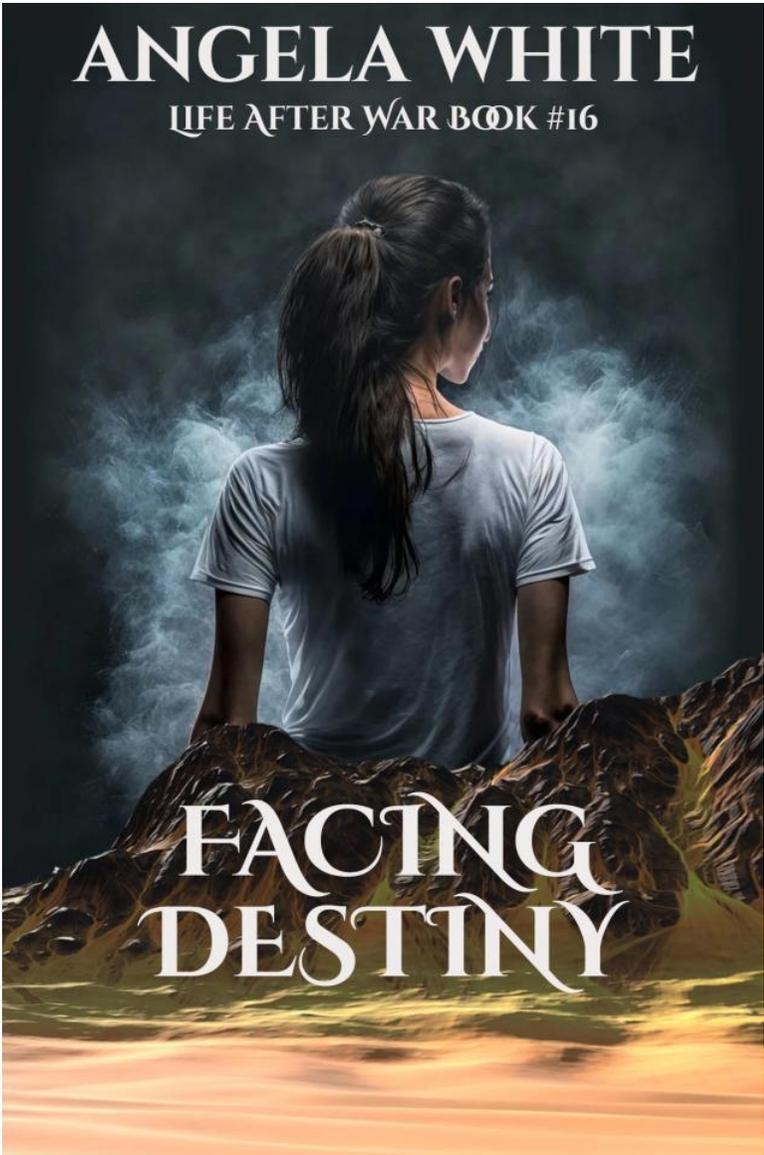


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #16



FACING  
DESTINY

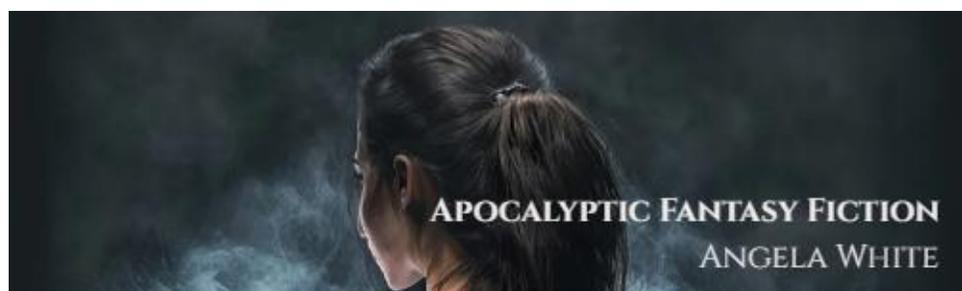
Thank you Marlene, Jim, Wendy, Angie H., Drew, Jackie, Crystal, Kristi, Diane, Jacqueline, Elizabeth, and John for all your help and hard work!

I'd also like to thank Michelle, Lon, Debbi, Garry, Ryan, and Tracey for helping me sprinkle Aussie lingo through the book. I hope I got it right.

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Angela White

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You Asked For It  
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It Hasn't Changed  
That Makes Two Of Us  
Close

# Lost Truth

They lied to us every single day.  
We believed every word.  
Even when the truth was there,  
We accepted what we heard.

They schemed and plotted.  
We didn't seem to care.  
They silenced the critics,  
Until no one else would dare.

They ruined millions of lives.  
We overlooked their pain.  
They divided us along every line,  
Then denied any of the blame.

They changed the rules.  
We scoffed at science,  
Accepting their crumbs  
And forgoing our own reliance.

They spilled blood to keep control.  
We cheered those deaths.  
They told us what to think,  
And then stole our very breath.

They balked at the facts.  
We obeyed anyway.

Candor was lost,  
And remains so to this day.

People are not chattel.  
We're not meant to conform.  
We're supposed to spread light and love,  
Not obey someone else's norm.

They knew the war was coming.  
We weren't able to deduce.  
Now our lives have changed forever,  
And the world has lost all truth.

Chapter One  
**I'm Dangerous Too**

1

*Shift updates.*

Ian settled on the plush couch and got comfortable. It was a long list. He'd been patrolling the warming boat for hours. He had new secrets to divulge to the boss, but he was only giving her normal updates right now. He got his notes and began copying them into an organized list that Angela could quickly skim. Ed, her new assistant, would go check in with her or another senior Eagle, and they would deliver all the notes from this shift. She would also get copies in her nightly reports.

Ian wondered if the top deck would smell as good as the rest of this ship. The cooks had been working for hours and they would be at it for several more. Chili, pancakes, soup, cookies, and fresh bread aromas were invading all areas of their living space, making Ian hungry. He was looking forward to the barbeque lunch they were supposed to have in a couple of hours. He was also eager to ditch his Eagle jacket.

All Eagles were wearing their full uniforms today while on duty, as required by the boss. She wanted to be sure there was a helping hand visible if the camp needed them, but Ian was almost

sweating. Angela had ordered the air conditioning shut off for today. Ian assumed that was to force more people to leave the ship, but it hadn't worked.

Around him, camp members who hadn't gone to the island were showering, cleaning up, and making plans to either enjoy the entertainment floor or the top deck. The rear area was open for public use. The front was off-limits to everyone except Marc and his team.

The ship was quiet as it rocked softly in the calm water. It made Ian nervous. Like Marc's team, he was twitching after the run, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. He hadn't seen much action this time. He didn't have an answer to his issue yet, but he planned to take Jeff's advice.

*"I'm not sure if I can keep doing this. I also don't want to quit."*

*Jeff had gone through that as well. "Take time; think it all through. Then the next action will hit and you'll see which way you go."*

People came in and out of the hall. They saw the guard on duty and Ian in the chair with his notes. They ignored both men to do their own thing, but Ian was positive if he or the guard made the slightest move toward their weapons, the camp would flee up the stairs and run over the bridge to get to Angela as if they were on fire. It was peaceful right now, but not in the way that implied people were happy. They didn't like it when Angela wasn't on board.

Ian copied the next note, wondering why these camp members had chosen not to leave the ship.

They'd all been told of Marc's deal with Nature; Safe Haven was protected when they were on the island. *Maybe it's some sort of survivor's block.*

At the end of the hall, Tobias lingered in the cabin doorway, doing the same scans. He and his wives had chosen to work second shift to lessen how much time they spent around Marc and Angela or any of the other byzan. Safe Haven's leaders were trying extremely hard not to create more problems, but Tobias was tired of the disconnected feeling. He'd been watching the camp and the Eagles. He wanted to be a part of that light in every way.

Ian noticed a short shadow out of the corner of his eye. He kept writing.

The shadow slowly eased toward him.

Down the hall, Tobias's head whipped toward them. His mouth opened to call a warning.

Ian sighed. "You're making people nervous. Stop it now."

Joey climbed on the couch, shoulders drooping. "I just wanted to play."

A loud cheer came through the window from the beach, where the other kids were playing and fishing. Ian patted the seat next to him. "I'm sorry you didn't get to go to the island yet. I'm sure that will change shortly."

"I asked to stay here. Pam wanted to force me, but Morgan said it was okay."

"Why?"

Joey's expression darkened. "They don't like me."

Ian felt bad for the boy. "You can stay here with me if you want to. When shift changes and I go to the island, I'll drop you off somewhere."

"But where? I only have one friend and she's busy with her family today."

"I'll cover that." Ian took a minute to get a personal update. "How are you doing with everything that's happened? Do you feel like you're starting to adjust?"

Joey made a face. "Cate makes me follow the rules. You have a lot of rules. I don't like rules."

Ian chuckled. "I don't either, but without them, the world would be an even bigger mess."

Joey nodded solemnly. "My daddy told me. He told me a lot of things."

Ian wasn't sure if he should encourage the boy to believe what his father had told him. "Maybe those are things you want to talk to the boss about."

"I don't think she likes me either."

Ian was certain about this answer. "Angela loves you. She loves *all* the kids. Kids are more important to her than the adults."

Joey wanted to believe that, but it was hard. "She doesn't talk to me. She didn't give me a job."

Ian did a fast count. "You haven't been with us for that long and we've had a lot going on. Give her a little more time? For me?"

Joey nodded. "That's why I came to you."

Ian stared at the boy. "I don't understand."

Joey smiled. “Eagles make things better.”

Ian was relieved. “See? That’s proof that you are adjusting. You know who you can go to when you need something.”

Joey watched Tobias hold the door open for his wives. “They’re going to the top deck to lay in the sun without their clothes on!”

Both women kept their robes closed over their string bikinis as they entered the hall. Those would stay on until they were settled.

Tobias had his tan shorts and green golf shirt. He didn’t plan to sunbathe. *No one wants to see my wrinkles.*

Ian snickered. “I guess you’re a little young. When you’re older, you’ll be able to appreciate it.”

Joey shook his head. “I won’t get older. I have to live right now.”

The boy climbed off the couch and marched down the hallway toward Tobias.

Caught off guard by the horror of the boy’s casual statement, Ian could only stare in concern as the child approached the older byzan male.

The little boy stopped a few feet from Tobias and scanned him up and down.

Tobias studied the youngster warily.

Joey moved forward.

Tobias retreated. He blocked the path to his wives with his body.

Shocked, Ian watched the boy walk to the exit. *Tobias backed down from him! The kid doesn’t even have a gift.*

Tobias met Ian's eyes across the long hallway. *If you knew that family the way I did, you'd back down too.* The boy's colorful Cartoon Network shirt was misleading. *He's not an innocent child.*

Tobias led his wives to the exit and took them toward the opposite stairs the child was now climbing.

Ian was impressed that Joey had intimidated Tobias without a single word. He added it to his notes, along with a few thoughts about the child. He underlined the last sentence.

*That kid will be worse than Matt if he snaps.*

"May I speak with you?"

Ian let out a muffled squeak at the voice in his ear. His pen and papers flew from his hands, creating a small shower of office supplies.

Bernice chuckled even as she apologized. "I am sorry. I thought you saw me coming."

Ian laughed with her as he gathered his papers and book. "Nope. You got me. Good job." *She's wearing a purple silk robe and hot pink flip flops. She's going to the top deck to swim or sunbathe.* Ian hid his interest.

Bernice was glad he didn't seem upset. She almost stopped there because she didn't want to ruin his good mood, but her conscience wouldn't let it go. "I want to apologize."

Ian sighed. "I'm on duty right now. Even if I wasn't, there's nothing to apologize for. You're not interested. That doesn't mean we can't be friends."

He flashed a charming grin at her, then swept the floor. “Did you see where my pen went?”

Bernice pointed. “Under the chair.”

She waited for him to retrieve it and resettle himself on the couch. “I did not mean to embarrass you with my refusal. I am in mourning for my husband.”

That did make him feel better. Ian gave her a genuine smile. “Well, you know where I stand on the matter if things change for you in the future. If not, like I said, I need friends too. It’ll be fine.”

Bernice was thrilled that he was taking it so well. She smothered her urge to hug him in relief. “Will you be enjoying the beach?”

“Yes.” Ian finished reorganizing his notes and then put the sheets into his book. “I’ll be going over at shift change. I think you guys have Debra from there.” Conner had been on point since 3 a.m. and he’d done a great job, but he needed to sleep soon.

Bernice grinned. “She is mean with that water gun.”

Ian laughed. “That, she is. I’d say it comes from being an Eagle, but she had that attitude when we found her.”

Bernice didn’t know what else to say. She rotated toward her cabin. “Have a good day.”

“You too.” Ian didn’t watch her go. He chose the next note and got ready to write it. He’d been angry at first, and embarrassed, but it hadn’t taken long for him to review the relationships in this camp and figure out what he’d done wrong. He just

needed to change his approach. All the men in Safe Haven had tried to claim their mates too aggressively, too quickly. He was going to give Bernice time to understand how important he was to the camp and how valuable it could be to have him around. And while he was working on that, he planned to show her what she was missing. Jealousy was a handy tool if it was used correctly. Now that Angela had taught him how to keep his mouth shut, his brain was working overtime. *You will be mine, sweet Bernice. The only thing that will keep it from happening is if I die while trying to prove I'm good enough for you.*

Ian saw Gabe walking toward the public showers by the medical zone. Another sigh passed his lips as he got to his feet to follow. The boss would want notes on whatever happened next. *Gabe is a perfect example of what not to do.*

## 2

“I want to talk to her.”

“She’s in the shower.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Get out of here right now and I won’t report it.”

“No.”

“Are you insane?” Biff had hung his jacket on the wall hook. He wiped sweat from his brow and donned it anyway as his relief, Trent, came off the

elevator where Tobias was waiting with his wives.  
“I’m calling the boss.”

Gabe scowled. “For what? I’m not a threat to her.”

“Kenn’s the threat! He put a gun to your head!”

“And the boss told me to get lost, but I want to hear that from Tonya.”

Tonya listened to Gabe and the guard on the hall arguing. A deep frown creased her face as she switched off the water and dried her hands, able to hear their loud voices over the fan. She was certain people were coming out of their rooms to listen and see what might happen.

Tonya had gotten a shower in the public area with the help of a camp volunteer, and then she’d remained here dressing and grooming. She felt better than she had in weeks, but the time away from her newborn was already weighing on her. Harry was with the baby now, but Tonya was eager to get back. Gabe showing up was bad timing on his part.

“I’m not leaving; go on and call the boss. Tonya will be out in a minute and I’ll still get to talk to her.”

*Not if I stay in here.* Tonya sighed. *A year ago, I might have, but this is Kenn’s mess. I need to clean it up.*

Tonya went to the door, leaving her towels, garbage, and dirty clothes for the cleaning crew like she’d been told to. She wasn’t allowed to bend over yet. Even the walk down the corridor had to be slow and careful so she didn’t hinder the healing her body

was trying to finish. No one knew the limits of descendant power yet, but there definitely were limits. Magic had saved her life, but she was far from being good as new.

Trent heard her coming. “Last chance.”

Biff glared to add support, glad a senior Eagle was here to witness Gabe’s behavior.

Gabe crossed his arms over his chest. “No.”

“Don’t call the boss.” Tonya eased out and let go of the heavy door, barely avoiding its swing.

Trent saw her wince of pain. He pointed at the wheelchair her escort had obviously left for her. “I’ll push you.”

Tonya shook her head. “I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

Trent glared at Gabe. “Hurry up. She needs to be back under medical supervision.”

Gabe ignored the guard. He scanned Tonya. Her still-rounded body was encased in noisy flip-flops, Kenn’s too-big sweatpants and a long white Metallica shirt. Red curls were spilling from her blue bandana, making her green eyes seem even bigger, brighter. *She’s adorable.* “Are you really okay?”

Tonya leaned against the wall outside the shower. “Yes. I just need recovery time.”

Gabe smiled at her. “I’m glad.”

Tonya felt the warmth in his gaze and his voice. She enjoyed it against her will. “What do you want, Gabe?”

Gabe’s smile faded. “Are you scared of me?”

“No, but I’m worried you’ll get in trouble, like Peter.”

Gabe put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the opposite wall. He cleared his throat. “I had this all planned. Now I can’t remember what to say.”

Tonya took pity on him. “Kenn picked you guys. I didn’t. You disappointed *him*. He’s the one you have to make amends with.”

“I know, and I will try, but if you don’t...” Gabe drew in another deep breath, pulling up the words he’d chosen. “You’re worth waiting for. I think I could love you and your son. When Kenn goes back for the final battle, I’ll stay here and care for you two. I’ll be a good...”

Tonya didn’t hear anything else.

*When Kenn goes back for the final battle.*

Tonya held up a hand to stop him. “When he goes, I’ll be with him.”

Gabe frowned. “But you’re not a fighter or a medic, and you have a young son to care for.”

Tonya’s mind slammed those words into place; her heart began to hurt. “I didn’t...” Tonya wasn’t sure what to say.

Gabe realized she hadn’t considered that and pushed harder. “Peter would have stayed too. It was wrong of Kenn to remove one of your protectors.”

Tonya tried to concentrate, not feeling as good anymore. “What do you want, Gabe?”

He scowled at her repeated question. “You. But only if you want me too.” He took a step forward,

aware of the guards waiting for Tonya's answer, along with everyone else. Faces were sticking out of doors all along this corridor. Sunken eyes and red skin with welts and stitches declared the residents of this hall as patients. The medical deck had stayed busy.

"There's one certain way to know."

Tonya knew what he meant. Confused and suddenly exhausted, she turned to Trent.

A cold draft ran through the hall, cooling Trent's skin in seconds. He felt danger arrive. "Tell him to get out of here and I'll handle it."

"Get out of here, Gabe."

Trent quickly stepped forward, reaching for Gabe's arm. "You heard her. Let's go."

Gabe was faster, slipping by him to clutch Tonya's shoulder. He pulled her toward him, lids closing, lips puckering.

Tonya's anger flared. Electricity shot out of her skin where he was holding her, swarming over Gabe's jittering body.

The smell of cooking food was smothered by cooking flesh.

Tonya jerked free while he sizzled, mental block snapping. Her witch rushed forward, eager to finish the job. Power shot from her hand, slamming into the wall.

The ship groaned.

Tonya heard it and tried to get control, but it was hard! The power wanted to be used.

Biff ducked a wild flare, not sure how to handle this. He knew not to shoot her, but that was about it.

A door slammed shut; two more followed. The rest stayed open to let people observe. They didn't care that they might be in the crossfire.

The lights dimmed. Tonya watched in shock as her witch sucked power from the electricity running through the socket.

The witnesses observed in horror as Gabe's skin began to smoke from the current going through his body.

Electricity flared out again and hit Trent. He staggered, glad the blast had been light. Hairs on his arms stood up, leaning toward Tonya as power prepared to shoot out again. "Get control of yourself!"

Tonya clenched her fists. "Stop it. Stop now."

The lights brightened as the witch let go of the power stream. It looked at her in confusion. *Master?*

Tonya gained control, heart pounding. "Let him go. Heal the damage if you can."

The witch pulled back. *I do not heal. I kill.*

Gabe stopped sizzling and jerking. He fell to his knees. Saliva ran from the corner of his mouth.

Trent keyed his radio, glad that his own hit had only been like a friction shock from a carpet. "Medic at the showers, same deck. Someone got zapped by a new wire."

"Copy."

Trent ignored Tonya's worried stare. "I'll make sure the boss gets the truth. Everyone here will keep

their mouths shut until you're ready to come out." The rancid odor in the hall would dissipate in a few hours and only these witnesses would know exactly what had happened.

Tonya scanned and found a dozen heads nodding. "Why?"

Trent shrugged. "Bragging rights. Once you come out, they get to say they saw what really happened."

Tonya paled a bit as she realized the entire camp would soon know. "They can already do that."

Trent limped toward Gabe. "Yes, but then they might make an enemy of you. It wouldn't be a good idea to remind you that they were here by gossiping about it."

"They're scared of me?"

Trent knelt. "They don't know if they should be yet, so yes."

"They shouldn't be. I'm one of the good guys." Thick power filled Tonya's mind as she walked toward the lounge. She didn't look at Gabe as she went by him.

In the shadows, Kenn left to avoid being spotted as more witnesses flooded the hall. *I need time to think now.* He'd gotten here before Gabe, but he'd caught the man's wild thoughts as he came down the hall. *I waited. I let it happen. And now I'll find out if she really loves me or if it was the power.*

Kenn headed for the employee hall. He had a short shift on beach guard duty and then he was free for the rest of the day. He'd volunteered. *I felt this*

*coming. I knew I would need time to consider my next words and actions. If she ends things with me, I have to handle it the right way. I refuse to return to being the old Kenny. I'm better than that now.*

Trent helped Gabe to his feet as the man struggled to do it on his own. "Bet you wish you'd gotten out of here."

Gabe didn't answer. He couldn't. His mind was a complete blank. Where thoughts had once been was only gibberish and pale hues of flashing light from the misfiring pulses in his brain.

Gabe collapsed.

Trent rolled him over, lifted him by the arm, and ran for the medic while Biff resumed the post and recorded it in the logbook.

"I want you two to get close to her." Tobias held the elevator for his wives. They'd paused for a minute to observe, but he wanted them gone from here now so they didn't get the blame. "Emulate her where you can. She's more important than these people are giving her credit for." Every descendant on this deck had felt Tonya joining their clan; Tobias had felt her power level. It was far above her fiancé's.

"Because she's fast with the medical stuff?" Daniella eased to the rear of the elevator to make room for her sister and the bag of gear she had insisted on bringing. Anna hated to be away from her kit. She said you never knew when danger might

arrive. Daniella agreed, but the elevator was small. *We should have gone up the steps.*

“Yes.” Tobias pushed the button. “Start by asking her for your results.”

Both women tensed as he glared over his shoulder. Neither sister wanted to hear the results of those tests yet. They were scared Tonya or Morgan would tell them they were ill. The entire camp was feeling that reluctance and there was little anyone could do to allay those fears. People were having side effects from exposure to radiation, to the gas the pirates had used, and to the chemicals from the war itself. There was no way all of them would survive. The knowledge was haunting.

It didn't bother Ian as much. He made a note about Gabe and then returned to the couch. *We're all going to die at some point anyway. I just want to have lived well and died for a worthy cause. Everything else is meaningless.*

Ian saw Kenn go by the hall. He assumed the man had felt something happening with Tonya, though he was going in the opposite direction. Ian was a little bitter. *Where's my willing partner? Why does it have to be a chase?*

Ian sighed. Loneliness wasn't fun. He could get sex on the bottom deck if he wanted it; he didn't. He wanted a lasting relationship with someone else who wanted to build a future here.

Ian thought about the weddings that would happen later. He wished Ralph and Daisey all the best. Charlie and Tracy were another issue all

together. *I don't want to go through that drama. That's not what I'm asking for with Bernice.* Ian had witnessed the hell that came from picking the wrong person. All it did was drag both people down until there was nothing left of who they'd been. *If she's not my match, I could really use a sign.*

### 3

“What are you doing down here?”

Joey froze. He was in the shadows of the animal cargo hold. He didn't think anyone had spotted him.

When no one spoke again or came toward him, Joey peered around the corner and saw two shadows.

“Are you okay?” Charlie stepped closer to Tracy, but he didn't touch her.

Tracy let out a harsh snort. “I'm peachy.”

Charlie winced. She was clean and wearing clean jeans with a red t-shirt. She even had her longer hair in two braids, but she wasn't well. Her pale face and thin lips told him not to push her on anything.

Charlie was wearing the matching red shirt and jeans. He felt her scan his outfit in distaste. *She only likes it when I have on Eagle gear.* “Do you want to talk?”

Charlie wiped away sweat from his neck. Not having the air conditioning on was heating up every deck. He assumed his mom was saving fuel.

He and Tracy were supposed to be getting ready for the wedding that was taking place around sunset, but their cabin had been empty. He'd found her by her erratic thoughts. "Tracy?"

"I needed a few minutes to myself." Tracy rubbed the puppy nuzzling her fingers for more attention. "And I wanted to see the dog."

Charlie scanned the small puppy and put it out of his mind. "We have a wedding to get ready for. Do you want me to walk you up?"

Tracy didn't answer.

Charlie wasn't sure how to handle the situation. Other than pleasing her physically, nothing he did was right.

Tracy didn't like it that he was blaming himself, but she didn't have the mental energy to comfort them both. Tracy slowly stood up. "Who gets the puppy?"

Charlie wondered if she really cared or if she was using it to avoid the conversation. "I think my mom decided to make him a K-9. He'll be trained to work with the Eagles."

Tracy huffed. "That's a girl."

Charlie flushed at her tone. She wasn't usually sharp with him. He knew what had to happen next. He forced the words out. "Do you want to call off the wedding?"

Tracy wanted to say yes. She also wanted to say no. She remained silent.

Charlie tried not to get angry. "I'm gonna go keep helping Ralph. He almost has everything

gathered up. Daisey is going over all the lists to make sure we didn't forget stuff. She thought you might want to do that too." Charlie turned toward the door. He spotted the observer in the corner, but a little boy avoiding the den mothers was the least of his worries. "I love you."

He wasn't surprised when she didn't answer yet again. It was obvious that she was going through more emotional turmoil. *I wish I'd never started this relationship.*

Tracy caught the thought, but it didn't have the power to hurt her. She was already hurting as much as she possibly could. *Angela made me torture someone!*

Joey frowned. *Is Angela like my dad?* Joey wasn't sure if that mattered to him. He liked Safe Haven. He got to play with the other kids, when they would let him. He had a friend here, and he felt safe. None of the adults were as dangerous as his dad had been.

Joey left the shadows and came over to stand next to the unhappy pregnant woman. He sensed she needed comfort that no one knew how to give. *Maybe I can help.*

Tracy stiffened as the little boy reached out and put a hand around her wrist. His touch was light and without power. She could tell he didn't have a gift; there was no reason for her to feel threatened. She still pulled away in revulsion. "Don't ever touch me."

Joey instantly withdrew into his mental shell. He dropped to his knees and put a hand out toward the puppy that was rubbing against the bars and giving little yips for more attention. "I'm sorry."

Tracy immediately felt bad for snapping at the boy. She let out a long sigh. "You didn't do anything wrong." Tracy forced a smile. "Did you need something from me?"

Joey didn't like how fast her attitude had changed. She reminded him too much of being scared of his father. He shook his head.

Tracy wanted to assure the boy again, but she didn't have an emotional reserve to spend. She went toward the door. "She likes to be rubbed on her ears."

Joey smiled at the information and immediately began pleasing the little puppy.

The animal area stank a little. There was no sense in cleaning it until all the animals were off ship, but it wasn't that bad. Most of the mess was in the pen where their cow and the goats lived. Those animals had been sharing quarters, happily, for a couple of weeks now.

Tracy paused. She forced herself to look back.

*In a few years, I could have a son just like that.*

*Fear swarmed her. How can I care for a baby? I'm terrified all the time. I never know the right thing to do or say now. I can't bring a baby into my life! If I'm under that level of stress, I won't be a good mother. I might not even be able to survive it.*

*She shuddered. And it's one of them.*

Joey heard the door shut behind him. He wondered if he should tell someone Tracy was feeling bad about having a baby with magic. “I bet Angela already knows.”

The Eagle on duty down here peered through the window and spotted him.

Joey tensed.

The Eagle wrote it in his notes. He didn't have orders to restrict anyone to specific areas right now. Everyone was free to come and go, including the kids. It made it harder to keep track of Safe Haven's many members, but everyone needed this freedom. Chad doubted Joey would get into trouble. Most of the kids spent time down here with the animals. It made sense that Joel's son would want to do the same. Just because his dad had been the most powerful being on the planet for a little while didn't mean he was different than any of their other kids.

Another part of the shell Joey used to hide his emotions cracked off. He relaxed a little. Every time a tense moment came and didn't explode around him, he adjusted a little more.

Joey stood and moved toward the next corral. The other animals were off ship. The horse was next in line to be led to the tall grass around the edge of camp. *I love horses.*

He approached the tall animal, observing for danger.

The horse stopped munching and watched the child approach.

Joey didn't try to touch the horse. He chose one of the few treats left in the bowl and dropped it into the bucket on top of the dusty feed.

The horse quickly retreated, tail whipping, ears pointing straight up.

Joey wasn't discouraged. He knew the horse was skittish. The adults had warned the kids to leave it alone because it was dangerous.

"I'm dangerous too." Joey sat on the stool outside the stall. "I just don't understand why. I'm a good boy. I don't hurt people like my daddy."

The horse continued to observe him from a distance.

Joey pushed off his shoes and then his socks. "I almost always do what I'm told. I thought they would like that. I don't yell, and I don't make a mess. I try to be perfect."

The horse's tail slowly lowered until it was resting against its hind leg. One ear laid down.

Joey rolled up his pant legs. "They all think I'm hiding a monster inside and I don't know how to show them I'm just me."

The horse took a step forward and sniffed the bucket.

Joey ran his bare feet through the little bits of straw and dirt that had fallen out of the stall. "I want to fit in with them. I'm scared."

Joey's misery filled the room.

The horse took another step forward, big brown eyes widening. Moisture slowly rolled down its

nose. The horse's tears mirrored the huge drops now rolling over Joey's cheeks.

The horse stamped his hoof wildly. *Don't unload your misery on me, little human. I have enough pain of my own!*

Joey scrubbed away his tears, but there was no surprise on his face. "So what's your problem?"

The horse realized he'd been tricked.

Joey smiled. "I'm a smart boy too."

The horse bonded with the child against his will. It had been much the same with his master, Jack. He had hated the man, but he'd also loved him. The human had forced him to accomplish things that no other animal of his kind ever had.

Joey slowly stood and held out a hand.

The horse lowered his head and allowed the boy to stroke his nose.

Magic swirled around both of them, creating a bond that can only happen between a human and an animal.

Joey rubbed the scars, frowning at the feel, but he didn't promise not to do the same thing. He knew not to promise something unless he was sure he could accomplish it.

The horse nuzzled the boy's hand, then stuck his nose into the bucket. He immediately withdrew. *My teeth won't let me eat the treats. They are too hard.*

Joey looked around and spotted a bag of oats. "I can help."

The guard on the hall came back by the door and took another quick glance inside.

Chad froze at the sight of Joey rubbing the horse's ears while it ate oats from his hand. The child was standing on the stool to reach.

Chad scanned and found the bag of oats had been cut open. It was a neat slice and the scissors were back on the wall where they'd been hanging.

Chad decided again not to interrupt the child. He walked away, wiping sweat from his brow. *Come on shift change. I need a stiff drink.*

Chapter Two  
**Flashes Of Insight**

1

**M**arc scanned the happy camp, but he was subtly observing Angela. She was stretched out on a thick blanket in the grass next to him. The sun was gleaming off her hair and pale skin, making her jeans and tank top glow. She'd been dozing in the sun for an hour, occasionally waking fully to check on her camp. Marc had made sure she was able to rest; when people needed something, he was handling it. Even the kids were under control for the moment. Cate and Cody were making sandcastles on the beach with the other happy kids. Being her XO was easy at times like this.

Marc glanced down at the cast on his ankle. *I'm not good for anything else right now.*

Angela turned her head, lips curving into a leer. Marc chuckled. "Fair point."

Angela slid her hand over his and resumed dozing. She was enjoying the moment while it was here. They'd all had a simple breakfast of muffins with coffee or powdered milk two hours ago and then relaxed. *Two entire hours without someone screaming or dying. It's been wonderful.*

Around them, Safe Haven was also enjoying the moment. Small groups of friends and families surrounded them in a vast circle that had taken over the entire top of the cliff and the small grassy area below it. Another hundred explorers were off on tours or enjoying the beach. Marc had a mental link with a dozen Eagles who were overseeing those activities on noticeably shorter shifts. Angela had insisted the guards be rotated every three hours today. Marc assumed it was to ensure they all got time on the island, but he couldn't help worrying that she was prepping them for another unexpected blow.

Angela yawned. "Good thoughts, please. You'll flip my switch."

Marc locked down on his mind. He'd insisted she do whatever she wanted as long as it wasn't working. He didn't want to trigger her reflex to accomplish something, though that was almost the only time she was content.

Angela leered again.

Marc laughed. "Soon, dear. We have company right now."

Angela sighed in mock disappointment. She rolled toward him and wrapped her arm around his leg. She rested her cheek against his thigh and let the foggy place have her again.

The Eagles relaxed. The camp chatter rose in volume. Dog resumed cleaning his tail. He'd had a fun limp-and-sniff on the tiny beach after his meal, but the sand didn't want to come out.

Marc noticed those signs, not surprised by the reactions. When Angela moved, people got ready to fight or run as needed. *It's the same reaction I noticed in them while Adrian was in charge. They don't respond to me that way because they don't associate me with a threat to their survival.*

Marc glanced up at Adrian's perch. The man was servicing Sadie again, openly. The tall grass hid most of the view, but her moans of delight were loud enough to echo over the laughing kids on the beach. *Put a muzzle on that!*

Sadie's sounds stopped.

Marc refused to let his good mood be ruined. He swept the gently bobbing ships that he could discern from here.

The guard on the bridge of the Adrianna flipped him the finger.

Marc saluted, laughing.

Ray had been waiting for that one. He flashed an all-clear sign and continued his rounds. He and Grant had volunteered for duty today. Neither of them liked sunbathing or camping, and they weren't ready to start their break despite Angela offering them the next week free of duty. They hadn't come down enough yet to enjoy it.

Marc continued his sweep of Safe Haven. He hated his new physical limits, but he did like being able to stay still and observe. He didn't usually get much time for that. Angela, and his own work ethic, had kept him hopping even before they hit the boat and then fate hadn't given them a break. The two

weeks of sailing right before their arrival here had been the longest break any of them had had since... Marc didn't frown like he wanted to. *Have we ever gotten a two-week break from chaos?*

Walking by, Samantha shook her head. "Not since I joined. Maybe before." She nodded toward the cliff as a round of applause echoed from those around Adrian. "He'd know."

Marc did frown this time. "Not worth it."

Wade and Neil nodded in support.

Both men were wearing full Eagle gear, but the baby items seemed to make that disappear. Neil and Wade just looked like parents now. The two boys were sleeping in big arms that had killed to keep them safe and would do so again.

Samantha was also in Eagle gear, though she was absent the heavy tool belt around her waist. Marc was glad she was following the conditions of her release from the medical bay.

Samantha paused as Neil and Wade went on, each carrying an infant, a diaper bag, and a piece of baby gear. They were going back to the ship. In just two hours, both boys had gone through their outfits and the extra one that she'd brought for each of them. "I think the twins need to be on the water now. Their stomachs are upset. Anything you need from there? I'll send the guys back out to you as soon as we pick a babysitter. The camp women have actually signed a list."

Marc considered. "How are you feeling?"

Samantha grinned. “Great, actually. Everyone keeps shoving energy into me. I’m healing fast.”

“We all do, thankfully.” Marc understood her happiness at having her body back, now more than he would have before. “If you feel up to it, let Conner off duty early. You keep point until shift change.”

Samantha’s face lit up. It was only about an hour, but she wanted it. “I’d be honored.”

Marc took a small stack of notes from his jacket. It was next to him, along with his guns. “Eagle point man only, not you.”

Samantha didn’t care. She shoved the papers into her pocket. “Anything else?”

“Nope.”

Samantha walked through the sunning camp with her chin up and good vibes flowing from her in thick swells that hit those she passed.

Marc was glad he’d been able to lift her mood. He scanned for the next way he could help or accomplish something on his own to-do list.

The sun was beaming on all of them and starting to cause sunburns. Some people wanted that; most didn’t. Marc waved at Stanley to pass out more little travel tubes of sunblock.

A weak, hot breeze blew over the beach, rustling weeds and sandy hair. The kids were having a great time. They didn’t feel any of the adult’s reluctance about being off their ship.

A bright red bird darted over the cliff and down to the beach. It landed near the kids.

Kenn started to drive it off before it could attack.

Marc shook his head. *Let it be.*

They both watched it fly off in relief.

Marc finished his sweep, fighting a yawn. The medications were kicking in now, making him sleepy. “Not yet.” He cut Angela off before she could offer.

Angela stayed where she was, but listening to him and Samantha had already flipped her switch. *It was a good snooze. I needed it, but he’s right. I’m not really happy unless I’m accomplishing something.*

Marc sighed. “Why is that?”

“Our time is short.”

“We have years.”

“I mean as people.” Angela slowly sat up. “Have you noticed how much more painful life seems to be now?”

“It is the apocalypse.”

“I meant physically.”

Marc made the connection, but he wanted to hear her full opinion on it. “Go on.”

Angela stretched, rubbing her spine when it popped. “We’re almost middle-aged now, Marc. How many more years of this can we do before our bodies break down or just quit working?”

Angela studied their older population, watching them rub aching hands or hold them in the sunlight to warm bones that were always cold. “I have to do things now because I won’t be able to when I’m

older. And I felt that way long before the war. I just didn't understand that's why I was restless. The hospital showed me what happens to the human body. I wanted to be able to help people get through that. At the time, I never considered that someday, I would be one of them."

"But your brain did and it drove you to do things faster. Now, you hardly ever stop." Marc kept going even though he didn't want to ruin the day. "You're scared you won't get enough done before you die."

"Not just die." She shared one of her new fears. "I'm using this body up. I can feel it having problems. Magic won't hold it forever. I'll be too broken to help, but not broken enough to be dead." Her voice became a bitter mutter. "I'll have to *watch* others doing it when I can't. It might drive me crazy if I haven't achieved enough."

The view into her mind was welcome. Marc put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. "At least we'll be together."

Angela laughed like he expected, but her mind closed to him. He wasn't deep enough for the conversations she sometimes needed to have. She always gave him a chance, but he never made it more than a couple of layers. *I think he's scared to go too deep because he thinks I'm all ugly in here and he won't know how to handle it.*

Her eyes went to the cliff, to the tired blond man being congratulated by men who serviced the camp. It was Sadie's third orgasm in an hour.

Angela scowled as Adrian leered at her. *Are you trying to get her killed?*

Adrian grinned. *You're impressed too. Admit it. I'm good at what I do.*

Angela snorted. *If it's good, why is she ready again?*

Adrian glanced over and found Sadie crawling toward him through the grass. His pride crumbled. "Shit."

Laughter rolled down the cliff, drawing Marc's attention. He snickered with the other witnesses as Sadie dove and Adrian curled into a ball to defend himself from her swiping fingernails. "She didn't like him flirting with you."

Angela chuckled. "Nope. She figured if he had time to chat then he had enough energy to use his bat."

She reached for her canteen and remembered she had a mug for today. They had a community water buffalo tank to keep from going through their stock as fast. She took a drink and grimaced at the warm liquid.

"You're spoiled."

Angela smiled. "I like a cold drink to be cold and a hot drink to be hot."

"Same." Marc scanned the ships again. "It really was brilliant to pick a cruise ship."

"Yes. But that doesn't excuse any of it."

"No. He had other choices. He always went the wrong way."

“Actually, for a Mitchel, it was perfect. They’ve always worked both sides, from the stories I’ve been told.”

“Told by who?”

“Little Joey, for one. I had Jennifer talk to him since she’s great with abused kids, but Pam keeps a record of what he says too. His family and the Mitchels were close for a hundred years. Where one was assigned, the other either stocked the run or traveled the captives. They even hunted together. I don’t have all of it yet, but there was a falling out where they realized Mitchels can only be trusted to further their own goals.”

“I bet it was over a woman.”

“And I’d bet you’re right.” Angela yawned again. She was too awake to sleep, and too drowsy to do any work. “I’m hitting the bathroom. Stay here.”

Marc stubbornly stood up, using his cane.

Dog rose to his feet and stared between them.

The rest of the camp went still and quiet, waiting for her to drop a shoe.

Angela sighed. “Please stay here?”

Marc understood he was spooking the herd. He reluctantly eased down and called Dog over. “You got your cast wet. You know that means you have to get a new one, right?”

Dog’s tail lifted. *Why do you think I got it wet? As soon as this is off, I’m out of there!*

Dog had tolerated the one Sally put on because it hadn't hindered his movement as much as this new one did.

Angela moved toward the long row of portable potties.

The camp settled back down, but they weren't as happy now. Being reminded that they were always in danger wasn't good for them. *I'll return to the ship for a while.*

"If you do, most of them will go too." Kenn had duty over the johns right now. They'd learned that lesson with Matt. "They might not want you to be active, but they want you close."

Angela stopped, staring at him.

Kenn shrugged. "Adrian wanted my observations."

"I do too." Angela continued to stare at him.

Kenn's face reddened. "What?"

"Just looking."

"At?"

"Your mind. It's not as dark, but I still see shifting shadows." Angela took pity on his instant fear. "Is it something I can help you with?"

Kenn was always stunned by how nice she could be to people who had treated her badly. "It's just fear and some old needs I'm still crushing and burning."

Angela understood. "Seems like one always replaces whatever you fix, you know? I hate that." She went into the bathroom, leaving him surprised.

*Other people go through that too?* Kenn immediately felt better.

Angela hated that. She wanted to step out of the stall and fry him alive. “And that’s just an old need *I’m* still crushing and burning.”

Learning how to forgive Kenn was the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life and it wasn’t for him. “I do these things so I can live with me and know I’m a good person. I’m not evil. I’m not evil.”

*But you could be.*

Angela nodded at her witch’s comment. *It would be easy. William and I could dominate the entire planet.*

*So why don’t you?* Angela’s witch liked being good, but she’d often wondered what held Angela on the light side.

Angela thought about her son. “Him. If I lost this camp, or even Marc, I could still be in the light. If anything ever happens to Charlie...”

*Then the dark side might get a new fighter.*

Angela snorted. “If I flip, I’ll go all the way. Being a fighter would never be enough. I’ll lead them the same as I have these people.” Angela forced that vision away. “That’s a problem for a different day.”

Angela ignored Kenn as she came back out. Her fast motion to Ivan prevented Kenn from speaking. When she lingered close enough for him to listen, he kept his mouth shut and waited.

Across the calm camp, Marc watched her, face not betraying his concern. *Don't do it, Angie. I don't want you to do this.*

Ivan turned his back to all of them so his answers would be private if he used hand code. He wasn't sure what she wanted, but Marc's frozen façade said he did and he didn't like it.

"I have a challenge for you."

Ivan brightened. "Awesome. Name it." He'd been waiting for a chance to earn some extra points by being able to get a job done. Most of the work she gave out was team-based and hard to take solo credit for.

Angela lowered her voice, aware of Kenn being able to hear. "There are a lot of troops coming. Everyone knows."

Ivan nodded. It was the second most popular topic right now. Nature held the top spot.

"That's a thousand people of mixed races, genders, countries, cultures."

Ivan knew she wasn't worried over the mix. *I'm missing something.*

"How many do you think are coming here willingly? Give me a percentage."

Ivan dug in, mind running through possible demographics.

Nearby, Kenn did the same. He was curious if his numbers would match.

"Probably not many of the actual fighting force. The officers have more perks. It's a higher count on them..."

Angela waited patiently while two smart men verified her numbers. Marc already had, though he'd been short a couple of groups; she'd updated *his* numbers on that one. Ivan and Kenn were harder than Marc in some ways, but this wasn't a time to ignore their intelligence because they sometimes lacked compassion.

"I think less than a quarter, but only about 50% might rebel, if that's what you're thinking. And the other side will kill a lot of those on the spot for turning traitor. We'd be left facing about 60-65% of the total force, but if those rebels fight with us, we gain maybe 10-15% of their total force."

Angela smiled at him. "Thank you." She turned to Kenn with a brow up.

Kenn snorted. "You don't care about rebels. You already have your plans set. I agree with his numbers, though I'd say some of those officers will side with their friends and family so it might go down to 55% and we gain 20%. Since they don't matter to you, I just need to hear the challenge."

Ivan flushed as he realized Kenn was right and he'd missed all of the signs, plus his numbers were slightly off.

Angela chuckled. "Very nice. Here's your challenge. How do we save some of them?"

Kenn and Ivan both stared at her in shock.

Angela waited, braced for ugliness. She'd already asked Marc and gotten a half-joking refusal to even consider the question. Because of Ivan's start with Safe Haven, she expected him to be more

understanding. She thought Kenn might shout or threaten to quit his job and leave with Tonya. It was a bigger risk to let him in, but she was honestly trying to forgive him for her own sanity. Every time she had a moment like this, another nightmare stopped visiting her.

The two men caught her thoughts and tried to react the way she needed, but it was hard.

Ivan thought of the soldiers who'd joined Safe Haven with him. They were all gone now. Some had been victims of illness or attacks, but most had been too weak to resist going corrupt. *Or they were that way all along and I didn't see it.* "What did Marc say?"

Kenn winced. *Bad choice.*

Ivan knew, but the thought of accepting refugees from the fighting force coming to kill them all was repulsive.

Angela stayed silent, but it was disappointing and she let it show on her face.

"I see." Ivan sucked it up, unable to take that feeling from her. "You'd have to separate groups of them, sort through the good, bad, and ugly, and then isolate them until it's all over. From there? That's *your* headache."

"Thank you for that half-assed effort." Angela motioned toward Greg. "Switch out."

Ivan's angry stomp and red face told the camp he'd pissed her off.

Kenn snickered. "Getting a little too much like Marc?"

Angela sneered. “Yes. It’s like watching a sponge. Do you know how *boring* it is to watch a sponge?”

Kenn laughed.

Ivan’s shoulders tensed.

Greg hurried around the embarrassed man. He joined Kenn and Angela, assuming he was on guard duty over her. “I hope he did something to deserve that.”

Angela frowned at Ivan’s stiff form. “Lack of effort unbecoming a leader. Copying instead of leading. Lack of compassion.”

Greg stopped protesting. That was more than enough to get him removed from a leadership position in the Eagles. This was a warning. Greg knew because Angela had just listed the charges they would use.

Kenn sobered. “Isn’t that a little harsh?”

Angela glared. “Yes. He’s done nothing but follow and copy for months now. He’s not using his gifts for the good of this camp. He’s just learning to take Marc’s place and I won’t stand for it any longer. He either steps up or aside. Others are waiting for that spot.”

Hope shot through every male there who quietly dreamed of loving her and helping her run this camp.

Marc’s harsh laughter sent fresh humiliation through Ivan and caused a large portion of the secret hopefuls to drop their heads and return to dreaming.

A few of the bolder hopefuls met Marc's eyes or tried to catch Angela's.

"You've opened a mess there." Kenn didn't like how his own mind had brightened with ideas. He lashed out in fear. "Stop acting like a whore."

Angela's face went blank.

Kenn froze as an icy wind went down his spine. It sank into his legs and made his bones ache.

Silence fell in ripples around them, spreading through the entire camp in seconds. Even Sadie stopped humping to observe.

Adrian laid there and tried to get ready to finish her off. He'd lost count of the orgasms; his flesh was raw, but she was twenty years younger. He knew it wasn't over yet. *I'm in deep shit with this one.* He refused to concede, however. *It's a pride thing now. I'll be damned if the entire camp is going to see me fail at this!*

Angela walked away.

The camp let out a collective breath, exchanging nods and smiles.

Kenn flushed, now feeling like Ivan. He suddenly wished shift change would come quicker.

Greg gave Kenn a nasty glare, then followed Angela.

Across the camp, Marc smiled as Kyle came by. "Have a seat?"

Unlike Neil and Wade, Kyle looked and felt like a top Eagle. When his sharp gaze went over the guards, those men and women stiffened in attention.

“No. Thanks.” Kyle was observing Kenn and Ivan for their reactions and thoughts. “Just curious why she’s pissing them off when it’s supposed to be a good day.”

Marc grunted. “She didn’t want to take it out on me. I refused to give her a solution to something. Ivan followed my lead. I don’t know what went wrong with Kenn. I thought he was going to give her the answer she needs.”

“Can I help with it?”

Marc sighed. “Yeah, but you won’t want to.”

Kyle shrugged, rubbing his splinted finger. The break was trying to heal and it hurt. “That’s in my job description.”

Marc chuckled, but he didn’t push Kyle to go offer his help. He didn’t want anyone to answer the question, but he also didn’t have the right to forbid it. *She can’t be serious.*

Greg was on Angela’s heels as she stalked toward the cliff. He’d known who she would go to next, but he’d thought she would wait until there were less witnesses.

“I would have, but Marc is disrespecting me by not doing his job because of personal views.” *I’m the leader of this damn camp and I will have an answer!*

Her mental shout stung all of the men involved and brought shame.

Adrian felt her coming.

So did Sadie, but she refused to stop until she reached that magnificent peak.

Adrian rolled over and rose, leaving Sadie on the ground.

Angela averted her eyes from his hard, raw body.

Sadie rose to reclaim what she wanted.

Adrian shoved her back. “The boss wants you.”

Sadie paused. “Why me?”

Adrian tugged her top up, covering her sunburnt breasts as best as he could with the torn material. “She needs an answer the rest of them won’t give her.”

Sadie’s curiosity was snagged. She pulled her pants on when Adrian tossed them to her, then faced the woman now reaching the top of the cliff.

Adrian pulled up his pants and slowly retreated, eager for the escape.

Sadie scowled without looking at him. “Don’t make me hunt you down again. It will get ugly.”

Adrian scanned his battered, bruised, bleeding body. *This isn’t ugly?*

He sat down right there to wait.

The crowd laughed and nodded. It was the wise choice.

Sadie searched Angela for signs of jealousy. “Why ask me? Adrian’s the smart guy.”

Angela shrugged, hating how out of shape she felt. “Didn’t come for brains.”

Sadie bit her lip, not sure if she’d just been insulted.

“How long were you with the UN?”

Sadie's face wrinkled as she fought to give an accurate answer. "Those days were blurry in the beginning. Months, I think."

"In that time, you had contact with, or at least observed, hundreds of others like yourself, right?"

Sadie shook her head. "Thousands."

"Even better." Angela ignored the thick odors coming off the girl's filthy body. "What do they all have in common? What do they want the most?"

"To live." Sadie immediately understood why Angela wanted to know. She stared in surprise. "After all they've done to you?"

Angela shrugged, voice resigned and proud at the same time. "They're *all* my people."

Sadie smiled, showing an innocent beauty that came with youth. "I'll help you. I want to save them too."

Angela leaned toward the girl. "If you don't get your period next month, come see me. We'll get you some medicine."

"To get rid of it?" Sadie understood how babies were made.

Angela smiled. "No. To help you carry it. We'll give you vitamins and supplies, and we'll help you deliver too."

Sadie stiffened. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"You're living my life." Angela said it without bitterness. "I want it to be good for you for as long as it lasts."

"Because I'm the sacrifice."

Angela stared now, surprised for the first time in months. “What?”

“You’re feeling bad about using me to keep Adrian away from you.”

*The hive connection is fully established in this one.* Angela sighed. “I am sorry.”

Sadie looked over at Adrian, mind considering Angela’s words about a baby. After a minute, she shrugged. “I could have said no, but I want him for as long as he’ll tolerate me.”

Angela understood completely. “Thank you for your answer.”

“You’re welcome.” Sadie dug into her mind, brow furrowing.

Angela waited this time instead of assuming the girl wasn’t intelligent. She’d just seen multiple flashes of insight that said otherwise.

“I think if they could see you, and know we were all lied to, maybe that would convince many of them to help and stay after the fighting’s done.”

Marc’s head whipped toward them. His anger rushed out. *You little bitch!*

Adrian pushed out a shield around Sadie, not Angela. He flashed a warning glare.

Marc’s surprise stopped the fight.

Adrian felt Sadie’s elation and Angela’s sadness, but he didn’t get to pick those feelings. He could smell Sadie’s musky scent all over his body. She might be conceiving right now. They weren’t being careful. She’d claimed him. Of course he would protect her.

Angela turned toward the hill, mind racing. “Stop by later and we’ll share a drink if you like. Moonrise is good for me, but wash first. You stink.”

“I will.” Sadie wasn’t offended. She was glad she’d been able to help.

Greg frowned at her as he followed Angela. “Marc won’t forget that.”

Sadie pointed right at Marc. “*He* isn’t the boss. *He* doesn’t get to decide what information she gets and neither do you.”

Greg dropped his chin.

So did more of the listening camp, but not Marc.

Sadie smiled at him. *But we can still be friends, right?*

Marc’s mouth dropped open. “She’s mocking me.”

Angela swallowed a snicker. *We might have both been wrong about her.*

Sadie turned to Adrian. Her eyes lit up with hunger and triumph.

Adrian sighed resignedly. “Let’s go to the bunker now.”

“I think not.” Sadie lunged, jagged, bloody claws coming back out.

Chapter Three  
**Build Up**

1

**A**ngela and Greg laughed with the others as Adrian shouted for help that wasn't coming.

Marc glared, mind shifting into high gear. *I have to find a way to change her mind.*

“Stop.” Kyle glared at Marc. “You’re going against her, in front of everyone.”

Marc didn't care. “Mind your own monkeys. This is my circus.”

Kyle stiffened and left as Angela approached.

Marc braced for a tirade.

Angela went on by, zeroed in on the man lounging with his family a few blankets behind Marc.

Shawn tensed.

Missy yawned and let go of her crayon. “Can we swim now?” Tomorrow, she was supposed to start working with Angela again. Missy wanted to do it now, but they were all supposed to relax and have fun today. She was bored.

Pam frowned, assuming she and Morgan were being distracted.

Shawn relaxed as he caught Angela's thoughts. “No problem. Missy and I love making movies.”

Missy grinned. “We caught Kenn in the bathroom. He made me erase that one.”

“Just erase.”

“Erase that one,” Missy dutifully repeated at Shawn’s gentle correction.

“What movies have you made, besides the wedding?”

“We’ve handled two engagements and several of our adventures to get here.” Shawn didn’t add details. Angela knew he’d been filming every time he wasn’t involved in the action. She’d told him to. This was ear candy for their audience.

Angela gestured at the sprawling camp. “I think we need one that catches what it feels like to finally be on this island.”

“Yeah!” Missy jumped up and began hunting for her shoes. “Come on, Shawn! We gotta go get the cameras!”

Shawn chuckled as he rose, flashing a fast glance at Pam to be sure she approved.

Pam had been expecting much worse. She smiled at all of them and settled against Morgan’s hip. Now she didn’t have to go swimming yet. The kids were eager to play in the surf, but most of the adults never wanted to feel the ocean again.

Angela went toward the buffet tables, sniffing. “I smell chocolate!”

People laughed at the reminder of the chaos in the gym.

Angela found the chocolate chip cookies and picked the smallest one.

Thelma picked another and pushed it into Angela's hand. "I insist."

Angela took it, beaming like a kid.

Thelma laughed.

Angela munched on the cookies and scanned her camp. Some of them thought she was putting on a show, but she was happy for this moment. She had the answer she needed and it had been verified multiple times. Getting them to accept it was a headache (*Yes, Ivan, of course it's my headache. Who else gives a shit about innocent people who were kidnapped, brainwashed, tortured, starved, and forced to fight?*) for tomorrow.

Ivan's anger reached the boiling point, but he swallowed the heat. He'd known how it would go when he decided not to cooperate with her latest crazy plan.

*You wouldn't be here right now if not for my crazy plans.*

Ivan refused to cave.

Angela actually liked him better because he didn't, though his refusal to do his job was fast becoming an issue for her. He was allowed to have his own views and moral code, but the job had to come first. If he couldn't do that, he needed a new assignment. As for Marc, Angela had known how he would take it from the first instant she'd gotten the idea.

*But they really have been kidnapped, tortured, brainwashed, and forced to come here. What kind of a person am I if I don't take that into*

*consideration? She met Marc's eyes. Most of them will want to go home anyway. We'll do what Safe Haven does. We'll give them freedom to make their own choices.*

Marc knew he would help her when it mattered, but for right now, he sighed. "Tomorrow's headache, okay?"

Angela smiled. Now that she'd had her plan confirmed, it was okay to enjoy the day. "What would you like to do?"

Marc glanced toward the top deck, where his team was slowly gathering.

Angela laughed. "Ivan, Marc needs a wheelman."

Ivan joined Marc, helping the man into his chair.

The camp winced with Marc as Ivan jarred his bad leg.

Marc sat in the chair and heaved a sigh. He looked at Dog. "Want a ride?"

Dog rolled over and rose slowly.

Marc lifted the wolf onto his lap and settled in for the bumpy ride.

Ivan took a fast glance at Angela. *Please don't hate me. I would have felt the same even without Marc's choice.*

*Prove that to me.*

Ivan shuddered. *Tonya cursed me because I chased you, because I wasn't good, because I might have betrayed everyone. I changed, but it was a close thing. The others, they didn't change at all.*

*You're going to let in a new horde of refugees with the same issues and restart the attacks, the betrayals, the thefts, the assaults. All because you feel pity for casualties of war.*

Angela nodded. "Yes, I am. And do you know why?"

Ivan shoved on the chair and got it rolling toward their ship. "Because it could have been us out there. We're all casualties of war."

Angela nodded. Ivan didn't want it, but he understood why it had to happen and saying it aloud would guarantee the camp spread it. *Thank you.*

*Yeah, yeah.* Ivan ignored Marc's fresh wave of anger and pushed faster. "Let's see if we can beat our record getting over here."

Marc braced with his good leg and both arms, then tightened his grip on Dog. "Fine. But if you throw me out of the chair, we have to go back to the boss and restart from there while she shouts at both of us."

"Just as long as I'm not covering it alone." Ivan increased speed.

Marc enjoyed the wild ride, but he locked his thoughts. *I doubt you'll be handling it alone, Ivan. In fact, you might not be handling it at all if you piss her off a few more times.* Despite Kenn's words, Angela hadn't opened any doors today. She'd reminded Ivan that he could be replaced, and she'd spread some hope that would encourage her other admirers to do big things for the camp to please her. She was manipulative—possibly the best at it Marc

had ever witnessed. On that end, he was proud. *No one makes a fool of my baby-cakes and gets away with it. I respect her.*

Marc let more truth out. *I also fear her a little. At some point, we're going to clash openly and then I'll be in real trouble. She's just as deadly as Nature.*

Ivan snorted at Marc's words and mental attempt to keep him out. "As long as she loves you, the most you'll get from her is dangerous."

*He's been practicing. Good.* "It depends on the topic. If I make her pick between me and the camp..."

Ivan slowed as they neared the beach. "Why would you ever do that? Even this wouldn't call for it. She's doing what she feels is right."

"I know, and I'll deal with it like I have all the other choices she's made that I didn't agree with."

"Because of the outcomes."

"Exactly. I trust her to keep us alive."

"But?"

"But we're both byzan, Ivan. I have this itch that I can't scratch now."

Ivan's eyes narrowed against the bright sun. "She showed you what it was like to lead Safe Haven."

Marc was impressed that Ivan understood it wasn't the job so much as the camp. "This place is special. Being in charge of it while she and the others were at the Weigh Station was hard, amazing. It left a place that feels empty now."

“Leading missions won’t fill it?”

Marc snorted this time. “She isn’t going to let me off this island. I’m protected here.”

Ivan had forgotten about Marc’s curse. “Did she give you details on the actual moment?”

“Yes. And I tried to trigger it early.”

Ivan chuckled. “It felt great, right?” He shared Marc’s hatred of Adrian now. *I’ve seen how close they are. I don’t want him as my rival either.*

“She’s right; you are soaking up too much of me.”

Ivan shrugged. “I have a role model. You should both be pleased.”

“I am, actually, but she clearly isn’t.”

Ivan pushed the chair onto the bobbing bridge. “Will she really replace me?”

“Yes. She doesn’t want that empty feeling next time around either.”

Ivan wasn’t sure he understood. He stayed quiet, working it out as they neared the ladder. A long, wide ramp sat along the railing of the top deck, glinting in the bright sun. It would be put up later or tomorrow. Angela had insisted they could carry everyone for today.

Marc lifted the wolf.

Ivan slid the blanket sling under the big animal, twisted the ends twice, then carefully hefted it over his shoulders.

Dog rested his chin on Ivan’s head.

Ivan climbed the ladder, scowling. “Stop drooling!”

Marc chuckled. He stood up, using the cane to keep his balance. Pain shot through his ankle. Weariness swarmed him. *I'm off the island.*

Marc looked back and found Angela watching. *The boundary is literal.*

Marc limped to the ladder. *Yes. When it storms, we should clear the ships.*

*Enjoy your downtime.*

Marc began to pull himself up the ladder, using only his arms.

Angela leered. *Damn, that's hot.*

Marc kept his concentration, snickering mentally as he pulled himself up.

Observing rookies immediately began making plans to get strong enough to do the same.

Ivan chortled. "I would have come back down for you."

"I know." Marc's pride was tired of being carried and pushed. "Get Dog settled, will ya? He is enjoying the service."

Ivan laughed with the others, not offended. He didn't mind caring for Dog. He was still amazed that the animal could communicate.

Dog sniffed the air. *Food. There's bacon again!*

The buffet table held all the leftovers from breakfast, odds and ends, and some of the dishes from their coming lunch. Angela was letting them use too many supplies for this, but everyone was grateful. Good food made a nice day even better.

On the beach, Angela keyed her radio. "I have a quick update for everyone. Due to time constraints,

I have bumped the privacy vote to tonight, during evening mess. Have a great day.”

Angela ignored the surprised comments and disapproving glares. It had to be done, and she wasn't going to give Marc all the ugly chores. If the camp was upset, it was better that it was with her. *I handle it better. He still flies off the handle too much.* Angela sent a smile toward the deck. *But you're making progress every day; don't stop.*

Marc chuckled, going to join the few team members who were already up here.

Ivan helped Dog into the little wagon and then tugged him toward the buffet that Brittani's parents had set up.

Marc scanned for the rest of the team and found most of them on the way. They'd been waiting for him. Now they could make excuses to their friends and family and finally get out of the camp's path for a while. Everyone had questions and comments, or well wishes to give. It was awkward and even annoying because so many people wanted that moment. As soon as they finished with ten, another ten took their place. All of the men had sought the protection of their mates to avoid other people. They didn't want to talk about it and until Marc said they had to, the entire team was sticking to distracting responses and vague replies like they always had.

Marc sank down into the padded chair, taking the center of the seats that were facing the island. Someone had wisely put the chairs facing each other

in two rows. All directions were covered and they could see and hear each other perfectly. Those who had loved ones on the ship would face the ocean. Having all sides covered would allow them to relax a little.

Marc put his cane on the seat to his right. He slid his jacket off and tossed it onto the chair on his left.

Neil came up the ramp from the ship and spotted Marc. Relief slid over his tired face. He didn't have to return to land and tell another lie or half-truth about what had happened. Neil went to the small bar that had been set up. "Who wants a drink?"

"You're making them?"

Neil stepped behind the bar and began scanning for the items he needed. "Just because I didn't drink, you assume I can't make them either. Shame on you."

Marc grinned. "Fair enough. I'd like a Long Island Iced Tea, with grenadine."

"Coming up, if we have the grenadine. Who else?"

Some of the men went to the bar to watch Neil mix their cocktails.

Marc carefully pushed off the uncomfortable medical slipper and then unstrapped the heavy boot they'd forced him to wear. His ankle gave another weak throb and then settled down.

"Boss said everyone can have two drinks today. If you skip the pain pills, you can drink like normal. I'm keeping track, so no cheating. Pain pills and alcohol can be a dangerous mix." Neil held out a tall

tumbler and stuck a straw into it. “Someone deliver that to the gentleman sunning his ugly toes in chair five, please.”

“I’ve got it.” Ivan took the cup and pulled the wagon over to Marc. He stopped near Marc’s feet and handed him the tumbler.

Marc laughed at Dog, who hung over the sides and the ends of the small red wagon. “Got enough food there?”

Dog didn’t answer. He had his face buried in one of the four bowls he’d chosen.

Marc took a sip and shut his eyes. “Neil?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“You’ve just been promoted to team bartender.”

Neil beamed as men laughed. “I worked my way through the academy while delivering beer on third shift. Ended up working behind the bar in a couple places when they were shorthanded. They liked having a cop around and I liked access to the skanks.”

Laughter rolled across the deck, pleasing the camp and Angela.

Marc saw Angela walk toward the farthest area of the spread-out camp. She and Greg vanished into the tree line. He studied the camp. He was expecting them to relax now.

“They won’t.” Daryl took the seat across from Marc, signaling his willingness to watch Marc’s six. He needed to maintain his current Eagle status no matter what. He was all-in now. “They’re not as scared of her as they are of you.”

Marc made a face. “After all she’s done in front of them?”

“Exactly. They know what she can do, and they know most of what provokes her. They know she—”

“She’d die for them. Yeah, I’ve heard that one.” Marc didn’t feel like blowing smoke up anyone’s ass today unless it was needed. “Why are they scared of me? Other than not seeing me die for them.”

Daryl ignored Marc’s sarcasm. Considering what they’d all been through to get to this moment, it was a wonder anyone could talk civilly. “Because they don’t know what all you can do, or what provokes you, except a threat to your family. They’ve got that one loud and clear.”

Marc leaned back, wishing the alcohol would take away the constantly working brain he’d switched to with his evolution. He didn’t mind the bits of glare he was getting now, but not being able to shut it all off for a while was rough.

Daryl didn’t rub it in when a dozen camp members and a few rookies hurried after Angela. It was easy to discern it was for safety and not excitement. Everyone wanted a tour of the island now, but only if they had a strong escort who would make sure they made it home.

“She counted on that.” Marc didn’t open his eyes as the cane was moved and placed next to his hand. “She hoped it would keep them from getting lost or hurt. Some of those spots on the grand tour might still be dangerous.”

Daryl and Ivan both snorted.

The noise told Marc that Ivan had taken the seat to his right.

Morgan came up the ramp. Wade was behind him.

Marc felt their anger and amusement. “What happened?”

“Gabe talked to Tonya.” Wade took the seat next to Daryl, across from the empty chair with Marc’s jacket.

Morgan picked up the jacket. He folded it. “Lift that leg.”

Marc obediently lifted his ankle, swallowing the wince at an ugly flare of jagged pain.

Morgan settled his ankle on the jacket, then went to the end and claimed the last chair facing the ocean. *I can’t stare at the island.* He also didn’t want to look at the ship or the water, but both were preferable to Pitcairn. The feeling of being protected hadn’t hit him at all yet. “The others are on their way up. Conner ordered a full security check after Tonya...talked to Gabe. Samantha’s going over the notes now.”

Marc’s attention was snagged this time. He looked over at Morgan.

Morgan shrugged. “I wasn’t there. Terry’s handling the aftermath. Gabe’s critical. That’s all I know.”

Marc scanned, but he was unable to penetrate the ship unless he wanted to pull energy he couldn’t

spare from his healing body. “Boss has a spy onboard. We’ll get the details later.”

Everyone knew he meant Ian, but his tone wasn’t snide. Everyone was impressed by how much Ian had changed, including Marc.

Marc’s mind returned to Angela and what she wanted. *The army coming here can’t be allowed to join us. It will upset all the progress we’ve made. It might restart the fighting with the normals too. She’s making a huge mistake. I can’t let this happen.*

Kyle came up the ladder in time to catch that. He pretended he hadn’t as he joined his team.

## 2

Greg walked beside Angela, scanning the ground and the trees for any of the threats they’d faced since landing here. He didn’t relax. He knew Angela had brought him out here for something.

The rookies behind them were all in Eagle gear, like the other senior members. Greg assumed Angela wanted it clear in the videos that Safe Haven was full of armed security. Her own casual clothes had been intentional to show their viewers a soft side. She had a reputation for being heartless, not womanly. She’d even left her hair in a loose ponytail that was already wild and escaping the holder. Curls blew across her shoulders and cheeks as warm wind shifted. This was the height of Pitcairn’s summer, though they hadn’t realized that

before. It would end in March. The warmth was great now, but they would have to get to work soon or they might run out of time to build protection from the hurricane season. Pitcairn's winters were mild; the tropical storms were not.

Greg caught her unease and frowned, hoping she hadn't lied. No one was ready to go back into battle even though they had such a limited time before the United Nations fleet was supposed to arrive. Angela had promised them a peaceful day. Greg hoped she didn't renege.

"I didn't say everyone was going to have a peaceful day, did I?"

Greg scowled.

Angela chuckled. "I'm just taking a tour. I haven't seen these places for myself, only through the memories of others and then through the darkness and the exhaustion. Everything's a little different than what I thought. I need to do a complete walkthrough to match it with my mental maps for when we do start working."

Greg wasn't sure why he didn't believe her, but he didn't.

The camp members and rookies walking behind them did. They all began chatting like it was the old world and they were on a guided tour of an infamous vacation spot. It was disheartening to Greg to see how much work they still had to do.

"You need to spend some time with Adrian."

Greg tripped over the root he'd tried to step over as she spoke. He rolled and got to his feet in a fairly

smooth moment that made the rookies clap. The camp people stared, not sure why he'd been rolling.

Angela kept walking, waiting for an oral response to her statement.

“I assume that's for training?”

“No, I think you're pretty well trained. Emotionally is where you need help.” Angela held up her hand to stop his coming denial. “We're all depressed. We survived a war and it wasn't good enough. We killed a lot of people. That wasn't good enough. Now we're here on this deceptively beautiful rock, but it's not home and it never will be. You need to talk to Adrian. I'm great at getting us through the battles. Survival is what I do. When it comes to the mental, I always went to Adrian.”

“Who do you go to now?” Greg didn't feel any heat behind the question and was relieved. He was honestly curious.

Angela's lips thinned. “A mix of the kids, the camp, and Marc.”

“Is it enough?” Greg wasn't sure why he was being sarcastic with the boss, but he suddenly felt like letting loose on someone and she was here. “Did your spirits lift? Do you feel all warm inside and happy about the future?”

Angela slowly came to a stop.

Greg did a quick sweep to make sure things were clear before turning his attention back to the woman who could be just as dangerous as Mother Nature if provoked.

“I think you guys missed a spot.”

Greg looked down and saw debris and another hole where a hatch lid had been. He immediately got out his notes and added it.

Angela stepped over it and continued on her tour. Her mind replayed his comment, but she chose not to respond. She had different limits. When he thought about it, the answer would be obvious. He was *allowed* to go talk to Adrian. She wasn't permitted to enjoy that comfort anymore. Adrian had ruined it for both of them.

"Damn."

"Get up!"

Angela had learned the art of the bouncing step a while ago, but the rookies were experiencing their first jungle landscape. Several of them had already tripped and fallen.

Greg shot a glare at the last one. "You didn't try to roll."

The rookie flushed. "Didn't think I could do it without losing everything in my pockets."

Greg huffed.

Angela kept walking, waving away clouds of insects hovering around the foliage. *I wonder if this island has cicadas.* Angela shuddered and shoved away the flashback that wanted to haunt her.

Angela didn't speak again until she reached the small town. She walked into the center, scanning the signs of everything that had happened. The crushed barn and bare spots would be repurposed into other shelters and things they needed. The restaurant would be put to its intended use. That would just

expand a bit. She connected those clues with the reports she'd already been given.

Angela shut her eyes, enjoying the rays of sun and the light, warm island breeze. "Show me our future here."

Angela reached out and touched Greg's arm. It was important to her that he understood things were going to change in the future for Safe Haven. For a little while, they might be living out of tents, but two decades into the future, Safe Haven's population would have grown. She wanted to be sure that was possible here.

Greg shared the vision with her, body tense. It was one thing to be around her and quite another to be touched by her. The lock rattled.

"Concentrate!" Angela connected their minds.

A towering, busy city of light and noise immediately jarred Greg's senses. He flinched, losing his concentration. The vision vanished.

"Tell them what you saw." Angela let go.

The rookies and camp members had crowded around, eager to see the vision of the future.

"We build up!" Greg glanced at the trees, a little stunned. "We had a city! It was taller than the trees, but they were still here and so was everything else. Instead of building out, we built up!"

Angela was satisfied the story would spread through the camp, alleviating some of the fears about having to be too close to each other or destroying the island.

Angela stepped around a tacky red spot in the dirt, hoping no one else stepped in it. Nature would clean the island if they left it alone long enough. Angela had other plans, though a cleaning crew hadn't been assigned yet. Crews would eventually be drafted. All battle sites would be cleared and cleaned. Most of the camp would never see the uglier spots. Very few of them would be brave enough to venture down into the tunnels without a full Eagle escort and none of those weary men wanted to offer tours of the places where they'd almost died or where they'd lost teammates. The tours going on today were all above ground.

Angela went to the restaurant, eager to see the inside. Theo and the rest of the crew she had chosen for the reconstruction projects would be busy, but before they could get started, she had to decide what they were doing and in what order. On the way here, she'd drafted plans to fit 500 citizens on the island, though at this point those numbers were extremely optimistic. Unless they took in more refugees, she doubted Safe Haven would have even 300 members before they had to return for the final battle, and that event would lower those numbers drastically. Still, she wanted to leave them room to expand. They would have plans drawn up for future generations on how that could happen. "We're missing the materials. We have the workforce."

"I've been thinking about that."

“Put it in your nightly notes.” Angela was too busy for his ideas at this exact moment. She finished her scan of the entry room.

Outside, camp members explored the site, but their attention stayed on the doorway and Greg’s wide shoulders.

The dusty tables and chairs bore prints from Adrian’s group and nature. No one else had been here in a long time. Angela wasn’t sure why the residents had stopped using the restaurant, but she assumed they’d lost the mental capacity to prepare meals. As far as she could see, the equipment and infrastructure were here. Thelma and Dwight were going to love it, especially the long, wide grill.

The restaurant held room for 50 diners at once, roughly the population of the entire island before the war. It also held an upstairs floor that would be converted into living quarters if it didn’t already have them. The wide space would be a nice change from the cramped conditions on the ship. *After I get a crew in here to do a few things...* Angela made another mental note to have the ugly yellow walls painted white so they reflected more light. *We’ll also put in a few mirrors to catch the sun. The ship has hundreds of them.* She hated dingy places.

Angela wondered if Greg was now hungrier or less than enthusiastic for the gift he was about to be given. Claiming the island hadn’t been easy. Anyone would be rattled. She rotated to find him standing guard in the doorway. “Do you still want it as much?”

Greg nodded immediately. He clamped down on his tongue to keep from saying anything else. This wasn't the right time to beg or boast.

Angela motioned toward a dusty table and chairs in the corner.

Greg shook his head. "We don't have a guard right now. I can't be that distracted."

Angela was pleased. "Overruled. Come sit down." She pointed at two rookies who peered in. "Door duty. Don't forget the rear."

Greg sat in the chair against the wall, where he could see all the exits and windows. He ignored the dust, waiting for Angela to give him a new life.

Angela didn't like it that he viewed this in that light, but he was entitled to think about it any way he wanted to. What she needed to make sure of was infinitely more important. "Do you understand we'll be bonded forever after we do this? It's not like I can just pop you a demon into place. We have to share."

Greg nodded at her. "I don't know how it works, but I know I want it no matter the consequences."

Angela sat across from him. "And that's part of what bothers me, Gregory."

Using his full name got Greg's attention. He'd always hated it when his mother did that. "Why?"

"Do you want me, Greg?"

Greg tensed as the mental lock clanged against the cell again. "What are you doing?"

Angela didn't pull any punches. "I'm testing your loyalty, your determination. Did you think I

was going to hand over some of my power without first ensuring that I can trust you?”

Greg locked down on his thoughts, hoping to give the right answers. “Ask me whatever you want. I have no secrets now.”

“It’s not your secrets that concern me. It’s your resolve.” Angela flicked her wrist.

Greg’s mental lock snapped. It fell to the ground and shattered.

Greg stared in horror as all the emotions came flooding back in. “What have you done?”

Angela entered his mind and gave life to his fantasies.

Greg forgot to breathe, already fighting not to respond. *I can do this. I’m not like Adrian or even Marc. My honor means more to me than she does.*

Greg shuddered as she came closer. *But only by a thin, icy line.*

Chapter Four  
**A Healthy Mix**

1

**M**arc sipped his tea, breath blowing back delicious fumes. He stared at Neil over his drink.

Neil glanced at the clifftop. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“When did you do it?”

“I didn’t. It’s in the gear Angela sent.”

Marc waved. “Let’s hear it. Gather around, men. It’s time for Trap a Traitor Hour.”

Marc’s team and the few others they’d invited took their seats or stood along the railing with their drinks.

Neil took out a radio and flipped it on. Familiar voices came through the speaker.

*“That was amazing.” Sadie cleared her throat.  
“Though it did hurt a little this time.”*

*Adrian snorted, fixing his clothes. “You should try being me.”*

*“No way. You have too many enemies.”*

*“True enough.”*

*“Where are you going?”*

*“To the bunker. I need food. Come on.”*

*“Kendle sent a bag. Sit down.”*

*Adrian groaned. "I think Marc planned this so I'm in pain every time I get hard."*

*"Are you saying you can't do it again?"*

*"Don't be a child."*

Marc and his team laughed at the conversation. They sipped and snickered as Sadie continued to tease Adrian.

Marc motioned at Neil. "We'll come back to that show. Tune in to the next drama. Go up one channel."

Neil switched channels, wondering who else Marc had bugged. He assumed there would be at least one more because Marc had said next instead of the other or last.

Silence came from the radio.

Marc shrugged. "They aren't in Luke's bunker right now, I guess." He waited a little longer in case Kendle and Quinn were doing something quiet, like reading.

Marc rolled his eyes. He'd never seen either of them read for anything but duty. "Up one again."

Neil did it.

The sounds of grunting flowed through the speaker.

Marc tensed.

Neil smirked. "That's the price you pay for eavesdropping."

Marc recovered. "Agreed. And this is spying. Call it what it is."

“Yeah.” Neil leaned back, waiting. He knew what was about to happen.

“Are we allowed to do this?” Daryl didn’t flinch from the hard stares that swung his way. “Spying without a warrant used to be illegal.”

*Angie was right. We need that founding document finished.* “Adrian’s group are considered hostile to the peace; they’re an exception. For now.”

“Meaning the council is going to handle that at some point.” Kenn didn’t want to hear this conversation right now. “This is downtime.” He glared at Daryl. “Leave it for another day.”

Daryl shrugged, not offended that the warning came from Kenn. He already knew the Marine agreed with him. In fact, he expected everyone to agree.

Neil refused to let that slide. “And I know why. If you’re torn, maybe you should go live with him!”

Daryl flushed, lips clamping together.

“Well, this is fun.” Marc pointed at the radio. “The five-minute wonder is about done. Turn it up.”

Neil laughed as he adjusted the volume on the radio.

*“Mmm. Nice. Was it good for you?”*

*“Sure. Get off my hair now.”*

*“Oh. Sorry. But really, was it good for you?”*

*“I said yes.”*

*“You said sure.”*

*“It was good for me.”*

*“Do you mean that?”*

*“Stop it. You’re killing the good mood.”*

*Her curse kicked in.* Marc wondered again who’d done it.

“If you knew, would you make them remove it?”

Marc sipped his tea.

Morgan frowned. “Saying nothing says a lot.”

“Yep.” Marc kept his face blank and waited.

Morgan held sympathy for Kendle. “It was Pam.”

Men stared in surprise.

Marc laughed. “I never even considered her. She’s good.”

Morgan waited while the others laughed, not sure what would happen now.

Kenn feigned a confused tone as he looked at Morgan, who he almost considered a friend. “The women seem to know the charms without studying them. How is that possible?”

*Dream walking.* “No idea.”

“Not a clue.” *Dream walkers.*

“Women have always been clever.” *Dreams.*

*Night walkers.*

*Thought thieves.*

*Black widows.*

Marc shook his head, starting to feel the buzz. “I don’t know why we thought that would stay a secret.” He motioned with his drink, sloshing a bit over the side. “Only the rookies here don’t know. Right, Kenn?”

Kenn flushed.

Everyone realized he'd intentionally brought up the topic to find out who else knew.

“Not just the women are clever.” Marc drained his cup.

Neil rose, already sure Marc would want a refill. He also wanted to be out of the crossfire if Marc decided to throw something at Kenn. *Not smart, dude. Not at all.*

Kenn knew, but he needed to talk about it and one opinion wasn't going to be enough. “It's important.”

Marc belched, “Oooo-Kaaay.”

Men laughed again, sending more good vibes toward the island, but Marc noticed the camp members hadn't relaxed. Daryl had been right. Only Angela made them feel that way. *I'm sorry. I'm trying to love them. It just isn't working.*

“It was an accident. And I haven't done it since.” Kenn glanced toward the bridge, where Ian was gathering shift reports. He was point man over the Eagles right now. “The little girl he hit with his flashlight was hiding on the top deck. She'd fallen asleep, I assume. I was doing rounds in my sleep. You guys know how that works.”

Everyone nodded. Some shifts were so long or busy that you dreamed about them.

“Her hatred blasted me in my sleep every time I got near the deck, but I was too tired to wake up. I knew what was happening. It wasn't all fragmented

like a normal dream. I shouted at the people around her. Some of them caught it; most didn't."

"I didn't." Marc remembered that moment clearly. It would always bother him that the child had died. Watching her father blow his brains out a minute later hadn't been fun either. "Go on."

Kenn sucked in a deep breath, vaguely hearing Kendle and Quinn trade after-sex barbs as if they were endearments. "We have a major security issue and I don't know how to fix it."

"So you're worried about the camp?"

"I'm worried about the council, and our medics, and Tonya, Angela, Jennifer. We can't protect them in their dreams."

Marc decided it was time to trust his team. "The boss gave me permission to discuss this with you guys about a month ago, but I chose to wait. If I hadn't, Quinn and Tommy would have had this information to pass to Kendle and Sadie. Adrian already knows, but he's always been tight-lipped about what we can do." Marc's gaze went to Tommy as he stood guard near the beach. The man had insisted on only working today. He said he didn't want downtime until he'd earned it. "I don't know how much Kendle is aware of. I bugged Adrian's camp to find that out, among other things."

"I didn't know." Daryl felt bad.

Marc didn't care. "I might be overreacting, but we know she's dangerous. She won't go against Angela directly now, but she might try to blindside us. The only place we can't protect people is in their

dreams. If Kendle knows, then the XO is right—we do have a major security issue.”

Neil brought Marc’s drink over, trading the cups out as the others muttered. “I’m sorry to tell you she knows everything, Marc. I’m sure of it.”

Marc had been dreading this confirmation. “What makes you sure?”

“When we did the recharge, she heard Amy talking. She even made it clear that she wasn’t doing any dream walking, though I think she did stir up some of our other traitors.”

“She did. That’s why Pam cursed her.” Morgan belched. “I told the boss.”

The others nodded in approval. If Angela knew Kendle was dream walking, she would have a plan for it.

Marc pointed at the radio. “And now you all know who signed our warrant. Turn it up. The fighting stopped; the scheming should start soon.”

*“What do you think would be different if Marc was in charge of Safe Haven?”*

*There was a pause before Kendle blew out a snort. “Adrian would be dead.”*

*“Duh. What else?”*

*Kendle grunted. “A lot of people who are getting a second chance now wouldn’t be here. He probably would have dumped them off in other places.”*

*“So that means the light of Safe Haven would have still spread, right?”*

*“I suppose so.”*

*“What else might be different?”*

*“Why are you asking me?”*

*“Something occurred to me, but I’m trying to verify it before I speak and sound like an idiot.”*

It was easy to tell Kendle was interested. Her voice became encouraging. *“Ask me what you need to know. I’ll want to go back out before the camp returns to the boat.”*

*“To stare at Marc.” It wasn’t a question.*

*Kendle didn’t reply.*

*Quinn continued with a frown dripping from his words. “Is he capable of handling the camp like Angela does? Can he keep them together? If so, she might be the one to go.”*

*“I think he can. I also think what I said stands—there would be a lot fewer members, but they would be infinitely more trustworthy than all of the people who are here now. Marc wouldn’t give second chances.”*

*“And yet, he has.”*

*“I’m not the only one.” Kendle’s defensive answer came through the radio.*

*“No, but he’s very picky about who he protects.”*

*Kendle’s voice rang out again with contempt. “I understand now. You think if we can get Angela to leave, Marc might go with her.”*

*“No, I’m thinking Marc will leave on his own. I’m wondering how many of the men might go with him, leaving her without a camp.”*

Marc winced, not liking how close Quinn was to the truth. He ignored the curious glances of his team and kept listening.

*“He’s always been restless. The Eagles are pretty sure he’ll run long before our time here is up. And since Adrian is banished, I’m wondering who will lead Safe Haven when Angela goes after him.”*

*“Not you, that’s for sure.” Kendle snorted again. She began fixing her clothes. “Marc isn’t going anywhere unless Angela sends him. And she isn’t letting him leave this rock until it’s time to go back to America.”*

*“You don’t know him like—”*

*“You’re wrong.” Kendle’s voice came through with clear confidence. “Besides, you never know how high Marc might go right here. That type of power is addictive.”*

*“If you say so.”*

*“Whatever you’re planning to get one of them to leave, just stop it now.”*

*“Because you’re already working on something.”*

*“I didn’t say that.”*

*“I know. It’s all about what you’re not saying.”*

*“You’re imagining things. Kiss me. Then get your shoes on.”*

*“You’re ready to go watch the happy couple on the beach.”*

*Kendle ignored Quinn’s sarcasm. “Yes.”*

Marc gestured at Neil to switch channels again.

Neil did, almost hoping they didn't hear anything bad. He wasn't ready for another battle yet. None of them were.

Silence came from all the channels.

"I don't understand what Quinn was driving at."

Morgan hadn't spent a lot of time with Quinn other than a few runs. He'd found Quinn to be a hothead and a little reckless, but he wasn't sure he agreed that the man was a traitor because he'd left to be with the woman he loved. "There's no way he's smart enough to actually create a plan that would get anyone to leave this camp, let alone leadership. Was he mouthing off to impress Kendle?"

Neil didn't see any reason to lie. "Quinn is always going to be intimidated as long as Marc's around. He thinks if he can be alone with Kendle he'll win her heart. He doesn't care what happens to Safe Haven. His questions about who can lead were probably meant to imply he could do the job."

Wade nodded. That's what he thought too.

Morgan looked at Marc, valuing his opinion more on this topic.

"He was fishing to see if Kendle gives a damn about this camp. He expected her to say no one else can do the job except for me or Angela but she didn't. Because she didn't give him an opening, he couldn't just blurt it out. I bet he's trying to find a way to circle back to it right now while they walk

down Cliff Road.” Marc wasn’t concerned. “Quinn isn’t the dangerous one in that duo.”

“I realize that, but something’s bothering me about the conversation.”

Marc lifted a brow.

Morgan frowned. “That’s just it—I’m not sure what. I just know something is wrong.”

Marc had picked up on that vibe too, along with several of the others, but none of them could pinpoint exactly what had been abnormal about Kendle’s responses or Quinn’s questions.

“You might be wrong.”

People turned in surprise, staring at the rookie who usually didn’t say much.

Biff refused to back down. “I’ve spent a lot more shifts with Quinn than you guys have. Most of the time he’s exactly like you’re thinking, but every now and then, he has a moment of genius. It’s part of why he’s been able to not only stay in the Eagles but also keep advancing in rank despite being such an obvious shithead.”

All of Marc’s team was surprised to hear Biff speak so bluntly. They had gotten used to the quiet soft-spoken rookie who was careful not to rock anyone’s boat.

Biff was aware of how they viewed him, but after being on Marc’s team for this island run, Biff had realized there was little that could happen on any other job to match what they’d suffered. He came through it with honor; he was allowed to speak his mind as an Eagle.

Marc lifted his cup in a universal gesture of *let's hear it*. Biff and Chad both looked like their names implied, but Marc didn't care about that. The two playboys were solid fighters and dependable in a crisis. *And I think Biff is about to prove he's also intelligent.*

Biff scanned the cliff, wishing they could see the road. "Quinn wants Kendle the way you want Angela. He hides it better. He's more dangerous than you're giving him credit for."

"Anything else?"

"Nope." Biff drained his drink.

Neil was there to replace it. He was keeping track of everyone's progress on the drinks; if they needed a new one quickly it meant he'd done a good job as bartender.

Biff wasn't surprised when the other men blew him off. He waited for Marc's response, aware that the man wasn't teasing him like the others.

Marc had gotten a chill as Biff spoke. He gave Daryl a hard glare. "You've spent time around them since we got here." Marc quickly added, "I know it wasn't a lot of time and that's a headache *I* need to handle, but I want your opinion. What gets us in and keeps us up-to-date on everything going on in Adrian's camp?"

Daryl didn't hesitate. "The girl."

Marc scanned the hill, along with most of the team. Sadie was once again snoozing and Adrian was leaning against a thin tree while trying to regain his breath. "The fist or the palm?"

Daryl sighed. "A healthy mix of both."

"You mean Sadie?" Kenn was surprised at the suggestion.

So was the rookie. "I think it's safe to assume after all the riding she's done today that she's probably fond of her horse. I doubt she'd be willing to sell it out."

Daryl ignored them both, talking to Marc. "She's like Angela."

Marc immediately understood. "Who would you recommend for that run?"

Daryl lifted his empty cup toward Ivan.

Neil was there to grab it and replace it with a fresh one while everyone but Marc stared in surprise.

Ivan held up a hand. "Hold on. What if I don't want to be ridden by her?"

Marc shrugged. "You're an Eagle. It's your duty to let her play man-jockey on your stallion."

"Why him? There are other singles here." Biff didn't want to be left out from earning team credit.

Daryl gave them the answer. "She's also a lot like Angela in the ways they're different."

The rookie scowled. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It does if you've been studying the differences." And Marc had been. He finished Daryl's explanation in a way that made sense to the rookie. "Adrian can only show her one side of life. She needs someone like me to show her there's another way."

Wade smirked. “You know, there isn’t anything as good as an original...”

Everyone laughed at Marc’s dismay.

“Maybe you guys are trying to get me killed.”

“Does the boss know we’re doing this?” Biff scanned the island. “And where did she go?”

“She’s handling a personnel problem while the camp is happy.”

The team was surprised again that he hadn’t insisted on going with her. In fact, as far as they knew, she only had one guard.

Marc quickly disabused them of that notion. “Greg is the issue she’s handling.”

Everyone wanted to ask or verify a suspicion; no one spoke. It wasn’t a good idea to draw attention unless they didn’t have issues of their own to be settled.

Marc leaned against the chair, enjoying the alcohol buzz but not the mix of it with the pills. *I’m done drinking now.* “Who wants to go first?”

Silence rippled across the deck, drawing attention from their guards but not from those on land or from Tommy, who was still on duty over the pontoon bridge. The other shifts were due to switch out shortly, but he would stay right there in the glaring sun for the rest of the day. It was one small self-imposed punishment on an entire list that he would have to go through before he would be forgiven, and even then it would be a lot longer before he was trusted again.

“In the future, when I ask that question I better get a volunteer right away.” Marc sat his half-finished cup on the small table next to his chair. “I’m the same jealous and possessive asshole that I was in the beginning. I see it more now and I control my behavior, but it’s still there. I don’t think it’s ever going to go away.” Marc shrugged, a little drunk. “At least she knew what she was getting into when she agreed to marry me.”

Some of the team snickered. Some of them were too busy considering their own issues to be amused.

Kenn cleared his throat. “I definitely still have the same problems. Tonya told me my reaction was justified and it was also murder.”

This time, more of the team nodded. Several of them immediately became angry at the reminder of what he’d done.

Kenn gestured in frustration. “Half the team agrees and half the team doesn’t. I’m struggling because I feel the exact same way now. I wouldn’t do it again, but if I were ordered to execute him for dereliction of duty, I would have enjoyed it just as much. My brain is having trouble understanding why one is wrong and the other is not.”

Men looked at Marc, expecting him to give the answer.

Neil handled it. “It was wrong because you didn’t have orders. That’s where the murder part comes in. It was justice because his dereliction of duty caused people to get hurt. But in the end, neither one of those matter because it served a

different purpose and that's why the boss let it happen."

Marc was ready to defend Angela, but he was also curious about Neil's opinion. He remained silent, waiting.

Neil sank down in the chair on Marc's right. "Peter would have been Safe Haven's first public execution. It should have happened with Adrian, but Angela found a way to save him. She manipulated all of us on that. I assume everyone here is aware."

Everyone nodded, including Marc.

Neil went on, keeping his voice down so the guards on duty weren't distracted by the conversation. "I think the next one should have happened with me. But she saw what was going to happen in the future and she picked who she found more valuable. This time, there wasn't going to be any way she could intervene. Kenn was going to insist on a trial, and so was Kyle. Don't forget, Jennifer was hurt."

Neil met Kyle's eye. "There still had to be payment for that. All of our camp members were going to demand Peter's death. For a little while, her camp was going to become a mob that would only be satisfied with blood. She didn't want to go through that. Letting Kenn handle the problem and then excusing it afterward was easier."

Marc had found flaws. "You have two issues. The first one is thinking she didn't want to go through that. You're forgetting what she's already

gone through to keep this camp together. She did it for them. She didn't want *them* to go through that."

Neil fit it into place. "Thank you. That makes me feel a little better."

Marc waved. "Well, then you'll love this one. Kenn might not."

Kenn braced, already sure what he was going to hear. *She hasn't forgotten shit.*

"Angela didn't excuse his behavior. His future is dependent upon the outcome of the camp votes."

Neil snorted confidently. "If you think she'll leave that to chance, you're the one who's missing things."

Marc chuckled. "I have no doubt she'll sway the outcome of the votes to whatever future she thinks is best for this camp. That doesn't mean Kenn is off the hook. In fact, because he disappointed her, I would guess the hook will have a very sharp point that she'll use to jab him every time she thinks about it."

Neil realized that was probably true. He gave Kenn a fake sympathetic look. "Sucks to be you."

Kenn pointed. "Right back at you, liar! She'll be jabbing you too, so go on and laugh."

Everyone else laughed as Neil flushed and Kenn glared. Both men were guilty and waiting for Angela's wrath to come down on them. Everyone knew it was going to happen. They just didn't know how or when.

Marc swept the rear deck, where a couple dozen women were sunbathing and twice as many men

were either watching over their females or trying to get their attention. The smell of coconut was strong even up here; suntan oil was being used in generous amounts on naked skin.

Debra came up the ramp and went in that direction, firing her water gun.

Marc laughed as the hopeful males scattered and the other men thanked her.

Marc saw a group of ramp dwellers come up behind Debra. Those were people who wanted to look around for a minute before going back into the ship where they felt safer or had other things to do, like enjoying the entertainment deck where Jonny was in his booth blaring hard rock music.

Marc peered at the glistening swimming pool waiting for their use. No one was allowed in until his team was either finished or they invited others to join. The camp would have it later. *I can't have it at all.* He frowned at his cast.

“So what’s going on with Greg?” Kyle had been quiet for most of this conversation, storing details and hoping Marc didn’t have any surprises for him. He was still stinging from Marc’s earlier curtness. *I managed these monkeys long before you became a master of this circus.*

“He’s facing a test. If he fails, he’s going to lose what he wants most. If he passes, then he has to come and get my permission, and that, my adored team, is not going to be an easy thing for anyone who wants what Greg wants.”

Kyle couldn't help another comment. "I'm surprised you let that happen without being there to observe it. She only has a couple of rookies with her. If Greg snaps, he could be a problem."

Marc liked it that Kyle was always covering security issues. He gave him the truth. "If Greg fails this test, she's going to kill him on the spot. I'm not needed."

Silence fell again through the group.

Biff broke it this time. "I don't think he's going to fail. He wants to be like Kyle more than he wants her. It's a big motivation."

Marc's brows drew together. "How do you know?"

Biff dropped his head. "Greg's been a good friend to me, even before I joined the Eagles. Might be the only real friend I have."

Distracted, the team begin evaluating him to decide if they wanted to offer friendship.

Marc didn't get distracted. "When did you two become friends?"

Kyle immediately joined Marc's line of questioning. "What was going on with you that Greg felt the need to reach out?"

The rookie didn't look at any of them now. He kept his eyes on the chair. "I wasn't feeling well, mentally. Greg found me in a...compromising situation and helped me because he's a great guy. He didn't judge me—he helped me. I'm better now."

"That explains things." Kyle gestured. "I wondered how your name made it onto the rookie

rolls ahead of all my other suggestions. I assume Greg recommended you?”

Biff nodded. “He said I needed something else to concentrate on. He was right.”

Most of the team wasn’t sure how to comfort the man or if they even should. Sometimes talking about the things that depressed people brought back the depression.

Kenn lifted a brow at Marc. “How is it possible you’re sitting here calmly while she’s testing another man’s loyalty?”

Marc smiled. “It’s easy when I have faith in the person.”

Relief went around the group. Knowing Marc believed Greg would pass the test was good. It was also a way to judge the future of others when Angela gave this test again. If Marc needed to be there or felt she needed protection, it would mean he didn’t have faith in whoever she was testing.

Marc knew that would also get around. People who weren’t sure of their own intentions and commitment to the dream wouldn’t ask now. They would be scared to be exposed and lose everything they held currently. It was a rough way to test character, and it left no room for second chances, despite that being what Safe Haven was founded on.

He and Angela had agreed on this plan because of all the traitors they’d had in the past. Sharing this gift with someone was amazing, and Marc couldn’t wait to be allowed to do it. He already had several targets in mind, but there was no way to be

completely sure that an Invisible hadn't slipped through the ranks and been given power early or had their gift unlocked before it was supposed to happen. They had agreed a test of loyalty and commitment was required. Each test would be specific to the person's suspected weakness. For now, that was the best they could do.

Every descendant on the deck with Marc both loved and hated that information. It would keep the traitors out of their ranks and protect their families; it would also expose them in time. Every man there wanted to ask Marc for a new gift. They'd been afraid to.

Marc grinned harshly. "Hold that feeling. I'm not giving out candy, and this isn't Halloween. If you want it, then earn it."

Once again, the rookie didn't understand. "Share gifts?"

Marc changed the subject. "Kenn, I'm surprised you haven't asked what happened with Tonya."

Kenn snorted. "I was there. She's fine. Gabe's not."

Some of the other men snorted or glared at him for the flippant attitude over what had happened.

Kenn pushed off the slippers he'd chosen. His feet were too sore for real shoes right now. "Looked like self-defense to me."

"It's not what happened, Kenn. It's *how* it happened." Morgan gave Kenn a sympathetic look. "She's one of us."

“She always was.” Kenn had been trying hard not to think about it. He wasn’t sure what would happen now, and he wanted time to make sure she was covered before Marc or Angela came up with any crazy plans that involved her. Even if she left him now, he wanted to be sure she was safe. “Sorry, man. You know how that works.”

Marc wasn’t angry. It was such a shock to see Kenn defending anyone other than himself that a small evasion could be excused. “But not for much longer. The boss and I have both lost patience with you. Get your shit together or get off this island before one of us has to kill you.”

Kenn took the warning to heart. He understood he wasn’t likely to get another. He changed the subject. “Shouldn’t you be talking to Charlie?”

Marc sighed deeply. “Been there, done that. He’s made up his mind; he won’t change it.” Marc gestured. “Whose turn is it?”

Several of them opened their mouths. Ivan beat them all. “I don’t want to talk about this mushy shit anymore. I’m not drunk enough. Let’s talk about the Weigh Station.”

Marc didn’t scold or insist. His team weren’t women who liked to chat, though that certainly would have made this easier. A couple of them had opened up. It was a start. “What about the Weigh Station?”

Marc was aware that team members immediately leaned forward to hear news and

details, even those who had gone to the station with him or Angela. He nodded at Ivan.

“I think I finally understand why God never answers us.”

Everyone waited for Ivan’s theory. That question had only haunted humanity for nearly all of its existence.

“Angela got an answer from Doug.”

Marc frowned. Most people didn’t know she had even tried. “Yes. But only her. She ran several tests over the last few weeks. No one else got through.”

Ivan assumed she had tried various ages and demographics, as well as genders and personality types. Angela had proven how smart she was. It was easy to give her the benefit of the doubt. However, that wasn’t what he was getting at. “I think only one person out of millions is able to actually connect and reach the next level without going through everything she has. We call her our seer, but she’s more. She’s our only connection to both of the Weigh Stations—heaven and hell.”

Marc had never tried to contact either place on his own; he couldn’t be positive Ivan was right. “Let’s say that’s true. What’s your point?”

“My point is if anything happens to her, we’ll never be able to reach them on our own. You need to figure out how she does it and copy it. Then both of you need to pass it to someone. We can’t lose that connection to something unpredictable, like the next illness.”

People winced at the reminder of what they'd gone through on the ship.

Ivan's mind went to the journey where Adrian had kept him and Angela alive and then they'd done the same for him.

Marc immediately got out his notebook and wrote it down.

Satisfied, Ivan drained his drink and let out a small belch. "That really is good, Neil."

Neil smiled happily.

Marc and the others considered the implications of what Ivan was asking.

"I have a related question. It might help with your final choice." Morgan had been forming his own theories. In school, biology and theology had been his favorite subjects. "What if the Tower of Babel wasn't about languages at all? What if it was a way to shut down a connection to all of the souls on the planet begging for help while refusing to change their behavior? People used to say God helps those who help themselves. If those people aren't willing to change, then there's no way He could help them. He would only have been able to listen to their misery and be hurt by it. What if He cut off that communication so He didn't have to be in pain anymore? He chose a few blood lines in each generation, or hell, maybe only one in each century who could get through if something new developed that He needed to know."

Ivan pointed. "Exactly."

“Keep going.” Marc had finished writing Ivan’s request and was now taking notes on the conversation. This was something Angela hadn’t discussed with him, but he was suddenly certain she’d considered it on her own. This conversation was probably for her, not him.

Ivan shifted in his seat, scanning the deck and the guards he could see to make sure things were clear. Then he dug into the root of his point, letting them all see his dilemma. “If we hadn’t gone through a nuclear war, I don’t think she would have been able to make the connection. I think it’s something that only kicks in when the world as God intended it is in danger. The fact that she can make contact with both heaven and hell says things have changed for us in ways that aren’t obvious like the war.” Ivan paused for a minute, trying to figure out how to word it.

Marc kept writing, a little ahead of Ivan now in thoughts. He’d figured out where the man was headed and he was right. It was a huge problem.

“We were always told that there was a grand plan. We were also told we wouldn’t understand it, but if we followed it, we would have eternal life. Most religious people assume that means life in heaven, not on earth. And certainly not in hell. But if God built in a dead man’s switch to notify him when there’s a change in the plan, then that means it’s really not carved in stone. And if it can be changed, wouldn’t that be the ideal way to go about it, if you were our enemy? If you wanted the great

reset, but you didn't want God to return or there to be a final battle, how would you stop it?"

"Kill Angela so she can't make that call." Morgan had been following this line of thought for months now. "But Nature's tried, a lot. Angela's protected."

"Is she?" Ivan pointed at Marc. "You had the thought that the island is the boundary line. Your ankle started hurting again the minute you crossed that boundary. It's the same way for her. The minute she crosses Nature's invisible boundary, she'll be the target again. Anyone who can communicate between the realms, the levels, the dimensions of reality—whatever you want to call it—will immediately be a target. And she knows, Marc! She knows and she plans to use it in that final battle, if not sooner."

Marc nodded. "I get your point. You think if there are more of us, she may not be the sole target."

Ivan sighed. "We all know if we lose her, we'll lose that final battle. I'm making a private, awful suggestion that we pick other sacrifices."

Marc stopped writing. He closed his book and stared at Ivan. *I was wrong. This conversation isn't for her.*

It was a long moment while he considered the implications. When he finally spoke, a cloud rolled over the sun and the bright day seemed to vanish. "I agree. All those in favor of a senior Eagle vote on this topic?"

Every single hand went up.



Chapter Five  
**I Could Be**

1

“**C**ongratulations.”

Greg shoved out of the seat and got away from the table. “We’re done? Good!” Greg stomped toward the door. “I can’t believe you did this. I can’t believe you did this!”

“Greg?”

Greg stopped. His hand clenched around the handle. “What?!”

“Don’t you want to hear the next step?”

“Not right now!” Greg spun around, shaking with fear and anger. “You unlocked me!”

Angela studied him to discern if she should change the way she handled these moments. “Did you expect me to give it to you without a test or any rules?”

Greg’s mouth opened and closed. His cheeks turned red. He finally forced out words. “Did Marc know you were doing this?!”

“Of course.”

Greg was surprised. He assumed Marc would have been here to observe and threaten him. *She kissed me!* “Why isn’t he here?”

“Because he knows you aren’t a problem.”

Greg calmed a little as he realized he already had Marc's trust. If not, he would have at least sent Ivan along to protect her. "What did Marc say?"

Angela smiled. "He said Greg is one of the hardest-working Eagles in this camp, and he has never shown signs of being a threat. He said we could trust you more than you can trust us."

Greg was shocked. "I had no idea Marc thought that highly of me."

Angela gestured to include the entire camp. "You're one of the few people who haven't fallen from grace. You think being in love did that, but you didn't cross the line. Stop punishing yourself for something you haven't done. You're not like Adrian."

Greg let her view his true feelings for a few brief, agonizing, wonderful seconds. "I could be."

Angela wasn't impressed, scared, or interested. "And I could be like Joel. But we're not. Leave here with peace in your heart. Go see Marc. He's the next block in your road to the final reward."

Greg blinked, mouth dropping open. *I don't like how she phrased that!*

Angela laughed.

Greg couldn't take it. He stomped out the door.

Angela's sexy chuckles followed him out into the jungle.

Angela stayed in the chair, once again studying the restaurant. She actually wanted to explore the areas she couldn't view from here, but she was exhausted from the short trip to get here. Marc and

his team had tramped down a number of paths, but it wasn't enough for those who were still recovering from radiation sickness. She was glad most of the camp had skipped these tours, but she needed them to get used to the island as fast as possible. *The easiest way is for me to be here with them.*

Angela began making plans to ensure that happened. She knew Marc was going to try to keep her on the ship whenever he could, but he couldn't refuse if she told him the island was better for her health. They would adjust security shifts and make it work. They were supposed to be safe now, but Angela only assumed that meant from Nature and her tricks. They could still be harmed by each other and by normal weather. *We have to start building our settlement as soon as the UN fleet is defeated.*

This restaurant was one of the few buildings on the island that was going to be used for its original purpose. Everything else would be reclaimed. Knowing how it would work would allow her to finish another part of her mental construction plan when she had time to fit the pieces in. That project was almost finished. Right now, she scanned the restaurant with a mind to size and comfort.

Brittani's mom and dad were good at the restaurant setup, and Angela was aware of how pleased the camp members had been the few times that she'd allowed their wonderful cooks to do that. It wasn't feasible all of the time, but because the camp liked it, Angela automatically included it in her plans. "It'll be like a buffet. They'll have to

serve themselves. We can't spare the manpower for waitresses and busboys, but the cooking has to be done anyway. There's no reason we can't sit in here at the tables and remember the old world with a little bit of fondness. And if Thelma and Dwight want to bring them things and chat, we can all live with it."

Angela slowly moved toward the door, eager to have her body back but not in the mood to start working on it yet. She was tired and a little grouchy. She needed a lot more sleep, a great meal, and to know it was okay to take the rest of the day off.

Angela's witch came to the cell door. *You're the boss. You can do whatever you want. But I wouldn't waste a single day.*

Angela already felt that way. Having her witch confirm the short time got her moving. Angela strolled down the steps. "I'm ready to go. If you stay here, you'll be on your own." Angela peered at her watch. "We should be having lunch soon. Don't miss it. You'll be sorry."

Angela took the opposite path of the one they'd used to get here. She wanted to finish her tour of this side of the island. The rest would have to wait until she felt stronger. She marched into the high foliage and thick vines, following a path she could barely see.

The rookies and camp members stopped what they were doing and hurried to catch up.

Greg brought up the rear; he knew that was where she wanted him even though he was supposed to be guarding her. The camp was always

going to be more important. It also said she didn't trust Nature to uphold their bargain.

Angela increased her pace until she was speed walking. It was the best she could do with her weakened body and the vines that tried to trip her with every step. She assumed that was just the nature of a vine. They liked pulling people down.

She listened to the heavy steps of the men and the disapproving mutters of the females, but also to the careful breathing and light steps of the rookies. She wasn't evaluating them for anything specific, just their jobs. The noise of the people behind her was loud in comparison to her own steps. Angela practiced her Eagle skills by trying to determine how many there were from the sounds. It was also a way to be sure everyone had left with her.

A bright bird flew overhead and darted into the cover of the tree canopy. Angela was stunned at the beauty for a moment. *We're on land!*

She paused, looking up. They were deep in the jungle now, though it was only a small area. She could hardly view the sky for the trees and the long, alert vines covering the trunks. Wildlife in a wide variety caught her attention next. It wasn't a single bird; there were a dozen within a stone's throw. She spotted a small monkey peering down at them. Nearby, a lizard in the middle of changing colors let out a little stamp of his foot in an alert. It rippled down the tree trunk, halting the activity there.

That absence of activity allowed Angela to spot a dozen more lifeforms living on the tree. *And that's*

*just what I can see. This place is amazing considering how small it is. Nature must protect the animals as well as the land.*

*Angela resumed her walk. We're part of those animals. She told Marc we could flourish here until our population got too big. I need to set a limit for population size on this island. We need to actively encourage our members to go home after they've been fully trained. We'll send them out in groups to reestablish small colonies in what used to be our cities. Over time, those will become Safe Havens. We'll refill the world with our light.*

It only took a few minutes to reach the path to the doctor's house. Angela paused at the fork. She knew the cleaning crew was working at the tree house. They had volunteered. Most were people who had recently gone through a trauma or a drama and didn't really want to be around the rest of the camp right now, even for downtime. Angela had put Megan in charge, hoping that would keep the girl distracted from her love life.

Footsteps struggled through the vines behind them; Angela and everyone else in her group spun around; many of their hands went to their guns or knives.

Greg drew both and got ready to fight to the death.

"Sorry. Just us."

Angela smiled at Ray, proud of him for his rugged determination to get back in shape. He and Grant were clearly having trouble. Sweat dripped

down their red faces and their breath wheezed in and out in loud gasps, but their legs didn't stop pumping over the path until they reached Angela's group.

Angela waited patiently for Ray to catch his breath. She also took advantage of the break to do the same. Radiation sickness was no joke.

The rest of the group wasn't as patient. The canopy of trees hid the sun and allowed a cool breeze that chilled sweaty skin and made them wish they had brought jackets or sweaters.

The jungle around them didn't like being trod upon and through. Bugs and birds were making their displeasure known with loud squawks and tiny, piercing bites. Slapping echoed steadily as people tried to avoid being bitten or took their anger out after it had already happened.

Ray fumbled in his pocket and brought out a sheet of paper. He didn't try to speak. He also didn't use his gifts. His demon was also gasping for air. He didn't think he was ever going to feel normal again.

Grant moved a few feet away and leaned against a tree with one arm.

Everyone turned away as he threw up.

Angela ignored the groans as she read the note. It already had Marc's signature at the bottom, telling her he'd signed off on all of it. He was going to handle the issue or it was already in progress.

*Shift Updates*

*-All our medical patients are doing well, except for one. Discharges with home care instructions are proceeding as scheduled.*

*-Supplies have been restocked, but we're low again. Lists will be included with a nightly report.*

*-We have one new patient in the medical bay. Nightly report will have details. Medics are working on it.*

*-Radios are going crazy with calls. Most are from the approaching ships. Two of them were from home. One was from Australia, we think. Kenn will be notified so he can verify.*

*-Lunch is ready. Thelma says they're setting it up on the island now. She has everything under control.*

Angela heard Grant rejoin the group. She waved at Ray. "Clinic for a pick-up. We're heading back."

Ray took the lead and got the group moving. Grant stayed in the rear near Greg, unable to maintain the leading pace, but he was definitely improving faster now. He could feel the difference between here and the ship. *I only threw up once this time.*

Greg welcomed Grant with a polite nod and turned his attention back to their environment. He didn't trust Nature either.

Ray was a bit annoyed that he was forced to go slow, but he was also secretly relieved. Like Grant, his stomach was a mess. He was holding onto it through willpower and distraction.

Angela read while walking behind Ray, trusting him to lead her.

*-Body pile is starting to stink. We have a guard in place on that hall, but it's not going to work much longer. When the camp comes back, they will notice the smell.*

*-Fuel levels are good if we need to move away from any storms. Captains are waiting for your orders on the overnight location of the Adrianna.*

*-12 Eagles resigned. All of them were rookies or level ones. We also had six camp members join. Two are promising, but only if they get the direct attention they need. Details will be included in the nightly report.*

Angela paused again to make sure she stepped all the way over a log that had fallen during the storm. There was a lot of debris, but it looked like it belonged exactly where it had fallen. A jungle wasn't supposed to be neat and tidy, and this one wasn't. They would need to make paths all through here to reach the areas they needed, but she didn't want to ruin the landscape. She had several ideas now that she had actually walked on it, but she would have to confirm those with a few members of the camp before anything could be implemented. Until then, they just had to be careful.

Angela saw they were a minute or two away from the doctor's place, according to the map and her brief glimpse on the way to Luke's cabin the first night. She finished reading the updates. It was the only way she would be able to relax once she

returned to the beach. She'd been humoring Marc for well over an hour.

*-Joey intimidated Tobias with only a hard look. His wives don't have their medical reports. Joey got the horse to respond. Chad agrees the child will be a problem. That kid will be worse than Matt if he snaps.*

*-Tonya popped. She drew directly from the ship's power. Dozens of people saw it. By evening mess, the entire camp will probably know you guys can do that.*

*-Some bugs are live. Nightly reports should confirm all have been placed and activated.*

*-All wedding arrangements have been covered. No change in the parties.*

“Incoming!” Ray made sure the guards knew they were coming. After everything that had happened here, Eagles were going to be quick to use their weapons.

Gus stepped out of the shadows behind the treehouse. He scanned the small group, brightening upon seeing Angela.

Angela stored the updates in her pocket and went to Gus. “Are we on schedule?”

Gus shook his head. “Actually, we're done. We were about to head back. A few of us volunteered for doubles today. Megan came out before the crack of dawn. She already had the entire place cleaned when we got here. And while we hauled out the supplies, she organized all the rooms. Once we got

everything here, she helped us put it away. It was the fastest stocking job I've ever done."

"Awesome. I hope you guys are hungry. Thelma and Dwight are getting ready to serve us cow."

Gus rubbed his stomach while some of the rookies and camp members frowned at her wording. "Nothing like fresh cow off the grill."

"I couldn't agree more." Angela glanced around. "Is Megan inside finishing up?"

Gus sighed. "That's the bad news. She left about an hour ago. She put me in charge. I hope that was okay."

"It's great. She chose someone responsible before she deserted her shift."

Gus wanted to defend the girl. He decided pointing out the obvious again was a better idea. "We're ready to roll here, boss. Send over a medic and a helper, and they can treat the first island injury."

Angela didn't remind him about Marc's team or anyone else who'd been hurt. Gus preferred to view the island from today and forget everything that had happened before. Angela planned to encourage that view in the camp members as well as the Eagles. She didn't want them to think of the island as cursed. It was going to be their paradise. They just had to build it.

"We roll out in three. Keep them together." Angela entered the front door of the treehouse as the rookies and Gus counted how many members were

in their group now so they could keep track of everyone.

The stocking crew smiled and nodded, but they didn't speak to her, her group, or each other. They were working through their emotions; they didn't have the mental energy for more.

It bothered Angela that so many people in her camp were going through that right now, but each of those troubled souls were the next fighter or camp member who would be committed to building a better future so those losses weren't repeated. Gus and Megan would do big things in the Eagles and in their other duties, but Willie and Doris were going to use their grief to become part of the medical staff. Willie was already considering what would have happened to their son, Joey, if they'd been trained to care for him. His wife would soon follow, though her reasoning would be the need to comfort other kids as they died because that had been all she could do for her own while the radiation sickness took him. Grief and recovery came in many forms. The couple would lean on each other and eventually, they would become instructors at the Safe Haven medical school. They would only cover the basics, but it would be the start that led to classes for each specific field in medicine as they had to face it. Fifty years from now, Safe Haven University would send groups of graduates out into the world once a year to help rebuild hospitals and clinics while teaching people to survive.

The smell of cleaning chemicals slapped Angela's nose and roiled her stomach. She forced herself to enter anyway, hoping she didn't gag. Everyone who had survived the radiation exposure was going through moments like this, but she didn't want anyone to witness hers. It was always better for the peace of the herd if they didn't know the cowboy on guard had a stomachache.

Angela was impressed as soon as she saw what Megan and the others had done. Fully stocked shelves of the medical supplies they used most were next to the reception area, and the folder system Morgan preferred had already been implemented. The brightly colored tabs stood out in contrast to the white tabs that were for non-emergency cases. The folders were ready to go, waiting for patient information. Also on the counter was a clipboard with printed templates and a box of pens. Angela found wheelchairs, I.V. stands with the wheels already attached, and even a stack of pans nearby in case anyone felt sick.

Angela went to the rear rooms and opened the doors, bracing for the harsh chemical smells this time. She froze in the middle doorway as a shadow moved through the room. *What the hell?*

Angela's hand slid to her gun as the apparition turned toward her. Another shadowy figure flew by her at high speed, strangling the first image. Both parties fell to the floor and then disappeared as the ghost door slammed right through her hands.

Angela slowly backed out of that hall.

A hand settled on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Angela grabbed the hand and flipped the person over her hip like Neil had been teaching her.

“Stop!” Gus brought up his shield, assuming she would go for her gun next.

Angela stared in regret but also pride. *I was finally able to toss him. He just had to scare the shit out of me.* Angela held out a hand. “Sorry.”

Gus lowered his shield and took the hand up. “You were screwing around in front of the camp, right?”

Angela snickered. “Yeah, let’s go with that.”

Gus grew serious as he stood. “I am sorry. I thought you knew I was here.”

“I saw a vision.”

“Past or present?”

Angela shrugged, impressed by his astute guess. “I’m assuming past, but that isn’t verified.”

“What did you see?”

Angela moved toward the exit. “It looked like the doctor strangled one of her patients.”

Gus didn’t ask any more questions. He moved faster, nudging Angela out the door ahead of him. “Time to go!”

## 2

Marc spotted Angela and her group as they returned. He saw Greg and Gus were more alert than usual. Angela appeared normal. Marc chose to

follow her lead. He nodded to her and held up his cup. “No refill this time.”

Neil took the cup over to the bar. “Are you going to give him permission?”

All eyes went to Greg as he marched over the beaten path to the beach.

Greg felt it and tensed even though he couldn’t read their thoughts.

“Yes, but he won’t like the requirement.”

Neil didn’t ask what it was. Gus and Greg were coming in their direction. They were about to find out what Marc required.

“You know, you guys could all go find something to do for a few minutes.”

“You got it.” Neil headed for the pool, rubbing his shoulder and taking the hint. *You don’t need to beat my ass twice.*

Kenn nodded, following Neil’s lead. “I have a vain intervention to handle. Be back in a bit.”

“Perfect. Unless she already has you on something, that’s your mind fix.”

Kenn grinned. He liked working under people who understood how his brain worked. If he didn’t have a project to stew on, he might find his own and that was dangerous. Not as much anymore, but old habits did die hard.

Marc gestured. “We’re staggering to land shortly. I smell barbeque and I want it.”

Kenn was glad to get the invite. “After we eat, we should all come right back and swim. Morgan’s head might explode.”

The rest of Marc's team grinned, shaking heads and getting comfortable.

Greg came up the ladder as Kenn went down the ramp.

Greg came straight to Marc. He waited, not sure what was supposed to happen now.

“Dog?”

Dog glanced up at Marc's call. He gazed at Greg, ears drooping.

Marc frowned. “No one told you to eat all four bowls.”

Dog belched.

Men laughed as the wolf groaned.

Marc sighed. “Now, Dog.”

Dog's tail wagged. Then a loud fart ripped out, scattering the team.

Greg laughed with Marc as he realized the wolf was clearing the seats to give them privacy. He sat on the chair next to Marc, pulse calming a few beats.

Marc waited until the others were out of hearing distance, then he turned cold. “There's only one requirement. You can't be single.”

Greg blinked. “Say that again.”

“You. Can't. Be. Single.” Marc shifted, searching for a more comfortable spot. “If you're single, I have to worry about you growing into a rival and I already have enough of those.”

Greg's handsome face and scarred hands clenched. “You are threatened by me. You lied.”

Marc didn't mind a little more truth. The alcohol made it easy to tell Greg what he thought, what he'd

thought for a long time. “You’re a good man with a strong place, and you have honor. Of course I’m threatened by you. Of all her admirers, you’re the one who’s most likely to end up with the prize in the end.”

Greg shook his head. “I don’t see her that way.”

“I know. That’s why you might be the one.” Marc let Greg, and everyone who was still listening, in on his future plans. “I’m leaving a will and some notes. I’m almost finished with it. My burn box will come to you, not Ivan.”

Greg was honored, and suddenly terrified that he couldn’t pay the price. “What do you want in return?”

“Nothing but your loyalty to the way things are right now. The instant you start eyeing my place or not doing your job, you’ll be gone—from this camp, from our lives, and maybe from the planet. The same goes for any of her choices who disappoint her.”

*There’s the threat I expected earlier.* It made Greg feel better. It also demanded the same honesty. “I need to be one of you so I can keep her alive when you’re gone, but I won’t ever be your sponge. I don’t really like you. I never have.”

Marc sighed. “Perfect answer. Now all you have to do is pick a different hole and plug it.”

Greg gaped at Marc’s crude remark. “You can’t mean that.”

“Ah, but I do. If you don’t have a companion by mess tonight, you don’t get the prize and you’re off

Angela's guard detail. We're not locking you again—control yourself.”

“By hooking up with some dumbass who won't ever know she's being used?”

“I was thinking a smartass who will figure it out eventually.” Marc jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the sunbathers.

Greg saw Lisa. He frowned. “I don't want to do this.”

“And I don't want Angela to share her gift with you. We're both not getting what we want.”

Greg stopped refusing. He was lonely enough to make it work. *I've only been unlocked for an hour and I'm already screwed.* “I'll handle it.”

“Good.” Marc sniffed the air. “When's the food gonna be ready?”

Greg gave the expected grin, but it fell as soon as he stood up. He walked toward the sunbathers, trying to pick an opening line to use on the woman who was too honest for this, too open. *She'll never believe I changed my mind about a relationship.* She'd come to him last night, forcing him to send her away unsatisfied.

Greg's body protested. *Angela kissed me!*

Greg grimaced. *Fine, we'll base it on sex and go from there. Just don't expect real emotions. I don't want her.*

Lisa felt him coming. She rolled over, top falling away.

Lisa's naked breasts reminded Greg that he hadn't visited a servicer or given a service in a long time.

Greg swallowed. *Okay, I want her a little.*

Marc was satisfied. The condition had actually come from Angela and it had little to do with Greg's honor. "That breeding tree is filling out."

Listening mentally, Neil laughed so hard that he slid under the water to keep anyone from hearing it.

Chapter Six  
**Shift Change**

1

**“Y**ou know you’re making a mistake. Why are you going through with it?”

Charlie stifled a shout. He let the shower door slam, scowling at Kenn as he straightened his tie. “You know why.”

Kenn snorted. “Even when I thought Courtney was my responsibility, I never considered marrying her just because she was pregnant.”

Charlie knew that was true. Kenn had been the same way with Tonya. No one was forcing him to marry her; he’d asked because he wanted to. Shame made Charlie lash out. “That’s because you have no honor!”

Kenn had expected that insult. “If I had married Courtney because she was pregnant, it wouldn’t have been honorable—it would have been my downfall. She was too quick to make bad decisions. There can’t be two of us like that in a relationship.”

“I don’t care about your life!” Charlie stomped over to the drink machine and slapped the empty glass. “I have to marry her!” Charlie’s wet hair dripped onto his shoulder and the floor.

Kenn decided to take Angela's advice. He didn't think it would work, but he definitely owed them both an honest attempt. "I didn't like my stepmother. She took advantage of my father and made him even more bitter, and then he took that out on me when she finally left. My real mother got the hell away from him the first time he hit her. She was the smart one."

Snared, Charlie frowned. "She left you behind to be abused?"

Kenn shrugged. "Sometimes parents make a choice to save themselves because they can have more kids. When you're older, that might make sense. You don't fear death yet. That will change as you age." Kenn allowed Charlie to feel his pain. "It's hard to believe your own parent would do that to you. It was a lifestyle in my family. We were all beaters and abusers. My uncles used to brag about who was best at keeping their women in line." Kenn winced. "It was the only way I knew to handle a relationship."

"You wanted mom for her power. Why are you lying to me?!" Charlie stomped down the hall. "They think I'm stupid!"

Kenn stared after the boy, not surprised that he hadn't fallen for it. *Charlie was always smarter than his mom. If he ever uses that brain for this camp, they'll love him too.*

Kenn spotted a work crew entering the elevator with boxes and bags of items. Lace and ribbon hung over the sides, fighting their attempts to keep the

rolls in the boxes. Kenn recognized the side effect from all the storms they'd gone through. The arts and crafts room had been stocked before then. They hadn't had time to fix it yet because it wasn't a priority area. The kids, den mothers, and camp members had finished the kids' dorm, but the craft area wasn't even on their list yet.

Kenn got his notebook out and added that to his private to-do list. It wasn't FND; he wasn't trying to gain anything. He just knew it would make their lives easier to have that room taken care of. There would be more use for it now. Classes would restart for the kids and the Eagles, as well as more paper trails being needed, and there would be new buildings to decorate. Angela would make every effort to ensure their environment was comfortable and a lot of that would center around the decor. They only had the basics in furniture, but what she did with it could mean the difference between mind-numbing and tolerable.

Kenn went to his stateroom, positive Tonya wouldn't be there yet. Their small son had started breathing on his own this morning, after pulling the tube out of his nose during one of his *I'm ready to be changed and fed right this very second!* moments.

Kenn couldn't help his grin. *My boy's already loud and demanding.*

Tonya had planned on a shower and then time with the baby and a medic to determine how long he needed to be in the incubator. Then she'd planned

to go to her new lab and check on Timmy's progress in sorting and filing her folders. Kenn still wasn't ready to face her, but it would give him a chance to verify that she hadn't moved out of their cabin. It felt cowardly to handle her this way after everything he'd done and they'd gone through, but he wasn't sure that he could do the right thing here. He was giving her time alone to make sure of what she wanted and to follow through with any plans she might have made in anticipation of this moment.

Wonderful smells floated through the ship, reminding him of the feast waiting on the island. Under the wonderful smells was a burnt odor that people told each other was a bad batch of food that hadn't made it out to them. The Eagles knew it was bodies being burned. Jeff had that chore today. No one knew why he'd volunteered again, but they'd been grateful they didn't have to do it.

The halls were full of residents, slowing Kenn's stride. Now that they'd had a few hours on the island, everyone had a better idea of what they should have packed in their kits. People had remembered suntan lotion and forgotten bug spray. The insects were currently causing a small snarl in the medical bay from those who needed to have bites and scratches checked.

Kenn found a note taped to their cabin.

*Cats left the med bay. No one has seen them.  
Keep an eye out?*

*Love you.*

*Tonya*

Kenn saw the door was slightly open. He assumed a cleaning crew had come by. He entered as he pulled down the note.

Fast, furious felines flew from the furniture to fillet his fibula.

Kenn cried out.

Witnesses winced.

Sentries snickered as Kenn fell against the door, slamming it shut. Crashes, bangs, and shouts echoed over the amusement.

“I guess we can quit looking for the cats.”

Ian nodded at Gus’s joke, marking it off his list. *It’s like the cats know she’s moving back there today.* “My shift is over in two minutes.”

“I’m your relief. Go on now.”

Ian noticed Gus seemed relieved to be here. He didn’t ask why, though he assumed it was because the island didn’t feel right to the big man. *I’ll feel it for myself shortly.*

Ian smiled at the little boy on the nearby couch. Joey had ended up here with a book and a restless twitch. “Are you ready to go over?”

Joey rose eagerly at Ian’s question, bouncing as he walked next to the man.

Guards cleared the way at the top of the ramp for them to come through, not wanting to be bumped by the excited child.

Ian enjoyed the boy’s happiness. *If I were a little closer to him, I would offer a piggyback ride and make sure Bernice saw it as we walked by. It would*

*have been a great way to show her I might be a good father to Crissy and any kids we have.*

Joey grabbed Ian's hand as they hit the top deck and came into view of the mostly naked sunbathers lining the rail. "Will you give me a piggyback ride?"

Ian brightened. "It would be my honor." He knelt down to let the little boy climb on.

Joey didn't care that people were staring or that Ian was using him to impress a girl. He was using Ian to get what he wanted. *Why shouldn't we both benefit from the deal?*

Both of Tobias's wives were near the end of the side deck, by the ramp. They smiled shyly at him, approving of his compassion for an orphan.

Tobias scowled. *That isn't just any orphan!*

The women ignored him, waving at the little boy.

Ian pushed the moment. He flashed a charming smile at the sisters. "Debra has point now. I'm heading off ship. Thank you for making my shift easy. Have a great time." He strolled away, bouncing around to make Joey giggle.

Ian wanted to see if Bernice had noticed, but that might give away his game.

Joey leaned closer so Ian could hear his whisper. "She was watching you the whole time. I think she likes you too."

Ian realized the boy had asked for the ride to help him. "Any advice?"

Joey grinned. "She likes it that you're good with kids."

“Why doesn’t she want to date me? Is it because I’m a normal or just an Eagle?”

Joey tightened his grip on Ian’s shoulders. “She wants somebody who can protect her and her daughter no matter what happens. You’re not high enough in Eagle or camp rank. If you were, she would date you, I think.” Joey gave full honesty this time instead of withholding important details like his father had taught him to do. “She doesn’t really want to date anyone, though. She misses her old life. Go slow or you’ll scare her off.”

Ian realized the boy was a lot more mature than he appeared. “Thanks.”

Ian put a hand around the child as he swung over the ladder. “Hang on.” Ian automatically braced to be strangled like the other kids did when they were told that.

Joey let go. He trusted Ian to get him to the bottom, but he didn’t like holding onto the man. There was nothing wrong with Ian, and in fact, he was nice compared to some of the others in Safe Haven, but Joey didn’t like to touch or be touched.

Sitting close to the buffet tables, Angela had spotted them coming down the ladder. She caught the thought.

Ian had planned to take the boy to the line of children who were getting fishing lessons from Stanley and Raheem. Nearby, Theo and Tim weren’t officially on guard duty, but they had volunteered to be extra eyes on the kids so the boss wouldn’t be as stressed. Molly appreciated that even

though she had been assigned. Duty over the kids when they were having fun was great even though it was exhausting. Still, it didn't hurt to have extra help.

“Good afternoon, Safe Haven. It is officially shift change. You have four minutes to get to your posts.” The radio echoed with Jonny's bored voice. He clearly preferred playing music to giving the announcements, but Angela had made it part of his job. He couldn't refuse.

Angela motioned.

Ian slowly changed directions, weaving between Eagles who either had to work or were getting off duty. He'd seen her stare. He hoped he wasn't taking Joey to a punishment. He wasn't close to the child, but he wanted him to have fun. It bothered Ian that Joey had remained on the ship while everyone else had come over to have a good time.

Angela smiled at both of them. “Would you like to visit with the boss for a little while? Everybody else wanted to do something else. I'm a little lonely.”

Both males brightened even though it was obvious by all of the people edging closer to her small campsite that she was lying to make them feel better.

Ian and Joey sat down on either side of her.

“I have a few more updates. I put them in your cabin.”

Angela assumed it wasn't anything important or he would have brought them straight to her. "You're off duty for the next 24-hours. Try to have some fun."

Ian smiled at her. "But?"

Angela chuckled. "But be ready to work tomorrow evening. You'll be with Theo and Grant. We have some ship stuff to do."

"You got it." Ian didn't ask any questions. He doubted she wanted everyone in this crowd to know their battle plans. "I may go hang at Adrian's campsite in a little while. I need to talk to Kendle. Any messages you'd like me to pass?"

Angela snorted. "If I want them to know something I'll think it. They're both scanning my thoughts like rabid dogs."

The feeling of being listened to vanished.

Angela sighed in relief. It was frustrating to be surrounded by hundreds of people who wanted to know your every thought. She took a few seconds to herself to consider the next steps but quickly stopped as she felt Marc scan her from the deck of the ship. *Damn it!* "It'll be dark in an hour. Will you be back in time for the wedding?"

Ian shrugged. "I might go for a walk after I talk to Kendle."

Angela sensed another secret coming to light. "A lie or something more dangerous?"

Ian frowned. "A lie can be deadly. You know that."

Angela did, but she wanted to know the surprise before he delivered it to everyone else.

“I put it in your notes.” Ian shifted and made a quick hand gesture to get her the information she wanted.

*Other islands question.*

Angela immediately rotated toward Joey with a welcoming smile. “How are you adjusting?”

Ian understood she didn’t want anyone to know that one. He sent his mind to the long walk up the hill and how much he was dreading it on his shaky land legs. Ian went to get something to eat first. *Maybe that’ll help settle my stomach.*

Angela and Joey fell into a conversation about his routine and schedules. She touched his arm and hair and smiled to help him relax, but also to let everyone else know he wasn’t a threat. The other kids were looking over and some of them were getting jealous. That was exactly what she was hoping for. If they thought Joey was worthy to be around her, then they might not shut him out as much. “You know it’s not your fault.”

Joey shrugged, eyes dropping to the ants on the grass at his feet. “Doesn’t matter to them.”

“Not all of them, no. But we all live with that. There are parts of my camp who can’t stand me and want me gone. It sucks, but I deal with it—like you have been. I’m proud of you for not getting angry and doing anything bad.”

Joey’s mood lifted. He leaned over and rested his cheek against her arm.

Angela hugged him and sent out a wave of motherly affection, sensing the boy wanted a comparison.

After a minute, Joey straightened.

Curious, Angela lifted a brow. "Well?"

Joey considered. "Better than my dad."

Angela laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"But it's not the same as having a real mommy who loves me just because I'm hers."

Angela couldn't handle his pain. She reached out and took him into her arms.

Joey settled awkwardly on her lap, willing to tolerate the embrace because of who was giving it.

Angela rested her cheek against his. "I do love you because you're mine."

Magic swirled around them, lighting up dark places in both their souls.

Joey hugged her, tightly this time. "Now that's better!"

Angela laughed again. "Did you just manipulate me in front of my entire camp?"

Joey leaned back, grinning from ear to ear. "You wanted me to be myself."

Angela's laughter rang across the camp, lifting the mood of every person who heard it. "Here comes Cate. Go play. I want to see you having fun."

Joey leapt up and took off toward his friend.

Angela looked toward the ship.

Marc felt her call. His team had all returned now. They'd given him time to handle Greg while

checking in with their loved ones, but even the tempting barbeque wasn't enough to bring their women back to the island. All the infants hated it. They'd stopped spitting up as soon as they were back on the water. Jennifer, Samantha, and the others were in the camp lounge with iced tea, cookies, and a fan.

Ritchie moved among the senior men, collecting empty cups and garbage. The pool was being used by a couple, and Neil, who was soaking the pulled shoulder muscle while watching the 1988 Superbowl on the biggest TV screen most of them had ever seen.

Marc got to his feet as Ivan came over to carry Dog. "Tell the women the boss will expect them to come and get plates before the wedding. The camp needs to see everyone spending time on land." Marc walked toward the ladder, ignoring Greg and Lisa, who were making out in the far corner of the huge swimming pool. He went down the ladder, hating how slow and awkward he was. He also loved it that he was able to do it on his own.

The rest of the team came down behind him. Ivan carried Dog on his shoulders. "If you fart, I'm throwing you into the water."

Dog whimpered and held it in. *Pick a target and hurry!*

Ivan moved up next to Daryl as they crossed the bridge.

“It’s amazing here.” Allison observed the island and the camp, having a good moment for a change. The smell of barbeque tempting her nose was sweet.

She and Zack had been here for hours, basking in the sunlight and a surface that didn’t lurch and jostle and send chills down her spine when it creaked and groaned. Zack had secured them a spot near the beach, but Allison hadn’t even walked in the surf yet and she wasn’t going to unless someone pushed her into it. If not for the amenities, and lack of bugs, she wouldn’t return to the ship at all. She slapped mildly at a tiny fly on her lotioned arm. She assumed it could smell the sweat underneath.

“I can’t believe I’m here.” Allison had thought she would die from the cancer long before now. Conner’s transfusions were giving her another chance to live and she was grateful beyond words.

Next to her, Zack grunted agreement, but his mind was on his sons. Mike and Eric knew how to fish. They were helping the younger kids learn how, under the close supervision of the adults and guards. Timmy was sitting nearby, but he was staring at the ocean. He and Megan looked like twins. Neither of them had moved in an hour. Zack knew she hadn’t been punished yet for leaving her post early, but she would be.

He didn’t care right now. Cathy’s disappearance had finally been noticed. The camp had been told she jumped ship and was missing, but most people knew the truth. She’d crossed the age line and been

severely disciplined for it. After the discipline, she hadn't been willing to stay in Safe Haven and try to regain her honor. Very few people considered the possibility that she might not be alive.

Zack turned his attention to the man standing near the pontoon bridge with a bait bucket. Tim wasn't welcome in any group right now, even though half the camp agreed with him. Because of his choice, awful things had happened. He hadn't been forgiven.

Zack wasn't looking forward to Tim's trial. The camp was talking about the upcoming vote on whether or not to remove the right to privacy from their constitutional document, but between those moments, people were staring at Tim, wondering if he could be trusted. Zack doubted he would stay in Safe Haven after the vote. *If he isn't charged and executed. We're all still pissed.*

Zack caught sight of Mike smiling at the girl standing next to him. He was helping Leanne learn how to cast. It was obvious the two got along well. Zack planned to encourage that relationship. *At least one of my sons might end up happy.*

He didn't know what to do for Timmy other than to leave the boy alone and give him time to adjust. Zack hoped it would be enough. He, along with several others, were observing to make sure he didn't do anything crazy, like hurt himself. Zack didn't think he would. *Timmy is in mourning right now. Not for Cathy, but for the life he thought they would lead together.* When that mourning stage was

over, his middle son would come out fighting. Timmy always handled challenges this way. The apocalypse had changed a lot, but not the core of who most people were.

*And that brings me to Tommy.* Zack scanned the man on guard duty at the edge of the pontoon bridge. He hadn't been allowed inside the ship again, though Zack knew Tommy had been assigned to a cabin and other work shifts. *That's another one who won't stay in Safe Haven long. Nobody loses that much honor and then rebuilds it. It's different if they lost their honor before they came. Once they lose it here, it's almost impossible to get it back.*

Zack swept the top of the cliff, where Adrian and Sadie were both sleeping. He quickly glanced away, not wanting anyone to think he was longing for their former leader. *I'm just keeping an eye on him like I am everyone else. The boss understands.*

Zack swept the beach and paused. "That might get ugly."

Allison followed his line of sight to the busy pontoon bridge where Shawn and Missy were also coming from the ship. Both of them already had their cameras out. One was taking snapshots while the other made a video. The group in front of them were waving, smiling, and shouting fun things at the camera. They didn't see Brittani coming across the bridge toward the ship.

Zack stood up, scanning the group. Conner and Candy were there, but if there was a problem,

Conner would only cover Candy and get her out of the way. Jonny was also in the group, but he'd been distracted since hitting on Grant and getting hit by Ray. Zack didn't know if he was dependable anymore.

Jayda and Ed became aware of the problem at the same time. They stopped, putting out arms to keep the others from going by.

Brittani tensed as she saw Trinity.

Trinity wore a bikini with thin red straps. It matched her red handbag and red flipflops while showing off slender hips and giant breast swells. The wide brown tourist hat completed the ensemble perfectly. In comparison, Brittani's jeans and plain white t-shirt were covered in sweat stains and food splatters that were also in her hair and on her face and hands.

Trinity smirked. "Make way for the help."

People around Trinity leaned away, frowning in disapproval.

Candy went around them all, eager to get her large stomach out of their way.

Conner stayed, glaring at Trinity. "Stop it."

Trinity swept the dirty cook in contempt. "Stop what? Telling the truth?"

Jayda went around them next, shaking her head. "Some skanks need a hard hit to wake them up." She gave Brittani a pointed look to remind her of their conversation. Some parts of Safe Haven were just as ugly as the old world had been.

Brittani sighed. *This isn't racism even though she's using those lines. She thinks that will hurt me. This is all about Gus.*

Jayda didn't believe her. She kept walking. The small friendship that had started among the trio had ended as soon as Trinity and Brittani had decided to fire on each other. After that, she'd had to pick a side.

Brittani walked forward, putting her nose in the air. She sniffed as she went by the group. "Why does it smell like dirty ass right here?"

People laughed as Trinity flushed.

Brittani had spotted the woman's weakness as soon as she came into view. Trinity was vain. Calling her hygiene into question would bother her for days. It also confirmed her theory on why Trinity was attacking her and not Bernice. That female was stunning. She was above Trinity in every way except for Eagle rank.

Brittani smirked. "Wait until she joins the Eagles and starts advancing, with Gus at her side. Trinity may leave!"

Wade chuckled as he went by her to join his team. "Trinity has no idea who she's messing with."

On the bridge, Trinity continued to the island, but the day was ruined for her. *I shaved. Did I use deodorant after that?*

Trinity sank down on the blanket next to a camp woman and tried to catch a whiff of herself without anyone noticing.

The camp woman got up and went to find someone else to sit with.

Witnesses relaxed as the two women separated and Marc's team came across the bridge. Shawn and Missy began calling for people to pose, drawing attention toward them.

Allison blew out a breath. "That was a close one."

"Yes, but I doubt it's over."

Allison frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean during this final battle with the UN, the Eagles can't be in all places at once. I wouldn't be surprised if those two go at it the first chance they get."

"I thought that fight was an act."

"As do most people. If they get caught fighting, the charges will be filed and they'll both be banished." Zack's eyes narrowed. "Unless Jayda gets her way and then we might have to burn Trinity at the stake."

Allison laughed at his exaggeration.

Fresh tension rippled across the beach, drawing attention from the Eagles. Only a few others noticed. They were busy laughing at Adrian as Sadie woke and attacked him again.

Zack and Allison both caught it. They scanned the camp, searching for whatever problem was about to hit them. The familiar feeling brought dread and nausea.

"It's mine!"

“It was lying on the sand! I just wanted to see it.”

“It’s mine! Give it to me right now!”

The shouting match between Amy and Joey drew attention from those closest. Zack kept an eye on it as the bad feeling grew stronger.

Joey held out the small doll. “I’m not stealing it.”

Amy snatched it from his hand, anger blazing. “You’re like your dad! You think you can take something even when it belongs to someone else!”

Joey glared. “I am not. He was a bad man.”

“I’ll bet you grow up to be a bad man too!”

Cate had been next to Joey, rebuilding a sandcastle the strengthening surf had washed out. She stood up, frowning at Amy. “He didn’t steal your ugly little toy. Go away.”

Amy’s rage flared hotter. “I knew you’d take his side!” She kicked sand toward the older girl.

Cate stepped forward to keep Joey from being hit.

Amy took that as a sign of aggression. She ignored the adults telling her to stop or calling her name. She balled her fists. “If you don’t get out of my way, I’m going to hurt you and him too.”

The threat against Joey removed Cate’s control over herself. She slapped the younger girl.

Unprepared for the pain, Amy hit the ground and stayed there, holding her cheek. Amy whimpered. “She hurt me!”

Cate rolled her eyes. “We’ve seen you kill people, remember? Get up.”

Amy had always felt the pain through her witch. Now that she was locked, being hit hurt a lot more. It was also a great way to gain sympathy from the den mothers who were helping her up. Even the Eagles were giving Cate sharp looks. Amy hid her gloating expression. She tried hard to sound her age. “I just wanted my dolly back.”

More people began to frown at Cate.

Cate glared in return, face slowly icing over. “I knew I couldn’t trust any of you.”

Joey tugged on Cate’s arm. “Let’s find something else to do.”

The two children turned around to find Angela standing there.

Cate braced to be punished.

Angela stared at Joey with a blank expression and a mind locked to everyone around them, including Marc.

Marc and his team had come to a stop to observe, not sure if they should interfere.

Angela concentrated, bringing up the time stream. She did it quickly, before anyone could intervene. She also reached a hand out.

Neither child knew who she was requesting; both of them touched her fingers.

Angela gasped. She took a step back and wiped her hand down her pants to remove the slimy feeling.

Cate stared at her. “You won’t, will you?”

Joey shuddered.

Cate glared at Angela. “If you hurt him, you and I will be enemies for life.”

Joey pulled on Cate’s hand again. “Come on. Let’s go play.”

Angela stared at the children as they ran to the other end of the small beach. The familiar sense of not being willing was all around her now. She flashed through those first moments, spotting what they had all overlooked.

Angela brought up her *everything’s fine* smile and flashed it around at Eagles, descendants, and normals. Despite being one or the other, she almost considered the Eagles to be both because of the way they were able to put their differences aside and work together. It also shined through in the moments where their cooperation and teamwork influenced the fate of Safe Haven or one of her members.

*But not this time. I’m the only one who sees it. It’s my responsibility to either alert the others or handle it.*

Angela turned toward Marc.

Marc was watching his daughter in concern, but it was also tinged in disapproval. He didn’t like it that Cate had hit the smaller girl. He didn’t understand what had really happened, and as soon as she explained it, Marc would react. That’s just who he was.

Angela kept a lock on her thoughts—the one only Jennifer was able to get through. She returned to

their campsite and settled down on the blanket, but inside, she tried to figure out a way to turn this into an advantage for her camp. The cost would be one small child and she would be the only one who knew he'd been sacrificed. *It's not the first time.*

Ian slipped into the tree line during the din with the kids. As far as he knew, no one had seen him go. Now that they were on land, everyone needed to practice their skills in tracking and evading. Ian was taking this opportunity to do both.

Ian heard voices raising behind him. Camp members were getting grumpy, tired, nervous, drunk, angry. Finding out the vote had been moved up and they only had a few hours left to make a final choice had dampened the mood a little. The fact that it was also late afternoon didn't help. Their fun day was almost over. After this, no one knew what to expect. *But they sense something bad coming.* Ian did too, but he didn't think it was something from the outside. It wasn't an enemy problem. This felt like an inside job.

Ian stopped and turned, able to view small groups of people through the breaks in the trees as the wind blew. Ian saw Angela and a couple known members of the law council exchanging looks while the Eagles hurried to get between two arguing camp women. In moments like this, the council was giving themselves away by making any kind of contact. Ian had put that in his notes last night, but it would take Angela time to implement a solution.

Ian saw Chad join Marc's team. The rookie reached over and rubbed the snakehead souvenir Daryl had put on a string and hung from his neck. Then he strode toward the ship. Ian assumed the man was about to do something hard, like a cannonball or asking someone on a date.

A bit grossed out, Ian turned back to the jungle. He did want to ask Kendle if she knew anything about the other islands, but this alone time was needed for his state of mind and their future. Kendle was just the cover. Ian wanted to walk the areas where they'd lost men. He was searching himself to determine what he could handle now. Spending time thinking about it was required and he couldn't do that on the ship.

Debra had that covered, overseeing the setup for the vote and also making sure the finishing touches were put on the honeymoon suites for the wedding parties. The coming vote, Nature, and the wedding were popular topics. Everyone wanted to avoid the UN fight, but Angela's new assistant, Ed, was about to start handing out upgraded patches. It would be an instant reminder.

Angela had given everyone a bump in level who had participated in clearing the island. Lower-level Eagles and those who hadn't been cleared for duty would watch the senior men attach the new rank patches to their jackets with longing. The coming run would most certainly give that glory to them. The senior men would use that incentive like they always had, but it felt deceitful to Ian.

*This job is deadly. He patted his pocket. Placing bugs in the enemy's home was a perfect example. If caught, they might kill him. Rookies have a right to know what they're signing up for. No matter what choice I make personally, I'm always going to feel that way and at some point, I may need to do something about it.*

Chapter Seven  
**Room To Work**

1

**“I**t’s been a good day.”

Angela nodded, rubbing her stomach. “I can’t eat another bite. I may sleep right here.”

Marc laughed. He and his team had also enjoyed the food. The tastes and smells had been amazing.

He swept the eating, lounging, content camp. Then his eyes went to the cliff top. Adrian had switched to the shade of a tree to keep observing. He’d been there for hours, writing and occasionally servicing Sadie. That satisfied female was sleeping next to him between bouts. Marc wasn’t sure that was what he’d meant as a punishment for the man. *But I do need to talk to him.*

“Ivan will take you.” Angela smiled.

Marc snickered. “Come on, Ivan. Push me up the hill.”

Ivan complied willingly enough. The mood was perfect right now. It was time for something to screw that up.

People noticed Marc moving through the crowd. When they saw where he was heading, they kept track, curious. A few of them had wanted to go

visit with Adrian, but they hadn't been sure how leadership would feel about it.

Adrian saw Marc coming. He swept Sadie's naked, love-marked body. "Company is coming up the hill. Would you like my jacket?"

Sadie growled at being woken. She was tired. She'd spent all night digging out of the bunker and all day claiming her mate.

Adrian chuckled. He slipped out of his jacket and draped it over her.

Sadie snuggled under it, inhaling deeply.

Her moan made Adrian's ego swell. *I did a good job.*

Adrian returned to his notes until Marc arrived. It was a long hill and he had too many thoughts in his brain to waste time. Copying the other parts of the book he'd lost was possible, but these new pieces had to be captured when they arrived. As he'd watched Safe Haven grill and picnic, a powerful piece of the past had appeared in his mind.

Marc didn't notice the rough ride up. His mind was centered on what his demon had told Angela.

*"Create a world where evil is valued even as it works for the good."*

He didn't know yet how they would do that, but Angela had spent hours on it last night and they were both working on it now. With both of them digging, Marc was sure they would find a solution. He'd been afraid to ask his demon because he'd feared there wasn't anything they could do. It was a relief to know that wasn't the case.

He was also fascinated with Conner's blinking theory. He hadn't had a chance to ask Angela any questions about it yet. Their morning had come early and been busy, but he wanted to know if she felt it when she blinked. *Does it hurt? What happens to the thought she's working on? Is there a way to speed up the body processes to adjust for the new mental load? Is it dangerous to her?* That was the one Marc was worried about.

Ivan didn't get into Marc's thoughts. He pushed the chair, enjoyed the good vibes, and refused to think about a redhead with a talent for curse charms.

Marc felt Ivan's relief, but he didn't ask about it. He already knew. Kenn's thoughts had been full of it this morning. Marc had been shocked to find out Tonya had caused so much damage. He hadn't realized curses were physically dangerous. Angela had made it clear that there were several different kinds.

Ivan shoved, reaching the top of the hill. He admired the view while gasping for air.

Marc set the brake on the chair.

Adrian finished his sentence and put the book down as Marc limped over on his cane. "May I?"

Marc moved closer.

Adrian put a hand on Marc's leg. The energy he sent was ancient, powerful. It sank into Marc's bones and sped up the healing process.

Marc sighed as the dull ache faded. *I wish we could do that for ourselves.* "Thank you."

“It’s my honor.” Adrian smiled at Dog, who’d insisted on struggling up the hill next to the chair. “May I?”

Dog growled, snapping at him.

Adrian snatched his hand back as Marc chuckled.

The wolf dropped down awkwardly next to the chair and stared at Adrian in dislike.

Adrian shook his head as Marc reached into his pocket. “I don’t know anything about it. I can’t tell you *anything*.”

Marc stared, trying to understand what Adrian wasn’t saying.

Adrian motioned toward Conner, who was on a blanket near the tall grass with Candy and a few others. “He knows most of the old stories.”

Marc nodded, getting it. Nature would have access to Adrian’s thoughts. If the antler piece could help them, she didn’t need to know they had it.

Marc studied Sadie, seeing evidence of a satisfied woman. “Will she be living in the shack with you?”

“No. She just doesn’t have that information yet.”

“I see. What about the others?”

Adrian shrugged. “I didn’t ask. I assume they’ll use Luke’s bunker.”

“Tell Kendle the cabin and his bunker are hers, as his widow.” Marc carefully dug the picture from his pocket. “This is too.”

Adrian scanned the image. *That explains some things.* Adrian put it inside his notebook. “I’ll make sure she gets it.”

“And the other thing? The one you discussed with Dog?”

Adrian tensed as that conversation flashed in his mind.

*If drawn by a bright enough light, lost souls might come, ready to mend old hatreds and be reborn in peace. That might shift the balance of good and evil to man’s favor.*

Adrian was careful with how he phrased it. He wasn’t sure how much Marc wanted Ivan to know. “I’ve studied it from several angles. I don’t have answers yet, but I have a trail I’m following.”

“I assumed we’d need a restful walk?”

Adrian was glad Marc wasn’t openly talking about dream walking. The Eagles were okay, but there were a lot of camp members close enough to hear them. “Yes, but only the founders.”

“I’ll let her know.” Marc shifted on his ankle, letting the cane hold his weight. “What do you know about blinkers?”

Adrian’s brows came together. “She’s blinking?”

Ivan stared in confusion. “I thought that was a couples’ thing.” Ian had asked him about it this morning. Ivan had guessed.

Marc waited for Adrian to answer.

“The labs didn’t mess with them often. It’s addictive to be in your head while thinking that fast.”

Marc nodded. “They didn’t mess with it because it’s dangerous, right?”

Adrian shrugged. “I think they just didn’t get anything from it. Blinkers take years sometimes, but then they solve an amazingly hard puzzle or challenge. The government wanted faster results.” Adrian’s face darkened. “It can be dangerous if the person forgets to live in reality.”

“I’ll keep track of it.” Marc continued to the next item on his mental list. “She’ll be setting training schedules and classes soon. People have already been asking about it. When she drafts your part, we’ll have Tommy bring it by. He’s free to come and go—everyone is. Angela said Safe Haven means the freedom to pick your friends.”

“Thank you. I told Kendle to make up with him. When he comes by, I’ll push it.”

“No, let her be herself. I want Tommy to see he has better options.”

Adrian followed Marc’s line of sight to the sad woman sitting near the beach. Megan hadn’t moved in hours. “It’s a shame about her and Darren. I thought they were a good match.”

“So did I, but he and Hannah had apparently started something too. Now he swears he wants to be a bachelor.”

“We know you can love more than one person at a time. Our hearts are big enough.”

Marc made a face. “Angela wants to know if she should expect more of that or if you believed it would fade when you made the breeding tree predictions.”

Adrian chuckled. “Angela wants to know?”

Marc snickered.

Adrian understood Marc was curious. He shrugged. “I didn’t get that far.”

“I was only asking because we’ll need to know how big to make the rooms.”

“Uh-huh.” Adrian grinned.

Marc smiled.

The moment was nice. Adrian stiffened, scowling. “Why are you up here making nice with me? What’s going on? Am I dying for real this time?”

Marc laughed. “I’m showing the camp you can get along with someone you hate, and in the end, maybe even come out with a powerful bond.”

Adrian made a rude noise. “And you expect me to believe that crap?”

Marc chuckled again. “I’m finally facing destiny?”

“You’re making her happy so you get laid tonight.” Ivan sank down in the grass. “She may not recognize your tactics, but I do.”

Marc swept the camp, finding Angela in the crowd. “She’s getting a look at all three of us together right now, each time she glances up here. It shows her three men who will do anything for her. She rarely feels safe. We give that to her.” Marc

shifted toward the chair. "I'm ready." He lifted Dog into his lap.

Ivan smacked the ground. "I just sat down!"

"I know. That's why I'm ready."

Adrian chuckled, thrilled with the jobs and locations they'd been cleared for. Kendle and Quinn would have to cover themselves, but he would help with Sadie. When the time was right, he would piss her off and she would turn to Safe Haven and Angela. She would be trained, polished, and matched with someone who was worthy of her. Adrian knew that wasn't him. He'd been trying to avoid this relationship, but she'd insisted and he was a single man.

Sadie rolled over, waking. Her eyes went straight to him. "Get over here."

Adrian thought about Angela's perfect ass and slowly rose from the chair. "A man's work is never done."

Ivan brought up a private line as he held Marc's chair and kept it from rolling away and flipping. *He didn't see it.*

Marc held Dog as they hit another bump. *He was hiding his own secrets. He couldn't dig through ours at the same time. Good job putting a bug right there.*

*I pushed it under the dirt. He may find it.*

"I know." Marc grinned.

Ivan strained, keeping the chair at a steady pace. *I'll make contact with Sadie soon.*

“Make sure you show her a side of men that she won’t get from him. Despite Angela’s claims that she wants a man who encourages her to take risks, she’s marrying the one who protects her.”

Ivan was floored. “I never would have made that connection.”

“You would have, once he becomes *your* rival.” Marc forced a smile and pushed away those ugly thoughts. No matter how many times he avoided death, the clock was always running in his mind now.

*Tick-tock, Safe Haven. Tick-tock...*

Marc’s head whipped to the side, searching for Nature and those giant snapping teeth.

Ivan reached the bottom of the hill. He put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Easy, Boss.”

Marc shuddered. “I’m ready to go get drunk again.”

Ivan was relieved. He didn’t like it here either. *This won’t ever be home for us. Nature saw to that.*

“After we handle the UN, I’ll talk to Angela about that recon run Kenn mentioned, but it will take all of us nagging to get her to agree to let me off this island.”

“Cool. Where are we going?”

Marc’s head turned northeast. “Home.”

## 2

Ian knew who was behind him before he turned around. He didn’t need a gift. Her hot, dangerous

presence changed the environment when she was near. “Hello, Kendle.”

“Ian.” Kendle noted he was in jeans and a faded ZZ Top t-shirt instead of Eagle gear like everyone else. “Are you working?”

“I’m gathering an inventory list while spending some time alone.” Ian gestured with his notebook. “I’ve already been by the other areas. This is my last stop.”

Ian surveyed her sweatpants and tank top. From a distance she looked like Angela to him. Up close, she was just lucky to be alive.

“Yes. Lucky.” Kendle scanned him, not getting anything from his thoughts that she needed to worry about. She still frowned. “Why do you need alone time?”

Ian gave her a pointed glance. “Why do you?”

Kendle sighed, eyes going to the airstrip. “I’m chasing ghosts.”

Ian shrugged, making a note about the contents on the shelf. “Never a good idea.”

“I know.”

Ian scanned the distance even though the three islands were almost a hundred miles from them and not visible. “Do you know anything about the other islands?”

Kendle shook her head, turning in that direction. “I didn’t leave Pitcairn until Luke flew us out of here. I never heard him talk about the other islands at all.”

Ian believed her. He added it to his notes. “Thank you.”

Kendle waited for him to leave.

Ian frowned at her. “I have a job to do. Chase your ghosts somewhere else!”

Kendle flushed. She marched toward the tree line. “Asshole.”

Ian kept going with his notes until he thought she was gone. Then he stepped into the shed. He reached over to lift a box lid and used the shadows to cover him as he placed a little silver listening device on the shelf hinge and activate it.

Kendle was watching from the trees. All she saw was an Eagle taking inventory. She’d seen them do it a hundred times. It never took long. Kendle decided to wait him out. She scanned the opposite direction.

A small yellow and red boat drew her eye. It was moving fast over the calm blue water and held five people who were too far away for her to scan mentally.

Ian came out of the shed. He spotted Kendle and followed her surprised line of sight to the boat. Ian motioned. “Call it in. You’ll get credit for the warning.”

“Maybe next time.” Kendle walked into the trees.

Scowling, Ian keyed his radio. “Incoming, Boss! They’re right behind our ship, in the blind spot.”

### 3

“We couldn’t even get one damn day?!”

People turned at the rage-filled shout, expecting to see Angela.

Angela stood, sighing.

Marc’s team was slightly drunk, but they sobered instantly at the sight of the RIB coming toward the beach. They leapt to their feet and brought up shields while hurrying to provide support if Marc needed it.

Marc brought up his shield as he limped quickly toward the beach, where the intruders would land if he let them. All of the people in the fast boat were waving and shouting, though they couldn’t be heard.

Camp people rose, retreating toward the jungle. If there was gunfire, they would scatter into the foliage until it was over.

Angela brought up her shield around the kids and babysitters along the beach, but not to protect them from the strangers. Marc was about to scatter wreckage everywhere.

Several Eagles spoke up or stepped forward to offer an opinion.

“I don’t see weapons.”

“I think they’re survivors.”

Marc let the RIB clear the edge of the cruise ship, but he didn’t give them time to fire. He blasted hatred at the incoming boat.

The RIB flipped into the air, scattering people and gear.

A body slapped the cruise ship and fell under the water.

Three more bodies hit the waves and popped up, but none of them tried to swim.

A herd of sharks swam eagerly through the wreckage in search of a meal. The smaller sharks couldn't fight their way through the larger masses to reach the whales, but they were just as hungry, just as deadly.

Angela sat back down. She locked her thoughts to keep Marc from knowing how unhappy she was that he'd handled it that way. She'd had her own errors in judgement, her own crosses of that forbidden line. It was only fair that he got to make mistakes too. *We're all killers here in Safe Haven.*

Adrian winced. *There was no other way to make sure the normals survived.*

Angela didn't answer.

Marc stared at the wreckage, calming, feeling regret now. *We could have used information.*

Eagles near him nodded, but they didn't scold or even mutter. They were always being hunted. The people should have known better than to approach without permission. Marc was right to react so fast. If they'd delayed every time action found them, no one would be here right now.

The camp loved seeing Marc defend their safety. Good vibes went through the crowd.

The bubble came into view around the camp.

People cheered.

Angela marked the boundary line, as did Marc and many of the senior men and women who'd been wondering how that would work now.

*We were right. It doesn't cover the ship.*

Angela nodded. *We'll get them living on land as soon as we can.*

Marc still felt her displeasure through their bond; he didn't apologize. *Someone tried to invade and I handled it. She should be thanking me.*

Angela motioned toward the bridge. "They're ready to set up for the ceremony. Clear the area, will you? They need room to work."

Marc limped that way, mind moving on from this bad moment to the next one that would happen.

Bits and pieces of the boat washed up, forcing the kids to abandon their playing until it was cleaned.

Angela stared at the wreckage and bleeding bodies. It wasn't just Safe Haven's citizens who were sacrificed in her schemes, but each one served a higher purpose. All she could do was hope that mattered when it came time for her own judgement.

Kendle joined Adrian at the top of the cliff. She scanned the feeding sharks, trying to estimate how many bodies were there. "Did he get them all?"

Adrian nodded. "Four came in and four went out."

Kendle smiled and sank down in the grass.

Adrian frowned at her. "What are you so happy about?"

Kendle's smiled widened. "Just enjoy the wedding. I'm busy putting a perfect carrot on my stick."

Adrian sat down and refused to think about anything but Ralph and Daisey.

#### 4

"It's time for the wedding. Everyone needs to move toward the beach. If you need help to get there, flag down an Eagle." Kenn didn't mind being the mouthpiece for this event. It was the next event that he was concerned with. He expected a few fights over the vote. "Anyone staying the night here needs to go get their gear as soon as the ceremony is over. We're having a wedding! Come wish our new head den mothers well as they join in holy matrimony."

Tim was waiting at the altar for the two couples. He was the only thing Tracy had asked for. Ralph had gotten Daisey to agree. If Tim was later convicted of conspiracy, Ralph said he was going to ask for another ceremony so they weren't cursed.

The stunning sunset glinted and shined over the island in brilliant hues and fading warmth. Dark shadows began to run along the beach as the sun sank below the horizon.

"Gather over here for group photos." Shawn and Missy were getting pictures and video of the guests.

Kenn moved through the content camp, passing the word while avoiding those photos and videos.

A ripple of people began to walk toward the beach, drawing others who were farther away. The music that had been blaring from their ship for hours suddenly stopped.

Kenn was relieved. Most of the wedding party had vanished an hour ago to put on finishing touches. The brides and grooms had been taken along. Out of all the proposals, only Daisey and Ralph and Tracy and Charlie were going to get married tonight. Everyone else had opted out or decided to wait.

*I understand.* Kenn wanted to give Tonya all the frills, like Jennifer, but better. He couldn't do that with a five-hour set up in dirty sand while surrounded by garbage from a barbecue. He knew Ralph and Daisey wouldn't mind, but he wasn't sure about Charlie and Tracy. They both just wanted to get it over with. He was certain they were going to regret it. This was a special day for both parties, even though men didn't like to admit that. Rushing through it was a mistake. "Gather on the beach, folks. It's time for us to witness the holy matrimony of some crazy folks."

People laughed as he went by. He hadn't been keeping a count officially, but Kenn believed only half of their camp was still on the island. The rest had returned to the ship, hours ago in some cases. Everyone had heard they were protected here, but none of them were feeling it and the RIB arrival hadn't helped. They trusted the ocean with all its floating debris piles more than land.

*Shell-shocked.* Kenn didn't know what else to call it. He did know it would last forever. They would eventually adapt to living here, but the survival instinct that Nature had instilled in them during the trip would never fade in this adult generation. Only the kids would have a real shot at not being traumatized every time a bird flew overhead, or a rock slid down a mountainside, or lightning struck in the distance, or cicadas sang. The road to get here had been the ugliest time of all their lives, with only a few exceptions. Kenn refused to name them, not wanting to feel guilty right now. He definitely deserved to, but for this one day, no one was giving him shit, not even Marc. After the explosion, the birth, clearing this island, and then finding out they only had two weeks until the next battle, Kenn's brain was fried. *I may need to take a break before I sign up for the next run.*

All over the beach and all through the Adrianna, men and women were having the same thought. Even hardcore fighters could be pushed to their limit. Most of them were there. If they didn't get a real break after this one, several people were going to leave during the night. Angela wouldn't stop them and they would never return out of fear that things would always be the same. They understood having to fight for survival, but if they weren't a part of Safe Haven's light, then they wouldn't have to do it as often.

Adrian caught those thoughts and more as he watched the camp gather around a pale white

canopy fluttering in the wind. Lace and flowers decorated the outside with silken bows in all shades of the rainbow. It was beautiful. Adrian was positive the inside was even better. *I wish I could be there to offer congratulations to Ralph and Daisey.* “I never would have guessed he was ready to settle down.”

Kendle snorted. “It’s Angela and that damn breeding tree of hers.”

Adrian didn’t tell her the breeding tree had come from his notebooks. He also didn’t remind her that Daisey was well beyond childbearing years. He saw people he knew, men, women, and kids he had saved and given everything to. It was good for him to view the fruits of his labor and sacrifices. “And that’s why she’s letting us stay close today.”

Kendle hadn’t been following his thoughts. She was watching Marc as he stood near the shoreline. He was well-protected, but the sight of him using a cane and having a cast made her want to nurse him back to full health.

Now Adrian snorted. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Kendle chuckled. “Can you imagine the fallout?”

Adrian didn’t comment on her choice of word, but it was an instant reminder of all those they’d lost. *There were so many white balloons!*

Kendle felt Adrian’s sadness, but she didn’t have time for it. Like him, she knew Angela had a reason for letting them stay close, for being generous with the gear that had been delivered. She

was soaking up memories of Marc while she was allowed to.

“She’s showing us the good that comes from making the right choices. Specifically, she’s showing me I built this and it’s worth my honor.”

Kendle glanced over. “Is it working?”

Adrian shrugged. “I always enjoy seeing my camp do well, but it doesn’t have as much pull anymore. The carrot on her stick began to rot when she let Marc throw me overboard.”

Kendle didn’t answer. She just smiled.

As soon as Kenn reached the people farthest away, he immediately turned back. He didn’t want to be away from the main action. There was a sense that something else was going to happen and he didn’t want to miss it, but even more, he didn’t want Tonya to be involved. She was standing on the top deck by the rail with several other women and their babies. If things went crazy, they would all be in the crossfire. The deck they were standing on had a front row seat to the wedding. Most of the men were glad Angela had arranged it that way. It was starting to get dark. By the time the ceremony finished, it would be. None of them wanted their mate or child to still be on the island when the sun set.

“Just squeeze inside.” Brittani waved.

She and her parents were catering the wedding and running security for it. When Kenn had asked Daryl how they felt about being overloaded, he had shrugged and smiled. “They ran that restaurant before the war.”

Kenn skipped the wedding area and went to the cooking station. He was looking forward to eating whatever had been brewing in those large pots all day. They'd had a barbecue earlier, but this was spicier and heartier. It was all Kenn could do not to start drooling as he got closer.

Dwight smacked Kenn's hand as he reached for one of the huge ladles.

Kenn drew back, surprised and a bit offended to be slapped like a child.

Dwight handed him a heavy oven mitt.

Kenn grinned sheepishly. "I guess you should have let me get burned."

Dwight shook his head. "Not today. I need another taster and you look like somebody who can stand a little bit of spice."

Kenn thought about Tonya and busted out laughing. "You could say that."

Distracted by the food, Kenn didn't see the wedding party approach the shoreline, but he heard everything go quiet and knew that's what was happening.

They had set up two large tents on the floating pontoon bridge for everyone to get ready for the ceremony. Petals were floating in the water around the shore, as well as lining the end of the ugly bridge connecting them to land. The pink and blue flowers were fake, though. They couldn't strip the island just for a wedding.

Kenn slipped the first bite into his mouth.

Heat immediately ran down his throat. Steam pushed through his sinuses.

Fire followed it.

Hell came next.

Kenn grabbed for the glass of water Dwight held out. He gulped it, rubbing his tongue along the roof of his mouth. He no longer cared about the wedding procession.

Dwight paused. "Too hot?"

Kenn reached around him and grabbed a loaf of bread. He shoved a chunk into his mouth as he spoke. "Course is too damn hot! What fa hell is wrong wiff wou?"

Dwight laughed, reaching for the cinnamon. "I told you I needed a taster."

Kenn quickly moved away before he was asked to try another bite. He could already tell that one was going to be too much.

Thelma frowned at her husband instead of laughing. "That was mean. You knew the chili wasn't ready."

Dwight put the lid on the pot and got a clean ladle to use. "He was reaching for it without asking. He got what he deserved."

The sound of an announcement coming across the ship speakers echoed for a moment, drowning out the laughter, conversations, and the soft lapping of the water against the boat and the island.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..."

Both brides were wearing detailed white dresses. Their grooms had black tuxedos. The

women had nails painted, new shoes, and makeup. The men had plastic flowers in their lapels and a high shine on their shoes. One of them was beaming and blowing kisses; the other was glaring sullenly at the cloth floor. Warm winds blew through the crowded tent, bringing sweat and perfume under suntan oil.

“...anyone wish to speak against the union of Ralph and Daisey or the union of Charlie and Tracy?”

The silence was loud.

“Speak now or forever hold your peace.” Tim paused again.

Nearly all the witnesses expected Angela to object.

“I have something to say.”

People glared at Angela.

Angela frowned right back. “It wasn’t me. Get your facts straight!”

Tracy cleared her throat. “I can’t do this.” Tracy lifted the dress to keep it from tripping her while she walked. “Ralph, Daisey—I wish you all the luck in the world. Charlie, we’re through. Stay away from me. Angela, I want an abortion and if you don’t give me one, I’ll take my life.”

There was complete silence as Tracy left the altar and marched through the shocked guests and witnesses. “And I’m not going back onto that ship until the medics are ready for me. Leave me out of all your plans. As soon as I recover, I’m joining Adrian’s camp. Then I’m finding a way home!”

Tracy stepped through the tent flap, bringing an end to her unexpected scene.

Charlie hurried after her as the camp murmured and muttered amongst themselves.

Now almost everyone did turn to stare at Angela, not sure what was supposed to happen next. Most of them had never been to a wedding where someone *didn't* get married.

Angela motioned toward Tim. “We still have one happy couple. Tie their knot.”

Chapter Eight  
**Very Grateful**

1

**T**im found his place. “Okay, does anyone wish to object to *this* union? Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Daisey leaned forward and kissed Ralph.

The camp cheered at her sign of commitment.

Tim smiled at the older couple. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride back.”

Cheers echoed as the couple sealed their union.

The rushing ocean surf was the perfect backdrop for the moment. The shouting wasn’t.

Angela slowly moved toward the rear of the crowd, away from the dressing room tent where Tracy and Charlie were arguing. She walked toward the tree where Adrian had spent the day. He was at the top of the cliff now, enjoying the larger branches and leaves that provided shade from the light drizzle.

Ivan followed, unable to read her thoughts but he was certain she was running through her options. At first he had assumed the scene was part of a plan, but the smoke rolling out of Angela’s ears said she was trying to find a way to counteract at least part

of Tracy's demands. Ivan assumed it was the part where her grandbaby was killed.

Angela laid down in Adrian's impression in the weeds, able to smell him and Sadie. She hadn't come here for that. She needed to be distracted for a moment. The thought of losing that grandchild was painful.

Tracy had known it would be. She didn't want to be a mother, but she also knew she could use this to hurt Angela in return for being forced to torture someone, for being forced into admitting she never intended to follow through as a full First Lady of Safe Haven.

"I can charm her."

Angela shut her eyes. "She already has been and it didn't hold or maybe he released her. Either way, that won't work."

"What will?" Ivan had been trying to keep his distance from Angela emotionally, but he couldn't stand the crushing pain rattling through the empty holes in her heart right now. "How can I help you?"

"Only two people might be able to, but neither of them believe they should. I have to leave this alone and let fate do what it means to do."

"What does that mean?"

Angela sighed. "I've never been able to change someone's destiny. I've been able to delay it or increase it or even make it happen faster, but I've never been able to stop their deaths. I doubt this situation will be any different."

Ivan realized she'd finally reached Adrian's point, where she wasn't going to fight fate's decisions anymore. He hated it that life was crushing her hope. "I'll find a way."

"I'd be very grateful. So will my son and his ex-fiancé, though both of those will come in the future. But I don't think it can be done."

*"I'd be very grateful."*

Ivan was filled with determination. He stared at the tent. Charlie was gesturing wildly, but he wasn't yelling anymore. Now he was begging. Tracy was busy getting out of the wedding clothes. She wasn't responding at all. *There has to be something I can do.*

Ivan viewed her situation like an Eagle. She would rather go live with Adrian and suffer that lifestyle than to be embarrassed by everyone knowing what had happened. There wasn't anything he could do to change that. She chose a very public moment and accomplished a very public break-up. However, if she decided to give the baby up for adoption instead of aborting it, people would eventually forget all about this. Most of them, anyway. Angela never would, and neither would Charlie.

"I considered that too. I'm about to use my last card, but it's weak."

"You'll offer her anything she wants."

Angela loved his quick intelligence. In that area, it was great for him to be like Marc. "Yes, after

she's had some time to cool down, but the only thing she wants is the one thing I don't want her to have."

"Who else have you talked to about this?"

"A dozen or so, including Tim and members of the Eagles. There's no law that says she has to carry it."

Ivan frowned. "What if we made one? Would it be retroactive?"

Angela shook her head. "I won't create a law to ensure I win. I wouldn't let anyone else do it. I can't either."

Ivan respected her for doing what was right even though it might crush the rest of the light from her heart. "Why does she want to get rid of it? Does anyone know?"

"She's scared of being a mother, among other things. She's not stable, but she's made good progress. Her road was hard; she's been walking it alone because she doesn't trust anyone. All recoveries have moments where people slip a few steps. The bravery comes when they keep trying to get it right."

Ivan was surprised. "You're proud of her."

Angela sighed again. "I am. She stated her wants and needs clearly and she faced me down in front of everyone. I didn't think she had that in her."

Ivan knew Angela rarely underestimated someone. "Maybe you should talk to her again."

Angela snorted. "I've done enough. Kendle will pick her bunker mates and send the rest to Luke's

cabin. If there's someone she doesn't want there, we'll know it. Until then, I can't interfere."

Ivan finally got it. "You're bound by Eagle code!"

"Yes. Safe Haven's leader has to follow those rules first. Eagle code says I can't use any of my authority or gifts against Tracy, in any way."

*So you're getting me to do it for you.*

Angela blasted him with heat. "I'd be very grateful."

Ivan waved his relief over ten minutes early to cover his post.

Angela put it from her mind. She splayed her hands in the thick grass and felt the small pouch. She knew it was for her. She slid it into her pocket and sat up. She hadn't finished that code rule, but her mind went to it now. Safe Haven's leader had to follow Eagle laws first, and only the Eagles could pick Safe Haven's leader. The camp got a vote, but it didn't matter unless the Eagles agreed. Like when Adrian had brought her in, she would have to do everything she could to ensure her heir was accepted and supported by the Eagles. Charlie might have saved his place by being willing to follow through, but there was no way he would ever be able to lead this camp if he let Tracy kill their child. It was a catch-22. He was damned if he interfered and damned if he didn't.

"You forgot something! You have to ask him before you can join his camp and he won't agree because he doesn't support killing babies either!"

Charlie stomped out of the tent, slapping the flap down. “How can you live with yourself?!”

Marc led Charlie toward a private area where he could vent without disturbing Ralph and Daisey’s happiness. The camp was getting ready to escort them to their honeymoon suite.

Angela had insisted on giving them what would have been the most expensive cabin on the ship before the war. She’d thought about putting Kyle and Jennifer in that honeymoon suite, as well as taking it herself, but in the end, she’d decided the old world memories that lingered would ruin it for them. Ralph and Daisey weren’t carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. They would enjoy the room the way it had been intended. Angela blushed a little. *No room should have that many mirrors.*

Angela stayed away from Marc and Charlie as the father tried to console the son, not wanting to be a part of the drama anymore. If someone else stepped in and convinced Tracy not to have the abortion, that would be great, but it would only delay the inevitable. Charlie’s first child wasn’t supposed to live. Angela didn’t know why and it was breaking her heart.

Her witch spoke up. *There are ways to go against fate. Each of you carry forbidden doors to save your offspring. The same can occasionally be done for someone else. Each live birth guarantees one free life. It has always been this way.*

Angela smiled at Ralph and Daisey as they both looked at her for permission to go to the ship. The camp was already surrounding them. They weren't going to wait, but it pleased her that they wanted to make sure it was okay. She sent out a blast of approval and then fell back into her mind. *Keep going.*

*Nature made it so in many species. Some animals and plants can be almost completely crushed and return to their full potential. But only the rare ones, the special ones, the most hunted, the most sought after. Everything is governed by nature's rules, including the descendants.*

Angela finally had an answer for why they were able to heal or give one of those birth lives to someone else. "It's to make sure we don't die out either."

*Exactly.*

Angela considered what that meant. Despite Nature's obvious hatred of humanity, they had been given extra gifts because they were rare. "And some of us won't breed. Some of us did, but lost those children." Angela began making a mental list of everyone in camp who had lost a child. Each of those descendants might be able to save someone during an emergency.

She turned back to the witch mentally. *But that doesn't save my grandchild.*

*Doesn't it?* The witch inhaled deeply, catching Adrian's scent. *How many children did he say he*

*has alive? You may have to make a new deal, but it's not like he'll say no.*

Angela tensed as she understood. Adrian said he had 12 children, but only five of those were living. Adrian had lives to spare if he could be convinced to use them.

Angela sent that thought to Charlie and allowed herself to hope a little. She didn't let it build, however. She'd already learned the hard way that fate hated it when you assumed you had something covered. Sometimes it was best to assume you were defeated until the last minute and then hope things went your way.

"But I won't be doing that." Angela slowly rose and headed for the ship. She had somewhere to be in a few minutes. "I'll be relying on a tried-and-true method that has kept us alive this far."

## 2

"I have one for this cabin." Shawn stopped outside the door, giving Greg a look that said he didn't want to do this anymore. The ship was about to fill with people and all of them were going to get a mood crash. He wanted to go finish making videos and forget what was coming.

Greg opened the door directly across the hall. "It's your job, Eagle. Get it done."

Both men stepped into the cabins and shut the doors. They exited less than a minute later with their duty accomplished.

Shawn studied the small sheet. “I don’t have anyone else in this hall.”

Greg held up three fingers.

Shawn moved to the center of the hall where he could see both security checkpoints and entrances while Greg handled his remaining drops. There wasn’t a guard on duty in either station, but Shawn still watched for anyone who might interrupt. Things like this were best handled while everyone was busy. All these cabins were empty. Almost everyone was going to the mess now. Then they would enjoy the entertainment floor, completing a celebration of the wedding and their arrival on this island.

*I wonder how many of them will feel betrayed that they laughed with Angela and talked to her tonight, and she didn’t mention a word about what was happening.* In their place, Shawn was positive he wouldn’t be troubled by it unless he was an Eagle and then he would feel left out and more than a little worried about his place in this camp.

Greg shut the last cabin door. He and Shawn headed toward the elevators so they could rejoin the partying camp.

Greg paused at the security desk. He quickly grabbed the clipboard for the next shift.

Shawn held the elevator to let Greg catch up. They went downstairs together, neither man speaking.

Clamped to the clipboard, a long brown envelope waited for the next guard in a brutal reminder of rougher times.

Identical envelopes now sat on the pillows of the people they were meant for inside 20 Safe Haven cabins and staterooms. Battle assignments had just been handed out.

### 3

“Son of a bitch.”

Three of the Eagles starting duty tensed at that low growl. They looked around to determine where it was coming from. Except for Daryl. He’d just found the envelope on his clipboard. He was staring at it in stunned silence.

“I’m not seeing that. I do not see that.”

The other two Eagles left their posts as a new moan echoed from a different cabin. They exchanged glances through the small crowd of descendants who were returning to their rooms for the night.

“What the hell?!”

“She’s kidding, right?!”

Doors slammed; men punched walls.

The Eagles joined the crowd to peer into the cabins where men were standing with rigid shoulders.

Conner caught sight of the problem and quickly retreated. He motioned the other rookie guard to

return to his post. *We don't want to be in the middle of that.*

Unlike most of the other Eagles, Conner had volunteered for a double shift. It was easier to fight the temptation to spend time with his dad if he was busy. He'd spent most of his day on the ship.

Conner kept track of who all had noticed the envelopes. Most of the high-ranked people were just coming down the ramps and steps, including Kyle, Jeff, and Neil.

Conner slid behind his post and refused to meet their eyes. It was the only warning he was able to give them. He had no doubt that Angela intended this to be a nasty surprise. He wasn't allowed to soften the blow.

All three men mentally tensed, slowing their walk.

Jeff opened his door first. He froze at the sight of the unwelcome item on his pillow.

Kyle and Neil both spotted the envelope and hurried to their own cabins.

"She's not doing it. I won't allow it!" Another door slammed.

Jeff slowly entered his cabin, vaguely aware of the chaos around him and the refusal of some Eagles to accept the new duty that had been delivered while they were enjoying a wedding and their promised island time. No one wanted these reminders, least of all the men who'd been there for every moment of Angela's ugly plan.

*She used rings.* Jeff slowly picked up the envelope. He fished in his pocket for his lighter and set it on fire. He thought about Crista while he watched it burn.

Passing the doorway behind him, Chad paused to see if Jeff was going to put it out. When the man only let it burn, Chad stepped in and gently took it out of his fingers. Chad lowered it to the ground to keep sparks from spreading. He ground it out with his boot, not sure what to say.

Jeff went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Chad made sure the embers were completely out and then left the cabin. He did leave the door open in case Jeff needed help. It was obvious that he wasn't handling this new assignment well.

Chad went to his own cabin, not dreading it like the others were. *I wasn't there for it. I've only heard the stories. I'm looking forward to more proof that she doesn't even need a gift. All she has to do is think of death and it happens. As a military man, I admire that.*

Neil caught the thought as Chad walked by him. Neil frowned. *You won't feel that way when it's all over. If you survive at all.*

Chad went straight to the envelope on his pillow. He read the front.

**Open this now.**

The sound of envelopes being ripped opened began to echo down the hall. He quickly pulled out a single slip of paper.

*I'm in the conference room. If you accept this assignment, please come to me for your orders.*

That was it. There was no hint of what she wanted and no promise of survival. It was simply asking if they would follow her plan.

Chad immediately turned toward the conference room. He had no problem with whatever she might need him to do. *As long as it's not hurting kids, and I know that will never happen with her, I'm all good with whatever she needs.*

A few of the others felt the same way. They followed him down the hallway, also keeping track of the reactions of other people. A few of them, like Jeff, were not taking it well and a few others were ranting to anyone who would listen.

*Didn't she promise to never do this again?!  
I guess she lied.*

#### 4

“I didn't lie. None of you have to do this.”

Silence fell through the crowded room as Angela spoke. The conference room held her kit, a stack of notes, and other paperwork that she hadn't gotten to yet. It was warm and a little dusty. These office rooms were always last on the list for the cleaning crews. Some weeks they weren't covered at all unless someone made a mess.

“Last time, I didn't give you a choice. I sent assignments and demanded that you follow them. Most of you did and we won, but that doesn't mean

it was okay to handle it that way.” Angela didn’t say there hadn’t been another choice at the time. The people gathered around her already assumed it. She wasn’t going to blow that open right now. “Because of the way I handled things last time, I believe we had more losses than I accounted for. I don’t want to go through that again. The assignments will not be handed out in the dark. You will know where the rest of us are, the same as we’ll know where you are. If anyone gets in trouble, there will be multiple ways to get help.” Angela motioned to the guard on the door.

The guard held up a finger.

Angela waited for the last arrival, glad that he was coming now. It would be better to get this over with in front of the Eagles instead of the camp.

Jeff entered, ignoring everyone else. He stomped toward Angela.

Men tensed. Those closest to the boss got ready to grab him before he could do anything stupid.

Jeff stopped in front of Angela. “Please don’t do this again!”

The smell of burnt flesh wafted up, telling her what he’d done today. Angela looked at him without the sympathy she was feeling. She wasn’t allowed to show that right now. “I can’t make any promises. This has to happen. You know that. Why are you putting me on the spot when you don’t have a better solution?”

Ugliness crossed his face, but it didn't come out of his mouth. He stared at her with desperate fear. "I don't want to do this. I don't want *her* to do this."

Angela gave him what little bit of comfort she could manage. "The kids will be with the camp. That's the best I can do."

Jeff left before he did do something stupid.

The other Eagles relaxed a little. Knowing she wasn't going to use kids in the main fighting this time was a relief.

Angela waved toward a stack of envelopes on the table next to her. "You can open them and read them; you can talk about it with each other, but I don't want the camp to know exactly what we're doing yet. I'm sure you understand why."

Most of them worried there was another traitor among the normals, but there wouldn't be a chance for them to join the other side. They were all hoping those people changed their minds before they made a final choice.

Tension filled the room again as Neil pulled several envelopes from the stack. "But you are using the women."

"Some of them." Angela sighed. "They had to make the same choice you've all just made."

Neil's voice matched his thunderous expression. "Then why are you even telling us?!"

"Because I want you to take a few minutes to adjust to it before you talk to them. Most of you are in stable relationships that make you happy. You've

done a great job at picking mates. I don't want you to blow those relationships."

They understood she was giving them time to vent at her. Some of the Eagles liked it. The rest of them were too mad to accept that concession.

Angela stood pat against the protests. In the past, it would have been hard for her. Almost every person in this room was bigger than she was and most of them had more training. They knew how to use the weapons they were wearing and each of them had a specific core set of values that made them indispensable as Eagles and members of this camp. The intimidation factor would have been too high.

*That's the real reason I couldn't do it this way last time. I never would have been able to face them before that battle with these instructions and make it work. I would have had to see their faces and it would have crushed me to know some of them might not come back from the orders I was giving.*

Angela squared her shoulders. *I'm not that person anymore.* "I'm protecting your children. Everyone else has to fight for survival, like we've always done. I know you're tired of it. I know you're tired of hearing these lines. Don't you think I'm tired of saying them? I'm sick of sending Eagles out to risk their lives. I want other options, but this makes us the superpower on our side of the planet. No one will dare come near us after this until they have giant armies and even then they'll hesitate to face us because of the stories that are going to

circulate from this battle. I told you our camp would have years of peace after this and I meant it. For my Eagles too.”

Angela looked around, pinpointing the few who were already restless. “Others still want it. There are always battles waiting for those willing to fight on the side of good. If you don’t want to stay here and enjoy the peace, I have work for you. As soon as we handle this issue, everyone is free to make that choice for themselves without it hurting Safe Haven’s destiny, and I do mean everyone.” Angela got up and walked toward the door. “I want all those envelopes delivered. If you can’t do it, have someone else cover it. All assignments are to be handed out over the next two hours. Get on it.”

There was silence for a minute after she left. Several people thought of saying something nasty, but it was obvious that wasn’t going to matter. As soon as the women found out Angela had jobs for them, they were going to be ecstatic. There wasn’t going to be a way to change their minds.

Neil scooped up some of the envelopes, shoulders drooping. “Does anyone want me to deliver their doom?”

No one took him up on the offer.

Neil was glad. The men in this room were the deadliest fighters in Safe Haven. It wouldn’t be good if they were afraid to handle their own envelopes.

*We’re going back to war.* Neil’s mind flashed a reminder of the last time they’d done this.

*“Are we ready?” Neil scanned the team of men behind him. “‘Cause we’ve got company.”*

*The Eagles were set. Everyone stilled except for being sure that they were indeed in position. This would be a quick hit and run, but it was also tricky on the timing.*

*They watched the three jeeps of soldiers roll right up to the cave entrance and rush inside as if they weren’t worried over anything or anyone who might be in the area. Neil vowed to change that. He and his teammates had been here for hours, waiting patiently to start Angela’s war.*

*Neil held up a hand as Jeremy’s finger settled over the button.*

*The last jeep of soldiers was expected to remain outside, but Neil wanted as many of them as he could get. He waited until they took up sentry positions outside the entrance to the vast network of caves. It had been a military supply depot at one point. Neil and his team had gone through it a week ago, cleaned out what they could use before wiring the entire tunnel system. There wouldn’t be any fleeing and escaping through a different exit.*

*Neil nodded.*

*Jeremy pushed the button.*

*An instant later, the cave began to blow up.*

*The Eagles stayed under the cover of the opposite cliffs, protected from the debris, but not the dust as the side of the cliff disintegrated into*

*millions of bits of dirt and stone. The first blow had been struck.*

Walking by him, Kenn put a hand on his arm in a rare physical show of support. “We’ll get through it. She needs us alive.”

“Convincing me or yourself?” Neil moved out from under Kenn’s touch. He approved of the new man that Kenn was now, but Neil still didn’t like Kenn and he never would.

“Both.” Kenn continued out the door, multiple envelopes clutched in his hand. Despite Angela saying she wasn’t using the kids in the main fighting, there were envelopes for some of them and it was his job to make sure they were delivered. He didn’t need to be told that. He’d known as soon as he saw the names.

*Missy. Cate and Cody. Amy. Kimmie. Joey.*

Marc might be furious, but Kenn was relieved by it. Those twins were deadly and they needed all the best fighters protecting their camp. Even their time against the government might not compare.

Kenn remembered that fight clearly.

*Kenn opened his eyes to find Tonya sitting at the table, spinning a lighter on the dusty surface. He groaned as he sat up, carefully feeling his jaw. “What are you doing here?”*

*Tonya didn’t answer yet. She needed him to be fully alert for this.*

*Kenn stood up, hand braced on the wall. He felt like hell.*

*Tonya pushed a travel mug of stale coffee toward him. "We'll talk in a minute." Tonya ignored the cluttered shelter, more concerned with Kenn's reaction than garbage piled on the wooden floors or clothes hung to dry on a sagging Christmas tree.*

*Kenn took the coffee and the chair, but he kept his attention on her and not the pain. Something was wrong. It was the only time Tonya was quiet. Kenn rubbed at his face. "Spit it out."*

*Tonya heard the tone and knew he was awake enough. "I'm headed in, as a spy."*

*"Like hell you are!"*

*"Shut up!"*

*"You shut up! Tell him to send in his own bitch!"*

Kenn snapped out of it, refusing to consider what had happened after that. All wars were ugly. It just seemed like Safe Haven had been through more than any one group of people should have to endure.

*I hope she lets me live through this. I finally love my life.*

Kenn wasn't worried about Tonya at all. She had become an upstanding member of Safe Haven and a valuable member of the medical team. There was no way Angela would put her on the front lines for those reasons, not to mention the fact that she had recently survived a premature birth and had an

infant who needed constant care. “Tonya will be safe with the camp. I’m the one who needs to worry about survival.”

## 5

“Here comes bad news.”

Adrian spotted Charlie marching determinedly toward them and groaned. “I can’t help him.”

Kendle stood up, removing the lid from the bottle in her hand. “Well, you better at least try, for Angela.”

“You don’t give a shit about Angela.”

Kendle swallowed, relishing the burn of the whiskey. “No, but I love Marc and that’s his son. Help him if you can.”

Adrian didn’t need her to say that. There was no way he would refuse to try, but what Charlie wanted wasn’t going to happen. Tracy didn’t want to be a mother; she also didn’t want to have a child that someone else was going to raise. She no longer wanted to be a part of Safe Haven’s light or even a society. She had reverted into a recluse state. It had been a huge mistake not to force her to reintegrate. Seth had gotten Becky back into normal life, and it had almost worked, but Charlie hadn’t been able to accomplish the same with Tracy.

“Don’t you think there’s a reason?” Kendle no longer assumed that anything was coincidence as far as Angela was concerned. “It probably means it’s evil, like Cynthia’s baby.”

Adrian winced. He didn't like the reminder of that. It still hurt. "It may also be a destiny thing. It's possible that having the baby might harm Safe Haven somehow or interfere with Charlie's future."

Kendle shook her head. "If he lets her kill that baby, he doesn't have a future as a leader here. These people have lost kids. Killing one without a damn good reason isn't going to fly with the prigs. You know that."

Adrian did, but there was nothing he could do to make Tracy change her mind. Short of them dragging her off and keeping her on life support for the next six months, there wasn't a way to stop her from getting rid of the baby. Even if the medics decided not to help her, there were plenty of ways she could do it. Women had been performing self-abortions for centuries. Adrian agreed it shouldn't be used as birth control, but in this case, Tracy was mentally unstable. It was possible that she would even pass madness to her offspring. The abortion wasn't a totally bad idea.

Adrian started speaking as soon as Charlie was in hearing range, hoping to forestall the threats and pleas. "There's nothing I can do. You're only here to use me as a target for your frustration and anger."

Charlie pulled the bottle out of Kendle's hand and came over to Adrian. He sat next to the surprised man and took a long drink.

Adrian grabbed the bottle. "You're not old enough to get drunk."

Charlie would have snorted, but his nose was watering and his lungs were on fire. He sucked in a tiny thread of air, blew it out and drew in another. “What is that?!”

“Some type of pirate whiskey. The Eagles found it. Marc sent us a bottle to try. If we don’t die from it, the rest will be put in their stock.”

Charlie reached for Adrian’s eyes, claws coming out.

Adrian drew back in defense.

Charlie snatched the bottle and took another drink.

Kendle laughed. “Just like his dad, he knows how to handle you.”

Adrian couldn’t argue that point. *Marc always got what he wanted from me. Why should his son be any different?*

Charlie kept the bottle. “You owe me. You owe her. You owe the *baby*.”

Adrian paled with every softly spoken declaration. “What do you want me to do?”

Charlie stared at the dressing tent where Tracy had taken refuge from the disapproving and surprised stares of the camp and Eagles. “I want you to charm her.”

Adrian and Kendle stared at him in shock.

Charlie didn’t care if it broke rules or what trouble any of them got into for doing it. “She’s not happy. She hasn’t been since she was your whore. I want you to charm her and save my son. If you don’t, then I’m going to speak out against you being

with my mom when the time comes. I'll also speak against it every time the Eagles want to lift your banishment. And if I have to, I'll frame Conner and get him banished too. I'll make it my life's goal. I'm not nearly as easygoing as my dad." Charlie sucked in another long drink and then dropped the bottle into Adrian's lap.

Adrian caught it out of reflex, speechless.

Charlie headed down the hill, not looking at Kendle as he walked by her. "*You* stay the hell away from my mom. I don't want to slit your throat, but I will."

The adults watched the boy go. After a minute, Kendle came over and sat next to Adrian. "So how is this going to work?"

Adrian considered Sadie's likely violent reaction to the news and grunted. "You tell me and then we'll both know."

Chapter Nine  
**They Were Hunted**

1

“**H**ow do you think the men are handling it?”

Samantha shrugged at Jennifer’s question. “I think they’ll be okay.”

All three women had on sweaters despite the warm temperatures. The breeze blowing in hit the ship differently than the island. It was almost chilly on the top deck now. Samantha tucked the blanket closer around the small twin boys who were snuggled up to each other in the stroller. It was made for twins, but they didn’t need a full side yet. She was using the rear seat for their huge diaper bag of gear. She hadn’t realized how much stuff a baby needed. “Once they vent a little, you know?”

“Sure.” Tonya swept the few people camping on the shoreline. It was already so dark that she could barely view them as they sat around small campfires and put up tents. Eagles had cans of trash burning, but it hadn’t even put a dent in the garbage littering the sand and grass.

Jennifer wasn’t as confident. Ugly flashes went through her mind.

*“Where are we going?”*

*“For a drive. You were found on the edge of this campsite with a gun. You’ve said you were sent here to kill me. You’re a prisoner of war.”*

*Jennifer shuddered. “I’ve been that since it happened.”*

*Donner heard the truth there and immediately understood how he was being played. She wouldn’t have been sent in alone. “Pull over.”*

*The driver brought them to a fast halt.*

*Donner got out. He jerked Jennifer’s door open and grabbed her by the arm, ignoring her attempts to get to one of her other weapons. Louis slammed his hands across her arms, bringing a satisfying cry; they hauled her roughly to the side of the road.*

*Donner shoved her to her knees, then again, onto her back. His man put a boot on her neck to keep her there, grinding enough to get her attention.*

*Donner unzipped his trousers as the cheers of the men rolling by echoed over them.*

*“Tell your guard to come out.” Donner knelt down.*

*Struggling to breathe, Jennifer was helpless as he forced his body on top of hers.*

*“Call for help.” He watched as real tears oozed down her cheeks. He put a hand on her jeans, tone deepening into need. “Once these come off, you’re mine in every way.”*

*Jennifer screamed.*

*Donner nodded at Louis, who assumed a sentry position.*

*“Again, girl!” Donner slid that hand up her shirt to rip the front of her bra apart.*

*“Kyle! Kyle! Kyyyyyle!”*

“Are you all right?” Tonya had felt the wave of fear. It would have been hard to miss, but she was also using her new gifts. She had no idea what she was doing yet, but she was exploring.

Jennifer nodded. “Bad memories.”

Tonya grunted. That hadn’t been a fun experience for her either. “I doubt the boss will give you the same type of mission. She knows you’re pregnant.”

Jennifer believed that to be true, but she also understood wildcards, considering that she was one and she was married to a man who liked to occasionally flip his own. Then there were Safe Haven’s defenders. This would be a perfect time for one of their loyal Eagles to turn out to not be quite so loyal. That had happened in the past more times than Jennifer cared to count. *We’re better with our gifts now, but we still don’t have it figured out. If we did, I wouldn’t have this sinking feeling in the pit of my gut.*

Angela joined the nervous women by the rail. Everyone assumed this was going to be an ugly bloodbath. *I hate it that they’re right.* “Do you guys need anything?”

None of the women spoke, though they all had questions. They assumed there would be a briefing.

*She's tired. Her gray is showing more than usual.*

Angela fought the urge to touch her hair at Samantha's thought. She yawned instead. "Did any of you read your orders yet?"

All three women snorted in tandem.

Angela chuckled. "Stupid question." She scanned the children and the child-to-be, then walked toward the bridge for a check in there. "Try to have a good evening, ladies."

Her tone was ominous.

"Why is she stirring us up?" Tonya wasn't sure exactly what was happening. She'd been too scared during the first war against authority to pay attention to Angela's methods, other than to understand that she was entirely without mercy. She also didn't try to read Angela's mind. A small part of her was terrified that Angela would banish her now that she was one of them.

"She's rallying her troops." Samantha carefully steered the stroller toward the ramp. "She's reminding us we could all die out there if we don't do our jobs."

Jennifer gestured. "And she did it without saying it."

"I need to go pack. I want to be ready when the call comes." Tonya moved away from them. Kenn was downstairs with their boy. He was getting a checkup and a bath. Kenn had promised to take pictures, but Tonya wanted to be there to see it herself. It was his first one.

The sound of kids running below echoed up, making the adults smile. It was feeding time for the camp and then bedtime for the kids. They'd all played hard. Once Angela and the others got them settled, it would be a peaceful night while the children slept it off. That would give the adults some rare, precious time to themselves.

Samantha waited until Angela was out of hearing range. "I guess she knew about Gabe."

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "If Gabe hadn't touched Tonya, he would have been fine. She keeps replaying it; she's worried she's going to get in trouble, but Gabe knew better than to touch any female without her permission."

"I agree." Samantha let Jennifer go first to clear a path through the well-wishers and hold doors. They only had a few infants in Safe Haven and many of the people who had lost children in the war were drawn to their babies. None of them were going anywhere without a guard. Samantha looked over her shoulder.

Wade winked at her.

Samantha blushed.

Wade chuckled at her reaction. He was on duty over her and the boys right now, and he took that seriously. He also wasn't eager to consider how he felt about Samantha getting an envelope. He was reading the minds of the men coming up the ramp around them and it was obvious what was happening. He assumed Samantha had gotten one

too. Who didn't need someone who could predict the weather during the fight?

Samantha stiffened. "Let Neil be that half, okay?"

Wade considered how it was with Marc and Angela. Marc was forever interfering with things Angela wanted to do and it had caused nothing but drama. Yes, Neil could be that half of their relationship. *She's her own person. I don't want to control her. I just want to love her.*

Sam's heart warmed. She gave him another smile, this one more familiar, more sensual.

Wade's heart rate tripled in the space of a few seconds.

Jennifer tugged on Samantha's arm. "You're distracting our security. Stop it."

Everyone was laughing as they went down the ramp, but the amusement quickly faded. Neil and Kyle were standing there, watching them.

Already at the bottom of the steps, Tonya eased by the men. Samantha and Jennifer believed they were in for a lecture and maybe an argument. She didn't want to hear it. Tonya knew how to handle her man. Kenn was a wildcard. Everyone knew. It was safer for the camp if Kenn was with her so she could keep him under control.

Tonya snickered mentally. It was funny to think she had control over Kenn in any way, but she honestly did. As long as he loved her, she would be able to keep him on the good side. *Unless someone threatens our happiness.*

Peter's face flashed in her mind. Tonya refused to dwell on his death. "Catch you guys later."

Tonya went down the hall quicker than she should have. Sharp pain shot into her abdomen and traveled down her leg, but she refused to let it slow her. *I'm tougher than that now. And I have a little boy waiting on me.* She increased her pace and got out of sight.

Samantha and Jennifer both watched her go.

Neil and Kyle observed them in slight disbelief. Both women were staring after Tonya as if they wanted to be her. That made the men feel guilty for the tirades and threats they'd been planning. It also made them feel ashamed because Kenn was handling his relationship better than they were even though he was a wife beater and a cheater. It was humbling.

Kyle turned around and walked away. He couldn't talk to Jennifer about it yet. He was glad something had happened to reach him so he could cool off. Angela had offered that to all of them, but most of them hadn't been able to accept it.

Neil stared at Samantha. He caught Wade's *don't do it* gestures, but only Samantha mattered at this moment. *If I keep denying her the adventures I've enjoyed, and endured, then I'm going to lose her. Wade already decided to support her. I can feel it.*

Wade was sorry he couldn't side with Neil on this one, but like the trooper, Samantha's happiness

mattered more to him than even her safety. *If she wants to risk her life, it's her life.*

Neil walked up the steps and held his arms out.

Samantha entered them with a grateful smile. "I love you."

Neil kissed her, hard, and then stepped back. "Let's go to the cabin and get you packed. I want to make sure you have everything you need." Her orders were only monitoring for bad weather, but he refused to take chances. Her kit would have everything she needed if chaos struck.

Samantha grabbed him by the shirt and kissed him harder than he'd kissed her.

Wade studied the emptying corridor for threats, aware that the witnesses were happy for them and also angry. *Most of these people know it will only take one or two of us to refuse to follow these orders and then Angela's plan will be doomed. They're furious because we're not going to. I wonder if they know they're strong enough to do that on their own?*

Samantha resumed walking. "If that happens, the UN will get me and the twins. I suggest you both use the charm that works so well on me. I don't want to belong to the enemy. I like my life now. Don't let them take it away."

Slashing pain swarmed over Neil.

Both boys whimpered in their stroller.

Wade tripped over the carpet and barely caught himself on the wall. Her fear was almost tangible. And he could taste it. *No wonder she has heartburn.*

“I volunteered last time and endangered the babies. I used them, though. I was positive Donner wouldn’t kill me because of them.”

“If he wanted them, why did he hand you over in exchange for Angela?”

Samantha shuddered at Neil’s question. “Because he wanted them to grow up a little bit more. Think about it. He kept track of Conner and Adrian, then Angela, all the people from Canada, and God only knows how many more. He knew Adrian’s team members and he knew us. He was just going to wait until he didn’t have to change shitty diapers and then we were going to be hunted like everyone else has been.”

Neil saw the truth in that right away.

Wade had already considered it. If they weren’t a part of Safe Haven, Donner would have captured all of them without much trouble. They were powerful, but they wouldn’t have been able to match Donner’s mind. Only Angela had been able to.

“Exactly.” Samantha led the way to their cabin with determined steps. Having point over the ship this afternoon had reminded her how much she liked having a good place in this camp. It had done wonders for fighting off her baby blues. *I wonder if Marc knew I needed it for that reason?* “None of this would be possible without Angela and Adrian.”

“Adrian isn’t helping with this plan.” Neil had already gotten a lot of the details from Marc’s thoughts.

Samantha chuckled. “Don’t believe that, Neil. Adrian is involved in everything she does. The only time he’s on the outs is when she doesn’t know what Marc is planning to do.” Samantha gestured toward the ocean they could barely see through the tiny window and the sunset shadows. “Like throwing Adrian overboard. Angela knew Marc was going to move Adrian to the other ship. She had no idea how. As long as people aren’t making their own plans, Angela’s should go off without a hitch.”

“We’ll do everything we can to make sure that happens.”

Wade added his support to Neil’s. “My life on it—no one is taking you this time. I’ll die first.”

## 2

Jennifer, now alone at the bottom of the steps, veered toward the hall that would take her to the mess. She’d eaten three plates through the day, but her stomach was growling again.

Jennifer wove through the light crowd that was headed to the same destination. The smell of chili was drawing residents from their cabins. Jennifer wondered how many of the people on land would stay there after the Eagles informed them the ship was being moved tonight.

Jennifer entered the mess and got in line for a tray first. She wanted to snack on her food while waiting in the drink line.

The mess was crowded. Almost every seat and table was occupied, but the portions were smaller. Everyone had gorged themselves today.

She scanned, still smiling and thinking good thoughts, but her sharpening enforcer skills picked out details most people wouldn't have noticed. She certainly hadn't until these gifts had popped. Even her Eagle training couldn't account for all of it.

*Red skin. They're sunburnt. That means the medical bay will get busy later for a while and we'll need gophers to bring more aloe vera from the cargo bay.*

Jennifer scanned again, frowning a bit. *They're restless.* People were twitching, tapping their feet, rubbing their knees. *We'll need the last case of pain relievers too.*

Being on land was going to be hard on them, especially those who were older or not recovering well from the radiation sickness. Several of those were hunched over their trays right now, flushed and clearly miserable.

Jennifer wished she could help them, but the human body was easy to injure. Tomorrow would give most of them some relief. For tonight, Advil and Tylenol would cover it.

Jennifer nodded to Tobias; she smiled at his wife, Daniella. They were helping handle evening mess and doing a good job. All their cooks seemed to be in good moods, judging from the jokes and laughs flying back and forth. Jennifer swept the

eating camp again in hopes that she would find more people who were happy.

Male thoughts hit her as she reached the far corner. A table of Eagles and camp men were openly observing everyone... *Not everyone.* Jennifer narrowed in, following their quick glances and adding commonalities. *Couples. They're studying the couples.*

Jennifer placed it to Wade's sex classes. She listened for a moment, curious.

*Her nostrils flared. Doesn't he see she's getting mad? Too much vote ranting.*

*His lips are pinched and he's tapping the underside of his chair with his finger. He doesn't like whatever she's saying.*

*Her pupils dilated! She is interested in him!*

Jennifer took her tray, forcing herself to tune them out. She was alone right now, so she wasn't under their magnifying glass. Those who were either didn't care or didn't know. She had other issues to consider.

Tobias pointed at the bowls as Jennifer reached the end of the line. "Vitamins, chocolates, and antacids. Take what you're supposed to have or need."

Jennifer saw most of the chocolate was gone. "You'll have to ration that or women like me will take more than their share." Jennifer took three of the delicious little truffles.

Tobias chuckled. "Boss said it's okay today. Tomorrow, we'll have a guard on it."

Jennifer laughed. “Awesome. Where’s Anna?”

Tobias pointed. “Over there with Debra’s wards. Laura’s nieces love to read too.”

Jennifer scanned and saw the two girls were sitting with Anna, Bernice, and her daughter. All of them had a book in their hands or on the table. Jennifer approved of that friendship. Debra was still on point duty, though it was ending in about an hour. “Any trouble the council should be aware of?”

Tobias stared at her.

Jennifer waited, foot tapping.

*Tapping foot! She doesn’t like it that he isn’t answering her.*

Jennifer stilled, smoothing her face. *Okay, not just the couples.*

Tobias recovered. “No, no trouble. And it’s any relationship. They’re trying to figure out emotional clues that will lead to a woman saying yes every time.”

Jennifer burst out laughing. “It takes more than that.”

“I believe there will be several lessons.”

Jennifer guessed from his tone that Tobias wanted to attend the next one. “Why not? Wade isn’t byzan. There’s no danger there.”

“Cool.” Tobias went to help Daniella lift the crate of crackers onto the counter.

Jennifer went to her table with the kids instead of the leadership tables that were pushed together in the center. She smiled at Monica as she put the tray down. “How are my little angels?”

“Just that.” Monica handed Autumn to her mom and smiled at Roy. The boy had his head on the table and was drifting in and out of sleep. “They had a long day.”

Jennifer had loved it. She and Kyle had gotten to spend hours with the children. “I wish we had more days like this.”

“Me too!” Monica hated it that Charlie and Tracy were upset again, and the Eagles had had to suffer another attack, but that was an easy day in this camp. The attackers had been removed, Charlie was having a heart-to-heart talk with Adrian, and Tracy was bedding down in the tent on the pontoon bridge where she could be alone tonight. It was hard to think with so many people around. Monica hoped the night to herself, with guards close by, would help Tracy get her mind straight.

Jennifer smiled at Cate and Cody, who were sitting across from Monica.

The twins smiled back. After everyone else was sleeping, they would have their next training session. Cate had taken to her teaching methods right away. Now Jennifer was ready for both of them at the same time. *I hope.*

Loud cheers echoed and rippled, swelling. Jennifer didn’t need to look to know Shawn had entered the mess. She did look, though, curious who was with him.

Pam felt Jennifer’s discontent with Shawn getting all the attention. *We’ve tried to tell them he doesn’t want it, but they won’t stop.*

Jennifer let go of her rising anger. *They need a hero and the other men are too hard, too dark in their souls, for the camp to accept them in that position.*

Pam nodded. That made sense to her.

Shawn suffered the comments, cheers, and clapping with a red forehead and a fake smile that anyone could see through if they wanted to.

The camp didn't. They surrounded him and Pam in the line for a tray.

Jennifer left it alone. Something would happen or they would find a new hero in time. Kyle and the rest of the men who'd cleared this island didn't want that adoration anyway. They wanted to forget it.

"Yes, we do." Kyle sat across from her. He held out her envelope. "It was on the bed. I read it."

The mess quieted as everyone waited for her and Kyle to have a fight. Then it sank in for some of them. She had an envelope. They were at war again!

The mood snapped into dangerous tension.

Darren stepped into the mess. His bloodshot eyes went over the happy diners in contempt. They'd spent the day playing. He'd spent it adding Hannah's name to the memorial and simmering on how to keep it from ever happening again. He spotted the envelope in Jennifer's hand.

"No." Darren stomped over and ripped it away. He tore it in half and threw it at Kyle. "No!"

Kyle stood up, voice cold. "You need to talk to Adrian. He'll help you adjust."

“Or at least talk to Angela and Marc.” Jennifer didn’t trust Adrian.

Darren’s face iced over. “Angela and Marc are the reason Hannah’s dead! They knew what that island was like and they still let her do guard duty!”

“Calm down.” Gus came over to provide Kyle with support if it was needed. Darren was as vicious as Marc in the cage.

Darren pointed a paint-stained finger. “We lost three medics! They were stabbed through the throat and through the heart! They were hunted! None of Marc’s men should be alive!” Darren slammed his hand on the table, making kids flinch and whimper. “Women can’t be Eagles anymore! Enough is enough!”

Megan held up a hand as Gus started to step forward to confront Darren. “Let’s go visit Adrian.” Megan gently leaned against Darren’s hip, trying to lend comfort. “I’ll walk with you.”

Darren stared at her, but all he could see was her fighting the rage walker at the doctor’s house. “I’m sorry I put you through that.”

Megan didn’t know what he meant, but it didn’t matter. “I forgive you. Let’s go for that walk. We can look at the stars.” *When I wished for a distraction from wondering when Angela will punish me for leaving my post, this isn’t what I had in mind.* She didn’t know why the boss hadn’t already handled it. She assumed the awful waiting was part of the price she would pay.

Darren let Megan lead him toward the door. “You have to stay on the ship.”

Megan immediately agreed. “Okay. I’ll just walk you to the top deck.”

*The top deck is where Hannah died!* Darren ripped his arm out of her grip. “Don’t you leave this ship!”

Megan followed him down the hallway, aware of security frowning at them both. “I won’t. But you’ll go straight to Adrian, right?”

Darren nodded, jaw clenched.

Megan thought about his stash. “Maybe you could use that and go take a few days to yourself, you know? Sometimes it helps to have room to think.”

Darren snorted. “You can have everything in that hole, including the bones. They can remind you how easy it is to die.” He walked faster, leaving her standing there. “It might also keep you alive, but I doubt it. I saw the envelope in your pocket just now, Megan. Goodbye. I hope she sends you to the Weigh Station and not to hell.”

### 3

Kenn slid aside to let a trio of sullen rookies go by. He wasn’t in the mood to handle rebellions right now.

“That chili was rough, man.”

“I liked it. I can still taste it in my nose.”

“Same. It cleared my sinuses.”

Kenn grimaced. *It cleared my colon.* He let out a loud fart.

Kenn hurried down the hall as people stopped to spot the offender.

Someone gagged. “Run!”

Kenn moved faster, trying not to laugh and give himself away. He hurried down the steps and went to the rear entrance of the medical deck, where Marc and his team had spent the night. Tonya’s new lab was in the far corner. Kenn was ready to face her now.

Tonya looked up as he opened the door. “Hi!”

Kenn shut the door and joined her at the tall counter. The neat lab smelled like the old one had—confusing to his nose. He spotted Timmy napping on a cot near the small bathroom.

“He ate too much; the moving ship isn’t helping.”

Kenn put a hand on her wrist. “Gabe’s gone.”

Tonya went into his arms eagerly. “I know. But I can’t talk about it unless I have to. Okay?”

“Okay.” Kenn allowed her new power to surround him. He trusted her.

Tonya snuggled close. “Morgan said our boy might come out of the incubator tomorrow. He’s doing really well.”

“That’s wonderful.” Kenn held her and let himself relax.

“What was wrong? Why did you avoid me all day?”

Kenn chose to be honest. “You don’t need me now. You have everything you want.”

Tonya almost cried. She hugged him tightly. “It’s nothing without you.”

Timmy leaned over the cot and threw up into the bucket.

Kenn led Tonya from the lab. “Come on. I’ll send a medic in to him.”

Tonya gathered her notebook and waited in the hall while Kenn got Harry. Once she knew Timmy was covered, she let Kenn see how tired she was. “Am I clear to sleep or do I have a run tonight?” Kenn stared at her. After a minute, he resumed their walk through the empty corridor. “You’re good until noon tomorrow.”

Tonya smiled. “Perfect. I need a hot shower, a feeding session for all three of us, and then glorious sleep.”

“That sounds great.”

“I’ll want to come back around dawn. The results of the water tests will be in then.”

“That’s fine.” Kenn didn’t tell her once he dropped out he wouldn’t wake up until his body was ready. She already knew. “Take a guard.”

“Deal.” Tonya let him hold the elevator, moving slowly.

Kenn hit the button, stomach boiling. *We need to get out of this elevator before I gas her.*

Tonya grinned. “The chili?”

Kenn sighed. “It’s tearing and bombing its way through my ass as we speak.”

Tonya slid aside so Kenn could go out first.

Kenn hurried, trying to get away from her before he let go. He saw Kyle in his path. "Move! Chili bomb!"

Kyle ducked into an empty room, pulling Jennifer along.

Shawn came around the corner and ran into Kenn.

One of them farted like a foghorn.

The other recoiled, eyes watering. He bounced, arms flailing. "No more chili!"

Pam and Morgan pulled Shawn away from the cloud.

Kenn looked for Tonya. He found her reading her orders. It made him think of Gabe's words earlier. *Everyone thinks she'll stay here now that she's a mother.*

Tonya met his eyes across the laughing, scattering people. *I will not be staying here in the final battle. Train me or assign someone else to do it because I'll follow even if you leave me here.*

Kenn was stunned. *Why? You might be happy. At least you'll be alive.*

Tonya gave him a sad smile. *I'm going home, Kenny. Me and the kids belong with you, in America. This is just an unusually long vacation.*

Kenn loved her more right then than he was capable of expressing. He took her hand and led her proudly down the hall.

“Damn, you’re popular tonight.”

Adrian heaved a sigh. “And Sadie’s done rummaging for food. She’ll be coming for me in a few minutes.”

Kendle stood up, not wanting to feel the pain that would come with this conversation. “Any way to get it over with quickly?”

Adrian shrugged, mentally pulling up his files on Darren, Megan, and Hannah. “Maybe, but I won’t blow him off. Darren did quiet work for me for months. It’s awful to see him unhappy.”

“Understandable.” Kendle headed for the jungle at the top of the cliff to avoid Darren’s determined stride. “Good luck with all your commitments. I’m sure you’ll be able to cover them like you always have.”

Adrian winced, neck sore from how many times he’d done that today. Safe Haven might have enjoyed this long off day, but he hadn’t.

Darren stopped a few feet away, waiting until Kendle was out of hearing range. He sensed that she didn’t care about his feelings. He didn’t want to fight with her. *She’s not the problem anymore.*

Adrian snorted.

Darren leaned against the tree Adrian was under. He studied the ship, narrowing in on the smoke coming from the stack. “They burned her body.”

“I know. I saw Jeff take her below.”

“Why did you do this?”

Adrian had never seen Darren unkempt and erratic. “Does the who matter, or the why?”

Darren glared.

Adrian gestured. “Too many women and not enough men. They were going to be slaughtered every time they came together. I did it for them.”

“They’re being slaughtered now!”

Adrian knew honest facts and statistics wouldn’t help here. “I’m sorry for your loss, Eagle.” Adrian let his own pain come through. “I didn’t know Hannah. She joined in Ciemus, but I almost had another heart attack when I saw her.”

“She looks...looked like the other Hannah, who died before we got there.”

Adrian nodded. “She and Megan came in together and left us about the same time. We hit Ciemus and got another Hannah and Megan, only this time they were competitors instead of friends.”

Darren put it together. “You think those two are repeating lives and deaths.”

Hearing it aloud made Adrian doubt himself. “I don’t know what I’m saying. It’s probably just one of those distasteful coincidences.”

Darren didn’t want to make that final connection, but his brain did it anyway. “Megan’s next.”

Adrian winced; he rubbed his neck. “I hope I’m wrong. Now is a bad time for you to go off the rails, Darren. She needs you on guard. Tell Angela. She’ll put you two together for the coming fight.”

Darren stiffened.

Adrian sent a wave of calm, using the rest of his energy. He would be into reserves from here, but Darren's pain and anger were haunting. Adrian couldn't take it.

Darren heaved a deep sigh. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Adrian motioned. "Stay a while. We'll reminisce."

Darren shook his head. "You said Megan is in danger. I need to get assigned as her guard." Darren sucked in another deep breath. "I miss Hannah so much! I didn't know anything could hurt this bad."

Adrian felt tears on his cheeks as Darren walked away.

Quinn came from the shadows.

Adrian pointed, assuming Quinn was looking for Kendle. "She went the other way."

"No problem." Quinn walked by Adrian. "Hey, Darren? Wait up."

Adrian hoped Quinn would be able to help Darren. *I'm sorry I can't, but death has no master among humanity.*

Darren slowed, already fighting the peace now that he was away from Adrian. *Megan's in danger!*

Quinn caught up. "I'm going halfway. I'll walk with you."

"Okay." Darren didn't know Quinn personally, only by reputation. He didn't consider Quinn a threat or a peer.

"I'm sorry about Hannah."

Darren nodded curtly.

"I wonder if Marc would allow that."

Darren frowned vaguely. "Allow what?"

"Female Eagles."

Rage relit Darren's fuse. "Marc doesn't make the rules!"

"I know. I was just wondering if Marc would do it if he was in charge."

"The only way that will happen is if Angela gives up leadership and *that* won't ever happen."

Quinn smiled. "You're right. She has too many guards to be killed. She'll always be in control of our lives."

Darren staggered to a halt as Quinn slid into the jungle. His mind replayed the brief conversation in startling clarity.

*"If Angela gives up leadership..."*

*"You're right. She'll always be in control of our lives."*

*"She has too many guards to be killed."*

Darren stood in the middle of the road, mind splitting as the moon started to rise above him.

"That was quick." Adrian frowned as Quinn came back by. "Were you able to help him?"

"Yeah. I think I pointed him in the right direction." Quinn continued up the road. "Oh, Sadie said get to the bunker right now or she'll come get you."

Adrian stood up.

Quinn laughed. "You are whipped."

"It sure feels that way." Adrian went around him and took the lead.



Chapter Ten  
**It Was Worth It**

1

**“H**ello in the bunker!”

Sadie frowned at Adrian as she opened the door. “I live here. You don’t have to knock.”

“Did you ask Kendle?”

“She said me and Quinn are both welcome here. She said you don’t need these accommodations...”

Adrian didn’t answer. He was exhausted, filthy, and starving. He didn’t feel like listening to a tirade about where he was supposed to sleep.

Sadie had napped again and eaten instead of showering or looking for clothes. She was eager for the fight. “You go where I tell you to.”

Kendle laughed out loud.

Quinn glanced up from digging through the food Angela had sent. “Yeah, that’ll help.”

Sadie glared at Adrian. “You’re mine now.”

Adrian came into the bunker and dropped in one of the kitchen chairs.

Being ignored angered Sadie further. She grabbed Adrian’s shoulder.

Adrian used two fingers to break her hold. He used the same two digits to twist her wrist until she was on her knees in front of him. He refused to be

swayed by the moisture coming into her surprised eyes. “I let you push me around earlier because I felt like you earned it. Stop now.” He let go and leaned on the table. “Anything good to eat in there?”

Quinn slid a bag over and kept digging through his, but he also kept track of the girl. He wasn’t sure what her reaction was going to be.

“You reek.” Kendle pointed. “There’s a shower over there. Quinn already put water on to boil for everyone. One of you two go first.”

Sadie slowly stood up, not sure if she should be angry or submissive now.

“Just be yourself.” Adrian chortled. “It seems to work for you.”

Sadie smiled as everyone else chuckled. She decided to accept the light reprimand. “I don’t have any clean clothes.”

Kendle pointed again. “There’s a stack of sweatpants and T-shirts in the rear. I don’t have a solution for bras or underwear.”

Sadie grimaced. “Who wears those?” She moved toward the back to get started.

Kendle thought about everyone in Safe Haven. “I don’t think she’s going to fit in there.”

Quinn frowned. “Why does she have to? You told her she could stay here.”

“She has a date with the boss tonight.”

Sadie had almost forgotten about it. She began stripping her torn, filthy clothes, not caring who saw her body. “Do I have to go?” She’d much rather stay here and attack Adrian again.

All three of them nodded.

Sadie paused, standing naked before them. “Why?”

Adrian looked at his food. Half of the marks on her body were from their lovemaking. It was hard to see because he was so sore. The thought of having to do it again made him shift uncomfortably on the hard chair.

“Because it’s the alpha. She invited you out on a date. You not only go, you bring her flowers.” Kendle took a bottle of Wild Irish Rose from one of the bags on the table. “Take this. It has an 18% alcohol content and a burn that will take your breath away. Make sure you keep her happy, but don’t get so drunk that you can’t find your way back tonight. We’re all going to want details when you’re finished.”

Sadie dumped the first bucket and sucked in air at the chill. She slung her head around, splattering water all over the wall. “That felt good!”

Adrian chuckled.

Quinn dug into the food he’d chosen from the pack.

Kendle’s brows came together. “Close the damn shower curtain! If you make a mess, you have to clean it up!”

Sadie grinned at her. “I guess I’m not the matriarch after all.”

Kendle frowned as she realized she had that job. “I don’t want it either. That’s why I kill to earn my keep.”

Sadie shrugged. "I'm not the one bitching about everything; that must mean you're the mom of this group. Good luck. You're gonna need it."

Kendle wanted to protest, but she was too tired. She put a hand on her hip. "Okay. Then here are your orders from the matriarch of our clan. All of you will clean up your mess when you're done. I don't care if it's laundry or dishes. Clean it or I'll bitch so much that your ears bleed. That is all."

Everyone expected worse, Quinn especially. "Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

Kendle nodded. "On the shelves is everything we need to be comfortable for a month or so. Look through it and make a list of what you think we should start using first, based on expiration dates."

Quinn rose and went to the rear of the long bunker. He kept his back to Sadie, not caring about the girl at all. *I have the woman I want. That one is way too immature for the type of relationship that Kendle and I have.*

Adrian smirked. *Boy, are you in for a surprise.*

Kendle stepped outside to avoid the next thought or comment. A lot of it would be true. Some of it would be totally false. None of it mattered. Quinn was free to believe anything he wanted about their relationship, but Marc was the one she wanted and everyone knew. If Quinn deluded himself into believing otherwise, that was his problem, not hers.

"I need someone to wash my back."

Adrian rose from the table. "I'm only washing. You don't have time for anything else."

Sadie laughed. "I've already been working on it. Get over here!"

Adrian groaned like a child. "Do I have to?"

Quinn joined Kendle outside the cave before he could catch Sadie's response. "I'm too innocent to listen to that kind of roleplay."

Kendle laughed with him. She let the man put an arm around her shoulders, but she didn't lean against him like she might have done with Marc. *I don't ever relax anymore. Even if Marc were my mate, I don't think it would matter. I'd always be worried for his safety, like Angela is.*

Kendle glanced at the beautiful sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. *I wonder what it's like at the Weigh Station. I wonder if I could be happy there with Marc.*

Quinn finished chewing and swallowed. "That can't be good."

Kendle turned to see what he was complaining about now. She found Ivan walking calmly up Cliff Road. Both of them remained silent and kept their thoughts blank as Ivan scanned them.

"We have company coming. Get your clothes on!"

Ivan heard Kendle shout and chuckled. *The girl likes sex. I can work with that.*

Kendle scowled. "If you're hoping for strange, you're in the wrong place."

Ivan laughed, but didn't tell them why he was here. He stepped around them as he reached the top and moved to the door of the bunker.

*Knock-knock!* “Eagle Escorts at your service.”

Quinn frowned as Kendle and Sadie both giggled at Ivan’s joke. The sound of clothing being slid on and Adrian groaning in relief echoed through the open door.

Not the least bit worried about catching someone without clothes, Ivan stepped inside without being invited. He scanned the bunker quickly, aware of Sadie stepping in front of Adrian in defense. *She’s already an Eagle. She just doesn’t know it yet.*

Adrian leaned against the shower wall, gasping for air. *She knows it. Why do you think she has a meeting with the boss?*

Ivan didn’t understand why Angela would bring her rival into the fold.

This time, Sadie glared at him. “I’m not a rival.”

Adrian was too tired to be diplomatic. The truth came out instead. “No, you’re a dangerous threat she needs to get control of or eliminate. Be careful in what choice you make when she gives you the ultimatum.”

“Angela doesn’t have plans for her. There is no ultimatum.” Ivan walked over to Sadie and held up the nearest piece of clothing to give her privacy while she got dressed. He looked away instead of taking peeks at her body.

Sadie paused, not sure what was happening.

Adrian snorted. “She doesn’t need chivalry. She needs training.”

Ivan shrugged. “I would do it for my sister. She’s no different. She deserves respect.”

Sadie stewed on those words as she finished dressing. She didn’t dry her hair or her body. The clothes and wind would do that for her. She also didn’t comb her hair, brush her teeth, or use any of the body products that had been sent, like deodorant.

Ivan relented. *Okay, maybe she does need a little training.* He dropped the dirty clothing as soon as she finished pulling up her pants. He walked to the door. “I’ll wait out here. Let me know if you need me to carry anything.”

Ivan sucked in a deep breath of fresh air as he stepped outside.

Sadie stared after him. “What’s his deal?”

Adrian slowly forced his legs to hold him, but he only tugged up the sweatpants and went as far as the first bunk. He climbed in and shut his eyes. “He’s emulating Marc. He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

Sadie sat in the chair to pull her shoes on. “Marc is a boy scout, but he hates you. Is there anyone else he treats that way?”

“Kenn, but that’s about it. Marc is a nice guy to everyone except traitors.” Kendle took the chair next to Sadie. “He’s right, though. You need to be careful. When she gives you the choice, think it through from both sides. Or better yet, tell her you need time to think about it. We’ll help you find all the angles.”

Sadie took the belt and a knife Kendle held out, but she refused the gun. “I don’t have enemies on this island yet and we’re protected here. Unless I fall on a snake and make it bite me, the knife is more than enough.”

Kendle didn’t argue. She also didn’t agree.

Sadie left without glaring at Adrian. If he wasn’t here when she returned, she would track him down.

Ivan held out an arm to Sadie as soon as she approached, flashing a charming grin. “My name is Ivan.” He didn’t stare at the hard nipples poking through her damp shirt.

Sadie shunned his gentlemanly gesture. She started down the cliff. “Why do I care?”

Ivan shrugged. “I guess you could just say ‘*hey you*’ if you need something from me.”

Sadie realized he was trying to be polite, like Adrian had told her. “I’m not used to that. I don’t know what to do when somebody uses those techniques on me.”

Ivan stored her mix of educated and childish wording. He flashed another soothing smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll take it slow.”

Kendle turned to Quinn. “You know him better than I do. Is that right?”

Quinn’s shoulders went up and down. “He’s always been friendly with the ladies, but everybody knows he really wants Angela.”

Sadie heard, but she didn’t ask about it. *If I was as pretty as Angela, all the guys would want me too. That doesn’t mean I would want them or that they*

*couldn't have a happy relationship with someone else. Even I know it's okay to be attracted to more than one person over a lifetime.*

Ivan was impressed. "That's very mature. I wasn't expecting that from you."

Sadie blushed under his warmth. She didn't encourage it. *I'm satisfied right now.* She shot him a sideways glance. *But he is adorable. If I get tired of Adrian I might think about it.*

Ivan chuckled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put off those vibes. I'm not available romantically. I can only be your friend."

Attention snagged, Sadie slowed her walk. She sniffed, catching his cologne. She hadn't been around a man who smelled good in a long time. "Is it because you're in love with Angela or do you have a girlfriend?"

Ivan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's because of your roommates."

Sadie accepted that answer. Nobody trusted Adrian. It made sense that they wouldn't trust the people around him either. "What does she want with me?"

"It's hard to say. The boss doesn't usually share her reasons for doing things until after they've already been done."

Sadie had no problem believing that. Her few brief hours around Angela had been tense and exhilarating.

*That's it—tense and exhilarating.* Ivan held a wild branch to let her pass without being scratched.

“She told me to give you an escort and to make sure you get home safely.”

Sadie didn't thank him. She thought about it, but she didn't have a relationship with him. His opinion didn't matter enough for her to show gratitude. Her time in the UN had made it clear that not everyone was worth her friendship.

Ivan wasn't offended. He moved into place next to her and continued to scan for problems as the moon rose higher.

The jungle moved and whispered as wind blew through the trees, rustling the leaves. Ivan hadn't heard that sound in so long that it gave him a chill.

Sadie didn't mind the darkness. She also didn't mind the bugs that attacked any exposed skin. She was already covered in scratches and bites on her arms and legs, as well as her stomach and the cheeks of her ass. *It was worth it.*

Ivan did a quick scan and found several injuries that probably needed tending. He dug in his kit as he walked.

Sadie didn't know what to do with the first aid box he handed to her. “What's this?”

Ivan pointed. “You're injured. If you don't take care of those, they'll get infected.”

Sadie refused the kit. “I'll take care of it later.”

Ivan was suddenly sure the boss would make her do it before she went home, but he didn't say that or try to get her to do it now. Ivan believed in letting people do what they wanted as long as it

wasn't against their laws. *And sometimes, even those are meant to be broken.*

Ivan had finally gotten Sadie's attention now. *No one has ever cared if I'm hurt or in pain, not even my drunken parents.* She studied him openly, wondering what he was really like. *He has to be a good man or Angela wouldn't even consider him as Marc's replacement when Marc dies.*

Ivan grabbed another branch and held it. "I am a good man. I've also been an asshole in the past. Everybody has issues of some kind."

"Ain't that the truth." Sadie had never met a completely normal, stable person in her entire life. Everyone had secrets, and those awful deeds always came to light. The divorce that had been caused by her mother's affair had sent her to the west coast to study.

"So you grew up in a hypocritical household too."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means something against the rules was okay for one adult but not for the other and it caused hell for everyone."

"Yes, but you shouldn't be in my mind. I thought we weren't allowed to do that to each other."

Ivan didn't answer. He felt someone watching them. Alert mode kicked in hard.

Sadie felt the attraction as she noticed his muscles tense and the vein in his jaw start pounding. Her excellent sight allowed her to watch the hairs

on his arm stand up around his bruises and scratches. “Are you okay?”

Ivan slowly shook his head, too rattled to think of a politically correct answer. “Not really. This island fucked me up.”

Sadie had heard the stories. She was suddenly grateful Adrian hadn’t allowed her to be a part of the chaos. Again, she considered being nice to Ivan by telling him at least he had survived, but she didn’t. *I don’t want to get close to any of these people. I have Adrian and that’s all I want for now.*

Ivan paused as the beach came into view. “And what about later?”

Sadie understood what he was asking. She considered it for a few seconds, then she slowly took a step back. “I don’t know you.”

“I understand.” Ivan started walking again.

Sadie followed, frowning a little. She hadn’t expected him to give up easily.

“I believe in respecting boundaries. If you don’t want another friend right now, I’ll be around later. Maybe it’ll happen then.”

Sadie had also never been around a male who was considerate of her feelings. Her father and brothers hadn’t been, and frankly, neither had Adrian. He’d helped her survive, but he wasn’t really nice. Sadie suspected he was only capable of being that way with Angela and maybe not even then. The sexy man was hard to read and even harder to predict. She had no idea why he had

agreed to be with her except that it was something to do while he waited for Angela to be widowed.

Ivan was floored. “Anyone who says you’re not paying attention is definitely guilty of that themselves.”

Sadie brightened under the praise. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t get much of it.

“The boss is on the top deck. Climb the ladder and turn right.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

Ivan turned his back to her for a scan of the island that was giving him the creeps. “I’m an Eagle on duty. But I’ll be here when you’re done.”

Sadie didn’t want to be comforted by hearing that.

But she was.

Sadie stepped onto the bridge, scanning the guards on it as well as the guards waiting at the top of the ladder. The ship loomed huge over her, throwing off noise and light in every direction. Sadie saw Tommy was on duty. She paused next to him. “Are you being punished with double shifts?”

Tommy shook his head. “I haven’t been punished at all yet.”

Sadie’s brows came together as she tried to figure out what he meant. “Then you’re...self-punishing?”

Tommy chuckled without humor. “And I can’t talk to people while I’m on duty.”

She walked away from him without saying anything else. For a brief moment, she’d been

reminded of punishments from the UN. Double shifts and working until you dropped were common forms of keeping fighters in line when the threat of death wasn't enough. It was good to know that wasn't happening here.

Sadie scanned their outfits and tools. She didn't feel self-conscious, but she also didn't feel safe. These people were powerful. If they attacked, she didn't stand a chance. *At least not with my gifts.*

Greg nodded politely to the girl, but he didn't speak. He was on duty at the top of the ladder for this short shift, but his mind was on his emotions. *I'm strong enough to do this. I'm not a threat.*

It bothered Sadie that some of the Safe Haven's members weren't as upstanding as they'd first appeared to be. She walked away from Greg with her chin up. *I never lie. I don't need to.*

The dark deck was covered in shadows and flickering light from the candles.

The guards gave Sadie a fast scan and then returned their attention to the landscape. It was clear the wild girl wasn't a threat to the boss.

Angela stepped out of the shadows under the bridge.

Sadie let out a loud shriek and retreated, hand going to her weapon belt.

Greg was there to grab her wrist and stop her body with his. "It's just the boss. Breathe."

Sadie flushed. She shook her finger at Angela. "That was mean."

Angela chuckled. “Yep.” She waved at the chair closest to the ladder. “Have a seat.”

Sadie went to the chair and perched nervously. She scanned what she could see of the island from here. She found Ivan halfway up the bridge. It was obvious that he’d started running toward the ladder when she screamed. Against her will, she smiled at him.

Angela noted every response and thought the girl had, studying her. Sadie had a big future in Safe Haven. She just didn’t know it yet. No one did, not even Adrian.

Angela sent a wave of healing that sealed the cuts and gashes all over Sadie’s body.

She didn’t expect gratitude and she didn’t get any.

Jennifer came up the ramp with a tray and Kyle on her heels. Her flaring nostrils and tight grip on the tray implied Kyle had tried to insist on carrying it for her.

Jennifer gave a curt nod. *He wants me to feel helpless so I won’t accept my run.*

*That’s not true!* Kyle scowled at her.

*It is and you know it. Giving me my envelope in front of the crowd was for show so they’ll think you support female rights.*

Kyle sighed, forced to tell the truth. “Darren spooked me.”

*Damn it, Kyle! Now I have to tell the truth too.* Jennifer made a face. *But not unless she asks me.*

Sadie flinched as they both came over and dropped into the chairs across from her.

Jennifer held out the tray. “Hot chocolate?”

Sadie took one of the five wide rimmed mugs. She’d forgotten to bring the bottle of alcohol, but she didn’t care. She didn’t want to get drunk. “Who else is coming?”

Kyle studied her. “How do you know someone else is coming?”

“Five cups.” Sadie sipped her hot chocolate.

Kyle settled in his chair and waited. He was here to evaluate the girl like Angela had asked him and Jennifer to do. Angela would get the ball rolling when she was ready.

“Make room.” Daryl came through the guards and chairs. Dog was in his arms, chin resting on his big shoulder. The rotting snake trophy was on a string around the arm that was healing from that injury. It danced grotesquely as his arms flexed.

Sadie jumped out of her chair, almost overturning it. She kept the entire crew and everyone else between her and the new arrivals.

Daryl put Dog on the empty chair next to where Sadie had been sitting and then turned toward the ramp. “He has gas.”

Jennifer and Kyle groaned. Angela made a face. Sadie stayed where she was.

Dog’s new cast gleamed in the lights on the deck. He’d tried to run away, but Marc had caught him with one arm and dared him to bite. *That’s the one thing I won’t ever do.*

Sadie gawked at the wolf. It was huge, with enormous feet tipped in sharp claws that wrapped around the mug Angela sat between his paws. He gobbled his two cookies and then stuck his snout into the mug.

She didn't understand why the others weren't scared of him.

Angela took the chair on the other side of Dog. She reached over and adjusted his leg. After using it all day, he was tired. The cast made his leg twice as heavy.

Sadie watched Angela touch the wolf without any fear. *I must look like a coward to her.* Sadie slowly came forward and sat on the chair again, keeping her legs on the right side, away from the wolf.

Angela removed the empty cup and wiped away some of the cookie crumbs.

Dog looked over at Sadie, golden eyes glowing. *I love your fur.*

Sadie was startled into a laugh.

Dog stretched out his paws and began licking a sticky spot. It had been impossible to make it through the halls without braver people reaching out to grab a feel of his soft fur. Not all of them had had clean hands.

Sadie took another sip of the hot chocolate, uncomfortable in the pleasant atmosphere. She didn't know what to do around others when they were being nice.

“I have something I need delivered to Adrian. That’s why I asked you to come by.” Angela leaned back and propped up her feet. “That feels good.”

Sadie didn’t believe it.

Kyle held the tray out to Angela. Then he extended it to Sadie.

Dog whined.

Kyle shrugged, handing his cookies to Jennifer. “Ask someone else to share one of theirs. I have a pregnant wife to fatten up.”

People laughed as Jennifer swatted his arm.

Dog immediately turned to Sadie. *Share?*

Sadie took one cookie off the tray, swallowed hard acid, and then pushed the fear away. She extended her hand to the wolf, leaving plenty of room for him to grab the cookie without biting her fingers.

Dog reached out with his long tongue and licked it out of her hand.

“Eww!” Sadie dropped the cookie on his seat and rubbed her fingers on her pants. “Don’t do that.”

Dog was busy crunching the cookie.

Sadie heard the others laughing, but she didn’t feel left out or bullied. It felt like she’d just been welcomed into the group.

Sadie shut down. She crossed her arms over her chest. “How long do I have to stay?”

“Don’t be rude.” Jennifer studied Sadie physically, not getting into her mind. The girl seemed healthy and rowdy. She would make a great Eagle once she was trained.

Sadie uncrossed her arms at the reprimand, but she didn't give in. "I know what you guys are trying to do and it's not going to work." She looked at Angela. "You said you had something for me to deliver. Give it to me and let me be on my way."

Angela motioned toward the ramp. "It's downstairs. You'll have to come with me. If I leave you alone up here, Jennifer and Kyle are going to dig into your mind."

Dog lifted his head. *Don't go yet. See how it feels to belong here before you make a final choice.*

Sadie glared at the animal, fear fading. "You can't talk me into it either! I don't want to be one of you!"

Jennifer smirked. "You already are. That's why it feels good."

Sadie decided she needed to make herself heard. "It's not as good as being with Adrian."

Angela shrugged. "That's because we haven't fucked you yet."

Kyle's mouth dropped open.

Jennifer laughed out loud.

Sadie prepared to return fire, enjoying herself even though the atmosphere had changed.

*Tick-tock. Tick-tock.*

Angela stood up, stopping the next remark from any of them. "Let's go get your delivery."

## Chapter Eleven

# Play Nice

### 1

**S**adie followed Angela. She was a little nervous, but she lifted her chin and refused to show it. She was used to being stared at. She usually liked it, but the guards were examining her character to see if she was worthy to be one of them. She didn't like the results they were coming up with.

*She's too rough.*

*She's twitchy. It would take a lot of work to settle her down.*

*She's been sleeping with the enemy. We can't trust her, even if Angela lets her join.*

Angela led the way down the ramp. "Don't worry about them. They're always suspicious of new people. Even if you didn't have a relationship with Adrian, they still wouldn't trust you yet."

Sadie believed her. Safe Haven had been hunted for over a year, but they'd won every challenge they'd faced. For a brief moment, Sadie wished she'd been there to help them fight their enemies. *Maybe I wouldn't have been captured if I had been with Safe Haven all along.*

"A lot of my people feel that way, especially the kids."

Sadie knew they had children, but she'd only caught a few brief glimpses of them. As they descended the stairs into the cheery ship, Sadie spotted children everywhere.

"I don't wanna go to the dorm." Caleb pouted. "I'm not ready to go to bed."

"We had fun all day. You're all exhausted. You're going to go get showers and get tucked into bed. Then Monica is going to tell you all a bedtime story." Angela smiled at the tired den mothers who were herding the kids.

"Yay! A story!"

Ray eased through the line of kids to reach Angela. The alpha being here would help the den mothers get the kids settled while the rest of the camp kept celebrating. Ralph and Daisey were in their honeymoon suite.

Angela held the door to the next steps to let the kids go through.

Ray joined her. "Grant wants to fight this time."

"Excellent."

Ray scowled. "He's the only captain we have. He's too valuable to waste in a battle."

Ray had showered and shaved, but those haunted eyes hadn't changed. He was already fighting the UN battle in his mind. *And in there, we're losing.*

Angela wished Ray had chosen to take at least one vacation day; he clearly needed some off time, but she also understood. When your brain said no, it

meant no. “Do you know that for sure or is it just your fear of losing him?”

Ray glared at her. “You have no right to risk his life.”

“I’m not—he is. Why did you come and tell me he wanted to fight if you expect me to deny your request?”

“I’m an Eagle. It’s my duty to report things even if I don’t like them.”

Angela gestured. “Exactly, Ray. You have honor. So does he. Let him have this or you’ll end up regretting it.”

“You saw that?”

Angela shook her head. “I didn’t have to. It’s a logical conclusion. This is the last action any of us are going to get for a while unless we go out on a run. You’re robbing him of his manhood for the next three years. Be sure that’s what you want to do. I don’t think your relationship can take it.”

Ray stared as she and Sadie followed the kids, but he didn’t beg or threaten. He already knew that wouldn’t work. He would have to console himself with knowing Grant really was the only one who could sail them away from here when it was time to go home. Angela would make sure he was safe during the fight even if he saw action. *I have to believe that or I’ll never let him go. I refuse to let him die...like Dale.*

Angela reached out a hand in front of Sadie to stop her as another group of children barreled down

the hallway. She immediately lowered her hand. "Sorry. It's bedtime; they go a little crazy now."

Kids in pajamas and slippers ran toward the boss.

Sadie was surprised. "You let them?"

Angela nodded, giving fast hugs to the kids before sending them toward the dorm. "Everyone needs to blow off steam. Our kids are actually very well-behaved. I believe it's because I give them moments like this. If I didn't, we would have more problems. There are a lot of special children here."

Sadie knew that to be true. She was being assailed mentally by young minds that hadn't sharpened those skills yet. A couple of them were slicing through her barriers, however. Sadie turned around and found a boy and girl standing behind them. They were obviously twins.

Angela frowned. "Play nice."

Cate and Cody both immediately flashed innocent smiles.

Sadie watched them walk down the hall. "Those two are dangerous."

"And not just them." Angela held the door to the kids' area open.

Sadie went to the doorway, but her attention was snagged by all the activity in the wide hall outside the dormitory. Women were packing suitcases and children were bringing items for those suitcases. Stacks of supplies were all over the tables and counters as if they were being sorted and then packed. "What's going on?"

“The UN is coming. We’re preparing.” Angela studied the area to get an idea of how much they still had to do. What was going on now was supposed to be the finishing touches.

Debra came from the rear corner of the room, carrying a familiar object. She gave it to Angela, frowned at Sadie, and left. Her shift was over, but she was still working.

Angela stored the wrist blade in her jacket pocket, fighting the memories that went with it. Debra had borrowed it right after Angela lost the baby. *I wasn’t allowed to wear anything heavy then.*

Sadie stepped into the kids’ dorm.

Silence fell.

Kimmie came over from her post in the rear of the wide, chaotic room. Her third shift guard duty punishment had started tonight. She stepped in front of Sadie with her fists on her little hips. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Sadie wasn’t sure what to say to the aggressive child. She stepped aside so Angela could enter, protecting herself mentally as the child dug in for information.

Kimmie glared at Sadie, waiting for an answer.

“Alpha!”

“It’s Angela!”

Every other child in the room dropped what they were doing and flew toward the door.

Sadie immediately ducked and rolled. She came up in a crouched position in the hall.

Angela and the Eagles laughed. It was impossible not to be amused.

Sadie slowly straightened, hands dropping as more kids came down the hall. She slid back to let the children reach Angela, suddenly not sure if she should protect the alpha from the kids.

Every adult descendant on that deck caught her thought and approved. Sadie had the automatic reflexes of an Eagle, as well as the sense to know these children were dangerous to anyone they came in contact with. Those were two marks in her favor.

“They love her. Everyone else could be in deep shit if they snap.”

Sadie found Tommy standing next to her.

Tommy shrugged. “My next shift is about to start. I need to change my clothes and gear.”

Sadie was surprised. “They have you guarding the kids after you ran out on them?”

Tommy snorted. “I’m cleaning up after the kids, but they really don’t need protection.”

Sadie slowly came to that opinion too. She was catching flashes from their past now. Some children were holding small brown envelopes and staring at them in horror or confusion. Sadie caught more than she wanted to as she stared at Kimmie.

Sadie snapped out of it, not wanting to be bonded with the child. She was immediately slapped with another flashback from the smallest child in their group.

Sadie was horrified. “They’re all killers!”

Tommy stepped by her. “Except they only have the alpha between them and murder. The rest of us at least understand right from wrong. Some of these kids are too young to know the true consequences of their actions, but they’re still deadly. Be careful. Be respectful.”

Sadie rolled her eyes mentally. *So much for being myself. I’m not either one of those things. That’s how I get in trouble.*

“It’s the same with us. There are all these rules we have to follow.” Kimmie crossed her arms over her chest, much the same way Sadie had on the top deck. “I don’t like the damn rules!”

Kimmie returned to her post.

Sadie realized the girl was on duty. “What did you do?”

Kimmie pointed.

Sadie saw a short-haired woman hurrying up the stairs near the dorm. She quickly found the woman’s name in Kimmie’s thoughts. “Francesca.”

The woman turned around to discover who was calling for her. She spotted Sadie and quickly overlooked her for the little girl on the other side of the room. Francesca’s hand automatically came up to touch the short, jagged curls. Hatred crossed her face and then she hurried up the steps.

Sadie snorted. “So you gave her a haircut. What’s the big deal?”

The adults liked Sadie for that, but they also disapproved. It was clear she was as wild as any of their children.

Kimmie didn't answer. *I don't know you. Stop pushing me.*

Sadie bonded with the little girl against her will. "Damn it!" The bond cemented quickly. Sadie found herself walking toward the guard post, ignoring the Eagles and Angela, who was being smothered with laughing children.

Kimmie picked up a pen. "I have to add your name to the logbook because you came inside."

"Sadie. S-a-d-i-e."

Kimmie wrote it and then placed the pen back in the holder. She stared at the woman's hair. "Why did you pick blue?"

"I didn't, actually." Sadie smoothed her wild locks. "As we were going on the ship, they dyed our hair blue. Once we got on the ship, we were supposed to wash it out. I liked it."

Kimmie shrugged. "Not everything we don't want is bad for us."

Sadie understood the garbled message. She rotated to examine the rest of the room. "So this is where you live?"

"They say we're going to get to live on the island, but we're all packing to leave, so it doesn't seem like that's true."

Sadie automatically tried to comfort the child. "I heard once you defeat the UN, you guys will get years of peace."

Kimmie muttered a curse word Sadie rarely ever used herself. She snickered. "I'll bet you were hell in the pits."

Kimmie stilled. “You’re a fighter?”

“I killed one of our kind, without magic.”

“Me too.”

Another bond flowed between them, making the air crackle with electricity. Angela and the other kids observed as they enjoyed playtime, but they didn’t interfere. It was like this for their kind because they were suspicious and aloof. Sadie and Kimmie had suffered at the hands of the UN. Angela had counted on them being able to create a friendship. *But that wasn’t what I brought her here for.*

Angela straightened, holding her hands up to stop the next wave of eager children. “Finish packing now.”

All the kids went, swallowing disappointment. If they were fast enough, she might still be here when they finished.

Angela joined Sadie and Kimmie at the guard post. She scanned the adult guard and received a head shake. There hadn’t been any problems with the girl yet. There also hadn’t been any signs that she was Eagle material. Angela was having a hard time fitting Kimmie into Safe Haven life because the only thing she seemed to do well was stalk or kill. She was already positive the child would have to go to America with them for the final battle. After that, Angela assumed she would end up being a tracker to help eliminate any UN survivors on American soil who hadn’t renounced their goals of conquest.

Sadie and Kimmie had been distracted from Angela's thoughts by the other kids coming over. Sadie found herself surrounded.

Angela observed for a minute, trying to get another angle into Sadie's mentality. She acted like a ten-year-old most of the time, but occasionally, she seemed older than everyone here. Angela was trying to figure out how that was possible.

"I have that A-word stuff." Sadie blurted it out, unable to take the embarrassment of Angela thinking that way about her in front of all these children. "The one that makes me do weird things and say dumb stuff."

The kids immediately began offering words.

"ADHD."

"No, it's A.D.D."

"It might be autism."

"Isn't that the same as Asperger's?" The guard couldn't help himself.

Sadie pointed at the child who'd said autism. "It's that one. I'm on the side that can do things."

"Functioning?"

Sadie smiled at Kimmie. "You know all the big words. You're smart."

Another bond of friendship ran between them.

Angela was pleased; she was also in a hurry again. The clock had started ticking as Sadie stepped into the dorm. "Let's go get your delivery."

Sadie locked down on the thought of protesting. She suddenly didn't want to leave.

She followed Angela into the connecting room of the dorm. It was a large play area. A small boy was sitting on the steps to the jungle gym that had been put together next to the stage.

“This is Joey.”

Joey rose and picked up his suitcase. “I’m ready to go.”

Sadie scowled as she understood. “That’s not a package!”

“Yes, he is. He’s an extremely dangerous package that needs to be delivered to someone who knows how to handle him.” Angela held out an envelope.

Sadie stared at the brown paper in revulsion, making the connection. *Those are my orders.*

“They’re Adrian’s orders. You’re just a delivery boy.”

Joey chuckled. “She’s not a boy. See the boobies?”

Chuckles went through the room. Sadie slowly approached the child. “I’ll carry that for you.”

Joey gave up the suitcase, but not the small brown envelope in his other hand. Sadie refused to ask if those were his orders. She didn’t want to know. It horrified her to find out Angela was using children in her plan. *She might not be any better than the UN.*

Joey came over and took Sadie’s empty hand.

Angela motioned. “We’d like a radio call upon arrival to verify he’s safe.”

“Adrian won’t like this. Kendle and Quinn will hit the roof. Luke’s bunker isn’t a good place to raise a child.”

Angela held the door for both of them. “I’m aware. However, it is a great place to train a future Eagle.”

Sadie’s voice rose. “In what? Sleaze?”

It pleased Angela and everyone else that Sadie had chosen that description. It said she was aware that Adrian wasn’t the good guy he pretended to be. Hopefully, she would make the right choice when it counted.

Angela was saved from having to answer as Cate appeared in the hall ahead of them.

Cate stared at Joey.

Joey sent a deep wave of need.

Cate’s face twitched. She took another step forward.

Angela glared at Joey.

Joey let go and looked up at Sadie. “I’ll see her again.”

Cate finally turned and followed her brother into the dorm for real this time.

Sadie was aware of everyone staring at her and the little boy as they climbed the stairs. Sadie knew the other kids wanted her to be nice to the child, but she doubted they would have an instant bond like she’d just had with Kimmie. Unless this little boy had gone through the same things, they didn’t have anything in common.

“My daddy was in charge of the western United Nations division.”

Sadie stiffened again, glaring at him. “You’re the son of our enemy!”

Joey let go of her and kept walking.

Angela rustled the boy’s hair. “You’re not responsible for the sins of your family. None of us are. It may have been that way in the past, but I changed that because it wasn’t fair.”

Sadie liked hearing that even though she didn’t have a bad family to be cursed by. They’d been selfish and stupid, but that wasn’t the same.

She resumed walking, emotions starting to get unruly. She was being hit with too many things at one time that she wasn’t used to. Honesty and compassion were foreign to her.

Pam and Morgan were on the top deck. They both came over to say goodbye.

Joey kept walking.

A bit hurt, Pam stopped.

Morgan frowned. “Good luck, kid.”

Joey didn’t answer. He didn’t hate them, but it hadn’t taken long for him to figure out that family wasn’t going to stay together. He’d been taken in by nice people, but he’d refused to bond with them after seeing their future.

“Joey!”

Pam’s hurt voice made him stop and look back. He smiled at her. “It’s okay. I want to go.”

Pam forced herself to nod. *This isn’t right. He’s just a little boy.*

Joey controlled the need to lash out. *I'm much more than that.* He walked faster, forcing Ivan and Sadie to keep up. He was getting some of their thoughts now. It was new and wonderful. *I'll have my gifts soon.*

Angela walked them to the ladder and then knelt in front of Joey. She wrapped him in her embrace and kissed his cheek. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Joey nodded, hugging her. "He can teach me. If he doesn't, I'll be a bad boy when I grow up. We both saw it."

Everyone who heard him gained a better understanding of why Angela was sending the boy away. Once again, she was trying to save one of her lost souls.

Ivan came to the ladder to wait as Joey began to climb down. He was ready to catch the child if he slipped, but Joey's movements were confident. He was used to conquering new situations without letting anyone know how nervous he really was.

Ivan felt that deeply. As the boy reached him, Ivan gently took his arm and directed the boy onto his back. "It's good to have a ride through the jungle when it's dark."

Joey grinned and held on tight.

Sadie followed, staring at them. Ivan didn't comment on her healed skin or the little boy with her. Sadie assumed he'd known Joey was being banished. *His good attitude might be practice for when he has his own kids.*

It suddenly seemed like a good idea. Sadie decided she would try to help Adrian care for the child as practice for when they had their own baby. If Angela was right, that would be less than a year from now.

Angela stayed at the top of the ladder with her guard as everyone else went below, keeping her thoughts blocked.

## 2

“Why didn’t she give me an envelope or any orders for the fight?”

Ivan shrugged carefully, not jostling the child. “I don’t know. She obviously trusts you or you wouldn’t be allowed to be alone with one of our kids.”

Sadie frowned. “I’m not alone with him.”

“But you will be at some point. So will Kendle and Quinn.”

Sadie could tell from the disapproval in Ivan’s voice that he didn’t agree with Angela’s decision on that one.

Ivan rubbed Joey’s leg. “How are you doin’, champ?”

“I’m okay. She said this will be like having a nice dad.”

Ivan snorted. “She’s never been wrong, but this might be the first time.”

Sadie listened to Ivan chat with Joey, getting more upset with each minute that passed. By the

time they reached the dense jungle, her patience had run out. “How can you be okay with this? She banished a little kid for something he might do later. And she’s going to use him in the fight!”

Ivan slowed a little to let her catch up. “Angela has a reason for what she’s doing. Those of us who know her understand.”

Sadie didn’t. “I think it’s awful.”

Joey reached out to touch Sadie’s hair. He quickly let go. “Why is it hard?”

“I hate the way shampoo smells.”

Joey touched his own freshly scrubbed locks. They were soft under his fingers. “Your color is better, but I like being clean.”

“Well, good for you.”

Ivan swallowed a snicker at Sadie’s offended tone. The little boy had touched a sore spot. From all of the things he was reading about her, Ivan saw Sadie was in the difficult period of life where your conscience constantly spoke up, trying to direct you onto a good path. You could ignore it, for decades if you really wanted to, but if you were wise, you listened to that voice and were better off for it. Ivan considered giving her voice a little push of support but didn’t. *That’s not my job here.*

Sadie had been tracking his thoughts. She hated the feeling of being abandoned. “So what is your job? Just to sponge off Marc until you’re good enough for the boss?”

Ivan didn’t flinch or even tense. He was getting tired of hearing that accusation, but it no longer had

the power to make him angry because it was true. Angela had called him on it today. Everything that happened from here on out in his life would be because of *that* moment. Sadie's random comment had no power. That would always be in Angela's hands.

Sadie felt the first true flicker of jealousy. "Is there anything she's bad at?"

"She has too big of a heart. One day, it will probably get her killed."

Once again, Sadie didn't understand. *How can having a big heart be a bad thing?*

Joey supplied the answer, young voice full of tremors. "If you care for someone too much, you can be hurt by it."

Ivan frowned. "Yes, that is true, but that's not what I meant. A lot of the people who have gone on to betray us first convinced her or the other council members to give them a second chance, to let them in."

Joey nodded. *Don't let anyone in unless I need them for something and then don't trust them. Good to know.*

Ivan slowed, trying not to trip in the deep vines. "Wait. That's not what I meant. You just have to be careful that they aren't bad guys."

"So it's okay to let them in if they're good?"

Ivan relaxed as the boy got his point. "Exactly. Don't be closed off; be careful."

Joey liked hearing that. It gave him more options for a happy future.

Sadie hated that. It meant she had to take risks and let people get close. *That's not going to happen.*

“Why not?” Ivan was also keeping track of her thoughts. “Wouldn’t things be easier if you had people around you who could be trusted with your life?”

Sadie shrugged. “As long as they leave me alone, that’s good enough. I don’t need to be safe. I’ve never been like that.”

Ivan believed her. Just because she’d been a UN darling, that didn’t mean it was what she’d wanted or what she would have chosen if there had been another option. There hadn’t been, of course. The UN had responded to protests with bullets.

*Or worse.* Sadie swallowed a shudder. “How about a happier topic?”

Ivan was a bit surprised, but also pleased. A lot of people in her situation would have been begging for favors or bitching about the lack of them. “What would you like to discuss?”

Sadie’s stomach rumbled. “Was the barbecue good?”

“It was awesome.” Ivan dug in his pocket carefully to keep from dropping Joey. They were traveling through the thicker vines now and it didn’t matter that the time of day had changed—the vines still wanted to pull him down. “I brought something for you.”

Sadie took the small foil pouch, warming. *He brought me a treat!*

Ivan stored that reaction as he wiped his fingers on his jacket. He was wearing his backup. His main Eagle jacket was filthy and waiting to be washed. “The cooks were packing things to take to the mess. I thought you might enjoy a taste of it, but don’t share it with the outcasts or Angela might get mad.”

Sadie already had her fingers buried deep in the barbecued beef. She shoved a bite in her mouth. “I von’t!”

Ivan chuckled. It was a relief to find out she seemed to be a good person. He looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

Sadie glanced up in time to be caught by the full blast. She stopped, slowly pausing in her wild chewing. Chills hit her skin; a deep ache pulsed in her stomach.

Ivan felt it too. He assumed it was in response to the light charm he’d tossed out. He kept walking.

Sadie slowly followed, resuming eating, but her attention stayed on the mysterious man in front of her. *Maybe I should encourage a friendship with him. Him and the little girl. I like Kimmie.*

Joey hugged Ivan’s neck. *You got her.*

Ivan patted Joey’s hand. *Shhh.*

Sadie started to ask what they were talking about, but another voice echoed before she could.

“Help me!”

Ivan slid Joey to the ground and pushed the boy against Sadie. He drew his gun.

Sadie understood she was responsible for the child. She put one hand around his little wrist and drew her knife from her belt with the other.

A shadow stumbled toward them in the darkness, crashing and tripping his way through. “Please, help me!”

Ivan got a quick glimpse of a pirate sword and clothes in tatters. He saw weapons in the man’s holster and a thick body under the filthy garb. He didn’t see any signs that the man was in mortal danger. Ivan assumed his Eagle stance, lifting his gun. “Stop right there!”

The man kept coming. His eyes ran over Sadie and Joey in hunger. “You have to help me!”

Birds and insects went silent as the man got closer.

Ivan scanned the man’s mind and found no power, only thoughts of claiming some for himself. “Where did you come from?”

“Our raft sank. Everyone else died.”

Ivan didn’t believe him. “Are you from the detention center?”

The man hesitated.

Ivan finished his trap. “We are too. It’s okay. Safe Haven said we can stay here.” Ivan lowered the gun. He smiled brightly. “How can we help you?”

Not expecting an easy entrance, the man stumbled. “Um... I need food!”

Ivan stepped forward with his hand out. “I’m Ivan.”

The man's big hand came out; a grin split his face, showing neat white teeth. The pirate grabbed Ivan's hand and jerked him close. "I'm evil."

"I know." Ivan fired once.

The man fell to his knees, knife dropping from his other hand.

The shot echoed across the island, drawing attention from everybody.

The sound of running boots echoed next.

Ivan keyed his radio. "We had an intruder. The threat is neutralized. Recommend full check and double security."

"Copy. Injuries?"

"Negative."

The sound of boots grew louder, closer.

Ivan was unable to determine if whoever was running toward them was from his camp, Adrian's camp, or were companions of their attacker.

Ivan picked the darkest shadows next to them and nudged Sadie and Joey that way. "Stay close. Be quiet." As soon as they were in the shadows, Ivan brought up his shield and concentrated.

Sadie stared in delight as Ivan's shield glowed green and then blended in perfectly with the environment. No one would know they were there.

*Unless they read your thoughts. Be quiet.*

Sadie and Joey both went dark.

Ivan was a little impressed and a little creeped out at how well both of them did that. Ivan told himself it was due to their time with the UN and then turned his attention to the arriving boots.

“He isn’t here!”

“Are you sure this was the spot?”

“Positive.”

Daryl glanced around. “Eagle check!”

“Over here.” Ivan let his shield become clear again, then he lowered it.

The small group of Eagles surrounded Ivan and Sadie. Daryl clicked his radio once.

Ivan knew that was a code to let Marc and Angela know he now had an escort. Ivan led the way, anxious to get Sadie and Joey to where they were going. He hadn’t expected problems.

Daryl broke off from the group and went to the body. He hefted it over one big shoulder and turned toward the ship. “Let’s go find out who you are.” He was eager to let the few people on land get a glimpse of the body and run for the ship. Angela wanted them all on board overnight. She couldn’t order it; this would help.

“He was part of the group who took over this island.”

Ivan was sure Joey was correct. He didn’t give his thoughts on it.

Sadie was upset. She picked Joey up in her free arm, not caring that the move drew approval from Ivan and their escort. “I thought we were safe here.”

Ivan shook his head. “Nature won’t attack us while we’re on the island, but she won’t stop anybody who comes here from trying to hurt us either. Her deal is with all of humanity, not just Safe Haven.”

Sadie didn't like that. "Maybe we can make a different deal."

Ivan frowned over his shoulder. "Leave that shit to the boss. She's the only one who can stand that heat when things go crazy."

Sadie didn't answer.

Ivan sighed. "Some people have to learn the hard way. When it hits you, go to Angela and let her help you understand your place in the grand scheme of things."

Sadie scowled. "Do you know *your* place?"

Ivan thought about his orders. "I do now."

Their Eagle escort made Sadie feel better, but only because there was a kid involved. *I don't need backup. These Safe Haven people are weaker than I thought.*

Ivan snorted. "Yeah, weak. Sure."

Sadie flushed. "I didn't mean to insult everyone. You guys just can't seem to do anything on your own."

"We're trained to handle things as a group." Ivan reached out and took Joey. "It's great that you don't need help very often." Ivan glanced at her. "But everyone needs someone else, even if it's just that neighbor who checks on them or the paperboy who has a minute to chat. The war didn't remove our need for other people."

"But they can't be trusted!"

Ivan sighed. "Makes things harder, doesn't it?"

Sadie chuckled. "Yes."

The Eagle escorts kept their minds blank, but they stored the information. Ivan was following through. Marc would be pleased. None of them knew how Angela would take it.

Ivan swallowed his bitterness. “Let’s go faster. I’m on a schedule.” He didn’t feel bad about being curt to Sadie now. It was obvious that she was only interested in Adrian. Their plan wasn’t going to work. *But I won’t be here to see them try something else. The boss gave me the hardest run of my life. I have no idea if I can do it, but I’m going to try.*

Chapter Twelve

# Concerning Privacy

1

**A**drian and Kendle met them in the middle of the road, halfway up the hill. Quinn was above them, guarding the bunker against his will.

Adrian stepped forward, scanning them in a fast, memorizing blur. A kid—*special*. Sadie and Ivan. *Ivan is bloody and Sadie is quiet*. A heavy escort. All the Eagles had guns in their grips and eyes that shifted continuously as they searched for the next threat. “We heard a gunshot. What happened?”

“Intruder.” Ivan walked by him, taking Sadie to the bunker. He showed Adrian mentally, but he didn’t explain Joey’s presence. “They’re clearing the ship. You should shut your door after I leave.”

Kendle kept her disappointed thoughts locked. She assumed the intruder had been the missing fifth person from the RIB. She’d been hoping they might do more damage.

Adrian followed, frowning. “What’s...” Adrian saw the envelope in Joey’s hand. He flashed to their fight with the government.

*Marc grinned, tossing an arm around Kendle's gun hand as he drew his Colt and fired into Adrian's chest, five times in rapid succession.*

*The reports echoed, sending men to the ground and fighters to the train doors for cover.*

*Marc and Adrian were locked in eye-to-eye combat as the blond slid to his ass in the tunnel, pouring blood. Adrian tried to ask, but the wounds were already affecting control of his body.*

*"She said it was a fair fight, but that I didn't have to do it that way. She meant make peace, of course." Marc leered as Adrian coughed out blood and puked. "You can die now."*

"Hey!" Sadie shoved him. "Why does everyone have that reaction? Was it that bad?"

Adrian forced his feet to move, stomach boiling. "Bad doesn't even come close."

Sadie was finally curious, but there wasn't time right now. She handed the envelope to Adrian and went inside the bunker.

Sadie saw her clothes had been picked up. The entire shower area had been straightened and was ready for the next person. She grinned at Kendle. "Thanks, mom."

Kendle snorted. "I made your man handle it."

Joey wasn't impressed. *That's Adrian Mitchel? I don't understand why my dad was scared of him.*

Ivan laughed.

Sadie forced a smile at Joey. "Come on. I'll show you around."

Joey went to Ivan.

Ivan stared at the child, mind closed to the rest of them unless they wanted to fight their way through his mental layers.

Joey smiled. "I'll be fine."

"Still. If you need me, call me. I'll be here in three minutes, though I may need to borrow your lungs."

Joey giggled. He let go of Ivan and took Sadie's hand, sticking to it when she tried to pull away. "Show me my new home."

Kendle's mouth dropped open. "What did he say?"

Quinn glared at Ivan. "Was this your idea?"

Ivan snorted. "To leave a little kid here with you traitors and outcasts? You must be stupid." He held his breath as he went further inside. No one had showered while they were gone. The reek had gotten stronger.

Joey didn't notice the smell. "My dad had a bunker like this." It made him feel at home. His steps slowed at the sight of Kendle and her scars, but he didn't ask what had happened. He'd witnessed worse at the detention center, though those people had died from their injuries. The red mark down her arm was also a curiosity, but he knew not to question the unhappy woman.

Kendle didn't want the boy here. He was obviously trouble, and his neat clothes and quiet demeanor implied he was also intelligent. That

meant he would be harder to distract than a normal child.

Ivan went to the door. He was almost outside before Adrian recovered enough to speak.

“Wait.”

Ivan paused as soon as he got out into the fresh air. “What?”

Adrian dropped the single sheet of paper. “I can’t do this. Take him back.”

Ivan walked down the dark road with his frowning escorts. “Talk to the boss about returns. My department only handles shipping.”

Adrian stared as they vanished into the shadows. He slowly rotated to examine the child Angela wanted him to train or eliminate in just two weeks.

Power immediately lashed out, throwing heat over all of them.

Adrian inhaled deeply. *Byzan child. Dangerous.*

He reluctantly accepted that Angela might have been right to send the boy here. She already had a lot of adult byzan on that ship. A child conceived after that level was attained often inherited their parent’s strongest skill. Despite not having access to their gifts yet, they could still control people with blasts of their emotions.

Adrian suddenly longed for the moment when he and his daughter would be reunited. *I hope you don’t hate me when we finally come face to face again.* Adrian went inside the bunker and shut the

door against the bugs. “I’m staying here tonight. In the morning, we’ll make other arrangements.”

Kendle was soothed. She went to the cooking area and began pulling out pans. “Find me a protein and a starch and I’ll get a quick meal together. Then *everyone* will get a shower.”

No one argued. In fact, only Quinn was listening. Sadie and Joey were walking the shelves and talking about what they found. Adrian was studying them with concern and the faint gleam of a man who had a new project.

Kendle smacked the pan onto the stove, annoyed. *She’s not even here and Angela still controls every second of our lives. I hate her so much! There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give to see her die—including Marc’s life.*

Occupied, no one caught her thoughts.

Quinn saw her expression and recognized her body language. He considered offering her a service or comfort, but decided against both. He secured the bunker and went to make sure his rifle was thoroughly cleaned for duty.

## 2

Ivan saw Charlie putting a bedroll down near the tent where Tracy was hiding. Sobs came from there as Ivan approached. He frowned. “No luck, I guess. Do you want me to try now?”

Charlie scowled at him, already covered in shame and embarrassment. “Why? You want to

claim her now that my mom doesn't want you anymore?"

Ivan's heart dropped. "What?"

Charlie was pissed at the world and eager to let anyone have it if they were stupid enough to talk to him. "You were replaced today—by someone who has honor. I thought you knew. Everyone else does."

Ivan looked around, meeting the eyes of the guards. Contempt and gloating flew at him from multiple directions.

Ivan lifted his chin and stepped by the angry teenager without replying. It was obvious Charlie was right. Shouting at the snotty kid wouldn't help him. *I thought being like Marc would make her happy. I just found out differently today. What did she expect me to do? Try to claim her in front of everyone? Start a fight for her? I'm not that man anymore.*

Charlie growled, frustrated at the lack of a target who would fight back. As much as he wanted to be left alone, he needed to get rid of this anger and pain.

Conner appeared on the top deck. *I've got a chess board and a dirty movie.* The teenager had enjoyed the restful day, but he hadn't actually relaxed. *I can't. We're not in the clear yet.*

Charlie snorted, making Tracy jump.

Conner tried again. *A bottle and an ear that's not doing anything else tonight?* It would do him good to have someone to talk to about Candy. *If I*

*can figure out when it's supposed to happen, she might not need that extra life I have ready for her. Then she can hold onto it forever.*

Charlie sighed, which also made Tracy's shadow twitch.

*Fine!* Charlie rose, leaving the bedroll. He stomped by the tent, fury growing when Tracy's shadow cringed as if he was coming in after her.

The guards were glad to see Charlie climb the ladder and board the ship.

Lingering in the shadows behind the bridge to observe, so was Marc. He would show Conner his gratitude later.

The other Eagles were clearing the ship. Marc wanted to be sure the threat wasn't right here, trying to get on board without being noticed. His scans were running continuously. He knew something else was coming. *I'm already getting tired. How is Angela still standing at all?*

Marc's lips curved. *I still think she's a beautiful, dangerous robot.*

His demon laughed and resumed scanning for the next threat, while watching out for Angela, who was staring at the island from the front deck.

Marc turned toward the ramp, hearing steps.

Angela stiffened at the sounds behind her. She'd been deep in thought, trying to find every possible outcome of her choice on Joey.

Kenn spotted her alone and glared toward the bridge, where her rookie was standing and sulking.

“If you need time alone, do it in a cabin. It’s not safe up here without a guard.” Everyone had been warned that Darren was unhappy. They’d also been told intruders might be on the ship. The guards hadn’t finished clearing it yet.

Angela ignored his scold. She stared at the top of the cliff. “Update me while you’re here.”

“I only have a few items.” Kenn kept the heavy bag over his big shoulder as he dug out his notebook. “Shawn is splicing and dicing. He said he’ll have four versions ready by dawn if you can keep Missy and Pam occupied after your meeting.”

“I will. Does he need help?”

“He said the quiet time to work is his reward for the work.”

Angela chuckled. “Okay. Did you find a way to send it out?”

“No, but Marc did. He and Theo will cover it in the morning.”

“Satellite phone system?”

“Yes. They’ll make those files available, but they’ve also got an idea for a computer-generated notice that will pop up on any other satellite device and direct them to those files. I added radio calls where we broadcast the audio.”

“Odds that someone will see or hear any of it?”

“Good, actually. There hasn’t been anything new over the waves in a year. Word will spread.”

“I need to be sure. Add a surprise, if you know how to do it.” She gestured in Eagle code.

Kenn grinned. “Marc will love that.”

Angela scanned the bridge. There were footprints all up and down the pontoon bridge now, going in every direction. The mud had dried into a geological record of their exodus. “Next?”

“The call earlier was from Australia.” Kenn handed her the sheet with his copy of the call and its location. “Funny thing. The bodies from the RIB Marc blew up—”

“Were Australian.” Angela fought the guilt again.

“But Ivan’s pirate wasn’t. He had an old American passport.”

“We’ll maintain high security for now. What else?”

“The camp found out Gabe died. They think he was electrocuted.”

“He was.”

Kenn grimaced, showing his first emotion about the incident. “How do I protect her?”

“Get her to convince them it was an accident.”

“It was. I saw it.”

Angela had already viewed it through the memories of the guards. “There were too many witnesses to hide what happened. Always use the truth. It’s the perfect defense.”

Kenn didn’t feel better. That wouldn’t happen until this was all settled. The coming battle was nothing to him compared to Tonya being charged with murder.

“It would be accidental.”

Kenn sighed. *There was nothing accidental about it. Her witch went straight for his throat. You know as well as I do that our demons never attack without orders.*

“You shouldn’t have told me that.”

“I trust you.”

“This isn’t about trust. Don’t ever repeat that, even to her. Forget it and hope no one else noticed. If they did, I expect you guys to leave before she’s officially charged.” Angela turned back to the island view.

Kenn was smothered in gratitude. He quickly scanned to see if anyone might have overheard them.

Nothing moved.

Kenn rotated toward the bridge to finish one of his orders. He glared at the rookie until the man came down the steps and took up a post in the shadows near Angela.

Only a few feet away, Marc stopped himself from touching the rookie on the arm. *He’ll wet himself. No one wants to clean that up.*

Kenn left the heavy bag of weapons next to Grant’s chair and then trudged toward his cabin. His exhaustion level was too high for most things, but carrying out battle setups with one eye open was how he’d spent most of his adult life.

Kenn nodded at Marc as he went by. He’d been aware of the man since he hit the top of the ramp.

The rookie looked over and saw Marc. The man jumped sideways, almost bumping into Kenn.

Kenn chuckled, shaking his head. “Rookies!”

Marc laughed, assuming his cover was blown. He limped up behind Angela on his cane, in too much pain to leave it behind. He leaned against her heat, trying to offer comfort and support.

Angela braced her feet to take his weight, enjoying the way their bodies fit together. “I love you.”

Marc kissed the top of her curls and held her. Angela’s fear tasted like salty tears in the back of his throat.

Angela caught his musky smell and held onto it, emotions threatening her mental shield. She eased out of his arms to concentrate.

Marc was relieved. It was hard to hold his mind against her when they were touching. Their bond automatically tried to break through those walls. He decided a distraction was in order. “Ready for an update?”

“Yes.” Angela had been trying to leave things alone and let him handle them as much as she could. She didn’t want him to feel pushed aside or like there wasn’t work for him to do, but not running things herself might drive her crazy.

“I only have two updates, but one is really good.”

Angela sighed. “Then give me the bad one first.”

Marc frowned lightly. “No one was able to save Gabe. He’s gone.”

Angela didn't tell him Kenn had already delivered that news. "Tonya will have to learn to control her immediate reaction to deliver a mortal injury upon being surprised or displeased." There were other ways to handle it. Unless the person was being violent, what she'd done was forbidden.

Marc shrugged. "On the other hand, Gabe was slowly getting out of control and this will deliver a clear lesson to every other person in camp who's like that. It's a reminder that the descendants will defend themselves."

Angela agreed. "What's the good news?"

Marc smiled proudly. "Every single thing on the list is done."

Angela ran through that list in her mind. "Everything?"

"Yes. My oral or cover it yourself?"

Angela chuckled sexily. "Your oral is awesome."

Marc laughed. He got out his sheet and read to her. "The beach was cleared of garbage, but only directly around the pontoon bridge. Paths were tramped down all over the place. It will be impossible to say for sure where everyone is or how many people we really have. I assume you dropped your bug in the restaurant?"

"Under the chair. It's not on yet. That's the one with the shortest battery life."

"Good. All the above-ground sites that were toured today have a microphone in them. Some of the stops also have bags of supplies and gear.

Everyone was armed, re-armed, or stocked on ammunition for the coming battle.”

She nodded. It would have been a simple matter to drop those items along with the envelopes, but Angela had chosen to do it separately. Debra and Jayda had teamed up for 45 minutes of quick deliveries. Neither of them had been suspected of carrying out that run. Kenn’s drop had been a last-minute addition she hoped they wouldn’t need.

“The Eagles who dropped off those items believe you decided to make our stand on the island.”

Angela didn’t confirm any of the theories or ideas. Too many ears were listening. This was a little bit like the government fight in that she couldn’t tell them all of the details ahead of time, but it was different in every other way. Each opponent they met on the battlefield had the potential to be exactly like them. Before, it had only been Donner and an army of normals. This fight was going to be much harder and not just because they couldn’t destroy the islands. There would be other enforcers, trackers, hunters, trap teams, and more. Safe Haven’s fighters only held a couple of advantages. Angela was using them carefully.

“All envelopes were accepted.”

Angela was thrilled. Her heart rate calmed a little; she was able to let go of the grip she had around his waist.

Marc groaned in relief but didn't complain. He understood she was terrified. He was too, but he was better at hiding it.

Grant appeared on the bridge. He motioned through the glass.

Angela sighed. "How long?"

Marc rubbed her arm. "He's ready whenever we are."

"We'll stick to the schedule."

Marc motioned to Grant with her answer. He put an arm around Angela's shoulders. They were waiting on the votes to be gathered for counting; they had time. "Is this fight going to be like the last one?"

"I didn't want it to be."

Marc believed her. All deaths bothered Angela, even when the people deserved it. "How much of the plan do you have finished?" He knew she'd been working on it continuously, but he wasn't sure how long that actually was. It could have been all the way from the beginning when she'd first gotten the vision of this fight. If so, he assumed she would have most of the details already worked out.

"It still needs a couple of finishing touches and a few people assigned after those touches are in place." Angela wound her fingers through his. "I had to wait until tonight to see who was willing to play this latest suicide game. The final notes will be ready shortly. I'm waiting on one more thing to play out."

"What's going to be the hardest part?"

Angela sighed deeply. “The same as it’s always been—accounting for wildcards. We’ve seen this battle take place.” She gave him a quick glance, daring him to deny it.

Marc didn’t. “And?”

“Sometimes a wildcard flips just seconds after you scan and there’s no way to know that something changed until your next scan. By then it’s usually too late to counteract it.”

Marc understood. “We just have to survive it.”

Angela stretched her leg out, rotating her ankle and wiggling her toes. She was a little swollen. “I tried to account for all of it. As long as wildcards don’t flip, our odds are 50% right now.”

Marc grimaced. “That’s not good enough.”

“I know. After you go over it, you can update those odds.”

“I will.” Marc took the next logical step to ensure their survival. “Then I’ll have Adrian go over it.”

Angela smiled. “You’re a fast study, Mr. Brady.”

Marc gave the expected grin. No matter what else, he would make sure the most important people in this camp were not in the last ring of danger that she was worried about. The final moment of any battle was the worst possible time for fate to flip a card. *And if Angie’s worried about that, then we should assume it’s going to happen.*

Angela scanned the island again. The darkness had swallowed the land. It was almost impossible to

view anything beyond the two fire cans they'd left burning. All the campers who'd wanted to spend the night had changed their minds after the pirate attack.

The Eagles were relieved. It was hard to provide security when it was this dark. They'd shrunk posts to the halfway point of the bridge. None of their people were on land now except for Ivan.

Angela saw that man coming now.

Even the rookie guards smirked at Ivan as he went by them. They'd all heard about his demotion.

Ivan glared. "He isn't the boss. But keep smirking. Someday I *might* be in charge and I'll remember every single moment like this."

The humor and jealous gloating faded as the men realized he was right. Marc didn't get the only vote on his replacement.

The bridge bobbed lightly; Ivan accounted for it automatically. The wind was picking up. *I guess Nature knows we're out of the protected area. I don't know why she keeps wasting her energy on hitting us. If left alone, we always screw ourselves.*

Ivan climbed the ladder and joined them, also glaring at the rookie guard in the shadows of the bridge. "He isn't any good to you that far away."

Angela also ignored his scold. "Impression?"

Ivan sighed. "You're wasting your time trying with her in any way except one." Ivan gestured. "Daryl was right and wrong. Use *our* girl."

Angela understood. Sadie and Kimmie had hit it off right away. They would become good friends if things worked out right.

Marc motioned toward the unhappy rookie. “Have Megan sent to the conference room. It’s time for both her punishments. Then go see point man for your next shift. Switch out!”

Now that the witnesses were leaving, Angela faced Ivan. “I’m sorry.”

Ivan’s cheeks and neck turned red; his hands clenched at his sides.

“I’ve decided to give Greg your place.”

Ivan’s anger lashed out at her for the first time. “You fucking liar!”

Angela smiled coldly, hand coming up to stop Marc from doing anything. “Be glad I’m not dropping your rank too. Take the rest of the night off and think about your future in this camp. You can still have one and it can be great, but it will *not* be with me.”

Ivan’s humiliation spewed out. “I’ll get a bottle and sleep with that. It’ll be warmer than you!”

He stomped off, shoving his way through the men coming up the ramp.

Marc saw Neil and Wade coming. “Come on. Let’s go find out if we can share. They need the deck.”

Angela pulled away from Marc. She went to the bridge steps. “I’ll be down after the announcement.”

Marc didn't argue, though he frowned as he went below. *She thinks I don't know he gave her something and she wants to be alone to look at it.*

Angela smiled as she entered the bridge. *I love Marc the genius. Please don't return to being the hothead. The disappointment might kill me.*

She took the light pouch from her pocket and opened it, braced to be hurt by whatever Adrian had sent.

Her old dog tags gleamed at her.

Angela winced. Memories threatened to overwhelm her control. She hadn't worn the tags since they were in the mountain.

Angela slid the chain over her neck without crying, but it was close. *Momma still misses you.*

### 3

"I'll miss this." Tim shut off the light in his private room. He moved down the small, narrow hallway to the adjoining room and stepped into the church.

He pulled the door shut behind him, listening for the click that told him it was locked. Depending upon the outcome of the vote currently taking place, he might never be back here. He had just finished cleaning and packing all of his things. It was sad that it only came to two small boxes and his kit.

He'd left everything else. The room was ready for whoever else might be brave enough to challenge the current status of religion in Safe

Haven. Knowing where they came from didn't make it any easier to follow the rules. They'd all been wrong about that one. Mankind had assumed if they knew what the rules were, people would follow them.

Tim stepped around the altar and walked between the two rows of pews. A cold draft blew through the church. *Is a window open?* A chill ran up his arms and tickled his neck.

Tim paused to let his vision adjust to the darkness.

Five shadows stepped forward to box him in.

Tim scanned the blank faces in alarm. "What's going on?"

All five Eagles took another step forward, securing possible avenues of escape.

Tim put the boxes on the pew next to him. He dropped the kit onto his boot, instinctively following Eagle procedure. It was right there if he needed something from it during this confrontation.

And it was obvious that was going to be the case. Tim crouched, hand quickly unzipping it. He dug for the nearest weapon as all five men converged on him.

People outside the church stopped and stared in shock as the men swung at the same time, each of them nailing a different part of Tim's body.

Tim dropped to the ground, weapon sliding down the aisle. He curled into a ball as they beat on him.

*Thud!*

*Thud!*

*Thud-thud!*

The sound of the beating was awful.

Outside, Anna started to go that way.

On duty, Trent shook his head. "He earned this."

Anna scowled, realizing it was an Eagle thing she wasn't privy to. She stomped off to go find someone with more authority who could stop the abuse. Visiting the bookstore was forgotten.

In the church, Kyle stepped back. "Pause for round two."

The other men retreated, some of them wiping blood down their pant legs.

Tim gasped in air, trying to recover from the intense pain flaring along his ribs, his thigh, his shoulder, his cheek, and his ankle. He sucked in a deeper breath of air, moaning and then spit out blood on the floor of the church. It joined the other splatters already falling from his lip and nose.

Kyle motioned. "Round two."

Tim curled up in a ball again, forgetting to turn over. It left the same areas open for abuse. The Eagles quickly targeted those spots, drawing grunts and a shout.

Outside the church, the other witnesses faded into the shadows of the stairwell. They weren't willing to leave yet, but they didn't want the Eagles to know they'd witnessed the attack either.

Inside the church, Kyle stepped back again. "Pause for round three."

Tim whimpered, pain lighting up his nerve endings. There were four rounds. Tim fell into his training. He rolled over, scanning through the red blur over his vision for an escape. Not finding one, he curled into a solid ball and waited for it to be over.

Instead of calling the third wave, Kyle stepped forward and crouched down. “Do you accept this loving correction from your team, Timothy?”

Tim was in too much pain to concentrate, but his Eagle training delivered the proper response. “Yes! In the spirit it was intended!”

“Next time you know something important, tell one of us. If you break this rule again, you’ll pay with your life.”

Tim peered up gratefully. “I’ll tell you! I swear!”

“Good.” Kyle punched him in the mouth.

Tim sank to the cool floor, fading toward the darkness.

Kyle stood and keyed his mike. “Medic needed in the church.”

Standing next to him, Morgan keyed his in response. “Copy. On the way.”

Morgan immediately knelt and took the kit from his shoulder to tend Tim’s wounds.

His team watched in fascination as Morgan flipped into their medic. In moments like this, it was obvious that Morgan was a valuable asset to the Eagles. Respect for him went up.

Morgan used the smelling salts first, needing Tim to stay awake. “It looks like you’ve taken some hits. Don’t go to sleep for a few hours.”

Kyle strode to the door, scanning for witnesses. He spotted several in the shadows. He let his orbs glow red.

People took off.

Tim didn’t understand exactly what was happening, but he sensed it was an attempt by the Eagles to save him somehow. He didn’t ask questions. He assumed they would tell him what to do.

Morgan stood up. “He’ll live.” He dropped a bottle of Tylenol into Tim’s bloody lap. “Two of those with food every six hours. Come see me if things get worse.”

Tim blew out a bloody snort, spraying the floor and his arm. “You’re the last fucking person I would go to after this.”

Morgan patted Tim on his shoulder. “That’s the spirit.”

The five men left the church, going in different directions as they reached the exit.

Tim stayed on the floor and sucked in air, wishing once again that he’d made a different choice.

Chapter Thirteen  
**His Own Decisions**

1

***I****t's time to vote, Safe Haven. Please make your way to one of the polling places listed on doors and hall walls. If you don't see a list, ask an Eagle to point you in the right direction.*" The PA system let out a high-pitched whine as Cliff ended the announcement. He was taking his first shift as a radioman.

Flatulence echoed through the room.

Stanley cringed. He opened the tiny window next to him. "Sorry. The chili got me."

People laughed. Dwight's chili was powerful.

Grant smiled at the group as he and Ray got into line with the other voters. The office room was wide and warm, holding more than four dozen Eagles and camp people. "Good evening. Is everyone ready to decide the future of the planet?"

A couple of people gave weak smiles, but most of them made a face. Everyone was voting now; the mood had gotten rough again. They were already missing the easy-going day they'd just enjoyed.

"How can you say that?! The right to privacy is more important than the right to a gun!"

“You’re out of your damn mind. Stop talking to me now.”

Eagles and everyone else looked over at the two camp men. Both of them went in a different direction, one muttering and the other rolling his eyes. It was happening all over the ship in every area where they were assigned to vote. Angela had decided it would be easier if there were multiple places to cast a ballot instead of just one. Grant had no idea who was on point over this zone.

“She didn’t put anyone on point here. She trusts us.” Ray got them into the correct line. There was another vote taking place here among the Eagles as well, but only a few of them had received an invitation to cast a ballot in that one. Everyone was curious, but no one asked. They all assumed it was another part of the devious scheme Angela had created to defeat the enemy. They weren’t in a hurry to hear more details. Envelopes were sticking out of pockets all through the room. Minds were running over details and plans; the mood continued to sour.

“What are you voting for?”

Grant turned around, swallowing a frown. Jonny was sauntering toward them and he was once again staring in adoration, right in front of Ray.

Rage rose, but this time Ray controlled it. He let Grant make his own decisions.

Grant was proud of Ray. He was also annoyed with Jonny. He gave the man a disapproving look and tone. “You have to stop now. I’m not the least bit interested.”

Jonny wasn't cowed by the conversation or the witnesses. He took a step closer, smiling warmly. "That's because you don't know me."

Grant shook his head. "No."

Jonny examined Grant's white outfit, lingering on the special parts of his body. "I just want to get to know you. What's the problem?"

"The problem is you won't take no for an answer. I've made it clear. Leave me alone or things will get ugly."

Jonny saw Ray had his back to them. He stepped closer to let Grant catch a whiff of his once expensive cologne. "Are you sure? I bet I'm hung better than he is."

People around them laughed or scowled.

Grant's embarrassment flared, turning his face a dark shade of red. "Go away."

Jonny finally felt Grant's rejection. Ugliness swarmed his face. "How can you pick him over me? He let his last bitch die in the mountain!"

Grant punched Jonny in the throat.

Jonny hit the ground at his feet.

Grant stepped up next to Ray as witnesses stared or hooted. He feigned innocence. "Did he fall?"

Jonny tried to speak, but he couldn't stand the pain. He hacked and coughed, making people frown. A few of them even gagged.

"Someone get him to the medic." Daryl dropped his vote into the private box and then stomped through the crowd, not happy to be here. "The boss sent me to supervise things. That means somebody

in here caused her to lose full trust in us and it wasn't the radio jockey now puking on his own leg."

Daryl went to stand in the corner next to the lockbox, glaring at everyone. He wasn't really upset. He was following orders. With his arms crossed over his chest and his gloves on, no one noticed the fresh bruises on his hands.

Silence fell throughout the room, other than Jonny's sounds. No one spoke again until after they'd dropped their vote and left the room.

## 2

"Before I read the results of the vote, I want to remind you that violence is not allowed in this camp." Angela's voice echoed across the PA system. "I won't tolerate fighting or breaking rules. If it happens again, I'll come for you and neither one of us will enjoy that."

Eagles who were getting worried about the mood relaxed.

"I realize everyone is going to feel strongly no matter how this turns out. There may be shock and tears, and it'll be hard for you to deal with the happiness of some of those around you. Go to an entertainment floor and find something to do, or maybe even go to bed early. Read a book; talk to an Eagle if you need it, but I repeat: there will be no disruption of normal life in this camp because of the outcome of this vote."

Angela drew in a breath, a little shocked herself. “The result of the vote, overwhelmingly, is to remove the right to privacy so it can no longer be used as a defense to permit criminal behavior.”

Angela counted to 30. She could imagine what it sounded like down there right now. *That’s why I’m up here. I need the moment of space before I go down and kick in my next plan.*

Angela continued her address. “The vote was 72% for and 26% against, with 2% not caring. There is no margin of error on a simple yes or no vote. Everyone who counted the ballots counted all of them and then agreed on what each answer was and then they tallied them. There are no mistakes in the vote. There will be no recount.” Angela wanted it clear that they’d done everything they could to ensure the integrity of the process, but at 72%, there was no need to worry about it. The majority were going to get what they wanted. For now, at least.

It was possible when they voted on the final document itself that an editing process might begin. It could include changes to these new laws. That was how any founding document needed to work so all of the citizens who lived under it could at least tolerate it, if not be happy with it. Angela knew it was impossible to please everyone. She hadn’t considered her 17% disapproval rating in a long time, but she wondered now how much it might have fluctuated. It was almost a sure bet that it had increased after losing so many lives to the radiation sickness.

“Because the right to privacy has been removed, using that defense is forbidden, meaning you can’t say, “I told him in confidence.” You also can’t say, “It’s my wife or husband. I can’t testify against them.” Other changes will come from this, such as future employers being allowed to view your medical records, but anti-discrimination laws should balance that out. The council will do everything possible to make sure all laws are fair and justly applied.”

Angela drew in another breath. “Safe Haven’s council has agreed that in an absence of our own laws, old world laws do apply, with a few exceptions. The Eagles, as most of you already know, have a lot of authority. In many cases, Eagle rules supersede old world laws because they were created after the war, out of necessity. That necessity has not changed. As such, Timothy held an Eagle duty. He was bound by Eagle law to tell someone what Courtney was planning. Man on point will escort Timothy to the brig to await a trial date. He is officially being charged with dereliction of that duty.” Angela let off the mike and waited, confident her orders had been followed.

The radio immediately crackled with Kyle’s emotionless voice. “Sorry to interrupt, Boss, but I need to bring up the Double Jeopardy law. Tim has already been punished for his oversight, as an Eagle. He can’t be punished twice.”

Angela counted to five, as if she had to think about it. “The council will discuss this. The decision has been delayed.”

Jennifer’s voice came through the radio next. “Do we really need to? We’re all tired and you just said old world laws apply when we don’t have our own. We can’t try him if he was punished. Can’t we let it go now?”

“That’s up to the council.” Angela wasn’t going to skip that part of their new law system, even though she was manipulating it. “All members of the council will supply an answer before they go to bed. I’ll announce the decision to Tim and his lawyer. That’s all for now, Safe Haven. Good night, and remember to follow your orders to the letter. All of our lives, as usual, will depend on it.”

### 3

“What did Kyle mean? Tim wasn’t punished. He’s not even an Eagle anymore.” Samantha scanned the suddenly quiet men in their cluttered cabin. “What’s going on?” They’d both left after saying they had a quick meeting to attend. They hadn’t been back long.

Wade refused to speak. This was Neil’s job. He checked on the small boys who were enjoying their fifth nap today.

Neil shrugged, stacking her finished kit on the lowest shelf of the closet. “Tim was corrected by his team during a recent meeting.”

Samantha's lids narrowed as Neil rubbed his fist; several new purple bruises were there. She got up and went to the closet to get her shoes.

Eager to be out of the crossfire, Wade gestured. "I've got the twins covered."

Neil grabbed his jacket as Samantha donned her gym shoes and flew out the door to go check on Tim.

Neil gave Wade a relieved look as he shut the door.

Samantha marched toward the stairs and then stopped. She didn't know where to go.

"The Church." Neil knew where Tim would be now that he wasn't going to be arrested. He wouldn't want to be in the camp areas where everybody could see him and know what had happened.

Samantha hurried that way, but her anger didn't hold. Because he'd been corrected by senior Eagles, Tim would avoid a trial. Even though the official word had to come down from the council, Samantha was confident the charges would be dismissed. Kyle was right. Tim couldn't be punished twice. She didn't agree with the beating, though.

Crinkling paper and angry mutters caught Sam's attention as her anger faded. She began noticing the envelopes. Small and brown, they were in nearly every hand or sticking out of every pocket Samantha went by. It was impossible to mistake what was happening. "I'll be glad when you guys get your orders so I'll know where you are."

Neil didn't say anything.

Samantha stopped, hands coming to her hips.  
“Where is it?”

Neil patted his pocket. “I carried out my first order twenty minutes ago when I shed blood in our church.”

Samantha's anger lit up her face. “That's why Wade was okay with me leaving the cabin.”

“He's packing both of our kits right now. We're being sent out ahead of the others.”

Samantha wanted to scream. She also wanted to demand to be taken along, but she already knew no one was going to agree. She had two little boys who needed to be cared for and she was barely recovered from their birth. *I have to sit this one out except for weather scans. I don't know how I'll be able to stand it.*

Neil stepped closer, linking their fingers. He didn't give false promises. He lent physical comfort and hoped that would be enough.

“When are you leaving?”

Neil brushed lint from her gray sweater. “We're scheduled for the second stop. Probably five hours.”

Samantha hugged him tightly and then resumed her fast clip down the hall. “I'll be ten minutes and then we can spend the rest of that time doing whatever you want.”

Neil already knew what it was. As soon as she verified that Tim was okay, he was taking her back to the cabin.

Samantha slid aside as Marc and a few others came down the hall and took the steps to the next deck.

Neil fought the urge to ask Marc if he needed an extra guard right now. *My family comes first.*

Samantha moved faster, wanting every second they had left.

#### 4

Angela went down the ramp into the ship, chin up and mind blank as men and women stared at her in disbelief. Their displeasure about the vote was outweighed by the orders ringing through their minds. She had assigned each person carefully, based on what they would do in each situation. She was counting on them to follow through and she had no doubts that they would. This time.

Angela went to the bottom deck, listening to the mental clock tick. *I hate that sound.*

She stopped at the guard post on this hall. “I need to see this person.”

Jeff took the slip of paper. They didn’t really need a guard here anyway. Most of the people in the conference room could handle anything that happened. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

Angela didn’t want to have the same argument that was circling the ship right now. “It was a camp vote.”

Jeff had already switched off his radio. He didn’t want to listen to anyone brag that their side

had won. “They’re celebrating losing their freedoms.”

Angela sighed, nodding. “But it’s what they think they want. Who are we to tell them no? We know the old way doesn’t work.”

Jeff couldn’t think of a good response. He stomped off to go get the person on her note.

Angela smiled at Marc as she joined him in the doorway. “I see the new sheets in your pocket; update me.”

Marc leaned heavily on his cane. “The council already sent notes. They said to let Tim go. We now have a double jeopardy law on the books.” Marc spotted her wrist blade.

Angela noticed he was wearing one of the new vest setups.

They both chuckled.

Angela waved. “Go on.”

“The camp is starting to grumble about Gabe. Will that hold?”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t think Gabe had many relationships, but if I’m wrong, someone could still make a claim.”

Marc agreed. “I’ll let Kenn know she isn’t out of the woods yet.”

“Wait until morning. Let them have a good night. What else?”

“Theo picked Monica for his XO. They’ll be working tonight while the camp sleeps. It might make some noise.” Marc scanned the sheet. “That’s it.”

Angela rubbed her upset stomach as she went into the conference room and joined the others in the rear at the thick, long wooden table. They'd chosen this conference room because it was a huge square of space that was hardly ever used.

Standing near the table, Megan lifted a brow at Jennifer. *Should I start begging for mercy now or later?*

Jennifer shook her head. *After we're done here.*

Megan nodded, resigned to waiting a little longer to learn her fate. She rubbed her arms, trying to ignore the vent by her leg. Almost everyone was still wearing Eagle jackets and jeans to compensate for the air conditioning.

Angela fingered her long black sweater. *That's why I made them shut it off while we were on the island. No point in wasting that much power for people who didn't leave the ship.*

Greg grinned at Shawn as he came from the bathroom across the hall and sat at the dusty table. "Did you enjoy the testing that led to this moment?"

Busy examining the replicas of famous art that lined these brown paneled walls, Shawn was barely listening. "What testing?"

Greg's humor failed as he understood he was the only one who'd been tested.

"There are rules to deals like this." Angela sat in the chair across from the two men. The thick table was between them, but she didn't feel like it was enough. *I'm not sure what's going to happen here.*

“As soon as you gain the power, you have to set laws. That is non-optional. Do it first.”

Angela drew in a deep breath and stalled, scanning the others in the room. Pam was standing behind Shawn with a comforting hand on his shoulder. A moment like this could be traumatic, but she wasn't worried about Shawn being able to handle it.

Marc leaned against the wall, grateful to get off his leg in any way. The cane gave him mobility, but it did nothing to stop the agony of using the limb before it was ready.

Jennifer was standing by the door of the musty meeting room in case they needed an enforcer, but she only watched one of the men who were about to join their ranks.

Greg flushed under the hard stares. The people here were evaluating him in this final moment and finding him lacking. “I don't know what I'm doing wrong.” He hoped that like in the Eagles, senior people would point him in the right direction.

No one spoke.

Angela wanted to, but she didn't know either.

Greg's determination rose. “Then let's just do it. I'll prove myself during, like I've always done.”

Angela nodded. “Marc's going to hit us with a sleep spell. Everyone ready?”

Shawn and Greg nodded, getting set.

Marc blasted them hard, hoping to get this done quickly.

Angela sighed, feeling danger approach and then wait out of range for the right second to strike. She had to let this one play out. She let the two men view her vast selection of powerful doors. “See the ones with green edges? Those hold demons who need a host.”

Greg yawned. “Where did they come from?” There were at least a hundred.

Marc frowned at the man. “She’s giving you both one of our mental children.”

Shawn didn’t know what to say. He’d thought his split would come from Pam.

“Awesome.” Greg drifted off, eager to meet a version of Angela that he could have.

Shawn fought sleep for a last question. “Why isn’t there information on this from the labs?”

Angela dropped out before she could answer.

Jennifer did it for her. “Because those moments resulted in death every time. The mental children have to be willing. If you’re holding their parent hostage, they aren’t going to like you. If they don’t like you, you die.”

Shawn faded into sleep with a deep frown.

Pam stayed close, watching to make sure he was breathing okay.

Marc did the same for Angela, but he also kept an eye on Greg. *He isn’t the problem, though. I’ve vetted Greg so many times I can recite his thoughts. This vibe is coming from someone who’s always been riding the edge.* Thanks to Tonya’s comments when she lifted his curse, Marc’s mind went to Ivan.

Jennifer shook her head. “He just got a bottle. Kyle’s shadowing him right now. He’s going to his cabin to sulk.”

Marc was glad to hear it. *But that doesn’t solve the mystery.*

Jennifer scanned the deck harder, but it was impossible to get through the ship. A couple of their people could do that now, but only when they were full of energy. Kyle was one of them. Jennifer wanted to learn how to do it, but she was saving her energy for the fight coming in two weeks.

Jennifer picked up a potential problem. “Jonny’s coming.”

Marc filled her in. “He and Megan are getting their punishments after this.”

Megan winced, dropping her eyes.

Jennifer wanted to ask what Jonny had done, but this wasn’t a good time for it. She would find out later. *Why can’t our people just be good? Are we cursed?*

Marc refused to give his opinion on that as Angela and the two men began to dream walk.

*Tap-tap.*

Marc opened the door so Jonny could come in and wait. “Have a seat.”

“No, thanks.” Darren slammed the syringe into Marc’s neck. He pushed the plunger and let go, reaching for his gun.

Marc saw the baby in Darren’s other arm. *Oh, shit!* He sank to his knees as the drugs started to work.

Jennifer gasped, legs threatening to buckle. “He has Autumn!”

*Mommy! Help me!*

Pam fumbled for her radio and her gun, heart thumping. *I don't want to die here. I just got my life back!* “Help! We need help on the bottom deck!”

## 5

“It’s happening.”

“I know. Marc will handle it.” Angela and the two men were deep in the fog, walking together as dreams circled the edges of their vision. She pointed at the far, dark cliff. “We have to get there for this to work. If we try it down here, we’re vulnerable.”

Greg began to peer through the fog around their boots. “To what?”

Angela shivered, walking faster as the dampness started sinking into her clothes, her hair, her skin. “Everything. Watch your six.”

Shawn and Greg flanked her, hands on weapons, hearts thumping. This didn’t feel like a dream. It felt like one of their runs through hell.

“That’s almost where we are.” Angela climbed the hillside, fighting her own weight in the thin air. “Dreams can take you anywhere, if you reach the right exit.” She smiled. “Or the entrance, if you prefer a half-full glass.”

It made sense to them, but neither man was able to fully appreciate the words right then. Elongated

visions were flashing faster, showing each of their dreams, but there were thousands more.

Angela grunted sadly. “There used to be millions. Day by day, those goals go dim and then they die. Humanity’s hope is fading from existence.”

“So we’re going to kill another thousand or more to help things along.” Shawn was bitter.

“If we have to, we’ll remove more than that. Safe Haven almost has enough good souls to restart the world’s population in the ways we need. The UN is about to fill in our gaps and provide a new tree of life for everyone.” Angela stopped at the edge of the cliff. “Lift me up there. I have to be first.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a demon to face, of course. That’s always what it comes down to with our kind.” Angela used their cupped hands and her own legs to jump. She clawed her way up the rest of the cliff, listening to the men follow her. *Eagles really will go into hell to complete a run.*

Angela and the Demon of Time saw each other as she stood.

“Betrayer!” He rushed at her, summoning all the power of his position.

Shawn and Greg tried to get there, to get in front of her, but there wasn’t time.

The Demon hit Angela full in the chest.

Angela stabbed the Demon with her wrist blade, twisting and groaning with it.

Angela's heart stopped.

So did the Demon's.

Both lifeforces vibrated against the fabric of time, pulling alarms and strings around them as they fell.

Greg blinked. The Demon was gone and Angela was standing next to them, uninjured. "I don't understand."

Shawn did. "She showed him what would happen. He chose not to take the path that brings down the world. She's safe here again."

"At least for a while." Angela connected their minds completely this time, showing her multitude of powerful doors again. "This is what your mind will look like." She pointed behind them, at a small cell where her witch paced nervously, observing.

Greg and Shawn both nodded politely to Angela's witch, honored that the spirit was allowing this. They were also uneasy; there was no door on her cell.

"You have three preferences or dislikes. Say them and doors will close. You pick from what's left. Shawn will go first." Angela could feel the problems on their ship, the fear and the rage, but she had to concentrate on holding them all together for this transfer. Even if she stopped right now, they all had to get to their physical bodies and wake up, and that took time after a sleep spell. *It's all on you, Marc.*

"Healer."

Over half the doors went dim at Shawn's first choice. It made him hesitate on his next need.

Greg growled. "Come on!"

"Fire."

All of the doors but two went dim.

Shawn realized he'd chosen rare traits. He followed through with his plan, hoping one of those two held what he needed. "Can help me save Pam's life."

Greg winced as both doors went dim. "Sorry, man."

Shawn sighed unhappily. He'd known this power couldn't do that. "The strongest of the two, please. We'll be very active."

One door lit up.

Shawn opened it and stepped forward like Pam had told him to do.

Greg observed so he would know what to do, almost able to forget about the gunshots cracking faintly in the distance.

Shawn opened his arms. "I accept you for what you are."

Power entered Shawn's soul and merged, shoving into his mind and his body.

"Now you." Angela was fascinated by the process and memorizing every second to examine later, but she felt the end coming. If they didn't get back soon, she might not be able to at all. *I wish I had more faith that Marc can handle these moments.* "Now!"

Greg had always known what he'd prefer if he was a descendant. "Nature."

Three dozen doors lit up.

"Alpha."

Half a dozen doors remained.

"Water."

Greg stepped forward and opened the single door. He entered the darkness and opened his arms. "I hope you're willing."

Power slammed into him, squeezing his chest until he thought he would collapse.

*I'm not!* The demon let Greg draw in a single ragged thread of air. *Unless you answer correctly.*

Greg nodded awkwardly, realizing he should have asked more questions before this moment arrived.

The demon released its hold, letting Greg breathe. *Who is your master when I let go?*

Greg recognized the tone. He scowled, rubbing his throat. "I serve myself first and Marc somewhere after that!"

"Good. I will not spend much time in my father's shadow." The demon let go of him and entered, merging.

Greg sucked in air as the demon finished settling in, pushing and shoving to make room.

Angela shut the link and began the trip back. She marched quickly through the foggy nothingness, listening hard.

*Bang!*

*We're not too late!* She went faster as Shawn and Greg fell in on each side. Their new demons bowed to her in recognition.

*Alpha.*

*Mother.*

Angela smiled distractedly at her mental children. *Be loyal to your new hosts. They're both good men.*

“What’s happening on the ship?” Greg wanted to be ready.

“Another wildcard flipped. Our bodies, not to mention everyone in that room with us, are in mortal danger.”

Greg scooped Angela up and followed Shawn as he took off running for the place where they’d first entered. *But I wish I could stay here and explore for a while. When I return, I have rules to follow.*

Angela grunted. “Get me there in two minutes and you can stay behind for an hour.”

Greg went faster.

Chapter Fourteen

# You Use Everyone

1

“**G**et out of the way! I’m not here for you.”

Pam had drawn her gun and stepped in front of the table. She lowered her shield to fire.

Darren fired first, hitting Greg. The muffled shot didn’t echo far. He followed it up with a shot at Shawn, brow furrowing as Pam moved in front of Angela and blocked his next shot. “Move!”

“No!” Pam brought up her shield and dove over to cover Greg’s wound with her free hand. “Medic!”

Jennifer rushed forward, enforcer power reaching through Darren’s shield.

“Don’t!” Darren tightened his arm around the infant.

*Mommy!*

Jennifer withdrew, moaning in physical pain. “Give me my baby! How did you get my baby?!”

Darren stepped over Marc, who was fighting to stay conscious. He’d lost all control over his body and most of his mind. “You have to stop giving second chances!”

Pam caught his memory. “Francesca thought it was okay this time because he’s an Eagle.”

Jennifer moaned, rage building. *Kyle!*

*I'm coming! Stay calm!*

Darren kept his shield up, eyeing his target. "Get out and you can have the kid! Go!"

Pam blanched. "I'm not leaving Shawn."

Megan stepped forward, fully blocking his view of Angela's defenseless body. "Darren. Please stop."

Darren's face fell. "You're not supposed to be here!"

Megan nodded. "I know. I've heard the stories." She took another step toward him. "If you give me the baby, they won't kill you. You'll be allowed to leave."

Darren's anger flashed out, making Autumn whimper again. "And you'll still be dead! Get out of here! Move!"

Jennifer gathered power, but she didn't know how to use it without hitting Autumn. "Let her go!"

Darren heard boots coming down the hall. "Damn it!" He eased to the door and stepped into the hall with Autumn tight against his chest.

"Where's the bosh at?" Jonny slurred his words and took unsteady steps, but he was reporting as ordered. "Don't know why I'm in trouble. I got hit!"

Jeff walked behind him, radiating disapproval. Jonny was very drunk. Anything Angela ordered him to do would have to wait until tomorrow and even then, someone would have to tell him after he sobered up enough to understand words.

As they finally reached the bottom deck, Jeff saw a man in full battle gear step out of the conference room with a suppressed gun in one hand. He paused, hand going to his own weapon as he smelled gunpowder. “Is there a problem, Darren?”

Darren turned and saw them. The baby in his arm sucked in air to let out a scream.

Jonny saw the gun start to come up. Survival mode kicked in, sobering him instantly. He shoved Jeff backward and around the corner of the steps as he turned, hoping the bullet would go straight through.

The slug plunged into Jonny’s side and bounced off a rib. He groaned loudly but stayed standing, blocking the path. He groped for his radio. “All Eagles! Bottom deck!”

It wasn’t on. The call didn’t go through.

Jeff remembered to turn his radio back on. “He has a hostage! All Eagles to the bottom deck!” He stayed down as another slug hit the wall by his cheek. Returning fire was out of the question while Darren had a baby in his other arm.

Eagles and descendants were already flooding toward them from every direction. They ran faster at Jeff’s call. More men and women filled the halls and steps as they realized there was a problem.

Jonny fell as a slug slammed into the wall an inch from his neck. He kept his head down as he crawled around the corner, leaving a trail of crimson on the carpet.

“Shit!” Jeff put his hand over Jonny’s dripping side wound. The radio was a mess now; he couldn’t get through. *When I assumed the people in that room could handle anything, I didn’t want it tested!*

Jonny wasn’t worried despite the pain. “We’re good.”

Jeff grimaced as Jonny passed out. *We need medics down here!*

Darren re-entered the conference room before Jeff recovered enough to fire back, waving the gun. “Move!”

Pam shook her head. “No.”

“He has my baby! Get out of here!”

Even Darren was shocked at Jennifer’s scream.

“He only wants the alpha!”

“We can’t do that, Jenny.” Megan tried to reason with her. “We can’t let him kill Angela.”

“She’s not one of us! She’s corrupt now!” Jennifer’s real thoughts flew out with her pain. “She kills us off whenever she needs a sacrifice! That’s my baby!”

Darren’s expression was blank as he fired again. It didn’t make them feel better to know he wasn’t enjoying this. “Move!”

The slug plunged into the table by Angela’s arm.

Radios were a garbled mess without Marc there to keep the waves clear. No one could get through. The descendant hive was much the same as dozens of people tried to reach Angela or Marc.

Heavy boots ran toward them. Shouts and orders rang through the hall as senior men arrived on the scene.

The PA system blared warnings and calls for Eagles to go help on the bottom deck.

Pam slowly moved toward the door. “You swear you won’t hurt Shawn?”

“Pam.”

Pam ignored Megan. “He only wants the alpha.”

Pam exited, not looking at Marc. She slid by Darren, feeling like a coward.

“Give me the baby!” Jennifer tried to rush him again.

Darren let her enter his shield this time. As he dropped the baby into her arms, he snaked one hand around her throat and put the gun against her back. “Be still or it might hit you both.”

Jennifer immediately tried to take his lifeforce.

Darren shot her in the shoulder and shoved her out as she fell, cradling the baby.

He kicked the door to shut it.

Megan stayed in front of Angela, unable to believe who was doing the shooting this time. “Darren. What have you done?”

Darren stopped, but his hands kept reloading. “Get out of here, Megan. It’s not safe!” He sprayed the door up high to keep the arriving Eagles from rushing it. Slugs punched into the ship, making the lights dim.

“I won’t leave you. They’ll have to kill me too.” Megan drew her gun.

“They will!” Darren’s bloodshot, dazed eyes glared at her from sunken sockets. “You’re going to die.”

Megan had heard the stories from the camp. After Hannah’s death, it had become obvious even to them. All the Eagles had refused to mention it to her. “That’s why you’re doing this, right? They told you I’m going to die and you’re trying to stop it.”

Darren nodded curtly, glaring at Angela’s sleeping form over her shoulder. “It’s all her fault. She cursed all of us.”

Megan’s fear and pain gave her great sympathy for him. Her training wouldn’t let it make the choice. “I’ll help you. No one should go through this alone.”

“Thank you.” Darren lifted his gun and stepped around her.

Megan rotated, lifting her weapon. She pulled the trigger and shot him in the temple, closing her eyes as his blood sprayed her, the chair, and the sleeping people. “It’s my honor.”

## 2

Adrian ran from the bunker with Marc’s pain-filled mental shouts fading in his ears. *I can’t reach Angela!*

Adrian jumped the weeds and vines, then tucked and rolled all the way down the hill.

Quinn and Sadie watched from the top of the road, both wincing when he hit a stump and flipped sideways.

Kendle stayed in the bunker and stirred her stew. As long as it wasn't Marc, she didn't care what was happening in Safe Haven.

Joey peered down from the top bunk where Adrian had told him to go to sleep. "Marc got shot or something."

Kendle's heart slapped against her chest. *Not yet!*

She took off after Adrian, taking the same route to the bottom of the cliff. She hit the stump and cracked her ankle before jumping up and hobbling toward the beach.

Joey pulled the cover up and settled against the thin pillow. *You were right, Daddy. Safe Haven is weak.*

### 3

"Bridge is clear. Island looks clear. Adrian says there are no issues with them, but he and Kendle won't leave the pontoon bridge until we give him an update on the bosses."

"Copy. Stay there and wait for further orders."

Radios crackled with Trent's calm voice, but terrified calls were still shouting for help on the bottom deck.

Kenn and Tonya had just reached the descendant hall when the chaos started. Eagles and

fighters were running by to answer those frantic calls. People who'd gone to bed early were peering out through cracked doors.

Tonya heard a clear moment on the radio and hit the button on Kenn's set. "Kenn is covering the descendant hall."

Kenn pulled away, frowning at her.

"Copy. Who has eyes on the boss?"

No one answered Neil's question.

Conner came from his cabin. "Candy's in there."

"I'll be here if she needs something. Go do your thing."

Conner smiled weakly at Kenn and hurried toward the elevator. He wasn't sure if he liked being their main blood donor, but he had to help or he couldn't stay here and keep seeing Candy.

Kenn caught that. He made a mental note to remind Angela that Conner was still a Mitchel. She needed to be aware that he was unhappy.

Charlie flew from Conner's cabin next, fastening on his gun belt. He headed for the steps to the top deck, ignoring Kenn and everyone else. *I have to make sure Tracy's okay!*

Kenn grabbed the boy by the shoulder, clamping down hard. "No." Kenn spun the surprised teen toward the opposite steps. "Clear the threat first!"

The pain from Kenn's grip and his curt tone woke Charlie from the panic. He knew Kenn was right.

Charlie fell in with the others who were going toward the danger.

Neil came from his cabin, pulling the door shut. Kenn got a fast glimpse of Wade standing in front of Samantha and the twins. He was instantly jealous. Neil had someone to protect his family while he fought the bad guys.

Neil didn't waste time pointing out the flaws in that theory. He pushed through the rookies who had kits on and were eager to use their weapons. "Holster! There's no threat up here!"

Neil strode through the crowd, getting the rookies under control and sending out waves of comfort to the other men and women who were waiting for orders.

Neil slid down the banister to bypass the next clog at the steps. He ran toward the conference room, smelling gunpowder. He spotted casings and blood as he entered the scene. *Was this the start?* Neil picked out details as he flew by.

Charlie was on Neil's heels. He spotted Jonny on the ground and detoured, gathering power to heal him.

Jeff was grateful. "I haven't recharged. I'm out of energy."

Charlie handled it, using his anger at Tracy to fuel the stream.

"You have to get in there." Jennifer sobbed, crouched on the floor. Blood was puddling around her knees. "He only wanted the alpha."

Neil was floored. “You left Angela alone with the assassin?”

“Darren.” Pam was terrified she’d made the wrong choice too. She was holding a rag over Jennifer’s shoulder. Blood was dripping onto Autumn’s leg from the wound. “He shot Greg. He would have hurt the baby. We had to leave.”

Neil glanced around. “Where’s Marc?”

“Marc was shot.” Pam shivered. “I think. I couldn’t see.”

Charlie tried to hurry. He wanted to get into the room to help his dad as soon as Neil cleared it.

Neil didn’t care that Morgan and Kyle were flying down the hall toward them. “How could you leave her alone with a killer?! You’re her heir!”

Jennifer’s control snapped. “No! She made me pretend all this time. I was never going to lead this damn camp!”

Kyle slowed at her shout, mind placing that with the clues he’d been picking up.

Neil could only think of one response. “Charlie doesn’t want it.”

Charlie kept working on Jonny, but he stored their words for later. *If I can’t have Tracy and my child, I will need something to get me through.*

Jennifer sobbed again. “I don’t care! I’m done with this game.” She struggled to her feet. “She can risk someone else’s baby next time!”

Kyle got close enough to see the blood. “Medic!”

Morgan yanked off his kit and shoved it into Kyle's arms. Morgan's hand trembled as he checked the wound. "Straight through. She's okay."

Neil understood he couldn't count on them for help. He brought up his shield and braced. "I'll kick it down. We *all* go in and clear."

The rookies nodded nervously. The senior men were injured, dazed, distracted, or they were protecting other areas of the ship.

Neil lifted his leg.

A single gunshot echoed from inside the conference room.

Neil kicked, hoping they weren't too late.

#### 4

Megan turned toward the door as it was kicked open. Her gun hung at her side. "He was sick. I had to do it."

Neil came forward, scanning in approval. "You saved the boss's life."

Neil cleared the room, then keyed his radio. "Threat is down on the bottom deck. All assigned hands report to the medical bay. Finish clearing the ship."

Megan looked down at Darren, mind freezing, blanking. "I need to go now."

Neil stepped aside to let her go by.

Megan slipped in the pooling blood and fell forward. Her head cracked into the table.

“Megan!” Neil tried to catch her, but she fell too fast. She hit the ground hard and rolled onto her side.

Harry rushed in, but he felt for a pulse first. He’d recognized the sound. That crack meant death.

Harry shook his head, spotting a stream of blood coming from her ear. Another began to leak from her nose.

“Damn it!” Neil couldn’t fight the pain. “Switch me out.” He shoved through the gathering crowd.

Morgan examined the other patients now that he knew Jennifer was stable. “Does everyone have a trim?”

Kyle nodded angrily. “Now she has a bullet scar on both shoulders.”

The medics checked on the sleeping people next.

“Greg was hit.” Morgan pushed Greg over to reach the wound. “It’s a trim.”

“Same for Shawn.” Terry gestured toward Angela. “Not a scratch.”

Pam came in and stood by Shawn. “Megan distracted him.”

Morgan stared down at Darren, hurt and angered. “He trimmed Jonny out there too. He wasn’t trying to kill you guys.”

“Someone better get Marc up and running before the boss wakes up. He can run interference if she flips.” Kyle was reading Jennifer’s thoughts and trying to hide his reactions until they were alone.

Charlie came in to help.

“It was a syringe. He disabled Marc first.” Jennifer shuddered, not feeling the pain from anything but almost losing the baby in her arms.

Marc’s wakeup was fast thanks to the counteracting agent the Eagles all carried now. Little Rock had been a big lesson for them. His lids shot open. His hands went for his guns. He didn’t have his mental gifts, though. He could only use his physical skills.

Charlie kept a hand on Marc’s arm. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Marc groaned, rubbing his neck. “Angela...”

Charlie looked over bitterly. “Is fine. She hasn’t woken yet.”

Marc was relieved that she hadn’t been part of the fight this time. “Darren?”

“Dead.” Charlie helped Marc stand up.

Marc leaned against the teenager, fighting the drugs for control of his body. “How bad is it?”

Charlie dug out a bandage from his kit. “If he’d used a gun, you wouldn’t be here.”

Marc let Charlie put the bandage over the puncture spot. He limped over to the bodies as the medics worked on Greg and Shawn. Darren hadn’t really wanted any of them but Angela.

Marc was sorry about Megan. “Make sure everyone knows what she did. She deserves a hero’s memory.”

“I’ll add her name to the memorial.” Neil didn’t ask about Darren’s name.

Marc concentrated. *It’s over. She’s fine.*

Adrian wasn't comforted. *How many losses?*  
Marc refused to answer.

## 5

"Let me through!" Missy shoved her way into the hall and marched toward Jennifer.

Jennifer saw her coming and tightened her grip on the snoozing infant. Autumn had recovered quickly. The same couldn't be said of her parent. Jennifer was in shock.

Missy ignored Kyle, who was standing next to Jennifer and glaring at everyone. The little girl locked eyes with the injured mother.

Jennifer replayed it all in horror, heart thumping.

Every descendant there relived it with her, flinching at Darren's almost emotionless shots. He hadn't missed a single step of his plan, or a single shot. Megan had been his wildcard.

Missy rotated toward Pam. Fury blazed on her little face. "You left him."

People tensed, listening. The action might be over, but the drama was just starting.

Pam paled. She came out into the hall. "I had to. Darren was going to hurt Jenny's baby."

"He hurt my Shawn!" Missy's eyes filled with tears of betrayal. "You're not our family anymore. Stay away from us!"

Missy marched into the conference room. She stepped over blood and bodies to reach Shawn, leaving Pam trying to find air.

Missy glared at Neil. “Send Morgan out.”

Morgan was working on Greg. He waited, not sure which way he would go if he were in Neil’s shoes. *But I’m not. I’m as bad as Pam.*

Neil sighed. “Morgan’s a medic. We need him in here.”

Missy brought up her shield around Shawn and Terry while he stitched the new hole in Shawn’s arm. “Keep him away from my Shawn or things will get ugly.”

“I’m not sure they can get any uglier, kid.”

Missy snorted harshly. She glowered at Morgan, wishing she was allowed to show him how betrayed she felt.

Neil frowned. “I almost understand about Pam, but why Morgan? He wasn’t even here. And I don’t think he would have left the room.”

Missy’s orbs lit up bright red. “All he thought about was her! He didn’t think about my Shawn even once on the run down here!”

Neil grimaced. “Still, he and Pam are in love.”

“It wasn’t Pam.” Missy glared through the open door. “It was Jennifer.”

Morgan glanced at Jennifer as the truth spilled in front of a dozen witnesses. Terror and shame warred for space in his mind. *I’m sorry.*

Jennifer was humiliated. She turned away from them all, shifting Autumn between her and Kyle. “Get me out of here. And I mean that in every way.”

## 6

Angela woke with tears on her cheeks. She knew they’d lost people.

Marc was there to put a hand on her shoulder as she opened her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Angela leaned against him, drawing comfort.

Shawn’s lashes fluttered.

Missy leaned over him. “Shawn?”

Shawn groaned, hand going to his arm.

Terry hoped Shawn didn’t wake too fast and react before they could explain what had happened. “Don’t move. It’s just us.”

Missy sent a calming spell. “The medics are working on you. Be still. It’s okay now.”

Shawn became alert through the buzz of voices and the pain of a gunshot. *I’ve been here before. I didn’t like it.*

Shawn’s new demon took up residence in the mental cell in his mind. *Never again. I’ll be here now to watch over you while you roam.*

Missy was delighted. She hugged Shawn and welcomed his new power.

Shawn felt safer than he ever had.

Greg didn’t move.

Marc frowned at Morgan. “Is he okay?”

Morgan was putting in stitches now. “It’s better that he gives me another minute to finish anyway.”

Angela wiped her face. “He’s staying there to play.”

“He knew there was a problem.” Shawn didn’t approve. “He should have come back with us.”

Angela stood so Marc would use his cane. She eyed his small bandage. “It was covered.”

Marc ran a hand over the bruise forming on his neck. He could feel it swelling. “Not really. If not for Megan, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

Angela sympathized. “I hate that feeling.”

Marc realized she was waiting for him to handle the aftermath. He refused to enjoy it as he got gawkers to work and called for a cleaning crew.

“We’re done here.” Terry began collecting his gear, leaving the mess. A few threads and bloody wipes would be the easiest part of what the cleaning crew had to handle here.

Morgan waited for the other medics to finish. Then he gestured at Harry to take the lead. He didn’t speak to anyone unless he had to. Shame was coating him now, spreading in thick waves.

Harry got everyone headed toward the medical bay for shots, a new addition to their files, and a couple of hours of observation.

Marc led Angela out of the room. “Biff will stay with Greg.”

Angela yawned, almost overwhelmed by exhaustion. Dream walking took a lot out of her. “Take me through the camp while the medics finish

so we can get a recharge. This will be a long night for both of us. We need the energy.”

Marc knew she was right. “Someone tell Kenn and Ivan they have point until I send relief.”

Missy got Shawn in the center of the procession, glaring at Pam when she tried to talk to him.

Shawn shook his head. “Maybe later.”

Pam’s face fell. She stopped and stood there as tears began rolling over her cheeks. *I lost them both.*

Eagles surrounded the group, listening so they knew what to tell the camp, but also to protect their victims.

“Do another full check of the ship. It will make everyone feel better. Take Francesca to a cell. She’ll be safer in there tonight. When Jennifer recovers from the shock, she’ll hunt her down.” Marc’s tone deepened. “Stack the bodies in the furnace room. I’ll handle them after the camp goes to sleep.”

Angela didn’t tell him it would already be handled by then. The Eagles had gotten good at cleaning up the mess.

Morgan stayed in the rear. Jennifer was in the front. Kyle had insisted she go to the medical bay. She wasn’t happy about it.

Neither was Kyle, but he wanted her under observation for the gunshot wound.

Camp members were lining the hallways as the group made it to the medical deck. Word had already spread.

“Is it true? Megan and Darren are dead?”

Angela nodded. “Megan saved lives tonight.”

“Can we...”

“I wanted to...”

“Is it okay if...”

Marc stopped their greed, glaring. “No.”

People retreated, leery and resentful.

Marc turned to Angela. “Why do you let them do that to you?”

Angela gave him the truth. “We lost lives again. I feel bad.”

“So they get to take advantage of your grief and you feel better?”

She sighed. “I get to keep leadership, Marc. I don’t care about feeling better. I care about control of Safe Haven.”

Angela went to her people and began making them happy by granting their requests while the medics got the patients into exam rooms. She also pulled energy that she would send to Marc when they got their next moment alone. He didn’t have his gifts back yet, but when they snapped in, he would feel the exhaustion too.

Marc reluctantly joined her, keeping them hip to hip to let her share it now. He hated to draw directly, but he didn’t think he could wait until later. He was running on empty. When his gifts returned, he would have to sleep.

Angela nodded. *We’ll handle it. For now, just stand there and act like you didn’t know any of this was going to happen.*

Marc did.

Biff sat in the chair next to Greg, staring at the mess. Biff didn't understand why the people in this room had been hurt at all. *What made Darren flip? We've had female Eagles for a long time, and he was calming down the last time I saw him.*

Greg stirred, moaning, hands going to his injury and his gun.

Biff put a hand on Greg's wrist. "It's okay. It's all over. Be still for a minute."

Greg blinked, mind expanding to make room for two. He pushed aside the odd, slightly painful feeling and focused.

Biff tried to smile. "You were trimmed. Morgan sewed you up."

Greg glanced at the bandage, but he was more concerned with the others. "Who?"

"Darren. He shot four Eagles before Megan got him." Biff swallowed, looking at the blood puddle drying to the carpet. "She tripped and hit the table. We lost Megan and Darren."

Greg was relieved it hadn't been worse, though he would never say that. "I assume I'm supposed to go to the medical bay?"

"Yes." Biff followed Greg's limp. "Are you hit somewhere else?" He got ready to call a medic.

Greg shook his head. "I had a rough playdate. Next time, I'll wear more padding."

Biff didn't know what to say.

Greg swallowed a chuckle. Now wasn't the right time to be amused or happy. *But I am. This is the best day of my life. I'll probably spend the rest of it trying to match this one.*

*I used to feel the same way about being a descendant.* Jeff sighed as he went into the conference room. *But nothing turned out the way I needed it to and now I'm stuck in limbo, carrying the dead to a furnace while everyone else enjoys a tropical paradise.*

Tonya came down the hall, looking for the medics.

Kenn spotted her and came over. He was gathering updates for Marc. "The medics are all in the med bay."

"Is that Darren?" Tonya retreated to make room as Jeff rolled the body into a bag.

"Yes." Kenn steered her toward a nearby chair. "What are you doing here? Is the baby okay?"

"He's fine. Brittani and Jayda are on duty with the den mothers, and Dog is there with the cats."

"Still, you don't need to be working. You didn't even have a break."

She shrugged. "I run the lab. The medics will have tests they need handled."

"Not tonight." Kenn didn't want her to see the mess. He blocked her view into the conference room with his big body.

Tonya's tone cooled. "Don't you have updates to deliver?"

They both had to move as Jeff came out.

She brushed against his hand as he went by, smearing some of Darren's blood on her coat. Then she walked toward the lab without checking to see if Kenn had noticed.

Kenn shook his head, smiling a little. He'd always admired Tonya's resourcefulness and ability to think quickly on her feet. *She's getting better at it.*

Kenn went up to the lounge near the medical bay, where Marc and Angela had camped out to deal with everyone. Updates and Eagles had been flying through the lounge for an hour now.

It was finally quiet when Kenn arrived. He went to Marc, sweeping Angela as she made notes in her book, and then Greg as he stood guard in the corner. The man felt powerful now. He wasn't showing any signs that his injury was bothering him. *I guess it worked.* "I finished decoding the papers from the doctor's place." Kenn handed the sheet to Marc. "You're gonna hate this one."

Marc's sigh was loud and long. "Now I know why you switched us to plan B."

Angela cringed at the thought of what they were about to go through, but she rejoiced at how it might end. "I hope we're all ready to be under the water again."

Greg caught their thoughts. A ripple of fear went over his skin, ruining his delight at being able to do it. "A submarine."

Kenn rubbed crust from his tired eyes. "And that's not the biggest problem."

Angela stopped writing. “Nuclear?”

Marc nodded, storing the paper with their other notes. “As soon as they get here, they’ll verify our location, then fire. There’s no way we can evacuate in time unless we leave right now.”

Kenn snorted. “A sub can go anywhere we can and fire onto any land mass. We have to get control of it.”

Angela agreed. “Get it and sink it.”

“I can be the bait.” Greg was eager to start paying them back for the gift he’d been given. “And you know I want to play.” The painkiller Harry had given him was still working well.

“We draw them to you and you take over the sub?”

“Exactly.” Greg grinned at Marc. “I might need a rookie you wouldn’t mind losing.”

Angela scowled. “I mind losing any of them!” Her lids narrowed. “And to make it clear how much they mean to me, you can take Biff.”

Greg paled. “But he’s good.”

“So were a lot of the people who died so we could be here today! Don’t forget that.”

Greg looked at Marc, angering Angela but pleasing him.

Kenn saw it and shook his head. *When will they learn she’s the one they have to be loyal to? Marc likes it when they follow him first because he knows she hates it, and it eliminates another possible rival. He thinks he can escape his destiny, so he doesn’t need a replacement. He’s just humoring her.*

Angela believed that too, but this wasn't the time to call him out on it. Fate would do that for her if she left this alone and let Marc handle it like he wanted to.

*I'll try, she vowed, settling in for the wait. It's worth it this time.*

Marc's mind spun. "I'll be back."

Angela and the others knew where he was going. A problem like this needed all the help they had at their disposal.

Angela saw more people coming by, but she was done doling out favors. "Get them to their cabins. I've had enough guilt for one night."

Greg beat Kenn to the door.

Chapter Fifteen  
**This Is Hard**

1

**A**drian looked up, sneering bitterly. “I can’t get away from you guys tonight.”

Marc sighed. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Adrian sneered at Marc’s sudden wave of conscience. “What the hell do you want now?”

Marc held out a sheet of paper and waited, refusing to admit Adrian was right. The banished leader was trying to stay away from them and it already wasn’t working.

Adrian handed the paper back. “It seems solid, but you’re probably overlooking the small details, as usual.”

Marc winced, thinking of Darren.

Adrian slapped at a bug. His panic had faded into anger and exhaustion. “I missed that one too. But he was calmer when he left here. I don’t know what flipped him. I’m sorry I didn’t try harder.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t check on him after Kyle’s warning. He went a little nuts at mess. I had a chance to stop it.”

“You know my views on that.”

“I do.” Marc couldn’t help himself. “That doesn’t mean I don’t need to hear it.”

Adrian's anger flared. "You use me for your benefit all the time. You use everyone! When are you going to start giving back?"

Marc's defensive nature rose; he smothered it. "I want to change her plan, without her knowing how and why."

Adrian stared at him, adding up the clues. A faint ticking noise echoed from Marc's scattered mind. "It's your time."

Marc didn't hide his fear, his anger, or his desperation. "She has to be out of the loop on this one."

"Why? She'd do anything for you."

Marc ignored Adrian's bitter tone. "I think that's the problem. It always works when she makes the plan, but we still keep repeating. Nothing changes."

"You're assuming she's cursed?"

"I don't think it's a curse. I just think that path has been beaten down. We know where it leads." Terror came through Marc's next words. "And I don't have another life to spare on a repeat. This is it."

Adrian refused to consider what they'd both seen and been told about that moment. "Turn off your bugs and sit. I'll need time to think."

Marc started to deny it.

Adrian held up the small listening device. "Did Quinn plant them for you? It's sloppy enough to be his work."

Marc snorted, missing the Quinn who'd almost had Billy's place. *But I sensed something wasn't right with him and switched. Was it because Kendle didn't date him at first?* She'd gone for Tommy before giving Quinn a chance.

Marc sat. "No one is listening right now. They're still handling the aftermath."

Adrian believed him. "Have you seen something she hasn't?"

"No. But I feel it. Someone on that ship is going to kill me." Marc met his eye. "Or you will."

"Not me." Adrian shook his head. "That method had to change. Nature probably picked an assassin, and I can't go through them all for you in time."

"In time?"

Adrian had caught the rhythm of the ticking. "It's slower. I noticed it earlier and it's obvious now. It's a two-week clock."

Marc was able to draw in a deep breath and push out the feeling of doom. "That's a lot of time to interrupt fate."

Adrian let Marc feel his sympathy. "It's also time to get your affairs in order, Marine."

"Like I don't know that!" Marc swiped Adrian's bottle. "Do your magic mind shit so I can go. Two visits in one day is two too many."

"Only if you get me out of shit with your son." Adrian quickly filled him in on Charlie's demands and threats.

Marc scowled toward the tent where Tracy was no longer hiding. "I'll cover that; you cover my ass."

"I will, no matter what it costs me. And I'll expect a reward."

"Of course. You can't just do anything good. You have to be getting something out of it."

"And anything I can ask for pales in comparison to the gift you now have."

Marc wanted to be happy, but he was scared they would be robbed of that joy again. "We'll be more careful this time. No repeats."

"No repeats," Adrian parroted, hoping it all worked out that way. "The plan is solid. Maybe you didn't account for the wildcards."

"Actually, I did. All three wildcards will flip. We have to let those run their own course. We'll all be satisfied with the end." Marc hid the emotional wave that wanted to rise. *And I'll be all right in the end too. I just may need some space.*

"Or you'll be dead."

Marc passed the bottle as he stood. His cane dug into the ground as it held up his tired body. "Can I trust you?"

Adrian nodded quickly. "Right now, yes."

Marc understood. Adrian was being blasted by the people he lived with. "This is your chance to have it all back. And to have her."

"I only want it the right way now." Adrian reclined in the damp grass, able to smell Angela's

scent even though she'd only spent a few minutes here. "Why me?"

"Because I've considered every man in camp, and a list of old pals who never joined us, but it always comes down to you. Keep me alive, Adrian. And I'll stick to our original deal."

"What happened to Greg? And Ivan?"

"They both displeased her."

"Greg only got his gifts tonight." Adrian had felt both new members join the hive. "How did he screw up so fast?"

Marc snorted. "He didn't ask her what *she* wanted. He assumed my approval was enough."

Adrian laughed. "She doesn't want him!"

"Nope. Not Ivan either." Marc was relieved by that. He didn't hide it. "You're the only other man she's ever shown a true interest in. I no longer think you can be replaced."

Adrian jerked a thumb toward the bunker, trying not to cry. "The problem is probably in there, but I doubt you're a direct target. It's more likely that you'll be caught in the crossfire. I'll work on it. Give me a couple days."

"Thank you."

Adrian was too tired to fight like they usually did. "You're the only man I trust too, if that helps at all."

Marc nodded. "It does in a moment like this."

Adrian saw Marc was wearing a new vest setup. He rolled his eyes. "You don't need to test the new equipment yourself."

Marc snickered. “That, my friend, is the fun part of this job.”

Adrian sighed. “How can we be friends when we hate each other?”

Marc felt fate pause to listen; it was impossible to lie. “Maybe it’s not hatred anymore.”

Marc walked toward the road, certain of Adrian’s choice. *No matter what deal Kendle tries to make, her carrot will never match mine.*

Marc spotted Quinn leaning against a tree nearby. He finally saw why Kendle was with him. “We’re the same size, roughly. In the dark, your bad attitude and lack of rank doesn’t matter. She can pretend you’re me.”

Quinn spun into the jungle and vanished, furious.

Marc headed home, smirking despite everything that had happened and everything he knew was going to happen. *I still have two weeks! Thank you! I can do a lot with that much time.*

Adrian’s comment came to mind.

*Time to get your affairs in order, Marine.*

Marc nodded. *I just started on the list.*

## 2

Marc’s elation faded as he climbed the ship ladder and found Angela standing there with a group of Eagles. “What happened?”

“Some people took off when the shooting started. Tracy’s missing.” Charlie was snapping gear in place to go look for her.

Marc shook his head. “She’s fine. She wants to be left alone to think. You have to give her space.”

Charlie paused. “She didn’t make a date for the abortion?”

Morgan shook his head. “Not with me. You can ask the others, but she didn’t have a chance. She didn’t come on the ship at all after the wedding.”

Charlie fought with his need to go find her. “Space?”

Marc nodded, stepping by him. “It’s a good sign that she wants more time. Leave her alone as long as you can and let her work things out without all of us in her face about it all the time.”

Charlie knew that made sense. He forced himself to nod. “I guess.” He looked at Angela. “I need to be busy, but it can’t be anything where I have to pay a lot of attention.”

The Eagles chuckled.

Angela smiled. “Go with the first drop-off team. They’re just walking a path for us.”

Charlie went with Kenn when he waved. “Thank you.”

Angela met Marc’s eye. “Three rookies took off with a few camp members. They went out in a lifeboat.”

Marc’s face darkened. “They made their choice. What else?”

“Ivan left.” She handed Marc the note. “Guards found it on his bed during the last security sweep.”

Marc stared in surprise. “Ivan went AWOL?”

Daryl took the envelope from Marc’s hand and read the note on the inside lid. It wasn’t sealed and it was empty.

*I’m sorry. I chose a different path. Good luck. I hope you all survive.*

Marc was suspicious. He looked at Angela. “Did you give Ivan orders for this battle?”

“Yes.”

Marc studied her when she didn’t rant about Ivan’s betrayal or show any emotion at all. “Did you send him away to protect him?”

Angela left the deck without replying.

Almost everyone assumed that was the case.

Greg frowned, finally starting to feel the pain from his injury. “Shouldn’t she be sending *you* away to protect you?”

Marc nodded, his mind tingling as it always did when someone lied to him or held something back. “I find it hard to believe that Ivan walked away without a fight.”

Morgan agreed. “He must have had a huge incentive.”

“And it had to be something he couldn’t already get here.” Marc stared at the island, considering the clues. “She didn’t send him away to protect him; she did it to protect herself. Maybe he wasn’t as stable as we all thought.” That answer made immediate sense to Marc.

It also made sense to almost everyone else listening. Angela had sensed some kind of threat coming from Ivan and she'd sent him away so she didn't end up killing him. Men and women relaxed. Everyone returned to work.

Except Greg. He limped after Marc like he was supposed to and kept his mind on the coming battle instead of his suspicions.

Marc knew better than to rely on Greg's rookie mental barrier. He went down to the bottom of the ship, using his cane to get him through the employee hallways. He moved quickly to avoid the guards who patrolled these areas, ignoring the pain.

Greg was glad Marc was taking him somewhere private. He was having a hard time concentrating on his mental shield.

Marc held the door for him. As he stepped inside, Marc slammed it and stomped to the far end of the cargo area.

Greg understood Marc hadn't brought him here to talk. *He brought me here to get control before I ruin his plan.* After being doubted, it was another slap.

"I knew you could do it."

Greg scowled. "I didn't get that impression."

Marc shrugged. "One of you had to be the example we set for everyone else. The others who want this are watching. They assumed Shawn would get it anyway because his partners were both descendants. It had to be you."

Greg's confusion deepened. He fought the urge to rub his aching shoulder. "Meaning?"

"Meaning when they ask, it won't be hard to tell them it sucked and they'd better be ready to be tested."

Greg finally got it. "So you didn't doubt me?"

Marc snorted. "Never."

"Ivan didn't really leave, did he?"

Marc glared. "We need to work on your mental walls."

Greg frowned, suddenly not sure he wanted in on this secret. "Why?"

"Because I'll need a confidant at some point and you need to know how to do this without tipping your hand to the boss."

Greg flushed. "I'm trying! This is hard."

Marc sighed, nodding. "And it's about to get harder. Sit down and bring up your strongest wall. When you can keep me out, I'll tell you why Ivan left."

"So it's true? He's gone?"

"Yes."

Now a little more eager to meet the new challenge, Greg sat down.

### 3

"Mind if I sit down?"

Jonny grinned at Jeff from his bed, ignoring the slight twinges in his side. The pain medication was in full effect now. "Company? Awesome!"

Jeff chuckled. Most of the other patients had visitors in their exam rooms. Jeff sat in the chair by Jonny's bed. He handed him a heavy pouch.

"What's this?"

"Gratitude."

Jonny pulled out a shiny 9mm. "Wow. It's amazing." He flipped it over. "You used all original parts."

"It hasn't been fired yet. I just finished rebuilding it. You get to adjust the sights."

Jonny was floored. "Aw, man. I didn't save your life. He only trimmed us. You would have been fine. You don't owe me anything."

"I agree. Enjoy that. I put love into it for months." Jeff shut his eyes, but he kept seeing the gun coming up. *I didn't suspect Darren was the problem because he was one of us.*

"Are you okay?"

Jeff grunted. "I'm working on it. You mind if I hang out here for a bit?"

"Not at all." Jonny felt honored. "It's almost like I have an Eagle guard."

Jeff got comfortable. "You do."

Jonny paused. "Wait. Do I need a guard?"

Jeff sighed as voices echoed down the hall. "As you already know, you don't have to be the target to end up getting shot."

Jonny nodded harshly. "I do know that one."

The guards on the area converged on the group coming to the check-in desk.

"It's late, folks. Maybe come back tomorrow."

“Keep your voices down.”

“Patients are sleeping.”

The camp members quieted, dropping their cards and gifts onto the desk as they left.

All the patients and medics were happy to see the people go. It was tense enough.

Angela moved away from Marc’s door, brow lifting as she joined Morgan at the front desk. “How is he?”

Morgan had just finished his quick aftercare exams, refusing to think about anything that had happened. He hadn’t tried to go into Shawn’s room yet. Harry was handling him while Missy watched. “Fine, as far as I can tell. The swelling is going down. He doesn’t have a fever or any reactions that imply it was more than just a small dose of our knockout drug.”

Angela was relieved. “Thank you. Try to sleep at some point.”

Morgan didn’t answer. He also didn’t look at Kyle as he went to the cabinet to store Marc’s file, but he knew that man was standing in the doorway to Jennifer’s room. He could feel the glare.

Angela went back to Marc’s room.

“That’s a mess.” Marc yawned.

“Maybe.” Angela smiled at him. “It’s okay to crash now. You’ve had a long day.”

*Tap-tap.*

Marc flinched.

Angela looked up, eyes turning red in defense.

Charlie came into the room. “Is this a bad time?”

Angela sent the witch back to her cell. “It’s fine.”

She didn’t ask how he’d gotten by the guards. After Jennifer’s announcement, the Eagles were assuming she’d done it to show Charlie that even a teenager could lead, or that it had been planned to keep him from screwing up his image with the camp. It was neither of those things, but she didn’t have time to look ahead right now and see what had changed. *I hate wildcard flips!*

Charlie sat in the chair by Marc’s bed. The run had been delayed. The ship was anchored. “They think I drove her out.”

Angela shrugged. She was catching those thoughts too, along with others wondering when she was going to punish Pam and Jennifer for abandoning her. “Appearance isn’t everything, and most of it can be repaired.” She paused, able to give him that concession now. “If you want it.”

Charlie sighed, not sure how he would get through the next days without seeing Tracy. “I don’t think I can until I get over Tracy. Then I’ll try.”

Marc was surprised. “I thought you were against taking over your mom’s job when she retires.”

“I was jealous. She gave my place to Jennifer before I’d even passed on it.”

“You were occupied, son. She had to be sure the future was covered.”

Charlie knew that. “I don’t blame either of you for the way things turned out. I made my own choices with Tracy.”

Marc smiled. “And we don’t blame you for all of the mess. She was willing.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

Charlie had to laugh. Then he sobered. “What’s going to happen to Pam and Jennifer?”

Angela tugged Marc’s blanket over his ankle and foot. “They’ll both adjust.”

“I meant their punishments.”

“They aren’t in trouble.”

“Why? They left you in there for him to shoot!”

Angela wasn’t angry about it like so many others were. “Megan had me covered. And even if she hadn’t, I still wouldn’t have wanted anyone to be disciplined over it. That was a hard situation.”

Listening from across the hall, Kyle was relieved that Jennifer wasn’t in trouble with the boss, but he wasn’t convinced that Pam should be let off the hook.

“The Eagles want them both out.”

“No. Until they come to me or Marc and resign, nothing changes.”

“But she called you corrupt! She was willing to sacrifice you. She shouldn’t be your heir anymore.”

Angela gave the teen a pointed look. “Until I have a replacement I can count on, nothing changes.”

Charlie flushed, but didn’t argue.

Angela saw Marc yawn again. “You can sleep now.”

Marc didn’t tell her he was still seeing flashes of the syringe, the tunnels, and of the darkness swallowing him whole. Sleep wasn’t all it was cracked up to be when your mind was being cruel.

Angela muttered a strong spell. Magic dusted his body.

Marc sighed in relief. The spell would give him a few hours of dreamless sleep. “Thank you.”

“It’s always my honor.” She watched him drift off, still loving to look at him as much as she always had. He hadn’t changed much, though he had some gray around the edges that wasn’t from lack of energy. *He’s going to be a handsome older man.*

Charlie was slightly jealous of their relationship, but he was also thrilled that they were together. “I can stay here with him if you need to go cover things.”

“I do, actually. I won’t be gone long.” Angela wiped at the dried blood on her clothes. “I need a shower.”

Charlie started to tell her to go on, but more steps echoed, drawing attention. This was the scene they’d all been waiting for. Everyone braced for ugliness.

Shawn and Missy were in the first exam room. Morgan nodded that way and joined Pam, hoping this wasn’t going to be as bad as their witnesses were expecting.

Missy appeared in the doorway to Shawn's room. "Visiting hours are over!"

Some of the witnesses snickered.

"Let them in." Shawn wasn't in the mood to go through this, but fate had forced his hand.

Pam and Morgan came into his room, both sending silent pleas to Missy, begging her to reconsider her decision.

Missy sat in the chair in the corner, furious and hurt.

Shawn didn't return Pam's weak smile or Morgan's concerned nod.

They both tried to find a way to explain their side of the story.

Shawn sighed, suddenly wishing he'd stayed behind with Greg. *He came back beaten up, but his mind was calm.* "I can't be with you anymore—either of you."

Silence fell through the medical zone as everyone tried to listen.

"Don't do this." Pam refused to accept his choice. "It was just one mistake."

Shawn nodded, voice hardening. "And it was huge. You left the boss alone."

"For a baby! Angela understands."

Shawn told the truth that she didn't want anyone to see. "You'd give us all up for *any* child, Pam."

Morgan wanted to say that was the right thing to do, but he also wanted to keep his place as a top Eagle.

Pam looked between them; her final hope began to die. “Neither of you are willing to fight for what we have?”

Shawn shrugged, shoulder throbbing. He’d refused the pain medications; he couldn’t take even one more moment of being drugged or dazed. “I could have, but you abandoned the woman who made sure *your* life was covered again and again.”

Pam started to cry. “I didn’t know what to do! Jennifer and Darren were screaming at me. The baby was being squeezed and crying. He’d shot several people.”

Missy couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “Yeah, Shawn! You left him lying there bleeding!”

“Missy.”

The girl fell silent at Shawn’s hard tone.

Shawn looked at Morgan. “Do you want to tell her or should I?”

Morgan shrugged. “Me, I guess.”

“What?” Pam didn’t want any more bad news.

“In a hostage situation, you never give the attacker what they want.”

“It was a baby.”

“Would you have traded the baby for this camp?”

Pam nodded quickly. “It’s just a baby!”

“Did any other options come to mind?”

“We tried to rush him twice.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes!”

“You didn’t find another option because of the desire you have to be a mother. You’ll sell any of us out for that chance. And in this case, it was a bluff. Darren trimmed everyone. He wouldn’t have hurt Autumn.”

“Jennifer panicked too!”

“It’s her baby, not yours, even though you’ve been pretending that when you’re on duty over the kids. You pretend they’re all yours.” Morgan had known for a while. “Shawn’s one of us now. He sees the truth.”

Shawn pointed angrily. “And that’s why you and I can’t stay together either. You didn’t tell me. I can’t trust you.”

Morgan was stunned to realize Shawn was publicly breaking up with him. “She loves kids. I thought it would help protect Missy. And with the cancer, she was never going to be a real Eagle. She wouldn’t be in a position to make that choice.”

“Well, fate decided your logic didn’t matter.” Shawn was ready for this to be over. “We’ll move out in the morning. We’ll bunk with the camp when I’m out of here tonight.”

“Wait.”

Shawn shook his head at her. “I won’t change my mind. We’ll be able to live and work around each other because we’re all adults, but this relationship is over. Now, I’m tired. If you two wouldn’t mind...”

Missy marched triumphantly to the door and held it, waiting for them to go.

Morgan led Pam into the hall and stopped. “We should talk.”

Pam didn’t want to make that choice yet. “I love you. I want to make it up to them and try again.”

Missy slammed the door and clicked the lock.

Morgan shook his head, sighing. “That’s not going to happen.” Morgan was forced to admit his feelings. “I care for you, and I want you to be happy, but I’m not in love with you. Maybe we should take a break too.”

Pam tensed. “All four.” She turned and walked away. “I got my life back and then lost it again. She even took Joey away from me.”

Guards turned away from her as she went by.

Morgan let her go, still not looking toward Jennifer’s room.

“Let’s talk.”

Morgan jumped. Kyle was right by his side.

Kyle pointed toward the rear rooms that were empty right now.

Morgan followed him, dreading this conversation.

Greg saw them go by from the bed in his room. He hadn’t had a visitor, but the medics had checked on him regularly since Marc had insisted they both come here to get some rest. He used his new gift to read their thoughts.

Both men shoved him out like he was a feather.

Greg shrugged, getting comfortable as the pain pill began to work. *I’ll get better at it every day.*

## Chapter Sixteen

# Blink

### 1

**K**yle waited until Morgan had shut the door to the empty room. Then he took the first step to making his wife happy. Once he said it, they were doing it. “After this fight, we’re leaving Safe Haven.”

Morgan’s shame filled him up, leaving room for nothing else. “Because of me. I’m sorry, Kyle. I tried to fight it.”

“It’s not you.” Kyle dug out one of his last small cigars. “We’re not happy here. She never has been.”

“I’m sorry I’ve made that harder.”

Kyle sank down in the chair, groaning. His spine was aching. “It really wasn’t you, though. The gossip would have pissed her off and she’d have faced them down, but tonight, with Autumn...” Kyle stopped, rage needing an outlet.

Morgan understood. And he was grateful Kyle wasn’t beating on him right now. “What can I do to help you guys?”

“Come with us.”

Morgan’s mouth dropped open.

Kyle gestured toward the other chair. “If that’s something you might be interested in, sit down.

We'll chat about those terms and expectations. If not, you can return to work and keep your mouth shut until after we're gone."

Morgan's mind ran through several answers, but only one felt right. "What does she want?"

"Good answer." Kyle shrugged, inhaling. "She'll hate the idea, but she's pregnant and she's refusing to stay until the delivery. She said that's how we—Angela and I—trapped her here last time. We need a medic along."

Morgan was disappointed. "So just as a medic. And a fighter if you need it. Plus manual labor, I assume."

"All of that, and maybe more later if she decides she can stand you." Kyle already knew it wouldn't happen until he died. Like Marc, Kyle wanted to know his family would be cared for after he was gone.

Morgan wanted to say no, that he had a solid place here and he would work through this newest issue. His mouth opened to say that. "I want your wife, Kyle. I want her like I've never wanted anything in my life. And I want you with her. If I come along, that will be my goal and it won't work." Morgan opened the door. "Thank you anyway."

Kyle stayed there and finished his smoke, mind going over all the truths and secrets he'd gleaned tonight. The camp thought they'd heard it all, but they were out of the loop on several issues, including Jennifer's true feelings.

*She avoids him because she's attracted to him. And why not? He's a younger me with more morals. By the time I die, they'll be friends and she'll have someone who's young enough to keep her alive until our kids are old enough to help.*

Kyle propped his feet on the other chair and shut his eyes, heart finally settling into a better rhythm. "Come on in here."

Little Roy ran in, giggling. He'd followed them.

Kyle lifted the boy onto his lap. "Do you like being in Safe Haven, Roy?"

Roy nodded slowly.

Kyle wondered if the child wasn't sure or if he was scared to tell the truth. "It's okay if you don't."

Roy hugged Kyle tighter. "You take me too?"

Kyle hugged the boy, chuckling. "Of course. You're my guy."

Roy snuggled up to his new father, hoping Kyle was always there for him. *He's the best.*

Jennifer had also followed, worried about Roy being out of her sight. Autumn was sleeping in her good arm, but Jennifer couldn't relax. She shut the door and went to the bed. She put Autumn near the wall and covered her up.

Kyle watched her, glad that she wasn't immune to their healing even though it was letting her refuse to stay under medical supervision tonight. Several descendants had given her energy. The wound in her shoulder was almost healed already. "He said no."

"Good."

“I want you to make him change his mind.”

Jennifer stilled, looking over.

Kyle rubbed Roy’s arm as the child got settled to fall asleep on his shoulder, like he did most nights. “If you really want to leave, that’s my one requirement. The day after the fighting is over, we’ll go—if Morgan comes with us.”

Jennifer caved. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Now would be better. You can look for Francesca on the way. She took off. No one’s seen her since she gave Autumn to Darren.”

Jennifer got up and left.

Kyle moved over to the bed. His body would keep the baby from falling off the edge. She hadn’t started rolling yet, but it was about time for that to start.

They all settled in together, giving Kyle a feeling of completion that he hadn’t known he was missing until he’d met Jennifer. “Home can be anywhere we’re together. If mommy’s ready to go explore the world, we’ll go do it. It’s time she enjoyed life instead of being held captive by it.”

## 2

“She’s not on the ship. We did a third sweep. There’s no way anyone is hiding on this ship.” Ian knew that for sure. He’d been part of every search.

Jennifer wasn’t surprised, only filled with rage that she didn’t have an outlet for.

Ian didn't want to be a substitute target. "If she's found, I'll personally call you."

Jennifer forced herself to go handle the next thing she had to do. Fear curled her stomach as she approached the steps to the entertainment floor. The camp was sleeping and there was only a skeleton security crew on each deck. She knew she wasn't going to have a problem with Morgan, but she was still afraid.

Morgan stiffened, hand stopping with the tumbler halfway to his lips. It was nearly empty, but he didn't feel drunk at all. Jennifer's fear hurt him. *I'd kill for you.*

Jennifer went into the bar and joined him at the long counter. "I think I want a drink."

Morgan drained the tumbler and set it down. He gently pushed it toward her. "Suck on the ice. If you like the taste, I'll make you one."

Jennifer took the tumbler as Morgan got up and went behind the bar.

Jennifer suckled an ice cube, nose wrinkling. Her eyes stayed on Morgan.

His stayed on the bottles and cups. "How is it?"

"Good. Strong."

Molly walked by the door, peering in to see who was using it after hours. She saw Jennifer and decided to walk this deck again.

Morgan mixed two tumblers, using less alcohol in hers. He knew she was staring, trying to decide how to ask for what she wanted. *Needs*, Morgan corrected. *Kyle sent her to ask because he knows I*

*won't tell her no.* Morgan slid the half-full tumbler toward her and collected his. "Go slow. You're not a drinker. It might hit you hard on top of the pain meds."

Jennifer sipped the cold drink, enjoying the flavor and the feeling of doing something she wasn't allowed to do. The thought of turning twenty-one seemed like an exceedingly long time away after the ugly year she'd survived.

Morgan stayed behind the bar, hoping that would help her feel better. He was surprised she was here at all. "Kyle has a lot of control over you."

Jennifer wasn't offended. "His opinion means a lot."

"Have you noticed he always gets what he wants?"

Jennifer smiled. "It looks that way, doesn't it?"

Morgan was glad to know that might not be the case. He took a big drink, fighting with his honor and his desire.

Jennifer tensed. "I'll never want you in my bed."

Morgan winced. "We don't have to talk about this. I said no. You don't have to ask." He forced a smile. "Enjoy your drink. You've earned a hangover."

Jennifer sighed. "Morgan, will you—"

"Stop it!" Morgan slammed his cup down. "You have no right to do this to me!"

Jennifer dropped her head. "I'm sorry. But I am asking. Come with us. I'll get used to having you

around. As long as you don't expect anything from me, it'll be fine."

"So I should give up my life here in paradise and come with you to be your medic and never have any hope of ever getting what I want?"

Jennifer met his eyes, feeling something for him beyond what she had before. "Yes."

Morgan shuddered. "No one would agree to this."

"Not unless they loved me too much to be away from me for so long."

Morgan sucked air into lungs that felt too small. *I won't see her for years!* "Damn you both."

Jennifer waited for the guard to go by again. "Can you be my friend?"

Morgan stared at her in longing. "For a while. Then it will hurt me, and I'll have to leave."

"Maybe you can take breaks and come back here to learn the newest medical techniques. Our neighbors will need care too."

Morgan realized she meant to go to a town and settle down. "I'd be a doctor, back home."

Jennifer sipped her drink while he thought about it, already feeling an odd buzzing in her brain.

Morgan finally shook his head. "I can't do this, Jenny. I want to, more than you know, but I can't be the guy waiting for *your* guy to die." Morgan drained the tumbler again and tossed it into the sink.

Jennifer realized Morgan wasn't going to give up his honor without getting something in return.

“Other than me, what do you want most in the world?”

“Immortality.” The answer was out before he thought about censoring it.

Jennifer didn’t laugh or scold. “There are ways to extend our lives. I’ve seen the scrolls, but I haven’t read them.”

“You’re young. You don’t...” He sighed as she tensed. “Fair enough. You didn’t fear death. Then the war came, but you’re young. The rest of us feel the end coming long before it arrives.”

“I’ll check into it.” She refused to lead him on. “It might not be possible.”

“It is. You saw the scrolls.”

“It could require a horrible price, like with the reset.”

Morgan hadn’t thought of that. There hadn’t been any reason to worry about consequences before because he hadn’t thought it was possible. “Will you dive for that information?”

She nodded. “And I’ll get it before we leave so you aren’t coming under false pretenses.”

Morgan was finally drunk. He walked around the bar and sat on the stool next to her. He drew in a breath. “If Kyle dies...”

Jennifer didn’t look at him. “I still won’t want you. You’ll have to convince me, like he did, and I don’t think it will ever be the same.”

Morgan sighed. “Let me think for a day or two.”

Jennifer slowly stood up, feet unsteady. “You have fourteen of them. We’ll need to know by then.”

Jennifer staggered toward the door.

“Wait, please.” Morgan quickly cleaned the mess and shut off the light before joining her.

Jennifer didn’t mind the wait. She wanted the escort even though she wasn’t comfortable being alone with him. “Thank you.”

Morgan slowly lifted his hand. He put a finger on her shoulder and sent healing energy.

Magic swarmed her, merging and mixing. Blue light shot out, confirming his suspicion.

Jennifer stiffened at the feeling, unable to control the reaction. It felt too good.

Morgan broke the contact and held the door open for her. He’d serviced enough women since the war to know what her reaction meant. If Kyle died, she would turn to him when her needs rose. This moment would be a reminder that they were compatible. *I am that guy waiting on his friend to die.*

Jennifer wasn’t sure if she should feel guilty. She walked in silence, trying to figure it out.

Morgan took her to the medical bay, following when she went to one of the rear rooms.

Jennifer stopped with her hand on the knob. “It doesn’t change anything for me.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want this. But I do need it.”

“I know that too.”

Jennifer opened the door and smiled at the peacefully sleeping family on the bed. “You can crash in the chair if you want to.”

There wasn't another option for Morgan. He followed her inside and locked the door. Then he moved the chair in front of the door and sat down for his first night watching over the family he'd longed to be a part of every night while he slept next to Shawn and Pam.

### 3

Dawn found Marc and Angela alone in the medical bay. The last patient had been released half an hour ago. The medics had cleaned up and left them alone. This was the only place they could be right now that the camp wouldn't hound them for something. The only issue was the noise from the brig work Theo and Monica were doing just down the hall, but it had to be done.

"I've been thinking about after."

Marc tensed. "Which after?"

"The final battle."

Marc waited, refusing to let a single thought cross his mind.

Angela chuckled. "I already know you're making your own plans. Let your shield down. I need that ruthless side." *If it's there.* Angela no longer assumed Marc would fill in her blanks, but she had many other brilliant minds who might have that piece. She'd figured it out now. Only Adrian was capable of keeping up, though William and Ivan would have been quick studies.

"I don't want to be like you. I hold back."

“I know. That’s why I no longer assume you have the answer I need. However, sometimes you do snap a piece into place for me. I’d never skip a possible solution because it might hurt our feelings.”

Marc snickered at her attempt to stop the fight before he got out a real protest. “Fine. Hit me.”

Angela sat up. “You think you’ll be dead; it doesn’t matter to you.”

Marc winced. “It does matter to me. I just have a hard time facing it.” He shrugged. “We’re actually talking about it now. That’s progress.”

Angela didn’t remind him how long it had taken just to get to this first step. They’d both been hoping his clock would be gone now, that Darren’s attack had been the last threat, but it was ticking as steadily as ever. “I’ve been thinking about those we’ve faced, known. We know they don’t all go into the judging chamber. And we know we affect that choice, up to a point.”

Marc nodded. When Angela wanted someone added to the rooms at the Weigh Station, it happened. She was even able to pass primitive messages to Doug and get answers.

“We’ve also discussed how to figure out the next spot on the map and how to reach it. You think it’s Hell.”

Marc nodded again, glad he didn’t have to say it. Hearing her speak those words was already too much.

“I agree, based on what we have so far, but consider this...” She sent him the image of a hamster ball with a long tube coming from the top. “Assume we’re the bottom ball. Above us, two more hamster balls. One is heaven—the Weigh Station. The other is likely hell—we’ll find out at some point. Above those two would have to be at least another ball with three tubes coming from it.”

Marc frowned. “Three?”

Angela showed him that single hamster ball again.

Marc got it right away. “There’s another exit. Or portal. Or spot on the map.”

“Yes. There may be tubes off the two middle balls, or more on the first, but for any of it to work, there has to be another tube coming from the single on the bottom to the single on the top. Tell me why.”

“Because this really is a circle of life. If earth were the end, by now it would only be either the very best souls who’ve made it through or it would be dead because of being the waste dumping ground for the Creator. It would be perfect or suck. We’ve always been right in the middle.”

“Excellent.” Angela leaned forward. “Now comes the hard question. How do I prove that theory? I can’t act on it unless I can prove it.”

Marc wasn’t sure if he’d ever been asked a harder question. He began tapping his finger against his knee. “What are the limits? Rules?”

“It has to be possible for us to do it without loss of life. I won’t say it isn’t worth it, but I refuse to sacrifice more lives to *this* goal.”

Marc understood. “Just one more question. Angie, are you pregnant?”

She smiled, hand dropping to her stomach. “Yes.” Coldness rushed out to stop his elation. Her face became a mask of impatience. “Now give me what I need!”

Magic swirled as Marc dug in willingly, making it twice as powerful.

Angela was suddenly positive this was going to work. “Faster, Marc. Think faster!”

Marc did.

Angela held her breath...

Marc blinked.

Angela observed in pride, fear, and curiosity. She was proud she’d been able to get him to do it and she was scared of what they were becoming, but the curiosity won. She watched intently, fascinated as he blinked again, then resumed tapping his finger.

“You can compare every religion, every opinion, every possibility of the afterlife and then hunt for commonalities.” Marc dove deeper, straining.

His demon came forward and merged, breathing for him. Thanks to his trips with the witch and then Marc, the demon could breathe for them for a long time.

Angela had already come up with that one, but it was good to have it verified.

“You could gather UFO reports, military records, NASA files, and compare for areas with the most sightings. Then you research the area for the explanations. Anything that’s left could be investigated by a team.”

Angela had also thought of that, though she’d only included military and NASA. She took out her notebook and added the UFO note. It almost made sense. Maybe the other tube, or door, lit up or distorted time or caused some other noticeable consequence that made observers think of aliens.

Marc saw a brighter idea further in the muck.  
*Can we?*

*Yes. I will warn you when we go too far.*

Marc dove deeper through the muck of time. He snagged the scroll and spun it.

The scroll expanded, revealing ancient writing with only seven words.

The demon read it. Marc was still learning the old languages.

*Time binds all matter in a triangle.*

Marc’s demon pulled him up as he worked on the riddle.

“Time binds all matter in a triangle.” Marc was almost back with her now. “*Binds, Angie. Binds!*”

Angela rubbed the goosebumps on her arm. “If you bind, you restrict. You control.”

Marc’s breath rushed out. “The Demon of Time.”

Angela slid onto Marc's lap, carefully, and wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you."

Marc held her, remembering the great news, but he couldn't help staying with the new information.

Angela understood. She'd handled it that way to avoid his hastily-made up rules for her pregnancy. "It has to be you."

Marc knew. "When?"

She kissed his cheek. "Not for a long time, I think. I won't send you in blind."

"Is it wise to wait?"

Angela wondered if he was already feeling the urge to go exploring. "Yes. We have to get the islands closest to us settled and working."

"I didn't know you'd made plans."

"I didn't. That's my XO's job."

Marc chuckled. "You're sneaky." He rubbed her arm and sighed happily. "Can we sleep for a little bit now?"

Angela kissed his neck, fighting a yawn. "No more diving for a while though, even if you want to blink, okay?"

Marc nodded. He was following her orders to the letter on the magic side of their lives. In the rest of it, he was as stubborn as ever.

"I love you."

Marc smiled. "I love you too. Forever."

Angela kissed him. *That's exactly what I have in mind.*

"Hey. Sorry to interrupt."

Marc and Angela broke apart, smiling as Tonya joined them. Their good moment vanished at the sight of her stress-lined face.

Angela climbed out of the bed, straightening her clothes and gun belt.

Tonya held out a sheet of paper. "I ran a test of Darren's blood. It came back positive. He had the rage sickness." Tonya forced out the next words. "We're all infected and I have no idea how to treat it."

Angela motioned. "Come in. It's time we let you in on something."

Tonya entered, frowning as she closed the door. "What did I miss?"

Angela admitted what she'd suspected since they arrived. "This island is a honey pot. They ruined it for us as soon as they found out we were coming here."

"So you know."

Angela nodded. "Safe Haven is going to become terribly angry in the near future. If we don't find an antidote, the camp won't survive this next year."

Tonya dropped into the chair, mind too tired to work correctly. "I'll get on it again in the morning."

"I'll have the doctor's books sent to your cabin." Angela put a hand on Tonya's shoulder in comfort. "Morgan is going to give you a medic test. After that, you can be at all the scenes to collect samples and details without the camp knowing what's going on."

Tonya frowned, sorry to deliver the next bad news. “Morgan isn’t staying. When Jennifer leaves, he’ll be with them.”

Angela smiled at her. “That’s why you’ll be getting the test and classes, Tonya. In time, you’ll take Morgan’s place as our chief medical officer.”

Tonya didn’t know what to say.

Marc chuckled. “Think of what Kenn will say.”

Tonya laughed. Kenn would hate the idea because it would put her in danger at times.

“Can you handle him?”

Tonya nodded at Angela, glad the old Kenn wasn’t who she had to deal with. “I’ll calmly explain that his battered ex has a job for me and I want it.”

Marc laughed this time, almost able to imagine Kenn’s immediate guilt and cave. “You’re a little evil. You know?”

Tonya took the compliment as it was intended. “Of course. Your wife taught me how to aim it.”

Marc sighed. “Fiancé.”

Tonya grinned. “Wife.” She whistled lowly.

Grant opened the door and stepped inside. Ray was on his heels.

Grant smiled as he held out the ring Marc had given him the last time they’d tried this. “I believe we can skip the other stuff.”

“I agree. I just need to clear up one thing first.” Marc looked at Angela. “Do you still want to be my bride?”

“More than anything.” Angela smiled happily, holding out her hand.

Marc slid the beautiful gold wedding band on over the engagement ring. They snapped together with a gentle click.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Angela began climbing into the bed with Marc. “I can do better than that. Get out!”

Laughter lit the room and spread through the walls, bringing peace to everyone, even those who didn’t want it.

**Two Weeks Later**

Chapter Seventeen  
**Bloody Dog**

*Atoll: a reef, island, or island chain that formed from coral and often has a hollow center.*

1

“**W**hy are we bothering with these islands? We’re over a hundred miles from Pitcairn.”

Silence fell through the bridge of the ship. The other eight men and women manning stations prepared to duck any coming punishment. Their boss didn’t care who got hit in the crossfire.

Cerise knew the risks of speaking up. She’d lost her husband to that crime during the reeducation period. Her only son had succumbed to it during training.

The captain turned toward her, plump profile squeezing into alertness. “Satellites recorded heat signatures on all four islands. We expect to find groups at all locations.”

Cerise wasn’t comforted. “I have an idea for a trap if this assault doesn’t work.”

The air grew cold. She’d just insinuated their plan was a dud.

Cerise shut her eyes as the captain leaned over her from behind. His hot, sweet-smelling breath blew over her neck, delivering mint and danger. “Speak softly, Cerise. The Gods are listening.”

Cerise rested her head on his shoulder. “I only seek to expand your glory. I have no ties to the Yanks.”

Captain Miles Silver inhaled deeply of her freshly washed hair and light perfume. He adored things that smelled good. She always did. “Safe Haven is able to bring fighters together without reeducation. They will never share their power for the greater good of all survivors. They are evil. They must be stopped now, before they grow any stronger. We go in openly to prove we fight fairly, but also because tricking them hasn’t ever worked.”

Cerise nuzzled his smooth jaw. “So many have tried. It would crush me to lose you. Do we have to take them alive?”

Miles chuckled. He let his hand come up to gently tangle in her short auburn hair. The soft curls wrapped around his rough fingers with faint scratching sounds. “Only a few.”

“It will be hard to spare any of them.”

“I told our leader the same, but he has firm orders and I will not intentionally disobey.”

Cerise had been bonding with Miles since their first meeting, using everything she had to sway his loyalty from the UN to her. She’d never mentioned betraying their jobs, though. She’d been waiting for the time when it might be welcomed instead of

getting her killed. Cerise felt that moment finally arrive. *He said intentionally!* “I’ll support any choice you make.” Cerise slowly straightened, glinting golden eyes running over the other sailors who were listening. “We all will.”

Heads bobbed immediately.

Miles ran a tender hand down her cheek. “If the plan fails, what would you have us do?”

Cerise pointed at a speck on the radar. “We set up floating bases around their island and pick them off every time they pop up. They made it to their haven, but they aren’t safe from snipers and trap teams. After enough deaths and missing residents, we’ll be able to walk right in and claim it.”

“Downside?”

“Time. It could take months to weaken them enough for that to work.” Cerise smiled, hand coming up to clasp his. “I wanted you to have an extra plan, in case I don’t make it through the coming fight.”

Cerise felt his body tense.

“Don’t speak that way! Our future will be glorious.” Miles stepped back and pointed at the radar man. “Record that. It never hurts to have an extra plan.”

“Yes, sir!” The radar man, Lowan, got to work right away.

Miles settled in his chair with a deep frown across his forehead. The thought of Cerise dying was haunting.

The other sailors avoided looking at him or Cerise. Her charm was stifling in the closed bridge, but it was necessary to keep the captain under control. When Miles wasn't charmed, screams and blood were his hobbies. Cerise had volunteered to keep him happy. In exchange, when the fight started, the entire group had to help her reach Safe Haven, even if it took their lives. They wouldn't have agreed, but Cerise was also bloodthirsty. Defying her might mean an uglier end than what Miles would deliver.

Cerise kept her charm flowing, fighting exhaustion. She was the only descendant on this ship, which made it easier to stay alive, but the hard part was coming soon. She only knew Safe Haven by reputation, but she was certain they weren't going to be sitting idly by, waiting for the attack. Reaching them might be impossible, but she didn't have a choice. *I have to figure out where they'll be. Cerise strengthened her charm. If you get in my way, I'll soak in your blood every night for twice that long.*

Almost everyone jumped as the radioman accepted an incoming call.

"Open-air." Miles delivered a comforting smile to Cerise, not feeling the tension like everyone else was.

"Cerise Bunting is summoned to the flagship. A transport will arrive in ten minutes."

Miles looked at her in alarm.

Cerise smiled in return. "Battle assignments."

Miles nodded, tense shoulders relaxing. “Safe travels.”

Cerise stood, sliding her knife into the sheath. She always had a weapon in her lap. Sitting made it hard to draw; she preferred to have that step already accomplished. She spun her cloak over her shoulders and strode toward the door with her bright red arm visible to everyone. She’d been marked by an alpha years ago. It hadn’t stopped command from using her every chance they got.

As soon as she was gone, the charm she’d used faded. The crew shared looks of relief and of apprehension. Miles wasn’t charmed now either.

Miles didn’t notice. He was watching Cerise on the monitor as she went to the hatch. The flickering light gave her a glow that refused to let him look away.

Cerise gave him a quick wave as she rounded the corner.

Miles hid a smile and shut off the monitor. “Update me!”

Lowan nudged the terrified sheila next to him. Hazel and her sister Jade were excellent sailors, but they froze with fear in any confrontation. They were almost useless to the UN, but the radioman didn’t want either of them executed. *Miles promised me a double reward for getting him here on time to get a good spot near the main island.* Lowan smiled at Hazel as she began to stammer updates on the docking, sonar, and other systems of this submarine.

*I'm going to ask for her and her sister. I can't wait to play with them in my bomb shelter at home.*

Miles glared at the radioman. "Confirm her pickup!"

Hazel winced at the shout. *I hope Lowan doesn't die on this run. Miles said I can have my pick of these idiots for castration experiments. I can't wait to play with him.*

Across the bridge, Jade watched her sister with a tolerant smile. *Miles said I can eat her heart after we win, but I'm hungry now. I hate waiting.*

## 2

"That's Darwin Knight!"

"He's the best gunman on the planet, mate."

A hush went through the small crowd of fighters who were waiting for their transport boat to arrive. They stared at the bloke walking toward their bobbing dock, in awe.

Darwin lifted his chin, but he flashed a charming smile toward the rookies and the senior fighters. The key to getting underlings to work for you was to always treat them with respect. *And if that doesn't work, you order someone to rip out their eyes and have lunch.*

Darwin examined the other ships, timing his arrival to that of their ride. He hated waiting around and being forced to speak with those below his clearance. He wasn't a snob; he had loose lips and that could get him killed before Safe Haven's

Eagles ever got a chance. Bragging and enjoying the chats with groupies was part of what he liked best, but now was a bad time for that.

An infamous form drew his eye, bringing annoyance. “Justin Milat.”

The fighters around Darwin muttered and strained for a glance of the notorious serial killer. Justin’s entire family had gone crazy over the years. He was just the latest in that insane DNA chain. Few of his crews ever returned to base intact, but he rarely failed to acquire his target.

Darwin’s chin went higher. “I don’t use hands-on methods. Most prey can be manipulated into doing what I want without taking their lives or limbs.”

The fighters around him nodded in agreement. The UN taught them to save their energy and their ammunition for the targets who really needed it.

A bright blue flash caught his attention next. Darwin scowled at the sight of Cerise stepping into a transport boat a quarter mile away. Her cloak was a stunning mix of blue hues that never failed to get attention, but the bright red mark down her arm stood out even more. “Oi! She’s a traitor! What is she doing here?!”

“Bloody dog, ay.”

“She bleeds her victims, mate. Her hands are always covered.”

“She was marked as a warning to all the other descendant trackers.”

“If she thinks you’re a traitor, she kills you. Orders don’t matter to her.”

Darwin listened to their comments vaguely, stomach dropping as Cerise pointed at him and gave a wide grin. *I hope they don’t put me on her team.*

Cerise’s grin widened. *I don’t have anything on you; we’re good.*

Darwin glanced at Justin Milat, who was ignoring all of them to be the first one to reach the flagship. Darwin lifted a brow at Cerise.

Cerise’s eyes turned bright red. *Him, I could bleed.*

Darwin marked Milat off his mental list and stepped onto the ship.

Cerise did the same. She didn’t have anything on either man, but they would conspire against her now and that would change. *Everyone has a button and I’m really good at pushing them.*

Cerise pulled her 20” blade, sat, and laid it across her lap. Then she reclined and shut her eyes, letting her other senses read the situation unfolding around her.

Cerise felt heaps of other trackers, many more than she’d ever seen in one place at the same time. None of the governments had liked it when their kind gathered. A moment like this would have been forbidden. *And I would have been sent in to punish those who participated.*

The other trackers scanned the island areas that they could see from here, as well as each other, already digging in.

Cerise conserved her energy. She noted every name on her mental list, as well as refreshing her memory about their weaknesses, but she didn't challenge any of them. They were busy challenging each other. She doubted many of them even knew she was here. *And I hate that. So I guess I'll have to make a scene.*

Cerise caught Darwin's attention with a small flip of her finger. She knew he was keeping track of her. She pointed a single finger at the boat where Justin was standing up to be let onto the flagship.

Darwin couldn't help it. He nodded, grinning.

Cerise flipped a piece of dirt off her finger, subtly aiming at Justin's ship.

A rogue wave ran between the boats and smacked into the transport, jarring everyone.

Justin jumped right as the wave reached him. He clung to the ladder with one hand, dangling to spin around and glare at whoever had fired at him.

He saw Cerise's bright blue cloak first.

She shrugged. *Could have been anyone in this chaos.*

Justin scanned again. He spotted Darwin laughing. Justin's eyes narrowed.

Darwin held up a hand, suddenly realizing he was about to get the blame. *It wasn't me, mate.*

Justin went up the ladder, anger growing.

The fighters in the ship with him also scanned, hoping to learn a name to win favor.

Cerise could have told them it wouldn't matter. Justin had no loyalty to anyone or anything. He was only here because he was allowed to kill their kind.

*You do realize that's why the rest of us believe you're here?*

Cerise gave Darwin a wide grin but didn't answer. Instead, she kept track of the scans that were happening around them. Several of the men and women in the wide pointed ships were powerful. She was interested in what they might be picking up, though she doubted Safe Haven would be so easily found. The fact that the UN Armada was here, and had been for hours, and yet there had been no sign of Safe Haven said the prey had chosen to hide instead of fight. That made things more difficult.

Cerise's boat reached the flagship. Sitting in the rear, she was the last one off. It gave her time to evaluate more people, as well as the captains of the little boats around them. Miles was always on the lookout for a new crew member, but not everyone could stand to be underwater for long periods of time. Their minds had to be solid and most of the troops now stomping onto the flagship like they owned it were not okay in any way. *I reckon that's why the UN chose them for this battle.*

Only the strongest of the groups were still alive now, thanks to the nightly matches. They had hundreds of fighters with various skills, but there were twice as many hunters who would work for the trackers. Once the trackers found a trail, anyway.

She thought teams would be sent to the islands, but the UN had been close mouthed with the details. That was why she'd had to play nice with Miles for the entire trip. If she'd killed him, she wouldn't have made it here. She only knew how to run one part of the submarine and that wasn't nearly enough.

Cerise wasn't sure any of them would be enough for this battle. The prey would pick them off little by little until there were only a few troops left and then Eagle teams would wipe them out. Cerise had told Miles that the last time they were in bed together, but she wasn't sure if he had passed the information on to Director Haussler.

Cerise had only met Director Haussler once, but the one-eyed German had made an impression on her. As long as he had all the information, he was sure to come up with a devastating plan. The bloke was a genius; it ran in his family.

Cerise felt Justin glaring at her from the top deck. *There's another family line that passes on its skills.*

Everyone needed a killer during the apocalypse, but Justin wasn't controllable. She hoped Director Haussler knew that.

Cerise sheathed her blade and went up the ladder at a leisurely pace as the boat pulled away for its next duty. She reached the top deck, ignoring Justin's hand as he offered to help her.

Justin's frown dipped into his long black beard and made him look like one of the pirates they had all been glad to discover were dead. The pirates had

been another group that might have been able to threaten the UN's control. Their gas was too effective against descendants.

“I'm surprised to see you here, mate.”

She stepped by Justin without answering. She could feel his evil thoughts slamming into her, but her shield had been up since she'd stepped off the submarine and onto the portable dock. The fact that the shield was invisible was a testament to her skills. The fact that she could keep it up during all of this and they were just now realizing what was going on was a testament to their lack of attention to detail. That was why she was valuable and they were expendable. Despite everything she'd done in the past, the UN had made sure she was here for this battle. Some of the trackers staring at her blue cloak and red mark had bribed their way onto the lists. But not Cerise. *I was drafted almost a year ago for this mission. It's now my life's work.*

Cerise followed the line of trackers into the wide bay on the top deck of the huge flagship. She took a place in the shaded corner as space began to fill and the tension began to rise. It was almost time to kill and maybe die. That thought would never be more than a few seconds away now, keeping them all on edge and ready to fight to the death.

“That one.” Assistant Director Oliver Silverman pointed at Cerise.

Albert, the assistant's assistant, hurried forward.

Cerise stopped and waited, letting the thin, wiry man come to her.

The other trackers began to realize who was among them. Attention shifted from Justin to her. Mutters flew through the growing group and traveled to those who were still coming aboard.

Cerise took the note without responding emotionally, but the wave of confidence she sent out slammed into the lackey as he moved away.

He frowned at her. “Childish charms won’t get you a command position.”

Cerise chuckled at his attempt to act as if he wasn’t enjoying the feel of her mental caress. “Being the arm of an arm won’t get you a command position either.”

Laughter rang out from the witnesses.

The lackey hurried back to his place, bearded face red under all that blond and gray hair.

Cerise actually felt bad for him. One of their many directors probably had something on him, forcing the man to be their clerical slave. It was common.

Cerise read her note.

**The Director is waiting. Hurry up!**

Cerise frowned at the lackey, sending out a wave of anger.

Men and women moved aside, but they also prepared to attack her as soon as she showed a weakness.

“Enough.” Oliver wanted to see what she could do, but his boss wouldn’t be pleased. “Get to your meeting.” Oliver glared at his lackey. “Were you told to converse with the trackers?”

Albert shook his head, thin frame tensing. “I’m sorry. She’s an outcast. I didn’t think the rules applied to her.”

“Neither does she.” Oliver motioned. “Make sure they all get to where we want them.” He followed Cerise, studying her walk, her mind, and her ass. It didn’t look wide enough to have birthed so many offspring, but the UN records were clear. Cerise Bunting was the mother of ten children. The three sets of triplets hadn’t survived the invasion of Australia. People believed that had driven her mad, allowing her to kill at her pleasure instead of serving the assembly.

Cerise slowed as she reached the only door on this side of the wide, grimy deck. “There were 13. Your files are out of date.”

Oliver flushed, lips vanishing into his scowl. “Never without permission!”

Cerise snorted as she stepped inside. “Ever hear the saying it’s easier to apologize afterward than to convince people beforehand?”

Oliver nodded, going to his chair near the boss, who was watching all of them. “Yes. Ever hear the saying don’t bite the hand that’s feeding you?”

Cerise chuckled. “Touché. My apologies, Assistant Director Silverman. But I’m not wrong. I know how many children I’ve birthed. I was there.”

Fresh laughter echoed in Oliver’s ears. He turned around in his seat and refused to look at her.

Cerise stayed near the door, scanning and waiting. Footsteps were coming, indicating others

had also been chosen for this meeting. Cerise handed her note to the guard as Justin and Darwin entered together, whispering.

Darwin stilled as he saw everyone staring at them. “What? Did something happen?”

“Did you find them already, Cerise?” Justin didn’t censor his disdain. “Bloody dogs always catch a scent faster when it’s their kind.”

Cerise stopped herself from stiffening, but it was close. Aware of the Director studying her, she reacted as the situation deserved.

Cerise’s hearty laughter embarrassed Justin again. He stomped over to stand near Oliver’s chair, glaring at everyone who laughed.

Darwin cleared his throat as he stepped inside and gave his pass to the guard. He started to repeat his question, then thought better of it. He stood near Cerise and waited, hoping that showed he wasn’t scared of her.

Cerise leaned over. “But you are, mate. I smell it on you even though I already cleared you. What are you afraid of?”

Darwin shuddered, fighting her mental invasion. “You’re a ruthless killer. You only bring in bodies half the time.”

“I remove threats to our future goals. If you’re loyal to the cause, you have nothing to fear.” She dug in harder, starting to enjoy herself. “What’s going on in there, Darwin Knight? Making any plans to follow your famous family?”

“No! I don’t kill my own kind, not even you!”

The crew and guards expected the Director to stop them, but Haussler only watched in fascination and shrewd intent.

Darwin brought up his shield. “Stop it now! You’re not the boss here.”

Cerise was startled into a genuine laugh at his childish words. She withdrew from his mind, smile lingering.

“Disarmed by mirth.” Director Haussler’s cold voice brought instant silence to the room. He slowly stood, single eye going over the ten trackers. “You are the best of your kind. If you can be defeated by amusement, this battle is already lost.”

Cerise wanted to protest that, but she took the scold with a lowered head like she was supposed to. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

Haussler believed her. Cerise wasn’t known for repeating mistakes. “Command has decided we will use a three-team flush.” Haussler pointed at the wall as Oliver hit the button that unrolled a wide, long map of their location. “As you can see, there are four islands. All are small. Two have barely any cover or structures that would allow a camp that size to hide or defend itself. The two barren islands will be cleared today. I expect it done within hours of landing.” Haussler sent a hard look around the room. “If you miss my deadlines, you have lost the grand prize and may be charged with dereliction of a sworn duty.”

No one spoke, but everyone considered that grand prize. The UN had done a perfect job on that

one. They'd told their fighters they could have whatever they wanted. It had brought the most hardened fighters, but also those who relied only on luck or stealth. Against Safe Haven, Cerise wanted to use all of them.

“The third island is Henderson. I am sending a team there to get started. By morning, all teams will be on Henderson, clearing and verifying it is empty. That will leave only Pitcairn, where we have always believed they would dig in. It will take us two days to reach them. At midnight, three days from now, we will surround the final island and attack with everything we have left. Wires are being set to keep any of them from slipping away, but I expect we will catch a few who might have made it because they will not expect us to use the darkness. Command estimates we will lose 1-2% of every team to natural dangers from picking this plan. Account for that when you choose your teams from those lower ranks you saw waiting on the side deck.” Haussler glared at Cerise now. “Do not kill anyone on our list. Command wants POWs.”

Cerise frowned right back, ignoring the others who were nodding or smirking. “That depends on the list. If it's Angela, Marc, or Adrian, there's no way anyone will be able to take them alive, sir.”

“Their leaders are not on that list. We want them gone this time; they will never cooperate with our future plans. Huge bounties will be awarded for those bodies, as long as they can be identified by sight or DNA.”

“So we’re going after the younger generations?”

“We want Eagles. As you find the teams, kill off the top two or three and bring in the rest. They are half-trained, but not yet warped by Safe Haven’s refusal to coexist.”

Cerise clenched her fists. “We can’t coexist!”

“Very good.” Haussler looked around. “You have one hour until we begin the drops. You have full access to the armory. We are maintaining this position. Get ready for the fight of your lives. Just do it somewhere else. One of you stinks and I am not wasting time discovering who. Get out.”

Cerise was first to the door. She leaned against the shocked guard and started sniffing loudly.

Justin and Darwin went by her with scowls at the newest wave of laughter.

As soon as the others were gone, Cerise looked at Director Haussler and then nodded toward Oliver. “It stinks because your assistant has gone rotten. Check the logs, mate.”

Oliver jumped from his chair to run.

Haussler drew his small pistol and fired once.

Oliver fell at his feet, hands pulling on his leg.

Haussler stepped over the man. “Check the logs.”

A crew woman flew over to do it, ignoring the blood and the body. She’d seen too much of that to be shocked by it now. “It looks like he was relaying the details of this meeting to someone on ship 00219, sir.”

“For what purpose?”

“Checking, sir.” The woman typed faster, able to feel the Director’s impatience. “Oliver Silverman has a girlfriend on 00219, sir. Perhaps he was feeding her details so she could benefit unfairly?”

Haussler nodded. “Have the girl brought to my cabin. Arrange a meal. Make her comfortable.”

The woman typed in the instructions and sent them to the other boat, refusing to consider what would happen to the girlfriend.

The Director turned around, mouth opening to reward Cerise.

She was gone.

Haussler frowned. “Bloody dog.”

The crew woman nodded, but didn’t offer her thoughts. She hadn’t been asked and that was a huge mistake that their current director wouldn’t forgive. Cerise didn’t know it, but she’d just made an enemy of the boss.

Haussler motioned at Albert. “Clean it up!” He dropped into his chair, mind blank on the surface for anyone who might try to read him. Below, he was stewing. He’d known Oliver was relaying information. Now, he would have to do it all openly and there was a risk that someone would figure out he had been involved. It was only a few crates of goods being sold on the side to pad a retirement, but Haussler knew it would be his life if he was caught. *The girl has to die. She’s the only other person who knows.*

Haussler thought about Cerise. It was possible she had read that too, but final orders on her had

already come anyway. Cerise would not survive the invasion. "Update her file with credit for the catch. And for the number of offspring. We would not want our files to be wrong, eh, Oliver?" He kicked the dead body.

No one else spoke. Haussler was clearly insane; it was a requirement for this run.

Chapter Eighteen  
**Let's Roll This**  
UN Flagship

1

**“L**ine up! Pick a team and join that line!”

Albert walked among the fighters with a new spring in his step now that Oliver was dead. “There are three desks. Get in line at one and sign your name.”

Cerise stepped into the wide cargo preparation area. Silence slowly fell until all four hundred fighters and trackers were staring at her.

“It’s the dog.”

“The bloody dog.”

“She kills our kind on every run!”

“She shouldn’t be here.”

“Maybe she can sniff them out.”

Cerise ignored the openly spoken comments, though the owners of those words refused to make eye contact as she examined the room. When she headed for one of the sign-up stations, the crowd instinctively moved away from it. The line was gone by the time she reached the folding desk.

Justin and Darwin smirked at her. Both men had voiced each of those protests as soon as they’d

gotten here, hoping to make sure she got the worst of all the team members.

Cerise had prepared for this. She lifted a brow toward the two men. “How many of my crew have died on runs, in total?”

Darwin flushed.

Justin glared. “Just because you’ve been lucky enough to never lose anyone, it doesn’t mean you’re a better leader.”

Cerise chortled. “That’s exactly what it means. I only kill targets. My crew is like family when we’re on a run.” And they were. She refused to sacrifice her team to make a capture. There were always other options.

A few trackers re-entered her line, sold.

Cerise shook her head at all of them. “You three are on the piss too much. Not interested.”

All three men stared in angry surprise. She’d refused them and outed their weaknesses for alcohol.

Other trackers entered her line now, wondering if she would accept them.

Cerise nodded. “Sign your names and get ready. Meet back here in fifteen minutes.”

The trackers quickly did as she instructed, ignoring the mutters and glares from Justin and Darwin.

More people moved into her line.

Justin realized what was happening, but he didn’t know how to stop it.

Neither did Darwin, but he had to try. “I shoot better than she does.”

Cerise nodded. “True. You also hog the glory. My team shares equally in credits and punishments.”

Darwin stopped talking, no longer as eager for this job. *If she keeps running her mouth, I’ll be in trouble.*

Justin shook his head. *No. We’ll be removed as soon as the fight’s over.*

Darwin couldn’t take that. He strode toward the door. “I’m going to the boss on this one, bitch. You can’t have all the best fighters and trackers. That’s not fair.”

Cerise wasn’t offended by the common term. “They’re signing up by choice; that is our motto, right? Make your own choices and go as far as you want. Well, they want to be on the winning team.”

Justin lifted a finger. “I’ll divide my financial share among the survivors.”

A few of the greedier men and women gravitated back into his line.

Darwin stopped, unwilling to bribe his crew but also unwilling to bug the boss. Word about Oliver’s removal had already spread.

Cerise waved at Justin. “If money means a heap to you, he’s the better choice. I can’t stand greed. I’ll be tempted to kill you.”

More fighters got out of her line, casting worried looks.

Cerise was satisfied that most of the selfish fighters would go to Justin and the weakest ones would go to Darwin. She doubted either bloke would survive the fight. They didn't need to worry about the boss's plans.

Haussler opened the door and scanned all of them from there. His lips curled as he understood what was happening. But he didn't speak against it. He slammed the door, making a few of the fighters move into other lines so they wouldn't be punished later.

Haussler slapped the clipboard into Albert's hands. "Make sure I'm notified any time she calls in. Give her preapproval for all gear. She has something to prove. I think she hates someone in that camp."

"Bet it's a Mitchel."

They both laughed and kept going down the deck. It was time for his next meal, a stiff drink, and a quick talk with the girl being brought across the water as they walked.

The girl, Violet, spotted Haussler's angry walk and paled. She clung to the speeding boat, heart racing. Oliver had stopped answering and she'd been ordered to the flagship a few seconds later. *We're busted. I'm about to be removed.*

Violet swept the island nearest to them and found nothing blocking her path. She slipped into the water before the captain noticed.

The ocean closed over her head as the captain slowed to come back around. His muted shouts

faded as she sank and then there was only the roar of the water and the terror in her heart as cold fingers closed over her ankle and yanked her down.

## 2

“Find her!” Haussler punched the lackey, knocking Albert overboard. “Now!”

More bodies hit the water as troops jumped in, eager to retrieve the Director’s target, but they weren’t divers. They couldn’t search for long without gear and the water was full of silt from their arrival, blocking the view.

Cerise and Justin joined him at the rail, scanning. “Do you want me to handle that, Director?”

Haussler waved them off, furious. “Don’t waste energy on this. Get your teams ready!”

Everyone moved away, hoping he didn’t notice them next.

Cerise stopped in the doorway. Darwin was holding her clipboard.

He met her eyes with a guilty glance. “You didn’t sign your name on it.”

Cerise shrugged. “Put yours. See if they’ll fight for you.” Then she laughed and walked away.

Justin joined Darwin, waiting until they were alone. “Maybe one of us will have a chance to kill her, mate. When she finds them, it’ll be chaos.”

“Maybe that’s why her hands are always bloody.” Goldie cleared his throat as he entered. “She just made me XO.”

The huge black man took the clipboard from Darwin’s hands as both men stared up at him. They were lost in his shadow. “I’ll make sure she knows you cunts wish her all the best.”

Justin took a chance. They were caught conspiring. There was nothing left to lose if Goldie or Cerise went to the boss. “Name your price.”

Goldie laughed. “Your life.” He exited, whistling happily.

“Damn it!” Justin started to panic. “Now we have to get rid of them both!”

Darwin was busy using his brain. He put a hand out to stop Justin’s furious pacing and mutters. “There’s no way everyone on her team is loyal. We still have half an hour until the drop. See who you can find to do a quick slash and walk. I’ll do the same.”

“Yeah.” Justin followed Darwin out. “What if that doesn’t work?”

Darwin pointed at the island. “Safe Haven is a formidable foe. We’ll have to make sure she’s in the first wave when we find them.”

“When *she* finds them.”

Darwin sighed. “She really is a bloody dog. She’s tracked descendants in places the rest of us couldn’t even reach, let alone survive.”

“Why’s she so different? So much better?”

“She worked for the labs before the war. That bitch has been hunting descendants for 30 years. It’s experience. When we’re that old, we’ll be that good too.”

“Nice.” Justin didn’t feel it though. The sight of the island had given him a cold chill in the dawn light and it hadn’t gone away. *I’m going to die here. But not alone. When I go, I’ll be surrounded by the bodies of those I’ve crushed.*

### 3

Goldie stopped near the Director, waiting respectfully to be acknowledged.

Haussler was already aware of the unfolding drama. “She has to die on this run anyway. Our organization can no longer keep collecting power. It is time to cull our herd, here and now, and she did not make the cut. But if they interfere with her finding the target, I will consume them so slowly it will feel like an eternity.”

The boss knew his spy among the ranks would pass that on to the two embarrassed trackers. Cerise was safe from her final destiny for now, but that would change the instant someone called in Safe Haven’s location. Goldie would also pass that along. The man had been with him for years, working both sides when it was needed. Getting Cerise to name him XO had been easy—he’d said Haussler ordered it. *And I did, but not openly. The blame for her death will not come back to me.*

*Goldie might catch the hit for it, but she does not have friends on that team. They might even reward him.*

Only the big boss back home wanted Cerise to survive this invasion, and that was only because her main gift had never been copied or passed on to offspring. Haussler didn't know exactly what she could do, but it had always made him nervous that she was the only one who had it, whatever it was. Now that the assembly was culling the herd, he was taking this opportunity to remove a future threat to their control. Cerise Bunting was a wildcard, like her entire family had been for centuries. "Wild dogs, every one of them."

Haussler might have let her live to please his boss, but she'd forced him to kill Oliver before their plot was finished. Now he needed a new way to smuggle supplies. *As soon as she is on land, I will work on that. I cannot do it while she is here.*

Even Haussler wasn't above her wrath if she caught him stealing. Cerise had no mercy for breaking the rules. She was the most trusted, and hated, person on this mission.

#### 4

Cerise went to the armory in the center of the flagship, feeling like a kid on a birthday. All their boats had a weapons room, but this one was massive and contained everything a team might need to root out the enemy. Cerise was eager to play with some

new toys, but she used casual steps and her shield gave little ripples, intentionally, as she went by some of the other trackers and fighters. A few of them would be a challenge, even for her. Letting them know she was ready for a fight might prevent it from actually happening. Most of these blokes preferred sneaking up and hitting when their prey wasn't ready for it.

Cerise entered the empty armory after a fast sweep and nod from the guard on the door. An old gymnasium had been converted into a thick-walled bunker lined with heavy-duty shelves and cameras. Cerise felt eyes on her as she moved between the rows, picking up tags but not the items themselves.

She decided her team wasn't good enough with guns to rely on the detailed rifles and powerful shotguns that decorated one entire wall. She chose up-close weapons. Her team would enjoy the hands-on tools, though she did take a few guns and the ammunition they needed. When she reached the medical area, she skipped it and kept going to the drug section. She preferred to use the skills of her team for healing, but those special men and women were often targeted first, so they would either die quickly or be stuck in the middle where they were useless. As a result, Cerise had developed a different plan for their medics to follow. None of them liked it, but it had kept her teams alive for years. All they had to do was follow her instructions.

Cerise thought about her new team and sighed. “This may be the run where my perfect record is broken. Some of those cunts are too stupid to make it through.”

“I agree.”

Cerise turned, dismayed to find a fellow tracker leaning against the doorframe. The guard was nowhere to be seen now.

“You didn’t hear me because you were in your head.”

She nodded at his observation, sliding the stack of tags onto the shelf by her hand. “My mistake, mate.”

Orlando advanced as he drew his knife. “We’ll soon see.”

Cerise knew not to be fooled by the reckless approach. Orlando was probably the strongest descendant on any of the teams. She’d been mildly surprised when he chose Justin over her, but the gleam in his eye explained that now. He was high.

Orlando was confused when she didn’t move; he walked faster, hand lifting.

She strengthened her shield in time to absorb his first stab. The blade stuck.

Orlando snarled, eyes dilating.

Cerise frowned. “Cheater.”

Orlando’s rage swallowed his mind. He battered her shield with his knife, his fists, and small blasts of pain whenever her shield rippled.

Cerise waited for the man to wear himself out, not straining to keep her shield up, but she was

aware that she would be soon. *I don't use it enough. I'm rusty.*

Cerise saw her moment and let go of the shield. The loud pop snapped in Orlando's face. He recoiled to protect himself.

Cerise slid her knife into his stomach and ripped upward. Blood fell to the ground in a thick patter that didn't stop.

Cerise twisted, slicing, smiling. "Thank you for the practice, mate."

"My...honor." Orlando staggered out into the hall, gushing blood.

Cerise put her knife on the floor and waited to be arrested or at least interrogated.

The camera in the corner whirled her way. The speaker blared. "Get to your post!"

The guard on duty stopped in the doorway, shocked and dismayed to see her alive.

Cerise scooped up her knife and the stack of tags she'd gathered. She shoved those tags into the angry guard's arms. The guard had let Orlando by because he'd been sure the bigger, angry, drugged man would win. "Never ignore the little bitch just because she's little."

Cerise went to the toilet by the steps. It emptied in a hurry as crew members caught sight of her red arm. Then they saw the other one was dripping blood and they took off running.

Cerise washed, wiped, dried, and then went into a stall.

She sank down, but she didn't use the toilet. She sat there, recovering, as the minutes ticked by. Orlando had been drugged, willingly from the look of things. *I don't understand what happened. Did someone pay him to die or pay him to try?*

Cerise took another minute. Then she stepped out of the stall and left, not bothering with a fake flush. She always reckoned those in charge were watching every move their underlings made, even in bed and in the shower. Cerise wasn't concerned about that or the unauthorized death. She was worried that one of the strongest fighters had been sacrificed and she'd gotten the blame. *Something's going on here and I will get to the bottom of it.*

She walked down the hall, also not caring that the crew was jumping out of her way or gawking at her in fear or disapproval. *As soon as I locate Safe Haven, I'll turn my attention to the people on this ship.*

Descendants who caught the thought made mental notes not to come back here after the fight was over.

Goldie sneered at them as he caught up to her.

Cerise widened her shield to include him, nodding a polite hello. She and Goldie had been on several runs together over the years. She trusted him completely.

Goldie marched at her side and kept his thoughts blank.

“How does it look, mate?”

Goldie snorted harshly.

Cerise nodded. “Exactly. We’re all in over our heads.”

“Yeah. The only survivors will be those who can hold their guts in the longest.”

## 5

Violet held her breath as the oxygen was taken away. She stared into the deep brown eyes of the man holding her in place with his shield. She’d tried to fight him as they sank down to a rocky coral surface, but he was too strong. As they’d fallen, Violet had caught sight of dozens of men and women in the water, all wearing black. *I wonder how they keep from getting lost.*

Greg lifted his hand, showing her the thick rope.

Violet nodded nervously. Being under the water was eerie in this situation. She was a great swimmer; she normally enjoyed it. *Why aren’t you killing me?*

Greg lifted his other hand, pointing.

Violet paled as a thin shark swam by and vanished into the silt. The blood would draw them.

Greg concentrated, practicing every chance he got. *They’ve been trained to go for bodies. Blood is icing on the cake.*

Violet stared into his wide eyes. He’d brought up a shield around them when he first grabbed her, then shoved gear onto her so fast that she hadn’t been able to fight. She’d only been concerned with the breathing device he’d shoved into her mouth.

Greg brought his shield back up, practicing that too, but also to deflect the curious shark. The woman smelled like food to it. Everyone else down here smelled like the chemicals on their suits and skin. It discouraged the sharks and jellyfish, but their first captive hadn't been planning to end her day in the water.

Greg pointed up, then at his watch. He held up three fingers.

*We're going up?* Violet panicked. She lunged backward, dropping the respirator. She hit his shield and bounced into his arms.

Greg caught her out of reflex, proud of himself when he managed to keep his shield in place. He held her tightly with one arm and bent them both down to pick up the respirator.

Violet saw a long scar across his shoulder. She knew it was from a bullet. She slowly calmed, but she reached out to grab his head and make him look at her. *I can't go up there!*

Greg frowned, making her let go. *Stop yelling.*

Violet pushed away from him, stopping herself before she hit his shield again. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. *I'm not going. You can't make me breathe. I'll be dead before you get me to the surface.*

Greg sighed. The woman had no reason to trust him and every reason to fear him, but the UN was still her focus. *Okay. We'll go up last.*

He wanted to tell her she was safe with them, but he refused to lie. No one down here was safe

right now. All it would take was one sighting and the water would fill with bullets and other projectiles, as well as trackers and fighters. They were walking a thin line. Greg glared at her. *Do what you're told.*

He shrank his shield until it was forcing her to move into his arms again. He held her tightly, hands gripping her sides, hard wet body flush with hers.

Violet realized her situation down here was just as dangerous as it had been up there. She tried not to cry. *Just kill me now. I've been hurt enough.*

Greg's heart thumped. He held the woman until she began to fight the lack of oxygen and then he shoved the respirator against her lips.

Violet sucked in air and collapsed in his arms, no longer fighting. *I don't want to die.*

Greg felt her soft hair against his hands; her heart was beating harshly against his arm. The need to protect her grew into a fiery desire that strengthened his shield until the water couldn't get through it.

Greg celebrated the victory over his gift, but it wasn't as sweet with the woman shivering in his arms. The lower temperature of the water, along with shock, was affecting her now. If she didn't warm up soon, she might die.

Marc tapped on Greg's shield. *We're heading in. I'll carry her.*

Greg reluctantly gave the woman to Marc.

Marc brought up his shield and used a heat spell to warm the water inside it.

Greg followed the rest of the team, arms feeling empty. It was a strange reaction, one that wasn't welcome.

Marc scanned the scared woman as he walked, confirming and verifying details about the armada above them but also about the woman herself.

Marc followed the rope on his belt as they pulled themselves along the edges of Ducie Island. They entered a wide canyon in the underwater coral and vanished.

## 6

“It's a trap!”

“Ambush!”

Cerise and everyone else turned toward the screams, ears bracing automatically as they spotted huge sprays of water and beach flying into the air. Explosions echoed through the openings between ships, magnifying in the water. Ripples slammed into the ships trying to reach Ducie Island.

Cerise braced with her feet, shielding her eyes from the spray as her boat neared the shoreline. It was calm here compared to Henderson Island.

Cerise leapt from the boat as a larger wave hit, using the momentum to float over the exploding water. She withstood the shrapnel blast, mentally evaluating the damage to her shield. Thousands of pieces of crushed seashell dropped as she let them go and quickly brought her shield back up.

She landed in knee-high water on a tilting surface that immediately shoved her out of the water again.

Cerise's shield flickered as it bore the impact of the blast. If it had been on land, she might have lost her barrier.

Cerise kept going, determined to reach the surviving teammates waiting for her on the one part of the beach that was safe.

“Help!”

“Sharks!”

“Trap! It's a trap!”

Cerise wanted to know what was causing Darwin's meltdown, but there wasn't time to look as her boot hit another mine and triggered it.

Cerise flew upward, arms and soaked cloak using the force to propel her over the last of the mined water and onto solid ground. She sucked in air and held her shield as she recovered, aware of panicked screams coming from both islands.

On his way to clear the atolls called Sandy and Oeno, Justin grumbled at the sight of Cerise's entertaining landing. “Once the fight is over, I'm taking her head.”

The captain of his small boat looked directly at Justin. “That could earn you a promotion or death. Don't miss; neither side will like it.”

Justin stored that unspoken request. Someone wanted Cerise dead. Justin snorted. *That makes about 50 of us.*

Justin saw Darwin's ship flip into the air. He rolled his eyes. "You won't have to bring him back later, mate."

The captain shrugged. "My boss said none of you are coming back until all the islands are cleared. When you finish one, you'll be ferried to the next to provide support."

Justin realized he would get a chance at Cerise during the final island landing. "Perfect."

The captain frowned coolly. "Clearing comes first; treachery and rewards will wait or heads will roll—literally."

Cerise didn't see Justin's boat go by. She was scanning Ducie. The UN had decided to land on two ends and the middle, giving the flagship a clear line of sight for all of these fights. Cerise would have suggested something less harsh. They'd already lost a dozen of her team and the same was true of the other landing parties. Cerise didn't pick up the one thing that would have made this frontal assault worth it. "They're not here."

The trackers on her team nodded and breathed sighs of relief at her confirmation of their own conclusions.

"We can go now." Goldie waved at the shoreline where reddish water and body parts were already accumulating. "We'll blow a path."

Cerise scanned to their right, able to view one rubbish-covered beach on Henderson, where Darwin had been drafted to get a basecamp set up. He was supposed to wait for her and Justin after

that, but Darwin was stopped 50 feet from the beach. None of his team had made it ashore yet. “They predicted this battle strategy.”

Goldie clicked his radio. “Recommend we change approach locations.”

“Negative. Proceed.”

Goldie scowled.

Cerise wasn't surprised by the response. “It would take too much time to do it right. They want this done and there are over a thousand of us. Don't expect a break until I insist on it.”

Cerise joined her team, not responding to Darwin's continued shouts for help. Command didn't like deviations. “Back-to-back for orders!”

Every team member rolled right and put their back to the person behind them. They scanned while they waited for her to speak.

“We're headed into hell, for no reason. If you're with me at the end, good for you. Maybe I'll have a few spots open on my personal team. If you're not with me at the end, there's no shame. We'll come back later and strip your body to outfit us for the next invasion, the next mission. Even in death, you will continue to serve those who conquered you.”

Cerise walked forward, leaving them speechless.

Goldie laughed. She was stirring them up, pissing them off, and laying seeds that would be trampled into the ground of their hearts and forced to grow. Goldie knew her plans well. He did his part to help it along. “We will all ask for freedom for our

countries. They have promised to consider giving independence to any land who sent all their men to fight.”

*And we did that.* Cerise kept walking, drawing her longest blade while fastening one side of her cloak so she could fight unhampered and still have half of her floating ability. “Put it out of your minds. It’s time to live or die. Concentrate on the sound of my voice, the feel of my protection, the terror of my rage. Use me to get yourself through this. I want to feel you hating me. Is that clear?!”

Her shout sent birds up from the few bushes, ruining their hiding places.

“Yes!” The team was comforted by her unexpected words.

Cerise looked at Goldie. *I wish our real team was here.*

Goldie nodded. Those powerful, dangerous men and women were at home, trying to keep their few remaining family and friends alive. “ARF!”

Cerise barked back at him, comforted. “Let’s roll this atoll.”

Chapter Nineteen  
**Cover The Rear**  
Pitcairn Island

1

“**W**e have our first POW.” Wade turned off the radio and stored it with his headset until the next scheduled check in with their teams. He was Angela’s radioman on this run. Neil was her IT guy. “Two bells came with it.”

“Unplanned captive code.” Angela switched on her laptop and waited for it to load. Faint noises were finding their way across the water, sounding like a vain storm trying to make thunder. The battle had begun.

Angela typed in her password and swiveled the screen. “Do it when she reaches the pole. If you go too early, she’ll knock it down. If you go too late, her partner will shoot it.”

Neil got ready to activate their first recording.

Angela scanned her group, judging moods and minds based on the situation. Word was already spreading through the people camped out with her below the remains of Kraft mansion. The burnt room Marc’s team had found was wide and deep, offering them more protection than some of the other tunnels.

“Now.” Neil hit the button and held his breath.

“This is a recording from Safe Haven Refugee Camp. It’s just a speaker and a tape recorder. Don’t be alarmed.”

Neil watched as the Australian woman stopped and spun, long blade coming up.

“Welcome to Hell. We don’t want you to travel alone. This will be a guided tour. Please look to your right.”

Everyone glanced over. Cerise narrowed in and found hundreds of pointed shells hiding in a bush. She swept, scowling. “All the bushes are booby-trapped.”

The recording continued, playing Jennifer’s young, smug voice. “It’s not just the bushes. Every inch of these islands are lined in death—yours. Each team is getting this same warning. Your leaders will tell you to keep going. As the Alpha’s official heir, and camp enforcer, I’m offering amnesty to any descendant who kills one of our enemies. You can even join us if you like. This offer is only open to descendants. You normals have it harder. You have to kill at least ten to get in. Be prepared to prove that.”

Cerise swiped the speaker wire with her blade and moved forward. She sighed at some of the thoughts from her team. “Come on, then. Goldie and I can be the first two tongues you take as proof.”

No one attacked, but their thoughts were full of trying.

Jennifer's voice echoed from the next speaker that had been tied to a large rock. "As members of Safe Haven, you'll always be fed and given medical care. You will be loved and included. You will be judged fairly. Come join us. At the very least, don't fight against us when you get here."

Cerise cut the wire again, stopping the voice. "Call it in."

Goldie did, bringing his shield up as he followed Cerise. She wasn't stopping now. The girl on the radio had pissed her off by trying to openly steal her crew.

The large group of trackers followed them, but the seed had been planted.

A new speaker kicked on, driving that seed into their brains.

"Safe Haven rewards bravery. We never keep you against your will, starve you, or rob you of your family. We encourage you to consider this other option. The path you are walking leads to parts of you lying in the sand, leaking your life away on a barren island without ever having seen who you're fighting."

Goldie cut this wire, stomping through the sandy rushes and bushes.

Jennifer's voice came from behind them this time, echoing through a bullhorn hidden under the sand. "If you make it to the other end of this island, there's a monitor. Watch the video and see who we really are. Then kill the leaders who brought you here and join us."

Jennifer's voice stopped, leaving awkward, tense silence.

Cerise turned around, glaring. "Do it now, together, while you have a tiny chance to win. If you attack me at the end, I will slaughter you like I have the other traitors who got in my way."

No one rose to her challenge, but it was clear by the shifting eyes and darkening faces that she would be in danger from this moment on.

Cerise lowered her shield and turned around, head lifting. "Cowards."

Goldie followed her, not lowering his barrier. He didn't trust his luck as much as she did.

Cerise swiped at the nearest bush and triggered the next chain in the battle.

## 2

### UN Flagship

"Reports are coming in, sir. There are no combatants on Ducie or Oeno. The atolls are empty, sir."

Hausler eyed the radar report that had just been handed to him. "There are heat signatures in the center of Ducie atoll."

The crewman didn't tell the boss that wasn't possible. He already knew the center of that atoll was just deep water. "Maybe the system is having another glitch?" That had become common since the war.

“Maybe.” Haussler scanned the satellite printout again. “How long until team one is finished?”

The crewman frowned. “They didn’t say, sir. There were still explosions in the background, along with an odd recording I couldn’t decipher.”

“Give them another five minutes and then send their transport.” Haussler turned his attention to Sandy, watching the landing on his screens. “Did Darwin survive?”

“Yes, sir. He was injured. His team started setting up a base camp, but they’re refusing to go any farther without a leader.”

Haussler sighed. “Send Cerise’s team as soon as they finish with Ducie. Stick to the plan.”

“Yes, sir.”

Haussler glared at Albert as he entered the bridge. He’d just finished dumping Oliver’s body over the side, per the boss’s orders.

Albert shook his head. “No sign of Violet Livingston, sir.”

Haussler put it to rest. Violet was the only normal in that family. If she hadn’t drowned, the sharks would get her as soon as she peed in the water and drew them. All the ships in this zone had been alerted to watch for her to try to climb aboard. Security was heavy everywhere. Except on those islands. Haussler glared at the screen. *Go faster!*

“Team three is landing, sir.”

Haussler watched the chaos, unhappy, but unwilling to go against orders. Command had been

specific about sending troops first, then the team leaders. It was causing them to lose more than they should have. Haussler knew that was intentional. Normally he wouldn't have cared, but if they lost too many fighters, it would be impossible to pinpoint Safe Haven's command center and that was the most important part of this invasion. *How can I blow them up if I don't know where they are?!*

### 3

Cerise waved. "Normals in the back. We'll clear it. You cover the rear."

Cerise kept all of her energy in her shield this time as she marched through shell bombs that exploded under her feet, triggering rings that spread out to include the entire team stomping angrily toward the halfway point of the oval atoll. It was only one and a half miles square, but the traps were slowing them down. They hadn't lost anyone yet to the annoyingly sharp blasts, but almost everyone had a minor injury.

Cerise felt eyes on them, but there wasn't time to find the live cameras. She was impressed that Safe Haven had been able to rig up that level of technology way out here, but again, there wasn't time to admire the handiwork. Shells blew from the short crags by her leg, impaling her shield. She flinched to the right, not expecting the blast to be stronger. She recovered her steps, increasing her pace instead of slowing. She crunched over the only

area where it would hold their weight, blowing more of the traps. Rings flew out, sizzling under the arid sand.

*Bam! Bam!*

Two large explosions behind them said the normals had found trouble. Screams breached her shield and buried themselves in her ears. Parts of men and women were strewn across the brown ground like splashes of vivid paint.

Goldie shook his head. There was nothing they could do for the mortally injured fighters.

Cerise turned around and kept going, scanning for larger lumps under the sand to blow first. She'd hoped the rings were clearing the entire path for her, but that wasn't the case.

Cerise spotted the empty curve of the atoll. She hurried toward it, stomping and jumping when a shell bomb blew.

Goldie stayed at her side, also jumping where needed. A larger charge blew under his boot, shoving him toward the water in the center of the atoll.

Cerise grabbed his shirt and pulled hard.

Goldie caught his footing, eyes narrowing in. *Something's down there.* He turned to Cerise, stepping forward. "There's something—"

*Blam!*

A charge fired under his foot, rocking them both.

This time, Goldie grabbed Cerise to keep her from going into the water.

The team kept going by them, eager to be finished.

Cerise fell in with them, not against letting someone else take the blasts for the second half of this gauntlet.

“It’s clear!”

“There’s a telly!”

Cerise and Goldie joined the team in the cleared area, both seeing signs that people had been here. It was perfectly empty, like someone had created a rest stop for them.

Goldie stared at the deep water in the center of the atoll, but whatever had caught his attention before was gone now. He didn’t try to scan the water; it was too hard to punch through it.

The monitor clicked on.

Trackers retreated, shields returning to full strength.

Jennifer’s laughter flowed over them, bringing more than annoyance this time. It also brought embarrassment. Most of them lowered their shields and crossed their arms in defiance. A few of them spit to show their contempt.

“I see you didn’t all make it. Sorry about your losses.” The screen cleared, showing Jennifer standing on the top deck of the Adrianna. The rest of Safe Haven’s council stood around her or along the rail, smiling into the camera.

“We’re going to kill every single one of you over the next few days. Make your peace with that or make a deal with us. All survivors are welcome

in Safe Haven.” The camera turned to show the camp on the island, enjoying the beautiful day. “We want to be left alone. What you are doing is against every constitution of every country on the planet. You’re all traitors to your founding fathers.”

People on land waved at the camera with no idea what Jennifer had been saying at the time.

“I knew you’d put your weakest members in the rear.” Jennifer laughed again as the camera turned, showing Ray walking by with a small bag. He pulled up the edge to show them a thick roll of dynamite. The camera lifted to show Kenn carrying a monitor toward the ladder.

Cerise blanched. “Get back!” She shoved at people, trying to get them away from the telly.

The dynamite on the rear of the monitor popped as it sparked, giving a single lifesaving second for more of them to retreat.

Then it exploded, blowing fire and electronic debris into the entire team.

Cerise and the other survivors fled toward the end of the atoll.

#### 4

“That’s our cue.” Kyle opened the hatch and rolled out. Two Eagles followed him while a third shut the hatch and secured it.

Kyle stayed on the ground, stopping near a bloody body. He began stripping the few pieces of gear he thought he needed. Then he used the dead

man's blood to dot his skin with scratches and minor impalements.

Next to him, Jonny and Trent did the same. When the three men stood up, they looked just like the bodies on the ground, down to the worn uniforms and filthy skin. Jonny's healing wound made his grimaces look real because they were. He'd insisted on still doing his part even though Angela had told him Jeff wanted to take his place.

Kyle checked his watch as they moved through the cleared damage path toward the unsuspecting UN team. "We're behind by 15 seconds. Increase pace."

The trio broke into a jog, counting it down. Three minutes after emerging, they approached the cleared area where the UN had lost a large number of its trackers this time. Kyle grabbed a jacket from a corpse with a leg wound. He limped forward as he put it on, acting like a survivor. "Wait for me!"

"Wait for us!"

Kyle and his two men joined the rear of the fleeing team. He brought up a shield to prove who they were when the team leader spun around.

Cerise was glad to see survivors even if two of them were normal, but she wasn't stopping unless they were under attack. She hurried her remaining team toward the final stretch of shell bombs and larger charges, mind buzzing with fury. *When I get to them, I'm killing the bitch on the recordings.*

Kyle caught that thought. He moved up through the crowd until he was only a few feet away from

Cerise. If he got the chance, she would go down in the next fight.

Jonny and Trent spread out and took some of the shell blasts to have real injuries when it was all over. Blending in with the crowd had been too simple of a plan coming from Angela, but all three men were glad she wasn't using them as the main killers this time.

Angela had chosen technology to spearhead this plan and Kyle was grateful. *If she hadn't, my pregnant wife would probably already be out here drawing someone's blood.*

Cerise stopped. She turned around, scanning hard. Troops flinched away from her. "Show yourself!"

Her team didn't understand what was happening. They assumed she was shouting at Safe Haven for all the traps.

*Crazy.*

*She's snapping.*

The surviving normals prepared to run back the way they'd already cleared. The descendants got ready to claim the unspoken bounty on her head.

Cerise's lip curled. "Cowards!" She spun around and finished the walk to the end of the atoll. *As soon as these three islands are cleared, I'm telling Haussler to sink them, just in case. Anyone hiding here can learn how to hold their breath for a very long time.*

Kyle stopped thinking about anything except survival, but he stored every thought he caught

while studying the enemy directly for their weaknesses.

He found a lot to work with.

Cerise headed for the end of the atoll to finish blowing any traps there before the transport ship came in to get them.

On the flagship, Albert looked at Haussler. “Do you want me to get things ready for their return now?”

Haussler shook his head. “None of them are coming back. How many times do I have to say that?”

“But...we will have survivors, sir.”

“Will we?” Haussler didn’t tell Albert as soon as the sighting came they were going to call their nuclear submarine and unleash the fury of physics. The fallout would cover all of these islands. There would only be survivors for a little while and then Safe Haven’s memory would fade away with all the other troops they no longer needed. *The entire world is almost ours.*

## 5

“Work slower. We’re way ahead of schedule.”  
Marc knelt near the bound captive.

He didn’t touch her or even look at her, but Violet still cringed. The man’s power was intense and they were all crammed into an underwater cave with a ceiling that barely allowed room to stand.

The walls were dripping, groaning, sometimes falling away in chunks as the men and women in black labored.

Marc shut his eyes, reaching out. He was able to scan above the ground now, as long as he wasn't more than 8 feet deep. After that, Kyle had to take over. They'd both practiced that skill more than their others while preparing for the UN fleet to arrive.

Greg frowned, hands not stopping as he wound up the extra cord they hadn't used. Kyle and his small team had infiltrated the troops. The first stage was finished. Angela had told them to leave their messes for these waiting moments. They couldn't go out until the UN declared this spot clear and moved on. Everyone was glad that Angela had arranged things this way, but they were also disappointed that they weren't going to get to see any of the destruction being delivered on these islands. The men who'd gone to war with Marc found it the most bothersome.

Marc finally looked at their captive.

Violet had been covered in a layer of emergency blankets to keep her warm. She'd also been fed and watered, but she didn't look okay. Marc dug in deep, using the medical x-ray ability that he and Morgan were still perfecting.

He saw light blue areas on her extremities. "The blankets aren't enough." Marc scanned the team. Most of them were sweating. They'd spent two weeks cave-diving and working down here. *They*

*adjusted to the temperature changes. And we're all well-fed. She's so skinny I can almost see her heart beating.* "Greg."

Greg carefully moved around the others who were winding wire, picking up bits of plastic and casings that would be recycled. He knelt near Marc, stretching his spine.

"She'll lose some fingers and toes by the time we get out of here. Warm her up."

Greg scowled, mind going to the rest stop.

Marc's eyes turned red. "Now!"

Greg sat next to Violet and gestured. "Willing is always better."

Violet was too miserable to refuse. She climbed into his lap, shivering.

Greg held still as she got settled, sighing at the cold contact. "That feels good."

Violet tensed.

"I meant the cold. I'm sweating like a pig." Greg tugged her closer, sighing again when her cold shirt stuck to his bare arm.

Violet swallowed a moan as his heat swarmed over her and brought pleasure. She curled up against his chest and went still, refusing to consider what the future might hold. *But I'm scared. We all heard the stories of what Eagles do to captives.*

"That's only priority targets and even then, we only do it if we have to."

"What about me?" Fear welled up, making her voice loud. "What will happen to me?!"

“A talk, and then we’ll release you.” Greg didn’t want her to worry any longer. “You aren’t a prime target.”

Violet shuddered. *Yes, I am, just not on your list.*

Greg pried into her mind, practicing his skills. Angela had told him he was too rough. Being gentle wasn’t hard now. Violet was a tiny thing who obviously needed to be cared for.

Greg scowled. “You are in danger!”

Violet nodded. “Haussler.”

Greg memorized the name. He rubbed her arms. “We’ll cover it later. Warm up.”

Violet was already starting to nod off. The stress of the day was combining with his heat. *And the feeling of safety*, she told herself drowsily. *Don’t pretend it’s not there. He makes you feel safe. And that’s dangerous. When you wake up, get away from these doomed people!*

Greg caught it all, unable to resist. Her fear was now a tiny seed lying in his mind. “Why does he want you gone?”

Violet yawned. “I know his secrets.”

Everyone looked over.

Violet was too tired to notice.

“Will you tell me one of them?” Greg suddenly thought he knew.

Violet yawned. “It’s nuclear.” Her head rolled against his arm.

Greg adjusted her to be more comfortable. He looked over at Marc.

Marc nodded.

Greg sighed. “I’m sorry, Violet. You just became a priority captive.”

## 6

“Wake up!”

Darwin groaned, head ringing. “Not so loud!” He groaned again, tacky hands coming up to hold his pain.

Cerise moved away from the makeshift shelter his team had put together for him while they waited. They’d refused to go any further without a leader who could stand a hit. Cerise glared at the smoking, sitting, staring survivors from Darwin’s ill-fated landing. “On your feet!”

Goldie moved among them, growling and threatening the few who moved too slowly. Most of them had snapped to attention when Cerise landed, using the path they’d cleared. It was hard to resent her for that when she was covered in bloody wounds, grit, and anger.

Cerise swept the atoll, mentally bracing to do it all again. “But this time, the blows will be harder.”

“How do you know that?” Darwin came from the tent, ignoring the team that glowered at his fast recovery.

Darwin swallowed the drugs Goldie handed to him, familiar with Cerise’s methods. All of her main crew was drugged before each run so they could make it all the way through. They didn’t feel the pain until after it was all over.

Cerise scanned the bushes, and the sparse foliage that also littered this little rock like thorns on a rose cane. Tiny glints shined in the bright sun, confirming her theory. “These aren’t seashells crunched up under someone’s boot. Brace for impact.” She walked forward, bringing her shield to full strength.

Her team hurried to get behind her, remembering what had happened on the previous atoll to those who brought up the rear.

The quick flood to follow her made Darwin frown. “Don’t you want to form a plan?”

Darwin’s team hurried after Cerise, giving him sneers and contempt.

Darwin fell in at the rear, mind no longer plotting her death. The blast that had knocked him out had also rattled his confidence. *I want to survive this run. Petty vengeance can wait for a different fight.*

“How are we getting to the center?” Goldie hadn’t brought a portable raft. “Do you want the transport boats?”

Cerise shook her head. “We’re going by foot. It’s a short swim where we can avoid more of their coral bombs.” Cerise increased her pace. “First, we have to get through the outer ring and make sure it’s clear.”

“Why?”

“Yeah, nah! We know it’s empty!”

Members from both teams voiced protests this time.

“We should consider their offer!”

“You traitor!”

Cerise kept going as a fight broke out in the middle of the large group. She didn't care if they were left behind or if they were killed. *I care about getting this rock cleared and moving on. I'm so close to my target I can taste her perfume.*

Kyle studied the ground for traps. *I don't want to die. I don't want to die. And she doesn't wear perfume. It's natural.*

Cerise's lips thinned, but she kept walking. “Watch your step. It's about to get ugly.”

A speaker clicked on. “Hi! Welcome to Hell. I'm your guide. I'm also the heir to Safe Haven and camp enforcer. I hope you enjoy your brief stay!”

Cerise sliced the speaker, grinding her teeth. *A teenage enforcer and heir. I'm not impressed.*

*But you are getting pissed.*

Cerise nodded at the comment from her witch, moving forward. “If you decide to take them up on their offer, make sure we're dead. We'll do the same for you.”

None of the trackers from Darwin's team were willing to challenge the sheila striding into the mined ground as if she were on a Sunday stroll.

Her first team considered taking her up on the challenge. Some of them already had been. They started making actual plans now, certain their traitorous thoughts wouldn't be noticed while she was dodging landmines.

Cerise caught it all. *That's what an alpha does.*  
*We see and hear everything and use it to our*  
*advantage.*

Chapter Twenty  
**My Target**

1

“Cerise delivered the update early, sir. Oeno and Sandy are clear. She’s requesting a full restock, including crew.”

Haussler’s one eye narrowed. The scarred socket on the other side glared.

Albert shrugged. “The losses from stage two are significantly higher, sir.”

Haussler pounded the thick console by his plush chair. “Damn, Darwin!”

Albert nodded. “May I suggest we assign Cerise to the lead on Henderson as well?”

Haussler rotated to view that screen. Justin and his team had landed with a 15% loss. The coral bombs were impossible to avoid. The entire reef was made of coral. They couldn’t tell the real from the man-made.

Haussler eyed the remains of one of those bombs. It was scattered across an empty station, allowing his scientist to evaluate it. Finding out Safe Haven wasn’t using live coral was almost frightening. Who took time to protect the environment during a war?

“Sir?”

Haussler nodded. “Send her whatever she wants.”

“And team lead on Henderson?”

“We’ll see what happens when she gets there.” Haussler didn’t like Cerise, but he was always impressed by her resourcefulness. “She may need a break.”

Albert hadn’t considered that. “Yes, sir.” He relayed the orders to all the department leaders on each boat that held something she needed. It would take an hour or more to get it all shipped out.

“Send it to Henderson.” Haussler had also considered how long it would take. “I don’t want them camping out right where they are. Make it clear that the supplies and gear are going to Henderson. If they don’t show, they don’t get resupplied.”

Albert smirked as he relayed those orders.

Haussler stepped out onto the side deck of the immense flagship. It had once been a military launching pad for the navy of a fallen country. He loved being its captain as much as he adored being a boss during the great reset. He was only tenth from command of everything. “A new day has arrived. The world must bend or break.”

Albert allowed himself a deep breath in the few minutes of peace they had while Haussler was outside. There was constant tension because of his level. Bach Haussler had achieved byzan status during the war. He’d stayed busy since then, helping

the UN conquer those who resisted change. Most recently, they'd been in Australia.

Albert blocked those thoughts to keep from crying over all the pain he'd witnessed, all the lives he'd been forced to help crush. *Come on, Safe Haven. If you fall, they win it all.*

Sitting next to Albert, Denese nodded. Almost no one wanted to be here. That's why the UN couldn't attack Pitcairn first. If Safe Haven offered a deal, too many of their fighters would take it. Haussler was only sending true killers to land right now, hoping they could confirm the location.

Albert looked over at Denese.

Denese's eyes lit up for a brief second, then returned to pale green.

Albert dug into the updates and supply orders, keeping his mind on his job.

Denese did the same, but it was a comfort to know another member of the resistance was here on the flagship bridge where they might be able to help save the world. *Or we'll die together. It's still a comfort.*

Haussler came back into the bridge as the fax machine beeped and began to spit out an update.

"Two patrol boats on the opposite side of Pitcairn have missed the scheduled check in. Do you want me to divert ships on either side to check it out?"

"No. Send two from the cowards and troublemakers around us. We don't need all of them hanging out here and acting like this is a party."

“Yes, sir. We’re also getting a new signal, sir.”

Haussler rotated again to view the other monitors. “From where?”

“Open ocean, between us and Pitcairn.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“It has a video file attached, sir.”

Haussler hoped it was from Safe Haven’s leader, arranging a meeting to discuss surrender terms. “Play it.”

The monitor lit up with Angela’s tired face glaring at them. The camera swung slowly to show every high-profile target on the UN list. Even Adrian was there, walking along the beach.

“Is there sound?”

“No, sir.”

The descendants on the video all let their eyes glow red. The image was intimidating. Then the camera zoomed out to show that they were posing for a group photo. Everyone laughed as the cameraman turned, showing a sprawling camp enjoying the island.

Haussler frowned. “What is this?”

All the sailors were watching the screen, remembering good times with their friends and family before the war.

Albert smirked slightly. “It’s a barbeque. Sir.”

Haussler motioned. “Shut it off.”

The lackey frowned. “It’s not responding.”

Haussler’s stomach flipped. “Shut down the entire system before it spreads.”

Albert tried, but the files duplicated and jumped to all the folders on the desktop. He hit the shut-down icon, hoping it hadn't gotten farther than the first level of folders.

Computers all across the flagship shut off; radios lit up to report the problem.

Albert waited 30 seconds, then restarted the main system.

Haussler nodded in approval as the screens began to flash through normal startup procedures. "Good work."

"Was it a virus, sir?" Albert hadn't had time to identify it, only to react.

"Probably." *So much for a surrender meeting.* Haussler sat in his chair. "I want to know the second we're fully operational."

"Yes, sir."

Haussler didn't like the feeling he had now. *Why would they send a clip with no audio? And it wasn't important, though we know they're all together now. Or at least they were as of that video.*

Haussler looked up as the computers all went dark again. "What are you doing?"

Albert typed in commands that were ignored. "We have a glitch, sir." He used the restart keys to force an override.

The screens flashed on, showing just Angela this time. She was standing on the beach, staring toward the ocean. She slowly held up a piece of cardboard with red letters.

***All survivors are welcome here.***

“Shut that down!” Haussler lunged out of his chair, hands clamping onto the sailor’s shoulders. “Now!”

“I’m trying!”

The computer went dark. All the others followed.

“It jumped.” Denese pointed at her dark screen. “I saw it jump into the system folder as it went dark.”

“Leave it off.” Haussler waved off their concerns. “I don’t want that video going out. Leave it off. Use the radios!”

His crew obeyed, but none of them were happy about it. Playing with the computers was a huge perk of their jobs. Without it, they were laboring for nothing but a bad end.

## 2

### Henderson Island

“Here she comes.”

Justin rose from his perch on a gritty, flat rock. He’d been snoozing and hadn’t heard them land.

All of Cerise’s team was bloody, dirty, and victorious. They’d survived an island. Some of them had survived two deathtraps alongside her, while Justin hadn’t even started clearing his target. *I hate following orders.*

But one look at this place had convinced him that command was right to wait until they had a full

fighting force before trying to tame this hunk of coral.

Cerise came to where Justin was waiting with his handpicked personal security crew. The entire beach here was littered with rounded boulders of all sizes, plastic, rubbish, and debris from the entire world. A large number of trackers and hunters were exploring that junk, pocketing dangerous items and fighting over the few bits that held value. A few of the smarter men and women had pitched tents and gone to sleep. “I see you’re ready to roll.”

Justin’s lips vanished again. “Command said to wait; we waited.”

“Well, the wait’s over. I want them ready to move in five minutes.” She stepped by him to scan the newest unfriendly ground she had to conquer. *I’ve almost had enough of this.*

The sight of Henderson reinforced that feeling. Clearing this rubbish-surrounded rock would be hell.

Goldie tensed, doing his own scan. “There’s a campsite.”

Cerise narrowed in on his line of sight. She found a charred ring and some debris that might have been there a long time. “Anything else?”

Goldie swept the fifty-foot cliffs that dipped and rose like giant flat stairs through a hostile jungle. “This will not be fun.”

Cerise burst out laughing.

The waiting fighters watched her and listened while edging closer to her team to inquire about

their first conquests. Most of those haunted men and women walked away. The trauma was too fresh to talk about it.

Others began to spread stories of how Cerise had led them through the atolls at a steady pace that had claimed a hundred total lives and given them nothing. None of them were happy with how she'd accomplished the run.

“Wouldn't it have been easier to blast your way through? We have a heap of restless magic users here.” Justin didn't care about hurting her feelings or incurring her wrath. “You lost good men.”

Cerise nodded. “We would have been done faster too.”

“So why did you pick that way?”

Cerise moved toward the nervous new crew coming off the boats. “Figure it out.”

Justin stewed, as did the others who'd heard. It wasn't hard to believe she'd had a reason, but they were followers, not leaders. They weren't smart enough to add the clues most of the time. The UN didn't encourage thinking in its drones.

“It would have drained us.” Kyle stepped by, following Cerise. “Wait up.”

Cerise slowed, glad of the support but not impressed enough to reach out. The few who wanted a place on her crew after the fight would all change their minds by the time this run was over.

“I found something on Sandy.” Kyle held out a small brown envelope. “It was under a rock. I forgot until now.”

Cerise opened it as the man left her to join the other fighters who wanted to know what all Justin's team had done since they'd landed.

Cerise's stomach tightened as she read the note.  
*It doesn't have to be this way. Just leave.*

Cerise imagined Jennifer's voice saying it. She crumpled the paper and shoved it into her cloak to burn later. She was supposed to report it... Cerise stared at the man who'd delivered it. *Do I know him?*

Kyle felt her full attention land on him. He automatically straightened, smiling at a female fighter with more boobs than shirt.

Cerise scowled. *He'll probably try to blackmail me later.*

She didn't care about that. She'd killed a heap of descendants for trying to bribe her. She knew how to handle it.

Darwin limped over to them. "Can we burn our way through?"

Cerise considered, liking the idea. "Maybe. We'd have to clear it with command."

Justin held up his radio. "I'll make the call." He didn't want to track through the jungle looking for targets who weren't there. *I want to kill someone!*

Cerise waved him off; the images in his mind were disturbing. *If he snaps, I'll get out of his way and let him take a cut before I step in. He has a thing for bad boys and we have too many of those.*

Small fights were happening among the troops, as well as assaults on those who seemed feminine.

Bets were being placed for the fights that would happen later tonight. Blood was already leaking into the ground here even though the battle had been delayed. “Line up! We go in two!”

Justin opened his mouth to argue.

*Ka-blam!*

The tree behind Justin’s tent exploded, showering them all with debris and shrapnel.

Cerise got her shield up in time.

Justin didn’t. He caught the debris with his hand, then encased himself in protection.

*He’s fast.* Cerise was impressed. She wasn’t sure she could have done that.

Justin dropped the shield and the piece of debris. “More coral bombs.”

Cerise shrugged. “Better than the pressure mines. They don’t go off instantly. They have a 10-20 second timer. It’s designed to catch the center of a group and do more damage rather than to just get the first few people who enter a dangerous area.”

Justin gaped at her. “How do you know that?”

“You’re a team leader. How can you *not* know that?”

Justin lifted his chin. “My uncle got me this job. Because I’m good at what I do.”

“Your uncle?”

“Director Miles Silverman.”

Cerise’s heart thumped. “You mean Captain Miles.”

Justin sneered. “He’s only serving in that function on this run because we don’t have anyone else who can pilot a nuclear submarine.”

Panic flew through the group.

“That’s why they’re only letting a few of us off the ships at one time.”

“It gets rid of mouths to feed.”

“We’ll be hit as soon as we call in a sighting!”

Darwin fell to the ground, grabbing his injured leg. He put his head down. “Someone will have to take my place. I don’t feel well.”

“What do we do?” Justin had no experience with battle plans. He normally just dove in and hoped it went well.

Cerise waved toward the flagship they could barely view as the sun moved into their path. “We complete our mission, but when we find them, we don’t call it in. If we can capture them, there won’t be a reason for the boss to blow it up.”

“That’s not good enough.” Justin didn’t want to trust Cerise, but this new information changed everything. “If they really want to get rid of us, when we call in the capture, they’ll still fire.”

“What if we tell them we have the top people on their list, alive?”

Justin frowned, slowly nodding. “That should help. Command always wants more power. What else?”

Cerise snorted. “Where’s your contribution? Give me something to build from.”

Justin did. “I was going to blackmail Haussler. He’s a smuggler.”

Cerise grinned. “Really? I get to gut a full Director this time?!”

Her glee annoyed or angered most of them, but not the true killers. For once, her bloodthirsty nature might help save their lives.

Darwin immediately loved that idea. “We’ll get you to the flagship. Once he’s dead, he can’t order the sub to fire. But we still need to find our target. Command won’t be happy with us for killing him.”

“We can do that.” Justin let out a deep breath, nodding. He moved toward the start of the path. “Darwin can watch the gear until we need it. The rest of us will get this done while we still have the energy. When they send supplies out next time, we’ll send Cerise to handle the Director. Her team can hang in the rear while we clear.”

Every member of Cerise’s team from Ducie hurried forward to take the lead.

Cerise smiled as she joined them. “We learned some hard lessons. Don’t worry. Your turn will come.”

Justin followed. “Why doesn’t that comfort me?”

The radio crackled. “Your request to fire the island is not approved. Move in on foot to prevent location identification. We’re getting at least a dozen heat signatures less than a mile north of you.”

“Like they don’t know exactly where we are.” Cerise sighed, drawing her blade. “I wonder if we’ll

have our original guide out here too? I miss the sound of her peppy little voice.”

Her team laughed.

Justin’s team didn’t. They were bringing up the rear. It was already clear that was a bad place to be.

### 3

#### Ducie Island

“How is she?”

“Still out, but better.” Greg stood up, leaving the unconscious woman on the sand. “Color and temp are good.” Greg didn’t consider any of the questions or thoughts he now had. He was certain Marc had already covered it.

“I have.” Marc waved at the others. “Finish resetting the triggers. Then we’ll head to our next spot early.” Marc wanted a break from this island.

Greg was ready to go. “We leave in four minutes! Set those mines. I don’t want to see them when you’re done. You have three minutes!”

Marc waited, hating it. The urge to get going was growing.

Greg knelt and took over the wiring from a rookie, while Ray did the same to the other slow man.

The rookies watched, amazed at how fast the senior Eagles were able to get it all in place.

“How long?”

“Just 30 seconds. Move out. We’ll catch up.” Ray started storing their gear while Greg began hiding the tiny trigger.

The small team marched toward the side of the atoll where they’d dropped their gear upon emerging from the hatch. This atoll had a large underwater cave system. They’d only explored as much of it as they’d needed to carry out their plan. The rest had been left alone.

Ray waved at the rookies to run ahead. “Short scout.”

The two men hurried ahead by five feet and scanned for trouble as the group began the short trip to their next base.

Ray felt the danger grow. He made a fast choice. “Pace up one notch. Go!”

The senior men increased their pace, shoving those who’d missed the call ahead of them. The line straightened out as everyone caught on.

Marc wasn’t satisfied. “Increase pace by one.”

Now the senior men were caught off guard. They hardly ever had to move this quick unless they were in action.

The rookies stayed ahead, hearts thumping as they scanned for danger. Both men were relieved when the atoll cliff ended and their small ship came into view.

Ray stopped, eyes narrowing in.

A slender, scarred shadow in black slammed into him, bouncing. She fell against Biff and took them both down.

“What is she doing here?”

Marc grabbed Kendle’s arm and hauled her to her feet. “Why are you here?!”

“It’s Quinn!” Kendle sucked in air, feeling out of shape even with another two weeks of workouts under her belt. “Angela got a call asking for ransom. We need you at home!”

Marc scowled. “Damn wildcards.” He nodded at Ray. “Carry it out like we talked about, then go home. I have to rescue a lost pup.”

No one told him he shouldn’t go, but they all thought it. Quinn wasn’t worth blowing their run.

Marc grunted. “Which one of you wants to go back in my place and tell Angela that?”

Kendle frowned. “You’d leave him as their captive?”

Marc shook his head. “We’d kill him before we let that happen.”

Kendle’s heart thumped. “Please don’t. I need him.”

Marc frowned at her. “How did you get here?”

Kendle grinned. “Jet ski.”

Marc chuckled. “Okay, but you ride in the rear.”

Kendle snorted. “Not a chance. Angela told me to bring you, not the other way around.”

Marc snickered as he caught sight of the blue and white jet ski. It blended in perfectly with the crystal water and foamy surf. Even using the satellite, the UN wouldn’t know they were there. Angela had only approved them for emergency use, however. Marc sobered. *Angela sent for me and that*

*means the plan changed. Quinn might not be the only unexpected problem.*

Kendle followed Marc to the jet ski, ignoring the scowls and mutters from his team. She also ignored the captive hanging over Greg's shoulder. She only cared that Marc was leaving with her. "Hurry!"

Kendle's panic was contagious. The rest of the team moved faster, scanning over their shoulders for the next boat patrol. The Eagles had been blinking in and out enough to make the UN doubt their equipment, but the security patrols were staying out too far to have a clear view. Angela had been right to use the dead coral to their advantage. It had given them a wide ring around each island where they could use the natural cover and remain unseen. None of that mattered as Kendle's panic flooded the men.

Marc mounted the jet ski, bracing as Kendle climbed on behind him despite her words. He looked at Ray.

Ray nodded. "We'll get them floating, then head for our next stop. Check in when you arrive."

"Yes, mother." Marc spun the jet ski and headed toward home.

Ray stared after them while Greg and the others got Violet's body into the slower boat. "Something isn't right."

A rookie joined him near the water, also watching Marc leave. "What is it?"

Ray shrugged. "As usual, I wish I knew."

Violet stirred, forcing her tired brain to work. “We don’t have anyone on Pitcairn yet. It wasn’t us.”

## 4

### Pitcairn Island

“Can I go to the bunker now?”

Adrian smiled at the tired child. “Sure. Get a shower and don’t make a mess.”

Joey grinned, sending out a strong wave of control. “Kendle yells a lot. She’s like a mom.”

Adrian laughed. “I agree. Behave and we’ll try to fish when the sun sets.” Adrian wasn’t worried over it. Joey had been the perfect little guest. He did everything he was told, though Sadie’s idea to play house with Joey had stopped the first time she had to help him blow his nose. Adrian was glad she wasn’t pregnant, but he’d spent the last two weeks working with the boy alone. *I think we judged the kid too harshly because of who his father was.* Adrian sympathized.

Joey didn’t answer. He was eager to get out of the sunlight. He tolerated being outdoors; he didn’t like it. He also didn’t want to walk back alone. He’d done it to get down here and he was still spooked.

“My shift is up in five minutes. I’ll go back with you as soon as Quinn relieves me.” Adrian smiled at the boy. “We’ll get Kendle to cook for us before she and Sadie come down for their shift.”

Joey shook his head. “Sadie’s sleeping, and Kendle went for a walk this morning. I don’t think she’s coming back.”

Adrian frowned, turning toward the island to scan the bunkers. “Where did she go?”

Joey shrugged. “She said she couldn’t take it in there anymore. Sadie told her to go for a walk.” Joey looked up at Adrian. “She took her kit.”

Adrian scanned the island for Kendle and came up blank. He scanned for Quinn and found the man on the airstrip with Eagles who hadn’t left Pitcairn. They were checking on the new guard towers that had been installed. “He knows he’s supposed to be here soon.”

“He was thinking about being in charge of Safe Haven.” Joey began walking up the beach. “So was she.”

Adrian clicked his radio twice, letting Marc’s radioman know there might be a problem. He didn’t contact Angela. *I’m not allowed.*

Joey kicked at the sand. “She gave me a message for you.”

“Who?”

“Kendle.”

Adrian caught up to the boy, leaving his post unattended. “What was it?”

“She said she found the perfect carrot, to be ready.”

Adrian’s evil side cheered; his moral side began to weep.

Adrian moved faster, scooping the boy into his arms. “Let’s go for a walk and find out where she went.”

## 5

“Boss wants an update.” Quinn joined the men on the airstrip, scanning the work they’d done. Two tall guard towers up here allowed them to view the ocean all around the island, including on the cave side.

Kenn sneered. “Why would she send you?”

Quinn flushed. “Just give me the damn update so I can get back before she flips. You know how she hates being out of communication.”

Kenn swallowed his next nasty remark. He waved at Morgan to do it.

Morgan joined Quinn, speaking quickly. They were almost finished with this security sweep. “We removed two small scout ships. As Grant sees them on the radar, we head out and handle it. Nothing else since this morning when it all started.”

Quinn wrote it down. “That’ll make her happy.” Quinn stored his book. “You about finished here?”

Morgan nodded. He returned to Kenn, unwilling to chat with the outcast. He was already having enough trouble keeping the respect he’d earned. Eagles weren’t happy that he had agreed to consider leaving with Kyle and Jennifer.

Kenn glared at Quinn. “You got your update. Get lost.”

“Stop it.” Morgan knew Angela didn’t want them fighting right now. “We’ll go. We’re done now.”

The rest of the team glared at Quinn as they headed to the cliffside where a long rope ladder had been set in place with concrete. It was a hard, short climb, but it was a lot faster than taking the tunnel or the jungle to get up here.

Quinn went to the edge of the cliff and scanned the boats as the team started going down.

Kenn went last. He delivered a final glare at Quinn before he vanished over the side. “I don’t trust you. Find a way to prove your loyalty and do it soon or the Eagles will expand your punishment.”

Quinn rolled his eyes. “Go away, big man. I’m busy here.” Quinn got his book back out and made a note about the position of the ships.

Kenn went down the ladder so fast that the others were forced to hang onto the sides to let him go by.

Quinn waited two more minutes, evaluating their ships. Then he stored his book and went to the shed at the end of the airstrip.

Quinn did a deep scan of the area, searching for cameras.

Finding none, he stepped inside the shed and shut the door. He smirked at the useless bug in the corner. It had a dead battery because Ian had activated it two weeks ago and never came back to charge it. Quinn had spotted it yesterday when he’d come up here to pick his blind.

Quinn took off his Eagle jacket and dropped it on the ground with his kit. He unpacked his rifle and set it on the shelf in front of him. “It’s going to be a great night. All I need is a drink and a target.”

Quinn pulled a bottle from his bag and opened it. “Okay. Where’s my target, Kendle? I’m ready to damn us all.”

Chapter Twenty-One

# I Hate That Sound

Open Ocean

1

“I’ll be dark soon.” Violet stared at the beautiful sunset with trepidation. “We can’t be out here after dark.”

Biff sighed, tired of hearing her complaints.

Greg didn’t answer. He was slowing them to avoid an assumed radar sweep. Angela and Marc were sure the UN was monitoring the ocean all around these islands, but movement under ten miles an hour didn’t register on radar unless they were close to it or the system they were using was powerful. Their small boat was painted blue in the center, and white everywhere else to blend in on satellite images. *We’d be hard to find right now.* Greg frowned. “Still.” He throttled them down to half the assumed speed.

Violet frowned too, head turning toward him from her perch in the middle. “Why are you slowing?”

“Radar.”

Violet pointed at the setting sun. “We can’t be out here in this barrel after dark!”

Greg didn't like it either, but there wasn't another choice. "Tell me about your boss."

He'd wanted to question her when she first woke, but she'd kept him busy with her fears and demands. She was terrified of everything from water to bugs. He had yet to pinpoint something she wasn't scared of and he didn't have time for it.

He wanted his entire party to come through this alive. Biff had become a friend since Greg had found him thinking about jumping off the ship. Biff needed to feel like he was worthy of surviving and he wasn't living up to that in his own eyes. Greg also didn't want to sacrifice Violet, who was a good communications officer who had compromising information on the UN. She was a main target of the very man they all had orders to kill upon sight.

Greg tried to clear his mind of all the other noise. They all had two big goals in this fight. Killing the boss and sinking his flagship was number two. Finding that nuclear submarine was a top priority. "Tell me about the captain of the sub."

Violet shuddered. "Miles Silverman is... There are rumors that he's in love with Cerise Bunting, but Haussler thinks she charmed him. He's hoping to regain control of Miles while Cerise is off clearing the islands and hopefully dying."

"Does he have any other secrets?"

Violet was scared that Greg would toss her overboard once she spilled her guts. "I'll tell your boss everything."

Greg had already been in her mind, but he hadn't torn down her walls yet. Marc had told him not to. Greg shrugged. "You may be sorry you picked that way. She isn't in a good mood,"

Violet refused to budge. Greg's thick arms had kept her safe earlier, but staring at them now made it clear that she would be like the bite of an insect to him.

Greg sighed in annoyance, tired of her fear, the sound of the boat's small engine, the noise of the waves hitting them, and the endless sight of the ocean. "Eventually you have to conquer those fears and just live your life."

Violet frowned at him. "I'm the top UN contingency analyst. I've been living on the edge for a year. Terror doesn't go away. You know why?"

Greg shook his head, surprised at her harsh tone.

"Because we all want to live. If the fear left, we'd kill ourselves off."

Greg snorted, waving a hand to indicate their current situation.

Violet got his point. "True, but still."

"I understand that." Greg checked the radar again. "But it seems like you've taken that job to the extreme. You call it covering all the bases. I call it fear of living."

"I don't get you."

"If you were prepping for what could go wrong, that would be one thing, but you've let that fear stop you from doing things at all. That's not living."

Violet stopped talking, offended because he was right.

“Are we on course?”

Greg nodded at the rookie. Biff was a silent partner most of the time. “Check it again, though.”

Biff got out his instruments and began calculating where they were. It was part of the level test he would have to pass at some point.

Greg scanned the setting sun and then Violet’s tense face. “Turn on the sonar for a sweep.”

Biff did that first, then went back to his instrument kit.

Greg listened to the rushing of the water below them.

*Blip.*

*Marc was right. They’re patrolling the water between Pitcairn and the other islands.* “Go dark!”

Biff killed the engine on the small boat.

Violet held onto her seat handle and swept the ominous water. “They’re right under us, aren’t they?”

Biff didn’t want to answer. “I should have rubbed the damn snakehead again.”

Greg put a finger over his lips.

Violet shut her eyes. *Please don’t let it be Miles. Don’t be Miles!*

The water behind the boat began to bubble.

“Shit!” Greg fired up the engine, shooting them forward. “Hang on!”

The water displacement was too close. It snagged the small boat and flipped it into the air, spilling all three passengers into the water.

## 2

“We’re done for the night.” Cerise stuck her gummy blade into the dirt and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “This is flat enough for a basecamp. Tell Darwin to get it all up here.”

Goldie smirked. “He will argue. It will be dark soon.”

“Perhaps you should go tell him we’re on a deadline.”

Goldie spun away from her, waving, pointing, shouting to be heard over the annoyed mutters of their team.

This tiny island had gotten under their skin. It was incredibly hot, even for Aussies, with thick, ugly plants that stole the breeze and shot out warm air as they tromped by. The insects they’d been told didn’t exist suckled on their blood like babies, using natural numbing agents in their saliva to keep them from feeling it. After four hours, some of their team was feeling the effects from losing blood at a steadier pace than they’d been able to travel. “I’m about done with this.”

Goldie stopped and turned, face lighting up. “Can we deviate?”

Cerise nodded. “Call them in. We made a deal. I want them here by midnight.”

The tired, angry trackers and fighters around them didn't care about the conversation. They were only concerned with their overnight break.

“We need food!”

“We can't camp on the ground. Look at that farking spider!”

Cerise shouted to be heard. “Darwin has everything we need! Go get him moving.”

Two dozen men and women flew down the path they'd beaten to get up here. They'd made it to the first cliff top on the island. It was only 30 feet, but it was made of volcanic rock and sharp spiky plants, with wide tree groves and jungle-like vines on everything. The coral-bombed beach had been a piece of cake compared to this hike.

“And we haven't found a single trap.” Cerise knew they were following a dead trail. She decided a little truth would be a good tonic to their exhaustion. “Command said we can't leave until we clear every inch. They have satellite readouts. They think it's empty, but they're being careful.”

“Not with our lives.”

Cerise frowned at the bloke who'd spoken up. “We serve to further the goals of a better life for everyone. Our sacrifice will mean something to future generations...” She stopped as the man walked away. Everyone was tired of hearing that. “Well it's true!” She dug it in deeper by whistling as she scanned the area to be sure they could spend a night here. She also kept her shield up now that Goldie was gone. Alone, she was vulnerable.

Cerise snorted. *Okay, it might be a challenge. I haven't been vulnerable since I was six. And even then I was dangerous. The people around me just didn't know how much.*

### 3

“How much longer?”

Jennifer checked her watch for the twentieth time. “Ten hours for the first teams to get here with any captives.”

“God!” Jayda flopped down in the dirt next to the teenager. “I hate waiting!”

A few people frowned at her for the wording, but everyone agreed. They'd been here under the main town for half a week now, only coming up once a day to take their turn blinking for the enemy. Everyone was ready to face whatever demons were waiting as long as it meant they could get out of the ground.

The dark-skinned redhead rubbed her leg where the old injury from Ciemus was sending out cramps. She glanced over at Trinity, who'd had a broken wrist at the same time. *We were almost friends then.*

Trinity met her eye. *We still could be, but you'd have to switch sides. You can't be friends with two sworn enemies.*

Jayda scowled, nose going up. *I made my choice. You're the one who needs to change.*

Trinity turned to those closest and began chatting. She'd been working on cleaning up her image, and her hygiene, and it was working. The camp had forgiven her and taken her back in, but they were all watching for a repeat of her bad behavior.

Jayda and Brittani had just been avoiding her, though Jayda missed the friendship that had started. The one night with all three of them playing cards had been fun.

Trinity agreed, but there wasn't a choice for her. Brittani had to go. At some point, the UN would make it to the island. Trinity hoped the camp enemy handled her personal enemy too.

"Stop it." Daryl glared at the women. "No fighting." He wasn't happy to be here, even for this short shift. It was his punishment for having contact with Adrian, for taking Adrian's Eagle notes and passing them off as his own. *I have to babysit our troublemakers.*

Daryl wished the time would go by faster. He and a few others were being sent out soon to provide relief for some of the tired Eagles on the Adrianna. He didn't mind being down here in the tunnels, but he hated the assignment. This group all had the potential to be a pain in the ass. All the people who were fighting or had issues were here. Angela had made it clear that Jennifer had full authority to strip anyone who got out of line, but word had spread that she was leaving. Her days of immediate respect

were over. It was tense as camp members glared at her and each other or made snide comments.

Daryl saw Debra's hands moving. Laura's nieces snickered. *Oh, yeah. There are also snide gestures.*

Theo had saved Bernice's daughter and gotten a kiss as a reward. Debra hadn't liked that. She'd tried to claim Theo since then, but he only serviced her and sent her on her way.

*I think I hurt him by treating him that way first. He needs an apology, but I don't want to give him one!*

Bernice wasn't aware of the turmoil in Debra's mind. She and Crissy were reading their books. They were fine with the environment and the company. They were safe here.

In the corner, Samantha was working with a few rookie descendants, helping them master their shields like she'd done with Debra. She still sometimes helped the deaf woman with a lesson, but most people just wanted Samantha to be a mother and camp member.

Samantha had no intention of falling into obscurity. *I have big plans.* Samantha smiled at Monica and Daisey, who were holding the twins while they slept. Neil hadn't liked it that she'd been assigned here instead of the tunnel with him and Angela, but he hadn't protested when she pointed out how many other powerful people were here.

Daryl didn't tell her it was because couples weren't supposed to work together and she was on

storm watch. Daryl was only allowed to be here because Brittani didn't have a job during this fight. She and her family were finally getting some time off, though it wasn't a comfort-filled vacation like Angela really wanted. Daryl was sure she would reward them later in some way. While covering the three daily meals, their cooks had also been using their freezers to prepare two weeks of freeze-dried meals to cover them for this fight. They were sleeping near that stock, enjoying not having to do anything but hand out pouches.

Daryl spotted Charlie getting to his feet and groaned.

Charlie locked eyes with Daryl. *I need to go for a walk.*

“You can go whenever you want. The tunnels are open to everyone. But you shouldn't, kid. She made her choice.”

Charlie opened his mouth.

Daryl cut him off. “You may push her into doing something stupid. Let her have all the time she wants and maybe you'll get lucky.”

Charlie stepped around him, not arguing. He didn't have the heart for it right now. He was sick to his stomach at being away from Tracy for these last two weeks. He needed to walk around and think. *If I knew she was okay, and still pregnant, I could keep leaving her alone.*

Charlie slipped out without speaking to anyone.

The guard on the hatch wrote it down, frowning. Chad hated this setup. Angela was giving the camp

the run of the tunnels as long as they didn't go above ground where satellites could track them. There were guards all through these passages, but no doors, only curtains made of lead that would deflect bullets and give them time to run.

Daryl hoped Charlie stuck to the deal. *If you go up there, you'll be endangering her too.*

Charlie didn't answer the mental warning. Daryl wasn't sure if the boy had heard him.

Daryl checked his watch. Angela had told them it would all be over by noon tomorrow. "Come on time. Speed up the next sixteen hours."

"I know." Tonya rubbed her sore spine as she stopped next to him. "The tests are done. I confirmed it. The water is fine on the island. The ground is not. The soil is contaminated in several places. We'll have to dig it out." Angela had designed a portable lab that they'd set up down here in a dark cubby. Once Kenn had rigged up brighter lights, Tonya had gotten busy.

"Maybe that's what the previous residents were doing with the side where parts were blown out. Maybe they buried it."

Tonya shrugged. "I'll add that to my 'thousand questions' file." She went by him and joined the other mothers at the makeshift nursery. None of their infants needed incubators now, but they were still using them to ensure the newborns had enough heat in these cool conditions.

Daryl thought all the babies looked extremely healthy. He also thought the twin boys were going

to be a handful. They were already competing for attention by crying or cooing the loudest.

Daryl rubbed his snakehead and moved on with his scan of this part of their camp.

Next to him, Ian was staring at Bernice and Debra.

Bernice felt it and looked over.

Ian stared at Debra. *I'll be on the ship later, helping guard Grant. Theo will be there too. I can pass a message.*

Debra shook her head.

Bernice frowned.

Gus was manning the guard post across from Daryl. He saw it all, heart dropping. *I waited too long again.*

Daryl shrugged. *I think the jury's still out on that one.*

Gus winced. It reminded him of the vote. Safe Haven had removed the right to privacy, cleared Tim because he'd been punished, and then proceeded to outline a long list of protections they no longer had. Most people hadn't realized it covered so much of their day-to-day lives, but they should have. Angela had been passing those nuggets through the camp long before the vote. Now, doctors had to tell someone if a patient was talking about committing a crime. A wife had to tell on her husband. Employers would be able to view records in any area. Their medical data could be released in court cases. Gus had been horrified. And he'd been elated. *The future will not be able to restart the*

*corruption of the past without these protections. No one will be able to hide mental problems, like Darren.*

Now Daryl winced. Everyone was still stunned by Darren's reaction to female Eagles. He'd labored alongside them for months before snapping, making everyone nervous about each other. Was he the first in a series of mass shootings?

Gus snorted.

Daryl rolled his eyes. *You're right. We've had that since the war. There's always been friendly fire in Safe Haven.*

"I think that's because we don't vet people well enough."

Daryl nodded at Gus's complaint. "I couldn't agree more."

Gus was quiet for a minute. Then he looked over. "Is she okay?"

Daryl nodded. "She misses you, Lou, and the old setup you guys had where she could help in the mess on the same shift. If you want to restart it, I won't interfere."

Gus shook his head. "It's better this way." He stepped by Daryl and moved toward their stinky bathroom.

Daryl sighed. He and Gus were trying to be friends, but it wasn't working. At some point, it would probably be official that they were done trying, but not yet. They both cared about Brittani too much to give up so easily.

Trinity gagged. *It's always Brittani!* She got up and followed Charlie out of this zone. *There has to be a better place to be.*

Daryl motioned.

Tommy slipped out behind Trinity and shadowed her down the tunnel. He stayed far enough back that she didn't feel like he was stalking her. He had scanned the others in the tunnels, moving from site to site all day long, but his mind stayed on his orders. He had been surprised to be included at all, but Marc had made it clear that he wasn't in the clear.

*"If you get the chance to save someone's life during the action, do it or you might just discover you aren't happy here again."*

Tommy knew that was right. The Eagles and the camp were still avoiding him. It would be a long time before he fit in again and enjoyed his life in Safe Haven. *And they all know I won't make it.*

Tommy wanted to protest that assumption, but he couldn't. It had only been a couple of weeks, but he was lonely, bitter, restless, and missing Kendle. He'd even found himself missing Quinn's reckless behavior and Adrian's sly glances.

Tommy saw Charlie heading up a ladder, but he didn't stop the boy. One person alone on a heat sensor wouldn't raise a lot of eyebrows, though it could still endanger them if the UN didn't think it was an animal.

Tommy wished he was out there with Marc where he might be able to earn his way back in

during the fighting. Nothing was happening here. All the action was supposed to take place on the other islands or on the open ocean. Angela didn't want the enemy on Pitcairn.

Trinity stopped in the doorway of the next area, where Angela was camped in a far corner, surrounded by her maps and notebooks. Trinity saw Conner and Candy in the other corner, playing Battleship. She decided to join them. *At least he's like me.*

Conner looked up as she approached. "I'm not like you at all."

Trinity smirked. "Sure you are. We both wanted something that belonged to someone else. You got lucky." Trinity smiled at Candy. "How long until you pop?"

"A couple months." Candy looked between her and Conner, not sure why Conner didn't like the woman.

Conner swallowed his nasty attitude. Trinity was the least of his worries. "You guys play this one. I'm tired of losing." He turned the board toward Trinity, who took the empty chair and began arranging the pieces without waiting to see if Candy wanted to play with her.

Candy didn't, but she also didn't want to be rude. She started setting up her side of the board, frowning a bit.

Conner took the opportunity to check in with Angela.

Angela shook her head. “I don’t know anything new yet. They’re all fine as far as I know.”

Conner sighed. “I’m sorry I’m not more helpful in these moments.”

Angela didn’t look up from her notebook. “If we have trouble, you’re here to help. I find that very useful.”

Conner didn’t want to face this moment, but he was tired of worrying over it. “What if I want to go with Kyle’s group?”

Angela had also been dreading it. Now that it was here, she hated herself. “I’m sorry, Conner. I can’t allow that.”

Conner sat down by her, mind racing to options that he’d avoided. “I knew, I guess. That’s why you don’t send me out for runs anymore, and why I’m sent to the med bay instead of the action scenes.”

“Yes. You’re special. I need you to stay here and let us figure out why so we can keep saving lives.”

“And then I can go?”

“Once we duplicate it, yes.”

Conner leaned his head back. “Then I guess I’m here until I die.”

Angela frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Think about it.”

Angela’s brilliant mind snapped the clue into place. “You’re a Mitchel.”

He nodded tiredly. “That’s why there are so many of us. My dad’s a whore, no doubt, but our

family is huge. There were once hundreds of us, and we all did this.”

“For who?”

“Rich people sometimes. Some for government men who needed a boost or a cure. Mostly they stockpiled our blood.”

“Blood doesn’t keep...” Angela realized that wasn’t necessarily true. “*Normal* blood doesn’t keep.”

Conner yawned. “Our blood can be frozen, but the temperature can’t be changed after that, even a little. I doubt the old stockpiles are good.”

“So we’d need a lot of Mitchels.” Angela sighed. “The world can’t take that. There are already enough.”

“There’s about to be at least one more.”

“Sadie?”

“Uncle Brandon will add a son by the end of summer. If William doesn’t get into Ciemus.”

Angela was sorry to hear that Ciemus was under attack, but there was nothing she could do from here. *I wish they had come with us.*

Conner snorted. “Sure. Then Jennifer could have had three guys stalking her. Can’t imagine why she wants to leave.”

Angela wasn’t surprised that Conner knew Brandon’s secret. They were family. *He probably recognized signs I missed.* “If that was the case, she wouldn’t be taking Morgan along and planning to stop in Ciemus when they land.”

Conner was curious. “Then why? I don’t understand. Other than being a prisoner, Safe Haven’s great.”

Angela winced. “I am sorry. I’ll work on something as fast as I can, and I’ll—”

“Give me whatever I want,” Conner finished with a sneer. “I’ve heard that lie before, in the labs.”

“Fair enough. I give you my word that we’ll let you go after the final battle.”

“I won’t survive it. Too many trackers will be hunting Mitchels.”

She stared. “You don’t want to go back for the fight.”

“No. I want to stay here with Candy and be good and live a normal life. Why is that wrong?”

Angela was thrilled to find out what he really wanted. “I can make that happen.”

“No, you can’t. You need me to heal your fighters.”

“I need your blood. We can freeze and store a lot of it in three years without harming you. And it will give me time to find a way to duplicate the effect without breeding Mitchels like pets.”

Conner snickered, relieved to find out Angela meant it.

“I do. Safe Haven stands for freedom. Thank you for wanting to stay.” She sent a wave of happiness and a charming smile.

Conner brightened. He went to the door guard for a check in, feeling better.

*I wish I did.* Angela hated letting someone else make parts of her plans without her guidance or approval.

Wade sensed she needed a distraction. “They’ve cleared both atolls now. They’re all gathering on Henderson, like you predicted.” Wade turned the screen around so Angela could see.

Angela fought her upset stomach, studying the zoomed-out satellite view. The UN armada was immense. *There’s no way we’ll get them all, even with the mines.*

Wade nodded. “Neil and I think so too. He wanted to add personal incendiary devices to our spies, but Marc told him no.” Wade didn’t tell her the Eagles had overruled that.

“What other solutions were offered?”

Wade didn’t care about her curt tone. They were all cranky and it was obvious that she was having a hard time being out of the action. “Gassing them. They may get away, but they’ll get a direct blast as they mount their assaults. The rest of the cloud may hit one or two of the atolls and islands and then it’ll dissipate like the others have. Morgan refused to be part of that before Marc had a chance to say no.”

“What else?”

“We could lure them in after the fight with calls for help by women alone or someone who found a food supply.”

Angela snorted. “They won’t come back here for anything, ever.”

“That’s what I said. Then I suggested the spies should get to the flagship and force their boss to order everyone to go to the same place.”

Angela nodded. “That could work.”

“Marc said he’d cover it.”

Angela knew that was the hardest part of what she and Marc had put together. Sneaking back from the three islands while the UN cleared them and formed a huge circle around all four locations was only going to be possible because there were so many ships trying to squeeze them in. The sound of their boats might not be recognized as an intruder. It was also a big net to cast. Marc was counting on it taking the UN a full day and night to close that net. The UN hoped to have the three outer islands cleared by the time the rest of their armada closed in.

Angela clenched her fists. “It’s not enough.”

Wade clicked his radio once. He smiled at her confusion. “Marc told me to click once if you said that.”

“What’s his plan?”

“I have no idea. None of us do. He only talked to...” Wade stopped.

Angela glared. “Adrian. He trusted his life to Adrian instead of me. Where is he?”

Wade shrugged. “You told them to stay in one of the bunkers for the fight. I assume he’s—”

“I want to listen.”

Wade switched the radio to let them listen in on Luke’s bunker.

“Not that one.”

Wade switched it to Adrian’s hidden bunker, frowning. “He wouldn’t go against whatever Marc told him to do. You know that.”

“No, I don’t.” Angela didn’t like it that there was only silence on the radio. Her upset stomach lurched into queasy. “Check them all.”

Wade caught the bad vibe. He checked the other locations, but they didn’t hear anything.

Angela stared at the radio in concern. “He gave them all jobs, Wade, and he trusts them to follow through. But we know they can’t be trusted or they’d still be in this camp.”

She stood up, brushing away the dirt as the connection clicked into place. She scanned the bored and nervous people, looking for the one who didn’t want to meet her eyes. “Cate!”

Both twins flinched.

Angela prepared to use her alpha power. “I know you’ve been in contact with Joey. Tell me what’s going on.”

Cody stared at her, confused.

Cate looked at the ground.

Angela knelt in front of the girl. “Joey or your dad—pick.”

Cate began to cry. “I can’t! My mind won’t let me!”

Angela hugged her. “You’re under a spell, Cate. You’ve been charmed. And we both know who did it.”

Cate whimpered. “I need him!”

Angela knew that feeling all too well. “He knows your dad will remove the charm and him. He knows there’s only one choice.”

“He’s gonna kill daddy!” Cate burst into tears. “Help me get him out of my head! It hurts!”

Angela realized the sound of the clock was gone. She waved Monica over to comfort the girl and headed for the nearest exit. “Wade’s in charge here. Ed, you’ll assist him. Everyone is staying, except Stanley.”

Wade grimaced. “You’re kidding, right? You’re taking the klutz?”

Stanley dropped his head.

Angela pulled on her jacket. “He can keep up with me. I’m going for a run.”

Ed leaned in, voice low. “Is that a good idea? For you, I mean?”

Angela sighed. “I have to go. Stanley will protect me.”

Stanley’s shoulders stiffened. “With my life, Boss.”

“Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Wade followed her, aware of people standing, muttering, starting to panic. “You don’t even know where to go!”

“But you do.” Angela put her hand on the hatch release. “Spill it.”

“I can’t. Marc wants you to stay here.”

“His clock stopped ticking!” Angela’s shout stunned Wade and everyone else. “He’s going to die!”

Wade leaned in to whisper. Then he pushed on the hatch as she flipped the latch.

Wade watched until she and Stanley were out of sight, then he re-latched the hatch and moved to the center of the dirty room to explain what was happening.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# I Hope It Is

## Submarine Bridge

### 1

“**C**an we go now?”

Jade denied that. “He’s still in the talking stage. We have to wait until he gets to stage two.”

The rest of the submarine was quiet, other than the usual creaks and groans it made as it rested at the surface.

Lowan agreed. “And then you have to be gone before stage three.”

They’d planned to frame someone to create a distraction, but fate had provided the real thing for them.

Hazel fell silent, withdrawing back into her shell. It had saved her life and earned her a spot on this ship, but in moments like this, she wasn’t sure she’d gotten lucky. Miles had a reputation that had preceded him across continents. America had been lucky to get Donner instead.

Safe Haven didn’t stand a chance once Miles hit stage three. Going through the crew on this submarine wouldn’t be enough for him. He would switch targets at that point and even Director Haussler wouldn’t be able to control him. That was

why they had been ordered to quietly patrol the water between Safe Haven's paradise and the other islands. Director Haussler had told Miles anyone he caught was his to do with as he pleased. That would keep the enemy from escaping, but it would also keep their fighters from blowing the plan early.

Most of his crew hated being a part of this madness, but it was also the only way they could accomplish their own goals. Being a member of the resistance when everyone could read your thoughts was more than a challenge—it was a suicide mission that only those with endless determination even considered.

Miles' hearty laughter boomed through the walls of the submarine.

Hazel made a face. "What is it with him and treating them to dinner before they become dinner?"

Lowan shrugged. "He said something about humans being no different than animals when it comes to things that can ruin the flavor."

Jade paled.

Hazel gagged.

"The last order from base has a file attached to it." Lowan had just finished typing in the latest orders and updates from the flagship. "It's a video file."

Jade hoped it was good news. "Play it. Maybe we'll be able to see where they are in the battle."

Silence spread through the bridge of the sub as the message began to roll.

*“Safe Haven is not your enemy. We do not hunt you or attack you while you enjoy life.”* The camera showed a RIB with five people flying toward the happy campers on the small beach.

Hazel gasped. “That’s some of the first team we sent out to make contact!”

“Shh.” Lowan didn’t think Miles could hear them, but he wasn’t positive.

“But they’re... He’s going to...” Hazel shut her eyes as the powerful descendant on the beach fired. “We’re not the enemy either!”

Jade put a hand on her sister’s shoulder, wincing as the RIB was hit and bodies and debris flew through the air. “They don’t know.”

Hazel wiped away her tears and shrugged off her sister’s hand. “They didn’t even try to find out what the team wanted.”

“I know. But they’re hunted animals, and animals react without thought.”

The video changed to a teenage girl with bright red orbs. *“Join us. Kill your leaders and come find us. All survivors are welcome.”*

Everyone was tempted, but the fear of Miles and Director Haussler was stronger than the small bit of hope from the video.

Lowan shut it off. “It’s too bad the UN didn’t start in America.”

Jade gestured. “Sure. We could be the ones sitting on an island waiting for a nuclear detonation.”

Lowan shrugged. “At least we wouldn’t be the bad guys.”

“What if they get lucky and kill Miles?” Hazel glanced around. “None of us will get the rewards we were promised.”

Everyone’s mind went to their darkest desires.

Lowan shrugged, glad that all of his stuff was in the bag near his feet. They’d all packed as soon as Goldie’s call had come in. “We don’t need his permission on those rewards. We do have to complete our run first. Besides, the odds of him losing even 3-to-1 are almost zero. Miles is immune to almost every known descendant spell. That’s why he’s able to be a normal and a UN captain.”

The men and women currently discussing it were only normals. The only power they held was in their ability to pilot the submarine and that would vanish as soon as Director Haussler told them to fire on Safe Haven.

Lowan shouldered his bag. “We can talk to Cerise about this stuff later. We go when he slams the door.”

An angry shout echoed down the hallway, bringing a fresh wave of tension. All of them fell silent, listening for the right moment to run.

## 2

Miles sat in the plush red chair next to his open cabin door, evaluating the three soaked captives he’d plucked from the ocean. He recognized Violet

from one of the bulletins command had sent over earlier in the day. He recognized the two men as members of the enemy by the way they glared at him instead of being scared or subservient. His reputation didn't allow for resistance. The best his prey could hope for was a small maiming.

He could also tell they weren't part of the UN troops by the clothes they wore, by how alert they were to the fact that there were no other exits in the room—both men swept the door every few seconds, waiting for the opportunity to dash—and also by the feeling of strength both men gave off. The UN troops were fed a specific diet to bulk them up, but these men had gained it through physical work. It was clear when he compared them to his crew. All the others here were pale and thin from months without seeing sunlight or being on land. Even the UN diet couldn't combat that. Only a few of his crew were actually healthy. *They've had everything while the rest of the world has nothing. Command was right. Safe Haven is not good.*

Greg sneered at the man, but he didn't open a dialogue. Their training taught them to observe the enemy and use their words. Director Miles had only thought it, therefore Eagle training was lacking. Greg made a mental note to add that to his final report after this run was over.

Miles crossed his arms over his thick chest. "It is a beautiful meal the cook has prepared. You will eat."

Both men continued searching for an escape instead of refusing. The cabin was sparse, providing little hope for hidden treasures. There was only a moldy mattress on the floor, a wide table with four chairs, and a stove covered in layers of grease and grime.

Violet immediately leaned forward and began gobbling the rice and beans as if she was starving. “It’s good!”

Greg frowned at her. “It might be drugged.”

She nodded, talking through a mouthful of rehydrated rice. “I hope so. Then I won’t feel anything.”

Miles smiled widely. “Not all drugs take away sensation.”

Violet spat the food out, spraying the table and her companions.

Miles stood up, blocking the doorway. “You will not waste food!”

Greg and Biff tensed against their bonds. Both men had used their training as they’d been fished out of the sea and brought to this room. Once here, they’d been secured to their chairs and a meal had been laid out for them. The knives in their wet pants, and other small, useful items, hadn’t been found.

Violet scooped another bite of the rice, hoping to calm Miles. “I’m sorry! I’m eating it!”

Miles glared at the two men.

Biff knew the right answer; he shook his head in tandem with Greg. “No. Thank you.”

“The hard way, then.” Miles slammed the door.  
“Sometimes sour meat is exactly what I want.”

“Sour meat?” Biff blanched. “He’s going to eat us! We have to get out of here!”

Miles grabbed the table and shoved it across the room. It cracked into the wall and scattered debris everywhere.

Greg let his demon eyes glow red in warning.

“He’s immune!” Violet cowered on the floor as Miles came toward them. “Don’t make him mad!”

Biff and Greg bounced their chairs backward, leaving water puddles. “Too late.”

### 3

The bridge crew hurried by the cabin. The only way to the exit went by the captain’s quarters.

*Bang!* Something heavy slammed against the door.

The team took off running, believing Miles was coming after them.

Other members of the crew followed. A lot of them had been aware that the crew on the bridge were planning an escape; they wanted out too.

There was no time to argue as another round of bangs and shouts echoed from the cabin. It never took Miles long to subdue his prey. They were already running out of time.

“Duck! Duck! He’s coming!”

The shouts from the cabin caused panic. One of the tag-a-long crew slapped his hand on the *emergency surface* button as he ran by.

Red lights flashed in warning. The computer voice reminded them how foolish it was to use this procedure while already on top of the water.

The submarine shot forward, breaking the anchor and throwing everybody backward. Concussions, broken bones, and deaths occurred all over the ship. Smoke began to come from the engines. It rolled through the submarine, filling the halls with fresh danger.

Miles stormed from his cabin and ran to the bridge, not surprised to find it empty. He didn't need gifts to know the entire crew was full of traitors.

Miles sat at the main station.

The submarine responded instantly to his smooth hands. It slowed and calmed, regaining equilibrium in the still water.

He activated the fire control systems and shut compartments that were taking on water.

Sparks flared in many of the rooms; the suppression system began to kick on, putting out the fires.

Miles switched on the camera that had been shut off. He spotted his crew jumping into an inflatable to the right of the hatch.

Miles considered going after them. Then he thought about calling it into command. His stomach

rumbled, reminding him of the three live bodies waiting for him.

Miles engaged the dive controls, then set it on autopilot, unconcerned with all the alarms and lights flashing across the consoles. “They’ll be sorry they left.”

Miles went toward his cabin. “It’s open ocean, and if they do get lucky enough to reach an island, anyone on them will slit their throats for being traitors or for being the enemy. They’re not my problem anymore.”

Miles ignored the smoke and water, the damage and the bodies as he walked by. He didn’t care about anything now except enjoying his reward.

#### 4

“He’s coming! Hurry up!”

“Oh, God! He’s almost here!”

Greg didn’t need the panic from either one of them. It wasn’t helping. He’d fired half a dozen spells at Miles that had absolutely no effect, but had given Miles time to beat on him and Biff. Violet had hidden under the broken table the entire time, scooping rice off the floor and shoving it into her mouth in an effort to appease Miles and save herself.

Greg slammed himself against the wall, feeling his shoulder muscle tear. The broken chair shattered under his fingers. He strained to reach any of the pieces, maneuvering to be between the door and

Biff. He hadn't forgotten his vow to bring Biff home alive, but that didn't seem as likely now. He was still bound at the feet and one wrist to the chair when Miles kicked the door open and ran at them.

Greg's demon jumped forward and took control. A thick shield appeared around both men.

Miles grabbed Violet from under the table and jerked her up by her hair, paying no attention to her screams or struggles. "I'll snap her neck!"

Greg's demon refused. *I don't know her and I don't know you. You can both die.* The demon gathered most of Greg's energy, waiting for the command to fire.

Greg recovered, understanding his demon wasn't going rogue. *Wait for my call.*

*Yes, master.*

Miles tightened his grip on Violet's neck. She stopped struggling, huge tears rolling down her cheeks. She forced out raspy words as her hands clenched into fists. "I wanted to be one of the good guys. We all do."

Greg stared at her, willing her to cooperate. "You have a chance right now to save two lives and be a hero forever in our memories."

For the first time in her life, Violet decided someone else was more important than she was. She blinked twice to let Greg know she was willing to help them. "Don't kill me, Director Miles, please. I fell out of the boat and they grabbed me. I didn't have a choice!"

Miles was beyond caring. His stomach was rumbling too loudly. His mind buzzed into red shades. "I'll have my dinner now." His mouth lowered toward her neck.

*Do it!* Greg let the demon have control.

The demon blasted a combination of both Marc and Angela's death spell. It slammed into Miles and Violet. The two bodies fell together.

Greg rushed forward, dragging the chair clumsily along. He dropped down next to Violet. *Save her.*

The demon sulked in his mind. *She was not one of us. She was one of them.*

Greg didn't care. "I got her into this mess. I want to get her out. What can you do?"

The demon retreated, resuming its place in the cell in Greg's mind. *I can do nothing. No one recovers from a hybrid death spell.*

Greg felt the horror then of what he'd become, but there wasn't time to explore it and discover if he was sorry. *I'll mourn for her later.* He rose. "Come on, Biff. It's time you earned your keep."

Biff forced a chuckle, attention staying on the two bodies. They had fallen while Violet was wrapped in Miles's big arm, but in death, it seemed like an embrace. "I hope she doesn't have to spend eternity with him in hell."

Greg sighed. "Same. If there's a choice, I'd like her to get a second chance."

Biff winced as Greg crushed the rest of the chair to get free. He had been expecting members of the

crew to come running in to help Miles, but it was growing apparent that his crew was only afraid of him. “When he was in trouble, they were rooting against him.”

“When he gets distracted, they take off to avoid becoming a target.”

Biff was glad Greg had killed the man, but not the woman. He held still while Greg took the knife from the compartment in his belt and cut him loose. “What’s the plan now?”

Greg took a moment to evaluate. They were bleeding in areas, as well as bruised and swollen, but neither of them were seriously injured yet. *He was tenderizing the meat.*

Greg kept the knife in hand, missing the gun that had flown out of his holster when their boat flipped. Biff had also lost his rifle, though he had his soaked pistol. Miles had let him keep it, laughing at the thought of it working before it dried out and was cleaned. It was more likely to misfire and kill whoever was using it rather than who they were aiming at.

Greg scanned the cabin like he had when they’d first been brought in, but this time he spent a minute searching for any areas where Miles may have stashed a better weapon. The safe on the wall was tempting, but Greg didn’t want to waste time trying to find the combination.

Greg felt Biff getting ready to repeat his question. “We take over the sub and point it at the enemy. Maybe we can bluff them into leaving.

Their people are not like us. I think they'll cut bait at first chance."

Biff frowned. "Angela ordered us to sink the sub and get back to camp."

Greg forced the door open. "Marc told me to keep it."

Biff couldn't help an observation even though this wasn't the time for it. "You do know that's why she got rid of Ivan, right?"

"Yes. After this, she'll send me away before I can screw up too. It's perfect."

They stepped out into the narrow hall, smelling burning plastic and smoke. Cries for help came from all directions. The dank, salty smell wafting through the compartments under the smoke also implied there was a leak somewhere. Greg hoped it wasn't important and put it from his mind.

"What are we doing about the survivors?"

Greg didn't answer. He refused to say it aloud.

Biff swallowed a protest and reminded himself that these people had come to kill them.

Greg motioned. "You're left; I'm right."

Biff went to the first compartment, fighting with his morals.

"Empty." Biff eased toward the next one.

Greg sliced a throat quickly and rose, joining him.

Biff and Greg began to clear the submarine, not finding many survivors. The dead had been abandoned and the living had fled. Greg knew they'd find them huddled together near the rear of

the ship. They were underwater. There was no place for them to run to until the sub surfaced.

Greg stepped into the torpedo room and spotted a dying man inching toward a radio. He walked over before he thought about it.

Biff saw him from the doorway as he went by. The rookie hurried into the next room, locking down on his immediate urge to protest. *I might not be cut out to be an Eagle.*

Greg came back into the hallway, hating the flashing red lights. “None of us enjoy this part of the job, rookie.” His voice grew pointed. “But it is part of the job.”

Biff stepped reluctantly into the maneuvering room. He could already hear a low moaning of someone who likely needed to be given mercy.

Greg waited in the smoky doorway to be sure it was done.

Biff made it fast, not meeting the eyes of the woman bleeding out in her chair. She slumped onto his arm as he cut her throat. The blood gushed over his arm and splashed onto the floor where the blood from her missing leg had created a small lake.

Biff scurried backward, stomach and mind twisting.

Greg put a hand on his arm and led him into the hall. “Breathe in. Breathe out. Nothing but air.”

Biff forced himself to obey, blocking it all. *I can do this. I knew it would be like this before I joined. I can do this.*

Greg wasn't sure now. Biff was too sensitive. It was great in a mate, but it was a liability in an Eagle. "Come on. We're almost finished."

They made it to the end of the sub and found what they'd expected.

More panic erupted. The few survivors there pushed away, begging for mercy. None of them considered fighting.

Greg scanned them and found desperate souls who wanted to be left alone. *I know how that feels.* He turned and went back toward the bridge.

Biff was relieved. He gave the crew a threatening glare. "Stay here and wait. Try something stupid and he'll come right back."

"We won't."

"Thank you!"

"I thought they would kill us."

"We were told they would."

"Safe Haven is different. They don't kill innocent people."

The mutters and relief followed the two men, lightening their moods and easing some of their mental pain.

Greg reached the bridge and stopped as a new thought occurred to him. He turned to find Biff staring at him with the same expression.

"We don't know how to pilot this tin can. We killed the captain."

Greg shrugged. *I had help, but it's hard to be pissed considering he was going to eat us.* "We'll

go through the crew. Vessels like this have support personnel.”

“What if they don’t want to help?”

Greg didn’t answer.

“I can do it.”

Both men spun to find a robust man with wild red hair in the doorway. “I’m Saul, but you can call me Blue. You’re from Safe Haven, right?”

Greg nodded, not getting anything from the man’s mind. *He’s either one of us with a great shield or he’s an Invisible.* “You can sail this ship?”

“It’s not a ship. It’s a Virginia class nuclear attack sub...”

Greg held up a hand. “I believe you. My question is more about trust.”

The man shrugged, stepping into the room to avoid a sparking wire that had broken during the false surfacing. “I’ll prove it as I go.”

Greg recognized that answer. “Fair enough.” He slid aside to let the man reach the controls. “Get us to the surface. Then the crew in the rear can go.”

Saul scowled. “Go where? The open ocean is not a joke.”

Greg knew that. “So you suggest we kill them? In that case, there’s no need to surface.”

The bigger man settled into the groaning chair. “They’re not your enemy, you know. They never were.”

Greg was tired of hearing that sentiment. “But they’re still here, aren’t they? They would have

killed us as soon as they were ordered to, right? Just get us to the surface.”

“Fair enough.” Saul began hitting switches and checking numbers on the various panels and consoles. The submarine protested the flip of orders. It groaned loudly, spitting out smoke and water in the damaged areas. “You may want to take a seat. I reckon I’m a bit rusty.”

“How long’s it been?” Greg took the chair to the man’s right.

“About thirty years. I’m usually a pilot, but Miles didn’t want to leave me behind.”

Biff took the seat to his left, not sure if they’d made a mistake by coming here at all.

Saul looked at Biff. “We’ll be fine, son. Just sit tight and let me work.”

Greg realized the man had a great shield. Saul was huge, with colorful tattoos over his forearms and neck. Greg saw ships, planes, bikes, cars. *We do need another wheelman...* Safe Haven didn’t need more power, but it would please the boss. “Help me achieve my goals for this run and I’ll evaluate you to join us.”

Saul straightened in his chair. “Keep your head down when you step out. I wouldn’t want you to lose it before you can follow through on that.”

Greg and Biff spun in their chairs as footsteps sounded behind them. Half of the crew had followed them from the rear of the sub.

“We can help.”

“We’ll get the sub cleaned up.”

“We can help you pilot it.”

Greg opened his mouth to refuse.

Saul smacked the console. “We were told all survivors are welcome!”

Greg stared, picking and choosing his battles. *I’m sorry, Marc, but the boss will get to evaluate them. I can’t be responsible for murders.* “Get it cleaned up. You can all go with us.”

Saul was thrilled. His grin stretched again, showing broken brown teeth that had probably troubled him all of his life.

Biff glanced away, not wanting them to see his dismay. He had been hoping Greg would let them go, but bringing them back to Safe Haven went against everything Marc had told them before they began this run. Marc would be pissed. Angela would be pleased.

Greg already knew. *Guess I forgot that part when I made this plan.*

Chapter Twenty-Three  
**My Statement Stands**  
UN Flagship

1

“**A**ll teams are on Henderson now, sir.”

Haussler studied the newest satellite reading, wishing the time would go by faster. “Keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir.” Albert was enjoying his role as flunkey now. Haussler had told him to man Oliver’s station. He hadn’t left the bridge since.

“Sir! We have a new signature!”

Haussler hurried over to the other station. “Where?”

“On Ducie!”

Haussler studied the monitor. “She must have missed them.”

“Not possible. They went over every inch of land...”

Haussler nodded. “Above the water. Send a transport ship over to check it out.”

Albert entered the orders, wondering if he would order their divers into the water. They only had a few people with that skill. It would take a long time.

Haussler didn't want to. He knew they were being delayed. It didn't cost time to check it out right now, however. The transport crew was off duty until Cerise's team was finished and maybe beyond that. Henderson and Pitcairn were the only remaining landmasses to clear; more of their troops were expendable. "Get me eyes on Henderson. I want to watch the fights."

The flagship crew was relieved. If Haussler was enjoying the slaughters, he wouldn't be digging into their minds or taking his anger out on them.

## 2

"Do we have to hike?" Jade scanned the foreboding landscape, ignoring the small camp of fighters guarding the beach where they'd just brought in the inflatable. The hot air clung to her fragile skin like a smothering blanket. "I didn't sign up for any hiking."

Her sister agreed. "We'll stay here. Cerise can come down to the beach."

Lowan ignored both women and went to talk to the chief of security. The views in the distance were pillars of smoke rising from faint landmasses on either side of them; it wasn't encouraging, but it wasn't the complete chaos befitting the reports they'd gotten.

Eight men were patrolling the three beaches on this side of Henderson. The rest of the island's edges were impenetrable as far as they'd been told.

No one had wanted to come in through the coral bombs and then have to climb a 50-foot cliff to reach flat ground. *Not that there's much of that.* Henderson rose from the ocean like a series of huge, odd steps covered in paint of a dozen different green and brown hues. Lowan wasn't looking forward to the climb either, but he was grateful to be off the submarine. "Where's the boss?"

Darwin pointed toward the jungle. "On the first rise, mate. There's a clear footpath now." He'd been left here to supervise bringing the rest of the supplies. Helping to carry the loads to the campsite hadn't occurred to him.

Jade and her sister wanted to argue, but if a path had been cleared, they had to follow the rest of their group. Command didn't like stragglers. The sisters reluctantly walked toward the footpath, already starting to sweat. Their skin wasn't used to the bright sunlight. They weren't used to the humid air of outside. They'd been inside the sub for months except for the rare training matchup or exam that required them to go to the medical ship of their fleet or the flagship. Unlike the others, they didn't know most of the men and women here by sight, only by reputation and the occasional name that came through in orders.

Lowan followed, pointing. "I see torches on both sides of the path instead of one."

Hazel inhaled deeply, trying to get more air into her protesting lungs. "Do you think she took over this group?"

Jade snorted before Lowan could answer. “Of course she took over. It’s what she does.”

There was no arguing with that. Cerise’s most effective battle plan was to infiltrate the enemy, act like them, and convert them to her way of thinking. When the moment came for capture or exposure, her skills with charms had always given her the win. When she’d approached the three of them during one of Miles’s dinners behind doors, they’d agreed because of her reputation. If anyone had a chance to reach Safe Haven, it was Cerise.

“I think we should try to join them.” Now that she was out in the real world, Jade was considering the future beyond a momentary pleasurable revenge for her sister sleeping with a forgotten boyfriend years ago. “It’s beautiful out here, I think. We might even learn to like it. Either way, we wouldn’t be hunting anymore, and we saw the video clip. For the first time in months, Safe Haven is open to survivors again—and we are that.”

All of them nodded, even the people they were walking by. It was a common conversation circling all of the small camps that had been made along the path.

Fighters of every race and nationality were camped here, waiting for the sun to finish sinking so they could participate in the matchups. Small fires and spirals of smoke guided them toward the main camp.

“We’ll see what Cerise has to say about it.” Lowan wasn’t willing to cross her in any way. Safe

Haven was a rumored ghost at this point, but Cerise's dangerous gaze was only a few feet away and already glaring at them through the wild jungle.

"Just the three of you?"

Lowan shrugged. "You know what he's like." He didn't tell her they'd dumped the rest of the crew who'd come along without asking. Those weak men and women were shark food now.

"*Was* like. Miles is dead." Cerise had felt it when it happened. She was stunned someone had been able to accomplish that. She was also relieved that she wouldn't have to return to the sub to do it herself.

Fresh mutters went through the camp. It began to spread through the ranks.

The sub crew was delighted to hear that. The sisters hugged. For a brief moment, they loved each other again.

Jade retreated, letting go. Touching Hazel reminded her how much she did want the reward she'd been promised. "What's next? Are you really going to finish clearing this hunk of snot?"

Cerise chuckled. "I've never given up on a job. Until now. Come dawn, I'll call for transport ships and tell them it's clear. We'll sail straight to Pitcairn from there or we'll go home after they blow it up. The only thing we have to do is get through the night without anybody calling in a sighting of Safe Haven."

Standing nearby, Kyle cleared his throat. "What if they just show up?"

“My statement stands.” Cerise moved toward the ring that was being set on the largest flat ground they had at this point in the climb. It wasn’t huge, but it would allow them the nightly matchups. And without the UN bosses here, every match might be to the death. It was completely possible they would go through 40 or 50 fighters tonight and twice that number of trackers. There would also be individual challenges and honest fights that broke out. It would be a zoo in the middle of a circus surrounded by wolves.

Everyone in the group who caught Cerise’s thought cheered, but it wasn’t only those troops. The Eagles also let out a cry that matched the men and women around them. Safe Haven’s Eagles had become incredibly good at killing and then they’d been told they weren’t allowed to do it anymore. This was a chance to remove some of the enemy and let out the frustrations of being vital to their camp’s survival. The life of an Eagle was hard. Moments like this helped make it worth it. They weren’t proud of themselves for it, but it was hard to feel shame with so much eagerness now pumping fresh life into their tiring bodies.

Kyle stayed near Cerise as she picked a spot by the impromptu ring and brought out a camping chair from her kit. When she perched in it and pushed off her boots with a low groan, Kyle understood she didn’t expect to be attacked. It said a lot about her. *And it’s not all good, but that has to come later.* Kyle pointed at Goldie.

Goldie's grin widened. He hardly ever received a challenge in these matchups.

Cerise glared. "You stole my fight."

Goldie laughed.

So did Kyle even though he regretted asking the big man now. *I didn't know she wanted to fight me!*

Cerise laughed. "I would have challenged Goldie later for the tiny chance that he might win. You're nothing to me."

Goldie began taking off his gear, revealing a body twice Kyle's size. It was obvious he took care of himself beyond the UN rules for personal care.

Kyle wasn't concerned.

The witnesses were. Jeers and groans ran through the crowd.

"He'll kill him!"

"Yeah, nah."

"There's no way the Italian wins!"

"My money is on Goldie." Cerise dropped a heavy pouch by her bare feet. "But I think the Italian's scrappy. I say he'll last...five minutes."

Shouts and bets began flying through the warm air. On the beach, fog was rolling in, but no one thought it would cool them down when it finally reached their location.

Kyle realized Cerise had triggered the betting stage. He patted his bulging pocket. "I'll save mine for *your* fight."

Cerise studied him as the crowd quieted. "I'm not allowed to fight in these matches. I was joking about challenging Goldie. Everyone knows that."

Kyle shrugged, flashing a leer to cover his mistake. “What the boss doesn’t know...”

Cerise snorted, but her eyes stayed on him, evaluating deeper than she had before. *I’ve never seen him before. I toured all the other troop ships. And I had dinner on the Italian bucket. He wasn’t there.*

Kyle sent out a thick surge of desire, but he doubted flirting to distract Cerise would work. She was much too sharp.

Cerise stopped her evaluation, shaking her head. “Don’t use those stunning eyes on me. I get pregnant at the drop of a hat and three of the four produced triplets. That won’t be good for either of us.”

Kyle chuckled. “Still, if you change your mind...”

Cerise blushed under his intent gaze. She looked at Goldie. “Don’t kill him. I may want to use him for an hour.”

Goldie cracked his knuckles. “Better do it first. He is not coming out of that ring.”

Cerise reluctantly leaned back in her chair. “First match in two minutes!”

Kyle stepped toward the ring. “Is that us?”

“Not yet.” Goldie frowned at Cerise. “He’s eager to die.”

Cerise shrugged. “Aren’t we all?”

Lowan was also keen to join the fighting, but he was certain Cerise wouldn’t be here for the entire thing. The sub team settled around her, digging out

their valuables for wagers. Thin fog began to waft up toward them as the sun finally sank.

Kyle felt the excitement increase. It was impossible not to be caught up in it. *They get to do this every night. I'll put it in my report.*

Cerise looked straight at him. *I need to dig into you.*

Kyle nodded. "When you're ready."

She turned her attention to the first pair leaping eagerly into the ring. "After the show. If you survive Goldie."

"I will." Kyle took a fast glance at his watch to make sure they were still on schedule. "If you want to keep him, tell him to sit this one out."

Goldie scowled at him. "Don't think you will win!"

"I don't. I know."

Goldie stomped toward the fighting men, shoving people out of his way. He leaned against a tree, glaring at everyone. Even the spiders on the tree shied away from him.

Cerise snickered. "You have a heap of balls."

Kyle's amusement reappeared. "You have no idea. But you could."

Cerise blushed as those listening laughed at his banter. "You got a name, other than walking target?"

"Kyle Genovese."

Mutters and whispers flew through the crowd of fighters.

Cerise placed the name. “Famous crime family, right?”

Kyle refused to think about those days. “Before the war, anyway. I’m the only survivor.”

“Really?” Cerise pointed toward the group coming from the beach with the last of their supplies. “He might say differently.”

Kyle stared in shocked dismay at the sight of his elder brother, Jacob. “Son of a bitch.”

Cerise studied him again. “He also thinks he’s the only one of you left. This should be an interesting reunion.”

Kyle wanted to act like the top Eagle and handle it carefully, smoothly.

But he wasn’t capable of it. He rushed forward with his knife coming from his belt.

Jacob glanced up in time to see Kyle; he missed the knife. “Hey! I thought you were with Sa—” He staggered as Kyle stabbed him in the heart. Another quick slash sent blood gushing from his throat. It ran over his UN uniform in a flood of crimson.

Cerise observed in fascination. “Guess you weren’t close.”

Kyle wiped his blade clean and walked away, leaving the body.

Cerise ignored the two men in the ring who were screaming at each other as they stabbed. “Any particular reason you did that?”

“Fulfilling a vow I made before the war. I’ve hated him for a decade.”

No one questioned what the vow had been or what fight had caused it.

Cerise glanced at Goldie as the ring was cleared of both bodies and wagers were paid out.

Goldie was staring at the body. *He killed his own brother.*

Cerise lifted a brow. *Maybe you should withdraw from the match.*

Goldie's fury rose as he understood she and everyone else now thought Kyle was hardened enough to maybe win their fight. "I don't run from anyone!"

She shrugged. "It's your life to waste as you please."

"How can you support him over me?!" Goldie slapped his leg. "We are a team!"

Cerise sighed; steel came into her voice. "You're Haussler's bloke first and mine second, mate. Maybe if that changed..."

"That's a lie!"

She pinned him with a hard glare. "I've trusted you for years. And today you accepted Haussler's deal for the private bounty on me. You broke our trust, Goldie. Now you'll earn back your honor or die."

Goldie clenched his fists and went to the ring as everyone stared in surprise. Goldie had been with Cerise on almost every run. It was a shock to find out that he'd agreed to kill her.

Kyle saw her true feelings. He lifted a brow. *Should I spare him?*

Cerise nodded. *If you can. He's a good bloke in a bad situation.*

*Duly noted.* Kyle stripped his gun belt, dropping it next to her. "If I lose, that's yours."

Cerise picked up the belt, spotting a small slip of paper sticking from the one holster. "A Glock. Nice."

Kyle smiled, showing real emotion. "It's my second favorite possession."

She looked up. "What's the first?"

"My life." Kyle entered the ring as a hush fell through the crowd.

Cerise lifted her hand. "And... Go!"

Kyle stayed still as Goldie rushed him. He took up his kai stance, hearing Adrian's voice in his mind.

*Level one through five is for rookies and training. In a real fight, six through ten will keep you alive.*

Goldie's huge fist slammed into Kyle's chin, aiming for a knockout.

Kyle didn't budge.

Cerise stared as Goldie paused and the crowd reacted.

"He didn't feel it."

"How could he not feel that?!"

Goldie swung again.

Kyle let the second hit land, using the pain to fuel his rage.

Cerise lifted her shield so she could concentrate on the fight. She also palmed the paper from his holster.

Goldie's anger overflowed. He swung again, then again. His big arms pumped massive force, but it didn't affect the smaller man in any way except for the blood drips from cracked skin.

Kyle caught the last blow with his palm. "Surrender or die."

Goldie spat in Kyle's face.

Kyle swung back, using his training. The side of his elbow cracked into Goldie's cheek.

Kyle didn't stop. He swung again and again, driving the bigger man back with the force of his blows. Neil and Adrian had spent a year beating on the Eagles. Goldie's quick defensive punches had no effect. Kyle pummeled the man, drawing moans and groans from him and the crowd.

Cerise was stunned to see Goldie go down to one knee. *And he didn't use magic!*

Kyle's rage was in control. Stopping wasn't an option. He fired two more hits, sending Goldie to the ground. "Get up! Fight!"

Goldie wanted to, but Kyle's hits had rattled his brain. He slumped to the dirt, bleeding from his lip, nose, and ear.

Kyle kept hitting him, but the rage was clearing. "Pick a side!" Kyle delivered a harder hit, not winded yet. "You can't have it both ways!" Kyle drew back to give him a knockout blast.

“Stop!” Goldie collapsed, tears rolling over his face as he coughed out phlegm, blood, and regret. “They have my girl!”

Now she knew why Goldie had agreed. Cerise glanced at Kyle. “Thank you.”

Kyle slung blood from his hands and scanned the shocked, almost quiet crowd. “It’s time for all of you to pick a side. All *good* survivors are welcome in Safe Haven.”

The crowd went crazy, yelling and pushing toward Kyle. Half of them reached for radios.

Cerise lowered her shield and blasted them all with her charm. She sent out wave after wave, trying to control their reactions.

Kyle watched in approving fascination as she charmed all of them. His shield glowed brightly. “That’s amazing.”

“It’s why Haussler kept her alive this long.” Goldie spat again, producing more blood. He groaned. “Another tooth half out.”

Kyle held out a hand and helped the big man to his feet. “Hold milk on it. It might heal.”

Goldie let go and stared, mind refusing to believe this smaller bloke had delivered such an ugly beating. “Where did you learn that? We aren’t trained that way.”

“Adrian Mitchel, my mentor.”

A fresh ripple went through the crowd, forcing Cerise to hit them all with another blast. She opened the paper and read the note, not sure what would happen now that Kyle had admitted who he was.

*Angela has agreed to meet you tonight. An Eagle escort has been provided.*

Kyle nodded at her. "In an hour."

Cerise blasted everyone with a powerful memory charm, aware of several descendants bringing up shields again to avoid being hit—she didn't recognize any of them. "Next match!"

The stunned crowd woke from her daze and began cheering as the next slightly confused fighters stepped into the ring.

Kyle noted her special gift. As far as he knew, no one in their camp could manipulate memories. *We need that ability.*

"That was fast. Winner!" Cerise waved at them to clear the body from the ring as the Japanese man collected the wagers and flashed a bloody gaze around. He was missing one eye, but he was alive. *That's a win for us.*

Ray wanted to join Kyle as he stood near Cerise's chair, but he wasn't sure if it would look wrong. Their audience was huge. Five hundred fighters, trackers, and hunters were here. The noise was incredible.

Ray slapped at a determined gnat and watched the next fight without offering Kyle the sympathy he knew the man needed. *Kyle's tough. He'll get through this.*

The tracker next to him made a face. "He killed his brother and won his fight. Why does he need comfort?"

Ray let his orbs glow. “Never without permission!” He slashed with the knife that had been in his hand since they landed.

The tracker fell to his knees as blood leaked from the neat slice in his neck.

“Next match!”

Cheers went up as Ray stalked toward the ring. *I'm ready, boss. If I don't make it out, know I loved my life in your camp.*

Ray stepped into the ring as another descendant did the same.

Ray scanned his huge opponent and grinned widely. *I don't have to hold back on this one.*

Cerise had caught it all. *They really are from Safe Haven. I'm an hour from my goal.*

Kyle and the other Eagles monitoring thoughts for true intentions all frowned. It was clear that Cerise was a huge threat. If she used her charms on the Eagles, Angela would be unprotected for their meeting. When Kyle had said they needed to pick a side, he'd meant Cerise too. No one knew whose side she was on. When she reached Angela, anything could happen.

Kyle met her eye. *Don't make my boss kill you. We need skills like yours.*

Cerise refused to answer as Ray stood pat and took the first hit from his opponent like Kyle had.

Ray immediately fired back, using Neil's kai move to spin around and punch the man in his neck. Then he attacked with his knife, stabbing relentlessly.

Screams for mercy echoed over the crowd that was once again surprised. These actions were neat, smooth, organized. It wasn't their usual rage-fest fights.

Ray retreated as his opponent, a child rapist according to his thoughts, fell to the ground and didn't get up. He grabbed his winnings and dropped them by Cerise's chair. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Kyle collected his gun as Cerise stared. "We pay our own way."

"I believe in that too." Cerise recovered, gesturing. "Get the fires built higher. I want more light here. And get the food going. All this killing is making me hungry."

Kyle was pleased. *Good. They can all have a last meal before they die.*

The crowd cheered as another pair of trackers approached the ring, glaring at each other.

Jade and Hazel viewed the fights, fearful they would have to get in the ring. If someone challenged them, they couldn't refuse or the entire group here might attack them for being cowards.

Lowan was enjoying the bloodbath, but his own rage illness was trying to take control. Miles was dead and they were alone on this island. He eyed the sisters. *Maybe I don't need to wait any longer.*

He moved closer to them. "Ladies?"

The sisters turned toward him.

Lowan shot them both with darts. They dropped to the dirt, unable to call for help.

Lowan began shedding his clothes. “Miles gave them to me.”

Cerise had been aware of their desires. She’d hoped the chaos would hold until they’d achieved their goals. “Take them up the hill. You’re distracting the fighters.”

A few dozen men had started toward them to help Lowan enjoy his prizes.

Kyle refused to allow it even though he read Cerise’s thoughts and agreed that all three of them were corrupt. He fired his Glock three times, then holstered. Lowan fell, hand still on his button.

The approaching men stopped, not sure what was happening.

Kyle shrugged. “They were not approved.”

Cerise sent out a new surge of control to keep them from calling command. “You’ll run me out of energy if you keep doing that.”

Kyle didn’t answer.

Cerise shrugged. “It’s your game now. I’m just one of the many players.”

Kyle rotated to enjoy the next match, wondering if anyone would get into the ring with him now. *I want to do it again. Tonya was right. We are all infected. Putting us down might be the only answer.*

Chapter Twenty-Four  
**Over The Edge**  
Pitcairn Island

1

“**W**hat’s going on?” Kenn and his group had just made it back into the tunnels. After leaving the airstrip, they’d gone out to remove another patrol boat that was getting too close to their rear door. Then they’d ferried a small group of Eagles to the *Adrianna* to help out there. The walk back through the evening fog had been pleasant. That mood had changed as soon as they opened the hatch.

“We can’t get through to Marc.” Ralph saw more camp members inching toward the open hatch. The tunnels were damp and dim, but they were safer than being topside after dark. He stomped toward them, voice lifting over the chatter. “Stay down here!” Being away from Daisey had given him a shorter temper than usual.

Kenn scanned the upset camp members and nervous Eagles as he joined Wade. Instead of sleeping, the entire camp was awake and worried. People were roaming the tunnels, passing rumors and concerns. It was far from the calm camp he’d been expecting.

Kenn caught a whiff of their bathroom setup and rotated, nose wrinkling. *We need to get out of here soon or we'll have another outbreak.*

“We got an emergency message from Ray, but we aren’t allowed to answer him.” Wade handed Kenn the sheet. “Kendle’s up to her old tricks.”

Kenn’s fury rose. *We should have removed that bitch!* “We saw Quinn at the airstrip earlier. He has our updates.”

Neil frowned. “What?”

“Quinn said Angela sent him for an update.”

“She didn’t. In fact, she told Marc not to involve Quinn in any of his plans.”

Kenn’s unease grew. “Where’s the boss?”

Wade didn’t want to answer, but there wasn’t a choice. “She went out an hour ago. She said Marc’s clock stopped.”

“Actually, she screamed it.” Neil didn’t want Wade getting the blame for letting Angela leave. “She took Stanley.”

Kenn rolled his eyes. “We’ll go find her.”

Wade agreed immediately. “She told us not to leave the tunnels, but your team wasn’t here when she said it, so...”

Kenn waved at his group. “Let’s go find out if the boss needs help killing a castaway.”

Camp members muttered and nodded, certain that he and his team could help fix whatever had gone wrong. Kenn sighed as he went up the ladder. *Wish I had as much faith.*

“Shut the hatch.” Kenn took a minute to scan the island with his gift. He wasn’t great at it, but he was able to pinpoint locations now. Scanning wasn’t as simple as looking anyway, but it was full dark now and that made it harder for some reason he didn’t understand yet. “I’ve got heat signatures in three places—airstrip, beach, and main town.” Kenn moved toward the town. “It’s supposed to be Adrian’s group guarding the bridge in shifts, and we saw Quinn at the airstrip. Let’s see who’s in town.”

The team followed Kenn, hoping Angela already had things covered. But they weren’t sure.

Morgan slapped at a determined insect. “Marc changed her plans.”

Kenn made a face. Marc had told them to keep it from Angela. “He knew something was going to go wrong.”

Morgan stayed close as Kenn increased their pace to a jog. “The emergency code said Kendle was the problem. I don’t think Marc can handle her.”

Kenn snorted. “Marc’s byzan. He can handle anyone.”

“I meant because he has feelings for her, but now that you mention it, how do we know she isn’t byzan too?”

Kenn tripped over a thick patch of vines in the darkness. He recovered and increased their pace again to a run. “You had to say it.”

Morgan assumed Kenn had already thought of that. “If she is byzan now, we can’t handle her for sure.”

“The boss will cover it.” Kenn scanned harder. “Everyone call for Angela; get me a location.”

The descendants and normals all began sending out mental shouts as they followed the glowing yellow patch on Kenn’s jacket to the main town.

Angela didn’t answer. Thick silence blanketed the island.

## 2

Marc noticed the silence as he stepped from the jet ski onto the dirty, foggy pontoon bridge. *My clock is gone.*

Calm water lapped against the bridge. It implied everything was fine. *But I know better, don’t I?*

He tensed, stopping as the vibes became dangerous. *No. It isn’t gone. It stopped. My time’s up.*

Marc turned to face Kendle. He hadn’t needed an hour of Ray’s desperate mental calls to know who the threat was, but he hadn’t understood what it meant until now. *She’s going to kill me. I never would have thought she’d consider this, let alone follow through.*

Kendle lifted the gun. “You have two choices here, Marc.”

Kendle’s wet hair clung to her face as she stared at him, finally revealing her true feelings. Marc

wanted to slap it back into place. He stepped toward her, eyes blazing. “Shoot me. Go on. Angela will skin you alive.”

Kendle smiled cruelly. “She’ll be dead shortly.”

Marc stopped as fear entered his heart. “What have you done?”

“Just a trim.” Kendle patted her radio. “But if I don’t call in the next ten minutes, she’ll die.”

Marc realized she had a partner in crime. He needed to determine the setup before he reacted. “What do you want?”

“You. It’s always you, Marc. We were meant to be together.”

Marc saw the madness creeping in. “You’ve gone over the edge.”

Kendle snorted. “Yeah, a year ago.” She lowered the gun, then holstered. “Actually, I finally feel sane for the first time since the war.” Light glinted off Marc’s ring as his hand inched toward his weapon, drawing her attention. Fury rushed from her. “You married her. How could you do that to me?!”

Marc thought faster. “Don’t do this, Kendle. Call it off and we’ll forget about it.”

Kendle’s face crunched up, illuminating her scars in the foggy glow from his belt light. “I never will.”

Footsteps drew their attention. A flashlight bounced toward them.

Sadie hurried across the bridge, missing the tension. “Thank God! I can’t find anyone. Adrian’s

missing. So are Quinn and Joey, and the Eagles won't let me into the tunnels to talk to Angela."

"She isn't there." Kendle motioned toward the dark island. "She's walking into her destiny."

Sadie rubbed her face and yawned, still missing the vibes. "What does that mean?"

Marc swallowed his panic. "You said I have two choices. Does one of them save her?"

Kendle nodded. "Take over the camp, Marc. Install me as co-leader. Banish that bitch. We'll stay here and just live. None of us have to go back and die for her plan."

Marc controlled his fury. "And the second choice?"

"Ascend with me." Kendle's eyes lit up. "We'll rule Earth from the Weigh Station while we search for the Creator. He can reset things and give me back my life." She tried not to sob. "And Luke."

"What happens if I say no?"

Kendle's eyes glittered dangerously. "Then she dies, you die, I die, and so does your camp."

Sadie finally caught on. She tensed, mouth dropping open. "Are you threatening him?"

"Shut up!"

"You're calling the UN?" Sadie pointed angrily. "You have no idea what you're doing!"

Marc glared. "Yes, she does. She's squeezing me to get what she wants. She doesn't think I'll squeeze back."

"Need!" Kendle's voice shook. "What I need. I can't live without Luke and you."

Marc only saw one solution. He didn't want to take it. "Please don't do this." He sent out a wave of need, sorry he'd ever allowed her to join them. "We can go away together."

Kendle's heart thumped. "You don't mean it."

"I do."

"Just to save her!"

"It's also to save you." Marc reached out. "Let me help you, baby."

Kendle shuddered as Marc's hand ran up her arm, tracing her scars. "You can't help me. No one can."

Marc opened his arms. "Let me try."

Kendle allowed him to embrace her, feeling the wind, the heat from his body, and the fear he was hiding. "You only have a few minutes left." She hugged him tightly. "Please make the right choice."

Sadie backed away, feeling chaos about to happen. *I need to go find Angela.*

Marc slowly lowered his head, lips pressing against Kendle's for a brief instant of pain. *I'm sorry. I never wanted it to come to this, but you've given me no other choice now.*

Kendle felt it coming and tried to pull away.

Marc held her tightly and stepped off the bridge; the water swallowed them both.

Kendle fired spells in panic as Marc's hand closed around her throat. She screamed for Quinn to fire, but the water muffled her in every way.

Sadie inched over to watch, horrified. *He's drowning her! Should I help? I know she's bad, but... He's drowning her!*

Marc stared into Kendle's eyes as he held her under the water and squeezed.

Bubbles rose to the surface in a furious spiral.

Marc didn't have to hold his breath. His demon did it for him. *I'm a monster now. Angela was right—I don't want to be this way.*

Kendle struggled to hold on, to think, to get through his mental shield, but his hand only squeezed tighter. *He's killing me!*

Kendle's demon fled, abandoning her. She went limp as her air ran out. Tears burst from her eyes in red sprays.

Marc tightened his grip again and mourned his fading humanity.

Sadie was there to offer Marc a hand as he surfaced. She'd considered running, but she didn't want to trigger his instinct to chase her.

Marc drew in air, but he didn't leave the water. He could feel Kendle trying to hang on. He held her under the salt water until urine and bits of feces floated up around his legs, proving she was gone.

Marc finally let go of her. *I may never recover.*

Sadie retreated as Marc hefted himself from the water and stood. His eyes landed on her and lit up red again.

Sadie turned to run.

Marc snagged her arm and jerked her backward. His hand went around her throat. “Where are they?!”

“I don’t know!” Sadie sucked in air, not struggling. “I woke and everyone was gone!”

Marc wanted to finish her off too. He was sick of threats from people who were supposed to be on their side, but he was also heartsick at what he’d done.

Sadie felt his pain. Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Marc let go of his grip on her throat, but not her arm. “Tell me everything you know, everything you heard, saw.”

Sadie started babbling. “I didn’t see anything! I don’t know anything! All I heard was...” Her eyes widened. “She said she had the perfect carrot for his stick.” Sadie groaned, heart thudding against her chest. “They thought I was sleeping.”

Marc dug in her mind for the memory.

*Adrian felt Conner watching him and fought not to look. I miss that kid.*

*Kendle nodded. “Me too. But he’s a lot different than you.”*

*Adrian grunted. “Good.”*

*Kendle shrugged. “Right now, sure. Later? Who knows? We may need another you.”*

*Adrian stilled, mind spinning back up with the plots and schemes he’d paused and tried to forget about. “That’s almost possible, but I’d have to have*

*an extraordinary reason to become that hard, selfish bastard again.”*

*Kendle was encouraged. “If I come up with something, should I let you know?”*

*Adrian wanted to tell her no, that he could tolerate three years of this to get a few legal, ethical weeks or months with Angie later. But I can’t. He sighed. “Yes. But it can’t work if any of us die, so don’t go there or I’m out.”*

*Time slowed as Kendle turned to look at him. “Not even if it’s Marc?”*

*Adrian frowned at her, eyes narrowing against the sun and the sudden tension. “You wouldn’t do that.”*

*Kendle stared back, not hiding anything. “What if we ascended?”*

*Adrian opened his mouth to tell her to go away before she got them both killed.*

*Adrian returned to watching Safe Haven. “If you make that plan, and I’m not saying you should, be incredibly detailed. Don’t miss a single tiny thing. She won’t forgive and forget even once more. She’ll give Marc the order and both our heads will be on pikes.”*

*Either way, my torment will end. Kendle let out a satisfied sigh as time picked back up. “The future just shifted again. Did you feel it?”*

*Adrian nodded. He’d also felt it slow. I just chose a different path. Now we’ll all pay for it. “Get out of my sight for a while. I hate your guts right now.”*

*Kendle understood. She got up and walked toward the trees, not offended. She couldn't resist a parting blow, however. "It didn't take much to turn you."*

*Adrian felt the evil inside stir. He grunted, letting it wake this time. "It never does. I'm a Mitchel."*

Marc let go of Sadie and stormed toward the beach, leaving Kendle's body in the water and Sadie on her knees, crying gratefully that he hadn't killed her too. *It's always Adrian. It's always been Adrian. And this is the last time we'll ever go through it. I'll see to that right now.*

Marc sealed the new hole in his heart by filling it with anger and vengeance. *I'm coming for you and I won't be stopped.*

### 3

"Stop. Don't move."

Angela slowly woke, groaning. Her hand went to her head and came away red. She stared at the tacky stain in confusion. "What happened?"

Stanley put a hand on her arm to keep her from rising. "You got shot. I dragged you over here and put on a bandage."

Angela peered at the thin, bare-chested male. "Shot?"

Stanley looked over the thick fallen tree where they were taking cover. “Someone shoots every time I try to go for help. We’re trapped.”

Angela pointed. “You have a radio.”

Stanley frowned. “We can’t make calls.”

“Says who?”

“You. It will give us away.”

Angela struggled to clear her mind of the cobwebs and fuzz. “Do you have water?”

Stanley shook his head. “We didn’t bring a canteen. My kit was low and you didn’t bring yours. I used my shirt for your leg.”

Angela peered through the growing darkness. “I was shot?”

Stanley slid his hand to her cheek. “Are you okay? Did I give you too much painkiller?”

Angela smiled. “I get it. That’s why it doesn’t hurt.”

Stanley wasn’t sure why she was acting strange. “We’re in trouble here, boss. We need help.”

She peered through the fog. “Did you say someone shot me?”

Stanley didn’t know what to do. He stayed close to her and hoped someone smarter showed up soon.

“You are smart. You took care of me.” She grinned. “Hey! I read your mind. That’s cool!”

Stanley began to understand she wasn’t well. “We need to get you back to camp.”

“It’s dark.” Angela rubbed her arms, shivering. “And cold.”

Stanley gave her an apologetic look. “I don’t have a jacket with me or I’d give it to you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Angela brushed a spider from her leg, eyeing the bandage. “Am I still bleeding?”

“I think so, but the bullet went straight through.” Stanley wasn’t sure what to do. “Can you call for Marc?”

“Who?”

*Bang!* Wood chips flew over both of them as another bullet hit the tree trunk by her shoulder.

Stanley tugged her down lower.

“I hear someone calling for me. In my mind. Should I answer them?”

Stanley hesitated. “It might be whoever’s shooting at us, trying to trick you.”

“You don’t hear them?”

Stanley shook his head. “I don’t hear anything but bugs.” He offered her a hand. “Maybe we can sneak through the trees now that it’s dark.”

Angela tried to stand. “Let’s go to your camp. I’m ready.” She fell backward and slumped against the log.

Stanley checked to be sure she was covered by the tree. Then he reluctantly took the gun from his holster. “I’ll protect you, boss. Even if it means my life.”

Adrian patted the boy's leg. "It's one of ours." He'd caught the worried thoughts too.

Joey held tight to Adrian's back, not enjoying the ride like he usually did. "Can we go to the bunker and play soon?"

"Maybe." Adrian stopped near the collapsed barn, scanning. He was getting signatures, but none of them were Kendle. They hadn't made any repairs to the town in anticipation of this battle. Adrian assumed that would change after they won. *I hope I'm here to watch it grow into the glorious city it was meant to be.*

Charlie came from the tree line and spotted Adrian. Relief let him smile and greet the man like a friend. "Hi! I was hoping you'd be up here. I went to the bunkers first, but they were empty. I need to talk to Tracy. Will you pass a message for me?"

Adrian stared in confusion. "What?"

"I walked Ducie with the Eagles and then came back, hoping Tracy had changed her mind, but mom said to give her more time." Charlie gestured toward the bunkers. "I gave her two full weeks, but enough is enough. I want to know what she's doing, and that she's okay."

Adrian realized Marc hadn't handled it. "Your dad was supposed to cover this."

Charlie paused near them. "Cover what?"

Adrian shook his head in annoyance. "Figures." He drew in a breath and braced for a tirade. "Tracy isn't with us. She hasn't been."

“What are you talking about? She said she was going to stay with you, and I told you what to do.”

“Your dad said he had it covered, Charlie. I haven’t seen Tracy.”

Charlie stared with bloodshot eyes. “What?”

Adrian realized the teenager did love Tracy. *I thought it was just the sex and then duty.*

Charlie snorted harshly. “That’s what everyone thinks. Where is she?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her.”

Fear pushed into Charlie’s mind. “Since when?”

“Since she refused to marry you.”

Charlie was horrified. “That was weeks ago!”

Adrian let Joey down, hoping this didn’t get any uglier. “I assumed she was with you guys.”

“She’s gone!” Charlie scanned the island and didn’t find her. He opened his mental door to use their personal connection.

“Don’t. You’ll give us away and blow your dad’s plan.”

Charlie kicked at a pile of debris that hadn’t been removed. Charred sticks smacked into Adrian’s leg. “She’s been taken! I have to negotiate for her release!”

“Don’t. Let your dad handle it.”

Charlie ignored him. He shoved energy into that special door.

Adrian brought up his shield around Charlie, hoping that would hold it in.

Charlie glared. “Let me go.”

“I can’t. You’re going to get us all killed.”

“I don’t care!” Charlie broke. “She’s out there alone! Or she was taken!”

“You don’t know that.”

“Then where is she?!”

“I don’t know. We’ll talk to your dad as soon as he gets back.”

“Let me go! I have to find her!”

Adrian kept his shield around the frantic teen, not sure what to do now.

Joey smiled at them. “Maybe he needs a nap.”

“Shut up you little shit!” Charlie beat against the shield. “Let me out!”

Adrian lowered the shield and immediately fired his strongest sleep spell.

Charlie dropped to the ground, body and mind relaxing.

Marc came running through the fog behind them.

Joey smiled again as he spotted the man.

Marc saw Charlie on the ground and ran faster. “I’ll kill you!”

Adrian saw Marc’s bright red eyes and understood mortal danger was running his way. Adrian didn’t have time to explain. All he could do was bring up his shield and try to hold it as Marc’s fury surrounded him.

Joey ran by, slapping Marc on the arm. “Stop it!”

Marc didn’t notice. He and his demon merged, pressing against Adrian’s shield. Marc’s water-

wrinkled hand came up... It punched through the shield.

Adrian strained, shocked. *No one gets through!*

Marc's other hand came through. He reached for Adrian's neck.

Adrian staggered, shield falling.

Marc grabbed for his gun. "Head shot this time."

*Bang!*

The loud crack of a rifle nearby spun Marc around, hand pausing. "Who's shooting?"

Adrian brought his shield back up as a new wave of terror entered his heart. "I had Angela on my grid. Now she's gone."

"This is all your fault!"

"I don't even know what's happening!"

Marc heard voices. A second later, Adrian's radio lit up.

"I shot Angela. She's lying on the airstrip. You guys should all come help her."

Adrian's mouth dropped open. "That's Quinn!"

Marc realized his mistake too late. He took off toward the airstrip.

Kenn's group came through the jungle and saw Marc running toward the cliff.

"Wait! It's a trap!"

Marc knew, but it didn't matter. *She's hurt!*  
"And she's pregnant!"

"Damn." Kenn tried to keep up with Marc, but he lost him in the fog now layering the island. "Wait up!"

The rest of the team joined the run through the jungle, hoping fate was kinder to the couple this time.

Adrian stayed with Charlie, protecting the sleeping boy. He wanted to go with Marc, but in his current state, Marc couldn't be trusted to do anything but lash out at anyone in his path. If Angela died, Marc might flip out and kill them all.

"He might do that even if she lives." Adrian had caught Marc's torment and the recent memories that were causing it. "I can't believe Kendle's gone and he did it."

Adrian looked around, realizing someone else was missing. "Where's Joey?"

Even the bugs went quiet this time.

## 5

"He's coming! He's coming!" Joey ran to the shed and darted inside the open door. He slammed it shut, ignoring the woman crouched in the rear of the shed. "He's almost here!"

Quinn was ready. "Did you tag him?"

Joey nodded. "He has a green arm. The Eagles patches are yellow. Look for green." Joey's orders for this battle were long gone. He hadn't cared that Angela had told him to help the other kids if the island was overrun. He and Quinn had bonded hard and fast while he lived with them.

In the other corner, Francesca tensed but remained quiet like Quinn had told her to do. She was his spotter if he needed it.

Quinn motioned at the child. "You should go."

Joey crouched. "It's not safe out there."

"It might not be safe in here either, kid. After I kill him, they'll know where I am."

Joey stayed where he was.

Quinn shrugged. "Where's Kendle? Is she with him? She didn't call on time."

"I think he killed her."

Quinn's fury took over his mind. *Kendle!*

There was no answer.

Francesca was suddenly terrified. *If Marc killed Kendle, who he loves, I'm a dead woman as soon as he sees me here and understands Quinn and Kendle hid me.* Francesca's clean hair and clean clothes were more proof that she'd had help.

Joey pointed toward the jungle. "Here they come!"

Francesca ran for the door and jerked it open. "I'm sorry! Don't kill me!"

She ran out and went toward the group she could hear pounding closer. "Don't shoot!"

"Quitter." Quinn inhaled and aimed at the shadows emerging from the fog. "They won't get a happily ever after, Kendle. I promise."

Joey put his fingers in his ears, eager for this to be over. *Adrian and Angela will be my parents as soon as Marc dies.*

Quinn saw a pale green flash and narrowed in. He pulled the trigger lovingly.

*Bang!*

The body fell to the dirt, creating fresh panic in the Eagles who didn't know where the shot had come from.

“Get down!”

“Spread out!”

“Man down!”

“Find the blind!”

“He shot Marc!”

“Direct hit!” Quinn danced in a circle in the shadowy shed. “I got him with one shot. Marc's dead!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

# You've Helped Enough

1

**K**enn rolled the body over, drawing energy to try healing even though he knew it had been a kill shot.

Blood poured from the hole in the thin woman's head. It ran through her blonde hair and puddled in the dirt.

Kenn stared. *Woman?*

"That's not Marc." Chad was also stunned. "Who is that?"

*Bang!* A slug hit the ground near Kenn's boot.

"Where did it come from?" Kenn crouched over the body, refusing to feel anything yet. Getting rid of their sniper had to come first. "Do you see anything?"

"No." Chad swept the darkness around the airstrip. The jungle was alive with noisy bugs and nocturnal animals in search of a meal. No one wanted to be out here right now. "But if it were me, I'd get away from all the bugs and animals. I'd want a roof and walls."

There was only one structure up here. Everyone narrowed in on the shed.

“I saw a shadow.” Kenn pointed. “Surround and break it down?”

Morgan shook his head. “Quinn’s too good with that rifle.”

“What if he can’t shoot?” Chad gestured, hoping they could all see it. “You guys can bring up a layer of shields around it.”

Kenn nodded. “We need to get closer.”

Chad dropped to his knees and began to scoot through the thin foliage lining the airstrip.

*Bang!* The bullet plunged into the ground near his head.

Chad flinched and rolled, not stopping until he felt the cover of the weeds.

Kenn and the others scattered, leaving the bleeding body.

“I see someone.” Morgan pointed, keeping his hand low to avoid drawing fire.

Chad frowned. “It looks like...Marc.” He scanned the body and then the man running furiously through the fog toward the shed. “How’s that possible?”

“Don’t know; don’t care.” Morgan brought up his shield and got to his feet. “Let’s go help.”

Everyone was relieved to discover that it was Marc, but they were also concerned. The waves of fury and madness were impossible to miss.

“I say we stay here and let him handle it.”

Kenn shook his head at Chad. “That’s not who we are. Let’s go.” He followed Morgan, hoping it

was the right call. If Marc had snapped, no one would be able to handle him.

“Hey!” Stanley waved one of his socks, hoping Kenn saw it. “I need help over here!”

“That’s Stanley!”

“Where’s the boss?”

*Bang!*

The sock flew from Stanley’s hand and stuck to the tree behind him.

Stanley and the others dropped again.

Marc kept going, finally narrowing the sniper’s location by the rifle flash. He strengthened his shield as Quinn opened fire, unloading bullet after bullet.

Quinn panicked as he recognized Marc. “I killed you!”

He missed the two last shots and then Marc was at the door, kicking it down, forcing it open, rushing in with all the fury in his heart.

Kenn turned away as Quinn’s screams started. He went to help Stanley.

The other Eagles also stayed back, even when smoke began rolling from the shed.

A small shadow darted out. The child ran toward Stanley.

Chad lowered his gun. “It’s Joey.”

The Eagles scanned again, realizing there were other people around the edge of the airstrip.

“Is that Francesca hiding in the weeds?”

Kenn nodded. “Arrest her—Marc’s orders.”

Chad moved that way.

Francesca saw him coming. She ran into the jungle.

“Stop!” Chad followed, furious. “I’m not the one you have to worry about. Come back here!”

“Leave me alone!” Francesca tripped, sliding toward the alligators trying to sleep through all the noise.

Chad slid to a halt, paling at the fresh screams and grunts. “Damn. I told her to stop.”

The disgusted man returned to the smoky airstrip, shaking his head at Kenn. “She didn’t make it.”

Kenn didn’t care. “Angela’s over here. She’s been shot.”

Eagles hurried that way with their kits.

Kenn handed Stanley a shirt from his kit, nodding to the man who was covered in small red welts from the bugs and spiders. “Great job, Eagle.”

Stanley donned it gratefully, fighting the need to itch his skin until it shredded under his fingernails. “I’m not really an Eagle.”

“You are now.” Morgan injected antibiotics into Angela’s thigh, glad the wound wasn’t worse. “She’ll live. It’s a flesh wound. He used her to make a honey pot.”

Quinn let out a last ugly shriek and then fell silent. Flames rolled from the shed.

Marc stepped out, covered in blood and satisfaction. He waved off the men who would have tried to extinguish the fire. “Let it burn to the ground.”

Chad took a post nearby to make sure it didn't spread. He doubted it would. The fog was damp and thickening, but he also didn't want to follow Marc while he was upset.

"Who's on the ground?" Stanley had been sure Marc was dead. "I saw him get hit."

"We all did, but it wasn't him." Chad motioned. "Whoever it is, they have fluorescent smears from the 4 o'clock flowers over there. I'd guess they were hiding in them."

Joey approached them, blocking his thoughts and his disappointment at how things had turned out. "Is she okay?"

Marc knelt by Angela and got ready to heal her. "She will be."

"Good." Joey slid closer, hand in his pocket.

Marc checked her injury and tried to calm down. "It's not bad."

Stanley opened his mouth to tell Marc she hadn't remembered anything when she woke the first time. He saw Joey's hand come out; metal glinted in the light of the fire.

"No!" Stanley dove in front of Marc.

The knife slid into his side, stealing his breath.

Marc grabbed the child. "Stop!"

Joey held on, stabbing Marc in the arm, the shoulder, his hip. "Die! Die!"

The Eagles tried to help, but Joey brought a shield up around him and Marc.

"His gifts popped!"

Marc forced his own shield up and expanded it, breaking Joey's hold.

"No!" Magic flew through the air, slamming into trees and the ground as the furious child gave it everything he had.

Marc blasted the boy with a sleep spell that didn't work.

Joey stabbed again, aiming for Marc's throat.

Marc swung them around, nearing the cliff edge.

Joey stabbed yet again, little eyes blazing red. "My dad wants you in Hell!"

Soul screaming at the unfairness of his life, Marc tossed the boy off the cliff. "I banish you to Hell in place of your father!"

Joey's body collapsed into bones as he fell; they shattered against the rocks below and crumbled into dust.

Marc stood there, looking down. *I killed a kid. I'm evil.*

Kenn slowly approached the dangerous byzan male. He didn't speak yet, but he drew in a breath and put a hand on Marc's bloody shoulder.

Marc's heart thudded. *I could end it all right now. No more pain, no more survival actions that crush my soul. All I have to do is take two steps.*

His foot inched forward.

"Will you be my best man?"

Marc was jarred out of his horror. "What?"

Kenn's grip tightened briefly. "I need a best man for my wedding. I picked you."

Marc snorted out bitterness and surprise. “Why?!”

“Because I need you there. We all need you.”

“For what? To kill those you can’t?”

“Yes.” They’d all known Joey was like his father, but none of them could remove the little boy.

Marc hated fate. He hated his life and all of the choices that had brought him to this moment. He also began to calm. His eyes faded to miserable blue. “I’ll carry the stain forever.”

Kenn nodded. “I know what that’s like.”

Marc shuddered. “How do you live with yourself?”

Kenn gave a small, unhappy smile. “I’m a selfish bastard. I refuse to think about the wrongs now. It gets me through most of the time.”

“And when it doesn’t?”

Kenn gripped Marc’s shoulder again. “I lean on the Eagles, Tonya, Angela, or anyone else I need to. I’ve been told that’s what we’re all here for—to help each other survive.”

Marc’s sorrow sprang out, bringing tears to his eyes. “I didn’t want to do it—any of it.”

Kenn tugged. “I know. Come here, Marine. Lean on your teammate. God knows we’ve leaned on you enough.”

Marc let Kenn hold him while he sobbed. *I killed them both. This pain will never leave me now.*

More steps echoed through the darkness. Eagles turned to confront them.

“It’s just us.” Brittani hurried forward, carrying a folded stretcher.

Behind her, Trinity and Jayda were carrying another stretcher and several medical bags.

“Wade and Neil said you need this stuff.” Brittani glanced at Angela’s bloody form, Stanley’s gasping face as Morgan stopped the bleeding, then the body on the airstrip. “Is Angela okay?”

Chad took the stretcher from her and began unfolding it. “Marc and Morgan said she’ll be fine.”

Brittani spotted Marc and Kenn. She frowned. “What’s going on there?”

No one answered.

Brittani pulled it from their thoughts. “That’s awful.”

Everyone nodded.

Trinity joined them, dropping the bags. She grimaced at the sights and smells. The flashlights were showing more than she wanted to see. “I’ll ask Marc if he needs anything.”

Chad started to tell her it wasn’t a good idea, then decided she should know that. He unfolded the sheet they’d brought for the stretcher while the Eagles lifted Stanley onto it.

Morgan lifted Angela carefully onto the other stretcher; the Eagles stood guard and watched the shed burn. They also kept track of Marc and Kenn, not sure what would happen next.

Brittani hated to be the one to say it, but there wasn’t a choice. “We have other problems to handle.”

Morgan shrugged, arranging Angela's arms so they could fasten the straps. "Give him a few more minutes."

Trinity stopped a few feet away from Marc and Kenn, glad to be out of the tunnels but unhappy that it was dark, foggy, and crowded up here. She was pissed that Neil hadn't let her come alone. He'd insisted that they needed Brittani. *Don't know what for. She didn't do anything but carry a load, same as me.*

Kenn glared at her over Marc's shaking, bloody shoulder. "Get me a medic kit."

Trinity held up the one she'd brought.

Kenn snatched it from her and led Marc toward the medics. "Come on. Let's get you patched up."

Trinity stayed there, glaring and feeling spiteful. *Too bad Kenn didn't get shot.*

Trinity missed the stiffening shoulders and disapproving glowers. She stared over the cliff, seeing nothing through the darkness. *I don't understand why everyone's upset. Angela's alive and so is Marc. The losses were insignificant.*

Trinity turned to rejoin the group. Her foot slipped in the loose, bloody gravel. She fell toward the edge as a shout of panic ripped from her lips. "Help!"

Brittani flew toward the cliff with the others and got there first. She dropped and slid the last few feet, arms outstretched to catch Trinity as she fell.

Trinity grabbed her hand. "Don't let go! Don't let go!"

Brittani pulled. Eagles grabbed arms and even hair to help, annoyed with the woman.

Trinity crawled up the side as they pulled, humiliation spreading.

Brittani yanked hard. She helped Trinity stand, relieved. She waited for the magic words while she caught her breath.

Trinity couldn't take it. Terror and rage exploded in her brain, preventing rational thought. She shoved Brittani toward the edge, no longer caring who saw her.

Brittani ducked and spun.

Chad pushed Trinity as hard as he could, sending her over the edge. Her scream echoed for a long second before it cut off abruptly.

Brittani stared at Chad.

Chad shrugged. "She slipped. It happens when you're useless."

Brittani wasn't sure if she was okay with it even though the woman had tried to kill her.

Chad gently took her arm and led her away toward the shocked group watching them. "It was faster than the hanging she would have gotten for attempted murder."

Brittani was forced to accept that. She pulled away and walked next to Kenn. She didn't talk to any of them.

Trinity's fast death snapped Marc back into reality. He scrubbed his face with his wet shirt, making his mind shove the ugliness into his crypt. *Now I know how Angie feels.*

Kenn nodded. “But you’re alive and so is she. Hold onto that.”

Marc walked beside the gurney, trying to focus. “We need to get ready. The UN troops are on the way here. In three hours, this island will be crawling with the enemy, sooner than we planned.”

Kenn thought of Trinity, Joey, and Francesca. “We don’t need outside help. We’ve got it covered right here.”

Morgan swept the scene, and then the burning shed. The fog was already killing the flames and there wasn’t any wind. “Gather it all and head back.” He gestured. “I want that body too.”

Eagles nodded, going to collect the woman who’d died in place of Marc. Everyone wanted to know if she’d been a good guy or a killer caught by accident.

“Someone go get Adrian and Sadie.” Marc kept walking, forcing his mind to handle things instead of breaking down again. “They’re with Charlie. I want all of them in the tunnels so they can’t be used against us.”

“I’ll do it.” Brittani took off running toward the town before anyone could protest.

Chad stared after her in concern.

Morgan gestured. “Eagle escort for the boss’s son.”

Chad took off. “Wait up, Britt.”

Stanley tried not to cry as the pain in his side increased from the moving gurney. “I don’t understand. What made Joey do that?”

“His father.” Marc hoped speaking about it might help him let it go. *Or at least let me block it after this, like Kenn said.* “Angela thought Joel would be trapped in hell. It was a big mistake, but she didn’t know how else to defeat him because he was more powerful than her. We never considered Joey a real threat. His orders were to help the other kids here if things went wrong. That’s what all of their envelopes say. None of them are supposed to fight this time unless we lose, and then they’re going to stay together and run for their lives.”

Marc made himself keep talking. “A couple of weeks ago, we began to suspect Kendle made a deal with him. We assumed Joel wanted Angela in hell to torture. I think Joel was supposed to refuse our souls and send us to the Weigh Station together.”

Stanley struggled to keep up. “What happened two weeks ago?”

“Angela figured out her mistake when Joey tricked her. She realized his father had done the same and Joel held all the power of hell. And she knew who he’d target first—her biggest enemy. She needed to find a replacement for him, but all the descendants we have are special, good. They don’t deserve it.” Marc wiped blood from Angela’s arm as they walked. “I think she decided to sacrifice herself. That’s why she went out.”

“But I stopped her from dying.”

“And I’m grateful, Stanley. You were the wildcard this time.” Marc fell silent, mind going to

the woman whose body was feeding the fish in their small bay.

Kenn had questions. “How did Quinn plan this without anyone knowing?”

“Invisible, like the kid, though we knew he would pop at some point because of who his father was.” Morgan shrugged. “That’s what I’m assuming anyway.”

“That’s what bothered us about the conversations we heard!”

Morgan nodded. “Quinn was planning the murders even then.”

Marc shook his head when others would have asked more questions. “Later. We need to get back to the tunnels and prepare.” He reluctantly switched on his radio.

“We know where they are!”

“Safe Haven surfaced!”

“Clear this channel for orders!”

Marc turned it off, shaking his head. “Pass out the extra mags.” They’d been hoping the UN troops would spend all night on Henderson, fighting and killing each other. The cut would have helped them with the coming battle.

“What about our ships?” Stanley held in a groan. “I can walk. You guys can go help them.”

“It’s covered.” Marc’s curt tone stopped the conversation. No one spoke again until they reached the tunnels.

Wade opened the hatch and held it as their injured people were brought down.

Eagles and camp members crowded around them, angry that Angela had been hurt again.

“What happened?”

“Is she okay?”

“Who shot her?”

“Make room!” Morgan wasn’t in any mood to answer their questions. “Get to your spots!”

Marc carried Angela. He held her while a clean stretcher was set up, then he got her on it, wishing she would wake up and take over so he could be alone in his head until the fight started.

Cate and Cody ran over to him. Cate wrapped her arms around Marc’s waist. “Thank you!”

Marc returned Cate’s hug, smearing her with drying blood from his hands. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it.”

Cate hugged him tighter. “It’s okay. Joey’s sorry too.”

Marc tensed. “When did you talk to him?”

“A few minutes ago. We’re still friends. He said he’s gonna watch over me now.”

“That’s more bad news.”

Cate shook her head, smiling. “He was tired of being alone with no one to love him. He asked me to forgive him. I did. We’ll always be friends now.”

Marc remembered what Angela had told him about the first king’s desire. “We need to find a way

to get people to love him down there so he doesn't take his father's place in the hatred too."

Cate let go. "I'll help him. He's my bestest friend."

Marc stored that information for later. There wasn't time to go over it right now. He gestured. "We need her awake. See what you can do."

Morgan came over with his bag.

Wade frowned at the sight of Brittani and Chad bringing Charlie's body down. Adrian and Sadie were in the rear of that group.

Marc waved. "Let them in and then seal it all up. I want tripled guards at each entrance. Get it all set up like we planned. This island is about to get crowded. I don't want a single combatant down here."

Sadie smiled at the people who glared. She was thrilled to be here where it was safer. She didn't care that they were unhappy about it. She'd found Adrian and Charlie in the town and stayed with them, terrified that Marc would come back and kill her.

She sank down in the corner next to Panaji and leaned her head against the cool dirt wall.

Panaji didn't hate her like the others. *I think she's beautiful.*

Sadie blushed, grinning. "Right back at ya."

Adrian came down the ladder and went to Marc.

Marc nodded toward Morgan. "Help him and be quiet. I don't want to hear your voice at all."

Adrian did, locking down on his questions and thoughts.

Morgan glanced at Harry. “You good there?”

Harry sighed, opening sutures. “I’m good. Stanley isn’t. He’s losing a lot of blood. That kid might have nicked an artery.”

People stared in surprise.

Harry frowned, wiping away blood to view the hole. “What?”

Morgan grinned at him. *How does it feel to be one of us?*

Harry realized he’d read their thoughts about what had happened. He brightened. “Well, let’s see if I can really heal them now.”

Magic flowed through the tunnels, bringing peace and excitement in equal measures. Another descendant had joined their ranks in time for the fight. The tunnels were stocked with supplies and food, and the hatches were welded shut except for the three they’d chosen to use. Those hatches would now be sealed while they waited for the enemy to arrive.

Kenn waved away a gnat, hating the dirt under his feet. *If we lose, we’ll already be in the ground. No need to dig graves.* “What happened to Charlie?”

“Sleep spell.” Morgan retreated as the boy twitched. “It’s wearing off. Move back; give him room.”

Charlie groaned as he woke. He struggled, not sure where he was.

“Be still.” Brittani had put him on the floor by Angela’s stretcher. She glared at Chad.

Chad shut his mouth on the question.

“I’m fine.” She went to the corner where she’d spent most of the last few days.

Chad shrugged. “Just trying to help.”

“You’ve helped enough!”

Camp members wanted to know what had happened there too, but her curt words prevented it.

The descendants scanned thoughts to find out everything that had happened.

Marc glared around the room. “We don’t have time for any more drama.”

“Then tell us what happened.” Ralph wasn’t scared of Marc. “Angela would update us.”

Marc sighed, misery coming into his tone. “We lost people—Francesca, Quinn, Joey, Trinity...and Kendle.” Marc refused to say more or think about it.

Ralph wasn’t happy. “Why didn’t Angela or Cate tell anyone Joey charmed her?”

Morgan shrugged. “I think she chose to use it to save Marc’s life.”

“Kendle’s dead? And Joey?” Adrian was shocked and crushed. *I knew the kid was bad inside. He blasted me with his emotions whenever he could so I couldn’t make a plan to remove him. And I still came to love him.* Pain sank into his heart. *She said she would make sure I suffered.*

“And she has. Awesome.” Charlie was elated by all of it. He smiled tiredly at his dad. “Now Kendle

can't come between you guys anymore. Good work."

Marc didn't answer.

Charlie remembered why he'd been topside and frowned. "Tracy's a prisoner! You have to call them and negotiate for her return."

Kenn glowered at the teenager. "And who do you suggest we offer in that trade? Your mom?"

"Of course not!"

"Then who?"

Charlie struggled to find an answer, but he couldn't think of anyone else in Safe Haven they needed to get rid of now that Kendle was gone. "Uh... Adrian!"

Marc forced himself to handle one last personal drama. "Tracy left the island. She made me promise no one would be allowed to hunt her down, including you."

"She's pregnant! She can't be alone!"

Marc was out of patience. The truth flew from his mouth. "This is the line of good and bad, Charlie. Are you a grieving father or a dangerous stalker who can't let her go?"

Charlie didn't want to be like Kenn. It was one of his biggest fears because of how he'd been raised. "Do you promise she's okay?"

"I do."

"Is she still pregnant?"

"I have no idea."

Charlie tried hard to give the right answer. “I’ll leave her alone. But will I ever see her again? Or the baby?”

Marc sighed. “That has not been revealed. Now get your head on straight or you won’t survive to find out. Hundreds of killers are headed our way. Be glad she’s not here. If this goes bad, she might be the only survivor from our camp.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

# I Lied

Henderson Island

1

**“I** shot Angela. She’s lying on the airstrip. You guys should all come help her.”

Kyle and the other Eagles tensed, quieting, while the rest of the fighters and trackers went crazy. The radio call had been caught by most of them. *I guess turning off our radios didn’t matter. It would have helped to know Quinn was a traitor.* Kyle switched his radio on and moved closer to Cerise, hoping for an update, but the channel was flooded with replies.

“We know where they are!”

“Safe Haven surfaced!”

“We’re on the way!”

“Kill her now!”

“Clear this channel for orders!”

“Get to the transports!”

“Fire on Pitcairn, Miles! Fire!”

The radios slowly cleared as everyone waited for the captain of the submarine to acknowledge Haussler's order.

Cerise took the opportunity and keyed her radio. "Miles, blow up the flagship."

Trackers and hunters turned toward her in shock, but only a couple of them thought to challenge her.

Eagles quickly handled those few with knives and fast gunshots.

"Miles is a little busy being dead, but I'd be happy to follow your orders." Greg's smiling voice came through their radios loud and clear. "One torpedo, coming up."

"Traitor! Kill the traitor!" Haussler's voice was panicked; it sounded like he was running. "Kill her now!"

Cerise tried to use her charms, but she was knackered. The thin waves of power were no match for hundreds of very awake, very angry men and women. They rushed toward her, drawing weapons and gathering power.

The Eagles brought up shields over her and themselves, not fighting back yet. Everyone flashed back to the naval station as the crowd began fighting each other to reach the target.

Kyle put a hand on Cerise's tense shoulder. "How many of them do you want to save?"

Cerise shook him off. "That's not my call."

"My boss said it is. Decide now—do they all die?"

Cerise shut her eyes so she couldn't see the ugliness happening all around them. "Not all of them are bad."

"So you'd save some?"

"Yes."

Kyle held up a hand. "In three, two, one... Now!"

The Eagles all hit codes on their wrist watches. Gas pods broke open all over the island; bright green mist flowed out, racing across the terrain.

"Run!"

"The pirates are here!"

A few dozen of the fighters and trackers brought up shields, scanning wildly for their other enemy. The rest ignored the gas and continued attacking the layered shields over the Eagles.

Goldie added his shield to theirs, but he stayed back from the strangers, not sure who he could trust.

*Ka-blam!*

Cerise watched the fighters and trackers, scanning for the few who might be able to get through the shield. She also swept the distance, where a huge fireball was now lighting up the night.

"That was the flagship!"

"Director Haussler and Miles are dead!"

"We're free now!"

More fighters and trackers stopped attacking. Many of them ran for the beach, hoping to snag a ship out of here.

“The ships are leaving.” Kyle could hear the anchors being lifted and the shouts of commanders getting their hirelings to set sail.

Another torpedo flew out of the water and slammed into the side of the burning flagship as the bridge crew jumped overboard. It exploded into fiery pieces and began to sink. The ship next to it caught fire from the flaming debris.

“They aren’t leaving. They’re heading for our island.” Ray was keeping track of the progress.

“Some of them are.” Zack pointed to where a dozen ships were sailing away from them.

Ray nodded. “And the rest are headed to Pitcairn anyway.”

Zack felt his energy starting to run low. “Marc will handle them. We’ve got our own issues right here.”

All of them were tiring. Holding layered shields over themselves was easy. Keeping them up against the fists, knives, and bullets was much harder, especially after spending all afternoon fighting and killing. All the Eagles had participated in the matchups.

Radios lit up again with Jennifer’s firm young voice. “Safe Haven is now open to survivors. Stay in the bay and wait to be evaluated. If you step onto our island at all, you *will* be removed.”

Cerise frowned. “I really hate that kid.”

Kyle laughed. “I’ll let her know. She loves getting under your skin with just words.”

Cerise realized Kyle knew the teenager. “Friend of yours?”

Kyle grunted, starting to strain. “You could say that.”

“Boss...” Ray let go. His shield vanished, taking away a layer.

“Just like we trained, Eagles.” Kyle held up a hand. “And go!”

Cerise and Goldie flinched as the shields dropped and a crowd of killers rushed forward.

“Now!” Kyle brought his shield back up as he stabbed out, slicing open a man’s stomach as he grabbed the woman next to him and inhaled.

Cerise and Goldie were stunned to see the Eagles consuming lifeforces. The UN had forbidden them that way to refuel, even during a fight.

The other trackers and fighters were also shocked. Dozens more took off toward the beach, giving up.

“Shields up!”

Eagles groaned and moaned, fighting and sucking. Fresh strength flowed, adding new layers to their shields.

The remaining fighters and trackers were smarter than the people Safe Haven had faced at the naval station. They saw what was happening and understood they couldn’t win this way. More of them stopped fighting and went to the beach to catch a ship heading for Pitcairn. These Eagles weren’t the target anyway.

Cerise kept her shield up and waited, unwilling to take lifeforces. *I'm already too powerful.*

Goldie joined the Eagles, sucking them down like a lizard during a bug storm.

“This isn’t enough.” Kyle belched, staggering at the influx of power from the lifeforces. He struggled to hold his shield and assimilate the energy. “Stage two!”

All the Eagles pushed their buttons again.

Explosions lit up the night.

Cerise watched in horror as trackers and fighters began to blow up. “You put explosives on them?”

“Personal incendiary devices. Our boss didn’t want to use them; the Eagles insisted.”

Cerise winced as gore splattered over the shields. More fighters took off toward the beach, hoping for an easier target.

“Stage three!”

Cerise didn’t want to know what was coming next, but she couldn’t look away as huge sprays of sand exploded, catching the survivors. They dropped into the ground and disappeared, but their awful screams lasted for a long time. “What did you do?”

“Boobytraps. All the islands are covered.” Zack held out a hand to Cerise. “It’s time to go now.”

She took his hand, ready to fight if he attacked her.

Zack tucked her hand under his arm as he led her toward the rear of the shields. “It’s a beautiful

night for a stroll, but keep your shield up. We wouldn't want to lose you."

Cerise was suddenly sure all of this had been planned. "You knew I'd be here."

Zack shrugged, leading her through the chaos as the others followed, keeping shields at full strength. A few determined fighters were still trying to reach them, though the green gas was layering the sand exactly like Theo had predicted it would with their modifications. "We knew some powerful enemies were coming. We didn't have names."

"But..." Cerise stopped, catching sight of two furious men running toward them. "Brace for it. Those two won't stop."

Kyle timed it, aware of the coming threat. "My boss wants them both gone. Handle it and earn your meeting."

Cerise stopped, getting angry. "You said I already earned it!"

"I lied." Kyle shrank his shield and stepped back to avoid the collapsing hands and teeth of the fighters caught in the gas. "Kill them both or die with them. It's your choice."

Cerise glared, bringing up her shield around herself. "You do it. I'm not part of your group. I don't have to follow your orders."

Kyle shrugged, turning toward the upper level of the island that hadn't been cleared yet. "Suit yourself." He walked away as Justin and Darwin reached Cerise and began hacking at her shield.

They didn't care about the Eagles or the few fighters trying to fight the gas to get the prize.

Cerise retreated so Goldie was at her hip. "Together or are you throwing me to the wolves too?"

Goldie shrank his shield around himself and followed Kyle without answering.

Cerise's rage blew the lock. She screamed as she blasted out her most powerful spells, covering everyone around her. The death waves rippled along the sand and slammed into the fleeing fighters.

"The bloody dog!"

"She snapped!"

Cerise fired again, aiming this time.

Justin's eyes exploded, raining blood and gore over Darwin.

Darwin screamed, firing his rifle.

Cerise took the slug in the chest and fired back, fury creating a fiery shield that melted the slug before it could penetrate.

Darwin dropped, blood running from every orifice.

Cerise walked toward the beach, slinging flames and death across the begging survivors. Mercy never entered her mind.

Kyle and the others watched in satisfaction, but they didn't speak or draw her attention. It was clear that Cerise was byzan. Triggering her snap had been Ray's idea and it had been brilliant, but they didn't want to be on her list.

Cerise was foaming with hatred and anger as she reached the first beach. She stopped, red eyes sweeping the cowering survivors and the burning ships on the water. The bloke manning the submarine was still using torpedoes on the UN troops.

“We lost.” A wounded man grabbed her leg, unaware that she had just killed a hundred of them. “How did we lose?”

Cerise knelt and scooped his guts up. She yanked, bringing a horrid scream and then death. “We underestimated how ruthless our enemy really is.” She dropped the gore and strode across the bloody sand. When she found a survivor, she killed them.

“Are we sure we want to take her back with us?” Ray hadn’t been scared in a long time, but he was now. With her charms, she was as deadly as Angela or Marc. “Triggering her might not have been one of my best ideas.”

“Boss wants this one.” Kyle shrugged. “Steps have been taken to ensure she doesn’t get out of control.”

Ray made a face. “Steps like an elephant tranquilizer?”

Kyle chuckled. “Something along those lines probably. Marc will cover it.”

“Oh, okay. We just have to survive the four-hour trip home. Cool.”

Kyle ignored the sarcasm. “She’ll calm down in a bit and then we’ll go, but we aren’t headed home yet.”

Zack scowled with the rest of the team. “Wait. Where are we going?”

“We’re joining Grant on the Adrianna. His guard shift needs a break and we’re full up on energy now.” Kyle scanned for new threats and found an island of bodies and only a few survivors. The modifications they’d made to the gas had been more than just weight to get it to hang around the ground. *We added a lethal cocktail. Breathe in too much and stop breathing.*

Kyle observed Cerise as she strode through the dissipating clouds. “But it didn’t affect her at all.”

Goldie snorted. “Nothing does. She’s invincible.”

“What do you mean? Anyone can be killed.”

Goldie shook his head at Ray. “People have been trying for decades. She’s been stabbed, shot, dropped from a plane even, and she always survives.”

“So why did you agree to kill her? You have to know they aren’t going to let your girl go even if you managed it.”

Goldie’s fear came out in a thick wave. “They took her to the lab ship as soon as they found out she’s carrying twins. I didn’t have a choice.”

Kyle’s anger resurfaced. “The reset?”

Goldie nodded, terrified of that future. “They’re going to kill my babies. I had to try to give them a chance. You would have done the same.”

Kyle thought of Jennifer and his unborn son. He gestured. “Knock him out. I’m ready to roll.”

Jeff quickly darted Goldie before he could protest. Then he draped the man over his shoulder.

Cerise looked back at them, eyes still blazing red. She swept them in contempt and then continued her rampage on the helpless survivors.

“I wonder if it’s the same with her.”

Kyle shrugged. “Like I said, we’ll let Marc settle that one when we get home. Right now, we’re about to be late. Round up the few we picked and get to the launch site. I’ll meet you there.” Kyle went after Cerise.

Ray pointed. “I think someone’s up on the last cliff. I see a fire.”

They all scanned the faint glow.

Zack shook his head. “We have who we came for. Let them go. A lone man is no threat to us anymore.”

Kyle let go of his shield, not afraid of Cerise or the gas. His demon had it covered. Jennifer had helped him pick one that was almost invincible. It gave him a bond with Cerise, one that she wasn’t aware of. Kyle had recognized her as a kindred earlier, but he hadn’t been through as much as her. *Will I get like that?*

Cerise spun around, hand coming up.

Kyle kept walking, hands at his side. “It’s time to go. Get yourself under control and come on. I hate being late.” He went by her to handle the last few moaning victims on the beach.

Cerise watched him slit their throats, feeling the rage subside. *I did it again.*

Kyle grunted as he rose and his knees popped. “I’d say sorry for triggering you, but we needed this. I’ll say thank you instead.”

Cerise stared. “I’ve never been thanked for slaughtering people.”

“I have. You get used to it.” Kyle wiped the blood from his blade and headed back toward their group. “Let’s roll.”

Cerise followed, becoming aware of how much damage she’d done to the UN troops. The bodies were smoldering as she went by, smoke wafting up to remind her what she was. *I need to be put down.*

Kyle slowed to let her catch up. “A lot of us feel that way.”

“How do you handle it? Without taking your own life.”

“I serve the greater good. Without people like me, the gentle members of my camp wouldn’t survive. I serve a purpose that’s worthy.”

Cerise sucked in air, forcing herself to calm, to lock away that dangerous rage. “I used to feel that way too.”

“And then you figured out they lied?”

She nodded. “Everyone lies and twists the facts to fit their own narrative. I’m sick of it all. I want

peace!” Her eyes turned red again. “Get me to your boss before I snap again.”

Kyle sighed. “I’ll be the one to put you down if she decides you need it.”

Cerise felt another chunk of rage fall away. “Do you think you can?”

Kyle didn’t like the eagerness in her tone. *She’s miserable. We’ll help her with that if she’ll let us.* “Yes. The camp enforcer has been drilling me on controlling our kind since we set sail.”

Cerise was encouraged by the news. “The UN doesn’t have any enforcers left. The troops got tired of punishments. Their enforcers all died in their sleep.”

Kyle snorted. “Well we don’t sleep much, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Cerise didn’t know what to say to that. She followed him through the jungle, refusing to consider her latest snap anymore. *It’s over. I can’t bring them back.*

Kyle took lead of their group and led them deeper into the jungle. “It’s a short, rough hike. Everyone ready?” He increased pace without waiting for the answer.

## 2

“I can’t believe how much damage she did.”

Jeff wasn’t as impressed as Ray. He hefted Goldie higher onto his shoulder and kept walking.

“We’ve seen Angela go nuts too, along with a few others.”

Ray shrugged. “Still. I thought we held most of the power in this fight.”

The Eagles talked as they hiked through the dark jungle. There was no one up here. They were thirty feet above the beach now, an hour later. They couldn’t view the destruction anymore, but they could still hear a few cries for help.

“Sounds like Greg is enjoying his duty.”

Kyle snorted, also shouldering his burden more firmly. “Greg doesn’t know how to fire torpedoes from a submarine. He’s got someone else doing it.”

“Still.” Ray fell silent, realizing he was saying that too much.

Zack understood. Their duty wasn’t as pleasant as sitting at a console and forcing someone to push a button. Insects were feasting on them every time they lowered their shields and the vines up here were wrapped around the miro trees like webs, making them detour around to harder paths. “Are we on time?”

“A couple minutes early, but that’s fine.” Kyle stopped as they finally reached the top of the cliff. He peered over one side and saw nothing but black. Even the water below was hidden from view, though they knew it was there. They’d mapped this out and then hiked it twice before the UN arrived, but it was still unfamiliar in the dark and they weren’t using flashlights to keep anyone from following them.

Cerise stared at Kyle, sweaty forehead wrinkling. “Do you have a helicopter hidden up here somewhere?”

The Eagles snickered.

“No.”

Cerise wiped away sweat from her neck. “Then what are we doing?”

“Practicing our flying skills.” Kyle put his captive down and dug in his kit. He held out a heavy pouch. “Strap up. We’re going for a walk.”

Cerise opened the pouch and pulled out the harness. A reluctant grin crossed her smoke streaked face. “We’re rappelling?”

Kyle nodded, clicking his harness into place with practiced ease.

“Awesome.” Cerise watched the others and followed their example, mood lifting. “I always wanted to try this.”

“You never have?”

She shook her head at Kyle. “No need. Command flew me in whenever they wanted me somewhere.” She didn’t think about the last time, where they’d dropped her with a faulty parachute.

“We use a different approach to most things. You’ll find that out if you stay with us long enough.” Kyle reached out and checked each of her connections to be sure she’d done it correctly.

Cerise was impressed that the bloke showed no fear of her even though he’d seen what she could do. The others in this group weren’t the same. She could feel their caution.

Kyle stepped back. “We go in two. Everyone ready?”

Men grunted or nodded, shouldering the unconscious captives they’d brought from the fighters and trackers.

Cerise stepped by Kyle and peered over the edge. “I reckon there’s a boat waiting?”

“Two lifeboats from our cruise ship.” Kyle grinned. “Though I’m not sure they can be called that anymore. We modified them a bit.”

“Engines?” Cerise laughed at his surprise. “You aren’t the only ones who know how to improvise when it’s needed.”

Kyle smiled, liking her despite the concern that she wasn’t one of the good guys.

Her amusement fell. “I’ve never been that.”

Kyle shrugged. “There’s a first time for everything.” He picked up the unconscious man and moved to the edge. “Secure your ground lines, Eagles. We fly on one.”

Cerise followed their instructions, firing in the holding hook and tugging to be sure it was secure.

“Now we walk right down the cliff.” Kyle tightened his grip on his captive, then stepped off the edge and started the short descent.

Cerise held in the laughter as she walked down the cliff behind him, but her positive vibes flowed over the entire team, lifting weary spirits.

The Eagles were aware of it, of how powerful she was even in a calm moment. Kyle now joined his team in worrying. If she snapped around Angela,

it wouldn't be easy to put her down. *I wish we'd set up a meeting away from our camp now.*

Cerise missed it in favor of enjoying the dark walk to the water. The feel of a boat under her boots was almost a disappointment. *I want to do that again!*

Kyle and Jeff shared a look. Cerise was so much like Angela that it would be easy to forget she'd come with the enemy to kill them all.

Cerise unhooked her clip and settled on the bench, scanning the clever paint job that had blended the two boats in perfectly with the cliff. Unless one of their patrols had passed within a few yards, these ships wouldn't have been spotted. "These boats have been here the whole time, right?"

Jeff nodded, putting Goldie down by her feet. "Hiding in plain sight is always the best option. We've learned that lesson well."

"We never had a chance."

Ray frowned as he took the seat next to her. "Actually, you had all the odds in your favor until the alpha evolved. Now it's a fair fight."

Cerise didn't argue, but she was impressed with the Eagles. *It's too bad I didn't come for them. They would have made great additions to any team.*

"We serve the greater good. We wouldn't have ever joined you." Kyle wanted that clear.

Cerise didn't answer, but her thought came through plainly. *When you only have one option, you take it and mourn your morals later.*

Ray handed her his bloody jacket. “Put that on. Any passing boats will think we’re all part of the crowd if they get close.”

Cerise tugged it on over her cloak, refusing to leave it.

Kyle fired up the engine and got them moving as Jeff did the same in the other boat.

Cerise held on and locked down on her thoughts as they headed toward the open ocean, away from Pitcairn.

### 3

Haussler held onto the floating debris that used to be part of his ship. *How did this happen?*

Water sloshed over his head, threatening his grip. He held his breath and waited for the wave to crest.

The water was alive with burning debris and troops screaming for help that wasn’t coming. The ships that hadn’t been hit were fleeing or heading to Pitcairn to claim the prize. They weren’t doing salvage or rescue.

Haussler surfaced, sucking in air. *I’m not in charge anymore.*

He spotted a slow moving rigid inflatable boat and sent out a wave of command.

The driver turned slightly, obeying the order.

*But I’m alive and I have a new goal.*

Haussler held his breath again as the boat slowed near him, sending fresh ripples of debris-

laden water over his head again. *I'm going to find that traitor and kill her.*

Haussler climbed into the RIB, taking control of the lone man's mind. "Get me to Pitcairn. I've got a date with a devil."

"Yes, sir." The sailor got them moving through the choppy water, not ducking as another ship exploded, raining debris on them. It was just another day in the life of a UN man.

Chapter Twenty-Seven  
**I Can't Be Here**  
The Adrianna

1

**“I**ncoming.”

Grant moved toward the door to the bridge. “It should be Kyle’s group. Get ready to bring them aboard.”

Ian gently pushed Grant back into the bridge. “Stay here.”

Grant wanted to argue that he was supposed to be part of the action this time.

Ian glared at him.

Grant went to his chair and sat, crossing his arms. His bottom lip poked out.

Ian went to join the other Eagles on the deck. Grant was definitely one of them. In the future, Angela would have to make sure he got the excitement of being an Eagle. He wasn’t happy just being their captain.

Grant watched Kyle’s group climb up to the deck with their captives. Marc had told them all to keep their new friends drugged until everything was over. The brig of the Adrianna had been enlarged and outfitted with that in mind. They could hold three dozen prisoners in their cells now. Theo had

knocked out a wall, outfitted the room next to them, then added steel doors and cages. Medics had added locked drug boxes, and the guards on duty there right now were all descendants. Their captives would have a hard time faking sleep or trying to escape. It was as secure as they could make it.

Theo came from the elevator behind him. “Are we on schedule?”

Grant nodded, but he checked the screens again anyway. “We’re stationary and quiet with only a few lights on. No one can see us in this fog. We should be home by dawn.”

Theo stood in the doorway. “I’m on duty up here in a few minutes. Anything I should know?”

“Nope. It’s been quiet for us. *Too quiet.*”

Theo frowned at their captain. “Stop wishing for action here. When we get home, you can fight then.”

Grant snorted bitterly. “They aren’t letting me fight and you know it.”

Theo shrugged. “Angela said you would be part of the action.”

Grant didn’t say she lied, but he thought it.

Theo went down the steps, not answering. Grant hadn’t been with them long enough yet to understand that Angela never lied. If she didn’t want someone to know something, she just didn’t tell them. *And that means you’re going to get the action you want, but I’ll bet you won’t be happy after that either.* Theo had also noticed that their captain was restless and not at all satisfied with his position in camp despite it being one of the most

important. Until Grant figured out what would make him happy, and then chased it, nothing else was going to sate him.

Cerise followed Kyle down the ramp, aware of dozens of men and women glaring at her with red eyes in open warning. She controlled her need to respond in kind, instead admiring the ship. *I always wanted to take a cruise.*

“We felt that way too.”

“And now?”

Kyle grunted. “Now if I never see another boat it will be too soon.”

Cerise caught flashes of what they’d been through from nearly everyone she saw. Attacks from enemies and their own people, sicknesses that had killed dozens, fires, an explosion, shootings. “I didn’t know.”

“It wasn’t a pleasure cruise. We’ve been fighting for our lives every single day.” Kyle jogged down the steps, feeling the woman headed their way. “I assume your days since the war have been spent much the same?”

“You could say that and not be lying.” Cerise refused to consider what she’d gone through. *I may have to relive it for their boss. I’m not doing it for her flunkies.*

“What about for an enforcer?” Jennifer stepped from the employee hall next to them.

Cerise’s anger rose. “You.”

Jennifer did a fast scan and rolled her eyes, hands coming up to her slender hips. “Another byzan? Great.”

Kyle chuckled.

Jennifer’s head swung to him, eyes lighting up. “Hiya.”

Kyle swung Jennifer into his arms and kissed her.

Cerise gaped.

Eagles laughed at her.

“So it was all an act?”

Ray nodded as he went by them with his captive to reach the steps to the brig. “Our boss likes us to use charm whenever possible. It saves a lot of cleanup.”

Cerise tried not to be angry as the couple separated.

Jennifer ran a hand over Kyle’s cheek, eyes glowing for him. “Welcome home.”

Kyle kissed her again.

Cerise felt the passion and the love. “Soul mates.” She sneered. “Well aren’t you two lucky.”

Jennifer nodded. “We think so.” She turned to face Cerise as Kyle directed the rest of the group toward the next steps. “Let’s talk.”

Cerise glared at the teenager. “I want to talk to your boss.”

“And you will, if you pass my evaluation.” Jennifer held the door open to the unused office that they’d outfitted for meetings like this one. “Get comfortable, remove your weapons, and handcuff

yourself to the chair.” Jennifer stopped the coming argument. “Do you want this or not?!”

Cerise stomped into the room and began taking off her cloak and weapons.

Kyle met Jennifer’s eye.

Jennifer reluctantly nodded. Yes, she wanted him to stay with her. The feeling of power coming from their new guest was immense. *I might not be able to handle her alone if she gets out of line.*

Kyle handed off his captive to Ian, the guard on this hall, then came back and leaned against the doorframe, more than willing to stay.

Cerise sat in the chair and cuffed her wrist to the metal frame of the table. “All right, I’m secured. What’s next?”

Jennifer took the seat across from her and opened the folder she’d had lying there for days. She picked up the pen. “Please state your name and the reason for this...visit.”

Cerise rolled her eyes. “Paperwork? Really?”

Jennifer waited.

Cerise blew out a long sigh. “Fine, but I need food and a shandy—maybe a couple Durries if you have any.”

“No smoking on this ship.” Jennifer took a kit from her feet. “Water to drink and a protein bar to chew on.”

“This is hospitality?”

“Nope. It’s an interrogation.” Jennifer nodded to Kyle. “Shut the door. No one out there needs to hear her scream.”

Despite her skills and power, Cerise paled at the matter-of-fact tone. *I knew I hated this kid.*

Jennifer laughed. "Perfect."

## 2

"Do you have an update from home?"

Shawn held the brig door for Jeff to bring in his captive. "Nothing since the radio calls."

Jeff put Goldie on the cot and then snapped the ankle cuffs into place. "When are they due to check in?"

"An hour ago." Shawn was worried. He didn't hide it.

Jeff shut the cell and locked it. He scanned the others, glad the eight captives hadn't woken yet. Everyone knew the knockout drugs hit people differently. Angela had even retained her gifts after being drugged, though not at full strength. "Make sure they stay out."

Shawn patted his dart gun. "No problem."

Jeff frowned at the man. "Don't overdo it. We want them alive."

Shawn shrugged. "If you say so." He didn't want new people to join them.

"The boss says so." Jeff glared to add to the warning even though he understood. There was no way to be sure these new people wouldn't be as big a problem as the others they'd taken in, but Angela's conscience had demanded they try.

Shawn waved him on. “Go get a meal and take a break. I’m sure you’re ready for it.”

Jeff headed for the door, shaking his head.

“It’s not wrong to want them to go away. We deserve peace now.”

Jeff didn’t answer as he went down the hall, but he agreed. *However, we can’t survive alone. Picking a few good men and women from the enemy is a compromise we can all live with.* Jeff sighed. *We hope.*

Shawn secured cells and watched cuffs get clicked into place, not looking forward to this shift over the brig. *I’m a descendant now. I wanted to see action and use these gifts.*

Ray sat on the stool and groaned. He pushed off his jacket and boots, eager to get comfortable. “I’ll nap for a couple hours and then we’ll be on duty together.”

Shawn assumed the orders had come from Angela. “Cool. Last cell is open for Eagles.”

Ray stretched, but stayed on the stool. “In a few minutes.” He didn’t want to go to sleep without knowing they were underway. He’d already fought with himself not to go check on Grant.

The sound of the anchor coming up echoed loudly, making the guards wince. The captives didn’t budge.

“I guess they aren’t as strong as us.”

Ray wasn’t sure about that after seeing Cerise’s snap, but he didn’t say so. Shawn was already twitchy. *No need to add to it. After he uses his gifts*

*for the first time, he'll calm down and return to the man we've all come to depend on. Until then, he needs to be babied a bit.*

Zack came out of the first cell and shut the door. He clicked the lock and tossed the key onto the table. When he left without speaking, Shawn turned to Ray. "What's his problem?"

"He agrees." Ray rooted through his kit for a snack from the prepacked bags that their cooks had put together for this run. "You're both wrong. You'll find out in time."

"How can you be sure?"

Ray gave the simple answer that had allowed him to put aside his own misgivings. "Angela said so."

Radios lit up across the ship, and across all the islands where fighters and trackers were struggling to tend their injuries or find a boat to stop and pick them up. "Safe Haven is open to all survivors. Stay in the bay and wait to be evaluated. If you set foot on our island before we give you permission, you *will* be removed."

The radios shut off. Dozens of people responded; most screamed insults and threats. A few promised to defend the bay from the others.

"Looks like the videos worked."

Shawn snorted. "Yeah, it's bringing all that chaos right to our door."

"Would it be better if we let them all go so the UN can regroup and attack us again later?"

Shawn hadn't thought of it that way. "So Angela's going to kill them all to keep that from happening?"

Ray shrugged again. "Only she knows the full plan."

"You're both wrong." Ian entered the brig and dumped the captive in an empty cell. He clicked the ankle cuffs on. "This is Marc's plan, and he doesn't want any of them to join us. If not for Angela, Marc *would* kill them all."

"Is that right?"

"Of course it's right!"

Ian left, unwilling to listen to the common argument, but his thoughts were clear. *If Safe Haven hadn't taken you guys in, you'd probably be working for the enemy so you were fed and safe. Stop hating them for taking the only option they had. Compared to the rest of the world, we have been lucky.*

Ian went back up to the interrogation room they'd prepared and resumed his guard post by the closed door. He tried to listen to the conversation while watching for problems. He was eager to find out more about Cerise. *I hope she's not a threat to the boss. I don't want to kill a woman.*

Inside the room, Jennifer leaned back in the chair, glaring. "You're hiding things from me."

"My pain is none of your business, mate!" Cerise was also angry, and knackered. The snap had used up most of her reserves.

“You’ve told me where you’re from and that you’ve been working for the government there for years, rounding up our kind for the labs. And that’s it. I can’t let you near Angela. You’re a serious threat.” Jennifer motioned to Kyle. “Dart her and put her in a cell. We’ll drop her somewhere after it’s all over.”

“You’re not taking me to Angela?”

Jennifer shook her head. She prepared to snatch Cerise’s demon to keep her from breaking free and taking over the ship.

Cerise knew she would have to give them something or she wouldn’t be able to reach her target, but she already hated Jennifer. “Is there someone else I can talk to?”

“You need us for something.” Jennifer pried harder, trying to open that door in Cerise’s mind. “Let me in.”

*I may know another way to get what I need.* Cerise slammed her head forward on the table and knocked herself out.

Jennifer and Kyle stared in surprise.

“What do we do now?” Jennifer didn’t trust the woman, but she also didn’t feel evil intent.

Kyle sighed, ready for this run to be over. “We take her to the boss and let Angela remove her if she snaps. But she has an amazing charm gift. We have to account for that.”

“Some of us can’t be charmed.” Jennifer filled him in on something she’d gleaned from his memory of the island. “You, Shawn, and Greg are

hybrids. You're immune to a lot of our spells and charms."

"I'll make sure the boss knows, if she doesn't already."

Jennifer rubbed her sore shoulder, standing. She joined him, letting him hold her again. "Autumn's waking up."

Kyle opened the door. "You go. I don't want to leave our new friend alone in case she wakes up too."

Jennifer hurried toward their cabin to get the kids from Daisey. She hated not having her children in sight anymore. The trauma of seeing Autumn in Darren's arms hadn't faded in the two weeks since it had happened. *I still can't wait to leave. As soon as this run is over, we're out of here.*

Kyle wasn't as eager, but he understood. He made sure Cerise was breathing, then he put a bandage over the small cut on her forehead. "You'd better not be a threat to the future we're planning. I'll snap your neck in a heartbeat."

Outside the door, Ian nodded. "If he doesn't, I will."

### 3

"Angela? You have to wake up now. We need you."

Angela came to in a fast blur, memories flashing savagely. "Someone's yelling for me."

The medics looked around. It was almost dawn. The island was covered in thick silence as everyone waited for the first UN ships to reach them. “It’s all quiet here, boss. For now.”

Angela opened her eyes, still hearing the woman’s desperate shouts in her head. “We were in the fog together.”

Morgan looked at Stanley.

Stanley had refused to leave Angela’s side even though it had been hours and he was weak from his own injury. He nodded. “She wasn’t right when she woke up before.”

Morgan checked her eyes, pulse, and did a quick mental scan. He frowned. “Did she hit her head when she fell?”

Stanley nodded. “I thought she was dead.”

Angela smiled at him. “You saved my life. I remember you covering me.”

Stanley blushed at her warm tone. “Anything for you, Boss.”

Angela frowned, not sure why they were all staring at her. “What?”

Morgan held up a finger. “Follow this.”

Angela’s eyes responded correctly, but there was no awareness in them.

“What’s your name?”

“You called me Angela.”

Morgan began to worry. “Do you know who you are?”

A slight frown creased her dirty forehead. “Um... Yes! I’m Angela.”

Morgan waved at Marc, who'd been waiting for the exam to be done. "Talk to her. I want to watch her responses."

Marc took Angela's hand, grateful she was okay. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm good. I'm...sore!" She rubbed her leg, frowning at the bandage. "Did I fall?"

Marc tensed. "You don't remember being shot."

"I was shot?" She clutched his hand. "Why would someone shoot me?"

Marc connected mentally, searching for her witch. He found the cell empty. "What's going on here?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Morgan got a new kit from the stack in the corner. "Keep talking to her."

The few people who were still up came closer. All of them felt better at seeing her awake.

Marc wasn't sure what to say. It was clear that she was still injured. "I don't know what to do for you, baby-cakes."

Angela's brow furrowed. "Baby-cakes... I know that name." Her hand tightened on his. "And you're...my Brady!"

Marc nodded, watching awareness fill her foggy eyes. Anger came in right behind it. "Quinn shot me!"

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as alpha power flooded the tunnel.

"Is he dead?"

Marc nodded, not thinking about all the new bodies they needed to burn or bury. “The UN troops are coming. They’ll be here in an hour.”

Angela shut her eyes, fighting to keep her focus. “I need coffee.”

Kenn handed her his mug, relieved that she was awake. “Just poured it.”

Angela sucked down half the scalding cup. She let out a small belch. “Better. What time is it?”

“5 a.m.” Marc tapped her watch.

“Oh, yeah.” Angela examined it, thoughts scattered. “Something’s supposed to happen at dawn.” She struggled to remember.

Marc connected their minds again, relieved to see the witch now sleeping in her cell. He looked for problems.

A door in the rear wasn’t glowing, but it was open. Marc gently shut it, not looking inside.

Angela smiled in relief. “Thank you.” She sat the mug down and carefully got up off the gurney. “That hit rattled my door. I couldn’t close it on my own.”

Morgan stored her odd words in case they had to do that again in the future. “Are you sure you’re okay now?”

“My name is Angela. We’re on Pitcairn, under the main town, and there are hundreds of assholes on their way here to kill or capture us. And we’re the chosen people, even though we don’t want to be and we didn’t ask for this. Also, my leg hurts like hell. Does that cover it?”

Marc chuckled as Morgan and others nodded. “That’s my baby-cakes.”

Angela leaned forward and kissed him.

Marc let her, but he didn’t feel anything. *It’s too soon.*

Angela entered his mind and ripped that door open, returning the favor.

Marc tried not to cry again. “I’m sorry.”

Angela hugged him, but she didn’t tell him it would be all right. He’d killed Kendle and Joey. *Marc may never be all right again. But at least that ticking clock is gone. As long as he lives, the pain was worth it.*

Marc pulled away from her.

Angela spotted Adrian sleeping in the corner with Sadie and a few of the camp members who’d been wishing for him to return. “He’s not supposed to be here.”

“I brought him in.” Marc glared at the former leader. “Easier to keep track of him.”

“But he helped Quinn and Kendle.”

Marc reluctantly denied that. “Actually, he didn’t know what was happening. I saw it in his mind.”

Angela didn’t believe it. “Sadie told you about the carrot. He knew Kendle was planning something and he didn’t tell us.”

Marc was too tired for this. He gestured at Kenn and walked through the tunnel toward the other side of their spread-out camp.

Kenn didn't want to defend Adrian either, but he wasn't about to refuse Marc's order. "Adrian's been feeding us information for weeks now. We weren't allowed to tell you where it came from."

"Then why did I get shot? Why did Marc almost die?"

"Because even Adrian can't stop wildcards from flipping."

Angela didn't want to accept that. "I think he knew and let it happen!"

Kenn looked at Adrian, aware that the man was awake and faking it. "Like Tim?"

Angela clamped her lips together. She shoved Kenn's mug back into his hand and limped through the dank tunnel after Marc.

Marc tried to control his misery, but it was hard. He stopped to let her catch up.

Angela met his eye in the dim light from the strings of solar powered Christmas bulbs. "This was your plan."

Marc nodded. "I know. But you got hurt, the boy died, and Kendle..." Marc swallowed a scream at the grief sinking into his heart.

"You killed a woman you love."

Marc hated her in that moment because she was forcing him to face what he'd done.

Angela smiled softly. "You'd do it for me."

Marc leaned against the dirt, hoping her blunt words here would help heal the new gaping hole in his soul.

Low murmurs echoed to them from other parts of the camp, along with smells that neither of them wanted to identify.

“You knew it was coming. You planned around it. Fate flipped several wildcards and your plan still worked. Our camp will no longer be haunted by her evil or her hatred. You sacrificed her to give us a future.”

Marc forced out the truth of how he felt. “But it didn’t, Angie. I can’t stand the sight of you.”

“Because I remind you of Kendle.”

“No. Because you let me do it.” Marc walked into the darkness.

Angela let him go, heart thumping painfully. “But you’re alive, Marc. That’s all I care about.” She went to the medics to see if she could help them with Stanley.

Marc walked the tunnels, not answering anyone. He tried to sort through the pain and anger in his brain, but it was hard. *Maybe if I’d killed Adrian too I wouldn’t feel this way.*

Monitoring his thoughts, Angela nodded. *You still can. I tried to blame him and give you that option, but you wouldn’t let me.*

Marc thought of the vision all those months ago, of Adrian caring for her and his daughter. They’d all assumed he was dead if that happened. “But we were wrong. In that future, I’m not dead. I’m just not here.”

Angela tensed, but she didn’t try to convince him to stay and face the pain. *I had to every time I*

*made a plan and lost people I cared about. I refuse to do that to him. If Marc wants to leave, we'll wish him well and let him go. He's earned his freedom.*

*Marc almost broke as he caught that. I don't want to leave...but I'm not sure I can stay now. As long as I blame you for this pain, I can't be here.*

*Adrian kept his eyes shut and listened to everything, but he already knew he was going to talk to Marc after the action was finished. You can't leave her here with me, Marc. I'm not that strong and neither is she.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight  
**You Asked For It**

1

“**T**he fog’s clearing, finally.” Grant activated the radar that had been useless until now. “Let’s see where everyone...” He paled. “Get Kyle up here. Now!”

Theo saw dozens of signatures lighting up on the monitor. He took off running down the steps and then down the ramp into the ship.

Daryl was on duty on the top deck now and thrilled to be out of the tunnels. He moved to the bridge stairs to cover Theo’s post. He rubbed the nasty snakehead sticking from his pocket. “Here’s to battle number fifty as an Eagle. May it go as well as the first.”

Other Eagles on the deck added their hopes to his, but they didn’t touch the snake. The smell from the rotting reptile was awful.

Daryl knew. *It reminds me that I’m alive.*

Daryl scanned the coming sunrise and the calm water around their steadily crawling ship. In a few minutes, this beautiful landscape would come alive with danger and death, but for this moment, it was peaceful.

It didn't match the mood. There were only a few dozen people on the cruise ship, but most of them were strong fighters. Those who weren't fighting were here as support. They were tired and grouchy. Waiting for the fighting to start was just as rough now as it had always been. *It's hard to believe any of us live long enough to marry or have kids. It seems like this is all we ever do.*

"It is." Kyle came by him. "Get ready, Eagles. And that's an order."

Men and women straightened and went to their posts, adrenaline starting to pump through their tired bodies. Many of them hadn't slept in a full day.

Theo returned to the bridge.

Shawn came from the elevator. "Theo can go help Kyle. I was told to come up here in case you need a hand."

Grant frowned as Theo hurried out, eager to join the coming chaos. "Whatever."

Shawn took the first mate's chair, ignoring Grant's grumping. Everyone had heard that he wanted to fight. *But that's not really what he wants.* Shawn thought he had figured it out. *Grant wants to feel like one of us. Only letting him sail the ship makes him feel like an outsider.*

"I see our bait." Chad wasn't happy to be on the top deck for this, though like Daryl, he was thrilled to be out of the tunnels. He wanted to be below to make sure their captives didn't break free. He didn't have faith that Ray could handle it alone even

though he was powerful. So were their captives, and everyone else was up here now.

Kyle scanned the pirate ships coming into view that Grant and Theo had anchored days ago and left. The ships had been stripped of everything usable, including fuel, and put around the bay as lures for the enemy. Kyle estimated a hundred enemy troops were now on those ships searching for them and anything they might have left behind. Other smaller ships were floating and drifting all around the lures.

“Looks like they went for the bait.” Kyle motioned. “As soon as we’re spotted, reel ‘em in.”

A few seconds later their radios lit up.

Kyle didn’t listen to the ugly cries and threats, but he felt their hatred and jealousy. The sight of their cruise ship stopped the looting and fights. Dozens of ships of every size and color now turned toward them. Trackers in the bay headed for them too.

“We were tricked!”

“The island’s empty!”

The Eagles liked hearing that. It told them the enemy hadn’t found a way into the tunnels yet.

Grant sailed between their anchored boats, making sure the cruise ship was in full view of the bay.

Eagles on the deck brought up their shields.

Grant began rotating them, heart thumping harder as he saw how many smaller, faster boats were coming their way. He turned the big cruise ship and steered them back between the bait boats.

Kyle and the others went to the rear deck where the bulk of their weapons were waiting. Ritchie, Tim, Theo, Molly, and a few others were there to help fight or to hand them fresh rounds if they needed them. No one spoke. The time for that had come and gone.

## 2

Cerise woke with a headache, a backache, and a rough mood. She straightened in the chair, hearing shouts, explosions, and radios blaring with ugly threats. She tugged on the cuff, wishing she'd thought to bring a key.

“Just sit tight.” Ian and Jennifer glared at her from the doorway.

Cerise swept them, seeing two young kids and two adults. “Let me loose. I can help.”

Ian snorted.

Jennifer considered it. The screams of those chasing them were ugly. If too many of them got on the ship, they might need help.

Cerise considered sending out a charm.

Jennifer lifted her shield around all of them. “Sit tight. It’ll be over soon.”

Cerise believed she could get through Jennifer’s shield, but it would take a powerful blast. *I don’t want to hit the kids.* She slumped in the chair, growling.

Jennifer was relieved to find out Cerise wasn’t corrupt enough to hurt children. She kept an eye on

the woman and an ear on the battle as the noise increased.

The ship shuddered as something exploded nearby. The window in the hall showed a spiral of thick black smoke, but it was hard to tell where it was coming from.

Ian watched both females, wishing he was like them. He also wished he'd been left on the island. *I don't want to do this anymore.*

Jennifer understood how he felt. "When this one's over, you can leave too."

Ian shrugged, embarrassed. "Eagles don't run from danger."

Radios on the ship clicked on, playing the recorded message Jennifer had taped weeks ago.

*"Safe Haven is open to all good survivors. Stay in the bay and wait to be evaluated. Do not chase our ship or you will be considered a threat and dealt with accordingly."*

Cerise snorted. "You know they're not listening to you, right?"

Jennifer smiled down at her infant as the baby stretched, waking. "The good ones are. The rest will get what they deserve."

Cerise understood it was a trap. "So if they follow, what will you do? You can't shoot them all. There are almost a thousand."

Jennifer shook her head. "Actually, you handled a quarter of them for us on Henderson. Greg is still blowing them up, knocking them over, and sucking them in when the submarine rises and dives. The

Eagles topside are taking out another chunk with grenade launchers. The sharks in the water are removing those who try to swim to us. A large number also fled. I doubt they'll return to your command center in Europe. When this is over, only about a hundred will still be here and most of them will be waiting in the bay for my next orders."

Cerise shook her head, smiling against her will. "You let us do the work for you this time. You're ruthless."

"We have to be. We've been hunted since the war." Jennifer's eyes darkened. "Some of us were hunted before then, by people like you. We'll do whatever it takes."

Cerise didn't doubt it.

"You should tell me your story and save yourself some pain."

"Pain from what?"

"The alpha isn't in a good mood. You don't want to be evaluated by her. She won't be as patient as I've been."

Cerise snorted. "Patient? You've been a rude bitch."

Jennifer nodded. "Exactly."

Cerise understood that warning. "I can't. I have to talk to your boss."

Jennifer shrugged. "Just remember you asked for it." She connected to Kyle for a live update.

“Fire!” Kyle led the way, aiming at the closest ship trying to reach the rear of their cruise liner. He fired.

The men and women around him did the same, each picking a target based on their position.

Explosions rocked the air, hitting boat after boat. Debris and bodies flew into the angry ocean. Sharks that had darted away from the vibrations circled back to investigate. More screams filled the air, but very few of the troops fired back with guns or magic. After clearing the other islands, they were exhausted and scattered mentally. The rage was all they had left; it didn't allow for rational thought.

Smoke and fire rose into the sky, drawing more ships toward them.

Jennifer broke the connection, sighing unhappily. “This is the last time we'll have to hear that.”

Autumn let Jennifer rock her back to sleep, eager to escape her mother's emotional pain.

Cerise caught it this time. “You're leaving Safe Haven? Why would you do that?”

Jennifer couldn't stop the memory of what had happened with Darren.

Cerise felt a bond forming with the teenager. She tried to fight it. “One bad moment doesn't mean you should give up.”

Jennifer's anger broke the lock on her memories. They flooded in, showing the loss of her first son, being abused by Cesar, fighting for

survival alongside Eagles and camp members who hadn't survived. She tried to force it all back into her mental crypt.

Cerise was glad when she locked it back up. "That was awful, mate. I'm sorry."

Jennifer nodded in acknowledgment, but she didn't speak yet. She wasn't sure if she could without crying.

Cerise resisted the urge to offer more comfort. Instead, she gave advice. "When you leave, don't go back to the Americas or any large landmass. Find a small island like these and stay there."

"I'm going home."

Cerise shrugged. "They have the three babies they need for the reset now. As soon as command finds out we lost here, they'll trigger it and there won't be any place you can hide in America. They're going to conquer it first this time so Safe Haven never has a chance to gather this much power."

Ian grimaced. "So much for our three years of peace."

Jennifer gasped. "I thought the reset would take us back to before the war!"

"A reset will take us wherever they decide to start from. The Secretary-General decided not to reverse the world war. Their plans all worked, everywhere, except in the Americas. You Yanks are first on the list this time. Find a small island and keep your head down. You might not ever be found."

As much as Jennifer wanted to agree, the thought of America being destroyed first gave her chills. *If that happens, I can't ever go home.*

“Oh, you'll go home. You'll start the reset right where you were after it all happened.”

Jennifer's fear filled the hallway. “I'll have to go through it all again.”

“No need. Shield yourself, then go off grid.”

Ian frowned at them. “Is that possible?”

Cerise nodded. “An enforcer is special. They have other options. That's why the UN was okay with most of ours being killed by friendly fire.”

Jennifer had wondered about that skill for months now. “When everywhere else is reset, I can avoid it, I think.”

Ian was surprised. “You didn't tell the boss.”

Jennifer revealed the secret she'd been keeping since they set sail. “I might be able to protect Safe Haven from it, if I can get stronger.”

“I don't think you have time for normal evolutions. Our command center was supposed to observe this fight live. They'll meet and make the choice in the next few hours.”

Fear took over Jennifer's thoughts. *I can't do it again.* She shivered as a cold sweat broke over her skin. *Months with Cesar as his slave. Fighting the other slaves. Killing their babies when they couldn't.* Terror replaced the fear. *I'd rather die!*

“You have another option.”

Ian didn't like how easily Cerise was getting under Jennifer's skin. “Shut up!”

“She’s right.” Jennifer gently put Autumn in Ian’s arms. She glanced at Roy, who was sleeping in the chair by the door. “I’ll be back.” She went toward the ramp, mind screaming at her to stop.

Ian glared at Cerise. “What did you do?”

Cerise tugged on the cuff. “I gave her a way to fight back. Now unlock me. She can’t do it alone. She’s just a kid.”

Ian stayed out of her reach. “Not a chance in hell, lady.”

Cerise chuckled without humor. “That’s exactly right.”

Jennifer stepped onto the top deck and scanned the rear, counting ships, evaluating. Most of the threat was gone, though another small group of fighters were about to board their ship. The Eagles were out of grenades now and their rifle shots were just bouncing off shields.

Jennifer planted herself on the ramp and waited. *Ten lifeforces should get me to the next level of power, and then I’ll have enough strength to protect a small area from the reset.*

She shuddered at the thought of becoming a byzan, but she didn’t leave the ramp. *If I take twice that, I might be able to protect our entire island.* She shivered this time as cool ocean sprays dropped over her and the slick deck. “I’ll be the most powerful being on the planet.”

A tear rolled over her pale cheek as she began to mourn her humanity, but she didn’t move from the ramp. *I’m not going back!*

*Kyle! Something's wrong with Jennifer!*

Kyle didn't answer Ian's mental call. He didn't have time. Dozens of men and women were climbing up the ship. They'd boarded up doors and windows, but the trackers were breaking the glass and kicking their way through anyway.

Weak magic blasts flew across the deck now, hitting shields and the ship. The Eagles didn't use their energy to return fire. They only lowered their shields when they were close enough for hand-to-hand combat. Marc had made it clear that this battle wasn't going to be won with magic. Neil's kai lessons let them remove threats before they had time to gather enough energy to fire again. Despite having bigger numbers, the UN troops were at a disadvantage. They didn't spend their time fighting like the Eagles. Their rage-induced reactions couldn't compare to the cool, efficient killing methods that Adrian had taught his army to use.

Furious troops still in the chasing ships threw things at them and made obscene gestures as they got closer.

Grant steered to the left and crushed a speedboat, but it didn't bring him pleasure. *All I ever get to do is sail this damn ship!*

Kyle fired his handgun.

A tracker fell down the side of the ship, banging off other climbers. He hit the water and went under.

Waiting sharks snapped off limbs and digits, fighting with each other for the meal.

Kyle fired again and got another tracker who'd been about to climb onto a second deck balcony.

“Duck!”

Kyle ducked and spun, other hand bringing up his knife. He stabbed the woman sneaking up on him, twisting and ripping. He yanked the blade free and ran toward the ramp as she fell. “They’re on the ship! Fall back!”

Eagles followed him to the ramp. Stage two in this plan was defending just a few areas, including the bridge. After the battle, the ship would be fully cleared.

Kyle called for Jennifer mentally, but he didn't get an answer. He scanned and found her on the ramp. “She’s not supposed to be here!”

He ran faster, dodging troops who were just reaching the deck.

The Eagles behind him ran with knives out, slashing throats and guts open. Blood and gore splashed across the deck of the *Adrianna* yet again.

*Whoosh!*

*Ka-blamm!*

Their bait traps began to explode, blowing debris in every direction as the pirate ships caught the troops in a death blast. They went up in tandem, taking out smaller boats that had been passing, as well as everyone who'd been on them.

The UN troops hadn't had a recharge at all, and they hadn't had much rest. Their energy ran out

after only a few blasts, forcing them to fight without magic. Bullets began to fly, pinging off shields and the metal rails.

Kyle slipped in blood on the deck. He bounced off the rail and regained his footing.

Magic flew by him, missing. It hit the ship and drew a loud creak.

Smoke and screams coated the top deck as more troops made it onboard and ran for the bridge and the ramp.

Shawn fired repeatedly from the bridge, but he couldn't stop the troops from going down the ramp. He dropped to the bottom of the bridge steps and emptied his magazine.

Kyle motioned Shawn toward the ladder where another group was climbing up.

Kyle didn't see Jennifer as he began slicing and dicing. There was a bottleneck of enemy troops trying to get down into their ship. Kyle assumed guards at the bottom were keeping them from going any further. He knew Jennifer was in that mix. He swung harder, slicing spines and necks, but the UN troops didn't even try to defend themselves. It was eerie and worrisome, but there wasn't time to figure out what was happening.

At the bottom of the steps, Jennifer grabbed the next man and inhaled. A huge blast of energy shot into her as she dropped the body. The withered corpse broke apart at her feet. She wasn't leaving any of their energy even though the first inhalation took their lives. She wanted it all.

Eagles who had come from other decks stayed back. They were ready to handle problems if anyone got by Jennifer, but they weren't willing to stand next to her when she was out of control this way. And it was obvious that she was. Jennifer was screaming and crying as she consumed each one, but her mental charms were holding them in place, keeping the fighters on the steps until she got to them.

Kyle shoved through the charmed men, horrified as the view cleared. Jennifer was in the middle of a pile of bodies. She was covered in blood and gore, but her screams of horror bothered him the most. "You have to stop!"

Jennifer barely registered his presence. She grabbed the next charmed woman and inhaled sharply.

Kyle ducked the blast of extra energy that came out of her and slammed into the wall. Jennifer was too full to hold anymore, but she was still sucking them in.

Kyle's thoughts went to the captive Jennifer was supposed to be guarding. *Cerise did this.*

Jennifer grabbed the next man.

Kyle shoved him out of her hands and stood in front of her. "Jenny!"

Jennifer grabbed him and pulled him close, starting to inhale.

Kyle kissed her.

The fear broke. So did her charm.

Jennifer let out a long, nasty smelling belch.

The few trackers left on the steps ran back up the ramp and were met by the rest of the Eagles. Their lives were taken quickly.

Jennifer staggered backward as the evolution overwhelmed her. She dropped to her knees in the middle of the corpses, still crying.

Kyle watched in horror as Jennifer evolved, becoming a byzan. “No!”

It was too late. Jennifer accepted the new power willingly. She and her witch evolved together, becoming more powerful in seconds.

Eagles who’d come to help now turned around to go clear the ship. This was Kyle’s problem to handle, and then maybe Angela’s if Kyle couldn’t.

Kyle didn’t know what to do. There was no known way for them to reverse it. “What have you done, Jenny?”

Jennifer vomited on his boots.

Kyle shoved his concern for her soul aside and helped her to her feet, worrying about the baby.

Jennifer let him lead her into a hallway that didn’t have bodies or gore. The smell was getting to her, along with the guilt. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you do this?!”

Jennifer wanted to answer, but fear began beating into her heart. “I can’t get Ian to answer. Ian has Autumn and Roy!”

Kyle followed her down the hall; he didn’t lead the way this time. If Cerise had taken their kids captive, Jennifer would handle it and it would be ugly. He knew better than to interfere.

Jennifer breathed a sigh of relief as she got to the interrogation room and found Ian standing in the corner, holding Autumn. Roy was still sleeping in the chair. Cerise was gone.

Kyle realized it had been a trick so Cerise could escape. He left Jennifer there and ran down to the brig.

Dazed Eagles stared at him as he ran by, but they didn't follow. It was clear they'd been charmed.

Kyle ran inside and stopped, furious. Every cell was empty. Their captives were gone.

Kyle keyed his mike, hating his next words. "I failed, boss. She's gone."

#### 4

"I can't do that yet." Grant struggled against the mind charm. "We'll go when the boss calls."

Grant understood from the filthy clothes and hard profiles that this group was more dangerous than the rest of the men and women trying to take over the ship, but he wasn't going to give in without a fight.

Cerise scowled. "You damn Safe Haven people are too strong." She pointed at the angry, hungover captives she'd brought up in the elevator. "Would you like to die instead?"

Grant forced a shrug, still fighting her control. "If I have to."

Cerise was saved a reply by the radio lighting up with a hard male voice.

“Bring it in, Grant. We’re ready now.”

Grant was relieved. His hand went to the radio.

Cerise got there first. She switched it off. “No need to ruin our surprise.”

Grant considered everything he’d learned from the Eagles and Angela. He took the only option available to him. He began to shout mentally.

Cerise stopped the others from hurting him. “We need him.”

Goldie was in the doorway, watching for Eagles to finally notice them. “We have other captains—like you.”

Cerise studied Grant. “Not ones who can defy my charm.” She was impressed he could resist her and still sail the ship. His white outfit gleamed in the dim dawn light filtering through the bridge. *He’s special. He just doesn’t know it yet.*

Grant got the cruise ship turning again, still mentally warning everyone they had a problem. He didn’t reach for any of the weapons hidden around him, however. Against this many, he wouldn’t win.

“Just get us to land and we’ll leave you and your ship. You’re not who we came for.”

“Angela will skin you alive.”

“I’ve been told that a few times now, but I think you’re all lying about how powerful she is.”

Grant snorted.

Cerise shrugged. “We’ll see. In the meantime, stop wasting your energy on mental shouts. As soon

as we're close enough, we'll go. There's no need for any of your people to die."

Grant sailed the ship toward the pontoon bridge, slowing for the neat maneuver he'd gotten so good at. He didn't tell them to hold on.

Cerise and her companions weren't ready for the abrupt move. The force from the neat turn slid them against the walls and each other, allowing Grant a moment where he could have fired on them, but he had to control the ship. He brought it to a gentle stop, snickering at their anger. Then his amusement faded. "My fiancé is headed up here. Get lost or he'll kill every one of you."

Cerise didn't need to be told twice. She could feel a dozen furious descendants coming their way. She led her group down the steps.

Grant realized this was the action he'd been told he would have. "That's it? I didn't even get hit!"

Last in line, Goldie ran back up the steps and punched Grant in the mouth.

Grant slumped against the console, rattled.

Goldie jogged down the slick steps, grinning.

Cerise frowned at Goldie as he caught up to them. "I told you to leave him alone."

Goldie shrugged. "He wanted to be hit. It would have been rude not to."

Cerise shook her head and led her team off the ship. She ignored the threats and weak shots from the few UN troops who were waiting in the bay as ordered. "Let's go."

She took off up the beach and vanished into the jungle as Kyle and the others finally reached the bridge.

Kyle checked on Grant. He helped the captain to his feet, scanning his swelling face. “Are you okay?”

Grant nodded, holding his hurting jaw. “I asked for something I didn’t want. I just didn’t know it until I got it.”

Kyle thought about Jennifer and grunted. He reloaded his gun, wondering if she would feel the same way after she calmed down and understood what she’d done. “Life hits us hard.”

Grant spat blood into the waste can. “It wasn’t life and I’m gonna pay it forward the first chance I get.”

Kyle chuckled even though he was worried. “Now you sound like an Eagle.”

Grant smiled through the pain. “That’s all I wanted.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

# This Might Be Too Much

Pitcairn Island

1

“**S**he’s close.” Neil rotated the laptop so Angela could see.

Cerise and her team were making their way through the main town now, but they weren’t having an easy time of it. A hundred UN troops were there and all of them had orders to kill her.

Neil admired Cerise’s smooth attacks and quick spells. He also feared them. She was powerful. If she managed to get down here, a lot of their camp might be killed.

The Eagles had most of their camp crouched along the walls now and covered by layers of vests and gear. Eyes peered out through the cracks, waiting for it to be over. The rest of the camp tried to ignore it and go on with their activities, but it was hard. The screams of the dying were pitiful.

Angela narrowed in on Cerise’s companions. “Those two in the rear have to be removed.”

Wade noted it. No one asked why. They assumed Angela had found something in their thoughts that couldn’t be forgiven.

Eagles observed the ugly battle going on above their heads on the monitor, but they could also hear it. The fight was at their door now. The screams and blasts of magic were loud, harsh, unwelcome.

The kids were lined up in front of the camp members, listening. Unlike the normals, they wanted to go fight.

Senior Eagles stayed by the ladders to the sealed hatches to be sure no one got in, but also to stop any of their kids from going out without permission.

Wade was certain there wouldn't be much for them to do. Cerise's team was killing men and women left and right, and those troops were also killing each other. Everyone wanted the prize. *You aren't going to get it.* Wade already knew who the winner was going to be. "She's powerful."

He was concerned about what might happen when the fighting was over. Angela hadn't told them what would happen then and neither had Marc. Wade missed being out with a team, but he was thrilled with how Marc and Angela had chosen to handle this fight. The enemy was doing most of the bloodshed and Safe Haven's people were under the ground with no way in or out until it was all over. Other than the dank, dirty environment, it was perfect. Wade looked around, wondering where Marc had gone.

"He's covering the far hatch, with Kenn and Ed."

"He should be here with you."

“Yes.” Angela tried not to feel betrayed. She smothered the feeling and concentrated. “She’s going through them quickly. This will be over in a few more minutes.”

“What about stragglers all over the island?” Wade wasn’t looking forward to clearing it all again.

“We’ll sniff them out.”

Sitting by her leg, Dog whined. He hadn’t gotten to fight at all this time.

Angela rubbed his soft ear. “We need you here in case someone does get in.”

Dog liked knowing he was being counted on to protect their people.

“You can do a patrol of the tunnels again if you like.”

Dog lowered his nose to the ground and began to track Marc. Like the others, he thought Marc should be here with Angela too.

Angela sighed. *We might have lost him for a while, Dog. And that’s okay. Let him have the space he needs.*

Dog sneezed out disapproval and went through the tunnel without replying.

“Are you sure you want to do this, boss? We can hold out down here for a long time.” Wade didn’t want new people to join them, but even more, he didn’t want Angela to go up and talk to the fierce group slaughtering their own troops.

Angela stood, ignoring her throbbing leg. She pulled on her jacket and zipped it up, glad for the

vest under it. Marc had insisted; she hadn't argued despite the weight. All Eagle jackets had been reoutfitted with vests. "We go as soon as she gets to the airstrip."

Neil frowned. "How do we know she's going there?"

"She's tracking me, Neil. She has been all along, and somewhere up there, is my blood."

Neil couldn't think of any other reason to delay this. "Will Marc be going with you?"

Angela glanced down the dark tunnel where Dog had gone and shook her head. "I don't think so."

Angela limped up the ladder, wishing she'd taken the painkiller Harry had offered. Her leg ached in time to her steps.

Everyone knew there was a big problem between the couple, but they couldn't fix it right now. Against his will, Neil gestured at Wade and Adrian. "Eagle escort for the boss."

Adrian was on his feet and at her side in an instant, drawing disapproval that he ignored.

Sadie didn't even glance up from the game of Checkers that she and Kimmie were playing. "Have fun."

Neil was positive that Adrian would bring Angela back alive. "Open the hatch on my call."

“She was here.” Cerise wiped the bloody debris off her hands and stood. The airstrip was a mess. A small shed had burnt recently and there were several bodies, but no sign of her target, other than the drying blood.

Cerise was exhausted, disappointed, and worried that she’d come all this way for nothing. “Come out and face me!”

The five remaining members of her team scanned the cliff and the tree line they’d come through, covered in blood and minor injuries that needed tending. Bugs buzzed around them, droning in annoying swells that wouldn’t leave them alone.

“Maybe she was on the ship.” Goldie had wanted to search it before they left.

Cerise felt death approaching. She swung around to meet it.

Hausler lunged up from behind the tree trunk where Angela and Stanley had hidden from the sniper. He was covered in foliage, filth, and fury. His wrinkled, stained uniform glared at them in a reminder of who he was as he grabbed Cerise by the neck and jerked, trying to snap it.

Cerise’s clawed hands dug into his face and neck, getting no reaction. Too knackered to use more charms, Cerise depended on her skills as a fighter. She kicked backward and hit his ankle. She elbowed his hard stomach. She butted her head into his.

Haussler laughed at her. “I thought you were such a badass.” His grip on her neck tightened. “Now I think you have only been lucky.”

Cerise felt another snap coming. She tried not to let it happen, but her witch hated being touched even more than being threatened. She sent out a blast of death, using her reserves.

Haussler screamed as he died, eyes bursting, lungs rupturing. He hadn’t thought to bring up his shield.

Cerise’s snap ended before it began. There was no energy left to use. She slid to her knees, wheezing in air as her body started to wither. “I demand a meeting with the alpha!”

Time slowed. *Your demand has been approved.*

Cerise felt immense power approaching. *They didn’t exaggerate. She’s stronger than me and I’m no slouch.*

Goldie brought up his shield as he caught that thought. Anyone stronger than Cerise was a serious threat.

Angela climbed out of the ground with a dozen Eagles behind her. “I’m here.”

The rest of Cerise’s team turned, also bringing up their shields.

Cerise stayed on her knees, staring in hatred and desperation. “Angela.”

Angela limped toward the powerful woman, digging into her thoughts, her memories, and her desires. “Cerise.”

They stared at each other in tense silence as everyone else waited for the next chaos to hit.

Adrian paused. "I know her."

Cerise scowled. "You should. You ruined my cover."

Conner sighed. "Did you screw her too?"

Adrian frowned, looking at Cerise's arm. "I gave her that mark, a long time ago."

Kenn put a hand on his gun. "For what?"

"Hunting me after I escaped from the labs."

"And yet you turned out to be a traitor too."

Angela stepped by Goldie and held a hand out to Cerise. "Welcome to Safe Haven. It will *never* be your home." She shot a small stream of energy into the woman to stop her body from withering further.

Cerise gave a small cry at the mismatched energy and then passed out at Angela's feet.

"Get down!"

"Don't go up there!"

Camp members had followed the Eagles. They fled down the ladder or dropped to their knees at the shout.

Haussler's driver came from behind the same tree where his boss had hidden. He fired, aiming for Angela. The driver wasn't charmed. He was filled with hatred for them. *You should have helped us before Haussler came!*

Goldie threw his knife. The blade stuck in the driver's chest, ending the fight.

Adrian's shield rippled, bouncing the slug away from Angela. It ricocheted into the camp members.

“No!” Conner caught Candy as she fell down the ladder. His magic settled over her before he came to a stop, trading his spare life to save hers.

Harry hurried over to help.

“Come on!” Conner strained, forcing the magic to work for him. “You can’t have her or the babies!”

Harry added his new skills to Conner’s magic, loving being able to help this way.

Candy’s body relaxed as she was healed. Her lids opened; she smiled at Conner. “Can we get married now?”

Conner and Harry laughed as the others frowned or rolled their eyes.

Marc appeared through the dim tunnel. He climbed the ladder, glowering at everyone.

Tension increased as he scanned the area and saw what had happened. He glanced back down into the hole. “Is she okay?”

Conner and Harry both nodded, getting Candy to her feet.

Marc saw Adrian had Angela covered. He stomped toward Cerise’s team, digging into their minds.

Goldie wanted to resist, but it was clear the man would kill them all if he did. He let Marc in, fearing another person for the first time since they’d set sail. The fight with Kyle didn’t count because he hadn’t been afraid until after it was happening.

Marc grunted. “Get them all below. This island isn’t cleared yet.” He glared at the Eagles and cowering camp members. “Now!”

People flooded toward the ladder as the Eagles disarmed Cerise's team and cuffed their wrists.

Angela motioned to Wade. "Get Cerise below. Marc's right. More troops are coming this way."

"What do you want us to do about that?" Wade was angry and eager to fight now. "Do we spare anyone?"

Angela sighed. "No. I didn't give them permission to be here yet."

"What about them?"

Goldie and the others tensed, waiting for her answer.

"Remove the two in the rear and get the rest settled below. We have a lot to discuss."

The two women in the rear took off running.

Marc spun around and fired his rage.

Both women collapsed in a pile of dust and bones.

The rest of Cerise's team froze, not wanting to draw his attention.

Angela smiled calmly. "After you."

The strangers hurried below, still not looking at Marc.

Angela didn't either. She understood Marc's rage and bitterness, but she was starting to feel that way again too. *It's not my fault Kendle went bad. He's right. As long as he blames me, he can't be here.*

Adrian followed Marc, more worried about him than the rest of the trackers and fighters still

exploring their island. Tommy, Wade, Trent, Neil, and Kenn went along to help.

Marc let Adrian and Kenn walk with him, but he didn't talk to them. He pointed when he found someone hiding, then continued his scans as they handled it. *This rage is too hot, too bright. I have to get it under control.*

He locked down on his pain and strode toward the town, where a larger group was gathering, fighting, killing each other.

Adrian wiped his blade on his pants and hurried to catch up with Marc, mentally running through his past words to other Eagles who'd been brought to this point. He didn't think any of those lines would work on Marc. *He's too smart for my bullshit. Someone else might need to handle this.*

Kenn snorted. "If you can't help him, we can't either."

Adrian hated the feeling of failure sinking into his heart. *I'll think of something.*

Kenn believed him. "Think fast. He needs it or he might flip to the dark side."

"That won't happen." Trent was certain of it.

Adrian didn't agree or deny. Marc's mind was a mess right now. It was entirely possible that he would snap if he didn't get relief from the stress that his conscience was subjecting him to. *What can I say to someone who killed their lover?*

"They weren't lovers." Kenn sneered. "Keep trying, traitor!"

“Are you sure? He’s awfully upset for someone who only shared a kiss or two.”

With that ugly thought ringing in their minds, the Eagles stopped talking about it and returned to hoping Adrian could fix the problem.

Adrian dug in a different direction, hoping he and Trent were wrong. If Marc had slept with Kendle, that would mean he hid it from Angela for almost a year. *She won’t forgive that... Will she?*

He didn’t have an answer. *She overlooked the rest of it. This might be too much even for her.*

Tommy stopped, heart clenching. *Kendle’s dead... And Marc did it.*

Pain flayed his nerves and sent rage rushing through his veins. He pulled his rifle and aimed.

Adrian felt it coming. So did Kenn and Marc. All of them turned as Tommy fired.

*Please forgive me.* Adrian took a single step and put his body in front of Marc.

The bullet entered his chest; blood bloomed on his shirt and soaked into the material as he sank to his knees.

Kenn shot Tommy in the head before he could fire again. “Knew we should have killed him as soon as he came back!”

Marc caught Adrian as he fell over. “Damn you!”

Blood sprayed Marc’s face as he laid Adrian on the ground.

Adrian gasped in air and coughed out blood, body tensing as death searched hungrily for him.

Kenn went to make sure Tommy was dead even though he knew his shot was good. *I'm sick of this shit. When do we get to have peace?!*

Marc placed his hand over the wound and opened his mental doors. *Save him.*

Marc's demon closed the cell, refusing. *Now they'll both be gone. Let him die.*

Marc wasn't even tempted. *Do what I say or find a new host.*

Shocked, the demon sent powerful healing orbs in furious blasts that matched his outrage.

Adrian gasped for air, feeling death approach. He forced out words. "Don't leave her!" His lashes fluttered shut. "She needs you."

Marc sent more energy into the healing spell. "Shut up."

Adrian struggled to stay alert. "I forgive you. So will she."

Marc didn't know if Adrian meant Angela, but it didn't matter. He healed the former leader and refused to think about anything else.

"Why would he do that?" Trent kept his hand on his gun in case anyone found them right now. "He hates Adrian."

Kenn shook his head. "He wants to *be* Adrian. It was never about the women, though they've both let us all think that."

"I don't understand."

"Later." Kenn motioned toward the town. "I want this island fully cleared in two hours. We don't have to do the tunnels this time. Meet on the beach."

Wade took the lead. He was already eager to be done and back with Samantha. “Let’s go, Eagles. It’s time for us to fly.”

The Eagles spread out in that deadly V and began walking the jungle as they checked their weapons and tightened their new vests. Adrian didn’t have one, but everyone else did.

Adrian opened his eyes as the pain subsided. He could feel the bullet still lodged in his chest near his lung.

“You’ll need an operation.”

Adrian let Marc help him sit up. He didn’t ask any questions. He just stared at Marc in confused gratitude.

Marc wiped his bloody hands on his pants and stood. He scanned and found the Eagles handling things. He looked at Adrian. “I’m scared.”

“Of what you’ve become and done?”

“Of Angela.”

Adrian understood in a blinding flash of disappointment and resignation. “It’s true.”

Marc nodded curtly.

“And you think Angie will hate you for it.”

“She will. This will always be between us even though that bitch is gone.”

Adrian realized Marc hadn’t been mourning Kendle as much as the past. “When you said she made you do it…”

“I meant going off to fight the government. It never would have happened if she’d sent you instead.”

“They wouldn’t have followed me.”

“I know.”

“She didn’t have a choice.”

“I know that too.”

“But?”

“I cheated on her, once, and then forced Kendle and Quinn to hide it from everyone.”

Adrian connected the dots, breathing better now. “How is that possible? Angela can’t be fooled.”

Marc didn’t know what to say.

Adrian finally did. “I’d bet she’s known all along, Marc. She already forgave you. Now you have to forgive yourself.”

“I don’t know how.”

Adrian held out a hand. “I’ll help you, if you let me.”

Marc took his hand and pulled the former leader to his feet. “This doesn’t mean we’re friends.”

Adrian chuckled, wincing at the leftover pain. “No, we’re closer than that.”

Marc grunted. Neither of them wanted it, but there was no denying it. Their destinies were intertwined and always would be. “You should go see the medics about a surgery appointment.”

Adrian put his hand on Marc’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m staying with you until this island is cleared. You and Morgan can slice me and dice me later.”

Marc laughed, feeling a little better. He walked toward the beach with Adrian behind him, in the bodyguard place. It felt right for the first time.

Adrian agreed. *I'm earning back my honor. That's all I need now. Everything else is secondary to being able to live with myself.*

Marc understood completely.

### 3

“Do a last sweep of our island.”

Saul turned the submarine for another round, not minding the job. It was fun to surface on top of a boat and then watch Greg and Biff empty a magazine into the survivors. They'd avoided those waiting patiently in the bay, but everyone else was a target.

The submarine crew had cleaned and repaired the ship as best they could, but there was still a damp, burnt smell. Charred spots along the walls and floors glared in proof of what had happened. The stink of the bodies that had been piled in the engine room was being ignored by all of them, but it wouldn't be possible for much longer. They would have to surface and dump them soon.

Greg was eager for this ride to end. “What happens if we scuttle this tin can?”

Saul frowned. “You're not keeping a nuclear attack sub? Do you understand what a powerful weapon this is, mate?”

Greg snorted.

Saul flushed. “So you do, but why? Because some sheila said you should?”

“The alpha isn’t just some woman, but no.” Greg wiped his dirty face on his dirty shirt. “No one should have this much power over someone else.”

“Not even if it keeps them from killing you or each other?”

Greg shook his head. “There’s always the chance someone evil will get their hands on it. Unless it will create an ecological disaster, we don’t need it.”

“It might.” Saul scanned the radar and saw nothing. “Radioactive particles cannot be diluted, only disbursed. Sea life around the sunken reactor will absorb it and spread it through the food chain. After Fukushima, there were studies about Bluefin Tuna carrying identifiable radioactive particles from it when they were caught in other parts of the world.”

“Because hot particles aren’t found in nature.”

“Exactly.” Saul was impressed that Greg could converse on the topic. “We should have a tinnie sometime and chat.”

“A beer sounds good.” Greg made the best choice in the situation. “If we put it in a deep trench, the cool water will stop it from melting down, right?”

“Yes.”

“And there isn’t a lot of sea life in deep trenches, right?”

“Not true. We just don’t eat most of what’s down there, but other animals do. And dispersion will still happen.” Saul turned the sub again. “But if you have to do it, yes, a trench would be the best place. But you can’t just drop it in and hope. The pressure down there will crush this hull. I suggest putting it down *near* a trench. Most people skipped those areas long before the war. It should be left alone now. In time, the silt will cover it.”

“Good. Find me one and calculate how long to get there.”

Biff spoke up. “What about the crew, and us?”

“We’ll call for a ride.”

Biff didn’t protest. *I just want this run to be over.*

Greg nodded. *Same.*

Saul checked the maps.

For a minute, Greg was left in his thoughts. He liked the quiet, but he also hated it. His mind kept replaying Violet’s death. *I’m not sure I want to be this way now.*

Saul held up a small map book. “The Peru-Chile Trench is the closest one to us. We can be there in a few hours. If you want to, we could go a day further and drop it near the South Sandwich Trench.”

“What’s the difference, other than how long it will take to get there?”

“Only about a thousand feet.”

“Then we’ll take the closest spot.” Greg didn’t want Marc or Angela to be angry at the choice, but he refused to call in and let them make the decision.

“Send out a signal when we get there. We’ll wait until our ride arrives to sink it.”

Saul shrugged. “It is not so easy to sink a sub, mate.”

Greg stared at him. “But you can, right?”

Saul straightened in his seat. “I can drive, or crash, anything if given enough time and the right tools.”

Greg chuckled. “Fair enough. Let’s talk about those tools.”

## Chapter Thirty

# A. R. F.

### 1

“It’s all over, boss.” Ed spread the good news from the top of the ladder. “The ship and the island are both clear. Marc said they can be sent to the ship now if you want.”

People cheered all through the tunnels as the information was passed on.

Angela smiled at them, spirits lifting a little at the good vibes. “Let them out.”

Ed and Gus went to direct the exodus from the tunnels.

Dog groaned as the kitten took off after the leaving camp members. He grabbed the tiny furball by its head and brought it to the mother cat.

The kitten rubbed the drool against Dog’s big leg, purring.

Dog dropped down right there to keep the kitten from escaping again.

The mother cat went back to sleep.

The kitten burrowed into Dog’s fur, searching for a snack.

Dog nudged it toward its mother, whimpering.  
*Why am I the cat sitter?*

Angela brushed dirt from her arm as it fell. Two hundred people were leaving the tunnels and heading for their cruise ship. The Eagles already knew to make sure they went straight to the Adrianna. They would check off the names as each person went over the pontoon bridge. They would also keep shields over them in case any of the UN defectors now waiting impatiently in the bay decided to attack.

A cooler draft blew through the tunnels as the hatches were opened, bringing groans of relief. It had warmed considerably while they waited for the fighting to be over.

Tonya gathered the cats in a large carrier, ignoring the hisses and yowling of the male and female. The tiny kitten dug under them both for a nipple, eager to grab a meal while they traveled. The little baby had thrived on all the attention he'd been getting from the bored people in these tunnels. A dozen residents had begged Tonya to have him. She'd refused, telling them the cats belonged to everyone as mousers.

Angela stayed in the chair next to their captives, though she wasn't sure yet if they were that or if she was letting them go. This group's intentions hadn't been settled. She motioned at Morgan. "Wake them up."

Morgan injected Cerise instead of using smelling salts. The B-12 shots worked better on their kind and they had more of it than they did the smelling salts.

Cerise came to all at once, body flinching away from Morgan.

Goldie woke slower, not happy that he'd been drugged as soon as he reached the bottom of the ladder. He glared at all of them.

The other captives also groaned and complained as they were woken, but they waited for Cerise to handle it.

Angela made the connection. "You're an alpha, like me."

Cerise rubbed her sore neck. "Not as strong."

Angela could tell that too. "You were the woman shouting for me in my dream."

"And you're the one who told me you don't do dream walking meetings."

Angela rubbed her sore leg, being careful not to dislodge the bandage. "It got you out of my mind."

Cerise sat up and pushed against the wall. Her body didn't want to hold her up yet.

Brittani brought over a chair and quickly backed away.

People packed gear and supplies while they listened. Pam and Brittani were overseeing the cooking area, but they didn't switch off the hotplates that Kenn had rigged up for them. The cruise ship wasn't ready for cooking yet and everyone needed at least one more meal. The smell of soup was a nice addition to the sweaty odors. They were making enough for the entire camp to eat off it all day.

Cerise lowered her mental shields, letting Angela view into her mind. “I don’t want to go through this twice.”

“You won’t have to.” Brittani gestured. “She’s the boss. If she doesn’t like what she sees and hears, you’ll be removed.”

Goldie rubbed his sore arm. “Cerise can’t be killed. You’re better off making a deal.”

Angela snorted. “Anyone can be killed, even a byzan.”

Goldie realized they knew how evolved Cerise was.

Angela gestured. “Feed them while we talk.”

Ralph hurried over with mugs of the hot soup. He handed them to the captives without showing fear. Unlike the others, he couldn’t read their thoughts. He didn’t know he should be scared. It gave the impression of him being braver than he really was.

Cerise scanned the tunnels and found dozens of witnesses watching and waiting.

Most of the senior Eagles were staying until they knew if she was a good guy or another walking corpse. The camp members didn’t want to be topside without Eagle protection. It resulted in a lot of witnesses.

Angela glared. “Get moving!”

Another rush of people hurried toward the ladders.

Cerise sipped the soup, groaning. “Homemade food. Awesome.”

Angela motioned.

Ralph brought over a tray of mugs. “The milk’s powdered. Our cow hasn’t given milk since we found it.”

“Maybe it’s not a cow.” Cerise swallowed a mouthful of noodles, stomach clenching.

“It was old before the war.” Angela took the mug Ralph handed her. She also sipped and watched, waiting for the woman to fully wake before she began her questions.

Goldie spotted the body in the far corner. A hand sticking out drew his attention. “That’s Amira. I gave her that watch.”

Angela caught the flashes of the team who’d come in the RIB. She winced. “We’ve developed a *fire first, ask questions second* mentality. They were flying toward us without trying to communicate. We assumed they were a threat.” Angela sent the images of how the woman had died. “She saved my husband’s life, even if she didn’t know it. She’ll get a proper burial with our other heroes.”

Goldie held onto his anger. “You aren’t the good guys like we have been led to believe.”

Angela’s lids narrowed. “I thought the UN told you we were bad, greedy killers who’d slit your throat for a slice of bread.”

“They did...” Goldie stopped, not wanting to be the one who told their story.

Cerise took over, silently mourning that team. “We sent them out a month ago. They had a bigger

ship. I reckon there was trouble on the way. There were ten of them when they left Australia.”

“That’s where you’re from?”

Cerise nodded. “Unlike the Americas, we’ve had UN forces on our soil since right after the war. It made it almost impossible to organize a fight.”

Angela made the connection. “You’re Cerise Bunting, leader of the Australian Resistance Force.”

“You’ve heard of us?”

“Briefly. Donner wanted to be sent there instead of Canada. He only talked about it once with me.”

Cerise sighed. “We would have been better off with Donner. Director Miles and Director Haussler weren’t easily distracted. It took methods no one should have to employ.”

Angela understood. “You do what life forces you to.”

“Yes. We depended on mental gifts to get us through most of those moments, but the UN had hundreds of hunters and trackers. By the time you Yanks destroyed the International Detention Center, I was the last resistance member within a thousand miles. Then several survivors from Canada came searching for me. I’d had an unfortunate incident the day before. I didn’t hide like I might normally have done.”

Cerise refused to relive her moment of submission to Miles. She locked that door.

Angela flipped it open without breaking a sweat.

Cerise stared in surprise.

Angela shrugged. “I’ve evolved a few more times than you.” Her polite tone faded. “Spill your guts or this conversation is over. You’ll be out of here a few minutes from now.”

Cerise didn’t have a choice. “The UN came ashore while my family was pulling a last harvest from the earth. I was on the sub, in bed with Director Miles.”

Angela stopped her. “I meant from the very beginning. I want your story.”

“Why?”

“It tells me what kind of people you are.”

“You won’t like it.” Cerise wiped dirt from her leg and sat the half-finished mug down.

“I don’t expect to, especially since you just told me you were sleeping with the enemy.”

Cerise understood she wasn’t going to be able to skip anything. “Goldie and I grew up together. He’s descended from the Aborigines who inhabited Australia before the British invaded. I’m descended from the invaders. We lived on neighboring farms in North Queensland. I married his brother.”

Angela shook her head at the people who would have asked questions or argued with her about the words. “Keep going.”

“As we grew up, we figured out we were different. When the UN approached us, we were told we’d be using our gifts to help make the world a better place. As soon as we were taken to the labs, we understood that was a lie, but it was too late to refuse.”

“I tried anyway.” Goldie flexed his arm and rubbed away dried blood. “They burned my farm. It took years to repair the damage.”

“I saw what they’d done to him and I didn’t resist. I told my family I was a soldier in the Australian Defense Force to cover my absences and the occasional hate mail we received. For years, they were safe.”

“Your guilt is glowing brightly. Get it out.”

Cerise drew in a deep breath. “I’d been working with them for years, rounding up our kind. When the war came, I had no choice but to help them collect my neighbors.”

“She’s a traitor!”

“That’s why her arm’s red, like Adrian and Kendle!”

“She can’t stay here!”

“Remove her, boss!”

Angela turned red orbs on the shouting camp members.

Silence fell. They glared at Cerise and hurried out to spread the story.

Angela resumed the conversation, not surprised by Cerise’s revelation or her camp’s reaction. “I assume you didn’t have much of an army there.”

“Not really. When the war happened, there were only about 80,000 troops and most of them were already under UN influence. We just didn’t know it. When they landed, our own army helped them.”

“It was like that everywhere.” Angela gestured at the listening Eagles. “We took in several people

who fought with our government. Almost none of them are here now.”

Cerise didn't ask what had happened. She already knew they'd been killed or died fighting. “The war came to Australia through the UN. We didn't have any nuclear explosions, but it might have been better if we had. The UN decided to use us as a staging post for other invasions and battles. They landed three days after the war; they never left. Two hundred and fifty thousand troops took over the airports, radio and media stations, military bases, police stations, schools. They took over everything, including homes. They moved right in and made themselves at home with our sons, daughters, wives.”

“Didn't you fight back at all?”

Cerise nodded at Ralph's question. “Some of them tried, but the UN had powerful weapons beyond their magic users. Most Australians didn't. The laws made it hard to have the type of gun ownership you Yanks enjoyed.”

Angela held up a hand to interrupt the coming gun debate. “Go on.”

Ralph closed his mouth.

Cerise shrugged. “I'm not sure it would have helped anyway. Without training, and organized groups, a single gun wouldn't have stopped hundreds of troops from clearing each home and business. In other countries, they used food as a lure to get populations to cooperate, but we weren't

starving. They decided brute force would conquer us and it did.”

Camp members still in line to leave listened to the story without sympathy.

That bothered Angela, but she understood. *We’ve all been through hell. It’s hard to have compassion for others when we’ve been hunted for so long and lost so much ourselves.*

“My family farm raised ducks for eggs and grew limes and avocados. When the UN landed, they began stripping all the food storage centers. Then they targeted food production. Farms as big as ours were top on the list.”

“They didn’t want you to be able to survive on your own.”

“Nah. They needed the food to feed the troops they were collecting and sending through their programs. I wasn’t home when they reached my farm. I got back to find it stripped, burnt, and my family gone except for my son and husband. They were injured and starving.” Cerise shuddered. A single red tear rolled over her cheek. “My husband tried to stop them from taking all the food. Our orchards had yielded a nice crop. Our silo was full. It would have carried us through the next year.”

“They killed him.”

Goldie shook his head. “When he resisted, the troops opened fire on everyone else. Cerise lost all her children but one. Her only son was put into the reeducation camp with her husband. Neither of them made it out.”

“They showed me the graves of my daughters.”

Goldie hated her pain. He put an arm around her shoulders and finished that part of their story. “My wife was staying with her family while we were gone. The UN wanted to make sure we were under control. There had been rumors Cerise wasn’t loyal enough. They came there with orders to kill her girls. It didn’t matter that her husband fought them. Haussler said they would have killed them anyway because they were normal.”

“Wait. All your daughters were normal?”

Cerise gave her memories of births, birthdays, and then the sight of their graves. “My husband was normal. Only my son showed signs of being like us, but he hadn’t developed gifts yet.” She sucked in another breath. “I went crazy when I found out. I slaughtered the troops still there waiting for me. Haussler came himself and forced me to go to the reeducation camp. He promised that my son and husband would be treated well if I cooperated.”

“How did he force you?”

“He had Goldie’s pregnant wife. If I’d fought, he would have killed her.”

“And after, you realized they wanted his twins and they wouldn’t have killed her.”

“Yes. He bluffed me and it cost both my remaining family members. He sent them to a different reeducation camp. I never saw them again.”

“Do you know they’re dead? Maybe they escaped or were sent to another country.”

Cerise wiped away fresh tears before they could fall. “I felt it. The resistance contacted me while I was grieving.” She forced a brighter note into her voice. “I found out at least a dozen trackers hadn’t been captured yet. All of them were supposed to do the same thing.” Cerise met Angela’s eye. “Get to Safe Haven anyway we had to and beg for help.”

Cerise rose to her knees. “Please help us. If you don’t, the Australian way of life will end forever.”

Old magic swirled into the air, surrounding the entire group.

Angela reached out and helped the woman to her feet. “We have a council. I don’t make those decisions alone anymore.”

Before Cerise could protest, Ralph snorted. “Yes you do. Decide here and now and the Eagles will make sure you have the support you need when the time comes.”

Angela glared at Ralph. “One more word...”

Ralph paled, realizing he’d interrupted them too many times. He went up the ladder to find something else to do before he forced her to punish him.

Cerise waited tensely for Angela’s answer, but everyone else knew what was coming. Angela hadn’t passed up a chance to help survivors or eliminate evil in the entire time she’d been leading Safe Haven. Some might point to refugees that had been left behind, but a few of them might have survived and would be waiting for their return. *If so, hopefully they’re better people now.*

Sally and her parents were a great example. Even though they'd finally become a part of Safe Haven, they'd been too eaten up with anger and grief from not being found worthy the first time. Angela had wanted to help them all along, but the quick, ugly flashes she'd caught from their minds had told her they would only bring chaos into her camp. She didn't mind that Ray had tried anyway by throwing them medicine, but it had only delayed the inevitable. That trio had been destined to die and even though they'd interfered, it hadn't changed that destiny.

It was still one of the hardest parts of all of this for Angela. She'd been able to change several outcomes over the last year, but only at the particular moment she'd been aiming for. Fate had quickly re-organized itself to deliver the same endings no matter how many times she forced it to. There were other examples. She hadn't been able to tell what was coming for their children, but she'd known there was a problem. She believed the illness she'd suffered right after they left the mountain was originally what was supposed to take those who'd died from the radiation exposure. Those marked souls had died anyway. Adrian had warned her it wasn't possible to change someone's destiny. *He was right, but I'm still going to try because I haven't fully given up hope.* "I'll talk to the council. They may want to interview you. If they agree we should, then we will."

Cerise had been absorbing every detail about Safe Haven as it presented itself. She used that information now. “What’s *your* choice? They’ll follow your lead.”

The witnesses were impressed that Cerise already knew how to get what she wanted.

Angela smiled at the beaten, bloody, bandaged woman. “Safe Haven never refuses to help those in need.”

“And the cost?” Cerise hoped she would be able to pay it. “There’s always a price for deals like these.”

“You’ll spread our light to your part of the world.”

Cerise smiled in relief. “That’s it? Thank you for your honor.”

“Thank you for your courage.”

“What about all the people she’s killed? Doesn’t that matter?” Harry had been reading their thoughts since they came down.

“Yes, it does.” Tobias came through the tunnel, smiling. “Cerise has been letting them go and using bodies from the fight that got them captured. It was often a family member who died in the fight. As you know, we’re infamous for giving our lives for our loved ones. She used that for proof of death. Some, she really killed because they were evil. She feels bad for the good people who died, but anyone else would have killed them all. She did it for us. That’s how we escaped Joel the first time.”

Cerise shook hands with Tobias. “I see you and the wives made it to safety.” She nodded to Daniella and Anna, and got smiles in return.

Tobias put an arm around each of his wives. “Safe Haven is everything we were told.”

Charlie had tried to be quiet, but he couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Where are they keeping the captives?”

Goldie and Cerise both frowned.

“What captives?”

“There wasn’t time.”

“You don’t have any captives?”

Cerise shook her head at the upset teenager who looked like he hadn’t slept in days. “They planned to take younger Eagles who could be retrained, but it all happened too fast. As far as I know, they didn’t take any.”

Angela pointed the woman toward the beds they’d placed in the corner. “Finish your food and rest. I only ask that you respect our rules while you’re here.”

“I can do that.” Cerise glanced at Goldie and the others. “If you want to stay, now’s the time to ask. She didn’t forbid *you* from joining.”

Goldie shook his head. So did the three other teammates.

Cerise hadn’t expected it. She sat by Goldie instead of going to the cots. “Thank you.”

Goldie grunted, anger fading. “You should have killed me.”

“I’m going to help you save your children. My nephew and niece deserve to have a free life.”

“And my wife.”

Cerise sent out a wave of comfort. “I’m sorry. Haussler wanted to hurt you with it later, after you delivered my body. Your wife died during the birth. They didn’t need her anymore. They didn’t even try to save her. Your twins are alive, but they aren’t doing well. They might not survive.”

Goldie began to cry. “No!”

Cerise held him, aware of the sympathetic glances from the Eagles and the alpha. It made the pain more vivid.

Hatred grew hotter for their enemies. Angela caught her eye. *Keep letting them feel your pain. It will help me find recruits for your cause.*

Cerise stared in surprise. *Goldie’s right. You aren’t good.*

Angela moved toward the ladder, eager to feel the sun on her skin. “No. If I were, all of us would be dead and you would have made the trip for nothing.”

People slid aside as a patrol came through the tunnel.

Goldie cringed, bringing up his shield. “It’s a wolf!”

Angela paused. “I guess introductions are in order. Bloody Dog, meet our often bloody Dog.”

Cerise froze as the wolf sniffed her boots.

Dog sneezed on her and then lifted his leg.

“Dog!”

The wolf came to Angela and stared up at her with angry golden eyes. *What? You're my alpha. She's an imposter.*

“She’s a guest in our camp.”

Dog sniffed the air again. *Guest or prisoner?*

Angela shrugged. “There isn’t much difference.”

“She’s talking to the wolf!” Goldie was distracted from his pain. “Is it talking back to her?”

Dog looked over at him. *Don't stay long, guest. I don't like any of you.*

“I heard him in my mind! He’s one of us!”

Cerise chuckled. “I heard you guys collected strange gifts.”

“And that’s putting it nicely. I’ll be copying that memory charm of yours too, but don’t use it while you’re here.”

“I won’t.” Cerise didn’t care if Angela copied that skill. She was just relieved that Safe Haven’s powerful leader was willing to help them.

Angela stepped aside for Cate and Cody to go up the ladder.

Cody glanced at Cerise with red eyes and then looked at Angela. He shook his head.

Angela nodded to him. “Duly noted. Go play.”

Cody climbed the ladder quickly, eager to dig in the sand on the beach while they waited in line to get on the ship.

Cerise had caught it. “What was that all about?”

Angela saw no reason to lie or hide the truth. “You’ve been denied entry by three of us now.”

Cerise laughed. “The wolf doesn’t count. And he’s just a kid.”

“Dog’s judgement is as final as mine, and Cody Brady is the next leader of Safe Haven.”

Cerise was shocked. “Don’t you have a son and an enforcer who should inherit that job?”

“They don’t really want it.”

“Like that matters.”

“It does to me.” Angela went up the ladder. “We pick ourselves and fate provides the path. I know that for sure. I’m living proof.”

Chapter Thirty-One

# It Hasn't Changed

1

Ian handed Marc a sheet of paper from his notebook. “Sorry, man. I can’t do it anymore.”

Marc read it, already knowing what it said.

*I hereby resign from the Eagles.*

Ian flashed to Cerise hitting him with her charm. He’d only turned his back for a moment, distracted by Jennifer’s screams, but it had been enough. Cerise had blasted him, missing the two kids. In that instant, he could have been killed. His mind refused to do this anymore.

Marc stored the paper and opened his mouth to tell Ian it was okay.

Debra tapped his arm.

Marc took the nearly identical note from her. “Why?”

Debra signed as she thought it. *They don’t listen to me when it matters, and I can’t even make a radio call! I’m useless as an Eagle.* Debra had spent the battle underground, carrying supplies and guarding hatches, but she hadn’t been useful and the feeling had lingered.

“That’s not true. You’ve done a good job.”

*I had a lot of help.* Debra shrugged. *I want something that makes me feel good.*

“You mean like a cook or medical officer?”

*I mean as a test subject for the medics. Let’s find out if they can fix my ears.*

Ian smiled at Debra. “We’re both off duty now. Want to go get a drink?”

Debra grinned. *I thought you’d never ask.*

Marc watched them walk away, surprised but also amused. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“I did.” Wade went by Marc. Wade had dropped the boys off to Daisey and the other den mothers. They had a double Eagle guard right now. No one was getting into the kids’ area without serious bloodshed. “She’s been ogling him for weeks, hoping he’d notice her.”

“How did I miss that?”

“You assumed she was playing hard to get with Theo.” Wade slowed to let Marc join him. “So did Theo.”

“What about Bernice?”

Wade chuckled. “She wants Ian too, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“She hasn’t faced it yet, but I’ve seen her watching him. She waited too long, though. Ian finally realized Debra’s perfect for him.”

“How did he come to that realization? And when?” Marc was eager for the distraction.

“He saw her talking to Laura’s nieces. He learned sign language. Debra was telling them she

wanted to resign, but she didn't want to disappoint everyone. I guess Ian felt a connection with her."

"Will it work out for them?"

Wade smiled as Samantha came into view on the beach. "A year from now, they'll have a baby and be happy. Just guessing of course, but I am rather good at reading the signs."

Marc was enjoying the peaceful moment. "What about Lisa and Greg?"

Wade's good mood fell. "You forced him into that, Marc. He doesn't want her. When they break up, it will be ugly and she'll hate him for a long time."

"Damn."

"Yep. If you want to head that off, take him with you and let them drift apart without the nasty public break up."

Marc paused. "Take him with me where?"

Wade made a face. "Don't play stupid with me."

"I'm not playing." Marc understood all at once. "You think I'm leaving."

"I *know* you're leaving."

"And where am I going?"

Wade gestured toward the beach, where Angela was getting ready to start interviewing the UN troops. "As far from her as you can get."

Wade went down the ladder and jogged over the bridge to join Neil and Samantha at the table they'd set up for the council.

Marc stayed on the top deck, hating himself for being a coward.

Angela glanced up, but she didn't pressure him. She sent out a wave of love, then turned to the new people.

Marc went toward the bridge, not sure how to face everything that had happened. They'd cleared the ship and gotten the camp members below, but there was still a lot of cleanup to do. Angela's volunteers were already starting on it. The smell of bleach was killing the smoke and smells of blood. *I wish I could clear my mind as easily.*

Tim came to Marc. "Grant got a call from Greg. The sub's a loss. They need a ride."

Marc scanned Tim; the bruises were gone now, but the man had returned to wearing his white collar. "You have a location?"

"Grant said it's a few hours from here. Greg said they can wait a bit if you need time."

Marc nodded. "I think Angela is sending a crew out later for a survivor sweep. They can pick him up."

"Cool. Greg also said he has ten crewmen who need to be evaluated for entry."

Marc sighed. *I should have known he would do what Angela wanted.* "Anything else?"

"He's sorry, but Eagles don't murder people."

Marc winced. *If only that were true.*

Tim wanted to offer comfort, but he wasn't sure it would be welcome. He decided Marc needed space. He went back up to Grant. He was the gopher right now.

Marc walked to the rear of the ship. The pirate vessels were still burning, though they would be at the bottom of the ocean soon. The traps he'd designed had worked perfectly. "I didn't think she would do it. I made the plan and I followed through, but even while it was happening, I couldn't believe she'd done it."

"I feel the same way."

Marc saw Shawn leaning against the rear wall of the ship, mostly out of sight of land.

Shawn grimaced, rubbing the trim scar on his shoulder that still ached. "Life's ugly. And it happens fast. One minute, we were a happy family. Now, I'm single again and Missy hates Pam. We can't even be in the same room."

"Maybe you should forgive her and try again."

Shawn shook his head. "Can't. I faced too much after that night. In ten years, Missy will be my wife. It's better that I don't have another woman in the middle of it."

Marc didn't like any of the relationships that involved underage kids, even if they hadn't happened yet. Just knowing they might was bad enough.

"I'm leaving."

Marc stared, mouth dropping open. "What?"

"I can't be here while she's growing up. I'm leaving. I'll be back when she's older."

Marc's respect for Shawn went up. "Are you sure? We can keep you two apart."

“No, you can’t.” Shawn motioned to a shadow Marc hadn’t spotted yet.

Missy stepped forward, ready to fight for him to stay.

Marc interrupted it. “Don’t take away his honor, Missy. You won’t want him without it—I know.”

Missy’s eyes filled with tears. She ran for the front of the ship, sobbing.

“That was hard. Thank you.” Shawn drew in a ragged breath. “If you need an extra hand when you go, I’m available. When that run’s done, I might stay there and help them rebuild.”

“Why does everyone think I’m leaving?”

Shawn shrugged. “Angela told us not to guilt you into staying. It’s not us. It’s you.”

“I have no plans to leave this island.”

“Do you have plans to stay?”

Marc scowled.

“Exactly.” Shawn held out the cigarette he’d taken from the last man he’d killed and tossed over the side. “She knows our thoughts before we do, sometimes. All of us hate that, but it can be helpful.”

Marc refused the smoke. “How can it be helpful if you hate it?”

“It’s like medicine. If it tastes awful, you know it probably works.” Shawn inhaled a last time, then flipped the butt over the side. He leaned on the rail to watch it fall. “She said we can all be free now. A lot of us are thinking about leaving.”

“That doesn’t make sense. We’ll have peace here now.”

“Yep.”

Marc frowned. “They don’t want peace.”

Shawn shrugged, thinking about how it felt to wake up from Cerise’s charm. He hadn’t been that upset, but Ray was still fuming over it. “We want peace for our camp. Giving up all this action is harder. Even the few who feel like they’ve had too much of it are already thinking about how bored they’ll be without it.”

“What else did you find out?”

“You may not want to know.”

Marc’s shoulders stiffened. “Nothing can hit me as hard as I’m already hitting myself.”

“I wouldn’t be sure.” Shawn looked over his shoulder, meeting Marc’s eye. “The camp wants you to go.”

“Because death follows me.”

“No. So Adrian can make things the way they used to be.”

Marc laughed harshly.

Shawn turned back to the water. “I agree, but they do think he can give them peace and satisfy them. Even Kyle wants you to go and he’s one of your biggest fans.”

Marc did feel that one, but it wasn’t enough to match his misery. “Why? He’s leaving too.”

“He blames you for Jennifer’s evolution. You put her on this ship where she was in danger again.”

Marc made a face. “She would have done the same if she’d been on land. As soon as she found

out the reset is coming even though we won she would have figured it out.”

“So you based a plan around reactions and they did what you thought they would.”

Marc started to get the point. “You’re saying I would have gone off to fight the government and met Kendle, even if Angela hadn’t sent me.”

“I’m saying you can’t blame the boss for something you would have done anyway.” Shawn turned, staring at the one part of the beach that he could see from where they stood. “We all have a destiny, Marc. Kendle’s was to get us here and she fulfilled it. Let her soul rest in peace and move on.”

“I can’t!” Marc controlled his anger, but the misery spilled out in thick waves. “I loved her.”

“The things we love are what kill us in the end. I don’t remember who said that, but it’s absolutely true. At some point, Pam will give up her life for mine and I’ll have to try to live with that.”

“But she’ll do it willingly!” Marc’s wall collapsed. “I killed her, Shawn. I held her under the water and drowned her.”

Shawn assumed guilt was Marc’s biggest problem. “You know she would have killed Angela. You had to pick between them and you made the right choice.” Shawn straightened. “Like I did when I ended things with Pam. I know it isn’t the same, but I do love her and I know she loves me. I’ll spend years missing that relationship and then I’ll carry the guilt for her death. It’s an ugly future that I don’t want.”

“You can try to change it.”

“And I will, but we both know it’s impossible to change some destinies.” Shawn walked by him, headed for the ramp. “I plan to spend my life doing good things so I have some comfort when those ugly times come.”

Marc stayed at the rail, thinking about Shawn’s words. *Maybe that’s how I can forgive myself. I need to help others until my heart doesn’t clench anymore when I think about it.* Marc sighed. *And I’m sure that will be an awfully long time.*

## 2

“Make him stay, Alpha! Please!”

As much as she wanted to ease Missy’s pain, and her own, Angela couldn’t. “We’ll spend the time making ourselves into better people while they’re gone. When they come home, maybe enough time will have passed for them to be at peace.”

The waiting troops observed and stayed quiet, blocking their thoughts from all the descendants trying to read them. Their fears about Safe Haven were clear, but they still held hope they would be accepted and become part of the only camp that had been able to resist the UN.

“He said years!”

Angela hugged the girl. “I know.”

Missy's sobs were hard to handle without joining her. Angela gently pushed the child toward Adrian. "Can you?"

Adrian led Missy away from the tables so Angela could work. He ignored the chest pain as he knelt down. "Piggyback time."

Missy climbed up, tears rolling over her little cheeks. "I want him to stay!"

Angela's heart clenched. *Would it help if I beg?*

She sighed again when there wasn't an answer. *Fine.* She wiped her face and forced a polite smile at the line of troops waiting nervously to be evaluated. "Fill out the paper. Take it to the first person at the end of the table. If your sheet makes it down to me, you have a chance. If it gets thrown away, you need to go wait on the pontoon bridge for a ride out of here."

The strangers relaxed a little, glad to hear she wasn't going to kill them if they weren't approved to join.

Angela eyed the Eagles waiting on the bridge, then got to work.

The three Eagles on the bridge chatted lightly and watched every move the strangers made. They felt the weight of the extra magazines in their pockets. When Angela made the call, they would obey. Evil would not be allowed to leave their island and spread.

Neil joined them on the bridge after leaving Wade with Samantha. She was helping Angela evaluate the troops. Neil didn't like it, but he

understood she was needed. *And unlike Marc and the rest, I'm not fighting that anymore. Samantha will end up high in Safe Haven's hierarchy and I'll support her all the way. Then she'll never think of leaving or ending our relationship.*

Samantha looked over at him. *I wouldn't even if you tried to forbid me from doing my job. We're going to be together forever.*

Neil beamed at her. *I love you.*

Samantha blushed, body warming. *Three weeks left.*

Neil's body lit up.

Wade frowned, heart pumping nervously. He didn't add a wisecrack like he might have if someone else had been involved. He wasn't willing to risk Neil's wrath in any way.

Ed scanned the peaceful meeting and the smoke coming from ships burning in and around the bay. "Who will we fight now that the UN's gone?"

Neil's warm feelings fled. "Now we just have to fight each other."

"Stop it already." Morgan couldn't take more drama, good or bad. His nerves were shot.

Everyone quieted and concentrated on the job at hand. Fifty people were waiting to be approved or denied, and another dozen stragglers were arriving by lifeboat and raft. It would take hours to get them all into the quarantine zones that Kenn was busy setting up in the main town.

Theo and Monica went by them, talking about their plans for a much longer dock that would hold

all the ships they now had. They were about to go start stripping the few damaged boats that hadn't sunk. Greg's idea to reclaim that material for building on their island had been accepted. Besides the one pirate ship they'd kept, and the cruise liner, the new people had come in a dozen boats that would need a place to rest between uses. Their armada had changed forms and grown.

Silence fell as Jennifer came down the beach with Kyle behind her. He was carrying both kids. Jennifer had her hand on her gun belt. The feeling of power coming from her dwarfed most of them.

Angela pointed at the chair next to her, then lifted a brow.

Jennifer took it, glaring at the strangers who stared in apprehension. "When you fill out those papers, tell me everything you know about the reset."

Angela approved. She wasn't upset that Jennifer had forced her evolution. *I counted on it, like Marc. When they all leave the island, Jennifer will help me build a future we can be proud of.*

Kyle was relieved when Jennifer didn't immediately deny that. *Maybe we can stay.* He hadn't wanted to leave, but making her happy was more important than his own desires.

Jennifer controlled her new need to lash out at all of them. "Stop it. I can't take more drama right now."

Morgan looked at her, surprised that she'd used his words. *Are you staying?*

Jennifer shrugged at his mental question. “That has not been revealed.”

Morgan refused to accept that answer even one more time. “Well, I’m not going. You do what you want. I have a home here and I’m not giving it up, even for you.”

Kyle gawked in shock.

So did Angela and the Eagles.

Jennifer smiled, heart starting to calm. “Thank you.” She hadn’t given him the scroll information yet, but she would when things settled down. *I always keep my word.*

Morgan stared in confusion. “For telling you no?”

“For having loyalty to the dream. I wish more of us did.” Jennifer motioned the first person toward the table. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Wait.” Cerise pointed at two people in the rear of the line. “They’re with me. They won’t be staying here.”

Angela motioned for the Eagles to separate the two resistance members. She caught flashes of their time on the flagship and was glad they didn’t want to stay. Albert and Denese had helped Haussler conquer a lot of people since the war. They’d passed information and helped a few resistance members, but they’d been too scared to kill Haussler because they valued their lives more than freeing the future from a tyrant. The Eagles wouldn’t forgive that.

“They’re drugged.” Jennifer frowned at Angela. “Or they were. It’s wearing off now.”

Angela still couldn't find it in her heart to refuse them even though they'd had this issue with Ramer and it hadn't worked out in the end. "We'll try to help them."

Jennifer waved them forward. "Next!"

Cerise liked it that some of the addicted troops were going to get another chance to have a normal life.

Eagles began to clap as Stanley came down the hill and took up a guard post next to Angela. He flushed under their approval and stood straighter, ignoring the pain in his side. It felt wonderful to be the hero this time.

Ray approached the table. "Permission to speak my mind?"

Angela nodded.

"I think you should kill them all, starting with her." He pointed at Cerise. "She charmed the crew and tried to take over the ship. She can't be trusted."

"Your opinion is noted."

Ray's fists clenched. "That's it? She gets away with it?"

Goldie scowled at Ray. "You should be quiet and let your alpha make her own choices."

Ray pulled his knife and tossed it. The blade sank into the table next to Goldie's hand. "Let me give you a choice. Pull that knife and slit your own throat before I get to you."

"Ray."

Ray paused, shoulders stiffening. "Not now!"

Grant put a hand on Ray's shoulder. "Stop. I'm fine. It's just a black eye."

"He hit you!"

Grant went to the table to retrieve Ray's blade. He shrugged. "I should have been expecting it." He pulled the blade free, grinning at Goldie.

Goldie shook his head. "You're not mad? I think you're all nuts."

"Yep." Grant laughed as he swung with his empty hand, nailing Goldie in the mouth.

Goldie fell out of the chair, groaning.

"You should have been expecting that."

Eagles laughed.

Cerise observed in surprise, encouraged by the behavior. "I didn't think he had that in him."

"Neither did he. That's why it happened." Angela didn't feel like explaining that Grant had begun to question his own manhood. "Next!"

### 3

"Are you all set here?"

"Yes." The town was covered in tents, a wired perimeter, and huge spotlights. Kenn thought it looked like a prison camp, but he didn't say that. The precautions they'd chosen were necessary. Half the people Angela had approved were descendants and the rest were fighters.

Kenn stepped aside to let Tonya see into the large tent they'd set up in the middle of the town. "They'll come here first and get changed, medicated

if needed, and get a bag of gear. They'll go to the other side and pass through a checkpoint. Then they'll be directed into their zones."

Tonya swept the other tents, frowning as she remembered the zones in the mountain. "I'm glad our people are all on the ship now." Until they finished rebuilding the town, Safe Haven was once again cruise ship-bound.

Kenn put an arm around her shoulders. "It won't be like that this time."

"I hope not." Tonya handed him a bag. "Brittani and Pam sent food. They gave the other cooks the rest of the day off."

Kenn wasn't surprised. Pam had been avoiding all of them since Shawn's breakup, and Brittani was feeling guilty about Trinity's death. "I'll let the boss know. She'll send someone to talk to them."

Gus came from the tent next to theirs. "Brittani will be fine in a couple days. It isn't the first time someone has tried to kill her." He tugged up his loose pants, proud of himself for the weight loss and muscle gain. "But if she does need it, send her husband."

Kenn nodded. "Agreed."

Trent stopped by them, swiping sweat from his neck. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure."

"Not you. *Her*."

Tonya tensed as she read his thoughts.

So did Kenn. "Don't."

Trent had to. “I saw it all. Descendants will pick it from my thoughts eventually. You know that.”

Kenn’s mind went to escape plans.

Tonya smiled down at the sleeping infant in the holder on her chest. “I removed him before he went on a shooting spree like Darren.”

Trent breathed a sigh of relief. “I knew it was something like that.” He ran a gentle hand over the baby’s head and walked off, whistling.

Kenn stared at Tonya in surprise.

Tonya went into the tent, putting it from her mind.

Kenn followed, refusing to ask if that was the truth or a perfect lie. *I can’t believe I didn’t think of it.*

Tonya went to the desk they’d set up. She sat in the only chair. “I’m almost ready for my first test. I just need a live training session.”

Kenn thought about it. “Aren’t the medics going to operate on Adrian later?”

“Yes. Can you get me an invite?”

“Why me?”

“You and Morgan are friends now. We all see it.”

Kenn grinned. It felt great. “I’ll mention it to him, but you can just show up. They’ll like that.”

Tonya sighed in happiness. “Life’s good for some of us. You know?”

“I do.”

Tonya chuckled. “Hold onto that phrase.”

Kenn laughed at the reminder. “In a couple of months, you’ll be Mrs. Kenn Harrison. Are you still sure it’s what you want?”

Tonya’s mirth faded into longing. “There’s only one thing I want more.”

Kenn was drawn, hard. He made a joke to cover it. “What is it? I’ll give you anything; make it a challenge.”

“A little girl so our son has someone to grow up with.”

Kenn’s eyes sparked. “You get the clearance from the medics and I’ll be there without bells on, or anything else.”

“Ah, hell.” Jonny laughed as he entered. “Save the mushy stuff for when you’re alone.”

Laughter echoed from the tent and soothed the three dozen new camp members being brought to the quarantine zone. They entered the large tent and waited for instructions as their escorts surrounded the canvas and hoped the fighting was over for another day.

A volley of gunshots from the beach destroyed the good vibes and reminded them that death was always their shadow.

“She didn’t let them go.” Rico had been approved to join. He stared at Kenn in fear. “She killed them all.” Rico’s bulky body twitched, showing signs of withdrawal and fear.

Kenn shrugged. “You live by the bullet, you end up biting it at some point. That’s been the law of the land for centuries; it hasn’t changed.”



Chapter Thirty-Two

# That Makes Two Of Us

The Adrianna

1

“**W**e won.”

A tremendous cheer echoed through the ballroom and spilled out into the night. It traveled to the island and faded.

Angela smiled. “Our three years of peace starts now.”

More cheers and shouts broke the quiet and sent animals fleeing deeper into the jungle.

“We’ve earned this long break. Appreciate it.” Angela went straight to the next item as the camp enjoyed being around electricity and appliances again. “I have a run for those who aren’t ready for that yet.”

They quieted. Most of the camp had gotten a shower and clean clothes, then hurried here for a group meal. They’d been expecting her to make a statement, but not an announcement of a new run, a new fight.

Cerise and her team were still filthy and exhausted. Eagle guards lined the walls on both sides of their table, watching with hard eyes that

couldn't wait for them to be gone. Only a few senior men had stayed in the town to monitor their quarantine zones. They didn't really care if the new people fought with each other or had medical emergencies. The general consensus was that Marc had been right all along; the strangers weren't welcome.

Cool air conditioning flowed over the large room, cooling skin but it didn't temper the anger. Signs of the rage illness were everywhere Angela looked, but this mood had little to do with that. It wasn't easy to forgive someone who'd wanted you dead just the day before. "We've secured our little corner of the globe. They'll leave us alone. Until they regroup or trigger the reset. Then we'll have to do it all over again."

Mutters and anger filled the room this time.

Angela pointed at the front table, where Cerise and Goldie were having a hot meal and ignoring the hostile glares from the camp. "The UN took over their country and enslaved them. They took their babies. They forced them to come. Not everyone wanted to be here. They were told their families would be slaughtered if they refused."

"That's not our problem!"

"Let them fight their own war!"

"A lot of people feel that way. They let us do it alone for a year. But Safe Haven doesn't ignore tyranny. Effective immediately, I'm planning a run to Australia, to help Cerise. If you want to be part of that, put your name on the sheet hanging by the

door. You have until dawn and then the signup period will be closed. The mission team will leave in two days.” Angela held up a hand. “If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. But do not discourage others from following their hearts. You can stay; they can go. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

Angela sipped her hot tea, waiting for the protests and agreeing shouts to subside. Most of her camp would never be Eagles. She understood that now. Those who decided to risk their lives to help others were a rare, special breed of people. *And I’m grateful for every one of them.* “We’ll be on this ship for about a week while our crews build the basic structures. If you can’t stand that thought, you can camp on the island. Stay out of the bunkers. I have plans for them.” She checked her list to see if she’d covered everything.

At the front table, Cerise kept track of the signup sheet, hoping at least a few of the powerful men and women here would agree to return with them.

No one went to the door.

Cerise’s heart clenched. *We need help. Why won’t they help us?*

“*You* haven’t asked.” Kyle was a few seats down the row and still pissed at Marc, Angela, and Cerise. “Eagles don’t throw away their lives for nothing.”

“It is not nothing!” Cerise stood up, glaring around at the sullen people who glared right back. “We were told Safe Haven helps those in need.”

“We used to and then you all agreed to come here and kill us.” Ray hadn’t even considered going.

Cerise controlled her anger and disappointment. She looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer wanted to be nasty too, but she couldn’t. “I’ll go...if no one else will.”

Chaos erupted. The noise drowned out everything else.

Angela sent a sharp blast of pain through the crowd. It landed where she aimed, silencing the loudest of the protestors. “She can make her own choices!”

Jennifer shrugged, feeling Kyle and Morgan’s outrage. “I keep seeing Darren holding my baby hostage. How can we not help them and then still call ourselves the good guys?” She stood up, meaning to go put her name on the sheet.

“Jenny.” Morgan put a hand on her wrist, touching her openly for the first time. “Let the Eagles carry this one. Stay here with your kids and live.”

“I can’t, unless I know she’s covered.” Jennifer stared at Cerise. “Goldie showed me how your girls died. I’m sorry.”

Cerise tried to smile. It came out in a sob. “They shot them down like animals because I refused to come here.”

“Your girls died for us, in a way.”

“But you can’t go. I won’t allow it.” Cerise shoved to her feet, spilling her drink. “I’ll be in my assigned room.”

Silence followed her out into the hall where her guard, Jeff, led her to the cabins on the bottom deck.

Angela motioned. “She lost her son and her husband in the reeducation camps. She came here because she knows we’re the only ones who can save her country.”

“I’ll go.” Gus had hated being out of the action for this run.

“No!” Brittani glared at him.

So did Bernice.

Daryl frowned. “It’s his choice.”

“He’s doing it out of guilt. That’s not right.”

“That’s not true. I like fighting. I’ll be bored here in a month, let alone three years.” Gus went to the sheet and put his name on the first line.

Other men and women rose to do the same.

Missy began to cry as Shawn got up to join them.

Jennifer sat, confident she’d guilted enough of them into helping.

Silence fell as Marc stood up. He didn’t look at Angela as he signed his name.

Angela forced herself to smile. “The team has a leader. Anyone else?”

More Eagles rose, making a line to the door.

Marc walked out.

Angela let him go, heart breaking. “The mission team will meet in the small gym at dawn tomorrow. Everyone else gets to sleep in. That’s great, right?”

“Have you heard from Greg?” Lisa caught up to Marc as he neared the medical bay.

“He’s fine. Molly and Theo are going to pick him up shortly.”

“Good. He’s okay, though?”

Marc stopped, facing her. “You know I forced him, right?”

Lisa nodded. “He told me we aren’t serious.”

“But?”

She smiled. “But I want him. A fling can turn into something serious over time.”

“That won’t happen.” Marc was tired of feeling bad. The truth spilled out. “He wants Angela. You’re just a substitute.”

Lisa grinned. “Awesome.”

Marc stared. “Awesome?”

She nodded. “Angela won’t ever want him. He can pine for her while dating me. In time, he’ll see he won’t ever get her and we’ll settle down together.” Lisa went around him and resumed her jog to the entertainment floor.

A reluctant smile stretched Marc’s lips. “I think the women in this camp are about a million times smarter than the men.”

“Then why do we always get left behind?” Tonya came from the employee hall, hands going to her hips. “Kenn just signed up. Make him take his name off the sheet. I need him here.”

Marc shook his head. “I want him as my XO.”

“Why? So you can get him killed?”

Marc held the door to the medical bay for her. “If I wanted him dead, he already would be.”

Tonya believed him. “Then why?”

“Because it was either him or Adrian. This is a rough run. I need an XO I can count on.”

“Then take Adrian.”

Marc led the way to the surgery room they’d put together two weeks ago. “I want him here to help Angela. She needs a good XO too.”

“The Eagles won’t allow that.”

“They will after he proves he can be trusted again.”

“How’s he supposed to do that? The fighting’s over.”

Marc didn’t answer as he grabbed a mask and entered the operating room.

Tonya slid a mask on too, frowning at him. She went to Harry instead of pushing Marc for something he wasn’t going to agree to. “Can I help?”

“Shhh...” Harry sliced into Adrian’s skin again.

Tonya grabbed a sponge and wiped away the blood.

Harry probed the wound with his fingers and dug out the slug. He dropped it on the floor and sent healing energy into the hole.

Tonya added her gift to it, hoping she could heal. Multi-colored orbs shot out in a steady stream.

Marc observed, storing the information. They’d lost a healer in Kendle, but Tonya and Harry had taken her place. Safe Haven was covered.

“I’m going with you.” Harry let go of the magic and staggered back.

Marc nodded. “Chief medic for the run.”

Harry grinned. “Really?”

“Yes. Morgan decided to stay here and help the boss.”

“Great.” Harry looked at Tonya. “Can you finish for me?”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “You mean give him a shot, a bag of blood, and send him on his way?”

“Yes, though Conner’s coming for the blood part.”

The door opened. Conner came in.

Marc frowned at the teenager. He was still covered in Candy’s dried blood. “Get a shower after this.”

“I will.” Conner had just come from the ballroom. “She’s eating and laughing like nothing happened. I kept these clothes on to remind her that she almost died because she went into an uncleared area.”

“I see.” Marc watched as Conner let Harry stick him with the I.V. needle. “I hear you’re tired of being our blood bank.”

Conner snickered.

“Your dad will start donating in a week or so. Once he’s recovered from this.”

“Good. I can use the break. My arm looks like I spend all my time shooting up.”

Marc winced. “We have new people who’ve been doing that, along with popping pills and

smoking anything that will burn. Stay away from them.”

Conner frowned at him. “Why would I spend time with addicts?”

“Some of them are your age.”

“Okay.” Conner wasn’t tempted. “I thought about going with you, but I’d rather be here.”

“We have enough people now.” Marc scanned the pristine room. “How soon can he be moved?”

“The drugs will wear off in about half an hour. I only gave him half the normal dose.” Harry checked on Adrian’s breathing. “Do you need him for something? I can wake him up now. He’s fine. He just needs time for his body to process the blood Conner’s giving him.”

“I’ll stop by later and talk to him then.”

Harry paused. “Angela wants him off the ship as soon as possible. She already has his escort standing by.” He gestured at the rear corner of the room.

Daryl waved through the plexiglass.

Marc considered overruling that and chose not to. He headed for the exit. “Tell him someone will be by his bunker with instructions for his future here.”

Conner stood up. “Wait. What future? He’s still banished, right?”

Marc kept going.

Harry shrugged when the boy looked at him. “He saved Marc’s life. I’m not sure, but he might be allowed to be part of our camp again.”

Conner refused to let himself hope. He sat and made a fist to get the blood pumping faster.

“At the very least, you can spend time with him now.” Harry knew how much Conner wanted that.

Conner reluctantly denied it. “Not until he proves he’s one of us. I’m not risking my life here with Candy on a maybe.”

Harry was proud of him.

So was Daryl.

Conner said a silent prayer, hoping his dad had changed. *We need you to be good again. And if you can't, you need to leave. Being a Mitchel isn't an excuse anymore.*

### 3

“There you are.”

Marc winced as Charlie flipped on the main light in the bar. He finished the beer and tossed the bottle into the can in the corner. The loud clank and sound of glass breaking brought the guards.

Charlie sent them away. “I dropped something.”

Trent and Jonny returned to their posts. The camp was enjoying the entertainment floor. It was loud, but not rowdy.

“You can’t leave.” Charlie took the stool across from Marc. “Mom’s pregnant. She needs you here.”

Marc got another beer from the cooler at his side.

Charlie eyed the trashcan. “How many of those have you had?” It was hard to tell from all the glass and garbage.

“A few.” Marc belched and twisted off the top.

“Are you drunk?”

“Not yet.” Marc downed half the bottle and slapped it on the counter. Foam ran over the neat bar.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I have a run.”

“You’re running away, you mean.”

Marc tossed the cap into the can. “So?”

“So we need you here.”

“Not like this.”

Charlie was disappointed. “I used to think you were stronger than anyone here.”

“No one’s stronger than your mom, kid. She can slaughter a thousand men and then smile at you over dinner.”

Charlie wasn’t sure how to respond. “Are you mad at mom?”

“A little. Not as much as I was, but yeah.”

“Does she deserve it?” Charlie wasn’t completely sure why they were feuding, but he assumed it centered around Kendle’s death.

Marc sucked in air and blew out another loud belch to clear room.

“That’s not an answer.”

Marc chuckled without humor.

“Come on. You guys are in love. You just got married and you’re having a baby. Whatever it is, can’t you let it go? She’d do it for you.” Charlie gestured. “In fact, she has done it for you. How many times did you embarrass her in front of the camp?”

“A lot.” Marc shrugged, reaching for the bottle. “This is different.”

“Tell me how.”

“Someone died and I can’t bring them back.”

Charlie stared. “You really did love her.”

Marc downed the rest of the bottle and tossed it in the can with the others.

“What can I do?”

“Take care of your mom for me while I’m gone.”

Charlie understood a pity-party was all Marc wanted right now. He stood and went to the door. “No need. Adrian will be happy to love her while you’re gone. If you don’t come home, he might even be my new daddy.”

Marc winced as Charlie slammed the door. “Damn kids.”

Charlie shook his head at the guards. “No luck. When he’s like that, no one can get through to him.”

Jonny saw Angela coming down the hall at a fast pace. “Bet she can.”

Trent motioned. “Clear out of here, kid. She’s gonna use language you don’t need to hear.”

Angela went in the bar and pulled the shade on the door. She took the seat Charlie had vacated.

When she only waited with sympathy instead of yelling, Marc sighed deeply. “Get it over with.”

Angela stared at him in the mirror. His physical injuries had been easy to heal. The mental wounds were gushing blood. “You start.”

“I don’t want to do this.”

“That makes two of us.”

Marc felt the words rushing up his throat. He reached for another beer to smother them.

“I can’t help you if you won’t let me.”

Marc paused in opening the beer. “Can you at all?”

“I think so. You weren’t ready before; this had to wait.”

“What changed? Besides me becoming a murderer.”

“You’ve never been that.” Angela rotated the stool and locked eyes with him. “I’ve known since it happened, Marc. You’re the one who couldn’t face it.”

Marc drew in a breath and forced the words out. “I’m sorry. I never meant for it to happen.”

“For what to happen?”

“Kendle. I... I slept with her.”

Angela smiled at him. “See? That wasn’t hard.”

“Why aren’t you mad?”

Angela sighed. “I was at first. Then I was scared you’d stay with her. But you hid it and lied for months. You accused me of your transgression while hoping I would fall too, so you could confess

and wipe out your guilt. I had a lot of time to think it through.”

“And?”

“And you thought you weren’t coming back. You thought both of you would die in that fight. You didn’t do it because you wanted to replace me.”

“No, never.” Marc stole a fast glance at her. “Did you...?”

“No, never.” Angela saw his face fall. “I can lie and say I did, but it won’t take away your guilt.”

“That’s why I have to go. I can’t face it.”

“Because you can’t fix it.”

“Maybe I could...if things were reset.”

Angela’s demeanor grew cold. “I won’t ever allow that, Marc. Stop thinking about it.”

Marc did. He shoved to his feet and came over to her. “I hate myself.”

Angela clasped his hand. “I’ve done a lot of things I never thought I would—things I loathed then and now. Some days are harder than others. That’s what it will be like for you too. But after a while, the pain fades and the bitterness eases. You’ll go weeks without thinking about it. Then months. But only if you face it every time it comes up.”

“It loses power over you.”

Angela nodded sadly. “It’s awful that way too, but yes. Remind yourself that I know and I don’t hate you for one moment of weakness.” She kissed his hand and then let go, standing. “When you think you can, come home to me. I’ll always want you no matter who you kill or who you sleep with.”

Marc let her go with tears in his eyes. “I don’t deserve you.”

Angela snorted. “Yes, Marc, you do. We’ll suffer together when you’re ready. Until then, be careful. We still have a final war to win.”

Marc watched her go, mind flying to his last secret. It would be a while yet before he could come clean on that one. “But it’s not all bad.”

He sighed miserably. “It’s also not good. When you find out, you may have to legally banish me.”

He tried not to cry. “Maybe Adrian needs a roommate.”

## 4

### **Henderson Island**

“You can’t keep me here forever.” Tracy glared at her captor. “Charlie will hear my calls or you’ll fall asleep and I’ll get your radio.”

Ivan didn’t answer. He kept working on the small hut he was building at the top flat spot on this small island, refusing to think about anything but accomplishing his duty. Angela’s words kept repeating in his mind.

*I’ll be very grateful.*

Tracy slumped against the cushion he’d brought. A bag of food sat next to her, as well as a kit of gear and a rifle. She’d been shocked when he handed it to her and told her to watch out for UN stragglers.

“I could shoot you and take your radio.”

“It won’t reach to Pitcairn and you’d be alone here with the snakes and the spiders.” Ivan hammered in another nail.

Tracy wanted to do it anyway. Waking up here, alone with him, had been terrifying. “Why are you doing this?”

Ivan hammered in the next nail.

“How long are we staying here?”

Ivan was tired of her chatter already, but he doubted the truth would shut her up.

“I’m going to find out at some point.”

Ivan’s eyes went to her rounding stomach.

Tracy’s mind gave her the answer. “You don’t want me at all. You did this to save the baby.”

Ivan nodded, though he did feel bad for her. “As soon as you give birth we’ll go back.”

“But that’s...at least five months!”

Ivan resumed hammering nails into their roof.

“You can’t do this!” Tracy grabbed the rifle. “You can’t make me have this baby!”

“Go on and shoot. You’ll die here.”

“I’ll flag down one of the troop ships sailing by.”

“Okay. I’m sure they’re in a great mood after losing. You can be the fun at their party.”

Tracy hated him for his calm facts. “You can’t do this!”

Ivan grunted. “Now you know how Charlie and Angela felt when you decided to kill the baby.”

“It’s my body! It’s my choice!”

“Not anymore.” Ivan hammered in the next nail. “You should drink some water. It’s humid. You can get dehydrated even while sitting still.”

“What if I starve myself?”

Ivan turned toward her, orbs lighting up bright red. “I don’t want to restrain you, Tracy. I don’t want to put a single bruise on your skin. I don’t even want you to get a mosquito bite while we’re here. Don’t force me to be an asshole. You won’t win.”

Tracy almost pushed him anyway. Before she could make the choice, peace settled over her mind. She picked up the canteen and drank.

“That’s better.” Ivan smiled. “Good job, kid. Keep those calming spells flowing for the next five months and I’ll make sure you get to be born.”

On the first flat rise, surrounded by bodies, bugs, and bones, Jade woke up.

She slowly sat up and shoved her sister. “Hazel! Get up! They left us.”

Hazel didn’t respond.

Jade shrugged off a spider web and stood on shaky legs. She kicked her sister this time. “Get up!”

Hazel’s head slumped to the side, showing a hole where she’d been hit in the crossfire of a blast.

“No!” Jade’s scream echoed into the trees. “I wanted to kill her! No!”

Above her, Ivan turned toward the noise. “Stay here.”

Tracy cringed at the thought of being alone.  
“Don’t go.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. There’s a wounded bird that needs to be given mercy.”

“That was a woman, not a bird!”

Ivan nodded. “I know.”

Tracy watched him go, heart pounding again, but she didn’t move. All her threats were a bluff. Whatever he wanted her to do, she would. I’m reliving my nightmare. *If I don’t fight it, maybe I can get through it with my sanity this time.*

Ivan liked it that she was thinking about a better future for herself, but his own guilt was heavy as he hiked back through the jungle. The woman still screaming down there was about to discover how big a mistake that was. Ivan moved through the trees and vines, still unable to believe he’d accepted this run.

*I’d be very grateful.*

“Anything for you, boss.” Ivan moved faster, eager to be done with the ugly chore.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

# Close

### 1

“**A**ll better.” Adrian stored the cleaning supplies, then headed for the shower he’d prepared. His bunker had been searched. The Eagles had left muddy tracks and bits of debris everywhere. The sight of it had bothered him enough that he’d had to clean it before handling himself.

His filthy clothes dropped to the corner of the shower space; his dog tags jingled as he opened the water valve. The fresh wound on his chest pinched and pulled as it tried to finish healing. Conner’s blood and Harry’s power had handled most of it, but not all. Adrian assumed it was because he was becoming immune to magic healing. If he got hurt again, he would have to heal on his own, like he had on the ship with Kendle and Sadie.

Tension hit the air alongside the warmed water that was quickly cooling.

Adrian slowed the flow to a trickle and wet his washrag under it. He didn’t bother to scan his den. He’d felt the arrival. He wasn’t alone, but he was naked, weak, and vulnerable.

Adrian scrubbed quicker. *At least I’ll die clean.*

He soaped his entire body, then did his hair before rinsing. He groped out for the valve.

“Allow me.”

Adrian fought a chill as the cooler water gushed over him. He quickly rinsed, refusing to let a single thought cross his mind.

“Towel?”

“Not yet.” Adrian wiped water from his face. He grimaced at the feel of the stubble. He soaped his face and quickly shaved with the disposable razor.

No thoughts flowed as he worked, from either of them. The tension continued to grow.

Adrian rinsed his face and his razor. He stored the tool as the water shut off. A towel settled over his shoulders.

Adrian dried in fast, efficient movements, trying to form an opening sentence. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“I did it again.”

Adrian pulled his pants up. “Yes, you did.”

He tugged the belt from his dirty pants and used the wet washrag to wipe it down. “How do you feel about it?”

“It was necessary.”

Adrian’s voice deepened into a scold. “That wasn’t what I asked.”

Angela held out his shirt, wedding ring glinting in the light from his small fire. “I feel cold.”

Adrian took the shirt, but he only wrapped it around his neck. He went to the chair and sank down to pull on his socks. “Thanks for the clean duds.”

“The Eagles sent things too. How do you know the clothes are from me?”

Adrian lifted the kit onto his lap and opened it. “I saw you eyeing my shoes while we were in the tunnels.” He pulled out the new boots and began to lace them up. “They sent comforts. You always cover the basics.”

Angela began cleaning up his shower mess. “Marc sent two items.”

Adrian snorted. “I found the bottle and his thank you note. Tell him it’s no fun when I’m alone.”

Angela chuckled. “I will.”

Adrian tugged on the boots and finished lacing them. He kept his eyes on the hooks.

“The plans you gave Daryl are bold. The Eagles will love diving and rappelling.” She thought of Neil’s team. “Most of them, anyway.”

“Kyle will report details on each reaction. The few who go all in without showing fear are your frontline fighters for the final battle. The ones who go all in even though they’re terrified are their backup. The guilt of feeling fear will make them incredibly loyal to those who go first.”

Angela memorized that as she slid his dirty gear into one of the trash bags the Eagles had sent. She waited for more, patiently. She didn’t have a time limit anymore. None of them did. The UN was crushed. They were allowed to just live now if that’s what they wanted.

“Is it what *you* want?”

Angela paused in tying the garbage bag. She looked over.

Adrian locked eyes with her. Heat sparked, warming the room.

Angela let it build. She hadn't drooled over his naked body, though she'd certainly admired it in quick glances. For this one moment, she needed honesty. "I want to conquer the world."

Adrian felt time slow, but it didn't matter. His answer would always be the same. "I can be that evil bastard. He's always there, waiting for the chance to prove my bloodline's reputation is well earned." Need flared in his voice. "And there isn't anything I'd refuse you, even without a promised reward. You know that."

"I do."

They both winced.

Angela stacked the garbage bag by the exit. She took down the shower to let it dry out before he needed to use it again. "We've been hunted since the beginning of our existence. We're not normals or descendants. We're hybrids, better copies of the parent plants."

Adrian was shocked. *Now I know why Marc sent her here, but he had to know I won't tell her no.*

"He knows, but he didn't send me." Angela delivered the next shock. "Marc agrees that we should rule the world. The normals will never be fair to us or to each other."

Adrian found his voice. "This isn't about them. You don't want to give it up. You fear dying, being

replaced, aging..." Adrian saw her twitch and knew he'd found her problem. He considered for a long moment instead of rushing in blindly. Clearly Marc had already tried to wing it and failed. "Jennifer's evolution wasn't an accident, was it?"

"No. If the UN does the reset, she'll protect us here."

"Does she know you let it happen?"

"She will when she thinks about it, but it won't matter to her. All she can see is having to relive her time with Cesar. She'll do anything to stop that." Angela poured a cup from the thermos she'd brought. She set it on the small table by his chair. Then she sat on the floor next to it and leaned against his leg.

Adrian searched for the right words, the right answer, but his Mitchel side was exploring the vision of her turning evil and him being at her side for all of it. He didn't want to be bad, but he couldn't deny or hide the excitement he felt from her even considering it.

Angela realized he didn't have the answer she needed either. She let out a long sigh.

"I'm sorry. My only answer is selfish. I can't be that way anymore unless you tempt me." Heat blazed again. "Tempt me! Please!"

Angela eased into his lap and curled her arms around his neck. Need smothered them both.

His hands came up to hold her. "Tell me what you want."

"Confirmation."

Adrian stared in surprise. “You don’t think I will!”

Angela shook her head. “No. I think you’re finally all good now. The Eagles want that proven or they’re coming here to execute you.”

“Both birds.”

Angela nodded at his bitterness. “This is the only way I can let you live.”

Before he could reply, she kissed him.

Desire flooded Adrian. *I want her!* He pushed her back. “But not like this.”

Adrian stood, holding her so she didn’t fall. He let her gain her feet. “You should go now. It looks bad that you’re here.”

Angela frowned at him. “I destroyed the last threat to the future of this camp and that’s all I get?!”

Her disappointment slapped him in ways that her kiss hadn’t. His eyes smoldered. “You’re cruel.”

Angela bit her lip.

The sign of insecurity shattered Adrian’s control. He slanted his mouth over hers and snatched her breath with the passion.

Angela had known this might happen. She’d always planned to stop it, but the feel of his mouth on her was magic. She groaned lowly.

The sound echoed loudly in Adrian’s ears. He shoved her into the chair. “Get out.”

Angela stayed where she was. “I’m glad that’s done.”

Adrian glowered at her. “How can you be so calm?!”

“Two birds.”

He frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“Your loyalty is proven.”

“And the other?”

She smiled. “When I snap, you’ll be there to guide me through it.”

Adrian wanted to deny it, but her taste was tingling on his lips and her scent was filling his nose every time he inhaled. “Damn you.”

“And yourself, Mr. Mitchel. You taught me a little too well.”

Adrian went over to adjust the fire in the tiny fireplace. When he turned around, she was gone.

His heart pounded. *Her cracks aren’t growing, but she’s changing into something extremely dangerous. If I was a good person, I’d warn Marc and then try to kill her before she becomes like Joel.*

Adrian sat down and picked up the mug of coffee. He shoved the conversation into a mental hole and tried to forget about it. *It feels good to be good. I’d forgotten how satisfying it is.*

He replayed their kiss and stared at the fading flames. “But it won’t ever be able to match that. When she calls, I’ll always answer.”

Adrian lifted his mug in a bitter toast. “I hope your run goes well, Marc. And I also hope you stay gone.”

## Angela's Log

Life after war is hard. Without protection, it's almost impossible. That was the first new law we learned.

Even groups of armed fighters couldn't stand when the draft trucks came through. They took our men—all of them. Friends and families followed, chasing stolen sons, cousins, uncles, fathers. They stripped the land bare in straight paths; nothing stood in their way. Now, the roamers fight over anything that's left. Being alone is lethal. We had to band together.

Once in a settlement, refugees were at the mercy of the leader there. Trusting them wasn't always a good idea. That was the second ugly lesson. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is. Not that we had many options. Only the hardest, most skilled men and women were able to form settlements at all, let alone keep them running. Their camp; their rules.

Defending our settlement was a constant battle. We never knew where the next hit would come from, only that it would be harsh. Knowing when to flee and when to fight was the third new law of the wasteland. Leaders who had a gift for that were revered.

Then everyone found out those hard, skilled leaders were different. They found out magic walked among them, and had for a long time. The reactions have been extreme, but you have to

understand the awful situation they're in. Staying close to us often means the difference between life and death.

Someone who can heal injuries or see threats coming is invaluable. Fire Walkers provide heat and defense. Mind readers can tell them who's plotting an attack. Enforcers keep citizens from fighting when they should be working. Grabbing onto a person with a special skill made sense as soon as we were discovered. Most normals don't want to do it. They just don't want to die.

But some of those battered refugees carry too much hatred to make peace. If not for us, they would still have their loved ones. Humanity lost everything when the bombs fell. Even I understand there has to be a payment for that.

We don't know our true origins. The scientists believed we have leftover sparks from creation in our DNA that formed genetic mutations.

The government men who visited us in the labs wanted weapons for fighting wars and controlling their populations. They weren't concerned with figuring us out; they just wanted to use us.

Most descendants think we inherited a genetic curse. Imprisoned upon discovery, only a few of us managed to escape captivity and blend into the world. Over the centuries, some of those precious few formed resistance pockets, killed those who took their children, and then died for the cause. It changed nothing. They couldn't reach the top

people giving the orders. The hunters kept coming. The scientists kept experimenting. We kept dying.

Then an alpha was born. He had the ability to call our kind, to get us to work together, to fight for the dream of freedom. Resistance leaders recognized the opportunity and took it into their hands without a thought of the humans who'd never known of our plight. When the alpha male was strong enough, they triggered a global nuclear war that had no winners and destroyed entire countries.

We'd just never been free...

Descendants are dangerous. That's part of why we were locked up. The power inside is weak to temptation, and vulnerable to threats of hurting each other or our rare children. We're dangerous, but we're also fragile. Our bloodlines are shaky, flaky, overbred. Offspring can be born entirely without compassion. Before the war, they were removed or employed by a government. Now, there's no one to stop them from growing into killing machines. Those of us with honor teach our babies control. We never use our gifts on each other without permission or provocation. That's magic rule number one.

In this desperate new world where only survival matters, our light draws refugees, but the humans who hunt us don't understand how it works. If we're forced, the magic rebounds. Whatever the oppressor asks for will be granted and then turned into the very thing that destroys them. Never force us to use our gifts for personal gain. That's magic rule two. It has to be willing.

Rule three sucks. Most of us didn't discover our cruel destiny until after the war. Our purpose on this planet is to protect the humans who hunt us, take our children, rip apart our souls. If we hurt a normal, we develop mental cracks that lead to insanity. It's an awful duty and a cruel punishment. Those who suffer it must be put down before they grow so strong that they can't be stopped.

The descendants are bitter. Some of them want our kind in charge and the normals serving us. They don't care about the mental cracks or the innocent people we devastated to gain our freedom. We've been torn apart or enslaved from the beginning of our history and there has to be a payment for that too. Rule three sucks.

Rule four is how we survived. We'd been tormented for so long! It was safer to hide what we can do than to face our neighbors. Before the war, they didn't have a clue that we existed. As the apocalypse worsened, our skills became beacons that brought good and evil souls alike. To save our children, we hid as much as we could, and fought only when we had to. Our power isn't without limits. If we fight first, we'll be too weak to run.

After the apocalypse, we followed this rule all the way to the ocean, and then to a tropical island. We'll have good years in our little paradise, but then we'll return and serve our true purpose. Normals are on the verge of extinction. It's our duty to save them.

Almost none of us want to. We'll do anything to keep from being enslaved again—even take over their world. All our alpha has to do is give that order.

I'm Angela.

I'm the alpha.

And I just might.

Angela shut her notebook and stored it in her kit. No one would read it for a long time, but she still felt bad. She was also excited. *At some point, I might rule the world.*

“That’s bad.”

Angela found Cody lingering in the shadows of the conference room. She smiled at the boy.

Cody climbed into the seat next to her and waited for her to explain.

Angela didn't. She put her hand on his and let the boy feel her love.

Cody glanced at her book and then at her face. “That’s for me, later.”

She nodded. “Those are our rules. We live by them or those we love die. I'll teach you to follow them and spread our light.”

“Cate says you're dangerous to the future.”

“It's true.”

“Is it because you're byzan?”

“I think it's because I'm tired of the death and the ugliness. If I take over, we might have a lot less of that.”

“Might.”

She nodded again. “Absolute power corrupts. That saying is true. I can feel it tempting me.” She smiled at him again. “I need you to be the good one. When I go too far, you, and others, will help pull me back.”

Cody surprised her. “No, I won’t.”

He got down and padded toward the door, unconsciously mirroring his father’s confident stride. “I’ll help you. You’re right. We should rule the world; there’s no one who can stop us.”

“What about the normals?”

“We’re going to protect them from their own bad choices. That’s enough.”

Angela was glad to hear him say that, but she was also worried that he was already corrupt and all her plans were in vain. “Cody? How did you become byzan?” She’d wondered that for months now.

He looked back at her with bright red eyes and not a shred of remorse. “I gave you the plan to get us out of America. You never would have used the kids on your own.”

Angela tried to count it, but those months had begun to blur for her. “You knew all of this was going to happen.”

Cody smiled, showing the brilliant mind of a dangerous hybrid. “I’ll be a good King. The normals will love me. We won’t have to die for them.”

Angela made the final connection. “You’re the missing piece in my construction project.”

“Yes.” He left the room, heading for the bar where Marc had passed out on the counter.

Angela watched in joy as the project came together in a perfect fit that would allow their kind to exist, to flourish beside the normals instead of dying for them. “And a little child shall lead them. All I have to do is keep him alive.”

**The End of Book 16**  
**What would you like to do now?**



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# Deleted Scenes

## 1

Jayda waited for Marc.

Marc stopped next to her and waited for the others to go by. It took a minute. After his team, with Wade jogging and smiling at the women who turned to stare, the rest of the people who'd been working were now coming over.

Jayda kept her thoughts blank, but she was certain everyone knew what she was going to ask.

Marc did. He could have spent the time trying to find the right words, like Angela often did, but he chose to give her the honesty she needed to hear instead of being politically correct.

Jayda drew in a breath as the last people walked by.

“Because it won't work.” Marc kept going, preempting her long moment of being careful with her words too. “If Angela thought hate crimes and special protections would work, we would already have those in place. It wasn't easy for her to watch Ray's treatment either.”

Jayda hadn't expected an easy solution, but she couldn't help her response. “What will work?”

“Exactly what we're already doing. Think about what happened. Tell me, as an Eagle in the rookie levels of psychology.”

Jayda brought up those lessons and pulled out everything but the naked facts. “Two women had a verbal confrontation. Indirect insults were used...” Jayda considered and finished. “The aggressor lost.”

“And she strengthened her target.” Marc nodded toward Trinity. “Take a fast look. Try not to be obvious.” Marc studied Jayda as she scanned the beach and cliff, then the camp groups. He smiled. *Well done.*

Jayda blushed under his warmth. Marc’s personality when he was pleased was like being drugged. *And then there’s that smile.*

“Oh. Sorry.” Marc glared. “Better?”

Jayda laughed.

Everyone who saw it believed she’d just laughed in the face of his anger. Respect for her went up.

Jayda stared as she realized what he’d done for her. “Why?”

“Because you had the balls to come question me.” Marc grinned. “That’s how psychology works. You didn’t have an amazing moment just then, but they’ll think you did. A group can see something and still not understand what it was. Brittani was right. It’s about Gus. Trinity was jabbing for weak spots.”

Jayda smiled. “Brittani did pick the perfect target. Trinity’s hunched on her blanket and not reading thoughts because she knows none of them are good.”

“Exactly. She was corrected, by Brittani, and now, by the disapproval of the camp. If Brittani had shouted for an Eagle to file a charge, the reactions would have been different.”

“But why?” Jayda needed to understand. “It’s a law to protect us from those who don’t accept us.”

Marc grimaced at that old slogan. “It’s a protection they don’t have, Jayda. They have to deal with hostility from other races too, but they’re always on their own. Equal means equal.”

“They haven’t been slaves!”

“Neither have you.”

“Some of their ancestors owned blacks!”

“So have yours, maybe.”

Jayda hated his facts. “It was an atrocity! It never should have happened!”

“On that one, we agree completely.” Marc felt her sadness and put a hand on her shoulder, not sure if she would accept more from him. He knew Eagles were staring in surprise at her for being brave enough to shout at him. “Safe Haven can’t give you peace from the past. Only you can.”

“I don’t know how.” Jayda had finally admitted her biggest fear. “I hate them so much!”

“I do too. Awful choices ruined the world, but this camp is a place of second chances. It’s also the only thing between the past and future becoming the same. We defend the light and we self-cleanse our blemishes.” Marc glanced over at Trinity, who still hadn’t moved from her scared huddle. “She won’t change her feelings about Brittani, but she won’t

use that tactic again. It backfired badly. Everyone who heard her got a reminder. And the boss is listening to this conversation. It's now in her file. If she breaks a law, it will come up under her character and you know that's not good."

"But what about in the future, after we're all gone or killed?"

Marc shrugged. "We can't fix it all in one year. I'm sorry. We need more time to figure out the solutions."

Jayda smiled as his fingers tightened on her for a brief instant and then vanished. "I'm sorry I get so upset. You guys do a good job. I guess you can have a few more years."

Marc laughed with her.

Angela watched proudly. When Marc wanted to be a leader, he was amazing at sensing what people needed.

Adrian glared from the top of the cliff, body stiffened in pain. *That's my job!*

Sadie tackled him from behind. "Break's over!"

## 2

Daryl motioned at the guard on the bridge.

The guard gestured.

Marc waited, hating how slow Eagle hand code was to him right now. Normally he didn't mind. Right now, everything was grating on ragged nerves.

The noise of the surf increased suddenly, drowning out the happy camp enjoying their first taste of land in months.

Marc looked around and found every member of his team listening. Heads were tilted, hands were frozen in mid-activity. *We all hear it.*

Marc scanned the descendant on land. *None of them do.*

*I hear it.* Angela's voice was angry. *The sharks have forced the whales to abandon their normal stop to give birth in their nursery. They're eating the young as they're birthed. The whales have no way to protect themselves.*

Marc and everyone else who heard it was horrified. *How can we stop it? Or help them again?*

*You'd need a bell they can't resist.*

Marc connected that to their Cayman Island chaos. *What's the downside?*

Angela chuckled harshly. *We'll learn to love grilled shark.*

Marc liked that answer. *We'll start drafting plans.*

"I can handle the bell part, I think." Kenn took the seat directly across from Morgan. "We'll need to run a few cage tests to make sure I get the right pitch."

"How long?" Marc wanted this fix in place immediately.

Kenn considered. "Tomorrow, maybe. I might be able to rig up a camera so we don't need the cage."

“How do we know the bell will work?” Daryl was skeptical. “We’re a long way from the Caymans and the sharks there.”

“It’s not for the sharks. The whales will be attracted to it. The sharks are the train they’re bringing.”

Men snickered at the old gaming term, but not Marc. “How do we fish them without getting the whales or getting hurt?”

“The bait. Whales don’t hunt other fish, that we know of. They’ll hang around if they have a safe place to give birth where there’s plankton for them to eat.”

Marc studied the problem. “The sharks are starving because there are so many of them in one place... And we have all that fish food.”

“Great idea. We can’t use it anyway. None of our fish survived.” Biff waved a hand. “And we do have enough fish at the moment.”

Marc nodded. “We’ll feed them from those new sand bars below the cliff cave. Twice a day. That should draw them for an even easier meal. But we won’t put out enough to really feed them all. It will make them fight and start killing each other off. We can collect some of the bodies if they aren’t too torn up. We can also spear them during each feeding and take our own cut.” Marc realized he’d forgotten something. “We’ll also be careful not to remove too many of them or too many of the same kind. We don’t want them to go extinct. We want them to scatter.”

“Sounds good. Once they split up, the whales can return to migrating again.”

“Hopefully.” Neil had been listening. He sank into the empty chair on Marc’s left. “We’ll start feeding this afternoon. I’m thinking me and Wade will need something to stab occasionally for the next couple months. Sign us up.”

Everyone laughed at the crude double entendre.

### 3

Angela paused in the employee hallway outside the cargo area. She’d just finished a complete round of the ship. She was due at the medical area for a quick meeting on several of their issues, but she needed a minute to herself. *I’ve earned it.*

Angela opened a mental line. *I saved a sliver of energy for this. If you’re ready.*

Angela chuckled at the breath blowing over her neck. “You’re better than my other guards. I always hear them coming.”

“You’re gonna hear me too.”

Angela snickered, body tightening as his hands slid down her arms. “I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

“I’ll take what you can give me.” He kissed her neck, body throbbing against her hip. “Please!”

Angela turned in his arms, head tilting. “Take your downtime.”

Marc groaned, hands coming up to cup her breasts. He flipped her nipples, pressing between

her legs. Her hot scent floated up into his nose and sent a chill over his body. “You’re ready.”

Angela nodded against his cheek. “Cover my mouth when I cum. I don’t want the whole ship to know what we’re doing.”

Marc opened his jeans with one hand, the other tugging on her waistband. “Pull them down.”

Angela’s nipples hardened at his husky whisper. She slid her pants down and leaned against the wall.

#### 4

*Tap-tap!* “Can I come in?”

“No!” Tracy hurried off the bedroll.

Ivan retreated to let her come out, frowning. “You don’t have to be scared of me.”

Tracy didn’t call him a liar, but her eyes did. “What do you want?”

Ivan sighed. He walked around the tent. “Never mind.”

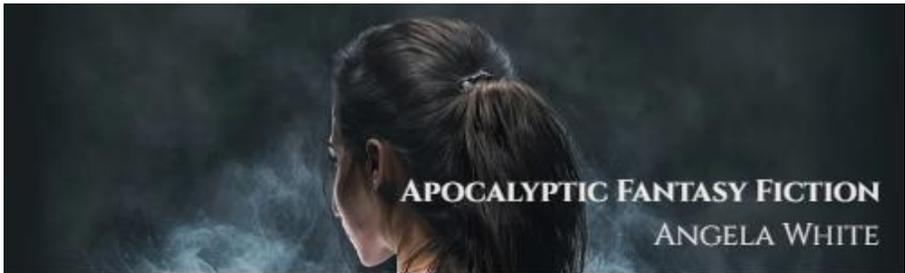
Tracy went back in, relieved that he wasn’t going to try to talk her out of it. *I’ll miss the power, but I’ll get my mind back and I need that more.*

Ivan understood it wasn’t all about being a mother. Tracy was scared of going crazy, of evolving and splitting. *I could help her with that if I had more time.*

*But I don’t.* Ivan slipped around the side of the tent and ducked back inside. He hurried toward her with the syringe before she thought to scream, grateful the shadows were covering the movements.



# Audio



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## From the Author

This one has been a rough ride. As the author, I'm thrilled with how it came together, but as a reader, I'm angry at Marc and shocked. How could he do that?!

All I can say is people make mistakes and then they have to fix them. Marc wouldn't be a full character if he didn't have screw ups like everyone else. Don't hate him. He already hates himself and that's enough.

So Kendle's gone now. It feels wrong not to mention that she also made mistakes. She wasn't evil. Everything she went through drove her crazy.

Does Marc share some of the blame for that by leading her on?

Of course. That's why he hates himself. Putting her down wasn't as hard as knowing he caused some of her madness.

Will Marc really leave?

He's the team leader for the run to Australia. Safe Haven can't ignore their need and old magic has bound them together on a crash course that will end in the labs. We've never explored those, so it will be a new adventure! And while he's gone, Marc will try to learn to forgive himself.

As for him and Angie, nothing has changed except for his guilt. He can face it now and move on. He will be back.

In time for the birth of his daughter?  
That has not been revealed.

Have a wonderful finish to your summer,  
Eagles. I hope to have an AT book out in late fall.  
Waving at you,  
Angie

# Book 17



## [Stopping Time](#)

### 1

“This was a great idea.” Samantha leaned against Neil’s arm. “Thank you.”

He smiled at her, but his mind wasn’t on her words. Neil studied the mood of the room. He’d set up a date night for her with a family-friendly rom-com, snacks, and snuggling on the couch. Amy was on her blanket at their feet, coloring and also enjoying the good atmosphere.

Amy glanced up at Neil. “I want to spend the night with the other kids.”

Neil looked to Samantha for the decision.

Samantha shrugged. “Whatever you want, sweetheart. Now or after the movie?”

Amy stood. “Kimmie is passing by. I can go with her.”

Both adults smiled tolerantly as they rose to go. When she got excited, her baby talk came through.

Kimmie opened her arms as soon as the door opened.

Amy lunged, driving the girl back. “Run, pony!”

Kimmie took off down the hall.

Samantha watched the girls, thrilled by how Amy had adjusted.

Neil looked at the man on duty. “Ten minutes until shift change?”

Wade nodded, throat dry. Samantha’s happiness was stunning. He couldn’t look away from her.

*He’s ready.* Neil glanced at Samantha. *Is she?*

Sam headed back into the candle-lit room. “Finish it with me? I like this one.”

“Sure.” Neil cleared his throat. “Wade’s off duty in a few minutes...”

Samantha tensed for an instant, then nodded. “Okay.”

Neil frowned. “If it’s not right, or it’s too soon to do this...”

Samantha shook her head. “I was trying to remember if I’d had a shower recently. It’s been busy.”

Neil gestured, leering. “Need a scrubber?”

Samantha nodded. “And maybe a warmer. I’ll let you know.”

Neil grew serious. “Soon?”

Samantha went toward the couch. “I think so. I almost want him as much as I did Jeremy the first time. It feels good.”

Neil was relieved. He turned back to the guard post.

Wade was staring in fear.

Neil frowned. *I didn’t expect that reaction.*

Wade was stricken with panic. *What if she doesn’t like it?!*

Neil never would have guessed Wade could suffer from performance anxiety. *You’ve serviced dozens...* Neil paused, seeing Wade’s lips twitch. *Okay, hundreds of women. What’s the difference here?*

Wade sighed. *I love her. If I fuck this up, she’ll drop me. I have to live up to Jeremy here, not some camp horn-dog. Those are big shoes to fill.*

Neil liked the respect. He immediately found a solution. He went to Samantha and whispered in her ear.

Samantha nodded, relaxing. “Do you mind?”

“Of course, but I trust him to be gentle. He wouldn’t have the rep if he was mean or rough.”

Sam grabbed his wrist.

Neil felt her lust; it matched Wade’s. *Time for me to go do a workout.*

Samantha shivered at the image of Neil covered in sweat. “Stay, or he’ll feel weird.”

“Are you sure?”

Samantha kissed him.

Neil let things go, warming her up while they waited for shift change.

## 2

“She’s in there.” Trent stepped back to let Daryl through. “Hope you’ve got a strong stomach.”

Daryl entered the bathroom, wincing at the odor. “Brit? Are you okay?”

Gagging came from the first stall.

Daryl stayed by the sink, worried. She hadn’t been eating well since Marc’s team left and she spent every night in the bathroom. She’d insisted she didn’t always vomit, but Daryl was tired of being put off. “You have to tell me what’s going on. We have medics who can help you.”

The toilet flushed.

Daryl eased onto the bathroom counter to wait, mind trying to figure out what could be wrong with her. *Is it Malaria? Lyme disease? The rage illness?* Everyone knew they’d been infected, but most of the signs weren’t glaringly obvious like this. *Maybe she’s still upset over Trinity’s death.* Daryl had been shocked when he learned about the attempted murder, but Brittani had refused to discuss it at all.

Brittani opened the bathroom stall and leaned against it. She tried to catch her breath before she spoke.

Daryl's concern rose. She was pale under that beautiful dark skin and her eyes were sunken. Her hair even had gray streaks. "What the hell's going on?"

Brittani drew in a deep breath. "I'm pregnant, and I think there's more than one by the way I can't stop..." She fled into the stall, gagging.

Daryl had frozen. *Pregnant. More than one. I'm going to be a father!*

Brittani groaned. "Glad you're happy."

Daryl keyed his mike, eager to share it with the world. "We need a wheelchair and a medic in the deck C bathroom. Move your ass."

"On my way." Morgan's voice was concerned. "Injury or illness?"

"Pregnancy."

"Oh. Great! Be right there."

Brittani groaned again. "That's why I didn't tell you yet."

Daryl shrugged. "You'll be fine. We'll take care of you."

"That's what I mean!" She wiped her mouth on her shirt. "I don't want special treatment."

Daryl handed her some towels from the roll, smiling at her. "But you are special, Brittani, and not just because you're having my baby."

She grimaced at a fresh roil from her guts. "Babies. There's at least two."

Daryl finally caught her hint. "At least?"

"Maybe three." She lifted her shirt to show a stomach that should have been on a woman who

was four months along. “I’m not sure this is normal.”

Daryl slid off the counter and began shooting energy into her weakened body. “You are officially off duty until after the births, and I mean that.”

Brittani nodded, letting him help her change her shirt. When he gave her his, the scent of his body went into her nose and straight to her stomach. The rocking eased.

Daryl grinned at her. “That’s sweet.”

Brittani made a face. “It’s bullshit. I’m the mother!”

Daryl placed a gentle hand on her stomach, grinning widely. “They’re already daddy’s girls. Awesome.”

### 3

Angela ducked under the tape with a wave of her hand that said she wanted to be alone.

Her shadow wisely backed off, but kept her in sight. His orders were clear on that. Ed keyed his mike in the short code that meant she had left camp.

He got a single crunch of recognition in return and then he was alone; Angela was nowhere in sight.

Ed scowled, hitting the mike before starting to search for her. She’d passed them all in infiltration. If she didn’t want to be found, she wouldn’t be. “She ditched me.”

There was another click signifying he'd been heard and then the guard resignedly began to try to track her in the dusky shadows of the jungle.

Angela observed him from the tree branch above, red orbs wary. Ed was good. If she made a noise, he would hear it.

A few seconds later, he moved out of sight, following the decoy she'd quickly imprinted in the dirt.

Angela dropped down and went in the opposite direction. Once she'd begun her lessons with Adrian, none of them had stood a chance—not even Neil, whose team had finally pulled even with Kyle's.

Adrian looked up from the small fire with a smile of welcome that went a long way in easing her nerves.

When he waved at the empty chair on his right, she went to it.

“Have you heard anything?”

Angela shook her head. “We can't risk them hearing us.”

“It's been weeks.”

“Tell me something I don't know!”

Adrian didn't like her being upset. “Have you tried a dream walk?”

“No.” Her hand went to her stomach. “I'm saving energy.”

“Good.” Adrian quickly continued. “I could try, if you like.”

“Not yet.” Angela wanted to, but she knew the mission team was okay. *I’d feel it if they were in trouble.*

“Okay.”

Angela stared at the flames.

“What can I do for you?”

“I need a distraction.” She’d been using the kids, the new people, training sessions, building plans, and future schemes, but none of those were holding her now. “Give me something my brain can dig into for the next month.”

Adrian reached under his chair and brought up a thick notebook. He tossed it to her.

Angela smiled as she read the title on the front. *Eagle Training*. “Did you add what I asked for?”

Adrian nodded, glad he could lighten her mood. “There are plans for all-kid teams, all-female or male teams, and even one where Dog takes part. By the time we go home, you’ll have an army that can work alone or together in any situation.”

“I want you to start holding open sessions on the beach. Others will see it and join.”

“I thought you’d given up on getting the camp members to become Eagles.”

“I want the new people to sign up. They’re leery, and with good reason, but they need that sense of honor we carry or they aren’t going to make it here much longer.”

“Whatever you need.” Adrian didn’t offer her the bottle. He did study her over it, seeing what

Kenn had told him about before he left. “I thought the glowy thing Cate talked about was the baby.”

Angela froze.

Adrian grunted. “What are you hiding?”

“You don’t have time for that list.”

Adrian chuckled. “Fair enough. Tell me about the glowy thing.”

Angela let go of her mental lock.

Adrian stared in surprise as she began to glow. Her skin seemed translucent. He could actually see the blood rushing through her veins. “You stayed up there too long.”

Angela locked it up so the guard tracking her didn’t see it. Ed had figured out she tricked him and was coming back this way. “Yes. It’s part of me now.”

“So when we keep evolving, we gain more power and then we can go to the Weigh Station and become like them. Interesting.”

“Interesting? It’s awful. I don’t know what I am now!”

Adrian clucked at her. “Don’t lie to me. You know exactly what it is. You don’t want to admit it because you hate being different.”

“I hate it because it isn’t true! I’m not an angel. If anything, I’m the exact opposite.”

“Kronus and the others weren’t good either. Angels aren’t like we read about in Sunday school. *None* of them were good.”

Angela tried not to cry. “I want to be a normal again, without having my demon ripped out or being locked away.”

Adrian scowled. “No. I won’t ever do that.”

Angela looked up in triumph, eyes glittering. “Thank you.”

Adrian’s stomach dropped. “You scheming little bitch.”

She nodded, settling against the chair. “Now that you’ve confirmed it’s possible, tell me how it’s done.”

“Not on your life.” Adrian got up and headed to his bunker.

Angela stayed in the chair, mind flying ahead with plans she hadn’t explored because they weren’t possible before. “This might change everything.”

Adrian saw Ed. He whistled lowly. “Follow the light from my fire.”

Ed went by him, grateful. If Kyle and the others found out she’d ditched him, he wouldn’t be given guard duty over her again.

Adrian kept going, furious. He entered his bunker and closed it up, trying to figure out how to stop her next plan. *If she gives it up, we’re all doomed.*

“She won’t do that until we’ve won the war.”

Adrian shouted, hand going to his gun.

“Easy.” Morgan was sitting in Adrian’s chair. He’d been listening to their conversation through the bugs Marc had insisted they keep active throughout the island. “We need to talk.”

Adrian took deep breaths and held his bladder.  
“About what?!”

“Your future in this camp.”

“I’m not in your camp.”

Morgan sipped the drink he’d poured from Adrian’s stash. “I’m not Marc or Kyle. I have little loyalty to you and we’ve never really been friends.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me to leave?”

“The opposite, actually. The Eagles want you back, in most of the duties you performed before.”

“But?” Adrian knew there was one.

“But as soon as Marc comes home, you have to drop out of sight again unless he says otherwise.”

Adrian frowned at the medic instead of telling him Angela had just asked for almost the same thing. “What’s the catch?”

“Why does there have to be a catch?”

Adrian glared. “I’m not in the mood for games, Morgan. Spit it out or get out.”

Morgan sat the empty cup on the little table. “When we go home, *you* have to lead us.”

Adrian was surprised again. “That’s Marc’s job.”

Morgan shook his head, standing up. He went to the hatch and opened it. “We don’t trust him, Adrian. He’ll never watch over us the way you did. Get him to give you the job or none of us are going back.”

Adrian stood there, mind a mess, as Morgan left.  
*I can’t do that... Can I?*

Morgan joined Kyle for the walk back to camp. Neither of them spoke. Coming here and delivering that ultimatum hadn't been easy. No one had wanted the duty, so the senior men had been given the job. At some point, Angela would hear about it and change her plans accordingly. "But, what if she doesn't?"

Kyle wasn't worried over that. "She'll always do what's best for the camp. Marc's the one we have to worry about."



[Stopping Time](#)  
Book Seventeen

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