

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #17

STOPPING
TIME

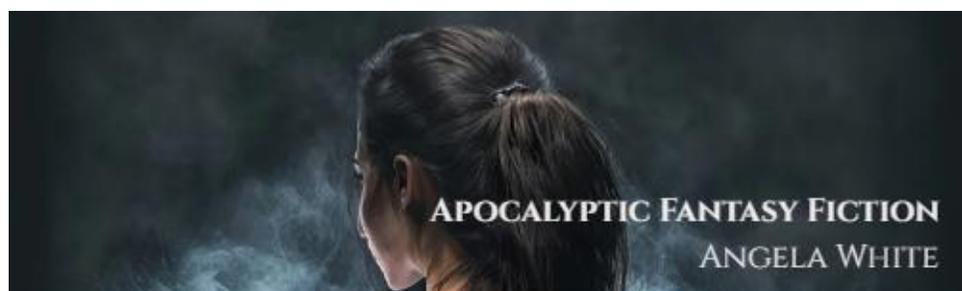


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by
Angela White

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Applejacked
On The Plus Side
Do The Same
Mommy's Coming
You Know Why
Free Will
Close

Don't Trust Time

Time is sly;
It sits idly by,
Then it makes you cry.
Don't trust time.

Time is full of rage,
Locked in a mental cage.
An unknown mage.
Don't trust time.

Time isn't who it seems;
It steals your dreams,
And fill your mind with screams.
Don't trust time.

What did I say?
Have I given it away?
Oh, these games that we play!
Don't trust time.

Prologue



1

Greg scanned the bridge of the stinking, creaking submarine for anything he wanted to take.

They were resting on the calm eastern Pacific Ocean surface near the Peru-Chile Trench. Molly and Theo were coming to get them all soon. Greg was eager to get out of the clothes he'd been in for days now. Body odor was filling the sub, but it wasn't just his. The air conditioning had shut off during the last round of torpedoes they'd sent at the UN. It had only been an hour, but the temperature was rising quickly.

Greg wondered if Lisa would be there to welcome him home. The thought wasn't as smothering to him now. "Are we all set?"

Saul ran a hand through his damp hair, showing dark pit stains. He knew how to fix the air conditioning, but Greg had refused to waste the time or manpower. "It's a shame to do this."

"It's also right." Greg listened to the crew getting the hatch open. Everyone had packed their

gear and gathered at the egress. He and Saul would be the last to leave.

Greg felt the mood shift into something tense and desperate. He placed it with someone he didn't want to speak to right now. *I thought I was out of range. Damn hive evolution!*

Greg gave Saul a hard look. "Keep shutting things down."

Greg went into the hallway of the submarine and ducked into a side compartment. It was clean again and things were working properly other than the air conditioning, but the charred spots and loose wires said something ugly had happened here.

Greg concentrated. *Who's calling, please?*

Marc wasn't amused. *Funny.*

I try. Greg could almost hear the camp celebrating in the background, but Marc's mood was tense and tight, like it got when Angela was in danger or when he drank. *What's up?*

I think you know.

Greg sighed. *No one should have this much power.*

Marc slammed his mostly empty beer onto the table. *We need it for this run, Greg. Without it, we can't evade their sweeps. We'll be captured. A few of us will be held and the rest will be slaughtered on the spot! You'll doom everyone if you scuttle that tin can.*

Greg and Marc both tensed as Angela connected to their line.

Sink it now and save hundreds of lives in the future.

Greg hated them both for putting him through this. He recognized yet another test of his loyalties. This time, they'd made sure he had to pick one or the other. *Are they Safe Haven lives?*

No.

Greg's stomach dropped; he forced out words. "I'm sorry. I can't sacrifice Eagles."

He pushed the intercom button on the wall. "Saul, stop. Bring it all back online, including the air."

Cheers came from Saul and the crew.

Marc's elation was smothered by Angela's fury. *Fine. Go with him!*

She broke their connection with a violent swing that stung both men.

Marc didn't care. *Head my way; start sorting through those new people. It'll go easier on them if you handle it.*

I will. Greg refused to dwell on what he'd just lost. He was an Eagle first again, and he would be gone long enough for Angela's anger to fade.

He shuddered. *Until those lives are taken in the future and then she'll hate me forever. I'm not even in the friend zone anymore.*

2

Marc gently broke the connection, pleased with how it had gone. Greg's choice had ended any

chance he had of ever being with Angela. Greg thought she valued Safe Haven lives above all others. “He should know that isn’t true. She’s put others above us all along. The only way our side can have a chance at a future is if the threat is gone, because she’ll protect the normals first every time.”

“She’s trying to keep them from going extinct, jackass. I just have no idea why.” Kenn joined Marc in the small, empty training room they’d chosen for prepping their run. He saw the beer and Marc’s slightly glazed eyes, but he didn’t let that intimidate him. “You’re wrong anyway. When we cleared the atolls, Angela targeted normals harder than the descendants, who were more dangerous. I think that proves she doesn’t always protect them first.”

“I would agree, except I know why she chose that plan.”

“Why?”

“She was hunting power. She gave the teams time to pick out descendants they thought could be added to her army. She had to take the cut from the normals.”

“She would have found a way to save them if that was all she was doing.”

Marc grunted. “She also scared *our* normals. Most of them will never cross her openly again.”

“Yeah, they’ll stab her in the back and leave her body in a tunnel.”

Marc ignored that. He pushed a battle plan toward the Marine. “We’re taking twelve Eagles, four of whom are rookies. Cerise and her peculiar

people will also be along for the ride and we're supposed to trust her as our guide."

Kenn made a face. "Not a chance."

"Exactly. Get Neil to scan her and make maps while you and Wade ask the right questions to bring up those mental maps. She'll know what you're doing and try to block. Confront her openly then and she'll fold or flee. If she flees, Angela will kill her and we won't be leaving."

"*You* shouldn't go at all." Kenn didn't shy from Marc's warning glance. "If you leave her here alone, you'll destroy your marriage. Adrian will win her over this time."

"And?"

"And you'll lose your life with her!" Kenn glared. "What is your problem?!"

"Her." Marc knew honesty mattered for their mission, but also for his peace of mind. "He'll make her happy while I'm gone. He'll care for her mind and her safety; he'll make sure she eats and sleeps. I couldn't leave her in better hands."

Kenn stared, digging deeper. He winced as Kendle's death flashed through Marc's mind. It was on a loop in the background behind his plans for invading the government lab. "You bullshitted everyone else—maybe even her. Tell me the truth. You can't take this mess into combat."

Marc knew that was true. He fought not to let out an ounce of emotion as he spoke the words that were screaming across his heart. "She didn't kill

him. It was supposed to be both of them. She's supposed to be feeling this way with me."

Kenn wasn't sure what to say that would help. Mentioning loyalties, the future, and human nature wouldn't go over with the furious man across from him. Now that he'd spotted the signs, Kenn was alarmed by how angry Marc was. "You knew Kendle was evil. I guess Angela doesn't see the same in Adrian."

Marc's face blazed. "Tell me the truth! I can't take this shit into combat!"

Kenn was sick of the drama. The truth poured out like a bucket of ice water. "She's letting you go. You can't blame her for holding onto the only man who ever treated her well and has always been there for her. She let you make the call, but she didn't agree with it or Adrian would be dead. And you knew she wasn't going to do it; you get to act superior and walk away without showing that you're crushed. She hooked you up and screwed herself, again."

Marc felt a tear slip over his cheek. "I don't know what I am anymore."

This wasn't the first time Kenn had handled a member of his team when heartbreak was involved, but he'd never thought to be doing it for Marc. "Get that chin up, Marine! You signed up to fight for your country, not some piece of ass. Get your shit together and get back out there breathing fire and killing shit. It's where you belong—with your brothers."

Hearing the old-world phrases brought some of Marc's emotions under control. He wiped his face and stood up. "I'm crashing. Find me if you need me."

Kenn frowned. "Passing out, you mean?"

Marc grunted. "You got pissy drunk every night before we went into battle. Why can't I?"

Kenn watched him go. "Because you're supposed to be better than me."

Marc snorted and left the room.

Kenn examined the battle plan, but his mind wasn't on it. *I wonder if he's right. Maybe Adrian can make her happy. If so, this is the perfect time for Marc to die in battle.*

"I'm counting on you to make sure that doesn't happen."

Kenn jerked, heart leaping as Angela came in.

Angela didn't care that she'd scared him. It didn't please her anymore. "You're both very, very wrong. I'm not sending him away to get rid of him; he has to go so I can keep him."

Kenn studied her sad eyes and stiff expression. "I don't understand."

"I know. And I can't explain it before you meet your objective."

"What do you want me to do that you couldn't put in my orders?"

Angela smiled sadly. "Teach him to trust me. You're the only one who might be able to make it happen. I need this, Kenn."

Kenn heard the unspoken accusations and her pain, but it was dull in comparison to her words. “If you need it, I’ll cover it.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s my honor, and I mean that.” He didn’t say he owed her, but he felt it. He was also a bit ashamed that he’d thought she was throwing Marc over for Adrian.

“Both of them have a place in my life. I just need them to accept it.”

“Marc will never accept Adrian.”

“No one knows exactly what the future holds.”

“I’ll try to make it happen.” Kenn cleared his throat awkwardly. “You be careful here while we’re gone.”

Angela felt that old desire to hurt her creeping back into his mind. She waited for him to cross a line, controlling her fear. Kenn was geared-up, healthy, and fit. Anyone would be a bit alarmed by his size and stance.

Kenn brought up a mental wall and stared at her with a blank façade. “I’m working here.”

“And doing a good job of it. Don’t stop.” Angela left, confident that Kenn would work on Marc. *No one can wear you down like my Marine. I know.*

Kenn waited until she was gone before lowering his wall. Not repeating the old abuses he’d inflicted was hard when he’d enjoyed so much of it. “I’m sorry.” He picked up the battle plan and put his dangerous mind to work.

3

Lingering in the hallway shadows, Tonya continued around the corner, relieved. She knew Kenn loved her and their son, but if Angela ever cracked and allowed him to get close again, he would be gone. Tonya hated knowing that, but she also liked it. That knowledge was helping her make plans for her future, no matter if she had to face it alone. *He might leave me someday. All these men have the wandering itch and this island isn't going to see enough action to keep them happy. We'll all have to get used to feeling abandoned while they go out and conquer this new world without us.*

“Sometimes, it will be the other way around.” Angela came around the corner and stopped, scanning the woman and the baby in her arms.

Tonya didn't give an answer that might be twisted against her.

“You're not glowing anymore.”

Tonya glanced around to make sure they were alone. “Guilt does that to a person.”

Angela sympathized. “You didn't mean to hurt him, but he would have hurt you at some point. Gabe and Peter shared many common traits.”

Tonya forced herself to nod instead of blurting her secrets. Angela already knew them. “How do I make the guilt go away?”

“Forget it. And if you can't, then leave. Be ready to go on a moment's notice.”

Tonya gawked. “What?”

Angela spoke the brutal truth. “The only way the guilt will go is if you’re exposed. Learn to live with it or leave. I’ll wish you the best in whichever way you choose.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t have to kill Gabe. You took an ugly burden from my shoulders and I’m grateful. If you need help, you’ll have it.” Angela stepped by the shocked woman. “He’s a little cold.”

Tonya covered the sleeping boy with another blanket from her kit. Her mind replayed those words over and over without leaving space for anything else. *I might have to run.*

Angela kept tracking Marc with her newest copied gift. His signature on her grid left traces when she narrowed in, allowing her to spot every place he’d stopped. It was fascinating and very distracting.

Monica felt her unease. “I have it covered, Boss. No worries.”

Angela flashed a strained smile. *I don’t trust my security. That’s never a good sign of what’s to come.*

Angela put that fear aside and tracked her mate to a bar where he was trying to remove a stain without scrubbing. “It’s time to come clean, Marc. We both know what you did. Now we’ll face it.”

Chapter One

I Like Being Invisible

Safe Haven Refugee Camp
Pitcairn Island

1

“**I**t’s been three weeks.” Kyle kept his voice low even though any number of descendants were scanning for trouble. “We should have heard from the mission team by now.”

“I know.” Morgan kept gathering trash with his pointed stick. He didn’t want to talk about it so openly. Safe Haven’s members were working and playing all over this beach. Not to mention the dozens of Eagles and camp members on the top deck of the cruise ship. A bad vibe would hit them all and kill the calm mood.

Kyle lit the trash can that the approaching workers would use for this burn session. “She’s handling it better than last time.”

Morgan scrutinized Angela through the open sides of the tan beach tent where she now started every morning. She handled people who needed to talk to her, schedules, interviews, and any other business on her lists. It reminded the senior men and women of their beginnings in Safe Haven. Adrian had encouraged people to confide in him by using

the same tactics. Angela was doing it to lure people off their ship.

Kyle handed his garbage stick to a rookie and then ignored the curious man. "I don't like it."

Morgan stabbed more garbage. "That's because it's not right. And she isn't saying a word or giving a sign. That's dangerous for someone like her."

"You think she needs to talk about it?" Kyle often overlooked Angela's gender because of her skills.

"Maybe. She doesn't have a right hand man, not really. Ed's her official gopher, but she doesn't talk to him." Emotional stability was an important part of the relationship between boss and assistant, but Angela and Ed didn't have a bond at all and that wasn't changing.

Kyle was aware of their audience growing. He continued the very real play carefully. "She and I used to do that. We haven't in a while."

"Why not?"

"She isn't the same. Something changed."

Morgan met his eye. "Sounds like she was offended somewhere. Figure it out, make amends, and then restart those talks."

Kyle grinned. "Jennifer said the same thing, with harsher words. I'll start working on it."

"You have a long day starting."

"Makes it easier to sleep. I hate it when the teams are on runs without me."

"Same." Morgan loved those men, too. He wanted all of them to return.

Morgan tensed as Adrian came into view on the hilltop. The red mark of an outcast on his arm glinted at everyone.

Morgan glared at the man like the other Eagles were doing, but the seed in his mind grew.

Kyle frowned realistically. “We can’t do that to Marc.”

“Screw Marc! He left her here alone!” Morgan tossed his garbage filled stick to the ground and walked away. “I have other shit to do.”

Kyle didn’t protest, but it wasn’t because his status had changed the instant he’d said he would take Jennifer out of here. He agreed with Morgan too much to keep defending Marc.

Neil winced as he walked by, but like them, he didn’t defend Marc. He’d left his newly pregnant, new wife to go play war, and he’d blamed her for Kendle’s death. The Eagles weren’t going to let this one go.

“It’s all yours. Watch that fire.” Kyle went to the pontoon bridge.

The workers chatted lightly about what they’d heard as they took over collecting and burning the piles of trash on the beach.

Kyle motioned to the next group of rookies as they came to the top deck. They were fully geared and in high spirits, but they were also loud and careless. They clearly didn’t know the job yet.

Angela came from her beach tent and joined them on the gently bobbing bridge.

Her watch gave a single beep to remind her it was time to start her shift. She scanned the group of rookies and shifted the thick folder to her other arm so she could reach her gun easier. “We’re just going to do rounds of a few sites. Do you think you picked enough security?”

Kyle studied the nervous rookies gathering around them without the proper formation or stance. *I guess it could be the scattered squid stance.* “No.” He waved at Grant to join them.

Angela snorted, but she didn’t argue. The new people had only been released from quarantine yesterday. Each of the three dozen UN refugees had a settling partner, but the Eagles and camp didn’t trust them.

Grant joined the rookies, chuckling when some of them recoiled from his sweaty body. He’d just finished his two hours of daily Eagle workout time. He was funky right now. These rookies were due for the same workout after dinner.

Angela inspected the top deck of the ship and found several of the off-duty new people observing her. She ignored them for now. Eagle training was already underway. The new people were all signed up. The Eagles would sort through them.

But that’s not enough. Angela glanced toward the hilltop, where Adrian had spent every day observing them and doing workouts. He was regaining his health and watching everything they did.

“You should put him to work before he gets bored and does something stupid.”

Angela didn't answer.

Grant started to repeat himself.

Kyle shook his head. *Pushing the boss isn't a good idea.*

Angela rotated toward the beach, pretending she hadn't caught that. The Eagles had a lot of authority because they were trusted. If they were making quiet plans, they were doing it for the good of the camp. “Let's get this tour started.”

Kyle led them across the pontoon bridge that was showing wear and tear in places. The rough outline of a dock paralleled the bridge with long metal posts they'd taken from the wreckage of Kraft Mansion. They didn't have enough posts to finish the dock yet, but Kyle knew where they would get them. *All we have to do is learn underwater salvage.* The ships they'd sunk were made of steel, and while round posts were preferred, nearly any shape would suffice.

Angela paused at the end of the bridge. She opened her folder to the correct tab. “Fishing updates.”

Ed hurried to find them in his book.

Everyone waited while he shuffled through a stack of papers, muttering. It was always like this.

Angela looked at Kyle. *I've had enough.*

Kyle couldn't refuse her silent request. “I think I have this covered, Ed. Why don't you switch with me?”

Ed's face fell. The excitement of the position was long gone. "I really am trying."

"You're not being fired." Angela wasn't in the mood for drama or bad attitudes. "You should resign before I need to do that."

Ed nodded. "Consider it official right now."

Angela ignored the clock ticking on her wrist. "Tell me what you want to do and we'll get you switched."

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course." She gestured. "Take Kyle's slot for this shift. Let me know in the morning."

Ed was relieved. He hadn't wanted to ask for another assignment, but he hated being her right-hand man unless there was action.

Angela tapped her folder.

Kyle swallowed a grin. "We've fished every day since the mission team left." Kyle observed her for a reaction.

Angela didn't give him one. She only lifted a brow. "And?"

"We've gathered 502 pounds of mixed fish. We finally have a small stock. We got ahead when they started dragging nets between two boats like you suggested." Kyle scanned their fishing trollers. "The first day they only got eight pounds, though. No one had faith."

"Eight pounds?"

Kyle shrugged. "We also got 200 pounds of trash and debris."

"What happened?"

“Grant told us to drag the nets out of the current. He reminded us Henderson Island was famous for the beaches being covered in garbage from all parts of the globe. That mess is floating by us all the time.”

Angela sighed. “First digression. What are we doing with the trash?”

Kyle was ready for her. He’d been expecting that question as soon as he was told about the 200 pounds in one day. “We’re drying it on the decks overnight and then adding it to the nightly trash bonfires.”

“And we’re sorting out the things that aren’t safe to burn?”

“Yes, but most of the Eagles don’t understand why we’re protecting the air after a nuclear war.”

Angela chuckled. “I don’t want our people dying from toxic fumes.”

Kyle wrote it down, feeling like an idiot. “So noted.”

Angela waited for the rest of the answer to her question.

Kyle replayed their conversation. “We’re using one of the damaged ships to store the rest of it. Marc said not to create another garbage dump here so we don’t violate our deal with Nature.”

“It’s not too much weight?”

“It’s fine right now. Theo and his crew pulled the heavier appliances, pipes, poles, and other stuff we need, so it’s offsetting the weight of the trash.”

“Excellent. How much room do we have?”

“We’ve filled the rear deck about halfway. I’d guess the first garbage ship will be full in about two months.”

“I’ll find a solution before then.” Angela wrote it in her book, wishing she’d already thought of one. “I assumed they would have a town dump, but I didn’t consider how big it would have to be to hold the garbage from 300 people.”

Kyle frowned. “Our numbers aren’t that high anymore.”

Angela let him figure it out.

Kyle got it quickly. With the addition of the new people from the UN invasion, Safe Haven had 251 people. Most of their losses in the last month of travel had come from normals abandoning ship. “For the future.”

She nodded. “Within these three years.”

“That means more people have to join us.”

“Yes. It’s unlikely we’ll breed so many fighters in that short a time.”

Kyle couldn’t tell if she was joking. He kept his opinions to himself.

Angela was glad. She didn’t want to scold him in front of the rookies. “Back to the update.”

“Neil and Wade’s idea for shark hunting has produced 80 pounds of meat and two serious injuries. Both rookies were told not to try any more hands-on submission tricks.”

Angela had helped to handle those injuries. “They’ll have the first shark bite scars to show off after they finish healing. Next?”

“Theo said we can test the whale spear whenever we’re ready. He also said they take a week to make and we only have two of them. Pick someone with a perfect aim and a lot of patience.”

Angela stared at him.

Kyle flushed in pleasure. “I’d be honored.”

“We’ll test it out together, but not from the Adrianna. Pick a ship that can take the fight and weight.”

“Theo said the smallest UN ship we have should be good for what you have planned. He wants to go over it again and reinforce a couple of areas.”

Angela wrote that in her notes, then flipped the page. “Agriculture.”

Kyle snickered at her professional wording. He also gave her what she wanted. “We checked all the orchards and had Tonya run tests. They seem fine, but the harvest is light. We assume it’s the last one of the season.”

Angela wasn’t surprised. “Getting here right as summer ended wasn’t the best scheduling, but we’ll make it work.”

“Some of our crops will still grow in these temps. It only goes to around 65° at the worst.”

“I’m more worried about sunlight. If it stays cloudy, it won’t work.”

Kyle held up a hand toward the bright sun. “Should we transport Sam’s garden off-ship now so it can get sunlight while it’s clear?”

“No. It’s all growing well, except for the banana trees. I don’t want to disrupt that. The bananas can

come off, but have Samantha consult our companion planting charts before workers add them to one of the orchards.”

Around them, most of the rookies were getting bored and they weren't even on the island yet. They hadn't realized how long it took to do rounds and get updates.

Ed stared at the ocean and ignored them all.

“There are two crop fields, both empty and small. I recommend we use them for modest foods that we can plant a lot of.” Kyle paused. He glared at Ed. “Get them in line or switch out.”

Ed sighed unhappily. “I'll send you a hardass who can pay attention. I'm out.”

Kyle watched Ed go back onto the ship instead taking control of the rookies. “What is his problem?”

Angela studied Ed and found only satisfaction. “Send him to Tim.”

Kyle wrote while he spoke. “If you can't pay attention for five minutes, you'll never be an Eagle.”

The rookies straightened, scanning the peaceful beach and garbage-littered ocean. Angela had made it clear they had to become Eagles to stay. The new people didn't want to be banished. All of them were happy here.

Kyle handed Angela a private note.

She stored it to read later. “How many other possible plots?”

“Dozens, on this island alone. We'll stay busy.”

would get criminals off their ship while they waited for sentencing. They hadn't had a new crime in a little while, but there was no doubt it would happen. Humanity was anything but peaceful. All council meetings were also on break right now so she could get the island set up, but she doubted it would be long before they got back to work on their founding document. "Talk to me about water."

"We're fully stocked on our ship again. Marc had us collecting and storing it on the other ships. We're covered for three months at the moment and we're adding two weeks' worth every month, on top of what we use."

"That's great. Let's get some of it lugged to town. I'll let you know how much once we finish the tour. What about food?"

Kyle kept writing and listening to the rookies. "Six months, but that's a mix-n-match issue for the last month of it. We're out of a lot of things now."

"I saw the oat bags being brought up from storage. Have the cooks use it in more recipes to conserve flour."

"Oatmeal raisin. Yuck!"

Angela laughed.

The sound carried across the beach and went up the hill on the wind.

2

Adrian fought not to break his rhythm. The pushups were hard on his body, but they left too

much time for his mind to betray him by replaying the sight of her jean-clad body and long black braid glinting in the sun. “Eighteen, nineteen...” Adrian shoved to his feet and went to the pullup rope he’d rigged on a sturdy tree. He lifted his body into the air and held there for a five count.

“You’re making progress. You could only do a three-count before.”

Adrian let go of the rope. “You should be cleaning, cooking, or both.”

Sadie grimaced. “You’re supposed to train me.”

“I am.”

“In what? How to be a housewife?”

“In self-care, Sadie. If Angela sees how messy that bunker is, she might shut it down. It’s not safe for any of us to have a breeding ground for germs.” Adrian had refused to sleep or have sex in there anymore. “And you can’t eat protein bars all the time. Your body needs other stuff. Learn to cook and clean; then we’ll do something else.”

Sadie stomped back toward the bunker, giving up her idea of an orgasm and a swim.

Adrian resumed his pullups, worrying about Sadie’s future. *She grew on me. I won’t let her be hurt.*

He examined the beach and found Angela’s group walking in the opposite direction. That would buy Sadie some time to clean, but it wouldn’t be enough.

Adrian reluctantly dropped to the ground and followed her toward Luke’s bunker to help. “It’s

worth it. One of these days, the women I care for will do the same for me.”

Angela’s laughter floated up on the wind again, mocking him.

Adrian didn’t care. Anticipation of a visit flooded his stomach with butterflies. *She’s scanning my thoughts again. She stayed away as long as she can.*

3

Angela broke the connection and marched into the jungle.

Kyle had caught all of it. He wisely didn’t comment, but Adrian was right. Angela was pretending to be fine. A visit would help her cope and buy her more time. *But not Marc. His time has run out.*

Angela spotted the edge of the concrete road that Theo and his team had verified existed. She began digging out a small section with her boot.

Grant copied her, attacking the opposite side.

The rookies followed his lead and began helping between sweeps of their surroundings. Even kicking dirt was better than just standing there.

Kyle gave Grant a look of approval, then opened his notebook to be ready for Angela’s next questions and choices.

Angela switched feet, thrilled with her strengthened legs. A month ago, they wouldn’t have tolerated more than a few hard kicks. Now, they

were taking it without protesting. *Except for the ingrown toenail on my right foot.* Angela switched legs again. “How are we coming on the tunnel bunker?”

Kyle flipped to the last page in his book. “It’s fully mapped and lighted. The solar lines have been attached to the walls. We have a basic two-square wide path through the entire center, even where we fell through.” Kyle paused as a chill went up his spine.

Angela stopped kicking and sent out a thin wave of comfort. “Come back to me.”

Kyle shook it off. “Sorry, Boss.”

Angela resumed walking. She was able to feel the road beneath her boots for a few steps and then the island took back over.

Kyle stayed on her heels. “The tunnel where we sheltered during the island invasion has been finished for two days, except for the bathrooms. We’re still digging a drainage ditch for the plumbing. We’re sending this one directly to the onboard sewage treatment system. Theo said it will be a month before he can get that finished, but workers are clearing room for the hoses in small sets. We’ll have it ready.”

Angela was happy with that progress. Digging was hard work and it took time, especially when they were being careful not to kill or destroy more than they absolutely had to. Marc had been adamant about that to secure their deal with Nature.

Angela forced her mind away from her mate. “What about furnishings?”

“We’re at 50%, roughly. Beds and tables are in, along with major appliances and power cords. Theo said nothing else should be brought down until he has all that hooked up and running without overheating.” Kyle glanced back and found Grant directing the rookies on where to be while they walked. He turned back to Angela. “The Eagles have been using it as a base during shifts and a sleeping area when they don’t feel like hiking back to the ship in the dark. A lot of workers are coming down for breaks as long as the Eagles are there. No problems or injuries.”

Angela smothered a chill this time. “Are the signs posted?”

“Yes. Anyone who can read will understand not to be rough on the vines, roots, trees, plants, bugs, or animals.”

Angela walked a little faster, making her lungs and heart work harder. “Are the other bunkers stripped?”

“Most of them. We haven’t touched Luke’s property.” Kyle refused to say Kendle’s name anymore. She was dead to them in every way.

“Okay.” Angela paused to let Grant finish settling the rookies in place slightly ahead of her and to both sides. Then she resumed her faster walk, now starting to feel it in her legs. “What about the town?”

“All sites have been cleared or evaluated. Now that the QZ setup has been stored, Theo and his team will get started on repairs to the buildings he decided were okay. He expects all these projects to be completed by the end of this month.”

“Really? Tell him I said *nice job!*”

“I will.” Kyle automatically slid closer to cover an angle the rookies were missing. “Our five bunkhouse locations have stayed about half full since you opened them to the camp.”

“That’s excellent. Pass the word that there’s room in those bunks and let another group of camp members sign up. Keep doing that every two weeks until we have them all off the ship.”

Kyle wrote it down while vaguely listening to Grant explain what a rookie was doing wrong that Kyle had had to cover his spot.

“How many uses of our tree house?”

Kyle chuckled. “Three. Two smashed thumbs from bad swings and one concussion from tripping over vines.”

Angela grunted, stepping high to avoid the tangled masses that had been trampled but not conquered. “How’s our path idea coming along?”

“It’s all planted. As soon as the clover grows, people will see the path through and it will push the vines back a little but not kill them. Sam did worry about it getting enough water.”

“I think nature will cover it.” A path made from clover wasn’t important. If it didn’t work, nothing was lost. If it did work—and it really shouldn’t; the

thick vines should choke the clover—then she would know Nature was going to help whatever they planted on this island. “Any signs of growth yet?”

“No, but we haven’t checked it in four days. When it rains, you can’t tell the vines from the dirt.” Storms had slowed them, but it was bright and dry now.

“I think that’s it for my list. Surprise me with something I’ve forgotten.”

Kyle pointed. “You asked for it.”

Angela saw the two girls sneaking across the bridge toward the beach. Amy and Kimmie thought they could get by the rookie guards on the ship and they were right. Angela motioned sharply at the guard on the top deck.

He followed her finger to the girls.

He shouted at them.

Rookie Eagles on duty gave chase.

The girls ran.

Angela rolled her eyes. “Cut them off. Take them to their guardians.”

Grant stared for a minute, not understanding she was talking to him. Then he grinned. “You got it.”

Angela smiled but turned away so the fleeing girls didn’t see it. She needed them to think she was upset. *But I’m not. They’re bored and going for a little adventure. Normally, I would allow it. It just isn’t safe right now.* She swept her own rookies again, most of whom were new people. She’d insisted on it so they could sort the wheat from the chaff faster.

Angela hiked toward the town, no longer as eager for this tour and rounds. *I want a little adventure, too. I just don't want anyone to die. I don't think I've been this bored since before the war.*

Kyle stored that and stayed close for her next question. He refused to glance back as they entered the jungle. Jennifer was on the bridge of the ship. He could feel her hot gaze observing him and everyone else. Her evolution wasn't causing trouble yet, but Kyle was certain it would at some point.

“Has she made a final choice?”

Kyle stiffened. “About which topic?”

Angela understood Jennifer was considering a number of options. “Don't rush her, then.”

“I won't.”

They both watched Grant skillfully head off the girls and march them back to the ship.

Angela thought about Cerise's observation of Grant.

He's special. He just doesn't know it yet.

Cerise thought that because Grant had been immune to most of her spells and charms. Angela knew it was really his ability to get people to work together. He was letting it all out now that he wasn't caged in the bridge; it was a blinding flash of proof that people didn't have to be a descendant to be useful and important.

Angela avoided a taped-off square of ground that had been dug up. The soil was being removed as Tonya tested it. She would need the rest of the

year to get the entire island cleared. It was already slowing their building plans, but as long as they made steady progress, it would be good enough.

The contaminated ground was being dumped into the shallow parts of the ocean around the far side of the island. It was slowly adding to their landmass, while being cleaned in the sun and surf. Angela hated doing that, but there wasn't another solution. They couldn't store it on ships or the island without exposing everyone, and the ocean was already full of radiation and trash. She couldn't solve that problem, yet.

Kyle waited while Angela got lost in her plans to build a trash collection system around this island. She was trying to figure out what it would be used for. Kyle believed she would come up with something. She was fantastic at adapting existing materials into usable ideas that Theo brought to life. Their relationship was perfectly balanced and imperative. Neither was more important, though one couldn't exist without a creator.

Angela got them back to work. "Clinic first. I'll call it from there."

Everyone settled in for the hike.

Angela felt danger zero in on her, but she didn't change her plans. She wanted it over with.

4

"He's not going anywhere!"

"That's not going to happen."

Ed glared at Adrian through the bunker doorway. He ignored the mess and the stench and the glaring girl acting like she was gathering the trash. “We’re down a dozen Eagles. There are three dozen new people in our camp. Do the math.”

Adrian did it against his will. *My Eagles are outnumbered 3-to-1. Shifts are short, light, and all of them have uncovered angles from tired people doing double duty. She’s in danger again.* “You could cover her.”

Ed denied that. “I’m too restless now. I’ve lost my edge.”

Adrian studied the man and found a tiny mark on his neck. “Who’s the lucky girl?”

Ed stiffened. “I’d rather not say.”

Adrian sighed. “That means the boss won’t like it. What’s the deal? Too lazy? Too young? Too old?”

Ed chuckled and didn’t answer.

“You’ve made the choice or you wouldn’t have given up your job. I hope you’re sure.”

“I am.” Ed’s happiness faded back into anger. “You can’t let rookies guard the boss and think she’ll survive.”

Adrian easily resisted that blow. “She’ll fry anyone who threatens her.”

“Or maybe she’ll sacrifice another child to save her precious herd of normals.” Ed walked away before Adrian could ask. “I like being Invisible. It makes me the perfect spy for either side.”

Adrian grabbed his gun belt as Sadie's mouth dropped open. "Who's your boss right now?"

Ed jerked a hand toward the water. "Marc."

Adrian marched faster. Both men ignored the anger of the female in the bunker.

Sadie threw her handful of garbage toward him. "Prick!"

Ed followed Adrian, but he let some distance open up between them. When Adrian was far enough into the jungle that he wouldn't notice, Ed headed for the ship. *Mission accomplished.*

He crossed the pontoon bridge without guilt. Angela was about to have the man she needed to watch her back and stimulate her mind. If it led to anything else, Ed didn't care. "You shouldn't have left her, Marc. You went too far this time; the Eagles have had enough."

Chapter Two

Limbo

The Adrianna

1

“**G**et up there! I can’t believe you two!”

Heads swiveled to observe as Grant brought the disappointed girls back onto the ship.

Adding her support, Jennifer glared at them as they went by, but it only held a little menace.

Kimmie and Amy still flinched and hurried below to get out of her sight.

Jennifer still wasn’t used to that reaction yet. She remembered doing it to Angela, though, and that made it worse. It was isolating to be so powerful that people were terrified by a hard look. *I was shot twice in six months. Both my shoulders have bullet scars now, and I’m always a target. They have very little reason to fear me.*

Jennifer had expected to have less respect after letting the truth slip, but nothing had changed. She was still the enforcer. She was still being trained and treated like Angela’s heir. Jennifer’s sharp mind was trying to figure out why. “Angela didn’t tell them otherwise?”

The camp and Eagles trusted Angela, even over the angry rant of someone who was clearly telling the truth.

“Maybe it doesn’t matter. They don’t think I’ll give up the chance to lead Safe Haven.”

Jennifer still wanted that, in ways, but her heart had changed upon seeing her daughter in danger. *And now I understand why Angela needs an heir. No one who’s sane wants to sacrifice their family for this job. The others think they would because they don’t get along with their family or because they don’t have one, but they’re crazy. They don’t understand what it’s like to be hunted every minute of the day.*

Jennifer could feel trackers searching for the source of the huge evolution. It had been registered by all the descendants in their hive and anyone else within hundreds of miles of her. That made things more dangerous for everyone here. “If I really wanted to protect them, I would leave.”

Jennifer sighed. “But I don’t love them like the boss does. That’s the real reason I can’t take over when she’s had enough. We’ll find the right heir while we’re here. Until then...”

The elevator dinged behind her.

Jennifer stopped herself from drawing her gun with her good hand. She was anxious and had been since the mission team left.

“Are you okay?”

She forced a smile onto her face. “All good. My guard has the runs. Don’t punish her for leaving. I

insisted. The gas bombs were more than I could handle.”

Ray chuckled. He took his place in the shadows, but he didn't promise not to report Monica. She should have called in her relief early.

Ray swept Jennifer and found a powerful young woman exploring her indefinite state. The sling over her shoulder glared out bright white in the dim noon shadows of the bridge.

“Any trouble below?”

“No.” Ray scanned the top deck. The guards were in their places. The deck was busy with working crews and walking citizens who wanted sunlight without leaving the ship. They'd been calling them ramp dwellers, but those souls were a little braver now. They were actually traversing the deck instead of cowering on the ramps, but they still hadn't left the boat yet.

Ray had been on all their ships and on all the nearest islands. He was one of the few who could say that. He'd been doing salvage and delivering supplies to outposts that Angela was setting up on each island. She said if anyone got stranded, they would have supplies to cover them, including a radio and a way to make a fire.

It made sense since they'd had crews going to the islands to collect weapons and gear, and to clear the bodies from the invasion. It was done now, as far as Ray knew. They weren't working on those islands anymore, but the supplies were still there. It made him think they would return at some point.

They certainly had enough boats and fuel to make that trip if they needed to. Their fleet now held nine ships and one tired cruise liner. Five of those were made for battling rough seas and pirates. Angela had them anchored in the small cove near Cave Cliff, on the other side of the island.

Ray saw Molly neatly patrolling the side deck with Panaji, who was her trainee this week. Selito and Raheem were also on duty, doing their first shifts as rookie Eagles. All three men were thrilled to get the promotions. Ray hadn't realized they were all doing FND work, but it was clear now.

Jennifer checked the screens and panels on the console to be sure nothing had changed. It was the most boring job on the ship and she was happy with it. Her pregnancy was going well. Autumn was next to her in the pumpkin seat and sleeping peacefully. Roy was with the other kids, having a snack. Kyle was with Angela. Jennifer had been given three weeks off to recover from her gunshot, though she'd been ready for work after a few days. This was her first day back at a post. It was all good, but she wasn't at peace.

She hadn't spoken to Angela about it yet. *Maybe that's why I don't feel right. She's the alpha. She can make me leave even if I decide I want to stay.*

Jennifer regretted her outburst, but every word had been the truth. *And yet I'm on duty again, with my kid right here. Am I nuts?*

She sighed. She hadn't been completely inactive, though most people didn't know she'd

been doing private lessons with Cate and Cody. Angela had started that months ago and Jennifer had resumed those classes only a few days after the chaos. She hadn't gotten orders or asked for permission; she'd shown up at the normal time and called the kids to her. The guards had readjusted their schedules and reported it, but Angela still hadn't come to talk. Jennifer knew it was her own fault, but it had still brought depression and loneliness.

The twins were progressing steadily in their lessons. It had kept Jennifer from feeling completely left out, but now that she was back, she realized she hadn't been left out at all. She hadn't been shunned during meals or avoided in the halls. *I don't understand what happened. Shouldn't everyone hate me?*

“The twins made it clear you needed a break and you were scared about the baby. The camp likes it that you had a weak moment. It makes you seem more human to the normals, and the descendants like knowing you're flawed. They thought you were perfect. It was intimidating.” Ray went out onto the bridge steps to keep from being distracted further.

Jennifer let out a noise of derision. “I'm not even close to perfect.” She scanned the calm ocean and stopped herself from going over the list of her crimes, her sins.

Ray felt a connection to her and welcomed it. He'd spent a long time thinking he was the only one who worried about being damned for his life

choices. It was both comforting and sad to know every single person on this ship had felt that way at some point.

Jennifer made a mental note to thank Marc's twins during their next lesson. They were adjusting to everything that had happened, but they were furious with Marc for leaving. His long talk with them beforehand hadn't helped. They wanted a mom and a dad, at the same time.

Cate also wanted to fight. If Angela hadn't approved the monthly matches, Cate would have found a way to do it secretly among the kids. She was wild and being away from her father again wasn't helping that side of her. She did spend a lot of time with Angela. That was keeping her in line so far. The first matchup was coming soon. The little girl was yearning for the days to go by faster until the next one.

In the bridge, Jennifer saw Ed come onboard with fast steps and an angry expression. She didn't dig into his thoughts for the reason. He was glancing toward the hilltop where Adrian was usually working out and watching. It was easy to guess their former leader had said or done something Ed found offensive.

Jennifer felt Morgan come up the ramp. She tried not to frown. Kyle was making them spend time together even though Morgan had publicly said he was staying even if she left; the evenings and meals were tense for her. She wanted to tell the often unshaven man to go away. She also wanted to

thank him for standing with her and Kyle every time she heard he'd been given shit about it. She hated it that he was being treated poorly by the camp and lower-level Eagles. Only his high station here had kept the peace in some of those arguments.

Jennifer refused to dwell on it. *I'll make a choice soon and this limbo will end for all of us.*

Ray snorted as he came back inside, but he didn't speak.

Jennifer studied Morgan's tense shoulders and longer hair as the returning rookies smirked at him. People thought he was trying to destroy a happy marriage. They knew that wasn't the case, but they still thought it. Jennifer didn't understand why people were wired that way. Even when shown proof, they refused to change their opinion or belief. *The truth shouldn't be subjective, but it is.*

Morgan caught that as he paused under the bridge to reach the rear deck. He thought about past politics. They used to call it human nature, but it didn't have to be that way. *We have to retrain our fragile egos to accept new information and process it correctly.*

Morgan waved at Daisey before he caught sight of who was standing next to her on the rear deck. Daisey and Ralph were overseeing the preparations for Safe Haven's first group dinner on land. The town restaurant was ready to service the camp for a full meal now. Angela was making it happen.

Morgan expected the two-hour affair to include speeches and tributes to those they'd lost and those

who hadn't come with them. It would be sad and sappy, and people would pass out. *In the tunnel bunker right below the party.* Angela was a genius, and it wasn't just because that would get more of them to stay on land when nothing bad happened. People had to be retaught to spend time together. Their long journey here allowed mental walls to be erected. People had isolated out of fear. Now they were scared of each other and that had to change.

Morgan didn't look at Pam. She was standing next to Daisey and dressed to catch his attention, but the bright, lacy clothes and carefully applied makeup couldn't hide her red nose and bloodshot eyes. She wasn't doing well.

In the bridge, Jennifer tensed. Her connection to the hive lit up, warning everyone that something was coming.

Descendants all over the ship froze in place, waiting to determine how they should react. When the most powerful magic user on the planet sounded an alarm, it was heeded.

Nearing the clinic, Kyle cursed himself for not bringing more security.

Deep in the jungle, Adrian trekked faster toward Angela.

Angela kept walking and working. She couldn't stop every time trouble found them; she would react when it was needed.

Jennifer scanned the ship and the ocean, then the island. She found it quiet and calm, with a light, warm breeze carrying the sights and scents of a tropical paradise. *But the birds went quiet. I'm not wrong.*

The radio on Ray's belt lit up.

"I know you're listening! Answer me, damn you!"

Ray lowered the volume but didn't shut it off. That would be a waste of time. It was running in Jennifer's mind as if she was the radio.

"It's my job."

Ray didn't ask her about that even though he wanted to. William's voice blared out again.

"I'll find a way to reach you. The water can't hold me here forever!"

The radio went dead.

Jennifer blinked, coming back to herself. She broke the connection.

Angela's firm voice came through their short-wave radios. "Let me worry about him when the time comes. He can't hear us or reach us. We're protected."

Ray was glad Angela had immediately calmed their biggest fears.

Jennifer was able to scan through the ship and the ground now. She listened to the disruptive

waves of the normals below to see if it had been enough. This wasn't the first time they'd heard William calling, but it was the first time the camp had heard it openly while Jonny checked radio stations. It was part of his job as their DJ.

Morgan stepped back so he could view into the bridge.

Jennifer glanced at him through the glass. She slowly nodded.

Morgan saw how she hesitated. He made a note in his book to tell Angela it might not hold for another call. She needed to do something to assure the camp that William would die in the final battle.

Morgan stored his book and resumed his walk to the rear deck. He greeted Daisey and gave Pam a polite smile, but he went to Ralph for the update. Pam had moved into the camp hall and made friends with Daisey, who was happily sharing den mother leadership with her new husband. The kind woman had been trying to get Morgan to change his mind about Pam and that included enlisting the help of camp females. Three weeks of emotional excavators had brought Morgan to the edge of his patience. *It's never going to happen. Let me go.*

Pam didn't respond. She just watched him with needy, betrayed eyes.

2

"It's all trayed and freezing. We're done prepping fish today."

The other cooks let out small cheers despite being happy to have the food. Skinning and cutting up so many fish at one time was dulling their knives and their knees.

Dwight stepped over the fat cat waiting for the next scrap to drop. All the felines were in the mess right now, including the roly-poly kitten who was the delight of the entire ship for the amusement it generated.

Dwight didn't mind. It was less mess to clean and it made his wife happy to have them around. Tonya also liked it because it saved a little on cat food. She was worried about them getting enough to eat since the island only had a few rats. She claimed those would be gone in a few months and then the cats would need a share of the human food.

"We'll cover it." Brittani finished washing her hands and pulled up her thick gray jacket hood. "I'm gonna go lie down until the next shift."

"You're off until tomorrow. Get some sleep."

Brittani forced a smile and limped to the exit. When she got tired, her healed leg sometimes ached like it had right after she'd been shot.

Dwight and Thelma exchanged a worried glance. Brittani's behavior since Trinity's death had been erratic, different. They were afraid to ask her about it after the rocky moments they'd had.

Dwight had another concern. Watching the normals was part of his job now because he was on the law council. If they started conspiring again, he had to notify Angela, and what better place to meet

and talk about mutiny than in the mess? So far, things were calm, but the two groups were still leery. It wouldn't take a lot to restart that mess.

Dwight let a piece of fish fall to the floor.

The kitten beat the adults to it. The piece was gone in a quick gulp and so was the kitten. It went right back to its spot under the counter by his feet where its parents couldn't fit.

"We're hitting the showers." Tobias wrapped a fishy arm around his wives and led the giggling women out of the mess.

People called spicy encouragement that brought smirks and blushes. Tobias and his women were fitting in well now, without any of the repelling issues everyone was worried about. They didn't spend much time around other byzan, though. Thelma wondered how that might go when the group events happened, like camp meetings or the dinner on land. She liked the thruple. She hoped repelling was a myth.

Thelma scanned the mess tables and the buffet they'd put out hours ago. Most of the camp ate at set times, but a handful were living on a different schedule. Most of those people were here now.

Ian and Debra were having powdered eggs and toast while gazing at each other without speaking.

Thelma was certain they were talking, though.

Near them, Jeff was grabbing a quick meal before his next shift. Leeann and Missy were tormenting him with constant chatter about everything and nothing.

The same was true of the camp women who were supervising a snack for the younger kids and those about to go on duty. Hawk and Caleb were going to join Marc's twins for duty over the kids' dorms. They were eating lightly and enjoying their new status.

Across from them, Candy was snacking and waiting on Conner for their daily game of whatever he brought up from the cargo hold. He and Charlie were donating blood right now for the medics to freeze. All the descendants had been donating. As soon as Angela suggested it, the medics had been swamped with volunteers. Everyone knew being healed by magic wasn't always possible.

Allison was on a stool near the door, reading a book and trying to ignore the guards on duty. Her appetite was good and her tests were still clear. The happiness radiated off her in thick waves that tried to distract her new family. *I wish there was a way to feel this good forever.*

Zack and two of his sons were in the corners on duty. The boys were officially Junior Eagles now. They stared impassively, determined to do a good job.

Heads turned as the mood shifted.

Grant came in with Kimmie. His hand on her shoulder told everyone she was in trouble.

Jeff sighed as Leeann and Missy fell silent for the first time. He examined Kimmie's jumper and gym shoes; both held bits of sand. "Off-ship?"

Grant nodded. “Halfway up the pontoon bridge before Kyle spotted them.”

Jeff glared at all three girls. “Ambushing me is...rude!”

Kimmie gave him a charming smile. “Just rude? ‘Cause we can try harder.”

Grant left before he laughed. He’d already dropped Amy off to Wade. She was getting the same treatment Kimmie would once Jeff remembered how to talk.

Grant swallowed a snicker at the thought of Wade’s face when he’d called him daddy number two. Wade was adjusting well to his new life, and surprisingly, so was the camp. Grant assumed that was because Samantha and Neil had already had that type of relationship with someone else.

Grant jogged back up to the ramp, eager to rejoin Kyle and the boss. He was soaking in any extra shifts he could get while the camp didn’t need him to sail the ship. Knowing he could have another life had soothed him enough that he was starting to look forward to the future again instead of dreading it for only having one needed skill. He much preferred duty while wearing his black Eagle outfit and rookie jacket.

But I don’t want Theo’s level of work. That’s too much for anyone to carry for long.

Grant smiled at Cody and Cate as they went down the hall, followed by Dog. They didn’t stop to chat.

Grant wondered how high up in Safe Haven the twins would go when their Eagle egos kicked in.

Cody caught the thought and finally had a name for what he was feeling. *Eagle ego. I like it.*

Cate rolled her eyes and led the way to their next stop.

3

Tonya carried the blood bags to the cooler and gently stored them on the shelf in the lab.

Timmy waited for her to move, then he closed and locked the cooler. “Is that it?”

Tonya washed her hands. “Not even close. We still have to collect and store the samples Terry and Tim drew while we were working on Conner and Charlie.” She glanced over at the two quiet boys. “Water, water, water.”

Charlie obediently drank more from the bottle he’d been given.

Tonya didn’t tell the teenager what he needed to hear. His messy state and rough attitude didn’t encourage advice.

Conner held up his empty bottle. “Can I go?”

Tonya smiled at the neat, shaven boy as she lotioned her hands. Conner wasn’t a problem. He was one of the few teens in camp who wasn’t. “Sure. You’re off donating duty now for the next month. Eat, sleep, drink your water rations.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and remind Candy she has babysitting duty after evening mess.” The heavily pregnant woman would have help with that. She was too far along for hard work, but she still wanted to be helpful.

“Will do.” Conner left. He hadn’t spoken to Angela’s son the entire time they’d been here. He didn’t have anything to say and Charlie was a closed-off wall while he adjusted to Tracy being out of his life.

Conner headed for the cargo steps while exchanging greetings with those waiting for their appointment with a medic. He avoided the thoughts of his last run that his mind wanted to replay on a loop. It wasn’t good to dwell on what couldn’t be changed. Drew was gone. *I can’t bring him back.*

Charlie finished his bottle of water and left via the other hallway. He didn’t speak to anyone and they left him alone. His mood was dangerous again. His mind kept replaying his manhood mission. *I always had help. I was never on my own. Maybe if I had been, my life would be different now.*

Tonya added the new numbers to their blood stock file. Thanks to Adrian coming in around dawn every few days to let Terry draw blood, they had one full cooler and had started stocking a second. According to her tests, the thawed blood was still good, but the real proof would come the first time they used it for an injury. “Take the basket and get their samples. Check each one to make sure it’s labeled.”

Timmy left the lab quickly, gliding through the med bay and waiting patients fast enough to create a breeze. He turned sideways to fit through. His stomach still touched people.

“Why’s he in such a rush?” Jayda stayed in the hallway between the lab and the main med bay.

“Food is calling.” Tonya opened the folders for each of the four samples Timmy was about to bring back to her. She was rotating them in batches now and finally feeling like she could keep up.

New names mocked her, sending her mind to the final battle where they’d gained three dozen refugees. Some of those people were here now to get medications, results of tests, and to seek care for chronic conditions, like allergies and asthma. Safe Haven hadn’t dealt with those issues in a long time. It made her wonder how those people had survived. “Maybe they’re special.”

Cody stopped in the hall by Jayda, but he spoke to Tonya. “I think they just got lucky.”

Tonya swept the twins. “Healing sessions, duty, or roaming without permission?”

Cody grinned.

Cate scowled.

Dog sniffed around for the source of the smell hitting his nose.

“We have duty over the kids’ dorm. Cate wanted to stop by and visit the kitty.”

“I’m sorry, guys. They’re in the mess, annoying the cooks and stealing fish.”

Cate giggled at the image.

Tonya was drawn toward the sound. Marc's daughter and son were dressed alike and had the same haircuts. They were adorable, with haunted eyes that screamed rage from their treatment. It was all she could do not to grab them both and hug them until their pain faded.

Cate saw Tonya's warm look and iced over.

Cody took her hand. "Tonya's okay."

"She's with *him*. He hurt our new mom."

Tonya frowned. "That was a long time ago, Cate."

Cate's nose rose into the air. "Eighteen months is not a long time."

Tonya stared. "That's why you were making him do cage matches."

"So?"

Tonya wasn't intimidated by the powerful little girl. "So stop it. The alpha is the only one who can punish him and she does, regularly. Safe Haven is about second chances."

Cate stuck her nose in the air. "Whatever."

Tonya snickered. "Man, do you sound like your dad."

Cate growled and stormed out of the hall.

Tonya sighed. "She needs someone to talk to about your dad. We always sent people to Adrian when they got like this. I know she doesn't like him, but she doesn't have to. She just has to listen."

Cody wanted his sister to be happy here. "I'm pissed too!"

Tonya sympathized. She didn't scold him for the bad language. "I didn't want Kenn to go either. Maybe all of us should talk to Adrian."

Cody cocked his head. "Can we? I mean, can *you*?"

Tonya shrugged. "I guess we'll find out. Now run along. Your sister needs her guard."

Cody brightened. "Thank you for noticing." He followed his sister.

Dog sniffed Tonya's leg. *Let me have it, Red!*

Tonya grinned as she slipped a half sandwich from breakfast out of her pocket. Dog was tired of fish and the only break they were getting was breakfast. Angela said it was unfair to ask the cooks to prep all that fish and cook something else at the same time.

Dog licked it gently, then took it in his mouth and left the room. *You're a good human! Yes, you are!*

Tonya washed her hands again, grinning. "KJ will be riding that wolf before he's a year old. I can feel it coming."

She saw Daryl go by and understood he was on duty over Marc's twins. It made her feel better to know they had protection. *I don't want them hurt. If time resets, I'll lose my new life.*

"Daryl to the deck C bathrooms. Move your ass." A rookie's reckless voice came through the radios. "Your relief is on the way."

"Copy."

Jayda scanned Tonya and the baby through the lab's glass door, then returned to the main med bay to keep watching the new people. Jayda took her security post seriously. Tonya always felt better when the muscular woman was here.

Timmy brought the basket of blood samples in and put it on her desk. He bit his pudgy lip to keep from asking if he could go now.

“Your dad gave me a message. Are you ready?”

Timmy groaned. “I don't want to talk to Tim again!”

Neither do I. Tonya used a firm tone. “He said you're on a diet, as of right now, until you talk to Tim again. He also said no smoking or drinking or drugs. He'll ask Angela to lock you up to keep you from doing it, so forget all those ideas.”

“Food isn't a drug!”

“Then why are you craving it above all else?”

Timmy held in tears. “I guess I'm on a diet.”

Tonya was proud of him for standing his ground. “How about talking to someone else?”

“I'm emptying the garbage cans!” Timmy left the room.

Tonya wasn't offended. She hoped the boy got his mind straight because he was wonderful to have in the lab. He paid attention to detail and he was gentle, careful. “Safe Haven needs you, kid. Get it together.”

Tonya began sorting and storing the vials of blood that she would start testing tomorrow. Her job was going well. The baby was doing great. She was

learning new skills in hands-on moments and from the books they'd brought. She had friendships with other women for the first time in her life. She was respected by camp and leadership. She also had gifts that wanted to grow. "I have everything I've always wanted. Why am I not happy?"

Tonya's mind went straight to Kenn. Her stomach clenched.

She hated to agree, but it was obvious. Without her mate, only the baby mattered. Everything else was just helping her kill time while Kenn was gone.

Tonya wondered again if she could contact him. She already knew it was a bad idea; that's why she hadn't tried it yet. It might get him caught or distract him. She wasn't going to try it when so much was at stake. "But I want to. I miss him."

KJ twitched in his sleep, responding to her wave of sadness.

Tonya forced her mind back to the work.

4

"She's in there." The rookie retreated 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 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 sat on the bathroom counter to wait, 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 back into the stall.

Daryl froze. *Pregnant. 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."

Brittani groaned again. "That's why I didn't tell you yet."

“On my way.” Terry’s voice over the radio was concerned. “Injury or illness?”

“Pregnancy.”

“Oh. Great! Be right there.”

“Actually, can you send Tonya?” Daryl didn’t want a normal handling this.

Tension flowed through the radio before Terry answered. “Sure.”

Daryl smiled at his wife. “You’ll be fine. We’ll take care of you.”

“That’s what I mean!” Brittani wiped her mouth on her shirt. “I don’t want special treatment.”

Daryl handed her some towels from the roll. “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 words. “At least?”

She lifted her shirt to show a stomach that belonged on a woman who was four months along. “I’m only a week late. I’m not sure this is normal.”

Daryl remembered Brittani’s confession that she was scared of having kids. He cursed himself. *I should have listened.* He slid off the counter and began shooting energy into her weakened body. “You are officially off all duty.”

Brittani let 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. “Thank God!”

Daryl grinned at her. “That’s sweet.”

Brittani made a face. “It’s bunk. I’m the mother!”

Daryl placed a gentle hand on her stomach. “They’re already daddy’s girls.”

Chapter Three

I Know

1

“Send me Brittani’s medical file when we get back to the ship.”

“I will.” Kyle slid aside to let Angela see the clinic they’d just reached.

Angela studied the treehouse in amusement, while getting her breath back. Theo and his team had added rubber mats to make it easier for wheelchairs and gurneys to roll over, but he’d also listened to Marc. The vines under those mats were now curled around the edges in thick balls that were wrapped in solar lights. It looked like the entrance to a fairy clinic. “Whose idea was it?”

Kyle had to check his notes. “Uh...Monica says it was a group effort. Theo says they went on break and came back and it was like that.”

“She doesn’t want credit.”

“FND?”

Angela frowned. “Find out why she feels she needs it.”

“I will.”

Angela waved at the rookies. “Full perimeter. Stay alert. Our first deaths happened here shortly after we landed.”

The rookies all tensed and glanced at each other for directions.

Kyle and Angela let it go for a minute to see if anyone other than Grant was willing to step up and take control. So far, he was the only one really trying to earn level one status.

Two of the rookies matched her words to their training. They headed for the opposite side of the clinic.

But they didn't organize everyone else. Kyle got the other rookies into position.

Angela went into the clinic, not waiting for him.

Kyle didn't scold her, but his instructions to the rookies were sharp and short so he could catch up to her.

Angela paused inside the entrance and checked the closed clinic for threats.

A shadow flew through the hallway and disappeared into a rear room.

Angela relaxed. She went to the desk and sat on the stool. "Ghosts I can live with. Live people scare me."

Kyle entered and began rotating among the few windows while Angela read the results of testing by the previous doctor and Tonya, who continued to impress Kyle with her ability to become a lab technician. She'd also helped with a number of minor medical issues over the last few weeks. Her infant was thriving, her cats were healthy, and the ship liked it when she was onboard. Kyle's only complaint wasn't something she could fix. Tonya

missed Kenn. The tiny flares of sadness from her were reasonable.

Kyle studied Angela. She hadn't shown a single bit of sadness since they'd all said goodbye on the dock and watched the mission team sail into the horizon.

"I'm fine."

Kyle started to call her a liar. A shadow flew toward him from the rear hallway. It veered off toward the door and vanished.

Kyle let go of his holster, but left it unsnapped. "I don't like that."

Angela admired his quick reaction. "I don't like these numbers." She tossed the book onto the desk.

"Why don't you banish the ghosts from the island?"

Angela looked over at him.

Kyle waited, hoping they were still close enough to have trust.

"I don't think it's healthy. We have to face our mistakes."

"Agreed, but we don't have to let it rule the rest of our lives."

Angela opened her folder and added the notebook. "I don't want to banish them until I know where they're going. Until they become dangerous, or I understand how it works, leaving them alone is a safer plan."

"That makes sense." Kyle felt a hit coming and braced. "Your turn."

Angela didn't hesitate. "What was the outcome of the private Eagle vote?"

Kyle didn't want to confirm that, let alone answer it. But he had to if he wanted to keep getting the same honesty from her. He still didn't know what had hurt their relationship, but this would be the start of fixing it. "They've all agreed and submitted names for consideration."

"Let me know your final choices and I'll check them over."

Kyle didn't trust her reasonable words and tone. "You don't miss much."

She shrugged. "Deductive reasoning in this case. I'll only approve two and I'll train them for a long time before I show them how to do it. I refuse to be betrayed in this."

Kyle was relieved. "We're picking carefully."

"I can only use good souls and they'll be sacrificed, maybe. It sucks."

"Yes." Kyle knew she was glad to have it covered, however.

"I'm also grateful that I don't have to carry it alone."

"The Eagles are always here for you, Boss."

"I'm honored. Your turn."

They both stilled as a powerful scan went over the clinic. It touched both of them and then vanished.

Angela waved. "Your turn."

Kyle brought up a personal issue this time. “If there was a way to increase lifespans through consuming...corpses, would you approve it?”

Angela barely kept from gagging. She spent a minute gaining control of her guts before she answered.

Kyle knew she wasn't torn. The anger in her eyes said she knew why he was asking and there was no way she would ever allow it.

“I can't. It will lead to killing people off for the ingredients. Our babies will be hunted even harder. Suicides to donate will become common. I won't put us through that to gain ten or even fifty years.”

“What if it was a hundred?”

“I can't be bought, Kyle. You already knew my answer when Jennifer told you about the scroll.” She didn't enjoy his wince. “I applaud you both for not telling Morgan yet.”

“She's doing it today.”

“He's not going to agree either, so it's fine. My turn. Why did you kill your brother?” Angela had gotten the story from three Eagles who'd witnessed his action.

Kyle froze. Fury flashed across his face.

The rookies got ready to run for help. They couldn't hear the conversation, but they saw Kyle's body language through the windows.

Kyle forced the dangerous rage to settle. “Jacob killed our mother.”

“Was it an accident?”

“He hacked her body up and tossed it into a swamp like it was a movie.”

“My God. Why?”

“She was having an affair. He waited for me to leave on a run.”

“You weren’t a kid if you were on a run.”

“It was two weeks before the war.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Angela went back to her notes, glad that she had an answer for a behavior she hadn’t been able to explain. *But something isn’t right about his story.* “Your turn.”

Kyle sensed the mood becoming dangerous. “We can stop now. I’m on duty.”

She snorted. “We’re all slacking off and I think we need a break from rules for a little bit. Your turn.”

“What are you, Tonya, and Samantha doing tonight when you sneak off after dinner?”

Angela laughed. “I told them we were spotted. We’ve been doing FND workouts in areas that still need some love. You’ll notice it’s all clean and organized again, though we’ve had a few rough end-of-season storms rolling across the ocean.”

Kyle waited.

Angela grinned. “I tried. We’re working on a private project that I’d rather not discuss until I decide if I want to use it.”

“Why are you working on it if you don’t know?”

“How else can I know? Some things require hands-on or visual proof of concept before you’re willing to try them. Like flying. If you’d never been

on a plane or heard of flying, would you get into a thin tin can for that purpose?"

Kyle chuckled. "No, I guess not. I'll ask again another time."

She sighed unhappily. "About a month, I think. If I can take it that long."

Kyle connected it to Marc and the mission team. He didn't ask. He also didn't continue their conversation. This wasn't a good time or place for digging up secrets and releasing ghosts. This place had enough of that.

Angela's thoughts continued along the embellishment she'd tried to get by him about cleaning the ship. They really had made wonderful progress in getting this island and their ship ready for life in paradise.

The island cleaning crew had gotten most of the basic work done on the locations she'd assigned, but they had also bumped into the next level of the job. A few people had been assigned to live in their tunnel bunker; the cleaning crew was helping them settle in. Neil's completed map had proved the Eagle theory that the tunnels were linked in more than one place. It was a rectangle with two center paths connecting under the town in a lopsided pirate cross. Cut into the dirt, the paths had been so camouflaged that they might not have been found except for the lights they'd strung along every wall.

When danger, problems, or inconveniences were reported, the cleaning crew told the person responsible for that issue. Theo was getting most of

the notes right now, but that would soon even out for him and load up the next poor soul she assigned to do something down there. It was a hard, heavy workload. She'd given Theo two off days a week since they landed, but it wasn't enough. *We'll need another engineer soon and I already have him picked out.*

Angela opened the time stream to verify that choice, though she doubted it would work.

Kyle ignored the active ghosts while she tried to see through the foggy future. He wasn't surprised when nothing happened. Even Jennifer was having trouble viewing what came next. "Maybe you all need another recharge."

Angela froze.

Kyle stiffened at her thoughts. "None of you can get through?"

Angela connected to the hive and found dozens of angry, worried descendants who thought they couldn't see ahead because they were going through a new evolution. "I can open it, but I can't hold it now without extra energy that I can't spare. It's...slippery."

Kyle felt the cold shield of battle waiting to drop. "If that's true, then we have something else coming for us."

Angela looked toward the door. "I want you back on the ship. Finish your shift with a complete check."

"I'm not leaving you without a guard."

“My sniper is in place. We both felt him arrive.” They’d been getting stragglers from the island battles all along, but none of their people had been hurt. “And this is what we do when we’re short-handed. Those who can’t defend themselves get the protection.”

Kyle didn’t deny it. Knowing Adrian was out there made him feel better. He was worth ten rookies. “I’ll make sure your next guards are senior Eagles.”

“Don’t pull them from shifts or downtime. And take some of the rookies back with you. They’re making faces at each other around the building. Give them a wakeup call.”

Kyle stormed outside and began shouting.

Angela went to the window and stayed in sight as an easy target.

A wave of anger broke over the clinic.

Kyle and the rookies assumed it came from her. He got them out of sight, reprimanding them the entire way.

The few rookies he’d left stared at each other in relief and pride.

Angela drew in a tight breath and collected her folder. “I refuse to be afraid to live.” She opened the door and went out.

2

“This is crazy. Let’s go back to the ship.” Neil wiped spit-up from his son’s mouth and then from

his arm. “We saw the town. It’s still ugly. I don’t need the full tour.”

“Okay. I want a shower before I hit the cargo room with Tonya and the boss. We’ll find some more baby medical books, I hope.” Samantha was still wiping the mess from Jeremy’s son. The twins hated being on land.

“It’s just heartburn.”

“What if it’s something else?”

Neil frowned. “It isn’t. I checked all the books—ours and theirs. They just don’t like how still land is.”

“I don’t think that explains it, though. It’s a bumpy ride in a stroller or being carried.” Samantha confided one of her fears. “I think something’s wrong with their stomachs. I want Morgan to scan them.”

Neil was forced to give her the truth. “I had him do it a week ago. There’s nothing wrong.”

Samantha chuckled. “I thought you weren’t worried.”

“I’m not. Now.” He placed the baby into his side of the stroller, then took the other child from Samantha. He smiled at the sleepy baby. “Morgan says this phase only lasts about six months, so that’s good, right?”

The child spit up again, splattering Neil’s shirt.

“Now that was uncalled for!”

Angela’s laughter flooded the area as she came down the path. “I thought it was great!”

The small group of rookies with her ignored Sam and her family as they tried to catch their breath.

Angela took the fussy baby from Neil and stood next to the stroller to protect both children while their parents tried to find the balance between disgusted and amused. She nuzzled the baby in her arm and placed a calming hand on the one in the stroller. “Boys, this is land. This is where people come from. It’s where your mommy and daddy come from. In time, you’ll live here, too. Give it another chance, okay? For me?”

Both boys cooed at her.

Sam rolled her eyes.

Neil laughed.

The rookies around them just waited for it to be over. They had no ties to Safe Haven yet, or to its people.

Neil scanned them and scowled through his discomfort as the spit-up soaked into his shirt. “Where’s your guard, Boss?”

The rookies glared at him for the insult.

Angela gestured. “Give this family an escort to the ship.” She walked away before Neil or the rookies could protest.

Neil pointed at the biggest men. “Stay with the boss. That’s an Eagle rule. She’s never allowed to be alone. Try to at least do that right.”

The three men started to go after her and then stopped.

“Where did she go?”

“She was just here!”

“Find her!” Neil went with Samantha and his kids, but he clicked his radio three times and then repeated the code. *The boss doesn't have protection.*

Angela hurried over the path toward the town. Adrian was doing a great job for Neil to have missed him. She hoped it stayed that way. She didn't get much time alone, but she also didn't want to bury any of the easily distracted rookies. Training only covered so much when they were new. She'd now gotten almost all of them out of the line of fire. “I feel more like myself already.”

Angela heard the excited yipping of their only puppy. It faded as the dog moved away from her location. She'd worried about letting it loose on the island, but the puppy had avoided the crocs and the ocean so far. Or maybe Nature was protecting it. The small animal was a good reminder of the lives they'd had before. It and the cats were loved for that.

The rookies caught up to Angela as she reached the town. She immediately distracted them. “Do you think the restaurant will hold two hundred people at a time?”

They instantly went toward that building to evaluate it, arguing.

“No way. Not big enough.”

“You haven't been inside. It might be bigger.”

“I'm telling you, it's not big enough.”

Angela slipped into the barn while they argued.

“Hey! Where'd she go this time?”

“Someone’s coming!”

Adrian marched out of the trees. “Hold your fire!”

Nervous rookies let go of their guns as they recognized him.

“We can’t find the boss.”

Adrian glared. “You can’t find something if you don’t look for it!” He stomped by them. “Take a break!”

Grant and Trent arrived in time to witness it all. They took posts in the trees and shadows around the town so all the angles were covered.

The rookies didn’t know anyone was there.

3

Adrian marched into the barn and slammed the door. “What the hell are you doing?”

Angela turned to him with hot, needy eyes.

Adrian was blasted by desire. He stopped, scanning her. *She looks good!*

He swallowed, suddenly nervous.

Angela smirked.

Adrian scowled. “That’s a dirty trick to avoid the reprimand you know you deserve.”

“I avoided the shouting no one needs to hear.”

Adrian studied her harder. “You’re still having issues with fear.”

“Every time I stand up for myself, my heart thuds in my chest and sweat pours from my pits. I just act better now.”

“Bull.” Adrian stayed by the entrance, aware of rookies peering through cracks. “You did it on purpose to get me alone.”

Angela smiled coldly. “Now tell me what my problem is.”

“You miss Marc.” Adrian didn’t need gifts to know that. “But you also want to check the time stream, and you can’t do it alone.”

Angela’s smugness faded. “Will you help me?”

“Of course. You didn’t need to go through all this.”

“I like screwing with you.”

Adrian laughed. “The feeling is not mutual.”

Angela’s brow lifted.

Adrian wasn’t sure how to respond without starting something dangerous.

“Aren’t you going to ask why I chose you for this?”

Adrian’s eyes darkened. “I assume it involves something shady.” Heat sparked again. “Who else would you pick?”

She snorted. “There are several other candidates for that award.”

Adrian’s voice deepened. “Don’t bullshit me, lady. I’m the best.”

Angela laughed.

The sound traveled through the wooden walls and captured every rookie in her protection detail.

“You can’t keep using rookies. You don’t know about some of these people yet…” Adrian’s anger threw more heat into the air. “Bait?!”

Angela sat on a crate. “I refuse to let my friends and family play that role anymore.”

“Get back there.” Adrian pointed at a crate under the steps where she was protected by three solid walls. He stood in front of her and waited. The sense of death coming was suddenly clear and sharp, bitter.

Angela opened the time stream.

Adrian fed her energy to go as deep as she needed. He stayed ready to pull her up, but his attention swiveled repeatedly to determine where the threat was coming from. She’d drawn him because she didn’t feel safe. That was her problem.

Angela spotted what she was looking for and slowed the images. She rushed forward mentally. “Hello, Saul.”

Adrian refused to lose focus as Angela began telling someone named Saul that he was guaranteed a place in Safe Haven if he scuttled a submarine. Adrian saw the rookies outside finally snap out of their dazes. They glanced around, not sure what they’d missed.

Adrian’s hand slid to his gun as a shadow shifted above them.

Angela flinched at the noise as Adrian fired, but she didn’t let go of Saul until she was certain he was hers.

Adrian waited for a second assassin.

Rookies hurried in, shocked that they’d missed the action and the intruder.

Adrian backed up and spun. He fired again, getting the man now rising up behind Angela with a knife.

Angela let go and stayed still, following her Eagle training for hostage situations.

Adrian reloaded and then slowly holstered as the sense of death faded. It was over.

Adrian clicked his radio. "All clear."

Angela used her radio next. "We're 5-by here. Return to your posts." She was certain Eagles were flying their way and she didn't want them to stop working. "It's just another straggler."

Adrian glared at her. "What would you have done if I hadn't been here?"

"The same as the last one." Angela yawned as weariness dragged at her. "I planned to practice muting his screams through my shield. I think we can learn to block sounds."

Adrian blanched.

Grant and Trent hurried into the barn a few seconds later.

A fast scan told them what had happened and verified it was over.

Adrian started to leave.

Grant stepped in front of the door. "We have to get the rookies back and take the bodies to our dump site. You stay with the boss."

Adrian couldn't refuse because they were short on manpower. He waited for someone else to get free and come for the job.

Angela remained on the crate. She could have handled the intruders, but they'd been stalking her for days, getting closer each time she got distracted. She assumed they'd been waiting for her to get lost in magic or emotions.

Adrian waited until they were alone again. "Were they survivors or new trackers?"

"No idea. They were descendants, though. They were very good at hiding themselves and their thoughts. I'm just not sure why they didn't use magic."

"They were trackers. They probably thought you would sense magic use. Survivors wouldn't have had the patience to wait for a good moment."

"But they didn't know who you are or they would have kept waiting."

Adrian glared at her.

Angela leaned back. "Go on and say it before you explode."

"You're being reckless. You're endangering the baby. Safe Haven would not be fine without you."

"Sure they would. We're protected here."

"Maybe for a few weeks, but they'd fall apart without your brain and determination. Stick with it."

"You think they'd hold for a few weeks?"

Adrian refused to confirm it again as he felt her dwell on leaving. "You can't go anywhere."

"Who said I was?" She yawned again, suddenly exhausted. "I'm thinking about a break. I haven't

toured the other islands. I've studied the maps and watched the videos, but it's not the same."

"If you do that, please take a crew who can protect you."

"I don't really need it, you know. I used that moment for this moment."

"I assumed so. What do you need that you can't ask for outright and receive from one of your *other candidates*?"

Angela chuckled at his bitter tone and switched the subject. "I assembled a list of people I've never used my alpha power on. I didn't need to. Answer the riddle: why?"

Adrian snorted. "They're your most loyal, trustworthy people. They're also your commanders for the final battle."

"How do you come up with the answers so fast?"

"I've already covered most of it. I didn't leave notebooks on it because I didn't want to face giving up control. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"Anything else?"

"Five of us tested negative for the rage illness. Why?"

Adrian examined her. He caught the faint hint of vomit and spotted the splatters on her shoes. It wasn't worse than his own sweaty, garbage-scented clothes. "Are all of you pregnant?"

“I’m the only female.” She didn’t tell him it was everyone who’d ascended. She needed him to be smart enough to figure that out for himself.

Adrian thought about their rage tests, and how they’d found out about it. “You were cured when you ascended. It lasted, maybe?”

“Would that imply a protection from other issues?”

“I doubt it because our radiation outbreak hit you, too.”

“So there’s no concrete answer.”

Adrian dug deeper. He hated to leave her hanging. “Did your group have contact with something everyone else didn’t?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Did they have protection charms or spells put on them?”

“I don’t know.” She really didn’t. Not all charms and spells could be seen or sensed.

“If they were covered by a charm, it’s possible magic is still covering it, though I don’t understand why other problems would be able to get through.”

“What if it was a shot for the rage illness? Or food?”

They thought about Donner at the same time.

Adrian’s anger flared out again. “He had a vaccine, maybe.”

“What are the odds of us hunting that down or copying it with Tonya’s brain and your luck?”

“Slim to none, I would guess, but it’s possible.” Adrian finally understood what she needed but

couldn't ask for because she wanted proof that he understood it. "The rage illness is getting worse and you don't have a solution. You need me to find it."

She nodded.

Adrian put that at the top of his list. "I'll figure something out."

"Good. Now I have all my best people working on it."

Adrian soaked in the praise even as he distrusted it. "You're buttering me up for something."

"I'm ready to finish my tour now."

"Uh-huh." He went to the door.

Angela waited for Adrian to check their path even though she was certain the trouble was over for now. She enjoyed how it felt to have him as her protection, but the fear was still lingering. Only Marc made her feel totally safe.

"It's because you know he'd kill anything or anyone for you, even if death isn't required."

"Perhaps." She walked to the next building over.

The restaurant had gotten a lot of work. The new people had been quarantined in there after they passed their first tests. She'd put them to work on repairs and replacements. It was completely different now except for the major appliances, but even those had gotten upgrades. Theo had declared it ready for use yesterday.

Adrian inspected the building. It was empty, and unlike the rest of the island, it didn't feel like there were ghosts here.

Angela checked the cabinets to determine how much space they had to work with. She wanted the main meals to be held here, not on the ship, but they had to be able to hold supplies and equipment to serve at least two hundred at a time, in double shifts. The widened main floor and the upstairs bar setup would help. She'd wanted to use the second floor as quarters for the workers, but Theo had convinced her showing that type of difference between the crews would cause trouble.

“Good job getting the radio tower up without Kenn’s help.”

Angela warmed under his words. “Thanks. Jennifer and I followed his notes. It helped that this island had the infrastructure for it. Their old tower had been removed, but everything else was just buried under vines.”

“Kenn will be proud of you guys. And a little jealous that he didn’t get to set it up.”

Angela caught the hint. “I’ll ask him to fix what we did wrong, even if we didn’t do anything wrong. Then he’ll get to upgrade it.”

“That should soothe him.”

Angela looked over. “Have you searched recently?”

He swept her long, graying braid. “Yes. I’m able to get through. I’m not evolving this time around.”

Angela’s face darkened. “Do you know?”

Adrian shrugged. “It’s hard to say what I know.”

“You know what I’m asking if you know.”

“I know.”

“And?”

“I know.” His tone deepened. “Please take me along. Don’t make me wait here for word like one of the mates.”

Angela nodded stiffly. “You’ll be doing what you’re covering right now, plus more. There’s no holding back this time. I’ll need everything you can do.”

“You’ll have it.” Adrian stepped outside for a quick walk of the main path through the town that was being stocked and set up with outside tables and benches.

Angela resumed her evaluations of the restaurant.

Watching from the cover of the thick vines and trees, Trent and Grant hoped they were doing the right thing by giving Adrian and Angela time together. They stayed hidden as the afternoon continued to roll toward evening.

Chapter Four

Something I'll Regret

1

“**T**he ship is clear.” Kyle let go of his mike and scanned the heavily guarded top deck again. They were running skeleton crews below where it was harder for anyone to scan them, but up here, it didn’t appear that they were low on manpower at all.

Kyle saw Morgan in the shadows under the bridge. He nodded to the off-duty man as he walked down the ramp into the ship.

“Copy. Resume normal security procedures. Let everyone out of their areas.” Angela’s calm voice flowed over their nerves like a balm.

She was still on the island, but Safe Haven’s tension level plummeted. This wasn’t their first lockdown; they just wanted to know she was safe. The new people were rattled every time an intruder was removed, but they were alone in that. Even the kids shrugged it off. Only Adrian’s voice on their radios, and William’s call, were a serious topic of conversation an hour after the fact.

Standing under the bridge of the ship, Morgan fought the need to glance up and verify Jennifer’s safety again. He could feel her vibrant witch

scanning for trouble. He didn't want her to think he was showing emotions that she needed to return. *But I came right back up to guard her as soon as the cold wave hit, so there's another lie I'll tell myself and her.*

“Can we talk?”

Morgan flinched. She was right behind him.

Jennifer was surprised she'd been able to catch him off guard. “Jumpy.”

Morgan forced a chuckle and kept his distance. “A bit. What's up?”

Jennifer didn't look him in the eye. It wasn't because she thought the Special Forces man would make a move. She just didn't want anyone else to think it. He was already taking enough abuse over their choices. “I have what you asked for.”

Morgan saw the scroll flashing in her thoughts. He frowned. “I didn't think we were still making that deal.”

Jennifer's anger emerged in a curt tone. “Kyle's had you at our dinner table every night for the last three weeks, but you didn't think we were still doing it?”

Morgan glared. “I was trying to sound humble and nonthreatening. Sorry. I'm new to lying.”

Jennifer flushed. “Do you want the information or not?”

“Why now, Jenny?” Morgan fought the urge to apologize. “Why are you making sure I'll still agree?”

She glanced away. Her lip quivered. “You said you were staying here, even if we leave.”

Morgan didn’t fall for her innocent vibes. His tone hardened into a mimic of hers. “And yet, I’ve been at your dinner table every night for the last three weeks.”

Jennifer flushed again. She wasn’t sure what to say now.

Morgan swallowed his bitterness. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. Of course I want the information. I just need to know if I can pay the price.”

“Your loyalty is payment enough considering how useless the information actually is.” Jennifer brought up the scroll text in her mind. “You need to be a killer—the kind we’d have to execute.”

Morgan read the first three lines and stopped. “I can’t do that. I *won’t* do that.”

“I know. That’s why I’m allowed to tell you.”

Morgan quickly figured out who would have forbidden it. He looked around. “The boss knows. When did you tell her?”

“Kyle did it about an hour ago. I’m telling you before she can ban it for everyone. I wouldn’t do that if I thought you’d use this.”

Morgan was soothed that he’d been told so soon after Angela. Jennifer trusting him made it better. “Why did you wait?”

Jennifer frowned. “How do you know I’ve had it for long?”

“I caught some flashes.” Morgan was monitoring her for unhappiness. He’d insisted Kyle do the same so they could end this farce at her first real sign of reluctance.

Jennifer could have taken the mental opening to do just that. Instead, she blinded him with her approval. “And you never asked. You’re a good man, Morgan. I know you don’t believe it, but I do and in the end, that’s all that matters to you, right?”

Morgan’s throat went dry. He forced a nod. “In the most humble and nonthreatening way.”

Jennifer snorted. “Nonthreatening is something you can’t be. It’s who you are. As for humble...” She sighed, gaze going to the tree line on the island, where Samantha and Neil had emerged with their sons and their sullen rookie guards. “Humble isn’t for people like us. When you have this much power, it no longer fits.”

Morgan stared at her, sensing the choices she was making for all of them. He would have protested if it had been anyone else, including himself. Because it was Jennifer contemplating a takeover of the normals, he didn’t say a word.

Jennifer studied Samantha as the group came across the bridge. “They got away with murder.”

Morgan quickly glanced around to see if anyone had heard her.

“We’re alone except for the normal guards on this deck and beach. Everyone else is just now being let out of their area. Kyle did a count during the check.” Jennifer started to return to her last topic.

Don't ask. Morgan tried to be firm with her. She had to understand some things were better left alone. *Don't dig. It's over.*

Jennifer faced Morgan. "You know what they did."

"I know."

"And?"

"Let it go."

Jennifer recognized an Eagle answer under his tone. "Okay."

He frowned at himself as he figured out there was a reason she'd brought it up. Jennifer didn't want Samantha and Neil punished. It would disrupt all their lives. "And?"

"You can use it as a testing tool. *Everyone* knows Neil used those clouds to block the boss. Tell our normals and rookies they can do that, too. They'll think they have a mental protection. We'll have a way to catch their crimes as they're being planned."

Morgan sucked in an admiring breath. "That's genius."

Jennifer was harder on herself. "Not really. It's only going to work a few times or once in a big net. You know?"

"We'll adjust as we go." Morgan wrote it in his book while she watched. "What else is rumbling through that scary brain of yours?"

"You don't have time for that list."

Morgan's tone grew dead serious. "But I do. This is camp business. Have a seat over there and start spilling your mind."

Jennifer motioned to Ray.

Ray brought Autumn down the steps. "Thank you for letting me watch her for three minutes." He gently rubbed the baby's soft hand and went back up the steps. He was on duty over the ship now until Grant came to shut it down for the night. Thanks to Grant's private lessons, Ray could now sail the cruise liner if he had to.

I'm almost a captain and that means Grant can have more free time to enjoy paradise with everyone else. Ray forced his attention away from the island. But I hate it when he's over there without me. That island isn't safe, as evidenced by a body crew that took two new corpses to our dump site a bit ago.

Jennifer and Morgan went quiet as Neil and his group came aboard.

Ray stopped at the top of the bridge steps.

Neil jerked a hand toward the ramp. "Report to the workout area for two more hours!" Neil's bad mood was clear.

The rookies stopped, scowling and whining.

"Why?!"

"She didn't say that!"

"You failed your first day on escort duty over the boss." Neil pointed at the ramp, glaring. "Go!"

The rookies Angela had sent back with them stomped below. All of them muttered or threw dirty looks at Neil.

Ray studied Samantha. He was curious about what had happened on land, but he didn't think she or Neil knew. All they were thinking about was getting showers.

The rookies saw Morgan as they went by the bridge. All of them smirked at him or made faces.

Morgan ignored them.

Jennifer let her eyes glow bright red.

The rookies hurried out of sight.

“Who has duty over the boss?” Morgan was free if she needed another guard.

Neil kept walking toward the ramp. “I saw Trent and Grant out there with her.” He didn't mention Adrian. There was no need. Everyone had heard him call all clear. Neil was upset that he hadn't spotted their former leader before the action. He didn't have a problem with the blond man performing guard duty over the boss. *Angela is always safer with Adrian around. It's the other crap that I'm against.*

Morgan started to ask Neil if he wanted in on the Eagle plan. He stopped himself as he remembered Jennifer. She was listening intently to all of them.

Jennifer stiffened, stung. “You think I'll tell her whatever you guys have going on.”

“You are her heir.” Ray went into the bridge while Neil and his family went below.

Jennifer stared at Morgan.

Morgan headed for the rear deck. “Excuse me for a minute. I need to check on something. Don’t go anywhere.”

Jennifer knew he was making an excuse to get away from her so he didn’t blurt out a declaration of loyalty in response to her displeasure. He was always walking the line between her and his honor. Unless it was needed, he didn’t linger and she didn’t feel smothered. Jennifer watched him walk away. *In fact, I feel a bit abandoned every time he puts space between us.*

It wasn’t a romantic feeling. *I think it’s because I consider him a friend now.*

Surprised by the revelation, Jennifer waited under the bridge with the snoozing baby and allowed her dangerously smart mind to explore the possibilities of that relationship. *I don’t have to be afraid of a friendship. And neither does he. We’re not cheaters. Others on this ship have that stain.*

Jennifer didn’t look at the guard coming by for a pass of this side of the deck.

Molly didn’t notice. She had other things on her mind.

2

“She has no idea what she’s in for.” Thelma led the way through the hallway, weaving around people coming from their areas now that the lockdown had been lifted.

“Neither does he.” Dwight kept pace and returned the smiles and congratulatory words from people who’d heard Brittani was pregnant.

“I knew something was up with her.” Thelma hurried through the crowded halls to reach the medical bay. Tobias and his wives were running things in the mess by themselves for the first time. They’d come right back after hearing the radio call and then they’d all been locked down together.

Thelma was thrilled that her daughter was pregnant, but the mood didn’t feel right. “Something’s wrong. I know it.”

Dwight kept pace and let her blow off steam. He’d caught Daryl’s worry, too, but he hoped it was just a new father overreacting.

They both paused as they reached the medical deck and found it almost empty.

“Stop right there!” Kimmie stepped in front of them before they could enter the medical bay. “Do you need the doctor?”

“Let them through. It’s her mom and dad.” Amy tugged on Kimmie’s arm. “He didn’t mean them.”

Thelma frowned at both girls. “What are you doing here?”

Kimmie smiled. “We’re being punished with an extra shift.”

Thelma grunted. “Doesn’t sound like you hate it.”

“We don’t.”

“Amy!”

Amy looked at the floor. “I mean, it’s awful!”

Dwight wasn't amused. "Who told you not to let anyone in?"

"Daryl. He said no normals." Kimmie moved to let them through.

Ralph came out of the medical bay as they went in, scowling. He didn't speak to any of them.

Dwight looked at Kimmie. "What's his problem?"

Kimmie shrugged. "He wants us to stop treating the normals differently, but he doesn't understand. He's one of *them*."

Dwight paused. "Ralph is a good man."

Amy's hands clenched into fists. "Good men can go bad. We don't trust the normals anymore. They aren't like us."

Thelma and Dwight went into the medical bay with huge frowns.

"I thought Angela fixed that."

Dwight sighed, thinking of council meetings where they often discussed this topic. "I think it was just a charm. I've been told that's different than an actual spell. Charms don't hold long, where a spell might last forever."

Thelma went into the first room when Tonya pointed. "Then maybe Angela needs to learn the spell. No one wants that crap to restart."

"Agreed. Maybe one of the Eagles will mention it to her." *Or I'll bring it up again at the next meeting.* Dwight held the door for his wife and refused to say more.

Still on duty over the medical area, Jayda gave Terry a sympathetic look. He'd been ordered to stand down, by Daryl. Timmy was running things in the lab while Tonya handled Brittani. The descendants didn't want any of the normals around their children, even if they hadn't been born yet.

Terry knew what Jayda was thinking. "I don't blame them." He finished wiping the counter. "It works out. This reception area needs a good cleaning anyway."

Jayda felt bad for the hardworking man. She lingered on him for a minute, aware of his thick arms and short, stubby legs. *I wonder if his lack of height is why he's still single.*

She thought of another possibility. *Or maybe he's gay.*

Tempted to search his mind and find out, Jayda walked toward the lab to keep from being distracted. There could be time to unravel Terry's mystery later if she wanted to.

Jayda didn't glance into Brittani's room as she went by, but she still felt the tension. It was going to be a rough night for some of their people.

Brittani pretended to be sleeping while Daryl filled her parents in on her condition. Now that she'd found out what was wrong, she had to decide what to do about it. *And I'm not going to let anyone influence my choice. I'm going to do what I think is right. After all, I'm the one who has to live, or die, with this decision.*

“It’s a mystery. The boss wants you to solve it.”

“I’ll do my best to find out why Ed resigned.”

Tim kept his distance from Kyle. He hadn’t forgotten the merciless beating he’d been given. He was grateful it had saved him from a trial and banishment, but he didn’t want to repeat it. “Anything else?”

Kyle snorted.

His nasty remark was interrupted by Jonny on the radio.

“This is your ten-minute shift change warning, rookies. Everyone else knows this stuff already. Ten minutes to shift change. Now, back to the music!”

Kyle rotated neatly toward the steps. “Good luck, *Father*.”

Tim flushed at the sarcasm. The senior Eagles hadn’t forgiven him for resigning to be their preacher, but Tim was sure of his choice. *I’m mostly at peace now and I’ve never had that before. This is what I’m supposed to be doing.*

Tim began running through memories of Ed. When a senior Eagle resigned, there was always a reason for it. *I know.*

Kyle went to the steps and waited for the now off-duty guards to come down from the top deck. When he spotted his target, he fell in step with her. He didn’t mention her being absent for most of the shift.

Monica looked over at him. “Everything okay?”

“You tell me.”

Monica stiffened. “What’s going on?”

“You’re collecting FND credits. The boss wants to know why.”

Monica lifted her chin. “It’s none of your business.” She increased her pace and got away from him.

Kyle made a note in his book. Her response would go in his nightly report. *She didn’t deny it.*

Kyle detoured toward the descendant hall to put Brittani’s medical file in Angela’s cabin. Tonya had two copies of every file. It was great. Kyle had expected to have to wait until they finished with Brittani’s appointment, but Timmy had brought her file right out. Tonya had known Angela would want to study her case.

Kyle hoped it wasn’t for a bad reason. The last three weeks hadn’t been perfect; everyone missed someone from the mission team, but it had been calm and allowed people to regain some of their health and sanity. Kyle didn’t want that to end yet.

Charlie glanced up from the guard station on the empty descendant hall as Kyle entered. His shift was almost over and then he had twelve plus hours to do nothing but let his mind make him miserable.

They didn’t speak.

Charlie’s thoughts were murky and dangerous, but he was doing his jobs and workouts without complaint. Kyle also hoped that peace lasted. Tracy being gone was rough on him. They were keeping

the teenager busy, but Kyle expected his cork to pop at some point.

Kyle put the file on Angela's worktable and quickly exited. Her cabin was desolate. It felt like she unleashed her emotions there and there only. If she didn't get some happiness, it would affect her pregnancy and that couldn't be allowed. *I don't care if she cheats on you, Marc. We're doing what's best for her this time around.*

Kyle didn't look at Charlie as he left the hall. "If you see Ed, tell him to go talk to Tim."

"I will." Charlie swallowed his bitterness. *It didn't work for Tracy. I hope Ed is luckier.*

4

"Do you think it's working?"

"No." Daisey patted Pam's arm. "I'm sorry. I've talked to him and so has Ralph. We even got the camp to work on him, but there's no luck. Morgan doesn't want to resume your relationship."

Pam swallowed a sob. "Thank you for trying." She headed into the ship for another night of pity from the camp and scorn from the Eagles. Angela's army was ruthless about Eagles shirking their duty to the dream and she'd sacrificed Angela with only a little hesitation. Missy was still openly hostile to her over leaving Shawn with a madman. Morgan was avoiding her. Pam tried to act like she wasn't miserable, but she was sure everyone could read it on her face.

“I’ve heard we all go through it. It’s part of Safe Haven, right?”

Pam frowned at the new man as he neared her. “What do you want?”

Rico went around her. “Not a thing. Just trying to offer comfort.”

Pam wasn’t sure if the man was digging for information or if he was hitting on her. She wasn’t in the mood for either one. “I’m fine. You do you.”

Rico didn’t toss an insult in response to her polite way of telling him to go fuck himself. “Have a great day.” He took the next hallway and got out of her sight.

Pam forgot about him as the steps to the camp hall came into view.

She shuddered. “I can’t keep doing this. Something has to change.”

She thought about Safe Haven’s motto. *Without change, there can be no peace—only survivors.* “That’s exactly what I’m doing again. I’m surviving. This isn’t living.”

Pam detoured to the mess instead. “No one cares if I get fat now. I’ll eat whatever I want.”

Her heart clenched as she spotted the deserted table where she used to sit with her little family.

Pam turned around and headed for the nearest bar instead. *I need a few stiff drinks. If that doesn’t work, I may do something I’ll regret. After all, I am gifted with charms.*

“Welcome back. Did you enjoy your stroll?”

Samantha pushed the stroller inside their cabin.

“Spare me the bs. What did she do?”

Wade grinned. “Can’t fool you on anything.”

Sam snorted. “I’m waiting.”

Wade shut the cabin door behind Neil. “She and Kimmie went off-ship for their own stroll. The boss saw them and had them escorted back.”

“Damn.”

Samantha ignored Neil’s real worry. “It’s not a big deal. All our kids have gone rogue before.”

“You don’t think the boss will punish her?” Neil didn’t want Amy to get in trouble.

Wade shook his head. “Not now. I got worried about that, too. I sent her to do a shift on guard duty with Kimmie. Jeff thought it would keep them both from getting a worse punishment.”

“Because they’re Eagles now, they get punished like us.” Sam was impressed. “Great job.”

“It was Jeff’s idea, but you’re welcome.” Wade took one of the boys from Samantha so she could have a minute to herself. Sam was with the babies almost 24-hours a day. It was good for her to get a break. She didn’t take one very often despite having the double workload of twins. “I put clean towels in there a little while ago.”

“Awesome.” She went into the bathroom.

Neil put his son on the changing table and began removing the soiled garments while Wade did the same on the bed. They were finished with both

babies in less than five minutes. Repetition had allowed them to get good at dressing the squirming boys.

One side of the cabin was littered with baby items and stacks of gear. The other was neat and lined with tables that held Neil's maps. He was currently working on three of them and making a copy of each. Between the kids, the maps, the kai lessons, and his romance, Neil was a very busy man and loving every minute of it this time.

"They're already happier." Neil fastened the last snap on the one-piece sleeper outfit and then put the boy into the bassinet next to his brother. "They really are water babies."

Wade laughed. "That doesn't sound right."

"But it's true."

"No argument. What happened out there?"

Neil frowned. "Another loose end from the islands. Adrian handled it."

Wade was unhappy that it kept happening, but they'd gotten through it. "Good thing he was there."

Neil kept his opinion to himself.

"What are the plans for this evening?" Wade had enjoyed his day off of personal training and teaching the rookies to play with fire, but he'd also missed his new family. "I'm free until late evening."

"Sam and a few of the other women are digging through the cargo area for more baby books. I was going to take Amy and the boys to the playground, but since she's on duty, I'd really like to get in some extra kai practice."

“No problem. How’s the class going with Tobias?”

“No dice. Tobias wasn’t able to help. We can brainstorm a list of who else to ask about leveling up without pain or death.”

“Is he in the clear now?”

Neil removed his jacket. “I’m good on him. He’s not a problem.”

“Other than the repelling issue.”

Neil peeled off his gooey shirt. “I’m not sure about that anymore. I asked the boss to test my theory. She agreed.”

Wade opened the hamper so Neil could toss the balled-up shirt in. “When?”

“At mess tonight. We’re going to have all the byzan in the same room, at the same time.”

Wade paused. “Shouldn’t you start with a smaller test group?”

“Maybe, but I need them all there to prove my theory.”

“Care to share?”

“Absolutely.” Neil leered.

Wade laughed, but it was strained.

“I think it’s a myth.”

“And what if it isn’t?”

“Then we get them apart as fast as we can, and I do mean fast. Some of them will be gone before dawn hits this ship.”

Samantha stuck her head out of the bathroom. “I’d be more worried about Angela’s reaction to Ed sending Adrian as her guard, on top of resigning.”

Wade quickly looked away from Samantha's naked shoulder.

Neil frowned. "What?"

Samantha chuckled. "So only one of you is in on that drama. Interesting." She stepped back into the small bathroom. "Give me a couple minutes and then join me if you like."

"I will." Neil stared at Wade. "Ed did what?"

Wade shrugged. "He resigned and left his post. We were shorthanded. Someone suggested he go talk to Adrian about it."

"When we were out there, I didn't notice Adrian."

Wade was surprised. He swept Neil's messy state. "Kids are distracting."

Neil's frown slowly faded. "No lie there."

"And maybe it will work out for the boss. We all know she needs time with him."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Wade nodded, but he didn't give in. "Cool. Just don't shut it down because you're Marc's best friend, okay? We're doing what's best for the camp."

Neil put a piece into place. "When did someone suggest Adrian as her guard?"

Wade flushed. "A few days ago."

"So this is a conspiracy."

Wade refused to answer. He didn't want to lie to Neil about anything. *But it really is what's best for the camp. We were all happier with Adrian in our lives.*

Neil refused to debate that point. He'd known something was going on by the quiet Eagle moments in the halls and during training, but he hadn't suspected this.

The men spent a moment observing the infants as they settled against each other for a nap.

"You stink."

Neil chuckled. "You don't."

"Go join Sam. I've got the boys."

Neil didn't hesitate. He wanted to be clean, and Wade was great with the babies.

Wade settled into the chair by the bassinet and leaned back to rest while things were quiet. It had been calm for weeks now, but they all knew that couldn't last. He was saving his strength for the next action moment that found them. Because it had been so long, Wade expected it to be a doozy. "We'll get through it together, like we always have."

Not all of us come through those moments. Neil hated to be bitter, he still missed Jeremy as much as Samantha did. Wade was great for them; things were going well. *But no one can ever replace our first partner. That hole in our lives will always be there now.*

Chapter Five
It's Not Personal

1

“We’re all good down here, Boss.”

Stanley held the lead curtain for Angela as she descended the sturdy ladder and joined him in the tunnel bunker. He glared at Adrian, but didn’t toss an insult.

The other guards heard his friendly greeting and relaxed as soon as the hatch was shut.

“Thank you for giving me point over this shift.” Stanley glowed with pride.

Angela liked it that Stanley had volunteered to work on his off day; she rewarded him. “Shift change is coming soon. Got plans after?”

Stanley thought about it. “Uh... No. Nothing until after evening mess.”

Angela grinned. “I heard Wade’s next class will be in the cargo area. Females have been forbidden.”

Stanley sniggered. “He did that so you guys would sneak down to check out his trainees. He’s giving them a boost.”

Adrian was stunned by the change in Stanley. The clumsy geek they’d come to tolerate because he was so nice was almost gone; an Eagle stood in his

place. Even the clothes and gear fit him correctly now that he was standing up straight.

Stanley felt Adrian's approval. It filled this part of the bunker and brought awareness from the few people who were awake enough to recognize the feel of their former leader. They came to the tunnel entrance to stare.

Adrian scanned the bunker instead of speaking to them and overstepping his bounds. The bunk bed-lined walls were completely covered in wood paneling that had been taken from the cruise ship. The floor was a wide, white-tiled path under a white-tiled ceiling. The bright color added more light than the solar strings alone would have. Theo had done an amazing job in three weeks.

"I agree." Angela enjoyed Adrian's approval. "He pulled all the tiles from the UN ships and surprised me with it. I thought we'd have dirt floors for the duration."

"He's a special type." Adrian felt her thoughts change. "No one's perfect. He saw a chance to have some happiness and took it."

"While robbing someone else of theirs. You of all people know how dangerous that can be." Angela strode down the path, boots clicking lightly on the floor. "Either way, Debra forbade me from punishing him."

"You could have overruled her."

"No, I can't. You set it up that way."

Adrian didn't hear anger. That meant Theo was being punished, just not openly. "The Eagles are handling it."

"Yes." Angela looked back at Stanley. "Meet me at the beach?"

Stanley was thrilled to be picked for any duty with her. "I'll be there, as long as my relief shows."

Angela didn't like it that he was picking up a negative attitude from the older, cynical men. "Some of the new people are committed to the dream. Give them a chance to prove it."

Stanley didn't pull any punches. "Then why is the traitor your guard instead of the rookies that were assigned for today?"

Angela kept walking. "Whatever."

Adrian and Stanley both smirked at her Eagle answer.

Angela was glad neither of them pushed. She didn't need another lecture on being more important than the rookies. She didn't feel that way.

Adrian followed her through the bunker, seeing sleeping Eagles and a few camp members. Island life was laid back and Angela was clearly giving them a chance to experience that. "But it won't be good for them later."

Angela didn't answer, but her shoulders stiffened.

Adrian caught it. He didn't apologize. "Would you rather I didn't comment?"

She forced away the anger. "You're along for your mouth. Use it."

Adrian laughed aloud, sending more good vibes into the hall.

Eagles sat up or opened their eyes in bleary surprise.

The camp members settled into a deeper sleep as a feeling of safety settled over them.

Angela kept them moving, taking him through all of the tunnels, rooms, and chambers. He recognized the tactic. She was showing the camp he came down here too, making it safer. *That's a dangerous illusion.*

Angela nodded. *And a necessary one. I never thought it would be a problem to get them off the ship.*

Adrian felt warm air as they entered the next area. "You have heat?"

Angela smiled. "Great, isn't it? Half the bunker gets extra heat for those people who stay cold, and for the medical area. The rest will stay at the natural temperature of being ten feet under the ground, like in the mountain. Our few women with menopause are loving it."

"You thought of everything."

She grunted as a rough odor hit them. "Except the waste. I hate pumping it out into the ocean or onto our ship. Neither option is better than the other."

"I'll come up with something." Adrian dug in. With so many witnesses, he needed to prove why he was being allowed around the boss again. "You

can't put bathrooms all over the island. How many are already here?"

"Most of the homes and businesses had an outhouse or two. The same for the bunkers, though the waste was never removed or pumped. There are dead spots we're clearing as we get time. The island had also started advertising to tourists. They put in a dozen three-stall buildings that Theo needs to work on. No plumbing."

"They likely all use septic systems. You can probably use those for about a month and then they'll need to be emptied. Our population is about five times what they had, so leaving them alone isn't an option. It won't dissolve fast enough."

Angela slid over and placed her back to his, taking over guard duty so he could think. She needed her solution verified.

Adrian ignored the feel of her standing so close. "We used to have waste plants that sanitized it. We can't fit that here. Hard chemicals take too long to dissolve the waste and paper even if we wanted to use those, which I know you don't." Adrian went into the zone, confident that Angela would keep him alive while he searched.

Angela enjoyed the moment. She was certain Adrian would come up with the same answer that she had; she liked just being his security for the moment. She didn't get much time where her job was as simple as this.

Adrian grunted. "Security isn't simple."

"I know. Keep trying."

Adrian blocked out the distractions. “Where else... Amusement parks used huge septic systems before city plumbing connected them to the sewers.” Adrian’s tone grew more confident. “And those live bacteria packets were used once a week to keep it all dissolving. They still had to empty the sludge and fix occasional breaks in the foundational structures, but that didn’t happen often.” Adrian settled on a choice. “You’ll build three of them, as large as you can afford space-wise, but only have two open at a time. Use the bacteria packets and when you empty the septic systems every few months, you can add the sludge to your island expansion plans.”

Angela sighed. “We didn’t bring any bacteria packets, that I know of. I asked workers to send up anything like that, including chemicals that might not be good for the island, but so far, we’ve only found three cases of RID-X.”

“Go easy on that. I’d only use it during high-volume times. It breaks things down too far and then you can’t filter them out.” Adrian concentrated. “Alternatives would be...baker’s yeast with sugar, I think. Sauerkraut, tomatoes, sour milk, yogurt.”

Angela got her book out.

Stanley came closer to keep watch now that they were both distracted.

“Use some Epsom salt for the drain field. It will bring up the levels of magnesium in the drain water and keep that area growing instead of becoming a dead zone.”

“But?”

Adrian came out of the daze, frowning. “Half the research said adding bacteria works. The other half said to just avoid bleach draining into it and pump it every few years. There was no concrete answer on that one.”

Angela stared. “How do you have so much information in your brain? I mean, that had to come from years ago and I can’t even remember conversations from before the war.”

Adrian smiled. “It’s part of my family legacy. We can accomplish more than most people because we always find a way to improvise. You can’t do that without storing alternatives to everything.”

“How do you train for that?”

Adrian’s smile faded. “Ruthlessly.”

Angela understood the training wasn’t pleasant. “I’m sorry. But I’m also grateful.”

He looked away. “So am I. I didn’t want to use those methods, especially on my friends and teams...and my family.”

“Your daughter.”

Adrian nodded. “Alexa is a genius. I’m proud of making her that way. I’m also sorry for it.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

Lightning flashed above them. Time slowed as they shared a vision.

Seven dangerous, determined shadows appeared on the beach. Their scarred, harsh

appearance startled everyone on the island who saw them.

Angela felt death arrive. She swung around to bring up a shield over Mike.

One of the strangers beat her to the draw. He fired once.

Mike staggered back with blood dripping through his hands.

Leeann screamed as Mike's blood soaked into her wedding dress.

Another gunshot rang out. One of the strangers fell.

Safe Haven's Eagles assumed one of their own had done it. They drew guns and began a shootout that didn't stop for hours as both sides hunted down survivors.

Adrian recovered first. He locked his emotions and waited for the next stop on her rounds.

Angela didn't push him to talk about it. She didn't want to admit that she wasn't sure if the future they'd witnessed could be changed. She'd been searching for a different ending to that moment for six months now and no matter how they set things up, it ended in death.

But I am going to try. I traded Kendle for Marc and stopped his death. I think I can do that again... It just has to be on a bigger scale.

"She's not evil even though it felt that way. These people aren't ready to face my daughter, and they react badly. Alexa simply does what she's best

at.” Adrian tried not to beg for Alexa’s life when Angela didn’t answer. He already knew she would try to save them all, even Billy.

Joy settled into her heart. Adrian’s confidence in her choices were the exact opposite of what she’d been getting from Marc since they’d joined forces in Indiana.

“We have different goals.”

She snorted at Adrian’s comment. “That didn’t need to be said.”

Angela motioned to the guard over this exit.

The rookie hurried to open the hatch. He was eager for her to be gone now so he could think about what he’d heard. Rico had told them to memorize every word to replay during their quick shower meetings.

Angela grabbed the rope ladder and forced her arms to pull her body up without help from her legs. Marc had started a trend. Everyone wanted to be able to do that, but it was much harder than it looked. Even some of her senior men had given up on it.

Adrian was proud of Angela for the physical work she’d been doing. Now that she was openly working on herself, others would follow her lead. As soon as the Eagles saw it, they would jump in and lead a physical health revolution for everyone. Even the camp would get involved.

As they left the bunker, radios lit up with Jonny’s loud voice.

“It is 5:45 p.m. Safe Haven, and shift change is underway. Now, back to the music!”

Angela made sure her radio was off. She didn’t want any part of the jazz fest Jonny was giving them today. He switched it each morning to give everyone a day of something they liked, but Angela didn’t care for most of it. *I prefer the quiet now.*

“So why have music all the time then?”

“We’re recording radio calls. The constant music or updates give us a few hours to do it without most of the camp hearing.”

“Why not put a radio in a private room...” Adrian hated being rusty, but there was no denying the long months out of leadership were affecting his skills. “Doing it openly doesn’t raise suspicion.”

“Exactly.” Angela stepped over a wide clump of vines that were already bouncing back from being trampled.

“Have you heard much?”

She shrugged. “The same as it’s been for the last year—dead for months and then something will flare up and kill another group or clan. It never changes.”

Now at Cliff Road, they were able to view workers carrying items from the ship to encourage people to come to the island. This load was beach chairs and small tables.

“It’s good that you’re doing that. They need to be on land again, even if they don’t think so.”

“Yes.” Angela changed topics. “When we do the group meal, I want you to stop by. A few people need words that I don’t have.”

“I’d be honored.” Adrian was stunned that she would let him join the camp for any moment.

“You’ve done well sneaking onto the ship for the blood donations.”

“Practice is needed. I got rusty on the trip here.”

She grunted bitterly. “All of us did. We’re weaker now. That’s why I have to get them off the ship. They’ll die there if I leave them alone.”

“I’ll help where I can.”

“Thank you.”

Adrian found his mouth opening to make her happy. “I’ve caught some things you should probably be aware of.”

She slowed but didn’t stop. “Let’s hear them.”

“Your ship has a...relief deck. I was invited to stop by.”

“Noted. Next?”

Adrian didn’t hear anger in her tone or surprise. He gave her a bigger nugget. “I know why one of your Eagles is earning FND credits.”

Angela stopped, intrigued and eager for the break to get her breath back.

“Do you remember telling Candy the other shoe had dropped?”

Angela thought about that moment. Her lids narrowed. “Someone else was interested in Conner.”

“Yes.”

“So?”

His tone was pointed. “So there’s another teen who’s free now.”

Angela's lips thinned. "Charlie."

Adrian felt the same way. "She's watching him for the right moment."

Angela wasn't happy. "What about her current partner? There's been marriage talk."

Adrian grunted. "I'd shut that down as fast as possible or they'll spew their drama all over the normals and maybe even revive the old fight about sexuality."

Angela groaned. "The council is not going to waste time on sex. I'll cover it. What else?"

"Kyle lied by omission."

Angela felt that ding in her mind again. It matched the one she'd heard as Kyle told his short story.

"His father told him to do it as soon as he got back from that run to California. He didn't want the other son to inherit. None of them liked the mother. They were glad she was removed, but Kyle was following orders. He's still tormented by his purpose in life."

Angela sighed. "We've had some conversations along those lines."

"Considering how angry he sounded, I'd suggest a few more."

"Agreed." Angela got her book out and made a note.

Adrian scanned their surroundings and the people on the beach, but his mind stayed on Conner.
I miss that kid.

Angela made another note in her book.

Adrian admired her in short glances. “You look different.”

She snorted. “It’s been a long year.”

“Yes, but there’s something different.”

“If you say I’m glowing, I’ll puke on your shoes.”

Adrian laughed. “You are, though. That’s it.”

Angela stared at his sexy blond hair and worked her way over his sleeveless shirt and plumping arms, not skipping his lean hips and crotch bulge. She ended with his scuffed work boots. “You look better. Good job on regaining some of your health.”

“Thank you. Good luck on your health journey as well.”

Angela stored her folder. “Spit it out before you choke.”

Adrian let her have it. “You’re tired again and pushing too hard. Let the Eagles take care of you and regaining your health will be easier.”

Angela wasn’t offended. “I try. Sometimes. There’s just too much to be done. You know how it is.”

“So you’ll sacrifice another baby to the dream.”

Angela didn’t blink. “It’s a clump of cells right now. If I lose it, it’s meant to be. These people have to come first.”

Adrian scowled. “Say that again.”

Angela didn’t repeat the lie she’d barely forced out. She trudged up Cliff Road with sweat rolling down her chest and spine. Before the bunker, they’d gone to the disappointing sheriff’s office that had

two cells left standing. The cemetery she hoped to never use was too overgrown to dig new plots. She'd also stopped by the public cave bunker on the ridge and found a few rats among the broken furniture and empty shelves. The best part had been the old weather station. She hadn't expected to find any infrastructure way out here. This island sported a few small shacks with outdated, limited equipment and she was grateful for it.

"Who were you charming earlier?"

Angela stopped halfway up the road and took a small jar from her pocket. "One of our captains."

"He's with Marc?"

"For now." Angela stopped under a tree that was full of bright birds. She set the jar on the ground and opened it.

Adrian observed as she retreated and went still.

The colorful birds were immediately curious. Two of them flew down and began pecking the bottle.

"Are you feeding them?"

"Sort of."

"What's in there?"

"Ants that Dog smuggled onboard."

Adrian was a bit revolted as he realized she was feeding them to the birds. "You could have just crushed them."

"And I would have, but this is a better use."

Adrian didn't argue, but he mourned for the ants that had followed Safe Haven. Angela was responsible for killing thousands of them.

More birds flew down. The pecking against the bottle became a constant sound. It fell over and rolled a few feet.

The birds hopped backward and then advanced again.

Ants scurried from the jar.

The birds stopped, heads tilting, beaks shutting.

The ants quickly got under the cover of the vines and were lost.

The birds observed them, but they didn't give chase.

"Interesting." Angela retrieved the jar as the birds flew back into the trees.

Adrian was amazed. "What do they eat?"

"I think they make a daily flight to another island or they fish."

"And what about the bugs, the snakes? They can't fly."

"Old age provides their meals. When something dies, it's consumed. This island is self-sustaining." Angela resumed their trek up the road. "The ants will be impossible to get rid of now."

Adrian heard satisfaction in her voice. "You do feel bad for them."

"Of course. They were very helpful to us. This way, some of their colony is also getting a chance to thrive in paradise."

Adrian rewarded her for that generosity. "Would you like to work on your gun hand later?"

Angela lit up. "I'd love to."

“Swing by my shack. I’m there when the flag’s up.”

Angela didn’t know what he meant by that, but it sounded easy to figure out. “It might be late.”

He added the clues. “Because of your private project?”

“Yes.”

Adrian saw where they were going and slowed. “Uh, is this your last stop?”

“Yes.”

He tried to stall. “You didn’t spend much time at the cemetery. Bet there’s some interesting history there.”

Angela snorted. “I gave her all day, Adrian. If it isn’t clean now, she’s not going to do it.”

Adrian stopped trying to distract her. “It isn’t. Don’t be rough on her. Sadie’s just a kid.”

“A kid who’s sharing your bed.”

Adrian shrugged. “You sent her to me. That’s on you.”

Angela laughed. “Nice try.”

Adrian grinned. “I’ve got more.”

Angela stopped. “Okay. Give me one I don’t know about.”

Adrian’s humor faded. “I think Sadie’s sterile.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “I said one I *don’t* know.”

“How could you know?”

“You’ve been satisfying her for over a month and yet there’s been no happy announcement or a skulking trip to the clinic.”

“Deductive reasoning isn’t foolproof.”

“It is in this case.” Angela waited.

“She doesn’t know yet.”

“I won’t tell her until I have to.” She lifted a brow. “And?”

“And it bothers me.” Adrian swept the beautiful landscape without seeing it. “She wants my baby. We could be content together. I could have raised my child for the first time in my life.”

Angela sent a wave of comfort. “Don’t give up on that dream. Have her come in for some testing. Tell her all Eagles get medical checks as part of the job.”

“I might.” Adrian studied her. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“You know.”

“What do I know?”

Adrian grunted. “Enough!”

Angela laughed, but it was sad this time. “My Eagles have made a choice. They want us together for the good of the camp. Who am I to argue?”

“Just to work. It’s not personal.”

“No, but if it results in a relationship, most people will accept that because it’s what’s best for the future. They know Marc will never love them.”

“Like you do, anyway.”

“No. Marc will never love them at all.” She paused again to draw in air and let a leg cramp pass. “He loathes them for interfering with his plans for our future and for being so weak that they need me

all of the time. He blames them for everything. And they've figured that out now. I failed in his acclimation to the herd."

Adrian didn't want her to take all of the blame. "To be fair, you tried to teach him."

"I did; it didn't work. He now craves the power of leadership even while hating those he wants to lead. It's dangerous." She walked toward the bunker again. "It forced me to make hard choices."

Adrian thought of the run the mission team was on. "Will it work?"

"You tell me. It was your plan for every member of this camp."

Adrian was proud of that. "It will. Safe Haven tears people apart and rebuilds them."

"But they're not always fully functional afterward."

"No." Adrian couldn't lie to her. "Using my methods can be dangerous. Some minds refuse to change no matter how much they're beaten or shamed."

"Marc is like that."

"True. He's also one of us, Angie. He can't be destroyed by hard times. You know that."

"Thank you." Angela walked faster. "Come on. I need some amusement now."

Adrian didn't expect this to be funny. "What did you see that I missed?"

"A lot." Angela forced her tired legs up the hill and over to the bunker entrance.

Adrian hurried to get in front of her. “Might be dangerous in there. You never know.”

Angela let him go first. Adrian’s defense of Sadie was admirable. She wasn’t jealous. She was proud of him for bonding with someone.

Adrian stopped in the entrance.

Angela paused for a scan of what she could see. They’d reinforced this bunker after the entrance collapsed. Since then, Adrian had also resealed it and hung a new door. The covering of vines was still providing shade and bugs that flew around her curiously as she waited.

Adrian stared in shock. The bunker was neat and orderly, with almost nothing out of place that he saw. He scanned for Sadie as he stepped inside. “Are you in here?”

“Showering!” The water came on.

Adrian went to the table. “Nice work.”

Sadie didn’t answer.

Angela came in.

Adrian tugged his chair out. It pulled from his grip as a leg caught on the rug.

Adrian tugged harder.

Garbage slid out and scattered.

Adrian realized the rug had been hiding it. He quickly nudged the trash back under the rug while Angela sat across from him. He dropped into the chair, bumping the table.

Angela swept the shelf by the sink, counting the few cans and boxes. “Get some rations from the ship when you come onboard for your next donation.”

“I will. Thanks.” Adrian swept the room, searching for other issues.

Angela got her folder out and opened it. “I could use a drink.”

Adrian hopped up and went to the sink. They were storing their water under it in tubs and buckets.

Adrian opened the door... He slammed it shut and held it. “Uh, we’re out of water. How about a 7Up?”

“That’s fine.”

Adrian slowly let go of the cabinet handle. He was glad it stayed shut. He had no idea how Sadie had fit so much garbage in there.

Adrian took a bottle from the pack by the sink and brought it to the table. He saw something lumpy under the blanket over the bottom bunk.

Sadie!

The water continued to run.

Adrian smiled thinly at Angela. “Excuse me a moment.” He went to the rear of the bunker that they’d roped off and divided into rooms with old, yellowing sheets.

Angela snickered and opened the soda.

Adrian stepped behind the curtain, glaring.

Sadie glanced up from her comic book. “Hi, honey! Long day at work?”

Adrian saw she had the water running into a bucket, but it was splashing all over the floor and sheet. She was on the floor in the corner, laying across a blanket-covered heap. It was obvious what was under the blanket. “You’re in so much trouble!”

Sadie yawned. “You said make it look good. I did.”

Adrian stuttered, mouth opening and closing without words.

Sadie flipped the page and resumed reading.

Adrian quickly shut the sheet. He scanned again and found garbage everywhere. It was under pillows and books, inside shelves and cabinets. It was piled behind boxes and the door. Adrian stood in front of the most obvious stash. “All set?”

Angela glanced over. “In a hurry?”

“Yes. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

“This is my last stop.”

“Oh, yeah.” Adrian came back to the table.

Angela glanced toward the shower. “If you can’t do it, I will.”

Adrian swallowed his reluctance. “Just don’t hurt her.”

Angela whistled. The sound echoed through the bunker and down the hill.

Adrian knew to wait when nothing happened.

Angela stored her folder and stood. “You may want to move.”

Adrian opened his mouth.

Dog flew through the open entrance and slid to a stop near Angela’s boots.

Angela pointed around. “Dig it all up.”

Dog sniffed. His fur lifted. He growled at Adrian.

Adrian flinched and slid out of the chair as the huge wolf charged toward him.

Dog began pawing at the rug, sending garbage flying.

“Good boy.” Angela walked casually toward the exit as Sadie began shouting and Adrian tripped over his chair and hit the ground. She stopped just outside the door, smiling. “It’s been a good day. I wonder what the evening will bring.”

Chapter Six
Be What You Are

1

Stanley came hurrying up the road. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” Angela wasn’t surprised that Eagles were coming their way. Sadie’s screams were piercing.

“No! Stop, Dog!”

Angela looked over her shoulder at Adrian, who was still on the floor. “Are you coming?”

Sadie’s anger boiled over. “Don’t you dare! You stay here and help me!”

Adrian scrambled to his feet and flew out the door.

Sadie continued to shout. “You bastard! No, Dog! Stop licking me! My pocket’s empty now!”

Adrian fell in behind Angela.

Stanley stared at the filthy bunker in concern. He finally followed them.

More Eagles came up the road.

Adrian waved them off in Eagle code and was obeyed, mostly because they could all see Angela. The feeling still sent Adrian’s mood through the clouds. He straightened into a semblance of his former self. For a brief moment, he missed the

action of being one of them, the connections and bonds, more than he wanted Angela as his mate.

“I have a challenge for you.” Angela paused out of sight of the beach and the bunker.

Adrian nodded. “I’m your guy.”

Angela snorted. “I want you to stay with us.”

Adrian rolled his eyes. “That’s not a challenge.”

“Without being seen.”

Adrian’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I need to know if you’re still good enough to train my army.”

Adrian’s face tightened. He snapped his mouth shut.

Angela resumed her walk, certain that Stanley wouldn’t give them away. He was already bringing up a strong mental wall. “Just think of other things. Walls make us curious about what’s behind them.”

Stanley adjusted his strategy.

Adrian recovered. “Infiltration or evading?”

“My guard.” Angela let gravity pull her down the hill to give her legs a break. “If you lose me or you’re spotted, you leave the ship.”

There wasn’t an answer.

Angela hit the bottom of the road and turned around. Only Stanley was in sight. She could feel Adrian watching her, but she had no idea where he was. “Excellent.”

Stanley had seen Adrian duck into the tree line, but he doubted the man was still right there. It was spooky and fascinating. *I want to be able to do that.*

Angela agreed. “We’ll work on it. For now, let’s talk about the tunnel bunker. What issues did you find while you did your shift?”

Adrian kept pace and planned his invasion. Getting on the ship wouldn’t be easy, but Angela’s open challenge to his skills had to be answered. *I’ll get on there even if I have to drain myself to a husk.*

2

Chad saw Angela and Stanley emerge from the jungle. “Boss is coming back.”

Just finishing a round of the ship, Conner frowned. “She’s not alone.”

Chad shrugged. “Stanley probably volunteered. He’s trying to prove he’s a real Eagle now.”

Conner didn’t point out what the alcohol-smelling guard had missed. A wave of depression hit. He quickly got out of sight.

Chad met Angela at the top of the ladder. “Your office is ready. You have a short line waiting.” He was about to go on duty on that hall.

“I know.” Angela smiled at Ray in the bridge and went down the ramp with Stanley on her heels.

Stanley fought the urge to hunt for Adrian. He switched his thoughts to Wade’s meeting later.

Sweet, fishy smells wafted up the steps to greet them.

Angela’s stomach roiled. She curled her thumbs into her fists and hoped that would settle it. She needed to eat, but food held no attraction.

Evening mess was only an hour away; the halls were full of people trying to get chores finished so they could enjoy the coming show with their meal. The feeling of something about to happen was everywhere.

Angela wasn't looking forward to it, but some of their people thrived on drama. She doubted that would ever change. Human nature required something to alleviate the boredom of everyday life.

Angela jogged down the steps.

She felt Adrian's disapproval even though she didn't know where he was or how he'd made it onto the ship without being noticed. *Good job.*

Angela went by the waiting people who smiled or went quiet upon spotting her. She entered her office while Stanley took a post near her door. She didn't give Adrian time to slip in before calling the first person, but she felt him walk right by her and take a spot in the corner. "Who's first?"

Jeff came in. "Me." He'd come here to wait right after handling Kimmie.

Angela waved at the chair across from her.

Jeff glared at the corner as he came in and sat down.

"Two out of about ten that we walked by. Interesting." Angela drew out a sheet of paper and added Jeff's name to the list of people who'd noticed Adrian. "I'd like you to work with Tobias for a while." She slid the sheet over so he could read it.

My Lie Detectors.

Jeff was intrigued. “If it’s true, then he has a skill the rest of us need.”

“Exactly.” Angela put the paper away. “I can copy almost anything we do. I’m hoping some of you can, as well. Start working on that during your downtime.”

“You think it’s a learned skill.”

“I think every gift we have is a learned skill.” She lifted a brow. “How can I help you?”

Jeff got right to the point. “I don’t know what to do about her.”

Angela studied the healthy man. He’d bulked up a bit over the last few weeks. “What do you want me to do?”

Jeff sighed deeply. “Nothing, honestly. Is there a chance of that?”

Angela chuckled. “Yes. You and Wade tied my hands even if I wanted to punish her, which I don’t. They were finished with their required shifts. They got in trouble again on purpose, hoping we’d keep assigning them to guard duty. Both girls are officially in the Junior Eagles as of an hour ago. Neil will cover the lessons. You and Wade will help with their classes. Self-control is the main theme. Once they get that down, we’ll bump them into some light, regular action. Use that carrot and apply the stick when you have to.”

Jeff was relieved, but he didn’t relax. “I know I covered her, but giving Kimmie what she wants will only encourage her to repeat the bad behavior.”

“That’s why she’s becoming an Eagle.”

Jeff raked her brutally. “Hasn’t stopped you from being reckless.”

Angela flushed.

Jeff braced for ugliness.

So did Adrian. Her temper was flaring all over the place today.

“But I haven’t blown up on anyone and I won’t. Being emotional doesn’t mean being out of control. You’ll both be happier when you figure that out.” Angela opened her big folder to the green tab. “You think having a mother will fix Kimmie. I’m here to tell you it won’t. She’s always going to be wild. Let life beat that out of her.”

Jeff scowled. “I’m trying to stop that from happening.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? So it doesn’t crush her like it has the rest of us.”

Angela sympathized. She also respected him for wanting to protect the girl. “We’re so hardheaded. You can’t change the core of who people are unless you abuse them in some way. It’s ugly, horrible, and we always feel worse after it’s done, even when it works. You don’t want to send her down that path. Letting life crush us is better than doing it to each other.”

Put like that, he couldn’t argue. “So we don’t get super strict with her. I still think the mom idea has merit.”

Angela scanned her breeding tree. “I have about fifteen possible matches for *you* to pick from.”

Jeff stiffened as he understood. “It’s for her, not me.”

“It doesn’t work that way. For her to have a mom, you have to take a wife. Or girlfriend. Those terms are up to you.”

“I meant like a foster mother.”

Angela studied him again. “You’re giving up custody? Kimmie won’t like that.”

He nodded curtly. “It’s the right thing to do. I never meant for this to go so far anyway.”

They all heard his pain and the lie. It was clear that Jeff wanted things to stay exactly like they were.

“Separating our underage people hasn’t been easy and mostly, it hasn’t worked. The older partners are all dead or always being sent out on runs. You understand I’ve done that intentionally to remove those issues from the future?”

Jeff frowned. “If I back off, I’ll stick to it. You’ll have to cover the kid. Her foster mommy needs to be a hardass.”

May I?

Angela nodded. *Quietly.*

Adrian connected to Jeff. *Do you know how many child molesters I’ve removed?*

Jeff snarled at them both. “I’ve never been that!”

Adrian nodded. *Exactly. You wouldn’t be here. Why do you carry the shame of something you aren’t?*

Jeff couldn't lie. "I want the life she sees in her mind when she looks at our future. She loves me for who I am, not who she can make me into. She might be able to take away Crista's ghost."

Adrian broke the connection and let Angela finish the moment.

"I talked to Kimmie not long after we set sail." Angela pulled up that conversation so Jeff could share it with her. "I had to be sure she was safe with you and that you were safe with her. Two killers aren't usually a good partnership." Angela smiled as Jeff's eyes watered. "I cried when she told me you'll be everything to her that the rest of the world can't be. Then she said she was sorry for using you to make herself feel better about all the killing. You two were meant for each other in odd, powerful ways that I see no need to tear apart."

Jeff wiped his eyes. "I love that kid. She's so much like me it's terrifying."

Angela chuckled, nodding. "I think the same thing about Cate. I didn't need to birth her for that. Sometimes life just matches things up and you get to play an amazing hand. The rest of the game might suck, but that one hand is perfect and you never forget that feeling."

Angela thought of inheriting Safe Haven. *That was my perfect hand. It will never be as good as that for me again. I accept it and mourn it a little, but that perfect hand was a crowning achievement that can't be topped.*

Angela waited when Jeff lingered.

“I’m sorry I didn’t go with them, to watch over Marc.” He assumed she already knew why he hadn’t volunteered.

“I need you here. Marc and I bartered people for this run.”

Jeff heard the tremor of anger she was trying hard to hide. He didn’t bring it up or thank her for the lie to spare his mood. Instead, he glared at the corner of the room.

Angela kept things moving. “Anything else?”

Jeff rose, grunting as his ankles popped. “We’re behind on getting things set up.”

“Yes. Being short a dozen hard bodies has slowed my progress.” She flashed a bright smile. “I’ll cover it. Enjoy this rest while you can. Theo’s almost fried.”

Jeff was both eager and dreading her call on that one. An engineer’s life in this camp would stay busy for decades. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I ask.” Angela made another note while she waited for Jeff to leave.

Adrian caught brief flashes through her mental shield. His heart clenched. *You’re not doing it for him.*

Angela sighed. Sadness filled the room. *No. I’m doing it for her.*

The final battle?

Angela nodded. *It will see many relationships settled. There’s no reason for me to deny them a few years of peace and happiness together.* She opened

her folder to the medical tab. *I don't understand why fate puts soulmates together at the wrong times.*

I don't have an answer. Adrian knew that question was over his head. *Keep me posted.*

Angela snickered, better mood returning. *I will.*
“Next?”

Tonya came in and took the warm seat. “I have a few updates. Only Timmy is a priority.”

Angela read the paper Tonya gave her.

We need another cat pair if you want to avoid inbreeding. Or we can try to spay/neuter. That should be fun to learn. We have about five months before it becomes an issue, but we'll have a dozen cats/kittens by then.

Angela copied that into her book, then went on.

Adrian's blood is twice as powerful as Conner's. Even the frozen is testing stronger.

Tonya waited patiently while Angela read her updates and made notes. They were back to paper copies of almost everything now. Tonya was glad. It was too easy to forget things when she only kept track of them in her mind. She was looking forward to Kenn connecting their computers so they could have digital copies, too.

Timmy got his ultimatum. He'll need a follow-up conversation with the boss.

Angela had known it was coming. “I'll add in some good words. I've heard he's doing well in the lab.”

“He is. And Mike has settled into training with Jonny and the Eagles. Eric’s the only one left in that terrible trio.”

“Eric’s a special case right now. He’s enjoying being fully healed. I hope he’ll copy his brothers and settle in. If not, I have plans.”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “I hope it’s not a talk with Tim. He’s not good at his new job. No one feels comforted after they talk to him.”

Angela shrugged. “I don’t care about their comfort. Is it working?”

“It didn’t with Tracy.”

Angela didn’t blink, but she felt the unexpected blow.

Tonya looked at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

Angela refused to be drawn into more hatred or sadness. “Answer my question.”

Tonya gave in reluctantly. “Yes, in ways. I understand why Kenn had to go. I’m still pissed about it—just not as much.”

“Good. Thank you for going.”

Tonya played nice. “It was half an hour of my life. No big deal.”

Angela was proud of Tonya, but she also worried the redhead might be losing too much of her fire. “Have you been training?”

Tonya made a face. “Doesn’t matter since we’re all about to die of boredom here for the next three years.”

Angela hated that answer, but she understood why people felt that way. “I’d like you to draw up some plans for a run.”

Tonya was floored. “Are you sure? I’m just a medic.”

“Who has the brains and ambition to be more.”

Tonya let that soak in. She nodded slowly. “I used to help Kenn, back when Adrian was in charge.”

“I know. He told me to pick your brain when I’m short on strategic plans.”

“He said that?” Tonya melted. “He has a special mouth hug coming.”

Angela laughed while trying not to gag.

Adrian dug into Tonya’s thoughts while the boss had her distracted. He didn’t like what he found.

Tonya was glad to be herself for a minute. Around the camp and staff, she was very careful to project a good image that she was trying very hard to maintain. “Where are we going?”

Angela caught all of that, along with the guilty sparks in the background. “I’ve heard America has a lot of cats. But you’ll have to train up if you think I’ll let you go along.”

Tonya stared. “Me? Really?”

Angela smiled. “I want you in training *this* week.”

Tonya smiled wider and stood. “I’ll go over it tonight. Thank you!”

“It’s my honor.” Angela waited for her to be gone. Then she paused. She could feel Adrian staring in shock and concern. *Forget that one. Please do it right now.*

Adrian understood Angela was protecting Tonya. His surprise increased. *Are you sure? Letting a demon kill the first time out is a dangerous sign.*

“I’m encouraging that in several people.”

And building up debts to be called in later?

Angela lifted her chin. *I don’t need to do that. I’m not you.* “Next?”

Ralph came in, but he didn’t sit. He stood by the entrance with his arms crossed over his chest.

Angela tried to skip the tension. “Yes, I’ll add it to the top of the list for the next council meeting. No, I won’t schedule that meeting yet. I have one more trick up my sleeve and I’d like the chance to use it.”

Ralph’s anger partially faded, returning him to the kind den mother they all adored. “Thank you. It’s just not right.”

“It’s hard to change a mindset when you’ve been hunted so hard and lost so many good lives. It hasn’t been that long since someone grabbed Marc’s twins. Jennifer’s child was the hostage in a recent gunfight. They have a right to feel that way.”

“I don’t agree!” Ralph’s arms swung out as his anger returned. “You’re blaming innocent people for actions that haven’t happened yet.”

“*Yet*, Ralph. *Yet*. Even you think it will happen again. My decision stands.”

Ralph had to keep trying. “And your last trick?”

“When it’s time, you’ll be in on it like you have been most of the others.”

He lifted a brow. “Is it another memory twist?”

“There’s no magic involved.”

Relief flooded his aging face. “Good.”

Angela sipped her canteen while waiting for him to be gone. Her stomach rumbled painfully.

Displeasure flowed through the room and made it worse.

Adrian fought to keep his mouth shut. His annoyance grew as he realized she hadn’t eaten since breakfast, if then. She’d been on the beach when he came out at 10 a.m. and it was now almost evening mess. *That’s not going to happen again.*

Angela flipped the tab in her folder. “Next.”

Grant came in, still wrinkled, sweaty, and stinking. He and Trent had come aboard just a minute after she had and gotten the message from top deck guards. He’d jogged all the way here, using the employee hall. “I was told you want to see me.” He refused to think about his part in the Eagle plan.

Angela took a patch from the folder pocket and held it out. “Rookie team leader. Congrats.”

Grant took the round, handsewn patch as a wide grin broke over his lips. “I’ll work hard.”

“I believe that. The Eagles usually celebrate these things. Be ready when they call you.”

Grant understood that meant getting drunk with the senior men. “Nice.”

Grant tossed a hard look toward the corner and sniffed. “I’ll smell them coming.”

Angela laughed as he left.

Adrian realized his scent was overpowering Angela’s odors. Grant had smelled him. *That one doesn’t even need a gift.*

Angela added his name to her short list. Grant was a wonderful addition to her army, mostly because he wanted to be a part of it so he was giving it his all. Some of her senior men couldn’t say the same anymore, but the breaks they all needed were in progress. Her people were already looking and feeling better and that included Adrian. “Next.”

“That’s it, Boss.” Chad peered at her through the doorway. “Do you need another guard?”

Angela gathered her folder and rose. “Stanley has it covered.”

Chad didn’t think Stanley was good enough even though he’d saved her life. “You can take me if you want and leave the klutz here.”

“Shut up, you...drunk!” Stanley spun around and swung, hard.

Chad smacked into the wall and tripped. He fell at Stanley’s boots and stayed there, groaning.

Angela stepped over him as she came out of the office.

Adrian glared through his shield. *Food, Angela.*

Angela stored her folder in her largest jacket pocket. “I have no intentions of missing mess.”

Stanley followed her down the hallway while rubbing his hand. Chad had a hard jaw. “Good to hear. The den mothers passed the word on you a few days ago. If you don’t start eating at all the meals, they’re going to do an intervention.”

Angela groaned, both at the news and at Adrian hearing it.

Adrian fought not to reveal himself through his anger. *It’s almost like you don’t want the baby.*

He caught a blast of rage and then it was gone.

Adrian’s sharp mind began working on that puzzle. When a woman had a secret, he could sniff it out through any layer of shielding.

Angela kept walking and refused to think about it.

Eagles began falling in with them as they approached the mess. Senior men surrounded her with hard bodies and attitudes, forcing Adrian to linger in the rear or give himself away. They were sharper than the other men and women in these halls. He kept his mind on his job and his shield on high strength.

Angela entered the mess and paused to see how many of them were here. She spotted Tobias in the corner and Marc’s tired twins at the center table.

The other kids were at the three tables closest to the counter. All of them turned. They felt the tension arrive with her.

Half of the children glared over Angela’s shoulder. The others stared in longing,

remembering better times for themselves in this camp.

Brittani's parents also felt the tension. They kept their volunteers behind the counter, out of the possible crossfire.

Conner tugged on Candy's arm and directed her to an empty table away from everyone else.

"What are you doing?" Candy had gotten used to sitting with Debra and Laura's nieces.

"Just sit here tonight? For me?"

Candy shrugged, rubbing her huge stomach. "Okay."

Conner also glared over Angela's shoulder. *I don't know what you're doing here, but you need to go.*

Descendants in the crowded mess began searching for what they'd missed.

Charlie got up and left his barely touched tray on the counter. He didn't look back.

Debra and Laura's nieces put their books down, not sure what was happening.

At the table next to them, Jeff added his glares to the others.

Jonny glanced around, confused. "What's happening?"

Jeff sneered. "Just a rat in the corn. It'll be gone soon."

Jonny went back to his barley and fish soup, enjoying the food. He'd spent all day working the radio and the DJ booth, and training Mike how to

do the same. He was too tired to care about someone else's drama.

Ray stood up. He started to call for security.

Angela shook her head.

Ray realized the boss knew Adrian was here. He sat by Grant and crossed his arms over his chest.

Grant smiled at him. "Good job."

Ray patted the patch on the table by Grant's tray. "For what? You got the promotion."

Grant didn't answer so he didn't give it away to the few people who hadn't caught the feel of Adrian being here. "We should take a walk after dinner."

Ray's mood lightened. "Sounds great."

Jennifer came into the mess through the opposite entrance.

Dog came in behind her. He wasn't missing mess either, not even to have fun with Sadie.

He stopped near Angela and sniffed. His fur lifted.

Angela used the first words that came to mind. "Down, boy."

Dog glanced up at her in scorn. *Really?*

Angela flushed. *I'm sorry.*

You should be. Dog stalked from the mess with his tail bushed up.

All three cats hurried after him, rubbing and meowing in comfort.

Wade and Neil observed all the byzan. They knew Adrian was here now, but the repelling issue was a much bigger threat.

Morgan and Kyle appeared in the doorway Angela had come through. Kyle pointed toward their table like he'd done every night.

Morgan went to the food line, chin up against the hostile glances.

Jennifer went to their table, letting Morgan get their trays. She had three more days of wearing the sling and she'd promised the medics she would stick to that. They hadn't been willing to clear her for duty without a promise. She nodded to Allison and Zack as she went by their table.

Allison felt Zack stiffen. "What is it?"

Zack shoved a bite into his mouth so he didn't have to answer. He concentrated on the dull ache in his ribs that said he wasn't completely healed from his ordeal. He winced at a flash of the death rattle that had taken his teammate while they hung on that sandy warehouse wall.

Allison felt his pain. She rubbed his wrist and forgot her question.

Angela went to the far corner, waving the others along. They congregated around Tobias and his wives without speaking. Everyone knew what they were testing now and what could happen if it went badly.

Tensions rose as they all stared at each other and prepared to defend themselves if necessary.

When nothing happened, Kyle waved toward Neil. "Maybe he's right. It's a myth."

“It’s real.” Angela remembered the feeling of revulsion Joel had produced, but it wasn’t present now. “What if it’s a sign?”

Jennifer nodded. “I’m leaning toward that theory. Byzan only repel if they’re corrupt. That’s how we’ll know.”

It was a relief for all of them, but especially Tobias. He smiled at his wives.

Angela motioned the twins back toward their trays. “Finish your rehydrated vegetables.”

“Yes, mom,” they echoed while grinning.

Chuckles went around the mess.

Tobias stiffened suddenly. “You son of a bitch.” He rose and stomped toward Angela.

Angela sighed. “I asked him to be here.”

“Doesn’t change my reaction.” Tobias stomped by her and swung through Adrian’s shield.

Adrian hit the ground, shield vanishing.

People gasped and shouted at his sudden appearance.

Eagle descendants who’d missed him immediately cursed themselves. Those who’d known laughed at those who hadn’t.

Adrian rubbed his jaw and glared at Tobias. “I said I was sorry fifteen years ago. That’s your last free hit.”

“Don’t speak to me—ever!” Tobias went back to his wives, who weren’t surprised by his reaction.

Kyle offered Adrian a hand up. “You sleep with one of his wives?”

Adrian studied the two women, causing them to blush. “No. I think.”

Kyle snorted. “Then why’d he clock you?”

“I stopped him from killing someone, a long time ago.”

“Who?”

“Joel Livingston.” Adrian headed for the exit now that his cover was blown. “Thank you for the training session, Boss.”

“It’s my honor. Get some ration packs on your way out.”

“Will do.” Adrian got out of sight.

Angela joined the twins at the center table and opened her folder.

Adrian growled in her mind. *Food, Angela!*

She reluctantly got up and got in line for a tray that she needed but didn’t want.

Adrian tried to drive it in. *Starving yourself won’t bring Marc home any faster.*

Angela pointed at Conner. “Escort him off the ship.”

Conner blanched.

Eagles scowled when he started to refuse.

Conner snapped his mouth shut and marched after his dad.

Angela smiled at Candy. “Sit with us?”

Candy waddled over gratefully. She didn’t like being isolated anymore. She’d made friends now and she wanted to continue those relationships.

Angela waved at a few more people who were sitting by themselves. They all joined her in line or went to the center table.

Morgan put the trays in front of Jennifer, then followed Conner without being asked or told. Tobias's punch was minor compared to what the top deck guards might do upon seeing them come up the ramp together. Rookies were apt to fire first and think after.

Adrian slowed to let them both catch up. He assumed Angela was doing this to give him a few minutes with his son; he was grateful.

“You owe her a lot.”

Adrian nodded at Conner's declaration. “I'll repay it and then some.” He scanned the teenager deeply.

Conner didn't mind. Now that they were out of public view, it was okay. “You seem better.”

“So do you.”

Conner smiled. “I'm a real Eagle now. I've been on runs and I work directly for leadership. Morgan's worrying over nothing.”

Adrian wasn't sure of that until they reached the top deck.

All the guards glared at him, but they didn't draw guns or call an alarm. They scanned Conner, then resumed studying the ocean and the island.

Morgan detoured toward the bridge. “Hang on for two minutes. I have something for you.”

Adrian hadn't forgotten the ration packs. He just didn't want to take anything away from Safe Haven.

Conner snorted. “No one eats those ration packs. They’re nasty. You can have them all.”

Adrian chuckled. “Do you need anything?”

Conner understood it was okay for him to be around his dad now. He took the opportunity. “Just some of your time.”

Adrian smiled warmly. “You pick it and I’ll be there.”

“How about after the group meal on land?”

“Sounds perfect.” Adrian examined the boy’s gold engagement band. “You sure about getting married?”

Conner didn’t need to lie. “No, but I love her and she loves me. We’re doing what’s expected so we can be together.”

Adrian didn’t like that, but he was impressed by the adult choice. “When it gets rough, come talk to me. I’ll give you tips to get through it without destroying your relationship.”

“I will.” His dad knew more about women than anyone Conner had ever known. “Just not the stuff that screwed *you* up, okay? I don’t need to be tempted.”

“No worries.” Adrian put a hand on the boy’s healthy shoulder. “I saw something a few nights ago.”

Conner stopped him. “Don’t. Let her have this time.”

Adrian understood Conner already knew there wasn’t going to be an easy birth for Candy. “I’ll help if I can.”

“As long as they all live, I’m good.”

Adrian didn’t make a promise he couldn’t keep.

Terror entered Conner’s heart. “I thought it was just a close call. I didn’t dig deeper. The time stream is...unsteadier than it used to be.”

“Yes.” Adrian let go as Morgan rejoined them.

Morgan held out a kit that wasn’t full. “When you’re on duty over the boss, you wear this gear and it doesn’t come off until your shift is over. Are we clear?!”

Adrian kept a straight face while Conner flinched. “Yes, sir.”

Morgan laughed and left.

Adrian slung it over his shoulder and headed for the ladder. “There might be some shouting when I get home. Don’t panic. She’s not dying and neither am I.”

“Why are you with her?” Conner didn’t like Sadie. “She’s young, loud, sloppy, and rebellious—all the things you used to hate.”

“Sounds like all the rookies I’ve trained.”

“So you’re just training her?”

Adrian stopped at the ladder. “I know you don’t want to hear this, son, so I’ll make it quick. Be nice to Sadie. She hasn’t done you a wrong. Beyond that, my love life is none of your business.”

Conner laughed. “I didn’t really want to know anyway.”

Adrian began the descent, proud of his strength as he practiced the arms-only move that Marc had started and Angela was encouraging. “She’s honest,

kind when she's happy, and she makes me laugh. I'm not bored...or chasing what I can't have. It's a good deal."

Conner was able to accept that. "Be careful."

"And if I can't?"

"Then be what you are—a Mitchel."

Adrian reached the pontoon bridge and looked up with glowing blue eyes. "What *we* are, Conner. Never forget where you came from, even if it's better where you are now. Your beginnings mean everything."

Chapter Seven

You're Outnumbered

1

“So how’s the family?” Tobias looked toward the door.

Samantha came into the mess a second later.

Wade went to help her. “I’ve got it.”

Neil scowled at Tobias as everyone settled down to eat and discuss what they’d seen. “They’re good. What’s with the violence?”

“That wasn’t violent. It was a payment on an old installment plan.” Tobias swept Neil. “Have you been practicing?”

Neil let it go. He didn’t care why Adrian had been hit, just as long as he was. “It’s not working. The boss will switch me out soon.”

“Understandable.” Tobias was glad he wouldn’t have to do that part. He’d enjoyed working with the sharp trooper. Firing him because he couldn’t copy a gift seemed mean and would be detrimental to his end goal of being fully accepted here. “You want to join us for dinner?”

Neil was happy to get the invite. “I would, but I need to go see a woman about a car in a few minutes. I’ll catch you later.”

Tobias wasn't offended, though he did wonder which woman Neil was tracking.

Tobias felt Angela's stare and looked over.

Angela had been listening and reading the evening reports. Despite Neil's ability to lie, it was only for self-defense or protection of his new life. He wasn't picking up Tobias's skills at all. *You'll have a new student tomorrow. This one isn't as friendly.*

Tobias wasn't worried. He had nothing to hide and he was holding nothing back whenever they asked him for information or help. He'd even been willing to help Neil, but he didn't know how to make someone evolve without death or trauma. *I've spent a decade trying to keep my wives from evolving.* Neil would have to seek those answers from someone else, but Tobias hoped the man would still spend time with them. It had been good for his wives to have the camp accept them because the senior Eagles were.

"I'll cover it." Angela pushed away the tray she hadn't eaten much of. "I'll be on ship rounds for a little while and then I'll be in my office if anyone needs me." She headed for the door.

As she went by Jeff's table, his conversation with Jonny floated through the mess that had quieted to hear her.

"I'm surprised you didn't go with Marc."

Jeff grunted. "So was he, but I like being alive."

Jonny hadn't noticed the quiet. His loud voice carried. "What does that mean?"

Jeff spoke the truth before he thought about it. “I didn’t trust Marc to get me through it alive. That’s rule number one on any run, you know?”

The mess went silent.

Jeff saw her standing there.

Angela’s eyes blazed. She stormed from the room, leaving tense people in her wake.

Angela wasn’t angry that Jeff had spoken carelessly and it would now travel the camp and stir up people who had a loved one on Marc’s team. She actually needed that to happen. *I’m angry because I can’t disprove his words.*

There was no guarantee that all of Marc’s team would survive. *The deaths and injuries will be blamed on him, but it’s really my fault and I’ll carry it forever, like I do with all the others. Hell isn’t enough to punish me. Fate will come up with something else.*

Her hand went to her stomach and stayed there.

In the mess, Samantha looked at Wade.

Wade nodded. “I’ve got it covered. Go on.”

Samantha tucked the blanket tighter around the sleeping infants in the stroller and hurried after Angela. She would grab something to eat later.

Wade settled in by the babies, thrilled with her public show of confidence in him.

Neil joined Wade at the table, but his attention stayed on Samantha as she went after the boss.

Wade knew what Neil needed. “You should go steal that personal time you mentioned earlier. They’re sleeping. I’ve got it covered.”

Neil smiled. “Thanks. That last set of kai levels yesterday was harder than it needed to be. I want to run another set before bed.”

Wade was sore from it. “We’re still out of shape.”

“Yep.” Neil left, content that things were as calm as they got in this camp.

Wade let out a breath and kept his mind from exploring the many plans he had running. *I know a little of how Angela feels now. It’s amazing.*

He dropped his head as his alpha power flowed out in thick waves that tried to draw people to his side. *And dangerous. All of us are walking time bombs of one kind or another now. It’s just who we are.*

2

“He didn’t mean anything by it.” Samantha hurried after Angela. “It’s just who he is.”

Angela slowed to let Samantha catch up. “I’m fine. It was a good excuse to get you out of there.”

Samantha grinned. She’d missed sneaking around to accomplish Eagle goals. “Cargo area? It’s empty until Wade’s class later.”

Angela waved at Tonya as the redhead appeared in the window of the employee door they were passing. “This won’t stay a secret much longer.”

Tonya fell in with them. “Will it be a problem?”

Angela denied that. “I just didn’t want everyone else trying this before I knew what to expect from it.”

The women were satisfied with her answer.

Angela didn’t tell them she was protecting the camp, like usual. If it was possible to do what they were trying, she might have to forbid it. So far, it wasn’t possible, so it was okay to let her army try.

Angela frowned as they went by the infirmary. Amy and Kimmie were still on duty and openly stopping normals from getting near Brittani. A line was forming at the other end of the hall; Terry was handling normal patients away from that room.

They saw Daryl’s shadow through the exam room window. He was tense, pacing.

“They have a hard choice to make.” Tonya had delivered the results of her assessment a short while ago. “They sent her parents back to work so they could discuss it and make the one that’s best for them.”

Samantha frowned. “I haven’t heard yet. What’s the problem?”

“Too many babies at once.” Angela scanned for observers, then quickly opened the entrance to the cargo steps. “She’s carrying triplets and we have no idea how to care for her or the babies.”

Samantha cursed the war yet again. Many hospitals could have handled this back then. “But you’re going to try, right?”

“Once they make their choice, we’ll all jump in and help. Until then, we’re leaving them alone.”

“You mean abortion.” Samantha let the door slam to show her displeasure.

Angela flipped on the cargo lights. “She might die carrying them. She’s already having trouble. Since she’s taking all the risk, she gets to make the choice.”

Samantha was torn now. “If they’re aborting, why is her husband upset?”

Tonya clarified the situation. “He wants her to abort, for her safety. She wants to carry them, for their lives.”

Samantha groaned. “That’s awful. Which way do you think it will go?”

Angela grunted. “I don’t think, I know. Brittani will try her hardest to birth them and maybe die in the process.”

“But we need her! This camp needs her.” Samantha stopped, hands going to her hips. “Can’t you talk to her?”

Angela caught the complete flip. She wondered if Sam would when she replayed this conversation later. It was a good thing, despite the bad situation. *At least one of my chosen leaders can change their mind when presented with more information.* “Like I said, we’re leaving her alone until she needs us.”

Samantha followed them. “We?”

“Tobias wants to help us and I’m going to insist they let him. He’s delivered more descendant babies than the rest of us put together.”

Tonya locked the door behind them. “He’d make a good medic. Then I wouldn’t have to go get him every time something like this happens.”

Angela was glad to find the entire cargo hold empty. “He’s cleared now.”

Tonya shut the other doors and locked them. “So I can bring him in?”

“Yes.” Angela sighed. “Just don’t bring him in too far, Tonya. Kenn will be very unhappy with the competition.”

Tonya laughed. “Not a chance.”

Angela didn’t argue. Tonya was lonely. Tobias was kind, persistent, and he knew how to please a woman.

A deep frown creased Tonya’s clear skin. She didn’t like it that Angela thought she would cheat. “I’m not interested.”

“Good. If Kenn kills this one, I *will* remove him.” Angela slid into one of the chairs that Wade had already put out for his meeting. “Clear your minds now, ladies. Reaching a new level without killing seems impossible after ten failed attempts, but I’m sure we can do this. We just have to keep trying.”

3

“I can do this.” Britani slowly sat up in the sheet-covered medical recliner. “I’m going to do this.”

Daryl had heard that tone before. He knew she meant it. “I want the babies, too.” He sighed miserably. “I just want you more.”

Brittani let him hug her again, relieved. The last thing she needed was him hounding her to get rid of them.

Daryl winced. “I won’t, unless I have to.”

She liked it that he wanted to protect her. “I’d be the first Safe Haven descendant to have triplets.”

He frowned at her. “That goal isn’t worth your life.”

She began sliding out of the recliner. “No, but we’d still be in the history books. That’s cool, right?”

Daryl helped her stand. “Is the medicine working?”

She smiled. “It’s great. My stomach’s calm and even a little hungry.”

Daryl finally started relaxing. “Good. Mess?”

She nodded. “My parents will come hunting for us if we don’t keep them updated.”

Daryl chuckled. Dwight had shaken his hand twice and Thelma had kissed both his cheeks. Then they’d found out the bad news and frozen, torn. “I wonder if your dad wants to be an Eagle.”

Brittani rotated toward him with bright red eyes.

Daryl wasn’t intimidated. “It’s his choice, like this was yours.”

“You mean ours.”

Daryl told her the truth as he saw it. “No. My choice would take away the risk to your life. But it’s

your life to give if that's the way you want it. My job is to support you in those choices, like you will me when I go against something you want or believe in. We get to be true to ourselves first."

Brittani hugged him tightly.

Daryl held onto her and shut his eyes. *Please, God. Please don't take her away from me. If she dies, so will I.*

Outside the infirmary, Amy and Kimmie heard footsteps. They slid in front of the entrance to block it.

Rico came around the corner.

Both girls glared at him.

Rico stopped. "I'm on garbage duty."

Kimmie pointed. "Come back later."

Rico didn't argue with the powerful kids. He went back the way he'd come.

"I don't like him."

"I don't get anything bad from him." Kimmie scowled as more steps echoed. "Here comes another one."

Amy paled. "It's my Neil."

Neil joined the girls. His hard glance told them he wasn't in the mood for cuteness or lies. "Where did Samantha go?"

Kimmie shook her head. "We can't tell you. The alpha won't like it."

Amy didn't have that bond with Angela, but she did with Neil. "Cargo room, I think, but she'll hear you if you use the top door. It squeaks."

Neil ignored Kimmie's anger and headed for the employee hall. "Your shift's up in ten minutes; go to the training room. As Junior Eagles, you both have to put in two hours a day there on top of everything else."

Happy squeals followed him through the hallway.

Daryl came out to see what had happened.

Kimmie beamed at him. "We're Junior Eagles now!"

Daryl smiled at them. "Great work." His smile vanished. "Now pay attention on duty and celebrate later!"

The kids immediately stood straighter and wiped their expressions.

Daryl was impressed. "When your two hours are done in the training room, do not go to the adult showers. Use the kids' dorm facilities. Then go to the mess for downtime with your team."

Happiness filled the hall and flowed into every room around them.

Daryl enjoyed the mood boost for a minute longer. He trusted the kids out here more than he did most of their camp. "I may talk to the boss about using you two as regular guards. Are you okay with that?"

Kimmie shook her head. "Eagles don't pick their jobs. The boss does."

"Outstanding answer." Daryl went back to his wife.

The girls resumed scanning the deck for problems or people.

Neil eased into the employee hall. He'd lingered to hear anything Daryl might say about the normals. He was glad to know Daryl wasn't thinking badly about them. He was just concerned with the safety of his family. "On that one, we're brothers in a common cause."

Neil eased down the steps and entered the employee hall that ran along the cargo area. He settled in to listen while keeping his mental shield as strong as he could get it without draining his energy. *What are you up to, Samantha? Do I need to interfere?*

Angela pounded on the wall. "Get lost!"

Neil flinched and tripped over a broken chair. He fell against a rusty cabinet and smacked his knee on the metal edge.

Female laughter came through the wall.

Neil hobbled off before things got ugly.

4

Adrian's mood was good as he stepped onto the island. Evening was settling over the land, but this time, it didn't make him feel anxious. "I guess I'm recovering from that horror."

Clearing this island hadn't been a grand adventure. That nightmare had scarred senior men more than the entire trip here had done.

Adrian cleared the first hill and saw the bright light of an outdoor fire. He hurried toward Cliff Road, anxiety flashing back up hot enough to burn. *Are you okay?*

Sadie not answering sent adrenaline into his legs and pumped him up the dark road in record time. He slowed as he reached the top and his lungs reminded him they needed oxygen. He wheezed and burned, hands on his knees.

Sadie saw him as she came out of the bunker with a large armful of garbage. “There you are! Get in here and help me.”

Adrian sucked in air and watched her toss the trash onto the bonfire in front of the entrance. He didn’t find anything dangerous about the location, but he still didn’t trust her around fire. Things often got out of hand even when she was trying to be careful.

“Come on!”

Adrian forced his legs to move.

Sadie went to the garbage pile in the center of the bunker and grabbed another load of the mess. “The wolf left a while ago. Do you think he’ll come back?”

Adrian went to the rear of the bunker and retrieved the shovel they’d used to clear some of the rockslide after the last action on the island. He sucked in enough air to speak. “Probably. Sounds like you made friends.”

Sadie snorted. “He kept pushing me and pulling me around until I got it all in this pile. Then he talked to me!”

Adrian scooped a load and followed her out. “What did he say?”

Sadie dropped her load and jumped back as the flames flared up brighter; smoke poured over the road. “He hates dirty places because it hurts his nose. He said I can play with the kitten when I get it clean.”

“And?”

“Well, I want to play with him, too.”

Adrian laughed. “Those Brady males sure know how to catch a female.”

Sadie snickered. “I don’t think Mitchels do too bad.”

Adrian smirked at her.

She studied him, smile fading. “You’re still not staying the night.”

“No. But we’ll have a nice dinner together and if you ask me, I might even wash your back during a shower.”

Sadie leered. Then she sobered. “Is something wrong with me?”

Adrian’s heart dropped. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play that game! I’ve seen your looks.” Sadie grabbed the shovel from him. “I should have thought of doing it this way.”

Adrian lingered in the doorway as she used the shovel to get another load. The bunker was a lot cleaner even though it still stank. Sadie looked tired

and very unlike the playful girl he'd come to care for. "You might not be able to have children."

She paused, looking at him. "I'm on the Pill."

Adrian was stunned. "What?"

She lifted the load of trash. "I'm not a skank. Trapping a man is wrong. I asked the preacher to get me a prescription."

"Excuse me?"

Sadie went by him and dumped the load. "Were you trying to make it happen?"

"Only through normal means." He wiped away sweat from the hot fire. "Thank you for your honor."

She smiled brightly, sending a chill down his legs and into his groin. But his heart rhythm didn't change. "Let's finish this and get cleaned up. Then I'll cook something, provide a service, and you can read comic books until you fall asleep."

"Cool!" Sadie hurried into the cooler bunker.

Adrian stood there and mourned. He'd been hoping Sadie would try to trap him, because he would never ask her for a baby. Now, there wouldn't be a child either way. That hope was gone.

5

The four rookies trailed Neil down the hallway along the Eagle training corridor.

"I hope you know what we're doing."

"Be quiet. He'll hear you."

"Even if we sneak up on him, he'll use his magic. We shouldn't do this."

“He embarrassed us today. He deserves this.”

“He’s one of them!”

“He’s a washed-up old man with kids. Now shut up!”

The rookies went by the guard desk without spotting Molly or Trent, who were doing a cleaning check for the work crews.

Molly met Trent’s eye across the hallway as the rookies hurried after Neil. “You want to call it in or should I?”

Trent reached for his radio... Then he stopped. A smile curved his lips. “No, wait. This could be good for them.”

Molly caught on and snickered. “That’s mean.”

“It’s what they deserve for trying to gang up on someone.”

Molly frowned. “We’re going to miss it.”

“Let’s go.”

Trent and Molly stalked the rookies, using Eagle training. The employee hallways were too empty to get ahead of them, but the rookies were easy to follow. They were only observing the man a hundred yards in front of them. No one was watching the rear.

Aware of his tail, Neil went into the Eagle training room.

The rookies slowed to see if anyone else was going in there.

Molly and Trent stopped out of sight, both swallowing laughs at the thought of what might happen.

The rookies hurried into the training room behind Neil.

Light feet flew through the hallway. The sense of fury was staggering. Descendants on this deck instinctively turned toward it and waited for the call to arms.

Trent jerked Molly out of the way as Amy flew by. The little girl ran into the training room and slammed the door shut.

Molly heard the lock click. “Oh, shit.”

The two Eagles rushed over and peered through the window as the little girl attacked.

“Stop!”

“What is she... Stop! Let go!”

“Don’t hit me there!”

“Quit it!”

“She bit me! She bit me!”

Thud! Crack!

Trent and Molly eased back so they didn’t draw the girl’s attention away from her more deserving targets.

Trent kept his voice low. “Do you think she’ll understand we knew Neil would win?”

Molly paled. “Maybe we should be gone when she’s done.”

Slap!

“I’m bleeding!”

“Come back here, you coward!”

“Watch your flank, Amy.” Neil’s voice calmly directed the matchup.

“I’m bleeding!”

“She has my hair. Make her give it back!”

“No! Help!”

Molly turned around and walked away. “I’m out.”

6

“It was a good mental workout.”

Tonya nodded at Sam. “I think I can sleep now.”

Sam didn’t have trouble sleeping with both of her men in camp. She didn’t say that, however.

Angela hid a frown. She didn’t sleep or eat very much. “Do your men know what we’ve been doing?”

Samantha yawned and wiped the moisture from her eyes. “Neil is wrapped in a cocoon of regret for not going with Marc. He’s missing a lot.”

“And Wade?”

Sam sighed. “Wade catches it all. He knows every secret I have by now. He’s too much of a gentleman to bring it up unless it becomes a problem.”

Tonya laughed. “How does that mesh with the sex class he’s about to give?”

Samantha led them toward the mess. “It’s not just a sex class. He’s going to teach them what their fathers forgot—to have honor when dealing with women.”

“We also need one for women when dealing with men.”

Both tired mothers agreed with Angela's mutter.

Angela and Tonya escorted Samantha to the mess entrance. Tonya yawned. "I need to get my monster from the sitter and sleep. Thanks for the lesson. I'm sorry it didn't work."

"Yep." Angela walked toward the steps, now being drawn by the excitement on the deck below them. Tonya and Samantha were tired and focused on getting back to their infants. They weren't picking up on it.

Angela followed the buzz down the steps and toward the large training room. Muffled shouting came to her as she reached the bottom.

"Make her stop now, Neil!"

"Help!"

"I'm still bleeding!"

Angela followed the others who'd been drawn. The images she was getting from Neil put a grin on her lips.

Trent wasn't sure if he should intervene. The screams were slowly becoming serious.

"She'll get tired in a bit." Angela leaned on the guard desk and swept the small crowd.

Ed felt her regard. He didn't speak in case she was mad at him for sending Adrian to guard her.

Angela lifted her brow at Tim, who was next to Ed.

Tim shook his head. He hadn't figured out Ed's problem. Their meeting had just ended when the screaming drew their attention.

Angela wasn't surprised. She locked eyes with Ed. "Have you made a choice?"

Ed nodded quickly. "I'd like to float and not be assigned to anything."

Angela shrugged. "Fine. I need a guard right now."

Everyone around them frowned as they realized she didn't have one. She'd ditched Stanley in the mess.

Ed took the slot in relief. Following her around the ship for a few hours was easy duty.

"No teeth! No teeth!"

"Rush her! She can't get all of us!"

"No! Let go! I need that later!"

"Rush her!"

Thud! Thump.

The sound of a body hitting the mat was clear.

Tim winced and left.

"Wade's class should be starting soon. You can wait here to see what the rookies look like when Amy's finished and be late for it...or you can be there early and score points with a senior Eagle."

Men exchanged glances at Angela's comment. And then took off running toward the cargo area.

Angela laughed.

Ed realized he was going to miss it. *There's punishment number one.*

Angela didn't say differently. She moved closer to Trent. "Another two-hour workout when they come through the door. Or put them in a lifeboat and get them out of our lives."

Trent assumed Angela knew the rookies were slacking off and planning violence. “I’ll make the choice clear.”

Kyle came down the hall, glaring and barking. “This is a training hall! Where do you belong? Why are you here?!”

The remaining Eagles and camp members got out of his sight.

Kyle stopped by Angela and Trent. “Does that workout include the child who’s giggling while beating the shit out of four grown men?”

Angela nodded. “Make them do it together. They won’t slack off with her there and she’ll enjoy being treated like an Eagle. Make them stay to clean after she leaves, so there’s no chance of retaliation tonight.”

“We’ll cover it.” Kyle pushed her button, carefully. “Good choice. It’s exactly what Adrian would have done.”

Angela stared at him.

Kyle turned and headed for the steps. “I’ll finish rounds. Go eat something.”

Angela’s upper lip thinned. “Tell your wife to find me as soon as she gets a minute.”

“Yep.”

Trent met Kyle’s eyes as he hurried by. *Good one. She felt that.*

Kyle knew. He didn’t like manipulating her, but Marc had left them all no other choice. *Things won’t be the same when you come home, Marc. I hope you can adjust.*

Wade left the mess after pressing a soft kiss to Samantha's cheek.

Ralph joined him as he hit the hallway.

Wade felt the sudden mood shift. "Are you okay?"

Ralph ignored the question. "Does the boss know we're trying to manipulate the normals through old brainwashing techniques?"

Wade thought of the carefully chosen movies and books that had been put out and of the art their kids had taped to the walls. "It's hard to say. She's got her own stuff going on, you know?"

Ralph didn't care about her spending time with Adrian. "Do you think she's really working on it?"

Wade scowled. He slowed to avoid a small group of men who were going to the same destination. "Why are you losing faith in the boss?"

Ralph also didn't care about witnesses. "She isn't stopping the segregation and discrimination! There are four normals being abused right now in a training room."

Wade understood why Ralph felt that way; he just didn't agree. "You and I are working on the normals. The boss has a plan in action."

"You think that's it?"

"No. She doesn't want the drama and violence either." Wade caught a flash of Angela refusing to

give in on something Ralph wanted. “If she turned you down, she had a good reason.”

“The reason she gave is unfair.”

Wade shrugged. “Maybe the council will cover it when they reconvene.”

Ralph scowled. “That’s what she said and then she refused to schedule a meeting! Now I can’t protect my people!”

Wade became worried over Ralph’s raised voice and pinched face. “What’s going on with you?”

Ralph couldn’t lie. “The normals are waking up from the charm she used. Now that we’re on land again, our base nature is coming out. I’m trying to keep them alive.”

Wade waited to let a group of giggling single women go by them. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You have to help me, Wade.”

“I will, and so will the boss. You just have to give her time.”

Ralph stiffened. “And how many more will she kill off while I wait?!” He stomped away.

Wade continued toward the cargo area, good mood now gone. Ralph sensed the choice Angela was making about taking control of everything and he didn’t like it. “But the descendants do, dude. You’re outnumbered.”

Chapter Eight

The Way Things Are

1

Jennifer tapped on Angela's door and opened it. "Kyle said you want me?"

Angela put Brittani's file on her desk and stood up. "Would you like to sub for me in the office?"

Jennifer smiled. "Yes." She didn't tell Angela she'd missed being useful. It was too obvious for the boss to miss.

"I'd rather no one knew where I'm at for a few hours." That obviously didn't include the senior people.

Jennifer came up with a good excuse to keep people away. "Your stomach's upset. You're resting."

"Perfect." Angela slipped on her shoes while wishing Brittani's file had been more helpful.

"Nothing in it we can use?"

"Not that I saw. Feel free to go over it yourself." Now that the right to privacy had been removed, there was no need to ask Brittani first. It made Angela angrier than she already was.

"Take a guard."

Angela snorted. "Ed's in the hall, almost asleep. He needs a brisk walk."

Jennifer chuckled. She went to the desk to peruse Brittani's file. Sometimes the smallest detail was the most important. She was learning that the hard way.

Angela stopped near the door. "Are you staying?"

Jennifer slowly nodded. "Yes. Please. I'm sorry."

"We all have weak moments. I'm not upset about that, but I do need to know why."

Jennifer's hand went to her baby bump. "I can't protect Autumn and Roy like this. It's not fair to take them away. They're safer here than anywhere else, even if it's not really safe here. I was tired, scared..." Jennifer sat in Angela's warm chair. "I know you pushed me into things, but I would have made those choices anyway."

"I'm sorry."

Jennifer sighed. "I'm sorry Charlie still doesn't want the job."

Angela shrugged. "Actually, that's about to change, but it's too late. The woman he chose ran away from him. He can't do the job now. He has no respect." Angela opened the door, tone hardening. "He lied. He hid the rule-breaking. He pressured her and put her in awkward situations she wasn't equipped to deal with. The camp won't forget it."

Ed flushed. He'd been listening and knew she meant Charlie, but half of that applied to him as well.

Angela waved at the guard on the hall. “When she comes out, stay with her like you would have with me. Ed has my back.”

Chad frowned through his swollen lip and bruise. Humiliation covered him like a coat. Everyone knew Stanley had put him down and he hadn’t fought back. “He resigned. He doesn’t have any respect now either.”

“Still, it’s what I want.”

Chad shrugged and retreated before Ed could add another black eye to his face. “You’re the boss.”

“Not for the next three hours. That’s Jennifer’s headache.” Angela felt relief slide onto her shoulders, replacing the weight of the world. She let a genuine smile crease her lips. *I’m on downtime.*

In the office, Jennifer braced her feet to handle the new weight.

The crumbled letter on the desk didn’t draw her attention yet even though it was in Kyle’s handwriting.

2

“We’re done for now. You can all go crash.”

Groans of relief met Theo’s announcement. His crew was putting in twelve-hour shifts and getting a lot done. They all enjoyed the few hours they had to themselves anyway, but a lot of them wanted to go to Wade’s class.

Theo stored his tools in the kit around his waist as the others went down steps and through the halls.

They'd finished rewiring a section of this deck so it could handle the bigger appliances they'd taken from the other ships.

Monica handed him the last screwdriver she'd been using. "I'll sweep up. You go on."

Theo smiled at her and left. Monica often cleaned the garbage from their jobs. He knew it was FND work for most people, but he hadn't been able to figure out what Monica would need those credits for.

Theo's tired mind went to off time and who he might spend it with. He'd accepted that Debra had moved on. He wasn't torn up, though he did miss her. He was more concerned with his own happiness now. The need to explore had been hitting him in sharp slaps that said he wasn't going to be content much longer. *I think I'll go to Wade's class and listen. It can't hurt to know what I'm doing with the next one.*

Monica finished cleaning quickly and stored the equipment in the hall closet. Then she went into the small lounge at the end of the corridor.

Charlie looked up.

Monica checked the halls and found them empty. She entered the lounge and shut the door.

Charlie put his flask on the table and glared with drunken, angry orbs.

Monica lowered the shade on the window and began pulling off her shirt.

Charlie watched her strip, body hardening even while his heart cried. When she neared him, he shut

his eyes and held still. It was the second time today, but that didn't matter. He could give her what she wanted and for a few minutes, he would pretend Tracy was in his arms.

Monica smothered the guilt as she climbed onto his lap. She'd left duty earlier, unable to resist his mental misery. He needed the distraction and she wanted his body. It was perfect for them both.

Monica took him hard and quick, the way they liked it.

Theo came back down the hall with a wrench in his hand that he'd forgotten to put away. Moans immediately drew his attention. He recognized Monica's rough voice. Then he heard the male now begging her to go faster, harder.

Theo stored the tool and got out of the area before they finished. *I didn't actually see them. That could have been anyone.*

He didn't care about Charlie, but Monica was a member of his team and he needed her. *It's just sex and that's none of my business.*

3

"Is someone in here?" Stanley started to close the sauna room door.

"Justs mes."

Stanley stepped inside the private room, frowning at the drunken woman slouching in the corner chair. He was off-duty now, but Jennifer

wanted a new round of the ship done and he liked being asked. “Are you okay?”

Pam shook her head. “But there’s nofing I can do about it.”

Stanley knew she was lonely. “Let me help you to your room. You can’t keep passing out in here. Someone will find you.”

Pam knew he was right, but it didn’t matter to her. “I already lost it all. Nofings she can do to me now.”

Stanley didn’t know what to say or how to handle it. He decided it was time to let someone know she was having trouble adjusting to being single. *And hated*, he added mentally. The camp had followed Missy’s lead. They were furious at her for leaving Angela and the Eagles alone, unconscious, with an assassin.

Pam sucked in air; tears rolled over her cheeks.

Stanley’s heart broke for her. He reversed direction and came to her side. When she didn’t move, he knelt to slide an arm under her. “Let’s get you on your feet.”

Pam kissed him.

Stanley held still. His nostrils flared. A vein popped out on his forehead.

Pam pulled back to see how he was taking it.

Stanley let go of her. She fell into the chair.

“Never without permission!” He stomped from the room, letting the door slam.

Pam burst into tears.

Stanley heard her as he left. It swayed him again. Instead of going to report her, he wiped his sleeve over his lips and went toward the mess to enjoy an hour of downtime with the other low-level Eagles who'd been on duty over the ship today.

When no one came in to confront her, Pam picked up the bottle of wine she'd brought from the bar and tilted it up. She didn't stop until the bottle was empty.

4

“Hello.” Tonya greeted Theo as he passed her, but she didn't linger to chat. The baby in her arms was sleeping, giving her time to handle a personal goal that had to be done when no one else was around. The men were gathering for Wade's class. The women were also there, observing through cracks and lingering in the halls. This relief deck was deserted.

Theo hurried down the steps so she didn't have a chance to scan his thoughts.

Tonya swept for other people, then stepped into the storage closet. She pulled the door shut, tugged the floor mat in front of the entrance to cover the crack, then flipped on the light.

She put the baby into the pumpkin seat already sitting on the wide middle shelf and rubbed her arm. The baby was gaining weight now.

Tonya took a dusty kit from the top shelf and opened it. She added a few ration bars, some

pouches of water, and two baggies with baby formula that she'd taken from the infirmary. She took a magazine from her jacket pocket and added it, then zipped the kit and put it back on the shelf.

She'd started collecting things long before Angela's advice to be ready to go on a moment's notice and it had nothing to do with what she'd done to Gabe. *I need a safety net and this is one part of it.* So were the other kits she was building. Hidden around the ship, she would have at least one of them no matter where she was the next time life flipped on her.

Tonya gathered the baby into one arm, then turned off the light. She waited, listening, before she stepped out and continued down the hall. *If we split, I may need to leave. If I'm accused of murder, I may need to run. If Kenn gets mean again, I'll hide. Every private goal I'm working on right now is to cover me and my son in any of those moments.*

Tonya entered her cabin and smiled at Daisey, who was watching her orphans. The cats and kids were on the big bed, crashed in a variety of positions. Daisey was in the rocker by the bed, reading a romance novel. "Thanks."

Daisey put her bookmark in and stood, yawning. Her spine popped.

Tonya groaned in sympathy, but she didn't complain. Daisey was a lot older. If she could take it without whining, then so could Tonya.

Tonya handed Daisey the baby and let her fuss over him for a minute. She and Ralph loved kids and it showed.

Daisey enjoyed the time with the infant. As far as she knew, Tonya hadn't let any other normal but her and Candy care for her children or spend time with her newborn.

Tonya smiled again. "You're not like the others. We trust you and Ralph."

Daisey wiped drool from the baby's mouth, then gave him back to his mother. "Thank you. ...I miss my grandbabies. These moments help me."

Tonya held the door with her free hand, and locked it behind Daisey. Her calm, happy smile faded into the scheming redhead Kenn had fallen for. "When we take over the world, I want her to have an easy life. She isn't like the others. She won't need to be retrained or removed for our peace of mind."

5

"You're all here for different reasons." Wade's words quieted the group of men in the cargo bay. "Some of you want peace of mind that you're doing it right. Some of you want to make your relationship better or hotter. A couple of you want to maintain that relationship by making sure your partner is too happy to switch to someone else. Most of you just want to be a relief source, and again, your reasons for that are different. There's the perpetual hard-on.

Pride and boasting rights are in here. Record-breaking and soulmate searching are sitting next to you. Everyone has a different reason.”

Wade took the beer from Theo and leaned back, making the chair tip. “That’s okay. I can help, but you have to remember one hard rule or you’ll crash and burn. Ready?”

The two dozen men sitting and standing in front of him shifted closer to hear the rule that might govern this new part of their lives.

“There are two possible endings to every moment. You must use the right responses to get the desired result.” He checked his watch. “We all have about an hour. We’ll cover some rules and then we’ll have a test on what we covered before.”

Theo cleared his throat. “I missed your first class. Can I do a makeup lesson?”

Wade chuckled. “Just observe when we get to that part tonight. I’ll test you guys next time.”

Those who hadn’t been to the first meeting were thrilled. They opened bottles of beer or water and settled in.

“The two end results are a commitment or no strings. If you use a strings line on a comet, you’re done.” Wade sipped his beer and continued. “I call them comets because no-strings moments are the hottest sex you’ll ever have, but they don’t come around often and many never repeat. You didn’t do anything wrong. They just didn’t like how it felt to go home alone. Those will eventually become stringers. So, we have stringers and comets.”

The men were glad when Wade paused to let them catch up.

Wade was amused by how many of them were taking notes. He was also filled with pride that he had a following.

Wade immediately crushed that feeling. *I'm just here to help them and do my part for the boss's breeding tree.* He went on. "Stringers and comets are just like you. They all have different reasons for the hookup. Being horny is usually where the comets come in. You'll also get trappers and trackers who hunt your kind for the few who might make good husbands. Then they trap you by forcing you into a corner or making you too happy to service anyone else. Those are your choices to make. My advice is to avoid them. I've never had a good moment afterward with a trapper or a tracker."

Something thumped lightly against the wall across the room.

The men exchanged glances and pretended they didn't know a group of females had snuck down to listen through the employee hallway that ran along the cargo hold.

"In later lessons, we'll cover how to tell those apart. For now, you need to start working on the four Ss of sex. We'll do the four Es next."

Terrance grinned. "And then the Xs?"

"Exactly. That one will get graphic. Take a cold shower before the meeting." Wade laughed with them. He also scanned to see who was here and who wasn't. "Your words and actions tell the woman if

you're hoping for a relationship or a job. The four Ss will guide you. Sound, slow, soft, satisfied. You'll apply the right sounds, while going slow. You'll use a soft touch and make sure she's satisfied. If you apply the four Ss every time, word will get around. After all, they came for the amazing orgasm. Never build them up and fail to deliver."

"*Damn. He's good.*" The female voice echoed through the wall.

Wade scowled. "One more noise from the mice and this meeting is over!"

Men glared toward the hiding women.

Silence fell around them.

Terrance caught Wade's eye. "What if we get interrupted?"

"I've already told you to be careful about your choice of location so that doesn't happen. But if it does, follow-up on your own within a day and finish the job with apologies, cum running down her thigh, and a smile. She'll be forgiving."

Men laughed.

"We'll go over sounds first. Men grunt and groan. Women want words. What words you give them depends on if they're stringers or comets. *That's good. You feel good. I like that.* Comets love those. Stringers get turned off. You're not giving them enough feedback to know how to respond. Stringers want a bond. You have to say how you feel. *I love you* still works, but go deeper. Start with how they make you feel physically and work your way up to emotions. Comets hate emotions and will

turn to stone at the hint of that. You can use baby, honey, sweetheart in passionate moments and they're fine. Stringers want you to use their name or the nicknames you've chosen. It shows the bond."

Wade waited again, but he suddenly found himself wishing Neil was here to verify that Samantha fit into these profiles. The thought of pleasing her made his stomach cramp. "Don't use the exact words from these meetings. Women talk about their sex lives and it will travel the ship that none of us can come up with our own lines. Don't ruin the job. Put your heart into it and get something amazing in return."

Listening from outside the main entrance, Jayda waited for Wade to call her in. He was a wonderful teacher. Jayda was only a little nervous at the thought of being his surprise guest for their test. All she had to do was act out the emotions on the cards he'd given her, but being surrounded by horny men examining her every expression would have rattled her before. Now, she was stronger—mentally and physically.

She also knew Wade wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. Samantha had snatched a great man. Their lessons had revealed Wade was full of light that wanted to spread. She had no doubt he would end up in a full leadership position as soon as his team retired.

The rookies were often caught discussing that moment and pretending they would be able to cover it. The senior men sneered at them and refused to

say if they planned to retire at all. Jayda had worried over that one for a while because it would be her future, too. She'd figured out the senior men didn't expect to live through the final battle with Nature. They had some plans for that fight and everyone would keep training, but the Eagles had lost some of their faith after watching Nature kick Marc's ass.

Jayda stilled to listen as Wade continued.

"Slow is the second S. Some of these women were abused and they're trying to get over it. Fast movements scare them. Most women don't want to be rushed, pushed, hurried, shoved, or pulled. Go slow. When the action starts, go even slower. Pick a song with steady, slow beats and use it as your mental guide." Wade moved on. He didn't want to run out of time for the testing he'd planned. "The soft-touch and satisfied come later. You're not ready for that."

"Aw, man."

"Come on!"

"Give us something!"

Wade laughed. "Okay. Here's a single example, and then we're moving on. Ready?"

Men nodded and grinned, expecting something good.

"Kiss and rub her first. Don't just rush in and eat the taco."

"O.M.G."

"What did he say?"

"I don't do that anyway. Gross."

Wade pinned the man with a knowing smirk. “And you’ve stayed single, huh? Imagine that.”

The rookie flushed while everyone else laughed.

“Never rush in. The woman will tolerate it if you’re a good eater, but she’ll still feel like you rushed. Don’t dive in to get it over with so *you* can have fun. They don’t like it.” Wade glanced toward the door. “You can come in now.”

All the men rotated to see who it was.

Jayda stopped in the doorway. Her heart pounded against her chest. Her palms became sweaty. Her stomach flipped over.

Wade waved. “Tell me what’s wrong with her.”

“She’s scared.”

“She’s afraid.”

“Shit. She’s terrified.”

“So how do we handle that?”

“The first two Ss?”

“Exactly. Step back. Use the right sounds.” Wade locked eyes with Jayda. “You’re safe with me. You know that.”

Jayda swallowed her fear. She walked to his chair and waited for instructions.

The men in the room retreated to give her space.

“Good. We’ll take turns now. If you can guess her emotion, you pass. If not, you’ll get another chance next time with a different special guest who’s trying to conquer a fear of men.”

Everyone loved it that they could say these meetings were about more than just sex.

Wade was honored to be helping. These public declarations of fear would help the women later when they interacted with these men.

Jayda scanned quickly and found Terry's face staring at her in light desire. She gave him a small smile.

Wade caught it and stored that reaction. "First card. Let's go."

Jayda had the first few memorized. She tapped her foot in mock impatience and tried not to stare at Terry. *I don't care that he's short. He's cute.*

Wade waited until Jayda looked away. Then he flashed a message in Eagle code.

Terry blushed as the other Eagles caught it. He decided to take Wade's advice. "How about a dance later, sweetheart?"

Jayda's scowl took up her entire face.

Wade shook his head. "She's not a comet, man. You just lost her."

6

"Thank you."

Charlie kissed her sweet lips, then helped Monica onto her feet.

Monica quickly righted her clothes and hair while Charlie zipped up and then leaned back like he was ready to pass out.

"Are you okay?"

Charlie forced a nod. "I'll be able to sleep now. I'm good for another eight hours."

Monica wanted to stay and offer more comfort, but she was out of time. “I’m hitting the shower. Don’t forget to do the same.”

“I will.” Charlie didn’t care if anyone smelled her perfume on him, but he did care enough about her to wash up. He just didn’t want to be around when this finally blew up. “Are you going to tell her tonight, like you said you would?”

Monica nodded; sadness came over her face. “Molly is a great girl. Anyone would be lucky to have her.”

“But?”

“But she isn’t enough for me. Or she isn’t right for me. Something like that.”

“I’d find better words for that conversation.”

“Yeah.” Monica headed for the door. “Call me when you get up. I’ll find a few minutes to stop by.”

Charlie didn’t answer.

Monica pulled the door shut behind her and strode through the hall as if she wasn’t having an affair with the boss’s son.

Charlie slumped in the chair and let his eyes shut.

The door opened. Conner came in wearing a deep scowl. “We need to talk.”

Charlie yawned. “Later.”

“Now.” Conner slammed the door. “This is the second time I’ve caught you guys! I can’t keep hiding it from your mom.”

“Don’t care.”

“It will cause trouble.”

“So?”

Conner glared. “What’s wrong with you? This isn’t about Tracy.”

Charlie winced. “Don’t speak that name around me ever again.”

Conner wasn’t scared. “Tracy isn’t worth all this. What’s your problem?”

“You wouldn’t understand. *Your* father’s a piece of shit.”

Conner got it all at once. “Then why didn’t you go with him?”

Charlie held in a shout. “He told me to stay here and watch my mom bond with Adrian. I’m his spy.”

“And yet, you’re here, avoiding them both.”

Charlie tired of the game. “I’m pissed that she isn’t helping my dad.”

“It’s only been three weeks.”

“Twenty-one days is enough time for a nuclear submarine to circle the planet twice! Where is he? Is he alive? Does he need us?” Charlie’s anger faded into misery. “Did he go in hopes that he would die because Kendle’s gone?”

Conner sat next to Charlie. He tried to be careful with his words. “He and your mom are bonded. If he was in trouble, she would know.”

“But would she help him?”

“Of course.”

Conner’s faith eased some of Charlie’s pain. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re right. Your dad *is* good. It has to be hard to know he’s in danger and you can’t help.”

“I could...if I left.”

Conner stilled, concern increasing. “Don’t do that. You’ll screw their plans. You know they’ve made plans. It’s what they do.”

“It’s what my mom does.”

“Still. She won’t let him die. You know that even if you’re doubting everything else.”

Charlie’s anger rushed out again in a low mutter. “But how much will she let him be hurt before she steps in?”

Conner couldn’t answer that in any other way. “As much as she thinks he needs.”

“No one should have total power over everyone else’s life.”

“She’s the alpha. It’s the way things are.”

“It’s the way things *were*.” Charlie slid further into the chair. “I need to sleep. Go back to your Eagles and keep playing war.”

Conner left, but he wasn’t angry. Charlie was lashing out because he was miserable. His affair with Monica was a symptom of that. “I hope your mom steps in with you soon.”

Charlie tried not to cry. *I hope so, too. I’m about to make an ugly choice and only she can stop me from following through.*

Chapter Nine
Not On Your Life

1

“**I** can’t believe they made Grant the leader of all three rookie teams.” Jack let his training manual shut, worrying over his own position. If Grant moved up just one level, he might take Jack’s job. *I’ll always have to stay a level ahead of him now. So much for coasting my way through.*

Erin wasn’t worried about Grant. Second in command on a level one team wasn’t a sought-after slot. “That’s easier to believe than we’ve been on this island a month now.” She’d joined when the cruise ship came through the Cayman Islands, like Piper had. Both females were still a little stunned by their rescue and quick placements into the Eagles.

Level two Eagles picked up the conversation; training manuals shut across the room. Multiple teams were supposed to be studying to make their next promotion.

“It feels emptier with so many senior men gone.” Dace had been one of the last few pitiful refugees Safe Haven had allowed into the mountain. He’d watched the mostly peaceful camp almost get destroyed while he recovered from starvation. He hadn’t been sure any of them would make it out of

there alive, but Angela's Eagles had saved everyone with their magic and their training. He'd joined at their next open call for new rookies. "I'll feel better when they're home."

Stuart was also from the last group allowed in, but he wasn't as grateful for the rescue. He hated being normal. "There's still no word. They're probably dead."

Dace scowled. "Marc just went quiet to gain the element of surprise."

Stuart ignored the scolding tone and glare from his descendant team leader. "I can't believe he left her."

Piper agreed. "What does she see in him?"

Dace had a spark for Piper. He backed down reluctantly. "I don't know. Let's talk about something else."

Stuart joined back in eagerly. "Why? If she isn't happy with Marc—"

"She is." Kyle's firm voice ended the conversation. He inspected the lower-level men and women from the classroom door. He disapproved of them and their attitudes. "You're supposed to be studying the training manual right now. I'll make sure the boss knows you were slacking off to gossip about her."

Kyle left before the whining started. He remembered being new, but he didn't think he'd been so lazy. "A lot more was on the line then, I guess. If we slacked, we died. These newer people have it easy."

“I agree.”

Kyle stiffened as Rico came from an employee door carrying see-through bags of trash.

Rico sped up and got ahead so he wasn't forcing Kyle to spend time with him. He was fresh out of the quarantine zone and doing all the right stuff to become one of them.

Kyle disapproved of that, too.

He took the steps up to the next deck and went to Angela's office. The halls were quiet and waves of calm were flowing steadily, but Kyle could tell the difference. Angela's fake mood charms fooled most of the other Eagles, but not the senior men who'd trained her. They knew her feel. *She's not here.*

Kyle recognized the vibes an instant later. Jennifer manning the boss's post was a pleasant surprise.

He tapped on the door.

“Come in.”

Kyle saw their kids sleeping on the blanket-covered couch next to the desk. He scanned Jennifer and found her shining, like she used to do when she'd had Angela's full trust. “Who's with the boss?”

Jennifer finished the inventory sheet and slid it into the thick folder. “She took Ed.”

Kyle tried not to celebrate being able to push Angela into something. “And her lip curled a little, right?”

Jennifer snickered. “She’ll ditch him the first time he turns to scan their six.”

“She couldn’t care less about who he sent as a guard. She’s pissed that he gave up after she gifted him with that job. He won’t enjoy this shift.” Kyle assumed Ed would spend it slogging through the jungle in the dark. “How long are you covering her post?”

“It could be a while.” Jennifer looked at him with glowing brown eyes. “I’m not just manning her office. I’m the boss right now.”

Kyle beamed at her. “Terrific.” It was the first time Angela had left Jennifer in charge since the drama. “Is everything okay between you two now?”

Jennifer nodded. “I think so. She asked if I’m staying.”

Kyle stilled. “What did you say?”

Jennifer resumed sorting through the stack of papers that Angela hadn’t gotten to yet. “Yes. Then she grilled me on why and left me in charge.”

“Because of the kids, right? Safety.”

“She accepted that reason.”

Kyle caught the vague wording. “But that’s not all of it, right?”

Jennifer didn’t answer.

“I see.” Kyle refused to push her on anything. He wanted Jennifer to do whatever made her happy.

Jennifer checked her watch and sighed. “I’m sorry. I know you’ve put in a lot of hours today.”

Kyle grew serious. “What do you need, Boss?”

“Will you make sure she got where she was going? I don’t have her on my grid anymore and I can’t relax.”

“No worries.” Kyle went willingly, smothering a yawn. He was glad for a moment to hide his pleasure that the plan was working. They’d guessed Angela’s reaction to being around Adrian all day. Now it was up to Adrian to prove he was good for her. If she came home in a bad mood, they would scrap this plan and work on something else.

Jennifer sucked in a lungful of air and got back to work. She hated not telling Kyle how she really felt, but it was still better than lying. “And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss this.” Being in charge was the same thrill ride it had always been, but the break had made her appreciate it more. “Angela’s right. It’s addictive, even when it’s bad for you.”

Jennifer picked up the next evening report.

Kyle’s letter was near the bottom of the stack.

2

Angela walked up the path toward the dark town, breathing deeply of the crisp night air.

Behind her, Ed stomped through the vines and muttered under his breath.

Angela slowed, sensing the right moment about to happen.

A loud crash echoed from Cliff Road.

Ed rotated to do a scan of that area.

Angela slid into the dark trees and froze.

Ed turned back around and scowled. She'd passed him in infiltration months ago. If she didn't want to be found, she wouldn't be. "She ditched me." This was another punishment for resigning.

The guard unenthusiastically began to try tracking her in the shadows of the jungle.

Angela observed without moving. Ed was good. If she made a noise, he would hear it.

A few seconds later, Ed went out of her sight, following the decoy she'd imprinted in the dirt right before the distraction.

Angela swept the faint path she was about to take. She followed it up and found a red, white, and blue neon line waving at her. Adrian had created a flag out of glow necklaces from the ship's gift shop.

Angela quietly took the narrow path that wound down and around Cliff Road. She wasn't scared; she was excited to be breaking her normal routine.

Adrian looked up from his small fire with a smile of welcome that lit up her nerves.

Adrian had put a small table and two chairs near the fire. His shack was a dark shape twenty feet behind them. He hadn't thought she would be comfortable inside that small space. He'd also hung a small target and filched a sports pack with an airsoft pistol and pellets in case they needed something to break the tension.

Angela paused, suddenly not sure if she should be here. It didn't look good... *But I need this.*

"You're here for a gun lesson. There's no reason to feel guilty."

She blew out a breath. “Then I won’t.”

“Good. Start with your left hand, from ten feet.”

She rolled her eyes. “I could make that distance blindfolded.”

“Then do it with both hands and we’ll move on.”

She frowned.

Adrian knew. “Stay at ten feet until you bring the right back up to that level.”

She gave him the excuse she’d been using on Marc and the Eagles for months. “I don’t have the strength to pull the trigger with the right. I can’t even make a full fist anymore.”

“Are you using the tennis ball, like John told you to?”

Angela winced. “No. The reminder hurts me.”

“It’s supposed to. If we were happy all the time, we’d die out. Anger, fear, rebellion, sadness, hatred—they all keep us striving for the next goal, which keeps us alive.”

Angela began shooting, but she didn’t pop off rounds. She concentrated on being perfect while he watched.

Adrian studied her stance and movements for a few minutes. When she reloaded the 22 pellets, he began offering corrections. She hadn’t missed any of the left-handed shots, but it wasn’t smooth for her either. “You’re slouching on the right leg. And keep that wrist straighter.”

Angela obeyed and enjoyed only having one thing to concentrate on.

“Arm up.”

Angela adjusted and found it easier to hit the center of the target.

“Empty the mag now. Faster!”

Angela missed two of the shots completely. The pellets flew into the darkness.

The V popped out on her chin as she reloaded.

Adrian didn't need to see her face to know it was there. She was a receptive student who was easy to predict until she mastered a goal or level. *Then she outpaces us on it. She's amazing.*

Angela switched to her right hand with bitter longing. She missed being a steady gunner. In action moments, it slowed her because she couldn't depend on that skill anymore.

“I need to see it to help you.”

Angela stopped stalling. She lifted the gun and fired. Her hand refused to clench tight enough. The gun slid, almost falling. The pellet flew into the air and came down somewhere in the trees.

Angela used her other hand to grab the gun and shove it back into place.

“That's not a strength issue, Angie. It's nerve damage. You need to use the tennis ball all day long for a month and hope it helps. Now keep trying, even if you have to use both hands.”

“One-handed gun control is sloppy anyway.”

“Agreed, but it is needed in this new world. You won't always have two free hands.”

She thought of several moments where that had already been true. “I'll start working on it.”

“Now.”

Angela lifted the gun.

Adrian observed in silence this time, letting her push herself. That hand wasn't obeying anything she tried, however. He'd seen soldiers lose a slot over injuries like hers. A guard wasn't dependable if they couldn't pull a trigger when it mattered.

“I have magic.”

He frowned. “You won't always, though. The drugs stop you. An enforcer might be able to slow you. Spells and charms still take effect. You need that gun hand.”

Angela let that sink into her accomplishment-minded mind.

She worked on it for the next twenty minutes without stopping. Her left hand stayed steady; her right hand refused to control the gun.

She finally put it down near the target, arm aching.

Angela scanned her mentor openly, seeing the dangerous body and ruthless attention to detail that had always drawn her. Even lounging in a folding chair, Adrian was someone to be wary of.

His gear caught her eye next. Adrian was wearing a radio that was tuned to the emergency Eagle channel, a belt with extra mags for her gun as well as his own, and several other items they'd decided on right after he was shot and she assumed command. It made the Eagles feel better to know her guards could call for help in multiple ways if things went crazy.

When Adrian waved at the empty chair to his right, she went to it.

Adrian pointed to a mug on the table. “Finish that or I won’t agree to anything you’re about to ask for.”

Angela reluctantly opened the mug and sniffed the soup.

“I used to make it for Conner’s mom. Her stomach was always upset.”

Angela took a sip and frowned. Then she got the flavor burst and swallowed it. “That’s good.”

“I’ll make sure your cooks get the recipe.”

Angela kept sipping, finally feeling hungry.

Adrian was thrilled when she finished all of it without any protests or tricks.

Angela swept the darkness that led to an ocean illuminated by bright moonlight. With her stomach settling nicely, her mind went to Marc. *He’s out there somewhere, without me. I hate this.*

“Have you heard anything yet?”

Angela shook her head. “We can’t risk the UN hearing.”

Adrian frowned again. “It’s been weeks.”

“Tell me something I don’t know!”

“Have you tried a dream walk?”

“No.”

“Good.” Adrian quickly continued. “I can help again, if you’d like to look ahead.”

“Not yet.” Angela wanted to, but it was too soon.

“Okay.”

Angela stared at the flames, mind threatening to ruin her mood.

“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.”

Adrian reached under his chair and brought out 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?”

“Yes. 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 covering our training sessions on the beach. Others will see it and join.”

He swallowed his joy. “I thought you’d given up on getting camp members to become Eagles.”

She sighed. “I want the new people to do better. 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.”

“Do you have a group of rookies ready for an evaluation?”

Angela rolled her eyes. “I have twenty restless souls who need the works, from minds to feet. That may drop to fifteen, depending on their current shifts.”

Adrian understood she wanted some of them cut right away. Feet meant walk them out. He was good at that. Small demonstrations of what they were in for was usually enough to discourage weaker people from showing up for another lesson. “Whatever you need.”

She changed topics abruptly. “I need to know what went wrong with the founding documents. Did we change it too much over the years? Did we forget to change it enough? Did we overlook the papers and focus too much on the Constitution? What went wrong?”

Adrian settled back with his beer and enjoyed being needed. “I think it was the growth rate. In the 1700s, the population of England was only something like 13 million. I don’t think they imagined that just 200 years would produce a boom of our magnitude.”

“That doesn’t cover all of it.”

“No. I also believe they were shortsighted about how determined our enemies really are.”

“We had a republic, and we couldn’t keep it.”

Adrian didn’t completely agree. “Franklin was right, but we haven’t lost it yet. Safe Haven is proof of that.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Adrian knew that was a warning sign. He waited, hoping she would volunteer her thoughts instead of making him dig for it or play a game to earn the knowledge.

Angela made a face. “You’re ruining all the fun for me.”

“No, I’m avoiding the bush beating you’re doing because you know I won’t like a change you’re about to make to my master plan.”

Angela stared at him. *Adrian is so smart. It’s cruel of fate to put us together and never let us fully connect.*

Adrian dropped his eyes to the ground. He wanted to be humble, but he wasn’t capable of it. He rubbed it in instead. “You spent the day testing the theory that the island is safe so you can leave. You’re letting Kyle and Jennifer handle plans they think they came up with to give them practice for real leadership. You’re not bonding with the pregnancy out of terror that it won’t survive. And you’re going to change America from a republic to...?”

“A hybrid.” She stared. He was everything Marc wasn’t and vice versa. The men were truly two sides of an incredibly valuable coin.

His brow furrowed. “How will that work?”

“You’re a smart guy. You tell me.”

He smiled arrogantly. “Because you don’t know or because it arouses you to be around a man who can keep up with you most of the time?”

“Both, and more. Please?” Angela didn’t tell him that anyone who could keep up with her mind might be able to excite her. Her byzan brain was still learning, planning, expanding. Now that most of the

fighting was done, it had kicked into overdrive as a buffer against boredom.

Adrian dug into that vision of the future. “The leaders can’t be rich, elites, foreigners, religious, political, or anything else that would come before the welfare of the entire country. We can’t be divided anymore.”

“Yes. And it must be based on freedom. No forcing anyone to do anything, and I don’t care if that’s paying taxes or jury duty. I want true freedom.” Angela leaned forward, voice becoming intense. “How do I give us that?”

Adrian’s eyes turned a smoky, roiling blue that stared through her. “Mix them all. Democracy, monarchy, socialism, capitalism, authoritarian, republic, dictatorship—mix it all. Pull the parts that work best for the citizens and ban the rest so it can never restart the misery we’ve all survived.”

Angela waited for him to come out of the daze. Having another answer verified let her move on to the next issue. “Kyle gave me a letter.”

Adrian yawned. “Last Will?”

“How did you know? And shouldn’t you be upset?”

“All senior Eagles write one at some point. They deliver it to the boss if they think the end is near.”

“I haven’t seen anything in the few peeks I’ve taken of the future.”

“Like with Darren?”

“Yes.” Angela shuddered. “But not in a violent way. There wasn’t any anger, only bitterness, like

if he had a medical issue..." Angela's stomach dropped. "Maybe he's sick."

Adrian pulled the text from her mind. "It sounds more like regret, Angie. He's not stable."

"He's cracking?"

They both stared.

Adrian recovered first. "Is Kyle byzan?"

"I'll find out, but I'd say yes. He's taken out hundreds of bad souls." She slapped the chair. "He's not sick or suicidal. He's about to leave so his cracks don't endanger his family."

Adrian nodded. "That sounds right. Has he put any plans into motion that you know of?"

"He's pushing Morgan and Jennifer together."

"So she'll be covered when he leaves."

"He's not leaving. We'll help him."

"Doesn't he already know the kids can use a spell to keep him from cracking?"

Angela's mind snapped pieces into place faster than his did this time. "Yes, but this makes more sense. He considers himself evil because of his purpose in life. Now he can leave her with a good man and a valid excuse; he'll go kill more bad souls without restraint. He misses it."

"We all do." Adrian didn't offer her his bottle. He did study her over it, seeing what Kenn had told him about before he left. "I thought the glowy thing 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. “I didn’t lie earlier.”

Adrian stared in surprise as she began to glow for real. Her skin was translucent. He could actually see the blood rushing through her veins. “You stayed up there too long.”

Angela locked it down again so the guard tracking her didn’t see it. Ed had figured out she tricked him with the decoy print 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. “You know exactly what it is. You just don’t want to admit it because you still 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. Angels aren’t like we read about in Sunday school, Angie. *None* of them were good.”

Angela tried not to cry; she stared at the fire. “I think I want to be a normal again, without having my demon ripped out or being locked away.”

Adrian scowled. “No. I won’t ever allow that.”

Angela smiled in triumph, eyes glittering as she looked up. “Thank you.”

Adrian's stomach bottomed out. "You scheming little bitch."

Angela smiled wider.

Adrian glowered. "That's what this entire day was about. You didn't need my help with anything. You aren't breaking from being alone. You were pushing me, for proof."

Angela settled back 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 shack. "Do another half hour of practice before you go back."

Angela stayed in the chair, mind flying with plans she hadn't explored before because they weren't possible. "This might change everything."

3

Adrian saw Ed as he stepped onto the rock platform that housed his shack. He whistled lowly. "Follow the light from my fire."

Ed went by him, grateful.

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 that 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. Thick fumes hit the air as he spoke. “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?”

Morgan drained the glass. “The opposite, actually. The Eagles want you back, in most of the duties you performed before.”

“But?” Adrian knew there was one.

“As soon as Marc comes home, you have to drop out of sight again.”

Adrian frowned at the medic instead of telling him Angela had 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 cup on the little table. “When we go home, *you* have to lead us.”

Adrian was surprised again. “That’s Marc’s job.”

“Not anymore.” Morgan stood up. He slid by Adrian to reach the hatch and open it. “We don’t trust him. He’ll never guard 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 as he came around the side of the shack. Coming here and delivering that ultimatum hadn't been easy. No one wanted the duty, so the senior men had accepted 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.”

The two men slid into the rocky shadows and watched over Angela as she began shooting at the target again. When she kept working on her bad hand, excitement and dread mixed in their stomachs. To them, it meant more trouble was coming.

Ed realized Angela was double covered; he wasn't needed. He headed for the ship, trying not to be hurt. *This is how I wanted it. I made the choice. Now I have to live with it.*

A familiar wave of tension flooded Kyle. He tried not to get annoyed. *She's fine, Jenny. Doing some target practice and enjoying half an hour alone.*

Jennifer's stunned pain slapped him in thick waves. *Why am I reading your Will?!*

Morgan swung toward Kyle in the same breathless terror. “What did she say?”

Kyle was trapped. The lie he’d rehearsed fell to ashes in his mind. “I’m covering the future...and my own happiness. Being an Eagle isn’t enough for me now that I’ve evolved.”

Morgan sucked in air. “You’re byzan.”

Jennifer’s misery swarmed both men as Kyle nodded. His mind opened to let them see his fear.

Angela was forgotten as the trio mentally connected and began sorting through Kyle’s mental state. Jennifer and Morgan spotted the first crack and flinched together.

Adrian came to the entrance of his shack and resumed duty over Angela as she continued to work on her own improvement. He made another connection while she ignored the newest drama. *She did that on purpose. Why?*

Angela switched hands and kept working. Adrian was right. In this new world, firearms were still the law of any land. She refused to think of the answer to his mental query. She was curious how long it would take him to figure it out on his own.

Adrian scanned the quiet jungle and the peaceful ship in the bay. He could almost see the boredom rising from every soul. *She really is setting things up so she can leave. And some of these people are going with her. That’s why she’s winding them up.*

Angela turned to look at him. *I'm also teaching them to solve their own problems so they won't need me as much anymore.*

Adrian's face darkened. "For Marc."

"For my own happiness. Being just Safe Haven's leader isn't enough for me anymore, either. Your army wasn't created to sit on this island and let the rest of the world rot while we get fat and lazy. We're all making our choices on the future now."

"That's dangerous considering that we still need to go back and fight."

"Says who? The Messenger? Some ancient guide that no longer has control over us?" Angela sat the gun on top of the kit and marched onto the dark path. "I'm the boss down here. I'll do as I please. If someone has an issue with that, they'll have to get over it or start another war, with me."

Adrian was suddenly scared that he knew what she was planning for all of them.

Drawn by the new tension, Kyle and Morgan also stared, but not with dismay like Adrian was doing. What Angela was suggesting had crossed their minds many times and been shoved out so they weren't tempted to go against her. Knowing she wanted them in control of the normals was a relief.

The men followed her toward the ship and kept track of their audience. They needed Adrian's help for a peaceful transfer of power to the descendants.

Adrian trailed the group to make sure they got back to the ship. He also ran scenarios in his mind

to determine where this might lead if he just stayed out of her way.

Adrian saw the outcome and felt a chunk of his reluctance break off and fall to the ground. “I expected worse.”

Angela had also been keeping track of his reaction and opinions. “So did I. Now you know why I’m exploring that possible future.”

“It’s still wrong.”

“Yes, but what is it you were always telling us?”

Adrian sighed. “Right and wrong no longer matter. Only survival does and there are no rules to that.”

“Exactly.”

Adrian rubbed his marked arm unconsciously. “I’m not saying yes.”

“Think it through. There’s still time for that.”

“But?”

Angela increased her pace down the steep road to give her body another short workout. “Don’t take too much time or we’ll do it without you. We’ve all pretty much made up our minds. We’re not dying for them. We’re going to rule them. That’s how it should have been all along.”

Adrian stopped on the beach, mind a mess as right and wrong fought for space.

Angela kept walking.

Kyle stayed next to Angela as she went across the pontoon bridge. “Should I tell Jennifer you’re back in charge?” He was ready to help get the kids to their cabin and crash. He was exhausted.

“No.”

Kyle frowned. “You don’t need to do rounds again. Jennifer covered it.”

“I’m not. I’m heading to the safest place on the ship. I’ll stay there until the next shift change.”

Kyle followed her up the ladder and then down the ramp, studying her mood and thoughts.

Angela yawned widely. She went straight to her office and tapped lightly.

Jennifer glanced up with a smile. “I’d be honored if you slept here.”

Angela went to the empty couch across from the kids and stretched out. She was sleeping hard a few minutes later.

Jennifer stared at Kyle, waiting for him to tell her what was going through his mind.

Morgan waited in the hall, also waiting while providing guard duty over both women.

Kyle didn’t want to do this right now. “I’m sorry.”

Jennifer melted. “It’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

Kyle shook his head as he left. “No, we won’t. I’m not sealing my cracks, Jenny. I’m keeping them.”

“Why?”

“Because my happiness matters, too. When I leave, Morgan will keep you safe.”

All of the good feelings Jennifer had been developing for Morgan turned to ashes. A dangerous coldness took their place.

Chapter Ten
Push Back

1

“**G**ood morning, Safe Haven! Shift change is coming up fast and breakfast is almost ready. It’s time to rise and shine. Good morning, all you wonderful people. Now get your asses out of bed!”

Molly groaned at the loud radio call. “I thought I switched that off.”

Monica leered. “No worries. You were busy turning me on.”

Molly giggled. “Last night was hot.”

“So are you.” Monica wrapped her arms around Molly’s naked body. “Good morning, beautiful.”

The women kissed briefly.

Molly remembered the last thought she’d had before falling asleep. “I haven’t seen much of you recently.” She smiled hesitantly. “We’re okay, right?”

Monica nodded and pulled away. “Just busy earning points.”

“Is it working?”

“I think so. I have duty over the boss today.”

“That’s great!” Molly admired Monica’s bare bottom as she rose from the bed.

Monica was careful not to touch any of the canvases or easels so she didn't get paint on her clothes. The warm cabin was crammed with art projects that Molly worked on during downtime. Monica had quickly learned most of them were still in progress. *I hate the smell of paint.*

“You know, I've been thinking a lot about us.”

“Yeah?” Monica retrieved her clothes from the chair.

Molly caught the lack of enthusiasm, but she pushed ahead anyway. “We're really good together...and maybe we should talk about the future.”

“That makes sense.” Monica hurried toward the bathroom. “But hold that thought, huh? I can't be late.”

Molly smiled again. “Of course. Have a great day.”

“Same to you, babe.” Monica shut the door.

Molly shut her eyes and let the after-sex soreness carry her back into slumber.

Monica breathed a quiet sigh of relief as she dressed and fixed her hair. The bathroom was cluttered with items that belonged to both of them. Monica knew she should help out and clean it, but she was tired of working. She wanted to play.

Monica slipped out of the cabin a few minutes later. She pulled the door shut gently, mind already moving on to the next fun moment. Charlie was just waking up. She wanted to give him a mood boost before he had to start his own day of labor.

“Don’t you feel guilty at all?”

Monica jumped and spun, hand going to her gun belt.

Conner’s eyes narrowed. “How much longer do you think people will cover for you?”

Monica was glad the temporary guards on this hall, Ian and Allison, weren’t close enough to hear him. The passages weren’t empty, but traffic was light with groggy people minding their own business. The smell of meat cooking was just starting to pull people from their beds. Great food was always a draw now.

“Well?”

Monica scowled at the cute young man wearing his workout clothes. “Don’t be a prude.” She wanted a few minutes with her new boyfriend and she was going to take it.

“Have it your way, then.” Conner knocked on Molly’s cabin.

Monica paled. “What are you doing?”

Conner admired Monica’s pretty face, but her attitude would have come between them even if he wasn’t hooked on Candy. “Telling her, of course.”

Monica shoved him. “Don’t do that!”

The door opened. Molly peered between them sleepily. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Conner tripped.”

Conner went around Monica. “Boss wants to know if you can cover sentry duty over Jennifer during the evening meal?”

Molly nodded. Her brow creased. “Why didn’t you want him to tell me that?”

Monica delivered a caring tone. “You need your sleep. You work hard.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be there.” Molly shut the door and crawled happily back into the musky bed.

Monica glowered at Conner. “Not funny!”

Conner shrugged as he went down the hall. “I thought it was. And don’t ever touch me again or I’ll put you on the floor. I don’t care that you’re a woman and an Eagle. Keep your hands to yourself.” He raked her in contempt over his shoulder. “Though I doubt you’ll be an Eagle much longer. As soon as Angela figures this out, you’re gone.”

Monica opened her mouth to argue.

Conner jogged up the steps, leaving her with the option of shouting or following.

She chose to let it go. “I’m a grown woman. I’ll do what I want.”

Monica strolled to the steps. She had no doubt it would all blow apart at some point. “And I don’t care. This is the apocalypse. There are no rules.”

Conner didn’t send a nasty thought in response, but he wanted to. If not for Charlie being his best friend, Conner would have already told both Molly and Angela what was going on.

“Are you okay?” Jonny was also going to the workout zone to do his morning routine. He fell in with the teen. “You seem pissed.”

Conner shrugged. “Some people are still stupid. The war couldn’t change it.”

“Very true.” Jonny thought of his obsession with Grant. Now that their captain had begun proving himself as an Eagle, Jonny wanted him even more. “I’d like to help, but I think I’m infected, too.”

Conner got serious. “Do you think it’s catching? We might have another outbreak.”

“Could be.” Jonny laughed as they entered the main training area.

Conner didn’t ask again, but it lingered in his mind. *We know you can inherit low and high-IQ genes. Maybe you can spread them, too.*

Jonny and Conner joined the higher-level men and women on the treadmills.

Everyone in the training room was wearing workout sweats except Kyle and the rookies. They were in full Eagle gear to prep for their coming training and duty shifts. Conner felt odd not being on that side of the room, but he was happy not to be with the new people or the lower-level Eagles. He’d been taken into Daryl’s team and was thrilled to be there.

Jonny smirked at the bruised rookies gathering for a final lecture before being sent out with the boss today. It was their last chance to prove they could learn to do the job; no one thought they would succeed. Out of all the new people, only Rico seemed to care, but he was still mistrusted as much as the others. New people weren’t welcome in Safe

Haven. Jonny was glad he'd gotten in before things had become ugly.

The bruised rookies glared back, but they didn't pick a fight. Being beaten by a child was humiliating. They had no defense.

"Pay attention!" Kyle was fed up with the new people, like everyone else. "If you screw this up, you're out of here!"

The rookies stared at him with glassy glares and closed ears.

Kyle sighed. "Get to the beach and do what your new trainer says. If you get switched, you'll be out of here before dawn." Kyle stomped from the room.

The rookies took the other exit.

Conner and Jonny exchanged looks and hoped the expulsion didn't get violent. They didn't want to shoot the new people down in cold blood.

Kyle marched up the steps, shaking his head. *Guns won't be used. They make too much noise.*

2

"Good morning. Nice day." Adrian greeted everyone as he came down the hill to the beach, even those who glared at him. "Isn't nature a lovely sound?"

He also stayed ready to duck any fists. He wasn't in the mood to take another hit.

Adrian went toward Neil, who had a clipboard and point over the beach. The trooper was

overseeing multiple projects while also protecting the boss until she left this zone.

Adrian scanned Angela, aware of her stiff shoulders and lightly tapping foot. She'd felt him before he got here.

Their bond lit up, but Adrian refused to be distracted. He lifted his sunglasses and began evaluating the fifteen bored, overconfident men and women scattered around a corner of the beach.

The rookies tossed rocks at each other or kicked the sand, chattering and joking while ignoring everything else. Adrian wasn't impressed with any of them on sight. He also welcomed the challenge of turning some of them into Eagles. "Willing, rehabs, or tests of loyalty?"

Neil examined his sheet instead of throwing an insult like he wanted to. "A mix of all three, along with people who need to be distracted, people who hope to be distracted, and rage control. I stuck number tags on them because I can't remember their names yet." Neil didn't see the need for it considering they weren't going to stay.

Adrian picked out a few who had the feel of rookies. "Numbers 8, 6, and 12 go last. We'll start with the worst and work our way up."

Neil blew his whistle.

The group joined him near the edge of the water. The bruised rookies in the rear stared at the ground so they didn't draw Neil's attention. They all assumed he'd taught Amy to be vicious; if they

couldn't beat her, there was no way they could handle him.

Neil hoped they did try again. *I can use the outlet.* "This is Adrian Mitchel. Do what he says and you might be one of us someday."

Neil didn't say many of them would be permanently removed if they failed, but he was eager for that call to come down. The new people weren't even trying to fit in. They reminded him of the mountain hell.

Neil glanced over to verify the boss was okay.

Angela signed the daily schedule sheet and slid it into her thick binder under the correct tab. She was looking forward to having a computer to keep track of everything she wanted. Kenn would be assigned to build it after the mission team returned.

Misery shoved against her chest. Desperate to keep it locked, she allowed herself to glance at Adrian.

Adrian felt her regard. He smiled at the cute brunette rookie in front of him.

The woman flushed and pushed her large chest out in an open invitation. She hadn't been here long, but she knew who he was. "I'm Hannah. I'm free later."

Adrian chuckled and subtly glanced toward the desk.

Angela was gone. He spotted her walking toward the jungle path.

The female in front of Adrian decided he hadn't taken the hint. She slid into his personal space and locked their lips.

"Hussy!" Sadie flew across the beach toward them.

Angela stopped to enjoy the show, smirking.

Sadie grabbed Adrian by his hair and began dragging him toward the hill. She didn't even look at the surprised brunette recoiling to get out of the way. "No flirting!"

Neil tried to speak, but he was laughing too hard.

Hannah sighed. "The best ones are always taken."

Neil's anger returned. He refused to take pity on her because of the name curse. They also had another Megan. Neil found it cruel to know both females were doomed to die, but that didn't change how he treated them. "Adrian isn't the best. He's a dangerous traitor."

"If you say so." Hannah sniggered with everyone else as Adrian slipped free and ran toward the Eagles for help.

Sadie resumed gathering fallen wood, content that she'd made her point.

Sadie was in clean clothes, with clean hair and a nasty expression on her sunburnt face. Adrian had insisted she clean up before coming down here. She'd consented because she liked shower sex. Adrian didn't. It was uncomfortable on his older body, but there was no way he would admit that.

Angela walked into the jungle. A smile curved her lips; the tension line faded from her forehead. Warm wind rattled leaves from the trees that were starting to change color. Angela swiped them tolerantly from her hair. She hadn't known they only went to green. She'd assumed all plants followed the same color patterns, but it was clear that tropical climates didn't go barren for months like in their homeland.

Adrian rejoined Neil, not hiding his satisfaction. Neil stared at him.

"What?"

"I know what you did."

Adrian tried to deflect. "You'll have to be more specific."

Neil snickered against his will. Adrian had spotted Angela's need to be distracted and covered it at his own expense. "Keep up the good work."

Adrian flashed a charming smile as Morgan joined them. "That is the plan."

Neil refused to allow the bond Adrian was trying to rebuild. "I don't trust you."

Adrian met his eyes. "What's the worst that could happen? *He* left her. There's nothing I can do to match that."

Morgan and Neil wanted to defend Marc, but they didn't. When he returned, even if his mission was a success, things wouldn't be good here for the wolfman.

Adrian went toward the trainees, flashing a hard glare. “Who’s my new sniper? That slot will eventually be on duty over the boss.”

Hands went up; Eagles turned toward him in longing for the job.

Morgan sighed. “It’s too bad we can’t put them togeth—”

Neil walked away. He understood, and even concurred for the most part, but he refused to discuss replacing Marc in any way. Yet. *He surprised me with this one. I assume it felt as bad to him when he found out I’m not really a boy scout either.*

Morgan hadn’t expected Neil to accept the idea right away. He was Marc’s closest ally, despite their physical altercations. *He’ll be pissed when he finds out Kyle and I officially put that into motion last night.*

Adrian stopped, scowling deeply. “No guard on the boss?”

Morgan kept walking. “She insisted. I can take the rookies back to the ship if you want to cover it.”

Adrian felt the lie, but Angela had vanished and the group of rookies were now watching him like hawks. He did what no one expected. “Follow me.” Adrian marched after Angela; he glared at every senior man and woman around them as he went by.

Those Eagles lifted chins or made rude gestures at his annoyance.

Camp members observed in confusion, not sure what was happening.

Morgan paused by the pontoon bridge. He didn't glance back. He examined Wade's face instead. The lessons from the sex class were already settling in. Wade had told them not to be caught studying the women for homework this time and Morgan was doing it automatically.

Wade stared in surprise from the top front deck. Guards all over the ship and beach were doing the same. *We didn't count on that.*

Morgan nodded, swallowing his surprised dismay. He slowly came out of the disappointment. *She sent the rookies back yesterday. It won't matter that they have a group of people around.*

Zack walked by Morgan to reach the bridge. *It might even help. We know they both thrive under pressure. That many people monitoring their every move and expression is definitely pressure.*

Morgan followed Zack. "I didn't know you were helping us."

Zack didn't stop to chat. "I keep my loyalties locked away so it doesn't interfere with my job."

Morgan knew that was true. "So why speak out now?"

Zack jerked a hand toward the ocean. "He fuckin' left her!"

Morgan decided it was a good moment to play devil's advocate in case he was wrong—in case they were all wrong. "Stopping the reset is a big deal."

Zack had already told himself that and gotten the answer that flew out of his mouth. "Yeah. Is he gonna leave her every time to handle that himself?"

‘Cause people are always going to have kids. If that’s all someone needs, we’ll spend forever trying to stop it.”

Morgan wasn’t sure. “We all have a different image of what that will be like. Until it happens, we should try to fight back.”

“Those people weren’t like us.” Zack stopped at the ladder. “Did you hear the shit they’ve done to their own country? They didn’t deserve our help.”

Morgan relied on the excuse the Eagles were giving camp members who were unhappy about that. “We did it for the future, so we don’t have to fight the UN when we go home.”

Zack snorted. “I’ve already heard the threat you used on Adrian. I’m not one of the herd. I know we’re not going back.”

Morgan did look toward the island now. Adrian and the rookies were out of sight. “I have faith that Adrian will get through to her.”

Zack nodded. He started climbing the ladder. “So do I. That’s why I helped you.”

Morgan waited for Zack to get ahead. Then he used just his arms to pull himself up the ladder. It was much harder than Marc made it seem.

Wade retreated from the deck rail to let the men through. “Stanley’s searching for you.”

Morgan swung his upper body onto the deck and rolled, stopping in a perfect training crouch.

Zack laughed. “Showoff.”

Morgan nodded, standing. “I try.”

Footsteps hurried toward them.

Morgan saw Stanley's face and knew what he wanted.

Zack kept going. "Good luck."

Morgan sighed. "Tell the boss this time, Stanley. Pam needs help that I can't give her."

Stanley sucked in air. He'd run all the way here. "She's in critical condition. She might not make it."

Morgan stopped. "What?"

Stanley gasped in more oxygen. "She drank too much. Terry brought her back."

Morgan let Stanley pull him toward the ramp as shame washed over him.

Then he stopped, pulling free from Stanley's sweaty grip. "No."

Stanley frowned. "You have to talk to her!"

"I've talked to her a lot. She only wants one thing and I can't do it. She has to get through this on her own, and then move on."

"That's not right."

"It's harsh, but if she wakes and sees me there, she'll fight for another chance when there isn't one. She needs to fight for herself." Morgan went toward the minibar on the rear deck, following Zack.

Stanley was torn. He looked between the rear deck and the ramp. The rear deck was set up for any off-duty Eagle to have private entertainment under the sun. It was invitation-only for everyone else.

Zack whistled. "Here, boy!"

Stanley burst out laughing as he realized Zack meant him. He hurried after them, barking loudly

like any other rookie who'd been picked for special time with senior Eagles.

3

Adrian barked at the rookies the entire trek through the jungle.

“Get ahead of her, damn it! She’s not even running and she’s pregnant! Catch up!”

The rookies didn’t want to be here doing this. All of them had been forced into the UN fighting force and they felt like the same thing was happening here.

It was, but only because they’d been brainwashed into bad morals and ethics while with the UN. Without change, they weren’t able to have peace—they could only have survivors. Adrian believed in that, but he did dislike having to treat them this way. He just didn’t know what else would work.

Angela enjoyed the sunlight beaming down on her skin. Tanks tops and jeans were her favorite clothes anyway, but they were also perfect for most of her manual labor. She let the sweat roll down her arms and spine and kept going. By the time she reached the town, she was soaked and so was everyone in her escort. They emerged from the jungle and drew immediate attention from those in town.

Camp members scanned her and began bracing for trouble.

Eagles moved closer to help if she needed it.

People stocking the restaurant came to the door or windows to find out what was happening.

Angela grinned, but she didn't have the air to talk. She gave an exaggerated gasp and a wider grin.

Camp members relaxed as they understood she was getting a workout.

Eagles glared. She wasn't supposed to be working out so hard that she was pale except for bright red cheeks. They glowered at Adrian next for allowing it.

Adrian didn't notice. He was still barking at the rookies to get them in place around her.

Angela winced at a stomach cramp. Then she pushed herself forward.

Adrian also missed that. There was only so much he could see while wrangling ducks who refused to maintain a row. He knew he'd missed something, though. He felt it.

"Enough!" Adrian followed her with angry steps. "Get rid of them all."

The rookies protested, but Adrian ignored them. "They've had the basic training. They know what to do; they won't because they're too damn lazy!"

"Screw you, old man!"

"Yeah! You can't do it, either. Listen to you wheeze!"

"We're safe here now. Why does she need a guard at all?"

Adrian looked at Angela.

Angela shrugged. “I believe I said don’t hold back.”

“Thank you.” Adrian spun and tossed out fast pain spells that staggered the rookies and sent quiet stillness through their witnesses.

Adrian didn’t prolong it. “You have no respect for her or for yourselves. This isn’t the UN. We do things differently here and you can’t hang.”

“We can hang in anything you do!”

“Challenge accepted.” Adrian advanced. “Kai, level one!”

Most of the rookies lined up and got in their stances. Sloppy and angry, they were destined to bleed.

Angela leaned against the shaded side of the restaurant to observe and get her breath back. This matchup would be exactly like these UN refugees were used to—short and vicious. She knew who would be standing when it was over, but she doubted this would help him earn respect from the new people. They wanted the fame and glory without the work or the scars. They weren’t going to become members of Safe Haven. Letting Adrian try whatever he wanted was a desperate attempt to change their fates.

Angela studied Adrian as he ducked and punched, took an ugly hit to the ribs and fell to the dirt. His fast roll and lunge brought down three rookies and then he was back on his feet, sweeping and swinging like a demon. *Humans are wired for violence. Everything we do can turn violent in an*

instant. Is that a survival defense? Is it so we can evolve into peaceful beings in the future? What drives the violence? If I knew, then maybe I could change the reason it's needed.

Monica came from the jungle in a fast jog. Her time with Charlie had gone well, but she was running late. She came over to stand by Angela, scanning the area intently. "Sorry, Boss. Those runs are still hitting me."

Angela was distracted by the smell coming from Monica's skin. She rotated toward the woman with bright red orbs.

Monica froze. She refused to think about anything but how scared she was. *Now I feel alive!*

Angela pulled in the rage. "Switch!"

Trent tugged Monica from her frozen stance and took her place. "Go cover the other side of the restaurant."

Monica went quickly, but she didn't run. *Never run from a wild animal.*

Angela's rage simmered.

Trent wasn't sure what Monica had done, but he knew what came next. "Punishment or removal?"

Angela focused on the woman until she was out of sight. When she finally spoke, it was low and full of sly glee. "Neither. She needs a truth drop."

"What did she do?"

"It's more like *who* did she do. Ask around. Find out who all knows and didn't tell me."

Trent added it to his notebook. "Soon, I assume?"

“During the meal would be interesting. It might trigger a truth wave.”

“Well, we always need that, don’t we, Boss?”

“Yes.” Angela calmed. “Jennifer could use another sentry, but wait until this lesson’s over.”

Trent nodded. Adrian had already subdued most of the rookies and was about to finish two more who were falling for his wounded act.

Thud-thud!

Angela shook her head at a bleeding rookie near her feet. “Eagles don’t cheat unless it’s needed to complete a run.”

Rico nodded, lowering his foot. He’d been about to trip Adrian while his back was turned. “Honor?”

“Yes. It allows us to accomplish amazing things that don’t leave a dirty taste in your mouth or a stain on your soul.”

Trent turned away to prevent the rookies from seeing his expression. Angela’s lie was one they’d heard from Adrian during their own training, but it wasn’t true in any way. *This job always leaves a stain or a scar. If it doesn’t, we’re not doing it right.*

Tension flooded Angela’s nerve endings. Static electricity went over her sweaty skin and lifted the damp hair. Her stomach churned.

Leaves and debris fell from the trees and the roofs of the building around them. Animals went still and silent. The ground rattled, stopping the fight.

Angela lifted her shield and stepped toward the camp people so they could take shelter with her. “Stay close!”

Many of them ran toward her in relief. A few fled into the restaurant rather than have contact with magic.

The rookies scrambled to their feet.

Adrian pointed at the closest building. “Into the barn!” Theo’s rebuild was sturdy.

Angela sucked in air as time slowed. The sky above them darkened. The ground stilled in tiny increments as dirt shifted all around the island.

The hive lit up with terrified alerts.

It’s happening!

Time just slowed!

Fight it! Angela powered over the panic. *Get those shields up! Push back!*

Adrian was aroused and annoyed as he watched her try to stop time. *Why does she want to give this up?!*

Angela strained, strength going down as the time stream shoved against her in thick ripples that kept getting stronger.

Adrian directed the camp people into the barn or restaurant with slowed motions and steps, but his eyes stayed on Angela.

Lightning flashed. It struck a tree by the old post office. Wooden slivers blasted across the town in slow motion.

Half the rookies took off running for the ship.

Rico stripped his jacket and tossed it toward Adrian. "Cover her!"

The jacket seemed to float into Adrian's hand. Rain and hail fell from the sky in real-time, slamming into the ground and people.

Eagles grabbed the slowed camp members and dragged them into the restaurant. A few of the camp members helped, ducking and dodging the hail and flying debris to assist their fellowman.

Adrian checked for holes opening in the ground, thrown back to the beginning of their journey. Nature had swallowed parts of his camp then and taken the life of two of his female friends. A shudder went over his spine.

Angela clasped his wrist. "Easy."

Adrian was grateful for her comfort. He was also ashamed of his weaknesses.

"We're all damaged. There's no shame in that." Angela strained, shield flickering as she pushed it outward. Her mind expanded; a new door blinked to life in her brain.

Angela didn't explore the new gift. She was no longer eager to play with power. *It's too easy to be tempted.*

Angela's shield failed. It shrank around her and vanished. Hail struck her, knocking her to the ground.

Adrian fell over her an instant later. He padded her stomach with Rico's jacket as he brought up his own shield. He pushed it out like she'd been doing.

Angela recovered and added her strength to his.

Time slowly inched forward... It slammed back against them in brutal power. Both of them cried out. Their shields collapsed and refused to come back up.

Adrian held onto Angela and waited for the horror of a reset.

Boom!

The ground vibrated from the recoil as time snapped back into normal motion. The weather settled quickly, but the ground rumbled unhappily for a long minute.

On the ship, guards called a shocked warning.
“Look!”

The wave thundering by their island was taller than the cruise ship. Huge ripples spread out on either side of it, forming two smaller swells that would eventually be consumed by the middle monster.

Water sprayed as it zoomed by, soaking the side of the cliff and barely missing the bay. There was nothing they could do but hope it broke apart by the time it reached land.

In the town, Adrian pressed a kiss to Angela’s cheek, then slowly let go of her. “If you were normal, you might have missed this.”

Angela took his hand up. “It wasn’t us, though, right?”

Adrian stayed close and scanned to see if anyone needed help. “No. It felt like the power level went to zero in one hit.”

Angela let him wipe dirt from her arm and hip. “What would cause that? Our energy levels don’t drop that fast.”

“They do if we die.”

Angela’s relief was crushed. “It’s killing them.”

Adrian nodded as he retreated. “They’ve sacrificed hundreds of pushers in these attempts.”

“These?” Angela tried to concentrate through the newest alarm bell ringing in the back of her mind. She got it all at once. “It’s been real each time. We thought it was the Messenger, but it’s happened since we handled him!”

“Yes. We’ve all affected time throughout this trip. Surely you know it’s been us?”

“I didn’t.” Angela was stunned. “We don’t need any of the other trappings?”

“It requires all of it, plus other stuff to make it work. It also requires an energy level only byzan have.”

“And we know there are other byzan. How could there not be?” She gestured angrily. “We were released on the world during a time when killing is as necessary as breathing.”

Adrian nodded. “But we’ve never *tried* to do this. Our moments were accidental. Theirs are intentional and they don’t care if a pusher dies. They have an entire lab of rats that have to be fed. One

less mouth buys them more time before their supplies run out.”

Angela made a horrible plan, but it had a major flaw. *We can kill the pusher, too, if I can figure out how to move while it's happening.*

Angela's energy bank registered a change. She could bring up her shield again now if she needed to. She motioned the Eagles to let the camp out of the restaurant and barn. She didn't tell anyone to go after the running rookies. When they got to the ship, someone would remove them from her army for cowardice. “I wasn't able to save them.”

“Did you try as hard as you should have?”

She slowly admitted the truth. “No. I held a grudge.”

Adrian wasn't surprised. “Maybe rightly so. I'll go through them and give you a list of names to keep.”

“No need.” She held in a shudder. “I'm sorry. I hate most of them.”

“You're not perfect, Angie. You're going to have weak places. That's okay as long as you keep trying to fix them.”

It helped to hear that. She smiled at him.

Adrian soaked it in. He loved making her happy.

“I feel the same.” Angela led the way. “Let's do it again for some other issue I haven't conquered yet.” *Like how we're supposed to move fast enough during a time slow to accomplish anything.*

Adrian signaled their remaining rookies to stay with the camp. “Help them if they need it. And keep

your ears open. More stragglers could have been shaken loose in that quake.”

“It was an earthquake!” A nearby camp member turned to his partner and confirmed that’s what had happened.

Angela didn’t force it on them. They didn’t have to accept magic. As long as they didn’t fight it, things could work out in the end. *But if they do fight me, they’ll die. I’m not allowing survivors anymore. It always bites us in the ass. I’ve had enough of being nice.*

Chapter Eleven
You Missed it

1

Angela let Adrian stay close as she went back toward the beach, but she kept a strong barrier over her thoughts. Adrian was falling for every kind word she tossed his way. Marc had separated them because of his jealousy. Angela had planned around it. She'd even left her hair down and made sure it was clean for today. She could feel Adrian's hot gaze going over her and stopping on the long curls every time. It wasn't hard to get him in the mood to screw himself. He was so starved for her company that she could lead him into almost anything she wanted. He was letting out secrets with every conversation.

She pulled one of those now. "That's how I do it, right? A reset lets me go back to the moment I accepted who I am." She glanced at him, catching his stagger and mouth dropping open. "I have to say no."

Adrian quickly nodded. "Yep."

Angela knew it had to be something else or something more. "I could change my bloodline."

He snorted. "Others could; you can't."

“I’d have to go all the way back to the origin point.”

Adrian stopped talking.

Angela kept track of his face as she spoke, to know when she hit the target. “Eve wasn’t a natural descendant. She had to make that choice.”

Adrian swore under his breath. “Too fucking smart for your own good.”

Angela snapped it into place. “The angels came down and tempted the garden residents. All of them caved. But I can change her choice.”

Adrian tried to discourage that line of thought. “There would just be two lines of power instead of three, and the angels would still exist. It wouldn’t change anything we went through.”

“Oh, I won’t stop at Eve and her stalkers.” Angela’s eyes blazed. “I’ll spin it back to the very beginning of our existence.”

“Why?” Adrian was horrified.

“You know why.”

Adrian did. *She wants to take over from the first moment so we never have to fight anyone for control. It’s awful and brilliant.*

Don’t be absurd. I want to remove magic from the world. And then take over so we don’t have to fight anyone for control.

Once again, Adrian couldn’t find fault with her logic. Only the methods were a stopping point with him. He assumed the same was true of her. *You won’t sacrifice kids to achieve that goal.*

Would I give up the few to save the many?
Angela put a calm smile on her face as the sound of people coming echoed through the trees. *I've been doing that all along. I'm surprised you missed it.*

Adrian didn't know what to say.

Angela spotted a hatch opening nearby. She stopped and waited as the tunnel guard came up.

Panaji spotted her and gave a thumbs up. "We all good down here, Boss. Half didn't even wake up."

"What about damage?"

"A few debris fell and we had dust. Guards are handling it."

Angela added it to her mental notes about safety on the island. The people in town had no injuries even though the flying shrapnel should have hurt someone. Not a drop of Safe Haven blood had been spilled on this island since Marc's truce.

Adrian stayed next to Angela as she met the coming Eagles and kept them all moving back toward the ship. Stressing men and women surrounded her as they walked, all eager for comfort and instructions.

"The quake missed our main setups. No repairs are needed other than a blown sensor light on one of the cargo bay doors. Theo and Grant are checking the ship." Kyle had run straight here, but he wasn't out of breath and everyone noticed it. "The rookies were sent to the gym to wait. We'll handle it during the land meal. Speaking of which, are we still doing that?"

“Yes.”

Kyle wasn't eager for it. “Then you'll need to make an announcement. They're all upset.”

Angela keyed her radio. “I need a volunteer repair crew to come to town. The tremor knocked over our beer pit and the ice is melting. I need at least fifty men and women to drink it before it goes warm.”

Adrian grinned as the airwaves blared with willing voices.

Angela wiped sweat from her neck. “Keep using that strategy, but don't draw them with chocolate. We don't have much of it left.”

“Will that be enough?” Kyle was linked to the hive; no one was happy.

She nodded. “The camp doesn't want to think about magic; they'll accept the quake story. The descendants know we have to get the herd calmed before we can discuss what happened.”

Ed had come with Kyle. He wasn't convinced. “Won't that draw attention?”

“I doubt any of the normals will even notice. As long as we keep them fed and calm, we can do whatever we want.” Angela went toward the beach, where more people were gathering.

Trent had followed her and Adrian as their guard. He scowled at Kyle. “I thought Marc was supposed to stop this from happening!”

Kyle shrugged. “It stopped, didn't it?”

Trent hadn't considered that. “The reset has started, then.”

Kyle nodded. “We’ll fight it, too, but there’s not much we can accomplish from here. The future, and the past, are in Marc’s hands now.”

Trent made a face. “God help us.”

Adrian glanced at Angela. “Even if He won’t, she will.”

Trent allowed Adrian’s faith to calm his nerves. “It’s good that you’re here for her.”

Adrian nodded. “An extra hand in a bad moment is a blessing.”

Trent realized Adrian had misunderstood. “No, I mean *for* her. If she loses the baby, we’ll be without a leader.”

Adrian had expected this. “I know you’re all doing it for that reason. No need to give me the lecture. Morgan covered it.”

“Not true. He forgot to tell you the catch.” Kyle used words that couldn’t be mistaken. “If it goes sour, you will not be given leadership in her place. You’ll be hanged for failure to protect the boss.”

Adrian didn’t blink. “Agreed. Now step aside so I can see that angle. You’re blocking my light.”

Kyle understood the double meaning. He slid aside and let the former leader go to the boss’s side. “Don’t let us down, Adrian. We’re just starting to like you again.”

“Marc isn’t going to like that.” Chad waited for Jennifer to agree instead of scanning the top deck again like he was supposed to.

Jennifer ignored the bruised man and went to the bridge. “Has everyone checked in for this shift?”

Standing on the bridge steps, Ray nodded. “I’m your right hand when you’re ready.”

“Who has the bridge?”

Ray gestured. “A very hungover captain who enjoyed his celebration with the Eagles a bit too much last night.”

Chad sniggered, forgetting himself for an instant. “Our captain got Applejacked.”

Grant glared at Chad through the glass window. His shadow-lined eyes and green pallor told them how he was feeling. His sentry in the shadows nodded politely and returned to scanning for trouble.

In contrast, Ray was chipper and perfectly dressed. His neat hair blew softly in the gentle wind; a vibrant presence emanated from him in friendly dependability. Jennifer wondered who else had that impression of Ray. He was one of the few Eagles who hadn’t been involved in a huge scandal.

Ray’s good mood deflated. “Dale.”

Jennifer was instantly sorry. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

Ray wasn’t mad at her. He smiled at Grant. “It’s a beautiful day. No worries.”

Grant belched, letting out a cloud of revolting odors.

Ray recoiled. “I take it back! It’s an ugly day! Ugly!”

Jennifer laughed with him.

Grant tried not to puke as stomach acid burned its way up his esophagus. He wasn’t in any shape to work, but his pride had insisted.

Jennifer didn’t care because they didn’t need to move the ship today. Calm blue and green waves rolled by the island and created tiny ripples that bumped into the anchored cruise ship. Jennifer didn’t mind the gentle rocking. It was soothing. It was also dangerous because it was making everyone drowsy. The excitement from the quake was gone now. “I’ll want to do continuous rounds until someone relieves me.”

“You’re not being relieved.” Ray grinned. “She’s got you on duty all day and into the evening.”

Jennifer sent out happiness that hit everyone on the deck around them. Guards rotated toward her in longing.

Morgan growled, waking them from their daze. He joined Jennifer at the steps, glaring and pointing people back to their jobs.

Jennifer lifted her chin. *I didn’t mean to distract them. I didn’t do anything wrong.*

“Neither did they.” Ray came down the steps. He gave Morgan a cool glare. “Get it under control or we’ll have issues.”

Morgan swallowed a nasty remark.

Jennifer looked at Chad. “I have enough security. You can go now.” Chad’s black and purple eye was a reminder that gentle Stanley had put him on the floor. Chad had been found passed out in a closet since then. He was great with his gun and he’d aced Wade’s explosives class, but he was a failure at nearly everything else. Jennifer had wondered if he might have military experience when he’d first joined. Stanley flooring him without any payback had finally shoved that notion out of her mind.

Chad walked away, frowning.

Trent came over and took his place. “Boss wants me with you today.” He’d just come up the ladder.

Jennifer immediately felt better.

Morgan and Ray both made mental notes. Jennifer and Angela didn’t like Chad.

Jennifer sighed. “He hasn’t done anything wrong. Leave him alone.”

Neither man promised.

Jennifer didn’t push it. Chad gave her a bad feeling. There was probably a reason for it. She smiled at the baby in her arms. *We’ll leave that for another day. Right now, we get to be the boss again!*

Autumn gurgled back, caught up in the good emotions. *Love my mommy.*

Morgan scanned the deck and tried not to get distracted. Jennifer was interesting, but Autumn was fascinating. Having duty over them both was a challenge in many ways.

Jennifer adjusted her arm sling and went to the ramp. “We’ll stop by the mess and ask Roy if he wants to come along. Then I’ll start at the bottom and work my way up.”

The men stayed close and monitored for more trouble even though it appeared to be a bright sunny day. The feeling of something else not being right was all around them.

Jennifer stopped as Cate and Cody came up the ramp. Dog walked behind them and discouraged chatter with hard stares and bushy fur. He’d also felt time slow and he didn’t like it.

Ray studied the kids and found them in Junior Eagle gear. They were clearly about to work a shift. He hoped they didn’t need to use the knives or the bear spray on their belts.

Jennifer hoped they didn’t need to use their gifts. Cate got carried away whenever she was scared and Cody went straight to *kill them all* mode to end any fight. The private lessons were helping them, but it was going slowly. Both children had been brainwashed and hurt for a long time. The effects of that weren’t going to go away. Jennifer smiled at the twins. “You guys okay?”

Cody spoke for them both. “We want to help now. We’re tired of hiding.”

“You were in training.” Jennifer ignored Ray’s curiosity and Morgan’s disapproval. “The boss needs a guard. Practice what we’ve been working on.”

“Cool!”

“Yes!”

Morgan cleared his throat. “Is that a good idea? She isn’t alone right now.”

Jennifer nodded. “Cate and Cody understand how important it is for the alpha to be happy, even if that means she spends time around people they don’t like.”

Cody forced a nod.

Cate snorted.

Ray chuckled. “Doesn’t sound like it.”

Jennifer pointed. “Be nice to Adrian.”

Cody snorted this time.

Cate leered. “I’ll treat him just like he deserves.”

Morgan groaned. “This might get nasty.”

“Today is all about building your endurance physically while using your new training in a real-world situation.” Jennifer wanted them to be serious and work hard. “It’s also possible that you’ll have to use it for real. If so, stay calm and remember your aim. No crossfire hits!”

Both kids nodded. Their little faces looked up in powerful determination. “Nothing will happen to the alpha on our shift.”

The double timbre was intimidating. Jennifer was pleased. “Have a pleasant day, Brady children.”

“And you, Enforcer J.”

Jennifer shifted the baby to her other arm as she resumed her walk. When Ray and Morgan fell in on either side of her and Trent took the rear, she began to relax from the hyper-tense mood she’d been

shoved into when time started slowing. *I panicked and only thought about my family. Cate and Cody will only worry about Angela. They're the perfect guards for her right now.*

3

“Where’s the beer, Boss?”

“Your drinkers are here, ready to help.”

Angela chortled with the line of men and women as they passed her on their way to town. The beer pit wasn’t supposed to be open yet, but it was a perfect distraction for at least half of their people. Whiskey and wine were still all over the ship. The beer had gone quickly. The only stock left was the kitchen’s share of the rations. Angela donating some of it for tonight had been a pleasant treat to anticipate. Getting it early was even better.

Angela saw the twins coming across the pontoon bridge. Both kids were zeroed in on her and Adrian.

She handed her folder to Adrian. “Right hand for this shift.”

Adrian wanted to. “But I can’t guard you and do this at the same time. I’m sorry, no.”

Adrian felt dual scans of opposite sides as the kids approached. They rotated those scans every five feet and also the direction each time. They were covering a large circle around themselves and then around Angela as they got in range.

Angela opened her arms to the twins and gathered them close for a hug.

Dog licked his muzzle clean as he padded toward them. His claws stuck in the matted vines and retracted with every step. *Need to chew those off again.*

Adrian stared. "They aren't here for a visit."

Angela sent a surge of love over the kids. "They're our protection while we work."

Cate and Cody glared over her shoulder. Their eyes lit up bright red.

Adrian tucked the folder under his arm. "This doesn't scare me."

Cate grinned. "It should."

Angela retreated and let go. "Take your posts. You'll get your first break in an hour, if you can make it that long."

The twins began circling them with slow steps and alert eyes that saw everything.

Adrian recognized the formation immediately. "You're teaching them the old forms."

Angela went to the path she hadn't taken yesterday. "No. My enforcer is teaching them the old forms. I'm their training tool for the day." She tried not to grin. "So are you."

Adrian felt the first strong mental tug from a powerful descendant trying to dig into his mind. "Is that all you've got?"

The twins attacked together, ripping away wall after wall faster than he could bring them up. Adrian

was unable to defend against them unless he brought up his shield.

Everyone on the ship and beach observing them expected Adrian to do that so his secrets wouldn't be exposed.

Adrian relaxed and let the kids explore. *I don't have anything left to hide.*

The kids withdrew after a minute and followed Angela, disappointed that they weren't going to get to blow Adrian out of the water. They were also relieved that he didn't have any schemes going to hurt Marc while he was gone.

Adrian felt the hostility level drop. He caught up to Angela with a lighter step. *Maybe the day isn't going to be that hard after all.*

Cate tapped on his arm.

Adrian looked down at her.

Cody stuck a leg out and tripped him.

Adrian fell face-first into the vines along the path, grunting in pain.

The twins continued on their rotation, sniggering.

Angela turned and saw him on the ground. "Are you okay?"

Adrian stayed down for a minute, sucking in air against his throbbing knee. "All good. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're on the ground."

Adrian blinked dirt off his lashes. "So?"

"So, you're bending my book."

Cody scooped it up and handed it to Angela.

Angela wiped it off, crooning. “Are you okay? Did the clumsy man hurt you?”

The twins sniggered again.

Adrian’s lids narrowed. “If you guys want to play rough, I can, too.”

Cate kicked the dirt as she came around, sending a fresh cloud into Adrian’s face. “You’ve already lost. You just can’t see it yet.”

Adrian coughed and blinked away tears as the grit scratched and burned. “That’s because there’s something in my eye. I think it’s a tree. Or a spear. Maybe the sharp end of a dinosaur.”

Dog hurried after the kids. He walked up Adrian’s body, big paws pushing the man deeper into the vines.

Adrian tried to roll over.

Dog’s big paw smacked into his head, burying his face.

Adrian groaned. “Yep. Definitely a dinosaur.”

Angela’s laughter rang through the trees and Adrian’s heart. He slowly sat up and began wiping off his face. *I love it when she laughs. I wish I could spend the rest of the day causing that.*

Dog paused, tail lifting. *You want it, you got it!*

Adrian froze as the wolf farted in his face. “This can’t be happening.”

Dog let another one rip.

Angela’s amusement sent tears over her cheeks. “I can’t breathe!”

Adrian tried not to gag. “I can.” His stomach rolled over. “I don’t recommend it.”

He got to his feet and inhaled clean air. “What the hell did you eat?!”

Dog went to Angela so she could rub his ears. *A dead fish I found on the beach.*

Adrian scowled. “Why would you do that?”

I wanted to smell nice for you.

Angela’s laughter lasted all the way to her next stop.

4

Daryl stopped outside the gymnasium exit, waiting for people to go by. The corridors were emptying as camp members and off-duty Eagles went to the island to join Angela’s beer challenge.

Jeff came around the corner and joined Daryl. Neither man spoke. They knew why they were here.

Jeff kept an eye out for Kimmie and Amy. The girls were doing short patrols of the ship right now. He didn’t want Kimmie to know about this even though she’d been through worse.

The hall emptied. Video game noises came from the gym, telling them the rookies inside had no idea what was coming.

“They think we grounded them.”

Jeff huffed. “In a way...”

Daryl shrugged. “We all get grounded at some point, I guess.”

“Yep. No stopping that one.”

Daryl reached for the knob.

“Wait!”

Both men flinched at the loud call.

Ralph hurried toward them. "Wait. Don't do it."

Daryl frowned at the man. "Don't interfere with Eagle choices, Ralph. It won't go well."

Ralph wasn't intimidated, yet. He didn't see any tools in their hands, though they were both armed. He doubted Angela would have ordered them to shoot. It would alert everyone.

Daryl refused to tell Ralph they were using poison these days. New people wanted to drink with senior men. It was an easier situation to set up. "What do you want?"

"You made me the den mother. I have to protect them."

Jeff snorted. "They won't protect you or anyone else. They ran."

"I saw them flee onto the ship. I also saw the look you two exchanged. That's why I'm here." Ralph eased between the two bulky men and blocked the door. "They haven't been given a fair chance. Let me try something else."

Daryl wasn't in a hurry to remove anyone. He was wrapped up in his own worries about Brittani. She had switched into sleep mode. Neil and the medics said it was normal. Candy had verified that she'd felt exhausted in the beginning and only extra sleep helped. Daryl was letting Brittani rest and making sure she woke for meals. He didn't know what else to do for her.

Jeff understood he would have to be the voice of reason. *But I don't want to be.* "Go talk to the boss."

Daryl stared in surprise.

Jeff shrugged. "Safe Haven has a lot of cowards. We didn't remove them for it."

Ralph smiled in relief. "Thank you! I'll go find Angela."

Jeff's tone hardened. "*Jennifer's* the boss right now. She's on the medical deck."

Ralph paled. "I can wait for Angela."

Jeff didn't hide the contempt in his voice. "You can, but she left Jennifer in charge and she won't like it if you go over Jenny's head."

Ralph realized that was right.

Daryl helped things along. "It also won't help your case in the normals argument if you're seen avoiding the descendants."

Ralph scowled. "Did you just call me a coward?!"

Daryl and Jeff both walked away without answering.

Ralph marched toward the steps. "I'm not afraid of any of you!"

Daryl snickered.

Jeff yawned. "Have a cocktail while we wait for her answer?"

"Sure." It was okay to take a little free time while Brittani rested. Daryl led the way to the top deck. "How long do you think it will take?"

“About ten seconds.” Jeff was positive. “She’ll cull them faster than Adrian or Angela. That’s really why he doesn’t want to talk to Jennifer.”

Daryl didn’t know people saw the teen as ruthless. “Should Kyle be worried?”

“I doubt it. In fact, he should keep encouraging it. We can use it to keep people in line.” Jeff grinned. “No one wants to face someone meaner than Angela.”

“She isn’t, though. Jennifer just makes the choices faster because she’s young and doesn’t think it through.”

“Yeah, you keep believing that.” Jeff went around him and broke into a jog. “It’s margarita time!”

Daryl wasn’t offended, but he was concerned. People believed Jennifer was worse than Angela. He followed Jeff and tried to figure out why. *What did I miss?*

5

“How is she?”

“Lucky to be alive.” Terry handed Jennifer the clipboard so she could read his notes.

The med bay was busy again. All the patients and staff tried to listen in as they went through their check-ins and checkouts. The scent of sanitizer mixed well with their curiosity.

Morgan held Autumn and tried to keep little Roy happy while Ray stood watch in the hall. His

shift as her right hand was over, but he'd volunteered to help a while longer. Morgan was glad. Ray was dependable and the kids were keeping him distracted from dwelling on Jennifer's sudden coldness.

Jennifer wasn't surprised that the medic had deemed Pam's overdose a suicide attempt.

Terry wanted to be sure Jennifer understood. "Just because it was alcohol, that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"I don't think you're wrong." Jennifer scrawled a quick note. "That came from the boss."

Terry read it.

No visitors.

Terry was relieved. "I'll tell her the boss said Morgan can't come."

"No." Jennifer had already thought this one through. "She'll keep hoping for him to show up later. Crush that dream with the truth and help her move on."

Terry glanced at Morgan. "How? All she wants is him."

Jennifer ignored the accusing tone while her followers winced or frowned at the medic. "Start with a talk with Tim when she's stronger and work your way up to the boss."

"That isn't going to work. Tim hasn't helped anyone."

Terry's white coat was flecked in various colors and stains that said he'd been working hard. Despite his ruffled state and annoyed tone, he was smiling

at the patients and the volunteer staff as they went by. Jennifer was sorry to ruin his mood with something as ugly as the truth. “I know. At some point, he’ll figure out he’s wasting his time as a preacher and return to the Eagles. Make sure you tell him I said that.”

“I will, but that doesn’t help Pam, now does it?”

Jennifer returned the clipboard. “Pam is the only one who can help Pam. She has to accept their choices. If she can’t do that, she might be better off dead.”

Terry gawked at Jennifer as she walked away.

In the shadows, Ralph had stopped to listen. Now, he gaped along with Terry, horrified. “Why would the boss put her in charge? She doesn’t care about any of us.”

“That’s not true.”

Ralph jumped and turned.

Trent caught up to Jennifer and her escorts. He’d stopped to scan the corridor. “She cares deeply, but she doesn’t let her emotions get in the way of logic. It’s actually nice to have that for a change.”

Ralph drew in a breath and advanced toward Jennifer without calling Trent a liar. Trent didn’t know the secrets happening all over this ship.

Jennifer turned to meet him. “How do *you* know those secrets, Ralph?”

Ralph didn’t lie. “I’m a spy for the normals and for the boss. People tell me things because they know I can be trusted.”

Jennifer smiled at the graying man. “I like you, Ralph. I always have, for exactly that reason—you can be trusted.”

Ralph was tired of being pulled by both sides. “Why can’t we all just be the same?!”

Jennifer only had one answer. “If we knew that, we probably wouldn’t have destroyed the world.”

Ralph’s anger faded a notch. “I need to talk to you about the rookies.”

“I know. But that choice was made by Angela and I can’t overrule it.” Jennifer smiled coldly this time. “I will let her know you’ve challenged her choice, openly, and are demanding an answer.”

Ralph blanched. “Don’t put it like that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

Ralph didn’t know what to do. “I had to act fast. They were going to remove them right then!”

“Why do you want to save them, Ralph? Is it so the normals survive or so your side will have enough fighters in that inevitable battle against us?”

Ralph froze.

So did everyone else but Jennifer.

She tried to get Ralph to understand. “You can’t win that fight, so there’s no reason for it to happen. Protect the good normals and let us remove the ones who will disturb the peace. You remember how it was in the mountain?”

Ralph paled, heart sinking. “They might not be that bad.”

Jennifer shrugged. “It started exactly like this. We let it go then because we hoped it wouldn’t be

that bad. It almost cost all our lives, and it did take some of us. Please accept Angela's choice. She isn't doing it to hurt you or them; she's building a better future for the rest of us."

Ralph didn't follow as Jennifer and her escorts went to the next deck. He wanted to go warn the rookies in the gym. Their lives were being forfeited. He also wanted the peaceful future that the descendants clearly saw in their scans of the time stream. *I don't know what to do!*

Terry felt Ralph's unease and confusion. He patted the older man on the arm. "Angela loves them, too. If she decided they need to go, it's for a good reason."

"I want to believe you."

"You can. Every life lost is a failure on her long list. She only adds to it when there's no other choice."

Ralph slowly went toward the normals deck, trying to accept the choice that everyone was okay with but him.

Terry watched him go, hiding his own concerns about what the descendants were planning. He wasn't going to cross them on it. *I still want to be like them. If that means a few other normals don't get to stay, then it's a small price to pay.*

Chapter Twelve
Round One

1

“**H**ello, Safe Haven. This is the 5:45 p.m. update. We have a small list this time. Get comfortable and take it all in.” Jonny’s eager voice rolled through the mostly empty ship. Only a skeleton crew was still onboard.

“The quake damage was minimal to our ships and island. An hour of cleanup will get it all put back to rights. However, we have heard a few radio calls talking about a rogue wave that hit parts of the west coast. We will collect details and pass them along. Isn’t it great that we have a radio connection to our homeland? Thanks, Boss!”

Sitting next to Angela, Adrian made a face at the obvious tone Jonny had used.

Angela switched off her radio. The rest of the announcement was just as fake and probably unnecessary. Most of the camp was already eating, drinking, and enjoying time with their friends and family in town. “He’s no Mitch.”

Adrian wiped dirt from his arm. “I’ll try to find you a better mouthpiece.”

“I already have one. He’s on a run right now.”

Adrian understood Jonny was a temp. “What will you do with him after Kenn takes back over?”

“He’ll do relief shifts and run the music.” Angela motioned. “This is a perfect spot for a sentry post.”

This cave wasn’t being used yet. Most people didn’t like it because the wind blew straight inside and kept them coated in dust. Angela loved it because of the view. She was able to see their cruise ship and part of the cove where their other boats were anchored.

The cove dock was going easier because they were able to pull previous posts from that location and just move them fifty feet. The small bay holding their cruise ship was a different engineering nightmare.

Adrian held out the paper he’d been working on during their stops. “Give that to your enforcer.”

Angela scanned it and added it to her folder. “She’ll hate you for pointing out her flaws. I’m telling her I spotted these issues.”

Adrian didn’t argue, but he was sure Jennifer would find out and make him pay. She would also implement his corrections and then the rotation the twins were practicing would get smoother and reach more ground. “She’s done well with them.” Adrian meant that. *Upon first meeting Marc’s daughter, I didn’t think she could be tamed.*

Two kids, a wolf, and the alpha all turned toward him in condemnation.

Adrian pointed at Dog. “No more! You can’t gas me every time I say or think something you don’t like.”

Dog lowered his tail and resumed sniffing through the cave. It held traces of Marc.

Dog whined. *I miss him.*

Adrian felt sadness swarm the cave. It wasn’t hard to guess the reason. He stood up. “Break’s over. Let’s walk the tunnel system and pop up on the camp. The kids can practice drilling in close quarters.”

Angela knew what he was trying to do. She rose, dusting dirt from her clothes. “Let’s go eat. I think I can now.”

Adrian liked that idea. He led the way through the glaring twins and the emotional wolf. “It’s not good for the baby. When she gets upset, distract her any way you can. That’s an order.”

“You’re not the boss!”

“Don’t tell us what to do!”

Dog growled lowly to add his feelings on the matter.

Adrian didn’t care. He also didn’t drive it in. Like with Jennifer, they would do it even though it came from him because it would help Angela. *That’s all any of us want. When she’s happy, everyone feels safer.*

The twins couldn’t argue with that. They glanced at Angela and found sadness filling her mind again.

Cody distracted her. “What are you going to do to Monica?”

Anger sizzled through the air. Hot dust blew over them and flew down the tunnel.

Adrian whistled, head shaking. “You’re a brave little man, you know?”

Cody nodded solemnly. “I get it from my father.”

“Along with that sharp mind.” Adrian glanced at Cate, trying to get through her hard outer shell. “What did you get from him, sweetheart?”

Cate smiled innocently. “An eternal hatred of you and your family. Stop trying to reach me. I don’t want to be your friend.”

Adrian immediately called her on that. “Yes, you do. You think it’s a betrayal of your dad, so you’re keeping up the act even though you both want me to train you.”

Cody and Cate regarded each other in surprise, not sure how he’d discovered their secret.

“You missed an important fact.” Adrian gestured. “I am training you. I’ve been offering corrections to your formation all day and I’ve kept you both out of my thoughts since that first encounter. I’m evaluating, seeing where I can help, and passing that information to the alpha. You’re getting what you want. Stop fighting me. We’re not enemies.”

Cate swallowed a blast of anger.

Cody looked away, trying not to cry.

Adrian took the golden opportunity. “We can do a quick mock battle when we get to the top of the cliff. The boss can hold a shield and absorb any bad hits.”

Everyone perked up, including Angela, who’d begun stewing on making a law about cheating. Until they had one, she couldn’t punish Monica or Charlie.

Adrian turned around so they didn’t see his smirk. He led them toward the airfield, swaggering a little.

Angela saw the twins inch closer to the cocky man, flanked by the wolf. Adrian’s words hadn’t been as effective as he believed. Adrian didn’t understand how mad the twins were at Marc for leaving. They were taking it out in cruel ways. None of the Eagles wanted to get in the cage with them for training.

Angela decided to help it along. “I know about the deal Morgan made with you last night.”

Adrian stopped, half turning. “What?”

Cate put a leg out this time.

Cody shoved hard on Adrian’s hip.

Dog leaned against Adrian’s knee, providing the rest of the force they needed.

“Shit!” Adrian flailed as he went over the side of the cliff. His scream echoed as he dropped heavily and hit the water.

Cate and Cody howled wildly.

Dog chuffed, pawing the ground. *Do it again! Do it again!*

On the top deck of the cruise ship, Chad paused. “Did you see that?”

The guard rotating by him moved faster to get away. “No. What?”

“I think something fell from the cave.”

Dace stopped and squinted. He rolled his eyes. “It’s just Adrian. Keep working.”

Angela rubbed Dog’s ears with one hand and held her stomach with the other. Her belly was sore from how much she’d laughed today. “Thanks, guys. I love you.”

Cate and Cody wrapped arms around her as Adrian surfaced, still screaming.

Dog nudged Angela’s leg to get her moving. *Food. I smell it.*

Angela headed for the town, not waiting for Adrian to climb the cliff ladder. “Round two goes to the Brady kids. Stand by for round three.”

2

“...finishes our updates, folks. It is 5:50 p.m. and shift change starts in ten minutes. Now, back to the music!”

Neil switched the radio off as the tunes started to flow. The DJ booth on the entertainment floor had kept a variety of music pouring through their one station, but Neil didn’t care for most of it. *I got*

used to the quiet of the apocalypse. And I like it more.

“This was a great idea.” Samantha leaned against Neil’s arm as he rejoined her on the couch. “Thank you.”

“Sure.”

“Hey, have you seen those twin giraffe pajamas and matching yellow blankets?”

“No. Why?”

“I put them in the wash, but I can’t find them now.”

“The washers probably gave them to one of the other parents.”

“Yeah. Keep an eye out for them?”

He nodded, but his mind wasn’t on her words. Neil studied the mood. 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 now, coloring and also enjoying the good atmosphere. They usually spent the evenings working on maps, training schedules, or the list of the entire population that Angela wanted. They were matching gifts to the people and trying to figure out who might be Invisible. Samantha often fell asleep while he and Wade were still working on that one. They’d split the chore into past and current people, but it was taking a long time. There hadn’t been many fun nights for them.

Amy glanced up at Neil. “I want to spend the night with the other kids. Hawk and Caleb are waiting to play with me.”

Neil looked to Samantha for the decision.

Samantha shrugged. “Whatever you want. Now or after the movie?”

Amy dropped the crayon and stood. “Kimmie is passing by. I can go wis her.”

Both adults smiled tolerantly. When she got excited, her baby talk came through.

“Do you want to take your dolls?”

Amy shook her head. “You guys make sure they gets fed.”

Samantha laughed. “They’re so lifelike, I might feed them instead of the twins.”

Neil chuckled.

Kimmie lifted her arms as soon as the door opened.

Amy lunged, driving the girl backward. “Run, pony!”

Kimmie took off down the hall, cackling wildly.

Neil was proud of the girls. They were working a daily shift, spending time in classes, and finally making friends with some of the other kids. It gave him hope that they would keep recovering from the atrocities they’d experienced.

Samantha watched them, also thrilled by how Amy had adjusted.

Sam’s body glowed with good health. Her larger breasts drew Neil’s attention. *Yummy.*

Sam ogled his hard body. “I may need you to release the pressure again if the boys sleep through like they did last night.”

He leered. “Awesome.” Neil went to the door Amy had left open. He smiled at the man on duty in the hallway. “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 patted the couch. “Finish the movie with me? I like this one.”

“Sure.” Neil cleared his throat. “Wade’s off-duty soon...”

Samantha tensed for an instant. “Okay.”

Neil frowned. “If it’s not right, or it’s too soon to do this, we’ll wait.”

Samantha stopped his stressing. “It’s been eight weeks. I was just trying to remember if I’d shaved recently. It’s been busy.”

Neil leered again. “Need a scrubber?”

“And a warmer.”

Neil grew serious. “You’re sure?”

Samantha stretched out on 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 to invite Wade to their date night.

Wade was staring at her in fear now.

Neil didn’t know what to say. *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 a dozen...*

Neil paused, seeing Wade's lips twitch. *Okay, a lot of women. What's the difference here?*

Wade sighed. *I love her. If I mess 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 shut the door and went to Samantha. "Maybe I should leave you two alone this first time."

Samantha didn't want to start trouble. "Do you mind?"

"Of course, but I trust him to be gentle. He wouldn't have the rep if he was mean or rough. I'll just go do a workout."

Samantha shivered at the image of Neil dripping 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.

Outside the door, Daryl walked by with Jeff. Word had come down. They went to the training zone to finish off a final chore before going to the land meal.

“Thank you for coming.” Tim gently closed the Bible on the lectern. “Enjoy dinner. I heard it’s not fish!”

The few people who’d shown up for his afternoon service chuckled. They lingered, happy to be with others who believed in the same way of living as they did.

Tim didn’t rush them out, but he didn’t encourage conversations either. This wasn’t the place for gossip or meaningless words about the weather.

The church was neat and sparse. Tim had removed everything he considered to be valuable. He refused to continue the tradition of saying don’t worship gold while being surrounded by things made from it or bought with it. He only allowed the bare basics—shades over the dusty windows, wooden pews, hymn books, Bibles, Christ on the wall, and the pulpit. He hadn’t even brought in a trashcan because a church was no place for garbage to be brought or tossed. Church was a place to learn about God and nothing else.

Some people said he was too strict. They resented him changing anything. When they protested, he pointed out life was based on being able to change and adapt. That’s why they’d survived—because they were capable of change. That didn’t work with most people, but it did let them know he wasn’t going to give in. *We have to give religion its second chance.*

Standing outside the open church door, Jennifer didn't ask why, snidely, like she wanted to. Angela had chosen to allow it. As long as she was the boss, she got to make the rules. *But it won't be allowed under my reign unless someone convinces me why it's needed.*

Jennifer nodded to the leaving congregation and waited for Tim to notice her.

Tim began walking the pews to put away the books. He could hear shift change being called, but his mind stayed on the lesson he'd been trying to give. He doubted any of his tiny congregation had gotten it. *But I'm not doing it all for them. It's for me and the others here who know the darker side of this camp.* "We need to be reminded that from darkness came the light."

"Indeed, it did."

Tim spun around. Bibles flew from his hand and slid across the floor.

He scanned Jennifer, arm still in a sling, standing in the church doorway while three big Eagles lurked in the corridor behind her.

"Good evening, Father."

Tim's balls drew up at her mocking tone; his throat went dry.

Jennifer walked into the church. "It might be one of those types of meetings. That depends on your answers." She settled on the front bench to let her tired feet have a break. "I've added some people to your comfort meetings. Make sure the boss gets your results."

Tim retrieved the Bibles he'd dropped. He was glad when her escorts stopped at the threshold and didn't come in. "What do you want?"

Jennifer studied him, replaying his last thoughts carefully. Using her new gift could only be done in small moments away from the other descendants unless they were family or friends. Knowing she could make time go backward by a few seconds would terrify too many people. Even magic users were afraid of manipulating it. "Sit down. Tell me how your meetings are going."

Tim put the Bibles into the racks on the rear of the pews, then rotated to face her. "What do you want?"

Jennifer shrugged at his repeated query. "No small talk. I can live with that. What I can't live with is someone betraying the rules of camp and doing whatever they please."

Tim's confusion laced his voice. "What did I do wrong?"

"You took pills from our stock. You gave them to an unapproved refugee and there's no record of it in the files."

"Sadie didn't have a folder." Tim motioned toward the rear, personal room. "I made her one. I added what she got, how much of it, when she'll need more, and that we talked about the pros and cons as well as the side effects listed on the insert."

"I want it right now."

Tim got the folder quickly, glad he'd handled it that way. He came out to find Jennifer standing by

the pulpit. He handed her the brown folder. “I was going to put it in the lab tonight while everyone’s on land.”

Jennifer skimmed it quickly and found exactly what he’d said. She also saw an envelope in the file addressed to Angela. Jennifer concentrated, but she couldn’t tell what was in the letter. She’d been practicing that while handling updates, but she hadn’t had any success yet. She handed the folder back to him. “Give it to Terry directly.”

“Okay.” Tim put the folder on the pulpit and waited.

“Why did Angela let you live?”

Tim froze. His mind went blank.

Jennifer wasn’t in the mood to rip him apart. “Answer my question and I’ll tell you how to get the boss to say yes.”

Tim realized she’d pulled the letter’s contents from his mind. “You’re not allowed to do that!”

Jennifer lifted a brow. “You have ten seconds and then I’ll walk and you can beg for it for the next two years.”

Tim swallowed his bitterness. “I’m her spy now. I took Ian’s place when he quit.”

Jennifer was relieved. “Good.”

Tim scowled. “How is that good?”

“It means I don’t have to remove you, Tim. It also means you’ll get the chance to atone. Do a good job and the boss will forgive you eventually.”

Tim used a hard tone. “And my reward?”

Jennifer chuckled coldly. “Tell her you want a public vote on it. She’ll consider all the possible outcomes and give you an answer. It will save you being stalled by each level as you go up the chain of command, in case you’ve considered doing it that way.”

Tim wasn’t satisfied. “You said you’d tell me how to get her to say yes.”

Jennifer liked his intelligence. “Tell her having a place to go on land will give us all a way to remove the guilt we carry in our hearts.”

Morgan and Ray were a little surprised by how ruthless Jennifer was being. They were also impressed. Neither of them had realized she had that much strength inside even though they should have.

Trent was just elated that they were going to get a church. He hadn’t been able to attend today’s service because he had to work.

Tim stared. “You’re doing this for Kyle.”

Jennifer didn’t confirm that. “I know he came by to talk to you.”

Tim decided to rat Kyle out. “He didn’t, though. I think I offended him. He got snarky.”

Jennifer wasn’t surprised. Kyle was a complicated man. “Maybe he’d try again, if there was a place where he felt connected to the weigh station.”

Tim frowned. “Angela won’t like this.”

“No, but she’ll do it because she’s also wearing a coat of stains. She wants to be clean again. Tell her having a church on the island will help.”

“And when she says the one here on this ship is good enough?” Tim had already thought about what she would say.

“You call her bluff. If it’s good enough, why isn’t anyone using it?”

All the men were stunned by the truth in that.

Tim recovered first. “She won’t let me use her that way.”

Jennifer snorted. “Of course she will. Angela’s guilt will let her give in to things that she shouldn’t even consider.”

Tim’s confusion returned. “Why is having a church a bad idea?”

Jennifer didn’t hold back. “Because it will divide us even more, Tim, and I think you know that. At some point, you’ll have to make a choice between this life and the life after death that you hope exists.”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?”

“Because we can’t do the right thing all the time and still survive. If you don’t care about your life enough to do whatever it takes to keep it, then maybe the afterlife really is where you belong.”

Pain flooded Tim’s face. “I can’t believe you said that.”

Jennifer shrugged again. “I can’t believe you’re surprised. I’m a straight shooter, in every way. I tell the truth. It’s up to you to accept it.”

“And if I won’t?”

Jennifer walked toward the exit. “Then enjoy that afterlife, if it exists. You won’t have a life here

if you screw up again. Second chances go to people who are in the boat and rowing, not those who are pulling against us.”

Tim drew in a calming breath as she left, taking her muscle along. He knew she was being honest. She’d come to warn him more than to get an update on his medical mischief. “That means something’s about to happen and it concerns me. I need to get ahead of it or be ready to leave. There is no other option in this camp now. Once you make a choice, you don’t go back. You only go forward.”

4

It’s too late to back out now. Come on, courage. We’re about to have the best night of our lives, or the worst. No sense in stalling. Wade tapped on the door.

“Enter!”

Wade paused at the growl. Samantha sounded busy. He opened the door.

Wade’s breath caught. He quickly shut the door and sucked in air. “I can come... I’ll go do some... This isn’t a...” Wade struggled to breathe.

“That’s good.” Sam moaned.

Wade swallowed. “I can come back later.”

Neil lifted his head from between Samantha’s long legs. “Or you could come give me pointers. I’ve never gotten this quite right.”

Samantha snorted. She arched as Neil suckled again. “So good...”

Wade's feet moved him close enough to see Neil's tongue stroke her clit. Precum ran down the crack of her ass. "Holy shit."

Neil chuckled against Sam, making her twitch. "You ready, Eagle?"

Wade groaned. "Ready? I just came." Wade memorized the sight of her squirming, wanting more pleasure. "You're awesome for this, Neil. I mean that."

"Come over here and help me make sure she has a good one. Then we'll have some fun."

Wade joined them on the bed, sitting at the end. His big hand went out and lightly pinched her taut nipple.

Samantha arched.

Neil stopped, wanting to know which movement she was reacting to. When Wade repeated the action, she repeated the motion, but it wasn't as sharp. On the third light squeeze, Neil timed his mouth.

"Ohhh!"

Bingo. Neil was relieved to find out it was still a combo for her. He enjoyed both ways, but he also preferred the combo now. If Wade could adjust, they would all be happy.

Wade gazed into Samantha's eyes as he rubbed her breast, harder, more possessively.

Samantha smiled sexily. "Kiss me?"

Wade grinned. "I may cum right then."

"Been a while?"

Wade leaned down. “Because it’s *you*, Sam. I’ve wanted to be with you and Neil for a long time.”

Samantha opened her arms.

Wade kissed her gently, sweetly. He wanted to show her all the things he knew about sex, but it was all he could do not to cum in his own pants as their tongues met.

Neil slowed his movements when he felt her tense, not wanting it to be over for her yet. This first time needed to be special for all of them, but mostly her.

Neil felt Wade shudder. He knew that exact feeling. Wade wasn’t going to last long on this first round.

Wade deepened the kiss, lost as Samantha pulled him down next to her, twisting her hips to allow Neil’s work.

Wade shuddered again, trying not to embarrass himself. He froze at a hand on his belt buckle.

Neil deftly flipped it loose and popped the button before Wade thought to react. “Let him out. No reason to ruin clothes and add to the laundry work.”

Wade held still as Samantha reached down and slid a hand around him.

Samantha grinned. “Get the tissues, Neil.”

Neil snickered as he got the box they kept in the end table.

Wade kissed Samantha, body tensed, trying to fight it as she rubbed his length and squirmed

against him. He ripped his mouth free, gasping for air.

Samantha let go of him. “I want three full minutes before you blow.” She spread her legs.

Wade slid over her with expertise. He nudged her thigh with iron. “I love you, Sam. No matter what happens or what changes over time, that never will.” He kissed her as he pushed into her willing body.

Neil watched Wade make love to Samantha as if she was his everything—exactly like Jeremy had always done. After a while, Jeremy had loosened up, but Neil knew that time wasn’t needed for Wade. He put the tissues by Samantha’s hip. Then he rubbed Wade’s big arm.

Wade looked over, hips flexing, free hand roaming her body.

Neil brushed Wade’s hair aside so he could see better.

Wade shuddered at Neil’s touch. He thrust deeper.

Samantha groaned, nearing the edge. Their sparks were lighting her up.

Neil kissed Wade’s shoulder.

Wade swelled inside her, male nipples hardening.

“Ah!” Samantha shouted as she came, clenching down on him like a vise.

Wade froze, mindful of her time limit. If he moved at all, he would blow. This was too hot.

Neil studied her orgasm, comparing it to the last months of doing this alone with him. It was always good, but this was liquid fire rippling down her thighs and curling her toes. Neil finally relaxed. He kissed Wade's shoulder again. "She came. Your time limit's gone. Enjoy her while she's twitching."

Wade sank down and gathered her shuddering body close. He locked their lips, groaning against her mouth.

Samantha held him close as he thrust deeper and kissed her neck. "I love you, too, Wade. No matter what happens or what changes, that won't."

Wade moaned. "Tissue!"

Neil handed it to him.

Wade slid out and exploded.

Samantha enjoyed the chills and his sounds. She clasped hands with Neil, heart healing a little.

Neil kissed her hand, but he didn't take his eyes from Wade. *Sexy.*

Wade sucked in air. He wiped down, breathing ragged. "Best...of my life!"

Neil increased the volume on the movie to muffle any more noises that came from their cabin. Then he joined them.

Chapter Thirteen
Truth Wave

1

“**I**t’s dinner time, Safe Haven. In fact, you’re running late. Get over to the island and spend time with your neighbors. That’s an order.” Radios on the island echoed with Jonny’s rushed voice. He was clearly trying to hurry and get done so he could come over.

People in town shut off their radios or lowered the volume to continue their conversations. Table centers were stuffed with bowls of rehydrated spaghetti, plates of garlic rolls, and tubs of powdered butter. There were baggies of freeze-dried parmesan cheese to complement it, along with red pepper flake shakers. Two tables near the barn also held plates and trays of flourless cookies, cupcakes, and dry milk chocolate pudding. It was a recreated smorgasbord of old-world delights.

“Adrian’s coming.”

“He brought Sadie.”

Panaji blushed. “Good. She’s pretty!”

The low-level Eagles at his table teased the shy man. They didn’t mind Adrian joining the dinner party. It had been boring, with a lot of drunken

speeches that made everyone sad. Adrian's arrival might change that.

The people were calm and content, even those who hadn't wanted to come to land. They were chatting with their neighbors and exchanging quips with people at the tables around them. It was a wonderful moment that Adrian didn't want to ruin. He was only here because Angela told him to come.

Sadie stiffened as a hundred heads rotated toward them.

Adrian kept an arm around her waist. He was glad she'd worn the clean jeans and t-shirt he'd swiped for her. "UN rule for situations like this?"

Sadie forced herself to relax and act like she belonged here. "Never let your enemy know you're nervous or scared."

"Excellent." Adrian pulled out a bench near the end of the long row of tables that were three-deep and stretched the length of town.

"Hey!" Trent whistled. He was off-duty and glad to be off his throbbing ankle. It had healed, but not fully. Overuse still proved that. "Boss wants you guys over here!"

Even the jungle around them went quiet, as if to listen to the human drama.

Adrian didn't have a choice with everyone staring at them. He took Sadie to the main leadership tables and checked for an open spot.

Angela patted the empty chair by her side. "Sadie goes right here."

Adrian approved. Sadie needed some attention, but he was too tired and sore to give any more.

“You have a spot there.” Angela pointed with her free hand. The other one was in her pocket, squeezing a tennis ball.

Cate and Cody patted the empty chair between them, both smiling politely.

Adrian’s lip quivered. “Shit.”

The twins burst out laughing.

The sound drew attention to the trio. More people noticed Adrian and Sadie joining Angela and most of leadership. Samantha and her family had decided to stay on the ship, and Jennifer had duty over the ship. Everyone else was here, though half the camp was currently below them, exploring the tunnels, playing games, or sleeping off the beer.

Adrian grinned at the twins to show them he wasn’t upset. He took a stale chip from Cate’s plate and crunched it while she giggled.

Angela didn’t trust the fast bond that was developing there. She observed it like she’d been doing with other friendships and rivalries. *I need to figure out why we have to be mean in order to bond. Are we trying to prove we’re good enough? Maybe we need to know the other person is good enough? But it isn’t always like that. Some partnerships never get mean or violent. What allows them to be peaceful and happy?*

Angela dug into the mystery and picked at the food left on her plate. She’d already eaten most of the spaghetti. It was the first time she’d had an

appetite in a while. *Is it because they have more things in common? Because that doesn't make sense. Why do opposites attract if we're meant to be with our own kind? I assume that's a nature thing, to make sure the species doesn't die out, but it doesn't explain violence in couples who are well matched.*

Sadie took the plate she was handed, barely noticing what was on it. "It's supposed to be this way."

Angela frowned slightly at being interrupted. She didn't care that the girl had read her mind without permission. People did that to her every minute of the day. "What?"

"You're trying to make sense of a world that isn't supposed to make sense."

Angela dove right in, confident that the girl could keep up. "That doesn't make sense since everything else makes sense. It's too perfect to be imperfect."

Sadie had followed her easily. "No, you're applying sense to it. In reality, this world is harsh, nasty, cruel, and extremely violent. Every part of the food chain is the same. You're applying sense and a desire for peace where it doesn't belong."

Angela stared at the girl. "Say that's true. Can it be changed?"

Sadie nodded. "Sure. It just won't be as good as the original. The perfection will no longer be too perfect to be imperfect."

Angela pushed the iced milk jug over so Sadie could reach it. “Have you heard about my breeding tree?”

Adrian stilled to listen, now ignoring the kids who’d been telling him a story about the new people.

Sadie sniggered. “The Breeding Tree. Sounds like bad porn.”

Angela chuckled. “Guess I could have picked a better name.”

Sadie shrugged. “I think it’s funny. What’s it about?”

“Making sure the next generation is born.”

Sadie began eating. Her wrinkled brow told everyone at the table she was thinking hard on Angela’s words.

Angela didn’t rush the girl. She already knew Sadie was smart. She wanted everyone else to know it, too.

Sadie swallowed. “There’s not a lot of babies anymore. And people will die sooner. This generation will only be represented by a few dozen kids because so many people can’t have them now. You’re getting people to breed in hopes that there will be enough kids to grow up and take your places.”

Adrian gawked in surprise, suddenly turned on. *I knew she was smart, but I didn’t think she was that smart.*

The rest of the table gawked as they realized Sadie was right.

Sadie poured a cup of milk. “Are you special breeding or just throwing them together and hoping something sticks?”

Even Angela was floored this time. She forced words out. “Both, depending on the desired outcome.”

Sadie used her hands on the garlic roll, not caring that it got under her fingernails. She stuck a piece in her mouth and talked while she chewed. “You need the smart ones to keep breeding the most. Are you replacing them with dumb ones so they get a break? You can burn them out, you know.”

Angela shook her head. “I don’t view them in terms of intelligence.”

“You should. Three dumb workers can’t equal one who’s smart. The UN was right about that.”

“Maybe, but I can’t force people together. I can only nudge them and hope something sticks.”

“Fair enough.” Sadie liked it that Angela wasn’t a dictator. “If you don’t measure them in terms of intelligence, what are you using?”

Angela popped the button on her jeans and groaned in relief. “Happiness, work ethic, and skills.”

Sadie wiped her mouth on her hand. “How do you measure happiness?”

“By their rate of production.”

Sadie frowned at her. “People aren’t characters in a game.”

“Well, we might be, but that’s a totally different conversation. When people are content, they produce steadily. When they’re happy, that rate of production increases. They give more.”

“More of what?”

Angela gestured at the listening people. “Everything—mood lifts, calm moments, quality of work, love for friends and family. Everything.”

“Okay.” Sadie shoved in another bite and sucked her fingers clean. “Why’d you ask about the tree?”

“I think you’d make an interesting branch.”

Adrian opened his mouth.

Cate and Cody kicked him in the shins with their heels, at the same time.

“Damn it!” Adrian hunched over to rub his legs.

Sadie gestured. “He doesn’t want a kid right now and I’m not interested in anyone else.”

Angela handed her a small plate with cookies on it. “What if I told you that assumption is wrong?”

Sadie met her eyes. “I’d say he wants *your* baby, not mine.”

Angela smiled at the girl. “Thank you for your honesty.” Her tone lost all warmth. “Now tell me if that matters to you.”

Sadie slowly gave the truth. “No. I only got on the Pill so I didn’t drive him away. I want any bond that I can get. I love him.”

Angela patted the girl’s wrist. “I can’t promise you real happiness with him, but he’ll adore the child and treat you well. You’ll have that, at least.”

Sadie had already thought about it. “I’ll have more. He doesn’t want anyone else and you’ll never be free. He’ll stay with me. We’ll be a happy family that you can experiment on for your tree...and the other programs you have going.”

Angela recognized yet another sign of Sadie’s intelligence. She looked at Adrian.

Adrian kept his head down and tried not to cry. *She’s giving me what I almost want the most—a true, willing family of my own.*

Angela nodded. *Treasure it and find the peace you’ve been denied since birth. Betray it and suffer all the hell you’ve put on hold since your change.*

Adrian lifted his cup. “To the alpha. May she live forever!”

A matching echo from the camp rolled through the trees and faded into the sunset.

Charlie shoved away from the table and stomped into the jungle. He marched down the path toward the ship, glaring at the ground.

Angela caught Trent’s attention.

Trent put his beer down next to the bright lantern. He caught Monica’s attention. “Aren’t you going after him?”

Monica tensed. Then she gave a puzzled smile. “Why would I?”

Trent shrugged. “I just thought since you two are a couple now, you might want to comfort him.”

Monica’s face flushed bright red. Her mouth opened and shut.

Conversations around them paused as everyone waited for her response.

Monica stood up. She glowered at Trent, then Angela. “Mind your own business!”

Angela laughed, long and loud. The sound followed the embarrassed woman into the jungle.

Angela glanced around the suddenly tense people. “Does anyone else have something they’d like to get off their chest? I’m not digging in. This is voluntary.”

Heads turned again as people searched for any takers.

Debra stood up. She made fast motions with her hands that a quarter of the camp was now able to understand.

Ian translated for those who hadn’t learned sign language yet. “We’re not staying. The three of us are leaving after the mission team comes home.” They’d still been doing guard shifts and helping with the cooking and waste chores, and that would continue until they left.

Angela’s brow lifted. “The three of you?”

Ed stood up, flushing at being the center of attention. “They asked me to come along. That’s why I resigned. I love it here...just not enough to stay.”

Angela smiled at them even though she was disappointed that Debra was going. “Anyone is free to leave. I wish you nothing but happiness.”

“We were going to come to you in the next few days. We’re all thinking about it to be sure.” Ian put

his hand around Debra's wrist. "We'll still do that. It's only fair that you get a chance to talk us out of it."

Angela chuckled with everyone else, but she had no plans to try. If they wanted to go, then they were allowed. *I only want people here who want to be here.*

Theo smacked his beer on the table. "Now that you've ruined my team by exposing Monica, I guess I can tell you I'm not staying either. Once I get you guys up and running, I'm going home."

Ed immediately reached out. "We'll let you know where we're going. You can stop by on the way to wherever you end up."

"I might." Theo didn't care about the mutters. He knew his value to the future. *But I'm fried. I can't help them when I'm like this.*

"It's your life to do with as you please. And you can all return to visit or stay. It's not one or the other." Angela glanced around again. "Anyone else?"

No one spoke or stood.

Angela allowed concern to enter her tone. "If anyone hears from the mission team, please make sure I'm told."

Dismay went through the camp.

Angela headed for the barn. "I need some help getting the rest of the beer."

Five descendants followed her into the barn while the drinkers cheered.

Angela went to the crate and listened for the camp to start gossiping about everything instead of watching them.

It took half a minute. The low murmurs of chatter let the descendants hold a quick meeting.

“Are we all here?” Zack stayed by the exit to warn of any coming interruptions.

The barn was stacked with things the cooks needed, things the engineering team needed, and various other stuff Angela wanted stored here. There wasn’t much space to move around, but it was sturdy and that was what mattered.

“Yes. The rest are linked into the hive through Jennifer.” Kyle hated being away from her. “She volunteered for point over the ship for the rest of the night.”

No one spoke on that subject, but their thoughts were clear through the link.

She’s doing FND.

The boss will forgive her if she puts in the work.

Good. I like it when she’s on duty. We hear things faster.

Jennifer was relieved that the opinions weren’t bad.

So was Kyle. “Watch the normals while we talk. Jennifer thinks one of them popped and is hiding it.”

The other descendants began studying the camp people through the windows and open doors.

Angela got them rolling. “Has anyone had contact with the mission team?”

All of them shook their heads. No one linked in through the hive spoke up.

Angela gave Kyle the pry bar to use on the crate lid. “The mission team felt it, too. Or maybe they were the cause of it stopping. I know we’d all like to think that.”

“I would.” Jack was honored to be included. He was a low-level Eagle and fairly new to being a descendant. He helped them lift the lid off the crate. “But you don’t.”

Angela lifted a case of beer and handed it to him. “No. Marc’s plan wasn’t a frontal assault. I think this afternoon’s attempt to slow time was already in the works.”

Jack passed the case to Jayda, who was standing a few feet away. They’d automatically formed an assembly line. “Which means it failed. We’re in the clear now.”

“I think it means they have a backup or they wouldn’t have tried.”

Angela nodded at Zack’s comment. “More than one, I’d guess. They’ve collected what they need. Now, they’re experimenting. Very few trials go right on a first attempt. They have extras.”

Jack didn’t like that. “What can we do about it?”

Angela gave the answer none of them were happy with. “Exactly what we did. Bring up your shield and push back.”

Jack paused in passing the beer. “If the mission team didn’t stop it, then one of us did. So why do you sound defeated?”

Angela refused to lie. “We didn’t stop it. Adrian thinks their pusher died during the attempt.”

Panic ran through the hive.

Angela wanted to make promises, but she couldn’t. “Have the senior Eagles meet me in the pool room tomorrow afternoon, along with Tonya and Samantha. We’re going to explore what we learned today.”

Jack frowned. “What did we learn?”

“Maybe nothing, but it also might be a way to stop time.” Angela felt their disbelief. She didn’t feel like trying to convince them right now. “All we can do is try. It’s really up to Marc now.”

“We could go help him.” Jack didn’t care for Angela’s attitude. “Or something, you know? We can’t just abandon them.”

Zack frowned at the low-level man. “Sometimes, people have to learn hard lessons on their own.”

“I don’t understand.”

Angela went to the exit with the last case. “We’re not going after them. That’s my final word on the matter.”

Jayda wished Neil and Wade were here to help convince Angela it was the wrong choice.

Kyle snorted. “Those two are a little busy right now. Try them tomorrow. Maybe.”

Jayda caught the images in Kyle’s mind and snickered. “We’ll have clouds again when we scan them.”

“Yep.” Kyle was glad of the topic change. He gestured with his free hand. “Let’s go do a round of the ship.”

Jayda recoiled. “I don’t want to spy on them!”

“I meant for the other situation. Charlie and Monica returned to the ship. Molly’s already there...”

Jayda understood now. “Molly’s about to be distracted.”

“Exactly. Jennifer won’t have a guard during the drama. She isn’t safe.” Kyle led the way.

Zack let the others go on. He frowned at Angela the entire time.

Angela spoke as soon as they were out of hearing distance. “Don’t ask me why I’m stirring them up if we’re not leaving. Use your brain and answer it yourself.”

Zack pouted as he left, not sure if she was helping him learn something or stalling.

Angela let out a sound of relief. *Both, of course. I love a good twofer.*

Angela put the beer into the pit, then returned to her table, but she stayed standing. While she waited, she checked for people slapping or itching from bug bites and found nothing. Even the mosquitos were leaving them alone. She could hear them and see a few around their lanterns and burning cans, but they weren’t attacking.

The table next to her slowly quieted. It rippled down the eating rows until everyone was looking at her in wary tension.

“In ten minutes, the following people need to report to our new private room for a short talk. It’s above the restaurant. Tonya, Timmy, Candy, Jeff, Missy...”

Murmurs went around as people tried to figure out what the names had in common.

More mutters went through the camp as some of them realized it was a grief service and a therapy session. It was a blatant reminder that some Eagles didn’t return from their runs.

Fear ran through everyone with a loved one on Marc’s team.

“And Adrian.” Angela pointed at the cases of beer being dumped into the slushy beer pit. “Everyone else can have another round or go below for one of the entertainments. I believe the den mothers chose a sci-fi film festival, a reading area with tea and blankets, and a game center with challenges and prizes.” She glanced at Sadie. “The Duck Hunt champ gets an unofficial Eagle jacket and a guaranteed chance to try out for the next set of rookies.”

Sadie longed for that title.

Torn, Adrian didn’t push her in either direction. He wanted a baby and a family, but it could wait until she was trained. They’d all be safer.

Angela went over to help Candy out of her chair. That enormous stomach protruded like a huge fist. She was seven months along and feeling rough. The medics were already on standby for the call. No one expected her to go to term. Twins rarely did.

Conner kept a warm hand on Candy's hip. "You shouldn't be using the stairs."

"Walking is good for me. All the books say so." Candy waddled toward the restaurant, surrounded by helpers. "I'll move real slow. Let everyone else go first."

Angela put a hand in her pocket and resumed squeezing the tennis ball. "Take your time. The others are still trying to figure out what I know or what they did."

"But it's not a bad meeting or I wouldn't be going."

Candy's words lightened the mood. She was right. Candy's reputation was good again. She and Conner were full members of the camp and they were happy together. It was great to know Mitchels were capable of producing good things, too.

Angela glanced at Adrian.

Adrian knew what was happening. He hadn't expected this many ears to fill, but it didn't change how he would do it. Helping people through their problems was part of his old job. He'd been good at it, if not great at times.

Sadie eyed the crowded beer pit. "Can I take one of those into the tunnels with me? A beer and a game sound fun."

"Of course."

Cody rose and came over to her. He held out his little arm. "I'd be happy to escort you."

Sadie giggled. "Sweet."

Adrian watched Cody take her to the hatch, mind spinning.

Cate kicked him in the leg.

“Ow! Why?”

Cate grinned. “I’m bored.”

Adrian felt her need. He sighed, rubbing his leg again. “Just ask. I find it hard to say no to a female; there’s no need to hurt me first.”

The little girl made a face. “But I like it.”

Adrian snorted. “Something else you get from your father.”

Cate nodded. “He hates it that you know him so well.” Her confident tone faded into longing. “I don’t know him at all.”

Adrian assumed the girl wasn’t ready for the comforting arm rub he wanted to deliver. He settled for giving her what she wanted. “This meeting needs a guard. You’re it.”

Cate allowed another bond to form. “Cool.”

Angela stopped to let Conner and the others go through. She glanced back in time to see Cate responding to Adrian. *It’s odd. It’s almost like they’ve chosen a replacement and are putting him into place.*

Angela kept squeezing the tennis ball in her pocket. *That can’t be true. If they wanted him to do anything, they’d treat him like they did earlier. They know he responds to abuse. This is something else...something dangerous.*

Cate looked over her shoulder.

Angela glared at the girl. *Stop it right now. You can't use him against me. We are not going after your dad!*

Cate's eyes lit up with fury.

Adrian leaned out of her way.

Cate barely stopped herself from firing. She got up and stormed off toward the jungle.

Dog came from under the table and followed her.

“Hey!”

Everyone, including Cate and Dog, turned around at his alpha shout.

“I gave you a job!”

Cate really did want that duty. She came back and headed into the restaurant with her nose in the air and a bristling wolf on her heels.

Adrian glanced at Angela. “Maybe you should change your mind.”

“And maybe you should mind your own business!” Angela stomped into the restaurant.

Adrian acted wounded as he followed her. *Well played, Boss. Well played.*

Angela's lips thinned. *This isn't a game. You know how hard it is to get a herd to accept anything as one mind.*

Nope. That's the easy part. Getting them to follow through is what sucks. Gossip is cheap. Actions draw attention.

Angela contemplated the coming night and held in a shudder. She hadn't had a nightmare in weeks.

Descendants began bracing for interrupted sleep and ugly retellings.

Adrian distracted himself as he went up the steps. He concentrated on what to say to the angry, confused, hurting people instead of promising everyone that Angela would be the first to answer Marc's call for help if it came. The downside to it was ego. If he didn't call out to her, Angela wouldn't go. One of them would have to swallow their pride and he doubted it would be the woman now stressing over leaving her heir on the ship with only a skeleton crew.

2

Jennifer saw Charlie come down the torch-lined path toward the beach. Monica was right behind him. *The whore and the pecker head.*

Molly moved closer. "Are you okay?"

Jennifer scanned the calm ocean and the mostly empty top deck. "I've been better. I'm sorry for what's about to happen. I just found out."

Molly saw who was coming. She barely heard Jennifer's words. "She seems stressed. Maybe she needs a back rub."

Jennifer moved toward the bridge so the sentry there could keep an eye on her. If Kyle came back and saw that she didn't have protection, he would complain to the boss and the Eagles. Then they'd start smothering her again.

Ray waved at Piper. "Step out and be obvious."

Piper took a spot at the top of the steps where she could see both Ray and Jennifer.

Charlie climbed the ladder in short, sharp pulls that rattled the ladder and warned people he was coming.

Monica came up right behind him, voice carrying. "I'm sorry!"

"You said you were going to tell her!"

"I was. I got distracted."

"Shut up!" Charlie reached the top deck and went to the ramp.

"Wait! You have to help me do this."

Charlie snorted. "Keep dreaming."

Monica realized he was serious. "Wait. We're a couple now. You can't walk away from this."

Charlie saw Molly first, then Jennifer. It didn't stop his answer. "We were never a couple, Monica. We fucked a few times. We aren't even friends."

Monica stopped, stunned.

Charlie went down the ramp into the ship.

Molly stared in hurt surprise.

Piper groaned from the bridge steps. "I'm not trained for this."

Ray snickered but stayed silent so he could hear whatever came next.

Monica ignored them all. She went to Molly. "I'm sorry. I should have told you we weren't exclusive."

Molly's heart squeezed. "Not exclusive."

Monica faltered at the pain on Molly's face. "I'm sorry... I just don't want a commitment yet. We can keep seeing each other."

"We can." Molly's mind flipped into a new level of damage. "Of course we can."

Monica relaxed. "Good. I need to go cool him down. I'll come by after your shift."

Molly slowly nodded, hands unclenching. "Let me help." She grinned with teeth made of ice. "We'll cool *you* off first."

Monica recoiled.

Molly grabbed her arm and swung the shocked woman over her shoulder. She marched to the rail and hefted Monica overboard. She stayed there, watching, as Monica hit the dark water and went under.

The splash brought guards from the shadows.

Jennifer came over, too, enjoying Monica's shouts when she surfaced. At night, the water was colder. "Will you do the same to Charlie?" Jennifer wanted to know if there was more excitement coming during her shift.

"No. He wasn't the one sleeping in my bed. I don't care about him at all." Molly rubbed her shoulder. "I may have pulled something."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Want to go see the medic?"

"Nope. Gonna think about it the rest of the night and remember how good it felt."

Jennifer put her good hand on Molly's arm. "Now bring it back in."

Molly realized she was putting off currents of rage. The sky above them was starting to react.

“I’m like you!”

Jennifer squeezed her arm and let go. “Yes. I’m sorry for your pain, but I’m also grateful. If she hadn’t flipped you, that lock might not have snapped.”

Molly’s rage calmed to a low simmer. She saw Monica swim to the shore. “Do you think people like that can change?”

Jennifer wasn’t sure. “Maybe, but you can’t be the one to do it. Leave it to the boss. She’s very good at it.”

“I’ll try.” Molly gestured. “We can finish rounds or whatever you want. I’m okay.”

“Good. I want to go help tuck the kids in. I feel the boss coming this way to take point for a while.”

Monica made it onto the pontoon bridge. She considered climbing back up and having a fight. Molly’s glare was a clear challenge.

Jennifer’s sneer said it wouldn’t be a fair fight.

Monica stomped toward the town to stay in the tunnel bunker.

Molly replayed Jennifer’s words. “Is the boss returning because I’m distracted?”

“No. It’s because she wants to be.”

“I don’t get it.”

Jennifer didn’t want to tell the new descendant that Angela was missing Marc so badly she was considering staying the night with the kids. “It’s a

long story. You'll get caught up as soon as we connect you to the hive."

"What if I don't want that?"

Jennifer didn't lie. "Then she'll ask you to leave, Molly. All descendants have to be linked to the hive. We're too dangerous to have mental freedom."

"That's not right."

"It's the only option for our kind. You'll have to make a choice. I hope it's the right one. Don't throw it all away over a cheater. You're worth more than that."

"Would you say the same if it was Kyle?"

Jennifer suppressed the rage. "I'd fry them both where they stood; don't be me. You're better than that, too."

Chapter Fourteen
Lock It Down

1

“Hold that door.”

Charlie stopped and held the elevator he’d just come from. People weren’t supposed to use them unless they were ill or pregnant, but Charlie didn’t care about the rules right now.

Daryl slid by him with a long, heavy bag over his shoulder. “Thanks.”

Charlie caught the scent of blood. He narrowed in on the familiar shape of the bag.

Daryl stopped him from making a scene. “Get in or go away.”

Charlie understood it was an Eagle chore. He glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed.

The passages were deserted. Faint sounds of island merriment came through some of the portholes.

“Make up your mind.”

Curious, Charlie got back into the elevator.

“Incinerator deck.”

Charlie hit the button. He studied the bag... “It’s a body.”

The smell of smoke told him this wasn't the first one Daryl had taken down. The incinerator had already been running.

Daryl readjusted the weight. "It's trash. Always say trash."

Charlie grimaced. "Human lives are not trash!"

Daryl became annoyed. "Since when do you care about anyone but Tracy?"

Charlie clamped his lips together.

Daryl used his free hand to brace as the elevator began moving. Dead bodies weren't like boxes. They shifted, hardened, and resisted going into the furnace. *Even in death, we don't want to be removed.*

"What did he do?" Charlie assumed the gender. Killing women was rare in Safe Haven.

"It's what they wouldn't do."

Charlie's eyes widened. "You killed the rookies!"

Daryl was glad they were in the elevator. "Hush, child. Your mother has enough worries."

Charlie pouted. "All she cares about is giving up the job to Adrian. She's with him now, making him think they'll have a future together down the road."

Daryl tried not to breathe deeply of the rancid air. "Maybe they will. If anything happens to your dad..." Daryl stopped at the immediate rage from the boy.

Charlie pulled it back in. His sharp mind suddenly offered another solution. "What benefits do I have as an Eagle?"

“You’re not an Eagle.”

“Then as the son of the leader here.”

Daryl didn’t lie. “A little more than I do, but a lot less than Kyle does. Get it?”

“Value scale.”

Daryl nodded pointedly. “Leadership rewards those who can be counted on to do the right thing.”

Charlie flushed. Anger opened his mouth. “Are moments like this the reason you’re not as high a level as Kyle?”

Daryl ducked the wild blow easily. “Nope. I’m not as good with people and I know it. He deserves the higher slot.”

Charlie hurried out as soon as the elevator opened, trying not to gag. The scent of shit had grown stronger every second they’d been closed in the elevator.

“Death stinks—literally.”

“Yeah.” Charlie followed Daryl and switched on the light when they reached the incinerator room. He saw the cool furnace and passed off the smoky smell as someone with a cigarette left. “I need the Eagles to support me on something, over my mom.”

Despite carrying a body and the weight of murder, Daryl laughed out loud.

Charlie froze. He hated to be made fun of.

Daryl put the body on the metal table so it could be stripped. He left space for the body that Jeff would bring down next. “Whatever it is, kid, the answer will be no. You’re not an Eagle, not in

leadership, and you aren't her heir. You have zero influence here."

"I want her to go after my dad."

Daryl sighed. He felt bad for the teenager. "I'm sorry. I really am."

"But you won't even consider it."

"No." Daryl walked by him to go collect another body. "We roll when your mom makes the call, not a second before."

2

"This was a good call. Everyone feels a little better now." Conner walked Adrian to the exit of the restaurant.

"Yes." Adrian was happy with how it had gone. Three hours of talking about the people they missed and the mistakes they regretted had let out some of the poison. Adrian wasn't sure why talking with the new preacher wasn't working; he assumed Tim didn't know what to say. People didn't want to be told it was God's will or some things were just destined to happen. They wanted to vent, and remember, and connect with others who were going through the same pain.

Conner stepped out into the cooler night air and scanned the town. Garbage was overflowing from cans that hadn't been lit. The wind was carrying it into the jungle. "No cleanup crew for this, I guess."

"You're too light on people for it. She wanted everyone to have a good evening. Tomorrow will

see crews scouring these grounds for litter.” Adrian had heard the senior guards discussing it.

Shouts and sounds of encouragement came from the open tunnel hatch nearby. The people below were enjoying themselves. The next time Angela wanted to do something like this, more people would be willing.

Adrian studied his son in the fading lantern light. “Why are you scared to get married?”

Conner laughed sarcastically. “You know why. Mitchels are cursed.”

“Only because we make the wrong choices. I have hopes we’ll break that awful tradition.”

“So you’d consider marrying Sadie?”

“Hell, no! Mitchels are cursed.”

Conner chuckled. He also felt better now. Attending the meeting had eased some of his worries.

“She knew you needed time with me.”

Conner felt bad for avoiding his father. “But I made the only choice my heart would allow.”

Adrian put an arm around Conner’s shoulders. “I’m not mad at you for it. I’ve often excluded friends and family in pursuit of love.”

Conner’s snort echoed. “Love?”

Adrian wasn’t upset. “I’ve loved them all, in one way or another.”

Conner pulled away. “You loved their bodies.”

Adrian denied that. “Most times it was for their minds; the bodies barely registered.”

“And the others?”

“I loved them as the future mothers of my children, the extensions of our family.”

Conner couldn't let it go. “That isn't love and you know it.”

Adrian sighed. “It's what I called love for most of my life.”

“And now?”

Adrian scanned the dark jungle, looking toward the ship. “Now I understand the difference and it's too late. She'll never be with me. She'll just use me to further her goals.”

Conner almost felt sorry for his dad. Then he remembered what all Adrian had done. He didn't tell his dad he deserved it, but it hung in the air between them.

Adrian motioned. “You can go stay with Candy if you want. You're off-duty now.”

“She's snoozing next to Cate. She's fine. I am surprised Sadie decided to stay in the tunnels tonight without you, though. I guess winning the Eagle jacket gave her more confidence.”

Adrian rolled his eyes. “She's not afraid of being alone or surrounded by men drinking, shouting, and playing games.”

“She likes it.”

“Yes.” Adrian began the trek toward Cliff Road. “She knows the men here are okay. She fears the females and the kids.”

Conner laughed. “So do I!” He kept pace with his father as they moved through the jungle. When

the hill appeared in front of them, he didn't hesitate to start the climb.

Conner's body was filling out. Adrian was thrilled with how the boy had settled into life here.

"Greg made me promise to eat more and workout. It wasn't my idea."

"It's still good." Adrian was curious about their relationship. "Are you and Greg close?"

Conner nodded. "We almost died together. He's a good man. I hope he comes back."

So did Adrian. He didn't gossip about how Greg had gotten a demon, but he wanted to.

Conner didn't either, but he was certain of why. Angela wanted everyone to be a descendant, even those who weren't supposed to be one.

Adrian didn't repeat his offer to let Conner skip this. He wanted the time with his son. He just wanted to make sure Conner was happy. If that meant missing this moment, he would.

"Thank you for understanding. I'm good."

Adrian beamed. "Yes, you are."

Both males tensed as their link to the hive lit up with Jennifer's voice. They listened intently even though it wasn't the first mental call she'd made tonight.

3

I know you're one of us. You have two days to adjust and prepare your friends and family. After that, I will hunt you down. All descendants must be

linked into the hive. It's how we monitor each other for cracks and corruption. Come talk to any of us within the next two days. We might even keep it quiet for a little longer if it's going to cause problems. Jennifer let go of the descendant minds who understood why she was doing things this way. Molly wasn't the only normal who'd popped.

Morgan tucked the small blanket around Roy's leg as they walked. The boy was sleeping heavily over his shoulder and had been since midnight. "How can they sleep like this? My spine would be screaming."

Jennifer didn't have an answer. Autumn was sleeping in her good arm, slightly turned so one arm and one leg were dangling. Every time Jennifer had adjusted the child, Autumn immediately rolled back over.

"It's for moments like this." Ray was still with them and now in the lead for rounds. Trent had been sent to the island. Ray had refused to go. He didn't want to be away from Grant, who was in the bridge. "Parents need to work, or hunt, or gather. Beds are an unnecessary comfort."

Morgan huffed softly. "I'd like to disagree."

Jennifer sent out the mental notice again as they reached the mid-deck of the giant ship. *I know you're one of us. You have two days to adjust and prepare your friends and family. After that, I will hunt you down. All descendants must be linked into the hive. It's how we monitor each other for cracks and corruption. Come talk to any of us within the*

next two days. We might even keep it quiet for a little longer if it's going to cause problems.

“Two in the same day seems strange.”

Ray nodded at Morgan's comment. He held the door for the tired adults. “That's why we're searching for the lurker now. She isn't doing constant rounds for the exercise.”

Jennifer snickered. “Actually, I was, but the mood shifted and I decided this was a good way to flush them out.”

Morgan tensed. “A lurker, like we faced in the mountain?”

“It could be.” Ray decided to be positive. “Maybe they're just scared. It is a huge change, especially if you've spent the last year hating magic.”

Jennifer went by the sentry post. “I don't feel menace.”

Morgan's unease grew. “Do you feel anything at all from them?”

Jennifer checked the guard mentally and didn't find anything. She was doing it with everyone they passed, but there was no sign of anyone hiding anything that leadership didn't already know about. “No, but I feel the new presence. I think I can track them down, but it will take a while.”

Ray caught on to Morgan's tension. “What if they were already lurking, as a normal?”

Morgan nodded. “It's possible.”

Ray's hand slid to his gun. "Start tracking them now. We'll drop the kids with Brittani and Daryl on the way."

Jennifer wanted to. She connected to Angela for the choice.

Now manning the bridge while Grant slept in the cot behind her and Piper stood on the steps, Angela also considered it. She reluctantly refused. *You said two days. We'll honor it.*

Jennifer cursed herself. "I'll make it one day next time."

Morgan couldn't help the concern. "Maybe half that would be better."

Jennifer finally felt his fear. She was disgusted with herself. *Now we'll have two days of tension while we wait for a possible time bomb to go off. Damn it! "I'm sorry."*

Angela wasn't upset. *It takes time, and moments like this, to perfect the job. You're doing fine. Carry on.*

Jennifer's self-doubt eased a bit. *Thank you.*

Morgan realized Jennifer's confidence had taken the same hit as her shoulder—it was damaged, but healing.

"Let's go ask if the medics need help with anything." *Or if they've noticed anything in the new people.* Jennifer hated not being able to identify the lurker with her gifts, but this required her mind. *I know that I know them. They feel familiar...and I don't think I like them because it makes my stomach churn.*

Ray and Morgan immediately assumed the person was evil. They reached for their radios at the same time.

“You have no proof.” Jennifer glared at both men. “Don’t upset the good mood!”

“We don’t need proof to take precautions. If we wait to have a suspicion confirmed, it could be too late.” Morgan keyed his radio and held it out to Ray.

Ray frowned as he spoke. “Boss, I think we should lock it down for a quick security check. We want to make sure that quake didn’t shake a straggler loose from their hiding spot.”

Because Angela had used that openly right after the quake, it was acceptable to use it now.

A few seconds later, Angela’s calm voice came over the ship’s PA system and every active radio. “Prepare for a lockdown drill, Safe Haven. Sorry, but now’s a great time for me to improve security. Feel free to sleep through it if you’re not an Eagle; just don’t leave the area you’re in until we call all clear.”

Down in the ship, Jennifer took the steps to the medical bay. “Daryl made Brittani sleep in the overnight wing. We’ll drop the kids and start right there.”

Ray got his book out and removed the newly printed checklist for their lockdown sweeps. He spoke into his radio as they walked. “All Eagles are now on call. Get up, find your gun and vest, and wait for orders. On duty Eagles will don their vests

and begin constant rotations until otherwise notified.”

They were slowly developing a routine for people to use. Back when Adrian had been in charge, Marc and Neil had created an evacuation plan that Kenn had fine-tuned for their mountain escape, but they hadn’t covered how to react to a crisis. Angela and Kyle were doing that now.

Muttering camp members and Eagles staggered to their taped copies of the checklist and got started. Doors shut and locked throughout the ship. Guards appeared in the halls, searching for problems.

On the island, hatches were shut and locked; bullet-deflecting curtains were lowered and Eagles came from their beds to stand watch over the sleeping camp.

Jennifer felt danger invade the air. She hurried toward the steps, not sure if they were taking the kids into a danger zone.

Morgan shifted Roy to his other shoulder so the child was protected from jostling by the Eagles coming into the hall. “We’ll cover the action. You’ll cover the kids.”

“Deal.” Jennifer went faster, now able to feel death sweeping through. She inhaled deeply, forehead wrinkling. “Wait.”

Ray beat her to it. “I smell smoke.”

Adrian kept walking even though he had a bad feeling and his legs were starting to ache. “You can get to the perimeter, but the Eagles have things sealed off by now. They won’t open doors or hatches until Angela calls off the lockdown.”

Conner realized that was true. He forced himself to resume the trek up Cliff Road to Adrian’s shack. Since the problem seemed to be on the ship, he wasn’t as concerned. “Do you think I’ll be happy with Candy?”

“Maybe. You just need to do things a little differently.”

“Like what?”

“Start with your words, son. Ask if you’ll be happy with Candy *and your kids*. She’s going to give birth in the next month and then you’re a stepdad. Most kids hate that authority figure. Start thinking of them as yours and it will all go easier. Make the kids happy and their mom automatically gets a boost from it.” Adrian took the path to his shack without hesitating. He had the number of steps memorized now. He could get there without sight if he needed to.

“I don’t know how to be a father.”

Adrian winced. “I’m sorry for that. But a lot of people don’t know how to parent. You’ll learn it as you go. The number one rule is no violence, in any form. Don’t even yell if you can help it. You see how Charlie hates Kenn. And how he ignores his mom on everything?”

Conner thought about the affair and confessed. “I knew about that and didn’t tell anyone.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised. “The Eagles kept it quiet, too. The boss will either accept that or make it clear that she wants to be informed. Either way, no one knew what to do this first time. You’re in the clear.”

Adrian moved quickly over the rocky path, trying not to gasp for air as his home came into view. The flag above his shack was already losing its glow. Adrian vowed to find something else to use that wasn’t needed by the camp. It didn’t feel right not to have a flag on his home.

Conner swept Adrian’s shack. It seemed like a miserable place to spend time.

Adrian didn’t say differently. When Conner was older, he might remember this moment and be able to give himself the answer. Not everything was best when spelled out. Right now, he would blow off the explanation of enjoying being alone with only a tiny area to care for. Later, he would understand that’s how adults retained their sanity in an insane world that had pushed them to the edges of society because they weren’t pretty enough, rich enough, skilled enough. *It’s a defense. Like Charlie’s affair.*

“You think he’ll do it again.”

Adrian shrugged. “Maybe. Charlie is angry and bitter, and he feels guilty over Tracy’s abuse.”

“He didn’t do that.”

“He chased her even while she was recovering. He made a bad choice next by getting her pregnant

so no other man would steal her before he could grow up. He made the same mistakes that I would have if Angela had given me any room to maneuver.”

Conner hated being reminded of his father’s flaws almost as much as he hated their family reputation. Both had caused him trouble all of his life. “I thought Marc always came between you two.”

“He was there, but Angela’s not wired to cheat. She stopped it. And I’m grateful.”

Conner was surprised. “Really?”

“Yes. I’m a much better person now. I miss living in the faster lane sometimes, but I love the new man I’m becoming.”

Conner gave Adrian a fast hug. “Me, too.”

Adrian tried not to cry as he hugged his son back. He looked over Conner’s shoulder toward the beach and connected to Angela to thank her.

Movement immediately drove that from his mind.

Adrian let go of his son and took off running down the hill as fast he could go. *Smoke! Angie! The ship’s on fire!*

5

“Keep those doors shut! Put clothes against the cracks! Open your windows!”

“No windows!” Angela ran by the descendant deck, following the thick stream of smoke coming

through the hallway. “No more windows or you’ll cause a backdraft!”

Stuart began shoving terrified people back into their cabins. “Get in there!”

Angela didn’t have time to stop and correct him again. She used her radio and her mind. “*Get off the ship! Evacuate! Check every cabin!*”

On her heels, Dace grabbed a fire extinguisher from the rack as they ran by.

Everyone behind them did the same. They’d put stacks of extinguishers all over the ship. They were about to find out if that would save them.

“All camp members need to evacuate the ship immediately!” Jonny’s bleary voice told everyone he’d returned to the DJ booth on the entertainment deck. “Walk to the nearest exit. Follow your normal routes. Do not use the elevators or employee halls.”

Angela keyed her mike as soon as he stopped talking. “Clear that deck and work your way down, Jonny!”

“You got it.”

Angela slid down the railing on her hands. She brought up her shield against the thicker smoke. “We have about three minutes of air inside when it’s solid. We’ll have to get clean air in rotations.”

Angela felt two strong lifeforces flying her way. She stopped outside the glowing red door to the machine room, able to see flames shooting up through the window. The relief area, machinery zone, and a hallway were engulfed. “We have a

spreading fire on the machine deck. Get off this ship right now!”

The ship groaned under them. *Don't leave me!*

Grant's voice came over the PA. “The fire suppression system isn't working in there. I'm turning on the others to soak everything around you!”

Foamy water shot from nozzles in the ceiling. Steam rose from the walls around the fire.

Angela felt Adrian and Conner reach them, along with ten other sweating bodies who'd run down here like she had. Then she opened the door and hurried into hell.

6

Jennifer shoved Autumn into Brittani's arms as Morgan put Roy into Daryl's. She wanted to offer directions, but there wasn't time.

Brittani took the diaper bag. “Go do what you do. We'll get the kids to the island and stay with them.”

Jennifer turned away reluctantly. “Thank you.”

Pam came from the exam room across the hall. She merged into the chaos of the evacuation and let it carry her along. Her moving lips weren't noticed at all.

Morgan grabbed Jennifer's good hand and tugged. “Let's go!”

Jennifer pulled free but quickly realized they were going to get separated. The passages were full

of people running to and from the fire. She took a firm hold on Morgan's belt and ran right behind him so his big body protected her from being knocked aside by the people who were panicking.

The smoke thickened noticeably. Coughs echoed through the spreading fear. Jennifer sent out calm as they ran, but she didn't try to force anyone into a different direction. The sight of fleeing low-level Eagles saddened her, but it was their lives to use as they saw fit.

Alarms blared and lights flashed. Power went off in rooms as they ran by. Grant was trying to shut everything down to minimize the damage. Jennifer's lungs burned from the run and the smoke.

Morgan hurried down the steps instead of sliding so they didn't lose contact. The lights above them flickered...and went out.

Shouts and cries of pain filled the area to compete with the smoke.

Kyle shoved his way through and met them at the bottom of the steps. "We're rotating with extinguishers. Shields up; make them solid. The smoke's too thick for the normals. If you see one, send them out!"

Morgan and Jennifer brought up shields and followed Kyle. Now separated, Morgan was left behind because he refused to leave her unguarded from the rear.

The Eagles didn't notice, but they wouldn't have liked it if they had.

Kyle did notice it and he approved. Jennifer's safety meant everything to him. He would have sent her to the island if he thought she would go.

Jennifer staggered as a blast of heat drove people backward. Flames shot up the wall in front of them, sending fresh black smoke through the room.

The heat rose, making it harder to breathe. People gasped in the tiny breeze coming through an open porthole.

"Get those shields up!" Kyle grabbed a normal and spun him toward the exit. "Get out of here, Rico! Go help people evacuate!"

Morgan pushed Jennifer behind him as furious orange and yellow flames climbed the walls and spread to the ceiling. *All three leaders are in here. That's not allowed!*

Jennifer let the other Eagles push her toward the exit. All of them had extinguishers.

Jack ran around her and hurried into the roaring heat. Not to be outdone, Hannah and Erin followed, grinning wildly. It was their first adventure.

Jennifer had to lower her shield for air. Thick smoke filled her lungs and forced her to retreat even further.

No longer in range of the fire, Jennifer yanked off her kit and began digging through it for the medical bag in the bottom. There was no way they wouldn't have burns and other injuries when this was finished.

Lisa and Jayda ran by her with more extinguishers.

Jennifer ducked their wild movements and grabbed her radio. “That’s enough people down here! Help with the evacuation!”

Adrian came through the smoke, gasping. He dropped an empty extinguisher by the wall.

Jennifer lifted her shield over him so he could get a breath without smoke in it. Her shield was automatically filtering out the worst of it.

Conner came out next, coughing smoke. He stepped right through her barrier, desperate for fresh air.

Jennifer kept pulling out medical items, heart pounding. The fire was bad. If they didn’t get it under control soon, they might lose the ship.

Adrian tapped. “Let me out.”

Jennifer lowered her shield so both males could go back in to help.

Inside the fiery hall, Morgan pushed Angela away from the front line of the blaze. “Let her through!”

Angela struggled through the firefighters to reach the window that was already open. She lowered her shield and sucked in smokey air as tears rolled over her cheeks. Smoke came from her mouth as she gasped out words through her burning throat. “Ice it.”

Morgan used his new gift for the first time in front of everyone.

Molly joined him. "I think I have that, too!"

Everyone else retreated as Morgan and Molly fired ice that coated the walls and ceiling and immediately melted.

The blaze pushed back in a roar, hungry.

Adrian felt death arrive. His eyes went to the woman he loved and then to the son he adored. This time, it was easy to make the right choice.

Adrian shoved Conner toward the exit. "Get out of here!" He pushed through the other descendants, trying to reach Angela. "Get out of here!"

Only a few people heard him over the angry rumble of the blaze.

Angela stumbled through the smoke and put a hand on Morgan's shoulder, lending energy. She didn't have a copy of the ice gift yet. That would change after this.

Other descendants came forward to lend their energy. Jayda brought up her shield to deflect some of the heat from Morgan and Molly.

Morgan's terror rose another level. "It's on the spare oxygen tanks! Aim there!" Fear beat against his brain. Sweat dripped from his hair unnoticed. "Don't let it—"

The ship groaned an instant before the tank was breached. They all heard it clearly. *Help me!*

The first oxygen tank exploded.

It blew through the wall and then the people trying to put out the fire.

Chapter Fifteen

Start Accepting That

1

“**F**ood’s burning. I smell it.” Greg groaned as his swollen stomach clamped and twisted. “No more burnt food.”

Greg snapped awake from the standing doze. Fear refilled his mind. *I’m still here, in this cage. They hurt me. They’re about to do it again.*

He’d lost count of the days since their capture; it might have been five. The first two had been naked isolation in the dark, unable to see, hear, or taste anything. When the hoses had come on, he’d barely felt the cold drenching for getting a drink. Smells, he’d had the entire time. Shit and vomit were bad, but the acid scent of his piss fading into nothingness was the worst. *They weakened me.*

No one talked to him at all. He hadn’t heard another voice since they’d been overwhelmed on the beach. *That’s where I lost my eye.*

Greg mentally spun away from the memory. He held onto the slimy cage bars and braced as best he could. It was hard to get ready for pain. Rushing in as an Eagle was different than being totally helpless in front of the enemy. His demon was useless while he was drugged and his captors had been very

careful to keep him that way. He'd also lost count of how many needles had been plunged into his body, so he couldn't narrow down how long it had been that way either. *I have to find a way out!*

He'd never seen cells like these. They had no weak spots to kick apart and no hole for a key. *I can't pick a lock that doesn't exist.*

The ceiling above the cell had wide beams that supported either a roof or another floor. It was impossible to tell. There were no noises from outside this room. They hadn't been questioned. No demands or accusations had been made. It was almost like the crews here couldn't speak. *They don't even talk to each other.*

Greg couldn't see the other mission members, but he'd heard them. He assumed they were all somewhere in this huge warehouse with dark green walls and concrete floors that led to a single exit. That beckoning egress was guarded by a wide gate made the same way as these cells—with no hole for the key. He hadn't seen the gate open once, even though these weren't the same tormentors as last time. *Maybe they all live in here and are rocked to sleep by our screams.*

Male and female forms in UN uniforms glided by with no expressions or self-expression. They didn't jump at shouts or swipes through the bars. They didn't grimace at vomit spraying them. Their noses didn't curl as turds dropped near their gravity boots. They worked awful routines of pain, hoses,

and drugs without responding to any stimuli. *Maybe they're AI.*

Three of the emotionless blocks approached his cell with tools Greg recoiled from. He cringed against the rear of the cell as they advanced. "What do you want?!"

Flames shot out.

Darkness swarmed Greg's sight. He fled from the agony, seeking sanctuary in his mind. *Lisa.*

Greg pushed through the mental fog while his body arched and a scream ripped from his aching mouth. He went deeper, squinting through the one eye that still worked. *Lisa?*

Over here! The woman's shape was intimately familiar to Greg. He rushed toward her, leaving the smell of his burning flesh behind.

Lisa couldn't see anything through the fog. "My dreams are usually clear. This is too much smoke."

"They burnt the food."

"I think the ship exploded."

Greg's words dried up; terror took their place as heat neared his groin. *This is going to be bad.* He surrounded Lisa with his arms and broken fingers. *Hold me!*

"Always!" Lisa squeezed him tightly and snapped awake. Tears rolled over her burnt cheeks. "Greg! Greg!"

Her shrieks didn't wake Erin, who was in the bed next to her. Erin had been sedated while they cleaned out her burns. She'd gotten hit by melted plastic pieces.

The screams brought the medics and guards.

“They’re burning him alive! Greg!”

People winced as they realized she’d been dreaming of the mission team. The explosion, combined with her worry, had created a nightmare.

Terry used smelling salts to make sure she was fully awake.

Tonya gently held Lisa’s burnt hand. The woman had been lucky. Her injuries were minor compared to those who’d been closer to the explosion.

Lisa’s shrieks faded to sobs. “We have to help him!”

Tonya gave the platitude she’d learned from the old world. “It was just a dream, honey. You’re awake now. It’s okay.”

Lisa shook her head wildly; more tears spilled. “It was real! He needs us!”

Tonya tried again to get through. “You were dreaming about the explosion. Your mind mixed things up.”

Lisa kept crying. She knew what had happened, and that she was hurt, but Greg’s pain was all she could feel.

Terry injected the sedative into Lisa’s IV tube.

Tonya patted the woman’s hand again and waited for this night to be over.

The medical bay stank of burnt things. Smoke was lingering in places. The air and heat had been off, and most of their windows were closed to keep out the bugs. The smoke had nowhere to go, but

they didn't have the manpower to open them all, and they didn't want to activate the heat or air. It would draw the smoke into the vents, where it would linger longer.

"It's times like these that I miss the people who left, even before the mission team rolled out."

Tonya frowned at the medic. "You mean Ivan."

Terry wasn't intimidated by her disapproval. "Yes, I do. He was handy to have around. I can't believe he split."

Tonya kept her voice down. "I don't believe it. He gave up a chance to be with the boss for some unknown adventure? No way."

Terry silently concurred. *Maybe Marc got rid of him.*

Tonya agreed. That made more sense.

"Greg..." Lisa surrendered to the darkness with tears drying to her cheeks.

Lisa's injuries had been cleaned, coated in silver sulfadiazine cream and then layered in plastic wrap. Tonya never would have considered using plastic wrap for anything but prolonging the life of leftovers. Now, it was helping to prolong the lives of their injured people. It didn't stick to the cream, didn't have to be held down with tape that fragile skin couldn't handle, and they had loads of it.

Tonya listened through the open door. The medical bay was full and still active, but it wasn't the chaotic furor of earlier. This was the first calm period they'd gotten since the explosion. Half the medics were taking a break now, while they could.

Handling the radiation sickness had taught them valuable lessons on conserving energy. The average time length of burns was triple other emergencies and disasters. Even things like gunshots couldn't compare to the wear and tear. Gunshots were over fast. The person lived or died right then, for the most part. Burns took days or even weeks to kill the victim. This would be a marathon instead of a fast run.

Tonya was grateful not to be doing it alone. Everyone with healing skills had been brought in as soon as the fire was out. The rooms around this one all had someone there to keep an eye on the patients. They'd worked straight through to get everyone stable, but they hadn't been able to heal them like in the past. "Lisa didn't have a magic treatment from anyone, right?"

Terry made a note on Lisa's chart. "No, not that I found in her file. We've been keeping track of that for everyone since before Ciemus, so it would have been at least six months ago."

"And yet, she's barely responding."

"I think burns are another magic limit."

Tonya wasn't happy about that. "We'll add it to Neil's books so it can be tested later."

They both winced at the thought of burning someone just to collect data.

Standing in the hallway, Jennifer stared in concern.

Security was light despite the explosion. They'd already been shorthanded and the deficit had now

doubled. *More camp members have to join the Eagles or we're going to have to take in new people even though we don't want them.*

The ceiling lights flickered briefly before regaining normal brightness, drawing Jennifer's attention. The ship was moaning and creaking in pain, rattling their nerves. Tonya had tried to calm it, but she'd gotten an angry zap for her trouble. Jennifer was worried about that. If the ship turned on them, they wouldn't be able to keep using it and right now, this ship was providing almost every aspect of their life support.

Ray entered the medical bay and came to her with updates. "I toured the damage zone. All the embers are out. Do you want the rest of it right now? I can put it in a report for later."

All of them were dirty and stinking of smoke and sweat. Ash smudges stubbornly resisted attempts to remove them, leaving streaks and swipes on arms, faces, knobs, switches, and walls. Ray scrubbed at his hands while he waited for her response.

"Is it important?" Jennifer paused her newest fear and scanned the tired man. It was almost dawn. None of them had slept yet and none of them would until they dropped or the crisis was over.

"Maybe. I'm too tired to judge."

"Then give me all of it and I'll decide." Jennifer went to the next medical room. She was making a continuous round of this zone. She was on duty here as a sentry, but also as their leader.

Angela's body was hard to look at. Jennifer forced herself to do it. Their healers were also making rounds, but it wasn't doing much. *We're almost immune to magical healing now. I wish there was some way to increase our skills in that before it's too late.*

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside the med bay.

Ray immediately brought up a shield around Jennifer and slid a hand over his gun.

Conner tapped on the main door. "Coming in." Everyone was on edge. Most of the guards were announcing their presence to keep twitchy fingers from pulling triggers.

Ray lowered the shield and stayed close. He didn't fully trust Conner, but it wasn't the sweaty boy's fault. His family name had preceded him.

Conner was used to that reaction. "It always does." He stopped a few feet from Jennifer. "My dad has things under control on the island. He hasn't found any plots or danger. If he sends someone to you for a private job, you need to dig into them or take them out on the spot."

"That's good." Jennifer had sent Adrian to cover point duty in the tunnel bunker right after he'd carried Angela's crispy body in here. Conner and others were going back and forth to help and get updates between healing sessions. "Are you okay for a while longer?"

Conner grinned, snorting.

Jennifer chuckled sadly, remembering when she'd had unlimited energy. She hadn't felt like that since before the war.

Conner brought up something he felt was important. "Not everyone left the ship. Some of them barely woke until the explosion and even then, they weren't sure if they should evacuate."

Jennifer paused. "Didn't it go over the radios?"

Ray had that answer. "It did, but there were too many calls going out. Not all of them were clear, and a lot of people had been drinking."

Jennifer added it to her notes. In moments of chaos, things got missed. They'd been sending people to check all the cabins for injuries. "Those people would have been accounted for."

"In bodies."

Jennifer sympathized with Conner's frustration. The ship damage wasn't as bad as they'd first thought, but it could have been and all those cabin dwellers would have died. "We'll find a way to fix it."

"Why didn't they hear you through the hive connection?" Ray had been wondering that since it happened.

Jennifer hated herself in that moment. "I forgot to use it. It's a huge mistake."

Conner and Ray both offered comfort and clichés.

Jennifer pounded herself mentally and vowed to never handle things that way again. *Angela was*

right—it's all learning experience that I can't get from training sessions or drills.

“Neil said he can come back whenever you need him. Wade’s floating. They got Samantha and the boys out to the beach and then came back to help evacuate the top decks. Then Neil went to help Adrian keep the camp under control.”

“He should stay on the island in case the camp members don’t accept Theo’s answer. Adrian might need the help.” Jennifer gestured toward Morgan. She wasn’t ready for anymore updates or choices yet. Something was nagging in the rear of her mind. She needed to pull that thread first. “He needs you the most. Jayda’s next, then the boss again.”

Conner took a bottle of water from the lounge cooler and downed it while he went into Morgan’s room.

Charlie came from Angela’s side.

Jennifer and Ray faced him in accidental tandem, brows lifted.

“She’s breathing better now. Some of the burns healed up.” Charlie dropped into the chair by the cooler. “I’ll do it again as soon as I get my breath back.”

Jennifer pointed at an empty bed a few doors down. “Go take a nap; finish a bottle of water while you get comfortable.”

Charlie did it without arguing. He’d already delivered a healing session to all of their injured people and two to his mom. It was helping, but not quickly.

Jennifer's relief cleared room for more work. She motioned at Ray. "Let me have the updates now."

Ray examined his notes. "All the fires are out and Theo is in there poking around to figure out what happened. We have security all over it, along with a phone video rolling to prove his findings. He says it seems like an accident, but he'll make a final call when he's sure."

Jennifer hoped that was true. "I want to know the minute he decides. If it goes the other way, I'll need time to prep the others."

The hive was buzzing unhappily in their minds. The descendants were sure someone had tried to sink their ship and they were blaming the lurker who'd refused to admit they were really a descendant. No one had come forward yet, but the clock on that was still ticking.

"We've had two fights. One was a couple of drunks in a literal pissing contest that the wind won. The other was an Eagle accusing a camp member of trying to blow up the ship. Adrian calmed the situation and convinced everyone that wasn't true. If it is, Adrian's credibility will be ruined again."

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "Least of my worries. Keep going."

"Monica is with Theo, as well as the rest of his team. A few descendants who know what they're doing insisted on staying to observe. They said the video isn't enough because anyone can hit stop or pause."

Jennifer sighed. “We’ll allow it for now and handle it when his findings come down.”

Ray was furious. “If the normals did this...”

Jennifer didn’t need to lie to him. “Yep. The laws here will change. The same is true if it was one of ours.”

Ray wanted more details. “Meaning?”

“The magic laws will be put into place.” Tonya joined them at the front desk. “There are laws for our kind that will severely restrict our freedoms and usher in a new age of warfare.”

Jennifer didn’t want to think about that right now, but it would be also another step in the grand plan to take control. Magic laws would come before Safe Haven’s rules.

Tonya held up a hand to stop Ray so she could ask a question. “Do you want to keep the medics and healers rotating or send them out for the night since it’s been four hours?”

Jennifer scanned the eight injured people around her and found most of them teetering on the edge. “Tell them to keep coming right back from their breaks. I don’t feel okay sending them to bed yet.” She looked at Ray.

“That was my last item.” He put away his book. “That’s it for my updates. Anything you need or want?”

“I’d like to have the cooks open the mess with coffee and cold items here on the ship. Then they can do breakfast on the island like they’d planned.

Tell them to keep people fed and happy, but not to deplete supplies other than what we allotted.”

“No worries. Thelma sent mugs of coffee to the guards a little while ago. I think she’s planning on a food delivery, too.”

“Nothing heavy or it will make us sleepier.”

“I’ll let her know.” Ray went to the steps.

Jennifer felt the stress balling up behind her sockets. Kyle was doing rounds of the ship, then the beach while checking on the kids and gathering more updates. He was reporting to her once an hour. It was tense. She hated having her kids in a tent with the others who’d been on the ship, but she couldn’t send them down into the tunnels without any of the adults they depended on. She also didn’t feel good about them being on this boat until Theo declared it safe again. “What a fucking mess.”

“Watch your mouth!” Morgan’s shout drew weak mirth.

Everyone felt his pain from Conner’s healing session. His roommate, Jack, hadn’t woken yet.

Jennifer forced herself to resume her own rounds. She entered the double room with Dace and Jayda. Both of them had required a tracheotomy to help them breathe. Oxygen treatments were helping, but both guards were in bad shape.

Cody glanced up from the blanket-filled chair between them. His bloodshot orbs fought to focus.

“Go back to sleep. I’m just checking in.”

Cody dropped right back out. Despite having youth, he had no reserve energy to spare for healing

sessions. He was crashing after each one. He was also keeping Jayda and Dace alive.

Jennifer went to the next room to check on Angela and the new woman, Hannah. All the medics assumed she would die because of the curse on that name. So did Jennifer.

Eight good men and women had been critically injured and they didn't know if it had been an attack. "Should I be acting like we're at war?"

Angela didn't answer.

Hannah didn't respond either. The medics had sedated her right after her first healing session because she was screaming about burning alive. Jennifer stared at the badly injured woman. "But she wasn't saying *I'm hurt* or *I'm burning*. She said..."

Hannah whimpered in her sleep.

Jennifer's heart rate increased. "She said *they're* burning. She was dreaming about the mission team, too."

Jennifer glanced toward Lisa's room. "Are they all?"

She connected to each of their injured people and tried to see their dreams.

2

"They're just rookies! They volunteered! They don't know anything!"

Harry and the rookies had been separated and taken to a corner of this warehouse. After days of darkness and drugs, the torture had started. There

had been two brief pauses where he'd been fed and watered, and hosed off. The rookies hadn't been fed at all. Their bodies were showing it; their frantic shouts for food in exchange for information were awful on every level.

Harry had tried to share his food and been beaten for it. Eating while the starving rookies drooled and begged had crushed him. *I ate instead of starving with them. I'm no Eagle.*

Heat sprayed over the cells again.

Harry struck the slimy bars in outrage. "Stop it! Let me help them! Let me out!"

Fire flamed over his cell next, sending him into the corner to avoid the blast. Flame throwers were impossible to argue with when you didn't have a weapon.

Harry broke. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know! Just stop it and feed them!"

More fire hit the rookies, burning them alive.

Rancid odors covered Harry in fury and fear. "I'll kill you all for this! I'll kill you all!"

Jayda snapped awake. "Let me out! I can save them!"

Jennifer hurried in with Terry. She comforted the injured woman while he checked her vitals and made sure she didn't pull out any tubes.

Dace didn't react at all.

Cody flinched awake and stumbled over to help.

“We have to save them...” Jayda passed out. Her body didn’t have the oxygen it needed to stay awake.

Terry replaced the oxygen tube in Jayda’s burnt nose while Cody used the little energy he’d regained to ease her pain.

Jayda’s body relaxed as she fell into a dreamless slumber this time.

Jennifer directed Cody back to the chair while she connected to the hive. *General alert. We’re getting flashes of the mission team...and it’s horrible. I don’t know if it’s a trick or real. When I do, I’ll update you. It’s the same with our issues here. As soon as our investigator makes a call, I’ll let you know.* Jennifer gave them the update everyone was waiting for. *There’s no change in our injured people. They’re all alive. That’s the best news, right?*

Jennifer let go. She couldn’t stand to act hopeful when she wasn’t. “We’re going to get more people down here now. Put them to work watching over our friends. Get it organized and I’ll support you as needed.”

Terry was honored. He was also incensed. “I hope it was an accident. If it wasn’t...”

Jennifer knew. “Yeah. We could have another explosion. And none of us will try to put out the fire this time.”

“They had to sedate Missy. She was screaming for Shawn.” Terry dropped into the chair across from Jennifer, who had stretched out on the couch in the reception area around noon. “I’m not sure this is just bad dreams from the explosion. Missy wasn’t even there.”

“It’s not.” Jennifer left the grimy arm sling off and carefully used that hand to scrub the crust from her lashes. She sat up and checked her watch. She’d slept for two hours. It felt like two minutes.

“What the hell is going on?”

Jennifer forced her legs to hold her as she stood. “The mission team has been captured. They’re being interrogated and tortured.”

“Then we have to go after them!”

Annoyed quickly by his yelling, Jennifer gestured angrily. “Look around! We’re not in any condition to go anywhere.”

“Not everyone was hurt.” Terry hated his opinion, but he still put it out there. “Adrian could do it. So could Kyle...or you.”

Jennifer sighed, anger fading back into exhaustion. “This camp will split down the middle. You know that. Stop making me feel bad for something I can’t fix.”

Terry knew she was right. “I have to try. It’s hurting me!”

Jennifer didn’t tell him it was worse as a descendant. She was getting the fear and terror from their minds and from the hive connection. “We have to trust Marc.”

Terry let out a curse that made Jennifer flinch and brought Dog to her side.

Dog was doing rounds of the ship and the island. Adrian had told him comforting people would help; Dog just wanted to catch the bad guy. He tolerated the crying on his fur in hopes that he would get to crunch someone's neck for disturbing their peace.

Jennifer rubbed Dog's soft fur and tried not to cry. "We'll get through this. I know I'm not Angela, but I know what she would say. We have to take care of the camp first, always."

Terry leaned his chair back. He didn't shed tears for his friendship yet, but he would. Harry probably wasn't coming home. *I should start accepting that.*

Radios crackled in blaring panic. "We have a fight in the mess. I need help breaking it up!"

Jennifer sighed miserably at the radio call. Then she locked it all away and keyed her radio. "I'm on my way. If they're still fighting when I get there, things will get rough."

Jennifer hoped that helped because she didn't have the energy to punish anyone with magic right now. She was exhausted, empty, sad.

Jennifer hurried from the medical bay, leaving Terry in charge of both normals and descendant patients. There wasn't another choice. Later, that whole mess would likely restart and she was dreading it. "But he's staying. I need every medic in there trying to save lives. Prejudices have to be put aside. So do my suspicions."

Jennifer didn't see Rico come from the employee passage as she hurried toward the steps

Rico didn't pause in his plans. He wasn't scared of Jennifer. *The only one I fear is lying in a medical bed, covered in creams and burns. I'm safe until she heals up.*

Rico had no doubts about Angela's recovery. *You can't kill that chick. Anyone who wants to hurt her needs to pick an easier target. Like her kids.*

Chapter Sixteen

Read Between The Lines

1

“**H**oly crap!” Chad paused in the entrance of the mess. He considered going in and hesitated. *I need to be doing so many other things right now.*

“I’ll kill you!”

“Take that!”

The mess was trashed. Chairs were being used as weapons. Table settings were projectiles and bludgeoning tools. Trays were spread across the floor, along with food and blood smears. Violent motions and words were everywhere.

Chad was tired and fed up with policing the aftermath of the explosion. He’d been used as errand boy for the last twelve hours.

Wade shoved by him. “Come on!” He ran into the middle of the ten-person brawl and started dropping people.

Those who’d learned Daryl’s one-hit maneuver copied him, enjoying the practice.

Chad still hesitated. The entire fight was made up of Eagles and they weren’t holding back. Blood was dripping from noses and mouths, making the floor slick. Boots slid and recovered or slid and fell, but no one stopped swinging. It was like the female

moment in the training room, but with less hair pulling and more violence. Those women had wanted the chocolate bars. These men wanted to cause pain.

Jennifer came down the hall in a fast run. She spotted Chad in the mess doorway. Anger flared.

“Get in there and help!” She shoved him from the rear.

Chad staggered and caught himself on an overturned booth. He went toward a calmer side of the fight. *You can do this even though she’s watching. Stay calm; don’t kill anyone.* Chad grabbed a low-level man and spun him toward Wade.

Wade rotated and dropped the man without hesitating.

“Great idea!” Ed spun his opponent toward Wade. He didn’t notice the wide grin on his own face.

The other guards copied, shoving their target toward one of the one-hit senior Eagles.

Jennifer observed from the doorway, glad that none of the men were using guns or knives. She stayed to one side so others could get by. She knew better than to get in the middle of that chaos. She was vicious, but she couldn’t stand up to that and she knew it. All the training with Angela’s team didn’t matter. *If I’m not allowed to shoot them or use magic, I’ll just get in the way.*

Jennifer didn’t think it was unfair to shove Chad in. He was large and in training for these moments.

I'm in leadership. We don't take the front lines unless those lines are failing. We stay in the rear and let our fighters do what they do best. My job is figuring out how to punish them for this. Everyone was already working double shifts and she couldn't spare them from that work to make them do hard labor that was menial.

Conner reached the door and caught Jennifer's thought. "Angela would let them keep going until only the senior men were conscious." He shifted closer to Jennifer and brought up his shield as the fight neared them.

Jennifer knew. "I would too, but it's not good for the camp. Rumors are already flying along the Safe Haven grapevine. They'll think this is related and it will wind them up tighter."

"It might be related."

"Yeah."

Conner leaned in. "I can use a sleep spell."

Jennifer was tempted, but they needed Conner's energy to be used on healing their injured people. "Wade's team almost has it under control."

That was true. Men were finally noticing the one-hit clearing crew and fleeing away from the brawl.

Daryl joined them, wheezing a little from running here. "The beach tent has more security than it needs. Put me to work."

Jennifer was glad to have an extra hand, but she didn't want to use him here. "Stick around. I'll use you where it's needed as I go."

“You got it.”

Jennifer felt a cool chill of danger brush her neck.

Conner turned with her, tracking it.

Jennifer didn't protest when he kept his shield over them both. The sense of death coming was clear again, sharp. She grabbed her radio. “*Check in!*” Her mental order stung people and her radio shout jarred them awake. “*Check on everyone who can't defend themselves!*”

Chad saw her leaving. He neatly ducked a wild swing. “What about the idiots in here?” A few of them were still fighting.

“Wade has it covered. Come with us.” Daryl quickly caught up to Conner and Jennifer.

Chad slammed his fist into his opponent's jaw and went to the exit. He didn't wait for the body to drop; he knew the hit was good.

“Nice!” Wade did the same to the man charging him.

Chad hurried after Daryl.

Daryl listened to the vibrations and the thoughts as they traveled, but there wasn't much to pick up. Most of the camp was in the tunnel bunker with Adrian. Their problems were angry Eagles and a lurker who had likely chosen this moment to strike.

“If they're caught in the act, eliminate them, and don't waste the energy. We need it all.”

Everyone agreed with Jennifer's furious order. It would be a race to see who got to consume them.

Jennifer hurried to the med bay. She saw Rico and ran faster, anger blooming over her exhausted body like adrenaline.

Rico felt it coming. He froze in place. "I'm guarding this door. I didn't do anything wrong."

Rico was dressed in full Eagle gear and standing tall despite being isolated and distrusted.

Jennifer reluctantly pulled in the hungry anger that wanted to taste him.

Daryl and the others stayed right behind her. They glared at the new man.

Rico drew in air, pulse racing. "I checked on everyone. The problem's not in there."

Jennifer and the others still entered and began checking each patient.

The medics and healers were already doing that. All of them glared at Rico through the windows.

Rico wasn't surprised or hurt that they didn't believe him. He stayed where he was.

"Do you think he's okay?"

Jennifer shrugged at Conner's comment as they met back in the reception area. "No time for that right now. Concentrate!"

Conner caught a fresh surge of fear and tracked it to the employee hall.

Jennifer realized they weren't patrolling there. She let Conner have the lead. Mitchels were known for tracking skills.

The employee hall reeked of smoke; half the lights were out because of melted wiring. Jennifer noted those things and more as they traveled.

Conner narrowed in on the fear. He pushed the employee door open and led them to the animal area. Smoke was still in these passages, thick enough to make him cough. The animal area stank and needed to be cleaned, but it was hard to notice those things through the heavy smoke.

Daryl lifted his bandana. “Do we have another fire?”

“No, it smells stale. Open the windows.” Jennifer caught another thread of the fear they were tracking and followed it into the stable. She stopped in surprise. “It’s coming from them.”

Everyone stared at the horse and goats cowering together in the rear of the largest stall. Several smaller animals were on the ground near the exit. The smoke had gotten to them.

“Damn it!” Jennifer hurried to the closest porthole. “Clear out the ship. Chad, go salt those idiots in the mess and make them help. Then get them to the med bay for stitches. After that, send them to the island for garbage cleaning until they drop.”

Chad hurried off, heart hurting. *Those poor animals!*

Daryl approached the stall and followed his instincts. “I need to reach the window behind you. Can you all move a little?”

To his shock and elation, the horse snorted and shifted over.

The goats came forward aggressively, heads lowered. It was cute from the babies. From the mother, it was threatening.

Daryl sighed as he stepped forward to meet her. “I did say I like a challenge.”

The horse charged between them, forcing Daryl backward.

Jennifer groaned in frustration. “Stop fighting us! Move aside!”

The horse shied from her anger.

The goats butted the rail.

Daryl hopped over them and ran to the window.

The goats chased him while the horse fled to another side of the stall.

Daryl pushed the window open and jumped onto the railing.

The mother goat struck the ship wall instead of his leg and staggered.

Daryl hurried back over the railing, grinning. “Glad I missed that one.”

“Look out!”

Daryl ran into the hanging lightbulb, shattering it with his face.

Jennifer hurried over to help him. Blood was already running down his cheek.

Daryl held still while Jennifer began pulling the larger shards of glass from his nose and his bandana. “I see the light.”

Jennifer snickered despite the situation. She plucked faster, relieved as the smoke began to thin.

Daryl shut his eyes against the blood. Darkness immediately snatched him into the fog where monster hounds roamed and prisoners screamed as they lost body parts to the pack.

Daryl jerked back, eyes flying open.

Jennifer scowled. “What was that?”

Daryl quickly blinked and kept his eyes wide open. “A concussion.”

Jennifer wanted to agree, but she couldn’t. “When we get hurt, we can connect to our loved ones over any length. That’s amazing and awful.”

Daryl didn’t want those flashes. “How do I stop it?”

She tugged a large fragment of the lightbulb from his cheek. “I didn’t even know we could do it. You’ll have to ask someone who’s been around the block more than us.”

“Tobias?”

“Yes.” Jennifer dug in her pocket for a bandage. She still had them from helping people right after the explosion. She pushed it over the worst spot, making Daryl flinch. “Conner can stay with me. Go see if Tobias and his wives can shed some light on this.”

“Daniella and Anna.”

Conner flushed as they looked at him. He shrugged. “Just seems wrong to keep calling them his wives like they’re his property.”

“Okay, kid.” Jennifer didn’t appreciate the extra work even though he was right. “See if they can help

us and then get to the med bay so Tonya can redo that bandage. It's already loose."

"I'll be fine. Thank you." Daryl hurried off to find Tobias. He tried not to blink too long and trigger another flash. *I can't take much of that or I'll give in to Charlie and insist we go after them. Half of that team is innocent and the other half are my friends. We can't let them all die while we hide on this island. It's not right.*

Jennifer agreed. The dreams were terrible. If it continued, Angela might have a revolt on her hands.

"You're supposed to stop that, remember?" Conner didn't want Angela to be stressed upon waking. They were lucky she hadn't lost the baby in the blast. She needed time to heal.

"I know she does, but we may not have that luxury. The mission team needs our help. As soon as we have this under control, I'll call a meeting on it."

Conner opened the last window. "Angela already said no. They asked her tonight during the town meal."

"That was before the team made contact."

Conner had another theory. "Did they reach out or did we, because of our own trauma?"

"Great question." Jennifer sighed. "I guess we need to figure that out before we give her an ultimatum."

Conner settled against the stall wall and pinned her with his dad's arrogant blue eyes. "Before *you* give her the ultimatum, you mean. You're her heir.

That slot comes with the fame and the blame. When she wakes up, it's all on you.”

2

“I wish we knew who to blame.”

“I just want the lockdown lifted. I hate being down here.”

Adrian frowned at the low-level guards as they went by on a patrol. “Too loud.”

Both men took the mild scold and moved on. Most of the camp was finally sleeping while they waited for word. It was an odd time of the day for it, but they'd all stayed up until noon, sympathizing and worrying. It was late afternoon now. The guards wanted to go do things while the camp was out, but they couldn't leave the tunnels until the lockdown was over.

Adrian understood, but he only wanted to hear from Angela. Seeing her body on the floor of the ship, burning and smoking, was tormenting him. He'd carried her to the infirmary while Conner helped with the others. They'd both been lucky the explosion hadn't reached beyond the first line of people fighting the fire.

“Think good thoughts!” Neil stopped by Adrian's post, unable to take the man's bad vibes. The tunnels were silent and eerie, reminding them all of clearing this island.

Adrian took the distraction gratefully. “I have an answer.”

Neil tensed further. “To what question?”

“The one Morgan slapped me with the other night.”

Neil’s displeasure grew. “I don’t know anything about it.”

Adrian pinned him with a hard stare. “Don’t know or don’t *want* to know?”

Neil was also eager for a distraction from his helpless anger. “Fine. I know some of what they’re doing. I’m not part of it.”

Adrian had suspected that. “Tell Morgan and Kyle I’ll say yes, on one condition.”

Neil didn’t remind Adrian that one of those men was off his grid right now. Morgan was hurt, badly. “Go on.”

“Tell them Neil has to agree.”

Neil was confused. “I’m Neil.”

“I know.”

Neil blew out a breath. “So if I don’t agree, then you won’t...”

Adrian gestured. “Talk to Kyle and Morgan. They started this. It’s only fair they finish it.”

Neil chuckled without much humor. “I know why you’re telling me. You don’t think I’ll agree with whatever it is and that lets you off the hook.”

“Yep.”

“Why not just say no?”

Adrian almost moaned. His face lit up with need. “Because I really *really* want you to support it.”

Neil liked the honesty. He didn't like the implied drama. "Put it out of your mind. Whatever it is, it has to be wrong. No."

Adrian smiled at the former trooper. "Thank you."

Neil walked away, shaking his head. "Now if I only knew what we just settled."

Adrian was proud of himself for making sure it wouldn't happen. He was happy enough watching over the herd during moments like this. The news of the explosion had run through the tunnel bunker quickly. There had been fights and shouts when he arrived, but people had settled down when he threatened to call Jennifer over. He hadn't told them Jennifer was in charge now; he didn't have to. They hadn't heard Angela's voice at all and that only meant one thing.

Concern had replaced the anger, but surprisingly, the topic of conversation had been the mission team and not Safe Haven's injuries. Adrian hadn't shut that down. He sensed Angela wanted the camp wound up about the missing team. He wasn't going to interfere with anything she had going.

He sighed. *Except maybe her plan to take over the world. I didn't think she meant it when we talked before.*

Liar! Adrian's demon slathered over his shoulder. *Imagine how fun it would be!*

Adrian slammed the mental cage door and refused to be tempted this time.

Resting in the cot at the end of the row near Adrian, Sherman tried to memorize everything he'd heard to go over tomorrow when he was alone. He'd learned a lot about descendants since the war. He hadn't used most of it, however. Trapping them had to be done carefully.

Sherman went to sleep before Adrian scanned him and found out his thoughts were full of using magic against the magic users.

3

Morgan didn't want to go back to sleep. He knew what was coming.

He also didn't want to stay awake. He had second-degree burns forming blisters and causing him agony at every movement. The dead skin, and debris that had been blasted into his body, had been removed around the blisters. Tonya said not to pop them. Morgan didn't want to know what that would feel like.

The door to his room opened.

Morgan tried to open his eyes, but his lids were too heavy. "Not a good time."

Pam stared in dismay at Morgan's burnt, bandaged body. Tubes were running into his arm and other areas. Clear plastic wrap was lying over the worst damage. It magnified the view.

Pam willed him to sit up and tell her this was all a bad joke. He didn't even look alive. His chest was

barely rising. The oxygen mask was like a death shroud. *What have I done?*

Morgan slid into sleep against his will.

Pam stayed by the door so the medic could tell she wasn't doing anything wrong. "I just needed to see him."

Pam swallowed stomach acid and fought the rapid heartbeat that warned she was pushing herself too soon. She'd had a small stroke, according to Tonya.

Pam didn't care except that she wouldn't get to be with Morgan and Shawn again.

"You need to rest." Terry helped Pam back to her bed. "He's alive and starting to heal."

"Thank you." Pam got into the bed and thought of calm, peaceful times to get her heart rate to slow.

Terry reconnected her to the heart machine. It scanned her vitals and immediately released a small dose of procainamide to calm her heart.

Pam sighed as the heaviness subsided. She pulled the blanket over her lap and refused to think about anything.

Terry left her door open. He understood being isolated was stressful.

Terry went to Angela's room.

Charlie didn't budge from his chin-on-chest position. "She's a little better. The wheezing stopped."

"Good." Terry checked her vitals and carefully drew back the plastic wrap for a better view. Angela

was on her side. Her leg and hip had taken the brunt of the blast. “It’s almost healed!”

Charlie yawned deeply.

Terry replaced the plastic wrap. “The empty bed down the hall is still open.”

“Dozing here is enough.” Charlie hadn’t been in the comfortable bed for long.

“Bad dreams?”

Charlie nodded, lips pinching like Angela’s often did when she was contemplating something bad.

Terry didn’t ask what the boy had seen or what he knew. The medic was running on fumes. They still hadn’t gotten a real break or any sleep. It was now dinnertime. The cooks were delivering leftovers and coffee to the ship and the tunnel bunker. The camp was finally waking up. The people on this ship hadn’t been to bed yet.

“I’m here to help.”

Terry jerked, startled.

Charlie chuckled. He’d felt the man coming before he reached the medical bay. Charlie was scanning regularly to check for problems with Cate, Cody, Dog, or the babies his mom had adopted. He was the oldest member of their family here now. It was his job to care for them.

“That’s a heavy burden to carry.” Tobias and the two women crowded into the small space. They’d helped carry patients from the blast zone, and then helped fight the fire. After that, they’d helped care

for the people in the beach tent. They hadn't been to bed yet either, though they had gotten a fast shower.

Tobias was once again wearing loud colors and the odd mix of a tank top and slacks. Daniella and Anna were in jean shorts and long-sleeved sweaters. Terry didn't care. *Odd clothes, but good people.*

Terry retreated into the corner so he wasn't in the way, but also so they couldn't send him out.

Charlie observed suspiciously as Tobias placed a hand on Angela's ankle.

Daniella smiled at Charlie. "We've gotten good at this. Just give us a minute to regulate the flow and you can join in."

Anna gestured. "Let the normal try, too. It's important that they all learn how this works."

Terry came forward eagerly. It was nice to be included.

Charlie saw their hands start shaking as electricity jumped down their arms. Both women jerked like they were live wires.

Tobias connected them mentally; electricity shot out and formed a narrow triangle. It was fascinating.

Terry felt the hair on his arms responding.

Charlie moved the plastic wrap, not worried about someone seeing his mom's ass cheek. It was obvious that this trio knew what they were doing.

"We've had many years of treating our own injuries." Anna let them know she was ready. "Even."

Daniella shut her eyes so she could maintain control. “Even.”

Tobias put his other hand on Terry’s arm. “Even.”

Daniella connected to Charlie.

Power filled the space between their locked arms. It cracked over Angela’s body. Orbs sank into her hip and began spreading.

Charlie watched the burns heal into first-degree, which were minor and would be gone quickly with normal healing.

The ball shrank as it traveled, leaving tiny orbs all through the damage path. Her chest lit up.

Angela sucked in a deeper breath, groaning. She coughed up something brown and tissue-like that Charlie quickly wiped away. *Gross.*

“That’s scar tissue breaking off. All the burn patients will cough that up. It’s normal.”

Terry memorized Tobias’s explanation to add to his notes later. Burns were new to them. They only had one book on it so far. When he had more time, he would search the cargo area for any others.

Angela’s stomach glowed brightly for a few seconds longer than the other areas, and then it waned.

Everyone let go when Tobias did. The static electricity faded; hair settled down.

“Thank you.” Charlie was finally able to come down a notch since seeing his mom while her skin burned and screams ripped from her lungs. *But she wasn’t screaming from the pain. Her burns were*

third-degree. There were no nerves left to cause pain. The screams were for my dad.

Tobias put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Give us time to get this all straightened out, then we'll go after them."

Charlie was relieved to have at least one person who agreed that's what they should do. "Call me if you need anything."

"I will." Terry was wide awake again.

Anna frowned at him. "It's a side effect of helping us balance the flow. It won't last long."

"Then I'll use it while I have it." Terry went to prep Dace for a breathing treatment. Unless the Tobias trio tired, they could get all of these people healed up to minor injuries.

Charlie waited until the normal medic was occupied in the next room. Then he pinned Tobias in place with his shield. It solidified into a tough barrier that Tobias would have to blast through.

Anna and Daniella immediately moved in front of their mate, but they knew not to touch the angry boy's barrier.

"What are you doing?"

"We helped her!"

Charlie kicked the door shut without looking away from Tobias. "Tell me what you did."

Tobias hadn't moved; he wasn't surprised by anything except how strong Charlie's shield was. It would require a powerful blast to get through. "I burnt away some of the scar tissue on her womb. She'll have a better chance to carry to term now."

“Prove it.”

Tobias snorted. “I can’t prove it. You’ll see the outcome and know.”

“I think you charmed her.”

“Charms don’t heal.” Tobias tried to reach the sullen child. “I could teach you everything I know. You’re wasted as a sentry.”

Charlie tapped the solid shield. “I’ve got you trapped.”

Tobias shrugged. “So you’re good at protecting and you have a few gifts to fight with. I stand by my statement. You’re wasted on guard duty.”

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. “What should I be doing? Cooking?”

Tobias scowled. “Don’t mock the people who feed you!”

Charlie pointed. “Don’t change the subject!”

Tobias gave the truth as he saw it. “You’re a healer, boy. You can fight destiny, but you can’t change it. You’re meant to be the medical heart of any team or any camp. In time, you’ll be the one saving future babies and healing the guards.”

Charlie refused to admit how much he liked hearing those words. “Why didn’t you tell Terry what you were doing?”

Tobias sighed. “Because I don’t want amateur medics doing operations and procedures. It’s easy to burn away too much and cause miscarriages or permanent damage.”

“Terry’s a normal. He can’t do any of those things.”

“The medical staff here will eventually try things with normal equipment. Your lab girl is good. She’ll learn and grow. The others are guards trying to be healers. It doesn’t work. Use your staff where they belong.”

“Is that why you were a cook?”

“I have many skills.” Tobias put a hand on Charlie’s shield and melted it.

Charlie hurried to erect a new one.

Tobias brought up his own shield. He used it to become invisible so the boy couldn’t attack him. “I’m not wrong. You’re a healer. Morgan’s an Eagle. Both of you should accept who you are and use it for the greater good.”

Charlie didn’t like being evaded. He lowered his second, weaker barrier and leaned against the exit to prevent the man from getting by him. He also considered the words. *I do like helping people*. “But my emotions are shit. I can’t always control it.”

Tobias was ready for that. “If you were happier, it would be easier. As it is, you’ll have to get that under control. I suggest fishing.”

Charlie made a face. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It’s relaxing once you settle in.”

“I assume you’d be there?”

“If you like.”

“I would.” Charlie moved aside. “Go help the others while I think about it.”

Tobias let go of his shield.

Charlie rushed forward while drawing his gun. He shoved it against the older man’s throat. “I win.

Your brains are all over the wall and I didn't need magic."

Tobias hadn't been tricked in a long time. His wives retreated, bracing for a moment of bad temper. He wouldn't hurt a fly unless they were involved, but he liked to shout and curse.

Tobias surprised them by not reacting that way this time. "Fair enough."

Charlie holstered and left. His mind stayed on the advice he'd been given. He swept the medical desk and tried to imagine himself working here full time. "That's interesting."

Tonya had been listening. "Please say yes. Even with your teenage tidal waves, you'll be more help than most of us who already work here."

Charlie was surprised that Tonya was in agreement. "We don't like each other, though. Won't that cause trouble?"

She frowned, chin tilting. "Why don't you like me? I'm sweet, helpful, and I torture Kenn in my own way."

"Because you love him."

"Yes, I do." Tonya supported her back with her hand as a deep ache settled into her spine. She'd been on her feet for a long time now, but there was a lot of work left to do. The medical bay was filthy again. "Does that mean you have to hate me?"

"I don't hate you." Charlie was emboldened to tell the truth. "I just don't understand why you're with him. You could do better."

Tonya was tired of hearing that. "I know."

“Then why don’t you breakup with him?” Charlie made a fast connection. “Are you scared to? My mom was, so I understand. I’ll help you get away from him.”

“Whoa, Charlie. I’m not scared of him. He’s never abused me. I keep telling you all that. I’m with him because I want to be.”

“But, why?!”

“He’s earned a second chance. I know you don’t think so. I might not either if I were in your shoes, but I’m not. He’s good to me and I love him. If that’s going to stop you from working here, I’ll stay in the lab when you’re on duty.” Hurt, Tonya turned away.

“Wait.” Charlie didn’t like it that he’d hurt her feelings. “I’m sorry. You’re okay. You do a lot here. It’s good.”

“Cool.” Tonya fought the urge to reach out and smooth down one of his wild hairs. The nurturing instinct was strong. “Your mom would be proud of you being a medic.”

Charlie was too tired to keep more truth from slipping out. “What about my dad...and Adrian?”

“Ah. Well, your authority figures might not understand at first, but they’ll come around because you’re doing what you enjoy.”

“I think they’ll tear me apart and the Eagles will call me a chicken.”

Tonya’s lips pursed. “Does it matter? You’ve pretty much done whatever you want since joining Safe Haven.”

Charlie sighed unhappily. Seeing his mom's burnt body had changed most of that rebelliousness into fear. "I don't want that reputation now. I'm ready for my second chance."

Tonya gave him a test. "You can't get it from leadership since your mom blacklisted you."

Charlie shook his head. "I blacklisted myself by not following the rules."

"Excellent answer." Tonya motioned to a clothing cabinet behind her. "Get dressed and help me for this shift. You can think about it later with a few hours of real-world experience under your belt for comparison. You can sleep later."

Charlie nodded. "That sounds good."

Tonya met Tobias's eyes as Charlie went to the cabinet. *Thank you.*

Tobias smiled softly. *It's my honor.*

Sparks flew between them, thick and powerful.

Tonya looked away first.

Anna and Daniella followed their husband into the next exam room. They weren't jealous or sad that Tobias and Tonya had an attraction. As long as they weren't being abused or locked in a lab, they didn't care if another female joined their family.

Any male who tried that would be killed in his sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Another

1

Daryl entered the medical bay, still frowning back at Rico, who had refused to switch out at the last shift change. Daryl had gone hunting for Tobias only to find out the man had come here to help on his own.

Daryl went to the desk. “I had a fight with a lightbulb. I didn’t win.”

Daryl’s swollen face looked enough like their blast patients to give the medics a chill. Smeared in sweat and soot, he blended right in.

Anna motioned him toward an empty room.

Charlie went with them, curious how the trio would handle this injury.

“I need to talk to Tobias about some flashes I had.”

Tobias came from another exam room. “You got them when you were hurt?”

“Yes.” Daryl flinched at the memory.

Tobias confirmed Jennifer’s theory. “It’s easier to connect over distances when pain fuels it.”

Charlie wrote that down on his new clipboard and waited while they got Daryl settled on a chair and then healed him. Tiny slivers of debris pushed

out of his face and fell onto his shirt and the floor.
“Amazing.”

“Yes.” Daryl blinked. His vision straightened; the pain subsided. “Healing is just as important as fighting.” He rubbed the drying blood from his cheek. “Moments like this make me question why I didn’t become a medic instead of an Eagle.”

Noise echoed. Footsteps and insults proceeded the brawlers from the mess. Ugly curses flew back and forth.

Daryl sighed. “Now I remember. Medics aren’t encouraged to hit people.”

A chill went through the medical bay.

Tonya came from the break room and got everyone moving. “We’re getting patients from the mess fight now. Finish up and report to the reception area for your next assignment!”

Medics came from chairs and rooms to help.

Another cold chill blasted the redhead. Tonya checked on their patients first.

She found all of them tossing and turning, pulling tubes out, groaning. “Shit!” She hit her radio. “Jennifer to the med bay!”

“Almost there!” Jennifer’s breathy voice told them she was running.

Tonya pointed Charlie toward the desk. “You’ll check them in. Get their name and problem. Anyone gushing blood goes first.” She went into Angela’s room while Terry handled Dace and Conner covered Morgan. Tobias helped with Lisa while

Anna and Daniella joined Charlie at the desk to wait for orders.

Charlie drew in a deep breath as screams sounded and flashes of nightmares assaulted him and the other descendants. *This isn't even hard. I can do this.*

Daryl snorted as he came out to assist. “You think that now. Time will change your opinion.”

Charlie shrugged. “As long as it satisfies me, I'll still do it. Being an Eagle isn't for me. I can't be on that side of the pain.”

“It's normal to be afraid of pain.”

“I'm not afraid.” Charlie signaled the new patients over to the desk as they shoved through the doors. “I like causing it, so I can't have that job.”

Daryl had questions about that, but there wasn't time as the lounge filled with hurt men and the exam rooms flooded with fresh screams. “We'll talk later if you want.”

Charlie thought about Tobias's offer and shook his head. “I'll take a fishing break at some point.”

Tobias nodded at him from the exam room and then got to work.

2

“You will do it.”

Marc screamed at the pain, hitting his knees in the filthy, tiny cell. “Never! You can't break me!”

The captives in the cells around him admired his courage even as they dreaded the reaction to his answer.

“Do the next one.”

Flames shot out, smothering one of the smaller cells.

“Again.”

That voice had greeted Marc upon waking to captivity, but he hadn't seen the person it belonged to. It was a remote voice directing this horror from another location. All he knew was it was a male and he hated them more than he'd ever hated anyone in his life.

Fire engulfed one of the smaller cells.

“No more!” Marc slammed his head against the damp bars repeatedly, trying to knock himself out to make it stop. He still had his clothes on, though they were soiled and ripped beyond repair. Right now, they were also soaked from the hoses that had just cleaned out his cell. None of that hindered or helped him.

“Another.”

More flames and awful shrieks sank into Marc's mind and set up a permanent residence there. Smoke rolled over the bare, damp floor and filled his cell.

Marc sucked in the smoke as fast as he could, trying to take the easier way out.

“Another.”

The heartless voice dug deeper into Marc's mind. *I thought I hated Adrian and I loathed Kenn,*

but that was nothing compared to this. “I’ll rip your guts out and eat them!”

It wasn’t his team being tortured this time, but that didn’t matter. Their pain was his pain. An instant bond had formed as soon as he’d woken and found the unknown captives lined up across from his cell.

“You will do it.”

“Never!” Marc’s frantic head slams made him dizzy and brought bloody welts to his face. They were his only injuries. He’d been treated gently. No one else had.

“Another.”

Captives whimpered in fear.

Marc threw his body backward. The cell tipped over and thumped him brutally against the bars. He surrendered to the darkness gratefully.

“Another.”

Kids began to scream.

The teammates alert enough to see what was happening also screamed for mercy.

The UN boss smiled at Gus and Biff through the speaker. “Tell him it didn’t stop just because he checked out.”

Flames rolled over the smaller cells.

Men and kids shrieked in agony.

“Another.”

Angela sat upright in one fast movement, making the medic jump. Her mouth opened...

Everyone braced for a scream.

Angela caught it. She held it in, body shaking.

Pain lanced through her brain and shifted down into her lungs. Dizziness swarmed her and forced her to suck in shallow, steady breaths to clear it. She'd inhaled a lot of smoke. It was a wonder any of them had survived. She could feel the others fighting for their lives, but it dulled in comparison to her dream. She was glad to be awake, even in this situation.

In the tunnel bunker, descendants hugged and passed the good news that Angela was alive. They'd felt her wake.

Angela's misery didn't reach them, but it made Hannah whimper in her sleep.

Terry put a hand on Angela's arm. He'd come in for a quick check and found her in the middle of a nightmare.

Angela couldn't stop the hot tears.

Terry was able to guess. "This is the apocalypse. It's not supposed to be easy, or moral. Survival trumps all of it."

Angela had been living by that philosophy for over a year now. *That doesn't help me.* "Get out, please."

Terry went to the front desk to see where he was needed. They'd gotten all the patients settled down

and put the tubes back in, but none of them were resting easy. Lisa and Jayda were still on the edge of death. The brawlers had been released hours ago. The medics were beyond exhausted.

Angela let herself cry for another minute. She mourned who she'd been before the world had been ripped up and flipped inside out. *I miss my ethics.*

Angela let it fade, and then locked it away. She had so many of those moments now that she'd had to enlarge her crypt. It took up a corner of her mind. It was tiny compared to the completed construction project, but it weighed just as much.

Angela slid off the bed and groaned; her aching hip protested. She was mostly healed, though. Some raw flesh, a few first-degree burns, and missing hair were the only physical signs that she'd almost died again.

One of these times, I really will. She was morbidly curious about what would happen at that moment. Would hell snatch her consciousness while the ocean consumed her energy and the earth reclaimed her body?

“Stop it.” Charlie came in and shut the door. He didn't look at her body or her face. Instead, he got clean clothes from her kit. Burnt in places, it wasn't a survivor of the explosion. He held out a towel first so she could wipe away the snot, tears, and ointment. “You need a new kit.”

Angela scrubbed and took the clothes he gave her. She didn't care what they were.

Charlie frowned when she didn't say anything.
"Are you okay?"

"No. Never." Angela rubbed her stomach through the soft jogging pants. "But I'll survive. Come take these tubes from my arm."

Charlie grabbed a gauze pad and began prying up the tape. He tried not to pull the singed hair on her arm.

Angela buttoned her shirt with one hand, not scanning or connecting to the hive. She wasn't in control of her emotions yet.

Charlie taped the gauze in place and tossed the needle into the toxic waste bin like he'd been taught earlier. "Mom."

Angela looked for her boots.

"They were melted in places." Charlie handed her the spare gym shoes from the smoky-smelling kit.

Angela sat in the chair to put them on.

"Mom!"

"The answer is still no."

"What?!" Charlie marched over and jerked her up by her arms. "We have to go help Dad!"

Angela's body cried out at his rough touch, but her lips refused to allow the noise. She broke his hold by jerking both her arms straight up. She shoved him, knocking him into the table.

Charlie brought up his shield.

Angela barked a smoke-roughened laugh. "You attacked me and now you're scared, like I'm the

problem.” She bent over carefully to tie the shoes.
“Stop it.”

Charlie lowered the shield. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. So am I. There’s no other choice I can make right now. Stop asking me to ruin his plan and rush in where I’m not needed.” Angela drank from the water bottle on the tray by her bed. The painful itching in her throat eased.

“But you are needed! They’re being tortured!”

Angela resumed dressing. “Charlie, do you think your dad can be caged without fighting back?”

Charlie had caught flashes of her nightmare, too. “He was drugged. He can’t fight.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Charlie slowly calmed, but his stomach churned. “It’s an act. He’s trying to accomplish something.” The teenager sat down heavily on the soiled bed. “He’s letting them burn to accomplish a goal. I was wrong. He doesn’t care.”

Angela fought the pain and confusion in her mind as she straightened. “He cares as much as I do, but we both know the future is up for grabs. He’s trying to claim it for all of us.”

“Not for the kids they’re burning! Not for our friends dying in those cells!”

She hated it, too. “This is the worst part of leadership, Charlie. I’m glad you chose not to follow me. You won’t have to make choices like this and scar your soul forever.”

“We have to help them.” Charlie tried not to cry as he humbled himself. “Please, Mom. Please. I’m

sorry for all of it. So is he. Stop punishing us now and go get him!”

“It crushes me that you think that.” Angela went to him. She hugged his stiff body. Then she stepped back, lifting her chin against his horrified dismay. “I won’t waste his pain and their deaths. Please accept it. I won’t change my mind.”

Tonya came to the door, scowling at both of them. “What’s going on in here?”

Charlie was appalled by his behavior. “I acted like Kenn to get her to do what I want.”

Angela slid by Tonya before the woman could ask if she was okay. The answer would be uglier than what she’d given to her son. “You’re nothing like Kenn was. Clear your mind and get to work. We need you right here.”

Charlie didn’t look at Tonya. He was too ashamed.

Tonya didn’t scold him. She was too distracted. *Did she say like Kenn was? Which way did she mean that?*

Terrified to ask if Kenn was dead, Tonya tried to connect through their personal bond. *Kenn? Are you there?*

He didn’t answer.

4

“I don’t have an answer.” Theo hurried by the charred, fire-blackened walls and doorway of the machine zone. He was covered in dirt, soot, and

grease; his boots kicked up small pockets of ash that dissolved into the water on the floor. He'd had a dozen people drop by in just the last few hours. It had almost been a full day now. Everyone was impatient to know the cause of their misery.

Guards gaped in shock as Angela came down the hall.

Theo's team also gawked at Angela, distracted from their search. Monica almost reached out to offer support. Then she remembered what had happened and didn't.

Angela stopped in the hall so she didn't disturb any evidence. "How can I help?"

Distracted, Theo started to blow her off like he had all the others. Then he remembered who he was talking to and turned around. His eyes went over her missing hair, red skin, and bandaged arms as he spoke. "Uh...I'm trying to figure out where the fire started. I've searched down all the wires except this one."

He held up a piece of twisted plastic. "We're searching for a tiny round plastic casing. It used to be yellow. It'll be black now and not round anymore."

Angela fought the pain in her body to get this settled faster. "Let me see if my heat scan works. It's new."

Theo waited. "What's a heat scan?"

"I think it's to verify temperatures, or maybe to change them. I'm not sure yet." Angela opened the newest gift in her mind. The signature blinked to

bright blue. She scanned the floor and walls, still not entering. “It gets red in the corner.” She pointed and then shut the mental door. That one took an enormous amount of energy to use.

Theo went where she directed, scowl growing. If the descendants could do this, too, it was another way he wasn’t needed.

“Put that pride aside, Theo. I’ve never treated you differently. There’s no need to invent a slight so you can run off. Jeff isn’t being trained as your replacement.”

Theo’s team stared at him, trying to decide if that was true.

Theo flushed. He opened his mouth to fire back, then snapped it shut. He went to where she’d pointed and peered at the only place where there could have been wires.

He matched the melted plastic casing to the piece in his hand, stomach dropping. “It was me.”

“What did you say?” Monica had been glad to be called. She liked her job. “You?”

Theo wanted to die. “It’s the wire I was working on. It’s melted right where I connected it. A spark must have fallen from it and caught the curtain from the bed.”

Angela was relieved. “Accidents happen. It wasn’t sabotage. That’s great.”

Theo wasn’t letting himself off the hook. “One of the generators must have overheated.”

Monica tried to protect her team leader. “Or maybe one of the relief moments rocked it and dislodged the tape?”

Theo wanted to take that excuse, but his honesty wouldn’t let him. “I don’t think so. It overheated. The cord I used was too weak for the load.”

Angela spoke patiently through her rolling stomach and fried nerves. “I needed a haircut. Don’t sweat it.”

Theo was surprised into a harsh chuckle.

Angela turned to find Ralph right behind her. She smiled at him. “We can let them all out. Tell Jennifer to lift the lockdown.”

Ralph tugged his jacket closer. With so many windows open now, cooler air was blasting through the ship in chilling drafts. “We have people missing.”

Angela tensed. “Which side?”

“The fighters from the mess have all gone off the grid. They vanished as soon as Tonya released them from the med bay. I need you to track them.”

Angela was weak. She needed time to recharge. “Jennifer and Kyle are better at it.”

Ralph refused. “It has to be you.”

Angela asked even though she knew the answer. “Why?”

“You’ll kill them on the spot to keep the peace, no matter which side it is. Jennifer and Kyle will protect the descendants.”

Angela didn’t waste time arguing with that flawed logic. “There’s a group in the cargo bay and

a group in the mess. I can't get their thoughts through all these decks and my injury. It's not all healed."

Ralph swept her and saw half her hair was gone on one side. Her skin was raw or still layered in blackened dust and her clothes weren't the usual tank top and jeans. "Are you okay?"

"No, but the others are worse. The medics are working on them."

"Will everyone live?"

"We're not sure. Ask me again in a few hours."

"I will." Ralph headed for the cargo steps.

Angela looked at Monica. "Make sure he has support. Try not to kill anyone. It won't help the mood."

"You got it." Monica hurried off.

Angela took a minute to determine where she was needed the most.

She found a calm ship and a sleeping island. Jennifer and Adrian had handled things well. Tobias and the others would continue working on their patients. If those lives could be saved, they would be.

Angela limped toward the mess. "I need a long soak and calm for a few hours. I feel like I was blown into a wall."

Angela winced at her bad joke. The flashback took her by surprise.

"I'm on fire!" Dace slammed into Angela's flaming body, knocking her into the wall where she

fell, face down. Horrible heat ran over her leg and up her hip. She screamed as she began to burn alive.

“Put me out!”

“Help!”

“Can’t breathe!”

“Medic!”

Agony and death rattles were drowned out by the fire as it spread along the ceiling and walls.

Molly blasted it with ice again, crying hard tears and coughing. Jayda had shielded her, though that woman hadn’t been able to save herself. She was on the ground by Molly’s melting boots.

“Oh, god! Half his arm is gone!”

“Put me out!”

“Medic!”

The fire slowly responded to Molly’s magic, but the screams of the injured continued to ring through the blast zone.

“Medic!”

Angela snapped back to the present. She forced herself to breathe normally. The stale smoke in the hall hurt her mentally and physically. She took the elevator to the mess deck to avoid it.

She refused to let herself cry again. The salty tears would add to her pain and she was already at her limit. While Jennifer had things under control, Angela needed to recover and regain some of her lost health.

She leaned against the elevator wall. *I should be dead. Again.*

All the others were still seriously injured, but she was already out walking, trying to pull her mind together enough to continue her plans and schemes. She wasn't invincible, and she still felt pain as much as she ever had, but death seemed to hold no power over her.

Rejoicing or even being grateful didn't cross her mind. "I'm damned. Maybe this is my punishment."

5

"It's all over. Go to the tunnel bunker or the ship, but don't go alone. Stay with your buddy and sign in when you get there so we can make sure everyone is accounted for." Wade directed the camp members from the beach tent they'd erected right after the evacuation. He would have preferred to keep them here until daylight, but there wasn't enough space for more cots and people were tired.

Samantha stayed with her babies in a corner of the long tent, not in a hurry to leave while everyone else was. She hated big crowds. She always had.

Samantha contemplated her life before the war, but she couldn't match it to the person she was now. *That life seems like the dream. This one feels real.*

She assumed it was because she had love and children now. *I was lonely then, so much that I buried myself in work and refused to consider another way of living. It would have been too hard to balance all this and my insecurities. I know that now.*

Samantha didn't have many of those left. The last year had stripped away layer after layer and filled it in with this new person that she actually liked.

Wade met her eyes across the crowd. He leered. Samantha blushed.

Wade chuckled and resumed directing people out into the cool night air.

Allison came over and sat down next to Samantha.

Samantha felt something coming that she wasn't ready to face. "Not the right time."

Allison indicated the line of leaving people. "They're in a hurry to get to bed. They aren't paying any attention to us right now."

Samantha found only a few descendants keeping track of thoughts. "Still."

Allison leaned back in the chair, content to wait until they were alone.

Samantha realized the woman wasn't going to take a polite hint. "Whatever it is, I'm not in the mood."

Allison shrugged. "I am."

Wade felt Samantha's displeasure, but he was busy. He motioned Zack to sentry duty over her.

Samantha's unhappiness grew. "No!"

Allison looked at Zack. "I told you she wouldn't come clean without encouragement."

Zack frowned at his mate. "And I told you not to ask. If the boss wanted you in on it, you would be."

Allison wasn't upset. "Not true. She's always said we pick ourselves."

Samantha flashed back to the time in Safe Haven when Rick was the biggest threat and they hadn't known.

Allison was immediately sorry. "Hey. No, it's not bad. Please don't get all sad on us. We don't need the rain."

Samantha tensed. Her emotions were linked to nature. Most people didn't know she was able to cause weather changes.

Zack shook his head at Allison. "You're not handling this the right way. Just ask her, take no for her answer, and let it go."

Samantha suddenly understood. "You feel left out."

Allison nodded. "I'm asking to join in and help. I want to be another level, too."

Samantha didn't know if Angela would be happy about this, but she decided it didn't need to be a secret anymore. "We can't. At least, not yet. It hasn't worked."

Zack came closer, drawn in. "What exactly are you guys doing during those secret workouts?"

Allison repeated what she'd already told him. "She's trying to get to Neil's level of power, without having to fight."

Zack's brows squeezed together. "We have enough power in this camp. We don't need more."

Both women snorted at him.

Zack went to rejoin Wade at the exit. “I don’t want to know.”

Samantha laughed.

Allison didn’t. “He’s scared we’ll force Angela to enact magic laws. He doesn’t care about power levels.”

“He should be. It’s in her mind a lot these days.” Samantha stopped holding back. Allison was one of them. She could be trusted. “If she does that, the rules and laws will change for everyone, even the normals. He’s right to worry.”

“Why would you gaining a new level make her do that?”

“If I can, everyone can.” Samantha didn’t mention Tonya, who was in on the lessons, too. She sensed Allison didn’t like the redheaded medical woman. “We can’t have more people reaching byzan. There are already too many.”

“But we’re all good. No one repelled.”

“It’s too easy to go bad, Allison. Once you’re byzan, it affects the brain. Cracks show up and make things worse.”

Allison didn’t care about those issues. “More byzan would help us in the final battle.”

Samantha denied that attempt at deflection. “You’re not going home for that fight, according to rumor. Tell me why you really want this and I’ll mention it to the boss the next time we meet for a session.”

Allison didn't have a choice but to be honest. "I want to live forever, Sam. I need more power so I never die."

Stunned silence went through the mostly empty tent. Wade and Zack regarded them in concern.

Samantha stared. "You can't have that. None of us can."

Allison pointed toward the cruise ship. "One of us already has it and I want it, more than anything else."

Samantha blanched. "You'd have to go through everything the boss went through, and most of us can't. She's different."

Allison wiped sand from her shorts. "Because of her level of power. She can't die now, Samantha. Think about what that means for the rest of us."

Zack and Wade considered it and came up with a few good results.

Samantha went straight back to Rick. "What if our enemies did that? The fighting would never end."

Allison didn't care about that either. "If we can't die, our enemies don't matter. What can they do to us that's worse than death?"

Samantha's eyes went to her kids. Terror entered her heart. "We have to stop this right now. No one should get to live forever."

Allison stood up, angry now. "You don't get to make that choice and frankly, neither does the boss. This isn't a dictatorship. If it's possible, we all deserve that gift. You have no right to deny

everyone else just because Jeremy's death scared you into being a hermit!"

Samantha watched the woman leave. She understood why Allison felt that way. She'd almost died, more than once. "But so have we all. Living forever would be the worst thing that could happen to humanity. When we die, our evil is gone. If we lived forever, it would screw up the balance."

Zack followed Allison toward the tunnel bunker.

Wade came over to Samantha. Concern was all over his face. "I'm not sure what to do about this one."

"Tell the boss."

"But she's holding sessions, trying to make it happen. Doesn't that mean she agrees with Allison?"

Samantha's voice lowered. "Angela told us if it worked she would have to put us under magic laws first and Eagle rules second. She's making sure it *can't* happen."

Wade wasn't soothed. "But it clearly can, Sam, or we wouldn't be discussing it at all. At some point, we will be under magic rules in this camp."

Samantha wasn't afraid of that, but she knew her men were. "We'll leave if we have to. Don't worry about it. That moment is far into the future."

Samantha stretched out on the cot by the boys and tried to rest. *I trust the alpha. If that changes, so will my choices.*

Wade returned to the flap, but his mind stayed on her words. If it was far into the future, then why was Angela trying it now? *I know she covers things before they happen, but would she be doing it decades in advance?*

No. Wade added the clues that Allison obviously already had. “The moment is coming sooner than we think. We’d better get ready for it.”

Chapter Eighteen
Not This Way

1

“**T**he lockdown is over, folks. Please report to your scheduled work duty. If you’re not scheduled, report to Jennifer in the boss’s office and she’ll tell you where to go.”

Jonny let a few seconds go by for people to laugh. He was back in the DJ booth and happy about it. He’d missed the music. “Once again, the lockdown is over. The threat has been cleared. Please report to the man on point for an assignment. We have a lot of chores waiting.”

Kyle scowled. “That man is not good for moments like this.”

Sitting next to him in the main office of the cruise ship, Jennifer agreed. Jonny’s words would make people stay on the island to avoid the manual labor. She started to say Jonny was a temp; footsteps sounded outside the door.

Jennifer braced to handle whatever was coming, but she was tired. It was nearing midnight and she was almost out of energy. People had been coming to the office for the last three hours to be assigned.

She hoped this was the last one so she could stretch out on the couch again.

Molly appeared. “I’m ready to be added to your hive. Hook me in.”

One glance at Molly’s puffy, furious face said she had an ulterior motive. She was a hero for putting out the fire, but they couldn’t reward her without encouraging the rage she was carrying for Monica.

Kyle cleared his throat. “Uh, maybe you should wait until you aren’t upset. It’s a lot of stress that we don’t need.”

Molly nodded angrily. “That’s why I have to be hooked in! Who knows what else she’s capable of? Or already done! I don’t want to be blamed for her actions. Hook me up.”

Kyle paused. “Do you really think Monica’s a threat to the camp?”

“No, but I didn’t think she was a cheater, either. Hook me in.”

Jennifer made a face. “You’re hoping we’ll find something and punish her because we don’t have a law yet against cheating.”

“We should! It’s wrong!”

Kyle tried to bring some humor into the moment. “This must be the rage stage.” Then he replayed the words and found ‘yet’. “Wait, are we making a law for cheating?”

“Hook me in. I have a shift after this.”

Jennifer held up a hand. “Give me a minute, guys.”

Ralph appeared behind Molly. “I want a word with you right now!”

The hall guard slid between them and Ralph. “Do you want me to shut the door?”

Molly scowled. “I have a shift over the medical bay. Link me in so I can go!”

Kyle leaned back to avoid the heat now radiating from Jennifer’s stiff body. “You guys might want to give her that minute.”

Voices echoed from the corridor as a group of normals stomped toward the office. They’d tried to volunteer in the medical bay and been refused. “They can’t keep excluding us. It’s not fair!”

“Jennifer will make them quit.”

“I don’t know. She’s Angela’s heir and Angela isn’t stopping it.”

“Why would she?”

Ralph gestured angrily. “That’s what I’m talking about. This has got to stop!”

Jennifer forced the annoyance down so it didn’t lead to something she couldn’t control. The rage illness was slowly wearing away her tolerance. *But I’ve got it covered right now.* Jennifer shook her head at Molly. “We don’t need your anger. Get it out of your system first, then I’ll link you in.”

Molly lifted her chin, giving them all a snotty glare. “Cowards!” She pushed by Ralph and the other normals.

Jennifer sighed. “Think, Molly, think. If I connect you while you’re pissed, it will bleed onto everyone else. You want that. You hope it starts a

witch hunt because you're scared to face Monica now. You think you'll forgive her and get hurt again. Who's the coward?"

Molly slammed the hall door to show she'd heard and didn't like it.

Kyle needed to be sure. "Do you think Monica's done something else or is Molly just hoping for it?"

Jennifer made a note in her book. "We'll add it to our lists for later." Jennifer glared at Ralph. "You think we're being unfair. What about when Adrian ran things this way? Did you think he was unfair, too?"

Ralph flushed. His mouth dropped open and then snapped shut. He spun around and vanished down the hall.

The normals waited for Jennifer to hit them next.

"We just wanted to help." Sherman hoped his past complaints wouldn't be taken into account here. This moment had nothing to do with that.

Jennifer was too tired to stay angry. "Angela and Theo are verifying the results. We'll have an announcement soon and then things will return to the way they were."

Sherman spoke up, emboldened by her calm tone. "What if we don't want that? We're always being used, lied to, or sacrificed. We're sick of it."

"Same." Jennifer pushed into their minds and connected them. Then she opened the link to the hive and let them hear the descendants.

We're in danger from the normals.

Maybe we should leave and start over somewhere they can't reach.

Angela will fix it.

I don't understand why they hate us. We've been used, lied to, and sacrificed for them since we were discovered. They think the war started this, but we were prisoners in labs long before that! They used us to gain power and we almost went extinct. The normals have no reason to complain.

Jennifer showed moments in their past where both sides had been used against each other. Even she hadn't known at the time. She'd been younger then, but she still felt like she should have noticed the lies the governments and media used to keep everyone prisoners to their greed. "I'm just sorry we didn't do it sooner."

The normals were ashamed, hurt, and horrified by her words. They also understood.

"Give us time and we'll settle these problems. Safe Haven will truly have peace, but we all have to work for it. Something that amazing doesn't happen overnight. We have to try harder." She smiled softly. "I'm willing. I love you guys."

Hearts and bad attitudes melted. People made quick promises to talk to others who were feeling the same way. By the time the group left, they belonged to Jennifer.

Kyle was impressed and aroused. He was also sad. *Not this way. It isn't right.*

Jennifer felt guilty, too. *But if it gives us peace, it's worth the stains on my soul.*

The guard shut the door as the last one left. He stood in front of it and celebrated. Jennifer had charmed the first group of normals who would now spread that to the rest of their fledgling colony. In a few months, all the normals would be brainwashed into loving their rulers. *And then we'll have peace.*

2

“I can’t wait for a hot shower. I have sand everywhere.” Candy waddled along with the group of women and kids returning to the cabins on the ship. The descendant deck was mostly deserted.

Samantha snickered. “Same. I have no idea how it got into my panties, but it itches.”

Women groaned in sympathy.

Samantha spotted Dwight and Thelma going to Brittani’s cabin. She approved. Samantha planned to check on her later. It was good that Brittani’s parents were stopping by now before there was a line of well-wishers.

“See you at mess.” Candy went into her cabin. She was eager for the alone time more than for the shower. Talking with Adrian about Lee had both hurt and helped her. She felt like she needed a good cry to finish letting go before she could fully move on with Conner.

Cate and Cody took the post on the hall like they’d been asked to, freeing two guards for other jobs.

The rest of the kids escorted the women to their cabins before going to their dorm for snacks and naps. It had been a stressful time for them, too.

Missy followed the others, but she wasn't eager to rest. Her mind was already full of fear for Shawn. There wasn't room for more.

Thelma smiled at the little girl as she went by, but she didn't talk to her. Thelma had other concerns right now.

"Coming in with food." Thelma knocked and then waited a few seconds.

Dwight followed her into Brittani and Daryl's cabin, braced to see the couple in an intimate moment.

Brittani slowly sat up in the large bed. "Gross, Dad."

Dwight realized Daryl wasn't here and Brittani had been sleeping. "We saw you two sneak off from the beach tent."

And you had to come interrupt us? When she'd been younger, Brittani had mourned her parents not being like her. These days, it was a blessing that they couldn't read her mind. *I don't feel nice anymore.* Brittani forced out a calm tone. "I needed to sleep in a bed and not a cot. My back won't take it. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, it's better now. The patients in the med bay are all stable." Thelma sat a small basket on the bed next to her. "We brought you some things. One is an amazing soup. Angela ordered it."

Brittani let go of her annoyance as her stomach growled. She began digging through the food and personal care items.

Dwight swept her sunken eyes and thinner body. The cabin stank of rot and decay. It was worse than the smoke lingering in the corridors. “Are you okay?”

Brittani yawned tiredly. “I didn’t sleep well.”

Dwight tensed. “Bad dreams?”

“Yeah. About Gus.” Brittani didn’t want them to think she had feelings for her ex. “I’m sure it’s because of the talk going around.”

Dwight sat in the chair by the dresser. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Thelma changed the subject. “Would you like to go for a walk? We can stop by the maternity store on the shopping deck. It’s almost untouched.”

Brittani made a face. “My stomach’s a little rocky right now. Maybe after I eat.”

“Okay.” Thelma studied her as Brittani opened the soup and began to sip.

So did Dwight.

Brittani groaned. “That’s good!” She slurped down a few mouthfuls before realizing they were staring at her in concern and dread. She paused. “What?”

Thelma refused to say it.

Dwight forced out the words. “We want you to reconsider.”

Brittani had been expecting this. She had an answer rehearsed. “I will think about it. Now go about your lives. Intervention’s over.”

Dwight snorted at her sarcasm.

Thelma clasped her daughter’s thin wrist. “Please. You’re very ill. Your body can’t take this.”

She pointed at the mirror Brittani could see from where she was. “Look at yourself.”

Brittani did it against her will. She knew it was bad. She felt bad.

Tears dripped onto the sheet as she stared at herself. *I’m an old hag now.*

“You’re a beautiful woman trying to birth our children.” Daryl came through the open door with a tray and put it on the dresser. He scowled at her parents through his bruised, swollen eye. His hands ached, too, but he didn’t want to waste healing power on himself when the others needed it more than he did. “She doesn’t need this stress. Be helpful or be gone.”

Dwight started to argue.

Thelma moved between them. “We were just leaving.”

“Mom.”

Thelma smiled awkwardly at Brittani. “Finish your soup.”

Thelma and Dwight saw Daryl’s injuries, but they didn’t ask how he’d gotten them. They only had enough room for their daughter right now.

Daryl understood. The babies were already draining her and he was filling her up daily. At some

point, he would run out of energy or it just wouldn't be enough to help her. He planned to talk to Tonya and Angela about it.

Brittani tried to stop crying.

Daryl couldn't take her pain. He came to her side. "Let them stay and help me."

Her parents waited, not sure what was happening.

Daryl connected their lifeforces. "Just think about how much you love her and I'll do the rest."

Both parents immediately flooded the cabin with silent concerns.

Daryl used their energy to shove orbs into Brittani's weakened body. He planned to do this every morning, even if she didn't seem like she needed it.

Brittani tried not to fight the pain. She sighed in happy misery as her aches stopped and the swelling in her ankles went down.

Both parents gawked at the changes. Brittani's hair became beautiful brown again and her skin filled in. A faint glow lit her face.

"Much better." Daryl kissed her cheek and stood up, swaying. "I also love you the other way, you know. I do this for the babies, not for your vanity."

Brittani's hand came up to her hair. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Daryl took a bottle of water from the tray and downed it.

Brittani pushed herself to the edge of the bed, being careful even though she felt better. She slowly stood up.

“Oh, shit.”

Daryl’s curse drew them all toward the small red stain on the sheet.

Brittani froze. “I’m bleeding.”

Dwight leaped up and ran out into the hall. “Medic!”

Thelma came over to support Brittani in case her legs gave out.

Daryl connected to the hive. *Help!*

“Medic!”

Brittani put a hand on her tense stomach. It was hard as a rock. “I dreamed I was bleeding, but I thought it was just a nightmare.” She stared at the red spot in horror. “It wasn’t a dream. I’m bleeding...and Gus is dead.”

Daryl and Thelma caught her as she fainted, laying her on the bed.

Dwight ran for the medic.

Thelma began to cry soft, painful tears. “Not this way. Not this way!”

Daryl shoved more healing orbs into his wife.

“Medic!”

3

“I’m glad you’re here. We have a huge problem. What took you so long?”

Jennifer scanned the large coffee mug in Tonya's hand and grinned at the jittery medic. "How much coffee have you had?"

Tonya gave a dry laugh. "Funny. I'm serious. We have a big problem here and I don't know what to do or who to tell and it might be my fault because I didn't think his injury was—"

"Hey!" Jennifer snapped her fingers. "Take a breath."

Tonya sucked in air and hurried toward the rear rooms. She didn't scold Jennifer for not wearing the arm sling even though she noticed it. That shoulder was healed. They had bigger concerns.

Jennifer followed, passing Brittani's room in confusion. "I thought you called me for a pregnancy issue. I took my time so you could do your medical stuff."

Tonya kept going. "I scanned her and did a non-invasive exam. She's fine. A little spotting is okay at this stage in the pregnancy, as is the hard gut from gas. She's not in labor. We're just keeping her for observation to be on the safe side." Tonya opened the door and held it. "*He's* the problem."

Jennifer went toward the man in the bed, frowning. "I thought he was healing well now."

"His lungs and burns are healed. I came in to give him a check and he woke for a minute."

Jennifer brightened. "That's great!" Morgan hadn't been awake much since the explosion.

Tonya lowered her voice. "No, it's not. He's..."

Jennifer felt Morgan wake up. “Hiya! How are you feeling?”

Morgan yawned. “Sleepy.” He blinked a few times, trying to focus. “Bad dreams, though. The mission team isn’t doing well.”

Tonya paled, but didn’t leave. She needed Jennifer to verify her diagnosis. “Tell Jennifer what you told me.”

Morgan rubbed his itchy beard. “That I need Pam to give me a good shave? She’s great with a blade.”

Jennifer’s mind shuddered. “Pam?”

Morgan tugged the sheet up to be sure he was fully covered. “Yeah. Is she working?”

Jennifer stared stupidly. “You want Pam?”

Morgan frowned lightly. “She is my mate. What’s going on?”

Jennifer put the pieces together. She turned to Tonya. “Pam did it.”

“But I can’t remove it. This charm is solid, with no lock to even try a mental key.” Tonya sipped her coffee and refused to think about how tired she was. She also stopped herself from thinking about Kenn. There were many reasons their connection wasn’t working. There was no reason to believe he was dead. *...but I’m scared. There’s no denying it. If Angela doesn’t do something soon, I may try to rescue him on my own.*

Jennifer tried to unlock Morgan.

Morgan stared at them through his confusion and the grogginess that always came after a rough mission where he'd been injured.

Morgan looked better in every way except for the blank expression that implied he wasn't thinking clearly yet. Jennifer tried to break the charm again, using a stronger spell.

Tonya didn't have much patience left. "Nothing's happening!"

Jennifer scowled. "If not this way, I'll try something else." She clasped Morgan's hand. Sparks flew between them and quickly died.

"She removed me from his mind...or maybe hid it." Jennifer considered solutions. She even thought about flirting to rekindle the spark. It might trip his memory and override the charm.

But she didn't. *I never wanted him. It was all Kyle's idea.*

Tonya was shocked. "You can't leave him like this."

Jennifer's mind slammed an answer into her mouth that would soothe Tonya. "See what Angela can do. She's more experienced than we are."

Tonya calmed as she realized that was true. Jennifer didn't have to do anything. The real boss would handle it.

Jennifer wasn't offended; she was relieved. She went to the exit. *This is my chance to cut that cord and I'm taking it. He left Pam on her own to sink or swim. I'm just returning the favor.*

"Jennifer."

She stopped at Morgan's call, but she didn't turn and she locked her mind to him. "Yes?"

"I forgive you."

A tear rolled over Jennifer's cheek. She quickly scrubbed it away on her sleeve. "It's my shame."

Morgan ignored Tonya's narrowing eyes and sharp mind. "No one is honorable all the time. Just don't go too far in and get stuck. It would be terrible for everyone if you stayed there."

"I won't."

"Goodbye, Jenny."

Tonya didn't know what to do now. It sounded like Morgan knew what Pam had done and was allowing it. *If he's willing, Pam can't be punished.*

"He is." Jennifer left.

Morgan let memories of Pam fill his mind. *It's better this way.*

Tonya went to the desk and sat down tiredly. She wanted to add more supplies to her stashes, but she didn't have the spare energy right now. She got her personal notebook out and wrote a fast report of the important things that had happened during her shift. She made sure to include the Pam problem. *If she'll charm him to get what she wants, she'll probably hurt someone for the same reason.*

Tonya put her head down on her arm for a snooze, heart hurting. *Please don't be dead, Kenn. My life isn't worth shit without you.*

The very tired guard on the med bay watched her through the window. Rico was still listening and memorizing all of it.

“So, it really was an accident...and I’m so sorry!” Theo handed the mike back to Jonny and staggered toward the steps. He needed to cry himself to sleep now.

Jonny took back over the radio call, eager to resume the music. “And that finishes our updates, folks. It is 6:43 a.m. and shift change starts in twelve minutes. Now, back to the music!”

Jennifer and Angela listened from the office, both hoping the call would settle the conspiracy theories swirling through Safe Haven.

Jennifer didn’t pick up any new grumbling. “I think my converts have spread the good will.”

“Good. The mess brawlers have promised to wait and see if they’re needed before causing trouble. Their fight was a practice session that got carried away. They moved to the cargo area for privacy. I think we can let this go now.”

Jennifer yawned tiredly and tucked Autumn’s blanket around her legs. She and Roy were sleeping in here where Jennifer could be sure they were safe.

Angela stared at her. “Ready for some more off time?”

“No!” Jennifer grinned. “What’s next, Boss?”

Angela didn’t laugh. “We’ll nap and then start the day like normal. I need to put in face time so they believe our explanation. You get to handle the rookies we eliminated.”

“Burning them?” Jennifer’s stomach rolled over.

“I think that part’s done. They had belongings that need to be sorted into our main stock.”

“I’ll handle it.” Jennifer was glad the troublemakers were gone. “But we do need more hands to help in moments like this.”

“I know, but there’s only one reason refugees come to this camp now and it isn’t to live in peace.” Angela stared at Jennifer. “Do you understand what that means?”

Jennifer’s sharp mind went straight to the mission team. “You mean Cerise. She’s dangerous.”

“Yes, but that’s not my point.”

Jennifer tried again. She loved impressing Angela and teaching herself to be smarter. “If people only come to us for one reason...then the mission team was in danger from the minute they arrived! Cerise can’t be trusted.”

“And she wasn’t. Marc made plans for her.”

“If he made plans, then why are they being hurt?”

Angela let Jennifer figure it out on her own as more practice.

It took a few seconds. Jennifer’s relief was palpable. “It’s all part of Marc’s plan.”

Angela sighed. “You got half of it. Try once more.”

Jennifer caught it in a blinding flash. “It wasn’t just Marc’s plan! You helped.”

Angela nodded. "I'll do whatever it takes to give us a future where all this crap doesn't exist anymore."

"You mean you'll hurt anyone to accomplish that goal."

Angela wasn't offended. She also didn't lie. Her heir had to understand that hard, ugly choices like this were part of the job. "Yes, though I do try nonviolent methods first, and I always group them together to get more than one benefit."

Jennifer felt Angela's gaze harden. She made the connection. "I did what I thought was best. We'll all have peace from it."

"Until Shawn comes home and reminds Morgan that he doesn't want Pam."

Jennifer shrugged defensively. "Maybe Shawn will be busy with Missy and forget...or he'll decide to leave it alone because Morgan seems happy."

Angela's tone firmed into stone. "It's wrong and you know it. I want you to make Pam remove the charm and volunteer to spend a month in jail for it."

Jennifer's brows and voice went up. "Not a chance in hell!"

Angela shrugged. "You'll leave me with no choice but to enforce the magic laws, Jennifer. Think about it while they heal. Be sure it's what you want for us."

"Do you want it?"

Angela shook her head. "No. Man's laws allow us much more freedom. Magic laws will crack down on everyone, including my heir."

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you do yet, but you will. One week, Jenny, and then I’ll do it myself.”

Trent tapped on the door, stopping any answer Jennifer would have given. “Top deck guards are reporting a rough wave just toppled a small sailboat. No survivors.”

Angela motioned at Jennifer. “Do a scan from here, to be sure all of them are gone.”

“I can’t scan through the ship and the water.”

“Then that’s something you need to work on.” Angela left the office.

Jennifer stretched out on the couch. *Angela just gave me my next training goal. Awesome.*

Walking the hall on duty, Kyle was happy for her and delighted that Angela wasn’t taking revenge on his wife. *Thank you, Boss.*

Angela went up the steps. *Don’t thank me, Kyle. She’s in danger every second she has this position.*

Kyle took that warning to heart. He stood in front of the office and kept a hand on his gun. Anyone coming here with bad intentions would be met with lead.

Angela didn’t feel guilty for winding him up. It didn’t hurt to have their guards angry and eager to kill. Kyle hated his job in this new world, as he had in the old one, but he was desperately needed. “Without death-loving men like you, none of the herd would survive.”

Chapter Nineteen

Agreed

1

“I’m glad you survived.” Tonya hung Jayda’s clipboard on the end of her bed. “We all are.”

Jayda refused to look at the medic. Her bald head and bright red skin glared when she didn’t.

Tonya understood the problem, but she didn’t know what to do about it. She was good at mixing drugs, reading results, filing reports, and assisting in medic moments. She had no experience with mental care.

Tonya opened the porthole between the two beds. Dace had been released a few hours ago, but there was no extra personnel for cleaning. It was making the medical deck stink.

Tonya scanned the small break room office a few doors down; her baby was sleeping while Terry snoozed in the chair nearby. They’d all gotten four hours of sleep and felt better, but they were still stealing every ten minutes of dozing they could get.

Satisfied things were okay for the moment, Tonya began stripping the soiled bedding. “You could at least talk to me, you know. It’s not fun

doing this stuff. Conversation would make it go by faster.”

Jayda wanted to be reasonable, but she was doing everything she could not to cry.

Both women looked toward the hall as voices echoed.

Brittani appeared in the hallway with Daryl. The couple didn't notice their audience as they stopped to let Conner go by with a clean armful of blankets for their few remaining patients.

“I'm sorry.”

Daryl beamed at Brittani. “It's fine. False alarms are the best kind of alarms.”

Brittani made a face. “Still, it sucks. I don't know what's normal. We'll have to live like this for months.”

Daryl didn't like it either. “Before the war, you would have been in a hospital under the care of people trained for this.”

Brittani disagreed vehemently. “And maybe the duty nurse would have reported me to the government for extra cash. Eight months later, they would have taken our babies and I would have taken my life. I'll stick with the apocalypse if you don't mind.”

Daryl didn't snap back at her. She was emotional from fear and lack of sleep. Everyone was scared to shut their eyes for long. The nightmares weren't skipping anyone. Even the camp members were starting to report them.

“Ahhhh!”

Daryl sighed. *We're all getting jarred by their screams.*

In the small break room, Terry smashed his hand over his mouth and tried to get his emotions under control. He looked over at the baby who'd flinched but was already falling back asleep. He lowered his hand and sucked in air that still smelled of smoke. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

Daryl guided Brittani by the door. He nodded at Terry, scanned the baby, and kept going.

In the room across the hall, Jayda rotated her head carefully, nerves burning as they healed. "She's wrong."

Tonya dropped the dirty sheets into the corner and started collecting garbage. "Why?"

"In her scenario, it's an eight-month wait and then it's all over. In this hell, we wait to die, over and over and over. It never ends."

Tonya shuddered. She forced out uplifting platitudes. "If not for the bad, we wouldn't have the good."

Jayda let the tears roll. Her anguish flooded down her cheeks and soaked her raw chest. Salt burned into her wounds.

Tonya stiffened at the pain. Anger made her spin around. "So you're a little ugly now! It will heal and you'll forget all about this. Stop being a drama queen!"

Jayda's tears fell harder. "It's not for me, you insensitive cow! It's for the death."

Tonya motioned. "We didn't lose anyone."

Jayda shut her lids to stifle the flow. “Not us. The mission team.”

Fear flooded Tonya. She rushed over to Jayda’s bed. “Who was it?! Who?”

“I don’t know.” Jayda sobbed.

Tonya carefully hugged the woman, heart breaking. “I’m sorry!”

Standing in the doorway now, Conner blocked their pain so it didn’t drag him down. He’d come to take out the trash, but Conner didn’t want to interrupt the women. He went into the next room instead.

“How are things?” Morgan hated being out of the loop. The pain medication was blocking his gifts and making him groggy.

“Better.” Conner began gathering trash. “Everyone will live, even Hannah, and the damage to the ship wasn’t structural. Grant says center walls can take more hits than outer walls. Makes sense, I guess.”

Morgan watched the teenager instead of staring at his unconscious roommate. Jack still hadn’t woken.

Morgan could feel Pam lingering out in the hallway. “Why is she avoiding me?”

Conner didn’t have the energy left to play nice. “She might have charmed you, Morgan, and the women here have decided to leave it. As soon as you heal up, go to the boss.”

Morgan lowered his voice. “Shawn and I made plans for this.”

Conner came closer to the bed. “Do the women know? Are they trapping Pam?”

Morgan didn’t shrug like he wanted to. Moving wasn’t a good idea. “Missy knows.”

“Then they are okay with leaving you charmed!”

Morgan was grateful to be alive, so much that he had no anger to express. “They’re doing what they think is best.”

Conner’s anger burst out. “All this greater good shit will turn us into slaves at some point!”

Morgan frowned with his eyes. “Not *us*, boy.”

Conner understood in a bright flash that made him recoil. “I won’t be a part of it!”

Morgan changed the subject now that he’d triggered the teenager. Conner would go to Angela about all of this and push her into the next stages of the plan she’d made. “Tell Pam she can come in, okay? I need a shave.”

“I’ll tell her.” Conner stomped out, forgetting the trash bag.

Morgan tried to force himself into a dreamless snooze. Waking up screaming wasn’t good for him or the medics.

But they can relax now. We only get hit every few weeks, or so. We should be safe again while we heal up. “It’s also what’s slowly killing us. The magic is dying from stress and unhappiness and constant use. It ages best when left alone for years. Jayda is right—better to die quickly, once, than over and over and over.”

Morgan forced himself to tell all of the truth. “She’s also wrong. Despite the pain, we should cling to every minute, every second, every day with everything we have. Life is a precious gift that can’t be returned once lost.”

His mind went to the mission team. He’d felt the death, too, but unlike Jayda, he knew who it was. “I’m sorry, buddy. It should have been me.”

2

Angela entered the mess at 10 a.m., hoping for coffee. The nap hadn’t recharged her; she was still tired and hurting, but she had a day of work waiting that wasn’t going to do itself.

Tim glanced up from the dustpan he was holding for one of his congregation to sweep in a pile of debris. He saw her newest injuries and paled. “Good morning.”

Tim and his small congregation of twelve were wrinkled but otherwise untouched. Angela wondered if they’d left the ship during the evacuation but didn’t ask. They’d come to clean without being called. It was good enough. “Same to you. Thank you for helping.”

Tim shrugged. “I wanted to soften you up before I ask for something you won’t want to give.”

Angela motioned to the counter stools. “Let’s talk.”

Tim hesitated. “Can we go somewhere private?”

“Why?”

“So they don’t hear me beg.”

“Isn’t pride a sin?”

“Of course. I’m still human.”

Angela gave in. She grabbed a coffee mug, filled it, and led the way to an empty office without speaking.

Tim shut the office door and took the seat across from her. He studied her pinched lips instead of her wounds and missing hair. “You’re saying no.”

Angela had been planning this conversation for a month. She’d waited until it benefitted her in multiple ways before allowing it to happen. “You want to teach things from a book that I don’t believe in.”

Tim was instantly offended. “You don’t believe in God? You ascended!”

Angela’s orbs lit up red for a few seconds, then faded back to tired and dangerous.

Tim swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“Putting words in your mouth. You said you don’t believe in the Book. But I do, and so do other people.”

“That doesn’t change my feelings on it.”

“Most of the Bible is about justice and fairness, and providing for your people. I would have thought you’d be all for that.”

“I am. It’s the other stuff I have an issue with.”

“Why?”

“Because this camp can’t have two masters. And I mean you and your book, not the Creator. People will be forced to pick between us. It will create sides and split us even further.”

“The Bible brings people together.”

Angela held up a hand before he could fall into preaching mode and miss her point. “There’s a huge hole in the theory it’s based on. Solve the riddle for me and I’ll reconsider my choice.”

Tim waited, curious and suddenly dreading what Angela’s busy mind had figured out.

“Try to imagine yourself as an alien outsider observing a project that you have no connection to.”

“I’ll put aside my bias as much as I can.”

“Don’t put it aside. Forget everything you know about our origins, then tell me how there were dozens of different family lines throughout the world if everyone came from just the garden’s two residents.”

Tim ran through what he knew. And it didn’t add up. “That can’t be right.”

“It is. Tonya found the medical books on large populations without inbreeding. It takes at least 50 men and women to populate the earth without us all being related, and even that number is too small to avoid natural genetic defects. It actually takes about 500. The charts in the book clearly show it in both even and mixed gender sets. There’s no way we all came from one breeding pair. We’d be like the European Royal family who inbred for centuries

and then died out, with a lot of genetic defects along the way.”

“That doesn’t mean... It’s not that simple.” A defensive glaze settled over Tim’s eyes. “Adam and Eve were perfectly made by God. There wouldn’t have been any defects!”

“Maybe not in them, but after hundreds of years of their kids breeding, defects would have taken over. I’d like you to read the genetic books for yourself.”

“I have the Book!”

Angela had expected that. After all, Tim was basing his new life on it. “You’re not wrong, Tim. The book is. You’re not doing anything wrong by accepting new information.”

Tim resisted the pull of temptation. “It’s not for me to question.”

Angela tried it from another side. “Do you believe writers can be trusted?”

Tim sneered at her. “You can’t tear down my faith in the Bible. It’s the word of God!”

“Once more, then, from another angle?”

Tim forced a curt nod. To get what he wanted, he had to listen. *That doesn’t mean I have to believe it.*

Angela knew, but she was determined to reach the real person inside instead of the preacher shell. “Imagine a group of cavemen taking shelter from a storm. One of them gets scared and the mental lock pops. It shoves them into an evolution. They can suddenly create fire for warmth, and for defense.

They quickly realize their fellow cavepersons are in awe and fear. Do you think they would have evolved enough for morality to stop them from using it to their advantage?”

Tim didn't enjoy sparring. He was glad she wasn't getting upset even though he'd yelled. “No, not likely. But they would have been killed if the fear was too strong.”

Angela concurred. The delicate, deadly balance they were walking with the normals here was proof of it. “In that small society, someone with power could survive if they were smart enough to hide it, or if they grouped with others like themselves. They would have eventually formed three types of groups.”

Tim added it up. “Normals and not normals. What's the third?”

“A mix, like here. There would have been people who were bonded to both sides or maybe the location was better, or the food was more plentiful. The third group could have been normals and descendants who had kids together. Families.”

“That makes sense.”

“So those three groups fought. There's no way they were peaceful. Agreed?”

“Yes, though the family group might have moments of peace.”

“Yes, and they were slaughtered every time they had contact with outsiders. Either way, evolutions came from the fights and fear. New gifts would have appeared. Those few would have become the

leaders, or guards for leaders who were smart enough to make a deal. Agreed?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. I’d go so far as to say the leaders were magic users and the normals were their slaves.”

Angela refused to delve deeper into that part. “Agreed. So the fighting forces evolutions to happen faster. The demons start filling in blanks and training their hosts to handle those around them. There were only oral rules at that point, I would think.”

Tim shrugged, drawn in. “Maybe not even oral. The magic and evolutions could have outpaced the ability to form words over grunts and growls.”

“Agreed. That has to come next. Those leaders needed a way to get their clan under control so they could organize defenses and hunts, or just to stop the constant violence that kept causing the evolutions. They wouldn’t want more competition.”

Tim was already nodding. “Exactly right. They became territorial. Single cave dwellers out alone were in extreme danger as superstitions and magic terrified everyone into striking out. The attacks would increase and force the circle to keep turning.”

“Agreed.” Angela bumped it to the next level. “One of them starts to form commands from their grunts and growls. Saying ‘no’ and ‘run’ were probably first. You can almost hear the groan and cry in them. From there, hand gestures begin to match the words.”

“Disagree. I think the hand gestures would have come first and helped force the language when gestures weren’t enough.”

“Wow. Great point. Agreed.”

Tim took them to the next level. “It’s about this time that art moves from the ground to the cave walls, trees, and any natural shelters they find.”

“Yes, because cave art wouldn’t have begun on the walls. They drew in the dirt with their hands first.”

“And the sand would have held together in ways that showed them some shapes and designs could stand against the water. So they start building.”

Angela leaned back in the uncomfortable office chair. “You sidetracked there. Or do you think it would have happened at the same time?”

“It might have come before even. Shelter is a basic need we always seek out. You don’t get hit with cold rain and just stand there. In most cases.” Tim chuckled. “We have some serious drinkers in this camp. They might be an exception.”

Angela didn’t remind him they were discussing a possible ancient past. She was thrilled that Tim understood they were also discussing the old world and their current existence. “So basic language and basic building skills mixed with warring and magic. That’s a lot going on.”

“And other than the magic, it’s all documented in several countries.”

“There were a lot of family lines to be able to document it in several countries. I assume all of

them followed this same basic timeline, no matter when they started.”

Tim missed her comment. “A couple of them had more influences, like extreme heat or cold. Also living in the jungle, forest, or coastal would affect it, but it would have been close. Defenses or immunities might have come sooner for them.”

“Agreed. The next level would be a group of homes together—a town.”

Tim considered it. “I think we skipped a lot of death and narrowing down family lines.” Tim understood what she was doing now, but he was too deep into the conversation to stop. “And the gatherers would still be gathering, while the hunters would still be hunting. There might be two more groups when you add those in.”

“Agreed, but we’ll assume just two families survived from each country. Maybe the others met another region’s people for mating and they were taken, or incest crushed the other lines.”

“Agreed. But I think some would have also died out naturally.”

She nodded. “Agreed. What’s next?”

“Your point. The written word.” Tim popped his sore spine. “You’re going to say in all that chaos, the written word came about as a way to control people. Fiction came next and the evolving leaders saw how powerful it was. They put the stories into written form to get their people to do what they wanted.”

Angela didn't push that part yet. "You said magic wasn't documented, but the Bible is full of it. A burning bush. A giant. People being told to sacrifice kids. A man being tricked into taking the sister who couldn't *see* well. Being able to call animals. Descendants were always there. We belong in this world, too. We have the right to exist."

Tim stared at her. "Agreed..."

"As long as we stay away or as long as you get to control us?"

Tim flushed. "Both, maybe."

"And you wonder why I'm considering drastic options to protect my kind." She sighed, voice sad. "We're not your enemy anymore. This isn't those first caveman days where we didn't know any better than to act like animals. Don't teach your kind to hate us and we won't retaliate." She held out her hand. "Agreed?"

Tim was shaken by their conversation, but he knew one thing for sure. He didn't want to go to war at all, let alone against Angela and her army. He shook with her. "Agreed."

Angela relented now that she'd gotten what she needed. "You can build your church from wood you collect from Henderson Island. There's space at the top of Cliff Road, next to the public toilet. It'll be small, but you'll learn to build up like we do and it can grow as we go."

"I don't understand why you're doing this."

“I trust you to help me keep the peace. I also think the camp will like it.”

“Some of them don’t believe in God.”

Angela shrugged. “They don’t have to. I’ve sacrificed a lot of lives to ensure they have the freedom to skip it. They just don’t have the freedom to take it away from everyone else. Your congregation will grow. They’ll follow you. We’ll argue about things, like women always wearing dresses or being told what to do by their men. Safe Haven’s rules will come first or you’ll hang for treason.”

Tim sighed. “I knew this would end in threats.”

“I have no choice, Tim. Over the years, your power will grow and the fighting will restart because your congregation will try to convert others instead of leaving them the fuck alone!”

Tim paled.

Angela snorted angrily. “Forget it. If you start going door-to-door, I’ll shut you down and send you out into the wastelands. Religion will never supersede our laws. Anyone who tries it will be put to death for undermining Safe Haven’s future as a peaceful society.”

Tim knew she wasn’t bluffing. “And will other things have these same strict, immoral rules?”

“Ensuring the safety of the future is neither immoral nor wrong. Your mind is warped into thinking only your way is correct.”

“Answer my question.”

She sighed. “Everything is being evaluated and approved or gotten rid of. It has to be or I can’t give us peace. You and I both know these people, on both sides, need a firm hand or they’ll turn this tiny island into hell.”

“Agreed. I just don’t like your methods.”

“Neither do I, but they are effective.” Angela wanted him fully on her side. “I have an answer you’ll like.”

Tim frowned. “An answer to what?”

“To the riddle. Why does the Bible say we all came from one pair?”

Tim waited, hoping she really did have that answer. If not, it would bother him for the rest of his life.

“There were gardens in other countries and they all held more than a single pair. When people wrote the Bible, they just excluded them. Fitting them all into one book would have been an exhausting endeavor and they probably didn’t like those other people anyway. The choice to exclude them was easy.”

Tim thought about that. He wanted to fit it into place. “But that means the Bible isn’t the word of God and I can’t accept that.”

“You will over time as you reread it, as religious people are apt to do. Your faith in the Creator is wonderful, Tim, but your easy acceptance of a book put together by corrupt men is troubling on every level.” Before he could fight it, Angela decided to go all the way with this moment.

Tim squinted at her as a glint caught his attention.

Angela let go of her control, allowing the thing inside to be seen.

Tim's mouth dropped open. *She looks like an angel!*

Angela quickly locked it back up. She hated that part of herself, but she wasn't above using it. "I need an answer."

Tim gave in because of her glow. "I'll need a list of rules."

"No. Send me a question each time something comes up." She gestured. "Or just come talk to me. This has been an enlightening conversation. I'm enjoying it."

Tim's lips curved. "You're not ready for me to go?"

She shook her head. "Have a drink and a snack with me. The den mothers are about to drop off a basket. We'll eat and chat and ponder the future of all humanity."

Tim grinned. "Agreed."

3

"Everyone is accounted for. All shifts are covered. We're good to go."

"Awesome." Ian went to the ship to let the point man know. He'd brought reports and updates from the bunker. As soon as he delivered these, he could sleep.

Wade stayed by the large beach tent that was now being taken down. All the people who'd spent the night here were back on the ship or in the tunnel bunker. The brawlers from the mess were cleaning trash from the sand and edges of the jungle. Later, they would trudge into that green tangle and pull more garbage from it. They wouldn't be relieved until they'd scoured the entire island.

Wade hoped that was enough to discourage the conspiring. They didn't believe Theo's explanation. They were preparing for war against the normals.

Wade had already put notes into his report for the boss. The normals were settling down, except for Ralph. The descendants were ramping up for more. "It comes in threes. We've had a time quake and now an explosion. The third hit will be worse."

Walking by, Debra caught his thought. *That's why some of us are leaving when the mission team gets back. We've had enough of triple hits.*

Debra went to an unmanned corner of the large tent and started dismantling it. Jeff and Kimmie were working on the opposite corner. Debra smiled at them and fell back into her mind. She'd been too scared to live before joining Safe Haven, but the time here had given her courage and new skills. She was almost ready to explore the world and face whatever came. *Just not here. These people are about to be dominated by magic laws and I don't want any part of that.*

It bothered Wade that so many of their people were thinking about leaving, but he didn't believe

magic rules would be much different than what they had now. *I need to talk to Adrian about it.*

“I’m here.”

Wade jumped, making everyone laugh. Adrian was right behind him.

“I didn’t even sneak. What’s up with you?”

Wade scanned the former leader and found a confident man who couldn’t hide his pain. Wade knew what had caused it. “She’s okay. You can breathe again.”

Adrian sighed. “I’m trying, but it was so much like the mountain!”

Wade sympathized. Carrying Angela’s body to the medical center had become a habit for Adrian. “You should stop that.”

Adrian snorted out bitterness. “I will if she will.”

Camp members going by smiled toward Adrian and contemplated how safe they’d felt with him guarding the tunnel bunker.

Wade made a connection. *Did Angela let him reconnect with the camp last night for that reason?*

Adrian shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe.” Wade studied Adrian. “How far ahead do you think she sees?”

“A lot. More than any of us, for sure.”

“Because she’s a higher level.”

Adrian denied that. “Jennifer is technically the highest level here now. Brains and power don’t always mix the best. Angela is an anomaly that isn’t likely to repeat in our lifetime.”

“Jennifer won’t become like her?”

“Jennifer will become her own dangerous, talented person. There’s no need for us to all be alike.” Adrian tried to change the subject. “Why did you want to talk to me?”

“Allison said something that worried me.”

Adrian listened to Wade’s thoughts about it. “That’s not good.”

“Yeah. Allison isn’t the only one. I’ve been scanning people since she told Samantha what she wants. A lot of people here are thinking about what it would be like to never die.”

“Well, they’re wrong. Angela isn’t immortal. If not for our healers, she would still be on death’s door.”

Wade didn’t let Adrian blow him off. “But would that door ever open for her or would she eventually heal while the others died?”

Adrian didn’t have an answer. “I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

Adrian didn’t want to. He was scared of that answer. “Talk to the boss about it, Wade. This is above my clearance level.”

“But it’s not. She put you in charge of the camp. And don’t say it was Jennifer’s order. She’s following Angela’s plans to the letter.”

“So?”

Wade scowled. “So if it was a surprise, then tell me why everything was covered so well.”

“Jennifer is good at her job.”

“Jennifer is a reckless teenager who gets lucky.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Wade tried not to be snarky. “But I do. She sucked down a host of souls, against the rules, and didn’t get punished for it. She now has more power than any of us, except the boss, and her mate has cracks he refuses to heal. That’s a bad situation developing.”

“Yeah, but I believe Angela has good reasons for that.”

“Then you agree that Angela knows all these things ahead of time and lets them happen.”

Adrian was trapped. He refused to confirm or deny anything. He brought up a mental wall and walked away. “Talk to the boss, Wade. I don’t have the clearance to answer.”

Adrian’s refusal to be honest convinced Wade that he was correct. *Which means all of this is part of her plan. Allison is right. We’re going to have magic rules soon and there’s nothing we can do to stop it.*

4

Angela was back in her office when the lunch meal was called. The mess was mostly cleaned and ready for use. Tim’s people had stuck around there to be gophers and spread good vibes.

Angela thumbed through the caught-up notes and reports. She didn’t read them to verify Jennifer’s choices. The girl had done all of it and then some. Jennifer was working hard to get respect

back and she would succeed. “But you don’t really want this job, Jenny. You’re too good, too pure. I don’t want you to go bad like Adrian, like me, like Marc. I want you to finally have happiness in your life instead of this constant pain and regret.”

“Shouldn’t that be my choice to make?” Jennifer hadn’t been far away.

Angela chuckled sardonically.

Jennifer dropped into the chair across the desk. Her filthy body left an outline on the chair. Neither of them cared. In times of crisis, cleanliness was often the second thing to go. Rational thought was the first.

Jennifer swept Angela’s healing skin and burnt hair in sympathy and relief. Judging from her movements, Angela was stiff, sore, and once again lucky to be alive.

“I’m better now. I found my last bottle of Advil.”

“We have to find a way to duplicate that.”

“Definitely. Tylenol doesn’t do the same job. It dulls the pain. Advil takes down the inflammation and that’s something we all have. Our bodies are abused.”

“About that...” Jennifer forced it out. “I think you should have someone check you over. Tobias did something. He told Charlie it would help you carry to term.”

Angela now had an explanation for the odd feeling she’d woken with. “Maybe it will.”

“But what if it wasn’t to help?”

“I’d say we’re both suspecting him without a reason.”

“I’ll still feel better if you do it.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“All the animals are off-ship now. Chad got the horse and the goats to use the cargo ramp next to the pontoon bridge. He let them loose. And everyone who isn’t on duty is on the island now. You finally got them all off.”

Angela forced a chuckle and waited, sure there was more.

Jennifer was too tired to keep trying to find a way to convince Angela. “Charlie’s right. We need to go get the mission team. I told everyone I would call a meeting about it.”

Angela got up and walked out.

Jennifer sighed. “I’ll take that as a no.”

Chapter Twenty
No Other Option
6 Days Later

1

Shawn stood ramrod straight in the small cage, with his hands over his shriveled penis. It was the only position where the hounds weren't able to reach him. They sniffed and pawed, drooling for the taste of human blood.

Shawn's knees shook. He'd been like this for a long time. The torture sessions had been short when they'd first started. Now, they stretched on endlessly as the dogs raked their jagged claws across anything they could reach.

Shawn's mind started to blink out. He was spending too much time in it, but there was no other escape from the thirst, the hunger, the pain.

Shawn thought about Missy. He felt the connection go through and tried to pull it back before the little girl saw what was happening to him.

Too late. Missy's horror went through his mind.

Shawn couldn't take her pain and his own. He stumbled.

Pain ripped into his leg as a hound tried to pull him closer.

Shawn jerked upright again, shouting.

Missy snapped awake.

Shawn wished he could.

Missy woke the kids and the adults on their deck with awful screams. She didn't stop for a long time.

2

“We're all here, Boss.” Wade snapped the waistband of his Speedos and wiggled his brows, hoping to make her laugh. After the rough start to their morning, he was certain she could use the mood boost.

Angela chuckled because it was expected. Her mood boost would come from a successful training session.

Everyone in the water laughed. All of them were wearing bikinis or swimming trunks. Wade was the only one showing off in a speedo, but he had a great body. Angela wasn't above ogling his huge arms like even the men were doing. Wade and Theo were the best-built men in camp.

“Let's get started so we can go get things set up for the matches later.”

Tonight's fights and afterparty were on most lips and thoughts. This group had skipped the cinnamon roll breakfast the others were enjoying right now. The scents wafting through the ship were wonderful. It was smothering the smell of chlorine from the pool.

Wade dove smoothly into the water and joined his family.

Neil and Samantha slid down to make room for him.

Dog stayed on the beach chair in the corner, avoiding the water. *Why do they like getting wet in here? It smells like the old world.*

Angela went to the edge of the pool. They'd removed the diving board for this lesson. She stood where it used to connect and faced her chosen fighters. "I'm sure you've all been curious about the private lessons I've been doing with Tonya and Samantha."

"We guessed you were trying to gain another level without fighting or killing." Neil smiled at Samantha, but it was strained. He didn't want her in lessons anymore. He wanted her in their cabin where she would stay safer. The explosion had changed everything.

"We are. We're also trying to find a way to stop time. I want to start officially training for it, in the pool. The water will mimic the conditions."

"Good idea!" Kyle had hated not knowing what to do when it happened. "So we push it backward?"

"A few of us will. The others will watch."

Wade heard the note of importance in her voice. "What are we watching for?"

"The right moment to act. If we can kill the pusher, we win. We'll study our pusher and determine the best way to kill them while they work."

Other than Neil and Wade, no one thought it was too harsh, and those men only disagreed

because Samantha was involved. Anyone pushing time was assumed to be in on the reset and therefore an enemy.

Angela jumped in and let the water take her to the bottom of the cleaned pool.

The guards on the doors observed in confusion and then rotated back to scan the hallway as footsteps echoed. Angela had made it clear that she didn't want to be interrupted.

“What are they doing in there?”

The highest level guard, Lisa, glared at Sherman and Ralph. “Mind your own business!”

The normals scurried away.

Lisa was glad. *I can't answer them because I don't know, but it looks like fun.*

Angela surfaced and wiped her face. She hung onto a side.

Samantha and Tonya swam over to her to protest quietly. They didn't want to try this in front of everyone.

“Put your pride aside.” That was becoming one of her favorite sayings now. Her people were arrogant, with good reason, but Angela needed them to be able to forget it in these moments. “When we bring up a shield, we can move the water around us. I don't want that. No shields. We're pushing the water using our minds.”

People snorted and groaned.

Angela demonstrated. She was only able to push the water away in small places. She forced out more

energy and let it go as the water pressed back on her. “As you can see, it’s hard.”

She made sure everyone was paying attention. “We’re going to do it under the water, while we hold our breath. Pick a partner. One tries and the other makes sure their partner gets to the surface for air.”

Angela didn’t give them time to protest or make matches based on relationships. She grabbed Samantha’s wrist and pointed.

Sam drew in air and sank to the bottom. Under the water, there were no great smells or sounds of passing camp members chattering excitedly about tonight’s matches. The water smothered her in a dull roar that reminded her of the ocean outside these walls.

Neil came over to be Tonya’s partner so he was closer to Samantha.

Angela followed Sam down.

Samantha started trying to push the water away with her mind. She hoped it would be easier to have something that would push back against her, unlike the other lessons where they’d tried this with air.

Angela scanned the others while small bubbles flowed steadily from her nose. None of them were doing it so far. Several people floated to the surface. Angela scanned Samantha and pointed up.

Samantha went slowly, mind fighting her gift. *I know I can do this. Why won’t it work for me?!* She surfaced and spat out water, hating the taste of the chemicals.

Angela motioned the rest of them to surface. She stayed down until all of them were up and breathing in fresh air.

She gave them all two minutes to recover, then called it. “Next set, go!”

Angela ignored the first-degree burns that were fading more each day. The chlorine in the water burned her skin and her eyes and made her more determined to secure this skill. She tried harder, using more energy, but she was still only able to push the water in tiny places.

Samantha called it this time. *Everyone up!*

Her mental order brought them all back to the surface.

Angela studied the pool waves with a frown. “Maybe we have to be in danger...”

“A lot of our gifts are like that.” Samantha brought up her shield and shoved the water toward Wade, who she knew could handle it.

Wade went under and brought up his shield instinctively. He quickly surfaced and waited for another wave so he could try again.

Angela shook her wet head. “We’ve been practicing this with no success for weeks.” She looked at Tonya, who was clearly cold and appeared weak, and then back to Samantha, who was glowing with good health. “Everyone will shove the water toward you.”

Neil and Wade protested, loudly. Their voices bounced off the tiled walls and slick floor.

Samantha wasn't scared. "You're both right here if I have trouble. It's fine."

Angela motioned the others to the deeper water. "We'll keep her on the shallowest end." Angela swam toward the middle of the pool and took a place on the side.

Samantha got set. "Whenever you're ready."

Angela slapped the water. "Now!"

Samantha saw the wave coming and fought not to duck under the water. She pushed out her mental force against it.

Water broke over her in a thick wave that tried to rip her from the side of the pool.

Neil put a hand on her arm. He had stayed next to her.

Wade swam closer. Neither man was shoving water.

Angela glared at them. "Get over here or get out."

Wade went a few feet away.

Neil's rage lit up his eyes.

Samantha slapped his arm. "Get over there and help me figure out how to do this!"

Because Sam wanted it, Neil did it.

The next wave was bigger, faster. Samantha's panic blasted them all mentally as it took her under.

Samantha pushed harder, fear lending her strength. She pushed the water away from her face for a brief second.

Then it snapped back and knocked her toward the pool wall.

Sam brought up her shield and bounced off it. She surfaced a few seconds later, gasping for air.

“That’s enough! She almost got hurt!” Neil was furious that Sam was doing this, willing or not.

Samantha held up a hand, counting. She took her time and calmed her heart rate. When she got to one, she glared at Neil. “Do it!”

“No!” Neil climbed from the pool and stayed near her so he could dive in and help if she needed it.

Angela wasn’t angry at him even though she should have been. She also wanted Samantha to be safe. “Again! Push!”

Water rolled toward Samantha in another tall crest.

Samantha sank to the pool bottom, struggling to grab the slippery water. She pushed it away from her body and then let go as it snapped back on her.

Sam swam for the surface, fighting not to cough. She broke the surface and gasped in air. *That one hurt!*

Angela came up near her. “You’re done for today.”

Neil nodded savagely. “Yes! I’ll help you out.”

Samantha wiped her face and drew in another deep lungful of air. “Not yet. I’m okay.”

Angela gestured. “Let Tonya do one.”

Tonya nodded reluctantly. She hated the water, but she was willing to try.

“No!” Samantha twisted around in the water and gave the signal to get set for another run.

Angela was proud of the new mother.

Neil wasn't. "No! That's enough!"

Dog was tired of Neil's shouts. He jumped off the chair and padded toward the loud man.

Neil didn't see it coming. One minute he was shouting at Angela. The next, he was falling into the pool with his mouth wide open.

Descendants laughed.

"Good, Dog!"

Dog shook off the splash of water and returned to his chair.

Neil climbed from the pool and glared at the wolf. "Don't do that again!"

Dog put his snout under his tail and began cleaning his ass.

Neil groaned. "Gross!"

Angela regained control while trying not to laugh and encourage Dog to repeat the shove.

I can do this. Samantha stood on the bottom and let the muted voices fade away. Sam imagined having her shield up. She pushed it out mentally, hands lifting.

Angela squinted through the swirling water with everyone else. Her eyes were burning... *The water's moving!*

Samantha ignored the excited hive members now encouraging her. She fought her burning lungs and used more energy to shove her imagined shield out toward the center of the pool.

Samantha's body bent with the lack of pressure. The water was down to her ankles. She opened her eyes in surprise, letting go of her concentration.

"Look out!" Wade tried to swim toward Samantha as the wave bounced against them and rebounded.

Neil jumped in, slipping. He fell into her and used his arms as a cushion and his body to block as the wave slammed into their side of the pool.

Samantha held onto Neil as water gushed into her mouth and up her nose. She felt him lift her up and scrambled for the side.

Neil followed her up, coughing and aching.

Samantha sucked in air and coughed out water with her words. "Did it!" Coughs echoed again. "I did it!"

Angela pulled herself onto the side of the pool. "Very good."

Wade got out of the water and joined his family to make sure they were okay.

Angela glanced around pointedly. "You all want me to go get the mission team. I need you to learn how to do this or we won't stand a chance."

"Sam knows how now. She'll teach the rest of us." Tonya shivered.

"That's not enough." Angela reminded them of the quake. "We could barely react when time slowed. We have to find a way to still function as a fighting force."

Stunned silence filled the pool room.

Angela wiped water from her face again. “That’s why I can’t say yes when they beg me to rescue our loved ones. We know the enemy has other pushers. And you felt how hard it is to resist.” Angela stood up carefully on the soaked ground. “I already have a plan in the works, but we have to learn how to do this. If anyone can, it’s us.”

The descendants were filled with pride and determination at her words. Samantha moved back toward the pool, ignoring the protests of both her men. “I think I can do it out of the water now and send it at you guys. It’ll feel closer to the time quake.”

Angela wanted to allow that, but she knew better. “We have to do this in the water, so we can’t dive under the waves to avoid it. Where we’re going, that option won’t be available.”

Samantha shrugged. “No pain, no gain.” She dove back into the cool water.

Neil and Wade were right behind her.

3

“Wow. I’m surprised they survived.” Samantha entered the garden area three hours later with a small entourage and hair that was finally drying. The rest of the lesson had gone well. Afterward, she and her men had stayed in the water for a personal moment. She was still tingling from it. “My poor babies!”

Camp women and kids laughed as Samantha rubbed the browning leaves on the plants closest to the door.

The plants were doing well, all things considered. Some of them were even close to harvest time. The garden hadn't gotten much care during the trip here. Angela had made sure it was watered when the workers had a free shift, but that was it. They were living from the rations they'd gathered and what had been on the ship when they found it.

"That has to change right now. This is so important!" Samantha took a minute to center herself and seal up her new memories of the handsome men scanning her and everyone else from the doorway. The sex had been amazing, but she needed to work now. "We're fine. Go do your own things."

Neil went to the steps to the top deck.

Wade took a guard post outside the door.

Samantha pointed. "Put the babies in the pumpkin seats first; make sure they're in a circle so they can see each other."

Samantha wanted their children to start bonding. "After that, come get a pair of gauntlet gloves before you touch anything. A lot of these plants have spikes, spines, or thorns. If you get poked, you can catch illnesses from it."

Samantha didn't go into details. Not all plants carried those problems to pass on, but her volunteer workers weren't ready for an in-depth lesson yet.

Making her helpers afraid to touch them barehanded was better than hoping they remembered which ones were safe.

Daisey helped get the babies and smaller kids settled. She and the other den mothers were thrilled to be allowed around the descendant offspring. Samantha had cleared a space weeks ago for the kids to play and sleep while their parents worked, though the mats were very dusty now. They were using the clean pumpkin seats and walkers today. Blocked in by bags of soil, the kids were safe, in sight, and entertained by each other and a new environment to explore with their eyes, ears, and noses.

Missy lingered in the hall with Wade until the others were occupied. Then she looked up at him in open pain.

Wade felt it stronger because of his natural bond with all females. The little girl had bags under her eyes and her hair was a mess. She wasn't doing well with the separation. He put a hand on her shoulder and tried to send comfort.

Missy blocked it. She didn't want to be comforted. "I want my Shawn."

Wade gave the girl the only answer that would satisfy her young heart. "You'll have him. The Boss didn't send him out to die. He'll be back."

"Promise me!"

Missy's shout drew attention to them. Samantha came to the doorway.

“I promise.” Wade was certain of it. “Most of them will return. We need to be ready to help them heal.”

“Because mission teams always come back hurt?”

Wade nodded. “The apocalypse doesn’t give us happy adventures. It gives us a chance for survival and we have to be strong enough to make it happen. Shawn is.”

Missy shuddered.

Wade hated her pain. He pushed in comfort over her mental protests this time. “It’s not good for you to become sick with the worry, Missy. He’ll need you to be strong so you can help him. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know how!”

“I’ll help you, doll, but not while I’m on duty, okay?”

Missy nodded solemnly. She believed in that rule, too. “I’ll stand guard with you. I don’t like the dirt.”

Wade smirked. “Unless it’s throwing sand?”

Missy giggled, pain easing. “Tearing down castles is more fun than building them.”

“That probably explains why humanity destroys more than it creates—it’s fun.” Wade wiped a drip from his neck. His hair was still wet. His Eagle clothes were covered in small wet spots from it.

Missy felt Samantha about to call her over and say something distracting. “You promised.”

“And I meant it. Now go help with our food supply. Samantha’s right; it’s very important.”

Missy obediently went to the new mother and waited for instructions with the others.

“You’re good with kids.”

Wade spun, hand drawing and body dropping into a killing stance in a brief second.

Rico didn’t move anything but his mouth. “I’m on duty over this hall.”

Wade regained his calm stance, holstering. “Then get to your post.”

Rico scanned the room over his shoulder and then continued his walk, following the rules for guards to scan each room on every patrol.

Wade frowned at the new man, but he didn’t pick a fight. *Why don’t I trust him?*

Rico checked each room before going to the Eagle post at the corner. He scanned the other hallway and pretended he didn’t see the redheaded medic slip into a closet and shut the door. It wasn’t the first time he’d noticed Tonya doing that; he never told on her even though he was curious about what she was doing. *They have their secrets and I have mine.*

4

“Good afternoon, Boss.” Neil met Angela at the top of the ramp. “It’s a lovely day.” His anger at her over the pool lesson had faded under Samantha’s pleasure at being successful.

Angela sniggered. It was cloudy, with sharp wind and silt-filled waves that proved Samantha's warning of a storm coming. Nothing about it was lovely. "I take it your new mix is going well?"

Neil blushed a little. "You could say that and not be wrong."

"I'm happy for you." She really was. "Samantha's sadness over Jeremy will fade a little more every day that Wade is in your lives."

Neil's good mood took that hit and tossed it right back. "So will mine. But what about yours?"

Angela didn't want to fight. "I'll be right as rain in time, Neil. Enjoy your family."

The wind pushed against them determinedly. The storm wasn't supposed to be bad. Watching the waves smack against the pontoon bridge made Angela wonder if that was right.

She looked around. "Are they still settling in?"

Neil sniggered this time. "No, they're pretty comfortable at this point."

Angela blushed at the mental images. "Enough. Don't wind me up when I have no place to go."

Neil laughed. "Sorry. Sam's in the garden with the boys and a group of volunteers. They're getting the banana plants ready to be put into an orchard and watering the rest. She said she'll be there all day."

"Her kind draws energy automatically from nature. It will be good for her to spend time surrounded by the plants she started."

"Wade's the guard over the garden." Neil hurried to explain. "Everyone else was busy or on

an off day, and it's just for a short shift. We won't put them together again unless you call it. We don't have enough Eagles since the fire cowards ran and we demoted them back to camp members."

"It's fine for today." Angela understood introducing sex into a relationship was a tricky thing. She slid a hand into her pocket and started squeezing the tennis ball she was now carrying everywhere she went. "It's crazy for two people, let alone three. Take this week and rearrange things. Then don't do it again unless I call it."

"We won't." Neil was relieved. He made a note in his book while scanning her for trouble.

Angela laughed. "You could just ask."

"Yeah, but you lie really well. You're almost as good as..." He stopped, catching himself. Angela was still pissed over his lies. Bringing that up wasn't a good idea.

Angela scanned the choppy ocean around the ship. She spotted debris. "Did you see the sailboat go under?"

"No. I wasn't up here then. The guards swear no one survived."

"Good."

"How are the patients?" Neil was friends with most of them. He didn't want it to appear like he only cared about one by picking a name.

"Much better. We only lost a few animals."

Nearby on duty, Chad grimaced at their cavalier relief. He hated it when animals suffered.

Angela ignored the guard. “Where are you scheduled for the day?”

Neil glared at the man to get him to move on faster. “I’m here for the next hour, then Wade and I will be on the rear deck working on the name-to-gift matching.”

“I’m sorry it’s so uneven. Being a dozen men light does affect things.”

Neil nodded. “And the rookies aren’t working out, so it’s not like you can give them a full shift alone. Don’t sweat it, Boss. I’m 5-by.”

Angela brightened at his term. They didn’t use it much anymore because it reminded everyone of Adrian’s leadership. “Where’s he scheduled for the day?”

Now Neil’s good mood did take a hit. A thick frown pushed his brows together. “With you.”

“Okay.”

Her accepting tone angered Neil. “How can you do this to Marc?”

“Do what? Torture Adrian in his place?” Angela shrugged. “He’d be happy about it, I’m sure.”

Neil’s guilt spoke for him. “I’ll agree with the others about you and Adrian. If you promise to go get the mission team as soon as the matches are over.”

Jennifer and Monica moved closer and acted like they weren’t listening as they covered the bridge and front deck.

Angela frowned. “Why the change?”

Neil sighed. “I have another man in bed with my wife, happily. I have no right to tell you how you can find happiness. I just wish it was anyone but Adrian. I can’t imagine sharing Sam with an enemy.”

“I’m actually distancing myself from Adrian.”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“People break ties in different ways. I have other options if I want to have an affair, like Sadie does.”

“Do you?”

Angela sighed this time. “Marc will be different when he comes home. There may be times that I long for comfort he can’t give me, but that will just make me try harder to heal him; our relationship will grow strong again. Adrian is a tool I’ll use to further my goals.”

Neil was already in too deep to stop now. “We all see the spark, though. It could get out of hand and then Marc’s stuck in a three-way relationship he didn’t consent to.”

“I’d let him go before putting him through that. But you all underestimate my feelings for Marcus Brady. Our love is eternal. I’ll never throw him over for Adrian or anyone else. We’ll be together forever, even after we die. Doug already reserved two places for us in the garden. You can’t imagine how much I look forward to that day. I also dread it with every fiber of my being. I won’t go quietly into that good night. No one should.”

Neil recognized the Dylan Thomas reference. He hated poetry, but some of the classics had stuck with him. That was one of them. Another was from William Ernest Henley. *I wish I could remember the whole thing.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my unconquerable soul.*

Neil dwelled on it. *I have cried aloud and I'm not unbowed, but I am the captain of my unconquerable soul.*

"That's true of all of us." Angela lifted a brow. "Are we good now?"

"Yes." Her explanation had calmed Neil. "Sorry. I'm twitchy today." He didn't say it was her fault for putting Samantha in danger in the pool. He tried to think of something else he could say that would convince her to go get their missing team.

Angela's tone softened. "I love it that you're loyal to Marc. Don't ever change."

"What about the Eagles? They think this will work."

Angela sighed again as her heart thumped. Adrian came into view. The beach was busy with people going to town. Most of them were carrying supplies. The work tent where she started each shift was empty and waiting for her, but it wouldn't be used much today. "They're doing what they believe is best. I have no plans to retaliate."

"Do you think Marc will?"

A cloud passed over the dim sunlight. A chill came through the warm air.

Neil knew she was tired of being asked, but his mouth still opened. "When are we going to get them?"

Angela needed to confide in someone and Neil owed her his silence. "Can you keep a secret, Neil?"

Neil brought up his mental clouds and laughed harshly.

Angela leaned in and whispered in his ear.

Neil blinked. "That's not possible."

"But it is, my sneaky friend. It's right there and none of you spotted it." Angela went toward the ladder. "Keep your thoughts shut, Neil. If anyone finds out from you, even by accident, I'll schedule you and Wade on fourteen-hour shifts for a month. You'll be too tired to enjoy the new mix, I promise."

Neil didn't doubt her. He did like the challenge. "Who am I guarding against that you feel the need to give me such a nasty warning?"

Jennifer tapped Neil on the shoulder. "Me, I'm guessing."

Neil jumped and ducked, shield coming up with his mental clouds.

Angela laughed all the way down the ladder to the pontoon bridge. She went to the beach tent to adjust a schedule.

Jennifer was laughing, too. She headed back toward the bridge as Neil straightened, flushing.

On duty over Jennifer, Monica saw Molly coming up the ramp. Her furious eyes and red face said she was hoping for a fight.

Monica turned her back to the angry woman. *I'm not allowed to get distracted on duty.*

“Are you allowed to get wet?” Molly reached out and shoved her into the dirty top deck swimming pool.

Jennifer laughed again. “She earned that.”

Neil scowled. “Take her post.”

Molly grinned savagely. “I’m right here.”

Neil saw Monica surface and gestured. “That’s your headache.”

Jennifer groaned. “Makes me wish we had something for it.”

Neil chuckled. “Like Advil?”

“I was thinking a bullwhip and chair.”

Neil’s laughter faded as Tim and his small congregation came up the ramp and went toward the ladder. They were dressed like everyone else, but all of them were carrying a Bible. “Where are you guys going?”

Tim smiled soothingly. “To spread some light and calmness among the herd.”

Jennifer paused. “And picking a spot for your new church?”

Tim kept walking. “Not needed, AJ. I have a deal in place and I will stick to it.”

Jennifer frowned. “AJ?”

Neil tried not to snicker. “Angela Junior.”

Jennifer beamed. “I love it.” It was nicer than being called Enforcer J, though she did like the respect that one gave her.

Tim chuckled at Neil’s surprise. “She’s never been as uptight as you, *Todd*.”

“Don’t call me that!” Neil glared at the preacher. “Watch your step, or you’ll find yourself in the swimming pool! Molly isn’t the only one who can push people.”

Tim kept walking, still smiling. “And a good day to you, too, *Neil*.”

Monica finally made it out of the pool. Water ran from her body as she calmly walked over to where they were all standing. She slung her hair wildly to shake off the water, spraying them. “I needed a good dunk.” She gave Molly a sexy leer. “I love it when you get me wet.”

Offended on Molly’s behalf, Neil turned around. “What about when a man does it?”

Monica rotated toward him, ready to spar.

Neil shoved her back into the pool. Water splashed up and drenched his boots.

Molly burst out laughing. “Awesome.”

Jennifer walked toward the ladder to start scanning from there. She wanted to work on her

skills, not spend time berating people who weren't going to listen anyway. "Get it out of your system now." *When we take over, abusing the normals won't be allowed.*

Coming down the hill toward the beach, Adrian caught that thought clearly and stumbled. *They all know about it. This isn't one of Angela's plans that will twist around and turn into something good. She really means to conquer the world!*

Chapter Twenty-One
I Have Limits

1

Angela glanced up at Adrian from the beach desk where she'd added the schedule change to her notes. Rico was now a permanent medical bay guard, by his request. "Why would you think I was bluffing?"

Adrian ignored her vanilla chlorine scent, though the damp, curly ponytail on the side of her skull was a distraction. "Because you have a good heart and you're not a tyrant."

Angela scanned his jeans and tank top in appreciation. His body was strengthening and healing, but she hoped he didn't plan to fight tonight.

"This is wrong. You have to stop now."

A warm breeze blew over the table, riffling the papers she had weighted with rocks.

Adrian came to the front of the table and leaned down. "Angela!"

She fought a flinch and gave him a nasty glare. "Feel like being abusive today, do you?"

Adrian didn't back down. "Why are you letting everyone go corrupt?"

Angela signed the sheet and put it in her folder.
“I’m letting them see what it would be like.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re all wondering if it would give us peace or even happiness.”

“It won’t, not this way.”

“I know.”

Adrian sulked. “I thought this was all part of a plan. You aren’t going to take over the normals?”

“Yes.”

“To which one?”

“Both.” Angela yawned and wiped moisture from her eyes. “They’re getting to see what life would be like if they followed different rules.”

“But some of them won’t come back from this!”

“I know.” Angela kept a wall between them so he couldn’t pull things from her mind this time.

Adrian understood she wasn’t going to tell him anything right now. He rotated to scan the beach for someone who would.

Angela rose, taking her folder along but not the weighted papers. “Let’s just have a nice day, Mr. Mitchel.”

Adrian studied her, now missing the long hair that had been burnt off. It looked like she’d shaved half her head. The riffling papers caught his attention next. He took her seat and began scanning them, not caring if she protested. *What are you doing to my camp, Angela?*

Angela went to the beach to meet her other companions for the afternoon. She wanted to help

set things up. *These people have to decide to be part of the light. Forcing them won't work.*

Cate, Cody, and Dog hurried across the bridge and stopped in the sand. They kicked it with their new shoes while Dog pawed it with his freshly clipped nails. She'd taken all her wards on a self-care errand earlier that had started in the barbershop and ended in the clothing department. Even Dog was sporting a shiny new scarf. They all looked great.

So they're messing it up as fast as they can in retaliation for being clean and cared for. It's an odd way to show me love.

The kids stopped kicking, realizing they were disrespecting her gift.

Dog dug deeper to gather a pile of sand and then he rolled in it.

Angela laughed.

It sounded fake to the twins. Cate quickly tapped Dog's rear end. "Stop now. It's rude."

Dog stared up in shock. *Did you swat me?*

Cate nodded. "When you're bad, you get a swat."

Dog whimpered. *But I'm a good wolf!*

"It's okay. I'm sorry!" Cate fell to her knees and hugged Dog tightly.

Dog leered at Angela over the girl's shoulder. *I'm getting good at this.*

Angela laughed again, genuinely this time. "You're a trip, Dog."

The wolf pulled free from the girl and resumed rolling in the sand.

Cate scowled as she realized she'd been tricked. "Bad wolf!"

Cody had been scanning the beach for problems. He tensed, bringing up his shield around them.

Humor fled. Tension replaced it.

Adrian and the Eagles on duty flew toward them as they spotted the threat.

"Down!"

Angela ducked as Cody lowered his shield.

Cate and Cody fired magic at the same time.

The man lunging from the water was struck in the chest by both hits. He staggered backward and slipped. He went under the water and slowly floated back to the surface; he wasn't breathing.

The dead man was scarred and too wrinkled to identify a nationality. His thin body implied he'd been starving. It made Angela sad. *People are attacking us for food now. How awful.*

Guards hurried to make sure he was dead and alone. They stomped through the murky waves, punching and kicking.

Angela put a hand on Cate's shoulder, scanning the girl.

Cate let her, not feeling anything but satisfaction.

Cody shied from her touch. *I don't want you to know.*

Angela let go of Cate and walked toward the jungle while her Eagles began dragging the body onto land. “You’re Marc’s son. You enjoy killing. It’s not a surprise.”

Cate stared at her brother sadly. “You’ve been corrupted.”

Cody tried not to get angry or sad. “I was put here to kill. So were all of you. Why is it wrong to enjoy it?”

“Come on.” Adrian nudged the boy toward the jungle path. “Let’s walk and talk.”

Angela was glad Adrian was stepping up to handle it. The words she had for Cody wouldn’t help. *I like it, too, and I also hate it. He’s not conflicted like I am. He wants to keep doing it. Even Cate stops when she sees blood. She’s vicious; her brother is the killer.*

Adrian talked quietly with the young boy while Cate trailed them, listening and scanning for more intruders. Her animosity toward Adrian was on hold for the moment. *Cody might be bad. It could still happen to me. I have to fight it.*

Adrian was proud of the girl and worried for the boy. “All life is precious. Deep down, you know that. Taking it has to be respected.”

Cody nodded. “I do respect it. Force is the number one method of control over any population. My dad is right about that.”

Adrian frowned deeply. “What’s number two?”

Cody smiled toward Angela. “Love.”

Adrian tried to inject a possible wedge that he would use to reach the child. “Hope is stronger than both of those.”

“No, it’s not.” Cody showed his intelligence. “Hope doesn’t stop the pain and hatred. Only death or love do. Hope is for the weak. I prefer action and I always will.”

“Damn, you *are* like Marc.” Adrian understood they wouldn’t be able to get Cody to stop enjoying death. “But that doesn’t mean it’s okay to kill. We only do it to survive.”

“Innocent people don’t need to be killed.” Cody smiled again. “I told her I’ll be a good king. I will because I know the difference between murder and killing. One is wrong; the other is necessary in any society.”

Angela frowned this time. “I wanted to make a world where that isn’t true.”

Cody shrugged. “Maybe you should try it on a different planet. This one’s too far gone.”

Angela immediately confirmed a hypothesis. “So if we went backward, there was a time when it was possible?”

Cody studied the question and came up with the verification Adrian dreaded and Angela celebrated. “Yes. At the moment of creation, we were given free will. If that was gone, the violence would go with it.”

Angela stopped Adrian and Cate when they would have scolded the boy. “Let him finish.”

Cody did with no remorse. “If we didn’t think for ourselves, we wouldn’t break rules or do bad stuff unless our controller told us to. People say they want freedom, but it’s the very thing that makes them all miserable.”

“You can’t enslave an entire planet!” Adrian was beyond angry. “What the hell, Angela?!”

“I’m not talking about abuse.” Cody stared up at Adrian with Marc’s hard blue eyes. “You’re twisting my meaning. The controller has to be good.”

“It’s still slavery.”

Cody pointed to a nearby tree. “Ants don’t see it that way.”

Cate stared at her brother. “They can’t think for themselves. They follow a queen.”

“Yes, they do.” Cody caught up with Angela. He took her hand and stayed next to her.

Cate followed her brother. It wasn’t a hard choice for her even though she didn’t like it.

Adrian fought to wake up. *This has to be another bad dream.*

Angela walked into the tree line with the kids. “Make your choice, Adrian. You’re either with us or against us, and you don’t have much time left to pick.”

It was a hard choice for Adrian despite the moments where they’d briefly discussed going bad together. “I won’t do it.”

Angela chuckled sexily. “Yes, you will.”

“Why do you need me?” Adrian gestured at the kids. “You have a powerhouse right there.”

“It’s not enough. You have to lead us into the past so we can build the perfect future.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Then you’ll lose everything and die. There is no other option.”

Adrian wasn’t intimidated. “I’ve already lost it all. You can’t take away what I don’t have.”

Angela didn’t show him an image of his son. Conner’s happiness here was dependent on Adrian doing what he was told and coming through with training, but there were also unspoken lines both Mitchels weren’t allowed to cross. If one of them displeased the senior people in camp, they would both be banished or eliminated.

Angela didn’t like it being that way, but it was necessary. Mitchels were dangerous creatures who always repeated the mistakes of their family. The only true way to keep them in line was to make their survival dependent on each other’s behavior.

Adrian’s stomach rolled over. He didn’t know why, but he did know it was connected to her threat. *She thought of something I can’t fight.*

Angela kept walking. “You have until dawn to make your choice and then I’ll make it for you.”

2

Neil didn’t watch Angela and her escorts go into the jungle. He scanned the top deck of the ship,

searching for Kyle. Annoyance settled back into Neil's gut. Behind it, was rage.

Kyle knew what was coming. Neil hadn't been able to get him alone since the explosion. It had been six days now and the former trooper was tired of waiting for the right time.

Kyle slid under the bridge where only their current captain and guard could hear them.

Neil didn't beat that bush. "Adrian gave you a challenge. He wants me in on the deal, willingly."

Kyle blew out a frustrated sigh. "I don't suppose you'd just agree and make my life easier?"

Neil was instantly offended. "You're stabbing Marc in the back while he isn't here. That's low, man."

Kyle wanted to stay calm and talk about it, but the rage snapped his censor. "You've been kissing Marc's ass for a year now. Aren't you tired of the smell of his shit?"

Neil's fury lashed out.

Kyle brought his shield up just in time. The pain spell bounced into the ship.

The ship groaned and rocked harder in the waves.

Guards hurried toward them.

Neil turned away to stop himself from repeating the forbidden action. *I can't believe I did that.*

Kyle stared in shock.

So did the guards.

Jennifer flew up the ramp. Anger flowed out ahead of her, making descendants and normals

cringe out of her way. Her shield rippled with tiny flames and her eyes glowed bright red.

Neil stopped and put his arms up. He was worried, but he wasn't scared. He didn't fight the punishment.

Jennifer only fired once, but it hit Neil like a hammer. He screamed in agony, sounding like the nightmare reactions they were all tired of.

Kyle and the others stayed still and quiet so they didn't draw the enforcer's attention.

Jennifer's eyes stayed bright red. "Don't ever do it again."

Neil slowly stood up. *Now she scares me.* He'd had no idea Jennifer held that type of power. Hearing about her enforcer moments were nothing compared to experiencing one. "I won't."

"Explanation?"

He had no choice but to tell her the truth. "The disloyalty to Marc is unforgivable!"

Jennifer's shield went down and her voice eased, but her eyes didn't change. "Maybe, but your mistake is. The rage illness is starting to hit us now. We have to try harder while the medics work on a cure."

"I will. I'm sorry." The right words fell out of his mouth this time. "Thank you for your mercy." Neil meant it. Her punishment could have been much worse. Magic laws were harsh.

Jennifer rotated toward the ramp, picking out the descendants who were watching her warily. "You all think you know what it's like to live as one

of us. There's another side to it, a darker side that cannot be manipulated or reasoned with. If this happens again, Angela will implement those dark constraints. You'll see me in your nightmares and rightly so. Just don't do it." Jennifer felt the magic fade. She'd snapped into full enforcer this time without thought or protest. *It's who I really am.*

She didn't look at Kyle as she went down the ramp. This wasn't a defense of her mate. *It's my job.*

"That's one hell of a job." Jack looked down the bridge steps at Kyle. "She may have just stopped it from happening." Jack now wanted them to live under the magic laws so he could be himself and use his gifts without worrying over the normals rioting. *I may have to do something about that.*

Jack wasn't afraid of being punished because Jennifer was reasonable. *You guys don't know how easy you've got it. The UN enforcers weren't reasonable. They didn't ask for an explanation or have mercy on their husband's friend. They doled out punishments because they liked causing pain. They are still in my nightmares.*

Kyle couldn't speak. *I've never been so scared of my wife.* A grin split his lips. *It's awesome.*

Neil wanted to be mad, but Kyle's reaction was priceless. He laughed.

Kyle's grin widened. "She can kick my ass any time she wants to."

The two men went about their duties. But it wasn't forgotten. Neil felt bad for losing control.

Kyle worried about finding a way to get Neil to agree.

Jennifer stopped on the ramp.

Angela stood at the bottom of it, eyes glowing bright red.

Jennifer stalled. “What?”

Angela crossed her arms over her chest. Her foot began tapping.

People in the hall behind her stopped or went the other way to reach the top deck.

Jennifer denied the silent order. “Pam hasn’t broken a rule.”

“No, you have.”

Jennifer felt old magic surround them. Alpha power was stronger to keep even the enforcers in line. Jennifer still resisted. “I won’t do it.”

Angela tried logic. “You can’t enforce the rules if you don’t follow them.”

Jennifer felt the old magic waiting to strip her of her gifts. It wasn’t Angela’s choice. When an alpha challenged one of the hive, magic decided the punishment by scanning their minds for the truth. *I can’t win.* Jennifer reluctantly gave in. “Fine!”

Angela shifted aside. “Do it right now. She’s in the medical bay.”

Jennifer stomped that way, muttering.

Angela didn’t go along to be sure it was fair. *I have faith in you, Jennifer. I know you’ll do the right thing.*

Jennifer almost cried. It crushed her to know that was still in doubt at all. *I'm sorry, Alpha.*

Angela didn't comfort the teenager again. She couldn't until Jennifer actually did the right thing. Leaving someone charmed because it helped you in some way was against the rules. Never without permission was the foundation of their existence.

Conner came from the employee hall with surprise covering his face. *How did she get back on the ship already? And where's her guard?* He moved into the shadows to protect her until someone showed up.

Angela smiled at him. "Very nice." Then she vanished.

Conner laughed as he realized she was projecting herself in full detail now. He hurried up the ramp to the top deck. Candy had insisted he have some fun while she rested. He'd agreed to hang out in the tunnel bunker and be with the other Eagles who wanted a good time without all the fighting and drinking. Candy was coming over later with the other camp members. *She's almost ready to deliver. I'll take tonight for myself and then give the rest of my life to her and our kids.*

3

"I think we have everything." Pam swept the medical room for anything they may have missed. Water sloshed over the porthole, making her worry

about the coming storm. The ocean was choppy and getting rougher.

Morgan stood by the open door and waited. The medical bay was busy as everyone tried to get out in time to attend the matches and afterparty. It would start soon. Morgan had no plans to attend.

Pam lifted the light kit.

Morgan automatically took it from her and put it over the shoulder that was fully healed.

Pam beamed. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Morgan forced a smile to make sure she was satisfied. "Ready?"

Pam exited the room with her chin up and her heart hurting. Morgan was hers again, but it wasn't the same. *Things will be better when Shawn comes home.*

Morgan winced.

Pam missed it. She fought an upset stomach from the motion of the ship.

The medics didn't mention it. They glanced away as the couple came through the reception area to finish their checkout. Both of them were being released now.

The woman entering the medical bay saw it and then felt it. *He's miserable. Why is he tolerating Pam's control? It can't just be to give me separation.*

Morgan slid a hand around Pam's waist and led her toward the door. They both saw Jennifer standing there in enforcer form. The tiny sparks on

her shield gave chills to the medics as she was noticed. They never wanted to see flames again.

Pam made her feet move. “Come on. Let’s get you settled in my cabin.”

Morgan couldn’t stop his eyes from going over Jennifer’s sweet face. He quickly dropped his attention to the floor. “Whatever you want.”

Pam marched them toward Jennifer, not sure if the teenager would move. She knew instinctively why the girl was here. *I’m not giving him up!*

Power flew out and slammed into Pam. She dropped to the tiled floor, gasping.

Morgan saw the next strike coming and stepped in front of Pam. “Stop!”

The power hit Morgan and surrounded his entire body in glowing light. It faded into the air without hurting him.

Tobias beamed at Jennifer from the reception desk. “Nice aim, Enforcer J.”

Jennifer strode forward. She grabbed Morgan’s arm through her shield and pulled him out of the way.

Morgan didn’t resist any further. Pam had earned whatever punishment the enforcer had chosen.

“You get one chance to do the right thing.” Jennifer delivered the terms. “Voluntary punishment or alpha choice?”

Pam could barely hear through her thumping heart and rushing pulse, but she caught enough to

understand this was coming from Angela. “It’s the same! Go to hell!”

Jennifer let the power out again. It surrounded Pam and sank into her body.

Pam felt her heart calm and her pulse slow. She sucked in a surprised gasp of air. Then the pain lit up every nerve ending in her body. Horrible screams flew from her mouth.

Jennifer enclosed them both in a thick shield so the others couldn’t interfere. Morgan was moving forward again to stop it and the medics were all frowning thickly. She fired another blast of pain.

Pam’s screams grew louder, sharper. People came from rooms and hallways to see what was happening. Guards ran toward the medical bay.

Pam couldn’t take it. She cowered on the floor, sobbing. “I’m sorry! Please, stop!”

Jennifer did. Her double timbre voice lashed out instead. “Admit your crime!”

Pam stayed on the floor. “I charmed Morgan!”

Medics and witnesses muttered unhappily. The ones who’d known about it dropped their heads and hoped Jennifer didn’t punish them next.

Except for Tonya. She felt vindicated. She’d reported it as soon as she verified her suspicion.

Jennifer was busy with Pam. She refused to have mercy on the weak woman. “Who else?!”

Pam couldn’t refuse to answer, no matter how hard she tried. “Kendle! Courtney!”

Jennifer was shocked, but she couldn’t follow those threads right now. “Explanations!”

Pam finally felt shame. “They were hurting my friends or they had something I wanted.”

Jennifer lowered the fiery shield. Her eyes faded to deep shame. “I knew about it and didn’t report it. The alpha has punished me. Your atonement has also been chosen.” Jennifer pushed the right words into Pam’s mind so they could move on.

Pam paled. “No... That’s too much.”

“Yes, but I only agree because I didn’t like the people you cursed.” Jennifer glared at Morgan. “Or charmed.”

Morgan took the blow like a man. He laughed. “Tell us something we don’t know. You only want Kyle. It’s good. I already forgave you.”

Pam stiffened as she understood what that meant. “You were faking?”

“You can’t charm someone who’s already under a charm.” Morgan shrugged before she could go to the next logical question and ask who. He didn’t want her to target Missy for revenge. “It gave our enforcer happiness and punished me for wanting her at all. It also gave me another chance to see if I could make it work with you.”

Jennifer didn’t ask about his results on that. She didn’t care. “One month, Pam. Report there before sunset or the alpha will ask you to leave because you can’t be trusted.”

Jennifer left without looking at anyone else. Angela had given her the punishment of humbling herself in front of everyone. That was done and she

could now move on. *Without Morgan in my face all the time. It was worth it.*

Morgan helped Pam to her feet as most of the witnesses returned to what they'd been doing. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Pam looked up into his handsome face and did the right thing. "We're through. I'm sorry."

Morgan kissed her cheek and walked away in relief and sadness. He'd given her another chance, but it had only proven the attraction was dead. Pam's choice to curse people and charm them didn't factor in, surprisingly. Pam had forsaken her Eagle vows by leaving the boss alone with a killer. He would never feel the same way about her again.

Pam walked by the witnesses and the medics. She went to the brig before she could change her mind and tell Angela to banish her instead. *I can do this. I'll earn my place back and be happy again. It'll just take a very long time.*

4

In the hall outside the medical bay, Ralph and Sherman exchanged looks.

"What was that about?" Ralph didn't understand. "Why is she allowed to hurt them?"

Sherman directed the older man down the hall away from the medical bay. "Let's go for a walk."

Ralph didn't like Sherman. His past attitude had kept them from being friends, but he let the man

take him somewhere private now. Ralph was desperate to figure out how to protect the normals.

Sherman shut the door to the small stockroom. He faced Ralph. "I'm not sure if I can trust you."

Ralph stiffened. "I was thinking the same thing."

"How can we tell?"

Ralph decided to take a chance. "I believe they're planning to take over the normals—all of us."

Sherman nodded. "I think so, too. I'm looking forward to it."

Ralph frowned in confusion. "What?"

"When they put us all under magic rules, we'll get to use it against them."

Ralph cleared his throat. The dust in here was thick, except for a spot over by the shelves where it looked like someone had moved around a backpack. "I don't understand."

"I've been among them for a long time."

"Okay."

"I've been studying them that entire time. Once she puts us under magic rules, the old ways have to be followed." Sherman dropped into the dusty chair in the corner. "Our defense is to trap them into service."

"How in the hell are we supposed to do that?"

Sherman held in a sneeze. "If you can capture them, they have to serve you."

"That's crazy."

"An alpha has to enact magic laws and then we have a defense. Why do you think they've stuck to

our laws? With all that power, you'd think they would do whatever they want."

Ralph leaned against the door. "I have wondered why they bother with laws at all."

"It's a condition of their existence. It's a defense against them taking over the world, Ralph."

The light flickered above them.

"We have to stop her from enacting those laws. This camp will go crazy."

Sherman denied that. "We need to push her into it. Then we grab one of them and make the others leave. We'd have the island and a descendant to protect us."

"That's slavery!" Ralph was horrified.

Sherman understood. "I've been in other camps where magic laws ruled. I didn't try it, either. I want to live and this is a death offense upon failure."

"Good, really. We could be in trouble just for discussing this."

"Yeah. But it's nice to have someone to talk to."

Ralph sighed. "I wish I could talk to leadership about it, but they've shut me out."

Both men ignored the roughly rocking ship. The weather was getting worse.

Sherman wiped dust from the sleeve of his turtleneck. He liked to be fully covered. It hid the scars from his own captivity by magic users a long time ago. "They know you're doubting the future they've promised."

"I am. I can't help it."

“Well, here’s a surprise for you—they can’t view ahead right now, so those are old glimpses. That future probably doesn’t exist anymore.”

Ralph stored that and shared something he’d discovered. “I’ve heard them talking. They all believe a new evolution is coming. We’ve been through hell. That might be true.”

“It might also be a side effect of the rage illness.” Sherman was glad he wasn’t infected with it yet. He’d gotten his test results this morning. “They’re showing more symptoms than our side is. I think it’s stealing their power and their control.”

Ralph brought up something else he’d noticed. “Allison’s rumors about living forever might not just be rumors. Adrian told his son not to be fooled into taking that path because it will end in destruction for the person on the journey.”

Sherman wasn’t surprised. “They’ve got Jennifer’s converts and Tim’s congregation trying to convince everyone it’s a good idea before they do it. We need those magic laws, Ralph. As soon as that happens, we’ll get an advantage they can’t fight.”

Ralph took another step on that destructive path. “They’re fighting tonight. Maybe it will get out of hand on its own.”

Sherman cracked his hairy, swollen knuckles. “I think we should help it along.”

“How do we do that without getting in trouble?”

“We tell the truths we’ve learned and gathered. It’s time for everyone to know what’s being planned

and how to fight it. Angela won't punish us. In the end, she might even thank us."

Ralph cleared his throat again. He didn't do well in a dusty environment. "Why would she?"

"Because she wants that other world, Ralph. Why else would she be letting everyone go corrupt?"

Ralph didn't have an answer for that, but he'd asked it himself too many times. "I'm in, as long as we're not breaking the rules. I won't go that far."

Sherman didn't say he would go as far as it took. *Because I won't.* "I'm not one of them. I have limits."

"But?"

"But if an opportunity were to toss itself into my lap, it would be rude to refuse such a gift."

Chapter Twenty-Two
Control Isn't The Goal

1

Rico passed the small stockroom without knocking on that door to let Ralph and Sherman know they were under observation. The normals and new people had chosen to start helping each other have these private moments, but Rico had only agreed so they'd leave him alone about it. *I didn't come here to pick sides. I have other goals.*

Rico nodded politely to Jennifer as she came down the hall.

Jennifer frowned at him. "Everyone picks a side at some point." She neared the stockroom door and slowed.

Rico didn't stick around to listen to punishment screams. He went to the medical bay door and took his post on guard duty.

Jennifer waited until he was out of sight and then kept going. Ralph and Sherman weren't the problem, but she also didn't want the new guy to think conspiring was okay.

Sherman was harmless on his own, and Ralph wasn't willing to do more than spread rumors. It might cost him his place as a den mother, and even destroy his marriage when Daisey found out, but it

wasn't a crime to tell the truth. "And it'll help the boss get these people where she needs them to be. My headache is a popped lurker trying to avoid detection."

In the medical bay, Tonya felt the guard take his post. She glanced through the window and gave Rico a quick smile.

Rico gave her one back and then turned away so he didn't get distracted. He straightened his gun belt and enjoyed having on clean Eagle gear.

"He's always here now." Tobias looked at Tonya. "He watches you a lot. I think he's crushing on you and is just too shy for conversation."

Tonya brushed lint from her lab coat. All of them were neat and clean in their medical coats and slacks. Even Anna and Daniella were wearing fully covering clothes today. "People are saying the same thing about you."

Tobias grinned. "Yeah, but I'm not too shy to talk to you, am I?"

Embarrassed and flattered, Tonya frowned at the people still lingering. "It's over. Move on!"

Patients and their loved ones hurried into their rooms or rushed to the desk for a checkout.

Tobias chuckled. He was handling the main desk today. His mood hadn't been good upon waking this morning, but the proof he'd been waiting for had now been delivered and it had come from a teenage girl with the heart of a dragon. As Jennifer aged, she would be magnificent to observe.

“As long as I’m not the target.” *Magic laws are coming our way, soon.*

Yeah. Tonya went to the rear rooms to check on their last patient. She entered Jayda’s room and paused.

Jayda looked up from the kit she was packing. “It’s checkout day for me, too.”

Tonya didn’t think that was a good idea. “I may need to talk to the boss first. Convince me you’ll be okay so I can convince her.”

Jayda’s dark skin was filling in and her very short hair gleamed with better health. The healing sessions had helped even though it hadn’t been quick.

“It’s not up to you.” Jayda zipped her new kit. The old one had melted to the floor in the machine room and had to be scraped up with a metal shovel. “But I’ll be fine, so you can relax.” She patted her stiff, bristly hair. “It’s growing again. My skin’s healing, like you said it would. I’ll be fine.”

Tonya had come to care for Jayda. They’d had several late-night talks about being hated in childhood and doing crazy things to survive during those awkward teenage years. She wanted that to continue.

“Me, too.” Jayda hadn’t expected to like Tonya; every conversation had changed that impression. “Give me a couple days to settle back into camp life and then we’ll hang out.”

“Cool. Are you going to the matches tonight?”

“No. Being around so much violence isn’t good for me. Or any of us. I wish Angela would cancel it.”

So did Tonya, but these people had to have a legal release for the rage or they’d be breaking more laws than they already were. “It will probably get intense.”

Jayda slipped on her new shoes. “I want the opposite for a while. I’m planning on a cool soak and a long nap in a comfortable bed.”

“I’ll be here, too. I’ve seen enough blood this month.” Tonya shifted aside to let the woman through. “Come to the small desk. I’ll do your paperwork.”

Jayda was relieved that she was being allowed to go. She was tired of these walls and the smell of decay lingering through the cleaning chemicals. *This smell will always make me think of death now.*

Terry came out of the breakroom, checking his clipboard. He bumped into Jayda, knocking her kit out of her hand. It hit the floor with a heavy metal clank.

Terry righted them both with a fast arm. “My apologies! Are you okay?”

Jayda blushed, nodding. Tonya wasn’t the only friend she’d made. “I’m fine. See you in the morning?”

Terry grinned. “I’ll bring a double tray and a cribbage board.”

Tonya was happy for them. It made her anxious for herself. Missing Kenn hadn’t eased or gotten

easier in the last week. If anything, her nerves were fraying faster now. It felt like everything was moving quicker.

Tobias glanced over. “It is. The illness is presenting faster than we’re ready for. We need a solution.”

Tonya took the hint. She gestured at Charlie. “Get Jayda checked out, will ya? I need to go work in the lab again now that all the patients have been released.”

Charlie was happy to help. He was enjoying working in the medical bay, though he knew the real test would come during the next crisis.

Molly came through the med bay door and spotted Jayda. She joined them at the small desk. “The boss told me to come be your settling partner.”

“Cool.” Jayda kept filling out the paperwork. She liked Molly, but she didn’t think of herself as a hero. She didn’t need Molly’s gratitude.

Molly saw the kit at Jayda’s feet. “I’ll carry that for you.”

“I’ve got it!” Jayda was too slow to stop Molly from lifting it.

Molly felt the weight and heard the clinks. She recognized it for what it was. “Jayda, why do you have a kit full of fire extinguishers?”

The med bay went silent.

Tonya stopped at the lab door.

Tobias began shaking his head.

Jayda’s eyes flooded with tears. “You have to let me out of here!”

Molly and Charlie sent calming spells as they gently directed the terrified woman back into her room. She'd acted a near-perfect role, but she wasn't recovered.

"It's just in case there's another fire." Jayda stopped resisting. Her tears faded. She yawned.

Charlie helped her into the rocking bed. Molly took off Jayda's shoes. "Just rest. You'll feel better when you wake up."

Jayda curled onto her side. "Will I?"

Charlie hoped so. It was sad to see the woman so terrified to live now. He thought of a few things he could say, if she felt like hearing them. *I'm scared of fire, too.* "Can I stay with you for a few minutes?"

"Yes."

Molly shut the door and went out to put away the stash of fire extinguishers. She hoped Charlie could help her new friend. Jayda was traumatized. If she ever had to face a real fire, she would probably run away like the low-level rookies had during the explosion. *She won't be an Eagle anymore, either. I need to find some way to help her if the medics can't, even if it breaks the rules.*

2

Jennifer shut the office door and locked it. She left the light off, no longer scared of the darkness. *That's my hunting ground now.*

She added her reports to the stack on the desk, then sat on the couch. She still hadn't found the lurker. While people thought she was reaming Ralph and Sherman, she had time to dig in and search. *I told you I would hunt you and I am.*

Jennifer moved mentally through the rocking ship, no longer blocked by the steel beams or the thick walls. Only minds and water resisted her now. She was spending twenty minutes a shift doing this and the other forty minutes on rounds and handling business. Her only deviation so far had been the pool lesson and disciplining Neil.

Jennifer skipped over the known descendants; she could dig into them through the hive. She concentrated on the normals who hadn't gotten a deep scan from her yet. There weren't many left. She'd been covering deck by deck, shift by shift. All she had left was the cargo deck and the people who worked on that level. Then she would move to the island and restart her scans there.

Jennifer connected to young Mike, who was covering the private radio booth for the night while Jonny was off-duty. Everyone wanted to join the matches or watch them.

Jennifer listened to Mike's thoughts for a while. She made notes about his awakening sexuality and his fears of being a bad mate. Then she went deeper, hoping there was nothing to find.

Wade hurried across the windy top deck of the cruise ship. He cradled a thermos in one arm and a rolled-up stack of papers in the other.

Neil waved him over to the booth he'd wedged against the rear bridge support wall.

Wade got in and slid aside so Neil could pull the side shut and fasten it. He'd felt Neil's pain as he was punished. "Are you okay?"

Neil nodded. "I actually feel better."

"You got a little release."

"Yeah. I wish I hadn't lost it with Kyle."

Wade knew Neil missed his friendships with both Kyle and Marc. "Maybe you should join in tonight."

"I'm attending. You?"

"I took tunnel duty. Don't feel angry."

"But you are infected?"

"Yes. Almost everyone is."

Neil didn't mention his negative test result. He also didn't bring up clouds to cover or tell a lie. His anger came from a different source, one he refused to acknowledge.

Wind blew over the top of the cubicle walls, making them vibrate.

Both men thought of Samantha's nightmare.

"Don't trust time!" Samantha screamed as the wind blew her overboard. Heavy ocean water dragged her down until there wasn't a bit of air left in her lungs.

"Most of us are dreaming about the mission team."

“Yes, but I think something’s happening with Sam, too. I just don’t know what it is.”

Neil weighed the papers, frowning. “Maybe she’s about to reach a new level. She did great in the pool.”

Wade hadn’t considered that option. “Not good.” Wade wasn’t pulled between his new family and the Eagles or his duty. “What did the boss say?”

Neil looked toward the island even though he couldn’t see it through the booth wall. “She still can’t see anything. None of us can. There’s no way to narrow down whose turn it is to play the survival game.”

Wade hated how cruel that sounded. He also understood Neil’s bitterness. They never got a real break. Their friends and family were always in danger. Everyone was sick of this circle. “What else are we supposed to do?”

Neil now knew a part of Angela’s plan. He wasn’t allowed to give away even a hint and it was hard. He’d been ambushed repeatedly over the last two weeks by people insisting that he beg Angela to go get the mission team. He’d passed the messages, but he hadn’t begged. He didn’t know what she was waiting for, but he wasn’t going to flip her cards over until she wanted it to happen. “We’ll cover things as best we can.”

Wade didn’t want to speak up, but he felt he had to. “The Eagles will probably punish you if you do all that yelling again.”

Neil knew. “I don’t care. Sam means more to me than my place in this camp.” He pulled the stack of papers closer. “Let’s get a little work done and go to the island.”

Wade took his seat, but he caught the blowoff. He didn’t invade Neil’s mind, but he worried over it. Neil’s happiness was as important to Wade as Samantha’s and the kids.

The men stilled as a trio went by without knowing they weren’t alone.

Ian gentlemanly held Debra’s arm to help her over the cords running along this side of the top deck. “Are you sure you want to go see the matches? This will probably be rough.”

Wade didn’t see Debra’s gesture, but he heard her thought.

I need to prove something first. After this, we can leave whenever you want to.

Wade hoped she was careful. Ian was right. The afterparty was likely to be as wild as the matches. He had volunteered to be a tunnel guard. Neil was attending the party. Sam was staying here on the ship.

Neil didn’t like it either, but they were all allowed to have their own lives. “She’ll be here with Jennifer and Morgan. She’s safe.”

“I’m worried for *you*.” Wade didn’t say more.

Neil considered skipping it, but rage flared to life hot enough to burn him from the inside out. He pacified himself. *It’ll be dark soon. Patience.* “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” Wade scanned his sheet. “Where did we stop last time?”

Neil scanned the master sheet. “We finished with S.”

“T it is. First?”

“Trinity Taylor. Deceased. Descendant. Known skills were bone healing, an amazing snare, and the ugly jealousy that got her killed.”

Wade made notes in his file. “Mine is Lisa Tellier. Alive and here. Not a descendant. Amazing with a knife and not so great with a rifle.”

Neil copied it into his file. It was the easiest way to get two copies and check each other’s work. “Next?”

“Tommy Terzic. Deceased. Not a descendant. The best gun in camp for a while, and then an obsession with a dangerous castaway got him shot.”

Above them, the sky continued to change color, morphing their environment into something darker and dangerous.

Around them, people continued to go to the island to fight, get drunk, and forget the rules of civility for their one night a month.

4

Angela checked her watch, and then scanned the sky above the town. It was almost dusk now. Snacks were out, drinks were already in hand, and the music was waiting for a single flip of a button. The party was minutes away.

They'd cleared the center of town and put up the long beach tent near the barn. Lanterns and spotlights were on the few roofs that could handle the weight, and folding chairs littered the grounds.

Angela was standing on a picnic table to be seen by everyone waiting with bated breath for her call. Angela used the microphone in her hand as grins broke over their eager faces. "Welcome to the first Safe Haven matchups on our island!"

Angela had to wait for the loud cheer from two hundred people around her to fade.

She lifted the mike again, drawing quiet from the crowd and a protest from sore arms that had gotten a great workout in the pool. "Once a month, we get to be ourselves!"

The descendants cheered loudly.

The normals clapped because it was expected. They were scared of the magic users being free.

The trees around the town were full of birds, squirrels, and monkeys that observed curiously while keeping their distance. Angela had already made it clear people weren't allowed to use guns tonight. Shooting at the wildlife in the dark, while drunk, was a recipe for disaster.

The entire town was set up to house, feed, and service them for tonight, including a row of Port-Os that had been brought from the ship and assembled near the barn. Fire cans were waiting to be lit, the beer pit was almost full, and the cage was ready for all the people who needed this outlet. These fights wouldn't be totally fair, but it was the best she could

do with so many different levels of normals and descendants. “There are a few rules for tonight. One: it ends at dawn and starts at sunset.”

People glanced at the darkening sky and tried to make it go faster.

“Two: stay in town. It’s our designated area for this event. No partying or fighting on the ship or in the tunnels. Three: don’t break our basic rules. Being ourselves doesn’t mean we can violate moral lines. Please have fun, but don’t make me enforce the magic rules. Jennifer doesn’t want to be here for this. Don’t make her come over.”

The crowd quieted a little. They understood Jennifer didn’t want to see the violent matches after recently surviving a gunshot wound, but they also knew she would be more violent than anyone else if they pushed things too far.

“Don’t you mean *activate* the magic laws?”

Angela smiled at the curious camp member. “I don’t need to activate something that already exists. I just need to enforce it.” *And Pam gave me what I need to put it into the new constitution when I’m ready. Cursing Kendle and Courtney may have influenced their behavior. Pam’s punishment might not be over even after her month in the brig is up.*

Mutters went through the few descendants who understood what that meant. The others glanced at the sky again and waited for the fun to start.

Angela motioned toward the sunset. “Spend this last minute of daylight thinking about the future, and about how long it took us to get here. We’ve

lost a lot of good people, Safe Haven. This is part of what they gave their lives for. Respect it.”

Everyone watched the sun sink below the horizon. Sore muscles clenched in anticipation.

Darkness fell across the water and splashed onto the glistening shore. It spread over the tropical dirt and ran up the exotic trees in a fast sprint. Silence smothered every living thing for three seconds; it was impossible to make noise in that total vacuum. The waiting cheer built up in the throats of the fighters and their audience.

The hush passed, filling the void with screams and shouts of violent anticipation.

Angela handed the mike to their MC for the night. “Let’s roll.”

Music and cheers echoed.

“Match one will start in four minutes. Make your bets, Safe Haven.” Jeff didn’t need to yell yet as the focus shifted away from waiting to enjoying.

Missy came to his side, followed by Kimmie, Cody, Cate, and Amy. Almost all of them were participating. The kids had on zipping blue jean jumpers. Jeff had no idea where the den mothers had found clothes like that to fit their small bodies, but it would make cleaning them up later a lot easier. “I’m still against this.”

The kids waited with glazed eyes and twitchy movements. Jeff realized their nerves were high. He pointed at the chairs near Angela. “Don’t get up until you’re called or I’ll pull you out.”

The kids ran to the seats. They weren't allowed to bet in these matches with anything except chores. The adults had more leeway, but not a lot. Personal items were allowed, but no ammunition, which couldn't be spared. The camp stock was already low. Angela had set it up so people could trade personal ammunition for a choice from the stacks of gear and extras they'd been storing in the barn without knowing why it was there. That choice was popular with camp members who weren't worried about using a gun, but the guards considered it too much gear for one night of betting.

Jeff went to the boxing ring they'd refitted inside a training cage. The noise level increased as he entered the ring. Angela had made him do this. Jeff didn't want the memories of last time. He regretted the things he'd encouraged the kids to do, even though it had allowed them to survive. None of it had been good.

"You're the barker for her circus." Adrian joined Jeff near the ring. He was helping. "Kenn will probably do it next time. You'll pick out his mistakes and train him. Two of you will make it easier to keep control."

Jeff snorted. "You have no idea what's about to happen here."

Adrian didn't rise to the curt tone. Jeff needed this release as much as the fighters. "I'll be betting on you later."

Jeff growled. "No, you won't!"

Adrian chuckled to cover his real feelings about this event. *We'll turn into the UN if she isn't careful.*

Angela caught his thought. She was aware of several people radiating disapproval, but it couldn't stand against the will of the others.

Adrian was one of those who didn't approve, even though he was acting like it. From the drinking to the coming adult matches with no rules, he didn't like it. Even the lack of clothes bothered him.

People weren't wearing many despite the warning of rain. The gusty wind was warm, making it perfect for short shorts, swimming trunks, and bikini tops. They looked like a group of old-world partiers.

Angela had also decided less was more. Adrian had never seen her in jean shorts and a half top. It was erotic, perfect, dangerous. He wasn't the only one to stare at her, though most of the females were checking out her many scars and trying not to see themselves that way after a year in her army.

Adrian stared at her across the people now shoving closer to the ring for a better view of the coming blood. *Can you keep this under control?*

Angela's vision blurred, letting her see the shadowy figures that people were already projecting onto the ground and each other. True selves would be revealed tonight. *Control isn't the goal.*

What is?

Truth. Angela stood up from her ringside seat. She lifted her cup. "I said let's roll!"

“It’s starting.” Stanley grabbed the string to shut the hatch. “Close it.”

Guards in the tunnel bunker relayed the order.

The tunnel was cooler than aboveground. There was only a light draft coming through the guarded sections. The people down here were also calmer. Video games were already being enjoyed and a few Eagles were playing poker. Most of the camp people were watching movies in the small theater area Theo had rigged up. It was a better way to spend the night, in Stanley’s opinion.

Hatches shut all through the system. They wouldn’t be opened unless there was an injury or until the kids were sent down. Den mothers wearing disapproving scowls were ready to clean them up, treat any small wounds, and then distract them from the rest of the violence taking place.

Radios crackled with Neil’s excited voice. “Lock it down, Eagles. Stay where you are, folks. We are locked down.”

Stanley approved. “We don’t need a bunch of bleeding drunks scaring the people who can’t handle this.” The ship was off-limits to the fighters. Angela knew it would get wild.

Patrolling the tunnels, Conner came through the bullet-deflecting curtains. “I hope it only gets wild.”

Conner seemed upset to Stanley. His jeans and tank top showed a man’s body starting to fill in; he even had the tight jaw line to go with it. Stanley ran

through what he knew of Conner and came up with an important detail. “You were in the labs, right? You know how it works there.”

Conner walked by him without answering. *I refuse to relive that life. I'm free now and happy. That other life was the nightmare. This is reality.*

A loud cheer echoed above the tunnels.

Conner shuddered. *I'm not going up there to fight. That is not my life anymore!*

6

“Amy wins!”

The fight had been short and unsweetened. The kids wanted this so much that they weren't making the fights last. Adrian doubted the adults would either.

Neil shoved between the still-swinging kids, separating them. He kept nudging Amy with his hip as Adrian lifted her bleeding opponent out of the ring.

Missy wasn't happy to lose to the smaller girl.

Neil shook Amy's shoulder roughly to make her stop.

Adrian was surprised Missy hadn't put up more of a fight. *She looks tired, even under the blood.*

Missy kicked him in the shin and ran to her seat. She slung blood over the ground as she ran.

Cody healed her bleeding hand.

Amy held up her little fists and snarled at the crowd.

The adults felt her menace and growled back or shouted at her in encouragement.

Amy also kicked Adrian and then jumped out of the cage.

The crowd parted for her, even the hardened killers. The children weren't being stopped as soon as they drew blood, though Adrian would have preferred that. Angela had set the limit at how much pain or damage they were causing.

"Next up...Kimmie and Cate!" Jeff grabbed Kimmie's arm and tugged her close for a fast hug and harsh warning. "Don't hurt her! We'll have to leave!"

Cody held onto Cate and made her listen to a last piece of advice. "You'll hurt my future if you hurt Kimmie."

Cate and Kimmie pulled away from the controlling hands and ran to the ring.

The crowd cheered.

Their family and guardians braced to jump in and save them from themselves if it got too ugly.

Jeff looked at Angela.

Angela lifted her glass in a toast and then drank.

Jeff assumed it wasn't alcohol in her goblet, but he wasn't sure. Things had an odd vibe right now that was still growing.

"Betting closes in thirty seconds!" Adrian stayed between the two glaring girls, making them wait. Tables around the ring stayed busy handling the wagers.

Kimmie dropped into the new fighting stance they'd been learning.

Cate stood straight and stiff with clenched fists, counting the seconds.

Adrian stepped back as the bell dinged.

Angela didn't watch Cate fire ice against the rules. The kids weren't supposed to use magic tonight. She didn't see Kimmie catch it, absorb it and fire back flames. She watched the crowd. And Jeff. He'd told her about the other UN matches; she'd planned accordingly.

Jeff moved through the men and women, picking out the ones with that certain tension in their face and body language.

Angela tried to see the predators like Jeff did so she would be able to spot them herself. The tension in their bodies and those darker irises weren't signs she could always rely on. *I will remove all of you from society. I'll sacrifice other laws to make sure you can't ever hurt kids again.*

At her side, Ray's thought was clear. *What you're doing here is hurting them. Look!*

Angela shook her head, ears filled with distorting screams and shouts. "I'll stop them if I watch it."

"That's why you should! This is wrong."

"It's who they are, Ray. You of all people should understand denying them freedom is wrong."

"But they're getting hurt!"

Ray's shout was mostly drowned out by the groaning, cheering crowd that hadn't expected to see a kid magic battle. Ray observed the girls in horror.

Angela kept watching Jeff.

"You'll give away the honey pot if you keep staring." Kyle stepped in front of her. "You're not fighting tonight, Boss. And when it's over, you'll go to Adrian's shack and let him protect you."

Angela shrugged. "Okay." She went toward the ring to help separate the girls as Adrian made the call.

"Match goes to Kimmie!"

"Slam you!" Cate kicked Adrian in the ankle and jumped out of the cage.

"Damn it!" Adrian had bruises all over his legs now.

Kimmie pointed at Amy. "Round two goes to us!"

Amy shouted and high-fived Kimmie as she returned to her seat.

Missy leaned against Cate. "Next time we'll go in together."

Cate nodded. She laughed at Kimmie's funny face. So did Amy.

The kids weren't holding a grudge.

Adrian sighed. "I wish I could say the same for the adults."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Challenges

1

“**T**hat’s it for the kids. The next matches will be new people, former UN people, and any Eagle under level two. Two and up will go later.” Adrian was glad they’d only had a couple of kid matches. To him, it meant their children were calming down. He motioned the fighters toward the tables. “Sign up and make your wagers.”

Jeff glared at Adrian.

Adrian forced himself to follow through like he’d promised so the partiers would stay distracted. “Let the crowd see some of those moves. Give ‘em a reason to bet on you!”

Satisfied, Jeff turned back to the conversation he was having with one of the new men from their last UN fight. “So you like the littlest one?”

“Right. I just want to touch him, though. No sex.”

Jeff grinned and wrote it down. “Go to the hatch near the creek after they send the kids below.” He continued to the next target in their sting. This would only work on normals and Invisibles, but he’d already found three they could remove. It was a good start.

A fat camp member with a bare, hairy chest caught his attention. Jeff moved his way. *Make that four.*

“Betting is now closed! Back up!” Adrian hated being an announcer for this circus. The crowd was getting rowdier. Most of the normals and camp members were staying close to the ring but away from the betting tables. The scowls were continuous as they observed the chaos that hadn’t been allowed in Safe Haven until now. The Eagle matches had been controlled, calm, safe; this was the opposite in every way.

Jonny climbed into the caged ring, grinning for the crowd that cheered him on.

Sadie took off her Eagle jacket and tossed it to Adrian. “Hold my beer, honey.”

Adrian laughed with everyone else. He didn’t want to encourage her recklessness, but she did need to know how to handle herself in a physical fight. Magic wasn’t allowed against a normal.

Sadie smirked at Jonny as she raked him from beanie-covered hair to dusty Eagle boots. “You look scrappy.”

Jonny didn’t care that he was facing a female. “You look a little fat.”

Sadie’s gasp was echoed by the females in the crowd. She lifted her chin. “Remember those words, Scrappy. I’m gonna make you eat them.”

Adrian quickly caught her attention. “No.”

Sadie reluctantly switched stances out of the nose breaker. “It wouldn’t have killed him.”

Adrian sniggered and then got out of the ring. He didn't want her to be too rough and ruin her chances of joining the Eagles later.

Jonny ran forward at the ding, swinging neatly.

Sadie ducked it and swung back, landing a light hit on his arm.

The crowd groaned at the lack of blood, booing.

Jonny grabbed her by the waist and flipped her over his shoulder.

Sadie hit the mat and lost her breath.

“Hey! She's just a rookie!” Adrian was pissed. *I should have let her use the nose breaker!*

Others in the crowd booed at Jonny for being too rough on a new fighter who wasn't even a part of their camp.

Jonny put a foot on her heaving chest and declared himself the winner. “Mine!”

Sadie wanted to keep fighting, but she had to breathe. She gasped in air. “I give!”

Jonny helped her stand, but he didn't feel bad. “You good?”

Sadie punched him in the mouth. “Now I am.”

Jonny shook it off and grinned at her.

Sadie left the ring with a cramping stomach and ringing ears.

Terry directed her to the tunnel hatch so Conner could make sure she was okay.

Panaji jumped up to go after them.

Grant grabbed the man's arm and yanked him back down into their ringside seats near the boss.

Panaji flushed.

Grant let go and handed him a beer from the cooler by his feet.

Panaji took it and hoped no one had noticed his reaction to Sadie being hurt.

Adrian shoved the microphone into Jeff's hand and followed. "Are you okay?"

Sadie nodded. The pain was easing and the humiliation was growing.

Adrian didn't like her being downhearted. He preferred her wild energy. "I didn't want to cheat. I'm sorry. I should have told you that's his go-to move. I just thought he would have some honor." Adrian glared toward Jonny.

Sadie let him help her to the hatch. "Don't want it that way." She grunted in relief as the last of the pain faded. "I'm fine. Go help her keep it sane."

Sadie went down the hatch ladder and waited for the guard there to check her into the medical tunnel. It was the only hatch open right now and it was heavily guarded.

Adrian turned back toward the ring and stopped, struck by the sights. The evil in people was coming out. Horns and teeth and terrible shapes were bleeding through the faces of the descendants, showing what they held inside. The normals were backing away, going to the restaurant and the large tent Angela had put up for those who weren't sleeping under the stars. He could see their fear, taste their revulsion. The air was thick with blood even though very little had been spilled so far.

Adrian found Angela across the ring. Cody was on one side of her, leaning close to whisper something that pleased her. Dog was in the chair to her left, snout drawn up in a frozen snarl of disapproval.

Cody noticed Adrian's attention. He lifted his smaller goblet and grinned widely.

She's put a King into place and they don't know it yet. It's open, in their faces, and they don't see it. Adrian swallowed his sadness and went to help cover the betting tables.

"Next match in two minutes." Jeff pointed at the females entering the ring with fierce glares and tense movements. "Which battling beauty will come out? Place your bets, folks!"

Monica smirked. "Always did like wrestling with you."

Molly went to her spot and waited for the bell to ring.

Monica faltered at that intensity. "This is just a matchup, you know."

Molly let her hurt anger fly. "They're dragging your body out."

Jeff caught the sudden alertness and stepped between them. He glared at Molly. "Do I need to call the enforcer?"

Molly backed down immediately. Learning Jennifer could strip her gifts had been enough to keep her in line. "Okay. She'll limp out."

The crowd laughed, mostly. Some were already ramped up so hard that they wanted blood and guts.

Adrian glanced up. The sky above them had no stars in view. The wind had settled into brief pushy gusts that said rain was coming soon. Lightning flashed in the distance. A cold chill went through his stomach.

Neil felt it, too. “Stay close to her from here.”

Adrian scanned the crowd again. “We have time for your match first. Then I will.”

Neil snorted. “What about yours?”

Adrian wasn’t tempted. “My bet’s on you.”

Neil grinned proudly, unable to help it.

“Match to Monica!”

Monica spat out blood and stayed back as Molly got to her feet. She stayed ready to defend herself as the angry woman’s eyes lit up bright red. Monica shuddered. *She wants me dead. I felt it.*

Molly stomped from the cage with blurred vision. Monica’s harsh headbutt had given her the win. “I’ll be ready for that next time.”

Terry sent her toward the tunnel.

Monica waited until Molly was belowground before getting out of the ring. She stumbled off toward the restaurant, a little broken. *Molly tried to kill me in there. She strangled me twice and tried to push in my throat.* Monica had never been afraid of dying so strongly. *I may have to leave now.*

The crowd drew in a collective breath as Zack and Ray moved toward the cage. Both Eagles were skilled, efficient, and descendants.

As soon as they were inside, Jeff brought up his shield around the cage to contain the magic.

The bell rang.

Ray fired first. The light pain spell bounced off Zack's shield.

Jeff absorbed the spare energy.

Zack grinned as he fired.

Ray also caught the magic blast and absorbed it.

The men quickly realized they were too evenly matched for a magic battle. They advanced at the same time, thick fists rising.

Adrian was relieved they were using their bodies. It would encourage the others to do the same.

Blood sprayed across the cage floor. Zack retreated to let Ray gain his feet.

Ray spat out blood and advanced.

Adrian's relief vanished.

Zack struck out first this time. He connected with a fist and magic.

Ray dropped to the mat.

Grant rose to go help him.

Panaji grabbed the man's arm and pulled him back down.

In the ring, Ray lunged to his feet while swinging.

Zack jumped the low fist, but he missed the leg sweep. He fell against the bar and dinged his head.

Ray stepped back to let him recover.

The crowd boomed again. They didn't want honor; they wanted blood.

That bothered Ray. He lowered his fist and motioned at the gate. "We're done. I give."

Zack was relieved. His head was ringing and he felt like a tooth was about to fall out.

He was also pissed. He didn't want an unearned win. Rage and pride battled in Zack's mind.

Ray felt it coming and brought up his shield.

Zack forced himself to do the right thing. He stumbled from the cage, hands lifting in a victory he didn't feel.

Ray left the ring, but he wasn't calm or happy. *This isn't like before. I enjoyed those cage matches, except the first one where Kyle beat my ass for lying to everyone.*

Ray went to get a beer. He knew Zack wasn't happy either. *We may want a rematch at some point.*

Zack let the medic check him out, but he refused to go into the tunnels.

Jeff motioned at the other senior men around the cage. "Boss says no rules for you guys. Sign up."

The crowd cheered and shouted.

The senior men exchanged good-hearted grins and taunts, but the rage illness pulsed behind their eyes and stiffened their muscles in anticipation of drawing blood.

Adrian and others looked at the alpha in warning.

Angela's blood-red orbs glared back as she lifted her goblet to them.

The senior Eagles understood she wanted this to happen. They just didn't know why.

“Only normals in these next matches! Any other normals who want to battle? Come sign up during the intermission.”

The crowd cheered again as two more contenders stood up.

Ian and Ed grinned at each other and made rough gestures, but it was clear they were friends. Expectations dropped from those who wanted to see violence. Hope went up in those who didn't.

Angela looked at Cody. “It's time.”

Cody immediately stood up and used a light alpha call. *All kids need to go below right now.*

Disappointed, tired, dirty kids did as they were told. They'd all gotten to fight, except for Cody. *I'm a future King. We oversee the jousts, we don't participate.*

Angela forced herself to watch the next match so she didn't give away the sting. They were using the impression of trusting the kids to care for themselves. *And I do, actually. I just know evil is stronger than responsibility most days.*

Jeff subtly signaled their predators.

Those men faded into the jungle to get to the right hatch.

Ed and Ian began with level one of kai, disappointing the crowd again. A beer can flew through the air and struck the cage.

The two fighters barely noticed. They enjoyed the workout.

The hunger of the audience increased. The noise became a roar that echoed to the people below them as Ed fell and Ian claimed the victory.

2

Conner met Cody at the ladder. He helped Dog and then assisted each child.

Dog took off down the tunnel to the food area to check on his cats and get a snack. The felines were living on the island now, along with the puppy that had finally started training classes with the Eagles, when they had time for it.

“How are things up there?”

Cody held up a hand; he looked like Jennifer in that moment.

Conner sniggered, but he did wait.

Cody scanned the guards—Tim, Trent, and Stanley—then he turned to Conner. “It’s still just wild, but it’s changing. Who’s removing the predators?”

“Wade and Stanley.”

“Good.”

Conner was impressed by how Stanley had changed and grown over the last six months. He was a reliable Eagle now.

“Wait.” Cody recounted. “Amy’s not here.”

“I’ve got her!” Neil stomped on the closed hatch in Eagle code.

Conner hurriedly opened it and took the struggling girl.

“No! Wanna stay! Fight!”

“Amy!” Cody’s eyes glowed bright blue.

Conner stared. *I’ve never seen our eyes light up like that.*

Amy stopped struggling. She let Conner put her on the tunnel floor.

Cody smirked. “Much better.”

Amy ran forward and punched him in the mouth. She kept swinging, taking the boy down under her displeasure.

3

Neil shut the hatch and stayed there until he heard it lock. The guards would get Amy under control and she would be punished, maybe. This was the night to let loose and be wilder than they were usually allowed to. And Cody was assuming that all the kids would follow him, as well as the adults. The boy had a big surprise coming if he didn’t learn how to win everyone over, but Neil wasn’t concerned with all of that. He was listening for gunshots that said their predators had fallen for the sting.

It was a simple ambush, but there was always the chance something could go wrong. Neil had volunteered to handle it, but Angela had decided he wasn’t in the right state of mind. Wade had been chosen because he wasn’t presenting signs of the rage illness.

Five rapid shots thundered through the jungle and brought most of the partiers to an instant alertness that broke through the alcohol and the rage.

Radios blared. “Sorry, Boss. Damn cross pranked me.”

People laughed and relaxed at Wade’s call. They didn’t know it was a code for things going according to plan.

Neil went back toward the ring. *I need that release now.*

Thunder boomed above them. The wind picked up, blowing leaves over the crowd and drawing cheers.

Jeff paused, not sure if they should stop the fun and take cover.

Angela twisted her hair into a wild mess on top of her head and pinned it. The other short side stood out, reminding them of the explosion and nightmares of the mission team.

Angela’s inner witch took over her features for a brief second, letting everyone see who she was on the inside. “Let’s roll.”

The descendants cheered.

“We are halfway through, ladies and gentlemen! Who’s next to draw blood? Let’s get those challenges underway!” Jeff shouted with the crowd this time. Now that the kids were safe and more predators had been eliminated, his mood was going up. The urge to join the battles was sweeping

him off his feet. *I didn't think I had so much anger left.*

“Challenge! Challenge!” The crowd took up the chant as more fighters came toward the signup sheet with rude gestures and insults that weren't censored. The no-rules matches were here.

Debra lunged into the cage first. She spun and crouched, pointing at her target.

Grant glanced around to see who she was pointing at.

People laughed and pushed him out of his chair.

Debra ignored all the gestures and mouths moving. Not being able to hear was an advantage in this moment. *I have to know before I leave this island.*

Grant got into the cage warily. He'd seen the women fight, but he wasn't sure how rough he should get. Debra was more than a foot shorter than him and weighed half as much. It didn't feel like a fair fight.

Debra ran forward and kicked him between the legs.

Grant flinched aside at the last moment. His quick rabbit punch to her cheek was all instinct.

Debra took it and fired back, hitting hard enough to make his feet slide on the damp mat.

Grant hit her again, bad feeling now bubbling up in his throat.

Debra went to her knees. She braced for the final blow.

Grant delivered it lovingly to her jaw. “I’m sorry!”

Debra hit the mat with blood coming from her lip. “Tank...ou!”

The medic and Adrian got her out of the ring.

Grant followed as the match was called and the crowd roared for more.

Grant grabbed Debra’s arm and pulled her around. “Why did you do that?! There’s no way you could have won!”

Debra grinned with bloody teeth and pushed into his mind. *I’m not scared of anything now. I can face the future openly.* She pulled free of his shocked grasp and let the medic walk her to the hatch.

Grant let the crowd surround him; someone shoved a drink into his hand.

Jonny tilted the goblet. “Drink, you badass. Drink!”

Grant downed the beer, relaxing a little. He’d helped Debra achieve something, though he didn’t understand what it was.

Ray’s fury simmered as he watched them. He marched toward the cage. “Who wants another piece of this?!”

The crowd went wild around him and the cage. He lost sight of Grant.

“I do.” Theo stood up and began dropping gear. His sculpted body drew howls from the women, including Angela.

Ray was almost glad he was facing a normal. He didn't want to use magic right now. It would be too easy to lose control. In this environment, he was almost being encouraged to do that. It was frightening. "It's also liberating." He settled into his best fighting stance as the bulky engineer stepped cockily toward the cage.

Ray scanned the crowd a last time, searching for Grant. He found him near the barn with a group of drinkers and Jonny. Grant hadn't even noticed Ray was in the cage again.

The bell rang.

Theo came forward.

Ray ducked and brought up his arm with his palm open.

Theo saw the nose breaker coming, but he couldn't avoid it. Blood and pain exploded across his face.

Ray forced himself to stop. *But I want to do it again!*

Theo couldn't stay on his feet. He dropped near Ray's boots. Blood poured from his nose.

"Match to Ray!"

Grant finally turned around as the crowd went wild, but he couldn't see the cage. "Was that Ray in there again?"

Jonny pushed another opened beer into Grant's hand. "He won. He'll be over here soon, I'm sure. Enjoy your drink."

Grant was already feeling the first one. He tilted the beer up and drank while the others urged him on.

Jonny's eyes never left Grant's face.

Ray took a seat by the betting tables so he didn't go pick a fight. Grant was free to drink with whomever he wanted. Ray accepted it, but not gracefully.

Jeff caught Angela's nod. He moved them onto the part of the evening he was dreading. "We only have Eagles left. Who's ready to see which one is really the badass in this camp?"

The alert audience sprang into a tension that was almost sexual. Everyone had wondered who would win in a matchup like that.

Jeff motioned to Kyle. "You have the unofficial title. Are you ready to defend it?"

Kyle laughed as he walked toward the cage. "I've been defending it since I joined the Eagles. I've earned this spot."

Daryl watched Kyle go by. His resentment replayed Charlie's comment from the elevator.

"Are moments like this the reason you're not as high a level as Kyle?"

Daryl moved forward before his drunken brain finished thinking it through. "You only got that slot because your team bails you out every time you screw up."

A hush fell over the Eagles.

Angela rotated toward them.

So did Adrian. No one had expected that.

Daryl wasn't finished. "It should have been my team and my slot. I work harder, I shoot just as good, and I'm more of a threat in a fight. You didn't earn that place. It was given to you."

Kyle felt like he'd been punched in the gut. *I didn't know he felt that way.* Instead of getting emotional, Kyle made a sweeping gesture toward the cage. "Can I see you in private, please?"

Daryl didn't laugh with the crowd. He was dead serious.

Daryl looked rough before he even stepped into the ring. The three-day beard, wrinkled shirt from yesterday, and slight limp implied he'd been on a drunk before now. The senior Eagle stepped into the cage with rage spilling from his eyes.

The sky roiled with white clouds and a thick breeze that sent more leaves over the cage.

Angela settled back to enjoy the show.

Jeff closed the cage door. *I hope you're ready for this, Boss.*

Angela sent anger back at him. *This is who we are now, who you are!*

Jeff refused to be tempted. "Where's that damn bell?!"

The loud cheer of agreement from the crowd almost drowned out the ding.

Kyle heard it first. He waited, cool and collected.

Daryl caught the end of it and came forward. He preferred to be the aggressor.

Kyle almost chose the new gift in his mind. The hundreds of people watching him discouraged that. *I don't want them to see how different I am now.*

Daryl tossed out a light pain spell as he swung, hoping to disorient his opponent.

Kyle let the spell land and ducked the punch. Daryl's strength was in his knockout hit. "But you don't have much else, do you?"

Rage was slithering through Daryl's mind, twisting him up. He rushed again, using a stronger pain spell and a leg sweep.

Kyle didn't seem to feel the spell. He jumped the sweep and delivered the first contact of the match.

Daryl fired right back, not caring that blood was trickling from one nostril.

Kyle wasn't fast enough to duck it this time. He lifted his shoulder and let the hit glance off.

Daryl lost his balance and fell.

Kyle pounced, hard fist swinging. He didn't let up even when he felt Daryl firing.

Daryl blasted Kyle off him and up against the cage.

Kyle smacked his skull on the bars. He instinctively let himself fall to avoid Daryl's knockout punch. He kicked out hard, using his ears to determine where.

Daryl went down, face landing near Kyle's knee.

Kyle brought his knee up as hard and fast as he could.

The crowd screamed at the ugly click of Daryl's teeth slamming against each other.

Daryl saw darkness flying toward him.

Kyle grabbed him and jerked him close. "Say it!"

Daryl tried to swing again, but his mouth was on fire. He gurgled out what Kyle wanted to hear. "Your spot!"

Kyle let go.

Daryl hit the mat; a torrent of blood flowed from his nose.

"Medic!"

Terry hurried into the cage.

Kyle stood up, bloody arms lifted in victory. "Who's the top Eagle?"

The crowd roared back at him, "Kyle! Kyle!"

Kyle stomped out of the cage like the old wrestling stars, flexing and growling.

Terry saw how much blood there was. "Get Daryl down to the healer!" Conner was covering that tonight.

Adrian stepped into the cage and healed Daryl as much as he could. "Not a good time to open the hatch, Doc."

Terry was distracted by the title. "That's the first time I've been called that."

Adrian leaned out of the way so the others could pull Daryl out of the cage. "Get used to it."

Adrian had them take Daryl to the tent and put him next to Theo, where others were already crashing, having sex, drinking, chatting, and

watching over their injured people. The guards would also make rounds of that tent later to be sure everyone up here was okay, but they weren't covering it right now. Things were too dangerous for most of the normals and even some of the descendants. Despite spending a lot of his younger days enjoying nights like this, Adrian wasn't having fun. *I'm really not the same person anymore. I don't know if I should laugh or cry.*

Chapter Twenty-Four
I'll Be Gentle

1

Jeff took back over. “Our top Eagle defended his title and made sure everyone else will think twice about challenging him for that slot...right? Does anyone else want it? Who’s next?!” Jeff heard the longing in his shout as clearly as everyone else.

Adrian stepped forward. “You and whoever’s crazy enough to get in there with you.” Adrian held out a hand for the microphone.

Jeff didn’t want to expose himself to this crowd, but the rage needed an outlet. He gave up control and stepped toward the cage. “Whose ass am I beating?!”

Jack came forward eagerly. His huge chest and arms flexed under the black tank top.

Jeff grinned at the level two Eagle. “Fresh meat.”

Jack ignored the laughs and catcalls. He twirled around with a leg in the air like a ballerina, making everyone sure he was about to suffer the beating of a lifetime.

Jeff’s eyes narrowed. *He’s playing me.*

Jack grinned as he entered the bloody ring. “Give me a little taste, so I know what I’m in for.”

Jeff didn't wait for the bell; he fired his nastiest pain spell.

Jack brought up his shield and caught it, but he didn't know how to absorb it like the others had been doing. The spell broke over him and brought loud screams from his mouth.

The crowd screamed happily in return.

Jeff advanced to put the guy out of commission.

Jack kept screaming as he fired back. Power flew out of his chest and surrounded Jeff. It locked him in an invisible fist and slammed him against the bars.

Jack wanted to strike again, but his energy level sank to nothing. He settled into his kai stance.

Jeff was embarrassed someone so low level had gotten in a hit. He fired in a graceful blast. Flames flew from his hands.

Jack's screams mirrored the ones they were hearing in their nightmares. Senior men and women flinched and started waking from the bloodlust.

Terry sprayed the fire extinguisher as Jeff backed up, paling.

Jack sucked in oxygen as Adrian healed the worst of it. Fresh first-degree burns were nothing for him now. The explosion had allowed him to increase his skills.

“Match to Jeff!”

Jeff followed Jack and Terry toward the hatch. “Are you all right, man?”

Jack shivered at the fresh hell of cool air on his burnt skin. “Yes. Don’t make me teach you another lesson!”

Jeff laughed, relieved. “I lost control. My bad. Really.”

Jack was in too much pain to linger for a heartfelt chat. He went with the manly response again. “Suck it up. You lost.”

Jeff’s anxiety came down another notch. He helped Terry get Jack into the tunnel.

Conner came up and shut the hatch.

Jeff frowned. “I didn’t know you wanted to be a part of all this.”

“I don’t.” Conner marched toward the cage.

Adrian was angry they’d opened the hatch, but he couldn’t stop Conner from fighting if that’s what he wanted to do.

Angela got the next moment rolling. “Kyle is the top Eagle in camp, but is he the top fighter?”

Kyle swung around, slightly offended. “Didn’t I just prove it?”

Angela shrugged as she faced the other senior man who might be able to challenge Kyle and win. “Is he the top fighter in this camp?”

Neil wanted to be nice to his friend. He didn’t want to challenge Kyle. He still felt bad for firing on him earlier. His mouth opened. “No, he’s not. I am. Not even Adrian can beat me.”

“What about his son?” Conner came through the crowd with a swagger that said he knew what he was getting into.

Neil laughed loudly.

Conner walked by his dad.

“Don’t do this!” Adrian was instantly worried for the boy.

Conner gave Angela and Kyle a cool look. “I’ll uphold our family honor.”

Angela also tried to get him to change his mind. “Your family doesn’t have any honor.”

“Me, then. I have enough honor for all of us.” Conner got into the cage without hesitating.

Neil did hesitate. “This is unfair. If I don’t hurt you, I lose my title. If I do hurt you, people will say I beat up a kid.”

“That’s not my problem, is it?” Conner gave an annoying Mitchel grin, showing beautiful white teeth and rippling blond hair like a wheat field. “Come on, *Todd*. Pick on someone who can handle you.”

The crowd started chanting Conner’s name, impressed with his courage.

Neil looked at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “He’s a kid, Neil. Eagles don’t hurt kids.”

“But he’s asking for it!”

Adrian sighed. “I know. He’s offended that you all forget us now. He believes he can bring back our family name, without the stains.”

“Then you’d best let him try because there’s no chance *you* can do it.” Jeff motioned toward the cage. “In or out, Neil. Make your choice.”

Neil couldn't walk away. Besides the rage, his title as best fighter was something he wanted to keep. It made him feel good. "And I'm not letting you take that. I'd rather beat your ass than be called second best." Neil approached the cage.

"We get to bet!" Jeff slapped the cage door. "Intermission!"

Angela laughed. "We need a gate in the middle or something." She handed the microphone to Jeff and scanned her camp.

They were in a frenzy. People were shoving to the betting tables and they weren't hiding at all anymore. Demon forms blended with faces and no one cared. This was a descendant party now. Music was blaring heavy electronic beats through the speakers Theo had rigged up this morning. People were dancing, mating, drinking. *Are all of them willing?*

Angela spotted a single form who wasn't.

Adrian also saw it.

Angela's thought was clear. *Make sure Ray sees this.*

Adrian grabbed Ray's arm and pulled him out of the chair by the betting tables. He pointed.

Ray saw what was happening.

Adrian held him in place when the man would have rushed forward. "The alpha will handle it. She wants you to see it." He let go when Ray nodded curtly.

Angela eased toward the lightly struggling couple in the dark shadows near the barn.

The music stayed the same, giving her cover, but most of the crowd quieted to observe. Even through all the madness happening, the descendants were acutely aware of her every move.

Jeff reluctantly stepped toward Angela.

Adrian stepped in front of him.

Jeff gestured. "He saved my life. I owe him."

"He's a rapist."

"Not yet."

"Should we let it happen to prove it?"

Jeff was trapped by Jonny's actions. "No."

"Good. Let the alpha handle it. It's not your fault that Jonny is broken."

Jeff hated himself for listening to Adrian, but the man was right. Jonny had already crossed a line he could never return from.

Angela let her witch come through as she approached the couple.

Grant tried to pull away from the hot breath on his neck. He knew it wasn't Ray. The drugs he'd been given kept him weak and off-balance. "No!"

Jonny's breath in his ear grew ragged. "I'll be gentle." He unzipped his jeans.

Angela's arm snaked around his neck and jerked him backward, cutting off his air.

Angela let her witch have control. Jagged teeth plunged into Jonny's neck and bit down hard enough to crunch through bone.

Blood gushed from Jonny's mouth and neck and ran over his body in a waterfall.

Angela let go and stepped back, licking her lips.

Jonny fell over at Grant's feet. Thick blood pooled in the grass and dirt as Ray ran toward them.

Jeff looked away, heart breaking. *I always lose the people I get attached to, but it's not a curse I'm carrying. This camp is a cursed place for me.*

Angela rotated to give them all the bloody profile they wanted.

The roar from the crowd sent monkeys fleeing deeper into the jungle.

Angela's voice magnified with the double timbre of her witch. "Is this what you want?! Is it?!"

The descendants cried out in fresh bloodlust, begging her to keep going.

Angela slung a hand toward the cage, splattering blood over her clothes and the ground. "Let's roll!"

Kyle knew Jeff didn't want to MC anymore. He took over for this match. "Betting closes in thirty seconds! Last call for bets!"

Adrian shouted over the chaos. "My best gun on Conner!"

The crowd groaned or laughed at him. There was no way Conner could beat Neil. No one else bet on the boy.

Sporadic drops of icy rain fell over the island as the storm neared them. Heads tilted up to receive it gratefully.

Angela let the drops land on her changed face, mind spinning, heart squeezing in the joy of freedom. She walked through the crowd covered in blood, showing her true self, and no one flinched or

ran away. Bodies gyrated against her in acceptance and desire, accepting their magnetic bonds.

Angela let them feel her love, twisting and sliding against them in delight. *My people!*

Alpha! Alpha!

Adrian observed her with deep need as the rain soaked her clothes and hair. He yearned to be with her in any way that she would allow.

Conner saw his dad's attention was on Angela. Adrian's self-restraint angered him further. He glowered at Neil.

"Bets are closed!"

Neil wasn't sure why Conner had called him out, but the glaring was intense. "What is your problem?!"

Conner pulled the cage door shut and blocked it as if Neil might run.

Neil's eyes narrowed, anger rising. "You could at least tell me why I'm being forced to kick your ass."

Conner stepped lightly over the gory mat. "Do it and get the answer."

Neil couldn't think of anything he'd done to offend Conner. *My problem is his father.*

The bell dinged; the crowd drew in a collective breath, going silent.

"This isn't right!" Terry struggled to be heard over the music. "He'll get killed in there with Neil."

Terry was the only one to protest. Even Adrian was now focused on Angela instead of his son.

Adrian kept his eyes on the prize so he didn't ruin Conner's chances. Mitchels were notorious for their advantage-gaining first hits. Conner would do the same, as long as Neil didn't pull it from anyone's mind.

Neil agreed with Terry. "This is a no-win for me, kid. Get out of here."

Conner smirked again in the Mitchel family way that irritated them all so much when it came from his father.

"Damn it, Conner!" Neil could feel the snap coming. He didn't want to hurt the arrogant teenager. "At least give me a handicap."

Conner gestured. "Fine, but I'm not getting out of this cage."

Neil sighed. "Yeah, you are, but you won't be walking." Neil locked it all away as the bell rang again. "What did you pick?"

"Something you're familiar with, but I doubt you know how to fight." Conner lifted his hand and muttered under his breath.

Neil didn't know what was happening. He waited impatiently for this to start so he could end it fast.

"Hey!"

"How is he doing that?"

A knee-high bank of fog rolled through the camp and began covering the ground in a blanket of thick gray clouds.

Neil's jaw muscle twitched as the fog gathered around the cage and slipped through the bars. "You sneaky little shit."

Conner didn't waste time gloating. He rolled onto the gory floor of the mat and vanished under the fog.

Angela watched the fog center around the cage, impressed with Conner's tactics. He was using Neil's mental clouds against him. Neil couldn't see through it. "That's brilliant."

Adrian nodded at her admiration. "He is a Mitchel."

Thud!

Neil took the blow and spun toward the sound of Conner's feet, but it was too late. A kidney punch took him to his knees.

Neil quickly rose and ducked, feeling it coming. The clouds were thick and warm, making it hard to breathe. It muted his hearing and distorted the voices of the screaming crowd that didn't like being denied a view.

Conner hadn't recovered enough energy from the healing sessions; he couldn't hold the fog for long and still fight.

Neil began using his kai skills to clear parts of the cage in search of him.

Conner felt the right moment arrive. He let go of the fog and smacked the bars as a decoy noise. Then he dove and rolled, coming up on Neil's left side.

Neil turned into the hit.

Conner's fist slammed into his forehead and knocked him into the bars.

The crowd screamed in surprise and longing as the upper layer of fog cleared in time to show them Neil falling forward and Conner's knee coming up to meet him.

Crunch!

Blood flew from Neil's nose and mouth.

Conner swung, confidence rising. *I could win this!*

Neil lunged out and grabbed Conner's throat. "Not a chance."

He tangled their bodies and took the teenager to the mat. His hand tightened around Conner's throat without mercy.

Conner tried to fire another spell, but Neil increased the pressure. Darkness started covering his vision.

Neil let go and rolled to his feet. He immediately put his boot across Conner's neck so the boy could only draw in a thin thread of air. "Now tell me why!"

The crowd went silent to listen. Even the rain fell softer as if Nature also wanted to listen.

Conner twisted free and punched Neil's ankle.

It almost snapped. Neil felt it give a little; agony flared along the bone.

Conner drew back to do it again.

Neil kicked the boy in the face, once and hard.

Blood flew across the mat and splattered the screaming crowd.

Adrian stepped forward at the same time as Terry. "It's over!"

"Neil wins!"

The crowd cheered again as Conner refused to give up. He rolled, firing a spell as he kicked out and got Neil in the back of his leg.

Neil staggered forward.

Conner's fist was there to show him the light.

Bright stars glanced across Neil's vision. Rage snapped his control. He ducked the next swing and wrapped Conner up tightly against his chest. He smothered the boy with his bigger body.

"Over! It's over!" Adrian unlocked the cage door.

Neil brought up his shield. "Back off!"

Adrian couldn't risk Conner's life by attacking Neil. He searched for Angela. "Please! I'll do whatever you want!"

Angela observed with a witch's face and orbs made of bloody ice. "Let it roll."

Neil allowed Conner to draw in air, but he didn't let go. "Tell me why!" It was maddening the way he refused to answer. Neil fought to control his rage.

"He'll snap his neck!" Adrian felt it coming. "Help him!"

Terry stepped toward the cage door.

Kyle blocked his path. "Let them finish it." He trusted Neil to do the right thing, but Conner's grievance was pulling at all of them. They had to know.

Neil slammed his head into Conner's, drawing more blood from both of them. "Just say the words!"

Conner's rage sent flames over his body. It burned through his shield and spread to Neil.

"I'll let us both burn. Tell me!" Neil barely felt the heat. It matched his rage, but it didn't matter.

Conner stared at him in complete hatred. "You were his friend. He loved you the most and you abandoned him like everyone else. You're not fit to shine his shoes!"

Neil froze in shameful discomfort as the boy spit in his face.

Neil slowly let go and lowered his shield. The flames faded as he wiped his face.

Conner rolled away and stopped against the bars. He shoved onto his knees and got ready to stand. "You sold him out even though he forgave your sins and ignored your flaws. He brought you in to something magical, something perfect, and you let them take it away from him!"

Neil felt the words sink into his heart. He didn't know what to say that would make any of it better. Pointing out Adrian's awful mistakes wouldn't make a difference to the distraught teenager holding onto the bars to pull himself up.

Conner's anger hadn't faded, though he was unable to do more about it physically. "You all threw him away at the detention center. You didn't even blink. You betrayed him again and again, and then you gave him up for Marc!" Conner swept the

now silent crowd in contempt. “Do you think Marc would do that for any of you? He never gave a shit about this camp. My dad gave you all this second chance and you left him for dead!” He focused on Angela. “And you’re the worst. How dare you act like you care about him!”

Adrian stepped into the cage. “That’s enough.”

Conner spat blood toward Neil. “They owe you everything.”

Adrian blinked away tears. “I love you, too, son.” He helped Conner toward the exit while sending healing energy. “Let’s get you back in the tunnel.”

Conner glared over his shoulder, ignoring the pain.

Neil stared back, crushed.

Conner stumbled as he turned toward the tent. “Put me with Daryl. And get me a beer. I need something to take away the taste of my blood.”

The crowd cheered for the boy. They were touched by his defense of his father.

Adrian dropped his gun on the betting table as they went by. It would be added to Safe Haven’s stock.

“You knew I couldn’t win. Why did you bet on me?”

Adrian smiled warmly. “You’re my son. I’ll always bet on you.”

Eagles were humbled again. They nodded to Conner and Adrian in recognition of the truth in Conner’s words. They also remained distant

because they'd learned Mitchels couldn't be trusted. Conner was swaying that opinion with every encounter, but it would take a long time to change such a legacy.

Angela waved at Jeff.

Jeff resumed MCing the matches, but his rage had started to fade with Conner's emotional defense. It made him think of his parents and his missing friends and loved ones, of Jonny. Crista's face flashed next.

Jeff pushed it all away and lifted the microphone. "Is that the final match of the night? 'Cause we still need to get drunk and dance!"

The crowd cheered again, louder.

No one else came through to fight. Enough blood had been spilled.

The rain increased, washing away some of the gore and ugliness.

Jeff dropped the mike and went to the tables holding the wine and whiskey.

Adrian got Conner into the tent near Daryl so Terry could check him out. He retreated to make room and found Angela standing right behind him. He rotated as lightning flashed, drawn like a puppet on a string.

Angela's normal face stared up at him in regret and desire. "He's wrong. You know that. You've always known."

Adrian stepped around her so he didn't kiss her right there in front of everyone. "Yes. But he's also right."

Angela went into the tent to help heal their injured people. She didn't talk to Conner as she ran a hand over his wounds, but she opened her heart to him like she hadn't been able to do before. In another lifetime, Conner might have been her son. *I'll see him that way from now on. I just needed to know he loves Adrian as much as I do.*

Conner refused to cry as her love washed over him and healed more of his injuries. *I miss my mom.*

Angela cried for him, sending thick waves of sadness through the tent and out into the crowd.

Conner couldn't take it. He opened his arms to her, and a small piece of his heart.

Angela accepted his gift and stored it away next to Charlie and all of her other children as she hugged him. "I'm sorry."

Conner's anger fled, leaving a hollow ache. "So am I." He forced a smile. "Where's my beer?"

Angela went for it herself.

2

Kyle entered the tent and looked around for Daryl. He spotted the man sitting with Conner while Terry huffed and worked on the teenager's injuries. Theo was next to them, drinking and glaring at Ray through his broken nose and swollen face.

Ray was sitting next to the cot where Grant was now sleeping off the drugged beer.

Kyle waited by the flap until Daryl glanced in his direction. Kyle gestured.

Daryl sighed miserably. He gestured back.

Kyle grabbed an empty folding chair and joined them in the medical section of the tent. Angela had ordered them to create a small area for this. They'd brought over medical supplies, cots, and gurneys. Kyle was glad they hadn't used much of it.

Daryl knew why Kyle was here. He wanted to make things better, but his drunken pride refused to allow it. "I meant every word."

Kyle snorted. "I got that impression. What I don't get is why. You've been there for the runs and the training. You know it's not true."

Daryl ignored Terry's repeated huffing. "We've all been on the runs and we all do the training. Why do you get top slot just because Adrian recruited you first?"

Kyle didn't know what to say. He studied the bruised, bloody man in thoughtful silence.

Daryl shifted in the chair, grimacing at the immediate flare of pain from his brain. "You're a predator, too. You should have been removed as soon as you brought her into camp. You stand for everything that was bad in old-world men. You don't deserve to be top Eagle. You shouldn't be an Eagle at all."

Conversations had stopped in the tent. Angela entered with an armful of beers, but she stayed by the flap, waiting to see how this played out. *Daryl got me with this one, too. I had no idea he felt that way.*

“When did you decide all this?” Kyle kept an even tone. He thought this accusation had died months ago after his argument with Kenn.

“It started when Chris died on your run. Were you too busy hunting pussy to protect your team?”

Kyle’s jaw clenched.

Daryl finished it, not caring that he was about to get another beating. “There’s no place for men like you in the future, Kyle. Someday, she’ll see how wrong it all was and you’ll lose everything.” Daryl met his eyes. “Like you deserve.”

Kyle slowly stood up, face red and hands clenched. “You’re wrong, in every way.” Kyle walked from the tent with his head up.

Angela went to the chair Kyle had left. She held a beer toward Conner.

Conner and others took her offerings, leaving her with one.

Daryl took it when she held it out, but he didn’t open it. He stared at Angela in satisfied regret.

Angela motioned at the blood on her clothes. “I have it on my hands, too—gallons of it. Would you like to rip me apart?”

“Sometimes.” Daryl’s bitterness came from his mouth. “You’re sacrificing my wife for a possible branch on your damn tree. Why would that bother me?”

Angela reached over and opened the top on his beer. She dropped the cap under her chair. She didn’t argue with him.

Daryl knew he was being unreasonable, but his fear was too vivid. “You have to stop her from doing this!”

Angela still wasn’t sure why he’d attacked Kyle. “Will you tell me?”

Daryl didn’t feel the need to hold back now that he’d already said so much. “No matter what I do for this camp, I’ll never be as loved or feared as Kyle. I can’t beat him, so I have to live in his shadow. We all do. It’s humiliating. He’s a fucking monster!” Daryl covered his face with his free hand and cried.

Conner felt bad for him. “Brittani isn’t going to carry the babies long enough. They’re both hiding how bad it is. He’s almost out of energy. He can’t keep filling her up. It won’t last.”

Angela put a hand on Daryl’s wrist. She healed the rest of his injuries and sent in a mild sleep spell. “We’ll help her. Rest for a while.”

Daryl didn’t fight the drowsy feeling. He dropped the beer into his lap and leaned against the chair. “I wish I’d never met her. Then she wouldn’t be about to die.”

He faded into sleep with tears drying to his beard.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Her Army Will

1

Neil joined Kyle near the closed betting tables. “Chris died before we opened those slave trucks. It’s not true. You know that.”

Kyle did. Neil was making sure their audience did, too. “He’s drunk and worried about his wife. We’ll sort it out tomorrow when he’s sober.”

“Being drunk isn’t a good excuse for smearing someone’s honor.” Neil’s anger hadn’t faded with the fight. He swallowed it with a cool beer that he didn’t want. *I need something stronger.*

Kyle nodded. “You and me both.”

Neil dropped the empty bottle onto a table with the other garbage. “Let’s get really really drunk and wake up with the type of hangover that can last a month.”

Kyle laughed. “Deal.”

As they went by the tent flap, Kyle caught Adrian’s attention. “Are you drunk yet?”

Adrian frowned. “No.”

Neil gave in without a fight this time. “Well, we can’t have that. Come on.”

Adrian smiled in surprise. He went with them to get a bottle.

Angela's lips curved. *That went well.*

Conner saw it. He realized she had helped all of them by making sure the truth was exposed. Daryl would get help with his family and the three men now going into the barn might resume a friendship forged by the apocalypse. "My dad needs that. Thank you."

"People connect and disconnect all of their lives. Sometimes they need a push and sometimes they need to be left alone." Angela studied him. "Which do you need?"

Conner had gotten his release. He gave her the truth easily. "I'm tired of being away from my dad. I'm worried about the birth; Candy's only a few weeks from her due date now. I'm scared of not being good enough for her."

"And?"

Conner watched his dad go into the barn with Kyle and Neil. "I don't want to be like him, but I do. You know?"

"Yes." Angela stood up and stretched her spine until it popped. "Things will be different when the mission team comes home, but we'll always need to make runs out for supplies and gear. When it gets too hard here for you, volunteer for a run. It's better to take time away than to betray the people who love you. All of us have learned that the hard way."

Conner knew his actions would be kept quiet by the other restless men and women who went on those runs. It was instantly tempting. "I can't leave Candy alone."

“She’s not alone. She has an entire island of people to help her.” Angela didn’t care who was listening as she finished the lesson. “I’ll give you freedom, Conner, and try to help you keep a life here at the same time. All of my army deserves happiness in almost whatever form they want. If you need space to be a true Mitchel, you’ll get it; just don’t be that while you’re here.”

Conner came down the rest of the way. His body relaxed. “Thank you for understanding. It’s not something I can change. It’s who I am.”

Angela ran a hand through his soft, blood and mud-streaked blond hair. “Unlike most of the survivors, I don’t hate Mitchels. I’m grateful for your family. I’ll always help you if I can. That’s a promise my family will honor in the future, as well. We’re bound together forever.”

Conner’s pride went up. He’d just secured the first alliance of the new world for his family.

“Let’s try to have some fun now.” Angela went out into the partying crowd and let the music carry her away.

Terry watched her in longing. “God, I wish I was one of you guys.”

Several descendants glanced over to see who’d said it. When they saw it was their doctor, they shrugged in agreement and resumed their partying.

Conner also liked the idea. “I can talk to her about that some other time, if you want.”

Terry almost said yes. Then he remembered the testing Greg and Shawn had gone through. “No. I’ll

ask for it myself when I'm ready. If I can't do that, I'm not strong enough to be like you guys."

Conner was sure Terry would pass the tests, but he was also sure there was already a list of people waiting for that gift. "Am I clear? I want to keep an eye on her while she has some fun." There hadn't been much of that for their leader.

Terry nodded. "Go on. I'm going to stay near Daryl."

"He'll be out for a few hours."

"I assumed." Terry yawned. "I think I'm ready for a nap now. I don't feel as angry as I did."

Conner paused. "You didn't fight anyone."

"No, but I still feel better." Terry laughed. "Maybe just seeing blood is enough to quell the rage."

Conner felt that strike a target. He wrote it in his book so he didn't forget it. Then he went out and found a good post to keep watch over the boss.

2

Neil, Kyle, and Adrian sat on stools in the loft of the barn. The dusty landing held stacks of sleeping bags, chairs, and stools that hadn't been used tonight. It still smelled like sweat and sawdust.

Gathered around the window, the trio drank and studied the crowd of partying descendants. Angela was in the middle of the throng, dancing. She moved in ways that drew men and women closer in

hopes that she would bond with them through her seductive moves.

Adrian watched her slide against the willing crowd in abandonment. “She couldn’t have done that when she first joined us.”

“She’s come a long way.” Kyle didn’t say Adrian was responsible for that, but he thought it.

Neil took offense on Marc’s behalf. His temper flared again. “So how does this work? We sneak her out for time with the traitor when Marc’s busy or do we sneak him in while Marc’s on runs?”

Kyle winced.

Adrian kept watching Angela. She wasn’t holding back and the crowd loved it. He saw enough senior people around her to be confident she was safe, but he didn’t approve of her throwing caution to the wind. “He told me she gets restless and reckless when they’re apart. It’s been true every time.”

Neil scanned Angela again and also noted the guards staying close, especially Lisa and Dace. It was a wonder either of them were alive after being hurt in the explosion. It was good to see them watching out for their leader, but Charlie, Conner, and Cody had really saved most of their wounded people. Their healing powers were amazing.

Kyle confessed his reason to Neil without planning to. “It feels like it’s all ending. I had to do something.”

Neil understood even though he didn't want to. "You believe putting her with Adrian will give that back to you."

"It will; you know it will. They're perfect together. Imagine the things they'll push us into doing! We'll be legends who live forever in the minds of these people and all their descendants." Kyle hiccupped. "No-o pun intended."

Adrian and Neil realized Kyle was drunk.

Have I ever seen him get smashed? Neil didn't think so. Drinking was a big part of Safe Haven's other side, but Kyle had always stayed in control.

Kyle felt their stares and shrugged. "It's been a very emotional night."

The men chuckled in agreement.

"It's not the end." Adrian still didn't look away from Angela. "It's closure. This part is closing and another part is opening—the future. We made it here, to this precipice. Soon, we'll take the next baby steps in fixing the world."

"Do you really believe that?"

Adrian nodded. "I always knew it would be hard. I tried to take the coward's way out, but she forced me to face it and now I'm here, watching it happen."

"Would you have done it?" That would always bother Neil.

"Is that the reason you turned on me?"

"I turned on you because you're a traitor."

Adrian tried to be honest. "I don't think so now. I did before, but all these months out of leadership,

watching someone else run my creation says differently. It's been hard and I chose her. If I'd handed the camp over to my handlers, it might have driven me insane." He belched. "But who knows?" Adrian didn't want their pity or the old bonds to be sewn back together. He wanted new bonds based on the truth—they were all damaged people who'd made mistakes. *And we survived.*

A cheer came from the crowd.

Neil and Kyle scanned and saw some of the dancers were removing clothes to be naked in the rain. The mess brawlers surrounded the women, shouting encouragement.

Adrian studied Angela. "It's not my camp. It never will be again, but I'll be here to help in any way that she needs. If she wants me to lead us back home when it's time, I won't say no." Adrian left them there and joined the crowd.

He motioned senior men to stop the stripping so it didn't get out of hand. There were too many people in the muddy mix to keep track of things now. This was a lot different than pool time with sober guards all around them.

The brawlers reluctantly convinced the women to get dressed, remembering Angela's words about breaking the wrong rules. Her display tonight told them how she would feel about a rape. It was foolish of the drunken people to invite that possibility.

"He's a good man and a total slimeball." Neil leaned against the loft wall. "I can't stand the confusion."

Kyle often felt that way about himself. “Some things are right and some things are wrong. We say those don’t matter, but this camp was founded on it. She has plans to fix it all. I’ve seen it in her mind. I saw it the day we met, though I didn’t know that’s what it was back then. She’s going to use us to change the world, Neil. All we have to do is make her happy.”

Neil understood where Kyle was coming from now. “I want that, too. I really do, but setting this up was wrong. They’re bonding while Marc’s gone. What happens when he comes home?”

“Drama, maybe.”

“And we don’t need that anymore. Call it an ending or closure, but we just don’t need it anymore.”

“Then Marc will have to leave.”

“She’ll never tell him to go.”

“No.” Kyle saw Adrian approaching Angela’s location. The senior men and women around her retreated a little to let him through. “Her army will.”

Neil lifted the bottle and took another long drink. It burned his throat and set his stomach on fire. “It’s still wrong to do this while Marc’s gone.”

“It’s the only time it can be done.” Kyle faced Neil. “Have you noticed the changes yet?”

Neil blinked at the quick topic change. “In her or the camp?”

“Both.” Though Kyle wasn’t sure about her. He assumed he would recognize it when Neil said it. “This camp has changed again. Different faces,

different shifts and duties, different rules. And people are settling their final issues now.”

Neil wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Feels different. Not as dangerous, so we’re making our own trouble.”

“Yes, but that’s not my point.” Kyle put his bottle down, unable to take any more and still think clearly enough for this conversation. “Every single person here is almost complete.”

Neil frowned, vision blurring a little as the alcohol started to catch up. “Complete?”

“We’ve scraped off all those old-world layers and replaced them with entirely different people. The last of those scars are being filled in now, while Marc’s not here to get in the way. She triggered it or set it up, and she didn’t just have a random time. She’s even giving us a monthly chance to say goodbye to those old layers.”

“These matches are for rage release.”

“She loves a good twofer.”

Neil flinched. “You sound like her when you say that.”

“Exactly. She couldn’t do this with Marc here in her face and questioning every choice she makes or getting jealous when she dances with her people. Do you know what that means?”

Neil did, but he didn’t want to say it.

Kyle scowled at him. “Stop being Marc’s friend and be an Eagle!”

Neil had no choice. “It means he’s not good for us. Eagles want him away from leadership, for real this time.”

“Not just from leadership, Neil. From the leader. She can’t function on all 8 when he’s around. Marc needs to change or leave, and we’ve already seen that he can’t change.”

“He was doing better...” Neil stopped, remembering recent moments with Marc where Angela had been forced to adjust her plans. People had gotten hurt because of it. “No one picked him to be the leader. She let him push his way into it, but he didn’t earn it.”

Kyle nodded. “If he’d left them alone, would she have lost their baby? He was so focused on keeping Adrian away from her that she got restless, reckless. And Marc knew she would, but he didn’t account for it. He’s always interfering and then blaming her when something goes wrong.”

“Like Kendle?”

Kyle stifled a rough belch. “Maybe. Angela says it was a plan they both made.”

“That’s one of her changes—protecting people who don’t deserve it because she feels bad.” Neil was too far in to stop now. “I believe she’s letting Marc blame her this time because she feels guilty over not removing Adrian.”

“He deserved it.” Kyle’s voice rose in passion. “So do we all, though. And some of us have done far worse than be tempted!”

Neil knew that was true. “Do you believe Adrian?”

Kyle sighed. “I do. It would have killed him to see the government ruin his Eagles and tear apart his dream. I think he would have fought back in the end. I also think a lot of us would have died before that happened.”

“Yeah.” Neil forced himself to be fair. “He was an amazing leader. I know it would be better if they were allowed to work together...or whatever.”

“You just know Marc won’t ever accept it and that means you have to pick a side.” Kyle studied him curiously. “Why are you so bonded to Marc? I know we wanted him to replace Kenn. I understand the victory and the friendship, but why did you pick Marc over Adrian? That happened long before we found out his secrets.”

Neil let out another bit of poison with an actual shudder. “He offered to give me Becky.”

“What?”

“He said he’d set it up if I wanted her. He’s not a good person.”

“But you did want her.”

“Imagine what might have gone differently for her if he’d said no, she’s too young and threatened me with my place over it. Rick only took her because I wanted her!”

Kyle got the point. He even agreed, for the most part. “It always comes back to Becky with you.” The alcohol muted Kyle’s censor. “Is it because Rick and Seth got to fuck her and you didn’t?”

Neil laughed, shocking him.

The laughter faded. Deep sadness took its place. “I got her killed, Kyle. I’ve never felt so bad about anything in my life. She deserved better.”

Kyle watched Neil cry in stunned shock even though it wasn’t the first time he’d heard those words. Neil’s open emotions were another change. Kyle realized everyone had shown emotions tonight that were usually bottled up.

Neil got control of himself and wiped his face on his shirt. “I’m sorry. You do deserve top slot. You’ve changed the most out of all of us. I’m proud of you.”

“Damn drunk! Stop crying!” Kyle wiped away tears as Neil laughed. “I love you, too, man. We’ll make it work no matter which side you pick.”

Neil wasn’t sure which way he would go now. “I’ll talk to the boss about it, but not tonight. She’s happy. Let her have it.”

Kyle was relieved. “Awesome. Let’s go get you some food, huh?” Kyle stood up slowly, letting his balance adjust.

Neil felt his body reach the tolerance level and sighed in relief. “It’s about time.”

He fell over into a pile of sleeping bags.

Kyle laughed and held onto the rail as he went to rejoin the party. He slid down the last two steps and righted himself at the bottom. Kyle straightened his jacket and wobbled toward the doors. “Some people just can’t handle their alco-o-hol.”

3

“Can we get an updtter, please?”

Jennifer snickered as she keyed her mike. “We’re fine here. No issues.”

“Goods. That’s good.”

Jennifer laughed this time. She shifted Autumn higher onto her hip. “Your daddy is very drunk.”

Charlie swallowed a chuckle. He was Jennifer’s guard for the night. He wasn’t supposed to laugh on duty.

The ship was quiet and calm despite the storm. The wind was the worst part of it, but Jennifer wasn’t worried about the weather. Samantha’s warning hadn’t included anything dangerous. “And it has to rain sometimes. The song was right about that.”

They’d just come from the medical bay, where Tobias’s family was covering the patients while Tonya ran the front desk. Jayda was feeling a little better, but the medics still didn’t want her out on her own.

Jennifer put the baby into her bed as Daisey came. “She’s been fed and is almost asleep.”

Daisey settled in the chair by the baby bed, smoothing her long blue dress. “We’ll be fine. No worries.”

Jennifer heard the strain in the older woman’s voice. “Is there a problem?”

Daisey reluctantly nodded. “Ralph is upset with the boss.”

Jennifer heard the unspoken plea. “I know all about his conversations with Sherman and the others.”

Daisey paled. “No.”

Jennifer rubbed her sore arms. She hadn’t expected swimming to hurt so much afterward. “He’s on the edge. Angela’s waiting for him to make a final choice.”

Daisey had suspected it. “What should I do?”

Jennifer was proud of the woman for doing the right thing even though it concerned her new husband. “Keep being yourself. Ralph will need you if he gets punished.”

“He won’t be eliminated?”

“No. He’s trying to protect the other normals. He’s not wrong for trying, just in how he’s going about it.”

“He doesn’t know what else to do. He thinks Angela doesn’t care anymore.”

“That couldn’t be farther from the truth.” Jennifer went to the exit so she could resume her rounds. “Have faith in her and in Ralph. If she thought he’d go the wrong way, Angela probably would have already handled it.”

Daisey tried to relax. “I will.”

Jennifer scanned the quiet ship deck, then marched down the steps to check on the cargo deck. It was the only place where people were still working, other than the med bay and the mess. Brittani’s parents were getting things ready for a

crowd of hungover people to return to the ship right after dawn.

Charlie stayed close and tried not to get distracted by the thought of his mom on the island partying with Adrian and the Eagles. He'd been invited to join them, but he didn't feel like he could trust himself in that environment. *I'll say stupid stuff, get drunk, get sick, and feel like shit for two days afterward. No thanks.*

Jennifer opened the cargo door.

Chad came from the guard post with quick steps. "Identify yourself!"

Jennifer approved. "Give me an update."

Chad relaxed as he saw her and Charlie. "We're good here. Sam's still working, though. Not sure she should be."

"I heard that!"

They all chuckled at Samantha's shout.

Jennifer went into the garden area.

Samantha was covered in bits of dirt, straw, and green debris from the plants. It was even in her hair. She was adorable. Motherhood certainly agreed with her.

Charlie scanned the earthy-scented room, then waited in the hallway.

Chad returned to the nearby guard post and noted the time on his sheet. Jennifer was coming through once an hour, at almost the exact same time every rotation. Angela would be proud of the girl for doing the job even though she could have stayed

in the office all night and gotten updates over the radio.

Charlie listened to the women chat about the garden, and he kept track of the guard, but his mind stayed on his mom and Adrian.

Samantha waved at the small radio booth in the rear corner. “Mike and Leeann just left. Things are quiet.”

Jennifer was glad. “How are those two?” She hadn’t found anything in her scan of Mike’s mind, but she hadn’t been able to go very deep. He had a dark spot that she assumed meant he was Invisible. Jennifer had made notes on it for the boss.

Samantha shrugged. “Mike seems happy enough. Leeann’s very quiet these days. I think not having her memories or her gifts is changing her a little.”

Jennifer was just glad the girl had stopped trying to run away. “Well, she’s been wild, so maybe it’s for the best.”

“Maybe. I wish she’d talk more so I could judge it better.”

“We’ll work on bringing her out of her shell.” Jennifer rubbed her belly. The smell of stale food and lingering smoke wasn’t pleasant, but it also wasn’t so bad that it upset her stomach. Now that she was in the second trimester, the nausea was better. “She’s got Mike working on it, too, I’m sure. He’s a good kid.”

Samantha nodded. *But I’m not so sure.*

Jennifer stored that reaction, but she didn't think Samantha was correct. *She's just tired.* Jennifer saw the twin boys sleeping in the stroller. "Maybe you should take them to bed."

Samantha stretched her sore arms. "I'm almost done here. I'll quit soon, I promise."

Jennifer knew Samantha was enjoying the alone time while her men were on the island. "Just don't overdo it, okay?"

"I won't." Samantha brushed dirt from her hands. "It feels good to work again."

"You'll be sore."

Sam laughed. "I already am."

"Well, when you're done, have the guard help you to your cabin. Chad doesn't mind being your pack mule. Right, Chad?"

"Not at all!"

They chuckled at Chad's shout from the guard post.

Samantha sighed. "We could really use a pack mule. It won't be fun carrying all these pots and planters to the island when the boss calls for it."

Jennifer wasn't eager for that either. "Maybe we can use the horse to haul some of it."

"Maybe."

At the guard post, Chad stopped a protest, but he hated that idea. *Animals are not meant to be our labor force!*

Charlie looked over at him.

Chad flushed.

Charlie wasn't mad. He had a soft spot for animals, too. *But I also love eating most of them, so I guess that makes me a hypocrite or something.*

Jennifer came out of the garden. "Once you get her to the cabin, shut it all down here and lock the doors. No one in or out until the morning shift."

"You got it." Chad tried not to draw her attention. He was scared of her, though he wasn't proud of that.

Jennifer felt his fear. It bothered her, but she needed that image with the camp to help keep the peace. She moved by the guard without offering comfort.

Charlie smiled at Chad as he went by.

Chad nodded back and watched them leave. *This is a good place. I'm glad Safe Haven brought me in out of the wilderness.*

Jennifer went to the brig while wishing everyone felt that way. "Come on. We'll check on Pam and Allison and then go to the mess for a snack."

Charlie kept pace and brought up something that was troubling him. "Allison volunteered for brig guard duty so she'd have a chance to talk to you again. You know she's going to ambush you about living forever, right?"

Jennifer was almost bouncing through the hallway now. Her mood was great. "Things are covered and calm. And I've had time to think about it. We can have that conversation."

Charlie's sleepiness faded a bit. He was also interested in that topic, though not the way Allison was. She was talking about it all the time, like she was obsessed. People were starting to notice.

Jennifer had noticed, too. "It's normal for her to feel that way. It's normal for all of us."

"Yeah, but she might make a bad deal to get what she wants."

Jennifer slowed, turning toward him. "What do you know that I don't?"

Charlie had been waiting for the right moment to drop the news when it wouldn't cause Jennifer to flip into their enforcer. "Are you calm?"

Jennifer understood he was also scared of her. "As much as I can be until the boss and the others return. What's up?"

Charlie reluctantly let out his concern. "Allison is Invisible, and she and Pam are good friends. Everyone keeps forgetting that. She shouldn't have been put on duty over a friend."

Jennifer resumed her walk toward the brig, now worrying. "I hope you're wrong."

"So do I, but you're hunting for a normal who popped and didn't tell us. It seems like something a person obsessed with living forever might do..."

Jennifer broke into a run.

Rico heard footsteps go by the closet he was in. He assumed the guard here on the cargo deck was doing an extra round of all the rooms.

Rico pushed the closet door open.

The squeak drew Chad's attention from the guard post. He spotted Rico. "Hey! What are you doing in there?!"

Shit! Rico stepped out, hand sliding to the knife on his belt. "I found something. Come take a look."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Deal Me In

1

“**J**ennifer’s coming.”

Allison shrugged. She flipped over another card and put it on the pyramid in front of her. “Rico didn’t come by yet for the updates. She’s probably getting them herself.”

The brig was neat and clean, with only the one occupied cell. It didn’t get much use, but they still kept it ready.

Pam retreated into the corner of her cell. “She’s pissed again.”

Allison looked up as the door opened. “Everything okay?”

Jennifer scanned both females and the jail. She realized she’d overreacted and covered. “Good workout to run here. I was getting sleepy.”

Charlie also scanned the brig. He was relieved the two women were here and not conspiring. Pam’s thoughts were bored and sleepy, though fear of Jennifer was waking her up. Allison’s mind was as dark and impenetrable as ever. “Sorry.”

Jennifer wasn’t upset. “It’s fine. Watch the hall for me. I’ll hang out here for a while and then we’ll go to the mess.”

Charlie shut the door and leaned against it, but he listened to the women as well as the empty hallways. *Something doesn't feel right.*

Jennifer ignored his bad feeling this time. She wasn't in the mood for another false alarm. She took the seat across the desk from Allison. "How are you?"

Allison yawned. "Tired, but still okay. The...transfusion from Conner really helped."

Pam heard the hesitation and knew Allison had hedged, but she couldn't read her mind to find out why.

Jennifer talked with Allison, but she began scanning Pam's thoughts for trouble. Because of her illness, Jennifer had skipped her in the search.

Pam felt it. "I'm not a lurker. I'm a bitter, drying-out drunk hoping for a chance to prove I can change."

Jennifer saw Pam's hand shaking.

Pam quickly shoved it into her pocket. "I'm fine. Just some withdrawals."

Jennifer hadn't considered being in here would dry Pam out. *But Angela did.*

Pam nodded. "That's probably why she picked this. She's trying to help me."

"Will it?" Allison wanted Pam to get better and get out of here early. That might happen if she did well.

Pam shivered. She rubbed her cold arms as sweat started to form on her neck. "Yes. I can do this." Pam held up a finger. "Excuse me."

Jennifer and Allison grimaced as Pam vomited into the bucket in the corner.

Allison got up and retrieved the hand towel from the small sink in the bathroom. She hung it on the bars of Pam's cell, then returned to her seat.

Jennifer now felt bad for Pam. *And I shouldn't. She broke a rule and she'll pay her debt for it.* Jennifer studied Allison. "Are you still Invisible?"

Allison frowned. "Of course. I don't want to be like you guys yet. I've made that clear."

Jennifer pushed. "But why? As one of us, you'd have a better chance of the cancer staying gone."

"Or I'll unlock an obsession that I can't control." Allison glanced over at Pam's pale face. "She wants to drink. I want to suck down lifeforces like spaghetti."

Jennifer winced. Her stomach clenched. "Yeah. Don't do that. It's not good, and it didn't make me immortal." Jennifer rubbed her shoulder. "It also didn't help my mental state."

Allison waved. "Thus the reason I don't want to be unlocked yet. When I think I can handle it, I'll come to you."

That pleased Jennifer. "Good."

"I'm killing time until the next shift comes in. Want to play a hand of poker? I promise not to talk about charms or magic." Allison looked over at Pam. "At least, not here."

Jennifer was tempted. She'd made almost continuous rounds of the ship and other than the garden and mess, everyone was in their cabins and

settled for the night. “Let me make sure Samantha got to her cabin first.”

“Cool.” Allison swept the cards up and began shuffling them.

Jennifer keyed her radio. “I need an update on Samantha and the cargo deck.”

Samantha’s out-of-breath voice came back. “Headed to my cabin. Forgot to turn out the cargo lights.”

Jennifer wasn’t worried over that. “We’ll cover it. Goodnight.” Jennifer gestured at Allison. “Deal me in.”

2

Down in the tunnel bunker, Wade caught the guard’s attention. “Was that Samantha?”

Stanley shouted over the music. “She’s going to bed. Ship’s fine.”

Wade was glad she was going to get some rest. Most people down here in the tunnels were wishing they could do the same now, but it was only 1 a.m. and the party above them wasn’t over yet.

Wade entered the kids’ area on his round of the bunker. He was doing it twice an hour, but nothing was happening here. People had chosen an area and were staying there. Even the medical area was quiet now. Their few patients were resting and recovering while thinking about the mistakes that had brought them down here.

Only a few of the kids noticed when Wade came through.

Wade saw most of them were sleeping despite the noise. The adults couldn't do that. Kids weren't bothered by noise in the same ways.

Amy opened her eyes. She was in her cot. "Have you got my dollies?"

Wade stopped. "I haven't seen them."

Amy's lids shut as sleep pulled her down. "Someone took my dollies."

Wade didn't promise to replace them like he might have with one of her other toys. The lifelike twin dolls had been unique in this camp. He hoped they were found in a laundry bag.

Dog peered up at him from the floor under Amy's cot.

Wade liked it that the wolf was with the kids. They were safer while Dog was on duty.

Wade stopped at the small table where Cody and Cate were coloring. The twins were at a table alone so they couldn't fight with the others. It bothered Wade that they weren't adjusting as well as they needed to.

Cody was sporting a bruise on his cheek and a split lip. He kept glancing over at the cot where Amy was. Wade felt bad for the boy, but he didn't let it show. "What did you learn from that encounter?"

Cody's grip tightened on the blue crayon. "Some people don't want a king."

Wade waited.

Cody frowned up at him. “Or maybe they just don’t want *me* as a king.”

Wade used a gentle tone. “People don’t want rulers at all, Cody. They want a good leader.”

Cody’s face squeezed together. “But I am good. Amy was nice to me before. I don’t understand.”

Cate snatched the blue crayon from her brother’s hand. “Amy doesn’t like me. She believes you’ll give me power over her.”

Cody nodded. “I will.”

Cate smirked at her brother. “I know.”

Wade frowned. “People won’t like that. They only want the leaders they pick.”

Cate looked up this time. “My dad is a leader here and they didn’t pick him.”

“Yes, and we aren’t the least bit happy about it, kiddo.” Wade swept their drawings and recognized the protection pictures. “Do we need those?”

Cate resumed coloring. “It was Cody’s idea.”

Cody snatched the blue crayon from her hand. “I don’t know where they go yet.”

Wade felt danger enter the air. “Are we about to have another problem?”

Cody wasn’t sure. “I think I’m just being careful, like my dad would be.”

Wade was relieved. *I’m not ready for more trouble yet.* “Do you guys need anything?”

Cate took a chance. “Can you make the alpha go get my daddy?”

Wade felt her pain. He hated denying the girl. “I’m sorry. No. Is there something you guys need that I can give you?”

“No.”

“Nope.”

Wade moved on, but he was bothered by the simple encounter.

He passed by the bathroom area without breathing deeply. Port-Os with giant buckets and vents were keeping the smells down while the digging crew continued to clear room for their septic system, but it still wasn’t pleasant. He lowered the curtain between areas and checked on their injured people next.

He strolled by the sleeping patients and entered the living area.

Camp members and guards glanced up in concern. Candy stiffened on the cot by the heater. She’d come here for the warmth. Her back was hurting and she kept getting chills.

Wade realized his expression was causing them to worry. He kept walking. He didn’t feel like conversing. The constant music was giving him a headache and he was tired. *I’ll be glad when this party is over. I hate being away from Samantha and the kids.*

Wade hoped Neil was having fun, though. A lot of their people needed this break from always following the rules and trying to be perfect.

Wade went to the gaming area to check on Sadie and the others. He didn’t believe there would be

problems even though she was the only female among that group, but he refused to take chances.

Back in the kids' area, Cate yawned widely. "Bed now."

"Okay. We'll finish these in the morning and take them with us." Cody climbed from the chair and went to the cots that were waiting for them.

Cate held the blanket so Cody could crawl into bed. She kissed his cheek and covered him up. "I'd want you as my king even if you go all bad."

"Thank you." Cody shut his eyes.

Cate crawled into her own cot and tugged up the covers. "I wish Daddy was here."

Cody yawned. "Me, too."

"Do you think we can go get him on our own?"

Cody snuggled into the cot. "We don't need to. After tomorrow, things will move faster again."

Cate tried to focus through the sleepiness invading her body and brain. "What does that mean?"

Cody fell asleep before he could answer.

Cate settled into the bed and ducked under the covers. *No dreams tonight. No dreams tonight.* She fell into a deep slumber and stayed there as the music continued to pound through the ground above them.

3

"Should I make them turn it down?" Adrian was handling security now. Most of the Eagles were too

trashed to walk, let alone do guard duty. Only the few who'd volunteered to stay sober were still patrolling the edges of the sprawling party.

Angela checked her watch. It was 3 a.m. Dawn was a short few hours away. She scanned the crowd around them.

Dozens of men and women were still drinking and dancing. The rest were in the tent, the barn, or passed out in the mud. She nodded. "Pass the word that we're almost done. Then point out the snacks. They need to eat a little or we'll have a lot more puke to clean up."

Adrian went to handle it.

Angela swept those closest to her, judging their happiness. The mood was good and a lot calmer now. This event had given her a lot of progress on her plans. She was pleased with most of it. Letting them have this outlet now while she could oversee it had been a good idea. In a few months, when she wouldn't be as mobile, Adrian would cover it and Neil would be his right hand.

Angela resumed dancing in the center, drawing a small cheer from those who'd noticed her withdrawal. They shifted closer again, slick, muddy bodies encouraging her to join in like she had earlier.

The sky opened up with yet another spat of cold rain, soaking the dancers.

Angela lifted her arms and welcomed it. She always felt hot now. She'd been horny in her last

pregnancy. This time, she was putting off too much heat. The cold rain felt wonderful on her skin.

Adrian came back through the dancers, frowning. It wasn't safe for her to be without protection now.

Descendants scowled at him with bright red eyes.

Adrian didn't back down. The other dancers thought they were guarding her, but it would only take one bump and fall for her to be hurt. The mud was up to their ankles in places.

Angela rotated toward him. Her eyes were also bright red. "I have three hours left!"

Adrian gave in, letting go of his worry.

Angela surprised them both by tossing an arm around his neck. She lifted a brow.

Adrian wasn't stupid. He stepped closer and let the music carry them both away.

Conner observed them from the flap of the muddy, stinking tent. It was impossible to miss the sparks, but it wasn't as sexual as he'd expected. He could tell Angela was holding back.

Conner assumed she was giving his dad this time because of her guilt. Conner didn't regret his outburst. It had already helped his dad. People had been nicer to him all night, and he'd been included. Now, Angela was giving him a little of the attention he longed for. So far, his plan had gone perfectly. *Getting my ass beat by Neil was worth it. All that's left is for them to sleep together.*

Conner yawned, yearning for that vision of the future. They were meant to be together and build a world where people were safe and happy. *I'm sorry, Marc, but I hope you don't come back.*

Conner wasn't the only one to think that as they watched the dancing leaders. For that one moment, it was almost possible.

"You really are a sneaky little shit." Terry grinned to show he wasn't pissed as Conner turned around.

Conner laughed at the tired medic. "Shhh."

He led Terry further into the tent so Angela didn't hear them. "As soon as I figured out what the Eagles were trying to do, I started helping."

Terry frowned in confusion. "What are the Eagles doing?"

Conner realized the medic didn't know. "They're putting Angela and my dad together and letting nature take its course."

"So you're not really mad at Neil?"

Conner's eyes lit up.

Terry understood. "Oh, great. Another conniver who likes a twofer."

Conner indicated the other sleeping, snoring, dreaming people in the tent. "Why haven't you crashed yet?"

"Since I'm not drinking, I promised the Eagles I'd make sure the boss made it to Adrian's shack." Terry had been honored to be asked because he was a normal.

Conner denied that. “I’d get a spot ready in this tent. They’ll dogpile when they crash.”

“Dogpile? As in all of them sleeping on top of each other?”

“Yes.” Conner didn’t tell the man that’s how most descendant families slept. Separating, even by one room, was often too much to keep them together.

Terry took his word for it. He went to clear out the center chairs and stools. It was the only place that didn’t have people or puke.

Conner took the unobserved moment to pretend it was his mom in Adrian’s arms and not the woman he’d replaced her with.

4

Grant woke up with a pounding headache and a spinning stomach. Bright sunlight struck his face and tipped the scales. He sat up, hand covering his mouth.

Ray handed him a bucket.

Grant emptied his guts, groaning.

Ray waited patiently, holding a towel and a clean shirt. He’d known how this morning would start.

Grant wiped his mouth. “Where are we?”

“Adrian’s shack.” Ray hadn’t taken them below into Adrian’s tiny bunker. Getting Grant this far had been hard enough.

Grant took the clean shirt, not asking why he wasn't wearing one. He groaned again as his head spun. "What happened to me?"

Ray didn't want to tell him, but there was no way he wouldn't find out. "Jonny's dead. You were covered in his blood."

Grant stiffened as a memory filled itself in. "He was touching me. I kept saying no..."

Ray's fury flared back to life. "He tried to rape you. He's dead now."

Grant was horrified and humiliated. "I only had two beers!"

"We think he drugged you." Ray took the bucket outside and dumped it.

Grant didn't have control of his emotions. He fought tears. "I got him killed."

Ray came back to the doorway of the shack. "He got himself killed. You didn't do anything wrong." Ray was upset that Grant hadn't been more careful, but now wasn't the time for a lecture.

Grant was devastated. "I didn't think he was like that. He's been a good friend."

"No. He was a hunter biding his time." Ray took the dirty towel and tossed it into the cold fire pit in front of Adrian's shack. "Angela handled it in front of everyone. It won't happen again for a long time."

Grant was relieved that Ray hadn't been the one to do it. Tears of shame clouded his vision. "I'm so sorry!"

Ray came over and held the man while he cried. "Shhh. It's okay. You're okay."

Grant held onto Ray and sobbed. “I’ve lost it all!”

Ray realized Grant was worried about his place in camp and in the Eagles. “No, sweetheart, you didn’t. Jonny tried to take advantage of you. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Men don’t get raped!”

Ray snorted softly. “That’s like saying only little girls get molested. It just isn’t true.”

Grant slowly recovered. He wiped his face on the clean shirt.

Ray handed him a bottle of water and the bottle of aspirin from his pocket. “When you feel better, we’ll get you to the ship so you can shower and eat something.”

Grant grimaced. “I don’t want to face anyone.”

“Most people are still in town or under it. Only the top deck guards will see us.”

Grant nodded, then held his head as pain went through it. “I feel like shit.”

“Yeah, being drugged will do that.” Ray helped Grant to his feet. “Come on. We’ll stop by the medical bay so Tonya can check you out.”

Grant let Ray lead him out into the bright morning sun. “I’m never drinking again.”

Ray chuckled. “Okay.”

Grant didn’t laugh. “I mean it. From now on, the only alcohol I’ll drink is a toast at our wedding.”

Ray knew this wasn’t the best time for what he’d been stewing on all night. He brought it up

anyway. “About the wedding... Would you like to get married in a few weeks?”

Grant staggered down the steps. “I would.” He leaned over the fire pit.

Ray listened to him vomit while making plans. Seeing Jonny’s obsession so clearly last night had convinced him it was okay to get married. *If Jonny thought he could get away with raping a man in front of everyone, then a gay marriage isn’t going to cause shock. We can be happy now.* Angela had paved that path with blood when she bit into Jonny’s neck.

5

“Shift change! Open up!” Morgan stomped on the muddy hatch in Eagle code. He scanned the town while he waited. Things had clearly gotten wild. There was trash, blood, mud, and vomit from one end of town to the other.

Morgan scanned Jonny’s stiff corpse. Lying next to the barn, it looked like part of his head had been ripped off. *But there’s only one body, so it could have been worse.*

Morgan saw Jeff. He was in a chair by the cage and hunched over, but his eyes were also on the body. “What did he do?”

Jeff didn’t answer.

Morgan assumed Jeff was too hungover or maybe even still drunk.

The hatch opened.

Kimmie climbed out, shoving him out of her way.

Morgan watched her run to Jeff and hug him. *Must have been rougher than I thought.* Morgan went down the ladder.

Kimmie held onto Jeff. “It’s okay. You’ll be okay.”

Jeff didn’t look away from the body. He’d been staring at it for hours. “I can’t stay here anymore.”

Kimmie’s smile lit up her face. “Really?”

Her sudden mood change drew Jeff’s attention. “You want to leave?”

“Too many rules.” Kimmie looked at the body and quickly glanced away. “Too much death. It was better before we came here.”

“Even though we were being chased by horrible people and you were hurt?”

Kimmie shrugged. “At least out there we could be ourselves.”

Jeff had been stewing on what to do with the girl. “You’d be safer here.”

Kimmie hugged him again. “Don’t leave me! I’m a big girl. I can help you!”

Jeff faced something everyone else had worried about. “What if *I’m* not good for you?”

Kimmie touched his face. “You’re my dad now. Why wouldn’t I be safe with you?”

Jeff examined that and found it a perfect fit. *That’s why we bonded so hard! We’re a family.*

Kimmie settled on his knee. “You’re not bad. It’s this place.” Her eyes went over the tent where a

hundred descendants were sleeping and snoring. “And these people.”

Jeff had been telling himself that for months now. “It’ll be hard out there. And I can’t promise you won’t be hurt or taken again. I’m only one person.”

“I’m not scared of out there.”

Jeff leaned his head against hers, heart calming. “What are you afraid of?”

Kimmie shivered. “Turning into one of them.”

Hearing his biggest fear spoken aloud made up Jeff’s mind. “I’ll talk to someone about a boat.”

Kimmie shook her head. “They won’t let us leave together. They believe you’re bad. That’s why *you* think it.”

Jeff stared at her, stunned. “Is that true?”

“You didn’t feel bad until we joined Safe Haven.” Kimmie stood up. “We should just leave right now.”

“We don’t have any gear, even if I steal a ship.”

“It’s not stealing. It’s our share of the supplies.”

“Supplies.” Jeff remembered the island drops. “We could collect supplies from Henderson Island on our way back to the mainland...”

Kimmie kept her voice low so her excitement didn’t wake anyone who would stop them. “Let’s do it. Right now.”

Jeff thought about staying and trying again to fit in.

His eyes went back to Jonny’s body. Something snapped. “Okay.”

He stood up. “Go to our cabin. We’ll pack and slip out while they’re all recovering.”

Kimmie grabbed his muddy hand and skipped alongside him. “I can be ready in five minutes.”

“Impressive.”

“I never unpacked, so I just need to add a couple things to my kit.”

Jeff was stunned again. “I didn’t unpack either.”

The pair walked calmly toward the cruise ship, both feeling better than they had in a long time.

6

In the tent, Adrian looked down at Angela.

Angela shook her head against his bare chest. “Let them go and good luck to them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Safe Haven is supposed to be a place of light and safety. If they don’t view it that way, holding them here is wrong.”

Adrian wasn’t sure that was the right choice.

Angela was. “We’ll see them again.”

“You think?”

“Yes. In three years.” She lifted her head. Her damp, wild curls fell over his scarred skin. “Have you made your choice?”

He snorted softly. “Like there was ever a doubt. I’ll do whatever you want. You know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

Adrian shut his eyes as she snuggled closer. The feel of her lying on his half-naked body was amazing. “Thank you for last night.”

She chuckled. “It’s still last night.”

Adrian rubbed her bare arms. “What happens when Marc comes home?”

Angela stretched against his hard body, nerves lighting up with need. “Let me worry about that.”

“Okay.” Adrian held her close and let sleep drag him back under.

Angela stayed awake, feeling their embrace and the cool morning air. People were piled all around them in the tent. It looked like a bunch of muddy dogs that needed a bath. *Smells like it, too.*

Angela thought about the coming day and shuddered.

Adrian’s arms tightened around her.

Angela let herself take another ten minutes right there, where she was happy for the first time in ages. *Not even Marc makes me feel this way anymore. I understand why Jeff’s leaving. We can’t be ourselves here.*

She shut her eyes. *But I’m not running from this challenge or any other. This is my camp and I’ll rule it until I die.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

You Know My Father

1

“**P**eople died last night.” Ralph sipped his cooling coffee and kept his voice down. He’d heard returning guards discussing it. “They were all normals.”

Sherman wasn’t surprised. He stirred powdered creamer into his mug. No one else was out and about yet on the normals deck. Morning noises came from a few of the cabins, but not many. “All descendant parties are like that. They’ll say there was a good reason. I think they just like killing our kind.”

Ralph and Sherman went to a table in the far corner of the lounge. Both men were fully dressed despite the early hour. Neither of them were sleeping much right now. The nightmares from the mission team were enough to make them glad of it.

“I started spreading the truth last night. It didn’t do much. Jennifer’s converts got to them first.” Sherman stared through the window at the island. “We may need to do something more drastic than just talking.”

Ralph heard steps. He waited for them to go by the hall door. He frowned upon seeing Jeff and

Kimemie. “They’re all starting to come back onboard. We need to be careful.”

Monica went by next. She didn’t look through the window.

“She’s like us.” Sherman had been watching everyone. He knew who they were and what they were capable of. “We can try reaching them one at a time.”

Daisey came from their cabin. She saw Ralph talking to Sherman. Anger filled her with adrenaline and determination.

Ralph smiled at her as she stomped over. “Good morning.”

“No, it’s not!” Daisey put her hand on her hip. “You listen to me. If you don’t stop this right now, I’m leaving you.”

Ralph’s heart clenched. He sat his cup on the table. “What?”

“I’ll divorce you if you rock this boat again. They already know you two are a problem. I’m not going down with you.”

“Be quieter!” Sherman glanced around for witnesses.

Daisey ignored him to play her trump card. “Do you want to be alone again, with just your sons?”

Ralph flashed back to right after the war, before they’d joined Safe Haven. His middle-aged sons had been useless in the apocalypse. They were only trained for office work. Even now, they were stockboys and pencil pushers instead of Eagles. He barely spent any time with them these days because

he was ashamed of his parenting. *I should have taught them to be stronger.*

Daisey knew what he was thinking. She'd planned this conversation around it. "Those boys love you. If you get banished, they'll go with you. What happens to them then?"

In all his worries, Ralph had forgotten the loyalty of his kids. Daisey was right. They would follow. "I won't be able to keep them alive."

"Keep your voices down!" Sherman scanned again to determine if anyone was listening.

Daisey turned on Sherman. "Oh, shut up! I'll turn you over to the enforcer and ask for removal. Don't mess with me!"

Sherman shut up.

Ralph tried to reason with her. "They're killing people on our side. We have to do something."

"What you can do is not pick a side at all! Stop this right now. All it will take is one more murder or kidnapping and this camp will tear us apart. We'll lose everything."

Ralph couldn't take her anger, but the tears starting to roll over her puffy cheeks hurt him. He made his choice to stand with her, even if it cost both their lives. "Okay. Please don't cry."

Sherman didn't have any family here. "I've got nothing to lose except my life to slavery. You two do what you want. I'll do the same." He stood up, taking his mug. "Excuse me."

Daisey watched him leave. "He's trouble."

Ralph was ashamed. “I twisted him up. He’s not wrong, though. We’re in danger every second that we stay here.”

“No, we’re not! You’ve been brainwashed into thinking that, but this is a very safe place. And we’re loved. Even in the old world, we wouldn’t have been because we’re older. They respect us here and they care for us. Don’t take that away from me. Please.”

Ralph surrounded her with his arms and gave in. “I’m with you. We’ll stay and do what we’re told. Hell, how bad can it be?”

“Stop it.” Daisey gave him her full feelings now that they were alone. “It’s easy work when we don’t rock the boat. We get to help rebuild our country, and we’re together. We don’t need to be involved in making laws and politics. We can just go with the flow. It’s gotten us this far. I trust fate to keep protecting our kind.”

“I can’t stay out of the politics.”

“Why not?!”

Ralph sighed. “I’m on the council.”

Daisey gestured at the shocked people coming from their cabins. “Not anymore. That’s supposed to be a secret. If you don’t remove yourself, the boss will do it for you.”

2

“Hey.” Dace joined Charlie at the front top deck guard post. “Have you seen Chad or Rico?”

“No.” Charlie finished his scan of the beach.
“Late for their shifts?”

“Rico didn’t report at all last night and Chad hasn’t been seen since midnight.”

Charlie rotated toward the ramp, frowning.
“Chad’s probably sleeping off a drunk in a closet. Rico, I don’t know about. Have you alerted the point man?”

Dace nodded. “I also posted a couple of notes. I’m doing another round of the ship and then I’m calling for a search. We can’t have the new people roaming free.”

Charlie jerked a thumb. “Maybe they’re both on the island. They might have snuck over.”

Dace had already thought of that. “Morgan has duty over the tunnel bunker now. He’s checking on it.”

“Good. Do your last search and report to the point man. I’ll let the boss know there might be a problem.”

Dace scowled. “Don’t put it like that. Things are calm again. We don’t want that fire brought back to life.”

“Fair enough.” Charlie keyed his radio. “Sorry, folks. Eagle duty just got bumped up by two hours. We need you to cover open shifts. Please report to your next duty post as soon as possible.”

Dace caught on quickly. “I’ll let them know as I hit each deck.”

“Yep. And don’t forget to check those closets.”

“I won’t. Should I tell Samantha to go to her cabin until we’re done?”

Charlie’s gut rolled over. “What?”

“She’s still in the garden.” Dace frowned slightly. “At least, the babies are. They’re sleeping in the stroller. I assume she’s in there too behind the plants or something.” Dace went to the rear deck to start there and give people time to report for duty.

Charlie connected to the hive. He didn’t try to hide his concern. *We have two people unaccounted for. Chad and Rico haven’t been seen since last night. Please advise.*

Morgan answered, *I’m searching the tunnels. Standby.*

Charlie resumed his scans and rotations. He smiled at people going by and even laughed at birds playing in the surf, but his mind stayed on the lurker. Whoever was out there was waiting for the right moment and they had unlimited patience. That was bad. Patient killers were more likely to be good at achieving their goals.

But who are they after? Charlie ran through the traps they’d set using leadership and kids as bait. Angela and Adrian had insisted, and the traps had been based around the safety of the possible targets, but the den mothers had hated every second. It had been a relief when nothing happened. *It’s also another concern. They’re not just patient; they’re smart*

Charlie scanned the bridge.

Jennifer nodded at him and resumed her own scans. She had napped on the office couch and gotten back up with the sun. She'd carried a bad feeling since waking.

The ocean was once again calm, with beautiful blue and green waves that rocked the ship, but it wasn't soothing this time. Each wave mocked her. *I've missed something. That's the only answer for feeling this way.*

The guard in the bridge behind Jennifer gestured. *All clear here.*

Charlie gave the scarred woman a nod. It was good to have Hannah back on duty. It was her first full shift since the explosion. No one had thought she would survive. The healing power of their medics was astounding.

Jennifer agreed. Tobias and Charlie together were handling anything that came their way, with Conner, Tonya, Morgan, and Terry backing them up. Terry wasn't a magic medic, but he was still a gifted healer who they'd all accepted would one day be like them. Jennifer assumed Angela would share her gifts, like she had with Greg and Shawn.

Jennifer stopped her mind from taking that path. Thinking about the missing mission team was a bad idea while she was on duty. "May you all come home alive and unharmed."

Charlie echoed that sentiment, even for Kenn. He liked Tonya. It would crush her to lose the Marine.

Hannah stepped to the bridge doorway to do a sweep in that direction.

The red light above the elevator clicked to green as she walked away.

A bloody man stepped out and moved toward Jennifer.

3

“Good morning.”

Wade yawned. “If you say so.”

Morgan chuckled. “Long night?” He didn’t hear many people awake down here either. The tent above them had been radiating snores from every direction. These tunnels were much the same. He didn’t even hear kids up yet, playing without supervision.

“Considering I’ve been up for twenty hours now, yes.” Wade was just glad the music had finally stopped. He listened to the birds through the tunnel walls and was glad he wasn’t up there yet where the noise would ring through his brain. It felt like he was hungover. *Neil enjoyed it and I feel it. How is that fair?*

Morgan handed him the morning folder. “We have a couple missing people from the ship. We think they snuck off to join the party.”

Wade pulled the folder closer. “I’ll do a search up there for them as I go to the ship. The only people down here are those on the list Angela gave me yesterday.”

Morgan was sure that was true. Wade clearly hadn't been drinking and he was a good point man for any location. "I'm doing my first walk-through. Call me if you need me."

Wade tiredly scanned the short list. "Rico. Chad." He frowned. "I don't know about Rico, but it's odd for Chad. He's always on time."

Stanley laughed from his post over the hatch. "That's funny."

Wade yawned. "What do you mean? He is always on time."

Stanley gestured. "I mean the name pun."

"What?"

"Chad's last name is Time."

Wade's fuzzy mind showed him another camp member who'd had that last name. "Shit!"

He hurried to the folder he'd brought along but hadn't worked on. He scattered the papers across the table and grabbed the list. "Chad Allen Time. Alive and here. Not a descendant."

He checked Neil's list. "Don't be there. Don't be there." He already knew it was. "Christopher Allen Time. Deceased. Descendant with an animal gift and a talent for murder."

It's his son. And there's only one reason for him to be here without anyone knowing. "He's our lurker." Wade dropped the papers, mind spinning. "Why would he do that? What would he want?"

Revenge immediately came to mind. Wade recalled who had killed Chris. His stomach lurched.

Check on Samantha?! Wade's mental call jarred the hive, but he didn't get an answer from Sam, saying she was fine, to stop yelling.

Wade grabbed his radio as he ran to the hatch. "Check on Samantha!"

Stanley didn't know what was happening. "Who's Christopher Time?"

Morgan had returned at the shouting. "He was our veterinarian, until Samantha executed him for being a serial killer."

Wade lunged up the ladder, shouting mentally and through his radio. "Neil! Sam might be in trouble! Neil, wake up! I need you!"

4

Samantha knew she was in trouble before she woke up. The sense of danger followed her into alertness, making her stomach cramp.

She opened her eyes, blinking away crusty tears. *Was I crying?*

"Ah. You're awake. Great. I'll be right down."

Samantha recognized Chad's voice through the speaker on the camera, but she didn't understand the anger in it. She slowly sat up on the bunk.

Sam looked around the bare room, stomach cramping again. "Where am I?"

The room had been emptied of everything except a small desk and this cell. Sam couldn't view through the filthy porthole, but she could feel the ship sailing through the water. *We're moving!*

The sound of babies crying echoed faintly. Sam recognized it, but her thoughts wouldn't come together.

The small room was caged in. Her brain woke another level. "I'm in a cell!"

Sam tried to connect to the hive. *Neil? Wade?*

There was no answer.

Samantha reached for her gun and found her belts gone. Even her boot knife was missing, as were her boots. The jeans and short-sleeved top were the same ones she'd had on when she went to work in the garden.

Samantha tried again, reaching out to Angela this time.

Where is everyone?! Samantha groaned as pain flared along her neck. She caught a flash of being hit. "It was Chad. Chad hit me."

Samantha connected that to the cell and began to understand she was a captive. *Not for long.*

Sam got ready to blast the cell open. As soon as her witch returned, all hell would break loose.

The blue and white UN walls mocked her courage.

Footsteps echoed outside the room. She tensed as evil washed over her in a breathtaking wave. *He hates me.*

Chad's face appeared in the barred window. His grin widened like a hungry wolf. "Hiya! Miss me?"

The sound of her sons crying echoed loudly through the hallway.

I'm going to kill him slowly!

Chad still had on his Eagle gear. It infuriated Samantha. She gathered energy to fire on him.

Chad opened the door and stuck one hand in his pocket. The other held up a familiar object as the crying babies went quiet. “Before you try to blow me away...”

Sam saw the diaper bag in his grip. Her heart dropped into her boots as her mind finally connected the pieces. *I thought he left them in the garden, but he must have gone back for them.* “Where are they?!”

Chad set the diaper bag on the small desk and perched next to it. “It was too hard to carry their baby seats, but they fit perfectly in this bag.”

Sam studied the shapes of her children, not discerning any movement. The tip of a hand was showing above the edge of the bag, along with the missing yellow blanket, but that was all she could see. “Please don’t hurt them. Please.”

“I won’t.” His smile vanished. “Unless you resist and then they’ll go overboard.”

Sam glared, shoulders shaking with fear and anger. “I’ll kill you for this.”

“You have a habit of killing. That’s why you’re in there.”

Samantha tried to think straight, but panic was starting to set in. *Neil! Wade! Angela!*

Chad knew she was trying to connect to the others. He laughed at her. “We’re miles from that island, Sam. They can’t hear you.”

Samantha felt her witch return as her system began clearing out the drugs. *In a few minutes, I'm going to kill him. First, I need the key to this cell.* “Why are you doing this? I thought we were friends!”

“I almost didn't. Safe Haven's light was cleaning me, erasing the darkness from my past.” He glared angrily. “But your mates kept working on that damn list! I ran out of *time*.”

He laughed crazily as his mood flipped. “It's good that Jennifer screwed up and patrolled the ship at exactly the same time each hour. I might have had to take you from your bed if not for that.” He laughed again.

Samantha assumed Chad was in the later stages of rage illness. “It's not your fault, Chad. You're sick. I can help you.”

“Yes, you can, and you will.” He pulled a syringe from his pocket and slid it across the floor. It went under the lowest cell bar and hit Samantha's foot. “Take that.”

“What is it?”

“Just something to keep you under control.”

“You have my babies. You don't need it.”

“Take it right now!”

Chad's shout was terrifying. Sam still refused. “No.”

Chad started to pick up the diaper bag. “I wonder if babies float at all?” He shrugged. “Guess I'll find out. I hope the drugs I gave them won't stop you from feeling them die.”

“No! Wait!” Samantha scrambled for the syringe. “I’m taking it!”

Chad watched as she injected herself. He’d almost done it when he took her from the cruise ship, but he’d decided this way was better. He wanted her to know everything that was happening.

“Why are you doing this?” Samantha felt the drugs hit her empty stomach like a rock. She fought not to gag.

“Yes, let’s talk about that.” Chad returned to his perch on the desk. “You know my father.”

Sam frowned through the nausea. “I didn’t know you had family in Safe Haven.”

“You don’t know a lot, but we’ll cover it.” Chad gave her a charming smile. “Your vet was also a Vet. But it wasn’t enough to stop you from blowing his brains out.”

Samantha froze. “Chris.”

Chad nodded savagely. “You killed my father.”

Samantha tried to think of something to say, but there was nothing that would erase the hatred in Chad’s eyes. She grabbed onto the only thing that came to her scared mind. “You’re not like him, Chad. He was a killer. You haven’t done anything wrong yet; just let me go.”

“My father was a hero! He removed scum from the earth all his life!”

Samantha trembled at the madness in his vice.

Chad noticed and enjoyed it. “My dad joined back in Utah. I made it home to find out he’d left. I tracked him to Safe Haven mountain and then the

trail went cold. There was no way in to you guys at that point; you had stopped taking refugees. I was one of the last few people allowed in while you were camped on the beach, stocking the ship. It took me weeks to find out what had happened, but you know how Eagles like to drink and talk. I acted drunk and they spilled their guts.” He glared. “Imagine my shock when I found out who killed him.”

Samantha knew not to speak now. The madman was enjoying telling his story. Interrupting that mental play would only bring her pain.

Chad frowned through his sore lip. Humiliation still covered him like a coat. Everyone knew Stanley had put him down and he hadn’t fought back. If he had, he would have revealed his fighting skills. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to act like a rookie and a harmless idiot? I almost couldn’t do it. I let my gun skills be known. I hoped they would put me on duty over the boss. It’s good for her and you that they didn’t. I wouldn’t have missed those two shots. I’m a Navy Seal!” He glared again. “Like my father was.”

Samantha was shocked again. “I didn’t know Chris was military.”

“That’s because you never tried to figure out what made him tick. You didn’t care about him.” Chad’s delighted rage increased. “He was a POW for years. When he finally came home, he taught me everything he knew—including how to kill an enemy in gruesome ways.”

Now Samantha tried to buy time with her response. “Why didn’t you act sooner?”

He gestured at the diaper bag. “You were pregnant. Then the radiation sickness hit and I realized Angela was the real power. You killed Chris because she gave you the order.” His crazy eyes dilated. “She trusted you to remove a man who’d murdered dozens of people and gotten away with it. Until the war. Until you.”

Samantha felt the fresh drugs trying to rob her of her gifts again. *I can’t wait for a key. I’ll have to take him out now and hope we’re rescued.* “You’ve been on duty around me plenty of times since the birth. Why did you wait?”

“I needed time to form a plan that would work. A lot of schemes have been tried on Safe Haven and only a couple of them had any effect.”

“Still, you waited a long time.”

“Angela recovered from her miscarriage. Charlie is almost grown. Neither of those losses would stop her or damage her. Vlad didn’t think it through. He should have let her deliver and get fully bonded first. That would have killed her and destroyed your camp.” Chad walked away from the diaper bag, glancing out the small window.

Sam blasted her strongest spell toward him before the drugs took complete control.

The spell immediately rebounded and slammed into her chest.

Samantha hit the ground, gasping for air as pain lit up her nerves and brought tears.

Chad had spun around as she fired. He laughed cruelly again and reached for the diaper bag.

Samantha's terror brought adrenaline and panic. "Please, don't hurt them! I did it. It was even my idea. The babies have nothing to—"

Chad drew his knife, stopping her pleading.

He began cleaning his fingernail. "That's why, Samantha. You'll do anything I want to keep them safe." He grinned widely at her. "Right?"

She swallowed the awful taste of slavery without hesitation. "Yes. How long do you want this atonement to last?"

Chad went back to work on his nail. "Three days."

She stared suspiciously. "That's it?" She had been expecting years. *I can do this to protect my babies. Melvin and Henry lasted three times that long before I killed them.*

"Yes. When the time's up, I'll call Neil to come get your boys. I don't want to hurt them. They're actually cute."

Samantha swallowed again; it was harder to get by the lump in her throat this time. "And me?"

Chad leered cruelly, going from her head to her feet. "If you survive, you can't go home. The kids can, but you're banned from enjoying any future with them."

"I don't..." She got it all at once. "I have to give them up."

Chad put away his knife. “Make it official so the fun can start. I’ve waited a long time for these three days. My patience is almost gone.”

Samantha studied the diaper bag, heart breaking while sweat broke out on her neck and dripped down her spine. “If I say no?”

“I’ll kill them in front of you and do what I want anyway, but there’s no way you’ll survive.” He tapped his watch. “Ten seconds. Possible life or immediate death? The choice is yours.”

Samantha stopped stalling. She nodded in terror as her heart thumped painfully. “I agree to your forced terms, on one condition.”

“What?”

“If you hurt my kids in any way, you’re cursed and it can never be removed.”

Chad shrugged, standing. “Don’t care about curses or even living past these few days, truthfully. I agree. Now make it official!”

Samantha couldn’t use her gifts now, but that wasn’t needed for this. All she had to do was speak it. “We have a bond in place. I’ll honor it.”

Chad grinned as old magic swirled through the air and settled over both of them. “Perfect.”

He marched toward her with eager green eyes.

Samantha fled into her mind, whimpering. She knew this would be bad.

Chad unlocked the cell door and tossed the keys onto the desk. “What part of your body do you like the most?”

Samantha's hand automatically came up to her hair as she retreated against the wall.

Chad lunged forward and trapped her with his body. He tangled his hand in her thick tresses and began ripping them out while she screamed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Applejacked

1

Jennifer rotated as the elevator opened. She saw the bloody man first. “Rico?”

The guards noticed and reached for their weapons.

Jennifer connected to his mind automatically and found a powerful descendant. “You’re the lurker!”

She slid in front of him and brought up her shield just as Hannah fired her gun.

The shield deflected the bullet. It slammed into the bridge wall and stuck there.

Guards and hungover Eagles in town took off running toward the beach at the sound of a gunshot.

Rico tried to catch himself on the wall and smeared blood down it as he fell.

Jennifer kept her shield up; she dug into Rico’s mind while the other guards flooded into the bridge, shouting threats.

“Took her.” Rico staggered to his knees. “Gone.”

“Who’s gone? What happened to you?”

Rico tried to stay conscious. “He took her. Samantha’s gone.”

Fear filled Jennifer's mind.

Rico collapsed at her boots.

She lowered her shield and grabbed her radio.
"Medic to the bridge!"

Dace and Charlie disarmed the beaten man while Jennifer ran down the steps. "Search the ship! Find Samantha!"

Wade's frantic voice came over the radio.
"Check on Samantha! She's in danger!"

Guards all over the ship ran toward the garden or the descendant deck.

More people on the island began waking to the changed mood. Groans and rocking stomachs were ignored as Eagles grabbed the little gear they'd brought and stumbled toward the ship to help.

Dace and Charlie stayed next to Rico. The man had been badly beaten. It was a wonder that he'd made it up here.

Rico rested his swollen cheek on the cool floor.
"It's ticking. The closet is ticking."

Dace's heart thumped. "Explosives?" He grabbed Rico's arm. "Are there explosives on this ship?!"

Rico nodded; he passed out, slumping to the floor.

Dace let go and ran out of the bridge.
"Evacuate! We have to evacuate!"

People flooded the ship, not hearing the order.

Angela made it onto the ship in the first rush. She passed the bridge and ran down the ramp.

“Check the closets. Do not open any bags you find. Mark those doors.”

The thoughts from Rico implied there were bombs all over the ship. Searching for them was a huge risk, but she didn't have a choice. *We need this ship.* It provided all of their power and water. The land setups weren't even close to being ready.

Adrian stayed at her side and followed her down to the cargo deck.

“We have two unaccompanied minors in the garden!”

Jennifer's radio call made Angela angry. “Say that again.”

“Samantha's twins are here, Boss, but she isn't.”

No one knew how long the kids had been there, alone. They could hear the boys crying in the background of Jennifer's call.

“Get them to the beach, then help evac the med bay. Everyone else needs to search the closets. Don't open any bags or boxes, just listen for noise.” Angela kept going to the cargo deck.

Wade and a very hungover Neil flew by them and jumped the steps to the garden area.

Adrian followed Angela, not sure why she was going to the cargo deck.

“It's the only way someone could have gotten off this ship without the guards knowing.”

Angela slid down the rail and was struck by memories of doing this the night of the fire. *We*

might be about to repeat that, body. Try to get ready for it.

Angela's witch began shoring up her bodily systems. She also stayed ready to flee. It's how things worked for their kind.

Angela ran into the cargo hold. She could already feel a draft that said her suspicions were correct. "Damn it! We didn't fix the sensor light!" She stared at the open ocean behind the ship. Water was sloshing lightly over the floor, soaking the bits of gear it could reach.

The cargo rooms were still full of supplies and crates, but Angela didn't need to search through them. She pointed at a row of recreational boats and paddles. "There's a canoe missing from that wall."

Adrian scowled. "A canoe won't stand up to the waves in an ocean. He'll drown them both."

"Maybe that's the plan." Piper hurried in and handed Angela an envelope. "This was on Chad's pillow in his cabin."

It was identical to the ones she'd used against the government. Angela ripped it open with a chill.

You took my father so I took your weather girl. She is not coming back. Have fun disarming my bombs. It was great of Wade to teach me how to set those timers. They'll all go off at noon.

Angela dropped the letter into Adrian's hand. She concentrated, listening to that little voice telling her something wasn't right here.

Adrian already had it. “He’s keeping us busy so he can get away with his prize.”

That fit, but she still couldn’t take the chance. Angela keyed her radio. “I want all camp members and kids off this ship! Everyone else will meet me on the cargo deck to start a sweep. Get down here right now!”

Adrian went to the small stockroom closet in the corner and gently pried open the door.

Tick...tick...tick...

“Shit.” Adrian considered opening the kit on the shelf, then shut the door instead. “We’re in big trouble.”

2

“We found ten backpacks. Exactly half of them are making that ticking noise.” Jennifer ignored the shouting coming their way as she updated Angela. People with hangovers and nasty attitudes were gathering on the beach to harass the guards and each other. No one had woken in a good mood. “We swept the entire ship in an hour. We still have some time before noon, if that’s correct. He could have lied about when they’ll go off.”

They were the only ones on this top deck. The rest of the ship was empty now. There hadn’t been many people to evacuate. Even most of the normals had gone to the island to enjoy fun in the bunker. Jennifer swept the bridge.

Grant nodded to her. He was ready to sail the cruise ship to wherever they wanted it, but he didn't feel any better than he had upon waking.

Angela scanned the ocean harder, trying to find a tiny canoe with a precious life. "Keep going."

"Everyone is off the ship except for this group right here, and Neil and Wade. They're gathering gear for the rescue party. Tonya has their twins in the beach tent. She's feeding them. She also gave them a checkup. They're fine, other than being hungry and a little rash from sitting in dirty diapers overnight." Jennifer smothered her guilt and anger. It had happened on her watch. She would never forgive herself. "Tonya had the medics do a fast check of the drugs while everyone was being evacuated. We're missing a vial of the crap the government was using. Tonya gave me a name, but I can't pronounce it. We collected it from the UN ships after the last battle."

"That explains how Samantha was taken without alerting anyone."

"Yes, and why Wade and Neil can't connect through their personal bonds either. When she wakes up, we might be able to hear her."

"I'm already listening for it. I'm sure her men are, too. Keep going."

Jennifer delivered the rest of the update. "Rico has three broken ribs and a concussion. The medics got him alert enough for a statement. He says he found a ticking backpack in the cargo deck closet and Chad attacked him when he tried to report it."

Jennifer lowered her voice. “Rico is a descendant. He’s been hiding things from us. He saw Tonya in that closet. It’s her kit. He wasn’t going to tell on her until he heard it ticking.”

Angela’s heart sank. *We may lose two strong women this time.* “Let’s not announce that right now.”

“Too late. A group of normals overheard the medics grilling him. It won’t be long before Neil finds out.”

“And Tonya has his twins.” Angela motioned. “Tell them it was my order.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it was. Chad’s just using it to delay us.”

Jennifer felt that, too. Every second they spent here searching and calming the herd was another second where he was taking Samantha farther away from them.

“We’ll handle this the old fashion way for now. Give Neil the note.”

Jennifer paled. “He’ll go nuts. He’s barely staying calm right now to collect the gear.”

“I don’t want him calm. I want him to go nuclear and lead us right to Sam.”

“What about this ship?”

Angela sighed. “Theo wants to put each backpack into a concrete box and move them. I’m going to let him try. We don’t have anything better to hold them.”

Loud, terrified voices came up the ramp, followed by the grunting of Eagles carrying all the gear and supplies Neil and Wade had chosen.

Jennifer reluctantly pulled the letter from her pocket and held it out as Neil hurried toward them.

In the bridge, Ray stood next to Grant and scanned for trouble. He wasn't happy. Grant had volunteered to sail the ship out into the ocean a little before noon. Angela had agreed, providing they followed with another ship so they could evacuate Grant. Ray didn't want them to take the chance at all. He'd argued that Chad may have lied about how long they had to disarm the bombs.

Grant clasped Ray's hand and tried to focus. He had a thread nagging in the rear of his mind. "I don't understand why he would have taken her in a canoe. He has to know they'll drown."

Ray had already read the letter from Chad. "Pretty sure he'd be okay with that."

"Not really." Grant tried to think like a man bent on revenge. "He wants her to suffer. A fast drowning wouldn't be enough."

"Shut up!" Wade glowered toward the bridge. "Just shut up!"

Ray pointed at Wade. "Stay right there."

Neil read the letter; color drained from his face. He let go of it and turned to Angela.

Angela shook her head at his thoughts. "I would never punish her in your place, Neil. Stand your ground. We'll get her back."

Neil remembered the last time Samantha had been taken. She'd been returned unharmed, thanks to Angela trading herself.

“And I'll do it again. Keep it together.”

Neil tried to pretend it was someone else's mate so he could still function. “I'll get the kits packed.”

Angela didn't believe they would need them for this run, but she let him go. Neil needed to stay busy until they could leave.

Grant ignored all of it, following the thread. “He'd want to take her somewhere. And he'd want it to last, so he needs...supplies. At least food and water for himself, and maybe even medical gear so she doesn't die too soon.”

Wade stomped toward the bridge. “I'll make you shut up!”

Ray stood pat in the doorway.

Neil grabbed Wade's arm as he went by. “Listen!”

Wade forced himself to leave Grant alone.

That wasn't what Neil meant. He was listening. Samantha would try to reach them. *She has to be able to get through.*

Grant stood up and paced the bridge, picking at the thread. He almost had it. “Where would he get supplies? Nothing's missing from the ship.”

Ray wanted to help. He tossed out ideas while keeping an eye on Wade. “From the islands?”

Grant nodded. “Maybe, but which one?”

Jennifer and Angela were both listening to him now. “That's it.”

Grant came to the door, gently pushing around Ray. “Does Chad have military experience?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I thought so, but Stanley took him out.”

“Could he have been faking?”

“If he’s Invisible, yes.” Angela moved toward Grant. “Why? What did you catch?”

Grant rubbed his neck. “I’m so hungover right now, Boss. Like I was last week.”

Angela nodded. “I remember you stayed and did your job anyway. We were all impressed.”

“Not Chad.” Jennifer remembered that moment, too. “He said you were all jacked up and laughed.”

Grant shook his aching head. “No, he said I was Applejacked. It’s a navy term. He’s been playing us.”

It all fell into place.

“He faked it.” Neil’s fury sent a rush through his body and took him to his knees. “He’s already had her for hours!”

“If he is Navy, he might be able to sail our bigger ships.” Grant went to the console and began activating monitors and tracking screens.

Wade didn’t understand. His anger was taking up too much of his thoughts. “Why does that matter?”

“Theo found the tracking beacons on the UN ships. He activated them so we could find any that might break an anchor during storms. We hoped to recover them.”

Jennifer nodded. “And that would explain why Chad took her in a canoe. He just paddled around to the small cove.”

“I’ve got it!” Grant pointed as people came toward the bridge. “He took the whaling ship.”

Neil beat the others to the monitor. He stared at the moving dot in terror. “He’s fifty miles from here!”

“Not for long.” Angela went to the deck and started sorting the pile of supplies and gear. “We leave in ten minutes, Eagles. Grant will sail us over to the cove and then take our ship away from the others. I want everyone evacuated. Do not disarm those backpacks. Get clear and get back to the island.”

Ray approved. Losing the ship would be bad. Losing Grant and Theo with it would be much worse.

Wade’s mental block of anger and terror faded a notch. It allowed him to think. He rotated toward Angela with violence on his face. “You let this happen.”

People stilled at the accusation.

“You knew this was coming and you let it happen!”

Wade’s voice carried over the light breeze and drew the attention of people on the pontoon bridge and the beach.

“Adrian wouldn’t answer me when I asked him about it. He was covering for you!”

Neil kept trying to reach Samantha. He could almost hear her calling for help.

“I didn’t know who or when.” Angela strapped on a vest over her muddy half top. “We all knew there was a lurker.”

“I don’t believe you!”

Angela shoved extra mags into the slots on her belt. “I understand. Anyone would be upset in this situation.”

Wade wanted to let it go, but his fear for Samantha was consuming him now. The anger was fading into an emotion he couldn’t control. “We’ll leave. If you’re lying, we’ll resign and go.”

Neil didn’t agree or disagree. He was trying hard to connect to Samantha through their bonds.

Angela zipped her jacket and circled her finger in the air, calling the Eagles from the beach. “We leave in nine minutes.”

“That means we’ll lose this ship!” Dace scanned the beach, where the crowd was growing. “We don’t have enough food or water to survive on the island.”

Angela already knew. Keeping most of it on the ship while she convinced people to live elsewhere had been a huge mistake. “But we can’t spend time unloading it. Chad might have counted on that. He’s making me pick between Samantha and our survival.”

Those who knew her best knew what choice she would make. They hurried to the gear pile and started pulling out what they needed.

The others stared at her in fear and mistrust.

Angela kept gearing up. “I already made the call. Food and water can be replaced. Samantha cannot. Get off this ship and do it right now.”

Jennifer had been keeping track of the beach crowd. “We have another problem.”

Angela motioned. “Don’t hold back.”

Jennifer hurried to the ladder and began the descent. Things on the beach were getting ugly and Angela didn’t have time to calm them. *Good thing that’s not my job.*

Jennifer made a seamless transition into enforcer as she stormed across the pontoon bridge. She welcomed the feeling this time. It replaced the guilt.

3

“Are those your backpacks!”

“Tell the truth!”

“Are you a spy?!”

Tonya retreated from the angry crowd filling the medium-sized tent. They’d put it up to offer protection to their weaker members, but it had become a trap. The rioters were crowding inside, preventing anyone from leaving. If a fight broke out, kids and elderly people would be hurt. The rioters were mostly descendants and they were furious. Any normal in their sight was a possible target right now.

Tonya handed the baby to Daisey and led the crowd away from the kids. The den mothers were

holding all their infants and toddlers. The Eagles were helping Angela search the ship. There was no one here to deflect the anger.

Tonya held up both hands. “I’m unarmed and I would never do that! I’m one of you.”

“We have a jail now!”

“Yeah! Get her and drag her up to the jail!”

Tonya stopped against the rear of the tent. She was ready to dive under the loose edge and run. “I didn’t do anything. That’s not how Safe Haven handles crime anyway!”

The brawlers from the mess surprised everyone by pushing through the camp members. They formed a line between Tonya and her accusers.

“Back off!”

“Go sober up!”

“The boss will arrest her, not you!”

The rioters pushed the brawlers. The brawlers pushed back. Loud shouts filled the tents. The babies started crying. Rage sparked; muscles tightened in anticipation.

Jennifer opened fire.

Rioters fell, screaming in pain.

Jennifer didn’t have mercy on anyone. If they were shouting or threatening, she took them down.

The mess brawlers stayed in front of the redheaded medic. Everyone else waited to see what would happen to Tonya.

Jennifer didn’t have a choice. “You’re being arrested on suspicion of conspiracy and attempted murder.” Jennifer gestured at the brawlers. “They’ll

make sure you get to the jail. They'll stay and guard it until the boss gets back."

Tonya nodded immediately, relieved. "Bring them all by for feedings?"

Daisey cradled Tonya's son to her big chest. "I will. They'll be fine."

Jennifer kept her enforcer form as the brawlers walked Tonya out of the tent. "Chad set her up and you've all fallen for it."

"Those are her backpacks!"

"The boss told her to put those packs in the closets! She didn't add the explosives. Chad did!" Jennifer didn't offer more details because she didn't have them yet. "Stop acting like animals every time something goes wrong! Even Neil is being reasonable and it's his mate!" She walked out. "I hope Angela banishes you all for rioting."

That hadn't occurred to the angry, scared people. Most of them turned toward the town while trying to come up with an excuse for their behavior.

Ralph stood by Daisey and watched them leave. "I helped stir them up with rumors. I should be punished."

Jennifer glared over her shoulder. "Yes, you should be."

She went to the smaller crowd of arguing men and women on the beach. *You also gave Angela what she wanted, so I wouldn't count on that happening. You just keep playing into her hands. By this time next month, we'll all be under magic rules and happy about it.*

“I need to talk to him.”

Terry scanned the rescue team and approved of the hard-asses even while disapproving of Angela being geared-up to go along. He didn't think she should leave.

Terry opened the tent flap and held it so Angela could come in with her team. They were two minutes from leaving.

Angela went to the cot in the temporary medical tent.

Rico had been medicated, healed by Charlie as much as he could be, and his ribs had been wrapped. A guard stood outside the tent in case the rioters returned. Those people had been sent to clean the town, but Angela doubted they were doing it.

Rico tried to sit up.

Angela waved that off. “Stay still. Just answer questions for me.”

Rico forced his body into a sitting position anyway. He groaned at the broken ribs, but he still did it. “I'm sorry.”

“Why didn't you call for help?” Wade would have done that right away.

“He attacked me.” Rico's face was hard to look at. “He's a much better fighter than I thought.”

Angela held up a hand to stop the others. “I need to know why you didn't answer Jennifer's call.

You're one of us, but you hid and distracted us from the real threat. Why?"

"I hate magic. I hate myself for being this way."

Angela caught flashes of his past, where being a descendant had caused him pain and misery over his thirty years. She sympathized.

Then she motioned at Neil and Wade. "Dig in."

Both men shoved into Rico's thoughts and began tearing down his walls.

Angela checked her watch. "One minute."

Neil ripped away walls, but there was always another one there. "He's too good."

"This will take too long. Call Jennifer."

Angela denied that. "Not yet."

"He's hiding something!"

Angela felt it, too. "I have sympathy for you, Rico. You've tried hard to fit in here and you've been rejected, insulted, and mocked for it. You've done well in my army so far. Please don't make me call the enforcer to break you down. She has no mercy anymore."

Rico's eyes went to Terry. "Make the normal leave first."

Terry threw his hands up. "I am the leading medical officer on this island! I am an upstanding member of this camp. I will not be ordered out!"

Angela grunted. "Finally!"

Terry realized she'd been waiting for him to do that. He fell silent, trying to figure out why he hadn't done it sooner.

“He stays.” Angela studied Rico and found the right button to push. “Tell me.”

Rico was terrified of Angela and he was already weak and in pain. *There’s no way I can keep it from her.* “I hate you.”

Angela waited as everyone else glared.

“You killed them. They weren’t all bad and you removed them like gum from a shoe.”

“He’s a UN man!”

“Kill him now, Boss!”

Angela snorted. “For being forced to admit a feeling all of you have experienced for me in the past.” She looked at Wade. “Or feel for me now?”

Rico kept glaring at her. “Safe Haven’s light was working on them. They were changing, but you weren’t happy with how long it was taking. You’re not a good leader.”

Angela sighed. “It wasn’t the length of time, Rico.”

“Then why? Why did you kill them all and not me?!”

Terry recognized the symptoms. “He has survivor’s guilt.”

Rico’s tears slid over his bruises. “They were my only friends.”

Pity filled the tent from some of them.

Adrian gestured dismissively. “I’m sure she saw something in the future that made her choice easy.”

Angela frowned. “Deciding to kill is never easy for me.”

Rico stared at her. “So you did see something. Why didn’t you just say that?!”

She shrugged. “Would you have been okay with us removing people based on crimes they haven’t committed yet?”

“What? No! I’m still not.”

“Well, there’s your answer.” But Angela wanted him to understand what had tipped her choice. “I saw a gang rape and the others cheering it on. I eliminated all of those who didn’t try to stop it. Rape is punishable by death in this camp.”

“Even if it hasn’t happened yet?”

Adrian thought about Jonny. “Yes. People won’t be hurt while we wait for proof.”

Sadness filled Rico. “I just want to be an Eagle and left alone.”

Angela understood, but she couldn’t allow it. “If you stay, you have to be linked into the hive so this can never happen again. Make your choice by the time I get back.”

Rico searched for a loophole. “What if you lock me and pretend I’m Invisible?”

“Not a chance in hell!” Terry didn’t care that everyone was staring in surprise and disapproval. “You’re either one of us or you’re gone!”

Rico tried not to cry. “Please don’t make me leave. I can’t be away from her.”

Angela’s eyes narrowed. “I assume you mean Tonya.”

Rico nodded. “She’s amazing. She doesn’t know I exist. I need time to convince her I’m a good man.”

Angela turned away as the alarm in her mind blared. “You’ll have to convince more than just her. When Kenn gets home, your time’s up.”

Wade scowled. “Wait, he knew the backpacks were there!”

Rico hurried to explain. “I’ve been watching Tonya. She’s gathering stashes of supplies, I think. But I heard it start ticking. I’m an Eagle. I had to investigate.”

Wade glowered. “So you would have reported her?”

“Yes. I would have gone straight to the enforcer if Chad hadn’t attacked me.”

People liked hearing that. It meant he could be trusted to do his job even when it involved those he cared for.

Adrian followed Angela from the tent. “What do you want us to do about him and the other troublemakers?”

“Handle it by Safe Haven’s rules. For now.”

Terry came to the flap. “Why are you letting Rico wait? Are you encouraging Tonya to cheat on Kenn?”

“No, I’m giving her the chance to be with someone who might be a better match.”

Adrian stared at her this time. “You’re still punishing Kenn.”

“I never stopped. Tonya just gets caught in the crossfire sometimes. She doesn’t deserve any of this.” Angela kept walking toward the cruise ship that was powering up to sail them to the cove. She tensed as the sound of someone running toward them echoed. “Not now. Damn it!”

“What is it?!” Wade didn’t think he could handle even one more delay.

Neil kept marching toward the cruise ship. He wasn’t waiting.

Stanley reached them and gasped in air to talk. “Candy’s in labor. Tobias thinks it’s going to be a breech birth.”

“No!” Wade was almost at his limit. His pupils dilated in another clear sign of the rage illness. “We have to go right now!”

Angela made a quick choice. “The other ship has to be warmed and maybe even fueled. Get it covered. I’ll meet you there.”

Adrian realized she was right. *We’ll keep one ready to go from now on.*

Wade caught Neil’s angry thought and passed it along. “We’ll go without you. Don’t pick this camp over Samantha.”

Angela hurried toward the jungle path. “If you go without me, she’ll die. Don’t let your emotions ruin our chances.”

“How do you know that?!”

“Because this is all one huge trap. I’m the other rat he’s trying to catch. Sam is the bait.”

Stanley stayed with Angela as she broke into a run. “Why do you have to go?”

Adrian slid by him to take the spot on her heels. “Because they won’t just be fighting Chad. He owns Samantha by now. As soon as the rescue team arrives, he’ll make her fight. Angela’s the only one who might fire back on her.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine
On The Plus Side

1

“**D**on’t push, Candy. Take those deep breaths.” Tobias gently inserted his hand around the baby’s leg.

Candy whimpered. “It hurts!” Tears ran over her face.

Anna stopped Conner when he would have used a pain relief spell. “It’s not good for them.”

Conner held Candy’s hand instead. “There has to be something you can do for her!”

“He’s doing it.” Daniella got the incubator warming up. Theo’s temporary power lines for the party were now being used to run the medical wing. This part of the large tent had been kept neat and clean. Terry had done well last night.

The rest of the tent was a reeking, filthy mess that still held vomit drying to the floor and people passed out in sleeping bags. It bothered her to know they’d slept through all the chaos. *This camp needs an alcoholics program.* “We’ve done this a few times. Just keep her calm and be ready to lend energy if we need it.”

Conner hated to trust them, but no one else was here yet. Conner looked around for Angela.

Tobias carefully began turning the baby. “Where’s that cord...?” He reached for it with his fingers. He felt Candy tensing up again. “Here comes another contraction. Don’t push, love. Scream if you want, but don’t push.”

Candy moaned loudly, making their witnesses cringe.

Angela entered the reeking tent and scattered them. “Get out of here! This isn’t a peepshow! Give her some space.”

Adrian pointed at people as they exited the tent. “We need trash cleaned up and a body crew. Pick one.”

Angela grabbed Stanley’s arm as he tried to hurry by. “Get Morgan up here. Take his spot in the tunnels.” She waved at Ed. “Door guard.”

Angela left Adrian outside to get people working. She joined the birth crew. “What can I do?”

Anna wiped sweat from Tobias’s brow. “We’ll need heat and more water.”

“I’ll get those.” Trent went out, glad to be away from Candy’s pain. He couldn’t take her groans and tears, let alone the moments when she would pass those children into the world. *I’m never having kids.*

Angela caught that thought. *Wanna bet?*

Tobias felt the umbilical cord. “It’s not around your neck. Good.” He rotated the baby slowly. “Let’s get you born. Push now, Candy. Strong and steady.”

The small girl slid out as Candy screamed.

Tobias caught the slippery baby and began uncovering her mouth.

Daniella handed him the bulb syringe so he could clear the air passage.

Anna put a hand on Candy's hard stomach. "Don't push now, okay? He needs to make sure this one's not breech, too."

Candy's head fell to the side. Her eyes rolled back.

"Candy!"

Conner's scream alerted them to a new problem.

Anna took the baby.

Tobias quickly cut the cord and tied it off. "Her blood pressure is spiking. I can feel it."

Angela put a hand on Candy's arm and began shoving in healing orbs.

Conner did the same, praying. "Please, God. Please!"

Tobias tensed as the second baby began to crown and Candy's body started to vibrate. "Stroke coming! Lifeforce!"

Conner was ready. He forced it into Candy's clenching body, still praying.

Tobias caught the second little girl and cleared her mouth. "Pack it off!"

Daniella shoved towels between Candy's legs to help stop the bleeding.

Morgan hurried into the tent. He used his X-ray gift on Candy. He could see her bodily systems evening out. "She's stabilizing. She..."

Angela felt another horror coming. She stopped sending healing orbs and backed away to get her breath.

Morgan didn't want to say it in front of Conner, but there wasn't another choice. "Cancer."

Conner's head whipped toward them. "What did he say?"

Morgan didn't look at the boy. "It's all over her left breast."

Tobias was shocked that Morgan had a medical gift. He handed the second crying girl to Anna and then began massaging Candy's stomach. "Once she passes the placenta, the bleeding usually stops. Things should even out then."

Morgan scanned the pile of disgusting goo on the floor by Tobias's feet. "Is that the first one?"

"Yes." Angela motioned to Conner. "I need a cooler of ice from the ship before they set sail. Run!"

Conner flew out of the tent.

Ed didn't understand. He was watching from the flap. "A cooler of ice will help her with breast cancer?"

"We need to get the placentas in a cooler. The ice will keep them usable until we get a freezer set up." Anna finished the explanation as she gently wiped the second girl's arms and small body. "Placentas can be used for creating medications specific to the mother and child. Or children, in this case."

Ed was a little revolted. “Were we using it in the old world?”

Anna shrugged. “For some things, but it wasn’t financially viable for everyone to freeze every placenta. Only the wealthy were able to afford that luxury.”

Ed shook his head in disgust. “The old world sucked in almost every way.”

“Yes, but this one sure has its moments.” Angela watched as Tobias finished delivering the afterbirth and then changed Candy’s bloody towels.

Morgan was still observing her. “She’s stable now. Great job!”

“It’s my honor.” Tobias had forgotten how wonderful it felt to help bring life into the world. “Thank you...alpha.”

“It’s what I do.” Angela went to the flap. “Terry is our Chief Medical Officer now. He’ll be by shortly. Catch him up and follow his orders.”

Morgan was happy for Terry and not sad for himself. *I might be good at it, but I hate it.*

Tobias had changed his mind about Morgan the instant he recognized the gift. He knew what the man needed. “Take a break. We’ll need you when we try to remove her breast.”

Morgan paled as he realized they would have to cut it off. He and Marc had decided not to operate on anyone unless there was no other choice. “Is there any other way?”

Tobias wiped his hands and leaned on the stool. He scanned Candy’s better color and even breathing

before he answered. She was already starting to wake back up.

Morgan waited impatiently. There was a lot of work to be done.

“I can train you to do descendant surgery. Do you have the fire hand?”

“No, I have ice.”

“We’ll need a fire hand and a sleep caller.”

“Conner does sleep spells really well.”

Tobias glared toward the flap. He could hear Adrian out there putting people to work. “All Mitchels do. What about fire?”

“We have several people, including the boss.”

“She might not be here when we’ll need to do it.”

Morgan shrugged. “Neil has a list of people and skills. I’ll pick someone careful and reliable.”

“Screw those two. Pick someone fast. If they can’t keep up with the cutting, she’ll bleed to death on the table.”

Morgan flinched. “I’ll cover it. When do you want to start my lessons?”

“After your break, son. You’re frying alive in your brain. Go get whatever set of tits dug into your heart and ripped it out.”

People frowned at him for the wording.

Morgan had tensed. “I can’t ever do that.”

Tobias understood the woman was already taken. “Then find someone like her and pretend. Take whatever happiness you can find, Morgan. When word gets around that you’re a surgeon,

you'll be overwhelmed with our kind and theirs. It's a very rare skill."

"Don't you mean *we'll* be overwhelmed?"

Tobias held up a shaking hand. "I'm just the teacher. My cutting days ended when I developed a shake from being hit with the drugs too many times. They're made with an antidepressant base that had the same side effect. I'll never be able to operate again."

2

Angela went toward the muddy path out of town, aware of time ticking away and a camp on the edge of tearing itself apart. The rioters weren't calming yet. Their mutters and glares were spilling across the town as they stomped around and tried to find a way to release their rage that wouldn't bring Jennifer's wrath.

Senior Eagles didn't spark those fights. They used calm logic when confronted, like they'd been trained to do. It helped that they'd been serving with most of the rioters. Some of them were even friends. *And we agree with their anger. We just can't act like that or nothing will get done.*

Jennifer spotted Angela and hurried over to her. "We have more missing people, Boss!" She had finished the count of the beach and the tunnels, then added in everyone who was here. "We're short Monica, Jeff, Kimmie, and Sherman."

“Monica decided to leave Safe Haven. She lowered a lifeboat and left right after dawn.” Angela didn’t have time for this, but she couldn’t leave it to Jennifer. Samantha had been taken during her shift. She was likely to react excessively. “Jeff and Kimmie also left. They’re going home.”

Jennifer’s anger sparked. “He kidnapped her!”

“That’s not what happened.”

“She’ll be hurt.”

“No, she’ll be protected. Jeff finally figured out he sees her as a daughter. Kimmie saw him as a dad right away. They sorted it out for themselves.” Angela was actually thrilled with it. She, along with everyone else, had assumed the pair would be a couple in the future. *Kimmie was right. We gave them those labels. It was never the truth.*

Jennifer hoped that was correct; they couldn’t spare another crew to go search. “What about Sherman?”

Angela frowned. “He’s a loose end we may need to clean up. Organize a search.”

“We’ll find him.” Jennifer wanted to express how sorry she was.

Angela didn’t have time for it. “This is the hell of a leader. You don’t always cover things well enough and sometimes, people pay with their lives. All you can do is make plans to counteract it the next time.”

Jennifer now understood some of Angela’s mood swings even after successful missions. “What do you want me to do while you’re gone?”

Angela pointed at the man in the middle of the town, surrounded by Eagles. “Adrian has point. Back him up.”

Jennifer was relieved not to be in charge this time. She went to Adrian’s side and tried not to wilt under the glares of the senior men and women who’d put their faith in her and been disappointed.

Adrian motioned Ian to guard Angela. Then he went to Thelma and Dwight, who were in the small crowd with their family. “Can you cover the meals with what we have here?”

Thelma nodded. “For a day or two. Then we’ll need fresh supplies.”

Adrian motioned Jennifer along. “See what they need and get it rolling.”

Jennifer obeyed without question. *Let someone else manage this mess and I’ll help clean up the pieces. When Neil and Samantha get home, I’ll find a way to make this right.*

Angela hurried off before something else needed her attention. She broke into a jog as soon as she and her guard were out of sight.

Ian assumed she was going to the cove now. He stayed close and tried to imagine what this rescue might be like.

Angela took the side path that led to the jail.

“Are you going the right way?”

“Yes.” She increased speed. “We may be picking up another passenger.”

Ian thought of the two women now sharing the island jail. *Which one is she letting out?*

Angela drew in deep, steady breaths and went faster. She could feel Neil getting ready to call her. “My time’s almost up.”

Ian didn’t laugh at the unintentional pun. He wanted Chad dead.

Angela grunted as the jail came into view. “You’re not the only one.”

Ian saw the group around the jail and got in front of Angela.

The brawlers spotted her in relief.

The rest of the crowd continued to shout and try to push their way into the jail.

“Let us have her!”

“She tried to kill us all!”

Angela sent a mild pain spell that dropped the rioters and spared the brawlers.

Ian shoved by the moaning men and women without sympathy. “Stop being stupid and you won’t be hurt.”

Angela let the brawlers surround her by the door.

“We’re glad you’re here.” Stuart gestured in annoyance. “We’re trying not to injure them, but they’re getting physical.”

Angela was proud of them for not hurting the scared people. “Send two men for sleeping bags and some supplies from town. It’s still stocked from the matches last night. Come back and stay here until I get done with the rescue.”

Stuart frowned. “What if they try to get inside again?”

Angela glared at the recovering rioters. “Do I need to give them permission to shoot?”

People glared back resentfully.

Angela shrugged at Stuart. “Try not to kill them, but if you do, I’ll understand.” She headed inside. “Just make sure they don’t breach this jail, any way you have to. If you’re successful, I’ll bump you a level in rank and bake you a cake.”

Stuart was able to find humor in almost any situation. “What flavor?”

“German chocolate.”

“Aww. She knows me so well.” His face hardened as he turned toward the reluctantly leaving rioters. “There are two women in here. When the boss gets back, there will still be two women in here, unharmed and ready to face their trials or punishments. You asshats get to town and start helping them with guard duty, trash cleanup, and anything else they tell you to do. If you come back here, I’ll put a bullet in your brain.”

More of the people left, but their anger didn’t fade.

Ian stopped by Stuart. “No worries. Adrian will handle them.”

Stuart stared in surprise. “Adrian’s in charge?”

“Yes.”

“And people are fine with it?”

“Sure. He’s good at the job.”

Stuart thought about Marc. “I wonder what her mate will say?”

Angela ignored the gossipy guys guarding the gate and went inside.

The small jail was exactly like ones from the old western films, even down to the wide desk and the rack of keys on the wall. Angela went by the empty gun case in approval. Megan and Erin had the guns on the desk and were making sure they were loaded.

Angela went to Tonya's cell. "Daisey will bring the baby here. Do you want a ride off this island?"

Everyone stared in surprise, assuming Tonya was guilty.

Tonya had already been thinking about Gabe's death. "They're going to find out now, right?"

Angela didn't lie. "It won't take much for someone to connect the events. One was an accident and the other is coincidence, but it may not matter. They might try lynching you when the truth comes out."

"I didn't mean to do it. I didn't know it was going to happen."

Angela believed her. "Make your choice. Neil's about to call and then it will be much harder to sneak you out."

Tonya stared. "Why would you risk this for me?"

"I told you. Because you've changed. You're living proof that Safe Haven works. I love you for that."

Tonya wiped away tears. "I'm staying. I've built a life here. Now, I'll fight for it."

“That’s my girl.” Angela swept Pam. “How are you holding up?”

Pam was pale and hurting all over from withdrawals. “My head’s clearer. The rest is still a mess.”

“Don’t give up. Everyone makes mistakes. Facing it is what makes us stronger.”

Pam shivered and tried not to puke yet again. “I won’t. Thank you.”

Angela went to the door. “Ian will stay here and help keep things under control.” She left before Ian could protest.

Allison smiled at Pam in relief. “She must have faith that you’ll atone and recover.”

“Why?”

“She let you hear all that and you’re still alive.”

A beautiful day surrounded Angela as she left the jail. Warm sun and soft wind implied everything was going to be okay. Angela wasn’t fooled. *Someone always dies in these moments. That also never changes.*

Angela’s radio lit up. “The ship’s ready. You have three minutes and I’m leaving without you.”

“Coming down the cliff ladder in two minutes, Neil.” Angela ran faster through the jungle to meet that deadline.

People all over the island heard the exchange and sent good wishes along. They were okay with her leaving this time. Adrian was here to cover her absence.

Angela wanted to celebrate that achievement, but there wasn't time. "I cleared the way to come and get you, too, Marc. Don't give up. I need you more than you've ever known."

3

Angela reached the cliff ladder and resisted the urge to slide straight down like some of the Eagles enjoyed doing. Now wasn't the time to take chances.

"There she is!" Neil motioned to the captain. "Get ready."

"I am."

"No!" Ray was also pissed and worried. "You were drugged last night! And almost hurt! You're in no shape to sail this ship."

The rescue ship was a fast little UN scout that had been stripped and emptied to make it even lighter on the water. Theo had recommended it in case they needed an island evac ship that was quicker than their others.

Grant knew Ray was right. "But this is where I belong. Angela needs me here. You need to sail our cruise ship away from this island." Grant wasn't in the mood to fight. "I need to redeem myself."

Angela jumped the last few feet and hurried toward the ship. "There's nothing to redeem, but we do need you, Grant."

Ray understood he wasn't going to get his way. He reluctantly stepped onto the narrow dock. "Just... be careful!"

Grant smiled lovingly.

Neil growled. "Come on!"

The boat swayed as Angela boarded, reminding her it was built for speed. *And that's all part of the trap we're going into, isn't it?*

"Get us moving!"

"Not yet!" Angela picked up the radio mike in the ship's small bridge and made sure the system was on.

Neil watched in frustration. *Samantha!*

Wade waited next to him, heart breaking. *Samantha!*

Angela tried to act like it was any other day and any other chaos, not a moment that could determine the future of a dear friend. "Chad, I know you're listening."

Neil and Wade lifted their heads in alertness at the name of their enemy.

"I know what you want, but you aren't going to get it if you don't answer. I'll stay right here on my island and you can rot."

Angela kept the mike keyed as Neil began to shout and Wade started threatening her.

Kyle stayed between her and the angry men.

Angela let off the mike and waited.

Chad's staccato, arrogant voice came through the ship radio. "*Boss.*"

Kyle flipped a finger toward the radio. "Asshole."

Angela keyed the mike and let Chad hear the calm water and the island birds for a few seconds to make it clear she hadn't left yet. Then she opened the negotiations. "I want proof that she's alive and your word she'll stay that way until I take her place."

Chad laughed cruelly. "You don't get to make demands anymore, *Angie*. But I wouldn't want Neil to stroke out before he gets to see her death."

They waited as shuffling noises came.

"Say hello."

Samantha's scream pierced every heart that heard it. Eagle radios on the island were also transmitting the exchange. Everyone was horrified, especially Ralph.

I'm going to let Neil disembowel you, Chad. I can't wait. Angela let the radio to go dead, then keyed it. "If she dies, I'll sink your ship and turn right around. Don't let the rage take away your victory."

Chad laughed again. Samantha's gasps of pain were clear in the background. "I've had my revenge on her, boss lady. Now I only want you."

"I'll be there as fast as this boat will go." She held out the mike for him to hear Grant rev the engine. Angela shut off the radio. "Now we can go."

"Wait!" Sherman hurried from the cliff above them. "Wait for me!"

Neil glared at Grant. "Go! Now!"

Grant looked at Angela.

Angela's frustration ate at her patience. She forced herself to handle whatever it was. "Wait for him."

Neil punched the ship wall.

Wade dragged him to the rear deck, murmuring words of useless comfort.

Angela met Sherman at the edge of the bobbing ship. "What is it?"

"You need me. Take me with you."

"Why?"

"I know things." Sherman rubbed his freshly shaven chin. "About you guys."

Angela sensed bringing him along would be beneficial. *And I'm out of time.* She held out a hand to him.

Sherman took it and jumped onboard. He quickly let go.

Grant immediately began taking them out of the small cove.

Angela pointed at the captain. "Stay away from him."

"I will." Sherman retreated as Kyle came over to guard Angela. "I'm not a threat."

Now that they were underway, Angela wanted to spend the time planning a way to save Samantha. "I'm busy. Make it fast."

"It's my fault."

"What's your fault?"

Sherman stared up at the cliff wall as the rescue ship began to move. "Samantha being taken."

Neil quieted, drawn by the name.

Angela slid between his location and Sherman.
“Some details would be nice.”

Kyle got ready to shoot Sherman and shove his body overboard.

“I’ve been talking to people. I told them things about you.”

“What kind of things?”

“How to trap you. I believe Chad took Samantha so he could enslave her.”

Neil came toward them, hurt and furious. “Why would you do that?!”

“Kill him!”

Angela held up a hand. “I’m working here!”

The Eagles glowered instead, silently promising Sherman an ugly death.

Angela stepped closer, voice going cold. “Tell me everything.”

Sherman knew not to move and trigger an attack. “I thought if I could trap one of you, I’d get to be like you. But I got scared.”

“So you told other people how to do it?”

He nodded in shame. “I thought maybe one of them would reward me for the information.”

“And yet, you hate magic.”

“I do. It’s an abomination.”

Kyle couldn’t be quiet. “Why do you want to be something you hate?”

Sherman’s rage came into view on his face. “So I can kill your kind. I’ll spend the rest of my life hunting magic users.”

Angela stepped closer as Neil and Wade ran over.

Kyle tried to hold them back so Angela could deliver justice.

Angela knew there had to be a catch. “Why are you telling me this? Did I bring you along so you can start killing my kind now?”

“Maybe. Is Chad your kind?”

“Chad isn’t like us. Why do you want to kill him?”

“He left with his slave. He wasn’t supposed to leave! He should have helped the rest of us escape your tyranny!” Spittle flew from Sherman’s lips as his true feelings were revealed. “Samantha could have protected all the normals. She’s not evil like you!”

“Boss...” Neil’s groan of need matched the mental advice from all the witnesses. Everyone wanted him dead now.

Sherman tried to calm himself. “He’ll probably hurt her. She has to do what he says anyway, but she’s strong. He needs to break her. If she doesn’t agree, it won’t work.”

“Start from the beginning.” Angela felt something important coming. She stayed between him and the others.

“You know we can trap your kind.”

She nodded. “But we haven’t dealt much with that. Even Donner wanted something else.”

“Donner was your kind. He couldn’t enslave you through magic. Only a normal can. Or an

Invisible.” Sherman’s words gave them a chill. “That’s why you didn’t see it coming. Chad’s mind is locked to you. As long as he’s locked, and alive, you can’t break the spell.”

She shrugged coldly. “I thought I’d just kill him and break those bonds.”

“You can’t if she agreed. Magic doesn’t work that way.”

“Death won’t end curses either.” Angela had no problem using Sherman to verify information. He wouldn’t make it back to the island after this run.

“No. Can I buy my life from you?”

“No!”

“Hell, no!”

Sherman waited for Angela’s answer. He’d taken a big risk by coming clean.

“You want a ride out of here, with all this information about us.”

“Yes. You said anyone can leave Safe Haven, and telling the truth isn’t a crime.”

“You said you’re going to kill my kind.”

“And I stand by it, but under man’s laws, I have to do it before I can be charged.”

“There are exceptions to that rule.”

“Fair. So lock me up for a month for making threats and then drop me off somewhere. I haven’t done anything that warrants the death I see in your eyes.”

Angela suddenly wished for a cigarette. *Guess that won’t ever go away.* “Fine. I’ll drop you off somewhere. Now convince me it’s a good deal.”

Sherman braced against the ship as Grant got them moving faster and Ray watched them from the small cove. “She’ll have to honor whatever deal she makes. Unless you can take her yourself.”

“But we can’t trap her.”

“No. *I* can.”

Neil and Wade shoved by Kyle and surrounded Sherman.

Angela stared at him. “Wow. That’s smart.”

Sherman tried not to be intimidated by the two aggressive men. “I’ll free her right away. You can drop me off and we’ll all forget we ever saw each other.”

Angela burst out laughing.

Sherman stared in confused worry.

Even Neil and Wade weren’t sure what was happening. Playing good cop, bad cop didn’t usually go this way.

Angela’s mirth faded. “You’re so arrogant. You think I didn’t know any of that. You believe I’ll help you enslave one of my kind. You hope we’re all dumb enough to fall for your promise of letting her go.” Angela’s orbs lit up bright red as she marched toward him.

Sherman tried to run.

Neil grabbed him by the arms while Wade lifted his legs.

“Wait!” Angela stopped them.

Sherman glared snottily at the two men. “I’m valuable. You can’t kill me. She won’t allow it.”

Angela drew the knife from her belt. “No, I’ll do it myself.”

She ran the blade across Sherman’s neck while he was screaming. Blood sprayed all of them.

Neil and Wade dumped him overboard in satisfaction and frustration. Both of them wished it had been Chad.

Blood spread over the water’s surface and then sank to the depths of the cove.

Angela wiped her knife down her jacket. “On the plus side, he served a purpose.”

Neil wiped off his hands. “We know how to beat Chad now.”

Angela looked at Grant, the only normal along for this run. “Yes, we do.”

Kyle had been working on a plan while they questioned Sherman. “We should take another ship with us. While you distract him, Neil and Wade can slip onboard from the other side. That whaling ship doesn’t have an active radar system right now. Theo disconnected it right after the fight.”

Grant frowned. “If Chad’s really a Navy man, he’ll find a way to make it work. We should assume he’ll know the minute we get close enough for him to scan us.”

Wade studied the blank radar. “Why can’t he see us right now and vice versa?”

Grant gestured. “The Adrianna’s radar was modified. It covers long-range. We won’t be able to see Chad with this one until we’re within a few miles.”

Angela joined the planning session as the fresh clock in her mind began ticking. “We can use that. I have an idea.”

Chapter Thirty
Do The Same

1

Adrian actually felt it when Angela left the island. The mood shifted from chaotic to dangerous. Samantha's scream was still ringing through their minds and hearts, causing horror and hatred that wanted an outlet. People stared at him and Jennifer in thoughtful resentment, wondering if they could be ignored or even overwhelmed.

Adrian took charge of the situation. "I want all kids sent below. Daryl will appoint someone responsible down there who likes to use their gun. Jennifer, I want a search organized. We're hunting for more backpacks, and Sherman."

The senior Eagles obeyed without argument, pointing and waving at their targets.

The town was still a mess from last night. Vomit and mud puddles, trash piles, and stray items of gear and clothing littered the town and the ground around the few buildings. The firepit and beer pit were overflowing with garbage that needed to be sorted before it could be burned. Adrian wasn't looking forward to getting it all cleaned up. Like most of the others, he had a hangover and an upset stomach.

Jennifer donned her enforcer form as she gathered the troublemakers and gave them instructions on where to search.

Adrian waved at Morgan. “I want updates on medical and security. Put people on posts according to their trustworthiness. You know them better than I do now.” The red mark on Adrian’s arm flashed as he jerked it toward the filthy fighting cage. “I also need that taken down and the rest of the party favors collected.”

A few camp members came forward, still frowning and ready to fight, but they also wanted things put back together so they could get fed and take a nap. Almost everyone had drank too much last night.

“Hey! You can’t put her in charge of anything!” Piper was pissed. “She let Samantha get taken. She should be removed from leadership!”

Adrian didn’t want to deal with that issue now, but it was clear from the agreeing cheer that he couldn’t avoid it. “The Eagle rules say she’ll be treated like the others who’ve made mistakes—fairly. None of your leaders have been perfect and they never will be. Humans are flawed. We do the best we can.”

Piper was forced to admit that was true, but she still wasn’t happy about it. She opened her mouth to keep arguing.

Morgan was almost at the medical tent. He spun around, spraying mud from his boots. “Get to work, Eagle!”

“Slam you!”

Morgan glared. “You have no idea what it’s like to have this shit happen on your watch! Jennifer is a great leader, and she helps in important ways. Who do you think told us to be on the lookout for the lurker in the first place?!” Morgan didn’t censor his words. “While you’re busy flirting with Dace every time he comes up to the bridge, Jennifer is helping the medics solve a supply problem or assisting the engineer with electrical matters!” Morgan realized everyone was staring at him. He snapped his mouth shut and went into the tent.

Adrian stared at Jennifer in appreciation. “Angela said she had a special mind helping with that stuff. Good job.”

Jennifer flushed under his praise and all the stares. “I still screwed up. I should have escorted Samantha to her cabin.”

“Yes. And you’ll do that next time, won’t you?”

“Absolutely.” Jennifer rotated toward the waiting people. “If there is a next time.”

Morgan went to Terry, who had put Rico next to Candy and was handling medical issues from the big tent now. “How are things?”

Terry gave him a brief report while handling the needs of his patients. Candy was feeding her girls now and Rico’s ribs were being rewrapped from his rough trip here. The camp members weren’t used to carrying stretchers. Rico had almost fallen out a few

times. “Samantha’s twins are starting to wake up. They’ll need to be fed soon.”

“Thanks.” Morgan quickly left.

Terry saw Rico staring at him. He didn’t stop to chat; he kept working.

The medical tent was now stuffed with cots and chairs for their patients and visitors. None of them were comfortable. It was a huge difference from the sterile conditions of the ship’s med bay.

The warm tent stank, reminding them last night had been a wild party that wasn’t allowed to happen again for another month. Terry hoped it was longer. He hadn’t enjoyed any of last night.

Rico tried not to go to sleep yet even though the medication was pulling at him. “Will she be okay?”

Terry knew who he meant. “She’s safer than the rest of us right now.”

“The jail isn’t secure.”

“No, but she’s with other descendants. They’ll take care of her.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

Terry had been thinking about it. He assumed Rico had gotten into his thoughts. “Maybe.” Terry grunted. “And maybe not. I’ve never liked Kenn and Tonya deserves a chance to be happier with someone else.” Terry glared at the new man. “I’m not saying that’s you.”

Rico was asleep.

Terry went to check on Jayda. She’d been brought here from the ship instead of being taken

below with the other camp members. The medics hadn't cleared her yet.

Terry realized that was his job now, as Chief Medical Officer. He smiled at Jayda and kept working around her cot. "How are you feeling today?"

Morgan rejoined Adrian. "Candy and the babies are good. Neil's twins are recovering. Daisey was told to take them to Tonya for feedings. They're about ready. I'll do that if you want."

"Take an escort."

"I've got it." Piper marched toward the medical tent, daring anyone to get in her way.

Adrian liked Piper's courage. "She's not wrong to question things."

Morgan still glared at Piper. "She's also not right to do it openly and cause more drama in the middle of all of this."

"Agreed." Adrian scanned the town and found more things that needed to be covered. "Get Brittani into the medical tent. Conner's hyper right now from his run to the ship. Let him work on her instead of keeping Candy awake. He'll talk her ear off and she needs to rest."

"I will."

"Good. Pass out some painkillers to the guards, and send the calmer people into the restaurant so they can gossip and drink their morning coffee. That will bring things down another notch."

Morgan went to cover those things and gather an escort.

Adrian felt approving attention on him. He understood the shift in mood. Last night had been the final convincing the camp needed to accept him back in their lives. Conner had told the truth. Marc was the one they couldn't depend on.

Adrian evaluated things again while he waited. Last night had given them more than just that. The rage people had gotten an outlet and were under control again for a bit, which would give Angela time to go get the mission team and steal the cure from the UN if they had one. It also let the descendants see each other for how they really were so they could decide if they wanted that much freedom and violence in their lives. Adrian could hear people thinking about that one.

“Where do you want me?” Charlie had been ordered to come to Adrian. He'd taken his time hiking here, but he was doing it.

Adrian was surprised, and grateful. “I need a right hand.”

Charlie wanted to. “But I'm not allowed. I'm not even an Eagle anymore. I only had guard duty over Jennifer because everyone else was busy and Kyle knows I'll kill for her.”

Adrian was proud of the teenager for telling him the truth. “How about helping Terry in the medical tent and reporting to me once an hour with updates?”

Charlie nodded coolly and went that way.

Adrian went to help Theo rig up the freezer in the restaurant that he hadn't gotten to yet. "Then we'll get volunteers to put those banana plants into the ground. Samantha will like seeing that when she comes home."

Radios across the town crackled with Zack's voice. "We're moving the cruise ship now. We may go out of range. I'll make contact as soon as we know something."

Adrian keyed the radio Angela had given him from her belt. "Copy. Good luck."

"Yeah. Same to you."

2

Daryl was glad to go into the tunnels and get out of sight for a while. Everyone knew about his outburst. The stares were hard to take.

Sadie flew out of the tunnel before he could come down the ladder. She went straight to Adrian and waited for orders. Working was better than being in the tunnels right now. There was no one to play Duck Hunt with her.

Daryl went down the ladder and found Stanley there with his hand on his gun. "Very good."

Stanley frowned at him. "What do you want?"

Daryl realized Stanley was upset with him, too. For some reason, that hurt more than Jennifer's angry glares. He didn't know what to say.

Stanley didn't like being mad at anyone. Seeing Daryl so unsure of himself eased a little of the angry surprise. "Make it up to him."

"I will. I'm sorry."

Stanley accepted that. "People say stupid stuff when they're drunk."

Daryl tried not to get defensive. "They also tell the truth."

"Not about Kyle. You were wrong." Stanley pulled the hatch shut. "Are you here for updates?"

"Yes. Who has point right now?"

Stanley stood straighter. "I do."

Daryl knew Stanley had been up all night. "Pick your relief and get some sleep. You have point shift down here overnight tonight."

Stanley was thrilled. Overnight point duty only went to the most trusted people. "Debra can handle it. She didn't drink at all and she went to bed early."

"Good. Update me." Daryl saw a few other people coming their way. He hoped they were sober enough to work.

Stanley opened his notebook. "There isn't much to tell. Everyone on our lists is accounted for and there were no fights or injuries here. Wade kept things calm overnight. Candy reported to the medical officer a few hours ago, though. I was told she went into labor?"

Daryl nodded. "She had two girls. They're all fine." Daryl didn't tell mention the breast cancer. That would fly through camp on its own.

“We searched down here and didn’t find any packs or packages that didn’t belong.” Stanley stayed next to Daryl as they went into the first tunnel section.

Tonya’s cats fled into the shadows ahead of them.

Kids glanced up expectantly. They were fully dressed, fed, and occupied with arts and crafts.

Daryl did a quick count to be sure they were all here. Then he spotted the pictures they were working on. He recognized them.

Cody pointed at a stack in the center of the long, narrow table they’d put along the wall. “Those are ready.”

Daryl only had one question. “Where do they go?”

“In the gear Neil collected.”

Daryl frowned lightly. “Neil has gear somewhere?”

“Yes. The alpha told him a secret. He figured out what she wanted and started stocking up.” Cody pointed. “These pictures go with it.”

Daryl was intrigued. “Where is this stash of mystery gear?”

Cody used Eagle code. *In the barn.*

Daryl blew out a breath of self-derision. *I’ve seen it and still didn’t see it for what it is.* “I’ll deliver them myself.” Daryl took the pictures and rolled them up so he didn’t lose any. “I need to gather some things. Do you kids want to do a treasure hunt for me?”

Cheers echoed through the tunnel, making Dog flinch. He'd had a quiet night with the kids.

Daryl motioned to Stanley. "Make a list. We need ten snack baggies. You'll have to pack them yourselves. Don't bother the cooks. Gather up all the handheld shovels from the extra kits near the hatches. We need one for each of you and a couple extras. Then we need Samantha's planting kit from the garden corner down here. Take it all to the same hatch and let Adrian know when you're ready." Daryl was certain Adrian would like the idea of putting the kids to work. "You'll need guards while you're up there. I believe Dog, Cate, and Cody can cover it. Okay?"

Cody was relieved that he didn't have to dig. He wasn't in the mood to get dirty.

Cate and the others were just happy to get out of the tunnel. They didn't care what they were doing.

Now that he'd found a way to keep them busy, Daryl scanned each child individually. He was finding more tolerance and compassion for children now that he had his own on the way.

The kids let him see their true concerns for one quick look.

Daryl made mental notes. Most of their issues were small and easily fixed, like letting them spend more time outdoors. The others, like Amy's terror that none of her new family would return, couldn't be fixed until fate made a final choice. Daryl smiled at the little girl. "Would you like to help them with guard duty?"

Amy's lower lip stuck out. "She doesn't like me."

Daryl had forgotten Amy and Cate didn't get along. "Is there a friend you'd like to be with today so it's easier?"

Amy's eyes welled up. "Kimmie's gone. I don't have friends now."

Cate felt that strongly. *Neither do I. We're both alone.* Impulse opened her mouth. "You can help us. It's okay."

Amy brightened. "Really?"

Cate let her nicer side come through for a change. "Sure. We can keep them safe together."

Amy beamed. "Okay."

Daryl was glad the girls were getting along right now. He went to the next area, hoping it went well.

Leeann started to stand up and go after him. "Maybe I can help, too."

Mike jerked her back down by her wrist. He hissed in her face. "You stay with me!"

Leeann bit her lip and stayed on the chair by his side. No one had heard them. The kids were all hurrying to find their shoes.

Mike's older brother came over from his post on guard duty. "Mike, be careful."

Mike scowled at Eric. "Mind your own business!"

Eric leaned down so he could whisper. "I want to, little bro, but you're in public right now. Dad never let anyone see or hear it. Our friends and

neighbors never knew what was going on. Unless you want to be split up, you'd better do the same."

Mike nodded curtly. "You're right. I need to act more like dad."

Other guards came through the tunnel in time to hear that. They smiled in approval. Zack was an upstanding member of Safe Haven. Most people didn't remember a time when he hadn't been.

But his sons did.

3

"It's almost noon. We should be hearing something soon. One way or the other."

People frowned at Dace for the flippant attitude.

Adrian only nodded. The tension was building. Chad may have destroyed their cruise ship and ruined their chances of surviving here. If it blew up, Angela would probably decide to load them all onto one of the UN ships and go back to America. People were already considering it, but they weren't happy.

Adrian was surprised. After all the times he'd heard people say they wished they hadn't come or they were going back as soon as they could, he hadn't thought they could be converted to island life. *But I was wrong. Angela got them to accept this as a real safe haven.*

Adrian refused to worry over her. It was too soon to hear anything. It would take the rescue team hours to reach Chad's last location, let alone to

catch up with him. *I'll start worrying come sunset.*
“Are we all accounted for?”

“The last few are coming from the beach now. They took down the tent and stayed to clean up. They should be about finished.” Morgan turned toward loud voices, glad that the mud was mostly dried up now. Muddy prints were all over the place, but they were starting to flake away in the light breeze and would be gone in another day or so. “Sounds like they’re coming now.”

Adrian scanned the group. He had everyone else working and calming down now. He didn’t need new drama.

Adrian saw Ralph’s determined face and groaned. *So much for that.*

Ralph came straight to him, along with Daisey and some of the other camp members. “I need you to lock me up.”

Daisey scowled deeply. “I told you to wait until Angela gets home!”

Ralph ignored her. “I conspired against the boss. Lock me up.”

Adrian wasn’t sure if that was the best choice. Jail was rougher on an older person than it was for someone young. “Are you sure? We’ll trust you to stay in a tent with a cot and a heater.”

Fresh tension ran through the town as they listened to the exchange.

Ralph held out his hands. Samantha’s scream over the radio had convinced him that this was the

right thing to do. He wasn't taking no for an answer. "Cuff me. Do it!"

Adrian frowned at the man. "We'll take you to the jail, but I am not using the cuffs. Stop being dramatic! We don't need this right now."

Being scolded openly eased some of Ralph's guilt. He turned toward the path to the jail. "Daisey had nothing to do with it. Let her keep helping."

"We will." Adrian motioned. "Samantha's twins need to be fed again and so does KJ. Morgan will take you all to the jail and wait while Tonya feeds the kids. Then he'll bring them back and get them settled in the tunnels with guards."

Morgan nodded. He didn't mind the trips back and forth, though his boots were caked in drying mud. It was better than doing cleanup or just sitting around and waiting for word.

Ralph was satisfied with that. He kept walking by the people who were staring in surprised anger. "Whatever Sherman has planned, I'm not a part of it. I never wanted to break the rules."

Adrian realized Ralph had done more than just gossip. *He really did conspire.* Adrian motioned Dace along. "Make sure they get where they need to go. Stay at the jail. I'm sure they can use an extra hardbody."

Dace brightened. Piper was still at the jail. "You got it, Boss."

Adrian froze at the title.

Eagles tried to decide how they felt about it.

The radio interrupted their thoughts. “It’s almost time. We’re off the cruise ship and clear, waiting and watching.”

Adrian keyed his mike. “Copy. We’ll be listening.”

Zack didn’t laugh because it wasn’t funny to him. Others snickered and went about their work.

Time ticked by slowly while everyone waited for their cruise ship to be destroyed.

Adrian saw a pair of mud-streaked panties in a tree branch. He tensed, reminded of Quinn and Kendle. He pointed it out to the cleaning crew.

Ralph stopped by Morgan. “Tell Samantha I want her services when she’s ready.”

Morgan realized they didn’t have any other lawyers right now. “I’ll let her know when she gets home.”

Ed was still on duty over the medical tent. He couldn’t stop his mouth from opening. “If she comes back at all, you mean. Lurkers are crazy smart and he’s had her for twelve hours.”

Scowls and insults were tossed toward him.

Adrian made a connection. “And if he’s so smart, why did he take the slowest ship and leave the others? He had to know we’d send a rescue team. They’ll be able to catch him before he can get to a big landmass.”

Jennifer joined Adrian. “Because he doesn’t just want Samantha.” Jennifer had been stewing on it for hours now. Ed’s comment had allowed her to come

up with an answer. “Angela gave that kill order. She’s heading into a trap.”

“I trust Kyle to watch her six.” Daryl had just come up from his hourly check of the tunnels. “It’s all good down there.”

Jennifer scowled deeply. “Really? Last I heard, you believe he’s a child-raping monster.”

Daryl flushed. “I was drunk and said some things I regret.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“You’ve never made a mistake?”

Jennifer snorted.

Daryl grinned at her through his bruises. “Well, you’re young. Give yourself a chance.”

Jennifer swallowed a chuckle. This wasn’t the time for humor.

Tim joined them by the barn. Half of his congregation came along. “Hey, is it okay for us to hold a prayer service? We want to send some good thoughts to the mission team and Samantha.”

Adrian studied the preacher without answering. Tim and his congregation had been frowning at the mess and the hungover people, but they weren’t preaching or condemning with their comments. Their bright eyes and headache-free faces rubbed it in without trying.

Tim swallowed, suddenly nervous as conversations quieted to hear them. “Angela said I can build the church. She didn’t say we have to hide when we pray.”

Jennifer knew what deal Angela had made. “She forbade you from openly converting people, though.”

Tim shrugged. “I’m not asking anyone to attend. They’ll see us and join, or not. This is for my...the people who feel like I do.”

Adrian wasn’t sure. He hadn’t allowed religion to take a hold in this camp when he was in charge, for many reasons. “I assume you’ve heard her backstory?”

Tim nodded. “I know the boss hates Christianity. I hope to change her mind. It’s not all bad.”

“It’s not all good either.” Daryl also had a childhood that had taught him not to believe in people who claimed they spoke to God.

Adrian saw Jennifer’s eye roll and agreed. Angela didn’t hate Christianity. Tim was wrong. “Abide by the terms of your agreement for now. If she doesn’t like it, she’ll make that clear.”

“Thank you.”

Daryl scowled. “Why is she allowing this?”

Adrian knew that answer. “She’s following our constitution. It says we have freedom of religion, not the freedom to make others follow our religion.”

Jennifer approved. “She’s a patriot. She loves America.”

Daryl still wasn’t happy about it. “So other religions could do the same here?”

Tim walked away without listening to the half-lies Adrian was about to tell. The full truth was more

complicated. *Yes, she'll allow it, but only after she makes a deal that prevents them from growing more powerful than she is.*

“It’s noon.” Lisa, now on guard duty over Adrian, had been keeping track.

Everyone went silent and waited for the sound of their ship blowing up.

Ten minutes later, Adrian and everyone else had reached their patience limit. He keyed the mike before someone else did it. “Update me.”

Zack’s nervous voice came right back. “No change. We sent in a volunteer to retrieve a pack for further examination.”

Adrian scowled. “I didn’t tell you to do that!”

They all heard Zack shrug through the radio. “I don’t remember asking your permission.”

People laughed around Adrian, but it was tense.

Adrian didn’t ask who had chosen to be the possible sacrifice. He didn’t need to.

Neither did Jennifer. “I’m going to kill him.”

Adrian nodded. “Ray’s another one who gets restless. Maybe having a church will help him, too.”

Hearing Adrian confirm her thought made Jennifer feel better, but she couldn’t relax. Ray was risking his life and she wasn’t close enough to help him if things went wrong. “I’ll be so glad when this damn day is over!”

Heads bobbed in agreement. It was only afternoon, but it felt a lot later.

The radio crackled. “You’re not gonna believe this.”

“Just tell me!”

“It’s an alarm clock, Adrian. There’s no explosive. It’s a fake.”

People breathed out sighs of relief or cheered.

Zack’s voice interrupted the celebration. “We’re going in for the other nine now. Standby.”

The entire camp went back to waiting. There was nothing else they could do until the threat was cleared.

Chapter Thirty-One
Mommy's Coming

1

“**I**t’s almost sunset.” Wade held tight to the boat and ducked against the spray. He was eager for the cold ride to be over. He still hadn’t been able to connect to Samantha. He was terrified for her.

“I know.” Neil didn’t need to check his watch, though letting go of the RIB to do so wasn’t a good idea anyway. Their boat was being pulled behind the rescue ship. They were flying up and slamming down, swinging out to the side and being jerked back by the tow line they’d carefully measured. If it was too long, Chad would be able to see them swinging out beside the ship on his radar. If it was too short, they would topple in the wake. It made for a rough ride where hanging on was all they could do. The only help was the tarp he’d tied over the raft. It kept some of the wind and water out, letting them stay dry.

Salty water squirted into Neil’s face.

He sighed. *Except for our faces.* The tarp had come loose on this end.

Neil’s fingers cramped at the tight grip. His brain pounded in time to the movements of the boat,

threatening to split his skull open. *I'm never drinking again.*

Wade didn't comment on that. A lot of people had made that vow since waking up; he doubted any of them would stick to it. Drinking was Safe Haven's unofficial hobby. "I need to say something."

"Same for me." Neil had already planned on having this conversation. "Just save her. That's all that matters."

"Yes." Wade was glad Neil understood. If they had to pick a life, or there was a chance to take a hit for her, both of them were willing to die in Samantha's place.

Neil braced his foot against the small engine they'd connected to the RIB while traveling on the rescue ship. They'd only been in this rigid inflatable boat for an hour, but it felt like a lot longer. "If it's me, tell her I'm sorry for being so wrapped up in my head that I didn't know she needed me. And tell her I'll love her even after I'm gone."

Wade brought his anger forward to keep from breaking down. "If it's me, tell her I didn't know what love was until now. Thank her for changing me from a man whore into a real man."

Both males let their emotions out for a few seconds. Then they locked it away and drew on their coats of anger and vengeance. Someone had taken their mate. There would be a heavy price paid.

"Do you think we're making the right choice by trusting Angela with this plan?"

Salt burned Neil's nose. He rubbed it on his damp shoulder and cursed himself for not doing a better job of tying down the tarp. "Yes."

"I'm not."

Neil understood. He was having his own doubts, but he refused to speak them and possibly jinx the run. "Stand your ground, Eagle."

Wade felt better hearing that, but he still tried to don the cold shield of battle early so he didn't babble anyway. He'd never felt fear like this.

Neil had. *But that doesn't make it any easier.* "I've been keeping something from you guys."

Wade had suspected something was going on with Neil, but it wasn't in his nature to pry. "Is it bad?"

Neil drew in a breath. "I'm byzan now. I've been trying to ignore it, but that's not working."

Wade was only a little surprised. "You've made a lot of plans to kill people, like we all have." Wade considered confessing that he was also byzan now, but decided not to. Neil was under enough stress. He didn't need more.

Neil was in his own head and missed those signs. "If I keep gaining levels, I'll leave Sam behind like Angela did with Marc. That's why I was so against the pool lesson. I'd just figured out why Marc and Angie weren't working out. I don't want Samantha to gain another level. If we get through this in one piece, I'd like to find a way to give it up."

Wade was surprised now. “Even if it’s possible, going back levels would take away a lot of power. Are you sure you want to do that?”

Neil delivered the rest of his confession. “I mean to give it *all* up, Wade. We’ll convince Samantha. The twins are already locked. We’ll do the same with Amy. Then we’ll stay on the island and just be camp members who never have to run into the fire, only away from it.”

Wade wasn’t sure what to say. “That’s a hell of a plan.”

“Think about it later. After Samantha recovers, she’ll help us find the spell or charm or whatever we need.”

Wade liked Neil’s faith that Samantha would recover from this. “I’ll get back to you on it.”

“That’s all I ask.” Neil kept his mind on those future plans so he didn’t break down. *I have to keep it together, for Samantha.*

Neil felt the RIB slow. Tension sank into his guts as he began listening for Angela’s radio call. “Are you ready?”

Wade felt the cool shield of battle settle over his damp skin and sighed in relief. “And then some.”

2

“It’s almost sunset.”

Angela didn’t tell Grant she was aware of that. The bright orange and pale yellow sunset was in their faces as they flew through the choppy ocean.

Storm clouds were rolling in from the west, but they would be at their destination before it arrived.

Kyle joined them near the bridge. “We know it’s a trap, Boss. You can’t swap yourself for Samantha.”

“I’m not.”

Kyle waited for her to explain.

Angela couldn’t. Samantha was prying lightly at her thoughts. “How much longer do you think it will be?”

Grant checked the radar and their speed, then recounted. He came up with the same results. “We should see them any time now.”

Angela scanned the darkening water in front of the ship. Grant already had them going as fast as was safe in these uneasy seas. Their ship was light enough to flip if he hit the wrong wave.

Angela felt the moment arrive. It came with an upset stomach and an eagerness she couldn’t hide. She kept her back to them so the men didn’t see her relief. *We made it by sunset. We’re okay.* Arriving after dark had doomed them all in her short glimpses of this moment.

“I’ve got him on radar.”

Grant’s call brought Kyle and Angela over to the monitor.

“That means he’s got us now, too.” Angela rotated toward the ship’s radio in tandem with Kyle.

“I see you.” The radio lit up in confirmation that they’d been right to assume Chad would make it work. *And that means we’re also right about him*

being military, but he'll expect me to follow Eagle hostage rules.

Kyle nodded. "But he isn't expecting our hidden men. This isn't in the training for any level."

"I hope not, but I have a backup plan." Angela leaned closer, not trusting mental or Eagle code right now. "It's time to use the new gift you were supposed to practice in the cage with Daryl last night."

Kyle's new byzan mind linked that up instantly. *She did know.* "You lied!"

Angela didn't deny it. "Get ready, Eagle. This one depends on your amazing aim."

She glared at Grant. "You stay down. If you get yourself killed, Ray might slaughter us all."

Grant chuckled at her joke.

Angela didn't.

3

"It's almost sunset. Hurry up!" Chad shouted in Samantha's bruised face. "She's almost here!"

Samantha had most of her gifts now, but she'd already learned she couldn't attack Chad without being hit by it instead of him. Their deal was binding in every way. "She has a plan, but I can't tell what it is. She's not thinking about it."

"Then dig in!"

Samantha braced for another beating. "I can't. That's the alpha. You only get into her brain if she invites you in."

“Will she?”

“Maybe, but she has to know I’m compromised now.” Samantha’s eyes went to the diaper bag on the desk. She could see the bulges of her children, but she hadn’t heard a single sound. *They haven’t cried in hours. Why aren’t they crying?!* “Can I feed them now? You said you’d think about it.”

“I fed them a bottle before I came back down here, and I added a few more drops of the drug I used on you. Got tired of their crying. They went right to sleep.” Chad hadn’t slept in almost two days. He swayed as he leaned down in her face again. “Concentrate!”

Samantha did what he wanted. Her witch’s voice bled through her own. “We see three people on her ship. Everything else is dark or empty.”

“I can’t believe she only came with two guards.” He leered at Sam. “Is it Neil and Wade? Because that would be perfect.”

“It’s Kyle and Grant.”

Chad knew something wasn’t right about that, but his delight at being so close to springing his trap made him brush it off. “Let’s go up and check the radar. If she sent Neil and Wade to sneak up on me, she’ll get a huge surprise.”

Samantha eyed the diaper bag. “I’ll carry them!”

“With that broken wrist and dislocated knee? I don’t think so.” Chad scooped up the diaper bag and peered down. “They really are cute boys, Samantha.”

Samantha dragged herself over to the door and started climbing the steps on her hands and knees. Chad had forbidden her to stand up. When she'd forgotten, he kicked her knee out of socket to make sure it didn't happen again.

Pain hit her with every step, but Samantha barely noticed. Chad would be distracted with Angela soon. *And I will get my babies!*

Chad hurried around her and went to the bridge of the reoutfitted whaling ship. He grinned as he spotted the dot flying toward his location. He grabbed the mike. "I see you."

He dropped the diaper bag onto the counter of the bridge. He turned toward the rear of the ship, searching the ocean. There was only a single ship on the radar. "Did she do it honestly? No surprise arrival or tricky trade attack?" With only two guards, and one of them being their valued captain, it seemed like Angela was giving up.

Chad stayed in the doorway of the bridge.

Samantha crawled toward it, attention on the diaper bag. *My boys! I want my babies!*

Chad studied her in glee. "It's almost time. Start gathering energy, and remember what I told you while I was breaking those three fingers, Sam. If you hold back at all, if you protect them in any way, I'll shoot an entire magazine into this diaper bag." Chad rested his free hand on it.

"I won't hold back." Samantha lowered her eyes and waited by his feet as tears rolled from her eyes.

"Good girl."

Samantha felt Neil and Wade shouting for her, but she'd blocked them out so she couldn't betray them. Whatever plan Angela had come up with was her only hope. Sam expected it to backfire against her because it was a violation of her new master's rules, but it was worth it in hopes that someone would at least be able to save her twins.

"As soon as she's in range, open fire."

"On who?"

"On Angela." Chad watched the ship come closer. "Aim for her and her only." Chad patted the rifle on the counter by the diaper bag. "I'll handle the rest."

4

Angela spotted Chad on the deck. She saw the figure crawling after him, but she couldn't place it for a few seconds. Her mind refused to accept that broken, bald, crying person as her friend.

"Is that Samantha?" Grant was horrified.

Kyle was pissed. "She's out of the way, Boss. Kill him right now."

Angela started to.

Chad felt it coming. He slid in front of Samantha, now clutching the diaper bag. "Stay back!"

Kyle snorted. "He believes a bag will stop you."

Angela didn't have time to dig in for that mystery. She waited for Chad to give her a shot.

Kyle and Grant also lifted their rifles. If they got a clear shot, they already had permission to take it.

Chad's bloodshot orbs spewed rage and triumph when none of them fired. Angela hated that mix on sight. *You haven't won anything yet, you coward!*

The Eagles recognized Chad's position as a defense against their gun plans. Angela lifted a brow at Kyle.

"I'll handle it." Kyle was already so full of energy that he felt like throwing up to relieve the pressure.

"We're going dark now." Angela had scanned Samantha and found what she'd planned for. She broke Samantha's connection to the hive.

It wouldn't end her bond with Neil or Wade, but theirs would be the only thoughts she picked up. Angela expected the two men to shove promises and questions at Sam upon first contact. This would be over before Samantha could dig into the minds of her mates. "Let her go. I'll come over."

"You're not the boss anymore!"

Angela didn't understand why Samantha was so fixated on the diaper bag, but there wasn't time to figure it out as Chad began screaming at his new slave and his new slave cringed away from him. "Get ready, Kyle."

Kyle wasn't sure what was going to happen next, but he trusted Angela to get Samantha back alive. "I'm set on your call, Boss."

Chad squeezed the diaper bag.

Samantha started screaming.

He held it over the open water as Angela tossed over the grappling hook to connect their ships. “Now! Kill her or I’ll drop them!”

Samantha had no choice. She fired her strongest spell at Angela.

Kyle tried to catch it.

He shuddered as he failed. The pain Samantha was feeling sank into his bones and drew screams from his mouth.

Angela kept her shield up and waited. *Don’t rush it. Don’t rush it.* Her rage was trying to take control. Her witch wanted to taste Chad while he was still alive.

Samantha fired again, using wind this time.

The smaller, lighter ship dipped in the water, knocking Angela off-balance.

“Yes! Do that again!” Chad set the diaper bag by his feet and lifted his rifle into ready hands. “Again!”

Samantha fired a third time, heart going cold. *I have to kill her to save my sons.*

Angela caught the awful wave of panicked fury and staggered again as the boat rocked. Her shield flickered. *Go, Neil! Go!*

Samantha fired again, sending violent wind.

Kyle fell backward, hitting his head on the railing. He dropped to his knees, stunned.

Samantha fired directly at Angela with eyes that begged the alpha to save her babies no matter the cost.

Angela braced as the blast flew toward her. “I forgive you, Samantha.” The blast hit her and knocked out her shield.

Chad fired.

Angela stumbled...and fell. Her arm splayed out in a final gesture of defiance. Then it went slack.

Kyle and Grant shouted and hurried toward her.

Samantha stared in terror at the diaper bag. “Give me my babies now. You said you’d give them to me. Give me my babies!”

“Shut up!” Chad threw the diaper bag over the rail.

Samantha’s shriek echoed over the waves and engines. She scrambled toward the rail to go in after them.

Chad kicked her in the ribs. “You’re not going anywhere! You’ll be my dog forever!”

Samantha fired the last of her energy at Chad.

Old magic prevented the hit and blasted it back at her.

Samantha held her arms open wide as it slammed into her and lifted her up off the deck. “Mommy’s coming!”

Samantha’s body flew over the rail and into the ocean.

“No!” Chad let go of his rifle and ran toward that rail. “No! She’s mine!”

Chad felt a blast coming. He ducked and spun, sliding across the deck to reach another weapon.

Kyle’s hit went right by him, ruffling his dirty, bloody shirt and missing.

Chad swung the harpoon around. “I helped Theo put this in! He even let me test it! See if your shields can hold us against this!”

Angela pulled Kyle down right as Chad fired.

Kyle felt the harpoon go over his head. It hit the rescue ship’s bridge window and went right through, shattering glass over them all.

Grant lunged to the floor as glass and debris sprayed his seat. He stayed there, assuming another projectile would be coming. *She told me to stay down. I’ll listen next time.*

“No!” Chad hated their luck. He grabbed the other steel harpoon and pushed it into place.

Kyle fired again.

Chad stumbled against the rail as the spell swarmed over his body. He tried to keep going but couldn’t. He froze in place, unable to do anything but shout in frustrated rage.

The RIB came flying around the front of the rescue ship, carrying two furious, fearful men.

Kyle checked on Angela.

Angela opened her eyes. “Very nice.”

Kyle helped her up, scanning for injuries.

Angela dropped the melted slug her witch had grabbed.

Kyle was reminded of the training tent when she’d first joined. Her witch had covered her in a shield they couldn’t see.

Angela let him help her up. She rubbed her shoulder as she scanned the water. “Where is she?”

Grant pointed. “She went in over there. Neil’s almost to that spot.”

Angela stepped toward the anchored whaling ship that was bobbing in time with theirs. She smirked at Chad’s frozen face as she boarded his ship. “Hello, Mr. Time. How does it feel to be stopped?”

Chad screamed as she approached, but he couldn’t run or attack her. Kyle’s freeze spell had been perfect.

Angela drew her knife. “Let’s get you ready to face your maker.”

5

Samantha let the water pull her down. *Where are they?!*

She flipped over in the rough waves, barely feeling the salty cold on her abused body. *Where is it?!*

Samantha turned again, but the sunset was making it impossible to see through the water. She dove deeper, becoming frantic. *Where is it?!*

A dark shape caught her attention. It was sinking steadily. She dove after it, lungs starting to burn.

Samantha swam as hard as she could, but the tiny dot kept sinking faster than she could catch up. *My babies!*

The water became heavier, harder to push through. Sam used her new skill to shove the water away.

It collapsed on top of her and shoved her under faster.

Samantha's vision began to blur. Her lungs ached. *No! Keep going!*

But she couldn't. Samantha let her body go with the force of the water. The surface broke over her head a few seconds later.

Samantha coughed out saltwater and snot, lungs heaving in air so she could go back down. She gulped in air and ducked under the waves.

"I saw her!" Wade steered the RIB to that spot and killed the engine.

Neil dove over the side.

Wade anchored the rope around Neil's leg with his body, hoping they'd brought enough of it.

Samantha's body sank faster than Neil could swim after her. He felt the water being displaced and realized she was doing it. *What is she searching for? Sam?!*

Samantha felt Neil in her mind, but she didn't have time to be glad he was here. *Find them! They're sinking!*

Neil didn't know what she was talking about. His lungs began to hurt as he dove deeper.

Samantha's frustration peaked. She couldn't get to the bottom. The ocean kept popping her back up. Even pushing the water away wasn't helping now.

Neil grabbed Samantha's ankle. He wrapped his arm around her leg and tugged on the rope.

Samantha felt them being pulled upward. She struggled violently. *No! Let me go!*

Neil almost wasn't sure who he had a hold of as the bald shape fought him. The familiar feel of her body confirmed it was Samantha and sent his rage to a new level. *She's trying to kill herself. Damn you, Chad!*

Samantha wasn't able to fight Neil's hold on her leg. She stared frantically through the murky depths as he pulled her up. *Momma will join you soon.*

Neil broke the surface and hauled Samantha from the water.

Wade was there to grab her and pull her into the boat.

Samantha sucked in a fresh breath and tried to dive back in.

Neil shoved her into the RIB and followed her. He rolled in and wrapped her shivering, fighting body in his arms. "Get us to the boss!"

They didn't have a medical kit in the raft. Neil had been afraid they would lose it during the rough ride here.

Wade made sure the rope wasn't in the water so it couldn't be caught on the engine propellers. He got them moving, aware of Samantha starting to scream. *She's in bad shape, Boss.*

Samantha realized they weren't going in after the babies. "Go back!" She beat on Neil's chest and arms. "Our sons are drowning! Go back!"

Neil held her in stunned shock. “What?”

“Go back!” Samantha knew the twins couldn’t have survived this long. She broke down in sobs. “My babies!”

Neil and Wade understood at the same time. Horror filled their minds.

“The babies are fine, Sam.”

“Tonya’s caring for them. They’re waiting for you on the island.”

Samantha kept crying. She knew a lie when she heard it.

Neil kept trying to convince her while Wade got them back to the rescue ship. “It’s okay, Sam. Shhh... It’s okay. You’re okay now.”

“I’ll never be okay again!” Samantha’s rage flew out and blasted a hole in the raft.

“Shit!”

Kyle was there to throw them another rope. “Grab it!”

Neil had to let go of Samantha to cut the rope on his ankle or he would be pulled down with the deflating raft.

Samantha jumped toward the waves.

Wade grabbed Samantha around the waist, ignoring her pounding fists and screams.

Angela leaned over the railing and helped Wade wrestle Samantha onboard while Kyle pulled Neil back to the surface by the rope.

Samantha fell to the deck of the ship. It knocked her breath out. She lay there, trying to gasp so she could scream again.

Wade made it onto the boat. He helped Kyle pull Neil up.

Angela opened her kit and quickly got the medical box out.

Samantha barely felt the sting of the needle. Her heart was broken. “Kill me. Lost them. Can’t live now.”

Angela motioned to Grant.

Grant used a voice he didn’t feel. “I’m the captain. This is my ship, and you belong to me now!”

Samantha didn’t fight him. She didn’t care.

Old magic settled over the boat and locked her new owner into place.

Neil boarded and fell to his knees next to her. “It’s okay, Sam. Grant’s going to let you go.”

Samantha kept sobbing. The drugs hit her an instant later. She stilled; her sobs became whimpers of unimaginable pain.

“What’s wrong with her mind?” Kyle scanned the other ship, where Chad was still frozen in place on the deck. Kyle didn’t know how long the spell would last.

“Babies.” Wade gasped in air. “She thinks he killed the twins.”

“My babies!” Samantha surrendered to the darkness.

Neil held her close. *She’s alive. Thank you, God. Thank you!*

“We’ll get her home and she’ll be okay.” Wade glared at them all. “Right?”

Angela wanted to say yes, but each person handled trauma differently. “We’ll help her.”

She gestured toward the bridge, where Grant was clearing glass so they could set up a cot. “Let’s get her into dry clothes and set up an IV. I’ll do what I can for her. Our medics will finish it when we get home.”

Neil saw Chad standing on the deck of the whaling ship. Chad was naked and bleeding lightly from several places, but he was unharmed otherwise.

Neil glowered. “Why is he still breathing?”

Angela shrugged. “I thought you might want to let him know how we feel about his actions. See to your mate first. Then he’s all yours.”

Grant frowned. “Can I do it now or does she have to be awake? This feels bad.”

“Try it.” Angela observed as Wade and Neil began stripping Samantha’s shivering body of the wet clothes.

“You’re free now, Samantha. And never let anyone do this to you again!”

Nothing happened.

Angela shrugged. “It was worth a try. We’ll cover it after we convince her that Chad lied.”

Grant didn’t understand what had happened. “What did he tell her?”

Angela was still putting the pieces together. “I think he told her he had the babies in that bag.”

“Does it matter that he lied?”

“Sadly, no. If you can capture us, it still counts. The magic laws are very cruel. We don’t even have to agree for it to be binding. Sherman was wrong about that.” She wiped water from her arms and face. “It’s part of why we don’t talk much about our gifts or what we can do. It’s also why I had to stop holding public lessons. The normals are learning too much about us.”

Grant stiffened. “I’m a normal.”

Angela put a hand on Grant’s shoulder. “No, you’re one of us. You just happen to be normal, too.”

Grant took a chance. “I don’t want to be...”

“I know. But you and Ray need to work that out before I’ll agree. If it comes down to your relationship and becoming like us, I would hope you’d pick Ray.”

“I would. I love that man.”

Angela nodded. “So do I.”

Angela and Kyle stood watch while Neil and Wade took care of Samantha. It was impossible to determine all of her injuries right now, but so far, nothing was life-threatening except for her state of mind.

Neil’s rage continued to grow as he cared for her. “Broken wrist and fingers. Be careful putting the shirt on her.”

“I will.” Wade’s anger was also building. “Broken knee, or maybe dislocated. Not sure.”

Neil and Wade slowly brought the sweatpants up and lifted her hips. They felt her lighter weight. “I don’t think she was fed at all.”

“Maybe nothing to drink either. Her lips are cracked and she’s running a fever.”

Neil looked across the ships. He met Chad’s eyes.

Chad started screaming again. He pissed down his own leg.

Neil resumed caring for his mate. “Hold that thought, Mr. Time. I’m going to make it happen in a few minutes.”

Wade wanted to kill the man, too, but his rage was under control compared to Neil’s. “I’ll get her IV set up. You go handle that piece of shit so we can leave.”

Samantha needed real medical care. She couldn’t wait while Neil tortured Chad. “I only need a minute.”

Angela was there to hand him a dry rifle. “Great idea.”

Neil lifted and aimed in a bare second. He pulled the trigger twice in rapid succession.

Blood split across Chad’s stomach, darkening.

Chad shrieked as the slugs plunged through his abdomen and split him open. Guts fell to the wet deck and turned it red.

Chad screamed endlessly as his innards kept spilling out, but he couldn’t follow them to the deck. He felt it all, but he couldn’t move.

Neil's third shot opened a hole in Chad's forehead, but it still didn't break Kyle's freeze spell. Chad died standing up with his insides on the bloody deck by his boots.

Angela nodded in satisfaction. "Disemboweled by bullets. That might be a new one for us."

Grant motioned toward the whaling ship. "Kyle can probably sail it back, or maybe we can tow it."

Angela denied him. "Leave it right there. Get us back to the island."

Grant fired up the engine while Kyle and Angela disconnected them from the whaling ship.

Angela saw a tiny fleck in the water to their right and turned away from it before anyone else noticed. *Jeff and Kimmie can also sail that ship. It will get them back to America. Their lifeboat won't.*

Kyle was appalled by what had happened, but he also wanted his wife to be happy and she only was when she was working for the boss. When Jennifer saw Samantha, she would freak out.

Angela felt his concern. She put it to rest. "Mistakes happen. We've both made our share. Just stand by her; don't let her quit the Eagles."

Kyle revealed the other half of his dilemma. "She's pregnant. She doesn't need to be in your army. And I don't want her to be."

"Because I lied."

Kyle gestured angrily. "Yes! You told them you didn't know any of this was going to happen!"

Angela still didn't deny it even though Wade and Neil had heard him. "Get us home, Grant. This drama can wait."

As they pulled away, the diaper bag bobbed to the surface. A sharp wave toppled it, spilling two lifelike dolls into the water. They quickly sank out of view.

6

"I guess they cleared the ship." It was dark now and chilly to all of them. They were glad as the dark shape of their island came into view. If not for the radar and the lit-up cruise ship, they might not have known the island was here.

Angela nodded tiredly at Grant's comment. The cruise ship was alive with guards and work crews. It was a relief.

Their arrival was noticed before they got closer. Guards lifted night vision glasses and radios to call a warning.

Grant reduced speed as they approached the bay. He keyed the mike. "Rescue ship coming in."

A cheer went up from the guards.

Samantha jerked awake. Her eyes went around them wildly in the darkness. "My babies?!"

"On the island, Sam." Wade hated how broken she sounded, but he didn't know what to do for her. This wasn't a battered woman months after the fact. This was hours old and painful to witness.

Samantha drew in a deep breath. “I’m not dreaming.”

Neil gave her the basics. “No, we’re here. You’re home now. Chad’s dead.”

Samantha’s stomach clenched. *He’ll be in my brain forever, alongside Henry and Melvin.* She shivered in the cool air.

Neil took off his jacket and started to put it over her.

Samantha jerked away from his heavy hand, smacking into the wall of the bridge.

Neil stopped, heart clenching.

Angela slid over and gently helped Samantha back into the cot. “It’s okay. Deep breaths and we’ll have you back with your babies in less than an hour.”

Samantha trembled. Her eyes went to the dark water alongside of the ship. She peered through it desperately. *What is that?*

She leaned down, trying to view through the waves. *Is that a diaper bag?*

Samantha knew they were home, but her mind insisted the diaper bag could have floated this far. That tiny hand peeking from the top of the bag haunted her.

“Grab her!”

Angela and Neil caught Samantha by the arms as she tried to run to the side of the boat.

“No! My babies!”

Wade quickly gave her another mild dose of the sedative they were running low on.

Samantha sagged in their arms, but her screams didn't stop until the drugs yanked her under.

Neil and Angela got her into the cot again and kept their hands on her to make sure she stayed there.

Neil stared at Angela in terror. "I don't know how to help her through this." He knew Angela had gone through hell. "Do you?"

Angela didn't make a promise she couldn't keep. "She needs time, love, and constant supervision until she accepts what happened and moves on."

Neil had already planned on all that. "How will we know when she's improving?"

"She'll get pissed. Be ready to give her outlets that get her used to the water again or you'll never get her off the island."

Wade glared. "Let her stay scared of it, then, because she's never leaving our island again! She'll stay there where she's safe and someone else can run into the fire!"

Neil recognized Wade's choice and nodded.

Angela didn't answer.

Chapter Thirty-Two
You Know Why

1

“**I** think she’s waking up.” Terry was disgusted at Samantha’s condition. She had a broken wrist, broken fingers, open sores on her bald head, a dislocated knee that he’d already popped back into place, a beaten face, and bruises all over her body from Chad’s fists. The only thing she hadn’t been subjected to was rape, as far as he could tell. When Tonya was released from the jail, she would do an exam and verify it.

Angela waited, ignoring her exhaustion and sore arm as she squeezed the tennis ball in her pocket ruthlessly. It had become a control for her nerves, for her new impatience.

The medical tent was full of people, including Candy and Conner, who were occupying the corner wing with their new daughters and a small heater. They’d told Candy about the cancer a little while ago. She’d known something was wrong, but she had been scared to have herself tested.

The entire tent was warm and clean now. It was a huge change from the way things had been when she left. Angela was happy with her camp.

Samantha heard babies crying. *Even in my dreams, I'm being haunted.*

Other noises slowly came to her—people talking, utensils clanking, slurping, steps crunching on the dirt and gravel. *Where am I?*

Samantha began remembering things. The clearest was the loss of her children. *I wish I was dead.*

“She’s awake now.” Neil looked over at Tobias.

Tobias began checking her vitals while he scanned her mind.

Samantha flinched away at the touch of a male. She opened her mouth to scream.

Neil placed one of their sons into her arms. He stayed ready to grab the baby if she freaked out again.

The familiar weight and scent of her offspring snapped Samantha’s eyes open. She stared at the live, squirming baby. Her mind refused to accept it, however. *It’s another trick. This is someone else’s baby.*

Neil nodded to Wade.

Wade lowered the other infant into Sam’s hurt arm. He kept a hand on the baby to help with the weight, but he didn’t touch her. Angela’s warning went through his mind. *She won’t want to be touched by a man for a while. Give her space and love. The rest will work itself out.*

Samantha stared at the infants who were now craning their necks to reach a breast.

Neil took the next step. He untied the front of her shirt and helped both babies latch on like he had before she'd been taken.

The babies nursed hungrily, whimpering and straining to get closer.

Samantha's slow wake finally began to take effect. "You saved them!"

Neil decided to let the details go for now. "They're both fine, and you will be, too."

She glanced around the medical bay in sudden fear. "Chad. I killed his father."

"And I killed Chad, so we're all good."

Sadness flooded Samantha's face. "No. I made a deal. I can't be here with them. I can't stay."

Jeremy's son tangled tiny hands into her open shirt and suckled harder.

Samantha began to cry.

"Grant owns you now." Neil waved the man over.

Grant put a hand on Samantha's ankle, making her flinch.

Sam shuddered as she stared at him. Old magic lit up their skin where it connected. "Master."

Her defeated tone brought fresh anger to everyone, but especially to Grant. He hated this. "I release you, Samantha, with two conditions."

She waited, afraid to have any hope.

"You have to try to be happy again. All of Chad's rules are void. He's dead. I won you. Let him go and do as I say."

Samantha didn't have a choice if her men weren't defending her. Heavier sadness settled into her heart. "I'm broken now. You want to trade up."

Neil winced.

Wade's rage sent him out of the medical tent.

Grant let go of her ankle. "You have to stay on the island until you heal up. Once the medics clear you, our bond is broken and you're free." They'd all agreed on that so she was surrounded by people who would watch her. The last place Sam needed to be right now was near water.

Samantha looked at the feeding boys again. She woke another level from her captivity. "That's it? Don't you want to hurt me, too?"

Grant controlled his anger. He mentally replayed Chad's death and decided it had been too quick. "No. I want you to recover and be happy again. You're safe now, with the people who love you."

Samantha spotted Angela lurking, watching her. Another flash of the fight came to her mind. She waited to be punished for firing on the alpha.

Neil hated the submissive reaction from Samantha. "Can you help her?"

Angela wanted to, but she couldn't. "Not yet. Right now, she needs you and the kids. Make sure she can always see them, and make sure you *never* use a diaper bag."

Samantha tensed up. Panicked words rolled from her mouth. "I saw the hand. He had babies in

that bag! They drowned! I should be dead. Why am I not dead?!”

Neil ran a gentle hand over her bare brow. “Easy, Sammi. Easy.”

Samantha allowed that familiar name and touch to comfort her. She was able to get control of her panic this time. “I’m okay. It’s okay.”

Neil tugged the receiving blanket up over her chest so she didn’t get chilled in the cold air surrounding the tent. “I’ll take care of you. It will never happen again.”

Angela reconnected Samantha to the hive. “We’ve all missed you. We’re all here for you.”

Voices came through the hive, apologizing, vowing to help her, and declaring hatred for her abductor.

Their support helped Samantha control her mind so she could tell them things she thought were important. “Chad said he was Invisible.”

Conner grunted. “It’s too bad you didn’t unlock him. That would have broken the cold bonds. Our kind can’t enslave each other.”

“True.” Tobias shrugged. “Well, she’ll know it for next time.”

Wade glowered from the flap where he’d stopped to listen. “No! There won’t be a next time. She’s staying right here!”

Samantha’s tears came again, but they weren’t full of pain and panic this time. They were tears of relief. “My babies!”

Neil motioned. “She’s a little clearer now. Show her the rest.”

Angela held up a small recording device. “This is what he used to trick you.” Angela hit play.

The sound of crying babies was identical.

Angela switched it off as Sam tensed. “He must have recorded it while you were changing diapers. He also took Amy’s dolls. That’s what was in the bag.”

Samantha wanted to believe them. Hope was trying to bloom. “I saw hands.”

“The dolls were lifelike, Sam.” Neil tried to trigger her memory. “We even joked about mixing them up.”

Samantha recalled that moment. She stared at her nursing sons again. “It was all a lie?”

Everyone nodded.

Samantha drew in a deep breath and tested that theory. “Chad framed Tonya.”

She tensed, waiting for the magic to punish her for betraying Chad.

When nothing happened, relief finally took priority. Samantha sobbed. “He’s dead!”

People nodded coldly.

Her sobs echoed again. This time, the feeling of it being over spread through the tent. Samantha had been hurt, but she was alive and her abductor wasn’t. It was almost a best-case scenario.

Angela stepped outside as Samantha kept crying and Neil tried to comfort her.

Wade stomped off.

Adrian glanced over from his post near the restaurant. He'd switched to guard duty upon their arrival.

Angela scanned the quiet, calm town as she joined him. It had been cleaned and restocked from the ship's supplies. Angela assumed it had also been searched again. Adrian was thorough and he would have needed to keep people busy while they were gone. Cleaning the town wouldn't have covered it all.

"We did do a second search of the ship and the tunnels. No other backpacks. We moved the ones from the ship into a locked crate and stored it at the jail." Adrian knew she would want the evidence if there was a trial for Tonya. "I assume Chad is no longer a threat?"

"No."

"Good."

She noted the new lights hanging from eaves and the sound of a freezer humming inside the restaurant. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Adrian turned away to keep from saying more. He was relieved that she was back and unharmed. Seeing Samantha had reminded him it hadn't been that long since Angela's life had been in danger, too. He wanted to hold her, to press kisses to her face, to cry with her to help release the pain she was bottling up over Samantha being hurt so badly.

Angela motioned Zack over. "Tonya has been cleared of all charges. She is being released now.

Gather an escort and bring her here to the medical bay. Let's have all our mothers sleep in there with Samantha tonight. I believe it might help her believe she's really free."

Zack didn't ask questions even though he had a lot of them.

Angela felt weariness threatening her mind. She pushed it aside to finish getting them all settled for the night. "Update me."

Jennifer came from the shadows of the tent where she'd been observing in horror. Samantha's pain was awful. *I'll never be able to make this up to her.*

Angela sighed. *I know how that feels.*

Jennifer consulted her book. "The ship is clear. We put a skeleton crew on it."

"I want them all on the island. Tell Ray to shut down everything he can and then come join us. No one stays on that ship anymore unless there's a full crew of guards to keep things covered."

Jennifer was glad to hear it. "We didn't find Sherman."

"No worries; we did."

Jennifer kept going as she saw Sherman's death in Angela's thoughts. "Everyone has been fed and watered. We have entertainments going in the tunnels. The bodies from last night were dumped, and the mess is mostly cleaned up, as you can see. We've also locked the barn."

Angela didn't discuss the gear they were now protecting in there. "Next?"

“That’s it, unless you want the nightly reports?”

“No.” Angela yawned. “It’ll wait until morning. You’re off-duty now. Go spend some time with your husband and kids.”

Jennifer lingered. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. Go on now. You can tell Samantha that later. Right now, she doesn’t need more tears.”

Jennifer walked away with her chin down and confidence rattled once again.

Neil came to the tent flap. “Sam’s asleep.” The medic was watching her and the babies who were still draining Samantha’s engorged breasts.

“The painkillers will make that worse, but she needs the rest.” Angela waited in case Neil felt like he needed to vent.

Neil reached out slowly.

Angela allowed his hug, but she didn’t like it. *I don’t want to cry!*

Neil chuckled as he drew back. “Too late.”

Angela wiped her eyes. “Why?”

Neil turned to stare at Samantha from the flap. “You know why.”

Angela did. She walked away before he could move on to the next thing he wanted.

Angela felt the cool wind, and changed her mind. She motioned to Zack, who was getting ready to go to the jail. “I want all of them released on their own recognizance.”

“Is that wise?” Letting someone out of jail on their word of honor wasn’t smart in Zack’s opinion.

“Yes. All of their alleged offenses will be investigated and handled, but not tonight. There’s no heat in the jail and they haven’t been found guilty. Making them suffer the weather is cruel and unusual punishment.”

“You’re the boss.” Zack went toward the dark path with his escorts.

Amy ran by them and ducked into the medical tent. She’d been told she could visit Samantha now.

Dog followed the little girl.

Angela went to a group of Eagles standing nearby. “I need a packet of cocoa mix and any coconut candy you have. I’ll make a good deal.”

Kyle came over to join Neil at the tent flap. “I’m happy for you, man.”

Neil was watching Angela now. “Thank you.”

“You know it.” Kyle had been stewing on things during the ride home and the trip to the town with Samantha’s almost lifeless body on the stretcher. “She did know it was going to happen. Which means she knew every time any of us would get hurt.”

Neil nodded. “Including herself.”

“Shouldn’t you be pissed?”

“Yeah, and Wade still is.”

“But?”

Neil blinked away emotional tears. “She let Samantha live. We got her back and Wade didn’t die. It changed for us this time.”

“Is that good enough?” Kyle wanted to be able to let it go.

Neil wiped his face. “It is for me. I’ve screwed up so much. I was terrified she’d take it out on my family. Knowing she won’t will let me accept it.”

Kyle still wasn’t sure that was good enough for him. “She’s picking who lives and dies... Like a God.”

“No, like an alpha.” Tobias joined them. “This is why alphas exist. If someone doesn’t pick, then those deaths are random. Just as many evil souls will be spared as good ones. She’s changing the odds.”

Kyle’s sharp mind went to a problem with that. “Won’t it disrupt the balance between good and evil?”

Neil’s attention was snagged. “Yeah. What happens when there’s more good than bad?”

“We’ll have peace until that balance changes.” Tobias shrugged. “If her heirs can keep it tilted, we might have peace for thousands of years even without the Creator’s return.”

“Do you really believe that’s going to happen?” The stories were too farfetched for Kyle sometimes.

Tobias’s voice firmed into eager dread. “If your wife was in danger...”

Neil got the point. “So we need to figure out how to *not* kill her before she does kill us, so she and the Creator can be reunited.”

Tobias laughed. “Yep. Sounds like fun if we can do it.”

Kyle scowled. “And if we can’t?”

Tobias looked toward Cate, who had come up with Amy. “I wonder if Joey’s saving us all seats in hell?”

Angela finished her trading and then whistled sharply to get attention. “I’m calling a mandatory camp meeting, right here, at 8 a.m.”

Small cheers broke out from the missing mission team’s loved ones.

Angela didn’t confirm their suspicions. *I still need the meeting to go my way.* She went to the restaurant. “Excuse me, please. I have a cake to bake.”

2

“I smell chocolate.” Stuart grinned at the other brawlers. “She really did bake us a cake!”

The jail group was in good spirits, for the most part. Their voices echoed through the jungle and woke some of the sleeping people in the medical tent and in the barn.

Angela heard the group coming. She stepped out onto the porch of the restaurant and put her finger to her lips.

The guards quieted, realizing most of the camp was sleeping.

Angela waved Jennifer to cover it. The girl had refused to go to bed like everyone else.

Jennifer pointed at the medical tent. “We have things ready in there for most of you. Pam and Ralph can go into the tunnels. Stanley will show you two where to sleep for tonight.”

Tonya came through the middle of the tired group. She lifted her chin against the stares and went into the medical tent. Tonya was thrilled to be out and sad for all that Samantha had gone through, but she was also glad of it. *Angela will go get the mission team now. These people won't settle for just one rescue.*

Tobias and Rico glanced up at her in welcome.

Tonya missed them as she looked for Samantha.

Wade and Neil opened their eyes and glared from the chairs on either side of Sam.

Tonya took a pair of gloves from the folding desk. She saw Samantha was sleeping, and went to Candy, who wasn't. “Let's get you checked out real quick. Unless you want to wait for a different medic?”

Candy smiled at Tonya. “I'd rather have you. Welcome back.”

Tonya nodded politely and got to work.

Conner took the babies and put them in the warmed incubator. He was glad when Tonya pulled the curtain shut around Candy's cot. The male medics kept forgetting it.

Pam watched for a minute, then headed toward the tunnel hatch. She didn't expect people to talk to her, but she was glad to be out of the jail cell. She

refused to think about finding a leftover bottle from the matches. *I can do this.*

Ralph waited to be scolded and given a labor punishment at the very least. His sadness and disappointment in himself was obvious.

Tim came from the small bonfire. “Would you like to stay with us tonight?” Tim indicated the sleepy congregation that had been about to end their prayer service and go to bed.

Ralph started to refuse, but the warmth from their preacher was hard to resist. It would let him have a night away from Daisey, who was always eager to nag him when he didn’t do what she wanted. That part of marriage, he hadn’t missed. “Sure.”

Tim put an arm around Ralph’s shoulders and led him toward the fire.

Jennifer scowled. She glanced through the restaurant window at Angela, who was also observing them. *Is that breaking your deal?*

No. That’s offering comfort. Angela came back to the door.

The brawlers were taking seats on the porch, and talking about things that had happened. “Can I sign you all up as our first island police force?”

Cheers echoed, waking people in the medical tent.

Samantha didn’t budge. Neither did the happy babies sleeping in her arms.

Neil and Wade glanced around, verified things were okay, then resumed dozing in their folding chairs.

Rico finally caught Tonya's attention and smiled at her through his bruises. She'd already finished Candy's exam and come to the small desk to record the results.

Tonya nodded back and began filling out charts for all their patients. Terry was on duty now, but Tonya already knew she couldn't sleep yet.

Terry saw the brief exchange and remembered Rico's confession. He opened his mouth to tell Tonya.

Rico's dismayed expression made him stop.

Terry turned away before Tonya noticed.

3

Angela wiped flour from her arm as she stepped from the restaurant. The brawlers and the few people who were still awake were enjoying small slices of cake. She'd stayed another hour to help the cooks make cinnamon coffee cakes for breakfast. It had been nice. She hadn't spent much time doing normal chores and enjoying good company. It reminded her of being a rookie in Adrian's army.

"You were my prize student."

Angela laughed to cover her jump. He was right next to her. She hadn't heard his approach.

"You need sleep."

"I'm about ready now."

Adrian motioned to the room above the restaurant. "I can put down a sleeping bag...for us."

Angela wanted to. Sleeping on his chest had been amazing. "I'll stay in the medical tent tonight."

Adrian would have been surprised if she'd agreed. "I should go below."

She heard his reluctance and understood he needed some space from Sadie. "Maybe you should put a sleeping bag in the loft for yourself."

He grinned. "Maybe I will. Goodnight, Boss."

"And to you." Angela went to the medical tent, yawning. She found an empty chair and dropped out a few seconds after sitting down.

Tonya came over with a blanket and covered her up. "Sleep well. You did good."

No one worried over her being so close to Angela. Tonya wasn't acting guilty and Samantha had told everyone Chad framed her. The few people who hadn't been sure let it go. She was innocent.

Tonya felt the mood shift again. She was relieved but also worried. *They aren't telling me something. I can feel it.*

Rico smiled again as she walked by his cot.

Tonya's awareness grew. *Whatever's going on is connected to him.*

Tonya let it go for now. Spending time in jail had reminded her of the past and who she used to be. *I'm never going back to that life. I'll die first.*

Tobias saw it all. He didn't want Rico to have that type of advantage. He opened his mouth.

Tonya scowled deeply. “You have zero chance of me falling for you. Stop it, before things get ugly.”

Jealousy ran over his face. He sneered toward Rico. “What about him?”

Tonya blushed. “That’s none of your business!”

Watching from the flap, Morgan groaned silently. *Not good. Kenn better get back soon or he might not have anything to return to.*

“I need to crash.” Kyle stopped by Morgan’s post over the medical tent. “Keep an eye on Jenny?”

Morgan hesitated. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to restart that.”

Kyle knew things were awkward, but he wanted to make sure Jennifer was taken care of. Seeing Samantha so broken had reminded him that his wife still needed another protector.

Jennifer’s orbs lit up bright red.

Morgan chuckled. “Your wife wants a word.”

Kyle went to her, bracing for a tirade.

Jennifer kept her voice down. “You’re sentencing Morgan to death. Letting Pam keep him charmed is only the tip of the iceberg. I’ll kill him next time and not feel a bit guilty about it. I don’t want a safety net. If you die, I’ll get by or not, but you’re never allowed to force me into a relationship. Got it?!”

Kyle kept going against his better judgement. “Maybe there’s someone you do—”

Jennifer walked away. “Whatever. It’s their funerals.”

Kyle chuckled. "Okay. You win."

Morgan was glad Kyle was going to stop pushing them together now, but he was already missing the time he'd gotten to spend around her.

Tobias caught Morgan's eyes through the tent window.

Morgan followed his gesture to find Hannah standing in the nearby shadows, staring at Adrian in similar longing.

Morgan sighed. *Okay. I give, too.* He left his post and joined her at the barn. "I'm not Adrian, but I'll make sure you're happy when it's finished."

Hannah scanned him from top to bottom. A smirk curved her lips. "I thought you belonged to the enforcer."

"I do, but she doesn't want me, so I need a companion who doesn't expect much."

"Companion or relief source?"

Morgan knew that wouldn't be enough for him. "Companion. Anyone can get me off. I need someone who can keep me on the edge." Hannah was cute, stacked, and in the Eagles. She was a perfect way to forget about his heartache.

Hannah felt the same way about Morgan. He wasn't Adrian, but he would distract her enough to make life here tolerable. Hannah shrugged. "Kiss me and we'll see if it's possible."

Morgan pretended she was the one he wanted. His arm slid around her curvy body. He kissed her softly, slowly, body lighting up.

Hannah kissed him back, delighted by the sparks.

Jennifer felt a flutter in her stomach. Joy bloomed in her heart. *I felt the baby move!* She rotated toward Kyle so he could share in the moment with her.

Jennifer saw Morgan's embrace.

A tiny thread of jealousy went through her mind. Rage flared to life and turned her eyes red.

And then she controlled her reaction. *That didn't happen.*

She walked away.

Kyle caught it all. He stored the moment to use in the future like he'd planned all along. *I knew I was right.*

4

Adrian tossed his sleeping bag out on the loft floor of the barn. He knelt to straighten it out.

Thump!

He glanced down and saw a shadow come through the doors. Adrian paused.

Dog staggered to the ramp and began climbing it. He belched and whimpered as he tried to walk.

“Are you okay?”

Dog came over to Adrian and leaned against him. *I helped clean up. Those cans are empty now!* Dog chuffed, blowing out rancid beer breath.

Adrian stared. “Are you drunk?”

Dog flopped down on the bottom of the sleeping bag and groaned again.

Adrian took a chance. He reached out and gently rubbed the wolf's huge head.

Dog leaned into the caress, pretending it was Marc.

Adrian felt bad for the animal. "He'll be home soon."

Adrian opened the sleeping bag and crawled inside, sliding his feet around the wolf.

Dog buried his snout under the edge of the sleeping bag.

"Aww. Poor Dog." Adrian put his head down. "You gonna sleep with me tonight?"

Dog groaned again.

Adrian was happily surprised. "Cool. Just don't puke in my—"

Dog vomited.

Adrian sighed as warm wetness began soaking into his pant leg. "Sleeping bag."

Dog pushed himself up.

"So you're just going to puke and go? No kiss goodnight?"

Dog lifted his tail.

Adrian scrambled out of the way. "You're such an ass!"

Dog's legs buckled. He dropped, groaning again.

Adrian wanted to be mad, but he couldn't. He began stripping his clothes, frowning. "You need

coffee and a shower.” The wolf’s smell was already getting to him.

Dog peered up at him with drunken, miserable golden orbs.

“Serves you right for getting drunk.” Adrian finished wiping off and then he took his kit and went to the ramp. “Come on. I’ll get you cleaned up and feeling better. If people see you like this, they’ll think you’re dangerous.”

Dog growled lowly.

Adrian rolled his eyes. “The only thing dangerous about you right now is your aim.”

Dog forced his queasy body to follow his enemy to the shower. When Adrian stripped and waved him in, Dog went without a fight. *Never drinking again.*

Adrian snorted. “Yeah, we all think that and then the next party happens and we get smashed. It never changes.”

Dog stood under the water and tried not to puke again. He hated the aftertaste.

Adrian soaped him up, not feeling odd about showering with a wolf.

Dog shut his eyes against the soap and went back to pretending it was Marc caring for him.

Now Adrian did feel something. He blew out his bitterness and kept working. “Marc’s wife does the same thing. I’m just his damn babysitter.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Free Will

1

Angela felt the warm hand before it settled onto her shoulder. She opened her eyes. “That’s the nicest wakeup I’ve had in a while.”

Terry chuckled and retreated so she had room to stretch. “They’re gathering.”

Angela checked her watch. Alertness began seeping in. Excitement bloomed. “It’s finally time.”

Terry misunderstood. “Not yet. You have a few minutes still for the bathroom and a fast cup of coffee if you like.”

Angela scanned the patients. Most of them were awake and doing morning things she didn’t stare at. They didn’t have enough dividers here to give everyone privacy. They needed to get people moved out of this tent and into better conditions. *But the clinic is too small. We’ll need to expand it.*

Adrian entered the tent with two mugs. He gave one to Angela without making eye contact that might make her feel uncomfortable. He loved looking at her when she first woke up. Her scars made no difference. *She’ll always be beautiful to me.* “Do you want me to add that to the list?”

Angela nodded. “I hope it won’t be needed, but there’s no sense in just hoping. Give it to Neil as a side project.”

“I will.” Adrian saw Samantha feeding her babies and touching them. She couldn’t stop feeling their hands and legs. “She needs therapy.”

Wade heard that and nodded. He was helping Samantha care for the twins, and making sure they weren’t hurt in one of her panic attacks. She’d had two of them overnight, but they hadn’t needed to sedate her again because she was able to see the babies.

Angela shook her head at Terry when the medic would have gone over to talk to Samantha. “Leave her alone for now. Let her finish waking up.”

Terry understood. Samantha wasn’t all here yet and it had nothing to do with the drugs she’d been given or her injuries. Almost losing her children had terrified her mentally.

Angela didn’t tell him it was more than that. They would all have to help Samantha readjust. Chad had messed up her sense of reality by pretending the dolls were alive. His clever ruse had worked too well.

Samantha looked at her across the tent. Panic lurked under the surface.

Angela nodded toward Neil, who was coming in with damp hair and quick steps that said he felt guilty for being away from her even long enough to take a shower. *Count on your mates and your friends. Every day will get a little easier.*

Samantha accepted that. She tried to make herself relax. *It's over. I'm home. We're all alive.*

Neil hurried over and began repeating those sentences in low whispers as he helped her shift the babies around her casts for burping.

Angela turned toward Adrian. "It's quiet."

He yawned hard enough to make his jaw click. "People are okay now. Most of the drama is over. They're settling down."

"I meant the dreams." She gestured. "They all got a good night's sleep. No screams to start the day."

Adrian realized she was right. "The mission team went quiet. What does that mean?"

Angela couldn't answer because she didn't know. "Let's get the meeting rolling."

"Hang on." Neil didn't want to upset Samantha, but this couldn't wait. He'd thought about it every time he helped Samantha calm herself or take her medication for her injuries.

Angela sat back down with her mug and waited.

Neil didn't yell, but his voice was loud enough for people outside the tent to hear him. "You've known Invisibles are a problem for almost a year now. I want a solution—today."

"What do you expect her to do?" Terry scoffed. "Unlock each person one by one?"

Everyone looked over at him.

Terry flushed.

Angela nodded. "That's exactly what we'll do. Neil can handle it."

Neil was shocked to have gotten what he wanted so quickly, without a fight. He marched toward the flap to get started.

“Neil.”

Neil stopped, hand coming up to brace on the support pole. “Please, don’t. Don’t give me a limit. Let me make them all like us.”

Angela sighed. “I want to. I do, but we can’t. Only unlock the ones who want it, and you can’t push the others.”

“Why?! It would end all of this!”

Angela rubbed sleep from her face. “Free will. It’s something about our design that I agree with completely.” Cody’s confirmation hadn’t solved the problem like she’d first thought. Her heart wouldn’t allow that to be taken away from her people, even if it really was what would be best for them. “We’ll always have these moments unless we can win them over honestly.”

Neil turned in shock. “Then what about all your plans for taking over control?” He didn’t care about their witnesses.

Neither did Angela, now. “Oh, I meant that. We’ll rule gently and they can join us at any time to have a full say in their future.” Angela rotated her ankle to wake it up. Spending the night in a chair was for young kids who didn’t feel it the next day.

Neil almost cried. “That won’t ever work on all of them! This is never-ending. You and Adrian lied!”

“No. It is possible.” She repeated what she’d been saying all along. “You strip away the layers a little at a time. Jealousy, hatred, and pride have to go first. Then you take the next layer. But you don’t leave gaping holes. You refill those craters with honesty, confidence, and free-thinking.”

“That will take a lifetime.”

She snorted bitterly at him. “Many lifetimes. Each generation will be better. In time, we’ll have peace from it.”

Neil only saw the negative side for his family. “We’ll never be safe off this island.”

“No, not us, but we can’t hide here, either. As the founders, our lives are required to be on the front lines.” Angela smiled sadly. “The blame with the fame.”

Wade recoiled. His mind matched training moments to her words in ugly threads. “You’ve been conditioning us. Never without permission. Take the blame with the fame. Accepting the hive mind. You traitor!”

“That’s enough.” Samantha’s rough voice echoed through the tent. “You knew what we signed up for from minute one.”

Wade refused to argue with Samantha. He glared at Angela.

Angela refused to change her mind. “Free will, or let someone else do it.”

Neil smothered the anger to keep from upsetting Sam further. “I’m calling a moral board meeting on

this and all the other shit you have planned. I want to be clear that all of us are in agreement.”

The hive lit up, blaring through all their minds.

Free will!

Free will, Neil!

Always free will!

Neil was forced to accept that he and Wade might be the lone dissenters. He picked up fear in a thin wave and made another connection. “They’re afraid. Of you.”

Angela knew. “They have concerns for their own freedom if we force the normals to be like us, but also about enslaving them. They just don’t want to cross me.”

“You won’t hurt anyone here on purpose.” Terry was certain of it. “Don’t they know that by now?”

Angela’s sadness filled the tent.

Samantha burst into tears, unable to take it.

Neil hurried over to comfort her.

Angela drew it back in. “Someone once said it’s better to be feared than loved. I always assumed they were bitter because they weren’t loved. I was wrong, but so were they. Both, at the same time, is the worst part of leadership. I’ve never felt so alone.”

Angela held up a hand to stop the declarations from those closest to her. “I was meant to carry most of this burden. The man who holds me up has been gone too long and I’m staggering a bit under the

weight. When he gets home, I'll be happier and then people will remember how much I love you all."

She went toward the flap. "Meet me on the pontoon bridge in two hours if you want to go for a dangerous ride that you may not return from." She glanced over her shoulder at Neil. "*You* are not invited." She didn't rule Wade out.

Sweet smells and obnoxiously loud birds greeted Angela as she stepped out into the bright sunlight with Adrian on her heels. People turned her way. They'd been listening.

"Are you going to get them now?"

"Who's going with you?"

"No mercy, Boss!"

Angela didn't get a chance to open the meeting like she was used to doing as the brawlers surrounded her with hope and comments. It threw her off a little.

Camp people shifted closer. Others came from their sleeping bags and breakfasts. Radios were switched on to transmit her words to those on duty out of sight and hearing distance. They studied her in hope, begging her to keep going. Samantha's rescue didn't have to be singular.

Angela kept scanning, ears tuning in other lowly spoken conversations.

"She might go get them now."

"Should we ask her again?"

"Yes. It's time."

"If anyone can rescue them, it's Angela."

"I agree. She brought Samantha home."

Angela was thrilled to find it was an even mix of descendants and normals. Almost everyone was in favor of staging another rescue. “I have to leave for a while.”

A cheer met her announcement.

Angela had been working on them, but she hadn’t expected that reaction yet from anyone but the scared friends and family of the mission team. “I want to bring them home where they belong.”

Another cheer filled the town.

“In the past, when I’ve left, things fell apart. People got sloppy and hurt. I also brushed against death a few times. Any of that could happen again.”

People immediately denied it.

“Not this time. You’re stronger now.”

“Adrian will protect you.”

“This camp will be fine. We need our missing people brought home.”

“Don’t go chicken on us now!”

Angela laughed. “Are you sure?”

“We are.” Zack already knew he was going along.

Angela finished the lesson she’d started with Zack the night of the land meal. “Tell me why.”

Zack gestured. “Mostly, the camp. There’s no way they would have been okay with so many of us leaving, especially you.”

The witnesses realized he was right.

“And now?”

“Now they’re demanding it. They’ve been having the nightmares, too.”

Angela nodded. “I also needed the lurker exposed. I had to wait until they struck. None of us could see very far ahead. We knew that meant the person hadn’t made the choice to attack. I had to wait.”

Stuart frowned. “What if they never did?”

“If they’d chosen not to attack, our sight gifts would have returned.”

Stuart stepped closer. “Are they back now? Can you see the mission team?”

“Yes. It’s ugly. They need help.” Angela tested them all. “What about Jennifer? I have to leave her in charge.”

No one spoke up right away this time. Jennifer had become their enforcer and they followed her orders, but they weren’t sure how they felt about her being in charge after letting Samantha get kidnapped.

Neil came to the flap in the silence, doing what his mate wanted. “Sam says she still trusts Jennifer. She isn’t blaming her for the actions of a madman.” Neil forced a smile at the girl. “Neither am I.”

Piper sulked, but she didn’t speak against it this time.

Piper hadn’t been here long enough to understand how Safe Haven worked in these moments. Jennifer had made a mistake. She would account for it and that wouldn’t happen again. Expecting perfection from every moment wasn’t reasonable.

The rioters were spread around the crowd and none of them were angry anymore. Learning that one of their kind was guilty, even if he was Invisible, had settled them down. Adrian didn't expect problems from them unless the normals tried to break the rules and Adrian knew that wouldn't happen. The party where descendants had revealed themselves had scared the normals into obedience.

Cody joined Adrian. He kept his voice down. "She did it. We can go now."

Adrian remembered his earlier observation about pride. "Not yet. She's still waiting on your dad to call her and ask for help."

Cody frowned up at him. "You're wrong, as usual. It was never a pride thing. She had to give him time to accomplish his mission. A rescue was always in her plans."

Angela brought up another issue she needed to handle. "Some of you knew about the affair. You didn't tell me because Charlie was involved. That's never allowed to happen again. If you know something, report it or you're not doing your job. Got it?!"

They nodded or refused to meet her eyes.

Charlie didn't look at anyone as people scanned the crowd for the offenders who'd caused them to be scolded.

Angela let it go, but she doubted it was over. The Eagles would always try to protect their leader from getting too upset to lead.

“So Jennifer is in charge of the camp?” Neil wanted to know who to go to if Samantha needed anything that required permission. His desire to unlock all the normals tugged at his mind. He would do it after Angela left and hope the temporary boss didn’t mind if he went ahead and pushed the others. At worst, he would be reprimanded; it was a small price to pay.

“Jennifer, Tonya, Neil, Daryl, and Morgan will share equal leadership. Any serious decision needs a 3/5ths majority.”

Morgan let go of Hannah’s hand and scowled. “I’m coming with you.”

Angela denied him. “You’re going to take a few days to yourself and then start training with Tobias to be our new surgeon.”

Heads turned toward Morgan in hope, proving the warning about him being needed.

“How long will we be gone?” Lisa missed Greg more than she’d ever thought possible.

“As long as it takes. Get your gear and a meal, and meet me on the pontoon bridge.”

Lisa was thrilled that she was being allowed to go. *Greg needs me.*

Tonya bounced little KJ on her hip, grinning. “You hear that? They’re gonna go get Daddy!” She didn’t care about leadership at all.

Angela didn’t promise to bring back any of them. She couldn’t. She didn’t know who was alive at this point. She swept the happier crowd. “Meet

me in two hours if you want to be considered for this run.”

The people listening from the tent behind her caught it that she hadn't scared the camp with the truth about possible deaths during the rescue.

“She always shields them from anything that might cause trouble.” Rico stared at Wade. “Is it right?”

Wade studied his mate and children. He was able to nod because Samantha was here and alive. *Angela gave me my heart back. Neil's right. We don't have to be pissed now.* “As long as it's about survival, yes.”

Samantha felt his mood shift. She didn't ask if he was going; she didn't need to.

2

“Hey.” Jennifer slipped into the medical tent. “Got a minute?”

“Yeah.” Samantha didn't look away from the babies now sleeping between her legs. Both twins had a cheek against her thigh and a hand curled around each other. She couldn't look away. *I'm not dreaming.*

Jennifer knew Samantha wasn't all here, but her conscience wouldn't let her wait any longer. “I'm sorry.”

Samantha rubbed her son's arms while she spoke. “He was watching all of us. He would have

found a hole in security on any shift. He hates...hated me.”

“Still, I’m sorry, Samantha. I should have walked you back to your cabin.”

Samantha rubbed a tiny arm. “Chad dragged me away from them. I’d hoped you would go to turn out the lights and find them, and Rico.”

Jennifer hated herself even more than she already had. “I’m so sorry!”

Samantha kept touching her children while her mind roamed empty halls.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Jennifer still didn’t have the complete story on how Samantha had been taken from the ship.

Samantha relived it, shuddering. “I heard fighting in the hall. I went out to see who it was. Chad was beating on Rico. He told me to come help, that Rico was trying to blow up the ship.” She shuddered again. “So I did.”

Jennifer waited, guilt increasing.

“He forced me to answer your call. Then he started hitting me because I wouldn’t leave the babies alone in the garden. I don’t remember anything else from that night. I woke up on his ship, in a cell. He ripped out my hair first.”

“Stop. Please.”

But Samantha couldn’t. Now that she was finally talking about it, the words wouldn’t stop. “He made me shoot up and then he hurt me.” Samantha ran a hand over her sore, bald head. “He started breaking parts of me until there wasn’t

anything left.” She looked at Jennifer with dead eyes. “I’m empty now. Can you fill me back up?”

Jennifer slowly nodded, aware of Neil and Wade listening in dread and hope. “I can try...but it might hurt.”

Samantha didn’t blink. “Nothing you can do will match what he did.”

Jennifer gently entered Samantha’s mind.

“What’s she doing?” Terry didn’t want Samantha to get upset again. He couldn’t take her screams.

“Looking for an open door.” Morgan remembered when Marc had done this for Angela. He’d followed Jennifer in to collect medical supplies for the rescue team. He and the others had all stopped to observe, hoping Jennifer could help their injured friend.

Jennifer grabbed the slippery mental knob. “Ready?”

Samantha’s hands clenched into fists. “Go.”

Jennifer jerked the door open all the way.

Light flooded into Samantha’s mind. It flashed images of her before the war, when she’d been alone and almost happy. It ramped up quickly to replay all the big moments of her life.

Samantha whimpered when Jeremy’s death came. “I still miss you!”

Jennifer waited until Chad’s evil fist swung toward Samantha. Then she slammed the door.

Samantha jumped. Fresh tears rolled over her cheeks. But the empty vacuum in her brain was gone. She listened in relief. “The crying stopped.”

Jennifer withdrew. “Whenever it starts up, you slam that door, okay?”

Samantha was already feeling more like herself. “I’ll be a door slammer.”

Jennifer chuckled, but she was guilty and sad. “Can I do anything else for you?”

Samantha drew in a shaky breath. “Don’t shut me out because you feel bad. I need my friends.”

Jennifer was crushed and humbled. “Never!” She hugged Samantha tightly, sending love.

Neil was glad of the moment. Samantha wouldn’t let him or Wade into her mind now and they didn’t want to shove in and violate her privacy.

Kyle had been observing from the flap. He glanced at the guard next to him. “The boss wants us to make up. Should I slam a door in your face or snot all over your shoulder?”

Daryl was surprised into a laugh. He grinned at Kyle. “How about you beat my ass again and we’ll call it even?”

Kyle shrugged. “If that’s how you want it.”

Daryl chuckled.

Kyle swung.

Daryl hit the ground, moaning.

Kyle walked away as people rotated toward them in disapproval. “Go get some food and then take over point duty in the tunnels.”

Daryl spat out blood. “How am I supposed to eat? You knocked a toof loose!”

Kyle shrugged again. “It’s not my mouth. Mine doesn’t run off without thought.”

Daryl laughed again, but pain laced it this time, reminding him that he’d made a mistake. “So we’re good now?”

“Yes, unless you’d like another beating.”

Daryl held his mouth. “Thanks, no.”

Molly ignored Daryl’s bloody mouth and his position on the ground as she came over. “Have you seen Monica?”

Daryl spat out blood. “Didn’t you hear? She took off right after the matches. She’s gone.”

“Gone where?” Molly didn’t understand.

“She left the island. She’s going back to America.”

Molly’s anger returned. “But I didn’t get to kill her!”

Daryl stood up, frowning. “Were you trying?”

Molly caught the tone. She smiled awkwardly. “Of course not. I’m just upset about what she did.”

“Okay.” Daryl wiped his face on his bandana. He studied Molly while cleaning up. *I don’t believe she was exaggerating for effect.*

Molly smiled at him again. “Don’t be silly. It was a joke. I was joking.” She walked away before he could call her on it.

Daryl wasn’t sure how to handle this one. *We don’t have Eagle rules for it yet.*

He considered Angela's words about removing the rookies. He sighed. *But we do have magic laws for it. I have to tell the boss.*

"Let that wait for the nightly report." Tobias came to the flap. "I need your permission for some things."

Daryl frowned. "Why me?"

"You're about to be one-fifth of leadership. You get to make the choices now."

Morgan and Jennifer lingered to listen. They didn't like it that Tobias was skipping them. Neil and Tonya didn't care. Leadership meant little to them now.

Daryl wasn't sure if he should be proud or scared. "What do you need?"

Tobias waved him inside while he spoke. "You know I gave Brittani her last exam."

Daryl nodded. "She was hoping you'd have good news for her where the other medics didn't."

"Well, I did give her an option, but she refused to talk about it."

Daryl wasn't surprised; he was sad. "I tried to tell her, too, but she said no to the abortion."

Tobias grunted. "I gave her a different option. I need you to handle the setup for it."

Daryl tried to smother the tiny thread of hope now wriggling in his gut. "You want to try to remove one or two?"

"No. I want to set up a communal living arrangement for anyone who's pregnant. She

doesn't want to rely on anyone but you. I need you to go over her head and do it anyway."

"I don't understand."

Neither did their audience. They listened in confusion.

Tobias didn't care who was listening. "When we live together, bonds form that keep our nerves steady, balance blood pressure, and regulate temperatures as a group. It's rather amazing what our bodies will do for each other in a communal setting."

Daryl tried to understand. "You want them all in a tent or something?"

"I was thinking a bunkhouse. They'll move in when they get pregnant and move out a few months after the birth, if they want to. It can be for families, too. Communal living is very healthy for our kind. We're not meant to be alone."

"You think it will help Brittani carry to term?"

Tobias refused to lie. "Maybe. I believe nature gave her three because she's in the right environment for it. The alpha's tree will need a lot of nests, or one big one where we all ensure the future of our kind."

Daryl understood Tobias had lived that way before. "When?"

"I was born into one. When it was ripped apart, nothing was ever the same again."

Daryl had to take any hope. "I'll bring it up at the next meeting, and I'll add it to my notes."

“If you wait, others will benefit from it, but not you and your wife. She’ll lose them all and maybe it will destroy your marriage before it’s even begun.”

Daryl was still able to feel fear for himself, too. *I can’t let that happen!* “I’ll talk to the boss about it before she leaves.”

Tobias smiled. “Good. Now go take your post before the enforcer gets upset.”

Daryl chuckled through his throbbing mouth. Tobias had a healthy respect for Jennifer. He didn’t want to draw her anger. *None of us do. She’s hell on wheels most days. She’s just plain hell the rest of the time.*

Daryl left the medical tent. He went by an arguing couple in the middle of the town, frowning at them both.

Grant didn’t notice. All he saw was Ray’s face lighting up. “You can’t leave. We need you here.”

Ray didn’t answer.

Around the meeting, people glanced at their friends and loved ones in dismay. All of them shook their heads. Arguments broke out.

“You’re not leaving.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“You don’t know how to rescue anyone. You can’t even shoot!”

“You’re not trained for this.”

“Please, stay here.”

“They left in the middle of February and we’re eighteen days into March now. They’ve been gone a long time. They need help.”

“I know, but let someone else do it!”

Angela walked away from it. People would make their choices and some would get upset, but this run was going to happen even if she had to do it with just the few Eagles she’d already picked out.

Near the tent, Sadie stared at Adrian in fear. “You’re going.”

Adrian nodded. “It’s my duty. The mission team needs me.”

“I need you!”

Adrian smiled at her. “I’ll be back. I promise. Now go get my kit from the shack bunker while I grab something to eat. I don’t want to be on a ship with an empty stomach.”

Sadie reluctantly did what he wanted. She already knew he wasn’t going to change his mind.

Adrian was proud of her. Sadie would do well here while he was gone.

Adrian glanced over at Panaji.

Panaji was staring at Sadie in longing that he was too inexperienced to hide.

Adrian approached the man. “I’d like to talk to you.”

Panaji paled. “I didn’t do anything!”

Adrian nodded. “And that’s why I’m talking to you. She’ll need a friend while I’m gone.”

Panaji was honored and scared. He confessed while hoping this didn't get him removed from the Eagles. "I can't. I want her."

Adrian smiled. "I know. So does everyone else."

Panaji frowned. "Why aren't you mad?"

"For the same reason Kyle isn't upset with Morgan and Neil likes having Wade around. You'll keep her safe while I'm gone."

Panaji's courage showed up. "What if she wants me, too?"

Adrian shrugged, refusing to look at Angela. "Then it's fate and I won't argue with that. It never works out when I do."

3

In the medical tent, Neil and Samantha stared at Wade.

Wade collected his kit from next to her bed. He drew on his Eagle jacket.

Samantha wanted to hug him and wish him well, but her mind cringed at the thought of being touched.

Neil didn't want Wade to go, but as an Eagle, he couldn't protest. The mission team definitely needed Wade. He had skills in multiple areas and he was cool in a crisis. "Be careful."

Wade held out a hand. "And you."

Neil shook with him as a lump came into his throat. "Don't get shot or anything, okay?"

Wade chuckled, brushing off the feel of danger trying to settle onto his wide shoulders. “Same to you.” Wade looked at Samantha.

Sam fought her terror and nodded. She tensed but held still as he leaned down.

Wade barely touched her bruised cheek with his lips. “I love you. Be safe.”

He went to the flap.

Samantha tried not to cry. “Wade!”

Wade stopped, turning.

Samantha let her heart speak. “We’ll wait for you. Come home!”

Wade understood how hard this was on her. He gave her a sexy grin. Then he was gone.

Samantha broke down again, unable to stop the tears.

Neil ignored her flinch and hugged her gently.

Samantha was able to allow it this time.

Neil tried to spread good thoughts. “Wade will be back. Nothing can kill him.”

Samantha shuddered as thoughts of Jeremy went through her mind. *That’s what he thought, too.*

Chapter Thirty-Four

Close

1

“**Y**ou know she’s not taking you along for your medical skills, right?”

Charlie snorted. He cast his line out into the shallow shark pond they’d created near the small cove.

Tobias and Charlie were both in jeans and tank tops, and relishing the warm sun on their skin. Neither of them had been able to enjoy that since they’d arrived. Drama and tension had prevented true enjoyment of the tropical island.

They’d grabbed their poles and tackle box while everyone else was packing. Charlie didn’t have much to gather. He wanted to spend this last hour on the island differently so he would have a better memory to take along.

“Well?”

“Yeah. She’s afraid to leave me here. She thinks I’ll take off like Jeff did. And Monica.”

Tobias glanced over from his chair. “Would you?”

Charlie scanned the calm ocean and sighed. “I’ve been considering it. I’m so messed up in the

head right now. If I just knew Tracy was okay and if the baby lived...”

Tobias put a worm on his hook. “Do you know what the hardest part of being an adult is?”

Charlie shrugged. “Stress?”

“Regrets. We’ve made so many mistakes that we spend all our time looking back, wishing we’d done things differently. It sucks.”

Charlie knew Tobias wanted a bond with him. “Why me?”

Tobias shrugged. “I don’t have a family now, other than my wives, and the other teenager I’d consider working with already has a strong parent here.”

Charlie frowned. “I have strong parents.”

“Not in the way I mean. They can’t teach you some of these things because their parents didn’t teach it to them.”

Charlie tried not to be snotty. “Okay. Teach me something they can’t and we’ll do this again when I get home.”

Tobias accepted the challenge. “It’s okay to be bitter about your childhood, even when your parents just want to forget about it. What you went through was wrong. It shouldn’t have happened. You’re allowed to be angry.”

Charlie stiffened. “You don’t know anything about my old life.”

“I know more than your mom says. The way you two act is enough to tell me it was awful.”

Charlie jerked his pole to snag the shark that had clamped down on his fish. “Yeah.”

Tobias cast his line toward the small fish pool to catch more bait. “Your mom hates herself for it. She’ll spend a lifetime making herself pay for those mistakes.”

Charlie didn’t want that. “She should let it go. We’re both alive and we’ve never been in the labs. It could have been worse.”

“Spoken like their son, but let’s face it—you’ve never gotten to vent about it. Your pranks were great, so I’ve heard, but that’s not justice.”

“Stop.” Charlie had started to let go of his hatred for Kenn. “I don’t want revenge.”

Tobias could feel that the boy meant it. “So it’s Tracy?”

Tobias jerked his line and caught the fish. He pulled it up and held it over so the boy could rebait his hook. The shark he was trying to catch had slipped away.

“It’s me. I let him beat on my mom for years. I should have stopped it.”

Tobias hated Kenn even more in that moment. “No, you were a kid. It’s not your fault—any of it.”

“I wish I could believe you, but she protected me. I didn’t know what was happening for a long time. When I figured it out, then he hit me more often...”

“Yes?”

Charlie’s anger returned. “He was trying to get me to use my gifts.”

“Yes. He knew all along. He still knows you’re hiding gifts from everyone. Don’t be surprised if he tries to get you to use them.”

Charlie snatched the line and yanked harder this time. The hook sank into the small shark’s mouth and stayed there. Charlie reeled it in and held it over the live well while Tobias cut the line. Someone would come by later and find dinner ready to be gutted and fried. “Should I use them?”

“That’s up to you, son. Just don’t let anyone push you into it. It should always be your choice.”

“Wars don’t allow that.”

“No, they don’t, but in our private lives, magic doesn’t have to be in the front as much, you know? You can have friends and fun without power.”

Charlie liked that image of the future. “Do you think there will come a time when magic is gone from the world?”

Tobias slowly nodded. “But not for years. So, we’ll use it while it’s here.”

Charlie chuckled, feeling a little better. “You know it.”

“I also know keeping the peace isn’t always the best way to handle things.”

Charlie felt the real lesson coming. He lifted a brow. “And?”

“You should make a scene when the time’s right and demand that Kenn be legally punished. It will help you and your mom move on without so much anger.”

Charlie grunted. He loved the idea. “My mom won’t go for that.”

Tobias shrugged. “Then use the magic laws and do it yourself.”

Charlie stiffened. “We can’t charm or curse each other. It’s against the rules.”

“No, but we can punish those who’ve wronged us.”

Charlie made a connection. Dismay crossed his face. “You’re winding me up so I’ll get Kenn in trouble and you can have Tonya.”

Tobias chortled. “I knew I picked the right teenager.”

Charlie grew cold. “Why do you think I’ll agree to this?”

“Because you hate Kenn as much as you ever have and so does your mom. That type of resentment doesn’t just go away.”

Charlie didn’t fall for it this time. “Now tell me the real reason.”

Tobias glanced toward the town they couldn’t see from here. “Tonya deserves better than an abusive Marine. She deserves someone who will love her and encourage her to be more than she is now.”

Charlie wasn’t happy with the turn this conversation had taken. He stood up, brushing the grass from his clothes. “Sorry, Tobias. You’ll have to find someone else to do your dirty work. I’m out.”

Tobias watched the boy walk away, but he wasn't upset. "If at first you don't succeed..."

2

There were too many people to fit on the pontoon bridge. They lined it and the beach, waiting for her. All of them were carrying a kit or wearing one, and their bodies were covered in gear, including the double vest setups everyone hated because they were so heavy.

Angela was touched. Her happiness spread out in front of her and rippled toward the crowd of willing fighters. *My army!*

Even people with no fighting experience were here, standing in small groups with others like themselves for comfort. They were her future Eagles and the future of Safe Haven.

Angela hefted her kit over her shoulder and strode down the hill to join them.

A path parted for her. Angela began picking her crew. "Ray, Trent, Zack, Jayda."

That last name brought frowns. The woman had released herself from the medical tent an hour ago, daring anyone to stop her.

Angela wasn't deterred. "Jayda will be better off with us, where she's needed." Angela motioned toward the waiting kids who expected to be left behind. "Cate, Cody, Charlie."

Adults who thought they would be picked over children protested.

“What?”

“You can’t take kids for this run!”

“Cate and Cody are my defenders. Charlie will help with medical and guard duties.” She scanned the crowd. “Adrian is my XO. He’ll pick three of you to help with his part of the run. I’ll take four more for my plans.”

Eager Eagles and camp members lifted hands or came forward.

Angela chose them based on her needs. “Dace, Erin, Piper, and Theo.” She sent smiles around. “Everyone else can volunteer for Daryl’s housing project. He needs a lot of help. I’d love that project to be finished by the time we return.”

“Hey! You can’t take our engineer.” Stuart waved at Theo. “He was already injured from the party. He needs to stay here and rest. And then work for us!”

Theo hadn’t been expected to be chosen at all. He looked at Angela in resignation. “I’ll stay and keep things together.”

Angela shook her head. “You want an adventure and you’re going to get it. Jennifer will draft a few people and put them to work on your projects.”

Stuart scowled. “Is that wise? We can’t afford a fire...” Stuart remembered Theo had been responsible for the explosion and fell silent.

Theo flushed under his bandaged nose and bruises at the reminder.

Angela smiled at him. “We all make mistakes. You were overworked. Don’t let that determine your future.”

Theo brightened. “So I can come with you?”

“Absolutely. We have others here who can learn to do that job. I need you along for this run.”

Stuart didn’t want any of them to go. “How long do you think you’ll be gone?”

“Three weeks or less.”

People relaxed. Three weeks would go by quickly and then their leader would be home with their missing members.

“Are we taking the cruise ship?” Trent didn’t like that idea, but he was willing if that’s what Angela thought was best. A good night’s sleep had restored some of his faith.

“No, we’re taking a different ride.” Angela pointed at the water, where a bright sunrise made the waves glisten like brilliant jewels. *Now, Saul.*

The submarine surfaced half a mile away, shedding sprays of salty water back into the ocean. It was an impressive display, causing people to point and stare.

Adrian felt like an idiot for missing it. “Was that there earlier?”

Angela nodded. “It’s been here for ten days.”

They all stared at the long underwater vessel, trying to imagine what it would be like to live in it for three weeks.

The hatch on the submarine opened. Saul’s big red head appeared. He scanned the beach and island,

then found Angela on the pontoon bridge. A huge grin split his face. “Hello, Safe Haven.”

Angela motioned. “That’s Saul and the crew that run the submarine. They’re giving us a lift.”

Most of the rescue team joined Angela. They expected her to give them private words before they left.

Angela only had a few sentences ready for this moment. She hadn’t planned it out because she didn’t want it to sound insincere to her team or to their audience. “We’re going into hell again. Nothing about this run will be easy. And I’m not sure how many are coming home. All I can promise is that I want no losses. That’s the goal for us—no losses.”

They weren’t encouraged by her words, but it didn’t change their minds about going.

“We all have things on the cruise ship that we want to take or that we need to leave for someone else. We’ll spend half an hour on that and then we’ll load the sub. Saul’s our captain. He and the crew will show you where to put everything, based on weight. Listen to what he says. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Can he be trusted?”

Angela shrugged at Zack’s question. “That remains to be seen of all our new friends. If they prove they can, we’ll take them in. If they betray us...” She smirked coldly toward Saul, who was listening with the sub crew. “Then we’ll need to figure out how to sail that thing really fast.”

Ray glared at the giant tattooed captain. “I’ll start learning as soon as we’re underway.”

“That is why you’re along. I’ve never known someone to pick up such a complicated skill so fast.” Angela glanced around, including them all. “This isn’t just a rescue mission. You all know me. I never do anything singular. I’m not coming back until the head of the snake is in my hands. Get your minds around that while we travel. If we don’t find the boss snake, we’ll free our loved ones and keep hunting. We’ll be home when this island is actually safe.” Angela waved at the rising sun. “Be ready to go in half an hour.”

Wait for me!

The mental shout drew attention toward the island. Other people noticed. Laughter ran through the leaving volunteers and the rescue team.

Dog padded down the hill with a kit in his mouth and a kitten riding on his back. He even had on the vest Marc had made for him.

“What is that?” Adrian eyed the wolf in amused disapproval.

Dog stopped by Adrian. *It’s my gear.*

Adrian snorted. “That’s not gear. It’s a cat.”

The kitten licked Dog’s ear, then flopped over on its back. Its lanky legs hung over both sides.

Dog saw Angela and went toward her. He was careful to balance the playful kitten.

Angela stopped him at the end of the pontoon bridge. “You can come. Leave the cat.”

Dog whimpered. *I need it to lick me to sleep.* He gazed up at Adrian hopefully.

Adrian retreated. “Not it!”

Angela pointed toward the jungle.

Dog huffed. He moved closer to Adrian. *Here, hold this.*

The cat launched itself in full attacked mode, paws open wide and claws gleaming.

Adrian turned to run. “Not it, damn it!”

The cat landed and dug in for the long haul.

Angela sighed as Adrian took off down the beach, screaming and slapping at his back. “Stop playing around.”

Adrian’s screams faded as he tripped over a rock and fell into the water.

The cat took off across the beach with its fur up.

“That’s better.” Angela headed for the cruise ship.

Dog followed at her heels, chuffing. *What do you see in him?*

Angela shrugged. “Entertainment, if nothing else.”

Ian came from the bridge as Angela reached the top deck. “I heard screams.”

Angela waved it off. “Dog shot Adrian with one of his cats. No big deal.”

3

“Wow. This is a much better sendoff than last time.”

Everyone who heard Jayda's comment felt bad for not giving Marc's team a better goodbye. Many of them had ended those moments with ugly words, or worse, silence.

Angela scanned the beach.

The mission team loved ones stared back in happy impatience. They wanted her to be gone already.

Angela wanted that, too, but she had to give her crew time to say goodbye. Couples stood on the beach and ignored everyone else as they tried to get their way. Angela didn't want to listen in, but some of their conversations were too loud to miss.

"I don't want you to go!" Sadie pouted. "I'll miss our showers...and stuff." Adrian was now covered in scratches and bruises. Sadie was worried that would get worse while he was stuck inside a tin can with Cate, Cody, and Dog.

Adrian chuckled. "Guess you'll have to find someone else for a few weeks." He wasn't entirely joking.

Sadie made a face. "Hurry up and go already. The sooner started, the sooner you farted." She made a face. "Hold on. That's not right."

Conner rolled his eyes. "It's very not right." He hugged his dad and waited for any words of wisdom Adrian wanted to give.

Adrian snickered. "I thought you had comforting words for me!"

Conner forced a laugh. He was dreading being away from his dad after just getting permission to be around him again.

Adrian smiled at them both. “Look out for each other, okay?”

Conner didn’t care for Sadie, but his dad did and that was reason enough. “Okay.”

Sadie studied the boy like he was a bug. “I don’t know what to do with him. He’s too old for babysitting and too young for sex.”

Conner flushed as people laughed.

Adrian went to the small wedge of pontoon bridge they’d adjusted to allow docking with the submarine.

Sadie and Conner stood together and watched.

Dog trotted after him. *I’m with you. Pick me up.*

Adrian was still surprised Dog was spending so much time around him. He frowned at the wolf. “No tricks.”

Dog leaped into Adrian’s arms. *Hold me!*

Adrian barely managed to keep his balance. He stepped onto the submarine with a wolf in his arms and Marc in his thoughts. *I’m looking forward to seeing you. How strange.*

Three cats meowed loudly from the beach by the pontoon bridge.

Dog’s growl echoed, saying goodbye to them.

People laughed again and then tried not to cry as they separated from the leaving crew.

Terry pushed two books into Charlie’s hand. “These will cover a lot of medical issues.”

“Thanks.” Charlie saw Terry’s eyes go to Jayda. He helped that along. “Jayda! Can you help me carry this stuff?”

Jayda joined him gladly. She didn’t have anyone here to see her off.

Terry smiled as she approached. “Be safe.” He kissed her lips softly, openly declaring his intentions.

Jayda blushed prettily. *Okay. I can work with that.*

Tonya came over and hugged Jayda. “Take care.”

Jayda fought to hide the tears.

Charlie took the books and headed for the submarine. He waved at the line of kids on the beach before getting in. He wasn’t close to those kids, but the adults weren’t paying them much attention and they were feeling left out.

As Charlie stepped down the ladder into the submarine, he realized he wasn’t carrying as much anger and bitterness as he had been. He assumed it was because his mom had finally agreed to go get his dad, but the talk with Tobias had also helped. It had reminded him that even old people made mistakes. *I still have time to fix my life. Rescuing my dad will be the first step.*

Zack came down the ladder next, unable to take Allison’s tears anymore. She didn’t want him to go. His sons were fine with it. They had faith he would return. Allison didn’t.

That bothered Zack. *Am I walking into my death on this run?* It wasn't the first time he'd had that feeling, but it seemed like he might be carrying Allison's fear this time.

Adrian motioned Zack over to help put their gear where Saul wanted it.

Angela lingered with Jennifer while she waited for the rest of her team to get into the submarine.

"I wish we could go back and give the mission team a better send-off. You know?"

"Yes." Angela motioned toward the camp members and Eagles. "Make sure they all know how proud I am of the way they've changed." She'd already given Jennifer a few instructions and told her where to find the leadership notebooks.

"You sound like you're not coming home."

Angela gestured. "Go talk to your mate."

Jennifer crossed her arms over her chest. Kyle's choice to go was infuriating and terrifying. Jennifer didn't like the mix.

Angela helped things along like she always did. "What if he dies? Do you want silence to be the last thing between you?"

Kyle glanced over from his post by their diminishing gear pile.

Jennifer stomped over to him.

Kyle took her hand and kissed it. "Wait for me?"

Jennifer snickered, anger fading into something worse—pure fear. "Yes. Same?"

Kyle smiled warmly. “Of course. You’re the light of my heart. You’re the first name on my lips in the morning and the last face I see before sleep takes me. You’re my everything.”

Jennifer began crying.

Kyle held her close, frowning. “That’s not the reaction I was going for.”

Jennifer held him tightly. “Swear you’re coming back!”

“I swear it.” Kyle kissed her and hugged her again, being careful about her stomach bump. He met Daryl’s eyes over her shoulder.

Daryl nodded at him in recognition. Jennifer loved Kyle. He understood that clearly now. *I was wrong*. Daryl grinned. “Hurry home. Her mood will be shit for the next three weeks!”

People laughed again.

Jennifer marched toward the beach, forcing the tears to stop by thinking about things that made her angry.

People got out of her way.

“Wade!” Kids ran toward the geared-up man as he came down the hill.

Wade didn’t stare in surprise at the submarine. Neil had told him about it while he was packing so he could gather the right gear to take along. He dropped his bags and pouches and slid to his knees to hug them all.

The kids mobbed Wade, knocking him over. It quickly became a tickling fest. The laughing caught on, making people turn their way. They soaked up

the good moment like sponges, then stored it to use as a buffer against whatever was coming. None of them expected this run to be easy after Angela's words.

Amy clung to Wade as the other kids let go and picked their next target.

Wade settled her on his hip and turned toward the island to give them a tiny bit of privacy. "You'll keep me informed?"

Amy bobbed her head. "Me, too?"

"Yes."

Neither of them were okay with radio silence. "We'll talk every day, for a few seconds. Always at different times."

"First is tomorrow at noon."

"Agreed." Wade saw Cate and Cody coming. They were smiling at Amy. Wade was relieved they'd made friends and sorry that it had to end so soon. "Don't forget to help Missy while we're gone."

Amy frowned at him. "Why?"

"Because she's alone now, and because..."

Wade whispered in Amy's ear.

Amy giggled. "Cody? Yuck."

Wade shushed her. "Don't tell. It's his secret to give up when he's ready."

"I won't." Amy hugged him tightly, almost choking him. "Bye-bye, Daddy Wade." She pushed free and ran to meet her new friends.

Wade stared after her in surprised pleasure. It was the first time the little girl had called him that. “I love you, too, kid.”

Nearby, Ray smiled. “She’s sweet.”

Grant nodded, but he didn’t let it distract him. He held Ray’s hand and tried again. “You don’t have to do this. We all know you’re a badass. You don’t have to go.”

Ray gently pulled free. “Yes, I do.”

Grant controlled himself and switched tactics. He glanced up at the hill, where most of the staying camp members were watching them and talking, pointing, laughing with their neighbors. “We should get married before you leave—as a good luck charm.”

Ray also glanced up at the gathering townspeople on the hill, but he focused on Tim. That man and his congregation were standing to one side, and their numbers had grown. There were now twenty of them and most were holding a Bible. Ed stood on Tim’s left. Ralph was on his right. *That trio could be dangerous.*

“Ray?”

Ray smiled at Grant. “We’ll do it right when I get back. You can start planning things while I’m gone. Between that and Eagle training, you’ll be too busy to miss me.”

“Please, Ray. Don’t go.”

Ray's control slipped. "I have to. Kenn needs me." Ray blanched as he heard the words. "I mean the mission team. They all need me."

Grant's face collapsed. Anger ran over it. To keep from saying things he would regret, Grant walked away.

"Damn it." Ray tried to take it back. "I didn't mean to say that!"

Tonya was walking by. She'd overheard it all. "Yeah, your obsession with my fiancé is usually well hidden. What's up with you?"

Ray stiffened, cheeks turning dark red. He struggled to find a safe answer.

Tonya chuckled. "We all know about it, Ray." Tonya wasn't threatened by his affection for Kenn. "In fact, I almost like it. He already has two people here who love him. If we count you, it's three, and that means he's starting to win people over. It's good."

Ray stared as she walked away, taking the same path Grant was on. Ray hoped she would say good things to his fiancé, but he didn't linger to see if they talked at all. He went toward the submarine, mind settling into the starting stage of battle mode. "I'm on my way. Hang on."

Angela heard Ray's plea and agreed. Her own eagerness to leave swelled up and burst out of her mouth. "It's time! Let's roll!"

Dace stopped next to her on the lightly bobbing pontoon bridge as the rescue crew all headed her

way. “I feel like a secret agent. Will you call me Dace Bond?”

Angela laughed.

Kyle frowned as he went by. “This isn’t a game.”

“I know!” Dace grinned at Angela. “At least give us a code name.”

Angela snickered. “You’re going in with a good mood. I like that.”

“No, really. Think about it. We’re going off to another country in a submarine, on a secret mission to save the world and rescue our friends. It’s like we’re spies! We should have a code name.”

People grinned at Angela, sharing in some of Dace’s enthusiasm.

Angela motioned people to move faster.

Adrian whistled from the hatch while rubbing his new injuries. The cat had slid down the back of his arm and taken off with some of his blood. “Let’s roll!”

Angela’s heart thumped. Her mind went to the night spent with Adrian, and then to Marc’s affair. She fell in with the team now climbing into the submarine. “Secret mission Let’s Go Back is now underway, folks. Stand by for all hell to break loose.”

Zack laughed. “If truth be told, Boss, even the most damaged man in your army wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Angela’s good mood swung. “And what about the women?”

People looked at Lisa and Jayda, who hadn't said much since coming down the hill with their gear.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Can we go already?"

Jayda flipped them all the finger.

Fresh laughter rolled over the ocean and said goodbye to Safe Haven.

4

The submarine was small inside. Their taller people could barely stand up straight without hitting the ceiling. Various compartments led off from the main hallway.

Angela was encouraged. *We'll all get a chance to bond on this trip. There's nowhere to hide. Every team needs those moments.*

In the bridge, Saul waited for Angela to join him. He kept his eyes on the screens as her scent preceded her. Saul's nose was sharper than his vision. "Welcome aboard."

Angela stood in the bridge doorway where she could see him and the other people now traversing the length of the sub. "I'll want updates in a bit, but let us get settled first."

"Aye. Orders?"

"Go to the last place you saw my husband alive."

"You got it." Saul typed in the coordinates. "Do you want us on top or under?"

Angela figured out what he meant. “Top is fine.”

“Oh, come on, Boss!” Dace shouted through the submarine hallway. “Secret agent stuff!”

Angela laughed along with everyone else. “Fine. Please do a dramatic dive to please my rescue team.”

Saul flipped switches and hit buttons in rapid succession. “You’re heading into a trap.”

Angela grunted. “It’s not even the first time this week.”

Saul was glad she knew. He activated the communication system. “Hang on. We are diving in three...two...one! Diving! Diving!”

Angela held onto the wall brace as the sub went under and her team cheered. *We’re on the way, Marc. Are you ready for us?*

Everyone who heard her quieted to listen. They’d all tried to make contact at some point during the last week, but no one had gotten through.

Adrian was confident that Angela would be able to make a connection.

Angela tried again. *We’ll be there in a week, Marc. Are we set for part B?*

Angela froze as Marc connected to her. The sense of cold defeat slapped her across all the empty miles.

Don’t come. We’re already dead. I’ve killed us all.

The line went dark.

Angela sat down in the seat next to Saul. “Get me there as fast as you can.”

“He doesn’t sound good.” Saul had also listened.

“He’s not. Being caged is a nightmare for him.”

Saul ignored Adrian as he came up to stand guard over her. “Then why did you send him into this?”

Angela sighed. “Because he’s the one they want. He has a weak spot they haven’t been able to exploit until now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

“You can trust me.” Saul assumed she was holding back because she didn’t.

Angela admitted what most of her team already knew. “Marc doesn’t trust himself. He never has. He believes he might crack someday and go over to the enemy.”

Adrian frowned at her. “That’s no different than you.”

She nodded. “Yes, but I don’t have that thick of a moral line. Marc’s is absolute. If he breaks his personal code, it will destroy him.”

Adrian kept an eye on their new captain as Ray came up to take the empty seat on his other side. “What would that be, exactly?”

Angela didn’t want to go into those details right now. “Impossible to say for sure, but whatever it is, I think it’s happened. That’s why he doesn’t want to be rescued.”

Adrian was aware of the others listening and starting to mutter in concern. “And the rest of the team?”

Angela didn’t lie to them. “They might really be dead. We could be on a body run instead of a rescue.”

Adrian said the only thing he could think of that might be comforting. “We’ll bring ‘em home either way.”

Angela shoved the misery aside. “Yes, we will. Even a body is better than never knowing.”

Adrian agreed. “And if bodies are all we can collect, we’ll take out our anger and grief on anything that moves.”

“Yes. This run will not encourage survivors. I’m not looking for a peaceful conclusion. One way or the other, our war with the UN is about to end. We left them all over the planet while we came here to protect ourselves. Now, it’s time to go back.”

The End of Book 17

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“You’d have to do what I did.”

“Take lives?”

“Drain them while they scream for help. There are even...recipes for capturing a group and storing as needed.” It had been a little over the two-week deadline, but they hadn’t discussed it at all until now.

Morgan’s face had gone green. “I won’t do that.”

Jennifer refused to think about what she’d already done, but it flashed in her eyes. “Yeah, I don’t recommend it.”

Morgan made a connection. “Does that mean you’ll live longer?”

“Yes, but it can only push the aging back so far. I judged it to replace about a year.”

“So I’d need to do it once a year to maintain a current age or status?”

“I believe so. I gave Angela a report, and also Kyle. They both said it will be outlawed.”

“It should be.”

Deleted Scene #2

Angela stepped onto the porch of the clinic. “Lock that door and meet me in the town.” Angela didn’t give them time to argue. She marched into the jungle and was quickly out of sight while the rookies tried to figure out who she’d been talking to.

Angela slid behind a wide tree and let it fly. She held onto the trunk, uncaring about bugs or the splatter hitting her shoes. The stomach heaves were hitting her throughout the day, reminding her that she was carrying a new life.

Angela wiped her mouth on her sleeve and headed to town by a longer path so she had a few minutes alone. She felt danger creeping up on her and walked slower, hoping it happened before the rookies caught up. *I’m tired of killing them to save myself and I have no faith I’ll get that happily-ever-after now. There’s no reason for me to hide behind my camp anymore. They’re safe here. I’m not.*

Angela heard familiar voices and slowed. She hoped to get by them without being seen, but they were on the path ahead of her. Unless she wanted to trek through the jungle some more, she would have to have contact. *I’ll make it quick. If I give Neil time to think about it, he’ll figure out I’m the bait again and I just don’t need the lecture.*

Deleted Scene #3

Adrian stared at Angela in admiration. “I’ve only known one other descendant who could do that and even she had to be forced into it.”

Angela caught a flash of his daughter. She scowled. “Stop telling me how you tormented your daughter into being stronger. I don’t like it.”

“Yes, you do. You want that, too, but you’re scared of it.” Adrian ignored the children circling them and teenager jogging toward them for guard duty. “So you do it to yourself and improve that way. It’s exactly what my daughter did when I let up on her or decided I loved her too much to treat her so roughly.”

He went toward the sheriff’s office, shaking his head. “You guys want to be abused. If you’d stop asking me for it, I’d stop delivering it.”

Angela laughed, following him. “I’ll give you parts of that. The rest is bullshit.”

He laughed with her. “Okay.”

Angela scanned the workers prepping this area for the next work shift. It had been repaired, supported, painted, wired, and was almost ready for use. Angela wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Will this jail be needed tonight?”

“I hope not. These matchups have to stay under control or we’ll stop it and just face the anger issues as they happen.” Angela was happy with how

Jennifer had handled Neil's outburst, but she didn't want their enforcer wasted on minor drama. "We need the cure."

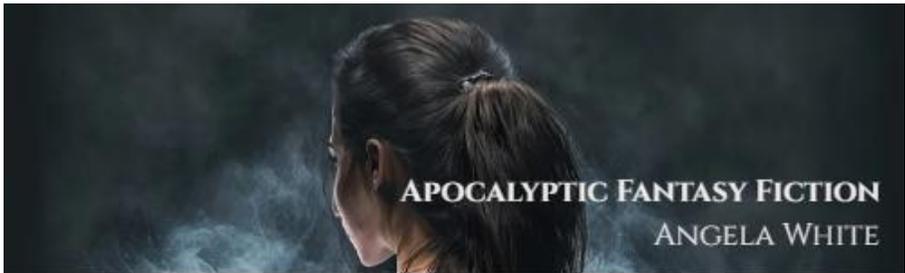
"Do you think the UN has it?"

Angela headed toward the path to town. "If they do, I'd need a sneaky partner who could ignore the pain and misery of their captives to steal it." She glanced over her shoulder pointedly.

Adrian realized that would be his job. "I can do it."

"I know you can." *I also hope you don't.* Angela didn't give him time to dig for details. She broke into a quick jog and forced them all to keep up. "Work those lungs. You're going to need it."

Audio



Did you know the Life After War series is now
available in audiobook format?

[Audiobook Page](#)

Note From the Author

Hi! That was some ride, huh? And we're only halfway through this part of Safe Haven's latest adventure! Once I started writing this book, I realized it would have to be 1300+ pages to cover everything that's happening, so I split it down the middle. Book #18 will cover the mission team and what they've been going through. The rescue team will join them for an explosive ending.

A DNA Lesson

I was all set to explain this in the story using the characters, and then I got deeper and realized the research I used is so much better at explaining why the world can't be populated from a single breeding pair. There are real-world examples as proof. They are cited in the article linked below. It's a little long, but well worth the time to read in my opinion.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160113-could-just-two-people-repopulate-earth?msclkid=f7f40e15c5df11ec93e0b0beb4748d9f>

Why did I include this?

Survival after an apocalypse has to include repopulation. Small groups are in real danger from genetics and they don't know it because most of us aren't trained in that. As you've noticed by now, I

love mixing reality and fantasy. This series is fiction, but you honestly can use many of the survival methods in here. I've made sure of it.

Why am I hitting on religion?

I'm not. It's just another part of life after war. People will always have their beliefs. I picked Christianity because of my childhood and because it was dominant in the US at the time I started this series. If my characters had been located in another country, I would have used their majority religion and those social and environmental issues. Try not to take these things personally. I'm not picking on you. I'm starting to bring closure to a massive series that deserves to have all the loose ends tied up.

When will book 18 be out?

Sometime this year! It's great, right? I can't wait to bring you the other half of this adventure. I'm also a bit sad. We're so close to the end now. People are leaving, settling in, and making final choices on their future. Some characters won't be heard from again. Others will return when it matters most. I hope you'll be with me all the way to that bittersweet ending.

I also hope you have a wonderful summer. Get out there and enjoy it while you can. None of us were meant to just sit in our homes and grow old. I truly believe that. Live your life to the fullest. You only get one chance each day to make the most of

that sunrise. Don't miss it. You never know if the next one's coming.

Audiobooks

You can now get audiobooks for most of my series. The rest have been assigned to narrators and are in production. Here are those links:

[Life After War Audio](#)

[Alexa's Travels Audio](#)

[The Bachelor Battles Audio](#)

On a personal note, my Facebook account was hacked and there is no way for me to get it back. The person changed the email on it and Facebook has no human support for me to contact. The message now says the account has been disabled even though I can still see the page and nothing I've tried over the last 7 weeks has worked. If you were a follower on there, I recommend signing up for my monthly newsletter to get information from me directly. I will not be creating a new FB account. It's just not worth it until they add live support for issues like this. You can [join my monthly newsletter here](#) or through the link at the very end of this book.

Thinking of you fondly,
Angie

Book 18



Let's Go Back

“I think this is a trap.”

Shawn rolled his eyes at Greg. “Of course it’s a trap. We counted on that.”

“We shouldn’t have left him alone with her.” Biff didn’t trust Cerise at all. Marc’s moodiness had gotten worse with every minute he’d spent around the Australian killer.

Kenn agreed, but he didn’t say so. “Cerise Bunting is the least of Marc’s worries. He can handle *her*.”

Kenn's tone implied Marc wouldn't be successful in his mission to kill the UN boss.

Kenn didn't take it back when people glared at him. He doubted the enemy would be so easily fooled. Even this plan for the rest of the mission team to blend into the surviving population wasn't likely to work. This time, they were seriously underestimating their opponent.

Kenn hadn't thought that back when he and Marc had gone over their plan, but Marc had spent every night since then getting drunk with Cerise and the submarine crew. Kenn's faith had shifted into concern that Marc was in over his head. *It's happened before. We killed that old guy, back when Marc was my fireteam leader. He didn't shoot like the rest of us, but he didn't keep control and things got out of hand. That's what I expect this time.*

Shawn frowned at him. "Then you need to cover it—cover us."

Kenn nodded. "I will." The Eagles were just as important to Kenn now as the Marines had been to him back then. "Stick to the plan for now. We blend in and wait for the signal. Cerise acts like she's turning him in and gets him inside."

Biff made a face. "Yeah, acts like."

Harry gestured. "I agree. She's not acting. Marc's in danger and so is this mission. Kenn will have to cover it."

Greg scowled at them. "I'm telling you, I feel a trap and I mean now—our landing."

Kenn scanned the beach again as the RIB bounced along the waves toward the shore. “I see the vehicles Cerise said would be waiting. No signs of people.”

Greg wasn't convinced. “It feels bad, man.”

Kenn nodded again. “And that's why we're here. Just do your job and we'll all come out in one piece.”

Shawn grimaced. He agreed with Biff. It didn't feel right even though they knew they were going to be captured at some point.

The other men in the wide RIB didn't add to the unease, but they felt it. All of them scanned the Australian shoreline in trepidation. They were only a week into this run and it already felt hinky. Being closed up in the submarine with Cerise and Goldie had been hard. This was worse because it was unknown.

“No movement.” Kenn lowered the binoculars and glared at Biff. “Remember your training!”

Biff didn't know what part of shooting classes and awareness sessions were supposed to prepare him for landing on foreign soil and getting caught on purpose.

Behind them, the submarine dove, displacing water and sending out ripples as it vanished from sight.

Kenn timed their speed and got ready to slow down. “Go straight to those hatchbacks when we land. Secure our ride and stand watch while we hide this RIB.”

Men nodded at the order.

Kenn wasn't encouraged. Leaving Marc behind on the sub had been a bad idea, but he couldn't go back now. They were almost at their destination and he had orders to follow.

The RIB slowed as they hit shallow water.

"Out! Out!" Kenn got everyone out of the RIB and beached it roughly. He killed the engine just as it would have hit the soggy sand and disintegrated.

The RIB jerked to a stop.

Kenn hurried to help Greg pull it away from the water while everyone else went to the three Toyota HiLux that Cerise had claimed were fueled and reinforced. Kenn covered the deflating RIB with a net and quickly staked it down so the wind wouldn't blow it off. *Greg's right. This is hinky.*

Greg nodded from Kenn's side, but there was no time to talk. They hurried toward the vehicles.

Gus slid behind the wheel of the sand-covered rear hatchback. He grabbed the keys in his pocket, hoping Cerise hadn't been lying about them working.

The engine fired to life.

Men grinned, starting to feel a little better.

In the lead vehicle, Greg scanned north; his stomach dropped. "Movement! We have movement!"

"Where?!"

"Behind those shacks! I think it's a bulldozer!"

Kenn didn't wait to see which way it was going. "Load up!"

Greg shifted into drive to be ready, but his eyes stayed on the large group of men and women behind the bulldozer. “Are they attacking us?”

Kenn wasn’t sure either. The people were advancing slowly and they weren’t yelling like he would expect from attackers. He verified the others were in, then he took the open seat in Shawn’s middle HiLux, next to Biff. “Stay on Greg’s ass.”

“More movement!” Biff yelled through the open window. “Hundreds and they’re running this way!”

“Get us out of here!” They had enough ammunition to cover it, but Kenn knew killing two hundred Australian citizens five minutes after arriving wasn’t going to go over well.

“They’re blocking us in! They have bats and pipes!”

Greg rolled toward the entrance ramp to the beach. The sand would slow them down.

“Shit!” Greg pointed at the fuel gauge. “It’s at a quarter tank. She lied!”

The radio came on with Shawn’s angry voice. “Our low fuel light’s on. We’re not going far.”

“Same here.” Gus hated being in the rear. He willed them to go faster over the beach as the mob of people broke into a run.

Biff was also watching the mob. “Why aren’t they yelling or something?”

Kenn didn’t have an answer.

Greg drove onto the broken, sand-covered sidewalk and bounced the lead hatchback onto the

grassy knoll next to it. He knew better than to take the obvious path.

Kenn held on and watched the mirror to be sure all three vehicles got out.

Greg saw more beach or a small town. He steered toward the town, hoping it was the right call.

Biff pointed. "More people. Look!"

They saw hundreds of survivors with weapons, but not guns. Biff remembered Cerise's words about only a few homesteads having guns even before the war, but that didn't make him feel better. The baseball bats would hurt just as much and only delay death in place of awful pain.

Shawn saw the barricaded streets and alleys. "I think they've used this trap before."

"Movement! Behind the trees at the park."

The radio call made Biff flinch. He paled as he took in the newest mob of filthy, starving men and women now filling the sandy street. They were about to be blocked in. "They're blocking each street as we come to it!"

"Windows up! Doors locked! Vests on! Stay together!"

"West?"

"Not without explosives... East? Damn. Another bulldozer. Water to the south. No way out. Stand and fight?"

"If we have to. For now, weakest point?"

"River, mudslide... The bridge is gone. Bulldozers are rolling into place behind us! She said the sewers here are flooded."

“We could drive through the houses.”

“Go north, around the mudslide.”

Kenn used a curt tone to cut through the panic of his team. “How many bad guys are back there?”

Biff hesitated. Not all the faces in the shifting, silently herding mobs were bad. “Looks like a few hundred.”

“Biff, what’s the POP and ESR?”

His answer was quick. “Prewar population here was 55,000. Estimated rate of survival is 50% at three months and 33% at six months. We didn’t do it for a year.”

“Guess.”

“I’d say 25% at least.”

“That’s still too many.” They were in deep shit unless they could find a way out.

Biff was still carrying the civilian state of mind that he’d carried across his dying country. “Avoid and evade is still in place.”

“They probably think we’re a foreign government starting an invasion.”

“That’s how we should play it. Maybe they’ll surrender.”

“And then what? We can’t guard so many.”

“We can sort them into groups and medicate the bad ones. We’ll add it to their drinks.”

“Wait.” Shawn’s voice deepened. “I see sores. There’s sickness here.”

Kenn made the choice. “Lock and load, Eagles.”

Biff blanched. “He’s going to kill them?”

Shawn nodded. “We can’t treat them all.”

“But we don’t even know what it is yet!”

“Yes, we do.” Kenn gestured at his old smallpox vaccine scar. “It’s deadly and we don’t have time for this.”

“What about the healthy people hiding behind the others? I won’t be a part of this. These people are sick. It’s murder. Not all of them are bad!”

Shawn tried to reason with the rookie as he followed Greg’s hatchback. “There’s no way Kenn can make any other choice.”

“We agreed not to hurt the citizens here! This will violate the deal we made with Cerise!”

Shawn scowled. “Cerise is busy warming Marc up. She won’t care as long as he gives her what she wants.”

Kenn used his radio. “AKs on standby. Roll on my mark.”

“I have an idea.”

“I’m dying to hear it—maybe literally.”

Biff winced at the jab and sucked up his courage. “Blow the bridge and sweep them out. The sick ones won’t survive. The healthy ones might.”

“Here they come!”

“On my call, Eagles!”

“No! Give them a chance!”

Chaos overtook them as the mob rushed forward, throwing sticks, stones, tools, and tree branches. They finally screamed in rage.

The vehicle rocked as the mob hit it with anything in hand to breach a window or a tire.

The drivers lowered windows so the others could open fire.

Filthy fingers grabbed the lowered window and shoved down, snagging Biff's hat and then his hair. He was jerked against the door and pulled toward the opening window.

Disgust and fear became rage in an instant as he jerked back, leaving hair and blood streaks on the door frame. He heard the window going down further and the other Eagles shouting orders, and then he was firing, too, killing people he was sure didn't deserve it.

The gunfire died slowly. Piles of bodies surrounded all three vehicles as the mob retreated out of range but not out of sight.

Biff reloaded and kept his gun in hand, cursing Marc and Angela. *I'm a murderer now.*

Shawn put the windows up. "It had to be done. They were a threat to everyone who came through here."

Kenn reloaded. "He's right. If they'd pulled you through the window, you'd be dead."

Biff's stomach lurched as he saw the scattered mob come back together near the park, but he controlled it. *I will not puke. Not here.*

"Reload, Eagles, reload!"

They were going to repeat their actions. Biff wiped his hands dry to be ready even as he mourned another chunk of his humanity.

Shawn tried to offer comfort. "The boss would have made the same call."

“Kenn’s not the boss!”

Kenn called the other vehicles on the radio. “Get back to the RIB!”

Biff stayed silent as the mob remained by the park and Greg led them back toward their landing spot. These vehicles weren’t made for a cross-country trip into hell, but he also didn’t want to be back on the submarine. He felt trapped. *I want to go home.*

Shawn understood what Biff was feeling, but there wasn’t time to comfort him as the mob they’d left behind at the beach heard them coming and grouped up for an attack.

“Cerise did this on purpose.” Biff was sure of it. “She split us up from Marc, and now we’re expendable.”

“Open fire!”

Biff joined his team in clearing a path back to the beach, but he was certain it was the wrong direction. *They’ve got us on the run now. We’re all doomed.*

Bam!

Bam!

Two huge explosions rocked their small convoy and flipped the first two vehicles. Metal and flames shot into the sky.

“Down! Get down!”

“Lookout!”

A third grenade struck the rear vehicle in the side door and exploded, flipping it into the terrified mob of citizens who didn’t know what was

happening. They took off running away from the scene as a familiar, feared sound echoed above the chaos.

Two helicopters rose over the horizon and approached the burning hulks on the beach. Their guns scattered some of the mob trying to reach the survivors of the wrecks.

Biff screamed as hands pulled him through the window. He fired repeatedly, emptying his magazine into hearts and brains. He kept pulling the trigger even after it was empty. He didn't hear the dry click of an empty chamber.

All around him, the mob went down to carefully fired shots that Biff knew weren't Eagle rounds. *We don't use REMs with .223 ammunition. Our enemy does.*

Biff fell over in the sand and waited for death. His body refused to obey him. A needle jutted from his neck.

Footsteps hurried toward him. All Biff could do was listen.

“We have three survivors.”

The boss man smirked through the radio. “Bring them all in, even the dead. I have uses for them.”

“Yes, sir. We'll have them loaded and be back within the hour.”

“Very good. Reicher out.”

The few Eagles who were alert enough to hear celebrated even as they worried over their capture. Marc had said they would be taken along the route,

not as soon as they landed. It wasn't part of their plan.

Biff heard Greg start screaming. His balls drew up. *But Marc's not here to suffer with us, is he?*

The drugs knocked Biff out.

Greg continued to scream.



[Let's Go Back](#)
Book Eighteen

Backstories



Would you like to know more about Marc?

There are two backstories available! One will show you Marc and Angie's childhood and romance. The other centers on how Marc and Dog came together.

[**Back Story page**](#)

Invictus

by: William Ernest Henley

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods maybe
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.*

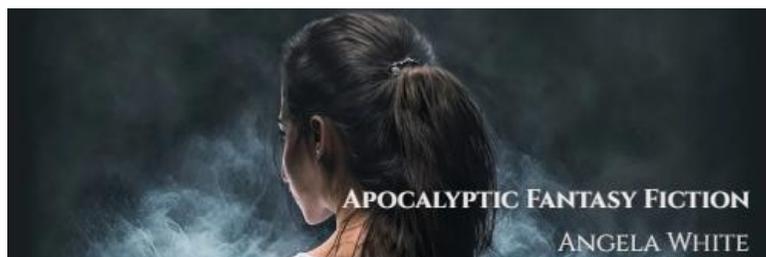
*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

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AVOIDING FATE
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