachelors could identify the meat, but the taste was good and the vegetables were familiar. Not that they had received much of those during their time at the complex or on the run. Network employees ordered meals like this, as well as renters, and the slaves fed it to them.

Around the men, the Runners went about their normal routines as if one of them hadn’t been killed. It horrified the men to know how callous the women were as they dug into the hearty bowls with jokes and calm conversations. They were also a bit revolted at the sloppy eating habits of the escorts who slurped, belched, and chewed with their mouths open. The males ate lightly. The riding and then the attack had taken a toll. Their weaker stomachs couldn’t handle such a mood or meal after spending all day in and out of adrenaline flows.

Hope let out a loud belch, then looked at Rosa. “Can we watch the program now?”

Rosa frowned toward Baker. “Sam said not to.”

Angered, Baker put a hand on his hip and stuck his chest out in a display of manliness. “What are you, my new Den Mothers? I’m free!”

Rosa chuckled with her Runners. It was cute when the men got all puffed up like that. “Turn it on. We might be able to catch the ratings update.”

Melissa quickly took out the often repaired satellite TV that had been put on the forbidden list hundreds of years ago. In all of their travels, Melissa had only known of troops and Pruetts to have them. “We may not be able to get any reception in this culvert. Don’t get your hopes up.”

Around them, the Borderlands were full of movement, but nothing close was human or their alarms would be beeping. Rosa had ordered them placed twice as far out as usual.

“And now, here are some updates on today’s heats!”

Everyone jumped at the blaring announcer’s voice.

“We’ve lost a third of the racers so far, which is low for the first day of time trials. These females are determined to survive this round and claim a mate! Isn’t that scrumptious?”

Baker and Greg both winced.

The Runners nodded in agreement, laughing. They continued to eat and observe the screen that was being tuned in. Static prevented them from observing more than the outlines of the racers, but it was obvious that the broadcast was replaying sets by the reactions of the audience.

Baker leaned in as the announcer detailed what had happened throughout the day. Sam’s race had been scheduled for midafternoon. This was where he found out if she was alive.

The Runners also leaned in to watch, but it wasn’t out of fear for her survival. They were eager for some entertainment after the boring drive and the too-easy fight with the fake Nomads.

“Things got really exciting in the fifth heat today when the latest bounty hunting Pruett came through as the only survivor! You can see from this replay that she took several hits, but it didn’t discourage her bid to win this episode of the Bachelor Battles.”

Almost everyone observed Sam’s race–Baker scowling and the women laughing. Greg didn’t pay attention. He was tucked under Rosa’s arm, happily fed and dozing. He wanted to sleep.

Rosa stroked his arm. This type of traveling would toughen him up. She turned her attention back to the monitor, secretly relieved when Sam rolled across the pit-dotted lane toward the finish line. As she cleared it and the crowd went crazy, lightning struck behind the stadium and the camera went out. The announcer switched them to replays of different races. “During the pause to let the lightning storm pass, there was more trouble with that famous Pruett clan as Sam assaulted a dozen Diva gang members in the bunkroom after her race. Rumors are speculating that she wanted something to bet on while she waited.”

The Runners around Baker burst out laughing, but Baker was more worried than he had been. He leaned closer, hoping to get a view of her. Had she been injured?

“All of the fighters were fined ten thousand UDs for causing a disturbance, but none of them were disbarred.” The announcer continued with excitement. “Several were taken to the infirmary for minor injuries. We have not yet learned if that will lower their rank in these races or in the final choices for this episode.”

Baker yawned, finally coming down from the tension. Exhaustion was claiming him. He hated being away from her. He was positive the Network was going to kill her. They had let her cousin and her sister go, but he didn’t think they were going to do that again. There was no reason for them to let Sam live, but even if she did survive, she would come out of there with a tame, well-trained bachelor to take his place. There was no win in this for him.

The replays ended, switching to updates on different games, but the Runners didn’t switch off the TV. Baker assumed this was an evening tradition and resigned himself to waiting until they were done before he could sleep.

It didn’t take long for him to assume the same position Greg was in, just without the big body of a Runner for warmth. As he drifted off, Baker wondered where Sam was and if she was thinking of him.

In his dreams, Baker made it to the complex, but Sam wasn’t there. The Network had already fed her to their hounds.

Chapter Eight

**Get Used to That**

Adelphia Stadium

**1**

**“T**his is the second day of Time Trials for the next episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

Sam winced at how loud the announcer was, and then caught herself, covering by bending down to verify her gear was strapped tightly. It was something a Pruett didn’t usually do, but she would rather have everyone think that was odd, than to have witnessed her reaction to the loud noise. It was one of the few weaknesses she had, but it still wasn’t the big reason she had never come to claim a mate before.

“For this race, folks, the Network has decided to turn off the audience chairs. That means no projectiles will be fired at the Runners while they race. We’ve also been informed that the pits are closed and the animals have been put away for the weekend. However, all of the remaining races will be held in a single lane.”

Sam grinned. *Hands-on. Nice!*

Around her, contestants that were doing stretches paused to shake their heads and mutter. No one wanted to be in the same lane with her.

Sam wondered if that would allow her to get in front or if they would block her into the rear. Contestants weren’t supposed to kill each other during this part of the trials, but it wasn’t a firm rule. Sam casually tucked her cloak into the straps that would hold it while she ran.

Watching Sam clear access to her weapons from the rear of their set, a tall, thin changeling jerked a hand. “I’m out. Take me out!”

Sam grinned again.

The announcer squealed in delight. “Well, that one was bluffed! We’re now a Runner short. We’ll have to wait while they bring up someone from the next heat of racers.”

Sam took the opportunity to glare at the others, hoping to get a few more of them to duck out.

One more did. A girl with blonde hair and sparkling green eyes, looking like one of the promo models, walked off.

“That’s two! Any others?!”

None of the other players withdrew, but Sam could feel their tension as two more contestants came from the tunnel to join the line. There were eight of them in this heat.

Sam did hold some sympathy for those around her, but overnight, she’d had time to consider how important it was that the council had tried to bribe her onto their upper class payroll. She had chosen to encourage the rumor that she’d been offered a job. It was obvious what the council wanted. The Network always shopped their own ranks before hiring outside help, but The Ring needed a new crew of hard bodies. The yearly roundups couldn’t be interrupted.

The referee at the far end of the lane raised her flag to signal the beginning of the race.

“There they go!”

Sam grabbed the spike pouch from her belt and began throwing them at her competitors.

The other contestants were caught unaware, ducking, arms coming up for protection.

Sam’s aim was deadly, and unexpected. Spikes plunged into arms and necks, sending blood across the field and screams through the stadium. The audience rose to their feet and shouted in blaring support of her actions.

“Well, that’s something we’ve never witnessed before!”

There was a brief pause while the announcer consulted someone they couldn’t hear. Then the speaker opened up again.

“We’re being informed it is not against the rules! Other players will be drafted to take the place of those who are unable to continue. What a great show, right?!”

Sam was busy defending herself against the few players who were wounded and retaliating. She delivered punishing blows with her electronic baton, not hampered by the bruises and cuts she’d gained yesterday in her run and from the fighting. Pruett medications were strong and so were their bodies.

Troops hurried in to separate the fighters after being ordered to save any of them that they could. The Network obviously wanted to prevent this from becoming a habit of racers hoping to eliminate their competition when they didn’t think they could outrun them.

Ducking nasty claws, Sam chuckled and swung her killing tools eagerly. *I’m gonna upend all your traditions. Get used to that feeling.*

**2**

Julian slammed his hand on the desk. “Get a harder crew up there! Do it right now!”

Rusty hurried, but he wasn’t sure that would matter. He honestly expected Sam to repeat the same action every time they brought a new player up until she was the only survivor. It would be another version of the games. The audience would love it, but it would undermine authority too much, so there was no way that Julian would allow it. Wondering if he would be sending the hounds in to kill the bounty hunter on the next order, Rusty opened the radio line connecting them to the control booth in Adelphia.

Julian was furious at the report from their troops. The team had found the wreckage of the train yesterday, but no bodies. No bounty hunters, no rebels, and of course, the ape wasn’t there. Most of the council assumed the rebels were coming to the city next, but Julian understood they had been duped somehow. The rebels were already here.

**3**

“Here we go again, folks… And they’re off!”

Sam reached for her belt, acting as if she were going to repeat her earlier actions. She paused for everyone to react, then took off running down the lane.

The other racers hurried to catch up, but with weapons in their hands and cloaks shifted to the wrong side for easier access, they were caught off guard.

Ten seconds later, Sam neared the finish line alone.

The announcer shouted across the stadium speakers. “The Pruett is so far ahead there’s no way anyone can catch up! That may be another record!”

Sam crossed the line laughing and waving at the crowd. Wanting to avoid the other players charging toward her, she spun toward the corridor to find a group of stern Defenders waiting for her. Each of them had a harsh scowl and a weapon in hand.

Sam stilled as the crowd quieted, everyone curious as to what was going on.

The sturdy sentry in the front came forward with a chip on her shoulder and a broken nose. It was obvious she either didn’t follow orders well or she took them much too seriously.

*This is someone’s private security team*.

“Come with us.”

Sam considered arguing, but she was curious as to what was going on. She allowed the sentries to lead her further into the stadium, aware that they were going up this time, instead of down.

When they came to the small elevator in the middle of the building, Sam guessed she was going to the top of the stadium. No other Pruett had, as far as she knew. “Cool!”

The six guards didn’t smile as they crammed into the small space together, but she sensed that some of them wanted to.

The small elevator dinged as it stopped on the second to last floor.

Sam and her escorts got out and went to the left. She did a quick sweep of the other halls, noting small doors and glowing rings on booths that were in the middle of recording. The Network had an organized setup for the timed runs, but she didn’t observe much security. In fact, other than a leering guard at each end of the hall, she and her small escort were the only people in this shiny hall.

The speakers echoed loudly around them. “There’s a fight on the field, folks!”

Sam listened in amusement as the announcer went on to describe the battle that had broken out when the racers behind her realized they could only come in second and began killing each other. One of them was dead and two more of them were too injured to continue. It had been a good day.

Sam was taken to a viewing box, where the same high-level council member from yesterday was standing near the window. The suite held bright paintings and padded furniture that looked extremely comfortable. However, despite being where the wealthy and powerful handled business, roaches still crawled in the corners.

Terry gestured toward the chairs. “Join me.”

Sam was left alone with the woman again, but this time she suspected they would discuss something more important than her becoming a lackey. A single visit was a surprise. A second visit in as many days was a special situation that would send the media into a frenzy of speculation.

“The Network sent me to offer you a better deal and I’m going to do that. Then I’m going to offer you a personal deal that depends on the notorious honor of your family.”

Sam was curious. Would she be offered another lackey position or would the Pruetts finally be offered a seat at the big table? “I’m ready to listen to both, but I don’t speak for my relatives.”

“We know that’s not true. All of your clan is in exile. You are the only one free and the reason is because you’re here, where we can kill you.”

Sam shrugged. She wasn’t intimidated yet, though she was certain she could be if the woman were smarter.

Terry understood she wasn’t going to be able to force Sam into making a rash emotional choice. She settled back in the plush chair to study her. “How high do you have to go to be obedient?”

Sam chuckled this time. “You don’t have a chair for that.”

“If you refuse the deal, you won’t make it out of this stadium.”

Sam wasn’t impressed. “I already expected that, but Pruetts are pretty hard to kill, so I’m still gonna bet on myself.”

Terry smiled coolly. “Yes, your family is definitely resilient. I’d like to speak to you personally now.”

Sam leaned forward, letting a little bit of her anger show. “I won’t do for you what you refuse to do for yourself!”

Terry realized the changeling knew some of what she wanted and frowned. “Not all of us are as strong as the Pruetts. You know that.”

Sam sighed. She did know that. She’d been surrounded by it all her life. “What are you offering?”

“My boss said you can have the place of top Defender, with a possible promotion to the council upon the next death or resignation, providing you win this episode and remain in good standing.”

Sam wasn’t about to make a choice like that before she’d had time to consider it. “Go on.”

Terry lowered her voice. “The rest of the board has voted to give you an immediate seat at the *head* of the table if you eliminate the person currently occupying it.”

Sam was only surprised that more than one or two of them were involved in the plot. That made it very likely that their boss knew they were conspiring. “It’s hard to do something like that when the target knows I’m coming for them.”

“It’s also hard to do that when the person you’re hired to kill isn’t who you believe they are.” Terry leaned forward, eager to snare the loyalty of a Pruett. “The leader of the Network is Julian. *He* is an evil, ruthless tyrant who will put males back in control of the world. We can’t let that happen. You have to kill him.”

Sam couldn’t breathe. *Him. He.*

Terry waited impatiently for the news to sink in, barely remembering her own shock when she had taken her mother’s place on the council. They had all been lied to for centuries.

Sam was unable to spot a joke or a lie. That scared her a little. “Why are you doing this? What’s making you switch loyalty now?”

Terry’s haughty expression morphed into deep grief. “He killed my lover. Riana is dead.”

Sam felt the woman’s pain. She didn’t like it. “Men really rule this world?”

Terry nodded. “They’ll have every one of us in chains if you don’t kill him.”

This time, Sam was unable to resist the emotional response. Her eyes turned crimson. “You have my word. And if you’re lying, I’ll have your head.”

**4**

As Sam and Terry stepped out of the private meeting area, a small gaggle of reporters rushed toward them, shouting questions.

“Did you offer her a job?”

“Samantha? Sam, are you the new leader of The Ring?”

Sam protectively stepped in front of the council woman, eager to play the role. “Get them out of here!”

She glared at the few Defenders on duty. “This won’t be allowed again.” Implying she was taking the job and knew they’d been paid off to allow the reporters access.

Now trying to contain the excited gaggle, guards paled.

The reporters shoved against the troops now forcing them back to the unguarded stairs they’d come up. Behind Sam, Terry went down the opposite hallway, escorted from the premises. She walked fearlessly between the angry changelings in the corridors and was quickly tucked into the armed transport truck. Terry activated the communicator on her wrist. “We’ve got her. Connect me to the boss.”

**5**

“We have Terry on line one.”

Julian came over to the row of monitors that Rusty was covering. They were alone in his private residence in the top of the dome. Cool air blew over them in luxurious waves.

“This is Julian.”

“She agreed to take the job as head, with a bump to the council later.”

“That’s great. Does she want a pardon for her family?”

“No. She wants them dead. Sam stands to inherit eight million UDs and all three slaves. She said they’re already in the city, to wipe them out.”

“We are trying.” Julian frowned. “Did she have any suggestions on that?”

“Yes, actually, she did. Use the kids. She said the rebels will demand a rescue and we can set a trap.”

“Perfect. Get back here so you can be part of that operation.”

“Yes, sir.”

Julian waited until the connection was off before turning to Rusty. “I don’t trust Terry anymore.”

Rusty was always eager to get rid of another female from their council. “I never did. Do you want me to handle it?”

“Yes. She doesn’t need to know where our new training center is located.”

Rusty agreed. In fact, he had decided to recommend that none of the other members made it to their secret den.

“Let’s also test the new Pruett. Do it at the same time.”

“Who do you want me to send?”

“Robert.”

Rusty knew not to argue with the boss, but he doubted Robert would be able to get close enough to infect Sam unless he was presented as a slave… Rusty began to grin. “I’ve got it!” He spun around to reach the other console, chuckling. “You’ll love this, Boss.”

Chapter Nine

**A Bargain Made**

The Eastern Borderlands

**1**

**“W**e’ll get to the highlights of the heats in a few minutes, folks, but first, we want to bring you this breaking news. As most of the world knows, The Ring was viciously murdered by rebel bounty hunters last month. This station has just discovered that Sam Pruett and her crew of Runners are going to take their place!”

Baker and the Runners froze at the announcement. They had just finished breakfast and were preparing to continue their journey west. This area was a barren desert, smothered in volcanic ash that still traveled on the stronger breezes. While there was a clear view in all directions, the hazy sun and blowing dust made it impossible to see more than a mile or two. It kept everyone nervous.

“Based on this small clip, we believe the position has been offered to, and accepted by, Samantha J. Pruett and her crew of restless Runners! There has been no official word from the council, but as you know, they never confirm these things before they are announced.”

Rosa flipped off the monitor, not wanting to hear anymore. She’d woken with a bad feeling and it had grown through breakfast. She gestured toward the Mopars. “Get us loaded up. We leave in ten.”

Melissa was frowning. “Do you think Sam sold out her family?”

Rosa snorted. “No, but that’s what the enemy will believe. She’s just playing the game.”

Relieved, the Runners continued packing the camp.

Baker and Greg helped where they could, and stayed out of the way the rest of the time. Neither of them spoke. Greg was experiencing effects of all the traveling and Baker was busy worrying over Sam. He didn’t want to go west. He was needed in the east.

They traveled for almost an hour before the queasy feeling grew too strong to ignore anymore. Baker tapped Rosa on the shoulder. “I need to get off!”

Assuming he had an upset stomach, Rosa pulled into a relatively flat culvert and motioned two of her girls to stand guard. She regarded Baker impatiently. “I can give you five minutes to settle your guts, but then we need to keep rolling.”

Baker drew in a breath. “It’s not my guts. It’s Sam.” He focused on Rosa with flashing silver eyes. “You have to let me go back.”

“Why would I do that?” Rosa glowered at Baker as he stepped away from the bike.

“Because we both love her.” Baker came around to stand in front of the dusty woman. “I can’t be across the country when she needs me.”

“She doesn’t need you.” Rosa grimaced as her uneasy feeling grew. “Sam can take care of herself.”

Baker leaned forward to glare at the big changeling. “I’m going back! You are going west to enlist help! Is that clear?”

Rosa wanted to laugh, but she couldn’t. “No.”

Baker tried again. “We need any help you can find in the west. You’ll do better without me along.”

“I can’t let you go. Sam will kill me.”

“Then you’re letting them kill her to save me. You know that’s what she did, right?”

Rosa scowled. “What?”

“Her crew, and her…whatever I am to her, will be thousands of miles away when she faces our enemies. Alone.”

“Candice’s group will be–”

“Outside the dome!” Baker interrupted. “They can’t help her.”

“Then how can you?” Melissa had been listening to their conversation. Like Rosa, she had a bad feeling and no faith in the rebels or the women of the west.

“He can get tossed into a show with her.” Rosa shrugged. “But then he’d be as bad off as she would be. No.”

“I won’t be caught. The bachelors have tunnels and alarms. How do you think we’ve gotten to so many of the prizes?”

Rosa scowled. “You didn’t tell Sam that!”

Baker didn’t back down from her anger. “No, I didn’t. When we were in the Georgia safe house, I also didn’t tell Candice about it.”

“Why the hell not?” Heather leaned over Rosa’s shoulder to listen and ogle. The lure of a slave standing up for his convictions was impossible to resist.

Baker stared at them with coldness he had never revealed. “I don’t trust any of you. You’re women. I can’t endanger all men just because some of you have finally learned that slaves are human, too.”

Each woman felt the blow deep in her guts. All of them were guilty of hurting men in minor ways, but their acceptance of slavery put them in league with their enemies.

“Damn.” Rosa sighed. “That was the sound of brothel use ending for this crew.”

“Sam hated it anyway.” Melissa didn’t look at either man now. She was too ashamed. “We all knew.”

“Yeah, she could go years between visits, but she let us because she’s a good boss. And I’m not saying that because I’m related to her, you know?” Ginny cackled, breaking some of the tension.

Baker leaned forward again to place a chilly hand over Rosa’s wrist. “They’ve let two Pruetts go. What are the odds of a third coming out of that complex alive? This time, she needs help.”

Rosa hid a chill. Baker had mirrored her own thoughts, almost word-for-word. She twisted around on the bike to scan her girls and to get away from his touch. She was happy with Greg, but Baker was hot fire. *Too much for me to handle.*

Rosa counted the nods and shakes of her riders.

Baker observed the silent vote with worry and frustration, but he knew better than to rush them. Runners had their own code and they followed it meticulously.

Rosa jerked a hand at her bike, where Greg was being pulled in the cart. “Pick one and let’s go.”

Baker scowled, stomping to the Mopar. *Looks like I’ll be escaping someone’s custody yet again.*

Rosa waited for him to get set, and then led the Mopar line toward the nearest flat spot. She could feel Baker cursing her and was surprisingly hurt by it. *Damn rebel ideals are getting under my skin.*

Rosa pulled onto the flat stretch and then swung around in a neat, wide rotation that led them in the opposite direction. They would stay at the same cave they’d used overnight and listen to arguments for going on or back. Runners never dashed madly into a fire without proper preparations. Pruetts had taught them that survival lesson a long time ago. If they couldn’t come up with a good plan, they would stick to the one they’d been given and Baker would have to accept that. Rosa didn’t want to tie him up like the slave he really was, but she would. Sam had entrusted his safety to her and Rosa took that honor seriously. The only way Baker would get out of her sight now was if she let him. She hadn’t forgotten who he was or what he was capable of.

Baker held on to the feeling of relief. *I’m coming Sam. Hang on.*

**2**

**Adelphia**

*What am I gonna do now?*

Sam wasn’t sure what to do with herself. After the first two races, each contestant was given a two-day break while the referees finished running through the list of racers. Then they would match up heats for the final race. Until they were ready, Sam had to find something to occupy her time. Her one required interview was already settled with this morning’s hallway incident. Her face was currently flashing over screens as announcers continued to broadcast news of her new job.

Sam spotted the solid red door of a rental booth and reluctantly walked that way. While she was here she needed to uphold the Pruett image and they always spent time with the slaves.

She opened the door and was happy to discover there were no other renters. It was also something of a surprise, considering all the males with their ankles chained to the wall in this chamber looked fresh. They also appeared to be in good health.

Sam shut the door and leaned against it. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared, judging reactions. If they were too scared, she would stay over here while she talked to them.

Instead of cringing away from her, the rentals smiled or waved, trying to let her know they were willing without pelting her with the sound of their voices.

Confused, Sam allowed them to lead her toward the plush couch, waiting for one of them to speak. The Network always demanded they be paid up front. There was usually a Den Mother in here to collect the fee so the council could be sure slaves weren’t stealing from them, but it was just her and the men this time.

One of the males, a shorter copy of Daniel, gave Sam a generous grin and handed her a drink. “Congratulations on your new job.”

Caught off guard, Sam felt the heat rise. She noticed their coloring next and realized they’d been picked out for her. All of them were sandy blond and brave around females. Both of those were so rare that to have them in the same space, fresh and healthy, couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Are you a gift?” Her Runners had done something like this for her right after she’d chosen them.

“Yes. The board would like to thank you for your cooperation.”

Sam spun around to find a tall man with dark hair and fiery blue eyes standing in the shadows near the window. He wasn’t chained. He was so similar to Baker that her heart thudded. “I think I’m going to like this job.”

Robert sat down on the edge of the large couch. “I’m all yours.”

Sam made note of the frowns of the other males, but she didn’t give anything away as she stared at the copy of Baker.

Robert waited for her to grab him, like he’d been told she would do.

Sam let the tension build. She didn’t need the other males to tell her this one wasn’t like them. It was in his leers and confident, cultured speech. The true renters would have spoken softly and been scared while doing it. For Sam, this was proof of the deadly secret she’d been told. She scanned his skin for marks and found none. He wasn’t a renter or a gift. The man now stretching out on the couch in a provocative position to tempt her was one of *them*. “What’s your number?”

Robert stared at her in wary confusion. He wasn’t prepared for questions. “My bachelor number?”

Sam chuckled. “Your council number. Which one are you?”

The rental males stared in shock. They didn’t doubt her accusation. Rage began to fill their hearts and sink in deep.

Robert froze for a bare instant of betrayal and then smiled invitingly, blasting her with his voice again. “Does any of that matter? We can talk afterward.”

Sam nodded. “Sounds good to me. I like blood, so stand on the rug. Makes cleaning easier.”

Now the supposed slave blanched, unable to hide his fear or his defiance.

Sam took a step closer. “What’s your number?”

Caught, Robert sat up and smoothed his ruffled feathers back into place. “Six.”

Sam ignored the rental males, who were now muttering and casting dangerous glares at Robert. “What number was that other flunky who offered me the job?”

“Terry. She’s new.”

“So she’s number ten.” Sam studied the free man–the first she’d ever seen or heard of. “What will my number be?”

“They offered you a seat?!”

Sam laughed at him. “Yeah. I’m guessing it’s yours.”

Enraged, the man lunged from the couch, producing a knife from his pocket.

Aware of the great setup, Sam forced herself to only disarm him with a nasty punch and a fast slam into the wall that knocked him out. She wanted to kill him. He was lucky she was a Pruett.

As he crumbled at her boots, Sam judged the situation. First, she needed to know how the witnesses would react. Attacking a council member was a death sentence, but the tyrants couldn’t broadcast it because then the world would find out there were men on that ruling board.

Sam found the true bachelors in the far corner of the room, not scared like they should be, but twitchy and hoping not to be in trouble.

She slowly unbuttoned her cloak. “Order us a meal and a bottle on the Pruett tab. We’re going to be here for a while.”

Sam knelt down and tied the man’s hands and feet, then wrapped his mouth with a towel that one of the rental males handed her with a fast smile that sent heat back into her guts.

When she finished, Sam hung her cloak up and sat at the small food counter, enjoying the sights and smells around her. These males were the kind she liked at the brothels. It bothered her that the enemy knew her so well, but at the same time, she was also proud of her reputation for sticking to one type, one kind. When she took the buffet choice during the games, they wouldn’t know how to react. “I need some help. Are you in a position to give it and earn Pruett loyalty for your futures?”

The stockiest of the five men held out a gold token that made Sam smile. Those had come from Rosa. “Beautiful.” She motioned toward the unconscious man. “I need him stashed somewhere. It might be a while.” She gave the rental male a sharp look. “You’re allowed to speak.”

The man flushed. “We’ll put him up for you.”

The others nodded, now eager to pay forward some of the abuse they’d suffered.

Sam placed a matching token on the counter. “You are owed a Pruett favor. Try to keep him alive, but feel free to make sure he understands what it feels like to be a slave.”

The men brightened, revealing the side of them that Sam adored. She dug into the food they placed in front of her, not caring what it was.

“Would you like a service, Sam?”

Sam almost choked at the flash of agony and lust. She forced the bite down. “I’m good.”

Disappointment filled the air.

Sam looked around in surprise. “Really?”

More than one of them nodded and smiled at her again, trying to change her mind.

“We’ve been out of rotation for a while and you’re... Well, you’re a Pruett and they always please us without hurting us very much.”

Flames engulfed Sam, testing her control. Crimson filled her eyes. But her heart sent out too many waves of misery for Sam to agree. “Just the body-stashing, please. I don’t have the control right now for anything more.”

The males knew that to be a lie, but they stopped pushing at her warning. Only Daniel had forced a changeling into a snap and then taken her. They weren’t Daniel.

Sam’s problem was that they weren’t Baker.

Chapter Ten

**At It Again**

New Network City Sewer

**1**

**“W**ell, she’s at it again, folks!” Speakers echoed through the monitor. “The Pruett has locked herself in the rental room and refuses to come out. Noises imply she and the stock are having a great time.”

Candice and her group listened to the report in amusement as they waited in the dirty sewer for Naomi to return. They had passed the night sleeping.

“That’s our Sam.” Candice switched off her radio and shoved it into a cloak pocket as the lock on the door flipped.

Naomi wasn’t alone this time. Two large mountain females escorted her in, both sweeping Candice and her group warily.

“We’re ready to meet with you.”

Candice and her group followed Naomi through the subway to another corridor that took them down two more flights of stairs and into the bowels of the subway station.

No one spoke.

The Diva meeting space was the same as the rest of the subway, except that it was larger, open, and filled with people. There were Divas, Snakes, swamp women, Glowers, farmers, business owners, and even a few Defenders, along with representatives from the brutes and the miners. They were all squeezed in together.

As Candice and her group entered the wide area, she did the usual sweep for exits and threats. While scanning, it was obvious that all portions of the New American population were going to be represented. That would make it harder for her to control the outcome.

Before she was noticed by everyone, Candice stopped to study the current mood. There were many enemies packed in together–especially of her family, who had killed more relatives of the citizens here than any other bounty crew had. The classes of the population were seated together, leading Candice to wonder if they had segregated themselves or if the Divas had done that for them.

To her immediate right were the business owners. It surprised Candice to see the famous city vendor, Mama Swank, was sitting in the front of the group. Marked by their expensive outfits and paid Diva guards, they were the first to notice her arrival and fall silent.

To the right of the executives was a small cluster of troops. Behind them was an even smaller group of Snake women. Continuing around the chamber, the swamp girls came next, followed by the starlets and the reporters, who lingered between the groups and the wall with nervous gestures and repeated looks to their private security–also Divas.

A large squad of the gang’s fighters lounged against the walls in deceptive casualness. They all wore the same white tops and shorts, again making Candice wonder if it was intentional or if they just wanted to show off the scars on their big bodies. Pruetts often used that technique, but not usually among their own kind.

To the left of the entrance, the southern Nomads and a small group of slaves were sitting and standing. Medicos and brothel workers, the slaves clustered in the middle of the Nomads and tried not to draw attention. They were being protected by Candice’s friends and relatives who had come from the south, but also by Diva members who leered from their posts.

To the left of the Nomads and toward the rear, were three Glowers. Sitting in front of the desert people was a small clan of miners who were flanking a larger group of farmers. The old woman in the front of the growers was the same older lady Candice had paid for the death of her two hogs at the Tennessee River Crossing. She was the next one to notice Candice and gesture for her group to be quiet.

In a far corner, five large shadows drew Candice’s attention next. Mountain brutes always stayed to themselves. There had only been a few approved for the games in the last century and it was shocking to find them here among so many of the hired hands who had hunted them over the years.

As Candice continued to scan, picking up details, the wide room slowly went silent.

Candice’s group stayed tight around her in a display of protection, nodding to those they knew. Daniel remained by her hip, unable to believe he was around so many females. Despite being with the Pruetts for almost three months, it wasn’t easy to be brave. None of these women were like his owner. They couldn’t be trusted.

Everyone fell silent as Candice advanced, eager to hear what she had to say.

Candice wasn’t sure why there were Defenders in this small crowd, but she didn’t pause to ask as Naomi signaled her to come over and meet someone. Candice assumed it was the newest leader of the Divas, who she would be expected to fight for control of the gang.

As soon as she saw the older woman, Candice had to revise her theory. The wrinkled, scarred lady was more likely the mother or grandmother of the last boss–making her an elder.

Naomi introduced them. “This is Harriet.”

Diva members tensed as Candice extended a hand to shake, but she didn’t hurt the old woman. “Candice Pruett.”

The elder studied her with hard eyes and a firm grip. “You look like your mother did when she came through the games.”

Candice grinned.

Harriet let go. “Sit.”

Candice was curious. How much power did an elder have? She’d never met one. Candice took the single seat across from the matron, being careful not to rock the rickety table between them. It looked as if it would fall without provocation.

Candice motioned to the ground around her, settling her group. She wasn’t expecting problems yet, but it paid to be careful and Pruetts were always that.

As Candice and the elder sat, most people got comfortable on the hard, dirty floor. It was amusing to see hardened fighters flinching from scurrying bugs.

Harriet stood up with Naomi’s help. “Before we start the meeting, I demand everyone show proof of loyalty.”

Candice and her group tilted their chins to show the family crest on their necks. Around the room, others who had been granted that honor did the same.

Candice observed in fascination as each group revealed their secret code to prove there were no spies. The medics and rebels, along with the starlets and the reporters, all shared tattoos that Candice recognized. The mountain brutes came forward to show brands that caused many of the observers to wince, especially the brothel men who had also been marked in such a way.

The Glowers didn’t need to show proof. It was obvious they hated the Network, but the guards and Snakes who didn’t have proof to show were glared at with harsh suspicion.

Across the area, clothing shifted as people continued to reveal their proof. Miners flashed axe scars on their ankles in the shape of a cross. Farmers and business owners held up tokens of loyalty they had received from various members of the groups here, including the Pruetts. Some of the Divas were holding feathers or colored ID cards. Candice memorized the signs in delight. The proof of rebellion had been all around the Network this entire time and they hadn’t recognized it. The most obvious was the gold bangle that Mandy, the infamous Bachelor Tamer, as many of the citizens called the starlet, was holding. An outsider might have assumed she was a rich girl trying to buy her way into this meeting, but Candice recognized the shape of the bangle. Unlike what she had observed in the dome, this shape was a P. *Angelica and I helped make those for my mother a long time ago. I forgot about them.*

“Anyone without proof will now be removed.”

Before many of the fighters could react, the gang spread out into the group, grabbing those who hadn’t shown proof. Shouts and screams filled the air, along with the sounds of death.

It didn’t bother the people who had shown their tokens. They had no sympathy for traitors, but those sounds were a balmy breeze to them anyway.

It took a while for all of their suspected spies and traitors to be hauled away. Not all of them were killed. Half a dozen fled down the corridors. Others surrendered and were dragged from the chamber amid growled threats that they hadn’t been spared. Many of the groups in this room had resorted to cannibalism over the years to survive. It wouldn’t surprise Candice if some of those who had surrendered might not have been better off trying to fight. This meeting consisted of just leadership, which meant all of their subordinates would be waiting in other areas of this dank sewer, and all of those fighters needed to be fed.

Harriet slowly resumed her seat.

It was becoming clear to Candice that this was going to be more than a quick plea for assistance. These people wanted something big from her. To get them to fight, she was going to have to give it. From Naomi’s words, she already knew one condition of this deal, but the Pruetts stood for freedom. That couldn’t ever change or their family would fall.

Harriet motioned to Naomi, who carefully placed a large map across the weak table. “A gift.”

Candice scanned it and lifted her brow. “You have the womanpower and this map of the upper complex. What could you possibly need from me?” She’d decided to play it cool. Instead of admitting she had come here hoping to gain leadership long enough to fight the Network, Candice had realized they thought she needed to be convinced. There was an advantage in that.

Harriet gave her honesty. “Everyone will follow you. Among ourselves, all we do is fight.”

“You couldn’t agree on a new ruler because you’re all afraid I’ll kill them.”

Harriet’s lips tightened. “That was a concern when we discussed it.”

Candice realized they had probably had that discussion while she and her group were waiting in the small, filthy room. She also understood several other groups had probably been locked in as well, simply to prevent problems. She approved.

Harriet opened the meeting. “All of us have concerns about Pruett leadership. We hope to settle those issues now.”

Candice found a comfortable spot in the chair. “I’m all yours.”

Harriet relaxed a little at Candice’s willingness to listen. “Good. In a while, we will break for food and rest, and then come back for a final decision.”

“What happens if the answer is no?”

“Then all of us will go our separate ways and die at the hands of the enemy.”

Satisfied, Candice splayed a hand. “Sell me.”

“What do you wish to hear first?”

Candice scanned the people again. “Tell me who you are and what you want. Be clear so there are no mistakes.” She focused on the Diva elder. “There may be fights over some of this.”

The Diva elder shook her head, making her braids bob. “No, there won’t be. We’ve all agreed not to, and my girls have orders to kill anyone who interrupts this meeting for any reason other than what we deem necessary.”

Satisfied, Candice questioned the troops first. “What makes you betray your masters?”

The leader of the Defenders, Teva, stood up. She was scowling darkly. “They are not our masters. They’re our owners, the same as with the men. Those here with me have sons who are either in the shows or are about to be.” She sat down quickly, aware of all the mutters and grumbling of the crowd. No one had sympathy for her.

“You want your sons to be free?”

“Out of the games and into our custody, to care for as we see fit!” Teva corrected Candice firmly. “We do not support male freedom.”

Candice gestured toward the snakes.

Cora, ruler of the scaly women, didn’t bother to stand up. She clearly didn’t like talking to a Pruett. “We wish to survive without being hunted by either side.”

Candice smirked as she turned toward the swampers.

The leader of the marshy females, clad in black jungle attire that appeared hot and uncomfortable, stood up. “I’m Pawley. I have a sister at the trials right now. We are the last of our line. Swamp clans want the same as the snake women–to survive.”

Starlets and reporters came next, having to speak over nasty comments from many of the others.

“Being a lackey runs in the family. You all know that.” Mandy’s sultry voice caught attention among both the men and women, bringing enough quiet to allow her to be heard. “Ruth is here to represent the reporters. I’m here to represent the actors. There are a lot more of us who couldn’t make it to this meeting without drawing notice. We want the same thing as everyone else. We want to choose our own destiny. Just because our families are sellouts, that doesn’t mean *we* have to be like them.”

Impressed, Candice lifted a brow toward the farmers and miners.

“I am Mona. My group of miners lives near the farmers. We escorted them in. We have to travel together because we’re constantly hounded by troops and when they don’t come through, the rebels or bandits hit us. Because we spend all our time working, we don’t have fighting skills and our clans are dying. We want protection.”

The mountain brutes went next. Their attitudes among polite society obviously hadn’t improved during their exile.

“We’ll kill anyone who comes to our mountain!”

Divas quickly rushed over to quell the women.

As Candice paused to hear the demands of each group, she realized they had skipped the most important one of all. The slaves.

The group of males sandwiched between the Nomads had gone mostly unnoticed during this meeting so far. The rulers of these groups had become leaders by being strong, which meant not giving in to the disease because a man was in the area. That small sense of safety faded as Candice waved toward them. “Who speaks for you?”

The chamber immediately began to warm as a tall, older guy with a scruffy beard and sexy red curls over a bruised face stood. He focused on Candice as he spoke.

“I’m Duncan. We want better working conditions.”

It was a double shock. Both the sound of his voice, which triggered instant heat from every changeling who heard it, but also that he hadn’t asked for freedom. All the representatives here had been certain they would hear that from either the men or the Pruetts, though the Pruetts hadn’t officially spoken yet.

Candice waited for the Divas to calm the situation. “Is that it?”

Duncan’s shoulders slumped. “I already know the answer, so I’m not going to trigger the fight by asking for what will never be granted.”

The few females with a conscience were hurt by his hopeless desperation, but everyone else was relieved. Not having to fight over slavery was a big relief.

“You’re not a representative of all males!” Daniel stood as he shouted. “I want a vote.”

Candice stared at Daniel in shocked approval. “Who do you speak for?”

“I speak for Baker’s rebels in the safe zone.” Daniel wasn’t as scared as he knew he should be. “There are hundreds of us. We outnumber all of your clans.”

The room erupted in chaos.

Daniel stayed standing.

Candice stayed sitting. She was ready to react, but it was also a test of intimidation. Anyone who wanted to shut Daniel up obviously had to go through her. Had she built up enough respect to be able to pull it off? Moments like this would certainly tell.

Diva members were forced to silence arguments between the groups as people fought over Daniel’s words. When there was enough quiet to be heard again, Candice gestured toward her mate. “Daniel is a free man. He holds his own papers. Pruetts do not believe in slavery. We will not support slavery. They have the right to be free.”

The room again went wild at the official word from the Pruetts. This time, Candice tugged on Daniel’s hand to pull him down.

“Stop this!” Harriet finally had to shout to get quiet. Despite the locals agreeing, and even the slaves knowing that it wasn’t going to happen, the Pruetts were still going to push male freedom. It was a frustrating disappointment to those hoping to get this meeting over with quickly and return to their posts before their absence was noticed.

Candice slowly stood, delighted when silence fell. She swept the groups, making eye contact with worried, angry citizens. “We have different traditions than most of the people here. We’re not going to force our beliefs on everyone. That would not be possible if I accept your offer. You’ll have to work this out among yourselves.”

Now there was complete panic.

Candice sat down and began pulling items from her cloak. One of them was a small monitor. Sam’s final race wasn’t for another two days, but Candice was still hoping to get an update on her wild cousin.

“In five days, I’m going to attack the dome.” Candice turned on the TV. “I will take the enemy down, with or without your help. As for leadership in the city, you can kill each other off over it for all I care. I’ll be in Ohio, enjoying the willing love of my *free* male.”

Harriet shook her head at Naomi when she would have protested. “Our bluff didn’t succeed. Give her what we’ve withheld. We’re running out of time.”

Candice looked at Naomi as the woman took a pouch from her cloak. “I’ve already said no. There isn’t anything you can offer to reverse my decision.”

Naomi came over to Candice and held out the small pouch. In a square, it was heavy as Candice took it. She gently opened the bag to find an ancient book in a glass box. She peered through without opening it.

*Marcella’s Manifesto.*

Goosebumps popped out on Candice’s skin*. It’s the missing journal of our post-war family! We’ve been searching for it since before I was born.*

Candice stared in suspicion. “This won’t buy my loyalty.”

Naomi snorted. “Only blood does that, and we’ve shed enough of it. We’re giving you that because everybody here has signed the back page. It’s going to be the founding document of our new country after you eliminate the Network. If you don’t accept, we’re going to kill you all.” Harriet stared at Candice, locking eyes. “That is not a bluff. We want this country founded on freedom from tyranny, including yours.”

Candice shook her head. “Marcella Pruett is the reason none of us have liberty now. She’s the founder of male slavery.”

“Yes.”

Candice was horrified. “The men have suffered enough and until you can understand that, you won’t be able to build the world you’re hoping for. All you’ll do is keep killing each other.”

“That’s why we need you to lead us.” Mandy’s words drew nods from the reporters but frowns from everyone else. They much preferred the starlets to not talk.

“I can’t teach you humanity if you have slaves of any gender. Unless we can agree on freedom for everyone, my answer is no.” Frustrated with the lack of compassion in her fellow women, Candice shoved the items into her cloak and motioned her group to follow. “We’re going to spend the night in the church next door. You have until dawn to make up your minds and then Pruetts will consider each of you enemies due to the threats I’ve received during this *peaceful* meeting.”

As Candice left, it wasn’t a surprise that she was followed by the brothel workers and the medicos. What was surprising was when the desert Glowers and mountain brutes also strode after her, making sure everyone else kept their distance. It was almost as if they had assigned themselves her protectors.

Candice liked it. Both of those groups had been shunned by the Network and everyone at the meeting. Them, she could trust. The rest of the selfish women were suspect and would be for the entire time Candice stayed in this ugly city. She hadn’t forgotten that most of them were longtime enemies and she was certain that they hadn’t either.

Chapter Eleven

**Pruett History**

New Network City

**1**

**T**he church was tall, long, and old, with two stories and a huge steeple that lacked a cross. Daniel could see where it had once been, but time and weather had stolen it. Around the decrepit building, a flat, dirt lawn was dying under countless tents and homemade garbage huts of every shape and color.

“Pick a spot and blend in.” Candice looked at their tag-a-longs. “Don’t stop anyone from coming in.” Meaning they were to stop intruders from leaving, not from arriving.

The mountain brutes and Glowers immediately did as she said.

The renters hesitated. Those tents and shacks held hundreds of changelings who were gazing at the group with low growls and flickering vision.

Aware of the rising tension, Candice held up a shiny gold coin, getting immediate attention from the starving people. “I won’t forget the homeless. No Pruett will.” She tossed the coin to a wrinkled old woman who appeared to be by herself in this sea of angry breeders. “Care for my slaves?”

“My honor.” The wrinkled lady quickly hobbled forward to direct the men into her small shack.

The slaves reluctantly followed the old mother.

“Can she handle this crowd?” Chester was protective of all men.

“No.” Candice sighed. “No one can.”

“Then why?” Chester tried not to get upset. He assumed Candice had a good reason.

“These are my kind.” Candice’s tone mirrored the agony of the homeless around them. “I feel their pain. No one else cares for them. With any other leader, they’ll be dead soon. With a Pruett, they at least have a small hope.”

Candice’s voice carried. As the women heard her words and passed them through the maze of haphazard homes, most of them went back into their shacks. A few of the ragged wretches even came over to stand guard around the shack where the slaves had been taken.

Candice strode through the misery without pausing again, going to the entrance, but her rage grew at the smothering desperation. The enemy was a week away from paying for their atrocities. Justice was coming in muddy, bloody boots.

Daniel had never been in a church. Candice had tried to teach him about God, but it had angered the bachelor. What cold creator left their children to such misery?

As they reached the entrance, he paused at the sights and feel. It was overwhelming–worse than the dank sewer or the homeless camp outside. Daniel knew of the orphans from changelings who had snapped, but he hadn’t understood how young they were. Most of those filling the house of worship were under ten. He’d always envisioned them as troublesome teenagers who refused to work. That’s how the Network portrayed them, but the building was packed with filthy, sickly little girls. Barely clothed, their scarred skin was dotted in sores that glared out around ribs and swollen stomachs that never got enough to eat.

Daniel cringed at the image of kids growing up this way, of *his* children being forced to struggle. His life had been hard, but this was the ugliest thing he’d ever witnessed. His heart broke for each one of them. “They’re just babies!”

“Yes.” Candice placed a comforting hand on his wrist, but didn’t say more. If Daniel still held even the tiniest spark of caring for his former masters, this would help smother it.

The church was stifling, with cobwebs and stacks of religious items perched precariously on floors, benches, windowsills, and pews. It was obvious that cleanliness was not next to godliness here. The people were much the same, covered in filth and desperation.

A cheery voice greeted them from behind the sitting and standing children who filled nearly every pew of the large, dusty building. “Welcome to our place of worship. Come right in!”

Candice stopped in the threshold, with Daniel at her hip. It forced the rest of her kin to wait out on the tiny porch where the wood had holes and mold. It was yet another intimidation technique. A line of legendary fighters would make even the hardest of changelings reconsider causing problems.

The priest who hurried to greet them was dressed in black and white robes, with multiple necklaces that clanked together in the same annoying rhythm as her footsteps.

“You are all welcome he-here…” Irma stuttered as she saw who it was, hand coming down to find support on the grimy pew. “Pruetts!”

Daniel tensed. So did Chester and a few of the others who heard the ugly tone.

Candice extended a small pouch that clinked. She was finally running low. It felt odd to be so light. “A weeks’ rent, priest.”

The tall cleric shook a graying braid, green eyes flickering with tinges of pink as she fought to control herself. “No!”

Mary came through the narrow space, orbs glowing crimson. “Irma.”

Rage flared in the priest, heat baking off her trembling, aged body. “You!”

The kids nearest to the priest scattered through doors and open windows.

“Don’t be here. Don’t be here.” Muttering, Irma scanned the clan angrily. She found Bruce right behind Mary. Irma’s clawed hands ripped into the already damaged wood. “How dare you bring him here!”

Mary sneered at the woman. “Look at him and remember the shame you brought to yourself that you can never repent of.”

Candice observed in fascination as Mary slid behind Bruce so he was completely visible.

To the shock of everyone except his mate, Bruce scanned the priest with hatred. “Hello, love.”

The sound of his voice, even filled with such ugly hostility, sent tears down Irma’s cheeks. It killed her anger, but not the bitterness. “Bastard.”

Bruce shrugged. “I never think about you at all, so maybe I am.” He smirked, tilting his chin so the crest on his neck would show. “A *Pruett* bastard.”

Bruce joined Mary in the rear of their group.

Storing a hundred questions, Candice dropped the coin bag. Personal drama had to come later.

The loud noise caused many of the remaining kids to jump.

“Take it or don’t. We’re not leaving.”

Irma scowled, coming to snatch the bag before anyone else could. She scrubbed away the tears. “Your family goes against everything this place stands for!”

Candice rolled her eyes and led the group up the long, narrow aisle to reach the door near the pulpit.

Irma gazed at Bruce in regret the entire time.

Daniel lifted a brow at Bruce as they followed Candice. The man had just shown more emotion than Daniel had seen from him so far.

“I was born in this city.” Bruce smiled fondly. “She was my mother’s best friend. When I reached selling age, she sent her oldest daughter to buy me.”

Daniel was aware of Candice listening curiously. He had to ask the next question and keep Bruce talking. “Your mom refused?”

“No, she snapped at the betrayal and killed the messenger. Irma kidnapped me in the chaos and went off grid. She knew what would happen. She was waiting outside my window. My mom was able to call a bounty hunter before troops arrived with a murder warrant and took her to the dome.”

Daniel winced. Murderers were either fed to the sharks or put into Vulture Run.

“I was assigned to the case.” Mary twined her hand through Bruce’s in a rare display of affection. “It took too long to track them. Irma had taken her fun and then sold him into the rental program. He was hurt.”

“You got me out of there.” Bruce squeezed her scarred hand. “You even offered to free me. There’s no dishonor for you.”

“How long?” Candice had stopped to cast a dark glare at the priest who was watching them.

“Years.” Bruce’s tone revealed agony that made all of them wince. “I had to be trained before I could be used by the public. When Irma finally realized she cared and came back for me, I put up such a fuss that they sent me back into training.”

“You fought for him?” Daniel was shocked. “Without a bond?”

Mary’s face darkened with hard memories. “I wanted a breeding pass. I was willing to go to any lengths to get one and that was the payment for the run. I didn’t know Bruce at all except for the picture on his missing male file.”

“We met after she won the Luck of the Draw and came to look at the prizes. We were both stunned at the spark.”

“I’m surprised you weren’t born immune.” Daniel looked to Candice as they reached the pulpit. “They love each other.”

“Yes.” Mary guided Bruce into the storeroom. “All final Pruett matches are love.”

“Wait.” Daniel frowned. “How did he go from a rental to a games prize? That’s unheard of.”

“The enemy bought me off.” Mary’s perfectly passive voice that rarely changed lifted in anger. “They trained him to please a Pruett and then gifted him to me atop the bloody bodies of eight other changelings who were also desperate for a breeding pass.”

“That means you were almost a rebel!”

“Yes.” Mary’s voice trembled, but with pride this time. “A dangerous one who had to be pacified to keep from calling the very meeting we’re about to attend.”

Candice scooped up a few of the books and relics stacked by the pulpit, and pushed them into Daniel’s hands. “Learn about these. We’ll discuss them like we have before.”

Distracted, Daniel clumsily stored the items in his cloak pockets. He loved to read. Each time he finished a book, he felt smarter.

“I can’t feed you!” Irma shouted as the Wanted rebels kept coming in. “The Network will know you’re here!”

A second bag of coins flew through the air, smacking Irma in the shoulder. She staggered against the pew, but caught the payment.

“Everyone donate!” Candice jerked her hand. “Show our host some gratitude for her generous hospitality.”

Pruett currency flew through the air.

The priest cowered between the pews from the onslaught being flung at her.

Candice’s amusement rang through the dusty building in cruel waves, causing more of the kids to leave.

“That was mean. She obviously cared because she tried to get him back. Maybe the Network told her to steal him when his mom refused to sell. After all, she’s a Diva and that’s what they do. I saw her necklace.”

Candice recognized Daniel’s defensiveness as a bit of Stockholm syndrome remaining from his time with Rankin. She didn’t correct him or scold. Retraining took time. She directed Daniel into the storeroom after doing a fast scan. “If you still feel that way when we leave, I will apologize.”

Daniel understood there was more going on here and vowed to get those details. Candice would most certainly return to this conversation now that he had registered a complaint. She always did with lessons. Her tone said to pay attention and he would.

Candice settled him in a far corner to wait and rest. There hadn’t been a clan meeting since she was a child. She expected it to take hours. Back then, she hadn’t understood most of what was going on as she guarded a window with Angelica, who could barely walk at the time. That gathering had also been held in a church, but the host had welcomed their clan to the neighborhood. Now, *she* had called the meeting to determine the future of their family. It was fate.

Daniel studied the men and women who joined them, noting they were all tattooed, muscular, and scarred on nearly every inch of their exposed skin. Dressed in similar dark cloaks and boots, only their weapons and facial features stood out.

Candice hugged two of them–a man and woman with leathery skin and leather cloaks over leather clothes. “This is Lydia and Bobby. She doesn’t usually let the baby bird out of the nest. This should be fun.”

The dark haired man flushed as the big brunette laughed and nodded to Daniel.

“These wonderful people are Sam and Angelica’s parents, Amos and Camille.”

Daniel nodded politely. He was unprepared for the big hug from the bushy haired blonde woman.

“Good to meet you, boy!” Amos boomed as he also hugged Daniel. “Welcome to the most hated lineage since the enemy gained control of America!”

Candice chuckled, grateful her relatives were showing Daniel acceptance.

“This is Daniel, huh?” Chester joined them. “He isn’t marked yet.”

Chester’s red curls and beard perfectly matched the intricate braids of the three young girls following him nervously. All of them were dressed in black cotton pants and tops with black sombreros hanging down their muscular backs.

“This is my uncle.” Candice helped Daniel stand when Chester’s shoulder clap knocked him off balance. “He taught us all how to play with fire.”

Chester swept Candice up in growling hug. “I saw your game. Outstanding!”

“Well, you’ve certainly done well for yourself.”

Daniel turned toward the accusing tone as the others quieted to listen.

The Indian man standing at Daniel’s elbow scowled, making his fur headband wrinkle. “You’re cute, too. Figures.” A fur robe outlined thick arms and a bad attitude.

Daniel had enough experience with jealousy to spot the problem. He stabbed out. “You didn’t get picked as a prize. You’re growing old and used, and barely managed to snag someone important.” Daniel sneered at the flushing man. “You’re lucky anyone bought you at all with that record of failure, let alone a Pruett. Did you lie to her or buy your way in?”

Candice stared in surprise. The rest of her relatives burst out laughing.

“Leo bought his way in.” Another woman joined them, favoring the embarrassed Indian man with a delighted grin. “But like a fungus, he grew on me.”

Daniel instantly mistrusted the rental male.

The woman held out a hand to Daniel. Black hair coiled atop her head twinkled with diamonds, as did her tan skin and flowing blue fur gown. She was covered in jewels. “I’m Ivy.”

Candice’s humor was replaced with a cold warning. “Ivy is my aunt and the clan whore. She’ll ride anything she can catch, no matter who it belongs to.”

Daniel snatched his hand away as Leo snickered over his discomfort.

“But I always pay well.” Ivy trailed a soft nail down Leo’s bare cheek. “Don’t I?”

Leo delivered an eager smile, big arms flexing. “Always.”

Warmth flooded the area.

Daniel didn’t get time to ponder that odd relationship, though a thought nagged as more people entered. It was the perfect time for something if he had the courage to reveal the truth to his owner. Candice would immediately add up the clues.

A man and woman in flowing tan jumpers and wide white turbans joined them, escorted by two similarly dressed, extremely beautiful girls who scanned the occupants suspiciously. All of them wore the family crest on their right cheek instead of their necks.

“Sophia and Horace are sugar Nomads from the southern country.” Bruce loved being alone with kin, where he didn’t have to act like a slave. “They oversee the cane farms in the south that supply the city with sugar and fuel loads twice a year when the wagons come through to collect resources.”

Instead of answering, Daniel went to stand in front of Candice. “Will you mark me?”

Candice studied him for a moment where everyone else quieted to hear her response. Only Bruce truly understood. Leo didn’t have the mark. Ivy didn’t care enough to claim him officially. This was a test of Candice’s love, done right here in front of the family. Daniel was forcing Candice to decide if he was good enough to be one of them. Bruce admired his courage.

Candice smiled softly. “I’d be honored.”

Chester grinned, happy with the choice. “Who has a kit?”

Mary took a small box from her cloak and handed it to her daughter, giving Daniel an approving pat on the shoulder. “Don’t be afraid of what you’re about to do.”

Daniel caught the tone, as did Candice as she gently pushed Daniel to his knees. “Thank you.”

Mary smiled at him. “No, my son. Thank you, for bringing back the girl we all need. You’ve saved us.”

Daniel held still as the needle-lined tool neared his neck, determined not to scream no matter how much it hurt. When the pain came, he grinned as viciously as his owner and didn’t utter a sound.

“Very good.” Sophia praised him as Candice helped Daniel stand so they could admire the crest on his neck, but Daniel jerked away from them. He rotated gracefully toward Ivy, hands going to his weapon belt in a fluid motion that marked him a Pruett trainee. “Claim Leo or send him out. This is a *family* meeting.”

The adults exploded with mirth and shouts that Candice didn’t try to quiet. Daniel’s demonstration of clever intelligence had her speechless. He’d known she wouldn’t mark him until he asked for it. She’d told him that. He’d chosen this moment to do it, proving several points and raising a couple more–all without her suspecting a thing.

Candice frowned. *If I’ve underestimated my mate this much, how badly have I done that with Baker and his rebels?*

“You have no rights as a slave!” Leo’s fists clenched at the sore spot between him and his lover. “You can’t do that!”

“He’s right.” Chester overrode the next argument from Leo. “Toys had to wait outside at the last meeting.”

Now on the spot, Ivy sighed. Leo wanted it, but she didn’t. “Wait in the yard. Stay out of trouble.”

Leo stormed from the room, cheeks flushing darker as thick jocularity followed him.

Ivy shrugged, coming over to sit on the single chair that wasn’t covered in dirt or someone else’s gear. “Well, that sucked.” She dropped her kit at her feet, sighing again. “You have no idea what a little bitch he can be whenever I have to tell him no about something.”

Fresh humor echoed.

“The legendary Pruett clan.”

The men and women stopped snickering at Candice’s words. The meeting was beginning.

Daniel sat proudly at her feet, neck aching lightly. The tattoo hadn’t hurt as much as he had expected.

In the lobby of the church, doors opened and closed as locals came in and witnesses left on errands of information distribution. Irma stayed as far away from the rear space as she could get, seething in rage that she was sworn not to show or relieve. Priests were supposed to be passive. She’d chosen this future to offset her crimes against Bruce, but she still wanted him. The heat was a wildfire running through her body. If not for the deal she had made to report runaways and criminals, she might have already flipped.

Candice took out the glass box with the manifesto the Divas had given her. “I won’t support most of this, no matter who lands the job.” She handed it to Chester, who carefully opened it and began to read.



Chester shoved the box at Ivy. “Here. You’ll love this.”

Candice gestured toward the door. “No one comes in and no one goes out.”

Family members who had trainees along motioned them toward the entrance. There were no other exits or windows, making it an odd place to find even a single Pruett and here were six of the legends, plus mates and children.

Candice began taking items from her pockets and passing them to those closest. “Many of us have gathered information–some on paper and some from rumor or observation. We’ll share them.” She drew out a larger pouch. “I also brought snacks.”

It was how their peaceful gatherings began. Breaking bread was a tradition.

Daniel observed in fascination as Candice handled things like she did this every day. It was amazing and a bit intimidating. Mary had told him of the child being born into each generation who was stronger than the others. He hadn’t understood until she pointed out that Candice had her soulmate, but she hadn’t started burnout, despite that always happening fast once a bond was established. It was proof to the people here, especially those who had already suffered it. She was destined to lead.

“This meeting is open.” Mary gave their motto proudly. “Let any who break our trust be crushed under our boots.”

The family responded energetically. “Hear! Hear!”

One of their young guards whistled lowly to get attention. “We have followers coming.”

Short and stocky, she reminded Daniel of Angelica, except this girl had brown hair and couldn’t be more than twelve.

Candice shook her head. “I’ll talk to them later.”

“Got it!” Ruby spun back to face their uninvited guests. “This is a family thing. Get lost!”

The newcomers drew up at the hostility.

“But we need to talk to her!”

“Get out of the way, child.”

“I gave you an answer.” Ruby glared ominously, sending out a wave of fury that marked her as an early changeling. “Don’t make me be mean.”

Candice chuckled, giving the girl’s mother an approving look. “Nice.”

Sophia’s chin went up a notch in response. “I’ve tried hard to honor our ways even though I couldn’t remain with you.” She waved the box on as it made its way around to her. “The real ways, not Marcella’s vendetta.”

Sophia’s other daughter, Glory, joined her older sister on guard duty as raised voices came.

The people wanting to speak with Candice found it annoying, but also cute–until the two children drew knives from their small belts and took up that familiar fighting stance.

The locals grumbled as they left, but they didn’t challenge the kids. That would bring the adults out in the wrong mood. It was also a little scary that they believed their children were deadly enough to handle guard duty in a place like this.

Candice cleared her throat. “We’ll start with the thing uppermost in my mind. Has anyone heard from Tara? We could really use grandma on this. No one causes chaos like her.”

As they began comparing information, Bruce sat by Daniel. “We’ll stay quiet and listen. You know what I mean?”

“Yes.” Daniel was relieved he wasn’t going to be required to participate. He didn’t feel like one of them yet, despite his great act. His scars could be counted on one hand. Their scars were too numerous to count.

“I heard a story last year.” Ivy fidgeted with her ring. “There’s a Pruett in the west. The far west.”

Chester smiled eagerly. “Coastal?”

“I hear she’s a sailor who delivers goods up and down an unwalled portion of that coastline.”

Bruce leaned in as everyone began talking. “Tara Pruett was a wagon driver who circled the country collecting resources. She had five daughters and one son.”

“Grandma liked to sample different flavors.” Ivy gave Daniel a warm glance. “As a result, our clan is white, black, brown, and a few others.” She glanced toward the door. “If I don’t get a breeding pass, the Indian will die out with us. Leo and I are the last.”

Sophia snorted. “*You’re* the last. Leo is just your sperm donor of this decade.”

Ivy flushed, but didn’t deny the claim.

Daniel assumed she was switching partners regularly in hopes of finding a match to produce something other than the burnout that Mary and Sophia were currently experiencing.

“Grandma was a roamer.” Little Glory smiled. “Mommy says we are too.”

Mary nodded. “Many of us are Nomads. We were forced to split up when the enemy began to recognize how much power we had. That’s why Chester’s girls don’t have a mother. The council marked Allison as too strong-willed. She didn’t survive her game.” Mary gave the saddened girls a loving glance. “But you have all of us and you can always count on your family.”

“Hear! Hear!” Ivy called. “Drinks all around.”

Candice frowned at her.

Ivy shrugged innocently. “It’s never too early to get into a mug or a male.”

Candice winced at the tasteless society joke. “When are you going to grow up?”

“When I get what you have, you cold stone!” Ivy bared her teeth. “Wanna rent him?”

Candice let the red bleed through, tone settling into gravel and spiked edges. “Wanna die?”

“Yes!” Ivy glanced away. “But not over your sloppy seconds.”

The relatives laughed again, but Candice didn’t. It reminded her that Daniel had been used before she’d rescued him.

Daniel didn’t like it. Candice being uncomfortable made him angry. He glared at Ivy. “Sloppy is bringing your whore to a family meeting and then trying to rent me in front of him.”

Guffaws and claps filled the room as Ivy flushed.

“That’s enough.” Candice’s hand settled gently onto Daniel’s shoulder.

“She started it!” He crossed his arms over his wide chest sullenly. “I’m not sure she’s one of you anyway.”

Silence fell–a thick one that forced Daniel to backtrack. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

“Not really.” Ivy shook her head, face pale. “I’m not. How did you know?”

“You don’t act like them.” Daniel tried to figure out how it was possible. “Adopted?”

Ivy nodded. “I’m the seventh child Tara had, but I’m from a different litter dropped on someone’s stoop.” Ivy fell silent, drowning in her memories.

“Tara found her in a Borderlands campsite that had been attacked by vultures. By the time she got her back to civilization, Tara had decided to claim her.” Mary gave her adopted sister a warm look. “We’ve loved Ivy since we found out about her.”

*Not sure why*, Daniel snarked, but this time he kept it to himself.

Ivy knew. She shrugged. “I spent years with Tara, longer than any of her other children. If anything, I’m more like her than they are.”

Now the rest of the siblings were forced to accept that they were the different ones.

*Odd dynamic.* Daniel chose to push on to another question he had. “How did she hide a son?”

Bobby grinned. “She told everyone I was a girl. I had more hair then.”

Some of the adults snickered at memories.

“Bobby made a very cute girl.” Lydia grinned at him. “When I met him, the Network had just discovered his true gender and put out an order for his collection.”

“You got the order?” Daniel frowned. “That’s an amazing coincidence after Mary and Bruce.”

Lydia shook her head. “It was fate. Never doubt it. What we’re doing here will bring great and terrible changes to an entire nation. It was meant to be and we are the ones meant to be doing it.”

Reminded of the graveness of their mission, the family all looked to Candice.

“Let’s begin.” She sat down. “One, will Pruetts personally replace the council? Two, will slaves be given freedom if we take control? Three, do we set up the new society based on Marcella’s Manifesto? Four, do we keep the games going? If not, how do we control our society? There are more issues, but we’ll start with these and work our way down. Get comfortable. We’ll be here a while.”

Chapter Twelve

**Local Demands**

**1**

**W**hen the meeting ended, everyone except Candice and Daniel left the church. Besides not wanting to keep all their Pruetts in one coop, Mary and Bruce didn’t care to be under Irma’s roof any longer than they had to be. Candice stayed because she wanted Irma to be uncomfortable. It was also a prime location. They were next to the Diva den and almost able to view the dome entrance from here.

“Are you okay?”

Daniel lifted his chin. “Doesn’t even hurt.”

She snickered tiredly. “Liar.”

The meeting had gone well, but having the relatives together had caused hurtful sparks of mental dissent. It had reminded Candice that some of her clan was still very much like their infamous founder.

She glowered at the box. *Marcella’s Manifesto.* Under that first offensive page was a short booklet detailing the guidelines of the clan. Parts had been remembered and passed down, but the complete text had been lost during the riots in 230AW. Candice hadn’t believed they would ever locate it, yet here it was, intact despite being in enemy hands.

Candice strolled to the softly lit den of the church, where she was visible from the main entrance. She settled on the window ledge and opened the box.

The pages of the booklet had been laminated a long time ago, but the material was brittle enough to make her retrieve a pair of tweezers from her kit. Turning the pages would be harder on her, but easier on the fragile book that had just been subjected to the rough hands of her kin.

Daniel found a spot nearby to lurk and blend. She would appear unprotected, giving him a small advantage if there was trouble, but it would also keep him from drawing attention. Males weren’t allowed in any of these places. Daniel had assumed their rulers didn’t want rebels to have a place to hide or meet, but now he believed it was to keep men from learning anything not censored to match propaganda. The only education slaves received was basic math and spelling, with brief, punishing lessons on past brutalities that made them ashamed to have been born with a pole instead of a hole.

Daniel scanned the front of the building, where the priest and her few helpers were now feeding the orphans. The condition of the kids was appalling, the numbers staggering. He had no idea how the poor church could feed so many.

As he had the thought, a handful of business locals approached the church with full arms.

Irma and her helpers hurried out to gather the boxes, but she didn’t pay for them.

Daniel observed the donations in surprise. He hadn’t believed people in this city cared about each other at all.

“Grandchildren.” Candice didn’t look up from the page that she was busy memorizing. She would make a copy later when there was time.

Daniel gaped in horror. *Illegal kids*. He hadn’t considered that some of the orphans actually had living relatives. How terrible to not be able to take them in without fear of the harsh reproductive laws! The Network put the birth control chemicals in the vaccination and the food, but not everyone ate from Network stocks or got their shots on time, making this possible.

Daniel realized that was likely how Tara Pruett had been able to birth so many children. He just wasn’t sure how she’d been able to bring them into open society without paying the price of death.

The line of suppliers ended, but the children kept coming. They fidgeted and fought like the adults would have in a line, all needing care that the church couldn’t provide.

“I can fix some of this if I accept the Diva offer. It isn’t just the slaves who are suffering.”

Daniel knew Candice wouldn’t have agreed even if he hadn’t spoken up at the meeting. She was trying to teach him something; he tried hard to figure it out while waiting for more information.

Candice loved the way Daniel absorbed her lessons so intently. Sometimes it didn’t even seem like he breathed until she was finished. “You’ve heard of the frog in the pot?”

Daniel nodded slowly. “It’s heated so slowly that it doesn’t realize it’s being cooked until it’s too late to jump out.”

“Very good.” Candice smiled at him.

Daniel flushed, returning the emotion.

Candice cleared her throat. “Societies are often handled the same. The enemy has been doing it for a long time. These people expect it.”

Disappointment slapped him. “We’ll get stages of freedom.”

“Yes.” Candice grunted. “Can you imagine all slaves being freed at once?”

“Yes! And I’ve thought about it. I don’t believe we would take babies from their mothers.”

“But isn’t that exactly what Baker and Jason have planned for theirs? And what you supported before the mountain was blown up with us in it? What about your own offspring?”

Trapped, Daniel snapped his mouth shut. *I don’t like this lesson.*

Candice knew. She didn’t like it either, but a choice this big had to be fairly considered from every angle. “Those men will need food and clothes, shelter, and protection from obsessed mates who will try to take them back by force. They will have to be taught to care for their children before they can be in charge of those innocent lives. Households have to be set up. Rental personnel will need medical care and monitoring like they receive in the complex. The list of details to handle is enormous, Daniel. Please be sure you understand where this could take us.”

Daniel figured out what she meant, but he couldn’t question the odds of a new gender war because a new swarm of orphans shoved into the church and ran toward Candice.

“Stay where you are.” She pointed at Daniel as she tossed a quick handful of coins into the air from her pockets before the children could mob and rob them. “Get out of here.” Her eyes flickered pink as the kids scrambled for the cash.

Instantly terrified, all but one of the kids ran. The remaining girl was about nine, sporting scraggly braids that hung to her thin hips. The only advantage Daniel saw was that she was tall. In time, her body might fill out to match and allow her to become a good fighter. Right now, she was a lost pup pretending to be a hound.

Candice gave the girl a deep scan, observing abuses and signs of a survivor. Wearing leather armor too big for her, it was obvious the kid was a thief.

*A good one*, Candice allowed, sweeping real shoes and even a ribbon in her dusty braids. The girl was a true scrounger if she had enough to sell and enough to keep. “I need items.”

The girl studied her. “Are you really one of them Pruetts?”

Candice tilted her chin so the child could view the family crest. “Yes.”

“Then I need something, too.” The girl crossed her arms over a flat chest. Both wrists had vicious defensive slashes that were healing.

Daniel hid a smile. She was a brave little thing.

Candice was intrigued. “What do you need?”

“We want Den Mothers. We voted.”

“Voted.” Candice stared in delight. “You’ve organized the orphans!”

The girl nodded. “I’m the only one of us that can get in the dome to steal. I provide the most food, so I get two votes.”

“Which lets it go the way you want?”

“Every time.” The girl scanned Daniel warily. She didn’t usually have contact with males. “I’ll get you in, but you have to give us Den Mothers. We’re tired of being alone and sick.”

Candice held out a hand. “You have a deal, my friend.”

“Lea.” The girl quickly touched palms and then fled to tell the other orphans the news.

“Here comes another group.” Daniel nervously studied the opposite entrance. “They’re slave renters. They own all the booths that line the dome.”

Before Daniel finished speaking, Candice had gained her feet with a weapon in each hand.

Everyone remaining in the church–Irma, her helpers and a few homeless worshipers determined to be fed–froze as the mood grew icy.

“Free rentals for life, for all of your kin.” One of the slavers tried anyway. “And a personal trade of a slave to you, right now, from any of our stock.”

Daniel gawked at the offer. In terms of UDs, that was worth millions. Candice had a big family.

Candice waved toward the dirty window and then the rickety doors now being blocked by her blended followers outside. “You may have to give me that much just to get out of here alive. I don’t honor sanctuary.”

The five large, colorful flesh traders knew Candice wasn’t going to give in from her reaction.

Daniel wasn’t sure why she hadn’t already started shooting. He’d never known Candice to pull a weapon on someone without using it.

“Don’t tell me you can’t be bought.” The slaver tried again, ignoring the threat as her crew tensed. “Just tell me your price!”

Surprising them all, Candice chuckled harshly, lowering her weapons. “Just tell me your demand–as if I don’t know.”

“You’ll take everything!” The slaver immediately began complaining. “Freeing the slaves will destroy us. You can’t do it.”

Candice sighed, disgust spilling over. “You’ve destroyed countless boys. Expecting compassion after that is insane. Get out of here. You have one chance to do so.”

“We’re not leaving until you agree!”

The dozen big slavers with the woman didn’t appear as confident. They began inching toward the exit.

Candice nodded. “That’s your choice. This is mine. Kill them all.”

Daniel ducked as gunfire split the tense air. He remembered his own confusion about her using whatever weapon she drew and realized Candice had planned to kill the slavers as soon as she’d pulled her guns. *I love her so much!*

Daniel crawled along the grimy floor to wedge himself under a warped bench, like Candice had instructed him to do during any fighting that happened while they were in this city. He hadn’t wanted to agree, but he knew better than to disobey. He wasn’t ready for this type of combat yet.

The fight was quick and bloody. The hungry and helpers fled, leaving Irma crouched by the entrance with her head buried under her arms. She clearly wasn’t a physical fighter, though she had to be tough because she’d been here for so many years.

“I knew you’d cause trouble!” Irma didn’t come up as bullets singled out wounded and made them dead.

Candice laughed, hard and cruel. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

**2**

**The Network**

“We have reports of fighting at Irma’s church.” Shelly kept her eyes on the monitor. “Witnesses are saying Candice and Daniel are involved.”

“We’re not responding to fights.” Juli ignored the reactions of the other four members. Everyone else was attending complex business, but word would spread that the rebels were mere blocks from the dome.

“Is there anything else I should do?”

“Locate the missing link! Angelica is still off grid.” He looked to Rusty as Shelly’s fingers began clacking on the keyboard. “When will we have the bachelor kids?”

“Another day for the ones in the wagon train.” Rusty frowned. “Do we have to wait?”

Julian considered it and then gestured. “Check the sheets. If we have Jason’s offspring with Rankin, we’ll do it now.”

Rusty began typing.

Alex paused. “Does he know?”

Julian chuckled without humor. “Of course not. Rankin didn’t waste time conversing with her harem. When we told her to deliver a sample, she was just thrilled to be there legally.”

“Will Sam be like that as head Defender, do you think?” Rusty wasn’t expecting a good report from Robert.

Julian shrugged. “It’s always easier to control lessor leaders by letting them rampage, but I don’t care for the embarrassment. We’ll set firm rules.” Julian doubted he would have to handle that. The odds were stacked heavily against Sam’s survival. He didn’t expect to have to honor their deal.

“We have him.” Rusty switched the file to the largest screen so Julian could view the information and the image. “The boy arrived an hour ago. He should still be out from the transport drug.”

Julian studied the adorable seven-year-old child who looked exactly like his father. “Any trouble with the guardian?”

“We arrested her for non-payment of taxes. She’ll be in the vulture nursery in the next hour.”

“Good. Get a reporter up here–one we can trust.” Julian glowered at Shelly. “Terry is not to have access to the child. *You* handle it.”

Shelly typed faster. “Yes, sir.”

“Make it clear the kids are being held responsible for the actions of the parents. Scare them.”

“Is it a bluff?”

Julian pinned Alex with a dark glare. “Why?”

Alex swallowed nervously. “I can’t put boys into the games. You’ll have to remove me.”

The room went silent as the two men stared at each other.

Julian’s face relaxed. “Okay. It’s a bluff.”

Alex squinted in suspicion. Julian never gave in that easily. “You’ll let the kids live?”

Julian’s face was now totally void of expression. “My word on it.”

Alex relaxed. “Thank you. It means a lot that you’d do that.”

Julian waved off the automatic sucking up. He gestured calmly to Shelly. “Stand up.”

Shelly did it warily, confused.

Julian motioned to her belt. “Use that.”

Shelly frowned, hand going to the handle of her whip. “On who?”

Alex cringed down into his seat as Julian pointed. Alex had raped Shelly as her initiation onto this council. She wouldn’t disobey the order. Alex was the reason she carried the whip.

Julian clapped in delight as Shelly began to strike Alex, whipping his hands before he could reach a weapon, drawing blood and screams that allowed Julian to regain control. Those were two of his favorite things now. *Because* *I’m changing.*

**3**

“What did they do with the bodies?” Daniel and Candice were alone in the storeroom. He was lingering in the doorway, watching Irma scrub bloodstains on the walls, floors, and pews.

“You don’t want to know.” Candice handed him the food pouch and her canteen.

Daniel grimaced, no longer hungry. “What is wrong with these people?”

“They don’t want to die.” She shrugged tiredly. “If there was nothing else, would you choose starvation?”

Daniel wanted to say yes, but couldn’t. “Maybe.”

“Me, too.” Candice patted the bedroll she had spread between her legs. “Come let me hold you for a bit.”

Daniel sat the food and water down to crawl into the bedroll and lean against her baking heat. “That feels great!”

“My thoughts exactly.”

There was a peaceful time where Candice believed he had fallen asleep.

“Do you think they’ve reached the big den yet?”

She sighed. “Yes. Baker said it wasn’t far.”

“How long to reach the wall?”

“A week on foot, with heavy losses. It’s rough terrain.”

“By the time Sam’s game begins?”

“Yes.”

Daniel shifted so he could observe her. “I’m sorry.”

Candice shut her eyes so that he couldn’t read them. “So am I, Daniel. As much as I want slavery abolished, you keep proving the need for it. Men are sly, manipulative creatures that have to be monitored for betrayals. If all the slaves are like you and Baker, freedom may already be out of your reach.”

“Why didn’t you tell your family that?” He was both ashamed of himself and proud.

“There’s no need to tell them what they obviously already know.” Candice’s annoyance was aimed at herself. “You heard the votes. Even Chester thinks we’ll have to keep slavery. They’ve always known. I’m late to this party.”

“Is it bad that we’re smart? It feels good.”

“The lessons you received about the past were not fabrications.”

“But girls are stronger now. We couldn’t do that again.”

“Now? No. In the future, after your kind has flourished and the disease has been cured? You’ll have the advantage again and you may use it to conquer us in retaliation for being enslaved. It’s exactly why women voted for slavery–revenge and fear.” Candice yawned. “More now or in the morning?”

Daniel wanted to continue the conversation, but he was tired and getting sleepy in her warm embrace. “Morning.”

“Thank you.” It had been a lengthy trip to reach this nasty city and the tiny sewer space hadn’t allowed for true rest. She was exhausted. “I want freedom for everyone, Daniel. If I can find a way to do it, I will. My word.”

“I’ll love you no matter what.” Daniel hugged her. “Always.”

Candice held him and tried not to worry over the promise. She was open to new information, but as of right now, she’d made her choice. None of those she’d spoken to about it would be pleased, including her mate or her relatives. She’d spotted one path to peace for their bitter nation and she was taking it, even if that meant enlisting help from sources the Pruetts didn’t usually approve of. *One week*, she repeated as she drifted off. *Your dome is nothing to me. One week and I’m coming to those top rooms.*

Chapter Thirteen

**Heads Will Roll**

Adelphia

**1**

**“W**elcome to day four of the Time Trials! This marks the beginning of the final heats for this week. All the players have run two races and the blood has flowed, but the death count hasn’t been as high on the lanes as usual. However, the bodies off field have increased so much that the Network sent extra security overnight.”

The announcer paused as the first group of racers stepped into view. The Network chose the lineup, not letting anyone know the matchups beforehand. The betting booths were a madhouse for exactly two minutes per run. Most of the time, it was evenly matched players, but Dana suspected today might be different. She leaned forward in her chair, high atop the field as her council-connected understudy fidgeted in the uncomfortable seat next to her.

“It looks like we’ll have all our top contenders together!” Dana inwardly winced at her annoying squeal. Their training classes insisted on high energy broadcasts, but she’d never allowed it to dominate her private speech the way some in her career did. “They’re lining up at a single lane again, folks! This should be great!”

*Come on*, *Sam!* Dana hadn’t bet on this race, but she still wanted the bounty hunter to win. Dana’s account was well stocked with UDs that she might never get the chance to spend. Angelica’s game had made her rich.

Dana had never seen the stadium so full. Every seat was filled for all the races today and all the hotel rooms were taken. Even the upstairs hall now held high rollers who had come to bet on the Pruett. If not for the steady wind, the heat and smells would have been stifling. There was no conditioned air in Adelphia. The Network couldn’t spare the power. They barely had enough to keep the stadium lit. Dana was one of the few reporters who knew how bad the power shortage was.

“In this heat, we have five racers. The favorite, of course, is Sam Pruett!” Dana automatically paused for the cheering. With every seat in the stadium filled, even the hundreds of speakers couldn’t cut through that din. The audience clearly favored Sam.

“In second, we have Dorian Cutter, a Diva gang member with the fastest time of any of her kind in these games. It’s not as quick as that last Pruett run, but it is close. In third place, we have Miranda Blaze, a stocky farmer from our very own town of Villanova!”

Dana took a quick sip of water during the weak cheers, fighting with herself not to reveal more about Miranda. The tiny town behind the stadium hadn’t ever put up a contestant before, but the Network didn’t want people snooping there. The memos hadn’t stated why they couldn’t cover the small town and Dana hadn’t asked. “Our number four is the famous Snake tracker, Kissy. Her entire family was killed by Pruetts during an attack on the Network Rider. I think it’s safe to assume that she came for revenge.”

Next to Dana, the young girl wearing an expensive red and green jumper and matching cloak scribbled notes furiously as she studied the waiting racers. It rocked the rickety desk that was covered in papers, broadcasting equipment, dust, and scratch marks. The spiders and other bugs ran for the safety of cracks.

Dana let the booing and mild cheering die down before continuing. “Our last racer in this heat is Rhonda Rock! Named for the location she was born in, this mountain brute may be arrested as soon as the race is over. We’ve just learned she doesn’t have a travel pass. Without that, the mountain woman is here illegally and the Network doesn’t take those violations lightly. She may end up in a game anyway, though. The punishment for traveling outside a restricted area without a pass is death. These cautions were put into place after the mountain clans rose up nearly a hundred years ago and tried to breach the dome in New Network City.”

Dana gave her helper a quick scan, seeing the younger woman was calmer than usual. She’d been saddled with the pimply spy last week, but hadn’t protested the extra work. Children weren’t a threat to Dana. In fact, the girl had already become a fountain of information that Dana was sipping from carefully. “Get ready.”

“Really? I get to be on the air today?!”

Fighting the urge to slash the hyperactive girl’s throat and paint the dingy walls, Dana keyed the mike. “It looks like we’re about to race, folks! And they’re off… No, they’re not.” Dana tried not to laugh. “It appears the racers have chosen to fight instead. If any of them survive, this might be the best episode of the Bachelor Battles we’ve ever watched!”

Dana sipped her water, motioning for her over-excited partner to take the air. *You tell them about it. I’ll watch.*

“That’s right, Dana!” Gabby spoke eagerly. “As soon as the flag dropped, the Pruett lunged at the Diva. The Snake then attacked the mountain brute, leaving our farmer to pick a side. She chose to eliminate the favorite, but that quickly backfired as Sam stabbed her through the shoulder and then proceeded to do the same to the gang member. The mountain brute has been killed, as well as the Diva.”

Dana reclined, trying not to enjoy it too much. After this episode, she would probably need a new job. *But that’s okay. Thanks to these amazing Pruetts, I can afford to switch careers.*

**2**

**New Network City**

“She did it again!” Naomi shouted as the radio was shut off. “Tell her to stop killing us!”

Candice lifted a brow. “Should Sam have waited for the enemy to kill her?”

“We are not the enemy anymore!” Naomi became desperate. “Please. Dorian Cutter was a breeder–one of our few.”

Candice shrugged. “Then you made a mistake in sending her.” She motioned Daniel to come along.

They strode from the church, where Naomi had stopped them on their way out. Candice and Daniel had eaten and listened to Sam’s final run–or what was supposed to be the final run. All the racers were dead or injured, delaying that heat until they recovered or dropped out. Candice expected to watch Sam’s real run this evening.

Around the couple, noises of normal life echoed–coughs, grunts, groans, cries, and tears. The homeless paused briefly in these habits as Candice passed, eyeing her with hope and suspicion.

“She forced them to change the time of the races!” Chester’s red curls bounced wildly as he hurried into place behind Candice. “They’re going to run it at night!”

Chester and his girls had chosen to camp outside the church with the homeless and their blending people–some of whom would be a surprise even to Candice. Chester had chosen to keep it to himself as a good faith gesture to get Candice to change her vote. As much as he wanted the men freed, he hadn’t been able to support it. They would be in more danger released than they were in chains.

“Yes, Sam likes to work in the dark.” Bobby also came from a shack in the homeless camp. “We’ve been watching the males. The old woman keeps feeding them and making them sleep. No problems so far. Lydia’s monitoring things now.”

“Adding weight to the stock before she sells it.”

Candice nodded at Chester’s mutter. “Perhaps. But she doesn’t know us, does she?”

Chester grinned.

“Where are you going?” Naomi quickly caught up. Her white top and shorts were speckled in fresh grease, as were her arms and hairy legs.

*Must have been large chunks of meat to splatter so much.* Daniel’s stomach churned.

“I have an appointment.” Candice delivered a challenging look. “Tag along?”

“After your cousin killed one of our best fighters today? No thanks.”

Candice snickered. She actually liked Naomi. “More the office type, are you?”

“I prefer to live!” Naomi’s eyes didn’t flicker. She wasn’t fighting for control of her disease as most of them had to whenever a confrontation happened. “Death doesn’t appeal to me.”

“Unless it’s in a form that won’t cost you anything.” Candice followed that up with another great guess. “That’s why you won’t take the job, right? It’s more work than you want to put in.”

“I am not lazy or scared! Slam you, Pruett!”

“In time, perhaps. Until then, come with us.” Candice waved a scarred hand. “I’ll guarantee your safety.”

Curious, and forced to prove her bravery, Naomi shoved her sweaty escorts aside to join Candice in the lead.

“Who wants it?”

“I’ve got her.” Ivy came up behind the Diva at Candice’s call. Like most of their group, she and Leo hadn’t gone far, either.

Naomi sneered at the fur wearing woman. “Are you also a Pruett?”

“Yes, she is.” Daniel was still feeling bad about insulting Ivy’s true relationship to the family.

“Aww.” Ivy beamed at Daniel. “You really are a sweetie.”

Behind her, Leo growled and stormed off in the opposite direction.

“Oh, hell. I thought he was okay now.” Ivy tapped Daniel on the shoulder, impressed when he didn’t flinch. “Any chance you two can be friends?”

Daniel was ready for that question. “That depends. Any chance you’ll change your mind and claim him?”

“No.”

“Same answer.”

“Because he isn’t a Pruett, you can’t be friends? That’s wrong.”

“Maybe.” Daniel shrugged. “But if you don’t trust him, why should I?”

The others laughed at his cleverness, but Candice and Ivy winced. Ivy, because he was right. Candice, because Daniel was verbally sparring with a changeling without signs of intimidation. And he’d won. As much as she loved it, she also loathed it. *They’ve been lying to us. I don’t like that. No one lies to a Pruett and gets away with it. Not even our mates.*

“Who are these important people you’re meeting?” Naomi couldn’t help being nervous. She’d noticed Candice was headed toward the dome.

“Locals who will inherit the city if you guys don’t pick a successor. Have you made any progress?”

Naomi shook her head, but didn’t elaborate.

“I didn’t believe you would.” Candice motioned toward the troops lining the dome. It was the same on all three sides. “I’m going in. I can take two. I’ve chosen Bobby and Chester. They can pretend to be my slaves if I’m caught snooping. Everyone else will blend into this crowd and stay quiet.”

Naomi started to protest, but Ivy placed a cold hand on the woman’s bare arm. “We don’t argue with the boss when she gives an order.”

Naomi clamped her lips together and stayed with Ivy when the fur wearing outlaw merged into the masses.

Daniel stayed with Mary and Bruce, like he’d been told to do any time he was split from Candice. He hadn’t seen them join the small parade walking toward the dome, but they were at his side now.

The others vanished into the sweaty, stinking, impatient crowd, though none of them went so far that they couldn’t see Candice.

Chester and Bobby fell in behind her and kept their chins down as proper males were supposed to do. Both of them hid snickers when Candice stuck her nose up and the smothering crowd around them parted.

“Pruett!”

“That’s one of the Pruetts!”

“Nice stock!”

Chester grinned.

Bobby blushed coyly.

Candice strode straight to the gate protecting the farthest side of the complex. During her games, she’d spotted part of a dock from a rear window on the fourth side. The special glasses she’d used had been gifted to Sam for her coming time in the dome. Right before they reached the line of bored, annoyed guards baking in the late spring humidity, a disturbance drew half of the grouchy Defenders into the crowd to break up a fight.

“That’s our cue. Stay ready. This might be a trap.” Candice strode to the remaining guards. “Orphans.”

The guard in the front stepped aside, gesturing. “Lea said you were coming. Hurry in before our crew boss comes back.”

Candice and her slaves hurried into the throng of Defenders and disappeared, both worried and glad. Being helped by enemy guards was odd.

They were directed into an employee entrance with a single door and no guard. A few seconds later, they were alone in a dingy, dank hallway with high, wire covered ceilings and garbage on the grungy floor.

“That was fun.” Chester made sure his voice didn’t carry. Just because he didn’t see any guards, that didn’t mean there wasn’t any.

Bobby edged closer to Candice, already feeling caged. “I don’t like this.”

“That’s why we usually leave you behind on runs.” Chester laughed. “Your mate takes the place of a Pruett.”

“Lydia is a hardass.” Bobby chuckled, breaking the tension.

Candice had spent the time surveying the dim hall in an attempt to pick a direction to explore. Hoping to find the dock, she took the opposite path that the fishy breeze was going.

As they walked, the males stared at the signs on the walls in anger and dismay. Neither of them had been a prize. They’d only heard about the training and treatment, though Chester at least had the wisdom of fatherhood and age on his side.

*Never befriend a male. They are stock.*

*Men are to be enjoyed and then sold.*

*Anyone caught overfeeding males will be suspended without pay.*

*Do your job or someone else will.*

*Employees are forbidden from the upper levels without a security pass.*

*Bachelors are wild animals. Never forget to lock their cages.*

*Mercy is for the weak.*

“This is all wrong. Why would they run stuff this way if they want us to recover?” Bobby’s mirth was gone. He slapped at a fly distractedly.

“They don’t, boy.” Chester looked at Sophia’s much younger brother by another lover. “I’m glad she brought you. Now you’ll see the truth.”

Candice let the men talk, not worried over it as long as no one else was able to hear them. She did assume they were on camera, but not a well-watched one or an alarm would have already sounded.

Chester felt her impatience. “Are your important people meeting us here?”

“No. We have common disturbances coming to keep the troops busy. We have to be back at the gate in thirty minutes.”

The males moved faster, neither of them caring for the timeline or the surroundings. The further they traveled, the fishier the air was becoming.

“Why did you invite Naomi and then not bring her in?” Bobby had assumed the Diva member would come with them.

“So she would be seen with us as we walked here.”

“You set her up! Nice.” Chester didn’t like Divas.

“In a way. Naomi will inherit leadership because she’s one of the few left in their clan who have the wisdom to plan for the future. Being seen with us will help her in that venture.”

“If she survives it.”

“Yes.” Candice frowned. “I hear voices. No talking now or you’ll blow our cover.”

Bobby knew that was directed at him and vowed not to screw up. He hadn’t been on runs with Candice and her branch of the family, but he’d always wanted to be.

Candice led them around the corner and paused, making them wait for the view until she forced her brain to accept what she saw.

The boat at the dock was enormous. Covered in working slaves and stacks of cargo, it was being loaded. She had no idea how it was even in the narrow port that appeared to be a cave cut into the side of the dome. In the distance, she could see the clear blue water of an ocean. Candice could feel the warm breeze and smell the salt. It was different than she had envisioned. She’d seen the ocean in books, but without the sounds and smells, it hadn’t matched up.

Candice edged to the side so the men could view the strange vehicle they’d likely never seen before. She certainly hadn’t. Sailing vessels and oil barges were things of the past, and yet here was one of each in sight and they both appeared pristine. These weren’t relics pressed into service in a desperate attempt to feed the masses. The bright and shiny boats were anchored at the very end of a dock that she estimated to be half a mile long. Smaller vessels and empty places along that dock glared at her.

The dock itself looked much the same as it had the first time she had been here to win Daniel’s papers. Male slaves in chains were being used for manual labor and ships were coming in and out of the small harbor. It was hard to believe all of this was hidden behind the complex and no one knew.

*One more lie falls. The Network has active ships and that means they have access to the rest of the country and the world. The wall was never to keep others out. It was always to keep us in.*

Chester nudged Bobby as the younger man started to comment.

Bobby slid behind Chester to gather himself and hide his expression. His mate didn’t want him on runs. Over the years, he’d realized it was easier and safer to let the woman hide him. Now, he was reconsidering that choice. The betrayals kept adding up in the war column. The rage he was experiencing was new and unwelcome.

Candice didn’t move from the tunnel entrance. With troops all over the place, there was nothing she could do alone. However, she wanted to. Boys as young as five were being whipped for not moving fast enough with their too-heavy burdens. Older boys were also carting boxes and bags of goods, but they knew to move fast enough to avoid the whip master.

*That evil bitch is mine.* Candice turned toward the hall. *Just a matter of time, lady. You’re going to feel that whip like all the kids you’ve used it on.*

Candice led them back to the gate, not needing the full time. She’d seen what she needed to. There was a dock. There was a huge ship being loaded. New Network City didn’t produce anything. They refined and built from what came in, but they didn’t create. That meant the council was sending supplies somewhere…or they were loading up to leave.

Candice motioned her males through the employee door, seeing the guards were again distracted–this time by a group of orphan girls successfully trying to rob them.

Candice and her slaves merged back into the sweaty, shifting crowd around the dome without being recognized, but Candice wouldn’t have cared if she had been. The sights and sounds were ringing in her heart and mind. Whips lashing across skin… Bleeding, screaming kids…

The news was running as they exited, featuring clips from across the complex. The screens and speakers outside the dome echoed with a small boy’s proud voice. “I’m going to be a bachelor when I’m older.”

Candice glanced up in horror, knowing who it was without the visual confirmation.

Jason’s voice echoed over the speakers, just younger and innocent. “My daddy was a games prize.”

*Jason has a son.* Candice studied the boy and found evidence of his mother in the red strands mixed with ebony. Rankin had stolen a child from Jason. When he and Angelica found out, it might blow their rebel plans, but it wasn’t the biggest problem. *That’s me.* Candice felt the rage flowing through her stiff limbs. *Before Angel can flip, I’m going to.*

Candice arched in pain. Her claws shot out, rage sending her through the levels in seconds. She looked at Chester with crimson orbs. “See that Bobby makes it home. I’ll be late.”

Soothed by what was coming, both males quickly obeyed.

Candice strode back the way she had come, but she didn’t aim for the guards or the door. She went straight to the reporter standing in the crowd. Waiting to do a live segment from the ground, the woman had a group of hired escorts carrying whips and sneers of superiority. *Good enough.* Candice increased speed as her hands reached for the right tool.

“Hey!”

“I know her!”

“Look out!”

Chester and Bobby hurried away from the screams, keeping their heads down to hide vicious grins of satisfaction. Candice was taking a pound of flesh. The sound was a waterfall of joy to them.

Candice swung, slicing through the neck of a hired guard with her longest blade. Before the head hit the ground, she had slit the throat of the last terrified sentry with her shorter blade and spun into the safety of the crowd that closed around her.

The reporter, now drenched in blood and trembling in fear, let go of her bladder as the camera in front of her flashed to green.

Chapter Fourteen

**Quick!**

New Network City

**1**

**J**ulian stared in horror at the reporter on the screen. He’d had her in his bed last week.

“Cut it!” As the screen in the center of the room went to static and then old promo ads, Rusty grimaced. “We all know who that came from.”

“A message from Candice?” Alex was aware that Julian was frozen in rage. Not even his robes or cloak vibrated in the cool air. Alex didn’t know how that was possible.

“Yes. She’s saying she can kill any of us while the world watches–that she’s going to.” Rusty lowered his voice, also aware of Julian’s dangerous reaction. “We have to kill her or get out of here before she follows through.”

Julian spoke without moving anything but his lips. “I want a review of the tapes.”

Rusty immediately began typing. “What zone?”

“This complex.”

Wondering what clue Julian had found that he hadn’t, Rusty typed ‘Pruett’ into the search scan and almost immediately an alert beeped. “Why didn’t the alarm go off?”

Julian still didn’t move, though he wanted to view the tape and see how she’d gotten in. He couldn’t move yet. If he did, he would snap. “Don’t alert those traitorous guards yet, any of you.”

Realizing he was going to set a trap with that shift of troops, Rusty switched the information to the largest monitor so Julian could view it without having to move. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get us ready to evacuate–before the train arrives from Adelphia.”

Rusty smirked. “All of us?”

Julian grunted, amusement helping him find a little control. “For now…”

It was a warning to the rest of them, but it wasn’t needed. Having a private guard crew slaughtered on their doorstep had convinced all of the council that they were in danger.

“So playing with the children isn’t allowed.” Julian ran his hand through his hair in mock resignation as he calmed. “Fine. What about your friends and relatives? Are they off limits?” Julian very slowly walked to his chair and pushed a button on the arm. “I want all contenders for head Defender called in for a test of their skills. This zone only.”

“You got it.” Lauren was in the main control room where she spent most of her working hours. Being a council member wasn’t as easy as the general populace believed. They all put in ten-hour days, every day. Julian kept them too tired to revolt.

“When they arrive, send them to the Diva den.”

“Arrests or cleansing?” Lauren was already typing the orders that would go out electronically. There would be troops in the sewers within fifteen minutes.

Julian repeated one of his favorite phrases. “Mercy is for the weak.”

“Should I send a notice of dissolution afterward?”

“Of course.” He recovered enough to sneer. “Any surviving Divas who turn themselves in will be allowed to become Defenders and given refuge in the dome.”

“But the dome is about to fall.” Alex was listening to the hot crowd of angry viewers outside chanting slogans.

“Yes.”

The other members held a variety of feelings, but the biggest was fear of their leader. Even the Divas who betrayed their own kind would eventually be killed when the dome fell and the complex was overrun. Julian was covering bases and loose ends. If they made a mistake now, they would be on his list.

“It’s time to activate the clock for the meeting and for this city.”

Rusty met his eye. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. They’re coming in. We’ll make sure we have a party prepared. After the implosion, we won’t have a pest problem anymore and the public will go back to doing what they’re told.”

“We’ve put a lot of work into this complex.” Brandon spoke up reluctantly. “Where will we go?”

“That’s none of your concern. Just be glad you’re coming.”

“I am.” Brandon was glad he’d only been scolded and not killed. “We all are.”

Julian ignored the immediate supporting statements of faith and belief. If the rebels followed too quickly, every one of these people would be sacrificed so he could reach the training center that had been in use since he stole leadership. He had what he needed there to start over, including a few select females, but he doubted the bunker would be needed for the impregnable defense it offered. When the dome fell, literally, the rebels would be inside, trying to find a way to save the children they obviously cared about so deeply.

Julian added an afterthought. “Hit that church, too. The Priest there is housing rebels. At least, I suspect she has in the past and that’s reason enough.”

“Does she have a history with them?” Rusty kept typing orders.

“Yes. She sold out her best friend to steal a rare Pruett son. She owes them for letting her live. That free pass is over.”

“I didn’t know there were wild sons.” Shelly pulled her favorite scarf closer against the vent above her head. “They hid them I assume?”

“And stole them back when necessary. Bruce Pruett was the only one we were able to keep in the complex. We gifted him to Mary when she showed signs of burn-out.”

“Why? That might have killed off that side of the family.” Shelly wiped glitter from her scarf onto the floor.

“Because Tara Pruett was the best tracker on the planet, a trait she passed to her children.” Rusty saw a muscle in Julian’s jaw begin to twitch. “Her eldest daughter inherited leadership. Without a strong matron, families scatter. Mary was already keeping them together. This is dangerous, because too many of them cause problems. So we gave her a mate she would burn-out with and we hadn’t had trouble for two decades. Bruce was from a distant branch of the family–a cousin five times removed, but it didn’t matter when the order went out. All hell broke loose.”

“How many male Pruetts are alive today in the wild?” Shelly sensed an edge of discovery that was snagging her caution away from the strong chemical odor that reminded her of Riana’s death. The cleaner had been in again.

“Three that we know of, but the southern branch hasn’t been heard from in a long time. From the surveillance tapes, I’d assume there are a few more by now. Chester and Horace appear healthy. There’s little chance they aren’t fertile. As you know, the cocktail wears off.”

Brandon protested Rusty’s information. “But we regularly update them at inoculation events. Do we need to increase the dosage or stick them more often?”

“Both.” Julian took his seat with strictly controlled movements. “If left alone, the population will recover within a few generations. The chemicals we give all children are key to maintaining that control. By the time they reach adulthood, the disease has become permanent, but it takes multiple doses even with the genetic enhancements we’ve added over the centuries.”

“We have inoculation programs in all cities and large towns.” Shelly tried to soothe the boss. “The infection rate has stayed at 98% the entire time we’ve been in charge.”

Julian’s face darkened. He didn’t like being reminded of the last power meeting where he’d killed both his uncles to prevent them from interfering. Over the decades, his family had softened on slavery and the ultimate plan that was coming to fruition. They’d even wanted to discuss coexisting with the women who had enslaved them.

*As if that’s possible!* Julian glowered darkly at Shelly. He wasn’t sure how much more glitter on the floor he could tolerate. “Our founders gave us a plan and I intend to enact the final phase.”

“The rest of the bachelor children have arrived.” Alex broke the tension as he gestured toward a smaller screen in the corner that displayed their underground tunnels. Very few people knew about the subway beneath the city. That was part of the reason the Network and the Divas often worked together. The gang knew. It was limited, but convenient when cargo arrived at the edges of this paradise that they didn’t want anyone to know about. The ocean dock was used for deliveries of goods from their growers and harvesters along the east and southern coast–unknown to everyone except complex troops and slaves. The boat crews kept their jobs for life and then fed the sharks.

“Get them on camera. I want a new segment where we show the children growing up in the lavish complex before becoming games prizes. Use those kids in every promo.”

“That should bring the rest of the rebels in.” Rusty’s arms and fingers were getting tired, but he kept typing.

“Yes, it will. We’ll leave while the first clip airs and the train arrives with Sam Pruett.” Julian swiveled to stare out the window, where a tiny part of his city was now burning. The fire wasn’t going to be put out. He was hoping it killed the orphans who had let Candice into the dome. That would really bring in the rebels for revenge. Who didn’t like orphans?

“I’ve got your weakness now, bounty hunters.” He leaned toward the window to view the coming sunset. “You played your hand too soon.”

**2**

**The Northern Borderlands**

“She shouldn’t have done that.”

Jason nodded, livid. The reception here was terrible, but it had been enough for him to figure out what had happened. “I love her for it.”

“Me too.” Seeing the bloody, pissing reporter had given Angelica the strength to keep Jason from going to the dome if he tried. He hadn’t yet, but she was waiting for it.

So were the men around them. The dozen remaining bachelors they’d brought along to the big den expected Jason to react. They were watching him, each deciding if they would go along.

In Daniel’s absence, the rebels had quietly chosen Jason as a substitute leader. He didn’t know yet because he didn’t view himself that way.

This sewer had once been a part of the railcar system, Angelica believed, due to the crumbling furnishings and small bits of track they were able to see. Nothing else was identifiable to give them an exact idea of what this underground area had been used for.

The bounty hunters always used leftover relics from the past, allowing them to stock UDs instead of spending them on hotels. It also gave them places to mark on their maps as hideouts. It had been useful in many situations. This was one of those.

Angelica was glad of it. These men were weak, scared souls who had almost stampeded when a single changeling had joined them. She was being careful with her movements to keep from spooking them further. Their animal escort was gone and she was the only woman here. When they’d descended into the ground, using ladders the big animals couldn’t traverse, the huge dogs had howled for hours. Then they’d vanished and the rebels hadn’t spotted any of them since. Angelica thought they’d realized they were free and went to explore their new home.

“Candice will get him out alive.” Jason used that belief to hold himself in place. He couldn’t leave all these men, but he wanted to. It was horrifying to know his tiny son was alone and unprotected in the complex.

“Yes. I’m sorry we can’t go yet.”

Jason swept the underground tunnel that was full of eating, sleeping, nervously watching rebel males. These walls were narrow and crumbling, shifting in small rumbles that warned of coming disaster. Despite being nearly ten feet under the stormy surface, they still weren’t safe. Tattered clothes and stolen rations were no defense against the cold nights and lack of medicine. “I hate this.”

Angelica gestured toward their training area. It was a shallow impression that only allowed half a dozen bodies to stand together at one time. “We’ve got another night here if you want to practice.”

Jason nodded quickly. “Good idea.”

He and a few others went over and began attacking the dummies they’d built from empty sacks filled with sand.

Angelica slid toward the entrance. Her rage was seething under the surface. Rankin and Jason had a son.

*We’ll get you out.* *Candice already knows without being told that your life means as much to the rebels as Daniel’s sons do. We feel that way about all our family.* Angelica stopped near the five large men she’d placed on duty. “Are the hounds still gone?”

Animal man nodded, while the other three spoke at the same time, getting nothing out clear enough to be understood in their fear of her. They were using the multiple voice defense.

Angelica sighed mentally while making sure her expression didn’t change and scare them further. Baker’s males here at the den were timid–more so than Jason and Daniel had ever been–and they weren’t from games. They also weren’t trained in anything. She and the true rebel males were teaching them, but it was slow work that few of the men were taking to without Baker here to lead them. She needed Jason to step up and take that role, but she hadn’t told him that. She’d been letting them get to know him first.

*Time’s up.* She opened the exit that had been welded together from several doors, making it two feet thick.

The harsh squeak couldn’t be avoided. She needed to go topside and judge exactly where they were. The big safe zone had been an old train station beneath what remained of Missouri. They’d left the day after she arrived, but walking through the Borderlands was dangerous. They’d already lost four males to snake bites. The huge pythons were buried in the sand, laying eggs. The wind sometimes covered them in dust, leaving a dangerous trap.

*We need transportation. Where can I find us a ride?*

Angelica climbed the rusted, shifting ladder, hood up to protect against the stiff winds that had forced them to stay put for the last two days. Not even her family was crazy enough to travel in this weather, but that didn’t mean the Network wouldn’t hire people who were. She could think of two groups who would hunt Pruetts in any conditions–Snakes and Divas. Candice hoped to make a deal with both of those clans, but Angelica expected a betrayal of any deal they made. She’d mentioned it to Candice before they parted ways, but her cousin had waved off her concerns in the usual gesture that meant *if they cross us, they’ll pay*. Angelica hadn’t argued.

The landscape was dry and hilly, covered in stones and boulders that not even the Network knew the source of. Many of the stones were darker and denser than the rocks their miners dug through and they didn’t make good cooking surfaces like the grit layered boulders that dotted the rest of this forsaken area.

Angelica noted a small patch of clear sky and made her choice. She would go and find what they needed. Maybe she would luck into a community of allies. Even more lepers would be welcome at this point. The Glowers were another problem Angelica thought they would have to handle at some point. Now that the ape was out, he wouldn’t want to be caged again either, but the public wouldn’t like the monster or the Glowers roaming.

“She’s not going to free us.”

Angelica ducked back into the hole, but didn’t descend. She stared down at Animal man, who carried a torch and a deep sadness that nothing seemed to ease. He still had the purple stripe through his black hair, though it was starting to fade. Jason had told her the color was given to men who had survived a brutal program with the worst changelings. She hadn’t asked anything else about the man. The escaped bachelor still refused to tell them his real name. He said he didn’t want to get used to it because it would earn him punishments when he was returned to the cells and couldn’t remember his number.

“Is she?”

Angelica hated to lie. Even if her family hadn’t been dead set against doing it, she wouldn’t have liked it.

Animal turned toward the den, pulling his snatched cloak tighter around thin, wiry shoulders. “I saw your face just now. You know she lied.”

Angelica didn’t stop the rebel and add to the damage. Candice had promised to free them, but that had been sworn when they hadn’t had a real opportunity to accomplish anything. Now that there was a true chance at overthrowing their rulers, they couldn’t do it without enough groups agreeing. Angelica didn’t think it was going to be possible. Nothing could get Divas and snakes to work with Pruetts. They’d been killing each other for hundreds of years.

Angelica slipped into the grit, shutting the exit door, but she’d only taken a step before it opened again.

“Where are you going?”

“To barter a ride. Keep them in line.”

“When will you be back?” Jason didn’t know what to do.

“A day, maybe less. Go back in. You’re not safe out here. None of you are.” Angelica stalked into the heavy dust without responding to any more of his questions. She had a job to do. If they were where she thought, it was close to the Borderlands water source. That made it a dangerous, needed place. If there was still water here, there would still be crazy women navigating it. She’d learned that in Georgia.

At the sound of steps, Angelica spun around to force Jason back to the den. She drew up at the sight of Animal man, relieved it wasn’t her mate. She didn’t like telling Jason what to do. He was a grown man who was capable of making his own decisions.

“I’m coming.”

Angelica felt the accusation before it was spoken. “You think I’m abandoning them.”

“No. Not with your mate there.” Animal man was a bit jealous. “We all see how much you care for him.”

“Good.” Angelica scanned the ugly sky for flying predators. She ignored the growling stomach that came from giving the last of her rations to Jason this morning. “But I would never shirk my duty, not even for my mate.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were leaving?”

“I didn’t want to have this conversation.”

“Why didn’t you pick a few to go with you as bargaining chips?” He sneered. “You could sell us.”

“I’m a Pruett, you nasty little snit! Get back in the hole and hide with the other cowards.”

Angelica stalked off. *How dare he insult me that way! If not for my duty, I’d slit his throat and leave him here to rot!*

Angelica sighed, calming. No, she wouldn’t. She’d make a nasty remark and storm off, exactly like she was doing. Honor didn’t stop after the duty ended. Honor was a way of life.

“It bothers you that she lied.”

“She didn’t lie!”

“Okay.”

Realizing the man was coming even though she didn’t want him to, Angelica thrust herself toward him. “If you walk too far away, they’ll grab you and run. Don’t you know how this works?”

“No.” He winced as the sharp wind stung his skin through the holes in his jumper and liberated cloak. “I’ve never been out of the complex. I was trained for pleasure. Like Daniel, I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Angelica doubted that would hold for her cousin’s mate. Candice had to have a man who could match her fire. Angelica shrugged. “I don’t see you as either, but before this is over, I’d wager all of you will have to kill to survive. Now be quiet. I’m listening for bugs.”

“Bugs. Why?”

“Because bugs mean water, my bitter friend. Now shush.”

The rebel did.

Chapter Fifteen

**Hell Breaking Loose**

Adelphia

**1**

**“I**’d like a top center seat. The padded ones with service and full ammo packs.”

“For how long?” The clerk slapped a determined mosquito from her bare arm.

Standing in line with viewers who carefully patted her arm or called encouragement, Sam grinned. “For the entire day.”

The clerk behind the dirty glass ticket window stared in dull comprehension. “That’ll be three hundred UDs per hour…”

“Put it on the Pruett account.” It was easily the most cash Sam had ever spent at once on anything that wasn’t gear for her career. Left to her own devices until her final race, Sam wanted some action. The day in the rental room had been restful. Now, she was bored.

The girl wiped her sweaty neck with a pink bandana. “Personal or business?”

“Personal!” Sam flipped into an angry boss. “Do you make it a habit of letting employees use their account for personal use?”

The clerk, a young girl with a wealth of zits and sparse intelligence, jerked in alarm, rattling the booth. “No, of course not!”

“Good.” Sam switched back to eager viewer. “I’ll need food and drinks, and someone to save my seat when I walk around.”

“We have gophers.” The girl nervously stood straighter, shoving her slipping toga sleeve into place. Even a rumor of cheating could get employees killed. “It’s ten UDs an hour.”

Around the ticket booths, the stadium was a shouting, shooting organism with parasites in various stages of their own immoral infections. *My kind of place.*

Sam took her ID card back. “I also require a reporter.”

Sam’s request drew that quiet cloudiness again. “A reporter?”

“Yes. I need to make it clear that I don’t support my relatives rampaging across New Network City, don’t I?”

Eased, the clerk nodded quickly, ponytail bobbing. “Sure! I’ll handle that.”

“Your name?” Sam didn’t care who was listening or how the girl might be hounded after this interview.

“Velvet. Velvet Malin.”

Sam’s face iced over. “Malin?”

Velvet paled as she sensed true anger that had nothing to do with rule enforcement. This was thicker, uglier. “Please. I came here to get away from them.”

Sensing honesty, Sam gave the girl a curt nod. “You get one chance to prove you’re not like them. Don’t screw up my order.”

Sam left the murmuring witnesses and shaking clerk, wondering which reporter they would send. After Candice’s display, it would probably be someone big and ready to fight.

*I’ll see if I can calm things down a bit so it doesn’t all happen before I get there.* Sam moved toward the top row of the stadium. It had the best catapults. She planned to spend the day shooting at the other racers and being seen having legal fun. The shady shit would come right before she left this bloody stop on the gauntlet.

“I’m a reporter.”

The voice was extremely close. Sam quickly turned as a familiar shield of danger fell over her.

A blade plunged into her side instead of her spine. Pain rushed up in thick waves that sent her into the change. If not for her armored decoy cloak, it could have been a kill shot.

“My sister was on that crew!” The reporter plunged her blade down again. “I liked that one!”

Sam understood it was revenge for Candice killing the city security team. Angered over guilt she shouldn’t feel, Sam forced herself up as she drew her blade, kicking.

She caught the thin woman behind the leg and used that falling weight to buoy herself up. Sam swung as she rose, taking off her attacker’s head.

Sam stayed the way she had landed, crouched and swiveling to be sure this was the only opponent. She ignored the head rolling between the aisle and the viewers screaming in shock as it hit their feet and bounced.

“Is there a Sam Pruett up there?” A woman’s cultured voice echoed from the bottom of the packed metal stand. “I’m supposed to interview… What is…?! That’s a... I know her!”

Sam winced as she realized her assigned reporter had arrived in time to misinterpret what had happened. “Wait! It isn’t what you think.”

“I quit!” The reporter took off running toward the safety of the glass booths atop the field, escorts left behind. The trio of security guards cast thick glares at Sam.

Sam sighed, waving toward a medic booth near her seat. “Well, that didn’t go as planned.”

**2**

“That wasn’t part of the plan!” Naomi shouted at Candice as she and the men returned to the steamy, crowded churchyard. A line of angry Divas was behind her, also glowering.

“You killed one of their best security crews on air. We’ll all be hunted now.”

Candice ignored them while she wiped blood from her face and arms. She loved crimson camo, but the males wouldn’t.

“You didn’t think you would be hunted?” Bobby glared back, voice sarcastic. “You act as if the council doesn’t know we’re here, brokering deals to replace them.”

Naomi paled under the dirt and sweat. “They know?”

Chester was surprised that the woman didn’t. “The Network watches every part of this city. Ask the bachelors about the camera system. The council will also know we were inside the complex, if they don’t already.”

Naomi took off running toward the sewer and her escorts followed, not sure why she was leaving. They’d been chosen for fighting skills, not thinking.

“Are we helping them?” Daniel stared as he and Bruce joined Candice. Mary was deflecting orphans from the church, fearing it was about to be raided.

Candice made a circular motion in the air and jerked her hand away from the city.

The homeless ran. They left tents and personal treasures in favor of avoiding the crossfire.

The old lady also herded Candice’s males out of the area. Sleepy and drugged, they didn’t argue when they realized a fight was coming.

“The Divas want males kept in chains. Do you really want to help them?”

Daniel, faced with the truth, shook his head at Candice’s reminder. “No.”

“Neither do I.” Candice drew her gun as the sound of arriving troops echoed. “However, we’re Pruetts and we have honor. It would be wrong to leave them to this fight simply because we’re not in there with them.”

“I understand.” He realized she was taking the time to teach him even though danger was coming. Right and wrong always mattered to her.

Everyone left in the churchyard reacted as a large squad of Defenders ran toward the homeless camp, followed by a line of hounds with thicker collars.

Daniel began to sing, as did a few of the other males who knew the secret to sometimes calming the diseased beasts that were larger than a Mopar.

Candice and her clan began firing bullets, knives, and arrows, mostly hitting enemies, but trimming a few of the fleeing homeless as well.

“Watch your aim!” Candice fired at a trio of big guards. Ivy and Leo would be required to train harder or she would take their weapons. Candice shoved into Daniel, forcing him toward the church. “Get inside!”

Daniel ran for cover while Candice let her fury loose on their attackers. There were no shouts calling for surrender or declaring them Wanted persons being taken into custody. This wasn’t a prisoner capture. It was an execution attempt.

Bullets flew into the frame of the church as Daniel made it inside. The helpers and kids fled through the back door and the windows.

“Get down!” Candice and the others poured into the church. Singing wasn’t working on the hounds. They’d killed most of the troops, but the huge dogs weren’t stopping. It was almost as if their collars were now preventing them from hearing the voices.

Chester and Sophia held the door shut as dogs hit it from the outside, grunting in effort as the others dragged pews over for reinforcement.

“I told them!” Irma screamed in fear and rage from the front of the church as the change ripped through her fragile body. “They said he’s mine when you’re dead!”

*Crash!*

A huge dog landed among the shattered glass from the window and lunged, grabbing the nearest person. It shook the priest like a rag doll as she screamed.

Blood sprayed across the walls.

When Mary and Candice would have helped Irma, Bruce stepped into their line of fire to prevent it. He’d heard what Jason did to Rankin and admired that.

Shocked a bit at the savageness from Bruce, whom they’d only known to be passive, both females gaped, distracted.

Ivy and Sophia fired at the dog, hitting it in the head. The massive animal barely flinched.

“What the hell?!” Chester stopped firing, preparing to go for the animal’s throat with his knife. “How is it still up?”

“Use explosives!” Bobby backed away*. I’m not ready for this.*

“No!” Candice took control “Sweet spot target! Sweet spot target!”

Daniel didn’t understand until everyone began hitting the dog’s eyes, throat, and sides. The loud, concentrated fire echoed painfully as they brought the animal down.

Candice spun around to reload and to spot Daniel. Finding him safe, she swept the dog and judged it to be almost dead. She took up a position at the broken window so she could see outside. “The rest are leaving!”

The dog in the church growled one last time, dropping to bent knees, and then it fell over. A few seconds later, the collar emitted a high-pitched whine… Then it beeped.

“Get out!” Candice grabbed Daniel. “Bomb!”

Daniel was jerked to his feet and shoved toward the den, where Candice had sat on the window ledge to read the night before. He staggered, slamming into the wall, and felt a stiff arm that didn’t belong to his owner lift him toward the ledge.

Daniel brought his arm up as he was brutally shoved through the broken glass.

People jumped out behind him as the dog collar exploded, blowing a hole in the side of the church that sent gigantic chunks of debris raining over the neighboring homes.

Some of the roofs caught fire, adding to the chaos. Locals fled toward wells for buckets of water, but around the fiery church, nothing moved except fire and smoke.

**3**

“That is a beautiful sight.” Julian was watching the city from a side window of the top floor in the complex. “Great addition to the plan.”

Shelly beamed at Rusty like everyone else was doing, but inside, she wept for the hope they’d all had. There was no way the rebels had survived that trap. It had been too good, too quick, to counteract. The most they could hope for would be a few survivors who’d been out roaming when the attack started and missed the blast. That wasn’t enough for a rebellion to succeed.

Julian scanned the crowd around the dome. The Defenders had orders to shoot suspected rebels on sight. “Any reports from our ground troops yet?”

“The Diva den is still being cleared. We’ve taken damage, but we have an elder in custody. She’s being brought in as we speak.”

“Put her in a game immediately. Interrupt the regular broadcasts.”

“What about the rest of the captives?”

“The hound stocks are low. They need live food occasionally–for their health, you understand.”

The six men laughed together at Julian’s decision.

The three remaining women joined them with uneasy glances that were quickly hidden from the boss. Everything rested on Sam now.

**4**

**Adelphia Stadium**

Sam watched the breaking news being broadcast on the stadium screens with everyone else, unable to control her expression as the church exploded. She didn’t see survivors, though she refused to believe there hadn’t been any. Pruetts were tough.

*More bodies you won’t find.* Sam kept the expression of shock and grief on, however. It was always wise to act for the audience and she was being watched by thousands. *How should I play it?*

Sam grinned suddenly. “I just inherited everything! Drinks on me–for the entire stadium!”

Mentally, she began to worry. It was unlikely that all of her family had survived if they’d been in that church. There was even a chance that she honestly was the last Pruett standing.

*If that’s the case, the enemy is going to get an episode they didn’t bargain for. If I don’t hear from Candice by the first match, I’ll take off the chains that bind me to civility. Once I snap that control, I won’t ever go back.*

**5**

**New Network City**

“They’re so heavy!”

“Be quiet or the Defenders will hear you!”

“Sorry.”

“Good thing you told us to put those mattresses here last night.” One of the little girls grunted at the weight she was dragging toward the hole in the ground. “Gonna make noise though, when they hit each other.”

The dozen orphans struggled under the weight of the wounded adults who’d been knocked out in the blast. Many of them were burnt, but the children couldn’t help them yet.

Lea shoved Candice’s stocky body through the hole, not waiting for the splash of the mattresses sinking deeper with the impact. It might still get the attention of the guards sniffing around the front of the church. She gave a loud whistle.

Almost immediately, a young voice in front of the church shouted. “Rebels are attacking the dome!”

The laboring orphans were relieved as the troops and remaining hounds left at the decoy call.

“Hurry up!” Lea shoved them ahead of her. “It won’t take them long to figure out we lied.”

“We can’t go back to our hide out! They’ll know.”

“Why do you think I told everyone to clear out last night?” Lea shoved Daniel hard. He was heavier than his mate. “We’re covered as soon as they wake up.”

The smallest girl tugged a redhead her own age off the mattress and onto a strong shoulder. “You really think we can trust them?”

“I do. We’ll get our Den Mothers. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.” Clara shuddered. “If not, we’re all dead.”

Lea stood up to make space for the other kids to drop their burdens. “We weren’t gonna make it alone. This is the best I could do.”

In the watery pile below, Pruetts began to wake and listen, grateful to the kids.

**6**

Candice and her family treated their wounds as they waited for the orphans to join them. They’d moved to the far end of the tunnel when they’d heard more troops arrive to examine the scene.

Daniel smoothed the burn gel over her red neck and shoulders. Her destroyed cloak was balled up and riding in her pack. She had shielded him with her body. As a result, half of her hair was gone and the rest was short, stiff spikes. All of them smelled like burning flesh and hair, and they were singed or actually burnt in places, but they were alive.

“We’re here.” Lea knew to announce their arrival.

The Pruetts didn’t thank the children. They didn’t hug them or offer tokens as rewards. They also didn’t make promises the kids had likely heard a hundred times from adults who wanted to use them. The family offered the only thing they had that was equal to the deed–their name.

Candice handed her weapon to Daniel. “Stand watch.”  
Daniel did it proudly as Candice knelt in front of Lea and then eased into sitting. She hurt all over. “Will you be my daughter?”

Lea gestured toward the other eleven girls she’d chosen to help with the chore Candice had paid her for. “What about them?”

Other members of the family pointed or raised hands.

“I’ll fatten up two of them.”

“I’ve got room for three.”

“I’ll probably never get a breeding pass.” Ivy smiled at the smallest girl. “I can adopt one of them.”

The girls stared suspiciously.

“Why would you do this?” Lea’s hand came up to her small hip. “You could pay us off or walk without paying at all.”

Candice smiled up at the child. “You saved the future here today. It wasn’t just our lives. It was the rebellion. That would have died with us. A few coins can never repay something so valuable.”

“We want to be wanted! Taking us in out of pity isn’t what we need.” Lea dropped down across from Candice. It felt wrong to stand over the powerful leader.

“Just stick to our deal, and give us Den…” The girl realized she and the others here were being given something better. “Real moms?”

Candice nodded, struggling not to cry as emotions overwhelmed her exhausted body and heart. “If you’ll have us?”

Lea laughed, holding out a hand. “You’ll do.”

Candice slowly turned the handshake into a gentle hug.

Lea had never been held by an adult who cared about her. It was too much to fight. She began to sob against Candice’s hard shoulder. *I’ve got a mom now. Holy shit.*

**7**

“I need you to relay a message.” They were walking away from the city now, using crumbling sewers that even the Divas avoided due to unsafe walls that were prone to collapse. The Pruetts were grateful, but there was still a damp, silt covered floor that tried to send them slipping and there were more bugs than any of them could count. The only time the sewers flooded was during the heavy spring thaw that had already passed. The rest of the time, it housed all the creepy crawlies they hated.

The tunnel they were walking through would eventually connect them to the main sewer under the dome if they continued in that direction, but that wasn’t where they were going. There were other things to handle first, but it was good to know they had an escape route full of dark shadowy compartments where they could hide and handle pursuers.

“Okay.” Lea was munching on an energy ball with the other orphans. They’d been given medications and food, but everyone was out of water. The energy balls were juicy, providing a partial drink and a good boost of energy to get them back to the dome.

“When the fighting starts, go away. Take your girls out of New Network City. The marks you now carry will be honored by nearly any of the local farmers. Work for them for a few weeks until we get details settled and then we’ll send for you.”

“You promise?”

“On my word as a Pruett.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Candice smiled.

“What are the messages?” Lea was happy with the chore. She didn’t want the other kids to get hurt.

“Go to the crowd around the dome first, and tell them you saw us in Battery Park.”

Lea frowned. “You want a fight.”

“I’m picking the location of a battle that has to happen. And I’m letting the family reputation have room to grow. When it’s over, you’ll do what I’ve told you?”

“Of course.”

“When do you want us to go?” Clara was at Ivy’s side. She didn’t like Leo and cast repeated stares of suspicion and fear. Unlike Lea, Clara had gotten too much exposure to rental males. They weren’t all good or meek like the Network claimed. No one was. All humans had a monster inside that had to be controlled or it escaped and hurt people. She knew. Clara gave Ivy a curious glance. *I hope my new mom does too.*

“Now, please.” Candice hoped the tattoos would protect the kids, but there was a chance that it would backfire. The guards would be looking for anything unusual. Candice motioned toward the ladder. “On your way, please tell the Glowers and brutes we’ll need that distraction at the dome at dawn. That will be the moment the ape gets his final reward.”

**8**

**Pruett Town**

“They burnt it down.” Baker stared at the former Pruett homestead. “Not even the entire town, just this house.”

Rosa wasn’t surprised. She was mildly concerned for Baker, however. He’d been insisting on monitoring all news broadcasts that they could pick up. Hearing Jason’s little boy swear he wanted to be a bachelor like his daddy had put Baker on edge and all of the Runners had figured out why. He was waiting to hear his own child being used as a pawn in the war.

“The town’s empty.” Rosa pointed to where dark homes sat in neglect. “At least a week, judging by the state of the fields.”

All of them realized the crops had been abandoned.

“Were you here for the fight?”

Rosa shook her head. “We were with Sam when the news aired her sister’s name and she turned us around to escort Angelica out.” Rosa grinned. “She never doubted Angel would win. We feel the same way about Sam.”

Baker liked their comforting words as they turned toward the main road into the town, but he didn’t feel it. The sense that danger was flying toward his love was too large to ignore.

Hope pointed again. “Someone stayed.”

The single lit shack was one Baker recognized in anger. “The Malins!” He spat. “Useless.”

“Actually, they’re great for information, according to the renters.” Ginny shrugged at the looks. “So I like to talk afterward.”

Baker sighed. “A lot of changelings do. It’s nice to fall asleep with them when they’re like that.”

“Information is something we always need.” Rosa’s reminder brought a quick shift to the mood. The women got ready to fight.

Greg stayed still, panicked eyes searching for a place to hide. There was little hope the breeding family would give up secrets without being convinced. The Malins hadn’t survived by being disloyal to the hands that fed them.

Baker pointed toward the rear of the shack. “They have a tunnel. Three of you can cut them off and we’ll be waiting in the front to grab the mother as they run out. She’s the one we want.”

Baker’s order was followed without question and this time, it didn’t feel odd or make any of the females believe it was because Sam was sweet on him. Baker had proven himself so far with them and they expected him to keep doing so. It made sense that Sam’s mate was a leader too. She’d be bored to tears with anyone lesser.

Rosa made a few motions to get the crew in place, then looked at Baker. “You’ve seen her before?”

“Yes, once. I should recognize her.”

“Good. She’s your target. Bring her down and secure her for interrogation.”

Baker understood it would be a test of his fighting skills, but he wasn’t worried over that part of it. He just wasn’t sure he’d covered everything yet. “Hang on.”

Rosa held up her hand, waiting.

Baker concentrated. *What did I see that day?* He went back into his rougher memories to the day he’d been hired to service the family of women. He’d barely survived it, but he’d been able to eat for a month afterward. “They had a guard…” Baker tensed. “She communicates with the Network a few times a day. Take her out so she can’t call for any troops in the area.” The guard had paid Baker after dragging his drained, bloody body to the door.

“We go on three…” Rosa was glad for the knowledge, but they always assumed any place they were invading had security. It was the Pruett way.

Chapter Sixteen

**Smothering Underneath**

New Network City

**1**

**“N**o Pruetts were caught.”

“What?!”

Alex cleared his throat. “We have no Pruetts in custody.”

“They were inside!” Julian shuddered as rage leapt up to torment him. “We saw it through the dog collar!”

“Our investigator is there now.” Rusty motioned for Shelly to remain quiet when she would have spoken. The boss didn’t need to hear her voice. “The preliminary information implies they made it out through a rear window. We didn’t have people there when it blew. Our troops were spotted before they could finish setting the ambush.”

Julian shoved everything off the table in front of him. “I want them all dead!”

“They will be.” Alex stayed tense. You weren’t supposed to run from a wild animal, but Julian’s behavior was getting worse by the day. It was hard telling who his target would be when he finally snapped.

“Scour the city! Find them!”

“Our troops in the sewer are finished. They’re moving on to the orphan hideout at the garbage dump.”

“I want their little leader brought in.” Julian’s hands clenched and unclenched as he fought for control. “Kill the rest and leave their bodies out for everyone to see. Send it through now.”

Rusty keyed the mike. “This is a citywide order coming through. Authorization code is 7-7-5-4-3.”

“Doing it now.” Lauren didn’t reveal how angry or desperate typing it in made her. She didn’t like the games and she hated the sight of blood, but here she was, now sending Julian’s death orders out on kids. She keyed a mike in the control room, taking in a deep breath. *“This is a command order. Pay attention!”*

In the tower, Julian abruptly dropped into his seat and stared at the thinning pillar of smoke from the church that was a total loss. “How long until the game?”

Rusty lifted a brow. “Sam’s or the Divas?”

“Both.”

“One hour for the elder and registered Diva leader. Sam’s final trial run is at sunset, three hours.”

“I want all screens and reporters on it. Before, during, and after, I want to see their children bragging about how they can’t wait to be prizes.”

Rusty and Shelly kept typing, activating, and alerting, but the rest of the council waited for instructions. None of them were okay with killing the orphans. They assumed Julian had forgotten how useful the little girls were. They made perfect spies and scavengers because no one ever suspected a little kid of treachery.

Julian stared at the painting of the founding fathers. Around that table, ten unsmiling, devious male faces glared and glowered as if they were changelings. Dressed in the clothing of the time, they were still vivid enough to fit in right now. Julian wished all of them were here to see his determination to push through the final part of their plan. Marcella had been clever enough to get the males enslaved, but their original founder, Lucas, had been even smarter. It was a shame he couldn’t be here to see the finale.

Julian felt the disease sweeping over his legs, darting him with pricks of pain that signaled a flip that he wouldn’t be able to handle in front of witnesses. He jerked upward, staggering toward his private entrance.

Brandon waited until the door shut and the whirl of the elevator sounded. “Where’s he going?”

“To visit the cells.” Shelly grunted. “He takes a death row walk and picks a control.”

Alex was revolted. “What does he do? Eat them?”

Rusty glared at Shelly and then the rest of the table. “It’s none of our business. Follow orders.”

Shelly frowned as she realized this room wasn’t safe to speak in. “We’re wired now?”

Rusty shrugged, standing up. “If I were the boss, I would do that. We’re clearly not all trustworthy here, are we?”

Shelly would have scolded him for making them look bad on the recording, but there wasn’t time as Julian came back through the private door wearing an expression of delight and glee that made everyone cringe.

“You thought I didn’t know! That is classic.” Julian leaned against his door, back in control. “But your betrayals reminded me that we record the entire city. We require all buildings to be outfitted with microphones that feed directly to our security files.”

The council shared confused, afraid glances that made Julian laughed.

“Yeah, you’re going to kill me and run the show.” He snorted harshly. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.” Julian gestured toward Rusty. “Get the audio files from the church and the sewer. By the time Sam’s heat is over, we’ll know everything.”

**2**

“Is everyone here?” Candice scanned the large field that had once been a city park. Turned into an orchard a few decades ago, the desperate people in this city had stripped it each time it started to grow, forcing the Network to abandon the idea. Candice had been surprised by it anyway when she’d learned the history of this city. Didn’t they know not to feed the bears? Later, she’d put the clues together and figured out it hadn’t been normal fruit. The homeless in the city at that time had gone sterile over that ten years. The orphan population here now came from newcomers and families who fell out of favor. The roaming bands of children were Network created and they hated their rulers even more than the Pruetts did.

The noise would have given away their location with all the sound if there had been any Defenders nearby. Raised voices, laughter, and songs were echoing through the peaceful air. If they hadn’t been setting a trap, Candice would have been furious with the lack of defense tactics. It was a wonder any of these people had survived considering how lax they were about security.

Candice’s speech had been prepared for weeks before she’d come back to this city, but it fell out naturally now as she prepared her army for war. “Our hosts say we’ll only be on camera here if something new was added, so we need to search and secure. Sort jobs by ability, not by affiliation, folks. We are not enemies here today. We are business partners reclaiming what was stolen from us. The enemy must fall!”

The cheering that met her statement sent ugly birds fleeing the trees and bushes around them. Five miles from the dome, there were still homes and rubble in sight that told them they weren’t safe. Candice knew it, but they weren’t safe anywhere. They were at war and it always came with risks that lesser people would decry as suicide or insanity. Those moments had earned the Pruetts their reputation.

“We’ve been pitted against each other to keep us from doing this very thing. We die and they rule, but that is about to end. All of our differences can be set aside until after we accomplish the goal that has united us. No more sons will be stolen. No more families will be destroyed to satisfy vanity and greed. We are the rightful rulers of our own destinies. We get to pick the future!”

“We can’t fight them alone!” someone shouted from the crowd of roughly fifty. The orphans were on the outskirts, staying out of the way.

Candice moved toward Lea. “Are we alone? Look around. We have ten times this many, all waiting to strike.”

Desert Glowers came out of their hiding places, revealing dozens of them. In the near distance, Candice could hear the energetic splashing of the ape traveling with that group. Across from the Glowers was a camp of mountain females. There were only a dozen of these hulking brutes, but they were almost double the size of a normal citizen–another reason the council wanted them gone.

Two dozen swamp women stood near the mountain clan, staring at Candice with both fear and hope. Behind those two groups, a small army of orphans were making camp and gathering food from the limited wilderness for everyone. The half-mile field had trees on one side and an idyllically flowing stream on the other. It didn’t look like the proper place for blood to be spilled or for the future of a nation to be decided. Candice walked through the crowd as the people vented oral rage and shared common ground with neighbors they had wanted dead just a week ago. Everything was about to change, but this time, the disease of tyranny had caused it.

“You can’t mean the kids!”

“They can’t help!”

“They don’t get a vote!”

Candice spun around with red eyes and all of her fury. “Without them, we would be dead. They are going to help us and they are going to get a vote. Get on board with my plans or go lick the heels of your masters!”

“Who made you the boss of everyone?!” someone demanded angrily.

“Your life of cowardice! None of this would be happening without me and my crazy relatives.” Candice shoved by the woman. “Sit down and start thinking of how we’re going to feed all these bellies.”

“We’re staying?!” The woman didn’t care that Candice had shoved her. Fear flared over her rough features.

Candice nodded. “Our fighters are coming here. The troops will track us here. You all came here to encourage a rebellion. You’re about to get your wish.”

“They’re here!”

The guards continued to shout as they tightened leg grips around branches and drew their guns.

Bullets and arrows flew through the air as troops swarmed into the open field.

“Wait for the reload!”

Candice’s order was followed by those who heard. The rest of them rushed forward while grabbing their weapons.

In the front of the fray, troops fired into the trees to clear a path. They’d come in full force, preventing those in the rear from firing until they made it into the field. All of the front line Defenders were out of ammunition in a minute, pausing to reload.

“Kill them all!” Candice roared as she took off running.

Around her, the family reacted first, and then the rest of her mismatched army charged, many shouting and drawing knives. There were so many bodies in the field that guns were almost useless as the two lines collided.

Candice ran into the enemy ranks without fear, allowing the disease to turn her into the monster that always lurked inside now. Her blades sliced into arms, necks, and hands, sending guns flying through the crowd. Anything she could reach became an open wound. Bodies fell around her in splatters and splashes that made the other fighters stay clear of where she was. They all branched out, each strong killer of the group taking on the strongest Defender they could find. Despite having more numbers than the squad, the squad was better equipped. The leaders had to go down hard and fast so the troops would lose faith.

“This is great!” Bobby was standing next to Chester, watching without participating.

Chester gave him a hard shove, knocking him to the ground just as an arrow went sailing over his head. “Stay there!”

Chester took up a stance over Bobby’s shocked form, regretting his vote to bring the rookie along. He scanned the crowd for Candice, hoping she didn’t need assistance because he couldn’t leave Bobby. He found her in the middle of a squad of Defenders who were trying to close ranks.

“She’s getting them from the inside!” Sophia laughed in delight. “I love this family.”

The front line of Defenders dwindled. By the time their leader called a retreat, it was too late. Candice and the rest of her group had come through the middle and made it to the entrance to the field, cutting off their escape. It kept two hundred Defenders and four hundred fighters crammed in together with no choice but to kill each other.

“Hold this spot!” Candice gathered her family with shouts, whistles, and gestures, hating being so far from Daniel. She’d left him on the other side of the field, out of the way with the other males who couldn’t really fight yet.

Candice watched Divas go down around them, noting the Glowers and mountain brutes weren’t protecting them. *The girls did their job.* Candice swung in fury at a Defender lifting a reloaded gun to fire at those kids. Blood flew across her face.

Feeling the next arrivals, Candice shoved over to make space for the hounds that ran into the valley. The thick collars had been reinforced and the animals were the biggest ones she’d ever seen.

Candice motioned her family to let them through. The hounds were so intent on getting into the field that they ran right by Pruetts to attack Divas and Glowers.

Chester shoved Bobby through the battle toward Candice, ducking swings and dodging big animals with fiery breath and mournful growls. The hounds didn’t attack men. Chester pushed Bobby behind their family line as Candice gave the next order.

“Kill the hounds!”

“Do not follow that order!” Daniel screamed into the bullhorn. “Do not kill the dogs!”

The sound of male fury stopped the entire battle for three seconds. Even the hounds lifted bloody snouts to locate the source.

Candice paused in her swing, allowing the Defender in front of her to stab her in the leg before she could jump back and bring her sword down.

“Take the collars off. You’re not killing them this time! Take off their collars or run for your lives because you’re not killing any more of the animals that we love!” It was the first time Daniel had sounded like a Pruett.

Mary scanned the battlefield and was relieved to find most of the troops dead, but the huge dogs were a threat. Before she could change her mind, Mary ran forward and sliced through the collar of a dog that was busy eating a reporter.

The animal jerked away in fear, cowering as the control collar fell to the ground.

The others who saw it tried to copy her move, glad the animals were reacting in fear instead of rage.

Some of the fighters continued to battle the dogs with intent to kill, however, angering Daniel. He gestured to the other males. “Sing! Do it now!”

The awkward chorus of voices had an immediate effect. The hounds froze, heads tilting up to allow death swings and collar slices. The rest of the changelings in the field snapped or fought to control their need as they tried to kill the remaining troops and not be mauled by the hounds or get trampled by the weaker fighters now trying to get out of the area with their lives. Blood and screams littered the battlefield.

Candice didn’t care. She was trying to make her way to Daniel and the line of singing males at the far end where the woods met the water. He didn’t realize he had made himself a target for every changeling on the field.

All across the bloody grass, hounds without collars were also running toward the line of singing males. Some had already reached them and were providing a wall of defense against the snapped changelings now scrambling toward the men with red orbs and long claws.

Candice had flipped from an angry changeling into a terrified woman trying to reach her mate. There were others already ahead of her who would reach him first. “Look out!” She knew there was no way Daniel could hear her.

She watched in horror as two women flying through the crowd leapt up and knocked Daniel to the ground. One of the females grabbed his arm as she rose and began to drag him off.

The second woman attacked the first; the two fell into a vicious battle for the prize.

Candice ran faster. She’d never been so terrified.

“Keep singing!” Daniel shouted toward the other terrified males as he stood up. Changelings by the dozens were rushing toward the line of men, hounds and troops forgotten.

“Do you want freedom?!” Daniel screamed. “Do your duty to the rebellion! Sing!”

A few of the terrified males took off running instead, but the majority did as they were told. It was heartening and horrifying to witness defenseless males take up fighting stances while forcing out a ballad.

“Louder!” Candice passed the singers to reach Daniel. Two other women arrived at the same time, but not the two who were still fighting over him. Candice spun in a wide circle with her sword out and took off both of their heads. She considered it fair payment for the way her heart was pounding at almost losing Daniel.

As the enslaved males tried to sing louder, emboldened by Candice being near them, the bloody frenzy on the battlefield began to calm. The sound of the male singing wasn’t possible to resist when it was concentrated.

“Get the rest of those collars!”

It took Candice a moment to realize Daniel was talking to her. She smirked and gave a low bow. “As you wish.”

Free to be herself, Candice allowed the disease to take over, but not to kill. The novel approach required a great deal of effort on her part not to shove the blade home instead of slashing through the leather restraints.

Next to her, Leo and Ivy were trying to remove the collar from a snarling dog, but they were both afraid to get close enough to do it.

Bobby shoved them aside and darted forward with his small dagger to free the hound. It wasn’t a surprise when he turned to them and smirked. “I can get used to this.”

Ivy chuckled.

Leo scowled.

Covered in blood and gore, Candice continued helping cut the collars.

Daniel and the males kept singing, controlling the situation and the females. Freed hounds were gathering around Daniel and the males, providing a slobbering line of protection that the other changelings were choosing not to fight. The singing and the calmer demeanor of the freed animals was causing the disease to weaken. Except for the Pruetts. Daniel didn’t know why they weren’t pausing in their anger, but he assumed it was related to their family somehow. It was clear that they were different.

Chester tossed homemade explosives at the hounds and the Network troops, grinning widely as gore was blown across the battlefield. “I love playing with fire!”

Sophia glared on her way by him. “Pay attention!”

Chester ducked the swipe of a changeling and slit her guts open with his long blade. She sank to her knees in shock.

He swiped out again and took the head of the changeling next to them who was aiming for Bobby. Blood sprayed him in a wide arc.

Sophia and Horace fought side-by-side, punching, stabbing, and kicking in tandem. Defenders went down as they cleared the path for Chester to come behind them and slit throats or snap necks. They’d been fighting together for a long time.

The entire Pruett clan roamed the battlefield, shooting injured troops and freeing giant dogs. The corner of the clearing held the line of orphans who had been cooking when the attack began. There was no need for them to come onto the field. The Glowers and mountain women had those children surrounded, but the kids themselves were waiting with clubs and sharpened sticks for anyone who did make it through the line of protection. The Glowers were only afraid of the dogs and the mountain women weren’t scared of either. They all waited eagerly for the battle to reach them.

Candice and her family worked together to keep that from happening. Candice had told the two groups to look after the children, but she’d also wanted them out of the way. The Glowers might accidentally infect people on their side and the brutes were never careful about who they killed once a fight started. She and her clan met near that line to counter the remaining squad of troops who hadn’t been able to retreat. The fifteen big females in silver and black were no match for their nightmares as Pruetts surrounded them, giving no mercy even when it was screamed for.

*You chose your side a long time ago.* Candice stabbed forward and retreated before she could be hit. *Take it. You’ve all earned it.*

Feeling like the hand of justice, Candice was unprepared for the knife that slammed into her back. She staggered forward, hands out for balance.

“One down!” Leo jerked the blade free. He threw the knife this time, hitting Ivy in the neck as she gaped at him in horror.

“Goal achieved!” He raised his arms in victory. “Now am I good enough?!”

“Kill him!”

“Candy!”

Leo’s body arched and jerked as he was shot repeatedly. Slugs and arrows flew into his chest, spine, and legs, but it was too late to stop the damage he’d done.

All three bodies fell to the parched ground in an eerie tandem.

“Medico! We need medicos!”

“Candy!”

Fresh screams and running feet echoed to Candice as she lay there bleeding. Pain flew along her spine like the fire she’d spent so many years battling. She forced out words. “Kill them all! Never stop fighting!”

The words were terrifying. It was what someone on death’s doorstep said to keep the family from being too distracted to fight.

Across the battlefield, the fighting stopped. A sense of doom fell over the area, bringing a cloud that even the sun couldn’t penetrate.

“She’s dead.” Bobby lowered Ivy to the dirt, shaking hands coated in her blood. “She said to never give up the fight for freedom.”

Bobby stood up to help Chester.

Lydia grabbed Daniel as the bachelor reached them. The medic was already next to Candice, pulling items from a ragged pouch.

Daniel pulled away from her.

“Let him work!” Chester shoved Daniel to the ground. He was stronger, but he wasn’t smarter. Daniel leapt up and tackled the bigger man, but as soon as they hit the ground, he rolled free and scrambled toward Candice.

“Let him go!” Mary shoved through the growing ring of witnesses to reach her daughter. “Let me by!”

The medico, Gerald, looked at Mary in desperation. “I can’t help her. I’m not trained for this!”

Mary yanked her cloak open and dug deep. When she pulled out a branding kit, half of those who understood what was coming moved away. The others watched so they would know how to do it if they ever needed to.

Mary hit the button to activate the tool, internally wincing at the newest scar to her child’s already marred skin, but she didn’t hesitate to slam it over the gushing wound when the beep sounded.

“Great!” The medico reached over her to hit the reload button on the tool when it began to cool off. “I want one of those for my gear.”

“Save her life and you’ll have ten of them.” Mary handed it to him.

The man immediately finished the work, face determined. When a Pruett promised something, they delivered. He had to do the same.

Mary and Daniel stayed with Candice, leaving them without a leader on the battlefield. Fighters wandered aimlessly, some stripping troops of clothes and gear.

“We should do something here.” Bobby scanned the chaos. “She always said upset people can’t be left on their own or they’ll come up with bad ideas.”

“Like that?” Chester waved sarcastically as the mountain women told two Divas they couldn’t go near the kids, causing another fight to break out.

Bobby shrugged. “I could sing.”

Chester shrugged. “Get on the bullhorn. I’ll guard you.”

Bobby scanned for the magnifier that Daniel had dropped when he saw Candice fall. “There! Let’s go!”

The two males took off running, drawing attention from the field of fighters.

“Shit! No running!” Chester grabbed Bobby’s arm to slow them down. “They’re in changed form.”

“Oh, yeah!” Bobby kept pace with Chester as they fast walked toward the line of mostly forgotten enslaved males. The hounds had remained with the singers, protecting them, but none of the men had thought to keep calming things after Candice was hurt.

Bobby scooped up the bullhorn and went with Chester to stand near the largest group of the hounds, hoping that would help. Their women were all busy right now.

Bobby began to talk, unable to come up with a song to sing in his excited panic. “Happy afternoon, New Network City residents!”

The absurd statement drew snickers and disgusted snorts, but it also took the anger down a notch.

“Well, go on.” Chester gestured. “Be yourself. It won all of us over.”

“Okay, folks. Have you heard the one about the fire hound and the changeling? They were hot for each other.”

Chester rolled his eyes and tried not to get distracted. When Bobby got rolling, it was often hilarious.

“What about the vulture and the miner? Both of them were picked clean when it was over.”

That got actual laughs from the crowd, encouraging Bobby to do better.

“We also have bats and bachelors. Both come out at night and suck.”

Chester frowned. “That’s too far.”

Bobby ignored him for the snickering females who were slowly turning from the anger to enjoy a new show. “What about the Snakes and Divas? They spend their time eating each other.”

The double jab earned Bobby a ripple of laughter that was addicting. He’d never played for an audience this big. He quickly picked out another nugget he’d heard from Sam and her Runners. “This city has it all, folks. We have a Network that doesn’t work and Defenders that don’t defend. We have warm running blood and cold water showers. We have the best of nothing. It makes us a special place.”

“Collars!” Candice tried to stay alert through the agony. “Get away from the collars.”

Dismay flooded those who heard as they realized what she meant. Men and women began screaming at each other, trying to give a warning that Candice knew was too late. The enemy was about to take another cut.

The first explosion scattered awful debris as it blew up next to a line of Divas and snakes.

Candice found Daniel’s hand and pulled him close. They held each other as the collars went off, blowing up allies and enemies alike.

Daniel didn’t let go even when she sagged in his arms and the medic fell over from a shrapnel hit. *I’ve got you. You looked out for me. Now, it’s my turn to make sure you survive.*

Next to them, Mary and Bruce were locked in the same embrace, listening to screams for help and savage reactions from locals who were being betrayed.

Divas and snakes began running away, taking the business women and the reporters along.

The starlets left slowly, mourning their losses. When they fled, they couldn’t take the bodies or the enemy would know they’d been here. Everyone who ran had hopes of resuming their old place now that the Pruetts had been defeated.

“Cowards!” One of the rebel males with the bloody Nomads grabbed a gun from the belt of the nearest woman and opened fire at the running locals.

No one stopped him. Many of those who fled would name everyone who had been here to save themselves. Killing them was justice to the men and to those who were alert enough to witness it. The rest of the people on the battlefield were injured, dead, or staggering around in dazed grief through the chaos and gore to find their friends or relatives.

The Pruetts were no different. Bobby and Chester were nowhere to be found, causing panic in their clan. The rest of them had gathered around Candice, refusing to leave her.

“She said we’d be hit this way. That’s why we’re using the plated cloaks. She said to act like we’ve all been killed if the opportunity came.” Before anyone could guess her plan, Mary smeared her bloody hands over Bruce and herself, and then dropped to the ground. “I’m hit!”

“Use a Para cord. Make it look like we were all hit.” Lydia was worried about Bobby, but she had faith that Chester would protect him.

Sophia scanned the battlefield desperately. “We’re still short two.”

“Follow orders!” Daniel was too furious to speak softly. “Don’t risk the plan over two men who can fend for themselves.”

Sophia clamped her lips shut as Horace drew out an explosive. He lit it quickly and tossed it into the empty trees nearby. “Everyone down! Incoming!”

The explosion wasn’t large, but it hit a pile of debris and sent real shrapnel flying toward the family.

When the dust settled, there was a pile of bodies that weren’t moving.

“It got them!”

“The Pruetts are dead!”

The remaining fighters were stunned. Worry and loss swarmed over the survivors, bringing fresh rage. They’d been sucker punched and now, their leader was gone. Without the Pruetts, few of them held any hope that the rebellion would be successful.

As that slowly sank in, people began to leave. No one approached the family. The council would want proof the Pruetts were dead. No one wanted to be caught with a body the Network had a claim on. That was always an ugly conversation.

The orphans, many of them crying, also began to leave. The sight of the tough children in tears broke the remaining will to fight. The battlefield cleared, leaving the dead and severely injured who would all become fodder for the campaigns and stocks.

“Wait.” Candice gritted her teeth at Daniel’s weight. She’d woken from the pain when he’d collapsed on top of her to protect her from taking another hit.

“Hang on, Candy.” Daniel could feel her fading. “We’ll take care of you.”

Candice listened to his heavy breathing, inhaling his sweet, sweaty scent. “I love you.”

Grief and rage swamped him as she passed out. They’d hurt his mate. “They’ll pay for this. The final word will be ours.”

Mary grunted her approval from his side. “Yes, and when we come, there won’t be mercy or hesitation. We’re going to give the same treatment they’ve delivered. It is going to be the ugliest thing the Pruetts have ever done.”

Around them, the family fought to keep from revealing themselves by letting the disease take control. After death, there were no changelings and uninfected. There was only the person who’d been smothering underneath all along.

Chapter Seventeen

**Monsters**

New Network City

**1**

**J**ulian stared at the bodies.

Almost an hour had passed since the end of the battle that they had watched through the remote collars of the dogs before activating the explosives. The bands were set to detonate upon the animal’s death or removal of the collar, but they sometimes triggered them early, like in the church.

The snakes and the Divas had been decimated. The few remaining members of those clans would slink off into the southern country until they were hunted down. He didn’t expect to hear from them anymore. It looked like all of the targets that had been in this city were in the field or family stack. He had a crew on the way to collect the bodies.

“The special featuring the Diva elder is about to begin.” Rusty hit a few buttons, bringing the dark screen in the center to life so they could view that carnage.

Julian let the council enjoy the episode without comment. He was staring at his screen, studying the pile. Something wasn’t right, but he didn’t know what it was. “Who did you send to collect the bodies?”

“Just a recovery team.” Rusty didn’t understand why Julian was worried this time. “If there are any survivors, the medics have the equipment to get them stable so you can put them into a game. They’re arriving on the scene now.”

“That’s the trap!” Julian pounded his fist on the table. “Call them back!”

“Too late. They’re entering the field.”

“Pull them back right now!”

As if the pile of bodies on the screen had heard his shout, all but one moved. The legendary family, without the burdens of the civilians, grabbed their weapons and attacked the recovery team. Julian had no doubt it was to take the supplies. That meant one of them was honestly injured. *Who?*

Julian typed in camera directions and was able to zoom in on a body. It was Candice. “Is she dead?!”

On the center screen, the elder Diva screamed in agony as a vulture ripped into her stomach and began to eat. The sound was soothing. It had been hours since his fun in the cellblock. He didn’t care that the sentries and other prisoners had witnessed it this time, but the rage was barely being held in. It was almost time for him to move into the next stage of physical relief. Blood was no longer satisfying him.

“What do you want me to do?” Rusty wasn’t angry, only scared now of Julian’s rage. “I can send more hounds. We also have two squads back from the eastern farms.”

“Blow them all up. Do it now.”

Even Rusty hesitated this time. The recovery crew was all medics. They rarely ever fought. They didn’t know their tool kits contained an explosive device. “Are you sure?”

Julian turned to glare.

Rusty shrugged “It’s just that this feed isn’t secure. Someone might figure it out.”

Julian continued to glower.

Rusty began typing in the code that would kill ten of their best medics. He had chosen the recovery team himself to ensure survivors could be brought in for interrogation and punishment.

**2**

“Take your clothes off!” Chester shouted at the captive females, shoving one of them with the front of his gun. He had no intention of firing upon the unarmed women, but it didn’t seem that way as he leaned forward. “Get those clothes off right now!”

Around him, the rest of the family issued the same order.

The terrified medics were confused, but grateful they hadn’t been killed. They started to strip.

“Faster! You want to die!?”

“It’s beeping!” Bobby grabbed the tool belt near his feet and flung it as far as he could into the woods.

It exploded seconds later.

“Tool belts off! Tool belts off!”

As the medics realized the belts were programed to detonate, they scrambled to remove them.

Mary and Sophia used their knives to slash the belts off the females who cringed from them in fear. It was just like dealing with the males.

Multiple explosions hit the area, but none of them were hurt due to Chester’s quick thinking.

Bobby clapped Chester on the shoulder. “Nice catch!”

Chester shrugged. “Wish I’d been thinking that hard when I let Leo get next to our leader.”

Bobby’s face fell. “You and me both.”

Chester scanned the area, half expecting troops to flood the gory field to restart the fighting. When no sounds of that came, both men were relieved.

“Do you think he sold us out? Or was it jealousy of Daniel?”

Daniel glared at them from his position next to Candice’s body. He hadn’t left her. “He sold us out.”

Chester stared. “How do you know?”

Around them, the family stilled to hear Daniel’s answer. His opinion was coming to be respected.

“How did they know we were here? How did they know where to send the medics to collect the bodies?”

Once Daniel pointed it out, it was obvious. The enemy was watching them.

“Do you want us to find the camera or should we prepare to move out?” Sophia looked at Daniel and then Mary.

Daniel gestured toward the medics who were checking their clothing and getting dressed. “That’s up to them. I don’t know enough medical information. It might not be safe to move Candy yet.”

Sophia and Mary took charge, directing a group to spread out and search for the camera. The Network had to be able to see them, which meant the council knew the Pruetts had survived and their medical team was now captive. Wanting to be sure the innocent medics were firmly on their side, Daniel spoke to them in low tones while holding his gun on them.

“I assume they can’t hear us from here. If I’m wrong then this won’t work.” He scanned their terrified faces. “Your masters will believe you are captives. You’re not. As soon as it gets dark, you can leave.” He looked down at Candice, who was unconscious. “I love her. Please save her in return for the favor I’ve given you. Give her back her life.”

“I found it!” Lydia climbed the tree to reach it. She could see where someone had come up recently and used the same footholds, assuming that if it had held Leo’s body then it would also hold hers. They were roughly the same height and weight, though she had her changeling fury as backup and he had only been full of cowardice.

“Why did Leo do it?” Bobby didn’t understand. “Killing Pruetts isn’t worth the reward the Network would have offered.”

“I don’t think the enemy came to him.” Bruce joined the two men at the base of the tree.

Lydia ripped the camera free and threw it to the ground.

Bobby frowned as the metal and plastic broke apart across the dirt and blood. “What do you mean?”

“I think he realized Ivy was never going to claim him. He was always going to be an outsider in this family. He had already spent all of his life that way–never being good enough for the person he was with. He snapped.”

“Snapped, like a changeling?”

One of the medics nodded. “We’ve suspected men get a variation of the disease. The Network won’t admit it, but we’ve watched our sons and brothers suffer through it. There was no reason to believe they would be mean.”

“There was also no reason to believe they wouldn’t be.” Mary felt her fire flare up and shivered. “Can you imagine males who change like we do?”

“We can’t free them.” Lydia didn’t glance at her men. “We can’t take that chance. I’m changing my vote to no.”

The males in the family didn’t protest yet. They were too horrified at the thought of becoming like the females they were so afraid of.

“Come help me.” Chester directed, full of anger and confusion that seemed to lend credit to the theory they’d just been discussing.

Bobby joined him to start gathering rocks for a burial. Pruetts didn’t leave their kin in the open to rot unless there was no other choice.

Leo’s body wasn’t touched. He wasn’t family.

**3**

**Adelphia Stadium**

“Look at that Pruett run! The other four racers can’t keep up even while changed!”

Sam was paying for the extreme boost of energy. Over the years, her family had discovered chemical means to enhance the disease. Eating energy balls beforehand worked, as did the nastier method of eating raw vulture eggs. For a few hours, the chemicals drew from fat stores and produced a steady stream of adrenaline that fueled their muscles. It also drained the body, sometimes causing failures in critical areas, like the heart.

Sam staggered as she crossed the finish line, chest squeezing. She fumbled in her cloak for a crude tablet that she shoved into her mouth while appearing to wipe away the spittle that had formed at the corners. She forced herself to straighten and glower toward the cameras, hiding the pain behind the rage. She then used her remaining energy to spin and draw the spikes from her belt.

The antidote worked fast, but it also made her vision blurry as it fought to slow the adrenaline stream. Sam took the time to aim. She couldn’t afford to have her reputation damaged by this moment.

She hit both of the final racers, but neither were kill shots.

The roar of the stadium and the announcer faded as the buzzing in her ears grew so loud that she was forced to shut her eyes and allow her body to react as the two remaining racers reached her with furious screams.

Claws swiped through her tattered cloak, leaving furrows of heat across her shoulder as she ducked the swing. She immediately lunged toward the steps crunching closer, long blade extended. She felt it slide into her arm and swiveled around to hack at the leg of the opponent about to stab her in the side. Eyes stinging, she scanned through cracked lids for the other racers.

Sam felt the blow coming, but couldn’t avoid the thin knife that plunged into her stomach and ripped upward.

Sam used her claws to pull the stunned woman closer, causing the knife to go in deeper. “I can’t be killed!” Sam shoved the woman down and drove her own blade into an eye socket.

Ignoring the mess, Sam waited for the next attack, vision straightening and then fading again as the opposite chemicals fought for control.

“Medico!”

Sam took two steps toward the tunnel and dropped like a stone.

The noises faded as she lay there, feeling pain and dimness fighting over her nerve endings*. Can I just die now?*

The inner voice that seemed to only be found in her kin was relentless. *No. Not now, not like this.*

Sam lifted her head. “What’s next?”

The quieted stadium burst into shouts and cheering that the reporters knew not to air. Sam was now as popular as the game itself because of her refusal to play by the rules.

Sam listened to her fans with one thought in mind. *Get the body carriers ready. I’m going to fill them up.*

Chapter Eighteen

**Let’s Get to It**

Northern Borderlands

**1**

**“I**’m going to call you Thomas.”

Animal man glanced over tiredly. “What?”

In the daylight, the bachelor’s scars gave him the appearance of being a Pruett. Angelica shrugged. “I can’t keep calling you animal man. You’re more civilized than many of the females I’ve been on bounty runs with.”

“Thomas is as good as anything else.” The male was too tired to argue and her choice was actually close to the truth.

“How did you get put into the games?”

Thomas stumbled over a small rock buried in the hardpacked ground. “Traded.”

“Your mother?”

“Network. I was born in a lab.”

“Are you one of the twelve who produce immune children?”

Weary of the lies, he stopped, forcing her to do the same to hear the answer. “Any man can be immune. The women get doses to keep the disease alive. By thirty, it dies out on its own unless enhanced.”

Weariness smothered Angelica suddenly, taking her strength. Her stomach roiled and her skin went clammy. She staggered, dropping her to her knees.

“Are you okay?!”

“Just need a minute.”

Thomas waited, worrying as she stayed down, breathing shallow. Her green face told him it was a stomach problem, but he knew she hadn’t eaten in a day because he’d witnessed the argument between her and Jason over it.

“Inoculations?” She resumed their conversation after a minute of placing pieces.

“Yes. The males get them in the labs to make them sterile or to steal a child. The females are infected and then reinfected at each vaccine event. How else could they keep an entire population like this over the centuries?” He frowned down at her. “Are you ill?”

“I’m pregnant. It’s too soon to know for sure, but I do, just the same.”

“That shouldn’t be possible.”

“It is if I haven’t been vaccinated.”

“You haven’t had a vaccine in the last ten years?”

She shook her head. “None of us have. Mary Pruett fudges the computer to make it look as though our town takes part. Some of them do. We haven’t for a long time.”

“Then you’re left with an early strain. It might not pass to your child.”

Angelica felt relief at having any hope. It was what had kept her from claiming Jason when they’d realized how they felt. She didn’t want to subject a child to this misery. She’d spent most of her life wishing her mother hadn’t done it to her.

Thomas extended a hand, and his trust. “Come on. We need to get moving.”

Angelica let him help her up, able to sense a difference in him already at the news. Hadn’t he been around a pregnant woman before? She snorted at her own naiveté. He’d told her he was born in the labs. He’d never been around females at all, except in training.

“I’m going to use you as a bargaining chip for our travel.” Angelica started walking again. “As collateral for payment. You’ll have to stay with them while we travel.”

Thomas sighed. “That’s why I came. I’ve heard of the fishmongers. They’re hard up for company, and they’ll make any trade for it.”

“My sister says the same, but she also said they’re like us–honorable. We’ll use that side and the Pruett shield.” She met his eye. “I need to mark you.”

Thomas shook his head. “I don’t want it as a ploy. If it isn’t honest, keep your mark.”

“It is honest. You’ve been loyal to Baker and he’s like a brother to me.”

Thomas lifted a brow. “I get the mark?”

She cracked a smile at his hopeful tone. “If you’ll accept it and all that it means.”

“With pride.” He stopped. “Now?”

Angelica drew a small box from her pocket. Before he could view the needles, she had taken the tool in hand and slammed it against his neck.

“Ahhh!”

Angelica stored it, remembering when she’d marked Jason. That had been much gentler, but she didn’t have the strength and patience right now. “Have *you* ever seen a fishmonger?”

Thomas shook his head, fingering the warm tattoo. “Not even on newscasts or in old books. Only in stories from prizes brought back after escaping.” He dropped his chin. “And from renters.”

Angelica sympathized with his emotional turmoil, but she needed information and pushed on. “What did the rumors say?”

“They wouldn’t stay out of the water. The chemicals did the same thing to them.”

“All changelings are bloodthirsty. What makes these so different?”

“Their males are not sterile. They just don’t produce many.”

“Are they mutants?”

“Yes. They have gills and webbed feet.”

Angelica took a few moments to consider the information, trying to balance it with the fact that neither of them knew if the rumors were true. She had heard the same stories from Sam and the Runners, with the girls all being drunk at the time. She hadn’t put much faith in them. She also hadn’t listened hard because she’d thought it was just another of their tall tales.

“If I get hurt, you’ll avenge me?”

Angelica stiffened. “I’m not going to take many more times of you insulting my honor before I do something about it, *Animal*.”

The bachelor knew better than to say anything else, but his thoughts were clear. He didn’t trust anyone.

Angelica assumed he had good reason for it. “You’re not going to die here.”

He didn’t respond.

“Why did Baker put you in leadership?”

The man didn’t answer, but Angelica could tell that he wanted to.

“This isn’t a family thing or a power trip. I need to know.”

“I was a favorite rental for a while in the complex.”

Angelica lifted her brow. “High-level clientele?”

“I serviced some of the council.” He grimaced. “If you get the chance, kill Shelly for me.”

Angelica stopped. Baker hadn’t told her or Candice that. She spun toward her companion, scarred face etched in the Pruett intensity that was so deadly. “Tell me everything and do it right now.”

Before the man could run or speak, they were both shocked into alertness by the sound of an engine coming toward them.

*Engine*? Angelica froze. Who had an engine out here?

The sound of rushing water came next, telling her they were closer to their destination than she had realized.

Angelica grabbed Thomas’s arm and ducked behind what remained of a large warehouse built from brick and petrified trees. The Network had quickly learned that old materials were unusable, but not before they had wasted a lot of time, money, and lives in ventures. The Borderlands were dotted with failed projects.

The sound of engines grew closer. Angelica scanned for a telltale dust cloud, hoping it wasn’t troops. The engines sounded like Mopars.

After a few seconds, the sound began to fade. Angelica cautiously stood up to try to spot the vehicles. As soon as she did, the smell of salt and fish hit her nose in a thick wave.

Angelica took in the ripple of upset water and the shadows of multiple women working in the murky liquid. Small boats roamed the outer waves, pushing fish toward the shore.

She studied the webbed hands pulling on nets, the wading pants cut out in the rear to allow for a short tail, the hair pinned up to keep from clogging gills on their necks, and realized her plan wasn’t going to succeed. She and the rest of her relatives were wild. They lived in ways most citizens of New America wouldn’t understand, but these women were even more rugged than the desert Glowers they had found under the old city of St. Louis. These females weren’t going to be fooled. The situation demanded honesty and a lot of luck. If it went wrong, she would die here. Thomas would die later, after a lot of misery.

*There isn’t another choice. If I don’t get the males out of here, the weather or the environment will kill them before the enemy does or they’ll start getting sick and I don’t have a way to help them. What can I offer these females, honestly, to get their help?*

Angelica studied the sturdy, misshapen bodies, mind flying. She looked down at the nervous male next to her, pieces clicking into place. These women would want the same thing the Glowers wanted, the same thing everyone wanted–freedom.

Angelica took Thomas’s arm, and helped him to his feet. “Stay close. Act as if you’re at the complex with one of the renters.”

Before Thomas could protest, Angelica stepped into view, forcing him to stay on her heels. She lifted an arm and waved energetically. “Hello! How is everyone today?!”

“Should I act like I belong to you?”

“Feel your neck.”

Thomas gingerly probed the new tattoo on his neck.

“You already are my property. So, yes, act like I own you. I do.” Angelica went straight toward the small crew, drawing attention.

Thomas expected the females to rush over and attack them, but no one did. Everyone froze, watching them in careful stillness. “They don’t seem surprised.”

“No, they don’t.” Angelica waved again, this time toward a small hut in the distance where several people were standing. As she waved, more came to the door. She assumed that was where leadership would be, but she didn’t go there yet. She went to the workers on the dock first.

The women were wearing clothes made from the hide of every animal available in these wastelands. The weapons had also been fashioned from the weak wood and unforgiving stone, providing knives and swords that had small handgrips because the wood wouldn’t take a blow if it were longer. “I’m Angelica Pruett.”

The tense mutant standing at the edge of the dock was clearly a supervisor from her clothes and weapons, but she didn’t act like it as she returned Angelica’s handshake with a confused expression instead of alertness like this situation required.

*They may not be as much help as I thought.* Angelica gave a quick pump of the woman’s webbed hand and let go. “I’m here to talk about the rebellion and a job. Who do I speak with?”

The woman pointed toward the shack. “Marta is the boss here.”

Angelica gestured toward her slave. “Come along now.”

Angelica moved toward the hut with Thomas on her heels. He kept his eyes on the ground, trying not to shake. The females were staring at him with more hunger than he’d ever felt and that was after servicing the council. It was terrifying. *I’m not going to die here. I’m not going to die here.* He repeated it over and over, forcing himself to trust his new protector.

As they walked toward the house that was roughly half a mile away, more females came out to stare at them in shock and suspicion. Now that they were on the shoreline, it was easier to see the tarps placed between huge boulders to serve as protection for campsites. It was obvious they didn’t live here. This was a work site.

With his vision limited, Thomas was spared the sight of slaves scurrying around with painful limps and skips.

It was hard to tell how their injuries had been caused, but Angelica had observed the same evidence of torture at the complex. She did a rough count as she maintained a steady pace. With unknown groups, going into their lair or turf wasn’t wise. If you had to do it, openly was often best for success in getting whatever it was that you’d come for. Angelica had been there when that plan had gone haywire, however; she stayed ready to scoop up her companion and run. There were too many for her to fight, especially if the males here were loyal to their owners or too scared not to follow attack orders.

As they neared the large shack, they were able to see it was actually two small huts directly in front of each other. Angelica assumed the first was for business. The rear would be a home for management. The shacks were 10’x10’ and made from rotting wood covered in straw and mud. They appeared surprisingly sound.

Angelica kept her hands away from her weapons as three large mutants in front of the first shack came to attention in recognition.

“It’s one of them.”

“Get the boss.”

“She’s here.”

Angelica slowed her steps as her mind placed those words to the proper reaction. They were leery, but not hostile. Were they waiting to be invited into the fray or did they know their services were desperately needed? She would soon find out. The boss would know she was here in a few more seconds.

She smiled at the guards. “I’m Angelica Pruett.”

Raquel, a veteran of the wasteland, scanned her in suspicion. “Prove it, please.”

Angelica tilted her neck. “You can accept the mark or I can kill half your crew as a demonstration.”

Raquel frowned. “We are not easy targets for bounty hunters. The men here have been freed and taken shelter with us. They all have their papers.”

Angelica shrugged as if she would want to have that proven. They thought she was here to search for escaped males. *I can work with that.*

“Bring her in!” A voice echoed loudly from the first hut. “Don’t keep a bounty hunter waiting–ever! It makes you look guilty.”

“But we’re not.”

“That doesn’t always matter. Bring her in.”

A fourth sentry came to the doorway and pushed aside the netting. “Come.”

That boss voice came again. “Don’t be rude!”

Angelica waited for the sentry to step aside so she could enter. She scanned first for threats and exits, then she studied the fishmongers.

Thomas stopped in the threshold, right where she wanted him for the moment. He was safer between her and the shack guards than he was in this room. That was clear.

The small table in the center held various bones. From what she could see, most of them were animals, but Angelica couldn’t be positive about all of them.

There was a single table and chair, though the chair wasn’t visible beneath the overlapping rolls of fat hanging down the sides of the woman in it. Matted brown hair curled around her hog-like face in greasy tendrils.

“I’m Marta. Welcome!” The woman belched loudly as she tossed a fresh remnant into the pile. “Sit! Eat!”

“Not on your life.” Angelica stared coldly. Marta was dressed in bleached leather that would probably drop her to the bottom like a stone if she ever went into the water.

Marta laughed, gesturing at the guards. “Get out.”

It forced Angelica to step in, jerking Thomas along so they weren’t separated as the guards fled.

“You eat your own.” Angelica was horrified, hand sliding to her belt.

Marta’s humor and polite veneer faded. “We are not easy targets and you need us. Don’t forget your situation.”

Angelica cautiously took the chair across from the disgusting woman. “You can’t be trusted.”

“No.” Marta reached into a small pail in her lap to emerge with a crispy leg of a sort that Angelica refused to let her mind identify. “But I can be bought.” She peered at Angelica with greed glittering in her too large eyes. “What can you offer me?”

“What do you need the most? Name three items. We’ll bargain down to two.”

“I only want one.” Marta angrily waved the greasy leg. “Real food.” She sucked off the entire leg of meat, leaving only the charred bone.

Angelica gaped. “You’re kidding, right?”

Marta swallowed it whole, then tossed the bone into the corner of the shack. “No. You eat fish all your life and see how it is to smell roasting flesh. You’d break, too.”

“So, you’d give up cannibalism if you had food of your choice?”

“Yes. We all would.” Marta lowered her voice. “They’ll vote me out soon, but each of them take second helpings when someone dies. It’s gruesome the way we’ll do anything to have fresh meat.”

Angelica didn’t feel any heat from the woman. “You’re changelings?”

“Yes.”

“Weakened.” Thomas stiffened as the woman’s attention swung to him.

“Yes. The older we get, the less our children are infected.” She shrugged. “Still backfires. Older women can’t have many babies and most of them are deformed because of our diet.”

Angelica repeated a favorite Network saying. “Chemicals have been clear from the water for over a century.”

“That’s a lie.”

Angelica wasn’t sure what to say. She had limited knowledge about nuclear effects, besides what they faced daily as bounty hunters in harsh lands. “How does the enemy avoid that in their own food supply?”

“They found the remnant of fishing farms in the oceans all along our coastlines. They rebuilt them, improved them, and then ran us out of the area so no one would know the truth. All coastal populations are slowly becoming mutated.”

“That explains the migrations inland over the centuries.”

“Yes. The enemy has a lot to answer for.”

“I agree. Will you be there to receive the reward or will your heart give out before you get a chance to fight?” Angelica snarked. The woman was huge.

“Fight?” Marta laughed. “We’ll provide the ride you need and then we’ll vanish into the tide until it’s time to claim a reward.” Marta’s face turned to stone. “And that’s all you’ll get from us, Pruett. Your sister has hunted our kind. Your cousin ignored us in her plans for rebellion. We feel very little loyalty to any of you.”

Thomas took a chance. “What about the males you’re sheltering? Do you have loyalty to them?”

“They cook.” Marta showed no visible reaction to his words or his voice. “We adore our cooks. They get first pick of everything–including mates.” She scanned Thomas. “Can you cook?”

Thomas straightened as if insulted. “No. I can prepare a gourmet meal. Cooking is for bounty hunters and Network troops.”

Marta laughed again. “Good, good. You’ll fit in here.” She glanced at Angelica. “All of them say that, but only a couple can make thigh taste like steak.”

Angelica almost gagged.

Thomas shook his head. “I won’t do that, not for any reason. I’d starve first.”

Marta shrugged off his revulsion. “For survival, you would do much worse. I know. I’ve done it.” She scanned them both again. “We need a diet we can survive from without shame. Provide that, Pruett whelp, and we might even fight for you.”

“I want you to protect a package.” Angelica was glad that the main threatening was finished. “It’s a very large package. You’ll need near a hundred boats. We can’t make multiple trips.”

“You don’t want your cargo split up.” Marta nodded. “I understand.”

She didn’t seem aghast at the idea of so many boats, encouraging Angelica. “It’s live cargo and has to be handled carefully.”

Marta scanned Thomas again before looking back. “You know I can’t guarantee recapture at checkpoints.”

“You can and will. As we travel, we’ll feast. We’ll do it again every evening. Then I’ll broker your end of the deal to be sure you aren’t forgotten in the restructuring that will have to happen.”

“I need proof of the food before I call in any boats.” A wicked gleam came into Marta’s eyes. “Cook for us. Now.”

Angelica glanced at Thomas. She saw his reluctance and shrugged. “I have to gather some items. I won’t use what you have here.”

Marta shrugged, belching loudly. “You can come and go, Pruett, but keep your male close. Until we have a deal in place, you don’t have protection.”

Angelica gave the woman a harsh grin from her games. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Marta paled a bit at the threat. “No need for that, whelp. Just keep your end of the bargain.”

Angelica motioned toward Thomas. “Come along.”

He followed her docilely from the shack, but he also flashed a quick look of interest at Marta, hoping it would help their cause. Thomas wanted to reach the border and this disgusting woman might be the only way. He was willing to pay whatever price was required.

Angelica led him out of the working zone, picking out more guards than she’d noticed on the way in. “Stay close.” She felt more trouble coming. “Actually, come here.”

She quickly removed her cloak and draped it around his bigger shoulders, tugging until he was covered. She drew up the hood, hiding him better than his outfit had. “If we get split up, go underground. Leave a trail. I’ll find you.”

Realizing there was about to be a fight, Thomas stared around worriedly, but he didn’t see anything.

Angelica knew what was about to happen. “It’s a test of who I am.”

She sighed as a line of mutant women appeared in front of them, blocking the path. Angelica sighed unhappily. “The family name needs some work in this zone.” She drew her longest blade into one hand and her gun into the other. “Let’s get to it.”

**2**

“Was this a part of your plan?”

Angelica grunted at the sarcasm. She had put up a great fight against the fishmongers, but one of the mutants had grabbed Thomas and threatened to slit his throat. She’d been forced to surrender.

It had shocked Thomas into complete loyalty. At that moment, he had expected to be betrayed. Instead, he had discovered a woman he could trust. As a result, he was busy squirming and wriggling against his bonds, trying to find a way to save her life.

They were tied to stakes between boulders, preventing anyone passing by from easily seeing them. The ground under her body was rough with rocks and debris that had washed ashore, but Angelica didn’t need them. All Pruetts carried spare weapons in odd places. It was in their training.

“I can’t believe you gave in to them. I thought you were a Pruett.”

“That means different things to us than it does to some.” Angelica was using her fingers to dig into the pocket of her pants. The women had taken her cloak, and patted her down while removing her belt, but they hadn’t searched her clothes. That was mistake number one. Mistake number two was leaving her alone. They hadn’t put a guard on duty.

Feeling slightly insulted, Angelica flipped the knife open and cut herself free. She had woken next to Thomas, relieved to see him there. After being struck from behind, her last thought through the grayness had been that he would probably taste good. His body had been beaten on enough over his life to be tenderized.

Angelica freed Thomas and helped him to his feet, aware that he wasn’t flinching away from her as he’d been doing. Without the capacity to explore his emotions, she gave him a comforting slap on the shoulder that knocked him off his feet.

Thomas looked up at her in amusement.

“We’ll have to work on that.” Angelica grunted, helping him up again. “Which way did they go?”

There was no sign of the fishmongers around them now. Even the small fires had been doused and covered. Angelica hoped they had gone downriver.

“I heard their leader say they were going to search for our cargo.”

Angelica’s eyes turned brilliant red. “They’re going to find it and then some.”

She motioned Thomas toward the closest fire pit to them. “Go blow that and bring it to life. Have a big meal waiting.”

Before he could argue, Angelica took off running toward the den where the rebel males were hiding.

Thomas was glad he was going to miss the battle this time. Watching Angelica kill was as bad as watching the other women do it, except that in some ways, it was worse because he liked her.

Sighing in weary determination, Thomas began to scour the area for a meal.

Chapter Nineteen

**Run for It**

The Borderlands

**1**

**“S**he’s been gone a long time.”

Jason didn’t answer at first because he didn’t realize Ralph was talking to him. Ralph was the only hard ass in this group of rebels as far as Jason was concerned.

“We want you to find her.”

Jason frowned. “She said to stay here.”

“Do you always do what she tells you to do?”

Jason snickered. “Usually.”

Ralph sneered. “I guess you’re not who we thought you were.”

“Who is that?” Jason was starting to get angry. He stood up.

“We thought you were a leader. Baker told us we could depend on you, but you haven’t done anything to help. All you’ve done is spend nights wrapped in her arms.”

Jason looked around, at the dozens of men who were listening. This story would spread to the other three hundred and fifty-two men here. After careful consideration, Jason gave them an answer he thought Angelica would approve. “I assumed free men don’t need a boss. Was I wrong?”

Trapped, Ralph frowned. “We want you to go after her.”

“I’m going to.”

Ralph started to argue further, then realized what Jason had said. “Okay, good. When?”

Jason pointed toward the sky they were able to see from the very top of the door, where it didn’t fit evenly with the earth anymore. “I’m waiting for it to get dark.”

“You’re going out into the Borderlands, alone and weaponless, in the dark?”

Jason nodded. “Yes. Coming?”

Now the one who needed to defend his courage, Ralph slowly agreed. “We’ll take a group.”

Satisfied he had handled it in a way that hadn’t required him to tell anyone what to do, Jason moved toward the door. “As soon as I can’t see light, I’m going out there. If I don’t come back, do the best you can to get these guys to the wall.”

Realizing he had been gifted with leadership, Ralph scowled deeply. “I’m going!”

Jason shook his head. “They need you more than I do.”

That tone left no room for argument.

Almost pleased despite not getting his way, Ralph moved into the small crowd to pick out a crew of men to protect Jason while he searched for Angelica.

*That went okay*. Jason congratulated himself. *Now if I do the rest of the show as well, we might all survive.* Jason was almost certain Angelica was in trouble and needed help. He’d never felt this way, even during the times they had been split up. He might have worried over her safety while he’d been a true bachelor, but he knew better now. Angelica was a Pruett and they could take care of themselves, but this was different. His heart wouldn’t settle into a normal rhythm and his mind insisted she was calling for him. It was impossible to ignore. When it had started, he’d passed it off as indigestion from the badly cooked meal made with short rations. Now, he knew it for what it was. Jason wasn’t scared of being out in the Borderlands alone. He was afraid of arriving too late to save the woman he loved.

**2**

Jason climbed out of the hole with his small group. He waited until they were all together and the door was closed before he began giving instructions and pointing out landmarks. He hoped that if they were split up, the men would be able to find their way back to this small semblance of safety. Distracted, he didn’t hear the hatch open again.

Ralph came to Jason and held out a small knife. “We had an extra. You take it.”

Jason found dozens of men already out of the hole around him and more climbing out. “What’s going on?”

Ralph chuckled. “We decided we weren’t going to let you have all the fun.”

Jason realized this was the way for the men to prove to themselves that the women were wrong about them always being without courage. During their time as slaves, the men had learned bravery wasn’t the absence of fear. Bravery was action despite fear.

Jason turned toward the direction Angelica had taken, now leading his army. This was part of what he had dreamed of during his years in the complex, waiting for rescue from Rankin. *If I had known it felt this good, I would have rescued myself.*

Jason pointed out items for them to take as weapons while they walked. The most common were rocks. Battles throughout the centuries, both on the side of freedom and against it, had been fought using parts of the earth. This one would be no different.

**3**

Angelica ran as if Jason’s life depended on it. He and the other men were learning to defend themselves, but they wouldn’t stand a chance against…

Angelica stumbled to a stop, unable to believe what she was seeing.

The culvert below her was filled with rebel males and mutated women, but they weren’t fighting. They were eating.

“There she is!”

Jason smirked. “I told you she’d get free and come here.”

Angelica staggered down the dusty incline and went to Marta after a fast scan of Jason’s pleased face.

The fish leader glanced up from her bowl with a sloppy grin. “The whelp! How was your afternoon, young Pruett?”

“Fun. Let me show you.” Angelica punched the woman in her mouth, knocking her over and spilling the soup.

Angelica identified chunks of snake meat and assumed someone had killed a reptile for their meal. She had no doubt that her mate had bargained this truce. Pleased, she sat by him and took the bowl he offered.

“Once we got it down, the rest was easy.”

Angelica chuckled, allowing relief to release her from the uncomfortable changed form. She leaned against his arm, proud.

The two factions were sitting on opposite sides of the fire and cooking area, studying each other. The women were getting a meal. Soon, their thoughts would turn to other forms of satisfaction. The rebel males knew. They were wolfing down the food and getting set to run for their lives.

“They’ve called for the boats. They said Animal man wouldn’t be hurt. They were also supposed to free you.” Jason smirked again. Nothing kept a Pruett from their mate. When he’d found out they tied Angelica up and hadn’t left a guard, Jason had been able to relax.

“Thomas.”

“What?”

“His name is Thomas now.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“What deal did you make?”

“A conversation after a fast dinner.”

“How did you know what to bargain with?”

“I looked at their leader.”

Angelica laughed. Marta had picked herself up and resumed munching, not caring that she’d been hit or that a cut above her eye was bleeding thin droplets.

Free males and changeling women having a meal together and sharing peaceful conversations was something Angelica had never witnessed. She didn’t think anyone had observed a moment like this in centuries. There was flirting and growling, but no violence and no threats of abuse. All looks being exchanged across the campfire were genuine attraction between willing people. The Network had forbidden this behavior centuries ago. Angelica was happy to encourage it.

“Your army is going to run when the battle starts.”

Jason nodded at Angelica’s warning. “I bought time until you got here. I didn’t know what else to do. There’s no way we can fight them.”

Angelica sighed. “I’m sorry to ask, but will any of them….”

“Not a chance.”

Angelica understood the revulsion. She wouldn’t mate with a mutant either. “How long until the talk starts?”

Marta belched loudly. “All right.” She leered at Jason. “What else you got?”

“Thirty men with guns aimed at you.” Jason motioned his secret men to come forward as the females tensed, realizing they’d been trapped.

“If you order your girls to fight, my men will all aim for you. My friends will be captured, but you will be one fat splatter across the ground.”

Angelica shivered at the hatred in Jason’s voice. “He isn’t bluffing.” She looked up. “I can’t believe you aren’t bluffing.”

Jason didn’t take his attention from the fishmonger glowering at him. “There’s another option.”

“What’s that?” Marta belched again, but this time, she didn’t put more food into her hands.

“Make a deal that works for both of us.”

“I told you; we have a deal with the Network and you’re worth a lot of UDs. Pruett hospitality is good and all, but it can’t match the masters.”

“The masters are about to be gone. The dome will fall soon.”

Marta laughed, making all of them brace for bad news.

“Yes, whelp, it will, but not because of a breach. The entire complex is wired. If your crazy family gets the mob to attack, the council will blow it up.”

“You can’t know that.” Jason was horrified. They couldn’t reach the city in time to warn anyone even if they left now and they had no reception out here to make a call.

“I can and I do. My girls and I service the docks. We’ve seen it. Hell, a few of us have helped place those pods because we breathe underwater. You’ve all been tricked.”

“Candice knows.” Angelica patted Jason’s arm. “We’ve always assumed they would bring it down before revealing their secrets.”

Displeased that her information wasn’t a surprise, Marta let out a sound of exasperation. “Well, do you know about the compound that can only be reached by sailing?”

Angelica straightened up. “Okay, now you have my attention.”

“But you still have nothing to trade.” Marta hadn’t relaxed.

“How about our bodies?”

Everyone turned to see Thomas trotting down the culvert. Behind him, the sun finished sinking, bringing blackness and sounds of night.

The rebel males protested his suggestion as Angelica waved him to her side. “I thought I told you to stay there.”

Thomas shrugged. “You also told me I’m a free man and I chose to go with that one.”

“Well done.” She glanced at Marta, brow lifting. “He made you an offer.”

“Just him? To service all of us?”

“Who cares about your women?” Thomas reminded Marta of her words to them in the hut. “They’re going to vote for your death anyway, right?”

Marta grinned. “I like you.”

Her girls weren’t happy, but it was clear they weren’t going to argue yet.

Thomas joined Marta instead of Angelica. “Agree to everything she wants and I’ll spend each night with you until your crew stabs you in your sleep. After that, Angelica will fight for leadership of your clan. That’ll be your revenge. You saw how she fights. There’s no way she’ll lose. You only took her down because she wouldn’t sacrifice me.”

Marta grunted happily, tugging him down. “Deal!”

Angelica scanned Marta’s women, seeing that truth and also the hatred. She singled one out while Thomas had Marta distracted with a kiss. When she motioned to the fishmonger and patted her pocket, the woman nodded eagerly and slipped into the shadows without being noticed. For a Pruett token, Marta would lose her life and Thomas wouldn’t have to submit to her. As soon as she dragged him away to consummate the deal, she would be killed by one of her own.

Now enjoying herself, Angelica grinned at the show and pretended she wasn’t a monster.

Chapter Twenty

**No Females Allowed**

Adelphia

**1**

**“Y**ou’re fine. Get out of here!”

Sam smirked as she left the infirmary located in the bowels of the steamy stadium. The doctor had gotten angry upon seeing how fast she healed. Only the stomach wound had been serious, but a few hours with medical care had already sealed it. The collapse had come from the chemicals, but without specific testing, the haggard doctor couldn’t figure it out. Sam assumed the woman had bet against her and lost, but she didn’t care.

Sam closed the door, spotting extra guards and lines of new players being brought in for the next games. None of them met her eye as she strolled by.

Instead of going to rest, Sam went up the hallway to the outside, and marched to the guarded booths along this side of the stadium.

Around her, the crowd either cheered or booed at her appearance, depending on their bets.

Sam chose the appropriate booth for her needs and went in. Recognizing the clerk, she walked to the counter and shoved a weaker female aside. “I’d like to be switched to a replacement contestant.”

The small office in the side of the stadium went quiet as three dozen Defenders and another dozen racers turned toward Sam at the words.

The player she’d shoved fled the building, leaving Sam to believe she might have been the reason the girl had been in here. No one wanted a fair fight with her.

Sam gave the puzzled clerk a patient smile. “You know how to handle that?”

The Malin girl nodded, hands going to the console in front of her.

While Sam waited for the clerk to send the choice in, she ran through the rules, wanting to be sure that she had everything covered. The top two hundred racers from the trials were assigned to a game. The rest were sent to the small, dingy apartments outside the dome to be close in case they were needed. The replacement players were free to leave or run the trials again if they weren’t used for the episode. During their time in the apartments, they were also allowed to charge a debt against any winnings. If they weren’t chosen, the debt went on the family tab. If they died, the relatives owed the bill. The top racers also got a choice to be replacements, but few of them wanted to miss the glory. Replacement players also didn’t have to wait until the end of the week to leave the stadium. They were put on a train and sent to the city. They even had an escort for protection. Sam wanted that for several reasons.

She scanned pictures on the walls of the booth, reading the dozen signs informing players of the rules in case they were naïve enough to have not researched it before they came there. Those who survived these brutal trials were put into brackets according to their times. Winners were the fastest average of all three runs. Roughly half the racers died or were too injured to continue, but hundreds of females applied daily for the chance to get a mate or at least freedom from the pain. Replacement players were always needed.

“The train leaves in an hour for New Network City.” Velvet was typing and reading. “The ride will take eighteen hours. You have an open account. Would you like to travel first class?”

Sam shrugged. “Sure. I never have.”

“I haven’t either.”

It was obvious the girl couldn’t afford it.

Sam left the office with an hour to kill. If she was late for her ride, she would lose her slot and be in trouble with the Network. If she hung around here, it was likely she would be ambushed before the train arrived. Sam headed toward the place most people would be too afraid to follow.

“Where you going?”

Sam ignored the young orphan girl who hurried after her. She didn’t approve of the roving gangs of children who stole to survive, but she did have sympathy for them. She was wise enough not to get mixed up with them unless she absolutely had to. Some of the children were as bad as the adults, and all of them were spies.

As Sam got to the edge of the property, she noted guards around the entrances to the town. Instead of coming up with a clever lie, Sam used her new authority. “I’m doing a security check. I want an escort.”

It was obvious the guards had been told not to leave their post, but when Sam held up a small pouch, two of the large females stepped forward.

Sam tossed the pouch in their direction and moved into the forbidden zone.

Behind her, the little girl ran off, presumably to tell on them.

Sam heard the gate rumble shut as they entered the thick line of trees outside the stadium. She was unable to spot the town through nature growing in thick brambles over the rubble that hadn’t been cleared. The Network was strict about never letting anyone back here. Sam wanted to know what they were hiding. This might be her only chance to find out. Like Baker, she was almost certain she wasn’t coming out of the complex alive. As pain lanced through her healing body and the fire inside flamed to a new notch, she realized she wasn’t concerned over that reality now.

The town came into view as the trio left the cover of the tall trees that never lost their needles. It was small and quiet, with only a few women moving through the late afternoon shadows. Most of them were hanging wash or cooking on outdoor fires, but a few were standing guard, though they appeared not to be.

Sam moved down the middle of the main street, seeing the town wasn’t as small as the Network had led them to believe. Instead of four blocks, the main street ran a mile between rickety wooden shacks and crumbling prewar homes. Sam might not have noticed the smoothness of the street under her boots without the deep ruts on both sides that told her heavy wagons came through often. That could only be possible because of the road being in such good shape. Sam wondered who the builders were.

One of the main reasons the enemy cited for lack of recovery after all these years was limited engineering skills. They swore they were just using what was left from the war, but Sam and her relatives had never believed that. They had access to Network equipment and old, looted books. The styles of guns were different, even if they accounted for necessary modifications. Communications were also very different, as was a lot of the upper class household gear. The enemy had engineers somewhere–maybe here.

“We can’t pass the last check point.” One of the big sentries slowed. “And so you know, we have orders to kill you if you miss the train.”

Sam chuckled. “Then you should have brought more help.” She ignored their unease, not stopping when they both did. “I’ll need a crew when this all settles down, no matter which job I take.”

The temptation was too much for the guard who hadn’t spoken. She hurried to catch up with Sam.

The other guard turned back toward the stadium, money pouch tucked securely in her pocket.

Sam kept walking. “Any chance you’d turn around and shoot her in the head?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

Sam heard the tone and glanced over. “Even if I offered you a chance at being my XO?”

Now the sentry thought about it.

Sam knew. “All you’d have to do is beat my current XO in hand-to-hand, with no rules.”

“Make it official and I’ll get her before she reaches the trees.”

Sam didn’t respond.

Keeping pace, the woman frowned as she realized it had been a test. “What kind of game are you playing?”

“Just finding your price.” Sam’s tone stayed amused. “Pretty low.”

“Do I get the token or not?”

Sam flipped the shiny ingot through the air. “I may need to make a quick exit. If that happens, it would be useful if someone was at the gate to let me out.”

“Since that’s where I’m supposed to be anyway, it’s covered.”

Not trusting the guard, Sam studied a large concrete and rubber building that reminded her of the dome, only shorter and rectangle. It was covered in tarps and personnel who scurried around in black robes with the Network logo blazing across their hoods in vivid warning to stay away.

Sam ignored it.

As they reached the building, one of the workers came toward them, toting a stack of rolled papers. As he rushed, his hood fell off.

Sam froze as the man tugged his cover up and hurried on.

*The man.*

As he hurried away, Sam spun to watch him. He was taller and wider than a woman, with dark hair and a thick mustache that clearly identified his gender. There were free men in Adelphia.

The sentry next to Sam laughed. “It’s always fun to see faces when people realize what’s going on.”

Sam cleared her throat to push back the bile that tasted like sulfur. “What *is* going on?”

“The Network is trying to increase the male population, like they promised when they passed the new law saying they can try drastic measures.” The guard pointed to the hill behind the building. “That’s the training center. You can’t tell how big it is from here.”

Sam understood the sentry believed the lies about the birth rates and didn’t contradict her. “What is this place?”

“It’s going to be the first town of men. They’ll have guards, of course, and rules, but they’ll be able to live here instead of in the complex.”

Sam walked under the tarp and into the cool hall that was almost finished. Cords and wires were visible, but the rest of the work was done. This facility was about to be operational and Sam didn’t believe the story of its use for a minute. “Is this a way to appease the UN?”

The guard looked at her blankly. “What?”

Sam shook her head. “Not important. Let’s take the tour and get back.”

Relieved, the sentry led Sam down the widest hall. “This first side is reception and registration. The slaves will be processed here over a few days and then assigned to one of the rooms in the center of the facility.”

Sam saw the restraints on the chairs, waiting for wrists, but the cuffs were smaller than what she’d seen used on rental males. They were also padded, which was an improvement.

“This is the shower system. As you can tell, they will always be secure here. The chains move with them on treads beneath the floor. They won’t escape.”

“Interesting.”

“It is, isn’t it? I love watching the improvements. At some point, we really will be recovered from the war.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, yes. The Network won’t ever stop until things are better than they were.”

Sam didn’t ask why the woman was betraying the masters she clearly loved. A Pruett favor or crew job paid better. This guard would be a threat.

*No spot on my crew for you.* Sam stepped through an entryway that didn’t have a door yet, spotting a cafeteria sign.

Behind the tables and buffet counter, the wall was riddled with square holes that held tracks and wrapped trays. The food was going to be delivered to the rooms on a massive scale, meaning the tables in here weren’t for the occupants. She could have assumed it was for the renters, but the lack of restraints and the stack of furniture in the corner said otherwise. Those tables and chairs wouldn’t stand up to a changeling for more than a few uses. Plush and elegant, Sam thought of the starlets and wealthy residents who went to the dome and received apartments for their stay in the city. “A giant brothel.”

“Yes.” The sentry smiled at her mutter. “Isn’t it great?”

Sam nodded to pacify the Defender, still scanning the huge cafeteria. Doors behind the counters ran into the cooking area, with bathrooms and closets nearby. Stacks of waiting materials were in another corner, drawing her attention. She couldn’t tell what was under most of those tarps.

Sam left the guard and began peering under the covers, shining the light on her belt. She found cases of dishes in fragile formats, along with nonperishable goods and pots for cooking, but the middle pallet was wrapped in thick plastic that she couldn’t see through.

Heart thumping, Sam grinned as she sliced it open. *I love being a rebel.*

Her amusement fell as she pried open a small corner. The pallet was full of metal and laminated signs that would be hung throughout the facility. She could only read the top stacks.

*No Females Allowed Beyond This Point.*

*Women are to be seen, not heard. No talking!*

*Do Not Consume Female Food. Conception preventatives have been added.*

Sam felt thick horror creep over her shoulder and tap. “This isn’t for them. It’s for us.”

The sentry leaned in the door. “I didn’t catch that.”

Sam stood up and replaced the cloth. “I said I’m hungry now. They’re going to have pudding every day.”

“Wow. Nice!”

Sam went on with her tour, but she didn’t linger in the other rooms. The rest of this walk was for show. She had what she’d come for and it was worse than she’d imagined. Not only had Terry been telling the truth about men planning to retake control, it had progressed so far that female prisons were being constructed. A plan like this hadn’t been quick or shortsighted. It might already be too late to stop it. She had to get on the train so she had a way to warn her family. If she died before that, so would this information.

**2**

**The Network**

“Sam Pruett is nowhere to be found. We’ve searched the entire stadium and run her name through the cameras. We can’t locate her. We also can’t find Robert.”

Julian listened to the report, rage growing. The small town behind that stadium held too many secrets to allow a wild Pruett to roam there. “If she misses the train, kill her when she surfaces.”

“Is that wise?” Brandon was painfully aware of how dangerous Julian was right now, but the mob around this dome was just as deadly. “The crowd is expecting to see her. We’ll already have to make sure she comes in as a replacement contestant even if one isn’t really needed.”

Julian didn’t answer. He was busy scanning the probability of Sam discovering something during the short time she had before the train left the stadium. He didn’t know why she had chosen to be a replacement contestant and that bothered him. Not knowing what his enemy was up to was high on his list of reasons for failure.

Alex typed in a code and brought the center screen to life. “The ape just reached the city.” His slashed hands were covered in bandages, making it slow work. He wasn’t protesting putting kids in the games anymore. Now, he was only concerned with his own survival.

Julian motioned toward Rusty, who began to issue orders to Lauren, who would send it out to the rest of their troops. *“This is a control alert. We have a breach in sector four.”*

Rusty waited for more information as Julian stood up and moved toward his exit. *Is it time to go?*

Julian motioned. “Everybody needs to be ready to leave by the time the game interviews start. Move out.”

Most of the council fled, eager to finish the packing they had started upon learning the evacuation was necessary.

Lauren waited until she and Shelly were alone. “Do you think we can hold it off for twelve hours?”

“I don’t think we can get two hours if they attack the dome. I’ll bet Juli leaves us.”

“I wouldn’t put that past him, but I’m not sure he’s willing to run yet.” Lauren typed in a code. The field where the Pruetts were supposed to be lying popped up on the monitor, showing an empty battlefield now being picked over by nature. “None of the Pruetts are dead.”

“Candice might be.”

Lauren had forgotten about her injury. “They have medicine now. She might be okay.”

“I hope so.”

“Me too.” Shelley stood up, able to see blood splatters across the keyboard from where she’d whipped Alex. It had been hard to stop. “Without Candice controlling that family, I’m not sure we’ve made a wise decision in offering the chair to Sam. If Candice dies, we might be better off with Julian.”

As Shelly left, Lauren was forced to accept that she might be right. Angelica and Sam were too wild. They would destroy everything the council had built. At least with Candice, men would still be slaves.

**3**

**New Network City**

“Someone tell me again why we let everyone get blown up.” Bobby was tired and confused. The excitement of being with his relatives for a run had worn off. “We needed their help.”

“We needed their fighters. The bosses were a threat.”

“I don’t understand. Pruetts always keep their word. We’ve disgraced the family name.”

Mary spoke up before the others could scold their rookie. “They were a threat to our control after the enemy falls. They’d have spent months fighting over our rules and choices, and in the end, they would have banded together and outvoted us after we did all the work.” Mary wiped Candice’s sweaty head while the medic examined the injury. “It was her choice. I supported it.”

“A lot of people were hurt and killed. They were our allies!”

“They were our enemies.” Daniel glared at Bobby. “Did you really think the city dwellers and the gang bangers were going to put a Pruett into leadership? Or that they would follow the orderly ways of society once the enemy was gone? Grow up!” Staying next to Candice, Daniel ignored the immediate angry shouts from Bobby, who had joined them as they came here. No one had asked where he and Chester had gone. They’d just been relieved the two men were alive.

“She isn’t awake to tell us that!”

Daniel snorted. “I don’t need Candy to tell me why she did this. I understand.”

“But we made deals!”

“Deals to keep men in chains!” Daniel pointed toward the dome that they could see through the window blinds of the empty replacement player apartment. “We are not the Network. Pruetts are for freedom!”

Quieted by the reminder, the family glowered toward the dome, reminded that the evil wasn’t gone.

The only difference in the replacement player apartment was a rear door that led to the courtyard with brothels and shops. The Network encouraged people to run up a debt that could only be satisfied through control of their families. Otherwise, the apartment was identical to the ones Angelica and Candice had been treated to during their games. The spray-painted family crest in the corner would let Sam know they had survived the battle.

“What do we do now?” Chester hadn’t protested the choice to betray their allies, though he hadn’t been sure it would be enough to weaken the Network’s hold over those clans. Afterward, viewing the hundreds of bodies from both sides, he had to admit Candice had been right about taking the leaders first and claiming the troops of each. Staring out the cracked blinds, Chester didn’t see a single representative from the groups who had met hours before. They were all fleeing retaliation or fighting for leadership.

“The Glowers will start attacking the dome at dawn.” Mary dug in the medic kit and handed Daniel a syringe. “Wake her up.”

Daniel didn’t hesitate. Candice had been out for hours. Her skin was pale and her breathing was rough. He needed to hear her speak so he would know she was fighting to survive.

“We shouldn’t send Sam in.” Lydia was worried about the future if they lost. “The war is known now. There’s no need to sacrifice a great fighter when we’re running low. Call Sam off this one.”

Daniel injected Candice and recapped the syringe. “How long will it–”

“Now…”

“Oh, shit!” Daniel jumped as a hand went around his wrist.

Snickers went through the tiny apartment at Daniel’s reaction. He’d been a solid rock so far; the moment reminded them he had been in the complex recently. It also shamed them. He was handling himself better than they’d given him credit for upon sight.

Mary helped Candice sit up, wincing for her daughter when Candice didn’t show signs her wound hurt.

“I’ve got it.”

Mary flinched away.

Candice shoved upward, wobbling with a hand out that refused assistance. She gained her feet and did a sweep of the room, the people. It eased her to find all of them present. Only Ivy and Leo were absent. Despite the death, just one gaze shied from hers, but it wasn’t in anger or revulsion. Bobby was ashamed he’d questioned her decision while she was unconscious.

Candice grunted, acknowledging it. She could guess what had happened. She’d been on runs with rookies. They rarely handled the stress like you wanted them to, but Bobby was family and he would eventually learn how things worked. His mate had protected him too much, making this harder on him than it should have been.

Candice limped to where Bobby was sitting on a torn sofa, alone. She dropped down next to him, finally letting out a moan.

Bobby blanched, but didn’t offer comfort like he had the urge to do. His mate kept him at home, preferring a man who cared for her house and serviced her needs. Bobby hadn’t minded it until now. He was in this room with the most badass of his relatives, but he didn’t feel like one of them.

“What would Lydia do if she were in charge?”

Bobby flushed. “Tell me this is why she wouldn’t bring me along before.”

“And if you were alone?”

Bobby’s cheeks went darker. “She’d kiss me and make it all better.”

Snickers and exasperated sighs allowed the tension to break.

Candice stared at him with a brow raised. “I can do that for you, but I suspect you’ll be hurting in other ways afterward.”

She glanced at Daniel, not surprised to find him on the edge of growling. He didn’t care that Candice and Bobby were related. He’d heard the story of Mary and Bruce, and knew it sometimes happened.

Bobby chuckled. “No, thanks. Kind of you to offer, though.”

Lydia laughed. She’d known Candice was joking.

Candice closed her eyes as the dingy room spun. “How long?”

Mary consulted her wristband for the hundredth time that day. “Seventeen hours.”

“We’re staying here?!” Bobby was immediately tossed back into fear and disbelief.

Candice shook her head, breathing finally evening out as the adrenaline forced her body to respond. “Of course not.” She smiled without opening her eyes. “We’re going to stay in the Diva den now that the enemy cleared it for us. We’re just dropping a message here for Sam.”

Bobby stood up, moving away from her. “You’re nuts. That place will be a target for all the Divas who survived and for the troops searching for survivors. We’ll be fighting the entire time!”

“Good.” Candice opened red orbs to pin him in place. “Maybe while we’re down there, your balls will drop.”

His face became ugly. “Slam you!”

“That’s better. Now get over here and help me up. You’re my body man as we go in. The others will clear us a path.”

Bobby was soothed and honored to be given that job, not realizing it was because he was a weak link.

Daniel was proud and furious at the same time. Bobby would be closest to his Candy, but it also meant Daniel was strong enough to be one of the fighters. He leaned against the door they’d broken in and listened as Candice and Mary instructed the family on how to conquer a busted den with only eight tired adults.

**4**

**The Network**

“We’re getting calls from the power bunker. Everyone wants to know when we’ll be arriving.”

Julian didn’t reply. He was reclined in his chair, eyes closed and breathing calm. He’d made a choice and regained temporary control over the disease.

“We also ignored another transmission from the UN. From the threats, I’m guessing they won’t wait until the deadline. They’re picking up too many broadcasts to ignore the situation.”

“If they come through the wall, our troops will delay them while we slip out. Even if they reach the dome before the missile fires, they don’t have the codes to stop it.”

“What if they bring the dome down?”

Julian shrugged. “Our training center will automatically take over the launch. It’s all connected now.” Julian had spent their lives working on that training center. Every extra unit of food and gear had been quietly rerouted there in weekly shipments. That also included slaves.

“Won’t they leave the meeting?”

“If they could, perhaps.”

Rusty assumed Julian had them locked in the bunker. “How?”

“I’ve ordered them sedated. They’re getting it in the food and water, but also in the air. The slaves and shows are keeping them entertained between doses.”

“I don’t think Felix is eating, drinking, or breathing. He’s furious that no one has arrived to greet the guests. He said our lackeys are lacking.”

“Pull up his file.”

Rusty brought the center screen to life, vaguely wondering where the rest of the council was. Robert was missing, and Shelly had been sent to Adelphia to watch the Pruett. Terry’s body was being placed on the subway as a frame of Sam Pruett, but even Lauren was absent from the constant stream of communications going out to troops over their private lines.

“Felix Marshal, from the family of Gerald Marsh, who was a decorated commander during the first war over male slavery. He killed more than fifty women to save his regiment, but lost the battle. We hanged him and gave his family a title. Felix is the seventeenth of his line and loyal to the point of fanaticism.” Rusty flipped to the next page on the screen. “Evaluations placed him as head of security for that facility because he will die before being breached.”

Julian sighed. “Normally I like that in a subordinate. Any way to get him out and bring him along?”

“Probably, but I doubt he’d agree with your other plans. We hanged Gerald Marsh because he surrendered to the females and then tried to bargain for terms on male slavery. We have to assume his descendant would make the same choices.”

“Oh. Well, we can’t have that. Find a pacifier. Anyone so tightly wrapped has an obsession they use for control.”

Rusty wondered what Julian’s was exactly, but knew not to cross the line by asking. “He likes using his authority. There have been rumors of abusiveness toward females.”

“Perfect. Tell him we can’t come yet because of a credible security concern. Have him lock it down and conduct a search. Tell him there’s an assassin in there with them–a female assassin.”

Rusty grinned, typing. “That’ll keep him busy.”

“It will also remind the men and women there that safety exists because I allow it. They’ve all forgotten how angry I can get when crossed.”

“You’ve kept them fed and happy for years. The trains of supplies and slaves always arrive on time. They aren’t scared anymore.”

“Yes, I’ve been lax there. In the future, we will make regular trips out to kill our aging leaders so this behavior doesn’t become a pattern. We certainly don’t want to be fighting with our own, now do we?”

Rusty burst out laughing at the joke. His mirth faded as the console beeped and a message came through. “Sam Pruett just checked in at the train station.”

Julian was relieved. He didn’t need to alter his plans. “Excellent. Have her arrested.”

“What about the game?”

“This dome won’t last two more days. When we leave, I want her locked in my stateroom.”

“She’ll probably be met by fans and supporters. Should we do it openly?”

Julian nodded. “Yes. Her fans won’t like her being arrested. It will make them eager to help bring this complex down. When it goes boom, they’ll all be inside to pay for their disloyalty. Have the hunters take her on the way here.”

“Nice.” Rusty was impressed. “I think you’re getting smarter. This is above genius.”

Julian liked the praise. He got up to pour them a drink. “Now, let’s discuss the assignment of rooms on the boat. I know there are ten, but we’ll only need half that.”

“Just the men?” Rusty was good at guessing what Julian wanted.

“Of course. It’ll be all of us, my private guards, and one sedated female Pruett.” Julian almost giggled. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Twenty-One

**I Need You**

Pruett Town

**1**

**“S**he’s never going to talk.”

Baker grunted at Rosa’s frustration. “I can’t do it. You’ll have to.” His anger had run out. Now, he was just tired and worried.

Rosa stepped toward the Malin woman while drawing her knife.

Amber Malin glared at them through her pit-marked, pale face. “Slam you!”

Rosa slammed the blade into the woman’s leg and twisted it.

“Okay! Stop! No!”

Rosa slapped the woman and shoved the blade in deeper, not enjoying her work but still taking pride in it. Bounty hunters knew how to get information fast.

“I’ll tell you!”

Rosa jerked the knife free.

Blood ran down the woman’s bare leg and hit the wooden floor. It joined years of dirt.

They’d had no trouble getting to the matron. Most of the family had already left, heading for the Network bunker in the Borderlands like they’d been ordered to. Amber Malin and her two eldest daughters had been packing the last of their valuables when the Runners broke in. They’d refused to take her out of the shack however, unable to handle traveling with the woman for even an hour. She was filthy and so was her hovel. They’d been here for a full day now, trying to get her to talk without using violence because she was pregnant. Baker had insisted they treat her gently, and they’d agreed, sure that he would change his mind.

Baker turned away from the screaming woman and went outside. Rosa knew what to ask and how to get the answers. “Will you kill her after we’re done?”

Ginny shook her head. “We’ll send her to our hideaway until the war is over and then she’ll face her crimes.”

“Has she committed any?”

“If not, we’ll invent one.”

“Your family hasn’t gotten along with them. You shouldn’t be allowed to make the choice.”

The Pruett cousin shrugged. “People like that always come back to hurt you, Baker. Sam will teach you how to handle the emotional side of moments like this.”

“By going to a brothel?” His guilt flared as another scream echoed.

“By reminding you these people are your enemies.”

Baker walked away from the Runner. He knew she was right, but that didn’t make *this* right. If not for Sam being in danger, he wouldn’t ever have agreed and it had taken a day for his patience to run out. Still, it was ugly.

“Are you okay?”

Baker nodded at Greg’s question. “It won’t be much longer now.”

Another scream sounded into the night.

Greg shuddered. “Who’s doing it?”

Baker walked to the bikes to wait.

Greg paled. “It’s Rosa, isn’t it?”

Baker kept walking.

Greg went toward the shack, hoping he was wrong.

In the shack, Rosa was getting answers.

“Because we were vaccinated!”

“When?”

“Centuries ago. When they found the immortality drive on the space station that fell.”

“Your family was vaccinated and then kept around to produce pristine males for their experiments?”

“Yes.”

“What makes you so special?”

“Malins have been on the council as long as the Network has existed!”

“You have family on the council and you live here? Like this?”

Amber didn’t answer. She didn’t want to betray the Network. She might survive this interrogation, but she wouldn’t come out of the bunker alive if she betrayed Julian.

Rosa leaned in, bracing on the arms of the chair. “I’m going to kill you and your daughters. Then I’m burning your house down for my boss. After that, if I think you’ve held anything back from me, I’ll hunt down every Malin left in the country. Don’t push me any further. If I have to hurt you in front of my new mate, it’ll be ugly.”

Amber understood she wasn’t getting out of here alive. It didn’t matter if she talked. In fact, talking meant delaying the death she saw in the Pruett soldier’s eyes. “What was the question?”

“Why do the Malins live here?”

“We’re spies.”

“Who are you spying on?”

“Pruetts.”

“Why does the Network have you spying on them?”

“If I tell you, you’ll hurt me.”

Rosa nodded. “Maybe, but if you don’t, I’ll chop off a finger every minute you make me wait.”

Both women heard Greg’s quick intake of air at the threat.

Rosa’s face tightened. “Don’t forget what I said.”

Amber shivered. “We have to watch the Pruetts. They’re part of a control group.”

“You’re studying them? For what?”

“The vaccines. If Pruetts start to recover, the Network knows to increase the dosage for the general population.”

Rosa was horrified. “Are there other groups like this?”

“Nine others.”

“Why them?”

“Their DNA recovers faster. The Network scientists use them as measuring tools for the rest of the country.”

“We avoid vaccinations and we don’t consume much of the rations from the Network. How are they giving it?”

“Brought back from the ashes of the past…”

Amber’s mocking phrase instantly sent Rosa to entering New Network City. Every vehicle was sprayed with rose scented perfume. There were no exceptions. People had been told it was a sanitizer. It was the same at all hubs. The rose spray was a constant.

Amber was unable to keep herself from taunting them. “Every thirty years, a wild Pruett goes into the games. She’s tested and measured, then given a mate to see how she reacts. As long as burn-out still occurs at the expected time, the dosage isn’t changed. You never knew. None of the clever Pruetts did, but we’ve always been here, betraying, just like your ne–”

Greg ran up and punched the woman in the mouth, knocking her out.

Rosa grabbed his arm in shock. She hadn’t expected him to react that way.

Greg jerked out of her grip. “Kill her and let’s go. We have to rescue Sam.”

Outside, a bike started up and then faded into the darkness.

“Was that Baker?” Rosa ran outside, but the bike was already out of sight. “Damn it!”

“We have to contact Sam.”

Rosa reluctantly nodded, opening her wrist communicator. “She’s not going to be in a good mood.”

“Nope.” Heather headed back into the house to guard their prisoner. “Should I finish her off or get her ready for a retraining camp?”

“Retraining.” Rosa chose it without hesitation. “She has more information to give.”

“What about the daughters and guard?”

“Kill the guard. Take the daughters so the mother cooperates.”

Heather shrugged. “If you say so.” Upon being found, Amber Malin had hid behind her daughters instead of protecting them. Heather doubted the thirty-something-year-olds would be of any value.

Rosa was aware of the dilemma, but she wasn’t cold enough to kill the gentle females without a better reason. After the war was finished and the dome fell, they would be put on trial. If found guilty of treason, someone else could execute them.

It took Rosa a few minutes to type out everything that had happened. She wasn’t sure where Sam was right now, though she’d estimated their boss should be on the subway if she’d chosen to be a replacement player like they’d planned. If that was the case, she wouldn’t get the message until the train reached New Network City and she hit the street. Underground communications were spotty at best, with only the media and the council having a guaranteed line.

Rosa thought about that while she waited, hoping for an answer. The Network wanted the media to be reachable no matter where they were, but that was going to backfire on them. If Sam wasn’t attacked, she would pick a fight. The Network wasn’t going to get anything it wanted out of that Pruett, but certainly not a peaceful arrival for the reporters to bore the crowd with.

Her wrist communicator beeped. Rosa read it, smiling.

*“I expected him to take off before now. Stop by the rental booth in Adelphia and tell the slaves you’re the meat wagon. Their passenger needs extreme retraining. Valuable cargo to be protected at all costs. Make it a priority. And thanks for the gift!”*

Rosa answered affirmative, glad Sam didn’t seem angry she’d lost track of Baker.

*Do you want us to go after him?*

*He’ll find me.*

Rosa grinned. *Good luck!*

Sam didn’t answer.

Rosa went back into the foul shack. As she neared the room where they were keeping Amber, Rosa heard Greg talking. She entered the room quietly so she didn’t interrupt him as he interrogated Amber’s daughters. Both of those females were crouched in the corner, shaking and whimpering at having a free male so close. Rosa didn’t think the girls had been outside the shack very often. She assumed from their thin, scarred bodies that they’d been their mother’s slaves.

“Tell me why the council doesn’t want men free.”

“Women will lose control!” The older girl shuddered. “Men! In charge!”

Greg looked at the other girl, seeing bruises that reminded him of his own slavery. “Where do they keep the kids for training?” Greg didn’t remember his own entry. None of the bachelors did. They were drugged for transport to the city complexes as soon as they were ten. They never saw the outside of the building or the method of transportation.

“They don’t tell us. No one knows where it is, so you males can’t sneak in there!”

Greg controlled his anger, wanting the information more than vengeance. “Who knows the location?”

“The council.”

“Who else?”

“No one else is supposed to know!”

“So who is it? Your mom, because she has a daughter on the council?”

“Rusty is her brother! Maybe his pink haired mistress knows.”

Greg sucked in air. “You lie!”

Both girls snickered at his expression.

Greg turned to look at Rosa.

Rosa went back outside to contact Sam again. She typed faster this time, furious.

Her communicator immediately responded.

*I’m sorry. The person you are trying to reach is out of range. Your message will be delivered as soon as they enter a service area. Thank you!*

Rosa sighed. “Figures.” She motioned to the Runners on guard duty. “We leave in ten minutes, with three prisoners. We’re headed to Adelphia for a pickup like this one. By the time we finish that, the dome will be down. Get us ready to roll. Boss’s orders.”

Greg joined her, unable to take the smirks or smells any longer. “The retraining center?”

Rosa chuckled. “That’s what we call the other Pruett homestead. We use it for people who need to be convinced, but can’t be killed.”

“Convinced of what?”

“The wisdom in never crossing a Pruett.”

Greg tried to smile. “Sounds like a good place.”

Rosa’s face darkened. “Not much better than this. I’m sorry you had to see it.”

Greg didn’t want to discuss that because he would have to face his own participation. “Hopefully we won’t ever have to again.”

Rosa slowly put her arm around his shoulders, relieved when he didn’t pull away. “I’d give a lot for a life like that.”

Greg rested his cheek against her. “Does that mean you’re ready to settle down?”

Rosa sighed deeply. “I’ve been ready for years. I just didn’t have anyone to settle down with. I can’t be alone. I’ll go crazy.”

Greg knew exactly how she felt. He hugged her. “You won’t be alone.”

“…are you still scared of me now?”

“A little. But I’m also scared of me. I can feel the anger inside. I don’t know how to control it.”

Rosa’s heart broke. “I’m so sorry you have to go through this.”

Greg shivered at her tone. “I need you!”

Rosa immediately took him into the darkness and delivered a blast of relief.

**2**

Baker drove through the night. He would have been able to keep going if not for the tender care he had been receiving. Thanks to full rations on time every day, he had to use the bathroom more often. As the sun began to rise, he was forced to pull over.

The area wasn’t empty. For the last hour that he’d gotten closer to civilization, there had been more homes and people. Women had stared at him in shock as he flew by, but none of them had tried to stop him.

Baker rolled to a shed that appeared abandoned and got off the bike with awkward movements. He was sore.

Baker hurried around the corner and did his business, trying to listen for trouble.

It found him without making a sound.

“Look what we got here.”

Baker came around the corner and found a small squad of Network Defenders around his bike.

“Where’s your owner?”

“Whose bike is this?”

“Let’s see your papers.”

Baker froze for a second, thinking, and then he held up his hands. “I’m Wanted by the Network.”

A Defender hurried over to detain him.

As Baker was shoved to the ground and hands began to grope, he sent his mind to Sam. He didn’t need to be alert for what came next. He just needed to get to the dome and this was the fastest way. Once these guards had taken their cut, he would be sedated and shipped to the council. All he had to do was survive their fee.

Baker grunted as a needle sank into his arm. “Right here in the mud, huh?”

The sound of his voice sealed the deal. Another needle sank in and claws came out.

“Get off him or I’ll shoot!”

Two of the Defenders ignored the shout.

Two gunshots echoed.

Baker fell forward as the remaining women released him and stood up to fight.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Get on your knees!”

“This is my town. That is my male. I have his papers.”

The Defenders didn’t care if the local was telling the truth. They wanted the man.

The local woman fired twice more, hitting both of them in the chest.

As the gunshots faded, the farmer glanced at Baker. “You want a place to hide for a day? If not, get out of here now.”

Baker needed to keep going, but he’d been injected twice and there was no way he could drive like this. His body was heavy and hard, and the sweats were starting. When the shakes hit, he would be useless. “Hide.”

Vera came over and grabbed his arm, ignoring his heat and his gasp of lusty fear. She helped him onto his bike and then climbed on behind him. By the time she drove him into her barn, he was shivering in her arms and she was fighting the need to give them both relief.

Vera got off the bike and went outside to close the doors and cool off. She hadn’t had a man in years. She’d sworn them off in favor of helping them escape. Her channels reached far and wide, but it was always a fight not to keep one. The rescued slaves were almost always grateful enough to stay if she wanted it. That came from her strength to resist hurting them no matter how she found them. She’d even carried a naked man in her arms once and hadn’t hurt him. That was a source of pride for Vera, but the healthy man in her barn right now was worse than a temptation. Vera had seen the tattoo on his neck and wanted him more. If he was good enough for a Pruett…

Vera sealed the barn and went back to clean up the mess she’d made. As long as it hadn’t been found yet, she could drag the bodies to the creek and blame their deaths on nature. If it had been found, she would give them Baker’s description and point them in the opposite direction.

Pain lanced through Vera’s stomach and legs, tightening her nerves until crimson blurred across her sight.

**3**

The man was still sitting on the bike when Vera returned an hour later. Sleeping uneasily, he snored and twitched as she shut the door and fastened it from the inside.

Baker opened his eyes, in torment. He needed to take himself in hand, but he wasn’t safe here. He could feel the heat from his host. She had saved him being raped, but she might be just as dangerous to him as the Defenders.

Vera approached him warily, not sure if he would grab her. That had also happened a few times, though no one had believed the stories. Her neighbors swore men were only timid pets, but Vera had seen them fight even, and this one was Wanted for multiple murders.

The two rebels stared at each other in desperate, common need.

“Which Pruett do you belong to?”

Baker groaned. “Sam.” He blinked, trying to focus. “You look a bit like her.”

Vera broke at the sound of his voice. “Enough for you to be willing?”

Baker nodded. “And guilty afterward.”

“For a mutual trade?”

“For betraying her. We have love.”

“Exactly. This is survival and compassion.”

Baker had already made his choice, but it was hard to follow through. “Where’s your bed?”

Vera’s knees weakened. “Right here in the straw.”

Baker got off the bike, closing down his emotions. “A business trade brought on by survival.”

Vera tensed as he approached. “Maybe we shouldn’t do–”

Baker lunged forward and slammed them against the wall, lips covering hers as his hard body ground into her thigh.

Vera wrapped him in her arms and moaned. “Thank you!”

Baker ripped the front of her shirt open. “It’s my honor.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

**Kiss the Floor**

The Network Crawler

**1**

**T**aking the train was dangerous.

Sam stepped through the sliding door of the subway car with a huge grin. She had a private security team now. Her escort from the women’s prison wasn’t among them. Sam had left her at the gate with a lie and another token. The guard now believed she was owed two favors from their family, when the opposite was true. Having two tokens meant it might take two Pruetts to kill them.

The subway train didn’t look like the Network Rider. While the furnishings and fixtures had matching colors, there were no luxurious bunks or lounges with pillows to encourage romantic moments. This train was used to transport people back-and-forth from New Network City to Adelphia. Not many people were allowed to take it, which meant there wouldn’t be a lot of income from citizens. The Network had refused to put more UDs into the train than they had to. As a result, it looked rather drab.

*“The Crawler will reach New Network City in two days.”* The computer voice was a match to the one from the arena. *“As we travel, please remember to enjoy the views when we slow. Our route will take us through the Underground Remains Museum that will be opened to the public next year.”*

Sam followed her security team to a rear room on the car, aware that the subway seemed empty. So had the part of the station where she’d boarded. Sam assumed it was intentional.

“This is yours.” The team leader swept the tiny compartment and then stepped aside so Sam could enter.

Sam went by them and into the next car instead. She’d never been on the subway.

Her team leader waved two women to stay as guards over the room, then followed Sam. If anything happened to the contestants on this trip to the complex, the guards were held responsible. Kasha didn’t want that future.

Sam walked the train, counting eight cars and only a few people. Though she hadn’t been here before, she was certain it shouldn’t be this way.

Kasha was thinking the same. She had a hand on her weapon, ready to fight.

Sam stopped in the second-to-last car, pausing to observe the tour guide.

The blonde’s suit matched the colors of the train, soft voice soothing as she explained what people were viewing through the floor length windows on either side of the benches. The tour car had comfortable seats and plants hanging in the corners, but it still lacked life. Other than the colorful guide, there was nothing inside this car to see. All the fascination lay outside the dirty windows.

*“Our journey through history begins with a mural depicting the war that gave us the Change.”*

Sam moved to the window, adjusting for the feel of the subway under her feet. It moved a lot faster than the Network Rider had.

*“As you can see, the mural is fifty feet high and at the perfect angle to be viewed from this distance. We must never forget how much effort the Network puts into our education.”*

Sam rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

The train sped up as glowing green and yellow murals depicted a nuclear explosion in graphic detail. Sam stared. Each blur by the window was one small clip of the bomb. A bright light, the explosion on the ground, the smoke going up, the blast coming out. Timed perfectly, Sam’s heart pounded as she watched the world end. She’d heard about the murals, but never seen them. It was heartbreaking. Babies and elderly fell under the flames, the winds, the greed and panic that came after. Sam tensed as Marcella Pruett’s ugly face expanded into a cheering populace holding declarations of protection, of male ownership.

Then the Change images came, reminding Sam how long it had been since women began suffering the disease. She turned away, furious again. They could make murals of the past and rewrite history, but it was still a fact that the Network was responsible for where they were now. They didn’t want recovery. They liked things exactly as they were and only the current revolution would shake that hold.

Sam didn’t pause again until she reached the rear, where the rental cars were rumored to be. There was a door with a guard, but the sign on it said no passengers were allowed. Once again pushing her new authority, Sam went right to it and reached for the handle.

“Let me!” The door guard hurried to open it.

*I could get used to this.* Sam entered the small brothel, waving her team to remain outside.

The four slaves in the subway car cringed into the far corners as the door shut.

Their terror froze Sam. She loathed it. Her rage was so bad that it was a struggle not to spill the blood of every Network employee on board with them.

The slaves were chained and dirty, with bruises and untreated injuries. They also stank. Sam groped for the door, rage overflowing her limits of control.

“Please don’t!” One of the slaves rose from his bench. “Pruetts are for freedom!”

Sam almost couldn’t. She’d never been so angry.

The slave who’d begged, Cliff, forced himself to stand. “Please?”

Sam couldn’t even nod. All she could do was stand there and try to breathe.

The males realized she was fighting for control and waited. If she were a true Pruett, she would honor their wishes to keep them from being harmed further.

“I came for information.”

The males didn’t know what type of information she wanted, but it was an instant relief they wouldn’t have to service her.

Cliff was ashamed. “We weren’t given time to clean up after the other passengers. If you come back in an hour, we’ll be able to handle your other needs, too.”

Sam’s rage flared again. They were hurt, but still so scared that they were concerned about pleasing their next customer. It was beyond horrible.

Cliff sensed the dilemma and took a risk. “Can we clean up now?”

Sam was able to nod this time. She turned to give them privacy and to continue to regain control of her rage. The subway rental males were all brunettes wearing short shorts and half tops that showed off starving bodies that Sam wouldn’t have used even in her most desperate hour. The only thing she could think of when she looked at them was they needed to be fed repeatedly until their ribs weren’t showing.

The subway rental car was an identical match to the Network Rider brothels, only smaller. Narrow drawers slid out from under shelves that were also beds and would barely hold Sam if she had tried to climb onto one of them. She couldn’t imagine making love to a man in that cramped space.

“What information do you require?”

“Anything you want to tell me.” Sam hit the buttons on the panel by the door, using her private account to rent the men for three hours. Then she ordered food and a long shower. The slaves were only given wipes and that wasn’t enough for her even though the wipes were sanitizers. She didn’t want their customers to be protected. She wanted the males to be. It still hurt and confused her that the Network didn’t. They were everyone’s enemy.

“We only have contact with players and Defenders, but we’ll help in any way we can.”

“What have you heard of my family?”

The males stilled in their washing and dressing.

Cliff let out a sad sound. “All dead, we’re told. The Network announcements have been constant.”

“Is there proof?”

“Video of the explosions and bodies.”

“What’s the mood in the city?”

“Angry. The Diva’s lost their den and their elder. They want revenge. Everyone else wants the Network to pay for killing your family. Pruetts were their last hope.”

Sam was satisfied things were exactly as Candice had predicted. “What about the council?”

“Old clips mixed with the new images and fresh warnings not to support rebels.”

“No leading ladies declaring victory over the troublesome Pruetts?”

“No.”

Sam slowly sank down onto the bench by the door as the food and supplies she’d ordered began to arrive through the conveyer system. “If they aren’t blaring it to the world, then my family isn’t dead.”

“We’ve seen the video.” Cliff forced himself to keep going. “Candice went down first.”

Sam swallowed a denial. They’d been lucky so far that their family had come through the rebellion alive, but Sam stuck to the plan they’d made at the train conquest. Candice was hard to kill. They all were. “Do you have other information I would find useful?”

“There are a lot of Defenders on this ride. They got on before you. They’re all in the front cars so they won’t be seen.”

“I suspected as much. Arrest orders?”

“As far as we know, yes.”

Sam scanned the hurt men. “Those guards were your last renters?”

Cliff nodded, head dropping. The women had enjoyed their screams.

Sam leaned against the wall and shut her eyes. “Wake me from a distance if you need to. I’m not in a friendly mood.”

**2**

“Samantha J. Pruett! We have orders for your arrest. Come out and surrender your weapons!”

The squad of Defenders outside the rental car exchanged worried glances when there wasn’t an answer. Someone had just placed a media call from here and it had to be her. The males didn’t know the codes for an outside line, but they didn’t have enough spine to commit such a crime anyway.

“Hurry up!” One of the Defenders glared at those in the front. “The reporter is getting on at the next stop!”

“Sam Pruett! Come out…or we’ll come in and get you!”

Sam’s laughter echoed through the door. “You don’t sound very convincing. Want to say it again?”

The Defender team leader lifted her gun.

Another Defender slapped it from her hand. “Killing males is illegal!”

“We can say she did it!”

“Not with cameras rolling, you twit! We wouldn’t have time to cover it up.”

*Knock-knock!* “I’m coming out now. Don’t shoot yourselves.” Sam slowly opened the door and moved into sight.

“Do it now! The males are clear!”

Sam waited, not sure if those with guns would shoot her or not. It was clear that they wanted to.

“It’s a full credit for taking her alive.” The tallest Defender stepped forward. “Surrender your weapons or I’ll change my mind.”

“What’s the charge?”

“Conspiracy and murder.”

“Who did I murder?”

“Like you don’t know! Killing a council member during a meeting everyone knew about was stupid.”

“Frame job.”

“Surrender your weapons!” The tall Defender reached out to take Sam’s tool belt.

Sam jabbed the woman in her throat, crunching her windpipe. “I’m your boss, bitches. Back up!”

Sam’s demand paused the squad even though one of them was suffocating at her boots.

“I made a deal. I’m a council member.”

“We have arrest orders.”

“From who? What number?”

While the Defenders were distracted trying to answer her questions, Sam stepped from the room, allowing the door to shut. As soon as it did, she reached for her weapons.

“Trap!”

“Shoot her!”

“Look out!”

Sam rolled the grenade into the center of the squad and turned toward the door to avoid the spray as it exploded, blowing guts and gear against her and the train.

Awful noises came next, but Sam couldn’t hear them. The blast was ringing in her ears and distorting sound so badly that she staggered, trying to regain her equilibrium.

A gun fired.

Sam flipped into the change as the bullet struck her shoulder. It bounced off as her muscles shot out and her hair grew.

Sam dropped to her knees and jerked her spikes out, spotting moving legs. She aimed for the knees and threw hard, hoping to keep them from getting closer. Only four women were still standing, but all of them were aiming at her.

Screams blasted as spikes went through legs. Made from old world manufacturing, they were brittle relics that splintered upon impact, causing multiple injuries.

Sam kissed the floor as bullets sprayed the door and wall, barely missing her head.

“Kill her!”

Sam narrowed in on the voice and pushed off the wall to lunge.

She hit the woman in the knees and took her to the ground, feeling the gunshot more than hearing it as the Defender fired.

Sam’s arm lit up with fire, but she still squeezed on the Defender’s throat until the woman stopped moving. Then she drew her knife and slit her throat.

Sam did a fast sweep and found herself alone in the lounge car with a dozen bodies and cameras that had captured her every move.

When no support rushed in, Sam moved toward the door. She was prepared to face another squad, but this time, she was using her gun and saving her pineapples for outdoor use.

Sam put a hand to her ear and came away with bloody fingers. Sighing, she wiped her hand down her cloak and drew her gun before hitting the button.

The door slid open to reveal the same empty car she’d come through on her way in. The tour guide was gone. Sam assumed the animatronic speaker was under the floor somewhere, folded into a small box. *More technology I can’t match to the society we have.*

Dripping blood, Sam left the tour car and went toward the rooms, still not seeing or hearing anyone. The ringing was beginning to fade and her balance was better, but Sam was almost relieved not to have another squad yet. The longer they gave her to recover, the better she would be able to handle it. They didn’t know, but they had the advantage right now. She’d screwed up by using the grenade in a confined space.

Sam entered the bunk cars, seeing open and closed doors in the same pattern as when she’d first come through. She chose not to explore them, sensing traps that were mechanical in nature, not human.

Sam opened the door to her car.

She stared for a long time.

Four bodies were stuffed into her small flat, all with their throats ripped out like Angelica and Candice had done during their games. For further damning proof, a Pruett token was on the carpet nearby, winking in mischievous curiosity.

*We need to start marking those. I’ll never know who paid for this.*

Sam went to the window and flipped the latch. The Network allowed open windows on the subway because there wasn’t room in most of the tunnels for anyone to jump. Even if they did, the train would suck them under and crush their bodies into damp spots on the rails.

Sam hefted the four bodies out the window, grimacing at the effort of contorting the big women to fit. She was breathing hard by the time she finished. The Defenders she had killed would stay where they were until the Network sent a cleaning crew, but Sam didn’t want to be held responsible for these extra deaths. By the time they identified the blood, the dome would be down and she would be able to track the person who had earned a Pruett token and then left it here. That bitch needed to die.

The door to the next cars was unguarded. The two beyond that were for the engineers and personnel who were likely watching the security cameras and calling the city in panic. Sam went back to the rental car to wait. The media woman had assured Sam that she had access to the train at all stops. Sam assumed she was a games reporter or had been one. Unless they got in trouble, they kept their clearances for life. If the train stopped for any reason, she should be allowed to board, and Sam expected the train to take advantage of the nearest station or hub to send troops in response to the calls from the engineers.

She would get to give her interview and then she would have to fight her way out, unless her interview provided enough distraction or chaos to keep her moving toward the city. The Network didn’t understand her arrest wasn’t necessary. She was headed straight for them. All this was doing was slowing her down. It wouldn’t prevent the justice she’d already been paid for. Knowing the truth was worth more than any reward she’d been offered.

Sam opened the rental door and gestured to the terrified males. “Stay in the corners. When we get to the city, get lost in the crowd. Dress like women. Do the best you can.”

“Where should we go?”

“Anywhere you want, just stay away from the dome.”

“They’ll be coming for you now. You won’t make it to the city.”

Sam laughed. “Wanna lay a wager on that?”

Cliff smiled shyly. “Against a Pruett? Nope.”

Sam chuckled, suddenly curious as to why the sound of their voices wasn’t affecting her, but there wasn’t time to puzzle it out as the train began to slow.

*“We are making a brief stop to take on passengers. Please stay in your assigned cars until we are moving again. Thank you.”*

The computer sounded evil to Sam’s injured ears.

The train shuddered to a stop, brakes squealing.

Sam leaned against the nearest wall and tried to get her full hearing back.

The door to the car slid open to reveal a reporter Sam recognized, followed by two neutered males with cameras and equipment.

“Oh, hell. Roll! Roll!”

The two men hurried to get the cameras going as Dana moved gingerly over to join Sam outside the rental door. “What happened here?”

Sam had chosen a story before she’d spilled blood, but she decided that wasn’t needed now. Candice would understand her jumping the gun. “There was an attack.”

Sam was glad to see the squad of troops who entered behind the reporter were nervous instead of hostile. When they heard what she had to say, their anger would hopefully flip to a more deserving target.

“An attack on you? By who?”

“By the Network. They tried to frame me for the murder of Terry, the missing council woman.”

“A council member is missing?”

Sam shrugged. “I’m sure someone knows where her body is.”

“If the frame didn’t work, then why are you under arrest orders?”

“Because I accepted an offer to kill the head of the council.”

“Oh, my God! Why did you do that?! And who made the offer?!”

“Terry hired me right before she disappeared. I’m on my way to complete that contract.”

“Why?!”

“Because the men on the council are tyrants, especially Julian. *He* needs to die.”

“He…?”

“Yes. The leader of our council is a man.”

**3**

“I need to get off the train now.” Dana was storing her equipment, heart pounding from watching the camera feed. Sam had killed an entire squad of Defenders without help. The woman was a ruthless fighter. Dana hadn’t ever seen anything so brutal. Bodies were everywhere. “Thank you for the interview. I’ll make sure it gets aired in full.”

“When the dome falls, you won’t have so much interference. They’ll have other problems to handle first.”

“Good point.” Dana looked at Sam, who hadn’t moved from outside the rental car door. “Can I see the males?”

Sam tapped on the door.

It slid open to reveal four clean, nervous men who stared into the camera and then ignored it in favor of going to Sam.

“You’re hurt!”

Sam didn’t try to cover her injuries. “Don’t broadcast that!”

“I won’t.” Dana was satisfied the men were alive and unharmed. She gestured for the camera operator to put away the rest of their gear. She couldn’t wait to change her clothes. Reporters were always dressed in red and green outfits that denoted their status. The colors allowed them to blend in well on camera, but Dana hated it. So did all the other reporters, but no one protested. If they were wearing a different uniform, then they would have different jobs.

“Come in here so we can take care of you.” The rental males took Sam toward the small car.

Sam gave the reporter a last bit of advice. “Be careful when you leave. They’ll try to take that footage.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Exactly, so be careful.”

Dana nodded, heading for the door. “I’ll see you around, council woman Pruett.”

It was obvious Dana believed she would be able to kill Julian and claim the seat she’d been promised in exchange. Sam didn’t tell her any different. She wasn’t sure how that would go and frankly, right now she didn’t care. There was a nasty tug in her chest that said trouble was coming from multiple directions and she wasn’t ready for any of it. There was also an ache that told her Baker was in trouble again.

Sam started to sit as the door slid shut… The train immediately began to slow, shuddering in a way that implied it wasn’t a scheduled stop.

Sam sighed. “Sometimes, I hate being right.” She opened the door. “Stay here, but keep the door open until they find me so they don’t shoot their way in.”

“Who is it?”

“Bounty hunters–the best.”

Cliff frowned. “Pruetts are the best. Everyone knows that.”

“Pruetts aren’t the hunters anymore. Now, we’re the prey.”

The door shut.

Sam vanished into the shadows, wondering if she could short the lights without stopping the train that was already chugging along the rail again. It had been a fast stop, which meant her guess was right. Network troops would have kept the train sitting there, giving her a chance to escape. Bounty hunters got the train moving because they knew it would trap their target on board. All they had to do was search each car and they would locate her no matter where she hid.

Sam heard voices and heavy steps she identified as Dana and her crew. Sam was glad when there wasn’t screams or gunshots, but the resulting silence wasn’t an improvement. At least if people were shouting, she knew where they were.

Sam moved into the tour car, wincing at the immediate computer response.

*“Welcome to the mural room! We are nine hours from our destination. This area is dedicated to the riots of 230AW and the savior Network who brought us all out of such troubled times.”*

Sam threw her knife and knocked out the camera in the top corner of the room. Then she used a spike to hit the light fixture, using her changeling strength. Darkness descended, only broken by the green glows of the mural they were speeding by, and the glowing green eyes of the computer tour guide that slid from the wall. *Great fake. I thought she was real.*

Sam pulled her cloak over her head and slid into the shadows behind the robot.

“There’s only one car left after this.”

“The rental car! We’re stopping there, right?”

“Of course. We’ll take our cut of the Pruett, too, before we hand her over. Now get in there!”

The door opened.

“No lights. She knows we’re here.”

*You guys are the best now?* Sam snorted silently, hands ready.

“I can’t see anything with that damn mural flashing by.”

“Turn it off. The button is on the robot’s ass.”

The bounty hunters snickered. One of them came toward Sam’s hiding place without caution.

Sam shoved her blade forward as the woman reached around, slipping it between the arm and body of the robot to jam it into a fleshy stomach. She ripped upward and then jerked it free.

Blood pattered to the carpet.

The mural flashed by, brighter.

“Turn it off!”

The body fell backward, showing death but not the injury.

“It’s her!”

Sam fired before the hunters could, spraying from the cover of the robot who continued to run its program.

*“This part of the mural shows our dedication to preserving human life. The Network loves its citizens–all of them.”*

Sam grunted as she threw her last spike. “And we feel the same. Lots of love here.”

Her spike sank into an unprotected throat, finishing the hunters.

Sam stood up and stepped free.

The train shuddered again as it slowed.

“Oh, hell!” Sam was fed up. She stomped toward the doors, aiming for the engineer car beyond it. After this, the train wouldn’t stop again. She would stay in the front and make sure of it.

Sam didn’t pick a weapon as she headed for the front of the train. Subway engineers wore the blue outfits of the transportation district, but they didn’t have a communication device or a tool belt. It wasn’t needed. The engineers were locked behind glass doors, with all the radios and controls. There was no way in there unless she had the code. Or a token to offer.

“Halt, there!”

A Network guard was at the main entrance door, waiting as it opened for another unscheduled stop. The lone Defender didn’t see Sam coming.

The door opened to reveal familiar faces.

Sam pulled the trigger as the guard lifted her gun, blowing brains across the carpet and walls.

“Nice.” Lydia stepped up into the train, followed by her Nomad escort. “Candice said we should keep you company.”

Sam chuckled. “Excellent. I was about to go talk to the drivers.”

The family members scanned the carnage they could see and smell.

“Too much stopping?”

Sam nodded, resuming her march. “Rental males are in the rear car and there’s a media crew hiding somewhere in here.”

Dana stood up from behind a nearby cabinet. The two camera operators with her also stood, but the males didn’t look at the new arrivals.

Sam waved them toward the door. “Go now or I’ll tell Dana what you’re hiding.”

The two men took off.

Dana stared in dismay. “They followed me to you, right?”

“Yep. One of your boys there is a traitor.”

Dana’s face hardened. “I’ll make sure they don’t have a haven.” She held out her hand. “Thank you again.”

Sam shook and watched the woman leave. She didn’t know what Dana hoped to get from supporting the rebellion, but she would likely receive it.

“Open the door!”

The engineers inside refused. “We want a token!”

“The boss said no more tokens. Open up or I’ll shoot.”

“The glass is reinforced!”

“The walls aren’t.”

“Open the door for her!”

“Not without a token!”

Lydia lifted her gun.

A terrified engineer shoved the greedy coworker aside and hit the button to let the rebels in.

The greedy engineer grabbed for a radio.

“Hands up!” Lydia lifted her gun. “Don’t do it. You can’t call them before I shoot you.”

“Long live the Network!”

One loud gunshot echoed and then the train shuddered violently.

Dana was thrown from the exit ramp and almost dragged under the groaning wheels.

“We’ve got it now!” Lydia laughed. “Sorry!”

Sam chuckled, seeing Dana had survived the fall as the door slid shut.

“Candice has updates for you.”

“I’m not going to the dome, am I?”

“No need. It won’t exist by the time we get there. The crowd was very riled. Your interview just sealed it. It might even be falling right now.”

“Where am I going?”

“To find Baker.”

Sam sighed. “Keep rolling to the city then.”

Lydia frowned. “Why?”

“Because that’s where he’ll look for me.”

“You’re still under arrest orders. Won’t there be troops at the station?”

“Maybe, but if the dome is down, they’ll have other concerns.”

Lydia grinned. She’d been able to stay home more and keep Bobby happy, but she hadn’t been able to get out of the family business completely. Lydia was one of the best hired killers the Network employed when they wanted someone removed. And if those people ended up on a southern plantation, where they could exist in peace, the Network never knew. “I’ll handle it. You rest.” She glanced around the cars she could see from where they stood. “Been a busy day.”

Sam laughed. “You could say that.” She went back to the males, satisfied her family would get her to the city. That’s what they did–came through when it counted.

Sam was disappointed she wouldn’t get to make her run through a game and get a bachelor prize, though, along with a new level of personal pride. She was also angry with Baker for leaving his protection and worried about him being alone. Desperate situations caused ugly consequences. That hadn’t changed and never would.

Chapter Twenty-Three

**The Leader is…**

New Network City

**1**

**“I** can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Candice only grunted at Bobby, but the tone still got through.

He clamped his mouth shut and helped her down the sewer stair. His leather clothes creaked from lack of proper care.

They were in the center of the other fighters, ready to battle to the main areas, but there were only bloodstains, bodies, and silence down here. Darkness had fallen over the oppressed city, bringing screams of people being interrogated on the streets. The Network always relied on scare tactics for their successes and it was another weakness.

Candice wanted to gloat a bit about her plans falling into place so well, but the pain in her body prevented it. The medics couldn’t heal her inside. They’d been able to stitch and medicate her however, and that would be enough for what she had to get through. Afterward, she would be either dead or able to rest.

The small team went down the slimy stairs without lights, relying on changeling eyes to guide them.

Left at a disadvantage, the men were forced to grope their way along or hold onto a female for support. It was noisy, but they didn’t see a live soul until they reached the bottom of the station.

Candice motioned Mary and Horace to go ahead and clear the path as they’d planned. She and Bobby stayed tight together, hands already hovering over weapons. Daniel and Bruce would try to help, but they weren’t fighters like Chester and Horace were.

Around them, the station moved with grieving, eerie shadows who froze in anger and fear as they spotted the Pruetts. No one attacked them or even approached.

Candice ignored the soldiers in favor of the leadership voices coming from the meeting room. As she stepped over bodies of young and old Divas, Candice wondered who had inherited the remains. The elder had been executed on live TV. Few people would want the job now.

Candice stopped as Horace prepared to kick the door in. His flowing tan pants had been tied to his ankles and his turban had been switched inside out for a harder cover. He was ready to fight.

Behind them, Divas began to come from the shadows, but their expressions begged for peace not blood.

Candice granted their silent requests. “Knock.”

Horace sighed at the order. “Okay.” He pounded on the barrier, scaring everyone except their group.

“What?!” Naomi opened the door. Her face fell.

All four Divas in the large, bloody meeting room panicked, taking off for exits scattered around the dank hall.

“Take them alive.” Candice let Bobby lead her to the chairs the women had been sitting in.

The rest of the Pruetts gave chase.

Candice leaned against Bobby’s hip, breathing harsh. She was trusting Daniel to be able to do his duty now, but it was hard to stay still and allow it when it had only been a few months and a dozen lessons between this and his submissive behavior in the complex.

“Get over there!” Daniel shoved the woman hard, not caring when she fell and scraped her knees. She’d tried to stab him twice before he’d gotten the courage to slap her. It had only taken a single hit from a slave to freeze her and drain the rage. Daniel was glad. He didn’t like how it felt. He would have rather slit her throat than beat on her, but Candice wanted these women for something.

The Divas were rounded up without much fighting. The Network had already taken that from them.

The Divas outside the room were torn. Half of them fled. The rest gathered around the open door and hoped the Pruetts would be merciful.

Candice glowered at the four women now kneeling in front of her. Covered in sweat, blood, and pain, her expression warned them of more ugliness to come if they didn’t cooperate. “I’m going to take them down. You’re going to help me.”

All of the women nodded, grateful to discover they weren’t going to be killed. They also wanted the chance at retribution. All of them had lost friends and family this time, not just fighters.

“How many survived who will fight?”

Naomi glanced toward the door. “Less than a hundred.”

“And the other groups?”

“The mountain brutes are with the children, like you ordered. The Glowers are escorting them while your…monster hides in the alleys and inches closer to the dome. The merchants have all surrendered, claiming they were kidnapped. They’ve turned on the starlets and reporters, who ratted them out in kind. The Network ordered them all executed.”

Candice sighed. “Go on.”

“None of the snakes here survived. The swamp fighters all made it out of the city. No one knows where they are now. The Defenders blended into the complex.”

“What of the men?”

The Divas peered back in blankness. “Who?”

“My males!” Candice growled, rage smothering her pain. “Those men are worth more than any of you!”

“We’ll find out.” One of the females glanced at the group surrounding them and then back to Candice. “Are you claiming leadership of the Divas?”

“Temporarily, yes.” Candice pushed away Bobby’s hand as she stood. “I’ll help you get settled after the dome falls and then you can pick your own rulers.”

“What if we want to become a part of the Pruetts?” The third Diva had had enough of death and losing.

“It’s the same as before.” Candice didn’t stop. “You’d have to give up your way of living and embrace ours. I have zero faith that you can do it.”

“Why not just kill us?” The fourth Diva watched as the females at the door parted to let the Pruetts through. None of their soldiers had any fight left in them now.

“Because we need each other, of course. What happens after will depend on your performance during.”

Encouraged, the Divas picked themselves up and went to gather their remaining fighters. When Candice said it was time to go, they wanted to be ready.

Candice took her group to the same space they had waited in for the first meeting with the elder. It was the only room she had spotted as they entered that didn’t have bodies and gore.

As they settled in, blocking the door with furniture, Candice moved to the corner to avoid the other people.

Daniel stayed with the fighters, helping get everyone settled. He knew Candice was hurting and he wanted to check on her, but he had been given duties on this run and he wasn’t going to slack off in any way. It wasn’t just their survival at stake; it was the survival of his gender and maybe even the human race.

The other Pruetts also knew Candice was hurt. As soon as Mary got Bruce settled, she joined Candice in the corner. The medics had taken their offer and fled as soon as it was dark enough to blend into the shadows.

Candice refused to let Mary examine the injury. “It’s healing. You know how it works.”

Mary allowed the rebuff because there were too many other things to cover right now. Everyone needed to know Candice’s plan.

“We have to stay out of sight and keep the crowd around the dome worked up. Ideas?”

There was silence as people considered. None of them expected Bobby to come up with the answer.

“What if we tell them the truth?”

As everyone stared at him, Bobby stared at Candice. Her decision would make the final choice. “Just spread the word we’re taking the damn dome at dawn. By the time Sam’s train gets here, we may already have the city secured.”

Candice considered it despite needing the time to heal. She had asked for other people’s opinions to verify that she had covered all the bases. However, she hadn’t considered being forthright with the mob around the dome.

Mary saw a flaw in that plan. “I don’t believe Pruetts have that type of support in the general populace.”

“Maybe we could help.” Horace didn’t want Candice fighting again so soon, but he had an idea.

“How?” Mary was all for any idea that gave them a better chance of success than the suicide run she suspected Candice had planned for herself.

“We make a deal. They help us take the dome and we promise to give them something in return that they want.”

“Slavery.” Daniel’s tone was ugly.

Chester patted the rebel’s shoulder in comfort. “We don’t always have to mean it. Sometimes, Pruett’s do bluff.”

“You mean…”

Candice nodded. “We lie where we need to.”

Appeased, the group began to make plans to spread the word that Pruetts would consent to keep male slavery in exchange for everyone’s help bringing down the dome.

“What about Sam? Is there some way to contact her?” Mary was worried for the girl. Most of Sam’s support structure was split between babysitting the ape and getting the rebels to the border. Mary didn’t have much faith in Lydia after being around Bobby. He wasn’t trained and he couldn’t fight; even Daniel was stronger.

“Not as long as she’s on the subway. Even Network communications are limited when people are underground.” Chester pulled his bedroll from his kit, hoping Sophia was having a peaceful night. She’d taken all their kids and trainees to the farms that had been cleared. The mountain brutes would help her keep them all alive.

“Why did she choose to be a replacement player?”

The others refused to answer Bobby. A part of being one of them meant figuring things out for themselves. It encouraged their family to be smarter than those who were told everything they wanted to know.

Bobby settled on a chair near Candice to wait for his next orders, frustrated.

“We should be hearing news reports about the gang being wiped out, even though the Network knows we survived.” Chester made a bed in the corner with his cloak.

“The council has gone quiet.”

Bruce looked up from making Mary’s bed in the opposite corner. “That means they’re getting ready to leave, right?”

Candice nodded. “And that’s why we’re going to the boat while everyone else goes to the dome.”

“Without a ruler, all those fighters will die in the dome. And we know the Network plans to blow it up if it’s overrun. The bachelors told you.”

Candice looked back at Bobby without remorse. “Do you understand what that means?”

Bobby slowly nodded, not sure if he was okay with that or not. “Those being sent to the dome are not supposed to survive. You did it this way to eliminate competition after it’s all over.”

“You may turn out to be one of us yet.” Candice didn’t smile like the others were. “Everyone go to sleep. Dawn will come fast.”

**2**

“Are you awake?”

“Yes.” Candice had refused to sleep yet. The sewers around them had stayed active for hours. The other fighters were snoring, filling the room with enough noise to cover a quiet conversation.

Daniel shifted, hands going to her wound.

Candice put a hand on his wrist. “Not now.”

“Is there time to wait for later?”

She sighed. “I don’t think so, but they’ll lose heart. You have to help me take the boat.”

“And then you’ll tell them and get medical care?”

“My word on it.”

“What else can I do?”

“Not much. I need to rest.”

“We’re not going to the dome at all? Even to watch the ape fall?”

“Sam’s parents will help Jonas. We’re sneaking onto the boat while the mob and the Network are distracted. When they set sail, we’ll be with them.”

“How are we going to hide on a boat?”

“We’ll steal uniforms and blend in.”

“Pruetts? Blend?”

Candice snickered despite the pain. “Okay. So maybe we’re going to take control of the boat and hold the council hostage until they agree to our terms.”

“And what will those be?”

“Unconditional surrender.” Candice slowly rolled over. “Lay against me? I’m cold.”

Daniel scowled. “Don’t you die!”

Candice chuckled. “You can’t kill Pruetts with a knife in the back. It only slows us down.”

“Tell him the real reason you’re healing so slow.”

Candice growled at her father.

Her mother twitched in her sleep and settled back down into Bruce’s arms.

“Tell him. He has a right to know.”

“Not like this!” Candice controlled her anger and disappointment. “It should be a happy moment, not another worry.”

“Tell him.”

Candice sighed at her father’s repeated order. “I’m pregnant. All my energy is going to the baby first.”

Danial didn’t hear anything but pregnant. “I’m going to be a father?”

Candice waited for more, hoping it was pleasing to him.

Daniel wrapped his bigger body around hers and tried to send her all of his heat. “Thank you.”

Candice shut her eyes. “It’s my honor, Daniel. I’ll try very hard to keep *all* of us alive.”

Daniel rubbed her shoulders, grin stretching his face. “I’m going to be a daddy!”

Chuckles filled the sewer, alerting the Divas that their new leader was awake.

**3**

Morning came too soon for Candice. As dawn broke over the rioting city, she stood up, fighting not to groan. “Turn on the news.”

Bruce hurried to activate his radio, worried. Candice’s injury was dangerous to all of them, but mostly to Daniel. If she couldn’t protect him, he would be lost. Despite doing so well, all the males in this room were a liability. “We should go underground.”

While the others snickered and gestured at their surroundings, Candice nodded. “We’ll find a place on the way.”

“Wait.” Bobby scowled, hands going to his hips. “You mean the men.”

Bruce nodded when Candice didn’t reply.

“Well, I’m not staying behind. She said I’m her body man.”

Horace frowned at the rookie. “To get into these sewers. Now be quiet.”

“I won’t. I don’t trust her not to–”

Daniel’s fist knocked Bobby into the wall. He slammed into it and slid down, lids shutting.

Candice let out a sigh of relief. “My thanks.”

Daniel returned to her side. “My honor.”

The other Pruetts snickered. Bobby was learning their lifestyle the hard way. If he survived this, the rookie would accept his owner’s choice from now on. Lydia hadn’t rejoined them, but Bobby hadn’t noticed her lengthy absence, or if he did, he didn’t care enough to mention it. Bruce knew it might be because he was embarrassed to be asking after his master like a dog, but lack of awareness was more likely. It wasn’t that Bobby didn’t care about Lydia. He just wasn’t as observant as he should be. That was proven by him saying he didn’t trust Candice. That was a huge mistake.

Candice opened the door, not surprised to find four guards on it.

They jumped to attention and hoped her demands were reasonable.

The news began to play.

*“… who says the attack on the subway that killed at least a dozen was a deliberate attempt to stop her game because the Network can’t afford to pay off the bets if she wins. Here’s the rest of that clip.”*

“Sam, why did you kill everyone on the train?”

“I didn’t. The bachelors are alive and well. So is the crew.”

“Can you afford the fines?”

“Already paid.” Sam snorted. “Didn’t make a dent in my account. I might do it again.”

“Why did you do it at all?”

“They tried to arrest me. I chose not to cooperate.”

“Why are you under arrest orders?”

“I accepted an offer to kill the head of the council.”

“Oh, my God! Why did you do that? And who made the offer?”

“One of the other members hired me.”

“Why?!”

“Because the men on the council are tyrants, especially Julian. *He* needs to die.”

“He…?!”

“Yes. The leader of our government is a man. We’ve all been betrayed.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I’ll prove it.”

“How?”

“This interview is live, right?”

“Yes.”

“Get ready to lose your broadcast. The council is shutting you down as I speak.”

“But that would be manipulation of–”

The radio went to static, ending Sam’s interview.

“She did it.” Candice was thrilled. They didn’t need a reason for the citizens to attack the dome now. Sam had given them the truth.

Daniel was furious. “How long have you known?”

So was everyone else, but not at Candice, though they did want to know how she’d figured it out when they hadn’t. It was obvious she’d known or she would be showing surprise or revamping their plans.

Outside, Divas were shouting. Above the sewer, the same was true of the city locals. They believed Sam.

“Because it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“How do you figure?”

“The slavery, the population controls, letting the disease run unchecked.” She looked at Daniel with some of her old pain showing. “When I snuck into the dome at fourteen, I went in through the slave bay. I saw a boat, or thought I did. That’s where they caught me.”

Daniel frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I saw men getting off the boat–free men who were giving orders. After enough drugs and beatings, I said I’d made it up and they sent me home.”

“Why didn’t they kill you?”

“I’m a Pruett, I assume. They didn’t want trouble with our entire family while they were planning their escape.”

“You believe this goes back that far?”

Candice sighed. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you when it started, but I suspect we’ll find proof of everything in the dome.”

“And we’re letting them blow it up.”

“Get geared up. We’re taking it down.” She paused to sweep the hundred Divas who had slept in the hall outside. “In exchange, I’ll consent to an easement of slavery laws so everyone can adjust.”

Divas brightened, getting in the spirit.

Wanting to be confident they were riled upon leaving, Candice grinned. “Whoever brings me the head of a male on the council will be considered for leadership roles. If it’s not a council member, you go into Vulture Run.”

Given a warning, and a possible reward, Divas rushed from the sewers.

Candice and her group didn’t follow yet, but they left the door open to let stragglers know they were coming. They checked gear, chose weapons, and kept their faces blank of real thoughts and feelings. It was almost time to take back control of a country that had been under enemy rule for over four hundred years.

Time stood still.

Chapter Twenty-Four

**Implosion**

**1**

***“T****he file was sent to multiple news agencies. The accusations Sam Pruett leveled against the government has brought the city to flames. There are riots in the streets and even rumors of a past mutation that the populace was told died a long time ago. There has been no word from the council, though troops have been called to the complex to defend the dome.”*

Rusty opened the door to the leader’s apartment without knocking. “We have to go!” Rusty glanced around, spotting no sign of Julian. “Where are you? They’re breaching the dome!”

Rusty scanned the spotless three bedroom apartment, listening to the news report on the TV that was blaring through the residence.

*“After killing the infamous family in an ugly ambush, the council ordered the arrest of Sam Pruett, who was on her way for her game. Sam survived the attempt on the train and gave us this shocking video.”*

Rusty wasn’t distracted by the report or the lavish apartment. The government lived way beyond the means of the average citizen. The females had to be careful to cover themselves in public so the rest of the nation wouldn’t know they were hoarding supplies, technology, and slaves. Every council room had items that were off limits to the general public, including art, literature, and music. Almost all of these had been exhumed from leftovers of the past, however. There were no new artists, popular musicians, or thriving authors in New America. Thinking outside the box was not permitted. The Network allowed this decadent lifestyle to sway them to anything Julian suggested. Closets of clothes and jeweled stars were the least of the things Julian tempted them with, though the females on the council had all gravitated toward those material possessions. It only made Julian’s conquest easier, as it had every ruler before him.

Rusty opened the door to Julian’s bedroom and froze. He hadn’t known there was so much blood in only one body. Rusty squinted. *Is it only one? I can’t tell with so many pieces.*

Julian looked up. “It’s time to go.”

Rusty forced himself to enter and take hold of Julian’s arm. He pulled him away from the teeth-marked leg. “I have an escort waiting. Where are your bags?”

“I already sent them to the boat.” Julian straightened up, control back in place for a little while. “How long before they breach us?”

“Minutes.”

Julian let Rusty and the security team take him to the private elevators. “Where is everyone?”

“The stairs to the dock. I didn’t have time to get rid of the women. I’ll take care of it after we set sail.”

“Good.” Julian put his hand on the elevator scanner. His was the only one that would activate the private transport.

Instead of going down, the elevator went up. The rear exit of the complex could only be accessed from the top floor of the roof.

Julian smoothed his clothes and fastened his cloak over his bloody shirt, aware of the troops staring at him. These five women knew all about the males on the council. They were here because of loyalty. *Cousins and nieces in our family are like that.*

The roof of the complex was a flat square in the center of a giant oval. Long stairs led from the exit and spiraled down the side of the tall building. Julian didn’t hesitate to start the descent. Now that they were outside, the roars of the mob were echoing up to remind him that he had played a dangerous game.

Rusty followed slower, not as comfortable with heights. It had taken longer to load the boat than any of them had expected, but a frontal assault at dawn had been a shock. Rusty hadn’t been alive for previous rebellions. Only a couple of those had even reached this level of violence in the city. It was terrifying.

The jeers from the crowd got louder as they descended. Gunfire and screaming became a constant noise.

Rusty saw people struggling down the stairs ahead of them. He slowed a little as Julian hurried to join them, trying to see who it was. He still had targets on his list, and now was a perfect time to eliminate people.

Around the stairs, the artificial atmosphere provided cloud cover that hid their descent. As they reached the second level and continued downward, their cover vanished.

“It’s Julian!”

“There’s Rusty!”

The council didn’t stop as their senior members caught up. It was obvious from how fast Julian was traveling that he wasn’t going to pause as he reached them. Instantly fearing being thrown over the side, the women hurried until his footsteps neared their heels and then they moved aside in hopes that he would just keep going.

He did.

As Rusty came between the two huddling women, he lunged forward and grabbed both of their legs.

Lauren and Shelly struggled, but it was too late. Rusty flipped them over the side of the stairs.

Bodies falling to the ground should have been noticed but weren’t. The chaos made it almost impossible to hear anything.

Julian hurried to the bottom, pausing by the bodies as an excuse for getting his breath back. Julian didn’t like being physical unless there was blood involved.

One of the women moaned.

Julian knelt by her, loving the death moments. He always paused for it in all of his control sessions.

Shelley focused on Julian’s victorious face. “Your days are numbered.” Blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

Julian gazed at the dying woman, triumph fading. “What did you do?”

Shelly’s eyes shut. “Hired your nightmare.”

“Which one?!”

“All of them.” Shelly’s last breath rattled out in a laugh that sprayed blood. “All of them…”

**2**

“It’s cracking!”

“The dome is coming down!”

People screamed at each other as the ape continued to pound against the weakest part of the dome. Right where the entryway met the door, the monster was banging away large chunks. Once it was breached, the failsafe would automatically take it down to prevent a sudden depressurization.

An awful groaning noise was coming from the ape. Taking constant gunfire from the few Defenders who hadn’t been killed yet, the ape had already been shot dozens of times with large weapons. It had also been hit with hundreds of small knives and explosive spheres. Its fur was too thick and matted to allow most of their weapons to get through.

The fire-breathing hounds that had come with them were doing battle with Defenders, but they were also being killed by changelings in the crowd who didn’t realize they were loyal. The rebels tried not to think about it. Attacking the crowd around them to stop it was the opposite of what they needed to happen as they slipped through the crowd, passing out blades. “Take a knife, kill a Defender, get her gun.”

Camille and Amos were fighting alongside the ape, trying to keep Defenders away while the primate pounded on the dome. Around Sam’s parents, a small group of Nomads and family members were doing the same. Around them, thousands of enraged changelings fought and waited to get into the complex. The news crews were blasting Sam’s accusation through every device, causing shock, dismay, and then anger. As the fury boiled, the women were hitting the streets to express their displeasure at being lied to and murdered by the very people they were supposed to be able to trust.

Amos saw a group of Den Mothers hurrying males and children away from the complex, dressed as women. He recognized it because that was how he had been stolen from the government and gifted to the wonderful Pruett woman who had hidden him for so long now. Their daughters, Sam and Angelica, were a source of pride for him.

The ape pounded again, harder in his desperation as exhaustion neared; the dome finally reacted. A crack ran up the wall, releasing warm, soggy air through the hole.

An instant later, the protective shield emitted a loud hiss and began to lower.

“They have a big gun! They have a big gun!” Camille couldn’t be heard over the din of the crowd roaring in approval. People pushed closer in a frenzy as Camille continued to shout, trying to warn them.

Unable to, she grabbed her mate’s arm and threw them to the ground. She had no hope of survival. “Never stop fighting!”

Amos recognized the moment and hugged Camille as tight as he could. “I love you!”

The impact of the missile hitting the ape at such close range threw a wave of force into the air that hit everything in a half mile radius. People were knocked to their feet, burning or bleeding from their ears at the concussion. Wind flew over the crowd, knocking debris into people and impaling those who were unlucky.

The ape staggered, shaking the ground as it fell forward to catch itself against a small part of the dome that hadn’t slid down yet. It often took the dome four minutes to lower when the Network was airing things out.

Around them, the crowd beat on the wall and each other in anticipation of being inside. They’d barely noticed the monster’s defeat.

The ape fell, crushing a group of Defenders who had still been firing into its big stomach.

Next to the ape, Jonah’s body was uncovered. He had been killed in the first wave as they approached the dome with the ape. No one had stopped to mourn him, despite the Glowers being loyal. There hadn’t been time. Now, the surviving outcasts began to gather around his body, and the ape, forming a circle of protection.

As the dome neared the 8-foot range, changelings began to leap over the wall and vanish inside the complex. The crowd was no longer interested in Pruetts, Glowers, Divas, or men. They had accomplished what everyone wanted–the dome was down and the government was defenseless. Loyalty and sorting out leadership would have a time, but that wasn’t now.

Candice and her group came through the crowd to join the circle, somber. They ignored the ape and went to their two family members. Sam’s parents had been killed in the blast.

Candice was cursing herself for not getting here faster. She hadn’t thought the dome would take so long to fall. Camille and Amos should have been inside the employee door, waiting for them right now.

Candice scanned the ape as her mother knelt by the bodies. There wasn’t time to give them a burial, but Mary would do the best she could to hide the markings that would get them stripped by scavengers. If there was a point later when they could, the bodies would be collected. Most Pruetts weren’t buried in accordance with laws, but with their honor.

***“You…promised!”***

Candice came to the ape, careful not to touch the mourning Glowers who had lost their ruler and their savage God.

***“Will you…honor your word?”***

Candice hunkered to stare at the dying creature. If the Network won this fight, the ape would be healed and put into service against her people. He couldn’t be allowed to live. “Yes.”

The ape wheezed out a painful breath of relief. ***“Do it now.”***

Candice stepped aside so Mary could run up and slam a thick pole into the ape’s eye.

Glowers screamed as the pole sank into the ape’s socket to reach the brain and end its misery.

“Now!” Candice and her group threw their knives and spikes, refusing to attack the Glowers barehanded. The crowd around them parted, but didn’t interfere.

Bobby rushed forward. “What are you doing?!”

Daniel grabbed him and swung the rookie out of the line of fire so he wasn’t killed.

Candice tossed her blade, hitting the last Glower.

Bobby landed on Chester’s knee with his face, hitting the eye Daniel hadn’t blacked in the Diva den. Chester had been trying to catch him and missed.

“They’re all down.” Bruce was standing near Camille and Amos, his friends, while watching out for his mate. He was sad, but also glad for them. Sam and Angelica’s parents had died together, fighting their enemy. Bruce’s voice was gruff with unshed tears. “Your sacrifice will be remembered.”

“Yes. Come.” Mary led the crew to the employee entrance where Defenders were fleeing. The changelings were killing everyone in a uniform, including the media, who was trying to cover the story. The Pruetts traveled through this ugly din without being delayed. Women in the middle of fights swung each other out of the path, not willing to challenge the family even by accident.

If they hadn’t just taken a double loss, on top of Candice’s injury, they would have been proud of the image they presented. As it was, they weren’t. The family was furious and scared.

Candice didn’t ease their fears over her injury again. She couldn’t. It was bad.

A stiff wind blew in off the ocean as they entered the dank, bloody tunnel, rustling Candice’s hair and making her long for more of it. She had never been on open water, but the idea was thrilling. She was positive the breeze out there wouldn’t layer her sweaty skin with toxic chemicals like it did here in the city. *If I have to die in this war, I at least want to ride the ocean first.*

**3**

“Hurry!”

The council members, all men, scurried across the empty wharf behind Julian as he marched toward the dock.

The already nervous squad of Defenders guarding the dock stiffened when they saw a group of well-dressed males hurrying toward them. Spotting Julian’s bloodstains and rebellious expression, the women lifted their weapons, suspecting bachelors of escaping. The guilty looking guards with the men could have been bought off. It had happened before.

“Halt there!”

“Where are your owners?!”

Julian kept walking until he was right up against the gun of the team leader. “I’m the ruler of the council. Let me pass or I’ll slit your throat.”

The team leader would have snorted, but the troops around the men were making gestures that said he wasn’t lying. Their fear got through.

Julian slid by the guards, not impressed with his security and glad of it at the same time. “Stay here and make sure no one follows us.”

Julian hurried down the dock, aware of voices coming through the tunnel. The changelings would reach this area quickly because it was on the ground floor.

Candice laughed harshly. “I thought the council wasn’t afraid of anything?”

Julian skidded to a halt as a dozen unwelcome shadows broke away from the shadows of the boat and came up the dock.

Julian scanned the boat and found his captain and the crew being held at gunpoint by four other rebels. It was obvious from the wet clothes that they’d swam to his boat and taken over. “Get off my ship!”

Candice chortled again.

Julian’s rage flared. If not for the relief session he’d had, he would have flown at her and tried to do what everyone else had been so unsuccessful at.

Candice knew. So did the rest of the Pruetts. Ten of them shifted cloaks in tandem to be able to reach their other weapons.

Louder, angry voices came through the tunnel, along with chilling screams of the last of the complex Defenders being defeated. The changeling mob could reach this tunnel at any point.

The few guards at the end of the dock eased down the wooden pier toward Julian and his ship.

Julian didn’t care. All he could see was the traitorous changelings in front of him. “Let me pass or I’ll kill the kids.”

Candice’s eyes flickered to red. “You have one chance to tell us where they are and then things will get ugly.”

Julian dropped the items in his arms and popped the latch on his wrist communicator. He dropped it into the water sloshing alongside the dock. “If I don’t arrive on time, all the bachelors and kids will be killed. That includes your good friend, Baker.”

Candice snorted. “You can’t bluff me.”

Julian sneered at her. “I’m a Pruett. I don’t bluff.”

“I’ll kill you for that lie!” Bobby flew toward Julian, leaving his place in Candice’s crew.

Mary gently shoved the rookie as he went by, knocking him into the water.

Candice stared at Julian. His dark hair, black eyes, and *you can’t defeat me* attitude said he wasn’t lying.

Candice’s face filled with rage. Her hand went to her weapon. “Excuse me a moment.”

Candice stepped by Julian without fear.

He, and everyone else, watched her walk to the crew of Defenders at the end of the dock.

Candice scanned one of the big females, verifying the whip that had caught her attention as it gleamed in the dim sunlight.

The dock supervisor felt it coming. She ran.

Candice tossed her knife, hitting the woman in the leg.

She collapsed in a heap, grunting.

Candice motioned to the other guards. “Beat her with her whip until she can’t walk and then leave her there for the mob.”

Council members cringed, expecting the same treatment.

“She’s like him!”

Alex motioned Brandon to be quiet as Candice stalked back toward her group.

She didn’t look at them as she went by.

The dock guards exchanged glances and then went to do as ordered. It was obvious that the chain of command had changed.

Screams came as the Defender was sliced open.

Julian laughed as Candice shoved by him to retake her place. The supervisor’s shrieks were delightful.

A small group of local changelings charged through the tunnel.

“Kill them or I’ll kill you!” Julian screamed it without looking.

The troops at the end of the dock ran forward to fight, clearing a path for the council to escape.

Two of the men, Brandon and Alex, took off running back towards the stairs, hoping they could hide in the elevator. It wouldn’t take them anywhere, but it also wouldn’t go to any of the floors where changelings would be. They would only have to defend themselves from the roof and if they could damage the stairs, this mob wouldn’t be able to reach them either. After the crowd got tired of looting and wandered off, the men might be able to escape.

The rest of the council stayed close behind Julian and waited to see if he was as clever as he always acted. If anyone could bargain a way out of this mess, it was him.

Julian’s Defenders were successful against the small group of changelings. The locals hadn’t remembered to pick up a gun.

Hoping the noise hadn’t drawn another wave, the guards returned to the dock and the drama unfolding there. All of them now hoped to be invited onto the boat if Julian was successful in clearing his passage. They also wanted to know the answer to Candice’s question.

Candice stared, waiting. She didn’t care if the changelings tore the council apart.

Julian read that on her face and tried another tactic. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but you have to get me out of here. Now.”

Candice gestured at the nervous men behind him. “What about them?”

Julian didn’t blink. “Them who?”

Candice laughed at the stricken expressions of the male council members. She had only known Julian for a few minutes now, but it wasn’t surprising that he was so ruthless. They should have known he had no loyalty to them. *I’m finally here. I found the enemy behind the hood.*

Julian spotted Daniel standing behind Candice. “Your kids are happy and healthy.”

Daniel grimaced, but didn’t rise to the bait.

Candice felt his pain, but she refused to be swayed. “Tell me.”

More voices echoed through the tunnel, indicating a larger group.

Julian scowled, starting to be concerned. “There isn’t enough time to explain everything.”

Candice believed that was true, but she was enjoying his squirming. “Give me the basics and I’ll decide if I need the rest.”

Julian took a step closer. He might be able to shove her over and make it onto the boat.

Candice didn’t budge as the family on either side of her tensed to fire or lifted weapons.

Julian stopped, realizing they would kill him even without the answers. It forced him to use the strongest advantage he had. “If you don’t get me out of here, I can’t stop the bomb that’s going to hit the wall where your little rebel friends are gathering, with the help of the fishmongers.”

Stunned, Candice waved him onto the boat.

Chapter Twenty-Five

**Feeding the Sharks**

**1**

**“W**hat did you plan to do with them after you set sail?”

Julian didn’t glance at the trembling councilmen. “Someone has to feed the sharks.”

The remaining council members turned to run.

The troops at the end of the dock came forward at Candice’s gesture.

A large group of changelings ran through the tunnel and charged toward the wharf.

Rusty dove off the dock and into the water. He didn’t come back up.

The local changelings spotted the running men and the boat that was obviously getting ready to sail.

“Get them!”

The mob surged toward the pleading, shaking men.

From the second level of the stairs, Brandon and Alex observed in sympathy as the furious changelings tore their fellow councilmembers apart.

Julian didn’t even glance at the scene. He went straight to the captain of his ship. “Everglades Center, as fast as you can. We’re already late.”

Julian’s boat crew wore the same uniforms of a complex Defender, but their rough, tan skin and sun bleached hair gave them away. It was obvious they weren’t regulars in the dome. Their tools and weapons were also different. Candice counted more ropes than she did guns on the big women who hurried to obey.

Julian marched toward his stateroom as if he was still in charge.

Bobby pulled himself up onto the dock, furious at being knocked in the water. He jumped onto the boat, but kept his distance from Julian so he wasn’t punished again. He refused to look at Mary.

The rest of the Pruetts jogged onto the ship as the captain sailed the boat away from the dock. The gangplank was ripped loose and dropped between the boat and the dock, where it was crushed.

The changeling mob ran toward the remaining guards.

“Did you help them?!”

“Were you their guards?!”

About to be overrun, the dock guards ran toward the ship and jumped.

Two of the five made it. The other three fell into the water and began to swim after them. One of the three women was a good enough swimmer to reach the small ladder on the side of the ship. The other two quickly fell behind for the sharks.

A few of the locals also dove in to follow, but the changelings on the dock were busy taking their anger out on the two screaming men who weren’t dead yet. Few noticed the leaving ship, and with no way to follow, those who did notice it ignored it for the open complex that was free to be looted and explored at their leisure.

Candice motioned her people to guard the boat crew and the three Defenders. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do with them, but if they obeyed her orders, it might earn them the chance at a future where one didn’t exist for them now.

Candice followed Julian below deck. His ship was decadent. The plush furniture and lavish golden accents immediately told passengers and crew alike that they were keeping company with someone important. The rest of the ship was the same. Candice assumed a lot of Defenders had died and killed for this coveted post over the years.

As New Network City began to fade from view, Mary allowed herself to relax. They now had the head of the Network under their thumb, as much as a Pruett could ever be under someone’s control, and the complex had fallen. At some point, there would be an explosion that would eliminate most of their looting rivals, along with equipment and labs the Network had been using to abuse their subjects. The bachelors had been evacuated and everyone else was accounted for, except Baker.

Candice had every faith Sam would find him. That was why she hadn’t worried over Julian’s threat to kill Baker or the kids. There was no way to know if he was telling the truth about them, but his gleeful tone as he threatened Angelica and the rebels at the border had convinced her that one definitely wasn’t a bluff. It also told her there was a spy among the rebels or Julian was able to watch their movements somehow. Both options were terrifying.

Bobby frowned, wiping water from his arms. “When is it going to–”

The complex exploded in a thundering wave of destruction. No longer contained by the dome, it blasted outward, sending shrapnel into the air for miles.

Everyone inside the building was killed, along with those outside trying to get in. Thousands of lives ended in one powerful blast that echoed across the state and drew the attention of a large group of orphans and their protectors who were traveling south.

Little Lea glanced up at the mountain brute walking next to her. “Do you think they made it out?”

The mountain woman, Benji, had another little girl on her shoulder. “It was all part of the plan.”

“To be in trouble for killing the bachelors? It’s illegal to kill men.”

“The bachelors were taken out of the complex yesterday. The Pruett clan sent multiple warnings through their contacts that the complex was going to be attacked. It forced the council to move the men out.”

“I can’t believe it’s gone.”

The mountain woman hadn’t lived in the city all her life. She didn’t share the child’s grief. “We’re on our way to a safe house. You’ll get a new home.”

Lea shrugged. “I didn’t have one before. It’s not a loss. It’s just hard to believe I won’t be able to look up and see that ugly tower anymore. It’s always been a part of my life.”

Benji pointed to the front of the line, where their guides, the remaining Nomads who hadn’t been sent to help Sam, were pausing. “Maybe they need help.”

The little girl ran up to offer assistance.

Benji breathed a sigh of relief. She was honored the Pruetts trusted her enough to escort the children, but she didn’t like kids. It was one of the advantages of living in the mountain. There weren’t many offspring and because of that, the parents kept the children sequestered where they couldn’t annoy anyone and be hurt.

“We are here.” The Nomad, Luba, pointed toward a shady area coming up. “Wait while we clear it.”

The group of orphans and their escorts waited impatiently in the open as the Nomads verified there wasn’t a trap. When they were signaled over and the entire group was under the cover of the trees, the mood lifted. It immediately dropped again as the children realized they were about to go underground.

The leader of the Nomads pointed at Lea, and then the other kids. “These are your people. Lead them to safety.”

Lea lifted her chin proudly and did exactly that.

Ruby and Glory were next to their mother, protecting her while she directed the orphans and other innocents into the tunnel. Chester’s children, along with the farmers, were bringing up the rear. Candice had wanted those who couldn’t fight removed from the possible crossfire. The city wasn’t safe, so she’d sent the farmers home with a lot of hands to help get the spring planting done. The city kids were eager to work on the farm under masters who weren’t abusive. The Pruett kids would tolerate the chore because they knew they were the real protection if there was trouble. Like their parents, they were dangerous.

Sophia stayed alert and listened for more sounds from the city.

Other than wind and screams, there wasn’t any.

**2**

Candice followed Julian into a lavish stateroom that gleamed from a fresh dusting. Boxes and bags of personal goods and linens were stacked neatly on one side. On the other was a basic set of furniture that would allow Julian to live here for an indeterminate amount of time. There was even a bathroom setup, complete with a shower. The small study in the corner was full of books, maps, pictures, and computer screens. Technology screamed at her from every corner of the 10’x20’ bunk. “Nice pad.”

Julian chuckled as if he wasn’t a prisoner and sank into the chair behind the desk that had been measured for his large frame. “Perks of leadership.”

Candice settled into the seat across the desk as other people arrived to provide protection and listen to the information she was about to dig out of the enemy. It was hard to consider him a family member until they remembered his revelation.

Julian poured two drinks from the expensive decanter on the desk and lifted one of them in the air. “To the Pruetts.”

It was impossible for Candice not to respond to the toast. She lifted her glass and downed the expensive alcohol. She had never had bourbon before. Even with her bank account, it was simply unaffordable. The alcohol burnt a fiery path down her throat and exploded in a sensation of pleasure and pain in her gut.

Julian did the same, mirroring her hiss at the sensation. “Only five people in the country have this.”

Candice wasn’t surprised, considering the amount of travel it took to collect the items required to make it. Corn was only able to grow in the south, along with wheat, barley, and rice. Distilleries only existed in the complexes, forcing them to transport the ingredients. It took months to make a single batch.

Julian gestured toward the pictures on the wall. “Your ancestors.”

While the others glanced at the images and found more proof of Julian’s words, Candice leaned back in the chair and studied her enemy. Pruetts had gone corrupt in the past, but not to the extent of the sly man observing every expression that crossed her face.

“It’s Tara!” Chester moved over to examine the pictures.

Candice stiffened, attention captured.

Julian smirked. “How do you think she got so many breeding passes?”

Chester glared at the picture. “She knew about all of it.”

Julian poured a second drink to cover the growing nervousness. He didn’t like the way Candice was staring at him. “Tara provides information from the territories. She’s always been one of mine.”

“Figures. That explains how she could drop off her bastards and never come back to check on them. It damaged her kids for life.” Chester couldn’t help the bitterness. His mate, Allison, had been killed while trying to find her mother and father. She’d heard a rumor they were being held in the complex.

Julian countered that calmly. “Tara is damaged. How could she help them by raising them?”

Candice kept studying him. “You sound like you know her well.”

Julian smacked the glass on the desk. He was annoyed when Candice didn’t flinch. He was used to people being scared of him, but she wasn’t. “I would agree with that statement considering that I fathered some of your rebel crew.”

Rage filled the cabin.

Candice made a curt gesture to clear the room. If anyone was going to rip him apart, it would be her.

Daniel stayed. Everyone else left, casting ugly glares that warned Julian not to wander around by himself if Candice let him out or he wouldn’t make it to his destination no matter what it cost them. No one wanted to know which of them he’d sired.

Candice didn’t want to know who Julian was referring to either, but deep down, she already did. “Why did you let me live when I came to the complex the first time? Was it all planned out even then?”

“What do you think?”

Candice reached over and took the bottle to pour a second drink. “You let me go. You knew this conversation would take place.”

“Very good!” Julian leaned back in the chair. “It’s not Mary.”

Candice shrugged. “It will devastate whoever it is. I’d rather not hear it.”

Julian wanted to smirk at her cowardice, but he was afraid to push. Unlike the other Pruetts, who were quick to anger and recklessness, Candice was letting her emotions boil. Julian knew that reaction was more dangerous.

“When you envisioned this meeting, how did you imagine it ending?”

Julian smiled again. “I had hoped you would join me, as my right hand.”

Candice also wasn’t surprised by that revelation. The Network had been going through council members too fast and replacements were always best when drawn from an inner circle who shared their ideals. The problem was that she and Julian had opposite ideals. There was only one way it could end, and she had no doubt that Julian already knew it, too. Which might mean the alcohol was poison or he had a knife in the drawer near his hand that he might try to kill her with, but Candice didn’t think so. Despite him knowing how it had to go, Julian honestly believed she was going to join him in his evil crusade to let men take over the world and make women slaves. That meant he had another secret and it had to be something powerful.

“I’m the only one who knows how to keep the men from progressing any further into the rage disease. If you kill me, or refuse to give me what I want, all men will suffer like you have for the next four hundred years.”

Candice stared at the evil man, almost unable to comprehend him. “How can you do that to your own?”

Julian didn’t show remorse as he answered. “The ends justify the means.”

“That phrase wasn’t true even when it was invented.”

Julian shrugged. “I’ve lived by it.”

“I need proof.”

Julian was also expecting that. “I know. That’s why you’re joining me at the training center. When you’ve met my demands, I will give you the formula and help distribute it to the populace.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I don’t want to die.”

Candice suspected the lie. “I want proof now. I don’t believe you can stop it in either gender. I believe it’s fading out now, because like you said, it burns itself out over hundreds of years.”

Julian realized he would have to give up on his plan to torment her for the entire ride. “We’ll have to go below.”

Candice stood up.

Julian was impressed when she didn’t show signs of the alcohol affecting her. He couldn’t say the same. After his control session, and then two shots of the expensive liquor, his stomach was boiling. He also couldn’t seem to shut his mouth. “I don’t want much. Everything I had hoped to accomplish will either continue or end at the training center. I won’t make it hard for you to consent.”

Candice noted the guards. Bruce and Mary were right outside the door and listening to everything being said, while others in their crew watched the captain and the Defenders who had joined them.

Candice indicated Julian to lead the way.

Julian took them down to the bowels of the ship, where the cold damp floors groaned and creaked under their feet. The ship had reached deeper water.

Julian opened the door to the lab that was empty and went to the center desk. He sat and began hitting buttons on the console.

Candice took a position against the wall nearby while her mother and father scanned the equipment and bays. All of the beds were empty and the lights were out over each individual compartment. The well-stocked area implied Julian was ready for medical emergencies. Considering her injury, that was almost a relief. If only they had a medic.

Computer screens came to life. Candice observed every swipe as Julian opened folders and files labeled with the names of bachelors who had obviously been experiments.

The next name caught her attention and held it.

“This is my file. Testing began at birth because of a genetic marker I carry that matches our founding father, Lucas. Look at the chart. The regular doses of the vaccine I’ve been receiving have begun to have an effect.”

Quick at math, Candice studied the numbers and came up with a fatal flaw. “You’re going to reach the max limit before the vaccine gets it under control.”

Julian brought up another chart showing his rapid progression. “We’ve made mistakes in the testing. The level of the vaccine needed to be adjusted before I reached puberty. We tried to play catchup; it’s been mildly successful.”

“That means you don’t have a real vaccine yet. You can’t do what you promised.”

Julian pointed at the bottom number on the file. “This is the last vaccine. We gave it to all the children, as well as the bachelor offspring. Look at the levels of the disease. It shrank the progression rate by 50% on the last batch. That’s more than enough time to beat puberty as long as we begin vaccinating them within the first year.”

Candice gazed at the screen. “All of this goes against your master plan. What’s the catch?”

Julian hit another series of keys on the computer and the screen went dark. “That, I won’t tell you until you agree to what I want.”

“This isn’t enough for me.”

“As soon as we reach the training center, I’ll show you the new test that was ready a week ago. They haven’t been able to send the results because of your troublesome actions preventing messengers from getting through.”

Candice understood Julian had refused to send the information over a medium that could be copied. She approved even as she hated him a little more for proving who he was. “This boat has to have a radio. Call them now and get the information.”

Julian gazed at the dark monitor for a long minute. “How far away from the city are we?”

“A few miles.”

“Any chance you might go back?”

Feeling the trap coming, she shook her head.

Julian gave her a familiar grin. “That’s what I needed to hear.” He leaned forward and switched the computer back on. A few seconds later, static filled the air. “I want an update.”

Candice swept the brightly lit control booth on the screen. A dozen men in Defender uniforms stood watch over clerks and secretaries who were busy typing on keyboards connected to banks of computers.

Aware of her tensing, Julian hurried to relay instructions. “I’m on my way. I’m bringing guests for a tour. Don’t panic.”

The large man on the screen nodded as he typed, obviously bringing up the information. “Which part do you want first?”

“I only want the vaccination data.”

The man on the screen typed again and then began to read. “94% chance of success with the last two dozen subjects. 99% chance with the next batch of subjects. Vaccination dates for the next control group are tomorrow morning, sir.”

Julian glanced over his shoulder. “Satisfied?”

Candice nodded.

Julian rotated to his lieutenant. “Please arrange a special welcome.”

The guard couldn’t see who Julian was with. “Yes sir. Docking time?”

Julian realized their current captain hadn’t been permitted to transmit that information and approved of Candice’s caution. “Eight hours.”

Julian disconnected the chat and swiveled around in the chair to look at Candice. “What did you get out of that?”

Candice hated Julian more and more with every second she spent in his company. “You have a male army. We’re sailing into a trap.”

Julian flashed an approving smile at her. “Now are you ready to listen to my demands?”

Candice crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes, and then I’m going to ask questions. Every time I think you’re telling a lie, I’m going to draw your blood. I don’t believe you’ve had that happen to you yet. It’s a unique experience.”

Julian laughed.

Candice flew across the small space and knocked him into the computer. She bashed his pretty face into the console three quick times and then slammed him backward to the ground by his hair.

She followed him down with a grunt and began to rake her claws down the exposed skin she could reach, digging in the tips.

Julian’s screams echoed through the boat.

Everyone who heard it was pleased. It was justice.

**3**

“She needs to eat. Open it.”

If the demand had come from anyone but Daniel, the family wouldn’t have obeyed. Candice was still interrogating Julian, though the screams weren’t as loud or often anymore. It had been three hours since Candice dragged Julian back in here by his hair, leaving bloody smears on the floor.

Daniel steeled himself as he entered the stateroom.

Bruce left the door open so he could grab Daniel and get him out of the way if there was trouble. He also wanted to see what was going on. There hadn’t been a problem hearing it. Candice’s questions had been brutal, penetrating shouts that revealed horrors he hadn’t imagined.

Daniel scanned the room, smelling blood and frustration.

Candice didn’t look up as Daniel stared at the bed where she had Julian. He wasn’t resisting her now, but she still glowered to be sure he didn’t try anything.

Julian grinned through the bloody nose and split lip. “Dinner. How lovely.”

Daniel sat the tray on the desk, glad there wasn’t a lot of blood. Candice was holding Julian’s arm with her legs, knife slowly skinning the family crest from his skin. That was his only serious injury. Daniel didn’t count the few gouges from her claws or the bruises from a struggle. He approved of her removing Julian from the family in such a way. It served two purposes.

Candice waited for Daniel to leave. When he didn’t, she sighed. “Tell me why.”

Daniel came over to the bed, noting Julian’s face tighten as the knife neared the half-peeled tattoo again. Blood had begun to dry on the sheet and his clothes. “We’ve both wondered if I can handle this side of you. Now, we’ll know.”

“It won’t matter to her, slave!” Julian spat. “You’re only hurting yourself!”

Candice gaped at Julian. “Son of a bitch.”

Daniel felt it, too. “I know you.”

Julian growled. “Get lost!”

Candice slid the blade under the gory patch and sliced into the flesh.

Julian refused to scream this time, but he couldn’t prevent the tears. Being skinned inch by inch was excruciating.

Daniel didn’t look away as Candice cut through a small part of the tattoo.

When she dug the blade under the next corner, Julian whimpered.

Daniel still didn’t react. In fact, he barely noticed. He was following the memory trail.

*“He’s paid for!”*

*“Another games kid?”*

*“This one is special. Make sure he’s cared for.”*

*“You got it. Owner’s name and account number?”*

*“Council member number one.”*

*“Oh. I’ll handle it personally.”*

*And she did.* Daniel shuddered. Rankin had hated the government. She’d told him that repeatedly as she raped him.

“Daniel?”

“He’s your father.”

Candice dug the blade in deeper, then sliced through a larger section of the ink.

Julian screamed.

Daniel grinned. “Again.”

Behind them, Bruce pulled the door shut.

“Why is she doing it without witnesses?” Bobby hadn’t been present for anyone being blacklisted from the family. He’d only heard of it happening once.

“That comes after the crest is taken.” Bruce motioned the rookie toward the stairs. “Get a report for us.”

Bobby frowned. “I was just up there.” He turned away before they could scold or punish him again. “I wish Lydia was…”

Mary gave Bruce a nod as Bobby spun around in panic.

“Where’s Lydia?!”

“On a run.” Bruce stepped by the rookie. “Come on. We’ll get the update together while I fill you in.”

Mary was relieved when the men vanished up the stairs. Training a rookie was exhausting, but Bobby had also been coddled for so long that he felt like he had the right to know everything. Teaching him to accept a bottom rung and work his way up would take multiple runs that Mary hoped someone else would handle. She’d had enough of the kid.

“You evil bastard!”

Mary nodded at Daniel’s shout. Julian was that and more. Their ruthless intelligence had spawned the tyranny this country lived under. Marcella had started it and Julian’s line had finished it. Mary had no doubt they would discover the conspiracy went back to the very beginning. The only mistake in a perfect plan had been letting Candice live, using her as the distraction. Julian had forgotten how magnetic their family was, despite being the leader of New America. *He underestimated us.*

“Always! There has always been a Pruett leading!”

“How many men are at the retraining center?”

“Hundreds.”

Mary waited, sensing the lie.

“Ahhhh!”

Mary sighed in pleasure at the sound of Julian’s scream.

“A thousand! A thousand!”

“Stop lying to me. I don’t enjoy hurting you.”

“You stop lying so he won’t know you for the monster you are!”

“You have no empathy. That’s how we’re different. I love the blood. I loathe the pain”

“You need the blood. You love the pain. It reminds you death hasn’t come for you yet.”

“Still playing with immortality, are you?”

“How do you know that?!”

Candice chuckled. “I know a lot. Your enemies hired me and they provided details. We know the grand plan. We know the disease will die out on its own. We know you have both the vaccine and the cure. And we know the UN is set to come through the wall in three weeks.” Candice paused. “Oh, and there’s the whole blowing up the rest of the power families so you don’t have to give up leadership. Did I cover it all?” Candice finished taking the tattoo in one long slice that sent blood rolling over Julian’s arm and the sheet.

“I’ll kill you! You’ll die for this!”

Daniel didn’t care about any of it except for the path his mind was still following. “You breed with immune women to produce the bachelors. Like the other members?”

Candice hated the topic, but she knew the rest of the truth needed to come out. “Not the others, Daniel. The leader. For the last thirty years, just him.”

Daniel thought he might be sick. “How many?”

Julian hissed as Candice slapped a bandage over his wound. “Thousands.”

“They’re at the training center?”

Julian’s other arm strained against the ropes she’d used to bind him to the bed. “Some. Most had to be put down. Only ten weren’t infected.”

“Because of manipulations with your vaccine?”

“Because the mothers weren’t compatible! It’s been a problem through our history.”

“That’s why the Malins were able to get away with so much. You need them.”

“The Malins have bloodlines in high places.”

“There was a Malin on the council?”

“Rusty.”

“One of the three men who escaped?”

“Yes. My XO. I didn’t know he could swim.”

“Why did your other children have to be put down?”

Julian chortled, madness showing. “They were too violent.”

“Side effects?”

“Yes. The wrong mix increases the progression of the disease.”

“How long have *you* been infected with our disease?”

Daniel and the other people froze at Candice’s casual question.

“You can’t know that.”

“Ah, but I can. I recognize my own kind. So will every other female you meet.”

“What gave me away?”

Candice pointed to the scars on his arms and legs. She hadn’t enjoyed stripping him to find the Pruett tattoo, but she’d done it and then left him uncovered to aid in the interrogation.

Julian frowned dramatically. “You had an advantage. That’s no fair.”

“He’s ill.”

Candice mirrored Daniel’s disgust. “He’s not curing the population problem. He’s infecting the men with our disease.”

“Why would you do that?!”

“We’ll be like her.”

Daniel’s revulsion came up his throat. “I’ll be topside.”

Candice understood, but she didn’t take her attention from Julian. “How close are you to that goal?”

“One dose and the scientists say I’ll be able to *change*.” Julian’s crazy amusement echoed through the boat. “In the morning, all the control groups will receive the final dose. You’re taking me to my army.”

**4**

“Not one word!” Mary glared at Bruce as he joined her on the deck of the smoothly sailing ship.

He stood by her at the rail, but didn’t speak. It wasn’t because of her order. After time around the younger bachelors, Bruce wasn’t worried over being properly timid anymore. He just didn’t know what to say. He was heartbroken and furious that Julian had interfered with their lives.

Mary spun around and landed against his chest.

Bruce held her, feeling her body shake. *She’s crying!*

Shocked, Bruce pulled her hood up and tugged his cloak around them so the crew would believe he was offering warmth instead of hiding her tears.

Chapter Twenty-Six

**Lean and Mean**

Near the Canadian Border

**1**

**“I** don’t want to do this.”

Angelica didn’t tell him there wasn’t a choice. She waited for Jason to come to that realization on his own. She scanned the hundreds of males observing them, waiting to follow him, and sighed. If Jason wouldn’t do it, none of them would.

Overnight with the fishmongers had been almost boring. Marta’s death had been silent and the food had kept the others happy. When dawn came, hundreds of men and women had been crashed together, without violence. They’d had a couple of close moments, but Jason had controlled his men and Angelica had insisted the fishmongers do the same. Even the few couples who had progressed beyond smiles hadn’t become a problem, though the howling had been annoying while they tried to sleep. The fishers were noisy.

“Will they help us if we fall out?”

The fishmongers, under Angelica’s guidance, made gestures of comfort. Now that their ruler was dead, the women were eager to follow Pruett rules. Marta had kept them out in the wilderness through their deals, but all of these angry females were ready for a better life that didn’t include being outcasts anymore.

Jason knew everything Angelica was thinking, but he couldn’t help the fear. This wasn’t a quick river crossing. It was the ocean!

Angelica motioned the women to get loaded, hoping it would help Jason make his choice. Lingering to dwell on what could go wrong wouldn’t help him.

Jason flinched as the fishmongers obeyed, expecting to be shoved onto the boat.

Angelica regarded him patiently, reminding him he wasn’t under the control of people like that anymore.

Jason slowly relaxed. If there was trouble, Angelica would save him.

“Yes, I will.” She knew what he was thinking.

Jason sucked in a tight breath before stepping into the swaying boat where the fishmongers would be responsible for their passage to the wall.

The other men began to follow his lead and got into the lines for the boats. Each ship would hold thirty men and a dozen sailors, making them a convoy of vessels that should draw attention from anyone on the shorelines as they passed. That couldn’t be avoided. There were only two water routes to Canada from here and both of them were populated.

As they climbed into the boats, Angelica watched the fishmongers for signs they were setting a trap. Killing their leader should have caused resentment, but Angelica didn’t sense any. They appeared relieved that Marta’s greedy rule was over. A new leader had been elected in her place in a unanimous show of support last night before they all slept where they dropped. Angelica had been horrified to learn that the young girl was Marta’s daughter. She didn’t think the atrocities of the war would ever end.

It took them an hour to load all the terrified males into the ships. The mutants controlled themselves remarkably well. Angelica knew it wasn’t just Pruett power, as Candice was the only one who commanded that level of obedience. The fishmongers held hope of a better future, but they were also well fed. Thomas and his males were excellent cooks, turning Borderland rabbits into small steaks of delight over an open fire. Thomas swore it was because they didn’t skin the animals first. In the past, it had been necessary to get to the meat, and to use the hide for clothing.

Now, cooking rabbits in their skin caused it to absorb the radiation. It could be peeled away, though. Their new diets of anything smaller than them had added increased value to the meat. Combine that with unchecked breeding and the hoppers were a great food source in the Borderlands that most citizens were unaware of. Angelica had caught them, with help from a small crew of women who’d wanted to learn, and the males had cooked. It had been hours of teamwork and calm, even with Marta’s body rotting a hundred yards away. Her clan had refused to bury her.

Angelica stepped into the boat and sank down by Jason as the last of the lines cleared. As soon as everyone was loaded, the sailors pushed away from the shore with long poles, and the boats dropped into deeper water.

Men yelled and scrambled for something to hold onto as the heavy ships sank deeper. Liquid death sloshed over the sides and onto the men, causing further panic.

Angelica whistled as loudly as she could.

The sound snapped heads to her and froze the chaos.

Angelica indicated her boat. It was being shoved along with the current.

The males in the other boats settled down in embarrassment, muttering and grumbling.

The females smirked and snickered at the reactions of the cute rebel males. Excepting the occasional illegal transport, they didn’t have contact with men who had spines and these Pruett rebels were full of courage.

The rickety boats under them didn’t appear capable of staying afloat, but they glided through the water at a quick pace that let Angelica breathe again. She was glad to leave the Borderlands. They were almost within sight of the wall. She hadn’t realized they were so close. By going this way, they would avoid the cameras there, and the guns that defended the impenetrable barrier.

The last ship pushed off from the shore. Sailing in a double line, even Angelica was impressed. She’d already had moments where she’d been certain they were going to die. Making it this far was encouraging.

“How long before our first break?” When Angelica didn’t answer, Jason frowned. “We’re not stopping, are we?”

Angelica sighed. “We’ll draw a lot of attention. If we stop, there’s a good chance the Network will get troops between the wall and us. Do you believe these men are ready to fight Defenders?”

“No.”

“Me neither. We don’t stop.”

Jason tried to find a comfortable position on the bench. “I’ll make it work. I just have two questions.”

“And those would be?”

“What if we need the bathroom?”

“Over the side.”

“You have to be joking!”

“No.”

Jason swallowed another protest to ask his second question. “What happens when we get to the wall? They’ll have troops waiting for us.”

“I’m working on that.”

Jason heard the lie, but didn’t call her on it. He assumed she didn’t want anyone else to know those plans yet and there were a lot of people listening to this conversation.

Angelica let him assume it was to hide the information from their escort. If he knew the truth, he’d jump out of the boat right now. He was staying in Canada with the rebels, where he would be safe. *Then I’m going back to help my family.*

**2**

Angelica had never been on the ocean before. Neither had any of the rebel men. The fishmongers observed them in pity and amusement as they fought to control stomachs against the tide pulling the boats north. The water was only a little rough, but even calm swaying sent tremors through guts that were already full of adrenaline being pumped from their fear of drowning. It didn’t help that the wooden ships groaned and creaked under their feet as they sailed through the water. The sound of men vomiting over the side of the boat had become loud in the hours since they’d set sail.

Now that it was nearing sunset, Angelica needed the noise to stop. If her maps were correct, they were approaching a populated peninsula where they would have to pass through a narrow channel. The sound would definitely draw attention.

Angelica scanned the women in the boat with her and Jason. One of them, a big blonde with scars and two missing fingers, hadn’t stopped staring at them. “What do you have for their guts?”

The woman raised her voice to be heard over the vomiting. “Fish eggs.”

Angelica grimaced. “Poison.”

Bridget snickered. “Not if you boil them and drain off the water. We grind them into powder and put it into hot tea for our new girls.”

Willing to do whatever it took to ease the misery and quiet them, Angelica shrugged. “Bring it on.”

Bridget pointed toward a ship near to them. “We keep it all there. That will require a stop.”

Angelica didn’t think she could get the men back on the boat if they stopped. Before any of them guessed what she was going to do, Angelica took off running toward the side of the boat.

Jason and the others watched in miserable amazement as Angelica leapt from their ship. Landing on her feet like a cat, she stood up calmly and advanced toward the other captain.

As the amused fishmongers and rebel men clapped, distracted for a moment, Angelica secured the medication the men needed. She didn’t know how she would distribute it yet to all of the boats, but they weren’t stopping.

Satisfied that Angelica was safe, Jason switched his attention back to the men on the bench with him. Ralph was here, along with Thomas, who no longer had ugly sorrow on his face. In fact, he was staring at Angelica as if he was in love with her. Jason gave the animal man a frown and then switched his attention to the women, who were a bigger threat. With Angelica off the boat, this was their chance to make a big mistake.

All the fishmongers, except for the one Angelica had spoken to, kept their distance. It was obvious they intended to keep to the deal. Jason regarded Bridget. “Who would have been your leader if we hadn’t shown up and forced Marta’s daughter into claiming it last night?”

Bridget straightened her shoulders. “Me.”

Jason was glad to know who he was speaking with. He doubted Angelica would secure leadership over the mutants for the Pruetts, but he was also certain they wouldn’t be eliminated. Their skills were too valuable to waste and Marta’s daughter was about useless. Jason was already positive of that. The young girl had vanished below deck on one of the boats and still hadn’t come back up. Jason thought she was scared Angelica was going to kill her for leadership before the trip was over.

“Marta only cared about food.” Jason lifted a brow. “Do you share that feeling?”

Bridget shrugged. “If we can eat, and we’re not being hunted, life is good for us.”

Jason understood. Despite half the country being fertile, the Network preferred to keep its citizens lean and mean.

“Where are you going after you drop us off?” Jason was genuinely curious about the answer, but he also wanted to verify the women did intend to let them go.

Bridget pointed in the direction they’d come from. “We have a village. We’ll go home.”

It was a relief to know the fishmongers didn’t need to be resettled. It made dealing with them easier.

Jason kept track of Angelica’s progress on the other boats as he continued to pry information about the future from his captain.

Angelica stood in front of the small chest the captain had shown her, trying to figure out how she would distribute it without stopping the boats.

The captain tapped her on the shoulder. “Would you like me to deliver it?”

“You have an engine?”

The captain held a finger to her lips. “One of the few. That’s why I carry the medical supplies.”

Angelica was thrilled. “Yes, please, as quickly as we can.”

Eager to chauffeur a Pruett, the captain hurried to the wheel and began to push buttons.

Panels on the rear of the ship slid out and then folded onto the deck. Two large engines slid out of the rear and splashed down into the water, held together by what Angelica could only imagine was centuries-old metal.

The sound of power filled the air and then splashes of water flew over the deck. The big ship lurched forward and swung out of the current, easily fighting it.

The men on the boat with them yelped, trying to find something to hold onto as their captain advanced toward the other ships.

As soon as they were in range, Angelica picked up one of the powder pouches and tossed it. Her aim was as good as always, allowing the captain to sail right by without slowing.

The captain grinned. “This is fun!”

Angelica made sure her aim was good as the next ship approached.

Around the sailing convoy, slaves and mutants observed Angelica’s trip in fascinated distraction that allowed a few of the men to get their weak stomachs under control.

Grin stretching across her face, Angelica lobbed the pouches with deadly accuracy and enjoyed the feel of flying. The boat was going so fast it felt like they were gliding on top of the water.

The sailors began preparing the tea right away; glad she had figured out a way to give the men a break. It had been funny at first, but the constant sound of vomiting wore on even the most hardened sailors after a while.

Jason noted Thomas watching Angelica again and spun away from Bridget. He put his chest against the animal prize, bumping him. “What’s up?”

Thomas shoved him hard, using a wiry strength that was unexpected.

Jason staggered and tripped over the bench. He fell awkwardly onto the warped seat, breath rushing out at the impact.

“Don’t ever touch me!”

Jason tried to get to his feet.

Thomas walked away. “I’ll throw you overboard. I don’t care who your owner is.”

“I don’t have an owner! I’m a free man!”

Thomas snorted. “Then act like it.”

Ashamed of his behavior, Jason got up and followed the man.

“What?!”

“Why were you staring at her?”

“She’s good. We can trust her.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So that’s why. I’ve never been around a female who was good. I didn’t believe any of them could be trusted.”

Jason didn’t understand, but he didn’t want to get knocked down again. *I need more workouts.*

“I could teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

“To fight. It’s obvious that you can’t.”

“She’s giving me lessons.”

Thomas smirked at Jason’s mutter. “The careful, censored versions that keep you from being hurt?”

“Yeah…”

Thomas padded to the far end of the boat, where there was a little more space and a lot less women gaping at his hair and muscles.

Jason thought about the pain that might come from a workout with Thomas and discovered he didn’t care. It would be worth it. When they had to fight someone, he could protect Angelica and not always be a burden or a weak link.

The women on the boat left them alone, approving as soon as they realized a lesson was taking place. The two men shoving each other had been a delight and a turn-on, but observing a lesson of only men was mesmerizing. The captain of their boat had to force herself to pay attention to her job as the sweat and punches began to fly.

Angelica didn’t know what was happening. It took her nearly half an hour to reach all the boats. Arms aching and spirits lifted, Angelica was glad to return to where Jason was probably bored or asleep… Angelica stared in surprised pleasure as she neared the ship. The rebel males were having a lesson. They weren’t wasting the time.

Angelica scanned and found the males on several of the other boats doing the same. As another group began to form a circle and the shouting started, more men noticed and followed. It was wonderful.

Angelica was careful to jump onto the boat at the far end so she didn’t disrupt the lesson. She lingered by the wheel with the captain and also tried to pay attention to their surroundings. The sunset was stunning and the cool splash of the ocean was refreshing. The breeze was constant and clean, telling them anything was possible if they had the courage to work for it. Angelica refused to ruin the moment by ordering the males to hide as land and lights came into view. If there had been more people in sight, she might have chosen otherwise, but there were only a few dozen women on either shore and none of them appeared armed.

The narrowing water between the landmasses made a faster tide that forced the captains to pay attention, but the males didn’t notice as they shoved and punched each other in the circle, letting themselves be men. Even their workouts with Candice didn’t compare as blood splattered the damp deck and former slaves shouted in excitement. From the shores, it had to appear as though a ghost fleet was sailing by with the souls of men who’d been gone for centuries.

On the right, land was thirty feet away and barren except for a single old woman in a chair. Bottle in one hand and fishing pole in the other, both were frozen in air as she gawked at the boats.

On the opposite shore, a dozen locals had paused in washing laundry. Some of them ran off toward their town.

In a great mood, Angelica waved.

The little drunk woman dropped her pole, but not her bottle. She stored that in her pocket and patted it. “I’m seeing things. I’ve had enough.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Family Ties**

Julian’s Ship

**1**

**“G**o on in.” Bruce opened the door so Daniel could enter. He was carrying two trays from the galley and wearing a pensive expression. Bruce assumed Candice had sent him to pry out more information.

Bruce shut the door and stayed alert, positive that was why he was still on duty here. Mary and Candice knew he wouldn’t forget any details he heard.

Daniel swept their prisoner and found Julian observing him intently. The bandage on his arm had bled through; blood had run down his side to pool on the sheets.

“Get up.”

Julian stood up awkwardly, hands bound. He watched Daniel put the trays on the desk, not speaking.

Daniel marched over to strip the bed, anger palpable. It had taken his owner an hour to convince him to do this and another hour of coaching to ensure he got it right. Danial didn’t want to be here. Candice had told him that was why he was perfect for the job.

Daniel went to the small wash area and got the medical kit. He threw it at Julian, reluctantly impressed when the man caught it like Candice would have.

Daniel got out clean linens, not caring if the man attacked him. He was angry and disgusted enough to fight back.

Daniel tossed the dirty sheets into a pile, keeping track of Julian while he worked. Candice hadn’t been worried about Julian hurting him, but Daniel wasn’t positive. The man was obviously crazy.

As he finished with the bed, he realized Julian was still standing in the same place with the medical kit in his hand. “I’m not going to do it for you.”

Julian sat the kit on a counter and began digging through it as best he could. He laid out the medical supplies as Daniel went to the desk to clear space for them to eat.

Neither man spoke yet. There was a thick, tense silence where they regarded each other and kept their thoughts to themselves.

Listening, Bruce was positive that wouldn’t hold much longer. Julian had been alone for hours and someone like him needed to be the center of attention to be happy. He expected the man to begin babbling at any point.

Daniel quickly tired of watching Julian try to handle his injury. He stormed over to the man and snatched the sanitizing wipes from his bloody hands. “Here!”

Julian held still as Daniel sanitized the injury and then smeared gel over it from a tube he’d had in his pocket. Angelica had given it to him with his basic gear before they’d left the homestead the first time. Pruetts weren’t supposed to have it. It also wasn’t a medication on this ship. “How did you get that?”

Daniel applied a more secure bandage and then began to clean up the mess. “You’ll have to ask Candice.”

“Is she in remission?”

Daniel stiffened. “No.”

“How do you know?”

“She has rage.”

Julian snorted. “She’s discovered a lot of secrets over the last couple of months. Perhaps that explains it?”

Daniel shrugged. “I didn’t come here to talk about Candice.”

Julian went to the desk and sank into the chair. “What did you come here for?”

Daniel cleaned his hands and took the seat across from the man Candice would never call father. “She sent me for information.”

Julian ignored the tray Daniel shoved toward him. “Why would I tell you anything more than I’ve told her?”

“You care for me. I don’t know why or in what way, but I felt it. So did Candice. That’s why I’m here.”

Julian was impressed with the honesty. It was a powerful tactic, mostly because it was right. “I spent a lot of time with you, before you were put into the games.”

“So Candice would want me.”

“So you’d be acceptable to her after so many years. Pruetts don’t just lay down with anyone.”

“You make me sick.”

Julian shrugged and lifted the lid on the tray. He began to pick through the lavish meal.

Across from him, Daniel did the same.

The awkward silence held a few minutes longer as both men tried to figure out what to say.

Julian broke first. “Would you like to know about your kids?”

*Score one for him.* Daniel’s fork dropped to the tray.

“You have two sons. Neither of them are walking yet, but your eldest, Devon, is getting close. Both of your sons have been in the program since birth.”

“What does that mean for them?”

“It means if she chooses to go against me, your children will suffer the disease like all of the women you’ve ever known.”

“But if they get the other half of the vaccine, the part made from *your* blood, they’ll be cured and unable to pass it?”

Julian shrugged. “There’s a 10% chance they’ll react badly, but considering our relationship, it’s unlikely they’ll experience a single side effect.”

“Are they on the list for tomorrow’s vaccinations?”

“No. They’re too young.”

“How can you do this to us? How can you support the suffering of men this way?”

Julian smiled in comfort. “That part of our lives is almost over.”

“What do you mean *our*?” Daniel’s shout echoed through the ship. “You haven’t suffered anything!”

Julian shoved a bite into his mouth without responding.

Daniel forced himself to calm down. “You believe four hundred years of misery is worth whatever final goal you hope to achieve.”

Julian nodded right away. “After this, men will always be in control. No one will ever have a chance to slip out from under the family again.”

“Have you ever considered sharing leadership?”

“No! Never! Women are the enemy! They betrayed us! We can never ever trust them again!”

Daniel understood Julian was too far gone in his fanaticism to be brought back and switched topics like Candice had suggested he do when he hit a wall. “You don’t look so good.”

Julian frowned. “Well, recently, someone stuck a knife in me.”

Daniel snickered. “As much as I hate to admit it, you are a Pruett.”

Julian couldn’t help the pride at Daniel’s acknowledgment. “Yes, I am. Everything I’ve ever done is to avenge my family.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They were slaughtered by women during the war.”

“So you’re carrying out vengeance for something that happened centuries ago?”

Julian slammed his hands on the desk and leaned over his tray. “Don’t mock me! You’ve no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Actually, I believe you’re capable of anything. Someone like you doesn’t have limits.”

Julian stared at him as if that wasn’t a bad thing.

“When you ran all of your tests, did your scientist give you a date?”

Julian stiffened. “A date for what?”

“For your death. It’s obvious that you’re on the downside.”

“I will never die!” Julian slammed his hands on the desk again and then shoved the tray to the floor. He punched the desk repeatedly, eventually cracking his knuckles and sending blood splatters across the wooden surface.

Daniel didn’t budge. Julian’s rage didn’t frighten him. Julian wasn’t a woman.

The door burst open and people came inside to offer assistance that wasn’t needed.

Daniel waved them off.

Realizing he was snapping, Julian controlled it and sat back down in the chair. He glared at Daniel, ignoring the witnesses. “I am *not* going to die.”

Daniel stuck to the plan. “Why do you really have an affinity for me?”

Julian’s face filled with pride. “You were my addition to the master plan. Without you and your choices, none of this would be possible.”

“You talk like you’ve won.”

Julian flashed a charming smile that the rest of the council had been terrified of. “It’s not over until it’s over, you know?”

No one liked the sound of that.

“What trap do you have waiting for us at the training center?”

Julian’s grin widened.

Bruce and the others went back out into the hall, but left the door open.

“What happens if you win?”

Julian jerked his hand. “Everyone falls in line where they belong.”

“Meaning the women are in chains this time.”

“Facilities are already being constructed.”

“How do you expect to accomplish that? It’s not like the general population is going to consent.”

“They will if your owner orders them to.”

Daniel stared at him in exasperation. “Candy is not going to vote for slavery of the females. She doesn’t even want men as slaves.”

Julian laughed. “Like I said, *boy*. It’s not over yet.”

Daniel switched topics again. “We found the codes on your computer. The council families are not going to be killed.”

“It’s interesting that you’re smart enough to have this interrogation with me and yet you haven’t figured out that I never create a single plan. I always have a backup.”

Daniel frowned. “You have another bomb arranged?”

“Of a sort.”

Daniel knew Julian wasn’t going to say more. “Where is Tara Pruett?”

Julian’s face betrayed him. It was obvious he had hoped this topic would be skipped.

“I don’t know.”

Daniel stood. “Okay. I’ll go tell Candice you just lied to me. She’ll be down to talk to you a few seconds after I tell her.”

Forced to answer, Julian snarled again. “Tara is on her way here!”

Daniel paused. “What do you want in exchange for letting our kids go?”

“Ah. The real reason you came.” Julian crossed arms over his chest, ignoring the pain from his injury. “I want Candice and all the other wild Pruetts with me, agreeing to every decision I make.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You’ll have to live with the consequences.”

Sensing the time had come, Daniel exposed his mental dagger and brought it down toward the man’s neck. “This is an amazingly complicated plan. How are you distributing the disease?”

Julian deflected the blade right back at Daniel. “Why, with you bachelors, of course. You didn’t think I let all of you leave the complex out of the goodness of my heart, did you?”

Everyone froze as Julian delivered news they had hoped to never hear.

“The bachelors you’ve rescued are already spreading the disease. Every child they have is infected. The tests given at birth don’t detect it in males. Most male children are never even tested. It’s already too late to stop what I’ve put into motion.”

“I’m infected?”

Julian was delighted by Daniel’s dismay. “I gave you the injection myself, right before you were transferred to the games complex. Then I notified Candice you were up to be won. Without you, my shy, malleable bachelor, the world might have been able to recover. Thanks to you being an icon of rebel strength and independence, all of the bachelors are out spreading my vision. Literally.”

Julian pulled Daniel’s tray over and began eating his food while Daniel removed shouting, threatening observers and guards from the cabin as they tried to reach the enemy. Julian smiled the entire time.

**2**

“What’s he doing up here?!”

“Kill him!”

Daniel stepped in front of Julian as they emerged from the lower deck. “He needs fresh air and I need to talk to Candice.”

The angry women on the boat, including Julian’s crew and the Defenders, had been filled in on the situation. They shouted and made ugly gestures, but held their positions. No one was willing to cross Candice just to kill Julian. He wasn’t worth that to any of them.

Daniel led the way toward the wheelhouse where Candice and the captain were standing in the dim room with a small lantern and maps.

Candice scowled as she realized Daniel had brought Julian topside. She would have scolded him, but his expression said it was important. Candice shifted away from their witnesses.

Daniel leaned in to whisper.

While they communicated, everyone watched in apprehension, not trusting anything that had come from Julian.

Candice let out an angry growl. “I agree.”

Daniel motioned Julian to join them. “Don’t forget what she told you about lying.”

Julian held up a hand that was still bound. “If my life wasn’t in danger as well, I wouldn’t tell you.” Julian regarded the captain. “I assume you’re still following my orders for a situation like this?”

The female tensed. “Yes, sir.”

Everyone realized the captain was one of Julian’s women who had known what was going on and not only condoned it, but helped him to achieve it.

Julian smiled at the woman. “If I survive, you get a *double* breeding pass and a penthouse suite in the new tower.”

The woman beamed. “Thank you, sir.”

Before any of them could guess what was going to happen, Daniel ran toward the captain. Catching her off guard, he was able to drag her out of the wheelhouse and toward the railing of the ship.

“No one crosses us!” Daniel hefted her over the side and shoved.

Julian regarded Candice as the captain’s scream cut off with a dull thud. She hadn’t cleared the ship. “My proof.”

Daniel stared at Candice in horror as he realized he had let his rage take control.

Candice’s heart broke. Everything was true. Daniel was infected. All of them were. The hope she had held for the future crumbled at her feet. “This changes everything.”

Julian went to the rail to observe the captain’s body as it was dragged under the ship. There was no way the woman would survive. “Can any of you sail a ship?”

Several of the Pruetts had experience, but nothing of this size. Julian’s ship, the Independence, was a three-story house inside a small battleship. It had everything a ruler would need while on the run from an angry populace.

“You can.”

Julian laughed at Daniel’s comment. “And there’s proof of the other side. The men I’ve bred during my life are smarter, healthier, stronger, and bitter from four hundred years of abuse. When the final battle takes place, the women won’t stand a chance.”

Females across the deck glowered, but it was obvious that he was right. Daniel had eliminated the captain with almost no effort, and they had witnessed the same thing during their rebellion. Few of them would be able to match a male changeling.

“Look out!”

Bounty hunters and Defenders spun around to locate the problem.

Julian grunted as he was shoved and then tripped, slamming into the deck with his face. His nose took most of it, blood spraying.

The click of a gun echoed loudly.

It could have been any of the people Julian had tormented on this ship, but it wasn’t. The drenched man holding a gun to Julian’s skull had last been seen diving off the dock as they made their escape from the city.

Julian looked at his former best friend without remorse.

Rusty’s hand shook as he fought not to pull the trigger before he got the satisfaction of words. They mattered to him after all the years he and Julian had plotted and schemed together, murdered their own together, and even offered comfort when the women weren’t enough. “Why?”

Julian glanced over Rusty’s shoulder to Candice, ignoring the blood running down his chin. “You hired bounty hunters to kill me.”

Rusty’s fury wasn’t going to be appeased by logic. “We were in this together! I never would have let them kill you!”

Julian snorted bitterly. “If you had come to me when they offered you the deal, if you had been honest, we would already have the entire family locked up.”

“Who the hell is that?!” Bobby was still running off at the mouth at the wrong time.

Julian was happy to out his former friend. “Rusty *Malin*.”

Pruetts advanced in anger.

Rusty lunged forward as he pulled the trigger.

Chester slammed into the man. He had come from behind, using the evening shadows.

Both men fell to the deck and rolled into the railing, swinging and grunting.

People hurried over to help Chester subdue the angry man as Daniel and Candice went to see if Julian had survived the assassination attempt. Beyond needing him to rescue their kids, neither of them cared if he hadn’t.

Everyone else hoped Julian was dead.

Julian slowly sat up, wincing. “Consider yourself off the council.”

Rusty spat towards him, restrained by Chester and two of the Defenders. “Traitor!”

“Tacky dresser!”

Candice rolled her eyes. “Lock them up.”

Both men were wrestled to the brig, where they would occupy the two cells.

Candice motioned her father along. He would pick up anything they talked about that she needed to know. Both of them expected there to be plenty of words. Julian and Rusty were furious right now. The truth often presented itself at moments like that.

Daniel stayed next to Candice, waiting for his punishment for throwing the captain overboard. He’d certainly killed her.

Candice ignored his guilt. “This is war. She was the enemy.”

Daniel stayed with Candice as she walked the deck. He could feel her working on plans and didn’t interrupt, content to be allowed to still be with her. After what he’d done, he deserved to be in the cell with the two men below. *I’m more like her father than I thought.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

**I Have an Arrangement**

Tara’s ship, sailing south

**1**

**“H**ow long until we get there?” Angelica had joined Bridget while Jason and the other men helped with dinner.

“Sometime in the next hour.” The captain pointed ahead of them, where fog was obscuring the view. “After the war, the north Atlantic flooded the Great Lakes and a 200 mile stretch of land on either side. That’s where we are now. The ocean provides half of the border with Canada.”

Angelica hoped it was unguarded. “I heard it’s also a nursery for whales and a feeding ground for sharks.”

“That’s why it doesn’t need to be guarded.”

Angelica observed the tranquil water, trying to spot any of that wildlife. Other than in books, she had never seen a whale. Unlike the men around her who were suffering bouts of seasickness that the medication was only helping with a little, Angelica was exhilarated by the salt spray in her face and the rocking under her boots. After this war was over, she was getting a boat. “We’re arriving after dark?”

“Yes. It seemed like the best way to go in case it is guarded now. We haven’t been this far north in years.”

Evening was falling over the water, providing beautiful views in the rippling waves, but limiting their sight. Despite enjoying the ride, Angelica was eager for land so she could get the men unloaded safely. She was certain her family was in danger and needed help. She wanted to travel south as soon as possible. “Are we still out of range of communication?”

“From our side, yes, but we should spot land soon.”

A loud splash to the right pulled attention. Sprays of water came up as Angelica glanced over, alerting her to something under the waves. She tried to estimate how large the animal was and couldn’t. Because of that, she decided it was a whale. Most of the ocean life had become bloodthirsty, but whales had remained gentle, though they had enlarged. The one currently swimming next to them was twice as long, and half as wide, as their boat. It was amazing.

Males screamed as they spotted the whale.

Angelica sighed. That was another reason she would be glad to be back among her family. She couldn’t take their fear much longer.

Another spray of water came alongside. Angelica squinted and found a smaller shape she identified as a calf. It was a nice moment of watching the mother and child that was broken by the sound of a loud horn in the distance.

Everyone looked up to see shadows coming through the fog.

“Friend or foe?”

The captain hauled on the wheel. “I’d say the latter based on their impact course!”

The small ship sailed by them, barely missing.

As it went by, the passengers on both decks were able to view each other.

“Pruetts!”

“Defenders!”

Shots immediately began to fly.

Ahead of them, more horns sounded, alerting those on land to their presence.

The fishing captains glanced toward Angelica, not sure what she wanted them to do.

“Don’t stop for anything!”

The women realized it would be a race to the finish and got excited. Some of them flipped into the change, scaring the men around them, but most hurried to get into position to draw more speed from their vessels. A few of the bolder men tried to help.

Caught by surprise by the fishmonger ships coming through, the small Network fleet was unable to stop the rebels from passing the red-taped barrier separating the countries. Defenders screamed as the fishing boats ran over them and made a beeline for the shore coming into view.

People on that shore observed the race, some of them aware of what was going on.

One of those was Claudette Fife, the UN representative leading the investigation into New American slavery. The Canadian Government had agreed the UN could enter through this waterway to view the land from the ocean, as long as they didn’t go to a shore. Claudette was set to board her ship an hour from now. She observed in amazement as ship after ship, carrying shouting, screaming, shooting men and women, flew toward them through the fog. She was horrified to witness Network troops firing into the unarmed sailors and their passengers. Bodies from both sides fell into the water and onto the decks.

“I want crews out dredging for those bodies!” Claudette pointed at her lackeys, determined to gather the evidence. They had heard the complex fell, but Claudette was certain Julian had survived–mainly because he was so evil. She had suspected what was going on behind the walls of New America, but this was proof. The men passing her location had obviously been slaves. It was in their scars and haunted eyes as much as it was in their exuberant reactions upon reaching freedom.

An awful squeal of high-pitched agony echoed across the foggy waves. One of the Network boats had struck a whale. The ship was splintering, quickly drawn beneath the cold water as other whales in the pod came toward it. The animals converged on the survivors, disproving the theory that whales were not carnivores.

Blood flowed through the water, drawing other predators. Fins flashed above the waves. More screams rose through the fog.

As the last boats passed her location, Claudette signaled her troops toward the dock in front of them. “Guard my boat.”

She marched toward the Canadian shore where the UN encampment had been set up two years ago when the complaints had first come in. Less than a mile away, thousands of Canadian citizens were gathered at the wall in support of UN actions over violations of the world treaty. As soon as they realized hundreds of slaves had reached freedom, those citizens would converge on this location and chaos would ensue. Claudette was hoping to get ahead of that, despite not expecting the arrivals.

As she hurried by her troops, she barked orders. “I want a perimeter up around the shoreline. I want another perimeter half a mile out to stop anyone from coming through. Put up our full barriers, all the way to the water. If anyone gets through, it’ll be your jobs!” Claudette hurried toward the dock, where the first ship, carrying Angelica Pruett, was stopping. “Get all of our medics up here. They’re not getting a week away from the sun.”

A camera flashed.

“Damn it!” Claudette detoured toward the reporter who was standing in front of a UN tent, snapping pictures of the refugee’s flight. She missed Angelica’s nod as the ship sailed by.

Canada didn’t look different. Angelica was instantly disappointed. For some reason, she had always envisioned the other countries of the world as shining examples of light and civility, but the land in front of her was as dark as the country she had just left. She could see faint lights in the distance and assumed there was civilization of some sort, but it was nonexistent in this area. There were only the edges of two tall, terrible walls broken by a deep channel of ocean water between them.

The cold, foggy air blew over her skin, providing relief from her disease. Rage Walkers was still ravaging her as bad now as it had been before she claimed her prize from the complex. The difference was, she had a relief source who was more than willing to dampen the fire whenever she requested it. She didn’t request it often. It was more than important to her that their physical moments came out of love and not as a pacifier for her disease.

Angelica and Jason stayed on the dock as the happy men from their boat unloaded.

“We made it!”

“She got us here!”

“We’re free!”

Once empty, Bridget sailed to the middle of the channel to allow the next boat to come in.

Angelica hoped the men would stay together, but she was no longer concerned with it. As they sailed in, she had noted the UN woman staring at her in recognition and admiration. The men should be safe here.

“What do you want me to do?” Jason was eager to help.

Angelica slid her hand into his. “Absolutely nothing.”

Jason was content with that answer. It had been a short time since he’d left the oppressive safety of the complex, but he was a different person now.

The bachelors were all yelling or crying as they left the boats, but they remembered to thank their escorts. More than a few shy smiles were exchanged, and even a couple of rare handshakes and hugs from those who had bonded during their short trip. The fishmongers had been remarkably controlled, considering they were surrounded by so many unowned men.

The rebel males gathered in celebratory groups along the shoreline to gaze in wonder at their new home.

Angelica had already scanned the distance and spotted numerous guards traveling their way on the orders of the UN boss. Angelica was keeping track of that woman, but if she didn’t hurry up, any conversation the woman wanted to have would have to wait until the war was finished. The need to get going was growing stronger. Things were happening in her country and that was where Angelica needed to be.

As more boats unloaded, Jason began to notice Angelica’s restlessness. It took him one more unloading to figure out what was going on. He waited for a moment when they were briefly alone on the dock. “We’re not staying, are we?”

Angelica shook her head.

Jason braced to be back on the water, but he didn’t protest. He hadn’t been jealous of the time Angelica spent around the other males during this trip, but at the same time, he was ready to be alone with her if it was possible. He enjoyed their time together, no matter what they were doing.

Angelica squeezed his hand. “A few more minutes.”

Jason grinned at the next group of bachelors getting off the boats, shaking some of their hands and enjoying their excitement at having freedom. He didn’t know what came after this, but he was certain the men would stay together. A lot of them had created bonds during captivity, but more importantly, those bonds had solidified during their escapes and flight. He turned to greet the next load. “Hey! There’s another boat coming.”

Angelica had hoped the Network wouldn’t chase them into Canadian territory.

“It’s flying a New American flag!”

Angelica let Jason keep track of that while she rotated around to meet the UN representative who was jogging through the rebel men with words of welcome while trying to reach the dock before Angelica left. Angelica was certain the woman knew she was about to. It was in her worried, darting glances to verify Angelica’s location.

Claudette and her people were dressed in blue and white uniforms with a small UN logo over each breast. Clever faces and heavy tool belts completed the image. They looked like players about to go into one of the games. Angelica tried not to laugh at the thought of Claudette in a cage with her. *Talk about a waste of my skills.*

The UN troops stared at the rebel males in surprise and hunger, but without the lust that accompanied changelings spotting unescorted men. Angelica was relieved. There was no way she could protect them from their new Canadian hosts and she couldn’t take them back to New America yet. Coming here had been a huge risk; she was glad it was paying off.

Jason observed the boat with a frown. “It’s traveling fast and looks overused.”

“I can say the same here.” Angelica waited as the UN representative reached the dock. The matronly woman hurried toward them with a genuine smile and a hand out.

“Welcome to Canada!”

Angelica grinned despite wanting to be as stoic as her family was reputed to be. “Thank you. Sending the whales out to greet us was a nice touch.”

The woman laughed. “I’m Claudette.”

“Angelica.”

“Pruett?” Claudette verified.

Angelica tilted her chin so the tattooed crest on her neck was visible.

Claudette’s smile widened. “Excellent. On behalf of Canada and the United Nations Council, I would like to offer you sanctuary and the opportunity to speak for your country.”

“I’m happy to accept sanctuary for the *free* men who just crossed your border, but I don’t speak for my country.” Angelica didn’t think the woman’s grin could get any wider but it did.

“You haven’t heard the broadcast.” Claudette jerked her radio off her belt and flipped the buttons. “This has been going over all stations for the last three hours.”

*“New America is no longer under control of the Network. There has been a coup. The rebels are in control of New Network City, Adelphia, the Atlanta hub, the Tennessee Crossing, and the southern train hub. All troops are required to surrender to the nearest location.”*

Angelica stared at the radio. “They did it.”

The radio crackled again with the rest of the transmission. *“The Network has been removed from leadership. The two highest ranking members are in the custody of Pruetts. Our family will ensure citizens receive justice for the atrocities committed against them. I repeat, Pruetts have control of New America.”*

Claudette shut off the radio. “Congratulations.”

Angelica let the women shake her hand again, stomach boiling. “I need to go.”

Beside her, Jason tensed. “That sail has a family crest.”

All of them turned to watch a small yacht glide up to the dock with a brilliant red rose wrapped around a sword on the sails. A matching symbol was on the side of the white boat, as well as on the cheek of the woman standing on the deck.

“Do you know her?”

Angelica felt like she should, but didn’t. “No. Get on the other side of me.”

The big woman stepped off her boat alone, demonstrating courage. There was a skeleton crew in view on her ship and all of them looked like her–a hard fight.

Angelica stepped into the center of the dock so the woman wouldn’t be able to get around her unless she allowed it.

“A whelp!” The lumberjack of a woman stopped in front of Angelica, scanning her from hair to boots. “I watched your game. Good fun.”

Angelica snorted against her will. “You should have been on that side of it.”

The woman chuckled. “I have, child.”

Angelica struggled to find a name and was surprised by what flashed in her mental file. “Grandma Tara?”

Tara chuckled. “Smart and a good fighter. Definitely family.”

Angelica didn’t relax. There was something about the woman that was already rubbing her the wrong way, and like Candice, Angelica never ignored her instincts. “What are you doing here?”

Tara gestured toward their country. “We have business.”

“Who sent you?”

“The council.”

Angelica frowned. “You work for the Network?”

“I have an arrangement.” Tara glanced over her shoulder at Jason. “I have your son on my ship. His name is Jamie.”

Angelica didn’t try to stop Jason as he ran toward the yacht. There was no way it was leaving without being searched now and it would be easier if they could sail away on it after she killed the crew. “If anyone hurts him, I’ll make it ugly for all of you.”

“They have orders to observe, nothing else.”

Angelica had to leave it at that, forced to concentrate. This was a Pruett and that made it the most dangerous situation she had ever been in. “What happens now?”

Tara walked back toward the boat, ignoring the danger of turning her back on someone like herself. “I take you in, I get my reward, and things go back to normal.”

Angelica followed, marking every weakness she could find. A new game had started and this time, it had no rules.

Claudette didn’t interfere as the trio left. She had all the proof she needed to convince her boss that a full-fledged invasion of New America was warranted if the Pruetts didn’t come out with control when this last situation was over. She would give Angelica and her family time to handle things and then she would make a report. A week after that, UN ships would flood through to rescue the remaining males.

Claudette moved down the dock and got to work settling the refugees into the tents for food and statements.

**2**

“I heard him and saw him on broadcasts. How did you get the kid?” Angelica wasn’t convinced Tara was telling the truth. She needed to know before she was trapped on the boat.

“I run the supply wagons and cargo ships. I made a delivery and pick up while I was at the complex. Missed the explosion by days.”

Angelica hoped the other children had been saved as well. Candice had told her it was covered.

“You and I will stay here and talk while they have their reunion.” Tara stepped onto her boat. “After that, you can join them and we’ll have a peaceful trip. I have orders to deliver you alive. I’d like to be able to do that.”

“We’ll see what happens.” Angelica wasn’t throwing out false bravado. She was pissed. How dare a Pruett betray another Pruett!

Tara’s chuckle floated across the deck. “Too bad you’ve already been brainwashed into serving the greater good. If you were a little more selfish, you’d make a perfect XO.”

Angelica rotated around and whistled at Claudette. “As a senior member of the Pruett family, in charge of New America, I give you permission to enter in support of our control.”

Claudette realized what Angelica was doing. She didn’t say anything, afraid to give it away.

Tara scowled deeply. “You can’t do that!”

Angelica stepped onto the boat. “I just did.”

Unable to deny the claim due to the transmissions being broadcast across multiple channels, Tara turned toward the front of the ship. “Go sit down and shut your mouth.”

Angelica was glad she’d made the last minute decision. She didn’t like the idea of bringing in a foreign entity, but in this case, she was going to make an exception–mostly because of the representative. Claudette had impressed Angelica in just a short few minutes. She hoped the UN would enter and provide the assistance she needed, providing she could figure out where to go to provide that assistance. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there!” Tara gestured at the woman manning the wheel. “Get us out of here!”

The boat sailed from the dock a few seconds later.

“The council wants you to support their leadership, openly. In exchange, they will free all of the bachelor children and consider lifting some of the regulations on slavery.”

“I already know the Network fell. They don’t have the authority to bargain anything now.”

“Authority, no, but they do have your children. Ask your mate what he wants to do. Bet he doesn’t hesitate.”

“Jason does not have the authority to bargain on behalf of the Pruetts.”

“Yes, he does. He has the mark.”

Angelica realized Tara was right. As soon as a male or female was marked with the crest, it gave them a voice. “Who helped you with this?”

“You are quick. I didn’t think anybody would realize there was a traitor in your group.”

Angelica snorted. “I’m probably the last of my family to figure it out.”

“I’m your family, too.”

“No, you’re not.” Angelica tried to pierce her grandmother with an interrogation glare. “Who is your rat?”

“Greg.”

Angelica gaped in shock.

Tara smirked. “That’s why he was perfect. He’s scared all the time, so no one noticed he was hiding anything. It became harder to track you after he split off with Sam’s group, but we had followed you far enough by then to know you were making a run for the border.”

“What did you offer him?”

Tara regarded her as if she were crazy. “I didn’t offer him anything. I promised not to kill him and all the other rebel males he loves so much.”

Angelica grimaced. It was going to be hard to punish Greg because she knew that. She would save the information for after someone else took his life. Long before, however, Tara’s skull would be separated from her body.

Tara knew what was going through Angelica’s mind. She smirked. “I never sleep alone and I’m always armed. If you believe you can, I’m ready to die.”

She was the epitome of a Pruett and Angelica was intimidated. She was also worried about Jason. She hadn’t heard a noise since he’d disappeared from her view. “Are we done here?”

Tara shrugged. “We’ll have time to talk again.”

“How long?”

“A full day.”

Angelica yawned. “Good. I can use a nap.” She was hoping to cover her intimidation.

“I’ve done everything you’ve done and then some. There’s nothing you can do or say to get one over on me. Just be a good little girl until we arrive.”

Angelica controlled herself by a hair and stood up. She took a few steps and then turned around to pierce Tara with her rage. “I may not be the one to do it, but one of us will get justice. You’re Pruett. You know.”

Tara motioned one of the girls on the ship to bring her drink. “Yes, I do.”

Angelica had to try. “Don’t you understand what this is going to do to the world, to our country?”

“Of course.” Tara shrugged “My mother was on the council.”

Angelica’s eyes widened. “There was a Pruett on the council?”

Tara laughed, hard. “Wow, the things you don’t know.”

Angelica was too upset about the revelation to care about being mocked. “What happens to us?”

“That depends upon your answer to the offer.”

“I don’t have the authority to negotiate.”

Tara frowned. “Your action with the UN representative says otherwise. Try again.”

“I *won’t* negotiate.”

Tara shrugged. “Then the Network will kill you and everything you hold dear. That’s not my problem.”

Angelica noticed boats in the distance. The fishmongers were subtly following through the fog. She switched her attention to the whales they were passing so she didn’t give the fishers away.

Angelica was dismayed when Tara’s yacht slid into the center of a large Network convoy coming into the channel. The fishmonger boats wouldn’t be able to compete.

“No! No!”

Jason’s shout echoed from below, transmitting a level of horror that chilled Angelica to her bones. She took off running.

Tara’s harsh amusement followed her down the stairs and into the bowels of the ship.

Angelica hurried into the stateroom to find Jason standing by the wall, horrified.

Angelica looked around. She spotted a small boy with glowing red orbs. “He’s a changeling!”

Jason groaned in abject horror. “They infected him!”

Jason’s son was wearing a bachelor outfit from the complex. He had a bachelor haircut, and a bachelor ID number tattooed on his wrist. He had Jason’s beautiful coloring and his mother’s courage as he stared at Angelica.

“You’re a criminal!”

Angelica’s mouth dropped open. The boy hadn’t been trained yet. That was the only answer she could come up with for him speaking in front of a woman.

Jamie continued to stare at her, making Angelica wonder what he was thinking. She refused to ask, sensing this child would have to be handled carefully. He was seven-years-old. By that age, she and Candice had been raiding neighborhood houses, fighting Defenders in humiliating battles they had refused to report due to their defeats, and observing the comings and goings of the business in the brothels. There was little doubt Jason’s child would be as intelligent and curious.

Angelica shut the door and went to comfort her mate. The boy was tough. His father needed care first.

**3**

“Good morning!” Tara beamed as Angelica marched through the door and joined her at the table in her cabin for breakfast as ordered.

Angelica grunted. It had been a long night and she wasn’t looking forward to this conversation.

Tara’s grin widened. She had enjoyed listening to the shouts and cries coming from the cabin where Angelica and her mate had been locked in. Finding out the boy was a changeling was a harsh blow that had guided Tara into a peaceful sleep.

“Why are you doing this? What did you get out of it?”

Tara speared a piece of fish and dipped it in a brown sauce. “There wasn’t a choice. All power women are eliminated as soon as they breed. I bargained a different life for myself–one where I make the rules.”

“What did you bargain with?”

“Julian’s uncle was supposed to inherit his seat. I made sure he didn’t and Julian rewarded me.”

“Sounds like a momma’s boy.”

Tara snorted. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking he’d kill over me. We’re not that close.”

After the night she’d had, Angelica didn’t have any patience left for pleasantries. “That’s a bullshit answer. You’re Pruett and we don’t put this much work into anything unless we’re getting something big out of it.”

Tara grimaced. “I hate men. It pleases me to hear their cries and see their blood. As long as men are in chains, I’m happy.”

Angelica had learned things from Thomas. “Men won’t be in chains much longer.”

Tara snorted, waving a beefy hand. “The council will never allow Julian to make all men into changelings, and his experiments have shortened his own life span. He’ll be dead long before any of that can happen.”

Angelica realized Tara didn’t know about the bomb scheduled to hit the power bunker in three weeks. She didn’t tell her. “You sound as if you don’t care.”

Tara shrugged. “Should I?”

“He’s your son, right? The one we never heard about.”

Tara’s weak rage flew through the room. “My only son! Bobby was an orphan!”

Angelica didn’t blink. “So why are you happy at the prospect of Julian dying?”

Tara glared. “I already told you. I hate men. All men.”

“How can you hate slaves? They’re defenseless.”

“Not the rebels.”

“They’re free now and gone.”

“Julian didn’t send me to round up rebels. He wants his *family* reunited.”

Angelica couldn’t take that. “You’re lying!”

Tara smirked, but pain lurked in her tone. “That’s where we all came from.”

“All?”

“I have eight children alive. All of them but one were created against my will, by council members.”

Angelica hated it that she was able to see the truth and even guess which one of them was the wanted child. “Ivy isn’t adopted.”

“No.” Tara grew wistful. “Ivy was a wonderful surprise. I stayed out too long and my birth control wore off. I got drunk on Indian punch with a southern tribe one night and woke up sore. I don’t know which one got me and made her. Julian wiped them out for it before you were born, but I hid the brat. Loved that one.”

Angelica was curious. “Are there other tribes left in the south? What’s it like there?”

Tara gave her a clever grin. “We can go together. He said I need to pick one of you as my understudy.”

“An understudy for what?”

“The Roundup. Someone has to make a list of the kids so The Ring can collect them.”

Angelica stared as she realized Tara sailed from place to place and gathered a list of kids to be snatched from their homes. “You sell out our people in every way.”

Tara frowned. “It sucks that you have a moral line, but Julian will fix that.”

“How?”

“Retraining. He’ll kill the baby, but you’ll be glad of it after he arranges your breeding with one of us.”

Angelica swallowed her rage and bile. “Us?”

“The family. We keep it tight. I can see the wisdom now.”

*And I can see the insanity.* Angelica didn’t get to say it as Jason’s son barged into the cabin and stormed over to Tara.

“I want it now!”

Tara glowered at the child, but she moved back from the claws coming out of his fingertips. “No more candy. You have to wait until we get there.”

Jamie snapped. He flew toward Tara with claws extended and screams coming from his mouth.

Angelica wanted to let the boy go. It was obvious from Tara’s huddling reaction that she wasn’t allowed to hurt the child, but she was also scared of him. Angelica reluctantly interrupted the interesting revelation.

She marched over and grabbed the child by the back of his neck. She lifted him off his feet, drawing choking noises and angry grunts that were accompanied by wild swings, swipes, and kicks. Angelica let him hang there, aware of Tara staring at her in surprise.

Tara wasn’t full of rage anymore. She was burning out because she had been gifted a mate of her choice from the bachelors. Julian had done it to her on purpose because she was getting too old and she would need someone to protect her from all the awful things she had done during her time as roundup leader. He was ready for her to be replaced and forgotten about in the family bunker. Tara was eager for it as well now that she had a male of her own to hurt.

Jamie’s little face was blue and tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, but he still stiffened in fresh rage when she began to lower him.

Angelica jerked the boy back into the air and held him there, hating herself, Tara, Julian, and everyone else in their country who had allowed the situation to become so bad that she was forced to do this.

Now at the door, Jason didn’t interfere. Angelica was doing what he hadn’t had the strength to do when the child became enraged.

Angelica remembered a moment like this with her and Candice, and forced herself to finish it. She gave the child an ugly shake. A weaker person’s neck might have broken. Jamie only flopped around like a ragdoll and growled harder.

“I’m the boss!” She lowered the child to his feet, ready to grab him again to drive in the point.

Jamie sniffed, claws sliding back into his fingers. He peered up at Angelica in worship. “I’ll be good now.”

Angelica turned away to hide tears of rage that had little to do with the disease. Someone had to pay for all the emotional suffering she had gone through and she suspected it would be the relative now observing with clever, glittering intelligence. Tara wasn’t really a Pruett. *That crest on her cheek has to go.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

**No Mercy**

Outside New Network City

**1**

**“S**he’s dead. Let me take you home and care for you.”

Baker ignored Vera’s hot words, continuing their trek through the rainy darkness of the alleys outside New Network City. As soon as the drugs wore off, Baker had tried to leave. That’s when the trouble had started. Vera didn’t want to be alone anymore. He had threatened her with Pruett vengeance, but that was fading fast as they continued to hear of the family being killed.

They had made the trip here in record time, due to his pleading for her to keep going every time she wanted to stop. He was surprised Vera was still helping him and grateful, but he worried about how it was going to end. The possessive hand on his shoulder was on the edge of changing. She had been that way the entire time they’d been traveling together.

“No one could have survived.”

Again, Baker refused to confirm her opinion. They had watched on Vera’s portable TV, witnessing the devastation at the dome. There was nothing left, but Baker knew Sam hadn’t been in there.

Vera whimpered as Baker took the bike to a faster speed. She didn’t want to help him locate his owner. She wanted to keep him.

Other people were also traveling through the dark alleys, but no one paid any attention to them. It was a male with his owner as far as they were concerned, and there were more immediate things to worry over. No one had heard from the Network in days and the complex was gone. Their country appeared to be without rulers. Surviving members of gangs and families were converging in places to discuss what came next, or fighting, but all of them were waiting to hear a real leader address the nation. It was obvious that Candice and her family had brought the Network down, like they’d promised, but no one knew if they had survived the battle. If they had, they were the new council by right of conquest.

“Please. I’ll never hurt you. You’ll be happy with me!”

Baker knew he couldn’t ignore her again or it would cause her to flip. He shook his head.

Vera’s clawed hand tightened on his shoulder. “I can make you.”

Baker sighed miserably. “Thank you for your hospitality, Vera. If we ever meet in the future, my owner will give you a token.”

Vera opened her mouth to scream.

Baker swerved the bike violently, almost tipping it over. He dislodged Vera with a harsh shove.

Stunned, she flew from the bike.

Baker sped off as she fell. Her screams brought guilt, but not enough to make him turn around.

Now free of the talon on his shoulder, Baker increased to full speed. He could reach that limit without the double weight. He would be at the subway station in hours.

Now a male alone on a bike, Baker drew attention. He had hoped to keep Vera with him as long as possible to avoid this situation, but her obsession had grown too quickly. He was forced to weave in between fleeing changelings who might pursue him because he was by himself.

Gunshots echoed behind him.

Baker automatically assumed Vera was shooting. He swerved out of her view and into a cluster of trees. He wasn’t certain the bike would make it through the muddy gaps, but he was determined to try. Being out alone was dangerous for a male, even though the Network was gone. Little had changed upon the destruction of the complex. Someone had to step up and take over leadership soon or everything Candice was trying to do would be lost.

Baker heard bikes coming up behind him and panicked. He drove into the darkest shadows, hoping he didn’t run into anything with the bike that he couldn’t spot.

The engines roared closer in a familiar tone that sent relief into Baker’s heart. He slowed, allowing the Mopars to catch up.

Rosa and the Runners fell in around Baker with motions for him to keep going. They knew where he was headed.

Baker immediately felt protected. He nodded to Greg, who was riding behind his big owner, then steered his bike toward the open road. With an escort like this, he could go anywhere he wanted to without fear.

Baker was curious as to how they had found him. He was also hoping they had heard something from Sam. She wasn’t supposed to make it to the games. The Network had wanted her to die to distract the rest of her family from the rebellion.

Baker was now surrounded by bighearted women who flashed glowers at people they passed. It drew immediate attention and even cheers as some of the people recognized Sam’s crew. Word began to spread through the countryside that a Pruett had been sighted.

**2**

“We’ll be there in five minutes.”

Sam heard Lydia, but she didn’t look away from the screen where the reporter was giving details of everything that had happened in the city. The reporter was standing in front of what remained of the complex. The devastation was incredible. There was so much rubble that it was impossible to pinpoint bodies. Fires were still burning and smoke was pouring out of various places. Screams of pain and grief echoed in the background, completing the battle scene. *Pruetts were definitely there.*

“The devastation is indescribable. The Network council appears to be dead in the blast, along with most of the rebels who did this. Various factions of the city are fighting over control while buildings burn and the injured die.”

Sam studied the crowd of fighting, screaming, attacking, and stealing women. “It’s not safe for the train males to go out there.”

Lydia agreed. “I can send them to the safe house with the Nomads, but that leaves you and I for whatever is waiting when the doors open.”

“Do that.”

Lydia left to tell their group the new plan.

Sam continued to study the screen. She had a feeling that Baker was nearby and she was hoping to catch sight of him. At the same time, she was also hoping she didn’t. If he was in the city, he was in terrible danger.

“Meanwhile, trains are still rolling into the city, carrying players who were supposed to participate in this week’s games. Sam Pruett is among those, causing a mob of people to gather at the station. It is unclear whether these citizens are going to welcome the new council member or attack her.”

Sam wasn’t sure which one that would be either, but she was leaning toward the attack. Taking a Pruett hostage would serve a dual purpose. If the Network had survived, a hostage could be exchanged for UDs and favors. If Candice had survived, Sam could be used against her. It was a win-win for a bounty hunter or a tracker. Sam was prepared to fight upon her arrival.

“Bounty hunters are flooding the city even though no one is sure who will pay them if any of the rebels are captured. Everyone here is loyal to the Network.”

Sam switched the screen off, unable to take any more of the reporter sucking up. It was obvious the woman was terrified that the council had survived and would come for payback. Sam was positive when her broadcast was over the reporter would be one of many who disappeared from sight until the chaos settled. Most of the elites would do the same, but a chunk of their population was gone.

New Network City had been fully packed for her game and the apartments surrounding the dome had been destroyed. It was impossible to determine what they had been before the explosion. The same was true of the local business owners and the Divas, who had been looting the complex when it blew up. Those left in the city were without leadership. In this situation, that would make things harder. Once a group had a leader, the leader could be negotiated with. When the mob was in charge, that wasn’t possible.

Lydia came to the door. “The engineers are saying there’s a crowd on the tracks. She recommended we take the employee hatch on the opposite side and let them keep rolling.”

Sam grinned. “Stop, drop ‘em, and roll?”

Lydia snorted, lips curving. “That is what we’re known for.”

Both women advanced toward the hatch to get ready for their departure.

The sounds were deafening as Sam opened the hatch. Shouts and screams, gunfire, thuds of bodies falling, and a horrible storm moving in told anyone within a 5-mile radius that chaos had struck the city. Lydia could hear the same noises echoing from other areas, but there wasn’t time to determine who might be the cause of those. All around the station, hundreds of bodies fought for space and survival. Stabbing and shooting, they murdered each other without knowing why.

Rain drenched the crowd as the sky above them opened up, wind blowing relief across sweaty skin, but it didn’t spread. Blood would flow here until the women were satisfied.

**3**

“No mercy!” Baker’s scream slammed into the Runners around him and set them on fire. It triggered the change in all of the females, including Rosa.

The Runners struggled to control their bikes as their bodies flipped into the change, bringing groans and clawed grips.

Baker shot at the crowd around the station, able to hear the train arriving. Snakes and Divas were fighting with each other, but not enough for him to be able to ignore them. When Sam emerged, everyone was going to converge on her. They needed to thin the crowd.

The Runners around him aimed at the biggest threats first. Anyone with a gun in hand was targeted and eliminated as they rolled into the station.

“Pruetts!”

“Get them!”

The cloudy sky above them rattled as the mobs clashed in front of the subway station. Thunder and lightning were ignored by those in life or death struggles. Rain came in heavy sheets that slammed into the muddy ground and splattered their boots, cloaks, and pants with mud, but the fighters refused to stop.

Baker ducked weapons being thrown, while trying to find a path for the bike. He swerved at the entrance ramp, knocking women off the steel platform.

The Runners followed him up the ramp, also shooting at women who gave chase and tried to surround them.

Screams and shouts overwhelmed the squeal of the brakes as the subway cars slowed.

Rosa spotted familiar cloaks as people rolled from the opposite side of the train. “Go left!”

Baker had also seen the people exiting the rear. He swerved directly into the middle of the thickest part of the crowd, shooting and shouting to be the distraction so Sam could escape.

The Runners followed him eagerly into the fray.

Sam turned, recognizing the guns and screams. Surrounded by angry locals and snake women, Baker was struggling to control the bike against the bodies piling on top of him.

Sam flipped into the change as she ran. She hit the squirming mass with all of her strength, knocking the Mopar into the air.

Everyone flew off.

Baker smacked against the ground. Dazed, he lay there. “Hi, honey!”

Sam was already on her feet. She took a position over top of Baker’s body as the Runners surrounded them on their bikes, shooting.

Sam and Lydia joined in the gunfire as the train males snuck away unnoticed.

The Runners weren’t able to stay on the bikes as the crowd pressed in on them. Forced to abandon their transportation, they surrounded Sam and Baker in a tight shoulder-to-shoulder circle, emptying mags and throwing spikes. In the distance, the sound of another mob echoed.

The train behind them began to roll out, also unnoticed by the fighters. They had who they’d come for.

“Get them all! No mercy!”

The sound of males screaming penetrated the rage of the female mob. It was impossible for them to ignore the sound of so many men shouting. Women in the crowd rotated toward the new noise, giving the person they were fighting with the advantage or an opportunity to crawl away. Women grunted and bodies fell.

Big males without owners came around the corner of a shrapnel-dotted alley and charged toward the changeling women.

Sam jerked her knife out of a snake’s throat and spun around as a Diva tried to take Baker from underneath her. Blood splattered as she swiped again, spilling the woman’s guts onto the ground.

Sam jerked Baker up and pushed him toward the wall of the station.

The Runners followed, providing a line of protection.

The crowd of angry, semi-armed men met the rear of the mob of changelings without fear.

“Those are complex bachelors!”

Sam didn’t have time to respond to Baker’s surprise. Women in the crowd were determined to kill them. Spikes were hitting and guns were firing. It was all she could do to keep Baker from being hit. It was also amazing to see the quick glimpses of men fighting, but it was also terrible for Sam and her Runners, who knew a lot of the plot the Network had in place. It was obvious the men were not like everyone had been led to believe. Their hair was longer, their muscles were bigger, and the rage shooting from their eyes was intimately familiar to every female here.

“They’re infected!”

Sam shook her head, finally getting a break from the fighting as the men reached the center of the mob of women, drawing them away from the station wall. “It’s normal anger. And better health.”

Baker hoped that was true. The Pruetts and the rebellion had forced the Network to take better care of their slaves, but he didn’t think that accounted for the rage allowing the men to kill.

Sam ducked as a knife pinged off the wall behind her and sliced into the woman standing at her side.

“Rosa!” Greg dropped to the ground beside his owner, trying to stifle the flow of blood coming from her arm.

“We need to get out of here!” Lydia shouted to be heard. “If he’s right and they are infected, we’re in danger, too.”

Sam wasn’t going to take that chance. She scanned the area, searching for an escape. Pruetts were good at finding them and she did so now, spotting a small hole in the rear of an alley.

Baker stayed close as she led the group to the tunnel, all of them shoving snakes, hunters, or locals out of their way to reach it. The crowd of males was pushing the women toward them now. The females were no longer in lust or rage. They were terrified. There had never been a time in their lives when men were violent.

The tunnel was stinky, but empty of people as their group ran in and vanished from the station.

The few changelings who noticed and followed weren’t doing so to capture them. They were running for survival.

The crowd of men didn’t notice the few women who escaped. Finally free of their chains, the men took their justice in blood.

**4**

Sam saw shadows at the end of the tunnel, but she didn’t slow. She had her bloody knife in one hand and remaining spike in the other. Behind her, she could hear Baker fumbling for whatever weapons he had. Between them, they would clear the path.

The shadow shifted aside as Sam barreled out.

“It’s Dana!”

Sam stopped at the last second, spinning around to slam the blade into the wall of the tunnel instead of the reporter’s neck.

With no time to explain, Dana was forced to recover on the run. She hurried toward the side of the tunnel and then went back in as if she was going to the train station. As soon as they were in the darkness, she curved around to a set of stairs that led down.

Everyone was relieved as they quickly got out of sight. The entrance was hidden enough that a mob probably wouldn’t notice it.

The rickety stairs took them down twenty feet before leveling off into a single tunnel that was pitch black and smelled of salt.

“I can’t use a light or it will give us away. Sorry.” Dana advanced through the darkness, proud of herself for timing their exit through the tunnel. She had heard the mob and the train, and then waited exactly where Candice had told her to, though everything was happening earlier than she’d been told to expect. Dana knew that was why Candice had given her this responsibility. It didn’t throw her off to be hurried or delayed. That was also the reason she had been a reporter.

“We don’t have far to go.” Dana was sure they had a lot of questions.

Despite an instinctive mistrust of the media, Sam liked Dana. She let the reporter keep the lead.

“Here we are.”

A sound of something shifting echoed and then light flooded their eyes.

“Hurry!” Dana waved them through. “From a distance, the light can be seen.”

The group was inside and the door fastened a few seconds later.

Dana flipped the light switch. “This is an old bomb shelter under an ancient radio station. The resistance made that entrance to reach the subway station. We’ve never used it until now.”

Sam’s group glanced around to find themselves in a wide basement with crumbling concrete walls and a dank floor. Water dripped somewhere in the distance and rats scurried along the floor. It was obvious that this area didn’t get much traffic.

They relaxed. This was the type of den that Pruetts preferred–something avoided by the public. Dana’s safe house had crumbling furniture and cobwebs over everything. Long metal stairs wound upward in the far corner toward a door, but there were no windows. It was cold and damp, but safe.

“Candice said you should stay here until she makes contact.” Dana handed Sam a letter in a sealed envelope. “She knew it wasn’t going to be safe to travel.”

“What was the alternative?”

Dana chuckled, nodding. “She said you might be bored.”

Sam let out a disappointed sigh. “I didn’t get to have my game. I wasn’t going through all the stress for the rebellion or a bachelor. I wanted the fights.”

The Runners around her laughed.

Baker frowned.

“Candice said if you can reach the bunker where the leaders are gathered for the power meeting, it would be good for you to take control of it until she reestablishes a government for the country.”

Sam nodded. “We’ll sleep and then head west.”

Dana wasn’t surprised. “I’ll be back in a couple hours. I need to go check on things topside.”

Dana quickly slipped out the exit before anyone could protest. Instead of causing concern, it brought relief to the Pruetts who were glad to have the reporter watching out for them and gathering information on things that were happening while they were resting down here.

The Runners spread out to explore their new den, leaving Sam and Baker alone.

Baker’s face flooded with guilt.

Sam already knew. She shrugged. “You don’t belong to me.”

“It doesn’t feel good.”

“Then don’t do it again.”

Baker stared at her. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

Sam’s eyes began to flicker. “What would you like me to say, Baker? You’re a whore. I knew that when I picked you up off the family rack.”

Baker winced. “I don’t want to be.”

Sam shrugged. “It’s a little late now. I’ve never demanded your fidelity because I don’t believe you can give it.”

Baker finally had the reason why Sam had refused his offer of a private agreement. Hurt, he stared at her, not sure where they went from here.

Sam pointed toward the corner, where Dana or someone else had placed a stack of blankets and boxes. “We need beds. Check it out.”

It was her way of letting him out of the conversation that neither one of them wanted to have. She was devastated by his infidelity, but at the same time, completely forgiving of it because she assumed it had been done so he could get to her.

Baker couldn’t let it go. “Does this change anything?”

Tired, bloody, and aroused, Sam glared at him, snapping a little. “Yes, it does! It means I can’t trust you!” Sam shoved him toward the boxes. “It also means I respect you, something I’ve never been able to do with a man. I’m not getting rid of you. I’m going to *fix* you.”

Baker almost cried. Instead, he forced himself to dig through the dusty boxes for blankets.

Sam listened for trouble and observed as he worked, hurt and full of need. She frowned as he went to the corner and spread out two blankets. “What are you doing?”

Baker paused in making the beds. “I’m sorry.”

Sam sighed. “So am I. That doesn’t explain why you’re making two pallets.”

Baker regarded her with shame. “I thought you’d want space.”

Sam’s eyes blazed. “Don’t hold yourself back from me now.”

Baker was relieved. He quickly put the blankets together.

Sam settled into the bed with a grunt. It felt good to stretch out and shut her eyes without being attacked. “Get under here.” She could hear him shivering.

Baker slid in next to Sam, tensing when she immediately wrapped him in her warm arms. He didn’t know if she would want a service, but he was prepared to love her for all he was worth if she did.

Sam sniffed, able to smell the other woman. She forced her eyes shut and went to sleep.

Baker stayed awake a lot longer, wishing he’d stayed with the Runners like she’d told him to do.

Chapter Thirty

**Family Business**

Dana’s Safe House

**1**

**“A**re they up yet?”

“Sort of.”

Voices and chuckles echoed to where Sam and Baker had just finished an argument that consisted of grunts and growls.

Dana entered the dank room and smiled. “Good morning!”

Sam grimaced at the cheer. “I need coffee and something to chew on.”

Baker hurried off to handle her needs.

Dana frowned. “Didn’t he tell you he was drugged?”

Now Sam scowled. “How do you know?”

“It’s how the Runners tracked you. Four Defenders were killed while attacking a male. He’s loyal to you. Anyone can tell that.”

Sam felt her heart settle into a normal rhythm. “I’ll handle it.”

“Good.” Dana held out a bag. “I found you a radio and some ammunition. Sorry there isn’t more.”

Sam stuffed the bag into her cloak. “Are you going to the next safe house after this?”

“Yes. I’ve done too many interviews to stay in the public view until the country isn’t so chaotic.”

“We’re glad to have you on our side.”

Dana turned toward the other end of the room, where the rebels were gathered to eat. “I’m not, really. I just believe we all have the right to be free. You Pruetts might be as bad as the council.”

Sam didn’t argue. She couldn’t. The woman was almost certainly right. Pruetts were ruthless and no amount of civilization could tame them completely.

Sam joined her Runners, flashing approving nods that were expected. They’d done well as far as she was concerned. Adapting to changing situations was a survival instinct that not everyone had.

Baker hurried over to push a mug of bitter coffee into her hand.

While everyone was distracted, Greg leaned closer to Rosa. “I need to talk to you. It’s important.”

Rosa sighed miserably. She had been happy with Greg during their weeks together, so it had been easy to avoid this moment. Now that it was here, her heart was breaking but there wasn’t any sympathy. “Why did you betray us?”

Silence fell as every head rotated toward the couple.

Greg winced, paling. “I was a coward when they approached me. I was afraid to refuse.”

“And after your balls dropped?” Baker was furious at the new betrayal from someone he trusted.

“I thought you would kill me.”

Rosa scanned the people in the room. It was obvious what they were all expecting. If she chose to pardon him, to give him a second chance, they would accept it because they loved her and wanted her to be content.

Rosa studied her heart and discovered that as much as she cared for Greg and wanted a future, his betrayal was unforgivable. They didn’t have one.

“What’s going on?” Dana didn’t understand the tension, though the accusation was clear. One of the men was suspected of betraying the Pruetts and that was a death sentence.

“Greg is a traitor.”

“I was forced to be a spy.”

“How did you report our location?”

Greg rubbed his arm. “I didn’t have to. My tracker was never removed.”

Everyone realized they were being tracked right now. If the Network survived, they knew where all the rebels were.

Rosa looked at Sam.

Sam was holding Baker’s arm to keep him from attacking Greg. “It’s your call. We have retraining programs.”

Rosa wanted to stand by her man, but the betrayal was too large. She wrapped her big hands around Greg’s neck.

Dana ran forward to help the bachelor who wasn’t struggling.

A Runner grabbed her and shoved her back. “This is family business!”

Dana swallowed a shout, unable to match the strength or skills of the big women. “This is wrong.”

“He could have come forward at any point.” Baker watched Rosa cry as she strangled her mate. “If you were one of us, always being hunted and finding out your friends are traitors, you’d understand and agree. Now shut up. This is hard enough on her without your drama.”

Rosa kept squeezing until Greg’s face turned red and then blue. When he sagged in her grip, she snapped his neck with a brutal jerk and stood up as his body fell.

Sam was there to hold Rosa as she sobbed.

Baker and the Runners disposed of the body, not feeling as much sympathy. Greg’s choice had earned him this awful ending. The fact that they were once again unsafe made them rougher than needed as they disposed of him. Baker’s concession was to make sure Rosa wouldn’t spot the body when they left. He held no malice toward her even though he suspected she’d known something wasn’t right for a while now. It was a shame all of them would bury and hope never to repeat. It was also a harsh lesson learned. From now on, all males would be inspected to verify their tracker had been removed, and that would happen no matter who inherited leadership of their broken country.

The group was ready to leave the den a few minutes later, but Sam refused to go through another fight so soon while they were low on ammunition and numbers. She chose to go through the ancient radio station after Dana dismantled the traps on the stairs. The rats down here gave her hope that the surrounding neighborhood might also be deserted.

After four centuries, almost nothing remained of the equipment in the radio station. They were lucky the walls and stairs were intact, though both groaned at having to support weight. Dust and debris shifted and crumbled as they ascended to find it was full dark. They were out of sight of the city, but the screams and gunshots were a constant symphony.

“The males have taken the city.” Dana led them down an alley and into the woods. “They’re cleaning out the females. It’s ugly. No one is safe there now.”

“I don’t understand how they became infected.” Baker was trying not to think about Greg.

That’s all Rosa was stewing on as she followed Sam.

“I don’t either, but that mob had our disease. We all saw their eyes and extra strength.” Heather was creeped out at the idea of changeling men. Part of her was hoping they’d imagined it.

Sam wasn’t sure what she’d seen, but the noises coming from the city tilted the odds in the direction of rage. The men were sacking the city, probably even doing what males of the past had–pillaging and celebrating their freedom in any way they saw fit. It was horrifying.

Sam hoped the innocent residents had left the city. She didn’t care if the men were clearing out snakes, Divas, or Defenders. Those populations needed to be eliminated anyway, so the men were actually doing them a favor, but Sam was also dreading the effect. At some point, those males would have to be brought under control. It would be up to Candice as to how that happened. Sam planned to vote towards leniency even though she disapproved of their actions. They’d been abused all their lives. That earned them sympathy with her.

The woods around the group cracked and snapped with wildlife and other citizens fleeing the city. No one bothered the recognizable group. There was a Pruett in the mix. The shadows around them had fled the city to avoid fights like that.

“Any word from the Network?” Sam refused to ask about her family. She didn’t want to show doubt over their survival to jinx things, but she was worried. It was impossible not to be after viewing the destruction at the dome. No one who had been inside could have survived.

Heather grunted. “No, and we’re monitoring all channels, but with the complex gone, most of the antennas were destroyed. I’m hoping to get a real update as soon as we enter a new area.”

“I need to get to Lake Wilma.”

Dana nodded. “That’s where we’re all going. Candice arranged a ride.”

Satisfied they were on the path they needed to be, Sam followed the reporter to the edge of the woods. Dana didn’t look like a reporter anymore. Other than her hair color, she fit in with miners.

Dana saw her glance and gave her a smile. “I come from a long line of dirt diggers. When I decided to be something else, no one was happy.”

“I can imagine.”

The miners were beefy, tattooed women with jeans, vests, boots, and short, spiked hair that was all dark. There were no blondes, making Sam wonder how Dana had gotten her platinum locks. She wasn’t going to ask the woman to drop her pants to prove it, but Sam was almost positive she was a natural blonde. The only way she could be yellow from a brown family was if her mother had gotten lucky enough to score a bachelor. “Is that why you became a reporter in the complex?” Sam guessed with infamous Pruett accuracy. “Because your dad was a bachelor?”

Dana didn’t answer right away, but her hands clenched into tight fists and her pace increased to a fast march. “My father was a bachelor who turned on his owner and escaped. He stuck around long enough to rape my mother on his way out of town. She had just been promoted into the Defenders. She didn’t want to be a dirt digger either.”

Except for before the war, Sam had never heard of a male taking advantage of a female. The books had spoken of that happening, but it had never been recorded during the history of female rule.

“My aunt and cousin hunted him. They brought him here and let the rest of the town use him until there wasn’t anything left.” Dana pointed back toward the safe house. “He’s buried under the floor back there. Every now and then, I spit on him as I walk by.”

Sam didn’t ask anything else about the reporter’s ancestry, but she made a note of it. That was another concern that would have to be taken into consideration.

Dana also let it go. “We need to cross the town ahead. After, we’ll be at the mines.”

“We’re traveling underground?”

Sam ignored Hope’s nervousness. She liked the idea of being out of sight. “Will we have escorts?”

Dana pointed toward the edge of the tree line, where shadows were breaking away. “Yes.”

Four burly mining women fell in step with them as they reached the trees, and then kept going.

The miner in charge took Sam’s right. “I’m Emily. I’ll be your guide through purgatory.”

Sam chuckled. “For how long?”

“We’ll drop you at the Pennsylvania, Ohio border.”

“Can you drop me at Lake Wilma instead?”

“Your cousin said you might want to skip that area because that’s where everyone is going first.”

“Everyone?”

“Survivors, allies, friends and family. Then everyone is meeting at the Pruett homestead in Ohio.”

Sam approved. “Lake Wilma first.”

“We go right by there. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Sam waited on the rest of her questions as they approached the town. Lit up with streetlamps and alive with people coming and going to various businesses and buildings, the town obviously wasn’t in the middle of a riot. That was a relief, but the sight of the uniforms was not. “This is a Defender training town!”

Dana walked faster, not answering.

The group slipped around the edges of buildings, trying to stay in the shadows as they passed bunks housing as many as three hundred Defenders. Sam had been here twice to drop off fugitives. Despite being well armed and skilled, she had been intimidated by the number of combatants. Tonight, she was terrified. Pruetts weren’t supposed to show emotion, but Sam had already figured out the bravado she survived with in the Borderlands wouldn’t succeed now. Being around weaker people and having compassion for them was making her vulnerable.

“Do you hear that?”

Sam would have scolded Baker for the noise, but the sound of a mob coming was distinctive after the subway brawl. She took off running, leading the way with Emily keeping pace to point out the tunnel they would hopefully disappear into without being spotted.

Male voices rang through the night.

Sam frowned, realizing the changeling men from New Network City had found the tunnel they’d come through. It worried her that they were still raging. In her experience, the disease flared in quick, dangerous bouts and then stayed dormant while providing enough pain to remind her it was still there. These men had been raging for hours. It wasn’t normal even by Network standards.

The Defenders of the town were also taking notice of the problem. The women hadn’t been alert as Sam and her group left the forest, but that was quickly changing. Chins were tilting up, hands going to weapons. It was obvious they hadn’t been warned.

“Over here.” Emily led them around a bunkhouse and into the woods behind it. She knelt at a small rise in the ground and began feeling around with her hands.

As soon as the entrance was open, everyone dropped into the dark hole without worrying about what might be waiting. The noises behind them–loud howls and screams of pain and rage as two changeling armies met in battle–was enough to convince them that whatever was ahead couldn’t be as bad as what they were leaving behind.

Sam stepped aside after she entered, waiting for the rest of her group to be in. Baker was already by her hip. The tunnel was wide and tall, filled with moldy, cracked beams that made all of them doubt the stability as they entered the darkness.

The last person to come down was moving slower than the others. Sam put a hand on Rosa’s shoulder in comfort, but she didn’t say anything. There were no words.

Sam and Rosa secured the entrance to the mining tunnel and joined their group.

“We were getting worried.” Five more miners were standing in the windy tunnel with lanterns and relieved expressions.

Sam delivered Pruett nonchalance by walking by them without responding.

The miners hurried to get ahead of her with the light that Sam didn’t need. She had always assumed the miners were the same, so the lanterns were a bit of a surprise. She thought maybe they were doing it out of a kindness for anyone else in her group who wasn’t a changeling. That would be the only male with them.

Sam wondered again what had happened to trigger the men in the city. She also wondered if she needed to worry about the man in their group. She didn’t think she was capable of doing what Rosa had done. She would leave him behind before she would kill him. Baker already meant more to her than anyone she’d ever known, except her sister.

“We have transportation ready. There are people waiting. This cart was about to leave. We’ve been escorting citizens in and out of the city. This last group wanted to wait until it got dark topside.” The miner pointed toward carts coming into view as they rounded a bend in the tunnel.

Sam realized there were railroad tracks under her feet and understood what the woman meant. The mining carts were all connected together in a long train. The tracks under them were dark, rusty mysteries that no one explored closely as they approached the ride.

“We have a place secured up front for you.”

Sam ignored the directions as she recognized people in the cart. She went toward the two Nomads who were with one of her Runners. She settled into the empty spot amid welcomes and the rest of her group did the same in various places around her.

The miner chortled. “Welcome to the New American Underground Railroad, Pruetts.”

Sam finally gave them what they were hoping for. She grinned.

Chapter Thirty-One

**That’s What We Do**

Julian’s Ship

**1**

**T**hree sharp trills woke Candice from her light doze at the desk. She opened her eyes to find Julian staring at her.

“There’s a message coming in.” He indicated the console to her right. “When you’re ready, push the green button.”

Candice sighed. Julian had been tied to the bed for a while now. He had to be hurting from the position and the removal of his tattoo, but he was acting as if he was on a vacation. He was even smirking. “You expect to be freed upon arrival.”

Julian yawned, not wincing at the pain, but he didn’t look away. “It’s a fascinating situation. You know it’s a trap and I know that you know. So why are we both following through?”

Candice saw his nose wasn’t broken and felt disappointment. She’d been hoping Rusty snapped it. “Because we believe we have secrets from the other person.”

“We are Pruetts. That’s what we do.”

“You may have the blood, but you aren’t really one of us.”

Julian didn’t care about her insults. “It won’t matter when the public finds out. As soon as they know a Pruett betrayed them, no one else in our family will have the opportunity to reshape this country. Even if you succeed, you lose.”

Candice shrugged. “You don’t have enough men to wipe out all the women. Even if you win, you lose.”

They stared, trying to figure out what the other was hiding.

The computer trilled again.

Candice hit the button.

“Good morning, Boss! I have updates for you.”

The screen stayed dark, indicating either a computer on the other end relaying a message or a lackey who wasn’t allowed to view into Julian’s private residence.

“Give me all the updates now,” Julian ordered from across the room.

“Yes, sir. There are four updates for you today, sir!”

Candice decided it was a computer generated voice.

“Update one: Males are rampaging across all of the cities on the list. The women were caught off guard, but many of them are forming a resistance now. Everything is on schedule. Update two: The Network Crawler arrived in the city and departed with no signs of Sam Pruett. There was too much fighting for the Defenders to know if she was killed upon arrival or escaped. Update three: Vaccines were given this morning. Testing will begin in one hour. Update four: The cargo from the north slipped out of our hands, but the wagon master secured the most important package and is on the way. That is all the updates for you this morning, sir. Have a New Network day!”

Julian’s happiness wafted through the room. “Did you understand those?”

Candice frowned. “Your plan to distract the women and spread the disease in the cities is working. You expect the vaccines to produce quicker results than usual because you started testing right away. The rebels slipped through the border, but you captured Angelica. And you don’t know where Sam is.” Candice gave him a bored glance and yawned.

Julian laughed. “On the council together, we will be unstoppable.”

“What happens when we arrive at the training center?”

“Not when, before.”

Outside, an ugly grinding noise alerted Candice to a problem.

“I never let anyone reach my base.”

Candice verified his bonds were intact and then hurried topside. She had expected Julian to set a trap, but not until they reached their destination. According to the map, they were still hours away.

Julian’s amusement followed her up the stairs. “The crew on this ship is mine, Candy, not yours.”

“Hold your fire!”

Candice climbed faster. The panic in Daniel’s scream was chilling.

“It’s our kids!”

Candice reached the top of the stairs and spun around the handrail to reach that side of the deck. As she gripped the handle, a boat came alongside, allowing her to see a group of children being held at knifepoint by *male* Defenders.

One of the angry men gestured at Candice. “Let’s make a trade.”

Candice wanted to refuse. If it had been anyone else, she probably would have. Because of Daniel, she had no choice but to comply. “Bring them up.”

Daniel breathed a sigh of desperate relief. After what Julian had told him, he knew the two infants were his. He had been preparing himself to jump over if Candice had refused to make the trade.

So had several other people on their boat.

The male Defenders smirked, knowing they had the upper hand. Other members of that crew began to attach the two nearly identical ships. The only difference was Julian’s flagship was larger.

Candice hadn’t expected this.

There was a moment where time appeared to slow while the free males secured the ships together. Bending and distracted, they were vulnerable. It was a tempting moment for Candice’s crew, who were positive they could take control. The problem was the kids were likely to be caught in the crossfire.

“As soon as he gets you onboard, he’ll threaten to blow us up.”

Candice nodded at Mary’s warning. “Do what he wants until I tell you otherwise.”

Mary left her alone. She didn’t see a way out of this one, but she wasn’t the leader of their family for a reason. Candice was sharper and able to deal with situations like this, no matter who the enemy was. Facing their own made it harder, but not impossible.

“Bring Julian up here; cut him loose.”

No one liked Candice’s order, but they didn’t protest. It was obvious that she had a plan that they weren’t privy to.

“Unless there’s no other choice, do what he wants.”

Everyone nodded or grunted at her words.

Julian was chuckling as he was brought up the stairs by Chester. “Round two to me.”

Candice didn’t speak. She was studying the children. All of them were scared. Their terror fed her determination to thwart Julian. In his future, these children would hate each other based on gender. Even if every Pruett died in the attempt, that wouldn’t be allowed to continue. She was now willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to ensure a better future for both sides. “We surrender.”

Freed of his bonds, Julian clapped. “Wise decision. You will join me. Everyone else will stay here and try to figure out a way to save you.” Julian motioned at his men. “Give them the kids.”

The transfer was made without comment or incident, but it was tense. None of the Pruetts were happy, except Julian. His delight rolled over their nerves and frayed the edges.

Daniel’s children had metal bracelets around their thin wrists with ID numbers on them, but no names. There was other information Candice couldn’t read as two haggard guards pushed the children into Daniel’s arms.

Daniel regarded the kids who had his coloring and features, heart thumping, squeezing. “My babies!”

The toddler in his arms immediately slapped Daniel’s face. “No talk! No talk!”

Everyone except Julian recoiled in horror. The baby was already being trained to be obedient.

Julian chuckled, clapping. “Good boy!”

The toddler also clapped. “D34 is a good boy! D34 is a good boy.”

It was another layer of horror to discover the children didn’t have names, but answered to an identification code.

Candice followed Julian onto his ship without looking at her family.

Julian opened the identical stateroom door, pushing buttons on the wall as he entered. A large view screen came on and began to give the news.

*“…and sightings of rebel males in the hundreds have been coming in from our northern border. Canada has refused to give information on possible refugees who have made it to their country. In other news, enraged males are still attacking cities and causing destruction. The Network complex has been destroyed by the rioting. The government still has not been heard from and are presumed killed in the explosion. Fights for control are rampant. Reggie, do we have more information on that yet?”*

*“Yes, we do. Survivors from the city and the complex are trying to help each other while being attacked by angry males. City Defenders are all dead or have abandoned their posts. We are recommending the public stay in their homes until this time of unrest is over.”*

Julian sat in the chair behind the desk with a grunt.

*“This recording began broadcasting a few hours ago and has been playing repeatedly on independent news stations.”*

*“New America is no longer under control of the Network. There has been a coup. The rebels are in control of New Network City, Adelphia, the Atlanta hub, the Tennessee Crossing, and the southern train hub. All troops are required to surrender to the nearest location.”*

Julian regarded Candice. “When did you tape that?”

Candice had taken a position near the door so she could listen to the people outside. “A month ago.”

“You told the reporter to hold onto it until the dome fell?”

Candice nodded.

“I know where all the family is except your wayward cousin. Are you bluffing about holding the Tennessee Crossing and other hubs?”

“No. We have a lot of allies.”

Julian stared at her. “I almost let your branch of the family become too powerful.”

“There is no almost.” She obviously meant him.

Julian laughed. “Impressive.”

Candice didn’t care about his false praise. “What happens when Angelica arrives?”

“You’ll address the nation with a speech. Killing men, even if in self-defense, is illegal. Your demand for the women to surrender should guarantee my plans.”

“Why kill them? You don’t have the numbers.”

“I don’t need numbers. I have the cure.”

It only took Candice a few seconds to figure out what he was referring to. “That’s what they’re spreading.”

“Yes. My males will be the changelings and females will become weak, timid creatures with no hope of escape. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“What happens to us personally?”

“As long as you obey, your family lives in comfort. If you refuse, they’ll be punished.”

“Okay.”

Julian regarded her with a scowl. “This is not a joke. I will kill every one of you.”

“Okay.”

Julian’s frown deepened. “What game are you playing?”

Candice gestured toward the screen, where a replay of past episodes was starting. “The Bachelor Battles, of course.”

Julian chuckled.

Candice switched topics. “What are you going to do with Rusty?” Council member number two was still in the brig on the other ship.

Julian’s amusement faded into bitter anger. “He’ll be retrained.”

“And your sailing crew?”

Julian grimaced. “They’ll feed the sharks.”

“I assume they don’t know.”

“Oh, they know. They’re betting on you to save them.”

Candice stored the information. “Will we be staying here or going back to the mainland to rebuild?”

Julian liked the acceptance, but he knew better than to trust it. She was a Pruett. They didn’t just accept anything. “We can discuss that later. Right now, you need to give me a good faith gesture.” His tone was unmistakable.

“You’re insane.”

Julian shrugged. “That, my wild relative, is completely beside the point.” He motioned toward the bed. “This is how all members are confirmed.”

Candice couldn’t do it. Even if she was at the height of lust, and he was the only male around, she still wouldn’t have been able to. “I’ll slit your throat and bathe in your blood.”

“Shall I order one of the children killed?”

Candice didn’t like feeling trapped. She also suspected there was an experimental agenda behind the demand. She scanned the apartment for a small black box. “I’m going to need help.”

Julian frowned. “That shouldn’t matter to you.”

Candice snorted. “It matters more than you think. And if you were a true Pruett, you would know that. We don’t just lay with animals, even ones we’re related to.”

“There’s time.” He smiled, hoping she would be pleased. “I’m a perfect genetic match for you. We ran it during your game.”

“What will it accomplish?” She knew he had to have an ulterior motive.

“The offspring will live twice as long.”

Candice stared at him in shock. “That’s the real reason you’ve done this.”

Julian gave her a disappointed look. “Of course. What else would be worth damning myself and the rest of the world?”

Candice realized she wasn’t going to be able to bargain her way out of anything with Julian. Not only was he an evil genius, but he was obsessed with something that had been haunting humanity since the beginning of time. He would have to die and it had to happen soon.

Julian was almost able to read her thoughts. “Every sample of the cure produced over the last forty years has been made from my active blood. If you kill me, you destroy the future. No matter what, I get to live.”

“What’s so special about your blood?”

“It bonded to the cure and the vaccine. I’m the first male to carry both and the only one who remained infectious. We still don’t understand why.”

“I assume the offspring will be cultivated to further your experiments?”

“Now, now. I’m not a complete monster. I only need one of our child’s limbs. It will be allowed to live.”

Candice was revolted. She was also determined to win this game. “How long until we get there?”

Julian pointed toward the bay window. “We’re here.” He pushed a button on the desk; the window slid down.

Candice stared as the holographic barrier disappeared to reveal a small island surrounded by ships where women toiled outside a concrete bunker, unaware of the agenda of their dangerous ruler.

Julian enjoyed her dismay. “Whatever you believe you know, whatever you think you’ve planned for, you don’t. You haven’t. You’ve never met a challenge like me. I’ll be your downfall.”

Candice crossed her arms over her chest. “Or I’ll be yours.”

Julian shrugged. “Either way, you’re stuck with me.”

Candice didn’t argue.

**2**

“Did you notice there are only women out here?” Bruce was trying to forget what they’d learned about Candice’s parentage, but it was hard.

Mary had noticed. Around them, the others were either meeting their children for the first time or offering comfort to someone else’s child. Bruce and Mary were keeping an eye on their captors, as well as watching Daniel. As soon as he was finished with his reunion, the family expected to have problems. He didn’t react well to being away from Candice.

The training center was a small fortress. Most of it appeared to be under a large flat concrete platform that took up almost the entire island. In the center of the platform was a large building blocking the view of the rear of the island. It contained an entryway for employees, according to the signs. There was heavy security, along with cameras and guns. The troops here mirrored the boat crew, with tanned, weathered skin and tools that belonged out here and not on land. Mary was curious about several of the items in their belts, but there wasn’t time to explore them. *After the fight.*

“We’re going around to the rear. We’re not going to get close enough for the women on guard out here to spot the male guards on this ship.”

“I’m sure that’s intentional.” Mary, like her daughter, had already figured out half of Julian’s army were brainwashed women who didn’t know the future he planned for the world. Mary was certain Candice would take advantage of that if it was possible, but right now, it wasn’t. If they resisted, the kids would be killed. No one was willing to take that risk.

And there was also the sense that Candice needed something else before they could fight. Mary couldn’t think of any other reason that her daughter would tell them to obey the enemy.

The women on duty around the bunker and on the fishing boats around the island stared and waved in welcome as they recognized Julian’s flagship and escort vehicle. Radio communications were exchanged.

Mary listened to be sure the first mate was following Candice’s orders and not Julian’s. She didn’t think the woman would backtrack on their agreement because she was already due a severe punishment from Julian for even letting them onboard. Mary thought the woman was also smart enough to know Julian couldn’t let her and this crew live now that they knew the truth.

When nothing negative was exchanged, Mary gave the first mate a nod.

The woman returned the gesture, waiting for orders. She was aware of the legendary reputation of the family she was transporting and she had faith they would come through. She hadn’t known about Julian’s plans, but the changeling men on the boat had scared her. In greater numbers, the men would be able to win any battle. It was terrifying.

Daniel stood up, wiping away tears. “Take the kids below.”

People hurried to do as he ordered, giving the kids comforting smiles and words. Both of the children were too young to know what was going on, but it was obvious they had already made a bond with Daniel because neither of them were crying or looking away from him.

Daniel joined Bruce and Mary at the front of the ship, staring at Julian’s window. He could see Candice’s shadow in the glass and that was a comfort. “We’re going to kill them all–men and women.”

Mary was relieved. She already knew Bruce was loyal, but having Daniel confirm he was too allowed her to let out the breath she had been holding. After everything the males had suffered, she wouldn’t blame them for joining their own kind in overturning female control. There was still no guarantee it wouldn’t happen later.

“What should I do?”

Mary placed a comforting hand on Daniel’s wrist. “You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Daniel immediately drew his gun and fired into the ship in front of them.

Candice didn’t move.

Julian dove under his desk.

Mary burst out laughing. “Good boy.”

Drawn by the gunfire, guard ships in stationary positions began to sail toward them from the retraining center, not sure if Julian needed assistance.

The radio lit up with Julian’s angry voice. “False alarm. Return to your posts.”

The ships immediately changed direction, disappointing Daniel. He was tempted to open fire again, but he decided to save his ammunition for a better opportunity.

The water around the edge of the compound wasn’t calm like out in the open ocean. They pulled the boats along at a faster rate of speed, and due to negligence on the part of the male sailors, they bumped into each other repeatedly. People were knocked to their knees as wood groaned at the impacts.

Daniel watched Julian gesture wildly and assumed he was berating someone for their lack of skills. As he observed the man, Daniel felt Candice staring at him. He wasn’t able to identify exactly what it was that made him uneasy about the look, but he suddenly wished he had put up more of a fight about her leaving this boat. Despite being distracted over meeting his kids for the first time, Daniel now felt guilty about his lack of loyalty to Candice. He had assumed that because of who she was, she would be okay alone with Julian. Now, he wasn’t so sure. Julian looked like he was a lunatic on the edge of killing everyone around him.

Mary was thinking the same thing. As they sailed around the rear of the compound, she noticed there were cameras and no guards.

The two ships went into an enclave that took them under a bridge and inside the bottom of the bunker. It was set up so much like the complex in New Network City that Daniel shivered as they went underneath. *I’m a prisoner again.*

Next to him, Bruce reached out for Mary’s hand.

Chester joined them, voice gruff. “We may not make it out, but we’ll make sure they can’t bring anyone else in here. As soon as Candy gives the signal, we’ll paint this island with their guts!”

Soothed with thoughts of angry vengeance, the men stood straighter and stopped searching for comfort. Like their female family members, they would find peace in the blood.

Chapter Thirty-Two

**My Price**

**1**

**“A**re you alert enough for a conversation?”

Rusty glanced up from the small cell. “Whatever you want me to do, I can’t. I won’t.”

Mary took a seat on the floor. “All I want is information. In return, I’ll give you a token.”

That got his attention. It was well known if a Pruett gave you a token, they owed you a favor. Rusty sat up.

Mary motioned Bruce to keep an eye on the door. She didn’t think some of this conversation would be good for everyone in their group. It was mostly Bobby. She couldn’t count on the rookie to react right or say the right thing when it counted. She also had concerns about how Daniel was going to react when the rest of the truth came out. Mary now suspected what was going on with Julian. She had come to Rusty to confirm it.

“What can I use the token for?”

“I doubt we would consent to spare your life. If I were you, I’d use it on justice.”

Rusty spent a minute considering what was most important to him. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know. After we’re done talking, I’ll tell you what I’d like to use my token for.”

“Deal.”

Bruce listened in amazement as she handled the enemy. Mary wasn’t aggressive often, but when she was, he took note of it. So did everyone else.

“Tell me about the council. How did it start and what were the goals?”

“The Network is a representative of each family, from the very beginning. Over the years, some lines have died out.”

“Not yours. You’re a founding member.”

Rusty’s lip curled. “The Malins and the Pruetts have always been tied together. Even when we didn’t want to be.”

“What about the family who lived next to us?”

“My mother recommended your elimination. That may have triggered all of this. She heard about young Candice defying Rankin when she came to pick up Daniel. She knew her for what she is–a threat.”

“Where are the missing council members?”

Rusty grinned. “Dead.”

“What’s the goal of the council?”

“World domination. What else?”

“Male changelings?”

“Yes. The rebels are infected. You’ve helped Julian spread it into another country. The UN will carry it to the rest of the world.”

“Two for one. They carry the male version of our disease and deliver a cure for the female version so we can’t fight back?”

“Yes. Brilliant, isn’t it?”

“Has the Network done this before?”

“The riots of 230 AW. You were told it was over the men. It actually *was* the men. Our relatives were doing a test run on the plan Julian is bringing to fruition. It also reminded people in the west that we can kill them whenever we wish.”

“Why did you agree?” Mary was following her instinct that said Rusty wasn’t as bloodthirsty as Julian was.

“You ask that like there was a deal or a choice.”

“You could have died instead.”

“I would have died instead. No one tells Julian and his crazy family no on something they want.” His look said she knew that very well.

“How does he buy new members?”

“Power.”

Mary grimaced at Rusty’s tone. It said power was the ultimate goal and nothing else would satisfy. That was a side of human nature that her Pruetts had always tried to smother in themselves. “Why does Julian want Candice? He has unlimited females and I’m sure some of them are more skilled than my daughter.”

“This plan didn’t start when Candice was born or when Daniel was taken. You were given a bachelor. He wasn’t as clean as you thought he was. He also can’t breed. He never could.”

Mary realized she had been infected through Bruce, turning Candice into something Julian and the council had engineered. “Tell me the rest of it. I know there’s more.”

“Julian created her through you, using his father’s plan. Thanks to the rushed trials he performed on himself, Julian’s infection is progressing rapidly. He needs to impregnate her before he snaps so we can continue the immortality experiments.”

Mary was horrified. “What happens to Candice and the baby?!”

“We can extract the fetus right after her death, and Julian only needs one attempt to impregnate her. He’s gotten a lot of practice.” Rusty leaned his cheek against the cool bars, bruised face alive with his own madness. “He’ll give her a month to make sure it’s viable and then he’ll cut it out of her while she screams.”

Mary flipped a token toward him as she stood up. “Name your price.”

Rusty grinned, mirroring her family’s haunting expression. “He betrayed me to get to her. My justice is your daughter’s death. It will crush all of you.”

**2**

“Part of the island is open.” Daniel pointed.

A wide dock ran into a tunnel that began at one end of the island and presumably continued out the other. It allowed for continuous travel.

“That’s so the women out front don’t see Julian come to the island.” Horace was impressed and dismayed. “It’s quite brilliant.”

Many of them had wondered how Julian kept so many secrets, but it was obvious he was using the family technique of doing it right out in the open and daring anyone to suspect him. That was a hard strategy to beat.

As the two ships sailed under the tunnel that was at least ten feet taller than the masts, they became aware of the shift in the wind and the coolness to the breeze. Concrete walls quickly surrounded them, blocking them from view as the entrance began to close. It didn’t make much noise, impressing Mary as she came up from the brig. It was an island retreat she would have designed.

On the side of a shipping platform, a line of men waited. It was impossible to tell if they were changelings without angering them.

The first ship carrying Julian and Candice listed to a rough, creaking stop. A few seconds later, Julian emerged.

Candice was right behind him. Her eyes went to Daniel first, verifying his safety.

Daniel nodded at her, arms busy with squirming children.

Candice stared at him, hoping he would understand the choices she had to make.

Daniel knew from her expression that he wouldn’t like whatever came next. He braced himself for ugliness, but he didn’t consider disobeying anything she chose to do. He trusted Candice.

Julian didn’t have the patience for the reunion. “For God sake! You’ve only been apart an hour.” He gestured to the troops who were waiting. “Put them in the cell. Hurry up!”

The head Defender of Julian’s retreat frowned. “They’re armed and they’re together.”

Julian rotated toward the pillared stairs, waving Candice to follow. “Put them together and let them keep the kids. There’s no reason for them to go find each other if they’re already together. And if they do come searching for her, I’ll kill her.”

“I still think we should take their weapons.”

Julian snorted. “Pruetts don’t need weapons to be dangerous.”

Julian’s arrogance was insulting, but he was also right. They had made a deal and he trusted them to keep their end of it because they were honorable.

The family allowed themselves to be taken up a small hallway that ended in a wide cell set up like a military barrack. As soon as they were all inside, the reinforced glass door shut and locked them in.

Daniel went to the door as Candice disappeared up the pillared stairs with Julian. “I’m going to kill him.”

Pruetts chuckled.

Chester laughed. “Candice has his name. You’ll have to pick another target.”

Daniel shrugged. “Just so long as someone ends that bastard.”

All of them nodded.

**3**

Mary helped get the kids settled and spent a moment circling their generous prison. Designed in a long rectangle, there were small cubicles with bunk beds along one wall. In a corner was a door that presumably led to a bathroom. She took a fast look in and counted six small stalls, two sinks, and two showers.

Next to the bathroom was a wide shelf stacked with toiletries for all ages. On the opposite side were twenty double stacked lockers where they were obviously supposed to store their gear. The other wall held a large viewing screen and had multiple sofas and chairs in front of it. In the center of the floor, was a round hatch. Mary assumed it went downstairs to allow for easier prisoner exchanges between trials and executions. This cell resembled the bunk of an army so much that she wasn’t sure they were just prisoners. It was more like they had been brought here to fight.

“Some of our names are on the lockers.”

Everyone who wasn’t busy with a child went over to locate their name at Chester’s comment.

Other things caught and held attention, such as the small kitchen and a tiny medical station. It was obvious Julian expected them to stay here for a long time. No one spoke it, but everyone knew he might get his wish if he held Candice hostage against them.

“There are sixteen of us, counting the children.” Daniel was curious even though he was busy with his toddler. “Who are the other four?”

“Sam, Angelica, Jason, and Baker.”

It was a relief to know four more members of their family were expected to arrive at some point, but it was also a concern. It appeared as if Julian had been prepared for everything.

“At least he can’t hit the power meeting.” Bobby was trying to find something positive in their situation. “When we took the game down, it stopped.”

“I doubt that.” Bruce gestured toward their gilded cage. “If he was this prepared, he didn’t leave control of the missile at the dome. It’s still set.”

“I need a little help here.”

Chester was trying to get Baker’s little brother to sit for a washing and dressing. The feral child had lived in the vulture nursery and he wasn’t responding to kind gestures. After everything he had been through, Chester refused to be firm in any way.

Daniel knew how to handle it. He had seen children like this brought into the complex after they were stolen from their murdered parents. “Sit! Punishment!”

Cain sullenly dropped into the chair and let Chester take care of him.

Baker’s little brother looked like him. If he had tattoos and an Onyx earring and necklace, he would have been a miniature twin. Chester didn’t know how Baker was going to react to the boy who was as wild as he had been, but Chester was already looking forward to handing over the boy’s care. Cain was a handful who would have to be forced to do everything. He hoped Baker would be able to bond with the boy and calm him so basic hygiene wasn’t so stressful.

Daniel stared at the boy, anger and frustration overwhelming. “I don’t ever want to have to do that again.”

“They just brought Rusty up.” Bruce had stayed near the door to watch the comings and goings of the center.

Mary looked over. “Which direction are they taking him?”

“They’re following Julian and Candice.”

Mary considered her brief conversation with Rusty before they had reached the center and then pushed the thoughts away. It was obvious Julian expected them to be here for a while. She didn’t have to do anything about it yet. *Candice will.*

**4**

“Please take council member number two to his cell and help him sleep.” Julian didn’t glance at the man being dragged along behind them.

Candice saw the new bruises that said Rusty hadn’t wanted to leave the other ship.

“I told her.” Rusty chuckled at Julian’s expression. “I told her everything.”

Julian sighed. “I do regret that our relationship has to end this way.”

Rusty opened his mouth.

A guard cracked him in the back of the head, knocking him forward to slam against the floor. It was an awful sound.

Julian walked away. “Come along. There’s something I want you to see.”

Candice followed.

The guards dragged Rusty away.

The training center hallways were absent of windows, signs, and art. There were only doors leading to rooms that Candice couldn’t view into. Her sharp ears didn’t pick out any sound, leading her to believe most of them were empty.

Julian went up another small flight of stairs to a dark hall. “This is my viewing booth.” Julian didn’t switch on the light. He didn’t need it either.

Candice was instantly nervous as they stopped in the center of the large glass room with no other exits, but she was also distracted by the sights.

Julian let her scan, watching her expressions.

Candice was horrified. There were breeding sections, labs, living quarters, testing booths, and cells. She stepped further in to view the other rooms, identifying them as utilities, storage, living quarters, and what she assumed was the boss’s digs. Candice stared at that room for a long moment, spotting a large bed and an even larger hound guarding it. She instantly assumed the big bitch was responsible for all the hounds she had ever fought. In the breeding labs, Candice observed females eagerly climbing onto tables. “What did you promise them?”

“A chance on the council or a shot at top Defender, depending upon how much they required. The scientists were much simpler to deal with. I just promised not to kill them. They were too smart to lie to.” Julian pushed buttons on the wall; warm air began to blow from the vent in the ceiling.

The temperature in the complex was 70° and made most changelings sweat. Candice realized now, feeling the warm air blowing over her sweaty skin, that the temperature had been set for men and not women. The complex in New Network City had been the same. *The signs were all around us.* *Did we see them and fake ignorance?*

Candice returned to studying the rooms. In the living quarters, four different areas housed kids, men, women, and guests separately. The rest of her family was currently switching on the view screen in their holding cell to observe the news while they waited to see what she wanted them to do. In the power room, lackeys who she assumed came from unsuccessful breedings scurried about, pushing buttons and repairing equipment.

In the control booth, four identical men drew Candice’s attention and held it. She stared in disgust. “Sons or clones?”

“A little of both.”

Candice faced him. “In what order will I be visiting these rooms?”

Julian sighed in delight at another sign of her intelligence. “First, the lab for bloodwork. Then, the testing booths and more bloodwork. After, you can pick–my bed or a table in the breeding section. Before the sun sets tomorrow, you’ll be furthering the family line.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

**Full Circle**

Mining Tunnels

**1**

**“I** think the water is getting closer.” Baker wasn’t a fan. The few river crossings he’d made alone had been harrowing moments where he wasn’t sure he would survive. The only one he’d enjoyed had been traveling to the Stone Mountain hideout with Candice. Despite their past relationship, he had liked observing Candy with her new mate. There had been jealousy that she hadn’t thought he was good enough for her, but it had been enlightening to see her expressing emotions. He’d known her for more than a decade before that and hadn’t witnessed the occurrence even once.

Sam already knew his fears and the newest threat. She had been listening to the sound for the last half hour. There was a terrible storm raging topside. She could hear it above the tunnel and feel cracks of thunder rattling through the ground. The only good thing was that changelings didn’t usually stay out in the rain. That meant the violent men would seek shelter and hopefully calm down.

“I can’t swim.”

Sam sighed. “Neither can I.”

Baker scowled. “We need to get out of here! Can we go any faster?” He already knew they couldn’t go back to reach the exit.

Sam couldn’t help being slightly panicked at his tone. She glanced toward the driver in the cart in front of them.

“No.” Emily was enjoying the dimly lit ride. Unlike the rare passengers they were hauling, she could swim and she liked water. The light was an added treat. She usually made this trip in the dark, sleeping. “This rail system is old and weak, mostly because of the water. If we go any faster, we may cause a structural failure. We’re already at the limit.”

Sam didn’t insist. She trusted the miners, who survived here day after day, and year after year, without support from the Network or anyone else. Sam was grateful for them. Making the trip from the city to the homestead in Ohio would have been a weeklong battle aboveground.

In the carts around them, most people were snoozing. Only a few were noticing what she and Baker had.

On either side of the tracks, waves began sloshing loudly, bringing more people to alertness. A sense of danger filled the air, making Sam smile. “I really was getting a little bored.” She regarded the driver. “Do things come out of the water down here?”

Emily’s expression was grim in the swaying lantern light. “That’s the number one cause of casualties among miners.”

Sam didn’t ask what creatures they might face. She already knew the dangers of the water. They were why she couldn’t swim.

The Runners around her also knew. It was the one thing that could make their group detour from a straight line after their target.

“We have the preservers.” Rosa was in the next cart. It was the first words she had spoken since strangling Greg. “We can tie them together and float out if it keeps coming.”

Sam didn’t like that idea. She scanned the carts, estimating there were more people who couldn’t swim or fend for themselves than the other way around. “Is there another route that will take us up an incline?”

Emily quickly consulted the maps stored in the front of each cart. After a moment, she nodded. “We don’t usually take this route. There’s an incline coming, but it will detour us short of your destination.”

Sam shrugged. “Take us up the hill. It’s not fair to endanger everyone else because I’d like to ride the rapids to conquer a weakness.”

Sam’s adventurous attitude amused the group of people.

“That’s a Pruett. When things are at their worst, they’re at their best.”

Sam almost wished Emily’s words weren’t true. Being like that had prevented her family from having peace.

The next few minutes were filled with tension and halfhearted attempts to break it with cracks about having fish for dinner. Sam didn’t join in, trying to figure out how she would save everyone if they were attacked. She wasn’t prepared to hear the sound of *rushing* water.

The small wave rolled onto the tracks and splashed against the carts, splattering everyone in cold dampness.

People yelled and cringed as the water receded.

Sam realized they were going to be hit with wave after wave of water as they traveled, and was actually relieved. If it didn’t come in hard and heavy, they had a chance to get ahead of it.

She felt the small cart begin to wind upward. They were okay as long as the train didn’t break down...

The carts under them groaned and squealed at the extra weight of carrying so many passengers uphill at full speed. Sam wished they had considered lightening the load, but there hadn’t been time.

A fresh wave came in, reaching further and soaking them more. The water was gaining ground.

In the carts, more lanterns flickered on as people struggled to see how close the water was.

Sam quickly took rope from her belt and tied Baker’s wrist to hers, listening to the instinct that said they weren’t going to get up the hill. She stood, pulling him along.

The tall ceiling of the cave allowed for plenty of movement. Sam took advantage of it and jumped out, jerking Baker along.

Prepared for the landing, Sam slid into the muddy water, arms there to steady Baker as he slammed into her side. The couple swayed uneasily for a few seconds and then balanced.

With less weight, the carts began to chug a bit faster.

Sam pushed Baker ahead of her. “As fast as you can!”

Sam’s Runners and the rest of their group followed, some making graceful leaps from the cart while others fell out and rolled to avoid being run over.

Other people in the carts considered doing the same, but only the bravest joined the family.

Everyone hurried to get up the hill before the next wave of water rushing through the tunnel.

This wave soaked everything in a blinding blast of cold that knocked people off their feet and brought shouts of panic.

Sam kept going. She recognized the moment. Survival was upon them.

Behind them, people shouted for help as the wave dragged them away. Changeling claws digging into the hard ground weren’t enough.

“I see light!”

“We’re almost there!” Emily was still on the front cart as Sam and Baker ran by. She liked getting wet. She was always one of the last to abandon the train when this happened. She wasn’t left behind, however. She timed her leap perfectly, landing on the platform as the train reached the top of the hill and evened out.

The Runners took stock of their group, noting their members had survived the brief moment of action. Disappointed with the adventure so far, the Runners followed Sam.

No one went back to save the others.

The mining platform was at the top of a long metal ladder with reservoirs and missing rails. It was obvious there had been another part here, but it had long since crumbled into debris that had been covered by dirt, leaves, and sludge from spring rains. It was impossible to tell how big this mining operation had been before the war, but Sam suspected it had been huge. At the top of the ladder, lanterns glared in a dim welcome as voices came.

“It’s Sam!”

Sam stopped and spun around. “Send the males back!”

Emily frowned. “Through the water?”

“Take them back to the other tunnel. They’ll suffer the water better than what’s waiting.” Sam turned back to the noise, hoping Emily obeyed.

“Sam Pruett is here!”

The people on the mining platform were a combination of those who had just fought in the city and locals. There were Divas, snakes, reporters, starlets, Defenders, brothel madams, and bandit crews. All of them were pissed and searching for a target.

“Watch out for that male!”

Sam pulled Baker to her side for protection. Several members of the crowd were already stepping forward with weapons raised.

Everyone in the crowd was female.

“Kill the male!”

Sam was forced to use her knife as several changelings came forward to grab Baker. Her vicious slashes sent blood across the platform and caused the rest of the group to back up.

Sam’s Runners quickly formed a circle around her and Baker.

“They’re on our side!” Emily was trying to calm people by reminding them the Pruetts were for freedom for everyone.

The crowd didn’t want to hear it.

“The males have killed hundreds of us in the city! He can’t be spared!”

“I claim him in vengeance for my daughter!”

Sam and her Runners had guns and knives in hand, but they were ready to reach for more powerful tools of destruction if needed. They never traveled light.

“These slaves belong to us!” Rosa’s bellow cut through the din of the crowd and brought shocked silence. “We get to kill them!”

It was impossible for the women to argue. As the owners of the men, Sam and her Runners had the right to execute them.

Sam walked toward the exit, ignoring Emily’s continued attempts to calm the crowd. It was obvious they couldn’t stay here.

Sam emerged into the rain to find the area sparsely dotted in trees around a lake and shore that was empty of people. She hurried across the muddy field towards the rippling water already nearing the point of overflow. The rain was coming in long, hard sheets that smacked into them with little balls of unidentifiable material Sam assumed was leftovers from the war.

She had no idea how something could remain in the atmosphere for so long and only come down with the storms, but she had developed that theory after being exposed to the particles for too long. She had a scar on her finger that reminded her even rain could be dangerous. Later, traveling through some of the western radiation zones, she had seen the same scars on people there.

Despite the rain coming down hard, there was little wind to prevent Sam from locating the right spot. As she neared the small hill next to the lake, she could see the entrance to the safe house. It was already uncovered.

At the top of the steps, two tall thorn trees stood in monument to those who had come before. Sam and Candice, along with Angelica, had brought them here on one of their drops, thinking it made a good marker for the entrance. At that time, there had been trees all over this area. Blight had come a few years later, wiping out half of the trees in the country, but their monuments had already been dead and hadn’t been harmed. They were now lonely sentinels among the last of their kind.

*Like my family.* Sam stopped at the top of the narrow stairwell, picking out damage. People had tried to get in with fire and tools. She rotated around to glare at the people who had emerged from the tunnel to observe.

Many of those women went back inside to avoid Sam’s angry glare. It was worse than the storm beating on them.

*If I only had time*. Sam hurried down the stairs, sliding half the way, and slammed her hand against the identification scanner. Baker fell along behind her, bumping into muddy walls. He hadn’t been ready for her movement.

*“Welcome to the safe house. We hope you have a rebel day!”*

Sam snickered as she entered. Every den had a comment like that programmed into the welcome greeting of the computer. It was one of the small ways they expressed their defiance against the tyrants who ruled them.

Sam entered and pulled Baker along with her. She slid aside and quickly cut his rope. This safe house had been part of a presidential compound before the war. Almost all of it had been crumbled into decay and unusable when their family had found it. Over the last century, they’d spent spare time repairing, rewiring, and bringing equipment to turn it into a den that would hold fifty people comfortably for more than a month in any situation. The extra stocks they had skimmed from their jobs were here too. There was food and water, weapons and ammunition, medical supplies, and a large chest of gold stars and other currency. Sam had never known any of them to speak about it, but she had always assumed this bunker would be a last resort for their family when the Network turned on them.

“We turned on them first. Score one for us.” Sam waited for everyone to get in, glancing around. Other people were here; she needed to make sure they were disposed of properly.

As soon as everyone was in, Sam fastened the door and typed in the code to lock down the bunker.

“I told you, it’s Sam!” Melissa hurried over. “We knew you would come here!”

“Any problems?”

Ginny shook her head. “Nope. You?”

Sam glanced at Baker and grunted.

Ginny chuckled. “All men are trouble. It’s part of their charm.”

Sam pointed at Ginny’s captive. “We may need to take him with us. If the power bunker won’t let us in, we’ll use him.”

The two Runners guarding Robert were eager. The short time they’d been forced to wait in this safe house had been boring. They much preferred to be in on the action that Sam had obviously gotten to enjoy on her way here. The blood drying to her cloak and face was proof.

Heather nodded. “We can escort him after the mob fades.”

Sam grinned at Robert. “Enjoying your time with the family?”

The council member grimaced. From the hollow, sunken cheeks, Sam assumed her girls had made use of their time. In any other situation, she might have berated or even pulled them from her crew, but this was a Network member who deserved every second of abuse the women wanted to hand out.

Sam walked around them, growling as she spotted other captives. “Malins!”

“Baker sent them.” Hope gave Baker a look of approval. “Your mate insisted we interrogate them. We learned a lot.”

Sam was proud of Baker, though he had disobeyed her orders. “Did he suggest a future for them?” She didn’t look at Baker, unable to hide her bitterness.

Baker dropped his head, shame flooding his mind again.

“He recommended they be caught in the crossfire or dumped somewhere there was heavy fighting.”

Sam snickered. “I agree. Maybe the mob outside needs to know this family has been breeding immune males for experiments and hiding their secrets for centuries.”

Heather began digging in her muddy cloak for chemicals to wake the women. “That sounds like justice to me.”

Sam scanned the shocked reporter. “Once you leave, you won’t be able to get back in. You should stay here.” Sam wanted Dana to survive this war. She liked this spunky woman.

“But she’s pregnant!”

Sam studied the unconscious mother for a moment, then shrugged. “Vote.”

Dana frowned. “Here and now?”

“Not you. The Runners.” Baker pushed away from the wall and headed for the bathroom area. “She’d sacrifice any of you. Don’t be fooled.”

Sam heard the tone and wondered what Baker was holding against the Malins. She understood her own feelings. His were a surprise.

Hope looked at Sam.

“I hate being civilized.” Sam pointed to the rear of the den. “We put cells back there for a reason, I guess. Lock them up. Candice will decide their fate.”

Dana breathed a sigh of relief.

The Runners scowled at her for interrupting.

Dana took the hint. “I’m needed in the city. We’ve been escorting bachelors and children out for the last week. Before, we did it during transport.”

Sam chuckled. “You’re the city rebels!”

Dana’s nose went into the air. “We are the Railroad.”

“How did you get involved, considering your father probably escaped the same way and then hurt your mother?” Sam couldn’t help the question. It would give her more insight into who Dana was.

“My mother taught me the difference between good and evil. I’ve never known that to be indicative of one gender or one race. All people can be evil. There’s no reason to hate them until they actually do me a wrong.”

Sam was satisfied with that answer. She felt the same. She studied the remaining people in the safe house, noting a few miners, a couple of orphans, and a few bachelors who had escaped. Sam was satisfied the people here were handled and she was already eager to go. The sounds echoing through the earthen walls and steel door said the mob outside wasn’t dissipating despite the heavy rain and impossible entrance.

“This is amazing.” Baker had come from the bathroom with a clean face and arms. He had been inside two dens with Candice over the years and both of them had been small and sparse. She had only required a small amount of space for herself, but it was clear this bunker had been made for a large group of people. There were dozens of beds, a hygiene compartment, clothes and weapons, and a pantry stocked with nonperishable goods. Baker went over to examine those, curious as to how long they had been here. Like almost everything else, nonperishables still had an expiration date.

Baker wiped away the dust.

497 AW. Exp. 2515 507 AW.

He couldn’t stop the smile. “Years. She hadn’t even gone to rescue him yet, but she was preparing a place to hide when this war came. Brilliant.”

Sam didn’t comment on Baker’s discovery. They also had a lot of equipment and technology that the average citizen didn’t have access to. None of it would help Sam right now, so she left it, but it was a comfort to know it was here. The factories inside the dome had been destroyed and it was hard to guess when or if they would be rebuilt. Some of these relics in Pruett possession may be the last in existence. “Has anyone heard anything from my sister?”

“A group of males made it across the border into Canada, but there hasn’t been any new reports in hours. They’re replaying the same clips from this morning.”

“Nothing new on the Network or Candice?”

“Nothing.”

Sam marched toward the rear exit. “I’m going west.”

“You guys should stay here.” Rosa gestured toward the people who weren’t captives. “Don’t open the door.”

They could hear the crowd still gathering outside despite the rain. Their anger was making it through.

Sam and the Runners moved to the rear of the bunker, familiar with it. They had dropped the last crate of supplies a year ago. That one had included fuel.

“I’m traveling to the Borderlands. Anyone who doesn’t want to make that trip can stay here and help protect the others. If the crowd outside makes it through, do the men a favor and shoot them. It’s a better death than servicing the mob.” Sam disappeared through the rear exit of the bunker and entered the long tunnel that would take her out into the woods behind the lake.

Baker hurried to catch up. He didn’t want to stay here without Sam.

A much smaller group hurried out of the bunker, several of them getting a chill as the door slammed shut, putting them back into danger. In the den, there had been a few minutes to breathe and relax. Out here, they were in full changeling form with adrenaline flowing and hearts thumping. It wasn’t pleasant.

Unlike the women, Baker had never felt safer. He was surrounded by strong women who would die to keep him alive. It was incredible.

It took them a few minutes to reach the small concrete enclave that held a dozen Mopars and another stack of weapons. The Runners hurried over to outfit themselves and get the rides ready.

Sam settled Baker on her Mopar and tried to keep an ear out for trouble. The other end of this tunnel didn’t have a door. They would be riding straight into anyone who might be expecting them.

A few minutes later, the group rolled out of the tunnel and bounced over a muddy field to reach the woods. With engines roaring over the storm and lights glaring, their exit was attention getting.

Baker realized Sam was trying to draw the mob away from the bunker and approved even when fear crept into his stomach. He couldn’t deny there was also an edge of excitement. He was finally out having an adventure with his very own Pruett.

Cresting a small rise, the bikes gained air; the Runners let out shouts of excitement that were contagious.

Fire flew through Sam as Baker joined them.

The Runners had never had a male voice in the chorus. It drove them to continue the yelling beyond what Sam normally approved of. They sounded happy. *I wish there was time to stop and tell him how much I love him.*

Sam didn’t know where this emotional side of her had come from. She had spent her life alone. As soon as she was able to handle herself, she had gathered a group of girls from their town and left. She had spent the next fifteen years traveling the Borderlands, searching for peace. Now, all she wanted was to settle down and live with Baker. It was terrifying. *Burnout is already hitting me.*

Chapter Thirty-Four

**More Blood**

Training Center

**1**

**“T**his first test is designed to measure intelligence. Using the screens on the walls, solve the problems to pass. At the door, you’ll be asked a final question.”

The testing control booth was a small square block with four dark glass windows. There was a console in the front of the block and an expressionless male technician waiting for orders.

A wall panel on her left slid aside to form a doorway. Candice stepped forward, donning her normal resolve. She needed one big piece of information from Julian. She had to earn it before she could ask for it. That meant playing his game, for now. “See you shortly.”

Julian chuckled. “I’m getting it on tape. If you survive, we can watch it while we create the next generation.”

Candice hissed as the barrier slid shut. The urge to kill Julian was so strong that she wasn’t sure she was going to be able to wait without a barrier between them. If not for needing a critical piece of information, he would already be a pool of blood under her boots.

The intelligence booth was barren of furnishings. There was one exit and three walls covered in computer screens. It made Candice nervous. She knew Julian would refuse to allow her out if she didn’t pass the test.

Julian’s voice came through the speakers. “Whenever you’re ready to begin, push the button.”

Candice immediately pushed the button.

Five screens activated on the dark walls, illuminating the space. Candice stared at the first screen.

“If at any time you wish to stop the test, all you have to do is tap on the glass.”

Candice flipped a finger in the air.

Julian chuckled and stopped talking to her so the results wouldn’t be corrupted.

The first screen was a series of math problems that she solved without problems. Julian hadn’t expected her to have issues as it was school age material. All female citizens were required to have this education.

The second screen was a little more difficult, indicating an advanced education level. He was impressed when Candice didn’t spend any more time on the second screen than she had the first.

The third set of equations was comparable to his own education, which had been constant throughout the first twenty-five years of his life. His father, Nathan, had insisted his son be smarter than he was and that man was brilliant.

Candice cleared the third screen without hesitating. All the information she needed to solve these equations had been taught to her as a teenager. Her mother had been a burnt-out changeling who hadn’t been able to manage leadership over such a wild family, but educating her children had been easy with her computer skills. The Pruetts had every program the Network had ever created for educational purposes.

Candice progressed to the fourth screen, where political, religious, and moral questions were flashed at her in a series of blurs with a timer in the corner intended to make her nervous. Candice used her normal line, not worrying about what answers Julian might expect. She didn’t care about the results of this test, but she also wasn’t going to pretend to be someone she wasn’t.

At the end of the fourth screen, a simple question blinked, forcing her to concentrate.

*In what year did the Network take over New America?*

Candice didn’t locate the correct answer on the screen. The timer was quickly counting down; she felt her nerves coil into a ball. If she failed this test, she would be ruled out as a genetic match for Julian and he would switch to someone else in their family without ever letting her out of this box.

Julian leaned toward the glass, rooting for her.

Candice made a quick decision and ripped open the panel on the wall under the screen. Using a small knife, she pried off the casing and began to manipulate the settings.

“Can she do that?”

Julian waved the technician to be quiet.

A new option popped up on the screen.

*None of the above.*

Candice quickly chose the new answer, triggering the door. She regarded Julian, brow lifted.

The speaker crackled. “You broke my computer. It wasn’t supposed to let you through without answering the fifth screen. You may proceed.”

Candice smirked as she stepped to the door labeled *Agility*.

Bullets flew by, coming from the opposite wall.

Candice ducked, survival mode kicking in. Slugs pinged off the walls and trimmed her flesh as she skated underneath the line of fire toward the exit. Like the last one, this booth was barren of furnishings except for the testing equipment. There wasn’t time to note anything else as electrified tiles shocked Candice and drew cries. She didn’t stop moving.

The tiles beneath her rumbled, indicating they were about to drop.

With no choice, Candice leapt forward, taking several electric hits.

She smacked to a halt against the barrier that immediately opened and dropped her into the next room.

“You may proceed.”

Candice grunted. “No shit.”

Julian laughed.

The computer triggered as soon as Candice stood, activated by her movement.

*“In this test, the candidate must reach the exit. The level of strength required scales with each barrier.”*

The booth was cold and damp, she assumed to preserve the huge stones that weren’t on tracks or rollers as far as she could see. The walls were growing mold and there were cobwebs in the corners. It was obvious this room hadn’t been cleaned for years. *That’s because most people die in the agility test*, she thought, wincing at the dead sensation in her lower leg.

Candice regarded the huge rocks and then turned a glare toward the glass. She couldn’t hear Julian, but she was positive he was amused. She wasn’t. She was getting tired and she was injured. At least three bullets were lodged in her leg, with another in her arm. Blood was trickling down her back and the knife wound Leo had delivered was now infected.

Candice resolutely stepped forward and shoved on the first rock.

Julian settled onto a chair in the small office, aware of the technicians discussing the test and laughing. They would probably be eliminated after this, due to lack of respect for the process. He didn’t count his own amusement. He wasn’t mocking her the way his men were. He was impressed. Only four people had successfully passed all levels of this examination without begging to be let out or dying. He was one of those, and he carried ugly scars to prove it. He was delighted Candice might be the fifth. That put three Pruetts on the list. Tara had done it the fastest, though Candice was on track to beat that record.

“How is she doing?”

The technicians straightened up, remembering the boss was in the booth with them for this test.

“I don’t know how to rate her for the first test. We’ve never had someone go through without completing the fifth screen. We gave her the highest marks you can for the adaptability she demonstrated.”

Julian observed as Candice used one rock against the other. She had knocked the first one over by tilting it with her body weight and was using it as a lever to move the others, instead of relying on her changeling strength. Julian was disappointed that he hadn’t gotten to witness her change yet, but he was impressed that she was saving her strength for when it mattered. Though she hadn’t done this before, it was obvious she suspected something bigger for the fourth booth. Julian motioned the technician to keep going.

“She tied the record time for test two, but she took one more hit than Tara. We gave her second highest marks.”

Julian agreed with that choice. Watching Tara go through the test had been just as fun.

“So far, she’s thirty seconds ahead on stamina and strength.”

“You have my little extra at the end ready?”

The technician nodded. “At your call, sir.”

In the booth, Candice used the last of her normal strength to shove the rock out of the way. She could see around the edges to the exit now. There were two large slabs left. She was reasonably confident she could get to the next one, but it was going to drain her. After, she would be forced to flip into a changeling or she wouldn’t make it through. Instead of draining herself now, Candice let her rage have control.

Julian was mesmerized by the sight of her flipping into a changeling. He had watched it on screens during her game, but it wasn’t the same as being three feet away from her, hearing her screams and observing the pain. It made him hungry.

Candice quickly shifted the last two rocks easily, feeling Julian’s eyes burning holes into her as he examined her in all her changeling glory. It would give him an advantage in any fight with her, but there was no help for that.

Candice pushed the button on the door and moved inside with her hands hovering over her weapons.

It was dark and silent, triggering her eyes.

She scanned for heat, finding large splotches of it everywhere.

The barrier closed behind her.

Julian slapped the counter when the technician didn’t switch the lighting fast enough. “Get the infrared on!” He didn’t want to miss any of Candice’s fight with the changeling men and women who had been trapped in the booth with a bloody body for hours to stir them up.

Everyone in the small office leaned forward to observe intently. This was the point where even the fastest, strongest candidates usually lost their lives.

Candice swung her knife in one hand and her longer blade in the other, killing everyone who approached. She didn’t wait to hear snarls or try to speak to them. She had no way of knowing who they were or why they were here, but it didn’t matter as changeling claws ripped through her cloak and skin. She was unable to use the gun because the bullet would ricochet, forcing her into ugly, close quarter combat that quickly wore her down.

Candice lunged again, feeling her blade cut into a fleshy part of a body. A dripping noise echoed and then the body fell.

Gasping, Candice spun and slashed outward again, able to feel someone sneaking up on her in the darkness.

Blood again pattered to the floor and then went silent as it was covered by the corpse.

The senior technician looked at Julian. “That’s all of them, sir.”

Julian motioned. “Send in the extra.”

Candice waited for the door to open or a light to come on. When that didn’t happen, she realized the test wasn’t over.

Her changeling ears went into overdrive. Because there was no other light to reflect off, and she was so tired, her changeling vision only penetrated a few feet in front of her. She slowly advanced, trying to spot a path through the blackness and bodies.

Candice heard the soft pad of huge paws. Her stomach dropped. *A hound. Shit!* They were hard to kill even when you were in full health and could see them coming.

Julian rose from the chair and went to stand right up against the glass to have the best view possible. If Candice died here, he wanted to be close enough to feel it. She hadn’t been given warning on what was coming, or extra ammo for her weapons. This was a contest of fighting skills against a savage enemy–something Pruetts had been thriving at since the war. The added twist was that the changeling hound was a *male*. It would have no sympathy for a woman. In fact, he always insisted the hound keepers were women so the big dogs would hate them for the abuse. He’d mirrored the plan for people, wanting men to inherit all parts of the earth.

Candice could feel the ruthless menace of the predator stalking her, but she couldn’t tell which direction the soft breathing was coming from. For one of the few moments in her life, Candice honestly considered dying. Her mind filled with memories of love and laughter with her mate and family, willing to surrender, but Candice refused to give in. That wasn’t how she had lived her life and that wasn’t how she was going to die. She would go down fighting and meet her end with honor.

The hound lunged forward.

So did Candice.

Julian’s evil face squished against the glass.

The hound was huge. Its body covered Candice’s entire frame as it landed on top of her. She could feel the thick tail curling, searching for an open area to hit. Her attempt to stab it in the eye failed, sending her to the hard ground. Candice could only think of one thing to do. She curled into a ball and sent her hands to her belt for a more powerful weapon.

The hound took advantage of her vulnerability. It snapped down on her leg.

Candice screamed.

Julian’s claws scratched on the glass. “More! More blood!”

Candice let the dog bite into her leg, bringing one clawed hand around to the animal’s face. She jammed her thumb into its eye.

The dog howled, enraged by its pain. It snapped down on her leg again.

Candice shrieked.

Julian beat against the glass in ecstasy, spraying spittle.

The technicians eased their chairs away from the boss.

Candice fired her gun into the dog’s big skull, using her hold on its eye socket to determine the correct direction to keep from killing herself as well.

Four quick shots echoed through the booth, hurting her ears.

Blood splattered across the glass where Julian was standing.

Candice screamed again as the teeth sank in deeper, and then the hound released her and slumped over.

Candice scrambled away from the animal, listening for the next threat. Her leg was on fire, she had no sensation in her back, and she was gushing blood from several places, but she wasn’t dead. That was a miracle.

*“You have passed. Congratulations!”*

The door hissed open. The lights flashed on.

Candice didn’t move.

Julian signaled the troops to collect her. He knew better than to enter the dark space without protection. Candice was still in her changed form and on the edge of more violence because of her injuries. Weaknesses always made Pruetts more dangerous.

Refusing to groan or scream again, Candice saw three panels in the walls that had allowed the changeling men and women to rush her from all directions. There was also a smaller, wider hound entrance near where she had come in. The walls were stained in the blood of previous testers. She suddenly doubted the hound had been part of the evaluation. That had been Julian having fun with her, as she’d had while removing his family tattoo.

Candice didn’t resist as the men dragged her out of the testing booth. They stopped in front of Julian, but she sagged between them, unable to put weight on her bleeding leg. The other one wasn’t responding at all.

“Take her to the medical bay. When they finish, send her to my bed. She’s ready now.”

Candice’s anger began to fade with her strength as she continued to bleed.

Julian lunged forward and grabbed her by the hair. He forced her head up. “Stay changed for the blood work or I’ll send your mate in there next!”

Candice’s rage immediately slapped the change back into place. She glared at him. “I should have let Rusty kill you.”

“Yes, you should have. Now you’ll both pay the price for such a weakness.” Julian gestured to the guards. “Get her out of here.”

“You didn’t answer Daniel’s question.”

Julian frowned. “What question?”

“The date of your death.”

Instead of flying into a rage as expected, Julian gave an evil laugh. “I’ll tell you right before I kill you.” Her blood and screams had shored up his control.

“Deal.” Candice let the guards take her from the booth, throwing a promise over her shoulder. “They’ll be the last words you ever speak.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

**Tough Love**

Tara’s Ship

**1**

**“S**he’s pretty. Maybe grandpa will keep her.”

Jason and Angelica turned to look at his son. Jason and the boy were in the bed, resting, while she took the chair by the door to watch over them. She had been exchanging smiles and waves with the child since he woke up, but his words ruined the good moment.

“Grandpa?” Jason was confused.

Jamie nodded. “Grandpa Julian said some of us get to keep our women. You might be one of those.”

Both adults were horrified that the boy had even spoken to Julian, let alone remembered his words. It was obvious the child had been brainwashed and would need to be retrained. Thankfully, Angelica already liked the boy. Time around her family would help him. Neither of them considered his actual words.

“We’re heading there now. Do you like your grandpa?”

The little boy shrugged. “He wasn’t mean to me.”

It made both of them feel better to hear that. Angelica had expected to feel a small measure of resentment for the child that had been stolen by Rankin and the council, but she had discovered only pity in her heart for the boy who looked exactly like her mate.

Angelica went to the tiny window as Jason tried to explain things to his son. She didn’t interfere with the lessons Jason gave to the child, but when they got to the part about who could be trusted and who couldn’t, she winced when he added the Pruetts to the list of people who could be counted on. She didn’t know for sure, but she suspected *grandpa* was the ruler of the council. If that was the case, they would have to put a qualifier on family trust.

Angelica studied the island, noting the female Defenders in the front. When Tara’s ship sailed straight toward them instead of taking a different entrance, Angelica’s dangerous grin appeared. “I wonder if they know…”

She glanced over at Jason. “They’ll be coming for us soon. Keep him next to you.”

Jason nodded. The sense of danger had grown the longer they traveled.

Harsh pounding came on the door before Angelica could say anything else.

“Get out here! It’s delivery time!”

Tara’s amusement echoed through the hall as she left.

Jason lifted a brow at Angelica. “Are you able to kill her? Because we’re not getting out of this if you can’t.”

“No one gets out of a training center.” Jamie frowned at his father. “You can’t be a rebel anymore. You’re one of us.”

Angelica stared at Jason. “I may need your help.”

Jason wasn’t afraid to fight now. He was furious. “I’ve got you.” Jason had come a long way since she had rescued him from the complex. Despite wanting his freedom, he had been just another timid slave. Now, he was a man.

Angelica moved toward the door.

Jason helped the boy to his feet and followed.

As the trio went toward the ladder to the top deck, the women on duty stared at Jason. It was obvious they didn’t spend much time around males. Angelica’s plan defined into a vague scheme that gave her hope.

When Angelica’s pace picked up and the aura of confidence slammed into him, Jason mentally sneered. *My Angel’s back, and you traitors are in trouble!*

Angelica climbed to the upper deck, no longer studying the island. She examined the three hundred females handling security for it. Most of the women were big changelings with glowing pink eyes who watched their arrival in suspicion. The rest observed in excitement.

Angelica realized the women on duty out here were bored *and* unsatisfied. *Perfect.*

Angelica joined Tara at the front of the boat as the ship docked.

Jason stayed behind the women. He kept Jamie by his side, hoping nothing happened to the boy now that they had been brought together.

“This will be your new home.” Tara gestured toward steel doors opening at the front of the complex. “You go in, you don’t come back out. You should take my offer. It will kill you to be caged.”

Angelica noticed women on duty staring at her expectantly. *I’m going to give you what you’re searching for,* *and in exchange, you’re going to betray your master*. Plan firmly in place now, Angelica waited for the crowd of women coming to greet them to be close enough to hear her.

Also aware of the expectant glances, Tara led the way down the ramp. “Come on!”

Angelica noticed the tension. It made sense that her relative would be aware of the danger, too. The difference was that Tara’s arrogance was going to be her downfall.

Angelica walked down the gangplank. As soon as she hit the concrete wharf, she stopped. “How long have you known men really rule our country?”

Shocked troops rotated their away. From the expressions, some of them had heard the reports of changeling males rampaging.

Tara scowled. “Just keep walking!”

Angelica estimated it was a hundred feet to the entrance. She had until then to convince the witnesses she wasn’t lying, or to provoke a fight with Tara. No matter what else happened, she and Jason weren’t going in there on these terms. “You are a traitor to this family. Men rule the council and you knew!”

Tara refused to be distracted. Julian had told her not to use the front entrance when she delivered Angelica, but Tara didn’t like being relegated to the rear entrance like a servant. She had disobeyed Julian’s order.

Angelica got louder. “How long have you known about the cure?”

Anger was coming from the crowd around them now. Instead of being restrained, Angelica walked through the guards, making eye contact with some. “They have a cure for our disease. There’s no reason for any of us to be suffering.”

“What is she talking about?”

“What’s going on?!”

Tara shoved her way to the door and hit the button to avoid answering their questions.

Angelica pushed harder. “Did he promise you a spot on the council? Or do you already have one?”

Tara grunted.

Because she didn’t deny the accusation, the troops took it as fact.

“Traitor!”

A knife slammed into the wall next to Tara.

Tara spun around, drawing her gun. “Who threw that?!”

“Tell us what you know!”

“Don’t let her get inside!”

Angelica knew the time had come. She lunged forward and grabbed Tara’s arm before the woman could reach safety, jerking her around. The gun went flying.

Tara immediately jerked her knife from her belt and began to stab Angelica in any place that she could reach.

Angelica changed, taking more hits that her cloak deflected enough to prevent mortal injury. Tara wasn’t wearing her cloak. Angelica lunged forward with her wrist blade extended and knives in both hands.

Tara rolled forward, punching Angelica in the mouth and knocking her backward. The blades still sliced into the older woman’s hands and arms, but she didn’t react to it.

Jason got his son out of the way, surrounded by Defenders who observed in angry confusion.

Angelica swung back viciously, trying to find a soft spot, but Tara was too quick. The woman had obviously spent her life fighting and she was good at it.

Angelica took another stab in the arm and a punch to the chest. Dazed at the fast reflexes, Tara knocked her to the ground and stole her air.

Tara rushed forward again.

Angelica rolled, hitting the feet of guards as she tried to avoid the boot blade. Blood smeared across the concrete as she continued to roll.

Tara jumped, trying to get ahead of Angelica. Flipping the handle on the move, she brought her knife down in a vicious display of strength.

Angelica caught the blade right before it sank into her neck, grunting in effort to keep it from finishing the plunge.

This time, Jason felt the moment arrive. He let go of his son’s hand and charged forward. The knife Angelica had given him this morning was curled under his palm as he reached the struggling females and slammed his fist down against Tara’s neck.

Tara gaped, unable to believe Angelica had chosen less than honorable methods. “Pruetts don’t do that!”

“How does it feel to be stabbed in the back by family?” Angelica grinned as Tara slid to her knees, blood running from the corner of her mouth.

“Pruett’s adapt.” Angelica shifted over to put an arm around Jason in comfort. “You are officially removed from our family, *grandmother*.”

Tara’s lids fluttered shut. “See you in hell.”

Angelica shrugged. “Maybe, but not today.”

She regarded the surprised, staring guards around her. They weren’t sure if they should arrest her, kill her, or join her. “There are males inside this complex, males who betrayed us. Pruetts wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t true. You know my family. We don’t bluff and we don’t lie.” She glanced down at Tara, who had finally stopped trying to live. “We do take out the trash.”

Angelica sighed, bleeding, hurting, and ashamed. “There’s a lot more trash inside. I can’t do this alone. Help me?”

Her request had been phrased in such a way that none of the Defenders could resist. These women had been alone for a long time. The image of men inside, ready to be used, fired them up.

Angelica pointed toward the door. “Let’s get that open.”

Troops rushed forward to comply.

Jason kept a hold of his son as the women around him attacked the entrance. He didn’t feel any remorse for killing Tara. In fact, he was proud of it.

Jamie glanced up at his father. “Grandpa will be very unhappy.”

“Good. I have a few things to say to him, too.”

Instead of joining the fighters as they tried to penetrate the center, Angelica searched for a camera. When she found it, she marched over to be the main object in focus. She had no doubt someone was watching everything happening out here. Using women had been a mistake. The Network needed them to be able to operate in public and grow power, but not all the women had known they were serving a government of men bent on putting women in chains.

Angelica flashed the family grin. “If you surrender now, I’ll go easy on you.”

Inside the bunker, Julian screamed in rage.

**2**

“I think we’re under attack.”

The family had been resting, but the sound of fighting outside had woken many of them.

Bruce pointed toward the dark view screen. “I think that’s why we lost the monitors a little while ago.”

The screens had shut off abruptly during a news report playing Candice’s coup recording. When nothing else had happened, the family had returned to resting. Except for Bruce and Mary. Mary was working on a plan to get them out of here alive and Bruce was worrying over Candice. He was sure she was in trouble.

So was Daniel, but he had his hands full taking care of the two young children. The family around him was only helping a little, giving him a crash course in parenthood. Daniel’s nerves were already reaching a breaking point.

The barrier to their quarters slid open to reveal a twitchy leader followed by half a dozen guards.

“Get over here!” Julian grabbed Mary by the arm and dragged her over to the control panel on the wall, ignoring the instant hostility from everyone else.

Daniel put a hand on Bruce’s wrist when he would have interfered.

“Tell her to stand down!” Julian hit the button and brought up a screen that showed the outside of the training center.

Angelica’s grinning face brought chuckles from nearly everyone.

“I’ll kill you all! Tell her to quit!”

Mary knew he wasn’t bluffing, but she could only give one response. “You wanted us here. We’re only missing Sam now.”

An evil expression came over Julian’s face. “That one won’t be joining us. I arranged other lodgings for her. Perhaps we’ll get to view the game.” Julian shoved Mary away from the monitor and shut it off. “What’s her price?”

“She doesn’t have one. She’s coming in.” Mary smirked. “For you.”

“They can’t get in here.”

“Then why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared of anything!” Julian leaned into her face, so angry he was spitting. “I’m a Pruett! Everyone is afraid of me!”

Mary didn’t react at all.

Julian lifted his hand.

Family and friends stood up and moved toward him. Bruce was in the lead, with Daniel right behind him.

The male guards ran for the door, not about to challenge them in defense of their boss.

Mary waited, not sure how she would react. It had been a long time since she had been hit like this and she had never been struck by a male.

Julian paused, feeling the danger. He lowered his hand and rotated toward the exit, glaring crimson at the guards who were now running down the hall to avoid his wrath. “She can’t get in here.” Julian opened the door and stepped through. “She can’t reach me. But I can reach all of you.”

Julian left with that threat.

Bruce hurried over to verify Mary was okay.

Mary shrugged off his concern. “We have bigger problems. Everyone come over here. I memorized the code he used to activate this console. Block the view from the camera.”

Pruetts quickly gathered around their matriarch, feeling like they’d won a victory. Julian’s behavior hadn’t been steady, stable, or reliable. With him acting like that, it would give Candice a better chance to kill him.

None of the others were sure why Julian wasn’t already dead after being alone with Candice. It made them worried that she might be gone, but none of them voiced the fear. Until the body was found, they would assume she was alive.

Mary and Bruce knew she was alive and kicking somewhere. Julian couldn’t complete his plan without her.

“He’s not sure about Sam coming. He lied. He does bluff.”

Everyone turned to look at Daniel, who should have been occupied with the fussy infant and squirming toddler in his arms.

“You still think he expects Sam to come here instead of falling for whatever trap he set for her.” Mary frowned. “Why?”

Daniel pointed at a child in the corner who was eyeing them in fear and anger. “He brought Baker’s brother. He wasn’t sure if Sam might show up here and he wanted to have it covered. He really is a Pruett.”

Mary stared at the feral child who had been brought out of the vulture nursery under what could only have been ugly circumstances; she was forced to admit Daniel was right. Julian was going to be the first worthy adversary they had come across. It wasn’t comforting.

**3**

“What happens now?”

Angelica pointed toward the camera. “He’ll get tired of watching me kill his troops and destroy his beautiful creations. He’ll make contact through the camera. We’ll make a deal. He’ll lie. So will we.”

Jason’s lips twitched. “I’ve never seen this side of you.”

Angelica grunted. “No one has.”

“How long do you think it will be before he makes contact?”

Angelica shrugged. “This is a fortress and he’s well supplied. It depends on how much time I need to buy for Candice to get whatever it is she’s searching for.”

Jason frowned. “How do you know she’s searching for something?”

“Because she hasn’t killed everyone on this island and taken over it. If she had found what she was searching for, she would be opening the door and inviting us in.”

Jason believed that could be true, which meant the situation was more dangerous than he’d estimated. Even if they got inside the complex, there would be a battle between the guards in there and the women out here. Jason didn’t want to see any of it. The hateful changelings around them were already making him uncomfortable. He and Jamie were huddled at Angelica’s side, hoping nothing triggered a fight. There was no way she could defend them against so many. Once the barrier opened and these women got inside, any males they found probably wouldn’t survive.

Angelica was aware of his unease. She shifted the pair so they were between her and the wall. If the boss man didn’t make contact soon, she would be forced to trigger him to keep Jason and his son safe. The women out here were only going to wait so long.

“Angelica Pruett!” The speaker crackled, quieting the crowd of furious changelings. The voice was male.

Angelica signaled to indicate she was listening.

“Surrender or I’ll kill your family.”

A male voice making such a threat against a female was unheard of. It caused an instant reaction in the crowd. Fights broke out as female changelings were unable to control their rage.

Angelica flipped a finger toward the camera.

Jason couldn’t help the chuckle. Angelica’s defiance of authority and refusal to play by Network rules was always going to be a source of admiration for him. She was fearless.

Angelica was terrified. She was playing an awful game with a madman. Their lives meant nothing to him. Angelica suddenly wished Candice was out here and she was in there. *One wrong move will see us all dead.*

Chapter Thirty-Six

**Skeletons**

Western Borderlands

**1**

**I**t only took them half the normal time to reach the power bunker. Sam had refused to stop. She’d been cooped up and hurt. She wanted to ride.

There were three routes through the Borderlands–two roundabout paths and one shorter, narrower way. Each came with its own dangers. The two outer paths were the most commonly traveled and unsafe due to bandits and changelings. They were the routes Candice and Angelica had chosen to take during their flights through the area. The center, less used route, exemplified the reason for the fear of this territory. The two hundred miles of arid, uneven terrain and rapidly changing weather was home to mutations that had been breeding unchecked for centuries. Sam chose that path.

“Ready?”

Sam nodded at Rosa’s question. Baker was behind her and once again secured to her by a rope. They were all wearing rainproof ponchos, which made him less noticeable as they entered the Borderlands in a tight formation.

The wind lashed out in greeting.

Goggles were lowered and cloaks were adjusted, but they didn’t stop. Sam had driven them straight through since leaving the safe house, but making camp here would be the act of a novice.

The landscape went from calmly dying brown to cracked tan that said the rains hadn’t come yet. *Good. Maybe we got lucky with our timing*. The rain came for a few weeks a year, but the storm cells stayed together for hundreds of miles, springing tornadoes like a fountain.

Rustic buildings once used for shelter were deep in the sand; they added a rougher layer of passage for the Mopars. Right after the war, there had been an attempt to return some cities to order. Most had been wiped from existence by nature or the Network, leaving no place for survivors or rebels to hide. Stone Mountain had been the last den in the eastern country, and there was only two others that Sam knew of. One was north of these lands, in the mountains. Candice had chosen to skip that with the rebel males and send them straight to the border wall instead.

The other den was ten miles from where the Network was holding their required power meeting. The location of the power bunker had been easy to come by, thanks to the council member they were holding, but before now, they had hunted this area and rebels had hidden here, all without ever knowing how close they were to a Network stronghold.

Baker was bored. He had heard a lot about the Borderlands, all exciting, but when they drove and kept driving until he was almost asleep against Sam’s hot shoulders, he had grown bored. It was nice to be so close to her, to feel the way she controlled the Mopar, but he was sore and his ass was starting to tingle. He also wasn’t sure how much more his stomach was going to take after a fast breakfast of dried snake. It wasn’t what he was used to and it had his guts rocking.

The wind pushed against the riders.

Baker felt Sam mold herself to the bike and tried to do the same as his stomach clenched again.

“Go right!” one of the rear escorts shouted.

Sam swerved to the left as a huge sinkhole opened up in front of them, following the code of opposites in case it was an ambush.

Another hole opened. Sam expertly swerved around again. The Runners were doing the same, forced to break ranks to avoid crashing into the holes.

“Woo-hoo!”

Baker stared in annoyance as one of the females shouted in fun. This wasn’t a flat road. Didn’t she care about getting hurt?

Baker realized all the big women were grinning or going faster. *Nuts. They’re all nuts.*

No longer bored, Baker held on to Sam and tried not to get sick.

Sam pointed to the right, where a herd of horned turkeys peered up in alarm at their approach.

Baker was immediately distracted.

Thanks to the information from Angelica and Candice, Sam was able to handle Baker. They had also told her he would need nausea medicine on trips. Once they stopped, she would handle it. The fragile bachelors weren’t used to traveling. Candice had warned her of everything that could go wrong, except for how quickly they would develop a bond.

The herd of turkeys flew into the air.

Baker laughed at the sight.

It was contagious, bringing smiles from the women. It gave Sam a sense of pride and warmth, reminding her of when she had been happy, back before the change had made her into a killer.

The ground grew drier as they traveled, showing shattered cracks and no tracks on the hardpan. It should mean no one was around, but a sudden sense of being watched crept over Sam. She drew her gun.

The Runners followed her lead.

Sam was pleasantly surprised when Baker shifted to the left and used his hand to help rebalance their weight on the Mopar. It felt natural to share control with him; she pushed the bike faster.

Ahead of them, Rosa made a motion and veered off the main path.

Sam followed, approving. Her XO was avoiding a possible ambush.

Now on even more uneven terrain, Sam shoved the gun into Baker’s big hand and took control of the bike. She felt his surprise and reluctance, but she had her hands full as they reached the ditches.

Drilled by four centuries of flash flooding during the torrential rains, it was a wild ride of gaps, dips, holes, and relics of the old world.

“Damn!” Baker saw them coming.

The gulls rose from the ruts beside the Mopars, lunging for the draft.

He raised the gun, horrified. Baker saw bald heads and black eyes, and realized the gulls were sightless. Half a dozen, they were each the size of the bikes. “Look out!”

Sam swerved to the left at Baker’s shout.

One of the huge mutations swept by, barely missing her.

Another flew over the convoy, nails striking out.

Baker fired the gun.

*Bang!*

The noise immediately made up for his miss, sending the birds to a higher altitude. They circled above the riders, squawking angrily.

Baker stayed ready with Sam’s gun.

The gulls followed for a time, but stayed well above. Baker assumed the noise of guns was one people didn’t make often here or maybe the birds were especially sensitive to it. Storing the information, he didn’t do the same with her gun because Sam hadn’t told him to yet.

*He defended us!* Sam was in shock. Every bit of that had been Baker. Even Daniel hadn’t handled himself so well. Sam couldn’t stop the huge grin that came across her face.

Sam felt his hand rise at the next movement to the left and shook her head.

They passed the bobcats without coming to harm or causing any. Bobcats were one of the few animals in the Borderlands that didn’t attack on sight. They preferred the carrion left from vultures.

Baker lowered the gun, scanning tensely.

Sam nodded her approval. He would be easy to train. If he wanted a place in the family business, he had just earned a shot at it.

**2**

The rough ride lasted until they were a few hours from the Network power bunker and then the sky changed. It went from swirling colors to dark clouds carrying dust, forcing them to pull over.

Sam was the only one who didn’t stare at Baker or offer him congratulations. She handed Rosa a map. “Red is good, blue is bad. If we get split up, I’ll search these first.”

Rosa studied it for a minute and then put it away.

“We’ll keep rolling.” Sam spent a minute handling her business and then got on the Mopar. Baker had done the same next to her, cheeks scarlet.

The Runners didn’t argue with her decision, even though the storm would definitely hit before they reached the bunker. It would be safer to hole up, but the sense that time was getting tight was tugging on them all.

They were able to stay ahead of the storm until they reached the desert grasslands. This was the most dangerous part of the untamed area; the Runners changed formation. They didn’t have a full complement and they were getting low on ammo.

Baker had switched the gun to his other hand after an hour and then back after another. He was glad he had rotated as the wolves came out of the sandy grass.

Baker pulled the trigger. He didn’t fire the first shot, but it was close between him and Rosa.

Flying through the tall weeds around them, the wolves were snarling, snapping nightmares that longed for blood as much as any changeling.

The noise of the guns was deafening, but the wolves paid no attention.

Baker spotted a large stone wall and assumed they would find shelter there. As the wall neared and the dust storm bore down on them, the wolves doubled in number. Then tripled. The guns took them down easily, but more came in to take their place.

Ahead, a group of ambushing animals charged at Rosa.

Sam pointed so Baker knew which ones to hit first.

He did a great job, but it wasn’t enough to keep the wolves from reaching the Runner. A big animal flew into her.

Rosa jerked the wheel, tires lifting… She rolled the bike.

Sam slowed and swung around. Never being split up was a hard rule they always followed.

Sam opened the gun portals on the outside of the bike and began circling Rosa, firing to keep the wolves at bay.

The Runner stayed below the line of fire. When Sam paused, Rosa leapt.

Baker grunted, but helped hold the woman on as Sam sped away.

The others hurried into formation around them.

Rosa leapt from their bike onto the rear of Melissa’s. They all sped for the wall as dust began to fly over the landscape.

The wall wasn’t solid, but it was as if there was an invisible border there that the animals refused to cross. The wolves skidded to a halt at the stone, howling.

On the other side of the wall, the ground sloped into a steep hill the Runners cleared at a fast pace.

As they hit the top, Sam waved.

The group slowed to view what she had.

“An old city!” Baker’s enthusiasm faded as he realized this was also an old battlefield. He estimated it had been at least a year because of the color of the bones, but it was impossible to be sure. They could have been here from the beginning. Once a well populated city, it was now just another graveyard from the old world.

Sam rolled forward, crossing over the bones and debris. She could feel Baker shuddering behind her. She hated putting him through this, but it was necessary. The dust storm was too fast. She’d tried to stay ahead of it, but they weren’t going to be able to much longer.

“There!” Sam stopped the Mopar and tugged Baker off the bike with her.

The Runners also stopped and hurried to where she’d pointed.

“We’ve got it!” Rosa and Melissa lifted the hatch and immediately dropped into the hole in the ground.

Baker groaned, vaguely aware of Runners securing the Mopars with chains quickly shot into the hard ground.

Sam pushed him over to the hole and picked him up as the winds increased. Sand blew over all of them.

Baker thought of resisting. “I could just walk.”

Sam shook her head, grinning. “To get to this den, we have to fall.”

Sam jumped into the hole.

Baker held on, screaming in her ear.

Sam kissed him to silence the noise.

They hit the platform below and stopped abruptly. Sam’s gravity boots beeped to signal they were empty.

Baker grunted as Sam pulled him into her side, clutching her for balance. “I may be sick.”

Sam laughed and pulled him along as she moved to let the others through.

The last Runner to jump grabbed an old rope and used it to slam the hatch shut as she dropped. If not for his terror, Baker would have had a hundred questions about this place and who set it up. Instead, he couldn’t stop shivering. If not for the lights the Runners were striking, Sam might have had to sedate him.

“Let’s go.” Sam led the way.

Baker stayed as close to Sam as he could without climbing onto her back. His uneven breathing and heavy steps were the only sounds in the tunnel. He had a lot of questions and concerns, but mostly, he just hated the dark. Slavery had seen to that.

“We’ll be good here.” Sam chose a cubby and went to it.

The enclave looked as though it had been set up for storage. Baker wondered what, if anything, all the dusty crates might be holding. He wasn’t surprised when two of the Runners immediately began to find out.

Sam cut the rope between them and slid down the wall. When she motioned toward him, he took the seat in front of her.

“We’re only an hour away. Sleep for a while if you can. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Comforted, Baker did as she instructed.

Sam stayed awake. She and Baker were fully bonded and it was terrifying. She couldn’t imagine being without him and yet, every second they traveled west made that reality more likely. Despite her bravado, Sam wasn’t sure they were coming out of this. They might go down in a blaze of glory to end the hold the Network had over their country. She was already mourning the loss and celebrating the honor.

**3**

“There’s nothing left.”

Sam didn’t respond to Melissa as they sat atop the hill to observe. The nuclear powered bunker in front of them had obviously been breached. On either side of the entrance was an untouched fuel depot and an animal shelter, but the door was open and smoke was pouring out. There were also bodies on the ground in front of the entrance. The animals, however, were grazing peacefully. They hadn’t been harmed or taken. This section of the Borderlands was near to where the western territory started. Built after the war, this bunker had protected elite members of the council for three hundred years. That was all over now.

“Who do you think did this?”

Sam shrugged at Melissa’s question. With everything that had been going on, this area should have been light on security. She doubted the council would have ordered troops out here to handle something when a bomb was scheduled to take care of it in just a couple of weeks anyway. This appeared to be an outside force.

Baker grimaced. “Are we going in?”

Sam rolled her dusty Mopar down the sandy hill as an answer. There might be things they needed inside, but she was positive there would be information.

Baker wished she had made a different choice. The bunker door being open was a bad sign.

Their escort stayed alert, also noticing Baker’s unease. If not for Sam’s choice, none of the women would have ventured inside. For most of them, this bunker represented everything that was wrong with their world and it had needed to be destroyed. Finding out someone had done that was a relief. For others, they didn’t want to know what macabre experiments had been conducted in there.

Sam ignored them all and entered the bunker, curious about what lay inside. As far as she knew, none of the Pruetts had ever been inside the power bunker, so this was another first for her family.

Outside the bunker, half of the Runners stayed with their vehicles and kept an eye out for the villains to return. The rest followed their boss inside.

Sam found bodies as soon as she entered. Lights were on in the distance, giving a narrow pathway of illumination that revealed well-dressed citizens wearing screams of death. There were bullet casings, along with knives and arrows, littering the floors. It was clear there had been a brutal battle here.

“Hey!” Baker pointed. “I recognize her.”

Sam studied the dead body with pink hair. Her throat had been slit. “Former Den Mother?”

“Yes.” Baker had been in and out of the complex enough times to recognize the regular people. “I think she was also a rental for member number two.”

Sam stored the information, listening for signs of survivors or attackers.

The lounges in the bunker were as lavish and decadent as Sam had imagined upon learning of this place. The people who came to these meetings had ruled in the past. They weren’t going to be kept in shabby conditions. The brothels, kitchens, and entertainment areas were the same. Sam saw illegal films and educational material that even the Pruetts couldn’t get. The medical bay was also heavily stocked, making Sam glad to know there was an area like this nearby if she needed it. When the war was over, she might have to come back and explore everything in here. It would take a lifetime to read it all and figure out everything that had been perpetrated against past and current populations.

The utilities were also still intact. It was pleasantly cool, with active radios and view screens in the rooms they were passing. Clips came to them as they explored the bunker.

*“With no word from the government for two full days now, citizens are starting to wonder what comes next. There has also been no word from the Pruetts after their initial claims of controlling the country. Everyone is waiting to discover who is leading us. In the meantime, fights for that position have broken out in all major cities across the country.”*

When Baker would have entered the rooms to switch off the devices, Sam stopped him. If there were anyone in here, the fading noises would tell him or her that company had arrived. Sam suspected they weren’t alone. This was suddenly feeling like a well-laid trap.

None of the compartments in the bunker were sealed. It took Sam a minute of concentration at one of the hand consoles to determine the safety switches had been overridden. That implied a traitor in the bunker had let the enemy in by the front door. Sam studied the information, trying to figure out what had happened.

“There should be a control booth, with a log of events.”

Sam was interested in how Baker had so much information about an area that even the Pruetts hadn’t explored, but she didn’t question him on it yet. She moved further down the hall.

The control room was on the first floor, in the center of the dimly lit bunker. Despite outward appearances that the complex might stretch for miles under the hillside, it wasn’t that big. According to the map Sam found on the door, the bunker only had thirty compartments. That wasn’t so large by any standard. In comparison, the family home had twelve. Sam was glad the bunker was small. It would make exploring it easier, and also defending it, if they were attacked.

Sam scanned the map for areas she wanted to search. When she had her bearings straight, she walked deeper into the complex, tiring of the news clips.

*“UN officials are reporting a large group of escaped men who claim to have been enslaved all of their lives. Investigators have entered the country in a large armada, but have not made contact with anyone on the mainland yet. This news agency assumes the UN is waiting for a ruler to be chosen so information can be exchanged in a meeting.”*

Sam considered the little they knew about the Network’s dealings with the UN and determined the announcer was wrong. Either the armada had been given permission to enter the country or they’d broken international law based on the rebel male’s stories of horror. It didn’t matter which one to Sam, but it might to Candice. She wouldn’t like anyone interfering in the sovereignty of their country.

Sam quickly reached the evacuation chamber, as labeled on the map, heels clicking in a steady rhythm down the glittering floors that belonged in a palace and not a bunker. Sam had never seen such finery and doubted she ever would again. These relics would be placed in museums or melted down to provide multiple rations for thousands of families. Greed would not be allowed in the new New America.

Sam wondered if slavery would be. With everything that had happened, she doubted Candice would free the males, but it was impossible to guess what her brilliant cousin would decide. Sam planned to agree with her, no matter how hard it was. Candice was the leader of their family. She would be honored as such.

At one point in their youth, Sam had been jealous of Candice. Older, stronger, and wilder, Sam had believed responsibility for their family should have been hers. She wasn’t sure exactly when her impression had changed in that area, but she now thought it had been shortly after Candice returned from the complex after trying to rescue Daniel the first time. Though Candice had failed, she had shown more determination to rescue a loved one than Sam had seen from their family.

Forced to split up to keep the Network from recognizing their power, it was common for their family to go years without visiting each other. They had loyalty, but they didn’t have emotional bonds. That hadn’t been true of Candice. Over the years, she had proven she would do anything for her family, including bleed for them. It had earned Sam’s respect. She would never cross Candice. If Candice decided men needed to remain in chains, that’s what would happen.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

**Properly Honored**

**1**

**T**hey entered the evacuation chamber and found it in pristine condition.

Melissa frowned. “Maybe they didn’t have time to use it?”

Sam pointed. There was a small path of sand leading to a cabinet behind the open door. There was also more sand leading into the open tunnel.

Sam went to the cabinet.

Behind her, the Runners got ready to fire, trusting her instincts.

Baker stayed out of the way.

Sam jerked the cabinet open.

A trembling man cowered in the bottom of the cabinet with bruised arms over his head. “Please don’t kill me!”

Sam holstered her gun. “Convince me that I shouldn’t.”

Felix glanced up at her in tearful terror. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Sam motioned the Runners to get the shaking man out of the cabinet. “What happened here?”

The man cringed away from the females, crawling toward Baker. “We were betrayed.” He stood up and spat on the floor. “The western women let the rest of them in, but they didn’t have the passcodes. It could only have come from the boss.” The man glared at Sam. “I know who you are. I demand justice!”

Sam frowned at him as Baker made a rude gesture. “Why would I give that to you? You are the enemy. You’ve done Julian’s bidding your entire life.”

Felix recoiled from the name. “You can’t know that!”

“You’d be surprised.” Sam gestured at the monitors. “Why do you believe I should give you justice for the boss betraying an evil henchman?”

“My relative was Gerald Marsh, who spared women during the war. He also spoke in favor of a mutual existence. All he got for his trouble was hanged.”

Sam leaned against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest. “Tell me everything you know and I’ll consider your request.”

Felix began to spill his secrets.

Sam already knew most of them, but the family tie came as a shock. “That’s why he drew Candice in!”

Felix shook his head. “That’s why he drew all of you in. Julian’s captive heirs can’t procreate. He’s trying to find a way to make sure his part of the line survives.”

“What else?”

“This facility housed the elders of the past.”

Now he had Sam’s full attention. Funeral ceremonies were forbidden. All bodies were taken to a crematory and the ashes were then dumped into holes on their property. Mourning wasn’t encouraged and there were never stones or plaques like they read about in the old books. The funeral rites of the council had always been secret, though the populace had assumed they were given different options. Even the wealthy were cremated though, so no one had been sure. “Take me there.”

Felix hurried toward the door, eager to obey and save his life.

Sam knew what was expected in exchange, but the man had made a deal and she wasn’t going to change it.

“This is morbid.” Rosa turned toward the door. “I’ll be on duty outside.”

Sam wasn’t surprised. After what Rosa had been through, it was a wonder she was capable of performing her duties at all. Sam, on the other hand, didn’t find it morbid. In fact, as she entered the Cryo Room, she was impressed and felt as though the people had been properly honored for whatever sacrifices they had made toward the recovery of their country. If she hadn’t known how evil the Network was, and how they achieved their goals, she might have been fooled into thinking they were civilized. All she needed to do was consider the games to know that was an illusion.

Elite members had probably been shipped to stasis chambers, and promised that they too would receive such respect and admiration while waiting for technology to provide them immortality. It had given Julian an edge over everyone that had been unmatchable.

Sam couldn’t help being impressed. It was genius. The only thing she wondered was why Julian had felt the need to eliminate the people in this bunker. The Network had obviously been doing business this way for centuries. The west had been under control with deliveries of wagons that contained the supplies they couldn’t make on their own, and fresh males. The east had been completely in control of the rest of the country. The only thing Sam could come up with was the elite members hadn’t agreed it was time to implement the final part of the plan that would put men in control of the world. The reason she believed that was because most of the bodies in this bunker were male.

It appeared as though the power people had been having trouble with their own. That also meant Julian had a lot of children somewhere. Even though those males couldn’t produce children, if Felix was to be believed, they were still in the line of succession and that would have to be dealt with.

The chambers were too frosted to make out features, but they lined the walls in a bizarre display of technology that made Sam’s head hurt when she considered the lives of their citizens. None of them would believe stories about this place. It was too big of a tall tale. They would have to see it and even then, they would be tempted to block it out like Sam was. The Network’s experiments were extensive. It would take them years to go through everything and determine which programs needed to be stopped or expanded upon. Sam hoped Candice decided to get rid of it all. Nothing the Network had started should be finished.

Sam went to the first cryogenic pod and picked up a dusty folder from the rack in front of it. She took her time reading, trying to absorb all the details. When she finished, she activated the security log.

Sam tapped the computer file next. There was a single disk available. She chose it, not expecting much.

The small screen came to life. It went from static to a flashing warning that there was a two-day-old report waiting instead of a six-hour update.

“Someone will be in trouble for that.” The missing security check in coincided with the state of the bodies in the bunker. Sam rewound to the most recent file and then hit play. The scene that popped up immediately captivated her.

“Are you looking forward to stasis?”

The elderly man on the screen with the oxygen tube running through his nose bobbed. “It will be an honor to join our ancestors.”

The man on the tank next to him snorted in clogged amusement. “You sound like your grandson.”

Sam hit stop. Before she listened to more of that conversation, she needed to figure out who these people were.

The ten men were all over the age of fifty, with four of them elderly and not in good shape. From the brief bit she’d allowed to play, Sam assumed those men were getting ready to go into cryostasis.

Sam studied the room around the men, putting off the uncomfortable niggle in her mind that said she knew at least two of them.

The screens behind the men were active and plentiful. It was obvious they were able to monitor the entire bunker from here. Sam saw males in other rooms, but only young ones being cared for by Den Mothers who should have been in the complex to help with the bachelors. Sam recognized two of them from her cousin and her sister’s episodes. It appeared as though the Den Mothers were cooking, cleaning, fetching, babysitting, and performing other menial tasks for the former members.

Sam wondered vaguely where the families resided and then continued with her observations.

There were no western women in any of the rooms, except for the brothel. Sam recognized them by their different clothing and by the fact that they were the oldest females on any of the screens. The western women were clad in animal skins that implied they were more savage than their lavishly dressed counterparts in the room. Sam quickly scanned the cringing slaves and found convicted rebels and men who were too old to fight or breed. It was still better than what the west was used to, according to the rumors she had heard. Sam just felt sorry for the slaves.

Happy children playing caught Sam’s attention again and she peered harder at the screen. All of the children were boys. *Dark haired and black-eyed…*

Sam shuddered. Either all of the children had the same father or all of the families had the same DNA. Sam believed the first one was the most likely. *Occam’s razor*, she thought. It appeared as though Julian was trying to breed out the other members.

Uneasy feeling at a full boil, Sam hit play and observed the rest of the clip.

“Are you ready to eat now, sir?” One of the Den Mothers entered with a large tray carrying bowls. Her pink hair was in wild disarray.

The eldest man of the group, Flynn, glared at the woman. “You’re interrupting!”

The Den Mother immediately bowed and began to retreat from the room. Flynn’s displeasure was always painful, like his son’s. He had passed on everything he knew about torturing women so that when his boy inherited his place on the council, he would know how to handle them. Pink had been around for all of that and knew what was coming.

“Let the bitch go.” Nathan stood, gesturing. “Get out of here.”

The Den Mother vanished.

Flynn scowled at Nathan. “I wasn’t going to do it now.”

Nathan frowned back. “We have bigger problems. They didn’t send wagons or gifts this time. The western women are getting impatient. They also didn’t send bachelors. The ones we already have here are used up.”

“To hell with your food and whores!” Cramer shouted. “I want to know where Robert is! What has Julian done with my son?!”

Nathan turned an ugly glare on the man. “He’s busy taking care of rebels and the UN, not to mention a little side trip down family lane.”

Cramer’s face turned red. “You’ve been trying to eliminate us from the council for years! I don’t even know if that boy is mine!”

Nathan shrugged, cool tone dropping into place. “Then it shouldn’t matter to you if he’s dead or alive.”

The timbre was enough to put Cramer in his place. He slumped in the lavish chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

Sam had figured out who Julian’s family was. Her stomach was on fire as she stared at Nathan and Jonathan. One middle age and one elderly, they were both black haired, with dark eyes and intelligent expressions that warned an observant person to leave them be. The younger generation who was inheriting leadership wasn’t in the room. Sam found them on a monitor, being cared for by Den Mothers with purple, orange, and yellow hair. From the sneers the pink woman had gotten upon entering the power room, Sam assumed the men didn’t like the colorful hair. She was curious as to why they allowed it here. She kept watching, digging for more clues.

“It is odd that your son, Juli, hasn’t arrived yet.” Alvin gloated. “The last communication implied we have a traitor here. Shouldn’t he at least call to verify the problem has been resolved?”

“Yes! Now we are hearing rumors that the United Nations has proof we’ve allowed male slavery even after the world treaty was signed.” Theodore was the next highest ranking member after Nathan.

“Julian’s experiments have distracted him.” Victor was right below Theodore in rank. He had little fear of death from the others. “The island of men is causing rumors. That location was supposed to be used for the work on immortality, not an army of changeling males. The rumors of a vaccine, combined with his other errors, have caused the population to rise up against us. We have to do something about it.”

As the men contemplated and frowned at each other, Sam understood more than she wanted to. These former rulers supported male slavery because of greed. They didn’t have to share, and they could be as cruel as they wanted to be and the women were blamed. They were able to enjoy the games while working on immortality, and of course, they hated their citizens. There were many reasons for them to continue whatever grand plan had been put in motion by their ancestors. Sam suspected they only had sympathy when one of their own was affected and even then, it was a shallow worry. Cramer had already turned his attention to the buffet, appearing to forget about his missing son.

“At least our families are safe in the bunker under the Adelphia stadium.” Bryce was hoping Brandon, his son, was there.

Nathan sighed. “You have to understand where Julian is coming from. He doesn’t like it that we’ve been working toward a peace deal with the west or that we insisted he start releasing the vaccine to our country next year. The rest of the world has moved on and is recovering. Julian will never allow that here. He has to live up to the legacy of our great and terrible family.”

“It’s a shame to him that leaders before this have allowed male misery to sway them. We are more liberal than our parents, as are our children. Julian is not, because he’s the spitting image of Lucas.” Jonathan wheezed. “He will always try to match his ancestor’s ghost.”

“We need to find out when he’s coming. I have a new girl I believe he’ll enjoy torturing. Sasha is experienced in screaming.” Victor flashed a fake look of sympathy toward Nathan. “I’m sure this is a difficult decision for you. If you wish to recuse yourself, we will certainly understand.”

Nathan gestured toward the man standing outside the door now, waiting to speak with them. “Felix is going to get in the way. He has a nasty sense of loyalty and duty that we won’t be able to buy.”

Victor shrugged. “Felix has gotten out of control with the torture. Everyone here knows there’s really no traitor. Julian is just keeping us busy until he decides to show up.”

“I’ll have Sasha distract Felix as soon as Julian arrives.” Victor was sure it would work. “She has a sister we can use for Julian.”

Sam waited, expecting Nathan or Jonathan, Julian’s relatives, to protest, but they didn’t. It was obvious they agreed with the decision that had been made.

Sam suddenly understood. “It’s all of the rebels in Julian’s kingdom in one place. He sent all of them here to die. He knew they were going to try to kill him. He knew and they didn’t see it coming.”

Sam heard someone running down the hall. She quickly ejected a disk copy and slipped it into her pocket. There were eight other files on there that she wanted to watch.

“We’re under attack!” Heather ran in. “We shut the door, but we can’t lock it!”

Sam calmly walked toward the exit. “We’re being taken into custody.”

Felix scowled. “Custody? By who?”

Heather frowned. “The same people who trashed this place. We’re going to fight, right?”

Sam fought the urge to draw her weapon. “Like I said, we’re being taken into custody.”

Baker had forgotten the Pruetts wanted to know how things were in the west. It was vital to the restructuring of the country once this war was finished; it forced him to stop a protest as Sam stepped outside.

Groaning again, Baker slipped a knife into his underwear and followed her out. Where Sam went, so did he.

As they emerged, Sam’s group was glad she had chosen to surrender. The fifty aggressive, well-armed women waiting on horseback and bikes for them wouldn’t have allowed much room for error, especially since half their crew had already been captured. They would be better off trying to escape rather than facing the women. It was obvious they were responsible for the destruction of the bunker.

“Sam Pruett!” The muscular woman in front of the riders held up a sheet of parchment. “You are under arrest for murder, treason, conspiracy, and the kidnapping of a council member.”

Sam grinned. “Robert. He tasted yummy.”

Runners smirked as the western woman continued.

“You will be taken before the West Coast Council for judgment of your crimes.”

Sam calmly held up her hands. “I surrender.”

The expressions of the fighters surrounding them became disappointed. They had obviously been hoping for another battle.

Milena, their leader, snorted in contempt. “Some Pruett you are.”

Sam grinned. *You have no idea*. *But you will.*

Chapter Thirty-Eight

**Bachelor Town**

**1**

**“T**ie them up.” Milena pointed. “Eliminate that male.”

Before Sam could interfere, one of the Defenders tossed her knife.

The blade sank into Felix’s neck.

Gurgling in horror, he slipped to his knees.

Sam glared at the woman giving the orders.

Milena glared back. “This isn’t the pampered east. We don’t make deals with the enemy and we complete our missions even if we don’t agree with them.”

It was obvious that the woman was making a dig about Sam’s family turning on the Network.

Sam didn’t argue. The woman wore the marks of a head Defender, but Sam was positive this wild child wasn’t in contention for a seat on their council. She was too uncontrolled. Sam’s knowledge of the west was limited, but she and her Runners had discovered several things that held true in every female they’d met over here. One was they were all equal in their hatred of men. The other was they didn’t like mutants. They believed it ruined the bloodline. But the most valuable thing she had learned on runs in this territory was that all of the females were completely loyal to Marcella, the original founder of male slavery. To speak badly of that ancient icon was to ensure a death sentence. Because Sam and her family had always been stoic and slow to provoke, they had been able to travel through these areas without fear. Being a descendent of the infamous woman had certainly helped, but their icy behavior and legendary escape skills had often swayed people. The angry woman in front of her didn’t possess any of the charm that Sam’s family was known for. In fact, Sam wasn’t even sure the girl would be a good fight. Her XO, a stocky woman with more blades visible than Sam carried on her entire person, was a different story. Sam grinned, hoping they got the chance to battle.

Baker stared at her. “What is it with you guys?”

Milena immediately gestured. “How dare you speak! Kill him!”

Sam stepped in front of Baker. “If you’re supposed to bring me in alive, that won’t help your cause.”

Milena held up a hand, stopping the women who had begun to react to her order. “He is yours?”

“Baker is a free man. He holds his own papers.”

Milena scowled. “That is not allowed.”

“Baker is Wanted by your bosses.” Sam hadn’t wanted to give out that information, but it was obvious from the way the women were eyeing Baker what was going to happen if his ownership wasn’t hashed out immediately. She would only be able to kill so many of them before they got her. The odds weren’t good.

Milena studied Baker. “It is easy for me to discover if you are telling the truth. Don’t lie. Who are you?”

“Richard Baker.”

“The leader of the rebels?”

Baker grinned. “The one and only, baby.”

Milena gestured eagerly. “Secure him.”

Sam motioned Baker to submit as the women tied his hands together and led him toward one of the horses. She had done the best she could to secure his safety, for now.

“These are your…Runners?”

Sam nodded again at Milena’s snotty query.

Milena scanned them. “I will consider some of them for my crew if they switch loyalty and take a proving test. The rest will be put to work guarding the brothels.”

Sam and her group didn’t protest as they were bound. Sam’s crew understood she wanted to be captured.

Sam was taken to a horse. Before the troops could lift her onto it, Sam leapt from a dead stop and took her place. Ignoring the surprise, she kicked the horse into motion and claimed the spot next to Milena.

When she stuck her nose in the air, Milena chuckled. “Acting like one of us does not make it true.”

Sam didn’t answer. She was busy observing everything about their hosts. She was positive survival would lie in the small details. Sam didn’t see the hounds that usually accompanied troop treks into the Borderlands. She also didn’t see radios or many guns. It led her to believe the west was living in a more primitive fashion. This theory was held up by the wagons following behind the horses. They had obviously been filled from the bunker, but most of the goods hadn’t been taken. “When will we reach the council?”

“An hour.”

That meant the complex was nearby. “What did Julian pay you for betraying everyone here? I assume this power meeting also held members from the west.”

Milena pouted. “We didn’t get as much as I wanted, but my mother makes the rules until I inherit leadership. We traded five wagons of supplies, twenty slaves, and a promise that he won’t send the male changelings here.”

Sam understood the west knew men were leading the council. They were in on it. “Does Julian have men on the council out here, too?”

Milena grew angry. “Males do not hold power in the west! We follow the teachings of our founder, unlike you!”

“And yet, you know the truth and did nothing.”

“We also knew the men being freed would trigger the failsafe to turn them into changelings. We hate you for putting this newest war into motion.” Milena kicked her horse and got ahead to avoid more talking.

Sam stored details. The women around her were staring, trying to place her with the rumors they’d heard of wild Pruetts attempting to free rebel men. No words were spoken, but Sam was clear from the exchanged glances that these women really did hate her for her moral line. The idea of free men was abhorrent to them. They were all her enemy. “What am I being arrested for, specifically?”

Milena jerked a hand toward the slaughter they were leaving. “You wiped out a lot of powerful families. There has to be payment.”

Sam grinned. “If I had done it, there wouldn’t have been a survivor.”

Melina flushed as guards snickered.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because I was told to.” Milena directed the wagon train. “Stay close. If you try to run, the troops will shoot you.”

Sam didn’t tell the snotty girl Pruetts didn’t run.

They rode for a few minutes before dusty shacks began to come up in the distance. While they were so far out, it was plain to see five roads coming straight down the middle of five fields. The fields appeared to stretch endlessly into the distance. As they got closer, they were able to see all of the fields were different, with familiar and strange plants mixed together. The only thing that was separate was the race of the workers.

Sam studied that, then confirmed her guess with a question. “What happens if someone crosses into the wrong area?”

“Killed on the spot by the first guard who can reach them.” Milena gave Sam a challenging glare. “If you survive the punishments, I’ll ask that you’re put here for hard labor. Then maybe you can find out.”

“You appear to have a personal problem with me.”

Milena lifted her nose into the air. “You’ll see.”

Sam saw the family tattoo on Milena’s neck. It was obvious she had flinched from the way the edges were blurred. “Do you have rebel males here?”

“A few. Most end up like that.” Milena pointed.

Sam and her crew grimaced at the four hanging corpses. Sam assumed they would see more demonstrations like that the further they traveled. It was a warning. “We have more freedom in the east.”

“You have decadence and greed in the east. We kill to serve our greater good.”

“And what is that?”

Milena repeated the answer automatically. “Ensuring Marcella’s vision lives forever.”

*Fanatic. Great*. Sam didn’t say that or let it show on her face.

The guards on the shacks noticed them coming, tensing in anticipation of a problem. When Milena led them toward the path where the white laborers were toiling in the sun and dusty wind, the other troops relaxed.

Sam understood race separation was a strict thing here. She had never been this far into the west. She wasn’t familiar with the customs, but she instantly disliked that one. All of the workers were scarred and apathetic, barely cringing from the electronic batons of the overseers strolling the fields to keep them laboring. “What do you do that makes them so lifeless?”

“We don’t give them false hope. Our laborers are bred for exactly that. They live and die to serve the Network.”

“How do you rise in rank here?”

“Only through birth.”

“Council bastards?”

“You can make top Defender if you kill everyone else vying for the job, but you can’t be on the council unless you’re related.”

Sam had many other questions, but she suspected she wouldn’t get full answers from Milena. She stored them for later, for when she was talking to the boss.

**2**

The sight of Bachelor Town brought the convoy to a halt on the rise above the buildings. It wasn’t a myth. It was right before their eyes, stinking and covered in dust, but it was here. Sam and her Runners had been listening to fabulous stories about a town of men for their entire careers, but none of them had believed.

Milena and her escorts enjoyed the expressions of the new people.

Sam, along with the rest of her group, gawked in surprise. The hillside in front of them slipped down a narrow path and wound between the jagged cliffs, creating a clearing that was the center strip of a town with five streets. Set into treacherous red stone, were homes, businesses, and guard shacks. Inside many of these, and lingering on some balconies as if no shortage existed, were males.

Baker stared in resignation, instantly recognizing his own kind.

Sam’s Runners filled the air with mutters.

“The bachelor city.”

“They look empty.”

“All of them are branded.”

“We’re drawing attention. Male in the middle.”

Baker flinched at the hot bodies of the Runners who surrounded him on all sides, but he was glad of it.

Milena watched in jealousy as Sam’s crew responded immediately to her order. Her own support never reacted so quickly.

The Runners compared sizes, weapons, and alertness of the town guards, not liking the results they were coming up with.

Baker felt Sam’s rope go back around his wrist and didn’t struggle.

Milena moved forward. “Let’s go.”

As they traveled, the Runners shifted positions to stay around Sam and Baker.

Milena expressed her disapproval. “He is in no danger from us. If he belongs to the council, he will not be harmed here.”

“Good to know.” Sam didn’t change her order however, or their positions.

The first buildings held women of multiple nationalities going about their daily activities. The second row sheltered the hounds and Defenders who watched their approach in suspicion. The last block had brothels. One on each corner, they were labeled by race instead of a name.

Sam made an ugly gesture that all of her Runners understood. If there was an opportunity, they were going to liberate this town.

The slaves didn’t react to the newest group of changelings coming in to use their services, but the women did. Their faces went slack with need at the sight of a fresh man.

“Head down, right now!” Sam glared at him. “And no talking. *Not one word*.”

Baker obeyed instantly, feeling the danger.

The security team continued to observe Sam and her group. They had heard stories of the rebel males, but the cringing slaves around them had prevented them from believing it. In fact, most of them were certain Sam had lied about Baker being Wanted. It was more probable that he was a crew tag. All the hard women on a team would share one or two males while on runs, tagging them for their crew.

Milena suddenly hoped Baker was put into the brothels. He was well cared for, unlike the slaves here that she had already picked over.

The ride through the town was five minutes of hard acting for the Runners. They were appalled by the starving, broken men crammed into rotting plank-and-dirt shacks. They wanted to avenge these innocent males; it was a struggle to play the role, especially when they reached the center of town. A sign proclaimed it the amusement area, but the Runners didn’t find it funny. Bound slaves were being tortured. Their screams demanded a vicious vengeance.

“This way.” Milena gestured. “If you’re lucky enough to be released, you’ll be able to pick your vehicles up here at the maintenance bay.”

The dusty western women drove the Pruett Mopars over to a drunken old woman with a baseball bat who was slouching in front of a small hut with wide double doors.

Sam took control. “How much?”

The old woman scanned her. “Who do you stand for?”

“Equality.”

The woman spat nastily. “Double then, my goody-goody.”

The old woman cackled at Sam’s displeasure as she straddled a Mopar and roared into the structure set deep into the bottom of the cliff.

“This way.” Milena took them through a large stone gate connected to both sides of the cliffs. On top of the gate was a thick line of security with body armor and no obvious weaknesses.

The iron gates clanged shut behind them, but the Runners didn’t glance back. It was obvious their previous idea of locating rebels or convincing the city women to switch sides had been a lost cause from the start. These western people were much more brutal than their sisters in the east, as hard as that was to believe.

The haphazard shelters outside the gate mirrored the ones inside, but the number of males doubled. These were personal slaves of the residents, as well as block men–all branded for manual labor. The scars over their ankles and legs were only outnumbered by others on their shoulders.

As the Runners passed, a furious guard flipped her whip and took a layer of skin from the shoulder of a slave who was laboring over laundry. Blood welled.

The Runners turned their faces away. It made them appear to be exactly what they claimed, but rage was in the cool glaze over their eyes. Each of them knew it wouldn’t take much to be provoked. Their time around Baker’s rebels had changed them irrevocably. They would never revert to this cruelty; death was coming to all the women in this town.

The shelters gradually became nicer as they rode, showing the first signs of class separation. Instead of clumsily pressed planks, the siding was clean and the windows were adorned with curtains instead of ragged sheets that hung from pegs. The slaves, however, appeared the same.

This second gate cranked shut behind them.

Baker was the one to break ranks as he looked back. He quickly rotated forward as Melissa delivered a curt glance of warning.

Milena stopped in front of a building that had one door and bars over the windows. “You’ll be called when they’re ready for you. Wait inside.”

Sam let her crew go in before joining them. She lingered in the doorway as the large escort of Defenders surrounded the building and began to dismount. Sam thought the horses looked just as abused as the men here. “Your mother leads the council?”

Milena grimaced, giving away her thoughts on that.

“Can she be bought?”

“No Pruett can.”

Sam was satisfied with the answer. Because she was dealing with people like herself, she didn’t bluff or lie. “When the country is restructured, all of you will be arrested. Surrender and receive mercy.”

Milena laughed scornfully. “We’ve told the east for decades that you wildcards needed to be eliminated. You’re a threat to all of us.”

Sam leered. “Agreed. The worst one is looking at you right now.”

Milena chortled again. “Good. Even my mother isn’t dumb enough to let *you* live. Your Runners may walk out of here, but you will not and neither will your tag.”

Sam didn’t respond.

The holding area was a large square room with two windows on either side of the door. There were no other exits or weak spots. The Runners took up places along the walls, noting the lack of furniture. The only things in the room were a small bath setup and signs on the walls being scoured away by the dusty conditions.

Sam stayed by the door, aware of the fact that it hadn’t been shut or locked. Milena’s entire squad had surrounded the building. They weren’t taking chances that she would escape.

In the distance, another storm was pushing closer. Raindrops were beginning to fall and clouds were gathering. As lightning flared, the Defenders outside advanced onto the porch, forcing Sam inside. When she shut the barrier with her boot, letting it slam, it was a relief.

“People in this town aren’t friendly.” They also weren’t loud and didn’t appear violent. In fact, Rosa thought they were terrified. Even the changeling women with their long claws and red orbs waiting in a line outside the brothels were remarkably subdued. She assumed leadership here was responsible for that. She wasn’t sure if she was revolted or impressed. Changelings had to be kept under control or chaos always ensued, but this was extreme.

Sam settled by a window, putting her back against it to help muffle some of the sounds. In situations this dangerous, the Runners took a moment to make plans. If there wasn’t time, they just followed their leader.

“They have the brothels sorted by race, too.” Heather had been studying it from the moment they entered the crop fields. “It looks like only corresponding races can use each supply store.”

That was another curiosity for most of them, but not for Sam. For her, it was a shame. Her ancestor had been a fanatic about bloodlines and gender. “After they take me out of here, it’s likely security will relax. I’d like this town under our control before the sun sets tomorrow.”

Rosa frowned. “You don’t think we’ll be taken in together?”

“No. That plane on the airstrip can only hold about six people, and they’ll want me double guarded to keep me from hijacking it.”

Everyone gathered around the windows to observe the small plane sitting by a ramp with stairs and two dusty guards.

When no one exited the plane, Sam marched back toward the door. “If you can’t liberate it, destroy it.” Sam opened the door before Milena could.

The girl frowned, retreating to allow Sam and Baker to exit.

Milena waved at the Runners. “My boss said you are all free to go. There are no charges against you. You can stay here for one night rent free. After that, you have to pay.”

Sam made a subtle gesture for Heather to shut the door.

Rosa studied the other Runners as it closed. Sam had given them orders. “I suggest we visit the brothels and get information.”

The woman grinned and began cleaning up, eager for the release as well as the knowledge. They would do what Sam wanted, but there was no reason they couldn’t have a little fun too.

Sam was thinking the same thing as she walked away.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

**Problem Child**

**1**

**N**ew Network City had been beautiful to look at. It had been designed to entertain and impress their guests. It had been a shining beacon in the distance that inspired people to dream of all the things that might be possible inside. Sam’s first glimpse of the western complex was exactly the opposite.

Instead of a dome covered high rise, she was looking at a mountain fortress that would be nearly impossible to penetrate. Much like in Bachelor Town, nature had provided the foundation and walls. The light shining out of the side of that mountain indicated thousands of rooms.

The view from the plane was limited by darkness and rain, but Sam was able to spot a large population center around the fortress. There were hundreds of locals living at the base, like there had been in the east. Sam was sure if the weather was better and it was daylight, she would be able to see stores and brothels that mirrored where she had just come from. All the hope she’d held of the west being different finished dying as the plane dipped toward the ground.

The storm had fallen behind while they flew. Their pilot had used the drafts that came ahead of the storms to win that race, but as they began their descent, a sharp draft rattled the plane.

Baker yelped as the plane lurched sideways. The sound of the engines remained steady, but he wasn’t comfortable with the way the vehicle shimmied in the wind. It was unsettling.

Sam’s grin widened as the ride roughened.

Milena glared at the pilot. “Bring it down easy!”

She was on the bench across from Sam; her white-knuckle grip on the seat implied she wasn’t enjoying the ride the same way. Sam couldn’t resist needling the woman. “Are you sure you’re a Pruett?”

Milena’s growl was drowned out by a crack of thunder.

Sam chuckled.

“I’m going to buy him.” Milena leered at Sam. “He’ll be in my bed and you’ll be in the stomach of a vulture.”

Sam gave the woman a fighting wave.

Milena’s nose rose into the air. “Council members don’t perform in the games. We’re not animals.”

Following instinct, Sam searched for a sore spot. “But you’re not a council member, are you? Your *mommy* is.”

Infuriated, the woman lunged across the plane and tackled Sam.

Baker tried to stay out of the fight, but it was hard in the confined space.

The pilot ignored them, struggling to land the plane in the rough wind. She would normally have refused such a ride, but they’d doubled her fee for this pick up.

Sam slammed Milena’s head into the side of the plane repeatedly, venting some of her frustration over how the males were being treated in Bachelor Town.

Milena now struggled to get out of Sam’s iron grip. She was finally reduced to biting to get the wild woman off her.

Sam flung the woman away. “Coward!”

Milena stayed on her side of the plane, wiping away blood. “Bitch.”

Sam was pleased with how their first encounter had gone. “And it gets worse from here.”

The pilot chuckled. “Your *mommy* is going to want her.”

Milena wiped blood from her cheek, dark eyes glinting dangerously. “She won’t go against the east. Julian wants this one dead and we’re going to give it to him.”

The pilot shrugged. She knew better than to argue, but during her travels around the broken country, the pilot had only seen one family who always survived. That gene wasn’t passed in every bloodline–evidence Milena–but in the Ohio Pruetts, the resistance gene was indomitable. Time after time, they came out on top.

The plane touched down on the damp concrete strip outside the mountain fortress, jarring everyone.

Baker held in another yelp as the plane shifted, sliding.

The pilot struggled to keep it level, hating the run. “I’m supposed to be in my cubby with a mug and a man. I don’t like this shit!”

Milena and her team were used to the grumbling of the pilots. When they didn’t complain, then there was a problem.

The landing strip ran in a half moon around one side of the fortress. In the wind and rain, not to mention the darkness, it required someone who was skilled and fearless. Their pilot brought the plane down directly in the center of the runway as if she had done it a thousand times. For all Sam knew, she had, but it was still impressive. She reached up and slapped the woman on the shoulder, not caring that it might interfere with the flight. “Nice job!”

The pilot gave her a nod of acknowledgment, but didn’t break attention as they bounced along the runway strip and rolled toward the unloading ramp in front of the fortress.

As the plane rolled to a stop, a dozen Defenders rushed out of a nearby shed, followed by giant hounds with red eyes and bad attitudes.

Sam stepped in front of Baker.

Milena pushed them toward the castle, grimacing. She didn’t like men and she didn’t like water. Other than that, she was fearless. *I am a Pruett. I’ll prove it by slitting that bitch’s throat.*

Sam felt the threat. She waited for the woman to gather the courage to strike her again. This time, Milena wouldn’t survive the battle.

Before Milena could get herself killed, a Defender pulled Sam into the fortress.

Baker was relieved. He had also felt it coming. He had no doubts about Sam beating the pampered girl, but he didn’t think killing her was a good way to start their meeting.

Sam tried not to be impressed or intimidated as she entered the fortress. She was led by one guard, with no one following behind Baker. That alone was intimidating considering they knew who she was. It was also a concern that there were only half a dozen guards in sight when they entered the complex and none of them rushed forward to provide security on her. These women weren’t afraid of a Pruett. They also weren’t afraid of Milena. They scanned her new injuries and smirked.

The entranceway to the fortress was like every castle Sam had seen in old books. It was a five story marvel carved into harsh, damp stone that was constantly being eroded by wind, salt, and rain. Sam was positive the other side of the castle had water damage. She could hear the waves, though she hadn’t seen the ocean yet.

The entrance hall was a quarter mile of dark, harsh entrances and exits flanked by stairs that led to upper levels and storage compartments. There were shelves and lanterns on the walls, but no electricity or devices to imply they had power here. Sam also doubted there was plumbing. She wasn’t looking forward to using a pot. Around the large room, there were statues and memorials that Sam didn’t have time to examine as Milena led her forward.

“They’re all memorials to our founder.” Milena liked explaining the reception hall. It was one of her favorite responsibilities as the daughter of their ruler.

The guards stared at Sam impassively, obviously not impressed. Sam was already tired of being looked at that way. *Before I leave, I’ll make sure that changes.*

“There are four memorials. One is dedicated to the beginning of male slavery. Another is to Marcella’s vision of there always being slavery. The third is to remind us of the sacrifices of the first females to die under Marcella’s plans.” Milena pointed to each one as they went by.

Sam caught sight of the fourth and grimaced. “Let me guess. That one is dedicated to the war.”

Milena’s shoulders straightened in pride. “Of course. We remember the events that gave us the gifts we have today. If not for the war, women would have never shaken off the chains of oppression and taken the steps to ensure their rule over the future of humanity.”

Sam didn’t comment. You couldn’t argue with a fanatic. *You can only kill them.*

Sam and Baker were taken into a holding area and into a small cell with two cots and a wash bin.

Baker shuddered as the gate locked behind them.

Sam immediately went over to the cot and stretched out. It had been a long ride to reach the bunker. She was ready for a few minutes of peace and quiet so she could think.

Baker sat on the other cot, but he didn’t believe he would be able to sleep. None of his memories of this type of captivity was good.

Milena turned away from the cell. “I’m going to let the council know we’ve arrived.”

As Milena left, Baker looked at Sam.

Sam felt his concern, but this wasn’t the time for comfort. “Remember who we are.”

The guards thought she was talking to them and began sneering and throwing insults.

Baker also stiffened, but only in shame that he wasn’t upholding the family honor. He forced himself to lay on the cot and mirror Sam’s cold attitude.

**2**

Less than five minutes later, Milena came back through the door to the area. “Leave the male here. They want her.”

Sam didn’t look at Baker. “I’ll find you.”

He didn’t protest as she left, but he felt her absence keenly. He had gotten used to being protected by Sam and her Runners. Being alone sucked.

The troops stayed away from Baker as the two women left. Despite half of them being in changeling form, none of the women molested him. Until the council made their decision, he was off-limits.

Sam followed Milena to the main room without attacking her, but at some point, she and the girl would have another moment and the result would be even more satisfying.

The reception room was an incredibly wide chamber that appeared to be a natural formation in the mountain. In the center, carved steps led to a small dais where five thrones held the council. The rest of the space was a dim, thankless reminder of the location. Sam wondered if that was intentional. There were lanterns, with no carpets or curtains or anything that even resembled wealth. If not for the five women watching her entrance, Sam would have suspected she had been taken to the wrong place.

This was nothing like the plush surroundings the east had kept themselves in. This was the stark barrenness of a monastery and the five women sitting stiffly in the cold thrones were the ghosts of the past. Though Sam had never met these women, she immediately recognized one of them. The resemblance to their founding family member was uncanny. Sam connected her to the racial segregation of the brothels. The council was keeping bloodlines pure. That theory was reinforced by the members themselves.

Five races were represented. In the center, on the tallest throne, was a white woman with glowing red orbs and long, sharp claws tapping soothingly on her armrest. To her right, was a Mexican woman and then an Asian. On her left, was an Indian and a black woman. Sam liked it that other races were represented. *If only you didn’t support slavery!* That was the part of Marcella’s manifesto that Sam had always had a problem with. She believed women could rule the world without having men in chains.

It took a while to reach the women because the room was so large. The uneven floor had obviously been left as it was found; it was patched in places. There were four other doorways that led from the chamber, along with a small window directly above the council. Sam didn’t spot technology that was familiar. In fact, she didn’t spot any technology at all.

Sam was able to see where there had once been more chairs. She counted five missing seats. Sam assumed those women had died, but she didn’t know why they hadn’t been replaced. Everyone had assumed the west mirrored the east, meaning there were always ten seats. That obviously wasn’t the case here.

Sam was pushed in front of the five women without bonds or a guard other than Milena.

The western council were dressed in what Sam assumed was native of their origins. The colorful outfits glared in sharp contrast to their ruler. The center woman was dressed in the severe black of a matronly fighter who was no longer in her prime. Wrinkles around her eyes and on her hands gave proof to that. She estimated Marcella had to be at least seventy. Her daughter, on the other hand, was under twenty and that was curious. Sam wondered how Marcella had ended up with a rebellious young girl, but this wasn’t the time to ask. The other council women were younger than Marcella. Sam assumed they had larger families or more stable lines of succession.

The woman in the middle gestured. “Please state your name.”

“Sam J. Pruett.”

The council members exchanged glances, sizing her up to determine if she was lying.

“You are the sister of Angelica?”

Sam nodded. “Did you catch her game? She’s awesome.”

One of the women, the Indian, chuckled. “I am Keisha the 19th. It is an honest pleasure to meet you.”

Despite the friendly words, Sam got the feeling the woman didn’t mean it in the least.

The next woman in line continued the introductions. “I am Gia, the 20th.”

Sam understood her theory of keeping the bloodlines pure had been an understatement. To achieve rulers for so many generations that still had the same racial makeup meant there was no inbreeding allowed for leadership either.

“I am Nida, the 23rd.”

“I am Ivory, the 14th.”

The ruler waited for Sam to look at her expectantly. When she did, the woman flashed a familiar grin.

“Marcella, the 17th.”

Sam couldn’t stop the grimace. She hated that name. Marcella’s ruthless behavior after the war had started the family reputation, but Sam would have given it up to not be related to the woman who had started male slavery.

“Enough with the introductions!” Milena was standing on Sam’s right, waiting to be acknowledged for the capture.

Keisha gave her a patient smile. “Formalities must be observed.”

A lackey came over with a book and a knife.

Sam knew she was supposed to make a blood mark and didn’t protest.

While the technician took care of it, she scanned the council again. Every one of these women was intimidating. They had obviously earned their place on the council by violent means. She determined that by the way they were scarred. It wasn’t as heavily as herself, but it was still noticeable. All five women were fighters.

The clerk took the book and vanished down one of the dark tunnels.

Sam crossed her arms over her chest and took a comfortable stance, waiting for the leader to begin. She would start this meeting respectfully and adjust as necessary.

“Sam Pruett, you stand accused of treason, conspiracy, sedition, and murder. What is your defense?”

“I’ve always had problems with authority. My mother called me her problem child.”

Everyone on the council snickered except Marcella. She stopped tapping on the chair. “Since you have no defense, we will proceed immediately to judgment.”

“I’d like to make a statement, but it’s not a defense.”

Marcella waved a hand. “The accused has requested final words and been granted.”

Sam took a step toward the ruler and let her disgust come through. “You have disgraced yourself and you have disgraced your family! Justice will be served and you will be subjected to the full penalties.” Sam pointed at the other members. “I find all of you guilty and sentence you to death.”

Marcella laughed. “That’s exactly what I was going to say.” She gestured toward the guards. “Get her ready for the game.”

Sam didn’t struggle. All of this was a formality, like Keisha had stated. Julian had ordered her death and no amount of breath-wasting words would reverse her sentence. All she had done was speed things along. She’d made that choice because she didn’t like Baker being alone in the cell.

“Wait!” Milena stepped forward. “I want the male!”

Marcella glanced tolerantly at her rebellious daughter. “Use your personal account. The price is double the norm and is paid to the east. They own him.”

Sam’s blood boiled. She glanced over her shoulder to make eye contact with Milena. “Don’t go to sleep. I’ll be there when you wake up.”

Milena didn’t laugh as Sam was taken from the room. She could feel the genuine threat behind it. She didn’t want to have to face Sam in a fight. The short moment between them on the plane had convinced her who would win.

Marcella and the council watched, waiting until they were alone to speak.

“It’s almost a shame to lose her. Are we certain there’s no chance of conversion?” Ivory was always on the lookout for new talent to add to their army.

Nida didn’t like that. “If this had happened a year ago, I would have said yes, but you know as well as I do that once we bond with a slave, we change. She is already bonded to the rebel leader. That makes her a threat. She’ll never uphold our values.”

“I agree. Broadcast the game live and make sure you capture the moment she dies. Send the feed directly to Julian at the center.” Marcella entered the other part of the chamber, where chairs that were slightly more comfortable waited in front of a viewing screen. “I want her bleeding or all of you will be.”

The members hurried to obey their leader’s order. Marcella never repeated herself. She would kill someone before she had to do that.

“Milena. Stay behind for a minute.”

The rest of the council didn’t look at Milena as they shuffled by her. It was obvious from Marcella’s tone that the girl was in trouble. All of the council agreed with whatever punishment was coming. Milena was Marcella’s only daughter. She assumed that automatically gave her the right of inheritance, but her rebelliousness and thoughtless actions were the opposite of the requirements. To rule here, you had to be true to your roots.

Marcella waited until they were alone and the girl was at her side before she spoke. When she did, the ominous tone flowed like death. “That is the last time you embarrass me. You will no longer present yourself to the council. The next time you show emotion or speak out of turn, I will order your death.”

Milena wasn’t in control–exactly what was always getting her in trouble. “I can’t believe you would say that to me. I’m your daughter!”

“Nothing is a given in our society.”

“But you don’t have other children. You have to leave it to someone.”

Marcella pointed toward the door. “I would leave it to her before I gave it to you.”

“You can’t mean that!” Milena took a threatening step closer to her mother. “I’m your blood!”

“We belong to Marcella.” The ruler didn’t scream, but her contempt slapped. “You’ve never really been one of us. Can’t you even try to pretend?”

“And you’ve never been my mother! Can’t you ever pretend?!”

The raised voice was yet another violation of the rules. Tiring of the disobedience, Marcella pinned her daughter with an evil glare. “If you step out of line again, even a little, I get the male and you get dumped in the shark tank.”

Milena opened her mouth to protest.

Marcella grabbed the girl by her throat and slammed her against the wall. “Go on! Say it!”

Milena struggled to breathe. Her mother’s iron grip was unexpected. Despite seeing the woman fight, Milena’s youth had allowed her to believe she could take her off guard at some point.

Marcella squeezed, wanting to finish the job. She was a changeling who enjoyed bringing pain to others, but she was also horribly disappointed in her offspring. Marcella spent most of her time trying to get pregnant so she could replace the willful child, but until she did, the girl was right. She had to have an heir or Marcella’s legacy would end with her.

Marcella shoved her daughter to the ground. “One word and I’ll finish it.”

Now put in her place, Milena crawled away from her mother’s rage and then scurried toward the door with tears coming down her cheeks. “If I ever get the chance, *mother*, I’ll return the favor!”

Marcella sighed. That was the first time Milena had ever felt like a real Pruett.

The leader went to the altar in the corner and knelt on knees that had thick scabs and scar tissue from all the praying she’d done over the years. She never missed the daily ritual. Neither had her parent. She’d learned the strict rules of life at her mother’s knee while eight other siblings battled for attention. Marcella had always known her destiny, but unlike Milena, she’d embraced it eagerly. It was an honor to carry on the founder’s legacy.

Marcella bowed her head and begged her idol for guidance on the future. A hard choice was coming, and she didn’t want to do it.

Chapter Forty

**Exiled into the West**

**1**

**“C**ome out here.”

Baker did as the guard demanded, encouraged by the male at her side. If he was left alone with the slaves here, there might be a chance to escape and help Sam.

Baker let them bind his wrists and lead him from the cell. They went down a long stone tunnel with windows that let him view the docks, armory, stock rooms, and more. There was obviously no need for secrecy here. The people were too scared to revolt or steal.

Baker was taken to a small room that he instantly recognized. He stopped, knees locking. “No.”

The male slave shoved on his arm. “Go on. It’ll be rough if you resist.”

When the guard reached for him, Baker reluctantly went to the table in the center, guts boiling and knees starting to shake. “What’s going on?”

The Defender slammed her fist into his kidney. “Shut up!”

The slave helped Baker onto the table, but there was no glance of sympathy. He’d clearly done this too many times to feel bad about it.

Baker was strapped to the table for the injection. He shut his lids as the needle sank into his arm. *Please, Sam. I need you.*

“Get him cleaned up and delivered.” The Defender left.

The slaves bobbed in obedience and began stripping Baker now that he was secured to the table.

Baker forced himself to remain calm and think. *What would Sam do?*

*Talk her way out and then kill them all*. *I can do that.*

Baker scanned the weak men removing his filthy boots*. No, I can’t, not alone.* “Where are the rebels?”

One of the male slaves finally answered, cutting away Baker’s pants. “There are no rebellions here.”

“How is that possible?”

“The west coast has a shortage of males.”

“For a while, they were letting the snakes hunt and eat the men who escaped or tried to fight.”

“And because you can only rent a male and not buy one, no families have popped up to breed new men. They are totally dependent on us for survival and we slaves know it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Even upon death, we pull out. Once in lust, the women can’t stop us. We developed our own defense. We refuse to give these evil women our children, to continue this life. We’d rather that humans died out. That’s how *we* rebel.”

Baker was surprised to find he didn’t hate them for their weaknesses as much as for their acceptance of that being all they could do. He clamped his lips shut and forced himself to stop trying. They weren’t going to help him. They wouldn’t even help themselves.

“We suggest you do the same or you’ll end up in the vulture nursery, too.”

“Enjoy the show.” The technician flipped on the view screen. A couple running through a jungle-like setting flashed up, filling the room with screams as the biracial couple fought together to kill the huge vulture. Their voices became louder to echo over the cheering audience and dying bird.

“We killed it!”

“We can do this! We killed a vulture!”

A horrible screaming noise echoed from the nursery, followed by the sound of wings–a lot of them.

“I think we only killed a baby!”

“Run!”

Baker tore his eyes away from the horror. Sam was going in there. “She’s not coming out, is she?”

Neither of the slaves answered.

**2**

Stuck inside a tiny cell, Sam could feel the storm now raging outside the fortress. Thunder was rattling the building, causing dirt to shift in her cubby. There were no windows for her to see the bright glare of lightning, but she was positive it was still happening. Mother Nature was unhappy. The west put up with her tantrums regularly, according to stories. Sam had always assumed the low population on this side of the country was because of the storms, but it had all been an illusion to keep the east from merging with the west and discovering Marcella’s methods of control. Even by eastern standards, Marcella was a huge tyrant. She was also a better ruler. That was obvious.

All the furnishings in this fortress appeared to be carved out of stone, though Sam had spotted a little wood. She wondered if that was out of necessity. She hadn’t viewed many trees since they left the power bunker, leaving stone, dirt, and sand to build with. Stone benches and couches, along with stone light fixtures and tables, appeared to be proof that building medium had been hard to come by over the years. Sam wondered why they didn’t import something from the east. A few comfortable chairs wouldn’t have been harder than transporting males or supplies.

“Open the cell.”

Sam resisted the urge to sit up at the voice.

A black robed woman came to the gate. Standing in regal glory and hatred, she was impressive. Sam couldn’t deny the intimidation wafting over, but she’d been in uglier places than this while trying to outrun her fate.

Marcella was the exact opposite of her daughter. She had long gray and black hair running to her waist in thick waves that weren’t confined in any way and yet conformed to the curve of her spine as she walked. The cowl had an open front, allowing Sam to see black eyes and pale skin that had been abused for decades. It was almost like looking at her mother or her aunt Mary. The family resemblance was striking.

Marcella’s daughter, on the other hand, could have mirrored this generation of wild Pruetts with her short spikes and tattoos. But for her loud attitude and reckless nature, she also would have upheld the family gene. Unlike her mother, Milena preferred a half top and a long wavy skirt in a silken thread that Sam was positive Marcella disapproved of. It was obvious the girl was flaunting her position of authority, against her mother’s wishes. Sam wondered what the punishment for that had been. Clearly, it hadn’t been too harsh or the girl would have changed.

When Sam only stared without reacting, Marcella motioned for her cell to be opened.

Her flunkey hurried to obey.

Sam noticed the private guard didn’t appear to be a fighter. She wondered what Marcella used such a timid person for.

Marcella filled the doorway, making it clear that Sam would have to fight her to get by. “She’s my death warder.”

“Tastes your food, walks in front of you. That sort of thing?”

Marcella nodded.

Sam shrugged. “I can see why the east coast wanted you gone. You’re too careful. You might have challenged them at some point.”

Marcella nodded. “Pruett intelligence and bravery are rare for there being so many of us.”

Sam thought of the weak links in her branch and grunted. She wasn’t going to argue a point she couldn’t make. Of all the family she’d spent time around during her travels, Sam could only stand two of them–Candice and Angelica. Even her parents were tolerated. In fact, they were the reason she’d left home so young. Watching her father forced to live as a slave had been crushing.

Marcella lifted a brow. “Nostalgic? Many players get that way as they face their judgement.”

“I’m not a player.”

“Convicted criminal, then.”

“I’m not that either.” Sam sat up, not caring if her movement triggered a guard. She met Marcella’s frowning gaze. “I’m a subject of the east coast, which I now rule if all of them are dead. Shelly left her seat to me.”

Marcella’s gasp echoed through the chamber.

Sam yawned.

“Why didn’t you say this at the trial?”

“You didn’t ask and I don’t know how your court system works.”

“You were going to use your thirty seconds to reveal this?”

“Nope.”

Marcella frowned, uneasiness rising. “Why not? It may have stopped your game.”

“I don’t want it stopped.” Sam flashed an eager grin to show what was under the cool control. “I signed up for the bachelor Battles.”

Marcella’s lips twitched. She hadn’t smiled in years. “The dome fell before you arrived.”

“Exactly.” Excitement laced Sam’s words. “Are your birds really harder?”

Marcella nodded. “No one survives the nursery. Those overfed vultures you have in the east can’t compare to the beasts we breed here for the games.”

“Awesome.”

Marcella laughed.

It drew the guards closer to listen.

Sam smiled a bit herself. Marcella’s amusement was pretty, unlike her.

Marcella studied her distant relative, clever mind formulating plans.

Sam felt it. “Before I became a council member, I was a bounty hunter. My Runners helped conquer that dome.”

“You can be bought.”

Sam’s tone sharpened. “I can be hired.”

“Ah.” Marcella added it up quickly. “Did they send you here to kill me?”

Sam grinned.

Marcella forced herself to remain in the doorway, where she was an easy target.

The troops behind her called for support.

“Why haven’t you tried yet?”

“I think I can make a better deal.”

“Trading up is a sign of greed and untrustworthiness.”

“So is considering replacing your daughter with a convicted criminal.”

Marcella stared in approval.

Sam lifted a brow. “What’s the offer?”

“What’s the rush?”

Sam pointed toward the guards. “I’m scheduled for a game.”

Marcella came into the tiny cell and sat across from Sam on the narrow ledge. “I’m going to ask a question. If you give me the right answer, I’ll pardon you. After you run the nursery.” Marcella gave her a warning glance. “Sometimes the techs can’t get to a player in time.”

“I don’t need a net, ringmaster.”

Marcella almost laughed again. “You are wild and well educated. How is that possible?”

“My cousin Candice insisted we learned.” Sam’s tone warmed. “She’ll be the leader of the council when we restructure. She’s like you.”

“And that brings us to the question.” Marcella pinned her with eyes that peered into the soul. “Will you release the males from slavery?”

Sam sighed, not needing to lie or hide her emotions. “No.”

Marcella scowled. “We have chemicals to make you tell the truth.”

“Pruetts don’t lie!”

Marcella stopped herself from recoiling at the shout as troops flooded toward them.

Sam controlled the rage. “Can we do this after the game?”

“You really do need it.” Marcella frowned. “And yet you have a willing male to ease your pain.”

“He’s not willing.”

Marcella made a rude gesture.

Sam sighed. “Okay, so I’m not willing.”

“Burn out?”

“Yes. Our branch goes into it almost immediately upon finding a satisfying mate.”

“My daughter needs that so she won’t be so reckless.”

“She’ll always be reckless.” Sam regarded the woman curiously. “How did you end up with her? She feels like a child born in hopes that it wasn’t too late.”

“That’s exactly what Milena is.” Marcella admitted it without shame or scorn. “I’ve had nine children. The one male is in the brothel and earns me top price daily. The other seven daughters died thirty years ago.”

“At the last power handoff?”

“Yes. Our relationship with our brothers in the east has never been peaceful.”

“Why haven’t you eliminated them like they’re trying to do to you?”

“Marcella’s Manifesto.”

Sam shrugged. “I haven’t read it. There are no copies in the east that I know of.”

“One was stolen from us a decade ago. It was the original.”

“If it turns up, I’ll see that it’s returned.”

Marcella nodded her gratitude. “Our family formed the Network. The manifesto tells how they always voted down gender lines and there were always five of each. Neither side could win.”

“So they split off. But by then, male slavery was established, so the eastern men couldn’t just take over.”

“No. They had to have dupes.”

Sam considered. “Why do you think Marcella consented to it? Why didn’t she slaughter them?”

“Because she wasn’t on the council and couldn’t reach them. The other senior members of the family determined she was unstable. She was exiled into the west after trying to assassinate those same people.”

“So when they split, the women came to her.”

“Yes, but she didn’t want them. They’d betrayed her and she had already begun gathering sisters who believed in the cause.”

“She had to take them or the east would attack?”

Marcella nodded, once again impressed by how fast Sam was adding up the story. “They forced Marcella to create the west coast government. Those five women and their families were given hereditary rights to the seats.”

Sam could imagine their founder’s fury.

“Would you care to guess? You’ve done well so far.”

Sam pulled up the beginning of their conversation, then determined the answer on how she would have reacted if she’d been their founder. “The power exchange laws.”

Marcella wanted to clap. “Excellent.” Her own descendants weren’t as sharp. She was enjoying the moment. It was like seeing her idol’s vision embodied in the flesh. “The east handpicked all ten seats on their council and they made deals through their five reps here. We had wagons of men and supplies coming in to help curry favor. When the vote came, seven of our ten females voted to allow a free-for-all once every thirty years.”

Sam chuckled. “She bought off the men. The council wanted control of the nukes and she threatened to send them the way they were intended.”

“Yes. The laws changed and now, we kill each other’s children every three decades in hopes of eliminating one of those original families from the founding table.”

“I assume you got rid of one by wiping out the power people at the bunker?”

“Of course. Five of us betrayed the sixth.”

“You can’t replace seats until only one remains?”

“Our founder wanted to be sure the east couldn’t repeat the demand. When only one family remains, we have complete control and can pick all of the seats.”

“And five of you are left.”

“It will be four as soon as I die. My daughter will not survive.”

“I would.” Sam slowly reached into her pocket and came up with a Pruett token. “I won’t swear loyalty to the old ways, but I will give my word to make sure the founding line survives and receives control over the west–like she wanted.”

“Marcella wanted control over the entire country.”

Sam shrugged. “We’ll basically have that. I won’t let deals like previous ones be made and neither will my cousin or sister.”

“You’re much like I believe the founding females were, but you have a dreadful need to spread equality. That makes me hesitate. At some point, you *will* let men be freed.”

Sam played with the token, aware that it didn’t mean anything to the woman. That didn’t matter because it meant something to her. “Yes. I refuse to lie. I want the men free.”

“But…?”

“But even if we could control the male changelings–And we can’t. They’ll be bigger and stronger–I don’t think those men are ready for freedom. They’ll need to be transitioned and that will take a long time.” Sam sighed again, forced to give more than she wanted to in order to seal this deal. “And maybe that could be stretched into a hundred years. By then, we can find common ground to prevent the problems of the past.”

Marcella shook her head, frowning. “After centuries of slavery that won’t happen. We will have a new war with the changeling males. It is inevitable.”

“Maybe not. Baker has a lot of sway over the rebels, and we’ve earned their trust and respect by rescuing them, defending them. They’ll be with us.”

“And when the brothel owners clamor for new males and you have to meet the demand? Or when the breeding programs run low and the locals start to rebel?”

“We’ll quell it.”

“No. You’ll give them males to keep the peace and their fathers will rise up. Or you’ll deny them access to any males and the women will rise up. The peace you seek cannot be attained.”

Sam grunted. “I wish Candice was here. I know she has answers to this.”

“Your cousin is dying in an eastern training center.”

Sam smiled. “I knew she didn’t go down with the dome!”

“You weren’t sure.”

Sam frowned. “Pruetts can die like anyone else.”

“So true.” Marcella studied Sam. “What happens if the males rise up?”

“War. We’ll lose… Unless we do it before they can recover their numbers.”

“If you can find a path to peace, that will not stop our deal. I’ve buried enough children to recognize the foolishness in some of the severity we exist with. However, I will never be a party to a future where the men can rise up against us and win. I would rather both genders died out and left this miserable earth to the animals.”

Sam understood that. “We’ll need a test of loyalty and honor… And it’ll need to be repeated with every child born.”

“With the boys.”

“No. That was a mistake of the first council. Neither gender is flawless and neither is evil. I want *all* children tested for disloyalty.”

Marcella waved a hand. “That is not key either. As long as you verify the intentions of the men, I can agree.”

Sam pushed the conversation back to the deal she was about to be offered. “You believe she’s going to kill you.”

“I know she is. I just don’t know when.”

“Doesn’t she realize the others will slaughter her to have one more seat eliminated?”

“She believes they’ll follow her because they won’t have my rigid rules.”

Sam snorted. “She won’t make it through her first night.”

“No. I doubt she’d make it through her coronation. Milena is the last of stilted genetics too old and radiated to produce offspring. I’ve tried several times since, but she was the remainder of my youth.”

“I could remove her for you…”

Marcella had learned enough to be satisfied with Sam’s character. “She plans to mate your male as you go into the game.”

Sam’s orbs flickered red. “Does she?”

Marcella stood up, hand out. “I accept your token of trust.”

Sam placed it into the woman’s wrinkled hand, proper answer falling like blood. “It’s my honor. It can’t be broken.”

Marcella left, motioning to the shocked guards. “Get her ready for her game and then go about your duties. If this leaks, all of you will die before I do.”

The troops were timid creatures with no thought of rebelling. Sam doubted they would even discuss the conversation among themselves. Her impression that the east was more severe had been a horrible underestimation.

Left alone, Sam wondered how she was going to keep her word and still uphold her own honor. As wrong as it was, she almost liked Marcella. That would make it hard to kill her. The woman’s daughter, on the other hand, was about to hurt the man Sam loved. That couldn’t be allowed and it trumped any deal or greater good choice. She wouldn’t sacrifice Baker for these people.

*Can I trust him to react the same? Would he sacrifice his life or his principles for me?*

Sam ignored the evil doubts that Marcella had planted. There would be time for tests of loyalty later. First, she had to fight a nursery of vultures, escape the paddock, rescue Baker, and kill the west coast council. *No sweat.*

**3**

Milena sneered as her mother entered the viewing area. “Did you enjoy your visit with the wild Pruett?”

“It was enlightening.”

Milena scowled. She’d rarely been able to push Marcella into true rage. Their brief moment earlier was nothing new between them, but her mother had never drawn blood. *I’ll have that honor.*

The animosity between them wasn’t new for the other people in the sparse viewing room either. They’d existed this way for a long time.

The viewing area was the one place Marcella allowed any material enjoyment. Small rugs were on the floor for people to sit and there were mugs that held a hot drink to ward off the damp chill in the air from being so close to the ocean. She also allowed a second lantern, but that was the end of her concessions.

Marcella took her place in the center seat, trying not to feel ashamed when the other children sat by their parent. There were a dozen in some rows.

Milena also sat in her place. She was the only one and it stung, but it was also how she wanted things. If her mother had managed to squeeze out another pup, Milena would kill it before it was weaned.

In the front of the chamber, big view screens were being turned on by males who limped and kept their chins down. Marcella found it soothing. She also found it boring. She wondered if Sam’s mate would be fun to ride. Her current toys certainly weren’t.

Marcella frowned as a new thought occurred. She looked at her daughter. “I thought you were claiming her male?”

Milena flushed. “He’s drugged and getting ready. I ordered a screen turned on so he can watch his owner die.”

Marcella sighed in disappointment. “She scared you.”

“I’m not scared!”

Marcella turned back toward the screen. “You could have already claimed him and been back. She scared you.”

Milena started to get up, challenged to defend her bravery.

“Sit and shut up or I’ll tell the others here to throw you out the window.”

Milena paused. “They’d throw you out, too!”

Marcella shrugged.

Milena was forced to drop into the seat. Her mother didn’t bluff. It was why she had control over the council despite only having one heir. Marcella was hard to kill.

The other women had tensed, scenting blood. They now sat back in disappointment. During this power exchange time, anyone could be killed without punishments or fines–even their leader.

Marcella knew what they were thinking. Isolated and alone, she lifted her chin. “I’m the last true Pruett in the western bloodline. As soon as you kill me, the east will lay claim. None of you have the right to challenge them. You’re not me.”

Order restored, the women turned their attention to the screens as Milena sulked and Marcella breathed a mental sigh of relief. That excuse wasn’t going to succeed next time. She was surprised it had now. If Milena had been smarter, she would have challenged for leadership in front of the others and bought them off to help kill her mother.

*Sam would have thought of it.* Marcella replayed their conversation as the interview segment started. *She’s my kind.*

Chapter Forty-One

**What Will You Give?**

Training Center

**1**

**“S**amantha J. Pruett has been found guilty of treason against both the eastern and western Networks. Her sentence is about to be carried out.”

Everyone in the training center holding cell rotated toward the view screen where the news had interrupted replays of the Bachelor Battles.

“Sam has been stripped, outfitted for a run in the nursery, and will now have an interview. Stand by as we enter the sealed cells for this. As you know, the controllers will not open a game even if we reporters are attacked, but we’ve heard this branch of the family can be trusted.”

“Branch of the family?” Mary glowered toward the glass door.

No one answered as Sam appeared on the screen.

The reporter stayed back from Sam and made sure her voice carried. “Sam? Can we have a minute of your remaining time?”

“Why not? No one else here will talk to me.”

Drawn against her will, Mary gravitated toward a seat. The others were already in front of the screen.

“How did she get in the west?” Bobby was confused. “She was on her way to New Network City.”

Chester frowned. “Be quiet so we can listen.”

“Sam, your trial was short and you didn’t defend your actions. Are you sorry now?”

“No. The citizens here have forgotten what Pruetts stand for. I haven’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“The power exchanges are a tool the east coast has been using to control you.”

“Um, that sounds like classified information, so let’s talk about the charges instead. Did you really help a group of rebel males escape the country? Trafficking men is a serious charge.”

“I did. There were hundreds of them.”

“Hundreds?” The reporter swallowed saliva. “What was that like?”

“She’s keeping them busy.” Bruce hoped Mary would confirm his theory. He liked Sam and didn’t want to see her die.

“Maybe.” But Mary didn’t think so. It felt like Sam was building up to something.

“Torture. I couldn’t touch them.”

“Why not?”

“They were immune and free.”

The reporter gasped. “Immune? Free?”

“Yes. The eastern population of men has recovered.”

“Cut!”

Sam’s wide grin was the last image on the screen. It switched to static.

Bobby stood up. “What do we do now?”

“We get out of here and help Candice conquer this bunker and island.”

“How?”

Bruce pointed to the tunnel Julian had taken. “We wait for Candice’s sign.”

“I don’t think we can do that.” Daniel reluctantly stood up. “She’s hurt. She has been since she was stabbed. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s in the medical bay and needs us to rescue her.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Daniel’s voice caught as he looked at Bruce. “She made me promise not to interfere, even if the baby died. I gave her my word.”

“Died?”

“Baby?”

Chaos erupted.

**2**

“We got the bullets out and stitched up a myriad of injuries.”

“But?” Julian glared at his medic.

“She’s paralyzed in one leg...”

“And?”

“She’s pregnant.” The doctor’s voice lowered. “It doesn’t look good for her or the baby. Her previous injury is too bad.”

Julian was berating himself for testing her without giving her the physical exam that the other players had undergone first. He was also furious that his plan for offspring would have to wait. As much as he wanted to order the pregnancy terminated, Julian wanted her baby. The tests he would be able to do on her child would be almost as important as those from their offspring together would be after she healed. “If she dies, so do you!”

“I’m already doing everything I can for her, but she needs rest and time without stress. She can’t get that here.”

“Join the club.” Julian scanned the screens on the wall. He didn’t care about Sam’s game in the west, but the changelings outside still destroying property in their attempts to breach the facility were a large concern. If they got in here, he was a dead man no matter what else happened. Angelica was determined to taste his blood. He could feel it.

**3**

“He’s watching.” Angelica turned toward the camera, covered in blood from fighting the few guards who didn’t want to believe they’d been fooled, and from the security traps that she’d been triggering.

“We’re picking up a broadcast!” Claudette was in the corner that she and the UN troops were defending.

Angelica thought the woman sounded thrilled to be in the thick of the action. Her amusement faded as she observed the broadcast.

When it cut off, she growled and spun toward the door where the camera was mounted. It had taken several hits so far, but the bars around it had held.

Angelica stopped below the camera and began pulling items from her pocket. She’d delayed this choice in hopes her relatives inside would have time to do whatever they needed to, but Sam was in trouble and Angelica couldn’t help her until this situation was resolved. “Time to heat things up.”

“What is she doing?” Julian leaned toward the monitor. Angelica was assembling something familiar… “She stole that from me! No one is supposed to have one but me!” It was the one thing that could cost him this game.

“Stop!” He slammed his hand over the radio console. “Stop that!”

Angelica laughed at the panicked order. “What will you give me?”

The din faded as guards quieted to listen. Julian had just shown a weakness.

The other troops froze at the male voice, unable to deny the truth any longer.

“What is it?”

Jason motioned the boy to be quiet. He and his son were huddled behind the UN troops, terrified and excited at the same time.

“Your life! Get out of here!”

Angelica kept working, lips curved in a mocking smile.

“Stop her!”

None of the guards on the landing answered Julian’s demand. Many of them shouted insults and made ugly gestures.

Angelica’s hands didn’t stop laboring on the EMP bomb. It was one of three that she and her family had managed to steal from stocks over twenty years. They were strictly regulated. Mary had claimed they’d used them on runs and then employed their homemade copies to manage the damage. The Network bombs were much more powerful.

“I’m not coming down there.”

Angelica didn’t respond. She was waiting to hear the hiss of the door. As soon as it opened, she planned to cover Jason and the boy with her body and wait for the changelings to stream into the center to do the work.

“What do you want? Your family? I’ll send them out!”

Angelica was almost finished. “I came for you, sweetheart. You’ll be top bitch in my post-rebellion stable.”

Julian’s screams were ugly, but they didn’t stop Angelica from sliding the last piece into the bomb and placing the magnetic side against the barrier.

“I’ll kill them all!”

“Better make it fast. I’m coming in right now. So is everyone else.” Angelica hit the button and then stepped back even though there wouldn’t be an explosion that sent out shrapnel. This weapon used a pulse of energy to short circuit any electronics in range.

*Pop! Buzz*.

The alarm disengaged as power went out across the center.

Angelica hurried forward to shove her blade into the crack to pry, hoping the blade didn’t break before she could get enough space to fit her fingers.

The door shifted, opening; she shoved her changeling claws in.

“Look at all the boats!”

Distracted, she turned, expecting to see the fishmongers.

She did, but that wasn’t what everyone else was staring at. Boats were coming from the rear of the island–boats of men in Network guard uniforms.

The male troops didn’t look like their female counterparts. It was obvious from their pale skin that they weren’t allowed to go outside and risk exposure to the guards in front of the island. Angelica watched the men flee, wondering how many of them would die during their attempt. Then she turned around and got back to work on the door.

**4**

“Something’s happening.” Daniel was still by the glass door of their cell. “Troops are running.”

“Toward?”

“Away.”

The others came to the door to observe.

Guards ran by the glass without a glance at them, panicked.

Mary signaled her crew into fighting formation. “Remember your lessons; watch out for the kids and rookies.”

Bobby went into the center with the kids, red cheeked. He was the only rookie here. Daniel had proven himself repeatedly.

Daniel stayed by Mary. “As soon as the door opens, I’m going to find Candy. Can you clear me a path?”

Mary smiled, patting his arm. “We’re going together.”

“*He’ll* be there.” Bruce was scared of Julian.

Mary grunted, feeling like her old self. “Good. Whoever brings me his head can have my art collection.”

A buzzer sounded.

The lights went out.

The view screen snapped off.

The air system shut down.

Bruce quickly dug out a light and flipped it on. “Was that one of ours?”

“I believe so. Bring the light over here.”

“It’s Angelica!”

Angelica walked through the tunnel toward them with a familiar grin. She immediately began to work on their door.

Mary added another warning. “The others don’t know our males are not in Julian’s army. Protection formation.”

Behind Angelica, male guards were fleeing from changeling women now streaming into the center. Some of the men were in changed form, but it was obvious they hadn’t fought anyone before.

Angelica came inside and started to secure the door until they were ready to go out.

Mary helped her.

Screams and shouts echoed through the center as the changelings overwhelmed the complex. Many of the males were struck down on sight by furious women who understood the council had betrayed them and their relatives through the history of Network control. Rage like that could only be settled in one way. Slaughters and rapes took place side-by-side while the Pruetts discussed what to do next from the safety of their cell.

“Are you positive about her injury?”

Daniel nodded. “She was bleeding again when we set sail.”

Mary paled, but no one could see it in the darkness. She was glad.

Daniel looked at Chester. “If anything happens to me, I want *you* to have my kids.”

Daniel’s revelation stunned the women.

Chester nodded quickly, also surprised but impressed with the courage that choice had taken.

The females were worried. It was a sign that Daniel might still side with the men, but there was no time to deal with it right now. Mary signaled three people along.

The family was confronted as they exited.

“We want those males!”

“Open the door!”

Mary didn’t waste time trying to explain what would have to be repeated hundreds of times and still wouldn’t satisfy. She drew her gun.

Around her, the others did the same.

Gunfire filled the hall.

The dark bunker was full of awful noises. Most of it was caused by the female changelings, but the men who managed to get the advantage over a woman were just as triumphant. Angelica and Mary tried to cover their group as more fights filled the halls around them, but it was hard in the dark. Only their familiar formation allowed them to keep track of each other.

As they got through the first wave of changelings who were determined to get into the holding cell to their men, a new group came from the opposite tunnel.

“Incoming!”

Before the angry guards could charge toward them, the main door of the center exploded. Screams and debris flew through the air as the entrance was cleared.

Another group of changelings from outside rushed in.

The Pruetts lifted reloaded weapons.

Angelica recognized them. “Hold your fire!”

Claudette hurried over to Angelica, delivering Jason and his son. “It’s safer in here.”

Jason grinned at Angelica. “The fishmongers showed up. Males are coming around the rear of the island. They’re not making it very far.”

Angelica was glad of the help. When this was over, the angry women here might turn on them as well. Bloodlust often worked that way. “We need to find Candice.”

Claudette and her group of troops took up posts in front of the family cell. “We’ll cover things here. Go get your girl.”

Mary led the way down the hall, trying to pick the right direction. “We need to locate one of the technicians or male guards.”

Daniel didn’t see any workers. “I think all of them are gone.”

Mary pointed at a security office. “The control men didn’t have time to get out. They have to be hiding in there.”

The family went that way.

Mary pounded on the door. “I want to reach the medical bay. If you tell me where it is, you’ll be protected. I’m Mary Pruett. I always keep my word.”

There was a shuffling noise from the right. Everyone turned to see two terrified males come from under a desk.

“There’s a map on the wall by your hand.”

Mary pointed as the door opened. “Go to the holding cell with the rest of our men. You’ll be safe there.” Using her changeling eyes, Mary memorized the route on the map, then led the way back into the dark danger of the training center.

Bodies and damage greeted their passage in every tunnel they traversed. It was obvious from the setup that Julian was organized, but he hadn’t counted on Angelica finding a way to get into his bunker.

“Two blocks down here.” Mary pointed. “It looks like there are three guards stationed outside the bay and two more inside.”

They advanced silently down the hall toward the bay, but the screams and shouts from everyone else would have covered any noise they made.

Bruce pointed. “I don’t think he has his guards anymore.”

Pieces of Julian’s clothing were on the floor outside the medical bay door, along with blood smeared over the handle. It was obvious he’d had to fight his way in.

The windows were dark, but all the changelings saw Julian’s big body on the other side.

“Stay back!” Julian retreated into the cubicle with Candice as Angelica and her crew entered the bay and locked the door with a blade in the hinge.

Julian secured the hand lock on the cubicle, hand trembling.

The medical bay was set up identical to the larger one in the complex in New Network City. Candice was in the center bed, surrounded by empty beds while tubes and wires ran in and out of her body to machines that beeped and relayed numbers. She wasn’t on a breathing machine, but she was being fed by IV because she hadn’t regained consciousness yet.

“Come out here!”

Julian lifted the knife in his other hand. “I’ll kill her if you let that girl in here!” Julian had always known who would come for him in the end.

Angelica was almost drooling as she pressed her face against the glass and bared her teeth. “I want to taste his blood.”

Mary saw a male technician hiding in the corner and dragged him over to the control panel. “Open the door.”

As the technician obeyed, Julian pressed his knife against Candice’s throat. “If you come in here, I’ll kill her!”

Daniel gestured. “He’s bluffing. If he kills her, Angel will rip his throat out with her teeth.”

Angelica’s anger flared hotter at the name. She snapped her teeth at Julian through the glass.

Daniel glared at Julian as the door to the cubicle opened. “Surrender or she comes in first.”

“You’ll kill me as soon as I give up.”

Daniel realized there was only one way to end this. “As a Pruett, I promise you’ll be taken care of.” Daniel ignored the protests of the others as he bargained with Julian.

Julian relaxed. When a Pruett gave their word on something, it happened. He let go of the knife. “I give up.”

Daniel rushed to Candice as the family secured Julian.

Screams echoed outside the medical bay as males were caught by lusting changelings coated in blood. Candice’s family wanted to help the males, but if they did, they would be risking their own. They were forced to remain behind the glass barrier as Julian’s males were given their first lesson in the art of war with women who had been battling their entire lives. The men didn’t stand a chance.

“I’ll be safe with you.” Julian was also terrified of the mob of angry females now gathering outside the medical bay. “I know you won’t let them take me.”

“Daniel.” Candice was barely conscious.

He had to lean in to catch her whisper.

Everyone waiting for her choice.

Daniel straightened up. He went over to Julian. “What is your death date?”

“Why should I tell you?”

Daniel stepped forward. “Because you’re scared to die. You brought us here to help stop that. Let me try.”

Julian stared at Daniel, eyes begging him to be trustworthy because he was a man. “The male variation wears off without follow-up vaccines. I didn’t give them my version because it causes burn-up within months. I’ll be dead before she is.”

Daniel held his hand out. “Thank you for your honesty.”

Julian smiled in relief, extending his hand to shake.

Daniel jerked the man forward onto the knife in his other hand.

Candice grunted her approval and passed back out.

Women outside roared and went to find other targets.

The family stared at Daniel, but the moment was interrupted by a view screen dinging.

“Sam’s game just started.” Mary didn’t know what to do about that problem.

Bruce pointed to another screen coming to life as the backup generators kicked on. “Is that a countdown?”

The technician was no longer worrying about answering now that his master was dead. It would be worse not to. “He sent it as soon as Angelica got in, so you can’t scan his eyes and abort. The computer knows the difference between living and dead.”

Fury made Daniel’s voice loud. “Why are you so happy?!”

The technician regarded him as if he was stupid. “Because women should be slaves and we should be rulers.”

Mary tried to regain control of the situation. “Send the west a warning. Tell them what’s coming.”

The technician smiled. “I can’t. Julian locked it all down. Only he knew the codes. There’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Daniel shoved the technician toward the door, feeling no sympathy for him. “Send him out.”

“To the holding cell?” The sly man smiled widely. “I’ll be safe with your friends.”

Daniel pointed at the opposite hall.

“No! No!”

Everyone agreed with Daniel’s judgment. The technician was shoved out into the hall where he was immediately spotted by a red-eyed changeling and chased out of sight.

Daniel didn’t like how ruthless he was becoming, but he wouldn’t have changed his decisions even if Candice told him to. That man didn’t stand for the same things they did. He was the enemy.

“We have to help Sam.” Angelica was becoming frantic.

“I don’t think we can. She’s on her own.”

“Actually, she’s not.” Angelica frowned at Mary. Then she took off running out the door and down the hall.

She leapt over the screaming, bleeding technician being attacked by a changeling guard and landed on the other side. She didn’t stop until she reached the holding cell where the rest of their family was waiting. She hurried to the UN representative as soon as Chester opened the door. She wasn’t going to abandon her sister to fate’s whims. “Can I get a ride?”

Chapter Forty-Two

**Take My Place**

The Western Fortress

**1**

**“T**hat concludes the interview. Sam will be given thirty seconds for a statement before being taken to the paddock.”

Sam leaned forward, letting her eyes glow crimson. She didn’t need thirty seconds. She knew how to start a riot with two sentences. “Milena, when I win this episode, I get your place as Marcella’s heir. She has my token to prove our deal.”

Chaos erupted from the reporter and the guards around her.

Sam was shoved out of the room and taken through the same tunnel, but they made a sharp left at the intersection and went down steepening stairs. Sam wondered what was going on in the viewing room Marcella had mentioned. Was the council in the middle of a screaming match or were they simply shrugging and asking what was next? Sam was voting on the latter from the other members, but she was positive Marcella’s daughter was furious.

Sam was shoved into a small cell outside the double doors of the nursery.

“I’m worth a lot of UDs. Can anyone be bought?” Sam didn’t have time to beat around the bush.

One of the guards flinched, gaining her attention. The other guards shook their heads in scorn, walking away from the cage.

Sam caught the first guard’s eye and subtly patted her pocket. They hadn’t taken her underclothes, leaving her a couple small weapons and a stash of tokens.

The guard gave a curt nod and then slammed her hand against the cage. “None of us can be bought!”

The guard stomped away.

Sam shrugged and began to get herself mentally prepared for a fight and flight. A run through the vulture nursery was supposed to happen in less than ten minutes and produce an exhausted winner who had outrun an entire nursery of angry vultures and their hungry offspring. Because it was so rare to have a survivor, both Networks agreed to give the players little advantages. For her game, she had been given a black-and-white uniform, her hair had been pinned up, and an empty tool belt had been fastened around her waist. She was told she could earn the weapons for it if she made it far enough into the paddock. She’d been allowed to keep her boots. When asked if she could put money on her survival, more contempt had met her query. Apparently, betting wasn’t allowed here. Sam disapproved of the no wealth accumulation setup.

“Doors are opening in 3…2...”

The same guard she had communicated with flipped the latch early and turned her back on the cell.

Sam was out in a flash, grabbing the traitor by her neck. She quickly hefted the woman around and snapped her neck.

“Why did you do that?!”

“She couldn’t be trusted.” Sam walked toward the double doors as guards surrounded her in confusion and anger. “You heard what I told them on the interview, but here’s a secret. I’m going to kill everybody on the council and destroy everything you do here. Then, I’m going to free *all* the men.”

Furious, the guards rushed over to beat on her.

Sam laughed, delighted. She loved it when she was able to get under someone’s skin so fast. She lashed out with her claws, not needing a weapon.

**2**

“She is escaping!”

In the viewing room, the council was horrified by how easily Sam was beating their Defenders. Even though more people were being sent in to help, Sam was eliminating them in record time. It was obvious that she wasn’t going into the paddock. She was about to have free run of the complex and she had the skills to keep that freedom.

“You did this!” Milena ran toward her mother, unable to control her rage. “You picked her over me! She just got here! I’m your blood!”

Marcella didn’t try to defend herself. She was tired of being in control and Sam had given her the one thing she wanted. Marcella grinned as her daughter neared. “She’s a real Pruett. You won’t ever be that.”

Milena stabbed her mother, crying and screaming.

The power switch had come.

The other daughters attacked each other or their parent to claim the family seat.

The bloodlust quickly spread. The guards hurried off to locate their rival for the next position up. It was true survival of the fittest here. Males would be safe during the melee and then they would be in grave danger from the winners.

Marcella slid to the floor, staring at her daughter. She was unable to move.

Milena stared back, covered in blood and rage that she never knew how to subdue. “Why couldn’t you love me?”

Marcella drew in a deep breath… “Sam Pruett is my heir!”

Her head slumped to the ground. Her hand opened to reveal the shiny gold token.

Milena screamed. She snatched up the knife she’d dropped upon seeing her mother’s guts hanging from it and charged off to locate her rival for the family seat.

Behind her, the slaughter didn’t stop. All the mothers but one were down, also choosing not to fight. They were all tired of this existence.

The one who chose to battle, Nida, was struck repeatedly by all of her daughters, unable to defend herself against the angry group of twelve. Overpopulating her line to ensure the family seat had backfired.

As Milena hurried into the hall, the guards quietly shut the doors to the viewing room and locked them. Marcella’s last order had been to lock the council in. Duty to their former ruler finished, the guards took off to do their own job search.

Milena didn’t notice. Her rage was in control.

**3**

“We have an alarm!”

The four surviving females ran to the beeping console. Layered in blood and gore, they didn’t attack each other despite being able to narrow down to one or two seats if they did. No one left wanted to rule alone.

“We have an incoming missile!”

“Where will it hit?”

Ivory’s child studied the console. She and her mother had been in charge of complex security for a long time. “It’s coming right here!”

New to the job, none of the females knew what to do.

“Do we have an evacuation plan?”

Ivory’s heir waved toward their dead parents. “Ask them!”

The other girls frowned.

“How long until it gets here?” Keisha’s daughter decided to take charge until Milena returned. She was sure the interloper would be killed.

“It’s hard to tell since it’s flying so low, but I guess about fifteen minutes.”

“Why didn’t our alarms go off sooner?” Gia’s offspring was on the verge of panicking.

“Because we were all distracted by the new Pruett!” Nida’s child made an ugly gesture. “How about we eliminate another seat and the four of us will share control and have peace?”

“I’d vote for that.”

The female heirs marched to the door together, eager to get it done and get out of here. All of them had private transportation, but they hoped to take their security with them.

One of them grabbed the handle.

It didn’t open.

“What are you waiting for? We don’t have time to play around.” Ivory’s girl yanked on the door several times. “It’s locked!”

“Get out of the way!” The others shoved on the barrier, getting the same result.

“We’ll go out the other way!”

The girls jumped over bodies and blood, shoving each other to reach the rear gate.

“It’s locked, too!”

“Let us out of here!”

There was no answer.

**4**

“This is it.”

Sam waited for the slave to open the door to Milena’s den.

“She’s coming for you. A lot of guards saw you grab me and bring me here.”

“Good!” Sam growled. “Go tell her where I am.”

The sleazy man ran off as Sam entered the door. She walked through the dank cell, noting previous renters had left stains to prove they’d been here.

Sounds came, drawing her deeper into the filth.

“No. Let me go. I have an owner!” Baker shuddered and moaned, body arching as he strained to get free of the cuffs. Eyes open but unseeing, only a release would help him.

“Please let me go!” Baker whimpered as a warm body leaned over him. He jerked on the cuffs and found both hands free.

“Ah!” Baker grabbed the woman, rolling them over. Already thrusting, he wrapped his arms around her waist in an iron grip and shoved between her legs.

Sam’s rage held her still, one hand keeping Baker from going anywhere and the other free to reach her belt if needed. He was an animal on top of her, shoving her up on the bed as he whined and drooled.

Sam spread her legs and let him rip clothes aside to reach what he needed, fury peaking.

Baker groaned, drugs in control. “I hate you for this! I hate you!” He shoved in deep, trying to hurt his tormentor.

Sam barely felt it. She was listening for Milena’s arrival.

A floorboard creaked.

Baker neared the edge, rocking faster, grip tightening.

Sam lifted her free hand. It wasn’t empty.

The door swung open.

“That’s mine!”

“Never was.” Sam fired.

Baker kept thrusting, climax sending him into a fit of jerks and grunts that made Sam worry. It sounded as if he’d been ridden repeatedly and never allowed to finish. From what Jason and Daniel had stated, that was a common torture used by Network Defenders.

Baker didn’t let go as the drugs continued to work on him, but the release did allow a small measure of sanity to return. He caught a familiar scent and then the smell wafting up from their bodies. “Sam?”

“I’ve got you now.”

“Sam!” Baker kissed her.

He didn’t stop there. He couldn’t unless she restrained him.

Sam didn’t. By the time he finished, she’d cooled off enough to join in, clutching him as they jumped the bridge together.

Milena’s body screamed up at them from the floor.

**5**

“Thank you for saving me.” Baker vomited again.

Sam grimaced, trying to stay ahead of the splatter and the guards on their trail. “My honor. Can you be quiet?”

Baker tried harder and was unsuccessful. They fled down the hallway with him spewing a clear trail. As soon as they’d stopped shuddering, she had grabbed him and taken off running.

Sam realized this wasn’t going to succeed. Running with Baker over her shoulder was slowing them and giving them away. She swung him to his feet and pushed him ahead of her, hoping he didn’t have anything left to bring up.

Around them, the tunnels were scenes of slaughter. Sam didn’t know if her arrival or words had triggered the power exchange, but it was clear what was happening. Low ranking guards were attacking their superiors or trying to locate the people above them. There were too many bodies to identify according to rank as they ran by. She assumed the viewing room was the same. In fact, she believed the chaos had originated there. Subordinates wouldn’t be going crazy unless their leaders were. The state of bloody agitation Milena had arrived in also upheld that theory. It had only taken Sam a few minutes to force a technician to tell her where Milena had stashed Baker. Sam was sorry it had ended so quickly. She had hoped to feel the woman’s blood on her hands, but getting Baker out of here alive was more important.

Sam found the stairs the guard had sullenly described; she had to carry Baker on one arm to keep up their speed. It was rough labor, but her changeling body was equipped for this. She had her rage to carry her through, but she wouldn’t be able to do this for long. Unlike her moments in the time trials, she didn’t have chemical enhancements here. In fact, the only things she had that she’d entered this fortress with were her boots, her underclothes, and Baker.

“Stop there!” The guard on the next set of stairs ran in front of them.

It was obvious the woman wasn’t in contention for a promotion because she was still at her post.

The guard lunged forward.

Sam spun aside to avoid the knife, dropping Baker. She snatched the shocked Defender by her neck and slammed her against the wall. The knife clattered to the floor. “How do we get to the rear dock?!”

The strangling sentry pointed.

Sam kept ahold of the woman’s arm and propelled her and Baker in that direction. “Take us there!”

The struggling guard didn’t want to lead them out. Sheila was a low-level Defender with no hopes of advancing further than she was right now, but she enjoyed her job. She didn’t want to lose it.

Sam raked her claws down the woman’s arm, drawing a scream. “Get me there now!”

The guard ran toward the dock in terror. She hadn’t been able to advance any further because she wasn’t a fighter.

Sam and Baker hurried to keep up, trying not to lose sight of the frightened guard.

A loud alarm began to blare through the tunnels, alerting Sam to a new problem. As they entered the bowels of the fortress and she finally caught the smell of salt, a computer voice echoed through the tunnel.

*“Please evacuate in an orderly fashion. Incoming missile will arrive in ten minutes.”*

The alarms grew louder as the message repeated.

“He didn’t hit the power bunker. He sent the missile here!” Baker vomited again.

“Yeah.” Sam realized she had lost sight of their terrified escort.

Baker held onto Sam and tried to keep his guts under control so they wouldn’t keep leaving a trail.

Sam changed direction as she tracked the smell of salt. Her sharp ears also picked up a faint hum of water and she moved them in that direction, not liking this. It would be too easy to make a mistake.

Baker tried hard not to trip as they went down the final set of stone stairs that were damp enough to be slippery. He slid against the wall, scraping his arm, and then he was lifted onto Sam’s back as she rushed into the darkness.

Dim lanterns in the distance led them to a small dock with no guards in sight and a huge section of ocean that came right up to the foundation of the fortress. It was obvious from the depressions in the ground that this had once been an impact site or at least the edge of one. Sam scanned the area, nerves pounding on her brain. Ten minutes wasn’t long to get away from anything the east had sent. She had little doubt they were responsible.

Baker pointed over her shoulder. “Is that a raft?”

Sam hurried in that direction.

The rear dock was poor even in comparison to the rest of the surroundings. The narrow wooden pier of molding, wooden planks appeared as if it wouldn’t hold the weight of one human, let alone supplies or equipment. The small dock ran up under the fortress, where the water met it near the beginning of the stone stairs. As she had suspected, the water was indeed eroding the brick away from the land, making the fortress unstable.

A shadow broke away from the dock as they reached it.

The guard Sam had just terrified drove the spear in, grunting as she put her full weight behind it.

Sam’s forward momentum helped to impale her.

Baker was thrown from her back at the abrupt stop, landing in a painful heap on the stone wharf.

Sheila shoved again, trying to make sure the Pruett was dead. She knew her life depended on it now.

Sam gurgled, staggering backward.

Baker screamed. He scrambled up and rushed at the guard.

Terrified again, Sheila tried to pull the spear out to use on the enraged male. She loosened it, but couldn’t get it free in time as Baker slammed into her.

They both fell into the water.

Sam slumped to the damp wood, spear dislodging. She was unable to keep from falling over.

Sam slipped into the water.

The computer echoed again, new alarm blaring. *“Due to changing weather patterns, the expected impact time has been adjusted. Estimated arrival is 3..2..1...”*

The explosion lit up the west coast for the first time in five centuries.

Chapter Forty-Three

**To Be Free**

**1**

**B**aker wasn’t a good swimmer. The riverboat captains in Georgia had begun to teach the rebel males how, but none of them had taken to it. Baker had passed their simple test, but a calm portion of river was nothing like the wild ocean now slamming him into debris around the dock. His only comfort was that it hadn’t taken much to drown the guard who hadn’t had time to draw in a breath before they went under.

He struggled to reach the spot where Sam had gone into the water, arms aching. The ripples were flowing outward, trying to carry him away.

Baker held his breath and dove under, ignoring the awful roaring of crumbling stone as he fought to find Sam.

A shiny white emblem on a black player’s uniform grabbed his attention.

Baker shoved through the murky, debris-laden water and grabbed her arm.

Sam was aware of Baker pulling her, but not much else. With ringing ears and lungs filling with water, she wasn’t capable of doing more than forcing herself not to resist, to trust him to keep her alive. Marcella didn’t believe the males could be trusted, but Baker was proving her wrong.

Baker heaved Sam’s head above the water so she could breathe.

Sam sucked in air and coughed out water.

Baker groaned in relief, and then in fear as he saw the wave coming toward them. “Hold your breath!”

Baker shoved them back under as the wave hit and rolled past to slam into the foundation of the fortress that was crumbling.

Baker pushed off of a chunk of debris bumping into his legs and broke the surface, dragging Sam with him. The couple coughed and gasped.

Baker tried to swim toward the raft that was still attached to the dock, but he doubted they would make it in time. The awful groans and creeks coming from the fortress behind them said the bomb had done its job and then some.

Another wave rolled in, forcing the couple back underwater.

Sam pushed them above the surface this time, using the powerful legs that were finally responding to her commands. She shoved them toward the raft, aware of blood flowing from her wound. She had about a minute and then she would be useless to him.

The raft was the same kind she and her family had often nicked from Network supplies during their runs, claiming they had been lost while pursuing criminals. It was slow, but there was nothing special about it and nothing more that would help them other than keeping them out of the water.

Baker slid his arms around the slippery raft and held onto the ropes attached to it, coughing.

Sam did the same next to him as another wave broke over top, stealing the air.

*Splash!*

A huge chunk of debris fell into the water next to them.

“Get in!” Sam pushed on Baker until he was in the fragile raft. If a piece of debris hit it, they were gone.

Another huge chunk of the fortress broke off and slammed into the dock, separating it from the shore.

Sam used her knife to chop through the ropes connecting them to the dock that was now sinking. They had given her one weapon for her game, but she’d collected several more on her way to get Baker.

The raft jerked, dragged into the current.

Behind them, the fortress crumbled into the ocean.

The raft floated in choppy seas as waves slapped them around and dragged them away from land. With no way to paddle, they couldn’t fight the current. In a short amount of time, land quickly fell out of sight, but the raft kept bobbing on the cold, salty water.

**2**

The sunset while on the ocean was something Sam would never forget. The glistening hues lit up the water and almost made her believe magic was possible. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She assumed the loss of blood was making her crazy as she passed out.

Sunset on the ocean was creepy for Baker. He stayed away from the sides of the raft, trying not to think about what it would be like to fall overboard and be lost in that cold, dark grave. He also refused to contemplate the animals in the water under the boat. He had heard stories and hoped none of them were true.

Few citizens in New America knew how to swim. The places where the water wasn’t toxic, the wildlife was, and Sam couldn’t rescue him right now. In fact, she might not be able to ever again. Baker had never seen anyone recover from an injury like that without weeks of sessions in a Network complex.

“Remember who she is.” He tried to comfort himself, shivering as he moved closer to Sam to see if there was anything he could do for her. “Pruetts don’t just give up.”

**3**

Sam screamed as saltwater hit her open wound.

Baker flinched, causing the raft to shift uneasily.

Sam opened her eyes, hands going to the injury. She scanned quickly, seeing Baker and the open ocean in every direction. Ignoring the pain, she swiveled around to peer behind them and screamed again.

Blood poured through the broken scab that had been forming.

Baker leaned over to replace his shirt over the injury, hoping that would halt the flow. “You’ve been out for hours. There’s no land in sight.”

Baker sounded terrified. Sam was impressed that he’d tried to tend her injury, but she wished he had waited until she was ready for it. The saltwater was stinging worse than the injury had been hurting before she moved.

Sam turned her head and had to catch herself on the side of the raft, dizzy.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood. I didn’t realize how bad it was until a little while ago.” He gestured at the wound. “The salt is burning out the infection.”

Now Sam was really impressed. She was also weak and about to pass out again. “Don’t drink the water.”

“I won’t. Save your strength.” He returned to unraveling threads from the rope on the side of the raft to use as stitching for her wound. He wasn’t sure yet what he was going to use as a needle, but he would figure it out when her crimson orbs stopped staring at him.

“Are they all gone?” Before Baker could answer, Sam slumped against the raft.

Baker was glad she had woken, though it had only been for a minute. Hours of listening to just the ocean and her unsteady breathing had been rough on him.

As he leaned in to check her injury, a flash caught his eye. Her hairpin gleamed in the moonlight.

Baker carefully removed it and bent it into the shape he needed. All he had to do was make a point. He took the knife from Sam’s belt and began to work on it.

The sharp blade quickly turned it into a needle without an eyehole. As he threaded the rope around it in an awkward tie, Baker hoped she didn’t wake up again until he was done. He had only read about doing things like this or watched the medics do it to him after a bad rental session.

Sam didn’t flinch when the homemade needle entered her skin and began stitching the hole closed.

She also didn’t react when Baker rolled her into a ball afterward, hoping that would allow her some warmth. They had no blankets or supplies here and nightfall was well upon them.

Baker began to work on their next need–food and water. He had no way to produce fresh water out of salt, but the ocean was full of wildlife that could be eaten. Baker struggled to remember what the river women had told them. *Three rows of teeth or less is fine. Anymore is toxic. Avoid colors and never fish at night.*

Baker realized it was too late to do any fishing. He settled for preparing the rope and needle so it would be a hook and line when the sun rose. He didn’t want to know the difference between daylight and nighttime aquatic life. He hadn’t asked then and he hoped he wouldn’t discover that answer now.

With nothing else he could do, Baker carefully curled his body around Sam’s and allowed himself to rest. He didn’t think he’d ever been so scared, but he also was relieved. Even if they didn’t survive this, the western council had been brought down. Sam was a credit to her family.

**4**

Sam woke to male shouting, something that was unusual in any situation.

“Come here! Hold still!”

Sam jerked her eyes open to find Baker struggling with a fish. His juggling act was an amusing way to start a day.

Baker let go of the fish. It slapped into the wet bottom of the raft and flipflopped around until it ran out of energy. As it lay there, gasping at him for air, Baker looked at Sam in panic. “What do I do with it?”

Sam chuckled through the agony. “Eat it.”

Baker slowly calmed. “I know. I even have seaweed to cook it on, but I don’t know what comes between that.”

Sam was surprised he knew that much. She looked at his knife. Lifting her arm to point was out of the question. “You have to slit it from end to end and clean it out. Then skin the scales away from the flesh and cook it.” She examined his catch without moving, approving of the two rows of teeth. “Good job.”

Baker was thrilled with the praise, but he was so hungry! He wanted to eat and he knew Sam needed it, too.

Sam wanted to help him with the fish, but the stitches were fragile and movement would rip them out. She also wanted him to have the experience so if she died he would be able to survive. There wouldn’t be much water in anything he caught, but it might be enough to keep him alive until the raft hit land. The biggest danger at this point, if he caught food regularly, was the ocean itself. This raft wouldn’t protect him.

With Sam’s oral guidance, Baker got their meal together. He was used to preparing food in extreme conditions, but this topped the list of his adventure so far. They had brought down a government and survived. It was amazing. “How do I light a fire?”

“Use your hook and knife.” Sam fought to stay alert, vision blurring. “Direct the spark onto the seaweed. Are you sure it’s completely dry?”

Baker nodded. “I caught it last night so it would be ready.”

Sam smiled at him. “You might as well be a born Pruett. You act like one.”

Baker liked those words, but they also hurt him. “I’m sorry you didn’t get your game. I know you were looking forward to it.”

Sam carefully shrugged. “I toppled the government here a couple hours after I arrived and I left with my bachelor. I consider it a job well done.” She shut her eyes. *So will my family.*

Baker cooked the meal while she dozed, trying not to fall into panic. He really did hate to be alone.

Sam forced herself to wake and eat when it was ready. She didn’t enjoy the fish, but she didn’t hate it either.

The noises and smells of the ocean weren’t pleasant in the sunlight. It smelled like rotting fish and sounded as if someone was slapping a wet blanket every time the waves broke against the small rubber raft. Baker’s body ached and his throat was parched. As he moved, his vision swam. He didn’t like being on the ocean. He had no idea how anyone could stand this for long.

As the waves continued to carry them, Sam lifted a finger toward the fish guts. “Start collecting those. We need a big pile.”

Baker didn’t like the sound of that. “Disgusting.”

Sam licked oil off her fingers and rubbed the rest around her lips. They were already becoming cracked. “We need something red to draw attention. That’s the only thing we have. Keep collecting them.”

“Okay.” Baker saw she was fighting to stay alert and chose to help her with a distraction. He had things he needed to say. “I saw your interview.”

Sam waited for Baker to express his displeasure over her choice, or to question whether she had meant it. She wasn’t prepared for his words.

“I don’t want to be free anymore.”

She stared at him in surprise. “What changed?”

Baker motioned in the direction he thought was behind them. It was hard to tell where they’d come from without any land in sight. “What we have now is better than that. I don’t know what deal you made for us to escape, but please don’t continue their vision. Men don’t deserve it.”

“I’m not sure I agree anymore. And you don’t either or you’d be demanding instead of begging.”

Baker couldn’t deny that. “Please, Sam. Don’t take her place for real. The west doesn’t need a new leader.”

Sam refused to answer.

**5**

It was dawn when Baker woke. Cool wind was shoving the raft along.

“There’s a storm coming.” Baker forced himself to climb over the pile of guts Sam had said they needed. “We’re going to die here.”

Sam didn’t answer.

Baker groaned at the effort that it took to reach her. His body felt as if it weighed three times as much and his muscles were gone. He shook Sam’s leg. “Sam!”

When there was no response, panic shot adrenaline through his body and allowed him to get close enough to verify that she was breathing.

Baker was relieved to see her chest rising and falling. He examined her injury and found pus coming from the stitches, along with lines of infection. “More red, Sam!” He cackled.

Baker clumsily dribbled water over the wound again, hoping the salt would burn out the infection. There was also a chance it would burn through the stitches, but there was little choice. He had nothing else he could treat her injury with and even though he had caught several fish, she wasn’t getting stronger. Neither was he. The lack of water was taking its toll.

It had been days since they’d escaped and Baker had no idea where they were or when they might reach land. What he did know was Sam wasn’t going to last much longer. Her injury hadn’t been as serious as he expected and they had stopped the bleeding with the stitches, but the infection was dangerous. He had watched rebel males die from the same problem.

Weakness swarmed Baker. He slumped into the raft next to Sam. With the last of his strength, he curled his arm around her waist and dropped his head against her shoulder as rain began to pelt them. “Hang on, baby. Hang on…”

Chapter Forty-Four

**Foreign Entities**

Above the Borderlands

**1**

**“W**e should be over the area shortly.”

Angelica was observing through the windows of the helicopter.

When Angelica didn’t respond, Claudette went back to her satellite conversation. Between pauses for the delay, Claudette had been studying Angelica.

Angelica appreciated the woman’s concern, but it wasn’t necessary. She had every faith her sister would be found alive. She was enjoying the feel and views. She had never been in the air before, at least not for long. This had been a day of zooming over the land, grass, and trees. It was fascinating. She had offered to bring Jason along, but he hadn’t wanted to leave his son and he had been a little intimidated at the thought of flying. He had chosen to stay behind and make a return trip with Mary when Candice was ready. Angelica missed him.

“Yes, sir. Yes, ma’am.” Claudette was on an open line with the UN, which consisted of four members who no longer rotated. New members were elected by their self-sacrifice, combined with bravery. She was thrilled to finally be inside the walls of New America legally. She had been tempted to come across before, which would have meant breaking international law. It was a relief to know she wasn’t going to be forced to do that. However, all of their concerns about the Network had been valid. The males were still enslaved here and the disease was rampaging unchecked. Claudette hadn’t told them yet, but the new rulers here would only have a short time to get things in order or the UN would insist on helping.

“Yes, sir. I’m flying toward the site now with the new number three.” Claudette paused to let the next message come through, scanning the ground. “Is that smoke?”

Angelica and the pilot were already staring. The talented man flying the helicopter steered them that way.

“No, sir. It was a full-scale coup of the country. They control both east and west.”

“It’s going to be one country again.” Angelica didn’t look away from the clouds of smoke billowing up from what appeared to be a small town in the distance. “It will take us a little while to get things straightened out, but we will bring our citizens together. The atrocities of the past will not be repeated.”

While Claudette relayed her message to the UN, the pilot took them lower for a better view of snakes with swollen bodies sending sprays of dirt into the air as they burrowed into the sandy ground to lay eggs that were being stolen by huge, wild vultures.

“There are refugees coming from the west, sir. We’re going to investigate this. I’ll connect with you later.” Claudette closed the line between them before her boss could deny the action.

Angelica snickered. “Will you be in trouble for that?”

Claudette shrugged. “He’s currently sleeping with my mother, so I doubt it.”

Angelica chuckled. She hadn’t asked any questions about the rest of the world yet. She could feel Claudette and her crew wondering why she hadn’t. They didn’t understand that until Candice had a chance to restructure things, no one wanted to be biased by any other setup. Candice would figure out how to make this country love itself without outside help. Getting the UN involved had indeed helped them win this war, but they would manage the rest on their own. It would just take them longer.

The refugees below them were traveling east, away from the chaos. Most of them were carrying bags and almost every female was leading a slave.

“I’ve never seen that in my lifetime.”

Angelica sighed. “I’ve never seen anything else.”

Claudette understood and didn’t push. The new leaders were not going to be held responsible for the sins of the old rulers, no matter the relation, but they would be required to clean up the mess as fast as possible. “Get closer.”

As the chopper zoomed down, a small town came into view.

“Brothels!”

Their shock was almost amusing to Angelica. She had been raised here and assumed the entire world was the same way, when in fact, the world was civilized and this country was a savage remnant of the past, still tearing itself apart. Angelica already knew things weren’t like that on the outside. One of Claudette’s bosses was a male, the pilot was a male, and at least half the sailors who had escorted them here were male.

New America would have to catch up to the rest of the world, but it would be done carefully. After everything they had gone through, and after watching the changeling males easily defeat women who Angelica had been positive couldn’t be defeated, it was obvious this was going to have to be done slowly. Freedom would be possible for the men in their country, but not all at once.

Angelica assumed Candice had already considered that, but until she recovered, they wouldn’t know for sure. Candice was the leader of their family and that hadn’t changed because she was also the ruler of the country now. The decisions she made for them would stand and be upheld for their family and for their citizens. “You should have someone check out that town.”

“Something special?” Claudette was hung up on the brothels. She was eager to explore the town.

“I believe my sister’s crew is there.”

Claudette had heard about Sam’s amazing group of Runners. She nodded eagerly. “We’ll take care of it.”

Instead of being encouraged at the find, Angelica was nervous. She couldn’t imagine a situation in which the Runners would allow her sister to be separated from them, but the distinctive burn pattern in the town was impossible to ignore. Pruetts had set it on fire. “Is there any word from your people along the coast?”

“No, but the feed comes in slowly in this unstable atmosphere. The bomb definitely hit land.”

Angelica didn’t say anything else on the subject, but she did wonder how Sam had ended up all the way in the west. She had been assigned to take control of the Borderlands bunker and remain there to hold it as another coup location.

“More refugees!”

Angelica studied them. Unlike the town they had passed, where almost everyone was traveling calmly, this group was in a hurry and carrying nothing. Many of them were on foot and almost none of them had a slave.

“Can you go lower?”

The pilot took them down at Angelica’s request. “This is the limit.”

It occurred to Angelica that she had been around speaking males for days and none of them had triggered her. It was a sign that she was entering the burnout phase, but she had more rage than ever. It was almost as if she were in… “Remission.”

Claudette glanced over. “Did you say something?” The chopper blades above them were making an extraordinary amount of noise.

Angelica shook her head, storing the observation to examine later. Candice would be thrilled.

The next group of refugees fell behind them, leaving a pristine desert backdropped by a smoky sky. There was no longer any need to follow the readings on Claudette’s devices. All they had to do was follow the smoke.

“The injured are coming now.” Claudette picked up her phone. “I’ll get a medical camp set up out here.”

The injured were bloody, with shellshocked expressions and staggers that said they’d been walking for a while. The explosion had happened days ago, leaving enough time for the severely injured to have died and survivors to have cleared the area. Angelica scanned the people hard, hoping to spot her sister, but all of these people were a different race. Angelica didn’t spot a single white citizen. It was another mystery about the west that she hoped Sam would be able to clear up.

The wind increased as they neared the smoke coming from behind a steep hill of sand. As they cleared it, the complex came into view.

“Oh, my God!”

Angelica wasn’t as impressed as the others. She assumed New Network City looked worse, but there was still an incredible amount of destruction below. The huge fortress that had obviously been set into the cliff was now crumbled on the ground around it with a gaping hole where a roof should have been. The eastern council had obviously lined up a direct hit. There was nothing left of the fortress, but there were people all over it, trying to salvage and steal.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No. She isn’t here.”

Claudette and the pilot both frowned.

“How do you know? There are hundreds of people down there.”

“No blonde hair and no fighting. My sister isn’t here.”

Claudette finally took note of the races below and began writing in her book. She was still waiting for her call to go through.

The pilot flew over the destruction, drawing attention from everyone on the ground. People below acted as if the east had arrived to finish destroying them and took off.

As the chopper left the shore and flew over the open ocean, it dipped in the strong current wind and then recovered. The pilot paid no attention.

Angelica wanted to laugh, but she was worried about her sister. The water was full of debris. It was like the pictures she had seen in books of the land right after the nuclear war. It was history repeating itself. There were also bodies in the water, many of them facing downward and too decayed to identify. Most of them had the wrong color hair, but a few of them were blonde. Angelica refused to ask them to stop and check the bodies because it felt as if she would be cursing their luck. She believed her sister was alive. She wasn’t going to go checking the dead.

“My boss wanted me to ask if you know anything about a Canadian reporter who supposedly made it over the wall a few weeks ago.”

Angelica peered harder at the debris. “We haven’t had time to go through Julian’s files yet. He might have notes on it. We’ll let you know if we find anything.”

The pilot checked his gauges. “We’re getting low on fuel.”

“Keep going.”

Claudette was sorry to say it, but she still did. “No one could have survived that hit.”

“You don’t know the Pruetts. Keep going.”

Claudette consulted with the pilot. “How long?”

The pilot studied his gauges. “We can go for another hour and then we’ll have to head north to refuel.”

Angelica was satisfied she had bought another hour of searching time.

Claudette’s call beeped as it went through. “I need a medical camp at the coordinates of the explosion.”

A stern male voice came through immediately. “Do you have permission?”

Claudette flinched, not expecting such a quick reply. “Angelica Pruett has given permission, sir.”

“Before you hang up on me again, I have other things I need an answer for. Write this down.”

The UN woman scrambled for her notebook and pen while Angelica snickered and the pilot frowned.

“We need an answer on vaccine distribution. The previous rulers put qualifiers on it and refused us the right to reproduce it.”

Claudette was scribbling. “I got it. Next?”

“Slavery laws, future inspections, and a timetable for everything we’re discussing right now.”

There was a short pause for her to catch up and then the man continued.

“The Canadian Prime Minister wants to know how long she’s going to be hosting the 392 rebels who snuck into her country without permission. She’s not pursuing sanctions due to the situation and has promised the males will be well cared for. However, if they stay more than sixty days, they are considered Canadian citizens by law and cannot be returned.”

Angelica shifted that to her priority list.

“There also needs to be a national address made as soon as possible. The news is full of rioting and stories of people battling for control over the cities. The sooner these new leaders step up and put citizens into those positions, the sooner my phone will stop beeping.”

“We’ll handle that one as soon as Candice wakes up.” Angelica listened openly to the loud man’s demands.

Claudette was actually glad. “Angelica insists that will be a priority. They want the country under control as much as we do.”

*She makes a great mouthpiece.* Angelica kept scanning the open water under the chopper.

“Handle things and then get back to me. Once you do, we’ll discuss how you involved UN troops in someone else’s war.”

Claudette grimaced. “That was self-defense, sir, as usual. You know these places don’t just surrender when we show up.”

“Your subordinates always echo that claim. As long as they do, you will not be punished. You may come home in full honor.”

“Thank you, sir!” Claudette disconnected the call in relief.

The pilot chuckled.

Angelica regarded the woman. “What did you do to earn that reputation?”

“I liberate slaves of all genders.” Claudette squared her shoulders proudly. “I don’t care who they are or where they are. If they’re being held against their will, I will find them.”

Angelica wanted to believe her. Nothing the woman had done implied otherwise, but Angelica was suddenly sure that Claudette couldn’t be trusted.

The pilot looked over his shoulder a little while later. “We’re getting very low on fuel.”

“Turn us to shore. We’ll meet the medical camp and help set things up.”

Angelica could almost feel her sister. “Keep going.”

Claudette frowned. “We can come right back as soon as we refuel.”

Angelica pointed. “I see something.”

The pilot didn’t. Neither did Claudette until she squinted hard. “Something’s moving...”

Vindicated, Angelica waited impatiently for the helicopter to reach the site. She was almost certain it was a flock of birds circling something. Angelica didn’t have her binoculars anymore and she didn’t see any on the plane, but the huge gulls were obviously attracted to something and Angelica wanted to know what it was. The only reason she could think for the birds to be circling something out in the ocean was that it hadn’t died yet. Otherwise, they would already be consuming their feast.

The pilot cleared his throat. “We have to refuel. I’m not crashing here. If we’re found, they’ll think I’m a slave.”

Claudette chuckled, approving the decision.

Angelica slammed her fist against the chopper. “Call it in! Send someone else!”

Claudette was already pushing buttons on her phone. “The other chopper had to go fill up. It should be finished now. I’m sending it to these coordinates and telling them to scan a hundred miles in all directions. Whatever it is, they’ll locate it.”

Angelica was forced to stay in the chopper as it turned back toward land. She understood the dilemma, but it was a hard fight not to open the door and jump into the water. Unlike Sam, she was an excellent swimmer. She was positive her sister was hurt and needed her. It was a frustrating ride where Angelica refused to speak for fear of committing violence when it wasn’t called for. *Hang on, Sam. I’m coming.*

In the time it took them to reach land, Claudette found out the other helicopter was already in the air and flying toward their previous location. Instead of continuing to where the medical camp would take hours to be set up, Claudette made a call to the captain of her armada. While the helicopter went out, she and Angelica would take the boat. Even if they didn’t locate anything, it would make them feel better.

Seeing all the destruction wasn’t encouraging. Claudette still didn’t think anyone could have survived the bomb, let alone to be alive out on the ocean. Even though she sailed it regularly, Claudette still feared the water. It was evil. *Like men.*

**2**

*Caw!*

Baker lifted cracked lids to find a bird perched on the side of the raft. Its colorful beak snapped at part of the gut pile and swallowed a large chunk.

Baker blinked, not sure he was really seeing it.

*Caw!*

Baker glanced up at the new noise as he realized the bird on the raft hadn’t made it. He was startled to find a dozen large birds circling overhead.

The bird in front of him continued to pick at the pile.

Baker shifted around to shoo it away and froze. There was a boat.

Baker remembered how to breathe. His hands groped out for Sam. “It’s a boat!”

As the ship came closer, Baker groped harder and his voice got louder. “Sam! It’s a boat, Sam!”

Baker looked over to find her sprawled out awkwardly in a slack jawed position.

Baker scooted over, unable to see her breathing. He shook her frantically. “Sam! Wake up!”

The big boat came alongside them and voices called out greetings. Baker didn’t hear any of it. He was pushing on Sam’s chest like he had learned from the medicos, hoping to revive her.

Steps splashed heavily into the filthy raft next to him and hauled Baker out.

Baker didn’t have the strength to fight. All he could do was scream. “No!”

“We’ll help her if we can.”

The comforting voices didn’t get through to Baker. The medics were forced to sedate him, barely catching him as he dropped. In his weakened condition, the sedative took instant effect.

Baker lay in strange arms, groaning and moaning. “Don’t you die on me, Sam Pruett!”

“It is them! Get on the radio!”

Baker went under the silence a few seconds later, still crying for his mate.

Chapter Forty-Five

**Sappy Stuff**

**1**

**“T**hey won’t wake up for a while yet. The medics sedated them.”

Angelica glanced up with a genuine smile as Claudette joined her in the medical bay of the UN ship. “Thank you. For everything.”

Claudette took the seat on the other side of Sam’s bed. She was happy for all of them. “It’s amazing they survived. The methods used were ingenious.”

“I think it was him.” Angelica studied Baker with fondness. “He saved her.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of the condition we found her in. She wasn’t capable of taking care of herself.”

“Slaves are among the most timid of the world’s population. Just because slavery has been abolished doesn’t mean our men have recovered. I highly doubt your sister’s mate, no matter how special, was responsible for their survival.”

Angelica shrugged. The woman didn’t know Baker the way she did. “The males in New America are clever. We’ve been watching them during this war, but even before, there were signs.”

Claudette frowned. “Does that include from your mate?”

Angelica’s expression grew pensive. “I knew from the beginning he was different, but I didn’t understand how much until we were dealing with the mutant women who sailed us to the border. Jason negotiated that deal on his own and came out of it with exactly what he needed. He didn’t sacrifice a single male, not even as a rental. It was impressive.”

“And also a concern?”

Angelica shrugged. “We’ve all been concerned about it. My sister and I didn’t discuss it, but my cousin voiced several opinions before we took the dome. She said they have to prove they can be trusted. Knowing the effects of the rage sickness they’re now going through will help, but it doesn’t change it. We already had those concerns.”

“The UN can’t support anything except complete freedom. Nearly every country in the world has signed the treaty, promising never to enslave another human being, of any gender, for any reason.”

“That final choice won’t be up to me.” Angelica’s expression didn’t change. “But I will have a vote. As of right now, I believe Baker rescued my sister and that proves him dependable. I love Jason and I believe he would do anything for me, including kill. I’m also positive Daniel feels the same way about Candice. However, I will not free the males without approval, so if that’s what your boss is expecting from me, you should soften the blow.”

Claudette made a mental note to do that. It was what her superiors were hoping for, but Claudette understood the concern after witnessing the violent males at the training center. The changeling disease had never spread to the male gender in the rest of the world. This was the first time she had witnessed that phenomenon and it was terrifying.

Once she explained the situation to the UN leaders, she thought many of them would also understand and consent, but the majority would insist the new rulers of this country were breaking international law. Julian’s grandfather had signed it during his time as leader. He had been under pressure from the UN on several other issues that they had promised not to investigate, such as having the remaining arsenal from America’s nuclear past. After the explosion in the west, it was obvious that concession should not have been granted. Claudette would have been against it, but as a low ranking investigator, she would have little authority in final decisions. Still, she thought she could at least buy the Pruett females time to get their country together before the UN started insisting on complete freedom.

“They should sleep until we arrive, probably another hour. Would you like to go to the mess and eat?”

“No.” Angelica motioned the woman on.

Claudette left, not insulted. Angelica had to be exhausted. She had only slept on the way to the training center and not again since then. Claudette assumed she would rest until they arrived and approved.

As the UN woman vanished into the hallway, Angelica looked at her sister. “She’s gone. You can quit faking now.”

Sam chuckled hoarsely. “I could always fool mom and dad, but never you. What gives me away?”

Angelica grinned. “I’m not telling.”

“Stubborn brat!”

Angelica was delighted to have her sister back. “I flew over your damage path. Nice.”

“Baker?”

Angelica motioned toward the bed on the other side of Sam. “Sedated and recovering. He’ll be fine.”

“Candice?”

Angelica’s silence told Sam she wouldn’t like the answer.

“What happened?”

“Ivy’s boy toy snapped. Candice was stabbed in the back. Then Julian got to torture her. She may never walk again.”

That news hurt Sam. She couldn’t imagine Candice not being able to walk. “When will they know?”

Angelica shrugged. “I haven’t gotten an update since I left. The reception out here is terrible.”

Sam could tell how worried Angelica was about their cousin. Angelica had always been closer to Candice than to her immediate family. Sam had left, eager to escape the misery of her home life, and their mother had sent Angelica to live with Mary out of fear that she couldn’t make the girl strong enough to survive in their family. It had been a smart decision as far as Sam was concerned. Other than herself and Candice, Angelica was the most intimidating person Sam knew. “I’m proud of you.”

“You must want something.”

“I do. I want you to know how proud I am to call you my family.”

Angelica frowned. “Are you dying? I’m going to get the doctor.”

Sam laughed and groaned as the pain began to catch up. “I’m going to rest now, little sister. I know you have it covered.”

Angelica almost cried. The entire time she had been a child, looking up to Sam and Candice, that was all she had longed to hear. Now, she had it all. A wonderful man who loved her, children in their lives and a child on the way, the respect of her family, and a chance to beat the disease that had tormented her for so long. They had control of the country, which meant no more tyranny. Everything was perfect except for missing the one person who had been the driving force to make it happen. It didn’t feel right to celebrate without Candice, so Angelica didn’t.

“If you two don’t stop the sappy stuff, I’m going to cry.”

The women looked over to find Baker awake.

Sam immediately began to get up.

“Don’t you dare!” Baker shoved himself out of his bed before Sam could. “Dammit, woman! Can’t you stay in a bed?”

Sam snickered, staying where she was.

Angelica chuckled. She moved toward the door to give them some privacy, but she went slowly, hoping to have her suspicions confirmed.

Sam shifted over so Baker could perch on the edge of her bed.

They gazed at each other in victory.

“You need a bath.”

“You need a new outfit.”

They laughed together, grateful they had survived. There had been moments where they had both doubted it.

Baker leaned forward and hugged her. “Thank you.”

Sam hugged him back with the arm that wasn’t strapped to the bed to keep her from dislodging the tubes and needles. “I’ll give you any reward you ask for.”

Baker frowned. “I didn’t save your life for a reward.”

Theory confirmed, Angelica went to the control booth to see if there had been word from the training center. Everyone was being relocated to the mainland.

As Angelica’s light steps faded, Sam pulled Baker close to whisper in his ear.

Baker laughed. “I’ll give you that anytime you ask for it!”

Sam gave him a pointed look.

Baker groaned. “You’re incorrigible!”

“Do you think you can keep me in line?”

“I wouldn’t even try. In fact, I’m hoping more of you rubs off on me.”

Sam laughed and held him. “Good, because I don’t think I can stand to be away from you now. You’re my heart.”

Baker gave her a quick kiss and moved back. He hated to interrupt the good moment with something that might prevent it from remaining, but there were things they needed to get settled. “I won’t hold you to any commitment you made while we were in the west. You made those choices under duress to bring down the Network. I’ve enjoyed my time with–”

Sam kissed him before he could say anything else.

Baker was quickly swept up in need, able to feel how much she wanted him.

As they broke apart, Sam held onto his shirt. “I don’t want to make an arrangement with you. I want a relationship with the man I fell in love with.”

“Are you sure, Sam? I really don’t expect anything from you.”

“Well, I expect a lot of things from you, so get this through your thick skull, Baker. You belong to me.”

Baker was finally able to relax and move on to the next topic. “I love you, too, Sam. I want to be with you forever, even if you vote against freeing us.”

Sam winced, but didn’t lie. “I might. I haven’t decided yet.”

Baker already knew. “I do understand. I also know if there’s a way for freedom to happen in the future, your family will make sure that it does.”

Sam sighed. “Marcella said no man can ever be trusted, but she was wrong. She never had her own bachelor.”

“You think if she had gone through the games and won her own man, she might have had sympathy for us?”

Sam shrugged, getting tired again. “I don’t think it could have hurt. Marcella wasn’t completely bad. If she had been surrounded by our branch of the family, she might have really been one of us. The corrupting factor was how Julian forced them to set up the council. He kept them at each other’s throats every thirty years, preventing them from ever challenging him. All the threats they made about sending a missile if he invaded were a bluff. Nothing out here works anymore.”

“I’ll bet the UN woman will be relieved to hear that.”

Sam’s voice dropped into cool hard tones. “The UN is *not* allowed to know. No one is. As far as the world is concerned, New America is still a nuclear power. Do you understand?”

Baker quickly nodded and shoved it into the rear of his mind so he wouldn’t blurt it out at the wrong time. He didn’t understand why Sam was making that decision, but he trusted her.

“It will weaken our position with them if we don’t free the males.” Sam yawned. “I’ll tell you more when I can stay awake.”

Baker patted her hand. “Sleep safe, sweetheart. I’ll be right here.”

Sam drifted off with a smile, positive his would be the first face she saw when she woke.

**2**

Angelica reached the control booth she had been shown earlier; she paused outside as she heard Claudette’s voice. The woman was talking to her superiors again.

While she waited, Angelica scanned the ship that was a marvel to her. Unlike the boats of the fishmongers, the UN ship didn’t have bugs or moldy planks groaning as it sailed through the ocean. It was obvious the UN had put their UDs into upgrades. She wished she had hours of unstressed time to explore the many compartments that kept the ship powering through the water. She had been on other boats, but this one made all of those look like the toys she had played with as a young child.

There were dozens of rooms with equipment she couldn’t identify, being manned by men and women in blue and white uniforms who smiled at her and then return to their jobs without asking questions. It was neat, clean, and organized. Angelica wanted this type of navy for their country once they settled things, and then no one would be able to sneak up on them. They would control both water and land.

Claudette disconnected the conversation.

Angelica tapped on the door and stepped in.

“Fresh reports are coming in.”

Angelica settled on a nearby stool, eager for the information.

“The training center has been fully secured. They’re dealing with the bodies and figuring out how to shut everything down. As soon as she’s stable enough to travel, they’re bringing Candice to Pruett Town.”

“As soon as Sam is ready to travel, we’ll go that way, too. It won’t be safe for you and your people to stay here then.”

Claudette understood Angelica was already trying to verify when the UN was going to leave. “Are we going to have trouble later? When the negotiating begins?”

Angelica shrugged, not looking away. “Maybe, but we’ll know the person on the other side can be trusted to keep their word and to do the right thing for their people.”

Claudette was forced to be satisfied with that answer. She really did like these women. “The fighting is finally dying down in the cities. The only problem left is the changeling males have taken over two connecting towns in southern Pennsylvania. The miners living there are asking for a Pruett negotiator to come make peace. They say they have room for the men, but they need someone to insist on no more violence.”

“The miners are peaceful.” Angelica lifted her brow. “Has Candice sent someone to handle it yet?”

“No.” Claudette’s tone dropped into concern. “She hasn’t regained consciousness.”

Angelica handled it as she thought Candice would. “Tell Mary to go. Take the fighters and do it openly. Broadcasting would be helpful.”

Both women were distracted by a high-pitched chittering outside the boat. The UN ship was sailing through the debris near the shore and disturbing dolphins from their dead body buffet. The long, shiny animals fled from the big boat, chattering and slapping at the water. It was a reminder to Angelica about the state of their world. She sighed. “Tell all Defenders to report to the nearest hub for assignments. Everyone will obey current laws.”

Claudette stared at her in shock. “Why?! You have the power to free them right now and I know you want to. You can’t mean what you said before.”

“I do. I won’t finish what Julian wanted. Candice trusts me to know that. It’s why she sent me and not her mother or mine. They would have broken under this choice.”

Claudette scowled. “You won’t, will you?”

Angelica turned toward the door. “No. I’ll always put the future first now. I am forever changed.”

Chapter Forty-Six

**Marked for Life**

**1**

**“T**here she is!” Melissa took off running toward the landing party that was bringing Sam’s stretcher from the UN ship.

The other Runners hurried to catch up, all waving, screaming, or yelling.

Angelica might have been embarrassed in another situation. Instead, she was happy that her sister had such a loyal crew. Most people in New America had learned to betray each other the first chance they got.

The two strong male medics carrying the stretcher concentrated on not letting the women dump their patient onto the ground in their excitement.

Sam didn’t react to the people around them. When the Runners tried to shake her into responding, Angelica shook her head. “They sedated her right before we arrived. She refused to stay in the bed.”

The big women laughed.

“That’s our Sam!”

“She would if Baker was in the bed with her!”

There was fresh amusement as the group escorted the stretcher into the makeshift medical camp that had been set up a few miles from the destroyed fortress. Claudette’s people had measured the levels of toxins and declared it safe here.

The Runners hadn’t cared where the camp was, as long as Sam was being brought to it. After taking down Bachelor Town, the Runners were eager to be with their leader. They’d enjoyed battling the guards there, but it hadn’t been the same without Sam. Finding out she had been gravely injured had angered all of them. They hadn’t wanted her to go into the western fortress alone, but Sam had insisted. Now that they knew she would survive, it was okay to be proud of their accomplishment.

“I assume you guys are responsible for the town I flew over?”

“You got to fly? That is awesome!”

“We had a little fun. Boss’s orders.”

Angelica hadn’t doubted that. As soon as she saw the brothels, she’d assumed Sam was responsible for the destruction. Neither of them liked the way the men were treated in those places. Many of the fines they’d received over the years had been for committing acts of violence against brothel owners and renters.

“When will she be up?”

Angelica looked at the medic.

The medic, a healthy male who didn’t spend time in the company of women because he worked on an all-male team, blushed. “A couple hours.”

Rosa groaned. “Damn. He’s cute.”

The medic flashed her a smile. “You’re not so bad yourself, darlin’.”

His copy of the old world line was too much for Rosa. She shook her head, walking away. “I can’t do that again. I don’t need a mate.”

Angelica gave the medic an encouraging look. “She doesn’t believe in slavery.”

“I’ll remember that.” The man left as the medical people in the tent took over.

The makeshift camp was full of tense, white clad workers who slipped between survivors with supplies and words of encouragement. Claudette had wisely insisted her male troops remain on the ship or inside the tents so they wouldn’t be mistaken for a slave.

“Get over here!”

A local woman slapped her slave’s arm as they walked by, punishing him for not moving fast enough on bare feet.

Angelica was unable to interfere with any of the slaves moving through the camp. Women still had men on leashes. Women were still abusing them. Men were still bleeding. In their lives, nothing had changed yet.

Good mood gone, Angelica went into the tent and joined the Runners as the stretcher was put down. Medics immediately rushed to hook Sam up to the machines that were waiting.

If Sam had been adrift much longer, she wouldn’t have survived. The cute medic had told Angelica that Baker’s actions had slowed the infection, but they wouldn’t have been able to stop it out there. Angelica considered it a miracle. Sam’s survival was a reward for all the other losses they’d had, and would suffer, because of this war. Hopefully, doing the right thing would make a difference in whatever final judgment lay ahead for all of them.

Another stretcher was brought in, carrying Baker. Awake and disgruntled, he had his arms over his chest and his lip sticking out in a continuous pout as he was placed next to Sam.

Technicians also rushed to hook him to machines, ignoring his mutters about being able to walk.

His rebellious attitude brought chuckles from Angelica and the Runners. The UN women were used to such behavior and didn’t react, reminding the Pruetts that the rest of the world was free of their limitations.

“Did they get moving yet?” Melissa looked at Angelica.

Angelica was glad to have a positive answer. “Yes. The training center is empty.”

“Good. I’ll feel better when Candice gets here.”

Angelica understood that. Being away from Jason was torture and she was eager to know Candice’s prognosis.

“I heard Candice refused to ride on the UN boat. She made a deal with the fishmongers.”

Angelica wasn’t surprised. If not for needing help with her rebel males and locating her sister, Angelica would have already asked Claudette and her group to leave. As it was, she didn’t expect them to be here much longer. Citizens from this area had been instructed to bring city stocks to feed and care for everyone. The supplies were already arriving in a regular assembly line of wagons and carts. Once Sam could travel, the UN would no longer be required.

Angelica didn’t expect that to be a problem. While on the way to the medical camp, Claudette had been contacted by her boss with a possible case of slavery somewhere in South America. Claudette was being dispatched to investigate it as soon as she was finished here, which meant the woman wouldn’t dally.

Angelica had briefly considered volunteering to go with the woman as an observer but hadn’t. Her country needed her to help with the rebuilding more than she needed to see the world that was now open to all of them. At some point in the future, things would settle and then she could travel. She also didn’t want to be away from her family until after the baby was born and probably not for a good bit after that. She had no illusions motherhood would be easy. The few days with Jason and his son, along with watching Daniel and his babies, had convinced her that her game to win Jason’s freedom had been a breeze compared to parenthood.

“We have people arriving.” Rosa was in the doorway. “I see Ginny.”

Angelica went out to meet them.

Baker considered who it might be and then motioned Heather over so he could whisper. “We have a member of the East Coast Council in custody. Robert.”

Heather immediately went to tell Angelica.

Baker looked around at the other Runners. “I missed you.”

They all chuckled.

“Well, you won’t have to miss us next time.” Rosa came over to the cot where Baker was now hooked up, covered up, and looked like a cow in a blanket. She took a tattoo box from the pocket of her charred cloak, making a mental note to restock the fire supplies. They’d used all of it in the stockrooms. People always made the mistake of putting flammables next to their nonperishables.

Baker held still as Rosa neared his neck with the device. “I don’t understand.”

She roughly slapped a tattoo in the place next to the Pruett family crest.

Baker was listening for the answer and barely felt the minor pain that was nothing compared to what he had experienced during his adventure here in the west.

“You’re one of us now.” Rosa clapped, a bit sad. She had hoped to do this with Greg. “You’re the first male Runner on Sam’s crew. Uphold that position with honor.”

Baker couldn’t stop the tears. He knew it wasn’t manly to shed them in front of the females, but he was touched they were accepting him. “I’ll be a good mate for her. I promise.”

Rosa smiled. “This isn’t because she finds you pleasing in bed or because you’re as tough as she is. It’s because you’ve changed us. You’re a good man and you’ve made us see that slavery is wrong. We hope you’ll continue to influence us in the right direction on the new paths to freedom that we all expect to take together now.”

Baker was honored and speechless. He had no idea what to say.

Rosa knew how to fill the sappy moment. “Now that that’s over, I need a mug and a male. Who’s got my back?”

Baker couldn’t help the chuckle. He liked these big women and he was proud to be considered strong enough to be a part of their crew. He would never dishonor them. *They’re my family now.*

**2**

Angelica stared at the leashed, bound, filthy slave who glared at her in bloody, unbroken defiance. He was barely clothed, barely fed, and exhausted. It was like looking at the bachelors she had helped rescue, except Angelica felt no sympathy.

Robert was in a cart being pulled by two of the Runners that Sam had left in the East. Heather had delivered Baker’s words and Hope had filled her in on their hostage, but neither had details to give. She’d just said Sam ordered a pickup and they’d found Robert waiting in the care of some rental rebels. This story would have to wait until Sam was better, Angelica decided, or at least until she could be alone with Robert’s guards. They were surrounded by citizens from the west right now. Many of those had already asked about Sam’s condition, expressing concern for their new ruler. It was obvious the local population here had seen Sam’s interview and statements. They knew she was Marcella’s heir.

The UN people were also seeing and hearing that, lending credence to the family claim on leadership of the country. They did control all of the key areas. The statement Candice had released about the Tennessee Crossing and the Georgia hub were also true. The people holding those areas were paid Defenders that the Pruetts had collected during their travels over the years. The news stations were under the control of Dana and her group of smugglers. Dana had been responsible for helping get men out of the complex for years. Angelica had no idea how the reporter had been doing it under Julian’s nose, but she was impressed. Dana would definitely have a place in the restructuring.

“Is there someplace we can store him?” Hope was also ready for a mug and a male.

Angelica knew the honorable thing to do was to take Robert into custody, present him to the UN as a prisoner of war, and turn him over to them for a global tribunal that would charge him with crimes against humanity. Eventually, some sort of justice would be served. Robert would be the sole target for everyone’s anger and hatred.

Angelica knew that was the decision her family honor demanded, but she couldn’t do it. Robert would have a lavish cell for a decade or more before ever facing a true sentence and even then, his death wouldn’t be allowed. Claudette had already made the mistake of telling Angelica that capital punishment didn’t exist in most of the world. “He’s a rental male. Put him in one of the brothel tents.”

Hope gaped at Angelica.

Next to her, Ginny hid a family grin. “There’s another camp building up a few miles from here. No UN people there. They could use a rental worker.”

Angelica nodded, seeing Robert was too drugged to protest. “Candice needs to be informed in case she wants to make use of his services.”

Ginny understood Robert was to be kept alive in case Candice overruled Angelica’s choice.

Robert finally roused himself as the cart turned. His drunken words were barely understandable. “I am a council member! I am a council member!”

Hope slammed her boot against the cart. “One more word and I’ll cut out your tongue!”

Robert snapped his mouth shut. Hope had already convinced him on the way here that she didn’t bluff. He had several scars to prove it.

Hope pulled the cart down the dirt path between the tents and disappeared.

Angelica looked at Ginny. “She could probably still use a hand.”

Ginny stared at Angelica for a moment longer and then surprised them both. “Can I buy him from you?”

Angelica burst out laughing. “Of course. I don’t have room for two.”

Ginny hurried off to look after her new slave.

Rosa had stayed close enough to the tent flap to spot anyone trying to sneak in, but she had also followed Angelica to be able to listen. As the girl came back, Rosa stopped her. “I’m surprised you did that.”

Angelica was already feeling guilty. “Was it wrong?”

“No. In fact, letting him live was more than he deserved.” Rosa reached into her pocket and pulled out a familiar item. She stepped toward Angelica before the girl could react and placed the tool against her neck.

Angelica was too surprised to feel the pain. “I’m confused.” She had wanted to be an official member of her sister’s crew for years, but she had been afraid to ask because she didn’t feel like she was as hard or as intimidating. Sam had never made the offer, leading Angelica to believe she felt the same. New members of the crew could only be added by unanimous choice and that included Sam.

“Welcome to the Runners.”

“Did my sister agree to this?”

“She would if we had bothered to ask her, but we didn’t need to. You’ve proved yourself worthy.”

Angelica couldn’t stop the scowl. “Because I lied to the UN and sold a member of the council into slavery?”

“We would never reward you for something like that. Can you think of anything you’ve done that would make you deserving of this?”

Angelica smirked. “Nope.”

Rosa snorted. “You didn’t give up on Sam. You knew she was out there somewhere and you found her. We love your sister the way you do. In time, you’ll have that same bond with us. We’ll all be your sisters.”

It was a great moment for Angelica. She had always believed she bonded with Candice because she hadn’t had anyone else in her life. Her parents had been cold, distant figures and her sister had been an absolute legend. Latching onto Candice had been a survival reflex. Now, she would have the rest of the emotional support she needed, along with people to keep her safe and entertained during the upcoming adventures she was sure to have as the country was restructured.

Around them, the tent camp was noisy and smelly, with citizens coming and going in every direction. UN employees and locals were interacting without violence, eager to exchange information. People here had long been denied knowledge of the outside world. It was great for them.

It was hard on the UN workers. Thanks to Angelica insisting none of the laws had changed yet, Claudette was unable to interfere with the activities in the tents. She was only allowed to help. It made it hard for the employees to witness the abuse, past and present, of the slaves, but few of the women were interested in hurting their men right now. The UN people were an exotic mystery. It kept them occupied.

Angelica was smiling as she returned to the medical tent.

Baker noticed it as she entered. “What made you so happy?”

Angelica shrugged. “A little council justice. I’ll tell you about it later, after Ginny has a mug and her male.”

Baker could guess from that. If it had been any other man, he might have protested, but he hated the Network and everything they had stood for. The council member deserved to be punished. Robert would suffer the fate he had sentenced countless males to during his time on the council. With every scream, and every drop of blood and semen that was taken from him, souls would find peace and their country would heal. “Congrats.”

Angelica grinned, nodding at him. “You, too.”

They both fingered their new tattoos and enjoyed the moment.

Chapter Forty-Seven

**Scribes**

Pruett Town

**2 Days Later**

**1**

**“A**ngelica! The boats are here!”

Angelica didn’t respond to Rosa’s shout. Candice, along with the rest of their family, was arriving via the fishmongers that she and Jason had befriended. They’d been able to sail most of the way home. They had been met at a tiny dock three miles from town. Candice’s prognosis hadn’t changed, requiring a vehicle pickup instead of the usual Mopar she wouldn’t be able to control. Angelica wasn’t going to join them yet. Candice would be taken straight to the new house. Angelica would see her there.

The UN was continuing to prove useful. Claudette had insisted on sending them a medical transport. The vehicle had prevented Sam from being jostled around so much that it damaged the repairs on her injury. She hadn’t liked it, but she’d submitted when Baker insisted. It had taken them two days to reach home, and they’d been joined by people along the way who had fought in the rebellion or been affected by it. Groups of refugees had followed Sam from the west, and were now squatting in tents outside Pruett Town. The locals here were caring for the refugees, using Network supplies that were being delivered by reassigned Defenders.

Footsteps and shouts sounded as more citizens heard the arrivals and went to greet their hero. Angelica felt the need to go keep things under control, but resisted. It had become natural to her to enforce the peace as a member of their bounty crew, but she wasn’t a hunter anymore.

Angelica scanned the basement again. The homestead had been burned, but the fire left an untouched basement hatch. Upon opening it with her code, Angelica had discovered their possessions intact. The flames hadn’t gotten through, though the space was still smoky. Angelica was relieved and knew Candice would be as well. Not only had they bled and wept to gather these items, some of them were irreplaceable.

Angelica tucked the framed document under her arm. The town had generously given them a place to stay until they could rebuild, but Angelica didn’t know when they would be able to start on that. There were too many other things ahead of it. They weren’t exactly destitute, however. The family had several other dens and houses that held stashes of items that they would need to recover their wealth. It would be up to Candice as to how they did that or whether or not they even needed to. In fact, everything was up to Candice.

Angelica left the basement with a spring in her step and hope in her heart. Everything would be different for their people now.

As Angelica emerged, she found Baker perched in the poisonous thorn trees that lined the property. They’d survived, though the bark had charred off to reveal green mantis eggs. It wasn’t the first time their home had burnt down, though it was the first occurrence during her lifetime.

Baker nodded at the document under her arm. “Candice will like that being brought up.”

Angelica wondered if Baker was nervous about meeting his little brother after so many years or if he had just felt like going for a walk. He was allowed to do that now. In this town, men were safe.

“We should have known something was up with you when you got near our pets.”

Baker stroked the tree that was vibrating under his body like the purr of a mountain cat. “I understand wild things.”

Angelica laughed. After Baker’s relationship with Candice and Sam, Angelica didn’t doubt that was true. She’d also had an opportunity to be with Baker, but preferred friendship. As a result, it was like talking to an older brother.

“Are you okay?”

Angelica gave him a funny look. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I hear Jason’s son is a handful.” It was Baker’s way of mentioning Rankin without saying her name.

Angelica stiffened, but only a little. “I’m working through it. I don’t blame the boy.”

Baker was glad to hear that.

“What’s going on?” Angelica could tell there was a problem by the way he was staring.

“I want to have a baby with Sam.”

Angelica gaped.

Baker didn’t tell her why. He assumed she could guess he wanted that bond with her sister–the kind she and Jason were going to have.

Baker jumped to the ground. “When everything is settled, are you going to join the Runners?”

“Are you?”

They stared at each other, neither willing to answer first.

Angelica snorted. “I know what you want.”

Baker gave her an innocent look. “I got what I wanted.”

“That’s not all or you’d be done with me and be back with Sam right now.”

Baker chuckled, throaty voice sending chills over her hot skin. “What do I want, *Angel*?”

Angelica spun around and punched him in the arm.

Baker staggered, wincing. “Ouch!”

Angelica rolled her eyes.

Baker understood he might be making her angry with the act and gave in. “Okay, so I do want something from you.”

Angelica snorted. “You want me to help you convince my sister to stay home for a year and have a child before we all go off exploring the world together.”

Baker flushed. “Yeah.”

Angelica shrugged. “Okay. The country can always use more like us.”

Baker draped an arm around her shoulders without fear or feeling a flinch in response. “Yes, it can. We’re awesome.” He gave her a quick hug. “Thank you.”

She shoved him away, not wanting the town to witness her being emotional. “Get lost.”

Baker jogged off, eager to be back with Sam.

Angelica walked, enjoying the sights and sounds of victory. Their town had been thrilled that Candice was coming home instead of setting up shop in a city. Upon learning she intended to make this her center of operations, the town had voted to give them a large apartment. The former owner had died during the rebellion.

Angelica thought it was generous. The women here had already received the vaccine or the cure from Network stashes and were starting to feel relief from the disease as their immune systems copied the chemicals and slowly flushed out the poison. The locals were happier with every hour that went by. It made sense that they would be grateful enough, and greedy enough, to want Candice to make their town prosper in the way the council had always encouraged of New Network City. Angelica hoped that wouldn’t happen here. Once they finished cleaning up the slums, this place would be beautiful. A city skyline didn’t belong here.

Angelica heard more vehicles coming and increased her pace. There were already signs of the new future in the town around her. The brothel was closed. There were no males inside and no screams echoing to disturb the peace. Everyone here understood abusing men was no longer allowed, though the official laws hadn’t changed yet. Pruett Town would be the first place of safety, but that would spread. Women here now hoped that over time, abuse of males would fade into a horrible memory that wouldn’t be forgotten but could be forgiven.

Angelica had her doubts. Many of the men who were accepting comfort from new protectors here would be furious if Candice didn’t free them. They would turn in open rebellion and there would be little that she could do about it. Tara and Julian had been right. It was a catch-22. Every male was talking about freedom and what he was going to do with it–like Baker’s rebels had been. They were also discussing how to be reunited with their children. Candice was likely already working on those plans, but she was never going to agree to take babes from their mothers. That would increase the male anger. Angelica hoped her cousin would find a solution where no one else could.

The males who understood true freedom was close had chosen to take homes in their town. They didn’t feel comfortable enough to flaunt themselves in doorways and windows yet, or to linger on porches, but their happiness was unmistakable. Male amusement was rolling through the streets, singeing changeling nerves and making women sigh in loneliness. Once those two populations began to mix, their country would start to recover. Angelica wished the same could be said for Candice. Walking was something she would never do again. The medics all agreed on that.

Angelica stepped inside the large townhome that she, Candice, and Sam were going to share. The front room was full of visiting train males that the three women had helped, along with the Runners. All of them nodded or smiled, but they didn’t stop talking. They had no reason to fear a female entering this home.

The new house was more lavish than the family was used to, containing six beds and sturdy furniture that even the Pruetts wouldn’t have been able to afford. Angelica assumed locals had gathered these things from Network hubs. There was no reason not to use the items. The house was also stocked with food, supplies, and a small number of weapons the townswomen had gathered in a show of support. If there was fighting here, they wanted the Pruetts to be able to defend them. There were also curtains over the windows and even a welcome mat outside the apartment. It didn’t have their name on it yet, but one of the rebel males would certainly take care of that as soon as paint sets were given to the artists in their group.

Angelica entered the study, where Sam was sprawled on a couch with an illegal book. Her injury was almost healed, but Baker was making her rest anyway.

Angelica hung the framed document on the wall across from the bed where Candice was going to be placed. She could hear her cousin arriving. Daniel would carry her in. Candice wouldn’t want people to witness that weakness, so Angelica didn’t send a greeting party to welcome her.

Sam watched Angelica straighten the frame on the wall, lips twitching. “Do you remember when we got that?”

Angelica nodded. “Only from the outside. I couldn’t go in then. I was young and Candice wasn’t sure if I was capable of killing yet.”

Sam’s eyes were haunted. “I felt the same way. We were shocked to come out and find the bodies.”

“The swamp women snuck up on me while I was stomping around, complaining about being left out. I almost died there.”

“We all knew, Angel. Me, Candice, and Aunt Mary. We all understood right then that you were one of us. When the moment came, you survived on your own.”

“You guys still wouldn’t let me go in on runs for a long time.”

“We didn’t want you to get cocky, like Bobby.”

Angelica pulled a face to cover her real thoughts on that. “I’ll bet Aunt Mary was thrilled to have him along.”

Sam let out a deep sigh. “I just know I’m thrilled that I avoided his company for most of this adventure.”

Both women laughed and then quieted as male voices mirrored their amusement from the next room. The sound took getting used to. It was good, but rare enough to pluck nerves and remind them they had changed once again.

“Any morning sickness yet?”

Angelica blushed. “No.”

“I heard raw vulture eggs will settle it.”

Angelica groaned as her stomach twisted. “Now you’re just being mean.”

Sam laughed. “What are sisters for?”

They both stilled as male voices lifted in excitement.

“It’s Daniel and Candice!”

“There’s Jason!”

The men all got up to greet the couple as they entered.

Angelica and Sam waited. They had no doubt Daniel would join Baker and Jason to exchange his part of the story after he got Candice settled. Outside providing protection for the house, Sam’s on-duty Runners were doing the same with any local who would listen. The bragging women were being tolerated by the town because they were heroes, but it was obvious they were still wild. It had come as a shock to everyone except Sam and Baker when the females had refused the cure.

Rosa had explained it as a fear of losing the rage that made them who they were. Sam said the women would eventually want the cure; forcing them wasn’t the way to handle it. Angelica agreed, though she would insist on her child receiving the vaccine at birth. She’d had enough of their family burning alive.

Angelica didn’t think she would be able to forgive and forget the awful things the Network had forced her to suffer, but she was no longer worried about burning up or burning out. Now, she wanted the suffering of her fellow citizens to ease. Then she wanted peace to live her life with her mate and their children, and to explore the world. Many people had the same plans. Surprisingly, though, it was the citizens and not the Defenders who wanted the adventure.

“Cain?”

“B-Baker?”

There was another wave of shouts and cheers as Baker was reunited with his little brother. Sam watched the shadows on the wall, happy for Baker when the boy flew across the floor and into his arms.

“Never leave me! Never leave me!”

Baker hugged the boy, crying again. “I won’t, little man. It’s you and me now.”

Daniel came in with Candice in his arms, big shoulders easily supporting her weight. He looked good. *Really good.*

Angelica and Sam gaped.

Candice grinned. “That’s love, ladies. Yours will be the same in time.”

The girls laughed as Daniel blushed. He placed Candice in the waiting bed, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then scurried from the room to join his buddies.

It was wonderful to see him acting upon his own needs and desires without requiring permission. Angelica and Sam were looking forward to the time when their men felt comfortable enough to do that. Being back around Daniel would speed up the process.

Candice adjusted herself in the bed, not wincing. There wasn’t any pain. Her leg was a dead appendage that refused to respond to any of her commands, though she was trying daily therapy anyway. Julian’s medics had insisted there was no hope, but she was a Pruett. *We never give up.*

Angelica and Sam waited for Candice to get comfortable. As she did, they listened to the men in the other room and marveled at how fast their lives had changed. Candice had only left for her game to rescue Daniel three months ago, but it felt like it had been much longer. What they’d accomplished should have been impossible in that amount of time, but everyone in their country had been ready for a different future. This family had been able to give it to them.

“Before we talk about anything else, there’s something I need to tell you both.”

Angelica’s expression tightened.

Sam looked at Candice, sadness all over her face. “We know.”

Candice wasn’t surprised, but it was still her duty to inform them. “I’m sorry. We haven’t recovered their bodies yet, but Camille and Amos will be given full honors.”

“Angelica and I discussed it briefly on the way here. We’d like them to be cremated. We’re going to scatter their ashes on the ocean. We believe they would have loved it there.”

“How did you know?”

“They weren’t at the training center with you.” Angelica refused to feel the pain. Mourning her parents was coming in short, painful blows that she preferred to deal with in private.

“They were killed in the blast with Jonas and the Glowers. If not for them, the ape might not have cracked the dome. We owe them a lot.”

Both women agreed, but they didn’t want to discuss it further.

Candice understood. “Ready for your new jobs as my scribes?”

Sam laughed, shrugging. “Okay. What’s a scribe?”

Candice snickered, aware that she was joking.

“Has anyone heard from Mary and Bruce?” Candice had been out of the loop while the fishmongers brought her up river and delivered her to the medical car. Radio communication had been spotty during the trip.

“They’re on the way. It’s almost calm now.” Angelica was still taking advantage of her relationship with the United Nations. Claudette had offered to send the chopper to pick Mary up and Angelica had accepted.

“People are gathering. We’ll need to expand the town.”

Candice nodded at Sam’s observation. “After Adelphia, all of us will gather here and begin restructuring plans. Right now, I want to handle things we won’t do then, things that either won’t be handled publicly or need to be handled now.”

“Like what?”

“Start with threats and enemies.”

Sam ran through that list quickly. “A few of the Glowers are here. We detained them on the premise that the vaccine takes weeks to work.”

“That won’t hold them long. You’ll need to send Defenders out to shut down their dens.”

“We’ll pass the word about our wishes.” Angelica didn’t like the decision, but she certainly understood. With Jonas dying next to the ape, both leaders were gone and the Glowers were already starting to scatter into the countryside. If they didn’t get a hold on them now, that disease would be the next to spread across the country and maybe the world.

“We’re still holding Robert.” Angelica lowered her voice. “I sold him to Ginny.”

Candice sighed. “I’ll decide what to do about him later.”

Neither of the women protested, but it was hardest for Angelica. She should have already turned him over to the UN’s justice. Robert was currently serving eight-hour shifts, five days a week, as a top rental in the refugee camp brothel. Whenever he was finally brought in, Angelica expected him to be a completely different person–exactly what he had done to males for years.

“I want the subway made free, indefinitely, so people can make it to the vote we’ll hold in medical facilities. They’ll hold more people at once and we can vaccinate or cure them at the same time. Our financial institutions have been interrupted and our economy is fragile. Freeze prices on basic things, lower prices where needed, and stop people from gouging. I don’t want anyone starving during the transition.”

Angelica and Sam were now taking notes. Despite Candice’s words about them being scribes, they hadn’t realized she would be giving them instructions. It was still a surprise to remember that they were in charge of the country.

As Candice waited for them to catch up, she also reflected on the changes that had happened. She didn’t dwell on the injury at all. The loss of one limb was a tiny price to her in comparison to the liberation that was happening. It would take the rest of her life, and the lives of her descendants, but they would be able to atone for the sins of the past and fix the mistakes of the leaders who had come before them. It pleased her that the Pruett family, who had caused a lot of this chaos, would be responsible for fixing it.

Every one of them owed it to their country and to the citizens around them. Family curses couldn’t be removed. They could only be atoned for and she was in the middle of doing that, with a nice first victory under her belt. Actually freeing the men from slavery and eliminating the disease would be the next victories. Candice expected it to take decades. In the meantime, she had thousands of other areas that would have to be fixed or broken down and rebuilt. She honestly couldn’t wait to get started on it all. The rest of her family would have adventures and carry on their ruthless reputation. *I have the honor of leading them.*

Chapter Forty-Eight

**All Better**

**1**

**“T**here he is!”

Bobby had just entered the home. Lydia was in the middle of the Runners, enjoying their stories and telling her own.

Angelica subtly moved to the doorway to observe the reunion. Bobby had two blackened eyes that were starting to heal. He’d been punished repeatedly and one of those moments had been by Mary. Lydia had to be disappointed.

Bobby stopped in the doorway, spotting his owner in the center of a victory pile. All the men and women in this room had proven themselves. Bobby flushed in shame.

Lydia sighed as the room quieted. “Now, you get it?”

Bobby flushed. “I’m sorry I insisted. I won’t do it again.”

Lydia’s disappointment was clear, but she still waved him over. “Come here.”

Bobby grinned, hurrying into her arms.

Lydia kissed him softly and stroked his glossy hair. “Is that all better?”

Bobby nodded, settling against her.

Everyone else burst out laughing.

Angelica looked over to find Candice asleep. It was obvious their fearless leader was seriously injured beyond the paralyzed leg.

Sam had come to the same conclusion. “I connected some pieces I think we should talk about.”

“Do you want to wait for Candice to wake up?”

Sam shook her head. “Pretty sure she already knows. It’s you I’m concerned about.”

Angelica frowned. “You know about mom.”

Sam let out the breath she’d taken. “That makes this easier.”

The stepsisters regarded each other.

“Julian played with our lives. With *their* lives.”

Sam nodded. She and Angelica were both Pruetts, but from different branches.

“At least we know she didn’t cheat on dad now.”

Sam grunted. She’d hated her mother for a long time for the affair that had produced a black haired child in a branch of all blondes. She’d loved Angelica, but it could have gone the other way. She might have spent her life hating all of them when they hadn’t known Julian was mixing Pruett cocktails each time they went in for a conception. Network law required samples brought in from the father that were cleaned and implanted. Only the poorer populations had been reduced to a metal table with straps and syringes for breeding. It had been easy for Julian to manipulate things.

“I still don’t understand what he was trying to accomplish.” Angelica sat next to Sam so their voices wouldn’t carry to the various people around them. “How could making me and Candice help him with immortality?”

“I don’t get all of it either, but it has something to do with the offspring he would have made from a child with one of you. They’d been doing it so long that they’d almost perfected extracting the flawed parts, the parts that allow the aging process.”

“So a child, with him would have lived longer. And each child after that, even longer, until immortality was reached?”

“Exactly.”

“Why him?” Angelica’s lip curled. “He wasn’t impressive in any way except his mental capabilities. Little Cain has more muscles.”

Sam snickered. “I suspect the council sank into complacency over the years and didn’t keep buff. It was probably also a way to blend in. A group of men with huge arms might have drawn attention.”

“Wouldn’t that have eroded the DNA?”

“Of course, but that’s where the wild branches came in. He waited for one of us to show ourselves stronger or smarter, and then lured us in with a bachelor. We came home with a man and the next step could be taken because we all get bloodwork while we’re there. You know. Even the time trials require a blood sample.”

Angelica nodded. The Network had claimed it was to prove who the player was, but Sam’s theory made more sense. “After a while, burnout kicks in and we want a child?”

“Yes. So we go to the complex, thinking we’ve chosen the father.”

“But Julian switched it.” Angelica was horrified. “How long? How many of us?”

Sam shrugged. “We’re still gathering the information, but at least most of Julian’s life. I watched the rest of the bunker meetings on the file.” Sam handed the disk to her sister. “When you’re done, make sure Candice gets it.”

“You gave her a summary?”

“Yes. It’s nothing she has to cover now, but you’ll both find it interesting. From their discussions on cryostasis, they believed they were only a few years from being able to start experimenting with reviving some of the old ones.”

Angelica shuddered. “Implanting heads on bodies?”

Sam remembered Angelica hadn’t been in the bunker with her. “No. They still had bodies. I assume the scientists were going to insert the stronger DNA into the cryochambers for treatments. It would have taken years of that for their bodies to adjust and reproduce it on their own.”

“And how many kids had to die to get the crap they were injecting?”

“Thousands, Angel. That’s why Julian was ready to put the final part of Lucas’s plan in motion. Those couples need time to be matched up, bred, and the babies gestated to the proper age for removal. They knew it would take years to conquer the women once they turned the changeling men loose. Their only flaw was acting before Julian’s final batch of men was ready. The few hundred in the city couldn’t infect enough changelings. They didn’t have the numbers.”

“We got lucky to figure this out.”

“I think so, too. Candice forced his hand by not letting me reach the game. The dome wasn’t supposed to fall for another week. By then, his tests at the training center would have been done and he would have ordered all males in their possession to receive the new injections. With another week to carry it out while I was in the dome, keeping it from being attacked, the hubs would have distributed it to towns across the country. We wouldn’t have been able to stop it.”

“So he only had the men in the complex to let out?”

“And not all of those. Dana and the Den Mothers have been sneaking them out in high numbers since we took the Network Rider in the Borderlands. Candice warned them.”

“Does she know? About our…” Angelica didn’t want to say it.

Sam nodded. “She knew as soon as she saw Julian. Didn’t you?”

Angelica dropped her head. That’s why she’d wanted him dead.

“Don’t do that!”

Angelica’s chin went up at Sam’s sharp scold.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of and neither does Candy. In fact, you both have a lot to be proud of.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey! You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Angelica left the room.

Sam sighed. She had no doubt that Candice had reacted the same way when Daniel tried to comfort her. It would take them time to adjust. Not many people knew, even among their family. The public would never know most of the horrors Julian and his kind were responsible for, but those who did would have to find a way to live with it.

**2**

“Are you ready?”

Candice nodded at Daniel’s question. They’d just finished a tense meal where people had fought not to protest the schedule she’d set. They were leaving for Adelphia.

Candice took in a deep breath to steady her voice. How she sounded mattered just as much as the words did. She pushed the button to begin broadcasting. “My name is Candice Pruett. I am responsible for the coup against both Networks–east and west. For the moment, I’m your new boss, so pay attention!”

Candice wanted to be sure everyone believed she was just as ruthless as Julian and his henchmen had been, so they wouldn’t cross her.

“With a lot of help, I have liberated New America from the tyranny of the councils. Never again will this country be allowed to fall into corruption. My family and I will take the next six months and put things in order before turning this country over to your elected representative. I’ll tell you more about that later. Right now, I’m giving you changes that are to be put into effect immediately. First, the games are abolished! Other laws will be discussed and voted upon, but this one has no room for compromise. I will no longer stand by and watch my fellow women kill each other because of a disease that can be stopped. That brings me to the next item of business. In ten days, all citizens will report to their nearest medical center for a cure. For those who have not yet presented symptoms, we have a vaccine. I repeat: we have both a vaccine and a cure for Rage Walkers disease. All females in New America will present themselves to a medical station in ten days.”

There was a pause and static where everyone could feel Candice weighing her next words. Many of them automatically assumed the topic was slavery.

“I was not elected to this job. I took it from the people who held it before me. That is repeating the same mistakes. To account for this, I am demanding a countrywide vote in six months for a President. However, our previous constitution will be instituted immediately in most ways. Copies will be distributed as soon as they can be made and election procedures will be outlined.” Candice paused again, speaking from her heart and her hatred. “This is a hard time for all of you. You’ve suffered terrible losses, and your lives have been disrupted–some of it through no fault of your own. You feel like you’ve been abandoned by your rulers and the disease is slowly wearing you down until there’s no hope. I know how that feels, but this is a lie that has been perpetrated by both councils to keep us under control. That type of leadership will not be repeated. We will learn to adjust to the disease. We will get control of ourselves. We will be vaccinated and cured, and we will learn to live with each other without violence.”

Across the country, mutters, mumbles, and shouts, filled the air in every town. Some of it was resentment, but most of it was anger at finding out the councils had been able to help them but chose not to.

“I’m telling you these things because many of you are going to be tempted to pick me as your President simply because I liberated you. That is the wrong reason to elect someone. If you’re not going to approve of the choices I make, then you shouldn’t vote for me. My biggest goal is to free *all* the slaves. I don’t expect that to happen overnight and I’m not going to make instant laws that hurt you financially, but hear me clearly. If you pick me as your President, I will free your slaves or die trying. Between now and the election, I will do everything I can to set that into motion. Males are human beings and it’s time we treated them, and ourselves, with respect by recognizing it. We’re better than that. Now, we’ll act like it.”

Angelica approved of the speech, but she doubted many others did. She could hear shouts from their townswomen and assumed the rest of their country was experiencing the same emotions. Angelica was also surprised that Candice was admitting so much. She was glad of it, but she wasn’t sure it would allow her cousin to win the election.

“As a candidate, I am obliged to tell you that I am paralyzed as a result of this war. I have no movement in one of my legs, and not only will I not be able to defend myself, but I will also require security because it will make me an easy target for anyone out there who wants to claim my spot or perform a coup. Weaknesses must be disclosed by all candidates. Now, does that mean I will be less effective? I think it’s evident that I have support in all areas of the country. My decisions are fair, based on solid values and the justice we’ve never received from the Network. I hope to be forthright with you and not handle you, but instead treat you as the recovering victims you are, that *we all* are. What has happened in our country for the last four centuries is an atrocity that will never be repeated. Unlike this message, which will repeat until you’ve heard it so much that you have it memorized.”

Sam was also aware of the hostile reactions to the address Candice had ordered to be broadcast once an hour for the next ten days. It would ensure that every soul in the country understood leadership had changed. She had already scheduled the first meeting of their new council. Sam had surprised them all by insisting Candice hold it in Adelphia.

“I am issuing pardons for everyone who helped me liberate New Network City, and for everyone who aided with the rebellion. That includes the mountain clans, who are now free to travel, and the mutant fish women. Neither of those clans is banned from society. All Glowers will report to the nearest medical center for vaccinations or the cure.”

Angelica winced. *That’s a lie. All Glowers have to be removed. We can’t take a chance on Julian’s shots against their disease.*

“All Diva gang members are also pardoned. The elimination orders are rescinded. Bodies can be collected and taken to the usual locations for burial.” Candice drew in another breath, ready to be done and on the way to Adelphia. “There were no survivors of either council, so we have no one left to blame, no one to bring to trial or to execute for the horrible atrocities committed against us. Because of the rage we all feel over not having a target, I’m ordering changelings to volunteer for Defender duty. You’ll be given jobs and activities to help you release the anger until the cure or vaccine can take effect.” Candice’s voice softened. “I’m going to talk to you again. You’ll hear me and see me, and know what I stand for. I’m a Pruett. We don’t hide. We fight for the truth and we never bluff. Please don’t test me on these new laws and adjustments to our lives. I’ll make it better for everyone or I’ll kill us all. There is no middle ground. Anyone you elect will be held to that same standard and there will always be one of us standing over her neck with an axe, waiting to swing it. This is my promise to you all. A new day has dawned.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

**Animal Attraction**

**1**

**“T**here are people following us.” Angelica’s head disappeared from the window of the medical transport vehicle before Candice or Sam could reply.

Sam looked at Candice. “She’s twitchy.”

Candice shrugged. “I thought she would expect it.”

The two women were in the medical transport with a pile of pillows and blankets they’d both refused to use.

“She didn’t spend time in the cities the way we did during our part of the rebellion. She doesn’t know how the public feels about us.”

Sam’s expression implied she didn’t either.

Candice didn’t ease the fears, continuing the usual family tradition of making people figure things out for themselves while dealing with the moments of stress. It was a hard way, a hard lesson, but it had brought them through a war with only a few deaths. Those people would be missed, but the sacrifice could have been much worse.

“It almost seems like you don’t want her to bond with the public.”

Candice forced herself not to clap the way Julian would have. Spending time around him hadn’t been good for her. “Angelica has more rage than you or I do now. We’re going to be limited for a while, and one of us, forever. She doesn’t have those limitations. The weight of the reputation that allows us to keep control over the chaos will fall on her young shoulders.”

“We’ll be there to help her.”

“As will her mate and her children. Not having to stay away from the rest of us will also give her a support structure so she doesn’t have to maintain the hard façade continuously the way we have.”

It was the first time Sam had ever heard Candice admit an emotional weakness. Sam instantly bonded with her in ways that she hadn’t before. Sam suspected they’d gone through many of the same struggles.

From what Angelica had told them about her adventures, the only part of it that had truly been life or death for her had been the fight with Tara. That had been an impressive battle, but she hadn’t been on the edge of dying the entire time. She also hadn’t seen the worst of their citizens. Instead, Angelica had viewed the evil of the outside world and protected her country and her family from it even as she used it to her advantage. She would negotiate with the UN for the return of their males from Canada, among other things. Candice planned to handle some of that during the radio address from Adelphia. She hadn’t spoken to the representative yet. She was looking forward to it.

Sam watched the countryside roll by through one of the small windows, aware of her Runners making continuous passes around the convoy. Candice had insisted they travel openly on main roads to provide stability and calm for a country that was in the middle of being rebirthed. They only had to deal with the placenta at this point, but that was still hard, painful work.

“We could find a way for you to be out there with her now, if it’s bothering you.”

Sam was glad Candice understood her injury was almost healed. “After facing Tara, she can probably handle a few angry citizens.”

Candice agreed. Angelica wasn’t alone, however. Sam’s Runners, along with a few dozen other various people who had joined in the rebellion were escorting them.

Candice turned around for a brief moment of eye contact with Daniel. He and Baker were in the front, with Jason. When Daniel had requested lessons, Candice had pushed him toward the driver seat and climbed into the back with Sam’s help. The ride had been stop-n-go for the first half an hour until he got the hang of it, but now, six hours later, they were chugging along at a nice pace. When they took their break at Lake Wilma, the men would switch drivers. Candice and Sam weren’t looking forward to two more sessions that jerked guts around and gave them headaches, but neither of them thought of protesting. Having their convoy driven by three males was drawing a lot of attention.

That was another reason Angelica was twitchy. There were females around them who didn’t trust the men, though most of the male changelings had now calmed. They only had one trouble spot left in the country and that would be taken care of shortly. Candice liked showing the citizens that not all men were bad and not all women were violent. They were a moving convoy of fifty, with free males and females in the mix. It was something the country hadn’t witnessed in four centuries.

Angelica’s face appeared back in the window. She was riding one of the few horses that had been brought from the west by the refugees from the fortress. “It’s a group of locals from the town we’re about to pass. They want to ride along.”

Candice waved a hand. “You’re in charge of security.”

Angelica flashed a grin and disappeared again. “Fall into the rear!”

Sam tried to find a comfortable spot on the padded bench. “Should I tell her she’s not supposed to get friendly?”

Candice shook her head. “She already knows.”

“Are you sure? I didn’t.”

Candice gave her cousin a teasing grin. “You aren’t the brains of the pair. You’re the brawn.”

Sam chuckled. “I’m definitely that.” Her hand went to the bandage on her stomach that covered the nastiest injury she’d ever had. Baker’s stitches had been a survival reaction that kept her alive, but they’d needed to be removed upon her rescue. Sam would never forget the pain of them being cut out in the places where the flesh had begun to heal around the rope. They’d been removed by a clumsy male medic with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks who had flinched at every sound outside the tent. He had been the one exception to Claudette’s brave people and it had drawn Sam’s attention. She glanced at Candice. “I saw some things in the west.”

Candice nodded. “I saw some things in the south. Angelica told me about things in the north. The rebels have information on the east. We have all the pieces now. As soon as we’re all together, we’ll complete the puzzle.”

**2**

Their arrival at the Lake Wilma safe house was noticed before they reached it. Tents and vehicles of people were lining the road. Word had obviously spread that they were on their way, though none of them had mentioned stopping here on the way.

Angelica immediately moved toward a medical transport vehicle to protect the most important passengers. Jamie, along with Chester and Daniel’s children, and Cain, were in the vehicle behind Candice and Sam. Angelica went to guard the children.

Tension flew through most of the convoy now; the size of the crowd was increasing the closer they got to the safe house. There were a variety of people in it, but no enemies as far as the Pruetts could tell. None of the snakes had survived and the remaining Divas numbered less than two dozen. It was a relief to know most of the family threats were gone. Sam and Candice were both ready for peace.

A noise echoed around them, slowly growing louder until it was unmistakable. The people were cheering.

Candice closed her eyes. When Daniel had been ripped from her arms, she had dreamed of moments like this night after night. Even back then, she had known the only way she would ever be able to escape the haunting pain of losing him was to make sure it could never happen again. Now, the moment was here.

Sam was shocked. “Are you crying?”

Candice didn’t try to hide the tears of joy.

Sam didn’t push, astounded at a display of emotion from Candice. She had known her cousin was capable of warmth, but she had never thought to see it.

The cheering grew louder, becoming almost too much for changeling ears as the convoy moved through hundreds of people who were no longer under Network control. They obviously knew who was responsible.

As they neared the lake and the entrance to the safe house, Dana and the miners came out to greet them. There were still rotting corpses in a few places and several fires that stank. The aftermath was being dealt with here, as it was in New Network City. Longtime residents had gone through several riots during the time the city had been in existence. It wasn’t new to them. All their lives had been based around destruction, cleaning it up, and then destroying it again. That awful tradition was over now.

The cheering slowly faded as the vehicles stopped and people pushed closer to view their new leader. By right of conquest, Candice was the new Network.

Dana hurried over to them, with Emily and several other miners on her heels. Angelica kept all of them back as Daniel and Baker helped Candice and Sam out of the vehicle and into the bunker.

Sam and Jason stood behind them to block the view as Daniel hurried down the stairs. Candice didn’t like anyone seeing her this way, but she had refused all of their ideas to increase her mobility.

Angelica made sure everyone in their convoy was inside the bunker before waving Dana and her small group in. She was taking their security seriously. She didn’t know who would be stupid enough to challenge them right now, but it wasn’t a good idea to take chances since their deaths would mean the winner inherited everything.

Joyous male voices echoed from the bunker as all the males they’d rescued greeted Candice and Sam. Most of them were rental males who no longer resembled what they had been before. Happy and not afraid to show it, they had turned the safe house into a home. Beautiful smiles and encouraging sights met the group as they came into the den.

Sam was glad their prisoners weren’t here. Rusty, along with the Malin females, was being held in Pruett Town under heavy guard. Candice hadn’t said what would happen to them yet, but her address had denied their existence, so Sam assumed their punishments would be personal, like Robert’s had.

Cliff hurried over to Sam. “We prepared a special meal for you. I hope it’s okay that we helped ourselves to things here. We wanted it to be nice when you arrived.”

Sam sank down into a chair, unwilling to admit how weak her injury had left her. She didn’t want to groan, so she grunted.

Cliff took that as confirmation that it was okay and hurried back into the kitchen area to help the other men.

Candice looked around and frowned. “They don’t have enough places set for everyone.”

“They don’t know if it’s okay to eat with us.” Sam slowly went to tell them while Daniel got Candice settled onto the small couch in the corner.

He placed several bags next to her that he thought she might need and then lifted a brow.

Candice gave a grunt that sounded much like Sam’s had. “Go away.”

Daniel chuckled. He went to help Chester with the two children he was slowly getting used to caring for. He had finally chosen names for them, but he wanted to get family approval before announcing them or using them.

Daniel took the squirming toddler from Chester and moved into the bathroom area, positive the child needed to be changed. He hadn’t been warned about this part of parenthood.

Chester settled onto the couch next to Candice, handing her the infant. The baby had slept the entire ride, unlike the toddler Chester had been forced to entertain. He had forgotten what it was like to do childcare, though he had raised his own like all men in New America with a family were required to. He hadn’t missed most of it. Chester *was* missing his own children who were still with the mountain brutes and the other family kids, protecting the orphans and farmers. They would be here by morning and go with them to Adelphia. After that, everyone would return home to Pruett Town. There was no longer any reason for them to live apart.

“Wow. That is just gross.”

People chuckled as Daniel’s voice echoed from the wash area.

Chester nodded, reaching over to help Candice adjust the belt around her waist as she fought with it. He didn’t comment, but it was nice to be able to care for her. Candice had always been the hardest of their family and hadn’t accepted help from anyone.

Candice didn’t like needing it, but she didn’t resent them giving it. They were her family.

Voices echoed through the rear tunnel as Angelica oversaw getting their vehicles into the rear entrance and refueled for their trip in the morning. It would take her a while.

Jason and Jamie had joined her. Baker and Cain had also gone with them, but it was mostly so Baker could run Cain through the tunnels and wear off some of his energy. Due to the way he had been living for so long, Cain was wild. Only the Nomads seemed to get his attention with their daily workouts. The boys and men were all following the Nomads in their exercise routines. Jason had told them about doing it on the boat with the rebel men and the others had insisted. The sight of it was enough to make changeling nerves fry.

“Oh! A baby!” Dana rushed across the room to plop down on the couch next to Candice. She immediately stripped the sleeping infant from Candice’s arms and began fawning over it.

Candice rolled her eyes. It was obvious that Dana wanted to have a baby.

Candice watched Sam greet the miners and then limp around the room to talk to other people. Candice hadn’t told her to do it, but Sam knew what was needed. There was information to be gathered, but Candice was no longer mobile. Angelica would be the one who enforced the family name. Sam would be the one who gathered information and made deals. Candice would be the one who ordered people killed to keep it all together. She didn’t mind the role. She often thought it was what she had been born for, what her family had been born for, and while it wasn’t true in the way that Julian had wanted it to be, it was necessary. Their world was a savage garden that hadn’t recovered from the tragedies of the past. That made them a violent, traumatized people who needed a firm hand.

“That’s it. I don’t know what the Network was feeding you, but I’m changing your diet right now.” Daniel finished washing his hands and then took the toddler toward the kitchen. “Let’s see if we can find something that doesn’t smell even remotely like what we just left behind.”

Daniel was unaware of the laughter as he walked by. He was also unaware of the approving looks of the parents in the room. Daniel was doing remarkably well considering that he had never met his children or been a parent before. The toddler in his arms looked happy to be there.

Loud noises came from the rear tunnel again, but this time, they were laced with an edge of tension that drew Sam. She grimaced at the pain in her stomach as she moved toward the tunnel.

Rosa followed, but at a distance so her leader wouldn’t be offended. She wasn’t sure if Sam needed backup.

Sam hurried down the tunnel, hearing Baker’s voice and Cain growling. She also heard another noise that still gave her chills even though she knew there was a good chance it wasn’t a threat. Many of the hounds were gravitating toward the free men, including the big beast Jason had rescued from the train where Rankin had died. It had been following the convoy, causing Baker’s little brother to slip into panic episodes. After living in the nursery with the vultures, he was terrified of all animals, no matter their size or intent. After days of the panic that often progressed to screams before Baker was able to calm him, Sam was fed up.

Baker struggled to hold the boy away from the hound that was sitting calmly next to Angelica and peering at them in confusion. “It’s okay! It won’t hurt you!”

Sam walked up to them and jerked the wild boy out of Baker’s grip. Holding Cain’s thin, strong arms to his waist with one of hers, she dragged him over to the hound and forced him to kneel.

The hound regarded them curiously, big head advancing to sniff.

Cain squealed in fear, but Sam held him in place.

The hound moved closer.

Cain began to scream.

The hound recoiled.

Adults flinched.

Sam grabbed Cain’s hand and placed it on the hound’s shoulder, rubbing the soft fur. She held it there, forcing them both to adjust.

Reassured, the hound smelled something attractive on the boy’s hand and licked it.

Cain giggled.

Sam let out a sigh of relief as the screaming stopped, but she didn’t let go of the boy or give up control of the situation. Despite trusting the hound, Sam was ready with her free hand to plunge her knife into its eye if she had to.

Unaware of its life being decided, the hound continued to lick the boy’s hand and then his cheek as the same scent caught its attention.

Cain dissolved into laughter.

Sam gave the boy back to Baker and walked into the tunnel toward the main rooms. “Keep encouraging that behavior; be ready to kill the hound as needed.”

Baker and everyone else stared in surprised approval as Cain broke free of Baker’s grip and went back over to pet the hound again.

Emboldened, Jason’s son joined him. Jamie was shyer than Cain was, but just as curious.

Baker stared after Sam. “How did she know to do that? Is there a book?”

Jason chuckled, thrilled. “If not, maybe she can write one for us.”

Chapter Fifty

**Tucked**

**1**

**“I** can’t. She’ll be mad.”

Jason leaned closer so their conversation wouldn’t be heard by anyone else at the long tables that had been shoved together. The train males had prepared a feast and were still coming and going with bowls and mugs. The clinks of dishes and other voices provided cover. “She’s already mad, remember?”

Daniel snickered at the rage joke, but didn’t follow it up with any of the ugly bachelor quips he knew. They’d had a lot of time to find cruel ways to depict their captors. “She’ll let me know when she wants to try it.”

Jason lowered his voice even more. “She has pride, Danny boy. If you ever want to get laid again, handle it so she isn’t crushed, and do it soon or you’ll feel like you did when they pulled you from the renter program.”

Daniel frowned.

Candice noticed. Her attention swung to the two men instantly.

Baker’s little brother stormed into the room, shoving by the legs in his way. Everyone expected him to go to Baker.

Sam grunted as Baker’s little brother swung himself into her lap. She settled them into a more comfortable position, allowing Cain to nuzzle her cheek like the wild dogs often did. It was one of the ways she’d been able to bond with him.

Sam realized everyone was staring at her. She glared and dared them to comment on it.

Baker watched them nervously. “He needs a bath.”

Sam frowned. “He hates the Den Mothers. I’ll handle it.” She was trying to teach the boy that he didn’t have to just accept things anymore, but he did have to obey some rules.

Candice approved. Daniel’s children were making a remarkable recovery in those areas, but they were still young. Cain would need time.

Angelica pointed her fork toward Cain and then Jamie, who was now in the doorway. “Go get your baths. Do it right now.” Before either of them could protest, Angelica motioned toward the hounds lying in the corner. “Take one of them with you for a guard.”

Happy, the boys left with sharp whistles that immediately drew both animals.

Angelica was a respected enforcer in their circle now, but it didn’t hurt that she was willing to give concessions to the children who were so abused. For the first time in their lives, they had firm leadership tempered with compassion.

Jason quickly looked at Angelica. He smiled as he caught the yawn she tried to hide by wiping her mouth with a napkin. She usually used her sleeves. She’d given herself away.

Angelica felt his stare. “What?!”

“Can I put you to bed?”

Oohs came from the Runners.

A flush went up Angelica’s cheeks. She shrugged. “If you like.”

Jason left the table with a pointed look at Daniel.

Daniel kept his head down, mind already plotting how to make it work. Candice’s injuries were healing well. In fact, if not for the leg, she would already be back on her feet and doing harder labor, he was sure. That meant a physical moment wasn’t out of line, but she’d shown no signs that she was still interested in it. Daniel didn’t know what had happened to her while in Julian’s care and he didn’t want to, but he couldn’t leave her like this. He had to fix the future for them, while she healed their country. They both had jobs to do.

Daniel drew in a breath, reminding himself that he was allowed to do this now. He spoke. “Are you ready for bed?”

Candice nodded. “As soon as Sam and Angelica give us a toast to Camille and Amos.”

The mood sobered as everyone looked at the sisters.

Sam held up her glass, assuming she should go first and give Angelica a minute to form the right words. “To mom and dad!”

Candice rolled her eyes as everyone laughed at the brief toast and drank.

Angelica stood up, but she didn’t lift her glass. “I’ll toast them when we recover the bodies.” She left the room.

Candice winced. She looked at Sam.

Sam lifted her glass again. “I got this… To mom and dad!”

Laughter followed Angelica down the tunnel to her bedroom. She’d stocked it over the years, but never slept here. She was eager to shut the thick door and not hear the family celebrating. She didn’t think her nerves could take much more. She was still wound up and angry. Her parents’ deaths were only part of the problem.

Angelica slammed the door and didn’t come back out.

**2**

Daniel gently lifted Candice into his arms, skin heating up from the contact. He waited for her to show a sign she felt it too and was rewarded with her eyes flickering pink.

“I’m low on patience.”

Daniel straightened at her warning and took her from the room.

The celebrations went on behind them as the thirty people continued to eat, drink, and remember their losses.

“Where are you taking me? We’re supposed to be headed to bed.”

Daniel took her into the rear room he’d prepared earlier.

Candice stopped a smile at the sight of the bed, clean clothes, and portable shower. She’d been cleaned in the training center before leaving, but it hadn’t washed off the stink of Julian’s hideout. She helped Daniel get her set up and then waved him off. “There’s a stool. I’ve got it.”

Daniel knelt down to work on his boots.

Candice’s eyes narrowed. “We should talk about this.”

Daniel shook his head. “You talk.”

Candice watched him remove his dirty pants and shirt, stripping down to nothing in front of her without fear. His huge grin told her what he had in mind.

Candice shook her head.

Daniel’s grin widened. “My owner taught me to meet a challenge head on.” He stepped forward and began taking her clothes off.

Fire shot through Candice, turning her eyes crimson and bringing her claws out. She shuddered, fighting for control. She hadn’t sought a private moment with Daniel in a while. At first, they’d been busy, and then she’d suspected she was pregnant and hadn’t wanted to add to the risk with all the fighting she’d known was coming. After that, she’d been too ashamed to bring it up. Physical moments between them would now be awkward fumbling where he pretended she aroused him and she acted as if it wasn’t a disability.

Daniel knew the problem. The medics had told him and so had Mary, but the bachelor hadn’t needed it. He knew how prideful Candice was. It was one of the things he loved about her. Jason’s words had been a confirmation that it wasn’t too soon.

Daniel removed her shirt, running a hand over her soft hair as he did so.

Candice shivered, lips clamped shut. Daniel had needs and even if she couldn’t feel anything anymore, he still could.

Daniel got the water flowing and moved her into the warmth as soon as she was naked, not reacting to her grunts of frustration. He settled her on the stool and closed the curtains around them.

A dim light came on at the top as the ceiling sealed, enclosing them in wet, private warmth.

Daniel expanded the space to the proper size and then held out a hand.

Candice let him help her onto her good leg, then braced on the dead one. She was learning to use it despite the lack of response or feeling.

Daniel knelt before her.

Candice froze.

Daniel moved forward and proved his theory of not all the nerves being dead on that side.

Candice clutched the walls of the shower and struggled not to make any noise that would give them away.

Daniel felt her repose, her pleasure, and swelled. *I like being right.*

He loved her until she shuddered against his chin, quietly moaning his name. He quickly shifted them so he was on the stool, and settled her onto his lap, facing away.

Candice grinned, bucking where she could, and enjoyed his wild rutting and uncensored groans. His noises were echoing through the bunker. When he exploded, Candice closed her eyes in happiness.

**3**

Walking through a nearby compartment, Jason laughed at the couple. Those who thought Candice’s leg would hold her back were in for a surprise. Daniel wasn’t going to let her use it as an excuse to withdraw from him or anything else.

Angelica was already in their tiny room, but Jason was hoping she was still awake. He thought Daniel had the right idea and it had to be now, while Jamie and Cain were playing with toys they’d never seen before. Chester had sportingly agreed to watch the boys, with Dana’s help, until morning so the parents could sleep. None of the children had cried the entire time they’d been with their family. It was good not to hear that noise, but it was awful to consider how that had been accomplished.

“Nice quarters.”

Angelica nodded as Jason entered. She was sprawled on the bed, tired body echoing his words. The mattress was a wonderful change from the bedroll on a boat deck.

“How long before we have to go back out?”

Angelica calculated. “Half a day.”

Jason grinned, eyes darkening. “Perfect.” He quietly latched the door to their room.

“What are you doing?”

Jason’s grin widened. “Pleasing us both. It’s been a while.”

Angelica stiffened. “I’m not sure this is the right time or place.”

Jason began removing his clothes.

Angelica listened to his movements, imagining what he was doing by the noises. When his shoes came off, she frowned. “We’re just sleeping now.”

There was a rustle and then the sound of his pants hitting the floor.

Angelica swallowed. “I mean it. We need sleep.”

Another noise came, telling her he was removing his shirt. *That means he’s naked*. Angelica groaned mentally. *Just don’t look!*

“Angel…”

Angelica rolled away from him. “No.”

Angelica didn’t hear a response. After a full minute, she rolled back over to see what he was doing.

“Damn.”

Jason nodded without pausing in his steady strokes, eyes roaming her body. “You can sleep, though.”

Angelica laughed.

Jason moaned at the sound of her amusement, her voice. Fire flew through his veins as she shifted to pull her shirt off.

Jason stepped closer as she stripped, eyes darkening further. He hadn’t been this horny since Rankin’s drugs, but this time, it was all desire. He wanted his woman. It made all the difference.

Jason stepped to the bed at her motion, flushing as she directed him toward her mouth. She hadn’t done this to him yet. It was erotic and pushed his control. “Please!”

Angelica slowly spread her legs.

Jason hurried into the bed.

**4**

“Lot of flavors to sample.”

Sam’s head whipped around at Baker’s comment. “What?”

He nodded to the rental males she’d been staring at.

Sam snorted. “Like they could handle me.”

“I talked to some of them about Adelphia.”

Sam tensed, glad the noise level was so high.

“They said you didn’t use their services.”

“I had other issues then.”

Baker forced himself to keep going at her harsh tone. “What about now?”

“Oh, for god sake!”

Silence fell in the room at her exclamation.

Sam flushed and glowered around the table. “Mind your own shit!”

Runners snickered. Everyone else did as ordered, but they kept trying to listen.

“Sorry, Sam.”

Sam gave him a sharp look.

Baker grinned. He removed the necklace he always wore and slipped it over her head. He waited for her to deny his open claim, heart thumping.

Sam was touched. She had never been given a gift by a man. None of them had. She fought back tears. “You are such an ass.”

People laughed, pretense already dropped. Everyone wanted the couple to have a happy ending.

“Can you adjust to Cain?”

Sam shrugged. “Easier than to you, probably. I understand wild things.”

“Can I give you a wild child?”

It took Sam a minute to understand what he was asking for. Most of the people in the room got it before she did and held their breaths.

Sam had to fight the heat before she could answer. The idea of Baker giving her a baby was fascinating. It was also scary. “I’m not ready for that…but I might be at some point.”

The witnesses were more disappointed than Baker was. They groaned and shook their heads at her.

“Okay.”

Sam felt that heat rise. “I assume you know ways to prevent that until I’m ready?”

The Runners snickered.

“I do.” Baker recovered quickly. “Can I show you one?”

“Only one?” Sam delivered an innocent look. “What will we do tomorrow?”

Baker laughed. “I have a few ideas.”

“Get the cuffs. I’ll be in shortly.”

Baker made them face the last fear. “No cuffs.”

Sam scowled. “I don’t want to–”

“Hurt me?”

She nodded.

Baker slowly rose and slid his huge arms under her stiff body. “That’s not an issue anymore.”

Baker took her from the room amid both laughter and frowns.

His better health was already letting him match their strength. The females watching now understood why the Network had kept the men on the edge of starvation; they continued to worry over the choice to free them.

Chapter Fifty-One

**Our Dystopia**

3 Days Later

**Adelphia**

**1**

**“G**ood afternoon, New America! Today is the day we’ve been waiting for. In a short ten minutes, our new ruler will begin broadcasting the live audio of her conversation with the United Nations. But before we get to that, our three-woman government has generously consented to a short interview as they enter the stadium where the meeting is taking place.”

“Dana, did they tell you why they chose Adelphia stadium? Does it have anything to do with the ban on the games and the unrest over the lack of entertainment?”

“Yes, Reggie. I was told this facility already contained the broadcast equipment. As you know, all other locations with this capability were destroyed during the rebellion.”

“Dana, what about the brave rebel men who will be with the council? Will we get to hear from them?”

“All indications are yes, Reggie. In fact, here they come and the males are leading the way!” Dana rushed over. “Baker! How does it feel to be the first free man in New America?”

Baker grinned shyly. “Amazing.”

“Is there anything you’d like to say to the men who fought alongside you?” Dana held out the microphone.

Baker used the words Candice had given him beforehand. “The war is over! All rebels will be safe in Pruett Town. I repeat: the war is over, men. Come home and help us build the future.”

Dana beamed, then switched to the next male waiting uncomfortably for her attention. “Wonderful! Jason! Do you also have words for the rebels or the changelings?”

Jason also used Candice’s short propaganda clip. “I’d like to ask them to come and help us. We need the builders, medics, rental workers, and others to join our efforts. We have jobs for you. No brothel work.”

Dana frowned slightly. “Well, the changelings might be disappointed to hear that.”

“Our leader has plans to help them, too.” Jason was cheerful. “Candice has all of us covered.”

“That sounds like a man with confidence, doesn’t it, Reggie?”

“Yes, Dana, and wow. We’ve never had males speak so openly in our society. This is so naughty!”

Dana laughed. “Here comes Sam and Angelica, the infamous sisters who transported hundreds of rebels to the wall and brought down the west coast. Sam, we’ve heard you’re the heir to the west coast council. Is that true?”

Sam didn’t need a preapproved speech. “Yes, but we’re not splitting the country up. Candice and I, along with Angelica, will handle things for the next six months until a President is chosen. That person will have dominion over all the country, not just one part of it.”

“That will certainly be a change.” Dana moved on. “Angelica, how do you feel about everything that’s happened? With Candice injured and Sam recovering, how does it feel to be the family enforcer?”

Angelica grabbed the mike. “Hey! You males in Pennsylvania. Mary says you’re refusing to release your hostages. As soon as this meeting is over, I’m coming down there to rip your hearts out and eat them! I’ll slit you from stem to bend. You’ll scream–”

“Okay. As you can hear, Angelica wants those hostages released, boys. I recommend you listen. Oh, good! Here comes Daniel and our temporary leader, Candice Pruett!”

“Dana? Dana, is she walking yet?”

“No, Reggie, she isn’t.”

Candice’s hard voice cut through the chaos like it always had in their family. “I have a message for the women of our country. Are you feeling lost? Angry? Restless? Are you without a job? Come to Pruett Town in southern Ohio. This is Candice and I have work for you–honest labor where you’ll be too tired to get in trouble or attack the males. Come to my town and join in the rebuilding of our country.” Through the days and weeks to come, the nation would be smothered with broadcasts like these.

Dana smiled widely. “Excellent. Thank you for giving us these moments of your time.”

Candice ignored the curious glances at her battered body. “You’ll get more of them. It’s important the citizens know who their rulers are. We didn’t have that before, but we will now.”

“I certainly hope so. I look forward to a time when I might also have a mate who can stand there and hold me without even sweating. He’s in great shape!” Dana leaned in a bit. “Aren’t you scared of him overpowering you?”

“Not a bit. Even if he could, he wouldn’t.”

“But we’ve been taught males are the enemy.”

Candice grunted. “Yes, we have. Daniel, please tell her what you told me this morning.”

Daniel frowned. “Do I have to?”

There were gasps at a male refusing, even politely.

“Of course not.”

“Then I will, because you want me to and I want you to be happy.”

“Thank you.”

Daniel blushed at the heat in her simple words.

“Oh, now, that’s adorable.” Dana stared in longing. “I really want one!”

Candice chuckled. “Go on now.”

Daniel cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t want to live without my Candy.”

“Aww. Now I haveto have one.”

“Dana, can you ask council woman Pruett if she has made a decision on slavery?”

“Actually, they’ve just entered the stadium, Reggie, but maybe we’ll hear something during the meeting with the UN. It is scheduled to begin in a few minutes. We’ll go off the air until then to save power.”

**2**

“Yuck. That tasted bad.”

Everyone laughed at Angelica’s joke. They’d rehearsed their lines on the ride here, spending the time sorting things. Now that the first part was over, all of them were feeling better. Manipulating people was an inherited skill, but that didn’t mean they had to enjoy it like Julian had.

Sam walked away. “I’m going to help get the guys settled.”

Angelica took Candice onto her back before she could protest. With Daniel’s help, they almost had the switches down without needing to communicate about it first.

Candice didn’t complain. They had offered a wheelchair setup at first that had inspired her to threaten decapitations. They’d settled for piggybacks and wagons.

Angelica dropped Candice at the table and slid into the spot on her right, studying their surroundings. They were in the center of the stadium field, at a table inside four portable walls to provide a measure of protection. Angelica still wasn’t sure why Sam had chosen to do this here, but she didn’t mind. They had claimed penthouse suites in the apartments outside the stadium, and in the morning they were going to tour the female prison in the town near here. Angelica and Candice were both curious about it after Sam’s description.

Candice got ready to anger people. She started with her cousins. “I’m not freeing them today, or even in six months.”

Angelica stared at her mentor, her idol. “They deserve freedom. We promised.”

Candice gestured with a scarred hand. “We promised to free them from tyranny and we’ve done that. Anything more has to come with careful considerations.”

“I don’t understand.” Angelica had sensed this was coming, but she needed to hear the reasons directly from Candice.

Candice knew that, too. “What happens to all those men if we announce they’re free as of right this minute?”

Angelica’s frown became a deep scowl. “The women won’t give them up. They’ll hide them from us like we used to do to the Network.”

Candice’s voice was grave. “And some of them are so bonded they’ll kill them before giving them up. Then, there are the men. Suddenly free, will the anger they carry in secret spill out onto the streets again? Rage can be as dangerous as apathy, as you know.”

Angelica did know. “But next week, after we calm some fears, make some more plans?”

Candice bobbed her chin toward the stands, where two male rebels were kicking a guard to get her tied up. She’d refused to swear loyalty to the new leaders. Their satisfaction was clear. “They were good through all of this. They’ve gotten strong. So much so, that they might become a danger to us again in a very short time.”

Angelica wanted to protest, but she’d read the same forbidden history books that Candice had. Before the war, men had ruled and women had bled. Things had been that way for a lot longer than five hundred years.

“I’d not put us back into that hell. Until I can figure out the solutions for these problems, our males will have to remain cherished slaves for their own protection.”

The words were a haunting parody of the leaders who had gone before them.

“So we really are taking their place?” Angelica was horrified.

Candice clenched her fists to cover her own revulsion. “Yes.”

“The men won’t allow that.”

“Hello?” A UN voice broke in on Candice’s satellite radio, interrupting Angelica’s protests. “Who represents your country now? It’s been a week. I demand answers! What do you call yourselves? Who leads you?”

Candice looked at Baker, who was lingering by the radio. “Handle that.”

Baker didn’t need to be told how. He grabbed the mike. “Candice Pruett is temporary President. Angelica Pruett is her XO. Show some respect and wait until she’s ready!” Baker cut off the connection so the UN man couldn’t hear what came next.

The two women stared at each other in disgust and relief as they realized how easy it would be for them to slow male freedom. Cheers sounded from their mates at Baker’s open anger toward the UN, driving in the feeling of self-loathing.

Angelica sighed miserably. “Sam will stop us.”

“You think?” Candice didn’t really want to do this. She just didn’t see another choice.

“Sure. You’ll see.”

Candice let the words ease her as they were joined by that frowning changeling.

Sam had heard some of their conversation and deduced the rest from their expressions. “Let me guess. I get the deciding vote.”

Angelica nodded.

Candice shrugged. She was the boss, but it mattered to her that the choices were made in agreement.

Sam stared at Baker. “Most of them don’t really need freedom from us, just a happy home.”

“That sounds like a Network line!” Angelica was furious at her sister’s words.

Baker didn’t argue with it, though he was sad over the way it had to be. Like Candice, he didn’t see another option yet.

Candice added a new layer of concern. “We may even still need the games for a while. We don’t have a court system yet. Until we build things, we can’t just rip out all the structure. Our society can’t take another collapse.”

Angelica’s stomach roiled again. “So we’re just herding the sheep?”

Candice didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Angelica pounded the table. “I won’t be a part of this. I won’t give up my honor for this!”

“Will you give it up for me?” Jason had overheard all of it, along with Daniel.

“What?!”

Jason stared back, sad but resigned. “We’ve known for a while that she wasn’t going to free us.”

“And that’s okay with you?” Angelica was in shock.

“It’s how it has to be.” Baker placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder when she sighed unhappily at his words. “Our society will eventually become equals, but not now, not here. Right now, there’s only anger and resentment on both sides. We have to let these wounds heal.”

Angelica looked at Candice in disgust. “You never meant for them to be free!”

“I wanted the Network gone and my property returned. I wanted the men to be treated better and our country to be released from the past.” Candice finished it with shame. “Revenge drove me, not freedom goals.”

Angelica’s voice rose. “What about the promises we’ve made?!”

“They’ll be fulfilled in time. My word on it.”

“But not for ten years?”

Candice shrugged. “The ten year moratorium is a great start. It keeps the peace on both sides.”

“This is wrong!”

“Yes. It’s also right.”

Understanding she was outvoted by her own family and her mate, Angelica slumped in her seat in surrender. “I vote yes.”

Her son would be born a slave despite the revolution she’d just fought. She buried her head against Jason’s hip as the private vote was finished.

Candice motioned Baker to activate the connection. As he did, she put the satellite phone on speaker so their radios would pick up every word and send it out to their citizens.

Claudette had already left for her next mission and her boss wasn’t good at handling the finer details. He had been calling for the last two days. None of them knew what Candice planned to do about it now that they didn’t need UN help.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

“This is Candice Pruett, Pro Tem leader of New America. I have a list of public grievances over the UN interference in my country. Please cease and desist all actions and interruptions in our recovery.”

“How dare you! After everything we did for you! The deadline still stands for New America to prove they’re abiding by the treaty!”

Candice continued in the same calm, firm tone. “New America is not subject to your laws, Mr. Secretary. Any previous agreements will not be honored with your organization, as you have proven to be as big a threat as the one we recently eliminated.”

“The UN is not a threat to anyone! We help those who cannot help themselves.”

“You have lied, cheated, and stolen your way through country after country under the guise of humanitarian aid. We have evidence of a mass grave, illegal entries, murders, conspiracy, and male trafficking. How do you respond to these charges?”

Candice signaled to the Nomads. She knew it wouldn’t be needed, but she hadn’t been bluffing and she wanted it known. The Canadian reporter had been shipped to them via the Runners and then Dana. She was being given asylum in exchange for her testimony against the UN and the Canadian Prime Minister for their part in helping the Network keep men in chains and women in the change.

“You have no proof of wrongdoing! These are serious accusations!”

“Yes, they are. My special guest is a reporter from the northern wall. She’s going to tell us how you helped the east coast council kill a group of rebel men and bury them before they could escape into Canada. Then my reporter will read the notes we’ve found on UN deals with both Networks for the cure and vaccine. Do not pretend you weren’t part of the tyranny we’ve existed under, sir! I will not stand for it.”

There was no response. The phone connection went dead.

Candice continued to address her country. “This will be the first of many calls that you can listen to and know we’re doing what’s right, not what’s easy. My special guest will go live after I’ve finished.” Candice paused to draw in a breath. “Most of these issues will be settled right after the election vote six months from now. However, we can’t let them all wait until then. Temporarily, the following laws are so read into our society for immediate distribution.

“The yearly round up is abolished. Anyone caught selling another person, or stealing one, will be imprisoned until an execution can be arranged. I realize this will impact your financial wellbeing. To offset that, you may sell your men to us, and use the UDs to start a new life that isn’t based on slavery. Those men will immediately be freed by me.”

The nation held its breath.

“Men are never to be hurt, handicapped, or disfigured. The same punishment applies.”

People shifted restlessly, impatient to know what the future of slavery held.

“…you can keep the slaves you have. For now. That is all.” Candice didn’t look at Angelica. She could feel the girl struggling not to cry; she didn’t want to make it worse.

The reporters began to repeat the broadcast in full as the Canadian woman got ready to tell her story.

Candice stayed at the table, not feeling proud anymore. The choice she’d made didn’t feel honorable. *Because it’s not.*

“Excuse me.” Angelica staggered from the table, followed by Jason.

Sam sighed.

Candice nodded in agreement.

Baker and Daniel didn’t speak or look at the women at all. Despite knowing it was coming, they couldn’t help the heavy disappointment.

Neither could Candice. It was ugly.

*As fast as I can*, Candice swore*. Freeing the men wasn’t my first goal, but it’s the most important thing I’ll ever do. I know that now. I’ll never stop working on it, no matter the cost.*

Chapter Fifty-Two

**Honor Thy Father**

**1**

**“D**id you know there are people waiting to talk with us?”

Candice nodded at Angelica’s question as the girl came back to the table. “Dana said the miners and Defenders have things under control.”

“Yeah, because they’ve done such a bang-up job in the past!” Angelica spun back toward the line of women being brought into the stadium.

Candice looked at Baker. “Take everyone to the apartments we showed you on the way in. You and Rosa handle things until we get there.”

Baker’s chest puffed out. “You got it.” He gestured at the others. “Let’s go.”

Sam chuckled at the expressions. No one was used to hearing a male tell someone what to do.

Sam waited until they were alone. “Who are we meeting now?”

“Possible problems and loose ends.”

Candice’s answer brought Sam to her feet. She checked her gear as if she was on a run.

Satisfied Sam understood, Candice used her cane to get to her feet. Again, there wasn’t any pain or a response from the dead leg. Sighing in aggravation, Candice limped toward Angelica and the line of women waiting to speak with her. “I had Runners sent out to gather them.”

Sam had wondered where some of her Runners were, but she assumed the women had chosen to take a break. They all had to do that from time to time, but it was a relief to know her crew was intact. What was left of them anyway. She had several open places even if Angelica chose to run with them, which Sam doubted.

Sam noted Defenders quietly moving into place around the stadium entrances and tunnels, blocking an escape. *Ah. One of those situations*. Sam squared her shoulders and strode behind Candice with an expressionless façade and hands hovering over her weapons.

Candice immediately felt better. They were all targets now.

Candice stopped, motioning to Emily.

Emily brought the groups and individuals over to Candice one at a time, ready to kill them if she was told to.

“First, we have Naomi. She and eight other Divas are requesting jobs as Defenders. The rest of their gang has fled the city. We’ve heard they’re joining the swamp women who took off before the dome fell.”

Candice waved Naomi toward the exit. “We’ll take them. Make her Head Defender.”

Everyone was surprised, but no one more than Naomi. She stared in suspicion. “Why?” She had come here expecting to be killed.

“You’re not quick to end life. I respect that.”

Naomi didn’t ask more questions. She lifted her head and left the field. She was followed by her remaining Divas. They all flashed Candice glances of gratitude for sparing them.

Candice switched her cane to the other hand and fought to maintain her balance on the dead leg. “Next.”

Emily brought them forward with curt gestures. She could feel Candice’s discomfort and didn’t like it. “This is what’s left of council security and some of the other complex Defenders.”

Candice caught the disapproving tone and studied the women who glared back as if they expected her to let them go based on courage. Candice chuckled.

The Defenders relaxed in confusion.

Candice scanned them, seeing fresh gear and clothes that had to have been taken from illegal stocks. She found heavy pockets that were likely filled with loot, and each woman had defensive scratches on their arms that were healing. “Who were you fighting?”

The captain of the guard sneered. “Men and women you stirred up. We’re lucky to be alive.”

Sam shook her head. *You were until that.*

Candice delivered a soothing smile to the women. “What were your jobs when not protecting the men who betrayed us?”

The guards hesitated. Candice’s friendly face didn’t match that ugly tone.

One of the women in back spoke up. “We all had different jobs.”

“Like what?”

“I was a dock supervisor.”

“I provided transport security for council slaves.”

“I oversaw marking the prizes.”

Candice’s head snapped up, eyes glowing bright red. “You’re the brander?”

The woman took off running.

Candice didn’t need to move as Angelica hissed in rage and snatched a knife from her belt.

Candice waited patiently as Angelica threw the blade and impaled the woman in the leg. She went down in a heap.

“Dogs!” Angelica didn’t like using the hounds for security, but she also didn’t want them killed.

Two large hounds without collars came from behind them and ran toward the screaming Defender.

Angelica looked at Candice.

Candice nodded.

Angelica’s voice cracked out. “Kill!”

The two hounds raced each other to the meal.

Candice watched the small Defender crew in front of her for signs they would fight their way out and found nothing. They’d come here knowing they were going to die. Candice didn’t drag it out. She made a fast motion and switched her cane back to her other hand as Angelica and the Runners rushed forward and took their lives.

The line of people waiting had thinned with the two groups, but those still in line tensed and considered running.

Candice glowered at them. “Next?”

The guard under the dogs screamed in awful support of the order.

Dana and the reporters were in the stands, filming and chatting. Candice had insisted they get it all on tape.

“These two have been arrested for rape. Not of each other.”

Candice stared at the changeling man and woman. They were complete opposites in every way except the insane glare in their eyes.

“Do they have a defense?”

“Both claim the rage was too strong to fight.”

Candice sighed unhappily. “Dana, get all of this.”

The man and woman tensed as the reporters came closer.

Candice drew her knife and limped forward. “I sentence you both to death. Being angry is no excuse.”

Runners held them as Candice drew her blade across their necks, ending it quickly.

The death of a male on the news would be the top story, Candice was sure. It would trump the UN address. “Crimes against each other will not be tolerated. Get along or die.” Candice waved toward the exit. “That’s all the filming for today.”

Dana got her people out of the stadium as fast as she could, sensing Candice’s mood. It felt ugly.

“Next?”

Emily motioned a terrified girl forward. “Velvet Malin.”

Sam caught the reactions of her cousin and sister, and reluctantly cleared her throat. “I’ll speak for this one.”

Everyone regarded her in surprise except for Velvet. She flashed Sam a grateful nod. “I’m sorry for what my family did to you.”

“How did you get away from them?” Sam hoped her faith in the girl wasn’t misplaced.

“I was sold to the council for experiments.” Velvet grimaced. “I sold myself to earn UDs and bought my own freedom.”

“The Network didn’t care by then because you were finished with the tests anyway?”

Velvet nodded at Candice, face showing her horror.

“Why did you come here?” Angelica was stunned by it. “You had to know we’d lock you up or kill you.”

Velvet’s tongue darted across her chapped lips nervously. “I came for news about my family.” She looked at Candice in the silence. “Are they gone? Am I really free now?”

Candice couldn’t help feeling sympathy for the girl. “No. Your brother survived.”

Velvet frowned. “Brother?”

Candice waved her toward the eating hounds, positive the girl knew how to handle them. “Take the dogs back to my apartment and ask for Daniel. Tell him who you are.”

Velvet shook her head as she added up the clues. “I didn’t come to make a claim on your family.”

“And I’m not granting one. I’m giving a brother and sister the chance to meet.”

Velvet dropped her head in shame. “He won’t want to see me.”

“Nevertheless, you’ll do as told.”

Velvet turned toward the hounds without further argument, surprised that she wasn’t being eaten by them.

Everyone watched the girl walk up to the hounds and slap one of them on the rump. “Come!”

To their shock, both big dogs immediately left the bodies and followed her toward the exit.

Sam looked at Candice. “How did you know?”

“She came right by them when Emily waved her over. Both animals cowered and acted relieved when she didn’t order them to do anything.”

“Interesting.” Sam looked around, seeing there were no other people waiting. “Can I get a minute?”

Candice nodded. She looked at Angelica, who hadn’t heard Sam’s quiet request. “Get them all back and settled.”

Angelica was glad to. The mess here was making her stomach turn. She glowered at Sam as she remembered the morning sickness comment.

Sam missed it. She looked at Daniel as he came toward Candice. “I’ll bring her back.”

Daniel glanced at Candice to approve Sam’s offer.

Candice shrugged. “She wants to run around the field without Baker yelling at her.”

Daniel chuckled. “I’ll keep him busy, but don’t overdo it, you know?”

Sam nodded, giving him a warm look. She wasn’t close to Daniel, but she still loved him because Angelica and Candice did.

The two women waited until they were alone, both scarred and forever changed.

“I need to tell you something.”

Candice waited, bracing for something she’d missed. While lying in Julian’s medical bay, waiting to see if her overused body could carry her any further, she’d planned and studied plans to be sure, but she hadn’t been. It had felt like she’d forgotten something important.

Sam stood up and came over to kneel by Candice.

Candice snorted, shoving to her bad leg.

Sam chuckled, rising to place her shoulder under Candy’s arm. The medics didn’t want her to use the leg at all in case the nerves were trying to heal.

Candice and Sam limped awkwardly toward the center of the field. As they reached it, chuckling a bit at their clumsiness, guards watched them from a distance.

Sam studied the ground and then moved them toward an edge of the stadium field that was covered by huge slabs of concrete.

Candice felt them before she heard them. The faint screams and pounding sent adrenaline and horror into her heart. “Who is it?”

“The power families who weren’t sent to the doomed bunker. Julian locked them in to keep them alive.”

Candice limped away from the hatch, forcing Sam to come along to keep them both from falling. “He failed.”

Sam realized Candice had already made that hard choice, the one she hadn’t been sure she would bring up.

“This stadium is being demolished in a few weeks.” Candice forced it out past the bile. “We’ll move that up.”

Sam understood Candice was waiting for her to protest, but she didn’t have anything to say. The Bachelor Battles was a hard game. Julian’s side had lost. All of them knew the price. Even death wasn’t really enough.

The women left the field without speaking again.

Sam knew better than to pick Candice up like Daniel was doing whenever she needed to go somewhere. They weren’t that close. Instead, she stayed near enough to grab the woman if she fell.

Candice was glad for the opportunity to attempt walking on the leg without Daniel hovering over her like a Den Mother. She was also embarrassed at all the witnesses. The streets of Adelphia were the busiest she’d ever seen them. It was a large town, but there was barely enough room for everyone who had come. In a week, the vaccine and cure would begin distribution in all cities and that included this one.

Sam was also aware of the people staring at them, but she didn’t think it was for the same reason that Candice did. In their lifetimes, no one had ever seen a male killed on TV. They didn’t care about the woman Candice executed; the shocked respect they were showing came from Candice demonstrating equal justice. They’d never had that.

Outside the stadium, long blocks of buildings stretched into the distance. There were brothels, stores, hotels, and apartments for longtime residents or frequent visitors of the Network. When they had arrived this morning, Emily and Dana had met them and escorted them to the largest building. It was still barely big enough to hold all of the Pruetts who were going to be there. They were still waiting on other members to arrive. Sophia and the children, with a few of the orphans and miners, were on their way to Pruett Town. They had been delayed by high water.

The other Nomads were outside the Adelphia apartment house, preparing to leave. Now that Candice was surrounded by protection, the Nomads were eager to get back to the only way of life that had ever satisfied them. Horace would pick up Sophia and the kids along the way. Little Lea had chosen to stay with the farmers until she was old enough to fight and then she would come and train with their family. Angelica hadn’t met the girl, but the update she’d received had implied Lea would probably become one of their best fighters or Runners.

Chester and his family were also returning to the south, but they weren’t leaving just yet. Chester was enjoying his time around the other men and being able to walk down the street unmolested. It was a big joke to him to see the expressions on the faces of the women as he strolled by whistling.

As they reached the apartment, Angelica came back out to join them. Before she could say anything, loud laughter from the nearby Runners drew their attention. That was all the Runners seemed to do, no matter the situation. The big women didn’t know how to be quiet.

Aware of what was going on, Sam nodded to Angelica, passing care for Candice to her, and went to join her crew.

Candice and Angelica observed without speaking, aware of all the faces in the windows of the apartment behind them.

The door opened.

Bobby came out onto the stoop and stopped between the two women. He also stayed quiet, observing the event.

“Lydia and Rosa.” Sam got their attention, wishing she felt better so she could spend more time celebrating with them. All she wanted to do at the moment was get this finished so she could go rest. She had no doubt that Candice felt the same. “This is yours for your actions during the rebellion.”

Heather and Melissa handed the women new cloaks and stepped back.

Sam slapped Rosa on the shoulder. “You’ve earned the right to have your own crew now. *Rosa’s* Runners.”

Rosa didn’t know what to say. She refused to show emotion. She swallowed a lump in her throat and handed the cloak back. “I’m happy being your XO.”

Sam had expected that. She pushed the cloak into Rosa’s arms. “It’s there when you’re ready for it.” Surprising them all, she stepped forward and gave the woman a huge bear hug.

Rosa caught her balance as everyone laughed.

Sam turned to Lydia. “We would like to offer you a spot on the crew.”

On the stairs, Bobby tensed. If Lydia became a Runner, she would be gone all the time. *Or I’ll have to really learn to be one of them.*

Not far away, Luba paused in preparing his vehicle to look at the rookie. “In the south, rules are taught gently. We have a different life there.”

Bobby was surprised by the offer, considering how badly he had done on the trip.

Luba knew what he was thinking. “Training rookies in a time of war is hard. It expects more out of them than some are able to give. With time, maybe you could still become what you want to.” Luba shrugged at him pointedly. “Maybe you’ll find a life that satisfies you more than the one you imagine will.” Luba went back to his preparations before Bobby could respond.

“Yes!”

Sam and the Runners cheered Lydia’s choice to join them, drawing more people to stoops and windows around them.

Candice didn’t interfere with anything that was going on. It was all family business, but at the same time, it wasn’t. Bobby and Lydia were not Pruetts.

Bobby turned around and went back inside the apartment.

Angelica looked at Candice. “Are you going to tell them?”

Candice had been stewing on that question since she’d discovered the truth. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Angelica didn’t answer. It was the right thing to do, but it was also the wrong thing. Destroying the image of who the couple thought they were, or thought they wanted to be, wouldn’t help any of them.

“Unless it becomes a problem, we’ll keep it between us.”

Angelica was relieved. “What about us?”

Candice grunted. “A lot of people already know the truth about Julian’s experiments.”

“But they don’t know what we know.”

“Do you think we should tell them everything? Will the truth set us free?”

Angelica stared at the bitter tone. She hadn’t been expecting it.

Candice struggled not to reveal how horrified she was. “No, Angel. I will not honor thy father.”

Angelica didn’t pretend ignorance. She had been working her way up to finding out how much of Julian’s behavior Candice was going to repeat. “He upped the dosage for the men in the complex for the last few months, including Jason and Daniel. Baker stole rations for the rebels from the Network, so they got it, too. The bachelors are already spreading the cure. Why hasn’t it affected Sam?”

“It will in time. I suspect that’s why she told Baker no about having a child yet. She believes when that happens she’ll burn out. As for us, as Julian’s children, we’re immune to the cure, like him. That was a side effect he didn’t anticipate but still tried to use. When his last dose wears off, the men should stop being contagious, and you and I will be the only ones who can spread it.”

“We’re carriers?”

Candice nodded. “It’s very likely that our children will inherit our immunities. There’s no way to know until it actually happens. Julian hadn’t gotten that far in this testing for this generation.”

“I think I’m in remission.”

Candice stared at her.

Angelica flushed at showing emotions, but it was a big deal for all of them. That legendary stage was unachievable according to the Network. “I can’t change anymore.”

Candice hadn’t been alert enough during the fight at the center to know.

“I can get my claws when I’m really upset, but that’s it.”

Candice wanted more details, thrilled for all of them, but before she could answer, the door behind them open again.

Neither woman had realized how quiet it had gotten as the Runners checked in on satellite phones with their people in one of the nearby towns that were having trouble. As the door shut, echoing, everyone turned to look at Bobby.

Bobby looked at Lydia. As their eyes met, he saw the dawning realization in her face that she would have to either leave him behind or bring him along in order to join Sam’s crew. In all of her excitement, she was just now considering how this would affect their relationship.

*That’s enough for me.* Bobby looked over at Luba. “Is the offer still open?”

Luba motioned toward the vehicle. “I’m leaving now.”

Bobby didn’t look at Lydia as he jogged down the stairs toward the car. As he went by Sam and Angelica, he threw an embarrassed look over his shoulder. “The next time you see me, I’ll be worthy of the name that I can’t ever really earn.”

As he got onto the vehicle, Candice and Angelica realized Bobby knew the truth.

Lydia watched in shock as Bobby rolled away with Luba. For one moment, her face filled with an awful depression that hurt the hearts of everyone around her. Then she lifted her chin, drew in a breath, and looked at Rosa. “I need a mug and a male. Who’s got my back?”

Instead of cracking another joke like everyone was expecting, Rosa embraced the horrible new emotions that Greg had given her. She put a hand on Lydia’s shoulder. “He’d come back if you ask him.”

Lydia shook her head and shook off the comfort. “Bobby has to decide if he wants this life or if he even wants to keep trying to be one of us. He might have just made the best choice for both of us.”

No one could argue with that. The Runners escorted Lydia inside to help distract her from her man troubles.

“Mary and Bruce are on their way!” Melissa relayed the message that had just come in. “The men heard Angelica’s threat and surrendered!”

Everyone was laughing as they went inside with the Runners.

Left alone, Candice and Angelica spent a moment enjoying the quiet and the feel of victory. The town around them was calm and curious despite the live execution and new rules. They still had enemies, but even those citizens were willing to give them a chance to prove there was life beyond the Network.

Angelica handed a small disk out to Candice. “That’s from the power bunker. Sam gave it to the Runners before they were captured by the west coast. There’s a lot of information on there. You’ll want to watch it alone.”

Candice put it in her pocket, good leg exhausted and bad leg nothing. “Somebody owes me a lot of UDs.”

Angelica shook her head in confusion at the quick switch of topics. “Excuse me?”

Candice indicated Sam. “We didn’t get the results of her last run. If she was the winner of the time trials, I’m a very rich woman. I had a lot of money on her.”

Angelica burst out laughing. She understood Candice didn’t want to talk about personal issues anymore and agreed. They had an election coming up in six months, and before then, years’ worth of work to be done. There was going to be plenty of opportunity for them to discuss everything that had happened. She chose to take them in a direction that was the complete opposite to please her cousin. “I hear we’ll be delivering around the same time. That should be a lot of fun.”

Candice moved up the stairs, turning her grimace into a very familiar grin. “Well, we do like to keep it in the family.”

Angelica groaned. “Are you going to spend the rest of our lives making terrible jokes like that?”

Candice slipped her free arm around Angelica’s neck in a graceful move that implied she’d been practicing. “I certainly hope so.”

Angelica put her arm around Candice to help her inside, chuckling. “Me too. I can’t imagine a life that doesn’t include you.”

Candice slipped her hand into Angelica’s, stopping them in the archway. “I love you.”

Angelica’s eyes filled with red tears. “If you knew I can still change, you should have just told me!”

Candice chuckled. “We’ll have our full strength back after the babies come.”

Angelica was glad to know it. She’d spent her life hating the change and now, when she had a tiny chance to get rid of it, she wanted to keep it close for protection. “Too much irony.”

Sam grunted as she came in, hearing her sister. “I couldn’t agree more.” She looked at Baker and Jason. “We want to go for a walk. Get your leashes.”

Silence fell in the flat.

Baker’s lips twitched. “Can we put them on you?”

Sam snorted laughter, echoing the braying Runners around them. “Maybe. I do like to stir up trouble.”

Baker beamed. *I love her so much!*

Next to him, Jason echoed the silent sentiment as he stared at Angelica. Life in the future would have hard moments for all of them, but there was also hope now and that was enough to make it all worthwhile. “We changed everything.”

“To us!” Sam raised an imaginary mug.

Everyone who had a cup toasted with her.

Candice looked at Velvet, who didn’t meet her eye, and then Daniel.

Daniel glared.

Candice smiled. He’d spent a lot of time trying to convince everyone that he was timid, but his true nature had bled through in moments–like when he’d forced Leo out of the meeting. Daniel had instinctively mistrusted the traitor and hadn’t been able to keep up his act because he’d felt threatened.

Daniel sighed. If Candice thought he should spend time with his sister, he would do it, but not now. Velvet would have to prove she was good. Then she would have to make the first move. He was a Pruett now and she was a Malin…

Daniel realized that would be keeping the old fight going and understood what Candice wanted from him. He reluctantly stood up and went over to sit next to the shy girl who had stuttered her name upon knocking and then waited for death.

Velvet jumped as Daniel sat by her on the couch. She was scared of males.

Daniel felt it. He’d been around that reaction his entire life. Even though it came from a woman, it still felt the same. He looked at her. “I’m Daniel.”

Velvet snorted lightly. “Yeah.”

Daniel didn’t know what to say to the girl. So he didn’t speak again. He just stayed next to her so she wouldn’t feel like a bug under a dome.

Candice was pleased. In time, Daniel would be glad to have a member of his first family that he didn’t have to hate. This would give him another layer of peace in payment for everything he’d suffered while away from her.

Candice still hadn’t forgiven herself for not being able to stop his captivity in the complex. Knowing what had happened to him there made that impossible. She would spend the rest of her life trying to atone for that and still fail. Some things couldn’t be fixed once they were broken. That was a law of life.

**6 Months Later**

Chapter Fifty-Three

**Close**

November 7th

**1**

**“T**he results are in, folks! We have a President!”

Angelica jumped at the loud announcement from the wall screen even though she’d been expecting it. Dana’s voice was even peppier than before the Network had fallen. She obviously was having a good time as the main reporter for the election.

“We are here in Adelphia, waiting for the President to come out and make a statement. We can’t wait to hear her first words. This is a momentous occasion for everyone in our country. We haven’t had a President in almost five centuries.”

Jason reached over and turned the screen off. “Are you ready to go out?”

“No.”

Jason snickered. “It’s cold. Do you want the thicker cloak?”

“No.”

Jason held out a hand.

Angelica continued to grumble, but she pushed herself off the couch and waddled toward the door. She didn’t want to go out and show vulnerability to the world. Her ankles were swollen and her back hurt. Right at this moment, she couldn’t remember why she’d wanted to have a baby.

Jason held the door for her, nodding to the Runners outside providing security. Over the last six months, the big women, and the few men now on the wild crew, had proved invaluable. Jason blushed as Hope slapped him on the shoulder and cackled. “Fatherhood looks good on her!”

Angelica grimaced at the tasteless joke.

Jason chuckled. “You’ll have your turn. We’ve all seen you and Thomas every time we visit.”

Hope cackled louder.

As they moved into the chilly hall of the complex that had been built across from the demolished stadium, the reporter’s voice blared from screens and from the hall in front of them where she was doing the live report.

“The fishmongers have agreed to let the rebel men stay with them. It’s rumored they have created bonds and several of the mutants are pregnant.”

Angelica didn’t agree with the free rein Candice was giving the media, but it was too late to interfere. None of them liked being in the dark anymore.

“Canada refused to release the rebel men, claiming that because they passed the sixty day limit, the rebels were Canadian citizens. Candice Pruett negotiated their return.”

Angelica thought about that trip and hid a gag. The morning sickness had been hitting her hard then and even the soothing herbs of the fishmongers hadn’t been able to calm it. The trip had been successful, however. No one wanted to incur Candice’s wrath by breaking the new rules, but the mutant women were also delighted to have the men. Locals throughout the country had refused to accept the rebel males after fighting changeling men, but the fishmongers hadn’t been intimidated. They’d been hungry. The rebel men had offered to cook every night and a deal was reached. That was the last trip Angelica had been on; she was restless now, as well as uncomfortable. “Too big to go anywhere.”

Thomas and Ralph had taken charge of the rebel males and been elected their unofficial leaders. The Mayor of that town had yet to be chosen. Marta’s daughter had been drowned by fishmongers who sank her boat while she slept because she had been too cowardly to fight at the training center.

“The family has promised us that new programs are coming soon to entertain and educate, but they’ve all sworn there will be no new games. Many of the local residents were disappointed to discover that, but they’re willing to wait and see what the council has in mind. We’ve also been told that Pruett Town will be renamed when it becomes the new capital of the country in the official independence celebration next year to mark the anniversary of our freedom from tyranny.”

Angelica shifted to her other leg to take the pressure off her back, refusing to hold Jason’s arm for support. Too many people were able to see them and she couldn’t afford the weakness. None of them could. Even while pregnant, she was finally the most feared Pruett in the family. That honor gave her deep pride.

Jason halted by a door down the hall. He tapped lightly as a warm breeze rushed over them. All the bodies were heating up the room.

Bruce opened the door and held it so Mary could exit.

Mary went straight to Angelica and gave her a firm hug.

Surprised, Angelica returned the embrace. She’d never been that close to her and her uncle.

Mary knew. “I’d never try to replace your mother, but if you need something she would have covered, you can come to me.”

Angelica was touched. After learning the secrets of her parentage, she had almost expected to be excommunicated from the family. It was a relief to know Mary didn’t feel that way.

Bruce handed Angelica a picture. They had just returned from New Network City, where the cleanup was almost finished.

Angelica stared with tears in her eyes at the monument that was dedicated to everyone who had lost their lives in the rebellion. The bronze statue had the ape in the center, surrounded by Glowers, Runners, Divas, snakes, locals, and of course, Pruetts and Nomads. Jonas was also depicted beside the ape. All around the edges were the locals they had lost. Angelica’s parents were the ape’s guards.

Bruce moved forward. “Amos loved you, girl.” He hugged Angelica. “So do I. Tell me if you need anything.”

Angelica hugged Bruce longer than she had Mary. The idea of having a father figure who wasn’t evil was appealing.

“The first decision our new ruler made this morning was to issue an official decree on slavery. In exactly ten years from this date, all males will be born free. To stop countrywide rioting, the President agreed to let owners keep their current slaves. Those males will not be eligible for the ten-year rule. However, there were harsh restrictions imposed on those owners. Brothels have been reopened, though the buying and selling of any persons is now forbidden unless you are selling them to the Pruetts. As you’ve heard, those men are being immediately freed upon sale to the family. In other male news, the rebel men, supported by Daniel Pruett, have petitioned for the right to vote. A Presidential decision on that issue isn’t expected for some time, as only free persons can vote under our new constitution.”

Angelica’s mood grew uglier. No amount of arguing with the local owners had convinced them to give the men freedom sooner. It was a bitter victory.

As they reached the end of the hallway that led to the auditorium, hot air hit them and the noise increased, warning her there were a lot of people ahead. Angelica assumed it was the full 10,000 bodies this facility was able to hold. Julian’s male engineers had done a remarkable job overseeing the project. Now that they were free, the engineers had gravitated toward Pruett Town, where they could live in safety. In fact, almost all the men they had rescued over their rebellion had come. They were helping build infrastructure that was based on forbidden books. Candice was paying top UDs for any old material people found or were hiding. Information was no longer forbidden in their world and it was leading to quicker recovery in most places.

The group paused at the next intersection to allow other members to join them. Lydia and several Runners came over to provide more protection since the group was larger.

Lydia was a different person now. Angelica had spent time with her since Bobby’s departure and noticed the changes. She was quieter, something that was odd for Sam’s crew. It was obvious she missed her mate. No one had heard from Bobby since he left. They hadn’t heard from the Nomads either, but that was normal for them.

The crowd roared as Angelica and her group came into view. As reporters rushed over and the Runners hurried to get in between them, Angelica scanned the auditorium. Screens were showing new laws as they were being discussed by the reporters. Den mothers were writing them out and passing the cards. Their old job of educating bachelors was a useful skill. In time, they would become teachers and replace the hour-long daily computer lessons that the kids were now tolerating in boredom.

As security cleared the path, Jason led them toward the stage.

“Bobby?”

Everyone paused to scan the front row, where family members were gathering to witness the new leader take control.

Bobby stood up, dark eyes and tanned skin making him appear to be a true Nomad. His clothing matched it–a white turban that was now being twisted nervously in his hands and flowing tan pants. He wasn’t the same rookie who had left with them six months ago. That was obvious in the way Bobby held himself in place even after Lydia took a step toward him.

The reporters caught on to the drama and began recording the reunion as Lydia paused, face crumbling when he didn’t run to her.

Bobby cleared his throat. “I’d like to make an arrangement with you.”

Lydia brightened. “Really?”

Bobby nodded, but stayed where he was. “Can I talk to you, alone?”

Lydia shook her head. “I’m working. Do it now.”

Bobby’s face turned scarlet. “I love you. I want to be with you, even if you are a Runner. I think I can make it work now.”

Lydia wanted to go to him, but she refused to shirk her duty. “I accept your arrangement.”

The witnesses and reporters gushed as the couple exchanged warm looks.

“We’re making everybody wait.” Jason led Angelica to the stairs by the stage, and passed them to settle her in the front row.

“Isn’t that sweet?!” Dana moved toward the stage as her camera crew followed. “That was Lydia Pruett. Adopted into the clan, the Runner has been providing security for the family and doing an excellent job of it. Several assassination attempts have been thwarted. Rumors imply the assassins were sent by members of the United Nations, who have been pretending to offer shelter to abused males around the world and now own more of them than anyone else. The United Nations is currently being sued by five countries, with more lawsuits expected. The longtime Secretaries-General committed suicide last week, and the woman running the show in his place walked out yesterday morning. The UN may be dissolved.”

The news flipped to a clip of Candice giving an address a few weeks ago.

“I have refused demands to allow the UN to tour our weapons facilities. We are a sovereign nation and we do not need foreign oversight. However, because our citizens insisted on the ten-year moratorium, I have been forced to agree to a six-month inspection of brothels, and a yearly inspection after that, until the world is satisfied we are no longer abusing our men. In exchange, they will not hassle us over the moratorium. They will remove all camps and troops on our side of the border.”

Angelica tensed as Dana looked her way, assuming the next clip would be about her. She hadn’t gotten used to being in the spotlight. She was glad she hadn’t been chosen in the election. She had protested vehemently about her name even being placed on the ballot, but local populations had insisted.

“The UN has demanded that New America outlaw capital punishment for the deal to be final. Those of us who have lived our lives under tyranny understand that some people need to die and we support leadership’s decision to refuse. The negotiations are still underway. In the meantime, supervision of the males has been given to Angelica Pruett. There is little doubt that she is able to keep control over the situation even though she is only weeks from her due date. I’m sure you all remember the riot a month ago when free males took over an armory, but surrendered as soon as Angelica showed up. They didn’t even try to negotiate when they found out who had been sent to quell them. Everyone feels safer with Angelica watching over the changeling men who are no longer experiencing symptoms of the disease.”

Angelica was glad when the reporter moved on. She wished the new President would hurry up. She had to pee and her ankles were swelling again.

The doors behind them burst open, letting in a rush of soothing cold air.

People in the crowd screamed, scattering as two large hounds came in, carrying Cain and Jamie. The children had become so used to the big dogs that they were now riding them like horses.

Behind the wild children who were enjoying scaring the crowd, Den Mothers ran after them with wild hair that was no longer in vibrant colors.

Angelica pushed herself up and turned around to glare with red eyes.

“Uh-oh.” Cain and Jamie quickly dismounted and took their seats in the front row with the rest of the family, heads bowed in innocent obedience.

Angelica whistled.

Velvet Malin, as frazzled as the Den Mothers, came to the door. It was obvious she had been chasing the boys and hounds, and fell behind. She made a sharp gesture. “Come!”

Both dogs followed her out of the crowd, bringing peace to the unexpected chaos.

As everyone stared, Chester lumbered in with Daniel’s children in his big arms. The redhead looked like he had been fighting with the hounds.

“How did I become the diaper whisperer?” Chester shook his head. “I need a new mate.”

Around him, his kids nodded.

Hearing his words, half the Runners swiveled in his direction.

Laughter broke out in the crowd. All of the Runners admired him for his skills with the kids.

Sophia’s group was behind Chester. Their family was followed by three slaves who appeared happy. As they entered the auditorium with their two impressive daughters leading the way to provide security, Angelica and Candice stared. It was like looking at their past lives. It was also a reminder that not everyone wanted to change. The Nomadic cane farmers didn’t see a need to fix what wasn’t broken.

“And that’s another group of our famous first family, folks.” Dana chuckled at her clever words and went on as if everyone agreed. It was obvious the males didn’t. The riot Angelica had quelled was over the 10-year wait period. “The hell hounds are mostly calm now, but crews of singers are rounding them up until we can determine what mix of chemicals will free them from their chains. The old Network didn’t have a plan for that, but our new one... And here she comes! Candice! Candice! Can we have a moment?”

Candice grinned.

Daniel stayed next to her as she braced on the cane that she only needed now when her leg was bothering her. She was mending and it hurt.

The audience in the auditorium cheered as if a game was starting.

“Wow. They really like you. Tell us, Candice, what is this new position you’ve created for yourself?”

“I’m the lookout at the top of the tower. When I see smoke, I send a crew to put out the fire or replace the tiles.”

“So you’ll be watching our new President to make sure she doesn’t overstep her authority?”

“I’ll be watching everyone.” Candice looked at the camera. “The distribution rate is low. Only thirty-five percent of you want the pain to stop. Only fifty-four percent of you want men freed at all. You’re talking about the games being restarted even though I’ve told you that won’t be allowed. You’re already pushing me. Of course, I’m going to watch the new President. So will you and so will everyone else. We’ll keep each other in line and find support in the struggle.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Candice shrugged, not letting her big stomach detract from the menace as she answered. “The rest of the world controls themselves and lives in peace with the men. We are just as strong as any of them. We can and we will.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to say to the country that chose your cousin over you?”

Candice nodded. “Yes. Good job. I’m proud of you.”

Candice went to her seat as the crowd roared.

“I wonder how Sam’s taking it?”

Candice smirked at Angelica’s comment. They’d both refused to talk to Sam right after the announcement, so she couldn’t resign. “Better than Ginny is. She just heard and thinks we’re leaving her in the western power bunker forever.”

Angelica chuckled. Ginny still had custody of Robert. She and a skeleton crew of Runners were holding the bunker until they found time to deal with it.

Ginny had also reported that she and Robert were a couple. Candice recognized obsessive undertones, but Robert was providing information on anything they asked, so she wasn’t rushing his demise. He was their last prisoner. The Malin women, along with Rusty, had been executed months ago. She’d ordered it as soon as the baby was born. The child had been sent to an orphanage and would hopefully never know who his parents had been.

“While we wait for the President, let’s go over some of the new laws concerning men. Reggie, do you have that sheet?”

“I do, Dana! Today’s vote gave us four new rules for those special guys in our lives. Men and boys are to be educated and paid for labor, equal to the females. That didn’t cause as much uproar as the brothel rules. All rentals, men and women, must be willing. They also have to be healthy, receive medical care, and, they have to be paid for the service! Brothel owners went on strike last month over that, but the abundance of males has caused them to fail in their efforts to reverse the council’s decision. Just yesterday, the union members agreed to a deal preventing criminal charges for past abuses, providing they abide by the new regulations.”

Candice glanced at Angelica, delivering a nod. She’d sent the girl to deal with the union members. An hour after she arrived, they had a deal in place.

Angelica didn’t respond even though she liked the praise. She wanted the men freed. Bargaining for terms of their slavery was awful. She didn’t count them being willing. They didn’t know any other life. Of course, they were going to return to selling their bodies. Candice had promised to wean the population off prostitution and Angelica believed her, but it was still frustrating.

“Slave owners are allowed to keep their property during the ten year moratorium. In exchange, all males with children can petition for visitation rights and even custody. The Watchman, our lookout, will make the final choice on those cases, not the President. Men can also own property and travel unescorted, though that’s still dangerous when you consider that less than half our citizens have come in for the cure or the vaccine. Now that chemicals are not being added to the food, water, and air, all changelings will burnout in time. There is no reason to resist the medical treatments that are being provided at no cost to citizens.”

Dana paused, not liking some of what she was relaying, but she couldn’t deny it was fair and effective. Every broadcast they made about the vaccine and cure brought a few hundred more people in for injections and allowed them to remove Glowers, severely diseased, about-to-snap, and criminal elements. It was awful and perfect–like life itself.

Dana looked around, seeing the crowd was getting impatient. The Runners had things covered, though. Dana had now witnessed them in action enough to know they could handle a rough crowd. Still, she hoped the new President presented herself soon. She was on her last update. “We spent time on the streets of this city this morning, asking people why they voted for Sam Pruett. Here are some of those answers.” Dana motioned for Reggie, who was in the control booth, to run those clips.

“I wanted Candice in there. Her game was amazing, but I’d rather have her watching *over* the person in there, you know? She won’t let them repeat Network evil.”

“Excuse me? Why did you vote for Sam and not her sister?”

“Her sister scares me.”

The crowd laughed, as did the reporter on the replay.

“Same here. Does it make you feel better knowing she isn’t going to make laws for us?”

“Well, I didn’t mean it that way. She’s terrifying. That will keep the free males from going on another rampage.”

Dana hoped that was true. They were telling people the males weren’t able to change fully now, that it was wearing off, but that depended on several things they weren’t discussing in public. Some of Julian’s experiments were bonding with the disease.

“Miss? Can I ask why you voted for Sam?”

“I didn’t. I voted for her man.”

“Um… What?!”

“Just kidding. I voted for Sam because she told us the truth.”

“Her entire family was involved in that, you know.”

“But Sam could have taken the Network’s offer and sold them out. She didn’t. She stayed true, so I rewarded her with my vote.”

**2**

“I can’t believe this is happening to me.” Sam ducked a powder puff and dodged a brush. “Stop that!”

Rosa and Baker snickered. The reporters had sent a crew to get Sam ready to be on camera. Sam had wanted to go as she was–dirty from the two days of travel it had taken to get here on her Mopar. She’d refused the confined space of their safety vehicles.

Sam tensed, glaring as a neutered man approached her with a long dress. “I’ll make you wear it.”

The man dropped the dress and ran behind the other members of the TV crew.

Baker waved them out. “It’ll be okay. You did good.”

Rosa frowned at her oversight. She should have thanked them.

Baker ignored her lapse. He was teaching the Runners how to treat other people. It was hard work. They’d spent their lives being famous for a *lack* of manners.

“You really should change your clothes.” Baker pointed to the bottom of her tattered cloak. “You still have blood on it.”

Sam sighed, stomping down from the platform in front of the mirror where the crew had pushed her an hour ago. “Change clothes. Wash your face. You sound like my mother.”

Sam winced internally at the poor word choice and then went on with her complaints. “Do you hear that cheering? I hate cheering.” She jerked a new cloak from the closet and tossed it overtop the old one. She fastened the ends, still grumbling. “Uncomfortable clothes, people sucking up, having to be *nice*. I liberated a country. Why am I being punished?”

Baker chuckled, taking her arm before she found another excuse to delay. “Your people are waiting, Madam President.”

Sam grunted, not resisting like she wanted to. She’d never been so nervous.

Rosa escorted them out into the hall where people began to cheer as soon as they saw her.

“Vulture balls!” Sam took in a breath and plastered the family grin onto her pale face.

Snickering at her curse, Baker led her toward the podium as they entered the auditorium, sensitive ears cringing at the noise as they were recognized.

He understood Sam’s tension under his arm. She wasn’t worried over being attacked. The sound was so loud that he was being disoriented. He could only imagine how bad it was for her ears, but he knew how to make her feel better. Baker leaned in and kissed her on the cheek as they reached the stairs, drawing more cheers and a few whistles. “You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Sam’s eyes glowed red. She lifted her chin and walked up the steps without stumbling like she’d been afraid of doing.

Baker took his spot in the front row, puffing out at the catcalls and Candice’s nod of approval.

Angelica leaned over to whisper in his ear.

Jason frowned, turning to look at his son and Baker’s little brother as they got loud again.

Cain shrank down in the seat. “Don’t tell Sam.”

Baker turned back around so the boy wouldn’t see his smile. Cain was in awe of Sam. He was dressing like her, walking and talking like her, and begging her for lessons on everything. Baker was thrilled every time she agreed and followed through. Cain was slowly adjusting to the outside world and it was because Sam had the strength to force him to do it without hurting him or losing her cool. The boy responded well to that approach. Baker couldn’t be firm with him. He just threatened to tell Sam.

“Pruett! Pruett! Pruett!” The crowd chanted wildly. Made up of both men and women, they fed off each other, bringing snarls and growls of need that weren’t just female.

Angelica whistled.

The obnoxious noise cut through the din. Everyone knew who’d made it. That sound and death were becoming synonymous with Angelica.

The crowd quieted; people slowly took their seats.

The Runners breathed a sigh of relief and stayed alert. They’d never handled a crowd this size, though escorting the changeling males to their new home had been close. Changeling women had lined the route to express their disapproval at the men being relocated instead of removed. Many of the men had killed women during the rampage. It had also colored the view of the rebel males in Canada, making it harder to get them back because no one wanted to take them in.

Sam braced on the podium as cameras flashed, keeping her eyes down like Dana had warned her to do. She saw the speech Candice had written when she’d refused to. Sam read the first two lines as an awkward silence fell in the auditorium. *Thank you for this honor. I’m thrilled to be here.*

Sam picked it up and reached inside her doubled cloak for fire supplies.

Candice sighed in pleasure as Sam burned the speech.

Angelica heard it and assumed Candice had triggered Sam intentionally.

Baker grimaced as the crowd of wild women cheered again. He leaned over. “Sorry. I hope you didn’t put much time into that.”

Candice shrugged. “A week or so.”

Baker groaned, then straightened. He met her eye.

Candice nodded to confirm the suspicion he couldn’t voice right now. She’d known Sam would win. She wanted it this way.

“Why?” Baker hoped the cheering would allow Candice to answer.

Candice motioned Angelica to do it.

Angelica leaned close to Baker, liking the way Jason’s head snapped toward them even though she was the size of a Mopar and Baker only had eyes for Sam. “She’s not.” Angelica looked at him. “You get it?”

He nodded. Sam wasn’t one of Julian’s experiments, but she was a Pruett–a real one bred from a willing bachelor and Pruett female. When she hit remission, it would be natural. Baker suddenly approved more than he already had. Once again, Candice had freed them–this time from a family curse.

The crowd quieted again, many of them tensing as Sam picked up the microphone. She had the authority to reverse laws or even create a new council to put them right back where the Network had kept them for so long. It was all up to her.

Sam glared at the crowd. “I can’t believe you did this shit to me.”

People went crazy again.

Sam threw her hands in the air. “I mean it!”

Her fans got louder.

Angelica grinned. “This is great.”

Candice nodded. “She’ll be unshakable after this.”

Now Angelica and Baker understood why Candice had triggered Sam’s wild side.

“Fine.” Sam glared in frustration. “Since you insisted on me being here…”

She had to pause for another wave of cheers and whistles. “Oh, stop that!”

The crowd laughed and refused to stop showing signs of their loyalty.

“I have an XO now.”

Silence descended across the auditorium and across the world. The broadcast wasn’t being limited anymore. Everyone could pick it up now.

“That’s better.” Sam cleared her throat. “I’ve chosen Dana to be my right hand.”

There was confusion, mostly from the reporter as her crew turned the camera on her.

“What? I didn’t… I’m not even on the ballot.”

“Dana will be the perfect woman to help me keep you problem children in line.” Sam pointed. “She’ll report it to me and I’ll tell Angel.”

Angelica, already in a rough mood, growled at the new President.

Laughter cut through the anger.

“I hope you all know I’m not the indoor type. When she reports it, I’m likely to show up there on my Mopar, with my girls and guys, and I won’t be wearing a damn dress!”

The audience responded with laughter and calls for her to leave the men behind when she came.

Sam knew how to handle it. She gave them a different atrocity to be angry over–one worthy of their rage. “I need to tell you something that I’ve decided should be public knowledge. It’s about the Network and their changeling men.”

Some of the front row members tensed, but Candice didn’t. She’d suggested this a month ago and was glad Sam agreed.

“Our disease has spread to the men.”

There were gasps and shocked expressions as Sam continued.

“The Network told us that couldn’t happen, but we saw them change in the cities. We saw their eyes and claws, and we felt them. The council lied. Men can be, and many already are, infected with the rage disease.”

Shouts and mild panic filled the air in halls across the country where people were gathered to witness the first speech of the new President.

“All men need to be brought in for vaccinations or the cure. Reporters will be given more details on that after this briefing.” Sam paused. That law would allow them to inspect the privately owned males and ensure they weren’t being mistreated. “I’ve added an amendment to the ten-year moratorium.”

Everyone tensed this time, including Candice.

“All parents can opt to make their sons free at birth, as of this very moment.”

Angelica looked at Candice. “Our kids won’t be born slaves!”

Candice hugged the girl because they were family, but she frowned over her shoulder. Sam’s announcement meant she was going to go against Candice’s wishes when she saw fit. That could lead to problems.

Sam felt the concern, but she wasn’t done angering her kin. “I’m supposed to spend the next twenty minutes telling you what I’ll do as your leader and what I won’t do. There’s even a list.” Sam gestured to the stack of papers on the podium next to where the speech had been. “But I’m not going to.”

Sam moved toward the stairs and sat down. She leaned toward the people in that section of the audience. “I want to tell you a story. I’m not going to leave anything out and you can make your own judgements about right and wrong.”

The crowd cheered again, but not as loud. Many of the leaders were worried about her words, but the citizens sensed awful truths coming, ones they wouldn’t have heard if they’d elected anyone else.

“It began over four hundred years ago, when relatives of the Network council activated an old radio station after male slavery became the law…”

Candice didn’t know if Sam planned to tell them everything, but she was suddenly rooting for it. Even if Julian was right and the masses rebelled when they found out the Pruett family was responsible for their misery, it was too late. Sam had been duly elected and she now held the power to crush those rebellions as she saw fit. *We’re all forever changed. The truth of our history isn’t going to make that any worse. In fact, it may finish giving us freedom.*

Candice knew the next ten years would be just as hard as what they’d already faced. During that decade, men would be able to organize and start recovering. There was a huge chance that they would revolt as soon as they were officially freed.

She didn’t want to think about how ugly it would get if that happened, but that was her job now. *If we can learn to trust each other again, it might be okay. And if we can’t…*

Her thoughts went to Julian and his awful methods of control over their society. She suppressed a shudder as she finished the thought. *If men really can’t be trusted, I’ll put them back in chains faster than my father did.*

**The End**

What would you like to do now?

[Note From the Author](#_Note_From_the)

[Deleted Scene](#_Deleted_Scene_1)

[The Network Council List](#_The_Network_Council)

[Print/Audio](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/forever-changed.html)

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**Note From the Author**

Hi! I hope you’ve enjoyed our time with the legendary Pruett family. I’m sorry to see it end. Are you? I can think of at least two spin off series that might come from this as we follow the descendants in their new lives, or go all the way back to the beginning and witness Marcella and Lucas’s evil schemes. If those sound like something you would want to read, please let me know in a review or on my FB page.

**What can I read now?**

Have you checked out all three of my series? Many of them connect to each other. You’ll see familiar characters there!

**Already read everything I have?**

Thank you so much! What an amazing fan you are. I’ll try to hurry up with the next release. Until then, may I suggest exploring my website? There’s a lot you can do there.

Thank you again for joining me on this adventure. Have a New Network Day! Lol.

Waving at you,

Angie

**Deleted Scene Book 3**

“I spoke with Rusty before we left the training center.”

Mary stilled, as did Bruce. They both looked at Candice with guilty expressions.

Candice sighed. “He’s been telling the guards he made a deal and he has a token to prove it.”

Mary tried to explain. “We had to tell some lies to win this war.”

“You should do it.”

“What?”

“Stop it!” Mary knew what was coming. Candice had been staring at her scars since she’d entered the room.

“You owe it to me for what I did to your face.”

Mary came over to the bed, furious. “You are my daughter! I would never do that!”

“I’m sorry…mom.”

Mary’s eyes filled with tears. “You evil little bitch.”

Candice opened her arms. “Can you forgive me?”

Mary crawled onto Candice’s lap and bawled like a baby.

People in the room also cried, but they hid it behind yawns and teary glances out the window.

Over Mary’s shoulder, Candice looked at Bruce. “Dad?”

Bruce joined them, fighting not to cry. Candice was saying nothing had changed for her, that she still had a father and she loved him.

**Rules of the Bachelor Battles**

1.) Ten contestants will fight to the death for their choice of one prize. Mercy is discouraged.

2.) A single viewing of the bachelors will be provided. Only one contestant is permitted in the cells at a time. Light sampling is allowed.

3.) Attacks and battles are forbidden in the halls and private chambers.

4.) Anyone can kill a contestant, including friends, family, and outsourced labor.

5.) Battle loot belongs to the winner, to be disposed of as they see fit.

6.) Broken rules will result in the contestant being arrested and replaced.

**The Fine Print**

-A week before each episode, the contestants are required to run time trials to determine their rankings for the start of day one. The top time will receive the Network logo patch and one million Universal Dollars (UDs).

-Each contestant must submit to one interview a day.

-Once an episode has begun, players cannot withdraw from the game.

-When round two is reached, the remaining contestants will be given a larger studio in a more secure wing of the complex.

**Stars & Guards**

Stars are given for each kill, for high popularity, and by council decision. Each star gains the contestant one Network guard in halls and private flats and a fresh cache of food, weapons, and medical credits. Stars cannot be lost, but can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family.

**Matches**

**Round One (Days 1-3)**

Battles are chosen by Luck of the Draw. One contestant is chosen to face three randomly drawn matches in a row. If they fail, the Network will choose who takes their place with a second drawing. The survivor moves on with fresh credits and more sentries. No other battles are held during this time, but assassination attempts are encouraged.

**Round Two (Days 3-5)**

There are two matches a day, chosen by the viewers, until seven total contestants have been eliminated.

**Round Three (Days 6-7)**

The three remaining contestants will confront a council-picked challenge. The winner gets a set place in the first elimination match. The challenger is chosen by computer.

**Final Match**

The winner and the remaining contestant will then battle in the feature. This is the final match, though few episodes make it so far. Due to assassination attempts and mind games, most Bachelor Battles are over by day six.

**Network Program Schedule**

5 a.m. Wakeup News

6 a.m. Shark Waves

7 a.m. Anti-Rebel Propaganda

8 a.m. Bachelor Battles

9 a.m. Replays of previous week

10 a.m. Disease Propaganda

11 a.m. Hound Falls

Noon News

1 p.m. Employment Opportunities

2 p.m. Wall of Death

3 p.m. Educational Propaganda

4 p.m. Walking Dead Hunt

5 p.m. Vulture Run

6 p.m. News

7 p.m. Tunnels of Time

8 p.m. Ice World

9 p.m. World Propaganda

10 p.m. News

11 p.m. Dodge-Blade

Midnight Free-for-all

1 a.m. Replays from the Previous Week

2 a.m. Violence Propaganda

3 a.m. Off-Air Service Time (2 hours)

5 a.m. Early News

**The Network Council**

1st -Julian

2nd -Rusty

3rd -Brandon

4th -Beck

5th -Riana

6th -Robert

7th -Alex

8th -Lauren

9th -Shelly

10th -Terry

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(completed series!)

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

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