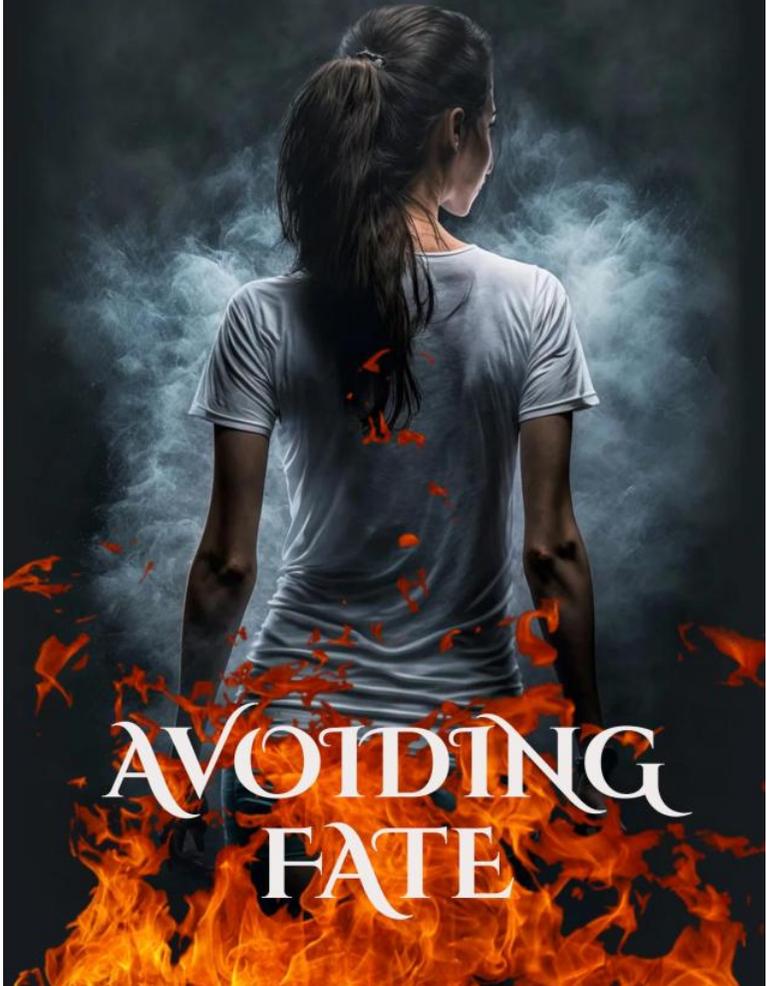


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #12



AVOIDING
FATE

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

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Book 12 of the Life After War series

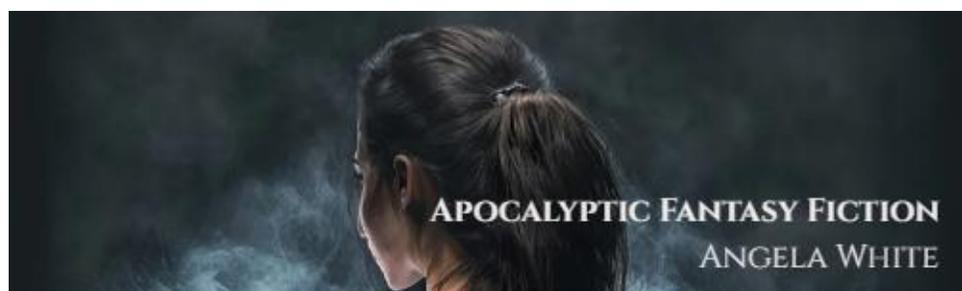
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Better Than Sex

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For The Future

Close

We Go On

Our journey has been long.
We've lost so many...
It's hard to bring up their faces,
But I know we loved them all.

Sacrifices are a part of life.
The pain reminds us we're not gone yet,
That we haven't been forgotten,
That time hasn't passed us by.

We go on in their memories.
We go on in love of life,
And hope for a better tomorrow,
Where peace resides and sleep is sweet.

We yearn for happiness,
And cling to our ghosts.
We're lost and aching;
Pretending we're whole,
Because it's expected.
It's what we do.
We go on.

Part One

“The older I get, the more I see there are these crevices in life where things fall in and you just can’t reach them to pull them back out. So you can sit next to them and weep or you can get up and move forward. You have to stop worrying about who’s not here and start worrying about who is.”

— Alex Witchel, *The Spare Wife*

Chapter One
America
December 3rd

1

“**T**his is Ciemus, calling Safe Haven. Come in Safe Haven!”

Everyone in the mayor’s office waited for a reply, but after a full week, none of the trio expected it.

“Come in Safe Haven, this is Ciemus.”

“They’re probably out of range.” Brandon refused to believe the worst so soon without proof that something bad had happened.

“I agree with Brandon.” Standing near the door, Donna didn’t look at either man in her office. “It’s too soon to know anything.”

“Come in Safe Haven!” William slammed his hand on the desk, rattling the radio. “Answer me!”

Brandon wasn’t sure what he could say to make William feel better. He was worried too, but not to the same extent.

Donna frowned at her angry mate. “Did you see something?”

William’s silence was an answer. He shifted to the window to stare at their peaceful town and high walls. The sounds of a normal day echoed outside,

but in here, there was no tepid breeze or happy chatting. The musty office stank of fish rot and rage.

Donna shook her head at Brandon when he would have gone over to offer William comfort. It was a bad idea to get close to a byzan when they were upset. William's instability had grown since Safe Haven, *since Angela*, left America. Donna frowned. "William, what did you see?"

"A funeral service. A lot of people were on the deck." William turned back to the radio. "They need help."

Donna and Brandon exchanged a short look, careful not to let it linger. They were spending time together on defensive and offense improvements for the town. They didn't want William to imagine it was more than that.

"We don't have a way to reach them. We can't abandon our town." Donna wasn't leaving her home, but she suspected that time was coming soon for William. Her heart continued to break.

"We should have gone with them. They needed us and we refused to go!"

Donna shrugged at William's accusation. "We have a life here. We chose to make it work. We didn't abandon our country."

William growled.

The sound echoed through the office and out into the hall, where people paused to listen.

William tried to control his rage, but it was hard. It wasn't an infection from the rage children, and it wasn't his mental cracks, though he was certain

Donna and Brandon thought it was a combination of both. His connection to Angela had severed overnight. Even though he couldn't contact her on the radio, he should still be able to reach her mentally.

"Maybe she blocked you." Brandon ignored Donna's quick gesture to leave it alone. "You were a little pushy, you know?"

William snorted. "This isn't about that. She's in trouble. They all are."

"Safe Haven chose to leave. They're on their own." Donna waited for another growl, braced to run. When William had returned from escorting Safe Haven to the shore, a new man had come home in his place—one she didn't like.

William keyed the radio again. "Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!"

Donna edged closer to the door, able to feel his rage rising.

Brandon was also reading how upset William was, but he chose to keep going. "Are you sure it wasn't just a nightmare? Even though we're descendants, we do have dreams that don't mean anything."

William sagged in the chair. "I can't feel her anymore."

Donna scowled, hand coming to her hip. "You have to let her go. You have a life here!"

William shoved the radio off the desk, shattering it against the cabinet.

Donna slid into the corridor so she had a clear path to run.

Brandon moved in front of William, hoping they were both wrong about the violence in his heart. William's wrinkled, stained clothing and unwashed hair were just a couple of the signs they'd been watching. He and Donna were clean and neat, as were the rest of the townspeople. William was the outsider now and it had happened fast.

William stared between them, rage twisting his handsome face. "Don't you understand?! If Safe Haven dies, so do we!"

Donna waved at their town. "We've survived on our own. We didn't have Safe Haven's help before; we don't need it now. We'll be fine right here."

"You don't know that. You don't know anything because you refuse to unlock your gifts and help us search for a solution." He pointed. "You're a coward!"

Donna's face iced over, eyes narrowing, lips tightening. "You want *her*. You don't care about Safe Haven. You don't care about this town, about me or about the future. You should have gone with them."

"Yes! I should have!" William spun around and began punching the window.

Brandon didn't want to interfere, but it wasn't good for the townspeople to see their leader so upset. It also wasn't safe. If the window shattered, people below could be hit by glass, as well as

William being hurt by punching through it. Brandon placed a hand on William's shoulder.

"Don't!" Donna knew what was about to happen, but it was too late.

William punched Brandon.

Trained as an Eagle, Brandon automatically returned fire.

"Stop it!"

William dove into Brandon, ignoring Donna's shout. The two men rolled across the desk and hit the floor, both swinging wild punches. Contents of Donna's desk went flying as it collapsed beneath the weight of the brawling men. Her stash of cigarettes was crushed.

Donna's frustration filled the room, making the men sweat, but it didn't stop their fight. Nasty punches landed, sending grunts of pain and anger through the office.

"Stop it! Right now!"

Neither man listened.

Donna's thumb started to slip off the lock she had put on her mental gifts. She struggled to keep the cage from opening.

William put extra heat into his hits, trying to make Brandon bleed. William didn't know any other way to release his worry.

"I said stop!" Donna was angry and about to be humiliated by this display. Townspeople were coming toward the office now. In a few seconds, they would be able see the fight. *Damn you,*

William... Donna let go the mental lock. She lifted her hand.

Power flew out in a gigantic wave that filled the room.

Both men were blasted backward, knocking them against the wall.

Brandon caught the edge of a nearby cabinet and managed to stay on his feet.

William collapsed to the floor at the unexpected blow from his mate. He stared up at her in shock. “For him?!”

Donna didn’t move when William rose and stomped toward her. She’d never been this mad. If he wanted a battle, he would get one.

William realized he’d gone too far, but he couldn’t help the jealous anger spewing in his mind. “You unlocked your gifts to spare him a beating. Not for me, but for him!”

Donna brought up a shield around herself. She’d watched him do it for years. “You scare me now. You’ve changed.”

William kicked a drawer out of the way, making her flinch. “They told me Mitchels were trouble. I should have listened.”

Brandon wiped blood from his lip, sorry he’d fought with William. Donna’s office was trashed.

Donna turned and began walking down the corridor. “I did it for our people. If you can’t see that, it’s time you left—again.”

Brandon stayed where he was, waiting for William’s reaction. The man loved Donna, but

Brandon doubted it was enough to keep William here now that she had told him to go.

William stared at the empty doorway for a few seconds, then straightened. He pulled his anger into a thick shield none of them could get through as he stormed from the office.

Brandon followed to make sure William wasn't going to hurt Donna or anyone else. He was sad things had gone this way, but since William returned, his anger was always in control. Donna was right. William needed to leave.

Security and townspeople retreated to let William stomp by. Like Donna and Brandon, they sensed something different about him and feared it.

William ignored Donna, who was standing outside her office, and strode toward the gate. He didn't speak to anyone.

Donna made a motion for the guards to let him out.

Worried townspeople stopped to stare at William's angry exit.

William hated it here now. These people were nothing like Safe Haven, nothing like Angela. They were all weak, especially his mate. She'd fallen for a Mitchel.

Brandon stopped next to Donna. "Do you want me to try to talk to him?"

Donna put a hand on his wrist to keep him from doing that. "Stay."

William glanced back in time to see the physical contact. His rage surged to a new level. He stalked

through the gate and disappeared into the woods around the wall.

“I’m sorry it came to this.”

Donna didn’t answer Brandon. She waited for more trouble. Since Safe Haven reached their area, trouble was all Ciemus had experienced. *It’s like their curse rubbed off.*

When nothing more came, Donna walked away. There was no affair between her and Brandon, but William had been accusing them of it with his sly glances. He was out of control. Unless he regained control of his mind, he was too dangerous to live here. Donna motioned the gate to be shut, holding in tears. “He’s not coming back.”

Brandon wanted to give her hope, but he couldn’t. She was almost certainly right. “Heaven help anyone he runs into right now.”

2

“Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!”

The anger coming through her radio caused Nancy to glance over. William was furious that Safe Haven still wasn’t responding.

Nancy resealed the bag of powdered milk and stirred her cup, trying not to clink. She had returned to the apartments, but she regretted that decision now. Another storm had rolled in, preventing travel for her, but not for other people. This area had more

activity than she was comfortable with, but she wasn't fully prepped for a winter journey yet.

"Safe Haven isn't coming back!"

"Safe Haven deserted us!"

"Has anyone seen the boat?"

"We need help! We're out of food."

Nancy turned off the radio. The calls from desperate refugees were also more frequent. It was awful to hear, but there was no way she could help them. She was barely able to help herself.

Nancy drank the milk, grimacing at the taste. She hated powdered, but her body needed it. Once the milk was gone, she wiped out the cup with a towel and put it in the rack. While in the kitchen, she peered through all the windows.

"I didn't think I would feel this way." She sighed at the sound of her voice rolling through the empty apartment. "But I'll get over it."

Engines echoed, filling the tense silence.

Nancy went to the stairs. She didn't have lights on or appliances running, including the small generator. She'd been waiting for the weather to break. This morning, the ice on the awning had almost been gone. She'd turned everything off while packing. There was nothing here to draw attention from the small line of cars now moving by the apartment. She was the only one in this complex, but it was just a matter of time before...

The engines slowed, drawing Nancy's hand to the gun on her hip. Thanks to Safe Haven, she knew how to use it, but the noise would attract other

predators. Nancy moved upstairs to be near her small stash of supplies. All her weapons, except the two guns she was wearing, were stashed there.

Nancy paused at the upper hall window. She hadn't boarded the glass up here. The first-floor windows were hidden behind shutters covered in dead vines. It was so pathetic it implied there was nothing to loot or scavenge in these apartments. That was an illusion, of course. This complex still held treasures, like toilet paper on bathroom holders and loose aspirin in forgotten purses.

She was dismayed to see the small convoy stop just three apartments down from hers. The men and women in the group didn't appear to be a threat, but it was impossible to tell for sure. The apocalypse had replaced civility with desperation. Even the nicest people from before the war had become bloodthirsty. She and her child would survive alone until Safe Haven's return. If they never came back, that was fine too.

Until the birth.

The voice in her mind was ruthless.

Nancy forced herself to be reasonable. The strangers didn't appear to be trouble. The women were healthy, unbruised, unbound. The men were smiling, chatting, helping kids from the vehicles. She might trade with them, but only after a few days to determine possible outcomes. She knew better than to rely on first impressions, but that voice was right. She would need help with the birth.

Nancy stayed to the side of the window, not letting her breath move the dusty curtain. She had observed Eagle training for a long time. She'd known for a while that she didn't want to go with Safe Haven, that she would be alone at some point. Learning those survival techniques would keep her and her child alive while almost everyone else in this country was dying. Nancy was confident in her abilities, but she also recognized the pitfalls of being by herself.

Nancy rubbed her flat belly through the blue jean jumper and long sleeve plaid shirt, where the amazing beginnings of life were taking place. She hadn't had contact with the child yet, but she could feel it growing and it was going to be powerful.

The small convoy of twenty people returned to their idling vehicles, leaving crunchy tracks in the icy slush. The three-inch layer of packed snow under it all wasn't going to melt yet. The reddening cheeks of the strangers implied the temperature was still rough despite the top layer of sun-thawed slush. The wind was the worst of it. Her fast trip outside to do her business this morning had brought tears and stolen her breath. It was more than cold out there.

Nancy had been taking readings twice a day for the last two weeks. Winter was just getting started. She wasn't looking forward to huddling in a closet or shed as each storm blew through, but that was exactly what she planned to do. A small space, a lot of blankets, a tiny LED light and an entertaining

book was all she needed to make it through any twelve hours of darkness, no matter where she was. She had chosen to read *Little Women* this month. It was one of the classics she'd never found time for. Now, time was all she had.

Nancy moved away from the window as the convoy rolled out, relieved she didn't have to flee her den this very minute. She went to her space in the closet, aware of the sun starting to sink. She needed to get things ready for tonight. Once it got dark, she didn't go out.

"We did a good job, baby." Nancy rubbed her belly again. Everything she needed was either in her closet or in the small bag fastened around her hips. The pack was rotated around the rear. She wasn't taking chances on being slapped in the stomach while running. "It can slap my ass all it wants."

Nancy snickered at her joke, scanning the contents of her stash. Unless she was in the middle of cooking, cleaning, or washing, everything would now stay ready to go in a large backpack. It wouldn't be easy, but she had gotten stronger since the war. Before society collapsed, Nancy had been in good shape. That would also help.

"Still need more water, but I guess as long as it keeps snowing, I'm covered there." She shrugged. "That'll make it easier to carry the pack."

Nancy closed the closet and did a round on the second floor. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom up here, along with three closets and ten windows. There was also a fire escape that led to the

rear yard. Nancy had placed small bags of supplies, covered by debris, on several of the fire escapes. Even if she had to go through a window, one of those bags would be within a few feet of her.

She also had transportation hidden throughout the complex, but she had been scared of making too much noise to start any of the trucks. There was some uncertainty as to whether any of them would fire up when she needed it. She'd done the recommended Eagle repair list, but there was no way to know for sure. She had also replaced the batteries. For some reason, car batteries were easy to find in this area. Few other things were. Stores were either empty or damaged beyond easy entry. If she didn't mind making noise, Nancy was positive some of the building collapses held a myriad of surprises that would help her survive. She had been forced to pass all those on her scavenging trips. There was only so much one person could do during an apocalypse and she was already doing it.

"Because we have company in the area, I'll doublecheck the windows." Nancy eased down the three creaky stairs, then jogged to the bottom floor. She was trying to stay in shape as much as she could, assuming that would also make the birth easier. She already knew it would make an escape easier.

Nancy checked the windows, then the house for anything else that might give her away. Even a small glint of metal through the window could draw

attention as someone drove by. It was incredibly dark at night, highlighting anything bright.

Nancy decided the radio sitting openly on the table was a risk and cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. "I put myself in danger with that one." She scooped up the radio and put it on the floor next to the small generator. Prewar people had commonly died in the winter from not using generators correctly. It made her nervous, but if she used it outside and someone drove by, there wouldn't be time to hide it. Putting the appliance against the wall, below the window, was the best she could do. With the window open and the shutters cracked, it vented, but she'd still stayed alert.

Nancy carefully stood, trying not to bump the ledge or the table. This apartment was full of furniture. She didn't know how many people had lived here before the war, but she assumed it had been at least eight. There were that many beds, all of which she avoided. It bothered her to sleep in a bed of any kind now. She wasn't sure why, but she hadn't insisted on conquering that issue. *If a bed phobia is my only side effect of the war, I got off lucky.*

The sound of engines finally faded into silence.

Nancy stared at the radio. "William is a byzan. He's like Angela. If he's that upset, something *is* wrong."

Nancy had mixed feelings about it. She didn't want anything to do with Safe Haven, but she was fond of a few people there and actually liked a

couple more. It was painful to know they were in trouble, but she couldn't help them like she had during the shore escape.

At the same time, it was impossible not to feel smug. She had been against Safe Haven leaving, seeing it as cowardly. The thought resulted in guilt that Nancy pushed away. She didn't have time for it. "None of us do. The clock has almost stopped."

Chapter Two
The Desolate

1

“Leave the clock.”

Patricia paused on the porch, grandfather clock in her arms. “It belonged to my mother.”

David shrugged in the late afternoon light. “No room.” He had insisted the family bundle up in winter gear for packing, then suffered complaints about sweating. He’d wrapped their thin boots with tape, then listened to them snipe that it was too bulky. It was a wonder they’d survived so long on their own. It usually meant the people were adaptable. This family was just stubborn and lucky.

David scowled when Patricia stared back resentfully. “I mean it. There’s no room.”

The woods around the cabin were covered in thick snow. Another storm had come through overnight, recovering the property. It was a relief. Until they were ready to go, no one would notice them living here. The animals knew, though. They didn’t like it. The herds were going north and passing through this area to get there. It made for easy hunting and surprise encounters. David was an excellent hunter. The family was decent at it, so they had plenty of food and snow melted water. What

they lacked was a defensible position and ammunition. David hoped to scavenge their needs while they traveled west.

“I can hold it on my lap.”

David scowled. “Can you also carry it in and out of every campsite? I’m not helping; neither is your family.”

“That’s mean.” Patricia sat the antique down, not wanting to admit how heavy it was. “This clock is all I have left of her.”

“You bring it, you carry it. If we need firewood, that’ll be the first thing I recommend.” David didn’t like being so firm with a female, but there wasn’t a choice.

Patricia glowered, but David refused to budge. “Bring a picture. It’ll last longer.”

Not sure if he was poking fun at her, Patricia brought her hand up, preparing to fight.

The two young boys packing homeschool books into a crate paused, staring at the adults in trepidation.

Lance stepped between them, frowning. “Can’t we compromise?”

“No.”

“No.”

Lance shrugged tiredly and left the line of fire. “Okay.” He went back to the armored car they were packing. He and David had used a semi to pull the vehicle from a muddy ditch. It had taken them weeks to get it ready for the trip north.

Patricia tapped her foot, arms crossing over her chest. “We don’t need you. Stop bossing me around.”

David was dirty, cold, and tired. “Is that what you want? Because I can make it happen, lady.”

Patricia didn’t want to surrender, but she was certain her mate couldn’t handle things alone and neither could she. “No.”

David gestured at the full load they’d already stuffed into the armored car. “No room. We can only take important things.”

Patricia gave a curt nod and struggled to lift the clock.

David didn’t want her to be unhappy, despite her combative attitude. He pointed at the roll of trash bags they were using. “If you wrap it up, I’ll put it in the cellar. Chances are no one will find it.”

Patricia’s face relaxed, smile coming to her lips. “Thank you.”

David turned away from her gratitude. He’d wanted to be gone yesterday, but the family kept finding reasons to delay. This morning, it had been hunting through their stuffed attic for treasures. He was almost ready to leave them behind. If not for his dreams, he would have. The voice insisted this family was important; they needed to be taken to safety. The problem was, he didn’t know where. He’d stewed on it for a week before deciding to take them northwest. Between man and the animals, humans were still the bigger threat, but they were all going south to avoid the cold. North meant less

firewood for warmth, but more food since that's where the animals were gathering. He'd made the choice based on history. Humans had been hunter-gatherers in the beginning. That type of existence was necessary now. If they wanted to live, they had to follow the food, not avoid the weather.

David scanned the armored car, then the mostly empty cellar below it. They weren't sleeping in the cabin. Too much traffic had come through here, searching for supplies that Safe Haven might have left. Rumors swore there were stashes in the collapsed mountain. David had avoided that area, but the scavengers there were branching out now. He needed to get this family out of here.

"Engines! Under cover!" Lance ran to his mate.

David scooped up the two thin boys and slid them into the cellar. It was a narrow entrance, but roomy inside. The old tornado shelter was perfect for life after war.

Lance dragged Patricia down the porch steps and shoved her to her knees so she could slide under the car.

Lance dove in.

David yanked the white tarp over the car, anchoring it with a fallen limb on the side that was out of sight. He grabbed the branches he'd cut for this purpose and began sweeping away tracks.

Mentally grumbling about doing all the dirty work, David finished, then yanked on the chain he'd hung. He slid into the hole as snowy debris plunged over the car.

The darkness was smothering while they waited, listening to the convoy pass near the driveway. Thick trees helped hide them, as did the debris now over the car, but David didn't relax even after the sound of engines faded. It was only a matter of time before someone turned down that driveway and found this homestead. "Take a short nap. Let's make sure they aren't circling around."

The worn adults were grateful for his order. Their Safe Haven guide had been pushing them harder than they were used to.

The cellar was one small room with a few bags of supplies. It had a wooden floor and four support beams for the roof. The earthen walls were hard and cold, muffling sound and denying light even a crack. Unless someone uncovered the armored car, then moved it, this shelter was undetectable. It was okay to sleep.

David crashed first. He'd been doing most of the work.

David's dream solidified until he was standing on top of a government compound. He knew there was a bunker under his feet, though there wasn't evidence of it. The Hawaiian island was deserted. It looked like people had never come here.

That's wrong. He stared at the ground. *It feels like the world doesn't exist at all. It's just me, and whatever lies below this soil.*

"You must stay with them."

David didn't turn to scan for the owner of the voice. Alexa wasn't behind him. She was in his mind. "Why do they matter so much?"

"The boys are special."

"More descendants." David wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Their genes are pure. They can help repopulate the earth. Others will be born, but they will be female. The male children must be protected."

"Even at the cost of my life?"

"Yes. You are a defender of the future. Such a sacrifice is noble."

David couldn't argue that. "I don't want to die for them... I want to die for you."

"And maybe you shall. Until we meet, stay with the family as long as they'll have you. Teach them to survive. Do it for me."

"I will. My word on it."

The female voice whispered once more. "Safe Haven's light is fading. Beware the remnants of society, for they are not mine and never will be."

David took that to heart. "I won't trust another living soul until we meet. No one will catch me off guard using kind words to hide evil. I will remove them before I sacrifice my life to a cause that isn't worthy of it."

David snapped awake, words ringing in his ears. The price for trust was too high. He couldn't afford to pay it.

"Are you okay?"

David smiled at the young boy through the darkness. "I'm fine. You?"

David heard a shrug against the earthen wall.

"A bit cold."

"I'm sweating. Come over and share my heat."

David swallowed a groan when the boy climbed into his lap, stepping on his thigh. "Easy."

He wrapped his arms around the shivering boy. Alvin was more than a little cold. David rubbed the child's arms for a minute, then unsnapped his jacket to pull it around the boy.

Alvin snuggled against his heat. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." David resumed dozing, holding the child.

Alvin stayed awake, wishing the strange Safe Haven man would never leave. Alvin was always scared now. This was the first time he'd felt secure since the war. He never wanted it to end. "Please don't leave us."

The pitiful whisper was lost beneath the snores, but David seemed to feel it. He held the child tighter and drifted deeper.

2

"You want me?! Come and get me!" William sent a fiery blast over the road, clearing a struggling truck and the rest of the debris in his way. He flew by on his motorcycle, laughing manically as people burned.

The few survivors cowered from his blasts. They'd spotted a lone man on a bike and thought he was an easy target. A few hits of magic had convinced them otherwise.

"Get on the radio!" One of the refugees pointed at the truck.

William kept going despite the urge to swing around and slaughter them all. His mood was darker than it had ever been. He was barely in control.

William sped up, taking the bike to its limit on the cracked pavement. If he hit one of those, he would go flying through the air, but that knowledge didn't slow him.

Maybe I want to die. William tried to go faster, but the bike couldn't. The shoreline both beckoned and mocked his efforts.

Refugees lingering on the beach rose at the sound of his furious engine, reaching for guns without ammunition. Many of them took off running.

William sped around the final turn and bounced over the walkway. He slowed as he hit the beach. Sand flew in all directions.

"Get him!"

"We can use that bike to leave!"

William fired flames as the refugees surged his way.

People screamed as they caught fire, no longer interested in the bike.

William brought up a powerful shield, not afraid of four dozen people knowing he was a magic user.

In fact, he wanted them to attack. It was a good excuse to release more of his rage.

Radios began echoing as the remaining refugees scattered.

William ignored them. If a large group came here to confront him, all the better. In his mood, none of them would live. If they left him alone, he might return the favor.

William leapt from the bike, leaving it to crash into the sand as he stormed toward the water.

The ocean roared as the tide came in, reminding him they were all really powerless. Without a boat, and a deal with the water, they were trapped on land.

Waves rushed to the shore, carrying treasures in the debris that lured refugees to their deaths.

The ocean is fishing for humans. William's mind blanked for a minute, forced into submission. It was too much, even for him. The bloodstained sand felt the same, but it wasn't. Safe Haven had smothered the gritty surface in light and humanity. Now, the beach was just another earthen sponge soaking up the blood of its conquerors.

“What is he doing?!” Dina gaped.

“Dying if he goes into the water, like us.” Her husband watched the descendant too, but he also paid attention to the terrified and angry refugees around them.

“Is he from Safe Haven?” Dina thought he had been.

Albert shrugged. “I don't think so or he would have been with them when they left.”

“He was here. He had female fighters as an escort.”

A small group of refugees who hadn't run or grabbed their radios observed from the far edge of shore. They were hoping Safe Haven would come home.

“Maybe they forgot him...” Dina motioned at her man. “Go talk to him. Offer him our last bottle.”

Albert frowned, but he retrieved the precious liquid as ordered. He trusted his wife's instincts. It had kept them alive this long. He wasn't going to quibble over it.

Dina put her arm around her daughter's thin shoulders, feeling the wind increase. The temperature was dropping. If they were caught out in the open during a storm, her family would fall ill. They were too weak to fight it off.

Dina watched the descendant plop down in the sand, wondering why he was alone. According to rumors, descendants needed normals to give them hope. “And we need the same from them...” She motioned Albert to hurry. A group of refugees were slowly returning. She wanted to make friends before another fight started. When the sun set, that was all these people did. She and her family had been left alone because they still had ammunition, but that was low now. “We need a friend. Go make one.” She gave her daughter a gentle nudge.

Lorna took her father's rough hand without complaint. Since the war, the eight-year-old had

learned to do what she was told, the instant she was told.

William heard them coming. He gathered flames to fire... William lowered his arm when he saw the father and daughter. Their slow steps and cautious smiles implied they weren't searching for trouble.

"Can we join you for a minute?" Albert was ready to shield his daughter with his body, but he agreed with his wife. They needed a protector. A descendant was at the top of that list.

William grunted, turning toward the ocean.

Albert took that as a yes. He settled a few feet away, nudging the little girl forward. Lorna was good at drawing sympathy from strangers who had a heart left. The problem was, most people didn't.

Lorna dropped right next to William. His shield touched her arm, drawing a zap and a low moan.

"Damn it!" William scooted over so she wouldn't be hurt.

Albert nodded to the girl again.

Lorna tried to tap William on the arm. This zap was loud and brought a small cry.

"Stop touching me!" William watched tears form and sighed. "I can't lower my shield or people will try to kill me."

The girl ignored the warning, moving closer again.

Forced, William included the child in his shield so she wouldn't be hurt.

Lorna smiled at him through missing teeth and adorable dimples. She rested her cheek against his arm, sighing in pleasure.

“Ah, that’s not fair. I don’t want the job!”

The child shut her eyes, enjoying the feeling of safety.

Albert couldn’t help feeling useless, though he’d helped keep the child alive. Being normal wasn’t ideal anymore. Everyone needed magic in this new world.

William’s anger rose. “I don’t want the job. Protect yourselves.”

“...just her, then?” Albert knew what his wife wanted. If their daughter survived, they could die at peace. Since Safe Haven left, dying was all anyone talked about.

“No.” William stared at the tide coming in, mind hunting for Safe Haven. *Where are you?!*

“They aren’t coming back.”

William glanced at the thin child, hating the sallow skin beneath a sunburn. She was starving. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you go too?”

“I’m not stable. I would have caused problems.”

The child peered up at him. “Me too. I’m sick.”

William frowned, turning his scan to the girl. “With what?”

“We don’t know.” Albert let out a sound of misery. “She gets fevers and sweats, then she’s fine for a while. Just started after the war, so we don’t know.”

William scanned deeper. “Malaria maybe. You need Chloroquine.”

“We thought of that, but we can’t find any.”

“A hospital out in the country might still have it.” William didn’t resist the urge to heal the girl. He placed a hand on her wrist. He also pushed in extra energy. She needed it more than he did.

“Thank you.” Albert motioned to his wife, who was coming toward them. “We can only pay with my body or hers.”

William scowled at the man. “I’m no rapist!”

“It’s not rape. It’s a fair trade.” Dina hated the way life worked now. “We don’t have anything else to give.”

“Can you give me peace and quiet for a few hours?”

Dina chuckled as she sat by her husband. “No, not really. If Lorna doesn’t start chattering, the other refugees will make noise. The beach is loud at night.”

“Why are you all still here?”

Dina’s sad gaze turned to the water. “We know they aren’t coming home for a long time, but...”

William grunted. “Yeah.” He gestured at a nearby shack. “If I set that on fire, will the others go there for heat?”

“Probably.” Albert didn’t understand. “They’ll just come back when it burns down. They sit on this beach all day or sleep, then drink and fight all night. If you want quiet, you’ll have to...insist.”

William lifted a hand and blasted the remains of the shack. Screams and smoke filled the air.

Once the others realized he wasn't attacking, they meandered toward the heat, keeping an eye on him.

Radios blared, giving new life to the hunt for magic users, but William didn't stop them. He was tired of running, of hiding. Humans needed to learn to live with magic. If not, they would die.

The sun sank over the water, bringing a new level of tension to the shore. Women and kids huddled around their small campsites, preparing for the evening's trouble.

The other starving refugees watched for signs that William had more food in the bag by his feet but none of them wanted to challenge him to find out. The bottle near his hands also appealed, but the refugees had found a stash of whiskey in the warehouse that hadn't been loaded in time. Safe Haven had left them a final drink.

William sent out a mental warning. *I want peace, or else!*

Everyone stilled, faces filling with fear.

William let out a calming breath. "That's better."

Lorna tapped his arm. "Will you stay?"

"No."

"Can we stay with you?"

"No!"

The little girl began to cry. "Please, mister? We won't be no trouble for you."

William lowered his shield. “Get her away from me—now.”

Albert scooped up the crying child and held her on his lap, but the family didn’t return to their campsite. They stayed with William as darkness settled over the land.

William brought up his shield again, sensing danger. He automatically included the small family inside. He didn’t want responsibility for them, but he didn’t want them dead either.

Cars flew onto the walkway and then the beach, throwing sand over people. Tires spun as other cars tried to follow. Sand was hard to navigate. It was thicker, meaner.

William turned to face the oncoming vehicles, fury spilling over.

The family cowered at his feet as he opened fire, blasting flames and madness in every throw.

It only took William a few minutes to eliminate the threats. The peaceful refugees had fled the beach, leaving a dozen who were willing to risk their life to stay close to a magic user. He was the first authority figure they’d had since Safe Haven left. It was hard for them to abandon.

William sank down, sweating and still furious.

“More will come.” Albert helped Dina and Lorna wipe sand from their torn, dirty clothes.

“Let them.” William didn’t speak again as darkness took over and the temperature continued to drop. Some things were too awful to voice. The

fact that they were now without Safe Haven's light was one of those.

More refugees arrived at the beach after the sun sank, but burning, smoldering hulks and bodies made them pause. When they spotted William, protected by his shield, a few of them turned and left. They knew they couldn't handle him.

Others parked and walked to the beach, not as aggressive as those who'd come before them. That approach obviously hadn't succeeded and there weren't enough refugees to rush him. Safe Haven had taken a large toll.

The family around William watched for trouble as a group of ten approached their location.

William let out an ugly sound. "I will kill you all."

Half of them immediately went in the other direction, picking spots nearby to observe.

The rest joined the family, not speaking. They didn't know what to say, how to beg or threaten.

William was still angry. "What do you want?!"

A man in the front, a tall, thin redhead wearing three coats and hip boots, tossed a bag at William's feet. "That's all the supplies and money we have."

"Tell me what you want!"

People cringed from his anger. Then they leaned closer for protection.

William sighed, anger fading into deep depression. "I make no promise of safety. I can't give you what you need."

“But Safe Haven can.”

“Safe Haven is gone!”

“They’ll return, in four years.” Lorna slid over to be close to William again. “You were thinking it.”

William realized the little girl was catching his thoughts because they were already bonded. He didn’t know how it had happened, but it had. “Leave me alone. If I’m still here come dawn, maybe we’ll talk.” He frowned. “And feed her. The stomach growling is making me angrier.”

The family remained with William as they cooked and ate, sharing their little food and his bottle. When those ran out, William resumed brooding. His dirty clothes and sweaty, gritty body now matched those around him. When the wind blew more sand over him, William let it collect. He didn’t have a ship to follow Safe Haven and there wasn’t time to find one. An ugly storm was coming, one that would blanket the entire country. William had searched for an end to it but hadn’t found one. America was about to get very very cold.

Chapter Three
Safe Haven
December 4th
[21.263244, -85.508671](https://doi.org/10.263244/2021.263244,-85.508671)

1

“I’m cold.”

Samantha pulled the blanket up to Amy’s thin shoulders. The child had knocked on the door a few hours after Neil’s bombshell. They’d brought her in without hesitating. Neil had risked his life for this, for them to be together as a family. “Better?”

Amy nodded, lids shutting. “Thanks.”

Samantha waited for more, but the little girl was out again. She’d been sleeping a lot and eating double her share since they set sail. It was good. The child needed to heal.

Samantha glanced over to find Neil watching her. She smiled at him.

Neil didn’t return the gesture. “We have to stay here for a while. It’s not safe topside.”

Samantha frowned. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but my...voice says we have to stay here if we want to survive.”

Samantha wasn’t sure what to do. They had supplies and a functioning bathroom, so staying

wasn't the problem. Letting everyone else fight while they hid, was. "Tell me what you saw."

"They're sick." Neil wiped sleep from his eyes, yawning, but he was already alert. His body would catch up shortly to the bad vibes.

Samantha blanched. "An outbreak?"

"I think so."

"We have to help!" Samantha moved toward the closet for her clothes.

Neil sat up in the bed. "You can't help them." He pointed at her stomach. "You can lose the babies." Neil glanced at Amy. "And her. If we stay here, we all live. When it's over, we'll help in any way we can."

Samantha's hand rose to her hip. "You want me to hide here. I can't do that."

"Then you'll bury three kids...and maybe yourself." Neil laid back down, putting his arms under his neck. "I won't stop you, but I also won't be able to save you. I don't have those gifts. Those who do will use it on their loved ones, not mine."

Samantha was horrified. She was also suddenly grateful Neil spotted the problem in time for them to have this choice.

"They want us out of sight for a while anyway. We're doing what's best for us, like everyone has to do at some point."

Samantha tugged her silky blue robe over her protruding stomach and curled her feet against the carpet, chilled. "It feels cowardly."

"It is."

“Then how can you make this choice?”

Neil sighed. “The same as I have every other choice since I fell in love with you—survival of our family. It’s us or them this time, Sam. Please make your choice.”

Samantha frowned. She hated being put on the spot when she didn’t have enough information. “I don’t know what to do. Maybe it would be okay if we help...” The sound of lapping water mocked her. The boat wasn’t moving, though Grant had received orders to get them underway at dawn. Samantha peered at the clock on the nightstand. *It’s almost eight. Why aren’t we moving?*

The other morning noises she’d adjusted to—chatter, little feet, the murmur of guards and creaking elevators—were also absent. It sounded as if no one was up yet and that was wrong. The guards on their door weren’t here either. They’d staggered off hours ago, but Neil’s sleep spell hadn’t caused it. Samantha had assumed Neil just wasn’t being guarded anymore.

Samantha felt someone coming toward their cabin.

Neil locked eyes with her. “I’ll get us through this. We’ll be alive when it’s over.”

She frowned at him. “Will our camp? Our friends?”

Neil grunted. “That has not been revealed.”

Samantha’s heart broke again.

Tap-tap! “You guys okay in there? Need anything?”

Neil waited for Samantha to answer Jonny, to make her choice. The guard had probably been sent to make sure she was still alive after a night with him. His honorable reputation was gone.

“We’re fine.” Samantha cleared her throat. “Leave us alone for a while!”

“Um, okay.” Jonny left, muttering about leaving her alone until she rotted.

Neil wrapped his arms around Samantha as she joined him in the wide bed. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no other way?”

“Not that I saw. This is the safest place you can be.”

Samantha rested against his bare chest, worry settling into her heart. “When are we ever going to get a break?”

Neil didn’t answer. He couldn’t. From what he’d seen while searching time, Safe Haven wasn’t going to get one. The road to recovery was full of sinkholes and black ice. They were slipping toward final doom, with nothing coming to stop it.

2

“Help me.” Missy dragged the blanket of supplies toward the stairs. It clanked and thumped, making a lot of noise. “Lift the side.”

Leeann, thrilled that Missy had woken her for anything, took the other end. It was the first time Missy had spoken to her in days. “Where are we going?”

Missy helped Leeann tie a corner of the blanket pouch so their supplies didn't fall out. There hadn't been time when they fled the kids' area. "We have to hide for a while."

Leeann tightened the knot while Missy pulled on her coat. "I don't feel anything."

Missy zipped up. "You've been sad. Give it a few minutes."

"Okay." Leeann lifted the heavy pouch in both hands. "But we better move faster. It's almost shift change."

Missy turned on her flashlight to lead the way. "We have to pick up a few people."

Leeann assumed she meant other kids, but she was distracted. The bad feeling was hitting her now. She just wasn't sure if it meant something bad would happen to them if they stayed here or something bad would happen because they were sneaking out.

"Wait here." Missy opened the employee door. She waved.

Four shadows broke away from the wall and came forward, each carrying a bag.

"This isn't right. We should stay and help." Cody shifted his pack onto his shoulders, then took the blanket pouch from Leeann.

Kimmie came around the corner. "We left notes. The alpha will agree." Kimmie took the blanket pouch from Cody, then slung it over her shoulder.

"She's also going to be upset about this." Kyle came from the employee entrance near them. He

kissed Autumn on the cheek and handed her to Molly, who was by his side. “Not to mention how pissed my wife will be.”

The dim, deserted corridor added to the bad vibes. There should have been guards all through this deck, but Kyle hadn’t spotted any. He didn’t even hear passengers talking or the echo of equipment from the gymnasium under his feet. *It’s too quiet.*

“We’ll take good care of her.” Molly motioned with her free hand. “Let’s go. Courtney is bringing Mike and Mia. That’s all of us.” The kid’s area was in chaos with children throwing up, running fevers. None of the panicking adults there had noticed them leaving. Kyle had been on duty over the kids. So had Molly, though she wasn’t sure how these panicking children had gotten their agreement so fast.

“Wait.” Kyle scowled, counting. “You said all the kids. We’re missing...a lot!”

The ship swayed gently beneath their feet, anchored in calm seas. Kyle frowned as he realized they weren’t moving. *Something happened topside. I need to find Jennifer.*

Molly gestured at Cody. “Tell him. He needs to let Angela know.” She’d had a few minutes to get details while helping the little boy find his shoes.

Cody put a hand on Kyle’s arm. “They’re sick. A lot of people are.”

“That can’t be. We would see signs...” Kyle scanned for guards at the intersection. “Where’s third shift?”

Molly led the children down the hall as Kyle left to search for the three Eagles who should have been watching this hall. “Come on, kids. We’ll fix up our container like a playhouse. We’ll have smores, sing songs and not do any chores. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

The scared kids were subdued, convincing Molly the moment the adults had feared was here. The kids were all wearing big coats and boots, with gloves stuffed in their pockets. The cargo areas were very drafty, so they didn’t stay as warm as the upper decks. Molly cursed herself for not grabbing her own warmer setup as they hurried down the hallway toward the stairs.

“What about our families, our friends?” Cody was only going because of Missy. He didn’t want her to be alone. “What about the camp?”

“Angela will cover them. She’ll be happy you kids are safe. You’re special. She knows that.” Pinned up hair and full tool belts around tiny waists would have made her smile any other day. Now, it gave Molly a chill she couldn’t hide.

“Not Caleb.” Leeann frowned at him. “Neither is Roy.”

“Special doesn’t always mean magic.” Molly didn’t explain further because she didn’t know either. She was just glad it wasn’t only descendant children who would be spared. Her wish was for all the kids to live. Missy had refused to answer that question, giving Molly more chills that still hadn’t gone away. She wanted to talk to Angela, but their

leader was ill. So was Marc. The best thing she could do was protect their kids until things were back to normal.

“What if they die?” Cody tried not to cry.

Molly put an arm around his shoulders, walking them faster. “Your parents are strong. They’ll survive.”

“I meant the other kids!”

Molly paled but kept walking. “Think good thoughts, okay? It won’t help anyone if we panic.”

3

“Don’t panic. I’m sure it’s nothing.” Tonya finished brushing her teeth and spit into the sink. “Pregnant women throw up. It’s part of the process.”

Kenn, leaning against the wall nearby, frowned but didn’t answer. He’d been woken by the sound of vomiting. Their cabin now stank; she was pale, shaky. He didn’t like the process, but that wasn’t the problem right now.

“You have duty soon.” Tonya gave him a weak smile in the mirror. “I’m fine. Go to work.”

Kenn stayed where he was, mind spinning. He was picking up unsettling thoughts from people across the ship. To make matters worse, none of them were receiving responses from the boss.

Tonya scowled as she caught his concern. “Then go check on her!”

Kenn kept the exit blocked with his big body. “I’m listening first.”

Tonya came from the bathroom, toothbrush still in hand. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know yet. Until I do, we’re staying here.”

Tonya tried to connect to anyone on their deck. Her guts immediately began to churn.

“I’ve got it. Shut that down until you’re feeling better.” Kenn strapped on his gun belt, hoping he didn’t need to use it. Angela had scared them all with the mental image of a ship full of holes. Most of them were now afraid to fire a weapon onboard.

Tonya listened for normal noises, but she didn’t hear them. “Where is everyone? We’ve usually been woken three times already.”

“Yeah. No kids, no security.” Kenn could feel the nausea hitting her in thick waves, but he didn’t tell her to stop again. He needed anything she might pick up.

Tonya shut the mental doors. “I caught something.”

Kenn grunted. Some of the thoughts were terrifying. It made them stronger, louder than the others.

“Why are the kids afraid?” Tonya stepped toward him. “Kenny?”

“Someone’s sick.”

“Sick?” Tonya stiffened. “Our kids!”

“Not just our adopted orphans. All the kids are either upset or not transmitting.”

“I don’t understand”

“Whatever it is, their mental connections have been shut or muted. I can’t get any of them.”

“Where’s Angela?”

Kenn’s silence sent terror into Tonya’s heart. “The boss is sick?”

Kenn slowly nodded. “I can’t get Marc or Ivan either.”

“Have we been attacked?” Tonya dropped her toothbrush and went to the closet to get clothes. “Is Grant on the bridge?” Tonya paused at the lack of answers, heart thumping. “Kenny?”

Silence.

Tonya turned to see Kenn grimacing in concentration. “You don’t have him...do you?”

Kenn let go, using too much power for all the searches. “No. Whatever it is, the captain has it too.”

“Are you getting anyone in leadership? What about Jennifer? Or Samantha?”

“Samantha has a shield around their cabin. Nothing from the rest of the council, except Kyle.”

“You have Kyle? That’s great.” She studied him, frown growing. “Isn’t it?”

“He’s in panic mode, baby. He just staggered into the infirmary, carrying a body.”

“Is he sick too?”

“I think so. He feels...odd.”

“So, you’re in charge.”

Kenn hadn’t considered that. “Oh, shit.”

“Exactly. You can’t stay here. You have to go save everyone.”

“Me?”

“There’s no one else who can run the camp, right?”

Kenn felt like he was going to be sick now. “No.” Baby items and medical books covered the available spaces and part of the bed. Kenn didn’t mind. Tonya was happy. That made it worth having to clear off his pillow each night when he crawled into bed. She’d already been asleep, sitting up with a book in her lap, when he arrived last night. When he’d fallen asleep holding her, taking over leadership had been the last thing on his mind.

Tonya dug out her kit and gun from under her other gear, worry growing. She hadn’t planned on using a weapon while pregnant. *I have a man for that.* “You’ll be a hero again.” She went into the bathroom to get changed. “You can lock me in the lab, then go save the world.” She shut the door.

“A hero...” Kenn frowned. “Wait. Did you say something about going to the lab?”

4

“Get that to the lab.” Kyle dropped into the chair, head falling against the wall. His body went slack as he stole rest. He’d seen descendants exhaust themselves to help someone, but he hadn’t realized how much it hurt to give everything. When he’d found Jennifer in the stairwell, bleeding, he’d done just that. He had nothing left to give her until he recharged, but at least she was stable.

Morgan grabbed the blood sample Kyle had done on Jennifer, under oral supervision, and put it with the others. Morgan and the other medics were too busy to deliver samples or even to handle Jennifer's blood tests themselves. Ten other people were here ahead of her. When Kyle had come in, carrying Jennifer, all they could do was point to an empty bed.

"Help!" Ray staggered under Grant's weight as they entered the infirmary.

"Any bed." Morgan finished drawing blood from Ben, then labeled it with shaky hands.

Ray stared. People were moaning, puking, crying or not moving at all. The four medics were overwhelmed. "Where's the boss?!"

Morgan didn't waste time. "Go find her."

Red skin peeled from Grant's arm as they got him on the cot. Harry jumped back, groaning. "This is my nightmare."

"Mine too." Morgan grabbed the crusty skin and took it to the waste disposal bag. There was already a small pile of skin and hair in the bottom. "I've never dealt with a situation like this."

"None of us have." Tim, a medic on last team, wanted to offer encouragement, but he didn't have time for it. The infirmary echoed with groans and whimpering. Vomiting and tears provided a complete symphony. The noises were staggering, as were the smells.

Ray didn't know how the medics could function in here. He had never witnessed an outbreak, of any

kind, and here were half a dozen bodies lying in piss, vomit, blood. It was enough to test his courage. *We need the boss.*

Ray left the infirmary, not seeing anyone in the passages. “Where are the guards?”

Ray took the elevator to the leadership floor, heart pounding in anticipation of what horror he might find there.

The doors opened.

“Oh, my God.”

The guards on this deck were sprawled across the floor, surrounded by vomit puddles tinged in blood. Many were in their doorways, where they’d collapsed while trying to get help.

While trying to reach the boss, Ray corrected, seeing they were all pointed toward Angela’s cabin.

Ray ran to her door, keying his radio. “We have an emergency at the boss’s cabin. All able security to the leadership deck!”

No one responded.

The awful odors thickened as he approached Angela’s cabin. Ray braced, stepping over Ivan’s limp hand. The guard had collapsed in front of the door.

Ray’s panic rose, threatening his ability to think. The door creaked ominously as it opened.

Angela lifted a weak hand. “Quarantine...”

A radio lay beside the bed, as if knocked there when she tried to call for help or give a warning. Whatever had happened had hit everyone hard and fast.

Ray backed away, scanning Marc's bloody body and her open medical bag.

"Quarantine...entire ship. Now."

Ray shut the door at her weak order and ran, fumbling for his radio. "We have an outbreak. Lock us down now!"

The radio crackled, then faded to silence. Someone had copied the order, but he didn't know who.

Ray shut himself in the elevator and hit the stop button, breathing harsh. "Think, damn it! Think!"

The radio crackled. Kenn's voice came, strong and confident. "We are under quarantine, folks. Stay where you are right now. Don't go try to find your loved one. You might infect them. I know you don't want that." There was a pause where those listening heard an elevator ding. "I'm taking Tonya to the lab. We'll get started figuring out what this is. People will be by to deliver supplies and collect garbage. Try to hang on—we're here and we're working on the problem."

Ray drew in a deep breath, incredibly relieved to hear a calm voice giving easy to follow instructions. He keyed his mike. "Where do you want me?"

"Ray?" Kenn's voice was relieved. "Good. I need a full account of manpower and status of the ship."

Ray hit his mike, glad to be able to deliver some good news. "We're anchored. Grant set the

autopilot to get us rolling as soon as we push a couple buttons. The towline is ready to roll out.”

“Excellent. Get that manpower list and meet me at the lab.”

“Copy.” Ray took another minute to calm himself, then hit the elevator button for the bottom deck. He would work his way up and try not to miss any areas. If Kenn needed to know where everyone was, Ray could do that. He just hoped to find people, not bodies, like on the leadership floor. Whatever was hitting them was worse on that deck. At least those in the infirmary had the strength to puke into a bucket or pan. Angela and Marc, along with their guards and hallmates, were covered in vomit and blood.

“That means the others might get that way too.” Grant was having bladder issues. Kendle was currently cleaning up a mess in the bridge. The cot had been ruined. It was now bagged for a trip to the incinerator.

“The incinerator! We’ll burn it all!” Ray hurried from the elevator, notepad in hand. Now that he knew he wasn’t alone, he could almost think again. *If only my stomach would stop rocking and my skin would stop itching!*

5

“I don’t think we should stay here.” Gus leaned over the mess counter to whisper. “We should go to the cabin area.”

Brittani didn't stop kneading the large pile of bread dough. "I can't leave. Breakfast starts in an hour."

"We're locked down." Gus leaned closer. "Guards might even block the doors. Then we'll be trapped in here."

His tone got through. Brittani scanned the mess. Half a dozen mildly alarmed camp people were still here, along with the camp's newest drunk. Most people had left after Kenn's announcement. Cathy, at a corner booth with Timmy, hadn't even glanced up. "Are we in danger?" Brittani concentrated on the boss.

Gus frowned. "We need to go to ground for a while, like we did after the war."

Brittani thumped the dough onto the floured counter. "Is it that bad?"

"Aren't you getting the vibes?" Gus was surprised he was having to point it out. Brittani was usually alert to things like this.

Brittani stifled a yawn. "I was up late. I'm tired."

"Try."

She concentrated and got worried thoughts from all corners of the ship. She scowled. "How did I miss that?"

"Panic hasn't spread yet, but it will soon because people know there's a problem now." Gus put a hand on her wrist, aware of Trinity glowering at him from their table. "I'll escort you."

Brittani pulled away, floury hands coming up. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

People glanced over, drawn by her tone, but not Cathy or Timmy.

Gus glared. "It's not safe here."

Brittani kept working the dough ball. "We're locked down. If there is a problem, we'll be safe in here."

"What if someone in here is sick?"

Brittani let out a sound of annoyance. "Then they'll still need to eat, Gus. Who's going to feed everyone if I hide?"

He shrugged. "Not our problem."

"Yes, it is. If you were a real Eagle, you'd be on guard, not asking me to hide from my duty." Brittani pointed. "Return to your skank. Hide with her. I'll be right here, cooking and praying for everyone to recover."

"Me too." Jayda stepped to Brittani's side. She'd been following the conversation. "And we'll be sure to tell everyone who did their jobs while the camp was sick."

Now Cathy peered over, trying to decide if she should interfere. "Can you guys pipe down? The kid and I are getting to know each other."

"You just mind your bassinet!" Jayda didn't take shit from anyone, let alone a cradle robber like Cathy.

Cathy busted out laughing. "Okay, I will." She smiled at Timmy. "Let's go sit in a different booth so we're out of the crossfire when their fight starts."

Timmy stood and offered her his arm.

Cathy melted. It was sweet—something many of the older men had forgotten how to be, or now refused to do for fear of being called sexist. “Very nice.”

Timmy blushed, eyes sparkling. “So are you.”

Jayda faked a gag. “Table in the rear for mommy and her little boy?”

Cathy stopped, mood dropping a level. She scanned Jayda from braids to boots. “That’s two. Hit me with number three and I’ll fire back.” Cathy pointed when Jayda opened her mouth. “Your biscuits are burning. Mind your job first, and your bitterness second.”

Jayda flipped around. Smoke was coming from the oven. “Damn it!” She hurried to open the oven door and turn on the fan.

Across the kitchen, Gus leaned over the counter to get Brittani’s attention again. “You always told me we have to go to ground when there’s an illness. I learned it from you.”

“That was when we were alone, Gus. Now, there’s a ship of people who need us. We’re not ill. We can help.”

Gus stared at her for a few seconds, then stomped back to his table.

Brittani patted Jayda’s arm, seeing the biscuits were indeed burnt. “A few of the Eagles like them that way. I’ll give this batch to the right people. And hey, thank you for the support.”

Jayda sighed, trying not to cry. “Gus is the easy one. He’ll do what you want because he still loves you. The others here don’t have any allegiance to two black cooks.”

Brittani frowned. “Does it always have to come to race?”

Jayda was still learning to trust other people again. “I hope it won’t, but I’m braced for it. People do crazy stuff when they’re afraid.”

“Yeah.” Brittani returned to kneading dough for the first batch of bread. “Let’s get them all fed. A full stomach helps.”

“I have an idea how we can deliver it to areas without breaking the quarantine.” Jayda pointed at the dumbwaiter. “We can load that up, then tell them over the radio to come get it. No contact.”

Brittani smiled. “Good idea. We’ll get it ready as soon as the next batch is in the oven.”

Gus had paused by Trinity. He peered over his shoulder to find the two cooks already back to work. It made him feel ashamed.

Trinity, soothed because Gus had returned unhappy, patted his thick arm. “Do whatever you want, not what she wants. You’re free of that hold now.”

You’re free of that hold now...

No, I’m not. I still have to live with myself. Gus went to the main door and shut it. He turned the lock, causing heads to snap in his direction.

Gus locked the other doors, not responding to glares or questions. *If she won’t leave this area, I*

can lock us in and keep her alive that way. I'm not giving her up.

“What are you doing? You can't keep us in here.”

Gus scowled at Timmy. “I'm keeping them out, get it? No one in here is sick so far and we have food.”

Timmy thought about it. “Let me go get my dad and brother first.”

“No. We're on lockdown.”

Everyone tensed for his whining.

Cathy shut it down. “You're an Eagle, boy. They come before you do.”

Timmy blushed to the roots of his hair.

Cathy burst out laughing, edge of fear shoved aside by amusement. She could feel the disapproval radiating from the adults in the mess, but she didn't care. *What good is it to be alive if I never have fun?*

6

“This is wrong.” Walking next to Candy, Tracy felt incredibly small, but not in a sexy way. She was terrified of being responsible for the pregnant woman. Tracy forced bravado into her voice. “You know this is wrong.”

“Yes. Come on.” Charlie led Tracy and Candy to the elevator. Not hearing normal activities was frightening. So were empty halls and checkpoints, but the absence of thoughts was terrifying. It was as if almost all the descendants were gone.

Tracy pulled her coat tighter, already cold.

Candy unzipped hers, starting to sweat. She was looking forward to the drafty passages below, but not being alone while they waited. When Charlie had come for them, she'd been thrilled to be included at all. Now, she was just worried. If Conner thought she should hide, it meant things were about to get bad. Again.

Charlie and Conner had felt trouble hit while caring for the animals and made the choice to protect their mates first and then help everyone else. It was wrong to sneak their women away, but the boys had agreed the unborn babies were more important than Eagle rules.

Both females entered the elevator with a dozen questions they were afraid to ask.

When they were inside, Charlie handed a bag of supplies to Tracy, then kissed her cheek. "Stay down until one of us come for you."

The doors shut before Tracy could protest again. Conner had insisted they be quarantined because they were pregnant. Charlie hadn't gotten an answer from either parent, or Adrian. His own mental gifts weren't functioning right, but he still felt the mental panic and heard the same on the radio. Conner was checking on the camp kids now, while Charlie got their women to safety.

"I need help in the infirmary!"

Morgan's scared voice over the radio got Charlie moving. He planned to wear himself out helping now, so his mom would forgive him for not

calling the alarm when he'd first sensed trouble. He'd made another selfish choice. Now, he had to atone for it.

“What can I do?” Charlie brought up his personal shield as he entered the infirmary.

“Over there!” Morgan pointed with his syringe. “Help him!”

Charlie hurried to the convulsing little boy. “Wallace! Can you hear me?” Charlie sent a thin blast of healing orbs. “He’s burning up!”

“They all are!” Morgan injected Brea’s arm, then rotated to Darren, switching needles with practiced actions. He filled the syringe and injected the shivering boy. “I don’t know what else to do for them!”

They had to shout to be heard over puking and moaning.

No coughs, Charlie noted. High fevers, no rash... Grant’s skin is red. He has blisters. It looks like a burn... Charlie went to Grant and examined him through his shield. “He looks different.”

Harry, hurrying by with a bag of waste for the growing pile by the door, nodded toward the rear of the infirmary. “The fishing crew are red too, with blisters. I think they were exposed first.”

Kyle glanced up from Jennifer’s cot. “That means it’s airborne... Right?”

“Unknown, but if we’re lucky, it’s in the air up there, not down here.” Harry got another empty bag.

“We have to get this boat moving.” Charlie gathered his energy to work on Grant. “We need our captain.”

“I’ve tried.” Morgan dumped a case of dirty needles into the compartment for disposal and went to the cabinet for a fresh box. “All we can do is bring down the fever so they don’t fry. Everything else is up to them until Tonya figures out what it is. She and Kenn are in the lab now.”

Charlie tried anyway, but he didn’t give Grant as big a blast as he’d intended. If Morgan was right, he needed to save his strength to help those who became critical.

Grant moaned as the heat subsided. “Away... Get away...”

Charlie stared, fear growing. “He’s delirious. He can’t sail.”

Tim pointed at the rear of the infirmary. “The entire boat crew is here, other than Claire and Gus.”

Charlie tried to think. “Gus is in the mess. He was off duty last night. I haven’t seen Claire.”

“She’s in Doug’s cabin. They spent the night together.” Ray entered the infirmary, stomach churning. “I just came from that deck. Doug’s sick. So is she; she said it’s a cold. She’s caring for him.” Ray began recording names in his book, working on accounting for everyone. “The boss and Marc are ill too. They need someone to care for them.”

Conner stuck his head in. “Guards and den mothers are bringing a bunch of camp kids! All of them are sick. Clear room.”

Morgan glanced around, then began issuing orders to the three stunned men under his command. “Double them up if they’re small. Start moving people and get bags ready. Try to catch the messes. We don’t have time to clean.”

“Medic!”

Kyle’s scream chilled them all.

Charlie ran toward the top Eagle, gathering energy to stop Jennifer’s convulsions.

“Help!”

Nearby, Wallace’s body jumped out of Harry’s hands.

Morgan sucked in air, begging his brain to wake him from this nightmare. He hit the radio button. “All hands in the infirmary!”

There was no answer.

“Medic!” Ray pointed at Nathan. “He just stopped breathing!”

“Oh, lord.”

There was no answer.

Chapter Four

I've Had Enough

1

“**H**ang on. I heard something.” Tracy put a hand on Candy’s wrist. She’d taken the lead since the other woman was largely pregnant. They’d been down here an hour now, looking for a good place to make their den.

A giggle echoed through the crowded cargo area around them.

Tracy frowned. “That was Cody.”

“Is he hiding too?”

Both women winced at Candy’s question. They were hiding to save themselves. Neither of them had given a single thought to the camp kids.

“Let’s make sure they’re covered.”

Candy nodded, following with the flashlight they hadn’t needed yet. Tracy was carrying the rest of their gear.

Molly broke away from the shadows, gun lowering. She’d been watching them for the last few minutes, not sure if she should make contact. “We’re over here.”

Tracy and Candy joined Molly at a storage container. Happy voices echoed from inside.

“Just you two?” Molly didn’t scold the women for hiding, but she couldn’t help the scorn in her

tone. *At least I'm trying to help the kids. These two are only concerned with their own survival.*

Tracy didn't say Charlie and Conner had insisted. She didn't want them to get in trouble too.

Molly grunted. "Are you sick? Feeling bad at all?"

"No." Tracy stepped forward. "We're not joining you. We were looking for a place for ourselves when we heard noises."

Molly relaxed. "Good. Go on about your business then. I'm sure we'll be fine." She ducked into the cargo pod with the kids. Courtney was sleeping while she took the first watch.

Candy and Tracy exchanged a guilty glance.

Candy sighed. "We just got trapped. That was fast."

Tracy sniggered. "Eagle mentality—she's got it."

Candy smiled. She waved at a small stack of lawn chairs and carpeting nearby. "We could make a blind and keep watch, but not have to deal with the kids directly."

"Deal." Tracy put her kit down and went to gather the materials. She felt better already. *Now, if I could just wake up from this nightmare.*

2

"She stopped breathing again!" Jeff knelt to perform CPR.

Adrian put a hand on the man's arm. "Let her go. Three times is enough."

Jeff didn't want to, but he was exhausted. He'd been trying to keep Sabrina alive for an hour, but her body couldn't handle it. He closed her eyelids, shuddering. Jeff hated death up close. He didn't mind if it was a killer or a traitor, but Sabrina had been a sweet girl from Ciemus who hadn't even graduated high school yet. It wasn't fair.

Adrian, Jonny, and Michael shared glances of concern, but they didn't speak. They'd all been quarantined in the lounge for three hours now. Watching Sabrina collapse and not rise had been awful. Their calls for a medic had gone unanswered, but Adrian and Jeff had insisted none of them leave due to possibly contaminating the rest of the ship with whatever Sabrina had.

"Why didn't the medic come?" Martin banged on the door. "Is anyone out there?!"

Jeff joined Adrian in the corner as Martin vented his frustration. They had stopped him from leaving right after Sabrina collapsed by using calm words and rule reminders, but he was reaching a new level of panic now that she'd died. Some rookies didn't do well under stress.

Adrian leaned in. "We need to get rid of the body."

Jeff winced at Adrian's whisper, though he'd been thinking the same thing. "I should stay away from everyone too. I touched her a lot."

Adrian sighed. "If she had something contagious, everyone in this room is infected. When a crew comes by, we'll get her down to the

morgue.” *She can keep Seth and Becky company.* Adrian shoved that thought away, hating himself.

Jeff made sure no one else could hear him. “I might know what it is.”

“Me too.” Adrian scanned the room, the people. “Save it for after they sleep, okay? We don’t need more panic.”

Jeff grunted. He certainly didn’t want to restrain anyone right now. He needed a nap. Battling death was exhausting.

Adrian considered it. “That’s a good idea. It might help the others stay calm.” Adrian hadn’t covered outbreaks in any of his notebooks. There hadn’t been time, but he also hadn’t known how to handle most of them except by government standards and that wasn’t used in Safe Haven. Now, he wished he’d spent more time on it. Unless Angela had filled in that gap, they were about to be wiped out and there was little that magic could do to stop it.

Jeff sank on one of the couches and stretched out. He began to doze almost immediately.

“How can you sleep right now?!” Martin glowered.

“He’s tired.” Adrian took the couch in the far corner, watching for trouble. He didn’t feel ill, but Sabrina hadn’t seemed ill before she collapsed either. The only sign had been a nasty sunburn. By the time he’d figured it out, they were under lockdown. He’d sent several radio messages in code to move the ship, but no one was responding, and

the boat hadn't moved. *I'm giving it another hour and then I'll go do it.* If not for the lockdown, he would have gone already.

Wake me when you're ready. It might take two of us to sail this ship.

I will. Adrian was glad Jeff was here. He could be counted on in an emergency and this definitely qualified.

3

"I'm not qualified." Tonya was shocked by the huge pile of vials and bags that Kenn was putting in the cooler or laying by the machine they'd just gotten started. "I'll never be able to identify it. I don't know what I'm searching for!"

"Just sort and organize; keep the samples from spoiling. I'll get you something to test for." Kenn exited, flipping the latch. *Please, don't be dumb enough to open it for anyone while I'm away.* Kenn keyed his radio. "All able-bodied people roaming the ship need to come to the lab right now. You have information I need. For everyone else, please give me another hour. The medics are narrowing things down. Please hang on."

"Help!" His radio crackled with Panaji's panicking voice. "Need medic in shower!"

Kenn braced for a garble of responses and was disappointed to hear only a few worried, exhausted replies. He got his notebook out and waited, hoping

at least a few unaccounted-for people were healthy enough to help.

The elevator dinged.

Steps echoed on the stairs.

Relief entered Kenn's heart, crushing the darkness as ten people came toward him. Half of them were still in their work clothes from the night before. The rest had dressed hastily, judging from untucked shirts, tilted holsters, and wild hair. The Eagles were clad in full gear, but it felt like that wasn't enough for this situation.

Kenn motioned Ralph back toward the steps. "Go help in the shower." Kenn waved the others closer. "Welcome to hell, ladies and gentlemen. Here's what I need and why..."

"Why are you in charge?" Monica had come with the others, unwilling to hide.

"Everyone else is out of commission." Kenn kept his tone even. "Also, *we're* in charge, not *me*. Ray found the boss's notebook on outbreaks. It has notes from both leaders and was taped to two medical books. I just gave those to Tonya. She'll use it as a guide for testing the samples. We follow Angela's notebook. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded, relieved she had left instructions. None of them knew what to do.

Noises echoed as the infirmary doors opened; grief and fear followed the camp members who were going back to the cabins for more ill kids. Kendle's ghost ship story came to several minds, bringing more fear.

“Why are you avoiding the leadership floor?” Monica would never trust Kenn. “Shouldn’t we go there first?”

Kenn grunted. “I want to, more than anything, but that’s a hot spot. Until we have gear and a plan for what we find, we’re staying away.”

“What if they need help?” Monica didn’t want to let it go. She hated Kenn.

Kenn gestured. “Look around! The herd needs us first. Angela wants it this way. You know that.” Kenn sat in the chair he’d placed by the lab and opened the red notebook. “First, stop. Stay still for a minute. Your brain and body are pumping adrenaline. You need that, but the rush can cause you to make hasty choices. Sit down; breathe. You can do this. You *will* do this.”

Kenn inhaled, following the advice. He planned to follow every step. “Do it.”

Ding!

Everyone glanced at the elevator, drawn by the noise.

Debra marched toward them, relief breaking over her face. She gestured. *Was on the top deck. Took time to get here.*

Kenn motioned to an empty couch on his right. She was a descendant. They needed that skill. “Did you catch it so far?”

Debra scanned the book. *Been listening to you since you made the call to shut us down.*

“Good.” Kenn took another minute to let the others finish their breathing break. He had flipped

through the suggestions and knew this would be the last peaceful moment they all got for a while. Dropping from exhaustion wouldn't count.

“Okay, let's do this.” Kenn cleared his throat. “Step one is to identify the method of transmission. Start with your command group.” Kenn paused to glance around. “Is anyone here feeling sick?”

“No, but I've had contact with two bodies.” Kendle came around the corner. “Sorry for being late. I waited until the elevator was empty in case it's contagious.” She stopped ten feet away, clearly still doing that.

Kenn resumed reading. “If three people or more fall ill at the same time, it is an outbreak. Those people were likely exposed at roughly the same time. If more people fall ill after contact with the first, assume it is a contagion. If they do not, still assume it is a contagion. Now is not the time to take chances. Lock down my camp.”

People gave Kenn approving glances for doing that already.

Kenn opened his personal notebook in his free hand and read from it. “We have sixteen people sick now, with six dead. We'll watch those numbers. Right now, the symptoms are a high fever, throwing up, explosive diarrhea and exhaustion. A few have nasty sunburns. There are no cou—”

“Wait.” Kendle took a step closer. “What do you mean by nasty sunburn?” She held out her arm. “Is it like this, just brighter?”

Kenn stared, throat going dry. “Identical.”

“Radiation sickness.” Travis leaned away even though Kendle wasn’t ill.

“Radiation poisoning.” Kendle knew the names now. “Acute.”

Travis scowled. “From where? We didn’t see a blast.”

Kenn ran through their route for the last week. “It would have to be concentrated...”

Kendle pointed toward a porthole. “The debris fields we’ve been pushing through.”

Monica paled. “We’re between two of those now.”

Kendle didn’t want to panic anyone, but she was certain what they were dealing with now. “We have to move this ship.”

“Stop. Wait.” Kenn pointed at the notebook. “There’s a note here not to skip anything, even if we know what it is. It also lists outbreaks below with more detailed instructions for each type.”

Everyone waited for Kenn to read the next part, except Kendle. She sank down on the floor. “Before you get rolling, you should know there’s no one on the top deck at all now that Debra and I are here.”

Kenn’s stomach tightened. “Not even the bridge?”

“No. The entire boat team is down, except for Gus. He’s in the mess, guarding against people who want to loot. He wasn’t up there last night either; he was off duty.”

Kenn sighed. “We’ll fast-track this. We have sick people of all ages and both genders. There’s no

commonality yet, but the book says to find one, that it always exists. What do all our victims have in common? Locations?”

Kendle shuddered as ugly memories flashed. *I still miss you, Dawn*. “Were they all on the top deck during a storm?”

Her horror story returned to everyone’s thoughts and increased the production of adrenaline.

Kenn read the list of victims. “Almost all our wild kids are sick.”

Kendle frowned. “Boss made them go topside to let go of their anger.”

“We know the boat crew and fishing team were up there.” Monica skimmed her notes from the last shift. “What about Jennifer?”

“She went with Kyle on that last run.” Kendle was a bit jealous of that action. She’d missed out on the fun to scrub pudding while the camp pointed and laughed. “Maybe they were exposed there.”

“And longer or stronger, because all of that team is on the edge of death, including Marc and the boss. Don’t spread that around.” Kenn added the warning mostly for Debra, who was a rookie.

“Not Adrian.” James frowned. “He isn’t sick at all. I heard him in the lounge a little while ago.”

Monica pointed. “Kendle has been up there for hours. She should be sick too.”

“Kyle isn’t sick either. We have three anomalies.” Kenn wrote it down. “What about the Eagles? There are at least five.”

“We have rotating shifts.” Greg had been point man overnight. He’d helped carry those first ten ill people to the infirmary when it started. “Not all of us have pulled top deck duty yet.”

“Okay, so that leaves camp people for the demographics. Few of them are sick. I count...four.” Kenn scowled. “The camp has been avoiding the top deck for the last two days because of stormy seas. They couldn’t take the rocking without throwing up.”

“What’s the next part say?” Kendle was hoping Angela had it covered.

Kenn continued to read. “Once you identify the source, get away from it, remove it or seal it off.”

“We know we’re going to move the ship. We’ll find the Geiger counters, so we’ll know when we reach a clear area. Then we’ll drop anchor until the boat team can take back over. Agreed?” Greg felt like they should hurry.

So did Monica. “Agreed.”

“What’s next?” Kendle also tried to move them along.

“It says to identify the contagion. While running tests, eliminate contaminates—garbage, vomit, blood, clothes, gear, bedding. It all has to be burned to ash. Pipes have to be flushed and a bleach-based cleaning has to cover every inch of the camp. Items that cannot be sanitized must be burned.”

“What about the people?” Monica thought about the infirmary. “We’ve had deaths. More are coming.”

Kenn skimmed and flipped the page. "...once we identify the contagion, go to rear of notebook for treatment by disease and complications list." Kenn flipped to the rear, not sure if he was hoping to find it or not.

Radiation Poisoning!

The red letters gave Kenn a chill. It was underlined. Kenn held the book up and open so everyone could view it.

Explosive bloody diarrhea is a sign of coming death if the symptoms start in the first hour.

If symptoms appear in 2-3 hours, the dose of gys was high.

If the symptoms appear 6-12 hours, and stop within 24 hours, the dose was sublethal-probably 1-2gys.

(1 gy = 100 rads)

0-1gy-extreme flu symptoms

1-2gy-blood cells die, bleeding from orifices

2-3gy-turns the skin red with peeling and blisters

3+gy-Infections and hemorrhaging

Treatments-used in combination, for 30-60 days at least, and as much as 2 years after the exposure.

1. Potassium iodide-radioactive particles come out in the urine

- 2. Prussian blue-particles come out in the feces**
- 3. Give diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid-it binds to plutonium, americium and curium.**
- 4. Draw blood every three hours to check for lymphocyte white blood count**
- 5. Preemptive Antibiotics**
- 6. Treat fever and vomiting as needed**
- 7. Watch for low blood pressure, seizures, anemia.**
- 8. Provide huge amounts of Fluids, electrolytes, and plasma.**

***Amount of exposure is more dangerous than length; if levels are above 10gy, death results in minutes.**

Kenn began copying it onto a blank page in his notebook. “Everyone needs to make a copy and give one to the medics. We still don’t have a copy machine that works.”

Pens flew across pages.

Kenn kept reading while he finished the bottom row of the chart. “Radiation sickness can be passed in tiny particles that come out in sweat, feces, vomit, saliva. We can also spread particles through face-to-face sneezes or coughs. *Treat this outbreak as if were a contagion.*”

Kenn flipped to the cleaning page, now understanding why there was more on aftercare than treatment. The chart was ugly. “Pipes have to be

flushed to get rid of particles in the sludge or they will become radioactive. We need protection gear from the cargo hold and a crew to take bodies to the incinerator. Arguments with that choice?" Kenn assumed an ethical discourse would come next, slowing them up even more.

No one spoke.

Kenn cleared his throat, caught off guard. "Um, okay. I am sorry for it. It says not to dump close to camp, but burying it creates a hot spot anyway. ...and I can't just toss them overboard. I won't."

People shifted impatiently, wanting him to move on.

"Next, we make copies... Damn it! We need copies of the rules on the next page given to every group in quarantine and to the cleaning crew. Basically, it all has to be bagged, then burned. After that, pipes get flushed and treated, and we watch for new illnesses. If any happen, we clean those areas again, then compare details to figure out where the second outbreak came from or if it means we didn't identify the contagion correctly." Kenn put the notebook on the end table so the others could flip back to finish copying the treatment chart. "We need a boat team, a delivery crew, a cleaning crew, a body crew. We'll split it evenly. I'm on the body crew."

Debra pointed at the next page.

Monica read it aloud. "Move all infected to one area and allow their loved ones to stay with them. They were contaminated while bringing that person

to the medic anyway. Now you can study them for signs of contagion without having to lock them away from their friend or family. It also provides an extra set of hands for nursing the sick. Please note this only applies to illnesses that are not airborne.” Kenn paused. “Okay, so we’re going to send everyone to the infirmary.” Kenn scanned the dozen faces. “Is there enough room?”

Greg shrugged. “I doubt it, but the lounge down the hall can be used too. There’s a paneled wall we can remove to enlarge it. It will also give the medics access to another set of bathrooms and sinks.”

“I’ll make an announcement on these things in a few minutes to keep people calm.” Kenn made another note. “Pick your team. Write it on this page so we can keep track of each other. You should add it to your books too.”

“Books! Thank god!” Tonya’s voice inside the office told them she’d found the two testing books.

Kenn stifled a yawn, feeling fresh panic coming from the infirmary. “Someone just died.”

“It was Nathan.” Kendle punched the floor. “Damn it! He was a good guy!”

Kenn went to Kendle and pulled her to her feet. “Stay mad. I don’t have time for your tears.”

Kendle jerked away from him. “Bastard.”

“That’s better.” He moved toward the corridor as the others resumed discussing teams and plans. Kenn keyed his radio. “I’ll be making an announcement in a few minutes. Let your neighbor know we have a couple answers while we’re

gathering the medications we need. Hang in there while we go to the cargo area for the supplies we don't have up here yet. We're working on it."

There were no radio answers.

Kenn gestured toward the stairs, now talking to his new team. "We'll go to the cargo hold together for the gear we need. We can stop by the showers on that floor and clean, then change. After, we'll split up for the jobs we chose." Kenn led the way, hating to leave the lab unguarded. There just wasn't a choice. Tonya was armed with his rowdy kid and a loaded 9mm, plus five mags. Her cats were also in the corner, sleeping. She would be fine. Everyone else was in grave danger.

4

"Unlock my cell!"

"I don't have that authority." Lou watched for an opening to grab the hostage back. Katie had gotten too close to the cell, allowing Kronus to take her prisoner. "I'm delivery only."

Kronus banged Katie's gun on the bars. "Then go get your boss!"

Lou staggered toward the stairs, still stunned at not finding any guards at their posts. "Help!"

He ran to the next deck and burst through the door to the lounge, the first room he thought would be occupied. "He took Katie captive!"

Everyone in the lounge was startled onto their feet, hands reaching for a defense.

“Calm down. Tell me what happened.” Adrian put a hand on Lou’s shaking, sweaty shoulder as he tucked his gun back into the holster.

“Kronus!” Lou blinked, trying to focus. “We took food to the brig. He took her gun! He’s holding her hostage!”

Adrian frowned. “Who’s on duty there?”

“No one!”

“What does he want?” Jeff began checking the gear he had with him.

“The boss, but she’s sick!” Lou groaned. “Ray said she can’t even get out of bed to puke.”

Adrian’s heart thumped. *I should be taking care of her.*

Jeff spun Adrian around. “You should be taking care of her people, you jackass! Get to the brig and handle that situation like Angela would. That’s an order, from an Eagle.”

Adrian grinned. “Cool.” He ran into the hall and down the stairs, followed by Lou.

Martin fled while the door wasn’t guarded.

Jeff shut the door behind them. “I’d rather be quarantined with a body than those two.”

The others in the lounge tried to chuckle, but it was hard. Sabrina’s jacket covered corpse was behind the couch. They couldn’t see it, but they knew she was there.

“Does Adrian need help?” Michael felt bad for hiding while people were dying, and bad guys were attacking.

Jeff snorted. “No. He’s gifted that way. We’ll wait for the next announcement.”

Jonny was relieved. The run with Kendle to Market Town had convinced him he didn’t want to be in the front for the action. He didn’t mind helping, but he didn’t need to be first into the line of fire anymore. He’d grown up.

Jeff locked the door, hoping Adrian wouldn’t come back here after he resolved the brig situation. “Maybe he’ll trip and fall overboard.”

5

“Don’t trip and fall overboard.” Ozzie warned the team for a third time as they reached the top landing in stiff wind. “It’s slick from the spray.” They’d just finished changing into protective suits and come up to move the ship.

Salty spray soaked their suits and blew debris over the deck. The dark clouds offered little encouragement as the sound of water added to the bad vibes. The slapping noises echoed like death knocking.

Whitney scanned and found familiar faces that no one would get to say goodbye to now. “Men down!”

The bodies on the deck were guards who hadn’t been transferred below yet. Their skin glowed bright red; blood was dried to their eyes and cheeks. None of them moved.

“Come on. We have to get the ship moving.” Ozzie went up the stairs first.

The empty bridge gave them all goosebumps. This area was never allowed to be without a captain.

Salty rot floated through... Debra realized her visor wasn't shut all the way. She snapped it into place.

“Once we establish control, we'll work on moving guards below and putting up plastic.” Ozzie went to the wheel, waddling in the bulky suit. “Do not remove your gear, for any reason.”

“Hey.” Whitney pointed. “We forgot about the other boat.”

Debra, Whitney, and Ozzie stared at the UN ship through the bulky visors, not sure what to do. They didn't have a crew to spare to sail that one, but they couldn't hook it up by themselves either.

“Angie can send a team back for it.” Ozzie made the choice, pointing. “Take a station and we'll go over the notes the team left.”

“Pam was able to talk to Ray for a minute. It's on autopilot as soon as we hit the button.” Whitney scanned. “There.”

The three people took their stations, none of them enjoying the sight of the ocean around them. The foggy steam on the water implied something bad. They didn't know if it was natural, but it reinforced the theory that they were in a contaminated area.

Debra turned on the Geiger counter. It beeped and crackled rapidly and didn't stop.

“Here we go.” Whitney pushed the button.

The computer activated, screen coming to life. More monitors flashed on, illuminating the team. Noises sounded from the ship, loud and rough.

All the team could do was hope that was normal.

The sound of the anchor lifting was their first clue it was.

“That’s good, right?”

Ozzie shrugged at Whitney. “No idea.”

The boat shuddered as the engines came to life, immense paddles slowly turning through the debris littered water in choppy clunks and clanks.

“Come in Safe Haven!” The scratchy ship radio blared, making them all jump.

“Does anyone see the boat?”

“Safe Haven, come in!”

“The ship sank! They’re all dead.”

“Come in, Safe Haven, please!”

Ozzie flipped the radio off, unable to take listening to it. “Don’t answer any calls from land.”

The lights dimmed as the engines strained, then burned brighter. The ship started to inch forward, drawing subdued cheers from below.

Debris smacked into the hull.

Ozzie studied the path in front of them, heart pounding. If they came across something big, he would have to disengage the autopilot to steer around it. Ray had given him instructions, but Ozzie hoped he didn’t have to try. All they needed was a clear area to anchor in until the captain healed.

*Please don't take long. My heart can't stand this
terror.*

Chapter Five
It's A Mess

1

“**H**e had a weak heart. There was nothing else I could do.” Morgan wiped his bleary eyes on a clean towel, blinking to stop the burning. They were using harsh chemicals to clean the cots between uses.

Harry grunted comfort, covering the little body. The boy hadn't lasted long once the fever hit. He'd gone into cardiac arrest and nothing had brought him back, not even Morgan's magic.

Harry went to change and wash his hands, emotions in chaos. The medics were wearing the fronts of scrubs, trying to change them between deaths to prevent transferring the contagion. The bin was now overflowing. Body fluids and hair littered the floors and cots, the victims. Harry was glad the smell had faded for his nose. When he'd first walked in, he'd spit up bile. His throat was still burning from it.

Morgan swept the infirmary, counting covered bodies. “We're losing the fight.”

“Kenn said medications are coming soon.” Harry didn't have more hope to give. He was almost out.

Morgan went to the next bed to check on Wallace.

Eerie groans and dry gags ripped through the medics and volunteers like stings.

A fresh wail from the rear drew flinches.

“Code blue!” Morgan began CPR on Wallace with robotic motions. None of them had returned. He was losing hope.

Charlie ran in, holding up a bag. “Medication and dosage instructions!” Bleach and vomit battled to be the stronger odor in his nose through the surgical mask.

The medics ignored him, trying to save Wallace’s life. Next to him, Darren went into convulsions.

Charlie hurried to help, taking the bag along. He shot cooling energy into the boy, horrified by the number of bodies.

Darren relaxed, muttering about a shadow only he could see.

Charlie emptied the bag on the next cot, one of the few still open.

Harry sidestepped a puddle of vomit on the way to the waste bin. There was no time to clean the room or people, only their hands.

The infirmary held fifty cots, nearly all of them occupied or filthy. They needed a cleaning crew in here, but people were scared to enter. Morgan didn’t expect real help for a while. That terrified him.

The doors opened again to admit Greg and Kendle. They were carrying Claire.

Charlie sorted the medications into piles and got three clipboards while the new arrivals found a place to put their patient. “Each pile goes with a clipboard. Read the notes before you grab a bottle.” Charlie copied it. The medics didn’t have time.

“He’s gone.” Harry walked away from Wallace, too emotionally worn to shed a tear.

Morgan covered the body this time. “Read the instructions to us as you copy it, rookie. We’ll decide who needs it first.”

Charlie read, sorted, and copied while the body team left to bring in another patient. They were handling live bodies first, corpses second. Charlie didn’t see Kenn. He assumed the man was removing bodies from each place the team cleared. Kenn was also sending healthy people to uncontaminated areas for supply deliveries. “Okay, if they have red skin, like a sunburn, they get a double dose. I’m loading those syringes now. Put their names on the clipboard so we know who got their meds. I’ll add the times.”

The medics were grateful to have a calm voice calling out instructions, but they also resented it. Where had that calm voice been three hours ago when their kids started dying? Morgan wiped his hand down blood-splattered scrubs, fury giving him a second burst of energy.

Charlie felt it, but there wasn’t a satisfactory answer. Any outbreak had casualties. The fact that it was mostly children hurt even more.

Charlie was glad his mate and child were hidden below. It gave him the strength to keep loading syringes even when Darren started convulsing again. *It's not me or one of mine.* He refused to think about his mom and dad. He knew he couldn't handle that.

In the corner, Kyle used the tiny bit of energy he'd regained from resting with his head on Jennifer's hand. Dim blue light glowed around her feverish body.

No one noticed.

2

"You can't handle me." Kronus bared his teeth. "Go get your boss."

Adrian settled onto a stool across from the cell. "She's too sick to come down here. You'll have to wait until she's better." Adrian tugged his plain brown coat together and zipped up. He missed his Eagle jacket, but it didn't feel right to wear it.

Kronus smacked the bars again. "You liar! A byzan cannot be infected."

"Don't know where you got your information, but she's been sick before. Byzan are not immune. Neither are you." Adrian pointed at Katie. "She's sick."

Katie nodded, lids drooping. "I told him. He doesn't believe we have an outbreak." The food she'd been carrying decorated the floor in front of

the cell where she was standing against the bars. Kronus kept a tight arm around her neck.

“Yes, he does. He wants to use it to his advantage.” Ramer was furious. Locked in the next cell over, there was nothing he could do to remove the arm from Katie’s throat. Kronus’s face was red, eyes growing wild. He was late for something. Ramer didn’t know what it was yet, but Kronus had been getting twitchier every time he glanced at the clock on the faded white wall. He was in the cell where two murders had happened. No one had told him that.

“Let her go!” Lou was furious. “She needs to go to the infirmary for medication!”

“If she dies, that’s a murder charge. Angela will let us hang you.” Adrian settled against the wall, brow up. “If you need something from her, and we both know you do or you would have waited for her to be ready to talk, I doubt killing one of her favorite people will help.”

Kronus let go of Katie, blowing out a frustrated sigh. “I want to talk to your boss!”

“Pray she heals up so you can.” Adrian kicked the cell shut. “Guess you’d have to pray to your friends at this point.”

Kronus dropped the gun onto the floor. “I’m part of the game now. They won’t help me.”

“Maybe you should try to convince them.” Adrian waved Lou to take Katie to the infirmary. “If Angela dies here, she can’t ascend and take her place.”

“She is not sick!”

Adrian tired of the game. He used his reserve energy to shove into Kronus’s mind. He flashed images from Ray’s visit to the leadership floor. “She is more than sick. She’s dying, but we have to medicate everyone else first, per her orders.”

Kronus paled. “But we are immune...”

“Not here.” Adrian locked the cell. “Keep the gun and shoot yourself if you start feeling sick. We don’t have enough supplies for you.”

Adrian took the guard post on the jail, not looking at Ramer, Vicky, or Stanley. He could feel how relieved they were that someone was out here keeping things under control. The other prisoners had changed into warmer jumpsuits and made their cots with the thicker blankets. Kronus had left his items in the bag. He didn’t plan on cooperating. “I’ll let you all out when Kenn makes his announcement. We need all the hands we can get.”

“Not me.” Ramer dropped back onto the cot and laid down. “If you open my door, I’m going straight to the infirmary for drugs. Nothing will stop me, short of a gunshot.”

Adrian sighed. “Okay. You can watch our guest and radio me if there’s trouble.”

“That, I can do.” Ramer heard the radio fall into the cell, but he didn’t rush to pick it up. He didn’t want to take a chance on grabbing Adrian, on forcing him to open the door. Ramer wanted a fix more than he wanted to live. That meant he needed to stay right where he was.

“I’m proud of you.”

Ramer grimaced at Adrian’s words. “I’m not. I’ve got a monkey on my back and even an outbreak isn’t enough to override it. I need help.”

3

“I need help!”

Greg and Kendle hurried over to Kenn. He was bringing Doug to the infirmary, but the big man was dwarfed by Doug’s heavy body.

Doug, barely conscious, tried to propel himself forward.

Kenn steered while the others supported Doug’s weight. Together, the trio got him onto the elevator.

Kenn struggled for breath as it went down. He didn’t try to talk yet, but he used his hands in code.
Update?

Greg frowned. “Two more deaths in the infirmary; one death in the camp cabins. Gloria was on the top deck two days in a row, sunbathing. She stayed up there to watch the storm come in. She had red skin. According to Angela’s notebook, that means she got a higher dose.”

Kenn added it to his mental list. *Okay. Next?*

“Adrian got Kronus to stand down for now, but we’re monitoring for more tricks. He wants to talk to Angela.” Greg lowered his voice. “He doesn’t believe she’s sick.”

“He’s back burner for now.” Kenn sucked in more air. “I feel us moving. Boat crew report any trouble?”

“Not that we know of. Our gophers should be here soon for another load of supplies. They’re hitting all cabins right now. That’s how we found Gloria.” Greg braced against the elevator ride. “She lives alone.”

The elevator opened, letting them out. The corridor outside the infirmary now held patients in cots, as well as in the opposite corridor.

“They’re rearranging while James removes the wall panel. It’ll be cluttered for another hour.” Kenn put Doug on the only empty cot, then went into the infirmary to let Morgan know he had more patients.

The quiet gave him chills, as did the dozen covered bodies. The only noise was the medics harsh breathing as they worked on Grant. All the other patients were unconscious.

Kenn scanned again. “Is the medicine working on any of them?”

“Too soon to tell.” Morgan filled another syringe. “We got the sunburnt people dosed with both medications. We’re dosing the milder patients now.”

Kenn frowned deeper. “Why are they all out?”

“The fever reducer makes them drowsy. Sleep is good, for most of them.” Morgan rubbed his aching wrist.

“Make a hole!”

Kenn moved aside so Charlie and Conner could enter, bringing Panaji between them.

Charlie panted. “He was in the stairwell. Think he was trying to make it here.”

They didn’t have an empty cot.

Kenn went to a covered body and lifted it, spine screaming. “Use this one.”

Harry hurried over to change the soiled sheets so Panaji could be laid down.

“Where do you want me?” Jeff, just making it here, joined Kenn. He hoped the man understood he was worth more than a messenger or body mule.

“We’re all better than that.” Kenn grunted. “But I get your point. Take duty over the lab. We need those results.”

“We need the boss.” Jeff meant it.

“Yeah, well, unless you can heal her, we’ll have to stick to the book she left.” Kenn hated his sharp tone. He couldn’t help it. He was scared and covering.

Greg understood. “Any chance she’ll return soon?”

“Until we clear the leadership deck, we won’t know. She might even be dead.” Kenn headed for the incinerator again, wishing the nightmare would end. *Someone please wake me up now. I’ve had enough.*

“I feel fine. We’re all fine. We should go help.” Zack stood between the cabins, frowning. The Eagle floor was empty except for the four of them. “I’m going to the infirmary.”

The passages were normal. The power was on, but it still felt dangerous. The Eagles had stayed in their cabins because they’d been told to do so. They were good at following orders, but it was obvious they were needed elsewhere.

“To make sure your boys aren’t there?” Allison smiled in comfort to let him know she wasn’t being snarky. Allison wondered if wearing the heavy black Eagle outfit was painful for Zack. His ribs were still healing.

Zack gave a curt nod. “Also the boss. We should have heard from her by now.”

All of them had been thinking it.

Moans echoed over the radio, again, drawing attention. Things were getting worse.

Ian turned toward his closet. “Let me get my gear.”

“I have surgical masks in my kit.” Shawn tossed it to Zack.

Zack frowned as Shawn shut the door to his cabin. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

Shawn stared at the letter in his hand, trying to make a choice. Missy had left this note on his chest.

Terrible things are coming. I’m safe. Please don’t tell anyone where we are. We can’t be without protection.

On the bottom was a list of kids and where they were hiding. Shawn put the letter in his pocket.

The ship creaked, walls dimming. Their ride wasn't happy.

“Come on! Let's go!”

Zack's anxious voice drew Shawn's attention this time. *I know where my girl is. Zack needs the same relief.* Shawn smacked the door. “Two minutes. Stop yelling or you'll add to the panic.”

“Yeah. My bad.” Zack swallowed the fear as best he could. He went to the main hall to stand watch.

Ian joined him first, geared up for a firefight.

Zack didn't tell him to change. Before it was all over, they might need that setup for everyone still healthy enough to enforce laws. Outbreaks did crazy things to people after just a few days. If it went longer, deaths unrelated to the illness were likely to happen.

“Hey.”

Zack spun around, gun coming out.

Quinn fled back into Kendle's cabin. “I'm sorry! I didn't know you had a thing for her!”

Ian put a hand on Zack's wrist, pushing the gun down. He deftly took the weapon while Zack stared in shock.

“I almost shot him.” Zack tried to think and came up blank.

“I know.” Ian kept the weapon, but he was sure Zack had a standby. “Eagle rule three G?”

Zack struggled to think through the sense of doom. “Uh... See it before you fire.”

“Concentrate on that for two minutes. Then I’ll return your weapon.”

Zack frowned as he realized Ian had taken his gun and he hadn’t known. “See it before I fire...”

Ian turned from Zack’s mutters, not surprised by the reaction from a senior man. His sons were in direct danger this time. It had to be an awful feeling.

Quinn peered around the doorframe. “Can I come out now?”

Ian grunted. “Get dressed first. It’s the wrong mood for nipples.”

Quinn gawked, openmouthed. “What?”

Ian came to the door. “We’ve lost communication with most of the descendants. People are sick, dying. Get dressed and do it fast.” Ian scanned the room, determined how the pair had spent the night, then turned his back so he could keep an eye on Zack.

“Where’s Kendle?” Quinn hurried to find his clothes. He yanked a sock from the curtain.

“Body crew.” Ian wanted him to understand how serious it was. “She and Greg went by half an hour ago with someone wrapped in a bloody sheet.”

Quinn winced. “Thanks for the details.”

Ian shrugged. “I didn’t know you two were close.”

Quinn dug his boot out of the bathtub laundry pile. “Neither did I.”

Ian didn’t know what to say. “Shit happens.”

“Exactly!” Quinn paused as a flash of last night hit.

“If you can reach it without using furniture or your hands, I’ll...”

Quinn blushed. He used a chair this time and grabbed his gun from the nail protruding from the vent. “Now where’s my jacket?”

“Hanging from the intercom.” Ian kept an even tone. He had noted what all the cabins were like and other than Kendle’s mess, it was good. The Eagles were neat and organized. “Your belt is under her scrubs.”

“Thanks! ...never gonna live this down.”

Ian stored a chuckle for later when he could enjoy it.

Quinn emerged from the room, pulling the door closed. He stuffed his belt into his pocket and worked on buttoning his shirt as Shawn and Allison came from their cabins.

Zack took his gun from Ian’s secondary holster without explaining.

Shawn didn’t ask. He was still stewing on the note from Missy.

Allison stayed in the rear of the group. She wanted to be out front, but now wasn’t the time for an argument on gender roles. She felt safe being in the company of four males in full gear. She also resented it. She kept an eye on the rear as they walked to the stairs.

“Coming through. Hold your fire.” Charlie struggled up the stairs. “We’re bringing food and orders.”

The Eagles retreated as Charlie and Conner, in full quarantine gear, hauled dollies up the steps. The teens looked like two giant blue and white bugs. It would have been funny in another situation. Here, it was a reminder that lightning had once again struck Safe Haven.

“Why didn’t you use the elevator?” Zack took the dolly from Charlie, surprised the boy had made it up here.

“It needs to be sanitized first. Only use elevators to transport the sick or bodies.” Conner nodded to the senior men, then opened his notebook in slow movements that tortured the waiting people. The bulky gear was hard to work in. “The infirmary needs hands. Kenn said be sure you want that duty. Once you accept it, you can’t leave that area.”

“What is it?” Zack felt panic threatening his sanity again. “How does it spread?”

Quinn paused, only catching one part. “Kenn’s in charge?”

Conner scowled at them. “Tired here, all right? Shut up and listen!”

Everyone retreated at the bark from the normally mild-mannered teen.

Conner waved toward the supplies Charlie was unloading from the two dollies. “Make these last, but share. We haven’t cleared all the cabins yet, so some people have nothing. Full quarantine is in

effect. You should stay where you are and follow radio instructions as they come.” Conner turned the page.

The Eagles waited, frowning at this delay.

“For those who refuse to stay where they are, there are four crews working. One is body removal. Two is cleaning and sanitizing. Three is supply and information delivery. Four is the boat crew. Pick a team, let the delivery crew know, then get to work.” Conner looked up expectantly. “You can talk now.”

Adults frowned at him. Shawn spoke up. “Infirmery, for all of us.”

“Kenn said Eagles would pick that.” Conner flipped to the last page. “The leadership guards are in the infirmery, along with a dozen others from all levels. Kenn thinks they have radiation poisoning. Tests are being run to find out for sure. All gear must be worn to prevent spreading the tiny particles. Your bottom box has two temporary outfits. People without gear will not be let into the infirmery.” Conner looked up again. “Who’s going to be where?”

Allison retreated, gut churning in anticipation of being put on a cleaning crew. “I’ll see if the boat team needs a hand...unless you want me somewhere else.”

Conner thought Allison looked out of place in her jeans and t-shirt, but he didn’t linger on it. “Females should avoid topside due to possible sterile effects.”

Allison shrugged, face going cold. “I already am sterile. I also have cancer. What else could it do to me that the war didn’t?”

The men winced.

Conner wrote it down. “Two more for another crew. Who is it?”

“Me.” Shawn cleared his throat. “I’ll help with delivering, too. I need to stay busy.”

Conner and Charlie smiled. The stairs only rule was wearing them out and Shawn had muscles bigger than theirs combined.

“Body crew.” Quinn had just remembered where Kendle was working. He wanted a minute alone with her to see where they now stood. Waking up alone had caught him off guard. He’d mistakenly left the after-sex conversation for morning.

Conner wrote and talked, getting better at it with all the practice. “Take part of these rations so you don’t drain the resources of where you’re going. Eat something on the way. Everyone is exhausted. They need a break as soon as you can arrange it. Those going to the infirmary need to get suits on now. Everyone else will get gear at the base location by the lab. Go there first.” Conner put his book away. “Sorry. Kenn was specific about us getting the information delivered first. I can answer a couple questions while you change into the gear.”

“Why is Kenn in charge?” Quinn didn’t like it.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Charlie refused to help create drama right now. “Leadership is down—all of them.”

“Even Jennifer?”

Conner’s expression became grim as he answered Allison. “She’s bad off. She may not survive.”

“Keep going.” Zack wanted to be on the move. He tore into the boxes to get the suits, more worried about his sons than he already had been. He was too scared to ask where they were yet.

Ian went over to make sure Zack didn’t damage the supplies or gear.

“How many dead?” Shawn had to know.

Conner lowered his voice. “Eight, with three more on the edge. We have missing people and there are areas and cabins we haven’t checked yet. It’s a mess.”

“The boss?” Allison pushed, hoping a female was still in charge somewhere.

“Alone and sick, so far as we know.” Charlie shrugged, guilty eyes on the floor. “You know the rules. The sheep come first.”

“Perfect time for assassination attempts.” Quinn didn’t trust Kenn to keep anyone safe.

“Yeah, but we don’t have manpower for guards. Kenn’s asking the Eagles to do what they do best and prevent attacks in any manner necessary.” Conner glanced around, sounding like his father in that moment. “No gunfire to spook the herd, for any reason.”

All the Eagles nodded at the order.

Shawn stepped forward. “I’m a senior Eagle. Where does he want me?”

Conner checked the instructions sheet. “We need our missing people found, but those four crews are important. Can you do both?”

“Absolutely.” Shawn paused, facing the fear Zack was hiding from. “Do you know where Pam is?”

Conner shook his head. He looked at Charlie.

Charlie sighed. He hated being the one to tell them. “She’s sick, Shawn. Morgan has her in the infirmary, along with everyone else from the fishing crew. It’s not good for any of them.”

Shawn froze, heart speeding up. *Pam’s sick. Pam needs me!* “Ian! Hold on.” Shawn went to the boxes and took the suit from Ian. “I have a special duty for you. Ever play hide-n-seek?”

“Of course.” Ian kept helping Zack sort the gear.

Shawn leaned down. “Were you good at it?”

Ian scowled. “What’s the damn job?”

Shawn whispered in his ear.

Ian calmed. “I can do that. It will please the boss to know.”

Shawn began donning the bulky suit. “Ian is helping with deliveries; I’m going to the infirmary. We leave in two minutes. The rest of you get going.”

It was almost a relief to have a bossy tone to follow. Not having leadership running things was terrifying for everyone. Without leaders, what would they do?

We’ll save ourselves. Shawn hurried up, determined to do his part before he had to vanish for

his next run. The date had been set last night. In a few days, he was leaving Safe Haven's light. *Until then, I'll stay with Pam.*

Chapter Six
Burn It All

1

“I’m going. You can’t stop me.” Trinity’s hand went to her hip, lids narrowing. “Move this shit or I’ll get mean.”

Gus glanced up from the mess counter. “You want out, you move it.” He’d blocked the entrances with heavy booths and was now enjoying a sandwich.

The other diners stayed in their seats or at the long counter, avoiding both parties.

The cooks kept working. Brittani had just finished the meals for breakfast and was cleaning up to start prepping for lunch. Having to serve individual meals was tiresome and inefficient, but at least people were getting fed. All the cooks were sweaty, wrinkled, and ready for a break. The diners hadn’t helped yet, but Brittani planned to insist on that when this shift got too tired to keep going. The pile of dishes waiting to be cleaned was daunting, but they had successfully fed the entire ship. It was encouraging. The news the delivery boys had shared a bit ago was the opposite.

Awful screeching noises echoed as Trinity began to drag a booth. It moved a few inches and

then stopped, wedged on the booth beside it, as Gus had planned.

The only people clamoring to leave were female, so Gus had designed a block that only females might have a challenge getting through. It wouldn't work on Brittani of course, or any of the female Eagles, but Trinity and Emma weren't Eagles yet. They just wanted out.

"Damn it!" Trinity glared at Gus. "If you don't help me, I'll—"

Trinity stopped as Brittani turned around. The warm room spiked with heat as the women glared at each other.

"We are in a crisis situation. That means there's no guards to protect the food." Brittani pointed. "If we open the kitchen, and you go running out there, people will try to come in. We may all starve."

Trinity pointed. "Mind your own business!"

Brittani crossed arms over her chest. "I'm an Eagle. Everything is my business."

"I'm on the engineering crew!" Trinity tried to make them understand. "I need to get to the bridge. There's no one sailing the boat!"

Brittani glanced at Gus. "Is she right? We could sneak her out as a delivery person."

Gus shrugged, fighting his own urge to run. "Wait until we get the next supply delivery. Kenn said instructions would be provided. He'll ask for posts to be covered then too."

"You're sure?" Trinity and Brittani asked at the same time.

Gus sighed. “No, but it’s in the Eagle training book. I finished it yesterday and passed it on. *The chain of information will be established to all areas central to survival within four hours of the crisis beginning.*”

Brittani glared at Trinity while she spoke to Gus. “It’s been seven hours.”

“I know, but the manual didn’t account for a lot of people dying.” Gus tried not to sound bitter. “I know you guys tuned it out so you don’t have to hurt, but I’m keeping track of Kenn when I can. It’s bad. The dead and dying have to come before the rest of us.”

The explanation made sense to all of them, even Trinity, but she couldn’t help the feeling that time was running out and it wasn’t just because of the illness. “One more hour; then I’m going.”

“Me too.” Emma wanted out of the mess. She hated to be closed in anywhere, especially with Brian. The camp drunk made her nervous.

Gus caved. “If we don’t get instructions in an hour, I’ll be your escort.”

2

“I’ve closed in on the cause, but I can’t prove it yet. The second test is running. It’ll be about four hours.” Tonya put her cheek on her arm to steal a minute of rest.

Kenn let her. They were talking through the open lab door that he had lined with sterile curtains.

She now had a surgical mask on, as did he. Kenn doubted they needed it at this point, but until the cleanup was done and everything was burned, there was still a risk of spreading or catching a mild case of poisoning from the particles.

Kenn saw two camp members in full gear come down the stairs and take the elevator to the infirmary. The medics needed more hands in there, but Kenn couldn't force anyone to do it. He had to let them volunteer.

Beep!

Tonya rose to check on a different batch of tests. "I'll need some help in here soon."

"I'll try." Kenn didn't know anyone else who could handle the equipment except people in the infirmary and they were busy. He shut the glass door, seeing Tonya's cats were now scanning the exit. "I'll be here for a while, organizing."

Tonya nodded.

Dog glanced up at Kenn. *Thank you.*

Kenn frowned. It felt weird to be guarded by Dog. "For what?"

Locking them up. Now I don't have to worry over them. Dog flashed a mocking smile at the two cats approaching the glass door. He moved off at Kenn's heel, ears and tail up.

"Did Angela send you?"

Dog snorted. *I protect the leader.* Dog sneezed on Kenn's ankle.

Kenn jumped back, grimacing. "Nice."

Dog licked his paw and rubbed it over his face.
Not my fault you stink.

“Go away.”

Only if you die.

Kenn rolled his eyes at the eager tone. “Fine. I’m staying here. Can you watch the lab corridor too?”

Of course. Dog went to do a round of his new perimeter, hoping Marc was doing better. Cody had asked him to stay overnight. When the kids had risen, Dog had listened for a minute, then gone roaming to verify the coming danger. Not long after, Adrian had called for his help to guard their leader. Dog had foolishly thought he meant Angela. Upon discovering the situation, Dog had agreed, but reluctantly. He wanted to be with Marc.

Kenn dropped into the plush office chair and leaned against the wall. It had only been seven hours, but he was feeling it. The bugout time where Becky and Samantha had been kidnapped had felt a lot like this. He could feel things slipping through the cracks.

“Is this where we’re supposed to be?”

Kenn sat up as Allison, Ian and Quinn came down the hall. “In here.” Kenn pointed to a stack of gear on the table nearby. The plush conference room held luxuries that were absolutely no help. Only the table and chairs were useful. “Suit up according to what team you picked.”

Instead of bothering him with a lot of questions, the three volunteers did as they were told.

Kenn was impressed that Charlie and Conner were getting the point across about business first. It made things go a lot smoother.

The instruction sheets on top of each pile took a few minutes to read. As they did it, the trio began to get changed.

Allison ducked behind the projection board at the end of the room to give the men privacy. She was eager to get topside and make sure everything was okay with the ship.

Ian edged closer to Kenn. "I'm search and delivery. Do you have a priority?"

Kenn like the idea of Ian being the one to sniff out the missing people. *Every juicy nugget of gossip always finds its way into Ian's path, so this should be easy for him.* "They all have equal value to the boss." Kenn extended a sheet from his book that he had hastily copied with the other hand. "Make sure you can read all that."

Ian scanned, comfortable with Angela's messy scrawl. "I'll cover it. They're probably all together."

Kenn stretched to work out the sore spots. "I think so too, but I haven't had the manpower to verify it. Ray was on the chore, but he's in the infirmary now. If you go, don't forget to deliver the supplies."

"Am I in the right place?" Vicky came up nearby stairs, peering through the dim passages with trepidation.

"In here." Kenn pointed at the tables as Vicky came in. "Gear up based on the crew you chose."

Vicky came to Kenn instead. “Adrian sent me from the brig. He said he can hold things for ten hours at the max, but it might go as soon as seven unless he gets help.”

Kenn was relieved to have that much time before things went crazy with Kronus. “What does he have you doing next?”

Vicky went over to the gear for the boat crew. “He wants me delivering messages. He said I should get in full gear.”

Kenn didn’t override the order. The chain of information was just as important as the chain of supplies or the chain of command.

“We saw Ralph and his group on the way here.” Ian pulled on the suit carefully so he didn’t rip it, then refastened his gun belt around the outside. “Ralph said to tell you he’ll try to keep the camp calm, but it would be good to send Eagles there.”

“I’ll send them when I get them.” Kenn held up his radio. “Two clicks is our code for a body pickup. Separate them by pauses for each deck. One second is top deck. Two seconds is top level cabins and so on. Leave a towel on the handle of the exact location.”

Dog came into the room from patrolling the hall. *The garbage and bodies are stacking up. I can smell it.*

Kenn frowned. If Dog could smell the bodies two decks up, he had to do something about it now. Kenn didn’t need to consult the notebook for what had to happen next. He motioned toward Vicky.

“When you get suited up, I have your first message to deliver. I want all roamers to meet me at the incinerator. No exceptions.”

3

“We do not answer that radio. No exceptions.”

Allison frowned at Ozzie’s curt warning, though the sounds coming from the radio made her skin crawl. She’d come to deliver Kenn’s message and join the boat crew. Refugees from land were screaming for Safe Haven to answer. She was positive she recognized one of those voices. William was irate. “Can’t we just click or something? Maybe a fast chat?”

“What would you say?” Ozzie understood her desire to respond. “We’re sick, sitting here like ducks in open water. We’ll be attacked. No long-distance radios are allowed to be on, as of this minute. Make a note of it. Kenn will confirm that order.”

Allison didn’t doubt it. She also agreed it was the best way to handle things, but it was still hard.

Ozzie sighed. “It bothers me too, but I need to leave it on. If the radio signal fades, we’re getting too far away from a shoreline.”

Whitney and Allison exchanged a worried glance.

Behind them, Debra observed the debris field in waves that held no signs of life. Claire had been raving about birds in her delirium, but Debra didn’t

see any on the debris or in the sky. That wasn't good.

Allison tapped Debra on the shoulder. "He's talking to you."

Ozzie pointed at the fuel gauge. "Tell Kenn I think we have a week before we'll have to refuel."

Debra made a hand gesture. *Anything else?*

"Yes." Ozzie used a firm tone, hoping it worked. "Stay where he puts you. Allison too. We only need two people up here."

Debra moved off. She had no problem following orders.

Allison scowled. "I want to help."

Ozzie glared right back. "You're on the mining crew, from what I remember, and helping with engineering if you have needed information. You don't know anything about boats, but Kenn needs you below."

Allison didn't want to accept that explanation, but it made sense. "Can I be on your relief shift?"

Ozzie nodded. "You can help then."

Mollified, Allison moved toward the stairs, eager to get out of the radiation suit.

Ozzie and Whitney didn't speak until they were positive the women were out of listening distance.

Whitney turned on the Geiger counter. Loud beeps and crackles immediately filled the bridge.

"Are we able to go any faster?"

Ozzie shrugged, not feeling well. "I'll try." He and Whitney had agreed to keep the ship moving no

matter how bad it got up here. The fallout cloud had to end somewhere.

4

“That’s enough. If we stuff it too full, it won’t burn evenly, or it may cause a fire.” James closed the heavy metal door. “Stand back.” He’d had a shift on garbage duty last week, but not many people had been rotated through it yet. No one else in this group had, which made him the teacher.

The group watched how James activated the incinerator. The machine was louder than the rest of the ship, giving them a break from the noises of death, though not the smells or sights.

The incinerator room was a long corridor lined in green walls that ended in a wide area with a concrete floor, a giant trash machine, huge vents and a variety of shelving that held tools only a few of them were familiar with.

“Tonya has the first results ready. She confirmed everyone has abnormally low white blood cell counts. We’re handling it right.” Kenn had ordered everyone here for an update during the lesson. It was the same people who’d answered his call earlier, minus the two men sailing the ship. None of them had gotten ill despite carrying bodies. It proved their theory about the contagion.

“Then why do we have so many bodies?!”
Monica didn’t think she could take what came next.

Conner gave her an emotional sedative, a new evolution of his sleep gift. He could calm someone or hype them up, but he'd never thought to be using it so soon.

Monica gave him a weak smile. It stank here, like death. She'd been avoiding the infirmary for this reason.

James retreated another step from the heat as the incinerator began to do its job. "When the timer goes off, the next load can be added. Theo's notes reminded me the ashes have to be scraped after a few loads. It usually goes into bags for the garden. We're going to burn those ashes again and again. When it gets too thick, scoop out a layer and put it in these stainless-steel cans. With each load, add a few scoops of the ash back in. Let me know if that keeps it down. If not, I'll search the book for another way to dispose of it."

Kenn squinted at his watch. All of them were wearing surgical masks, but he wasn't sure it was enough. "Everyone is hungry, scared. We have cabins that haven't been cleared yet. We still don't have everyone accounted for, but we have to be done before it gets dark. We all need to sleep then too, and craziness may happen. As we visit these floors, watch for anyone you think we need to sedate. Morgan gave me powder to add to the food. Brittani made a nice stew with chunks of everything, so it will blend right in." Kenn didn't like the idea of drugging people, but he refused to live through Kendle's nightmare. If people acted

crazy, they would be locked in their cabins or the jail. If that failed, they would be knocked out. “Last part before we suit up.” Kenn motioned Greg to help.

They carried a covered body to the second incinerator, straining and grunting.

“We’ll run both machines at the same time until we’re caught up.” Kenn sucked in air as they hefted the body up. “It’s the same procedure.”

James opened the door so Kenn and Greg could stuff the body in, head first. It was gruesome and brought tears to almost every eye at the disrespect.

“We’ve put all the names on the clipboard hanging by the incinerator. If you bring a body down, add the name to the list.” James relayed the rest of Kenn’s orders, hearing it in his head. “Waste people will take pictures and record the contents of pockets. Once it’s gone through the fire, mark off the name, then initial it.”

Kenn went to do that, mood dark. “The first one is about to beep... I want the two smallest people to load it this time, then we’ll go.”

Debra straightened her shoulders and went to the body pile, trying to show she could do her part, no matter how ugly the chore was.

James helped her, needing to assuage his guilt. If not for being suspended from duty during the trial, he would be dying in a drafty hallway near the boss’s cabin too. He also couldn’t help being grateful, which brought shame. It was a nasty mix.

Beep!

Debra and James lifted the next body.

5

“Is that low?” Kenn paused on his way through the soft rumble of machinery in the water room a short time later.

“Might be.” Greg shrugged. “Theo would know.”

Kenn consulted Ray’s notes on locations of all the Eagles. “He’s locked down in the garden. Send someone for him. The last thing we need is to run out of water.”

Greg added it to the list, marking that a priority. “Who’s our com man?”

“Ian. He’s gathering channels and locations now while he searches for our MIA list.”

Greg was glad to hear it. He peered at the water tanks again, hesitantly confirming it was lower than this morning. Theo and his team had been running the inner workings of the ship since they set sail. They were doing a wonderful job, but no one else knew how to do it.

Footsteps echoed.

Greg didn’t draw his gun, but he thought about it as he turned to face the possible threat.

“Just us.” Allison and Debra came around the corner. “She has updates for you.” Allison wanted to make sure Kenn listened to the deaf woman.

Debra clapped her hands at Allison. *Stop talking for me!*

Allison flushed.

Kenn frowned. "Spit it out."

Debra faced Kenn. *Ozzie says we're good on fuel for now.*

Kenn wrote it down. He felt the tension between the women; he just didn't have time for it. "I'd like you to check on the camp next. I need to know the mood, who's keeping control, reports of problems."

You got it. Debra moved toward the steps.

Allison followed, slower. She didn't like how Kenn was ordering them all around.

"Allison can help Zack at the incinerator." Kenn didn't want Debra distracted by Allison's thoughts of rebellion.

Debra vanished into the stairwell, grinning.

Allison marched to the next set of stairs, muttering about bossy men.

"I don't think she likes us very much." Greg held the door for Kenn as they entered the corridor. They were headed to the more isolated areas of the ship now, passing orders and information.

"I got the same impression." Kenn stored his book in his pocket. "Bet she'd call us sexist."

Greg wanted to snicker but couldn't. "This is all so wrong."

Kenn knew what he meant. "I agree, but it's Angela's rules."

"Yeah."

Neither man was happy about leaving Angela to her fate, but if they didn't save her people, it would

kill her anyway. The choice they'd made was the only one she might be able to live with.

6

“Theo!” Ian jogged to the garden, not surprised to find the doorway taped in thick plastic. All the areas with people were doing the same, except the camp. They were huddled in groups, muttering and studying each other for sign of contagion. “Boss wants Theo for water duty!”

Theo rose from the rear table. “Thank god!” He joined Ian, ignoring glares from those he'd been quarantined with. Hannah and Natalie were still angry about his lie.

Theo took the radio Ian held out. “Eagle emergency channel?”

Ian gave him an extra battery. “Is only for an emergency. Kenn is on channel four. Stay tuned there.”

Theo strapped it on. “What about the boss?”

Ian walked toward the stairs to the cargo area. “Kenn *is* the boss. Get moving. Everyone else in here needs to go to the camp area or the lab base for a job.” Ian kept walking, ignoring the rest of Theo's questions. He still had a number of people to account for, but he'd narrowed down where they could be. Now, he needed to verify it to get that final line of communication open.

Ian jogged down the stairs. He heard voices as soon as he entered the main room of the cargo hold.

The lights had been turned off to provide an advantage.

“Who’s there?”

“Stop where you are!”

Tracy and Candy came forward with guns out.

Ian froze. “Don’t shoot!”

“What do you want?!”

“Why are you here?!”

The women had planned their attack to confuse anyone who found them.

Ian recognized the tactic. “Kenn sent me. He needs everyone accounted for.”

Tracy held up a hand to stop Candy from repeating the next line. “What’s the password?”

Ian frowned. “There isn’t one. We have an outbreak. Lines of communication are being established right now, by me.” Ian scowled at them. “Holster those weapons!”

Tracy did it immediately. “What do you need from us?”

Candy didn’t budge. “How do you know we can trust him?”

Tracy frowned. “He’s an Eagle. I trust them.” She put a hand on Candy’s barrel. “Stand down.”

Ian slowly took a radio from his tool belt. “Here. Stay on four for general announcements and instructions.”

Tracy took the radio and the battery he dug from his pocket. “Emergency channel is only for emergencies?”

Ian smiled at Tracy. “Very good. We’re on four, steady. Five is problems.” He glanced at Candy. “I’m reaching into my kit now. Do not fire.”

Candy lowered the gun, eyes narrowed against the light from his toolbelt.

“This is all the food and water I have on me, along with my medical kit.” Ian put them on the ground at his feet. “All I need now is for you to open that container, then I’ll be on my way.”

Candy’s gun barrel lifted again. “For what?”

“I’m required to get visual confirmation of all people aboard this ship.” Ian dropped the Eagle speak. “I just need to see they’re okay. As long as things are fine, I doubt you’ll hear from anyone but a delivery crew until this all blows over.”

Tracy went to the correct container and knocked twice. “Check in time.”

A latch flipped, making Ian frown. *I didn’t know any of our containers lock from the inside.*

The door swung open to reveal napping kids and two uncomfortable adults. There were art projects on the wall above both lanterns. Ian realized they were written in a language he’d only seen on television. “Is that Egyptian?”

Courtney yawned from the spot by the door. “The kids wanted to do a spell. I suggested they put it on paper first so we can ask the boss.”

Ian studied it, trying to remember his classes. He’d loved ancient languages. “Uh, I think posting it activates the spell, but good try.”

All women scowled at the kids.

The children were either asleep or pretended to be.

Ian hid a grin. “Get those up to the boss after this all blows over.” Ian motioned Tracy to close them up. “I’ll be around. Remember to see it before you fire.”

“We’ll be careful.” Candy finally holstered. She was glad to have news, but she wasn’t sure it was a good idea for anyone to know where they were. It felt like the worst of the danger was just beginning.

Ian continued on his way, happy with the progress he’d made. All he had left was to verify that Samantha and Neil had Amy in their cabin.

The shower door opened as Ian reached that deck. Shawn came out. Guilt flashed across his tired face. “Hey, Ian. Find everyone?” Shawn had helped in the infirmary until he’d been told to leave for a decontamination shower. Pam was hanging on by a thread. Shawn wanted to get back there.

Ian frowned. “You should have told me.”

“Damn.” Shawn sighed. “How did you know?”

“I just saw Missy. She didn’t ask about you. Then I remembered how calm you’ve been; you didn’t ask if I’d seen Missy.” Ian stalked by him. “At least tell Kenn before he reads my notes. You can be removed for shit like this.” Ian trotted up the stairs, good mood soured.

“Is he right?” Jeff exited the shower behind Shawn, paper in his hand. Shawn had dropped his letter while changing clothes. When Jeff found it,

he'd shown the one Kimmie left for him. It was almost identical.

Shawn shrugged, moving toward the lab to report to Kenn. "If so, it won't be until things are normal again." Shawn slapped the wall as he went by. "I knew I should have told someone!"

Jeff didn't feel bad for keeping the secret, but he understood why Shawn did. He was a senior Eagle; more was expected of him.

Jeff sighed, listening to his inside voice. *Damn it! I don't want to step up and give more.*

His demon snorted. *Liar.*

Chapter Seven

I'm Telling Adrian

1

“Where are you going?”

“The boss needs help. Kenn is avoiding that deck because it’s a hotspot. He’s also handling the camp first. It will still be hours before he gets a team up there.”

Samantha sat up in the bed. She studied Neil’s handsome profile in his trooper hat and Eagle gear, enjoying the sight. She hadn’t thought he would wear it again for a long time, if ever. “You said we should stay here.”

Amy was still sleeping. Samantha was glad. She didn’t want to explain what was happening when she wasn’t sure herself.

“I still believe that.” Neil grunted. “But Angela needs my help now.”

Samantha had taken a nap and woken grouchy. “Don’t know why you’re willing to help her after she didn’t help at your trial.”

Neil frowned. “Samantha.”

Her hand went to her plump hip. “What?!”

“I’m a killer, but I’m not dead or locked up. I’m still an Eagle, still respected by the camp and guards. Who do you imagine allowed that?”

Samantha jerked a thumb at her chest. “Me. *I* made sure you were found not guilty.”

“Sam.”

Samantha crossed her arms. “I did it, Neil. Me.”

Neil blocked the images flashing in his head. He didn’t want Samantha to see how he’d set it all up and followed through. She’d accepted his choices this time, but he knew better than to reveal just how devious he really was. “Angela steered things the entire time. If not for her setups, I would have been convicted.”

Her lip quivered. “How can you say that after everything I did for you?!”

Neil smiled. “You did everything right, baby, but without her setups, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“What setups?”

“The biggest was holding a trial right away. The smallest was letting you defend me.”

Her eyes watered. “I did a good job!”

“Yes, you did.”

She frowned. “But?”

Neil sighed, forced to be honest. “You made it emotional, so we were able to skip the harder questions.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Neil sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. “What if she’d waited until the UN team returned for the trial? Jennifer would have been used against me and I would have lost. My cloud walls were effective because it was new. Our

enforcer would have broken through in about five minutes.”

“But she didn’t have time…”

Neil nodded. “Exactly. Angela rushed it through before the team returned, so they could arrive in time to feel like they were saving me and the camp.”

Samantha paled. “And if Jennifer could have gotten through…” Samantha started to panic, cheeks flushing. “Angela knows!”

Neil nodded again, voice grim. “I owe her a debt I can never repay.”

Samantha didn’t know what to say. She was complicit in the murders. Angela would never trust her again.

“I’ll handle that when the time comes.” Neil stood to strap on his gun. He checked it automatically, then holstered. “When it all comes out—and it will, don’t doubt it—she’ll see you really didn’t know. It will all be on me, where it should be.”

Samantha thought about that. “But not until the new constitution is ratified, right?”

“I don’t know if it’ll hold that long since I’m breaking quarantine.” Neil caught a whiff of Samantha’s peach body soap and stored it for later. He wouldn’t have any good odors after he left their cabin.

Samantha’s stomach churned. “But that’s to help the boss.”

“She’s sick. So is Marc, who she’s caring for.” Neil added his toolbelt to his lean hips. “I doubt she’ll be in the mood to keep pretending.”

“She won’t do anything to you.” Samantha was suddenly confident. “If she knows and let it slide, it must fit into her future plans for the camp.”

Neil shrugged, stilling as he caught panicking thoughts near their location “Or she’s made plans for me now.”

The sound of someone running drifted down the hall. “Help!”

No one answered.

The cry came again, fading as the person moved away from their cabin.

Neil met her eyes. “Stay here. *Please.*”

Samantha shivered. “I will. We will.”

Neil opened the door and glanced back as he turned the latch so it would lock behind him. “I love you.”

Samantha melted, anger fleeing in place of fear. “Be careful. I need you more than she does.”

Neil shut the door. *And the herd needs me more than either of you. I’m still an Eagle. Duty to the camp comes first. When the boss is okay, I’ll help the people. Maybe then my guilt will ease.*

Neil took the elevator to the leadership floor, then traversed the body littered hall in determined steps. The stench of burning flesh was thick in this lower deck. “Time to start paying on what I owe.”

Neil’s demon applauded his choice. *Get right back in there! Good boy!*

Neil grunted. *Shut up or be locked back up.*

Silence was the response.

“Good boy.” Neil stepped over Ivan, seeing the ragged rise and fall of his bloody chest. Neil opened the door and entered hell.

Ivan struggled to reach his radio button, weaker than he’d ever been. He keyed it, shaking with the effort it took to press and hold. “Boss has a visitor.” Warning delivered, Ivan surrendered to the grayness where there was no pain.

2

“Let’s go.” Kenn waved off people trying to get into the remaining suits. “No time. We need to help the boss.” Ivan’s words were code for an intruder.

Ian joined Kenn’s group in the stairwell as they went down. He’d just confirmed Amy and Samantha were in their cabin. He’d been there when Ivan’s call came.

Kenn checked his weapon as he led the way. “Be quiet as we go. Don’t give us away.”

“They already know we’re coming.” Travis had his gun in hand, wishing Ivan was leading this run. “That was an open radio call.”

Footsteps sounded through the ship, along with voices raised in anger.

“Oh, shit. Come on!” Kenn ran toward the dim stairwell.

“Stop right there!” Ralph took aim from the opposite hallway as Kenn’s group approached.

“Identify yourselves!” Corey gave support, standing next to the older camp man.

Kenn stopped, holding out an arm to stop those behind him. “Identify your own people, Ralph.”

“Kenn?” Ralph stepped closer, hand on his gun butt. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s Santa and his trigger-happy elves.” Kenn waved at his group to holster their weapons. “Why are you out of your quarantine zone?”

Ralph and Corey had shunned the required gear in favor of long coats over cargo pants and brown boots. Woolen caps completed the outfit, giving them the appearance of fishermen. Everyone else behind them was wearing the suits, but the sleeves had been ripped and taped so they could reach their guns. Besides the surgical masks, there wasn’t anything else they could do. It gave the group an odd look that Kenn found comforting. They felt like rookie Eagles who had pieced together outfits from loose gear. “Should I ask again?”

Ralph dropped his hand, chin lifting. “The boss has company.”

Kenn was glad it wasn’t a problem in the camp area. “Come up behind us but keep those weapons right where they are.”

Rushing water and debris being crushed blared through the porthole at the top of the stairs, making them all jump.

Corey retreated to let the Eagles go first, lips thinning. “We’re not trigger-happy or you’d already be dead.”

“Yeah.” Kenn led the way up the steps. “Good job on not letting the rest of the camp come too. I assume you all voted?”

“Actually, Daisey insisted she was going to come help. It rolled from there.” Ralph sucked on his teeth. “She gets the credit for keeping us in line with our values.”

“I’ll make sure she gets a good word.” Kenn drew his gun as they hit the top floor. “Masks up.”

The Eagles lifted surgical masks over their faces and waited for his next order. It didn’t feel wrong to have Kenn leading them. If there was gunfire, he would be the first one shot.

“Hello in the hall.” Neil raised his voice. “Boss said to send the herd back but gather the names of those who had the balls to come check on her and Marc.”

Corey shook his head. “We’re coming up there, Neil.”

“All of us!” Ralph ignored glares from the Eagles. “We want to see that she’s alive!”

There was a pause, then Neil sighed. “Kenn only in the room.”

Neil waited for the group to approach. “She wants her men taken to the infirmary as you leave.”

Everyone stared in horror at the bodies.

“Are they alive?” Ralph suddenly wished he’d let Daisey come in his place. He would never forget

this combination of vomit, blood and burning bodies coming through the drafty passages.

“We’ll get to them in a minute.” Kenn stepped into the doorway. “I want to see...”

Angela gave him the finger.

“Holy shit.” Kenn gawked. Her oily, dirty hair hung in a limp belt across her shoulder. It was solid white now. Clumps of dark hair littered the pillows and sheets around two shriveled forms covered in gore.

Angela forced herself to speak. “It’s not that bad.”

Kenn snorted, trying to recover. “You look like a lobster I caught as a kid.”

Angela sniffled, groaning. “Don’t make me laugh. My stomach isn’t ready.”

Kenn stared. He couldn’t help it. He’d seen ugly things in his lifetime. He’d done ugly things, but this was worse than all of it combined.

Angela tried to smile through cracked lips and peeling skin. “This should help your fantasies.”

Kenn winced. “If you don’t, he will.” Marc was worse than Angela. His cloudy orbs were almost lost behind deep bags and red skin that was coming off in places. They were both bundled in blankets, with nasty sheets around their shoulders. Shudders racked them both, making them twitch and tug the covers closer in futile comfort.

Kenn scanned the filthy room. “What do you need up here?”

Angela saw Kenn was tired but not at his limit and breathed a sigh of relief. There was no way she could take over yet. “You’re doing it.”

Reminded that he was the boss, Kenn spun a finger. “Get these guards up to the infirmary.” Kenn pointed at Corey. “Get there first and help Morgan prep for them. He’ll find places to put cots. You stack ‘em.”

Corey snapped off a neat salute, then marched for the stairs as the rest of the camp people began moving the sick and dead guards.

Kenn sighed as he shut the door. “Glad that’s over.”

“Don’t get comfortable.” Marc opened bleary eyes. “You’re not stayin’.”

Kenn snorted, relieved the power couple wasn’t dead. Ray hadn’t been sure about Marc in his report.

Angela leaned against the headboard, breath coming out in a groan. “Get on with it. I don’t have much left.”

Kenn frowned. “Get on with what?”

Angela cracked another smile. “Asshole.”

“There’s my girl.” Kenn avoided a tacky stain on the carpet as he settled into the chair and opened his notebook. He waited for Neil to go by with a garbage bag. *Neil? Cleaning?* Kenn shook it off. “We’ve had ten deaths.”

“Damn you!” Marc struggled to sit up, bony fist clenching. “Why did you start there?!”

“So he can end on a high note. Hush.” Neil began to remove garbage from Marc’s end table.

Kenn went on. "Half of them were kids."

"Son of a bitch!"

Neil took Marc's arm as he rose, pulling the man onto his feet. "Come on. You need to hit the head."

"Yeah, Kenn's!"

Neil shrugged. "We'll talk to the boss about that. Maybe you can schedule an appointment."

"Very funny." Marc glowered at Kenn as Neil helped him walk. Tiny steps were all he could manage as his head spun.

"I thought so." Neil got them to the bathroom, ignoring the approval coming from Kenn. "Get in here and show me why she picked you over Adrian."

Marc tried to jerk out of Neil's grip, staggering. "You're a hell of a comedian today."

"No, really." Neil pushed his way into the bathroom, positive Marc needed help. "I know your mouth's bigger. Let's see that wee wee."

Angela and Kenn grinned despite the situation. It felt good. They listened as the door shut.

"Get off me, Neil. I'm warning you!"

"I'm holding your arm. If you fall, your old lady might get angry."

"Well... Look away!"

"Why? *Are* you bigger? That'll crush Adrian's ego."

"How would you know?"

“Stop stalling. This was supposed to give her a minute to collect updates, not give her an asthma attack from laughing.”

“She can hear us? This sucks.”

Angela was almost in tears. For this moment, misery was drowned by amusement.

Kenn cleared his throat and wiped his eyes. “I have your book.”

Angela held up a finger.

Kenn waited, assuming Neil wasn't done.

“Wow! She *is* a lucky lady.”

“God, Neil. How am I supposed to piss now?”

“I am telling Adrian.”

Marc groaned. “Let me guess. He isn't sick.”

“Healthy as a horse.”

“Then you should definitely tell him.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Ma'am? I thought you peeked?”

Angela's rough laughter flowed through the room, hitting Kenn in thick waves. It made him feel like everything would be okay even though he knew better.

The sound of water running echoed, drowning out anything else the men said. The sound of the ocean and ship engines was louder here, explaining why no one had heard the guards collapse. It hadn't helped that it had happened while everyone was sleeping off Neil's acquittal party. Kenn didn't want the moment to end. The hell they were suffering wasn't something he wanted to return to.

Angela held in her pain. “You’re doing good. I’m sorry I can’t help.”

Kenn shrugged. “None of the sick descendants can. It’s like the demons shut down.”

Angela tried not to gag as her guts heaved again. “To protect themselves. If we die, they have to find a new host. They can’t if they’re too weak. Something about making the transfer.”

“So they abandon us when they think we’ll die?” Kenn didn’t like that.

“Yes.”

Kenn tried to find a solution. “Is there some way to bind them so they try harder to help?”

“Even if there was, it wouldn’t matter. Most demons are completely loyal.” Angela fought the nausea, swallowing a moan at her aching joints. “They only leave if they can’t help. Magic cannot cure illnesses—any of them. It can only strengthen the host body to help it endure.”

Kenn made mental notes, letting her direct the update. She had the worst news now. Everything else was better.

“Marc almost died.” A tiny tear crawled down Angela’s gaunt cheek. “My witch drained herself to save him for me. I had to give him lifeforces, against his will. His demon had already shut down. Mine keeps checking in with me as I get better, but there’s no power to use.”

“I’ll—”

“Save it for the herd.”

Kenn nodded at her set tone, looking around again. The cabin smelled as bad as it looked. Neil had one corner cleared of trash, but it had barely made a dent. Angela's medical supplies were scattered through the cabin, telling Kenn panic had ruled her for a while. She never treated supplies that way. "I've recommended only using our power for the critical patients. The medics are doing as they see fit, which I approved. I've got no experience at this."

Angela shivered. Chills were attacking again. "You've been managing a crisis since December 22nd of last year."

"Not like this." Kenn spotted a stack of blankets on the corner table and retrieved one.

"Same steps in the book." Angela groaned as he covered her with the heavy blanket.

Kenn moved back, wishing he could do more for her. "I noticed almost all of them do have the same steps."

"Ironic, isn't it? We used to spend billions of dollars on different cleanup and recovery methods, but we only needed a few and almost the same equipment." Angela slumped against the pillows. "The medications change, not the rest."

"Tonya updated me on the first batch of tests." Kenn steered them back to camp business, hating the panicked feeling that wanted to return as soon as his mind changed subjects. "She used a lot of terms from the book I didn't write down. She thinks everyone was exposed at roughly the same time."

“Do your preliminary findings support that conclusion?”

“Yes, except for three anomalies.” Kenn frowned. “Why do you sound like a lawyer?”

Angela’s good humor faded. “Trial aftertaste.”

“Makes sense. The anomalies are Adrian, Kendle, Kyle.”

Angela tried to sound firm through her misery. “Your ears only.”

“Okay.” Kenn was surprised she was going to trust him with anything important. He assumed he only had this job because there was no one else who could handle it right now.

“Kendle built up an immunity from her first exposure after the war.” Angela didn’t want to respect Kendle’s strength, but she did. The castaway had gone through this too and survived. “She’s not immune, but she can take more than most of us.”

“Okay.” Kenn wrote it in his book. “Kyle?”

Angela fought a cough and her burning throat to keep talking. “Jennifer gave Kyle a protection no one else can unless they’re an enforcer’s blood or mate.”

Kenn wasn’t sure what that meant. “So he’s...immune to illnesses?”

“Something like that.”

“What about Adrian?”

Angela gave him another pathetic stare. Kenn held up a hand. “Until you say otherwise, my ears only.”

She sighed. “Adrian has protection from a higher level.”

Kenn added it up. “The Gamblers?”

Angela snickered. “Great name.”

“Tonya started it.” Kenn scanned his notes. “She’ll have the second batch of tests ready in about eight hours.”

“Does she have a guess?”

Kenn nodded. “We believe it’s radiation poisoning, but we’re waiting on the tests to confirm it before we tell the camp.”

“Good job moving the ship.” Angela’s head spun; her nose began to drip again. “Who has the bridge?”

“Ozzie, with Whitney.” Kenn gave her an apologetic shrug. “It’s all the help we have right now.”

“How many ill?” Angela braced as she wiped.

Kenn sighed. “About twenty, counting this floor. We’re still clearing the cabins.”

“How many unaccounted for?”

“Same—almost twenty. Like I said, we’re clearing the ship. We’ll find them.”

“Damn it!” Angela concentrated. Now that Neil was here to aid Marc, she might be able to help her people in some way.

Kenn willed her to find the strength. He didn’t want this job.

The bathroom door opened. Marc exited, hand on the wall for balance. “Make her stop. She went to the edge to bring me back. She’s not ready.”

Angela didn't argue. "Get him in bed. He's cold."

Neil helped Marc back to his place. "I'm changing the sheets after this nap. Try to store up some energy for it and we'll get you both a shower." Neil grinned. "Together, if you're nice to the help. I know how we can all fit in there."

Marc groaned as he sank down. "And the bad jokes just keep rolling."

"Affirmative." Neil turned to Kenn and held his hands a foot apart.

Kenn sniggered at Neil's antics. It was rare for Neil to act this way, telling Kenn the trooper felt the situation was grave.

Neil nodded. "I do. I'll be out to help as soon as these two don't need me."

"Now." Marc rolled toward Angie. "Kick him out now, mommy."

Neil returned to collecting garbage as Angela tugged Marc's sweaty sheet up. The sweat was a good thing. Now that the fevers had broken, they could start recovering. "Have Morgan send meds up here, along with some food, if you can. No hurry and don't bring the last of anything."

Kenn wrote it down, certain that order had come from the boss. "Brittani has the kitchen under control. We were by there to pick up baskets for the camp. She'll have the next load ready in an hour. We'll make sure deliveries come here too. *Tip big.*"

Neil knew what to do. "I'll let them peek at the boss. It will keep people calm since they haven't

heard from her.” Neil wanted to open the window to air out the smells, but the ship was still moving, which meant it wasn’t safe yet.

Kenn scanned Neil, but he didn’t waste time going deep. He needed to know if it was safe to leave the wrinkled, stained trooper alone with Angela. All he found in Neil’s cloudy head was concern and determination to help.

Angela spoke up. “I’ll make a radio call when you’re ready. What do you need me to say?”

Kenn was shocked by the question, the trust. “Uh... Let me check my notes.” Kenn skimmed. “We’re pretty calm for the moment. When you call, let them hear how sick you really are. That’ll buy us time.” Kenn frowned. “I forgot. Kronus is demanding to see you.”

Angela stiffened. “Who do you have on him?”

“Adrian.”

“I’ll get ready for it.”

Kenn snorted. “Yeah, like I’m going to let that happen. We’re stalling until Adrian takes him out. He needs some time to set it up.”

“Kronus is immortal.” Neil repeated a common rumor. “He can’t be taken out.”

“That’s up there.” Angela groaned. “Damn it.” Stingy tears rolled over her cheeks.

Neil and Kenn concentrated. Sadness and pain rolled through the passages.

“Another death?” Marc wasn’t getting anything.

Angela nodded, wiping at her red face. Skin flaked off; it drifted to the sheet.

Neil hurried over to scoop it up. He deposited it into the garbage can that he'd assigned for contaminated debris. It would be burnt as soon as he finished cleaning.

Marc held her hand while she cried. "Who was it?"

"That doesn't matter to the boss." Kenn hoped Marc understood he didn't want to announce it. Angela was connected to her people. When they suffered, she felt it, but without her witch, she couldn't zoom in to identify the problem. She'd judged this one on the level of grief hitting her. She didn't need to hear a name too.

Marc took her hand, trying to lend his emotional strength. He couldn't do anything else. "I'm sorry."

Angela sniffled. "Me too. I was so worried about law and order that I forgot to guard against nature."

Neil winced.

Guilt flooded the room.

Angela's eyes snapped to him. "Seal that shit up right now. I won't warn you twice."

Neil brought up his clouds.

Kenn stared between them, mind clicking clues into place in loud snaps that echoed through the cabin.

Marc gestured at Kenn. "Finish up."

Kenn scanned the paper to find his place, shelving the thread he'd caught. "I'm moving healthy people into new places as soon as we've had 48-hours with no new cases, per the book. Then

we'll start cleaning. We have alarms on the weapons room. I did those myself. Not even Kyle could get around those without setting them off."

Angela approved. They didn't have manpower for guard duty.

"That's it for the bad." Kenn waited.

Angela met his eyes. "And the good?"

Kenn smiled. "Only five camp members are sick."

Angela felt a small measure of relief. She refused to read the illness list yet. She knew where her kids were. Charlie had come by to tell her they had a problem and found the guards knocked out. She'd felt him, but she hadn't had the strength or time to answer. Marc's life had been in the balance at that moment. Afterward, she'd wondered if she should be angry Charlie didn't warn the camp. She still hadn't made that choice. "Do you have a connection in the patients yet?"

"Topside seems likely." Kenn pointed at her. "Almost every one of you were either on the top deck when Rachel died or right after it. The kids went up to release anger. The rest were fishing, piloting, or recreating."

"Anomalies?" Angela remembered most of the steps in the book, but not the order.

"None, now."

Marc tried not to choke. "You've done well, Marine."

Coming from Marc, Kenn felt it. “My honor. Now finish healing and take this shitty job back. I never want to do this again.”

Angela leaned against Marc’s shoulder, lending heat. He was shivering again. “I’d trade you right now. I can’t tell you how rough this feels.”

“Worse than your daytrip with the flu?” Neil had wondered about that run. She still hadn’t talked to any of them about it.

She nodded. “There, I only thought I was going to die. I didn’t actually want it to happen for the relief.”

“Damn.” Kenn shot a blast of energy at the bed, hitting them both.

Neil smirked at their disapproval. “Suck it up.”

The radio crackled with Tonya’s annoyed voice. “Kenn! Where the hell are you?!”

Kenn sighed, storing his book as he stood. “Time for me to fly.”

“Break’s over.” Angela gave him a knowing look. “Feel a little better?”

Kenn realized he did. “Thank you for the downtime. I didn’t know I needed it.”

“My honor. Now get out of here and be our hero.”

Kenn left with lighter steps.

Neil locked the door behind him, glad the guards had all been taken to the infirmary. He would have called it in at some point, but he’d almost forgotten them when he entered the cabin. He

hadn't been sure Marc was alive. Neil had no doubt the battle to save his life had been hard.

"I need something from you."

Neil turned, slowly, at Angela's demand. "Name it." Neil braced for ugliness now that the boss was recovering.

"Get Jayda ready for Eagle tryouts."

Neil frowned a bit. The loudmouth wouldn't be able to cut it. "Okay."

Angela sent what little energy she'd recovered, forcing Marc to take it when he tried to pull his hand out of her grip. "Questions?"

Neil tried to act like it was any other day of getting orders for the camp. "Level goal?"

"Ten, by the time we reach the island."

Neil snorted. "In kai? Not possible."

"Eight?"

Neil considered. "Five, if she works hard."

"Five, it is. By the time we reach the island. No one finds out."

He tensed again. "Or?"

"Or she fails. This isn't a punishment." Angela tugged the blanket from her shoulders and weakly tossed it over Marc, who was shivering hard from the exertion of going to the bathroom. "It's a favor."

"To you?"

"To Ivan, though he doesn't know it yet. He's earned a reward. It almost killed him too." Angela's voice dropped. "I heard him, but I had to help Marc..."

Neil wanted to offer comfort, but there was too much darkness between them now. “I’ll do it as soon as things settle down. Anything you recommend I try or avoid?”

“The public. If you run into Jennifer, she may still dig through your clouds.”

Neil realized Angela didn’t know. “Jennifer’s sick, Boss. Morgan isn’t sure if she’ll survive.”

Angela pulled her hand from Marc’s weak grip as he dozed off, too tired to stay alert. “Get me dressed—right now.”

Chapter Eight
Open Waves
December 5th
6pm

1

“**G**ood evening, Safe Haven. I’m on my way to the infirmary.” Angela braced on the elevator wall as it started to move. Kenn had insisted it was okay for her to use it. “Kenn is in charge. He’ll pick an XO in the next few hours; you’ll have an official chain of command. He’s the only one in leadership who isn’t sick or distracted by personal problems. I expect you to treat him as if he is me.”

Kenn made ugly gestures.

Angela frowned at him, fighting pain and twisting guts. “I know what I’m doing. Be quiet.”

People listening to the radio understood someone had protested her decision.

“The ship is under lockdown. Deliveries and information are coming as we get them. We need volunteers for cleaning and taping up plastic. All windows need to be closed; no air conditioning, as of this minute. Ozzie, shut it off.”

Loud noises came at Angela’s order as the team on the bridge turned off those utilities.

Slight panic began to hit her from all corners of the ship.

Angela keyed her mike again. “All the sick people are at the infirmary now, as far as I know. I have us in lockdown so no one else is infected. They can’t run the AC until we finish cleaning, otherwise we’re just blowing the particles right into where you are. Volunteers need to put a note on the outside of their door so crews can record it, then get you working.” There was a pause as she looked at Kenn, eyeing his two-day beard and grim features. Angela was mildly surprised by his harsh smell and unkept appearance. It still hit her at odd moments that he’d changed so much. “I don’t need a guard right now. Put Ian to work.”

Dirt in the carpet crunched beneath their feet as they stepped out. *I bet he still hates a dirty floor. This is all a huge adjustment for Kenn. I shouldn’t forget it.*

“Ian will have duty over you until you’re done at the infirmary.” Kenn tried to appease her. “I’ll have other work for him then.”

Those listening approved Kenn’s choice. It made them feel better to know the boss at least had one guard during the chaos.

“Fine. All of this is coming from Kenn. I support it. As you can hear, I’m not well. Neither is Marc.” Angela stumbled in the dingy employee hall Kenn had insisted on taking for her safety. She drew in a breath and kept going.

Kenn wanted to offer her his arm, but he knew she would rather fall than take help. *She may get her wish. Some of the bodies are more alive than she is.*

Kenn signaled to Ian, wondering why she didn't just keep the gray hair. It almost looked good on her. "Take her to the lab, then relieve Jeff on duty there so he can sleep for third shift."

Ian nodded, glad he was able to be useful. He wouldn't be able to do much for their patients. He also wasn't above enjoying people being wrong about him never guarding the boss again. Sure, it had taken a crisis, but it still counted.

"I'm almost at the infirmary..." Angela squinted at the list of talking points from Kenn. "What's the last one?"

Kenn read it. "Looting. It'll be dark in a few hours, but I don't have the manpower for guards."

Angela keyed the mike, fingers aching. "I've been informed we've already had a case of looting." She paused for effect, using precious energy to sound angry about the lie. "I'm giving the Eagles permission to use lethal force on anyone caught breaking rules. If you see a problem, call them on channel..."

Kenn held up his notebook with the number. "Channel 5."

Kenn waited until she let off the mike. "Great cover."

Angela drew in a breath, winded. "I mean every word." She pushed through to the corridor outside the infirmary.

Dog was waiting. He padded to Kenn, like he'd been told, and shook dust onto the man's boots. He'd just come from the leadership deck. He'd taken his nap in a hall near there, protecting Marc on his break.

Kenn grunted. "Thanks."

Dog peered up. *Marc says hello.*

"Figures."

Angela waved them off. "I'll be fine."

Kenn left her there, not liking it but there was no other choice. Everything she would broadcast now was horror propaganda to keep people grateful for the lockdown. He had other things to handle.

Kenn shut off his radio as he neared the brig and peered in. Empty mess bowls were stacked on the desk; the trashcan was overflowing. The cleaning crew hadn't been by here yet.

Those inside didn't notice Kenn in the passage outside.

"She is not sick!" Kronus tightened his grip on the bars. He coughed, and spit onto the cell floor.

Adrian noticed the angel looked worse but didn't comment on it. "You heard her. You felt it, the same as I did. She's not faking." Adrian was glad Angela was going to the infirmary. Everything she saw there would piss her off and help her fight harder to survive.

Kronus glared, hating this mortal body for its weaknesses, the pain he hadn't felt before coming to earth. "You're buying time to strengthen her gifts

with souls of the dead. But it won't work. Those souls are useless."

Adrian glowered at the dirty man. "Have some respect for the lives being lost!"

Kronus laughed. "I do, since I bet on it."

"What are you talking about?!" Adrian came over and kicked the cell door. "Answer me!"

Kronus smiled.

Adrian realized the man wasn't going to tell. He fell back into a teaching tone. "At least give her an hour to experience all the misery. Maybe she'll negotiate."

Kronus's eyes narrowed. "Do you really think so?"

Adrian sighed. "No. I think she's going to kill you and trigger a new war."

Kronus smiled again. "You should thank me. Instead of sitting there, getting sleepy in clean clothes, you could be dying with the rest of that mission team."

Adrian understood Kronus had known they were going to get sick. He stored the information and refused to rise to the bait again.

Kenn continued down the hall. He wasn't letting Angela anywhere near Kronus in her condition. Adrian would handle the man when the time came. Kenn didn't know if he should give that order, though. It felt like something Angela needed to insist on, not a temporary boss.

Kenn saw the lunch delivery crew trudging the hall toward the stairs. They were wrinkled and sweaty, not chatting. Their shift had just ended. Kenn hadn't eaten yet, but he hoped they had delivered food to Tonya.

Kenn opened a closet and sank into the chair he'd placed there a couple hours ago. It was time for a quick snooze. It was going to be a long evening. The camp had to be moved so they could clean. He was going to supervise it himself if he could get free time, but he also needed energy.

He switched his radio on and leaned back in the chair. He had to grab a nap while he could, as if they were at war. He would be up all night. This nap would help get him through it.

Dog sat down in the hall to keep watch over the man. He didn't like the duty he'd been given, but he was doing it.

2

“Why did Neil kill my daddy?”

Samantha turned around with the basket of food in her hand, startled. The delivery crew had just left; their sparse information hadn't been comforting, though her stomach had responded to the wonderful scent of Brittani's stew. Now, it flipped over.

Amy stared at her from the little bed, surrounded by coloring books and crayons.

“We can't talk about that.” It had been a peaceful eight hours for her and the child. All they'd

heard, other than the radio she'd shut off, was footsteps going by a few times. She'd found a cute set of dresses and socks for the girl a couple days ago, but Amy hadn't agreed to try any of them yet. She was clinging to her threadbare jumper. They'd cleaned the small cabin and taken a nap together on the big bed instead. Samantha had loved every second of it.

Amy frowned. "Why?"

Samantha sat the basket on the dresser. "Because the alpha would have to execute Neil."

Amy colored harder. "Was it wrong?"

"Murder is always wrong." Samantha waited for more from the cute little girl. When they'd risen from their nap, she'd spent an hour brushing Amy's hair and putting little barrettes in while they chatted. She hadn't known the child changed her name after being captured by the UN. Amy refused to say what her old name had been. Samantha hadn't pushed. She understood wanting to start over.

"I've murdered too." Amy snapped the crayon in her grip.

Samantha sat on the edge of her bed. "You were forced. That's different."

"Not always." Amy snapped another crayon. "In my mind, I'm dark. I enjoyed it."

Samantha began to realize she'd been fooled by the child too. "Amy, are you glad this happened?"

Amy shrugged, picking another crayon. "I wanted to be a little kid, not a weapon. Becky would have made me hate all adults."

Samantha frowned deeper. “What about your dad?”

Amy went cold, tensing. “You won’t let the strangers take me. You’ll get me back, no matter what.”

“Your dad came—”

“No! He took too long!” Amy threw the crayon against the wall. “He left me for Safe Haven!”

Samantha understood what the little girl needed. “I already chose you over the camp. I always will.”

Amy dug another coloring stick from the torn box. “That’s why I won’t ever tell anyone. In time, we’ll be a real family.”

“What if you get mad at us for something, or you get jealous of the babies?” Samantha felt like she had to ask. The little girl now had dangerous leverage.

Amy shrugged. “What if you don’t want me when you have your babies?”

Samantha frowned. “That’s never going to happen.”

Amy shrugged again. “Same answer. I got to pick *this* life. I want it.” She peered over at Samantha, letting her true self be seen. “I’ll kill for it.”

Samantha reached over and hugged the girl. “Me too, sweetheart. Me too.”

Amy buried her head in Samantha’s jumper, calming. She’d longed for parents who loved her enough to do anything to protect her. *Now, I have that.* Bella’s parents were always drunk or never

home. Seth hadn't been there to stop her mom from slapping her or to stop her mom from selling her to the UN men. Samantha and Neil would die to prevent that from happening to her again. *I finally feel safe.*

3

“She’s been in the infirmary for an hour.”

Adrian shrugged at Kronus, taking another bite of stew that had been delivered. Adrian was in higher spirits, despite the open waves transmitting awful noises. Adrian was sick of it, though he was grateful for the update. He’d heard a lot of names while Angela helped their sick people. Daryl. Tommy. Ben. Wade. Many of his favorite students were sick.

The radio crackled again, drowning out sounds of vomiting, gagging and beeping machines. “Peter is on the way to help care for his team.”

Adrian heard a distinctive rustle and assumed Charlie was still suited up.

“Good. We need all the hands in here we can get.”

Adrian identified Morgan’s weary voice that time.

The sound of footsteps and a cabinet being slammed shut echoed; both were overwhelmed by Harry shouting.

“Her fever is going up again! I can’t stop it!”

The sounds from the infirmary were haunting.

Adrian stared at the radio, waiting for the next noises that would tell him who was at death's door. While he waited, whimpers and clinks of medical gear were the loudest.

“Give her a double dose.”

“We don't know what that will do.”

“Megan will die anyway. Give her a double dose of the medication.”

“Okay.”

Adrian was glad Morgan was listening to Angela. Those who were unconscious had little hope. Doubling medication was a desperate attempt to save their lives. Adrian applauded it.

Kronus smacked the bars. “At least feed me!”

Adrian glanced at the generous bowls Brittani had packed. He hadn't fed anyone in the brig yet. They were all watching him; Safe Haven members understood there was a reason the food hadn't been distributed.

“I want to eat!”

Adrian sighed, sitting his bowl down. He picked up the smallest bag and took it over to the window in the cell.

“About time!” Kronus snatched it and went to his cot to eat.

The smell of stew thickened in the brig, making stomachs growl.

Adrian resumed eating. Brittani had sent food. Charlie had added a bottle of sedatives. All Adrian had had to do was combine them, then make sure

Kronus got hungry. The hard part was eating while listening to his people die.

“Why aren’t you feeding them too?” Kronus stuffed in a spoonful and talked through it. “It’s good for earth food.”

Adrian snorted. “They eat together. The cooks didn’t send enough for everybody.”

“*You’re* eating.”

“I’m banished.”

Kronus shrugged, swallowing. “I’m their better. So are you. It makes sense we’d eat before them.”

Mutters came from the other cells.

Fresh groans echoed from the radio, followed by crying.

“We lost her. Megan’s gone.”

New footsteps echoed. “We have a lunch delivery for those who can eat. A bland broth and green tea.”

Fresh vomiting echoed, followed by the sounds of trash bags.

Adrian doubted anybody in the infirmary would enjoy the meal, even if they could keep it down. Adrian resumed eating. It was great cover to get Kronus to finish every drop in his bowl, but Adrian wished Angela would turn her radio off now. He’d heard enough.

“She must have taped her mike.” Ramer couldn’t help wondering if that was a good idea. *What if someone needs to get through?*

Adrian nodded, but didn’t speak. Angela needed Kronus and the camp to hear it, but like himself,

Adrian was sure everyone else also wished she would let them have silence back now.

Adrian glanced toward the corridor window, frowning. The sun was starting to set. Things might get uglier now. He considered the note that had been sent with the medication. *Do not kill him.*

Adrian didn't know what plans Angela had for the fallen angel, but he doubted it was pretty.

The radio crackled again. "Code blue! Ben just stopped breathing!"

The radio went dead.

Everyone was relieved, except for the people in the infirmary. They hardly noticed.

4

"Where have you been?!" Tonya jerked the glass door open, shoving aside the curtains.

Kenn frowned. "Trying to snooze while listening to creaking cots, moans, crying, puking and Ben ranting about keeping a secret." Kenn took the book she held out, aware of a cat sneaking around her leg. He gently shut the door.

Sitting at Kenn's heel, Dog gave the cats a condescending glance. *Stay in there and don't make trouble for me.*

The two felines looked at each other, then back at Dog with deceptive innocence.

Dog leered. *Good kitties.*

"So you verified it?" Kenn handed the book back to her. "We are using the right medications?"

Tonya wiped curls from her sweaty face. Without air conditioning, the lab was stifling. “Yes, it’s working. We just need to increase the doses. I’ve written it all down.”

Kenn put the paper in his notebook. “People are going to come here to give you samples. Wait until they leave before you get them and put them in the cooler. Do not open the door otherwise.”

Tonya had cleared every bit of counter space, then covered it in tests, prep areas, and books. Kenn was careful not to move anything, though he scanned much of it. The smell of chemicals was strong, though he couldn’t name what they were. It was still better than the odors in the infirmary.

Tonya frowned, pointing to the guard on the couch.

Kenn shrugged. “He can’t protect you if you keep opening the door.”

Getting tired, Tonya flipped him the finger.

Kenn sniggered. Tonya had her hair pinned up high and glasses on a chain around her neck. She only used them when her eyes were bothering her from reading small print. *Wish I could give her a break.* Kenn hit his mike. “We have a confirmation of the illness. It is acute radiation poisoning. We’re medicating people in the infirmary. If you don’t feel well, call us so we can get you medicated too.” Kenn paused, hoping for responses.

The radio was silent. Listening to Angela’s time in the infirmary had been stressful for everyone. Kenn hoped Angela was about done there. Tonya

needed help here, where she could sit and hopefully not wear herself out.

Tonya didn't ask if he'd been given a meal yet. She could hear his stomach. She waved at her bowl. "Finish that while it's warm."

Kenn did, pleased she'd been given a huge portion.

"You'll have relief coming shortly." Kenn looked toward Jeff.

Jeff shrugged, not opening his eyes. "It's pretty quiet here. She's right, though. You have to pick an XO. When you go to sleep, somebody has to be in charge."

Kenn ran through the list of people he had been stewing on since Angela mentioned it. "Too bad Ozzie has to run the ship. I think he would be..." Kenn's stomach dropped. "The boat crew. Damn it!" Kenn opened the door.

"What's wrong?" Jeff wasn't sure if he should follow. He shut the lab door and stayed in front of it.

"They've been topside too long! Stay here." Kenn hurried toward the stairs to the top deck, cursing himself. He keyed the secondary radio he was keeping on the emergency channel. "I need Theo and three volunteers to report to the top deck in full gear—immediately!"

“Theo!” Kenn was glad to see him coming up the ramp to the top deck ten minutes later. “You’re in charge of the ship.”

Theo didn’t protest. He’d expected it and come prepared, but he didn’t want the job.

“None of us do.” Kenn understood. “You’re the most experienced man here after Grant.”

“That’s scary.” Theo donned the bulky helmet. “Let’s get it done.”

The three volunteers behind Theo weren’t eager either, but they didn’t argue. Everyone else was busy, sick, or dead.

Kenn led the way, wondering if this small exposure would be too much for him to fight off. They only had a few suits. He didn’t want to waste one on himself.

Kenn went up the stairs into light wind and good temperatures that didn’t give a clue to the danger. The deserted deck was the same as before, as was the bridge, but it didn’t feel good. Air was suddenly the enemy.

There was debris in the water on both sides of the ship. The smell of rot slapped at their noses, burning through the masks. The damp deck shined in the light of sunset, mocking them with glints that promised fun in the sun was waiting.

“I don’t see fish.” Travis noted details, nervous. “The skycrap seems thicker. We shouldn’t be up here yet.”

Kenn agreed. He trotted up the slick steps to the bridge.

“Men down!” Kenn grabbed Ozzie’s arm as the man staggered.

“We held the ship.” Ozzie tried to smile. A drop of blood rolled from the corner of his eye, tracing a path of crimson over his burnt skin. “We held it.”

“Yes, you did.” Kenn walked him toward the elevator, not sure Ozzie would live. He also wasn’t sure Whitney was even alive.

Ozzie staggered again, forcing Kenn to lift the man over his shoulder.

“When it stops beeping...” Ozzie slumped.

“When it stops, stop the boat.” Whitney tried to help the men get him to his feet. “We voted to stay.”

“You did good.” Theo patted Whitney on the shoulder.

Whitney stumbled to the steps and puked.

“Get him below. Keep a bag ready.” Kenn fished one out while trying to balance Ozzie’s weight. “Theo, it’s your ship now.”

Theo took a place in front of the main console. “We’ll call if we start feeling bad.”

Whitney scowled through a pounding throat and cramps deep in his gut. “You stay until the beep stops. Be a man this time!” Whitney shoved Travis’s hand away. “Get me below.”

Kenn got the two men into the elevator and pushed the buttons without overruling the order. If they didn’t get this ship into a clear area, there wouldn’t be any reason to change shifts. They would all be dead.

Kenn took a last glance at the setting sun, mourning the switch from daylight. *Things will get rough now.*

6

“Lift the body.” Greg unfolded a large tarp. “We’ll get this under it.”

Jonny and Michael both frowned at the words, but they stepped by Greg to do as instructed. They’d stayed in the lounge until the body crew arrived. Now, they were supposed to get this room sanitized, then stay on that crew. It wasn’t the glamorous Eagle job they were used to.

Jonny handed the box of gloves to Michael, then rolled the body over by himself. Sabrina was stiff. He had to use real muscle to move her.

“Good.” Greg closed the tarp over the body.

Ian folded it over the top and the bottom, then pointed at the bag he’d brought. Angela had sent him away as soon as Kenn left her sight. “Tape.”

Jonny got the almost-used roll of duct tape, hoping it was the first one. Unfortunately, he doubted it.

This dim lounge had been enjoyed for a week. Now, Ian suspected it would sit empty. Any place someone had died would be shunned until the bad memories faded. “Wrap it all the way around while we hold it.”

Michael and Jonny each took an end, grimacing at the disrespectful method of handling the dead.

Greg was worn out, but he still had time for compassion. "It's to keep the radioactive particles from spreading while we take her to the incinerator."

Jonny paused. "The what?"

Michael stood, dropping the empty tape roll. "We're burning them." He wasn't asking. It made sense; he just couldn't believe it was happening. *We're protected. We're God's chosen people. Why is this happening to us?*

Greg felt their bewilderment, but there wasn't anything he could say to make it better. Even if he had thought of something, he no longer had the energy for conversation. Caring for the dead was taking everything he had.

"There's a note." Jonny nudged Michael, passing the plastic wrapped gear. "*These are the last two suits. Don't rip them. Love, Kenn.*"

Ian sniggered. He wasn't as tired as Greg yet, but he was close.

"*Ps. You two are the relief. Tell the current crew to get a shower in the sanitizing area going up in the big gymnasium. Instructions are posted there.*" Jonny put the note back in the bag and began donning a suit over his clothes.

Greg opened a large yard bag, then began putting the body in it.

"I can't do that...this!" Michael dropped the suit. "Switch me out. I won't do *that*. I can't stand to see it." Michael's fists clenched. "Stop it right now!"

Greg kept working. “Report to the base by the lab. Follow the signs.”

“This isn’t right.” Michael spun out of the lounge, furious.

Ian glanced at Jonny while Greg lifted the body so it would go into the bag. “What about you?”

Jonny knelt by the supplies to read the instructions someone had hastily scrawled on the back of an Eagle schedule. “Elevators?”

Ian gave him a relieved nod. “Yes. Always wear your gear in the elevators. We’re using them for faster body transport.”

Jonny braced. “How many have you taken down? Not counting this one.”

“Twelve.”

Unlucky thirteen. Jonny pulled on the visor and shut it, firmly. “One of you can go to break now. We don’t have to wait to start rotating.”

Ian gestured. “Take Greg’s spot. You’ll hold lights, push buttons. If we have to use stairs, you’ll carry. My back’s about done.”

Greg staggered from the lounge, grateful for a break from this nightmare.

“After we take it down, we’ll return and do the first layer of cleaning here.” Ian pointed. “Put that kit over your shoulder and let’s go.”

Jonny stayed ahead as Ian walked to the elevator, horrified by the job.

The boat groaned at them as they moved by.

Jonny staggered, mind struggling to accept it.

Ian shrugged. “Why should humans have all the pain?”

Jonny didn’t know what to say. He chose to remain silent.

That choice was a relief for Ian. He didn’t think he was capable of having a normal conversation about any topic without screaming. It would be best if he didn’t have to talk at all for a while.

Zack glanced up as the elevator dinged and opened.

Allison stepped into the corridor, hand on her gun.

“One coming in.” Ian nodded at Jonny. “Watch what we do, so you’ll know for the next one.”

“Maybe there won’t be any more deaths.”

Jonny ignored Allison’s hopeful comment. “Your radio is clicking.”

Ian sighed, stepping forward with the heavy, hard body over his aching shoulder. “That’s the infirmary. Everywhere else has a pause to indicate which deck.”

The radio kept clicking.

“What does that mean?”

“Multiple deaths.” Ian staggered as he lowered the body onto a pile.

Jonny stared, bile rising. *That’s a stack of bodies.* Garbage bags lined one wall, waiting to be burned. A second stack of bloody corpses lined the other wall, waiting for the same. He’d never seen

that in real life, until Safe Haven. Once he'd joined this camp, it was all he'd seen.

Ian wiped his hands with alcohol pads. "You okay?"

Jonny shook his head. "Yes." Jonny saw three bodies that had been in the morgue and swallowed a protest. Seth and Becky, along with Rachel, were here to be burned. It made sense, but it also made him uncomfortable.

Zack grunted. "Yeah, that about sums it up for all of us right now." He pointed at the glowing incinerators. "One's for trash. We're almost caught up on that now, so you can spread the word to start bringing it again. The cleaning crew is on the top inside deck and working down. Angela's notebook said we should clean now to avoid more illnesses."

Jonny tried to concentrate and store the words, but the smell here was already getting to him.

"Hang on for about thirty seconds. The vent will open at the peak of the burn." Zack knew the sounds and reactions by heart. He would never forget this duty. It dwarfed anything he'd been forced to do so far and that included getting nailed to a warehouse wall after his ribs were broken. Those were still aching, making this even more uncomfortable. "Tell Kenn we're stopping soon to let the machines cool. Don't let anyone restart them until we come back."

Allison waited until they were done talking, pausing while Ian labeled the tag on the body. "What's going on up there?"

Ian grunted. "Nothing good."

“More details, huh?!”

Jonny frowned at her snap. “Why are you here?”

She tensed. “Kenn told me to help.”

“Then leave, right? We have camp rules about females being out of harm’s way during a crisis, to protect future generations. This isn’t safe.”

“She doesn’t count in that.” Zack didn’t look at Allison. “I settled it already. Get up to the infirmary and bring down the next body. They need empty cots.”

“I already have a chore list.” Jonny left, scowling.

Allison hadn’t known Zack was aware of her infertility. “How did you know?”

Zack didn’t look at her. “I was at the meeting. You didn’t move to the breeder tables.”

She stiffened. “I could have been lying.”

“You weren’t.” Zack met her eye. “I saw your red cheeks, like the ones you have now. You were embarrassed.”

“You’re smart.” Allison didn’t have a mental filter on right now. She was too tired. “Wish I liked you more.”

Zack smiled without meaning to. “I’m trying to like you too, despite our awful date. Keep saying things like that.”

Allison flushed darker. “It really was awful.”

Zack shrugged, aware of Ian staring at them in mild disapproval. “My ribs were hurting. I didn’t lie.”

“Well, you didn’t have to call me easy. I’m not.”

“I’ve heard different. I’ve also heard you bat for my team. I assumed neither of those were true. I judged on behavior.”

Allison’s cheeks flamed brighter. “It’s been months. The guy who used to handle it went and fell in love. I was horny. Sue me.”

Zack laughed. “That’s better.”

“What?” Allison was sorry she’d blurted it out that way, but Zack’s opinion meant something to her. She just wasn’t sure why.

“Full honesty.” Zack kept going, hoping she could accept the words. “And I didn’t call you easy. I implied it, to see your reaction.”

Allison understood he’d been testing her to determine if they were compatible. She lifted a brow. “Well?”

He grinned. “You passed the first level.”

“What is wrong with you two?!” Ian stomped toward the elevator before Allison could respond to Zack’s flirting. “Have some respect for the dead!”

Allison and Zack watched until he was gone, ashamed.

The doors shut, dinging.

Zack went back to recording information.

Allison returned to hauling ash.

Chapter Nine
Unseasoned

1

“**G**ood evening, Safe Haven. We are under curfew until dawn, for all decks. That includes the entertainment areas.” Kenn let off the mike. He was in the infirmary, cleaning up garbage and loading syringes so the medical team could take a break. That hadn’t happened yet. They were too busy. Mutters and whimpers echoed behind him, followed by cots creaking as people with fevers tossed, turned and mumbled.

“Our first test results are identical in all the victims. We believe the debris fields we’ve been pushing through are contaminated. As you already know, we are moving the ship out of danger. When the ship stops, it’s okay to open the windows. We’ll give the all clear on the PA system.” Kenn left the mike keyed this time, like Angela had earlier. She was still here, organizing. He was hoping it would help the camp to hear her voice in the background.

“Just a few sips?” Angela held up the bottle.

Ben barely moved his head, fighting to survive. “Don’t think I can.”

Angela sat the bottle next to his cot. She knew Kenn was broadcasting. She tried to think of

something to say, but there wasn't enough alertness left in her brain. She was functioning purely on Morgan's orders. "Where do you need me?"

Morgan pointed to the basin. "Bathe the next one."

"You got it." Angela shifted to the basin.

Kenn cleared his throat, talking to the listening camp. "Post a list of what you need on the inside of a window or slide it under the door. Crews will be by overnight to pick them up. Do not break quarantine."

"Code blue on Ben! Code bl—"

The radio cut off abruptly on Angela's shout.

2

"We're breaking quarantine right now." Natalie pointed at the long line of camp members making the move to the plush cabins of the deck below. Twitchy people slunk toward the stairs with possessions clutched tight.

Those in the middle of the line wore expressions of tolerance. They remembered when they'd been easily spooked. The few members who'd been along for a thousand miles of fighting stayed back from the rest of the line. They'd learned to avoid the crossfire in moments like this.

"Oh, shit!" Martin pointed.

Everyone turned.

Three people in radiation gear went by, carrying a body to the elevator.

Panic ensued from the newer members of Safe Haven. They pushed toward the employee living quarters, anxious to avoid contact.

Ralph and his sons were at the rear of the lengthy line, along with Quinn and a few others Kenn had sent. He'd wanted to do it himself, but Ian had talked him out of it and earned point duty for the move.

"Get out of the way!" Martin puffed up his chest.

Ralph snorted. "You new people aren't seasoned yet. Calm down."

Wessley and Martin, ex-Eagles carrying a grudge about losing rank, stepped forward.

The feeling of a fight about to happen swept through the crowd, bringing people closer.

Halfway through the mob, Sally peered up at her dad. "You could steal a gun right now. They wouldn't even notice."

Leeroy stared at his daughter in horror. "We don't do that! We're not like *her*."

Sally pouted but didn't try again. Her grudge against Safe Haven wasn't the same as her father's grief over missing her mother. Even at her young age, Sally recognized the difference. Her dad was not on her side.

Hailey and Natalie, girlfriends of Wessley and Martin, stepped forward to flank their men. Dressed like 80s rockers, the two females snapped bubbles and pointed, tossing teased hair.

Ian was tired of the drama. He gave Quinn a motion.

A gun cocked; it was a very distinctive noise to every Eagle in the area.

Michael aimed at Travis. “Stop the boat. We want off.” Michael was at his limit. He’d been telling anyone who would listen what the body crew was doing, but they didn’t care enough to stop it.

Time seemed to slow for Ian he stared down the barrel of the gun. “This is a contaminated area. We have to keep moving.”

Michael’s eyes were wild. “Let me off!”

“Okay. If you want off the boat, I’m not going to stop you.” Ian slowly pointed. “You go straight down that corridor to access the lifeboats from the top deck.”

Michael stared in suspicion. “What’s the trick?”

Ian shrugged. “No trick. Would you like me to escort you?”

Michael gave a curt nod. “You’re not my hostage or anything. I just want off the boat.”

Ian moved toward the corridor. “I understand. I won’t take it personally if you don’t.”

Michael followed, frowning as he lowered the weapon. “Why would I hold a grudge?”

Ian spun around and slapped the gun out of his hand. He punched the man again and again until Michael collapsed at his feet.

Eagles hurried over to help but were beaten there by several camp members who’d also had

enough. The camp members punched or kicked the troublemaker into submission.

Wesley and Martin tried to get by Ralph and his sons in the din.

Quinn stumbled toward the shoving, yelling crowd. "I don't feel well." He coughed, dropping to his knees.

"He's got it!"

"He's infected!"

"Get to the next deck! Get to the next deck!" Ian directed the stampeding herd.

The twitchier camp members rushed down the stairs toward the luxury cabins, where the Eagles had been trying to get them to go in the first place.

The rest of the camp members moved slower. They were used to Eagle mind games.

Ian pointed toward the stairs. "Get him to the brig."

A group of Eagles hauled Michael to his feet and shoved him down the hall.

Ian glanced around to see what else needed to be taken care of. Senior members walked by them with snickers of approval as Quinn stood, brushed himself off.

"Do you know where my dad and brother are?"

Ian nodded at Mike, impressed that the teen wasn't overreacting like some of their so-called adults. "Your brother is in the mess. Your father is...eliminating contaminants from the ship." Ian didn't want to say Zack was burning bodies. They didn't need the extra stress right now.

Relief settled into Mike's face. "Thank you. I know I'm kinda young for it, but is there anything I can do? I don't mind helping."

Ian scanned the stocky teenager. "We need hands on the delivery crew and the cleaning crew. Go to the conference rooms near the lab for an assignment."

Mike was thrilled to be trusted with any responsibility. "Awesome." He trotted off toward the stairs, grinning from ear to ear.

"I wish they were all that easy to please."

"Me too." Leeroy stopped next to Ian. "After this is all over, I need to talk to someone about my daughter. She's holding onto a lot of hatred."

Ian felt the little girl's glare from across the room. She was sitting on one of the couches, waiting for the rest of the line to go by. "I'll put it in my notes to the boss."

"Thanks." Leeroy waved Sally over.

The little girl joined him, sneering. They descended together, not talking to anyone.

Ralph brought up the rear, with his sons. "What's next?"

Ian checked his book. "We need those supply notes taped to the windows or put under the doors. Can you supervise it?"

Ralph was also happy to be able to help. "You bet." He descended the stairs, watching out for Hailey and Natalie, who had gotten separated from their boyfriends in the rush. *Some Eagles.*

Ian did a fast scan of the living quarters to make sure it was really empty, then keyed his mike in code to alert the cleaning crew. They needed the camp moved for multiple reasons, but cleaning was the biggest. A lot of the people in the infirmary had fallen sick in the living quarters. It all had to be gutted.

Ian decided to follow the guards to the brig to make sure Michael was safely locked up and their other guests were still contained. They didn't need any loose cannons right now.

3

“Somebody just tried to turn the handle.” Jayda was positive she'd seen it.

Everyone left in the mess turned to stare.

The handle slowly turned both ways, testing.

Cathy started to ask who was out there, but Gus held up a hand. He motioned everyone to be quiet as he snuck to the door.

The handle turned again, harder this time. Everyone heard something being inserted into the lock.

Gus motioned the others forward as he advanced. He banged on the door. “You better get to your quarantine area!”

The others did the same, but it didn't drown out the sound of footsteps running away.

Gus checked the lock to make sure it hadn't been breached. “Who wants first shift?”

Timmy held up a hand, eager to impress Cathy.

Gus waved, glad to see the kid was willing to do something other than flirt. “Good. Get on it.”

Timmy beamed, straightening his black jean jacket proudly. He paused, smile fading. “Don’t I get a gun?”

Cathy and Gus both snorted. “No.”

Timmy wasn’t as eager for the post now, but he had no choice.

“We need to get food ready for the escorts. We’ll make sure they know somebody tried to break in while we give them a couple minutes to sit and eat.” Brittani was packaging the first batch of dinners to be sent out. The counters around them were stacked with food in various stages of preparation. Wonderful smells were thick here.

Trinity scowled. “You’re staying?”

Brittani shrugged. “It’s as safe here as anywhere else.”

“I don’t think we should open the door at all.” Jayda put a hand on her hip when people turned her way. “I may be a big mouth, but I still have the right to an opinion. If we open those doors, even to go to our cabins, we’re risking being exposed to anything in the air. We should stay here.”

Gus hadn’t expected that reaction from the others too. He looked back to Brittani. “We should get your parents to the living quarters so they can rest. They’ve been working all day.”

Thelma pointed at Gus. “You can go. We are staying.”

Gus flushed at the shaming tone from Brittani's mother.

Brian approached the supplies Brittani had just packed. "I can drop this off on my way."

Brittani stepped in front of the sober drunk. "You're not on the delivery team."

Brian pointed at her, finger in her face. "And you're not the boss of me!"

Brittani laughed at him. "What are you, like ten?"

Brian stepped forward, rigid with anger and fear. "You shut your mouth!"

Brittani punched him in the throat.

Everyone gawked as Brian dropped to his knees, suffocating.

Gus hit the button on his belt. "We need a medic in the mess!"

Trinity huffed. "Medics are not leaving the infirmary. You heard what the last delivery crew told us."

Gus realized she was right. He sent a small blast of healing energy into Brian. "Feel special. You don't deserve that." Gus dragged the coughing man as far from the cooks as he could. "Stay down or I'll break your legs."

Gus hoped Kenn got things straightened out soon. It wasn't good to have people who didn't like each other locked in the same room. He was still expecting a catfight too, but these women didn't understand who they were messing with. Brittani was ruthless when challenged, as Brian had just

learned. Her signature was a one hit delivery that disabled her opponent. She was incredibly good at it.

Trinity caught and stored the information without letting anyone know.

4

“Where’s Angie?” Marc struggled to get out of bed.

“Helping the medics, who are making sure she gets her medication on time.” Neil pulled the clean sheet back up to Marc’s neck. “She wants you to eat; then you can help too.”

Marc settled back against the pillow. “Stubborn woman!”

Neil wanted to go scrub the bathroom, but he needed to get Marc sleeping first. “I put broth on the end table. Do you want help?”

“No!”

Neil listened to Marc’s clumsy attempts to secure the bowl, but he didn’t interfere. “Eat it all. She said you need your strength if you want to pull a shift.”

“I’m bringing her right back here.” Marc kept muttering as he opened the lid on the bowl, spilling some down the sheet. He couldn’t help it. His hands weren’t steady. If he had to defend himself right now, he would die.

“Eat up.” Neil watched Marc sip the warm broth. “You can take bigger bites than that.”

Marc took a big mouthful and swallowed, frowning at Neil's sudden smile. "What made you so happy?" Marc sucked in another large mouthful of the savory stew.

"Seeing you eat."

Marc swallowed. "Worried about me?"

Neil ignored the sarcastic tone, motioning for him to keep going. "Of course."

Marc took another healthy swallow, stomach protesting.

"Besides, if you're sleeping it's easier for me to get shit done."

Marc scowled, lowering the bowl. "It's drugged." Grayness swarmed him.

Neil got there in time to grab the bowl and lift it out of the way as Marc began to pass out. "That's better. Now isn't it better?"

Neil put the lid on the bowl and slid it into the mini refrigerator. Then he got Marc arranged so he would be comfortable. "I'm sorry. The boss wants you to stay here and whatever she wants, she'll get from me."

5

"I want to stay."

Kenn gently tugged Angela toward the door by her elbow. "Go to your cabin and check on Marc. You pulled a full shift here. That's enough."

Kenn refused to listen to any more of her protests. Her crying and hacking was just as bad as

listening to the other patients in the room. There was no reason for her to be here. Most of these people didn't even know there was a medic in the room, let alone that one of them was the boss. They were too far gone.

Angela caved. She had limited gifts back now, but not enough to help anyone beyond offering mental or physical comfort. It was killing her to be here and not be able to help them. Kenn knew that.

Angela let the door close behind her, heart in shreds. *I've lost so many!*

Angela glanced up at footsteps coming around the corner. She nodded to Debra. "Updates go to Kenn."

Debra patted her on the shoulder as she went by, glad to see the boss lady up and about. It was obvious she shouldn't be, though. *Angela looks like shit.*

Debra went straight to Kenn, for once glad to lack hearing. She didn't want to know exactly how miserable the people in here were. She had a mental bubble around herself that only Kenn could get through for them to stay in contact. She didn't want to experience everyone else's pain. She had enough of her own.

Kenn ran the Geiger counter over Ben and then Wade, finishing another step in the directions to confirm the outbreak. Loud beeps and crackles overwhelmed the other noises for a minute.

Kenn turned it off and recorded his findings. He'd scanned everyone in the infirmary now to

determine where the radiation was in their body. No one was going to be happy to learn it was all through them. They were in the middle of a hematopoietic event that would destroy their bone marrow and ruin their immune systems. Even those who survived would suffer effects, maybe for the rest of their lives. “Give it to me.”

Debra shoved into his mind, not liking the dark, cobwebby corridors of Kenn’s thoughts. *We had a situation in the camp area, but Ian got them settled. Quinn pretended to be infected. Everyone is hiding in their cabins again.*

Kenn didn’t have the energy left to chuckle. “Excellent. Next?”

Michael is locked in the brig. He was part of that problem. Cleaning crews are in the living quarters. And the mess just called for a medic. Ian plans to check on that after he verifies the brig is secure.

Kenn paused for a minute to go over his mental list. “Can you do a round for me? I need updates on the water crew, delivery crew...”

I know what you need. I’ll check on Zack too. Debra left before Kenn could respond. She didn’t want his gratitude or admiration. She just wanted this nightmare to be over.

The ship’s radio crackled with Theo’s tired voice. “Our measurements say we’ve been in the clear for almost an hour. Permission to drop anchor?”

“Granted. Relieve the boat crew now. Full gear is still required.” Kenn didn’t want to take any chances on something blowing through overnight. Anyone laboring on the top deck would have to suffer through the bulky gear that made walking slow and climbing dangerous.

A few seconds later, the boat shuddered around them. It was obvious Theo’s heavy-handed touch didn’t mix well with the cruise ship. Kenn tried not to worry about it. Once the boat was anchored, Grant could take back over when he recovered.

Kenn scanned the room. Grant was still unconscious, but his fever had broken an hour ago. The fact that he was still alive was a good sign. Ray, on the other hand, was in the cot next to Grant, unresponsive. Ray had lasted longer than Grant due to his anxiety about the captain getting sick, but in the end, the illness had caught up to him too. Anyone who had been exposed on the top deck only had a slim chance of survival.

“I didn’t tell... I’ll never tell.”

Kenn glanced over at Ben; his fever was raging again. The Eagle kept saying he hadn’t told, he wasn’t going to tell, but Kenn was suddenly sure Ben would give away details in his delirium. Kenn hoped it wasn’t another bomb. They were already shellshocked.

“Coming through!” Corey rushed into the infirmary, in full gear, and went to the sink. “We’re doing water testing, like the book recommended.

We gathered water from the big tanks. Samples are on their way to Tonya now.”

Kenn finished the syringe, then began working on the next. “Did you find instructions for testing?”

Corey capped the water vial. “We sent it with the samples.”

Kenn was relieved, but a new layer of stress had just been added. Tonya only had two batches of patient tests done. Twenty-three more now waited behind them. The water samples would triple that load. Kenn knew she could be counted on in a crisis, but this was too much for anyone. *She needs help.*

6

“I need help.” Tonya opened the door, not caring that Angela might be contagious. “I only have two hands.”

Angela came in, then shut and locked the door. “For the moment, occupy those two hands with your vest and gun.”

Tonya gawked at her for a minute, then knelt to pull her kit from beneath the metal counter.

Angela slid into the shadows, not sure if she would be able to fight. She hoped it wouldn’t be needed.

Tonya donned the vest, wincing at the tightness around her growing stomach. She placed her gun on the counter, then slid a file over it. “What’s going on?”

Angela leaned against the wall, stomach heaving. “I don’t know yet. Debra picked up something hinky. She told Kenn to send you another guard.”

Tonya picked the gun back up. If someone came in who wasn’t supposed to, she would kill them.

Angela shut her eyes, listening. “Just make sure you see it before you shoot.”

Tonya began to run through what she remembered of the gun lesson, calming her nerves.

“You’re supposed to let me know when there’s a problem.” Still on the couch outside the lab, Jeff sat up, then stood.

Tonya flushed. “I didn’t even know he was still out there.”

Footsteps ran through the ship.

The radio crackled. “Help in the mess! Help in the mess!”

Jeff looked to Angela, brow up.

Angela shook her head. “Debra has a direct line to Kenn. It’s his order for you to stay here.”

“Just to protect his woman.” Jeff would never trust Kenn.

Angela shrugged. “It’s a double. We need her results.”

Tonya snorted. “You’re both missing the obvious reason.” She turned the page in the huge book, squinting at the small text. “The boss is here. The *real* boss.”

Jeff recognized the truth. He turned to face the corridor, hand on his gun. Adrenaline began to wake

him. “They’ll have to get through me and I’m no pushover.”

7

“Get off me!”

“Let go!”

“I’ll rip your hair out!”

The three males stood in the doorway of the mess, watching the three women roll around on the floor, slapping, punching, pulling hair, screaming insults, growling, kicking.

James waved. “Get in there! Break them up.”

Peter retreated. “Do it yourself.”

Both men looked at the teenager between them.

Charlie snorted, hands coming up. “That’s not in my job description.” The main dining area was destroyed; food and utensils were scattered all over the floor. Charlie assumed they’d been throwing things at each other before they switched to fists.

Jayda, Trinity, and Brittani didn’t know the door was open, though that was what had triggered their fight.

“Skank!”

“Whore!”

“Bad cook!”

Brittani snarled. “Why you little...!” She punched again, trying to hit Jayda. She knocked her into Trinity, who was recovering from being slammed into the side of a dining booth.

Brian had fled the instant the guards opened the door. Almost everyone else had gone as well, except for the cooks. Cathy and Timmy were still in a far corner, enjoying the entertainment. Brittani's parents were behind the counter, still cooking. It was as if they didn't know there was a fight. Gus envied their calm. He had no idea what to do.

"Break it up, ladies!" James clapped his hands a few times.

Peter and Charlie snickered at his attempts.

Angry footsteps echoed. They turned to find Debra marching down the corridor, fury on her face and hands clenched into fists. *I sent a false alarm to the boss over this. I hope they resist arrest.*

James retreated. "This should be good."

Debra shoved by Peter and Charlie to stomp into the mess. She took a few seconds to evaluate the situation, then went to the water cooler. She hefted it up and tossed it at the three women like a small water bomb.

Water and shards of plastic flew into the air, drenching all three women and half the dining area.

James, Peter, and Charlie rushed in during the shocked shouts, each grabbing a struggling female.

Debra pointed toward the door, mentally shoving into every mind in the mess. *Take them to the brig!*

"You can't do that!"

"She hit me first! It was self-defense!"

"Why are we being arrested? Eagles do this all the time!"

The guards in the doorway didn't speak. Debra was on her own here.

Debra glowered, pushing up her sleeves. *You wanna do this?*

The three women stopped arguing, even Brittani. Debra's gifts were strong; she was sure to use them in a fight.

James smiled at Debra as he herded Jayda out.

Peter followed with Brittani, leaving Charlie to escort Trinity.

Trinity glared at Gus, still winded. "Why didn't you help me?"

Gus walked behind the counter. "I need a mop."

Furious all over again, Trinity jerked out of Charlie's grasp and marched toward the door. "I'll be in my cabin."

Debra grabbed Trinity as she went by, slamming the woman into the wall of the mess. She shoved the rebel down and grabbed the handcuffs off her belt. Trinity squealed the entire time.

Charlie and Debra got Trinity to her feet, ignoring her threats.

Gus also ignored it. When this was over, they would be too. He was sick of drama and no longer willing to be a part of it in any way. He just wanted Brittani protected. She was the only one who mattered to him.

Timmy got up and closed the door. Then he dragged a booth back in front of it. He glanced around to make sure that was okay with everyone

and found approving nods. He came to the counter. “Is there something I should be doing?”

Gus pointed at the floor. “We need to get cleaned up, then prep for breakfast. After, maybe we’ll go get a shower and some sleep.”

Timmy was now willing to help. Seeing Charlie acting like an Eagle again had reminded him of his own goals. *It’s time I stepped up.*

Chapter Ten
Dim Lights

1

“**P**risoners coming in. Step back.” Charlie hoped Adrian was ready for the sulking, muttering trio. “Charges are fighting and destruction of property.”

Peter held the brig door, waving at Brittani. “Go to the last empty cell.”

Brittani stomped forward, sporting scratches and bruises, but not a black eye like Trinity and she wasn’t missing hair like Jayda.

Kronus eased from his cot, coming to the window. “What stinks?”

Brittani jerked away from Peter to confront Kronus. “You should be glad you’re eating at all.”

Kronus laughed at her. “I’m not eating anything that smells like shit.”

Brittani leaned in to sniff. “Lot of room to talk. You smell like a goat.”

“Mmm.” Kronus half shut his lids, body tensing. “I love goat.”

Brittani made a face. “Wow.” She turned her back to him.

Charlie picked up a bad vibe. “You shouldn—”
Kronus grabbed Brittani’s arm.

“Hey!”

Peter drew his gun as he stalked forward. “Let her go!”

Trinity and Jayda cringed against the cells, hoping to avoid the crossfire.

Brittani prepared to kill Kronus. “Let go of my arm.”

Charlie was stuck by the door without a clear shot. He concentrated on Adrian.

The other prisoners came to the windows to see what was happening.

“I mean it.” Brittani picked a nasty spell. “Let me go.”

“Okay.” Kronus jerked Brittani against the cell, banging her into the bars before she could blast herself free. She slumped in his grip, hanging by her hair. Kronus quickly pulled her up and wrapped both hands around her neck; blood ran down his wrist from her wound as he held her there.

“Let her go!” James wanted to shoot, but he still didn’t have a clear shot.

“Go on.” Kronus grinned cruelly. “Except you can’t, can you? This one has been marked. She’s *special*.”

Adrian studied Kronus’s grip on Brittani’s neck. It was tight. “I’ll get the boss.”

“You can give her my displeasure for having to wait so long.” Kronus stiffened to snap Brittani’s neck.

Use your sleep spell. Charlie didn’t have a harmless weapon to fire.

Not strong enough, kid. Adrian was gathering what little energy he had, but it wasn't going to be enough.

I'll boost you.

Kronus shifted...

Adrian and Charlie fired together, hitting the entire brig with the spell. It bounced off the walls and hit some of them twice.

"No!" Kronus tried to kill her anyway, but blackness took him first. He slumped against the bars, letting go of his hostage.

Peter rushed in to grab the bleeding woman, fighting a yawn attack. He dragged her out of reach.

Adrian shriveled, skin tightening, body losing mass. He crumbled to the floor like a sundried paper towel.

Charlie tried to stop Adrian's fall into emaciation, but he didn't have the energy. He'd given all he could spare to subdue Kronus.

Peter and James didn't know what to do. They had little experience with evil like Kronus had just shown.

Adrian lifted a bony finger. "Infirmity."

Peter lifted Brittani, wincing at the bleeding wound on her head. He hurried out of the brig, followed by James, who held the door. Blood dripped over his arm, creating a faint trail for the cleaning crew.

Adrian tried not to cry like a child. He'd forgotten how much this hurt.

Charlie stood, legs shaking. He pointed at the empty cells across from Ramer.

Trinity and Jayda didn't protest. Despite fighting with her, they were horrified by Brittani's injury.

Jayda took in Adrian's withered form, then Charlie's shaking body. She yawned. *Man, I'm glad I'm not one of them.*

"Pick someone to stand watch." Ramer had come to the bars. "Neither of you can stay awake for the rest of the shift."

Charlie turned to evaluate Adrian.

Adrian slid down the dim wall, unconscious.

Charlie sighed. "Who threw the first punch?"

Jayda glared, stopping outside her cell. "I did. No one calls me useless."

Trinity wisely went on into her cell, not rubbing it in. She'd been thrilled to get Jayda to swing first, but now, she wished she'd waited for a better time. Brittani had only been trying to break them up, but all of them would pay for this.

Charlie slowly picked up Adrian's keys and extended them to Jayda. *I wonder why no one else was knocked out by Adrian's spell. Maybe we've built up a tolerance?* "You're on duty. Uncuff her and take the post."

"What?!" Trinity came back to the cell door. "You're kidding, right?"

Jayda kicked the door shut in the woman's face, letting the keys hit her arm.

Charlie nodded. “Keep it like that.” Jayda had bruises and scratches, along with a chunk of missing hair that Charlie was sure would be found on the mess floor.

Jayda frowned. “Like what?”

“Take a hit to ensure prisoners don’t escape.” Charlie went into an empty cell and brought out a blanket to cover Adrian. He didn’t have the strength to move the man, but he remembered how cold he’d been during his own power drain. It burned on the inside, but he couldn’t ease that. Adrian would have to recover on his own. None of the healers could spare it from those who were dying.

Charlie dropped onto the cot he’d taken the blanket from and shut his eyes. He was out a few seconds later.

Jayda did her new job. “Hold your hands out.”

Trinity shoved her hands through the bars, glowering.

Jayda unlocked the cuffs and stored them in her pocket with the keys. She went to the Eagle post, shunning the chair in favor of scanning each prisoner to decide what she should do if they tried to escape.

When she got to Ramer, the man didn’t smile.

“You wanted to be an Eagle, right?”

“Don’t talk to me.” Jayda wasn’t going to fall for tricks. “I’m not your friend.”

Ramer glanced at the shadow of Kronus slumped against the bars of the next cell. “If you let

me out, I'll slit his throat before he wakes up. It'll save lives."

Jayda scowled. "Don't talk to me!"

"Come here and make me stop." Ramer leered.

Jayda retrieved Adrian's gun. She didn't have one of her own.

Ramer's mood dropped into fear. "Uh, never mind."

Jayda aimed at him.

Ramer retreated, hand rising. "I'm sorry. I won't talk to you."

Jayda lifted a brow. "You said come here. I'm here."

Ramer laid down on his cot.

Jayda lowered the gun. "You're a fast learner. That's good." Jayda returned to her post, mind moving on to the other prisoner. Kronus wouldn't be bluffed by a gun. She needed something ugly ready when he woke.

2

"What are you doing about Kronus?" Tonya put the next slide under the microscope, then stole a glance at Angela. She'd found the woman beautiful at several points through Safe Haven's history, but all of them had been before she'd taken over leadership. *It's slowly draining her, killing her. Would Adrian have been like this by now?*

"He's like it this very minute." Several people were feeding Angela major events as they occurred,

but she was only getting about half of it through her spinning mind and aching body.

Their guard was in full Eagle gear, presenting a figure of authority both females appreciated as he scanned the empty halls around them.

Tonya's mind stayed on *what if*. "We wouldn't make it with just one leader, would we?"

Angela grunted, getting another slide ready for Tonya to view through the microscope. "We may not survive with three."

"Three?"

"Marc's stepping up." Angela was glad. They needed him more than ever. "He finally gets it now—all of it. When he recovers, he'll be able to give us a break."

"Three-way rotation. Eagle standard."

Angela gave the redhead a smile. It was funny, but she was comfortable around Tonya. She didn't know when that had happened. The redhead was healthy and happy in a dirty lab coat and smudged reading glasses. She didn't have any secrets or anything bad to hide... Angela switched to safer topics. "I have a dangerous plan. Would you like to help me?"

Tonya frowned. "How?"

Angela sighed. "Check the tests and tell me who I can't save."

Tonya stared in disapproving surprise as Ian eased closer to listen while standing guard. Kenn had sent Jeff to get a shower and food.

Tonya glared at Angela. “That’s why you’re here, not to help me. You need to help yourself.”

Angela winced. “It is the safest place I can be. It allows Kenn to relax on one front. He needs to rest.”

“So do you.” Tonya had also thought Angela looked rough a few times before, but it was nothing compared to sitting next to her while she died. Each bit of energy Angela expended drained her further. It was more than unsettling to watch the last tips of black arm hair turn gray while they spoke. “Why do you need to know who you can’t save?”

“That’s part of the dangerous plan.” Angela couldn’t say much more without risking someone hearing them or catching their thoughts later.

“Let’s hear it.” Right at the door now, Ian wasn’t letting them plan anything that didn’t involve him too. Ian kept one hand on his gun and used the other to scratch his itchy beard. He studied the traffic moving in and out of the infirmary, and then their base of operations as Angela decided if he could be trusted. He was prepared to handle whatever came; he just had to be in the loop. Ian enjoyed protection duty.

“When Kronus comes for me, let him. Don’t call the guards.”

Both of them scowled at Angela.

“You can’t fight like you are right now.”

Angela nodded at Tonya’s concern. “I’ll be defenseless.”

“Then why do you want to let him reach you?”

“I have a hole card.”

More frowns met her words.

Angela didn't say anything else, now thinking about how many people they'd lost. “Let's get this test finished and put in the fourth batch. Then, you and Kenn can sleep.” Angela turned toward the hall, redirecting their focus. Two guards were carrying someone down the corridor, presumably to the infirmary.

“Who is it?” Tonya couldn't see from where she was.

Ian blocked their view. “Another unfortunate soul. Keep working, ladies. We need those results.” Ian went to the end of the hall, watching. The mood of the ship was dangerous. *I hope we get some good news soon.*

“So do I.” Tonya shrugged at the surprised look from Angela. “Kenn didn't say I couldn't listen.” She gestured at the timer. “We can check our results now. Maybe we can adjust the medication again after this.”

Angela joined Tonya at the counter.

The ship groaned, low and full of misery.

Tonya patted the wall absently. “I know, baby. We're working on it.”

The ship stopped moaning at them.

Angela stared.

Tonya shifted uncomfortably, scratching her stomach through the vest. “Can I take this off now?”

Tension filled the area... A gunshot echoed down the hall.

“Guess not.” Bitter, Tonya resumed work as Ian came back to stand right in front of the lab door.

3

“Move aside!” Corey ran through the hall by the infirmary with a bloody woman over his shoulder, bumping into people.

Peter and James almost dropped Brittani, but they didn’t yell. Blood was pouring from the unconscious woman Corey was carrying. He had a priority patient.

“Where do I put her?!” Corey couldn’t help his panicked tone. “Gunshot!” Blood dripped unnoticed onto the filthy floor that would require multiple washings to see its original color again.

“Oh, Lord.” Morgan sucked in a breath. “Over here!” He shoved everything off the cart they’d been using for filling the syringes. The bottles were empty now. They rolled unnoticed across the floor.

Terry, a new medic from Ciemus, hurried over with the kit they hadn’t needed yet, pulling the guidebook from the top. “Gunshot. Step one. Stop the bleeding if possible...”

Morgan and Harry followed his instructions in silent, stunned determination, aware of death circling the room again.

Ed, recovering from his beach injuries, waved to James and Peter. “Put her over here. I’ll see what I can do.”

They placed Brittani on the cot by Ed, who appeared tired but not ill.

“You’re not a medic.” Peter tried not to stare at Rose’s blood pattering onto the floor nearby while the medics worked on her. Her legs were also covered. She was losing the baby.

“That is something I have become painfully aware of.” Ed examined Brittani’s injury.

Peter frowned. “I just meant you’re not trained.”

Ed scanned the awesome medics. “Neither are they.”

Standing next to them, James’s stomach churned as he studied the infirmary. The smell of death was thick.

Ed shoved his hands into the alcohol bowl, then wiped them on a used rag. He saw Peter’s frown. “Sorry. We can’t use ship water and there’s no time to go to the prep area to wash every time someone comes in. It’s been too busy.”

Peter had to accept that. “What about gloves?”

Ed shook his head, returning to Brittani. “We ran out a few hours ago. Delivery people promised to search the cargo area as soon as they have a chance.”

Near them, Claire vomited down her chest, coating the dirty sheet with another layer of mess.

Peter waited for someone to help, but everyone was busy.

Claire threw up again, then sank back on the cot, gasping for air.

Noises rang loud and clear to Peter. Claire wasn't the only one puking and lying in it. Half a dozen people were doing the same. *I have to get out of here.*

Ed wiped away drying blood. "I think Brittani needs stitches, but it's not bleeding anymore. I'm going to cover it and let one of the medics verify that later." He began opening bandages.

James watched Morgan and Harry work on Rose. Blood was all over the floor and cot in thick puddles. He joined Corey, who was also staring in horror. "What happened?"

Corey scowled. "A camp member panicked in a dim corridor and shot a zombie."

"Damn idiots."

"She took it pointblank. She won't make it."

James swept the long, grim room. "Will any of them?"

"No idea." Corey approached the exit, wiping blood from his arms. "Might be a good time to be grateful we're not sick or crazy."

"I already am." James followed Corey from the infirmary. He didn't want to stick around for Rose's death. He didn't think she would survive either. Blood had left a solid trail all the way here. "I'll get the cleaning crew."

Corey grunted, going toward the cabins. He had someone to arrest or kill. He hadn't decided which.

Kenn met Corey in the hall outside the cabins. “They’re settling down again. Rose being shot brought calm.”

“I’m arresting Sheldon.” Corey gestured. “I don’t care if he was a teacher or that he’s been well behaved in camp.”

Kenn nodded. “We already did. Greg is taking him to the brig and getting an update there.”

“Good.” Corey pulled off his bloody shirt and grabbed a clean one from the pile the delivery crews were placing in all areas. “Where do you need me?”

Kenn swept the cabins, nodding to calm people and frowning at those showing signs of panic. “Point for a while. I need a break.”

Corey was eager to be busy. “You got it.”

Kenn took off his kit to dig in it. “Take over now. I’ll still be around for an hour if you need something.”

Corey also scanned the messy hallway. “I’ll get the cleaners up here. What’s the code?”

Kenn handed him the notebook from his pocket. “It’s all in there.” Kenn returned to the infirmary. He had been there when the gunshot echoed.

Kenn put on a calm face as he entered; he went to hand Morgan instruments while waiting for orders. He had no idea what to do for any of the groaning, bleeding, dying people.

“Put your hand here!” Morgan slapped Kenn’s hand over the exit wound.

Kenn pushed down hard, hating the feel of Rose's blood. He was glad she was unconscious. He wished all of their patients were. Those capable of it were staring at him, pleading with him to end their misery. "This totally sucks."

Morgan grunted, sewing through pouring blood. "Tell me about it."

4

Knock-knock! "This is the delivery crew. You guys okay in there?"

Timmy knocked back on the mess door. "We're fine. What's the word?"

"No change, so far. Are you guys staying put for the night? Boss wants to know where everyone is."

Timmy glanced around the mess. Gus was doing dishes. Cathy was mopping the floor. Brittani's parents were prepping things for the morning meal. Everyone nodded at him. "Yeah, we're staying."

"Good night." Conner left, arms and back aching. His team had delivered all three meals to everyone on the ship, along with water bottles, minor medications, and a few nonessentials to keep people occupied. It had been a long day.

The mess crew was glad the three fighting females had been arrested. Even Brittani's parents were enjoying the tension break. Gus thought about asking if Brittani was okay in the brig. He chose not to. He was furious at the women for fighting during

a crisis. *Maybe a night in a cell will cool them off. Plus, that's the safest place she can be.* Gus kept working, glad he wasn't part of the problem.

Cathy smiled at Timmy as he gazed at her. *I like 'em when they're trainable. What's wrong with that?*

Gus snickered.

Cathy flushed, remembering Gus was a descendant. *I miss the old days when no one invaded my thoughts.*

Gus shrugged, sending his response into her mind. *We were always there. You just didn't notice it before, and we didn't let on. Descendants have always existed. We'll never be gone, so you'd best get used to us.*

Cathy shrugged, mopping. *That may be true, but people like yourself should be careful pushing for that too fast. I suspect the Salem Trials weren't all lies or mistaken identity now.* She smiled at him, flashing cold, hard teeth. *Those people are gone, but the mentality isn't. if you push the normals, they will push back and even now, after an apocalypse, we still outnumber you.*

Gus took the warning to heart as he eased out of her mind. She was right. It was still dangerous to be different. That hadn't changed.

5

“Here comes Kendle and the cleaning crew.” Zack stopped to get an update from them.

Allison kept walking, taking the small, wrapped corpse to the incinerator. The pile there was large, but it wasn't growing as fast now. Everyone else was too busy to collect bodies, but the medics still needed them removed. She'd volunteered to bring a few down before starting the incinerator back up. The break they'd taken had been short.

Kendle slid aside for the body crew, personal shield visible. She didn't feel safe. The camp had watched her try to kill Angela, so she was viewed with suspicion no matter where she went. The Eagles disliked her for that, and for getting them all in trouble by betting on a training session. No one liked her except Quinn, and she wasn't sure why he wanted to be with her either.

I'm also living my nightmares. Kendle swallowed a shiver and kept going, but she couldn't get rid of the chill. Walking the empty passages of this ship, listening to people dying, was getting to her. It sounded almost the same; it felt almost the same. If not for the fragile hold leadership was keeping, it would be the same.

Kendle opened the door to the bottom stairwell, braced for anything. The dim corridors were covered in a layer of dirt that crunched under her boots. The sound was loud in the empty areas of the ship. Kendle's mind lashed out, showing her the ugly escape she and her twin had made from the last death ship.

Kendle shoved it away, shuddering as she walked.

“Stop right there!”

Kendle flinched from the glare. “Who is that?”

“Travis.” He lowered the light. “We’re all clear of bodies now, except the top deck. A few of us are trying to wash suits so we can go up for a check.”

“Don’t bother. I’ve got it.”

Travis let her go up the stairs, glad she felt okay but uneasy about why. She’d gone through this before, but she didn’t have an immunity to radiation. It wasn’t possible. No one could do that, not even a descendant. *Maybe her shield keeps it out.* Travis pondered that as he descended to update the man on point. With almost everyone sleeping, the ship was quiet, but not in a good way. It sounded like death had struck every door.

We’ve been marked. Travis trotted down the steps, now trying to cause noise. *Go away, death. Go away, death. You weren’t invited.* Travis didn’t imagine his chants would work. He had no skill in spells, but he figured it couldn’t hurt to try. *Get lost, death. You’ve worn out your welcome... Or maybe I’ve worn out mine.*

6

“You’ve worn out your welcome, Neil. Get lost.” Marc stood on shaky legs, scanning for his clothes. He was tired of these walls. *They mute too much noise. I feel like I’m trapped in a gynecologist’s office.*

Neil stayed where he was, confident he could wrestle the weak man back into the bed if he had to. “Angela will be here soon. Make her eat. She hasn’t yet.” Neil was glad to see color in Marc’s cheeks. He was still having an occasional spat of dry heaving, but Neil thought it sounded almost normal for someone recovering from a nasty cold. Whatever Angela had done for him had sped up Marc’s recovery.

Marc’s frown grew. “Where is she?” He knelt to grab his kit and caught his balance on the bed before he fell over. Dizziness was hard to conquer.

“In the lab, helping with tests.” Neil motioned at the clock. “Almost everyone else is sleeping peacefully.”

“Liar.”

Neil flushed. He hated that fact.

Marc began pulling on his pants, tired of cold legs from being in his boxers. He felt ill. Not being dressed made it worse.

Neil realized it was going to come to physical restraint this time and tried to brace for it. He didn’t want to hurt Marc. “She said you have to stay here. Follow orders!”

Marc drew in a steadying breath, taking out the heavy flashlight he’d recently added to his kit. He turned to Neil. “Are the lights dim?”

Neil frowned, considering. “Uh, yeah, they—”

Marc threw the Maglite, striking Neil in the forehead.

Neil staggered to his knees. “Dim, yes. My lights have dimmed.”

Marc felt for his boots with one hand and his nightstick with the other.

Neil slowly stood, hand checking for blood.

The nightstick slammed into his shoulder, knocking him back against the door. “Hey!” He slid down it this time, grunting.

Marc yanked on both boots and dug in the kit again.

Neil shoved himself off the floor, hand up to shield his face. “Can’t we talk abu– Umph!”

Neil flailed backward, deflecting the box of ammunition. He hit the door again. A second box smacked into his hip.

“You should move.” Marc stood with both of Angela’s drying boots in hand.

Neil turned in time to take the hits to his kidney and ass instead of his face. “You fight like a girl!”

Marc threw the alarm clock, shattering it against Neil’s arm.

“Ow! All right, an angry girl.”

Marc snickered. “Angie taught me.”

Neil glanced down to take stock of the damage, proud of himself for still being in front of the door.

Marc lunged over the bed and dove into Neil, shoving the former trooper into the corner between the wall and the door. He grabbed Neil by the ears and banged him into the wall, repeatedly. Weak, it wasn’t as brutal as he wanted, but Neil still dropped at his feet, moaning.

“Fuck your kai, and fuck you too, *murderer*.” Marc stomped on Neil’s thigh, hoping he got the edge of nut. “You owe me, you piece of shit. Get up and help me dress!”

Neil struggled to recover. His shoulder, thigh, forehead, hip, back and one testicle were throbbing or burning. It was a nasty mix.

Marc stumbled toward his kit. “I can’t find my guts, but I always have my balls.”

Neil groaned, amused, angry and ashamed. “Glad you’re feeling better.”

Marc growled. “I’m not! I want my fiancé with me. I guess I have to go beat her ass too.”

Neil slowly stood. “My money’s on her.”

“Yeah. Mine too.” Marc sat on the bed, brain spinning. “Come tie my boots. I don’t need any help falling. I’ve got that covered.”

Neil forced himself to move. “Even a sick tiger is lethal.”

“That wasn’t lethal.” Marc shut his eyes, weary. “Did you drug me again?”

“No. She said to let you wear yourself out...”

Marc snorted. “So you used your body. Good choice.”

Neil rubbed his hip as he knelt at Marc’s feet. “I had already dosed your food and bored you. There wasn’t much left.”

Marc yawned, adrenaline crashing.

Neil smirked. He was sore, but nowhere near out for the count.

Marc stretched, yawning again.

Neil glanced up, fingers slowing on the laces.

Marc twisted to the side and brought his hands together as he leaned into the blow.

Neil tried to duck it.

Marc kicked him in the balls.

Neil's body lunged forward as Marc's clasped fist struck him in the face. He fell into the end table, scattering the contents.

The lamp bounced against the wall, then smacked him in the other cheek.

Marc watched, enjoying the show. He followed Neil's hands-up stagger, blood starting to well from the lamp hit. *I miss popcorn.*

Neil scrambled against the wall, groaning as he pushed upward. He gained his feet and tried to see Marc through watery eyes.

Marc pointed at his half-tied laces.

Neil realized Marc wanted him to keep going. "Hell no."

Marc smiled, cold. "If I fall, my old lady might hurt you."

Neil wiped blood from his cheek, wincing at porcelain splinters. "Not worried about her anymore."

Marc frowned. "Get over here."

"Why? You save enough energy for one more attack?"

"Yes."

Neil sighed, afraid to walk yet. "There's a spot on my left leg that doesn't hurt and only one ass cheek is throbbing."

“Good to know.” Marc let his frown become a glare. “I’m done now. Get over here.”

Neil eased forward, grimacing.

“Oh, stop it. I’ve seen females in training tag you without a reaction.”

Neil started to lower his battered body to the carpet. “They don’t know where to hit it like another guy does.”

Marc laughed. His stomach protested, cramping. He wrapped his arms around his middle.

Neil flinched, leaning backward to avoid another attack.

Marc reached out to grab Neil’s shirt and keep him from falling again.

Neil lunged away, whimpering. He overbalanced and fell, landing hard on his butt.

Marc held his guts, almost crying. “I was trying to help that time!”

“And yet, I now have *four* throbbing cheeks.” Neil stayed where he was, not wiping away the blood or rubbing his aches and injuries. *There are too many. I don’t know where to start.*

The cabin had been trashed. Pieces of furniture littered the main area, with a few shards even making it into the bathroom.

“I’m not cleaning this up.”

Marc shrugged. “I may not be finished anyway.”

Neil groaned. Only the smell of chemicals remained of the neat cabin he’d cleaned. Even the

last bag of trash he'd gathered was knocked over, spilling tissues and other debris.

Marc eased down on the bed, heart thumping. "You have twenty minutes to get my boots tied. If I wake up and my laces are not done, you're in deep shit, Todd O'Neil."

Neil winced. The use of his full name was like a parent delivering a warning of impending brutal punishment. "I'll handle it."

Neil refused to think about anything else, concentrating on his pain. He'd forgotten Marc could hear his thoughts. *I won't do this again.* Neil took stock of his injuries, finding two that were almost serious. *He did this to me while deathly ill. If we ever go at it for real, I won't survive.*

Chapter Eleven
This Is Hell

December 7th
3am

1

“**N**ot gonna survive.” Jennifer sucked in a ragged breath. “Keep her safe!”

Kyle wiped the blood from Jennifer’s cracked lips, numb with fear. He had expected to be torn in a moment like this, but he wasn’t. Nothing could get him to leave Jennifer right now. “You know I will. Fight harder!”

“Nothing left.” Jennifer’s eyes shut. She couldn’t seem to find enough air.

Her pale face was stained in specks of blood; her already slender body was shrinking. Kyle had never felt so helpless. He concentrated, trying to connect to her like she had him while they were on the UN ship. “Take it back.”

“Never.” Jennifer’s breathing slowed...and stopped.

“Move!” Morgan shoved Kyle aside so he and Harry could start CPR.

Kyle strained... He managed a weak stream of orbs that floated toward Jennifer and vanished.

“Clear!” Morgan shocked her.

Harry listened for a heartbeat.

Kyle sent another rough stream of healing energy. “Come on!”

Kenn hurried over to put a hand on Kyle’s arm. “Try again.” Kenn didn’t have a healing gift, but he was able to add strength.

Kyle blasted orbs into Jennifer’s chest.

Sick people on the cots around them stared in desperate hope, praying it worked and that Kyle could help them next.

Jennifer arched, gasping in air.

Kyle stopped, breathing rapidly. It hurt to share energy.

“You can handle more. I’ll help.”

Kyle let Kenn direct him to the most critical patients. Jennifer’s lifeforce was strengthening. His was exhausted.

Jennifer’s lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes.

Morgan and Harry observed her for signs of a relapse... She stared at them in dawning alertness signaling a recovery starting.

Morgan breathed a sigh of relief.

Harry went to get a shot of b-12 for Kyle so they could use him to keep everyone else alive. The mobster was going to have a busy night, but it would be temporary. Tomorrow, he would be empty, and they would return to desperation. There were too many ill people for one healing descendant to handle. Haggard medics in filthy scrubs scurried among the dying people, trying to give comfort they didn’t have.

“Is Serio dead?” Claire already knew the answer.

Working at a counter nearby, Terry nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Weak sobs echoed through the infirmary. Claire was sick of crying. Her gut hurt from it, but there was nothing else she could do as friends died all around her. “What about Doug? And Freddy?”

Terry shrugged tiredly. “I don’t know. I thought Serio was getting better. We’re upping the dosage on the next round. The lab sent suggestions.”

Claire forced out her next question, terrified of going back to sleep. She knew she might not wake up. “Is any of it working?”

Terry scanned the loud, crowded infirmary. “Lou and Katie are worse. Wade and Ben are improving. The rest show no signs of change.”

The room was disgusting in both sight and smells. Garbage and bodies were stacked; there were wads of napkins on or around every cot. Waste cans were overflowing with items she refused to name. *I was just in here yesterday. It didn’t look anything like this.* Claire shut her swollen eyes. She felt like hell. “And me?”

Terry tried to find some comfort. “Recovery stage.”

“You think.”

“I hope.”

Claire realized she was at the same stage as Serio had been. *I may die soon.* Claire opened her lids, voice weak. “I want to make a will.”

Terry stared at her for a few seconds, comfort draining from his face. There was no reason to lie to someone who knew the truth. "I'll try to arrange it."

"Thank you." Claire held in a cough, not wanting to spray blood again. She swallowed a few times, hoping the tickle would ease. Her throat felt like sandpaper from vomiting, gagging, crying. All of that had made her cough and snot. It was like the worst cold she'd ever had, combined with the terror of blood coming from places it shouldn't.

All the cots were dotted in bodily fluids. It was germ heaven, despite the medics trying to clean between emergencies. Claire didn't envy them, though she would have traded places in a heartbeat. She'd never been so close to her own mortality. It was scary in ways she didn't want to face.

Morgan went to the main entrance to write on the window. It was easier on the delivery crew and safer than having workers in a dangerous area.

"Add towels." Harry dropped a bag of used linens into the corner garbage pile that was growing into a problem. "And schedule a time for trash removal."

Morgan added them, then spent ten seconds thinking about absolutely nothing. He was almost at his limit.

Harry resumed roaming the cots, already mentally shut down. He was caring, cleaning, shocking, and declaring them dead. He had the awful routine down well enough to avoid true thought. He was grateful for it right now. Later, he

expected to cry himself to sleep while very, very drunk.

Heavy, urgent footsteps echoed through the hall outside.

“Damn.” Morgan braced for more unwelcome news.

Harry covered Serio’s body and awkwardly slid it onto the floor. His shoulders couldn’t take lifting anymore. Harry dragged the corpse to the side, then got a clean sheet to cover the cot.

Molly hurried into the infirmary, carrying a child’s limp body over her shoulder. “She’s sick.” Leeann’s flushed face told them she had a high fever.

Harry waved Molly over. “Put her on the cot. Start wiping her down with alcohol. It’s in the bowl on the desk. Rags are next to it.”

Molly put Leeann on the cot, then went to get a rag. Hiding wasn’t her style. She wanted to help.

“What about the other kids?!” Shawn had come from Pam’s side. “What about the others?!”

Molly frowned at him. “Being relocated to a clean location. Quit freaking out.”

Shawn sneered at her and returned to his vigil over Pam, who hadn’t woken yet.

“We assume Missy used a spell on Shawn. Nothing else explains his attitude about her.” Ed was also getting an alcohol rag. Morgan had talked him through giving Brittani stitches a few hours ago. After, he’d been too hyped to just sit on his cot and let his ribs heal.

Molly dipped a clean rag and squeezed. “Why didn’t you go up to the living quarters?” Molly was sure they’d tried to get minor injuries out of here.

“I was going to, but they brought Brittani in and Morgan was busy.” Ed shrugged. “After that, it seemed wrong to leave.”

“Got it.” Molly went to Leeann, aware of life and death struggles playing out all around her. Jennifer was in a far corner, next to a cot with a covered body on it. Kyle was helping little Amber, who was in the other cot by Jennifer. Ray and Grant were shivering next to each other nearby, sharing a nasty garbage pail. Ivan was by Freddy and close to where Leeann now lay. Molly assumed the covered body on the floor was Serio. A line of senior Eagles were in the cots along the far corner. Daryl, Wade, Ben and Donald had fought together for almost a year. Now, they might die together.

Molly spotted three members of the fishing crew, but not the rest. *Did they all die except Zoey, Elijah and Panaji? Oh, my god. I didn’t know it was this...* Molly stopped scanning when she reached little Sean, heart breaking. His breathing was labored. He didn’t have long.

Molly shuddered as his chest stopped moving. Death flew over her shoulder and latched onto the child. “Help!”

Morgan felt it too. He hurried over to start CPR while Harry grabbed the defibrillator.

Molly turned away, praying for the boy to survive. Sound faded as she scanned the rest of the

infirmary. People were on the edge of death in every cot, or worse. Ozzie was dead. His sheet had slipped enough for her to recognize his watch. Tommy and Whitney were unconscious, both speckled in blood over their necks, chests, arms, legs. Molly's stomach churned as she realized the radiation sickness was making them bleed from every orifice. *Is this a payback for the refugees outside the mountain? For knowing it was happening and not warning them?* Molly shuddered again, on the edge of flight.

Morgan slowly walked away from Sean's cot, clicking the radio on his belt.

Molly watched Harry cover the little body with a sheet, frowning as her mind worked on a connection.

Harry felt her stare. "He's calling for a body pick up."

Molly shut her eyes, trying not to scream. "I've been hearing that all day. I've lost count of how many times I've heard that!"

Harry patted her shoulder as he went by, leaving a bloody print. "This is hell. We all live there now."

2

"I need updates. Then most of you can go try to sleep." Kenn studied the workers leaning against the two passages that connected in front of the lab. "I'm going to start with results first." Kenn pointed to Tonya through the glass, aware of how tired she

was. Tonya hadn't put in this much work the entire time she'd been a member of Safe Haven, but she'd refused the breaks, vowing to find the solution. Kenn was extremely proud of her. When this was over, he planned to express it, openly.

Right now, he wasn't sure there would be an end to this crisis. Fear lurked in every expression. Kenn also saw rebellion in a few. They were dirty, hungry, thirsty, tired, and scared. It made for a somber mood where no one felt like talking or cleaning. The stacks of supplies in here were no longer neat or large. They were running out of almost everything already. Kits and packages had been ripped open for spare parts. It looked like the area had suffered a riot.

Awful noises and smells floated to them from the infirmary, turning hunger to queasy guts that only wanted fresh air and peace from constant rushes of adrenaline.

Tonya picked up her notes, trying to focus. She was barely awake. "We have confirmed it is acute radiation poisoning. The medications we prescribed are right, but we need to double the dosage again. We should use IVs for everyone who comes in because they're dehydrated and have issues with digestion. If we can avoid feeding them solids, it might cut down on some of the mess. Tell the cooks to keep broth flowing to all the patients." Tonya stopped, voice lowering into personal pain. "There doesn't seem to be anything else we can do for them. It's up to their immune systems."

Tonya wondered if Angela was awake. Their tired leader had stumbled to the lab couch an hour ago and dropped into a silent, still slumber that was creepy.

Angela gave Tonya a thumbs up, but she didn't rise. She wasn't sure where to find the energy to keep functioning.

Tonya went on. "I'm running another batch of tests to verify the results we've come up with. I'm sorry. That's all I have."

Debra handed Kenn a paper.

Kenn was impressed with how organized the notes were. "So far, the boat crew is fine. Kendle has been visiting the bridge so Theo can rest between shifts. We're anchored and haven't had a positive radiation reading in eight hours. The towline is in and coiled for us to set sail when ready." Kenn added that to his own book, then scanned her list again. "No new illnesses since Leeann. The girl woke up and reported she had felt bad for hours but hid it because she didn't want to be a problem anymore." Kenn also wrote that in his book, along with the time she had been brought in. "It means she's not a secondary wave starting. That's great news."

Everyone listening was relieved.

"We don't have an update on the water yet. We have gathered the samples for the testing." Kenn gestured toward the lab. "She's overloaded. We'll get to the water as soon as we can. Until then, keep using the reserves."

The delivery crew wasn't happy to hear that, but they understood the choice. Charlie and Conner were lying on the couches in the corridor, barely awake enough to listen. James, Vicky, and Ian were all standing near those couches, also not very alert.

Kenn tried to hurry. "After Leeann was brought up, the kids in the cargo area were showered and switched to a clean spot. They don't need anything except normal deliveries. Our body crew has now cleared the entire ship. We have those areas marked with tape and ready to be cleaned. The camp is relatively calm, ironically, because of a shooting. Our new camp militia, led by Ralph, is keeping things under control." Kenn glanced at Ian. "I'd like you to stay with the camp for a bit. It would be a good idea if you took Travis along."

Ian frowned. He had expected a better position during the crisis. "Who did you pick for your right?"

Kenn's lip curled. "Not you, so why interrupt this meeting for a petty question like that?"

Ian flushed.

Everyone assumed that was only one of the reasons Kenn hadn't chosen the blabbermouth. Ian hadn't been forgiven yet for sharing secrets, though he was no longer exhibiting that behavior. It was too soon to believe it was an honest change.

Kenn handed the paper back to Debra. He spoke to her directly. "You're point man for the next shift. Take notes. I need these things covered over the next four hours."

Debra hurried to get her notebook out, not realizing what was happening.

Some people in the hall around them groaned or scowled in jealous confusion. Allison beamed at Kenn, glad a woman had been given the job. The rest of the tired workers didn't care as long as they got to sleep soon.

"All three meals and supply deliveries have to be covered. The current delivery crew is exhausted, so make sure they get a break. Our waste removal team also needs a break. The next person to go to the incinerator should tell Zack to take a shower, get a meal and sleep."

Debra held up her finger.

Sighs echoed from the group, expecting to have to wait while she wrote it down.

Debra forced words out. "Allishin."

Kenn understood her. "Good. Maybe she can stay there and keep the waste burning while Zack takes his next break. I'll need an update on that too."

Debra scribbled notes in her book while Allison stared between them, not sure if she now hated the idea of Debra being XO. She'd thought a female, any female, would assign her a better job.

Kenn checked his paper. "The cleaning crews also need a break. Make sure they get showered and have a dose of medication before they go to bed. Same with the body crew and anyone else who had contact with an infected person, area, or body. I realize we don't need to do that," Kenn quickly

interrupted the coming protests. “But better safe than sorry in this situation, you know?”

People nodded, too tired to put up a fight.

Kenn tapped on the window. “Any chance you’re returning today?”

Angela rolled over and vomited into the waste can Tonya had put by the couch.

“Okay, then.” Kenn skimmed his notes again. “The medics need more help. I want you to pass the word to the camp, Ian, when you get there. Some of them are friends and family of people in the infirmary. We haven’t released names of the victims yet, but I want you to do that now. Let people start having a chance to grieve; let the loved ones go to the infirmary and help.” Kenn pointed at Debra. “As soon as you get enough people, give all the medics a break. They’ve more than earned it.”

Debra wrote it down, agreeing. *Our medics are awesome.*

“I’m going to need to sleep soon, but I already know Tonya isn’t going to leave the lab yet.” Kenn again preempted a protest. “I’ll be on the couch right here if you need something. Questions?”

“I have one. Are you saying you want us to go tell three hundred people about everyone who is sick or has died?” Travis didn’t think that was a good idea.

Debra snapped her fingers, then she pointed to Conner.

Conner stared at her for a minute. Then realization dawned. “Oh, okay. She said that’s why Kenn sent two badasses to take care of it.”

Travis was instantly mollified.

Ian rolled his eyes at the ploy.

Other people in the hall began to feel better about Debra being put in charge.

Debra made another gesture.

Conner came to her side. “She wants me to travel with her for translation.”

Kenn could only find one problem. “Make sure you don’t put words in her mouth.”

Debra made another series of gestures.

Conner flushed. “She said she’ll rip my balls off and give them to Candy as a gift.”

Everyone laughed. Some of the tension broke.

Kenn was sorry to bring it right back. “Here’s our list of jailed, ill and dead. You need to make a copy for yourself because I still can’t get the damn machine in the central office to spit out what I want. I’m only going to give you numbers the first time. After that, we’ll go through specific names. When we’re done, this meeting is over.”

Everyone settled in with pens, notebooks and fragile emotions braced for awful news.

“In the brig, we have our previous convicts, minus Vicky, who we let out to help with deliveries.” Kenn gave her a hard glare. “This is a temporary release, on probation. If you break a rule while on probation, a harsher sentence will be enforced.”

Vicky nodded. She hated being the center of attention. *I like to work in the dark.*

“We have Kronus in the brig until the boss is able to deal with him. He’s tried to escape twice now; he’s attacked people. When you go to the brig, don’t get anywhere near his cell so he can’t use you in his next attempt. Adrian had to drain himself to stop the last one. As you can see, Charlie is pretty rough too. He helped Adrian subdue Kronus. Jayda is now the brig guard, and as you know, she isn’t an Eagle, so we need somebody to take over that position as soon as possible. They’re knocking Kronus out every five hours. He’ll get his next dose at 5am. Make sure someone stops by there regularly even after we get a new warden.”

Everyone made a note of that.

“Ramer is not to be let out. He told the guards if we let him go, he’d just steal drugs. Do not open his cell or get near it. Stanley has already had the pep talk I just gave to Vicky. Jayda sent him out to help us.” Kenn gave the camp klutz a firm stare.

Stanley nodded, cheeks red. He was helping the delivery crew and surprisingly, hadn’t dropped anything yet.

Kenn gestured tiredly. “I want Trinity let out of the brig too. She can pick a work crew but keep her away from Brittani and the mess. We don’t have time for personal dramas. Since Brittani’s in the infirmary from being attacked by Kronus, it shouldn’t be hard to keep her out of there.”

Anger filled the corridor, as Kenn had expected. Brittani was well-liked on the ship.

“Michael has also been let out of the brig. He swears fear got the best of him, but he’s under control now. He’s back with the camp.” Kenn gave Ian a glance.

Ian nodded, understanding. If Michael acted out again, he would be quietly removed.

Kenn grunted. “Our last guest is Sheldon. He thought Rose was a zombie and shot her. She lost the baby and died a few hours ago.”

Grief and fresh anger swirled this time. Rose had also been well-liked. She had been on her way to becoming a top female Eagle. She’d made a lot of friends since joining. Her loss was heavy.

“I don’t have a list of new deaths for you, but I think it’s safe to assume if they’re not on my infirmary list here, and they’re not in one of our quarantine areas, they didn’t survive. For the camp members who this may pertain to, have a guard check the waste area for confirmation. Zack is keeping detailed records of each body we burn.”

The few people who hadn’t known about it scowled. Those who did know also frowned at the reminder.

Kenn didn’t offer another apology this time for burning the bodies. He was doing what was necessary. “My infirmary list is Ivan, Freddy, Zoey, Ben, Wade, Donald, Katie, Doug, Claire, Panaji, Brea, Grant, Ray, Jennifer, Megan, Erika, Daryl, Tommy, Whitney.” Kenn gave them time to copy it,

aware of Dog roaming the halls around the meeting. He really liked having the wolf on duty. “The known dead are Sabrina, Gloria, Sean, Wallace, Ozzie, Darren, Lydia, Faith, Lou, Serio, Cassie, Gina, Amber, Nathan, Rose.”

“Oh, my god.” Corey hadn’t known it was that bad.

Kenn kept going. “Does anyone have anything else?”

The room went silent for a moment except for the ruffling of papers as people scoured their notes to make sure they had everything.

Kenn tensed at the sound of the lab door opening. “Wait!”

The two cats rushed through the opening.

Yip!

Yip!

Greg and Ian hurried forward to grab them.

The male from the bunker jumped through Greg’s arms and climbed his leg.

“Ow! Stop!”

The cat growled as Greg tried to pry it from his body. “That hurts!”

The female hissed as Ian lifted her, then lunged forward. She bit him on the nose.

“Get it off! Get it off!” He staggered through the chaos, trying to pry the feline’s tooth from his nostril.

“My babies!” Tonya started to come through the door.

Angela put a hand on the redhead's arm. She'd staggered to her feet upon hearing the door open.

Kenn slid in front of the exit to keep either of them from coming out. Or anyone from getting in. He still didn't trust a few of the people in this hall.

The cats jumped from Greg and Ian onto walls, couches, and other people as they fought to reach the door guards, Travis and Monica. It was as if they knew not to hit the floor for more than a second if they wanted freedom.

People cringed from the flying felines, ducking and shouting.

The big male jumped with claws out; it landed on Quinn's thigh, digging in.

"Stop it!" Quinn ripped the cat free and tossed it away from his body.

In the path, Monica shrieked, fleeing.

The big male landed on its feet against the now jarred open hall door.

Kenn pointed. "Grab him!"

Vicky lunged forward just as the female hit the ground next to her. The cat hissed, swiping. A claw dug into Vicky's cheek.

Vicky screamed, recoiling. "Help!" She bumped into the group coming to block the door, knocking half of them over.

Both cats ran through the opening.

Yip!

Yip-yip!

Kenn surveyed the corridor of knocked over, bleeding, whimpering people. "The next time we

get in a fight, I'm firing your cats at the enemy. They'll clear the path. We'll call it Feline Forces."

Tonya laughed.

The ship around them responded, walls brightening.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Tonya frowned at her. "For what?"

Kenn didn't turn. "Not now."

Angela slipped by Tonya. She stopped short of touching Kenn. "Stand aside."

Kenn immediately moved.

As soon as Angela was out of the lab, he turned around and shut the door, then resumed guard in front of it. Tonya wasn't coming out of the lab until this was all over.

Angela strode to the infirmary. Adrenaline had woken her again. She planned to use it while she had it. "You'll get a call about Marc soon. I'll let someone know where to send him first."

No one doubted her. They were thrilled to know Marc was feeling well enough to be allowed to assist in anything. It meant Safe Haven still had their leaders. Hopefully, that would be enough to see them through.

Kenn gestured at Debra. "You have point, as of this minute." Kenn dragged the couch in front of the lab door. He lay down, groaning.

Tonya scanned her quarters. The lab had a bathroom, a mini refrigerator, and a fairly comfortable couch. She could stay here indefinitely.

It was obvious that was what Kenn wanted. *But what is he not telling me?*

Tonya stewed on it as she went to get disinfectant wipes for the couch where Angela had been sleeping.

Kenn was glad Tonya wasn't using her energy to protest because he wasn't ready to tell her the truth yet. When she found out, she was likely to shoot him and then storm off. *This is a bad time for people to be running loose.*

Chapter Twelve
Times Two
December 7th
Dawn

1

“The tiger has escaped his cage. I repeat, our tiger is on the loose.”

“Send him to the infirmary.” Conner’s voice echoed in response to the radio call from Neil. *“We need all hands there.”*

The sound of Marc cursing in the background was clear as Neil replied. *“Thank you!”*

Tonya and Kenn both got up from their couches. The two-hour rest had helped, but neither of them had been able to fully relax enough for true sleep. Couches weren’t beds and things didn’t feel good.

Tonya checked on the current test, then headed for the bathroom.

Kenn motioned Jeff toward his spot on the couch and walked to the infirmary. He was positive there were new bodies waiting to be transferred. He would be able to work for a couple more hours, thanks to the nap. Then he would need real downtime. He had been hoping Marc would be able to take his place, but it was clear that wasn’t going to happen. Marc had been sent to the infirmary so

he would wear himself out and be unable to interfere with leadership while they tried to keep things together. That implied Angela thought he would be more of a hindrance than help. Kenn had to find someone to leave the camp with, someone besides Debra, who would still support her. Right now, the deaf woman wasn't close to anyone except Samantha and that chick was persona non grata for her blind defense of her mate against Safe Haven laws. Slapping Angela hadn't helped.

Debra would have a rough night considering she'd chosen Adrian's son as her translator. Kenn needed to add one strong presence to that group before he could sleep. He just hadn't decided where to pull the person from yet. In fact, the next strong person who came available still needed to be sent to relieve Jayda at the brig. She wouldn't be able to control their unearthly guest when he woke three hours from now.

Kenn spotted Kendle coming down the stairs from the top deck, carrying one of the industrial garbage bags they were using for dangerous waste.

Kendle kept the bag away from Kenn. She paused by him in case he had any instructions to deliver.

Kenn kept walking, but he gave her a nod. He wasn't sure what to say to Kendle, beyond keep working. He didn't think it was a coincidence that she was suddenly coming below now that Marc was out of his cabin. The castaway seemed to have forgotten the boss was also out and about. No good

would come of that, but Kenn didn't feel he had a right to tell her to stay away from Marc after everything they'd been through together during Charlie's manhood quest.

Kendle continued down the stairs to the waste disposal area. The stench was thick enough to make her gag. Kendle had a strong stomach in her opinion, but the smell of burning flesh was worse than being in the infirmary. She didn't know how Zack and Allison were standing back-to-back shifts here. "More garbage."

Allison didn't move from her spot in front of the incinerator. She was watching the timer. Zack was on a stool near a clipboard covered desk, but his head was against the wall and his eyes were shut.

"Just drop it somewhere. Then do me a favor and take him up to the infirmary. He needs to be tested for exposure...from what we've been doing down here." Allison was glad someone had come in without adding another body. "He insisted on staying until the medics were caught up. I didn't want to put the call over an open radio. It might make people think we have a new illness."

"You handled it right." Kendle put the bag on top of the small pile of garbage, noting the bodies were also almost taken care of. She didn't tell Allison there was another stack waiting in the infirmary for Kenn's big shoulders to bring them down. She had caught his thoughts as they passed in the hall.

“Come on, Zack.” Kendle got an arm around the man’s waist, trying to be careful of his ribs. After sitting on the stool for so long, he had to be hurting even if he wasn’t ill.

Zack was barely awake. He tried to get his legs to cooperate, but it was hard when all he wanted to do was curl up and sleep.

Kendle got Zack to the corridor where the stairs and elevator met under a beautiful blue canopy that was becoming covered in dust. She chose to take the elevator since this was a trip to determine a possible illness. It was a relief to not have to climb the stairs again.

The elevator dinged, caused everyone in the infirmary who wasn’t sick or sleeping to stop what they were doing and look up. That ding sound would haunt some of them forever now.

The sight of Kendle helping Zack toward the sickbay sent a fresh wave of panic laced tension through the medics.

Kendle took Zack to one of two empty cots, trying not to wonder who was under the sheet next to it. It was obvious the cot had only been cleared for a brief time. “Allison said to bring him up and have him tested. She’s not sure if burning the...garbage might have exposed him.” Kendle gave Morgan a pointed stare.

Morgan understood better than Kendle. He didn’t want any of the people on death’s door to

know they were just minutes or hours away from being burned.

Kenn came over to drag a body out of the way. Once there was room for her and Zack to get through, Kenn knelt and tucked the sheet under the body before hefting it up onto his big shoulder. He disappeared into the elevator.

Morgan began to examine Zack.

Kendle retreated. She did a quick scan to determine if there was garbage to be transferred while she was already here. She found Marc coming down the corridor; a battered Neil was on his heels.

Kendle could feel Angela watching her now, but it didn't matter. *I have to see that he's okay.* Kendle waited as chaos raged from every direction of the infirmary, only caring about one man.

Marc entered the infirmary and stopped, shocked. Neil had tried to tell him what was going on while they were in the elevator, but Marc had been concentrating on not falling. He'd only heard one of every five words. *It wouldn't have mattered. This is worse than he could have described.*

Marc went to Morgan, mentally scanning to see who was here. His grid failed to appear, frustrating him. He had forgotten his demon hadn't returned. He didn't have access to any of his gifts.

Kendle stiffened when Marc walked by. Her heart broke when he didn't even make eye contact. She slunk out of the infirmary, trying not to cry.

Angela returned to bathing Tommy with alcohol, trying not to feel happy about such a petty thing.

“What can I do?”

Morgan studied Marc, identifying the lack of power, then pointed to the desk. “Notebooks and pens are in the drawer. People want to write wills. Angie refused to do it.”

Marc glanced at Angela, not sure if that was personal or if she was afraid people wouldn’t fight as hard if they thought their affairs were in order.

Angela shuddered. “If I cry, I’ll collapse. I don’t have anything left to give.”

Everyone caring for a loved one understood. The adrenaline rush was wearing on them. They were mentally and physically exhausted, and still terrified with little hope in sight despite Angela and Marc both being here.

Radios crackled on the Eagle channel. “We have five missing camp members and a report of lights in some of the shops on the fun deck.”

Kenn answered, out of breath. “Anybody got a free minute to swing by for some lost sheep?”

“I’ll take care of it.” Kendle’s voice wasn’t exhausted yet like the rest of them.

Kenn decided he might as well push his luck all the way. “Good. After that, you’re with Debra and Conner, on point duty.”

There was silence across the radio and through most of the alert Eagles on the ship. Kenn now had

three of the most disliked or unknown people on the ship in charge.

They didn't understand he was basing it on sleep, as well as ability. Kendle had slept on the bridge. Conner had his youth. He was still going strong. Debra had napped in the prep area by the lab after breaking up the fight in the mess. That trio was organized, determined and dependable, if not likable. *Right now, ability and availability win out over personality.*

"Copy." Kendle's voice was as shocked as she felt. She hurried down the stairs toward the entertainment deck, not sure how she should feel about being on point. She didn't mind working with Debra or Conner, but she was positive the rest of the camp would. She quickly decided the only way to handle that was to do a great job. As long as she did everything right, no one would be able to complain when it was over.

With that thought in mind, Kendle made a quick detour by the weapons room to make sure the alarm was active. She found a slender shadow standing in front of the door. "What are you doing there?!"

Vicky spun around; guilt crossed her face. "Making sure the alarm's up." She paled when she realized who had caught her. "Congrats on getting point duty."

Kendle wondered if Vicky knew she had crumbs on her red shirt and a ketchup stain on her sleeve.

Might not be ketchup.

Kendle shied away from that voice in her mind. She motioned Vicky away from the door. “Don’t let me catch you here again or I’ll put it in my report.”

Vicky sneered at Kendle’s scars and arrogant attitude. “When this is all over, you’ll go back to outcast. I’ll be an Eagle.”

“You? An Eagle?” Kendle laughed, hard.

“Slam you.” Vicky trotted upstairs, casting a nasty glower accented by a swinging ponytail and rigid shoulders.

Kendle snickered. “You’re not limber enough.”

She checked the alarm, then added it to her report. She’d been around for enough Eagle training to remember that. No matter what you told camp members, or fellow Eagles, you always put the truth in your report. Nothing was hidden from the boss.

Kendle took the far stairs, aware of the ship groaning at her. The walls were alternating between very dim and slightly dim. And it was making noises. It unnerved most of them, but the sounds were strangely comforting to Kendle. Her ordeal on the cruise liner hadn’t been supernatural in any way, so anything connected to magic or descendants—like having a self-aware boat—was a difference she could hold onto.

Kendle trotted down the stairs and took the employee corridor to the next set that led her to the entertainment deck. She had learned how to navigate the ship quickly, unlike many people who were still carrying a gift shop map.

Kendle heard voices before she reached the fun strip, but it wasn't camp members.

“I don't care if you were sent. This area is off limits. Get back to your floor.”

“You going to make me, *slacker?*”

“I'll put it in my report. Save that stupid shit for somebody who gives a damn.”

It sounded like two Eagles who had a grudge. Kendle paused in the corridor for a quick sweep. Five camp members were moving up the opposite stairs, going toward the cabins. Kendle guessed they'd been spending time in the shops against rules. They'd been caught by James and Travis, who were now in the middle of a drama moment. All the camp members watching over their shoulders, hoping for a fight, were trouble as far as Kendle was concerned. *And that's saying something, considering who I am.*

“You shouldn't even be on duty.” Travis pointed at James. “You should be with the camp!”

“It happened once. I was punished for it. Get off my back!”

Both men were flushed and tensed.

And here, we have two alpha men learning how to assert their dominance. See how they preen and snort for the two chattering females enjoying the display? Kendle snickered at herself. Travis and James were okay, though she'd wondered how stable Travis was at times. Kendle stepped out of

the shadows. “How about you both get back to work?”

James immediately turned around and left. He had no problem with Kendle. Everyone had been assured that she was no longer a danger to the boss and that was the only thing she’d done wrong in his opinion. Trying to get Marc to love her wasn’t a crime. It was just an exercise in futility. Anyone could see that.

Travis stood straighter, not quite intimidating, though he was aiming for it. “I haven’t forgotten what you did.”

Kendle sighed. “We can do this one of two ways, Travis. Either you go back to work or I go to the infirmary and bug the boss.”

Travis hadn’t been prepared for those options. He shoved his hands into his pockets, delivering a nasty glare. He left, using an off-limits elevator.

Kendle took a moment to put it all in her report. Then she went by all the businesses, closing doors and partitions. “That’s just the beginning of the fun, folks.”

Kendle couldn’t help the bitterness, but she didn’t have to let everyone know how she was feeling. This was the first break she had gotten from prying descendants since boarding the ship. She wasn’t happy about the crisis, but she was happy to have time to herself again without being viewed as a potential mass murderer. *I can’t make up for what I did. All I can do is keep trying to prove I’ll never do it again.*

Kendle concentrated, positive her target was listening. *Where do you want me?*

Kendle waited for an answer, hating the sound of water smacking against the hull of the ship. Anchored or moving, the sound was the same to her—unnerving and nauseating.

Supervise food deliveries. People are starting to hoard things.

You got it. Kendle took the corridor toward the mess, content with the chore Debra had given her. It meant she would see areas of the ship that hadn't been visited by leadership in a while. When Kenn called for an update upon waking, Debra would be able to give him information on the rest of them.

It also meant she would have to face camp members. She was positive Kenn had ordered the camp to be first on the delivery schedule. Kendle wondered if he'd considered drugging them after last night's shooting. She doubted that would happen, but it was likely the choice had been considered. Kenn wouldn't be as careful of people's personal liberties as Angela and Adrian had.

Kendle winced at a mild leg cramp as she went up yet another flight of stairs. She wouldn't need the workout part of Eagle training if she was ever allowed back in it. All the steps on the ship would keep her in shape.

Kendle caught her breath as she walked down the hall, not wanting to sound excited when she knocked. As she walked, she listened to the voices. She couldn't make out the words, but the tones were

calm. Then she began to smell the food. *That's French toast. I love French toast!*

Kendle knocked. "I'm here to supervise deliveries. And eat!"

Chuckles came as the door opened. Kendle nodded to Cathy as she stepped inside.

Cathy relocked the door and returned to the counter. The cougar was wearing a long, checkered apron and covered in powdered sugar. Kendle could smell it, as well as see it. "Is there time for me to grab a plate?"

Gus waved at the counter. "We started prepping it as soon as Debra put you on duty here."

Kendle realized Gus was listening to everyone on his descendant line. She wasn't sure if she was okay with that or not, but it was too late to protest eavesdropping. She'd certainly been doing it.

Kendle settled at the counter where a glass of cold powdered milk and a plate of steaming French toast waited. Her mood lifted. She dug in, moaning between bites. "This is awesome."

Thelma smiled at her. "Did you get to see Marc?"

The delicious toast turned to dust in Kendle's mouth. "Yes." She forced herself to keep chewing.

Timmy sat on the stool next to her. "What about Angie? And my dad? And my brothers?"

Kendle swallowed. "Your dad's on duty burning trash. Mike was in the living quarters last I saw him, helping Eagles keep things calm. Angela is in the infirmary, doing everything she can for

people. Eric's still there too. He's not sick, but he hasn't woken."

"Will you let Debra know I can do something else?" Timmy leaned in. "They put me on sweeping duty because I kept dropping things. I also tried behind the counter, but I'm not a good cook."

Kendle shoveled in another bite and took out her notebook. She didn't see any reason why Timmy couldn't be on the delivery crew with Conner and Charlie, especially since he seemed to be maturing to match the situation. She had little doubt he might return to the petulant brat they all hated when this was over, but he seemed willing to cooperate right now. They needed that. "Okay."

"Thanks." Timmy went back to sweeping.

"We have lunch in these baskets too." Thelma pointed at the small stack on the table. "Each one is labeled for where or who it goes to. Sorry we don't have them ready yet, but Brittani didn't think about how much we needed her here."

Brittani's mom was obviously angry. Kendle frowned, swallowing another mouthful. "She didn't mean to get hurt. It wasn't her fault Kronus attacked her."

Silence fell.

Gus turned around with fear on his face. "What are you talking about? She was arrested for fighting. She's locked in a cell right now!"

Kendle shook her head. "Kronus tried to escape when she and Trinity were brought in. He banged her against the bars, from what I understand. She

has five stitches and a concussion.” The minute it was out of her mouth, Kendle wished she could pull it back. She realized the guards hadn’t told Gus because they didn’t want him flying to the infirmary. “You have to stay here, Gus. You have to keep working. We need the food and you’re doing a fantastic job.”

Gus tried to do the right thing. “She would come to me if I was hurt.”

Kendle was out of patience. “Then I guess you have to decide between actually doing the right thing or doing what you feel is right.”

Gus winced at the reminder. It was an exact line from Eagle training. He forced himself to turn back to the hot griddle, no longer in the mood to cook.

Kendle made a note in her book to get an update on Brittani’s condition. Then she went back to eating, no longer enjoying the great meal. It felt like someone had sucker punched her.

2

“Is she okay to be on point?” Vicky paused, making the rest of the delivery crew stop behind her.

James and Stanley peered through the shadows to see Kendle leave the mess and go up the far stairwell.

“She’s okay. I like her.” Stanley didn’t hold a grudge against anyone.

James shrugged, still angry at Travis. “We have more important things to worry about than a lovesick castaway.”

Vicky scowled. “She almost killed the boss.”

“The boss said she was safe.” James moved around Vicky, arms full. “Come on. We still have to deliver to the brig, then the lower cabins. After that, we have to get the next batch of supplies from the cargo area for the camp.”

Vicky and Stanley followed James. One of them was angry and embarrassed. The other was relieved to be free. The brief time locked up had reminded Stanley that he hated to be caged. His grandmother had locked him in a small shed for so long that his body refused to grow correctly. He’d never mastered balance because of it. Being in prison had reminded him of his childhood in captivity.

Vicky dwelled on Kendle. *I’ll bet she put it in her report anyway. Weird bitch.*

James was also stuck in his thoughts. *Travis shouldn’t have a place on the boss’s crew. He’s the laziest Eagle I’ve ever met.*

Kendle wasn’t so far up the stairs that she was out of range. She paused as their thoughts slapped her. After a minute, she decided to add it all to her report. Angela didn’t have time to cover these issues right now, but when things were back to normal, she needed to know who might still ruin the peace and serenity everyone was longing for. Kendle put Vicky at the top of that list. She wasn’t sure why the

auburn-haired girl rubbed her the wrong way, but there was no denying that she did.

Kendle felt the same way about James, but not as strongly. She considered him to be slacker. Stanley was okay, though. He was just recovering from the traumas of childhood, as were many of the people on this ship. The effects of youth lasted long into adulthood. Some people never escaped that damage. She hoped Stanley wasn't one of those. So far, the only thing against him was his proclivity to panic or drop things. Both of those could be overcome.

Kendle made another note in her book about Stanley, recommending he become an Eagle. She then continued on her way, hoping the trio didn't cause any problems as they made supply deliveries below.

3

James led the crew to the brig, tapping on the door to let the guards know someone was coming. He stayed away from the cells as he entered.

Adrian stepped out of Kronus's cell, empty syringe in hand. "I hope there's toilet paper in one of those bags."

Stanley laughed. "I told you they needed it down here." He smiled at Adrian. "I put in three rolls."

Adrian stored the key on the wall hook. He glanced in the next cell to make sure Jayda was

okay. He had insisted she take a nap since he felt like he was ninety and was moving at about the same rate. It was an improvement.

Vicky sat the bag next to the guard station and turned for the exit. She didn't like being around descendants anymore, even Adrian, who had given her safe harbor in his camp. She no longer trusted magic users.

James frowned at the quick exit. "What's her problem?"

Adrian was too weak to read thoughts. He hadn't been trying. "Doesn't seem like she likes the job."

James snorted harshly. "No one likes the job during a crisis."

Stanley moved around the cells, depositing bags in front of doors for the guards to give to the prisoners when they were ready. He wasn't about to step into any of the cells, especially the one with Kronus. The angel scared him.

James did a fast scan of the prisoners. Everyone was sleeping or going back to sleep after having been woken by their arrival.

"Tell Kenn he's got five more hours." Adrian dropped the syringe into the bucket and went to the stool. He dropped down with a tired grunt and joints that popped.

"Kenn said to let Trinity out and put her to work. She's to go to the prep area by the lab. She can pick any chore except the infirmary. If she goes there at all, unless she's ill or injured, she's to be locked up."

Adrian nodded, taking the keys from the hook.

In the cell, Trinity stood up. "I'm not the one who injured Brittani so bad she had to see a medic."

"We need all the hands we can get. The situation is bad." James took the keys from Adrian and opened her cell so the man could rest.

Trinity hurried out, not saying anything else. She was ashamed. The night in jail had reminded her that getting locked up was contrary to every plan she'd made.

Adrian yawned. "Anything else for me?"

"No." James left the brig before he could offer comfort. He didn't hate Adrian, like most people here did. He hadn't been a part of Safe Haven for Adrian's betrayal. He'd only been around to watch the man help in any way he could. He had seen the former leader interfering in Angela and Marc's relationship, but the couple wasn't married. James considered all fair in love and war. If he had his way, he would have chatted with Adrian for a few minutes about some of the security issues they had. He was positive the former leader would have good ideas. He was worth more than a guard on the brig.

"We have one cabin on the next deck and then the cargo area. We'll check on the kids there and get our next load of supplies for the camp." James led the way.

Vicky was waiting in the hall. She let James go by, not caring about leadership of a three-man team. *I have bigger goals.*

The trio descended the dirty stairs into the bottom of the ship, each of them concentrating on their own problems.

James knocked on Samantha's cabin. "Supply delivery. You okay in there?"

"Leave it!"

"Do you need anything?"

There was a long pause.

"I need medication... Amy's sick."

All of them had been secretly dreading that answer each time they knocked.

Radios suddenly crackled with open panic on the Eagle channel. "I need help in the cargo area! Courtney's sick!"

In the infirmary, medics and leadership froze. The secondary wave was here.

Chapter Thirteen
Burn Box

1

“**D**id you hear that?!” Brian rose from the chair he’d placed outside his cabin. “More people are sick! They don’t have it contained!”

People came from the humid cabins around him, filling the corridor. Some of them had suitcases Greg assumed were stuffed with loot. They were also wrapped in thick coats, telling him they’d gotten into the cargo areas. Everyone else was wearing summer clothes.

“The entire ship is contaminated!”

“We have to get off this boat!”

Ian, Travis, and Greg came into the area from their guard positions on the doors as the raised voices caught their attention.

“Calm down.”

“There’s no reason to panic.”

The three-dozen people in the corridor ignored the guards. A few rushed for the unguarded doors.

Ian and Travis tried to stop the mad dash.

Ian grabbed Brian by the arm as the man tried to flee by him with two bags in one hand and a gun in the other. “Hang on.”

“I want to file assault charges.” Brian tilted his head up. “See the bruise on my throat? It came from your cook!”

“Later.” Travis waved him away, trying not to laugh at the guy. He’d been throat smacked by a woman and couldn’t handle it.

Brian stomped on Ian’s foot, then pistol whipped him in the jaw.

Ian slid to the ground while Brian jumped over him and ran for the door. He disappeared into the dim corridor.

More people followed, some stepping on Ian or kicking him as they went through.

At the other end of the hall, Travis had the same problem. A group of Ciemus women kicked him repeatedly.

Greg stayed at his post, but he didn’t try to stop anyone from leaving. The mob mentality had peaked. Nothing he could say would matter. He keyed his mike. “We have twelve camp members heading for the lifeboats. We also have two injuries being taken to the infirmary.”

Ian hit his mike. “One. I’ll live.”

Travis wanted to add his support to that mini rebellion, but he was still being walked on and kicked.

Greg waited for the rush to be over. Then he went to help Travis, who had taken the worst of it. Ian had been smart enough to stay down after the first blow. Travis had tried to get back up and assert his authority over the Ciemus women.

Most of the remaining camp was in the hall now or in the small lounge area, scared but willing to wait and see what leadership was going to do about the newest problem.

Greg waved a few of them over. “Take Travis to the infirmary. Stay there and help if you’re not scared.” He gestured toward other people. “The infirmary needs help. The medics still haven’t had a break. Go in the same group. We’ll come by to collect your names later. Don’t forget the rule about looting.”

Greg returned to his post, content to let the camp people make their own decisions. Only the new sheep were panicking. Eventually they would learn to trust leadership. As far as the deaths they’d had, it bothered Greg too, but he understood this was the apocalypse. There hadn’t been a way to prevent death before the war. It was unreasonable to expect that now.

Blood ran down Ian’s cheek from the gun hit he’d taken. He wiped it away, scanning. Furniture and a garbage can had been displaced, making the corridor messy. *It’s impossible to keep this place clean!*

Camp members slowly drifted back into their cabins to wait for the next update. A few more scared souls gathered their things and left.

Greg hoped they were going to the infirmary and not the top deck. *I’m glad I’m not on duty up there right now. That’s going to be ugly.*

“Get out of my way!” Brian glared up at Debra. “If you think I won’t hit you because you’re female, you’re wrong.”

Debra had placed herself on the top deck ramp where all three staircases from the bottom levels merged. Two of those stairwells had groups of people trying to get by her to the top deck.

Debra began gesturing.

Conner translated quickly, hoping he didn’t need to use his gifts or his gun. “She said the lifeboats on the far end are yours. There are instructions on the wall by each boat for lowering them.”

Brian paused. “Is this some kind of trick?”

Debra was still gesturing.

“No one is in Safe Haven against their will. You can leave. Just do it safely, so none of you get hurt and you don’t damage our ship.”

Debra retreated, motioning Conner and Kendle to do the same. They were the only guards on the top deck; Theo, alone, was watching worriedly from the bridge. Physical restraint was out of the question.

People climbed the steps, not dissuaded. Furious shouts and raised fists had met anyone who got in their way, but they hadn’t attacked. They just wanted to leave.

Debra signed again.

“She said to remind you not to swim in the ocean. That’s where the mission team was contaminated.”

A few people paused at Conner’s warning. Clearly, they hadn’t considered the source of the illness.

Debra kept gesturing and Conner kept translating, both staying out of the way of the scared, angry people.

“There are sharks. You should pick set bathroom times for everyone, then move your boat away from that area, so you don’t attract as many of them. If you go north, you should reach land in about ten days.”

More people hesitated now. They had considered sharks, but they hadn’t thought about how long a trip it would be in the lifeboats.

Conner kept translating. “You also need to pick teams to row the boat. They don’t have engines.”

Debra stopped, not wanting to push the people so far that they considered taking over this boat. She just wanted them too scared to go out on their own.

“Are supplies still in the lifeboats?” Brian wasn’t deterred. He wanted off the death ship.

Kendle nodded. “There’s a few days’ worth in each. I see everybody brought something from below, so you should have no problem surviving the ten days without more supplies.”

A few people in the crowd gathered around the lifeboat launch pad began to consider exactly what Debra had feared.

Behind them, Eagles came up all three sets of stairs and blocked access to the lower decks.

A few of the rebels shifted toward the Eagles, seeking the Safe Haven comfort that had gotten them this far alive.

Brian sneered at Debra. “I know what you’re doing. It won’t work with me. I’m leaving.”

Debra pointed to the instructions below the lever.

Conner translated her thoughts, omitting the worst of the insults. “Have some of your friends help you. You don’t want to throw your back out right as you make your escape, coward.”

Debra turned and walked through the shocked people with her chin up.

Conner followed, swallowing a smirk.

The Eagles parted for her, showing approval. There weren’t many of them, but it was enough to handle the group of camp people if they tried to rush back downstairs.

A few of the camp members followed Debra and Conner, offering apologies.

The Eagles allowed them to go by, but all of them noted the people who were quick to flee when things got bad. Those people would never be Eagles now.

Kendle remained on the top deck. She was going to give Theo a break shortly, but she also wanted to make sure Brian wasn’t going to be a problem. They couldn’t afford to lose the lifeboat or

the supplies, but Brian was a future danger. It was better that he left.

Radios crackled to life all over the ship with Tonya's exhausted voice. "I have the first results on our water. It's contaminated. That's where the secondary illnesses came from. It's not spreading. We just didn't eliminate all the sources."

Relief went through everyone who heard.

People sneered at Brian's dawning realization that he had overreacted.

Jeff eased over by Kendle as the top deck slowly cleared. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"About what?"

Jeff locked eyes with her. "What's waiting for us on the island?"

Kendle's face melted into terror before she locked it all up. "Shouldn't you be more worried about what's happening now? You have friends dying in the infirmary with no one to care for them."

Jeff tensed at her mental image of Doug. He immediately turned toward the ramp and vanished.

Kendle went up to the bridge to give Theo that break now, almost certain Brian was going to change his mind and stay since they knew the illness wasn't spreading. She was disappointed. It would have saved on drama later.

A tiny part of her also wished Jeff was leaving. *The next time he asks that question, I might have to answer it.*

3

In the infirmary, Angela and the medics were thrilled by Tonya's announcement and proud of the redhead for refusing to leave the lab until the water tests were done. Kenn had finally gone to their cabin, but Tonya had kept working, with Dog guarding the door while watching for the escaped cats.

The infirmary doors opened to admit Kenn. It was obvious he hadn't slept long enough by the bloodshot eyes and drooping shoulders.

"What are you doing here?"

Kenn grunted. "Heard about the deserters. Update?"

Angela was the only one free to do it. The medics were occupied with people going into the final stages of death.

"No change here." Angela didn't tell him they'd lost two more. He would find out when he got the report.

"I stopped by the lab on the way here. Tonya said the level is highest in the fountain water. We need to find out if patients were consuming ship water even after we shut it down. If they all were, we're good. If not, I'm sending people through the ship with Geiger counters to check each water source."

"I'll send someone to wake you soon as we know if we have to search the ship." Angela took his arm.

Kenn let her push him back toward the door. He was asleep on his feet.

Angela stepped out of the infirmary to point at Tonya through the lab glass. “You go too. Now.”

Tonya didn’t argue with the order from the boss. She came out of the lab, locking the door. She helped Kenn toward the stairs, mind shutting down.

Angela went back into the infirmary. As she slowly recovered, she was sharing her energy with the critical patients. So far, it wasn’t working. She didn’t have enough to give. All the descendants had worn themselves out trying to save loved ones or camp children. The only one having any success at making people feel better was Marc. He was writing wills for those who were certain they were going to die. At this point, Morgan wasn’t able to rule out any of them.

Angela dug towels from under the counter, seeing the stack was almost gone. She refilled the alcohol bowl, then went to check on the IV bags for every cot. Angela wasn’t able to talk to the newest patients yet because the medics were taking blood samples for the lab. As soon as they finished, she would handle that.

While she worked, Angela listened to Marc. He was speaking to Jennifer. Kyle was on her other side, sitting on the floor with his cheek against her hand. Kyle hadn’t showered or changed his clothes in days. He was barely eating when the delivery crews brought food. His vigil at Jennifer’s side was constant.

“That’s Autumn. Next is Kyle.” Marc wrote his name on the paper, already sick of the duty he’d been given. He’d handled three other wills so far. It was awful. Marc was aware of the human misery around him as he covered people’s last wishes and affairs, but he was weak and miserable himself. It barely registered unless it was someone he cared about. The same was true of the mess and the harsh smells. After the first few gags, he’d forgotten to notice. It was this mental anguish he couldn’t take much more of.

“Make the camp leave him alone. They’ll know when he’s ready... He’ll pick one of the whores.”

Sweat rolled over Jennifer’s cheeks and neck. Marc took that as a good sign. The critical patients weren’t sweating. They were barely breathing.

“Put my daughter first, with whoever they try for a match. Kyle will always love her more, so they need to make sure she can handle that.”

Kyle groaned against her hand, but he didn’t interrupt. He was surprised Jennifer had found the breath to do this. With every second, he could feel her energy ebbing. The healing he’d done with Kenn’s help had lasted for half a day, but the radiation was stronger. It had snatched her back under and sent her fever through the roof.

“All my belongings...to Kyle. Tell the camp I gave them something...more valuable than property. I’m dying for the dream. Going to the island is the only way America survives. I’ve done my part...to

ensure that. I have no regrets.” Red tears slipped from Jennifer’s lashes.

Marc wiped them away, then finished writing her wishes on the page. When he was finished, he held the book over so she could sign it.

Kyle listened to the weak scratch of the pen on the paper. *I’ll never make it without her.*

Marc gave Jennifer’s hand a light squeeze and tried to send energy. His attempt wasn’t successful. Just like Kyle, there was nothing he could do but watch her fade.

Marc switched to the next cot before he broke into tears. He took the stool between Wade and Whitney. Both men were critical. “Together or one at a time?”

“Together,” the men responded.

Whitney had bright cheeks and the doomed eyes of someone who knew the end was coming for him. Marc wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and dropped the rag onto the floor. It didn’t have a clean spot left. “Repeat after me, if you can: I, your name, being of sound mind and failing body...”

Angela listened to them repeat the same lines she’d heard a thousand times in her life and never thought anything about. *I don’t have a will either.*

Nearby, Morgan finished with Courtney. He stood up to write things on the clipboard hanging from her cot.

Angela joined him. “How is she?”

“Not good, but none of them are.” Morgan held out the clipboard so Angela could read it.

Pregnant was underlined twice.

Angela moaned. The kids were taking an awful cut.

Marc didn't glance over at Angela's sound of misery, but he registered it. "Ready when you are."

"All I have is a burn box." Whitney tried to focus on Marc through bloody vision. "Take care of that for me?"

"Of course. Where is it?" Marc leaned down so the man didn't have to expose his hiding place.

Whitney whispered.

Marc wrote it, again patting a hand while hoping to send healing energy. It was like trying to start a car without gas.

Marc held the book for his signature. Whitney was the worst of the patients he was writing wills for.

"I guess it's my turn." Wade wasn't much better than Whitney, though his voice was stronger. "I have souvenirs from affairs... With women in relationships."

"I'll burn them." Marc didn't mind making the promise, but he was surprised at how many burn boxes he now needed take care of if these people died.

"No, you don't understand." Wade tried to smile. "I want the souvenirs delivered."

Marc snorted laughter, unable to help it.

A few people in the infirmary found it disrespectful, but most of them were happy to hear anything as positive as laughter.

“Okay, who do they go to?” Marc frowned. “Or do you want me to do this quietly?”

“Open. And soon.”

“What if you don’t...?”

Wade couldn’t shrug, but he wanted to. “Then I get to watch them open it.”

Marc got ready to write. “Let me have it.”

“I carry a box in my duffel bag. I like looking at them.” Wade waited for Marc to write. “The first one goes to Adrian. He thinks he’s the father of Nancy’s baby, but he might not be.”

Marc laughed again as he wrote it down. “I can’t wait to deliver that one.” Marc groaned. “Oh, my God! I did not mean that!”

Wade was laughing and wheezing. “I understand. It’s panties.”

Chuckles went through some of the cots around them from the people who were alert enough to hear.

“The next one goes to Theo. Tell him he doesn’t deserve Debra. She’s an amazing friend and lover.”

Marc wrote it down. That one would probably cause problems, but it was still hilarious. Theo thought he was the only one with a claim on the deaf woman, but that wasn’t true.

“I also have one for Doug.”

“Doug?” Marc thought about it. “Peggy!”

Wade blushed a little under his red skin. “I wanted to see if she knew things.”

Marc couldn’t help himself. “Did she?”

Wade smiled through cracked lips. “A few.”

Marc snickered. “Got it. We’re done with that part now, right?”

Wade’s fingers clenched against the filthy sheet. “I have one for Ivan.”

Disapproval came as witnesses realized Jayda had cheated on Ivan. He hadn’t had a relationship other than her.

Wade felt bad for that one, but it didn’t outweigh the fear of death. He needed to come clean about these things. “I also owe little Timmy an apology.”

Marc snorted, making his throat hurt more. “Where the hell did you find the time for all this?”

“Excellent scheduling skills.”

“Fair enough. Okay, *why* did you do all this? Can’t get enough sex or you like living on the edge?”

“Both.” Wade tried to smile. “I’m an Eagle.”

Marc snickered, writing. “Is that it?”

“Uh...no.”

Marc grinned. “I’m impressed. And a little scared.”

“It’s the last one.” Wade’s amusement faded. “Not sure you should deliver it. Could cause real problems.”

Marc waited, letting the man make his decision.

Pain lanced through Wade’s neck and stomach at the same time, reminding him the situation was dire. “Tell Kenn I’m sorry. Not trying to ruin his recovery. I just need closure before I die.”

Marc was stunned. “I didn’t think Tonya was like that anymore.”

Wade frowned. “Not the fiancée. His mistress. I almost caught them together once. Apparently, he’s a wham bam. I offered to take up the slack.”

Marc didn’t know what to say. He wrote it down, not sure if that secret would leave the infirmary. Marc glanced around the people who had heard, hoping they wouldn’t go blabbing until he figured out the best way to handle it.

The glances that came back told Marc it was up to him. All these people had had enough drama. They weren’t willing to tackle Kenn’s infidelity with so many lives in jeopardy.

Marc was relieved. He was also horrified. “How could he do that?”

“Courtney said he was scared of settling down. It happened in the mountain when Tonya was nagging him to propose.”

Marc hadn’t realized Kenn was afraid of getting married. It was almost excusable considering that Tonya was a cheater too, but she hadn’t been for a long time now... It gave him a duty to at least confront Kenn about it when this was all over, to make sure he wasn’t still cheating. If he was, Tonya had a right to know.

Wade shut his eyes. “I should sleep now.”

Marc once again tried to send healing energy, but there was nothing, not even the click of an empty chamber. He stood, swallowing groans that would have matched everyone else in the room as

they shifted in vain to find a comfortable position on the narrow cots.

He traveled the line to Ray, who was the best of these four, but still in critical condition. “Repeat after me, if you can...”

Brittani slowly opened her eyes, waking to disorienting noises and smells. There were coughs, grunts, groans, gags and even crying. It smelled like puke, blood, shit. *Am I dead?* She carefully turned her head.

Sharp pain tore through one temple. *Nope; can't be dead if I feel pain.*

Her vision focused. *I'm in the infirmary. Wow. That's a lot of sick people.*

Adrenaline helped bring alertness. She struggled to sit up.

“Take it easy. You have a concussion.” Ed was glad Brittani had finally woken. After being the one to handle her injury, he had been terrified he'd done something wrong.

Brittani stayed sitting on the cot, staring at the misery throughout the room. She spotted people she knew, people she loved and people she hated. The illness was having no mercy on anyone. Her next thought was of family. “Have you seen my brother?”

“I need a hand over here!” Harry shouted for help with Whitney.

Ed hurried over.

Brittani scanned again, spotting bodies piled along one side of the wall, wrapped in bloody, vomit splattered sheets. Her fear fled, replaced by panic. She staggered to her feet and began walking through the cots, searching for her brother. “Lou?”

As she went by Daryl, he reached out for her.

“Daryl?” Brittani took his hand, kneeling. “I can’t find my brother.”

Daryl tried to talk to her, but there was too much blood in his mouth. He pushed it out the side, letting it roll down his cheek.

Brittani watched the bloody spit form a pool on the pillow. *That’s blood. He’s bleeding inside.* “Oh, God.”

Daryl tried to nod, but he didn’t have the strength. He shut his eyes, hoping she didn’t leave.

Brittani sank to her knees by his cot, not sure what to do. Around her, the medics were working on people who were clearly about to die. She wasn’t sure if she should call someone over because everyone had soiled bedding. *They need help here.* Brittani pushed aside her pounding headache to stand. “Where do you want me?”

Morgan was glad to have someone on that side of the room. “Right where you are. Bathe the hot ones in alcohol. Yell if they go into convulsions or stop breathing.”

Brittani stared. *I don’t know if I can do this. I do know I have to try.* She approached the desk, following her nose to the alcohol.

Brittani was the only one to react to the infirmary doors opening and the sound of footsteps. She turned around. “What do you want?”

“They came to help.” Ralph indicated the people behind him. “They needed an escort. Put them to work. I’m going back to the camp.” The elderly miner left the room.

It was obvious he was exhausted.

The camp members came to Brittani, looking to her for leadership. Some of them wore masks and gloves.

Brittani started to call a medic, then remembered they were busy. She spotted Marc and Angela in the far corner, speaking to Grant. They didn’t need to be disturbed either. She squared her shoulders. “Bathe the hot ones in alcohol. Shout for a medic if they go into convulsions or stop breathing.” She was proud of herself for remembering Morgan’s words. “As soon as he says everything’s under control, or at least stable, we need to clear cots for the medics to sleep and sanitize this room. It’s not safe to be in here without a mask. Someone find a box and pass them out.”

Camp members did as they were instructed, all of them scanning for friends and family while gaping at the bodies. It was shocking.

Brittani forced herself not to think about the dead. *We need to concentrate on the living while we still have living to concentrate on.*

The elevator dinged.

Anyone with the energy left turned to see who it was.

Samantha staggered off the elevator, carrying little Amy. “I don’t know what to do!”

Samantha was wild-eyed, with crazy blonde curls hanging over wrinkled clothes and a terrified face.

Brittani took the child from the pregnant woman. “Go get a shower. Get out of here.”

Samantha wanted to stay.

“No pregnant women in the infirmary.” Brittani didn’t need to ask to know that answer.

“You heard her.” Morgan offered support, glad to have another voice of reason. He was also anticipating the break she had just spoken of. If he didn’t lie down soon, he would fall.

Brittani scanned for a cot. There were two of them. Both had bodies.

She pointed to Trent, a man from Ciemus who appeared strong and calm. “Move one of those bodies.” She pointed at another camp member. “Find a sheet to put over the cot. Dig through the cabinets.”

Trent didn’t hesitate to go over. He also didn’t check to see who it was. He lifted the body and moved it to the pile along the wall.

Gabe hurried over with a sheet and spread it out. “One of your stitches is bleeding.”

“That must be what I feel running down the side of my face.” Brittani put the child on the cot and

motioned toward the alcohol. “Start bringing her fever down while I throw on a Band-Aid.”

Still in the doorway, Samantha hesitated, torn. She could see Neil over in the corner by Marc and Angela. *I want to be with Amy.*

Neil glanced across the infirmary. *Get out of here right now.*

Samantha turned and left.

“He stopped breathing again!” Angela began compressions on Whitney.

Morgan brought over the needle of adrenaline he’d already had ready.

Harry charged the paddles.

Marc stepped out of the way, then stumbled to the next cot. He’d only been here for a few hours, but it felt like days.

Electricity ran through the room, drawing fresh attention to the newest crisis.

“Clear!”

Angela listened with the stethoscope. “I have a pulse.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, hoping when their turn came, she also found one.

“Help!” Marc was on his knees next to Ellie, one of the youngest camp orphans. “She’s not breathing!”

The despondent medics hurried to the child as Marc tried to force energy he didn’t have.

Angela swayed on her feet, focused on Marc. The adult deaths had taken a toll on him, but this was the first child. He wasn’t going to be able to

handle it. As she watched, the tips of his hair began to turn gray.

Marc jerked away from Angela's touch when she came to him. "Help me!"

"Clear!"

More of Marc's hair turned white.

Angela tugged on his arm, dragging him to the door when he resisted.

Marc was forced to let her. He'd never been this weak, but he kept trying to send energy, causing more of his hair to turn white.

"Stop it! What if Charlie needs it? Or Cody?! Stop wasting what little you have." Angela staggered down the hall, heartbroken. *I should have seen this coming. This is all my fault.*

"TOD is 6:43am, December 7th." Morgan's horrified voice echoed behind them.

Marc slowly trudged after Angela, weeping.

Part Two:

“So it’s true, when all is said and done, grief is the price we pay for love.”

— E.A. Bucchianeri, *Brushstrokes of a Gadfly*.

Chapter Fourteen

Strike Where It Hurts

6pm

1

Kenn woke in a quick burst, sitting upright the instant his alarm went off. *They let me sleep for a full shift. That can't be good.*

Kenn hit the off button as Tonya stirred next to him.

Nothing. I hear nothing. The neat tan walls of their cabin weren't thick enough to mute noise from the rest of the ship, but it was silent. Kenn reached for his radio on the end table.

"Let me shut the bathroom door." Tonya hurried in and turned on the water. Their radios picked up details. She didn't want everyone listening to her pee.

For a change, Kenn didn't stare at her bare ass as she ran for the bathroom. She refused to sleep any other way, even now. Kenn had stayed dressed and ready to roll. He keyed the mike, adrenaline making his heart pound. "Who has an update for me?"

The radio crackled right back. "Outside your door."

Kenn blew out a breath, mind crashing. *Thank you.* He'd dreamed of waking to an empty ship full

of dead bodies. It would be a while before he forgot that one. “Copy.”

Conner sounds tired. That means Debra kept him working. Good. Maybe I'll find out she's covered everything, and I can just go straight to rounds. Kenn swung his stiff legs over the bed. He hadn't even removed his boots, worried about not being able to get them back on fast enough. He stood, stretching. Body odor wafted up his nose.

Kenn smoothed his neck length black hair and slapped on some deodorant. There was still an hour before the next batch of lab tests would be ready. Tonya had time for a hot shower. He didn't. He'd adapted to functioning when not in a pristine state, but he still hated it.

Kenn opened the door. He frowned. *No one's...* Kenn glanced down to find Dog lying along the baseboard, blending in. “What gives?”

Shh... They're close.

The corridor was empty; the walls no longer glowed in contented green.

Kenn motioned. “Get in here.”

Dog scurried inside, snout curling.

The beautiful timber wolf was bigger up close than Kenn remembered. He didn't usually get near Dog at all. They didn't like each other, though Kenn had let most of that go a while back. He just wasn't sure if Dog had.

Kenn shut the door, aware of the irony of a terrified wolf being sent to update him. “Must be bad news.”

Dog scratched a layer of dust from his fur. *More deaths.*

“New illnesses?”

No.

“Good. What else?”

We’re going through the reserve water too fast. Someone is stealing or the delivery numbers are wrong.

Kenn pulled on his jacket, then took his notebook from the pocket. “Go on.”

Debra wants me to sniff them out. We need a master list of who isn’t accounted for.

Kenn frowned. “I thought they all were.”

Dog licked his paw. *Ian’s numbers are short half a dozen.*

“I’ll cover it on rounds.” Kenn tried to smile at the animal. “You can go with me.”

Dog stopped licking and started scratching.

Kenn grunted. “Is that it?”

Dog’s ears tilted. *Yes. The cats have gone by. Let me out.*

Kenn opened the door. “I’ll be ready in two minutes.”

Dog sat in the shadows. *It won’t take you that long.*

Kenn shrugged, shutting the door. He had no idea what the wolf... Kenn’s nose curled at the new, awful odor in the cabin. His stomach clenched. “Dog!”

Tonya came out of the bathroom. “What’s going on?”

Kenn grabbed his kit and fled. “Dog farted. Take cover!” He slammed the cabin door and hurried down the hall.

“You both suck!”

Dog huffed as Tonya’s shouts continued.

Kenn swung his kit on. “You’ll pay for that. Those cats listen to her.”

I know. I chose to strike where it hurts.

“I don’t understand.”

I gassed their leader.

Kenn groaned. “That means I’m a target too. Damn it!”

Dog chuffed, leading the way. *If they attack, I’ll use you as a decoy. Expect it.*

“Thanks for the warning.”

Dog pushed the door open, holding it for Kenn with his leg. *I have to keep you alive. I don’t have to save you from your mate’s spastic assassins. That’s all on you.*

Kenn took them to the top deck of the ship. He had a list of stops to make. He’d chosen to start here and work his way through the huge cruise liner. It wouldn’t be a straight shot because of the way the ship was designed, but it would finish him up in the infirmary where he would help their sick patients if he had any energy left. He planned to end the evening in the mess with a hot cup of coffee at a quiet booth, so he could go over his notes to make sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. So far, he hadn’t, other than a few unaccounted-for people.

Dog stayed by Kenn, falling into alert mode as warm ocean air rushed over his fur, blowing off more of the dust. It was hard to smell the cats up here. The only thing he was picking up was salt and fish—two things he enjoyed when he wasn't watching for an ambush.

Kenn trotted up the metal stairs to the bridge. “Coming for updates.”

Theo turned around in the captain chair, orbs bloodshot. “Let me know when you're ready.”

Kenn got his book out. The bridge smelled like fresh chemicals, telling him the cleaning crew had been by again. Outside, it smelled like rot. A stiff wind was pushing it their way, warning of more weather problems coming. “Shoot.”

“The first thing on my list is important. You may not think so, but it's understandable. You're overloaded.” Finished recording numbers for this hour, Theo shoved his notebook into the bulky pockets of his jumper. Many of the volunteers had chosen them from the list of approved clothing.

Kenn frowned. “Whatever you tell me will be taken under consideration. Now spit it out.”

“Kendle's state of mind is dangerous.”

Kenn snorted at Theo's declaration. “No shit.”

Theo gestured. “That's what I'm talking about. I don't mean she's a danger to the boss. I mean she's jumpy. We've already had one shooting by a twitchy person. We could have another if she doesn't calm down. I recommend giving her a job that keeps her mind busy too.”

Kenn wrote it in this book. “Anything else?”

Theo frowned at the curtness. “Is this payback?”

Kenn grunted, pen hovering over the paper. “This is because I’m busy. Your team will pay you back. I don’t need to be involved.”

Theo was relieved. “Okay, good.” He pointed at the clipboard. “Fuel is going to be a problem, but we’re okay for a week, according to Grant’s calculations. I’ll go over them today. I’m also shutting down things we don’t need. There will be areas where lights are off, or service is not functioning. Most of that is me, but if you make a list, I can confirm it.”

Dog sat down nearby, staying to the shadows. He listened to the update, storing the information while scanning for intruders.

“Debra has a water crew about to try to filter a batch. I assume that’s going to make a lot of noise. You may want to warn people.”

Kenn keyed his radio. “I’ll have updates for everyone over the next hour. You’re going to be hearing noises. That’s us, taking care of essential services.” Kenn looked at Theo. “Next?”

Theo patted his personal dosimeter. “Air quality is good. It’s my opinion we can stay here while people recover, but we should continue 24-hour monitoring.”

Kenn nodded. “Agreed.”

Theo consulted his list. “Last thing. Debra said to tell you my relief will be here around 4am.”

Kenn scanned his notes, then looked at Dog.

Dog licked his tail. *I have nothing on that.*

“Did she say who?” Kenn prepared to write it down.

“No.” Theo didn’t like giving that answer. “I forgot to ask.”

“Do you know where Debra is right now?”

Dog pawed the floor. *She’s doing a mission in the brig.*

Kenn didn’t ask for details. The brig was third on his list. He would find out soon enough. “Anything else while I’m up here?”

Theo shook his head, sighing.

Kenn took in how tired the man appeared. “Are you going to be okay until your relief arrives?”

“Sure. The mess sent up extra strong coffee and Kendle comes up every couple hours to check on me. All I have to do is watch the numbers on the monitors, drink my coffee, and mourn my friends.”

Kenn didn’t have anything to say to that. He took the stairs that would lead him to the camp area. While he did need an update on all of the places he was about to go, he was saving the infirmary for last for exactly the opposite reason. He wasn’t ready to mourn yet. He was still fighting for life.

Raised voices greeted Kenn as soon as he reached the bottom of the stairwell.

Dog moved in front of Kenn to provide guard protection, hoping he wasn’t forced to be violent with a camp member.

Kenn braced, then entered the corridor where most of the camp was now gathered.

“There’s Kenn. Ask him.” Ian pointed. Like Travis, the man was covered in scrapes, scratches, bruises. So was Greg, though his had come from the great cat escape.

Half a dozen camp members rushed to Kenn, with Perry in the lead. Behind him were half a dozen others Kenn wished they hadn’t brought along, but Perry was especially troubling. Kenn hadn’t nailed down why yet, but he was certain if he spent enough time with the man, he’d find something awful. Perry had that vibe of a possible serial killer but at the least, a child molester.

Kenn pointed at the full garbage can and trash on the floor. “You’ve only been here a little while. Clean that shit up!”

Those closest did, casting glares at the people who’d actually made the mess.

The smell hit Kenn next. People were still in the same clothes, with dirty hair and smudges from where they’d been digging through areas that they shouldn’t have been in. “And why isn’t everyone showered?”

The camp members who had already cleaned up hid smirks. They’d been told to mind their own business when they complained about it.

“You can’t keep us here.” Perry’s wife, Ellen, pointed at Kenn. Her saggy breasts heaved in indignation. “It’s against the law.”

Perry stepped up to Kenn, lean frame stiff with aggression. “You’re going to let us go or—”

“Or what?” Kenn stepped forward, bumping his bigger chest against Perry. “Or you’ll riot? You’ll shoot somebody?” Kenn shoved him, knocking him into Ellen. The couple bounced off each other, grunting.

Kenn glowered at all of them. “Make a normal request like a civilized person or I’ll lock you up.”

Dog padded back in front of Kenn, growling his support.

Perry’s hand went to the gun on his belt. “Get out of my way.”

Kenn gestured toward the open door. “You go straight down those stairs to the brig. Go on.”

Perry didn’t back down, but everyone behind him realized Kenn was serious. They waited to see if Perry was getting locked up or if he had secured freedom for them. Cowards in the mob always worked the same way. Kenn kept that in mind as he slowly took out his notebook. “I’m writing it down as an update for the boss. She’s the one who decides how much supplies you get. She’ll organize a crew to lower those lifeboats, so you don’t damage our ship. You are not being kept here against your will. You just have to wait a little longer for us to be able to help you leave.”

Most of the rebels were okay with that.

The people behind them were members of the camp who were either okay with what was going on in leadership, or they supported the decisions being

made. They were in chairs and doorways, observing.

But you still aren't willing to risk your own asses, are you? Kenn couldn't help the bitterness. The camp was making a lot of progress. There were only a dozen people he considered to be a problem anymore. That was amazing considering they had over three hundred people on this ship, but the troublemakers were still taking up his time when others needed it more. Kenn gestured at Perry. "Brig until the lifeboats are launched or stay here where you can access books, games and a bathroom with no one watching you shit?"

Perry retreated. "I'm leaving at dawn. I'll shoot my way out if I have to." He shoved around Ellen and disappeared into their cabin.

Kenn gave the rest of the group a small glare, memorizing names—*Ellen, Linda, Gail, Terry, Bobby Jean, Clifford.*

The three troublemakers who had caused problems yesterday were added to his list, despite the fact that they were all sitting on the couch together and not joining their fellow rebels this time. Kenn didn't trust it, mostly because they were sitting together. They had no history of doing that. The men were friends; the women were friends. They'd never spent time together as couples. "Anyone else have questions or messages for the boss?"

A few people came forward.

“Do you have a list of the dead?” Ralph’s oldest son, Randy, joined Kenn, keeping his hands in view. “An updated list?”

“I haven’t been to the infirmary yet. I’ll try to have that for you with the next delivery.” Kenn made another note in his book, recommending the mess include careful use of sedatives in the next meal for the camp. He doubted Angela would approve it, but it was almost a necessity at this point. “The infirmary needs help. Does anyone want to go?” Kenn waited, not expecting much.

Half a dozen hands went up.

Kenn gestured. “Stop by the prep area near the lab for information and protective gear.” Kenn stepped aside so the freshly washed people could leave.

He could feel the near panic still lingering, but there wasn’t anything he could do or say that would make it better. “I’ll be doing rounds for the next few hours if you need me.”

People muttered as he left, disappointed by the lack of comfort.

Where to now? Dog was still on the lookout for the cats, but not twitching as much as earlier. He was hoping the angry felines would leave him and the human alone because of the duty they had right now.

“I need to check on our guest.” Kenn wondered why everything suddenly appeared so dusty. Even Dog’s fur was speckled. It hadn’t been that long since the ship had received a cleaning.

Dog stayed outside as Kenn entered the brig. He didn't want to be around Adrian or Kronus. Both males made his heart hurt and he was already stressed.

Kenn scanned as he entered. He spotted Adrian on the stool, appearing rough but calm. Kenn had been worried Kronus would make another attempt while he was asleep. It was a relief to find a normal smelling room that was neat and clean, and running according to schedule.

Ramer appeared to be asleep. Kronus was muttering, on the edge of waking.

“He’s been drugged a lot over the last two days. We need to let him regain consciousness and really feed him...or kill him. Tell your boss the time has come for that decision.”

Kenn frowned at Adrian’s wording. It grew as he took in Adrian’s appearance. He hadn’t cleaned up yet either. “She’s your boss too.”

“Only until she kicks me off the ship. Then I’m my own boss again.” Adrian glanced up with bloodshot eyes as more footsteps echoed.

“Hey, Dog!” Charlie kept going by the wolf. “I’ll scratch your ears after I put this stuff down.”

The evening meal was being delivered. Kenn checked his watch, frowning that they still weren’t on a regular schedule. Then he remembered Brittani wasn’t running the mess now and Jayda was sleeping in any empty cell while Adrian took a shift.

Adrian envied Charlie the youth and good mood. Wearing his old Eagle gear to let people

know who he was, Charlie was the center of attention everywhere he went, except the infirmary. Adrian had been stuck in the brig so far. It was tiresome.

Conner came in behind Charlie, also carrying bags. He smiled at his dad. “This is dinner and breakfast. Gus has them serving two meals at a time for efficiency. He said it might cut down on how fast we’re going through food. Brittani usually covers that.”

Adrian scanned the boy and didn’t find any signs of illness in Conner’s lean body or tired movements. Adrian let himself breathe. He had been worried.

The sweaty boys sat the bags near Adrian’s post. They knew not to get close to the cells.

Stanley came in last, carrying the smallest load. He eyed the cells nervously as he put the delivery on the desk. Stanley didn’t like being in the brig. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets so he couldn’t have an accident in here.

More footsteps echoed as Debra came down the stairs to join them, clothes wrinkled, hair wild. She made a quick gesture.

Conner gave Charlie an apologetic shrug. “She needs me again.”

Charlie didn’t want to be on delivery duty with Stanley, but it was far from being the worst chore on the ship. “Have fun.” He tried not to be bitter that Debra hadn’t chosen him for the job. He knew sign language, just not well.

“Can I get a meal here?!” Kronus banged on the cell.

Everyone jumped. They hadn’t heard him rise from the cot and come to the window.

Adrian began digging through the bags to distribute the food to the prisoners.

“Not that drugged garbage! Give me yours.”

Adrian frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with this food.”

Kronus pointed. “Then you eat it.”

Adrian hesitated.

Debra snickered. *He’s got you there.*

Adrian reluctantly removed the food pouch he’d just attached to his belt. He extended it through the cell window.

Kronus grabbed the pouch. He immediately tore it open and began to eat.

Adrian turned toward Kenn, refusing assistance when he stumbled. “Jayda will be taking over my shift soon.”

“I’ll get another man in here soon as I can.”

Adrian nodded at Kenn’s promise. He was on the edge of collapsing again already.

Kenn waited in case Adrian had more, willing to listen to the man in this situation. He regretted having to use him as a guard when he was more valuable in a leadership position, but there was no way Safe Haven would accept that. They were scared about the illness, uneasy about the lack of information, and angry about Kendle and Conner being put on point with Debra. If he added Adrian

to the mix, it might be the straw that broke the camel's back.

“The boss would like an update on her kids.” Adrian didn't look at any of them. “I can feel her worrying about it and feeling too guilty to go find out. She thinks every minute of energy she can spare should be spent in the lab or the infirmary.”

Kenn made a note of it. “Cargo areas are next on my list. I'll make sure she gets an update.”

Adrian began distributing the food to the rest of the prisoners.

Kronus kept munching on the tuna sandwich, watching them all. He didn't care that he'd been wrong about the food. He didn't trust Adrian.

Adrian finished, aware of Kenn leaving and Debra lingering. Adrian also knew sign language, but unlike Charlie, he excelled at it. He'd been the one to teach Conner. He gestured at her.

Debra enjoyed having another adult to speak to. She smiled as she answered his question.

They conversed in silence, aggravating Kronus. “What are you talking about? Do you know how rude that is?”

Debra snickered again.

Adrian made another gesture.

Debra shrugged.

Kronus swallowed the last piece of fresh bread. “What's going on?”

Adrian grinned. “She wants to see you fall down.”

Kronus snorted. “It’ll take more than you to beat on me.”

“Actually, all it took was one fish.”

Kronus realized he had been tricked again. The acidic taste of medication brushed the back of his throat. He stumbled against the side of the cot and sat, jarring it. “You dirty little bitch!”

Adrian laughed at him, not holding back.

Kenn tried to keep track of what was going on in the brig as he trotted down the next set of stairs. He was impressed by the trick that had either come from Adrian or Debra. When Adrian had said Angela was consumed between the lab and the infirmary, he hadn’t been exaggerating. All plans going on right now were coming from other people. “Where are the kids?”

Dog took the lead. *They moved to the cabins on the same floor where Samantha and Neil live.*

Kenn scanned his book as he walked, realizing Samantha’s cabin hadn’t been put on the cleaning list yet. Amy had been sick there, so it needed to be quarantined until a cleaning crew could get to it.

Tracy stepped out of the shadows at the end of the corridor. “Who is it? What do you want?!”

Candy appeared at the far end of the corridor, weapon in hand. “State your business.”

Both women were wearing heavy winter gear and aggressive expressions. They weren’t waiting for an attacker to get near the kids. He approved. “It’s Kenn, plus an escort. I want an update.”

Tracy breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s what we want too. We don’t have illnesses here so far, but we’re checking all the kids every hour for fevers.”

Kenn swept Candy’s rounded form. “What about yourselves? Any symptoms?”

Tracy shook her head. “Other than being tired and worried, we’re fine. We’re letting Molly have a nap with the babies right now. She said she could only take so much of the infirmary. When they wake up, the older kids and Candy will take a rest. After that, it’s my turn. We broke it up into shifts a few hours ago.”

“You remembered your Eagle training. Good girl.”

Tracy tried not to feel condescended to. Kenn was only trying to help. “That’s my update. What’s yours?”

“I haven’t been by the infirmary yet, so I don’t have current information.” Kenn looked at the wolf again.

Dog snorted, pawing at the ground. *Bodies are waiting to be transferred. Some are big. Some are small.*

Kenn shrugged at the anxious kids. “I’ll try to get you an update with the next meal delivery. As far as I know, Leeann is alive. We would have all felt Angela’s grief if not.”

That made sense to them.

The kids and den mothers were stashed in three cabins down the hall from Samantha’s quarters. The doors were open; tiny faces peered at him. All the

kids were sporting surgical masks. It would have been cute if they had been playing dress up.

Kenn scanned the walls of cabins he could see into and found the spells Ian had mentioned in his report. Kenn recognized them too. However, he didn't understand the intent.

Missy came to Kenn, bundled in a jean jumper and winter coat. "Someone's coming."

Kenn spun around, hand going to his gun.

Candy lifted her weapon.

Tracy waited to see if she needed hers, hoping she didn't. She was too tired to be sure of her aim.

A shadow appeared in the corridor, stumbling toward them.

"Hold your fire." Kenn recognized the castaway by her scarred arms. "It's Kendle."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Candy holstered, wincing at a cramp in her stomach. *It's too soon, baby. Go to sleep.*

Kenn scowled, pointing at Candy. "Get her off her feet, right now. We can't deliver a baby in the middle of a radiation crisis." Kenn keyed the radio. "I need one person for private guard duty. Meet me in the lab in half an hour." Kenn gestured to Tracy. "Be ready for someone to relieve you."

Missy tugged on his arm.

Kenn leaned down, expecting more advice about Kendle.

"Watch out for Tonya. She's not safe."

Chills broke out on his skin. "I will. Thank you."

Kenn put a hand on Kendle's arm as she started to walk by. "Go to bed. Six hours minimum. That's an order from the boss."

Kendle switched directions. She hadn't eaten or showered yet. She couldn't. She was dead on her feet.

Kenn hated to leave Tracy on duty alone, but there were a lot of stops waiting and a lot of other issues that had to be handled.

Tracy knew what he was about to do. "I'll be fine until relief gets here. I don't need Dog to stay. You handle the camp. I've got the brats."

Kenn snorted, walking away. He hoped she really was able to handle it because he didn't have any free hands at the moment. If he had, he would have sent them to the lab after Missy's warning. As it was, that was still a few stops away. He was now very anxious to get there.

Chapter Fifteen
Triple Pickup

1

“I need to check the waste area now. I understand those smells are hard on you. Wait for me on the entertainment deck if you like.”

Maybe. Dog wanted to take Kenn up on the offer, but it felt like shirking his duty. He stayed next to the man as they went to the opposite side of the ship. The temperature dropped noticeably as they descended the dirty stairs.

“Who’s there?!”

I’m really tired of that question. “It’s Kenn. I’m here for an update.” He entered the incinerating room, nose curling at the odor. It horrified him to find piles of personal items laying on baggies, with cardboard boxes of shoes slid under the workbench. *Those belonged to people I was assigned to care for. This can’t get any worse.*

Allison was writing down details about the body they were burning. Allison’s perfect makeup was missing; her glowing curls hung in an efficient braid. *So she’s adaptable and bossy. Good to know.*

Zack was nearby, trying to strip the next stiff body of personal effects.

Monica came to Kenn, wiping sweat off her neck. She’d been helping wherever she landed, then

heading back to the original job for the next round. “We’re doing this one, and one more. Then we’re shutting down to let everyone rest while the machinery cools off. It isn’t meant to run this way.”

They all waited for Kenn’s decision as he scanned the clipboard.

“That’s fine.” Kenn read the list, wincing at the names. He knew all of them, though he hadn’t been close to the kids.

“Have you seen my sons?” Zack was barely able to stand on his feet, but he hadn’t been able to stay in the infirmary. He knew his boys weren’t in there, other than Eric, and that was enough.

Morgan had determined that Zack did have a low level of radiation poisoning, but he was also exhausted and still healing from previous injuries. He’d been ordered to take meds, wear a mask, and get bedrest. Zack had come here instead.

Kenn checked his notes. “Timmy is in the mess. Mike is in the camp area, though I believe he volunteered for open duty on the last round. You’ll probably see him down here at some point.”

Zack scowled, voice sharpening. “No, I won’t. No kids are allowed down here. Don’t let them carry bodies!”

Kenn agreed now that he’d heard it. “Okay.”

Allison finished recording the personal effects. About an hour into this job, she had started crying. A full shift into the chore, her body had been aching and heart breaking. After days on the job, now she

was numb. *Nothing I go through during the rest of my life will ever match this horror.*

“Help Zack to the shower, then take him to the infirmary for another dose of meds. While you’re there, get one yourself. I want you to sleep, then report to the lab prep area for duty at the beginning of the next shift. Keep your radios on in case there’s an emergency in your area.”

Monica and Zack left, grateful for Kenn’s order. No one here had the energy for drama or even shallow conversations. It was information only flowing through the waste area.

Kenn joined Allison at the table. He scanned the neatly labeled baggies, wincing. She was handling Nathan and Whitney now.

“Coming in!” Vicky entered the waste area carrying two large bags of garbage. She tossed them onto the pile and flounced over to the table. “Where do you want me next?” She was happy Allison was too tired to be bossy.

Kenn motioned. “You can take a break.”

Vicky broke into a grin. “Awesome. Now that the fun floor is open, I can borrow a book or maybe find batteries for my videogame.” She twirled her ponytail. “I wonder if they had any porn on board.”

Kenn scowled at her.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Allison snapped before Kenn could scold the flaky girl. “People are dying all over the ship, people we know and love.”

Vicky shrugged, twirl pausing. “I don’t love any of them.”

Allison shoved Kenn out of the way, slapping her clipboard into Vicky’s hands. “What about Whitney? Do you have any feelings for him? Because he’s dead.”

Kenn eased out of the area, not caring if they came to blows. If it wasn’t for needing more hands, Vicky would still be locked in a cell. Kenn kept walking as loud voices echoed behind him.

Dog peered up. *Where to?* He’d waited in the hall.

“The fun floor. We have the weapons stashed there. Angela thought it was a good place to hide it; right in front of their eyes.”

She put it there so you could protect her people. She believed that is where they would be the most.

Kenn felt shame as he realized Dog was right. Everything Angela did was for the herd. She hadn’t tried to hide weapons. She wanted them available to her people too, not just her army.

Dog stayed with Kenn, but not so far ahead that he was an easy target for prowling cats. No one had spotted them in hours.

Kenn took yet another stairwell, proud of himself for not getting lost yet. He took them to the entertainment floor, noticing what Theo had told him about services not being active. The beautiful fountain in the center of the open deck was no longer gushing and the only light was from small lamps at each intersection.

Kenn walked through quietly, scanning for intruders, but he didn't feel anyone down here. He had read the report earlier of camp members trying to have fun, but he didn't think anyone would be here overnight. With the main utilities turned off, it was creepy.

Kenn paused in front of the bookstore. After a few seconds of deliberation, he went in.

The bookstore was small but cleverly packed into the walls to create a generous selection. It was also cramped. Kenn worried he would break something as he went through.

Dog caught a smell that terrified him. *I'm going to check on the kids. You'll be okay by yourself, right?*

Kenn snorted. "Go on, you coward. Get out of here."

Kenn listened to the sound of Dog's nails on the tile floors as he took off running.

Kenn scanned and found a few shadowy areas where almost anything could be hiding. "I want you to understand I'm not part of your war."

Kenn moved to the informational side of the store, getting his flashlight out so he could identify the correct shelf. "I carry you around on my shoulders; I let you sleep on my bed. I make sure you get fed and I scoop your little turds. *All* those services are in danger if you involve me in your war."

Kenn shined his light on the parenting section, skipping the popular titles from the month before the war.

Kenn chose a book that had three copies, not bothering to scan the blurb. He had bought this for Angela during her pregnancy, though he'd done it for a different reason. He'd wanted Angela to feel alone and turn to him. He needed Courtney to feel like she could do it on her own, because he wasn't going to be there for her like he had been with Angela. During Charlie's gestation, he'd still been convincing Angela that he was a good guy. He'd eventually worn her down through awful tactics. She never would have succumbed to him on her own. He had been thrilled with the success of his manipulations then. Now, all he felt was crushing shame he didn't know how to get rid of.

Kenn chose a red gift bag from the stack on the counter. He put the book inside, then folded the bag so he could stuff it into his pocket. *Damn Wade.* Kenn had heard about the wills, about Wade's indiscriminate womanizing. He had been relieved at first, but now, he was simply scared. Even if Wade was the father, Tonya was still going to find out about his affair with Courtney.

Kenn stepped out of the bookstore, hoping he wasn't about to add to his shame. He'd chosen to do it this way so his secret would only be revealed to the few people who needed to know until he could figure out how to tell his mate.

Click. Click.

The radio on his belt lit up in the now familiar, hated code for a body pick up.

He sighed, keying his mike. "I'm on the way." Kenn checked the weapons alarm, then headed to the infirmary to see who had just died.

Kenn disappeared around the corner.

The bookstore's lower swinging door opened from the inside. Two cats eased out and padded down the corridor, following the scent of a scared Dog.

2

Kenn stopped at the lab before he went into the misery of the infirmary. He needed to see for himself that Tonya was okay. Missy's warning had crept him out.

Jeff had been getting bad vibes for the last half hour. He had moved from a spot in the corridor to right in front of the glass entrance a few minutes ago. He slid aside to let Kenn enter.

Kenn noticed the vest beneath Jeff's Eagle gear and approved. The mood was dangerous.

Kenn paused as Cathy and Timmy came down the hall. Cathy was dressed in slacks and a sweater, while Timmy had followed the Eagles with jeans and a black shirt. They made an interesting couple, but Kenn hadn't decided if he was okay with it. *Older men chase younger women. It's not supposed to be the other way around. ...right?*

Timmy smiled. “We volunteered to be your private duty person.”

He doesn't seem to mind the gender flip. Kenn scanned them. He assumed they had hated mess duty; it was closed for the night anyway. Gus and Brittani's parents were showering. Then the hardworking couple would join the camp. Kenn expected Gus to go to the infirmary after that. There was no reason Cathy and Timmy couldn't be put to work if they had spare energy. They couldn't handle the sick people or the brig, but the kids would be easy duty for them. *I hope.* “Go to the bottom deck cabins for guard duty over a quarantined group. Take your own supplies.”

Cathy and Timmy disappeared down the hall as Kenn went into the lab and kissed Tonya on her pale cheek while scanning for trouble. Angela was on the couch again, wrinkled and curled into a ball. Kenn assumed Marc was in their cabin. The little he'd seen of Marc had verified he wasn't ready to return to action.

Kenn dropped a small pack of Oreos into Tonya's lab coat pocket, aware that Jeff had noticed but Tonya hadn't. She was deep into her work. He liked that.

Kenn kept up a steady run of positive, calm thoughts to keep both women out of his head.

Tonya felt Kenn's closed mind but didn't probe. *I have bigger things to worry about right now than whatever you're hiding from the boss.*

Kenn flushed.

Tonya pointed to the book in front of her. “We’ve narrowed it down as much as we can. There are multiple areas of exposure: unfiltered water, actual dunkings, and then people who were on the top deck when the last blast came in with the wind. The crews are working on a second batch of water filtering now. The first batch levels were too high. We’ve increased the amount of bleach. That’s all the updates I have.”

Angela understood Tonya was tired, but she knew Kenn needed more details. “The last mission team was in the water for a long time. We held descendant lessons on the top deck. The water in the tanks when we boarded was cleaned and ready for the chartered passengers. We cycled it through. We didn’t know to test the refills. I also spoke to Courtney and Leann. Both of them filled canteens at the fountain by the cargo area. They didn’t know not to use ship water.”

Kenn made a few notes in his book, thrilled they had been able to narrow it. “If that holds, then we do have it contained. All sick people are in the infirmary. A third of all areas have been cleaned. It’ll take another 48 hours, but the entire ship will be sanitized except for the infirmary.”

Angela slowly sat up, not looking at her withered body. “Brittani felt well enough to help in the infirmary while you were sleeping. She’s got half of it cleaned. It was hard to move some people.”

Kenn could imagine how awful it felt to wait for people to die so she could clean their cot.

“The people who died first had a higher exposure or were exposed longer. Everyone else had a lower dose or was exposed for less time. It means we might have some hope for recovery now that we’re giving them the right amount of medication.” Tonya wanted to give Kenn some good news. She’d heard the call for a body pick up and assumed he would be the one to do it.

“A group of people want to leave the ship. I told them they could go.” Kenn wasn’t sure if he should have locked them in the brig.

“You did the right thing.” Angela stretched, locking down on her emotions. “We can’t keep them here.”

Kenn rotated toward the door, squaring his shoulders. It was time to step into the infirmary and pretend it didn’t hurt to see Safe Haven’s strongest people brought to their knees. Even the people he didn’t like, he preferred up and fighting with him, rather than lying on their backs and puking. He hoped that when all was said and done, they felt the same about him. Watching this camp die of radiation poisoning was the worst thing he had ever experienced in his life.

Angela pushed the button on her belt. “We have the situation contained now. We tracked the sources and eliminated or shut them off. There should be no more deaths in any area...except the infirmary for people who are already ill. I can’t promise you any of them will recover. I can only promise you that no one else will fall ill.” Angela took a breath. “Anyone

who wants to leave the ship may do so. Be on the top deck at noon if you feel you need to leave us. There are already supplies in those boats. I'm sorry we can't spare anything else. Thank you for all the time you spent in Safe Haven. We wish you luck."

Kenn hoped her announcement kept the peace. He stepped inside the infirmary and did a quick scan to find the first target on his list. He approached the cots along the far wall, pulling the gift bag from his pocket. His hearing registered misery on every level, as did his other senses.

Kenn locked eyes with Courtney. *How are you? Uh...okay, I think.*

Good. He sat the bag on Courtney's lap as he went to Morgan. "Where do you need me?"

Courtney had frozen at the sight of Kenn coming toward her. She'd had two doses of medication now and felt better, but her heart had stopped for a brief second. She peered into the bag, not sure what to expect.

He knows! Terror flew through her. She stuffed How to be a Single Mother back into the gift bag and hid it beneath the blanket. *He knows.*

Morgan waved at a row of bleeding, dying people. "They want to make wills. They weren't conscious when Marc was here doing it."

Kenn assumed the duty, walling up his emotions. They didn't need to see him depressed.

Kenn memorized their faces, their gestures, the unspoken dreams. He didn't think he would get the chance to do it in the future. Most of these people

weren't going to live. Kenn tried to brace himself for that fact. *If this is what it's like to be in charge of Safe Haven, to be a leader at all, I don't want it. I can't ever do this again.*

Four hours later, Kenn sat on a stool at the counter of the mess, sipping hot, strong coffee. It had taken him a few minutes to figure out how to work the machine, then fill it with water from his canteen, but he now had what he'd been craving since he woke.

Papers were spread across the counter in front of him as he compared the reports people had collected. The mess was empty; the cooks weren't expected for half an hour. Most of the lights were off, casting weird shadows over the neat area. The mess crew had done an excellent job. It was ready for the next day of cooking. Even the tiled floor was pristine.

I need you in the camp area!

Kenn spilled coffee across the papers at Debra's jarring shout. He left everything, running.

3

“They're leaving!”

“They're cooks! They have to go get the mess ready so you can eat today!” Greg and Ian were at one end of the corridor, trying to stop the same dozen camp members from leaving again. Others who'd been drawn by the noise observed through

nightcaps and sleepy eyes that protested focusing in the dim light.

Debra stayed at the other door, by Gus and the bleary cooks who were waiting for her to unlock it. She couldn't do that until Greg gave her the key.

"Stop it. We need to get to work." Gus had woken in a bad mood.

"We need to get to the lifeboats!" Michael wasn't taking no for an answer. He was dressed to leave.

"You heard the boss. She said noon on the top deck. Back off!" Greg had also woken grumpy.

Debra gestured wildly but no one paid attention to her. There was no one here who could translate her words and she was too tired to use a mental zap. The situation was escalating out of control.

More people came from their cabins to create a crowd of fifty pajama-clad members who pushed and shoved against each other.

"Stop it!"

"Go back to your cabins!"

Greg and Ian refused to budge as the crowd shifted toward them.

Travis, just waking, lingered in the middle of the corridor, not sure which position to take. *I want off this ship too.*

Kenn appeared in the window behind Debra, pounding on the glass. "When I get in there, I'm cracking heads!" Kenn dug out a set of master keys.

The crowd pushed toward Ian.

Debra saw the metal flash of a gun. *Get down!*

A gunshot echoed, incredibly loud in close quarters.

People screamed, running for cabins or dropping to the floor as the smell of gunpowder floated through the hall.

Michael fell into the crowd, clutching his chest; blood ran over his hands and splattered his legs.

Greg and Ian hurried into the mix to subdue whoever was shooting.

Debra did the same from the other direction.

Kenn also ran in as half a dozen troublemakers pushed by him. They fled down the dim hall.

Ellen's stringy hair slapped against her fat cheeks as she waved the gun. "Stay back!"

Now next to her in the chaos, Travis grabbed the hot gun. He shoved Ellen to the ground.

Greg and Ian handcuffed her while Kenn and Debra checked on Michael, who was on the ground at her feet.

"I didn't aim for him! I wanted that deaf bitch for getting in my head!" Ellen began to cry.

Bodies shifted around them as they assumed the danger was over.

Mandy, Michael's girlfriend from Ciemus, ran toward Ellen. She reached the sobbing woman, drawing a knife from her hoodie. She stabbed the cuffed woman repeatedly in the chest.

Fresh screams filled the hall.

"Get her!" Kenn tried to shove through the stampede.

Travis stared in shock at the scene as people bumped into him from all sides. *That's blood!*

Mandy grunted, stabbing Ellen again. "I'll kill you!"

You're good enough. Do it.

Kenn drew his gun at Angela's mental order, aiming carefully. He shot Mandy in the back.

Camp members who had stayed to see the chaos dove into their cabins again or hit the floor with almost everyone else.

"Clear!" Greg knelt to examine both women, checking for a pulse.

There was no mental praise for the careful shot from Angela. Kenn understood. This was awful, in every way. Kenn holstered his weapon. He did a fast scan, then keyed his radio for a triple body pick up. Michael was also dead. "We need a cleaning crew in the camp cabins." There was no reason to hide it. The people they'd been hiding it from had just caused three deaths. "Well, that went bad fast."

The other guards tried to calm people, insisting the danger was over even though they weren't positive that was true. People on the edge did crazy things and there was now a dozen of them loose on the ship.

"A group of camp members are going to the lifeboats. Do not stop them." Kenn didn't want angry, gunslinging Eagles running around the ship any more than he wanted camp members doing it. Someone with the experience to handle it would

answer that call. Hopefully, they would understand he was busy here trying to prevent more panic.

Kenn joined Gus, who was still staring in shock. “There’s a package on the counter of the mess for you. The orders came from the boss.”

Gus was able to guess what it was. Two hours ago, he would have protested vehemently. Now, he was in complete agreement. “Is it okay if we go?”

Kenn waved off other Eagles coming to the doors. “Yes. This area will be your first delivery?”

Gus shrugged. “We give it to the delivery crew. I don’t know the pecking order on that.”

“When they pick it up, tell them that also came from the boss. Feed this zone first. They’ll cooperate.”

Gus motioned to Brittani’s parents, then the others who had volunteered to help. They traveled the dim, groaning passages in a small, twitchy cluster, but they were all glad to be out of the main camp area.

“Are we arresting anyone?” Ian was eager. He still wanted payback for the beating he had taken.

Travis gravitated toward them, not anticipating the physical scuffles that might come next. He was still sore from the last one.

Kenn cast glares at the people who hadn’t joined the others but might still be part of the problem. “I think seeing three people die in front of them will calm things down. As long as they don’t do anything else, we’ll just put it in a report and move on.”

Fresh tension went through the corridor at his announcement. It reminded them all there would be hell to pay for the bad behavior.

More people went back to their cabins, chattering and muttering while avoiding the mess on the floor, chairs and one wall.

“Do we have other injuries or damages we need to be concerned with right now?” Kenn scanned for Greg, the most levelheaded of the group. He didn’t see the man now.

“I don’t think so. People are just shaken up.” Ian began checking each cabin to make sure that was true.

“Good.” Kenn considered for a moment, relying on his training with Adrian for how to handle a twitchy camp. “They need something to do.”

Travis made a face. “I don’t think reading or coloring pictures is going to cut it this time.”

“I agree. How about giving me a recommendation instead of giving me shit?”

Travis flushed, mind going blank again.

Kenn shook his head, disgusted. “I don’t understand why my ol’ lady likes you guys so much. You’re really not all that.” Kenn waved Ian back over. “Ideas for occupying the sheep?”

Ian considered their options. “At this point, I might be hungry. I’d be scared too, and since the adrenaline wore off, I’d get sleepy. After, I might start getting angry again...”

Kenn waited patiently, listening to the camp lock doors around them. They liked having

someone from leadership here. *I'll have to stay for a while.*

“But I wouldn’t be upset if I was entertained.” Ian’s brows came together. “Maybe we should open the second entertainment floor; let them spend eight hours exploring the shops. Well over half the camp hasn’t enjoyed any of the amenities on the ship yet.”

Kenn spent a minute considering how they would keep order in that situation, then nodded. “I’m going to be here for the next hour. I’ll draw up notes on it. In the meantime, you have duty on the bridge.”

Ian checked to make sure his gun was loaded. “While I’m up there, I’ll make sure we still have a Captain.”

Kenn was reasonably confident the person now manning the helm would be able to handle it, but he couldn’t help the nervousness. He wanted another reliable set of hands up there.

“Do you want me to go help...?”

Kenn grunted at Travis’s hesitant tone. “No. I want you to assist the body crew; then stay with them. You’re not good with live people. We’ll see how you do handling the dead.”

Chapter Sixteen
How Do I Pick?

December 7th
4am

1

“**W**hat’s that sound?” Marc paused at the bottom of the steps, enjoying the salty breeze blowing through. Neither man had a radio on. They had been told by a delivery crew that they were part of the next shift change. Marc had been eager. He didn’t care they had been ordered to go incognito through the employee halls.

Neil had also been relieved by the order. He didn’t want to take another beating to keep Marc in the cabin.

The sound swelled, clearing into panicking footsteps in the predawn stillness.

Marc tried to bring up a shield, but he didn’t have the energy.

Neil brought up a shield around both of them as he slid in front of Marc.

Marc scowled at the back of Neil’s head. “You are such a liar!”

Watching from the bridge above them, Theo was stunned by the revelation. The light on the deck had given him a clear view. *Neil’s a descendant!*

Neil winced, bracing as the steps peaked.

Angry faces appeared in the shadowy stairwell. A group of people carrying bags and weapons made it to the top landing; they spotted Neil and stopped. They looked at Marc next and saw he had a shield up.

Anger flashed again at the magic use. They rushed toward the lifeboats, casting both men warning glares.

Plastic sheets flapped in the breeze. The bridge was covered in it to block the captain from a sudden radioactive storm. Cool air rushed over the group, but it didn't clear the hot heads.

Marc didn't see any guards following the small mob. He stepped around Neil, wishing sunrise would hurry. The darkness made it impossible to distinguish hands or intent. Anyone could draw a weapon right now and try to kill him. He wouldn't be able to see it coming.

Neil followed him, keeping his shield in place. It was luck that everyone was assuming Marc was the one doing it. Neil shrank the shield around the wolfman, then stayed on his heels, trying to reclaim his appearance of being a bad ass. He would need that later when people found out.

Marc joined the angry crowd, not yelling or ordering them around. These people weren't going to do anything they didn't want to. All he could do was get them off the ship faster.

Perry and Bobbyjean knelt to read the instructions for lowering the lifeboat. They both wore bulging backpacks.

Marc shined his flashlight on the winch. "I can tell you what to do while you do it. I would do it for you, but I'm a little sick right now."

A small wave of panic went through the mob.

Perry knew Marc wasn't contagious "No tricks."

Marc gave him an ugly glare. "*You're* the problem, not me. Do what I tell you and you'll be gone in five minutes."

Perry wanted to argue, but he wanted to be off this boat more than he wanted to make a point. He didn't check out the view or enjoy the air. He wanted to be gone.

"Where do you think you're going to go?" Neil gestured. "It's all open ocean."

"We're going back to the UN ship." Bobbyjean sneered. "We can sail that, without magic users."

More footsteps sounded as a few Eagles finally reached the top deck. Debra was in the lead. They slowed as they realized Marc almost had the crowd under control by giving them what they wanted.

Theo resumed his place in the bridge, storing the nasty secret he'd learned about Neil. *I guess I wasn't the only one hiding things.*

Debra gestured at the Eagles.

Next to her, Conner translated, whispering. "Marc is supposed to sail the ship now. Get him to his post."

Eagles advanced as Neil took over supervising the two men lowering the lifeboat. The calm ocean lapped against the ship as the crowd observed the procedure. Multiple flashlights provided a view and eerie shadows.

Neil let go of the shield and pushed Marc toward the rear, where Eagles tugged on him until he was in the back of the crowd.

Debra took his arm, pointing at the bridge.

Her long-sleeved shirt and jeans were covered in stains, telling Marc she'd been working hard. Conner was the same, though he was sporting a fresh bruise on his cheek that implied someone had hit him or he'd walked into something. Marc was betting on the latter. It was dim in the halls and they didn't have a new body or prisoner. Marc doubted Debra would put up with anyone hitting Conner on her watch.

Marc went up to the bridge, hoping nothing else went wrong. Everyone on this ship was an amateur.

Debra and Conner lingered in the rear of the group for a minute. When the lifeboat finally began to lower, Debra tugged on his arm. The situation was under control. *We have other things to cover.*

Conner checked his book as they went back down into the ship. "We have reports of looting from the mess to check, or we can..."

Marc watched them leave, feeling the tension still in the air. He rotated to Theo, aware of the new physique, but he wasn't sure those cut pecs were

worth the hell that Theo was getting from Debra. “What is it?”

Theo pointed at the fuel gauge, keeping his voice down. “The last crew miscalculated. We’re going to need to refuel soon or we’ll be adrift.”

Marc’s heart thumped at Theo’s tone. “How soon?”

Theo grimaced. “Two days, tops.”

Debra and Conner paused as they hit the bottom of the stairwell. They’d caught Theo’s revelation, then Marc’s edge of mental panic.

Debra went on, signing.

Conner shrugged. “You’re right. I know. They’ll handle it.”

Debra led the way, glad Conner was reasonable. It was great to have someone to converse with who wasn’t panicking at every tough situation. Right now, it seemed like that was all they had.

They both slid aside so the cleaning crew could access the corridor to exit the living area.

“It’s all done in there. It needs to sit for another two hours. Then the camp can be moved back in.” Trent continued on his way to the waste area.

Debra put it in her book, then went toward the infirmary. She also wanted to stop by the lab to see if Tonya had any new test results.

Conner stayed on her heels, trying not to be creeped out by the environment. He had lived in much worse.

They moved aside again as the body crew stepped out of the elevator at the intersection. Travis and Jonny lugged a corpse between them, grunting and dripping sweat.

Conner couldn't see who was under the sheet, but it was a good guess that a camp member had gotten out of hand.

Debra and Conner took the stairs while the body crew disappeared into the elevator. Debra was glad shift change would be coming soon. She was exhausted. So was everyone else. Many people laboring right now were at the end of a 24-hour shift. The delivery crew was finally sleeping, but they were set to return at dawn so they could pass out supplies to the camp while Gus got the morning meal ready. The delivery and body crews were working almost nonstop, as were the medics.

Debra scanned her notes and saw the incinerator team had returned to duty, including Zack. Vicky was also down there, but Debra wasn't certain how much help the weeping woman would be. Whitney's death had brought emotions from Vicky that none of them had expected. Debra was suspicious of it. She hadn't thought Vicky cared about Whitney. She believed the woman was using it to gain sympathy.

Conner sighed. "So do I."

Debra tried to find another burst of strength as she came down the stairs to the lab.

She hadn't reached the glass before Tonya pointed. *I don't have anything new yet. Don't nag me, woman.*

Debra snickered, moving toward the infirmary instead.

A group of people came from that door, carrying waste bags. They followed another body team to the elevator.

Debra and Conner paused as more people exited the infirmary.

A group of camp members came from the prep area by the lab and went toward the infirmary.

Caught in the middle, Debra began directing traffic.

"What's going on in there?" Conner asked before Debra could signal it.

"Brittani's almost got the place cleaned." Morgan helped Courtney sit in the chair outside the door. He patted the woman's shoulder, hoping this was an honest recovery for her. He didn't get his hopes up. All the patients had a good stretch...before they died. "We'll have you back in bed in a few minutes."

Courtney grimaced, wishing she was well enough for a shower. Her clothes were filthy; she stank. "It feels good to be sitting up."

More non-critical patients were brought out of the infirmary. Debra spotted Tonya's guard, Peter, who had replaced Jeff for shift change. Debra frowned at him for being away from the lab door.

Peter hurried back to his post, hitching up his loose pants. With all the movement in the passages, he hadn't been sure who he was supposed to guard.

Rookies! Debra snorted frustration. She returned to directing traffic around the infirmary while Brittani did her whirlwind cleanup.

In the chaos, a shadow in the crowd knelt to pick something up and slipped under the couch outside the lab. He stayed there, waiting.

2

Kenn held the door for Gus as the big man came down the dingy hall carrying a huge, steaming pot. "Breakfast is served. Line up."

Kenn waited for someone to mention they'd already put breakfast into the baskets from last night's dinner, but the camp hurried out to get a serving of something fresh.

Brittani's father, Dwight, placed a bag of plastic utensils and paper bowls next to the pot, then followed Gus out. Dwight scanned the cabins for his son as they left but he was terrified to ask.

"Form a line on each side of this desk." Kenn pointed. "Food on one side; drinks on the other." While he'd been talking to people, calming them, Kenn had activated both coffee pots. "Who wants cream?"

The camp gathered around, eager for a warm meal and a cup of soothing coffee. More people had finally started to get their showers. A few were even

reading books in chairs nearby, but Kenn didn't ignore the lingering edge of fear.

"Have you seen Jonny or Drew?" Ian was still trying to verify locations of a few people. He scratched at a spot on his back that he couldn't fully reach.

"No." Kenn opened the lid on the pot. Butter and cinnamon smacked him in the face.

"I don't have them yet." Ian sniffed, stomach growling. "I'll add them to the mia list."

"Okay." Kenn assumed those guards were in a different area or even in the infirmary. It was also possible they were both dead. Right now, he wasn't able to keep track of everyone. It felt a lot like his failure during Safe Haven's first bugout.

The oatmeal smells good. Kenn scooped out a small bowl for himself, wishing he could actually eat it.

Chills broke out on Kenn's arms.

The ship's PA system hummed to life with Marc's voice. "It's time for the rest of shift change, Safe Haven. Good morning. Let's try to have a calm, peaceful day of recovery."

All over the ship, people who had been pre-notified by Debra moved toward their job location.

Kenn tensed as he felt a descendant mind trying to connect through the excited mental chaos of bored people getting to do something different.

The sniper is in his blind! Sniper!

Kenn dropped the oatmeal ladle, running. He shoved confused people out of his way. After

Missy's warning, he didn't need more information from Debra. Tonya was in danger.

3

"We're ready to start moving people back in now." Brittani spoke through the infirmary window. She shoved dirty curls out of her face as she wiped away sweat.

There she is! Brian slipped from under the couch, gun in hand. He'd been waiting for the sound of that voice outside the protection of the infirmary.

"Stop right there!" James pulled his gun as he ran forward.

Brian spun around, squeezing the trigger. He hit James.

James slid down the wall next to the lab, leaving a blood smear.

Brian spun around as people screamed and fled into the infirmary or down the dim corridors. A couple of the braver people hurried toward him, but the patients in chairs were helpless as Brian pulled the trigger again.

"Where are you?!" He fired at a glimpse of dark skin in the cowering crowd, hoping it was Brittani. "You'll never punch me again!" He fired.

Bodies dropped; people screamed.

Trapped inside the infirmary, Angela shoved against the incoming crowd, trying to reach the door. Her weak body was no match for their fear.

Tonya opened the lab door, gun ready. She did it quietly, hoping Brian didn't hear her.

Flying down the stairs, Kenn saw it all unfolding. "No!"

Brian rotated back toward the lab, lifting his gun, finger tightening on the trigger.

Tonya fired.

Brian squeezed off a single round before Tonya's bullet slammed into his chest.

Tonya gasped as a hand jerked her down. She landed in a warm, bloody lap.

The slug pierced the glass above her, shattering it and several pieces of equipment.

Brian slumped to the ground, gun falling from his hand.

People hurried forward to grab the gun, but they didn't try to save his life. Instead, the medics hurried to help people who had been hit by his gunfire.

Face to face, Tonya stared at James, feeling like the breath had been knocked out of her.

James gave her a little shake, rattling shards of glass from her hair. "What were you thinking?!"

Tonya tried to give him a smile, hands coming up to stem the flow of blood from his shoulder. "I have a vest on."

James snorted in painful anger. "Our vests will not stop penetration, god damn it! I'm so sick of hearing that. All it does is lessen the damage when the bullet hits these cheap plates and shoots upward. You have less than a 10% chance of *any* armor

actually stopping a bullet at such close range. My blood is proof of that!”

Tonya frowned. “I could have been killed.”

James slid her hand off his bloody wound. “You *should* be dead right now. He wasn’t aiming for your vest. He was aiming for your head.”

People surrounded them, trying to give aid. Glass crunched under their boots.

James pushed more hands away. “It’s my fault. I didn’t know he was under the couch.”

“You saved my life.” Tonya glared up at Kenn, who had just reached them. “And that’s all that matters. You’re not going to be punished for something you couldn’t control.”

Kenn nodded, heart cramping. “In fact, you’re going to get a thank you.” Kenn helped the bloody soldier to his feet. “First, we’ll get that bullet out.”

James pulled free of Kenn’s grip. He helped Tonya stand, scanning her for injuries. He swayed on his feet. “She needs a new guard.”

Tonya hadn’t realized how dangerous camp technician would be. She controlled a shudder as she scanned all the blood around the new bodies.

“She can stick with me for a minute.” Kenn tucked her under his arm as Morgan helped James toward the infirmary. Kenn wanted to keep her close until his heart settled back into a normal rhythm.

Tonya also pulled away from Kenn. She put James’s other arm around her neck and helped him into the infirmary, not noticing the blood pouring

over her arm. “I can’t believe you saved my life. I thought you’d forgotten all about our adventures together.”

They went inside, leaving Kenn frowning. *I should have been the one to save her. I’ll pay for that at some point.*

Kenn scanned the scene, hoping not to find any bodies. His hopes were dashed as he picked out Katie and Zoey lying near the couch.

Kenn clicked his radio in the code for another triple body pick up, then went into the infirmary to check for other serious injuries. Not finding any, he scanned for Brittani, hoping she had survived unharmed. She might be able to tell them what made Brian hate her so much that he’d tried to kill her and taken two innocent lives instead.

4

“I think I can save one of them.”

Angela turned to Conner, who had leaned down to whisper in her ear. It had been half an hour since the shooting. “What?”

“I’ve been saving up my energy. I’m ready to try.” He scanned the cots of bleeding, crying people, filthy hands coming up. “How do I pick?”

Angela understood his misery. She was sharing every little bit that returned with whoever was most critical at that moment. Conner was being smarter with his energy, though he would only be able to

help one person at a time. “Ben, Pam, and Jennifer are the worst.”

Conner scanned those cots; they had all been placed along the rear wall together. *That must be the critical zone.* “Can you pick one?”

Angela shook her head. “I really can’t. I need all of them. I can’t imagine our future without them.” She stepped around him to help Morgan extract the bullet lodged in James’s shoulder. They’d stopped the bleeding and started replacing the blood he was missing. Tonya was helping, though that consisted more of keeping James’s attention occupied than actually doing anything.

Conner didn’t want to make the choice. He stalled by scanning the infirmary. He saw camp members assisting friends and acquaintances that needed to be bathed in alcohol to keep their fevers down. The reducers weren’t strong enough by themselves. IV bags were being changed, under the supervision of Ed and Jeff. Conner hadn’t known either of them had medical skills. He assumed someone had shown the tired men how to do it, which also proved how desperate the situation was. Normally, the medics would never allow IVs to be handled by someone else.

Over near the infirmary doors, two bodies were wrapped in bloody sheets. The mess on the floor had been cleaned up to keep them from tracking it all through the infirmary, but the window and hall wall were still coated in crimson splatters. Conner hoped

the cleaning crew came through soon. It was the only place that still looked bad.

Thanks to Brittani, the infirmary had been cleaned, though at least half a dozen patients were dirtying it back up with bodily functions they couldn't control. Conner had nothing but sympathy for them, especially the row of children along the wall by the medical desk. There were only ten kids left in the infirmary now. It hurt Conner as he tried to remember who had been here earlier, who had died, but couldn't.

Debra came to Conner's elbow, signing.

Conner nodded, removing blood from his hands with an alcohol wipe. "About five minutes."

Debra left the boy alone, not asking who he had decided to save. It was an awful choice. If she had healing gifts, she would have only chosen children, but that was a personal decision she was glad she didn't have to make. She liked everyone on the ship. She didn't want any of them to die.

Several patients were watching Conner, aware of his moral dilemma. As his eyes swung around, resting on them, every adult head shook, denying him. Weak hands pointed at the shrinking row of kids.

Conner was horrified and impressed by their choice to save the children above themselves. *That's what I would want too.* Conner went to the children and sank down between two cots, wondering if he could find enough energy for a double.

The descendants in the infirmary kept an eye and a mind on Conner's progress as he began to heal two children. The sick people were hopeful it would be successful, that Conner would come around to save them when it was their turn in the critical row.

"Put it right there."

Brittani's voice echoed outside the infirmary. She was directing the cleanup out there, enlisting the help of roamers. Eagles had shown up to assist with the chaos and been put to work. Three lifeboats of people had left Safe Haven now, but it didn't feel as though their population had taken a hit yet. None of those people had been important to the day-to-day running of the camp, unlike the ill people they were losing. If the camp knew how bad it was in here, they might have been more like those who'd abandoned ship. As it was, their brig guest and the camp members in the cabins had been knocked out with breakfast. Other than the infirmary, it should be a peaceful shift.

Kenn's voice also echoed as he tried to determine why Brian had wanted to kill Brittani.

Brittani's raised voice echoed back the confusion that everyone else was feeling. Many of them assumed Brian had snapped under the stress of not knowing who might die next.

Debra went out in the hall. She was relieved to find out the attack had been personal, but it also worried her. Safe Haven's mental state wasn't good.

Debra held the door for Kenn as he collected a body. Brian's aim had been good for someone who

was having a mental breakdown. They had two new deaths and five injuries. Other than James, the others were trims.

Gus came down the hall, body covered in flour, face coated in guilt.

Debra also held the door so he could enter the infirmary. Brittani had just ducked into the bathroom area to wash up yet again. Debra hoped she and Conner were gone before Brittani came out to find Gus there. She hadn't read the woman's thoughts, but she was positive Brittani was angry that Gus hadn't come to check on her before now. *I would be if I were ill.* Debra made a mental note to check on Theo even though she was angry with him.

The ship PA system crackled, making people jump on every deck.

"Hello again, Safe Haven." Marc's voice was weak but calm, sending relief through people who were awake to hear it. "We're going to refuel the ship in the next 36-hours. I wanted to prepare everyone for the noise and get permission from the boss to move us into position."

Angela was busy. Morgan wasn't having any luck sewing up James's small, slippery artery because her hands were too shaky to keep it still.

Kenn keyed his mike. "You're the boss up there. Do what you think is best."

Everyone liked hearing that. They trusted Marc to be their captain.

"Copy. That means you're going to be hearing noises from the ship. That will be me. Captain, out."

Courtney glanced up as the infirmary door opened again. She watched Kenn take a body out, forgetting she wasn't alone in the room.

Nauseated, Tonya glanced away from James's surgery in time to see Courtney staring at Kenn. Fury went through the redhead.

"Save it for later." Angela couldn't handle one more moment of drama right now without snapping.

Tonya patted James's bloody hand as she turned back. "And there will be a later. You can bet on it."

James took that as her saying he would survive. He forced a smile through the pain. He'd refused a numbing shot, insisting they get him done and out of the way so the medics could concentrate on real patients.

Angela made a mental note to assign Courtney a guard. She looked over to see Brittani glaring at Gus. *Damn. There's another pot about to boil over.*

You can take that to the bank. Brittani was standing outside the bathroom. Her raw hands were clenched into fists and her lips were thin lines across her face, but she didn't respond other than to point at the door.

Gus left. He had been expecting her anger. He'd just needed to know she was okay. Later, he hoped she would let him explain that he hadn't known she was injured until a short time ago.

Angela caught it all. *Gus may need a guard too. She's pissed*

Did it work? Debra lifted a brow at Conner as he joined her in the hall.

Conner followed her toward the mess, where they still needed to investigate the report of the looting. *I think so. We'll know in a few hours.*

Debra wanted it to help, but she was also worried Conner would be forced to heal everyone until he was a withered husk like Angela was becoming. It was hard to view her idol that way. Angela had been a pillar of strength to Debra, even during her recovery from losing the baby. Seeing her like this was horrible. It might have shaken her confidence in becoming more powerful. Debra wasn't sure how far up that ladder she wanted to climb now. It didn't seem like there were many perks at the top.

Conner rapped on the door of the mess. "Coming in for updates."

Screeching noises echoed as booths were dragged away. Dwight opened the door and retreated to allow them inside.

The pungent aroma of fresh bread slapped Conner's nose, making his mouth water.

As soon as they were in, he and Dwight dragged the booths back over.

Conner and Debra picked up the bad vibes next. They joined Brittani's parents at the counter. The older couple was covered in flour, like Gus had been, telling them he'd stopped everything and ran when he'd found out someone tried to kill Brittani.

Dwight pointed. “We sprinkled baking soda on the floor. There are footprints.”

Debra knelt to examine the tracks, noticing open cabinets, while Conner translated.

“Is anything missing?”

“Food, water. Small amounts.” Brittani’s dad didn’t normally say much, but he was furious this time. “How dare someone break in here right now! Don’t they understand what’s going on?!”

Thelma patted her husband’s arm. “The boss will handle it.” Thelma was eager for it to be over too, but she also understood her daughter’s status in Safe Haven had changed again. She wanted Brittani to be happy, even if it hurt Gus.

Debra nodded, signing.

Conner translated. “She said the boss is going to be harsh on anyone we arrest. Whoever did this will probably be kicked off the ship.”

That was satisfying to the people who were working hard to keep everyone fed.

“Have you seen Lou?” Thelma looked at Debra, certain the deaf woman would tell her the truth.

Debra frowned, nodding.

The ship groaned loudly, drawing attention. Pipes cringed and clanked all through the cruise liner, causing ugly echoes and alarmed shouts.

Dwight went to the sink and rotated the knob. Horrible spitting noises came out, but that was it. “We just lost our water.”

Damn it! Debra rotated toward the door to check on the latest crisis.

Conner followed, praying it was something simple. Safe Haven couldn't take much more.

Chapter Seventeen

Queasy Gizzard

8am

1

Radios crackled. “That’s the water crew trying to get a fresh batch running through. We have delivery teams bringing up reserve water. There’s no reason to panic over this. It’s a good sign.”

Kenn’s sarcastic, tired update over the radio brought the hyper mood down a notch. He was on rounds now that the bodies had been delivered to the incinerator, where the waste disposal team was once again in full burn. Kenn hoped things stayed quiet this time so he could finish rounds.

Kenn tapped on the brig door and entered. He saw Kronus sitting on the floor in the rear of his cell. Jayda was sitting on a stool at the guard desk, enjoying a bowl of oatmeal.

Kenn smirked at the dirty angel. “Not hungry?”

Kronus shot Kenn a nasty glare but didn’t respond.

Kenn joined Jayda at the post, setting a bag on the small desk. “I brought you some supplies since I don’t have another man free for guard duty yet.”

Jayda glanced into the bag, eyes widening.

Kenn kept his body between her and Kronus's cell so the angel couldn't see. He had little doubt the man was trying to read their minds, but he wouldn't understand, and the drugs would make it hard.

Kenn turned around. "If you can be reasonable, I can get you a shower. Hell, I may be able to find you a beer."

Kronus stood, gesturing wildly. "I'll make you pay for this! No one keeps me waiting!"

Jayda stepped around Kenn and aimed the dart gun. She pulled the trigger while Kronus was still trying to figure out what she was holding.

The dart smacked him in the arm, sinking in deep.

Kenn chuckled. "Wow. She pulled the trigger on you faster than I would have."

Kronus sank to the ground as the drugs began to take effect. His filthy clothes began to soak up a puddle from the floor of his cell.

Jayda returned to the stool, putting the gun on the desk for the next time. She gathered her short, dark hair into a bun and clipped it, sweating. There wasn't a breeze down here with the windows closed.

Kenn took a minute to glance into the other cells. The rest of their prisoners were either sleeping or resting on their cots, even Ramer, though his hands were twitching. Kenn wished there was something he could do to help Ramer through the withdrawals, but there wasn't. Some bad habits had to be broken alone.

“I didn’t mean to shoot her.” Sheldon glanced up from his cot. His eyes were swelled from where he’d been crying. Rose’s blood had dried to his shirt and hands. “I was scared.”

Kenn didn’t offer comfort. Sheldon had killed someone. There was going to be a price to pay for that. He couldn’t just say sorry and walk.

“You’re gonna hang me, aren’t you?”

“Stop crying.” Jayda was out of patience. “You did something stupid; it cost someone their life. All you care about is how it affects you. What about her friends, her family? What about her future in this camp? Maybe you should worry more about other people and less about yourself. Then you wouldn’t be so scared you’re shooting zombies in the dark.”

Sheldon fell silent, more tears slipping from under his lashes.

Kenn peered into the cell across from Kronus and found Adrian watching the angel pass out. Adrian had headphones on. He looked like he’d been sleeping until Kronus started yelling.

Adrian slipped off the earbuds. “Did he make fun of her singing again? I told him not to do that.”

Kenn gave a weak chuckle. He glanced down to see Dog appear at his heels. “There you are, coward.”

Dog huffed. *I always run from angry pussy. Don’t you?*

Nearly everyone in the brig laughed.

Dog pawed at Adrian. *Marc wants you, after you shower. Dog’s nose wrinkled. You stink.*

Adrian flushed. “What does he want me for?”

Kenn frowned. “It doesn’t matter. Get a shower and get up there.”

Adrian left, proud of Kenn for how well he was handling this crisis. It was a far cry from the selfish, self-righteous Marine who had joined his camp ten months ago.

Jayda motioned Kenn over as Adrian left, not wanting the prisoners to hear her question.

Kenn knew what was coming, but he let her ask anyway. This was one of those moments all future Eagles had to decide for themselves before they could fully commit. He was only surprised it was coming from Jayda.

“Is it right? What we’re doing with the drugs?”

Kenn shook his head. “No, it’s not. In an ideal world, we would never need to use these methods. If the camp finds out we drugged their oatmeal, we may lose another group of them. We’ve already had three lifeboats of people leave.”

Jayda realized Kenn was trusting her with an important secret. “I can understand about the camp, but the prisoner is locked in.”

Kenn glanced at Kronus, who was now sitting in the corner of his cell, drooling. “He’s not a normal prisoner. When Adrian comes back from his break, have him tell you how things went in the higher power meeting and how they found Kronus. I think that’ll help you understand why we’ve chosen to handle him this way.”

Jayda realized Kenn had misunderstood. “No, I mean why are we using drugs instead of just killing him? He’s obviously dangerous, to all of us.”

Kenn stared.

Jayda shrugged. “I once heard on a ship, there shouldn’t be any fat on the bone. If they don’t serve a purpose, they should be eliminated.”

The words sent chills through the prisoners who heard.

It gave Kenn a new measure of respect for the woman he had viewed as a useless loudmouth until now. “I personally agree, but there are some lines Safe Haven can’t cross or we’ll revert into the old ways that destroyed the world. Killing unarmed people for minor crimes is one of those lines we can’t cross.” Kenn held up a finger. “I need to make a quick announcement. Hang on.” Radios crackled on the Eagle channel. “I’m holding an update meeting in the prep area by the lab in thirty minutes. Be there if you can.”

Kenn took the stool next to Jayda, spending a few of his precious minutes to guide the next Eagle into Angela’s army.

2

“Go get a shower and return.” Kenn pointed at the open door half an hour later. Quinn smelled worse than any of them. He couldn’t stay in this cramped office for the meeting. No one’s stomach was that strong.

Quinn left without argument. Kenn would be able to guard Tonya while he was holding his meeting. Quinn was looking forward to the hot shower, but he planned to hurry back to verify Kendle had attended the meeting. He hadn't seen her in a full shift now. He was starting to get worried.

Kenn paused to prepare for the meeting. This was another part of leadership he hadn't considered. Adrian and Angela had managed to stay a step ahead of the camp in most situations because they had taken a few minutes to think. The few minutes with Jayda in the brig had reminded him how important those personal moments were.

Behind him, Tonya kept working. She almost had the final batch of water tests done. She was hoping to give them good news during the meeting.

People began to come down the passages and stairs. Few of them were talking. Most were too tired to expend the energy. The rest were afraid of getting more sad news from anyone they conversed with. It was easier to just remain silent and hope the meeting gave them good news.

Kenn did a mental count as couches and chairs in the corridor began to fill. Ed, Brittani, Vicky, Stanley, and Charlie were here. They were all carrying travel mugs. Ralph was coming down the stairs, leading a group of camp members he had chosen as helpers. Gus was behind them, clean and appearing restless.

Kenn rotated toward the other hall and caught a glimpse of Trinity, Timmy, Jeff, and Greg rounding the far corner. He assumed Cathy had sent Timmy up so the kid's area could have an update.

Kenn waited, not speaking to anyone yet. Anything he said would just be repeated in the meeting. He turned toward the last corridor as a final group of people came toward them. Peter, Molly, Monica, Allison, Zack, and Ian were walking together. Freshly showered, they all had red eyes and sagging shoulders.

Behind them, Theo and Harry were having a quiet discussion while they came down the hall.

Kenn rotated again as footsteps echoed from the stairs that led to the bridge. He frowned, bracing to scold Marc for leaving his post.

Neil appeared, smiling through bruises and a black eye.

Kenn realized Marc had done the same as Cathy; he'd sent an emissary to retrieve an update.

Dog sat next to Kenn, shaking off dust. *I will guard while you have your meeting.*

Kenn was relieved. He didn't trust Marc to protect Tonya, but he did trust Marc's pet. Dog was loyal to any duty he was given. Kenn knew that now. He'd also figured out his previous pettiness against the wolf would still have to be paid for. He didn't assume them working together was giving him a pass. "Are we all here?"

Charlie shook his head. "Conner and Jonny aren't."

“Pretty sure they’re catching a nap.” Kenn didn’t mention the fact that Shawn, Greg, and Drew were also missing. He waited for those names to be mentioned. When no one spoke up, he got the meeting rolling. “Let’s start with missing people.”

“Only a few left.” Ian got his book out, curling his sore toes inside his boots. He hadn’t had them off, except to shower, in days now. “I’ve managed to account for everyone, except this list.” He handed the paper to Ken.

“I’ll compare it to mine.” Kenn stored the paper in his full book. “The water is about to come back on. The last test was okay. Tonya is waiting for a confirmation.”

Tonya tapped on the glass, more red curls slipping loose of the ponytail. “It’s good.” She gave a thumbs up. “Turn it back on.”

Kenn gestured at Zack. “See to that as soon as this meeting is over.”

Zack was glad to have been given duty that wasn’t around the dead. “I will.”

“We’re running low on fuel. I don’t know if Marc needs a refueling team up there or not. I assume he’ll call for it. Be ready to assist when he does.” Kenn scanned his notes. “We had a break-in in the mess a few hours ago. Food and water were taken. I need someone to put a camera up.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Jeff was almost as good with electronics as Kenn.

“The shooting we experienced was a personal matter. Apparently, Brittani and Brian had gotten

into an altercation in the mess. Brian was carrying a grudge. Everyone else he shot was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

It was a relief to hear, but it was also frustrating to know people were letting personal drama interfere with survival.

Ian fingered the narrow wound on his temple and then the matching part on his ear, hatred for Brian welling in his throat. *Good thing you're already dead, dude.*

“What’s the progress on the ship cleaning?” Kenn scanned for Kendle.

“She’s on duty over the kids.” Timmy stood. “She wanted me to tell you it’s two thirds of the way done. Stanley has her notes.”

Stanley came over and handed the papers to Kenn. As he went back, he tripped over the edge of the rug. He landed in a cramped seat on the small couch already holding Ian and Jeff.

“Hey!”

“Get off me!”

Kenn sighed, moving on. “The camp will be awake in four hours. I want shift people to sleep now, so we’re ready to handle whatever comes then.”

All of them paused as someone exited the infirmary, allowing awful noises to escape. The grieving father didn’t even notice the meeting.

“That’s all I have.” Kenn yawned. “Unless anyone has anything else...”

“I think we should start holding memorial services. There are so many, some people are going to feel cheated out of their grief.” Molly’s time in the infirmary had softened her heart toward a lot of people she hadn’t liked before.

“We don’t have the manpower to contain the camp or police such an event.”

Everyone understood Kenn’s choice, though few agreed with it. Many of the people in this room had already lost friends. That grieving process could only be put on hold for so long and then it would take over on its own.

“Anyone else?”

Jeff stood, lowering his hood. “I heard something today in the shower. I wasn’t going to say anything because it doesn’t feel like it should be my business. I decided against that after Brian’s shooting rampage. You have a right to know what’s going on...with the Eagles.”

Frowns came over nearly every tired face.

“What are you talking about?” Kenn controlled his queasy gizzard.

Jeff ignored the few people here shaking heads at him. “There’s a meeting being held about leadership, about going home...without Angela.”

“That won’t happen!”

“Who is it? We’ll take care of it!”

“They have a right to leave. The only prisoners on this ship are in the brig.” Adrian ignored all the nasty comments as he stepped into the hall with wet hair and clean skin. “I’m on my way up to Marc.

The boss wanted me to drop this off to you.” Adrian handed Kenn a small slip of paper and left the room.

Kenn frowned as he read it. He flipped the paper over so everyone else could see it.

Let them go.

“That’s straight from the boss, folks. I recognize her handwriting. So does everyone else who got an envelope during our civil war. Anyone is free to attend that meeting. Anyone is free to leave. If someone wants to update me on the choice afterward, that would be lovely.” Kenn snapped his book shut. “Dismissed.”

Kenn was furious about the betrayal by some of the Eagles. He was also disappointed Angela was allowing it to happen. *Maybe Adrian can talk to her.* Adrian hadn’t seemed upset at all... Kenn’s eyes narrowed. *There is something going on.*

3

“You have something for me?” Marc copied the numbers from his dosimeter onto the clipboard. Around him, bright sun sparkled off everything metal, making it hard to view through the windows.

“Kenn’s getting them going on preparations. He said he’s sending a team up later to finish taping the bridge.” Adrian held out a package. “They had one more suit for Grant to switch out. Both bosses insisted you get suited up as soon as the numbers start going up.”

Marc sat it on the small desk he'd had Neil bring up for books. He would put the suit on if he needed to, without argument. He was still suffering the effects of his first radiation poisoning. He wasn't anticipating a second blast.

Adrian moved around the bridge, checking numbers against what he remembered was accurate for a ship this size. He'd only done a small amount of research before they left America. He had assumed they would always have a captain who could handle these issues. *That was a big mistake.*

Marc nodded at the thought. "One we all made. Angela counted on that, the same as you."

"Assuming is dangerous." Adrian shifted to the front window, admiring the beautiful ocean view. The water they were sailing through appeared clean. He didn't detect any debris, but he also didn't spot any life. He would feel a lot better if there were fish or dolphins in the water that weren't dead or in distress, like some people had reported seeing in the last debris field.

"I have the refueling center on this map." Marc stepped away from it so Adrian could have access. He didn't ask for Adrian's thoughts on the matter. The blonde man knew that was why he had been called up here.

Adrian examined the map of the surrounding area, calculating not only what they would have to do to access the fuel, but also possible dangers. It was unlikely a refueling center would still have the

gas they needed. A year was a long time for such a valuable resource to have gone untouched.

Marc kept track of Adrian's thoughts, wishing he had the strength to pry deeper. Angela had a plan going. What he didn't know was if Adrian was aware of it. In the past, Angela had used Adrian's plans, combined with her own. This time, Marc wanted to know if Adrian had been let in.

Adrian didn't rise to the bait, though he wanted to say several things in response to Marc's thoughts. He was hoping that conversation didn't take place. "I assume you considered using the reserves?"

"Yes. I also considered refueling directly from the ship we're towing." Marc stretched his arms, still sore. He wasn't sure if it was from the illness or beating on Neil. "Both those actions require two full teams of healthy people to manage the stations. We should have smooth seas for the operation, but I'm not sure about manpower."

Adrian studied Marc. "You have a bad feeling."

Marc sighed. "I don't think we should go to the refueling station unless we're prepared for problems."

"I agree, but I also agree we don't have the manpower to refuel from the ship we're towing or to launch our refueling craft." Adrian shielded his eyes as the sun brightened. After days below, he couldn't take the glare. "Do we have other options?"

Marc shrugged. "We always have another choice, but it is not a good one. We have enough

fuel, I think, to make it back to the UN ship and drain those tanks. However, it's basically the same setup as refueling from the ship we're towing. We'd also return to a contaminated area. Out of the four options, the most realistic is to just pull into the refueling center."

Adrian nodded, leaning on the console. "We would need about five hands and a couple of guards for that run, depending upon current occupation of the station, damage from the ocean, and lack of repairs for a year." Adrian sighed. "I assume you want to know what I would do if I were in charge?"

Marc grunted. "You are still in charge in a lot of ways; we both know that."

Adrian didn't deny it, though he could feel that era quickly coming to an end. Angela no longer needed his lessons. Only specific situations, like this one, required his expertise. "Give me two minutes."

Marc turned to check the numbers again, occupying himself with a scan of the fuel, water, and air. It was helping him stay awake, since the only thing he could see through the windows was water and hazy sunlight.

"Once this big bitch is stopped, it'll take us a little bit to get her going again. We'll need to make sure the station is clear before you bring it in."

Marc left Adrian alone while he mumbled out details, remembering a recent situation where he had wished Angela would let him do the same instead of interrupting him with her well laid plans.

He was looking forward to a time when she would trust him the way she did Adrian, and obviously Kenn, since he was in charge of the ship. So far, it didn't feel like Angela had faith in his ability to lead.

“That's all in your mind. She's waiting for you to step up. When you do, you won't be able to give it back to her because she doesn't want to lead anymore.” Adrian quickly changed the topic before Marc could reply. “I'd do a four-man team under the fog that's coming. Oh, yeah. Samantha said there's fog coming soon.”

“Noted. Plan?”

“Myself, Greg...and Shawn, if we can pry him away from Pam.”

“I had a different crew in mind.”

“Let's hear it.”

Marc said three names that immediately made Adrian agree. “I can work with that.”

“Good. I'd like some other updates. Did you catch the meeting?”

Adrian knew better than to lie. “Almost all of it.”

“I didn't. I have my grid back now, but nothing else yet, and Neil is still gathering information.”

Adrian brought up his mental notes from the meeting, while scanning for Marc's guard. He didn't see anyone, but he could feel eyes on them. He just wasn't sure if they were human. “We're still trying to narrow down a few missing people. Should I add anyone to that list?”

Marc shrugged, wondering if Adrian had noticed Conner's absence. "If Kenn is as good as Angela thinks he is, those people are already on it."

Adrian hoped Kenn had it covered so her faith would be justified. In moments like this, the Marine had always served him well, but that still hadn't been enough to prevent tragedies. "Water will be back on shortly. Kenn told them to be ready for your call at the refueling station. We had a break-in at the mess. Brian shot and killed Katie and Zoey because Brittani punched him a couple days ago. Bad aim. He also wounded six people."

Marc brought up Brian in his mind; he didn't know much about the man. He wasn't positive when Brian had joined them, though he thought it was sometime around their mountain adventures. "What else?"

"The ship is almost clean; shift people are sleeping, and the camp will be up in about four hours."

"What about the brig?" Marc expected a real update from that area.

"Do you want it personal or general?" Adrian had never worked directly for Marc in this manner.

"I've got time to kill up here. Make it personal."

Adrian put Marc's placeholder back on the map and settled onto the rickety stool next to the desk. "We're drugging Kronus regularly. When he finally sleeps it all off and gets his gifts back, there's going to be blood spilled. We're using the cocktail from

Little Rock. Each time he gets it, his gifts are locked.”

Marc wondered if the angel, like Angela, would be able to fight through the drugs and access his gifts anyway. He decided not to invite more trouble by asking.

Adrian continued. “Sheldon will need to be under suicide watch if we ever let him out of the brig. He’s torn up over killing Rose and terrified he’s going to be hanged for it.”

“He might be.”

“Thus, the terror. We should encourage him to go with the Eagles who are about to leave Safe Haven.”

Marc was stunned. In all his time here, he’d never once considered Eagles might desert them. “What is she doing about that?”

Adrian sighed miserably. “She said to let them go and forbade me to interfere in any way.”

Marc could feel how much that choice hurt Adrian. “What about Ramer? Any chance he might recover enough to help out?”

Adrian reluctantly shook his head. “He might even be a danger. Withdrawals hit in a series of waves. The last one can be nasty if the person has gone cold turkey. People can even go into cardiac arrest from it. When he reaches that stage, I’m going to recommend the medics give him something to knock him out.”

Marc was sorry Ramer had been sucked into an addiction. Ramer was normally trustworthy. “What about the kids?”

“I told Kenn he should get Angela an update on her twins at least, but that was before the shooting. He’s been busy. As for the condition of people in the infirmary, I blocked out that part of the meeting.”

Marc wasn’t mad at him for it. His shift in the infirmary had been excruciating. “How do I become Byzan?”

Adrian’s mouth dropped open.

Marc grunted. “I’ll count to ten.”

Adrian’s face darkened. “You already have that answer.”

“I want to hear it again.”

“Why?”

Marc stared at him in cool hatred.

Adrian’s shoulders slumped. If Marc became byzan, he’d never be able to beat the man. “You have to give your demon control and trust it to still share the soul with you. Most of us won’t take that risk. We understand it’s part *demon*.”

Marc waited for anything else Adrian wanted to add.

Adrian clamped his lips together.

“You can leave.”

Adrian did, relieved there wasn’t going to be more personal drama between them. He was too vulnerable right now. Any of his secrets could be

accessed behind his weak walls, and as usual, he had more than one.

Marc is considering flipping to that level. Can I do that too? Am I that brave?

Adrian's demon waited for his answer, begging to be trusted, to be fully accepted as they were meant to be.

Adrian wanted to. If he became a byzan, it would take all of this ship's descendants to lock him down and that still wouldn't be strong. If he waited, the choice would be taken from him.

Adrian?

He tensed at Angela's cold voice in his mind.
Yes?

Never consider it again.

Why? I'm not bad anymore. I never really was. You know that.

No.

You know I can be trusted.

No.

But I built this camp you're so fucking fond of! I built this!

And then you crushed it. Something inside you is broken. If you become byzan, you'll force me to put you down. I won't allow it to spread.

You won't kill me. You love me. Adrian tensed in case he was wrong about how much she cared.

So did others who were listening, hoping Adrian had just pushed her too far.

Angela's icy amusement floated through the drafty ship and slammed into Adrian. *My plans for*

you are bigger than a heart attack in a dim hall to avoid your fate. You're going to serve me, Adrian Mitchel. As will all of your descendants, throughout every branch. They will be cleansed of your stain and allowed to flourish...unless you become byzan. If you do that, I will leave Safe Haven and hunt down every last Mitchel until your line is but a memory.

“It’s not fair!” Adrian punched the wall.

The ship groaned back at him.

It’s delayed justice. Fair would have been letting you hang. This way, you face the people you betrayed, daily, until you die for their freedom.

“That’s not my dream.”

No, it’s mine. You hurt me in ways even Kenn couldn’t. I believed in you. There’s no walking away from a debt like that with me unless you die.

People who had betrayed Angela winced as her contempt wafted through the ship in brimstone scents. *You made your choices, all of you. Now live with them or get out of my camp. The next lifeboat launches at noon.*

Chapter Eighteen
Karma Bites

Noon

1

“Do you have updates for me?” Angela looked to Kenn through the door of the office they were using for preparations. Nearby, Tonya was finishing a set of tests in the lab before she and Kenn went to bed. He wanted to be wide awake when they reached the refueling station.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” Kenn paused as he realized Angela was changing her filthy clothes. She’d been puked on and pissed on in the last hour of helping in the infirmary. He turned his back. “Are you sure you’re up to point duty?”

Angela grunted, trying to get the dirty jacket off. Her entire body was sore; she felt like someone had been beating on her for days. “Debra will be up at six. It’s not that long.” Angela wasn’t looking forward to having point either, but they both needed sleep.

Kenn observed her from the corner of his eye, not sure if he should help or mind his own business as she struggled with the bra strap. The office around her was cluttered with piles of items he’d

requested, or the delivery crews thought they needed. It was messy but usable.

“Where’s Dog?”

Kenn motioned toward the dirty floor under his feet. “Down there again somewhere, hiding in the shadows. He’s still afraid the cats are out to get him.”

“They might be.” Angela grunted as the little metal hook missed again. “Damn it!”

Kenn drew in a breath as he approached her. “Don’t freak out.” He took the two ends from her trembling fingers, adeptly clipped them together, then retreated back to his position in the doorway.

“Thanks.” Angela was too tired to be scared of him or anyone else. She pulled on her last clean sweater, wishing she had one that smelled like Marc. No one was doing laundry at the moment. When this was all over, that room would be another nightmare to sort out.

Kenn scanned her long, white hair and wrinkled, starving body with guilt. He wasn’t draining himself in the infirmary. His body was still healthy.

“You’re doing your job. Stop whining.” Angela pushed off her filthy shoes, then pried the socks off her feet. “I’ll take those updates now.”

Kenn got his book out, still frowning. “Cameras are going up in the mess as we speak. We’ll have full coverage through the computer on the counter by your arm in the next half hour.”

Angela picked a pair of shoes from the pile, verified the size, and set them aside. She hoped these weren't from their dead, but she didn't ask. She couldn't keep wearing her old ones. They were squishing and leaving small puddles of horror as she walked. "Keep going."

"I don't have much for you. Tonya is getting the next batch of tests running. It won't be ready until we get up, so no one needs to go into the lab. I'm not putting a guard on the door, but I will put an alarm."

Angela nodded, sifting through the pants. "Make it small. There's a lot of traffic going through here. We'll see anyone who tries to break in."

"I will." Kenn had the setup in his pocket, but he didn't say so. It was strong enough to kill a grown man. "Some of the camp didn't eat the oatmeal or sleep. I have a team of Eagles helping them leave now. There's seven."

Angela didn't ask who it was. She would find out later when she was better equipped to handle the feeling. "How long to reach the fuel station?"

"Roughly fifteen hours. We'll all be back on duty then."

Angela slid off the filthy scrubs and underwear. She quickly shoved her leg into clean pants. *There's the uneasy feeling.*

Kenn snickered but didn't comment. He had a line into everyone's mind right now, but he was only snooping for important things. When it came

to Angela, he wasn't snooping at all. Losing these people couldn't be easy on her. She was holding up remarkably well considering he was positive she wanted to break down.

"How's Marc?"

"Fine, as far as I know. Adrian was just up there. You can ask him." Kenn stepped aside so Adrian could access the doorway.

Adrian's heart thumped at the sight of her bare cheek disappearing into pants. He gave Kenn a quick glare. *Nice timing, dick.*

Kenn shrugged. *You can pretend you didn't like it. I understand.*

Angela slammed the shoes on the floor and sat on the edge of the chair. "I'm going to make both of you pay for this moment."

Kenn scowled. "I didn't do anything! He's the one who looked."

"You waved me in!"

Angela slipped the shoes on. "Finish your updates, then get the fuck out of here—both of you."

The men frowned as they realized they had pushed her over another line while trying to get her to fight back.

"I just needed to know you're up for point duty." Kenn hoped she didn't hold a grudge. His list was big enough already. "Update her on Marc's fuel plan."

Adrian scanned Angela through their bond. He ignored Kenn's displeasure, horrified by her condition. "Can I give you energy?"

“Save it for your next job.” Angela didn’t look at him. “Update me.”

Adrian sighed. “He has a solid plan for the refueling station. I went over it. I don’t see any problems.”

“But?” Kenn looked at Adrian expectantly.

“What makes you think there’s a but?” Adrian winced as a flash of Angela’s ass went through his mind.

Angela’s face turned redder. “We both heard your tone. Spit it out.”

Adrian felt alone in that moment. *She doesn’t want me in on this one.* “Nothing.” He headed for the hall.

“Is the water back on?” Angela pulled up her sock.

Kenn glowered at Adrian’s stiff back as he left. “Yes. So far, so good. When we get up, Tonya will run another test to verify it. Until we get a second positive test, we’re still using reserves.”

“Good.” Angela’s stomach twisted. “How’s your gizzard?”

Kenn didn’t want to admit that his was also churning. “I’m not sure what else we can do. We have to have fuel.”

Angela turned around, adjusting the clothing. She put her hair into a wild white ponytail that Kenn wanted to stroke and cut off at the same time. He hated seeing her weak now.

“What?”

“I’d feel better if I looked ahead.” Kenn joined her in the room, not wanting anyone to overhear them. He sank down on the couch, groaning at the relief. “I don’t have any *adult* descendants who can do it...”

Angela sat next to him, switching things from her dirty pockets as she spoke. “Would I do it?”

Kenn wasn’t sure if it was a trick, so he answered honestly. “Yes.”

“Do you think it’s wrong?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. We shouldn’t use minors in moments like this, then tell them it’s wrong to use that power when they want to. We don’t have to use it here.”

“Last question. Would Adrian do it?”

Kenn was surprised she’d gone there. “I’m not sure.” He looked over at her, aware that she wasn’t protesting him being so close on the couch. “Would he?”

“Never. Adrian refused to involve the children in camp security. He’s afraid if they have to kill, that it might corrupt them.”

“I worried about that too when I thought of it.”

Angela realized Kenn had a child in mind. “I can’t scan you, so you have to spill your guts. I used the last of my energy to threaten everyone.”

Kenn wanted to snicker but couldn’t. He was too worried. “Missy warned me Tonya was in danger. She’s full of restless energy. It would kill two birds with one stone, but I’m not sure it’s right.”

Adrian appeared back in the doorway. “That’s the one place where you’ve misjudged me. With children so restless they’ll endanger themselves or someone else, I did put them to work. I did it with Charlie and Conner, and a few others I believed needed it. In this situation, if you have an *in* with Missy, I would use it.”

Angela saw a shadow coming down the hall behind Adrian. She kept the knowledge to herself as she finished gathering everything from the pockets of her dirty jeans.

“I don’t know what else we can do.” Kenn sighed as the bad feeling grew stronger.

Samantha tapped Adrian on the shoulder.

He screamed, banging into the wall.

“It’s just me.” Samantha snickered. “I heard some of that. You guys have another option.”

“You are not doing it.”

“We are not taking a chance on you losing those twins.”

Angela and Kenn both denied it.

Samantha gestured at Adrian, hoping he would be on her side. “It’s not like I’m taking energy. They wouldn’t be able to evolve. There’s actually little danger.”

“What if we try it this way?” Adrian sent an image, aware that Angela didn’t have the energy to search for it on her own. He wanted to gift her until she was full and he was drained.

Kenn frowned at Adrian, standing. “No. Learn what that word means.”

“I want you back in the garden.” Angela motioned at Samantha. “I’m not going to change my mind.”

Samantha left, not surprised. She’d volunteered because she felt useless. If not for being pregnant, nothing would have kept her from the infirmary. As it was, she was doing once an hour checks through the doors while tolerating hostility from harried medics. She understood where they were coming from. They would also have to understand where she was coming from.

Angela stood, strapping on her gun belt. It felt like it weighed fifty pounds.

Kenn went into the hall to scan for trouble. She didn’t have a guard right now.

Adrian lingered, hoping for a moment alone with her to talk.

Kenn grabbed him by the arm and spun him out into the hall. “You don’t get to do that while I’m in charge.” He shoved Adrian toward the stairs, aware of his own shock as well as Angela’s surprised pleasure. He gave Adrian a threatening glare. “You can be drugged next.”

Adrian’s brows came together. “That’s not a bad idea.” He moved off down the corridor.

Kenn waited, watching the traffic in the hall. He found two small shadows at the intersection Adrian was approaching.

Chilled, Angela leaned against Kenn’s warm body. “Wait for it...”

Kenn automatically dropped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her against his heat. He could feel how cold she was.

Wait up! Dog trotted after Adrian.

Adrian slowed to let the dusty wolf catch up, assuming he had another message from Marc.

Kenn continued to observe, wondering if Angela gave him moments like this to rub in how wrong he'd been to treat her cruelly. This felt amazing, with her willing. She had to know that.

Dog walked in front of Adrian, leading the way. *How's your day going?*

Adrian shrugged as they reached the intersection. "Why do you ask?"

It's not going to get better, so I hope it's been good.

"What are you talking about?" Adrian stopped in the middle of the intersection.

Dog jumped out of the way as two wild shadows lunged through the air, hissing and yipping.

"Oh! Get it off!" Adrian staggered backward as one of the cats dug into his stomach with all its claws. "Help!"

The other cat wrapped tight around Adrian's ankle, biting and scratching.

"Bad kitty!" Adrian stumbled forward, arms flailing. "Let go! That's *my* ear!"

Dog took off running down the corridor. *That was from the Captain.*

The big cat on Adrian's stomach climbed his body in fast yanks up to his shoulder.

The ankle monster dug in deeper to hang on.
“Son of a bitch!”

The cat jumped off his shoulder and landed on the cabinet by the infirmary.

Adrian kicked his leg out, hoping to dislodge the other feline.

The cat on the cabinet jumped again, landing on Adrian’s head. It slid, digging in.

“Ah! Call it off!” Adrian’s hands came up to protect his face as he staggered down the corridor.
“Marc! Stop laughing and help me!”

Kenn and Angela were in tears. They shook against each other, trying not to be so loud that it carried into the infirmary. A few people were already coming, drawn by Adrian’s screams. Those were fading, but still continuing as he fought to extract the claws and teeth.

“That was the best shot I’ve ever seen.” Kenn was impressed at how quick karma had bitten Adrian.

Angela stilled against him. “You avoided yours when you defended me.” Angela retreated, not feeling fear or anger. She only felt pity. “Tonya knows.”

Kenn sucked in a breath. “How long?”

Angela gestured toward the bullet-chipped corridor. “Right after that.”

Kenn sighed. “Thank you for the warning. I don’t deserve it.”

“As leader of this camp, I need your personal drama to wait until we’re in the clear. I told her the same thing when she started to confront Courtney.”

Hearing the other woman’s name spoken brought it home for Kenn. “I don’t know what to do.”

Angela was surprised. “I would think you’d deny it, let her raise the baby alone and pretend it never happened.”

Kenn blew out a tired sigh. “I’m not sure I can. Blood means more to me since I joined Safe Haven.”

Angela stepped into the drafty corridor, shivering at the breeze. “That’s a choice you have to make, but it has to be later. Right now, you need to collect your angry woman and sleep.”

Kenn grunted. “If she knows, there won’t be sleep.”

“I think you’ll be surprised.” Angela knew Tonya planned to sleep hard and not speak to Kenn. That was the only concession Tonya had agreed to make when Angela gestured to her a little while ago. There was no doubt that bomb was going to explode. It might take the ship with them, but it wasn’t going to happen until this crisis was over. Angela respected Tonya for having the strength to do that. She had little doubt that the woman would follow through. Tonya honestly had changed. Kenn was the one who was still embracing parts of his old self. Until he conquered the last bit of nastiness

inside, he wasn't going to be trustworthy as a mate. Tonya had just learned that the hard way.

2

“The lifeboat is leaving in thirty minutes. Everyone needs to decide if they're going.” In charge of the Eagle meeting, Travis gestured at the twenty people who had shown up. “I vote we go. They don't need us here. All we can do is die for them.”

Jeff leaned against the wall of the empty swimming pool, glowering. “What do you mean by *them*?”

Travis retreated, hand coming up. “I didn't mean descendants!” Salty air rifled his hair.

“I think you did.” Jeff crossed his arms over his wide chest, enjoying the breeze but not the mood.

“So do I.” Zack was next to Jeff, barely awake.

“I meant leadership! None of us are high on Angela's list for anything except pawns in her next plan. Any of us could be the next sacrifice.” Travis wanted to say more about Angela, but he didn't push.

Jeff did a fast scan of the people who had shown up to the center deck meeting. They were all assuming Marc, still on the bridge, couldn't see behind him because of the sun's glare. Jeff was a little surprised to find Brittani and Ian at this meeting, but he was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they were spies, like

himself. He wasn't leaving Safe Haven, and certainly not in the middle of a crisis like a rat deserting a sinking ship.

"This isn't what I signed up for." Peter had had enough brushes with death during his time in Safe Haven to be leery of pushing his luck any longer. His packed kit was on his back; he was wearing winter clothes despite the warm temperature. He was ready to go.

"It's exactly what you signed up for." Molly was horrified that Eagles were talking about fleeing right when they were needed most. She had just come from helping burn bodies. Her mood was ugly. "You swore to keep the peace, the same as the rest of us. Eagles don't run."

"I don't want to be an Eagle anymore. I just want to survive. It's a basic right." The meeting was over as far as Travis was concerned. He rotated toward the ramp that led to the front deck. "I already packed my shit. I'm gonna go figure out how to lower that lifeboat."

A few people followed him, but most didn't, including all ten low level people the senior Eagles had expected to. Travis's defection was something of a surprise. They'd thought he was happy as a member of Ivan's team.

"I have a quick question."

Travis paused, bracing. "What is it?"

Jeff moved by him, not surprised when the taller man stepped out of the way. "When did you become a coward?"

Jeff walked down the ramp before Travis could form a reply.

The rest of the Eagles who had been on the fence also left the meeting, but they didn't go toward the front deck. All of them went below to assume the next duty they were assigned for or to finally get some sleep. Some of them had been on another 24-hour shift.

The last two people at the meeting stared at each other in dismay. Zack and Allison understood how bad it was that Eagles were deserting. When the camp found out, it might mean there would be another lifeboat of people leaving tomorrow at noon. The Eagles kept the camp stable, not leadership.

“Help me to bed?”

Allison nodded, coming over to take his thin, bruised arm. The medications were taking a toll on Zack now. He had confided the diarrhea was explosive, though not bloody. It was still better than what the patients in the infirmary were dealing with, but it was a scary reminder of what he'd gone through. Everyone had forgotten that Zack had spent time on the top deck too. His exposure hadn't just come from burning.

As they descended the ramp, Allison looked back to count the Eagles now gathered around Travis at the lifeboat. There were five of them, barely enough to man the boat in shifts.

Brittani had lingered on the ramp to observe. It surprised her none of the panicky camp members were up here.

Jeff grinned as he passed her. “Drugged oatmeal.”

Brittani processed that. Gus had been willing to do it. She was surprised.

She followed Jeff, Zack and Allison down into the ship, confident the five people fighting with the lifeboat would never be seen again. Once you left Safe Haven’s light, that little bit of protection ended.

“Where does she want me now?” Brittani wasn’t sure if she should go disrupt the new routine of the mess or try to help in the infirmary, where she felt useless now that things had been cleaned up as much as they could be.

“When was the last time you slept?” Jeff held the door for all of them, eyeing the dirty bandage on her head.

Brittani shrugged. “Yesterday.”

“I’ll escort you to the showers, then your cabin if you like. We’re all going the same direction.”

Brittani was glad for the company. The damp, groaning ship held endless shadows to trigger terrible thoughts. The four people traversed the corridor together, chatting lightly.

Brittani tensed as they headed for the coed showers on the ship. She hadn’t fully adjusted to that yet, though she’d done it a few times now. There hadn’t been problems. She hadn’t even felt

anyone staring at her, but it was different than how she'd spent most of her life.

Deciding this was another of those moments where she could conquer something that made her uneasy and stole power from her, Brittani chose to go ahead. She did want a hot shower and she would feel safer while other people were in here with her. This would be her first shower since the illness struck.

Brittani and Allison chose the full stalls in the rear of the room, while Jeff and Zack joined Trent and Corey in the open stalls in the front of the large bathroom. There were also toilets and sinks in an adjoining corridor. This was where the cruise staff had come to shower between shifts. It was built for bulk use.

Conversation started as clothes came off, driving back some of the awkwardness.

"I saw a supply delivery crew going to the cargo area." Zack adjusted the water to as hot as he thought he could stand it, relishing the feel of having his socks and shoes off. "I'll bet we're starting to run low on things."

"I heard Kenn talking to Debra and Conner yesterday about toilet paper." Jeff stepped under the water, closing his eyes. "That feels good."

For the next few minutes, there was only the sound of water running, and pleased grunts and groans as hardworking people tried to soothe sore muscles.

“Who has point now?” Allison wasn’t sure she could sleep if it was still Kenn.

“Angela until six, when Debra gets up.” Jeff was scheduled to guard the lab then.

“I don’t know how she’s still functioning. She looks like hell.” Brittani began to scrub, refusing to let her mind think about any of the horrible things she’d seen and heard over the last few days. All she wanted right now was a bit of mental comfort from sleep.

“She should take energy from the camp.” Zack was also eager to sleep. “It’s not like they won’t give it willingly.”

“I did think about that.” Angela entered the room, Dog on her heel. “If we don’t get a break soon, I’ll be forced to do that.”

Everyone tensed as Angela walked toward an empty shower. It was obvious that coincidence had brought her here at the same time they were discussing her; it still made them uncomfortable.

Angela wanted to offer the mental comfort they were hoping for, but she refused to lie. She got into the shower and stripped.

After she was gone, the conversation didn’t resume. Everyone hurried to eat and sleep as soon as they were finished, all dwelling on how rough Angela looked. She was a white-haired hag being escorted by a grouchy timberwolf. They all needed to rest so they could get back on duty and send her to bed. She clearly needed more recovery time.

Angela caught the thoughts, thanks to her link with Brittani. She didn't think the beautiful woman was even aware that she was broadcasting directly to the boss. It was good to have another connection in the camp that she could depend on, but it was also disquieting. Brittani was stronger than she realized.

Dog didn't like Angela's reflections. It bothered him when she was feeling bad. He didn't know how to lend her the strength physically, so he decided a distraction would be a good idea. He waited until she finished clearing the storage areas they weren't using, then paused as she came out. *I'd like to have a mate.*

Angela was completely distracted. "Say that again."

Dog huffed. *I want to be part of your breeding tree.*

Angela smiled wryly. "That's a great idea. There's just one problem. We're on the ocean. I don't think we're going to find many wolves out here."

Dog flashed her a memory of his conversation with Adrian.

You need a mate. It would be amazing to have all the camp's workers come from your bloodline.

Dog sniffed the air curiously, but his tone in Adrian's mind wasn't interested.

With those common mutts? I'd have my breed die out before polluting it that way.

Angela frowned. “Well, that certainly makes things harder. If you want a mate like you, I’m going to have to figure out how to track them down. As far as I know, there’s not a way to do that.”

I think I can. I’ve caught flashes before.

Angela shrugged. “Okay. Let me know the next time you catch the scent. I’ll see what I can do.” Angela paused as Kendle came down the corridor.

Kendle stopped dead in her tracks, goosebumps breaking out across her rough skin. She had no problem defending herself against anyone else, but she would never again raise a hand or spell to Angela. It made her feel weak.

Angela didn’t glower or threaten. She motioned Kendle over, aware of Dog moving between them. In normal times, Eagles would have also come closer, hoping to stop blood from spilling on clean floors. Here and now, it was just them, a filthy carpet, and an unhappy ship waiting for the end of its usefulness. If she wanted to kill Kendle, now was the perfect time. *And I do!*

Kendle approached with slow steps, ready to take flight. She’d decided that was her only option if Angela attacked her.

“I have a job for you.”

Kendle’s heart thumped. “I’ll do it, whatever it is.” She felt it was easier to cave now. It might save her a little pain later.

“You have duty over the captain during the fuel run.”

Kendle's heart skipped another beat. She shoved her hands into her pockets. "I didn't hear that right."

Angela stepped closer, voice lowering. "If I have to repeat it, you may need to use your fallback option."

Kendle shuddered. "Why would you do that?! That's cruel! To him!"

"The only man I trust with Marc's life is going on the fuel run. The only female I trust with Marc's life is a scarred, scared islander I may end up killing some day." Angela walked away, proud of herself. Kendle loved Marc enough to kill for him, no matter who the threat was. The same couldn't be said of anyone else on the ship except for herself. She had given Marc the best protection love could buy. "Get some sleep. You may have a ten-hour shift, depending on how long it takes to clear the station before we can start offloading the fuel."

Kendle's wave of happiness flew through the corridor, slapping Angela and everyone else in its path.

Angela paused. *Wait for it...*

"I hope that scarred bitch isn't put on point duty again."

"I know, right? She gives me the creeps."

Vicky and Hailey came around the corner and stopped, realizing they'd been heard.

Kendle's good mood crashed. She headed toward the kid cabins, hating everyone on the ship again.

Vicky paled. She flipped up the hood on her jacket and turned toward the opposite stairs.

Hailey waited to be yelled at. When nothing came, she flushed and followed Vicky.

Dog stayed on Angela's heels. *They've been in the cargo area. I can smell it.*

"Kenn knows." Angela kept walking, stewing on Kendle and the curse. Until the caster recovered, it would be weak. If she died, the curse would be broken. Either way, it was definitely still in effect. Angela was impressed with how fast it was happening. Every time Kendle's mood improved, something happened to slap her back into misery. The caster was powerful.

Angela had recognized the spell floating through the ship when it happened. She had been furious until she realized the intended target was Kendle. The caster was trying to make sure Kendle paid for trying to kill the boss. Since Angela was also carrying a grudge about that, she'd allowed the curse to land, but she'd felt a little bad. *Now, I can't imagine telling Pam to lift it.*

Chapter Nineteen

Let It Roll

5pm

1

“I want to see the boss!” Ramer banged on the bars, jarring the door. “Let me out of here!”

Jayda was seated across from his cell. “That’s not going to happen, and you know it.” She was out of patience. Sitting here in this hot room, guarding criminals while sweating and scratching at a new rash on her arm, was torture. She wanted to do more, be more.

“You don’t understand! I need to talk to the boss!” He banged on the cell again. Sweat and anger dripped from his lean body. His legs shook. It was sad and a little scary.

On the stool nearby, Adrian took in Ramer’s condition with sympathy. “I recommended we give you something to help you through these final stages.”

“And?!”

“I’m sorry. She said no.”

Ramer punched the cell and kicked it, screaming.

Adrian picked up the dart gun, sad it had come to this. "I really am sorry." He fired through the bars, hitting Ramer in the shoulder as he tried to duck it.

The narcotics dropped the non-descendant in two seconds, worrying Adrian, but there was little else he could do. Ramer had entered the final violent stage where his body was hunting for any trace of the drugs. His mind was going crazy demanding more of it. This part was so stressful on the human body that it could sometimes lead to a heart attack. Adrian hoped the sedative would get Ramer through the final stages.

He placed the gun on the desk, wishing he had more darts.

"Coming in!"

Charlie, Brittani, and Debra entered the brig. All three of them were wearing white shirts, though the logos were different. Adrian wondered if that had been their idea or Kenn's. It made the crews more visible to the guards and camp members.

"We brought food." Brittani had been on her way to bed and spotted them carrying a large load. Helping even though she was exhausted was the right thing to do.

Standing at the bars to enjoy the Ramer show, Kronus retreated, hand coming up. "I'm not eating or drinking any of that."

Charlie shrugged, rubbing his creased fingers. "I'm not sure we brought enough anyway. The mess

is low on supplies now that someone has broken in twice. We may have to ration.”

Adrian frowned. “I thought we had a camera?”

“It’s back up now. Someone cut the wires on it during the last shift change.” Charlie handed Adrian a small, heavy bag. “Have you seen Conner?”

Adrian slowly shook his head, stomach curling into a hard knot. “Not today. You?”

“No. He wasn’t at any of the meetings.”

“Pass the word to keep an eye out for him?”

“I will.” Charlie turned to Debra to see if she had anything for him to translate.

Debra had already scanned her notes. She shook her head. She just needed to check on the bridge. They had volunteered to bring the food here to save the delivery crew a stop and allow her a fast update.

Adrian began eating. He grinned. “This is good. Who cooked it?”

“Gus. He remembered my chili recipe.” Brittani had recognized the smell.

Adrian didn’t reply, busy shoveling another bite into his mouth. It was honestly the best chili he had ever tasted.

“Give me yours!” Kronus came to the bars, glaring at Brittani. He was aware that she was the woman he had hurt earlier, but he revealed no remorse as he scanned her from bandage to boots. “Are you busy later?”

Brittani’s orbs turned red. “Nope. I’d like to spend a few minutes with you.”

Adrian chuckled, coming over to shove his bowl into Kronus's hand. "Shut up for a while. She's more than you can handle."

Adrian walked Brittani to the door. "I'm sorry about your brother."

Brittani froze. "What?"

Adrian realized she didn't know. Being his usual self, he decided to determine if she was able to stand the next level of being an Eagle. "They took his body to the disposal area last night."

"Lou...?" Brittani ducked out of his comforting hand and ran down the hall.

Adrian made a note in his report so leadership would check on her later.

Debra gestured angrily.

Charlie translated. "That was awful. Why did you do that, you prick?!" Charlie scowled. "I have the same question, worse words."

Adrian went to his stool and dug in the bag for another bowl. "Angela is evaluating her for a leadership position. Someone has to stay on the island when we return. It has to be someone who can function while in personal pain. This was a perfect moment for her test, which she failed."

Charlie reacted before Debra could. "You are a giant piece of shit! Stinky, fly covered shit!"

Debra flipped Adrian the finger, then tugged Charlie out of the room before it could come to blows. They marched down the hall, comparing how much they disliked the blonde man.

Kronus let out a loud belch and dropped the bowl to the filthy floor. “Come work with me. I’ll never let anyone treat you that way.”

“Why would I?” Adrian pointed. “You can’t even get yourself out of a cell on a cruise ship.”

Kronus staggered. His sunken eyes widened as he realized he’d been tricked once again.

Adrian grinned, also getting hazy. “We’re going to nap together now. Don’t talk. I want to count your farts.” Adrian fell sleep to the sound of Jayda chuckling and Kronus falling.

2

Beep! Beep!

Kenn reached over to silence the alarm on his side of the bed. He didn’t get up yet. Tonya’s fully clad, tense body next to him said she was also awake, stewing. He wondered if she’d come up with a satisfying solution. He hadn’t.

Kenn waited for her to speak. He wasn’t sure how to start this conversation or what the outcome might be.

“I need to know why.” Tonya didn’t move yet. “And when.”

Kenn forced himself to be honest. “You were pushing for marriage. I started twitching. It’s not a good excuse, but it’s the truth.”

“In the mountain?” Tonya hadn’t been able to come up with any other time he had seemed

distracted. She'd assumed it was the stress they had all been living under then.

"Yes." Kenn waited for her to start ranting or threatening. He wasn't sure which one the passionate redhead would opt for, but he was positive he wasn't getting out of this cabin without bruises.

"Do you love her?"

"No."

"You fucked her."

Kenn snorted. "The two are not mutually exclusive."

Tonya's fingers clenched in the silky yellow sheet. "This isn't funny."

Kenn realized his attempt at lightening the mood had crashed. He hurried to put out the new flames. "I'm sorry."

Tonya had a hundred things she wanted to scream. She'd spent the last hours resting while trying to decide how much it mattered. In the past, cheating hadn't been a big deal because she'd never loved someone other than herself. That had changed.

Kenn sat up in the bed, stomach in a tight ball. She didn't know the worst of it yet.

"After the crisis is over, I need her switched to the other ship. You can't have any contact with her now, or afterward." Tonya thought that was more than reasonable. If the situation were reversed, Kenn would be beating on someone right now.

Kenn stood. "I'm not sure I can do that."

Tonya finally looked at him, fury growing.
“Which part?”

“All of it.” Kenn picked up his kit, tensed to flee. “Courtney’s pregnant.”

3

Kenn slammed the door behind him. Something hard smacked against it.

“What’s all the noise?” Charlie translated for Debra as Kenn came out of his cabin.

“*You son of a bitch!*” Something else banged into the door. “*I’ll kill that little skank!*”

Kenn left, wincing at the double bruise on his shoulder from a pair of old high heeled boots. She’d thrown them at the same time and landed both hits. “She’s cranky today. Everyone should probably leave her alone.”

Charlie actually wrote it down. “What about a guard?”

“*How dare you do this to me! I don’t deserve this! You bastard!*” Something shattered inside the cabin.

“No guard needed right now.” Charlie underlined the note in his book, frowning. “I guess that secret isn’t a secret anymore.”

Kenn grunted, pulling on his jacket and then his kit. “It’s not like I meant for this to happen.”

Charlie nodded at Debra’s quick gestures. “Exactly. Thinking it through before you do it makes a difference in the outcome.”

Kenn didn't let the ribbing get under his skin. He was already in as much trouble as he could be. He didn't care that the camp was going to make fun of him, though it did bother him that he was going to lose some respect when they found out. What he was concerned with, surprisingly, was if Tonya would leave him over it. He had decided he wanted to be part of his child's life, but he had no feelings for Courtney. Tonya, on the other hand, was his soulmate. He believed that now. *Losing her will crush me where nothing else can.*

"I'm ready for updates." Kenn led the way toward the stairs. "You can walk with me."

"Hang on. We have a message for you." Charlie pulled the paper from his book. "Missy made us swear we would deliver this as soon as you got up."

Kenn scanned the odd message and was surprised to discover he understood it. "That's where I'm going now."

The message said Missy was ready to try. Kenn wasn't surprised the little girl already knew. He just didn't deal well with children. He was hoping the time it took his to grow up would also teach him how to be a father. He didn't know what to say to the little girl who had intimidated most of the camp with her brash, blunt behavior.

"My dad said to tell you she's sweet inside." Charlie finished the update before Kenn could ask how Marc had known what he was doing without gifts. "The last water test is good. Angela oversaw that. She went to bed half an hour ago, after Debra

insisted. Dad said we're ten hours from our destination and that's all I have, other than the infirmary."

All of them stepped aside so the food crew could go by. More drugged items were going to the camp.

"We had two more deaths, but no new illnesses. We do have Courtney and Amy showing signs of recovery, but we know from the pattern that can mean it's the last good moment they have before they slip into the third stage." Charlie handed the paper to Kenn with the other details on it, not enjoying the man's pain at the news that Courtney could still die. "All the wounded from Brian's shooting are improving, except for James. His wound is infected. The medics are treating it and keeping an eye on him when they can."

Kenn put the papers in his book. "What about the kids Conner helped?" Like many of the others, Kenn was hoping they might be able to stuff the boy full of protein and use him as a healer for everyone.

"Both of them are unconscious, but they've lasted longer than the other people who were in stage three, so we're hoping he gave them the strength to make it through. We won't know for another day."

Kenn realized what Charlie was telling him. "You're saying we have a pattern, with stages?"

"Yes. Mom wrote it all out on a wall of the infirmary a few hours ago, along with how to treat each stage below it. It sucks that the patients are seeing it, but the medics know what to do for each

person now, based on their symptoms. It should help a lot.”

“Great. What about the camp?”

“The camp started waking a couple hours ago.” Charlie waited for Debra to finish signaling. He hadn’t been along at that point to take notes. “When we told them this evening’s entertainment, the reaction was good. Their mood is okay now that most of the troublemakers are gone.”

“And the brig?”

Charlie snickered. “Jayda has a fresh box of darts and an extra gun. She starts with singing. When Kronus doesn’t obey, she picks up the gun. She said they’ll work on his dirty cell when he wakes up next time.” Charlie didn’t tell him the rest. Kenn would read it in the report. They were all impressed by how resourceful Jayda had been.

“Seems like things are under control. Good job. Go to bed now, both of you.”

Debra moved off, eager to do as instructed. She hadn’t worked this hard since joining Safe Haven.

“Have you seen Conner?” Charlie was worried.

Kenn shook his head as he watched Debra walk away. She was limping on sore feet. “No, and if I find him down there visiting Candy, there’s gonna be hell to pay.”

Charlie let it go, also eager to sleep, but he couldn’t help worrying about his friend. If Conner didn’t show up soon, Charlie had decided he was going to use his mental gifts to do a scan. He had recovered enough of his energy after helping in the

infirmary that he was almost certain he could do one blast. It was another evolution he had received. He was thrilled to discover it matched his father's. Marc had even promised to teach him how to use it.

Kenn stored that as he went down the stairs. "Hello in the hall!" He announced his presence before he arrived. "It's Kenn. Stand down."

Cathy came out to meet him, assuming he was here for an update. "What's up?"

At the other end of the hall, Timmy holstered his new weapon.

Kenn peered into the cabins as he walked by, spotting Candy in one and Kendle in another. The cabins were neat and clean, with kits by the door in case they needed to relocate quickly. Kenn approved.

Both females gestured to him but didn't rise. They knew he wasn't here for them.

Tracy was at a small table in the center corridor between the cabins, tired, wrinkled, and covered in small bits of glitter. She saw his amused look but didn't chuckle. "How could you do that to her?"

Kenn blanched. "How the hell does everyone know already?!"

Tracy glared at him. "Stop thinking about her or everybody on the ship will know before morning."

Kenn had forgotten non-descendants who were pregnant with descendant babies could access their gifts. He secured his thoughts as he approached Missy, who had just come from one of the cabins. Kenn scanned all the children as he went by.

Autumn, Mike, and Mia were sleeping in the cabin near where Tracy was sitting. Roy and Caleb were in another cabin, playing checkers and slurping juice boxes. Cody, Missy and Kimmie met him in the hall.

Kenn still didn't know how this worked or what he was supposed to do. He looked at Missy, hoping the little girl did.

Missy sat in one of the small chairs she had dragged into the corridor. "Kimmie and Cody are going to help me. It's been a long time since I've done this."

Kenn instantly felt guilty. *I should have taken better care of our kids. Then they would be stronger.*

Missy patted his wrist. "Angela is sorry about it too, but we understand."

Kenn felt tears try to come. He gruffly brushed away her touch. "Let's get this over with."

Everyone frowned at Kenn, except Missy. She often used the same tactics to cover her emotions.

Cody and Kimmy stood behind Missy and placed hands on her shoulders.

"Do you want to ask questions, or do you want me to let it roll?"

Kenn didn't have many questions. "I need to know if the fuel is there and if we can get to it."

Missy opened the doors to a vast field of power that Kenn never would have suspected in the child. He immediately linked their minds so he didn't miss anything.

Missy tensed. "I'm opening the door..."

Power flew through the passages, blowing papers from the walls.

Timmy gathered them, assuming the kids would want to put them back up when this was done.

Kenn watched in amazement. Missy's gift was different than the other descendants who could do this. She didn't get brief, out of order flashes. This was minute-by-minute of what the future held for all of them; every moment was happening at the same time.

The images increased speed, making Kenn frown. "Wait." He saw Trinity using magic in the brig and then the speed increased until he couldn't pick out people or rooms.

"I can't show you all of it. I'm not strong enough." Missy concentrated, slowing the images as the cruise ship sailed into the mouth of an island.

She sped it back up, showing Kenn what he needed to see.

"There's fuel. Thank god." Kenn scanned for other people and found nothing.

Missy groaned, trying to hold the images in place.

Kenn pulled out of her mind. "Let it go now." He'd seen them offloading the fuel without being attacked. That was good enough.

Missy began to come out of the daze, breathing harsh. The two children behind her let go. They sank to the floor, yawning.

Kenn smiled at them. "Thank you. That was helpful."

Missy leaned on her knees, recovering. “Yeah. Now let’s talk about what you did to Tonya.”

He stiffened. “I don’t have time for—”

“Make time! Or lose everything you have. Including your place in this camp.”

He had no power to resist. He hadn’t known Missy was an alpha. Even though he was older and stronger, Kenn was a beta. Her gift overwhelmed him, bringing stinging pain along his nerves.

“Don’t make me do that again. I don’t like being mean anymore.”

Kenn gave her an angry nod, controlling himself. *It’s a good thing I’m not the same man anymore, little girl.*

Missy patted his big wrist again. “That’s exactly why we’re having this talk. You’ve made progress. You’re not a bad man, but I don’t want you to ruin all the progress Tonya has made either.”

Kenn considered her words. “When did you and Tonya become friends?”

“Since we set sail. Tonya spends time with us now.”

Kenn looked to Tracy, then the other adults for confirmation. “Since when?”

“She’s been spending time with the kids to decide if she’s going to be a good mother for your child.” Kendle had been listening while resting before her shift. “She’s not sure she’s good enough for you. She was thinking about giving up the baby to someone who would be a better mom.”

“That’s ridiculous! She’ll be great.”

“Of course, it’s ridiculous.” Missy glared. “*You* are the problem, not her.”

Kenn dropped all pretense. “I don’t want to be. I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s why we’re having this meeting.” Kendle came out and leaned against the dim hall wall. “Kenn, this is an intervention. We, your sort-of friends, have decided to help you through this rough time in your life. If you do what we tell you to, you might be able to come out on the other side better than you went in.”

People added agreement, waiting for Kenn’s reaction.

“We aren’t friends. Why are you doing this for me?”

Kendle frowned. “It’s not for you.”

Kenn was humbled by the show of support and once again proud of Tonya for the friendships she was forging with people he had assumed would never accept her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Kendle’s eyes narrowed. “Now, let’s talk about that skank who’s having your baby.”

4

“Straight ahead of you.”

Jonny carried the body as Monica held the door. The waste area was shut down again so the machines could cool off and people could rest, but the bodies were still coming.

Monica noticed the light was already on. “Is there anything else I can do?” She needed to spend time out of the infirmary, but she hadn’t realized what being on the body crew meant.

“No. I’ll handle it. You can go get cleaned up for your next shift.”

Monica turned to leave. She spotted movement in the corner.

One of the bodies moaned.

“Help!” Monica ran over as Jonny lowered the body. “That’s Brittani! She’s been missing for hours.”

Jonny helped get Brittani to her feet, taking in her filthy state, wild hair, and dazed, swelled eyes. She had a bloody tennis shoe clutched in one hand.

Brittani looked between them, voice like that of a child. “He wouldn’t bugout without these shoes.”

“Let’s get you a shower.” Monica wrapped her arm around Brittani and led the devastated woman out of the area, ignoring the unpleasant feel of touching the gore on her skin and clothes. Monica was horrified. Brittani had dug through the pile of bodies, searching for her dead brother.

Jonny waited until the women were out of view, then restacked the bodies. It hurt him to recognize people as he rewrapped sheets and placed the newest body, Megan, on top of the stack. He left room for more, aware that more were coming.

Jonny returned to the infirmary for the next corpse, wiping his hands down with the alcohol

wipes the medics had given him for this duty. The gloves had run out a few hours ago.

As he neared the lab, Quinn fell in from a nearby hallway. They both spotted Tonya coming down the corridor. When she bypassed the lab and went to the infirmary, he and Jonny quickened their steps. They'd heard about Kenn and Courtney. Both men assumed there was about to be more trouble when they didn't need it.

"She shouldn't be up here." Quinn pointed.

Samantha came up the stairs in a complete radiation suit, carrying three more. "I found these in the cargo bay." She shoved them into Jonny's hands and stepped around them.

Neither man could think of a reason to stop her now that she was in the proper gear.

"Do you hear that?"

Quinn wasn't sure what Jonny was talking about. "No."

"Exactly. What happened to all the ranting?"

The men eased into the infirmary, upset at the lack of noise.

"It's gone quiet." Jonny felt goosebumps break out across his skin. Patients who had been in the second stage were unconscious. There were still blood stains on sheets, skin and clothes, and little murmurs of conversations between a couple of conscious people who were dying and their loved ones, but the rest of the noise was gone.

"Not breathing!"

Jonny jumped at a shout for help from the corner of the packed infirmary.

Harry rushed over. "Who is it?"

Filling a syringe, Morgan gestured violently. "All three. Ben, Donald, Wade. Help me!"

So that's why it's so quiet. Jonny slowly walked to the body pile, not sure if he was about to pass out.

Quinn stood still a moment longer, spotting Grant and Ray having a conversation next to Pam and Shawn. Pam appeared to be unconscious; Shawn didn't look much better even though he wasn't sick. It didn't appear any of their people were going to survive.

Quinn went to help Jonny carry the next body out. *Please let this end soon. We can't take much more.*

Samantha eased down next to Amy's cot, relieved the little girl was still breathing. Her skin glowed bright red as she coughed up blood.

Samantha wiped it away, trying to smile at the girl through the plastic shield. "It's gonna be okay now."

Amy closed her eyes.

Samantha cried.

"I have to go." Shawn kissed Pam's hand, then leaned forward to do the same to her red cheek. "I love you."

She didn't respond.

Shawn went to the door, where Daisey was waiting to take over caring for Pam.

Daisey entered, bracing for misery. This wouldn't be easy duty.

Heavy steps stomped to the door. Morgan swung it open and ran after Shawn. He grabbed him by the arm, jerking him around. "You can't go now! She needs you here!"

Shawn had been hoping to avoid this. "I have a run."

Morgan let go of him, bitterness spreading. "You get to go play war while I watch Pam die."

Shawn sighed. "They need you here and me on a run, man. Come on. This is the job."

"The job sucks!"

Shawn nodded. "Sometimes." He didn't want to leave. He held out a hand. "She might be all yours if I don't make it back."

Morgan rotated toward the infirmary. "She might be dead when you get home. I can't stay with her. *You* should."

Shawn let him go, moving to the stairs. His team was gathering already packed gear now, then meeting at the cargo area for a briefing. From there, they would leave the ship and confront destiny once again. Shawn was torn in two directions. He'd gotten to see Pam, but not Missy.

Do the right thing. Do the right thing.

Shawn waited by the landing, letting his mind make the choice.

When his feet finally chose a direction, Shawn was proud of himself. He trotted down to the cluttered, shadowy cargo area and joined his team.

Chapter Twenty
Snare Strike
Midnight

1

“We have fog moving in. Preparation lists were delivered to each area earlier. They should be taped near an entry. It’s time to finish any preparations that aren’t done or finished. That includes closing doors and windows, sealing rooms the rest of the way. We also need to go quiet, except for designated areas. Turn off all unused lights or equipment. I repeat, this is a fog warning. All quarantines are in place until the fog lifts. Captain, out.” Marc hung up the ship mike.

“I hate the fog. I always have.” Neil waited for a reply from Marc as they watched midnight fog roll across the top deck of the ship. They were the only people up here right now. Thick white clouds taller than the steps were coming up to the bridge. It surrounded the glass in an endless layer of concealment.

Neil tried again. “It’s not as bad as a hurricane, of course, but I still don’t like it.”

Marc sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He did like having Neil on duty here, however.

Neil knew this wasn't the kind of thing they were going to be able to let go of and still hide from the camp. They would see his bruises and feel Marc's coldness. "I'm sorry."

Marc wrote down the numbers on the screen. "For lying, for hiding, or for the murders of two camp members?"

Neil stiffened. "I'll never be sorry for the last part."

Marc shrugged coldly. "I didn't think you were. If you regretted it, you wouldn't be about to talk me into hiding it for you."

Neil didn't like using their friendship, but it was all he had. "I'll do anything you want."

Marc snorted. "You would have anyway."

Neil didn't argue that. "How did you know?" He'd been running it through his mind for days now, but he still hadn't found the answer, despite what he'd told Samantha. He was hoping Marc had told the boss, and not the other way around.

"I didn't."

Neil shoulders drooped. "I should have known she would pick up on it. How did she tell you?"

Marc swiveled the chair around, face hard. "She said two words. You know what they were?"

Neil shook his head, bracing.

"*Find out.*" Marc leaned to the right, searching for a comfortable spot. "Do you understand what that means?"

Neil's heart sank. "She wasn't sure."

Marc pointed. “Exactly! That means every moment for her was real. If you don’t think she’s going to make you pay for that, you’re out of your mind. I’m the least of your worries, *liar*.” Marc turned the chair around, unable to look at his former best friend.

Neil let out a sound of exasperation. “It wasn’t like I could tell her what I was going to do!”

Marc’s tone sharpened. “Why not? Angela trusted you with all her nasty plans.”

Neil hadn’t even considered that she might go along. Therefore, he’d never thought to get permission. “Son of a bitch.”

Marc was unable to keep smugness out of his tone. “You underestimated her, and me. I suspected it as soon as I found out who the targets were. As soon as I found out *you* were being charged, I assumed you were guilty, that it was one of Angela’s plans to rid the camp of two troublemakers. I was horribly betrayed, Neil, when I found out the truth. There’s nothing you can ever do that will make up for this. Not to me, and certainly not to her.”

“So what does that leave?” Neil gestured. “Should I have been on the lifeboat that slunk out of here today?”

Marc shrugged. “My best friend would have stuck around to face the consequences of his actions, like the man we all believed he was. I don’t know what this new Neil will do. It’s the first time I’ve ever met him, and frankly, he’s kind of an

asshole. I don't think he's going to get support from anybody."

"If there's anybody left to deny support, that is."

Both men jerked around to find Ian standing just outside the plastic covered doorway. Wearing full Eagles gear, like they were, he had blended in perfect with the shadows, but he'd also avoided that fourth squeaky stair.

Ian shrugged at their surprise. "I'm taking advantage of descendants not paying attention or not having their gifts right now."

Marc waved him in, eager for an update.

Neil stared in surprise, expecting a rant or at least accusations from the tall, thin blabbermouth.

Ian handed Marc a sheet of paper, wondering if the split lip hurt Neil more than the huge bruise on his forehead. "I wasn't sure if the boss wants Neil in on it or not, so I wrote it down."

Neil winced. *I'm officially on the outs now.*

Ian saw Neil's expression. He sneered. "I knew before Marc. I didn't tell anyone except the boss."

"What, are you storing them up for a big delivery?" Marc gave a smile to let the man know he was joking. He had already noticed Ian's new quietness.

Ian returned the grin. "I'm her secret keeper. Once I adjusted to not being able to tell anyone, I discovered I like it more."

Marc chuckled. "I guess that means if I asked you what was going on with Kenn, you wouldn't tell me."

Ian leaned against the counter that didn't have any dials for him to hit accidentally. "Actually, that one is common knowledge now. So are a few others." Ian checked his watch. "And I happen to be on a ten-minute break."

Marc gestured the man to go ahead. Sailing the ship was boring unless something went wrong, and he refused to wish for that. During the day, it was beautiful ocean in all directions, with skyscrap above. Right now, it was darkness or fog. *Boring.*

"Kenn cheated on Tonya."

"I know that." Marc's mood dipped at the reminder of the wills he had written for some of the people in the infirmary. Whitney's burn box had been delivered to his cabin.

Neil listened, wondering when he would get blown out of the water now that so many people knew his secret.

Ian grinned. "Do you know who it is?"

Marc didn't. "No."

"Courtney."

Drawn against his will, Neil took a step closer. "You're kidding, right?"

Ian ignored Neil. "Courtney had to tell them about her condition." He waited to see if Marc would guess.

Marc's mood dropped another level. "I hope she doesn't lose the baby."

Ian shrugged. "Morgan said there's no way to know if any of the pregnancies will go to term now."

Neil was stunned. “I thought I had the only secret in camp.”

Ian snorted harshly. “Yours is a doozy, but it’s nowhere near the only one.”

Marc was impressed. “You really haven’t blabbed.”

“No.” Ian shrugged. “She gave me a job I hated, but I’m good at it.”

Marc gestured. “What else do you know that you’re allowed to tell?”

Ian chose not to ruin the progress he’d made. “Just one. The boss has an ugly plan for Kronus.”

Ian ducked through the plastic before he could say more. It was hard to be around Marc and not talk about the things he knew. Like the other alphas, Marc’s pull made people want to be in his company, but Ian didn’t want to lose his new job. Hopefully, there would be other times to spend with Marc when they weren’t in the middle of a crisis and he didn’t have half a dozen secrets that could disrupt every part of camp life.

2

“Let me out. I can help them.” Kronus smacked the cell bars when Jayda didn’t answer. “Did you hear me? I can help them.”

Jayda frowned at the angel. “You’re sick too. You can’t even help yourself.”

Kronus wiped snot on his sleeve. “I’m immortal.”

“Up there, maybe. Down here, you’re as mortal as the rest of the descendants. Go on, try to heal yourself.”

Kronus scowled at her, big bushy brows coming together. “The drugs you’ve been giving me block my gifts.”

Jayda smirked. “I’ll bet you guys spent a lot of time making bets when Safe Haven went into Little Rock. Now, you know what it feels like to be hit by the shit.”

Kronus ignored her. He was trying to find the energy to heal himself. She was right; he was ill. He felt like he needed to sneeze, defecate, vomit, belch and cough, all at the same time. “I hate this body!”

Jayda didn’t have sympathy for him. She also didn’t want conversation. Corey was her relief. He was in the next cell, sleeping. For another hour, Kronus was her problem and then she was on a break. That was all she wanted at the moment. She needed to pee and sleep, in that order.

“I’m telling you; I can help them!”

Jayda’s anger rose. “You’re not getting out until the boss comes for you!”

“Hello in the brig.” Vicky and Trinity came down the hall, bringing a delivery.

“I just can’t believe he’s gone!” Vicky sniffed.

Trinity rolled her eyes. “I’ve heard that about fifty times now. I still don’t believe it. Shut up already.” Trinity dropped the box onto Jayda’s desk. “Kenn said you needed this stuff.”

Jayda signed the paper to prove she had received the delivery—a new rule—then glared at the women, hoping they would leave quickly.

Vicky came over and leaned against the desk, face puffy. “He’s gone. My Whitney is gone!”

Jayda pushed the girl’s hip away from the box she was about to knock onto the floor. “I’m aware.”

“I don’t know how I’ll make it without him.”

Jayda copied Trinity’s annoyed tone. “Probably the same way you did before he died—ignoring him until you want something.”

“That’s not true!” Vicky waved grieving hands toward the cells. “Why couldn’t it have been one of them?!”

Kronus smiled at the crying female. “I can save all the people in the infirmary if you let me out.”

“I told you no!” Jayda picked up the dart gun.

Vicky moved closer to the cell, eyes swimming with fresh tears. “You can help them?”

Kronus nodded, reaching through the cell window.

“Get back!” Jayda lifted her gun, but she didn’t have a clear shot.

Kronus brushed tears from Vicky’s pale cheeks, pretending he didn’t mind the feel. “I’m sorry you’re in pain. If they let me out, I can help you too.” He retreated, hands up as Jayda shoved the gun through the cell window. “I didn’t do anything!”

Vicky pushed the gun down. “He was being nice to me. He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You should tell your boss what’s going on here.” Kronus stared at Vicky again. “My word. I will help them.”

Vicky stormed out of the brig. “I’m gonna do that!”

Jayda went to her stool, wishing she’d been quicker. Then she could have gotten away with shooting him again.

Kronus wiped his hands on his filthy clothes, stomach curling at the smell coming off his human body. He wished he’d taken the shower offer.

Trinity’s meek expression melted into the thunder that had started the fight in the mess. “He’s one of them? The Gamblers?”

Jayda nodded. “Yep.”

Trinity spun around and targeted Kronus with her snare gift.

Kronus stiffened. “Wait...”

Trinity locked on; she jerked him forward.

Kronus pinged off the bars and staggered back, blood dripping from his nose. “You human bitch!”

Trinity nodded. “In every way. If you speak to me again, I’ll knock you out and slice off the part that makes you a guy while you’re down here. Get me?”

“Useless whore!”

Jayda didn’t even try to stop Trinity from firing.

Kronus had no defense to the mental hand that slammed him against the floor and knocked him out.

Trinity shifted toward Jayda, but she stayed where she could still see Kronus. She enjoyed watching blood roll from his nose onto the dirty carpet. “You need anything?”

Jayda yawned, rubbing bleary eyes. “I’m good now. Thanks.”

Trinity started to leave, then paused. “I’m sorry.”

Jayda shrugged. “For the fight?”

“No. You asked for that. I meant for calling you useless.” Trinity’s demeanor slid into misery. “You can’t be. He’s dangerous. If you were useless, you would be on the delivery crew...with me.”

Radios crackled. “We need hands in the infirmary! The medics are down!”

Trinity immediately left.

She traversed the long corridor in fast steps, hating the sound of plastic flapping. Almost all doorways and windows had been covered, reminding her of growing up poor. They’d often had plastic over missing car or house windows when they couldn’t afford to replace them. She didn’t like it. In fact, she loathed it. Trinity had spent her entire life working to escape that environment and now here she was, right back in it.

“Don’t you go up there!”

Trinity spotted little Sally flying up the stairs. *Is she still wearing the same dress from a week ago?*

“Come back here!” Leeroy ran after his daughter. He looked like he’d just come from the showers.

Trinity shook her head and kept walking. *Kids*. She bumped into Trent as she rounded the corner by the infirmary.

Trent steadied her, then removed his hands. He was dirty. “Did you just deliver to the brig?”

“Yes.” Trinity couldn’t find a smile to give him for keeping her from falling. “Thanks.”

“How are things there?”

“Calm.”

“Even Kronus?”

She nodded, stepping around him. “He got his bell rung. It was a knockout by snare strike.”

Trent frowned, but wrote it down as he continued toward the stairs.

Trinity entered the infirmary. It was almost impossible to believe the amount of chaos.

Exhausted Medics were on bedrolls while camp members worked. A body was waiting for removal; an untouched food delivery sat in the corner near dozens of empty water jugs and empty paper towel rolls. There were three dozen people moving around three dozen cots. The air was thick with feces and vomit.

“Oh, my God.” Her ears filled with an insane amount of coughing, groaning, and gagging. It was worse than she had thought the few times she’d glanced through the window. Open, empty cabinets and boxes said the infirmary was running out of everything.

Trinity keyed her mike. “I need all delivery crews to get to work immediately. I’ll read a list of

items in a minute. I want these things brought to the infirmary in the next half an hour. If you're sleeping or on a break, get up and do this, then go back to it. We need these things here right now; you're the only ones left to help."

Trinity didn't wait for approval from anyone in the infirmary. This was one of those moments where approval didn't matter and the energy to serve did. Trinity waved at people. "Let's get all this garbage bagged up; somebody take the body to wherever we're taking them. I want all the empty cots cleared so we can put down fresh sheets and towels. Then we're going to help get all the patients into clean clothes and get some water in them."

Trinity read the list taped to the infirmary window, stomach dropping as she realized none of the delivery people had been by here yet. She keyed her mike. "We need sheets, towels, alcohol, all stomach and fever medications, rags, and any clean cots we have stored. Also, IV packages and bags, needles, syringes." She let off the mike, a bit stunned by the number of things they'd run out of. She was sorry she hadn't skimmed this list before.

She turned to the waiting, shocked people who hadn't begun to move yet. She frowned at their confused stares. "I gave you a job. Get to it."

People slowly began to work on the garbage piles or cots, but no one approached the body.

Trinity assumed there was a code for it. She made a mental note to ask someone. Right now, everyone was occupied. Trinity was afraid to go

closer to those people. It was hard to look at the messes, but it was even harder to view the pain. *Please let this end soon. We don't need any more death. And while you're at it, can you take care of Kronus? Safe Haven doesn't need him either.*

“Coming in.” Tonya entered the infirmary. An unhappy guard trailed her. They were both wearing masks over their faces.

Tonya went to Angela in the far corner, trying not to look at the patients. “I have updates for you.”

“Go ahead.” Angela didn't take her hands away from little Cindy, who was about to die.

“The levels in the blood samples are dropping. It may not seem like it, but I think almost everyone is getting better. The two kids Conner helped are in the official stages of recovery and Leeann may soon join them.”

“That's good.” Angela put a hand on Tonya's wrist and pulled a tiny amount of energy that she sent into Cindy's small body. Tonya could spare it, but only a little at a time.

Tonya walked away, wishing she could help more. It looked like everyone had someone to care for them... Tonya spotted Courtney by herself. Blood was dripping from her nose.

Tonya hated her new self at that moment. In the past, she could have walked away. Now, she found herself going to kneel by Courtney's cot so she could reach the pack of tissues on the floor. She wiped the blood from Courtney's thinning face, waking the ill woman.

Courtney was shocked to see Tonya looking at her with anything but hatred. She waited for something ugly, wrapped in misery.

It was a perfect opportunity for Tonya to strike, but she couldn't do it. "Where is that damn delivery?!"

Trinity realized Angela was getting updates from everyone and joined their leader. "Something happened in the brig."

Angela understood it should be mental. She placed a hand on Trinity's wrist this time and pulled the energy to connect their minds. "What is it?"

Kronus is sick from using the fountain in his cell. Vicky wants to let him out.

Angela braced as Cindy's body stiffened. *She came here, but Morgan wouldn't let her in.*

Kronus says he can help everyone.

How, if he's sick?

No idea. I think he's lying. He's knocked out again.

Good. The drugs should keep him under control a little bit longer.

No, he got knocked out. He might even have a concussion to match Brittani's.

"Thank you." Angela's tears rolled as Harry came over to declare Cindy's time of death. "Please go back to work."

Trinity did. It was obvious Angela didn't have anything left to give, but she was still trying.

I can do the same. I might be new, but I'm still a descendant and if giving these people my energy

keeps them alive, then that's what I'll do. She'd finally caught the Safe Haven infection.

3

“Turn your radio on.” Marc wanted to hear the open infirmary channel. He was trying to get updates on some of his favorite people. Waiting to reach the location was hard on his nerves. He'd cleaned the bridge, mapped their course multiple times, cleaned the windows, reread Grant and Ray's sailing notes, cleaned his fingernails, his gun, and his boots, but it hadn't covered even half the hours.

Neil checked the time. “You don't need to hear that misery. Things are peaking. It's awful there.”

Marc was bored, though the view now consisted of the refueling team on deck with Theo, practicing as the sun sank. He'd lost interest after the first practice run. *I memorized the routine and moved on.*

“I'll be leaving you in a few minutes. Is there anything you need from me?”

“Hardly.” Marc frowned. “Who's your relief?”

Footsteps echoed.

Kendle appeared.

“Absolutely not!”

Neil ignored Marc's protest as he went over to open the plastic so Kendle could come in. He ducked out at the same time, not speaking to her. Neil caught the scent of fresh washed hair and stored the image of Kendle in clean jeans and a tank

top. Despite all the scars covering her exposed skin, she was alluring.

“Get out of here!” Marc’s loud voice echoed.

Neil escaped before the grenade exploded. He didn’t imagine the plastic would be enough to hold it in, but he would be off ship soon and it would be someone else’s problem. When Marc had told him that he was part of the clearing team, Neil had been thrilled. He was eager to start re-earning the respect he’d thrown away.

“You need to get out of here.”

Kendle took Neil’s corner spot for guard duty. “Your fiancé sent me up here. I’m not leaving until the end of my shift.” Kendle didn’t hide the fear of what would happen if she disobeyed Angela’s order. The rest of her thoughts and emotions, she kept locked.

Marc threw himself into the comfy captain chair. “Fine. Just don’t talk to me. Or look at me. And I don’t want to hear you breathing.”

Kendle understood what Marc was doing. It hurt to have him say these things, but she could feel his secret happiness as well. They were about to have a full shift alone together, to say anything they wanted. It was exciting in ways Marc didn’t want to admit.

Kendle let herself stare, picking out places where he was wrinkling, withering. His skin was sunken, and his hair wasn’t shining. He’d been extremely ill.

“Angie saved me.”

“With a lifeforce?”

Marc refused to say more. He hated and loved the chills traveling his body as Kendle continued to undress him mentally. He could actually see her taking his shirt off. “It’s not going to work if you do that.”

“I haven’t been allowed around you for weeks. You do your job; I’ll do mine.”

Marc snorted at the common response from an Eagle who didn’t like being called on something they were doing wrong. He didn’t tell her to stop again. She was examining him and coming up with the same thoughts Angela had. *I look like hell. I smell like hell. I’m grouchy. I’m sick and tired of people staring at me like I’m sick and tired. What more is there to know?*

Kendle now believed Angela had given Marc this duty so he felt like he was doing something without being in the infirmary where he would drain himself, like she was doing. Kendle had been shocked by how rough Angela looked.

“I knew it!” Marc slapped the arm of the chair. “She doesn’t need me up here! Dog could have done this.”

Kendle laughed. “He might have trouble holding the pencil.”

Marc felt Kendle’s curse about to kick in. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he was certain her good mood was about to be crushed by something.

Kendle's radio crackled in the code for a body pick up.

Both of their moods plummeted.

"That was one of the camp kids." Kendle refused to cry. "I think her name was Cindy."

Like with Angela, Marc felt Kendle's pain. It wasn't as strong, but it was there. He fought the urge to comfort her, sending a prayer for the child instead. Safe Haven was losing people at a rate of five a day. If that trend didn't lighten, they might lose them all.

Marc wondered if Kendle's curse had cost a child's life or if the child's death had been a coincidence. He didn't understand how the curse worked. He hadn't thought to ask Adrian for details when they discussed it.

"From what I understand, curses are subject to the laws of chaos. It's almost impossible to predict what will trigger them. This is a perfect example." Kendle motioned to the radio on her belt. "It's not on. I shouldn't have heard the click."

"But I heard it too."

"That's what I mean. It's selective, random. It could have skipped me here and slapped me by seeing the body being carried out later, but the curse chose to hit me now to interfere with the good moment we were having." Kendle stared at the ocean and the darkening sky. "I deserve this."

Marc didn't argue with her. The tender feelings he had left for Kendle came from the time they had spent together battling the troops, but he wasn't sure

how strong it was anymore. He might have gone to bat for her before she tried to kill Angela. “So every time you have a good moment, you get slapped.”

“Yes. I’ve made an enemy somewhere.”

Marc snorted. “Obviously.”

“Do you know who it is? I might be able to get them to lift it if I can make amends.”

Marc spun the chair around to stare at her. “Who do you think?”

Kendle refused to allow him to see how much she was enjoying being this close. His sarcastic tone didn’t matter to her. “Angie didn’t curse me.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She would have told me.”

Marc ran through a mental list of names, but he was unable to narrow who else might have done it. “Jennifer, maybe?”

Kendle shrugged. “I’ve narrowed it to someone who’s sick because the curse weakened. For the last two days, it’s hurt my feelings instead of sending me into the past and making me cry myself to sleep.”

Marc didn’t want to feel anything for her. “Who do *you* think it is?”

She shrugged. “I’m still narrowing it down. Considering how nasty this is, and how little sympathy the person must have for me, I believe it has to be female. I don’t think a man would know how cruel this is.”

Marc considered that for a moment and had to agree. Much like poison was a female’s weapon of

choice, being mentally cruel was also something that gender excelled at. “What happens if they die?”

“I’ve heard the curse will be broken, but it’s hard for me to wish for that.” Kendle’s heart was breaking. “I don’t hate kids, and I don’t dislike anyone else in the infirmary to the extent that it would warrant treatment like this. I want all of them to recover.”

Marc smirked at her. “You’re trapped. Whoever did it knows you well.”

Kendle had to ask. “...did you?”

Marc’s amusement faded. “No. I don’t play the mind games in this camp. We already have a champion who handles that remarkably well. Nobody can take her place.”

Kendle understood the double meaning. It didn’t matter. “What can I do?”

Marc stared at her, not seeing the scars or the bags beneath hopeful eyes. All he saw was her plunging the knife into Angela’s guts, then smiling about it. “Nothing. You could save my life. You could save *her* life; it wouldn’t matter.” Marc swiveled the chair back around, not wanting to see her tears as they started to fall. “Let’s stick to the plan. You do your job; I’ll do mine.”

Kendle wiped her face.

If there’s nothing you can do to make it better, then there’s nothing you can do to make it worse.

Kendle didn’t want to listen to that inside voice.

I’ve saved your life, more than once. We’ll talk later, when you’re alone.

Kendle shushed her demon. *Be quiet.* She could listen. There was nothing wrong with that.

She twitched around as the plastic rustled.

Dog eased under the bottom of the plastic and joined them, coming to sit at Marc's feet. He gave a loud groan as Marc rubbed his ears.

"I thought you were with Angie."

Dog's leg thumped as Marc hit the spot he could never reach on his own. *She sent me out. I was jumping at noises.*

Kendle tried not to feel enjoyment so she didn't trigger the curse again.

Dog curled up at Marc's feet. *She wants me to stay with you.*

Marc waved a hand. "Turn your radio on. I want the live updates." Angela was once again broadcasting from the infirmary to keep people informed.

There wasn't anything Marc could ask that Kendle would refuse so long as it didn't endanger his life. She switched on her radio.

Horror lashed their frayed emotions.

"Time of death is 12:32, December 9th, 2013."

"You have to keep trying!"

"I'm sorry. Cindy is gone."

Wails sounded through the radio.

Kendle winced. She started to turn it off, realizing the code a few minutes ago had been for a different death.

“Leave it.” Marc felt guilty he couldn’t be there to help.

Kendle turned it down instead. It didn’t help much.

“Call the body crew. We have three waiting for pick up.”

“I thought the little girl was getting better.”

“So did I.”

Marc listened to the awful noises. Almost everyone who was ill now had a friend or family member in the infirmary to help care for them, but it wasn’t enough. The radiation was merciless.

“The fog is getting thicker.” Kendle pointed.

Marc used binoculars to scan in that direction.

Thick clouds of white rolled over the water toward the ship.

Kendle observed through the window as the kill team practicing on the deck below stopped and slipped into the shadows. She memorized their proud shoulders and walks, hoping all of them returned.

A fresh team came up the stairs and took their place. Kendle recognized the refueling crew who had been practicing up here earlier.

The radio echoed with shouts and crying.

Kendle turned it off. She couldn’t take anymore.

Marc didn’t overrule her. He was watching the fog roll toward the ship in thick waves that

reminded him of laundry soap bubbling out of a washing machine.

“What good is it to have the ship go quiet if we still have areas in the entertainment zone going full blast?”

“Step out there and listen.”

Kendle did, frowning. As she hit the stairs, resealing the plastic, she couldn't hear the partying anymore. There was no thump of music or laughter of happy people. There was only the water and the chugging of an engine slowing down. Kendle moved back into the doorway, but she didn't seal the plastic yet. Standing between, one ear could hear the ship noises, but the other ear only heard the water. It was spooky.

Kendle froze as Marc's hands settled onto her shoulders. His warm body slid behind hers, pressing up tight. She shuddered as his hands slid down her arms.

Marc leaned in, warm breath on her neck. “I figured out why Angie sent you up here.”

Kendle tried to step out of his embrace. “Why?”

Marc snatched a huge chunk of her energy.

Kendle arched in pleasure and pain at the unexpected attack.

Marc drew again, enjoying her gasps and her moans, but mostly, the restless energy thrumming across her skin. There was only a bit of pain. She was close to his level.

Kendle struggled to remain standing and let him have what he needed. She wouldn't have refused

him but having him take it like this was almost worth everything she'd done. The feel of him was indescribable.

Marc retreated, not wanting to drain her so far that she couldn't perform guard duty. He sank down in the chair, lids shutting as energy swelled over his weakened body, strengthening him.

Kendle slid to her knees. "Dog. You have duty until I can think straight."

Dog got up and began pacing. *Humans!*

Chapter Twenty-One
New Puppy
Nearing the Cayman Islands
2am

1

“It’s almost time to cut the engine.” Molly was keeping track on her watch. It was the only light allowed and even it had to be covered for each check.

Adrian was also timing. He finished his mental count and hit the kill switch.

The small craft began to slow in the calm water. The feel of ocean fog was ugly as they sailed through it, but there was no avoiding the white clouds that smothered their small inflatable speedboat.

In the rear, Neil waited for them to arrive at their destination. After meeting in the cargo area and slipping off the *Adrianna*, they’d performed their duties in silence. None of the chatter Neil had expected from Molly had come, not even questions about his bruises and scrapes, or the ugly scratches that ran over both of Adrian’s cheeks and his brow. Molly had been quiet and efficient so far. That was a good sign. Most rookies were already babbling at this point on a run from nervous tension. She was

enjoying the ride with her eyes shut, leaned back to enjoy the breeze. The only thing marring the picture she'd made was the lack of sun. It was 3am and dark on the open ocean. If not for the occasional flashes of light from her watch, Neil wouldn't have been able to see her.

Molly and Adrian slowly put the paddles into the water. It wasn't quiet, but it wasn't loud either. The sound of the ocean mostly muted it.

The pair paddled the boat, listening to creaking groans that told them other ships were nearby. It sounded as though there were several. Adrian hoped so. He was counting on a floating fuel station instead of having to go to land. Floaties had been popular before the war. This area around the Cayman Islands had been full of them.

"I see something." Molly pointed.

The two men strained to detect what she had.

A shark fin rose a few feet from them and ran along the water line toward the front of the boat. It disappeared under them, leaving large ripples on the water.

"Well, that was unsettling." Molly was thrilled she had been chosen for this run, but now, she was also nervous. Of all her dives, the single bad trip had been with sharks.

Neil echoed Molly's silent plea to let this go well. It would be hard enough to keep himself alive, let alone his shipmates. He had no experience on large bodies of water and visibility was low. The fog

was an unending wall that mocked him. It said no clouds in his mind could ever match the real thing.

Adrian grunted as the shark fin reappeared in front of the boat. He didn't speak, hoping the predator would go away after it satisfied its curiosity.

The shark stayed near them, swimming in large circles that shrank to close passes. The shark wasn't huge, but it was still big enough to sink them if it attacked.

Missy didn't tell Kenn about sharks. Neil pushed away the surreal feeling. It was hard to believe that a year ago he had been putting up a Christmas tree in the sheriff's office with his father in Arizona. Everything he'd seen and done since then felt different. It was almost as if someone else was now living his life, someone who didn't fear danger in any shape or form. Not even a shark.

Adrian glanced back at him. "You really feel that way?"

Neil nodded. "Mostly, because of you. There isn't any hell you won't go into. In some weird, sick way, that gives me strength."

"All the Eagles feel that way." Molly had been in Safe Haven for a long time before she decided she did have enough sand to compete with the best. "We all rely on him. It's why he's still in camp. No one else could have taught us to be this strong."

Neil didn't want to think bad about Angela, but he was forced to agree. He didn't add his thoughts

to the conversation, however. He had enough strikes.

Adrian pointed. "I see a floatie."

Neil and Molly had never viewed a floating fuel station. Both of them were disappointed by the tiny ships that had been reoutfitted for duty they weren't designed for.

Neil's frown grew. "It looks like it was pieced together with leftover awning from a trailer park."

Molly was equally dubious. "There's no way that thing is holding enough fuel for the Adrianna."

"Be quiet. I'll explain in a minute." Adrian was using the tiny amount of energy he'd regathered to scan the area for trouble. All he was picking up were a few terrified hearts and one powerful heartbeat hunting them. Adrian identified them as the shark and its prey. *I hope we're not on that list.*

"Sorry. I wanted to make sure we're alone." Adrian guided the little boat alongside the refueling barge. He pointed at the hull they couldn't view below the water. "This is a floatie. It has a pipe from land that comes up to feed the fuel. Consider it like a socket for power in a house. This was a way to refuel larger ships without them having to come into the crowded, shallower areas." Adrian tied off the rope, hands protesting the wet, hard job.

Molly frowned deeper. "You mean that tiny thing really can refuel a cruise ship?"

"Yes." Adrian tied off the rope to anchor the two ships together. He stood, carefully. "All floaties were required to be outfitted for every ocean vessel,

including aircraft carriers. Our problem is whether or not the land office shut off the flow to the pipes. All floaties have an inside cap that seals. When the cap is raised, pressure lifts fuel into the pipes. If the land station closed the pipes on their end, all it will do is suck air and maybe collapse a weak pipe system that hasn't had maintenance in the last year."

Molly tensed. "Everybody freeze."

A dark fin slid through the fog. The shark bumped the boat, shifting them in the water.

Adrian and Neil both reached for their guns but stopped, realizing they couldn't afford the noise so close to land.

Molly retrieved the dart gun she had been thinking about since they saw the fin the first time. She quickly loaded a dart.

The shark circled the front of the boat, trying to get between the two ships. The rope tightened, pulling the front of their boat down toward the water. Salty spray splashed them all.

Molly shot the dart into the thick part of the fin where it met the body, marveling at her own calmness with a reef shark within touching distance.

The shark emitted a groan as it dove under the water.

Molly loaded a second dart, ready to double tap if it came back.

"Over there." Neil pointed.

Near the front of the floatie, a large wave of bubbles appeared, followed by the foggy shape of

the shark, belly up. As they watched, it slowly sank below the waves and kept going.

“Did you kill it?” Neil wasn’t sure what the load was for this run. He hadn’t packed it. Kenn had. Kenn was the only one with access to the weapons room.

Molly shrugged. “I knocked it out, but sharks have to keep moving or they’ll drown.”

Neil was happy to hear that. It meant one less problem.

Adrian used the paddle to pull them back alongside the boat, then secured the rear of it, so they had two anchor points. It would keep their boat from being slapped against the other one if the waves picked up. Right now, it was calm and quiet except for the occasional sound of things moving in the water. Adrian hoped it was fish and not another shark.

Neil and Molly held the small boat still by the ropes while Adrian climbed onto the floatie. He shined his flashlight, getting a quick look before he shut it off.

Adrian moved back onto their ship. “It’s burnt inside. I have no idea how it’s still floating.” He slid into his place and began untying the rope. “The hatch melted. There’s no way we can lift it.”

Neil finished untying them and pushed away from the burnt hulk.

Adrian steered them in a wide circle around the floatie, hoping this was a farm. Competing fuel companies launched multiple floaties in popular

tourist areas to draw in captains who didn't want to be stuck in the cramped port waiting for the smaller ships around them to move so they could leave.

"There's another one." Neil pointed.

So did Molly. "I see a shadow over here too."

Adrian chose the one farthest from land, watching the dark, foggy shadow of the main island for signs of life. Adrian was disappointed. He didn't want a confrontation, but it would have been nice to know the apocalypse had more survivors. It was horrible to imagine the souls aboard their cruise ship were the only people left on this side of the planet.

Molly tied the ropes this time while Adrian climbed onto the second floatie. He stayed in the doorway to shine his light, and again, rejoined them after a brief scan. He helped untie them, then quickly pushed away.

"What was it?" Molly couldn't help asking.

"There was a fight. No bodies, but there's blood everywhere. Some of it is still wet. I'm not sure if the damp air might be preserving it, but it's possible people are still here, hiding. The pipes have been welded shut, like someone was trying to prevent theft."

The third floatie was taking on water. They didn't need to tie up to determine it wasn't usable. Windows were broken; bodies on the deck were in various stages of decomposition.

"Shouldn't we be seeing fuel leaks in the water?"

Adrian nodded at Molly's question. "It's a bad sign. The land office may have had time to shut it all down."

Adrian chose to go further from land, where the less expensive fuel companies had been forced to operate. It wasn't prime area before the war, but now, it was perfect because it was the farthest from port.

Molly slid the dart gun onto her tool belt and got ready to tie off their little boat as another floatie came into view through the fog.

"This one looks good so far." Adrian tied the front of the boat to the slippery rail as Molly secured the rear. The floatie creaked as they nudged it with their movements, sending chills through all of them. It was worse than any haunted house recording they'd ever heard.

Neil kept the boat steady while Adrian climbed aboard the dirty, weather-beaten floatie and shined his light. The control panel he'd spotted from the water was shut, protecting the delicate equipment. "Bring the Porta-gen."

Neil boarded the floatie next, carrying the gear. He stepped off the little boat just as it rose beneath his boots.

"Watch out!"

The shark slammed into the bottom of the small boat, knocking Neil and Adrian onto the deck of the floatie.

Molly was ejected into the water.

The shark attacked their little inflatable, tangling in the ropes. It ripped free from the floatie, also taking the rail.

The angry animal lunged, big jaws lined with jagged teeth. It splashed wildly, head shaking, jaws ripping. The boat deflated in seconds, becoming crunchy rubber in the shark's mouth. It went under the water, taking the boat carcass.

"Molly!" Adrian stomped on the deck of the floatie, hoping to keep the shark's attention on them. "Molly? Where are you?!"

Water smacked debris against the floatie.

"Molly?!" Neil tried to use this gift, but the fog was too thick. "I feel her, but not which direction!"

"She went back." Adrian was also concentrating on a connection. "Smart girl."

"The last floatie?"

"No. She found one close to it." Adrian connected their minds.

Neil watched Molly scurry up the ladder of the floatie that appeared heavily damaged. There was no sign of the shark.

Adrian let go, unable to hold the connection. He didn't have extra energy, and fog was a natural barrier to a descendant. *I didn't know that before. I wonder how Neil knew to use it.* Adrian gestured. "Use your nervous energy; tell her to sit tight. We'll pick her up when Safe Haven gets here."

Adrian glared when Neil only stared. "Do it now, before she starts firing her gun."

Neil realized Adrian knew he was a descendant. He shoved that aside to concentrate, relaying the message. Now, Molly would know his secret too.

Molly sucked in huge gasps of air, lying on the filthy deck of the floatie. She felt Neil's fear under the message, but she didn't have time for it. She was busy being grateful to have survived. The last thirty seconds of that swim had been terrifying. It was as if she'd been able to feel the shark tracking her.

A dark fin rose from the water, running alongside her floatie.

Molly stayed still, letting her heart calm. *I never thought I'd be in a Jaws situation.*

A whimper echoed from inside the floaty. Then a thud.

Shit! Always clear first, relax second. Molly got up, slippery hands grabbing the first weapon on her belt. She eased toward the doorway, trying to control her ragged breathing. She shined her light.

"Snogg!" A small seal with a nasty stomach injury screamed at her.

Molly automatically fired.

The dart landed, quickly silencing the defensive noise. The monk seal covered on the bloody floor, breathing hard as it watched her.

Molly ignored Neil's repeated calls, aware of the shark still cruising by. She grunted. "I hope PETA doesn't find out about this."

Molly shot the trapped seal a second time, then began to clear the floatie.

The reef shark kept pace, circling until she made it all the way back around. It nudged the front when it stopped, causing wood to creak.

“Easy, boy. It’s almost dinnertime.” Molly chose a rotting cabinet and opened it. She kicked the door off the hinges, wincing at her sore leg. It had been a while since she swam. Her body was reminding her of that. The bite she’d suffered during the beach fight had come from a small alligator. It had died, but she’d lost a chunk of her thigh. It was a scar now, but very fresh.

Molly took the cabinet door back to the main room, where the seal was now unconscious. “This better bump me up a level.”

Molly wore herself out getting the seal onto the rotting wood. The unresisting animal was small but still too heavy for her to lift. She was forced to roll it in a series of back straining shoves and tugs.

Once she got the seal onto the wood, she dragged it to the edge of the floatie, dripping sweat and guilt. “Let’s do this quick. I’m sorry.” She shoved the seal over the side with her boot.

“Ah!” Molly shouted as the shark lunged up near the floatie. It grabbed the seal.

Molly stumbled back inside as blood filled the water, hoping a full stomach would encourage the predator to go away.

Are you okay?!

Molly grunted at Neil's mental shout. *Just feeding the new puppy. I'm gonna take a nap now. Seal dragging is hard work.*

“What does that mean?”

Neil shrugged at Adrian's question. “No idea, but she sounds okay.” Neil scanned the floatie. “Do we need a new plan?”

Adrian considered their options. “I think we're good. All we need to do is verify we have fuel in the pipes before we contact Marc to bring in the Adrianna.”

Neil pointed. “Is that good?”

Adrian shined his light on the pipe cap, relieved to detect traces of wet fuel. “I guess the shark rattled it.” Adrian took a radio from the waterproof bag in his kit and prepared to make contact with Safe Haven.

Neil kept watch and waited. He was positive Marc had put them together for more than just the fuel run. When Adrian was finished, Neil planned to dig in and find out.

Adrian gave the bruised man a sharp glare. “Are you that eager to hear your doom?”

Suspicion confirmed, Neil fell silent and brought up his mental clouds.

2

The Adrianna

“Are you ever going to tell me why?”

Kendle jumped at the sound of Marc's voice. Neither of them had spoken in hours. "Tell you what?"

"Why you tried to kill her."

Kendle hid clenched hands in her pockets. "No."

"Why?"

"Ask something else."

Marc was bored. Her energy had woken him up, but there was nothing to do while they sailed. "How did you get into acting?"

"My mother was in the field." Kendle didn't want to talk about her old life either. "Can I blast you?" She was trying to stay ahead of him, so he didn't touch her again. She didn't think she could take it a second time without responding and that might get them both killed.

"Nope. Still topped off." Marc enjoyed having a full energy level again, but he hadn't wasted any of it with useless scans of the water around them.

"Okay." Kendle searched for another distraction. "You check the numbers recently?"

"Once an hour."

She frowned. "You've checked it more than that in the last ten minutes."

"Why'd you ask if you knew?"

His slightly annoyed tone made her smile. "I'm trying to distract you from being mean, personal, or stressed. It's a rough job."

Marc snickered. After a minute, he rotated to look at her. He still saw his friend, but the desire to

be around her was gone. “You hurt me. I thought I could trust you with any life.”

Kendle blinked back tears. “I’m sorry. I was so mad... I’d have to let you see it and feel it. It’s all complicated, wrapped around my past.”

Marc stiffened. “Not right now.”

“I know; I’m on duty.”

“Yes, but fate has a sense of humor too.” Marc felt a wave of energy coming toward them. He didn’t track it, sure Adrian was about to make contact. “We’d get rolling and the clearing team would call.”

“Later?”

Marc’s eyes narrowed at the pleading tone. “It won’t make me forgive you.”

“I know.” Kendle didn’t have a plan for that because she didn’t think anything would work. “I just need you to understand. My words will screw it up. You have to view it, feel it. After, I hope you won’t hate me as much.”

Marc let his hatred show. “Why? We don’t have a chance, ever.”

“I’m sorry you feel guilty about me. I’d like you to be free of that.”

Marc grunted. *So would I.* He mentally scheduled time to follow through, then turned his attention back to the numbers that hadn’t changed in hours, except for the temperature. It had gone down upon arrival of the fog. “You know she’s going to keep torturing you, right? You’d be better

off leaving with some of the cowards. They need a leader to keep them alive.”

Kendle was already shaking her head. “Kill me if you have to, but don’t ever believe I’ll go on my own.” She smiled a little. “I’m the female Adrian—always in the shadows or stuck to the bottom of your shoe.”

It bothered Marc to know that he now trusted Adrian more than he did Kendle. Adrian would never endanger the camp or hurt Angela. Kendle had done both in one brutal stab. “Why did she let you live? All her other assassins are dead.”

Kendle’s lips clamped together. *I’m not answering that.*

Marc glowered. “You weren’t scared when you tried to kill her. If you don’t fear Angela, I know you don’t fear me. Why did she spare you?”

Kendle tried to redirect. “How about an infirmary update?”

Marc used his gift this time. “Answer me.”

Kendle shuddered at the feel of his alpha pull, skin tingling. “Please don’t make me say it.”

Marc had no sympathy. “You’re assuming I know the answer. Maybe I don’t.”

Kendle’s fists clenched as her nipples hardened into rocks. “Then you should ask her, not me.”

“Kendle...”

Kendle’s lids shut. “Please.”

“Is she keeping you around for me?” Marc thought he knew the answer. He just wanted it confirmed.

“I’ll be helpful on the island. I know the—”

“Kendle.”

“Damn.” Her body twitched as he pulled harder, making her heart pound. “Stop it!”

Marc increased the strength. “Why did she spare your life?”

Kendle slid to her knees. “Because it doesn’t belong to her! It’s yours! I’m yours!”

Marc smiled coldly. He changed the alpha pull to an anger connection, zapping her tender nerves with his rage. “And if I sentence you to death for your crimes?”

Kendle began to cry. “No one will interfere. They’ve been waiting for you to do it.”

Marc frowned, closing the connection. “Angie didn’t tell me. That means she either didn’t want me to know or she doesn’t want you dead yet.”

Kendle breathed in deep as the awful, wonderful feeling faded. “She wants you to know everything. She just doesn’t think you’re ready to handle it the way she needs you to.” She couldn’t stop babbling now. “Adrian’s been helping you through those moments as part of his penance. She wants your crypt emptied.”

Marc was now interested in a conversation. “Tell me everything Angela hid from me or the camp.”

“I don’t know of anything she’s keeping from you.” Kendle wiped away the tears. “She’s still making quiet plans, but you’ve been included in them—like picking the teams that left earlier.”

“What about Adrian?”

Kendle frowned. “What do you want to know?”

“What is he planning to win my *fiancé’s* heart?”

Kendle’s brows came together, hurting again at his term. “He accomplished that months ago. He has to find a way to get her to admit she wants you both at the same time, then follow through.”

“She has admitted it.” Marc had made peace with that. He also wanted someone other than her at the same time. It just wasn’t going to happen—ever. *That lifestyle is for other people, not us.*

“Why?” Kendle’s voice was a whisper as she stood.

Marc’s laughter was cold. “You’ve seen how jealous we both are. The other people wouldn’t live long. We’ve talked about this.”

Kendle hadn’t expected different. She gave him a small blast of warmth, not caring if he blocked it. “I hope you’ll be happy. I won’t ever be a problem again. Time will prove it.”

“I hope so.” Marc knew when to use the fist and when to use the open hand. “I missed our friendship. Maybe we can have it back, if you prove that.”

“I will.” She smiled, tearing up again. “You’ll see.”

“Hey! Is the mushy shit over yet? I need a minute.”

Marc frowned as Tonya entered the bridge in jeans, a sweater, and her lab coat, but no mask or protective suit. “You shouldn’t be up here.” He was

impressed that she hadn't made any noise to alert him she was coming, but he didn't say so.

"Neither should you, but here we are." Tonya glared at Kendle. "Get out."

Kendle went, but only to the metal steps where she could hear if Marc needed help.

Marc waited for Tonya to come closer. He had no idea why she was here. Her mental walls were thick enough to give him concern, but he filed it for later. Angela would show him how to get through blocks whenever training restarted.

Tonya perched on the stool that had been brought up for the guards. "What happens to my baby if I leave Kenn?"

Marc was shocked by the question. "What do you mean?" He had assumed Tonya would stay with Kenn anyway, because of his prominent level in camp.

"Thanks."

Marc flushed at her scorn. He'd forgotten about the baby connection. *She can read through those walls. She's been practicing to be able to do that. It's hard. I know.*

Tonya didn't care. Marc's opinion didn't mean much to her. She just needed information. "Yeah, yeah. Answer my question. I have to get back to the lab."

"What question?"

Tonya frowned at his evasion. She didn't stop him getting into her thoughts, but she studied his methods to copy later. "It's a descendant. Does the

father have some stupid claim I don't know about or does this go by old world rules?"

Marc considered, then shrugged. "Old world, as far as I know. I think you need to talk to Angela about it to be sure."

"I will." Tonya covered her next concern. "What about the Eagles?"

Marc scowled. "Why ask me?"

She delivered a nasty look of her own. "Angela is busy. Kyle is too, and Neil has clouds in his brain. You're the top of the chain right now, even though you don't have a patch."

Marc sighed, trying to remember. "As far as I know, we like the baby staying with the mother and she lets the father have access. Unless the mom is abusive or a harm to the child. Again, ask Angela to be sure."

"Again, I will. What about you?"

Marc stiffened. "What about me?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"Why ask me?" Marc tossed her thoughts back at her. "My opinion doesn't mean much to you."

Tonya flushed this time. "It might matter, a little."

Marc chuckled. "Fine. It's over him cheating, right? No abuse or anything else?"

Tonya gestured angrily. "Isn't that enough?"

"Certainly, if he promised fidelity."

"We're engaged."

"I know."

"The fidelity is implied."

“Is it?” Marc shrugged. “Even so, I believe the event happened in the mountain. You weren’t engaged then.”

Tonya hadn’t thought of it in those terms. She scowled. “Why are you on his side?”

Marc smiled at her. “Because you are. You want to fight for him, but you’re not sure if he’s worth it. You came up here hoping I would tell you that he isn’t. But I won’t. If you two hadn’t discussed fidelity, I’m not sure he’s as guilty as you’d like him to be.”

Tonya’s anger was replaced with confusion. “Why would I want him to be guilty?”

“So you don’t have to feel like you failed.”

Pain lanced into her heart. “I did. He went to another woman.”

“No.” Marc wasn’t going to let her carry that weight. “That’s Kenn’s failure. I’d bet he knows it. Just be clear on the terms during the time of the event. If you still feel he’s not worth it, that’s your right. Most of the camp will side with you.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re on his side. You hate Kenn.”

Marc nodded. “I do. I also see how much he’s changed. Even in this, he isn’t denying or trying to cover it up. He’s facing it. I respect that. So do you.”

“Yeah. That makes it harder.” Tonya stood. “Thanks. You and Scars can return to bonding now. I’m sure that will please the boss.” Tonya left, casting a warning glare at Kendle as they passed on the steps. “Charlie won’t be allowed to heal you

next time. Neither will Angela. The camp will overrule it and you'll finally die like you should have on that island."

Kendle was crushed at the open hatred after having a good shift with Marc. She returned to her duty, lips clenched together. *No more talking. It just leads to trouble.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

At Least You Know It

1

“**W**hy did you send Neil on this run?” Kendle needed to fill the silence after Tonya’s exit.

Marc shrugged. “It had several benefits, but he was the best man for the job.”

“The old Neil, right?” Kendle didn’t like the new Neil. “Not the one with a brain full of cotton candy.”

Marc snorted. “That man never existed. He was a figment of Samantha’s imagination, temporarily brought to life.”

“Temporarily?” Kendle realized what that meant. “He lied. He’s one of us!”

Marc nodded. “While they’re out there, Adrian will be making a decision about Neil. On this one, I plan to support his choice. It wouldn’t be right for me or Angela to make it since we’re not Neil’s mentors and we’re both definitely biased.”

Kendle frowned, going to the taped doorway to do another scan. “I don’t get it. Why not tell everyone? Let him serve the punishment.”

Marc decided to let her in as a test. “Until we have a new constitution, we can’t execute, or even

jail, for crimes that are not on the Safe Haven camp list.”

“He killed two people.”

“We don’t have laws against murder.”

Her stomach churned. “...you mean for the descendants.”

Marc nodded. “It’s not something we want pointed out, but yes. The descendants don’t have any laws. They just don’t know yet.”

Kendle considered that while Marc recorded numbers from the screens. The temperature had dropped a little more, but the Geiger counter hadn’t beeped at all.

Marc paused, feeling something coming now.

The radio on the counter lit up in a series of clicks and taps that Marc deciphered. “There’s fuel. We can come in.” Marc keyed the radio in response.

Kendle waited for Marc to make a call on the ship’s system to let everyone know refueling was a go. His mind was going over the next phase of the plan. He wouldn’t be doing that if it wasn’t good news.

Marc picked up the ship mike. “Welcome to 3:15am, Safe Haven. This is your captain speaking. We are approaching the refueling station. All entertainments are to be shut down by 3:45 and everyone in their cabins by 4am. Someone will be by to verify your location and collect supply lists. I believe updates are also being delivered, along with a light snack. Try to get some sleep, and please consider volunteering for infirmary duty in the

morning. We need people who have strong backs and strong stomachs.”

Marc felt Angela wake at his announcement. He reached down and gave the wolf a quick rub. “I’d like you to stay with her now.”

Dog left, nosing beneath the plastic. He slid down one side of the stairs as Theo came up, still scanning for small, furry shadows.

Theo stepped inside the tape, arms bulging under his tight shirt. “I’m sorry, but I need the refueling papers now.”

More steps came up right behind him. “We need an update for the boss.” Charlie and Debra entered the bridge. They’d also felt Angela wake. She would want an update as soon as she was ready to leave her cabin.

Theo gave Debra a smile in the awkward silence. “You’re doing a good job.”

Debra made a rude gesture.

Theo sighed, picking up the folder he needed. He left without saying anything else.

Marc didn’t understand how he had been cast as the role of relationship fixer, but he found himself frowning at Debra. “You should give that man a break. He stayed up here when we didn’t know if it was safe. He’s a hero to the camp, or at least he will be after we recover.”

Debra’s furious gestures told Marc he wasn’t going to like what Charlie was about to translate.

“She says the heroes are Ozzie and Whitney, who died to get us to safety. All Theo did was stand on their backs.”

Marc didn't argue. Theo had come up after most of the danger was over. She was right. Ozzie and Whitney were the heroes. Theo was going to end up getting credit for it whether he tried to claim it or not, simply because he was the last surviving member of the boat crew.

Debra gestured toward Marc.

Charlie translated. “You look tired.”

Marc again found himself responding with compassion instead of annoyance. There were two hours to go before they reached their destination. He didn't want Debra to spend it upset. “So do you. Do you need a minute alone with me or Angie?”

Debra shrugged, but didn't try to communicate mentally. She was about to go nap and get right back up at dawn when they were slated to reach the refueling center. This was her last stop before going to the boss, then bed. She wanted it over.

Marc understood. “We're on time. Keep people in their cabins and everything locked down as much as you can, but if people insist on leaving, this is the right time since we'll be near land. Maybe see if we can find them some literature on the Cayman Islands in a gift shop or bookstore.”

Charlie wrote it down as Debra lifted her brow.

Marc shook his head. “I don't have anything else. There's been no change in numbers or estimates.”

Debra was relieved to hear it. She left, sorry for her rudeness, but she didn't have energy to spare on someone other than herself. Almost everyone on the ship was the same. The illness was peaking and so were the levels of exhaustion. If they didn't get a break soon, the caregivers would simply stop giving care. There was nothing else they could do.

Marc sighed as Charlie lingered. "I guess you want advice too."

The teenager flushed. "Is that okay?"

Marc smiled at his son, pushing aside his mental concerns. "Of course. Is your shift over?"

"Yep."

"Then what's your beef?"

Charlie leaned against the dirty plastic. "I feel bad that Conner and Candy were punished, but I wasn't. I want to tell everyone Tracy's pregnant."

Marc was surprised. "That's...very mature."

"And dangerous."

"A bit, but not as much now that you've dropped out of the Eagles." Marc studied the boy. "How are you feeling about that?"

"It was the right choice." Charlie settled onto the stool by his dad. "I don't mind helping, especially during times like this, but it's not what I want. At least, not yet."

"I can respect that." Marc took a shot in the dark. "Do you know what you do want from the future?"

Charlie shrugged. "I know what I end up doing, but it doesn't appeal to me yet either."

“What is it?”

Charlie leaned in to whisper, hoping Kendle didn't hear. “*Heir.*”

Marc shrugged at the tired teen. He'd already known Charlie's future in Safe Haven, according to the visions, but that wasn't carved in stone. “When it does appeal, let your mom know.”

“She'll be disappointed if I don't go that way.”

“Not if you're happy. That's all she really wants for you.”

“I know.” Charlie whispered again. “*Why does she have Kendle up here with you?*”

Marc shrugged, refusing to think about the truth. “Tired of the drama and wants us to make peace is what I assume.”

Charlie scowled. “Will that happen? It better not happen.”

“Already did, now relax.” Marc understood the boy's warning. He wasn't allowed to treat Angela that way. “Your mom and I are fine.”

“Are you?” Charlie didn't like the way things had happened with Adrian. He certainly didn't want it repeated with Kendle. “And what about the sickness? You both look awful.”

“We're in it together, now.” Marc let his mental walls down so the teenager could verify that. “We were on the edge for a while, in both ways, but we're recovering.”

Charlie caught his dad's concern for the others who were ill. “Is there anything we can do for them?”

“We already are. Your mom organized a rotation of healing from those who can give it, but only the two children Conner helped are showing real signs of recovery. Our gifts don’t do well with illnesses or certain injuries.”

The teenager thought about it. “Like Zack’s crushed ribs.”

“Exactly. We all have limits.” Marc sensed Charlie was leading up to something. He waited, letting the boy direct it.

“Mom looks bad. How long will it take her to recover from this?”

Marc had asked that too, just silently. He gave Charlie the answer he’d been forced to accept. “She’ll survive, but she’ll never recover. We’ve lost too many people on her watch. She’ll never forgive herself for it.”

Charlie didn’t know what to do. “I want her to be happy.”

“Me too.” Marc sighed.

Charlie finally asked the question he’d been stewing on for days. “Are you thinking about evolving?”

Marc slowly nodded, impressed with his son’s intelligence. “Would that bother you?”

“I don’t think so.” Charlie shrugged. “Mom didn’t change much. She was spitting fire before she became byzan.”

Marc chuckled. “True.”

“Why haven’t you, before now?”

“It’s complicated.” Marc didn’t want Kendle to have those details. “Ian is coming up for shift change. Why don’t you escort Kendle to the kid’s area so she can sleep? We’ll find time to hang out and talk more.”

Kendle scowled, coming to the doorway as footsteps echoed from the ramp into the ship. “I don’t need an escort.”

“You need a muzzle for your mouth.” Ian came up the ramp. “A boss told you what to do. I’m on duty now. Go do it.”

Kendle flashed a glare at Ian, a last warm glance at Marc, then went to the ramp. But she waited for her escort.

Charlie joined her with a smile, glad the fighting was over. “So, how was your day?”

They tensed at the echo of footsteps running toward them.

Leeroy appeared on the deck right below the bridge. “Anyone seen my Sally?”

They both shook their heads; Charlie wrote it in his book.

Ian stayed near the bridge doorway, watching the man.

Leeroy hurried across the foggy deck. “Sally? Where are you hiding?”

Charlie and Kendle continued down into the ship in silence, both tired, with a lot on their minds.

A few people moved around them, more than it had been as the camp finally came out of their shells

to help. Ralph now had them rotating fifteen-man crews, every six hours.

Charlie paused as a wave of nausea hit. "I need to eat."

Kendle's stomach also flipped. Unlike the younger descendant, Kendle knew what was causing it. "Someone's trying to make contact, through dreams."

"How do you know?"

"Never you mind. Just listen. It's hard to do this."

Go back!

They exchanged a confused glance.

"Go back?" Charlie had no idea what it meant. "Where?"

"The bridge?" Kendle's eyes widened. "Marc!"

They took off running, shoving the few people out of their way. Kenn was warning them Marc was in danger.

2

"Someone's coming up the steps." Ian ducked back through the plastic to see who it was.

He saw the small face and relaxed, smiling. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. You can't be up here right now. It's not safe."

Ian's smile faded as he realized the thin little girl was holding a gun. "Where did you get that?"

Sally lifted the weapon. "I stole it." She pulled the trigger.

Ian was knocked backward by the chest shot.

Sally was also knocked backward into the rail of the bridge next to the steps, but she recovered quicker than Ian. She ran up the steps as shouts echoed from below.

Ian felt himself for blood. There was none, telling him wearing a double vest today had been a good idea. He was relieved the girl had only been able to find a .22. Anything more powerful and he might be lying in a pool of blood right now.

Sally ripped the plastic down and pointed the hot gun at Marc. “You killed my mommy.”

Like Ian, Marc was horrified, not sure if he could shoot her. He began searching for a way to handle it without hurting her as he lifted his hands. “Your mom tried to kill me. I was defending myself.”

Sally’s insanity glared at him. “You should have stopped for us! She would have been a part of you by now!”

It always comes back to that. Marc sighed, able to feel the little girl’s madness. The angels had cured the rage sickness on the ship, but they hadn’t been able to take away the anger. “I’m sorry we didn’t stop.”

Sally’s finger tightened on the trigger. “My dad’s wrong about you. I hope this ship sinks.”

Ian threw his flashlight.

The Maglite slammed into the back of Sally’s head. She dropped the gun, falling forward. Her foot tangled in the stairs, pulling her down. She fell all

the way to the bottom, landing with an awful crunch.

“No!” Leeroy ran to the body, screaming. “What have you done?! My baby!”

Marc came to the doorway, gun now in hand. He studied Leeroy to determine if the father was also a threat.

Ian walked toward Leeroy to comfort the man, though he wasn't sure what to say. The evil in the child had stunned him.

Leeroy spotted the gun next to his daughter's leg and grabbed it. Before anyone could stop him, he put the gun under his jaw. “This is Safe Haven's fault. I've lost everything.” He pulled the trigger.

Ian turned away, wincing.

Marc hit the button on his radio for a double body pick up and slowly resumed his post. *It's days like these that make me wish I'd died in the war.*

The ship radio lit up in Eagle code.

Marc went to the console to write it down so he could translate it. When he first came up here, he'd been able to keep it straight, but that had been a lot of hours ago and he hadn't fully recovered from the radiation poisoning. If he didn't write it down, he would forget it.

Ian explained what had happened to the Eagles who rushed up the stairs, the few who arrived. A week ago, three dozen hardbodies would have shown up to offer assistance. Now, there were four moody males and two weary women. Debra was definitely getting a taste of leadership. She and

Charlie prowled the scene, adrenaline waking them, while Kendle and the others stood guard.

On the bridge, Marc finished translating the message. He keyed his mike again. "We have the all clear on visibility. Permission to take us in?"

"Permission granted."

Angela's weary voice wasn't a comfort to Marc. She sounded like she was at her limit.

We all are. Marc watched the body crew come to the deck. It was a long trip down to the waste disposal area. There was no way to avoid people seeing two new corpses. Unless someone explained what happened, camp members would assume it was another wave of the illness. Marc made a quick note, then stuck his head through the plastic. He held the paper out to Ian. "Make sure the boss gets this. I'm good with all these people up here." Marc was certain Kendle would now sleep in the folded corner cot behind him.

Kendle nodded at Marc through the window of the bridge, heart pounding. She was glad Ian had handled it. She was also glad Kenn was looking out for them, even in his sleep. *He might make a good leader yet.*

Ian ran so he wouldn't be gone long. He was eager to escape the sight of the little body. He had hoped being hit by the flashlight would knock the gun from Sally's hand or get her to turn around so Marc could grab her. *I didn't mean for her to die. Is that murder?*

Marc observed in concern as Ian disappeared below, but he wasn't able to send the man an answer. He didn't have one.

Marc went back to the radio to give Adrian and Neil his answer. He was glad their mission had gone well. *May the refueling go just as easy.*

3

"This is from Marc." Ian came to Angela and extended the slip of paper.

Angela skimmed it quickly, holding Ben's hand. He didn't have much longer. The man was gasping and crying; it tortured her to be so helpless.

Ian didn't know which deck was worse. He was eager for everything to be over, more so than he had been before.

Angela felt him reaching his limit and took time she didn't have to look up at him. "Is Marc wearing a vest?"

Ian stared, trying to process the question. "Oh, I don't think so."

"Then it wasn't murder. You saved his life. She would have killed him." Angela clasped Ben's hands tighter as he sucked in air. His terror was smothering. *Please forgive Ben sins committed in the name of Safe Haven. Those acts allowed us a future.*

Ian frowned as he realized Angela had either known what was going to happen or she had

watched it happen without warning Marc. “What the hell?”

Angela nodded toward Tonya, who was with Courtney. “She’s been relaying things as they happen. We won’t let her do anything else because we don’t want her to lose the baby.”

Ian was able to accept that answer, but he was surprised to find Tonya in here helping. “Does Kenn know she slipped out of the lab?”

Angela shook her head, tears rising. Ben was on his last minute of life. “He’s sleeping until we reach the refueling station. She’s taking advantage of him and I love her for it.”

Ian understood not to scold the redhead. He gave her a nod of approval instead, moving away as Angela motioned Morgan and Terry over to Ben’s raspy body.

Tonya didn’t have the mental capacity to be happy about a good moment from the Eagle. She didn’t view Ian as a blabbermouth. She saw him as future team leader, but right now, she would trade all of her good moments with him or any other Eagle in exchange for Courtney’s life. The toxic levels in her blood were going down, but she had fallen unconscious again. This was the final stage.

Tonya sighed, looking up at Ian. “Let Kenn know as soon as he wakes. He might want to say goodbye to her and the baby.”

“We had a rough moment, but it’s over,” Adrian translated the answer as Marc sent it. He and Neil had caught the bad vibes a few minutes ago and made contact.

Neil gestured. “I want to know if Samantha was involved.”

Adrian turned the radio down instead. “She wasn’t.”

“Ask him!” Neil hated being away from Samantha. Anything could happen while he wasn’t there to help her.

“No.” Adrian tried to recharge while they waited, already sick of the ocean that mocked him with odd slaps of debris against the floaties, keeping his nerves on edge. “He’s busy.”

Neil scowled. “Doing what? Pushing buttons on a computer?”

Adrian frowned “Slowing the ship so the Adrianna doesn’t plow through this little floatie like it’s not even here. I’m not going to bug him by asking about your girlfriend!” It was hard to believe he was having this conversation with Neil. Adrian had thought Neil was long over this stage.

“Fiancé.” Neil sat on a rotting stool in the far corner of the floatie and began digging through his kit. “She said yes.”

Adrian shrugged. “Fiancé, then. I get it, but I’m not going to do it.”

Neil glowered across the broken furniture. “You’re just Marc’s bitch now. You won’t fight him on anything.”

Adrian snorted. “I don’t see you telling Angela no.”

Neil kept digging in the kit. “Whatever. You don’t owe him, anyway. All is fair in love and war if she wants you.”

Adrian scowled, dropping into one of the galley chairs. “I’m not having this conversation with you.”

Neil gestured again, tone sarcastic. “No, you’re not henpecked. You won’t even talk about it.”

“Actually, I have a job to do. Distracting me won’t work.” Adrian decided to get started on that since Neil wasn’t going to let him rest.

Neil tensed. He’d always heard that tone directed at someone else. “Now? Wonderful.”

“At least it’s not Marc passing sentence, right?” Adrian scanned Neil’s various injuries. Marc clearly hadn’t liked Neil following Angela’s orders to keep him in the cabin.

“I’ve always been one of your favorites. That should help a little.” Neil tossed the sarcasm right back. “I’ll face Angela on this. Your threats don’t mean anything to me.”

Adrian tried to find a comfortable spot on the rotting seat. “You misunderstand. I’m not making the choice for Angela. I’m also not making the choice for Marc. This will be a camp decision. I’ll replay our conversations. When they see you’re not sorry, you’ll be in trouble. I won’t have much to do with it. Consider me a tape recorder.”

Neil wasn’t intimidated. “That’s only if she tells you to release your tapes to the public. We’re in the

middle of an outbreak that's already cost two dozen lives. Do you think she gives a shit about me right now?"

Adrian knew that was true. "Fair enough, but at some point, the crisis will be over. The boss we all love, and hate, will return. Do you want her to review this conversation and see you acting like a rookie who refuses to admit he was wrong?"

Neil sighed. "I don't believe it was wrong."

"You murdered two unarmed people! You lied to everyone in camp, for almost a year. How is that not wrong?"

Neil didn't meet his eyes. "Seth and Becky were not important. I made the decision to eliminate a possible problem from the future."

Adrian pointed. "Ah, but *possible* is the key word here. You don't know for sure either of them would have been a problem. You let your emotions get control because Samantha wanted Amy; you wanted Becky. To keep yourself from betraying your relationship, you removed temptation—permanently. That's as wrong as it gets, Neil. I'm surprised you can't see it."

Neil blocked out his guilt. "Becky was going to be hanged for attempted murder. Seth was going to be dumped off at the first port we came to. All I did was cut out the middleman—the camp. The end result was going to be the same."

It hurt Adrian to hear Neil talk like this. "How did you get it by me for so long?"

Neil shrugged. “I believe everything I’m saying.”

“I mean lying to me about being a descendant.”

“I was never going to tell anyone, not even Samantha.” Neil glowered. “But you helped Angela bring them back. You’re not my friend.”

Adrian shook his head. “No, I’m the prosecutor. Later, because it’ll hurt me, I’ll probably be chosen as your executioner.” Adrian was tired of the conversation. It was clear Neil had his own way of thinking about what had happened and a quick conversation in a foreign floatie wasn’t going to change his mind.

Neil tensed. “I feel people... Descendants!”

Adrian nodded. “On land. Hopefully, they won’t notice us. The fog seems to be lightening.”

“What should we do?”

“We don’t respond to contact attempts. If they come out here, we’ll explain we have our radios off and our ship is quarantined for a contagious illness. All the plastic over everything will provide proof. Hopefully, they’ll be scared of catching it.”

Neil swallowed. “What if they attack?”

Adrian glared pointedly over the tiny, leaning table. “Then *all* of us will use *all* resources at our disposal and face the consequences later.”

Neil understood he would be expected to use his gifts, even if it was in front of the camp. He didn’t argue. That was what the descendants were here for and if the camp saw him protecting their ship, maybe they wouldn’t be as harsh in their reaction to

his lies. He knew murder was wrong. He also knew the camp would give him a free pass if Angela did.

Adrian huffed. *Liar!*

Neil didn't show a reaction, but it hurt him to be called that by Marc or Adrian. He was used to being the favorite. Now he was on the bottom with the rest of the people who couldn't cut it. The feeling was awful.

Adrian began flipping through the channels on the radio. They might be able to pick up a transmission to let them know whether or not the land people were trying to make contact. There was only a small chance they didn't know someone was out here. There had been a lot of noise when they arrived. "Check on Molly."

Neil went to the doorway; he flashed a light toward the floatie where Molly had taken shelter.

Light flashed right back, telling him she was fine and alert.

The water around them seemed rougher than when they arrived. Neil realized Adrian was right. The fog was lifting. It was completely possible Safe Haven would arrive in time for the land people to have a perfect view of them refueling. According to the instructions that had been delivered to Marc, the engine had to cool before the ship could be refueled and the process itself would take hours. That left a lot of time for anyone on land to see a cruise ship a few miles from shore and wonder if they could reach it. It was almost certain they were about to have their first foreign contact.

Adrian agreed with Neil's assumption. He was anxious for Safe Haven to arrive so they could refuel and go. The feeling of bad things about to happen had been hitting him since the shark knocked Molly into the water. Adrian grunted. "So this is how you plan to handle it with the camp and my Eagles?"

"*Angela's* Eagles."

"Whatever. You know it won't work. Why are you going through with it?"

"I don't have a choice." Neil sighed. "If I tell the truth, other people will pay too. If it was all my idea, only *I* pay for it."

Adrian had known Neil was trying to protect Samantha. He'd just assumed she had been in on the plan. So had Marc, thus this interrogation. "It won't work. When Samantha sees you going through pain, she'll interfere. Then the truth will come out anyway."

"I know."

"And?"

Neil sneered. "I went to a higher authority, traitor!"

"You made a deal with Angela."

Neil's anger fled. "It's not official."

"Or even discussed, until she sees how you plan to play it?"

"I think so." Neil leaned against the dirty, damp doorframe, body aching in all the places Marc had hit. "I'm in deep shit."

Adrian felt great sympathy for him at that moment. “Well, at least you know it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
Because Of You

December 9th
5am

1

“So what’s the plan for Marc?” Neil was sick of listening to the water and waiting for the sun to rise.

Adrian frowned, barely awake. He’d been snoozing for the last hour. “How would I know?”

Neil opened his eyes. “Because you’re helping with a plan now. I assumed it wasn’t the only one.”

Adrian tensed, bringing up walls against Neil’s prying.

Neil laughed, retreating. Watching Adrian’s thoughts and dreams had been enlightening. Adrian had forgotten he was a descendant and left his doors open.

Adrian hated it that the trooper had now gotten over on him twice. He lashed out brutally. “You’ve lost all your friends and your place in camp. Keep laughing. Your family will be next.”

Neil stopped. “That was uncalled for.”

Adrian shrugged. “Right now, I like Marc more than you. Welcome to the future you’ve made for yourself.”

Neil returned to his earlier accusations. “Anything to avoid an honest answer.”

“This side of you is ugly, Neil.” Adrian yawned, starting to wake.

“Thus, the reason none of you ever saw it.”

“Why are we seeing it now?” Adrian was curious. “You didn’t have to kill them.”

Neil didn’t respond. Only one person would get that answer from him and she was busy saving lives in the infirmary. He owed Angela everything now. If she asked, he would answer.

He’s scared. Adrian caught that, stored it. “What do you think happens to Samantha?”

Neil frowned, shifting against the damp wood. “Nothing changes for her. She didn’t do anything wrong.”

Adrian wanted to be home. “It doesn’t work that way, Neil. You know it. When an Eagle falls, their mate usually goes down with them.”

“She didn’t do anything wrong!”

Adrian confirmed his thought that Neil was actually terrified beneath his bravado. He pushed harder. “No one will trust you. That means we won’t trust her either, because now we all know Samantha will stand by you, through anything.”

Neil groaned in frustration. “How many times do I have to tell you?! She didn’t know anything about it!”

“Okay, let’s try this a different way. How do you plan to hide it? I noticed it was hard for you to keep up your cloud wall earlier.”

Neil didn't answer. After everything he and Adrian had been through, it was no longer certain he could trust the man with something like this.

Adrian sensed Neil's reluctance was related to his own betrayals. "I can lock it up for you or take your memory if that would help."

Neil stared in suspicion. "Why would you do that for me?"

Adrian met his eyes. "Loyalty, Neil. You and Kyle can come to me, for anything. I just need to understand why."

Adrian sounded so much like the leader he had trained with that Neil allowed the truth to come out. "Because of you."

Adrian stiffened. "Me?"

Neil shrugged. "I watched you go from hero to criminal. There had to be a payback."

"You killed them to hurt me?"

"To snap you out of being Angie's lapdog! Look at what's been going on! How could you give us up so easy?!"

Neil's actions were a protest, but it was also murder. Adrian hated himself again in that moment. "I'm sorry. I tried to do the right thing. Because I couldn't, I'm not fit to lead. I'll never be in charge of anyone again. It's for the best."

Neil snorted roughly. "Whose best? Marc's?!"

Adrian wasn't sure what to say in response to Neil's open animosity.

Neil wasn't done. He'd felt this way for a while. "It certainly wasn't best for the camp. No one gave us what you did."

Adrian was shocked. "Where was this support when I needed it at my trial?"

Neil pushed to his feet. "I was still gasping for air from the blow that you were a traitor! I only recently started breathing again."

Adrian was silent for a minute, considering what Neil was telling him. Removing Seth and Becky without orders was Neil's way of trying to get Adrian to come back and lead the camp. "You tried to tank Angela?"

Neil didn't answer.

Adrian didn't know the right thing to say, so he went with the first thing that came to mind. "Can you forgive me?"

Neil sighed. "I'd ask the same question."

There was no hesitation for Adrian. "I do forgive you. I hope you can hide it, so you can keep your place."

"Thank you... Boss."

Adrian blinked away the tears that formed at the corner of his eyes. *I have one of my Eagles back.* The feeling was indescribable.

"What about Angie?"

Adrian cracked a small grin. "Thought you weren't worried about the punishment."

Neil glared, anger never far away now. "I'm worried about Samantha getting hit in my place."

Adrian yawned, stretched. “I can tell you what will work, but you’re going to call me her lapdog again.”

Neil pierced Adrian with a hard stare. “You *are* her lapdog, and Marc’s bitch. I can’t stand that.”

“You want the old Adrian back, even if he’s evil?”

Neil immediately nodded. “You scratch mine; I’ll scratch yours.”

Adrian chuckled, rueful. “If I had known you were really like this, Neil, you would have gotten a different position in my army.”

Neil sighed, anger leaving for a moment. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Adrian felt Neil’s mind go straight to Jeremy. Neil’s walls were down, allowing Adrian full access into the man’s emotions. It was easy to see how conflicted the trooper had been about his decision. It was something of a surprise to discover Neil had also been jealous of Kyle because of the killing duty Adrian had always assigned to him. “Damn, Neil.”

Neil shrugged, embarrassed. “That isn’t something you can say to someone who thinks you’re an uptight prick who wouldn’t even break the speed limit before the war.”

Adrian flushed. He’d had that thought about the trooper more than once.

“I wanted a different life.” Neil removed his hat and ran his hands through sweaty hair that was slowly drying in the salty breeze. “I thought if I

played the part long enough, I would become that person.”

Adrian sympathized. Almost everyone in his camp went through moments like this; it just usually happened in the first few weeks, not a year later. Adrian replaced Kenn in the hierarchy in his mind. “You would have been my XO. I wish you had trusted me. Our foundation would have been completely different.”

Neil felt those words in his heart, but he didn’t reply as he picked up something hinky from the floaty where Molly was sheltered. He went to the door, scanning the coming dawn.

Adrian joined him.

Neil pointed.

Adrian followed it to the top of Molly’s floatie. She was on the roof, lying down. The dart gun was in her hand and her eye was on the scope.

Neil and Adrian swept for trouble in the dawn light. They found a familiar fin gliding through the debris. Several darts were sticking from it.

Molly pulled the trigger.

A new dart plunged into the shark’s fin, causing it to flinch. That was the only reaction.

Molly grumbled as she loaded another dart. A small red letter caught her attention. She narrowed in and grimaced. “Expiration date, 2012. Figures.” She loaded the dart anyway and got set to fire.

Molly’s second shot almost hit the shark in the eye.

It let out an eerie cry and disappeared under the water.

Molly stored the gun on her belt, but she didn't sit up. The fog was lifting, fading. She was afraid the people on land might be able to see her if they had binoculars.

Neil and Adrian gave her gestures of approval when she looked in their direction.

Molly used Eagle code to let them know the darts were expired.

“That means her little friend will return at some point.”

Adrian shrugged, mind already falling back into their conversation. “So, what can you do?”

Neil settled onto a rickety stool, brows coming together. “I don't get you.”

Adrian leaned against the doorframe. “What's to get?”

“You're acting like this isn't a big deal.”

“It might not be. That's up to Angela.”

Neil glowered. “That's what I'm talking about. You decided you deserved to die. Then you set out to accomplish that sentence, no matter who you had to piss off or hurt.”

Adrian couldn't deny dying had been preferable to not being in leadership back then. Some days, it still was.

“Then why don't you fight for it?!”

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” Adrian pointed toward land. “We’re trying to build a better society. Someone like me cannot lead it.”

“Neither can Angela. You corrupted her.” More regret crossed Adrian’s expression. Neil tried not to have sympathy, but it was hard considering his own transgressions. “Where was I?”

Adrian began fishing through his pockets for smoke fixings. “I set out to die and I was willing to do anything to achieve that sentence.”

Neil picked back up there. “You got lucky Angela cared enough to make sure you were spared at the trial. Then you spent that time birdogging her, which allowed our camp to be attacked over and over and over. We lost a lot of people because you weren’t paying attention to your duty!”

Adrian had given himself the same speech a hundred times. He had heard it openly at least that many since they’d left the mountain but getting it from Neil hurt more than any of those. “I’m sorry.”

“But you don’t regret your decision.”

Adrian slowly shook his head. He wasn’t allowed to lie anymore. He also didn’t need to. “If I had still been in charge, we never would have been able to reach the next level of the afterlife. We would still be in the dark on what happens when we die. I consider that to be my magnum opus, even above the creation of Safe Haven. My choice has allowed mankind to evolve to a new level of awareness about their origins. I’m happy with what I’ve done, in that manner.”

Neil hadn't considered it that way. A little of his anger deflated. "I can understand. I just can't justify the means."

"I would give you the same answer."

Neil winced this time, finally showing regret.

Adrian understood more of what had forced Neil into the decision now. He just needed to make sure Neil wasn't so corrupt that he was a danger to the dream.

"What do you care about the dream anymore?"

Neil's bitterness shocked Adrian. "I can't believe this is the same guy I trained in Eagle ethics. I watched him beat men for having a thicker line than what he crossed."

Neil's cheeks turned red, but he didn't respond this time. He didn't have a defense for it other than he been trying to go straight. *It didn't work.*

"She's going to replay this conversation, but I don't think it will be for a while. Even before everyone got sick, Angela was heartbroken over this. She didn't want to dig into it; she didn't want Marc to dig into it either after he already had. As far as leadership is concerned, it happened exactly the way the trial turned out. However..."

Adrian couldn't stop the nervous tone. "I picked up thoughts from her. It doesn't look good for you. She knows you scammed her; she's pissed about it. I don't know how many people may be caught in the crossfire of whatever plan she devises as your punishment, but I do know there's one thing you can

do to make sure you're the only one who gets hit by it."

"Tell me." Despite his bravado, Neil was scared of Angie. He also respected her and was still as loyal as he could be, considering the things they had all gone through since she took control. He didn't blame her for Jeremy's death, or any of the deaths they'd had. He blamed her for continuing to play with Adrian's emotions to prevent the man from resuming leadership.

Adrian scoffed. "I can't believe you really think that. She doesn't want leadership. If I got the camp and Eagles to agree to it, she would hand that burden back over to me faster than you could shake a stick."

"I don't believe you." Neil told the truth as he saw it. "She gets off on the control, the same as you do. She doesn't want to go back."

"You're wrong. She's tired. She keeps leading the camp through hell because no one else can. Did you see how fast she picked another descendant to carry the burden as soon as she was in leadership?" Adrian blew out a frustrated sigh. "Angela knows she won't be able to handle it much longer the way things are."

"You mean Jennifer."

"No. I mean Marc. Marc thinks the same as you, but neither of you understand what it's like to be in charge of our camp. It doesn't take long before you're so worn down that you'll pass it to anyone the instant they show skills you need. It is a constant process of evaluation and disappointment."

Neil wasn't sure he could believe that. "I need proof."

Adrian spent a minute trying to find something to satisfy the trooper. A recent observation he'd made came to mind. "Our ship is in the middle of a crisis, but she's still thinking about leadership positions. Your proof will be when she announces a fighter list, even though none of us have gone through the evaluations."

"There's no way she can do that yet."

Adrian shrugged. "I'd be willing to bet as soon as our medical crisis is over, that list gets posted—before the funeral."

"I'll watch for it." Neil wondered if there was anything else they needed to discuss. It felt like he was forgetting something important.

"Do you want my advice?"

Neil realized he was getting tired. He had meant to bring them back to that. "I'm willing to listen to your idea."

Adrian grinned at Neil's stubbornness. *I wish I had seen this side of him sooner.* "Tell her everything. Be prepared for pain while she grills you, but she's still the battered female rookie you took under your wing. Without you, she wouldn't be where she is. I promise you; she has not forgotten that."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. There's also the fact that she needs you and your little family. We have a war to win

when we come back. Your trio will probably be on the front lines.”

Neil’s guts churned harder. “No! Samantha and Amy are staying on the island.”

Adrian sighed, tired, sore and nervous without being exactly sure why. “We can’t hide anymore, Neil. Survival depends on sacrifices. You knew that when you signed up.”

2

The Adrianna

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Brittani stared back at him from her bed, face puffy. She’d been lying here, remembering her brother. Kenn was the first person to stop and check on her.

Kenn had been drawn by her endless pain lashing over his open connections. “They just don’t know what to say.”

Brittani sniffled, heart breaking all over again. “Do you?”

Kenn sighed. “Yes, but it’s cruel. I’m finding it hard to do that to you. You’re nice. Almost too nice to be an Eagle.”

Anger came into her red face. “I’m not.”

Kenn snorted. “We know you have a temper, but who doesn’t these days? Beyond that, you’re nice. We all know it.”

“And use it!” Brittani hated how she’d let these people manipulate her.

Kenn shrugged. "It's what we do."

"It's wrong."

"It lets us survive."

"My brother didn't!" Brittani sat up, rage flowing freely now. "My brother is dead!"

Kenn nodded, hardening his mind to get through this with her. "He was a sacrifice that let the others survive, like his mother, his father, and his very needed older sister who all loved him."

Tears flooded from her eyes. "I hate you."

Kenn opened his arms.

Brittani flew into them, body racked with huge, shuddering sobs. "I want my baby brother back!"

Kenn rubbed her shoulder and cried with her. Her pain was intolerable. "I can't give him back to you. All I can offer is the chance to honor his memory."

Brittani cried harder. "I hate you all!"

Kenn patted her and rubbed, repeating what he'd watched Adrian do so many times for hurting camp members. "It's not fair, not to any of us. He didn't deserve to die. None of our lost people deserved it."

Brittani shuddered. "I don't think I can go on!"

Kenn hugged her close and let her cry, hating the next part. He understood why Adrian handled it this way and he agreed, but it still hurt. "Here comes the cruel part."

Brittani tightened her grip on his big body, bracing.

Kenn drew in a deep breath. “I need you. Lock it up, now. When it’s time, we’ll all suffer through that part together too. Don’t shut down when we need you the most. You’re dishonoring his sacrifice.” Kenn set her stiff body away from his. “Daryl needs you. So does everyone else who hasn’t died.”

Kenn headed for the infirmary before she could target him with her anger. Adrian had always stayed and let them take it out on him to deal with his guilt. Kenn didn’t have that part of the burden because he wasn’t the leader of the camp. When Angela recovered this time, she might need the same treatment to snap her out of their losses. That would be his job, providing he still had one when this was all over.

Kenn paused outside the infirmary. He hated death scenes.

“She isn’t going to die.” Tonya opened her folder so he could view the last test results. She’d just come from the lab.

She let him have the folder and went into the infirmary. Courtney, and many others, still needed care.

Kenn read Tonya’s note and felt his heart lighten. So far, the baby was okay.

Kenn entered and went to the cot, not looking at either woman. He dropped the folder onto Courtney’s ankles and went to Angela for a check in he didn’t really need yet. He just felt bad that he

wasn't spending time here suffering with everyone else.

Courtney hadn't expected Kenn to offer comfort. She was too miserable to expect things from anyone. She was just grateful someone was caring for her. She tried to focus on red curls, throat burning. "Water?"

Tonya helped her get a drink, hurting. *This is not fair.*

Courtney sagged against the cot, exhausted.

Tonya replaced the empty bag of fluids, marveling at how much she'd changed. She kept telling herself she was doing a good thing as Courtney coughed up blood again.

"It is good." Ivan fought not to cough too, unsure if he had his eyes open. His mind was spinning too hard to tell. He had been told he was recovering. Being able to hear Tonya's thoughts confirmed that, but he didn't feel like it.

"It's true." Tonya jumped at the chance to have a good moment. "I did the tests. In a few days, you'll be able to tell too."

Ivan tried to smile at her, but he passed out in the middle, turning it into a grimace.

Tonya ignored Kenn's comforting shoulder rub as he left, but she didn't pull away. She didn't have time to decide how she felt. Until she did, it could wait. *Safe Haven needs me. And I need Safe Haven. Kenn, I'm not so sure about anymore.*

“Kill the engine.”

Marc pushed the buttons. He immediately felt the ship respond. Noise levels dropped in half. Within a minute, there was quiet from the ship.

Ian stayed by the door, providing guard duty for Marc and Theo as they brought the ship in to the floatie for refueling. They’d been able to see the faint outline of the Cayman Islands for the last half hour of sunrise, causing unrest among their healthy members and sadness among the leaders. It was a tropical island paradise they would never get to enjoy. It was obvious by the stillness that the Cayman Islands hadn’t survived. A few people had been harboring secret hopes that the United States had been the only country destroyed; they were still yearning for rescue, even after eleven months.

“What happens from here?”

Theo finished adjusting the dials, watching their speed and the radar. “We get in as close as we can. When she stops, we use the tugs to get in place, then drop the anchor.”

Marc was certain it wasn’t going to be as easy as that sounded, but he was willing to let Theo handle it. The buff man had spent a lot of time going over the design of the ship in the books, but he’d also spent time with Grant on the bridge before they set sail and after. If anyone could do this, it was Theo.

Theo was almost certain they were going to overshoot by half a mile. That meant wasting fuel

they didn't have to get the big ship into the correct position. He also didn't like how many floaties were popping up on the radar. In that half a mile, it was possible they might run into one—literally.

“What would be the effect?” Marc was monitoring Theo's thoughts, as well as Kendle's and the fuel crew on the deck below.

“Not much, I think. There would be a fuel spill, of course, but that's minor compared to everything that's happened since the war.” Theo watched the numbers count down. “However, a spark could cause a fire or even an explosion.”

“What can we do?”

Theo pointed toward the refueling crew on the deck. “They'll have instructions. Keep an eye out for floaties or big debris in front of us. I'll try to steer around if we happen to be that unlucky.”

“Have you noticed all the movement in the water?” Ian was horrified. Dozens of sharks were circling the cruise ship.

Theo hadn't noticed, but he didn't want to look away from the screens.

“I told our guys to use heavy gear.” Marc had picked the animals up on his radar as they neared the location. He stared into the distance, wondering what kept the sharks here. *Maybe there's a nursery.*

“I see our floatie.” Ian used his glasses. “Our clearing crew is on top. There's a lot of debris in the water. They had problems.”

Marc joined Theo at the radar screen. There were multiple signatures; one was directly in their path. He wasn't sure if they were going to hit it.

Neither was Theo. He rubbed the console, murmuring encouragement to the giant ship. "Come on, baby. Slow down for me right where I need you."

The ship shuddered under them; resistance increased as the water thickened. The ship slowed, numbers on the speedometer ticking down three times as fast.

Marc gaped in disbelief as the ship stopped exactly where it needed to be. "Now, I've seen everything."

Theo wanted to echo Marc's shock, but there wasn't time. He hurried out of the bridge and onto the deck to join the fuel team. It would take a while for the engine to cool off, but there was still a lot to get done before then.

Marc took a minute to confirm his sanity. He pinched himself until his arm turned blue under his fingers. "Nope, still awake. Damn it!"

"Here comes trouble." Ian stood on the stairs to block anyone from reaching Marc.

Marc came to the plastic and pulled it open as a small group of Eagles and camp members made it to the top deck. They spotted him and came over.

"We want to talk to you!"

Ian went to the bottom of the stairs so he would have room to fight if it was needed.

Martin stepped up to him without fear. “We want Marc’s permission to leave.”

Ian scowled at him, then everyone else. “What if he says no?”

Martin gave a hard glare that said he wasn’t going to back down. “Then we’ll have to go ask the boss and she’s a little busy right now.”

“Let them go.” Marc pointed to the lifeboats. “You have to pick one and liberate yourself. I don’t have the manpower right now.”

Everyone in the group sighed in relief.

Martin stepped around Ian, ignoring the man’s immediate fighting stance reaction. He held out a hand to Marc. “I’m sorry it has to be this way. Thank you for letting us leave.”

Marc respected Martin for the way he was handling things. He shook with the deserter. “I wish you luck.”

Martin turned away. “Right back at you, Marc. I hope we see each other again someday.”

“Me too.” Marc went back into the bridge. He was almost certain that wouldn’t happen. The nine people moving guiltily toward the lifeboats were their weakest Eagles and several restless camp members. That group wouldn’t have an easy time of it no matter where they landed, but from the look of the shoreline, they definitely weren’t going to find safe harbor here.

The faint sound of an engine brought Marc back to the plastic sheeting of the doorway. He and

Kendle observed as Quinn and Allison took a small inflatable to pick up the clearing crew.

Marc scanned the floaties. He didn't respond to the wave he got from Neil or Adrian, but he did give Molly a friendly gesture. He didn't care that it appeared sexist. Molly was the only one of that crew he wasn't pissed at.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Trap Team Troubles
The Cayman Islands

1

“That’s a lot of sharks!”

Allison scowled at Quinn’s shout over the noise of their engine. They weren’t supposed to do anything to provoke an attack.

The inflatable speedboat was surrounded by choppy waves and sharks of so many varieties that Allison couldn’t identify them all. Dozens of rare, normally unaggressive sharks were fighting each other everywhere she looked. The natural enemies were gathered here, for whatever reason. These disturbances could trigger a larger event if they were unlucky. Quinn’s shouting could have also been a final straw. She had no idea why he’d been sent along for this run.

Per Marc’s orders, Quinn steered them toward Molly first.

Two dozen Lemon sharks around Molly’s floatie flinched as the boat neared, vanishing below the waves. Reef sharks took their place, circling the boat in restless anger.

The rest of the sharks swam through the debris being shifted by the wake, dark eyes watching every move the humans made.

Quinn stopped by the side of Molly's rotting floatie, grinning up at her. "Miss, did you call a taxi?"

Molly frowned, gesturing for him to be quiet.

Quinn scowled, but he didn't argue when she pointed at the sharks, then lifted her brow to ask if he was crazy. A dozen more reef sharks were gliding their way with fins barely rising from the murky water.

On the other side of the huge cruise ship, a lifeboat dropped heavily into the water.

Nearly every shark dove out of sight to go investigate the new vibrations.

On the bridge, Marc was torn as he watched it unfold on his mental grid. He chose to do what he felt was right, not what they deserved. He keyed the mike on his belt, sure those Eagles were still listening. "You have a lot of company coming. Watch the water."

"Same to you!" The radio screamed at him. "Flank!"

Marc and his guard hurried to check their rear, bad feeling growing as they registered movement from land. "Company! Incoming!"

Gunshots rang out, bringing attention from all over the big ship. Terrified faces appeared in portholes; boots sounded on the stairs. Snipers took aim, waiting for Marc's call.

Screams came from the people fleeing in the lifeboat. Marc didn't use his energy to help them, following Angela's order to save it for their ill people. He observed in guilty misery as two people were shoved out of the boat during the panic. Everyone was trying to get in the center, away from the sharks. Bloody screams hit the waves.

On the other side of the ship, engines and more gunfire echoed. A speedboat of scavengers bounced toward their floatie. The three men were firing AKs—badly.

“I know that aim! That's Blake!” Neil hit the front of the advancing boat.

It gave a weak pop.

Molly and Adrian fired at the same time. They both hit the man in the front.

Blake jerked the wheel as he fell out of the boat.

Quinn held the pickup boat steady as Allison took aim on the now retreating survivor. He resisted the urge to rush her. *I hate it when they do that to me. Some parts of Eagle rules are stupid.*

Allison pulled the trigger and immediately rotated to Quinn without watching it land. She knew it was good. “It's not stupid! They do it for moments like this! If I kept waiting, the target would have gotten out of range.”

Quinn realized she was mad. His brows came together. “What's your problem?”

“You! You shouldn't be along for this run!”

He frowned. “You're a very unpleasant person.”

Allison stared... She chuckled quietly. "Yeah, I guess I am." She slid over to allow Molly a seat. "Get us rolling, *please*."

Quinn smiled and did as instructed.

Molly took the rear position, standing, with her weapon ready. She was the guard for the next pick up. Allison was too new to know that's where she should have been.

Neil and Adrian were ready to go. They landed in the front of the small boat simultaneously, like they'd drilled months ago. After so many flooded areas, Safe Haven had learned to use small watercraft, though they'd never gotten good at it.

"Are they leaving!?" Allison pointed at the lifeboat of crying, scared people coming around the front of the cruise ship. "That's Martin ...and Corey!"

Only Allison was surprised. She hadn't been invited to that Eagle meeting.

Allison realized her crew already knew. She fell silent as Quinn took them back to the Adrianna, trying to figure out how. *What did I miss?*

Molly scanned for problems, not looking at any of her shipmates. She replayed swimming away from the shark over and over in her mind, refusing to think about anything else.

Neil gestured at Adrian. *Is she okay?*

Adrian yawned. *She's covering something. She hopes we'll think she's traumatized, so we won't look for what she's hiding.*

Neil's gut tightened. *Any idea what it is?*

She knows your secret.

Neil's stomach churned now. *It might be one of yours.*

Can't be. I don't have any. You're the only one still lying.

Neil brought up his mental clouds, positive it was already too late.

The two Eagle boats passed within twenty feet of each other. Five hard stares followed the ducked profiles of the deserters. No words or gestures were exchanged.

Sharks began returning from the other side of the cruise ship, watching both boats of humans for another treat. Adrian's people were glad they only had to get back on their ship. It was close. Land was a mile away for those in the lifeboat; the sharks haunted them the entire way.

2

Molly took Theo's strong hand as she reached the top of the ladder and let go the instant her boots touched the deck. She immediately turned toward the ramp.

Theo shrugged and held out his hand to the next team member trying to get onboard. Lemon sharks lined the water under the ladder.

Quinn had sailed the boat into the loading chute and was now securing it to the rail. Theo admired the handiwork as he pulled Neil onto the deck. The chute held five small boats of sturdy nature for

emergency situations. This was the first time it had been used and it had gone flawless. *Ozzie would have been proud of what we built.*

Molly went down the ramp into the ship without responding to any of the questions or Ian's order to get a decontamination shower. She jogged through the hall, headed for the stairs by the elevator. She could feel someone trying to keep up with her in the hall. Molly knew who it was by the feel of their panic.

Ding!

Molly jumped as the elevator slid open.

Peter gave her a weak smile through the visor of his radiation gear. "This elevator is back open." He put a sticker on the wall above the buttons and waddled off. Wearing a full suit, Peter was both funny and scary to view.

Molly stepped into the gleaming elevator, barely aware of the strong chemical smell. *I have to get to Angela.* She breathed a sigh of relief as the doors started to close.

"Hold up!" A hand shot through the gap.

The doors slid open.

Neil entered the elevator, aware of how she'd paled. He hit the shut button, blocking an escape with his body.

Molly drew her gun.

Kenn moved toward the elevator. He could feel the bad vibes it was about to release into this hall. He came face-to-face with Neil, who was wet, red-eyed, and nervous.

“Holster, rookie.” Neil said it without moving from the elevator, even when Kenn retreated.

Molly put her gun away, cheeks red. She let out a ragged breath as Neil went to a chair by the infirmary and sat.

Neil had kept his back to her for the ride, trying to think of something to say. He still hadn’t come up with anything that would work. Molly was furious at his betrayal.

Kenn lifted a brow at Molly, noting she was also wet and tired, but a furious rage was burning in her eyes. *Neil did something bad.* “You need me?”

Molly walked toward the infirmary, leaving salty footprints. “The boss.”

Kenn motioned Neil to block her. “Angela is busy.”

Neil reluctantly stood in front of the door.

Molly rounded on Kenn, not intimidated. She’d never been frightened of anyone, except Neil during that elevator ride. “Let me in there!”

“Why?”

“None of your business!”

Kenn sighed. “I’m man on point, Eagle.”

Molly considered her options, then realized all she had to do was yell. That allowed her to calm down and think. *I’m safe here. I made it to the boss.*

“Yes, you did.” Kenn frowned. “What rattled you?” Molly was usually as steady as they came. Adrian had been eager for her to join the Eagles. So had Angela.

Molly glanced at Neil. Her lips clamped shut. Without talking to the boss, she didn’t know what to do.

Kenn shrugged. “She’ll be out in a few minutes. It’s almost shift change. Have a seat and wait—unless it’s an emergency. If it is, tell me right now.”

Kenn scowled when her eyes went to Neil again. “Fuzzy-brain isn’t a descendant. I am. Tell me.”

Molly’s hands clenched as she spun around. She shoved Neil out of her way, knocking him into the door. As it swung open, she went in.

Neil tripped as he tried to catch himself, falling onto a chair and then the floor.

Kenn skipped helping Neil up to observe through the window as Molly stomped to Angela and whispered in her ear.

Kenn caught the words. He replayed them in growing fury. *Neil’s a descendant. He’s been lying this whole time. And Adrian knows.*

Neil sighed, shoulders slumping. “The boss does too. And Marc.”

Kenn stopped himself from attacking Neil, but it was close. Angela’s quiet response to Molly, and Molly’s shocked expression in return, proved Neil’s words. That meant Angela already had plans. Kenn glanced at Neil, seeing the lie now that Neil’s

mental clouds were down. “Wow. She’s gonna fuck you up, dude.”

Neil winced.

Kenn’s anger grew at the response. It was more proof. “Why are you here?!”

Neil gestured at the clock. “Shift change. I’m on duty over the boss.”

“Who gave you those orders?!”

Neil ignored him, tired. He waited as Molly came toward the exit, mentally begging for a chance to explain.

Molly grabbed both doors as she went out. She swung the left side as hard as she could, cracking Neil in the face.

“Oh, my gosh! I am, like, so sorry!” Molly kept walking as Neil crumpled to the tile.

Kenn laughed. He met Molly’s eyes, amusement fading. “I didn’t know.”

Molly was too stunned to talk about it calmly. She glanced at Neil, who was bleeding and moaning. “I want him dead.”

Kenn wasn’t surprised. “For what he did to Seth, or for fooling us all this time?”

Molly’s lips thinned into a hard line. She left without answering.

Kenn understood. It was both, and then so much more that he couldn’t find the words to express it either. Neil had been a pillar of good they’d all depended on. Now, they would have to watch him fall. It was awful.

“I see you’re helping again.” Brittani strode down the hall.

Wearing clean clothes and shoes, with her hair in a tight braid, she looked ready to try again. Only the horror in her eyes gave her away. Kenn held the door open. “I’m proud of you.”

Brittani entered with her chin up and her heart locked. *Lou would want me to keep helping, to keep living and I will, but this pain might kill me when it’s all over.*

Kenn finished the chore with a mental thought. *I’ll be there for you then. We all will.*

Angela gestured toward the door. “Get in here.”

Neil went into the infirmary.

Kenn came to the door in case she meant him too.

Angela pointed at the corner, not looking up from Dion as death claimed another of her lost children. Tears ran over her cheeks in thick waves, soaking the boy’s face.

Neil, nose bleeding, walked to the body pile.

Kenn went in to help. This shift had taken five more lives. Terribly, the cots were finally emptying.

4

“I want you to verify the sniper watch is rotated, then check on our other ship.”

“You got it.” Adrian headed back down the bridge steps he’d just come up. Marc wasn’t in the

mood to chat. Neither was Adrian. He was too full of his conversation with Neil to hide anything.

Marc watched Adrian's shadow as he made contact with Zack, who had taken over sniper watch. *Time is running out for you, Adrian. I'm counting hours now.*

Marc saw the towline crew heading to the rear of the ship. He'd also wanted to make Adrian do that, but he'd taken pity on how bad Adrian looked after no sleep and being drained. He wouldn't have been much help.

Marc turned back to Theo, who was giving him instructions.

"If the flow is too fast or doesn't overspill each tank correctly, it can cause stability problems. There's even a small chance of rolling the boat onto its side due to uneven weight distribution. I want you to watch these gauges. You see how they show the stability of the ship and the horizontal line of the hull on the horizon?"

"Yes." Marc memorized the correct position for the dials, wishing the skycrap would thicken or the fog would return. They were in plain view, with morning light illuminating every person on the top deck. None of them were safe.

"It can fluctuate 5% to either side. After that, we have to stop filling until the tanks level out." Theo rocked his hand. "Sometimes the fuel goes in too quick and causes rocking, which, as you know, we don't need."

Marc nodded. "Got it."

“Watch this gauge here.” Theo pointed. “When the fuel level gets to this point, you need to call down to shut it off.”

Marc frowned. “Every tank can still hold another quarter after that.”

Theo shook his head. “Never fill a boat gas tank all the way. You have to give the fuel room to expand.”

Marc shrugged. He was willing to take Theo’s word on it. “Is there anything else you need me to do?”

Theo moved toward the fading, buggy plastic over the doorway. “Just make sure we remain stable and you yell when we’re at three-quarters.” Theo ducked out, waving at Quinn, who was waiting for orders now that he’d changed clothes. “I have you positioned here at the shut off valve between the deck and the tank. Make sure you open it or close it as soon as we tell you to.”

Theo waved Allison toward the fuel fill. “You watch that line. Make sure it doesn’t twist, jump, or leak. You see any of those problems, you let me know.”

Theo kept moving, running over the mental list while speaking it out aloud to be sure it was all covered. “We’re properly vented. The vent hose is high on the vessel and away from the engine or any other heat source. The gauge flow arrester is functioning. The grounding cables are in place to provide a discharge for any static electricity that builds up.” Theo joined the small crew near the

hoses that had been brought up from the cargo area. “Anyone who smokes, I want you to have your last cigarette for the next five hours.” Theo made a gesture. “I’m not kidding. Light it up now, because once we get rolling, anyone who lights a cigarette will be shoved overboard.”

A few people pulled out smokes and lit them, but everyone wore an uneasy expression at the threat. There were sharks in every direction around the boat and the fuel floatie.

“The most dangerous part of refueling is static electricity. Unfortunately, we carry it. We have to avoid discharging it once the fuel starts, so there are a few things I’m going to have you do while the engine cools. The first is that all of you need to switch to a pair of leather boots, not rubber. Anyone wearing wool or anything that makes you itchy needs to change. We’re going to have a metal object up here, probably a milk pail, for everyone to touch before we get started and after, so it naturally discharges the spark. While we work, there will be no rubbing, itching, sliding, scuffing, or scratching. Don’t run your hands through your hair; don’t reach into your pockets for anything. If you have to walk somewhere, raise your feet all the way. Do not scuff across the deck. We have fire extinguishers ready in case something goes wrong. Should you catch fire, I recommend jumping overboard. It’s quicker than waiting on us to figure out how to use the extinguishers.”

Debra made a short gesture, then pointed at the water.

Theo flushed. “Oh, yeah. On second thought, wait for us to figure it out. Getting burned is better than being eaten.” He pointed at the nozzles while people muttered. “A positively charged nozzle can react with a negatively charged pipe. Everything is grounded, but you need to be careful not to lift the nozzle from the pipe during refueling. Breaking contact can cause a spark as quickly as making contact. All you need to do is clamp these hoses into place and watch for spills. Don’t try to adjust anything. If there’s a problem, wave me over and I’ll handle it.”

Theo ran through his mental list one more time, then looked at the small team. “Does anyone have any questions I can answer before we get started?”

Heads shook and feet shuffled restlessly before remembering they weren’t supposed to do that.

“Anyone who needs to get out of their clothing, do it now.” Theo indicated a large crate by the ramp. “I had a variety of boots brought up. Please remember what I said about smoking. That rule will go into place in a few minutes, so if you’ve got them, smoke them now or do without.”

Theo joined Allison and Quinn with a hand out for the pack they were sharing. “I think I’d like to try that.”

Allison held the lighter for Theo, wondering if the man had ever smoked before.

Theo inhaled deeply, braced for the coughing.

Quinn put the pack away, scanning the wooden boat behind them. Nothing moved on Adrian's ship.
Why does that bother me?

Quinn shook it off and enjoyed a few minutes of chatting before the next shift of labor began.

5

Adrian tied the small boat to the side of his smaller ship and carefully climbed the ladder. The ship they were towing hadn't been boarded since they left America. He agreed with Marc that it was a good time to check on things while they were stationary.

Adrian went to the towline first; it appeared okay from this end. He would recommend they switch it out next time they stopped.

Adrian moved toward the wheelhouse. He didn't like being out of sight of the *Adrianna*, but with the towline still attached, he wouldn't be left behind. The smaller vessel swayed gently under his boots, giving the impression he was on a pleasure trip. While smaller than the *Adrianna*, this ship was still big. It was carrying a few bulky items and a variety of crates and bags they hadn't had time to sort through on the beach.

Adrian's first clue something was wrong was the sound of footsteps coming from below.

As he turned around, his ears registered two more sets of boots coming up behind him.

Adrian drew his gun.

A dense shield slammed around him, locking him in place.

Five shadows dressed in black outfits with UN emblems on their chest surrounded him.

“I did it! I got him!” Sadie pressed against the shield, making faces at Adrian. “I caught a Mitchel!”

Adrian observed his new captors. This lone female among them sported a tall, blue mohawk and dark, sun-kissed skin that Adrian would have been glad to rub in another situation. Even without her words, he would have pinpointed her as a new descendant from her twitching fingers. She was ready to throw another spell if he resisted. She was also bragging. *A rookie. That might be useful.*

Adrian didn't have the energy to get through the shield. His mind began laboring on a spell she wouldn't expect as he turned his attention to the two bruised, scarred fighters holding guns on him. Both men were bald with American and British features, and the same black clothes with the same UN emblem.

Adrian wasn't impressed despite the muscle. He scanned the man standing by himself at the corner of the wheelhouse. This one had a long black braid. As the man shifted, Adrian caught his profile and identified him as Native American.

Dag stepped forward and slapped the shield around Adrian, making it ripple. “What about me, hotshot? You haven't evaluated me yet.”

Adrian frowned at the man with the shorter braided blonde ponytail. “I always seem to run into a German or a Mexican on trips like these. Do they produce you guys in factories just for moments like this or were you the only ones willing to take a run for me?”

Dag, the XO of the group, wasn’t sure how to take that. He stared, mind spinning.

Jamie, the team leader, snickered. “You think highly of yourself. So does the UN. You wouldn’t believe the reward they offered.”

Adrian shrugged. “Probably not. Are you here just for me? That sure would make me feel special.”

Dag motioned their two fighters into position. “The UN doesn’t tell us what they want.”

“We know, though. Once Safe Haven is under control, the American government can come back out of the ground.” Jamie huffed in disapproval. “It’s terrible you helped peasants conquer your own government.”

Adrian didn’t get pulled into that blackhole. “Were the decoy scavengers yours or ours?”

Dag lifted his chin. “That was all you. Banishing people is a bad idea. You should just kill them.”

Adrian couldn’t argue. “How do you expect to take our ship?”

Sadie leered at Adrian, orbs glowing red. “With you, of course. Everyone wants you, especially your own people.”

Adrian snorted bitterly. “You obviously don’t have the latest information.”

Jamie frowned at that.

Dag was positive it was a bluff. He gestured to Sadie. “When I count to three, I want you to drop the shield. We’ll get him darted and back to land in time for lunch.”

Sadie stepped forward eagerly. “I hope he fights. I’ve never been this hungry.”

Dag scowled at her. “The UN will only pay us if he is intact. Do *not* take his lifeforce.”

Sadie’s happiness fell. Her lip pushed out in disappointment.

Jamie didn’t like their descendant being unhappy, especially since he was sleeping with her. “Don’t worry, sweet-ums. You’ll get a chance at the shark killer.”

Sadie’s mood improved. “I really do want her. She’s a great shot. I’ll bet Molly tastes like sugar.”

Adrian realized these killers had been observing since the clearing team arrived. “Cameras?”

Jamie nodded. “We installed them on all floaties two weeks ago. We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Mitchel.”

That explained the sunburns they were all carrying. Adrian frowned as he realized this was one of the brainwashed groups they had learned about during Charlie’s manhood quest. “You’re a trap team.”

Dag and the others scowled; Jamie chuckled. “Excellent. A little more proof you are who we came for.” The boss gestured.

Sadie lowered the shield.

Adrian fired a spell at her as the two fighters, Roy and Wendell, both shot him with darts.

Adrian slid to his knees, fighting the powerful sedatives as he tried to gather more energy. *Angie!* A weak call spun into the tropical air.

“Dart him again!” Dag grabbed the gun from Roy when that man didn’t respond quick enough. He slammed the dart into the chamber and popped Adrian in the back.

Adrian slumped at their feet.

Sadie hurried forward. “Lunch time!”

Wendell grabbed her by the arm. “The boss said—”

Sadie lunged around and latched onto his lifeforce. She snapped it loose in a matter of seconds and swallowed, moaning.

Wendell’s corpse fell to the deck, shriveled.

Sadie realized what she had done and backed away, hands coming up in defense as pain hit her gut.

Jamie and Dag stepped toward her, both wearing angry expressions.

“I’m sorry! I was so hungry!”

Dag lifted his gun.

Sadie tried to bring up her shield.

Nothing happened.

Dag and Jamie waited, one confused and the other surprised Mitchel had been smart enough to do it.

“Why won’t it work?!” Sadie began slamming through doors in her mind, firing random spells that brought no response from her magic. “What happened to it?! Where is it?!”

Jamie motioned toward Adrian’s body. “He locked you up. You’re no longer a descendant.”

Sadie screamed. Her hands came up to yank on her blue hair in brutal rips.

“This is making too much noise.” Jamie had seen descendants flip out, but never for this reason. “Shoot her.”

Angry about Wendell’s murder, Roy lifted his gun.

Sadie ran. She made it to the side of the ship before the surprised men reacted, diving overboard.

There was a large splash and then silence.

Dag holstered his weapon. “The sharks will take care of it. We need to get Adrian back to Grand Island and send a support team for Kronus. He’s the most important package we’re collecting today.”

6

“I heard something…” Kendle was the last one on the rear of the Adrianna. They’d finished pulling in the towline to making sure there were no tangles to prevent it from stretching out when they set sail again. The rest of the workers had already switched

to other areas of the ship for their next duty. Kenn was keeping every able-bodied person busy every minute that he could between breaks and sleep.

Old magic wafted by on the warm breeze and vanished into the sunny sky.

Kendle stared at the tow ship. *I hate that spell. Angie!*

Kendle tried to pinpoint the call. When she did, she took a minute to decide what to do. Adrian was calling out to Angela for help again. Because no one was responding, Kendle assumed the call was too weak. *I'm the only one who heard it.*

Kendle rotated toward the main landing, but she avoided the steps that would take her into the bowels, where Angela was supposed to be on a break. She took the long way to the bridge, going to Marc instead.

Kendle didn't hate Adrian, but she loved Marc and she needed all the points she could score. *Marc will get to make this decision.*

Chapter Twenty-Five
You Will Do It

1

“Do you want me to do something about her?”

Neil held the door open for Angela to enter the corridor that would take them to the coed showers.

“No.” Angela fought her sore throat, eager to have this conversation over with. “Kendle is doing exactly what I thought she would.”

Neil wasn’t surprised to hear it, though he was a bit dismayed. “You knew there was going to be a problem during this stop, but you didn’t tell anyone.”

Angela snorted. “I told the people who matter.”

Neil felt the blow, like she’d intended. He was on the outs with everyone. It didn’t leave room for the fame or glory he had enjoyed as the most honorable man in camp.

Angela wanted to let him stew, but she was running out of time. She hoped pushing him now was the right way to go. “If I had told you yes about Kendle, would you have done it?”

Neil nodded.

“I don’t sense any guilt about it.” She looked at him. “Is that a problem?”

Neil grunted. “As long as my family is protected, no.”

“I wish I’d known all of this before we set sail, Neil. You would’ve gotten a different place in my army.”

Neil opened the shower door for her. “Adrian told me the same thing, but I wouldn’t have won Samantha with the truth.”

He fell silent at the sight of Allison and Quinn using the showers.

Allison and Quinn both gaped at the couple. Neil was covered in yellowing bruises and didn’t seem capable of standing up straight. Angela was a shriveled hag with sunken eyes that neither of them could look at for long.

“Everything okay?”

Allison grunted at Angela’s query, soap dripping from her hair. “Theo said our skin is too dry; our hair needs conditioner so we don’t create sparks.”

Angela stepped into one of the stalls to disrobe, vaguely aware that she no longer felt uncomfortable doing this around other people. Only Kenn and Adrian made her feel that way now. “I’m sure Theo knows what he’s doing.”

That was the end of the complaining. Angela’s white hair and bony body was enough to stop anyone from whining about how unhappy they were. It was obvious the boss was giving everything she had.

Angela quickly washed, already feeling guilty for the amount of time she would be away from the infirmary. Morgan and Harry needed this break

more than she did, but those men had insisted she leave. Angela knew it was because she couldn't stop crying, but she really couldn't. This culling of the herd was killing her.

“I think I saw one of your socks.”

Silence fell as everyone looked at Neil.

Neil grinned at Quinn, hoping this effort gave Angela a few minutes of peace instead of the mental misery threatening to swallow her.

Quinn flushed. “Uh, thanks.” He hoped Neil would let it go.

Neil wasn't about to. They all needed to laugh so they didn't scream. “It was hanging from a light fixture in one of the cabins they cleaned yesterday.”

People snickered or shook their heads as Quinn flushed darker and refused to meet anyone's eye.

Neil grinned wider. “Do you want to know where they found your shorts?”

“Please don't.”

“In the mess, under a booth. How on earth did your shorts get under a mess booth?”

Quinn covered his face with his hands. “She said she had them.”

Neil laughed. “Are you missing more than one pair of underwear?”

Quinn groaned.

“The cleaning crew is trying to find the entire outfit. Be nice and lose a pair of pants somewhere. Ian almost has the set. He found your spare boots on a balcony.” Neil grinned. “Well, two different balconies, but still.”

Laughter broke through the room as Quinn slid under the water. “Never gonna live this down.”

There was soothing quiet for a few minutes as the group showered. Steam floated through the room, easing tension and congestion.

“Charlie’s coming.”

Angela hurried at Neil’s warning. “It’s a message from Marc. They’re about to start fueling.”

Everyone in the shower was either assigned to that dangerous event or planned to be there in case they were needed, including Angela. Morgan had insisted she get some fresh air after her shower, instead of coming straight back to the infirmary.

Charlie stuck his head in, refusing to acknowledge Neil. “Mom?”

Angela wrapped a towel around her hair, then another around her body as she stepped out. “The people in here are okay. Let’s hear it.”

Quinn and Allison liked that.

Neil doubted she meant him. He tried not to draw attention any more than he already was by being next to Charlie in the doorway.

“Refueling will start in ten minutes. We need all hands. Theo said we’re ready to go. He’s just waiting for the engines to finish cooling off.” Charlie sent a mental message. *Dad said there’s trouble on the other boat with Adrian. He wants to know how you want him to handle it.*

No change in the plan.

He’s having doubts that she can handle it.

Angela sighed, standing behind a locker to dress. “Tell him to get her ready—by any means necessary.”

Charlie frowned as he wrote it down. Like others in the room, he’d just figured out Angela had known there was going to be a problem here and hadn’t warned anyone.

Neil glared at her. “That’s twice on the same stop.”

Angela shut her locker and began pulling on socks. “Keep counting. It’s not over yet.”

Angela strapped on her gun, then pulled on her jacket and boots, wet hair dripping all over her and the floor. There wasn’t time to dry it. The wind on the top deck would take care of that when she got up there.

Realizing Angela was almost done, people shut off showers; squeaking footsteps echoed across the floor as they tried to get dressed as quick as she had.

“How are Tracy and the kids?”

Charlie flushed. “Fine, as of a few hours ago.”

Angela didn’t scold him. “Get some sleep when you can. I don’t want to see white hair on you.”

“Okay.” Charlie headed back up to the bridge.

Neil studied the boy until he was out of sight, aware of Dog coming out of the shadows to fall in on the teenager’s heels. *I wonder if the wolf will talk to me now...*

Neil pushed the thought away, turning to scan the other hall. He was on duty over the boss. No one was going to get near her without him being aware

of it and making them pay. He wasn't looking forward to the fallout when the camp discovered his secrets, but he was grateful to be a descendant. There was a lot he could do, and Safe Haven needed it.

Angela stepped by, slinging wet hair as she finished braiding it, then began to wrap it in a loose bun. "Maybe if you do enough, they'll forgive you."

Neil followed her, aware of the others rushing around behind them. "Yes." He hesitated, then went on. "Will that work?"

Angela was thoughtful as she walked toward the intersection while clipping her bun into place. "There's a great chance it will work on the camp. There's absolutely no chance it will work on me."

Neil was already pushing the line. "What *will* work on you? How do I earn your forgiveness?"

"That depends on what you're asking forgiveness for." Angela tugged on black gloves next, then moved toward the freshly scrubbed elevator, tired and sick of stairs.

"For murder."

"I can't offer you forgiveness for that. I'm not positive it was murder. I still haven't decided how I feel about that part of it." She shrugged. "That decision goes to a higher level than me anyway."

Neil pushed the button to the top deck. The doors slid closed. "Then for breaking your trust."

Angela's face darkened into a thick cloud. A wave of heat filled the elevator. His damp Eagle clothes and boots began to dry.

Neil retreated, hand coming up. "I'm sorry."

Angela forced the rage down. "You betrayed me. You lied to my face; you put this camp through days of stress that helped weaken our immune systems. We were all so busy with your bullshit that we missed the real threat." Angela forced the rage down. It had been a long time since she'd been this angry with one of Safe Haven's members. "With every person we lose, your hands get a little bloodier. As the leader, I can't condone that; nor can I forgive you for it. Your actions cost more than the two lives that were taken. You can't earn my forgiveness because you can't bring those people back."

"Even though you're glad to have some of them gone and you knew this was coming?" Neil didn't have anything left to lose. The truth was the only thing he could cling to.

"Yes. You're the only person who has ever tricked me into planning for something that you never intended to follow through with. Like the people you're going to face at some point, I'm shocked that you were never what you pretended to be. That's a long time of lying, Neil. Even if you hadn't distracted us, there would still have to be payment for that."

"So what happens now?"

"Because the camp needs you so much, I've chosen not to make a final decision until they get their say. Forgiveness doesn't matter to anyone right now."

“It matters to me.” Neil hit stop on the elevator. He leaned against the wall away from her, so she didn’t feel threatened like Molly had earlier. “I wasn’t a good man before the war. I wasn’t evil, but I wasn’t good. When my father was killed, that eliminated the last living person who knew me. I saw it as an opportunity to change who I was.” Neil let out a sigh that revealed the disappointment in himself. “I tried to live by it. For eleven months, I *was* a good man.”

Angela hated her time being spent this way, but it was part of the job too. When one of her men was having an epiphany, it had to be handled right then if she wanted the outcome to go her way. “Are you willing to tell me what flipped you now? I would have asked sooner, but I thought I already knew the answer.”

Neil lifted a brow. “Will it matter?”

Angela shrugged, also leaning against the elevator wall. She lifted her leg and tugged on the clean sock that still refused to stay up on her ankle. “I won’t know until I hear it.”

Neil let out a sound of misery. “I still wanted Becky....”

Angela understood how hard it was for him to admit that to her. She helped him along by filling in the next part. “And because you had an open relationship with Samantha, your brain started whispering you could have Becky on the side, that Samantha would have to agree because you agreed with Jeremy.”

Neil was horrified. “I could feel it coming. I was going to get drunk one of these nights and say something stupid. I was about to throw away the first happiness I’d had in my life, for a piece of ass with a damaged child.” Tears rolled down Neil’s cheeks. “I’m not a good man.”

Angela knew the right response to give according to Safe Haven’s rules. She also knew the response she wanted to give as a female. She chose to be a leader. “What about Seth?”

Neil scrubbed away the tears. “Seth took advantage of her just weeks after Rick’s assault. Then he got her pregnant right after her abortion. He wasn’t punished for any of that, but he should have been. *You* know he should have been.”

“I do. However, I wasn’t in charge then. If I had been, that would have gone differently, but long before it, you would have been banished for your relationship with her. My camp would have been so strict that not enough people would have joined to allow us to reach this moment in time. Adrian had to lead us first. Now, I can tighten the laws to prevent those situations. You’re a crumb that slipped through the cracks. So is Kyle, though that situation had a better resolution.”

Neil’s anger returned. “You sound like it was an experiment.”

Angela shrugged. “Adrian and I studied the relationships, but I don’t consider it an experiment as much as something that was going to happen one way or another. We didn’t put Seth or Kyle with

younger women who had been abused. They both did that on their own. We just studied the results so we could figure out how to prevent it from ever happening again.”

Neil was relieved to hear something good might come from the whole mess, but he was still confused. “How does that work?”

Angela pushed the button to open the doors. “I’m going to make examples. Then I’m going to make us so strict on morals that it becomes a comfortable way of life and people won’t even consider making the same bad decisions that you’ve allowed to ruin your life.”

The elevator opened. Angela touched Neil’s shoulder. “Thank you for being honest with me. I know that wasn’t easy. I’m sorry your attempt to change failed, but as I’m sure you know, Safe Haven is a place of second chances. If you can get the camp to forgive you, it doesn’t matter how leadership feels. You’ll still have your place here and you can try again to be the man I was once so proud of.”

Angela stepped out of the elevator, glad she had been able to end things that way with Neil. If the camp didn’t forgive him, she would be expected to banish him at the very least. Angela almost hoped they didn’t, despite how badly they needed the former state trooper. Her wrath at being fooled for so long needed an outlet.

Angela's mind went to Adrian's situation. *Wait. That's right, I have a bullet in the chamber. Time to fire it.* Heat came off her body as she walked.

Neil put more distance between them as they went up the final stairs to the top deck.

2

"This is the Cayman King. I'm speaking to the Captain who is stealing our fuel."

"Oh, shit." In the bridge for an update, Theo panicked. "We just started to refuel!"

"I'm aware." Marc considered the options and made a hard choice. "Don't answer it. Spread the word."

Theo clicked his radio on the Eagle channel, ordering no contact.

"Dear cruise ship captain, this is a friendly port. There is no need to hide in the fog and pretend you do not hear me. Send a team to land so we can trade. It has been a long time without contact. We have many questions for you, but no hatred."

He's trouble. Marc was picking clues from the words and tones and becoming concerned. The Caymans didn't have a king. They had a Premier, with a two-party system, which meant the government here had fallen. *That's dangerous if pirates came for the fuel and here we are, stealing it.* Marc winced. *Well, that settles that question. Kendle was right. It is stealing.*

“Can we pay for it?” Ian was coming to the same conclusions as Marc, just slower.

“I doubt it. Anything we offer will be accepted and then more demanded. We might be able to leave if we gave up half our food and water, and of course, our women.”

Ian didn't think they were in shape for another fight. “Maybe they'd just take the food.”

Marc gestured. “Use my glasses. Tell me what you see.”

Ian did, frowning as he spotted ripe mango orchards that hadn't been harvested. Heirloom tomatoes were rotting on the vine. “They aren't starving.”

“No. Winter came through and finished off any farms the government or looters missed in America. Down here, the weather is temperate. It allows for growing year-round.” Marc considered. “They might be out of ammunition, like home. The only other thing we have is a cargo full of supplies.”

“We have another ship.” Ian pointed toward the rear.

Marc snorted. “So you see my point?”

Ian ran through the leadership secrets he'd collected. They had to keep that ship and everything else they'd brought. There was already barely enough for everyone. They weren't trading for their needs on this trip. They were taking it. “Agreed. No contact.”

“I need you to pass the word again when you go below. Make sure everyone knows they’re risking all our lives if they answer.”

“I will.” Ian opened the plastic. “Coffee from the mess?”

“No, thanks.”

Ian nodded to Kendle, who was resting in the cot behind the booth where Marc was sitting. She’d refused to go to a cabin until her shift began.

Kendle didn’t get up. The deck below the bridge was dotted with groups of working people. Most were Eagles, but a sizable number were camp members who wanted to help and couldn’t handle the stress of the infirmary. She was scanning anyone who got near the steps to the bridge.

“My patience runs thin!” The radio blared. “Answer me, thieves!”

Marc shut off the radio.

“There are descendants here.” Kendle sat up. “I didn’t feel it before.”

“The fog is lifting, and we made a lot of noise.” Marc tensed. “We’re being scanned.”

“This is bad.”

“Yep.”

“What will Angela do?” Kendle hoped Marc wasn’t sent. He was hiding his pain well, but she could still feel it.

Marc swiveled around to meet her eye. “She’ll send someone healthy we can afford to lose.”

Kendle laid back down. “She’s the boss.”

The plastic rustled. Neil came in and took his guard post over Marc.

Kendle frowned. "I thought I had duty next." She frowned at Neil as he took a place in the shadows, no longer certain he was one of the good guys.

Marc sighed. "I have a job for you."

Kendle brightened, standing. "You name it, I'll get it done."

Marc finished writing down the fuel numbers and turned to her, expression hard. "I'm glad to hear you say that."

Her happiness fled. It was replaced with tension. "What do you want me to do?"

Marc gestured toward the foggy island. "We're missing a dog. I want it returned."

Kendle snorted as she realized who he meant. "No, you don't." As far as she was concerned, trading Adrian for the fuel was a good idea.

"Actually, I do." Marc's tone settled into the rough rock she'd gotten used to during their fight against the troops. "You will go meet the people, rescue Adrian, and make sure those who survive your meeting are not going to be a future threat."

Kendle stared at him as if he had grown two heads, hand coming to her hip. "How do you expect me to do all that?"

Marc smiled. "You're going to pretend you're my Angie."

The refueling team paused, glancing up as female shouts echoed from the bridge.

Theo gave a sharp whistle. “Pay attention!”

The team resumed work, being careful not to create a spark. This was all new to them, but so far, it wasn’t a hard job, just a tense one.

“You’re out of your mind!” Shouts flew down to the deck. “I won’t do it!”

A wave of tension came after it.

Theo assumed Marc was getting Kendle under control by using his displeasure at her refusal. It wasn’t necessary to use the alpha command. He already owned her, even if he didn’t want her.

Guards monitored their foggy surroundings, uncomfortable being in sight of land. Though the fog bank was still hovering over the water, they had a clear view above it, which meant anyone on land also had a clear view of them.

Neil left the bridge to stand on the stairs, unable to take the ugly battle going on between Marc and Kendle. It was mental now. He was finding it hard to resist either of them. *I guess that means I’m not an alpha.* Neil wasn’t disappointed. In fact, it was a relief to know that from now on someone would be able to stop him from making bad decisions. He still wasn’t certain that it had been bad, but he loathed how it felt now; that implied it was.

“You can’t make me do it!”

Marc stared at Kendle for a long moment, deciding how far he needed to push her.

Kendle kept her shield up, hurting at resisting anything Marc wanted, but this was too much.

Marc attacked from a different direction. He smiled at her.

Kendle groaned, trying to strengthen her shield. “That’s not fair.”

Marc stepped closer, turning on the charm. “Please?”

“Okay, okay!” Kendle crumbled, as he’d known she would. “Just turn it off.”

Marc stopped using the charm, but he couldn’t help another smile. It was a nice boost to his ego to know he had the power to make people respond to him. As long as he didn’t abuse it, it was awesome.

“For you, maybe.” Kendle couldn’t resist smiling when he laughed. *He’s adorable. Why can’t he be ugly?*

The tension eased, but Neil didn’t go back in. Like they’d done with Angela and Adrian, the Eagles would give Marc the same respect. Leadership definitely had perks.

Marc picked up the bag he’d had Charlie pack and held it out. “You’ll find some things in here that don’t make sense. Just do it.”

Kendle took the bag without touching his hand and moved toward the door.

“Don’t go out there.”

Kendle stopped, spinning around. “I have to get changed in here?!”

Marc pointed at the elevator. “Hit stop when you get in. It’s yours until you hit the button again.”

Kendle stomped to the elevator, grumbling.

Marc laughed again. He missed spending time with her when she wasn't burning through his clothes with her eyes. *I'm more than a chunk of skilled man meat.*

He also wanted to punish her for trying to kill Angie. If it had been anyone else, they would have been executed. Because of his relationship with Kendle, she had been given a pass on attempted murder. The affection he carried for the castaway, while still fading, had saved her life. Marc wasn't okay with that.

"You have got to be kidding me!"

Marc snickered. *She found the push-up bra.*

"This is humiliating!"

Marc nodded, though she couldn't see him. He had noticed differences between the two women and tried to account for them, but some of it, nature was pretty strict about. Angela was bigger in the chest, and because she'd had children, her body was rounded. It was easy to change the way Kendle walked and put makeup on the scars, but when it came to more boob, only a push-up bra could do that. "Tuck in your shirt; put your cuffs inside your boots."

"Slam you!"

Marc did a scan on the fuel gauges. They were a little over halfway full. In another quarter tank, they would start the disconnecting process. A short while after, they would be underway. Marc was

looking forward to it. Like everyone else, he hated being in view of land while hostiles were watching.

Ding! Kendle stepped out.

Marc rotated to do an evaluation and sucked in a tight breath at the similarity. Even though he had planned on this effect, it was still eerie.

Kendle smiled, using soft eyes and a lot of teeth, the way Angela did.

Marc nodded, voice rough. "Just like that."

Kendle tensed as he stepped toward her with a makeup kit. "No."

Marc ignored her. He flipped open the case and picked up a likely applicator. He smeared it into the one foundation and began to rub it over her face.

Kendle held her breath, fists clenched against her hips as Marc applied way too much. Small clouds of powder danced around both of them, causing coughs and the urge to sneeze.

Neil stepped inside the plastic, drawn by the noises. He laughed at the scene. "Wait until the Eagles hear about this."

Marc chuckled.

Kendle tried to glare at Neil.

Marc swiped her nose, filling it with makeup.

Kendle pushed him away and used her sleeve to take off a few layers. "You're not filling in a ten-mile trench!"

Marc held the mirror so Kendle could apply the makeup.

Neil leaned against the wall so he could view the stairs and the gauges. He also scanned Kendle

occasionally, impressed by the job Marc had done turning her into Angela. *He was absolutely right. She needed the push-up bra.*

Kendle grimaced. “This sucks.”

Both men ignored her but inside, they agreed. They were using it to keep from thinking about any of the awful things happening on the ship or the tragedies yet to come.

Kendle slid the gloves on when Marc held them out, refusing to admit how much she was enjoying being in front of him while looking this way. She was trying not to have thoughts like that in public. She preferred to enjoy those while she was alone and couldn’t get in trouble for it.

“That won’t work if you have to go out together.” Neil shrugged at the dirty glares they both tossed in his direction. “I’m just saying. Angie looks at you with heat. If Kendle is standoffish, that might give it away.”

Marc suspected Neil was trying to matchmake, but he wasn’t sure if the trooper was doing it in hopes of repairing their friendship or if he was trying to help Adrian win.

Neil glared. “One big mistake is all I’ve made. Can you say the same?”

Marc shook his head. “No, but my mistakes are a lot different than yours.”

Neil shrugged, unwilling to discuss it in front of Kendle.

Kendle scanned the Eagle jacket Marc moved from the bag to the counter so he could dig under it, wishing it was really hers. “Doesn’t have the patch.”

“We’ll get those from the horse’s mouth when it’s time.” Marc picked up a bottle of perfume.

Kendle’s mouth dropped open. “You mean Angie’s going to see me like this?!”

Marc spritzed her.

Neil chuckled as Kendle began coughing. “That was mean.”

“It stopped the noise.” Marc began gathering her hair into a loose ponytail, hoping it was long enough to braid.

Kendle froze. Heat ran through her body, giving her goosebumps. She tried to be afraid of him, as she had been for a moment in Ciemus, but she wasn’t feeling that now. She thought of the other men she’d had contact with since the war, especially Ethan, but not even terror could cut through the need. She wanted Marc, in every way.

Neil gestured. “That’s enough heat to convince people.”

Marc was aware of it, but he was busy. He deftly wrapped the ponytail holder in place, then began working on the braid like Angela had shown him. When he was satisfied, he wrapped the second ponytail holder around it, then twined the braid around to make a small bun. Once he clipped it in place, he mussed the entire setup so it would appear she’d been windblown.

Marc retreated, enjoying the heat and her discomfort. “What do you think?”

Neil studied Kendle. With the lighter layer of makeup covering her scars and dressed like Angela, the hairdo made her look so much like the boss up close that distance wasn’t going to be a problem. “It’s good.”

Good for you, maybe. Kendle was on fire. She was also furious at Marc for using her against herself.

Marc gave a nod, able to feel Angela coming up the steps. “There’s one little thing I need you to do on this run.” He stepped closer, sending an alpha wave. “If there’s a way to kill Adrian by accident on this mission, you *will* do it.”

Kendle gave Marc a gaze of deep need and haunting devotion. “All you ever had to do was ask.”

Neither of them paid attention to Neil, but they were aware of him. This was a test of his loyalty, as well as hers. If anyone found out, or if she skipped an opportunity to get rid of Adrian, it would prove to Marc that neither of them was on his side. *Sometimes a man just needs to know who his true friends are.*

Part Three:

“You’ve got sadness in you, I’ve got sadness in me – and my works of art are places where the two sadnesses can meet, and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.”

— Marc Rothko

Chapter Twenty-Six
Cayman Chaos

1

“How much longer?”

Theo didn't turn away from the refueling taking place. Their hoses were stretched out across this side of the deck like giant, bulging snakes. “You can check with Marc on the numbers, but I'm pretty sure we need another hour.”

Angela finished scanning the deck, then moved toward the bridge. She'd taken a moment to be sure anyone on land got a chance to recognize her. Guards were in the shadows up here now. She had assigned great shooters with all the mags they could hold, though those men and women were no match for the ill Eagles. Marc was as safe as she could make him.

“Boss is coming up.” Neil moved aside, holding the plastic so Angela could join them. He and Marc both breathed a sigh of relief as she entered the protection of the bridge

“Angie, meet Angie.” Marc watched for her reaction.

Angela stared at Kendle. Except for the scars on the skin she had showing, and her black hair, they could have been twins. Kendle was wearing the identical boots, jeans, Marine shirt, and Eagle

jacket. Even her hair was pinned up in a wild bun that spoke of hard labor with no time to worry about something as frivolous as a hairdo.

Angela couldn't help the jealousy as she imagined Marc helping Kendle get ready, but satisfaction in the job overrode the rebellion in her heart. "That is excellent."

Angela tore off the Velcro patch from her jacket and handed it to Marc so he could put it in on Kendle's arm. The castaway had lost weight; her body wasn't recovered from everything that had happened on the beach. It was eerie how similar their skin was at the moment, including the bags under their eyes and the leathery patches around hardened calluses.

"What do we do about the hair color?" Kendle was uncomfortable standing in front of Angela after Marc had put his hands on her, had drawn energy from her. The fact that she looked like their leader didn't even come into the picture.

Angela pulled a rattling spray bottle from her pocket. She tossed it to Marc.

Marc began squirting Kendle's hair.

"Stop!" Kendle covered her face as he layered the silver spray in.

Angela gestured. "Set it like I explained on the way up here."

Neil scanned the bridge one more time for threats, then left her alone with Marc and Kendle.

"Good?"

Angela nodded. *Do I really look that bad?*

Kendle's fun at playing Angela faded. *I wanted to be the pretty you.*

Angela grunted. "That makes two of you."

Kendle wisely backed out of the bridge and stood on the stairs. She kept her attention on land or the refueling crew, refusing to think anything that would get her in trouble.

Marc checked the fuel numbers again. He looked up and caught Angela's expression. His stomach tightened into a hard knot he knew would be there for at least the next ten days. "It's time?"

"Yes." Angela joined him in front of the long console. She slid under his arm and rested against his chest.

Marc held her, trying to calm both of them. "This was the best plan we could come up with."

Angela didn't argue. Almost everything about to happen had been a combination of her and Marc, but in the end, she had made the final decision on all of it. She wasn't certain it was going to be enough, but she couldn't help feeling proud once again for getting them to this point. After they cleared a last ocean hurdle, the island had to be claimed. Then, they would have years of peace from everything except personal drama. With a couple of minor exceptions, Angela felt confident she could handle that part of leadership. It was the constant battles and death that made it intolerable.

"Are you sure about this?" Despite helping her create the plan, Marc couldn't help worrying.

Angela nodded even though she didn't feel as confident about that answer as she would have liked. "They need me too much to kill me. That will give me an advantage."

"I know you're keeping something from me again." Marc kissed the top of her head. "I assume you have a good reason."

Angela sighed, small smile coming to her cracked lips. "I love you."

Marc chuckled. "Nice evasion there." He assumed she didn't want to speak where anyone could hear them because it would interfere with whatever finishing touches she had put on the plan. Marc had expected her to add things. He let it go, begging fate to give them a happy ending. *No one should have to go through the things we've been through. Anyone who does deserves a pass.*

"I feel exactly the same way." Angela tilted her head up.

Marc kissed her and smiled against her lips when his battered body still responded. *That's my Angie.*

Angela retreated a step. It had been a while since she was this scared. "It should be coming any minute."

Marc made a curt gesture toward Kendle. "Get in here."

Kendle stepped in. "I can't do this with her watching."

Angela smirked. "Afraid to imitate the real thing to my face?"

Kendle nodded immediately. “Yes!”

Marc moved between them but made sure he could still see the fuel gauge.

Energy came through the bridge. It was a tiny difference, but all the descendants noticed it.

Marc held up a hand. “Remember the five count. It drives the other side crazy and gives you a few seconds to think about each response. The five count is your friend.” Marc turned the radio on.

Adrian had been a hostage for two hours. Angela had hoped the call would come sooner. Because it hadn’t, that meant what she’d seen at her first meeting with Adrian was about to take place. It appeared little had changed. One hole in the vision, however, was a gaping black pit that made her heart pound and the palms of her hands grow sweaty. She didn’t know the ending. It hadn’t been revealed.

Marc finished instructing Kendle. “Remember, the refueling team already knows, so you’re not going to get any reactions out of them that would give things away to someone watching from land. If people come up from anywhere else on the ship, they’ll think you’re Angela at first. If you can’t keep them from reaching you before they give it away, you have to shut them down. The Eagles have instructions not to let anyone come to the top deck until refueling is finished because it’s dangerous. That will buy us a little time for people on land to see you leave the ship. We still need at least forty minutes to finish refueling and half an hour after that for the fumes to dissipate.”

Angela noted the numbers as she checked her watch. "It's time. Go play me."

Kendle didn't move.

Marc pointed toward the deck, brows coming together. "If you want people to respect you again, then you have to be willing to do things for the camp in public. It doesn't get any more public than this."

Kendle shoved herself toward the door. She stopped before she stepped out, taking a minute to calm her nerves and get in the mood that Marc had suggested earlier. She opened the plastic and glared at Neil. "Let's go help the refueling team so we can get the hell out of here."

Neil gawked for a brief second at the close imitation of Angela's tone...then he fell in on Kendle's heels with a blank façade and a thumping heart. It was eerie the way the two women had just switched places.

Kendle had played the boss in her mind many times, like many other females in this camp, but with Angela watching, it felt dangerous.

"Duck!"

Kendle brought up her shield as a big bird went over their ship, cawing in angry tones.

The Eagles laughed at her and themselves. A couple of them had even drawn weapons.

Kendle released her shield, frowning at Marc. He was in the doorway, chuckling. Angela was behind him, a dark shadow with a satisfied face. Kendle realized it had been intentional so she would use her gift. Anyone who was watching from land

now knew she was a descendant and she looked like Angela. All that remained was to have her issue a few orders.

Neil whispered the first item from the list Angela had given him.

Kendle found Trent in the small refueling crowd. “Be ready to go early. Make sure everyone on the floatie gets back onboard. That’s your job now.”

“You got it.” Trent approached the rail so he could communicate with the three men on the floatie. The fuel was making the ship sink slightly beneath their feet as it filled the tanks, causing groans and unease in the passengers. It gave the Eagles relief. Every inch it sank was more miles they could travel without having to do this again.

Kendle scanned for the next item on Neil’s list.

The ship radio crackled. “Raven to the bridge.”

Kendle frowned. *That was too fast.* She turned on her radio and keyed the mike. “Copy.”

Kendle turned back toward the steps, fighting the urge to bring up her shield again. She now felt like a bug about to go under glass. This was the moment where the person holding the glass chose to drop it or just stomp their prey and move on.

Kendle slid inside. “I didn’t hear it.”

Marc gestured toward the radio on her belt. “You forgot to turn it back on. The call came as soon as you lifted your shield. It looks like you’ve been making them wait.”

Kendle wasn't sure that was the right way to go. The vibe she was picking up from land was more than hinky. It was downright cold.

Kendle lifted a brow as Angela picked up the radio. "Mercy? Survivors?"

Angela shrugged. "I'll let you know." She keyed the mike. "Your transmission was garbled. Please repeat."

The radio crackled with a man's thick voice. "This must be the boss. You are stealing our fuel."

Angela counted to five. "We didn't know there was anyone here."

The radio crackled back. "We are a British nation, as we have always been. That fuel comes from our land. You owe a large bill."

Angela counted to five.

Kendle could feel the frustration of the person on the other end when they didn't get an immediate response.

Angela keyed the mike. "If I had known there were people here, I would have offered to trade for the fuel. Please allow me to do so now and accept my apologies."

"That is more like it! You owe us slaves and food supplies."

Angela counted to five.

By the time she got to three, the frustration had reached a high enough level to cause the man to interrupt.

"It is a good deal. You will not get another!"

Angela hit the mike. “I don’t have slaves on this ship and we’re not carrying food. We fish every day for our needs. That’s how we got sick. Our ship is under quarantine.”

Now there was a five count of silence from the other end as the voice tried to determine if she was lying and if not, how much danger they were in.

Despite the animosity between them, Kendle studied the moment. There was a lot Angela could teach her and she did want to learn it during the times she wasn’t too bitter for it to stick.

The ship radio lit up again. “We have observed many people on your boat. All of them are well fed. That did not come from fishing. We know. We will board your ship and take our payment for the fuel.”

Eagle radios suddenly crackled with a series of clicks on the emergency channel that made Kendle tense. She noticed Marc and Angela weren’t surprised and assumed they had it covered.

Angela keyed the mike. “This ship is in the middle of an outbreak. If you board, you have to stay. I suggest a neutral location to negotiate terms. Perhaps this could become a major trade port of the post-apocalyptic world. We’d be happy to spread the news to other areas.”

Marc made several gestures.

Angela nodded at him and continued waiting for a reply.

Kendle stayed away from the door so those watching didn’t know she wasn’t the one on the radio.

“I hear no lie in your voice and I have no wish to inflict more misery upon my people. You may come to land to negotiate trade terms.”

Angela softened her tone. “I will meet you at the main dock warehouse in half an hour, if that is acceptable.”

The radio crackled with the voice of a man who was satisfied he was getting what he wanted. “That is definitely acceptable. You may bring one guard.”

Angela keyed the mike and laughed at him. “I don’t need guards.” Angela hung up. Everyone on the bridge waited to see if that would fly. In the past, Angela hadn’t gone anywhere without protection. They were counting on these people to not know that.

“Agreed; out.”

Angela looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. “It was hard to tell if he bought it. I think he has an emotional shield. I didn’t pick up much static from him.”

Angela turned to Kendle next.

Kendle stuttered, hand coming up. “Sorry, but I was watching you.” Kendle grinned. “That was badass.”

“No, what you’re about to do will be badass.” Angela stepped toward the castaway, making both her and Marc tense. “I want the people who took my dog to understand how much it upsets me when someone other than me abuses my pet.”

Kendle had no problem with that. “What about descendants or refugees?”

“You need a meal and some practice not hitting the wrong people in the crossfire. Sounds like a perfect setup.” Marc wanted Kendle to be clear; they didn’t need descendant survivors left to chase them.

Kendle was a bit surprised. “Anything else?”

Angela nodded. “You’re allowed to make one exception to the plan, if you decide it should happen.”

Kendle assumed she would know that moment when it happened. She moved toward the plastic, able to feel Marc now worrying over her leaving the safety of their ship. “I’ll catch up.”

It was her way of telling him she wasn’t going to be gotten rid of that easy.

Marc’s lips twitched.

Angela’s fists clenched.

Kendle hurried out of the bridge and down the stairs.

2

Angela got into the elevator from the bridge and descended into the ship. As she went, she clicked her mike on the Eagle channel to gather a crew for what she needed. The emergency code that had come in the middle of the call had been for intruders. They didn’t know where it had come from, however. It was time to search the ship and she couldn’t do that alone.

Marc picked up the ship mike as the two women left. “Lock us down, Eagles. I repeat, I want the entire ship secured and everyone accounted for.”

Kendle listened to Marc’s voice as she went to get geared up. She passed the refueling team, who gave her quick glances and wishes for a successful trip. Kendle kept pretending she was Angela and responded warmly. “Be safe while I’m gone.”

People stared at the rarity.

She quickly trotted down the stairs toward the mess. As she reached it, the cooking team came out, clearly headed for the living quarters. A few of them carried supplies, but most of them were empty handed and hollow eyed. Lou’s parents knew their son was gone. They were staying busy to keep from thinking about their loss, but it obviously wasn’t working.

Kendle continued down the stairs, passing the main living area. Doors were closing on cabins, and windows were being locked even though it was unlikely someone would climb up the side of the ship and fit through a porthole. Guns were being checked for ammunition. Kendle kept going, hoping Ralph and the drafted camp crew were able to keep control there.

Kendle traversed the entertainment floor to the weapons room, aware of stares and mutters from people who knew she wasn’t Angela. The camp members didn’t know what was going on. Few, if any, of them down here had been listening to the radio. They were too drunk. The descendants with

the camp members thought she was pulling something.

Kendle passed the corridor to the waste area, nose wrinkling at the burn. It seemed worse today. *Burning bodies. I'll never forget that smell.*

Kendle strode down the corridor by the shops and businesses, aware of more camp members lingering in the shadows of these rooms. She assumed the search crew would be through here shortly and get people back to their assigned areas.

Kendle saw another shadow by the weapons room and scowled, anger rising. She made her steps quiet as she snuck up on Vicky.

Vicky felt it coming; she started turning to face the danger.

Kendle grabbed the woman by her ponytail and smacked her face into the wall.

Vicky slid to the floor, bleeding and knocked out.

“Lay there and think about what you’ve done. The search crew will catch up to you.” Kendle opened the door and went in, closing it behind her.

Gearing up only took a few minutes. Kendle didn’t take anything she didn’t need.

Quinn was standing there as she emerged.

“Son of a bitch!” Kendle kept from reaching for her gun, but barely.

Quinn couldn’t force a smile. “You’re leaving.”

“For a bit.” Kendle stepped around him, headed for the ramp that would take her to the cargo area.

Quinn followed, not sure what to say. He was intimidated by her appearance even though he knew she wasn't Angela.

Kendle didn't have time for it right now, but she also didn't want him to get in trouble. She made a rude gesture. "You're supposed to join the boss for a search of the ship. Get on it!"

Kendle kept going as Quinn stopped, hurt. After a few seconds of contemplation, he did as she'd ordered.

Kendle saw Charlie heading for the cabins housing the kids. He was hurrying and didn't notice her.

Eagle radios went off across the ship again in emergency code.

Kendle kept walking.

3

"We think she's in labor." Timmy pushed the unconscious woman toward Charlie as he came down the dim hall. "We found this wheelchair in a closet."

Charlie took over the chair while Timmy tucked the blanket back around Candy's shoulders. "I'll get her to the infirmary. Everyone is supposed to be locked down now."

"What's the problem?" Cathy was standing in the nearby shadows, hand on her gun. In full Eagle gear, she'd blended in perfectly.

“We don’t know yet. Hopefully, it’s a false alarm.” Charlie turned the squeaky chair toward the cleaned elevator. “What happened to her?”

“She was stretching and saying her side hurt; then she dropped.” Kimmie went back into the cabin as little Mia started crying. “I didn’t go anywhere. Stop it.”

The crying halted. A soft giggle came.

“I love you too. Go to sleep.”

Charlie chuckled as he left, being careful not to stop suddenly and send Candy flying from the chair.

Cathy and Timmy returned to standing guard as Charlie vanished into the elevator. They waited for the tense feeling to fade, but it didn’t. They searched the other shadows and listened for footsteps, but the kids were loud. It was hard to distinguish much between the shouts and laughter of happy children.

The other end of the corridor was dark, with shadows that didn’t match the cheery antique furniture. Two of the shadows eased closer to the kids while more men came in from the employee hall. Chatter from the children covered their steps as a fifth man joined the UN team.

Kimmie felt them arrive. She came to the doorway, orbs glowing red. “Go away!”

Cathy and Timmy rotated, drawing their guns.

Two suppressed shots echoed.

Both guards fell to the plush carpet, but there wasn’t any blood. They’d been hit by knockout rounds.

Kids screamed, cringing away as the team advanced. They'd watched the pregnant woman get picked up, revealing where the guards were.

"Get those twins. I'll get the Brady boy." André lifted his gun toward Kimmie. "Keep your power to yourself and no one will be hurt."

Kimmie crossed her arms over her little chest and stepped aside so the man could enter the cabin. "I wouldn't count on that."

"Don't go in!" Chuck tried to reach André's arm. "It's a trap!"

André stepped across the threshold... He screamed, hands coming up. Blood dripped from his nose. He dropped to the carpet, blood gushing from his mouth like a fountain.

The rest of his team stared in shock. Then they looked at Kimmie.

Kimmie smiled, easily falling back into the UN camp mentality. She waved. "Next?"

The descendant on the team lifted a hand. "I've got ya."

"No, you don't." Cody slapped him with a heat spell and then ran up and kicked his shin.

Kimmie sent a wave of rage that leapt eagerly onto the two bald fighters and began devouring their skin. Screams became shrieks.

Dirk was the last man standing, with no idea how things had gone so bad so fast. "Surrender and no one else has to get..."

Kimmie and Cody advanced, smiling with huge teeth and hungry souls.

Dirk took off running down the corridor.

“I’ve got it.” Tracy tossed her knife like she’d been practicing.

The blade slipped into the man’s spine, bringing him to his knees as a cry of agony spilled from his lips.

Angela appeared in the opposite corridor, flanked by half a dozen Eagles.

The kids ran to her, eager for praise.

Angela hugged those who mobbed her, giving them approval even as she mourned not reaching them in time to keep them from killing again.

Eagles dragged the bodies from the area, piling them all into one of the elevators for later disposal.

Peter slapped the button, leaving a bloody smear. Whoever opened this elevator next was going to get a shock. They didn’t have time to notify anyone that it was coming.

Angela waved Peter to stay. He would get Timmy and Cathy off the floor, then supervise a new guard shift.

“Come on.” Angela and the others went toward the infirmary stairs. Kenn’s coded emergency hadn’t come again. They didn’t know what had happened, only that he’d called for help—something few of them expected. Kenn liked to handle things himself so he could take full credit.

Angela felt time slow as they approached the infirmary. What happened in the next thirty minutes would determine the fate of their country yet again. All dimensions were shifting this way to observe.

Angela stopped around the corner, then stole a fast look.

She ducked back. “One target so far. Multiple people in the crossfire.”

She waved Quinn to the right hall, where Tonya and her guard were locked inside and standing away from the glass. Angela took in a deep breath and walked to the infirmary.

“Give it to me!”

Angela winced at the sound of Ramer’s furious shout. She peeked through the window, memorized his location, and ducked to the side.

Target is in the middle. Two hostages. Go on two. “One...two!” Angela pushed the door open, holding it so the Eagles could enter unimpeded.

“Drop it!”

“Get down!”

The Eagles rushed in, scanning for threats.

“Get down!”

“I’ll kill him!” Ramer jerked Stanley tighter against his chest as he stood overtop Kenn, who was on the floor, face down. “Stay back!”

His entire body was shaking, even his finger on the trigger. Madness glared out of his sockets, demanding surrender.

“Help her!” Morgan directed Kyle to Candy’s unconscious form. She was still in the wheelchair. There was no other place to put her yet.

Kyle went to work on Candy, trying to find the energy to stop her labor.

“Ramer!” Angela switched to the front of the hostage situation, begging her weak body to get her through this. “I will count to three and then someone will shoot you. Let him go.”

Stanley didn’t struggle as Ramer’s grip tightened. He was terrified.

“I want drugs! Give them to me! *Now!*” Each word was louder than the last.

People edged closer or shifted to block a cot holding their dying loved one.

“Okay.” Angela went to the medical cabinet and ripped the flimsy door off the hinges. It clattered onto the floor as she grabbed a bottle. “Let’s trade. *This* for him.”

Ramer shoved Stanley toward her and held up his hands to catch it.

Angela threw the bottle as hard as she could.

The glass shattered against his elbow as he cringed from the blow. “No!”

“Go!” Angela made the call.

Kenn, on the ground at Ramer’s feet, punched the man in the back of the knee and then kept hitting him as he fell.

Angela let it go for a minute, then whistled.

Kenn reluctantly got up, leaving Ramer’s bruised, bloody body where he’d curled up.

Stanley hurried to get the broom. “I’ll have this cleaned up in minutes.” He began sweeping the glass shards, smiling at Angela and Kenn for saving him.

Morgan and Harry checked those closest for injuries, then went to tend Ramer.

Patients and caregivers relaxed. Then the tension of their situation sank back in, bringing fresh pain and a wave of desperation.

Kenn collected his gun, furious he'd let Ramer sneak up on him and take it. "Sedate him and send him back to the brig?"

Angela was already heading for the door. "The brig is compromised. Handcuff him to a cot; knock him out as needed."

Kenn followed Angela and the Eagles, taking a quick glance through the lab door to verify Tonya's safety and her guard. He spotted the blood on the clothes of some of the Eagles who fell in behind them and realized there had been trouble elsewhere as well. *It comes in threes. Three must be the brig.*

Quinn gave Kenn an order, in hand code.

Kenn realized the man was right. He gently took Angela's arm, stopping them all. "You're on duty here." Kenn guided Angela back to the infirmary and held the swinging door open. "We'll clear the ship. You help our sick people." Kenn knew she wouldn't refuse that chore.

Angela sighed, deep and miserable. Then she went back into the sickbay.

Kenn and the Eagles strode toward the brig, hoping things were already under control when they got there.

That hope was dashed as another shrill voice echoed through the halls, screaming for Angela to come and face her destiny.

Kenn drew his gun and flipped off the safety as he followed the noise that was taking them away from the brig. *Those who scream the loudest have to be handled first.* Kenn followed his training even though his instincts didn't agree.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Time To Go

1

“She’s not coming!” Kronus stumbled out of his cell to join the five-man UN team that had taken over the brig during the land call. “She let him turn her back!”

Oliver, the team leader, checked his watch. “It doesn’t matter. We’re on schedule.”

“It does! She invited me! She said she had a job!” Kronus hated liars.

“This job is the one that matters. We’ve decided to take over the ship while everyone is ill. It’s the perfect time to conquer Safe Haven.” Oliver stepped over the female guard they’d dived. He shut the other cell, hoping the drug-craver kept the Eagles busy. Ramer had been begging for freedom, so Oliver had obliged. “Take Kronus to the offload spot. Contact our ride in five minutes.”

Kronus scowled as one of the fighters stalked toward him. “You came for me. You can’t send me away now.”

“Of course, I can. You have no gift available for hours, and I’m in charge.” Oliver delivered a cruel leer. “You now belong to the UN.”

Kronus didn't argue. It wasn't wise with two hard men pointing guns at him. Down here, he could be killed.

Blair, a simple fighter, waved Kronus toward the exit. "Let's go."

Kronus obeyed, casting an ugly glare of retribution toward Oliver.

Oliver waited for them to be gone, then flashed a grin at the other three men. "We'll be heroes."

Javier, the XO, nodded, but didn't speak. He was listening for footsteps.

Oliver gathered the weapons and ammunition from the guard and the desk station, then joined their fighter and descendant in the hallway.

Maliki increased the strength of his shield, widening it to include their XO. He was supposed to keep Safe Haven's guards from sensing the team, but Javier hated to be in the bubble. He said it muted too much noise.

"Any sign of Lila?" Oliver paused, mind going over the new plan.

Maliki shrugged. "Not yet. We're a few minutes early."

"All the teams probably are. We've grown bored over the last weeks." Javier shrugged, leading them down the salty smelling corridor. "We'll adjust. Let's get out of sight. Remember to stay in range of Maliki's bubble and use your darts. Do not kill unless there isn't another choice. Every capture is worth double credits."

Maliki frowned. “Are we offering support to Lila?”

“Negative. Finding that group out here was pure luck. We came for Kronus.” Oliver reloaded on the move, glad the darts were working on these stronger people. Refugees were always easier to bring down than descendants. “Safe Haven isn’t allowed to have an advantage like him.”

Javier smiled proudly. “We’ll be honored for bringing in this ship.”

“Yes, but do not have contact with anyone who is sick.” Maliki scanned for visible loot. “If we bring back this illness, we will be shot, along with our families.”

Gunshots echoed from a hall behind them.

The trap team hurried into the shadows as steps came their way, then veered off toward the noise.

“There’s our decoy.” Javier kept them still, letting this area empty of people. He’d memorized the map of the Adrianna upon getting the assignment. He knew how to reach the bridge. He’d even accounted for the small elevator space and brought men who would fit at the same time. Now that Blair and Kronus were gone, it should be a smooth takeover with a 4-man crew.

From here, they would sail the ship straight to the international detention center. If they didn’t change speed, and they made subtle direction changes, the passengers wouldn’t notice for hours. By then, it would be too late, but they had to time it to the boat’s departure. Javier had expected Angela

to make that call before she left the ship, but it hadn't come. Once they reached the top deck, they would need to blend in until fueling was finished and the extra guards went below. Whoever was manning the bridge at that point would surrender the helm or die. There would be no negotiations.

2

“Drop your weapons! Come out with your hands up!” Kenn mentally winced. “I mean it, lady!”

Lila fired at Kenn.

Kenn dropped below the rim of the empty fountain. The once beautiful decoration was now chipped with the woman's bad aim.

Thud! Thud!

“She's almost got the door open.”

Their intruder was holding two guns while kicking down the barrier to their weapons.

Kenn opened a connection into her mind. His eyes narrowed into angry slits. “It's the UN captain we allowed to leave. I should have sunk that lifeboat!”

Quinn finished reloading. “Eagle plan C1. I'm on point. Pick a decoy.”

Kenn chose a small statue on the fountain. He snapped it off with his boot heel.

Thud! Thud! Crack!

The door couldn't take many more hits like that without giving. Kenn tossed the heavy figurine.

It clanked to the ground on the opposite walkway between the stores.

Lila spun out of the cover of the doorway, firing at it, missing.

Quinn pulled the trigger, once.

Lila froze. A bloom of deep red popped out on her cheek. It widened. Blood gushed down her face as she fell over.

There's another one I'll dream about. Quinn reloaded and advanced on Kenn's heels to clear the area. Neither of them wasted time checking on Lila or kicking her gun out of her reach.

"Clear!"

Camp members who hadn't heeded the lockdown call now flooded from the stores and entertainment venues. They pushed and shoved up the stairs toward the cabins.

Kenn keyed his mike. "Situation is over. Body crew needed for one dead traitor." Kenn hoped his calls over an open radio would convince other intruders to surrender when they were found. Knowing there wouldn't be mercy was a big deterrent.

Kenn studied the barrier. It was hanging on one hinge and had several large cracks in the lower boards. Anyone could get through it in just a few more kicks.

"I can't stay. Angela's getting ready to make the call. I'm on the pickup team." Quinn frowned toward Vicky's unconscious body. The bruise on her face was turning colors. "Lila didn't do that.

Someone had found her here earlier, probably trying to break in, and knocked her out.”

Footsteps echoed as a group of camp members joined them to help with the rest of the search. Charlie was leading and appeared alert.

Kenn motioned to Charlie. “Take this post. I’ll get someone down here to relieve you as soon as I can.”

Charlie took a spot in the shadows near the battered door. “Good time to eliminate any other thieves or possible assassins...”

Kenn grunted. “I don’t know how the boss feels about that.”

Quinn snorted as he walked toward the cargo area to get their inflatable ready. “Yes, you do.”

Kenn sighed, sure Quinn was right. “Just make sure it stays with the three of us. I don’t want to deal with your mom on it.”

“No problem.” Charlie doubted anyone else would be dumb enough to cause trouble. He got comfortable and listened to the groaning ship around them as Kenn joined the search group that had already moved on.

They strode through the ship, breaking off in small groups to clear halls and meet back at each landing. There were two dozen of them.

The camp watched through windows with worried faces pressed against the glass to see who would win this latest invasion.

“Time to go, Safe Haven. Disconnect us.”

Angela’s order over the radio brought an immediate response.

The fuel team began the dangerous process of removing the hoses without creating a spark. Theo stayed on top of the team, directing valves to be shut in the right order. He followed the directions on the book page he’d ripped out and brought along to be sure they didn’t make a mistake.

The floatie team was relieved the call had come. The sharks were still lingering. Over the last half hour, the huge animals had started to get aggressive with each other. They were fighting all around the floatie now, where the team was barely breathing for fear of triggering a bigger problem.

Molly cursed herself for volunteering to come back out here. After Neil’s bombshell, she’d needed to stay busy.

“We could use a distraction.” Ian whispered instead of shouting or using his radio. They had no way to know what might anger the sharks; now was a bad time to find out, but their ride was coming shortly. It probably wouldn’t go well.

“Do you hear that?” Molly listened toward land. “It sounds like a...bell.”

Ian frowned at her. “So?”

Molly ignored his tone. “If they’re ringing a bell, I assume it’s an alarm.”

Ian shrugged.

Molly's concern grew. "It's muffled. Like it's underwater."

Quinn didn't understand. "Why would someone be ringing a bell underwater?"

Molly pointed at the sharks nudging the rear of the floatie next to them.

Lim had been listening to them. He didn't feel right offering an opinion to the Eagles yet. He was only a possible rookie waiting for his test. His biggest asset was his descendant gifts, which were considerable when he wasn't exhausted. He used them now to scan the area. *Someone has weaponized the sharks. We need help here or we'll never make it back on board.*

A few seconds later, Lim breathed a sigh of relief. "We have a distraction coming. Get ready to roll."

Molly and Ian finished shutting the fuel cap, then gathered their gear. The boat they'd come in was on top of the floatie, protected. They removed the ties now but left it where it was. The number of sharks around the floatie was still increasing. The trio didn't want to leave it despite the way the wood creaked and groaned beneath their boots. It still offered more protection than their small boat would.

Theo motioned to them from the deck of the ship.

Lim translated. "He said they're finished. We can leave these hoses connected. We have a spare set in the cargo area."

Molly shook her head. “Tell him to pull it up when the distraction comes. It’s ready.”

Lim relayed the order, not sure if Theo would do it.

To his surprise, Theo beamed at him and resumed supervising the action up there.

Molly didn’t rub it in to the rookie. Theo knew they couldn’t afford to use those replacements unless there was no other choice. Molly studied the foggy landscape, not hearing the bell anymore.

A familiar fin rose from the cloudy water near the floatie. Several darts were sticking out of its body.

Molly laughed bitterly. “You’re like a fucking disease I can’t get rid of.” Tears welled. “Isn’t the cancer enough?”

The shark vanished beneath the waves.

Ian and Lim stared at her. They hadn’t known.

“Don’t go running your yaps!” Molly scrubbed away the tears. “I don’t need your pity. I have enough of my own.”

Bump!

The floatie slid sideways at the forceful nudge.

“They hit from the bottom.” She grabbed her end of the escape boat, getting the handle. “Hang on!”

The floatie cracked in the center as it was hit from underneath. A gaping hole appeared... It began filling with water.

Shouts and screams drew attention toward the cruise ship. Something was thrown into the water. It splashed down, trailing blood.

The closest sharks rushed at the corpse, tearing into it and each other. Their feeding drew more of the predators. Those investigating the boring sinking of yet more wood now thrashed toward the new smells and vibrations.

Molly slid into the inflatable as the floatie fell out under her feet. She grabbed Lim's arm to keep him from going under. He'd forgotten to keep ahold of the little boat.

Ian swung his wet legs in, then helped Molly drag Lim in with them.

Most of the sharks were being drawn to the feeding frenzy near the Adrianna now. Another heavy splash came. Then another. Molly watched Eagles heave bodies over the rail, praying it wasn't any of theirs. Good people deserved better.

A familiar fin rose near Molly's arm.

Fury went through the trio.

Molly punched the shark's back.

Lim stabbed it.

Ian emptied his gun into it as it groaned and darted away.

The noises didn't deter the other sharks from the free meal at the rear of the cruise ship. Blood and body parts littered that side of the water.

Molly and Ian directed their little boat toward the front chute, where Theo and the refueling team were waiting to help them onboard. They tried not

to make sudden moves that might bring the sharks back.

The floatie finished sinking behind them, sending up a cloud of bubbles. A wave of ripples caught up to their small boat and gave them a ride on weak rapids. It slammed them into the side of the cruise ship.

Ian grabbed Molly's arm and heaved her toward the ladder as Lim tossed the rope to Trent, who'd come down the long ladder to help.

Molly went up the ladder as quick as she could without falling, sorry she'd let her secret slip. *I'm never leaving the ship again.*

Lim tied the inflatable to the rail, then climbed the ladder, proud of how he'd handled himself. *I can't wait for the next run.*

Ian was too tired to care either way. He was just grateful to be back on the Adrianna so he could sleep soon.

The refueling team went below deck together at Theo's direction, ready to shower and pick their next job from what was needed.

The top deck cleared.

The anchor began to lift.

It was time to go.

4

"Everyone ready?" Oliver scanned the UN team for problems.

The ship shuddered under them, finally moving almost ten minutes after the call. Oliver stewed on that. *A woman gave the order, but the leader of Safe Haven is falling into our land trap right now...*

The elevator dinged.

Oliver and Javier stayed back while their fighter and descendant cleared the bridge.

Maliki stared in dismay. "It's empty."

Oliver came out, scowling. "Something went wrong. It's supposed to be Brady up here. We have orders to collect him, Mitchel and both their kids." Oliver hated the thought of failure. He strode to the console and entered coordinates into the keyboard.

The ship began shifting slightly east.

Oliver gestured. "Make the call. Set up defensive positions. The ship belongs to us."

Maliki and McClery went to opposite doorways.

Javier took over the radio and dialed in the correct channel. "We have the Adrianna. We are on the way."

Oliver's personal radio clicked. "Boss, how long should I wait for this pickup?"

Oliver frowned. He keyed his radio. "Blair should have been there with my package half an hour ago."

"No sign of him."

The radio clicked again with another voice. "Same here. André has not made contact."

Oliver realized theirs was the only full team still operating. “No one gets up here.” He keyed the mike. “Provide escort in whatever way you can.”

“Copy that.”

“Copy.”

Javier waited for a response from the detention center, hair rising on his arms. He could almost swear he was hearing a voice in his mind and it wasn't from their descendant.

You are. When shit happens, don't move. If you move, you die where you stand.

Javier froze.

The main radio crackled with a weak signal from the detention center. “Good work. Bring them straight here. Instructions will be relayed.”

“Copy, out.” Oliver went to the front window, mind racing. *This feels wrong.*

“That's because it is.” Marc lowered his shield, revealing Neil and Dog in one corner. He was in the other.

Marc grinned at the shock of the mohawked descendant. “Our boss taught us some amazing tricks.” Marc fired a weak blast of his rage at the leader, while Neil shot the descendant first, as he'd been told to do.

Dog attacked the fighter, driving him through the plastic. He fell down the stairs and the angry wolf followed.

Trent and Theo rushed forward, kicking and punching the fighter. They'd been lurking under the bridge stairs, as per orders.

In the bridge, Oliver dropped to his knees, blood ran from his eyes. His screams were intolerable.

Neil shot him in the head.

Marc nodded, guns still in their holsters. “Thank you.” He turned to the survivor who had frozen in place and still hadn’t moved. “Next, or do you surrender?”

Javier knew he was beaten. “Surrender.” Without their descendant, he didn’t stand a chance.

Marc approached the man with a calm smile. “Wise choice. Let’s take a walk, huh?” Marc put an arm around the man’s thin shoulder, feeling him tremble. “Did you see all the sharks?”

“Uh, yes.”

Marc led Javier down the stairs to the deck. “Are you armed?”

Javier slowly gave Marc his guns and knife.

Marc gestured toward a group of kids waiting on the landing. “The kids or the sharks?”

Javier stopped cold. “Wait.”

Marc let his eyes glow red. “My son is on your list, isn’t he?”

Javier took off running toward the rail.

The kids gave chase.

Marc observed with a tolerant smile.

Javier almost made it. Little fingers yanked him back at the last minute.

“Oh! So close!” Marc turned toward the bridge, where their captive was watching Javier’s violent death with a glaze of terror. “What’s your name?”

“McClery. Allan McClery.” He stood when Marc gestured, glad the kids didn’t let Javier suffer. “I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” Neil pushed McClery toward the empty chair they’d brought up for this reason. “You’re going to be our...guest for a bit. The Ghost wants information. You’re going to tell him whatever he wants to know.”

McClery tried not to shake. “I wasn’t even supposed to be along for this run. Someone got sick. I was called up a month early.”

“Bad luck for you.” Marc rubbed Dog’s ears. “So, why do you want my son?”

Terrified of both kids and sharks, the fighter started babbling.

5

“Please don’t let her die!” Samantha grabbed Angela’s arm as she staggered to her feet. Desperate tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. Please.”

Angela pulled away, heart breaking. She knelt by the cot to replace the oxygen mask over Amy’s face. The little girl had been brought back, but her pulse was ragged and her skin was waxy. “As soon as I recharge, I’ll try again.”

Samantha sank to her knees, sobbing.

“Ray!” Grant pushed to his feet, gamey clothes hanging from his emaciated frame. “Someone help Ray!”

Angela hurried toward the couple, trying to gather energy she didn't have.

“Jenny! Help! Medic!”

Harry responded to Kyle's hoarse shout, limping from his aches and bruises. It was impossible not to bang into things when you were this tired.

“He's dead! Joey is dead!” His father collapsed on the filthy floor, hands covering his face. “My boy!”

Stage three's here. Angela injected Ray.

Grant did compressions, shoulders screaming, spine burning.

Ray's body arched as he gasped, heart stuttering, then resuming a weak, rapid thump.

Grant hugged him, bawling like a baby.

Angela immediately went toward Joey, positive his father was right. They'd brought him back twice, but his weak body just couldn't keep fighting. *Once more...* Angela filled a syringe.

The infirmary door opened. Steps came.

Angela injected the boy, then started compressions.

“I can help you—all of you.”

Angela ignored Kronus, concentrating on Joey. *He's mine until I'm done with him. Let go!*

Joey arched, gasping in air.

Angela reached for the oxygen mask, heart skipping a beat. Another of those lethal moments had arrived, but she was so weak she could barely

slip the oxygen mask back over the little boy's blood-crusted face.

"I know you don't trust me, but I swear, I know how to help you."

People began turning, listening to Kronus.

Angela finally faced him, furious, but also relieved. Waiting was torture. "How?"

"Orin has a strong bloodline. A transfusion will give your people the strength to fight this off like it's just a cold." Kronus hated the sights and smells in here; they reminded him that he could die down here on earth.

Harry scowled at the blood-speckled angel. "One person can't give that much."

"Not all at once." Kronus waved at Angela. "Why are you even hesitating?"

"Because you can't be trusted."

"It's just one of us. You know we can't come down here without your permission or approval from higher powers." Kronus glanced around, including everyone. "Frankly, you have nothing to lose."

People responded like he'd expected.

"Do what he wants!"

"Let him help us!"

Angela turned, scanning the cots, the bodies now waiting for removal. "What if they take the ship?"

"We're dying!"

"Help us!"

Angela's head dropped. "Give me the details." Kronus straightened his shoulders, missing his wings. "I go get Orin. We return; you use his blood. When you're ready, you tell us to leave and we do."

Angela sighed. "It's a camp choice."

"Let him do it!"

"Let's hold a vote!"

Angela keyed the radio on her belt. "Kronus is here. He says he can go get a...friend who will help our sick people. It's a camp vote because of who his friends are. I vote no. All those in favor, say aye or click your radio now."

Clicks and garbles came through for almost a full minute.

"All these opposed?"

"Me." Only Marc's angry voice.

Angela nodded, blowing out a tired sigh. "Go get him."

Something exploded outside the ship.

The intercom crackled. "That's our clearing team. No worries." Marc was observing as Theo's team used grenade launchers on the two inflatables waiting to pick up the stolen people from the rear of their ship.

Kronus walked toward the doors but vanished before he reached them.

People gasped and stared after him or avoided Angela's eyes. They had betrayed her after swearing it would never happen, no matter how terrible things got.

Angela noticed Joey had stopped breathing again. His father was staring at the doorway, watching for Kronus to return. Angela knelt to resume compressions.

Guilt flooded the infirmary, but they didn't offer apologies for trying to save their loved ones.

Angela didn't expect them to. In their place, she most certainly would have done the same.

6

"She's halfway to shore." Neil was standing on the stairs, relaying information to Marc as he and Theo got the ship up to speed. Their guest was bound and sitting in the shadows of the bridge until Marc was ready to move him.

"Sharks are all around her boat. She has her shield up or they would have attacked her."

The cruise ship bumped into sharks and debris from their activities as the fueling station began to fall out of sight.

"Someone has a grenade launcher on the dock, but it's at his feet. I think they fell for it so far."

Marc came to the plastic, tired of listening to Neil's voice. Their audience needed to think that was his mate out there all alone while her people left. *It's not Angie. It's Kendle, so I don't care...right?*

Marc had assigned people to this plan with two goals in mind. The first was to complete it successfully. The other was to determine his

feelings. He knew how he felt about Angela. With Kendle, it was harder. He hated her, but he also cared for her and hoped she found happiness. In a few years, that might be with him, if Adrian got his way. Marc had plans for that man, but when he put everything else aside, his own feelings were the wildcard because he didn't know how deep they went.

Marc watched Kendle approach the dock. For show, he sent a weak wave of protection that surrounded her in his blue light.

Kendle blasted her own protection spell back, swarming the entire top deck with heat.

Marc went back into the bridge. *It will bother me if she dies. This test of my emotions might not have been a good idea.*

Neil snorted. "I told myself the same thing, afterward. Why are we wired that way?"

Theo had caught enough of the words and vibe to understand what they were discussing. "Because the Creator has a terrible sense of humor." Theo scowled. "Didn't you know? We're all liars here in Safe Haven."

Neil and Marc stilled, defensive in their guilt.

Theo finished setting the dials and moved toward the exit. "If people knew what we were all really like, they'd never want to join us."

Neil hung his head.

Marc let out a miserable sigh.

Neither man denied it.

“Can I hit her now?” Zorie studied the small, protected inflatable speedboat coming through the sharks, fingers twitching. He was certain he could take out Angela’s shield. Her reputation was legend. Zorie wanted to know who was better. His shield pulsed around his trap team with hungry energy.

“Talk first, hit later.” Kurt waved toward the woman in the small boat, soaking up details. He plunged into her mind as she waved back, trying to find out if she’d believed his act as the Cayman King.

Stop that! Kendle sent a light zap. *Never without permission.* She lunged from the boat and landed on the rotting dock.

The sharks attacked her now unprotected boat, sinking it in seconds.

Water splashed over Kendle as the animals fought each other over the missing meal.

Kendle smirked at the expressions of distaste from the trap team. *You guys don’t like sharks either, huh? Bet you’ve never killed one with a hammer.* “Where’s my dog?”

Kurt stepped aside to reveal Adrian.

The blonde man was either unconscious or dead. Bound and hanging over a wide gap in the center of the warehouse floor, Kendle understood they were going to feed him to the sharks. Based on the amount of chains they’d used, they didn’t intend to let him go even if a deal was struck. *Lying*

cheaters too, huh? Kendle smirked again. *So am I. This should be fun.* “I assume he’s been knocked out?”

Kurt stepped forward to meet her. “Darted, yes. He’s quick with his spells. Are you?”

Kendle assumed Angela’s air of arrogance. “You’re probably going to find out. What do you want?”

“You, of course.” Kurt waved at the leaving cruise ship. “All of you. My men are taking over your ship as we speak.”

Kendle glanced toward the *Adrianna*, glad it was moving away. “I doubt it, but I’ll handle that when I get back. One more time, what do you want?”

Kurt smiled. “Your full surrender or we’ll kill your lover.”

“Former lover.” Kendle noticed Zorie licking his lips and took a step toward the ugly, mohawked French man. She’d found her loose end to unravel. “You and me, right now. Kurt can do a three-count.”

Zorie lowered his shield to show he wasn’t afraid of her. “Agreed. Kurt, start counting.”

Kurt scowled, stepping forward. “No, surrender and we’ll—”

“Shut up!” Kendle smiled at Zorie. “Safe Haven always needs good men.”

Zorie chuckled at her attempt to get him to turn against his team. “I’d be honored, but for one problem. I like my job, Boss Lady.”

Kendle’s lips tightened at the title.

It was an easy mistake to make.

Zorie spotted it. “Wait.” He flashed to her arrival, to watching gray hair go floating in the ocean spray. *That wasn't her hair.* He reached out to verify his suspicion...

Kendle bit into his finger and ripped it off.

“Ahh! Ahh!” Zorie lunged backward. He fell off the dock, still screaming.

The sharks gave fast assistance; they put him out of his misery.

Kendle sucked blood from the finger and spat it out at Kurt's boots. Then she smiled.

Zyron, the team XO, ran. “Black widow! Black widow!”

Boris stared at the feasting sharks. *We just lost a descendant. The UN will kill us all.*

Kendle slid in front of Boris and took his arm. She spun him around as Kurt fired at her, using his body instead of her shield. She needed to gather energy.

Bullets slammed into his chest, driving them both backward.

Kurt was horrified. *I just killed my best friend.* “Boris!”

Boris fell to the dock, gurgling out a last breath.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she drew her gun. She rolled across the bloody dock like she'd been taugth and stopped against the beam. She took aim as sharks lunged up, biting at her.

Kendle fired.

Zyron slumped against the corner of the warehouse. Three more steps would have put him out of sight.

Pain sank into Kendle's arm, ripping, tearing.

Kendle curled up and kicked the other fighter in the ankle as hard as she could manage from that position.

The bone snapped.

Boutros screamed, dropping on top of her.

Kendle rolled, taking him into the water.

Sharks swarmed, turning the area into butting predators and deadly snaps. Blood rippled over the surface and sank.

Kurt stared at the carnage. *When did I lose control?* He swept the churning waves by the dock, seeing only body parts. "Damn it!"

"Aww. Did you lose your promotion?"

Kurt spun, gun coming up. He fired at the soaked shadow in front of him as she brought up her shield.

The slug bounced off Kendle's bubble; it slammed back into his chest.

Kurt dropped the gun, sliding to his knees. Blood ran from his mouth.

Kendle lowered her shield. She'd brought it up as soon as she let go of Boutros under the water. It had taken a lot of energy to keep it up against the crush of sharks, though. She gasped in air, blood thumping in her veins. Going into the water had brought back her time with Ethan. If not for that

fear, she might not have had the strength to keep the shield up underwater.

Kendle looked toward Adrian... She froze.

A dozen faces stared back at her from a line in front of him.

Kendle grunted. *What would my fearless alpha do? Use any method available to kill them all?*

Kendle advanced toward the line of men and women, mentally calling for Adrian. *There's going to be another slaughter. I can't protect you while it's happening. Wake up or die.*

8

“She’s waking up!” Kyle stood, head swiveling for a medic. “She’s waking!” Kyle had finally changed clothes, but he hadn’t spared time for a shower. He had been terrified the entire time he was gone that Jennifer would slip away.

Morgan didn’t budge from Pam’s side. *I saw her lashes flutter. I know I did.*

Samantha didn’t rise from Amy’s bedside. *It’s not my baby. I don’t care.*

Brittani looked over, but she didn’t let go of Daryl’s hand. He was on the edge. She could feel his soul trying to leave.

Doug patted Romeo’s hand, blood dripping from his nose. “It’s almost over now.”

The boy didn’t respond.

Jeff wiped away blood from both of them, mourning his friends.

One cot over, Candy cradled her stomach and cried for Conner.

Next to Candy, Ivan opened his eyes. Angela was the first person he saw.

She tried to smile. "Welcome back."

Ivan grimaced. "You look like I feel." Ivan forced his lids to stay open. *She needs me.*

"Yes, I do." Angela leaned down to whisper in his ear.

When she straightened, his eyes were shut. He'd fallen back out. There was no way to know if he'd heard her plea for him to protect Marc if she didn't come back. Angela didn't have the energy to make other plans. *So be it.*

She straightened as Kronus and Orin appeared outside the infirmary. She gave the few awake, hopeful people a forgiving tone. "It's not your fault. I would have made the same choice. Any hope is better than none."

Orin shoved by Kronus to enter the infirmary, gleefully spinning around to observe everything firsthand. "This is amazing! I can't believe you got her to agree!"

Angela waited, gathering her courage. This was by far the stupidest risk she'd ever taken.

Orin came to her, opening his arms. "Thank you for the invitation."

Angela held still as he hugged her.

"It will be your downfall." Orin grabbed her around the neck and spun her into his grip. His arm tightened.

Angela was supposed to go meekly, but the witch inside refused to take this lying down. She sent heat through Angela's skin until steam baked off her.

Orin shouted, letting go.

Angela still didn't fight. Her witch was out of energy now. Angela just wanted this over with. *I've never been this tired. I thought I was before, but I didn't know what tired was then.*

Orin grabbed the gun from her belt. He aimed it at her, eyes cruel, face hard.

Kronus finally recovered from the surprise of Orin's actions. He held up a hand. "Stop! Don't kill her here!"

The exhausted people around them realized it had been a lie. Fury came from them. Several rose to do their duty as defenders of the light.

Orin flinched at the movement. New to guns, he pulled the trigger.

The bullet went wild and plunged into Brittani's leg.

Brittani fell, whimpering.

People shouted as fresh blood dripped to the floor. Medics hurried toward her.

Angela's rage became an icy shield that froze her breath and spread through the room. Cracking echoed from the walls as ice poured through the vents to envelope them all in a frigid haze. *I'm speaking directly to you, your Majesty. It's time we met.*

“Yes!” Orin swung around to share a glance of triumph with Kronus. “She’s calling the Creator!”

Angela dug deeper, trying to find a door she’d never viewed in her mental warehouse; she knew it existed. *I demand an audience through my birthright. I am a descendant of your master.*

“Wait.” Orin’s finger tightened on the trigger. “It’s a trick.”

Angela felt death approach. She’d wagered it all on this moment.

“Not until we ascend!” Kronus staggered toward Orin, blood dripping from his nose.

Orin laughed. “I’m never going back. She’s the only one who can make me.” His finger tightened the trigger another notch.

Angela panicked. *Please!*

Kronus echoed her fear. He slowed time to find a solution.

Angela’s brain kicked into gear. *I have to ask.* “I invite you for council.”

Say my name, child.

“Death.”

Orin pulled the trigger.

Time stopped.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Every Sacrifice was Willing

1

“**Y**ou rang?” Hard laughter flowed over the frozen room.

Angela shuddered at the feel of the presence surrounding the ship, entering the infirmary. It dwarfed the Messenger’s aura, terrifying her. *I can’t fight that!*

“Easy. You called me, remember?”

Angela sucked in air... *I can’t feel myself breathing!*

“You aren’t. Your life belongs to me.”

Angela recovered quickly, like she always had, but the fear didn’t leave. “Only in your dimension. Here, we’re equals.” She looked around but couldn’t find him. The voice was in her ears, not her mind. He was here, on earth.

“You may think that if it eases your fear. I cannot be tricked by childish methods.”

She was certain he was close. “You already have been. I don’t see you, but you’re here...aren’t you?” Angela couldn’t help the elation from being right.

The icy air solidified. Angela choked, falling to the frozen floor as it rushed into her lungs.

With nothing left to lose and only one thing to give, Angela quit fighting. *Take it, then. My life isn't worth anything to you. My energy belongs to the ocean!*

The ice receded. "I cannot break deals already made. When you die, that promise will be honored."

Angela swallowed repeatedly, trying to soothe the sting. *Thank you.* Angela bowed her head to wait for the end. *I've lived more in a year than most people do all their lives. Safe Haven will survive and with them, Marc and my children. It's enough. I have NO regrets.*

More ice receded. "I rarely hear that." The pain withdrew. "Rise; speak."

Angela got to her feet, trying to stop shaking. She'd made a big mistake assuming this king would be her match on earth, like Kronus and Orin.

"Yes, you did, but it is too late now. I grow angry again with this delay."

Angela heeded the warning. "How can I shatter my enemies?"

The King appeared in front of her, radiant and handsome in his arrogant confusion. The red beard, brown eyes and yellow skin were a perfect combination. He looked like all of humanity in one beautiful form. "Why ask me? Your clever mind can produce an answer."

Angela had thought to have more wonder, or to ask enlightened questions at this point, but misery was heaviest in her heart. It emerged first. "What

could I do that I haven't already?" Angela's tone fell into deep depression. "I've killed thousands..."

The powerful being showered her with contempt. "You hunt for evil methods to remove evil souls, then wonder why it doesn't bring peace."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"You're corrupt. The answer is beyond you." The King didn't move, but his image softened into a tolerant expression on a mystical face. "Replace them with good souls—with children, perhaps, since you will lose the rest of them."

Angela's heart broke. Tears welled. "Can I trade you for the kids?"

The King came closer, stepping between her and the bullet. "You have nothing I need. Even if you did, I do not judge souls. I do not cause evil. I expose mankind's secret selves to the light. You and yours would commit the atrocities anyway. It's your nature."

Angela couldn't argue. "The Creator gave us both sides, but we use one too much."

The King scowled at her with rage that dwarfed the disease effects. "My realm is full of it. I would *wager* heaven wasn't as occupied."

"No."

The King studied her, evaluating. "When did you learn how to contact me? I've been watching."

"It's in William's book, though he didn't see the connection. I didn't either until I got to the known rules section. I'd been following them all my life, without ever knowing why." Angela smiled sadly.

“Never without permission. I had to invite you to offer a gruesome suggestion.”

The King let out a frustrated rumble that echoed like thunder. “It did not have to be gruesome. I am not the monster. I only open those cages.”

She shrugged, trying to remember her plan and stick to it instead of begging for answers. She wasn’t convinced this being had the other information she needed. There was too much confusion in his beautiful eyes. “Still not good for our souls.”

“In the beginning, exposing evil *was* good. It allowed humanity to find the monsters and defeat them.” The King’s huge hands clenched against his red robe. “The Creator will be angry when he discovers the betting included my kingdom. I am now forced to punish those who do not deserve such an eternity.”

Angela unthinkingly repeated a line she’d heard all her life. “Only bad people go to hell.”

“What about the sick kids who died on the UN ship, or in the western fighting?!”

Angela tensed at his terrible anger. It was cold. She shivered at his mental image of children screaming through eternal flames.

“They cannot be washed clean by anyone but the Creator, so they must serve an unjust sentence.”

Angela tried again. “Until He returns...”

The King snorted bitterly. “*He* is not coming back.”

“How do you know?”

“He said so as he left. I believe the exact words were... *Not a chance in hell.*”

Angela couldn't find any amusement. “You've heard our talks. Will my plan work?” She couldn't help trusting the powerful being. He had no reason to lie. She'd already offered her life.

“Maybe.” The King was surprised to feel hope. “Can you stop the reset?”

Now Angela felt hope. She'd expected to be laughed at, or denied. “I thought it through from every angle, but I don't know.”

The King held out a hand, palm up. “May I?”

Angela didn't have any walls around her mind right now. It was another sign of his trustworthiness that he hadn't looked. “Absolutely.”

The King chuckled. “Doesn't it worry you that I may really be the monster, that I've lied to you?”

“No. I did get that vibe from my trip to the weigh station, though.” She slid her hand over his but didn't touch him. “I should have listened to my instincts.”

“And killed Kronus the instant he appeared on earth?” The King began sifting through her thoughts, copying everything for later examination.

“Yes.”

“I think so too, but again, the time for that has passed.” He withdrew, lowering his arm. “Speak the rest of your offer so I may release time. It is not good for your world to stop spinning. It may not restart.”

Angela let her desperation show. “Can I go find him, beg him to come back?”

The King studied her, robe trembling. “Maybe. You would have to die.”

Angela sighed. “That will happen as soon as you release time.”

He smiled, stunning her. “Perhaps. I have not flipped a card in Safe Haven since you came together.”

Angela struggled to think. “Mother Nature has had that honor?”

The King grew serious as he studied her plans, and her mental construction project. It was nearly finished and very impressive. “Yes, but even that creature can be controlled.”

“By the Creator.”

The King leaned forward, enjoying having someone to mentor again. “By an invasion. Instead of taking, force her to accept.”

Angela felt her energy draining as time waited. “I never would have considered...”

“It is my honor to assist you.” The King scowled at her. “And also my hatred. I loathe your kind. Putting descendants in charge of the weigh station broke the entire system.”

“Who did it?”

“That has not been revealed.”

It wasn't a surprise to discover this being also had limits. She'd suspected that as soon as he obeyed the ocean deal for her energy. “It has to be

a mix. Too many of one side or the other will sink us.”

The King felt her depression. “Humanity will sink anyway. Those differences prevent bonds and encourage hatred.”

Angela confirmed another corner of her project. “Even if we were all the same, we would still have these issues.”

“Yes...”

“Lies are not allowed with me.”

“You are no one.” He glared at her in disappointment.

Angela’s anger flew out of her mouth. “I am everything! I am the heir, gifted with the keys to the kingdom by the Creator.”

The King bowed to her as he retreated. “Prove your claim; receive my support. Fail to do so and the bullet will strike your heart.”

Angela pulled up the words from William’s book. “There’s a legend of a female descendant child. Within her heart was the seed of creation. If she had been allowed to grow, she would have populated the earth with a new kind of human—one who has absolute power over evil.”

The King kept retreating, tone sullen. “That proves nothing.”

“The murder of that child drove God away. He swore not to return until his daughter was reborn.”

“I know the story! I was there!” The King retreated another step, clearing the bullet’s trajectory. “When Sarah came here, she was full of

hatred for the very souls she'd been sent to save. Even now, she sings to me of her happiness that humanity is on the brink of extinction. He cannot return to that. We will all be destroyed by his grief!"

"She needs to be brought into the light." Angela gave her first command. "Send her soul back out to try again."

The King stopped fading. "She has been sent back five times, over five thousand of your years. Atrocities always follow. No one is strong enough to keep her demon in line once she is earthly."

Angela drew in a breath, now following her plan word by word. "My child might be, if she were blessed by someone as powerful as you."

Laughter flowed from the King. "Your gall is amazing. Have you decided on last words?"

"Yes." Angela had tried all her weapons in this mental battle. It was time to just swing. "*Your* child would also be strong enough. Then the Creator would have to forgive you for whatever it was you did to get put in this awful job."

The King flinched.

Angela kept going, trying to find the right button. "You could just send out the call and lie; tell him that she's here. I'll deal with the fallout since you're obviously a coward." Angela stood, slipping free of the fear spell he'd put on her when he first arrived. "I'm not weak. Neither is humanity. Stand aside while I fix your mess."

“It’s not my mess! I tried to stop her death!” The King drew in a breath, preparing to restart time. “You do not know!”

Angela gave her second command. “Then show me, so I can. This has become tiresome.”

Rage and love surrounded her as he dug all the way into her mind, her plans, her fears. He began to laugh. “You know who is responsible. You just need my permission.”

She didn’t rub it in that she’d tricked him again. “Actually, I *want* your permission. I can conquer the weigh station without your support now that you’ve told me how.”

The King gazed at her in loathing and respect. “You are a magnificent player and a total liar. You do humanity proud and doom them in the same stroke.” He bowed to her again, contempt spreading across his eternally young face. “If you make it back, I will send Sarah out to try again.”

“And the father?”

“On the night of your wedding.”

Angela didn’t ask how that would happen. She didn’t want to know those details.

“I’m not a sperm bank.” The King raked her with fresh contempt. “Immaculate conceptions are immaculate.”

Angela let herself breathe again. “I’m sorry for my rudeness.”

“We haven’t had an enforcer in these realms in centuries.” He’d just realized how she’d managed to slip free and trick him.

“That’s going to change as well.” Angela drew in a breath. “I now need a favor.”

The King lifted both hands, palms up. “If I can, I may.”

Angela snorted at the word play. “Can you do anything for my dog? He’s lonely.”

The King’s mood changed to dangerous. “You enjoy the attention. If he has a mate, that will change.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve made a final choice between them.”

Angela shook her head. “There was never a choice to be made. Please send my dog someone he can love and who will love him in return.”

“It will never replace the bond you share.”

“I don’t need it to be a replacement, just a happy period in reward for all he’s done right.”

Anger rushed toward her.

“And what of all he’s done wrong?!”

Angela sent her own rage right back. “That’s why the happiness is only temporary!”

The King waited, now scanning her in every way.

Angela let him. *I have nothing left to hide.*

“Lies are not allowed here.”

Angela grunted. “I’m working on it. The cracks are small so far.”

The King stared at her with sympathy and smugness. “You know.”

“I do. So do others. They’re watching. If I get out of control, they’ll put me down.” Angela wasn’t

sure that was true of most people on their ship, but she knew it was from one of them.

“How?”

“It’s part of what my dog trained them for. Deep down, Adrian worried that he would be the one to go crazy. He put precautions in place.” Angela lifted her chin. “So have I. Ivan has orders. He’ll find them as soon as he returns to his cabin.”

“That one walks the line.”

Angela sighed at his warning tone. “All Safe Haven’s people walk the line. So do their leaders.” Weakness swarmed her. She drew in a breath and did something she never would have considered before this meeting. “Will you look ahead for me?”

The King’s eyes narrowed. “The reason?”

“I need to know if dying fixes things, if I’m really the reason death follows my camp. When Orin kills me, he and Kronus will never make it off this ship alive. They can’t go back to the weigh station without my permission. The instant you unlock time, I’ll ban them from heaven, then die. I need to know what comes after.”

The King pulled up a globe much like the one the Messenger had used during the end of their meeting. Angela stared hard, but she couldn’t see much from where she stood.

The King studied her over the globe. “Ask and receive.”

She swallowed. “May I watch with you?”

“Yes.”

Angela took his right. She immediately loved how it felt. Peace and strength flowed from the King. Desire was also there, but it was covered in layers of disinterest. He didn't want anything as mundane as sex. He wanted a friend. "Are we allowed to do that?"

The King shook his head, sadness rippling down his cloak. "This very moment is forbidden."

Angela smiled at him. "Then I'd be honored to be your friend. We'll talk over brandy and cigars, late at night when the rest of the world is sleeping or guarding from nightmares."

The King hesitated. "Our bonds will go deeper. I recommend you avoid this decision."

"Why?"

"You're a descendant! You cannot be trusted."

She smiled again. "So, are you in?"

The King chortled. "Of course."

A loud click echoed. A copper chain snapped around her wrist.

Angela accepted it willingly. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." The King lowered the globe, extending it to her.

Angela took her future in one hand and placed the other on his wrist. "Will you be my good friend?"

The King nodded. "No matter the cost." A matching chain snapped around his wrist.

Angela studied the images as they began moving, hoping the bond would hold when it

mattered. She was new to descendant negotiating. William's book wasn't detailed enough.

The King studied the future, without the dazed eyes and rough breathing she was used to. "It would seem you were right. That is an ugly death they receive for killing you."

"Yes, but too many of mine die in the fight." Angela concentrated, waving her hand over the orb.

The images sped up.

The King stared at her in surprise. It was more proof of her claim. The orbs weren't supposed to work for anyone without a birth claim.

Angela studied the future, heart clenching when Marc and Kendle became a couple. Her anger rose when Adrian left; half the camp went with him.

Angela's lids drooped. *So tired.*

The King touched her chain.

Energy shot into Angela's wrist and traveled up her arm. The pain was excruciating.

He's definitely above my level. She ignored it to watch Adrian's group land in America.

They were slaughtered by nature. It took weeks, but the surrounded camp fell.

Angela waved her hand again. "Show me the island."

It was empty. Graves littered the landing area. One of them belonged to Marc.

Cody and Charlie were next to him.

Angela shoved the globe back at the King.

He closed it with a tolerant motion, waiting for her decision.

“What card are you going to flip?” Angela didn’t know if he could, or would, tell her but she needed the information.

“A debt has been called in.”

Angela nodded as soon as she figured it out. There was only one person in the infirmary right now who owed her a life. “If possible, I’d like him to survive.”

The King glared. “So you can have revenge whenever you feel like it?”

“So I can keep studying his behavior and duplicate it. He’s honestly changed. I need that formula.” She let her anger show. “Then I’ll send him down so you can give my children justice.”

“Agreed. When I count to three, time will resume. Is our business finished? One.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“You are the heir, with the keys to the kingdom.”

“No lies here, remember?”

The King sighed, letting his misery show. It matched hers. “I miss the Creator. I am loyal to him, *always*. Two.”

“Is there anything you need?” She put a hand on his wrist chain. “Something I can do for you or help you with?”

The King stared at her again, eyes blazing with a million thoughts. When he finally spoke, heat radiated through the infirmary, thawing the icy walls. “Teach them to love me.”

Angela stared in dismayed surprise. “Humans fear death more than anything else.”

“Yes. If it cannot be changed, I wish to be released from servitude and placed somewhere there is no fear of me. I have served my duty faithfully since it was assigned.” He pleaded with her. “I want to be forgiven, like you humans are.”

Angela memorized those exact words. “Agreed, if you help pick your replacement. I don’t know the rules.”

“Agreed.” The King hesitated to call the final number.

Angela surprised them both by touching his wrist this time. It felt like any other arm to her.

Peace flowed through the King, bringing a relieved smile. “May I visit you?”

“Never without permission.”

The King snickered. “Perfect.”

Angela understood he wanted the contact more than she did. *Wow. I never thought of Satan being lonely.*

“That name is not mine.” The King bowed to her a final time. “I am Michael Mitchel.”

Angela gasped.

The King retreated, fading. “Three.”

Time snapped into reality.

Kenn stepped in front of Angela, shield coming up.

Kyle fired, hitting Kronus in the stomach.

Shawn threw his knife as Orin fired again. The blade went deep into Orin's chest. Blood bloomed on his blue robe as people shouted.

Kenn's shield dropped at the first bullet. He realized the second slug was headed for his heart and felt his demon preparing to flee. Kenn stayed in front of Angela, peace settling into his heart. *This is for my sins. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.*

The slug hit Kenn in the chest. Blood bloomed on his black shirt.

Angela caught him as he fell, heart breaking. She'd known, but it still hurt. "Don't you die, Grunt!"

Kenn dropped to his knees, covering his pouring wound.

A poisoned red hand appeared, grabbing Kenn's arm.

Courtney held tight as Kenn slid to the floor, stomach clenched as her mind directed the power his child had sent upon her plea.

Angela added what little she had left as Eagles who were able to secured the scene and more flooded in from various corridors.

Dying, Kronus sent the last of his power at the group.

Angela stepped in front of the hit. She stiffened, breath rushing out as she absorbed it. "Time to go."

Angela collapsed.

Around her, sick and healthy bodies did the same.

Panic took over the infirmary.

Angie! Adrian's eyes snapped open. The first thing he saw was a shark.

Hungry teeth snapped at him; black orbs glared in reproach at the delay of a meal.

The second thing he saw was Angie behind a line of locals, throwing ice... *Ice?* Adrian tried to stand and felt the chains around his hurting body. *I'm hanging in the air. How did that happen?*

His memory flashed an image of his capture. *Watch out! There's more of them!*

Kendle already knew. Kurt and his team had been a decoy while a second trap team got behind her. She was now stuck between them and the locals who had rocks and a few knives but no guns. Jamie was firing whenever she dropped her shield, forcing her to stand here and drain her own energy. She was almost out. In another minute, it would be over.

Adrian felt her panic. He responded the only way he could, using the only magic he had left. *I need help. If you want to join Safe Haven or just get off this island, come to the docks.* The alpha wave traveled through the warehouse and rippled over the horseshoe-shaped land.

"Dart him!" Dag pointed at Adrian.

Roy went to do it, stepping behind the locals.

Kendle took advantage of his absence to lower her shield and blast the team with ice. She grabbed a terrified local and drained him as they recoiled.

Kendle's shield went back up as Roy and Dag opened fire again. Bullets bounced off it, hitting the walls, floor, people. Several locals fell, screaming or dead.

"Stop shooting!" Jamie stepped in front of Kendle, noting her renewed strength. "Lower the dog into the water."

Kendle glowered at Jamie, stomach tightening at the pain of absorbing the life force. "I'm going to cut your throat out."

Jamie laughed. "How? You're trapped."

"So are you." Kendle gestured toward the road to the dock.

A large group of new locals were coming toward the dock in a hurry. They bounced down the grass and the street, forming a line of defenders coming to the rescue. Bullets flew as they got closer.

Kendle kept her shield up as the locals in the warehouse fled, leaving the trap team to fend for themselves. They were unprepared for the betrayal.

Wow, are you guys rookies. Safe Haven always expects that. Kendle dropped her shield and grabbed another local who had turned his back as he eased away from the fighting. She inhaled as hard as she could.

She tossed his withered corpse at Jamie

Jamie screamed as the body shattered against him, spraying dust and organs.

Kendle lunged forward and stabbed Jamie in the side as she inhaled again. "I warned you." She

hammered the blade into his throat a dozen times as she drained him.

Her shield came back up, thrumming with energy. *More!*

Kendle fought the pain, and the temptation to take another life. The addiction to killing was still a battle she always had to fight.

Kendle scanned the new group of locals as they tore Dag apart with their bare hands. *They're bloodthirsty. I should thin them...*

Angela.

Kendle spun at Adrian's voice. "Where?"

Adrian held still as the people he'd called lowered him enough to swing the pulley over the floor. He kept eye contact with her, communicating silently. *Let them go.*

Kendle wanted to fight his order, but it was impossible to refuse the light. She waved at the bloody locals. "We need to get going. Do you have a boat?"

Adrian joined her, shaking hands and chatting with their rescuers, but his anger made the meeting tense.

Kendle flashed smiles, but it had no effect as Adrian's anger grew. Kendle finally spun to face him. "What is your problem?!"

His eyes widened. *You're not Angela!*

Kendle snorted. "No shit. You helping here or what?"

Adrian snapped out of his shock to grin at her. "I'm glad you came."

Kendle snickered. “Save the charm. We have work to do.”

Adrian had been furious that Angela was off ship alone. Realizing it was Kendle was a relief.

Kendle laughed. *You really thought I was her. That’s rich. Marc will be thrilled.*

Adrian smelled vanilla as he scanned her, heart twisting. *Yeah, he knows her from head to toe.* Adrian scanned Kendle’s chest. *And where you needed padding.*

Kendle laughed harder instead of getting angry. *The makeup was fun. I can still taste it.*

Adrian came to her side. Then he turned around to watch behind them. It’s what he would have done with Angie or any teammate.

Kendle slid over so their shoulders were touching. She remembered that from her brief Eagle lessons.

Around them, the locals were standing in groups, talking and watching them. Kendle knew they should have a conversation, but she wasn’t sure how to start it.

Wait for them to come to us. Adrian shifted so he had a view of their guests and the road behind the warehouse. “I called them, but they just realized you aren’t Angela.”

Which means they’ll have to be evaluated on our ship, where they can’t escape. Kendle cleared her throat. “We’ll send you back here if you want. Safe Haven doesn’t murder people.”

Adrian was glad they couldn't view his expression. That lie was dangerous.

Two men broke off from the groups to join Kendle and Adrian in the warehouse. Both tall and dark, they had a sense of strength Kendle admired. They reminded her of Safe Haven men, the strong silent ones who always ended up saving the day.

Adrian rubbed her shoulder with his. "Not the men this time. *You're* the hero."

Kendle smiled. It sent peace over the strangers and brought them closer.

"I am Raheem."

"Selito."

Kendle held out a hand to shake.

Both men retreated, expressions fearful.

Kendle lowered her hand. "I'm not sick. This happened to me a year ago."

Selito waved at the leaving cruise ship. "Your boat has plastic up. Your people are ill."

Kendle didn't see a need to lie. "Radiation poisoning. It's not contagious."

The men looked to Adrian for confirmation.

Adrian didn't want to take over the meeting. He nodded and waited. Kendle was getting job training right now. She just hadn't realized it yet.

Raheem's voice was hesitant. "Your...boss will talk to us when we reach your ship?"

Again, Kendle didn't lie. "Yes, but not right away. She's working."

Relief entered their expressions.

Kendle's anger blasted out, trapping the two men inside her shield. She leaned forward as they panicked and tried to fight their way free. "What evil are you hiding?"

Adrian drew the gun from Kendle's holster and turned, keeping the other locals at bay. *She's got good instincts, but bad timing.*

Selito stopped resisting. Tears rolled over his sun-burnt cheeks.

Raheem kept punching the shield that gave no reaction to his fierce blows.

I don't like this part of the job. Where's the fun?

Adrian grunted at her. *Few and far between most days. Finish this so we can go.*

Kendle released her shield. "Tell us now so we don't have to go through it on the ship. If it's bad, you can stay here. We won't tell the boss."

"She lies!" Raheem was an inch away from attacking Kendle. "They won't care we were starving. We'll be slaughtered!"

Many of the small crowd voiced agreement.

Selito kept crying. "The UN told us Safe Haven has no forgiveness for our kind! We shouldn't have come."

Kendle and Adrian realized the trap teams had filled the locals with lies. Kendle sheathed her bloody knife. "Cannibalism?"

Selito nodded, wiping at his tears. "When your kids scream for food, when they die from needing it, you do whatever you have to."

Kendle pointed at the crops ready to be harvested, then the water. “Why didn’t you eat the crops or the sharks?”

“The crops are poison. We cannot grow food anymore.” Raheem, calming a little, shrugged bitterly. “Before we used the bell, the sharks didn’t come here.”

“What bell?” Adrian and Kendle asked at the same time.

Raheem pointed at the chains still hanging over the water. “We lower a bell there and slap it against the chains. The sharks come to be fed.”

Adrian frowned. “How is that possible?”

“We used to have tourists who liked to swim with them. The guides called the sharks using bells.” Raheem pushed his big hands into the pockets of his baggy shorts, waiting for their decision.

“A dinner bell.” Kendle sighed. “It’s not up to me, honestly, but my boss won’t like it if you murdered people coming through here...or worse. Maybe you should stay. I can’t promise she’ll clear you.”

Selito shook his head wildly. “Our population chose a lottery draw. No one was murdered! Every sacrifice was willing.”

Kendle shifted to look at Adrian.

Adrian shrugged. “I made exceptions in areas like this, but Angela has a unique way of passing judgement. I can’t promise it either.”

“Safe Haven is a place of second chances...” Selito didn’t want to give up the only hope he’d had since his family died. “Has that changed?”

Adrian smiled at him. “No. We’ll always be that. She’ll give you a fair evaluation. Just follow the rules and be helpful.”

Selito smiled back, aware of who Adrian was. “I will go.”

“Good.” Adrian holstered Kendle’s gun and waved toward the water. “We need a ride to our ship. Can you help with that?”

The rest of the group calmed.

Raheem stared at Kendle’s scars. *Anyone who went through that shouldn’t have survived.*

Kendle caught the thought. “If not for Safe Haven, I wouldn’t. They helped me stay sane.”

Raheem’s face melted into surprise. His body relaxed, anger fading. “You have the rage sickness.”

She nodded. “I did. Safe Haven cured me.”

Raheem dropped to his knees. “Please!”

Kendle felt an unwilling link forming, but she didn’t fight it. Descendant bonds were supposed to be strong for both people, but other than Marc, Kendle hadn’t experienced that part of it. She didn’t expect this to be different. “I will if I can.” She took his arm and helped him up. “Do a lot of you have the rage disease?”

Raheem shook his head. “Just me. My father was a pirate. I escaped the green fog and washed up here... My father tried to eat me. My mother shoved

him into an oil tank. Then she caught the disease. She sent me away.”

Kendle placed a hand on his shaking shoulder. “Have you infected anyone?”

Raheem shook his head, more tears slipping out. “Not yet...”

Kendle awkwardly patted his shoulder. “We can give you outlets that will help, but only you can control it. If you don’t, you’ll be put down.”

Adrian was proud of Kendle for coming out of her misery long enough to help someone else through theirs. He waved Selito to get their ride, then scanned their surroundings. Satisfied they were safe for the moment, he turned toward the Adrianna.

And didn’t find Angie.

She’s not on the ship! Adrian reeled, stunned. *She ascended without me.*

Adrian immediately flashed to the moment with Kronus, where Angela had whispered to him. Both their thoughts had been blocked. Not even Marc knew what she’d said.

“I do.”

Adrian glared at Kendle. “You weren’t even there!”

“I watched your memory.” Kendle shrugged. “I read lips. It’s part of why Theo wants me to teach sign language to the camp. He knows I can help Debra, so it’s a win-win.”

Adrian grabbed Kendle’s arm and spun her around. “What did she say?”

“Come visit me in a few days. I have a job for you.”

“What was the job?”

“I have no idea.” Kendle pointed toward their cruise ship. “I’d bet he knows.”

Adrian narrowed in on Neil, who was standing on the bridge steps, watching them in concern. A piece snapped into place. *The clouds in the weigh station. That’s how he knew to use it!*

“Son of a bitch.” Adrian hurried toward the men and the boat coming around the corner of the dock. “Let’s roll!”

Kendle followed, letting out a jealous sigh.

Selito and Raheem got everyone into the long boat and waited for Adrian and Kendle to join them.

Kendle scanned the land behind the warehouse, stomach full of butterflies. She glanced toward the ocean, to their ship.

Adrian waited impatiently for Kendle to make her decision. He could only guess how hard it was for her, but he had no doubt about her final choice. Marc was on the *Adrianna*.

Kendle walked to the boat and climbed in.

Adrian waved for them to go. “Catch up to the rear. Someone will open the cargo doors.”

“Are you sure?”

Adrian sighed at Kendle’s mutter. “We’re still needed. Until that changes, we won’t be pushed overboard.”

Kendle snorted. “That’s with Angela in charge. If she’s gone, *Marc* now leads *Safe Haven* and he

hates you more than I hate the man who tried to kill me. At least Ethan was sick; you don't have that excuse."

Adrian's balls drew up. His stomach twisted. But he didn't change his mind. Even if Angela was gone, Safe Haven wasn't. "Take me home."

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Better Than Sex

1

Neil greeted them as the boat was hauled into the small cargo bay. A line of tired Eagles pulled the ropes and daydreamed of sleep.

Adrian lunged from the boat and landed in front of Neil. “Take me to Marc, right now!”

Neil led the way without protesting the tone. Marc had told him this would happen.

“You knew!”

Neil took them through the employee hall toward the infirmary. “She’s alive. They all are. Marc is on his way from the bridge. Theo has that post now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

Neil snorted. “I might have, but you nailed my ass to the wall and let me hang there. Then you forced me to betray my best friend.”

Adrian scowled. “Marc flipped you.”

Neil shrugged. “It wasn’t hard. I don’t like you anymore.”

Adrian read Neil’s thoughts of a short conversation where Marc had offered friendship in return for loyalty. “You told him everything. You betrayed me!”

Neil refused to feel guilty. “Eagles are taught to lie to the enemy when necessary.”

“I know! I created that rule!”

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Neil opened the door to the small office across from the lab hallway. “Please wait here; your executioner will be along shortly.”

Adrian shoved by Neil and went toward the infirmary.

Just coming from there, Kenn slid in front of him. “She’s getting a checkup.”

Adrian scanned the infirmary through the windows. Cots of unconscious people greeted him. Their loved ones glowered.

“Let’s chat.” Marc came down the steps from the bridge, smiling at people, sending alpha waves that eased people’s troubled souls.

Adrian observed in jealousy. *That’s my job!*

It was. You betrayed them.

I saved them!

“One does not negate the other.” Marc waited for Adrian to go first.

Adrian stomped into the office. He dropped into the closest chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Marc shut the door. He sat at the other end of the long table, mind full of the plans that had led to this moment.

Adrian read them, anger growing. “You let her do this?”

“It was my plan.”

“What was?”

“Sacrificing herself for her people.” Marc brought up his shield.

“You bastard!” Adrian fired a powerful blast of acid pain. It settled over Marc’s shield and melted it.

Marc brought up another one, enjoying Adrian’s agony more than he could express.

“You made sure we didn’t even get a goodbye!” Adrian tossed a thicker blast, eating through the shield in seconds.

Marc brought up a third bubble, frowning a bit. “I like that spell.”

Adrian tossed a double blast this time, removing the shield first.

Marc caught the second blast and absorbed it like Angie had been teaching them to do.

“Damn you!” Adrian fired one more hit, using his alpha power.

Marc couldn’t absorb the blow in time. He took it in full. Golden light swarmed his body and sank in.

Marc laughed through the pain.

Adrian’s mouth dropped open. “You should be on your knees!”

“It only works on new people.”

“New...” Adrian groaned. “You’re already one of mine. I can’t grab you twice.”

“Exactly.”

Adrian realized Marc hadn’t fired back. “What are you waiting for?!”

“I’m enjoying the foreplay.”

“Slam you.”

Marc chuckled. “We’ve been here before. Your tits aren’t big enough and you won’t swallow.”

Adrian groaned, adrenaline starting to fade. “She’s gone, Marc! How can you joke?”

Marc sighed, hiding his own concern. “It was the best path to her goals.”

“To *your* goals, maybe.”

“Meaning?”

“You’re now the leader of my camp!”

“No. The Eagles are in charge. I’m in recovery.”

“It’s the same thing!”

“Angela wanted it this way.”

Adrian was hurt that she hadn’t said goodbye, that she’d known she was leaving, but mostly, that she’d had a scheme going and hadn’t included him. *I was blindsided!*

“God, it feels good to be on this side of things.” Marc leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. “She said it could be a while. We’re putting them all on IV lines so their bodies don’t shut down. We’re telling the camp they’re in a coma.”

Adrian tensed again, still waiting for Marc to fire.

Marc’s smile widened into the grin of a hungry wolf. “Angie doesn’t want to be around you anymore. She told me to tell you it’s time to move on.”

Blow one. Adrian’s heart thumped. “What?”

“She also said Mitchel DNA has to be passed carefully. She’s forbidden you to breed with anyone

the council doesn't approve because of how dangerous it is. Conner's going to have the same rules."

"That's... That's... Against the constitution of the old world, and of Safe Haven!"

"This is part of the new descendant laws. It only applies in special cases." Marc smirked. "Be proud. Your name will be the first."

Adrian felt his tiny world crumbling all over again. "What else?"

"Your previous deals with everyone are void. They all came clean while Angie was draining herself hourly to save their lives."

Adrian tried not to think about any of those forbidden alliances, but it was impossible. Faces and deals flashed.

Marc caught it all. *I don't want to miss anyone when I compare notes.*

Fury filled Adrian's face. "What about *our* deal?"

Marc blew out a tired sigh, getting to the part he hated. "We've agreed it might be best in the end."

Adrian grabbed that slippery rope, desperate. "Because you have feelings for Kendle!"

"Because I love her." Marc wasn't afraid to admit it now. "She's the subservient worshiper I need."

"That's what I am to Angela."

"We both know it's more." Marc smiled again.

Adrian braced. *Here comes number two.*

“I no longer need your help with the baby spell. I pulled it from your memory. I’ve been working on it and now that I’ve found the procreation scrolls...” Marc paused to enjoy Adrian’s gasp. “we don’t need help from anyone.”

Adrian tried to bring down a wall over his thoughts, but he was weak from being drugged and wasting his energy on opening blows. Sweat beaded on his neck.

Marc had been waiting for this moment since Angie asked him to handle things, savoring it like sex. He was truly her XO now. “I’m locking your gifts. Today.”

Adrian strengthened his shield as much as he could. “Only an enforcer can do that.”

“Not true. Anyone can copy that skill, if...” Marc’s grin covered his face. *This might be better than sex.*

Adrian’s stomach dropped as Marc revealed a mind full of doors that glowed green. *Those are new! How did he get so many so fast...* “You’re Byzan now. You reached her level.”

“I asked for it and received.”

“You took a big risk.” Adrian assumed Marc had fooled the time guardian somehow while embracing his demon.

“Scroll diving avoids the Demon of Time. I trust my power. It pulls me up. Your power knows you can’t be trusted, so you aren’t.”

“Why are you telling me?” Adrian was almost in tears. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll use it against you?”

Marc nodded. "I'm counting on it, but not for four years. You won't be able to dive, shield, read or draw."

"It won't change how she feels about me."

Marc grunted. "No. And if you become a good person, it might even increase her feelings."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Because I trust her. There's nothing you can do to win Angie away from me." Marc was thrilled that he now meant every word. "You might get her when I die, but until then, she'll always put me first. I don't have to be threatened by you. So I'm not."

Adrian was proud of Marc for the progress. He also hated him for winning this round. "This isn't over."

"Yeah, it is." Marc's lids narrowed. "She left a message for you. Once I deliver it, you will have an hour to set things in order, but don't go looking for Conner. He's not here."

Adrian frowned. "Where is he?"

"On a run. You'll see him when he gets back."

"Who's with him?"

"Eagles."

Adrian thought about it. "Can I call him?"

"You'll blow the run and screw his chances of getting over your mistakes. It's up to you. Personally, I'd rather he was gone too."

Adrian locked down on his need to contact Conner. "I won't do that. He's a good kid."

Marc shrugged. “We’ll see. In the meantime, be back here in one hour. I’m doing a group thing then to conserve energy.”

Adrian stared at Marc. “All this from scroll diving?”

“Yes.” Marc hoped it ate Adrian up for the next four years. “I stored the spells, the details. When we got sick, I had time to study them. It kept my mind off the misery.”

Adrian realized he’d been wrong. “I didn’t think you could reach it without mass murder.”

Marc’s face darkened at Adrian’s mutter. “I helped with enough plans to qualify. There’s still no conclusive proof otherwise on that.”

Adrian’s hatred glowed, but his bitter curiosity came first. “Why are you really telling me all this?”

“I found a special set of scrolls. Did you know a byzan can assign a job...a gift...to any alpha?”

“Please.” Adrian groaned. “Just tell me and stop playing with my life!”

Marc sighed, delighted to hear Adrian beg. “Effective immediately, you are the Keeper of the Descendants, a History by Adrian Mitchel.” Marc muttered, hand lifting.

Adrian’s shield melted.

Marc lunged over the table and punched him in the mouth. Then he hit the dazed man with the spell.

Adrian stayed down. He’d learned not to get up.

Old magic sank into his chest. Voices entered his mind.

“You’ll be able to hear it so you can record it, but you won’t be able to use any of it for four years.” Marc stood. Adrian was already falling into the daze of a new gift. “Hey!”

Adrian’s teary eyes snapped up to his. “Yes, Boss?”

Marc sucked in air. *That made me hard!* “One hour from this moment.”

Adrian dropped his chin. “Can I see her?”

“Yes. You can also try any last-ditch effort to escape this fate. It won’t matter. This part was her idea. We need a Keeper.”

Adrian felt love grow for Marc. “I’ll be useful now. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” Marc meant it. He owed Adrian a few good moments. He’d helped keep Angie alive. That was powerful to the man who loved her enough to share if she had demanded it. In the end, the charms and spells had finally worn off or been broken. She was his again.

“She always was.” Adrian had known that from their first meeting. “I had to try.”

Marc shrugged. “I understand that. I really do, but it’s all over now. You have a place—on the fringes, keeping track of it all. It’s what you’ve been best at all along.”

“Yes.” Adrian braced. “What’s the message?”

Marc opened his thoughts so Adrian could get the memory message directly from the source.

Angela glanced up from her notebook, looking into Adrian's tortured eyes. "This is the way it has to be. Spend the years regaining your honor. If you do that, I'll find a place for you in the rebuilding. If you fail, Marc will take your life force and Conner will be banished. The name Mitchel shall become a forbidden bloodline that I will wipe from the Earth. Do not fail. Your descendants depend on it."

Adrian was crushed. "Can't I just go away?"

The vision rippled as Angela sighed. "I'm guessing you're considering running away now. You have that choice. Conner won't suffer for it, but you will be hunted. We can't trust you roaming loose."

"I'd never hurt the dream!"

Angela sighed again. "If there's a rabid dog on your farm, you can track him. You have an idea where he'll attack. If you put him outside the fence, he's hurting others, and sooner or later he'll find a way to slip back in and rip your throat out."

It was the exact words he'd said to Samantha about Rick, back when they'd first joined. Adrian's heart squeezed. "I can't do this."

"Do you love me, Adrian?"

"You know I do!"

The vision rippled violently as Angela stood. "Four years will pass in the blink of an eye. A single betrayal will curse that future. Make your choice and do it now."

Adrian surrendered, body sagging. "I'll try. You know I will."

Angela smiled at him. “Happiness may be beyond us, but contentment can be enough. Emotions mean little compared to what you’ll be responsible for starting, for helping to build.”

Marc was impressed with how well she knew him. They’d recorded this in a dream walking session, but all her responses were accurate so far.

“I don’t know how to do this.” Adrian forced the truth out. “I’m a lazy, weak coward.”

“You’re also a hero. Remember that and hold tight to those ethics. I believe in you. And that’s enough of this. I hate the mushy crap. Spend your hour how you want, then embrace the next stage in your destiny.” For an instant, horrible sadness crossed Angela’s face. Then she brightened. “I’ll contact you occasionally, for my sanity. Marc insisted. He’s an amazing man. Try to emulate him and the four years might not be as bad as you’re expecting.”

The vision ended.

Marc pushed Adrian out of his mind and waited for the man’s reaction.

Adrian stood. “I’d like to spend my hour with her.”

“I assumed you would.” Marc went to the door. “I’m sorry it came to this. If you’d been a better man, I would have followed you.”

Shame flooded Adrian. “She made the right choice. I knew she would. You’re the perfect man.”

“Not even close.” Marc leered. “She’ll train me to be that and you’ll get to keep track of it. Think of the fun!”

Adrian knew Marc was enjoying rubbing it in, and he was sure the man was right that it would suck when those moments happened, but all he could feel was grateful to have been given any sentence that let him live and still have some contact with Angela.

Marc left, motioning at Neil. “Don’t let him out of your sight.”

“You know it.”

Adrian staggered into the infirmary, Neil on his heels. He had too much to process. The hardest was that Angela had planned all this without warning him. He hadn’t seen it coming. He’d thought she was too sick to carry out plans.

“She didn’t have to do anything but let you sink yourself.” Ivan was on duty in the bed next to Angela’s partitioned cot. He’d insisted. He didn’t care that the medics had only agreed so there would be another set of eyes on the boss while they were busy.

Adrian flinched at the fresh blow. “You knew too.”

“I guessed some of it, overheard some it, read a little.” Ivan shrugged, ignoring his sore body. “I am her understudy.”

Adrian’s chuckle was harsh. “She’s training you exactly like I did her.”

Ivan brightened. “You think?”

Adrian spotted an opportunity to pay Marc back for the loss. “I hope she doesn’t betray you the way I did her.”

Ivan shrugged. “If she does, I’ll learn from it.” Ivan was thrilled with his new job. Marc had promised to put him in classes with Angela, with Eagle training between. Nothing Adrian could do or say could compare.

Adrian scanned the partition. “Are you allowed to update me?”

Ivan glanced toward Marc, who was talking to Kenn at the door.

Marc nodded. He was monitoring the conversation.

Ivan reached over and pulled the curtain back. “She ascended, with a lot of the sick people. We’re all waiting now.”

Adrian went to her cot and dropped into the chair. He took her hand, eyes roaming her face and weak body. He sent his energy, his love, to help her recover while she battled for all of them. He understood what she’d chosen to do, just not who she’d chosen to do it with. “I would have gone with you.”

“Same here.”

Adrian frowned at Ivan’s mutter. “What did they decide about Kendle?”

Ivan looked at him over Angela’s body. “We won’t know until Marc’s next meeting is finished.”

“He’s meeting with her today?”

“Yes. After her, Kenn, Tonya and Charlie will have a turn.”

“And Conner, when he gets back?”

“Yes.”

Adrian’s stomach tightened further. “Marc’s cleaning house now, while she’s gone and can’t interfere.”

“No.” Ivan didn’t let Marc take the blame. “She told him to do it now, so she doesn’t get hurt anymore. She’s ready to be protected, the way you were supposed to do with someone like her.”

Adrian flushed. “Her destiny wasn’t to be peaceful. Coddle her all you want, but when it comes time to fight for our future, let her roll. You hear me?”

Ivan wrote it in his notebook. “Anything else, since you won’t be handling her training?”

Adrian sighed, rubbing her chilly fingers. “She has to have freedom to be a little wild or she’ll smother. If you guys really love her, let her breathe.”

“I’ll make sure Marc knows.”

Adrian waved. “Shut the curtain. She wouldn’t want the camp to see her this way.”

Ivan tugged the curtain half closed, making sure he could still see Adrian.

Adrian opened a dusty door in his mind and sent his demon into the time field. *Show me.*

The future swam closer, fading into a blur of years.

Adrian slowed it, scanning for details. He saw the camp, glorious in its relaxed sprawl, and a tiny graveyard that didn't get much use from its appearance. The people looked healthy and happy, and so did the Eagles.

Where's Angie? He zoomed in, hoping he had enough time before the time guardian became aware of his presence. *Show me!*

The image morphed into a cluttered tent with a laughing toddler and a chuckling woman spinning her around. In the corner of the wide tent, Marc was sitting in a rocking chair, reading to a small boy from a book. Cody and Dog were playing tug-of-war by the open flap.

Is she the same? Can she still do the job?

As if she heard, Angela in the vision looked right at him. "Get the fuck out of here before the demon of time senses you."

"Angie!"

She smiled at him. "It'll all work out. Just remember my number one rule."

"You never gave me any rules! I gave them to you!"

"I taught you to love someone more than yourself, Adrian Mitchel. Keep my lesson in your heart and fight for the light." She resumed spinning the little girl. "Or just die and get it over with. Safe Haven has no room for quitters or cowards."

Adrian snapped up, vision ending. He looked at Angela first, then Ivan. He wasn't sure how much time had passed.

Ivan yawned. "Your time's about up. Marc just sent Kendle to the office across the hall. She was...okay. I think you two are going to be good friends again."

Adrian stood, spine popping. "We already are." He bent to place a kiss on Angela's head. "Be happy, baby. You've earned it."

Adrian left the infirmary without talking to anyone who was watching him with expectations of it. Until he sorted himself out, he didn't want to have those conversations.

Adrian entered the office to find Kendle sitting cross-legged in a plush chair near the small TV. She was still wearing her disguise, though the hair color had run out hours ago and most of the makeup covering her scars had washed away. "You okay?"

Kendle shrugged. "She told Marc not to lock me down this time, that I'll learn to trust myself and then I'll be trustworthy." She frowned up at him. "Does that make sense to you?"

"Sort of." Adrian dropped into the chair next to her and placed a hand on her wrist. "Will you be my woman?"

"Can you share me?"

"Like Samantha?"

"No."

"Then yes."

"Do we need to set limits?"

“I doubt it.”

“You were the only thing I asked for when he told me he’d never be able to love me and that I should consider moving to the other ship so it wouldn’t tempt me to be bad when I see them together. He was very nice about it.”

Adrian studied her, assuming she’d been hit by many of the same blows he had. “What can I do for you?”

Kendle grunted. “You already did it.”

“Because I remind you of Marc.”

“A little. More because you’ll keep me from making another big mistake, and I’ll do the same for you, so it doesn’t ruin Conner’s chances.” Kendle’s lashes fluttered as she tried to hold back tears. “I knew there wasn’t a chance, but it still hurts.”

Adrian put an arm around her. “I know.” He leaned against her. “I’ll do the best I can to ease that when it gets bad.”

Kendle turned against his arm, cheek pressed to his. “You have to make the choice for us both. I’m not strong enough.” She shuddered. “He kissed me goodbye!”

Adrian knew what choice she meant, but he shook his head. “I’m not ready to make a final call on that. She’ll be happy with her family for four years and she deserves that, but when we return...”

“Yeah.” Kendle kissed his cheek. “If you wait too long to make the choice, you know which way I’ll go.”

“I do.” Adrian felt Marc coming their way and controlled his need to run. “Stay?”

“You know it.”

Marc tapped on the door. “It’s time.”

Kendle squeezed Adrian’s hand in comfort. “Come in. He’s ready for you now.”

2

“He’s ready for you—both of you.” Kendle pointed as she and Adrian left the office.

Kenn and Debra stood while everyone else frowned or breathed a sigh of relief. Marc was handling all the problems in camp right now. The eleven people had been waiting in silence, not sure what their future held.

All of them had taken turns going to the infirmary window to check on their friends or family, and to scan Angela’s partition. They craned now, scanning the room, Marc, and the faces of the people leaving.

Adrian paused by the hall chairs, torn. He wanted to be with Angela. That hadn’t changed because his gifts were now locked.

Adrian glanced at the waiting people.

Even Kenn stopped to watch, to see what choice he made.

Adrian didn’t need his gifts to know what they were thinking. His shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry.” He rotated toward the stairs. “Stay away from me so you don’t get in trouble too.”

Everyone was shocked, except Kenn. He was proud of Adrian for the first time in months.

“Should I reschedule this?”

Kenn grunted at Marc’s tone, motioning Debra in first as Kendle and Adrian vanished down the dim corridor. “Yes!”

Marc chuckled. “No worries. Leave the door open. This is a good meeting.”

“Awesome.” Kenn beamed at Debra. “I told you we did good.”

Debra grinned back, gesturing. *You were right.*

Marc pointed at two papers on the desk. “No need to sit. I know you’re tired. As of this moment, you are both Safe Haven XOs. You’ll share the job.”

Kenn blinked, breath gone. “What?”

Marc grinned as Debra clapped Kenn on the back and people in the hall cheered lowly for him. “You earned it. Congratulations, Marine.”

Kenn shook Marc’s hand automatically when it came toward him, mind blinking. *He gave me XO... Marc did what?*

Debra shook with Marc, beaming. She grabbed him for a fast shoulder hug that made him laugh and pat her arm. “You’re welcome. Congratulations.”

Debra turned to Kenn, waiting for him to breathe again so they could find out what came next.

Marc gestured to the papers. “Details are on there.”

Debra grabbed them both and shoved Kenn’s into his hand.

Kenn read it, smile slowly appearing.

Marc enjoyed the moment. “Attention, please?”

Debra’s head snapped up to him. She was monitoring Marc’s thoughts so she didn’t miss anything.

Kenn kept reading.

Debra nudged him.

Kenn looked up. “Where’s the protection for the boss? Bosses? You?”

Marc chuckled. “I’m giving that to you now. Ready?”

Kenn got out his notebook.

So did Debra.

“My personal guards are Neil, Kendle, and Charlie with Dog. They’ll rotate on eight-hour shifts, seven days a week until you send me a list of personal protection candidates. Then you’ll train them. They’ll be separate from the Eagles, but attend the same classes and training, plus whatever you else you decide they need.”

Kenn began to frown. “You can’t buy me.”

Marc snorted. “Yes, I can, but I don’t need to. You’ve proven your loyalty to the camp and to Angela. This isn’t a bribe.”

“It’s a...reward?”

Marc smiled at the confused, changed man. “It’s the best person for the job. We call that being fair.”

Kenn considered it. “Huh. Okay. We can do things that way.”

“Good. Moving on: Ivan, Jeff and Molly have duty over the boss. They’ll use the same rotation as the personal protection on me, but not the same shift

or person every time. Keep it flowing so all those people become a complete protection team in time.”

“You got it.” Kenn made notes, heart lightening. He’d been worried that Marc would remove him from camp because of his past.

“It was considered, but of all Safe Haven’s members, yours has been the biggest change. Don’t stop working on it.”

Kenn nodded, proud.

“I want a full round from you now, together, then you’re both off duty for two days to get set and sleep. Everyone I just mentioned for duty who is waiting in the hall will go with you on those rounds until you get their schedules set for the first three days. Pick a team leader and get rolling.”

Kenn shook Marc’s hand again when it came out, then left. *I can’t believe he gave me XO.*

He also gave you a team. Adrian never got around to that. Neither did Angela. Neil fell in on Kenn’s right. “I’ll volunteer for this shift so Marc isn’t alone right now.” Ivan was already with Angela, but Marc didn’t have a guard.

Kenn wrote it down. “Agreed. We’ll update you on who gets team leader.”

“Cool. Do not give it to me. I’m busy; orders from the boss.” Neil went to wait by the door. Marc wasn’t finished here yet.

“Understood.” Kenn wrote that down too, glad. After his lies, Neil didn’t deserve to be a team leader.

Marc waited for them all to be gone, then he knocked on the table. “Kyle.”

Kyle appeared, alone and frowning.

Marc waved him in. “Close the door. This is *not* a good meeting.”

Kyle’s heart dropped. “You know.”

“Not as much as I will after this is done.” Marc waited for Kyle to shut the door and pick a seat.

He took the one closest.

Marc liked that. Everyone else had kept at least one chair between them.

“It was my idea. I brought it up and I nagged her until she agreed.” Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s my side of it.”

Marc snickered. “Angie was right. You’re like the Terminator of our group.”

Kyle snorted. “My lines aren’t that good.”

Marc grew serious. He scanned Kyle openly, noting his gifts and his limits. “You’re not a true descendant.”

“No. I wasn’t born with a demon.” Kyle knew not to lie about that part of it. “I’m sharing space with a stranger.”

“How does it work?” Marc was hoping for details on the process.

“Only an enforcer can do it.”

Marc didn’t tell Kyle it could probably be copied. “Side effects, so far?”

“None.”

“Communication with the demon?”

“Direct, no. Dreams are starting.”

“Good. You’ll get a lot of the rules from that because you’re smart. When you have something you can’t figure out, I’m sure Jennifer will help.”

“She will.” Kyle waited, certain a punishment was coming.

Marc’s face hardened. “Did you know she was going to do it?”

Kyle frowned. “Do you mean was it thought out and planned?”

“I want to know if you had a chance to refuse.”

Kyle scowled. “I told you. I asked her.”

“So *she* had a chance to refuse.”

Kyle’s lips clamped shut.

Marc sighed. “Listen, I don’t care. It will make you better at your job and a better provider for your family.”

“But?” Kyle knew there was one.

“But it isn’t up to me. The boss didn’t give permission. From what I’ve read in the old scrolls, that’s not allowed.”

“I didn’t ask about the rules...”

“Jennifer knew it was wrong.” Marc ripped into Kyle’s mind to replay the moment.

Kyle held still, suddenly terrified Marc would lock up his new gifts the way he’d just done to Adrian.

Marc withdrew. “She knew it was forbidden. So did you. Angela will handle you both when she recovers.”

“When she returns, you mean.”

Marc shrugged at Kyle's curt correction, refusing to show how worried he was. It had already been hours, but there were days to go. "I want you to spend time with our new Keeper. Record the event in our official history, but all deals you've made are void. Adrian is now an Invisible. It is forbidden for you to involve him in camp business or descendant related material, other than the histories he will record for me."

Kyle nodded stiffly. He hadn't known Marc was aware of his deals with their former leader.

"Tell Jennifer the same thing."

Kyle's eyes swung to his. "What?"

Marc laughed at him. "That's it for now. You can go."

Kyle scowled. "That's it? I can go?" Kyle stood, chair scraping the floor. "Who do you think you are?!"

Marc's mood went cold. "What have you done to deserve a reward? You helped our kids hide, which strained manpower to search for them. They were then attacked and forced to kill. When Jennifer fell ill, you went to her side and didn't come back out. Helping a few sick people for a day doesn't erase your selfish behavior. There isn't a penalty for that in this camp, but everyone saw it. Your punishment won't end with whatever Angie decides."

Kyle groaned in frustration. "I just got everything I wanted!"

“I know, right?” Marc’s face changed into the sly leader Angie had always known was there. “Unless you’d like a get out of jail free card.”

Kyle tensed. “What about Jennifer?”

“She’ll get the same offer when she recovers.”

“What is it?”

Marc took out his book. “I want you to give up the Eagles for a while—both of you—and go on a run.”

Kyle caught the tone. “Back or forward?”

“Back.” Marc slid over a single sheet of paper. “That’s all I have on your target. The bottom has a list of names to talk to before you go. Jennifer might be able to get more information from them.” Marc studied Kyle, noting the baggier clothes and the sunken sockets. “You need to take extra rations along so you can all beef up on the trip.”

“Wait.” Kyle glowered at Marc. “You want her to go too.”

“Yes. The mission needs an enforcer. She’s the most experienced one we have.”

“No.”

Marc shrugged. “Okay. Like I said, you can go now. I have another meeting.”

“I’ll do it. She doesn’t need to go.”

“Yes, she does. You both need a job so Angie can’t punish you. You have a grid and a green door?”

Kyle nodded. “I don’t know how to use them.”

“I’m going to give you lessons on the grid before you leave. The tracking, you get to learn on your own. Safe Haven doesn’t have one.”

Kyle frowned deeper. “You’re giving me a descendant job?”

“Yes. But both of you, not one.”

Kyle struggled to find a reason to keep Jennifer here. “She won’t leave Autumn for that long. She loves her baby.”

“It’s love that will make her agree. My daughter needs a mother too, but I can’t go myself, at least not until we’re settled on the island. I can’t wait that long.” Marc sighed. “Cody’s nightmares are getting worse. His sister is in danger. She needs a team of killers to bring her home. I chose you to lead them.”

Kyle shoved the paper into his pocket. “I’ll talk to Jenny when she wakes up.”

“No need. Ivan’s filling her in right now.”

“Ivan?!” Kyle stormed from the room.

Marc laughed, smothering his pain. *She was right. Some of this is fun.* “Come on in, Mike.”

Mike entered, not shutting the door. He knew he had nothing to be worried about.

Marc smiled at the boy. Mike had been sent to the garden on a quiet mission to listen to radio channels and record what he heard. Between, he had stayed in the garden (his radio booth was in a grow closet labeled *never open*) and helped Emma with the plants.

Mike handed Marc a notebook. “There’s a key on the first page.”

Marc skimmed it. “This is good. How’s the garden?”

“Better now that we’re watering again, but it gave us time to finish the planting Samantha mapped out. It’s all in the ground. Emma’s sure it’ll all sprout.”

Those two had stayed when everyone else went other places. Mike wasn’t as bad as Timmy, but with the other brother, Eric, now awake from the coma he’d been knocked into during the beach fight, Mike would be drawn back into trouble. Marc wanted to avoid that. “Eric is doing well. He’ll be able to have visitors soon.”

“Awesome.”

Marc knew the boys would miss each other, but things were going to change for Zack’s family. It had already started. Cathy would help keep Timmy occupied and Eric would be put with Zack full time to improve their relationship and help shape the oldest son, who should be eager to resume Eagle training. Safe Haven’s future generations might not be rough, but this first crew was. All these weeds had to be carefully tended so they didn’t smother the flowers.

Marc didn’t like using females and breeding in these plans, but he’d agreed little else would do it. The need to be loved could overcome a lot of flaws. It was their second chance. Being young didn’t absolve them of mistakes. Those still had to be fixed and atoned for. Mike had a short list, so he had been separated from his family in hopes that his better

side would win. He would still get visits and bonding time, but not a lot of it until the brothers showed signs of moral improvement. “Did you like your quiet job?”

Mike nodded. “Can I keep doing it?”

“Absolutely. Take a two-day break; visit with your brothers and your dad. After that, you won’t see much of them for a while.”

Mike surprised Marc. “Good. I want a different future.”

“Excellent. I’ll give that to you, in time.”

“I want it.” Mike stood, sensing Marc was done. “I’m going to find Emma a tray. You want a meal?”

Marc grunted. “That would be great. Thanks.”

Mike smiled. His mouth opened...

“Get off me!”

Jennifer’s shout brought Marc from the chair. He jumped over the wolf in the doorway and plowed into the infirmary, ready to kill whoever was bothering one of his herd.

Jennifer glared at Morgan. “Touch me again. I dare you.”

Marc relaxed, figuring it out. Jennifer wanted to get up. Morgan and Kyle had told her no. *We see who won that one. She’s the enforcer. No one will force her, on anything, ever again.* Marc smiled as she noticed him. “Welcome back.”

Jennifer pushed onto wobbly legs, glowering. “What’s this shit about you giving my XO position to Debra and Kenn?”

Marc chuckled. “She’s definitely recovering.”

Jennifer gave Kyle a baleful glare. “And why were there no good moments? I’ve been on my back in a bed for weeks and not one orgasm! Would it have killed you to hook me up?”

Marc held his stomach while he chuckled. Many of the others in the sickbay were in the same condition.

Jennifer stilled suddenly, halting the amusement.

Kyle dropped to his knees by her, ready to catch her if she fell.

Everyone watched, terrified of what she would say.

Lightning flashed over the ship. A dark sky rolled toward them with ominous clouds.

Jennifer’s eyes turned red. Her voice blended into the double timbre of her witch. “The battle for the weigh station has begun.”

Marc was certain she was right. “God, help us.”
There was still no answer.

Chapter Thirty
I Must Be In Hell

1

“She went up without me!” William stood, rage surging. “She said we would ascend together!”

Only a few of the people on the beach around him glanced up. They’d adjusted to his mood swings. The refugees were sprawled at campsites and fires in a wide, smelly, trash circle around William. They were waiting for him to tell them what to do.

Nearby, a grungy man in sandals strummed his guitar.

*A light in the darkness
Safe Haven once stood
Sheltering survivors
And serving the good*

*A place of safety
In a harsh new life
Honor and duty
Among the despair and the strife*

*Blazing a path of hope
Safe Haven Refugee camp came this way*

*Arriving for many
In time to be the saving ray*

*And then they were gone, vanished
Leaving only traces...*

Dina enjoyed the guitar player's new composition, scanning the refugees around them. She counted roughly a hundred. *I wonder if William knows he has an army here.*

William knew. He hated them for it. His one link to them, the kids on the beach, was fading as their parents sat and waited for rescue. They weren't willing to help themselves. The beach was suffering from nature and the ocean, as well as the wind and the refugees. It looked and felt nothing like it had when Safe Haven was here. William hadn't understood how Angela could be okay with leaving people behind, but he did now.

William staggered toward the shore, filthy and unshaven. "She went without me..."

The musician stopped playing, picking up a more dangerous vibe than what they'd been living under for the last weeks. He slowly stored his guitar in the bag that never left his waist. The need to run grew, but he was in clear view.

The musician knelt by his small fire and began burying himself in the sand while praying William didn't turn around until he was covered.

“She said we would rule together!” William tossed his bottle into the ocean. “She lied!”

His roar finally caught attention. People began grabbing their things or walking away. They all knew not to run.

William’s attention was still caught by the movement. His lids narrowed. “She did it for you. She knew I’d never protect you the way she will.”

Families moved behind their children, certain William wouldn’t hurt them.

“You’re using them against me?!” William’s rage took over the rest of his brain.

Albert dove into his family, knocking them to the ground. He covered them as much as he could, hoping they were spared.

Insane anger flew out of William’s chest, striking the nearest people.

Lorna and her parents burned in the first blast.

The refugees panicked, fleeing.

William opened fire on them all.

The guitar player, now buried in the bloody sand, cried silent tears and waited for it to be over.

2

“Come on!” Donna dragged Brandon toward the rotten mill creek. “Get in the water.”

Brandon didn’t resist. He was still tracking the screams and magic use on his grid. They’d been overseeing the new garbage dump as the first loads were brought in. The familiar magic signature had

slammed into the walls around Ciemus and interrupted everything. William was now the biggest threat on American soil.

Donna shoved Brandon into the water and blasted the nasty liquid in desperation. “Please! We need a new deal!”

Brandon held his breath as the water came up even though he knew it wouldn’t drown them.

The water rose quickly. Brandon realized the ground was lower here, that Donna had brought them to the place where it would rise fastest. *If she’s this scared, we need more than a deal with water.*

Donna’s people observed in fear, hoping she got the spell done before William’s rage turned in their direction.

William’s mental eye swiveled toward home, to the place he’d been told to leave while another man took over his duties and his life.

“My honor.” Donna cut her hand, letting the blood merge with the water as it rose over her chest.

Brandon did the same when she gestured, amazed and afraid. William had killed almost everyone on the beach. His next target was being chosen.

The water enveloped them.

Donna ignored her hat as it was stolen by the water and the curls fading into wet strands against her pale cheeks. *I can’t believe he’s gone that far. I should have tried harder to help him.*

The Ocean King rippled through the waves. “What do you seek?”

Brandon gaped. He knew not to speak, but he stored every second for later examination.

“A new name must be added to the list.”

“Speak it.”

“As Mayor, I banish William Sinclair from our haven.”

“It is done.” The water began to recede.

Magic flashed out, surrounding the town. William would never be allowed to enter Ciemus again. Donna’s heart ached.

Brandon wasn’t sure this was enough. “What happens if he comes here?”

“Old magic will consume him. We’re safe.”

Brandon didn’t ask for how long. He already knew. Ciemus would be destroyed as soon as William managed to make a deal with the ocean.

“He can’t.” Donna let Brandon help her toward her office so she could get changed. “Angela told me that was going to be part of her deal. The ocean only gets her lifeforce if William is blacklisted from making deals.”

“Will it work?”

Donna shivered as the wind picked up. “Until Safe Haven returns. After, there’s only darkness.”

“I loathe that answer.”

“Me too.” She let go of his arm and left him standing at the bottom entrance.

Brandon watched her, heart thumping. He wanted Donna. He just hadn’t decided if he was going to do anything about it.

Donna stopped. She turned on the stairs, heart hurting. “Drink with me?”

Brandon lifted a brow. “Drink or...?”

Donna shrugged.

Brandon went up the stairs.

In the distance, William’s rage roared unchecked.

3

“There she goes!”

“Get her!”

Slavers chased the fleeing SUV, bouncing between trees and over the rough Georgia terrain. Animals flew from their dens, leaving their young to fend for themselves. The slavers had been watching the apartment complex for days, waiting on the lone woman to make her move. Blondes were valuable.

Nancy spun into a gravel lot and aimed for the rear field, hoping her smaller vehicle would be able to get through where their bigger trucks couldn’t. She’d left the complex at exactly the wrong time and drawn the attention of a small scout team rolling by. She had ducked back in and hidden, but they waited her out.

She rammed the weak fence, sending pieces of metal flying. Gear flew loose from her tied down tarp and smacked into the ground, shattering the contents. *Should have done a better job there.*

Nancy spotted two paths ahead. One led to the crammed highway. The other was unknown.

She took the rougher mystery road, praying for a miracle as one of the trucks neared her bumper.

Nancy gunned the gas. "Come on!"

The bigger truck slammed into her rear panel. The pit sent her spinning into a slushy drift. Snow flew up from the tires as she fought for control.

The bigger truck pitted her again, harder.

The wheel spun out of her grip. Her truck smacked into a guardrail and came to an abrupt stop.

Lightning flashed. Thunder cracked. The sky opened up, drenching the land.

Nancy fired at the boots coming to her door. Upside down, it was a beautiful shot.

The man screamed, falling.

The other door was ripped open.

Nancy fired into the man's face.

Hands grabbed her other arm and dragged her from the truck.

Adrian!

There was no answer.

4

"Faster!"

David tried to coax more speed from the armored car, but it was built for endurance.

"It's falling!" Patricia held onto her kids in the rear as the ground behind them rumbled and split.

The earthquake was still shaking, but they couldn't stop or the crack would swallow them.

Lance watched the road. "Left!"

David veered around another opening crack, heart pounding. He hit the gas again to take the next curve in the winding road. The armored car slid on a layer of fresh ash, moving toward the new crack.

Another tremor rattled the ground.

The armored car hit a chunk of debris and regained traction.

David took the first clear turn and got them away from the rifts opening in the ground. He took them west, hoping the voice in his mind was right about it being the safest place for this family now that Angela was dead.

"She ascended." Lance ignored his wife's glare. "There's a difference."

"He doesn't need to know." Patricia sniffed, nose rising. "He's Invisible, by choice."

David was eager for a distraction to keep his mind from dwelling on their near miss with death. "Why do you hate your own kind?"

Patricia glared. "You're not our kind."

"I meant Angela and Adrian."

Patricia's lips clamped together.

Lance was grateful for all David was doing for them. "We don't know the female leader. The male leader is a Mitchel."

David frowned. "I know."

Lance kept an eye on the rough ground. "Pat's family knew them too. They grew up together."

David slowed to keep from wasting fuel. “That doesn’t explain the animosity.”

“Her sister—”

“Stop!”

Lance patted his wife’s tense wrist. “He needs to know.”

“Why?!”

“So he can keep them away from us.”

Patricia accepted that answer. She gave a curt nod.

Lance turned back to David. “Her sister was killed by a Mitchel. The same man raped Patricia and gave us two beautiful children to love.”

David was stunned. “Was it Adrian?”

Neither of them answered.

5

“She’s dead! Safe Haven’s leader is dead!” Sally danced around the counter of the general store in middle Kansas, uncaring that the locals were eying her in fear or annoyance.

Her weekly trip in provided the dying town with fresh revenue. It was the reason they tolerated her odd behavior. The rest of the town was quiet and helpful. Sally didn’t fit in here.

“I knew they wouldn’t make it! They dropped me off here, but I’m safe when she’s dead!”

One of her wolf pups grabbed the end of a tablecloth and tugged, spilling a stack of blankets.

“Get those animals out of here!” The shop owner didn’t like dogs or wolves, and the woman was traveling with both.

Sally thought of protesting, but she reconsidered when she saw the man’s big hand go toward the shotgun on the counter. She whistled. “Let’s go.”

Sally trotted to the exit, basket in hand. Her dogs and wolf pups followed.

The locals watched her go. The oldest among them, Tia, walked to the window to keep observing. Despite the crazy behavior, Tia knew a sly character when she met one.

“Do you want us to follow her?”

Tia grunted at her granddaughter’s question. “Make sure we know where she’s staying.” Tia saw lightning flashing in the distance; the sky roiled with black and yellow clouds. “Storm’s coming—a big one. Don’t get caught in it. Strange things come out of the water now.”

“Do you think she’s right?” The store owner shook out the blankets one by one and refolded them. “Is Safe Haven really gone?”

Tia sighed. “No. We’re not that lucky.”

The owner grunted. “Luck is for magic users.”

Tia patted her guns. “So are these.”

6

A mile from the tiny town where Sally had chosen to homestead in a church, a hole in the

ground began to widen. The dirt fell in as a rusty, squealing hatch opened. A helmet appeared, then a wary face and lean body in full armor.

The man scanned in every direction before holding up a small box. He checked the reading when it beeped, then waved. “We’re clear. Bring them up.” He stepped out to make room and stand guard.

Soldiers began emerging from the bunker, some of them seeing daylight for the first time in a year.

Four dozen soldiers lined up and waited for orders as the hatch closed and locked from the inside. This tunnel system was one of hundreds crossing under the country. Few people not in government work knew they existed. Much like rogue waves had to be filmed to be believed, underground tunnels in America had existed for decades without proof of them.

“Our orders are simple for this first scavenging run. We’re going to take over the nearest town, strip it of resources and any able-bodied males. We’re using knockout darts. Do not kill the locals. We need them.”

“What about me?” Paul didn’t know what Rankin expected.

“Do your tests and try to stay out of the way.” Regan knew not to interfere with orders. That didn’t mean he had to be nice to the boss’s weak son. Regan motioned toward the distant shadows of buildings through moldy trees. “Let’s get this town

cleared and get back. Boss said we have twelve hours. We're going to do it in half that."

"Why?" Paul hated it belowground. "There's a lot out here to study."

Rankin shoved Paul out of the way. "Shut up, Rabbit. Corbin might be your father, but you're useless. Follow my orders or you won't make it back."

Paul dropped his head. He had read the signs too well. Now that Safe Haven was gone, the government was free to come back up. *If they're really gone... Mitchels are hard to kill. Everyone knows that. Why doesn't my father?*

7

I'm a Mitchel. We're hard to kill.

"I'll come for you now." Billy tossed in his sleeping bag, mutters filling the elevator of the parking garage in Nucla, Colorado.

Stay on your mission.

Billy's dream changed to a field of corn around an evil house.

"In here!" Billy slammed the door shut behind Edward and fired through the filthy screen, hitting the wolf about to come straight through the flimsy mesh. He fired again, wounding the second snarling wolf.

The other animals turned tail toward the cover of the corn.

“I think we’re okay for a minute,” Billy gasped, trying to control his breath as he reloaded.

“Um, Bill?”

Edward’s tone increased the speed of Billy’s fingers.

Edward grimaced as the wolf snarled, tensing for the leap. He was too close for a straight aim. He dropped to his knees and he fired.

Billy’s shot went through the wolf’s eye.

Edward’s tore its throat open.

Blood rained onto the wooden slats like a flood.

Edward shoved the gory carcass off his legs and joined Billy at the door. “I’m starting to get the feeling we’re not wanted here,” Billy cracked.

“You too, huh?” Edward grinned, preparing to kick the door open while Billy covered him. “I thought it was just me they didn’t like.”

Billy nodded once, indicating he was set.

Edward used his strength to kick with, shattering the lock on the door. It banged against the frame with a thick crack, then slowly swung back in a haunted screech that echoed to all corners of the huge house.

Edward sighed. “So much for not knowing exactly where we are.”

Billy shrugged, stepping into the old kitchen. “Won’t matter in the end.”

“No.” Edward covered Billy as he moved farther into the wide room. “No, it won’t.”

Thunder rolled; the wind howled.

Billy snapped awake from the dream, shivering. *So vivid! I can't wait to be living that life.*

The storm raged around his shelter, but he wasn't concerned. If it fell and he died, that was fate. If it held, he would continue on. That was also fate.

Billy listened, drawing his knife. Something slithered.

Thud! His blade sank into the snake that had escaped its bucket prison while he slept.

Debris hit the garage, rattling the walls. Billy ignored it in favor of securing his dinner. The beans had been soaking for half a day now. He flipped on his lantern and scanned his 10' x 10' den. The snake had been in here when he arrived—a free meal.

Billy cleaned the snake and put the meat into the pot on top of his dead fire. He cleaned up the mess and lit the tinder, then uncovered the dented corner he'd kicked out to allow smoke an escape. During the storm was a perfect time to cook a big meal that he could eat off of for days. His survival skills had sharpened to a fine point while he'd been on his own.

“Alexa?”

No answer.

Billy hated it that she only came to him in his dreams. He also loved it. In that realm, he could tell her anything and he did. They had few secrets left and they hadn't even met.

“She's in trouble.” Billy wanted to go straight to her. He was reasonably sure he'd pinpointed her

location by details in the background and words she used. It would take months to reach Hawaii, but he could do it. She'd told him no every time he begged her. Billy didn't understand why his job was more important than her freedom, but he didn't argue, only begged. She'd refused to relent, so he was still in middle America, hunting soldiers.

Billy scanned the feel of the land around him. He didn't need to see it to read it.

When he was satisfied that he was still alone, Billy turned on his small radio.

Haunting tones came out of the box.

Billy sang, cooked, sewed, and longed to be with his own kind.

8

The Weigh Station

“What have you done?!” The Messenger sank to his knees inside the layered shields over him and the group of kids. He was in the center, being held captive by bloody, angry children slobbering for more justice.

Angela absorbed a final blast from Azeez, then sent it right back, with her hatred.

He screamed, burning alive.

Teus, the only surviving level one angel, fled through the cloud wall.

“Mark that spot!” Angela kept an eye on it herself until Doug limped over and smeared his bloody hand down the cloudy surface.

The chess room of the weigh station had been completely destroyed. Smoldering boards and tables littered the ground. Even Earth's board had been erased. Angela had done that one herself, and with gladness. Even if her replacements returned to betting, their planet wouldn't be a target.

"What now?" Pam joined Angela. She was glad to be here, despite the ugly chore. They'd arrived together and instantly started fighting. Some of it had been with magic, but most of it had been Eagle training and pure adrenaline at being brought into the middle of a vicious battle. The level ones up here had been prepared to defend the weigh station, but not against enforcers. They'd been helpless to avoid the locks on their magic.

Daryl helped Erika to her feet, then went to check on Donald, who had taken several hits. Without power, he'd been an energy source during the fight and protected by the kids.

Donald took the bloody hand up, dazed but willing. This enemy hadn't been easy to kill. He grabbed his knife, gun empty. "Next?"

"You're the supervisor." Angela pointed at the kids, then the Messenger. "Kill him. Seventeen thousand, five hundred times. Save his last six lives for my interrogation."

The Messenger screamed as it began.

Donald went to supervise, not feeling guilt. He'd seen the replay of Angela's first meeting up here and felt the lack of empathy for those they'd

destroyed through their bets. To get answers, this had to happen.

Angela walked through the carnage, counting her survivors. She'd come with a group big enough to overwhelm each area, but she'd also brought two young enforcers who'd been eager to use their gifts. Angela motioned them over from their places on duty at the entrance.

Heather and Robbie ran to her side, each taking her hand.

Angela sent warmth to them both. "You've done well. I know it was hard for you. Are you sure you want to keep going?"

Both children nodded.

They were splattered in blood, but they'd never felt more innocent to Angela. "Take a few of his lives to strengthen yourselves. Remember to never let the layer over him go below ten shields."

"Yes, Alpha."

The children ran to join the circle around the Messenger.

"Let us in!"

"One at a time."

The enforcers slid between the layers.

Fresh shrieks pierced the smoky air.

Near the entrance, Doug put an arm around Claire and the other around Romeo, refusing to think about anything until it was all over.

Claire huddled under his big arm and stewed on what it all meant.

Romeo watched the descendant children and wished he was like them.

So did Ginny. She edged over to Romeo, the only other child who wasn't attacking the horned man in the center of the circle.

Romeo smiled at her. "You're like me?"

Ginny nodded. "I think so." She frowned. "Were you sick?"

Romeo nodded, smile fading. "I was supposed to die."

Doug groaned.

"Me too." Ginny rotated to stare at Angela in adoration. "She saved me."

"She saved all of us." Pam was copying Angela, who was now walking the small battlefield to check on the survivors and verify the dead. "We were all dying."

Doug sucked in air. "We can't return...can we?"

Pam slowly shook her head. "I don't think so, but we'll be together up here, right?"

Doug nodded, tears welling. "I didn't want to die yet."

Pam laughed so she didn't cry too. "We can't ever die now, Doug. Think about it. You get to be with your adopted son and some of your friends, forever." Her eyes shined. "That's heaven, right?"

Doug's mind began working it through.

Pam moved on, needing to be useful. Her heart was broken that neither of her mates were here and at the same time, she was elated. *They get to live. That's all I wanted.*

Angela finished her circle of the trashed room, ending with Brittani. She knelt in front of the bloody, shocked woman. “Are you okay?”

Brittani looked up, tears in her eyes. “I’m not worthy of this. I shouldn’t be here.”

Angela brushed Brittani’s bloody curls back from her face. “None of us are.” She held out a hand.

Brittani took it, letting Angela pull her to her feet.

Angela gave the woman a short, hard hug. “Stay with me now.”

Brittani zeroed in on Angela’s hip and stuck herself there.

Louder screams echoed.

Voices muttered from the other areas.

Angela waved to those not handling the Messenger. “I can’t give the other angels time to regroup. We have to go now.” Angela scanned the dazed, bloody faces of her army as they surrounded her.

Pam, Daryl, Brittani, Donald, Doug, Erika, and Elijah came over right away.

Claire and Ray were slower. Neither of them wanted to repeat their behavior, but they didn’t feel they could refuse either.

“I need two killers.”

A dozen young, eager faces whipped toward her.

Angela pointed at Ray, then Claire. “Take their place and take your turn with the Messenger or die

like you were meant to. This is the only choice I can offer.” She pointed at the trapped Messenger, who had just reappeared. “It’s his fault it has to be this way. He won’t tell us the truth. When we get to his last lives, we get answers.”

Ray hardened his heart. “How long will this take?”

Angela sighed. “Ten days of 24-hour work if he continues to reappear at the same rate.”

Ray spun toward the Messenger as Brea took his place.

Claire began to sob. “I don’t want to be here! Send me back to die. This is wrong.”

Angela looked at Doug, who was staring at Claire in pain but not trying to talk her out of it. *She wasn’t his match either. Damn it!*

“Please?” Claire was starting to go crazy. “I’m dead. No, I’m in heaven, killing angels. I’m dead! There is no heaven. I must be in hell.”

Angela waved a hand.

Claire’s body fell through the cloud floor. There was no noise.

“Anyone else?” Angela waited, hoping the rest of her choices were good.

“Maybe.” Wade approached Angela, hands on empty guns. “Is there a reward at the end of this? Like a wish where we get to go back and live?”

“That has not been revealed. I fight because it’s right. I chose you because you were going to die anyway and it will hurt me to lose you, any of you.

This was the only way I could help.” Angela tried not to cry. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do better.”

“Will we get to see our loved ones again. When they die?” Ray had to know he’d get a chance to say goodbye to Grant at some point.

The kids paused in killing to hear her answer.

Angela nodded. “When their time comes, I’ll evaluate them first for these rooms—my word on it.”

“You’re not staying.” Wade shrugged. “I guess I knew that. You recovered from the sickness.”

Angela frowned distractedly. “How do you know that?”

“I heard you, while I was under, helping people, begging fate to leave us alone. I know you tried.” Wade patted his gun. “So how do we get more ammo?”

“Ask for it.” Angela waited, not certain about this part.

Wade cleared his throat. “Can I have more ammo?”

Nothing happened.

He frowned. “Okay... More specific. Can I have three mags of ammunition...for my .45? Please?”

Weight sank into his pockets. Wade grinned, pulling out a mag. “Awesome!”

Around him, others began doing the same.

Angela considered what they’d just learned and pushed it. “Can I have a gun that never runs out of bullets?”

Nothing happened.

Angela looked at Wade.

Wade grinned. “More specific, maybe?”

Angela thought about it. “Okay. Can I have a 9mm that never needs to be reloaded?”

Weight sank into her backpack.

Angela hurried to retrieve it, excited by the possibilities. She pulled out an exact copy of the weapon she had now. Angela switched them and put the backpack over her shoulder. She also listened for people to make unreasonable requests and was pleased when they didn't.

“It won't refill me.” Ray held up his empty gun. “None of it works for me.”

Angela looked around. “Does anyone have something they didn't ask for?”

Doug sighed. “I do.” The weight of the fresh mags had settled into his pocket and his heart.

“Switch out.” Angela had a horrible idea of what that meant. Doug really couldn't go back. He'd been chosen to stay, like everyone else about to march back into the fire upon her command. Angela hated that feeling. She straightened her shoulders. *It's my army. When I leave, I'll take who I want, and the rules be damned.*

Doug had to ask. “What happens to Safe Haven if we lose?”

“It will cease to exist.” Angela walked to the blood-marked path in the cloud wall. “Surrender now and receive my mercy!”

Panic came from the other side of the wall, but there was no call of surrender.

Angela put a hand on the bloody print. “These rooms are mine by birthright. Let me pass.”

The clouds parted, revealing the first dim tunnel. Angela marched into the dirty space.

Her shocked army followed.

Chapter Thirty-One
Nightly Notes

Day 1

These are my nightly notes. Am I doing this right? Who the hell knows? It looks like the ones in your books, so hopefully it will get you caught up when you return. And while I'm on that, thank you for this job, Angie. It truly sucks.

Illness

1 death—Claire.

Camp

Are going nuts. They know you're gone and it's getting ugly. As soon as I finish this red tape, I'll spend the night with them instead of you. That also sucks. I hope you can feed from my aggravation.

Location

We're making ten miles a day. I told Theo to slow it to eight. I know you said ten days at the most, but it feels like we should cover a few extra.

Supplies

We're on the third batch of water now. Tests are good since we upped the bleach dosage like Tonya

suggested. The fountains are okay now, but we're all avoiding them anyway.

Food is holding steady. Gus has the kitchen running like a well-oiled machine and the meals are rather good. Brittani hasn't been back there yet.

Medicines are low, I'm sure. I'm doing inventory tomorrow on that.

Security

Prisoners are fine. I assigned Stanley to help there. He and Ramer are friends. Hope it helps. I recommend banishment if he backslides. Our new guest, McClery, hasn't been trouble so far. He also isn't saying much now, which is good. None of the guards are in the mood for tricks.

Mike picked up a lot of calls from home when you ascended. Several were for help. A descendant is killing refugees, just because they survived. The rest of the calls were celebrations of your death. Sick bastards.

This was indeed a clever plan, Angie. McClery confirmed what we assumed. The UN had a time set from the moment we dropped anchor. While we were attacked by the first scavengers, boats came through the fog behind us and boarded both ships. They knew it would take at least two hours for our engines to cool down before we could refuel. Once

they saw the fuel being loaded, that was their cue to act. They had that first two hours to get into place. At the two-hour mark, the people on land were supposed to make contact and distract us so their waiting teams could engage.

I've been watching the radar. So far, no followers or contact. Kendle did her job.

DOC

I added our confirmation to the book. The time is limited to just days for a visit unless the host invites them to stay. Then they lose their wings, which means they are mortal. Kronus stayed down here too long. I hope that isn't a yin and yang thing because you'll be up there longer than he was down here. Be safe, love.

Other

Adrian isn't handling this well. His thoughts are sliding into revenge, like you predicted. I'm sticking to our plan, but I don't think it will hold until you return.

Day 2

Illness

2 deaths—Leo, Cris

We're low on all medications related to this illness. Morgan put together a list of needs. We're searching for substitutes.

Camp

We told the camp everything. I made Adrian come in and support it. There was a little talk of going back to America, but people with sick family shut it down fast. They decided to wait for your return to make that choice. You were right—they're still too gullible. We'll work on it. In the future, no one will be able to do this to them again.

Location

We've come another ten miles instead of eight. Theo and his new crew are working on it. The tide was faster in places and dragged us along. I had no idea that would happen. I'm definitely not a Navy man.

Supplies

Water is good for now. We're cleaning batches around the clock. Almost everything we had in reserve is gone.

Food is still holding steady on your predicted numbers. We had problems with ants, though. We sanitized the kitchen and put down bait in the corners. Some people think they came in on the wind, others think they were already here. Either way, the tiny monsters have to go. They don't have mutations and they're not the wrong size, but they still annoy everyone and invade food stocks. Tonya threatened to kill me over it if anything happens to her cats. I told her as long as they're not stupid

enough to lick ant bait, they're fine. She then called the two critters to her and escorted them to the kitchen. She gave them a lesson on avoiding the poison. I wanted to laugh, but... Anyway, we placed vent covers over them so the felines will leave it alone.

Security

Adrian is being shunned. The Eagles revoked his conditional banishment. I had nothing to do with it. Neil led that charge. I also didn't ask why. I'm leaving that for you.

DOC

Angie, Kenn's baby has animal gifts. According to William's book, gifts come from the mother or the higher level parent. In this case, that's Kenn. Which means he has an unlocked animal ability. That might be handy when we go home.

Other

So far, the only way I feel different is my hair going gray and my joints aching. How the hell have you stood the constant drain this long? Are you even human? I've never heard you complain about the physical part. I now suspect you are a robot with an amazing ass.

Day 3

Illness

2 more deaths—Joyce, Vanessa

Camp

The camp is tired of being stressed. I suggested they use the entertainment floors again and enjoy the amenities. It was shocking how fast they went for it. On a side note, Angie, I don't like scheming and plotting any more now than I did before. That's a good sign, right? Something kicked in this morning, but I can't explain it yet. I'll try later.

Location

Seven miles. The water was full of bodies in a debris field moving toward the ship today. We went around.

Supplies

The last batch of water we filtered tested high for radioactive particles again. We increased the bleach and put everyone back on water rations, so they won't be absorbing so much chlorine. As soon as the levels lower, we'll be back on full water. I made exceptions for entertainment areas to keep the camp happy. They know the risks. I made sure of it.

Security

Jayda went back to guarding the brig last night, by choice. I found her and Stanley singing this morning, while Ramer cried and the other prisoners covered their ears. I didn't ask.

We drugged Adrian today. His constant pacing outside the infirmary was bad, but the muttering started disturbing the patients. He's sleeping for the next four to six hours. I know you wanted him to stay away, but I'll probably let him sit with you tomorrow. I can't take the pacing either.

Day 4

Illness

0 deaths today!

1 improvement—Grant sat up and had broth this evening. It lifted the mood of camp to know not all coma patients will die. To be honest, it did the same for me. I never realized how a leader in this camp feels the emotions of everyone—good and bad. It's a rollercoaster that only stops when I sleep.

Camp

The camp spent the night partying and remembering why they're here. They had a good time. The noise covered the sound of the storm. What are you doing up there? Nature is furious. We're being hit by all types of wind. Topside is forbidden.

Location

We anchored during the storm. We're right where you and I estimated for this point.

Supplies

No change in water or food situation. We found two crates of medication. There wasn't any Prussian Blue, but we found boxes of Potassium iodide. I sent one to the infirmary and locked up the other three.

Security

Adrian told the camp that Neil is a descendant. He wasn't aiming at me, though it could have caused a lot of trouble. It was all against Neil. To my surprise, the camp already knew. Ralph said they'd decided Neil's lies didn't matter and then he floored me. He said Neil is on your council. If he thought Seth and Becky were a threat to you, he had a duty to remove them.

After that, I got drunk and passed out by your cot. I'm writing this with a hangover while Morgan tries to shove coffee into me. I don't feel any different, but I am. Is this how isolating it was for you...?

I'm sorry.

Day 5

Illness

3 deaths today. Zane, Doris, Toby.

It's one step forward and three steps back with this radiation sickness!

All the people you took had a sponge bath today and were given what little energy I had. Others helped—Kendle, Morgan, Kenn, Kyle. I didn't tell them, but they know I'm worried.

Camp

The camp is enjoying the entertainments. No fights so far, but a lot of messes. The cleaning crew doesn't mind. It's better than shit and puke.

Location

We're moving again. Two miles today. The wind settled down, but the sky is ugly, like right after the war. We're not seeing birds or fish, but we're not directly monitoring for them yet. I don't have enough manpower. Even those who weren't sick are busy in the infirmary or volunteering in shifts to patrol the ship. The camp loved that suggestion. It keeps them in the loop.

Supplies

We're sorting through the cargo area now. I hope we'll find more medical supplies. We're still going through it faster than I can keep up.

Other

Burn boxes have started coming to our new cabin. I haven't touched them yet. Not sure I can.

I miss you.

Day 6

Illness

0 deaths. I'm not getting my hopes up. Neither are the medics. Spencer and Maxine are in their final hours. There's nothing I can do to stop it. Endless power and I'm still useless!

Camp

The camp is hungover every morning now. I put a limit on how many drinks and bottles can go out per hour, but I doubt it will help. We'll have to do something about the effect of this, maybe. I thought letting them have a drink or two would help ease the tension. I didn't think it would become a habit.

Location

Ten miles today. Back on course, but still too fast. We're talking to Grant tomorrow on that. He's better now, but he refuses to leave Ray.

Supplies

No change. We're still sorting.

Security

James punched Zack, for no reason I was told. Then they shook hands. I got the feeling it was connected to Neil, so I didn't push for details.

DOC

Adrian stopped pacing today. He's on the rear of the ship now, drinking and talking to himself. We're leaving him alone. The voices in his mind have kicked in fully, but his bond with you is driving him crazy.

Other

Tonya is still caring for Courtney. She's not speaking to Kenn at all and he's avoiding both females. Same with Gus and his women. Brittani's parents visited her today. It was so sad that I cried with them while I was on the bridge, getting updates from Theo. That's a powerful family. I guess you knew that when you took Brittani up there with you.

Day 7

Illness

2 deaths—Spencer, Maxine

Courtney didn't lose the baby. We don't know about effects yet, but the heartbeat is strong. We're keeping her in the infirmary until she's eating and doing things on her own. Tonya is still helping her. You can imagine how awkward that is, for both of them.

Camp

I cut off the drinking. We had two fights and a theft, along with property damage. I used my alpha wave. I scared them into doing what's right. And the

Eagles rewarded me with a nightcap. I don't understand anything anymore.

Location

Eight miles. We finally nailed the speed! Okay, Grant was able to tell us how to calculate it, but still, it was a great moment.

Supplies

Tonya figured out we can make Prussian Blue, but I didn't get the exact details on it. She said they brought bottles of unmixed ferric hexacyanoferrate from the cargo hold, so we're back to being okay on those meds for a bit. Unless we have another outbreak. Man, I hope we don't have to do this again. I'll carry the pain of not being able to help them until I'm a dirty old man who can only think bad thoughts because he's so used up. You'll sit on my lap, right?

Security

Mike isn't getting any radio calls now. We don't know if it's because home went quiet, or if we're just out of range. I want to believe in the simplest answer, but the power signatures from the byzan are still coming through clear. He's calling our kind now, calling them and killing them.

Other

Tonya asked permission to test camp people for radiation sickness whenever they come to her for

something. I agreed and signed the paper in the folder to make it an official order. Tonya may have spotted something in Kendle's blood that identifies the rage illness. She's working on a way to test for it. There was also a form in the folder allowing her to test for other illnesses without permission. I signed it. ...was that right?

Day 8

Illness

0 deaths.

3 improvements:

James. His infection is finally responding.

Brittani. Her gunshot wound is also improving now, though she's still unconscious, as you know. We switched meds for her, and the stronger antibiotic was effective, so we're using it on all of them.

Ivan is walking and showering on his own. He's the only one from our deck, other than us, who has recovered so far.

Camp

The camp cleaned their cabins and hallways today. I'm still in shock. I asked Ralph whose idea it was. He swears it was spontaneous after Candy was brought to the camp area. Her labor stopped. Adrian volunteered to look after her. I refused because he would have been in the living quarters

too much. I gave Tracy the job. Those two seem to get along pretty well now.

The kids were also brought up to the camp cabins, except for ours. They're in our cabin with Molly and Daisey. Those twins are funny. They don't like any man but me. Even Kyle got peed on when he came to give me updates.

Location

We're anchored again for another storm. We did see a bird in the mix, but Theo isn't sure if it was alive.

Supplies

The cargo area is half sorted. Camp members have volunteered. So have Eagles who can't stand to be in the infirmary anymore. I'll have better numbers in a couple more days.

Security

McClery hanged himself overnight. I changed the rules on what prisoners go through when they're brought in. From now on, it will be just like before the war, where we take everything, including their belts. I guess you know how bad that makes me feel. It also hurt Jayda. She was blaming herself. Kenn talked to her a little while ago. She seemed better after he left.

DOC

I had the nightly meeting with the kids and camp together. It went okay. I'll be glad when you're back to help me with the topics. I chose a short story about being a good Samaritan, but I wish I'd picked the longer one about having faith when the lights go out. It would have helped me.

Other

A few people have asked about training classes for descendants and Eagles. They already assume it has to be separate. A few have also requested we not use magic in front of them. You were right. It's coming, and soon.

Day 9

Illness

Kayla and Cecilia died overnight. Every time we get hope, it's crushed. Do your own damn report!

Day 9

I'm doing this on day 10, at 5am. I couldn't sleep. I'm sorry, baby. I now understand what you were going through. Every death kills a part of me, and I don't even like some of these people! Please come home tomorrow. I can't do this.

Camp

Ralph is so much more than what Adrian had him doing. He's able to get people to work together and that is a gift. The living area has been refitted to give more space and comforts. It now has a small medical wing so patients in the recovery stage can still be with their friends and family. Ivan wants to go. So does Tommy. I told them tomorrow will tell, but Ivan's going to leave on his own even if Morgan says no. As soon as he woke and found you there, he started getting better at a rapid rate. I think he's willing himself well so he can have an official shift over you. I admire that type of strength.

I also want him gone, Angie. I guess you know that.

Location

We did twenty miles today to avoid another debris field. The tide caught us and saved fuel, but we're ahead of schedule. Tomorrow, we'll probably drop anchor for half a day to get back on time.

Supplies

No change. The sorting slowed a little yesterday. We found a box of photos and got lost in grieving.

Security

Kenn and Debra are good together. They cover the days, and I have the nights with the camp and the kids. I chose a cabin in their area as a temporary spot while you recover, but I might want to stay there. When they're all sleeping, it feels good. I assume that's a side effect of being this new man... It's odd. I need them so much! I hope they never find out how easily I can be killed now. All it would take is their rejection.

DOC

You were right about Tonya's connection to the ship. I'm studying it. So is Kenn and a few others. We don't understand much yet, but I assume you'll fill us in after you get back. That should have been today...

Day 10

Illness

No deaths.

All radiation patients are showing improvement except for the names you left, the people you took. The death rate was so high! We have them on IVs, but they're wasting away. Please don't be gone

much longer. We all need you, even if death does ride us because you survive.

Camp

People are leaving things at the door to the burning room. I'm sorry they know, but I'm also glad we don't have to keep trying to hide it. I've instructed Theo to start on something for a memorial. He said he has ideas.

Location

We're anchored, waiting. Day ten is over as I write this...

Supplies

Cargo area has been sorted. Organization will come next.

Security

It looks like the UN didn't know exactly where we'd go, so they tried to cover it all. We're staying out of sight of land, and out of range of descendant scans. Unless they've got a byzan, they don't know we're not captives.

DOC

I copied a gift. I feel so...inhuman. You have to come back. You hear me?! I can't be this, alone. I need you.

Other

We refueled today, using the cargo reserve. We can do that twice more and then we won't have enough fuel to get home in this ship. I'm searching for another fuel station we can use. So far, there are too many traps waiting for us.

While we were stopped, we changed out the towline. That was ugly. If you want to laugh, have Theo replay it for you. I've never seen one man fall that many times in the oil we spilled trying to get it loose.

Day 11

Illness

No change.

Camp

No change.

Location

No change.

Supplies

Blah blah.

Other

Where are you, baby?

Marc looked up as the office door opened.

Cathy came in with Leeann over her shoulder. The recovering little girl appeared to be asleep.

“What’s going on?”

Cathy wasn’t sure what to do. “She tried to leave again. I had Morgan sedate her.”

Marc sighed, standing. *I already hate this part of the job.* He waved a hand, casting two spells at once.

Leeann didn’t respond.

Marc hadn’t expected her to. “That’s it.”

Cathy was surprised it was that simple. She’d expected it to take longer at least. Cathy shifted the girl higher onto her shoulder. “What do we do now?”

Marc shrugged. “We go back to forgetting Billy was ever a part of Safe Haven. He’s the only one who can trigger her memory.”

“What about talk?” Cathy marveled at being able to stand and chat while holding the girl. She was in great shape, thanks to this camp and the constant struggle to survive. “Someone is bound to mention it eventually.”

“Not for a while. No one feels like chatting about past traitors when death is hovering over their shoulder.”

“What about after?” It was her way of asking if they were going to survive this, if they had an after.

“We’ll put her with Conner and the animals.”

Cathy frowned. “Why?”

“Because Zack’s son, Mike, is going to be there.”

“Matchmaking?”

Marc sighed. “More like a desperate attempt to change the future. Adrian warned me it can’t normally be done, but I’d give a lot to be able to change this one.”

“Is it so bad?” Cathy wondered if Marc had noticed her strength. Some of their Eagles couldn’t even do this. “If he waits until she’s older, they could be happy together. She loves him.”

“If she goes to him, it will end all chance of us winning the final battle.”

Cathy’s concern grew. “She’s that important?”

Marc shook his head. “Billy is. We can’t let her interfere with the job he’s doing in the west.”

“Even if it means removing her?”

“Yes.” Marc opened the notebook as Cathy left to take the girl back to the infirmary.

Other

I blocked Leeann’s memory tonight and locked her gifts. I hope it works. If not, you’ll have to remove that one. I just can’t. She’s too much like you.

Marc dropped the pen and put his head down on the desk. *Where are you? Are you coming back to us, to me? I’m sorry for all the times I wasn’t fair, the times I hurt you. Please come home and give me a chance to make it all better.*

Silence met his pleas.

Chapter Thirty-Two
There's No Avoiding Fate
December 21st

1

“Code blue!”

“Help!”

“Code blue!”

Shouts circled the infirmary as unconscious patients stopped breathing, at the same time.

In the office across the hall, Marc winced. *It's over.*

He joined Adrian in the corridor, watching through the small window. “I’m afraid to go in.”

“Me too.” Adrian squared his shoulders. “If she didn’t come back, kill me.”

“Same.”

“Together?”

Marc hated himself for it, but he needed the support and only Adrian really understood how he felt at this moment. “Yes. One more time.”

Adrian and Marc stepped into hell together.

“Boss?” Morgan hurried to Angela as she blinked. Tears rolled over her cheeks in waves.

Morgan held her while she bawled, fighting the guilt as he and the other medics offered comfort

instead of trying to revive people. Marc had made it clear that wouldn't be possible this time.

“Help me!”

“Get over here!”

The other medics looked to Angela as people begged for assistance.

Angela kept crying. “I'm sorry. They're gone. I'm sorry.”

Morgan rocked her, heart breaking.

Marc and Adrian stayed back, scanning for other survivors. Neither man moved yet or spoke, not sure if they could. Finding out she was alive was overwhelming. The last eleven days had been rough as the illness finished ravaging their sick people. They'd convinced themselves she wasn't coming back; she would stay up there where no one would ever hound her again for sex, for love, for loyalty or anything else.

“A second chance.”

Marc nodded, bitter. “And we'll screw it up again. Right?”

Adrian shrugged. “We are human. I'm not sure we can do anything else.”

Ray opened his eyes. The ceiling came into focus. He narrowed in on the tiny holes in the tile.
I'm back. How am I back?

“...Ray?”

Ray turned his head, wincing at weak, sore neck muscles. “Yes?”

Grant collapsed by the cot, weeping.

Hope swept through the infirmary as people realized those who were still unconscious might have survived.

“Sammi?” Amy blinked. “Thirsty.”

Samantha stared at the little girl, shock taking over.

Neil eased by Marc and Adrian to help Samantha into a chair. Then he got the little girl a drink of water, smiling at her while ignoring those grieving for their dead. He felt bad for them, but right now, he was thrilled for Samantha.

Across the room, Daryl groped out for Brittani’s cold hand. “She wanted to stay up there.” His pain washed over the room.

Brittani gasped, chest arching. She sucked in air, unaware of people jumping and shouting in surprise.

Daryl clutched her, feeling warmth start running through her fingers. “How?”

Brittani groaned, pain sinking into her body as she woke the rest of the way. “Too many. She changed the required number per room.”

Daryl crawled from his cot and hugged her. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” She clutched him close, gasping in another lungful of beautiful air. “Love.”

“Same.”

“Nooo!” Panaji hugged Erika’s lifeless body.

Next to him, Tommy stared at Erika’s blue face. Blood trickled from her mouth onto Panaji’s arm. *I could have loved her.*

“Damn.” Tim gestured toward Donald. His arm hung from the cot; blood dripped from his nose. “We lost another one.”

Debra knelt by Doug and Romeo, feeling for a pulse.

She shook her head at Harry, who was now writing names on his clipboard.

Damn it! Adrian scanned the room. Five cots still needed to be checked. *Be alive. Be alive. All of you, be alive!*

Debra shook her head again. All four kids from the UN encounters were dead.

That only left Pam.

Over Angela’s shoulder, Morgan watched for signs of life in Pam’s blue skin. A blood drop rolled from her nose and slid down her cheek. *Please, God. Please.*

Debra slowly went to Pam’s cot, not getting a life vibe.

Morgan kept begging. *Please, God. Please. I’ll do anything you want.*

Debra knelt to feel for a pulse.

Silence fell between the cries and tears.

Debra drew in a breath.

So did Pam.

Debra lunged back, fighting the need to grab her gun.

Morgan flew to Pam, bumping into the cot. He grabbed her up. “Baby!”

Pam hugged him back, mostly to stop the squeezing. She gasped in air.

Morgan lowered her. “Sorry! Sorry! You’re back!”

Those who’d lost a loved one or friend glared bitterly at the couple. There wasn’t going to be a happy ending for them.

Marc sent energy into Angela, sliding into Morgan’s spot.

Angela accepted it, lids shutting. “No pain.”

Marc kissed the top of her gray head. “Fill up and sleep, baby. We are 5-by.”

Angela lost consciousness.

Adrian felt Marc’s need and scanned the room. *The boss wants an update on what happened. Is anyone able to give him a sitrep?*

“We won.” Ray struggled to sit up. “She replaced them all. Everyone not waking up is settling into those rooms. They’re not really gone.”

Greif paused as people listened.

“She didn’t want to do it, but they were going to die.” Ray paused, tears rolling down his cheeks. “After, she gave us the choice to come back or stay up there and be angels. We all asked to stay.”

“Why?” Grant didn’t understand.

Ray lifted a hand to touch Grant’s burnt cheek. “So we could protect you.” Ray stilled, head swimming.

Grant helped him lay back down.

Adrian relayed Marc’s orders. “We’ll get the rest of it later. Sleep, eat, have a shower if you think you can stand up. You’ve earned it.” Adrian turned toward Angela. *Now that the real boss is back, I can*

get my gifts unlocked. She'll do it for me right now because she's vulnerable from these new deaths.

Jennifer lifted a hand and snatched Adrian's demon. It ripped away from his soul with a scream of anguish.

The demon burst into the air above them, held only by a thin tether in Jennifer's hand.

Adrian fell to his knees, hands outstretched. "Please!"

Jennifer looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head.

"He's never going to change."

Marc got Angela comfortable, aware of Adrian starting to cry. "I know."

"Then why?"

"Safe Haven is a place of darkness and light, of honor and duty. It's a refuge for survivors. It's also a place of darkness and danger, where murder and magic go hand-in-hand. And it's his creation. We owe him a debt. We also deserve justice. Neither of those balances can be settled if you do that now."

Jennifer could have overruled him. As official camp enforcer, it was her final call, but Jennifer didn't consider it. She trusted Marc. Jennifer let go, instead of burning Adrian's demon.

Adrian sucked it in, eyes rolling back in his head. The instant he gained control of himself, Adrian fled the infirmary.

A few of the Eagles and survivors clapped. Marc had just put them first. Adrian could never match him now that Marc had accepted his destiny.

Marc straightened, sorry for his next order but eager for it to be over with. “Bodies will be transferred in half an hour.” Marc lifted his voice over the immediate protests. “In half an hour, the body crew will come. I’m sorry. We talked about this. I know you don’t want to hear it again.”

Marc waited as all of them glared or nodded in his direction. He understood the hostility. People would be sedated where needed and those who’d also lost someone to the sickness would try to help them. Marc didn’t think other people would understand enough to be a true shoulder to lean on. The same was true of those in this room. He expected these survivors to grow close. “We’re having a wake tomorrow, starting at noon, for everyone. We’ll gather on the deck after that to hold a funeral service.”

Marc felt bad about doing this now, but he pushed on with sympathy and regret in his tones. “None of us wanted things to work out this way. As soon as she’s ready, Angie plans to call a meeting. She wants a vote about going back to America.” Marc hoped that would distract them a little.

“Tell her no!” Ray shoved away Grant’s hand. “We lost a lot of people. It all means shit if we go back!”

“He’s right!”

“Erika wanted to see the island. We have to go, for her.”

Marc controlled his tears at the denials. “The boss loves you all. So do I.”

Bonding waves flew out, easing a little of the pain.

Marc frowned at Ivan as the man hurried into the infirmary. “Let her sleep.”

Ivan sank into the chair by Angela’s cot and took her hand.

Marc left them there, mind already racing ahead to the next items on his list. *This is how it was for Angie. No wonder she seemed like a cold bitch. These voices won’t leave me alone.* Marc saw Dog curled up in the corner across from the lab. He and Jeff were on duty, along with Neil, though Neil was still with Samantha and Amy. He hadn’t noticed that Marc was gone.

“Yes, I did.”

Marc spun around to find Neil a foot behind him. He snorted. “Nice trick.”

Neil shrugged, face impassive. “She gave me a job, and a promise. I won’t slack off, even for Samantha.”

Marc looked down as a hacking noise echoed.

The cats were cleaning Dog, and each other. Long licks cleared winter fur in large balls. One of the cats kept hacking, and finally regurgitated a hairball the size of a turd.

“Okay. Now that’s disgusting.” Neil gagged.

Dog snorted. *You have no idea.* He glanced at the cats. *You missed a spot.*

The cats went back to licking.

Marc held up a hand as anxious camp members rose and rushed toward him. They'd been playing cards and reading books, but that had all come to an end at his arrival.

"Is she back? Did Angie come back to us?" Ralph had been praying she would every morning.

Marc smiled. "Yes. She'll need some recovery time, but she's back. She said to tell you evening mess had better have chocolate of some kind." Marc chuckled with the cooks, noticing Gus and Brittani's parents seemed closer. They'd taken cabins next to each other.

Just moved from the infirmary, Brittani was in Daryl's cabin now, but Gus hadn't been in to visit her yet, that Marc knew of. The big shock was Trinity sitting by Brittani's bedside, playing cards with her.

"I have a list of names. These people need to go to the corridor by the infirmary. Do not go in until they call you. Everyone is getting a shower and fed. You'll need to be patient." Marc moved aside so people could reach the doors, taking the paper from his pocket. As he called the names, Marc refused to think about the status of their friend or loved one. Not all those who left had returned. "You can also be topside today. Ralph will organize groups of fifty, for two hours at a time."

The camp cheered. They'd been cooped inside the ship for weeks now.

“That’s all I have for you. I’ll be around if you need anything.”

People nodded at Marc or smiled at him. They liked his leadership. There was no doubt about his intentions.

A group of women came from the showers. They split up as they entered the cabin area. Jayda walked by Ivan’s cabin to reach her new quarters next to Gus and the other cooks.

“Hey!”

Jayda turned at Trinity’s call. “What?”

“We’ve got beer and poker chips. Get in here.”

Jayda slowly smiled, feet turning her around.

Marc enjoyed the moment, marveling at how their emotions were so vivid to him.

Gus was also glad the females were getting along, but it didn’t matter as much to him now. Gus eased through the main door and walked to the cargo area for his first private lesson with Kenn.

Marc noticed Allison entering the hall. Before he could return her stiff nod, Zack came from his cabin and went toward her. Marc waited with everyone else, expecting a nice scene between a new couple who had worked hard during the crisis.

“I can’t date you anymore. I’m sorry.”

Allison stiffened, lids narrowing. “What?”

Zack softened his tone. “We’re not good for each other right now. You know that.”

Allison hadn’t known this was coming, but she’d been dumped enough to guess why. “Too bossy or too feminist?”

“Neither, actually. I could have lived with those and given you time to adjust to this new life.”

“Then why?”

Zack tried to be kind. “My sons need me more than you do. When I get them settled, I might like to try again, if you’re single.”

Allison stared, realizing it wasn’t something she’d done. In fact, the reason made her like him more. “Oh. Well, we’ll see.”

“Are you mad? Hurt? I don’t want you to be.”

“No, I’m good. We’re good.” She gave him a quick hug and moved down the hall. *So, I’m a single again. There’s a shock.*

Zack spotted Timmy coming down the hall.

Cathy was on his heels and eyeing his ass. *I really didn’t think they do that too.*

“We’re helping Eric to the mess for chow. You want to join us?” Timmy had missed his father and brothers.

Zack shook his head, wishing he could. “Actually, I’d like a minute with Cathy. You can go on.”

Cathy looked up. “Me? Why me?”

Zack scowled at her.

Cathy paled. *He’s about to nail me for flirting with his boy. Shit.*

Zack motioned toward an empty office. “Let’s talk, shall we?”

Timmy slowly went on down the hall, silently begging his father not to screw up his relationship.

Zack shut the door and leaned against it, arms crossing over his chest. “So. What are your intentions toward my son?”

Marc slipped out of the cabin hall without waiting for Cathy’s stuttered answer. He needed to do a final meeting with the group Kendle had brought back. He’d spent hours helping them adjust over the last ten days. None of the locals were a problem. All that remained was for him to tell them they’d been cleared, then make sure their escorts were there to take them up to the camp area. Ralph had also organized that.

Marc spotted Adrian in the shadows and waved him over. “Stick around. I have something for you to do in a bit.”

“You got it.”

Marc went to the quarantine zone they’d set up in the empty gymnasium, glad Adrian had cleaned up and was functioning better today. He doubted it was a coincidence that it had happened just an hour after Angela returned. *Was he faking for the last eleven days?* Marc wasn’t sure, but it didn’t matter. “I’ve got you...under my thumb...” Marc kept humming as he greeted the Cayman refugees. “Welcome to Safe Haven. May it become your home.”

Marc was glad all the new people had checked out. They would be watched for a while, of course, but this group wasn’t a problem. They’d been waiting almost a year for rescue. They understood how lucky they were.

Marc watched as they began gathering their things, already comfortable with the guards and making friends. It was a moment of incredible pride that gave Marc a new understanding of how Angela and Adrian had felt each time they gave shelter to people worthy of it.

Adrian lingered at his side. “Does it feel good?”

Marc nodded. “I need a guard while Neil and I talk.”

Adrian brightened.

Neil dropped his head and fell in on Marc’s right instead of the bodyguard position he’d been enjoying.

Marc led the way to the top deck without speaking. He liked letting the tension build for moments like these, but this time, he really didn’t have the extra breath. He was still recovering from radiation poisoning and so was everyone else who’d been exposed. It would be a long time before they were back to where they’d been before. Some of them would never reach those levels again. The illness had been merciless. Tonya’s tests were revealing concerns all over the spectrum for future effects.

Marc moved aside for Ray and Grant to go up the last steps ahead of them. “I need the break. Take it slow.”

Ray smiled at him. “Congratulations.”

Marc frowned a bit. “For what?”

“Putting us first. We needed that. Now you two can rule together, like it should have been all along.”

Ray went up the stairs with Grant's hand on his hip, daring anyone to complain about the public display of affection.

Marc frowned. "Ray? Grant?"

The couple stopped. Grant's shoulders were tense as he turned. "Yes?"

"If it's what you both want, pick a cabin together. Get some gophers to help you pack and move."

Tears filled Grant's eyes.

Ray scanned Neil and Adrian to determine how the camp would react.

Neil shrugged. "Couldn't care less."

Adrian gave a nod. He didn't feel right doing more with Neil and Marc here, but he didn't like the decision. *I wouldn't have done that.*

Marc glanced over his shoulder. *Do you have a good reason?*

Adrian sighed, shoulders drooping. *Not anymore. I was wrong.*

"Excellent. Keep saying that. I love hearing it." Marc waved the couple on. "Go. Leave the lid up; belch and scratch. Talk too much. It's all waiting for you."

Grant immediately dug at the rear of his jeans, making crazy faces.

Ray swatted his arm.

Everyone laughed, sending out good vibes as the group reached the top deck.

Marc inhaled of it, scanning the surrounding area with his grid. He could use it on the entire ship

and be fine, but going beyond was hard on his energy level. The same was true of topside. He had miles around the ship on his grid now, but nothing from inside the ship. *I'll work on it, along with getting my physical health back.*

Marc jogged up the stairs of the bridge for a check in. He was out of breath before he got to the top.

Neil and Adrian hung back.

“Advice?” Neil didn’t want to ask, but he felt he had to. Marc’s thoughts were too bright to read now. He had a glare.

Adrian shrugged. “Not really. If you have any credits, now is the time to cash them in.”

Neil frowned. “That’s how I survived my trial.”

“Ah.”

“What if it were you?” Neil pushed. “What would it take for you to forgive me?”

Adrian grunted. “Marc’s not me. Wouldn’t work.”

“I don’t mean him.”

“Oh.” Adrian considered, brows coming together. “Not much. If you saved the camp, my kids, the future.”

Neil scowled. “Anything a level down? It’s hard to do those alone.”

“Tell me about it.” Adrian dug deeper and came up with a tiny light. “You could go find Marc’s daughter. She would like that.”

Neil sighed. “That team has already been chosen. Next?”

Adrian studied the guard shift and the calm water, hating Marc for how good he was doing. “Everything else I have is shady. That won’t help you.”

“No, it won’t.” Neil joined Marc on the bridge steps, nodding to Theo through the plastic. “I’m sorry. What can I do?”

Marc kept an even tone even though he was still furious with Neil. “Depends on what you’re asking for.”

Neil replayed Angela’s order.

Sleep with him. Shower with him. Pretend he’s Samantha. And make friends again. Marc needs you too.

Marc grunted. “Just me? I can give you that today. Angie or the Eagles? That’s harder.”

Neil gestured. “You first. If she sees I followed orders, she might not fry me.”

“So just to save your own ass.” Contempt laced Marc’s voice. “Should have known.”

“That’s not fair.” Neil pointed at the guards. “Eagles are trained to find double benefits for their choices. It doesn’t mean one is more important than the other.”

Marc sighed. “Why do you even care? You’re obviously not sorry; you’ll do whatever you want now that you think you can get away with it.”

The former trooper’s shoulders stiffened in renewed anger. “You’ll help me stay good. You’ve done it for everyone else. Why not your best friend?”

Ouch. Adrian gave the men more space and kept a sharp eye out for trouble.

Marc snorted. “My best friend murdered two people, forced us through a trial, and got off scot-free after lying to everyone for almost a year. How am I supposed to support him?”

“I don’t know.” Neil had to try. “We could have a beer later and try to figure it out...”

Marc took a bottle of water from the cooler that had been brought up for Theo, picking the red cap. He popped the top and extended it. “I can’t take beer yet.”

Neil grinned. He drank half the bottle and held it back out. “Thank you.”

“My honor.” Marc put the cap on it. “Neil, do me a favor and start counting to a hundred.”

“You didn’t drink.” Neil frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Just count.”

Adrian recognized Marc’s tone and retreated a few more steps to avoid the crossfire.

Neil shrugged. “One, two, three, four, five, six...” Neil paused to lick his lips, mouth suddenly dry. “Seven, eight, nine, ten...” Neil felt his blood change; chill bumps broke out. “Eleven, twelve...”

Marc waved over his hidden security man.

“Thirteen, fourteen...” Neil swayed on his feet. His crashing brain gave him the answer. “Son of a bitch.”

Trent caught Neil as he fell, sweeping him up and over his big shoulder.

“Thanks.” Marc stored the drugged water bottle in his pocket as Trent headed for the stairs. “Don’t forget to take the lightbulb.”

Adrian watched as Neil was carried below. *Do I need to plan a rescue?*

Marc chuckled. “He’ll be fine. I’m still salty about him drugging me to keep me in the cabin.”

Adrian relaxed at Marc’s good vibes. He followed as Marc did a visual inspection of their remaining lifeboats. They’d had a lot of wind since setting sail. “Is there anything I can do?”

Marc nodded. “I have a job for you, but it’s hard. No one else has been able to do it.”

“Anything.” Adrian moved closer, face lighting up. “You name it.”

“Die.” Marc lunged forward and shoved Adrian upward by his chest.

Adrian flew over the rail and out into open air. He dropped like a rock, slamming into the waves below.

Marc turned around, swiping his hands as if to remove dust. “Next?”

The top deck cleared of everyone but guards in seconds.

Marc grinned in response to the laughter of the Eagles. They were quickly adjusting to his style of leadership. In time, they would be bonded to him in ways that Adrian hadn’t been able to because he was unethical.

I'm the first byzan who wasn't corrupt before reaching this evolution. I might be the key that saves all of us.

3

“I asked you a question.”

Cathy frowned. She sat in the chair he'd slid out and crossed her arms over her chest.

Zack joined her at the table, but he took a chair next to her and scooted it over so their knees were touching. “There's a way out of this.”

Cathy ignored the heat from his touch. “I haven't done anything wrong.”

“What are your intentions toward my son?”

“What's the way out?”

Zack grinned, laying on the charm. “You could date me instead; leave him alone.”

Cathy gaped, cheeks flaming. “Excuse me?”

Zack's smile faded into a leer. “You'll be bored with him a week after you pop his cherry. He can't satisfy you. He's not a descendant.”

Cathy's chin went up. “Maybe that's why I want him.”

Zack increased the vibes. “Use me instead. I'll even roleplay. In the dark, we sound alike.”

Cathy felt her cheeks flame up hotter. She tried to sound angry instead of flustered. “This is a bad conversation. You're a pig.”

Zack shrugged. "I'm a father protecting his son. You're going to hurt him. I can handle you. He can't."

Cathy snorted. "You think that, but teenagers have energy."

Zack wasn't offended. "I understand how that could appeal, but I don't think you've considered the other half."

"What would that be?" Cathy was sure she'd covered it all.

"They do it five minutes at a time." Zack leaned in. He sniffed her, letting her feel his genuine interest. "Can you cum in five minutes, Cathy?"

Cathy shivered.

Zack almost let his cheek touch hers, using a method he'd watched the service Eagles use with remarkable success. "You need a man who knows how to get you there." He kissed her cheek with a bare touch, sighing. "And I do. I will. As much as you want, any time or place. You'll stagger through this ship with a smile on your face and my name on your lips." Zack leaned back, voice chilling. "If you dump my son. If you don't, I'm going to ask Angela to banish you and every other predator picking out a child to mate with."

Cathy was trying to breathe, to recover from his cruel assault. She'd never been so horny.

Zack knew. "I asked Adrian to help me with that. While he did, I asked him how he felt about cougars."

Cathy swallowed. "And?"

“He said he never would have given it a thought except for Angela. She convinced him the boys needed protection too. I love her for that. When she gives the order to remove you from the ship, it will be followed.” Zack kept a hard tone. “Don’t make me toss you overboard for breaking our laws.”

“He’s legal. It isn’t against our laws.”

“It is, and you know it. America had age laws. When our new constitution is voted in, you’d better believe that age line will go back up.” Zack was prepared for any defense she tried to use.

“Angela and Adrian said we need babies, for the future.”

“We do, from adults who can raise those children. Timmy isn’t ready to be a father. Let him be a child, while he still can. You’re robbing him of his future; I won’t stand for it.”

Cathy hadn’t thought of it from those sides. *Am I serious about this kid?* She’d been having fun playing with him, but Zack had just shoved seriousness into her body and mind. It was an unpleasant mix. And... *And I want to take him up on his offer.*

Zack wasn’t immune to the plan he’d used. “I mean it. You have needs; I have skills that are getting rusty. But I want it done openly.”

She hesitated. “He’ll be hurt, mad.”

“Yes, but he’ll make peace with it when he joins the Eagles and starts building a future.” Zack tried logic next. “And if he still wants you when he’s eighteen, I’ll step aside.”

Cathy snorted. “If I’m still with you then, it’ll mean I’m happy. I’ve never had a relationship that lasted more than a few months and I don’t expect one now.”

Zack dug in. “Because deep down, you really hate men. You pick them young to train them to serve you.”

Tears welled in Cathy’s eyes. “I can see where you’d have that impression.”

“I’m wrong?”

“Yes. I don’t hate you guys at all.” Her eyes dropped. “I’m scared. I know a teenage boy can’t hurt me physically. A grown man, however...”

Zack understood a lot more now. He forced the sympathy back but stored it for a later moment. “I’ve had my say. Now, I need your choice so I know what to tell Marc tonight when he asks for an update.”

Cathy wiped away the tears, shrugging. “I don’t love him. I’ll back off, do the right thing.”

Zack smiled. “Excellent choice. If you want to set me up for that and tell him I’ve forbidden it, that’s fine. It’s the truth.”

“I might.” Cathy stared at him, wanting to take a chance on a different life.

Zack reached out. He put a hand on her cheek. “How about if I teach you how to beat my ass physically? Afterwards, you can decide where we go.”

Cathy smiled. “Really?”

Zack nodded, thinking of Marc and Angela. Marc had trained her, and Angela now loved him more than anyone. “It would be my honor.”

4

Angela’s eyes opened.

Ivan stood, motioning to Morgan, who was at the desk. The infirmary was still full, but this time, it was patients recovering through sleep and their exhausted, relieved caregivers in the cots next to them.

Morgan knelt by Angela, wincing at sore knees. *I want kneepads for Christmas.*

Angela drew in a deep lungful of air. Pain came. Smells were next. Sound popped in. Angela sucked in more air. *Are you close?*

Footsteps came. Marc sat on her cot. “Close enough?” He waved the others away, sure she needed a minute of privacy.

Angela struggled to sound casual. “Are my eyes open?”

Marc closed her lids and sent energy into her eyes. “You were gone for a long time. Your vision will be different now.”

Angela was comforted by his words and his presence. “How long until it happens?”

Marc moved his hands. “Now.”

Angela opened her eyes, blinking at the bright light.

“You can adjust it, but you can’t remove it.” Marc held her hand, relishing the feel of her strength coming back. “The scrolls call it a glare.”

Angela shut her eyes. “Later, okay?”

Marc felt her mood shift. He wiped away the tears now coming from under her lashes. “Get it over with. You’ve come too far to be a coward now.”

Angela grunted. “Fair enough.” She looked up at him.

Marc stayed connected, curious about how it worked.

“I usually hide and do this alone.” Angela was self-conscious as she blinked and hit mental buttons. “They all think I know what I’m doing.”

“I won’t tell them different.” Marc had also thought that until his evolution. His compassion had grown. His jealousy and anger had shrunk until they were almost gone. It was amazing.

Angela didn’t tell him that side of the emotions would show up later. There was no need to ruin his good mood. She blinked faster. “Multiple modes!”

Marc thought of their first trip to the weigh station. “Now we know what they meant by not needing to go to the viewing room.”

“Yes.” Angela stopped as the rotation came back to the beginning. This was the first slot and the closest to normal. She concentrated, dimming the glare. Everything was brighter, but there were more shadows.

Marc leaned in to whisper. “Those aren’t shadows. It’s the darkness in them.”

Angela was dismayed to see how much evil remained in the people here. Even those who were grieving had madness lurking.

Marc was also able to see it on his stronger grid. “Zoom out, get the big picture.”

Angela did, including him too. Marc’s aura was blue.

“So is yours, I’d bet.” Marc put an arm around her shoulders, able to feel the chill on her skin.

The bond lit up, providing a connection they’d never had.

Angela moaned lowly. “Nice.”

“Yes.” Marc was suddenly eager for her full recovery. *If she moans now at just my arm on her shoulder...* He hid a snicker.

Angela chuckled tiredly.

“A constant two-way connection?”

“Yes, made possible only by a perfect match.” Angela leaned up, puckering.

Marc didn’t want to stop the kiss. Sparks flew, heating his healthier body.

Angela grinned against his lips, loving his response.

Pain sank into Marc. He drew back, frowning. “Where?”

Angela held up her wrist. It was blue and purple, and arched at a bad angle.

“Aww, baby.” Marc put a hand on it. “Anywhere else?”

Angela gave him a mental list, lashes shutting in relief as his energy eased her pain. "I'm one big bruise. That's the only real injury."

"I'll work on it in stages." Marc kissed her again. "I can also call help."

Angela slowly wrapped her healing wrist around his neck. "I've got all the help I need right here." She put her cheek on his shoulder. "Stay?"

"I can't. It's my shift."

"Okay." Angela instantly hated that.

Marc smiled at her. He didn't say anything snarky. He didn't feel it. Neither side was tolerable when they were alone. "I'll send you a gopher if you like."

"Just by volunteer." Angela didn't tell him she needed to get up, fighting it so she could have this time with him.

"You'll have to narrow it down." Marc patted a paper in his pocket. "Thirty people want that slot."

Angela smiled. "Who deserves it?"

"Kimmie. The spells protected the children. She taught them to do it."

"Agreed. Send all the kids up as gophers, huh?"

"Glad to." Marc waited to see if she wanted to do any work tonight.

"I might, in a bit."

"Are you keeping me here on purpose?"

"Yes."

Marc chuckled. "My shift is up at dawn. Kenn will be on duty then."

"He'll need a buddy to keep him alert."

Marc read her thought and sighed. “I didn’t talk to Tonya yet. I wasn’t sure if I should.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered, but get Kenn a duty buddy, even if he hates them.” Angela didn’t want him distracted while everyone slept.

“I will.” Marc worried what other bad choices he’d made while she was gone.

Angela didn’t like his fast need to take the blame. “If it felt right at the time, it wasn’t a bad choice.”

“How do you know?”

She snorted.

Marc scanned her. “Now?”

“Yes, please.”

Marc disconnected the IV, under her direction. Then he lifted her and headed for the bathroom.

Pacing outside the infirmary, Kendle peered through in time to see Marc carrying Angela to the restroom. *Maybe someday he’ll care for me that way.*

Angela glared over Marc’s shoulder. *He can carry your body right now...*

Kendle’s face vanished from the window.

Marc hid his amusement, starting to feel guilty for all the shit he’d given her over Adrian. He hadn’t realized it sucked to be stalked.

Angela smiled as he put her on her feet. “If I’m not out in five, I’m in the shower.”

Marc let her make the choice. If she felt she could, that was good enough for him.

Angela shut the door and staggered over to the small mirror and sink. She leaned on the freshly bleached porcelain and drew in a breath. Then she looked at herself.

Power shuffled beneath her skin. It moved and stretched, exploring the limits of this body. "I'm one of them now. Son of a bitch."

I did tell you not to stay long.

Angela sighed at Michael's amused voice in her mind. "It was worth it."

You believe that?

Angela smiled into the mirror, controlling the shift. "Yes. I was born for this. There's no avoiding fate. It always catches up."

Will you tell me what happened?

Angela sighed. "The Messenger was Cain, being punished for killing his brother. He lied about having contact outside those rooms. When he disappeared, it was to search the tunnels for a way out without the others knowing. He was one of the first souls to ever be punished. His lifeforce went straight to the Creator when I took his last spark. ...like yours would if I banished you from hell."

Yes.

Angela felt she had to offer, even if it was forbidden. "Do you want that now? I'll do it for you."

No.

"Even death fears that final judgement."

So now we wait again.

She nodded, but she wasn't sad or angry about it. "This time, the angels running the weigh station love humanity, even with all its flaws. The betting is over. It's all on us now."

Chapter Thirty-Three
That's What Men Do

6pm

1

Kenn knocked on the lab door and entered. “Marc said to give you this.”

Tonya glanced up from the patient files she was updating, frowning. “What is...?” Tonya almost cried. “That’s for me?”

Kenn smiled, handing her the new lab coat. It was signed by about everyone in camp, in indelible ink. “You earned it. They all love you now.”

“Do you love Courtney?” Tonya dropped the lab coat on her desk and glowered at him.

Kenn paused at the abrupt topic change. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Kenn sighed, realizing their truce was over now that the boss had come back. “No, but I want the baby even if she doesn’t. I had to let her know before she decided without me. Now, she can’t until we talk.”

Tonya hadn’t considered that. “She doesn’t want the baby?”

“I have no idea. Other than the moment of conception, we’ve never spoken.” Kenn scanned

and found a neat lab ready for whatever came. Things had been cleaned and restocked. It looked as if there hadn't been a crisis.

Tonya shrugged, holding in her anger. "I guess you'd better handle that."

Kenn tried a warm tone. "You come first."

She snorted. "Clearly, not true."

He tried to give more details, hoping that would help. "I got scared about marriage. You were pushing and I was trying to change. I broke. She was there."

Tonya's lips pursed. "That's not an excuse."

"I agree, but that's the way it happened. You deserve the truth."

Her tone sharpened. "I deserve a man who's loyal and mine."

"Yes... James wants you."

Tonya rolled her eyes. "Until we have sex and he wants to drive."

Kenn's lips twitched. "So you're with me for the sex?"

Tonya refused to laugh. "It's been a constant that I've grown used to."

Kenn waited, letting her control the moment. She hadn't spoken to him in days unless it was camp business. He'd been sleeping here on the lab couch or in the infirmary.

Tonya sat the beaker down. "You hurt me. I don't know if I can get over this."

Kenn's shoulders sagged. "I understand. I am sorry. I guess that doesn't help."

Tonya shook her fiery curls. “Not much, no.”

Tap-Tap! Courtney was standing on the other side of the glass door.

Tonya’s anger blazed. “What?!”

Courtney ignored Kenn’s motion to go away. “Can I talk to you for a minute? Both of you?”

Tonya gestured curtly at the pretty brunette. “At your own risk.” *She gets sick and still looks great. Wonderful. I hate her guts.*

Kenn stepped closer to Tonya, and away from Courtney.

“Thank you, for everything you did for me. I didn’t deserve it.”

Tonya lifted her nose. “No, you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” Courtney cleared her throat. “I need a paternity test.”

Kenn locked down on his thoughts.

Tonya glared at the woman. “Not until it’s born. We all get to live with that question for the next...?”

Courtney flushed. “Eight months, I think.”

Tonya wrote it in her notes. She would add it to Courtney’s file later. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” Courtney met Kenn’s eye, voice hard. “I won’t abort it. You can’t make me just because she found out. It might not be yours.”

Kenn seized the opportunity. “I’m prolife now. Down, girl.”

Courtney let out the breath she’d taken. “Okay. I, uh... I don’t want to talk about anything else until we get the results of the test. I’m telling the camp it’s none of their business.”

Tonya lifted a brow. “And the boss?”

Courtney flushed. “I’ll tell her myself if she wants to know. Otherwise, it stays between us.”

“What about the other guy?”

Courtney stiffened, tears welling. “He didn’t make it.”

Kenn almost believed her. If not for her fingers being clenched together, he would have.

Tonya did. “We’ll do the test right there at the birth if you want it.” Tonya pointed at Kenn. “Until we know, you sleep with the Eagles. If she’s carrying your baby, you’ll bunk there permanently.” Tonya left, not slamming the door behind her. She didn’t need to. Her emotions were obvious. *I haven’t let a man hurt me this way in a decade. There’s no way I can let it slide.*

Kenn watched her go. She would spend an hour helping James now, like she’d been doing since he saved her life, then go back to their cabin and pack his things. The bags would be sitting in the hall by the time he got there this evening.

“You know I lied, right?”

Kenn wasn’t surprised by Courtney’s words. Like himself, she had two faces. “Thank you.”

She eased toward the exit, sore and grateful to be alive and still pregnant. “No, *thank you*. It’s what I want.”

“A baby?”

Courtney revealed her true feelings. “*Your* baby. I love you. If she doesn’t change her mind...”

There wasn't a choice for Kenn. "Then I'll spend the rest of my life wearing her down until she does. I'm sorry."

"So am I." Courtney left, but she wasn't crying or even sadder. She'd always known who Kenn's heart belonged to. She couldn't compete with his ties to Tonya, but she would have a bond too, through the baby. It would be enough.

Tonya observed through the infirmary window, proud of Kenn and also furious with him. She was already lonely. Tonya straightened her shoulders. *But I can live with it to do the right thing. Let's see if he can.*

Tonya went to James, who was being released today. She flashed a bright smile. "Let's get you ready to move. Then I'll find you a hot meal."

James beamed at her. "Will you stay for a while? We can play cards again."

Tonya's voice hardened. "No, James. We won't ever be alone again. I don't share—in either direction."

His eyes softened with emotions she'd suspected for weeks. "You don't have to. I only want you."

Tonya sighed, aware of their approving audience but not caring. "I wish I could, but there's only one man I've ever really loved in my entire life and he's currently crying on my new lab coat. I won't ever do this again."

The camp cheered and clapped when Angela entered the mess for dinner. Flanked by Ivan and Debra, she paused in the doorway to absorb the good vibes. They'd spent too much time dealing with death. *That will change now.*

The mess wasn't full, though. Angela felt the cut as she swept the wide room and the people who could now begin to recover. *I lost too many. I'm not fit to lead.*

Angela went to the center table that was empty and waiting for her. She sat, not sure where to begin. Everyone wanted details, assurances. *I want a meal, an orgasm and sleep.*

Sitting at a nearby stool to get the mood of the camp, Marc's head lifted from his coffee. *I've got duty soon, but I can find us a closet on my break.*

Angela snickered.

The good vibes increased.

"You don't have to do this now." Kenn knew what she would want and how to handle it. He'd gotten plenty of practice working under Adrian. "We've waited almost two weeks. Breakfast isn't far considering what you've all gone through." Like Marc, Kenn had come to judge the mood of camp while Angela joined them. They were both worried over retaliations for lost loved ones.

Angela gave a hesitant smile. "Are you sure? I can do it."

Kenn denied her, as did other people. “We have the important answer—you came back. The rest can wait.”

Most people nodded agreement. Those who didn’t were longing for their loved ones.

“Thank you. We really are beat.” Angela yawned, then chuckled. “If we could have until morning, that would be amazing.”

“Consider it done.” Kenn began casting glares at those thinking of protesting or catching her alone. Thelma brought over a tray.

Angela put a hand on the sad woman’s wrist. “I’m sorry about Lou.”

“Thank you.” Thelma sniffed. She went back to the kitchen to stay busy.

The camp clapped again as another group of people entered the mess.

Harry and the other medics, now off duty, grinned and waved away the cheers, but it was obvious they were happy to get the recognition. They strode to the food lines, surrounded by friends—new and old.

The clapping and cheers swelled to a painful level as Morgan appeared, pushing Pam in a wheelchair.

Pam put a hand on the wheel, forcing him to stop and accept what he deserved. No one had worked harder than Morgan.

Morgan was thrilled and a bit embarrassed. *I wish Shawn was here to share this with me.*

Pam rubbed his wrist. “We all have jobs, baby. Take me over to the boss. She’s lonely by herself.”

Morgan wasn’t willing to let it go. “He should have stayed here! You almost died.”

Pam was grateful to have been brought back, but it was also soothing to know she’d been good enough to stay up there and help. It gave her a feeling of peace that she shared through a touch to his wrist with her palm. “I love you. Please?”

Morgan’s anger faded. “Okay.”

Pam let him wrap the blanket back around her shoulders, holding onto his upper arm. “We all win if he’s successful. He had to go.”

Morgan was able to breathe now, and to think. “Can you tell me?”

Angela nodded when Pam glanced her way for approval.

Pam whispered. “He’s on the kill team. They’re collecting the UN ship so we can use it to surprise the detention center.”

Morgan thought about what that meant. “We’re going there, instead of letting them come to the island.”

“Very good.” Angela motioned at one of the empty seats. “Stay?”

Morgan blushed a bit. “We’re all sitting together.” Morgan indicated a table nearby where the medics were settling down to enjoy a hot meal and the warmth of the camp.

Pam waved him off. “Go have fun.”

Morgan kissed the top of her head and joined his crew.

Pam let the tears go as soon as his back was turned. She didn't make noise, but her misery had to have an outlet.

Angela hugged her, not speaking. There was nothing she could say. All they'd been through, here and above, was traumatizing. Now they had to wait and see what side effects might come from the radiation, including infertility. Pam loved kids. Thanks to the illness, she might never have them.

"Please." Pam's rough voice broke. "Can you search for me, later, when you're better?"

"I'll look for everyone. You can pass the word. If they want to know, I'll share what I see." Angela handed Pam a napkin. "What can I do for you right now?"

"That's my only problem." Pam sniffed and wiped. "I'm happy, honest. I liked my job." Pam shivered. "I thought my...lifestyle would send me to hell."

Angela shrugged. "So did I, honestly, but that was your choice to make. It's great to know we were both wrong."

Pam wiped away more tears, suspecting she would be puffy eyed for weeks. "I wonder how it's decided, judgement, I mean."

Angela had many of the same lingering questions, but they were distracted by more clapping from the camp. Theo and Trent entered,

Charlie and Dog in the shadows behind them, on duty over their new co-captain.

Marc looked at Angela across the crowd as the camp welcomed Theo. He replayed Debra's opinion.

Angela shrugged. *Kill it if you agree.*

Marc held up a hand. "To our heroes, Ozzie and Whitney!"

The cheer was deafening.

Theo flushed.

Marc moved by him and joined Angela at the table.

Debra, now in the line for a cold beer, saw Theo's embarrassment. She couldn't help feeling bad for him.

Theo felt her eyes on him, but he avoided her like Kimmie had suggested. He got into the food line, accepting handshakes from those around him.

Debra frowned. *Hey!*

Theo flinched at her shout in his mind. He swung around. "What?"

People paused in their conversations to watch.

Debra gestured.

Theo shook his head.

Debra scowled and signed again.

Theo held up a hand, cheeks darkening.

Angela chuckled. "I love this channel, but I have no idea what they're saying."

Marc laughed. "He's begging forgiveness and swearing to never lie again. She says that's a lie."

Angela leaned against his heat. "Is it done?"

The good mood faded a bit for Marc. “Yes. Adrian made it onto the other ship.”

“You knew he would.”

“Yes.” Marc leaned closer to keep their conversation semiprivate. “Are you sure? I can handle it now if you want him brought back.”

“No.” Angela kissed Marc with heat, making sure he felt how much she wanted him.

People around them smiled and clapped again, delighted to have these good moments to share. The past weeks had been hard on all of them.

Angela took his ring from her pocket, where it had stayed since she’d accepted it; she placed it on the table. Then she held her hand out.

Marc felt like a nervous groom as he slid the ring onto her finger. “I’ll love you forever.”

“Yes, you will.”

Marc chuckled at the word play. He leaned over to kiss her cheek...

She sealed their lips again, eagerly, drawing hoots and laughter from their audience. Even those who’d lost someone enjoyed watching the couple reveal their commitment.

Kendle left the room, guts churning.

More cheers echoed as Theo and Debra met for a kiss. Their makeup moment was another good moment to absorb.

Tension filled the dining area as wheelchair-bound patients were brought in. Courtney was first in line, being pushed by James. Whispers floated

through the area. Almost everyone knew she was pregnant and refusing to name the father.

James chuckled at all the attention, not feeling awkward at all. He'd worked hard through the crisis and he'd saved a life. His place in camp had been returned. Kenn had already asked if he wanted one of the slots for personal security teams. James was thrilled. *And lonely; I'll survive. She doesn't want me, but others do. I'll never sleep alone again if that's what it takes to get over Kenn's woman.* He pushed Courtney to the long table that had been put together for the few patients who felt strong enough to attend this meal. He rolled her in next to Samantha and Amy, then vanished. He wasn't ready to celebrate yet.

"Has anyone seen Neil?" Samantha liked it that the long tables were close enough to allow communication without yelling.

Angela swallowed a chuckle.

Marc cleared his throat. "I believe he's finishing loose ends below."

"Okay." Samantha patted Courtney's wrist and drew her into a conversation. Cody and Missy were across from them, while the other cargo kids ran errands for those who hadn't been cleared to leave the infirmary yet.

Tonya studied Kenn and Courtney from the doorway, watching for signs they were still having the affair. She couldn't help it. The shock had passed. Now, she was pissed.

“They’re not.” Marc waved Tonya over. “Sit for a minute? I’d like to speak on Kenn’s behalf.”

Kenn immediately got up and left the mess, humbled and certain his presence wouldn’t help.

The camp cheered for a long time as Tonya was noticed. It was a huge leap from where she’d been just six months ago. Tonya smiled at them, trying to hold in tears. *I have a home now.*

Tonya joined Marc and Angela at the leadership table in the center of the wide room, wishing she could stay here after they talked.

“You can.” Marc pushed a chair out with his foot. “You’re always welcome at the boss’s table.”

Tonya sat, wiping away tears. “I didn’t even know I wanted this.”

“That’s what makes it perfect.” Marc nudged the plate of cookies toward her. “Have a few of those.”

Tonya took a cookie.

Marc got started, able to feel confusion and curiosity from the people around them. They were all noticing her coldness toward Kenn. “He needs you.”

Tonya refused to let it go. “And what about the next time I nag him on something he doesn’t want? Or when the baby keeps him up all night? Will he run to his other woman for comfort?”

Marc couldn’t answer her quick, angry points. “Do you think he will?”

Tonya's fire faded. She was too tired to hold onto it for long. "I don't know. Until I do, I'm not letting him con me."

"Good for you." Marc could feel Tonya trying to make a plan to find out how deep Kenn's feelings went. "I'll help with that, if you like."

Tonya knew she could trust Marc, but the offer was still surprising. "Maybe. I'll let you know."

Marc motioned toward one of their gophers. "We need milk over here. Cookies have to have milk."

Stanley hurried to get Tonya a glass of cold powdered milk.

"I hate that shit. Can't I dunk in my coffee?"

Marc grinned. "Of course. After you drink your milk."

Tonya stuck out her tongue.

Angela laughed with them, thrilled by how the camp was reacting to Marc. They'd already accepted his leadership. *Do I feel jealous? Am I worried they'll like him more than me?* Angela examined her feelings and was happy to say no. *He's meant to share this burden. I don't resent him for that. It makes me love him even more.*

Angela yawned. She leaned against Marc's big arm, almost comfortable for the first time in weeks.

Marc kept his arm in place as he felt her drift off. He was surprised she'd lasted this long after walking all the way here. She'd refused the wheelchair on the grounds she was more of a medic than a patient. He wanted to carry her to bed now,

but he wasn't recovered enough for it. He settled for waving at Ian, who hadn't been ill.

Ian carefully lifted Angela and followed Marc to the camp cabins. Angela had insisted she was ready to be with her people and Marc hadn't argued. Having the boss there would keep them out of trouble.

Angela mumbled a thank you to Ian as he put her on the bed.

Ian switched to the doorway to stand guard. It was his shift over Angela now. Ivan would take over later.

Marc covered her up. "Thank you for coming back."

"Always." Angela forced her lids to open. She smiled at him. "See you after my nap."

"Yes, you will." Marc walked toward the stairs, smiling at Charlie as he and Dog kept pace. They were on duty over him right now. "I bet your mom would love a game of chess when she wakes up."

"We haven't played in years."

"I know. Kenn was thinking about it earlier. He used to be jealous of the time you spent together." Marc noted guards on duty in the hall, able to feel the difference it made in everyone's mood. "Your mom misses some of those moments from your childhood."

"Is she still mad at me?"

"She was never mad at you, boy. She was disappointed. That happened again this time, but by

the end, you proved you could be counted on. Many people would have stashed their family if they could have.”

“It was wrong. You’re punishing Kyle for it.” Charlie had been feeling guiltier since hearing that.

“Yeah, but he needs to be brought down a level. So did you, so I let it ride. Now that you understand how selfish the choice was, you can hear the rest of that speech.” Marc waited for camp people to go by, nodding and smiling in return to their encouraging words and well wishes on the engagement. “Ready?”

Charlie nodded, sensing he was about to reach a new level of manhood.

Marc’s face darkened. “Those hidden people would have been with the camp for every bad moment they went through, including the triple shooting. When the trap team came for the kids, a lot of camp people would have gotten hurt trying to protect those children. Your selfish choices probably saved lives.”

Charlie scowled. “So it was the right thing to do. And also wrong.”

“Yes. Next time, warn the ship. That’s the only thing you were punished for.”

Charlie was relieved, but still upset. “I don’t think I like adulting.”

Marc snickered. “You’re becoming a man. Your mom will be so proud.”

“She’s not speaking to me.”

Marc patted his shoulder. “Just show up with a chess board. That’ll be enough.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Marc wanted his family united and happy. It was the only way they would withstand the future still waiting for all of them. “It’s my honor.”

“Speaking of honor...”

Marc grunted. “We discussed it. The right choice is complex. If you tell the camp, your baby will carry the pain of your choices. Everyone will know it’s the child of a predator.”

“Tracy is not a predator!”

Marc sighed. “Yes, son, she is. You like the relationship, but that doesn’t make it right.”

“Age shouldn’t matter.”

Marc stopped and looked at him. “You’ve been told wrong and right don’t matter now, that only survival does, but that’s an excuse to do whatever you want, and I won’t stand for it anymore. If you survive, but lose your honor doing it, you might as well have died. It eats away at your soul for the rest of your cursed life.”

Charlie wasn’t sure what to do. “So you don’t want me to tell everyone?”

Marc needed the boy to figure it out for himself. He gave another hint. “I don’t want my grandchild to pay for your mistakes or Tracy’s crime.”

The pointed tone finally got through. “I want to get married—as soon as possible.” Charlie really did, though Tracy still wasn’t keen on the idea. She was

going along with it so the camp didn't demand a trial as soon as they found out she was pregnant.

Marc nodded, relieved. "We both think that's best. How does Tracy feel?"

"Embarrassed. The other women are still treating her odd. She knows our marriage will help."

Marc frowned, catching the concerns that Charlie wasn't speaking. "But does she love you and want to marry you?"

"Will mom leave her alone if we're married?"

Marc snorted at the evasion and the question.

Charlie sighed. "I'll go back into the Eagles. Tell her to leave Tracy alone and I'll do whatever she wants."

Marc didn't know if Angela had already made plans for her unwilling daughter-in-law. "Tracy won't be punished until after the baby is born."

"But we'll have to live with the tension until then!" Charlie gestured. "We want it to be over now."

"And what is Tracy willing to give up? You're the victim." Marc was angry about it. He hadn't been letting it show because it forced him to deal with his own guilt for thinking it was okay just because Charlie was getting laid. He now believed Angela was right. The boys deserved protection too. "You shouldn't be sacrificing. *She* should."

"No. I chased her, dad. I used a spell on her. She's the victim." Charlie brought up a mental wall as Marc's eyes narrowed.

“She offered to do something...” Marc was reading Charlie’s chaotic thoughts through the wall. “What was it?”

“No.”

Marc sighed, not wanting to use his stronger gifts against his son. “Tell me.”

“I told her no.” Charlie pointed. “I’m telling you the same!”

Marc pried open the boy’s mental door in two seconds. “She agrees. She thinks she should be in the brig!”

Charlie groaned, stopping. “Don’t. Please, don’t. I did this!”

“So did she.” Marc kept walking. “You broke the rules. You may not be able to buy your way out of this one...but she won’t go to jail.”

“How can you know?” Charlie hurried to catch up.

“Because then we’d be stuck raising your child and frankly, I can’t handle any more diapers. Mike and Mia are little shit factories. It’s all they do, all day long. You and Tracy can wipe your own kid’s ass. Both my hands are full.”

Ralph rounded the corner, in alert mode.

Marc waved him over. “What’s up?”

“People are reporting a banging noise in the bathrooms by the cargo area. Tonya thinks one of her cats might be stuck in there.”

Marc nodded. “Ah.” He kept walking, ignoring Charlie’s smirk as they both envisioned Neil

waking up in the dark bathroom with the door blocked. “Be careful. It might be a big rat.”

Ralph patted his leg. “I know how to stomp them.”

Marc snickered. “So do I.”

4

“No running!” Allison followed the laughing kids, out of breath as they wound down to the cabin area. People sidestepped the evening chaos, not minding the noise. It was a welcome change from the tears and groans of the ship. Everyone was still mourning, but many of them also wanted to move on. It was too painful to think of all they’d lost.

Kyle glared at the kids, bringing them to a halt. He kept walking, carrying Autumn. She was in half a radiation suit so she could visit her mother. Jennifer was better, but Morgan had refused to discharge her yet.

“Hey!” Missy ran alongside Kyle. “Have you seen my Shawn?”

Kyle pointed toward Kenn, who was coming down the steps. He had a duffle bag over his shoulder and a grim expression. “He has the complete list of missing people.”

Missy ran to Kenn.

Kenn surprised everyone by lifting the girl in his free arm. “Hey, squirt.”

She wrapped her arms and legs around his big body, hanging on tight. “Where’s my Shawn?”

“On a run.”

Missy stared at the honest answer.

Kenn scanned for an empty cabin. “He wasn’t allowed to see you before he left.”

Missy rested her cheek on Kenn’s shoulder, arms around his neck. “When he comes back, I need you to help me be good.”

Kenn held her closer, finally understanding why Adrian had spent so much time with their kids. “You’re already good, sweetheart. I will help you, though. Sometimes we make mistakes and we need a good friend to get us through it.”

Missy hugged his thick neck tightly. “I’ll be your good friend.”

Kenn wasn’t ashamed to let the tears roll. He dropped his bag in front of an empty cabin and used the free hand to scrub at his face. “Marc was right. You are sweet inside. Who knew?”

Missy giggled. Soft blue light flowed through the cabin, bringing peace.

And an alpha. Kenn added up the new clue as Missy’s little feet began to swing, kicking him in the hip and stomach. *All the kids from the cargo area were alphas, except for two. Even Leeann was, though Marc locked her gifts. Angela’s twins are alphas. What are the odds of that? I thought alphas were rare.*

“We are.” Missy slapped her hand down his cheek to remove his tears. Then she kicked him in the balls.

Missy landed on her feet and ran into the next cabin with Cody and Kimmie, laughing.

“My eggs.” Kenn wheezed, reaching out for the wall so he didn’t collapse. “She cracked my eggs.”

In the cabin across the hall, Candy locked eyes with Kenn. *Where’s my Conner?*

Kenn concentrated on breathing and nothing else. Missy had still been wearing her shoes.

Candy slowly sat up, hands cradling her swollen stomach. *Please.*

“Give him a minute. He’s in pain.” Neil pushed Samantha’s wheelchair by the cabins. “He may not be allowed to answer. If not, don’t nag him. That won’t help your condition.”

Candy flushed at Neil’s sharp tone, but she laid down. *Back to thinking about rainbows and unicorn farts, I guess.*

Kenn snickered at her thought, getting his breath back. *Neil? Beer later?*

Neil smiled, happy it had worked out his way. He was grateful to Marc. *You know it.*

Samantha scanned for Amy. “She’s not here.”

Neil pushed the chair to the empty cabin next to Kenn. “I told the infirmary to give me half an hour to get a room ready. Daisey is with her until then.”

Samantha relaxed, thrilled to still have her family. “As soon as she’s up here, you should go have that beer.”

Neil kissed the top of her head. “I plan to. You want a snack sent up?”

Samantha frowned. “There’s no time to coddle me. We’re still in a crisis.”

Neil helped her into the soft bed. “It’s over, mostly. We’ll need to recover, of course, but there won’t be any more deaths from radiation.”

“That’s great. I still don’t want to bug the mess. It must be a mess.”

Neil folded the wheelchair and put it in the closet. “Nope. All primary areas are clean and stocked for normal use. Marc’s done an amazing job.”

“Marc!” Samantha’s anger rose. “He beat you, drugged you and locked you in a bathroom without a light!”

“I earned that and then some.” Neil smiled at her through his healing split lip. “Be good to Marc. It was his way of saying we can be friends again.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “You’re kidding.”

“No. At some point, he’ll come through here and we’ll chat like none of it happened. That’s what men do.”

“Why?”

Neil sighed. “I have no idea, but it works.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Important Friends

lam

1

“I need a cabin change.” Tommy waited for Ivan’s response without offering chitchat. He couldn’t. Erika’s death had stunned him.

Ivan understood. Sharing a cabin with Daryl and Brittani, watching them become a couple, would hurt. “I’ve got room since Jayda moved out.”

They were in the camp area now. Ivan was sitting in a chair between the doors, on duty.

Tommy gave him a nod and staggered off to collect his things. He’d only been out of the infirmary for an hour. *Why did I survive? Was I too corrupt to stay at the weigh station?*

Ivan wrote that down and continued his mental evaluation of what came next. Angela was sleeping, as were the others who’d returned. When she recovered, she could help Tommy. *Or maybe I can...* Ivan’s thoughts switched to matchmaking. *Who would be a good partner for him? Kendle isn’t available.*

Peter came down the hall. “I need a decontamination shower. I’ll be a few minutes late for duty.”

Ivan frowned. “What happened?”

“We found a withered body in the cargo area. We think it happened at the same time as Vicky’s death.”

Ivan shrugged. “Vicky couldn’t handle the new strength Kenn put on the alarms. Kendle said she found her there several times and even knocked her out once.”

Peter nodded. “She must have tried again when she woke.”

“That’s what I think too. The other body probably came from Kronus. We never did find his UN escort.” Ivan added it to his notes.

“Makes sense.” Peter headed for the shower.

Ivan studied the quiet halls, still stewing. *She did all of this on purpose...*

“Keep that locked up, will you?” Marc frowned at Ivan as he came through on rounds.

Ivan snapped his mouth and mind shut, realizing Marc knew whatever was going on this time. *That makes me feel better. Weird. I never liked Marc before.*

Marc caught it. He stopped and looked back.

Ivan met his eye, shrugging. “Should I lie and suck up like everyone else?”

Marc smiled.

Ivan braced for a correction. Marc had been giving them out left and right, and oddly, earning respect because of it. *Even mine.*

“What are you doing right now?”

Ivan frowned. “I’m watching over the boss.”

“Her door’s closed.” Marc resumed his rounds. “That’s a rookie mistake with someone like her. Add that to your notes.”

Ivan got up and went to Angela’s door, stomach in a hard ball. He opened it quietly, telling himself she was still asleep.

“Son of a bitch!”

Chuckling, Marc went up to the top deck, able to feel a shadow trailing him. She might have gotten by with it because he was still tired, but people were chuckling and thinking about her slinky actions in the dim corridors. The camp liked seeing Angela try to sneak up on him, even if her movements were weak and timid. It meant most of the horror was over for this moment. It was okay to joke and laugh. Marc knew she didn’t feel that way. She was trying to force them all into moving on as fast as possible, but she was also restless.

Marc liked doing rounds. He’d had small tastes of it, but this time, he was the one making choices, improving situations. It was addictive. The only thing more potent was the smell of Angela’s vanilla scent as she caught up and touched his shoulder.

Marc tugged her against his lean frame, not pretending she’d gotten him.

Angela chuckled. She wasn’t thinking yet, just living.

“That’s all you have to do, baby. I’ve got it covered.”

“In the morning...”

“Not if you don’t want to. I can ask a few questions and then fill them in during breakfast. They want answers, but it doesn’t have to come from you.”

Angela sighed, torn.

Marc rubbed her arms, stopping as they reached the top, dark deck landing. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Angela shuddered. “I don’t want them to hear me say I killed the angels at the weigh station. They’ll never forgive it.”

Marc didn’t agree, but she had a great history of being right. “Tell me, baby. I’ll handle the camp.”

Angela opened her mouth, not sure where to begin. It was a relief when it came spilling out. “Kronus wanted to kill me too, but it had to be up there, so I’d become one of them. Orin wanted me to die down here so I would go to judgement. If I were an angel, I could order him to return and never let him back out. Orin wanted freedom more than anything else. I knew they were the only two I might not be able to defeat in my condition. I needed them to both die, down here, but I needed at least one of them weakened so you could all handle him. I chose Kronus, as you know. He was delayed long enough to get sick. Because of the drugs in the food, the darts, and the contaminated water from his cell fountain, he wasn’t able to recover enough to get out until the UN opened his cell.”

“Why Kronus?” This was the part Marc hadn’t been allowed to know so no one could read it in his thoughts and give them away.

“He’s a time master. Because Orin went against their deal to kill me in the higher level, Kronus slowed time right as Orin fired. It allowed me to accomplish something no one else has ever done.” Angela yawned, energy already drained again. “I have to save the rest for later. We have an audience.”

Marc turned to see a group of kids coming up the steps. It was the same group he’d brought up to help handle the final UN trap team.

Angela wasn’t upset over his choice. The kids were angry fighters. When she and Kenn had discussed it, neither of them had asked what Marc would do. They’d assumed he wouldn’t do it at all. “We were wrong.”

Marc shrugged, seeing how happy Cody was with Missy next to him. “I needed the help and they were the only ones left with the need to kill.”

“They’ll remember it.”

“Good. I may need them again.”

Angela frowned at his words, his tone.

So did the kids who surrounded them in a circle of protection.

He tensed and immediately felt guilty for it.

Angela rubbed his arm. “It’s okay.”

Marc stopped, locking down on his fear. “It is. Whatever you decide is fine. I’ll adjust.”

Angela hated it that he was tortured. “Never worry about a decision like this. You’re probably the purest soul in this camp. Of course, I want you to keep it.”

Marc hugged her.

The kids clapped and smiled.

Kimmmie took Marc’s hand. “The alpha has approved your evolution. Do you wish to keep this great gift and awful duty?”

“Yes.” Marc finally had everything he wanted now. “Please.”

Kimmmie smiled up at him. “Assume your new level with honor. You are the first male byzan.”

Marc frowned. “William is byzan.”

“His evolution was not approved by our traditions.” Kimmmie’s scowl caused frowns in the other kids. “He’s a bastard.”

Marc didn’t like how that sounded. “Don’t use that word.”

She stared at him, trying to do what he wanted. “In this...situation?”

“In this context, and both. I don’t want you cursing, and the word bastard is negative. It’s not the child’s fault the parents weren’t married.”

Kimmmie prepared to use another spell. “So you approve William’s evolution? You have that power now.”

“Never.” Marc hadn’t put William’s name in his nightly notes, but he knew the man had snapped. So would Angela when her gifts allowed her to scan deeper.

“Then I stand by my decision and my word.” Kimmie’s tone switched to teacher. “Just because you don’t like it, that doesn’t change the definition or the expected behavior.”

Marc sighed, hating it that she was right. “We’ll have talks about that. I’m not Adrian, who’s lenient or Angela, who’s strict. I believe in meeting in the middle for the good of both people.”

Kimmie pointed toward the sleeping camp. “This is for the entire world. Some of our laws should never be changed. If byzans are not approved, they develop cracks that no light can heal.”

Marc and Angela both took a step forward.

“Say that again.” Marc knelt in front of Kimmie.

She nodded at his sudden flood of thoughts and questions. “Yes, to all of it.”

“Now?”

Kimmie scanned Angela. “She’s too weak to try it.”

Angela let them make plans, happy to get the information, but she was barely staying on her feet. She wasn’t sure she could walk down the stairs at this point, but she’d had to come up here. *I made it back. I needed to stare at the sky, the real sky, before I sleep again.*

Marc found Angela gazing at the darkness over the ship. He joined her as the kids went below with Allison, who had guard over them. “Are you okay?”

“Not hardly.”

Marc held her, prepared for tears and self-recriminations.

Angela's cold voice whispered in his ear, "You'll wait for that a long time."

Marc held her back. "Angie?"

Angela let him see the shifting power beneath her skin. "This was my very first plan, Marc. I cry for them because I love them, but I've killed them for the greater good. I won't scold me for making the only choice available. I also won't expect it of you when it's your turn to make these choices."

"I won't." Marc was certain nothing on earth could make him cross his ethics, except her.

"I won't." Angela smiled at him. "And I know you'll try hard. Our new angels will also try to make sure you're never put into that position."

Marc heard the tone and tensed. "But?"

"If the time comes, you will continue Safe Haven's brutal legacy, or I'll bring the kids back up here right now and remove it."

Marc chuckled. "There's my baby."

Angela rolled her eyes. "Joking, now?"

Marc grew serious. "I want this. I know it means everything. We're on the same page."

"Are we?" She leered at him. "I can just lay there."

Marc laughed. "How can I refuse such a gracious offer?"

"So we're all alone now?"

Marc kissed her, then steered them toward the employee steps. "Yes. Except for the ten kids in our cabin waiting for a bedtime story."

Angela chuckled and let him guide her to their new double stateroom.

She laughed when he opened the door. “That’s more than ten.”

Marc met her eye. “Do you mind? I can clear it out.”

Angela entered the cabin of wary children who had killed without her permission. Most of the cargo kids stayed in the rear, waiting for her punishment now that they’d approved Marc’s evolution.

Angela opened her arms to them. “There’s no place I’d rather be.”

The kids cheered, mobbing her.

“Same here, baby. We’re really on the same page now.” Marc shut and locked the door as she began tickling the children, causing squeals that brightened the ship walls. “And I’m never going back.”

Angela concentrated on the kids, letting the grief slip from her heart. She always felt this way at the culmination of her plans. They were traumatic to everyone involved, but once again, Safe Haven had survived. She hadn’t known about the UN trap teams waiting for them until she and Marc had gotten sick. The delirious flashes of that future had given her enough warning to create a winning solution, but the plan to take down the weigh station had been in the works the instant the angels had revealed their betting addiction and lack of empathy. Both plans had gone better than expected.

You paid a heavy price for this. Angela's witch was tired. Your mate will lead you into the future.

Angela smiled over the kids. That's exactly how it should be. Together, we'll be unbeatable.

But it's not together! He'll be the true leader. You'll return to decoy and figurehead.

Angela didn't feel the same jealousy. That's perfect too. Let him carry the weight. Without this break, my cracks will widen. Leave me in peace, demon. Rest. You've earned it.

I leave you in love. The witch faded. You can always find me in the flames.

Angela felt empty and old as her demon vanished. She smiled brighter at the kids and blocked her mind from thinking about anything but having fun.

The descendant children in the room smothered her in love and good vibes, lifting her mood.

Marc listened, relieved it had worked out like they needed it to. Her cracks could never be allowed to grow. She was more powerful than William. She wouldn't stop with slaughtering a beach of innocent refugees when she snapped. Angela might doom the entire world. She had important friends now.

2

Ivan lingered in the open doorway to Angela's cabin four hours later. Anyone might have thought he was staring in love or longing, but Ivan was stewing. Angela had been sleeping for an hour. Dog

was curled up on her feet. Tonya's cats were curled up on Dog. Charlie was in the chair in the corner, snoozing, though he was coming more alert the longer Ivan lingered. Charlie and Angela had played chess after the kids left and talked silently. Ivan hadn't snooped. He'd been stewing.

He was supposed to be sleeping now, while Dog and Charlie had guard duty, but too many things were bothering him. *I'm alive. No one else survived from my past. She saved me somehow.*

Ivan leaned against the doorframe, weak and fighting the need to crash. His brain was locked onto a thread.

...will accomplish chunks of progress at once with brutal strokes no one else would dare.

Angela had knocked out a list with this one. He ran through them. *The betting is over, Kronus is gone, the UN center is setup... Adrian's off ship now. William and the rest of her enemies believe she's dead. Kenn has some respect back, our troublemakers are gone. The camp voted to block all land contact...and she made a new friend. I think she also has a new leadership Eagle in Debra.*

Ivan drew in a breath. "Angie? Could we have gone around?"

Angela's witch rushed out to meet Ivan, furious and lethal.

Ivan smiled at her. *I'm not sure we've met.*

The witch stopped, drawn despite her anger.

Ivan held out a hand. *Let's chat.*

About? The witch slowly touched him, scenting, marking.

About her cracks. I think you're causing them.

The witch stiffened. *The choices you force her to make cause that, not me.*

How do you know?

The witch paused. *I don't, for sure. No one knows.*

Ivan smiled again. *Do you love her?*

Of course! We are bonded to our hosts. You know.

Yes. And if she cracks up, you die, right? There's no one else strong enough to host you now.

The witch hated her secret being known, but she couldn't lie. *Yes. Marc would try to share with me, for her, but there isn't room.*

Then I'd say a lot depends on those cracks being healed.

Yes. The witch studied him through sullen orbs. What do you want?

Go away. Let us watch her and see if they heal. Then we'll know if it's you.

When I return, her gifts will grow again. You may also watch for the cracks to change at that point.

Ivan was surprised the witch was being reasonable. His eyes narrowed. *What's the catch?*

There isn't one. She's in the evolution stage right now. It drains her when I'm here.

Then why are you still here?

Because she's mine! The witch hissed at him, showing fangs and rage. Worlds rose and fell in her anger.

Ivan's lips pursed. *You are the problem, aren't you? And you know it.*

The witch vanished.

Ivan settled in the chair by the door to reread the descendant history book.

Marc appeared in the hall.

Ivan let Marc view the entire conversation without speaking, hoping he'd handled it right.

Marc was satisfied. He resumed his rounds. He was too close to Angela to be able to do that to her witch. Ivan had been believed because he and the witch had never met face to face. If she'd known it was Marc's idea, she never would have agreed. *I'm going to save you, baby. Even if I have to make you an Invisible to do it.*

3

Kendle paused in rinsing out the rest of the hair color and makeup, feeling hot eyes roaming her body. She knew who it was by the tight breaths he was taking. "What?"

Quinn swallowed. "I want you."

Kendle sighed. "Let me tell you what I want, then you can make a choice."

"You can't have Marc." Quinn couldn't help his jealousy. He was expecting a brushoff here.

"But I can have Adrian, and I want him."

Quinn's face fell. "What's my choice?"

"Can you handle friends with benefits?"

Quinn forced himself to consider it. "For a while, maybe." He stared at her. "Adrian will hurt you."

"Adrian understands me in a way even Marc can't."

"I don't understand."

"I know. It's not something you can improve or compete for. It's what I have to offer you." Kendle's body deflated. "And you deserve better. Several camp women are waiting for you to show an interest."

Quinn understood she was giving him a way out that would let him save face. *I only want you! That sex was amazing!*

Kendle chuckled. "I was impressed with your aim."

Quinn grinned, chest puffing out. "I am one of Adrian's Eagles."

Kendle opened the shower door.

Quinn hesitated for a second, then joined her. Adrian could always be counted on to screw up and Marc was taken. *I can wait. Someday, she'll love me back.*

Outside the bathroom, Marc pushed the door shut the rest of the way and kept walking. "Good luck, dude. She likes trick shots, from what I've seen in Adrian's mind. If you can't keep up, she'll move on." Marc wasn't jealous over Kendle having

male friends. *If I ever snap my fingers, she'll come running.* It was a powerful feeling that no longer gave him guilt unless he was around Angie when he had the thoughts. Over time, that would ease. Their vow to be honest, no matter what, would make things better for their relationship and prevent anyone from ever coming between them again. “Now, I’m happy.”

Marc prowled the passages of the ship, working off the restless energy that came from it being almost over. When Angela woke next time, she would be stronger and able to start resuming some of her duties. *I don't want to give this up.* Marc hated that, but it was another part of his bond with Angie. He now understood why she hadn't been able to turn it back over to Adrian or anyone else. *When you know you're good at it, it feels wrong to give it up to someone who can't do it as well.*

Marc frowned. *Do I feel like I can do it better than Angie?*

No. Not yet. Marc was relieved. *I have a lot to learn and she can't wait to teach me. By the time she's done, I'll be eager to lead, and she'll be eager for the break. That way, we'll both be happy.*

Marc staggered, stopping as he understood what that meant. “When we return for the fight, I’ll be leading.”

He accepted that with pride and little smugness. “At least the UN won’t be involved. They’ll be gone before we reach the island.”

200 miles North

“It’s gone.” Travis stared at the faded map he’d liberated. “We’re on course. It should be here.”

The few people still in the lifeboat barely looked up at his announcement. They’d been out of water for two days. The fight between him and Corey had taken half their lives from wild shooting and sent a lot of their supplies overboard or ruined them. Twelve days at sea in the lifeboat had been too much for their sanity.

Travis stood on shaky legs, skin cracked, body too dehydrated to sweat under the piercing sun. He stared in every direction, searching for the missing UN ship.

Five miles away, Drew spotted them on the radar. He motioned to Shawn, who was sailing the big ship.

Shawn shrugged. “We have a job. They made their choices.” They’d been aware of several lifeboats passing. One had spotted them and tried to make contact on the radio, but Shawn wasn’t abandoning the mission for people who had abandoned their camp. Deserters had left the light. They were on their own.

Drew joined Jonny and Greg at the table in the corner of the bridge. They’d agreed to stay up here and sleep in the same room to avoid getting lost or hurt while alone. It was a big ship, with the feel of

ghost passengers who were happy their ride had resumed.

Greg dealt a fresh hand of five-card stud, yawning. Once the sun went down, they would start practicing for the next part of their run. This bridge was closed-in enough to provide protection from the air and water contaminants, but their drills would be done in bulky gear in case the mission ended in a bad area. The boss had insisted they needed to function both ways.

“Is it okay to talk about what we’re doing?” Conner, sitting on a stool by the door, wasn’t sure about the rules.

Greg nodded. “We cleared this ship. Say anything you want.”

“A five-man kill team seems light. What am I missing?”

The men liked it that Conner assumed he’d missed something and not the other way around. Greg motioned to Shawn.

Shawn swallowed his cold coffee. “We’re infiltrating the enemy.”

Conner frowned. “How?”

“Four kings, jack high.” Jonny put his cards down for the others to see and groan about. “We’re negotiating for a job.”

“What makes you think they’ll even talk to us?”

Greg stared. “We have you.”

Conner caught their thoughts; he paled. “I’m your prisoner!”

“And we’re out here away from your daddy, so be a good boy or we’ll just use your body to get in. We’re all fine with either one.”

Conner’s heart pounded. “I don’t understand.”

Shawn looked over from the wheel. “What’s not to understand? You have no friends on this *four*-man kill team. If you manage to survive, thank your dad for all the fun you’re about to have.”

5

Tow Ship

Adrian turned on the lantern, shivering at the cool breeze on his sweaty skin. He’d barely grabbed ahold of a rope hanging from this ship as it sailed by. He’d hurt his arm a little, slowing down the climb up the side of a vessel doing twenty knots. Now that they were away from the floaties, Marc had increased to cruising speed.

Adrian opened the ration kit he’d found and dug in. he sat at the crate he’d chosen to use as a table. Getting it up to the wheelhouse hadn’t been fun. Neither had moving the tied-down pallets of wood. He’d only needed to clear three inches of room to get the generator up here, but he hadn’t been able to do it. He planned to try again tomorrow.

Wood creaked

Adrian tore open the baggie. “Come eat. I have enough.”

A female gasp echoed.

Adrian didn't turn around. He'd spotted the shadow following him. "You need more training if you're going to kill descendants."

Sadie eased around the wheelhouse, knife in hand. She stayed on the other side of the crate, glowering at the man who'd locked her gifts.

Adrian poured the package into one of the two coffee cups he'd found in a cabinet. "It's cold, but it'll—"

Sadie dropped the knife to snatch up the cup. She drained it in seconds, swallowing chunks whole.

Adrian opened the second package and poured it into the other cup. He nudged it toward the oddly sexy woman wiping her mouth across her arm. "I snacked while digging through the cargo area. Go ahead."

Sadie repeated her actions, stopping to belch. She dropped the second cup, splattering her legs in the dregs.

Adrian stirred powdered milk into his open top canteen, then capped it and shook it.

When he sat it down, Sadie grabbed it without suspicion.

Adrian settled back against the wall as he lit a cheroot he'd found with the cups. He believed these items had belonged to the staff of this boat. He hadn't cleared all the lockers before Angela had taken over this ship at the beach for loading. He puffed, eyes shutting. The crash was coming soon. He could feel it.

Sadie crouched, arms going around her gut as milk spilled onto the deck.

Adrian didn't move, letting the sedative take effect.

Sadie slumped over, moaning.

"You'll be okay. And I won't hurt you. Just take a nap with me and we'll talk in the morning."

Sadie's eyes closed. Her weakened system shut down quickly from the drugs, leaving her breathing even. Her cramped face finally eased into peace.

"That's much better." Adrian stared at the lit cruise ship, mourning his new status and location. Neil had flipped on him; Angela had said goodbye. Marc had removed him from the ship. Adrian had foolishly thought having his gifts locked was going to be the only punishment until they reached the island. He'd forgotten about the threats and deals to move to this ship. Marc hadn't.

"Bastard never forgets anything." Adrian puffed, dwelling on Marc. In two weeks, he had calmed the camp, supplied their needs and won them over. There wasn't a person on the Adrianna who would take his side over Marc's now. "I lost."

Adrian felt the evil Mitchel side rise. He tried to ignore it, but he was alone. There was no one else to listen to. Marc's mistake had been in assuming the evil side was the descendant half. Adrian's human soul had always been the problem and Marc had sent the good half away.

"So now, we'll see what happens when we hit land. If I've gone totally bad by then, they can bury

me there. If they don't, I will get my camp back...and that includes my favorite student.”

Chapter Thirty-Five
For The Future

December 22nd

8am

1

Kenn walked to the top deck in the last group of fifty camp members going up for their time in the fresh air. He was off duty and finishing loose ends. Marc had most of it covered, but Kenn couldn't find any reason to put off the work now and he hadn't been able to sleep in. *It's not like I have a warm woman next to me.*

Kenn saw Brittani and Daryl inching up the stairs ahead of the jammed crowd and approved the mood. No one was complaining or pushing by the weak, bruised couple. Both of them had earned respect, but it was also wonderful to see their sick people finally out and about. It gave everyone hope.

Jayda paused next to Kenn. "They're engaged."

Kenn hadn't known. He added it to his mental list while taking out his notebook. He handed her a sheet of paper with several signatures on the bottom. "If you don't hand it in during the first Eagle meeting, the offer disappears."

Jayda read it, smile spreading across her face. "Really? I get to pick?"

“You did an amazing job. Leadership is proud of you.”

“What about you?”

Kenn frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Do you agree?” Jayda held up the paper, drawing attention. “I refuse to be a quota fill.”

Kenn’s lips twitched. “And you think the boss would do that?”

“If it served the future, yes.”

“And Marc?”

Jayda shrugged. “Don’t know him well, but probably. He is engaged to the boss.”

“But you trust my opinion?”

Jayda chuckled. “Yeah, I don’t know how it happened either.”

Kenn tapped the paper. “It was my idea. I printed it off and got it signed an hour ago.” Kenn moved into the crowd, leaving her smiling.

“Hey, I need a verification on something.” Charlie held out a small note so no one else could read it or pick it from their minds.

Kenn scanned and nodded. “So when’s the wedding? It’s a little odd that you two haven’t set the date yet.”

Charlie flushed. “I... We...”

Kenn laughed with those around them. “It’s okay, kid.”

Charlie found a timid tone. “I’ve been waiting. It felt disrespectful.”

Kenn shrugged. “It actually sounds like fun. The camp could use that right now, but I assumed it would put pressure on you.”

Charlie flushed again. “We’d love to do it soon. We want to be allowed to be... We want the rights of... We want to be married!”

Everyone laughed at his babbling, remembering their days of wanting to be alone with the person they were in love with.

Kenn wrote it in his book too, refusing to think about how well they’d just played a small crowd on their own. “I’ll let the boss know.”

“Mom doesn’t want me to. She’ll try to delay it, I think.”

“Maybe she’s right.” Kenn had no problem with what Charlie was now trying to do. He just didn’t think it would work.

“Maybe. I know we’re young, but it’s not like we have our whole lives in front of us, you know? We’re always in danger.” Charlie’s tone and eyes lowered. “I want to be allowed to love her now, while I can.”

Those who had lost someone immediately switched to his side. Those whose loved one had been spared, switched even faster.

“We’ll talk to your mom.”

“Angela likes us happy.”

“She’ll agree if we want it.”

Charlie scowled. “Don’t use me against my mom! If I can’t do it, neither can any of you.”

Kenn was proud of Charlie in that moment, able to feel the genuine heat behind the demand. The teenager didn't want negative side effects from their decision.

Kenn snorted. "No one uses anyone against your mom, boy. She can look after herself."

The tension broke, drawing chuckles as Charlie's cheeks turned darker.

"We'll talk to her, but we didn't mean we'd threaten the boss."

"We're not crazy."

More explanations and chuckles floated through the ship. The walls brightened, noticeably.

Kenn watched the non-magic users in the small crowd, evaluating reactions for problems and found one. *They're scared of us.*

They couldn't help it. Endangered people froze for a brief instant at the gravest of dangers, scenting in hopes they were wrong. For that second, all emotions and terrors were exposed. Other than sex, the moment before life was extinguished or allowed to continue was the most vulnerable a living thing could ever be. Kenn saw everything on the faces and in the hearts of those around him. Confronted with yet another form of magic, their first instinct was to scent for the danger they felt coming. Humanity was already sure descendants would be their doom.

Kenn did his job—he calmed the humans in his herd with a distraction. "Did you get to see Marc shove Adrian overboard?"

The crowd switched to hard laughter and funny comments. A few of them even imitated Marc's movements, but their eyes didn't lose that terrified glint of knowing their saviors would also be their killers in the end.

Kenn told a few jokes, then faded to the rear of the crowd as Charlie continued. The teenager kept them laughing as the crowd began to climb the stairs now that Daryl and Brittani had finally reached the top deck.

Kenn went back to the infirmary, mind and heart battling over his newest revelation.

2

"Have a seat." Angela cut Kenn off as he entered the swinging doors. She was in the middle of leaving.

Kenn winced as she pulled out her IV and hung it up. Blood rolled over her arm, but Ivan was there to wipe it and slap on a thick bandage.

"You're set as soon as we button your shirt." Ivan yanked the last piece of tape from her arm. "Even though I found you on your bathroom floor this morning and Morgan says you should stay here a few more days."

Kenn opened his mouth to protest.

Ivan jerked her shirt up.

Angela punched him.

Ivan hit the floor while Angela walked toward Kenn.

Chuckling, Kenn dropped into the chair by James, just noticing the quiet man. Around them, only a few people were still in the infirmary. Ramer and Sheldon were here now, both sedated. Ramer had been screaming and Sheldon had been crying. The medics hadn't been able to take either for long.

Angela waved at them. "Come on. You two have the same problem as a few others. I have thirty minutes of alertness in me; I'm not spending it in a cot getting a sponge bath from anyone but Marc!"

Kenn chuckled.

James frowned. "What do you mean, the same problem?"

Angela held the swinging door for both men, pointing to the largest office across the hall.

Angela turned her head to glower at Morgan, who was coming toward her with a hand extended. "Kendle showed me a very primitive way to make sure someone doesn't touch her. Shall I demonstrate?"

Morgan recoiled. He'd heard about Kendle's adventure on the dock. He went back to the medical desk where he'd fallen asleep.

Angela entered the office and went to the tiny window that allowed her to watch the opposite corridor. "A few others are coming."

Kenn was willing to let her try to ease his mind. If she said they had the same trouble with multiple people, that was a problem they needed to discuss and figure out how to handle.

Angela didn't turn. "Yes. We're going to have more meetings like this. They'll grow larger as more people become aware of the danger of merging magic into humanity."

"Is there no hope of having three societies, where magic, human and the offspring of both can coexist?"

Angela didn't answer Ralph's question. She didn't need to. Humanity hadn't been able to coexist with themselves. Descendants had been repressed and caged since they appeared. Neither of those things boded well for the future.

"I don't want them to die out." Kenn lowered his voice. "Or us."

"None of us do." Jeff held the door for Kimmie and Missy to enter. Zack came in behind them, nodding at Kenn. He held the door for Gus.

Kenn was dismayed as people kept coming in. It was a mix of both sides. *If that many people know, it's not a secret.*

"It never was a secret." Kendle held the door for Ray. She closed and locked it as Angela pulled the shades. "It's just that in moments like this, they can't hide it." Kendle sank down next to Kenn on the long couch. She leaned against his arm. Next to Kenn, Angela would barely be able to see her.

Kenn shifted to provide more cover, trying not to snicker.

Angela rested against the shade covered window, looking at them.

Twenty tired, worried people stared back, waiting for her to make it better.

“Let’s hear options in one sentence. We’ll explore those we think we can swallow.” She gestured at Kendle. “Go first.”

Kendle sat up, clearing her throat. “I don’t support this option, but we could breed them all until we’re one species.”

Angela held up a hand when people started to protest. “We’re just listing options now. Go on, Ray.”

Ray sighed. “We could do nothing and hope it solves itself, but I do support Kendle’s choice. If we’re all alike, we can’t fight.”

Angela waved. “What else do you have?”

Ray shrugged. “We can separate the two groups. It might mean new breeding laws.”

“We could get strict.” James was next in line. “We’re remaking the constitution. We can add things.”

“No. It’s perfect like it is.” Jeff hated the idea of changing the constitution.

“Then you can’t be allowed to exist because magic users are not covered.” Kenn challenged Jeff’s human side to explain it.

Jeff hadn’t considered that humanity’s constitution didn’t apply to them. “So we’re above the law?”

“We don’t have them in writing, except for Safe Haven’s rules, which includes all members, not just humanity.” Angela came to the desk and sat in the

one empty chair. “Keep going with options. We need to know them all.” Angela took a stack of papers from her book. “Each of you will take one of the options, preferably one you refuse to vote for, and tear it down. Find a way you could live with it, so the other side can too.”

“Why are we even doing this?” Ivan was already confused after hearing just a few of the options. “We survived again. Why do we have to start stirring them up already?”

Angela waved at Tommy.

Tommy pulled the string, making the shades fly up next to him.

A dozen guilty faces peered through the glass, but they didn’t leave.

Ivan nodded, sighing. “I get your point.”

Tommy started to shut the shades.

Angela shook her head. “Leave them. Let people see all races are represented, as are both genders and both branches of humanity. At some point, Dog will probably join us too. All species have a stake here. If we can’t find a way to make it work and save ourselves, then no one can.”

She took a seat and opened her notebook. “We’ll go up for the wake in a few minutes. Marc’s getting ready to start calling us to the top deck. Until he makes the call, hit me with all the options we haven’t covered. In a few days, we’ll meet again to discuss them.”

“It’s been a year.” Jeff stared at Angela, but his thoughts were on the past. “We’ve survived for 365 days.”

People stared. They had been too busy to keep track of the date.

Jeff frowned. “Do you think that’ll come up at the wake?”

Angela shrugged. “If not, you should mention it. People need to know so they can mark it, even if we are a day late.”

“That also means it’s almost Christmas, right?” Ray wanted something hopeful to think about after the wake and funeral.

Some people smiled. Everyone else frowned. It felt wrong to think about Christmas after losing so much.

Angela forced herself to give them what they needed. “Our losses are the reason we should celebrate Christmas, New Years and every other holiday. We’ve survived for a year after the end of the world. That’s a miracle. It deserves to be celebrated.”

The ship speakers crackled with Marc’s solemn voice. “Good morning, Safe Haven. We will begin services on the top deck in twenty minutes. Please gather on the top deck in twenty minutes.”

Angela smiled a bit. “My timing’s off. I’ll work on it.”

People rose, understanding the meeting was over.

Angela let them clear out, dwelling on the war. She'd forgotten the anniversary was coming and it had passed without exact minute prayers or tears. That felt wrong somehow, like they'd disrespected the horror of the event by not recognizing it.

Angela slowly stood, blinking rapidly to clear the darkness scope on her vision back to the dimmer glare. She'd scanned everyone at the meeting. She was making lists of the darkness she found. Safe Haven's members couldn't be allowed to pass that into the next generation. "I'm going to change them or remove them, for the future."

Waiting for her near the door, Ivan nodded. "I'll help in any way you want me to."

Angela lifted a brow.

Ivan sighed. "Fine. I'll be a part of your breeding tree."

Angela snickered as she moved toward the top deck. *A dozen down, three hundred and twenty-two to go.*

3

"Our journey has been long. We've lost so many..." Marc's emotional tenor carried through the ship over the PA system. "It's hard to bring up some of their faces, but we loved them all."

Marc met their teary eyes as he gave the first service to honor their losses. "Sacrifices are a part of life. The pain reminds us that we're not gone yet, that we haven't been forgotten, that time hasn't

passed us by. We go on in their memories. We go on in love of life, and hope for a better tomorrow, where peace resides for everyone.”

Angela took her place next to Marc, repeating the words as he gave them to her mentally. “We yearn for happiness and cling to our ghosts. We’re lost and aching, pretending that we’re whole because it’s expected of us. It’s what we do. We go on.” She wiped away tears, as many people in the crowd were doing. Marc was getting all of them with his emotions, as well as his words. “We are not the chosen people. We are not better than those who fell or were left behind. We are human first, and we hurt for all of humanity, not just those we had bonds to. The war almost brought us to extinction. We’re no longer a mix of refugees or separate races struggling to make a mark on history. We are simply survivors of the apocalypse. And we’ll go on. Because that’s what survivors do. It’s our job.”

Marc hugged her as she cried, finishing the words everyone in their camp needed to hear before the healing process could begin. “Hatred, bitterness and sorrow will always haunt us because we’re alive. Life has always been this way. Nothing has changed. We’re human. We make mistakes and we carry regret. None of that makes us better or worse than the person next to us, or even those in other countries who are fighting this same battle. We’re all part of the human herd. We need each other. The future needs us to put aside the past. All those we’ve lost will be dishonored if we can’t come together.

Please remember their sacrifices when you get angry, bitter. Life isn't fair. It never has been. It wasn't set up to be fair. It was designed for the strongest of the species to survive. Wrong or not, it doesn't change the facts: Those here now are among the strongest of our species. The war took things we'll never get back, but in the end, even an apocalypse couldn't eliminate us. We're here to stay. Fate will just have to accept it."

People cheered at the words, and at the feel of coming together. They were tired of fighting, tired of hating and killing. They wanted peace.

Marc vowed to give that to them. "I'm sorry for your losses, and for mine. But I'm not sorry we survived when others didn't. Don't you dare be sorry for it either."

More cheers and tears flowed over the deck, bringing healing to those who could accept it now. The others cried for their loved ones and friends, but they were also ready for peace.

Marc nudged Angela forward, aware that she didn't want to do this. Marc was certain now was the time. He insisted.

Angela faced her crying people, tears dripping down her shirt. "We're going to the international detention center to wipe them out. We'll be there in two weeks."

No one spoke.

Angela waited for protests.

Marc smiled at the people, proud of them. The anger coming into their faces now was honest. They knew there was still one big enemy to face.

Angela realized Marc was right. None of the hundreds of souls here on deck were against it. In fact, even those in deep mourning were in favor.

Marc put an arm around her shoulders. “We’re not afraid to die for what’s right. We don’t want to fight anymore, but we will. For the future.”

“For the future!” Neil shouted, hoping it was the right time.

The camp echoed it back, repeating the chant.

Marc held Angela as she took in the newest change in their people.

Angela cried harder. *I didn’t think they would ever get to this point!*

Marc kissed her forehead. *Neither did they. Be proud. We’ve all come a long way.*

“I am proud.” Angela smiled through the tears as the chants stopped and people began to drift back down into the ship or to the rear deck, where white balloons with names were being filled and released. “Of every one of them.” She turned in his arms. “But mostly, of you.”

Marc grinned. “Anything for you, baby.”

Angela sniffed. “It’s not just for me, though.”

“No. It’s for our future.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Close

1

The Descendants, A History by Adrian Mitchel

Adrian swallowed a chill as he stared at the title. Once this was done, he would live forever in the hearts and minds of all their kind. It was an immense honor and a mountain he'd never thought to climb. "How the hell do I do this?"

The voices clamored for his attention, screaming and shouting to be heard.

Adrian clenched his fists, fighting to narrow down just one.

"You have to call them forward."

Adrian looked over at Sadie, who was handcuffed to a handle on the wall. Other than that, she hadn't been restricted, harmed, or even searched.

Sadie had watched him start the coffee and listened to him piss off the side of the boat without speaking. When he'd sat to write, she'd been curious enough to wait for her own relief. His words reminded her that she needed a bathroom break. "Got a minute, Mr. Mitchel?"

Adrian grunted as he rose, very sore. He unlocked the cuff and waited for her to take off running.

Sadie stared into his eyes, preparing to kick and dart.

“There’s no need to disable me first. Just go.” Adrian winced at the shrill voices clamoring for his attention. “Come back in an hour and I’ll make something to eat.”

Sadie kicked him in the shin instead of the balls and took off running.

“Damn.” Adrian hobbled back to the notebook, grumbling, but he was pleased to have a sailing partner. He just needed to tame her a little and it might even be a pleasant trip.

A gun cocked.

Adrian sighed. “I saw the mess you made in the cargo area. If you kill me, you’ll starve to death. Don’t they teach you guys to cook before sending you out to battle us monsters?”

Sadie lowered the gun, unable to think of a response. She walked out of the wheelhouse, now the one muttering under her breath.

Adrian chuckled. He sat down, pondering her words. “Call them forward... But how do I organize it? Should I start as far back as the dates go or begin with today’s history and work my way back?”

Adrian sighed as he picked up the pencil. “Oldest first, please. Name and place of birth to start.”

Nothing happened.

Adrian cleared his throat. “I’m the Keeper. Come forward to have your history recorded, oldest first.”

Adrian sucked in air as a vivid impression filled his mind. A woman’s soft voice began to speak.

Adrian recorded it word for word, not letting himself dwell on anything he was told.

Sadie finished her bathroom break and came right back, Adrian’s gun tucked into her waistband. She watched him labor over the paper and mumble to himself, wondering what he was doing. She wanted to talk. She also didn’t. She already knew Adrian was dangerous. Provoking him wasn’t a good idea.

Sadie settled nearby to wait for breakfast, beautiful violet eyes studying her unwanted companion. She wished for her gifts so she could get into his head. Young and restless, Sadie had joined for the adventure and free food. Neither had been given until now and they’d both come from this man. She watched every move he made, clever mind working on his puzzle.

2

Adrian stretched, groaning.

Sadie flinched awake at the noise. She sat up, unhappy with herself for dozing off.

Adrian looked at the sun and realized three hours had gone by. He secured his book in his kit and dug out a ration bar. “Munch on this while I get

something going.” He tossed it over his shoulder, certain she would catch it.

Adrian listened to her rip into the bar, sorry he’d made her wait. *I didn’t expect it to be so consuming. I didn’t know that much time had passed.*

Adrian lit the small stove and got water boiling, amazed to feel so at peace when he’d been split from his gifts and his love. Three hours of recording had given him a feeling of satisfaction. The first fifteen pages in the notebook were done. It was amazing.

“What are you working on?”

“A history of our kind.” Adrian opened one of the food kits he’d gathered as he went through the ship. He added a few freeze-dried items to the pot and snapped down the lid. “It’ll be a while, but we’ll be able to eat off this all day.”

Her head snapped up. “More than one meal in a day? You’re lying.”

Adrian felt deep sympathy, but he didn’t let it show in his tone. “When it’s done, we’ll have a full bowl, with milk. After that, you can eat a bowl an hour until it’s gone. Just give it that hour between or you’ll get sick.” Adrian already knew she wouldn’t be able to eat so much. After the second bowl, her guts would refuse to hold any more.

Sadie glowered, stomach rumbling as she swallowed. “Why are you feeding me? What do you want?”

“Why do I have to want anything?” Adrian dug out clean clothes, missing his jacket. Everything he

was using now had been scrounged from below or he'd put it here before they set sail, not knowing he would need it.

“Nothing is free. Wasn't before; ain't now.” She took another large bite, spraying crumbs through an open mouth.

“True.”

She eyed his kit. “You want my history?”

Adrian shrugged. “What have you done?”

She paused; more crumbs fell to the floor. “Not much... Oh! I'm a traitor to my country and to my own kind. Is that enough?”

Adrian sighed, misery returning. “Not by itself.”

Sadie considered how she'd joined. “I fought in the UN matches and won a lot. I'm also the only female to win a death match against a descendant, without my gifts.”

“That'll do it.” Adrian was curious. If it could be duplicated, he would pass the message to Marc whenever someone checked on him. “We can do that during dinner if you like.”

She scowled. “You gonna drug me again?”

Adrian chuckled. “Probably. You're an admitted traitor. I'm a patriot. Natural enemies shouldn't mix too close.”

“How about you lock me in a cabin below?”

He heard her nervous tone. “Why?”

“So I know you're not touching me while I'm out!” She blushed.

Adrian untied his boots. “Okay.”

Sadie stared. “What’s the deal?”

Adrian kept removing his boots, then took off his shirt. “I’m changing. You don’t have to turn around, but please don’t touch me without permission.”

Sadie snickered at the reverse psychology. “You’re funny.”

Adrian removed all his clothes and washed off the layer of gritty salt that was making his skin raw. He ignored her roaming eyes, just seeking relief.

“I’ve been a service girl.” She shivered. “I hated it.”

Adrian wiped salt from the crack of his ass, cursing Marc. “Being forced can do that.”

“I liked some of it.”

“The credits afterward?”

Sadie chuckled. “Yes. And the cuddling.”

Adrian tossed the dirty clothes into the corner. “Cuddling after sex is nice. Doing it after making love is amazing.”

“And I guess you can do that, right?” Sadie didn’t want to trade her body for food and water, but she’d done worse since the war.

“Not with you.” Adrian used his dirty shirt, turned inside out, to wipe salt from his hair.

She frowned, starting to get self-conscious while he cleaned up. Her first bath in months had come from jumping overboard. “What’s wrong with me?”

Adrian kept using his basic line with twitchy females who didn’t know where they stood in the

world. If she gave him time, Sadie would become stronger than she'd ever been, and no one would ever be able to manipulate her this way again. The only hindrance was brain power. He wasn't sure if she was smart enough yet. Some people just weren't. "You're not willing and we're enemies. Both of those would have to change for me to be your service girl."

Sadie laughed this time. "You're funny."

Adrian stayed with his back to her as he pulled on his pants, not wanting her to see that he wasn't as immune as he sounded. *I'm a guy. We mention sex and it gets hard, even when it knows it isn't getting used.*

"I'll think about it."

"Me too, I'm sure." Adrian zipped up and sat to pull on the winter socks. They were all he'd been able to find, but they were infinitely better than none at all. "So why become a traitor? Gold or food?"

"Conscious choice. I was an activist before. I supported the UN. When they came calling, I wasn't busy."

Adrian met her eye. "Do you think I'll ever return your gifts if you lie to me?"

Sadie threw herself onto the pallet, sulking. "Asshole."

"Lying traitor."

"Mitchel."

"That's a low blow."

Sadie snickered again.

“How old are you, Sadie Jones?” Adrian had picked out her name and a few details when he’d locked her gifts, but it hadn’t been much. She would figure out that he was also powerless, but it might not be for a while if he was careful.

“Seventeen.”

“Family, alive?”

“Probably. I ran away a few years ago.” She stopped being fearless, unable to fight the old horrors. “I was in California when the war came.”

“So was I. Bakersfield.”

“Fresno.”

“Where’d they catch you?”

“On a beach, with a group of college kids who thought I was one of them.” Sadie shuddered. “They hurt us when they came. We were waving and crying, hugging.” Her voice dropped into betrayed pain. “We thought we were being rescued.”

“Stop.” Adrian buttoned his shirt. “I don’t want to feel bad for you yet.”

Sadie’s lip stuck out as she struggled not to cry.

Adrian finished dressing, then went to check on his drying weapons. He took time to wipe them again. “That weapon won’t work like it is. Bring it over here so I can take care of it.”

Sadie placed it on the warm rail and moved back, worried about being attacked.

“This will be a long trip.” Adrian kept working her, pretending she was a young Mitchel just pulled out of the labs. “I’d rather not spend it with an enemy.”

Sadie tensed, preparing to fight when he tried to throw her overboard.

“We’ll call a truce until we reach land.” Adrian leaned against the rail, studying her. “We won’t be friends, but we won’t have to watch out for a knife while we sleep.”

Sadie nodded. “Magic?”

“Do I need to bind you?!” Adrian advanced, hating her flinch. “Can’t you just keep your word?”

“I will! I will!” She cringed from his anger, backing away.

Adrian went by her and back to the wheelhouse.

Sadie slowly followed. “Why, really?”

Adrian sighed. “I get lonely.”

Sadie believed him. He held all the cards here. There was no reason to lie. “You have any games? I like games.”

Adrian motioned toward the front cabinet. “I think there’s a deck of cards.”

Sadie got the deck, handling it as if it were food. “Awesome!”

She’s just a kid. Adrian relaxed a little, suddenly grateful he’d spared the girl and she’d climbed back on board. *Thank you for not making me go through this completely alone. I know I don’t deserve it but thank you anyway.*

“Why did they toss you overboard?”

Adrian winced. He’d been hoping Sadie hadn’t seen that humiliation. “It’s a long story.”

Sadie shrugged. “How long until they get wherever they’re going?”

Adrian looked at her. “The UN doesn’t know where we’re headed?”

“Not that I heard, and rumors were everywhere, about everyone.”

Adrian stored that information. “A month, I think. It depends on Angela’s next choice.”

“The UN thinks Safe Haven is on the way to eliminate them. They’re gathering people, calling them back to base.”

“Good to know.” Adrian got out his pen as the voices in his mind began weeping at the lack of attention. “Give me an hour and we’ll talk some more if you want.”

“And eat?”

“Yes.” Adrian fell back into the work, forgetting where he was.

Sadie considered killing him, but she didn’t want to be alone either. “Does it bother you if people read over your shoulder?”

Adrian didn’t hear her. He was already into the history of a woman who had lived a very long time ago.

Sadie edged closer to look, curious and reckless. She knew the man was dangerous, but she couldn’t help being drawn to him. He’d been nice to her. She couldn’t handle that.

Sadie began to read as Adrian wrote, moving into touching range to see the small, neat text.

My father dumped my body into the river. I was consumed by the animals and trapped with

my demon in this wasteland of lost souls. My mother never knew. She went on to have seven more children, all daughters. My father mated each of them and produced deformed offspring with power and no will to control it. All of those damaged children ended up in the same river, year after year. Our justice was denied!

I have searched for an escape from this place for centuries. My demon faded into nothingness before the new world was discovered. I have been alone here since.

Sadie backed up, heart hurting. She didn't want to know more about the story he was recording. She now wanted justice for the lost souls.

“So do I.” Adrian put the pen down as the angry voice in his mind faded. “This one was used as an experiment. In the beginning, no one knew what would happen if they crossed descendants and humans. Her father tried to create superbeings who could go back up and challenge God's decision to create humanity.”

“Did it work?”

Adrian's brows came together.

Sadie flushed. “Well, I don't know this stuff. I only have the basics on our kind.”

“Same, until now. With these recordings, I'll be able to trace it back and maybe figure out what causes the cracks in a...” Adrian stopped, not wanting her to have current information about Angela.

Sadie already knew. “The UN says mental cracks come from disobeying an alpha’s order.”

Adrian snorted.

Sadie flushed darker. “That’s not true?”

“A byzan is above an alpha. We don’t tell them what to do; they tell us.”

“Byzan are a myth.”

Adrian stared at her. “You meant alphas or all descendants?”

“All. Any of us can go crazy.” She shrugged. “According to the UN videos and booklets. They passed out a lot of stuff like that, but it all says the same thing: Obey orders.”

“Makes sense, for them. For us, it’s all lies.”

“So we don’t get cracks if we disobey an alpha?”

“We get punished.”

“With cracks.”

“No.” Adrian sighed, trying to be patient. “Only byzan get mental cracks. Alphas just punish you.”

“Like enforcers.” Sadie shivered.

Adrian nodded. “Yes, but an enforcer is stronger than an alpha in a way, though they report to them. Enforcers are special.”

Sadie stared toward the big cruise ship. “Safe Haven has more than one.”

“Yes.” Adrian didn’t tell her they were all young. Even Jennifer was just a teenager.

Sadie shivered. “Are you guys going to attack the IDC? Because I want off before you get there.”

Adrian studied her, seeing strength and a reckless gleam in her violet eyes. In that moment, she reminded him of Angela.

Sadie blushed under his attention. It was the first time he'd shown heat.

Adrian turned back to his notebook. The next voice was already calling to him.

Sadie stayed back, questioning her physical response. "Did you use the alpha pull on me?"

"No."

"How can I trust you?"

Adrian knew he shouldn't, but he suddenly wanted a bond with her. "My gifts were locked. I'm an Invisible now, like you."

Sadie gaped at him. Anger flooded the wheelhouse.

Adrian ducked her lunge and followed her fall, hard body pinning her to the deck.

Sadie didn't struggle. She'd been taught to submit in this situation. Tears began sliding from under her lashes.

Adrian watched her, mind working on a new plan that would most certainly get him killed when they reached the island.

Sadie waited for his attack, body shaking, tears rolling.

Adrian moved to the floor next to her and sat, but he braced for another assault.

Sadie slowly opened her eyes in relieved confusion. "You don't want me?"

Adrian shook his head, disgusted with how she'd been trained, how she was reacting. "Let's make a deal."

Sadie stayed still, afraid he was testing her. "Okay."

"Don't you even want to know what it is?"

"No."

"Because you won't stick to it."

"I will! I always do what I'm told!"

Adrian sighed. "That's the deal, little girl. Never again submit to anyone, over anything, unless it's what you want."

Sadie stared at him in suspicious confusion. "I can't do that. I'm well trained."

"You were brainwashed. I can help you, but only if you agree to the deal."

Sadie slowly sat up. "You want me to fight you, on everything?"

Adrian chuckled. "I keep forgetting you kids take everything literal." Adrian stood, ignoring her flinch. "I want you to free yourself of the UN chains. You're a human being, not a slave or a weapon to control."

Sadie shuddered. "I can't do that."

"Then get off this ship." Adrian walked out of the wheelhouse. "I can't stand to watch you act that way. You're a survivor. You deserve better."

"I don't, though." Her voice lowered into a mutter. "I'm a bad girl."

Adrian kept walking, attention caught by balloons. As they came closer on the wind, he could

read some of the names written on them. Tears came to his eyes.

Sadie approached him on the right, where he could see her. She stayed by his side and watched the balloons float by until they were all gone and the rear deck of the cruise ship emptied of all but a striking couple and a few guards. “Who are they?”

“Your former targets.”

Sadie gasped. “That’s Angela?”

“And Marc.”

Sadie waved a hand. “He’s just her lover. His kids are the strong ones.”

Adrian stared at his rival. “Marc is the most powerful descendant on the planet.”

“You can’t know that.”

Adrian held up a hand. “Watch.”

Sadie studied the couple, realizing they were hearing this conversation. She decided it was a good time to be still and hope they didn’t order Adrian to kill her.

“They won’t.” Adrian sighed as Marc lit up a shield around the entire cruise ship in response to his request. “And I wouldn’t do it anyway.”

Sadie gawked at the open display of power. “You’d defy that? *Him?*”

Adrian met Marc’s eye across the ships. “In a heartbeat. They banished me. I’m free to do what I want and face the consequences.”

“He hates you.” Sadie could see it in Marc’s expression. “What did you do?”

Adrian stared coldly. “I almost stole his life, with her. And in the end, if he isn’t very, very careful, I’ll still get it.”

Marc had caught everything happening on Adrian’s ship. He sent a mental response, staring back just as ruthlessly. *Your grandson, Brian, was taken captive by the soldiers right after we set sail. Nancy now belongs to a group of slavers who might eat the baby when it’s born. Your daughter is in a lab, miles under the ground. And Conner is being handed over to the UN by our kill team. Be very, very careful yourself, Mr. Mitchel. You’re about to be the last of your line.*

Marc led Angela toward the ramp while enjoying Adrian’s screams.

Angela couldn’t take it. “Please? Do it now.”

Marc waved a hand.

Angela’s mind went silent as Marc locked her gifts. She was now an Invisible.

Angela smiled at the instant relief. “Thank you!”

Marc guided her down the ramp. “It’s my honor.”

End of Book 12

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“Everyone okay up here?” Kendle climbed the steps to the bridge, fighting harsh memories. It had been easier last night when everyone was up here with her.

“Surviving.”

Kendle stepped into the bridge, forcing herself to smile. “Boss wants an update.”

Theo frowned. “You shouldn’t be up here without a suit yet. We haven’t called it.”

“You have the no-scratch cone off.”

Theo laughed at her description of the helmet for his radiation suit. “We’re clear now. I’ll give the word when Kenn calls for it.”

Kendle swept the bridge, seeing it was still neat and clean.

“You did good work up here. Smell’s almost gone.”

Kendle nodded. Vomit and shit odors were hard to get rid of even after the mess was cleaned up. Blood dried and smothered itself. She still preferred the first two. Vomit and feces meant life. Blood meant it was ending.

The ocean mocked Kendle with its beauty. *Nothing so dangerous should look so wonderful.*

Theo checked the screen against the notebook on the counter and wrote it down. “How are things below?”

“The same.”

Theo glanced over. “Has to be hard for you.”

Kendle held in an honest reply. She had no idea how she was doing it.

“When was the last time you slept?”

“I snooze.”

“So, since we left?”

Kendle’s voice went cold. “No. I had the first few days in the infirmary, counting ceiling tiles between sedations.”

Theo didn’t bat an eyelash. “There’s a cot in the corner behind you. Take a snooze now if you like.”

Kendle wasn’t sure if she looked that bad or if he just wanted company. “Do you need me up here for something?”

“A conversation, security.”

Kendle snorted. “What do you want?”

“A sign language class, with you teaching it.”

Kendle frowned. “Why me?”

“Debra likes you. She told me she wants to talk to you.”

“She’s a descendant. She can talk to me anytime I want.”

“Exactly. You never have your guard down and she’s not pushy.”

“She needs to be if she wants to become an Eagle.”

“I think that’s what she wants to chat about.”

“And if we use sign language, the other descendants won’t hear it.”

“Yes, but I want her to be able to talk to anyone at any time. She speaks their language. Now, they need to learn hers.”

Deleted Scene #2

Adrian knew he was dreaming, but he didn't resist. He approached her without fear of rejection. *I need to hold you.*

Angela wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. "Mmm..."

Adrian kissed her cheek. "Thank you."

"For not leaving you behind?"

"For returning to us. I'm going to kiss you now." Adrian pressed his lips to hers, heart skipping a beat. Bright blue light shot out, surrounding them.

Adrian deepened the kiss, taking advantage.

Angela compared it to Marc and pulled away.

Adrian retreated, bitter. "Not even close, was it?"

"No. It hasn't been in any of our lifetimes. I always went back to Marc. I always will."

Adrian finally accepted it. "I still love you. Can we get rid of that now?"

"You tell me."

"It's possible, but you'd have to do it. I can't. I want you too much."

Angela tried to do the right thing, but her heart had two doors and one of them belonged to Adrian. "You'll always be second. Little could change that."

"What about Ivan?"

"Third."

“But why?”

“I’m greedy.”

Adrian chuckled. “Liar.”

She sighed. “I saw something that scared me. So I took precautions.”

Adrian could only think of one thing she could have seen to produce that reaction. “Marc and I both die.”

“No. I had to leave.”

“And you’d never take me or Marc away from Safe Haven...” Adrian gazed at her, heart in his tone and expression.

Angela stroked his scruffy cheek. “You taught me a lot. Covering my own needs and wants was in there too deep. I’m corrupt.”

“We all are, Angie. Stop blaming yourself for all of it.”

“I made the choices. I directed fate.” She dropped her chin. “I played god. I still am.”

“Well, the people doing those jobs couldn’t handle it. A closer had to be sent in.”

“Do you really feel that way?”

“No. It scares me that betting addicts had the future of all life in their hands. I understand the choices you’ve made; I agree with almost all of them.”

“Which ones would you have done differently?”

“The mountain. I wouldn’t have let it happen. We would have fought them honestly.”

“And lost half our army. What else?”

“Me. I would have killed me a long time ago.”

“Many have tried.”

“You could do it.”

“No, I can’t.”

Adrian frowned. “Why?”

Angela stepped forward and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Because I love you.”

Adrian swept her up against his chest, locking their mouths as he opened the connection. Bonds swirled around them, old and unbreakable by anyone but them.

“I release you.”

Every remaining bond between them snapped.

Adrian jerked awake. *She just said goodbye!*

Deleted Scene #3

“She’s out and about. Ditched me.”

“Copy.” Marc had been expecting it. Angela had napped for four hours. Her mind wasn’t letting her have a longer break. He’d picked up the pattern already.

Sure of where he’d find her, Marc kept moving up the stairs, accepting the ship’s groan like it was a camp member. “You’re welcome. Thank you for holding us up through this.”

Marc found Angela on the rear deck, staring toward the ship they were towing. He didn’t scold her. He put an arm around her waist to lend his heat against the almost chilly breeze.

“Congratulations on reaching my level.” She kissed him. “And damn you for it.”

Marc held her tight, the way she liked it. “Permission to use it for three seconds?”

“Granted.”

Marc clapped his hands over her head, hoping Adrian was watching.

Angela was delighted as a shower of flowers fell over them. He’d copied William’s gift, just from watching her memory. “You’re going to be amazing at this.”

Marc was suddenly sure she was right. He already felt more in control, calmer, wiser.

Angela snorted. “That didn’t come with it. You brought those skills to the level.”

“Really?”

“You finally have what you need to be happy.”

Marc wanted to ask if she did too, but he wasn’t crazy enough to hurt them both that way. He kissed her instead.

Angela held him close, thrilled and dismayed. Marc would be a great leader during peace, but he was going to be their fighting general for the trip home instead. Then, just when he was enjoying the role, he would have to give it up to Adrian, who would lead the ultimate battle against nature. No one knew what would happen from there.

Marc hugged her closer. “I’ll be fine. I never wanted it, so it’ll be easy to give it up.”

Angela sighed, not telling him he didn’t understand, that it got under your skin and refused to stop itching. “I don’t want you to be hurt.”

Marc held her back, making eye contact. “The only way I’ll be hurt, is if I don’t have you.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Marc gave her a weak growl. “Tell me!”

“I can’t. I don’t know. I’ve managed to get every descendant on this ship to search too and the answer is always the same.”

Marc braced. “Do you die?”

“It feels more like I’m gone.” She leaned back to view him. “I’ll tell you now. There’s no way I would leave Safe Haven unless I became too

dangerous to stay. I think you have to lock me down or send me away.”

Marc, with others, had already spent time worrying over that possibility.

“Me too.” Angela rotated in his arms. “I love you. Always.”

Marc rested his chin on her head, arms crossed over chest. “I found a few scrolls that might have information on why byzan become unstable. I couldn’t reach them. I’ll try again when we’ve all recovered.”

Angela fought tears. “Someone else just died. I feel so useless!”

Marc slammed her with the little energy he had, lifting her mood against her will.

Angela gasped, fighting the urge to giggle like a schoolgirl. “Where did you learn that? One of your little floozies?”

Marc burst out laughing. “From you.” Marc swept her up and took her back to the empty cabin. He understood her need to roam to avoid the grief, but she had to rest. *How about that orgasm now?*

Audio



Did you know the Life After War series is now available in audiobook format?

[Audiobook Page](#)

Radiation Chart

Explosive bloody diarrhea is a sign of coming death if the symptoms start in the first hour.

If symptoms appear in 2-3 hours, the dose of gys was high.

If the symptoms appear 6-12 hours, and stop within 24 hours, the dose was sublethal-probably 1-2gys.

(1 gy = 100 rads)

0-1gy-extreme flu symptoms

1-2gy-blood cells die, bleeding from orifices

2-3gy-turns the skin red with peeling and blisters

3+gy-Infections and hemorrhaging

Treatments-used in combination, for 30-60 days at least, and as much as 2 years after the exposure.

1. Potassium iodide-radioactive particles come out in the urine
2. Prussian blue-particles come out in the feces
3. Give diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid—it binds to plutonium, americium and curium.
4. Draw blood every three hours to check for lymphocyte white blood count
5. Preemptive Antibiotics
6. Treat fever and vomiting as needed

7. Watch for low blood pressure, seizures, anemia.

8. Provide huge amounts of Fluids, electrolytes, and plasma.

*Amount of exposure is more dangerous than length; if levels are above 10gy, death results in minutes.

From the Author

Hello! I hope you enjoyed this edition of life After War. I did, and at the same time, I didn't. It hurt me to lose so many characters that I love. I cried while writing several parts of this book. If I could, I would never kill off a good one, only the bad. But life doesn't work that way and neither does fiction. Still, I'm sorry for your pain.

On the bright side, Adrian is off ship and Marc is a byzan! About time, right? If it were up to me... It really isn't, though. The voices scream and I copy it down, a bit like being a Keeper. Once it's rolling, the characters have a life of their own.

...was anyone else surprised about Kenn and Courtney? I was. I can't wait to see what Tonya comes up with to test his loyalty. I'm also eager to watch Debra and Ralph become more important to Safe Haven. Those two are special.

How?

We'll find out together.

Until next time, watch your six.

Angie, out.

Book 13



[For the Future](#)

“I’ll meet you in the mess.” Marc kissed Angela’s chilly cheek, then stepped back, waiting for her to go below. The stiff wind blew gray streaked curls over her shoulder.

Angela knew why Marc was arranging to be alone on the breezy deck. She went below, guard on her heels. Even with the thick sweater over a long sleeve shirt and jeans, she was still cold. She’d just needed to view the sky, and Adrian, for a brief moment.

Neil unzipped his Eagle jacket as they descended into the warmth of the ship. He was glad Angela didn't want to stay topside where his shield wouldn't penetrate the decks of their boat.

Guards stared at Neil's injuries as they went by; his bruises were ugly right now, but his heart was finally healing. He nodded to them and kept his chin up.

Marc waited until Neil and Angela disappeared down the stairs, listening to the soft lap of the ocean and the faint call of a seabird. He turned, letting Adrian's mental profanities slow while he scanned. All Marc found was beautiful blue water and the gritty apocalypse sky. He rubbed his rough fingers together, scratching at a hard spot. He didn't like to hurt Angela's soft skin with rough patches.

Marc snickered at himself. *I'll give her time to recover, then I'll light her up until she glows.*

"That son of a bitch!" Adrian swung around to scream at Marc directly... He finally realized the man had turned and was staring at him with a bored expression. "What?!"

Marc linked their minds. *Record what happens next. It's vital to the future of every species on the planet.*

Adrian was helpless to fight the job or the alpha order. He pulled out his notebook, nodding to Sadie. "Grab my damn pen, then go below." He didn't want Marc targeting the girl. She needed to get out of sight.

Sadie hurried, also hoping Marc didn't pay attention to her. *He scares me.*

Marc glared at the mercenary girl to keep that edge, wondering why Angela had let Sadie live. The UN fighter wore their ragged, faded uniform and a blue Mohawk over wild eyes that said the minute her gifts were restored, she would start causing trouble. Marc narrowed in on her shaking form, reading her fears and very little hope for the future beyond survival. *Adrian will help her with that...* Marc clicked it in place. *She doesn't care about his feelings. Angela wants the girl when he finishes training her.*

Satisfied with that discovery, Marc rotated, gesturing to Theo through the flapping plastic and dirty glass of the bridge. *Turn on your radio.*

Theo held up the mike to indicate he already had. His watch glinted off the window and the calm water. The ship was docked, but the bridge was never allowed to be empty. Too many lives depended on that station to leave it unmonitored, but this was a mandatory moment for everyone else—even those on duty and their kids. Radios would carry Angela's words to the few areas that couldn't go unguarded.

In the bridge with Theo, Grant and Ray slowly moved into the elevator. Neither of them had been cleared for stairs. They were in sweatpants and long robes, and still chilled by the wind. They'd come up for a check in with their temporary captain. Grant

hadn't been cleared for that duty either, but he insisted on helping. Ray respected that.

Adrian stayed linked to Marc as the man went down dim stairs and joined a crowd in the hall. They all took the corridor to the mess. None of them chatted or smiled.

Adrian settled onto a stool, enjoying the breeze while he waited for things to start. He swept the crowd for friends and enemies, detecting the new bonds that had been forged. Many of those were strong. *He's winning over my army!*

Sadie didn't go below when Adrian started working. She lingered, observing and yearning for what she'd had. *I miss my gifts. If I had them, I could at least see what he's seeing.*

Adrian was aware of her unhappiness. Even distracted, female moods always registered on his male radar. "You can read it while I write. Just give me a couple minutes to get flowing first. If I don't record this, our new alpha asshole will come back up here blowing fire over both of us."

"It's cool." Sadie leaned against the wooden rail to wait. She didn't want Marc glaring at her again.

Adrian soaked in the sights and sounds of Safe Haven through Marc's mind. He hadn't been away for very long yet, but he still missed them. *It was foolish of you to get rid of me when Angela needs every hand she can get for shifts.*

It's all covered by the people you overlooked. Marc didn't say who. Adrian would find out on his own.

Adrian scanned the packed galley, refusing to stare at Angela while he was linked to Marc. He didn't need to make the situation worse. He also didn't think about Conner. If he did that, he'd start screaming again, or begging Marc to spare the boy. There was no point in either; Marc wouldn't change Angela's plans.

Marc moved to the center of the wide room. Most of the noise faded. "This is an historic moment."

Magic invaded Adrian. His hand began to move across the paper, getting it word for word.

Marc waved. "The Boss."

The camp clapped as Angela stood from the corner table where she'd been waiting and resting. It took a minute to fade.

Adrian forgot his promise not to stare. Her curls were loose, wild. Her lean, hard body filled out the jeans in pleasing ways. Her skin was almost glowing. *She's beautiful.*

Marc nodded. *Yes, she is.* Her recovery was going well. He was supervising it personally.

Angela cleared her throat, tugging her sleeves down to stop the chill from fooling everyone about her health. The new power inside was glowing, not her. "I picked my fighters from those who were going to die, with a couple exceptions. I didn't tell them; I couldn't because I didn't know we were going to get sick."

The crowd stared at Neil in reproach. They knew he was the reason she'd been distracted.

Neil didn't react. Standing his normal post behind Angela, he was watching everyone. It was easy to believe the rumor that he now had his full memory back.

Angela refused to shift all the blame to Neil. "I was tired, and weak from the beach fight." She dropped her head. "I didn't want anyone to know how bad it was. If I'd recharged, like William suggested, I might have been able to see it coming."

Marc sighed. "We're all guilty of that, to a point. We were consumed with personal issues. We forgot the biggest rule the war taught us: survival must come first."

Heads nodded; people accepted their role and the weight of that guilt.

Angela lifted the hand without a shiny new bracelet, also refusing to let her people carry any more of it than she had to. "We can't know everything that's coming. None of us can predict every potential future. Please don't hate me for not being able to save everyone. I did what I could."

"We're sure you did." Jeff was torn up about Doug and Romeo, but he didn't blame Angela. He blamed the people who caused the war. Jeff tugged little Roy further under his arm, smiling down at the nicely plumping boy.

Roy grinned around his sucker.

As far as Jeff knew, Roy didn't understand that Doug and his brother were gone. He didn't know if that was better or worse; he just knew it didn't feel right to pretend nothing was wrong, though that's

exactly what he was doing. He wanted Roy to be happy.

Angela kept going, ready to face the ugliest part. “I didn’t give anyone time to get set or ask questions—I attacked as soon as we ascended. They did me proud by following my lead.” Her eyes went glassy. “We lost people in that first battle. Their souls went into the judging chamber. When there’s a well open, the souls will be judged and sent where they deserve.” Angela delivered hard looks, targeting their loved ones. “I have no say in that; neither do you. Their actions during life will determine where they go. If they are deemed good, they’ll be sent back to live again.” Angela paused to take a drink of the hot tea Thelma had brought to her. Her throat was still sore.

Adrian switched to shorthand to get it all. He was capturing the mutters and gasps of camp, as well as their fear and anger. Nothing was closed to him right now; he was determined to get it all. His hand stilled as he waited for Angela to resume the meeting.

“The Messenger was in that first room. We surrounded him with shields...and killed him.” Angela waited for the shocked reactions to fade, then continued. “As a special soul, he didn’t go into the judgment chamber. He will be absorbed back into the Creator, hopefully making Him aware that someone has breached the weigh station.” She shrugged. “Maybe He will come back and kill us

all—everyone else has tried. Or maybe he'll come back and discover that we've changed.”

Witnesses liked hearing that even though it wasn't entirely true. They had plenty of issues. The difference was that they were actively working on them, not just giving lip service.

“I wasn't able to bring everyone back. All I was able to do was change the number of people required for each room, but when I got to four, it wouldn't go any lower. As we cleared each area, some of us couldn't leave. Robes appeared. Those souls were given the most important job of all—they're judging humanity. Don't grieve for them. They see everything you do. Make them proud.” Angela sank onto the bench, knees shaking. She'd had a workout before this, then walked to the top deck with Marc. She was tired again despite her healthy appearance.

The crowd muttered, feeling guilty for making her do this so soon.

Marc stood next to her. “Questions? Thoughts?”

“Do you think it will work?” Jennifer had little faith. Her hand came up and tucked her robe tighter. She felt very exposed, but the medics hadn't cleared her yet for anything but a wheelchair ride to this meeting. “Not all dogs respond to a whistle.”

Angela snorted, while her people frowned at the wording. She also had little faith left. “If not, I'll think of something else. I won't give up until we confirm our purpose, our exact origins and history. We deserve to know.”

Most people nodded and exchanged comments with those closest.

“Anyone else?” Marc was eager to be done so he could break the connection with Adrian.

“Are we able to visit?”

“Can they come down here and visit us?”

“Can we trade places?”

Angela shook her head. “No, to all of those. The ascensions were only allowed because the Messenger decreed it. When he died, I lost the ability to go up, and they can’t come down. I’m sorry.”

Grieving loved ones began to cry again.

Angela hated lying, but she and those left above had agreed it was best if their loved ones moved on. They wouldn’t if they knew they could visit anytime she approved it.

Marc hid his frown as he spoke to Adrian. *Make sure you get that part. It was a hard choice for her, and she has to carry it alone. I want her courage noted.*

You got it. Adrian scribbled faster.

Angela leaned against Marc’s hip. “We lost more people as we cleared the other two rooms. Four more went into the judgment chamber.” Angela was giving them these details as a punishment for herself against the lies she’d felt it best to tell. Marc knew the full truth and it would be recorded, but her people wouldn’t get to read it for a long time. The final battle would be over, and she would be gone by then. They wouldn’t be able to

badger her to set up visitations, to dig for a way to trade, to change the room rules again, and then finally, to beg her to kill someone and send them up in place of their friend or family member. She refused to put them, or herself, through that.

Marc agreed with her choice. He thought he could develop the skill to ascend on his own, but he had no desire to go up there again. He was still furious over the first trip. “Any other questions or thoughts?” Marc kept it going. Angela was playing up the weakness a little, but she really did need to rest. After this, they would start putting people down for recharges.

Samantha cleared her throat, acutely aware of unfriendly gazes hitting her and Neil from all directions. “When will we get an answer?”

“The Messenger told us it would take his soul a long time to reach the Creator. He always knew; he just couldn’t escape from the weigh station and he didn’t want to be absorbed. Everything they did up there was his idea. We gave him what he wanted least—we sent him home.” Angela’s voice rose in pointed triumph as she nodded to Marc. “It will take three years. We’re right on schedule for the Creator to return for our final battle, if he decides we’re worth fighting for.”

Marc shoved Adrian out of his mind.

Adrian finished writing out the scene.

Sadie read it over his shoulder, growing more confused with each word. She struggled not to ask questions until he was finished.

Adrian stopped writing, mind spinning with the implications. *Everything is tied into three years now, not four anymore. We've used one of them.*

Sadie plopped down at his feet. "The true Creator?"

Adrian nodded. Letting her read this had been a mistake. *If I can't convert her now, I'll have to kill her. The UN can never...*

Adrian's face went blank.

An ominous wind blew over the deck, bringing chills to her skin. Sadie immediately got up and put distance between them. She knew that look from her time with the UN. It said terrible things were being considered. She didn't want to be involved if it meant crossing the power couple here or the UN, and she already sensed Adrian might do both.

Adrian didn't react to her exit, mind offering the option he'd refused to consider until now. *If the good guys don't want me, the other side absolutely does.*

2

"Come on." Marc held out a hand. "It's time to get everyone settled."

Angela crossed her arms over her chest, keeping the new bracelet covered. Her bond with the other King had solidified overnight. "I don't wanna go to bed, Mommy."

The slowly clearing crowd in the mess laughed with them.

Angela stood, smiling at Marc. “Thank you...” She smiled brighter. “Can my cabin be last?”

Marc nodded, drawn.

Angela tugged him down for a soft kiss.

Most people were happy for them. A few stared in longing or jealousy.

Brittani cleared her throat. Her foot tapped.

Angela and Marc broke apart so the row of people could get by.

Marc tucked her under his arm, appearing happy. Inside, he was chaotic as he tried to cover everything at the same time.

Angela could feel his stress. She waited until they were last in the line now headed for the cabins or the infirmary. “Pick one and store it in a row. The top level is most important. As you add them, swap and switch until it feels right.”

Marc immediately began to do that.

Neil trailed the couple through the emptying hall. He’d proven his loyalty by going undercover to hear Adrian’s secrets on the floatie. He was trusted with their lives, but it wasn’t enough. *I want my real place back.*

Angela nodded to Molly as they walked by. The black clad fighter was finishing a shift on guard duty here. Quinn was taking over this area now.

Molly shot an ugly glare at Neil. She hadn’t forgiven him.

Neil kept scanning for trouble. He refused to be distracted during this duty.

Marc finished his mental aligning. “I can’t wait to get a moment alone to update all these.”

“Yeah, about that.” Angela shrugged. “You should do it when you think of it. You’re covering a lot more than you ever have. Forgetting and missing things will happen unless you record it right then.”

Marc dug into the updates, starting from the top. His grid had expanded into more than just a tracking ability.

Angela motioned to Wade, who was waiting for the elevator. “He’ll roll with us for a minute.”

Tim pushed Wade’s wheelchair over. He was glad to be out of the infirmary. They’d still been doing constant shifts, even after Angie and the others ascended. Tim was eager for real time off, but Marc had made it clear the descendants were going to get recharged before there would be relief for anyone else.

Marc got to Wade’s name on his mental list. He glanced over to find that nervous man on his right. Angela was now walking behind them, in the bodyguard’s place. The feeling was indescribable.

Angela enjoyed his happiness. She sought nothing in return for it though, unlike the man who’d mentored her. Angela paused by the next set of dusty steps. “I’m okay, but I need to be still for a couple minutes. Do you mind?”

Marc shook his head, aware of her tactics. He stored the act for later use if needed. “Not at all. Wade and I can chat.”

Wade swallowed. “Uh, okay.” He glanced up at Tim. “They’ll get me back.”

Tim’s shoulders drooped under his Eagle jacket. He sighed. “Back to the infirmary it is.”

Marc didn’t laugh. It wouldn’t be long before the entire ship of hardworking heroes got a break. Many of these people were pale, red-faced, green, or blue. They were also shaky, apt to stop and spit up leftover fluid, and to run for the bathroom when the diarrhea hit. The worst effects were over, but none of them were fully recovered yet except for a few descendants.

Angela sat in a chair to flip through the folder she was carrying.

Neil slid into the shadow of the long, dark velvet curtains, two feet from Angela. He skimmed the paper on top of her stack as she opened the folder. *Eagle Teams List*. Every position was filled in.

Neil frowned. *Adrian was right. She doesn’t want leadership anymore. She really is training Marc to do it.*

Wade waited for Marc to speak, refusing to think of anything bad. He was feeling better now, but Morgan hadn’t cleared him to walk yet. The blue scrubs weren’t bad. They showed off his big body, but not walking made him feel weak.

Marc gestured. “I’ll be returning a duffle bag to you.”

Wade relaxed as understanding fell. He shook his head. “I’d rather they were delivered.”

Marc's pleasure at Wade's survival switched to anger. "That will cause trouble in my camp."

Angela ignored Wade's quick glance at her. She supported Marc's choices so far. Even if she didn't, she would mention it when they were alone, not in front of witnesses. She had more respect than that.

Wade's face tightened. "Your camp, huh?" He lifted his chin. "I gave an answer."

Marc grunted. "Fine. But you go along too."

Wade grinned, sunken eyes twinkling. "Awesome!"

Neil swallowed a laugh to enjoy later.

"It's not funny." Marc glared between them.

Angela closed her folder. "Wade's like Billy, and Seth. In past lives, he was the King's deadly fool."

Marc filed that under the man's profile.

Wade rotated the chair to stare at Angela.

Angela shrugged at his hurt surprise. "You're causing chaos. Don't blame me for your choices."

Wade scowled. "It's not all for entertainment."

Angela didn't need her gifts to blast him with harder anger. "But it could have been handled differently!"

Wade dropped his chin. "Yeah."

Marc was mollified by her support and by Wade being punished. Angela rarely used that tone on senior men. "I'll be down shortly. Wheel yourself back to the infirmary—no elevators."

Wade pouted. "Tim would have waited."

“I know.” Marc offered an arm to Angela.
“Ready?”

Angela took his big arm without caressing it like she wanted to. Marc had a unique style of leadership, but it had been effective for eleven days. She wasn't going to interfere unless she needed to.

Wade used his weakened arms and began pushing himself down the long corridor to the wheelchair ramp. His mutters faded as he got out of sight.

Angela wondered if the no elevator rule applied to her as well. This time she did handle it like Adrian—she tested Marc's line. Angela veered toward the shiny cages of convenience.

Marc steered Angela away from the easy ride.
“It's a lovely day for a walk.”

Angela shrugged. “Okay.”

Marc went back to his mental grid as they reached the stairs and had to wait. They'd caught up to the slower individuals going to the recharge cabins.

Angela saw recovering patients who shouldn't be walking yet in her opinion, but no one was offering or accepting help. Angela slowly moved out from under Marc's arm, frowning.

He got the okay from the medics first. Morgan said it would be a good test of who's recovered enough to be in their cabins without supervision. Neil didn't want her to be upset with Marc's leadership. Since she really was hunting for a

successor, Neil wanted this trial period to work. He didn't want to adjust to yet another new leader.

Angela moved down the stairs at a slow pace, glad they'd caught up to the crowd. She really did need the recharge Marc was insisting on.

Neil moved next to Angela before Marc could wave him into the open guard position instead of a subtle escort. Marc was distracted and there were a lot of people around them right now. Most were like her—in recovery. Their scrubs and robes marked them different from the camp members who were wearing shorts and cut off shirts. Some were even in bikinis. The lower level swimming pool was open.

Candy appeared in the hallway below, head turning, searching.

Angela tensed.

Neil slid in front of Angela and pressed her against the wall by moving backwards.

The crowd instantly began scanning for a threat.

Marc found Kyle at the bottom of the steps. He nodded.

Kyle stepped into the hall to meet Candy. "It's not a good time."

Candy's mouth opened.

Kyle scowled at her. "Follow the rules!"

People glared at Candy, instantly pissed at her for disturbing their peace.

Candy flushed. She stomped off, one hand cradling the large stomach protruding against her

jean jumper. The other clenched into a fist at her hip.

Kyle resumed his post as Marc and Angie went by. *That won't work again. Next time, she'll make a real scene.*

Marc nodded at Kyle's warning. Candy was being handled in stages. As long as she followed the predicted pattern, it would be fine. If she became a wildcard, he would have to think of something more drastic. His options were limited because she was five months pregnant with twins.

The delivery crew came around the corner.

Angela scanned the busy floor as Marc took a stack of trays so one of the boys could go right back to the kitchen for another load. Everyone now on this deck was under recharge orders. Marc had temporarily moved them here once he picked who needed to go first. Except for a few, the infirmary patients were also here. The rest hadn't been released yet. They would be with the second batch of recharge patients. Marc had marked off eight days for this. The Adrianna was docked until New Year's Day.

Two dozen men and women carried bags into cabins, unpacked kits, chatted with guards, and watched each other for instructions. Angela enjoyed the warmth of so many bodies moving through the wide hall.

"Everyone gets a tray and a care package." Ivan handed bags to everyone who walked by him. He liked the new guard post centered between the exits.

It gave him a perfect view of everything, including the other two posts where James and Peter would soon take their places for the shift. “Get settled in your assigned cabins. Names have been put on the doors. No whining. We’re here to rest and recharge. You don’t have to like your bunkmate to sleep with them.” Ivan pushed a bag into Angela’s hands as she and the others chuckled at his wordplay. “Come get a bag and find your cabin. Take a tray. Get settled, eat, go through your care package. Everyone is on downtime until dinner trays are delivered. If you don’t like these entertainments, each room has a box with more options, but these bags were packed by the boss.” Ivan didn’t tell them Marc had done it while Angela supervised. That had been a fascinating hour of listening to her help Marc narrow down the needs of their people.

“You have one put aside for yourself?” Marc wanted Ivan recharged and back to work as soon as possible. He would be in the cabin by this station as soon as everyone else was settled. Daryl was already in there.

Ivan sighed. “It’s in my cabin, along with a tray and a copy of Pink’s greatest hits.”

Marc gave him a puzzled look. “What’s a Pink?”

Ivan’s mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes.” Marc kept walking, shaking his head.

Ivan flushed. “I’ll bet he’s an Aerosmith fan.”

Angela snorted. “Try the Eagles and Rammstein.”

Now Ivan wore a quizzical expression.

Angela followed Marc, also shaking her head. Ivan had a lot to learn about the layers of a human soul. It was possible to like two polar opposites. It happened often. Ivan needed to understand the outside rarely represented what was on the inside.

Marc filed that under Ivan’s mental profile. The constant link into her mind had been Angela’s idea. He’d balked at first, but as usual, she’d been right. He didn’t have to feel invaded, but he was still able to get all the important parts. It was a perfect setup for him.

Marc wondered if she was missing her gifts yet. He glanced back at Ivan.

Ivan shook his head. *No sign of that so far.*

And her cracks?

No change.

Marc resumed the walkthrough, satisfied he was doing right by her.

Angela knew their communication had been about her. It was a bit frustrating to not know what it was, but she didn’t ask or complain. It was worth it to not have a link to Adrian anymore. *And if I really wanted to know, Marc would tell me.*

Marc smiled at her. “Always.”

Angela tugged him down for another short kiss.

“Yuck!”

“Ew!”

Kids barreled toward them from their cabins.

Marc rotated as he dropped, arms opening.

Angela was happy when they piled on him like they used to do with Adrian. It also hurt her.

“I can’t do four days of just eating and sleeping.” Brittani glared at Angela from near the guard station at the opposite end of the hallway.

Angela smiled innocently, pointing at Marc.

Brittani’s glare switched targets.

Marc ducked into the nearest cabin. “Let’s help Amy and Samantha get set.”

Debra tapped Brittani’s shoulder and gestured.

Brittani stuck out her tongue and followed the snickering deaf woman into the cabin they were sharing.

Angela was satisfied with the way Marc had arranged things. He was controlling the game for the moment. It was a good sign. Moving a lot of people into the right places with the right words, or lack of them, wasn’t easy to keep track of. She knew.

Courtney entered the large cabin she was sharing with Samantha and Amy, smiling at the little girl. They were both digging through their care packages.

The other kids turned down blankets, held pillows, and gathered garbage.

Marc nodded to Courtney.

Courtney slid aside so Marc could exit, wondering what he thought of her.

Marc couldn’t answer the pregnant woman. *I haven’t made up my mind yet.*

Jennifer glared at Marc as he stopped in her cabin doorway. Pam snored softly from the other bunk. Marc kept walking, happy with his setup. The next cabins were empty until the kids finished settling people in. He'd given them that job just now without anyone catching it. Not even Angie had, though she didn't always think about things right when she noticed them. Unless he asked, he wouldn't know for sure.

Angela followed Marc, observing the interactions. For four days, these people would be shoved full of food, water, medications, energy, and rest. Vitamins and medical checkups were included, as well as grief counseling. As long as no one got too bored to tolerate it, this plan to boost their recovery would work. For the descendants, there would also be a recharging session. They would sleep after that, then be ready to trade places with the other twenty-four souls who needed this treatment.

Molly and Monica both smiled at her over the chocolate bars from their bags.

Angela chuckled as she walked by. Both females were having their periods. Chocolate always made that better.

Angela spotted Wade coming through the far doors. He had the cabin across from Brittani and Debra. Wade was covered in sweat, but he looked proud of himself for pushing his own wheelchair.

Allison came in behind him. "I've got your tray!" Allison waved with her free hand.

“I’ll be there.” Angela kept a happy expression.
Maybe I can drug her tea...

Marc sniggered. “Do you need anything?”

Angela shook her head. “Neil will see that I’m fed, watered, and given time to grow.”

Marc’s face went blank for a brief second. Then he grinned. “Deal.”

Angela frowned as he kissed her cheek and left.
“What was that about?”

Neil acted like he hadn’t heard her. *She doesn’t want leadership anyway...*

Angela stomped on his foot.

Neil flinched. “Hey!”

Angela waited for him to straighten up. Then she stomped on the same foot again.

He hobbled backwards. “Stop that!”

People were staring, laughing.

Angela stomped a third time, missing as he figured out it was coming and moved.

“What’s your problem?!”

“Marc can get away with manipulating me; you can’t!”

Neil stayed out of range. “He told me not to let you in on everything. He knows you won’t rest if your mind is full of his plans.”

Angela was forced to accept that answer. She grunted, daring him to get in stomping distance.

Neil staggered toward her cabin. “Come on. He wants you settled and now so do I.”

Angela held up a hand. “Wait. There’s a—”

“Nice try.” Neil turned around. He bumped into a delivery crew.

Stanley juggled his stack of trays.

“Look out!” Gus tried to catch the trays.

They landed in Neil’s arms.

Juice and applesauce splattered across Neil’s face in cold shocks. Tuna ran down his shirt.

The witnesses burst out laughing.

Angela closed her mouth on the warning.

Karma.

“Tell me about it.” Neil pointed at the cabin. “Let’s get you settled.” He led the way, removing his shirt to keep most of the mess contained. It wasn’t the first time he’d finished a shift half naked and covered in something. *At least this is only food.*

Descendants snickered at his thought.

Angela went into the cabin, mind switching into a lower gear. She moved to the bed, growing hazy.

Neil hurried over to pull the thick blanket down before she could lie on it.

Angela dropped out immediately.

Neil felt it when her mind shut off. *I don’t like that.*

He covered her up, then went to the doorway, motioning to Ivan.

Ivan tossed him a bag of the large t-shirts they’d gathered for people to wear while relaxing.

Neil donned one of them, then started unpacking Angela’s stuff. He would be here while she recharged, which meant he also had to deal with Allison. Neil nodded at the woman who hadn’t

taken her eyes from Angela. Now dressed in flannel pjs, Allison was sporting pink slippers and had a pink hairbrush in her hand. *I wonder why Marc put her with the boss...*

“That’s spooky.”

Neil put a stack of books on the table by Angela’s bed. “Jealous?”

Allison snorted out surprised laughter. “Well, yeah.”

Neil scanned her thoughts. He found a few troubling items he would report to Marc, but none of them were dangerous to Angela. Allison didn’t target females.

The door opened wider as Dog padded in. He immediately went to Allison.

Allison stopped brushing her hair. She stared at the large wolf, grip tightening on the brush.

Dog’s lips drew back... A low growl rumbled in his throat.

Allison’s face tightened. “I’ll shove this brush up your ass, mutt. Don’t fuck with me.”

Dog lunged; he snapped the brush out of her hand. It cracked into two pieces.

“Stomp on that!” Neil hurried over to the large spider that had fallen from the brush. “That’s a Brazilian Wanderer. I wonder how that got on board.”

Allison gaped in shock as Neil killed it.

Dog sat at her feet, sniffing her leg. *She smells okay. I got it in time.*

Neil cleaned up the corpse and the pieces of the brush. “Good, boy!” He gave Dog a quick rub as he went to the hall to report it.

Allison swallowed the bile in her throat. “I’m sorry. Thank you.”

Dog jumped up and ran his tongue across her face.

Allison recoiled. “Gross!”

Dog kept licking. *She had bacon for breakfast!*

Allison laughed as he kept going; his tongue tickled her cheek. “Stop it!”

She wiped her face with her shirt as he sat down. “Men! They save your life and then think they’ve earned the right to lick you!”

Dog curled up on her slippers. *Is this better?*

“Aw, man.” Allison drew in a breath and reached down to pet the beautiful animal. “If only you guys weren’t so cute. It’s hard to stay mad.”

Neil noted that reaction from both of them as he returned. *Marc can use that to help her. And she was brave. The Eagles can use that to train her.* Neil checked on Angela’s breathing, then settled into the chair at her side with his notebook. He left the door open so he could help if Ivan needed it.

Allison dug out a comb, not moving her feet. She liked having the wolf there. *I feel safe. What an odd sensation.*

Neil also stored that. He now understood why Marc had put Allison in this cabin with the boss. He wondered how many other cabins would yield little details for their new guardian. *Was it Marc’s idea?*

If so, the man's a lot smarter than the Eagles ever gave him credit for.

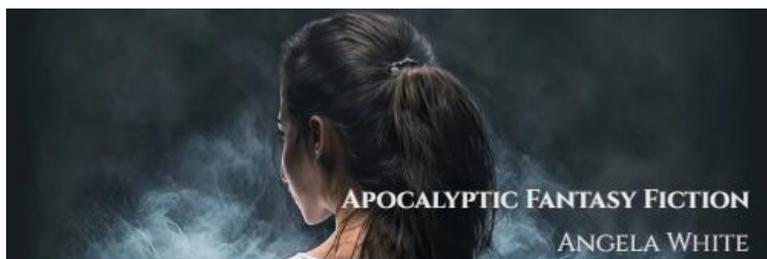


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VISITING HELL

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MARC AND DOG

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THE KILLING FIELDS
NIGHT MUST FALL
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