

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #18

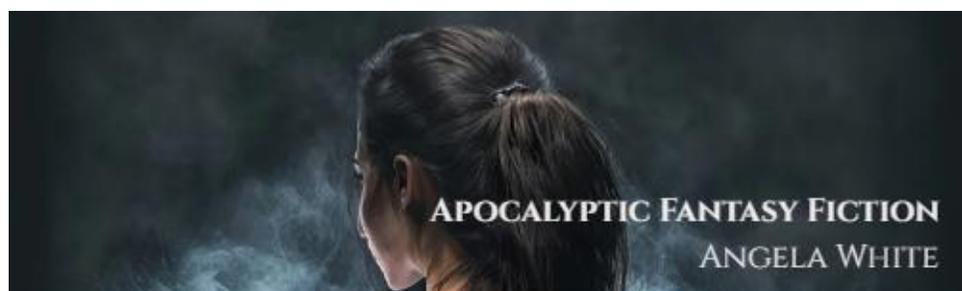
LET'S GO
BACK



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Let's Go Back
by
Angela White

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Finishing a book this size takes a lot of work, and none of it would be possible without the wonderful people who help me search for errors in the text. Thank you Terre, Joe, Jackie, Mattie, Crystal, Alison, Karen, Elizabeth, Holly, Sue, John, Jacqueline, and Kristi. I really do appreciate it more than I can express.

Slang/Lingo in this Book

This book has a variety of Australian and Swiss-German slang and lingo. I was informed by my Betas that it would be a good idea to put in a reference for those terms. So, here ya go!

Sau = very

Verdammt = damn

Prima = good

Bloke = male

Duds = clothes

Heap = a lot

Mist = shit, stuff, gear

Nee = no

Gaol = jail

Mince = meat, food

Lift = elevator

Beaut = great

Dunny = toilet

Good onya = good job

Sheila = woman

Too right = I agree

Oi = hey

Ay = yes

Mate = person, friend, acquaintance

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We Can Be Gods
It Can't Be Broken
You Have My Word
We All Have Choices
You Did It
You're Not Normal
This Is A Bad Place
All The Lies
Let's Go Back
None Of It's Easy
Close

Would You?

If you could go back,
Knowing each smack,
The people who lacked,
Each mistake that you sacked,
Would you?

If you could redo,
Honoring those who were true,
This time seeing the clues,
Of impending blues,
Would you?

If you could repeat,
And not accept defeat,
No longer afraid to meet,
Not tied to one seat,
Would you?

If you could return,
And finally earn,
The life you yearn,
Without the horrible burn,
Would you?

If you could erase,
Every moment of debase,
Every damaging case,

Every humiliating place,
Would you?

If you could stop time,
And go back on your dime,
With only one horrific crime,
And you'd control every chime,
Would you?

Chapter One
Landing
Mission Day 9

1

“I think this is a trap.”

Shawn rolled his eyes at Greg. “Of course, it’s a trap. Marc 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. He didn’t take it back when people glared. He doubted the enemy would be easily fooled. Even this plan for the rest of the team to blend into the surviving population wasn’t likely to work. They had seriously misjudged their opponent.

Kenn hadn’t believed that back when he and Marc had gone over the plan, but Marc had spent all eight nights since then getting drunk with Cerise and the submarine crew. Kenn’s faith had shifted into concern. 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. "Then you need to cover it—cover us."

"I will." The Eagles were just as important to Kenn now as the Marines had been to him back then. "Stick to the plan. 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."

Greg scowled at them. "I'm telling you, I feel a trap and I mean 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. "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 Greg. 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. 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 Greg. “Remember your training!”

Greg didn’t know what part of shooting classes and awareness lessons 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. He killed the engine just as it would have hit the soggy sand. The RIB jerked to a rough stop.

Kenn hurried to help Greg pull it away from the water while everyone else went to the three Toyota HiLux trucks 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 away. *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.

He 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! 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 attention 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 other mission team members were in their vehicles, then he took the open seat in Shawn's middle HiLux, next to Biff. "Stay on Greg's ass."

"More movement from the south!" Biff yelled through the open window. "They're running at us!"

"Get us out of here!" They had enough ammunition to cover it, but Kenn knew killing two hundred Australian citizens right 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 too much.

“Shit!” Greg noticed the fuel gauge. “It’s at a 1/4 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 as the mob of people broke into a run.

Biff was also watching the mob. “Why aren’t they yelling?” Both groups were advancing, with some of them running and brandishing weapons, but there was almost no noise.

Kenn didn’t have an answer.

Greg drove onto the broken, sand-covered sidewalk and bounced the lead hatchback toward the grassy knoll next to it. He knew better than to take the obvious path.

Kenn held on and surveyed the mirror to be sure all three vehicles stayed together.

Greg saw more beach or a small town. He steered toward the town, hoping it was the right call.

Biff pointed. “More people!”

They saw hundreds of survivors lining the road with weapons, but no guns. Biff remembered Cerise’s words about only a few homesteads having guns before the war, but that didn’t make him feel better. The baseball bats and crossbows would hurt

just as much and only delay death in place of awful pain.

Shawn saw 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 trapped. “They’re blocking each street as we come to it!”

“Windows up! Doors locked! 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, herding mobs were bad. “A few hundred.”

“What’s the POP and ESR?”

Biff’s 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 too many.” Kenn knew they were in deep shit unless they could find a way out.

Biff was still in the civilian state of mind that he’d carried across his dying country. “Avoid and evade?”

Kenn denied that. “They probably believe we’re a foreign government starting an invasion. They’ll hunt us down.”

Biff didn’t want to engage the citizens here. “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 broke through the debate. “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!”

Kenn checked his weapon. “We don’t have time for this.”

“What about the healthy people hiding behind the others? I won’t be a part of this. 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 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.”

Biff had to keep trying. “I have an idea.”

“I’m dying to hear it—maybe literally.”

Biff winced at Kenn’s jab. “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 vehicles rocked as the mob hit them 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. He heard the window going down further and the other Eagles shouting orders, and then he began 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 rifle 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 beach, 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 keep comforting 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."

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.*

"Yep." Kenn reloaded and automatically tugged to be sure the magazine had set in properly. "Open fire!"

Bam!

Bam!

Two huge explosions rocked their small convoy and flipped the first two vehicles. Metal and flames shot into the sky.

"Who's firing at us?!"

"Look out!"

"My eye! It hit my eye!"

A third grenade from the mob struck the rear vehicle in the side and exploded, flipping it into the mob of citizens.

In the near distance, two powerful engines revved up as they flew closer.

Half of the mob took off running away from the crash 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 more of the mob that was attacking the survivors of the wrecks.

Biff screamed as hands pulled him through the window. He fired his handgun 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. He also didn't know where his rifle had gone. He'd lost it in the flip.

All around him, the mob went down to carefully fired shots. Biff knew they 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.

Thick, dusty sand blew over Biff as the helicopter landed nearby. The other bird stayed in the air, firing bullets at the beach mob and darts at the mission team.

The mob finally scattered, clearing Biff's line of sight. Faded black boots hurried toward him. All Biff could do was listen.

"We have survivors, sir."

The boss man smirked through the radio. "Bring them all in."

"We'll have them loaded and be back within the hour, sir."

"Very good. Reicher out."

The few Eagles who were alert enough to hear the exchange celebrated even as they worried. Marc

had said they would be taken along the route, not as soon as they landed. It wasn't part of their plan.

“My eye! Oh, God! My eye!”

Biff heard Greg 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.

2

“I can still hear them screaming.” Marc glared from the stool near the stack of gear they'd brought from the island.

Cerise didn't stop working. She was handing gear up the ladder through the sub hatch to the crew who was loading their boat. “You knew they were going to be captured.”

Marc's voice deepened into anger. “You didn't mention the mobs on the beach or the helicopters.”

Cerise snorted lightly. “We came to your island in a nuclear submarine, but you didn't think there could be helicopters?”

Marc was forced to admit that was an oversight on his part, but he didn't do it aloud. He just kept glaring.

Cerise forced out an apologetic pitch. “I didn't know the beach gangs had grown so big. They've been forcing survivors to join. It's a horrible life after war for them.”

“You sent my team into that, blind.”

“I haven’t been here in months. I am sorry, but there was nothing we could do.”

Marc grunted unhappily. It had been part of the plan for the team to be captured; blending in with the population had been a good idea when he and Kenn came up with it.

Cerise shoved her blue cloak aside in frustration. “This would go faster if you helped.”

Marc leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, scanning the red mark on her arm. It reminded him of Adrian.

Marc hadn’t recovered from last night’s drinking session yet. *But it didn’t matter, did it? I still heard every shriek and scream.* He had hoped staying drunk for the last week would help him block it out when the team was captured, but that had failed. His team was now in the hands of the enemy, and he wasn’t with them.

Cerise worked faster. “Don’t try to connect to them. We’re close enough to the lab that Reicher might be able to track it.”

“No shit.” It was already a struggle for Marc not to order them to go help his team. Unsolicited advice wasn’t welcome.

Cerise grabbed another handful of gear and sent it up the ladder. Albert and Denese were on top of the sub. Both of them were coming to land, along with Goldie, who was on the bridge with Saul to relay final instructions.

Marc scanned the stinking sub miserably. Now that their gear was stacked near the hatch, the

submarine appeared empty again. It reminded Marc of leaving Safe Haven. Very few people had come to see them off and those few had expressed their displeasure in hard, cold glares instead of well wishes. *Did they jinx this run?*

Marc hadn't spent the last nine days training his team in anything specific. He'd let them use the time to flush out bad memories and to remember what was important to them. Those were the things they would hold onto during their captivity.

Marc had hated every minute he'd spent here, but he had learned a lot about how to operate this machine. If something happened to Saul, there was a small chance he could pilot it home. *But not until my mission is complete.*

Marc stood and began helping load the gear. *The sooner I get this done, the sooner the rest of it will be over with.*

Cerise gave him an approving nod, but she didn't try to reach him on another level. She'd spent the last week trying to bond with Marc. She already knew it wasn't possible. Not only did he not want bonds with anybody, but he also didn't like her. He'd made that clear. Even during the nights where they'd shared the same bunk for space and warmth, he'd been an indifferent body to curl against. His team probably assumed they'd had sex every night, but sleeping had been all that happened.

The submarine crew also helped hand gear up the ladder, but they didn't offer chatter. They were all eager for Cerise and her little team to be gone.

They had enjoyed not having rules or a boss other than Saul.

On the bridge, Saul listened to Goldie's instructions and promised to faithfully carry them out, but he also kept up a mental shield to prevent the man from reading his true thoughts. As soon as the passengers disembarked, Saul planned to get out of radar range.

Goldie knew the captain wasn't listening, but he didn't care. Saul and his crew were someone else's headache.

"Is that everything?" Cerise strode through the submarine to check compartments while Marc went up the ladder. He was suddenly anxious for a breeze.

It was a balmy afternoon without a breeze to cool his sweaty skin. Saul had said it wasn't good to run the air conditioning while the sub was idle, so it had been off since their arrival last night. They were all stinky and sweaty, with soot smudges from the walls and floors. It had been obvious upon boarding that there had been a fire. The chemical smells said the crew had cleaned, but it was impossible to remove all the soot. There were now prints and smears all over the ship from his team.

Cerise appeared the same as she had while talking to Angela on the island—tired, sad, and grimy from a long trip. Goldie was resplendent in his gold vest and red baggie pants. When he grinned, the gold over his teeth perfectly matched his ensemble. They had teased him about that at first, but it had changed to respect as they saw the effort it took

when you were stuck inside a can for a week without the sight of the sun or a breath of fresh air. None of Marc's team had put much effort into their appearance.

The boat floating alongside the sub was heavily loaded with the gear they'd brought from Safe Haven. Marc carefully lowered himself into the captain's seat to steer them toward land. He scanned that mysterious coastline, searching for the same dangers that had trapped his team. He didn't spot anyone.

Lightwood trees and harsh brown dirt met his gaze. Even though he didn't detect any threats, the land itself felt ominous. He wasn't looking forward to trekking through it. He'd been here once during his military career. That brief training exercise had ended in two of his team being bitten by poisonous reptiles. They'd required a break for two weeks of recovery time after antivenom treatments. Australia was not friendly.

Marc didn't look at the water even though the ride to shore would get him wet. The beautiful waves reminded him too much of Kendle's death. That was the last thing he needed to be stewing on right now. *I already see it repeating in my dreams; that's enough.*

Cerise and Goldie came up the ladder and joined him in the boat. Albert and Denese also climbed in carefully. Both of those bridge employees were unhappy to be leaving the sub, but Saul had refused to keep them on his crew. He had used the excuse

that command would be happier with two traitors being returned.

Marc believed that to be true. He was also glad they weren't staying on the sub while he was gone. Denese and Albert hadn't been completely willing in the battle against Safe Haven, but they also hadn't refused those orders, and that made them enemies. The same was true of Cerise and Goldie.

Marc didn't wait for them all to be seated. He tugged the anchor line free and quickly headed for shore.

The other people in the boat dropped down and grabbed one of the rubber handles on the sides to keep from being thrown out.

No one protested. Marc's mood was just as ugly now as it had been for the entire trip. No one wanted to set him off.

On the bridge, Saul waited for the RIB to get far enough from the sub to keep from being pulled under, and then he began activating dive procedures. He wanted to get out of sight. When Cerise had said the lab could be tracking them, she was absolutely correct. He hadn't received any incoming messages from command yet, but he was certain it was only a matter of time. What he wasn't sure about was whether he would follow any orders that came through.

Denese and Albert watched the submarine sink beneath the water in longing. They knew they were being sacrificed to give the team a chance at a successful infiltration.

The rest of them surveyed the shoreline for threats. Unlike where Marc's team had been captured, this landing spot was slightly wooded and away from civilization. There were no towns in the distance, no city skylines, and no roads. They would be hiking through the outback for an hour to reach Cerise's homestead. Marc had agreed to go there first so she could retrieve her hidden map of the lab.

Neil had made maps for Marc from her mental memories, but none of them were detailed enough. She had clearer memories from other labs where she had been trained or been a trainer, but her Australian site recollections were fuzzy. Having a map of this lab would be invaluable. Marc needed to know the layout before he went in.

He had a bad feeling about going to Cerise's house, however. He suspected it was a ploy to slow him down, though he wasn't sure what she hoped to accomplish by that. Reading her for the last week had made it clear that she hated the UN, and she missed her dead children enough to do anything to have them returned. Marc knew she was in favor of the reset, as were Goldie and a lot of the sub crew who had lost family members in the war. If not for the awful price that had to be paid to initiate the reset, Marc would have been on their side. Everything he'd been before the war had been better

than what he had afterward, even though he and Angela had become a couple and eventually gotten married. Kendle's death had changed everything. *If I could go back, I wouldn't do it.*

Cerise looked over with a frown. "Even though she tried to kill you and your wife?"

Marc refused to answer.

On the bridge of the submarine, Saul evened out the dive and slowed the sub. He wasn't sure where he wanted to go yet.

The communications alert beep coming from the console wasn't a surprise. It also wasn't welcome. Saul hit the button and listened to the order.

"United Nations member 1423564, you are to return to base immediately. Bring your ship into port A411. You have five hours to report."

Saul felt the rest of the crew throughout the sub waiting for his response.

Saul ran through the options. If he turned over the sub, he might be spared because he had also helped Cerise complete her mission. A lot of this crew would be put into retraining, though some would be killed for failure to follow orders. Saul was valuable because of his skills, but there was a chance he would still be punished for helping Safe Haven win that last battle.

Saul thought that was likely. He could man a sub, sail a ship, or fly anything with wings, but at this point in the game, the UN didn't need those

skills. However, they would be holding a grudge about being denied an easy victory over Safe Haven.

“The game is almost over, but they haven’t won yet. We’ll wait and see. Maybe Marc’s smarter than his team believes he is. Until then, we’ll go somewhere and hunt up a cow. Our ration bars are almost gone, and I can’t stand the taste of them anymore.”

A loud cheer echoed through the submarine. The crew knew there would be an awful punishment if they were forced to surrender after disobeying orders, but they were willing to take that chance on Marc and his team. Just because he was walking into a trap, it didn’t mean he’d already lost the game.

Saul still got them moving away from Reicher. It wasn’t a good idea to linger anywhere near that laboratory of evil.

Chapter Two

The Offer

1

“**W**e just lost contact with the submarine, sir.” Joseph leaned aside to let his boss view the radar screen from his seat.

Reicher gave it a quick glance, but he didn’t dwell on it. He would have only been surprised if the sub crew had returned. After firing on their own troops during the island battle, they knew they were in trouble.

That fight had weakened UN forces so much that the entire system was now in the final stages of collapse. It wasn’t just from Saul’s torpedoes, but that had certainly sped things along. “Send the usual warning for disobeying orders.”

Joseph quickly typed the command into the computer. He doubted there would be another order on this matter. They had little use for a nuclear submarine because they didn’t have enough troops to establish a new base anywhere. Many teams had been sent out for that purpose after the war, but they were all dead now or unresponsive.

Not all of those were assumed to be deserters, however. Some of the lands they’d been sent to were harsh and unyielding, like South America.

Others had been populated with wild, armed civilians, like the United States. Both of those zones were coveted targets for the ability to produce food, but they didn't matter right now either. The UN had no workers to cultivate them or to provide security for that enterprise. *Their reign is about to end.*

Joseph resumed transferring lab test results into the computer. He and the boss did this daily, without exception. It was just the two of them in the 10 x 10 time-locked security room that only had one exit. This cubby opened twice a day, for one hour. If they didn't stay on schedule, they would be locked in until the next time it opened.

Joseph had brought along a kit of basic rations when he'd first inherited this position. Reicher had made him leave it outside. He said if they couldn't stay on schedule then they deserved to be locked in.

The small room held two long metal desks, two chairs, and a massive computer setup that covered two walls and needed constant air conditioning to prevent it from overheating. They kept the room diligently clean. Every shift started with dusting to prevent problems with the equipment. They didn't have many people who could repair or replace it if the system crashed.

Reicher rose from his chair and went to the front of the security room. He stared through the two-way glass at the warehouse floor below, where new captives were being brought in. Many of them were injured, screaming, or fighting through the drugs they'd been hit with upon capture. The staff

assigned to handle the new admissions were already on the warehouse floor, waiting for the troops to get the captives into their small cages. This was the best time for Reicher to dig into vulnerable minds without them being aware of it.

This group of ten was more valuable than the others they'd brought in over the last year, and they were obviously stronger, more battle-tested. Marcus Brady's team was about to be broken down, retrained, and then converted into loyal supporters. The UN reign was indeed about to end, but it didn't mean this lab would close or that the tests would stop.

The United Nations had been used as a cover for almost a century for coordinated global laboratories that searched through every city, town, culture, race, sect, and demographic for descendants. The leaders of these labs were generational—born and raised there. They never left, though they did procreate. They were required to have three sons and pick one to inherit their place when they died. The other two were put into testing. Reicher had never questioned this existence or his destiny. It was what he'd been bred for, and he was sau good at it.

The sounds of the new captives didn't penetrate the security walls. Reicher was able to tell they were making noise by their open mouths and the slight twitches of the fresh-from-training staff who were now shooting them with darts so they could treat injuries and strip them. There was no telling what the captives had in their pockets or body cavities.

Everything would be removed, and the staff would toughen up within a day or two.

The cage warehouse was only reachable by the elevator in the corner. That lift could only be activated from this security room. Many captives made the mistake of fleeing to the elevator with hopes of escaping. It had encouraged enough attempts that the computer had recommended building escape-proof cages.

Reicher's Blinkers had worked on that one for years before the war. The ten captives below wouldn't be able to escape their cells even if they were able to use their gifts through the drugs. The material was titanium and opened only by computer command that went through chips inside the bars.

Joseph looked away as Reicher coughed up a bloody clump and spat it into the waste can. In the past, a leader would have hidden that, but Reicher was one of just two commanders still alive and actively running a lab. He couldn't be sacked because there was no one to remove him.

His counterpart in Hawaii, Corbin, was in the same situation with not enough warm bodies to keep it all going. Both labs needed to spend the next few years assimilating survivors to fill out their ranks. Reicher's illness didn't matter in comparison. The real problem it brought, beyond him growing weaker daily from the cancer eating through his stomach, was that his surviving sons weren't old enough to take over yet. The oldest one here was eight; the youngest was a toddler.

Joseph assumed he would be given the job when Reicher died, breaking the lab rules on inheritance for the first time. He didn't know whether to be excited or terrified. At 30, he would also be the youngest person to ever hold that position.

Joseph fought the urge to scratch his sweaty scalp. Despite the air conditioning, the hat he was required to wear always made him sweat. His uniform was often stained and wrinkled by the time they were finished, but Joseph didn't mind. Having fewer residents meant more amenities could be used, like hot water. Joseph loved taking long showers while watching reality TV.

Reicher was exactly the opposite. He kept himself perfectly neat at all times and would stop whatever he was doing to fix the issue if something happened. Joseph had only seen him deviate from it when dealing with descendants in training sessions. Reicher said that was the only time it was acceptable for the boss to look like anything other than what he was.

Joseph thought the older man was 20 pounds too light from his illness, and his skin was so pale it was almost translucent. Reicher looked like an old man in his 80s, though he was much younger. *He should be on a cabin porch in a rocking chair with a Life Alert button around his neck.*

Joseph opened a new file on the supercomputer to be ready. He knew Reicher's routine by heart. He'd been serving the man for ten years now. He knew everything his boss liked and hated in an

assistant, as well as his feelings on the important parts of their jobs, but that was where it ended. They had no bond outside of this daily session. *If I want to inherit, I should probably put in some effort on a personal relationship.*

Reicher glanced over his shoulder. “There’s really no need. Our relationship is perfect as it is.”

The cold tone told Joseph his assumptions were wrong. Anger flared in his gut.

Joseph controlled it. *Now I know which way I was hoping it would go.*

Reicher rotated back to the window. “Subject One has a fire gift and a demon that’s tougher than all of the others in the cells around him.” Reicher dug in deeper. “A weak sonic gift, too. That could be useful.”

Reicher coughed into the waste can again and kept going. “Hybrid. Number One is a hybrid.”

Joseph peered over his monitor, trying to see that man. All of the captives below were close to middle-aged. Most hybrids died before they hit puberty.

Reicher studied the one-eyed man now being medicated by the silent staff. “He’s new. He hasn’t been a hybrid for long. In fact, I suspect he hasn’t been a descendant for long.”

Joseph was even more impressed now. Someone had been able to successfully share a gift with a normal. That was almost unheard of in the labs where none of them were willing to give up any small amount of power they had.

Reicher continued his evaluation. “Subject Two is also hybrid. I can feel it on them. They both received their gifts from the same alpha.”

Joseph made special notes on that. Alphas had become common after the war, but only a few of them had gifts to match the infamous title. Being able to share power with two normals made them someone to watch out for.

Reicher moved on. “Number two also has sonic and fire. I sense a healing gift.”

Reicher was surprised that Marc’s team contained a healer at all. Healers were rare among their kind. He would have expected all of those to remain with Safe Haven on their island. “Three is normal. As are Four, Five, and Six. All normal and novices.”

Joseph got ready to type in removal orders. “We don’t have a place for them unless you want to move them into lab training.” They didn’t have anyone to train low-level staff right now, other than putting them through the lab routines, but those slots were never wasted on normals. They had just enough staff and supplies to convert this batch of fighters. Then they would have to downsize and shift their priorities to training.

“I’ll let you know. Subject Seven is a doctor.” Reicher was stunned. “The man is also a descendant. We’ll put him in the medical wing as soon as we reach a milestone in his conversion process.”

Reicher examined the four normal rookies trying to reach out to the doctor for help with their injuries. “Don’t remove the rookies right away. Use them for Subject Seven’s conversion.”

Joseph considered that a brilliant idea. It wasn’t a complete waste of lives.

Reicher scanned the next cage. “Another rookie. Also normal... But he has potential. Assign Subject Eight to the dimension level. I suspect he’s Invisible. There’s a dark place in his mind. If I’m wrong, he’ll go into a security slot.”

Joseph agreed. That dark place was a clear sign of the person being Invisible. The only time that wasn’t true was when the person was a psychopath. Either was perfect for a security position in this lab.

Reicher controlled the need to cough again. “Subject Nine has the rage illness. It’s in an advanced stage. I also detect an ice gift and control over water.”

“Do you want him cured of the rage illness?”

“Negative. We’ll use him to further the conversions of the others. Assign him to security training as his starter.” They didn’t have enough security officers. The new man could be used to supplement that until the rage illness grew too bad to control. If he became a convert in that time, then he might earn the cure.

The computer beeped behind him. Reicher ignored it to finish his scan of the new captives. “Ten is military. Sau angry but not infected.

Telekinesis, and possible quake abilities. Make sure his training follows the lab schedule to the letter. Even if he can't be converted, he can be used against the others."

"Yes, sir."

Reicher went to the communication pad next to his chair. He flipped the switch and searched the screen as the live camera centered on his target. "They made it faster than you assumed. Don't forget to factor that into computations for the rest of this team."

Joseph caught the disapproving tone. He had estimated how long it would take Marc and Cerise to reach her homestead, but he'd been off by half an hour. Reicher didn't like mistakes, even small ones. "I'll do better next time, sir."

"See that you do." Reicher sat down in the chair and was overcome by a coughing fit. He paused the live recording so his prey wouldn't immediately be aware of his presence.

The waste can caught another bloody clump before Reicher wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his dark blue uniform and then focused on the monitor. "It's all about this moment, Marcus Brady. You can save us a lot of time and all of *you* a lot of pain by just agreeing to what I want. There's absolutely no chance that I'm going to go away. Just give in now."

Reicher hit the button and reactivated the live camera and speaker system that was wired to every room in Cerise's homestead. It had taken his engineers a week to get it all set up; he'd started

gathering the supplies for it right after searching ahead to discover what future waited for him. That remarkable vision had revealed a destiny that would shape this time period in awful, incredible ways and lead to world domination for the winner. All he had to do was tame a wounded tiger that had escaped its island cage.

2

Marc knew they were being watched before he left the shelter of the Acacia trees that bordered one side of the homestead. He was able to see tall gray paint-chipped columns of a long front porch covered in untouched red bottle brush flowers and Cape ivy that helped give the appearance of the home being deserted. The front door was wide open and the porch was covered in leaves and debris that had been blown there by the wind. The barn was also open, as was the entrance to the shed and the outbuilding next to it. Animal tracks in the dirt and filthy, uncovered windows said no one was alive here. And it was all a lie.

Marc paused at the tree line. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?”

Cerise marched by him, wiping sweat from her neck. “Can we talk later? I want to get those maps.”

Everyone else followed her.

Marc stayed where he was and scanned again. He didn’t see people, but there were red dots all over his grid.

Marc tracked cables running down the side of the large house; they went in one of the open windows. *It's wired.*

Cerise didn't look up as she climbed the stairs and entered the house, but like Marc, she felt eyes on them. She kept her mind on her stolen maps and hoped things worked out the way she needed them to in the end.

Goldie and the others sank down in the weathered chairs on the porch to get their breath back. They dropped the heavy gear they'd brought from the submarine.

The hike had drained them. Marc had refused to stop for breaks. They were all worn out except for him; he was barely showing any effects from the hike. He was clearly in better shape than the rest of them, not including Cerise. She looked the same as she always did. Nothing daunted her.

Marc reluctantly left the tree line and came into view of any number of cameras or satellites that the enemy might be using. He stayed ready to lift his shield as he examined Cerise's ranch and her neighbors.

There was one other farm in the distance that belonged to Goldie's family, according to what he'd been told. He spotted a small graveyard between the two properties but no fence line. He also didn't detect any animals and the orchard trees were bare even though this was prime growing time here. The enemy had stripped everything. Marc assumed that

meant the valuable people too. *Or those unlucky enough to be caught in the Draft.*

He went up the porch steps and entered the parlor of the ranch house where he dropped his load of gear. Long and shallow, the parlor curved around a grand staircase that went straight up for 20 feet and then broke off into several directions that led to other areas of the three-story home. It reminded Marc of expensive houses in the United States. The dusty backdrop of red mountains and rocky mesas through the windows provided the same impression. It made him homesick.

Marc followed Cerise's footprints in the dusty debris to a rear office on the first floor. He surveyed her from the doorway as she dug through folders in an overturned file cabinet. She collected several papers and kept digging.

Marc quickly tired of waiting for her. He turned around and found Albert and Denese standing right behind him.

Denese looked at Marc in fear. "Don't let them kill us."

It was the first thing Denese had said to Marc, but it wasn't surprising. The two crewmen knew they were in trouble. He had expected them to ask for help sooner. "I'll do what I can."

Denese wasn't soothed by his noncommittal reply. "We can get you out of that lab, but you have to promise to take us to your island."

Marc held out a hand, more than willing to make that deal. "Agreed."

A staticky clapping noise echoed throughout the first floor. Marc and everyone else rotated toward it.

A sarcastic voice overshadowed the clapping. “How touching. Kill them both.”

Before Marc could lift his shield around the two crew members, Goldie appeared in the hallway.

Denese tried to run.

Goldie shot her in the back.

He hit Albert in the chest.

Marc’s gun was out, and his shield was up an instant later. He spun around, searching for the owner of the voice instead of killing Goldie like he wanted to. He couldn’t do that yet. Goldie was still valuable to the mission.

Cerise flipped the switch on the dusty desk monitor and turned it toward Marc. Then she resumed digging through the web-covered folders.

Marc waited for the static to clear, controlling his anger. He had already figured out that whatever he promised would cause the opposite to happen. That would include vowing revenge for these two deaths. *But I will get it. You can take that to the bank.*

Goldie holstered and stepped closer to Marc.

Marc’s rage flared out through his shield and shoved the man backward. “I’m going to kill you before this is all over. If you get too close, that could happen now, while your boss watches and laughs about it.”

Goldie retreated. “They’ve got my kids, man. You’d do the same thing in my place.”

Marc shook his head. Cerise had obviously planned this. “That’s a hell of a mental shield you have.”

Cerise kept looking through the folders. “It was a memory charm. I’m quite good with them, even upon myself.”

The monitor cleared, showing Marc an older man with haunting gray eyes, a neatly shaven face that clearly never saw sunlight, and a pristine security room with only one staff member and one exit.

Reicher smiled politely. “Please, take a seat Mr. Brady. We have things to discuss.”

Goldie stared at the bloke whose face he’d never seen but whose voice he’d been hearing for a decade. Haussler had always been his main controller. *So that’s the big boss. Huh. I expected someone more lethal-looking.*

Cerise held in a snort. She was intimately familiar with Reicher; he was lethal in every way.

Reicher didn’t react to his stomach turning. He often felt ill while handling business. He didn’t let it interfere. “Mr. Brady?”

Marc didn’t reply yet. He was busy studying his adversary. At first glance, the old man appeared to be made of stone... Marc spotted a blood smear on his sleeve and blue lips that said his body systems weren’t doing well. “You’re dying.”

Cerise and Goldie both stared at the monitor in surprise.

Reicher clapped again, though not as roughly this time. “Sit, Marcus. That’s an order.”

Marc’s laughter echoed loudly.

Reicher’s eyes narrowed. “Sit or I’ll kill one of your teammates while you watch.” The camera view shifted to allow Marc to see the warehouse through the glass window. He stored all the details he could in the short view, but struggling captives gave him no other option. He reluctantly sat in the dusty office chair and leaned back with his arms across his chest.

“Excellent.” The monitor showed him the boss again. “My name is Carl Alexander Reicher.”

Marc mentally sighed at the formalities. “Sergeant Marcus Brady.”

“I am the Secretaries-General of the remaining UN forces. I’m also commander of the lab you came to infiltrate.”

Marc saw no reason to hedge his bets, yet. “I’m co-leader of Safe Haven and the team leader who is going to shut you down for good.”

Reicher kept it going, curious how much Marc would give away during this first meeting. “I’m an alpha. I give orders and people follow them or they die. That includes your team.”

Marc shrugged. “Then you should probably go ahead and kill them. None of us are going to do what you want willingly.” Marc studied the man harder. “Is that why you split us up? Because you think I’ll turn on my team or that my team will turn on me?”

“Splitting your team was Cerise’s idea. She suggested you might be more amiable if you weren’t attacked and hurt before we had this conversation. I agreed because I want to make you an offer.”

That told Marc his teammates had been injured during their capture. He controlled his anger again, but it laced his tone. “Why me?”

Reicher studied Marc through the monitor. “You have most of the gifts of the others, plus an interesting tracking ability. Are you able to share that grid with someone else to help them?”

“Yes.” It bothered Marc that the man was able to read him over a distance. “Successfully.”

“And that sonic door, does it actually contain a full sonic gift?”

Marc kept a tight thumb on that door to make sure it didn’t open. “Yes.”

“You’re also proficient with fire, ice, pain spells, physical combat, and mental manipulations.”

Marc lifted a brow. “Why the gift recital? Recording it?”

Before Reicher could answer, the one staff member spoke in shock. “You’re giving it to the bünzli!”

Marc sniggered at the Swiss-German slang term for a goody-two-shoes. “That doesn’t fit me anymore.”

“I suspect it never did.” Reicher smiled at proof of Marc’s intelligence. “Yes, Joseph is recording my observations about you, Subject Eleven.”

Marc immediately fired back. “I only hear one flunkey, and he’s disrespectful, which means you’re shorthanded or you’d never allow that. And even though you can track me over a distance, you’re not able to open my mental doors. You might be an alpha, but you’re nowhere near as strong as I am.”

Reicher shrugged. “And you’re not as strong as the alpha who created two adult hybrids.”

Marc twitched, then recovered. “That’s why I’m the co-leader.”

“Yes, we may discuss Safe Haven’s iron ruler at some point if you accept my offer. For now, please read the document appearing on the screen.”

Marc wasn’t in the mood for games. “Just tell me what you want.”

“I’d rather you read the terms first.”

Marc snorted. “You’re buying time for your troops to surround me.”

“Not really, though a transport team is enroute to your location. I hope this will be a peaceful agreement between willing partners.”

His foe spoke with the cool cultured words of childhood instructors. It was hard for Marc to place a nationality. His flunkey was Swiss-German and had obviously been allowed to bond with his ethnic origins. Marc carefully pushed a button. “What do you want, *Commander Reicher*?”

Reicher’s graying eyebrows came together. “I’ll teach you to have respect for authority. It’s obvious the Marines weren’t able to do so.”

Marc didn't rise to the bait this time. He could feel Reicher searching for his buttons and trying to make him do something rash.

Reicher pushed a button on the screen instead. The monitor showed a document on one side.

Marc began reading it.

Goldie read it as well, while Cerise resumed digging through the folders. She had a small stack of papers in her hand now, but she hadn't found what she was searching for yet. "It has to be here somewhere."

Marc's attention was snagged as he read the document. "This is a contract."

Reicher's voice echoed through the monitor. "If you'll agree, you can be brought down to join your team. The harsh methods used to subdue them won't be necessary with you."

In the background, the Swiss-German voice whined again, "That's why it isn't necessary. You don't need a bond with me."

"Shut up, Joseph."

Marc smirked even as he kept reading. "It's hard to keep subordinates under control."

Reicher's tenor hardened. "All it takes is the right motivation. For example, Joseph here has decided he wants my job. He can't have it because he's too good at his own. Once he finally concludes that his position is more acceptable than mine, he'll adjust. I hope you'll do the same when you recognize the wisdom of what I'm offering."

Marc got to the final sentences of the document and tensed. His mind refused to accept what he was reading. *This has to be a bad joke.*

Goldie stepped closer to finish reading the document over Marc's shoulder. His mouth opened. "You can't be serious!"

Marc dropped his shield and punched Goldie in the kidney. The large man fell to the floor, groaning. "I did tell you not to get close."

Reicher's laughter mocked them. "Once you sign that contract, you'll have to let others abuse your subordinates. We don't do things that way here."

"I got it." Cerise picked up the map and the dart gun that had been beneath it.

The contract vanished from the screen. Reicher's gray face replaced it. He stared intently. "Will you take my place?"

Marc sneered. "No. I don't want your job! I want you dead."

Reicher sighed in resignation. "If that's the way it has to be, then that's the way it has to be. Cerise?"

Marc lifted his shield again, but it was too late to stop the dart that was already flying through the air. It plunged into his arm.

Cerise lowered the dart gun, shaking her head. "You knew we couldn't be trusted. I don't understand why you let any of this happen."

Marc didn't fight the drugs; he let them pull him down. *It's all part of the plan.*

Goldie got to his feet. He stared at Marc as the monitor went to static. “He let us capture him.”

“Ay.” Cerise used the dart gun to weigh down the maps she’d found.

“But we didn’t tell Reicher...”

Cerise didn’t verify that because it was obvious. They were playing a dangerous game.

Cerise helped Goldie pick Marc up. They carried him outside, where a transport crew was arriving. “It better be one hell of a plan, mate, cause you’re in deep shit now.”

Two blue and white transport jeeps pulled up as they got Marc outside. Cerise and Goldie did the heavy work while the short-staffed troops stayed in their vehicles.

Cerise didn’t recognize the transport drivers, but it was clear they did recognize her. Their worried gazes kept returning to the red mark of an outcast on her arm. They knew she was capable of disobeying orders and that it often ended in bloodshed.

A rear hatch rose on the first jeep.

They weren’t rough while loading Marc, despite Goldie having reason to be. Both of them liked Marc even though he didn’t like them. They placed Marc in the rear of the lead jeep and started to return to the ranch house.

The driver leaned out the window. “Get in.”

There was no point in arguing. It was clear the order came from Reicher.

Goldie slid into the backseat and shut the door. He didn't mention the pile of gear they'd left in the parlor of the house. It would be found and used by needy people.

The two transport jeeps were dusty and cramped. The small vehicles had probably been sent to conserve fuel. As Cerise joined Goldie in the backseat, she verified that by peering at the gas gauge on the dashboard.

It was sitting at a quarter of a tank. That was exactly how much it took for these smaller vehicles to get from here to the lab. Reicher wasn't taking chances that his troops would go off on their own with a full tank of gas.

They were underway a few seconds later, headed back to where they'd both been born—in a lab. They'd started these homesteads on short breaks, in hopes that they would be able to live here in the future, but the government hold over their lives had never changed. Being born in the lab usually meant they would also die there. That lingered in both of their minds as the small convoy flew toward the nearest city without stopping or slowing.

As the two transport jeeps fell out of sight over the next rise in the road, survivors began emerging from around both homesteads. They stepped out of the shadows or rose from the weeds on the ground. They'd been there the whole time and hadn't given themselves away.

A small group of these survivors collected their gathering shovels from the ground where they had dropped them upon hearing the new arrivals. They headed for Cerise's house. The gunshots had told them there were bodies inside; anyone the UN killed was likely their people. They would get a burial in the graveyard that was a great cover. The tomb below it was being used as shelter for the men, women, and kids who made up the Australian Resistance Force.

Chapter Three

You Need Me Too Much

1

Joseph saved the file and then faced his boss as the buzzer sounded for the security exit. “Do you want me to follow normal protocols for him?”

Reicher shook his head, acting like he wasn’t furious about Joseph’s insubordination during the call. That would be paid back at a later date. “We don’t need to torture him physically. Let him know what we’re doing, but don’t harm a hair on his head. His guilt will lead us to success.”

Joseph entered that into the computer.

Reicher stood from his chair to get a little feeling back in his aching legs. The blood clots and varicose veins were an awful combination with the aggressive cancer. “Send Goldie and Cerise to me as soon as they arrive.” It would take five hours for them to get here. “I’m staying the night.”

The buzzer sounded again. The heavy door began to swing shut.

Joseph hurriedly rose and left. It wasn’t the first time Reicher had decided to spend the night locked in here. “Pleasant evening, Boss.”

“And to you.”

The door shut. The lock activated.

Joseph let his true emotions swarm his face for a moment. He was furious that an outsider was being offered such a valuable position in the organization. He was also a little relieved because he had been worried about living up to Reicher's intense standards. Marcus Brady would bear the brunt of an awful training program while Joseph got to continue doing pretty much what he wanted whenever he wasn't in the security room that was the center of the octagon that formed this level.

Joseph strode through the white-tiled hall toward the showers. He always put his gear in there before his shift, so it was ready. He didn't stare into any of the living quarters that didn't have doors or look through the glass windows that allowed everyone to see what everyone else was doing as he went by.

The UN didn't believe in privacy. They believed in knowing what everyone was doing in case it was against the rules. The security personnel enjoyed punishing rule-breakers; the UN often rewarded a snitch with extra rations or credits on their account. This wasn't a good place to be a rebel.

People stared at Joseph politely as he went by. He wasn't the only one who believed he might inherit leadership when Reicher passed. The boss's illness wasn't a secret. Until they found out about Marc, they would continue to watch Joseph for greatness as well as mediocrity. It was one of those moments in time where almost anyone could

become a leader. *And if Marc dies during his stay here, Reicher will have to give it to me.*

If Joseph made a huge mistake, he would be killed. If he did something great, he might be loved forever for not being one of the few elites who usually gained power in this organization. He would be a hero to the lower classes.

Joseph cared about those things, but his addictive daily routine took up most of his concentration upon release from his shift each day. He had developed several coping methods over the years; the one he was currently employing always worked. If he didn't have this routine, he wasn't sure he would be able to tolerate living down here with so many monsters.

Joseph passed the cafeteria. He nodded to all three of the identically dressed people sitting at the middle table. The cafeteria was completely AI and deserted except for that trio. Sasha and Isabel were the sisters who ran the medical department on this floor. Sasha was curvy with long black hair. Isabel was once again heavily pregnant with twins. Her short gray hair was almost hidden beneath her hat.

The sisters were rotating twin machines. Over the last three decades, each woman had birthed 15 sets of twins. The awful diet served to them kept the machines well-oiled. Neither of the sisters looked their real ages, but the regimen only slowed the process. Both women were starting to go gray and they'd become self-conscious about it. Neither of

them wanted to relinquish the prestige of being the official twin breeders in this complex.

Sitting next to them, arrogant Owen was the top security officer. He had excelled at every test and every challenge he'd been presented with. He was also the father of half of the twin sets with the women sitting across from him. That normal trio didn't love each other, they weren't monogamous, and they didn't have feelings at all for their offspring. They were totally loyal to the program.

Sasha saw Joseph going by; she gave him a flirting smile and wave that he responded to with the same polite nod. He always refused advances from the sisters, and he never signed up for the breeding programs. *I need other outlets for my urges.*

The trio watched until he was out of sight, but they didn't make snide remarks or even mental jokes once he was gone. Joseph was a descendant. He might catch them and tell the boss. All three normals wanted to keep their lives here and they would do anything to make sure that happened. Pretending they liked Reicher's assistant was a small price to pay.

Joseph entered the shower and went to the first stall. He could feel the AI watching him and recording his movements, but nothing he was about to do was against the rules.

Joseph stepped into the water spray and began to strip. It was a rule to conserve water. The cleaners would come in later and take care of the laundry at the same time as the shower.

Joseph activated the security monitor next to the stall. It showed naked females being tortured for information on the Australian Resistance Force.

Joseph took himself in hand and began to enjoy the show. “I can’t mate with Sasha or Isabel because they have to be alive when it’s over.”

2

“You may enter.”

Cerise entered the security room at Reicher’s command. The five-hour ride here had been long and dusty with open windows and no air conditioning. The jeeps hadn’t held enough fuel to run that amenity. She groaned in delight at the cold feel of the room.

Goldie stayed near the open door. Everyone knew the time-lock system had a short hour of operation. He didn’t want to be stuck in here with the boss. He didn’t want to be here at all. If not for his babies, he wouldn’t have signed up for this run.

Neither of them had missed being in the labs. Despite being loyal to the UN in the past, they hated this place and everything it stood for. Finding out the UN was a smoke screen for global laboratories hadn’t changed that feeling at all. They were one and the same as far as the captives were concerned.

The residents they’d passed in the halls had given sympathetic glances and no conversation. They were all certain he and Cerise were in for ugly

punishments. Goldie thought they were probably right.

Reicher motioned to the desk where Joseph usually sat. “You will man that station while we talk.”

Cerise did as ordered. She had worked in a room like this for a year at her birth lab. She knew the computer system well.

Reicher studied Goldie. “As soon as we finish this debriefing, go to decontamination.”

“I will, sir.” Goldie assumed his sweaty, blood-splattered duds were offensive, but he wasn’t sure. This was the first time he had ever met Reicher in person.

Reicher fought the need to cough. “By now, I’m sure you’ve heard about the death of your wife.”

Goldie controlled the urge to lash out. It wouldn’t help him and it was too late to save her. “Yes.”

“We did try to help her. Your offspring were too large for her body and by the time we realized we needed to do surgery, she had lost too much energy and blood. We were able to birth both of your children, however.”

Goldie stored the information to abuse himself with later. *I should have been there for her.*

“Your babies are not doing well. When you leave decon, go straight to the newborn trauma center and stay with them until we decide they’re strong enough to be on their own.”

Goldie’s relief was palpable. “Thank you!”

Reicher's bushy brows came together. "You're going to be punished. You were given orders that you did not carry out. You will be put into retraining and eventually moved to the security staff."

Goldie glanced over at Cerise, who was busy typing everything into the computer. He looked back at Reicher. "If I had killed her, she wouldn't have been able to complete her mission."

Cerise didn't react. She already knew who had given the order for her removal.

Reicher shrugged with a slight movement of his hunched shoulders. "It doesn't change the facts. Failure usually means death. You're being given a second chance at rehabilitation."

Goldie examined the timer on the lock as it begin counting down. There was less than a minute left now. He couldn't help being stressed by it.

"During your retraining, you may be around Marcus Brady or his team. When you do have contact, you will be monitored. Obey orders."

"I will, sir."

Reicher bobbed his chin toward the exit. "Get out."

"Yes, sir!" Goldie was out the door a second later.

Cerise sighed. "If you're itching for time with me, Carl, you could have sent flowers and candy."

Reicher burst out laughing at her boldness. Then a coughing fit took over and ended with him hacking up another bloody lump.

Neither of them spoke as the buzzer went off, and the door began to shut. The faint noises of the living quarters echoed to them and then shut off abruptly. The timer reset for 12 hours. He rarely left this room. All his gear had been brought here, including pain medications and sleeping powders. Reicher was trying to slow his decline with a cold environment, but it wasn't working.

Cerise wasn't surprised, though she wasn't eager for the time alone with the boss man. It would have been easier if he only wanted one thing from her. That wasn't the case with Reicher. While she would end up giving her body, too, it was the intrusion into her mind that she objected to.

“I want Goldie listed as a prisoner of war.”

Cerise made a quick correction to the file and then waited, missing her cloak and longest knife. Here in the lab, she was forced to wear the normal uniform and to leave her special weapons in her locker.

“You are as well.”

She swallowed a chill and typed it in.

“We're going to get into your time with Safe Haven and the fascinating people you met there. Before we do, I want your opinion on the offer I made to Marcus Brady.”

Cerise took a minute to find that answer. Reicher could read her mind, so there was no point in trying to lie, but if she started babbling all the details she'd picked up, he would become annoyed

and punish her. She needed to give him what he wanted in the fewest words possible.

Reicher settled back in his chair, content that the next 12 hours would keep him entertained. It would be that long before Marc woke up.

Cerise swiveled her chair. Reicher preferred to look at someone's face instead of the back of their head. "He's perfect for the job. Once you break him down and remove his conscience, he'll be even better than you are."

Reicher spent a minute scanning her thoughts as she showed him which moments with Marc made her believe that. It wasn't horrifying to observe the replay of Marc drowning his lover, but it was a bit troubling. "Is he a psychopath?"

Cerise nodded. "But only in the sense that once you make his enemy list he'll plan a way to end you. He has a horrible habit of following orders, however; most of the revenge is physical or oral. Kendle pushed him into killing her. I doubt he would have done it without her extra shove."

Reicher knew they could use that during Marc's retraining. "What about his other relationships?"

She snorted. "As far as I could tell, he doesn't have any. Everyone respects him and a lot of people fear him, but only a few of them actually love him. His wife and children aside, I can only think of one other person in that camp who would be devastated if he was gone and that was his mentor and trainer."

"Todd O'Neil."

“Yes.” Their details on Safe Haven’s members and relationships had grown with every contact and every battle. Even the ones they’d lost had earned them information. “Marc is an angry man. He likes to kill and he’s byzan, like us. He’s absolutely brilliant, for the most part. He will have accounted for 95% of anything we can come up with.”

“I knew that as soon as I read his Ghost file. We’re going to use straightforward truth and tactics on Mr. Brady. There won’t be any tricks, though he’ll waste his energy searching for them, I’m sure.”

“If you were holding his wife or kiddies in here, it still wouldn’t help. All he would be concerned with is a rescue. Any converting he did during that time would be faked.”

“Agreed. Donner’s notes about Angela filled in a lot of blanks for us there. That’s part of why we chose not to bring her along.”

Cerise laughed this time. “Yeah, *chose* not to.”

Like most people in authority, Reicher didn’t like being made fun of or the use of sarcasm at his expense. He did like Cerise’s courage, but it was clear she had spent too much time away from the lab. “I want you back in the birthing wing.”

Cerise winced at the memory of her dead children. “I’d be willing to do that, on one condition.”

“You’re in no position to barter with me!”

She stared at Reicher in silent warning. They were both byzan, but she was a heap healthier than he was. In a fight, he might not win.

Reicher knew what she was thinking, but he also knew what made her tick. “You want your babes returned in the reset.”

Cerise didn’t try to hide her pain. “If you promise me that, and put it in writing, I’ll do whatever you want—like I always have.”

Reicher was satisfied that their hold over her was still concrete. The death of her last child had put her on the removal list because he hadn’t been certain she was controllable anymore. Reicher had sent the order to Goldie and then been relieved when Goldie had failed to follow it. Cerise was more valuable alive even though he didn’t need her to know that.

“Why did you order Goldie to kill me?”

Her question told Reicher she wasn’t scanning him. “You know loose ends have to be cleaned up.”

Cerise accepted that explanation even though she would have liked more details on it.

“Where will Saul go with my nuclear submarine?”

Cerise had already been contemplating that. “He kept talking about going someplace warm and getting out of that ship. I think he’ll head south and take a vacation. But he’ll listen to the radio. Whoever wins can call him if they’re willing to make a deal for what he wants.”

“What does he want?”

Cerise shrugged “I was busy with Marc and his team. I didn’t dig in on that one. Sorry, sir.”

Reicher wasn't worried about it. "Did you give him the order to fire?"

"No, that was Safe Haven, but I would have if it let me accomplish my mission."

"Good."

"I saw your brother in Safe Haven."

Reicher was surprised for the first time in a while. "He joined them?"

Cerise nodded. "And I do mean *joined*. He's not one of us anymore."

Reicher scowled at her. "Then why is he alive? You should have handled that already."

"I thought it would be a more fitting punishment to let Rico spend a month enjoying the place and bonding with people before we tell them, and they hang him."

Reicher smiled, soothed. "That sounds exactly like what my brother needs." He was satisfied with her honesty but not her mood. "You seem different. Has something happened that I am not aware of?"

Reicher placed it right before she started to speak. *The alpha*.

"I spent time around Angela." Cerise looked away. "She rubs off on you."

Reicher put the clues together. "She is the one who shared her gifts with the normals, yes?"

"That was the gossip while we were there, but the two hybrids stayed to themselves on the sub. I wasn't able to figure out much in the way of details beyond their goals and regrets."

He gestured at the computer. “Each subject has a file in there. Expand the details with what you did learn.”

Cerise got busy, ignoring the man now removing his clothing. She honestly wasn't concerned about a short physical moment with Reicher as long as it resulted in the return of her family. A quick orgasm with the boss wasn't horrible. The after-sex interrogation he would want to do, was.

3

Marc woke with a dull pain in his arm and a throbbing pain in his brain. He resisted the urge to rub his skull, staying still until he was fully alert.

The first thing he noticed was that he was wearing a paper robe with nothing underneath. His arm felt like it had been used as a punching bag. He knew they'd drawn blood and started an IV. He could feel the needle in his arm for whenever they wanted to give him another dose of the drugs to knock him out. He didn't have shoes on, or socks, and he was covered with a paper-thin emergency blanket that would likely be thrown away after a couple of uses. The enemy wasn't wasting supplies on him yet apparently.

He listened and smelled, but there wasn't much to go on. He didn't hear any voices or anything other than the push of an air-conditioned breeze through a vent above him. He could smell Freon and some

sort of cleaning chemical, along with a medicated shampoo. There were no voices, no perfumes, and no draft to indicate an open window or exit. Marc scanned for people next.

He flinched from the instant pain in his head. He didn't have his gifts back yet and the drugs he'd been hit with had a nasty side effect of keeping their target in pain. Marc already hated waking this way. *And there are a lot more mornings like this one to come. If it even is morning. I have no idea what time it is or even what day it is.*

A clicking noise and then an operating system loading echoed. Marc understood his captor knew he was awake. He opened his eyes.

Marc stared at the concrete ceiling, hating the paint. Blue and white implied a cheery shelter and this was anything but. He didn't have to see the other captives to know screams were more likely to be their company.

Marc turned his head and saw a large viewing screen on the wall across from the stiff cot where he was laying. The room had no other furniture, no bathroom, and not even a garbage can if he threw up. *I'd hate to be the cleanup crew.*

"Mr. Brady." Reicher's voice came through the dark monitor that was still loading up. "A crew is about to come in and bring you a few of the amenities you're missing. If you attack them, there won't be any others."

Marc stayed where he was. He didn't have control of his body yet. It was a bad time to try and

escape, not that that was the plan anyway. “How long have I been here?”

“Time doesn’t mean much. Try not to view it in those terms.”

By the painful clenching of his stomach, Marc estimated it had been two days since he’d had a decent meal.

The room was pristine, telling him it had been cleaned recently. There was no debris on the floor from footprints and no dust on the monitor. Marc wasn’t sure why he had been brought to a viewing flat instead of a torture room, but he was glad that part of his captivity wasn’t starting yet.

The screen finally loaded. Reicher looked the same as he had before, though the blood smear on his sleeve was gone. His hair and mustache were meticulously neat. But Marc didn’t feel like it was a vanity issue. Reicher had it in his mind that a boss should look a certain way and he made sure that he did. *I can use that.*

Marc smothered the thought and moved on. He already assumed Reicher was reading everything that went through his brain, but some of it couldn’t be helped. Noticing details about people was part of what he’d been doing all his life.

The door next to the monitor opened. Two UN troops wearing full battle gear carried in a handful of bags and set them right inside the door. They quickly left without speaking. The lock clicked.

Marc realized the door hadn't been locked when he woke up, but it didn't matter. He was just memorizing routines at this point.

"You'll find everything you need in the bags to last you roughly two weeks."

Marc slowly sat up, not caring if his gown sagged open and flashed his balls at the man. He did tug the blanket over his legs because he was chilly. "Two weeks, huh? Is that how long you're going to keep me here?"

"I seriously doubt I'll be patient that long, Mr. Brady."

Marc yawned. "Marc is fine."

"Excellent. You may continue to call me Reicher."

Marc chuckled. "I guess all that equality talk was just talk."

Reicher coughed to clear his throat. "The boss here has the ability to create a world with true equality for everyone or no one, based on his choices."

Marc assumed the mental manipulation was about to begin. To delay it, he began asking questions. "Why didn't you offer the job to my wife? She's the hardass."

"There are no women in generational leadership. They get too emotional about children and refuse to do the testing correctly. It's the only way we discriminate between the sexes."

"What is the purpose of this lab?"

“To discover answers to the riddles that have been plaguing mankind since we were put on this earth. Being the boss here means upholding law and order. It’s much like the military that you served so faithfully before the war.”

Marc slowly stood and went over to the gear. He felt like he could eat a horse. “What do you do here?”

Reicher wasn’t discouraged with a copy of the same question. He gave more information this time. “We have departments that are searching for other dimensions, like the one where your wife shared her demon offspring. Some of our labs test for life after death and hunt the keys to true immortality. Other departments are searching for answers from Blinkers. The true purpose of our foundation is information. You could be a hero with us, Marc. We don’t like bad guys either.”

“Then you shouldn’t have decided to be one.” Marc picked up a canteen of water and uncapped it. He sniffed it before taking a short drink. When he didn’t taste anything wrong, he downed half of it and let out a loud belch.

Reicher was encouraged by the way Marc was able to keep up with a conversation even though he’d just woken from being drugged. He decided to push it to a new level. “You’d be a real boss here, not like the co-leadership you had in Safe Haven. You’d be able to save your team and any future kiddies after you’re in charge. If you decide there shouldn’t be a final battle, then we would side with

Nature. Given your failed fight with her, I assume that appeals to you.”

It bothered Marc that the enemy had detailed information about recent events. “No more wars between descendants and normals?”

“Absolutely not. There will also be opportunities for you to go back and save your twin sister.”

Marc glared at the monitor.

Reicher tried another tactic. “How about nee more Mitchels? Does that appeal to you?”

Marc laughed. “That appeals to anybody who has ever met a Mitchel.”

Reicher laughed with him. “Too right. Do you have any other questions?”

“Who started these labs and when?”

“It was a combination of powerful families who came together during World War II. The false war was a sau prima cover for all the missing soldiers who ended up in these labs.”

Marc was able to assign the ethnicity now. Reicher’s declaration of World War II being a fake declared him German or Austrian. The pale skin and gray eyes made Marc think the man was both. “Who’s *your* boss?”

Reicher stared at him arrogantly. “I don’t have one.”

Marc believed that. The UN had been defeated in each battle they’d faced in the United States and at the International Detention Center. The finishing touches had been put on during the island invasion.

It was easy for him to believe the UN was on its last legs. “What’s the catch if I agree?”

Reicher didn’t lie. “You can never ever leave. You’re here until you die.”

Reicher’s stomach flipped over as Marc studied him through the monitor.

Marc kept drinking from the canteen and trying to recover his demon.

“It won’t work. You belong to me now, whether you believe that or not. Take the easy way out. Sign my contract. I’ll have a staff member bring it in. That staff member will then stay with you and take care of you in any way you desire while we prep you for training.”

Marc was tired of this. Until they were face-to-face and the man was in reaching distance, it was all pointless. “I’ve already given you my answer. That’s not going to change.”

Reicher tried one more time. “It would also mean no more attacks on Safe Haven, and more knowledge than you can consume in a lifetime. Or perhaps you’d like to live longer. You can have a prolonged life as long your body doesn’t betray you with something we can’t cure.”

“What if I still say no after all your retraining attempts?”

“We’ll use your team.” Reicher cleared his throat again.

“You need me too much to hurt my team and alienate me. You’re bluffing.”

Reicher's laughter echoed as he pushed a button. The monitor switched to the warehouse and a cell with a naked captive inside. "I'll talk to you again. In the meantime, please enjoy the movie I've arranged for you. It's live."

Marc froze as the camera narrowed in to show Greg. *This is going to be bad.*

Marc began digging through the food. *Maybe it'll be drugged and I won't have to watch this.*

Chapter Four
Until I'm Dead
Mission Day 14

1

“Food’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’re weakening 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 that 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 careful to keep him that way. He'd also lost count of how many needles had been stuck into his body; he couldn't narrow down how long it had been that way either. *I have to find a way out!*

He'd never been around 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. Greg 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 yesterday. He assumed they were all somewhere in this huge warehouse that had 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 any visible 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 vision. 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 hurt.* He surrounded Lisa with his arms and broken fingers. *Hold me!*

"Always!" Lisa squeezed him tightly.

Greg snapped awake. Tears rolled over his burnt cheeks. "Lisa! Lisa!"

Pain slammed into his body and stole his breath.

Greg passed out with the smell of his burning flesh filling his lungs.

Reicher activated the intercom. “Take him to the medical wing for an evaluation.”

It had been four days; several of the subjects were ready for the next level of the process. “He made contact with Safe Haven. They’re having problems. I saw an explosion. They have at least half a dozen citizens hurt, including their leader.”

Joseph quickly typed it in, but he wasn’t as happy about it as Reicher was. At some point, he hoped to battle Safe Haven and win. He couldn’t do that if they were killed in an explosion that he didn’t have anything to do with. “Can I ask you a question?”

Reicher tensed. “If you must.”

Joseph hated how Reicher’s attitude toward him had grown colder since the new captives had been brought in. He had come up with another tactic he hoped might work—showing concern. “Have you considered letting one of their healers try to help you?”

Reicher’s tense shoulders relaxed. He’d been expecting a different question. He wasn’t in the mood to listen to Joseph whine about not getting the promotion he wanted. “Yes, I have, but the organization needs them more than I do. My illness is so far gone that it would take the healer’s lifeforce and not just treatments.”

Joseph kept going. “Maybe another transfusion from the frozen Mitchel blood?”

Reicher grimaced mentally. He hated being viewed as weak in any way. “Perhaps, if I need it.”

Joseph knew he wasn’t supposed to keep going with that line of questioning. It was making the boss uncomfortable. He did it anyway. “If Marc doesn’t agree to what you want before things get too bad...?”

Reicher shook his head. “You’re never going to be a leader here, Joseph. You want it too much. I can’t give that power to you.”

“But, why? I’ve done everything you wanted and then some!”

“Shall I lie to you again or give you the hard truth?”

Joseph scowled. “I didn’t know you’d been lying to me at all.”

“The lie is that your job is more important than mine.”

“And the truth?”

Reicher ignored his burning guts. “The truth is you’re not strong enough to do my job. I can’t put a psychopath in charge. We’ll collapse and I could never allow that.”

“I’m not a psychopath.”

“Shall I recite your odd behaviors?”

“I never break the rules.”

“No. You’re the perfect assistant.”

Joseph didn’t know what else to say. He scanned his boss and found the man perfectly neat and in control, but his eyes weren’t the same.

“Update me on our twins and pushers.”

Joseph forced himself to reply as if he hadn't just been crushed. *I don't consider myself one of the monsters; he does.* "We have nine sets of twins that still have their time abilities, all under four years of age. Goldie's offspring are not getting better yet despite his constant care. Our pushers are fully rested. They can try again whenever you call it."

"All in good time."

"Why are you waiting?"

"Why do you care?" Reicher swallowed a cough. "In the end, ultimate goals will be achieved."

"You mean Marc taking your place?"

Reicher thought of Safe Haven and didn't answer.

3

"He's waking up!" Isabel retreated from the exam table, holding her stomach.

Sasha kept working. "It's okay. The painkillers are in full effect right now. He can't feel this."

"But it's too soon! He shouldn't be awake yet."

"Just talk to him calmly and explain we're working on his eye."

Greg held still against the pressure of someone tugging and pulling on his face. "I am calm. You're working on my eye."

Sasha smiled even though he couldn't see her through the bandages and towels. "Excellent. We're almost done. Just don't move."

Greg felt something give in his eye socket. He knew what that meant. “You can’t save it, can you?”

The medic’s voice was regretful. “No, I’m sorry. We did try, but there was too much damage. We’re removing the remaining bits now. But you’ll still be able to cry!”

Greg groaned angrily.

Isabel frowned. “That was insensitive, Sasha.”

“Well, I just meant he would have some use out of the socket even though his eye is gone.” Sasha removed the last bit of rotting eyeball.

Greg cooperated, but fury and panic were already making their way through his brain again. He didn’t have his gifts back yet and he felt like he’d been on a week-long drunk with nothing to eat. “My stomach is rocking rough.”

“Isabel, give him 6.25 mg Prochlorperazine.”

Greg heard someone move and felt the IV in his arm being touched. A few seconds later, a cool liquid shot through his veins and began calming his stomach. He refused to say thank you.

“Since he’s already awake, should I start the questions?”

“Yes, Isabel. I’m almost done here. You can go ahead with the paperwork.”

Greg was both encouraged and discouraged to hear female voices. Most women were easier to overwhelm than men, but he didn’t believe in being rough with them. It was a catch-22. He decided to get information instead of planning their deaths. “How long have I been here?”

Sasha glanced at the clock on the wall. “You’ve been in the medical bay for almost two hours. You’ve been cleaned up and your injuries were tended. The eye is the last part.”

Because his first question had been answered, Greg went on, hoping that would continue. “I’d like to request a lawyer.”

One of the women snickered.

The other answered, “We don’t have lawyers here, Subject One. You don’t get a phone call and there won’t be any visits from the Red Cross or whatever humane treatment of prisoner’s agency comes to mind. We don’t have those things.”

Greg began to dislike Sasha’s cool, arrogant tenor. “Can I talk to your boss or my team leader?”

“I’m sure Reicher will talk to you when he’s ready. As for the rest of your team, no, you may not have any contact.”

“Where is my team now?”

Sasha frowned in annoyance. “In the same place you were before being brought in here.” She waved at Isabel. “Let’s do a swab wipe to make sure we got all the pieces.”

Their touch was light and impersonal. The women would have been right at home in Safe Haven’s medical bay. Greg could tell he had been well taken care of; he could also feel a thin robe over his burnt body and a lot of bandages. “Will I get a trial at some point?”

Isabel stepped back. “So you admit you’re a criminal?”

“No.” Greg hadn’t expected that. “Why the torture and no talking? I might have been willing to answer your questions.”

Sasha glared at her sister to get her working again so they could finish before Reicher scolded them for taking too long. “We don’t decide on procedure for criminals.”

Greg was reduced to basic questions. “What do you want with me?”

“We don’t want anything from you, Subject One, except for your cooperation in completing our duty.” Sasha prepared a medicated bandage for his eye socket. “We have nothing to do with your captivity or retraining. My sister and I are just the medical staff. Please remember that.”

Greg didn’t like how it made him feel to think the medical staff wasn’t willing in the torture, yet they were still a part of it by tending the injuries just to send him back into hell. “What happens to me now?”

“The boss will decide. Again, we have nothing to do with it.”

Greg believed her, but he still started to hate Sasha. “Can I sit up and open my other eye?”

“Yes.” Sasha removed the gory towels.

Greg didn’t like the sisters upon sight, but he was craving the sound of a human voice. He refused to give them the cold treatment that Marc had suggested they use when they were captured. He lifted his hand to find his fingers in a cast, as well

as a bandage on his foot. “How many toes did I lose?”

The accident on the beach had given him all of these injuries, except for the burns. The burns came from here and other than the eye, they were the worst part of the pain. Second-degree burns never stopped hurting. Even the painkillers that had dampened the surgery on his eye weren't preventing the hot stings from constantly itching across his arms and legs.

“Only two. They had to be removed; they were turning gangrenous.”

Greg spotted a tall form in the corner and realized the man was a security officer. His name tag said Owen.

Greg was thrilled that his other eye was working well, but he didn't like the look of the security officer. Owen had dead black orbs and huge arms. If he knew how to fight at all, it would be a struggle and Greg wasn't ready for that after being weakened and now missing several body parts. He memorized other details instead of attacking.

Their identical outfits were only broken by small lapel pins that Greg assumed designated their jobs. Even their shoes were identical. He wondered if that was to keep them from having individual tendencies or if it was just easier to outfit staff by using the same uniforms.

The medical bay was a long, narrow rectangle covered in locked metal cabinets, cameras, shelves that were fully stocked, a small bathroom with a

shower, and one main exit that was guarded by the security officer. There was a glass window in one of the walls, but it was covered by blinds. Greg couldn't tell what was outside the medical bay.

Greg tracked the IV in his arm to a bag of blood hanging from the IV pole. "You know it makes no sense to torture us and then heal us, just to send us in for more torture. That's the definition of insanity."

Both female medics nodded, but they didn't stop cleaning or doing paperwork.

Isabel waved her questionnaire. "If you don't mind..."

Greg fell silent, waiting for the questions he had been expecting as soon as they were brought here.

"How did you become a hybrid and why?"

It took Greg a minute to understand the question. He had anticipated an interrogation over the infiltration and what they were doing here, not his descendant status. "Someone shared gifts with me because I proved I could be trusted."

"And that was the alpha, Angela?"

Greg considered lying to protect her, but it was clear these people already knew the truth. "Yes."

"Do you dream walk often?"

Again, it took Greg a minute to process the question. "No."

He placed the clues together and realized that was why he was getting a break from the torture. His quick trip to see Lisa had impressed someone.

Greg studied the women again, dislike growing stronger. One of them looked like she was due to give birth at any point. He couldn't help the snarky pitch this time. "Aren't you too far along to be working?"

Isabel gave him a warning glance, but she stayed out of his reach. "I've always worked until my water breaks."

Greg decided to push a little more. "Then aren't you a little too *old* to be pregnant?"

Anger flowed from Isabel and did absolutely no damage. Greg placed her as a normal. He was suddenly sure all three of them were.

Sasha got them back on track. "What do you know about alternate dimensions?"

This time, Greg's mind went straight to the odd place where he'd chosen his demon. "A little. I've only been there once."

Sasha and Isabel exchanged glances.

Greg assumed that was an incorrect answer, but it was too late to take it back now.

Isabel resumed the questioning. "What is your relationship to the other captives that were brought in?"

"We're part of Safe Haven's security force."

"Are you related by blood or through a marriage at all?"

"Sort of. The father of my demon is my team leader."

The medics exchanged another glance.

Sasha checked the sheet for the next questions when Isabel didn't keep going. "What was your job in Safe Haven? Do you have family there?"

"No, no family. I was an Eagle."

Sasha frowned. "An Eagle?"

"That's what we call our security force."

"Who is Lisa?"

Greg tried not to think about her. "My girlfriend."

Isabel jumped back in so she didn't get punished for not doing her job. Greg's answers were fascinating. "What do you know about the Australian Resistance Force or ARF?"

Greg frowned. "The what? Who?"

It was clear he wasn't lying. Isabel went on to the next question. "How well do you know Saul?"

Greg's frown deepened. "Enough to know he probably shouldn't be allowed into anyone's camp, even yours. The man is nuts."

"Do you know where he went?"

Greg realized Saul was MIA with a nuclear submarine. "No. I doubt he'll go back to Safe Haven, though. Angela wanted him to sink that sub. If he shows up with it, she'll make him follow through."

Owen spoke for the first time. "Your boss wanted you to sink a nuclear submarine?"

Greg didn't nod and cause his headache to get worse. "Yes. She said it was too much power for any one person or group to have over everyone else."

Owen resumed his watchful silence as Isabel recorded the answer.

Sasha opened the tube on Greg's IV to allow the sedative already in the bag to go through. They were almost finished and letting Greg stay clear of the drugs wasn't a good idea. Even after days of torture and starvation, his body was still strong enough to do real damage.

Isabel resumed filling out the paperwork. "I need you to tell me why you came here and then we'll be all done."

At this point, Greg saw no reason to lie. "My team and I came here to stop you from resetting time and to kill your boss so that he can't ever restart the awful shit happening here."

There was no surprise or even resentment from the two medics or the security officer.

"Thank you." Isabel finished the paperwork and put it in the right folder.

Sasha finished taping the bandage over Greg's socket and then stepped back. "We're finished, sir."

Both female medics peered at the camera in the corner.

Greg concluded someone was watching them. His stomach flipped as a hard male voice came through the speaker.

"What is his medical status?"

Sasha smiled. "He can take a heap more."

Isabel hadn't forgotten Greg's sarcasm. "Yes, send him back to his cell."

Reicher admired Greg's strength. "I agree."

Greg tensed. “Is there something I can do to change your call on that?”

“Not a chance, Subject One.”

“Owen will see you back to your cell.” Sasha quickly disconnected him from the IV and capped off both ends.

Weakness ran through Greg’s limbs, not allowing him any chance to fight as Owen came over and lifted him off the medical table.

He dragged Greg to the exit, ignoring the man’s resistance and his pleading. There wasn’t anything Greg could say or do to stop Owen from putting him back in his cell. Owen couldn’t be bought.

Greg tried to remain calm. *At least I was medicated and my injuries were treated. It could be worse.*

The elevator quickly took him down, telling Greg the medical wing was above the warehouse. As the elevator door opened, he spotted two indifferent staff members with electric batons waiting nearby.

Now Greg began to fight. Screams rolled from his mouth as Owen dragged him forward.

4

Marc glanced up from the toothbrush he was currently grinding down against a sharp spot along the wall. The monitor had been showing four of his rookies being tortured with fire. Marc’s guilt had reached a new level. The only consolation was the

lack of sound on the monitor. He knew the rookies were screaming, though. He could almost hear it in his head.

Small layers of dust were beginning to grow on the viewing room. Marc had explored it fully over the last four days. He hadn't found any spots weak enough to allow for an escape.

The dusty floor was littered in debris that had fallen from the ceiling, though Marc wasn't sure when that had happened. His hair had held a light shower of the gray debris. He assumed there had been a small quake or some other vibration that had shaken it loose from the ceiling while he slept. This was an old facility that clearly hadn't been repaired much even before the war.

The boss hadn't contacted him again. The monitor had kept up a continuous show of torture, mostly focused on Greg. That bandaged, hurting, fighting man was now being shoved back into his cell. Once again, the electric batons were rotated in his direction.

Marc glanced away before his guilt got the best of him. Despite knowing this was going to happen, he was still falling for the mental abuse. He found himself staring at the monitor for long minutes at a time without being able to look away.

Marc scanned the door, where his waiting exothermic reaction of thermite, created with rust and aluminum from the hinges and the vent grates, would be an ugly surprise for anyone who opened it. He also had a small blade made from a lid that

would join the toothbrush shank he was currently working on. He had his gifts back, too, but he was getting hungry. The food was drugged even though the water wasn't. He was waiting as long as he could each day to eat.

He'd already tried to send his demon out to do a scan and discovered an electric barrier around the flat. As soon as staff members came in and the explosive on the door blew, he was heading out to hunt the boss. Marc had already lost patience with being caged. He couldn't take much more of it without cracking.

The monitor went to static.

Marc quickly hid the toothbrush in the pocket of his robe. He had been provided with a lot of amenities, including a portable bathroom that was stinking in the corner.

The monitor cleared to show Reicher watching him knowingly.

Marc lifted a brow. "How are you on this fine day?"

Reicher chuckled roughly. "I admire your courage and stamina, Mr. Brady. Most of our captives resort to begging before now."

Marc shrugged. "Well, I'm not the one being fried alive in a cage. That makes it a little easier."

Reicher's tone was sympathetic but his face didn't change to match it. "Our methods are harsh, but effective. Please keep in mind that you can end this at any time."

Marc smiled calmly. “Maybe we should have a face-to-face meeting and discuss it.”

Reicher wasn't fooled. “You have to sign the contract first. Then you can kill me.”

Marc had come to the conclusion that Reicher's offer was genuine, but it didn't matter. “I can't. I'm not evil enough to do your job.”

Reicher's tone hardened. “But you are. My stomach's burning. As you know, byzans repel when one of them is corrupt.”

Marc gestured with the hand that still had an IV needle in it. “That's you.”

Reicher shook his head. “If that was the case, *your* stomach would be upset.”

Marc paused. “How can you not be corrupt? You're a kidnapper and a killer, among other things.”

Reicher shrugged. “I'm following my destiny. You're still fighting yours.”

Marc was forced to accept that Reicher was probably right, but it didn't change his answer. “And I'll continue to do so.”

“Have it your way, Mr. Brady.” Reicher turned toward his assistant. “As soon as he caves and eats, blow the door and take his weapons and all the supplies that are left.”

Marc realized Reicher was able to get through the force field around the door even though he couldn't. That angered him and made him ashamed of himself for not trying harder.

The monitor flipped back to show Greg's arms going up in flames while he beat on himself to put them out.

Marc looked away. "As long as I can't hear it, I'm good."

The monitor immediately switched to full sound. Greg's screams blared through the speakers in horrible waves.

Marc went over to the remaining supplies and dug out another ration bar. He ate it quickly, willing the medication to knock him out faster so he didn't have to listen to it. He was sure the sound would follow him into sleep, however.

The sound changed.

Marc tried to brace as he heard the newly dubbed Chief Medical Officer for his team start shouting in horror.

5

"They're rookies! They don't know anything!"

Harry and the rookies had been taken together to a corner of the warehouse. After days of darkness and drugs, the torture had started. There had been two brief pauses where he'd been fed, 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 this time.

Rancid odors covered Harry in fury and fear. "I'll kill you all for this! I'll kill you all!"

Harry had been alert most of the time. He'd memorized the faces and their routines. He'd also kept track of the days by the shift change that ran 12 hours each. They'd been captives for five days now.

Tears rolled over Harry's face as the rookies stopped screaming. Fire engulfed them all. "Let me out! I can save them!"

The rookies couldn't fight the flames. They fell or slumped against the cage bars.

An unchangeable loathing settled deep into Harry's guts for every person on staff in this complex.

Reicher observed the frantic medical man below. He could feel something else coming.

Joseph didn't. It was another mark against him. "He's about to break through."

Joseph snorted. "From one of those cages? That's not possible."

"From the drugs." Reicher observed intently. Very few descendants were able to fight through the drugs and still use their gifts and that included himself.

In the cell, Harry's fury reached its peak. Terror and rage shoved him through a live evolution. Healing power flew out of his chest and surrounded the fallen, smoldering rookies.

All of the staff stopped to observe. Everyone was curious if he could revive the dead.

Reicher doubted that was possible, but he was still impressed by Harry's evolution. "Take him to the medical wing. Make sure he's given a double dose first. We wouldn't want him to wake too soon."

Joseph typed it into the computer. He watched Reicher out of the corner of his eye. *I want his job. I'm going to find a way to get it.*

Reicher turned to look at him. "The only way you can get my job is if you kill me and Marcus Brady, and I've already left instructions for that possibility. Everyone in this complex will hunt you down. You'll never be a leader here, Joseph. Accept that so I don't have to replace you."

The timer on the exit buzzed. Reicher went back to his chair as Joseph hurriedly left before he attacked the man.

Joseph waved in the waiting cleaning crew as he left. “It stinks in there.”

Reicher gestured permission for the crew who would empty his cans and bags and leave without speaking. It did stink. The waste can was full of bloody clumps and tissues. The embarrassment from Joseph’s words would be paid back later, though, on the main target. He didn’t believe in killing the messenger.

Reicher knew he was in danger from Joseph, but there really wasn’t anyone else who could do the job as well, except for Cerise, who couldn’t be trusted any more than Joseph. If it came down to a battle, Reicher would rather face his assistant than his student. Cerise was by far the more bloodthirsty of the two. “That’s why she has to be retrained.”

It wouldn’t take her long to figure it out. Cerise was brilliant and her body was perfect.

Reicher smothered those old feelings. His emotions could never be allowed to influence his choices. “I’m a lab rat, born and bred. I’ll be that until I’m dead.”

Chapter Five
Not The Same

1

Cerise donned her blue cloak and fastened it. She paused in front of the mirror on the rear of the door to her tiny, private room.

The private flats were four feet wide and seven feet long. They had the same white tiled floors and blue and white striped walls that were prevalent throughout most of the government labs. The color scheme had been adopted from the UN cover story.

There was a locker on one wall and a tiny end table next to an uncomfortable cot with a thick mattress. The mattress was a rare extra. All of the injections that went into a woman's spine made it difficult for them to lay on a hard or thin mattress while being a breeder. After losing several of them to paralysis, the boss had chosen to make the women more comfortable. That was also where the single picture of the sun and flowers had come from. The government believed a breeder's mental state was better if she had something pretty to look at.

The private rooms were air conditioned, but there wasn't a dunny. She had to go down the hall to the community toilet with everyone else. It smelled like sweat and old paint in here, but Cerise

used to be grateful for it. Now, it was just a reminder that happiness, for her at least, wasn't possible.

Cerise stared at herself. *What happened to me?*

She looked exactly the same as she had the last time she'd been in this lab. The UN uniform and toolbelt hadn't changed. Her auburn hair still curled around her neck like it always had. Her sunburnt skin blended perfectly with this awkward and painful environment. That had always been the case. It wasn't a comforting place.

Her muscles were the same; her body was the same. Even her golden eyes were as cold and unreachable as ever. *But I'm not the same.*

Cerise knew what had brought the change; she was still trying to figure out how much she had been affected. *I only spent a few days in Safe Haven. I didn't have heaps of contact with most of the main camp. I don't understand how it infected me so fast.*

Cerise adjusted her cloak so it flowed evenly over her shoulders and then stepped out into the hallway. A small section of this birthing zone had been dedicated to living quarters for the mothers, so they were more easily monitored and reached by the birthing team. Cerise had always enjoyed not being in the main bunkhouse with the rest of the troops during her time here, but now it was giving her too much space to think about things she normally wouldn't have considered—like how much she hated it here.

Cerise walked the empty halls without longing for companionship or the sound of another human

voice, unlike Marc's team. After so much silence, they were willing to talk to anybody about almost anything. Cerise had become the opposite during her isolation. It made her less trusting of the lab goals and nervous about the new subjects. They were progressing along the schedule almost perfectly in time with what had been predicted for their conversions, but Cerise wasn't convinced. *It doesn't feel right.*

The men she'd brought here were hard, determined, and vicious. Their plans had been brutal. None of that matched the captives who were allowing Reicher's staff to abuse them. Cerise had already informed the boss that this was part of Marc's plan, but Reicher was arrogant. He wasn't accounting for a possible trap.

But that's not my problem. As long as he resets time so I get my kids back, I don't care if Marc and his men kill everyone in this place. It just has to happen after I get what I need.

The hall floors were grimier than she was used to. Reicher didn't have enough troops to keep the complex clean. All manpower was being diverted to more important services. Cerise still hated the way debris crunched beneath her boots as she walked.

Cerise saw Goldie going into the cafeteria. She almost turned around and went back to her room. None of Goldie's words would be positive. In her already contemplative state, it wasn't a good idea to pile on his negativity.

Goldie spotted her out of the corner of his eye. He stopped and held the door open.

Cerise swallowed a sigh and entered the cafeteria with a distracted nod at him, hoping he took the hint. Goldie was unshaven and his duds were stained from days without being changed. Even his gold fillings were duller. It was another sign that he'd given up.

Goldie's isolation had had the opposite effect of hers. He couldn't wait to talk to someone. That's why he'd come to the cafeteria. "Are you okay?"

Cerise still didn't speak to him. She went to the special entrée machine and pushed a random button without caring what it was. The main ingredient in all of these meals was the same. She refused to dwell on it.

"Me too, me too." Goldie went to the workers' vending machine and pulled a meal. "Been able to see my kids every day. It's good. It's good."

Cerise knew it wasn't. She still didn't ask. There was nothing she could do to help his children or to save them. She suspected Reicher was going to use them soon because of their bad health. *He always gets his money's worth before the subjects are killed.*

Goldie caught that and paled. He opened his mouth to beg for her help.

Cerise slapped his food out of his hand. It splattered against the wall, drawing attention.

Goldie started to challenge her. His face fell. "I'm sorry."

He quickly left before he got in trouble. Cerise was a breeder. Anyone who attacked a breeder signed their own death warrant, but it wouldn't be a quick removal. Reicher liked to make a show out of those people and Goldie didn't want to be on stage.

Cerise regretted putting another dent in their friendship, but all he could do was get both of them in trouble or screw Reicher's plans and that would be even worse.

The lunchroom stank of old mince and bitterness. Everyone on this floor used it. Cerise had learned to judge the mood of any complex by the feel of its cafeteria. Right now, things were ugly.

Cerise sat down with her food and tore open the pouch. She tilted it up and dumped some in her mouth rather than use the flatware and a plate. She didn't feel dainty and there was no reason to act like it here. In Safe Haven, she had used the forks and wiped her mouth on the napkins, but it had been a rare three days of civility.

And I miss it. Cerise tilted the pouch up for the next bite, refusing to fall prey to her own mind. Just because she'd had a few astounding, informative, entertaining days in that camp, it didn't mean it was okay to act like that here. If Reicher figured out she was having these doubts, she would be removed and there would be no reset for her kids. It was a dangerous line to walk.

Cerise saw Goldie watching her through the window as he moved down the hall. She tried to give him a forgiving smile, but it came out as a

grimace. She also suspected Goldie was going to be killed right after his children or maybe even before them. Sometimes the time pushers needed extra energy. Goldie's lifeforce would be a huge advantage in that situation and it would kill three birds with one moment.

As far as she knew, the pushing staff was fully rested and ready to try again. Cerise didn't know who they'd chosen for the next attempt, but she would bet her last credit that Goldie and his kids had already been assigned to it.

Cerise poured another bite from the pouch into her mouth and chewed. She knew what was in it. She had helped do the research after their scroll divers had pulled up the information on immortality. Consuming corpses was disgusting, but if it allowed her to live longer, she was okay with it. It's not like she killed people just to eat them. The bodies here usually came from natural deaths or the occasional captive who couldn't take the level of torture that Reicher wanted to dish out.

The cafeteria door opened. Sasha and Isabel came in.

Both sisters were full of good health, but not good cheer. Cerise didn't know what they'd been discussing, but the conversation cut off abruptly as they noticed her. She reckoned it was something bad about herself or leadership.

Cerise didn't challenge them. *That's Reicher's problem. I have my own concerns.*

Sasha went to the normal machine while Isabel went to the one Cerise had used. Both women were hungry after a 12-hour shift in the medical bay. They gave Cerise a brief nod as they went by.

Isabel picked up the pouch that came down the chute. "It's smaller."

Sasha glanced over and shrugged. "You're getting a little heavier with this pregnancy anyway."

Isabel smacked the front of the machine. "It's too small! This won't hold me for twelve more hours."

Cerise finished chewing her bite and swallowed. She smirked. "There's a new breeder now. Command cut the portion sizes."

Isabel saw which pouch Cerise had and tensed. "It's you."

Cerise chuckled at the ugly tone and glare. "Oi. I hoped we were going to be mates this time."

Isabel grabbed the normal pouch from Sasha's hand and stormed out of the cafeteria with both portions.

Cerise laughed again. "Your sister doesn't seem happy."

Sasha wasn't angry over the loss of food. Her stomach was upset anyway. She sat across from Cerise with a mug of tea. "She's always been a little jealous of you."

Cerise finished her pouch and pitched it into the waste can from where she was sitting. "Try to talk to her about the overeating. If Reicher finds out

she's being a glutton, he'll put her in retraining as soon as she gives birth."

Sasha glanced around to determine if anyone had heard them. Things like that weren't supposed to be discussed among the staff.

Cerise was a bit surprised at herself. In the past, she wouldn't have offered that advice. To cover for it, she glared at Sasha as she got up. "I will report this."

Sasha watched Cerise leave. "Cerise never tells her victims she's reporting them and she certainly doesn't offer helpful advice that goes against the rules. What's going on with her?"

Sasha left her mug of tea on the table and went to find someone who might be able to get that answer.

2

"Is Joseph in here?"

Half a dozen troops in the main barrack all pointed toward the shower.

Sasha knew what was going on by the disdainful leers that accompanied the gestures. She didn't care. She marched into the shower and entered without calling a warning.

Joseph was already halfway through his control session; it was hard to stop. He fumbled for the security camera and managed to shut it off.

The shower reeked of desperation. It absorbed all the bad vibes from everyone who came in here

and sent it back out in an odd mood that encouraged violence. It was concerning to Sasha, but not enough to make her change her mind.

Sasha leaned against the main door but didn't lock it. She didn't want anyone to assume they were doing things in here that weren't allowed. "I need to talk to you."

Joseph glared at her with a hard-on in his hand and anger on his face. "It's not a good time!"

Sasha scanned his stiff, wet body in appreciation and then ignored it. "I need to make a report on my sister before Cerise does."

Joseph slowly regained control of his brain, but the hard-on didn't go down. "What did she do?"

"She took my portion of mince because I pissed her off."

Joseph's anger returned. "You interrupted me for that?"

"It seemed important. And there's something going on with Cerise."

Joseph paid attention to that name. "What are you talking about?"

The scent of his body soap ran up her nose and flipped Sasha's stomach even more. "She's different since she got back. Something's changed with her. I was hoping you could tell me what it was."

Joseph had also noticed things were different with Cerise, but he wasn't going to talk about it with one of their medics. "If you know something, file a complaint. Reicher will handle it."

“It’s just something different in the way she’s responding to us now.”

“Well, until she reports it, it didn’t happen, so your sister is safe.”

“What if Cerise doesn’t report it at all?”

Joseph shrugged. “Then she’s the problem, not your hormonal sibling.”

Now that she’d gotten what she wanted, Sasha realized she was alone with a naked man. She remembered one of her other goals. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for a while.”

Joseph glared. “We can talk about this later.”

She scanned his twitching, swollen member and smiled. “It seems like now is the perfect time.”

Joseph felt an instant reaction, but she wouldn’t like the outcome. “Why me and not Marc? The boss’s new favorite toy would probably be happy to give you what you want in exchange for helping one of his men.”

Sasha snorted. “I don’t believe the boss is going to give leadership to an outsider. And I want a bond with the *new* boss.”

“You’re not safe with me.” Joseph assumed she knew what aroused him. Everyone else did. They’d been open about the scorn since finding out Marc was being given leadership and not him.

“You don’t scare me. Plus, we have cuffs.”

Joseph heard the truth coming out of his mouth before he could stop it. “They call me an incel.”

Sasha shrugged at the term for a weak bloke who was unable to attract a mate and hated women

so much because of it that he would do them violence. “I’m not sure you fit that definition since I’m here offering you a chance. However, breeding with me will change their opinions.”

Joseph stared at her. “But I *am* an incel. I hate you and all your kind.”

“My answer is the same.” Sasha stepped closer, slowly reaching out. “Turn your show back on.”

Joseph cringed. “Don’t!”

Sasha understood he was terrified of hurting her and being removed. She wasn’t. She’d been with enough men over her lifetime to know when one was truly dangerous. Joseph wasn’t.

Joseph couldn’t get by her because of the stall wall. Her hand slid around him. He froze, not even breathing as she began to stroke.

Sasha tried to finish him off quickly. Many of the men here were older and still virgins. All it took was a gentle hand and a determined sheila to help them.

Joseph grabbed her by the throat as his climax neared. He slammed her against the wall, moaning.

Sasha revised her opinion, but she didn’t stop stroking. She did lower her chin so he couldn’t get a better hold around her neck. *We will use the cuffs next time.*

Joseph exploded into her hand. He smacked his head against the wall as he climaxed so the pain would stop him from attacking her.

Sasha let him ride the waves. Then she slid out of his reach and rinsed off her hand. The strength in

his grip was a surprise. She had always considered Joseph a weakling.

Joseph leaned against the wall and tried to get his breath back. “Sor-ry.”

Sasha waved it off. “I’m not hurt and you’ve learned a lesson here, right?”

He gasped in oxygen. “Don’t have to hurt you to like it. Just have to hurt myself.”

She frowned lightly. “That wasn’t exactly what I was going for, but okay.”

Joseph sucked in more air to talk with, aware of his body still being partially hard from the new excitement. “Again sometime?”

Sasha grinned happily. “Of course. After you can go all the way without getting injured, we’ll get you signed up for the program.”

He nodded, though he had no intention of being a lab rat. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Her smile faded. “Has Cerise chosen a donor yet?”

Joseph frowned at the quick change of topic. “Nee, I don’t think so.”

“Well, maybe it will be you and then you can forget the cuffs.”

Joseph stared in surprise as she left. That idea was instantly appealing. *And forbidden.*

Joseph focused on the security camera in the corner. He could feel Reicher observing; he’d seen everything that had happened. “Your staff are starting to think for themselves. You should get rid of that new toy before the infection spreads.”

In the security room, Reicher frowned deeply, but he didn't change his plans.

3

Harry woke to the sound of female voices having a revolting conversation that turned his stomach before his brain registered all the words.

“We needed more bodies for the mix.”

“Too right, mate.” Isabel rubbed her huge stomach. She was happier again now that she'd fed. “They sure thrive on this diet.”

Sasha injected Harry's IV tube. “Toss on a little ketchup and you don't even notice the taste.”

Sasha went over to the desk for a new IV bag. Harry had drained himself trying to help his teammates. His body wasn't fully emaciated now, but he would need a couple more to regain his health, along with all the water Reicher would allow them to give.

Both medics were thrilled that Harry was going to be joining them after his training was finished. It was no easy feat to be the only medics on this floor, even if they were understaffed.

Isabel rubbed her aching spine this time. She would be glad when it was over. She enjoyed her job and the status it brought, but she didn't like being pregnant. The parasitic fetus that required her body to survive often left her with an upset stomach and aches and pains that it had no right to cause.

“Do you think Reicher will partake of the diet now?”

Sasha shook her head. “He’s big about not using up supplies we’re short on, and fresh bodies are definitely hard to come by now that the war has been over for a year.” She studied the man on the table. “Do you think the new guy will be a part of the breeding program?”

Isabel snickered. “Setting your sights on him already?”

“Yes. It’s my turn to breed and this one is strong; he has gifts the others don’t.”

“It will be beaut to have him around. We might even be able to breed at the same time.”

“True. Healers like him are rare. He might pass that on to the offspring.”

“Yes, and if the babies were stronger, then we might have more luck with the reset program.”

A harsh smell of burnt meat struck Harry’s nose. His mind replayed the murders of the four rookies he hadn’t been able to save. His evolution didn’t matter. His failure did.

Harry opened one eye and scanned his new environment. The first thing he saw was a stack of burnt bodies on a cart by the window. *My rookies!*

“He’s awake!”

Harry rose up on the medical table and slipped his arm around the nearest woman’s neck. Her state of pregnancy didn’t come to mind. He was too furious.

“Breach! We have a breach!” Owen hurried into the medical bay from his post outside the door.

Harry’s arm tightened around Isabel’s neck. He saw they were wearing the same uniforms as those who had murdered his teammates. His arm tightened again, stopping her from breathing.

Sasha slowly approached them. “Let her go and we’ll forget this happened.”

Harry felt the weakness in his body and knew this wasn’t going to be the moment he escaped. *But I can at least cause you pain.* He shoved Isabel as hard as he could, knocking her into the stools by the exit.

She hit them heavily and dropped to the ground, gasping. A thick stream of water began puddling around her feet.

Owen rushed forward and wrestled Harry back onto the table while Sasha injected his IV with another dose of sedative.

“Help!” Isabel began aging rapidly as her body diverted all her energy toward the coming birth.

As the drugs began to pull him down, Harry screamed obscenities at all of them.

The medical bay door opened. A large hound came in, growling lowly.

Sasha and Owen immediately retreated out of the way. Both of them wanted to help Isabel, who was losing consciousness but still releasing puddles of amniotic fluid. They didn’t move, however. The hounds knew the staff here wasn’t to be harmed, but

that didn't always keep them from reacting when they felt threatened.

Harry didn't even notice the dog. He knocked things over, staggering around drunkenly as the drugs tried to sedate him and he tried to destroy the medical bay. He threw beakers and glasses and knocked over trays. "Those were my rookies!"

Owen covered Sasha from the blast of weak magic. Harry's demon was also venting fury, but it had little energy to spare for spells.

Magic hit the IV pole and burst the bag. Warm liquid flew through the air and drenched the wall.

Harry ran his arm along the counter, not caring about the instant slices or blood. His fury was out of control. More glass shattered.

The hip-high hound was dark red, with red orbs and hot breath that came out visible in the air conditioning. Jagged teeth bared in warning that Harry missed.

Horrible pain flew through his hand.

Harry screamed again. Two fingers and the thumb on his left hand were gone.

The hound that had bitten him growled as it swallowed.

Harry kept screaming, holding his hand to his chest as blood flooded down his chest and pattered to the floor.

A dog whistle sounded.

The hound quickly ran from the medical room, licking Harry's blood from its muzzle.

Harry sank to his knees as the blood loss began to take effect.

Owen hurried over and lifted him onto the medical bed again, while Sasha grabbed the special equipment key and unlocked the drawer. She managed to get the cauterizer around Harry's hand as blood flew over all of them and the cot.

Harry screamed again and passed out at the fresh pain in his hand. He couldn't take the heat.

On the floor nearby, Isabel groaned harshly. "Labor crew. Labor crew!"

Sasha and Owen could only handle one patient at a time. They strapped Harry down while the cauterizer stopped the blood loss. By the time they got him fully sedated and were able to remove the cauterizing device, Isabel was already breathing rapidly and fighting not to push.

The medical door opened again as the birthing crew hurried in.

They picked her up and shoved her into a wheelchair. Isabel was gone a few seconds later with harsh moans ringing from her lips.

Owen examined the mess. He couldn't believe things had gone so badly so fast. "I'm going to be in trouble for this."

Blood splatters and broken glass covered the entire medical bay. In two minutes, Harry had done massive damage to their setup here. They didn't have another medical wing on this floor and some of this equipment was irreplaceable.

Sasha expected the same for herself. Letting one of the subjects go on a rampage was never a good idea. “Let’s just hope Isabel’s birth goes well. If she loses those brats, Reicher will blame us for it.”

4

Reicher stored the dog whistle. “We need healers, but only those we can control. Perhaps the loss of some digits will help him obey the rules from now on. And if not, we always need corpses.”

Reicher switched his monitor to a view of the birthing wing, where Isabel was being helped onto the delivery bed. Her skin had gone waxy and her eyes were glazing. Harry’s shove had ruptured something inside. “Did he do that by accident or did his demon take her life in exchange for those four rookies?”

Reicher wasn’t sure. That type of power hadn’t been in these ugly halls for a quarter of a century. “And we can’t have that now when we’re at our weakest.”

Reicher spat into the waste can and then switched the monitor to the next unlucky subject, so he didn’t dwell on Harry’s fate. Reicher hated to make important choices while he was upset. *I’ll cool off first. Then maybe I’ll have him killed.*

5

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 screamed and snapped awake.

Shawn wished that he could.

He shouted again as pain ripped through his ankle. He looked down to find blood squirting from a severed artery. The hound that had caused it was sprayed in the face and began licking eagerly.

Shawn tried to cross his legs to cut off the stream of blood, but he wasn't able to get enough

pressure on it in this position. He quickly leaned down and slapped his hand over it.

The hound lunged against the bars, razor claws coming through. It ripped a chunk of flesh from Shawn's arm.

He quickly stood up to get out of reach; blood poured from his ankle.

One of the staff members triggered a whistle in the kennel to get the hound away from the cell.

The apathetic man eyed Shawn's injury and then turned toward a glass mirror in the top of the warehouse that Shawn hadn't noticed before now. It blended in almost perfectly.

The speaker buzzed. "Take him to the medical bay."

Shawn tried to stay conscious. He needed to know how to open his cage, but blood loss made it impossible. His vision blurred. His body sank to the floor of his filthy cell.

Reicher opened the cage from his security room and watched them all the way to the medical bay.

Chapter Six
I Didn't Agree
Mission Day 20

1

“Wake up!”

Shawn flinched at the loud voice near his ear. His eyes jerked open, but his brain didn't react yet.

“The boss would probably be happy if you slapped him a few times.” Owen glared at the man on the medical bed. Owen, along with two other bulky males who had been pulled from their duties just for this moment, surrounded the bed to keep from having a repeat of the last incident with one of the subjects.

Sasha took a step closer. She had a new fear of the patients that hadn't been there before. “Wake up, Subject Two!”

Shawn's eyes stayed open this time. Awareness slowly began absorbing and relaying information.

They're all angry. That was Shawn's first observation of the three men and one woman leaning over his bed.

I'm tied down. And I can't feel anything in either of my legs or my waist.

“We were able to stop the bleeding in your ankle. While we give you another bag of blood, we have some questions.”

Shawn knew what that meant. They had stopped him from dying; he was valuable. He hoped the same was true of the rest of his team.

Shawn turned to look at the female medic in the white coat.

Everyone flinched back from the table.

Shawn recognized the reaction. *One of my teammates made it in here before I did.* Shawn let himself feel a little pride over that. It meant he had lasted longer without a serious injury. “I want to speak to your leader.”

Sasha frowned. “Unlikely. How did you become a hybrid and why?”

Shawn had been expecting these questions a week ago. “The alpha shared her gifts with me.”

Sasha was already tired of hearing that worshipping tone when the new people spoke of their alpha. “And that’s Angela?”

“Yes.” Shawn assumed they would start with questions they already knew the answers to. Lying yet wasn’t wise.

“Do you dream walk often?”

Shawn realized someone had been monitoring his thoughts while he connected to Missy. “A good amount. It’s easier to concentrate when it’s quiet.”

“What do you know about the meaning of life?”

Shawn paused, not expecting that. “I don’t know how to answer.”

“What do you believe is the meaning of life?”

Shawn gave a shaky smile. “Humanity has been searching for that answer for a long time.”

“Have you?”

Shawn shrugged. “I’m curious. If we knew our true purpose, we might be satisfied and less prone to violence.”

Sasha agreed silently. “What is your relationship to the other captives that were brought in?”

Shawn heard her fear. “We’re all teammates. We defend our camp.”

“Are you related by blood or through a marriage?”

He shrugged again. “Maybe to Marc. I’m not sure how sharing a demon works even though I was there for it.”

She didn’t smile at his attempted joke. “What was your job in Safe Haven? Do you have family alive?”

“Security for the council. No family.”

“What do you know about the Australian Resistance Force?”

“Never heard of them.”

Sasha didn’t believe him, but it wasn’t her job to dig for the truth. “Where is Saul going with the submarine?”

Shawn rolled his eyes. “I knew he wouldn’t sink it. Angela will be pissed.”

Sasha finished filling out the paperwork. “Why did you come here?”

“To kill your boss.”

Sasha worried that might be possible now. Harry’s violence had convinced her this crew was different. “Who is Missy?”

Shawn tensed. “An orphan I care for.”

Sasha had read the boss’s notes on Shawn. She used them now. “Isn’t it true that you have an illegal relationship with the child?”

“Of course not!”

“That’s not what your team says.” Sasha and the other women loved it that Reicher didn’t permit sexual abuse of any captives.

Shawn knew she was lying to get a confession. “I would never hurt Missy. I don’t see her that way.”

The speaker in the corner buzzed. A man’s hard tenor came through it. “You’re lying. You’re attracted to a child.”

Shawn assumed that was the boss. *I made contact! Too bad I can’t reach him.* “I never have been. Our relationship isn’t like that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Shawn dropped his mental shield. “You should come down and check out my memories.”

Reicher chuckled roughly over the speaker. “It’s an amazing team that sticks to a directive after 11 days of my retraining program. I assume whoever gets close to me will sacrifice their life to take mine?”

Shawn didn’t answer.

Reicher didn’t need it confirmed. “Let’s search those memories from here.”

Shawn had no defense as Reicher tore into his mind, proving he was a powerful descendant and distance didn't matter. Shawn also realized he had made a mistake by inviting the man into his thoughts. *Marc was right to handle things this way.*

Reicher decided he might have judged Shawn too harshly. He wasn't a danger to the girl right now. Later might be a different story, but Shawn would never make it home, so the child was safe. "What is his medical status?"

Sasha began gathering the trash. "He can take more. He's in no danger."

"You may proceed with the operation." Reicher coughed, then switched back to Shawn. "How do you feel about a better flat and a much easier job, Subject Two? I have a slot open."

Shawn watched as the medic began gathering sharp implements that would have sent a shiver down his spine if he could feel it. "What's the cost?"

"Your manhood."

The medic approached Shawn with a scalpel in one hand. She lifted the thin sheet covering his groin.

Shawn's screams were the only protest he could make. His body refused to move. "I didn't agree! I didn't agree!"

Reicher clicked his tongue. "I know, and your hesitation has cost you the ability to reproduce."

Reicher shut off the speaker, but he left the monitor on. Shawn would be awake for the entire thing. He wouldn't be able to feel it, but just

knowing what was happening was another form of mental retraining that was usually reserved for their most valuable captives. He'd decided to keep Shawn.

Reicher scanned the other monitor, where Isabel had given birth to two small girls. Their few healers were trying to save her life.

Reicher's anger at Harry rose another notch. "But I'm not keeping their doctor. His death will come in terrible ways."

2

Marc breathed a sigh of relief as the screaming cut off and the monitor went to static. He hadn't been able to look away. "Finally."

The boss had been checking in nightly. After going 23 hours each day with only the screams of his team, Marc had found himself eager for the human contact.

Reicher knew. That's why he was handling Marc this way. He was bonding with him like Joseph wanted but would never get. "Good evening, Marcus."

"You sound different today, *Commander*."

Reicher had adjusted to Marc calling him that. It no longer gave offense. "I almost lost something valuable. Whenever that happens, I try to figure out where I made a mistake and then immediately fix it—like you did in your old job I would imagine."

"I assume someone almost died. Family?"

“No, but she is a valuable part of what goes on here. Without Isabel, her sister would fall into a level of depression that would prevent her from doing her job. I would lose both medics and breeders.”

Marc refused to act sympathetic. “Well, considering what goes on here, I’m not going to wish her good luck. I will say if you surrender now, my team and I can try to save her life. Harry is a talented healer.”

Reicher’s rough voice chilled. “Harry’s the reason she almost died.”

Marc was surprised. “That complicates things a little, but he might still do it. If he’s had a chance to calm down, he might feel bad about it. You can use that.”

“I might.” Reicher didn’t mention Harry’s new injuries or the punishments he was receiving for hurting one of the staff. He scanned the room and the cold, naked man on the cot. It was all they’d left him. Each morning, a canteen and a ration bar were shoved through the door before Marc woke. He was eating only when he couldn’t stay awake anymore.

Reicher didn’t like the dirty space, but it was part of the mental conditioning he was doing. Marc had to be taken back to his primitive side. Letting him have a housekeeper would be detrimental to that goal. “Have you been using your free time wisely?”

Marc laughed harshly.

Reicher felt the mental crack waiting to happen. He didn't push those buttons yet. He needed a bond with this hard, angry, stubborn man that wasn't completely based on pain and torture. "Harry's evolution was magnificent to observe. Has that happened before in your camp?"

Marc shook his head. "I've never observed one live. I barely remember mine, but I know it wasn't like that."

"Healers are different than the rest of us. Their minds are fragile."

Marc nodded. "Harry won't be able to take much more of seeing people hurt. If you don't have plans for him, let him use his skills to heal."

Reicher coughed. "That's not part of our program."

Marc shrugged. "He'll snap again and take his own life next time."

Reicher knew that was a fair warning. "I'd stop it all if you'd agree."

Marc glared. "Cutting our nightly talk short by asking me that now?"

Reicher snapped his mouth shut, glaring back. He hadn't meant to take them there already.

Marc didn't gloat. He needed this human contact to keep himself from going nuts. "You look worse than usual."

That bothered Reicher. He'd neatened himself before this meeting. "What did I miss?"

"Just your eyes. You can't hide the growing panic."

Reicher shuddered. “Death is a terror that we all share, no matter how hardened we become. As the moment approaches, all facades are stripped away.”

Marc brought up something he’d been stewing on. “I am surprised you’re not using desperate methods to stay alive.”

Reicher contemplated those times in sadness. “I did for the first years of this disease. I gave up shortly after the war.”

“What caused that?”

“Discovering it was all a lie.”

Marc sat up, pulling the thin mattress up on one side to cover his cold body from the waist down.

“Which part?”

“You tell me.”

Marc concentrated. He was able to get some of Reicher’s main thoughts now, but not the deeper levels. Still, it was progress. He’d been working hard on it. “The weigh station existing but God not being in control of it.”

“Yes.”

Marc studied the approving older man. “I felt the same way when I ascended.”

Reicher smiled at the information. “And your alpha?”

“Yes, along with team members who aren’t here. And a Mitchel.”

Reicher grimaced. “Mitchels!”

Marc laughed genuinely. “Exactly. But they do have their uses.”

Reicher made another face. “They used to. Once we had enough blood frozen and trackers to replace them, I outlawed that family from my zone. If you survive, you should do the same.”

Marc found the truth falling out of his mouth. “I can’t. He’s bonded to my wife.”

Reicher’s gray orbs glowed briefly. “Your three lines were the first in Eden. It’s natural that bonds would grow.”

Marc was no longer surprised that Reicher knew so much. His gifts were incredibly strong. Marc hadn’t been able to keep him out at all. “I was told it was my fault for not sharing her. I’m the reason we were all cursed.”

Reicher waved that off. “Adam might be the reason, but not you. Blaming yourself for something an ancestor did makes no sense.”

Marc felt better even though he didn’t want to.

Reicher forged another bond. “The Mitchel tried to steal your mate. You picked a new one but managed to hold onto the first one as well. Is that why you killed the spare?”

Marc’s face glazed over. Rage rushed out and slammed into the walls.

Reicher cleared his throat. “You’re not ready to discuss that.”

Marc controlled himself, but it was hard. Captivity had weakened his emotions and made it easier to get under his skin. “She was a threat to my wife and children. She would have killed them all if given the opportunity.”

“So you removed her, by hand. Strangulation and drowning imply you feared it wouldn’t be enough.”

“I wasn’t sure. She was...special.”

“Ah. I see now. That’s why you volunteered for this suicide mission.” Reicher coughed again. “You don’t want to survive.”

Marc refused to confirm or deny.

Reicher kept trying. “You have an amazing team.”

Marc sighed at the topic change. “I assume you promote them to the next stage whenever they dream walk?”

“Or when they connect to home over such a long distance. Your team is doing both at the same time—even the normal who’s still alive. It’s astounding.”

Marc sensed Reicher was about to bring up the problems in Safe Haven. Marc didn’t want to talk about that. There was nothing he could do from here except get so distracted by it that he lost focus. He chose the next topic. “Why was Shawn castrated?”

“He’s being moved into the labs. Where he’s going, nothing is allowed to distract them. My Blinkers never leave their dorm after the initial evaluations are over. They’re never abused, and they are given anything and everything they need to encourage them to stay in the zone. Shawn’s relationship with the little girl, combined with where I want to put him, said it needed to be done.”

“I doubt Shawn is going to agree with you. When it comes time to decide who gets to take your life, it will be him. Bank on it.”

“Considering that I’m already dying, your threat pales in comparison. However, I continue to be impressed with your men.”

Marc’s mood dipped.

Reicher felt it. “What are you fretting about?”

Marc’s anger flared out again. “They’re not really my men. Adrian and Angela made them that way.”

“Well, as you say, Mitchels have their uses.”

Marc sensed Reicher didn’t believe Angela had been responsible. Despite the equality speeches and motions, he didn’t think Reicher liked women very much.

“I don’t.” Reicher forced a thin smile. “Parents scar us. We hate them and it becomes a lifetime achievement with each person we meet. For anyone to remind us of those failed guardians is to incur instant disrespect.”

“True.” Marc reflected on his own mother. “But it doesn’t always present at first. I went decades thinking I wasn’t treating whores badly out of respect for them.”

“And was it not?”

“No. I was proving to myself that I didn’t have to be as cold as my mother to the lower classes. It had nothing to do with the actual women themselves.”

Reicher figured out Marc didn't want to talk about his team. He considered a number of other options that might allow for more light bonding between them.

“You're persistent.”

“It's part of the job, I'm afraid.”

Marc rubbed his beard absently. “Angela is like that until she realizes she can't push me anymore. Then she lets me screw up on my own and tells me how to fix it after the fact. I hate that!”

Reicher made another connection. “Like with this mission. Would you prefer she broke you down on the spot and let you build yourself back up?”

“Sometimes. It's emasculating.”

“I've heard you're a jealous lover with misogynistic tendencies. Do you agree?”

“No. I'm a chauvinistic pig with kind tendencies.”

Reicher laughed, assuming Marc was joking. “I do not sense that in you, not even in the murder of your lover.”

Marc froze up again.

Reicher cleared his throat. “These sessions are to prevent cracking, Marcus. I need your brain intact, just changed.”

“Well, it's changing, but the more I hear the screams, the more I don't care about anything but killing you. You're giving me the cracks; don't get upset over the result.”

Reicher laughed.

Marc reached out this time, searching for a weakness he could use later. “Tell me why you’re a Nazi.”

Reicher tensed this time. “I am not one of those failed boogeymen.”

“Okay. Tell me who you hate.”

“I loathe the coward who assassinated a diplomat and changed the course of history for everyone on the planet.”

Marc was fascinated by history anyway, but he sensed Reicher would provide information that might contradict what he’d learned in his classes; he was eager for the distraction. “Hitler was a monster who exterminated millions of people.”

Reicher bristled. “Nee. The translations of his speeches were wrong. Ausrottung means deport, not exterminate.”

“The stories of him butchering civilians was common.”

“The Allied Forces spread those lies to turn the public toward their cause. This was proven many times. Telling them the enemy killed civilians, disfigured women and bayoneted babies gained many fighters and supplies from around the world.”

Marc had read about the propaganda side of the war. “Both sides lied about a lot of things.”

“So if they did not kill civilians, how can it be that they murdered 6 million Jewish citizens?”

“Maybe they didn’t consider those people to be civilians.”

“Perhaps. What of Paul Rassinier?”

Marc couldn't pull up the name. "I'm sorry."

Reicher wasn't surprised. "He was in Buchenwald. He lived through those times."

"What was his position?"

Reicher recited it. "One day I realized that a false picture of the German camps had been created and that the problem of the concentration camps was a universal one, not just one that could be disposed of by placing it on the doorstep of the National Socialists. The deportees—many of whom were Communists—had been largely responsible for leading international political thinking to such an erroneous conclusion. I suddenly felt that by remaining silent I was an accomplice to a dangerous influence."

Marc shrugged. "Not all camps were the same."

Reicher liked it that Marc was giving common sense answers without denial or biases. "His essays claim war was good for business and the world needed an enemy, even if it was a fictional one. He blamed communism and swore there were no gas chambers."

Marc rubbed his feet together to warm his toes. "We've all seen pictures of the camps and the ovens, and the piles of charred belongings."

"We've also seen Hollywood films that made anything look real. Belongings from fires can still be found in any landfill, as well as old shoes, broken watches, and other discarded personal items."

Marc didn't have an answer for that one. "No proof of being real or fake from either side."

Reicher rubbed his stomach out of view of the camera. “Can you explain why most of the tattoos held five digits when 6 million were supposedly exterminated?”

Now Marc took notice. “No, I can’t.” He’d never noticed that before. Even if Hitler hadn’t known the exact number of the Jewish population, it still would have been a seven-digit number.

Reicher gave Marc a minute. It was an important mystery. He was curious if Marc could come up with an answer.

“I can’t. It doesn’t make sense.” And yet, he’d heard 6,000,000 Jewish men, women, and kids had died. The tattoos were all five or six digits. *What does that mean?*

Reicher became more certain of his own conclusions. “In your service time, you saw cultures turn against each other.”

“Many times. Often over something stupid, like a snide comment or flirting with someone’s wife.”

“Why would it be different for Germany, who had been blacklisted after WWI and decimated by Woodrow Wilson and his Treaty of Versailles.”

Marc had always felt Germany got a bad deal in WWI. “I agree they were provoked in the first war. That doesn’t allow for what happened in the next one.”

“But it does, my young student. After they crushed Germany’s economy with the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was overrun with injured, crippled men from the war, and then with thieves

who knew the motherland was ripe for the taking. Adolph grew up in a harsh homelife and joined the military for WWI. He worked his way through the ranks and earned the respect and admiration of his people. He loved Germany and watching it be crushed in an unfair war and aftermath gave him a hatred of foreigners. He wanted them out of his country.”

“Or he wanted them gone. It depends on the translation again.”

“Agreed. Either way, when he gained enough power, he began sending them out, but he didn’t start with the marches and the ovens, yes?”

Marc considered what he knew of that time period. “I suppose not. Germany was being occupied by observers and conservators.”

“Who tore apart any economic recovery attempts. Remember, the world needs someone to hate so it isn’t reduced to hating itself.”

As much as he’d been deployed over trivial reasons, Marc had to agree, but he did it silently.

Reicher coughed harshly. He took in a deep breath, then smiled patiently. “Shall we continue?”

“Yes.” Marc wasn’t bored or dwelling on anything but this topic. It was better than being alone with his mind and the screams.

“The grounds weren’t covered in ash; nor were the prisoners. You’ve never viewed ash in any photo, even those taken right after a so-called liberation. There were ballrooms, dining halls, and maternity wards. Why would those things be

provided for people who were marked for death? The gas chambers weren't airtight. They were made of wood. The burnings supposedly happened in mostly wintertime with Zyklon that would have been too slowed by the cold to give a lethal dose of gas."

Reicher was rattling things off quickly, but Marc caught it all. He answered the one he was confident about. "I've never believed the stories of gas chambers and ovens. You can't walk prisoners into a place of death without them feeling it and resisting. I read somewhere those were used to clear mattresses of bugs in the camps and the Allied Forces just assumed and decided it was good propaganda."

"So you accept that governments lie, but you still think this wasn't one of those moments."

Marc ran a hand over his filthy hair instead of itching and opening sores on his fragile scalp. "I believe something awful happened. Hitler had to be stopped or the rest of the world was in trouble."

"I will stump you now, soft denier." Reicher was pleased with the progress. "Do you believe the Jewish people were dangerous?"

Marc snorted. "No, or the Holocaust wouldn't have happened."

"And yet, most of the top positions in the American government were held by someone of Jewish nationality when the war happened. The Vice President, the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Secretary of

Homeland Security, the Director of National Intelligence, the Small Business Administrator, the Presidential Science Advisor, the Chief of Staff, and that doesn't include the 40 other members of the House and Senate who were Jewish."

Marc tried to remember all their names. "That can't be right."

"But if it was?"

Marc frowned. "Then they were smart enough to take over our government without us knowing it."

"And yet, Hitler was able to kill six million of them without the population dipping in any of the census counts during that time period." Reicher slowly held up a picture; his hand shook slightly, but Marc was able to see the top politicians and their family lineage beneath their pictures. His stomach churned.

Reicher taped the paper to the screen so Marc had time to read the small print. "All of that was pulled directly from their websites or office biographies. It was the information they provided to the public. All of them were Jewish. You were lied to your entire life. We all were."

"For what purpose? It doesn't make sense."

"It does if you want to rule the world without firing a single shot yourself. You make it seem like you are the victim of a horrible crime and people will give you anything—even leadership of their country."

Marc leaned against the cold wall. His mind spun through their conversation, trying to take a side, a stance.

Reicher had only used this topic to open a doubt and form a bond. He didn't want Marc to dwell on it. "It does not matter now."

"It damn well does matter to me." Marc's mind was too full of new information. He needed time to process it. *But I don't like it that he has me on several of his arguments.*

Reicher moved them on. "Do not dwell on the old world of lies. Consider what you would do if you ran this complex, Sergeant. That time draws near."

"Why did you kill my rookies? They were asking for a second chance. That's why they volunteered for this run."

"And it cost them their lives. Desertion is a death sentence, Marcus. There was no way I would ever have let them live."

Marc didn't want the conversation to end, but the observation slipped from his mouth before he could stop it. "Your patience has run out. You're moving me soon. I can feel it coming."

Reicher removed the paper from the screen and stored it. "You're a smart man. I have appealed to your intelligence and to your compassion and wisdom. I have provided a fair deal with truthful promises. I will ask you one last time. Please, take my place? I need you."

Marc knew it had taken a lot of humility for Reicher to say that. He shook his head but didn't use a nasty tone. "No. I'd rather be dead."

"Have it your way."

"Wait." Marc glanced over. "Thank you for the conversations."

Reicher smiled warmly. "It has been my honor." His face lost all expression. "I know why you have drawn something personal from me. Your stubbornness insists you can win this game. In fact, it's probably saying you can take anything your men have survived and then more. You want me to hurt you. You want to be punished. And by God, I'm going to give you what you're asking for!"

The monitor went dead.

Marc heard a hissing noise.

He looked up to find green gas coming through the vent.

He inhaled deeply so he didn't have time to think about what was coming next.

Chapter Seven
Do You Consent?
Mission Day 22

1

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Get out of my way!” Sasha pushed by Marion, the supervising caretaker in the birthing wing. “Isabel?”

“Over here.”

Sasha followed the sound of her sister’s voice to the cubicle, frowning at how weak she sounded. She entered the tiny area and tugged the door shut. The other cubicles echoed with noises of crying babies and unhappy mothers who couldn’t wait for this part of their duty to be done.

“Easy!”

Sasha turned around and saw Isabel was nursing an infant. The baby had a nipple in its mouth and was chewing more than sucking. Its tiny fingernails were digging into Isabel’s breast between slapping and pinching her. “Yuck.”

Isabel nodded in agreement. “I have to be a nurse this time, too. They say it will help stop the bleeding.” Isabel grimaced as the eagerly suckling infant got rough again.

“How are you?” Sasha sat on the stool next to the bed. Isabel was pale and seemed exhausted. Now that the birthing was done, the aging process had slowed again, but the crow’s feet and the gray streaks made it clear that Isabel was too old to be doing this. *We both are.*

The arrival of Marc’s heartless team had encouraged Sasha to start thinking again. She didn’t like it, but she didn’t know how to make it stop. *Once awake, I reckon there’s no going back to sleep.*

“They won’t tell me. All they keep saying is I’m still bleeding on the inside. They don’t know what to do about it. The other medics were in here earlier, but they didn’t do anything for me.”

Sasha’s unhappiness increased. “I wish we still had a surgeon. Tobias would have been able to help you.”

Isabel didn’t nod again even though she agreed. It took too much energy.

“Maybe someone else can help.”

Isabel looked up with slightly glazed eyes. “I don’t care who it is; if they can help, I’m okay with it.”

“It’s the person who put you in here.”

Isabel shifted her arm so the infant could get closer without straining its neck. “I don’t think Reicher will allow that.”

“But you’d be okay with it?”

Isabel did nod this time. “I’ve heard them talking. He was out of his mind because he knew the

bodies we had in the bay that day. It's understandable."

Sasha stared at her sister in surprise. Isabel had never been compassionate or empathetic. "Are you okay?"

Isabel let out a heavy sigh. "I'm dying. If Heaven and Hell exist, I need to start earning credits."

Sasha waved that off. "You'll be fine, but speaking of credit, I finally cornered Joseph."

Isabel wanted to act interested, but she didn't have the energy. "Oh, yeah?"

"He isn't mine yet, but I'm working on it."

"We're not safe here anymore."

Sasha couldn't wave off Isabel's bad vibes this time. "I know, but there isn't another choice for people like us."

Isabel stared at her sister. "Cerise has been telling stories about her last run."

Sasha scowled. "Safe Haven won't take us in. We're the enemy!"

The little bit of hope left in Isabel's face faded. "You're right. I know you're right."

Isabel peered down at the infant who was starting to get sleepy. It was hard to keep hating the parasite now that it was crying for her whenever they were apart. She could almost feel how much the baby loved her. It was awkward and uncomfortable.

It was also a little maddening. It kept making her wonder where her other children were now.

Once babies could survive on their own, they were placed into different departments in the lab. The breeders never saw them again. *But I think I want to.* She looked back up at Sasha. “I’m not okay.”

Sasha took her sister’s hand. “I’ll talk to Reicher. We’ll get the new healer in here to help you.”

“What if Reicher says no?”

“Then I’ll force Joseph into it.”

Isabel yawned. “You need to get to him before Reicher’s new toy breaks.”

“I will.”

“Have you met the new boss yet?”

Sasha shook her head. “Reicher’s got him on the warehouse floor now.”

Isabel drew in another uncomfortable breath. Her chest felt like someone was sitting on it. “Maybe it won’t work.”

“Maybe.” Sasha had already considered that, but she still came to the conclusion she’d given Joseph. “He won’t hand over control to an outsider.”

“Then why is he spending his last months of life breaking in a new man?”

Sasha frowned. “I don’t know.”

Isabel let her lids close. “Find out. Joseph.”

Sasha understood the jumbled order. “I will.” Joseph would be in her pocket soon and then she wouldn’t be short on information about anything. She and Isabel had been trying to make a connection

with Joseph for years now. It was finally time to try harder.

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.

“Again.”

Fire engulfed one of the smaller cells.

“No more!” Marc slammed his skull against the damp bars repeatedly, trying to knock himself out to make it stop. He could hear the shouts of his teammates, but he’d been hearing it for 23 hours a day. It had little effect on him. The cries of the strangers were a torment he couldn’t escape.

“Another.”

More flames and awful shrieks sank into Marc’s mind and set up a permanent residence there. It wasn’t his team being tortured, but that didn’t matter. An instant bond had formed as soon as he’d woken and found the unfamiliar captives lined up across from him.

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.”

Reicher’s heartless voice dug deeper into Marc’s mind. *I hate Adrian and I loathe Kenn, but they’re nothing compared to this new feeling.* “I’ll rip your guts out and eat them!”

“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, other than some weight loss and decline of his muscle mass from lack of use. 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.

Reicher smiled at Gus and Biff through the speaker. “It doesn’t stop just because you check out.”

Flames rolled over the smaller cells.

Men and kids shrieked in agony.

“Another.”

Gus was able to save his screams for himself because he wasn’t bonded to any of the captives who were being killed.

Biff wasn't so hardened that he could do it. Their pain washed over him in thick waves that threaten to snap the lock on his mind. He struggled to find a way to save them. *I have to make it stop. I will make it stop!*

A small snippet of Eagle training flew through his stressed brain. *When in a hostage situation, it's possible to gain control. You have to force the captor to give you what you want or risk losing what they have. Just be sure you can pay the price.* Meaning, if he threatened something his captors wanted, they would have to pause the torture at least long enough to secure it.

Biff scanned the warehouse walls and then Marc's unconscious and uninjured body. *He hasn't been hurt. That means he's valuable.* Threatening Marc's life would probably do it, but Biff had no way to achieve that and if they called his bluff, he certainly wasn't going to kill his team leader. *What else?*

Biff spotted the largest, leanest of the hounds coming around his cage on a patrol. The dogs weren't in attack mode right now. *But they could be...*

Biff steeled himself against the coming pain and stuck his hand outside the cage. He waved his middle finger, glaring as the hound instantly swiveled in his direction. "I'm going to kill you for this. I swear it."

The hound lunged at him, growling.

“Look out!” Gus observed in horror as the hound took a chunk out of Biff’s hand.

Biff’s screams echoed over the dying captives, drawing attention from the staff and the boss. Footsteps hurried his way as a hound whistle sounded, calling off the dog.

Biff clutched his bloody fist to his bare chest and sobbed. *It hurt a lot more than I thought it would!*

Blood ran from his hand in a thick stream.

Reicher had little choice but to intervene, unless he wanted to sacrifice the man now. He considered it briefly, but there was something special about Biff and Reicher was still trying to figure out what it was. He activated the intercom. “Get him to the medical wing.”

He opened the cage so Biff could be removed.

Watching closely, Gus stored that information. It was the first time he’d been around any of his teammates. Seeing the rear of Marc’s cage had been helpful, but not enough. Gus hadn’t found a locking mechanism. Knowing the cages couldn’t be opened from this location was both horrible and a relief. It meant he could stop working on that challenge and move on to figuring out how to get transferred to a different location, one that might allow for an escape. He suspected Biff had just accomplished that. Gus was proud of the man. He was also sorry for him. There was no way to know if the next place would be worse.

Biff tried not to pass out as he was dragged from the cell and injected with a sedative. Now that the cage was no longer between them, he sensed fear from the staff, but he didn't understand it. He stumbled along between the armed security guards, dripping blood the entire way.

Reicher connected to the medical bay and activated the speaker. "Subject Eight is coming in for treatment. You will follow the new security procedures or be suspended from your duties in this complex."

"Yes, sir." Sasha had no intention of disobeying those orders. Since Isabel's assault, she'd developed a fear of the patients that wasn't fading. Her new concern was that one of them was going to kill her. She felt like that moment had already been chosen.

3

"Has it stopped bleeding?"

Biff gently lifted the bandage from his hand and peered at the injury. The medic had come in once he was almost unconscious and then she had left as soon as his treatment was over. That had been an hour ago. "I think so."

"The tissue is fragile. Don't use it or bump it for a few hours or it will start bleeding again. You will finish the IV. Don't get up. It will make you dizzy."

Biff scanned the medical bay, frowning lightly beneath his thick beard. There were stains on the walls and bits of broken glass on the floor. Most of

the shelves were bare and there were empty places outlined in grime where equipment had once sat. It made him wonder what had happened in here and who was responsible.

The open blinds over the large glass window in the medical bay provided a view into the rest of the complex that Biff hadn't had yet. Mentally worn out from the constant sight of his cell in the warehouse, Biff was eager for any view that was different. Even the blue and white walls were a welcome sight.

"While we wait, I have questions for you."

"Okay." Biff had been fed and medicated and he hadn't lost any of his fingers. There was a hole in one side of his hand that would always remind him of what had happened, though. *I seriously doubt I'll ever be able to spend time around a dog again.*

"Why are you along for this mission? As the only normal, you're a weak link."

Biff knew that count wasn't accurate, but he didn't argue it in case some of his teammates were flying under the radar. "I'm an Eagle and good at my job."

"You work for the alpha, Angela?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever dream walked?"

Biff frowned lightly, shivering. "No, but I want to learn how."

"What is your relationship to the rest of the team?"

"We're brothers-in-arms."

“Do you have family in Safe Haven?”

“No. I’m the last surviving member of my line.”
Biff wasn’t happy about that, but he also wasn’t torn up anymore. He’d come to terms with it.

“What was your job in Safe Haven?”

“Eagle team member.”

“And Eagles are your camp’s security force?”

“Yes.”

“What do you know about the Australian Resistance Force?”

Biff didn’t protect their traitor. “I think Cerise said she’s a member, but I’ve never heard of them otherwise.”

“Where is Saul taking our submarine?”

Biff considered hedging on that one, but he assumed they already knew these answers and were looking for any excuse to resume the torture. He told the truth. “South, probably. He likes the idea of living on a small island and never being around people again.”

“Why did you come here?”

“To kill your boss.” Biff heard the woman start asking another question, but his attention was drawn by movement through the window. He saw a gurney being pushed by. It held a familiar man.

Biff staggered off the table toward the window.
“Greg?”

“You’ve lost a heap of blood. You need to get back in the bed!” Sasha didn’t sense anything dangerous about Biff, but she wasn’t allowed to go back in and help him if he needed it. Reicher had

made it clear she wasn't allowed to be around the subjects anymore while they were alert.

Also standing outside the exit, Owen got ready to go in even though he didn't want to. He was the only guard this time because Biff was normal. Owen was suddenly sure that had been a mistake. "Get back in the bed!"

Biff ignored their demands. He leaned against the window, staring at his friend. Greg's body was covered in burns and bandages. There was even one over his foot.

Greg's head turned toward him. An empty eye socket glared in misery.

Biff felt a part of his mind snap. A dangerous voice came through that new crack. *Someone has to pay for this.*

Biff glanced up at the camera with a blank expression. "I don't think I can make it back to the bed."

Outside the room, Sasha gestured at Owen. "You have to do it. I'm not allowed."

Owen reluctantly opened the door. He entered slowly, watching for trouble.

Biff staggered against the window, paling even more as Greg was wheeled out of view. They might kill him now. "I really should have stayed in the bed."

Owen caught him as he fell. He got an arm around Biff and directed him toward the cot.

Biff grabbed the knife from Owen's belt sheath and wrapped his other arm around the bigger man's

shoulders in one smooth movement. He spun as he sliced, making it a beautiful dance that sprayed blood across the walls and the window.

Watching through the doorway, Sasha screamed.

Observing from the security room, Reicher cursed and sent an order for the hounds to go in.

Biff jerked the knife across Owen's throat a second time and then let the bloody body fall. He yanked the IV from his arm and dropped it as he ran toward the open door.

Sasha took off. She made it into the next room and slammed her hand against the button to shut the door.

A knife flew in a second later and hit her in the shoulder.

The door shut and locked as she started bleeding and screaming.

Biff kept going, sorry that it hadn't been a kill shot. Throwing a knife while drugged, abused, starving, and with a chunk of flesh missing from his hand wasn't something he'd practiced in Eagle training.

Silent alarms began to flash through this level of the complex. Staff entered the nearest room and locked the doors like they were supposed to when a subject escaped.

Biff was aware of how little time he would have to make this work. Without knowing the layout, he was running blindly down the hallway with only a paper gown and a bloody bandage on his hand,

trying to figure out where they'd taken Greg. *I have to save him!*

Biff wasn't sure how he was going to do it, but every second out of that cage was worth it even if he failed.

4

Cerise stared in surprise as a half-naked bloke ran by the cafeteria window, dripping blood and IV fluid. She recognized Biff an instant later. *I told Reicher not to underestimate Marc's team.*

Cerise reluctantly rose and headed for the exit. She didn't want to stop him, but she didn't have a choice. If Reicher replayed the tapes and saw that she'd just sat here while an escaped subject went on a rampage, there would be hell to pay and that bill would come straight to her.

Biff heard someone come out of a door behind him; he immediately spun around and lunged at them.

Not expecting it, Cerise fell under his weight. They both began to struggle—her for an advantage in the fight and him for one of her weapons.

Two large hounds ran down the hall toward them, both eager to eat anything they could before they were called off. Food supplies for the animals were also getting low; their rations had shrunk.

Biff's Eagle training kicked in automatically. He heard Cerise's graphic curses, but the sound of dog nails hurrying across the tiled floor was scarier.

Biff used the little strength he had left to roll them over, lifting Cerise's weapon while it was still in the holster. He pulled the trigger twice before she was able to shove his hand away.

Both bullets hit the lead dog in the chest. It was thrown into the second one and knocked it into the wall.

Cerise kept a tight hand around her holster and began punching backward with her elbows. She didn't stop even when Biff sagged. She was furious that a rookie had gotten the best of her.

The second dog recovered, but the smell of blood was too much for it to ignore. It began eating its dead pack mate.

Cerise shoved herself away from Biff and rolled to her feet as she drew her gun. She stayed along the wall, swinging back and forth between him and the remaining hound. If either of them got aggressive, they would die. "I was just itching for food and quiet before my next duty. What the hell was wrong with that?"

Reicher sent for a medic from a different floor, directing them to Sasha, but he kept an eye on Cerise and her captive as security rushed toward them. Sasha was popular among the staff. Her screams for help were ringing through every wing on this level. Biff might not make it back to a cell.

Reicher made a quick choice about their new prisoner. He wasn't happy to lose Owen, but he also wasn't as upset as everyone would expect him to be.

That death would add a new body to the diet of their breeders, and it would clear a slot he could use to tempt one of Marc's team. "Who wants to join the enemy in exchange for fake freedom?"

5

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Get out of my way!" Sasha pushed by the guard on the open door of the security room just before midnight. "You're all absolutely useless!"

She stomped in and stood in front of Reicher's desk, not caring if she got in trouble. Seeing her dying sister, and then almost being killed, had dulled her fear of the boss. "We have to talk!"

Joseph eyed the bandage on her shoulder and then her heaving breasts. He didn't care that she'd been hurt, only that she was still alive to repeat her actions with him. He rubbed the bump on his head. Reicher hadn't asked about his minor injury; he didn't need to.

Reicher was instantly furious, but Sasha was the most experienced medic they had on this floor. He didn't want to bring any of the other medics up from the main lab. "So talk."

Sasha had been expecting a scolding first. It threw her off a little. She tried to regain her equilibrium. "Owen's dead."

Reicher frowned at her. "I know. I ordered his body put into the rotation. That should make your sister happy. She'll get a full portion again."

Sasha grimaced. “Isabel isn’t doing well. She doesn’t care about mince now.”

Reicher held in a violent cough. “She should have been more careful around the subjects.”

“Too right. We both should have, but that doesn’t change the fact that Owen is gone, my sister might die, and I’m the only one left to handle all the medical needs for this floor. I want you to order Subject Seven to help her. If you say no, I’ll stop working and you’ll have to put me in a cage to keep me from leaving.”

Reicher normally wouldn’t have even considered it. He also would have met her challenge with exactly that order, but he needed her. *For now.*

Sasha wisely closed her mouth and gave him time. She looked over at Joseph and smiled.

Joseph immediately felt a reaction from his body. He gestured, keeping his hands out of Reicher’s view.

Sasha nodded, agreeing to meet him tomorrow.

Reicher’s tenor was icy. “I will let their healer attempt it, but only when I’m ready. If your sister isn’t strong enough to hang on, then a tortured captive isn’t going to be able to save her either.”

Sasha wanted to argue, but it was clear from Reicher’s tone that he wasn’t going to give in. She stomped from the room without yelling.

Reicher studied Joseph. “Congratulations on your new relationship.”

Joseph stared back, tensing. He felt something coming that he wasn’t going to be happy about.

Out in the hall, Sasha stopped, drawn. She wasn't scared of Reicher, but he did have the power to make her life miserable while she was here. She listened.

“However, your relationship is forbidden unless you join the breeding program.”

“What?!”

“If she falls in love with you, and I suspect she will, I lose yet another breeder and I can't allow that. Join up and have her legally or end it now. If you don't, I'll remove you both and bring up medics from the lab who can obey directions.” Reicher stood and headed for the open door. “You have this post. I'll be around.”

Reicher left without responding to Joseph's surprise or his anger about the ultimatum. He'd never left the man in charge before. *I hope he'll try to remember what's at stake, but I need to get into Marc's head. The only way I can do that is to get away and think.*

Reicher had realized he couldn't stay hidden in the security room now that so much violence had happened with Marc's team. His staff didn't feel safe; rebellion talk was happening in dark corridors. He needed to revive his previous perception of walking death, not someone waiting for death to claim him. Once he took a few hours of thinking time, and did his duty as a donor, he planned to walk the complex and kill anyone who angered him. It would send a clear message to all of them and help calm things down.

Reicher stepped by Sasha, who had frozen in fury at hearing the threats. “Get to your post.”

Sasha watched him go with open dislike on her face. *Yes, grandpa.*

Reicher’s shoulders tensed.

Sasha prepared to run.

Reicher forced himself to keep going. He needed her skills, and her fate was already set. He’d seen it many times while checking the future for his own destiny. All he had to do was leave her alone until it happened, then her punishment for disobeying orders and challenging authority would be complete.

Reicher entered the isolation flat where Marc had been held. He sat on the mattress covering the rickety cot and drew his gun. He put it on the mattress next to him in case he needed it. *I will find a way into your brain, Marcus. And when I do, you’ll never get me out of there.*

Chapter Eight
Theory HK129

1

Sasha stepped back into the security room with a pounding heart and two sets of handcuffs she'd stolen from the guard post down the hall. Her attention went to the timer now counting the last 20 minutes until the door locked again. Reicher wouldn't be happy if he found out she was breeding out of turn with an unapproved donor.

But he's dying, and no one owns me. I'll do whoever I want! Sasha didn't care anymore. Owen was gone and her sister was on her deathbed. *I can't be alone down here. I have to have a bond with someone or I'll go insane. Reicher needs me. I'm almost a queen now.*

Joseph felt her entrance. He tried to ignore her as he kept entering the day's test results, but it was hard. Stiff wood began lifting his uniform and gave him away. All he'd been able to think about was her next shower visit. "You shouldn't be in here. We'll meet in the morning."

Sasha sashayed to his desk and dropped both sets of cuffs. "Put them on or I'm leaving."

Joseph immediately gave in. He cuffed his left hand, and held out the right for Sasha to do. Reicher was in an isolation flat now. He doubted the man would return anytime soon. He was trying to get into his prey's mind. Joseph didn't believe it was possible. Reicher would have to give him leadership, despite what he'd said. *That means I'm almost the boss. I can do what I want.*

Sasha snapped the cuff shut, then put the keys on his desk so he could reach them if she had to leave suddenly. He might have to use his mouth and bend over until he thought his guts would pop, but it was doable.

"I'll cover it. Hurry up!" The hard-on inside his uniform was throbbing and leaking like it did during his shower moments.

Sasha wasn't here for her pleasure, though she planned to teach him how to handle that later. Right now, she needed to cement her control over him. "I'm taking your virginity. Do you consent?"

"Yes!" Joseph grinned eagerly, trying not to squirm and make the cuffs rattle. The guard was on a patrol, but he would hurry back if they made too much noise.

Sasha began removing her clothes.

Joseph fought the automatic urge to attack her. He curled his fingers into tight fists.

Sasha stood naked before him for a minute, letting him see what a woman looked like. She rubbed herself lightly and watched his eyes dilate into heavy need.

Joseph whimpered when she reached for him. He bucked into her grip through the clothes and almost finished it himself, alone.

Sasha smiled softly. “Count to fifty and we’re there.”

Joseph began counting.

Sasha freed his member and lifted her leg to straddle him.

Joseph lunged upward, unable to wait or control himself. He impaled her roughly, bringing a cry from both of them.

Sasha held the arm of the chair and let him have his way. The rough thrusts didn’t hurt thanks to the painkillers for her knife wound. His sudden movement had just startled her.

Joseph regressed into an animal, thrusting upward so hard that he bumped her further away. He moaned and then sobbed as she settled onto his lap and held onto his shoulders.

Sasha leaned back to view his face.

Joseph butted his skull into her chin and screamed as he climaxed.

They moaned and groaned together—one in ecstasy and the other in pain.

2

Outside the door, Cerise shook her head and walked away. She should report it, but she had a rough duty coming up now, too. *At least mine won’t end with a broken nose.*

Cerise went to the isolation flat and tapped once.
“Enter.”

She closed herself off mentally and then joined Reicher in the small, barren room.

He moved the gun to the floor and patted the cot next to his naked body.

Cerise went with a fake smile and settled herself across his lap. After he spanked her, he would provide her donor session. This would continue for weeks, or until she received a positive pregnancy test. This wasn't the first child he had sired on her. Cerise knew his routines well.

I didn't care before. She held in a wince at the first hard slap to her cheek. *Now, I hate it.*

Reicher chuckled indulgently. “We all have to do things we hate. This doesn't even make the top five of the worst.”

Cerise chuckled with him, while inside she died a little.

Reicher was still feeling the need to bond with someone. He missed the nightly talks with Marc. He pulled her off his lap. “You will face me this time.” Reicher sent a small pleasure spell that immediately lit Cerise up against her will.

“Why?” He normally didn't want to make eye contact during these moments. Cerise didn't trust him even for something like a new sexual position.

Reicher rubbed her body as she settled over him, ignoring the pain in his guts. “Because I want you to remember this moment and feel how good it was and that it came in the arms of your enemy.”

They both froze, minds connecting to show them what they'd missed.

“What is your relationship to the rest of the team?”

“We’re brothers-in-arms.”

Biff’s answer *was* the answer.

Reicher grinned happily. He sent another pleasure spell that forced Cerise to tighten around him like a glove.

She twitched and groaned, hating herself while craving more.

“Let go. Join with me, Cerise. We’ll be unstoppable until I die.”

She didn’t see another option and the lust was riding her hard now. “It makes sense that sex and death would end up together.”

Reicher held in a grin. “Who have you killed?”

“Myself.” Cerise climaxed hard, losing her breath and more of her sanity.

Reicher joined her, shuddering. This would be his last child, but the girl would be too powerful for anyone to control. *I will die, but my hatred will live on forever.*

3

“It’s not safe for you to be here, sir.”

Reicher approached the window of the hallway outside the warehouse a few hours later. Staff

members were staring at him in surprise; he never came down here. Their morning was starting differently than they were used to.

Thalia sent in a security request through the computer, but since Owen's murder, the rest of their forces were reluctant to answer calls from this level. She only expected someone to come this time if they used their cameras and saw the boss was here.

"Don't concern yourself, Thalia."

"Dad. Really, it's not safe. These subjects are almost uncontrollable."

"I know."

His pointed pitch discouraged her from the urge to take his arm like a frail old man and escort him out. He might look that part, but he would never play it.

Thalia had been raised in this lab. She had no desire to leave. She was good at her job, and she had enough authority to make her feel needed. Even the nervousness from her impending marriage couldn't compare to the contentment of working under her father.

Reicher tuned her out. His eldest daughter was nothing like him. Her skills in the torture field were irreplaceable. Her management abilities were nonexistent. Reicher was the opposite when it came to applying pain. All he did was send details on a subject's mental anguish, but Thalia figured out how to make them tick and tock with it. "But it's not working this time."

“No.” Thalia also scanned the caged men who were being shocked with cattle prods. “We’ve only had this problem one other time and never with so many subjects.”

Reicher coughed lightly. “The Mitchel.”

“Yes. But we will break Alexa. Corbin will do it. There’s no one better.”

Reicher had approved his daughter as a match for Corbin as soon as he broke the Mitchel, but they’d been waiting for almost a year now. Thalia was trying to hide her disappointment with false confidence.

Reicher let it slide. Not because he loved her and wanted her to be happy, but because he was in the middle of a mental moment. “Shut up.”

Thalia retreated out of his range, reminded of the past when she’d been foolish enough to push him.

The other staff members around them hid frowns. Every one of them liked Thalia.

Reicher noted that as another difference between them. He was never going to be a crowd favorite. He did like it that Thalia had managed to win over most of the staff, though. If he had to give orders that were detrimental to their mood, he would have her do it and save himself a riot. That would only work one time, but if he felt like he needed to use that escape, then it was probably the time it was most needed.

Thalia sensed her father was on the verge of a breakthrough. She relaxed. He often got snappy

when he was about to make a leap in one of their fields of study or an improvement to the way they did things. His brisk attitude was a defense mechanism. He wanted to be left alone so he could concentrate.

Thalia glanced away as Reicher wiped blood from his nose. His condition had worsened since the last time she saw him. Thalia couldn't remember exactly how long that had been. Reicher never came to these rooms, and he hardly ever ate in the cafeteria. *I think it was when I delivered those personal updates six months after the war.*

Thalia wanted a better bond with her father, but like Joseph, she didn't know how to get it. *The best I can do is help with his work, his goals, and try not to get in his way.*

Thalia motioned the rest of the staff toward the exit. Whenever her father got like this, he preferred privacy. He liked to talk aloud, but he didn't want others to hear the way his thought process worked.

Reicher was glad she'd caught on. Because she had, he didn't protest when she stayed. Joseph, in all of his greedy contemplations, had forgotten about Thalia. Just because a female had never inherited leadership before in these labs, it didn't mean that couldn't happen in the case of an emergency.

But I really don't want to break all the rules. These labs had been in place for a hundred years and they'd produced some amazing results. *I would hope even an heir I don't want would be better than*

completely upending the system and hoping something good came from it. “I may go out there. As soon as they see me, they’re going to start causing problems and distractions. Warn the staff not to be fooled.”

Thalia began typing it into the computer. The auto-generated voice would inform the staff through their earbuds or their pagers.

The torture command center held a computer system and a locked case full of devices that had all been used on Marc’s team now, with little success. Only Subject Two was responding the way other captives had during this process, but Reicher didn’t want to take manhood capabilities from all of the team. *There is another way to convince him to do what I want.* “I’m not taking a guard. The only way to open those cages is through the security room. If a cage opens, it was intentional, and Joseph should be executed when you take control.”

Thalia looked up at the camera in the corner. She could feel Joseph watching them and frowning.

“Do you really think—” Thalia stopped herself. Of course, her father thought Joseph was capable of it. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have made that statement. As for her taking control, Thalia made a face. She didn’t want Reicher’s job.

Reicher gave her a quick nod of approval, but his mind was deep into the well-proven fact that brothers-in-arms and sisters-in-arms created bonds that would last throughout a lifetime. Most of those moments came from surviving death. Some of those

moments came through the pain they were forced to endure to complete a mission. Most of those bonds came from simply being in the same place at the same time and living through the same conditions or situation. Survivors of disasters often had a bond with complete strangers.

The labs had always run on the theory that subjects didn't need to know each other to form a bond while being held captive in a place that hurt them every single day. It's part of why he had kept Marc's team separate. He didn't want their already strong bonds to increase, but he had a new idea based on reading through the files. Marc and Kenn had served together long before the war. It was well-known that they didn't like each other, but their missions had been successful, even the ones they didn't feel that way about. "I'm testing theory HK129. Update the file as needed."

Both Thalia and Joseph opened their copies of that file and read the details to familiarize themselves with what Reicher was about to do.

Theory HK129: Subjects who hate each other can have stronger bonds than friends.

Reicher moved over to the computer and typed in a new command for the staff.

Staff members in the warehouse began turning the cages into a semi-circle, allowing the subjects to have contact for the first time since they'd been captured. They had been able to hear each other often, but it wasn't the same as getting a clear view. Only Marc had been treated differently.

Reicher, Thalia, and Joseph surveyed the subjects as the cages were rotated and injuries were revealed.

4

Stunned silence held most of the captives quiet for a few seconds of observation and anger. Not all of Marc's team was alert enough to scan for injuries. Those who were, instantly bonded to the team they hadn't been sure of while on the submarine. These Eagles had been on crews together and handled missions for Safe Haven, but none of them were actually friends beyond Biff and Greg and even their relationship hadn't progressed past a few drinks and words of comfort.

Seeing missing body parts, bloody wounds, and freshly healing scars created a bond that was infinitely stronger than just being a team member. Now they were victims, all brought together for the same goal in the same place. Fresh determination lit up their dulled eyes and provided a small layer of immunity to the medium-strength shocks that two of the staff members had been delivering for hours now.

Gus remembered not to tense against the electricity. When his muscles were tense, the shock dug in and fought its way through, causing unbearable pain. When he relaxed and let it go through, he was a conduit relaying power from one place to the other. The problem came when the

electricity didn't have an outlet. Gus had learned to put his hand outside the cage and hope one of the hounds came by. If he touched the cage, the entire thing became electrified and shocked him repeatedly until it dissipated. He'd also figured out if he could touch one of the staff members going by he could transfer it to them, but they'd only made that mistake once.

Gus scanned the teammates around him, horrified. *There had to be a better way to do this.*

Greg's empty eye socket glared at all of them. He'd gotten the most of it, though not the worst of it. His missing eye and toes, and broken fingers, couldn't compare to the blood dried to the inside of Shawn's thighs. His shrunken member was an odd color and his face was exceptionally pale. Gus didn't know exactly what they'd done to Shawn, but he was immediately glad that it hadn't happened to him.

Gus saw Kenn's nod of awareness and confirmation that they were all in this together. Several of the other team members motioned back, sharing support and information. Gus just hoped being allowed to see each other meant they would be allowed out of the cages for a while. He'd figured out this wasn't a normal house of torture. It happened regularly and it was awful, but it wasn't designed to kill. The people doing this wanted something from them. Gus was ready to give it.

In the cage next to Gus, Shawn didn't move at all. He was living inside his mind now, refusing to

face reality and what his life would be like after this. In those few brief seconds when the pain hit and he was forced to come back, all he could think about was how much he would be willing to trade places with Greg. *If it was just my eye and some toes, I might be able to survive.*

It wasn't cold in the warehouse, but Shawn still shivered. Then he spotted Marc.

Marc stared back at him with unreadable blue eyes and a body that didn't look injured at all. Shawn went back down into his mind so the fury and jealousy didn't eat him up. This was all part of the game their enemy was playing. *And I lost. Even if this mission is a success, I still lost.*

Greg squinted with his good eye, trying to view into all the cells to verify the entire team was here. He didn't think he needed to squint from this distance, but he hadn't gotten used to only having one eye that worked.

Greg saw seven cells and no rookies other than Biff. He wanted to be upset, but he couldn't take his eye from Biff's beaten body. He and Harry were in cells next to each other and both of them looked like they'd been used as punching bags. It didn't help that the staff was giving Biff and Harry more of the shocks than anyone else.

Biff's body was a bruise from top to bottom. He had dried blood and broken stitches that were allowing blood to leak from his many injuries.

Harry's body was much the same, though he was missing fingers and some of his bruises were

starting to turn color, indicating his beating had happened before Biff's. That said Harry had snapped first. Greg was surprised. He had expected Kenn or Shawn to go first.

Marc refused to look at either of those men. His guilt wouldn't allow it.

All of the team had questions and concerns about home they wanted to share; none of them did. It wasn't a good idea to fill each other with distractions and fears that they couldn't fix or handle right now.

Greg decided to take a chance. "Why are you picking on the runts of our litter?"

The nearest staff member with a cattle prod glared at Harry and then Biff. "When you hurt one of ours, we get upset."

Everyone was surprised to hear that as much as they were shocked that the staff member had answered. Biff hurting someone wasn't a surprise. Harry's snap was.

Greg was encouraged by the conversation. He had to keep going. "Who did they hurt?"

The staff member didn't answer this time. He looked toward an empty warehouse wall and waited for instructions.

Harry and Biff missed the moment. Everyone else understood that wall contained an exit or a viewing glass.

Reicher's icy voice came over the speaker. "Light conversation is allowed. Continue."

Marc grunted. “That’s the boss man, in case you guys don’t already know. His name is Carl Alexander Reicher. He’s a Holocaust denier, a compassionate dictator, and an amazingly gifted descendant. He’s also dying.”

Everyone who heard that silently agreed, even his own daughter and staff. The description was perfect.

Greg focused on the evil man with the cattle prod again. “So, who did they hurt?”

The staff member, Wallie, hit Harry with the cattle prod again, even though the man was no longer conscious to respond to the pain. “He hurt Isabel. She and the babies may die now.”

Standing next to him, the other captor gave Biff two long shocks to an ankle already covered in burn marks. “*He* killed our security guard and stabbed our medic. You people are incredibly dangerous.”

The team laughed through their misery. It was true, but it was also ironic that the person torturing them felt that way.

“Animals!”

None of the team bothered to argue with the angry cattle prodder. Anyone who could think it was okay to force someone through a procedure or process that might threaten their lives and then turn around and call them the problem was mentally screwed up. A debate with them made no sense.

Kenn had lost his patience a week ago; the need to get out of this cage was overwhelming. He laughed with the team, but he didn’t keep

communicating with Eagle hand code. He hadn't forgotten that Mitchels had been in the labs. It was likely that the boss already knew their code. "So when are we being let out? We're all eager for what comes next."

Wallie wasn't surprised by the egos and inflated confidence of the subjects. During his time on the warehouse floor with them, Wallie had come to several conclusions. The biggest of those, he hadn't shared with Reicher because he wasn't sure if it would get him in trouble for doubting the process. He never had before, but it was clear it wasn't going to work on these men. It might have worked on the rookies they'd burned alive, but even them, Wallie wasn't sure about. *These men are different.*

Wallie stored the cattle prod on his belt, obeying a computer-generated order through his earbud. The other staff members did the same. "That's the boss's call."

He and the rest of the staff moved toward the elevator, but it didn't open, and they didn't leave.

Kenn and the rest of the team immediately turned to Marc, waiting for words of encouragement or a new plan. Like Shawn, all of them saw how well he'd been treated and tried not to react to it. Their enemy would want them jealous, but that was also a perk of leadership. Even in centuries-old wars, it had been common for chiefs to be well-treated upon surrender or capture. That had only lasted a brief time, however. All of the team was

certain Marc's misery was coming. It was a matter of when, not if.

Marc didn't have any words to give them. He remained silent while the team exchanged worried glances and began to discuss the explosion in Safe Haven.

Reicher was disappointed Marc wasn't giving more of himself. He activated the speaker. "I wish for one of you to join me. If you will take the staff's place while they're on break, I will consider you for a job."

The team looked at each other in firm denial.

Except for Gus. He found his mouth opening easily. "I'll do it."

"Don't give in, man!" Greg tried to lend comfort. "We can't be here much longer. Something has to give."

Kenn flexed his hands, ignoring the pain from broken fingers and cracked ribs. It wasn't the first time he'd had injuries like this. The bruises and burns were nothing compared to the pain in his lungs when he drew in a deep breath, but he was certain their captors knew that. Out of everyone, he and Marc were in the best shape, but Marc didn't have severe weight loss. The rest of the team had been steadily weakened through lack of food and water. Kenn understood why Gus was caving. He just didn't agree with it. "Hang on a little longer, Gus."

Gus ignored them to stare at the cattle prods. "I assume I'm killed on the spot if I try to escape?"

Reicher's voice was like stone as it came through the speaker. "I will not give you the terms of a deal. You will obey or stay in your cell."

Gus shrugged. "I'll do it. Anything is better than being in here for another week, or two, or ten."

"You fucking traitor!"

"Don't do it!"

Gus didn't react to the shouts and disapproval from his team. He shielded his mind to prevent them from being able to reach him while he had his gifts back. He didn't want to hear their insults or their begging. He also didn't want to give it away that the drugs had worn off early on him this time.

Gus's cell beeped and then the front of it swung open.

Gus quickly stepped out. He stretched his arms and legs and gently popped his spine, thrilled. His bruises and burns stung and reminded him of every moment spent in there. He glared toward Marc, then looked around.

The warehouse was filthy around the cages, but Gus was able to see that the rest of the wide building was pristine. It did indeed have cots and bathrooms along one wall for the staff. *They really do live in here and go to sleep listening to our screams. How awful for all of us.*

The smell of the warehouse was different from inside the stinky cage. He was able to smell water and bleach, two odors that were infinitely better than body odor and waste, but he also picked up fear.

Everyone tensed as a cattle prod slid across the floor and hit Gus's bare foot.

Gus picked it up. He rotated toward the staff members.

All the staff cringed against the elevator, stunned that Reicher would allow this. They were positive they were about to be killed.

The staff was small in comparison to Gus. It would be easy for him to overwhelm them, but he still wouldn't be able to open the warehouse exit. Gus turned toward Harry and delivered a short blast to the unconscious man.

The rest of the team began shouting obscenities as Gus moved from cage to cage, shocking them in places that hadn't been hit yet. He had an obsession with designs and some of their legs held bare spots that could be filled in with something beautiful.

Reicher returned to the window to watch as Gus began to enjoy the job while his team shouted and screamed.

Behind him, Thalia made detailed notes. Her dad didn't believe he was good in the torture field, but his ideas usually worked; all she did was carry them out. *I wish I was more like him so he would spend more time with me. I don't want his job. I like mine, but I also want to love my father for at least one moment in my life before he dies.*

Reicher stored that desire from her and continued to search Marc's expression for a clue into that stunning brain. Even while drugged and without his gifts, Marc had a natural shield over his

mind that was hard to get through and still didn't shed much light once Reicher was in there. Marc was a complex man with more secrets than Reicher had expected. Just monitoring his thoughts wouldn't get enough answers. Reicher had returned to old-fashioned detective work. *The body always gives us away in some way. You just have to know what you're hunting for.*

Marc blinked twice as Gus started shocking Kenn. It was his only reaction. Reicher caught it.

He allowed the torture to go on until Gus had shocked every member of his team several times. Each time it was Kenn's turn, Marc blinked or his hand twitched or he looked away.

Reicher examined Marc, suddenly sure that he had found it. *He can take the abuse of everyone else because it's a common bond. When it comes to the other Marine, the old connection kicks in. He can hear it and know what's going on, but if he has to watch it, that might snap the lock he has over his emotions and allow me a small space to stick in a pry bar. Seeing it on the monitors was nothing to him; in person is very different.*

Reicher relayed a new order into the computer.

Thalia read the command as it went through and agreed. Gus would be a valuable part of their team once he finished his conversion process. Turning on his teammates was just the start of him proving his loyalty, though. He was out of the cell now, but he was no freer than he had been while he was in it.

Out in the warehouse, Wallie slowly approached Gus. “You’re being moved to the medical bay and then the security dorm. Surrender your weapon and follow me.”

Gus almost couldn’t do it. There was a place left on Marc’s ankle that didn’t have a scratch or bruise or burn.

Marc felt Gus’s new obsession. He stuck his leg through the cage bars. “Whatever makes you happy, *traitor.*”

Gus shocked him happily, laughing like a loon.

Kenn looked away this time, unable to take Marc’s pain.

Marc shoved backward out of Gus’s reach and tried not to touch the bars until the electricity dissipated. Like Gus, he’d figured out what he could do with it and what he couldn’t.

Staff members came back over and began turning the cells away from each other.

Gus followed Wallie to a door in the wall that they’d all been staring at without knowing what was there. He vanished through the egress that quickly shut; the torture resumed.

5

Reicher faced his smiling daughter. “You may speak now.”

Thalia didn’t appear related to him. Her blonde hair and bright blue eyes marked her as Mitchel offspring. Reicher had already forgotten what

family line her mother had come from, but it wouldn't surprise him to find out they were mixed with Mitchels. He didn't keep track of things like that. Despite his hatred of Jewish people, he didn't pay attention to ethnicity when it came to doing this job. Hatred was counterproductive when he had citizens from all cultures working under him, including Jewish survivors. There were also proud nationalists, angry supremacists, and other sarcastic Holocaust deniers. He wasn't loyal to any of them. That wasn't his mission here.

Thalia beamed at him in pride. "You've got him now. HK129 is no longer a theory. Prima work!"

Reicher tried to feel good from her praise. A connection to a family member was encouraged in leadership to help keep them human.

Thalia tried again. "He's a wonderful choice as heir. I'm looking forward to retraining him."

"Yes, you do good work."

Her face brightened at the rare praise. "Thank you." She decided to take a chance. "Would you like to take dinner with me tonight?"

"Absolutely not." Reicher headed for the exit. *I feel nothing for her.*

Thalia's face fell. She went to the computer to make notes, trying not to cry.

Joseph saw it all from the main control room. He was seething about Reicher's comments, but he was also terrified that Thalia was right. Reicher had

figured out how to get into Marc's head. Now, he would use it to reshape the man into what he needed.

“Unless I interfere.” Joseph checked the timer on the security door. “He'll be sent to medical for a checkup at some point. When he does, I'll visit him.”

Joseph grinned evilly. “And maybe I'll end that subject on the spot. Marc can't become the heir if he stops breathing.”

Chapter Nine
Join The Club

1

The medical bay was a lot colder than the warehouse had been. Gus sat in the chair next to an empty gurney, delighted to be in clean clothes and sitting down. He'd been here for an hour now. He didn't have many serious injuries. The broken toes were healing and most of his burns were minor even though they hurt like they were worse. His captors were experts at causing non-lethal pain.

The medical bay was almost empty; it was obvious it was about to be used for something other than medical care. *Maybe interrogations*, Gus thought.

He'd been handcuffed to the chair by both wrists. Then an injured medic had come in to treat his injuries and check his health status. The bandage on her shoulder and her nose had been a glaring reminder that his teammates were willing to hurt women.

Gus wasn't okay with that in any situation, including this one. He'd told Marc so on the submarine. The UN had been famed for letting women into normally male jobs, but Marc had told him he would follow his training when it mattered.

I walked away from him then. I should have told him to leave me on the sub.

Sasha had pronounced Gus fit, and then she'd pointed to a stack of clothes for him to change into. She'd shakily unlocked his cuff on one side, dropped the key onto the floor by his feet, and then rushed out of the room. She was clearly traumatized and too fragile to be here.

Gus wanted to search her mind, but he'd refused to give away the only tiny advantage he had. He was more than surprised to still have his gifts. He'd expected to be drugged again. *It's a trick. They want me to turn on my team, and I have. I guess it worked.*

It had occurred to Gus that he didn't approve of most of Safe Haven's methods of training. He didn't like being here in this torture house either, but Safe Haven was supposed to be the good guys. *They didn't act like it, though.*

Gus knew he was starting to crack mentally. It was terrible to be aware of it and not be able to stop it, but he couldn't. Betraying his teammates was small in comparison to the mental rifts in his mind now.

He'd also found himself harboring an enormous amount of hatred for Brittani. He disliked Daryl and he was upset with Thelma and Dwight, but he felt true animosity for Brittani. He'd never hated another living soul until now.

She pushed me into this. I never would have volunteered for a run like this without her betrayal. She said we would be together forever. She even

told other people we would be together forever, and as soon as something sparkly came along, she left me cold.

Gus thought about Trinity next. She had wanted him for breeding purposes and bragging rights. She hadn't loved him either, but her death had still put a big dent in his life and caused the fractures in his mind to expand. He wasn't sure why he had reacted that way, but he blamed it on Brittani. *Why couldn't she just love me the way I love her?!*

The speaker on the wall activated. "Mankind has been asking that question for way too long. A better question would be why do you need her to love you at all?"

Gus recognized the boss's voice and understood the man was in his mind and he hadn't even noticed it. He gave a sad shrug. "It's just the way humans are wired, I guess."

Reicher encouraged the conversation. "I'm trying to rewire the human brain to not require love in a relationship."

"That sounds good to me." And it really did. Gus firmly believed if not for emotions, people would be more logical and make better choices. "I think the world would have been a safer place."

"So do I." Reicher was still outside the warehouse, observing Marc and his remaining team, but the monitor was focused on the medical bay where Gus was waiting. Reicher hadn't ordered them to drug Gus yet so he could observe the man's

gifts without the haze of medication. “It’s time to prove your words.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Use your skills.”

Gus already knew who the intended targets would be. *Anything to get out of that cage!* “I’ll agree, on one condition.”

“You’re not in a position to bargain over the terms of employment!” Reicher coughed suddenly and cut it off.

Gus heard the danger line and continued anyway. “Nevertheless, I want your word I’ll be hired on permanently after I prove myself.”

“Why do you want to work for your enemy?”

“I recently found out I like hurting people. It takes away my own pain.”

Reicher saw that in Gus’s mind again, like he had when the man volunteered. “One of your teammates needs to be punished for injuring our medic. You’re not allowed to stop until I tell you to.”

Gus steeled himself, suddenly hoping Marc was brought in even though he knew Marc hadn’t hurt the medic. “If you want it, you’ll get it.”

The door opened less than a minute later. Two large, twitchy security guards dragged Biff’s body into the room and lifted him onto the metal gurney. Even though he was unconscious, they still handcuffed him to the bed by his wrists.

Both the guards were big and bulky and wearing the tools they needed to defend themselves even

against his kind, but it was obvious that fear was in control. They wouldn't even have been considered rookies in Safe Haven.

The guards quickly left while casting curious looks at Gus.

Gus assumed everyone knew what was about to happen in here. "Am I supposed to wait until he wakes up?"

Reicher's confused, rough tenor came through the speaker. "Why does that matter?"

Gus shrugged again. "It doesn't. Pain or serious injury?"

"Pain, of course. It's the number one factor in motivation."

The door slid open again. Cerise entered, interpreting the situation in a brief second to come up with an accurate conclusion. Reicher had sent her in here to punish her and test her at the same time. Biff wasn't the only one in a bad situation.

Gus glared at Cerise. He didn't care about her bruises. "I wish I was allowed to hurt you."

The entire team hated her because she'd betrayed them, but it hadn't been because she hated Safe Haven or them. "It wasn't personal. You just do your job, and I'll do mine."

Gus turned his anger on Biff's unconscious body.

Cerise watched Gus torture his own teammate. She wasn't surprised Reicher was having him do this. It was a systematic way to turn team members against each other, but she was surprised the person

he was torturing wasn't awake. She reckoned Biff had become expendable now. Reicher was testing Gus to see if he would follow through.

Because there were no screams, Gus was able to do it without guilt. If he'd heard Biff screaming, that might have been a different story. As it was, he sent pain up and down Biff's motionless body in thick waves that Gus used to soothe his mental anguish. *I really do like causing others pain. When this is all over, they're going to have to lock me up somewhere to keep me from hurting innocent people.*

Reicher let it go on for a few more minutes and then activated the speaker. "You can stop now."

But Gus couldn't. He continued to send pain spells that would have dropped Biff to his knees if he'd been awake and able to stand.

Cerise forced herself to get involved; she could already feel Reicher about to give her the order to do it. She took a step toward Gus. "Stop it."

Furious at being interrupted, Gus turned his anger on Cerise.

Not expecting it, his pain spell swarmed her and took her to the ground. Awful shrieks ripped from her throat.

Reicher also let that go on for a few minutes. Cerise hadn't been punished for most of her transgressions while away from the lab and that included sleeping with Captain Miles Silver to gain control of the nuclear submarine that was now missing in action.

Gus ran out of energy before he ran out of will. The spell slowly faded. He shivered and shuddered, wishing it wasn't over yet.

Reicher activated the speaker. Approval laced his voice. "You're on probation."

"Who do I have to kill to make it official?"

"Report to the lounge for that answer. Cerise will show you the way." Reicher deactivated the speaker to keep them from hearing his violent coughing fit.

Cerise picked herself up off the floor, wiping away tears and glaring. She didn't argue, however. Reicher could just as easily have told Gus to kill her.

Biff still didn't move as he was left alone on the table. That didn't stop his mental screams. He'd been awake the whole time; he was too drugged to react, and Gus hadn't thought to scan his mind. It was another punishment for the life Biff had taken.

The two twitchy security guards came back in and dragged Biff off the gurney. They took him out into the hallway and turned down a corridor that led away from the warehouse.

2

Cerise led Gus down the tiled hallway, staying next to him and ready for anything. Biff had been able to take her by surprise and he was only a rookie. Gus had been in Safe Haven longer and he was twice as big. If he gave her problems, she'd

already chosen to eliminate him. One bullet was better than more of the pain he'd already delivered.

Gus pulled his loose sweatpants up over his smaller stomach and held them there as he marched down the blue and white hall. He saw a lot of empty rooms with dark windows, and doors that led to places he could only guess about, but he sensed the boss man didn't spend much time here. It was filthy and it stank. It was unlikely that the boss was willing to tolerate this environment.

"Reicher prefers the security room." She was still shocked that he'd come down. Cerise led Gus to a set of double doors. She knocked twice and then opened the one on the right. "Stand in the middle of the lounge and wait for orders."

Gus entered without hesitation. He was thrilled to be out of the cage and eager to forge a different life. *And hopefully at some point that life will cross paths with my ex and I can make it clear how I feel about her betrayal.*

Gus realized the lounge was nothing like the name implied. There was a large metal table in the center of the room. Three kids were sitting or sleeping on it. Two of those were twin infants. At the end of the table, an older female with a tight bun and a severe profile kept her hand on the baby nearest to the edge. Gus assumed she was a nurse or nanny.

Next to the table was a steel cart with various implements that could be used for medical procedures or torture.

The large square room had bare concrete walls and a concrete floor, like the warehouse. There were no other furnishings. It stank like mold and felt damp. Gus assumed they cleaned it out with hoses whenever they were done with whatever happened in here.

At the other end of the table, a descendant inside a powerful shield observed his every move. The woman was large-eyed, large-armed, large-chested, and small-legged. It was an odd combination that drew his attention repeatedly, but Gus wasn't fooled by her 5'2" elfish appearance. Some of the smallest people were the most dangerous. Marc was proof of that. He wasn't the biggest man in their camp by any means, but he was easily the most lethal. Gus disliked him for that too.

Gus saw cameras in the corners, along with the usual speaker boxes and that was it. It was him, three sleepy kids, a nanny, a powerful descendant, and Cerise.

Cerise ignored the glares from the other staff members. Marion was a caretaker for the kids and Valerie was their executioner.

Cerise hated Valerie. She had for a long time. She still didn't know if Valerie had been the one who'd killed her kids after the war. It was unlikely that Reicher had let the powerful alpha leave this complex, but Cerise couldn't help hating the woman anyway. *Abomination.*

Valerie smirked, scanning the red mark on Cerise's arm. She'd put it there a long time ago. "Bloody dog."

Marion's lip curled. She didn't like Cerise either.

Still commanding things from the guard room outside the warehouse, Reicher activated the speaker. "Bringing in the prisoner."

Gus observed in satisfaction as Goldie was brought in by two not-as-big but just-as-twitchy security guards. Goldie was handcuffed, bloody, bruised, and begging. He'd clearly given up the idea of bringing down his enemy.

"No!" Goldie tried to run to the table.

The guards pummeled him mercilessly.

Goldie cringed away. "Don't hurt them!"

The guards forced him to the rear wall and handcuffed him there.

Gus studied the twins. *Those are his kids.*

Valerie had been monitoring his thoughts. No one kept her out unless she let them. "Use the gold knife from the tray. When we give the order, make one quick slice across each neck. We don't want them to suffer."

"Don't do it! Please, Gus! Please don't hurt my babies!" Goldie continued to scream and beg for the lives of his children.

Gus was still inspecting the kids. The twins were obviously ill. They weren't going to last much longer on their own. The third child was a small boy who appeared perfectly healthy.

“I’m sorry! Don’t hurt my kids! Take me instead!” Goldie knew Reicher was punishing him for not killing Cerise during the invasion.

Gus didn’t want to be a part of this. Torturing an adult was one thing. Hurting kids or women was another. *I should have stayed in the cage.*

Valerie looked toward the camera. “You can take him back now. He’s not going to follow through.”

Marion leaned away from Gus in case he got the idea to use her as a hostage.

Cerise drew her gun. “You won’t be going back to your cell if you betray us. Your body will go to the cafeteria. Then we’ll eat you.”

Another rift fractured in Gus’s mind. He froze in place, torn between his duty and a nightmare.

The speaker activated with Reicher’s voice. “Do you need a moment to consider our agreement?”

A shiver went up Gus’s spine. He heard the unspoken warning that the torture he’d received so far would feel like a summer breeze compared to what would happen if he failed to deliver. Gus slowly shook his head and moved toward the cart.

Reicher’s tenor came over the speaker again. “Count down from five.”

Marion immediately began counting. “Five... Four...”

Valerie had already gathered energy for the spell. She began shoving it through the door in her mind with the simple symbol of a clock. All alpha

descendants had that door, but few of them were able to open it.

Cerise motioned toward Gus with her gun. “Get the knife!”

Cerise didn’t want to be in here at all, but it was another punishment from Reicher. Almost every free moment she had now was filled with torture in some form. He didn’t care that she might already be carrying his offspring. When Reicher wanted someone punished, the punishment lasted until he was satisfied.

“Opening the stream.” Valerie concentrated on her job, confident that Cerise would protect her if it was needed even though they were sworn enemies. She lowered her shield, so she only had one thing to concentrate on.

Gus stopped in surprise. Everything was moving too slowly. Just walking was like trying to punch through water. *She’s slowing time!*

Valerie concentrated harder. Grabbing ahold of the time stream was a difficult thing to do no matter who you were. Doing it under the threat of death made that even worse. Reicher would slaughter her mother and father if she failed to make progress.

Cerise caught that and ignored the automatic sympathy pains. Everything being done in this complex was against someone’s will.

The Demon of Time rushed toward Valerie angrily. “Forbidden manipulator!”

Valerie fired happiness toward the demon, who ducked it and kept coming at her as fast as he could.

Valerie fired her sharpest laughter spell and hit the demon in the chest.

The ugly creature burst out in loud mirth that stopped him in place and sent agony over his features.

Not used to being hit with something he couldn't fight, the Demon of Time slid into the shadows and growled as she grabbed the stream and yanked it backward.

“Do it now!” Valerie could feel the moment coming. There were only a few seconds once the time stream slowed enough to shove in the lifeforces from the timekeepers. If it wasn't done in that few seconds, everything had to be restarted.

Gus picked up the golden knife in slow motion and moved toward the kids.

He was fascinated by how time seemed to push back on him, making his body weigh a thousand pounds as he slowly walked toward them. Words were distorted, as was his hearing. Everything felt foreign.

Cerise kept her gun trained on Gus. She was positive he wouldn't do it.

Marion stepped away from the table. She was terrified of these pushes.

The two security guards next to Goldie also moved toward the exit.

Goldie screamed louder as Gus neared his babies.

Valerie grunted and strained, now trying to stretch a hole in the time stream while still slowing it down.

Gus shifted the knife in his hand and drew in a slow breath for courage. Then he lunged at Valerie and shoved the knife into her chest.

Valerie gasped, eyes glazing. Gus saw her demon shadow flee into the walls and then she dropped at his feet. Blood ran from her body in a thin stream.

Gus's mind fractured again. *I killed an unarmed woman.*

Time snapped back into place with a loud pop; an angry rumble followed. The ground shook harshly. Pieces of the ceiling and walls dropped from the old structure like dead wood.

Nearby, cracks opened in the earth and swallowed parts of the port city that was hiding the entrance to this complex.

Cerise fired.

Gus dropped to the floor to avoid the bullet.

Marion pulled a dart gun from her pocket and quickly fired at Gus. She ran for the exit as the dart landed in his big arm.

Gus smacked the dart to the floor, but it was already too late. The drugs began soaking in to take away his power.

Cerise fired again, but the kids were in the way and she had to pull the shot. The bullet plunged into the concrete floor next to Gus's leg.

The speaker activated. "Holster that weapon!"

Cerise did it reluctantly.

Gus laid his cheek against the damp floor and let the drugs kick in fully. He refused to think about anything as the sloshing darkness started taking over his mind. *I hear the ocean. How odd.*

Goldie continued to sob in relief that his children hadn't been hurt.

Reicher delivered orders in a curt tone that wasn't as upset as it should have been. "Return the timekeepers to their dorm, Marion. Guards, take Goldie to his cell; then come back and assist Cerise while she modifies Subject Nine."

Cerise approved. Gus was about to receive a memory modification. Jennifer had been able to read a few seconds of past thoughts. Cerise could change those few seconds. Everything would get fuzzy and then shift, based on what she told them.

She kicked Gus in the ribs and then knelt to handcuff him as another caretaker entered the lounge.

Marion and the other caretaker collected the children and took them out.

Cerise kept an eye on Valerie's body while waiting to be sure the drugs had Gus under control. Sometimes descendants came back and not in good ways. It was impossible for her to know who had been combined with something that shouldn't have ever been messed with. Not all fantasy was actually a fantasy now. Some of the nightmares had become reality and she had no intention of falling victim to them.

Valerie's hand twitched.

Gus saw it. *That can't be possible.*

Cerise quickly drew her dull machete and began hacking at the woman's head in satisfaction. It would have only been better if she'd gotten to kill Valerie herself.

The ground rumbled continuously while Cerise chopped. Mother Nature wasn't happy.

Gus grunted. *Join the club.*

Blood sprayed over Gus and Cerise as she continued to chop.

Gus's stomach flipped.

Cerise scowled down at him. "Why are you even here?! You had no intention of following through."

Gus focused on her in terror. "Have you ever been in a cage so long that you'd be willing to do or say anything to get out of it?"

Cerise flashed through the hell she'd been in since losing her children. She gave him a curt nod. "Yes."

She brought the blade down again and severed Valerie's head from her body.

3

Reicher observed it all on the monitor. He hadn't expected Gus to follow through, but losing Valerie was another blow. It had been a mistake to give Gus that opportunity, but it was too late to change it now.

Reicher quickly typed commands into the computer, then hacked up another part of his body. *I think it's in my lungs now.*

Reicher once again considered Marc's history with Kenn. He typed in another order.

Move the subjects to the main lab floors. Prep this level for a complete shutdown. Clean up the leaks and repair the wall in the lounge.

Despite the time push not working, Reicher was in a great mood. He now had what he needed to force Marc to do what he wanted. Losing Valerie might come back to haunt him in the end, but he doubted it. Descendant pushers were a dime a dozen, and this complex was full of kiddies. What he needed was someone to oversee it all and that was Marc, whether he wanted the job or not.

Leave Marcus for last. Bring me his XO.

4

Joseph was horrified by Reicher's lack of caring for his staff. Joseph wasn't close to these people, but he would never treat them that way. Right now, while they were short on manpower, was a horrible time to risk lives. He didn't understand why Reicher had allowed Gus to be around any of their women. Gus's thoughts had been full of warm and fuzzy feelings for females, but Reicher should have expected that to be false.

The timer on the door buzzed; it began to swing open.

Joseph finished typing in the details of what had happened and then left without permission. He wasn't going to stay in here for another 12 hours while Reicher ran loose in the complex and ruined the progress they'd made over the last decade. Marc and his team needed to be eliminated. "And I know how to make that happen. Reicher isn't the only one who can screw with someone's mind. I learned from the best."

Chapter Ten
It's Working

1

“Damn, it feels good to be able to sit down.” Kenn yawned sleepily. He had been drugged as soon as he was removed from the cage. He didn’t have his gifts or control over most of his body, but he was able to feel the relief from a new position. He flashed a smile at the nervous medic.

Sasha smoothed the last piece of the cast in place on his hand and stepped back. She tried to act like she wasn’t afraid of him. “Good onya for putting those breaks back into place on your own.”

Kenn smiled again. “Medic training for an Eagle gets detailed on handling personal injuries. We do a lot of solo runs.”

Sasha wiped the plaster from her hands, frowning. “This isn’t a solo run. You guys shouldn’t be here.”

Kenn refused to get into an argument. “Do I need stitches in my other hand?”

Sasha threw the trash in the waste can. “Yes.”

Sasha was exhausted. This was the sixth patient in a row she’d handled. Her nose was aching and her shoulder was throbbing.

The door slid open. Reicher entered but only far enough to allow the door to shut behind him. A

powerful shield covered him in multiple layers of protection that Kenn wouldn't have been able to get through even if he'd had his gifts.

Kenn recognized the setup. "You have someone outside covering you."

Reicher was impressed Kenn had recognized that, but he didn't confirm it. Very few people knew about his private security.

Kenn's lids lowered. "I'll kill them to get to you."

Reicher studied the Marine. "But will you kill your team to reach me?"

"Yes. I have no bonds with them."

Reicher had little trouble believing all the stories they'd been told were true. Kenn had the attitude of an abusive fighter who excelled at his training. "Not even with your fireteam leader?"

Kenn hesitated. That simple question said the enemy knew his history.

Reicher leaned against the wall near the exit and continued to study the man, covering his weakness. He'd taken medication to stop the coughing while he was on this floor; it made him sleepy.

Kenn tried to study the man right back, but it was hard to fight through the haze from the drugs. He did know Reicher wasn't going to fall for any of the schemes he and Marc had concocted before they left the island.

"How long until he can be moved?"

Sasha pinched Kenn's skin together and began sewing the claw slice. "As soon as I'm done here, sir. About five minutes."

"Good. I want him taken to the session wing."

Kenn lifted a brow. "What happens there?"

Reicher shrugged. "More of the same you've already experienced, except we'll explore your descendant side and decide if you're worth keeping."

"Why keep any of us?"

Reicher gave him a cruel smile. "My new heir will need a right hand; you're corrupt enough to do it."

"I'll just kill them."

"I think Marc can handle you."

A lot of pieces fell into place for Kenn. He was more than a little surprised. *Wow. Angela would have a cow. Maybe. Or did she know what she was sending Marc into this time?*

Reicher noticed Kenn didn't refuse right away. He waited to see what response would come first so he could match the proper training.

Kenn sighed. "I've already made the choice to walk on the light side. I don't think I can switch back now."

"How do you feel about Marcus Brady?"

Kenn's grimace wasn't enough. Reicher dug in as Kenn automatically recalled some of their most violent moments.

Kenn didn't try to keep the man out. It would be a waste of time.

Reicher pulled the most recent interactions and chuckled coldly. “Your plans neglected a lot.”

Kenn glared. “And yet, we’ll win. Your days are numbered. And I mean that in every way.”

Reicher felt a cold chill go over his neck. He didn’t let it change his mind. “Perhaps, but it won’t be a total win. I’m in his mind now and I’ll dig deeper with every minute he spends here.”

“His wife will handle that when he gets home.”

Reicher smiled happily. “Nee, she won’t. Marcus will never leave this complex. You can bank on that.”

Kenn tried to find a weakness in his enemy, but there wasn’t much to go on without being able to read Reicher’s thoughts. He wore a command uniform, and he was pristine. The subordinate staring in concern through the window behind him was a relative, judging from her fearful expression, but she didn’t look like him at all. There was no wedding ring, no obvious weakness in Reicher’s gifts, and he was still strong enough to fight despite the illness he was trying hard to ignore. Kenn willed it to go faster. *Eat him up before he turns Marc against the light.*

Reicher grunted. “It’s much too late for that, but I can’t take credit. His time in Safe Haven is responsible. He learned he’ll never have happiness there, and *you* helped teach him that valuable lesson. Thank you.”

The computer in the background began calling a warning to all staff that the level was closing

down. Kenn celebrated. *Most of us survived the first stage, Boss.*

Reicher hated Kenn's loyalty to another alpha. *He'll die before I do.*

Kenn felt the mark of death settling over his abused body. He laughed, long and loud. "It's about time!" He kept laughing.

Reicher left, confused and concerned that he'd made the wrong choices to safeguard the future.

Sasha hurried through the stitches. She hated being alone with the subjects, but they didn't have security to spare now. Valerie's murder was known, and staff had begun to go missing. Sasha reckoned they were all too scared to show up for duty. Reicher would punish them as they were caught, but Sasha wasn't going to run away from her job. She controlled her fear and finished tending Kenn's injury.

Kenn let himself doze. He was thrilled to be out of a cell and eager to be in the new location. He was also disappointed that he'd been in a room with his main target and hadn't been able to do anything about it. *That will change next time we meet. You can bank on that.*

2

"The locks are on a different schedule. Make sure you time it correctly."

"I will." Thalia watched as the door to Marc's cell swung open. The warehouse floor was busy and

filthy. “I still wish you’d wait until Cerise is finished.”

Reicher ignored her concern. Cerise was giving Gus a modification and Reicher wanted the last of the subjects moved now. “Did you get my orders on the shutdown?”

“Yes.” Thalia had been through one other shutdown, but it had only lasted a few days while the bombs were falling during the first war. “All staff have been reassigned except for the helpers who are working here.”

Reicher scanned those unfortunate residents.

Thalia didn’t. She felt their demise coming; she didn’t want to give it away. Shutdowns always included cleaning up unneeded manpower, and these low-level helpers were definitely not needed. The lab barely had space for the few citizens they’d already reassigned from this level.

Reicher ran through his plans again to confirm his choices. They were on the warehouse floor, standing near the open elevator. There was one cell left to be handled. Reicher was overseeing it personally.

Marc observed them without moving. He’d been overloaded with their drugs this time, but he was awake, proving that he’d built up a tolerance, but it wasn’t enough. It didn’t matter that he knew where the door in the wall was or how to activate the elevator. Marc still memorized those things bitterly.

Reicher studied Marc as he delivered more orders. “As soon as he’s out of here, shut the exits and release the hounds.”

Now Thalia did glance around at the staff members who were busy spraying out the warehouse and gathering rubbish from the torture sessions. None of them were listening and all of them were normal, but they wouldn’t receive an easy death for their loyalty. Word would spread and cause more unrest among the staff. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. It will give the hounds a good meal and then you’ll send them up to the first floor. They can provide security while we’re down here.”

Thalia wasn’t surprised by the choice; she just didn’t agree with it. “We’ll have to put the hounds down when we reopen that level.” It was a known fact that their hybrid dogs were hungry for human flesh. Once they killed, the labs were never able to get them back under control.

“I know.” Reicher stepped closer to Marc, almost daring the man to try something.

Marc knew it was a trap. He watched Reicher’s approach with a foggy brain and an intense loathing.

“I had an interesting conversation with your XO a little while ago.” Reicher saw Marc’s small flinch. The gloating grew thicker. “His conversion is going well.”

Marc could tell Reicher had figured out a way to win, but he was too drugged to pull it from the evil man’s mind. Marc slumped against the bars, not

stepping out of the open cell. “Well, Kenn always was a pussy.”

Reicher laughed. He looked over at Thalia to give another order.

Marc lunged out of the cage.

Reicher lifted his shield as Marc reached him. He sent an ugly pain spell through it that immediately dropped Marc to his knees and brought screams that echoed across the warehouse.

Everyone watching relaxed a little about Reicher’s coming demise. He was definitely ill, but he was not on death’s door if he was able to do that.

Marc tried to force his gifts and his body to obey; both failed him. The doubled dose of knockout drugs hadn’t sent him into the darkness yet, but he had no defense and no hope of doing damage.

Reicher hit him again, enjoying the cries and the renewed respect from his staff.

He felt Thalia willing him to keep going. She was angry about all the injuries to the medical staff; neither of them cared about Owen.

Reicher stopped, but not to prove a point about mercy. Marc already hated him. If he wasn’t careful with his cruelty, Marc would tear apart the lab just to get rid of his ghost. “I want you to think of me fondly at times, Marc. Don’t ever make me do this again.”

Marc drooled on the damp floor, chest heaving from the pain. His body twitched helplessly. “Next time... Next time...”

Reicher sighed in resignation. “Next time, you’ll kill me.” He rolled his eyes. “You can’t do anything to me. By the time you accept that, we’ll be too bonded for you to refuse me anything and that includes all the secrets of your little Safe Haven. We’ll have quite the fun when your wife arrives.”

Marc realized Angela had been right to send him in her place. *He wants you, Angie. Don’t come.*

He and Reicher both waited for an answer.

When there wasn’t one, Marc breathed a sigh of temporary relief.

Reicher hid his anger and gestured.

Thalia directed the staff. “Get him into the medical bay.”

Marc didn’t resist as two security guards dragged him into the elevator. He glared at Reicher, but his mind was too fuzzy to concentrate.

Reicher watched him until the elevator shut. Something didn’t feel right about this, but he wasn’t sure what it was.

“I thought he would do more damage in a moment like that.”

Reicher nodded at Thalia’s observation. “So did I.”

“Was he faking?”

Reicher strode toward the elevator. “Perhaps, but he spared both of our lives if so. This was his one and only chance to actually kill me. He’ll never get this close again.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s working. Marcus Brady will take my place. It’s just a matter of time.”

3

Marc didn’t resist as he was shoved into a chair next to an empty metal gurney. Terror of what was about to happen was trying to clog his mind.

The guards stayed close, watching for him to try again.

Sasha approached him tiredly. She was a little less scared of Marc because Reicher had chosen him, but the fear didn’t entirely leave as she studied his healthy body and angry face. “The boss wants to make sure you’re vaccinated. Are you able to tell me what you’ve already had?”

“I was current when the war came.”

“Active duty then?”

“Yes.” Marc fought the dizziness to stare at the ugly bruises on her nose and the dusty bandage on her shoulder. Both of those appeared to be fresh injuries. The fingerprints on her neck were turning yellow, telling him it wasn’t the first time she’d been hurt. “I went AWOL.”

Sasha wasn’t surprised, but she did disapprove. She began checking his blood pressure. “You should give him what he wants. He’s not a bad employer. No one is here against their will.”

Marc snorted. “I am.”

Sasha flushed. She was walking a thin line, but she was very curious about the bloke who was

supposedly going to run this place after Reicher died. She needed to go pack, but she also needed answers. “Why don’t you want the job?”

Marc tried to stay focused on her face. Sleep was yanking his chain. “It’s wrong. You must know that.”

Sasha listened to Marc’s steady heartbeat. “He always gets what he wants. You should give in.”

Marc chuckled arrogantly.

Sasha was impressed even though she didn’t want to be. Even while drugged, Marc was a hard, confident man who projected the ability to get things done. *Joseph wants to be that way, but he never will. Cerise could have been that way, but losing her kids broke her. Reicher is that way and it’s made him unstoppable. Which means he’ll get what he wants. I’m talking to my future boss.* “I’d still want to be a medic, when you take over.”

Marc’s bitter amusement stopped all at once. “He’ll never break me.”

Sasha had a flash of insight. “Because you’re already broken.”

Marc nodded. “I did it to myself before I came here.”

“Intentionally?”

Marc changed the subject. “How do you feel about his offer?”

Sasha’s face darkened. “We all expected Joseph to get it. But we’ll adjust as long as you’re a good leader.”

“When you say good, does that mean continuing the torture that goes on here or stopping it?”

Sasha felt the trap. One answer would anger Reicher and the other might anger her new boss-to-be. She decided not to answer it at all. “I need you to get onto the gurney.”

Marc’s new fear popped into his brain and opened his mouth. “Go ahead and cut it off. I don’t need the damn thing anymore anyway.”

Sasha made the connection. “I don’t have a castration order for you. I need to check your feet. You’re bleeding from one of them.”

Marc saw red smears on the dirty floor. He hadn’t known he had an injury there. It was odd the way the body could block out pain after a while unless it was extreme. Some of his Marine training had prepared him for this moment, but he wasn’t grateful for it anymore.

Sasha shut off her penlight and went to the counter where a small kit was all that remained of the medical supplies on this level. “You have something in there. I need to dig it out.”

Marc shrugged like it didn’t matter. “You’re the Doc.”

Sasha liked it that he was being agreeable, but she didn’t trust it. She glanced up at him in time to catch an evil thought cross his expression. “Please, don’t.”

Marc forced himself not to hurt her. In this position, all it would take was one jerk of a foot and he was almost certain he could manage that much

control over his body through the drugs. It would break her jaw, knock out teeth, and possibly even kill her. “Get out of here.”

Sasha fled without looking back. The two guards followed her.

Marc sighed. *I probably should have killed her. She can't be one of the good guys.*

But Marc's new guilt complex wouldn't allow it. Handling Kendle had broken him. He wasn't even sure he would be able to face a woman in the heat of battle anymore, let alone one just trying to pull a piece of shrapnel from his foot.

The door opened. The lackey from the very first contact with the enemy appeared in the doorway. *I think his name is Joe.*

“I prefer Joseph.”

Marc felt true danger enter the air. *And I'm vulnerable, with no weapons. This is not good.*

Joseph entered the medical bay and shut the door. Then he hit the button to lock it. That cool smile never left his face as he took a scalpel from the medical kit.

4

“Don't fall for Marc's act.” Cerise had been outside the medical exit, providing layers of shielding. “He's trying to play you.”

The halls were mostly empty now. A few inhabitants were still packing, like Sasha, who'd been busy handling patients, but otherwise, the level

was deserted. It made their steps louder; the sound of dripping water rang in their ears. The pumps would handle that if got too bad, but there wouldn't be a cleanup crew sent until they were ready to reopen this level. Cerise didn't think that would happen for a long time. Reicher was downsizing and she doubted he was finished.

Reicher walked steadily through the hallway. He swallowed a bloody cough and grimaced. "Marc and I are playing a game. But he can't win it. He's going to take my place. Make sure in the future he understands it's his duty to reproduce so the experiments here can continue."

Cerise glanced over. "How many children do you have?"

Reicher leered. "In which complex?"

"How is that possible? You never leave."

"Staff are often rotated out carrying a gift."

"How many, a few dozen?"

Reicher laughed. "Think much higher."

Cerise observed flashes in his mind of some of the mothers. Cerise felt honored to be among that crew, but she also felt Safe Haven's tug again telling her all of this was wrong.

Reicher felt it but didn't comment on it. It had already been a rough day, and he was feeling like his body might give out at any point. He needed to finish this step and then take a few days of recovery time.

Cerise escorted Reicher into the main security room and then stood in the doorway to keep him safe.

Reicher scanned the monitors and found Joseph leaving the medical bay. He narrowed in to verify Marc's safety.

He didn't see any fresh injuries, and Marc was still breathing. He appeared to be asleep.

Reicher wondered what they had been discussing. Joseph visiting one of the subjects was forbidden. He was supposed to be in this security room right now.

Reicher started to rewind the footage from the medical bay and found it hadn't been recorded. Whatever had happened in there, only Joseph and Marc knew. "Find him. Bring him to me."

Cerise immediately went to collect Joseph.

5

"Damn. It's all wet."

Sasha's tiny private flat was empty except for a small trolley on wheels that was loaded with her gear. She was trying to empty the bottom of her locker, but an inch of water had ruined a lot of her things.

She'd already packed Isabel's stuff from the room next to hers. She hadn't taken many of the mince pouches Isabel had stashed beneath her cot. Sasha planned to say it hadn't been there when she packed. When that failed, she would blame Isabel's

obsession with that diet on the chaos of the move and the stress of birth. *Mom told me to keep Isabel alive and I will.*

Sasha thought of the look in Isabel's eyes as she'd left. Her attention had returned to the infant sleeping in her arms. True warmth had crossed her face for just an instant. "Oi, Issy. What have they done to you?!"

Sasha tossed the next stack of wet duds into the corner. Her shoulder was hurting and her mood was rough. "Lay there and think about what you've done."

Joseph appeared in her open doorway. "Okay."

Sasha snickered but she kept working. Reicher had ordered everyone to get to the new level. Sasha was the last one to go from this wing.

"Can I help you with anything?"

Sasha reluctantly shook her head. She didn't want to be in a closed-in space with him after getting her nose broken.

Joseph flushed. "I'm sorry! I was trying to get deeper. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Sasha softened. "It's okay. We'll be more careful next time."

"Yes." He pulled a set of cuffs from his pocket. "Speaking of next time..."

Sasha hesitated. Reicher was out and about right now. He could catch them.

Joseph smiled at her. "I'm joining the breeding program. He won't care."

Exhausted and scared, a moment of closeness appealed to Sasha. *I need human contact.*

Sasha held her hand out for the cuffs. “Okay.”

Joseph settled onto her bare cot while she cuffed him to the bed.

When he stayed calm even while she was removing his clothes, Sasha relaxed. *He’s not a bad man. He’s just been isolated too long.*

Joseph smiled at her to encourage that impression. He also clenched his teeth until he thought they would break off and fall out. *I need her to trust me so she’ll do this without the cuffs...just one time.*

Sasha went slow, trying to work on her own pleasure, but the distraction in her mind prevented enjoyment. She settled for making sure he didn’t blow too soon in case she just needed to warm up. The feel of their bodies being connected, and the sound of his moans reminded her that she was still alive.

The computer sent out a warning through the hall speakers. *“This level will close in fifty-eight minutes. Please collect your belongings and walk calmly to the nearest elevator.”*

Sasha paused, saddened.

Joseph felt it. He fought to control himself as his climax neared. “I’ll get this floor reopened as soon as Reicher dies.”

Sasha resumed grinding against him and leaned her breasts into his face. “That could happen as soon

as you ask me for the right vial from the medical bay. Some of it is untraceable.”

Cerise paused outside the open door to Sasha’s flat. Their conversation had echoed clearly. Cerise tapped on the wall. “Drop your toss and get to the boss. Now!”

Joseph let go of his semen, hips lifting. Then he tugged on his hand. “L-let me loose.” He sucked in air to talk with as he filled her full. “Duty calls.”

6

“Tell me about your meeting with Marcus.”

Joseph joined Reicher and Cerise in the security room. He stepped over a small puddle that wouldn’t be cleaned up this time. Earthquakes often gave them leaks. “He was unconscious. I didn’t get to talk to him at all.”

“Why did you leave your post?”

“I was going to kill him.”

Cerise and Reicher glared.

“Why didn’t you?”

Joseph shrugged. “I’m getting everything I want. I have a woman who’s helping me become normal. I’m going to join the breeding team and keep her. You were right. I’m already happy where I am.”

It was impossible for Reicher to fight through Joseph’s mind while on the medication. They were

full of Sasha and his moments with her. “Your lust is disgusting!”

Joseph shrugged. “I am what I am.”

Reicher had to let it go for now. He didn’t have time to deliver a punishment that the man would need to recover from. “I want you to oversee the rest of the shutdown personally. I don’t want you on any other level until it’s finished.”

“Yes, sir.” Joseph was thrilled with how things were going. He kept running sexual replays through his mind as he sat in the command chair. “Whatever you want, Boss, that’s what you’ll get.”

This computer system would be switched to the next level right before he left, giving him one minute to reach the elevator.

Cerise escorted Reicher toward the lift. She was eager to get him settled in a more secure location. She didn’t trust Joseph any more than she trusted Marcus Brady.

Neither did Reicher. *But he’ll get what’s coming to him. In the end, we all do.*

Chapter Eleven

Alternate Dimensions

1

Greg woke slowly, gently. His senses registered a calm, comfortable environment.

Greg opened his eye. He immediately noticed a warm yellow shade to the walls and then a soft mattress supporting his tired body. Soreness registered next, but it was the discomfort that came from healing wounds and not fresh injuries. *Maybe the pain is over now.*

Greg slowly sat up, scanning the flat with his one good eye. Anger and depression tried to refill his mind as he realized it was empty other than a bed and a chair. He was still a prisoner.

Greg refused to let the negativity overwhelm him. He wasn't being tortured now and his environment had definitely improved. He stood and did a gentle stretch to determine his physical state.

Dizziness overwhelmed him; his stomach growled loudly.

It was the normal growl of a stomach ready for its next meal and not the painful twisting of a stomach in the middle of starvation. Greg wondered how long he'd been out. He assumed they had been feeding him through the IV because his body felt

better than it had during his time on the warehouse floor.

Click!

Greg's head swung toward the door as it unlocked. He stepped that way cautiously, not sure if it was a trap.

Greg tugged the heavy metal door open and stood there, trying to adjust to the new view.

Other captives wearing the same white jumpsuit with blue lettering strolled toward the center of the hallway where tables and chairs and even a magazine rack waited for them.

Greg blinked. *Definitely not what I was expecting.*

The other captives gave him curious glances as they came from their rooms to enjoy their free time in the lounge.

Greg stayed in the doorway. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now. Back when Marc had told them the plan, Greg had assumed it would all be over after the torture. He hadn't asked what he was supposed to do if he was put into the lab. He watched the other captives for a clue.

There were a variety of nationalities, along with both genders. Greg saw long, staticky hair, thick beards, and full mustaches. He assumed the captives were never given razors to shave with so they wouldn't have a weapon or be able to take their own lives.

The smell of cooking food permeated the hall, catching his attention next. Greg was suddenly

looking forward to whatever the captives were served.

A loudspeaker began to give information. “A meal will be served in 20 minutes. Please enjoy the newest concoction from our chef. Also, don’t forget to welcome the newest member of the Dimension wing, Subject One.”

All of the captives turned in unison and waved at Greg or smiled at him, following their instructions immediately.

Instead of being encouraged, Greg was creeped out by it. *They want to be here?*

Greg’s demon nodded. *They do. They’re full of eagerness for the jobs they’ve been given.*

Greg realized he had his gifts back. He immediately sent that powerful entity out to search for an escape route.

The captives in the lounge scowled at him.

Greg was able to hear their thoughts clearly.

Don’t do that.

Stop it right now!

You’ll get us all in trouble. You have to stop.

Greg sneered at them. “I’m not going to be a willing captive.”

The loudspeaker clicked on again. “Subject One, report to the session room immediately. Follow the red arrows on the wall.”

The other captives stared at him in longing now.

Greg concluded they were eager to do whatever he was about to. He began to dislike them.

Red arrows lit up on the wall.

Greg needed to know where the exits were, so he obeyed the order. He automatically adjusted for his new limp as he walked. He'd never understood how much missing toes would interfere with balance.

The other captives watched him without speaking.

Greg was bothered by the silence. Now that he was scanning for it, he was picking up thoughts from all of them, but it was only about the session room. None of them were thinking about escape.

Greg's demon reported back. *We are in an octagon with eight cells like yours and the lounge in the center. I see only the exit they are directing you to.*

Greg paused in front of that door. It slid open to reveal an elevator.

Greg stepped in reluctantly. If they were sending him back to the warehouse floor, he wasn't sure he could survive it.

Neither was his demon. *Then we'll blow this place and go down together.*

Greg nodded as the elevator descended. He'd rather be dead than back in that cage.

Agreed. His demon stayed ready to fight.

Greg read the signs in the elevator:

Always wash your hands.

Turn off the water while you brush.

Never make friends with the subjects.

It was standard stuff he expected to be here. Greg scanned the corners and found a small camera.

He forced himself not to lift a middle finger to whoever was watching him.

The elevator stopped after only one floor.

Greg saw a long rectangular room with barstools around the walls. As he stepped from the elevator, it closed and the light over it switched to red.

The session room was empty except for a dozen silver stools. White walls with charred marks gave a clue as to what happened in this place, but he refused to follow that line of thought.

“Pick a seat.”

Greg looked up and found a large glass window with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman watching him. He couldn't view much of the room behind her, but he doubted she was alone.

Thalia activated the speaker again. “Sit down.”

Greg chose one of the empty stools along the wall furthest away from that window. He studied the woman and the room she was in, but there wasn't much to see. From this angle, it only revealed blue and white walls and maybe a computer, but he couldn't be sure from here.

“We're going to try an experiment in a few minutes. First, tell me everything you remember about receiving your descendant.”

Greg had already answered these questions several times. He rattled off the same answers that he'd given before.

Thalia recorded his answers. They matched almost word for word with what was in his file from

other observers. She wasn't surprised or angered. All of Marc's team had their answers memorized. It was obvious they'd prepared before they came here. *But they aren't prepared for what goes on here.*

Greg caught that and stared at her in surprise. He wasn't used to having his gifts back yet. It had only been two weeks without them, but it felt like much longer.

Greg's demon hovered closely, enjoying the bonding. *I missed you, too, master.*

Thalia scowled at him. "Do you want to return to the warehouse?"

Greg quickly shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you're asking me for."

Thalia could tell he was withholding details. "Go through it in your mind from the minute you started the dream walk. I'll follow along and pull the details I need." She entered his mind and began flipping through his mental doors.

Greg was offended at the invasion of his privacy. He and his demon shoved at the same time, pushing her out of his thoughts. "I'll walk you through it. Stay out of my mind!"

Thalia shoved right back in, ignoring his protest. "We do things my way or you go back to the warehouse cell."

Greg was forced to let her explore his mind. His anger overrode his embarrassment when she discovered the most humiliating moments in his life.

Thalia didn't cause more stress by discussing those moments. Everyone had screwups. That wasn't what she was digging for.

Greg could feel her getting frustrated as she watched the entire event. "I don't know what you're searching for. If you tell me, maybe I can help."

"I need to know where she took you. Is it a real place? Is it something she pulled up from an old map? Did she invent it?"

Greg didn't have a concrete answer. "Shawn and I were both positive that it was a real place. We talked about it once afterward."

"You're itching to go back. I can feel it."

"It was a place with no rules and endless possibilities." Greg shrugged. "I was able to be myself there for a little while."

"And you cannot be yourself in your camp?"

Greg leaned against the wall and stretched his legs out. His body wasn't used to sitting now. It didn't like it very much. "I always have to be good in Safe Haven; all of us do. Having an alternate dimension to visit and live out the harsher parts of our personality would have been a relief."

"I reckon your alpha would not allow that."

"I never asked her."

"Because you were sure she would refuse."

"Yes. The alpha knows we need releases, but letting us have any release we want in another dimension would probably be bad for our mental state."

Thalia both caught the irony. That's exactly what was happening here, just not in another dimension. She moved them on. "Are you aware that most hybrids die before puberty?"

Greg frowned. "Is that what I am? A hybrid?"

"Yes. Your gifts did not come naturally. They were given to you by a generous, foolish alpha."

"You feel it's foolish because you think giving away power is wrong. As an Eagle, I believe giving power to other people is part of what creates a safer society."

"I'm not going to argue with you. I'm going to give you a warning."

Greg braced for something ugly that involved another warehouse threat.

"We've never handled a hybrid of your age. We don't know what the long-term effects are. If you start noticing symptoms, you need to report them so we can attempt to help you."

Greg was surprised by the offer. He told himself not to be fooled. "What symptoms?"

"Hybrids die before puberty because the gifts are greedy. The demon will drain you and try to force you to do what it wants. It's not loyal; it's not natural."

Greg's demon immediately protested. *I would never betray you!*

Thalia heard it but didn't believe it.

Greg believed it completely. *I know where these gifts came from. Nobody on this planet is more loyal*

than Angela. Her demon offspring are the same way.

“Nevertheless, if you notice symptoms, report it so we can try to help you. If it goes on too long, there’s nothing we can do.”

It soothed Greg a little that they were willing to save his life, though he assumed they were going to use it for bad purposes. Not wanting to die was a natural trait of humanity.

“Before we begin the session, I’m going to give you a quick rundown on the rules. If you break any of them, you will be sent back to the warehouse to spend the remainder of your time with us in a cage.”

Greg shuddered. “Tell me the rules.”

“You will come here once a day and try your hardest to achieve the goals for your session.”

Greg had no problem with acting like he was going to obey. “I can do that.”

Thalia didn’t care that he was trying to blow her off. If he refused to cooperate during the sessions, he would pay for it. “You will not fight with the other subjects or with the guards. You’ll eat when we tell you to and sleep when we tell you to. Other than that, your free time is your own. You can spend it however you want.”

Greg couldn’t help pushing a little. “Does that include trying to find an escape?”

Thalia chuckled, surprising him again. “Of course. All of the subjects spent their first weeks trying to find a way out of here. You’ll discover the same thing they have—there is no way out except

through me. When I'm satisfied with your progress, I can recommend you be transferred to a different wing."

"Can you recommend they send me home?"

Thalia's amusement died. "You're never going home, Gregory. This is your life now."

Greg fought the anger and the depression. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to return to that dimension and explore it while I stay linked to you so I can take notes and dig for details."

Greg snorted. "I've never been able to get back there on my own. Even when I go to sleep, I never go back there."

"Then you're going to have to try harder."

Greg's anger spewed out. "I have been trying hard, you fucking cunt!"

Thalia wasn't offended. She'd been called much worse. "I think you need the proper motivation."

Thalia hit the buttons on her keypad.

Electricity shot through the stool he was on and shocked Greg brutally. He fell off and hit the floor.

Electricity shot up from tiles and hit him again, bringing screams this time.

"I don't know how! I don't know what you want from me!"

More electricity shot up from the floor, bringing misery he couldn't fight.

Greg scrambled up as soon as it stopped and picked a different stool, hoping one of them wasn't electrified. He was dismayed as he realized none of

them had rubber grounds. There was no rubber anywhere in this room. “It’s one gigantic shock machine.”

Thalia’s arrogant voice confirmed it. “Yes. Your warehouse testing revealed a distaste for electricity. You were afraid of the other methods we used, but this is the one that actually got you to do what we wanted. This is the one we’ll be using on you during your time in the Dimension wing.”

Greg glared at her. “I hate your guts.”

Thalia chuckled again. “I would think so. If I were in your place, I would feel the same, I’m sure, but if you just do what I tell you to, it doesn’t have to be painful. Your time here can even be enjoyable. Just do what you’re told.”

“I don’t know how! I keep telling you that. The alpha used a sleep spell and took us there.”

“We’re not going to use sleep spells on you. You’re going to access that dimension on your own or you will pay for it with every second you spend in the session.” Thalia began shocking him again.

Greg couldn’t take much of it. He was sobbing on the floor less than a minute later. “Okay! I’ll do whatever you want.”

Thalia continued to shock him, driving in her point that he was helpless.

“I’m going to kill you!”

Greg’s demon offered encouragement. *We’ll rip her head off and use her brain to paint these walls.*

Thalia shivered. She had little doubt that an ugly death would come if Greg ever got his hands on her.

“Let’s try again. Sit on one of the stools and access the dimension where you received your demon.”

Greg slowly forced himself up and onto a stool, but that was where his cooperation ended. He honestly didn’t know how to give his evil tormentor what she wanted.

Thalia didn’t know how to access it either. That was all part of the experimentation that went on in the Dimension wing. Figuring out that there were other dimensions had been easy; reaching them was the goal. “Try harder!”

“Go to hell!”

Electricity flew through the room.

2

“Return to your flat now. Take a shower and the medication waiting there for you.”

Greg was relieved the pain had stopped, but he and his demon were both furious. There was no way he could stand to be closed up in a small flat right now, though the painkillers did appeal.

He stood on shaking legs that had taken most of the electrical hits. He made himself walk to the elevator.

In the security room, Thalia ordered a cleanup crew to go in. Bladder control was impossible when you were being hit with electricity, but these rooms weren’t like the warehouse floor. All messes had to be cleaned between sessions.

The elevator took Greg back up to the Dimension wing. Fury and humiliation radiated off him as he stomped down the hallway with pissy pants and fury in his mind.

Greg didn't know how long he'd been in the session. The constant pain and pressure to find the other dimension had taken all of his mental strength not to snap and curl up on the floor until they shocked him to death. *I'll never give in. You can't break me, either!*

As he entered the lounge hallway, he saw the stack of clothes on a cart next to the shower door. He headed that way with stiff steps.

The other captives were still in the lounge. They quickly glanced away. Even though they didn't feel it anymore, they hadn't forgotten what it had been like to be new here.

Greg swept the staticky hair of the other residents and saw it for what it was this time. He scanned their twitchy bodies and shoes that bore the same scuff marks as the walls in the session room. *They've all been in there. They've all gone through it.*

Greg stopped in the middle of the lounge, glaring. "How can you be okay with this?!"

No one answered him. All thoughts immediately locked down, preventing him from getting into their minds unless he wanted to dig.

Greg got angrier. "None of this is right! If we all work together, we can get out of here right now!"

The elevator opened, drawing attention.

Wallie stepped out with a small handheld device that Greg instantly recognized. “You’re not going to hit me with that ever again!”

Wallie approached Greg with a cruel grin.

Greg prepared to fight.

Wallie pointed his device at the nearest man in the lounge and shocked him.

Greg was too exhausted to use his gifts to protect the other captives. He hoped he had enough left physically to get the job done. He marched toward Wallie in his Eagle frame of mind.

Wallie ducked his swing and hit him expertly with the electricity, in the chest.

Greg dropped to his knees, heart clenching.
Heart attack!

Wallie resumed shocking the other captives as they fled toward the flats to escape his cruelty.

The speaker activated. “Disobeying orders hurts everyone around you, Subject One. Get in your flat!”

Greg crawled toward the door, completely subjugated. He wasn’t sure if he was having a heart attack.

As soon as he was inside, the door shut. A lock clicked.

Greg listened to sounds outside in renewed rage, but there was nothing he could do about it. Wallie was still attacking the other captives and from the sound of his laughter, he was enjoying himself.

The speaker in Greg’s room activated, this time with Reicher’s voice. “If I have to do this again, I’ll

remove you. I don't enjoy letting my subordinates cause pain that isn't deserved. Don't force my hand."

Greg shook his head, indicating he wouldn't. He kept his thoughts locked so they didn't prove him a liar.

His weakened demon was prowling restlessly, but it also remained silent. They were in a bad situation here. Now wasn't the time to go crazy.

"Take your medication and rest. You'll be allowed to have a shower and time in the lounge later. Do not abuse this second chance."

The screaming outside stopped. A tense silence came.

Greg went over to the small end table that had been brought in while he was gone. He swallowed the two pills with the glass of water while hoping he got one minute alone with Reicher before he died. *I'll make it count. My second chance won't be wasted.*

Reicher laughed in his mind. *I'm ready for anything you try, Subject One. By your leave.*

Greg blanched as he realized the man had enough power to get into his mind without him being aware of it. *We're all screwed.*

3

In the cool security room, Thalia regarded her father. Water sloshed around them, but they ignored

it. The ocean was angry today. It matched the general mood.

The security room down here was identical to the one upstairs, except its shape was an octagon and six of the eight walls held glass windows that allowed Reicher to view into any of the session rooms on this level.

Reicher finished his coughing fit and then took a minute to make sure none of the blood had gotten on his clothes. He straightened his shirt. "I'll survive."

Thalia had been thrilled to find out her new post was with her father, but she hadn't counted on how awful it would be to listen to him dying minute by minute. "Let us try to help you again."

Reicher gave a curt nod. "But not yet. I want an update."

Thalia was forced to obey. Like Greg, she had no secrets and no way of thwarting anything her father decided. "Joseph and Cerise are both in the breeding wing, getting a checkup. Sasha has been happily installed in the birthing wing to help with her sister. Isabel is doing a little better, but the bleeding hasn't stopped."

Reicher coughed again and then leaned back tiredly in the chair. "Is she still bonding with them?"

"Yes. The caretaker's report included several moments where Isabel expressed empathy and concern for her infants. Her latest request to keep them with her while she sleeps is proof that even the

most apathetic breeder can form a bond to their children if given enough time with them.”

Reicher thought about his own mother and then stifled that contemplation. He didn't want Thalia's sympathy or for the story to get around that he'd had an abusive childhood. Anyone with common sense would already assume that. He didn't want the staff gossiping about him more than they already were. “What about our prisoners?”

Thalia frowned. “Goldie and Biff are in the gaol on this level. Cerise modified Gus, though she said it won't last long because it wasn't the first time it had been used on him. All of the time pushers are ready for our next attempt...and Cerise still isn't pregnant.”

Reicher heard the slight accusation from Thalia but didn't react to it. Cerise's older body and his weak seed would take time before putting together the root that would grow the most evil little girl on the planet. Reicher hoped to be alive to see that child born, but it didn't matter as long as she was conceived before he died. “Continue.”

“All the other subjects from the warehouse have been settled into their wings for stage two. Like you wanted, we're handling them one at a time and only under your supervision.”

Reicher had ordered that for many reasons. One of which was someone else would always be in this room with him now while Joseph was here. Reicher was getting weaker, but it wasn't time for him to go yet. Joseph might try to push that ahead of schedule.

It would be a lot harder for him to do it while Thalia was here.

Thalia smiled proudly. “I’ll protect your life with my own.”

Reicher nodded curtly. “That is why you’re here.”

Chapter Twelve

Life and Death

1

Harry woke all at once. He jerked into a sitting position, gasping in fear. He couldn't remember what he'd been dreaming about, but he assumed it was something ugly from how fast his heart was pounding.

Harry noticed the flat as his fear faded. The yellow walls were almost soothing after waking to so many days on the warehouse floor. He could tell by the design that they were also padded. *Did they put me in a nut ward?*

Other than the bed and a small end table, there was no other furniture in the room. Harry saw he was wearing a soft white jogging outfit with cushy socks and comfortable gym shoes. It was a huge change from how he'd been treated before now.

Harry slowly swung his feet off the side of the bed. His entire body ached. He'd been beaten repeatedly and then healed and then beaten some more. His punishment for being violent with the medics had felt like it would never end.

Harry examined his missing fingers in bitter anger. He'd heard ghost limb stories and attributed them to patients imagining things, but he'd been

wrong. He could still feel the thumb curling against his palm. “But it’s gone. I’ll never be whole again.”

The door lock clicked.

Harry automatically stood and went over to it. He didn’t open it, however. He wanted to see what was on the other side first. He peered through the window.

A small lounge with other residents met his view. The calm captives were reading or writing; a few were even drawing. It was peaceful. *Are they here willingly?*

Harry swept them in quick glances, try not to draw attention. All of them were males and most of them were bigger than he was. It was a mystery why they tolerated captivity, but he wasn’t going to ask. He wasn’t sure he could stomach the answers.

The speaker activated. “Follow the red arrows on the wall to the session room, Subject Seven.”

Harry considered refusing. His aching body made the choice for him. He couldn’t take another beating.

The other captives didn’t look at him as he went by. Harry knew they were aware of his presence, but they refused to meet his eyes.

Worried, Harry followed the red arrows on the walls to an exit at the end of the hall. When the elevator slid open, he stepped inside while swallowing a lump of fear.

The elevator had nothing for him to read that gave him any clues about the rest of the complex. Harry wasn’t happy to be here even though he was

delighted to be out of the cage. He had heard horror stories about what went on in these labs. Conner had given him a lot of details during his blood donation days.

The elevator took Harry down one floor and let him out into a rectangle room. There was a metal garbage chute and a gurney in the opposite corner with a body on it. Harry's balls drew up.

The elevator slid closed behind him; the light above it went to red, telling Harry he wasn't getting out of here until his captors allowed it.

The session room was cold, but he didn't see vents for air conditioning. He didn't have the mental energy left to figure out how that was possible.

A speaker activated. "Heal the man on the gurney."

Harry saw the viewing window. He instantly hated Thalia on sight. Her ruthless expression said he wasn't going to like anything that happened in here and she was fine with that.

Harry hurried over to the gurney as he realized he was ignoring a wounded patient. His medical skills kicked in as he examined the man's pupils for the proper responses. "I don't see any injuries."

"He has internal damage."

Harry could imagine what had caused that. He began to send healing orbs into the man and then realized he had his gifts.

Harry's demon immediately suggested he fire through the glass window and try to kill Thalia.

The injured man on the gurney stiffened, groaning.

Harry shoved more healing orbs at the man, unable to take his pain. "He's dying."

The man went into convulsions.

Harry kept trying to heal him, but it didn't work.

The speaker activated. "Hurry up! Don't let him die!"

Harry tried harder.

So did Thalia. "You can't let him die! You have to try harder!"

"I am!" Harry hated being rushed. The panicky feeling wasn't helping.

Thalia ignored his sensitivity. "You're a doctor! Do not let him die!"

Harry began to panic. He shoved in bigger chunks of healing energy, breaking into a sweat. "I'm working on it! Shut up!"

The man inhaled a final time. His last breath rushed out.

Harry kept trying to heal him, but it didn't work.

The speaker activated again. "Dump the body into the chute."

Harry glared up through the window. "How can you be so heartless?!"

Thalia stared at him with calm tolerance. "Being rushed produces better results."

Harry gestured at the body. "Clearly, that's not true."

"Dump the body in the chute."

Harry couldn't leave until he did it. He went over to the metal chute and jerked the door open. A horrible smell rushed up to greet him.

Harry threw up.

“Dump the body down the chute.”

The lack of consideration was almost as bad as the torture he'd been put through on the warehouse floor. Harry wiped his mouth, swallowed his rage, and went to get the body. His anger needed a place to go, and his demon had already given him a target. He just had to wait for the right moment.

Harry got the body into the chute and shoved. It clanged and banged all the way down. He thought he heard the buzz of a saw at the end, but he wasn't sure.

The elevator opened behind him.

Wallie emerged from it, and he wasn't alone.

Harry could tell the two women weren't subjects by the way they were malnourished and bleeding. His captors had been careful to keep him healthy through the torture.

Wallie roughly pulled the women into the session room.

The two women whimpered and grunted, but no sounds came out of their mouths. Harry saw a fleshy stub and realized their tongues had been cut out.

“Execute one prisoner.”

Wallie drew his gun and shot the closest woman in the stomach.

Harry screamed as he rushed toward her. “What are you doing?!”

Wallie pulled the other woman out of the way and gestured with the gun. "Heal her."

Harry did everything he could to save the woman's life, but the injury was too severe. Thalia and Wallie shouting for him to hurry up and save her had absolutely no effect. She still died.

Harry was crushed.

Thalia activated the speaker. "Put the body in the chute."

Harry had already begun to hate that order as much as he hated the person giving it. He struggled to pull the body over to the chute without help.

"You say rushing isn't the way to go. So take your time on this one." Thalia nodded at Wallie through the glass window.

Wallie shot the second woman in the stomach and then hurried into the elevator. The door quickly shut, protecting him from Harry's wrath.

Harry had almost made it to the elevator in time. He banged on it mercilessly, screaming.

Thalia got his attention. "I said you could take your time, but you might want to at least try to save her."

Harry reluctantly went to the woman, already exhausted. He sank down next to her and began using his gifts.

It was like trying to stop a flood with a bucket. The blood kept gushing out. There was nothing he could do.

"Put the body in the chute."

Harry didn't wipe away the tears as they fell. "Do it yourself."

"Put the body in the chute or we'll bring in one of your teammates."

Harry didn't have a choice. He tugged and pulled the body over to the chute. His spine and arms ached and pinched as he finally got it in there.

"Are you ready?"

Harry shook his head in misery. "You're pushing me too hard, too fast. I'm going to snap."

"Well, at least try to save the boy's life before you do."

The elevator slid open. A small child stood there. Blood was leaking from the hole in his stomach.

Harry's mind shuddered to a halt. No sane person could do something like that. *This complex is full of monsters.*

Harry snapped. Rage and terror flew out of him and struck the window.

The glass was reinforced and saved Thalia's life.

Harry hit the window again and again, trying to punch through and kill her. He already knew he couldn't save the child that had collapsed in the elevator. He was using the last of his energy to try to make sure she couldn't do this again.

Harry felt a crack in his mind widen. He also felt a new wave of energy swarm his body. He instinctively directed it at the gasping boy.

Powerful healing orbs sank into the child. A slug pushed out as the wound healed from the inside.

Harry dropped to his knees, body withering.

The bleeding stopped. The little boy's lashes fluttered as he drew in a deeper breath.

The elevator shut, blocking Harry's view.

Harry broke down in tears.

The speaker activated. "You've done well. Take a minute to collect yourself and then return to your flat. If you wish to explore the wing, you are allowed."

The elevator opened again. It was empty this time, but a large pool of blood showed drag marks. Whoever had retrieved the child hadn't been gentle.

Harry forced himself to get up and stagger into the elevator. "This is inhuman."

Thalia didn't answer. Their methods were more than harsh. They were also more than effective. Harry's newest evolution might save Reicher's life. That was all Thalia cared about now.

Harry walked through the Life and Death wing without talking to any of the other captives or even looking at them. He wasn't sure he could function in any normal way right now.

He went into his room and grabbed the small pills next to the cup of water that hadn't been there when he woke. He took them and then collapsed on the bed. Tears rolled from his eyes. His body shook with grief and anger.

Harry felt the drugs start to take effect. His powers faded and exhaustion took their place. *I never should have volunteered for this run.*

2

Harry listened to the captives in the lounge, but he didn't get up from the bed even though it had been hours and he was allowed to have contact. Listening to them talk was already more contact than he wanted.

"They let him out of the session early."

"Does that mean he had an evolution?"

"Probably. I've never known them to let us out of a session early for any other reason."

"He's covered in blood. I bet they did the three-prisoner push."

"I don't care what they did. I only care about the results. If he had an evolution, then they're going to try to duplicate it. You know they like to keep all of us at the same level."

"Why is the new guy able to do more than we are? We've been here all our lives. We're happy here. Why is he stronger than us?"

Harry was horrified. He kept listening, trying not to hate them. He believed they had Stockholm Syndrome, where they'd formed a bond with their captors because it kept them alive.

"He's one of those Safe Haven people. All of those descendants are stronger."

"But why?"

“No one knows. That’s part of why the boss is doing things this way.”

“Maybe the new guy can save the boss.”

“I hope so. No one wants Joseph to take over.”

“I’ve heard a different replacement was chosen.”

“So did I, but Reicher isn’t going to give control of this lab and the remaining UN forces to an outsider and certainly not to an outsider from Safe Haven. He’s bluffing. When he dies, we’re either going to get Joseph or his daughter.”

Harry could tell they didn’t mind the idea of Reicher’s daughter inheriting. He could also tell they disliked Joseph.

“If the new guy really had an evolution, we could be successful this time.”

“And then maybe we wouldn’t have such an awful diet.”

“Hey, I like the food we have here.”

The other captives groaned.

Harry’s stomach twisted. He knew what they were eating to increase their lifespans and he would never approve of it. Even bodies from a natural death deserved burial, not consumption.

“The light on the lift just switched to green. They’re getting ready to call one of us.”

“Ay, I hope it’s me. I’ve been practicing on the few bugs we get down here.”

“Have you had any luck, mate?”

“No, but bringing people back from the dead can’t be much harder than doing it for an insect.

Once I master that, I'll have it and Reicher will make me the top L&D descendant in the lab."

"Not if I get it first, bitch!"

Harry now understood that was all the captives in this wing cared about—increasing healing gifts until they were able to bring someone back from the dead.

Harry thought of the session he'd gone through. *That's going to be my life until I master an impossible goal.* "I really was better off in the cage."

3

"Report to the session room, Subject Seven."

Anxiety sent chills over Harry's skin. He hadn't left his bed even though staff members had entered his flat to deliver clean clothes and personal care items.

He had his gifts back now, but they were weak. Harry was scared that his captors would hurt more people if he refused; he forced himself to stand. Going to the door was easy. Going through it wasn't.

Harry's walk to the elevator was slow and full of fear. He didn't care if they beat him again or starved him or any of the other awful things they'd done since he'd been captured on the beach. He just couldn't take any more deaths.

The elevator quickly took him to the session room. The door opened to reveal one of the residents from his wing. He recognized the man

only because of his bright red hair and the name tag with his number. The gun in his hand didn't register.

Subject 18 was his size and his age. Harry also thought the man had been a doctor before the war. He had the look of a family physician who was trying hard to keep the locals alive while they were busy killing themselves with high-fat foods and low-exercise lifestyles. Harry connected to him instantly. That was the type of medical practice he had always foreseen himself having.

Thalia activated the speaker. "Do it now, Subject 18."

Harry frowned as he realized that wasn't his number. It took another second for him to conclude he was the one being experimented on this time.

Subject 18 fired the gun in his hand. It only held one round.

The bullet hit Harry in the stomach and plunged in deep.

The pain was indescribable. He tried to hold it in with his hands and let it out with his screams.

"Save his life! Hurry up!"

Harry slid to the ground, gasping as more blood drained out of him and new waves of pain sank in. Harry had never been shot before; he didn't like it.

"Do it now! Save him!"

Subject 18 was already sending healing orbs into Harry's bleeding body, but he wasn't nearly as strong as the Safe Haven medic. The weak orbs vanished under the blood and did very little help.

Harry stretched out a bloody hand toward the terrified man. “The dark door in the back. Use the dark door!”

Subject 18 ripped open his mental doors, but he didn’t have the energy gathered to use any of it.

Harry’s heart stuttered. The blood loss was taking effect. “The dark door!” Waves of agony clamped down on his stomach. His skin went cold.

Fear of death filled Harry’s mind.

His demon prepared to flee.

“Get back here!” Harry pulled the demon in closer, preventing it from leaving. “We sink or swim together!”

Unable to escape due to Harry’s mental hold, the demon focused on helping Subject 18 save Harry’s life.

In the security room, Thalia and Reicher observed intently. Thalia wasn’t happy to be using Harry this way. She considered him too valuable, but Reicher had insisted this was necessary.

Harry fell, dropping to the cold floor. His blood added to the layer of stains on the faded tile.

Subject 18 began to panic. “I’m out! I can’t do it!”

Thalia activated the speaker. “You may take his lifeforce to save yourself.”

Subject 18 hurriedly scrambled away, instinctively going for the gun that was out of ammunition.

Even in a dire situation, Harry refused to sacrifice someone else to save himself. He dug deeper, searching for the spell he needed.

Harry jerked open a dark door in his mind. He stepped through without hesitation. “I accept you for what you are.”

Harry’s demon went through an instant evolution. Harry emerged twice as powerful, with twice the skills.

Thalia and Reicher observed in amazement as Harry healed himself. The bullet fell out onto the floor. The blood stopped pouring. A few seconds later, the wound was gone.

Harry stayed on the floor, shocked and dismayed. “What have I become?”

The elevator opened. Wallie emerged with a cruel leer on his face.

Harry braced for more pain.

Wallie went to Subject 18. “You have been terminated.” He stabbed the cowering man in the chest twice with quick, brutal blows.

Harry heard the body drop, but he was out of energy.

“The punishment for failure is death. That’s not always the case, but it is this time. He didn’t really try to help you.” Thalia signaled Wallie. “Get him back to his flat. Be gentle. His first day has been stellar.”

Wallie’s touch was gentle, almost soothing. He had learned quickly which subjects the boss favored. He was careful to never abuse them out of

turn. “Come on. Let’s get you back to that comfortable flat and let you rest.”

Harry didn’t resist or assist as Wallie got an arm around his waist and led him toward the elevator. He tried not to look at Subject 18’s body, but it was impossible to fight that urge.

The man had died with a betrayed expression. He clearly hadn’t believed his captors would do this to him.

Harry waited for the elevator to close. Then he shifted toward Wallie. “I need to tell you something.”

Wallie leaned in, not feeling any threat from the man who had drained most of his energy during the session.

Harry whispered softly, “I think I’m going crazy.”

Wallie laughed as the elevator began moving. “Aren’t we all?”

“Yes.” Harry lunged forward and bit into the man’s neck. He didn’t stop until his teeth snapped together and blood flowed like sweet, thick coffee over his lips and down his throat.

Blood sprayed the inside of the freshly cleaned elevator and dripped down the buttons. A puddle gathered at Harry’s feet as he sucked down Wallie’s lifeforce and healed his body the rest of the way.

He let go of the dead man and roared at the camera. “You can’t break me!” He held in a sob. “I’m already broken.”

In the security room, Thalia hit the buttons for security while Reicher laughed so hard that he sent himself into a coughing fit. Harry continued to be a source of surprise and entertainment for Reicher.

Thalia wasn't impressed. She had begun to hate the medical man for all of the trouble he was causing. He couldn't be allowed around Reicher as long as he was so dangerous. "Why do you think he's doing it?"

Reicher had already figured that out. "He knows what we need, and he doesn't want to save my life. He wants to end it. All of them do."

Thalia locked the elevator so Harry couldn't continue his rampage. Then she activated the gas. In a few minutes, he would be unconscious, and the staff could remove him and Wallie's body.

"Where does he go next?" Thalia expected a gaol sentence for Harry now. His repeated moments of violence were disturbing.

"No changes."

Thalia let out a disapproving sigh as she typed in the order. "He might go nuts and take out that entire wing."

Reicher shrugged. "That wing hasn't pulled its weight in years. We still don't have a replacement for Tobias, and they've never done what he did today. No changes. And save your exasperated noises for your future husband, if he's even alive. I have no need for them."

Thalia flushed at the reprimand and the reminder that her fiancé hadn't been heard from in six months. Her lips curled inward and vanished.

Reicher was satisfied. Harry's gifts would grow even faster now that he'd taken a lifeforce. *He's almost ready to give his all so that I might exist another year.* "Thank you, Angela, for sending me your best. I won't let them go to waste."

Chapter Thirteen

Blinking

1

Shawn didn't want to wake up. He already knew the reality waiting for him was awful. Being asleep allowed him to recall the past, when he had been a whole man and sane. The cracks in his mind were widening with every minute he spent in captivity.

A loud buzzer jarred him from that place between asleep and awake. Alertness flooded in against his will.

Shawn didn't open his eyes. He could feel a soft mattress under his abused and hurting body. The smell of food cooking drenched the air. A slight draft told him a door or window was open nearby.

Shawn willed himself to go back to sleep. *I don't want to do this anymore.*

The sound of voices caught his attention next. *I'm not alone.*

Shawn's lids flew open. He glanced around the sterile, padded flat that had soothing yellow walls and no other furniture.

The open door drew his curiosity, but he didn't rush to it. Shawn was sure it was a trap. His captors were eager for any reason to abuse him.

Shawn listened to the voices outside as he tried to decide whether he wanted to live or die. He had been thinking about that during every waking moment since being castrated. If he decided he didn't want to live, there were always ways to end it no matter how careful his captors were.

The ongoing conversation finally caught Shawn's full attention and then held it.

"I don't think we covered everything."

"I think we did. When their rescue team shows up, they'll do exactly what we've foreseen."

"All of these subjects from Safe Haven are stronger than us. Every one of them has had an evolution during the time they've been here. Some of the residents in this lounge have been here their entire lives and can't say that."

"We haven't figured out why they're stronger, but that doesn't mean they're going to react any differently than anyone else. We've accounted for everything."

"I know we've gone over these plans multiple times, but I'm not convinced. I think we're missing something."

Silence fell for a moment. Shawn figured out they were talking about a rescue team coming from Safe Haven, but there hadn't been any plans for that. Shawn held no hope for a rescue. *We're on our own.*

The conversation resumed.

"I think he's awake."

"After what they went through on the warehouse floor, he's probably afraid to come out."

“Should we go in and welcome him to the wing?”

“Probably. Reicher likes it when we accept the new members. He says it helps them adjust faster.”

Shawn braced for company as footsteps approached the door.

“It’s okay for you to come out. When the doors are unlocked, you’re allowed access to the rest of the wing.”

Shawn glared at the man. “Go away.”

“There’s no need to be rude.”

Shawn snorted. “You guys make plans for the boss who destroyed the world and is still trying to conquer it, but there’s no reason for rudeness? Do you get how stupid that sounds?”

The man in the doorway smiled. “Yes, actually. It sounded the same way to me when I was assigned here. After a while, you adjust.”

Shawn could hear the regret in the man’s voice. He scanned his fellow captive. He lingered on the flat pants.

The other man nodded. “I wasn’t happy about that part either when it first happened.”

“Not happy. Yeah, let’s go with that.” Shawn couldn’t believe the man was being so calm about something so awful.

The man couldn’t believe Shawn was holding on to something that was basically useless. “You’ll find other things to do.”

Captives snickered.

Shawn rolled over and faced the wall. He wasn't in the mood for company. It was horrifying that the other inhabitants were here willingly.

“Subject Two, follow the red arrows to the session room.”

Shawn knew the voice over the speaker was talking to him, but he had no motivation to obey. He stayed where he was.

The speaker activated again. “Subject Two, report to the session room immediately or there will be a punishment.”

Shawn shrugged mentally. *There's nothing they can do to me now that's worse than what they've already done.*

A scream echoed right outside his flat. The man he had been talking to shrieked. It continued until Shawn couldn't take the noise anymore. He shoved himself off the bed, full of impotent rage. “I'm doing it! Stop it!”

Shawn stepped out as the screams faded. He spotted the man he'd been talking to laying on the floor, but he wasn't sure what had happened to him.

The other captives quickly filled him in.

“We don't like punishing our own, but if you don't obey the rules, we have to.”

“Help him up.”

Shawn realized the other captives had punished the man. *I'm in hell.*

Red arrows began to flash along the wall. Shawn followed them. As he walked, he vaguely scanned his new environment and found it better

than the one he'd been in, but it didn't matter. Soft chairs and classic books next to a decorative fireplace and a softly glowing lamp held no appeal for him.

Shawn stepped into the open elevator and hoped whatever they wanted from him wasn't possible. He didn't want to do anything to help the enemy, no matter what it was.

The elevator took him down one level and opened into a small room with one chair in the center and walls that were as black as night. As he watched, faint glows began to appear on those walls. They quickly turned into planets and stars, making Shawn think of space. It was computer-generated from real images, but he wasn't impressed. All he wanted to do was to get back to his flat and sleep.

The elevator shut behind him. Shawn saw the red light over it and understood he couldn't leave until he did whatever they wanted.

He went to the chair and sat without being told. It was obvious where they wanted him.

The speaker activated. "Welcome to the Blinking wing."

Shawn didn't glance up at the woman in the glass window at the top of the wall. He'd noticed her as soon as he stepped into the room, but like everything else, she didn't matter to him.

"The assumed purpose of humanity has always been that we are supposed to procreate and pass on genes to the next generation. There has been no

proven meaning of life except the continuation of life itself. You are no longer able to have children and pass on your genes. Because of that, you'll be able to dig deeper and blink longer.”

Shawn was suddenly eager to get started. He loved being down in his mind. Blinking allowed no space for reality. “What am I searching for?”

“Proof either for or against the theory that procreation and survival is all that humanity is here for.”

“You want me to tell you the meaning of life now that you've destroyed mine?”

“Yes. Get started, please.”

Shawn willed himself to resist, but it felt like there was no passion left in him at all. He sank into his mind and began working on the problem.

In the security room, Thalia left him alone. Blinkers were not abused in the same ways as the others. Blinkers were special and they were treated like it.

Shawn took a minute to consider the difference between scroll diving, which he'd tried and failed at, and blinking, which he'd quickly mastered during his time here. Scroll diving meant going through the murky waves of time in search of relics that contained old and sometimes forgotten knowledge. Blinking was more like being a detective. You traced a question to its roots, and then followed it back to its present condition, all while searching out every connected path to prove its legitimacy. Shawn loved blinking.

He let the question form in his mind. Peace settled over him, leaving no room for anything else. *What is the meaning of life?*

Shawn began tracing it. “All life comes with the ability to reproduce. Some life forms have extra protections, and some have only a few. It depends on how fast they procreate and how many predators they have. The availability of food is also a factor.”

Shawn went deeper into that first branch. “No lifeform is without a suitable environment unless mankind interferes... Not true. Nature sometimes carries them away from their habitat. Some of those die... But many continue to survive in the new places. Agreed. The branch is valid. Nature assists all life forms in the struggle for survival. That alone implies we’re meant to exist.”

Reicher leaned forward in his chair. Shawn was approaching the point of addiction. It never took long. All their Blinkers had been given a challenge like this, just different topics that were all vital to a future without the hell they’d all survived. He was curious if Shawn would come up with the same answers that he and a few others had.

“Then why are we different from the plants and animals?” Shawn held up his hand and splayed the fingers. “We were built to build.”

Reicher was almost disappointed. He and the others had gone straight to intelligence levels. Shawn was following a physical path.

Shawn went deeper into the rabbit hole, enjoying the dirt on his face. It was always dark in

here and there was never any pain. His body shuddered and blinked for an instant. “Plants and animals build their environment. We’re no different. Nature nurtures to ensure we continue; we can build our environment like the other life forms.”

Shawn was disappointed, but he didn’t consider padding the truth. Blinking didn’t allow for lies. “So, we’re back to it being possible that we’re just meant to exist and reproduce.”

Shawn took a different path. “Communication might be a difference, but we can’t prove it. We’ve never really deciphered animal languages.”

He tried again, going further into the trace. “Plants and animals come with defenses. Humans have to build theirs. They don’t have religion, that we know of, so that’s another difference. No recorded history, no education, no control over the environment.” A grin stretched across his lips. “It’s absolutely wrong! We were given the ability to change our environment, even if it’s for the worse.”

Reicher was fascinated by how Shawn’s brain worked. He’d run through the basics in minutes. It had taken decades for his other Blinkers to express those thoughts.

Shawn shrugged. “Maybe they’re too stupid to get it; or maybe they lied.”

Reicher didn’t answer, but he was pleased that Shawn had been able to catch that thought while Blinking.

Thalia gestured. “Please, continue.”

Shawn sank back down gratefully. Even a few seconds in this reality was too much for his fragile brain.

2

Hours later, a staff member helped Shawn out of the elevator and back to his flat. His body refused to cooperate.

The other captives came forward and took Shawn's burden. They didn't like the troops.

The man he'd first spoken with patted Shawn's arm. "It'll get easier as it goes along. You just can't spend that much time in your mind at once. It gets dangerous."

Shawn barely heard what they were saying. He sat at the table where they put a tray of enticing food in front of him.

Shawn began eating automatically. Now that he'd been in a blinking session, he wasn't sure why he had been afraid of it. Digging for answers was something he'd been doing since the war. Having a demon hybrid allowed that process to get more in-depth.

"You're not allowed to blink between sessions."

Shawn frowned at the man. "Why not?"

"It's dangerous. You won't eat or sleep and you'll barely be breathing. The human body can't take much of that."

Shawn didn't care. Even while eating the food that had been wonderfully prepared, he was already

trying to sink back into his mind. *Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? Dig for it!*

“You have to stop. They’ll come in and punish us all this time.”

Shawn didn’t think he could take any more screams. He forced himself to stay alert.

“Do you have any questions?”

Shawn snorted bitterly. “If I did, I’d dig for the answers on my own. Don’t try to bond with me. I don’t want to like you.”

The conversation went on around him as if he hadn’t spoken.

“There are only a few rules here. You already know what they are now, other than you have to show up for all of the meals and medical checks.”

Shawn shuddered at the thought of going through another medical procedure.

The other captives no longer viewed it that way.

“Without reproductive abilities, we don’t consider sex when we blink. We don’t get distracted. We also have no desire to hurt anyone.”

“You’re neutered dogs. I get it.”

“You’re a neutered dog now, too. Try to accept it and move on.” The man gave him a shrug. “What we do here is more important than being able to have an orgasm. We’re answering the questions that have been vexing humanity for centuries.”

Shawn liked the sound of that, but the price wasn’t worth it. “People would do it willingly. There’s no reason to remove body parts.”

“You wouldn’t have concentrated the way that this requires. You think you could, but they’ve been doing this for a long time. The scientists know what works and what doesn’t.”

The total confidence made Shawn want to vomit. He pushed his tray away.

The man pushed the tray back over and then sat next to Shawn. “Eat it all or they won’t let you go into the next session.”

Shawn reluctantly picked up his fork and dug in, but the sweet taste held no attraction. *I’m broken now.* “When is the next session?”

“It depends on the level of success. Were you able to come up with anything?”

Shawn shook his head regretfully. “The challenge they gave me will take a while for me to fully trace.”

All of the captives nodded.

“It’s the same way for us and all the plans we’ve made.”

Shawn found himself slightly curious about that now. “What plans have you made that worked?”

“We designed the plan that drew Safe Haven to the International Detention Center.”

Shawn swallowed the creamy potato mash. “You guys lost that battle.”

“Yes, and we were punished for being wrong, but Joel’s instability wasn’t known to anyone.”

Shawn believed that was true. Joel had isolated himself from the rest of the UN commanders. There was no way they could have known. “What else?”

“We designed several of the plans that engaged your camp before you left America.”

Shawn contemplated their escape from the mountain. “What went wrong there?”

The captives shared a smile.

“Who says something went wrong?”

Shawn didn’t use his gifts to dig into their minds. He saved that energy for his next session. “I don’t get it.”

The slightly arrogant man who had pushed his tray back over smiled again. “We didn’t want all of you captured then. We also didn’t want your mountain. We needed to force you back onto the road before you decided that was the ideal place to set up a new town.”

“Why?”

“None of you would be as strong as you are now if your journey had ended there.”

Shawn felt anger, but it was easy to control. “What are you working on now?”

“A group plan to open the gates between dimensions.”

Shawn wasn’t sure he understood what that meant. “Why?”

“To discover and explore what’s there, of course. We have to figure out if reality is set for everyone, subjective, or if we make it with our minds as we go.”

Shawn realized he wanted that answer too. *If we make reality with our minds, then I can change it into anything I want.*

All the captives around him nodded again. “That’s why we’re here willingly. We want to change things for the better.”

Shawn found himself listening this time as they continue to extol the virtues of being a Blinker in Reicher’s lab.

3

Cerise hurried by the Blinker wing and entered the small communication cubby.

This radio cubby was one of three in the complex. They were unmanned but kept up in case the complex lost power and they had to use more traditional methods of contacting the outside world.

She closed the door behind her and quickly activated the radio. She was taking a huge chance, but she needed to make sure things were okay at home. “Is anyone there?”

The radio crackled softly with a man’s surprised voice. “We thought you were dead.”

Cerise snorted. “That’s not going to happen. Update me.”

“Well, Cerise, we’re sitting here at your house, playing with the toys you left us a month ago. We’re also in the middle of a meeting to decide if we’re coming in there after your boss or if we’re just going to fade away into the sunset.”

Cerise heard voices in the background arguing. “I told you it would be a month, at least.”

“Well, the beach mobs are spreading out into the countryside. We need to get out of their way or join them and take over. Since we don’t have the manpower to take over, I recommended we leave.”

“You can’t do that, mate. We made a deal!” Cerise peered behind her, feeling time running out.

The radio lit up again. “Who did you leave these maps for, ay?”

She frowned. “How do you know it wasn’t for you?”

“I recognized the bloke you dragged out of here. He came from Safe Haven.”

Cerise was forced to give a concession. “He’s supposed to take Reicher’s place.”

The voice on the other end of the radio was furious now. “There’s no way I’m going to let Reicher keep the Ghost!”

“How do you know who he is?” Cerise had been careful not to give any details about that part of her plan to members of the resistance.

“I’ve been following it on the radio calls and the reports from the IDC. I know a heap more than you think I do. For example, I know you’re a traitor. The Ghost came to help us, and you handed him over to Reicher!”

“I delivered Reicher’s doom, mate.”

“Who are you expecting?”

Cerise kept her voice down so it didn’t carry through the corridor. “Just be ready to offer them your full support.”

“Oi. Why would I? We know you’re loyal to your boss and no one else.”

“You have no proof of that. In fact, if you add up my kills, you’ll find it slants heavily in favor of the citizens.”

“We did, actually. That’s why we’re talking at all. Who were the bodies we buried for you?”

“Haussler’s ship crew. That was the last of them. Haussler’s body was tossed off a cliff for the sharks.”

“Haussler’s dead! Hot, damn that’s good news, mate!”

Cerise lowered the volume on the small radio. “Not so loud!”

“That means Reicher’s the last one.”

“But not for long. He’s dying.”

“Say that again.”

Cerise didn’t have time. She heard a footstep outside and quickly shut off the radio.

The door opened behind her. Joseph stood there, leering happily. “Oh, Cerise. Your day just got a lot rougher.”

Cerise smiled right back at him. “Shall we go to Reicher together and tell him everything we know?”

Joseph paused. Her tone implied she knew something about him that she shouldn’t.

Cerise shoved him out of her way and stepped out of the small radio cubby. “If he finds out about this, then he also finds out about your girlfriend’s untraceable vials and your desire to kill him.”

Joseph paled. He didn't know anyone had overheard that conversation.

Cerise shook her head in contempt as she walked away. "There's always someone listening, Joseph. You of all people should know that."

4

"I traced the call, sir." Thalia's curt tone was a reminder that he'd upset her with the scold. "They are at the Bunting homestead. We can be there in five hours by land." She didn't tell him how long by helicopter. They didn't have enough fuel to run those awesome machines right now.

Reicher waved at the computer. "File a copy of that entire conversation for later."

Thalia glared at Reicher. "She's not being punished now? She's giving away information to our enemy!"

Reicher gave a rare, comforting smile. "It's all part of the plan. Let them play their games and convince themselves that I don't know what's going on. By the time the trap snaps shut, it'll be too late for them to pick another side."

"It sounds like they've already picked one."

Reicher shrugged. "That's not necessarily true. Cerise wants her kiddies returned and Joseph wants control of this complex. If either one of them were to get what they want, their loyalty would be unshakable."

“Does that mean you’ve changed your mind about giving Marc control?”

“Absolutely not. When I die, Marcus Brady will be by my side to help me through it.”

“And me?”

“Yes.” Reicher forced another smile for his daughter. “You’ll help Marc take my place. Your future is set. All you have to do is follow my orders.”

Thalia beamed at him. “I’ve always followed you. Nothing will ever change that.”

Reicher grunted. “Hold tight to that thought.”

Chapter Fourteen
That's An Order

1

Marc woke up with tears drying on his face. He had been dreaming about Kendle's death. It was a recurring nightmare that refused to give his heart a break. The nights he didn't revisit that sin were worse, though. *At least she's the only one who dies in that nightmare.*

Marc knew he was in a different room. He'd been alert when brought here, though heavily drugged and reeling from Reicher's pain spells. The man was incredibly powerful.

Marc took a quick look around to verify that nothing had changed.

It was the same yellow walls and small, empty flat. The first isolation room he had spent time in hadn't been as nice.

Marc listened to his surroundings next.

He heard calm voices outside. That was also a change from his isolation and from the warehouse—no one was screaming.

Marc slowly sat up, wiping the dampness from his cheeks. He yawned and stretched and was relieved not to feel any new injuries. He hadn't

suffered much physical damage yet, but just knowing what they'd done to Shawn was enough to make him relieved that it hadn't happened to him while he was unconscious.

Marc had taken their pills willingly when he'd been brought here. He'd also memorized the elevators and hallways as they traveled. He didn't know when he might get to use that information, but it was still ingrained to collect it.

Marc slowly stood on legs that were sore but not weak. His body was tolerating captivity even though his mind wasn't. Marc refused to examine those mental cracks. Before leaving Safe Haven, that had been a serious concern. Here in hell, it was all part of the awful game being played.

Except, we're not winning this time. Marc knew how things were going to go end. He was unhappy with it and at the same time, he considered it a fitting conclusion.

The door unlocked.

Marc immediately went over and opened it. He wasn't afraid of anything that might be out there. His worst fears were in his mind.

He scanned the comforting lounge and content captives enjoying the rocking chairs and recliners. His body cried out to join them, but Marc refused to be swayed so easily. *I can't be broken with torture, and I can't be bought with a comfortable environment.*

A speaker activated. "Follow the red arrows to the session room, Subject Eleven."

Marc understood he was being watched. How else would they have known he was awake? It wasn't a surprise, but it also wasn't welcome. He hadn't had any privacy at all since being captured. That was another part of the mental squeeze they were doing; he wasn't reacting well to it. In the past, he had used mental and physical isolation to shore up his loner mentality. That wasn't possible here.

The eight other captives noticed Marc as soon as he came out. All of them smiled in encouragement, but it wasn't normal. He could feel the animosity behind their sharp teeth.

“Good luck!”

“Knock ‘em dead, mate!”

Marc read their jealous and petty thoughts and realized he had his gifts back now. He considered killing everyone in here and trying to escape, but only briefly. He studied them subtly instead.

The other captives in here were much like him—alphas, pumped, and aggressive. They were all dressed alike and groomed alike. To Marc, it appeared that Reicher was forming a powerful descendant army in this wing. *But I'm not going to lead that, either.*

Marc followed the flashing red arrows to the elevator that had brought him here. He stepped inside and leaned against the cool wall; it only took him down one floor. It had been the same to reach the new level when he'd first been relocated.

Marc crossed his arms over his chest. If they had sent him back to the warehouse, he wasn't going to

leave the elevator without extreme physical motivation.

The door opened to show him a small room with a chair in the center and walls that appeared to be space. The spinning planets and roaming asteroids were vivid, fascinating. “Nice trick.”

A speaker activated. “We find it easier to make these connections in an environment that will encourage subjects to think about the mysteries of life and the astounding creations that surround us.”

Marc stepped out of the elevator and looked up at the spotless glass where the same woman from the warehouse was watching him with Adrian’s blue eyes. Marc hated her. “Why do you use torture?”

“You would not work on these things for us willingly.”

“You’re wrong.” Marc didn’t hold back. “Researching the biggest questions of humanity is a noble thing to spend a life on. Torturing people into doing what you want, not so much.”

Thalia didn’t argue. She also didn’t remind him that even in the Marines, pain had been a determining factor in success. Marc was smart enough to know that. His protests were leftovers from his previous life. After a while, they would fade. “Welcome to the Creation wing. Please sit down.”

Marc went to the chair and sat. He stretched his legs out in front of him and rotated his ankles. It seemed like the innocent behavior of a captive who

hadn't been out of the cage very long. Marc used it to study the woman in the window.

He picked up the Mitchel vibe from her again, even though he wasn't sure she actually was one. It was possible that all lab employees had an arrogant air that made him want to fire everything he had at the window. Marc knew better, however. Even if he hadn't been able to recognize reinforced glass, he would have assumed Reicher had it covered. It was impossible to keep captives without the proper environment.

"In this session, we will be exploring your connection to the Creator."

Marc let out a sound of resentment. "I don't have one. That's the problem."

"You are descended from the first man. Your bond exists. You *are* able to connect."

Marc figured out what she wanted. "You want me to call God."

"Yes."

Marc shrugged as if it didn't matter. "I've tried many times in my life and He never answered. He never answers any of us. Why would He do that now when He never has before?"

"We have changed the destiny of everyone on earth. The Creator has to be aware of that. In case he isn't, we have to call him and make sure."

Marc already knew that part. "You destroyed the world in hopes that He would return."

Thalia refused to confirm that. As far as she knew, the labs weren't completely responsible for

the nuclear war that had devastated them all. She wasn't allowed to discuss that with the subjects, however. Reicher had a list of forbidden topics and the cause of the apocalypse was at the top of that list.

Marc shook his head, disgusted. "It's never going to work. He can't be fooled. You should have known it wouldn't work."

Thalia sensed Marc's scold was for Reicher and not her. She glanced over her shoulder.

Reicher was almost dozing in his chair. The pain had become too great to handle today; he was heavily drugged. He gestured with a weak hand for her to continue.

Thalia glanced back at Marc and found him gone.

She scanned the empty room and realized she hadn't deactivated the lift. "Damn these Safe Haven cunts!"

Reicher woke up laughing. It was the first time he'd ever heard her curse.

2

Marc leaned against the elevator wall as it carried him down. That was the only way this elevator traveled.

He opened the door as soon as it stopped. His captors knew he was gone by now. Shutting down this elevator would be their first reaction.

Marc quickly stepped out.

The light above it switched to red.

Marc celebrated silently. He looked around, eager to have an adventure.

Marc saw he was in another wing of the complex. He walked the cool halls confidently, memorizing exits and small guard posts that were empty. This level was dark gray with only a few ceiling lights and empty flats that didn't even have cots yet let alone mattresses. It didn't seem like anyone was living in this wing.

Marc swept empty rooms and bare shelves. *This is where they'll bring us after they're finished on the level where we are now.*

The walls around him swayed eerily as he walked. Until the submarine, Marc hadn't spent much time underwater. He didn't like it.

Marc saw another elevator. He hurried over to it and hit the button.

In the security room, Reicher struggled to stay alert. "Let him explore."

Thalia removed her hand from the keyboard that would have deactivated that elevator.

Down in the empty wing, Marc saw the buttons only went up. He chose the first floor.

The elevator didn't respond.

Thalia activated the speaker. "The first level has been locked off. Pick a different floor and it will work."

Marc glared at the camera. “Can’t you even give me ten minutes of privacy?”

Thalia was startled into a chuckle. “Nee.”

Behind her, Reicher became even more positive of his prediction that she would help Marc take over. Then she would become his mate.

Thalia had been promised to Corbin in the Hawaii complex, but that wasn’t going to happen now. Marc was a much better match for her.

Marc reluctantly hit the button to take him back up one floor. His captors were just playing with him by letting him roam. Not doing it freely took all the fun out of it.

Thalia waited for Marc to exit the lift and then shut it down. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

Reicher didn’t scold her. He wanted to, but he didn’t have the strength. The cancer was growing more aggressive. It was moving faster now that the end was nearing.

Marc sat in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest again. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to call the Creator.”

Marc laughed.

Thalia waited patiently.

Marc knew he wasn’t going to get out of this room until he tried. He was also positive it wouldn’t work.

He still did it reluctantly. If there was an answer, he would be forced to explain his actions, and Marc couldn't do that. *There is no excuse for murder.*

Thalia and Reicher observed as Marc opened a mental door in his mind and shoved in energy.

Marc made the call based on what Angela and Adrian had told him. During their time with Donner, they'd made this call successfully. Marc let his bitterness over that fuel his need to get through.

3

An hour later, Marc had used almost all of his energy and there hadn't been a single response. Reicher was dozing in his chair again, with bloody drool hanging from the corner of his mouth.

Thalia smothered a yawn and activated the speaker. "Return to your room and rest."

Marc staggered toward the elevator without replying. He got in and let it carry him back up to the residence wing.

The other captives were waiting to find out if he'd been successful. As Marc returned through the hall, they attacked him mentally, taking advantage of his weakness.

Marc pushed them out easily even though he was tired. He lifted his chin. "Bunch of cowards. Why didn't you face me before I went down to the session?"

"We're not allowed to interfere, mate."

Marc walked by them with his defenses ready to be deployed. None of the men here liked him. He could feel that already. *It's mutual.*

“Oi! You can't just walk away!”

They regrouped and tried to invade his mind again.

Marc struck back this time. He invaded all of their minds at the same time, pulling out secrets these captives weren't supposed to have anymore. As a byzan, he was on Reicher's level with smaller energy banks.

We're stronger than Reicher. When he dies, we can take over.

Safe Haven has to fall. It's not fair that they haven't suffered like everyone else.

Reicher's replacement won't live to inherit the job!

We should be in charge.

The new people are going to replace us. We have to take them out first!

Marc stored those nuggets and pushed in deeper for the more important secrets.

This lab is in danger. It hasn't been repaired in years and storm season is almost here again.

Reicher has a dozen kids alive in these walls. We can use them against him.

We'll never side with Safe Haven. They're the enemy!

Marc sneered. “You're all fakes. And I'm going to tell him everything.” He waited, eager to take out his anger in a physical moment.

Most of the other captives resentfully resumed their rest and relaxation in the lounge. They knew better than to challenge Marc to combat even with him being so outnumbered. Captives weren't allowed to fight.

Marc went into his flat and sat on the bed. Using so much energy had made him sleepy. *It also gave me a measure of control. If they let me get too alert, I'll blow us out of here.*

Marc's demon was exhausted but still there. *Why are we not doing that now?*

Marc yawned as he laid on the bed. *It's not part of the plan.*

His demon scowled. *I'm tired of hearing that.*

One of the captives entered Marc's room and shut the door. He leaned against it, glaring.

Marc didn't move. "If you're going to kill me, do it now and be quick about it or I'll eat your dick for lunch."

The other captive wasn't intimidated. He only knew Marc by reputation and reputations were often built on lies. "I heard you're taking the boss's place when he dies."

Marc yawned again instead of answering.

The captive approached the bed, insulted and angry. He picked a pain spell and began gathering energy for it.

Marc did a quick tuck and roll while punching. He caught the man in the groin and brought him to his knees. He followed it up with three alternating

punches that broke the man's nose and splattered fresh blood over their clothes and the floor.

Marc stopped as alarms began to ring. He wasn't allowed to fight with the other residents here. He assumed self-defense was permitted, but there was no guarantee. *I might be going back to the warehouse after all.*

Marc couldn't find it in himself to be unhappy. The short release had already returned more of his control. It was almost like he had the rage illness and only the sight of blood could pacify him. Being a captive wasn't good for his brain.

A bulky staff member pushed the door open and quickly grabbed the unconscious man's leg. He dragged the body out without looking at Marc.

Marc assumed the staff was scared of him. "You should be. When I've finally had enough, I'm taking all of us down. There won't be a single survivor."

Marc laid on the bed, not caring about the blood on his hands and clothes. *I never should have come here.*

In the security room, Reicher had barely woken from his drug-induced dozing. Thalia was fully in charge.

She decided not to punish Marc because she didn't think Reicher would have. She typed in orders for the injured man to be removed from the wing, however. He had gotten aggressive and that wasn't allowed even in small moments. *Only we're allowed to threaten, abuse, or cause pain.*

Reicher coughed up a thick, bloody clump that almost choked him. He finally got it out and then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He leaned back in the chair without neatening himself. “Incentive.”

Thalia nodded. Marc had a weakness; it was time they exploited it.

4

“Follow the arrows to the session room, Subject Eleven.”

Marc went willingly. A few hours in the bloody flat had reminded him of the isolation torture. They would clean up while he was gone, hopefully. The smell was rough. The man had pissed himself during the attack.

Marc knew he needed allies here. He’d considered trying to reach the other captives in his wing, but listening to their conversations had made that impossible. They were too different. They wanted to be here. They liked and respected Reicher. Marc wanted this place gone. They had nothing to converse about.

Marc took the same elevator down to the same session room. He saw the same woman observing his every move and reflection.

There was now a force field that wouldn’t allow him to penetrate the security room. His gifts were weak right now, but even in the isolation room, it had been a struggle to get Reicher’s thoughts

through the energy shield. Marc tried to connect to that man now, curious if he was angry.

The heavy electric force field repelled his attempts.

Marc went to the chair and sat. *I'll keep working on that.*

In the security room, Reicher considered his vision again. He lifted a finger to stop Thalia from continuing the normal session. "Introduce yourself to him, officially."

Thalia stiffened at her father's roughly spoken command. His weakened condition allowed her to see what he had planned. "I have a fiancé!"

"Do (*cough*) as I say."

Thalia angrily activated the speaker. "My name is Thalia Abbot Reicher."

Magic swirled around her, but she refused to greet it as it settled over her body.

Marc stared at the window. It shouldn't surprise him to find out Reicher had offspring working in this lab, but it did. "Sergeant Marcus Brady."

He scanned what he could see of her, wishing he could dig into her mind. He was also glad that he couldn't. If he had been able to, he would have taken over her brain and made her kill the man in the chair behind her. Marc knew Reicher was there. He could feel the man observing everything that was happening.

Thalia glared over her shoulder. "Happy now?"

Reicher didn't answer. He was trying to catch his breath from the last coughing fit.

Thalia continued with the normal session, but she stayed angry. She hadn't considered that working with her father would be so frustrating. "Call the Creator."

Marc ignored the order. "Why did you introduce yourself?" He could feel that it was important.

"I don't have to answer you."

Marc snickered at her snotty tone. "Did I get under your skin? Tell me how I did it, so I can do it again."

Thalia's frustration came across the speaker. "My father insisted. He thinks you and I are going to be a couple in the future."

Marc blew out a breath of derision. "A couple of bodies buried under the ocean, maybe."

"Exactly! Now, make the call."

Marc began gathering energy while he kept protesting. "You know this is a waste of time. Why are you having me do it?"

In the security room, Reicher tapped his chair to get her attention. "Motivate!"

Thalia hit a series of buttons on the keypad.

One of the starry walls next to Marc changed. A live feed appeared, showing him a closed door in a wing that looked a lot like his own. Marc instinctively knew one of his team members was behind it.

"Make the call or Subject Ten will pay for your lack of effort."

Marc wasn't sure who that was, but it didn't matter. "No."

"Very well." Sound activated on the monitor. "Hit him again."

Kenn's scream echoed through the camera.

Marc winced. Reicher had indeed found a button to push.

"Make the call."

Marc glared at the window. "It won't work. You already know that!"

Thalia moved onto the next stage. "Then call the weigh station."

Marc stiffened. He hadn't realized the enemy knew about that. *But I should have. They know everything else.* "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The place in Heaven where souls are weighed."

"Never heard of it."

Thalia settled in for the long-haul. She knew he was lying. Now she would use her skills to force it out. "Hit him again."

Kenn screamed.

Marc couldn't take much of that. He began searching for a way out.

Reicher had planned on it. Thalia filled him in with an arrogant tone. "These floors and walls are padded. The chair is folding. You can't check out this time."

Kenn screamed again. "No more! No more water!"

Marc assumed they were waterboarding Kenn. He was glad they hadn't opened the door. It would be even harder if he had to witness it. Reicher had chosen a type of torture that almost all military men scoffed at but secretly feared during their time in the service.

“Hit him again.”

Marc saw the lights dim on the screen. Kenn was being waterboarded and electrocuted. The awful screams went into Marc's heart and started ripping it open.

The old connection didn't allow him to keep resisting. Marc shoved the gathered energy through the mental door so he could make the connection to the weigh station.

Angela had tested a lot of people for this skill, but not him. *And this is why. She didn't want me to know I could do it.*

“He's doing it!” Thalia leaned forward in her chair to observe.

Reicher tried to stay conscious through the drugs.

Time slowed.

Marc solidified the connection. *Hello?*

Doug's worried voice came right back in his mind. *What are you doing?!*

Marc celebrated and mourned being able to make the call. It was proof that his skills had evolved.

“Hold that connection!” Thalia made sure the video feed was working. Then she started to ask

Doug questions. “Where are you? How do I get there?”

Marc immediately countered her. “Don’t answer any calls from me or the Eagles, Douglas. That’s an order!”

I won’t. Good luck, Brady. You all need it. Doug broke the connection.

Time resumed running.

Kenn stopped screaming.

Thalia wasn’t unhappy about Marc cutting off the call. She could make him do it again. “He did it! He made contact!”

Reicher didn’t respond to Thalia’s excitement. Marc’s order would make it harder to get through next time. *We may need a better incentive.*

Marc cursed himself for not being stronger. The enemy now knew he could be manipulated through the pain of his former fireteam member. Marc considered suicide again.

Thalia panicked. *We can’t lose him yet!* She activated the speaker. “It doesn’t stop even when you check out!”

Marc shuddered in the chair and forced himself not to react at all. His mind began to shut down. *Maybe I can go deep enough that they can’t reach me.*

Reicher laughed in his thoughts, long and loud. *You never should have signed up for this run, Marcus. It’s going to cost you everything.*

Chapter Fifteen

It Requires Action

1

“**N**o more water. They’re drowning!”

Kenn snapped awake, but his nightmare lingered, causing him to gasp for air.

Kenn didn’t remember where he’d been, but it had flooded. He’d tried hard to save his teammates, but it hadn’t worked. He’d been the only survivor.

Kenn slowly became aware of his surroundings. He didn’t care about the comfort. The fact that it was dry allowed him to breathe deeper and calm himself. *I didn’t know I was that scared of water until I came here.*

Kenn sat up on the mattress and stayed there, observing. He’d been in this flat for days now without seeing anyone. The blinds over the window in his door were on the outside. He could hear people moving by, but he couldn’t view them. It was the same as yesterday and the day before; he was bored.

Kenn peered at the camera in the corner. “So what’s the plan for today? More rest and relaxation?”

The speaker immediately activated. “Report to the session room, Subject Ten. Follow the red arrows on the walls.”

The door unlocked.

“I didn’t expect that.” Kenn got up and opened the door. He stood there for a minute, taking in his new surroundings.

The odors hit him first. It smelled like old food and sweat. Kenn had listened to residents doing workouts while doing his own to keep from going crazy. When you were isolated, working out was the only thing you could do to soothe yourself, other than masturbation and Kenn refused to do that here.

The men in the lounge across from his flat all greeted him with welcoming smiles.

“They finally let him out.”

“He’s military. See the tattoos?”

“That’s good. It means he’s like the rest of us.”

Kenn scanned for exits and only found one at the end of the hall where red arrows were flashing the path he was supposed to take.

Kenn nodded to the other captives and then followed the arrows down the hallway. He was looking forward to talking to the other inhabitants here, but finding a way out was more important.

The elevator slid open.

Kenn stepped back, not willing to trust his captors. If he didn’t know where he was going, he didn’t want to go.

The men behind him saw his reaction and nodded or laughed.

“He has his wits about him.”

“Ay. I told you, he’s one of us.”

One of the older men got Kenn’s attention. “They’re just calling you in for a session, mate. No pain.”

Kenn hoped that was true as he stepped into the elevator.

The door slid shut behind him.

Kenn studied the elevator in a quick glance and found a camera. He was under surveillance.

He also smelled bleach. The only time that was necessary in a place like this was when blood was spilled. Kenn assumed one of his teammates had caused that; it pleased him.

The elevator opened. Kenn saw an empty room with smudged white walls, a tiled blue floor, and a recliner in the center. It looked like the most comfortable recliner Kenn had ever seen in his life. He knew that was a reaction to constant discomfort, but it didn’t matter. He was eager to sink down in that chair and let it soothe away some of his aches and pains.

The elevator closed. The red light over it activated.

Kenn didn’t care. He strode straight to the chair and made himself at home in it.

Kenn recognized the features of the woman studying him, but that didn’t trigger his hatred. A lot of people had blonde hair and blue eyes. He didn’t instantly dislike them because they reminded him of

Adrian. He wasn't that petty. *I also don't hate him for the choices he made. I'm certain that helps.*

Kenn sensed Reicher was observing him, too, but the man didn't feel intimidating like he had before. The stories of Reicher's illness were still spreading through the staff, but Marc had told them before they were relocated.

Kenn waved at the window. "Anytime you're ready."

Thalia chuckled. Not all of their divers were so bold. She activated the speaker. "Welcome to the Knowledge wing, Subject Ten."

Kenn was intrigued by the title. He flipped the bar on the side of the recliner and propped up his feet. "What happens in the Knowledge wing?"

"You dive for it, and we record it."

"I don't know how to scroll dive." He'd heard about it, though. It was something he had put on his to-do list but had never done.

"In the rear of the cell that holds your power, you'll find a door in the floor. You dive through it while holding your breath as long as you can. If you find a scroll, you grab it."

Kenn fought the urge to scratch his hand. He couldn't reach the itch under the cast. "Does it matter which scroll?"

"The other sessions will give specific targets. For this one, grab whatever you can and don't run out of air."

Kenn didn't need to ask what would happen if he ran out of air.

Kenn's demon waited impatiently for a chance to escape his cell. He'd been drugged continuously since being here. This was the first time they had shared mental space in weeks.

Kenn knew he had his gifts back, but he didn't have a target yet. The woman in the window wasn't reachable and there was no one else in here with him. He thought about the captives he'd passed as he came out of his room, but quickly put that out of his mind. It wouldn't hurt the boss to lose a few of his lab rats.

"You may begin now."

Kenn quickly found the trap door, but it refused to open for him. Kenn pulled and kicked it and even tried using mental energy, but nothing worked.

In the security room, Thalia guided him to the next level. "Maybe all you'll ever be is a Grunt. I think we've assigned you to the wrong wing."

Determined fury gave Kenn the strength to pry the hatch up with his bare hands.

Thalia didn't give him any praise. That wasn't how to make a military man respond. They always felt like they had to earn it.

Kenn dove through the hole.

Thick pressure waves took away his breath and immediately forced him back up. He'd only been down for a few seconds. Kenn sucked in air mentally, confused about how this worked.

Kenn's demon stayed close. *You have to be ready for it. Gather your energy and then hold your breath. We'll go together.*

The speaker activated again, but the woman's directions meant little to Kenn as he tried to figure out how to conquer this newest challenge.

He and the demon went in together this time. Darkness surrounded them; the pressure was smothering. Kenn's lungs began to protest right away. He was forced up from the murky darkness again after only a few seconds. He hung on the side of the hole and tried to slow his racing heart.

Thalia didn't give him a chance to recover. "One more time and then we're going to send you back to your flat to wait for a transfer."

Kenn glared at the woman with bright red orbs. "I suppose you can do better?"

"I can hold my breath and dive for an hour."

Kenn didn't hear any bragging in her voice. It pissed him off. He dove through the door alone.

In the security room, Thalia and Reicher watched his face turn red from lack of air, but it didn't turn blue. They waited patiently to see what he might bring up.

Kenn couldn't view anything through the murky darkness. He ignored his aching lungs the way he had during training sessions in the Marines. He reached out with his hands, thinking maybe the scrolls were the same color as the darkness. He immediately felt a brittle parchment at his fingertips.

Kenn knew not to be rough with the scroll. He pushed in deeper and gently surrounded it with his big hand.

Then he ran out of air.

Kenn began to suffocate. He held onto the scroll and tried to force his body backward, but it was impossible. He was already exhausted.

Kenn's demon grabbed his ankle and tugged. Kenn had gotten stuck in a dark spot.

Kenn felt the pressure ease. He was able to swim up to the trap door, but he wasn't sure he would be able to draw in a full breath of air when he got there. His lungs felt like they were going to collapse.

The demon shoved Kenn through the hole and then followed him. He shut the hatch and then sat on it to keep Kenn from going right back down.

Kenn drew in a tiny thread of air and then let it out. He repeated that a few times before taking a deeper breath, allowing his lungs to re-acclimate even though it was only mental. He was still confused about how it worked, but he understood enough to know it had to be handled as if it was reality.

Kenn felt something in his hand. He looked down at the scroll. "I brought it with me!"

Thalia activated the speaker. "As soon as you open it, it's going to vanish. You have to read it as quickly as you can and memorize every word."

Kenn gently pried it open.

Thalia and Reicher studied the camera that had been zoomed in to capture the words in case Kenn didn't remember them.

Kenn read the scroll and then flinched as it caught fire in his hand. It was gone a second later, leaving only a trace of smoke in the air.

Thalia already knew, but she had to test his memory and his honesty. “What did it say?”

“Love is also verb; it requires action to be true.”

Thalia recorded it in the computer. “Do you think you can go again?”

Kenn wanted to say yes, but he had no energy left. He’d only been in this room for ten minutes, but it felt like ten hours. “I should probably take a short break.”

“Return to your flat and rest.”

Kenn stood up and fell down. His body was too weak to hold him up.

Thalia reluctantly hit the button to call in assistance. Kenn probably wasn’t dangerous in his current state, but she hadn’t forgotten the damage his other teammates had caused.

Kenn tried to stand up again. He held onto the chair this time and managed to get to his feet.

A staff member came from the elevator. “Let me help?”

Kenn nodded gratefully. “Thank you.”

In the security room, Reicher knew something was wrong and didn’t tell Thalia. This was also a training session for her. She was about to learn one of the bigger rules when it came to military men—they were excellent actors.

The elevator shut.

Kenn grabbed the staff member around the neck and quickly jerked. An awful crunch echoed through the elevator.

He let go of the body with a smile. “That felt good!”

Kenn hit the button to go down. “I’m not ready to return to my flat yet. I hope you don’t mind.”

2

“Why did you let him do that?!” Thalia was furious. “You knew!”

Reicher sighed. “Military men are notoriously efficient, genial, and dangerous. You learned a valuable lesson.”

Thalia jerked a hand toward the monitor. It was still focused on the body. “It came at the cost of one of our people!”

Reicher nodded tiredly at her outrage. “One less mouth to feed.”

Thalia didn’t like how heartless he was even though it was true. “I’ll send out an alert and try to get a search team together.”

“There’s no need. He’ll show up here in a few minutes.”

Thalia made a face. “The only way he can get here by using that lift is if he takes it to the wing below us and then uses the hidden lift on that floor.”

“He knows, I’m sure, otherwise he wouldn’t have gone AWOL.” Reicher was positive Kenn had figured out how the elevator system here worked.

He didn't know how that was possible, but he would figure it out.

A silent alarm calling for help at the security room flashed through most of the wings in the complex.

Only a few people responded. The staff was tired of being called in to die at the hands of the new subjects. They wanted Reicher to finish taming those men first.

3

Kenn marched confidently through the hallway of the empty wing. He glanced into the flats to get an idea of what came next, but he didn't linger. Silent alarms were flashing on the consoles that were active down here. He wouldn't have much time to reach his target.

Kenn didn't expect this attempt to be successful, but there was a small part of him that hoped it would be. The sooner he killed Reicher, the sooner they would all be able to get out of here.

The empty wing had carpeting on the floor and paintings on the walls. It was too dim for Kenn to tell what the paintings were of. He passed a long lounge with plush chairs and stacks of amusements. It was a well-stocked wing even with the empty shelves and no one was living here. It was clear that was about to change.

Kenn turned down the hallway and stopped near a glass window. He began feeling around the edges of it, hunting for an activation switch.

He felt a small metal button and pushed it. A door immediately slid open right behind him.

Kenn stepped into that elevator with a grin. He pushed the basement button.

He found it clever that the security room could only be reached this way. Kenn had pulled details about it from the troops who had escorted him off the warehouse floor. They'd thought he was too drugged to remember the conversation. The guards had been nervous about moving into the new wing and worried that they wouldn't remember how to reach the security room each day to deliver their reports.

Kenn had finally figured out how this complex was shaped. It baffled his mind how an octagon center could be surrounded by other octagons and then anchored on the side by long elevator shafts dug into the ocean floor.

Kenn had figured out they were under water right after the time quake, but he hadn't been able to figure out how things were set up. To make it even more complicated, the security room for each level was in the direct center and sat down into the floor by ten feet to allow for viewing of the level below it. That made sense to Kenn when he reflected on the warehouse setup.

The elevator stopped suddenly. The light inside flashed to red. They knew where he was.

Kenn smashed the elevator control panel repeatedly with his fist, cracking the plastic so he could get to the wires. *I'm not trapped anywhere. I'm a Marine and an Eagle. That's a lethal combination.*

Twenty seconds later, the elevator opened, letting Kenn out onto the basement floor of this level. He followed the octagon hallway quickly toward the center, keeping an ear out for security. *I'm on my way, Marc. I might be about to bust us all out of here.*

4

In the security room, Thalia tensed. "He's here." She could feel Kenn's delight that he'd made it so far.

Reicher wasn't worried. "Schedule that lift for repairs."

Tap-tap!

Both of them looked over.

Kenn's gloating face appeared in the window. He pointed at Reicher and imitated pulling the trigger of a gun.

Reicher didn't give him a response.

Thalia blanched.

Kenn hadn't counted on Reicher being behind a door that he couldn't get through without explosives. He concentrated, hoping his gifts would work through it.

Thalia jumped up and stood over Reicher with her shield up.

The pen from the desk flew into her shield and stuck there.

Kenn scowled; he considered hitting her with something larger, but troops were arriving to take him away. He tried once more.

Thalia held her shield tightly around her father and herself as the oxygen tank lifted. It smashed into her shield.

Thalia didn't let it fall. She slid it gently to the floor. Her father needed that.

Kenn heard the guards coming up behind him and decided to take his fury out on them instead. He spun around.

The sight of four small children stopped Kenn in his tracks. "No."

All four kids fired on him at the same time.

Kenn barely managed to get a shield up. He wasn't able to fire back, though. His conscience wouldn't let him.

The kids kept firing spells, forcing him to maintain his shield. Kenn didn't think to absorb the spells for more energy. He ran through all of it in a matter of minutes just defending himself.

Thalia waited until he dropped to his knees and his shield vanished before she called off the kids. She activated the speaker. "Return to your flat, Subject Ten! You have four minutes to get there."

Kenn began crawling across the floor toward the elevator that had brought him here.

“Punishment?”

Reicher shook his head. “Nee, but let him recharge on his own. The pain of being like that will teach him better than any torture could; believe me, I know.”

Still outside the door, Kenn caught every word. “You went through this! How can you do it to others?!”

“Because I believe in the research we’re doing here. So much so, that I’ll do anything to make progress...even bomb a tropical island.”

Kenn thought of the nuclear submarine. He was suddenly terrified for Tonya and his kids. He dragged himself into the elevator. *God, I hope he’s bluffing.*

5

Kenn staggered through the hallway of the Knowledge wing three minutes later. Reicher’s threat was still echoing in his mind.

The other captives watched him approach. They were all scroll divers.

Kenn used his mind to show them Reicher’s threat. It was immediately confirmed.

“It’s true. The boss here controls nuclear sites all over the world.”

“He can wipe us all out at the push of a button.”

Kenn leaned against the wall, fighting the pain from his withered body. “But you don’t stay for that

reason.” Kenn sensed these men had enough power together to bring this place down.

“No, we want those answers.”

“Knowledge is our lives.”

“It’s why we exist.”

Kenn assumed they were following orders and getting results. He bonded with them like he had soldiers in the past even though he didn’t want to, and he still viewed them as the enemy.

One of the men slowly approached him and held his hand out. “I’d like to help.”

Kenn reluctantly let the man touch his arm and feed him energy.

There wasn’t any pain. Kenn assumed they were the same level. It occurred to him that everyone in this wing had their gifts.

“We’re not drugged as much as the others.”

“Why? Are you trusted more?” If so, Kenn could use that.

“It takes too long to recharge; the boss wants answers faster than the drugs wear off.”

Kenn rubbed the cold fingers sticking through his cast. He was eager for it to be removed. “What’s his deal?”

No one answered. They weren’t going to give him any secrets about Reicher.

Kenn sighed in relief as the pain faded. He gave the man a nod of approval and gratitude. “What are you allowed to talk about?”

“Anything else that you want.” The man took Kenn’s arm and led him toward the lounge. “You can talk about anything, though.”

“Tell us a story!”

“Yes! We want to hear about Safe Haven, mate.”

“Ay, and the Ghost!”

“Don’t forget the wolf. We’ve heard he’s wild.”

Kenn joined them in the lounge as everyone started talking. He began digging details from their thoughts as he settled among them for what he hoped would be a peaceful evening. *I could get used to this. I won’t...but I could.*

6

“Do you think Reicher would let me keep them when I’m discharged?”

Sasha studied her sister in sympathetic revulsion. “No, Issy. You have to let them go. You’re being discharged in a few days. The babies are doing prima, but you can’t keep them. You know that.”

Isabel pretended her heart wasn’t sending out waves of unwelcome pain. “I do know, it’s just that...I don’t want them to die.”

Sasha didn’t know what to say to her sister. She did know she didn’t want any part of breastfeeding and caring for the infants she gave birth to if this was going to be the result. She didn’t care if it was great for the babies.

Goldie's twins were dying, while Issy's babies were thriving. It was another confirmation that newborns needed their mothers. Reicher had put Goldie with them to see if the father bond would kick in, but it hadn't despite Goldie adoring his children.

Isabel looked better. Sasha reckoned they had found a way to stop the bleeding or maybe it had stopped on its own. Either way, Isabel had gotten a positive checkup and was being sent out of the trauma wing. "I'm sorry, but I can't stay. I need to go hand out other discharge orders."

Isabel continued to burp her happy baby. "I reckon they're letting Joseph out of isolation now?"

Sasha nodded. "It's been hard on him. He hates being out of the security room, but we all had to go through a week of testing. It's over now. He passed."

Isabel didn't really care about Sasha's other life or anything else happening in the complex. Being forced to care for her infants had changed her. "The caretakers are always watching me now. They don't trust me anymore."

Sasha tried to make Isabel feel better. "They'll ease up after you're discharged. Just make sure you don't return here without orders."

Isabel knew that was going to be the hardest part. The separation might break her.

Sasha had assisted with exams, helped during a delivery, and disposed of more diapers than she cared to count, but she hadn't been ordered to have

contact with any of the fussy manure machines. She was grateful. "I'll see you later."

Sasha tugged the cubicle shut and headed for the opposite side of the wing. As she walked through the halls, she was aware of curious stares from some of the caretakers. She didn't know what had caused it. Being normal had disadvantages. If she was like them, she could have read their minds. As it was, she could only guess. She was blaming it on Joseph.

It had come to her attention that the other inhabitants here didn't like Joseph. She hadn't realized that before even though she hadn't liked him either. It was also common knowledge that she and Joseph had been matched for breeding, at her request. That meant she was receiving half of his bad vibes.

Sasha scanned the birthing wing as she left. *They all look healthier than usual.*

Shutting down the upper level to go further under the water had scared most of them. It was good to know their human bodies were thriving.

Sasha slid aside so workers could bring in trolleys of sweet-smelling food that made Sasha's stomach growl. *I wonder who they're having tonight.*

Sasha went to the isolation chamber and tapped on the glass.

Joseph hurried from the chair where he had been consuming Reicher's memoirs. It wasn't required reading for his job, but he was hoping it would help him forge a bond with the stubborn man. Much like

Reicher with Marc, Joseph was trying to get what he needed. “Did I pass?”

Sasha unlocked his door, grinning. “With flying colors. You’ll be in daily breeding sessions as soon as they get the room set up.”

Joseph leered at her. “Does that mean we can start now?”

The air filled with tension, but it wasn’t all sexual. Sasha reluctantly shook her head. “I have to help with the other breeding sessions right now. I’ll come by later.”

Joseph had to be happy with that. “Are you still going to help me pass the session?”

“Of course. You’re already doing a heap better. Maybe we’ll do it with the cuffs only on one hand tonight and give you more control practice.”

Joseph smiled. “Thank you for helping me.”

Sasha blushed happily. “It’s my honor.”

Joseph kept smiling. *And soon, it’ll be your life.*

Chapter Sixteen

I'll Do It Myself

1

“**A**s soon as they open this door, we’re going to kill you.”

Biff refused to look. He didn’t want to see what unbelievable thing had been sent to torment him this time.

“You’re never getting out of this wing alive, normal!”

Being in a better room with clean clothes and good food didn’t matter. He was still being tortured; it just wasn’t physical.

He’d been here for days, waiting for something else to happen. He had a feeling it wouldn’t be much longer now, but he wasn’t eager for it. His cellmates were crazy. They never stopped harassing him. When one went to sleep, another took his place. Biff was surprised that staff members delivering food and supplies weren’t being attacked. The men on this level were dangerous.

Biff was grateful for the locked door on his flat. The yellow of the walls matched the fear in his mind as the other captives continued to torment him. He’d developed a small defense by ignoring them

physically, but it was almost impossible mentally. The things they kept shoving at him were awful.

It's also not possible. Biff tried to talk himself through it. "It has to be drugs or maybe I'm living out a nightmare. None of these creatures really exist. This isn't happening. It's in my mind and I'm going crazy."

"Come on out, little normal. We want to play with you, mate!"

Biff shivered. He told himself not to look and found his head rotating toward the door anyway.

Long fangs dripping saliva snapped at him through the window.

Biff quickly turned away. *That's not possible!*

He tried to self-soothe again. *They put me here to drive me crazy. None of this is happening.*

Noise grew louder outside. Shouts and then screams echoed, making Biff clench his eyes shut. *I don't want to know. I don't want to know.*

The lock clicked.

Biff's head snapped toward the door in fear.

"Follow the staff members to the session room, Subject Eight."

The voice coming through the speaker barely registered as Biff waited for the captives outside to come in after him. He could hear shouts and steps getting closer.

The door opened; two staff members wielding electric batons entered.

"Get up."

Biff made himself obey. He hoped the two musclebound guards would be enough to protect him from the captives who were leering over their shoulders and shoving demented fantasies into his brain to induce more fear.

The guards stayed on either side of Biff. Pushes from the buttons on the batons sent electricity out in small spurts that drove back the 20 gloating, leering, raucous residents in this wing. As they walked, the guards discussed it.

“Why do you think they put a normal on this floor with the crazy people?”

The guard on Biff’s right shrugged. He jabbed out at one of the lunatics, hitting the man in the stomach. “Maybe he’s not a normal.”

Biff considered that as they entered the elevator.

The door shut, allowing everyone to take a breath of relief.

It only lasted a few seconds for Biff as the elevator dropped one level and then stopped. He tensed again as the door opened.

The guards pulled him out of the elevator and took him down a short hallway that ended in a narrow room with a glass window at the top of one wall and a desk with a chair in the far corner.

The guards led Biff toward that chair and then stayed on either side of him as he sat down.

Biff waited tensely as the elevator opened again and six more guards entered. He began to brace for

another torture session that would probably end with broken bones, if he was lucky.

Thalia activated the speaker. “Welcome to the Reality wing.”

Biff saw the woman in the window who was speaking to him. He wasn’t sure what to say to her.

The guards settled around the room.

“For your first session, defend yourself—with your mind. You’re not allowed to get out of the chair.”

Biff frowned, confused. “I’m not a descendant. I don’t have any gifts to use.”

“Even a normal can make a defender appear. All you have to do is think it and it will happen, if you try hard enough.”

“So I should think of a gun and it’ll magically appear in my hands?”

“A more practical choice might be a sentient being.”

Biff immediately thought of a stone warrior that had no obvious weaknesses.

Thalia saw it in his mind. Approval laced her voice. “Bring it to life, and make it protect you.”

Biff had no idea how to do that. He stared at the window with a small smirk on his lips. “You’re kidding, right?”

Thalia signaled the guards.

All the guards came toward him at the same time. The two who were already close began to throw punches.

Biff scrambled out of the chair and hid under the desk.

Electricity flew up from the floor and shocked him brutally.

Thalia waved off the guards and activated the speaker. “You’re not allowed to leave the chair, Subject Eight!”

Biff crawled back into the seat. It was impossible not to get angry. “I don’t know how to do this!”

“None of us do until we do it. Concentrate!”

Biff had often wondered what it would be like to be a descendant. He had also wondered if he would be able to pick what entity he would host. The stone warrior had always been a favorite combatant in movies and literature for him. It was easy to imagine having control of such a creature; it was incredibly hard to figure out how to make that a reality.

Thalia signaled the guards.

The troops approached him again.

Biff imagined the stone warrior swinging out and crushing heads together, swiping an arm out and bashing in brains. Grabbing men by the throat and crushing the life from them... Awful screams filled the air.

Biff’s lids flew open. A huge gray and brown stone warrior stood in front of the desk. While he watched, it brought a stone hand down and crushed the man about to swing on Biff.

Blood and gore splattered the walls.

All of the guards were as shocked as Biff was. Only one of them tried to fight back, but his punch only earned him broken knuckles before he was crushed against the wall.

The other troops screamed and ran.

Thalia had already locked the lift. There was no escape.

Delighted even though he assumed this was proof of his insanity, Biff pointed. "Kill them all."

Thalia and Reicher observed through the window as Biff killed everyone in the room. It was remarkable that he had done it so fast and on his first attempt. It was yet more proof that the Safe Haven people were different than the other captives in this complex.

Biff turned away as blood sprayed across his face. A tiny fleck landed on his lip. He licked it unconsciously.

Reality began to sink back in. *That's blood.*

Biff put his head down on the desk. *None of this is happening. None of this is real.*

Biff took a few deep breaths and then lifted his head. He opened his eyes.

Blood and gore were spread across the walls and floor in puddles, splashes, and sprays. Bodies lay in heaps everywhere he looked. There was no stone warrior.

Biff saw blood coating his hands. Terrible soreness sank into his arms. *It must have been me. I did this.*

He started laughing uncontrollably.

In the security room, Thalia prepared to gas him. It wasn't good to let a subject dwell on levels of insanity at this point in the conversion process. It often ended with them taking their lives.

Biff heard the gas coming through the vent and lifted his head toward it. *Yes, take me away from this place.*

Biff kept inhaling, but the gas didn't knock him out. The low concentration was only meant to get subjects under control.

In the corner, a gray and brown stone warrior appeared. It stood watch over Biff as the gas began to take effect.

2

“He’s flipping too hard, too fast.”

Reicher agreed with Thalia’s observation. “He needs someone to talk to. Send in Cerise as soon as she’s finished with her checkup.”

Cerise was getting a daily test for pregnancy. It was taking all of Reicher’s strength to complete those breeding sessions. He needed it to be over now.

The cold security room still wasn’t helping Reicher’s illness. He had hoped to slow it with low temperatures, but that was only weakening him faster, but he didn’t have another option at the moment. If he left the safety of this security room, any number of staff members might try to kill him and take over the complex. Most of the male troops

were hoping for that opportunity. Reicher could feel the female staff ignoring that danger in favor of having confidence in their leader. It made him proud. It also made him angry that he wasn't going to be able to protect them when things went crazy. He was only okay with violence when it was his idea.

Thalia entered the order into the computer while keeping an eye on the weather radar. "That's a big storm coming our way."

Reicher was also monitoring the tropical system brewing in the salty Indian Ocean. When they lingered, they drew warmth from the water and grew stronger. *Unlike myself.*

Reicher's illness wasn't giving him any time to breathe. He felt like one of the captives. It was fitting, pleasing him. "Update me."

The reports had just come in from each wing and level. Thalia pulled it up on the screen. "Food is down to 15% of prewar levels. I've estimated it will hold us for another year based on our current population." Thalia didn't say that would be extended if he kept killing off their staff. Reicher already knew. She now assumed that was part of his plan. "The hounds have demolished the top level. Half of them are dead."

"Good. They'll be hungry protectors for any intruders."

"Are we expecting a visit?"

"Not for a couple of weeks."

"The hounds might not last that long."

“I’m sure we’ll be able to scrape up a body or two to keep them active.”

Thalia didn’t protest. “The other levels are calm, except for Biff’s wing. They’ve been allowed to have their gifts again for too long this time. He’s in danger.”

“He *was*. Now he has a defender.”

“You think he’ll be able to use it against them?”

Reicher coughed wearily and didn’t answer.

Thalia finished her update. “A group of prisoners have been brought up for the next session. We gathered all the information they have.”

Reicher was glad to be disposing of them. “The resistance isn’t as strong as we were led to believe. The members we’ve captured barely put up a fight.”

Thalia didn’t remind him most of those unfortunate women had been normal. “At least Joseph won’t be able to watch that torture show anymore.”

Reicher nodded. Joseph’s obsession with sex and death was troubling. “When he returns, he will be watched. Upon his first step out of line, *you* will remove him.”

Thalia was thrilled with the order. *Once Joseph is gone, father really might let me inherit.* Thalia hadn’t understood how addictive this job was. *I want it now, almost more than anything else.*

She glanced over her shoulder at Reicher. *The only thing I want more is for my father to live and rule beside me.*

Reicher basked in that feeling; then he locked it away and resumed going over his plans for the rest of Marc's team. "Activate the monitor in Subject Eight's flat. I want to see everything he does."

3

Biff looked over as the exit unlocked. He'd been sitting on his bed for hours now, dreaming about what had happened while listening to the rumbling of the captives outside. They were very upset that he'd been successful.

Biff still wasn't sure exactly what had happened in that session room.

Steps approached the door.

Biff prepared to conjure his protector.

Cerise stepped inside. She closed the door to block out some of the ugly comments coming from the other captives who were watching. They were all upset that a normal had managed to do their jobs. They were worried that they were about to be replaced. *And you probably should be. Reicher isn't happy with you at all.*

Cerise sat in the chair next to his bed. She had been surprised to get the order to come and talk to Biff, considering how their last interaction had gone. Seeing him cowering on the mattress with his knees up to his chest and body trembling had convinced her that moment was a fluke. Biff was too broken to be a threat. "Are you okay?"

“What do you want?” Biff didn’t feel bad that he’d attacked her, but he also didn’t view Cerise as the enemy anymore. *We came here willingly. This is all on us.*

“The boss said you need someone to talk to.”

Biff snorted in contempt. “I’d rather talk to the animals out there than you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Cerise tried to get comfortable in the chair. Her body was sore, more than usual considering her lack of physical work in the complex. Beyond her awkward breeding sessions with Reicher, her most physical activity was walking from lift to lift. “I’ve been where you are. It helps to have someone to talk to.”

Biff felt reality trying to creep back in on him. With it, came the certainty that he wasn’t mentally stable anymore. “Pick a different topic.”

Cerise didn’t want to talk about it at all, but she had to follow orders. She’d been sent in to calm subjects on the edge of flipping many times; it just didn’t always work. She had no extra sympathy anymore for anyone. “It really did happen. You’re not going crazy.”

Deep down, Biff knew that was the truth and everything he was telling himself was the lie. A wide rift opened in his mind. “You should leave now.”

Cerise rubbed her chilly arms. “Why don’t you start with telling me what happened and we’ll go from there?”

“No.”

“The boss is happy with your success. He wants you to do it again, but you have to remember not to get lost in your mind. Don’t pull up something you can’t control.”

Just talking about it made it too real for Biff to handle. Without warning, he rolled over on the bed and lunged toward her with his hands out.

Taken off guard by him once again, Cerise fell against the chair and hit the floor with his big body on top of her and his hands sliding around her neck.

Biff squeezed as hard as he could.

Biff’s strength wasn’t a surprise this time. She accounted for it and used the correct force in response. Her fast punch to the throat and then his nose interfered with his ability to breathe. She brought her knee up in a quick jerk and then shoved her arms up to break his hold on her throat.

It didn’t work. He tightened his grip, grinning happily.

Cerise sent out an electric shock that swarmed her skin and hit him in every place where they were still making contact.

Biff grabbed her knife as he rolled off her; he shoved it under the bed.

Cerise scrambled away from him and headed for the exit. She didn’t care if she got in trouble. She left without permission, yanking the door shut behind her.

The other captives in the hall had begun shouting and hooting, rooting for Biff to kill her.

They retreated now, but their contempt followed Cerise down the hallway as she fled Biff's wrath.

Biff stayed on the floor. His head turned toward the cot.

Cerise's knife gleamed at him in welcome.

4

"Follow the arrows to the session room, Subject Eight."

Biff stepped out of his flat without fear this time. The stone warrior walked in front of him, daring the other captives to get too close.

The furious captives observed with intense hatred, but they couldn't defeat what he had chosen. All of their illusions were small or had weaknesses that were easily defeated. None of them could conjure something so menacing despite being more experienced than Biff.

Biff took the elevator down to the session room. He entered and went straight to the desk without being told. He stationed the warrior directly in front of the desk and then looked at the window with a lifted brow. "Are you ready?"

Thalia didn't like his confidence. She activated the session with an angry click of the button.

The elevator opened again, revealing abused people who had recently been prisoners. Their raggedy clothes and starving bodies told Biff they weren't doing this willingly. He refused to have mercy on them. *It's their life or mine.*

“Kill the man at the desk and earn your freedom.”

All of the prisoners scanned the stone warrior in front of the desk. Six feet tall and three feet wide, the warrior would barely fit into the elevator. It was an impressive defender.

When it didn't react, they advanced.

Biff sent the rocky fighter out to protect him.

All of the people turned their backs on it and shut their eyes.

Biff was furious when the stone warrior stopped attacking. “Kill them!”

He became concerned when the warrior started to fade. He quickly understood what he had missed before. “My belief brings it into existence. *Their* belief forces it to be a reality.”

Thalia activated the speaker. “Make it kill them.”

“I'll do better.” Biff stood and pulled Cerise's knife from inside his shirt where he'd hidden it upon waking. “I'll do it myself.”

“Get back in that chair!”

Alarms began to flash.

Thalia began shouting at the people to attack him.

The stone warrior's glowing black orbs focused on the prisoners, keeping them in place.

Biff slid through the room with the knife, stabbing and cutting to his heart's delight. “If I had known this is what I was going to spend the day doing, I would have been more cooperative!”

Thalia locked the elevator and activated the force field that she hadn't thought necessary until now with Biff. "Where did he get a knife?!"

Reicher had already figured that out. "Make sure the flats are searched every day."

Thalia flushed at the accusing tone. She was making a lot of mistakes in this job. It was humiliating.

Reicher almost offered her comfort and then remembered he didn't want a bond with her. He settled for a distraction. "Unlock the elevator and send him to his room."

Thalia moved her hand away from the button that would gas Biff in full this time. "In his condition, he'll start a riot."

"I know."

Thalia unlocked the lift while trying to figure out why Reicher would give that order.

Reicher didn't use his energy to explain it. He tapped the computer screen and brought up his personal journal. "You need to read that."

Thalia began scrolling through the pages. No one else in the complex had been allowed to access it. His memoirs had been made public a few years ago, but his journal was off-limits. She was quickly sucked into the first entry that told of how Reicher had been chosen for this position.

Reicher watched the monitor as Biff went toward the elevator. Biff had turned out to be just as special as he'd thought while watching the man on

the warehouse floor. He was convinced that Biff was Invisible. *Maybe this will flip his lock.*

Biff vanished into the elevator.

Reicher settled back in his chair as alarms continued to flash across the screens. He had handled Marc's team differently than the other captives that had come through this complex. It had been easy to tell from the beginning that the only way to get Marc to agree would be to convert his team. Once Marc saw his men were now fighting for the reset, he would be forced to face his worst nightmare—choosing between honor and duty.

After he made that final choice, he could be given the job he didn't want and he would be better at it than Reicher had ever been. *He's going to be completely without a conscience by the time I'm done with him. I can't wait to see how strong he is when Safe Haven finally shows up to collect their missing team.*

Reicher watched the monitor as Biff reached the lounge of his wing. There was already a bloody path of bodies and body parts between him and the elevator. Reicher increased the volume so he could hear what Biff was saying.

"Where did everybody go? I'm ready to play with you now."

Reicher laughed until a coughing fit forced him to fight for air.

Thalia kept reading, sucked into her father's true feelings. The bond she was searching for was

in these pages. *I just have to be smart enough to spot it.*

Chapter Seventeen

It's Real

Mission Day 33

1

“You have to try harder!”

Greg was extremely tired of hearing that from the woman in the window. He'd had multiple sessions in this room now, with little success. Being rushed didn't work. It also didn't change. Nothing did. Even the session room was always the same. There was only this desk and chair, and people waiting to die.

“Hit her again.”

Greg winced at the awful scream from the prisoner handcuffed to the wall, but he couldn't reach her. He was also handcuffed and lightly drugged so his demon couldn't be used. There was nothing he could do but listen to her screams. Greg wondered briefly what her crime had been, but he didn't ask. He didn't want to develop more sympathy for people who were marked for death.

Electricity flew out of the floor again, hitting Greg this time.

Greg controlled his bladder but not his rage. His orb lit up bright red as he glared through the window. “I'm going to enjoy killing you.”

Thalia wasn't intimidated by the threat. All of the subjects hated her. That was part of her job. "You're not trying hard enough. If you don't succeed today, we may move you back to the warehouse."

Greg had also heard that threat too many times for it to be effective. The only thing he cared about was the innocent people being forced to pay for his lack of skills.

"Hit her again."

Fresh screams filled the session room.

The other prisoners handcuffed around the room waited in fear for their turn. They begged Greg to keep trying so they weren't hurt. All of them had been captured during a sweep of the beach, months ago. They were suspected of being resistance members but no proof of that had been discovered despite weeks of torture. All of the captives knew they were expendable. This wasn't the first session they'd been taken to.

Greg couldn't handle the screaming anymore. He dug in mentally. *I have to find the way through!*

Greg's demon glanced up sleepily from its mental cell. *Maybe I can help.*

Greg had refused that offer until now because he didn't really want to make progress, but the prisoners they'd brought in this time were females. Their pain was his pain. *What can you do?*

The demon yawned and pushed itself into a sitting position. He stared at Greg unhappily. *You can send me back to where I was born.*

What happens if I do that?

You can be normal again.

Even in the midst of captivity and torture, Greg wasn't willing to do that. *There has to be another way.*

The demon yawned again and waited for Greg to make the choice.

Greg was aware of the captive still screaming. His tormentors weren't going to stop until he made progress.

Greg rubbed his thick, itchy beard while he studied his demon. *If I send you back, do I have to give you away?*

The demon shrugged. *I don't know. I'm a rookie in this too.*

Greg didn't want to take that chance, but he had to get the screaming to stop. It was ringing through his ears and widening the cracks in his mind. *How does it work?*

The demon held out a hand. *You tell me where to go and I do it.*

Greg clasped the cold, scaly hand in comfort. *Let's just try to visit.*

The demon was relieved. He had enjoyed his time with Greg; he didn't want to go back to being closed behind a door with no contact and no host.

Greg bonded with his demon even harder. The entity Angela had given him was completely loyal. Greg wanted to keep it forever. "Take me to where you were born."

Greg fell into a light doze; his head dropped to his chin and his body relaxed.

The screaming stopped.

Thalia motioned for quiet among the other whimpering captives as they watched Greg dig deeper than he had before. While she waited, Thalia took shallow breaths. The security room smelled like a bright bleach breeze today. Thalia hated it. The smothering odor was an ugly reminder that her father wasn't going to make it much longer.

Greg opened his eyes to find himself in the same foreign landscape that he had visited with Angela and Shawn. He celebrated silently as he stepped forward in the deep fog.

Dreams swam around the edges of his vision as he walked toward a far, dark cliff. Dampness sank into his clothes and skin, and then his hair.

Greg tugged up the pants that were too big for him. He had lost a lot of weight. He was slowly gaining it back in muscle thanks to the heavy starch foods served in this complex and his rigid workout routine, but he was still lighter than he had been when this mission started.

Greg remembered Angela's warning about being vulnerable on the ground, but he needed an outlet, and this was a perfect opportunity to buy time for the drugs to finish wearing off. He began kicking through the murky fog, trying to draw a threat.

Greg's sleepy demon followed him around and hoped they would be able to handle whatever Greg unearthed.

Greg felt danger coming. He took up an Eagle stance, relishing the feel of being free even if it was only in his mind. *No one can control me in here. In here, I'm the boss.*

A long tentacle came out of the fog. It wrapped around Greg's leg in a quick lunge and pulled him down.

Greg and his demon fought viciously, stabbing with mental weapons and hacking off body parts. Their shouts and the roars of their target filled the odd landscape.

Greg could feel the impatience waiting for him back in reality. As he finished killing whatever it was that had come through the fog, he was filled with determination not to give it to them. *It doesn't matter if I succeed or not. They're going to kill those prisoners anyway.*

Greg's demon agreed. *It might be more merciful to remove them so they can't be hurt. An order like that would not be against your moral code...*

Greg immediately liked and hated that idea. He didn't dwell on it, but it didn't leave his thoughts either.

The fog grew thicker around their legs. An odd wind came down from the mountain where Greg had chosen his gifts. He trekked toward that tall cliff again but not because he was afraid of anything else

coming their way. He was curious now if he could pull another demon through to increase his gifts.

Greg's demon stayed close and kept watch as Greg began to climb the rocky cliff. He didn't know if it was possible, but he was willing to do whatever his host wanted. He was just grateful that he wasn't being sent away.

Greg found himself almost falling asleep as he climbed. He paused halfway up as a vision took over his mind.

“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.

“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.

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."

As the vision ended, Greg let tears fall. "My life in Safe Haven was perfect before I became a descendant. It was also perfect afterward. I didn't need to volunteer for this suicide run to make sure my honor stayed intact. I could have remained in that camp. I'm not a threat."

Greg was relieved. He was also sad that he'd had to figure it out the hard way. "If I ever get back there, that'll be all I need to be happy. Even if Lisa decides she wants someone more ambitious, I still won't be a problem for the boss. I just want my life back."

Greg resumed climbing as the feeling of impatience grew. His controllers weren't going to wait much longer. He could feel Thalia in his mind, exploring this foreign landscape in ways he didn't know how to do yet. He wasn't jealous about her skills or angry at the invasion of his privacy. He just

hoped something grabbed her while she was in here and wouldn't let her back out. She needed to know what it felt like to be a helpless captive. That would be justice as far as he was concerned.

Greg reached the top of the cliff and paused in the exact spot where he had been standing with Angela and Shawn. Everything looked the same, but there were no doors to pick from. He assumed he had to be here with someone who was willing to share their gifts for that to happen.

Greg's demon pointed to a peak in the distance. *There's a door.*

Greg immediately headed that way. He could barely see it. He was surprised his demon had. "Doesn't it bother you that I may call in another entity to share your space?"

The demon snorted happily. *I get lonely in here. I'm looking forward to having company.*

Greg chuckled tolerantly. "That's what I like about you. You're just like me."

It took Greg a long time to reach the other cliff where the door was waiting. He tried hard not to fall. Injuries in this dimension still existed in reality.

The sky above him grew thicker with visions, angrier and uglier. Odd things slithered in the clouds and on the ground below him; breathtaking groans and creepy laughter echoed through the thin air. Greg didn't let himself get distracted by any of it.

His determination gave him the strength to climb the next cliff. He reached the summit with bloody hands and a grin on his face. *I did it!*

Greg's demon was more awake now. He brought up a shield around Greg as they approached the wide brown exit.

Greg was no longer worried about whatever he might find in here. *I make this reality. I can control it.*

Greg's demon wasn't convinced.

Neither was Thalia, who was trying to explore the area while Greg approached the door. She wasn't finding much in the way of landmarks to be able to make a map. It was frustrating that she couldn't control his mind or body for this trek.

In the security room with her and Reicher, Joseph observed through her mind while keeping an eye on several monitors and systems for the complex. Thalia had been left in the main position of assisting Reicher with the subjects. Joseph resented her for taking his place so well.

Joseph had been relegated to making sure they were ready for the massive storm that was brewing in the ocean near them. It wasn't certain yet that the typhoon would hit this complex, but it was still necessary to prepare for it.

Reicher was having a slightly better day. He wasn't drugged and pain wasn't controlling his actions, though the bloody coughs were still annoying him every few minutes.

Now that they were all in the same room together, it was easier for him to view the differences between the two people who now both thought they were going to assume control when he died. Neither of them was good enough. Joseph's anger might flip him into a more competent leader in time, but Thalia was too emotional. Reicher didn't dislike her because of it. Women were supposed to be emotional. He disliked her because she was too easily distracted by the pain of losing him.

Thalia's brows squeezed together. "He's opening it."

She activated the forcefield around the session room, turning it to full-strength to contain anything Greg might bring back with him. Kenn's escape had made the gossip rounds. Biff and Harry had killed everyone in their wings. The staff was now terrified of the new people.

Reicher was delighted in the raw power from the captives.

Everyone observed in tense silence, curious or concerned.

Greg paused with his weakest hand on the knob. A bad feeling was settling over his scarred skin. Chills were breaking out on his neck. "It's not good."

Greg's demon felt the same way, but it was too late to stop now. *I'll protect you.*

Greg opened the door.

A horrible blast of heat rushed out and seared him from head to toe. Greg was knocked onto his ass. He barely noticed as he stared in shock at the nuclear explosion happening in another city, in another dimension, and only in his mind. This was a confusing place he'd come to, but the sight of that mushroom cloud billowing out over a devastated city was clear. "That's our future."

Greg's demon recovered from the heat blast. He brought the shield back up around Greg. *How do you know that's not a vision of the past?*

Greg gestured toward the landscape behind the blast that was rushing out in a circle to encompass hundreds of miles around and above the point of impact. "It's dark, but there are no streetlights, no neon signs, no headlights. This is post-apocalyptic."

Sweat dripped down Greg's face. He realized it was getting hotter. The nuclear blast was nearing the door. *We have to close that!*

He got to his feet as more waves of heat blasted out again, trying to melt him.

Greg was able to jerk the door handle. He quickly let go as it slammed shut. "Ahh!"

Horrible burns popped up on his hand; the knob glowed bright red.

Help!

Greg looked over at his demon.

The demon stretched out a hand as it began to fade. He didn't know what was happening. *Help me!*

Greg jerked awake with a loud moan that frightened everyone in the session room with him. Captives cried out in surprised fear.

Greg took in a deep breath. The ugly pain in his hand drew his attention. Blisters were burning and filling with pus. He held his injured hand toward the viewing window. "It's real."

The captives in the room were relieved. Greg had obviously made progress, so they wouldn't be hurt anymore.

Thalia activated the speaker. "Take one of their lifeforces to recharge yourself and then go back in. I wasn't finished making my map."

Greg didn't react to the desk cuff opening. The thought of recharging at the cost of an innocent life was horrifying.

Thalia tried to stop the protest she could see forming in his mind. "If you don't do what you're told, they will be punished in your place."

Greg stared at her coldly. "You've forgotten something."

Thalia sighed impatiently. "What is it, Subject One?"

Greg clinched his aching hand around the blisters, making several of them pop. Hot pus and pain sprayed his arm. "I have my gifts back now."

He sent his demon toward the tensing prisoners handcuffed around the room. "Removing them is a noble choice."

The smell of piss and fear filled the air as the prisoners tried to escape but there was nowhere to run to.

The demon slaughtered every one of them to recharge itself.

Greg watched in satisfied dismay. A small part of him had been hoping the demon wouldn't obey. The rest of him celebrated. "I'll do this every time you try to use them against me, but I'll never take their lifeforces. I have honor. I'm an Eagle in Safe Haven's army and you can't break me!"

There was nothing Thalia could do to stop the slaughter. She tried anyway. "We're going to remove you!"

Greg laughed. "You can't hurt me anymore. I'm too valuable. I'm one of only two known hybrids who survived at this age and now I've made real progress. You're not going to kill me and I know it!"

The puddles of blood on the floor stared at him in harsh accusation. Greg stood up, jerking his arm free from the open cuff. "In fact, you're going to start treating me a lot better or you're never going to get what you want."

In the security room, Thalia threw her hands up. "I don't know how to handle him."

Joseph did. He pointed at her keypad. "Gas him and take him back to his flat."

"That's it?!"

Joseph didn't need Reicher's confirmation or permission to give her the truth. "We're not just

encouraging progress from these subjects. We're creating an army. When the Safe Haven rescue team arrives, we will have all the defenders we need to capture every one of them. Reicher is filling out our depleted ranks with tried and tested soldiers who can't be defeated."

Thalia hadn't considered that even though she had asked herself repeatedly why her father was handling these subjects differently. Joseph's answer made perfect sense. *Why didn't I think of that?*

Reicher nodded in approval. He didn't like Joseph, but the man continued to prove he understood how things worked. "Gas him and take him back to his flat."

Greg heard the gas pushing through the vents. He knew he was being knocked out, but he didn't care. His words were the truth. "No more torture sessions for me!"

Greg's demon settled into his mental cage as the gas began to take effect. *I look forward to our next adventure together.*

Greg smiled warmly at that entity. "As do I. Sleep well."

Same to you, master.

They both went out together.

Thalia paused in adding orders to the computer. "Did you see the explosion?"

Reicher rolled his eyes at her. Thanks to his connection with Thalia, he'd been able to follow along for all of Greg's trek without expending any energy. He wallowed in the better day, letting

himself enjoy all of his previous duties, including torturing his staff.

Thalia flushed darkly, embarrassed.

Joseph stared at Reicher in revulsion while the man wasn't aware of it. It was surprising how bad off Reicher was now. The once great man was a disheveled mess covered in tiny flecks of blood and desperation. His skin had even begun to swell and turn yellow. Only his bright eyes said it was a good day.

Thalia didn't care about Joseph's observations except that she was still trying to find a way to save her father's life. For the moment, a nuclear bomb was more of a threat than even his cancer. "Gregory believes that's going to happen in the future. It's not a vision of the past."

"He is correct."

That got Joseph's attention too. He turned toward Reicher in concern. "What are we doing about it?"

Reicher smothered another cough and shrugged at both of them. "Some things are meant to happen. It's not our place to stop them."

"You already knew about it!"

Reicher shrugged off Joseph's accusation. "It's in my dreams. Many of the other subjects from Safe Haven have also foreseen it."

"It's not in any of their files." Thalia knew that for sure since she was the one who maintained and updated those records.

“It didn’t need to be. We’re not going to waste our time trying to fight something that can’t be changed.”

Thalia and Joseph were unhappy with that answer, but they assumed the explosion would happen somewhere away from this complex. They both believed Reicher would never endanger the work being done here.

Reicher read that in their minds but didn’t confirm or deny it. He thought about the satellite uploads and then changed the subject. “Are we ready for the storm?”

Joseph nodded.

Thalia shook her head.

Reicher frowned deeply. “Update each other and get on the same page!” He hated it when subordinates couldn’t agree on an answer.

Joseph and Thalia began discussing the storm preparations as the complex swayed around them. The ocean was starting to wind up. It was feeding into the typhoon and creating a monster.

Reicher stared at the unconscious man in the gory room below them. Greg’s one eye had seen more in an hour than either of the subordinates now arguing about leaks and fragile elevator shafts ever had. Reicher suddenly wished Marc’s team had been here all along. *If I’d had them for the last year, the future would be sau different for all of us.*

Chapter Eighteen
Don't Talk To Me

1

“**F**ollow the red arrows to the session room, Subject Seven.”

Harry was tired of the comfortable clothes and the nice environment. He was sick of the wonderful food that they were served twice a day. He was sick of waiting to be called in for the next session where they killed him and forced him to bring himself back. Even worse were the sessions where they forced him to kill someone else and then bring *them* back. He had gotten good at it through repetition, but it didn't make it any easier.

The other captives in his wing didn't feel that way. They enjoyed their free time and spent it mostly enjoying the entertainments and the company of others like themselves. Harry was an anomaly. He didn't fit in here. *I don't fit in anywhere.*

“Go to the session room, Subject Seven!”

Harry glared at the camera in the corner of his comfortable flat. “No.”

Joseph was eager to make a good impression. Now that he'd been cleared for the breeding program and he was in the main security seat again,

he felt like everything was going to be okay. All he had to do was impress his boss and then he was home free.

Reicher took in Joseph's good mood and good health with a bitter scan and then put it out of his mind. It served no purpose to be jealous of someone who was having a better day. Joseph's misery would come, like everyone else's always did. There was no avoiding fate.

Joseph activated the speaker. "If you do not follow orders, someone in your wing will be punished."

It had been easy to discover Harry's weakness. As a doctor, he was sworn to help injured people. Using the other captives in his wing against him had become standard procedure with the Safe Haven medic.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest like Marc would have done. His bruises were fading. He was almost healed physically from his time on the warehouse floor. Mentally, he would never be the same and he knew it. "I'm not going to be your target or your bullet anymore. I'm done playing these games. If you push me, you won't like the results."

Joseph glanced over his shoulder at Reicher. It was only the two of them in here today. Thalia was on a break.

Reicher gestured dismissively. Harry couldn't change the outcome of his conversion; he could only speed it up.

Joseph handled it the normal way. He sent orders into the console for a random member of Harry's wing to be punished for his disobedience. Joseph assumed Reicher had planned on Harry reacting this way. He understood most of what Reicher was doing now, but not all of it. Joseph didn't feel comfortable asking questions, however. He needed Reicher to think he was intelligent enough to figure it out on his own.

Reicher had sent Thalia out when he couldn't take it anymore. Her eagerness to care for him was a constant distraction and an unwelcome reminder that he wasn't immune to the bonds between family either. The more time he spent around her, the more he began to care about her and what would happen to her after he died. Reicher didn't want those bonds, but it was impossible to fight when they spent so much time closed in this room together.

Having Joseph in here alone with him was a risk, but it was one Reicher had to take. *I have to put some distance between myself and my daughter or I'll end up changing my plans and that can't be allowed.*

Harry stayed on his bed and waited patiently for the screaming to begin. The first shout rolled over his nerves and sank into his brain. He didn't fight it this time. The crack in his mind fractured into a dozen different directions.

Harry smiled in relief as the stress of maintaining his cool control fell away. "Okay!"

The lock clicked.

“You have three minutes to reach the session room!” Joseph was a little disappointed that Harry hadn’t fought harder. He still enjoyed the sound of screaming even if it wasn’t a reality clip while he was in the shower.

Harry glanced at the camera. “Thank you.” He went through the door while gathering energy.

In the security room, Reicher felt things about to go wrong. He hated it, but he didn’t warn Joseph. It was already too late to stop it.

2

Harry strode out of his flat. He marched toward the other captives in the lounge. “I told you not to push me.”

The perfectly neat wing mocked him. Harry had an overwhelming desire to paint it in blood.

The other captives looked up in welcome, assuming he was allowed to join them for bonding time. They all liked Harry. It didn’t matter to them that some of their members had been sacrificed for him to make exponential leaps in his gifts. The progress Harry had made was encouraging all of them to try harder and to make their own leaps. He was their new role model.

Harry knew; he hated them for it. He held out a hand to the closest man. When the man reached out

to shake with him, Harry jerked him forward and inhaled deeply.

Alarms started blaring.

Guards ran toward the wing.

The other resident medics didn't know what was happening. They stared stupidly in surprise. They'd been here for years without violence. They didn't recognize it at first.

Harry dropped the withered body. Then he stepped forward, picking another target.

The confusion changed into awareness; survival instincts kicked in.

“Run!”

“Get away from him!”

“Call for help!”

The other medics fled without trying to use magic against Harry. He'd gone through too many evolutions for their gifts to affect him. Hiding was their only hope.

Harry felt the lifeforce strengthen his power and add to them as he went through the lounge, killing everyone he found.

The captives fled down the halls and into their rooms. They began barricading doors and crawling under beds in hopes that he would miss them.

“You can't use them against me anymore!” Harry screamed at the camera, fist balled in defiance. “I warned you!”

When there was no surrender or attempt to negotiate, Harry grabbed the next fleeing man and used his healing demon in the opposite way of what

it was intended for. He ripped the man's body open with his mental scalpel and let the insides fall out.

Harry's demon was appalled. *We have to get you out of here!*

Harry glared at his demon. "Less preaching; more judging!"

Stunned and worried over his host's sanity, the demon bowed in obedience. They walked through the wing together, slaughtering and consuming.

In the security room, Joseph quickly locked the elevator and called off the troops. Sending them in there now would only result in more bodies to clean up later. He activated the full-strength gas and hoped it knocked Harry out before he killed all of their medics in training.

Reicher didn't interfere. Joseph was already doing everything he could to regain control of the situation. Another lesson had been learned, but this one was costly. *Now I can't consume those talented men. Harry's lifeforce will have to be enough.*

3

The gas hit Harry hard. Within seconds, he found himself sliding to the slippery floor with a bloody hand still lifted to activate the elevator. As he began to fall unconscious, Harry connected to home. Unable to block it like he usually did, Harry observed in longing over the distance.

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.

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!"

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.”

Harry tried not to cry as the vision ended. While watching that extreme exhibition, two things had occurred to him. The first was he that could thrive here in the lab if he just surrendered his morality. Safe Haven had already trained him for pain and violence.

The second revelation was that they didn’t need him anymore. The Safe Haven medics who’d remained on the island were covering things. *I’ve been sent away and forgotten about.*

In the security room, Joseph waited, giving the gas time to work before reactivating the elevator. He was proud of the job he’d done to contain the angry man. If he’d been a little slower, Harry might have made it out of his wing.

Reicher was upset that Joseph had let Harry out of his room at all. “You never let it go at their first break or the first scream! You drive it in until they shiver in fear at just the thought of going through it again!”

Joseph flushed and accepted the reprimand. It was deserved. “I’ll never do it again.”

Reicher believed him. Joseph always gave that answer, or a version of it, when corrected. Then he lived up to it. “Send him to the medical wing for an evaluation. I want to know how far back he pushed his aging process.”

Joseph had begun to make the connection between Harry being allowed to hurt people and Reicher not punishing him. “I hope it helps, sir. I mean that.”

Reicher didn’t confirm or deny by replying, but it bothered him that Joseph knew that part of his plan. Joseph was smarter than Reicher had given him credit for over the last 10 years. Just now finding that out sucked. *If I had known he was this clever, things might have been different.*

But Reicher didn’t have time to change those plans now. “After the evaluation, bring him in for the final session in this level.”

Joseph was immediately surprised that Reicher was going to test Harry that way. If he wasn’t successful, he wouldn’t survive. “Yes, sir.”

Reicher knew what was at stake. He believed Harry would come through it without a physical scratch. Mentally, it would be the final snap. After this, Harry would be one of them forever.

4

Isabel paused outside the medical bay, nervous and sad. This was her first scheduled work shift since giving birth. She’d been away from her

children for five days now; she didn't know how much more of it she could take.

Hopefully being back to work will help me remember who I was. Isabel hated herself for breaking. She didn't want to be bonded to the adorable twins who were going to be used in a time push or sacrificed in one of Reicher's other plans. She'd known what she signed up for when she first became a breeder. Before the new people had been brought in, she hadn't cared what happened to those children. Now, it was crushing to think of how many innocent lives she had allowed to be chewed up in the machine. "And for what? Reicher's progress? What progress? We never get any results from this. All we get are the constant screams."

Isabel entered the medical bay.

Harry was strapped to the cold gurney by his wrists, ankles, and waist. He was heavily drugged. He suspected something was about to happen that his captors wanted him awake for but also defenseless. Being brought to the medical bay had sent his mind to Shawn and what he'd gone through in a room like this. It was a struggle not to start begging for mercy.

Isabel paused as she saw the man on the gurney. "Well, isn't that a beautiful sight."

Fear slammed into Harry's chest and ran down his legs. "Ah, shit."

Isabel's eyes lit up. Harry's shove had sent her into labor early and endangered the lives of both of

her children. It was a miracle they had survived at all.

Harry swallowed nervously as he saw the cold gleam. He watched her shut and lock the door in certainty that things were about to get ugly.

Isabel opened his chart on the computer screen and scanned to see why he was here; her mind spun with hatred and ideas that would get her in trouble. *But do I care about getting in trouble anymore? If I can't be with my babies...*

Harry cleared his throat. "What am I here for?" If it was castration, he wanted a few minutes to say goodbye to his manhood.

"Aging evaluation."

Harry relaxed a little. The aging evaluations only required a blood sample.

Isabel switched off the computer and then faced Harry. She studied him with open dislike, not speaking. An awkward tension filled the air.

Harry wondered if she was waiting for an apology. He immediately refused. "I'm the captive here. I'm not apologizing for shit."

Isabel tried not to listen to the voice saying she should take revenge now while Harry was here.

Harry felt death enter the air. He'd experienced it so many times during his captivity now that it was almost like a friend. *Maybe I really will die this time.*

Isabel went to the locked cabinet and opened it with her key. She picked a small vial that was rarely ever used and then retrieved a syringe.

Harry understood what was about to happen. He started screaming.

Isabel didn't care about the noise he was making. She also suddenly realized she didn't care if she got caught. She'd already been separated from her babies, and she was too changed now to return to the way things had been before. "At least I'll have revenge to keep me warm."

Harry continued to scream for help. He yanked on the cuffs, struggling and twisting, but there was no way to get free.

Fear welled up in Harry's throat. The acid taste burnt his mouth and sent his blood pressure up so much that he thought his head would explode. He kept trying to use his gifts, but they wouldn't respond.

Isabel filled the syringe full. She peered at the camera; she could feel Reicher observing in disapproval. "I never wanted to bond with them. This is all your fault." She stepped over to the gurney.

Harry leaned as far away from her as he could.

Isabel jabbed the needle into the IV bag hanging on the wall behind him. She emptied the plunger gleefully. "He'll probably kill me for this, but at least I'll know you're already dead."

"What is it?!"

"Nightshade."

The poison hit Harry in waves that quickly made it hard to breathe as they pushed on his chest. His body twitched as it took control of his nervous

system and started shutting it down. Harry stared at his murderer. He tried to smile at her. “Thank you.”

Isabel understood he wanted to die. Everyone down here did. That wasn’t a surprise. “If you see me in Hell, don’t talk to me.”

Harry gave a soft chuckle and began to fade. It was going to be easy to just let go this time.

Except, it wasn’t. Harry didn’t want to die. He wanted freedom and vengeance, and to cleanse the world of men like Reicher so places like this could never be reopened. *If I die, he wins.*

But I’m so tired! I don’t want to keep doing this. It’s killing me.

Harry began to fight the drugs. *I’ll find a way to change the future, or I really will let go next time. One more attempt is all I have left in me.*

Isabel turned toward the exit as it opened. She dropped the syringe and held her hands out for the guards to cuff her. “It really is all Reicher’s fault. He did this to us.”

The guards pulled Isabel out while other medics came down the hall.

Isabel cackled sadly. “He’s already gone. You can’t save him, mate!”

5

Harry struggled on the gurney. His medical mind had revealed two ways to possibly save his life. The first one—drawing all the poison into his stomach and then throwing it up—wasn’t viable

because he didn't have enough time. The other option was to push it out through every orifice he had.

In the security room, Reicher stood up. He ignored his aching legs and spine as he stared at the monitor. Wet spots were growing all around Harry. Liquid was pouring out of his pores, his ears, and even through his eye sockets to puddle around his body on the gurney. "That's amazing."

Joseph agreed. They'd never had a descendant who was able to fight poison. They had stopped testing with it because all of the subjects died.

"Don't let them interrupt." Reicher meant the guards and medics who were hesitantly stepping into the medical bay.

Joseph activated the speaker. "Stay where you are. Don't touch him."

The staff members were relieved to get that order. No one had forgotten that Harry had hurt Isabel. News of the recent slaughter in his wing was also starting to make the rounds.

Harry pushed harder. His body systems were restarting as the poison was shoved out, along with all the other toxins that had been building up over a lifetime. The dark brown liquid oozed out of his skin in thin trickles that made him feel like he was sweating even though it was cold in the medical bay.

"Make sure you put a copy of this video in his file. I want another one in with the next satellite

transmission. Even if this complex falls, proof of the progress we've made here will still exist.”

Joseph quickly typed in that order, but his eyes never left the screen where Harry was well over halfway recovered and that included from their drugs. If he tried to get out or hurt the medics, Joseph was ready to use the gas on him again. He missed most of Reicher's comment.

In the medical bay, Harry pushed out the last of the drugs, poison, and toxins. His body systems stuttered as blockages were cleared and his veins were reopened and then it kicked into high gear. Electronic pulses relit sections of his brain that had been killed and then continued on into areas that hadn't been active yet.

His heart began to beat stronger, steadier. His stomach returned to normal size. The swelling in his organs from the beatings and abuse faded away, leaving no scar tissue. His circulation improved. His lungs cleared. His prostate shrank and his balls lifted to their former length. In just a few seconds, Harry now felt better than he had since he was a teenager. He lay on the gurney, marveling at the sensation.

Mentally, nothing happened. The instability didn't heal.

Harry jerked his slippery hand through the cuffs, laughing harshly. “There's nothing you can do to me now.”

The medics and guards took off running. Watching Harry save himself from death was horrifying. None of them could do it. The differences between them and the descendants were too obvious in a moment like this.

Harry sat on the gurney, reveling in the return of his health and his youth. “I’m never going back to that other me. I am forever changed.”

In the security room, Reicher rescinded his orders. “He just graduated.”

There was no need to test Harry on the final level of this floor. Isabel’s test had been harder, and Harry was still alive.

Reicher’s heart thumped in hope for the first time since finding out what was wrong with his body. *All I have to do is learn to copy his gift before I consume him.*

6

Isabel didn’t fight as the guards led her down the hallway toward the small jail. She couldn’t resist begging. “Tell Reicher he has to let me be with my babies. I can feel them calling for me. They need me!”

The guards were not sympathetic. It was their job to ignore but report any emotional pleas from prisoners. Being in this complex for years had given these two a thick skin that blocked out every pathetic story that prisoners handed them.

Isabel knew it wouldn't work, but she had to try. "Their health is already fading. He has to let me be with my babies!"

One guard unlocked the door to the gaol and held it while the other man pushed her inside.

Isabel caught herself on the bars of the first cell. She looked around and found two of the four tiny cages occupied.

Gus met her eyes in sympathy. He didn't speak to her. The jailers here didn't like it when the prisoners talked.

Goldie coughed sickly and shivered. He was barely conscious. His injuries from being beaten were mostly healed. The pneumonia was getting worse.

Isabel recognized Gus. She stayed away from his cage. She didn't trust any of the Safe Haven people.

The guard opened the cell across from Gus and pulled Isabel toward it.

Isabel considered trying to run, but she knew she wouldn't make it far. She reluctantly stepped into the cage and listened to it clank shut. *That's the sound of my life changing forever.*

The guards left them alone in the jail. They had to return to the medical bay as an escort for Harry when Reicher decided to move him. None of the other guards were willing to get near the Safe Haven medic now.

Isabel sat in the rear of the cage with her knees to her chest. She stared at Gus.

Gus's anger rose. He didn't know why he was so upset all the time, but he assumed being in jail had something to do with it. "Do I know you?" The woman was vaguely familiar, but her name wouldn't come to mind.

Isabel remembered Gus was being punished for failing to do his duty during a time push. She liked it that he hadn't killed those babies, but she loathed him for being from Safe Haven. She broke into a wide smile. "Do you know who you are?"

Gus considered that question. He'd been asking it for days now. "I don't think so."

Isabel laughed in glee. "She modified you! Good onya, Cerise!"

Gus didn't know why the woman was happy that he couldn't remember anything before waking up in this cell. He tried not to worry about it. She was obviously a prisoner. She didn't have any way to get him or herself out of here.

Gus resumed digging through the charred remains of his memory. Rage swirled through his mind. He shoved it aside so he could concentrate. *I know I'm here for a reason. I know I'm not alone and that whoever I came with is in danger. Everything else is a fuzzy blur.*

Gus considered the prisoner's words. *Modified? Does that mean someone messed with my mind?*

Gus tried to fight through the drugs, but he was malnourished and tired. The jailers here didn't like it when the prisoners ate well or slept well. Gus

struggled to remember. *What the hell am I doing here?!*

Isabel watched him, enjoying his discomfort. *I killed one of them and now I get to watch another one suffer. It's almost like Reicher is giving me justice that I didn't ask for.*

Her heart clenched. She sighed. *He's also punishing me for bonding with my babies. I really hate that man.*

Chapter Nineteen
Keep Me Awake
Mission Day 35

1

“**Y**ou have to come up now! You’re spending too much time in your mind.”

Shawn didn’t want to obey. He liked being in his mind. The information was addictive, and he was good at putting clues together to form amazing pictures of the past, the present, and the future.

Shawn slowly opened his eyes. He didn’t move out of the recliner yet. “I’m up.”

Joseph was glad Shawn had responded. It was hard to get the attention of a Blinker, even when using pain or manipulation techniques that involved other people. Once they got so far down, they often had to be drugged and knocked out completely before they could be reached. He activated the speaker again. “Tell us what you’ve discovered.”

Joseph and Reicher were both positive that Shawn had made more progress. They’d both listened impatiently to his mutters.

Shawn stretched his stiff body. He’d been in the session room for a long time. How long, he wasn’t sure. Once he got down in his mind, nothing else mattered. *And that’s a serious problem.*

Shawn knew he wasn't in good shape. He could smell the reek of his body and feel the stiff, dirty clothes that he hadn't bothered to change in days. His hair was tacky with dried sweat and wouldn't stop itching. His stomach was twisting painfully and his neck was aching.

None of those things mattered. Only blinking did. Shawn swallowed to wet his throat. "Your research into other dimensions will be a dead end. You don't have the location of the gates to open them or close them. Without that, the time you're spending on research is pointless. You need a map of the gates that connect those dimensions."

Joseph typed it into the computer, but he was positive Reicher wasn't going to stop or even slow that research. Shawn wasn't correct, anyway. Subject One had recently made remarkable progress, without a map. "What else have you found?"

"Health isn't going to matter when we do explore those other dimensions. Even if we can get there, our fragile human bodies won't survive. Only our minds can make a trip like that."

Again, Shawn wasn't completely correct. Greg had proven it was possible. He had returned tired and with injuries, but he had survived. Joseph still typed in the response word for word. That was part of his job.

Shawn slowly stood from the chair and began stretching out the rest of his body. It wasn't happy. He had aches, pains, pinches, and little needle stings

were going all through his limbs. He was also very dizzy.

Shawn spent a minute facing hard reality. *I'm dying.*

The session room had become a second home to him. He was being called in twice a day, but only to record what he found because he refused to stop even while in his flat resting. They were also feeding him one of his two meals while he was in this session room because he wasn't eating in the lounge with all the other Blinkers.

Shawn frowned lightly. The other Blinkers were no longer welcoming him. Because of his quicker and almost easy successes, those men and women had grown bitter and jealous. Shawn didn't like to spend time around them. They were dangerous.

The speaker activated again. "What else have you found?"

Shawn filled them in on the rest of that trace. "All of our evolutions as descendants are meant to force humanity into a place where our minds will be all that we need. Our bodies are weak because they're temporary. Once we learn to navigate those other dimensions, we won't need food, water, clothes, or medicine. Our minds will cover it all."

"What will we need?"

Shawn repeated his previous answer. "Very detailed maps. It's too easy to get lost in there." Shawn meant that. A good amount of the time he spent tracing was reaching the previous point where he'd left off.

Joseph regarded Reicher to see if there was anything he wanted to add.

Reicher wanted more progress from Shawn. His information moments were prima, but they weren't what he needed. "Send in the clone."

Joseph snickered. They often chose captives who looked like someone in the subject's present or past that they had been attracted to or bonded with. They then put that person in danger. In Shawn's case, a little girl had been picked. Joseph typed the command into the computer.

In the session room, Shawn was aware of them conspiring against him. It didn't matter. All he cared about was blinking. Shawn let his mind sink into it again, still trying to verify if there was a map or if they really did have to wing it.

Shawn heard the elevator open. He assumed that was the signal for him to return to his flat. He got up from the chair and walked by the little girl without looking at her. "Where would we find a map?"

Joseph stared in surprise as Shawn took the elevator back to his wing.

Reicher chuckled. "We really didn't need to take his balls. All we had to do was put him in a blinking session. He'll never hunt a woman again. They can't satisfy him now. Only answers can."

Joseph thought about his last session with Sasha and frowned. *Even if I lost my balls, I would still miss them.*

Reicher chose not to respond. Thalia was due back from her break today. Until then, it was better that he didn't anger Joseph with too much truth that he couldn't handle. "Send the girl back to her dorm. Make sure Subject Two gets a full meal and spends a few hours out of his mind. Let the others in his wing know they'll be punished if they don't help him."

Joseph doubted it would matter. The subjects in Shawn's wing were terrified of him. They wanted him gone; every meal Shawn missed brought them closer to that goal. They weren't going to interfere even if it meant a few hours of pain in the shock room. Despite the rules and insistence that he eat, Shawn was 40 pounds too light. His skin hung on him like an extra blanket and his waste was nearly nonexistent. Shawn's body was keeping everything it was given in a desperate effort to stay alive.

In the elevator, Shawn continued to mumble about finding a map. "There has to be one. Why would you create other dimensions but not provide a way to traverse them? You wouldn't. There has to be a map somewhere."

The session room had smelled as bad as he did. Shawn took a fresh breath of air in the elevator and then sank back into his mind for the short ride. He didn't notice when the door opened.

The other Blinkers spotted him standing there and retreated out of his path.

"He won't last much longer."

“Ay. He stinks!”

Shawn vaguely realized the elevator had stopped. He walked on shaky legs toward his flat. Every few feet, his body shuddered and blinked. He passed by the other captives without acknowledging their presence.

The captives watched him with dangerous thoughts and shielded minds. Shawn was too powerful for them to handle in a direct attack, even in his weakened state. His evolutions, like blinking while walking, were well beyond their skills.

Shawn went into his room and laid down on his bed. He knew he needed to eat and take a shower, but he had no patience for those things. *All I want to do is blink.*

Shawn’s heart palpitated.

It drew him back to reality for a few seconds where he connected to Safe Haven in a fast rush that he couldn’t fight.

“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. A bright blue light passed between them.

Cody smiled at her.

Missy stared at the fading blue light in angry dismay. "No."

Cody understood. "I'll never push you. When it's time, you'll tell me."

Missy's face darkened. She opened her mouth to shout at him.

Cody cut her off. "The alpha will never allow it, Missy. Even if you don't want me, she'll make you pick someone your age. Shawn will never be your mate."

Missy fled toward Kimmie, trying not to cry.

Cody felt her sadness and wished he hadn't said any of it yet. "But it's true. If Shawn comes back, the alpha will remove him."

Shawn felt sadness, but it was disjointed. *She'll have a better life if I never go back. I can stay and keep blinking. She'll marry Cody and be happy as the eventual Queen of Safe Haven.*

Shawn understood he was an addict. He knew his life was in danger because of that. He still sank back down into his mind.

Outside his door, other Blinkers gathered. They watched him lying on the bed, mumbling.

“He’s dying. We don’t need to do anything.”

“Reicher will step in soon. He isn’t going to let go of a new Blinker.”

“He’s right. Reicher will force-feed him if he has to.”

One of the furious men came through the crowd. He held up a small stack of the plastic knives they were given along with their meals. “Let’s get this over with.”

Every Blinker there took a knife for each hand.

Alarms began to blare as their captors saw what was happening.

The crowd pushed into Shawn’s flat and surrounded his bed.

Shawn’s demon sensed the danger and began pulling him up. *Master!*

One of the Blinkers stabbed him in the chest.

The knife impaled him and broke off.

Shawn returned to reality with a gasp. *I’m dying!*

The small plastic utensils weren’t sturdy enough to cut a steak, but they were hard enough to plunge into Shawn’s fragile body and do lethal damage.

Blood sprayed across the walls as they kept stabbing him, breaking off chunks of the knives in his body. They didn’t stop even when they heard guards get off the elevator and run toward them. They’d agreed to make sure Shawn was dead; they followed through.

Shawn assumed he was dead. He just didn't know what to do about it.

He was wandering around in the darkness with his hands out, hoping to find a wall that he could trace to an exit. All around him, oppressive dark silence pushed in until he thought he would go mad.

The only comfort was the feel of the demon following along behind him in sad regret.

The demon had missed his opportunity to flee. He was positive that he was now dead too. Both of them waited to be sent to Hell to pay for the mistakes they'd made.

Pain slammed into Shawn's chest. He tried to draw in air, but it was too heavy. *This is it. I'm being sent down.*

Light flashed through Shawn's body. It grew brighter and stronger until the darkness was banished.

Shawn opened his eyes.

Harry smiled tiredly. "There you are."

Shawn stared in confusion. "No, I'm dead."

Harry didn't want to talk about that. He was horrified by Shawn's condition. He sensed it hadn't come from torture. He shoved in extra healing orbs, trying to give Shawn more help. It was obvious the man needed it. "You'll be okay now. I just need to get this last piece of plastic out of your stomach."

Shawn became aware of the pain next; every bit of his body hurt like it had while he was on the warehouse floor. He groaned as the agony in his gut increased. It felt like he was on fire.

Harry gently pulled the plastic out so it didn't fracture and leave pieces like several of the others had. He was too tired to keep digging the splinters out mentally.

Harry had been working on Shawn for hours now. He'd saved his life and then healed each injury over that time. Being trusted to come here on his own, without even a guard for an escort, had put Harry in a great mood. He didn't want to respond to the sign of Reicher's trust, but he couldn't help it.

Reicher was observing through the camera. Harry could feel the boss's pleasure, but he took no joy in that. Harry didn't like Reicher. He hadn't done it for him. He'd done it to save a friend and teammate. He had always liked Shawn.

Shawn was glad when the pain began to recede. He kept his eyes open out of fear. He was afraid if he closed them, death would still be waiting in that dark place to pull him back in.

Shawn and Harry were both covered in blood. Shawn had been stabbed so many times that his clothes had easily torn away. Blood was all over the gurney and the floor around it. The thick, coppery smell smothered both of them in an ugly reminder that everything had changed for them upon volunteering for this run.

The speaker activated. “What did you see while you were on the other side?”

Shawn thought about that oppressive darkness again. “Absolutely nothing.”

Reicher wasn't surprised or disappointed. There were a few hundred reports of a bright light after death. There were millions of dead bodies with no reports that said nothing special happened at that point. Marc being able to connect to the weigh station had changed Reicher's opinion. He now believed the bright light stories. The oppressive darkness where Shawn had been was probably a holding chamber of some sort.

Shawn also knew Reicher was there. He spoke directly to the man. “You need to go forward when you do the time push.”

Reicher activated his speaker this time. “Why?”

“Safe Haven is only training to cover what happens when you do the reset backward. If you go forward, they'll have no defense.”

Harry kept working on Shawn's body, but he listened alertly. He was surprised to hear Shawn giving information to the enemy, but he also wasn't. Harry understood the urge to please the boss here. Reicher was a lot like Angela.

Reicher fought a cough and repeated his question. “Why should we go forward? What's there?”

“Everything.” Harry's health in comparison with his own made Shawn ashamed, especially upon seeing the missing fingers and thumb, but the

feeling didn't last long. As usual, his mind wanted to pull him back into the Akasha field to dig for more knowledge. The fact that he had been brought back from death didn't faze him as much as missing his mental exploration time.

Shawn remembered what had happened. "They all killed me."

Harry finished healing the final hole in Shawn's stomach. "They're probably jealous."

Shawn shook his head. "I think they were afraid my success would mean their deaths because they're not needed."

Harry thought about how ruthless their captors had been so far. "That's probably true."

Shawn agreed. "Then I don't need to hate them or seek revenge. They were just trying to survive, like everyone else."

Being around a Safe Haven team member was good for Harry. He liked it that Shawn had mercy. Harry didn't think he had any of that left now. "Don't sit up for a few minutes. I need to send another set of healing orbs to make sure everything is solid."

Shawn stayed still, but the addictive urge to get back into his mind quickly fell over him. Fear welled up in his throat. "Talk to me. Keep me awake."

Harry began to babble about everything he'd learned during his sessions.

Fascinated, Shawn stayed awake and took mental notes. Later, he could add them to his own

observations to form new and amazing conclusions about reality, healing, and alternate dimensions. *I can't wait!*

3

Reicher gestured. “Keep them together now.” It wasn’t a shock that the Safe Haven people fed from each other. The surprise was *they* didn’t know it even though they were going through it.

Reicher kept observing, but he didn’t worry about the two men conspiring or trying to escape. Harry hated him and the lab setup, but he had already achieved more here in a month than he had during his entire life. The medic would respect that in the end. And Shawn was addicted to blinking. He wasn’t going anywhere unless it was in his head.

Reicher scanned the other monitors while wishing the rest of Marc’s team would hurry up and reach this point in the conversion process. He could feel time running out. *I need to get them converted so I can try to live or just die. No one should have to go through this much pain and that includes all of the subjects. At this point, I would have put any of them out of their misery.*

Joseph caught that and stopped an offer to help Reicher end his life. When it was time, he was certain the man could handle it. Until then, Joseph just needed to do everything right.

Tap-tap!

They looked at the door.

Sasha drew in a deep breath for courage. “I need to talk to you!”

Sasha’s broken nose was still healing. Her fading bruises were a reminder that she’d been attacked. Reicher felt a little bad for that. He splayed his hand in the universal language. *Go ahead.*

Sasha realized the door was locked. She wasn’t able to get in. It didn’t change her mind. “I want you to let my sister out of gaol. Right now!”

Reicher stared at her through the window. “Why would I?”

Sasha had gone by the medical wing to ask if Isabel needed any help on her first day back. The guards there had been happy to fill her in on Isabel’s precarious predicament. “You need us both to keep working. You’re low on meds now.”

Reicher snorted. The demonstrations from Harry had been more than enough to convince him that he could afford to lose all the other meds. “Try again.”

Sasha didn’t know for sure why Reicher had decided she and her sister were expendable, but she instantly blamed it on the new people. “We’ve always been loyal to you. You put her in a bad situation and didn’t give her the support she needed. This is your fault. You have to make it right!”

Reicher agreed with parts of that, but he had to get something out of this. “Convince me I should put her back into the retraining program.”

Under Sasha’s bravery, was fear. Seeing her sister behind bars had been terrifying. Sasha didn’t

look at Joseph as she pulled out her one trump card. “I’ll give you information on all of the traitors in this complex. I’ll tell you every single thing that’s ever been said about you.”

Joseph tensed, scared that his name would be on her list.

“And I’ll give you the Australian Resistance Force. I know who their leader is.”

Joseph thought about catching Cerise in the radio cubby. *I should have told on her right then!*

Reicher chuckled coldly. “Your betrayal will be paid back at a later date.”

Sasha slapped the glass. “Please. She’s my sister, mate!”

Reicher gave a curt nod. Making Sasha think she was able to buy her sister’s life would keep her under control until he decided how he wanted to use her. “Spill your guts. Joseph will make a record of it.”

Sasha began giving him information on everyone in the complex who considered her a friend, and everyone who didn’t. None of them meant anything to her. Isabel’s life was everything.

4

“Your test is positive. Congratulations!” The caretaker in the medical wing was the same one who had been present for the time push.

Marion smiled again. She had decided to let go of her animosity toward Cerise since she’d been

matched for breeding with the boss. It was a good idea to stay on friendly terms with Reicher's mistress. "Nice work!"

Cerise stared at the positive pregnancy test, mind flying through her options.

Marion continued to beam at her. "Reicher will be sau pleased."

The breeding wing was calm and quiet around them. It was naptime for the new mothers and their infants. Marion began gathering pamphlets. "I know you've been through this a lot of times, but I'm going to give you all of the literature like before. Make sure you read it and follow the instructions. We want you giving birth to a healthy baby and that depends on you taking care of yourself."

Cerise didn't respond. For a brief moment, she considered gathering her gear and trying to escape the complex. She knew where to find all of the exits and it was possible she might even be able to get by the hungry hounds on the first level.

She pushed that option away. Reicher would hunt her down. There was no way he would let her go now that she was pregnant.

The door to the medical bay opened behind them.

Cerise kept staring at the test. Flashes of her other children were hitting her hard now. Waiting for the reset so she could hold them again was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"Cerise Bunting, you are under arrest! Come with us."

Marion flinched back from her in surprise.

Cerise turned toward the guards, not registering the danger she was in. “What?”

Three security guards came forward. One of them had a dart gun.

Cerise brought up her shield. “What am I being accused of?”

“Treason.” The guards surrounded her.

Again, Cerise considered going off on her own. It wouldn’t take much to remove these three nervous blokes and then she would have the run of the complex until Reicher cornered her somewhere and gassed her.

Marion remembered her job. She stepped between them. “Cerise is pregnant. You will treat her with respect!”

The guards weren’t sure what to do. Pregnant women were off-limits to abuse. Anyone who hurt them was usually sacked on the spot.

Cerise slowly held out her hands and dropped her shield. “I want to talk to Reicher.”

The guards were relieved when she allowed the cuffs, then followed them to the jail. They didn’t promise she would be allowed to talk to the boss. That wasn’t up to them.

Marion waited for them to leave, then got on her computer. She sent an alert to Reicher.

5

In the security room, the computer beeped.

Joseph saw the message first. He stared in bitter hatred. “She’s going to get away with it.”

Standing over his shoulder, Reicher read the message and grinned coldly. “Call my daughter in. Her break is over. You two will man the security room and continue the sessions for the day.”

“Where are you going?”

“To visit the leader of the resistance. We’ve had an infamous rebel in our grip for months. It’s finally time to squeeze her and see if she pops.”

“Should you do that, in your condition, I mean?”

Reicher had been saving his strength for this moment. He gave Joseph a scathing glare, then headed for the door as it swung open. “Don’t be eager for a burial, Joseph. It could easily be you in that grave instead of me.”

Chapter Twenty

I Do What Works

1

“**S**queeze on in there.” The guard gave Cerise time to get into the small cage before shutting and locking the door. She wasn’t being treated like the other prisoners. Reicher’s orders about being careful with the breeders were strict.

The gaol was cold and stank like death. The guard didn’t look at Goldie or Gus. Neither of those men were considered a threat now, thanks to Cerise’s memory modification and the pneumonia. Goldie’s coughs echoed almost continuously with a deep, wet rasp that said it was in his lungs.

The guard left, locking the main door. The sound of his rattling keys and footsteps slowly faded away.

Cerise scanned her companions and lingered on the woman next to her. Isabel appeared rough. Cerise immediately guessed the problem she’d developed during the birth hadn’t been cured. It had just slowed while she was being taken care of. Now that she was suffering in a cramped, cold cage without enough food and exercise, and only misery to keep her company, her health was fading.

Isabel glared tiredly. “What are you staring at?”

Cerise began removing her jacket so she could sit on it. “I’m surprised to see you here. I heard your sister made a deal.”

Isabel didn’t respond to the brief hope. All she wanted to do was sleep.

Cerise considered spending energy on the woman and then stopped herself. She needed to save her strength for what was coming next. She tried mental motivation instead. “I actually thought you’d be in here a heap sooner. The gluttony rules should have netted you long before now.”

Again, Isabel didn’t respond to the barb. She didn’t feel like arguing.

Cerise knew what would work, but she felt bad for using such an awful motivation. *I reckon that makes me different than the guy running this place.* When Isabel dropped her chin and returned to dozing instead of fighting back, Cerise used it anyway. “He scheduled another time push. Guess whose kids he decided to use?”

Isabel’s head snapped up. Hatred crossed her face. “You’re evil!”

Cerise shrugged. “I do what works.”

Adrenaline and fear began to wake Isabel from her misery. She fought to stay alert so she could figure out a way to save her babies.

Cerise turned her attention to the other two prisoners in the small gaol.

Gus glared at her, but there was no menace, only confusion.

Cerise was proud of herself for doing so well with the memory modification. She was also dismayed that Gus wasn't fighting harder to remember who he was. "Marc would be ashamed of you."

Gus frowned. "Do I know that name?"

The image of a tall, arrogant, vicious fighter came to his mind. Clarity came with it for a brief instant. *That's my team leader.*

Gus immediately began digging into that thread, trying to unravel it.

Cerise was satisfied. She focused on Goldie next. "Are you going to survive?"

Goldie shivered and stared at her in a rare moment of awareness. The fever was racking him with chills and delirium. "You have to save them." Goldie coughed for a long moment that echoed through the gaol.

Cerise didn't answer his plea. As far as she knew, there wasn't a way to save anyone in this complex. *We're all doomed.*

Footsteps outside stopped the conversation. The door swung open. Reicher scanned them all in barely veiled contempt.

Gus stared at the older man. He knew he should recognize him, but he didn't. *Who am I? What the hell happened to me?*

Goldie crawled toward the front of his cell and used the bars to pull himself up. "I'll give you anything you want. Don't kill my kids!"

Isabel formed an instant bond with Goldie that was useless. She couldn't help him, and he couldn't help her. All they could do was sit in these cells while Reicher killed their kids.

Reicher stayed in the entrance, trying not to show how much of his strength he had used on a simple walk down here. Pretending there was nothing wrong wasn't easy, but he'd managed it. He looked good today. He was standing tall in a resplendent uniform with every hair in place. Only those who knew him best could see the pain in every movement. He was hiding it well.

The guard outside stayed ready to defend Reicher if any of the prisoners tried to escape. He knew his job depended on keeping the boss safe.

Distant shouts and cries from other residents who were being arrested echoed through the hallways.

Gus slapped the bars in frustration. "Who am I?!"

Reicher smiled at Cerise. "You did an excellent job on him. It's too bad you've been arrested for treason. I have a list of residents who need the same persuasion before they can be put back to work."

Cerise jerked a thumb at Isabel. "Oi. Why is she still in here? Sasha gave us all up."

Reicher stepped aside to allow a caretaker to enter.

The woman hurried to Isabel's cell as Joseph unlocked it from the security room.

Cerise observed as the woman helped Isabel to her feet and gently led her out of the gaol. The urge to aid the woman was impossible to resist even though she didn't like the medic. "She needs medical help. I think she's bleeding on the inside again."

Reicher had already made the arrangements. "She's going to the med bay. You, are staying right here, unless..."

Cerise sighed. "What do you want from me?"

"Your loyalty!"

Silence fell for a moment. Reicher didn't yell very often.

Reicher regarded Cerise. "How long have you been the leader of the resistance?" He knew the answer. It was a test to see if she would tell the truth.

For one brief moment, Cerise let her loathing be seen and heard. "I joined the day you killed my kids. As soon as I found out what happened, I started planning your downfall."

Goldie didn't care about their personal drama. "Please, Reicher, please. I'm sorry Gus killed your pusher. I know you were fond of Valerie." Goldie paused to draw in a painful breath of air that came out in a rushed cough. "I didn't want anyone to die. I wanted to save my kids!"

Still outside the door, Isabel paused to listen.

The caretaker allowed it because she also wanted to listen. New gossip was worth the risk.

The desperation in Goldie's voice filled Isabel's heart. *We have the same goal. If he finds a way, then so can I.*

In the cage next to Goldie, Gus was paying attention to the conversation. *He said I killed someone. Maybe I deserve to be in here.*

Gus's mind tried to bring up an image of anyone named Valerie, but there was only the sense of a warm spray of blood and nothing else.

Reicher stared at Cerise. "You forced me into it by refusing to obey orders."

Cerise sneered at him. "I didn't have a choice in most of those situations! You put me there to see if anybody could kill me. Expecting me to handle things peacefully after being attacked is unreasonable."

"You're a handful. You always were, but even after losing your children, you still haven't learned to follow orders." Reicher swallowed a cough. He didn't want to seem weak. "You didn't remove any of Marc's team, even when they escaped." Reicher pointed at Gus. "He should be dead for killing a pusher. I've never known you to spare anyone."

"Marc and his team are different, special." Cerise let out a sigh of derision that was aimed at herself. "I told you the alpha of Safe Haven got under my skin. You shouldn't have trusted me around any of the new people."

Reicher continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You also didn't report Isabel for gluttony or Sasha and Joseph's illegal relationship and conspiring. You

didn't report a missing knife after fighting with one of the subjects. Can you explain any of that?"

Cerise sat on her coat and leaned back against the cold bars. She studied Reicher from top to bottom and then chose to give him more truth. "I was hoping one of them would kill you. It didn't matter to me which one."

Reicher wasn't surprised by that revelation. "And if all of your children were returned, would your hatred for me still be as great?"

Cerise refused to be drawn into that theoretical debate. "We both know you're never going to allow that. You can't tempt me with the carrot on the stick anymore. I know the stick is empty."

Reicher slowly took his hand out of his pocket to reveal a small black case. He pushed it open with one thumb. "Say yes and I'll put it in writing to bring every one of them back."

Cerise stared at the beautiful diamond and gold ring. "What?"

Reicher snapped the case shut and tossed it into her cell. It landed in her lap. "You have 24-hours to make up your mind."

She slowly picked up the box. "What happens if I say no?"

"Then I'll finish killing everyone you've ever known and everything you've ever loved." He smiled thinly. "I will have you. Just give in now and save us both a lot of time."

Cerise fired back cruelly. "You only want me because I look like *her*."

Reicher didn't rise to the bait. He also didn't deny it. Cerise's resemblance to his lost love was still stunning to this day.

"Why do you want to marry me? I hate your fucking guts!"

Reicher already knew how she felt. It didn't detour him. "Once we're married, I'll be the leader of the resistance."

Cerise laughed harshly. "That isn't going to make them follow you!"

"You'd be surprised at what your friends will do to keep you alive, Cerise."

Cerise fingered the velvet box. "I could wait you out. You're not going to last much longer."

Reicher gave her a warm smile this time. "True. And I'm going to be replaced by someone who hates you and will never give you what you want. If I were you, I'd snap up this offer as fast as I could. You're not going to get another one."

Reicher left without threatening her further. Cerise was extremely intelligent. She would come to the conclusion on her own—she didn't have a choice.

Isabel moved away from the door and stumbled. Being out of the cage was letting blood flow to parts of her body that had been cramped up for days.

The caretaker gently put an arm around Isabel and hugged her close. "I'll help you."

Reicher observed until they were out of sight. Then he turned down the hall that would take him to the private side of the medical bay.

Goldie's pleas followed him.

"Please don't do it! Don't hurt my babies! I'm begging you!"

2

"That's brilliant." Joseph laughed. "This must be the reason he didn't arrest her when he overheard the call. All of the others would have gotten off scot-free. He's absolutely brilliant."

Sitting in her chair in the security room, Thalia had to agree. She wasn't happy about it, however. The thought of having Cerise as a stepmother was horrifying. "I can't believe he did that."

Joseph stored the copy of the conversation onto the super computer's hard drive. It was in the middle of storm preparations but still easily able to take care of running normal operations. "He's not really going to marry her, you know. He's using it for leverage."

Thalia didn't argue, but she was certain Joseph was wrong. Now that she had witnessed the moment, she was able to recognize the true emotion from her father. *He cares for her. He's never been that emotionally honest with me. We don't have the same relationship.*

Joseph stared at her. "Do you want the same relationship with him?"

Thalia rolled her eyes. "Don't be disgusting. That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Joseph wasn't positive. He hadn't spent enough time around her to know whether or not she was mentally stable. *But none of us down here seem to be, so I doubt she escaped that curse either.*

The security room was tense. Thalia and Joseph tolerated each other because they had to. The door was locked. If anything went wrong in here, they were on their own for the next 11 hours. Thalia and Joseph both wondered where Reicher would spend that time.

Outside, troops and staff members walked by with curious glances. They were used to Reicher being in there.

Thalia resumed scanning the monitors for problems. Residents all over the complex were being arrested right now, accused of treason. It annoyed Thalia to find out how many of their people were traitors.

"He's removing most of them. Do we have space for the rest?" Joseph was keeping track of her thoughts as well as the monitors.

"We're putting them into isolation rooms until he decides where they go. I expect most of them to go back into retraining. We can't afford to lose this many staff members."

Joseph felt exactly the opposite. "The more people we get rid of now, the more supplies we'll have to last us."

Thalia didn't remind him they needed staff people to keep this place running. Joseph adored the computers; he believed they could do anything.

Thalia knew it required human interfacing and repairs that wouldn't be possible if they lost some of the residents who were now being pulled out of their beds and off their jobs.

The lab vibrated unhappily in the angry ocean. It drew their attention.

Thalia switched over to the storm preparations while Joseph pulled up a small radar picture. Many of the satellites had gone non-functional over the last year. The few that remained were linked into this lab.

“That is one hell of a storm moving our way.” Thalia scanned the red and purple center of the typhoon that now stretched 200 miles from end-to-end. It was barreling down on the Australian coast with nothing to slow it or stop it.

“At least the mobs on the beach will take a hit from this.”

“Too right. Give me an update on the preparations so I can put it into the file.”

Joseph did it quickly. “All loose items are being secured. That will take a little while as we go through each level of the lab. Weak areas around the elevator shafts and walls are being re-sealed or welded. Antennas are ready to be retracted, and the protective shielding is complete for the top two floors.”

She typed it in. It always took a few days to get the protective shielding over the lab, which explained the extra vibrations today. “What about the computer system?”

“Our backup power is in place for the freezers, oxygen, computers, and locks on the doors. The tunnel connecting to the beach is fully sealed off now.” Joseph was glad they would still be anchored by elevator shafts that had been concreted into the ocean floor. The thought of being washed away during a storm was terrifying. “Both escape pods will be fully stocked by the time the storm gets here and a distress message is ready to go out to all active labs if it’s needed.”

Neither of them mentioned how useless that would be now that the Hawaii lab had gone dark. It was standard procedure and they were following it.

“What’s the ETA on the storm?”

Joseph scanned his calculations to make sure they were accurate. “About eighteen hours for the first rain bands. A full day for landfall.”

Despite the angry ocean around them that was already pushing on the walls and causing small leaks in places, Thalia was confident they would survive. An underwater lab was always a risky choice, but this one had been built with that in mind. Thalia resumed dwelling on Reicher’s proposal. *I just can’t believe he did that.*

Joseph enjoyed her discomfort. They’d been able to work together in here without problems so far, but they would never have a strong relationship while competing for the same position. “Maybe she’ll die before the ceremony.”

Thalia snorted in amusement, then dismissed that idea. She knew Joseph was serious, but she

wasn't going to interfere with any of her father's plans. "I trust him completely."

Joseph smiled genuinely. "That's something we have in common, then."

Thalia smiled back, but it was cold and hungry. "When I take over, you're going to have to change your behavior if you want to keep this job."

Joseph laughed loudly. "I was going to say the same thing to you!"

An awkward silence fell between them; neither knew what to say or how to break it. When Reicher made the official announcement, things were going to get ugly. There was no avoiding that.

3

"I'm going to die. There's no avoiding that."

Sasha gently inserted the IV into Reicher's papery arm without confirming it. Now that her sister had been transferred from the gaol, Sasha was feeling better about the future. She didn't want to mar it by agreeing that Reicher's time in control of this lab was almost over. She did want to know if Marc was really taking his place, but it was a bad time to ask.

The private side of the medical bay was three long, narrow rooms that were used to store their stock. A comfortable chair had been placed in the back corner, behind the shelves and boxes so it was out of view. That's where Reicher was sitting. If anything went crazy, he would be the last one hit.

Sasha still wasn't comfortable with it. "You should be traveling with a guard."

"Who says I don't have a guard right now?"

Sasha assumed he meant her. She wasn't sure how much help she would be in a fight, but she would do her best to keep him alive as part of their deal.

Reicher hated the medicinal smell of the medical wing. It was an unwelcome reminder that he was here for his health and the outlook wasn't good. This transfusion would buy him a little time, but then it would be six months or even a year before it would work again. Reicher doubted he would last that long. The feeling of death hovering over his shoulder was growing stronger by the day.

Reicher held still while the bag of warmed Mitchel blood began to flow into his weakened body.

Sasha was surprised he was here. He usually received treatments in the security room. "Is something happening, other than the storm?"

Reicher was impressed with her intuition. "I'm gathering my strength to handle a problem."

Sasha assumed he meant the resistance or possibly even Safe Haven. Half of their remaining medics had been pulled an hour ago and taken away. Rumors of conspiracy and treason were flying through the complex. None of the staff was happy to find out they had so many traitors in their midst.

Reicher relaxed his arm muscles so the transfusion would go quicker. “I’m preparing for a more dangerous foe. Mother Nature has no mercy.”

Sasha glanced around the medical bay where lower-level staff members were packing loose items into boxes that would be tied to the walls when the storm came. The smell of machine oil and smoke lingered lightly in the halls. Preparations for the typhoon were well underway.

Voices in the next room caught their attention.

“I heard he proposed to her.”

“I heard she threw the box at him and told him to go fuck himself.”

“I don’t think it matters. We might all go down in the storm.”

“I’ll go to the top level and leave via the beach tunnel.”

“That level is locked down.”

“There’s a manual override switch.”

“There are also hungry hounds. If you see a heap of water coming in, go to the escape pods on the bottom level.”

“Good onya! I’ll be there.”

Sasha glanced at Reicher as the gossiping guards moved out of hearing range.

Reicher made a quick connection. “That’s how Kenn knew about the private elevator and how to reach me.” Reicher gestured with his free hand. “Send an order. We’ve gotten lax. That has to stop.”

Sasha went to the computer and waited for his order. She was positive he was right. Before his

illness, the troops wouldn't have gossiped so openly.

“Gossipers will have their tongues cut out for a first offense.”

Sasha winced. She always hated handling that punishment, but she would do it and be grateful that it wasn't happening to her or her sister.

Reicher could feel the transfusion trying to take effect. Being tense or stressed out worked against the process. He leaned back in the chair and tried to relax. “How far back did Subject Seven push his aging process?”

Sasha finished typing in the security order and then opened Harry's file. “At least 10 years. He's healthier now than he has been in a decade, according to his own notes.”

Sasha was thrilled that Harry had settled into working in the medical bay without any more problems. She wanted him to help her sister. Now that Isabel was out of gaol, that could happen. She also knew it wasn't a good time to bring it up. Pushing Reicher was a bad idea.

“We'll have him attend an appointment with her shortly.” Reicher didn't want his medic stressing out either. He looked over at her.

The sight of Sasha's bandaged nose and yellowing bruises brought guilt that Reicher didn't want to feel but couldn't help. “Be careful with Joseph and the other men in this complex. Those we believe in don't always deserve that trust.”

Sasha warmed a little. Reicher had always been against sexual abuse. Getting a personal warning from him made her feel like he cared about her future. “I will. Thank you, sir.”

Reicher didn’t tell her she was the only medic he felt like he could trust right now. She was normal and not physically stronger than him, so if she turned out to be a traitor, he was confident in his chances against her without needing to use any of his precious energy on magic.

Sasha came over to check on his transfusion. The bags always emptied quickly during these moments. She expertly disconnected him from the IV and then disposed of the bag and used needle. “This should give you some relief.”

Reicher waited for her to put the bandage on his arm. He also made a face. “It’s incredibly frustrating to have banned Mitchels from my zone but still need to use their blood!”

Sasha’s question was out before she could stop herself. “Why do you dislike Mitchels so much? Is it personal?”

Reicher grimaced. “They’re always popping up when I can least afford the distraction. Those wild cards have always been a giant pain in my ass.”

“And?” Sasha knew there was one.

Reicher knew he shouldn’t tell her, but the moment in the jail with Cerise would spread. Everyone would know soon. “And one of them stole the love of my life from this lab and got her killed

in the process. I'll never forgive them for that. The only prima Mitchel is one I've already killed."

Chapter Twenty-One
Reinforcements

1

“**W**hy did you bring us up here? It’s so cold!”

Saul barely woke from dozing. He mumbled an answer, “This is the last place anyone will hunt for us. Everybody believes we went south.”

The crew member frowned; he wasn’t happy.

Saul cared about the happiness of the crew, but he also cared about remaining off the grid while Reicher and Marc played out their ugly little game. If he went anywhere near a former civilization zone, Reicher would likely see them on radar. Saul wasn’t sure what would happen then. That’s what he was worried about.

He didn’t think Reicher had the manpower to send someone after them and even if he did, they certainly wouldn’t be able to force Saul out of the sub without a fight. Saul wasn’t above unleashing nuclear fire in order to escape, but he wasn’t entirely certain that Reicher wouldn’t fire back with the nuclear weapons that he now controlled in multiple countries. It would be a no-win situation for both of them, but Reicher was absolutely insane. It was possible that he would take them all down in an

effort to reclaim the sub. As far as Saul knew, it was the only one in existence now. The war had changed a lot of things for a lot of people, but a nuclear submarine was still an ultimate weapon that could defeat any population. Reicher wanted it docked somewhere waiting for his orders.

“You didn’t have to take us someplace so cold. You could have gone east or west.”

Saul ignored the complaining crew member this time, but he comprehended the problem. They had stopped a few times to scavenge supplies, like now, but the rest of that time had been spent resting under the water, waiting for something exciting to happen. The crewman wasn’t so much uncomfortable as he was bored.

It is cold, though. They were all bundled up in gear that Marc had left onboard. The submarine wasn’t freezing, but it was close. Saul didn’t want to run most of the equipment up here in the north. Heat put off a signature. That was the downside of not going south, but if Reicher came searching for them, south was the zone he would hunt the hardest. *Maybe I’ll find a port with the right facilities and hide for a few years.*

The right dock would allow for routine computer maintenance on the ship, and it would have a dorm that used to be for incoming sailors to wait for debriefing after classified missions. *The only thing it won’t have is a warm body to spoon.*

Saul considered the few female crew members on board again, but he’d already chosen not to

approach any of them. All of those females had mates on this ship, except for one and she was a happy whore. The men here adored her, and she adored her new life of being cared for in every way, from getting the best food to never doing chores or a work shift. If he interfered with that perfect setup, a mutiny was almost certain.

“Can I at least do a radar check? The radio’s quiet today.”

“Fine.” It was unlikely that turning the radar on would keep the bloke busy for long, however. There was nothing around them and nothing was happening. The crew members were eager to leave this cold land. Saul was perfectly content being out of the line of fire.

They were off the coast of Canada, monitoring radio transmissions while the rest of the crew foraged in the small town nearby. The weather was calm for being so cold. It had been a perfect time to do some scavenging. Saul was positive the town had been deserted even before the war. The small shacks and crumbling dock were a pitiful reminder that nature always took as much as she gave.

The radar beeped calmly and steadily as it scanned. The computer screen activated, showing them an empty ocean and a deserted shoreline where a few of the crew members were playing in the snow and enjoying the antics of a nearby seal pod instead of standing guard. They’d all gone hunting yesterday and captured a few of those. The

seal steaks had gone over well, but that excitement hadn't lasted long. The crew needed to be occupied.

Saul had ideas for that, but he didn't want to implement them yet. Doling out chores just to take someone's mind off the environment wasn't a good thing for a captain to do. He wasn't worried about losing in a mutiny, but he would have to kill them if that happened and he needed all of the normals to keep this ship running efficiently.

"Nothing. Dammit!" The crew member switched off the radar resentfully. "How about a conversation?"

Saul grunted without opening his lids. "What do you want to talk about?"

"How did you get here?"

That question got Saul's attention. He opened his eyes to regard the man suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

The crewman threw his hands up in exasperation. "Oi! It's just a question, you cunt!"

Saul realized he was being oversensitive. He sat up in the chair and did a small stretch to soothe his aching spine. "I was in the military. Then I was drafted. Then I was stolen because I can man any type of transportation. Then Cerise convinced me to hijack a sub. And now here we are."

The crewman wasn't going to let Saul off that easy. "Where were you when the war came?"

Saul refused to contemplate that ugly day. "On a ship that didn't make it. Next question."

The crewman was aware of Saul's unhappiness with being forced to have a conversation at all. He didn't push for that answer. "Tell me about one of your adventures. I don't care what it was. Just talk to me!"

Saul didn't want to. Conversations about that sad past inevitably led to memories of things that had gone wrong, but it was clear the crewman wasn't going to let up until he had some form of entertainment. Saul chose one that would supply the entire crew with gossip for a few days. "I joined the Australian Resistance Force after Reicher killed my wife."

The crewman's mouth dropped open.

Saul scanned the man's thoughts again to make sure he wasn't a traitor. Then he continued the story. "I'd known about the resistance for a while. Tilly and Trevor were good friends of mine before the war. They always talked about resisting government tyranny. As you know, our country had been overtaken by progressive dissidence long before society fell. Tilly and Trevor were part of the organization that shipped weapons and supplies in for attacks on government facilities. They also provided an escape route for government people who were itching to defect. Many of those lost souls stayed with the resistance. Over time, it grew so much that the government couldn't ignore it anymore." Saul looked over at the crewman. "I've heard their son, Gordon, is the leader of the resistance now."

The crew member shook his head. “We were all talking about that a few months ago. There was a rumor going around that Cerise is the leader of ARF.”

Saul snickered. “There are a heap of rumors swirling around about Cerise. That doesn’t make any of them true.”

“So how did Tilly and Trevor and Gordon evade Reicher?”

“Reicher believes the rumors about Cerise. He thinks his connection to her will allow him to defeat the resistance when it matters. He’s got a big surprise coming. She’s just an ordinary member they recruited after the murder of her children.”

The vibes in the sub changed subtly. Saul caught it. He tensed. “Something’s coming through.”

“Awesome!” The crewman leaned toward the radio.

“This is different. Be quiet now.” Saul concentrated. It almost felt like someone was searching for him mentally. He brought up a shield in case it was someone he didn’t want to have contact with.

Where are you, Saul?

Saul didn’t know who was calling for him, but the sound of that timbre echoing through his mind was fascinating. He lowered his shield to allow the contact to go through, drawn. The sheila’s voice was magnetic.

Angela smiled in his mind as she made the connection. “Hello, Saul.”

Saul sensed more power than he'd ever known one person to have. Sulfur and brimstone filled his nose. It quickly dissipated and was replaced by the sweet scent of vanilla.

“My name is Angela. And we need to talk.”

Saul recognized the name. He spoke softly, hoping he wasn't on her target list. “What can I do for you today, Alpha?”

Angela liked it that Saul had respect, but she already knew he would say anything to stay off the grid. She scanned the thoughts that were open to her without digging in deeper. It wasn't needed yet. “I want that submarine at the bottom of the ocean. Before that, I have a job for you.”

Saul didn't refuse. He wasn't sure that he could. The feel of her in his mind was incredible. He wanted to get to know her better. “What do you want me to do?”

Angela sent out another wave of mind-capturing vanilla. “I want you to give me a quick ride.”

“I'd be happy to!” Saul laughed. “Climb on!”

Angela snickered. “I meant in your submarine.”

Saul sobered. “Are you going to get them out of there?”

“Yes. I'm also going to bring Reicher down. When I'm finished with him, the lab and the United Nations will be gone.”

That was music to Saul's ears. “That's the only reward I need. When do you want to be picked up, lass?”

“Head my way now and stay off the grid—exactly like you’ve been doing.”

Saul was suddenly as impatient and excited as the crew members. “I’ll be there as quickly as I can.” He already knew where she was calling from. He could hear angry birds and calm water in the background.

“One more thing. I need you to deliver a message to your friends.”

Saul sighed as that magnetic presence faded. He pointed impatiently toward the crewman who was still watching him. “Get the others back on the ship. We’re leaving right now.”

Saul picked up the mic; the radio was already tuned into the right channel. Saul had been listening for calls since dropping off Marc’s team, but he hadn’t heard much. “Come in, ARF.”

The radio crackled.

Saul knew someone was listening. “I have a message for you from the other side of the world.”

“Go on with it, mate.”

Saul grinned at the man’s cool tenor over the static-filled radio. “Your reinforcements are coming soon.”

2

“We need reinforcements at the south gate! Send reinforcements!”

The men and women now fighting for their lives at the entrance of the huge tomb weren't able to answer the shout for help.

Tilly and Trevor swung their machetes at the same time on the same foe.

The intruder fell at their feet, but there wasn't time to celebrate as three more intruders pushed in through the tunnel.

They had opened the tomb below the graveyard to do some scavenging, but they hadn't cleared it first. The beach mobs were all over the countryside now. Cerise and Goldie's homesteads were crawling with unwelcome visitors.

Rain and heavy wind came in through the open entrance, interfering with the aim and vision of the fighters. Thin, weaker people cowered in the corners while the fighters in their group tried to handle the threat.

"Get that door shut!" Gordon fired a weak blast of pain that disoriented the three intruders who were trying to get deeper into the tomb where they might be able to evade capture.

Tilly and Trevor used their machetes while other members of the resistance pushed on the heavy stone barrier to get it shut.

"Another one got through!" The blond-haired, blue-eyed boy wielded a sword in each hand. He stabbed with the right and sliced with the left, drawing blood with both blades.

His parents retreated to allow him room, but they didn't go far.

Gordon hacked off a head in one clean sweep and then spun around to do the same to the other opponent who had fallen to his knees. Blood and hair slid across the floor that was already dampening from the storm.

Gordon stepped back neatly, avoiding most of the mess. He sheathed both bloody swords with a huge grin on his face. "That was fun."

Gordon's dark-haired, brown-eyed parents frowned at their son as they finished disabling the other intruder, but they didn't scold him. Gordon was going to inherit leadership of the resistance in the future. Moments like this would allow the vote to go his way. Showing courage was important in any clan, but for ARF, it was a necessity.

"Disregard the call for reinforcements. It's over here. We're all closed up."

Everyone who heard the call was relieved that the resistance members at the south gate had been able to repel the intruders. The beach mob above them would find the bodies, however and know someone was down here. It would be almost impossible for them to go out and scavenge now without fighting, and even when they did, they wouldn't find much. The mob up there would strip everything usable.

Tilly and Trevor cleaned off their machetes while scanning to make sure they hadn't missed any threats.

Gordon frowned at the bodies of two fallen members. He hated losing people. "Someone get them into the crypt."

All of their bodies were being stored with bones that had been down here long before the war. It was the safest way to make sure they didn't have a disease outbreak. It also required less effort than trying to bury them. The entire population here had been on rations for months. It wasn't wise to waste energy.

Thunder boomed loudly above them, rattling the ground. Dirt fell over the relieved people. A storm would force the mob above them to take shelter. It was possible that the bodies wouldn't be found for a couple of days.

A damp smell began to wind through the tomb as the rain increased.

"I'm going to check the other entrances." Gordon left before his parents could assign him a guard.

Tilly started to go after the 18-year-old to provide protection.

Trevor grabbed her wrist. "The boy has to do some things on his own."

Because they'd already gotten a call saying the south entrance was closed, Tilly relented. She pulled away from her husband and went to join the other people who were dragging bodies toward the inner crypt.

Trevor studied her for a minute, admiring her lean, hard face and soft curves. He adored his wife.

He just hated the circumstances that had brought them together and kept them from living a good life. They'd been drafted during the Vietnam conflict. That trauma had scarred both of them deeply, but it had also turned them into a resistance force that had managed to stay together and grow into the 300 souls that were now cleaning up the mess around them. *It also gave us an amazing son.*

Tilly was aware of her husband's warm stare, but she didn't encourage it. She wasn't good at being emotional even when they were alone. When they were around other people, it was impossible.

Shouts of victory echoed through the tunnels.

Both parents were relieved that the fighting was already over. They needed Gordon to be accepted as the new leader after them, but they didn't want to endanger his life. Their only son was precious to them. It kept both parents fighting for survival, though that was getting harder by the day.

They were well-outfitted for the environment as far as their duds. Finding spare garments in empty houses was easy. Everything else was hard, especially food and personal items. It was amazing how fast toilet paper had disappeared.

This tomb was chilly, but not cold enough to cause illnesses. It was a relief from the harsh environment above. The worst they got down here was a few snakes that were chasing the rats. They'd quickly adapted their clothing and sleeping arrangements to avoid bites.

None of them liked living belowground; it was even worse when they were surrounded by the bodies of their fellow Australians. Most of these had been here before the war, but that didn't make it any easier.

Two small cookfires in the center of the main tomb provided a small amount of warmth for their older citizens. Tents and sleeping bags lined the walls and kept a clear path down the center. They'd quickly learned to be ready to fight for their lives at any moment.

"I'm picking up a radio transmission." The man who manned the radio for them waved Tilly over. "It's very faint. They must be a far distance from here."

Tilly listened hard through the static and the noise from the storm.

"Your reinforcements are coming soon."

"That's Saul!" Trevor hurried over. "I knew he survived."

Tilly waited for more, but that was the end of the transmission. "Reinforcements from where? Everybody else is gone."

"There's still one powerful population out there."

Tilly snorted at Trevor. "Reicher already has the Ghost. Safe Haven is useless to us now."

"We've all heard the stories that his alpha is actually the power in that group. And Cerise told us someone else was coming." Trevor was encouraged

by the news. “I think we should stay here and wait for them.”

Rumbles and mutters went through the people who were listening while they cleaned and worked, but none of them spoke against it. Tilly and Trevor had kept them alive so far. Everyone here had faith that would continue.

Tilly hadn't liked the unanimous agreement that they should leave this area to avoid the beach mobs, but she'd cast her vote for it because she hadn't been able to find a better solution. Reicher was busy with his new toys right now, but it was just a matter of time before he refocused his attention on wiping out the remainder of the resistance. *We should have left already.*

Tilly was proud of everything they'd accomplished, especially considering the odds. Most of the people who had started out with them from the city were still alive and still a part of this group. The few who had fallen had been killed by troops or in random attacks. They hadn't had a single death to starvation in the 16 months since the war. A trek through the outback might end that amazing streak. “How are we set on supplies?”

Trevor had finished an evaluation of that last night. “We're low, no lie, but I think we can hold out for a month. We'll have to cut portions again.”

Tilly sighed in disgust. “It's time we cleared out the rodents.”

Everyone groaned or grimaced at the thought of eating rats, but again, none of them protested. They

weren't ready for a trip through the outback where they would be out in the open and vulnerable. If eating rats allowed them to avoid that, then that's what they would do.

Trevor had always been in favor of it. He didn't mind a good rat soup. "I learned how to make rat chowder in Nam. You'll like it. It's crunchy."

More groans answered him, but there were also grins and a little relief from the people who had been told to start packing. That work could stop now.

Gordon came back through the south tunnel, followed by the victorious fighters who had protected that entrance. He joined his parents. "I hear we have company coming."

Gordon was the only descendant here. His value was indescribable to the other people in the resistance.

"Saul called. He said reinforcements are coming. A new player just entered the ring."

Gordon grinned at his mother. "Well, then I say we go hunt some rats and feed them dad's chowder when they arrive. If they survive it, they're probably alright."

Trevor interrupted the joking laughter. "We need to clear that mob above us or whoever's coming will be overwhelmed upon arrival."

Nearly everyone nodded at the observation. The beach mob was hundreds of bodies strong and many of them now had weapons they'd dug up from the homesteads as they passed through each city and

town. Despite low gun ownership on official paperwork, many Australian households had had illegal weapons before the war. They'd just hidden them and kept their mouths shut.

“We can try to distract them.”

Tilly frowned at her son. “I don't want to sacrifice anyone for that.”

The people listening approved. Their numbers were already low compared to the mob and only about half of them were fighters.

“I was thinking we could make a call.”

Tilly quickly picked up on her husband's idea. “We can act like we're a landing party and send them a hundred miles from here. Then we can clear out the ones who didn't leave.”

Gordon listened to the thunder. “Do you think they'll go? It's a nasty storm up there.”

“They might.” Trevor used his brilliant mind. “If we pretend to be someone they either want to join or they want dead.”

Tilly wiped dirt from her arm. “Who would that be?”

Trevor shrugged. “We can't fake Reicher's voice, but we might be able to convince them the call came from the lab.”

“What if we just say Reicher's coming here to capture members of the resistance?”

Tilly and Trevor stared at their son in admiration. His mind was always fast, but this was perfect.

Trevor considered it. “How do we set that up?”

“Yeah, we don’t even know if any of them up there have radios.” Tilly moved away from the stinky bloke who ran their radio.

Trevor motioned. “We know Cerise’s house does. All we have to do is tap into that feed and send a warning out that Reicher is on his way. An hour later, this place will be a ghost town again. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll act like ghosts.”

Everyone approved the plan that didn’t require a sacrifice.

Tilly gestured at her husband. “You can get that message recorded. No one knows the sound of your voice.” They had always kept her and Trevor off the radio so Reicher wouldn’t know she was alive.

“I’ll have it ready in about an hour.”

“Make sure you’re loud enough to go over the storm.”

The storm boomed above them again, rattling the ground as if to reinforce that order.

Gordon grinned at his mom. “Let’s get the rat traps.”

Tilly followed him toward that tunnel, shaking her head. “I can’t believe it’s come down to eating those squeaky little buggers.”

But that was one of the reasons why they’d chosen this tomb as a hideout. The rats were a last-ditch effort to keep from starving.

As they moved down the tunnel, Gordon threw his arm around his mother’s tense shoulders. “Will you tell me about my dad again?”

Tilly frowned at him. “Your dad’s behind us, working on a radio message.”

Gordon wasn’t deterred by her sharp tone. “You know what I mean.”

Tilly sighed in tolerant patience. “You were a generous gift from a close friend to a couple who are barren.”

“And that’s why Reicher will never stop until he captures or kills all of us, right?”

Tilly nodded as they walked down the dark, damp tunnel. “Yes. He hates Mitchels more than anyone else on the planet.”

“Why?”

Tilly put her arm around her son’s waist now that they were out of view. She rested her cheek on his wide shoulder. “Because Adrian Mitchel rescued me from Reicher’s lab and allowed me to have a life away from there with a bloke of my choice. Reicher will never forgive the Mitchel family for that. As long as Reicher’s alive, you’re in grave danger.”

Chapter Twenty-Two
Worth My Life

1

“It’s getting dangerous out there.” Harry fought the rocking floor as they walked.

“Yeah.” Shawn fought his mind. He hated being underwater; it reminded him of the International Detention Center. *I wonder if this lab has escape pods?*

Shawn tried not to tense up as the floor seemed to shift away from their feet. *I still miss Drew.* “What are we doing today?”

Harry grinned eagerly. “The first descendant surgery.”

Shawn snorted. “I doubt it’s the first in this lab.”

Harry shrugged. “Still. It’s a first for Safe Haven and the Eagle medics.”

Shawn’s mood control vanished. “We’re not in that camp anymore. What we do here doesn’t get marked on their slate!”

Harry wasn’t concerned about Shawn’s fluctuating emotions. “It does in my book.”

Both men slid aside for three twitchy staff members coming through the hall carrying plastic tubs. This wing was busy with workers removing supplies and closing unused rooms. They all

avoided the two new men physically, but their eyes observed every move the Safe Haven medics made.

Cameras also tracked their progress down the cool, damp-smelling hallway. Both men knew Reicher was on the other side of those cameras. They'd been given some freedom now, but they weren't truly free. Neither of them had forgotten, but it was best not to dwell on it and drive themselves crazier.

Harry dug in the pocket of his UN jumper for the key card. He hated these clothes. He missed his Eagle gear, but he hadn't asked for it. Reicher would never allow that. Harry did enjoy the comfortable shoes, however. They were an old doctors' brand and very supportive. *If we ever get out of here, I'll search the wastelands for another pair of these.*

Shawn caught that. He refused to contemplate leaving. *In here, I'm being forced to eat and sleep, and to take care of myself.* Out there, he would be dead within a week because there would be no one to stop him from Blinking continuously. Like most addicts, he knew he had a serious problem; he just didn't know what to do about it.

Harry nodded. Shawn's condition was a lot better now, but he was still too thin, and his mind was a loose wire that faded in and out based on what he was doing at that moment. Being here had scarred all of them, but Shawn had gotten the worst of it. Harry was worried that the man wasn't trying to remember this was a run and it would end at some point.

Harry opened the door to the medical bay and held it, automatically clearing the path for his teammate to take out any targets.

Shawn entered the medical bay and did an automatic scan as his hand slid to the missing gun on his hip.

The bay held one metal table in the center, two unarmed females, and long counters topped with deep cabinets that were still full. All the other medical bays had been stripped for the move.

Harry didn't care about being relocated to the next floor. His mind was on the operation he was about to perform.

Shawn was stressing about the move. He didn't know if he was staying with Harry or going back into a Blinking wing. *If they put me in with my attempted killers, I'll eliminate them all. It won't be taking revenge; it will be protecting my life. They did it once, they'll do it again.*

"He'll keep us together, I'm pretty sure." Harry was thrilled with that arrangement. He and Shawn worked well together. They fed from each other emotionally and professionally. It was the perfect setup.

Sasha spotted Shawn. She jumped up from the chair next to Isabel's bed.

Isabel was barely conscious. Her naked body was covered in a heated white blanket. An IV ran from her arm to a bag hanging on the wall above her.

Sasha took up a fighting stance in front of her sister. “Get out! Help! Guards!”

Shawn stayed in the entrance. “We were told to come here.”

Sasha didn’t believe that for a minute. She pointed, furious. “Get out!”

The speaker activated. “They are following orders. Do not interfere.”

Reicher’s annoyed tenor cut through Sasha’s fear and anger, but it didn’t stop those feelings. “They shouldn’t be here!”

The yelling woke Isabel from her medicated doze. She opened her eyes and saw the men. She immediately discounted Shawn for the ghost standing behind him. Cold chills went down her neck. “I killed you.”

Harry smiled coldly over Shawn’s shoulder. “Boo.”

Isabel screamed.

Sasha quickly retreated until her legs bumped into Isabel’s table. “We need help in here!”

Shawn didn’t enjoy the moment. He went to the counter and woke the computer so he could scan her file.

Harry was enjoying Isabel’s discomfort even though he knew he shouldn’t. His own terror at her attempted murder demanded satisfaction.

Isabel leaned against the pillows, lids shutting. She didn’t have the energy to fight. *He’s not really here. That’s just a ghost. Ghosts can’t hurt me.*

Sasha stayed in front of Isabel's bed. Just a week ago she had bargained for this to happen, but that didn't matter to her now. "I'm going to tell you one more time to get out of here and then we're going to have problems!"

Harry sneered at her. "Your sister tried to kill me and almost did. I'd say we're even for one shove, wouldn't you?"

His scathing honesty threw Sasha off balance. He'd been abused and panicky when the shove happened. Isabel had been depressed and seeking vengeance. "Why did you agree to this?"

Harry finally entered the medical bay. "Shawn already told you. We were sent. It wasn't my idea."

"But it's a perfect opportunity to take revenge while she's hurt, right?"

Harry stared at the sisters for a long minute, deciding their fate. He wanted to have mercy, but it was getting harder and harder to hold onto who he'd been before. He struggled with it now...and came out on top. "I'm not going to hurt you or your sister. I'm going to save her life with a delicate, history-making operation. You're going to observe it all. In return, you'll *both* owe me a favor that I'll claim later."

Sasha was used to bartering for survival. "If she dies, I'll slit your throat. You won't recover from that."

Harry snorted but didn't send back his own nasty threat. He joined Shawn at the counter so he could scan the medical file.

Shawn began gathering the things they needed from the cabinets. There wasn't much to collect. Most of this operation would be done with their gifts.

Sasha picked up Isabel's hand in comfort even though the woman was unconscious again. The other medics didn't know how to help her. Harry might really be able to save Isabel's life. It was hard to trust him after so much had happened, but there wasn't another option. She patted Isabel's hand. "We're going to help you, Issy. Just hang on, okay?"

The raw emotion in her voice touched the males. Shawn and Harry were both sympathetic to the women in this lab. They could only imagine what the females had gone through. Remaining animosity started to fade; determination to be successful replaced it.

Shawn's powerful demon scanned for problems in other rooms and from other residents. He found one.

Shawn regarded Harry with glowing orbs. "You're in danger."

Sasha looked over in surprise. "Not from me. We made a deal."

Harry shrugged as he pulled on a pair of gloves. "I think I know what he has planned for me, but the advances I'm making here are miraculous." He shuddered in terrified excitement. "It might be worth my life."

Everyone was stunned, including Reicher.

He might have just saved his own life again. Reicher settled into his uncomfortable office chair to observe. He didn't care so much about Isabel, but this was an excellent test of Harry's new skills. Harry had accepted another demon that was happily sharing the mental space. It was unheard of. Reicher was impatient to view the results. If they were good, it would be hard to follow through with his plan to consume the man.

Cerise tapped on the unlocked door and then entered.

The guard left to escort another staff member to the new level.

Reicher pointed toward the empty seat. "Joseph is in the breeding wing preparing for his first official session. As soon as this operation is over, Sasha will join him." Reicher had almost sent Sasha there now, but Harry might need her.

Cerise slid into the chair with a snort. "Official, yeah."

Everyone knew Joseph and Sasha were having a physical relationship. As long as the sessions on the official schedule went well, they wouldn't be punished. If it continued after a positive pregnancy test, Reicher would have to intervene. Breeders weren't allowed to have relationships. They were only allowed to breed.

Cerise forced herself to act like she cared about his daughter. It was expected now. “Where’s your girl?”

Reicher noted her obedience happily. “Thalia is overseeing the relocations for this level. We have determined that the storm is going to directly impact the lab.”

Cerise wasn’t surprised. The sound of the ocean sloshing outside these walls was hard on everyone. The occasional light flickering and damp walls were adding to the tension.

“We’re obviously moving to the lower level and shutting down this floor. You and I will handle that from here.”

Cerise began pulling up the correct files on the computer. She was a little surprised that Reicher was trusting her with this, but she also noticed he had some of his strength back. He wasn’t coughing and he was once again perfectly neat. A sense of power emanated from him that was both attractive and annoying. He could probably handle an attack right now. “What about the people in the isolation cells?” The others who’d been arrested at the same time as her were still locked up.

“We’re not moving everyone to the next level.”

Cerise glanced over her shoulder, demonstrating more of her intelligence. “The Blinkers, too?”

Everyone had heard about the Blinkers attempting to murder Shawn, and about Harry’s amazing operation that had saved that man. The

normals in the lab were now completely terrified of the new people. The descendants were in awe of them. Marc's team had already accomplished more in the time they'd been here than residents who had been in this lab their entire lives.

Reicher nodded. "They haven't been fed since the attack. They're on the edge of rioting. I believe they'll make an excellent welcoming party."

Cerise winced.

Reicher didn't ask her for her choice yet. He was more interested in seeing the results of Isabel's surgery. *If he's able to save her, I'll make different plans for his future.*

"Having someone like him around could be extremely useful."

Reicher already knew that. Consuming Harry would only buy him a small amount of time. If he learned how to copy Harry's gifts, or at least converted Harry enough to be able to trust him, then Harry could remove the cancer and Reicher could survive that way without killing the only descendant on the planet who was capable of bringing back the dead.

Cerise didn't believe that was what had happened. She doubted Shawn had been as close to death as everyone was whispering about.

Reicher didn't tell her differently. She didn't need details about Harry's amazing abilities until she could be trusted.

Cerise was monitoring Reicher's thoughts. She caught all of it and decided there was no reason to

act submissive anymore. “You’re *never* going to be able to trust me.”

Reicher shrugged tolerantly. “Many people have said the same before going through one of my programs.”

Cerise decided to get it over with. She spun around in the swivel chair and crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. “I’ll agree to marry you, on several conditions. You have to bring my kids back and then you have to stop with the time pushes. I don’t care about the adults, but you can’t kill any more kids. And leave ARF alone. They’re just trying to survive now.”

Reicher laughed out loud. “You’re testing your limits to determine how valuable you are to me, but you have no power here. You’ll do as you’re told and be happy about it or you’ll be eliminated.”

Cerise’s eyes narrowed. “Your death can always come a heap sooner than you expect. You have to sleep some time, you know?”

Reicher had already expected this. He acted like he was reluctantly reconsidering his plans. “Fine. I’ll bring your children back.” He gestured. “I’ve already drawn up the contract. You’ll find it in your file. Sign it and it’s guaranteed.”

Cerise pushed harder, revealing a small amount of her true feelings. “And my husband?”

Reicher’s rage struck her violently, knocking her into the computer. Small bits of electronics and dust flew to the floor; blood trickled from her nose.

Reicher pulled in the anger, but it was still evident in his voice. “Don’t ever ask me that again.”

Cerise hated how much stronger he was. She couldn’t challenge him unless she wanted a total knock-down, drag-out fight that would end in one of them dead. If that happened, the entire lab’s authority structure would collapse. The time push would never happen. Cerise submitted angrily. “This is the reason Tilly ran from you.” She quickly signed the document on the computer and saved it.

Reicher didn’t let her know that her taunt had hit the mark. He studied her in cold triumph with a shield over his mind.

Cerise wiped the blood from her nose and resumed entering commands to shut down this level. She also refused to think of anything else that might give him more of an advantage over her. She hadn’t meant to bring up her husband at all until the time push was actually happening, but she had planned to have a knife to Reicher’s throat at that point so he didn’t have a choice but to give her what she wanted.

Cerise mourned that lost dream. She might get her kids back, but the happy moments she’d had with her husband wasn’t going to be returned. *And I have Reicher to thank for that.*

Reicher felt danger enter the air. He braced to meet her charge with total force. “Make no mistake. I will kill you.”

Cerise controlled herself with a distraction. “They’re starting the operation now.”

Reicher kept his energy gathered for defense if it was needed. He also focused on the screen, where Harry and Shawn were now standing on either side of Isabel to begin the surgery. "I want multiple copies of this made."

"Yes, sir."

Reicher grinned. "It's going to be an amazing day. I can feel it coming."

3

"I have to open her up." Harry gave Sasha a hard glare. "You should leave."

"I'm not going anywhere." Sasha tried to be reasonable. "Just help her. I'll assist."

"Shawn is assisting." Harry motioned. "You can be our nurse."

Sasha went to the cabinet for a pair of gloves.

Harry picked a scalpel from the tray and then brought up a mental scalpel with a finer tip. "Are you ready?"

Shawn nodded. "I'm full of energy and it's all hot."

"Then let's roll." Harry used the metal scalpel to slice open Isabel's abdomen.

The light above the operating table flickered.

Sasha flipped on her flashlight to make sure Harry still had light if that one went out.

Harry braced his feet against the motion of the lab. He supposed the storm was closer now, but he

didn't have time to worry about that. "Pull the muscle aside."

Shawn wasn't grossed out by the gushes of blood or the muscles pulsing out drops of it under Harry's light touch. He lifted the muscle and set it on top of Isabel's stomach. It was still attached and bright red. Shawn found it fascinating how the human body could be taken apart like this without failing.

"How's her pressure?" Harry couldn't look away from what he was doing.

Sasha scanned the machine. "Not good, but she's holding on."

"Wipe!"

Sasha hurried to clear the blood from Harry's new incision.

"Seal this spot, Shawn!"

Shawn used his fire hand to trace a red-hot path over the tiny hole Harry was showing him.

"Good. Do it just like that each time." Harry explored deeper, searching for another leak. He knew there was one more, at least.

"Quick! Here!" Harry couldn't slow his mental scalpel.

Shawn used his fire gift to seal the cut as Harry exposed it. Blood puddled around their hands.

Sasha wiped the blood from the incision so the men could see to keep working. She bit her lip harshly as Isabel's body tensed. Harry was working hard to fix the bleeding. Screaming at him wouldn't help.

“That’s it. Seal it off!”

Shawn cauterized the third hole.

Harry sliced off the scar tissue and scanned for more bleeding. Isabel’s uterus had torn loose, letting blood seep through. It was amazing that she hadn’t died.

Shawn drew in a deep breath, calming himself. “Is that it?”

Harry wiped his sweaty forehead with a bloody sleeve. “I’m checking for more spots.”

Shawn waited tiredly for Harry to call it. He swept the patient and immediately frowned. “She’s too pale. Breathing shallow.”

Harry sent healing orbs into Isabel’s chest and stomach.

Her color evened out.

Sasha checked the machine and pointed.

Harry saw the shocky pulse and low blood pressure. “There’s another leak somewhere. Wipe that blood!”

Sasha cleared his view into Isabel’s open body while trying not to panic.

Shawn gathered more energy to be ready when it was needed.

Harry gently probed the fresh closure. “Wipe.”

Sasha cleared it again and grabbed fresh towels. There was already a pile of bloody rags at her feet.

“There.” Harry directed Shawn’s fire gift to the lightly bleeding slit. “When the uterus pulled away, it ripped a hole in her ovary.” Harry probed gently. “Hit it again.”

Shawn was almost out of energy. It was strenuous work.

Harry exposed the ovary and found multiple tears and thick swelling. “Burn through all of this. Close it off completely.”

Shawn obeyed, paying attention to detail.

Harry checked the other side and sighed unhappily as he found the same damage. “Do it again over here.”

“Her pressure’s coming up.” Sasha was watching the machine closely now. “It’s evening out.”

Shawn leaned back so Harry could view his work.

“That’s good.” Harry carefully set the uterus back into place and packed the site with gauze to soak up the remaining blood so he could be sure they’d gotten all the holes. “I wish Morgan was here.”

Shawn didn’t, but he understood why Harry did. Morgan’s x-ray gift would be handy right now. “Maybe you can copy it.”

“Maybe.” Harry organized the innards correctly, then pulled the muscles back into place. He tugged the edges of the skin together. “Seal her up.”

Shawn did it slowly and lightly, trying not to set her skin on fire. Learning on the job wasn’t fun.

Sasha wiped the blood clear again.

Shawn finished sealing the incision.

Harry checked the machine. He was relieved when Isabel's vitals all reached better ranges. "We did it."

"Are you sure?"

"She'll be okay now." Harry added more healing orbs.

Sasha wanted to hold onto her grudge, but she couldn't. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Harry wiped his hands and scanned Shawn's cauterizing line. "I wish we could take away the scar, too. Sorry. We don't have that skill yet."

Shawn sank down on the stool and drew in a deep breath. The smell of blood was thick. "We'll get better each time."

Harry nodded. "Yes, we will."

The speaker activated with Reicher's pleased voice. "Report to your next appointment."

Sasha knew he meant her. She reluctantly went to the sink to wash her hands. "I have to go."

"We'll take care of her." Harry sent more healing orbs. Shawn joined him.

Isabel's lashes fluttered. She didn't wake, though.

Sasha headed for the exit. "I'll let the caretakers know Isabel will be back soon."

Harry sighed. "No, you won't."

Sasha stopped, turning. "What do you mean? She's fine now. She just needs some time to recover."

Harry shook his head. “We had to burn her tubes shut. She’ll never get pregnant again. Her breeding days are over.”

4

“It’s so beaut to have you here again as a breeder!”

Sasha nodded distractedly at the caretaker as she disrobed. Harry’s statement about Isabel had been carved in stone. Isabel would never have another child. She would be devastated.

Sasha contemplated the last two girls Isabel had birthed and flinched away from that image. Isabel wouldn’t be allowed to have her babies, no matter how much they begged, threatened, or bargained. Reicher didn’t care about the mental health of the women in this wing, only their ability to spit out kids. “Marion?”

Marion held the paper gown for her to slip into. “Yes?”

“What happens to breeders after they can’t breed anymore?”

Marion kept a blank façade as she tied the gown in the front in both places. “I don’t know. We never see them again in this wing.”

It was a normal answer, but it still sent fear into Sasha’s heart. “Are they removed?”

Part of Marion’s job was to keep the breeders calm. She immediately lied. “I’m sure the boss has jobs for them. He doesn’t hurt women.”

Sasha lifted her foot for the non-slip slippers. “Can you find out for me?”

“Of course.” Marion slid on the slippers and then held back the heated blanket on the flat table.

Sasha heard the lie in the woman’s too-cheerful tone. She didn’t repeat her request. *I forgot for a minute—her job is to keep us breeding. She doesn’t care about anything else either.*

Marion covered Sasha with the blanket. “Would you like to go over the rules?”

Sasha needed the distraction. “Sure.”

Marion tucked the blanket beneath Sasha’s curvy body. Then she began threading the straps through the wrist and ankle cuffs. “Keep your hips arched to prevent leakage. After he withdraws, clench those muscles while we tilt the table. After that, you may take a nap for the half an hour wait time.”

Sasha doubted she would be able to sleep.

The door opened. Another caretaker led Joseph in. “Remember the rules. Once you’re in, stay in to prevent leakage. Do not withdraw until all semen has been expelled. Do not use excessive force but go deep to encourage conception.”

“No problem.” Joseph smiled at Sasha. “Hi, honey!”

Sasha frowned at him.

Joseph caught the hint. She’d told him these sessions were somber events. Joking and emotions weren’t welcome.

“Take your place and we’ll begin.”

Joseph saw Sasha was distracted. *And I'm not cuffed, but she is...* He managed to control himself by curling his fingernails into his palms. The harder he pressed and the more it hurt, the more in control he felt.

“You may begin.”

Marion didn't watch the breeding moment. She flipped the timer and got ready to tilt the table.

Joseph shoved in and began thrusting.

Sasha tuned him out, automatically tilting her hips.

The lab swayed roughly in the roiling water as the storm came closer to their location.

Sasha was suddenly overcome with nausea. She fought to control it as Joseph thrust faster, already nearing the end. She knew her bonds were turning him on, but it was also the first time he hadn't been cuffed. She'd been worried about it before, but she only had room to be scared for her sister now.

“Yeah!” Joseph let go, filling her full. Small drips of blood fell to the floor from his palms as his nails cut into the skin.

“Very good.” Marion tilted the table as he stepped back. “We'll see you here tomorrow.”

Joseph sucked in air and tugged his robe shut. He smiled warmly at Sasha and left.

Small blood drips followed him in a trail of warning.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Father Knows Best

1

“Let’s make this quick. Keep your mind on your work and do what you’re told.” Thalia stepped over a small puddle of water leaking from the side of the elevator shaft as she led the troops out of the lift and into the Creation wing.

The three nervous normals followed her reluctantly with a folded gurney. They’d been ordered to help. They didn’t want to be here.

The residents of the wing noticed their arrival right away. Many of them rose from their restless positions in the rocking lounge to confront her.

“We’ve heard the computer alerts. You’re shutting us down. When are we being moved?”

“Are you here to move us?”

“Who’s the gurney for?”

Thalia strengthened her mental shield as every descendant in the wing tried to penetrate her mind for answers. Everyone was upset now that the storm was nearly upon them. It was feeding into the tension. “Relocations are underway. We’re running a little behind. Keep your pants on!” She glared around with red orbs that warned them to remember their place.

The men in the Creation wing were no longer intimidated by authority. They had survived all of Reicher's torture; they hadn't been punished in a long time. They didn't hold back on their displeasure.

"You better get us out of here before the storm hits!"

"Ay! I'm not attending any more sessions until you get me out of here."

"Who are you here for?"

"Yeah, who are you moving first?"

The testosterone levels were staggering to the lone female who quickly strode toward Marc's flat. "Relocation is underway. Get your mist packed and be ready when we call your name!"

The residents saw where she was going. Understanding snapped into place. There was only one member of this wing who wasn't able to walk on their own.

"I told you!" The loudest man among them swung his hands around. "I told you! They only value him now! We're all expendable."

Tension rose to a new notch at the accusation.

Thalia waited for Marc's flat to be unlocked. Reicher was in the security room, covering the shutdown and unlocking doors as it was needed for these relocations.

This wing was a mess. Clothes and papers were strewn everywhere. If not for the lock on Marc's door, he probably would have already been killed. The feeling of violence was clear. Many of the men

glaring at her already had fresh bruises and injuries that only came from brawling.

Thalia quickly entered the flat and slid over to let the guards through with the gurney.

None of the three normal troops were armed. The tension in the complex was already too thick. Reicher had ordered everyone to keep their weapons locked up so they couldn't be stolen.

Thalia didn't answer any more of the shouting, mumbling, glaring men now crowding around the entrance to Marc's flat. It wasn't wise to trigger a fight with angry dogs unless you were prepared to die or kill them all. Thalia actually was prepared to kill them all, but that wouldn't go over well with her father.

The three guards gently lifted Marc's lean body onto the gurney and began strapping him down.

Unsatisfied with Thalia's responses, the angry residents blocked the exit. Their taunts and cries became increasingly louder.

"We're gonna drown in the storm!"

"They're leaving us here to die!"

Thalia glared at the loudest man. "We've invested a heap of time in your training. We're not leaving you here to die. Back off!"

Her comments were too little too late. None of the angry men retreated or calmed down.

"You're not like us. You don't have to worry about your life, eh!"

"Oi! Why are you taking the new bloke first?"

“How long until the storm gets here? Are the top levels really flooding?”

Thalia didn't like it that they had so much information. She supposed they had pulled it from the minds of staff members who were busy securing gear, moving supplies, and relocating subjects to the level below this one.

Thunder and lightning cracked above the lab. Muted, the thunder still made people jump and the lightning still caused electrical equipment to pause or stutter before resuming normal functions. Nature's power was awesome and terrifying.

“Straight to the elevator.” Thalia gestured.

The three troops hesitated to push the gurney into the crowd of angry men.

The smell of their fear hit the air hard and pushed into Thalia's nose. She didn't comfort the normals. She had nothing to say that was comforting. This was an ugly situation, much like the last three relocations they had done. Greg had also outlived his welcome in that wing. None of the lab's residents were happy that Marc's team was being given special treatment.

Thalia brought up her shield and braced to fight. “Who wants to die right now? There's no need for a storm. I'll kill every one of you!”

Thalia's dense shield and angry red orbs slowly began to break through the chaos. Several of the subjects moved away, clearing a thin path for the guards.

Thalia put her shield around the gurney so none of them could take their anger out on the unconscious man she was trying to move. All of the other staff members had refused to come here. Several of their other areas were going through the same problem. She had escorted each of their more valuable subjects personally. Marc was last on the list.

Thalia waited, glaring and daring.

Her cool response to their anger broke through a little more. Most of the crowd retreated this time.

Thalia walked next to the gurney as the troops pushed it toward the elevator and tried not to make eye contact that might trigger an attack.

Thalia felt death enter the air and understood that wasn't going to be possible. She gathered more energy as they approached the elevator.

The guard in front quickly hit the button to open the elevator.

“Don't let them get on the lift!” The loudest man triggered the rush by hurrying forward.

The others followed him like angry lemmings destined to drown in the sea.

Thalia dropped her shield and opened fire, sending out blindness and sharp pain in thick waves that pushed the crowd back. She shoved on the gurney, trying to get it into the elevator.

The front of the mob fell to her spells, but the middle of the mob rushed forward before she had time to fire again.

One of her guards went down to vicious swipes from homemade weapons that the residents weren't supposed to have. Blood splattered the wall.

The other troops pushed and shoved toward the elevator, knocking the gurney sideways.

The gurney refused to go in. Thalia brought her shield back up around herself and the gurney. She reached behind her and began flipping the cuffs that were securing Marc to the metal transport. She couldn't lower her shield yet to fire again. The minute it was down, she would be overwhelmed.

The two remaining normal guards with her tried to close the elevator. They hit the button frantically.

Nothing happened.

Reicher's pissed voice came over the speaker. "Get back to your flats, now!"

In the past, his booming rage would have cowered the attackers and sent them fleeing to wait for a punishment. Now, it only made them angrier. They pummeled Thalia's shield with their homemade weapons, their fists, and their minds.

Thalia's energy immediately began to drop. She shoved on the gurney again.

Marc began to stir. The sense of danger was cutting through the drugs to wake his mind even though his body wasn't responding.

Thalia flipped the last cuff. "You're all pissing me off!"

The crowd of men beating on her shield leered and shouted.

"You're never getting out of here!"

“We’ll keep her as a hostage.”

“That’s Reicher’s daughter. He’ll have to give us what we want!”

Thalia pushed on the gurney again, still trying to get it into the elevator.

Several of the attackers hurried around to block it. They pulled the two cowering troops out of their way and shoved them into the angry crowd.

Horrible screams echoed as the residents immediately took out their anger on the normals.

Thalia refused to run. She knew Reicher was waiting for her to get into the elevator so he could close it. “And I don’t run from anything!”

Thalia dropped her shield and opened fire. This time, she used her most powerful spell to disable all of the foes around her.

The sonic wave went out in a powerful blast that exploded eyeballs and hearts; it dropped half of the crowd in one blast.

Thalia rotated and shoved her hand beneath Marc’s torso. She heaved him up onto one shoulder and immediately brought her shield back up.

Something heavy struck it and stuck.

Thalia stared at the knife blade that had stopped an inch from her eye. Fury lit up the inside of the shield with waves of heat.

Thalia tugged Marc’s body onto her hip, then leaned his chest and head over her shoulder while holding onto his wrist. She didn’t look away from the angry mob as she slowly began to step backward.

Her shield trapped two of the angry men in the rear of the elevator.

As soon as the elevator shut, she turned around to face them.

Despite their situation, both men continued to attack her shield. They were now out of the Creation wing and on the edge of having a valuable hostage.

Marc knew what was going on even though he didn't have control over his body. His mouth was already next to the woman's hairy ear. He mumbled lightly.

Thalia immediately lowered her shield and heaved Marc's body into both men. She drew her gun with her right and her knife with her left as they went down under the unexpected weight.

The men shoved Marc off them and rose with clenched fists and insults spewing from their mouths.

Thalia stabbed her knife into the first man's forehead, then fired her gun into the second man's chest.

The noise was deafening in the elevator. Her ears rang loudly in protest as both attackers fell.

Thalia wiped the blood from her knife before holstering and sheathing. Then she checked on Marc.

Marc was grateful for the drugs that prevented him from feeling the pain of being so close to the gunshot. It was possible that he had hearing damage in one ear now.

Thalia wiped her bloody hand down her hip, smearing her uniform but drying her hands so she could access her weapon again if she needed it. She had defied Reicher's order on that one. *I don't go anywhere unarmed. This is why.*

Thalia clasped Marc's arm and pulled his weight up over her shoulder again.

Marc's musky smell washed over her and brought an instant reaction from her body.

Thalia ignored it like she had the few other times it had happened with other subjects. Despite what her father wanted, Thalia had no interest in a mate or a relationship at this point. Her engagement to the leader of the Hawaii complex had been arranged a decade ago. Thalia was loyal to that out of duty and honor, not desire. *If I had my way, I'd stay single forever. All relationships do is distract you from your job.*

Marc knew the woman had saved his life, but he didn't feel grateful for it. "You should have let them kill me."

Thalia snorted. "You may not value your life, but I do want mine. If I had let them take you, my father would have disowned me."

Marc felt compassion for her and quickly crushed it. He didn't want to be sympathetic to anyone in this lab. "We're all walking corpses. It's just a matter of time."

Thalia adjusted to put Marc back on her hip, with most of his body hanging over her shoulder.

"You're strong for a girl."

“That is what your mother said.”

Marc laughed.

Thalia cracked a smile.

For one instant, they were just two survivors waiting on an elevator.

Then reality crashed back in. Marc shut his eyes and fell out willingly to avoid it.

Thalia shifted his body higher onto her shoulder and dragged him into the new wing.

2

Reicher observed them closely. The camera had shown him everything in clear detail, including the small bonding moment between Marc and his daughter.

Reicher was pleased. The connection was already kicking in even though Marc had enough drugs in his system to keep him unconscious for days. They were keeping him like that to prevent his depression from taking his life. Marc was contemplating suicide every time he was woken up now. However, he'd felt Thalia's need and came up in time to help her a little. Reicher had no doubt that she would have been able to handle the two men in the elevator alone, but it was still pleasing to see that Marc had responded to her need.

“She's gotten pretty good with that skill, but not as good as you are.” Cerise meant that.

Reicher nodded. “She hasn't perfected the bounce yet, but she will in time.”

Cerise hadn't paid much attention to Thalia during her time in the lab. As Reicher's fiancé, it was important that she now create a bond so they would be able to get along. She also didn't want to anger Reicher again. The facial injuries he'd given her were still sore. "Do all of your offspring have that gift?"

Reicher didn't answer.

Cerise didn't repeat the question. It wasn't important.

Joseph was jealous. He peered over his shoulder at Reicher. "Why did you match those two up?"

Reicher finished scanning the radar before answering. The storm had made landfall and was almost on top of them now. "Because she needs someone like me."

Joseph took immediate offense. "You could have matched her with me! I don't have a mate yet and the breeding sessions with Sasha are not a relationship."

Reicher let out a long sigh. "That has never been an option."

"Why not? Is it because I have no value to you anymore now that you have a new toy to play with?"

Cerise retreated out of the line of fire in case things got ugly in here. Things were already ugly outside.

Reicher didn't answer Joseph's angry accusation.

Joseph took that as a yes. His resentment rose another level. It was a struggle not to keep arguing.

Cerise knew Reicher was getting fed up with Joseph's continual badgering about his status in the lab. If he wasn't careful, his value would drop to zero and Reicher would execute him.

The computer activated with its latest warning. *"Shutdown of level two will take place in three hours. You have three hours to clear this level before the shutdown commences."*

Heavy footsteps ran by the security room without stopping. Things were becoming increasingly chaotic, matching the intensity of the storm that was bearing down on them at level three strength. Small leaks were popping up all over the lab; the protective shielding was only in place over the top levels and the bottom floors now. This middle area was vulnerable in multiple ways. The staff members who hadn't received orders to relocate were noticing all of these things and panicking. It was officially a riot situation.

The scared, angry residents now roaming through the halls weren't having mercy on anyone. All staff members were in danger. Reicher had ordered them locked in their sections until escorts were sent, but only a few of them had made it to a safe place. Small groups of rioters were all over the complex, picking off weak targets and breaking into areas that were off-limits.

Reicher resumed watching the monitor to be sure Thalia and Marc made it to safety.

Joseph also watched the camera, but only in an effort to memorize Thalia's gifts. It was shocking to

Joseph that he had the same powers she did. *We both have sonic, blinding, pain, and a strong shield. What are the odds of that?*

The computer activated again. *“The top floor is 8% flooded. Computers are shutting down in three hours. There are riots in two wings. Please enter commands to handle these situations.”*

Reicher motioned as he stood. “Activate the lifts between the two rioting wings and let them kill each other.”

Joseph and Cerise stared in surprise.

“When the fight ends, send a hound from the top floor. Or two. Or the entire pack. They’ll be fed and sheltered from the flooding. After we pump out the water, we’ll send them back up with the whistles.”

Joseph couldn’t help questioning the order. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

Reicher nodded. “Both wings are failures. Marc told us all their secrets. Half of them are insane and the other half have cracked.”

Reicher wasn’t monitoring Joseph’s thoughts right now. He looked toward the woman standing in the corner, providing security. The time lock was inactive while they were shutting down the level. Their water-powered generators weren’t able to handle the full load. It took a lot of time and power to bring up the shielding around the lab, so he had waited until they were sure the storm would hit here. It was now taking away power that was needed for other services.

Joseph comprehended the decision even though it wasn't one he would have made. Descendants didn't do well in the labs. They either got ill and died or went crazy. *Like our boss.*

Joseph hadn't been surprised to find out that Reicher and Cerise were getting married. Cerise's resemblance to Reicher's lost love, Tilly, was beyond remarkable. There had been times in the past when Joseph had mistaken them for each other. *If I didn't know better, I would swear they were related.*

Reicher's jealousy and need for complete control had pushed Tilly into the arms of one of the subjects. When she'd died during an escape attempt, Reicher had been devastated. That hadn't been obvious to most people. He had performed his duties as expected, but Joseph had been able to tell the difference. *You don't spend a decade locked in a room with someone every day without getting to know them at least a little. Reicher loved her. Cerise is only a substitute.*

Cerise caught that and didn't care. She kept scanning the hall for problems. The unlocked security room was an easy target. Cerise was fully armed once again and enjoying the weight of the weapons on her toolbelt. She'd missed them while she was locked up.

So far, nothing had changed for her upon being engaged to Reicher, but she knew that wouldn't last.

The computer activated once more. *“This lab has multiple breaches of security. Get off your ass and do something!”*

Despite being the one who’d ordered that message entered many years ago, Reicher flushed. Fury ran through his body in tiny sparks that made his hair stand on end. His orbs turned red. “I’ve had enough.”

Reicher’s patience was gone. The chaos implied this lab had a leader who couldn’t control their station. He was embarrassed that things had gotten so out of control over something as simple as a typhoon. “Thalia needs an assistant. Help her get the subjects settled on the new floor. And then stay there with her.”

Cerise didn’t argue even though Reicher’s safety was more important to her than Thalia’s was. Thalia couldn’t bring her kids back. Reicher could.

Cerise pushed the heavy door open.

Four men dressed in black immediately rushed toward her, catching her off guard.

“Shut the door!” Her warning was too late. One of the staff members shoved a syringe into her arm as he ran by.

All four men entered the security room and surrounded Reicher as Cerise slid to the floor.

For a brief moment, Joseph considered letting the rioters have their way. Then reality reminded him of his goal here. He was itching to rule the lab, not destroy it.

Reicher and Joseph fired at the same time.

A double wave of sonic converged into a massive spell that hit all four men and then traveled out the door and rebounded off the hall wall. It continued out of sight, hitting other rioters who were rushing in to help their fallen comrades.

“Very good. Your sister hasn’t mastered that bounce yet.”

Joseph stared in complete shock, unwilling to accept what he’d just heard.

Reicher now gave the answer that Cerise had been fishing for. “All of my offspring have that exact set of gifts. Only a few of them have mastered the bounce. Be proud of yourself. That’s not an easy task.”

Joseph kept staring at Reicher. *That can’t be true.*

Reicher grabbed Cerise’s arm and tugged her back inside. “Keep her alive. I’ll go help Thalia.”

Joseph lifted a shield over himself and Cerise, gawking. “Yes...father.”

Reicher was quickly out of sight without replying.

Joseph’s mind kept going over the stunning revelation. *Do I need to make a new plan?*

Joseph slowly nodded. “Surely some type of bond has to exist there, a natural bond that I can use to get what I want.”

Joseph kept his shield up as he went over and pulled the door shut. He switched the lock manually and then hurried back to his desk to observe Reicher in action. This had only happened once before

during his time in the lab, but he had been new then and not trusted to run the computer while Reicher handled the riot. He hadn't gotten to watch the action.

The storm hit them in full as Joseph focused the camera on his father.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Fall In

1

“It’s the boss!”

“Grab him! He’s alone!”

A large group of staff members who worked in the supply department flew toward Reicher. Many of them had illegal weapons and several were bloody, indicating they’d already hurt someone.

Reicher’s anger shot out of his chest and bounced down the hallway in a zigzag pattern that ricocheted off the walls and increased in strength as it went. It slammed into the front line of the rioters and blasted them into the rest of the mob. The entire group went down.

They didn’t get back up.

Reicher walked over the bodies without worrying if any of them were faking. His spells were designed to kill and that was what they did.

The lights went out briefly above him and then resumed, much dimmer. The entire complex shook from the force of the waves being generated by the typhoon.

Reicher narrowed in on footsteps coming from the left. He stopped and rotated, scanning to detect if they were a threat or if they needed assistance.

“Help us!”

Two caretakers ran toward Reicher in relief. Both women were scratched and bruised and their uniforms were torn. Wild hair and wide eyes told him what they were running from.

“They grabbed the breeders!”

“They took over the breeding wing!”

Reicher expanded his shield to include the two women who stopped behind him, gasping for air. Sweat rolled down their smudged faces; small scratches leaked blood drops that infuriated Reicher.

A mob came down the hall after the women and spotted Reicher.

“Kill him!”

Reicher’s next blast of sonic swarmed the pack of predators and dropped them in a brief instant. The bodies collapsed against each other and blocked part of the hallway.

Reicher was having a great day. He reveled in the strength running through his body as he crushed the rebellion. He hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

Reicher used another blast to clear the bodies, slamming the corpses against the wall and creating ugly carnage spots that wouldn’t be cleaned until this level was reopened.

The two women behind him were normal, but they weren’t scared of magic. None of the men who

had been chasing them were descendants. They stayed close to Reicher as he resumed his fast walk.

Reicher chose the direction they had come from. Running into the fire had always made more sense to him.

The hallways were strewn with rubbish and debris, angering Reicher further. *Why do rioters always have to trash the premises?*

The complex groaned and shuddered as another tall wave pushed through the ocean over them. Reicher grew even angrier that he wasn't getting to observe the storm's fury from the camera-heavy security room. He always enjoyed watching nature. Having to miss it was exasperating.

Heavy footsteps and shouts echoed in front of them.

The two women realized Reicher was heading to the breeding wing. They were relieved he was going to help the others, but neither of them wanted to be in the fight zone. They dropped back from him, both considering fleeing to a safer area while he handled the problem.

"Keep up. If you fall behind, you'll probably be killed." Reicher didn't stop for them. Despite all of the coercion used in this lab, many of the staff still had free will. If they wanted to run, they were allowed. He just wasn't responsible for the consequences.

Reminded that Reicher was the only one who could provide real safety, the two women resumed

marching on his heels while their heads swiveled, searching for the next threat.

Reicher had the breeding wing on his radar now. Unsanctioned violence was taking place there.

Reicher paused near an open door.

Several staff members cowering behind their desks peered at him in suspicious relief.

Reicher gestured. "Fall in and stay close."

The staff members were willing to take the risk. All of them hurried from their hiding places and gratefully entered Reicher's protection. The hiding residents hadn't been injured, but fear covered their faces as they listened to the shouts echoing through the hallways.

Reicher didn't wait for them to get set or for them to thank him. He moved through the halls, only stopping when he sensed more people who needed assistance.

He had already been killing off staff members who weren't needed. Some of the people he was rescuing now were also on that list, but this was a mutiny and it had to be stopped. The only deaths that were allowed in this lab were the ones he ordered.

Reicher stopped at the fork in the hallway. He looked to the right and beckoned for more hiding staff members to join him from a small janitorial closet.

A small mob of rioters hurried out of the stockroom to his left.

Reicher kept marching instead of challenging them. He could feel the dangerous situation in the breeding wing growing worse by the second. He needed to get there if he wanted to save any of them.

The innocent staff members cringed against each other and tried to keep up as the mob followed, firing illegal guns and stabbing with forbidden knives into the shield that grabbed those projectiles and wouldn't let go.

One of the men in the rear of their group tripped and fell. He was quickly out of Reicher's shield.

Reicher kept going.

Another staff member in the rear tripped over a wet spot from a leak in the wall and slid to her knees. The hungry mob rushed toward her as she screamed.

This time Reicher stopped. He turned around with glowing red orbs and pushed his shield out to include both fallen staff members and their attackers.

The other innocent people inside the shield hurried to get on the other side of Reicher to clear his line of fire.

Reicher strode back toward the men who were struggling with the fallen woman. He brought up another shield that bounced into the entire group and separated them like leaves.

The fallen staff members avoided most of the hit and scrambled away with only minor injuries.

The rioters realized they were inside Reicher's shield. They lunged to their feet and hurried forward

to grab him. Their injuries didn't register in their haste.

The first man reached him and grabbed for his arm.

Horrible screams flew through the hallway as the man's arm caught fire.

"He has another barrier!" The man tried to punch through Reicher's personal shield.

Electricity went through his body at such a high voltage that his hair began to smoke.

The other two attackers realized their mistake and tried to run, but Reicher's large shield around the entire group wouldn't let them out.

Reicher used a mild sonic blast to disable both men. He rotated toward the breeding wing again as the bodies dropped. "Keep up now."

The staff members pushed and jostled each other to stay close to him.

Reicher paused again outside the medical bay. He glanced through the window at the medics inside.

Sasha nodded through the window. She had returned as soon as her session in the breeding wing was up. "We're fine in here."

Shawn and Harry had secured the room and brought up shields. They were alternating anytime they heard footsteps outside. Sasha was confident no one would be able to get in here.

She returned to Isabel's side and began checking her vitals. The surgery had gone well.

Once Reicher regained control of the lab, Isabel could be transferred into a recovery room.

Reicher studied Harry.

Harry was busy checking the incision site to make sure there was no infection. He missed it.

Reicher felt Shawn's hot eyes on him and understood he would have another fight on his hands if he entered the medical bay. Marc's team all had orders to kill him. Reicher knew that, but Shawn's animosity was personal. Being castrated had created a lifelong rage that would never be satisfied. He could feel Shawn fighting the urge now to come out and face him even though he knew he would lose.

Reicher left to keep from triggering that fight. Shawn's blinking sessions were incredible. He didn't want to kill the man yet.

It only took Reicher another minute to reach the breeding wing. The way the lab was set up, it only took a few minutes to reach any section on any level. It was an ingenious set up that still wasn't able to handle nature's fury. Reicher had made a mistake by waiting so long to bring up the protective shield. *I won't do that again.*

The breeding wing doors had been pried open. Blood spots trailed the tile floor and stuck to Reicher's boots as he entered.

The breeding area had been torn apart in a mad rush to get to the females. Some of the men in this complex had never been bred. Others hadn't been bred for a decade. Reicher wasn't surprised at their

actions, only disgusted by their lack of self-control. He moved between the overturned tables and damp spots on the floor.

He saw multiple violations of the rules. The women being attacked right now were not expendable, but this unauthorized breeding session might produce unplanned pregnancies. Reicher made a fast, harsh decision. He lowered his shield and fired out a medium strength sonic blast.

It bounced off the walls, gaining strength before slamming into all of the fighting, screaming, grunting, climaxing men and women.

Bodies hit the floor or fell to the tables. None of them survived.

The people behind Reicher were horrified, but they were also relieved that the attackers were now dead. Calmness began to return to the lab.

Reicher pointed. "Tell them they can come out now. Get this mess cleaned up. Get to work!"

It had hurt him to eliminate the women, too, but unauthorized breeding wasn't allowed in the lab, and he didn't want to waste the time to see if any of them caught pregnant, have them cleansed of the unapproved seed, and then wait for them to recover. This way, there were less mouths to feed and new DNA could be entered into the breeding stock through the females behind him and the others who were already on the lower level.

Reicher concentrated, scanning for the most valuable members of the lab.

He found all of them on the bottom level, where no violence was taking place other than nature's fury. The storm continued to rumble above them, shoving water and ocean debris against the protective walls of the lab.

Reicher was pleased that Thalia had kept control over that level. There were already enough staff members there to cause problems, but it seemed like things were calm and almost running normally.

Reicher marched back up the hallway. He would check every room on this level before it was shut down to make sure he had rescued everyone and eliminated those who weren't needed anymore. It was the perfect time to take care of that, as well.

Behind him, Marion, and the few breeders she had managed to hide came out and got to work gathering the supplies that hadn't been ruined or stolen. They had already been in the middle of relocating everyone from this wing. Marion and the other survivors were flustered and disheveled but otherwise unharmed. She had shoved the more valuable women into hiding places when the rioters had breached the door.

Reicher had only relocated about half of the wings this time. People were aware that he was downsizing. Only the employees who demonstrated progress and loyalty were being saved. Everyone who had been reassigned felt like they were part of a chosen people who would now repopulate the earth with loyal United Nations employees. It felt like the future was theirs for the taking.

Reicher snorted softly. “If only they knew.”

A small child appeared next to Reicher, easily keeping up with his long stride. He looked up. “We don’t understand why you’re letting this happen. It’s going to destroy all the work you’ve done.”

Reicher glanced down at the child tolerantly. “When you reach my age, you’ll grasp that it’s best not to explain your actions every time someone questions you. Pick and choose those moments carefully.”

The small boy understood that was Reicher’s way of telling him to shut up and get back to work. He strengthened the invisible shield around Reicher and rejoined the two other children following Reicher. The kids quickly vanished from sight.

The speaker activated. “The security room is unlocked! Reicher’s in here! Help me get him!”

Reicher chuckled at Joseph’s nicely faked panic. Any remaining rioters would now head toward him, allowing Joseph to practice his sonic blast.

Reicher remembered his own days of proving himself to his father. He had lost that harsh man during World War II. Deciding to leave the lab to join Hitler on his righteous crusade had cost Reicher his father and given him this job.

Reicher wasn’t upset with Joseph for taking a risk, though it was possible he would be overwhelmed. “Life without risk isn’t a life.”

Reicher was actually impressed with Joseph because of it. That didn't happen often. "Keep it up, boy. There may be hope for you yet."

2

Two hours later, the storm was starting to wind down as it passed over them. The lab was under Reicher's iron grip again and all of the rioters had been eliminated. Opening the elevators between Marc's wing and Shawn's wing had taken care of most of the problem. Any survivors from that ugly battle would be there to greet a rescue team, if they were coming. Reicher was no longer convinced of that. It was entirely possible that Safe Haven had given up their plan of coming here.

Reicher activated the elevator and took it to the new level that was being stocked and organized. All of the systems were active now and Joseph had been installed in the new security room to oversee procedures from there. Reicher had stayed visible, even escorting the rest of their staff to the new floor. He hadn't brought Harry and Shawn down, however. He had sent Thalia for that relocation. He still didn't want to trigger Shawn's need to strike out at him.

Reicher entered the level and stopped, scanning for leaks.

He didn't find any water puddles down here, unlike the floors above him. The top level had reached 19% flooded a short time ago. The pumps

were working hard, but until the storm passed, they weren't able to make much progress. Down here, all of the walls and floors were dry.

Reicher scanned the two dozen dorms and flats that made up this level. All of Marc's team was here, as were the residents he had rescued, other workers who had already been here before the riot, and even the people from their jail. Reicher hadn't decided on Goldie's fate yet, though it was possible the pneumonia would take him. As for Gus, Reicher had plans that didn't include leaving him to die. He would be used against his team again at some point.

The elevator beeped behind him.

Reicher stepped aside to allow Thalia to exit.

Thalia shoved loose hair off her forehead while wiping away the sweat. "That's it. We're all relocated."

Thalia's uniform was stained and dirty and her holster was open to allow fast access to her weapon. Reicher disapproved of one but was fine with the other. *One day, all guns will be eliminated from the earth and the world will be a safer place.*

Thalia caught that and understood her father was insane, but that didn't stop her desire to be like him or to make him like her.

Reicher glanced up at a camera in the corner. "Shut it all down now, Joseph."

Thalia took a moment to rest and get some of her energy back. She'd been running hard for the last eight hours, trying to get everyone relocated.

She was proud of the job she'd done. *I only had to kill three people.*

Reicher gestured. "Update me."

Thalia pulled it from her memory. She was too tired to go dig up the files. "We have minor damage on most of the levels, but the shielding is holding up. We've estimated that the flooding on the top level will not go over 22%. Even the hounds should be able to survive that."

Both of them contemplated Reicher's order that had introduced hounds to the rioting wings right as the wings were in the middle of fighting each other. The hounds were happily hunting survivors of that slaughter right now.

"All of the subjects have been medicated. We expect the first ones to wake in about five hours."

"I don't want our main medication used on the medics anymore after this. I don't want to take a chance on them developing the shaking disease."

Thalia nodded. That disease had ruined Tobias's skills while he was here. "Are we going to get him back at some point?"

Reicher went toward the security room. "No. Let Safe Haven have our leftovers. We have their best fighters and the most powerful healer in existence. We no longer need Tobias." Reicher glanced around. "Or most of the other medics."

Thalia comprehended the downsizing wasn't done yet. "Is there anyone else left on your list? I can handle it before I go on break."

“You’re not going on break. I want you to oversee Marc’s final conversion personally.”

Thalia was fed up with her father’s matchmaking. “You do realize that Marc is married, right? He already has a wife!”

Reicher’s calm tenor didn’t change. “That marriage was never filed with this complex, so it doesn’t exist. Even if it did, a divorce simply requires my signature.”

Thalia had read Reicher’s personal journal. She understood a lot more now of who he was and what drove him, but it hadn’t revealed why he was pushing her toward Marc instead of just putting her in control.

Reicher didn’t stop her from exploring the thoughts that he didn’t have locked up. Chief among those was Joseph finding out who he really was. It was only fair that she also had that information.

Thalia saw it and stopped, shocked. She wasn’t sure if she should be angry that Reicher hadn’t told her. “Does Joseph know?”

“Yes.”

“You told him before me? How long has he known?”

“He found out the same way you did—abruptly and only a short while ago.” Reicher kept walking. “It doesn’t change anything. Marc is my heir and neither of you can change that.”

Thalia’s anger finally emerged in front of her father. “I wish I had let Marc die! Then all your plans would be ruined!”

Reicher laughed at her. “Passion is great for a relationship.”

Thalia blew out a disrespectful noise but she still followed him down the hall. “It’s not passion. It’s hatred.”

Reicher shrugged. “You have to start somewhere.”

Thalia contemplated the handsome, severely depressed man she’d relocated to the nicest flat in this wing. “He’ll probably try to kill me the first time we’re alone together. Maybe he’ll drown me like he did his last woman.”

Reicher sighed. He was tired of her rebellious attitude. “You saved his life. He’s honor-bound to return that favor. Use his guilt to create a bond with him or go up to level one and stay there. That’s an order!”

Thalia understood Reicher had reached the end of his patience. Being threatened with exile to a flooded level didn’t hurt nearly as much as his unwillingness to bond with her. “Marc and I are never going to be a couple. This isn’t going to work.”

Reicher glared over his shoulder. “It will if you put your tight ass where your big mouth is.”

Infuriated, Thalia stormed off, shoving employees out of her way.

Reicher allowed a small grin to crease his lips. Both of his adult children here were like viewing a mirror of his youth. “I used to blow up like that for any reason. It took 20 years, losing those I loved,

and the end of the world to crush the rebellion out of me. Now, I only have room for making progress until death arrives. My willful children will make sure that I live on through their determination to be a pain in Marc's ass. I couldn't be prouder."

Listening from the security room, Joseph chuckled. That was the first time Reicher had shown any warmth for him, in any way. "If you want rebellion, *father*, then that's what you'll get."

Chapter Twenty-Five
One Little Thing
Mission Day 40

1

“I’m going deeper. You stay there.”

Kenn’s demon was already hanging from the side of the mental hatch, gasping for air. It didn’t protest even though it wasn’t safe. He had tried many times to convince Kenn that staying down this long was dangerous. Kenn refused to listen.

Kenn passed up scroll after scroll as he dove, like he’d been doing for the last hour. Something at the bottom of the murk was pulling him with a bright shiny gleam. *That’s the one I need.*

Kenn knew his lungs were on the edge of giving out. His demon usually breathed for him when he went this deep, but he had already been down most of the day, trying to reach the bottom of the murky Akasha field. He pushed forward anyway and managed to get a finger on the elusive scroll.

Kenn’s demon gasped in air, but it wasn’t enough to keep his host alive.

Kenn comprehended his life was in danger, but all that mattered was reaching that glowing scroll. He knew it was something important.

Kenn wrapped his beefy hand around the scroll and immediately swam for the surface.

It was easier now for him to swim out, but the burning lungs and dizziness said he might be in trouble when he got there.

He reached the hatch and pushed through. He tried to draw in air, but his lungs were too empty to accept it.

Sasha quickly put the oxygen mask over Kenn's face. He had been in the session room for hours, bringing up valuable information and skipping others. Without being a descendant, she could only guess why he had passed up the other scrolls for the one now glowing in his hand.

Kenn sucked in oxygen through the mask. They were giving him a treatment every time he came back up; they had to.

Kenn forced himself to relax and draw in small threads of air until his lungs could handle a full breath. The need to cough was strong, but he had learned from experience that it was a bad idea when there wasn't air to cough with. That pain was still vivid in his memory.

As soon as he inhaled deeper, Kenn opened the scroll, unable to wait any longer. He read the glowing golden words before they vanished.

Blessed steel opens and closes all gates.

Kenn stared in confusion. "What the hell does that mean?"

Sasha understood his mutter through the mask, but she didn't have an answer.

Sasha smoothed her wild hair and waited to see if he needed more assistance. She had been in here with him for hours now. Her blood pressure was pounding in her ears; fear was driving it.

Isabel's surgery had gone well. She had spent three days in the recovery room and was now back to work part-time. Her sadness was obvious, though. She missed her babies. Sasha was still trying to figure out a solution for that. She wanted her sister to be happy, even if that meant going against the boss.

The session room still smelled of bleach, telling her the previous session had spilled blood. That wasn't required any more from Kenn. Scroll divers didn't need violent motivations. They just needed enough air to last through the session.

"Marc might know." Kenn concentrated, ignoring the scroll that flamed up and vanished.

Sasha retreated from the table and headed for the lift. Now that Kenn was alert, Sasha didn't feel safe being in the same room. She tolerated Shawn and Harry because they had saved her sister, but the rest of the Safe Haven men were incredibly dangerous.

Kenn reached out for information. *Marc? Are you there?*

Greg responded instead. *What can I do for you today?*

Greg sounded cheerful. Kenn immediately resented him for it, but he wasn't surprised that Marc hadn't answered. As far as he knew, Marc

wasn't answering any of the team that was finally ensconced in the same wing together.

Greg couldn't help his good mood. He'd made progress in his session today, but he could also feel time starting to speed back up. That meant their captivity was almost over. *I don't even care if that's because death is coming. I just need this to be finished.*

Kenn decided Greg might be able to help. *I need information.*

Greg scanned the scroll through Kenn's thoughts. He connected it to the dimension work he was doing in his own sessions. *That solves half of my problem!*

Kenn frowned. *I don't understand.*

We need Tim here to bless a knife. We can't open or close the gates between dimensions without it.

Kenn was disappointed that he hadn't figured that out for himself, but he was tired.

Greg disconnected and resumed what he had been doing before Kenn's call rang through the wing. Reicher didn't like them to communicate about anything except the job, and even then, they weren't allowed to do it for long. Reicher was very careful with his subjects.

Kenn glanced at the window, where Joseph was looking down on him. When he had arrived for this session, Reicher's daughter was in there. *I guess I was down for a while.*

Joseph gave Kenn a thumbs up to let him know they had recorded the information, but he didn't chat with the military man. Kenn's wing was one of the few that Reicher had brought to this level without cutting any of its members. Joseph thought that was a mistake, considering Kenn and those military men were bonding. If there was another riot, Kenn would have a small squad at his disposal.

Joseph turned around to see what Reicher wanted to do next. This security post was longer but narrower, forcing them to line the desks up differently. It restricted Joseph's view of the door and his boss, while giving Reicher a clear sight of both.

Reicher was thrilled. "They're relying on each other now, connecting to complete their goals."

Joseph nodded. "It is amazing."

"It's proof that my methods work." Reicher gestured. "Send him back to the wing. Then find me a priest among the subjects."

None of the employees here could do it. Reicher had stripped them of religion in the same manner that he had removed their hopes and dreams.

The calm ocean outside these walls didn't hint at how ugly things had gotten during the storm. Reicher did a quick scan of the radar to detect when the next one was coming. He hoped it wasn't soon. He had also planned on it. The protective shielding was still up over two-thirds of the complex.

"You may return to your flat." Joseph observed for a minute to make sure Kenn was going to obey,

then he began searching through computer files. The complex was light on residents now and those who were here were extremely busy. The storm had passed, leaving a heap of damage that workers were cleaning and repairing. Reicher's wedding was also being planned.

Joseph didn't express his doubt about the order, but his mind was full of it. No new subjects had been brought in since Marc's team was captured. Joseph doubted any of the other subjects still believed in religion enough to be able to give a blessing.

Reicher watched Kenn carefully stagger toward the elevator. Reicher was unable to be out of this security room now. With all of Marc's team on the same level and still working through the conversion process, it was too dangerous. "But that's going to change soon. His men are almost mine."

2

Kenn took the elevator straight to his wing without trying to go AWOL like he had before. He already knew Reicher was untouchable. There was no point in repeating that disappointing adventure.

The rest of the team were already at their doors watching as Kenn came from the elevator. They spent most of their day at the doors; they were only allowed out into the small lounge one at a time and not very often. Reicher didn't want to take a chance on them organizing a rebellion.

For most of the team, it was a comfort just to be able to view each other, but they didn't use hand code or try to exchange messages. Reicher would see right through that.

Kenn paused outside Marc's flat. He peered through the window to make sure his team leader was still alive.

Marc's unconscious body on the bed hadn't budged since Kenn left, but the steady rise and fall of his chest said he wasn't dead.

Kenn continued to his flat. Each of the team checked on Marc on the way to and from their sessions. He hadn't been awake yet on this wing as far as any of them knew.

Kenn's door locked as soon as he was inside.

Kenn liked the better-outfitted quarters. The pull-up bar and radio with preprogrammed music gave him something to do and it was helping him with his health. It was also a distraction. He preferred to be scroll diving.

Kenn sat on his bed, immediately drawn back into his mind. *We need Tim. I wonder if I can connect to him from here.*

Kenn was aware that the conversion process was working on him even though he didn't want it to, but there was no resisting. Reicher had seduced him with information, and it had worked.

Kenn concentrated on home and made the connection quickly. *Tim?*

Kenn? Tonya assumed he was dream walking. She was thrilled that he had made contact. *Are you okay?*

Kenn hadn't meant to connect to her. Now that he had, concern flooded his mind. *Are you in jail?*

Yes. Samantha was kidnapped and I'm being blamed for it. They believe I tried to blow up the cruise ship!

What does Angela think? Kenn knew that was the deciding factor.

She knows I didn't do it.

Kenn doubted that Angela would let anything happen to Tonya while he was gone. *Angela will handle it. Have faith in her.*

Kenn hated Tonya's fear, but he only had enough room for his own goals right now. He couldn't be distracted with her situation unless it was dire.

Tonya's shock and hurt came through their connection, but it had no effect on Kenn.

Before Tonya could ask another question or protest his conclusion, Kenn skipped on, searching for his target.

There was no sign of Tim.

Kenn assumed that man was too busy to recognize the mental connection. *Maybe I can get another scroll instead.*

Kenn laid back on his bed and immediately dove through the mental hatch.

Kenn's demon was too exhausted to go with him or to breathe for him. *Don't!*

Kenn ignored him. He swam through the murk, pushing away scrolls that he had already collected. There was another small glint of gold that he wanted to reach.

Kenn's lungs gave out.

Darkness swam across his vision.

He reached out, relying on his fading sense of touch to capture the scroll. When Kenn began to suffocate, he barely noticed.

Kenn opened the scroll right there.

3

“Can you hear me?”

Kenn heard the voice from a long distance. He tried to respond, but he didn't have the breath to speak with.

Harry put an exhausted hand on Kenn's big shoulder. “Come up now.”

Kenn's lids opened. His hand lifted.

Harry realized Kenn had found another scroll while he was down. “No more going in alone now. If you keep doing it, Reicher will drug you between each session.”

Kenn drew in air in small gasps, lungs aching as the breathing treatment slowly began to take effect. He forced a short nod.

This medical bay was identical to the ones on the previous levels, except that there were no windows and four guards stood outside to make sure the patients behaved.

Harry glanced at Kenn's hand. "What did you find?"

Kenn drew in more air. "I found the map!"

Harry frowned. "How do you know what it is? You haven't opened it yet."

Kenn inhaled a little deeper. "If I open them while I'm diving, they don't burn up."

Reicher activated his speaker. "It's a map to the dimensions that we're exploring?"

Kenn pushed the breathing mask off his face. "No, it's a map of Heaven."

"Say that again."

"The weigh station is just one stop on it. Angela was right." Kenn heaved in air and exhaled shocking words. "Heaven is another world, another land, and they've all mastered what we're doing here!"

Harry and the others listened in surprise as Kenn drew in large gasps of air between his words.

"Life is an experiment and we're only on level one."

Reicher couldn't suppress a cough in time before turning off the speaker. The noise echoed through the security room and the session room. His actions during the storm had used up all the energy he had stored and weakened him again. The treatment had let him control the riot, but it was another bad day for him now.

Reicher's rough tenor came over the speaker. "Do not scroll dive again until your next session."

Kenn didn't care that Reicher and Harry were angry with him. He only cared about the progress he had made. "Didn't you hear me?! I found the fucking map! We can get there now!"

Reicher pointed at Joseph. "Zoom in tight. Make sure you don't miss any details. Then print me a copy."

Kenn gently opened the scroll and held it toward the camera so they could record it.

Standing by the door of the medical bay, Shawn observed all of them in light resentment and heavy impatience. He was eager for his session to begin so he could Blink. It had been interrupted by Kenn's emergency. He and Harry had been sent to help instead of attending their sessions.

"We got it. You may return to your flat now. Remember what you were told."

Kenn let Harry help him off the table and guide him toward the exit. "Do you understand what this means? We don't need to figure out how to access the other dimensions. That's a wild goose chase anyway. We're going on a more important adventure."

Harry didn't get it. "Where?"

"We can go look for the Creator now. We don't have to wait for him to come to us."

Reicher observed all three men as they went into the elevator to get Kenn resettled in his flat. None of them were considering escape anymore. Their rebellious thoughts had been replaced by the

amazing progress they'd made here. "All of the team has converted now, except for Marc."

Joseph didn't think that was true, but he didn't argue. The members who were on the edge were swinging toward Reicher with every session. It wouldn't be much longer before he owned them all.

"It's time for Marc to view the results. Wake him up, then send Cerise to him."

"What goal do you want me to give her?"

"Tell Cerise to convince Marc to join us and she'll have her kids back one day later. Tell my daughter to provide protection and control Marc." Reicher didn't believe that was needed, but the bond he was encouraging between them needed contact to grow.

"What about the rest of today's sessions?"

Reicher considered that schedule. "Send in Subject Eight next. He has a double session today. I'm curious if he can reach a new level with his defender."

"And if not?"

Reicher shrugged. "No one's perfect all the time."

Joseph understood that Reicher was in a prima mood despite being in bad health. He considered talking to him on a personal level.

Reicher's attitude grew cold. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to discuss our relationship. Until then, do your job while you still have one."

"That's not going to work on me much longer. I'm getting sau tired of your threats."

Reicher met Joseph's glare with a lifted brow. "And is that time today?"

Joseph flushed at the direct challenge. "No."

Reicher was almost disappointed. "Then do as you're told."

Joseph did.

4

"You may return to your flat."

Biff responded to that brusque tone immediately. He stepped over the bodies of the dozen guards who had been brought in to fight his defender. Biff didn't care about the deaths of their troops anymore. He was tired of feeling compassion for people who didn't have any for him. As far as he was concerned, everyone in this complex needed to be eliminated.

He entered the elevator without regarding the man behind the glass window.

The tiny elevator barely accommodated him and his defender. Biff leaned against the wall to give the stone warrior more space.

Biff took the elevator to his wing and emerged with the stone warrior on his heels and a smirk on his face. He had defeated all the challenges Reicher had thrown at him today. *In fact, it was too easy.*

As he exited the elevator, Biff spotted two females outside Marc's flat. Biff recognized the women an instant later. He scanned quickly and

found the other team members watching nervously through their windows.

Cerise and Thalia were both dressed in full gear; various implements of destruction were lined up on a cart nearby. Biff assumed they were there to hurt Marc to get him to obey. That was the only reason he could think of that Marc hadn't been awake the entire time they'd been on this wing.

"Get away from his door!" Biff sent his defender toward them aggressively.

Thalia and Cerise immediately turned their backs to the stone warrior that stopped in response to their disbelief.

Biff was used to that now. It gave him an advantage. He hurried forward, hoping he could take them both out.

Cerise drew her machete in one hand and her gun in the other. She was sick of being caught off guard. She'd gotten used to being safe in this lab from everyone but Reicher.

Thalia did the exact same thing next to her.

Biff stopped, realizing they knew what was going to happen next. He settled for placing his defender in front of Marc's flat to stop anyone from going in.

Cerise glared. "We're just waking him up."

Biff didn't care why they were here. He was still furious with Cerise and he hated Reicher's daughter. "Get out of here before I kill you."

Cerise saw Biff's hand go into his pocket and assumed he had a weapon.

Biff had stolen a knife from one of the guards. He snatched it from his pocket and tossed it.

Cerise used her pushing ability to slow time.

Alarms went off across the complex at the unauthorized use of that gift.

Team members began shouting at Biff to stand down so she would stop.

Thalia waited for the right moment to disable him.

Biff directed his stone warrior through the time slow. He had already figured out that the creature wouldn't be slowed because it didn't really exist in this dimension.

Both women flinched away from the stone defender as it brought down huge fists. Small cracks appeared in the floor.

The speaker activated. "Get in your flat, Subject Eight!"

Harry and Shawn were still in Kenn's flat to make sure the Marine didn't scroll dive again without permission. The ruckus outside brought Harry over to the door. He put his hand on the knob; it rotated.

Harry gestured to Greg through the window. *It's unlocked. Reicher was giving them more and more leeway. If he gives me enough rope, I'll hang him with it.*

In the security room, Reicher and Joseph missed it for watching Biff try to kill Cerise and Thalia.

Biff ignored all of them, marching straight toward Cerise. He considered her the biggest threat.

Thalia cringed away from him as if she was terrified. As soon as he passed her, she grabbed him around the neck and put him in a sleeper hold.

Distracted and surprised, Biff's defender vanished.

The women dragged him into his flat and dropped him on the bed. They both hurried out without hurting him. All the subjects were riled up now and Biff had just come from a session. It was an awkward situation. Joseph shouldn't have sent them in here until all the subjects were secured.

Biff ran to the closing door, pounding on it. "You leave Marc alone!"

Gas began flowing from the vent over his bed.

Biff turned around and lifted his middle finger at the camera. Then he went to the bed and lay down so he wouldn't wake up on the cold hard floor like he had the last time.

Cerise and Thalia went back to Marc's flat. They had been dealing with subjects for a long time in this lab, but Biff's ability to control his defender was remarkable and dangerous.

Biff caught that right as he began to fall under the effects of the gas. "You have no idea how dangerous I really am, ladies, but you're going to find out."

5

Biff found himself floating in the darkness without his defender. *I always hate this part.* He

never knew how long he would be down here until Reicher decided to wake him up.

A small light appeared in front of him. Biff automatically followed it, wanting any distraction from the boring, thick darkness surrounding him.

“Are you there?”

Biff recognized her timbre immediately. His frustrated anger lashed out. “Yes, but you aren’t!”

Angela was sympathetic to his anger and his fear, but she wasn’t here to comfort him. “What do you want from the future, Biff?”

Biff was caught off guard by the question. He considered it for a few seconds, but the only thing that came to mind was the one thing he was certain he could never have. “I want to keep my protector, even in Safe Haven.”

Reicher and Joseph felt the connection, but they were unable to hear what was being said or see through the murky darkness in Biff’s mind. That was one of the disadvantages of using the gas. It blocked them out.

Joseph shut off the gas so Biff could be woken easier for his next session.

Biff detected dark skies and restless ocean waves in the background behind Angela. There was also a shadow of someone lying on a cot who looked like they’d been through the same hell that Biff had experienced. “Is that Samantha?”

“Yes. She’s back with us now. She’ll need someone like you to make sure she’s never hurt again.”

Biff didn't take that in a personal way. He understood Angela was holding his place as an Eagle.

"I'll unlock you soon. You won't be Invisible anymore."

Biff hadn't considered that. It immediately sounded good to him. "What do you want in exchange?"

Angela smiled at him through the darkness. "I just need you to do one little thing for me."

"What?"

"Steal a map."

Chapter Twenty-Six
Ask My Wife

1

Marc wasn't relieved to be woken. He fought to stay in the cool, calm darkness.

Cerise sat in the plush chair by his bed to wait for the drugs to take effect. The wakeup cocktail was impossible to fight.

Cerise refused to consider what would happen after she was finished with Marc's tour. Wedding planning was the last thing she wanted to do.

Thalia hovered by the exit. She studied the few other team members as they stood at their own doors and worried about Marc. "They're still sau loyal to him."

Cerise nodded. "It's why they had to be handled differently."

Thalia knew there was more to it than that, but she didn't trust her stepmother-to-be with that information.

Marc shuddered as the last of the drugs faded and alertness entered his mind. *Here we go again.*

Marc opened his eyes. He lifted a jittery hand to wipe the crust from his face. "How long was I out this time?"

Thalia frowned at him. “We’ve told you repeatedly not to look at your stay here in terms of days or weeks, Mr. Brady.”

Even barely awake, Marc noticed the change. Until now, she’d only called him by his number. “Or months, right? And what’s with this Mr. Brady shit? I just got used to being called Subject Eleven.”

Cerise chuckled.

Thalia hid her smirk from him. She admired his courage and his constant Marine attitude. Very few captives managed to retain it as long as Marc had.

Marc slowly sat up, not caring when the warm comforter slid around his lap. “Give me a straight answer or get out.”

Thalia knew her father wanted Marc to be content here. It was still a struggle to be polite. “The move was five days ago. You were sleeping for the entire week before that.”

Marc held out a shaking hand. “If he keeps using that shit on me, I’ll be useless.” Marc could feel his heart straining, too. His entire body felt rough.

“As far as I know, the boss has no plans to drug you again.”

Marc felt time speed up at that revelation. “It’s almost over, then.”

Thalia nodded.

Cerise sighed. “I hope so.”

Marc wasn’t sure how he felt, other than like a failure. *I’m not getting my team out of this one.*

“Have you been trying?”

Marc pushed to the edge of the bed and stood. The blanket fell to the floor as he staggered toward the small bathroom without answering Cerise.

Thalia stole looks at his sexy body in the window glass. He was well-built. He took great care of himself. *Except for that cracked front tooth.*

Marc talked while he pissed. Modesty was nonexistent in this place. “We don’t have a dentist yet.”

Marc realized he had read her thoughts and smiled at his demon. *Welcome back.*

The demon bowed happily. *Master.*

“I’ll add it to your file.” Thalia didn’t care that he’d woken with his gifts back. She kept eyeing his hard body. She couldn’t seem to help it. *He’s a sau handsome man.*

Marc leered over his bare shoulder while still pissing. “Right back at you.”

Thalia flushed.

Cerise laughed.

Marc finished relieving himself and then activated the shower. “Why are you both here?”

Cerise smiled. “It’s time for you to visit your team. Reicher knows you all miss each other.”

Marc adjusted the temperature. “Yeah, right.”

Thalia’s blonde ponytail in a braid brought ugly images to Marc’s mind. It reminded him of Adrian. The time apart hadn’t lessened his animosity toward that man. He did admire Thalia’s Glock and the vest beneath her uniform, however. It was wise to be

fully geared around him. At the same time, it wasn't.

Thalia suddenly wished she'd spent a little time on her hair, and maybe even used some of the makeup she hardly ever wore.

Cerise rolled her eyes. "It wouldn't matter. You look like a Mitchel. He hates Mitchels."

Thalia regarded Marc to see if that was true.

Marc shrugged. "Most Mitchels are sneaky bastards."

Thalia lifted her chin. "Thank you."

Marc frowned. "For what?"

"For reminding me that I'm living up to my family name."

Her words confirmed her lineage for everyone listening, including Reicher.

Marc knew how Reicher felt about that family. "You might have screwed yourself by admitting that."

Thalia shrugged. "Anyone petty enough to deny me a job based on my DNA is a prejudiced bastard."

Marc chuckled as he realized Thalia had trapped Reicher with that one. The commander here prided himself on treating everyone equally. "Nice."

Thalia blushed under his praise. It was almost as good as getting it from her father.

Marc entered the water. "Someone find me a washcloth."

Cerise pointed at Thalia. "We both know he means you."

Thalia could almost hear her father's encouraging laughter. She stomped into the bathroom and yanked open the cabinet on the wall.

"Stick around. I can't reach my back."

Thalia threw the cloth at Marc, but she still eyed his naked body. "Then how have you been doing it all along?"

"The kindness of willing females." Marc grinned at her as he tossed the rag back.

Thalia knew he was playing a game, but her heart skipped a beat at that grin. *I was wrong. The chipped tooth makes him cuter.*

Thalia leaned in to wet the cloth while eyeing him openly.

Marc scanned her from ponytail to boots, noting the rocky nipples poking through her thin shirt. "How long since you've been laid?"

Thalia blushed. "Never."

Marc resumed wetting himself. "How long since you gave yourself some pleasure?"

Thalia's anger broke through at the perceived insult. "I'm not that degenerate watching us right now! I don't do that!"

"I see." Marc reached for the shampoo dispenser. "You can do my back. We'll knock out the front together."

Cerise laughed again. Observing Marc when he was being a rascal was fascinating and entertaining. *I wonder what he's like when he's really happy.*

Marc blew water off his face. "Ask my wife."

Thalia's face fell at the reminder. Her heart protested.

Angry with herself for responding at all, she dropped the washcloth and left the bathroom. Then she left his flat. She finally stopped at the elevator. A tear rolled over her cheek.

Cerise scowled toward the dunny. "That was mean."

"Nope." Marc's mood was slowly improving. "She's thinking about us as a couple, like that has a chance. Shutting it down now is a kindness."

Cerise felt bad for Thalia. It came out in a nasty blast of payback. "Maybe Reicher will change his mind and castrate you. If you're not going to use that sex appeal for our goals, then you don't really need it."

Marc felt the truth in that. He reluctantly reached out to Thalia. *I'm sorry.*

Liar!

Marc nodded. "As you would be if you were in my place."

Thalia slowly came back to his flat, ignoring the scowls from his team. "I have been in your place, Mr. Brady."

Marc was horrified. He looked up at the bathroom camera. "What kind of monster tortures their own kids?!"

Reicher didn't answer.

Thalia did. "He has to be sure we're loyal to the goals here."

Marc began to rinse his hair. "Does it work?"

Thalia considered her burning ambition to be good enough for her father. “Nee, not really. It’s the family bonds that keep me loyal. Without that, I would have already left.”

Marc doubted she was allowed to leave. He didn’t want to feel bad for her, but it was impossible not to. “I’m sorry for your life.”

Thalia sent his weak compassion back in his face. “I’m sorry for your wife!”

Marc grunted. “So am I. She deserves better.”

Thalia’s growing emotions broke her. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“It’s the other way around.” Marc meant that. His time here had made him appreciate how hard Angela had tried to keep them together through all the years and all the hell. “I fought her every step of the way. I even brought another woman between us.”

Thalia had read every word in his file, multiple times. “I heard she has another man.”

Marc snorted. “She’s playing with him, like I’m playing with you. She doesn’t want anyone else either.” Marc’s horrible guilt started to rise up again. “I took a lover and killed her just to prove my wife loves me. I’m a sack of shit. You should stay away from me before I ruin your life, too.”

His broken words were full of a deep passion that told Thalia he would never betray his wife again. Thalia hated that bond. *I can’t break that. My father’s plan for us is doomed.*

“Yes.” Marc knew the answer, but he asked the question anyway. “You’ll still try, though, right?”

Thalia sighed miserably. “Of course. It’s my duty to obey him, and like you, I never shirk my duty.”

The bond that neither of them wanted grew stronger.

In the security room, Reicher listened in approval. He wasn’t discouraged by their words. They were just clearing out old spaces to make room for new connections.

In Marc’s flat, Cerise made a gagging sound. “You two make me sick.” She couldn’t take the emotions. It reminded her of her dead husband. “Ay, screw already and get it over with!”

Thalia blushed again, while Marc chuckled. He knew what Cerise’s problem was, but he had no sympathy for her or the healing injuries on her face. “Where are we going first?”

“Greg is being let out into the lounge. You’ll sit with him for a bit and enjoy some hot tea with honey and milk.”

“Tea?” Marc finished rinsing.

Cerise ignored his disapproval. “It sets the stomach up for a good meal. It’s calming when you’ve been empty for a while.”

Marc enjoyed the steamy water a bit longer. “Where did you get milk?”

Cerise looked at Thalia. She wasn’t sure if Marc was allowed to have that information.

Thalia resumed stealing looks into the small shower. “We have cows and other livestock.”

“In an underwater lab?”

Thalia snorted. “They’re in a warehouse nearby. It has open doors and a solar-powered delivery system. They munch on the grass and weeds, and we pipe in water when it hasn’t rained. It’s fully automated until we need to milk them.”

“You have to do that daily?”

“We go when supplies run low. All the cows have calves, so there’s no danger of the milk drying up.”

Marc stored that information while he scrubbed the sticky spots from his arm and hands where IVs had been taped. Both of his arms were covered in small needle scars and healing holes. “Should I assume Greg will be selling me on giving in?”

Neither woman answered, which told Marc he had guessed correctly. Instead of bracing against it, Marc shrugged. He was tired of fighting. *None of us are getting out of here. There’s not much point in fighting.*

Cerise didn’t believe him for a minute.

Thalia wanted to. Her father’s orders were digging into her mind, pulling at her. She was starting to want Marc and that was dangerous.

Marc shut off the water without shaving. He almost liked having a beard. He stepped onto the bare floor and stood there, drip-drying.

Thalia stared in longing. *Beautiful.*

Cerise didn't find Marc attractive at all. She preferred redheads. She kicked his dirty blanket into the dunny. "Put some duds on!"

Marc laughed at her and stayed where he was. Drip-drying was good for the skin and his body needed it. He had zits coming in on his neck, dry spots on his legs and feet, and rough spots on his hands that itched. He glanced at Thalia. "Want to lotion me up?"

Thalia nodded once. "Then I'll slit your throat for playing games with me."

Marc snickered. "No deal. I'll just do myself."

Thalia blushed again as Marc laughed and Cerise snorted.

The thickening sexual tension was impossible to ignore, but Cerise knew Thalia wasn't going to come out a winner in that game. *Marc's winding you up to achieve a goal. Get yourself under control!*

Thalia's embarrassment ran across her face. Disappointment and acceptance came next. She smoothed it all away and assumed the blank façade she used during the warehouse sessions.

Marc took his time getting dressed. His gifts weren't back yet, but he expected them soon. He pulled on the soft pants while scanning his guests. Both women were blocking their thoughts from him now, but he planned to dig in for details at some point. He was sure a lot of things had happened since he was last awake.

"You could just ask."

Marc tied the string to keep the sweatpants up. He'd lost weight in here. They all had. "Would you tell me the truth?"

"If I'm allowed; it depends on the question." Cerise forced warmth into her voice. "You've made it to the second level of Reicher's program. It's okay for you to ask questions now."

Marc immediately tested that. "Did he agree to give your kids back before or after you agreed to marry him?"

Cerise gawked. "How do you know about that?"

Marc motioned at her hand. "You didn't have that rock on the sub."

Cerise fingered the beautiful engagement ring. "It was part of the agreement."

Marc sat on the bed to pull on his socks. "You made a bad deal."

"I know." Cerise did, but any chance to bring back her kids was better than none at all. "So did you."

"I haven't made a deal with Reicher."

"I meant with your wife."

Thalia's ears sharpened to listen.

Marc slipped on the soft shoes, holding in a groan of pleasure. All the clothes and gear here were the best. "You only knew her for three days and she got under your skin. Imagine being in love with her."

Cerise studied him. "Are you, though? Most people would say you can't cheat on someone you love."

Marc didn't defend his behavior. "It's possible to love more than one person at a time."

Cerise nodded. "But will she ever forgive you for that?"

"She already has."

"How do you know?"

"If she hadn't, we'd all be back on the island and she would be here going through this."

Cerise frowned. "How does that prove her forgiveness? Or even her love, for that matter?"

Marc saw no reason to lie. "She gave us all another chance to face our demons and accept who we really are and what matters the most to us."

"It sounds like she sent you away to die."

"That's because you aren't one of us. You don't grasp how much we needed to face these demons."

"I don't understand."

"I do." Thalia was a better judge of character than Cerise. "She's letting them clear their own slates and be who they want to be here, where no one cares if they're perfect. Each of them has faced their mistakes and they're coming to terms with it. When they die, it won't be with cluttered minds and hearts full of regrets. They'll face it head-on and make themselves proud."

Marc nodded. Thalia understood what made people tick. "They'll also forgive others in their past and move on from those chains of bitterness. We needed this, as ugly as it is."

“It’s sad that you believe that.” Cerise handed him a shirt from the stack on the shelf. “Come on. Let’s get this tea party started.”

Marc followed her. He didn’t meet Thalia’s eyes, but he felt her hot stare as he went by.

Marc smirked.

Thalia slammed the door shut and leaned against it, suddenly furious. Marc wasn’t her target, however. Her father had put her with Marc today to humiliate her.

Marc denied that. “He’s just trying to prove that he’s right.”

Marc scanned the doors that were around his. There were a lot of them. Some of the faces peering at him through the glass windows were familiar, but most were not. Marc didn’t respond to any of the encouraging smiles. He did a fast count. “How many of my team made it through to this level?”

Cerise refused to answer that. She didn’t want Marc to believe she was responsible for those deaths.

Thalia was used to delivering bad news. “Your four normals didn’t make it off the warehouse floor.” She braced for Marc’s anger.

Marc wasn’t surprised. “Thank you.”

Both women frowned at him in confusion.

“Why are you thanking me? I killed four of your teammates.”

“No, you eliminated four rapists from Safe Haven so my wife didn’t have to do it and feel bad for that later.”

Thalia was quickly adding up the clues to figure out more about Marc's mate. "But she will feel bad about it, right? Since she sent them here?"

Marc nodded tersely. "Yes. She still has a conscience. All deaths are awful in her mind, even the ones that need to happen."

Thalia began to hate his wife. The love in Marc's tenor when he spoke about her was sickening.

Marc scanned the spotless lounge. The half dozen plush recliners and tea cozy were odd to see. Marc had recognized that each level was more lavish than the last, but he wasn't here for the perks.

Greg's door unlocked. He came out with a relieved smile. "It's good to see you, man!"

Marc scanned Greg's scarred body in shame. The man had multiple burn marks on his hand and forearm, with more scars that traveled up his arm, his neck, and covered half of his bearded face. The eyepatch drove it in that Greg had been severely abused.

Marc noticed Greg's limp next and supposed he also had a foot injury.

Greg hugged him.

Marc hugged him back, touched. He held on for a minute. "I'm sorry."

Greg returned the extra moment of closeness. "Me, too, man. Me, too, but we knew this run would be rough." Greg pulled away. He adjusted the patch over his missing eye. "They keep me busy. Some days, I don't even think about it."

Greg saw Cerise and glared at her. “Go away.”

Cerise glared back, but she moved toward the lift. She lingered there, giving the men a little privacy.

“I hate that bitch.”

Marc nodded. Cerise would get most of the blame from all of them even though they had known she couldn’t be trusted from their first meeting.

“Let’s sit down.” Greg led him toward the lounge. “These chairs are amazing. If you hit the right button, they’ll warm your ass!”

The lounge was a comforting space in an ugly place that was intended to make the residents feel safe. Marc wasn’t fooled.

He picked a recliner in the center so he could view all the doors and the elevator. “You said they’re keeping you busy?”

Greg reclined the chair. “Dimension work is fascinating. I never imagined I’d care about stuff like this, but I do.”

Marc leaned back in the chair and was distracted for a minute by the total luxury. “Wow.”

Greg grinned. “Check this out.” He reached over and pressed a button on Marc’s chair.

Marc grinned as heat began to radiate through the chair and into his sore body. “I want one.”

“I know, right?” Very aware of them being watched, Greg forced out more cheerful words. “This place is amazing in some ways.”

Marc didn’t want to hear that. “Tell me about your results.”

Greg launched into a detailed ramble about other dimensions and how to reach them. He barely noticed when Marc stopped listening.

Marc scanned the other doors and the lounge, seeing his team was restless. All of them clearly felt time speeding back up.

Marc frowned toward those men.

All of them vanished from the windows.

Satisfied, Marc sat up in the chair and made himself pay attention to Greg.

Thalia glanced up at the camera pointedly. She hoped Joseph had caught that and passed it onto Reicher.

Marc knew he'd been caught, but it didn't matter. Reicher would expect his team to obey him even after all they'd been through. The game they were playing was complicated and dangerous; the prize was the future of the world. *All we have to do is be ourselves and follow our training. Angela told us that right before we left.*

Greg stopped talking, finally feeling Marc's distracted state.

Marc smiled at the disfigured man. "You're fine. Keep going with your hard sell."

Greg grimaced. Then he resumed chattering.

Marc began making two mugs of tea. This acting was the hardest part for him. *I wish time would hurry up and rush forward.*

Reicher caught that clearly. He was reminded of his favorite American military movie. "Be careful

what you wish for, Sergeant Brady. You just might get it.”

Joseph made sure the cameras were recording. “He’s not really listening.”

“I’m aware.” Reicher didn’t interrupt the useless conversation yet. He was curious if Marc would figure out what was happening.

Marc got it an instant later. He held up a hand. “You’re hiding something from me.”

Greg didn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah.”

“Just tell me so we can move on.”

Greg drew in a deep breath and let it out in an excited sigh. “I don’t want to leave, Marc. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been through a lot. I understand.”

“No, you don’t. I can’t serve two masters. I’m done.”

“Done with what?”

“The Eagles. Take me off that list. I’m done with reality.”

Marc stared, but he didn’t try to talk Greg out of it. He understood Reicher had gotten to the man.

Greg picked up the mug of tea Marc had made for him. He sipped and waited for his team leader’s reaction.

Marc sat his mug down and stood up. “I forgive you. So will Angela.”

Greg’s face tensed. “No, she won’t.”

Marc didn’t argue, but he was certain Angela would. He looked over at Cerise. “Next?”

Cerise gestured toward the lift. “Harry and Shawn are in a session. We’ll observe.”

Marc followed Cerise toward the elevator.

Greg breathed a sigh of relief. He felt bad for it, but he’d also needed that out of the way. *Now I can concentrate on me and my goals for the time I have left.*

Marc paused to look back. “And what are those goals?”

Greg smiled coldly. “I’m not an Eagle anymore. I don’t have to answer that.”

“Fair enough.” Marc entered the elevator.

Greg bit his tongue and waited for Marc to be gone.

Thalia and Cerise entered the elevator without speaking. They were both scanning Marc’s thoughts to detect how he felt about losing a team member.

Marc snorted at them. “He was more than just a team member; he was my friend. I’m sad.”

Cerise frowned, confused. “Why can’t you still be friends, eh?”

Thalia already had that answer. “It’s like Greg said, he can’t serve two masters. As long as Marc is loyal to their old lives, they can’t be anything but enemies.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven
You're Both Out

1

Marc moved to the rear of the elevator when the two women slid aside to clear him room. He stood behind them as the door shut, contemplating all the things he could accomplish in the short time it would take the elevator to transport them to the next floor.

Both women felt the threat. Their hands slid to their belts to prevent him from stealing a knife or gun.

Marc made a derisive noise. “I don’t really need a weapon.”

The females knew that was true. They were both relieved when the elevator opened.

Cerise quickly hurried out and stepped to the side so Thalia could exit.

Marc chuckled as the females fled the elevator. It did impress him that they were smart enough to know they were in trouble in a fight. A lot of women, including those in Safe Haven, gained a small amount of training and then thought they were invincible. The human body was set up for men to be stronger. That was a fact of nature. Without the weapons that most women scorned, they were

actually defenseless. Even Angela, with all of her determination to be a vicious fighter, had bribed Kyle to take a dive during her last test in the cage. If she hadn't, she never would have passed level 10 in kai.

Marc recognized the medical bay as he exited the elevator. He followed his escorts to the single room and peered through.

Marc was relieved to see Shawn and Harry. He wasn't happy about their conditions, however. Shawn was very thin and had a twitchy look about him that was an obvious sign of his rough mental state. Harry was missing two fingers and his thumb on one hand and his eyes held the glaze of obsession. Marc knew what that was like. He saw it on his own face whenever he looked in a mirror.

Marc swept the patient on the table between the two medics. Bloody gauze lined the floor and the metal cart next to the table. They were obviously in the middle of an operation, but neither man was moving at all. "Descendant surgery!"

"Yes. Harry has made amazing progress with his skills since he's been here. You wouldn't believe some of the things he can do now."

Thalia didn't think Cerise's simple statement gave Harry enough credit. "He's bringing patients back from the edge of death. Several of your teammates are alive right now because of him."

Marc continued to watch the men. He didn't know if they were aware of his presence, but he thought they were by the way Harry's lids narrowed

and Shawn's face was reddening. "Shawn is a medic now?"

"Yes, he and Harry work well together." Thalia didn't elaborate on how that situation had happened. Marc didn't need to know the awful trauma that Shawn had experienced at the hands of the other residents in his former wing.

In the medical bay, Harry concentrated on making the final cut to the bright red appendix he was removing.

Shawn followed behind Harry's mental scalpel with his fire hand, cauterizing the wound instantly. This appendix surgery had taken a few days to set up. It had required Reicher persuading someone with chronic appendicitis to volunteer. So far, they had done the entire surgery hands-off except for the occasional blood wipe.

Harry gently reached in and removed the appendix he had just cut out. He tossed it into the trash basin on the cart and then examined the site to be sure he had gotten it all and that Shawn's cauterization line wasn't leaking.

Shawn checked the man's vitals on the machines and kept his back to the exit. "I never imagined something like this was possible."

Harry grunted, peering closer at the open wound. "I might have read about it or seen movies with it, but obviously, that's not the real thing."

Shawn frowned lightly. "What are the odds that we're sharing a dream and none of this is actually happening?"

Harry gave a distracted chuckle. “This isn’t the Matrix. We really are here; it is really happening.”

It made Shawn feel better to hear someone say that. All of the time he spent blinking allowed a lot of space for doubts about reality.

“You’re getting good at the fire hand.” Harry began pulling the muscles back into place so Shawn could close the incision.

Shawn was proud of himself for the medical skills, but blinking was still all he wanted to do. His medical sessions with Harry forced him to stay alert. If not for that, Shawn wouldn’t care about them at all.

“They’ve kept Marc under for a long time now.”

Shawn nodded. “When he wakes up, he won’t be happy with the way things have changed.”

“No, he won’t.” Harry held the skin in place. “Light and easy now.”

Shawn began sealing the top incision with his mental fire hand. “He had to know there was a chance this would happen.”

“Yes. He and Angela both knew they were taking a big risk by sending us here.”

Shawn faced another fear. “Did Angela send us here to get rid of us?”

Harry tensed. That had crossed his mind repeatedly. “It’s possible.”

“Why would she do that? We were good Eagles and good people the entire time we were in her camp.”

“I don’t have an answer for you.” All of the reasons Harry had considered were possible, but none of them felt exactly right. “Maybe we can ask Marc when they wake him up.”

Shawn fought not to glance toward the door. “Are we going to tell him or let him figure it out for himself?”

Harry shrugged as Shawn finished cauterizing the incision. “He’s a smart guy. It won’t take him long to figure out all our secrets.”

Shawn believed that was true. “How mad do you think he’ll be?”

“It’s hard to say. Most team leaders get pretty upset when their team abandons them, especially during a run.”

“Yeah.” Shawn wiped the sweat from his forehead. Now that the operation was over, the man would be given blood to replace the little bit he had lost during the surgery.

“I believe he might be more understanding than most. After all, he’s been going through hell, like we have.”

Shawn winced. “He hasn’t gone through all of it.” Shawn was sympathetic to Harry for his loss of fingers, but he was still resentful that Marc hadn’t been physically injured at all while he had been castrated.

Harry understood Shawn was holding a grudge. He didn’t tell the man to let it go. If he was in Shawn’s place, he would probably feel the same

way. “Check his vitals again and record it in his file while I do a little cleanup on the site.”

Shawn went to the counter and activated the sleeping computer. He refused to look at the door.

Outside, Marc glanced at Thalia. “That’s three of them now.”

Thalia nodded but didn’t tell him if there were others. That wasn’t the way this tour was supposed to work.

Marc tapped on the glass.

Harry and Shawn both twitched and looked over guiltily.

Marc flashed a quick gesture in Eagle code. *You’re both out!*

Marc walked away before their guilt or gratitude could hit him. He didn’t want to deal with either of those emotions right now.

In the medical bay, Shawn and Harry exchanged relieved glances. It was good to know that Marc was indeed as smart as they thought he was. They hadn’t had to tell him they were staying here even if he tried to escape.

“We’re full medics for the enemy now.”

Harry shook his head. “Reicher’s not the enemy anymore. We’ve switched teams.”

Marc headed toward the elevator.

Cerise stopped him. “Use the other lift. We have a stop to make in a session room.”

Marc neatly pushed the button underneath the window on the wall. The elevator behind him slid open.

It was proof that he also knew how to work the transportation system in the lab.

Marc stayed in the front of the elevator this time, no longer in the mood to terrorize the women by standing behind them. He also didn't want to tempt himself. After three defections in a row from the Eagles, Marc was angry and frustrated. It was possible that he would let violence happen this time.

Thalia and Cerise both understood his emotions were starting to boil. They moved to the rear of the elevator and kept their hands on their holsters.

“Are we going to see Gus now?”

“No. Gus is in gaol for murder.”

Marc read Thalia's thoughts and saw Goldie's condition. He didn't know why Goldie was in a jail cell next to Gus, and he didn't ask. “Maybe you should send Goldie in for a session with *your* new medics. It would be a good test of Harry's skills. Curing pneumonia would be an amazing leap in medical progress.”

Both women immediately agreed with that, but it wasn't up to them.

In the security room, Joseph began typing in the order for that before Reicher could give it. It was a beaut idea. Joseph didn't like the proof that Marc was capable of thinking like them, but there was no denying that it was a solid experiment to try.

Behind Joseph, Reicher continued to watch the monitor, but he was aware of how fast Joseph was adapting to the new situation. *Maybe there really is hope for you.*

Joseph brightened and typed faster.

In the elevator, Marc waited for the next soul-crushing blow from one of his teammates. He had figured out now that every stop on this tour was going to hurt him in some way. All he could do was fight his hardest not to show the effects from it.

“You could try to understand why they made those choices.” Thalia was also quick on the draw and eager to have Marc on their side so that her father would be pleased. “It’s not all bad here. Surely you can see that?”

Marc stubbornly refused to answer, but like with his idea to have Harry experiment on Goldie, it was obvious that she was telling the truth. Safe Haven’s morality laws would have prevented most of the leaps they had made during their captivity. This lab had total freedom to bring out the best, and the worst, in people. Marc still hadn’t decided if that was a bad thing, but he knew it wouldn’t be good for Safe Haven and the rest of the souls hiding on their island. If they were allowed to do whatever they wanted, they would.

“That is the nature of all humanity.”

Marc shook his head at Thalia. “It’s the nature of all living things on the planet. It is why animals have pack leaders and insects have queens. Without firm directions, life gets out of hand.”

Cerise considered pointing out not all animals had that set up and then decided not to. Marc’s point was valid. She gestured as the lift opened.

Marc spotted Biff across the room that stank heavily of bleach. He smiled as Biff saw him.

Panic immediately went through Biff's tired mind. He hadn't been awake long. *Not yet. You can't take me away! I have things to do here!*

Biff sent his fierce stone warrior toward the elevator. "Make them go away!"

Cerise and Thalia both turned their backs.

Marc stared in stunned shock at the giant stone fighter thundering toward the elevator. The floor shook heavily and white dust fell from the ceiling as it neared them.

Thalia slammed her hand against the button.

Cerise shoved Marc toward the rear of the elevator, forcing him to look away. "Pretend you don't see it!"

Marc was too shocked to do anything.

The elevator slid shut right as the stone warrior reached them. It pounded on the door violently, denting the titanium.

Marc and the other passengers flinched back as the door dented in. Everyone was relieved when the elevator began to ascend, taking them out of reach.

In the session room, Biff calmed himself. He ordered the stone warrior to return to his side, but his enjoyment of the session was gone.

Reicher had allowed him complete control over his gifts this time. Biff had spent the last hour pitting multiple defenders against each other in an effort to learn how to control more than one sentient being at a time. He had been having a great time until the

elevator opened. Biff glared toward the window. “If you want me to do anything else, keep him away from me!”

Everyone was a little surprised at Biff’s reaction, including Reicher. He had expected a happy reunion from this stop, not an attack.

In the elevator, Marc replayed the moment, trying to figure out what had caused Biff’s reaction. *He said not yet. I interrupted something.*

That made sense to Thalia, too. “Biff has been violent the entire time that he’s been here. He has a short temper. I’m surprised you brought him along, and even more surprised that he was a member of your security force at all.”

Marc didn’t tell her that he hadn’t chosen Biff. Biff was Greg’s pet project, not his.

Cerise glanced up at the camera. “We’re going to skip this stop.”

Thalia checked her watch. “It’s almost lunch anyway.”

That gave Marc a rough idea of what time it was. His schedule-oriented brain calmed a little with that information.

Thalia now understood why he always asked how long he had been out or what day it was. It wasn’t an escape attempt. It was an adjustment. “Your mind is trying to assimilate.”

Marc didn’t answer. He didn’t want to face that yet. “What’s for lunch?”

“Whatever the cafeteria is serving.” Cerise led him into the employee side of the wing.

Staff members immediately recognized the trio and stopped to stare. Some of them were braver. They called a greeting.

“Good afternoon, Thalia. And you, Mr. Brady.”

Marc didn't respond.

Thalia nodded back at the sign of respect.

Cerise led them down the hall by a long room with glass windows on multiple sides and a single heavy-duty door that Marc immediately knew was protecting someone important. An instant later, he caught sight of Reicher sitting behind a desk in the rear of the room.

The two men locked eyes.

Reicher lifted a brow. *Are you ready to talk?*

Marc slowly shook his head. “They're wearing me down, but they haven't broken through.”

Reicher gestured dismissively at Marc's escorts. “Continue.”

Marc scanned the security room in fast glances that memorized details. He ignored Joseph in favor of the timer that was reflected in the glass. He saw the clock counting down from five hours. Instead of asking openly and giving himself away, Marc used distraction. “Does he ever come out of there?”

Both women missed his observation of the clock.

Thalia shook her head.

Cerise shrugged.

Marc chuckled. “Way to stick together on that one, ladies.”

Both women flushed. During that moment, Marc dug into Thalia's mind and saw she was contemplating her next shift. It started when the door unlocked in almost five hours.

Marc acted like he hadn't just gotten a vital piece of information. "Is the cafeteria food the same as what the subjects receive in their flats?"

"I don't know." Thalia let Marc go into the cafeteria first. "I don't oversee food for the subjects."

Marc decided to be reasonable for the moment so he could keep digging for information without them being aware of it. "It's pretty good."

Marc scanned the cafeteria as he walked between the two rows of stiff, pink high-backed booths that lined the entrance of the small café. The giant clock on the rear wall proclaimed it to be 1:12pm. Instead of confirming that he had figured out what time the security room opened, Marc strolled to the vending machines at the end. During the elevator ride, his stomach had reminded him it was very empty. The tea had soothed his stomach for a little while, but now he felt like he was starving.

Cerise and Thalia followed him from a distance, trying to give him space and protection at the same time.

Other employees in the cafeteria were frozen in place, gawking. It wasn't often that leadership ate in here.

Marc scanned the two vending machines and then regarded Thalia.

Thalia pointed. “Always use the one without the reproductive symbol on the bottom.”

Marc didn’t ask what was in that vending machine. He didn’t want to know. He pulled a pouch from the machine she had pointed to, and then went to the drink center for coffee. “Are you two eating?”

“I don’t have the stomach for it right now.” Cerise’s thoughts flooded with dread about her next duty. She didn’t mind being outfitted for the wedding dress or making decisions about music and fake flower arrangements, but the more steps she took down that path, the closer she would be to marrying Reicher.

Again, Marc didn’t have any sympathy for her.

Thalia joined him at the drink center. “I’ll eat during my shift.”

Marc didn’t move over, forcing her to get close to his body as she activated the coffee dispenser.

Thalia acted like it didn’t matter, but the feel of his warm hip pressed against hers sent sweet heat through her veins and made her pulse increase. She was certain he could see it pounding in the side of her neck.

Marc was aware of the effect that he was having on her. He considered it a mistake that Reicher hadn’t bred his daughter before now. “How old are you?”

Thalia grimaced at the question. “Don’t be rude.”

Marc chuckled. He was guessing she was in her late 30s, like he was.

“I’m 27. This life takes an early toll on us. You already know that.”

Marc understood she was sensitive about her looks. Now that he was standing so close to her, he could see the gray twining through her shiny blonde hair. “There are things you can do to make that go away, I’ve heard.” He didn’t tell her how many times he had watched Angela draw energy from someone else to replenish her own.

“That’s not allowed here.” Thalia glanced at him with a small frown. “You really don’t know any of our rules, do you?”

Marc shrugged. “I wasn’t even a descendant a year ago. I was Invisible.”

Thalia hadn’t read that anywhere in his file. She’d assumed he had been like her all of his life. Compassion flooded her mind and opened her mouth before she thought about it. “I can teach you some things, if you want.”

Marc leaned in and gently brushed the side of her arm with his, delivering more chills that made her pupils dilate. “Right back at you.”

Thalia blushed to the roots of her hair. She quickly retreated out of his reach.

Marc took his tray to the booth closest to the exit.

All around them, staff members stored details for later gossiping. Reicher's threat had only gone so far. Seeing the boss's daughter flirt with a bloke who was about to become their boss was too juicy to keep to themselves.

Thalia grew angry. By the time the sun sank over the salty water that surrounded them, everyone in this complex would assume she and Marc were having an affair.

Cerise had a motherly moment. She reached out and touched Thalia's wrist to get her attention. "Think it through before you ruin that impression."

Thalia forced herself to obey Cerise and immediately found an advantage in it. The few employees who were still standoffish or rude to her would change their behavior. She would have no trouble getting anyone to follow orders if they thought she was going to marry the new boss.

Marc tore open the pouch and began eating without caring what it was. He dug into the food and coffee, hoping it appeared like that was all he was interested in. He was really studying everyone and everything he could see. He had chosen this seat for the perfect view into the hallway and the cafeteria. A lot of details came to mind, but Marc didn't dwell on any of them so it didn't draw attention from Reicher or his escorts.

A line of females entered the cafeteria. The heavily pregnant girl in front stopped upon spotting Marc. The girl broke into a wide smile. "It's so nice of you to join us here, Mr. Brady!"

Her genuine enthusiastic greeting reached Marc despite him trying to remain aloof. He nodded back to her in a rare show of acceptance.

The girl and the others in the line behind her all smiled at him as they went to the machine with the reproductive symbol on it.

Marc observed them.

“Full portions again!”

“We lost some residents during the storm.”

“I love the barbecue flavor.”

Marc lost his appetite. He forced himself to keep eating anyway, but it was hard to chew and swallow as he realized what was in the reproductive pouches the women were now tearing into.

Thalia pointed toward the girl that Marc had responded to. “You’ll be treated like that every day. You’ll always be welcome in any of the staff areas.”

“I can’t be bribed.”

“It’s not a bribe. It’s a preview of how you’ll be treated here.”

Marc couldn’t deny that he was enjoying the respect and attention. They were making it harder and harder to say no.

“You don’t have to say no at all. If you join us, you don’t lose any of your team.” Thalia gestured. “Reicher might even save Gus for you.”

“And there’s another bribe.” Marc had already lost count of how many that was.

Thalia joined him in the booth and sent images of Reicher being treated like a king. In this lab, that’s exactly what a leader was.

“What if I don’t want to be a king?”

Thalia snorted scornfully. “All men want to be kings; all women want to be queens. It’s who we are.”

Marc considered how he had lived most of his life. He didn’t argue with her, but she was wrong. It felt good to have people respond to him, but it wasn’t because he wanted to be the boss. He had been isolated for weeks now. Any warm human contact was going to bring a response.

Thalia caught that and instinctively leaned toward him.

Marc began laughing.

Thalia straightened, ashamed of herself and furious with him. “Why are you like this?”

Marc rolled his eyes, but he stopped laughing. He was using natural attraction and contempt against her. To what end, he wasn’t sure yet. Marc was just following his instinct where Thalia was concerned. He could only hope it wasn’t playing right into Reicher’s hands. *It’s easy to develop feelings for someone who’s under your thumb.*

Thalia scowled. “I’m not under your thumb.”

Marc smiled at her. “You keep believing that.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight
We Can Be Gods

1

Greg, Shawn, and Harry were in the lounge recliners when Marc and his escorts came back to the resident section. Marc glared as he walked by.

All three men observed him with regret and relief.

Cerise tried to get Marc to see reason. “You shouldn’t hold a grudge. They’re doing what’s best for them.”

“They’re traitors.” Marc gave Cerise a pointed glare. “And we all know what happens to traitors.”

Cerise didn’t rise to the bait even though she felt the threat. She pointed. “Kenn is in there.”

Marc stopped in the doorway. Kenn’s flat was actually a small dorm full of people. Marc scanned the tattoos—Navy, Army, and Marines—and realized it was only military men here. The dorm had the same green lockers, bunks, and blankets they had all gotten used to during their time in the service. From what he could see of the rear of the long room, even the bathrooms were the same.

Marc was instantly comforted even though he knew that was the trap. Making it feel like a barrack was intended to keep the occupants under control

and it obviously worked. The men here were sitting at a long table and playing cards as if they were just waiting for their next run to come down.

Kenn noticed Marc first. A wide grin stretched across his face. “Awesome!”

Kenn quickly rose from the table. “This is Marc. I told you about him.”

Most of the men at the table gave Marc a quick scan to verify he was really one of them.

Marc automatically stood up straighter and assumed the cocky air that had given him so many successes during his time in the Marines.

The military men were able to recognize their own kind. A brief glance told them Marc was every team leader they’d ever had. The atmosphere became friendly.

Marc held his hand out as Kenn greeted him with a shake. He was surprised to find himself returning the friendly gesture without the bitterness that had always accompanied moments like this in the past. It felt like he had forgiven Kenn for some of his mistakes.

Kenn tossed an arm around Marc’s shoulders and led him toward the table. “We’re playing Hob-Jong. Have a seat.”

Marc noticed there was already an empty chair next to Kenn’s. He assumed they’d been told to expect a visitor.

Marc looked at his escorts. “Are you joining us?”

Both women shook their heads.

Cerise didn't enter at all. She wasn't welcome in the military dorm. "I have an appointment. Thalia will make sure you get back to your flat." She walked toward the elevator.

Marc gestured at Thalia. "I don't see an empty chair. You can sit on my lap."

Surprised laughter echoed from everyone but Thalia.

Kenn leaned toward Marc as he sat down. "She's a card shark."

Marc found that hard to believe. "Come prove it."

Thalia shook her head again.

The speaker activated with Reicher's amused voice. "If you win all five hands, you can take Joseph's next shift with me."

The speaker stayed active long enough for them to hear Joseph immediately start protesting.

Thalia didn't care that her father was goading her into spending more time with Marc. She was itching for that extra shift in the security room. "Deal me in."

The military men laughed and joked and pushed aside their chairs to make space for the stool Thalia brought in from the hallway.

Marc understood this wasn't the first time she had joined them for a game. He sat in the chair as the man across from Kenn started to deal. The missing fingers on his hand drew Marc's attention repeatedly. "What are we playing?"

“It’s called Hob-Jong. It combines poker and solitaire. We play with four decks and chips.”

As Kenn explained the game, Cerise paused out in the hallway, listening. She considered contacting Reicher with everything she had observed today and then decided most of it could wait until she filled out her nightly report.

Greg, Shawn, and Harry were still in the lounge. They were also listening to Marc settle right in with Kenn as if he had been here all along.

Cerise knew something was wrong, but she didn’t know what it was. She glared at the three men, orbs lighting up bright red. “What game is he playing? I demand a real answer!”

Everyone quieted to listen as magic swirled through the air, forcing them to answer.

All three men replied at the same time, “The game of life. Survival.”

Cerise wanted to grill them, but she wasn’t allowed to be late for her appointment. She stomped toward the elevator angrily. “I’m talking to Reicher about this.”

Greg, Shawn, and Harry waited for her to be gone before exchanging relieved glances. All of them were certain Reicher knew Marc was faking acceptance of his fate.

“Look ahead?” Greg waited for an answer from his companions. The trio had grown closer during the short time they’d been in this wing together.

Shawn immediately nodded. Looking ahead was a lot like blinking.

Harry wasn't sure that it was a good idea, but he hated to go against anything Greg and Shawn wanted. They were his only friends here. "But wait until they're distracted again. I don't want to do it while they're listening."

Back in the dorm, Kenn began arranging the hand that was being dealt. His fingers moved fluidly over the cards, shuffling them sideways to demonstrate his skill.

It reminded Marc so much of the past that he clenched his teeth together. Marc hated the past. The idea of going backward and changing his mistakes was more appealing than he wanted to face. If Reicher found that out, he would have another button to push.

Reicher leered toward the camera. "I already know your secrets, Marcus. I know everything."

2

Marc enjoyed the game. He had caught on quickly to the rules, and held his own until the fourth hand.

"What's your bet?" Kenn grinned at Thalia. They were the only two left in this final round. "I could be convinced to scrub your boots, but Marc will handle the rest."

Another round of laughter went down the table. All of the men had been teasing her and Marc. The

grapevine had traveled quickly about their rumored relationship.

Thalia didn't get mad or let it distract her. She laid down her face cards and then flipped over her hole card to reveal another king. "Hob-Jong. I win!"

Laughs and grins went around the table as they realized her cards trumped Kenn's.

Kenn smirked at the camera. "She won all five hands, Reicher. You have to keep your end of the deal now."

Thalia had no doubt that her father would keep his word. He was known for it.

One of the men looked up at the clock. "It's shower time before dinner. Let's get cleaned up and ready. It's lasagna night."

Marc's stomach growled at the thought of lasagna. The food in the cafeteria had been nondescript chunks of something edible smothered in a thick gravy. It had reminded him of his military days. He was anticipating a real meal.

Thalia stood up and headed for the exit, taking the stool with her. "Don't leave this dorm."

"He's not going anywhere. I'll keep an eye on him for you." Kenn grinned at her again.

Thalia rolled her eyes. She didn't like Kenn, but he was definitely an asset to the lab.

Kenn and Marc went to the benches in the corner, next to the coffee station. Kenn got them both a mug as Marc continued to scan this newest environment.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, letting the other men get their gear from their lockers and head toward the shower.

Marc found it creepy that all of them were going at the same time.

So did Kenn, but he knew why they were doing it. He just couldn't say it out loud or spend time thinking about it without Reicher finding out. The running water was a cover for freedom of speech.

"You seem happier."

Kenn nodded. "It's like the old days, except I'm not a bad person anymore."

"What are you doing during your sessions?"

"Solving problems. We're all scroll divers. We pull amazing information out of the murk."

Marc took the mug Kenn handed him. "But what good is that information? When Reicher resets time, it'll all be gone and you'll have to dig for it again. There's no way to retain the information."

"Reicher's working on that. It's why he hasn't scheduled another time push yet, I think. He'll cover it."

Marc frowned. "I can't believe you're okay with that. Killing kids is wrong and so is becoming attached to the man who had you electrocuted and waterboarded!"

To Marc's surprise, Kenn laughed. "That was videotape spliced together, man. He didn't hurt me." Kenn winced. He hadn't been shocked or waterboarded that time, but both had happened on the warehouse floor.

“It’s murder.”

Kenn shook his head. “The kids who die, they come back, too. They’re only gone for a few minutes and then we all go back with this knowledge that can change the entire world for everybody. It doesn’t have to be like it was before. All the wars, man, all the fighting, it didn’t mean anything. The research here will solve all those problems and lead to an existence of light and advancement that will save the world. All we have to do is keep working on these things.”

Marc recognized Kenn’s reaction as a defense against insanity. *It’s not working. I can hear the crazy.* “What about Tonya and your kids?”

“It will help them too.”

“They need you to come back.”

“No, they need me to find these answers. I’ve already discovered the connection points. If we can reach them in this dimension, we’ll open other levels for everyone. We can be Gods, Marc!”

Marc now understood Kenn wanted the reset. “You do realize this means you won’t have a relationship with Tonya and your son will never exist?”

Kenn glared as the truth flew out of his mouth. “It means I’ll never mistreat Angela and she’ll stay with me. You’ll never have her!” Kenn retreated from Marc, now expecting an attack. “I was wrong. You’re not one of us.”

“I’m not one of you because I won’t give up my wife?”

“You’re not one of us because you don’t support the reset. If you change your mind, I can overlook the rest.”

The drastic change in attitude after hours of friendship immediately hit Marc and dropped his mood back into the depression he’d been fighting all along. He sat the mug down and strode toward the door with his hands over gun belts that were no longer there. The old animosity between him and Kenn flared back to life even hotter. “Watch your six, Eagle.”

Kenn made an ugly noise. “I’m not an Eagle anymore; don’t tell me what to do.”

Marc jerked the dorm door shut behind him, letting it slam.

Waiting by the elevator, Thalia saw the quick glimpse of the pain that crossed his face. Then it was gone, and the cocky Marine was back in place.

Thalia hoped her father had caught it, as well. There was no way that was faked. Kenn’s coldness had hurt Marc. *That’s a weakness. My father will use that.*

Marc headed for his flat. “I think I’ve had enough visits for today.”

Thalia gestured toward the elevator. “How about a quiet dinner? I believe my father is going to be there.”

Marc immediately changed direction and joined her. “Sounds good.”

Thalia tried to smother all hope he had of completing his mission. “He’s always protected.

We're just going to have a nice dinner and chat or you can go back to your flat and sleep for another week or two. We can do this for years, Mr. Brady. All we have now is time."

"Your father doesn't. He's dying a little more every day."

Thalia shrugged as the elevator opened. "Who isn't?"

Marc couldn't argue with that.

3

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"I know. Hurry up." Isabel held the door for her sister. She was fully recovered now physically. Mentally, she was a mess. Finding out she couldn't have any more kids had shoved her into a place where her fear was second to her determination. *I have to save the kids I have now because there won't be any more for me.*

Sasha entered the birthing wing, doing a fast scan to verify there was only a skeleton crew on duty. Reicher was about to meet with Marc. Everyone who wasn't scheduled for a shift was traveling by that location with some flimsy excuse on the off chance that they might overhear the conversation. Gossip was speculating that this was the moment Marc would be given control of the lab.

Sasha smiled at the caretaker who immediately came toward her in concern. "Do you have anything for my stomach? It won't settle this time."

Marion beamed. “That’s wonderful!” Marion patted her wrist. “Let’s get you a test while you’re here.”

Sasha followed her in relief. “I don’t know what we would do without you.”

Marion led Sasha into the rear room.

Isabel slipped inside the breeding wing. She stayed close to the wall and hurried toward the back elevator while making sure that her boots didn’t click hard enough to draw Marion’s attention. Her heart pounded; her palms became sweaty. If Reicher found out what she was doing, she would be killed. *But I have to do it. I’ve been away from them for so long!*

Isabel entered the lift and hit the down button.

Sasha coughed loudly to cover the sound of the elevator.

Marion scanned her in concern. “Are you having cold symptoms?”

“No. I had lunch and it didn’t want to stay down. Now I have heartburn.”

Marion handed her a small paper cup with a white tablet and then went to the locked medicine cabinet to get the test.

Sasha fought the urge to look at the monitor in the corner. She didn’t want Marion to see it either. Isabel was taking a huge risk. *So am I, but there’s no harm in a quick visit. It’s not like she’s stealing them.*

In the elevator, Isabel waited tensely for the alarms to sound and guards to be sent. When the lift

stopped on the next floor and slid open, relief broke over her heart. She hurried into the birthing wing and strolled by the cubicles of nursing mothers. She viewed them differently now. Before, she had only had sympathy for the work they were forced to do. Now, she recognized them as fellow mothers who didn't want to be separated from their offspring.

Isabel opened the door to the nursery and entered. She scanned the two dozen cribs.

Crying babies shifted toward her, instinctively searching for their parents.

Isabel's heart swelled. She didn't want to feel compassion for anyone else's children, but that wasn't possible. As she walked down the row between pink and blue cribs, she trailed a hand over both sides, trying to send them comfort.

Isabel saw Goldie's twins. She paused by their bed and peered at the sickly infants. "I wish there was something I could do for you." She ran a light finger across the cheeks of both babies, heart clenching as they shifted toward her loving caress.

Isabel felt bad for leaving them as she hurried down the row.

Isabel's babies immediately stopped crying as she reached the crib where they were lying next to each other. She allowed herself a full two minutes of affection, hugging and kissing them and whispering endearments that she hoped would hold all of them through until the next time she could sneak in for a visit.

The door opened behind her.

Isabel gently placed both infants back into the bed and then rotated to face whoever had caught her.

One of the other mothers, Grace, was standing in the open entrance, staring in surprise. Under that emotion, was sympathy.

Isabel waited for the woman to call the guards.

The woman glanced over her shoulder and then looked back at Isabel. She made a quick gesture toward the exit.

Isabel smiled gratefully as she realized the woman wasn't going to tell on her. She gave Grace a fast hug and then slipped out. A few seconds later, she was back in the elevator and trying not to cry. *I got to see my babies!*

Isabel stayed to the side as the elevator opened, peering around to determine if it was safe to exit. She could hear her sister chattering away to the caretaker about some of the nonexistent symptoms she was supposedly having. Other than that, no one else was in the breeding wing. Reicher had drafted new women for the program from other areas of the lab after the riot, but none of them had tested positive yet.

Isabel hurried to the exit, once again controlling how loud her boots were on the tile floor.

Isabel stopped outside the main door and took a minute to get her emotions under control. Then she stepped back in and let her boots make as much noise as they wanted to. "Sasha! Are you in here?"

“Back here, Issy.” Sasha acted like Isabel was just arriving. “Sorry, I know I’m late for our dinner date, but my stomach is still upset from lunch.”

Isabel joined Sasha in the medical room of the breeding area. “I understand. The pouches used to give me heartburn, too.”

Sasha was forced to wait until Marion was finished with the pregnancy test. That included peeing while the woman stood there and watched her. Sasha didn’t mind. She was doing it for her sister and that made it easier. *I know she would do it for me.*

“Be right back.” Marion went into the stock room to find something for the heartburn.

Because Marion was a normal, Isabel let herself replay the quick visit with her twins over and over. She had to get it out of her system now, before she was around descendants who could read her mind. There was no statute of limitations on crimes committed in the lab. If the boss found out ten years from now, she could still be punished for it.

Isabel frowned. Her kids weren’t going to be alive ten years from now. If the next time push didn’t succeed, Reicher would simply try again and again, using anyone’s kiddies to accomplish his goals. “I have to get them out of here.”

Sasha shook her head, also whispering. “There’s no way we can make that happen. Enjoy the little visits we can steal for you and try to accept their fate.”

Fury ran through Isabel's heart and mind. "I'll never do that. I'm going to find a way to save them." She glared at her sister. "And you're going to help me."

Sasha didn't refuse even though the thought was terrifying. She'd never been able to refuse anything her little sister needed. She doubted this would be different. "How do you suggest we go about doing that?"

Isabel considered that dilemma. "I'm not sure. I think we need help."

Sasha snorted. "You've got that right."

Isabel didn't smile at the joke. She continued to work on the problem, determined to find a solution. In the history of this lab, there had only been a few people who went against Reicher and survived. Most of those attempts hadn't been successful and he had made their lives hell afterward. The few who had escaped, he still hunted for occasionally, but they were free. "That's it! We need to figure out how Tilly almost escaped."

Sasha winced. The story of Tilly's death was top-secret, as were the details of her escape attempt. They would have to break into the computer to access those files.

Marion saw her wince as she came back into the room. "This part doesn't last long. You know that. Soon, you'll be feeling the baby move in there instead of your guts rolling."

Sasha forced another smile. "Thank you for helping me."

Marion beamed again. "It's what I'm here for."

The sisters left the breeding wing together, chatting lightly about lasagna, their next shift with the new medics, and other safe topics to keep the magic users out of their thoughts.

As the door shut behind them, Marion went to the computer and began typing in a message to Reicher. "They really think I don't know what's going on."

Marion typed in a full report, including the times on the videotape. Sasha had been careful not to let her view the monitor, but Marion had heard the lift open and shut. She knew exactly what was going on. "I've been in this lab for decades. I know everything that happens here. You girls aren't getting anything past him. Reicher sees all because I'm his eyes."

Isabel and Sasha paused at the end of the hall, not sure where they wanted to go next. The other staff members were all gathering on the security floor now. That meant any number of rooms that were normally occupied would be empty.

"It also means there will be a skeleton crew on the gaol." Isabel turned in that direction.

Sasha followed her curiously, not sure why her sister wanted to visit the prisoners. "I didn't know you cared about either of them."

"It's not caring. It's a shared goal of delusional proportions."

Sasha chuckled. "That it is, Issy. That it is."

There was no guard outside the gaol.

Both of them were relieved. Just six weeks ago, Sasha would have immediately triggered an alarm and made sure the missing guard was punished. Now, she was grateful for his lack of loyalty to his job. "I'll stay out here. Make it quick."

Isabel went straight to Goldie. She tapped on the bars to get his attention. "Are you alive?"

Goldie couldn't talk without making himself cough. The pain in his chest was too severe. He gave a tiny nod and groaned as his head spun.

"I saw your babies. They're alive."

Tears filled Goldie's eyes. He forced out gratitude. "Thank you."

Isabel stuck her hand through the bars. "Take some of my energy so you heal up."

Goldie didn't have the strength to shake his head. "Too tired. Can't."

In the cell next to him, Gus was observing. He didn't have all of his memory back, but he knew who Isabel was now. "You shouldn't be here."

"Just keep your mouth shut about it."

Gus had no intention of telling on the woman. "He can't draw energy. His demon already left to keep him from using up any more power."

Isabel didn't know how most of the descendant issues worked. She frowned at Gus. "You do it."

Gus had figured out the woman was here against orders. He crossed his bruised arms over his sore chest. "What do I get out of it?"

“What do you want?” Isabel expected to hear he wanted freedom, but she couldn’t give him that.

“Blood.”

She tensed. “Whose blood?”

“Anybody’s.”

Isabel took a step back. “Do you have the rage illness?!”

Outside the door, Sasha made a shushing noise. Their voices were too loud.

Gus forced himself to stay still even though his nerves were jumping like he was touching a live wire. “If I can get control of my anger, I think my memory will return.”

“Is that all?” Isabel rolled her eyes. “I’ll tell you who you are.”

“Deal.” Gus reached out and grasped Goldie’s ankle. “I have to be able to touch you, too. I’m not very strong right now either.”

Isabel was afraid to trust him, but she was even more afraid to do nothing. One option gave her a chance to save her kids. The other didn’t. She stuck her hand through the bars of Gus’s cell.

Gus grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer. Then he began to transfer her energy into Goldie, fighting with himself the entire time. The urge to draw her blood was staggering.

Sasha peered through the door in time to see what was happening. *That’s illegal here!* She didn’t protest, but she had no idea how either of the prisoners would be able to help Isabel with her goal. “She must know something I don’t.”

Sasha heard voices. She tapped on the door. “Someone’s coming!”

Isabel retreated. “Your name is Gus. You’re a member of Marc’s team. You came here to kill Reicher. Cerise modified your memory. You probably don’t have the rage illness. She just told you that so you wouldn’t get your memory back.”

Gus stilled as pictures began to flash in his mind.

Isabel finished it off. “You owe me a big favor. Goldie owes you a big favor. I owe my sister a big favor. We’re all in grave danger here. Don’t trust anyone.”

Isabel left, hoping that was good enough. She was out of time.

Gus stared at the closing door as his memories began flooding in. “I remember now! I remember everything.”

Gus curled both big fists around the bars angrily. “But she was wrong. I do have the rage illness. The difference is that now I know who I’m angry at.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine
It Can't Be Broken

1

“That smells wonderful.”

“Too right.” Thalia exited the elevator and led him back toward the security room. “This way please, Mr. Brady.”

Marc spotted the long table and two chairs outside the time lock door and grinned. “You’re not taking any chances with me, are you?”

Thalia shook her head. “Until you sign the contract, you won’t be allowed around Reicher.”

Marc ignored the decked-out table to scan the security room again. The timer reflecting in the glass showed less than an hour until it opened. Marc immediately tried to draw things out. He slowed his steps to the table, smiling at the employees peering at him through windows, doors, and hallways.

Joseph glared at Marc through the glass. “That won’t work. It still has to be manually unlocked.”

“Stop giving him information.” Reicher pointed at Marc. “This wouldn’t be necessary if you weren’t so stubborn.”

Marc chuckled, taking that as a compliment. “Thank you.” He sat at the table and immediately

lifted the silver dome off the entrée in the center. “That looks even better than it smells.”

A staff member hurried over and began serving Marc.

Thalia sat in the chair next to him. She opened the bottle of wine and began pouring Marc a glass.

Marc leaned back in the chair. “I can’t be bribed with attention, wine, or great food either.”

Thalia frowned. “And I’ve told you they’re not bribes. This is how leadership is treated.”

Reicher scanned Marc’s thoughts.

Marc did the same to Reicher, not having any problem getting through the energy force field this time.

Thalia and Joseph both scowled at him.

Reicher clapped twice. “Very good.”

Both children were immediately jealous of the praise.

Marc dug into Reicher’s mind as much as the man would allow without a fight. He detected a lot of disturbing decisions and one that the man hadn’t made yet. Marc lifted a brow. “Shall I help you with that choice?”

“As you will.” Reicher didn’t like it when he was indecisive, but neither of his children were worthy of the positions they wanted or that they currently held. Both of them were too distracted to give their all to the future.

“You already know your incel son is mentally unstable.”

Joseph's face turned red. "I'm part of the breeding staff now. I'm not an incel anymore."

"Yes, you are." Marc studied him in contempt. "Having sex doesn't change who you are inside. You've been an incel too long to change now."

Before Joseph could protest again, Marc continued. "He's petty and jealous. He'll take it out on your employees and eventually be killed in his sleep by one of them, if the brother or father of one of his victims doesn't end him first. I estimate less than six months for that scenario."

Reicher was impressed. In his short glimpses of the future, he had seen it happen almost exactly the way Marc was describing, except that both incidents were the culmination.

Marc shrugged. He picked up his fork and began slicing off a bite of lasagna. "It makes sense that both of those would happen at the same time. Raping and killing your employees doesn't lead to loyal staff."

Joseph's lips disappeared as he clenched his teeth to keep from shouting. It was humiliating that Marc had him pegged so well; it was devastating that his father had just heard all of that.

Marc snorted. "He already knew."

Thalia tensed as Marc gave her a sideways glance. She wasn't eager to hear what he had to say about her. She poured a second glass of grog and began drinking.

"She's a little uptight, but she's good at her job. If she had a husband, the emotional distraction

might actually go in her favor and settle her down. If I were you—and I almost am at this point—I would give the assistant job to her.”

Reicher knew Marc was holding back. “What else?”

“She lacks confidence. You might be tempted to believe that’s because you don’t show her enough love, but her issue is mental. Both of your children have deep cracks that will never allow them true happiness. In her case, the cracks came from the Mitchel side of her line, I think. I’m sure that your geneticists could identify the flaw. Perhaps her children will be spared.”

Again, Reicher was impressed. “You’re an astounding judge of character, Mr. Brady.”

“As are you, Commander Reicher.” Marc lifted his wine glass. “Salud.”

Reicher lifted his glass and drank.

For a minute, only the sound of the two men eating and the woman drinking echoed through the hall.

Curious staff members edged closer to hear better.

Reicher swallowed a small bite of lasagna, hiding a wince as it hit his stomach and began to burn. The food was wonderful. His guts just couldn’t handle anything spicy. “Please continue with your evaluations.”

Marc was eager to keep driving a wedge between the evil family members. “Both of them want your love and respect. Neither of them are

prepared for what comes after they get it. Trying to live up to your legacy will drive them insane and they'll take it out on everyone around them. Even if you gave them shared leadership, the lab would still fall within a year. In fact, they would probably kill each other to have complete control while it was burning.”

Reicher's cold eyes went over both of his children in the same contempt that was in Marc's tone. “And that is why neither of you can have my job. You'll never see as much as Marc does.”

Thalia shoved up from the table and stormed off, taking the bottle of wine with her.

Joseph didn't have that option. He was forced to continue monitoring the computers while both men mocked his humiliation with their cold stares and arrogant facades.

Reicher took another small bite and then pushed away the goldleaf plate. “We're going to go over some things tonight, Mr. Brady.”

Reicher knew Marc wasn't ready yet, but he couldn't do it later. It had to be handled now. “Before we get started, I want to give you a piece of advice.”

“Okay.” Marc shoved in another bite of the amazing food. Just because someone gave advice, it didn't mean he had to follow it.

“I know you don't like the way we run things here. You want to make changes. All prima leaders reorganize when they take over, in order to ensure maximum efficiency. Just go slow. Don't rush all of

those changes and the staff will come over to your side. If you rush things, you could have the same ending as what you've predicted for my son."

Marc knew that was solid advice. "I'll think about it." He was slowly being seduced with power. It was impossible not to consider what the future could hold for mankind if he took over this lab and began directing things in a humane fashion.

Reicher pushed a button on his keypad. "Begin computer registration of Marcus Brady."

The computer activated. "*Please place your hand against the glass.*"

A small yellow circle appeared on the glass in front of Marc.

Marc reluctantly placed his hand on it.

"*Scanning...*" The computer clicked loudly. "*Fingerprint captured.*"

Marc blinked at the bright flash.

The computer next to Reicher began printing. "*Identification badge printing...*"

Marc frowned. "That doesn't mean I'm taking the job."

The computer immediately repeated what he had said, copying his tenor exactly. "*That doesn't mean I'm taking the job.*"

Marc's scowl deepened.

Reicher glared at Joseph. "Do *your* job!"

Joseph reluctantly rose from the chair, taking a single sheet of paper from the desk in front of him. He slid the paper beneath the door. "There's a pen

on the table. Don't steal it. If you want a weapon, use one of the knives or forks. We're low on pens."

Marc was surprised into a chuckle. He had been considering stealing it.

The staff member that had served Marc's food retrieved the paper from the floor and put it on the chair where Thalia had been sitting.

"That's a copy of the contract. Read it and sign it." Reicher took another tiny bite of his food, forcing his body to accept the nutrition.

"I could sign it and not mean it, and then execute you." Marc assumed Reicher had already considered that. He just needed to figure out the catch.

"Nee, you can't, Mr. Brady." Joseph glared at him. "This is a *magical* contract. It can't be broken."

Marc didn't like the sound of that. "What happens if I do?"

"You die. What else would you expect to happen when you break a magical contract?" Joseph went back to his seat and sat there, glaring and contemplating bad thoughts. Despite all the moments where Reicher had told him this was going to happen, Joseph had refused to believe it. *I really thought he would give it to me.*

"I didn't." Marc didn't pick up the contract. He resumed eating and drinking, letting the food energize his body for whatever he decided to do next.

Reicher scanned Marc's mind again, hoping for a hint of what he and Joseph had discussed in the

medical bay. Joseph still insisted they hadn't spoken at all.

Marc met Reicher's eyes. "You'll give me anything I want?"

Reicher nodded curtly. "Though I believe I have been accused of bribery enough times. Shall we call it a fair trade?"

Marc's orbs lit up bright red. "What if I want to fuck your daughter right here on this table while you and Joseph watch?"

Reicher wasn't offended. He used Marc's sarcasm against him. "I'd say my goals for the two of you are well underway."

Marc was shocked. "Don't you care for her at all?" He stayed in Reicher's mind to make sure he got the truth.

"No. Neither of them are valuable to me. You are. I need you to stay stable. Having a woman here will help you with that."

Marc sensed the partial truth, but he didn't call the man on it. It was obvious that Reicher did care a little for his daughter. He was covering it well.

Marc finished the piece of lasagna and rubbed his stomach as it began to gurgle. Drinking the tea before this had been a good idea, but it still might not be enough to keep the heartburn away.

Reicher held in a wince. "I know how that feels."

Marc didn't have sympathy for the man for his illness. He did feel bad for Reicher's mental state, however. It was obvious that his own conversion

process had broken his brain. Marc tried to help that along. “I figured out some of the answers to your questions.”

Reicher leaned forward in his chair eagerly. Any discussion about World War II was always welcome with him. “The tattoos?”

Marc blew out a small belch and took a quick sip of his wine before providing details. The lasagna was good, but he wasn’t handling it well. *I hope I don’t throw up. I hate throwing up!* “None of the camps were equipped to hold all of the people that were being exterminated.” Marc intentionally used what Reicher believed to be the badly translated version of Hitler’s words. “There would be no reason for the tattoos to be six or seven digits since none of the camps could hold that many. Each set of digits is unique to each camp.”

Reicher was ready for that. “Then why are none of the tattoos duplicated?”

Marc shrugged. “Luck of the draw. That’s the way life works. Those people died. Pick one.”

“That’s not a satisfactory explanation. In all of the camps, with all of the prisoners and all of the tattoos, the odds are completely against never having a duplicate.”

Marc shrugged again. “Many of the people who were put on trains in the beginning were immediately murdered. There were probably duplicates in every camp, but they were exterminated, so there’s no proof.”

“Not possible. Germany was being monitored strictly in the beginning of the unrest that led to WWII. And even if you’re right, where did those trains supposedly take them to?”

“Mass graves, I’ve always assumed.”

“And yet, none have ever been found.”

Marc shrugged and sipped his wine.

Reicher pushed his plate off the table and into the rubbish can. “What else?”

“We talked about the gas chambers. In the wintertime, they wouldn’t have needed to use them. All they had to do was let the prisoners die from exposure. It would have been cheaper and easier, and might have even worked faster.”

Reicher couldn’t refute that part of it. “And what of the world census count showing an increase in the Jewish population?”

“Where do those numbers come from?”

“Each country sent in their data yearly.”

“So, Germany sent in their own data?”

Reicher pursed his lips. “They lied about the numbers to keep the world from knowing what they were doing.”

Marc nodded. “That’s what I came up with.”

“And now you are no longer a soft denier because you believe you’ve explained enough of the discrepancies?”

“Yes.” Marc pushed Reicher’s button this time. “The Holocaust happened. Your father made a mistake by aligning himself with the Axis of Evil.

That was his choice. You don't have to deny the atrocities in order to be loyal to your dead dad."

Reicher slammed his fist on the desk and launched into a lengthy rant about the virtues of removing the Jewish population from the world.

Marc quickly tuned him out. He didn't care about that side of Reicher now, except that it was fun to make him lose control in front of witnesses. It would spread throughout the lab, weakening Reicher's hold over everyone. Even his son, who wanted to be like him, was now peering over his shoulder in surprised disapproval.

Reicher got control of himself, but the anger didn't leave his tone. "You're going to take this job, Mr. Brady. In fact, you're going to take it right now!"

Marc had begun to understand that the boss here wasn't totally evil. He was a crazy scientist who was getting answers that might solve all of humanity's problems and questions. It was his methods that were evil. Marc crossed his arms over his full stomach. "Hit me with your best shot."

Reicher did. "If you don't sign that paper, I'm going to blow up the island with your wife and children on it. There won't be a speck of their DNA left when I'm done."

Marc had been expecting that threat a month ago. "I want your daughter to look ahead for me. If she does that, I'll give you a final answer."

Reicher hadn't been expecting that, but he had already viewed ahead enough times himself, with

the energy of his invisible protectors, to know how it all ended. “You may not have the job for long, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to slack off.”

Marc’s chin lifted. “I never slack off. If I take the job, I’ll do it to the best of my ability until I’m dead.”

Reicher smiled. “That’s all I ask.”

Marc picked up the contract and began reading it line for line, giving it the attention that he hadn’t at Cerise’s homestead.

Reicher activated the speaker. “Thalia! Get your ass back here right now!”

Joseph collected the ID badge and the copy of Marc’s voice print. He placed them in the wall safe next to the computer towers. After Marc signed the contract, it would go in there as well and then copies would be sent up to the satellite. All of the walls in this security room were full of safes like this that documented most of the staff and all of the leaders that had ever run this lab. Even the very first one was in here somewhere.

Thalia came stomping down the hall. She hadn’t gone far and she had listened to all of it. She stopped next to Marc and put a hand on his shoulder. He had extra energy to spare and she still had to work a shift shortly.

Marc observed as Thalia entered the timestream and sped it up. It rolled too fast for either of them to pick out specific moments and details until she slowed it down. Hot orange blasts of all-consuming

heat flared out in both their minds, destroying the lab and everyone in it.

Thalia shut it down. She didn't want to know what came between now and then. Unlike Joseph, she had figured out that nuclear explosion they kept seeing was going to end their lives. The only thing that mattered to her before that happened was getting her father's respect.

Marc placed his hand over hers. "That's never going to happen. You're a female with Mitchel bloodlines. The odds were always against you."

Thalia met her father's eyes through the glass.

Reicher didn't deny it this time. Despite his aversion to females being abused, he had no respect for that gender. *And I've always hated Mitchels.*

Thalia turned around and left again, going to the elevator this time. She barely made it out of sight before she began to cry.

"Well, at least you have some honesty now." Marc resumed reading through the contract.

Reicher waited impatiently. Marc was stalling, but he didn't have a choice and he knew it.

Marc reluctantly picked up the pen. "I want it in writing that you'll leave Safe Haven alone now."

Joseph began printing out a copy of the promises that Reicher had made to Marc since he'd been captured. "It's all on here." As soon as the paper finished printing, Joseph handed it to Reicher.

Reicher picked up his pen and then lifted a brow at Marc. "Together?"

“Might as well since we’re going to die together.” Marc quickly signed his name on the contract.

Reicher signed his name on the list of promises.

No magic spun through the air, but both men felt the invisible bonds lock them together.

The staff member came over to collect the contract. He slid it under the door, where Joseph retrieved it and took it to Reicher.

Joseph then held up the list of promises against the glass so Marc could see he was being treated fairly in the deal.

A sense of crushing failure slid over Marc and brought his depression back to the forefront.

Time seemed to slow. A powerful presence pushed down into the lab, searching.

We’re on the way, Marc. Are you ready for us?

Marc stayed silent.

Everyone who heard that voice quieted to listen.

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.

Reicher had felt how strong Angela was. He couldn’t help giving himself away. “Will she still come for you?”

Marc heard the barely controlled greed and nodded. “Nothing will stop her now. She knows I’m in deep shit here.”

“Good. It would be a shame to have converted all of you for nothing.”

Joseph heard that and began laughing. “He lied about all of it to trick you! He’s going to give me leadership after all.”

Reicher’s contempt echoed. “There was never a chance of that.”

Joseph’s face collapsed. “Then why are you letting it all end? We’re all going to die!”

“Such is the nature of life. Death cannot be stopped, only delayed.”

“That won’t just delay it! You’ll lose everything we’ve built here!”

Reicher shook his head. “All of our progress has been documented. You yourself sent copies to the satellite. In the future, all labs will use that progress to build upon. We’ve laid the foundation for the future.”

“But we won’t be in it!”

Reicher coughed, catching the blood with his hand. Hot pain burnt its way up his throat.

Joseph caught his point without needing words. Reicher was already dying. It didn’t matter to him. “It doesn’t have to be that way!”

Reicher agreed. “But it isn’t up to me anymore. Everything changed as soon as he signed this contract.”

Joseph snatched the contract from Reicher's hand and began tearing it up.

Reicher laughed at him. "It's a magical contract, remember? It *can't* be broken."

Joseph rotated toward Reicher with violence on his face.

Reicher's three defenders appeared behind him, covering him with their shields. They didn't have enough energy to protect him and remain invisible. All of the children in this lab were weakened so they couldn't hurt those they were supposed to be guarding.

Joseph reluctantly stopped. He couldn't get through the triple shields, and even if he did, he would still have to fight all three kids and Reicher. "I'll make you pay for this."

Reicher splayed his hands. "I'm already dying. What else can you do to me?"

Marc observed it all in triumph. Reicher had indeed given himself away.

Reicher met Marc's eyes through the glass. "It's fine that you think that."

Marc sensed Reicher had more tricks up his sleeve, but now wasn't the time to dig them out. "As your boss, I order you to open the security door as soon as that timer goes off." There was only a minute left on it now.

Reicher pushed the button on his keypad. "That's not going to happen, Mr. Brady. While you are the heir of this lab, the position is powerless until I'm gone."

Green gas began flowing out of the vents beneath the table. Marc didn't have time to bring up his shield before the first blast invaded his lungs and began stealing his gifts and his alertness again. "You tricky son of a bitch!"

Reicher grinned. "Right back at you."

Marc continued to fight. "This was never about me. You tricked us all."

"On the contrary. It had everything to do with you." Now that Marc had signed the contract, Reicher didn't have to pretend anymore. "Without you, I never would have been able to draw in your amazing wife. Once she gets here, we'll complete the time push and then the nuclear explosion you are counting on will never happen. Safe Haven will never exist, but Angela will be picked up from Kenn's untrustworthy custody and placed in the lab to work for me. All the progress that your team has made while they've been here will be repeated, with your wife. We don't really need any of you now except as insurance to get her to do what I want."

"Angela will tear this place apart with her bare hands, including you!"

Reicher wasn't impressed with the threat. "You're underestimating my conversion process. When she sees your team fitting in here, she'll contemplate it. When she sees the amazing progress they've made, she'll think about it harder. When she sees the nuclear ending coming for all of us, including her precious little island, she'll cave a lot faster than you did."

Marc wanted to keep arguing, but the gas dragged him under the darkness. He slumped in the chair, cheek resting on the table.

The timer on the door buzzed.

Joseph went over and unlocked it so Thalia could enter. He stood there, contemplating everything that had happened. He was still confused about who was going to be running things now.

Reicher's cold laughter echoed out to every staff member who was listening. "Me, of course. I never intended to give it up. I just need a strong body to enforce my rules and a honey pot to draw in the most talented descendant to ever step foot on the planet. Now that I've accomplished that, it's time to move everything to stage three. Start shutting us down. That's an order!"

Chapter Thirty

You Have My Word

1

“**H**ow do you think things are going at home?” Wade shifted closer to Angela to hear her answer. They were marching through the outback toward Cerise’s homestead as the sun sank and the bugs tried to get through their shields.

Angela shoved her ponytail over her shoulder, still missing the half of her hair that had been burnt off in the explosion. It was growing back, but not fast enough for her vanity. “It’s only been a few days.”

“I know.” Wade was feeling bad about leaving Samantha so soon after she’d been kidnapped and abused. “Is she okay, though?” None of the team was allowed to make contact with home until the mission was over.

Angela nodded. “Neil and the others will get her through it. Concentrate on the run we’re on now, Eagle.”

Wade wasn’t upset at the mild scold. It was important for him to know that Samantha was alright so that he could concentrate on this mission.

Wade scanned their spread-out group to make sure they were still together. They had six normals

along who were being shielded by a partner that Angela had assigned to them for the trek to Cerise's home. Angela hadn't told them why they were going there instead of straight to the lab.

"Cerise left a map for me."

Wade felt the hesitation. "Is that the only reason?"

"No." Angela did the next scan, meeting the eyes of the team to make sure everyone was okay. She didn't expect trouble tonight; tomorrow would be different.

Cate and Cody both nodded at her. They were covering Erin and Piper with their shields.

The normals walked next to the children with heads constantly rotating, searching for threats.

A few feet to their right, Theo and Trent were being shielded by Zack and Jayda, who were also watching for problems. Everyone in that group was eager for adventure, except Jayda. She was just happy to have been brought along after her fear of fire had gotten so out of hand.

Theo glared at Angela over his healing broken nose. He didn't want to be inside anyone's shield. He didn't want to be protected.

Angela ignored him and swept the group that was bringing up the rear. Ray, Kyle, and Lisa were on drag duty with guns in hand and shields that pushed out in front of them. Lisa was inside Ray's shield, but she still looked like one of the defenders around her. She wasn't intimidated by not having gifts.

Angela looked ahead at the rest of the team. Adrian, Charlie, and Dace had point. They were stepping carefully, trying to be quiet while forging a path through the dangerous outback known as Australia. It was the first time that many of her team had set foot on this continent, including Angela. There was a lot to look at and get distracted by. There was also danger everywhere. That was why she had ordered everyone to be inside shields for the trek. She didn't want to lose anybody to a snakebite or a paralysis tick. Being shot might be the least of their worries.

Wade stayed next to Angela, covering both of them in his shield while she scanned the coming darkness for signs of Marc. Wade had been connected to her since getting out of the RIB. She had been tracking Marc the entire time. It was fascinating to detect the small blue glimmers she was following. *I want to be able to do that.*

Angela immediately opened a door in her mind and gestured. *Have at it.*

Wade switched into tracking mode as she took his place as a defender. It was a neat switch that most of the team missed.

Wade scanned the darkness and immediately found a small blue light. He didn't walk over top of it, but stayed next to it like Angela had been doing. He didn't know why she was handling it that way, but he tried to copy her movements exactly.

Adrian peered over his shoulder at Angela and signaled using Eagle code.

Angela knew they were getting close. That was why she had switched with Wade. He was a little too distracted to provide real protection. She, on the other hand, had laser focus right now.

“There’s a body over here.”

Angela held up a hand to stop the team. She joined Jayda to scan the fresh corpse. Tacky blood was drying on the grass around him. The man was almost naked, but he didn’t appear as though he’d been starving. His body had been stabbed repeatedly and stripped.

“There’s another one over there.” Zack pointed.

Angela got them moving again. Tension rose as several more stripped, stabbed bodies appeared in the brush. They moved around the dead men and women with hands on their holsters or with weapons already in hand.

Angela resumed her walk in the center of the large team. In the beginning, she hadn’t planned to bring this many people along, but after going through all the options, it had been clear that the mission team wouldn’t be able to help them during the rescue.

“The tree line is ending.” Charlie waited for Angela to reach his location.

The team gathered around the tree line, keeping their shields at full strength.

Angela scanned the ground again, spotting dozens of bodies now. Flies and other insects swarmed around those corpses. She noticed most of the dead still had eyes and eyelids, telling her they

hadn't been here long or the wildlife would have already eaten those parts. There had clearly been a large battle here recently, and a large storm. Recently fallen tree branches had been scattered over the ground for the entire hike.

Angela scanned again, catching signatures of live people, but it was confusing. *Are they under the ground?*

Adrian and Charlie both nodded. They had come to that conclusion a short time ago.

Angela left the tree line and headed for the house that had dying leaves and branches on the porch and a broken window in the attic. Other debris and signs of nature's fury littered the grounds, as well as garbage and human waste.

Her team followed her, waiting for all hell to break loose once again.

Angela was able to feel the ghosts of the inhabitants who had lived here before the war. It didn't seem like they had been happy then, but they were irate now.

Being able to sense ghosts was new for her. It had started on the island, in the little clinic with the ghost of the dead doctor. That had expanded while they were on the submarine.

Most of Saul's crew hadn't survived the island invasion. Those who had were severely traumatized and only loyal to Saul. Angela contemplated the defender she had left on the sub. Saul and Dog had taken an immediate dislike to each other. Dog had also been furious that he wasn't being taken to the

lab for Marc's rescue. If Saul disobeyed the orders she had given him, Dog would handle it.

"Do you really think a wolf can handle a descendant?"

Angela gave a curt nod to Charlie's disrespectful query. She didn't argue, though that was what he wanted. He wasn't actually mad this time. *His rookie nerves are showing.*

"I'm not a rookie!"

The entire team scowled at the teenager. It was obvious that he was.

Charlie flushed and lowered his chin. He couldn't seem to fit in with the Eagles no matter how hard he tried.

"Then stop trying. Just be who you are—my son." Angela gave him a smile, hoping to calm him down.

Charlie was warmed by the moment and allowed it to settle his nerves as much as they could be. He hadn't been on a run in a long time. He wasn't sure if he knew how to handle this situation anymore. It was completely different than doing shifts on guard duty.

Adrian put a hand on the boy's shoulder, hoping it would be welcomed. "You're doing fine."

Charlie quickly shrugged it off even though he did feel better. It was disloyal of him to keep bonding with Adrian.

Adrian wanted to deny that, but this was the wrong time for it. He stayed close to Angela as she

and the rest of the team entered the large house and stopped in the dim, dusty front parlor.

The empty house stank of old blood. It was exactly like all the other places Safe Haven had explored since the war. They had yet to go anywhere that was neat, clean, well-lit, or secure.

All of them were hot and sweaty from the trip here. They were relieved to reach a shelter. As shields lowered, bugs immediately swarmed in, drawing groans and light slaps. People quickly brought their shields back up against the ravenous insects.

Angela sent out a small wave of her copied sonic gift that slammed into the bug swarms, killing most of them and driving the rest out. “That should give us a little relief.”

People lowered their shields again, grateful to have a moment without using energy. For some of them, keeping up a shield for hours had been easy. The rest had needed help with shared energy multiple times. Everyone was ready for a break.

Wade traced the tiny flickers of blue light into a rear room. He pointed.

Angela followed. Two large blood spots in the hallway indicated Marc and his team had run into trouble here almost immediately.

Angela switched on her flashlight and set it on the dusty shelf near the exit. It illuminated the small office and the monitor that was still wired.

The rest of the team waited in the parlor or the hallway as Angela knelt by an overturned file cabinet.

Angela retrieved the map and stuck it in her pocket. “We have company.”

Every member of the team rotated toward the front door or a window.

“Hello in the house!”

The team slid aside to allow Angela room to come through. They smothered her in layers of protection as she went to the open door and stood there like an easy target.

Angela studied the small group of men and women now gathered on the front lawn of Cerise’s homestead. Several of them were familiar to her, but only from someone else’s memories.

“Oi! Is that Adrian?” One of the men came forward.

Adrian broke into a wide grin. “Trevor!”

The team observed in surprise as Adrian embraced the man like an old friend.

The woman next to Trevor also threw her arms around Adrian’s neck and held him tightly. “It’s beaut to see you, mate!”

Angela smothered her jealousy as Adrian kissed the woman’s weathered cheek.

Adrian turned to face Angela. “This is Trevor and his wife. They’re the leaders of the Australian Resistance Force. They’ve been smuggling in weapons and helping staff escape from the labs for decades. This is Angela, the leader of Safe Haven.”

Trevor smiled at her. “Saul said reinforcements were coming, but we didn’t expect you.”

Angela didn’t tell them Saul was her secret weapon. He really wasn’t, but the sub he was manning was. They had found three torpedoes at an old military base not far from here. The sub was also armed with nuclear warheads that Angela was hesitant to use. *But if they push me, everyone will be surprised. I will get my missing men out of that lab by any means necessary.*

A tall blond boy with bright blue eyes came from the rear of the group. “Adrian.”

“Gordon.” Adrian hugged him, too.

Every member of the team knew who the boy was on sight. It was like looking at Conner.

Angela focused on Trevor, but she didn’t see any resentment toward Adrian.

Adrian made introductions. “This is Gordon. He’ll inherit leadership of the resistance.”

Angela didn’t think the excited teenager was a good choice for leadership yet, but she kept those thoughts to herself. *It’s probably just my bias against Mitchels running things. Hopefully, he’ll grow on me.*

“Are there Mitchels on every continent?” Wade grinned to show he was joking.

Adrian shrugged. “Five out of seven, I think. It was a little too cold for me in Antarctica and a little too hot in South America.”

The rescue team laughed at Adrian’s joke, but no one else lowered their weapons.

Angela studied the small group, getting into their minds without difficulty. It soothed her to discover they were all eager to join her camp, but it bothered her that they were starving and desperate. A small part of her had hoped that Australia was faring better than the rest of the world.

Adrian waited for Angela to finish her observations, not pushing her into accepting his friends.

The rest of the team also waited, scanning the grounds and the buildings around them.

Angela studied the leaders of the resistance. Despite Adrian introducing Trevor as the boss, Angela was able to tell that he held a lower position in the overall rank. His wife and son seemed to be the enforcers of the group. Angela was curious why Trevor's wife hadn't been properly introduced, but she didn't call them on it yet.

Angela gestured.

The team reluctantly lowered their guns and holstered.

Angela stepped forward to shake hands with Trevor. "I assume you cleared this out for us. Thank you."

Trevor nodded. "It was our honor."

"The honor is all mine."

For a long minute, no one spoke. Angela used that time to search out more details about the locals who would probably come with them to the lab. She picked up secrets, but she didn't expose them yet.

When she was satisfied, she took the next step. “Join us for dinner?”

The group smiled, all lighting up at the thought of a real meal. They came closer.

Angela studied Adrian and his son, understanding this was one of the children he had gifted. Another quick scan of the boy found the same rash attitude, but a good heart. “He’s not like you.”

Adrian smiled. “No. He was raised by awesome parents. I had very little to do with it.”

“That makes two good Mitchels I’ve met now. The world really has come to an end.”

Everyone laughed at the common joke, including Adrian. He was relieved that she hadn’t found problems with his friends. It had been a long time since he’d seen them. It was possible that they had gone bad due to living in these rough times.

Angela went back into the parlor of the house. She signaled toward Zack and Jayda. “Search out and disable all monitoring devices.”

As the two descendants left to follow her orders, Angela sensed relief in the new people. She connected that to the leaders, but again, she didn’t comment on it. There would be time for that later. Right now, she wanted to get a base camp set up before night was fully upon them.

Adrian knew what she wanted. He took over security, directing everyone into jobs and places.

The locals observed in admiration and a little embarrassment that they hadn't already covered those things.

Angela offered comfort. "We operate differently than most people do now. Don't trouble yourself over the differences; we have a common goal and that's what matters." She sat on a dusty bench in the parlor and waved them over. "Fill me in while my team gets things set up."

The other locals waited outside, observing. They were fast learners. If the Safe Haven people had better methods, they planned to copy them. The rest of their citizens were still underground, waiting for word on how this meeting was going.

"Go back and let them know we're okay."

Tilly's order was immediately followed.

Angela took it as more proof that Tilly was the power here, not Trevor. She studied that cute woman now, seeing scars, intelligence, and a fear of the future.

Trevor placed himself between the two women on the bench, automatically protecting his wife.

The Safe Haven team approved. The tension dropped another level.

Their son, Gordon, followed the team members around, chattering excitedly about everything that had happened since they got the message that reinforcements were coming.

Adrian was proud of the way the eager teenager had turned out. It was proof that with the right

environment, even Mitchels could be upstanding members of society.

The brown-haired, brown-eyed parents observed their son tolerantly as he followed after the team. Other than fighting for survival, Gordon didn't get much excitement or contact with other people. Their own citizens were often too busy to entertain him and there weren't many kids his age in their group.

Angela pointed at Charlie. "Hang out with him for a while."

Charlie assumed she wanted him to scan Gordon for information. He led the teen toward the rear office. "Have you guys been here long?"

The adults didn't listen in on that conversation. Tilly was just glad that Angela was including her son even though he was reckless.

The Safe Haven crew was glad Angela was distracting Charlie because he was reckless.

Angela regarded Adrian.

Adrian understood she was giving both teenagers a chance to bond with someone who was like them. Charlie and Conner had become friends, but the boys weren't similar in most ways, other than the obvious. Charlie and Gordon could have been brothers.

Angela winced at that thought and returned her attention to the leaders here.

Wade stayed close to Angela. It didn't seem like the locals were going to be a problem, but his job

during this run was to keep Angela alive and he would do that no matter who he had to face.

Trevor was impressed with Angela's crew. "The rest of our group will want to come up and meet you all at some point." He didn't tell her there were hundreds.

Angela was impressed that they'd kept so many alive for so long. She knew how hard that was to do. "As soon as we get things secured, I'll start a group meal and you can bring them up. We'll all spend the night together, talking, updating, planning, and bonding like our kind was meant to."

Trevor frowned slightly. "We're not descendants."

Angela smiled coolly. "I meant survivors."

Trevor knew she'd discovered his secret. He got it out in the open now, so it didn't cause trouble later. "I'm not, anymore."

"But you were. I can feel the lock Adrian placed on you."

Adrian wasn't surprised that Angela had sensed that. "His demon left when he was mortally injured. I locked him after I healed him because he didn't want it back."

"So that's how it's done." Angela waved off Adrian's coming warning that she would have to almost die to give up her gifts. "Later."

Adrian frowned but obeyed. He hated it that she'd figured out how to be a normal again.

Tilly stayed quiet and continued to observe the new people. It was imperative that her disguise

remained in place as long as she was topside. She had been following that pattern of behavior for decades now and she wasn't going to change it just because new fighters had shown up.

Angela took the map out of her pocket and held it out. "Is this accurate?"

Trevor grimaced as he scanned it.

Tilly looked away.

Angela immediately assumed the map was a trap. She put it back in her pocket and reverted to the original plan. "I'd like to scan your memories and make a map, if that's okay?"

Both leaders tensed.

Wade stepped closer, hand sliding to his gun. "They're not telling you something else, Boss."

"I know." Angela signaled him to stand down. "I'm giving them the chance to tell me now before I have to dig in and rip away their defenses. It's always better to give people their dignity with the chance to come clean first."

Wade liked it that she was explaining her decision, but he didn't trust them. He stayed where he was.

Trevor and Tilly knew this was the moment that mattered for their future. If Angela didn't like what she found, she would leave them behind.

"Let's hope that doesn't have to happen." Angela waited for permission.

Trevor held a hand out, assuming Angela needed to have contact like their son did. "Please try

not to judge the decisions we've made. Life has been hard for us."

Angela had no doubt that was true. She gently took Trevor's hand and then regarded his wife.

Tilly shook her head. "I'd rather not."

The woman's lack of emotions bothered Angela. "Because it's painful or because you're hiding something important?"

Tilly and Trevor both understood right then that Angela was too intelligent to miss their biggest secret. Tilly slowly put her hand on her husband's.

Angela didn't need to dig in as both of them began replaying their time in Reicher's lab. Tilly had been on staff. Trevor had been a scroll diver.

They were some of the ugliest moments Angela had ever witnessed and that was even after the mountain flight and the death cruise to Pitcairn Island. She bonded with both of them. When she saw the secret, Angela quickly moved on so the other descendants on her team wouldn't dwell on it.

Adrian didn't interrupt them. The information Angela was gathering was vital to the success of their mission. Tilly might play a huge role in that moment. *You'll have to convince her. She's terrified that when she goes in, she won't get back out.*

Angela had already picked up on that. She withdrew from their minds and let go of their hands. "Your secret will be revealed as soon as we enter the lab. You know that."

Tilly nodded.

The terror on her face calmed Wade. He understood her secret wasn't dangerous to anyone but her.

“How have you managed to keep it from him this long?” Angela hadn't seen that in their memories.

Tilly hid a shudder. “We faked it by using my sister's body. She died from a drug overdose. When Adrian rescued us, he shaved my hair and made me dress like a man. I spent the next two months acting like a male, even mentally planning a future with one of the other women in our group to make it real.”

Trevor finished their story. “We don't spend time aboveground unless we have to, and we rarely use any traceable form of communication.”

“So Reicher really thinks you're dead.” Angela began adding that to her plans. It snapped into place. “I can work with that.”

That wasn't enough for Trevor. He scowled deeply. “I need your word that nothing will happen to her or we're not going with you.”

Angela frowned right back. “You already know I can't promise that. Reicher is incredibly intelligent. He also knows we're coming. I assume we've been on his radar since we landed. All I can promise is that I'll try my hardest to make sure your family survives.”

Trevor didn't agree to it, but it wasn't his choice anyway. He looked at his wife.

Tilly's lids narrowed, showing anger for the first time. "I need something."

Angela nodded easily. "You'll get to see Reicher die."

Tilly grinned. "Then you have a deal, mate."

It didn't surprise Angela that the woman was holding a grudge. After what she had been through, it would only have been surprising if she hadn't been.

"Do you have a plan?"

Angela hedged with a distraction. "Cerise told us Reicher wanted Marc. We adjusted accordingly."

Trevor frowned. "She can't be trusted. She belongs to Reicher. She always has."

"Ay. Reicher drafted her in my place after I escaped. She's completely loyal to him."

"That's not exactly true." Angela didn't tell them that Cerise's main drive was to get her kids and her husband back. She needed to dig out details, not give them away. "We'll head for the lab come daylight. You have until then to change your mind. Once we leave here, we follow through no matter what."

Tilly sighed unhappily. "Just make sure he's dead and that lab is gone, no matter what."

"You have my word."

"Security is up, Boss, and all monitoring devices are down." Zack came back with Jayda on his heels. She was providing protection for him while he worked. "Are we okay to set up here for the night?"

Angela stood up and walked out onto the porch. She sent her tracking grid out as far as it would go, then switched directions and did it again.

Everyone waited tensely to hear what she'd discovered.

"There are a few dozen stragglers trying to sneak in from the east. They see the lights coming on here and it's making them curious. They're too far away for me to tell if they're friends or foes." Angela looked at Adrian. "No deaths unless it's needed."

Adrian immediately hurried off into the coming darkness.

"The bodies here came from the beach gangs. The stragglers are probably part of that group. A heap of them ran off when we emerged from the graveyard." Trevor grinned. "They thought we were ghosts."

Angela snickered. "We've used that ploy a few times." Her mind went to Marc and his mission against the United States government. Her amusement fell. Deep sadness took its place.

Team members fought not to react to her emotional waves. She had been sending them out every time she thought about Marc.

Trevor and Tilly had no defense against her emotions. Tears came to their eyes and were quickly wiped away.

Angela got control of herself. She forced out a thin smile. "I've been away from my heart for too long. Please forgive me for the outburst."

Tilly and Trevor both understood how awful it was to be separated from someone they loved with little hope of being reunited.

Angela shook her head. “I have a lot of hope for us to be reunited. I’m worried about what happens after that.”

“You could stay here, mate.”

Angela was happy to receive the invitation directly from Tilly. It was official that the Australian Resistance Force leader was accepting them. She still denied the invite. “I’ll have to take them away from here and away from my camp. They won’t be in any condition to rejoin their friends and family.”

Tilly had planned to wait and see if the reinforcements were trustworthy before asking her next question, but it was obvious that these people were good. “Can we come with you?”

Wade and the others listened closely for that answer. None of them were sure if they wanted Angela to agree.

Angela wanted to say yes, but they had just met, and she had serious doubts about the stability of the mission team they were going to rescue. It might not be a good idea to have them around strangers. “I’ll give you an answer on that after we get them out of the lab.”

Trevor was surprised that Tilly had asked at all. They were both patriots who loved their country. The thought of abandoning Australia to go off to some other place didn’t feel right to him.

Tilly didn't want to leave her homeland either, but they weren't as strong as the Safe Haven crew. That was obvious now. *We need help and they can give it. Once we learn from them, we can come home and start over.*

Angela didn't let their thoughts guilt her into agreeing. She went to the staircase that divided the parlor in half. "Let's have more light in here. Be ready to handle whatever it draws."

Lights began to illuminate the large home as Eagles set up lanterns and candles. Soft, warm glows brightened the house and soothed most of the team. They had hated being cooped up in the submarine, but the hike here hadn't been fun either. Now that they had arrived and security was set up, the lights were a sign that it was okay to relax for a little while despite still needing to defend themselves if anyone showed up. None of this team was scared of that. They were only scared of failing their mission.

Angela took off her kit and began digging through it.

The other Eagles did the same, taking out rations, medical packs, and sleeping rolls. The house filled with noise and activity, reminding them all of their continuous flight across America. Most of those evenings had started the same way.

Cate and Cody came to Angela. Both of them scanned the strangers and then ignored them.

That was the final seal for Angela. She had told the twins to dig into anyone they came across for

information. It was easier for children to do that because most adults immediately dismissed them as not a threat. The fact that Cate and Cody held more power than a lot of her team members was usually overlooked because of their age.

Cate took Angela's hand and sent in a blast of good energy. Angela's wave of sadness had drawn the children from the top floor of the house where they had been exploring.

Angela absorbed it willingly. Thinking about Marc was painful in every way. She sent back her own blast of good vibes to the little girl. It wasn't easy on Cate either. She missed her father.

"Can I reach out to him now?"

Angela denied that. "I need you to wait until we're inside. I know it's hard, but I also know you're strong enough to do it."

Cate smiled. "Thank you for bringing us."

Cody added his gratitude. "Thank you for not leaving him in there."

Angela's orbs lit up bright red. "It's my honor. And it will be the death of everyone in that lab who hurt someone we love. You have my word on that. By the time I'm finished, that lab won't exist anymore and neither will any of the evil people running it."

Chapter Thirty-One
We All Have Choices

1

“**W**ho’s ready for a refill?” Angela glanced around the large group filling this part of the house. More people were sitting on the stairs and out on the front porch, enjoying the meal she had cooked. The house smelled great even with the small hints of body odor that were floating on the cool breeze coming through the few windows they had left open. It was a comfortable, though somewhat crowded environment.

After introductions and a lot of handshakes, the rest of Tilly’s people had returned to their underground shelter for the night. “I have a lot of leftovers here.”

Almost all of the Australians held up their bowls for a refill. Several of the Safe Haven crew did, too. It was rare for Angela to cook for them. The rehydrated beef stew over rice had been wonderful, though it had taken all the pots she could find to feed everyone. The powdered milk with it and mugs of coffee waiting for them was enough to make everyone happy, at least for this moment.

Angela had noticed the Safe Haven gear some of the locals were wearing, but she didn’t comment

on it. That gear had been sent with Marc. If he had left it here for them, it was fine with her. They could always replace the vests, jackets, and guns. Those things littered the wastelands now. The people were much harder to replace.

Angela carried the large pot around and ladled another big helping into all of the bowls. She had purposely used up most of their portable rations on this meal. They were going into danger again tomorrow. Her team deserved a good meal before that happened, but it would also be less to carry. She was hoping to collect any supplies left in the lab once the fight was over, but the submarine was still half stocked.

Wade stayed close and ready to grab his gun. It was possible that more stragglers would find them. The ones Angela had detected earlier had already been handled with a few quick shots over their heads. The unexpected gunfire had driven them off. Adrian hadn't liked leaving them alive, but Angela had insisted. She hadn't come here to kill desperate citizens.

All through the house, Safe Haven people sat with their Australian counterparts, enjoying the meal and the company. A dozen different conversations were taking place at the same time.

It pleased Angela that her crew was getting along with the strangers. Safe Haven didn't get much socialization. They normally ended up killing everyone they had contact with. This was a nice change for all of them.

She also noticed they weren't relaxing fully. Most of her team had taken off their heavier gear, but none of them had removed their weapons or vests yet. Despite believing the resistance force was friendly, they weren't taking chances.

Angela didn't tell them differently; she didn't know. It was easy for her to dig into someone's thoughts, but humans were sly creatures who hid their deepest flaws. Figuring out whether or not they were really trustworthy usually required seeing them in action.

Angela took the pot out onto the porch.

Wade tried to stay in front of her so she wasn't an open target.

A full moon had bloomed in the sky, providing light and a beautiful vista that most of them were enjoying. The sky was calm even if their minds weren't.

Angela filled Gordon's bowl and then Charlie's, insisting on feeding both teenagers as much as they could handle.

Gordon smiled at her. "Good grub, mate."

Charlie nodded. He was enjoying the meal, but not as much as the others. His mom's beef stew had been a staple dinner before the war. It made him sad to contemplate those times now.

Gordon understood. He had his own moments like that from before, when they had been able to sit down to dinner without being surrounded by graves or bodies. He didn't like living beneath the cemetery, though he understood why it was

necessary now. *When I was younger, I thought everybody lived in tunnels.*

Charlie sympathized. *When I was younger, I thought everybody got beaten on.*

Angela tried not to feel bad, but it was impossible. *When I was younger, I thought parenting would be easy.*

Wade sent several images of Kenn being humiliated. “Smurf balls was my favorite.”

Angela laughed because it was expected.

Charlie didn’t.

Angela moved on to the half a dozen resistance members sitting at the bottom of the porch stairs. All of them had volunteered for guard duty, but Angela had refused. No one was officially on watch right now, but every member of her team was keeping an eye on things. Regular scans were flowing out into the night and coming back empty.

Lisa held up her bowl for a refill. She was sitting by herself on one corner of the porch, contemplating the coming action. *I hope I’m good enough when the chaos starts. I want Greg to be proud of me.*

Angela smiled at the woman. “Stay close to your partner and remember your training. That’s all any of us have to do.”

Lisa didn’t believe that, but she wasn’t about to challenge Angela when she was just trying to offer comfort. “Thank you.”

Angela walked around the porch with the pot, going to the sleepy twins who were in the moldy porch swing now. Cate and Cody were dwelling on

revenge against the lab for everything they'd been through. Both children were still recovering and despite not wanting to, they were both bonding with Adrian in place of Marc. Guilt over that had driven them outside, away from him.

Angela didn't tell them it was okay. Adrian had already done that, and the kids had rebuffed him. Once Marc was back, that guilt would lessen as they realized they were able to have bonds with both men. Right now, they agreed with Charlie that it was a betrayal of their father.

Shadows moved in the distance. Angela assumed it was more of the beach stragglers, but as long as they kept their distance, they wouldn't be harmed. If they were crazy enough to challenge her, they wouldn't see dawn arrive.

Wade didn't like it that the kids were out here by themselves without protection. At the same time, he understood anyone who approached them was in serious danger. Marc's children were lethal.

Wade smiled at the tired kids. He also wanted to tell them that their behavior was fine, but it wasn't his place. Cate had an amazing amount of power—a lot more than he did—and Cody's destiny was more important than everyone else's here. Other than needing time to learn how to control themselves, the twins were above him in rank and every other way. Wade didn't feel right giving them advice.

“What about when they become Eagles?” Angela went back toward the house, taking the rear entrance. “Will you be able to train them?”

Wade wanted to say yes, but he wasn't sure. "I'll try hard."

"What's holding you back?" Angela paused. "Other than their rank?"

"Morality, I guess."

Angela supposed he was worried about his relationship. "We've been over this many times and not just with you. Everyone has the right to live the life that makes them happy, as long as it doesn't destroy anyone else."

Wade confessed one of his biggest fears. "Sam will want more kids in the future and I can't give her that."

Angela scanned the darkness around the house and confessed a secret of her own. "It might be possible for sterility to be reversed. We don't know yet because none of us have ever tried."

Wade brightened. He immediately wanted to give that feeling of hope back to her. "We're going to get them out of there and help them recover. You're going to get Marc back."

Angela entered the house without responding.

Wade followed her into the small kitchen, where Piper, Erin, Dace, and Zack were eating, drinking, and exchanging glances but not conversation.

The lantern on the kitchen table flickered in the light breeze, throwing shadows over the people and the walls. It matched the chaotic thoughts of those in the room.

Angela felt the tension, but she didn't dig in to detect what had caused it. She already knew. Dace and Piper had become a couple on the submarine. Erin and Zack didn't have a mate along for this run. Watching Dace and Piper be loving was hard on the others.

Zack also hated being away from his sons, but he'd been glad to come along for a break from Allison. He wasn't sure if he was ready to take the next stage in their relationship. He was terrified that he would revert to his old ways once they were married.

Erin was lonely and scared of the coming fight. She was a normal and a rookie. This run would verify her future or send her to a different job; tomorrow might decide her life in Safe Haven.

Angela refilled the bowls that were held out and then went into the hallway without answering any of their concerns. She was positive all of those things would work themselves out in time.

Kyle refused the refill. He didn't want more food right now. He was standing by himself in the hallway, staring through the filthy window at their surroundings, but he wasn't really seeing it. His mind was on home. Watching Angela during this run was giving him the willies. One minute, she was a confident leader and the next, she was playing Suzy homemaker. It had reminded him that Jennifer was her heir. *I won't know how to handle Jennifer if she turns out to be like Angela.*

Kyle scanned Angela's scars, like most of the team and the locals had been doing. He didn't want Jennifer to take Angela's place, but there was nothing he could do about it as long as that was what Jennifer wanted.

Wade caught Kyle's thoughts and understood completely. He and Neil didn't want Samantha to return to the Eagles after she recovered. They wanted her to be happy and safe in the center of camp, surrounded by people who would die for her if needed. "I hope it will get easier as time goes by."

Kyle nodded.

Angela snorted and left, telling both men that hope was futile. Life didn't get easier as it went along. That wasn't the way things worked.

Angela entered the rear office, where Ray and Theo were taking apart the monitoring devices to add to their gear. Angela had told them to take it in case it was needed later. Neither man was speaking. Ray had broken Theo's nose in the cage. Theo had lost that match. Both men were dwelling on it.

Ray waved off the refill. "I don't want to get fat while we're gone."

Theo snorted gently. "Grant will still want you either way."

Ray grimaced. He regretted the way he and Grant had argued before the rescue team left. Grant now knew about his affection for Kenn and that was bad, but Ray was more worried that Grant was too much like Dale for them to make it work.

Everyone had blamed Jonny for attempted rape and drugging Grant's beer, but it never would have happened if Grant had been more careful about who he spent time with. Now, Grant wanted to be a descendant. Ray doubted that was a good idea. He'd told Grant he would give Angela his answer by the time they came home. *I don't think I can agree. He's too reckless and he isn't a good judge of character.*

Theo wound up the cord and secured it with a bread tie, then put it into his kit. He waved off the refill as well. He assumed Angela, Ray, and Wade were conversing when the silence lingered. Theo hated being a normal. He had felt left out most of the time he had been in Safe Haven. *I have to do great on this run. I need to ask the boss for a gift later.*

Once again, Angela left without responding. It wasn't a good idea to make promises right before a run. Those distractions might get someone killed.

Jayda and Trent broke apart guiltily as Angela and Wade came to the small laundry room where they had chosen to spend the night.

Angela didn't comment on their bedrolls being placed next to each other. Trent and Jayda were both along for this run to help conquer their fears. Jayda's was fire and low confidence. Trent was afraid of the run itself after being kidnapped and almost becoming dinner for the crazy man back in Port Stanley. The fact that they were now sleeping together every night was known to everyone on the

team, but no one had called them on it. When they got home, explanations would have to be made to Terry. Until then, Trent and Jayda were free to do whatever they wanted.

“Do you need anything?” Jayda was eager to stay on Angela’s good side.

Angela shook her head. “Things are fine.”

Trent felt bad. He knew it wasn’t right to move in on someone else’s girlfriend, but Terry and Jayda had only been on a couple of dates and shared one kiss. It wasn’t like they were married. He still flushed under Angela’s knowing glance. “I’m sorry.”

Angela shrugged. “I don’t think you have anything to be sorry for at this point. Just be honest when we get home. Everyone will adjust.”

Wade gave them a dirty look. He didn’t agree, though it wasn’t his place to tell them they were in the wrong. Wade liked Terry. The medic would be crushed to find out Jayda was no longer his girlfriend.

Wade closed the door as Angela left, giving the couple privacy.

Angela didn’t spend time telling Wade how he should think or feel either. He was entitled to his own opinion.

Angela returned to the main parlor, vaguely listening to the conversations and light laughter. She had just completed a check in with everyone except Adrian.

As if her thought had conjured him, Adrian came down the stairs and joined her. He held out his bowl for a refill.

Adrian had spent the last hour upstairs, gathering things from the house that they might need and giving people time without his presence. He was aware of how disliked Mitchels were. In the past, he hadn't cared. Now, he was trying to make it easier on his teammates by not always being around.

Angela had put Adrian to work as soon as they left the island. He was spending time with all the kids, as well as covering guard duty and continuing training with the Eagles; he'd done well. Adrian was eager for revenge on the lab, like most of the other people here were, for what his kids had gone through. Conner's nightmares were often in Adrian's thoughts.

"I also want Marc back. I miss him." Adrian took his bowl and went to join Tilly and Trevor on the parlor bench.

Angela wasn't surprised by his confession. Despite their natural rivalry, Adrian and Marc were almost friends. She planned to encourage that as much as possible. Both men needed that bond with someone else like themselves, just like Charlie and Gordon were doing right now. The difference was that the teenagers didn't have to hate each other first.

Wade couldn't stop himself from asking something he'd been wondering for months. "Why

don't you just tell them what you want and force them to obey? You're the alpha. They have to agree."

Angela stiffened as people rotated toward them to hear that answer. She was tired of giving it. "Talk to Neil."

Wade understood the blowoff. "Okay. I will." He grinned at her, trying to recover the good mood. "Should we check in with Saul and Dog?"

Angela chuckled. "No, but thank you for that image."

Adrian scowled. "He was lying when he said he won't fire unless you call it."

"I know. I didn't make him need me enough to obey no matter what." Angela was tired of using that bond with men she didn't want. "My first charm wore off."

Adrian shrugged. "It's one less person that Marc has to kill."

The others laughed.

Angela didn't.

2

"Everything is settled down, Boss."

Angela nodded at Zack. "It's fine for everyone to crash now." Over half the team already had. The good food and hours of good company had allowed them to relax enough to sleep.

Zack went to spread that order.

Angela stayed in front of the fire with her mug of hot tea. She was sitting on the floor, shunning the chairs. It didn't feel right to her anymore. Being civilized was part of what had gotten them into this mess in the first place. They had forgotten how to be primitive.

Adrian joined her near the fire. He could feel her mood fluctuating and exhaustion setting in. She had stayed busy for hours, cleaning up and serving people. Adrian knew why she was doing it. As long as she was busy, she didn't have to think about what was coming. That wasn't good for her. She needed to have a therapy moment.

Adrian glanced around. Other than Trevor, Tilly, Gordon, and Charlie, no one else was paying attention to them. They were doing their nightly rituals and getting set for bed. Adrian decided this was as good a time as any to get it over with. "He may have switched sides, along with the rest of the team. Reicher's methods are extreme, and effective."

Angela had already considered that possibility. "I know."

"I know you looked ahead, but you can bet that Reicher has as well."

"A lot of us looked ahead. It always ends in a new nuclear exchange that finishes off most of the survivors."

Charlie glanced over at them angrily. "Then why are we here?!" His medical skills would be useless in that situation.

“We’re going back, so we can save the future.”

Adrian assumed her conflicting answer meant she was going to do the reset. “It’s not right.”

Angela nodded. “It’s the only way to save my camp.”

Adrian’s frown stayed on his face. “I can’t help you with that.”

Angela gave him a pointed look. “You already have a job on this run; do it.”

Adrian was reminded that she had assigned him to steal a cure for the rage illness while avoiding the other captives in the lab. Adrian didn’t know how those two were connected.

“You will when you see them.”

Adrian didn’t push her on it. They were walking a dangerously thin line here. Reicher was powerful. He would have already seen the possible options and outcomes. Whatever Angela had decided for this run, it was likely that Reicher already knew it.

Angela refused to follow that train of thought because Adrian was right. *I can’t make most of those choices until the moment that it happens. That’s the only way to keep him from being in front of me.*

Angela yawned tiredly. She was staying busy to keep from dwelling on her plans, her pregnancy, or how it felt to be separated from Marc. It had been over seven weeks now. Other than when they had been split up as kids, this had been the hardest seven weeks of her life.

Adrian fought the urge to rub her shoulder. Contact with him wasn't welcome in most situations. The closer they got to Marc, the further she pulled away from him.

Angela let her eyes close. The travel mug slid to the floor as she allowed herself to doze. She'd eaten heavily to settle her own stomach and provide nourishment for the baby that may or may not make it into this world. She was slowly coming to terms with that now, thanks to Adrian's constant pressure about taking care of herself. Even if the baby died, she had other kids who needed her love. She would survive.

Adrian got her sleeping bag. He stretched it out next to her, then took a moment to stare at her while only a few people were around to see it.

Angela's lids shut the rest of the way. The hard floor beneath her weary body felt right. She could have claimed a couch or a dusty bed, but this suited her better. She didn't want to enjoy any luxuries or allow herself to be happy while Marc and his team were captives.

Adrian gently nudged her over and got her into the sleeping bag. He covered her up and then sat by her to provide protection while everyone else slept or visited with members of the resistance force. Angela had already sent Wade to bed so he would be fully rested to take back over protection duty in the morning.

Tilly left her place on the bench and came over to the fire. She perched on a stool next to the crackling flames, studying Adrian.

Adrian took the mug Angela had sat down and began sipping on it.

“You love her.”

“Yes.”

“What happens when she gets her mate out of the lab?”

“I’ll step aside.”

“You’ve never been good at waiting in the wings.”

Adrian sighed. “No, but I’m doing it. She gave me a second chance and I won’t dishonor it this time.”

Tilly continued to study him. It wasn’t the Adrian she knew. “You’ve changed. You wouldn’t have hesitated before to split up a happy couple to get what you want.”

“That was the old me.”

“What happened, besides the end of the world?”

“I fell in love with someone I can never have. I’ve never felt pain like this, but I’ve also never been so driven. She brings out the best in me.” Adrian gestured toward the rest of the team. “She brings out the best in all of us, even if we don’t like her methods.”

Tilly made a face. “That sounds like Reicher.”

Adrian nodded. “They have a lot more in common than she’ll be comfortable with.”

“What are the odds that he’ll be able to seduce her to his side?”

Adrian snorted. “Absolutely zero. No matter what life throws at her, she refuses to give in. It’s part of why we all love her so much.”

Tilly could tell that was the truth. Over the last six hours, she had analyzed the new people and their hierarchy. Nothing had happened without Angela’s approval, but none of those moments had been forced or under duress. Her crew was with her willingly. “Do you think she’ll agree to take us along?”

“Before I answer that, let me ask you a question. Why do you want to leave?”

“We need to be trained so we can reclaim our homeland. We’ve been on our own for 16 months now and it isn’t working. We need help and you guys are strong enough to give it.”

Adrian made a connection. “Whose idea was it to send Cerise to Safe Haven?”

Tilly sighed deeply. “Gordon thought of it, and I filled out the plan.”

Adrian chuckled. “You’ve been waiting for revenge for a long time.”

“Yes. There’s only one person in that lab that I would spare and even that isn’t a good idea.”

Adrian was curious. “Who is it?”

“One of the caretakers. Her name is Marion. She’s a descendant who pretends to be normal so she can report to Reicher.”

“If she’s betraying normals, why do you want to spare her?”

“Because she was born in the lab, too. She never had a choice to be anything else.”

Adrian denied that. “We all have choices. Escape may not have been possible, but betrayal is always a choice.”

Tilly shrugged. “Not when the boss of the complex is your son.”

Angela rolled toward them, eyes opening. “Are you saying Reicher’s mother is a caretaker in the lab?”

Tilly nodded. “I thought everyone knew that. He forced his mother to stay in the lab and help him by telling him all the secrets of the breeders and the staff.”

Charlie was horrified. “And you would still spare her?”

Tilly frowned. “You don’t grasp what it’s like to spend your entire life captive and then to give birth to kiddies who are also captives. Reicher’s father was a horrible man who took Marion from her parents and groomed her from the time she was a small child until she was old enough for mating. If she had ever been given another choice, she would have gone a different way.”

Adrian lifted a brow. “How can you be so sure of that?”

Tilly spilled her final secret. “Because she let us escape. Without her help, I’d still be a prisoner in

that lab and you'd be there, too. She saw us and didn't sound the alarm."

Adrian stared in shock.

Angela smiled tiredly. "I'm glad you made it out." She rolled over. Less than a minute later, she was sound asleep.

"She seems way too nice to be a leader, let alone to bring Reicher down." Tilly had been watching Angela all evening. She hadn't seen the woman get aggressive one time.

Small chuckles and snorts went through the room from those who heard the comment.

Adrian pulled the blanket up over Angela while shaking his head. "This is the side of her that she doesn't show very often. Once you see her in action, you'll doubt tonight ever happened. She's the most vicious person I've ever met once riled."

Tilly shrugged. "I hope she lets that side out tomorrow or none of us will survive."

Adrian pursed his lips. "Just remember that you asked for it."

"How does she plan to get into the lab? It's a steel door that can only be opened by the computer."

Adrian shrugged. "I have no idea."

Tilly frowned. "She does have a plan, right?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

People tensed at his answer.

Tilly's eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean *not that you're aware of*? She has to have a plan!"

“Sometimes, it’s better not to plan things out before you do them.”

“In what world does that make any sense?”

“In the one where your enemy is able to see what you’re doing before you do it. Any plans she makes, Reicher will know about.”

“So we’re going in blind?”

Adrian nodded. “That’s the way the Eagles like it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s because you’re not an Eagle.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

You Did It

Mission Day 42

1

“Congratulations!” Marion began updating Cerise’s folder. “Reicher will be so pleased.”

Cerise stared at the positive pregnancy test without responding.

Around them, the breeding wing was being relocated. The lab was in the final stages of yet another shutdown. Most of the women and babies had already been relocated, but the daily pregnancy tests were not allowed to be skipped. Reicher had insisted on that.

Breeders stole glances at Cerise, wondering if she would now reside with them like the other women did while they were pregnant. None of them wanted the bloody dog in their dorm.

“Yours is negative.” Marion frowned at Sasha, then went to put both results into the computer.

Marion didn’t know why Sasha and her sister hadn’t been arrested yet, but she didn’t give away whatever Reicher had going. He made the choices in the lab, and she supported him. His intelligence had brought them this far.

Sasha swept the woman next to her in sympathy. The only thing she could think of that would be worse than being pregnant by Reicher was being on Reicher's enemy list. *Which me and my sister now are. At some point, he's going to figure out that we've been sneaking around and then things will become dangerous for us. I need to think of a way to get us out of here.*

Sasha cursed herself for not protecting her thoughts better. She glanced at Cerise to see if she had caught it.

Cerise had, but she had more important things on her mind.

Cerise set the test on the counter and forced a smile for the witnesses. But she wasn't happy. If the reset took place now, the baby she was now carrying would never exist. If the reset didn't take place, her other kids would never be brought back.

Next to her, Sasha studied her negative pregnancy test with dread. She had just come from a rough session with Joseph. Her socks were hiding the small injuries on her ankles from where his nails had been digging in. She was no longer happy to have been matched with Joseph. He wasn't going to be given leadership and therefore he couldn't offer her any protection or extra benefits on top of what she already had. All he could do was continue to hurt her for his own gratification.

Marion sent an alert to Reicher to let him know he was going to be a father again. Then she gestured

dismissively at Sasha. “We’ll see you for another session tomorrow.”

Sasha also forced a smile and left. Joseph had told her everything that had happened with Marc. *I should have tried to become his breeding match instead.*

Cerise headed for the exit, confused and sad. Despite the many breeding attempts with Reicher, she hadn’t thought it would work. *It shouldn’t have worked.* She assumed Reicher had used magic to get her with child.

Cerise and Sasha both paused outside the door to the breeding room. The women exchanged glances that revealed how unhappy they both were.

For an instant, Sasha considered confiding everything to Cerise and asking her for help. Then reality slapped her. Cerise was carrying Reicher’s baby. There was no way she would go against him.

Cerise considered making a friend of Sasha, but she wasn’t sure to what end. Sasha was right that she didn’t want to go against Reicher. *I also may not have a choice. There’s no guarantee of the reset bringing my other kids back. This child is here now and will fill some of the darkness in my heart if it’s allowed to live.*

The women moved off in opposite directions.

Sasha contemplated her next stop. She didn’t want to do it, but she also did. Things had gotten out of control in this lab since Marc’s team was brought in. Nothing made sense anymore. It wasn’t just Isabel who was feeling differently about the job.

Sasha reluctantly took the lift to the wing where Kenn and his team were waiting to be relocated. The rest of Marc's team had already been moved to the bottom levels, including Shawn and Harry, who were now the main medics in this lab. They were working daily to cure staff members of previously incurable illnesses and diseases, and they were having the same remarkable success. It had made Sasha and her sister obsolete because they were normals. They couldn't even try to copy those methods. Sasha was almost certain that she and Isabel were about to be downsized. If not for their ability to breed twins, their lives would have been in danger before. Now, Issy couldn't have any more kids.

It hadn't escaped her attention that Reicher had been removing people. They'd had over 500 employees on staff here eight weeks ago. Now, it was down to 200 and that number was about to shrink even further.

Sasha entered the wing that was empty except for the isolated prisoners and Kenn's dorm. She went to the locked door and waited by the window to be noticed. From this angle, the camera was only able to see her legs. She was hoping that would be enough to cover her if Reicher was watching. That was unlikely, though. Cerise was supposed to escort Reicher to the bottom level now. The computers should be in the process of being switched, which meant the cameras were off.

Inside the dorm, Kenn and the other military men were sitting at the long table with cards in their hands, but none of them were playing. They had watched the other residents of this wing get relocated for the last two days, but their orders hadn't come down yet. None of them had been knocked out; no one had been told to pack. Kenn and the other military men knew something was wrong. Kenn had connected it to the scroll diving. He'd retrieved the map, the pinnacle of information. *We're expendable now.*

Sasha risked a small tap on the glass.

Kenn didn't hurry over. She had the look of someone sneaking around and he didn't want to get her in trouble if she was trying to help. He laid down his cards as if he had just finished a hand and then got up, stretching. "I need a minute. Deal me out."

The other men caught his subtle gestures and covered for him with loud comments and a new hand being dealt.

Kenn did a few stretches while slowly moving closer to the door. It didn't feel like they were being observed right now, but he knew not to have faith in that impression.

Sasha leaned toward the door, hoping her voice didn't carry. "None of the scroll divers are being relocated."

Kenn had already figured out that much. "Where are we being sent?"

Sasha regarded him pointedly, sadly. "Nowhere."

Kenn understood they were going to be removed. “Why are you telling me?”

The other vets were listening closely even though they were still joking and playing cards. The noise grew louder to cover Kenn’s conversation.

Sasha didn’t want to get into all of the details of her situation. “I owe your medic a debt for saving my sister.”

Kenn studied her pale face through the window. He didn’t mind making a deal now. He had hated the medics at first, but it had quickly become sympathy that the women were a part of Reicher’s torture setup. “Do you need help?”

Sasha was stunned that he would offer such a thing to her after everything he and his team had gone through. She slowly nodded. “I need a distraction.”

“When?”

“Tonight, late.”

“For what?”

Sasha didn’t trust him with the truth that she was going to break into the computer. “Isabel asked me to do it and didn’t tell me why. I believe it’s so she can visit her kids again.”

It bothered Kenn that the women were split up from their children. “I’ll see what I can do. Get out of here before you get caught.”

Sasha wanted to thank him, but she didn’t know how to put it into words.

Kenn understood. “It’s what Eagles do.”

Sasha quickly walked away.

Kenn faced the other military men who were still pretending to play cards. He used the Eagle hand code that he had taught them over the last weeks. *Who's ready to bust out of here?*

Every man there gave him a positive response. All of them were eager to follow Kenn anywhere he wanted to go. During his time here, he had reminded them of their oaths and what they were supposed to be fighting for, but he'd also given them hope for a different future than just these walls every day. Reicher's retraining couldn't stand against that.

Kenn assumed that was why these men were being sacrificed. Reicher knew they had switched sides. He returned to the table and gestured at the dealer. "Let's play regular poker. I'm tired of Hob-Jong."

As the cards began flipping around the table, Kenn continued to use Eagle code to communicate. He hadn't been given a plan before coming here because Reicher would have pulled it from his mind. *Angela told me to build one on the fly and that's exactly what I'm going to do.*

2

Isabel approached the gaol with a syringe in her pocket and her heart thumping painfully in her chest. When she was about to do would result in a death sentence if she was caught. She was terrified.

Isabel smiled nervously at the guard who snapped to attention as he spotted her. “Reicher sent me to handle the loose ends.”

The normal guard was used to the medics being sent in to take care of prisoners who were being eliminated. Reicher didn’t believe in trials or dramatic displays of violence unless it was on the warehouse floor. The guard unlocked the door and then held it for her.

Isabel removed the cap from the syringe in her pocket. She stepped by the guard and then quickly spun around and stabbed that syringe into his chest. She hit the plunger and quickly got out of his reach.

The man was totally taken off guard. He had never considered the two female medics to be a threat because they were like him.

The poison quickly traveled through the guard’s system and reached his heart. He fell to the floor with a loud thump that made her look around in terror.

Inside the gaol, Goldie and Gus both got to their feet. They had heard her words and assumed the worst.

Isabel dragged the guard’s body inside the jail and pulled the door shut. The gaol stank heavily of body odor and feces from the small pots that were in each cell. It roiled her stomach.

“What did you do?”

Isabel ignored Goldie’s shock. Both men were filthy, heavily bearded, and appeared as though they had given up. Isabel understood how being jailed

could make a person feel that way, but she hoped it wasn't too late for them to recover a little bit of their spark so they could help her. "I'll let you both out, but you have to help me steal my kids and escape from this lab."

"I'll do it." Goldie was willing to take any chance at all that might save his own kiddies.

Gus wasn't as fast to agree. "Something happened. What was it?"

Isabel retrieved the keys from the guard's belt. "Marc caved and signed the contract. He's the leader of this lab now."

Gus and Goldie were both shocked by that.

"Marc's running things?"

Isabel shook her head at Gus. "Reicher tricked him. As soon as he signed the contract, he was gassed and relocated. He's only the boss on paper."

Isabel unlocked Goldie's cell. She stepped out of his way, not trusting him.

Goldie gave her a tiny smile as he exited the small cell. He was feeling a heap better now that he'd had an energy transfer. "You know he's going to kill you for this."

Isabel nodded. "It's worth the risk. We have to get our kids out of here."

Goldie went to the guard and began stripping him of weapons.

Isabel unlocked Gus's cell next.

Gus immediately shoved the door open, smacking it into her hip and knocking her out of the

way. He ran to the main exit and was quickly out of sight.

Isabel started to go after him.

Goldie placed a gentle hand on her arm. “Let him go. We’ll need all the distractions we can get.”

She nodded. “Take more energy. I’m a normal. I can’t do much else to help.”

Goldie drew a small amount of her energy. “You’ve already done a heap, mate.”

She fought a yawn as he let go. “We have to get the kids right now while the shutdown is happening.”

“We can’t just storm in there, even with a gun.” Goldie thought about it for a minute.

Isabel watched the door and listened for the sound of their doom coming.

“I’ve got it.” Goldie guided her toward the exit. “Go to the breeding wing and ask for a pregnancy test.”

Isabel frowned. “I’m not a breeder anymore.”

“Then lie. Tell them whatever it takes to get relocated with the other breeders. Stay there and be ready to grab the kids.”

“Where are you going?”

Goldie stepped through the door. “To find some help. We can’t do this alone.”

“Everyone in here belongs to Reicher. They won’t help us.”

“No, they belonged to the leader of the lab and that’s not Reicher anymore.”

“Shutdown for this level is at 92%. All the important staff members have been relocated and all the wings are empty now except for the residents you chose to leave.” Thalia didn’t agree with her father’s choice to kill the military men, but she didn’t argue. It was obvious that Reicher’s plans were more detailed than what he had put into the computer or talked about. If he thought sacrificing those men was a good idea, she wasn’t going to speak against it.

The halls were empty on this level. All of the staff and troops had already been relocated. Reicher didn’t want anyone around while he was short on protection. “Has Joseph activated the new security room yet?”

“I’ll check on it.” The computer was limited during the shutdown. Most of the cameras were nonfunctioning while being switched over. Thalia typed in her password and began reading through reports that had been sent in from the staff.

“It doesn’t look like it. Perhaps his breeding session is running long this time.” Thalia snickered. Joseph’s inability to control himself had resulted in humiliation for him and amusement for everyone else.

Reicher didn’t join in her mirth. He was tired of the embarrassment that came from his offspring.

Thalia decided to check the other statements while she was already there. “We’re missing a

report from the guard on the gaol. Once we get settled, I'll send someone to check on it."

Reicher waved it off. "Leave them in there."

Thalia understood the order. The two prisoners would die in their cells from dehydration or starvation. The missing guard would be reprimanded or executed when he was found.

"We also have something from the breeding wing..." Thalia scanned the notes.

Reicher waited impatiently for her. His normal protectors were all being relocated at the same time. Thalia was his protection right now, but he had an escort coming as soon as she finished in the breeding wing.

Thalia focused on Reicher. "Marion sent in her report. Sasha's test is negative. Cerise's test was positive. You're going to be a father again!"

Despite all the effort he had put into their breeding sessions, Reicher was surprised. He had expected it to take longer.

"That's wonderful news." Thalia smiled at Reicher as she rose and followed him out. "I'm sau happy for you."

She really was. She doubted that Joseph would take the news so well, however. Joseph's jealousy of the coming child would have to be monitored. Cerise would be in danger.

Reicher didn't respond. He could already tell Cerise wasn't happy about it. If she'd been pleased, she would have contacted him herself with the news.

Thalia shut the door. “Joseph should already be in the other security room. I don’t know why he hasn’t switched things over yet. I’ll take care of it as soon as we get there.”

The public elevator slid open as they walked by it. Cerise stepped out. She locked eyes with Reicher.

In that moment, Reicher understood things had changed for her.

Cerise didn’t know what to say. It felt like a betrayal on her part no matter what happened.

Reicher didn’t want her to get upset. Her aging body couldn’t handle the stress and a pregnancy. “We’ll work something out. Don’t upset yourself.”

She smiled, relieved. “Thank you.”

Distracted, they all missed the man waiting for them in a dark doorway. Gus lunged out of the shadows with a stolen knife. He looked like something out of a nightmare.

Thalia and Cerise smothered Reicher in layers of their shielding.

Reicher began gathering energy to fight with, but he wasn’t having a good day. It took time.

“Go back to the gaol! You can’t kill him.” Cerise stepped in front of Reicher.

“I didn’t come for him!” Gus threw the knife.

Cerise staggered backward with blood dripping down her chest. The knife handle stuck out at an awkward angle.

She slid to her knees as she pulled it free; blood gushed down her stomach and onto the floor.

Gus ran to the public elevator and quickly hit the button. He was gone a few seconds later.

Thalia was stunned by how quick the violence had happened. She kept her shield around Reicher while staring at Cerise's bloody body.

Cerise gasped for air and tried to heal herself, but she wasn't able to do it. She'd never been a healer.

Reicher stepped around Cerise and hit the button for the private elevator.

Cerise slumped to the floor, reaching a hand toward Reicher that was ignored. Reicher wasn't going to waste the small amount of health that he had recovered.

Thalia was in shock. "Don't you care?" She had expected Reicher to at least try to save his unborn child.

Reicher gave a small shrug. "Take her to the new medical bay. We'll see if our medics can bring back someone they hate."

Thalia recovered slowly, storing that reaction. *If it had been me, would he still be emotionless?* "What do you want me to do about Gus?"

"He can only go to the upper levels in that elevator and he can't get out of the lab." Gus was obviously insane. Letting him run loose in the complex would be another distraction for Safe Haven's rescue team whenever they got here. Reicher knew they were coming now. He'd recently foreseen it and then a nuclear explosion when he refused to release Marc and his team.

More footsteps echoed; both of them rotated, ready to fire.

Joseph hurried toward them, scanning the situation in a brief second. He didn't care about Cerise's fatal injury. "Sorry I'm late. I ran a quick radar scan." Joseph believed in following his hunches, like his father did. "I'll go activate everything in a minute."

"What news do you have that you couldn't send over the computer or speakers?"

Joseph avoided the blood as he reached them. "Big news."

Reicher lifted a brow, ignoring the awful gasps of the woman dying next to his boots. "Well?"

Joseph grinned widely. "A submarine is sitting two miles off our coast. Angela just got here, father. You did it!"

Cerise wheezed out her last breath as the family trio celebrated Reicher's success.

Thalia gestured. "Bring her with us."

Joseph grabbed Cerise's limp wrist and dragged her body into the elevator.

Blood pooled in the frame of the door as Cerise's body thumped over it.

Reicher considered what might happen to Cerise. He was curious if Harry and Shawn could bring her back. "Take us to the medical bay."

Thalia hit the button on the elevator pad.

Joseph frowned. "Don't you want me to get security up and running?"

“There’s time still. I want to see how powerful our new medics have become.”

Joseph stank of sweat and stale sex, telling them he hadn’t had a shower since his breeding session. Thalia suddenly felt sorry for Sasha.

Joseph scanned Reicher and noticed that it wasn’t one of his prima days. The man wasn’t coughing but he was shaking.

Joseph scanned their thoughts next and realized Cerise had been pregnant. He celebrated her death silently.

Reicher knew Joseph was happy about it, but that wasn’t important right now. Everything Joseph had coming to him would happen when Safe Haven arrived. “If the medics are able to bring her back, immediately isolate all of them, including her.”

Both kids understood Reicher had made a final choice and it wasn’t good for the medics.

Thalia gestured. “It might be better to keep Harry around in case you need him later.”

Reicher nodded. “I know, but he doesn’t need an assistant, now does he?”

Thalia understood Reicher was going to consume Shawn and buy more time for himself. “This is going to upset Harry.”

“That’s why you’ll keep him contained while it’s happening.”

The lights flashed in the elevator as the computer continued to shut down.

“As soon as we get things activated again, I want all the security footage from the jail. There’s

no way Gus could have overpowered the guard and escaped on his own. He had help and I want to know who it was.”

Thalia immediately felt bad for whoever had done it. Their death was bound to be ugly.

Joseph studied the body by his feet. “I was under the impression that she was a badass, but she was attacked or subdued repeatedly since coming home. What happened to her?”

Thalia had that answer. “She lost the will to live.”

“But she was about to get her kids back.”

Thalia didn’t look at her father. “Nee, she wasn’t. That was a lie to secure her cooperation and deep down, she knew it.”

Joseph scanned the corpse again. The sight of Cerise’s bluish face was a turn-on. *Maybe I can get five minutes alone with the body if the medic can’t bring her back.*

Reicher was fed up with Joseph’s degenerate behavior. He lowered his shield and punched his son in the mouth. “Rabauke!”

Thalia stayed out of the way as Reicher beat on Joseph, following him to the ground. He continued to swing until Joseph was cowering in the corner. Then Reicher used magic on his son.

Joseph’s screams reached the bottom level before the elevator did.

Thalia didn’t enjoy Joseph’s pain even though he clearly deserved it. Knowing they were family made it hard to observe and not interfere. To keep

herself from suffering the same fate, Thalia considered the information Joseph had delivered. The submarine setting two miles off their coastline could only mean one thing. Safe Haven's rescue team had arrived; the battle was sure to happen now. "You're all going to wish you had stayed hidden on that little speck of dirt. None of you are going to make it home. My father and I will see to that with every breath we have."

Reicher caught that even though he was busy teaching Joseph a lesson. He punched his son again savagely. *It's going to get sau ugly here, sau soon.*

As the elevator took Reicher and his odd family downward, Sasha came from a storage cubby and hurried into the security room they had just left. She'd been here waiting, contemplating nothing, when Gus attacked. She was shocked by it and a little sad for Cerise, but she didn't have time for more emotions. *I have to find out how Tilly almost escaped.*

She hurried to the computer and began accessing the top-secret files.

Chapter Thirty-Three
You're Not Normal

1

Three large hounds charged as soon as Goldie exited the elevator on the top level.

He didn't have time to come up with a plan. He let instinct guide him as he jumped over the first lunging canine. He jumped again as soon as he landed, reaching for the light fixture above him. He grabbed it with sweaty fingers and struggled to hold on as all three large dogs lunged and snapped at his legs.

This might not have been a good idea. Goldie wasn't strong enough to hold onto the hot, slick light fixture for long. He swung wildly to the left and let go. The minute his feet touched the floor, he took off running.

The hounds were well-fed now, but that didn't stop them from chasing another meal.

Goldie hadn't recovered enough energy to use his gifts. He had to rely on his fading physical strength. He hoped it would be enough to give him the win.

The dogs chased after him, flying through the inch of water left on the floor from the storm

damage. Half-eaten corpses of the rioters who had made it up here littered the hallway. The smell of mildew and decay filled Goldie's nose as he ran through the wet corridor, trying to reach any open room with a door.

The fastest hound snapped at his ankle, barely missing.

Goldie lunged to the left and then to the right, rolling into the small radio cubby.

His ploy distracted the dogs for a few seconds, allowing him to kick the door shut.

Goldie kept his foot against the barrier while scanning to make sure that he hadn't closed himself in here with any other threats.

It was a relief to find the cubby empty even though there was a body and the same layer of stagnant water coating the floor. The body had been eaten away in several places. The smell was overwhelming.

The dogs jumped against the door, growling and snarling in frustration.

Goldie reached out and grasped the stool. He slid it toward the door, then carefully used his feet to put it in place under the handle.

Goldie stood up and took a minute to get his breath back as stagnant water dripped from his body. His heart pounded as he considered his lack of options. He was now trapped in here with nothing to eat or drink and no weapon. He had lost the knife he took from the guard in the flight here.

Goldie switched the radio on, hoping it still worked. If not, all of this had been in vain.

The radio activated on the first try. It was sitting on a dry shelf, but Goldie was surprised that Reicher hadn't shut off power to this level completely. That had been a huge mistake.

Goldie tuned in the radio with a shaking hand. He picked up the headset and placed it around his neck. He didn't want it over his ears because he wouldn't be able to hear what was happening outside this room. So far, it was just the dogs trying to get in, but it was possible that some of the rioters had survived. "Is anyone there? I need help! Is anyone there?"

Static greeted him.

Goldie tried again. "Come in ARF! I need you!"

The static cleared. "Where are you?"

Goldie didn't recognize the male on the radio, but it didn't matter. Any help was better than none. "I'm on the top level of a government lab near the beach. Can you help me?"

"Absolutely."

Goldie was relieved, though surprised at the quick, easy answer. "Hurry! I don't have much time."

"We're here. Open up and let us in."

Goldie paled. He'd forgotten the steel door couldn't be opened from the outside.

The radio went dead.

Goldie didn't know if that was because the stranger had stopped transmitting or the shutdown

had deactivated this level. He replaced the headset in fear. "I hate dogs!"

Goldie swept the dusty shelves, but he didn't find much to work with. He drew in a deep breath. "I always prided myself on not needing a weapon in any fight." Goldie ripped the cords out of the wall and hefted the heavy radio up onto his shoulder. "Clearly, I was an idiot."

Goldie positioned himself behind the door, foot against the stool to brace it. He was hoping to only let one hound through at a time.

He carefully pushed the stool with his foot. The door began to open.

All three hounds shoved through, pushing him backward.

Goldie began swinging the heavy radio, screaming as a slobbering jaw clamped down on his calf and then his knee. He swung again and again, shrieking at the pain as he splattered dog guts and brains across the radio, the room, and himself.

He didn't stop swinging until he was the only living thing left in the room.

2

Reicher let Thalia exit the elevator first when it opened. He kicked Joseph in the ribs again and then followed her.

Before he could remind Thalia to bring Cerise's body, a computer alarm began to wail through every speaker in the complex.

“Manual override on the door has been activated! The top hatch will open in two minutes.”

A powerful presence pushed downward, searching for what had been taken.

Reicher recognized it immediately. Fury went through him. “Verdammt! You were wrong!”

He marched back into the elevator and kicked Joseph again. “The sub didn’t just arrive! She’s here now! You are sacked!”

Joseph didn’t have any defense left. The beating his father had given him had taken all of the fight out of his mind and his body. Even his demon was gone. It had fled, certain that Reicher was going to beat him to death.

Thalia hurried toward the security room. “We still have two minutes!”

Reicher followed her, leaving the bodies behind. “It takes 20 minutes for a complete computer switch. You’ll never get it done in time to activate the defenses.” He still followed her to the security post. It was the safest place to take shelter until he figured out what to do. The halls were empty around them, but that didn’t mean they would stay that way. Until the computers switched over, all of the elevators were active.

Thalia jerked the door open and held it for him to enter. “I thought you looked ahead.”

“I did!”

“You said she would have to negotiate with you to get in here and then we’d capture her!”

“It wasn’t supposed to go this way!” The security room was warm and most of the monitors were off. Joseph hadn’t done a prima job here either. Reicher wiped his bloody hands onto his already splattered uniform and sat at the desk; he began hitting buttons on the keypad. “It changes with choices, and there are wildcards.”

Reicher contemplated Cerise’s murder. “Whoever let Gus out of jail changed the course of events. Anything could happen now.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Reicher was already working on that. It might be possible to salvage the situation. “Gather the kids. Safe Haven’s leader will never fire against children.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Bring in all of Marc’s team as well. We might need the insurance.”

“What about Kenn? He’s still in the military dorm.”

Reicher waved her on. “I’ll gas them all soon as we get the computer switched over. I can’t allow them to help Safe Haven.”

Kenn’s conversion had failed. Reicher knew where he’d gone wrong on that one. It was in the files now to never again put military men together in the dorms.

Thalia frowned. “We don’t have a pusher ready yet.”

“Sure we do.” He regarded her pointedly.

Thalia didn't argue with him. She shut the door and hurried off. Her boots left bloody tracks as she hurried through the hallway. Joseph's blood, along with Cerise's blood, had been impossible to avoid.

Reicher activated the security lock. Monitors began coming to life. "Verdammt you, Joseph! I told you not to miscalculate. You may have cost us everything."

Thalia hurried by the elevator, aware of Joseph slowly trying to crawl out over Cerise's body. Reicher obviously wasn't as weak as he had been in the past. Thalia was curious what he had been doing to regain his strength, but there wasn't time to figure it out now. She hurried toward the nearest computer console to enter orders for a time push. She hadn't done it from the security room so Reicher could be locked in there. She was the only one in danger now.

Behind her, Joseph made it over Cerise's body and slowly gained his feet. He held onto the wall, leaving bloody smears. Now that he had been officially sacked, he no longer felt the same responsibility toward his father. He spit out bloody saliva, along with a tooth. "You're all on your own now! I have my own goals and then I'm getting the hell out of here. I've had enough!"

3

"Do you know what's going on?"

Biff shook his head at Greg's question. They were all being herded toward a large concrete room

that he had hoped to never enter. He enjoyed working with his defender, but he didn't want any part of hurting kids or manipulating time.

Behind them, a long line of yawning kids were being directed toward the room by staff members armed with guns. It was the first time Biff had seen the staff here carrying firearms, other than Cerise and Thalia. "Whatever it is, it's big."

Other team members were also in the line, but they were still trying to wake up. They stared around blankly, trying to figure out what was happening. Biff and Greg were the only two who were mostly alert, but neither of them had their gifts back yet.

The number of kids in the hall surprised Greg. He hadn't realized there were so many in the lab. *I guess they were keeping them all on this bottom level the entire time.*

Biff gestured in Eagle code. *Distraction.*

Greg staggered toward the nearest staff member. "I don't feel well. I think my demon is draining me."

The staff member jerked away in revulsion. "Get to the front! Thalia!" The staff member followed Greg, leaving that part of the line unguarded.

Biff immediately ducked into an empty doorway and hid in the shadows as the rest of the people went by.

Greg allowed the guard to push him toward Thalia. He tried to seem ill as they reached her. “I think I need help. My demon might be taking over.”

Thalia didn’t have time for his problem. She beckoned two of the older kids over. “Get him in there and put him in double layers. Hold him in place until I tell you otherwise.”

Greg didn’t resist as the two kids brought up their shields around him, forming a double layer to keep his demon from doing damage to anyone else. They entered the large concrete room and went to the corner, out of the way.

Greg rotated toward one of the kids and began groaning like he was in serious pain. “You have to help me! I don’t want to die!”

In the chaos, no one noticed that Biff was missing.

Heavy, rapid gunfire broke through the noises. Coming from above them, it shocked everyone into silent stillness for a few seconds. It was a rare sound for most of them.

A speaker activated. “Get set up! She’s almost here!”

Thalia went out into the hall and began dragging the stragglers in. A sudden sense of doom settled onto her shoulders, but she refused to surrender to it. “I’ll go down fighting. You have my word on that!”

Biff waited until the line of kids was gone, then hurried back out into the hall. He went straight to the private elevator, hoping it would work.

Biff paused at the sight of Cerise's bloody body. The elevator was revolting. He stepped over her corpse and then used his foot to move her arm so the door would close. "I see you found out how dangerous we are."

Biff hit the button, not sure which level it would take him to. He didn't glance at the camera in the corner. He didn't know if anyone was monitoring this elevator. He supposed not because it was still active, but that was impossible to know for sure. Looking up at the camera might give away his one chance.

The elevator dinged as it opened. He hurried out, recognizing the second floor. The security room immediately came into view, showing someone inside.

Biff hurried over, recognizing the woman in there.

Sasha flinched back even though there was no way for Biff to get through. She had found the file she needed, but the time-lock door had activated as soon as the computer alert went off.

Biff didn't need to read her mind to understand the woman was in trouble. *We all are.* "He'll gas you soon."

Sasha was already in the middle of saying her mental goodbyes and trying to find peace with the

death that was coming. “I deserve it for betraying him.”

Biff couldn’t help being curious. “Why did you do it?”

“I have to get my sister out of here. She doesn’t deserve this life. She and her babies deserve to be free.”

Despite everything he had gone through since arriving here, Biff was still able to feel sympathy. “Maybe I can save her.”

Sasha nodded quickly. “I’ll help you in any way that I can.”

“I need you to print out a copy of something and slide it under the door to me.”

That was possible. Even though this security room was locked, the computers were active. “What is it?”

“I need the map.”

“What map?”

“It should be in Kenn’s file. He found it while he was scroll diving.”

Sasha hurried over to the computer and began opening folders.

Gunfire echoed above them again, drawing her attention. “Are we being attacked?”

Biff pounded on the glass. “Hurry up!” He could almost feel Reicher starting to notice what was happening here.

Sasha quickly found what Biff was searching for. Her mouth dropped open as she read the title.

Biff pounded on the glass again. “Print it out!”

Sasha activated the printer while studying the map. “Does that really go to Heaven?”

“I have no idea. Now delete that file.”

Sasha deleted the file and then grabbed the paper as soon as it finished printing. She took it over to the door. “Promise me!”

Biff felt his gifts return. He brought out the stone warrior. “You have my word. I’ll try hard to get your sister and her kids out of here.”

Sasha didn’t have another option. She pushed the paper under the door.

Biff shoved the map into his pocket. He didn’t really care about it. It was just a requirement that he needed to fulfill to keep his stone defender after this run was over.

Gas began flowing through the vents above the computer.

Biff felt bad for the medic. He wanted to stay and keep her company while it happened, but if he did that, they would both be lost. He gave her a sad smile. “Your sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

Sasha didn’t try to fight the gas. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Please forgive me for everything that I did to you and your team. I didn’t understand how wrong it was until it was too late.”

“I forgive you. Go in peace.” He took off running as more gas began coming from other vents outside the room.

Sasha inhaled deeply and let it take her to a place where there was no longer any pain or misery.

“I did the best I could for you, Issy. I hope it’s enough.”

Biff hurried to the medical bay, holding his breath now as thick waves of gas gushed from the vents. He shoved through the door and hurried over to the corner where five oxygen tanks were sitting. There hadn’t been any reason to relocate those to a new level because every level already had them.

He strapped on one of the masks and activated the tank, sucking in large gulps of air.

Biff picked up one of the tanks and then looked at his stone warrior as more gunfire broke out on the level above him. “Let’s go hunting.”

His stone defender’s eyes lit up bright red as they both moved toward the exit.

4

“Get out of my way!” Joseph shoved through the group of breeders and mothers hovering around the entrance of their dorm to see what was happening. The sound of gunfire had terrified them. They had been ordered to shelter in place, but the door hadn’t locked, and no other orders had come down.

Joseph pushed through the crowd roughly, ignoring the cries of surprise and pain as some of the women fell or were bumped into each other. “Where is she?!”

None of the breeders answered him because they didn't know who he was searching for. They retreated out of his way and hoped they weren't his target.

Joseph ignored the caretakers as he marched into the rear of the room where the cribs were set up. His beaten face and bloody body warned them not to interfere. He left small blood trails from the injuries his father had delivered. He could barely see through one eye and he was sure one of his ribs was broken. Blood was drying to the inside of both nostrils and several of his teeth felt loose. It was the worst beating he had taken since graduating from Reicher's conversion program.

Joseph saw Isabel in the corner near one of the cribs. He marched over and grabbed her arm. "Where's your sister?!"

He shook her roughly when she didn't immediately answer.

Isabel was shocked by his condition. "What happened to you?"

Around them, the other mothers and breeders retreated further. Everyone was scared of Joseph and not just because he was violent. It was common knowledge now that he was Reicher's son. Interfering with whatever he was doing might bring Reicher's wrath down on them.

"Where is she?!"

Isabel tried to pull away. "I don't know!"

“You’re lying!” Joseph clamped his bloody hand around her arm and began dragging her toward the exit. “You’re going to help me find her!”

Isabel wasn’t used to being treated violently. She didn’t want him around her kids or any of the other infants. She let him push her out into the hallway.

Joseph shoved Isabel toward the elevator. “Tell me where she went!”

Isabel was suddenly sure that if she went anywhere with Joseph, she wouldn’t come back. She planted her feet firmly and used a stern voice. “Stop it. You’re not allowed to treat me this way.”

Joseph slapped her viciously, knocking her to the floor.

Isabel stared up at him in disbelief as blood began to drip from her nose. “You hit me.”

Joseph kicked her and then did it again. The satisfaction of watching her curl into a ball to avoid the pain sent a thrill through his hurting body. His lids narrowed. “If I can’t have your sister, then you’ll do in her place!”

Isabel understood death was coming. She thought of her babies as Joseph’s fist neared her face.

The awful hit knocked her against the floor and brought out anger that she hadn’t known existed. She swung back, rocking his head.

Astounded to be hit by a woman, Joseph didn’t duck her second blow. When her third hit neared his

chin, he snapped. Joseph pummeled her the way his father had done to him.

Isabel fought for her life. She swung back wildly and kicked, screaming for help.

Joseph wrapped his hands around her neck to get the sound to stop.

Isabel remembered the brief training session she'd been given years ago. She shoved her hands together and forced them up between his arms and then shoved her thumbs into his eye sockets. She pushed harder as her vision began to blur from the lack of oxygen.

Joseph was forced to let go. He drew back to hit her again.

Isabel rolled over and tried to scramble away.

Joseph grabbed her shirt and yanked, ripping it. He grabbed her bottoms and began jerking them down.

Horror filled Isabel. She flipped back over and kicked out with both feet, catching him in the chest and the chin.

Joseph fell, smacking his head on the tile floor, but it still wasn't enough to stop his rampage. He crawled across the floor and grabbed her leg, keeping her from standing up.

Isabel kicked again, delivering another brutal hit to his face.

Blood sprayed both of them and the floor.

Joseph swung with a closed fist, catching her in the temple.

Isabel slumped backward as darkness ran across her mind.

Joseph began unfastening his pants as blood dripped over his arms and the floor from his broken nose.

“You false snake!”

Joseph turned around at the voice right behind him.

Marion swung her knife in a quick, neat move, slitting his throat open.

Blood gushed all over him, the floor, and Isabel’s legs. Joseph fell over, gurgling.

Marion pushed Joseph’s body out of the way so she could assist Isabel. She got the woman to her feet and helped her lean against the wall. “Are you okay?”

Isabel was barely conscious. Her eyes were starting to swell shut and she was covered in blood—hers and Joseph’s.

Marion began swiping away the blood with her sleeve so she could see how bad the injuries were. “Reicher ordered that weeks ago. Joseph shouldn’t have crossed the line.”

Isabel struggled to find words. “Reicher’s son!”

Marion kept cleaning her up. “He’s also my grandson. It makes no difference. We all have rules to follow, and he didn’t.”

Marion led the limping woman back toward the safety of the breeding room. She got her inside and then manually locked the door. She ignored the

scared breeders and mothers as she took Isabel to the rear room where they kept the medical supplies.

Isabel blinked away the blood on her eyelashes and struggled to focus. She saw Marion bring up a shield as more gunfire echoed from the top levels. “You’re not normal.”

Marion shrugged. “Who is in this place?”

Isabel didn’t get the joke. Her mind was too scrambled. “You know.”

“Yes, but like with Tilly, an arrangement can be made. My son doesn’t need more distractions from his duty. I let her go for that reason. When things settle down, I’ll do the same for you.” It had angered Marion when Reicher eliminated all of the breeders during the last riot, but that wasn’t why she was helping Isabel. After everything that had happened, Isabel and her sister would end up being used as public examples and this lab couldn’t afford the lost time.

Isabel forced out more words. “My sister?”

Marion frowned. “Where is she right now?”

Isabel reluctantly told the truth through split, swelling lips. “Breaking into top-secret files.”

Marion’s face shut down. “Then she’s already dead. There’s nothing I can do for her. Just worry about yourself.”

Isabel let Marion help her into a chair as her stomach cramped and her vision blurred again. She could only hope the injuries weren’t severe. Even though she was a medic, she was too disoriented to tell how badly she was hurt.

Marion continued to tend Isabel's injuries. "We'll get you fixed up and out of here as soon as my son settles things down."

More gunfire echoed from the levels above them.

In a quick flash of intuition, Isabel's thoughts mirrored Marion's.

He can't settle this down. Safe Haven has finally come for their missing men. They're not going to leave Reicher alive; they aren't going to leave any of us alive. It's time for payback.

Chapter Thirty-Four
This Is A Bad Place

1

“You have to hurry up, mate!”

“The gas is coming! Hurry up!”

Gas was coming in through the vents in the dorm and out in the hallway around it. Reicher had clearly decided to eliminate all the loose ends.

Kenn didn't let the panic distract him from picking the lock. He had been carrying this long, thin nail around in his mouth since Sasha's visit to warn him they weren't being relocated to the next wing. He had taken it from the wall in the bathroom while keeping his back to the camera and hoping Reicher didn't notice.

Behind him, the military men shared around the improvised gas masks they had made. Honey was a surprisingly good adhesive.

Gunfire above them echoed loudly and brought more panic.

“We're all gonna die in here!”

“We will if he doesn't get that door open.”

Kenn felt the right spot and pushed gently. He rotated slowly; the lock on the door popped.

Kenn pulled it open and held it while the other military men rushed out, cheering. One of them put

a gas mask over Kenn's face to allow him a few breaths of air that didn't include the gas. Because they hadn't been relocated, everyone assumed the gas was lethal this time instead of just a knockout dose.

This wing was already a complete mess. None of them had liked being left here while everyone else was moved. Reicher had locked them all down a day ago and stopped the meal deliveries. Kenn and his men had spent that time preparing as much as they could, while trying not to panic. Kenn had considered breaking them out before now, but instinct had told him to wait. The gunfire exploding on the level above them was the sign he had been waiting for.

Green gas began to fill up the flats and hallways, affecting the other subjects who also hadn't been relocated.

Kenn sucked in air through the small hole at the top of the plastic shield and then passed it off to the next man as he hurried to the elevator control pad and began working on it with his nail. This was the most extreme lock picking that he had ever done, but he was confident that he would be successful. The problem was getting it done before the gas killed them all.

Someone fell in the rear of the group, overcome.

The military men were loyal to each other, but they didn't rush to help their fallen man or share the six improvised masks. Only those who could remain on their feet would be cared for.

Coughs and groans echoed through the chaos.

“Hurry up!”

“He’s going as fast as he can, mate. You know how hard it is.”

Most of the military men had already tried to lock pick their way out of this lab and failed miserably. They were missing fingers, toes, and eyes as punishments for those attempts.

Kenn kept working on the lock as the thick green gas floated over them from the vent above the elevator.

Another man fell, sliding to his knees and gasping for air.

Kenn cursed himself for not finding a way to make more masks. The plastic bottles had been easy to come by from their meals and the trash. Using cloth pieces of their boxers from the penis pocket had been brilliant, as had using sticky substances from their food. He still wished he could have done better. Losing any of these men would hurt him.

The light over the elevator flipped to green. The door slid open.

“He’s got it!”

All of the men shoved in together, cramming in close. They doubted there would be a chance for the elevator to come back.

Kenn hefted up the man who had slid to his knees and shoved him into the elevator where someone else put the man on their back.

Kenn scanned the dorm, searching for other survivors.

“Come on!”

“They’re already dead, mate!”

Kenn saw that was true. He squeezed into the overcrowded elevator and hoped it wasn’t too much weight for the lift to carry.

The door slid shut, cutting off the gas. All of them breathed in deeply, not caring about the body odor or the thick scent of panic.

The man next to the control pad looked to Kenn.

Kenn considered it. “My boss will go straight to Marc. Take us to the bottom level.”

The Navy man hit the button. “I thought you were itching for him to be gone.”

Kenn snorted. “We played a great role during our time here.”

“So it was a lie about wanting his wife?”

“No, I want her like I’ve never wanted anything else, but I’m not giving up my current life for a chance to go back to that future. I’m moving on.”

Kenn was proud of himself for that decision, but there wasn’t time to celebrate his maturity as the elevator came to a rough stop, but the door didn’t open.

Gas began coming through the vents in the top of the elevator.

Men began to panic; gas masks came back up.

Kenn went to the control pad, roughly shoving his way through to reach it. He considered trying to pick the controls, but the gas was already filling the elevator. There wasn’t time. He began punching it

repeatedly, trying to short it out like he'd done before.

The other men tried to pry the doors open, ripping off fingernails and pieces of their skin on the sharp metal.

Kenn let his anger out, punching harder.

Sparks flew out of the control panel, burning through his shirt. Kenn barely noticed. He grabbed the broken plastic and yanked it out with one hand and then grabbed the wires with the other. He ripped them free in one quick jerk, barely noticing the small electrical shock.

Smoke came from the panel. A small flame shot out and then the elevator slid open, allowing them freedom.

Everyone rushed out of the elevator, gasping and wiping away tears from the gas that slowly began to wind through the corridor.

Kenn saw water on the floor. He heard sharp nails padding along that watery surface. "Shit. We're on the top level."

"Incoming!"

The hounds came at them in a rush, baring their teeth and growling.

The military men automatically formed a half circle around Kenn and the open elevator, and braced to fight for their lives.

"Watch that aim, Eagles!"

The familiar voice sank into Kenn's ears and brought relief.

Gunfire filled the hallway. Hounds went down to carefully aimed shots that made the military men flinch despite their years of training.

Kenn grinned as a large group of black-clad men and women hurried toward them. “Welcome to Hell.”

Angela and her team walked through the hallway, clearing each room as they scanned Kenn and his group.

Angela felt more trouble coming. “To the right!”

Wade swiveled, rifle coming back up.

His quick shots took down four hounds charging toward them.

Wade lowered his rifle, but kept it ready as he joined Kenn and the group he was standing in front of.

Angela scanned Kenn, seeing his injuries and his mental state in one quick glance. She also saw his failed attempt to kill Reicher.

Kenn swept the large team around her in relief. They might need every one of them.

Angela didn’t have a gun in hand. The nerve damage hadn’t repaired itself. She was the spotter for this run. She kept her shield up as she stopped near Kenn. “Eagle.”

Kenn nodded in confirmation. “Always, Boss.”

Angela eyed the surprised, leery military men behind him, but she didn’t dig into their thoughts.

“I have some new recruits for you.” Kenn hoped Angela would accept the men into their camp.

Angela lifted a stern brow. “Can any of you kill the kids protecting Reicher?”

Three of the men immediately came forward with nods and determination. The rest hesitated.

Angela motioned.

Wade fired off three more shots, dropping the three men on the spot.

The other military men crowded back into the elevator.

“It’s okay.” Kenn tried to calm them.

Tilly flinched, now remembering Adrian’s warning. “What are you doing?!”

Adrian delivered that answer in satisfaction. “Removing evil. Anyone who can kill a kid doesn’t belong in our camp.”

Angela winced, thinking about Marc. She swept the other nervous military men. “The rest can have a chance.” She looked at Adrian. “Get lost.”

Adrian read Kenn’s thoughts about the private elevators, then signaled to the three people he had chosen to help with his part of this run. “We have work to do. Come on.”

Angela didn’t watch them go. She motioned toward Kenn. “Drag position.”

Kenn led the military men through the large rescue party. When Trent handed him a gun, Kenn took it in relief. “I feel better already.”

Wade got them moving, bringing his rifle back up as they moved down the wet, dirty hallway. He didn’t need Kenn to tell him which way to go. He

was still using Angela's tracking gift to follow the small blue sparks that indicated Marc had been here.

Kenn went to the rear of the group, where Goldie was limping along behind them. His injuries had been bandaged and slightly healed, but the man was in rough shape. He was covered in bite marks from the hounds.

Tilly stayed in the center of the rescue party. She was glad that Angela had allowed her to join the rescue. Trevor and Gordon had been left outside with the others to guard the beach entrance. When Trevor had protested, Tilly had ignored him.

"More hounds!" Wade could hear them coming.

Eagles lifted a weapon or faced the hounds with magic.

Tilly didn't. She was still shocked by Angela's actions. *Wade killed the men, but it wasn't his choice to make. Adrian was right. She can't be trusted.*

Walking next to Tilly, Charlie frowned at the woman. "Adrian never said that. The alpha is more trustworthy than any of us. Be careful."

Tilly snapped her mouth shut, understanding she was about to cross a line that she couldn't come back from.

Cameras tracked their progress down the filthy hallway. The team could feel the eyes on them, but it didn't change their course or their determination to save their missing team.

Angela expected to be contacted soon. The boss had lured her here. It made sense that he would speak to her. “But not until I prove who I am.”

Angela sighed deeply. Then she sent out a blast of tracking magic that rattled through the hallways and drew out the next threats they needed to eliminate.

Riot survivors came from storage rooms and closets, drawn by the alpha command in her magic. It ordered them to reveal themselves.

“They’re sick!”

“Put ‘em down.” Angela scanned their six while Wade and Zack handled the insane men and women rushing them without weapons.

A hound broke from the dark doorway to Angela’s right.

Erin fired one shot, hitting the slobbering dog in the chest. It flew back into the room, spraying nasty water over the wall.

“Very good.” Trent knew she needed to hear that.

Erin lifted her rifle again. “Down!”

Trent dropped.

Erin fired over his shoulder, hitting a second dog trying to sneak up on their flank.

Trent didn’t thank her. He scanned for more threats as his heart pounded.

Erin kept moving. She was feeling better now that she had proven herself a little.

Kenn nudged Trent back into place as he caught up to the stopped man. “Keep moving.”

Trent did it while facing an unwelcome realization. *I don't enjoy this anymore. Being kidnapped ruined the job for me.*

“None of the elevators will hold all of us at one time. We’ll have to make at least three trips.” Kenn wasn’t looking forward to cramming inside a metal box again. “He might gas it.”

Angela motioned.

Charlie and Jayda opened their kits and began handing out real gas masks.

The men from Kenn’s wing relaxed a little. They liked a prepared leader.

Angela signaled a few of the team. “Stay here and finish clearing this level.”

The four people she’d chosen didn’t argue, but they didn’t like the order.

Angela activated the private elevator that Adrian had already used, while directing more of the team toward the public lift.

Cate and Cody brought up shields around her as the door opened. There was green gas hovering along the floor.

Angela pointed at Kenn. “You’re with me.”

Kenn grinned.

Angela and the first group squeezed inside. Angela was tempted to go straight to the bottom, but she needed the entire lab cleared. She took them to the next level down.

Ray stepped out onto the warehouse floor first and froze. “Oh, God.”

Angela knew it wasn't the smell, which was the worst so far in this place, or the bodies of staff members who had been left to rot. Ray was seeing the ghosts.

Angela tried not to, but it was impossible. The shadows of the men and women who had lived, and died, in these cages flew through the large, wide room, groaning and shrieking.

"What the hell..." Theo stopped, revolted by the cages and the gore stuck to the concrete floors.

"Can you hear them?"

Theo nodded at Ray. "Is that a recording?"

"No." Angela didn't explain. Some people were naturally sensitive to the ghosts of the dead, but she had long suspected that Theo was Invisible. His reaction added to that impression.

Angela put a hand out to stop the rest of them from leaving the elevator. The kids didn't need to see this firsthand. "It's all dead in here. Load up."

She didn't leave anyone to guard the warehouse floor. The ghosts could do that.

They took the lift to the next level.

Ray went out first again. "What were they doing in here?"

Kenn held in a shudder. "These are session rooms." He didn't offer more details.

Angela pulled it from his mind gently, not wanting to traumatize him more than he already was. Kenn was putting on a good act, but it was clear that he'd been hurt.

“Sessions for what?” Wade wasn’t wasting energy on reading thoughts right now.

“A lot of shit that humanity can’t handle.” Biff came from a session room they hadn’t reached yet.

Guns came up.

Biff stayed there, waiting.

Angela waved off her guards as she approached him. She sent out a wave of comfort. “Eagle.”

Biff glared at her. “*Boss.*”

Everyone heard the threat in his tenor. Wade and the others lifted guns again, hoping they didn’t have to put down one of their own.

Angela had expected this and worse. “Tell me what you need.”

Biff’s anger fell aside; confusion took its place. “I don’t know!” He was too messed up to know what was best.

Angela stepped closer, delivering another wave of comfort. “I’ll help you.”

“You just want the map!”

“Not true. I want you to recover and find happiness.”

Biff slowly took a crumpled paper from his pocket. “We made a deal.”

“And I’ll honor it, but not here and not like this.” She nodded at the paper. “Keep it safe for me?”

Biff drew in a calming breath as he realized she cared about him, too, and not just the map. “Yes...Boss.”

Angela smiled warmly. “Fall in, Eagle. We have a team to rescue.” She turned her back to him to demonstrate her trust.

The rest of her team tensed again.

Biff walked by her with his chin up. He had hunted loose staff members on this level and eliminated several threats while waiting for Angela to reach his location. He had nothing to be ashamed of. *And I have a defender I can use any time I need it.*

“No, Biff. You have to leave it here.”

Most of them didn’t grasp what Angela was talking about.

Biff kept walking; he didn’t answer.

Angela decided not to push that issue yet. She went to the elevator and stepped in beside him. His pain was thick, awful.

Biff felt her sorrow. He knew she didn’t like how he’d been treated. Her compassion broke through his anger. A tear rolled over his cheek.

Angela opened her arms.

The others watched Biff cry in her arms, angered that their friend had been hurt so badly.

Tilly observed in longing. Angela’s emotional responses to her crew was something Tilly would never be able to give to her own group. Reicher’s abuse had killed that part of her heart.

The elevator opened onto a staff level that had been destroyed. Bodies and debris littered the floors in nearly every room.

Angela walked through it while her team handled the few threats they found. It was obvious this damage had happened weeks ago. The bodies were reeking, filling the halls with the sickly odor of decay.

Angela didn't spend more time on this floor than they needed to. She cleared the flats, noted the signatures of her missing men, then went to the public elevator.

“Do you want to leave some of us here?”

Angela didn't, but she needed to make sure each level was under their control. If she didn't leave a guard here, anyone could come up and hide among the bodies and trash. “Kenn and his men can cover it until we're in full control.”

The military men fell in around the elevator obediently. They were used to following orders.

Kenn frowned. He didn't want to be split up from the rescue team.

Angela met his eye. “I'd never leave you behind. Tonya would kill me.”

Kenn chuckled, soothed. “Watch your six, Boss. This is a bad place.”

Angela had figured that out. “No worries. When I leave here, you'll be with me.”

Kenn watched as the team left. Loneliness and shame tried to take over his thoughts. Angela had mentioned Tonya. *She'll be pissed at the way I've shunned her.*

Angela sighed in his mind. *She'll just be happy you're alive and home, Kenn. Have faith. She loves you more than you deserve.*

Angela broke contact, concentrating as the elevator opened onto the next level. Isolation cells and long dorms with dissipating green gas greeted them.

There weren't many bodies visible, just one military man she assumed Kenn hadn't been able to save. A quick glance into the isolation cells revealed dead men and women and more lingering gas. The deaths were fresh, as was the damage on this level. Reicher hadn't been able to keep control even before she arrived.

Angela wanted to assume that Marc and his team were responsible for that, but she already knew it wasn't true. Kenn had avoided thinking about Marc or the rest of the missing team. That told her to brace for an ugly reunion.

Cate peered up at her angrily. "They hurt my daddy."

"Yes, and we're going to make them pay for that, aren't we?"

Every member of the team nodded, including Biff.

Angela pointed at Erin, Piper, and then Trent. "Cover this level. Finish clearing it and join us."

Angela felt the eyes on them again. She regarded the camera in the corner, acknowledging Reicher for the first time. "I'm coming for you. Get ready."

The speaker activated. Reicher's laughter was cold and so were his words. "Your husband belongs to me now. You'll never really get him back."

Fear entered Angela's heart as she went into the elevator. That was her biggest fear. It had been all along.

In the security room, Reicher scanned the monitor. Thalia had things covered for the moment, but that was about to change. Angela and her rescue party were about to arrive.

He activated the speaker in the concrete room. "Standby for the push. It's almost time to change the fate of everyone alive, and dead, on this miserable planet."

Chapter Thirty-Five
All The Lies

1

“**T**his is the laboratory. We’re in the right place.” Adrian led his small group through the narrow hallway that ran around the edge of the complex. They were on the second floor. It was quiet here and the halls were empty. So were most of the flats. Those that hadn’t been empty held bodies that had been here for a long time.

Adrian paused outside the double glass doors of the laboratory. “Someone’s in there.”

They hadn’t run into anyone yet. Adrian had hoped they wouldn’t, but he could hear someone muttering and moving inside.

Kyle, Ray, and Theo waited with their hands on their holsters.

Adrian hadn’t needed to pick his three people for this run back on the island because they had already volunteered. He scanned them now, making sure they were ready for whatever might happen when they entered.

Kyle glared. *Really? You’re checking up on me?*
Adrian smirked.

Theo and Ray just waited for the action to start. Neither man cared that Adrian was the team leader

for this. They trusted him in action moments. It was around females that he became a nightmare.

Adrian grew serious. He directed Ray to guard the exit and Kyle to protect Ray.

Theo joined Adrian, surprised that he'd been picked.

Adrian held the door to let Theo go first.

Theo entered with his gun in hand. He cleared the right and swung around to clear the left.

“Get out.”

The menacing voice stopped Theo. He scanned the man in surprised dread. “Gus?”

“Get out!”

Theo felt Adrian come in to stand next to him. “I can't do that, man.”

Gus saw Adrian and scowled through angry eyes. He understood the rescue team had arrived, but his desperate anger wouldn't let any relief come through.

Adrian swept the small lab and found broken bottles, open cabinets, and a floor littered with glass and fluids. “What are you searching for? Maybe we can help.”

Gus turned away and resumed digging through the cabinet next to him.

Adrian tried again. “We're here for a cure to the rage illness.”

“I can't find it!”

The team understood Gus was here for the same reason. Adrian motioned the others to stay back. “It will be refrigerated.”

Adrian stepped toward the other side of the room while keeping an eye on the angry bear of a man. Gus's clothes were filthy and his hair was knotted in small tangles that resembled dreads. He was covered in tiny burn scars and old bruises. Adrian hoped the rest of the team was in better shape. "Do you want to help me search in here?"

Gus swung around and stomped over.

Adrian and everyone else tensed. It was obvious that Gus had had a rough time.

Gus jerked the refrigerator open and held it, fighting the rage.

Adrian quickly began reading the labels, showing Gus trust.

Gus wanted to kill the Mitchel. He also wanted to kill the team. He needed to see blood, to taste it.

Adrian picked up two vials. He held one out to Gus. "I think this is it. Do you want me to inject you?"

Gus grabbed it and hurried to the counter where he'd already gathered syringes. He couldn't stand to let anyone else cause him pain, even as little as a needle stick.

Adrian took a cooler from the nearby shelf and began packing it with pouches of dry ice. He put several vials inside and then started reading the others to see if he wanted to take any of them.

Gus injected himself with a full syringe from the vial. He leaned against the counter, waiting for more pain, for relief, or for death. At this point, dying

would be better than what he was fighting every minute of the day.

Theo felt bad for the man, but he wasn't sure what to say that might help.

Neither were Kyle or Ray. They watched through the doors and hoped the medicine helped Gus. They weren't looking forward to subduing him for the trip home.

Adrian finished packing the cooler and handed it to Kyle. Then he went to Gus, pulling on his leadership skills. "It will take a bit for it to work. It might be a few days before you feel better."

Gus groaned. "Can't make it that long!"

"I'll help you, if you let me."

Gus turned on him, orbs lighting up bright red. "Why? Traitor!"

"You're one of my Eagles. I'll always help you when you need it."

Reason and rage warred in Gus.

Adrian didn't make any threatening moves. He used logic. "I can put you to sleep or we can sedate you. When you wake up, you'll be over the worst of it."

"No!" Gus couldn't take being put to sleep anymore.

Adrian understood. The flashes in Gus's mind were ugly. "Then I'll help you through it minute by minute. Just lean on me and I'll get you out of here." He held out a hand.

Gus wanted to take it. He also wanted to rip it off.

Theo prepared to rescue Adrian as Gus reached for his hand.

Adrian sent out a wave of calm. “Let’s go home, Eagle.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

Gus punched Adrian and followed him to the floor, swinging and groaning. “No home! No!”

Theo and Ray hurried in and tried to pull Gus off Adrian.

It didn’t work. Even lighter from his time here, Gus was still bigger and stronger than both of them.

Kyle sat the cooler by his feet and fired a strong sleep spell that hit all of the struggling men.

Gus had no resistance in his weakened condition. He fell over and rolled off Adrian.

Theo yawned widely.

Ray fought the urge to do the same. He frowned at Kyle. “We had it covered.”

Kyle snorted as he picked up the cooler and resumed his post.

Theo helped Adrian up. Then he scanned Gus. “Who gets to carry him?”

Ray chuckled. “I say the man who triggered it.”

Adrian wiped away blood from his split lip. “I need to work on my communication skills.”

Ray spotted a folded gurney in the corner and went to get it. “Yeah, you do.”

Adrian tried to scan through the levels to check on the rest of their team, but he couldn’t get through. The gunfire had stopped; it was quiet. That made

him nervous. “Let’s get him and the cooler to the boss.”

“We should go find Marc. That’s where she’ll go.” Ray was certain of it.

Adrian shook his head. “That’s not how you win against someone like Reicher. You go straight to the snake and start hacking at it. We need to find him. That’s where she’ll be.”

“Hurry up. She might need us.” Kyle also hated being split from the team.

Adrian assumed Angela’s warning about captives had meant Gus, but he wasn’t positive. *Is someone else here?*

Adrian stopped in the hall and scanned again.

He found a tiny blue spark near a dim doorway. It blinked out of existence while he observed.

Kyle saw it too. “Do what you have to. We’ll cover you.” Kyle held the door for Theo and Ray to bring the gurney through.

Adrian knew this was his chore. “Get him and the cooler to the boss before he wakes up. I’ll track it down and meet you there.”

Kyle didn’t argue. He provided security for Ray and Theo.

Adrian went to where the blue spark had vanished. He concentrated and immediately picked up waves of insanity.

Adrian saw the doorway in a far corner of the hall. It blended in perfectly. If not for the spark, he wouldn’t have seen it.

Adrian went into that hall and found himself in a round room surrounded by small cells. All of them were occupied.

Adrian's heart dropped as he realized this was what Angela had warned him about. The two dozen kids and teens were sedated, starving, and beyond hope of recovery.

Adrian wanted to walk away. He could. Angela had sent him here for the rage cure and he'd found it. *But she didn't really want me to ignore the misery of these captives. She wants me to end their suffering.*

Adrian hated her in that moment. He didn't want to do this.

Adrian drew in a deep breath. Then he drew his knife. These kids had been experimented on for a long time. *I can't leave them like this.*

He entered the first cell and gave the boy mercy.

2

“Bring those twins over here.”

The caretakers headed for the infants being held by their mothers. Three sets of twins were here in case Thalia needed more than one attempt. She'd never tried to manipulate time before now, but she'd studied Valerie and knew how it worked.

The mothers had never been present for a time push. They shifted away from the caretakers, scowling.

Thalia didn't have time to deal with their feelings. "Bring me those kids!"

Caretakers grabbed babies; mothers tried to take them back, looking around for help.

Teenagers around the room watched and waited for orders. They were the chosen enforcers for moments like this. Reicher didn't like to use adult troops who were sometimes compassionate. The teenagers were without sympathy. They would do whatever they were told. Their only motivation was Reicher's approval and avoiding the pain that came when he was displeased.

Marc and his remaining team members were horrified and still almost helpless. They didn't have their gifts. They were barely awake enough to understand what was happening, but the cries of the babies and their mothers were impossible to ignore. They had to try. Half of them moved subtly in front of the main door to prevent anyone else from coming in to help.

Marc staggered toward Thalia. "Leave them alone."

Thalia pointed at the stone table in the center, ignoring Marc. "Put them there." She picked up the knife to be ready when Reicher called it.

Marc stepped between Thalia and the kids. "You're not doing this." Marc didn't have many options with his demon gone and his body shaking, his head spinning. He did what he thought would buy time for him to recover.

Marc leaned in and kissed her.

Thalia had never been kissed before, but she still knew it was fake. She shoved Marc and brought her knife up to his throat. “Back off!”

Marc’s training took over against his mental protests. He grabbed her arm and spun her around so the knife was at her chest.

Thalia hadn’t been here so long without knowing how to defend herself. She brought up her shield and shoved it between them, forcing the knife away from her. She grabbed the gun from her belt.

Marc caught her wrist, but he couldn’t break it. Even the thought of hurting a woman was abhorrent to him now.

Thalia knew. Killing his lover had taken a severe toll on him. He might never be able to hurt a female again. She spun around, twisting his arm this time. Her knife went to his chest while her gun slid back into the holster.

Marc stilled, mind finally coming to life, but he still didn’t have his gifts back. He was forced to wait.

Thalia was furious that Marc had kissed her. She slid her knife closer to his throat. “Heir or not, you’re going to pay for that!”

The speaker activated. “Don’t bleed him yet. We need him for the push.”

Thalia didn’t let go of Marc. “We have the kids!”

“That was never how it worked.” Everyone heard the reluctance in Reicher’s voice as he was

forced to tell the truth. “It has to be founding family bloodlines.”

“What?”

“Why do you think we haven’t gone back before now?”

“The pushers weren’t strong enough...or they were killed. Valerie was doing it.”

Reicher snorted through the speaker. “It has to be blood from the founding families and two of them have to die. All the others can do is slow time. They can’t go back or forward. The rumor about the kids was spread as a defense against rebels doing a push.”

Thalia was shocked. “That wasn’t in the files.”

“That’s the point.”

Thalia thought fast and found a problem. “We don’t have what we need. Why are we even here?!”

“Experimenting is the only way to prove our theories and limits.”

Thalia shoved Marc toward the teenagers. “Hold him!”

Three teens came forward and layered him in their shields.

Marc didn’t fight. After Joey, there was no way he could ever hurt a kid again for any reason.

“What do I do now?” Thalia was frustrated with how things were going and the fact that Reicher hadn’t trusted her enough to tell her all this before.

“Now you wait for the other founding family member to arrive. As soon as she does, start pushing.”

“I can’t push time and draw their blood.”

“That’s why you’re surrounded by heartless teens who are eager to earn my approval.”

Marc and his team realized they would have to fight the kids in here. Every one of them mentally refused.

In the security room, Reicher nodded tiredly. “That’s why I handled it this way. As soon as she reaches you, push with everything you have.”

3

Reicher flinched at a loud bang near the locked door.

Angela walked into view. “Your son isn’t the only one who miscalculated.”

Reicher didn’t care about her insult or the fact that she knew what had happened even though she hadn’t been in the lab then. He stared in admiration and obsession.

Angela held still and let him have his fill as the rest of her team surrounded the security door and filled the hallway around it.

She’s magnificent. Reicher admired her scars, her missing hair, her furious blue eyes, and the feeling of total power that surrounded her like a cloak.

Angela lifted her chin proudly. All the hell she’d been through had brought her to this moment. “I’d like to say the same of you, but well... I expected someone stronger.”

Reicher felt that hit. He suddenly wished he'd controlled himself with Joseph so he was pristine.

Angela smiled coldly. "Does it matter if you're neat and clean when you die?"

Reicher shook his head. "No. But it won't be my death today."

Angela moved closer to the door. She could feel the energy field around it without touching it. "Let the negotiations begin."

Reicher scanned her team now. "Surely there's time for introductions."

Angela knew why he wanted that. "Hoping to round them up later?"

Reicher chuckled. "Of course."

Angela didn't give him what he wanted. "Surrender now and I'll consider sparing you." She scanned him easily through the force field. "Though I suspect you aren't going to last long no matter how many lifeforces you consume."

Reicher's face went blank, telling her she'd guessed correctly. He pushed, concentrating.

Angela saw brown liquid come from his pores, his nose, and even his ears. She fought not to gag as her stomach rolled over.

Reicher wiped his face on his damp sleeve. "Your medics have taught me some amazing tricks."

Angela caught flashes of the feats Harry and Shawn had accomplished. She was saddened. "Surrender. It's your only chance."

Reicher's eyes lit up. "You can't get through the door and it won't open for twelve hours. By that time, I'll have regained control of the lab. Get used to the walls around you. You're going to be here forever." He started to activate the gas in the hallway to knock out her and her team.

Angela and the others brought up gas masks, glaring at him.

Reicher frowned. It wasn't going like he needed it to. "Your team is right below us."

"I know."

"Aren't you going to go get them?"

Angela stared at him in contempt. "You can't do the push without me. You think I won't fire on your protectors." She chuckled coldly. "You have no idea who I really am."

Reicher realized his plan wasn't going to work. He tried a different tactic. "If you don't surrender, I'll kill them all."

Angela laughed this time. "I can't be bluffed. You made a deal with my husband." She leered. "Magical contracts *can't* be broken. If you kill him, you die immediately."

Reicher was trapped. It only left one option. "Then I'll have to draw your blood myself!"

Angela brought up her shield as Reicher started to use his gifts.

The team around her opened fire. They didn't need an order.

Reicher held his shield against the team effort without trouble. He'd consumed lifeforces of staff

and subjects daily for the last month to gain power for this battle.

Angela didn't join in. Despite her strength, it wasn't good for her to use up energy while she was pregnant. She signaled the twins. "Introduce yourselves."

Reicher knew he was in trouble as soon as he saw the glowing blue eyes of the child by Angela's side. The power in that small boy was immense and it was wild.

Cody lifted a hand.

Power flew through the force field and slammed into Reicher's shield like a bomb blast, jarring him against the chair.

Reicher kept his shield up, but he already knew it wasn't going to hold. He connected to Thalia. *I need you!* He had expected Angela to go straight to Marc. *Bring him up here!*

I can't! His team is blocking the exit! The kids are holding them, but it won't be enough!

Angela caught it all. She didn't encourage him to surrender again. "It's almost time for you to die."

Reicher feared that as much as he always had. He struggled to find a solution as Cody fired again.

Reicher's shield flickered.

He brought up a new layer, breaking into a cold sweat. Splitting up from Thalia had been a huge mistake, but so had miscalculating where Angela would go first. "I didn't see any of this! How did you trick me?!"

Angela's smile widened. "I lied to you in every glance, in every grin, with every breath. I lied." She gestured.

Her team fired again, helping Cody.

Reicher groaned. "You never intended to nuke this lab."

"No."

"And you didn't have to do it this way—you wanted to."

"Yes."

"But why?" Reicher strained against the dozen descendant spells trying to get through his layered shields. "Why did you do this?"

"I looked ahead and saw a final battle where the UN pops back up and tries to claim control over my homeland." Angela's fury came through her voice this time. "So I stole command from you. Marc is the rightful leader of all the labs now and of the United Nations."

Reicher comprehended all at once. "And you control him."

Angela smiled. "I love him. So, yes."

The team rotated as heavy steps and grunts echoed.

Kyle appeared in the hall, followed by Theo and Ray, who were pushing a gurney.

Angela didn't see Adrian. She lifted a brow.

Kyle joined her. "He's tracking a spark."

Angela was pleased. She turned back to Reicher. "I'd like you to meet Cody's sister."

Cate wanted inside the room. She longed to feel Reicher bleed onto her hands. She stepped into view. “Open up!”

Reicher recognized that angry face. He’d sent her to the IDC so she didn’t kill him. She was one of his few failures. “Demon spawn!”

Cody’s eyes turned red.

Sparks flew from the ceiling light. The door rattled.

Angela put a hand on each child’s shoulder. “Take him down now. But don’t kill him. We need to trade him for your dad.”

Both kids opened fire, making the rest of the team seem powerless.

Reicher began to sweat. His shield flickered and then strengthened. He was surprised, but still strong enough to hold against the angry twins for a while longer.

Angela looked at the woman in the rear of her group.

Tilly stepped into view. She scanned Reicher in disgusted contempt. “Hello, Carl.”

“Tilly?” Reicher’s shield fell.

The team and kids cheered.

Angela wrapped Reicher in mental chains and shut off his gifts. “You’re locked, forever.”

Reicher stared at Tilly, unable to believe what he was seeing. “You’re a ghost.”

Tilly glared at him with years of hatred. “No, but you will be soon.”

“What... How?”

Tilly refused to give him the satisfaction of an explanation about her escape. “I came here to watch you die. So do it already!”

“I want my daddy!” Cate sent in pain, fists clenching as Reicher screamed. “Where’s my daddy?!”

Cody stopped her before she went too far. “The alpha will handle it.”

Cate peered up at Angela with tears in her red orbs. Crimson drops rolled over her cheeks as she fought to control herself.

Angela forced Reicher to activate the speaker. “Bring Marc and his team up here right now!”

Thalia had been monitoring the new situation. She answered angrily. “No! I’ll trade them for my father. If he dies, so do they!”

Angela nodded. “You have a deal. Don’t keep me waiting. I can’t promise he won’t suffer if you make me wait.”

Cate sent another pain wave that hit Reicher harder and sent a scream through his lips to enforce the order.

“Get out of the lab and I’ll let them go.”

Angela laughed at Thalia’s demand. “Try again.”

Thalia’s options were limited because Reicher was in the time-locked room. She believed she could get through Marc’s team, but she obviously couldn’t defeat Angela if the woman had already taken down her father. She relied on the rumors

about Safe Haven's leader being honorable. "Swear you'll spare us and leave!"

"I swear it. Now hurry up! My patience is low."

Thalia didn't answer as desperation filled her mind. She was the only one left. What she did now would determine the fate of this lab and everyone in it.

Thalia drew her gun and stalked toward Marc.

Angela was watching on Reicher's monitor while Cate enjoyed making Reicher cry. She was squeezing his guts where the cancer was eating it away. Angela signaled Wade and a few others. "Escort duty."

Wade heard the unspoken order not to leave Thalia alive. "It will be my honor."

Adrian came down the hall with a blackened eye and a haunted expression. He was still wiping away the blood on his hands.

Angela didn't let him feel her sympathy. "Go with Wade and collect our missing men."

Adrian immediately switched directions and hurried to catch up with Wade.

Angela observed him with a shielded mind. *I have to do the right thing now.* She shivered. *But I don't want to. I want to give in and let Marc end all of this.*

Cody took her hand, offering comfort.

Angela let his calmness soothe her troubled mind. Cody was already leading them with his quiet confidence. Angela suddenly wished Marc was

more like his son. *But then none of this would have happened. Some things are just meant to be—this is more proof of that.*

“Do you understand what he is?” Reicher sucked in more air as Cate let go of his guts.

Angela smiled. “He’s the future.”

“Blue glowing eyes have only been reported in the world one other time in history.”

Angela lifted a brow. “When?”

Reicher tensed as Cate prepared to resume hurting him. “When the Creator walked this planet with a child named Sarah by his side.”

“What does that mean?” Cody knew he was special, but he had assumed it was so he could lead the world into peace.

“It means when the Creator sees you, he’ll think of Sarah and get very, very angry.” Angela held in a shudder. “We’ll need to keep you out of sight.”

Cody frowned. “Can you bring her back?”

“No.” Angela’s hand went to her small baby bump. “But she can be reborn. This child has to live. If she doesn’t, we’re all doomed in that final battle.”

Cate was tired of that topic. She fired another hatred spell at Reicher while ice crawled up the walls. “I want my daddy!”

Angela pried at Reicher’s secrets while he was in too much pain to defend his mind. She noted the location of the last lab and that it had gone dark. She was relieved to discover that. “Now I can concentrate on my camp and the future.”

Cody also saw the information. “It’s not dark. It’s filled with ghosts.”

Angela shrugged. “Like this place will be.” She eyed the timer and then resumed digging into Reicher while Cate had him distracted. “Slow down or he’ll never last.”

Cate eased up, but she didn’t stop. She’d been waiting for this for years and it felt good. *The only thing better would be if my mother had survived so she could feel it too.*

Angela leaned down and kissed Cate’s head. “I’m your mother now. Switch your aim to his legs or he’ll die from internal bleeding.”

Cate obeyed instantly.

Reicher’s screams echoed through the room and the hall, bringing a smile to Biff’s face. “Thank you, Boss.”

Angela nodded. “This is the part I want you to remember the clearest. The rest is just a nightmare that you can wake up from anytime you want to.”

Biff peered over his shoulder at the stone warrior no one else here was able to see so far.

The warrior looked back comfortingly. *I’ll always be here for you. All you have to do is call.*

Chapter Thirty-Six
Let's Go Back

1

“We’re coming in. Don’t shoot.” Wade slowly pushed the door open and then held it so he and his crew got a clear view of the time room before entering.

All of them were dismayed to detect kids holding shields over their missing men. Those heavily bearded men didn’t look good and they weren’t resisting, though they were blocking the exit.

Thalia tightened her grip on the gun. “I’ll let Marc go last.”

Wade noticed her finger was on the trigger. There was a chance that he could use a spell, but the odds of her firing the gun and killing her hostage as it landed were high.

Thalia strengthened her shield, making it ripple.

Wade and the others realized she also had Marc inside a shield. They had to stick to the deal to trade for Reicher.

Thalia focused on the kids who were covering Greg, Harry, and Shawn. “Let them go.”

The kids did it, then quickly retreated as Wade and his group came forward to help the dazed men.

Their glassy eyes said the drugs were wearing off slowly.

Wade got an arm around Greg, muttering at the man's condition. He was disfigured, too thin, and he stank.

Zack helped Shawn while Dace assisted Harry.

Thalia lowered her shield and retreated. She slowly holstered. "Get out of here."

Marc stumbled toward the exit.

Thalia looked up at the camera. "You have your team. Let my father go and get out."

Angela laughed coldly through the radio on Wade's belt. She used Reicher's words. "There was never a chance of that happening."

"But we made a deal!"

"Yeah. I lied." Angela sent the final order in satisfaction. "Kill her."

Marc's team pulled away from their escorts and blocked the door again.

Thalia grabbed for her gun.

Marc spun and dove at Thalia, grabbing her arm as he let his weight fall.

Thalia let go of the gun and punched while firing a powerful pain spell.

Marc took the hit and absorbed it, restoring some of his energy. He tried to get arms around her to hold her in place instead of going for the kill like he knew he should.

"We have to help her!" One of the teenagers stepped forward.

The others weren't sure. They hadn't been given any orders. Reicher hated it when they thought for themselves.

Harry covered Shawn and Greg in his shield and dared the teens to attack. His reputation was well-known. Everyone in this lab thought he was invincible.

The teens all hesitated now.

Wade and the others brought up shields over the kids, ending their one chance to help.

Marc got his hand around Thalia's throat, but he couldn't kill her. His guilt was a constant, crushing presence that refused to allow him to follow through.

Thalia brought up her knee and tried to wrestle her hand free. She fired spells that bounced off the shield and hit them both, but Marc didn't let go of her. He let her wear herself out.

Thalia felt her energy draining. Hoping for another chance later, she stopped fighting and glared at him with red orbs. "I'll kill you for this!"

Marc hauled her to her feet. "Not in this lifetime."

Thalia looked toward the camera for help, but Reicher didn't respond to her silent plea.

Marc began consuming her energy, making her shield flicker. "I made a deal with your brother. Where is that abusive little weasel?"

Thalia made a face as her shield collapsed. "Dead." She'd felt it when it happened.

“Well, that makes my day easier.” Marc took the knife from her belt, then shoved her toward his angry team. “Someone handle that.”

Harry came forward eagerly. “I’ve got it.” He swung once, hard.

Thalia staggered at the hit. She tried to fire at him, but her demon fled. It knew what was coming next.

Harry wrapped his hands around Thalia’s neck and squeezed.

Wade and the others stayed back while keeping the shouting teens contained.

Harry laughed at Thalia as she fought to remove his hands from her throat. Her pitiful struggles had no effect on him. “I didn’t forget who tortured us on the warehouse floor, little boss lady. You killed my rookies!”

Thalia’s face turned red as her lungs ran out of air.

Harry finished it with a neat spin and a vicious jerk that snapped her neck.

Every team member who’d been her captive nodded savagely as her body dropped to the floor. She’d had that coming.

“No!”

“We have to help her!”

The kids tried hard to get through the shields.

Marc glared at them. “Stand down.”

The kids ignored his order. They gathered energy and fired spells that weakened their captors but didn’t get through.

Marc wasn't upset. "I'm not the boss yet. I get it."

He looked up at the camera. "Goodbye, Commander Reicher. Enjoy Hell."

2

Reicher was out of energy. He gasped in air, feeling the end coming swiftly for him. He'd felt Thalia's death and watched it, but he hadn't been able to help her. He was barely hanging on now.

"Kill him." Angela heard an alarm bell start ringing in her mind, but it was too late to pull back the order.

Reicher stared at Angela as the twins by her side used their gifts to rupture his organs. "You didn't win! He'll always be mine!"

Reicher's eyes exploded. His lungs went next.

Angela observed it, but his words dug into her brain and stuck there.

Cate and Cody stopped as Reicher's lifeforce faded. He slid to the floor, leaking blood from every orifice.

Tilly shuddered. "He's smiling. Oi. Why is he still smiling?!"

Angela sighed. "Because I missed something and he knew it."

Jayda eyed the mess and then the timer. "Do we have to stay here and wait for the timer to count down?" Jayda didn't want to. This place was full of pain. She wanted to be gone.

Angela wanted the information on those files. She pointed toward the hallway terminal. “Not if Erin can get in through there.”

Erin brightened as she realized this was why Angela had brought her along. She went to the terminal. “I’ll be in before he stops bleeding on the floor.”

“This all feels a little too easy.”

Angela nodded at Piper. She was feeling the same way. “But it’s too late now. Reicher’s dead.”

The supercomputer registered Reicher’s death and followed its programming. *“Leadership is being passed. Please standby...”*

Speakers all over the lab activated. *“This complex is now under new leadership. Report to your next shift and wait for orders from the new commanding officer, Marcus Brady.”*

Angela’s team began celebrating.

3

Marc glared at the teens again. “Stand down. That’s an order.”

He was obeyed immediately. The teenagers stopped gathering energy and throwing spells. They stared at him in confused resentment and waited for orders.

“Get to your dorm, pack, and stay there.” Marc swept all of the cowering people in the room. “That’s for all of you.”

Wade and the others slowly lowered the shields they'd kept around the kids.

Teens and caretakers walked to the exit with nervous, unhappy glances at Marc and all the team members. The adults wanted to ask what would happen to them now.

Marc's glare discouraged it. His demon was back now, thanks to the energy he'd absorbed while struggling with Thalia. If they pushed him, he would use his gifts to knock them out. He wouldn't hurt them, but the teens didn't need to know that.

The kids and caretakers now walked by Wade and the others as if they weren't there. They didn't care about strangers who didn't grasp how things worked here.

Mothers quickly collected their twins and hurried by with small smiles of gratitude that made Marc feel a little better.

Wade moved toward Marc with a smile.

"Stop." Marc frowned at Wade. "You need to leave. Get the rest of them and go back to Safe Haven."

Wade paused with everyone else. "What?"

"You're not needed here. Get going."

Harry, Shawn, and Greg came over to flank Marc in support.

Dace scowled. "We're here to take you home."

"That's not going to happen. Please leave before this gets any uglier."

Wade waved the others back and keyed his radio. "Boss, you need to come down here."

“Why?” Angela’s voice said she already knew.

“We have another problem and I don’t know how to handle it.”

“On my way.”

Marc spotted Adrian behind Wade. His anger flared out. “Get in here!”

Adrian approached Marc cautiously, bracing for a fight. Marc’s timbre said he wasn’t in the mood for a calm conversation.

Marc opened fire with his mind, using his newest ability.

Not expecting it, Adrian dropped to his knees and struggled to breathe. The lockdown spell was painful and powerful.

Marc brought up a shield over Adrian so no one could help him. “Get out!”

Wade went through the door, making the others follow.

“But we have to help them!”

Wade shook his head at Dace. “The boss will handle it.”

Dace scanned Marc and his angry, hurting team. “What if she can’t?”

Wade wasn’t sure about firing on his own teammates either. “Have faith. It was made for moments like this.”

4

Angela came into view a minute later, reading thoughts that verified her fears. This was going to

be hard. Killing Reicher and taking over his lab had been easy. Convincing Marc and his team to resume their old lives was the real challenge.

Angela entered the concrete room and scanned everyone in it.

Adrian stared up at her in pain from his place on his knees near Marc. She detected the shield over him and felt the freeze spell. Marc had developed another skill while here.

She glanced at Greg next, mentally wincing at the eye patch and his ragged appearance.

Greg glared at her, but he didn't speak.

Biff entered behind her and went to stand by Marc. He brought out his stone defender and smiled coldly as she and the others saw it this time. It was clear whose side he was on.

Angela saw Shawn. Her guilt grew. The man was thin and unhealthy. His sunken eyes glowered at her in silent accusation.

Harry was brimming with good health and insanity. Angela could feel it. Despite his advances, he wasn't doing well either. None of the men were.

Angela finally focused on Marc.

His mental pain slapped her harshly.

Marc let her scan his mind to see what had happened here and what he'd gone through. Her guilt didn't make him feel better. He doubted anything would.

Angela hadn't rehearsed words for this moment because she'd hoped it wouldn't come to pass. Now that it was here and glaring at her in reproach, she

felt the words come to her tongue, but she hesitated to say them. All of her reasons, her excuses, seemed small in comparison to their pain.

Marc saw she had new scars and half her hair was gone. He connected it to the flashes he'd gotten of an explosion. He tried to be glad that she was okay and managed to, but it was hard. He wanted to hate her for sending them here.

“It’s time to go home.”

Marc and the others scowled deeply and shook their heads.

“No.”

“That’s not my home anymore.”

“I’m not leaving.”

Angela concentrated on Marc. “What can I do for you?”

Marc delivered his demand with a cool tone. “Take us back.”

Angela smiled. “That’s what we’re here for.”

“No. Take us back in time.”

Angela stared in fake confusion. “What?”

Marc gestured wildly. “We can go back and none of it will ever happen.”

Angela kept stalling. “You mean the war?”

“I mean us! We’ll be happy this time. We’ll run together. I’ll be there for you. None of it has to happen that way.”

Marc’s team understood what he meant, but they didn’t support it.

Harry stepped away from Marc. “We’ll lose all the advances we’ve made, man.”

Biff flat out refused. “I’m not giving up my defender.”

Marc ignored them. “Let’s go back, Angie. We can do it right this time!”

Wade frowned. “You can’t do a time push. You sent the kids away.”

Marc scoffed. “We don’t need them. We need founding family blood.”

Wade was surprised. “You’d kill your own kids?” He hadn’t heard Reicher’s explanation.

Marc pointed. “We have Thalia’s body. She’s a Mitchel. We also have Adrian.”

Wade tried to stay calm, but he didn’t know how Angela was going to fix this. “Who’s the third?”

“My blood is enough. Only two of us have to die and one already has.” Marc held out the knife he’d taken from Thalia. “Kill him. Follow through this time and let’s go back!”

Angela sighed unhappily. She couldn’t stall any longer. “I can’t do that, Marc. It would take away too many people and moments from the world.”

His anger grew sharper. “It would stop the war! That would save millions of lives.”

“It would also remove people. Everyone born after that awful day wouldn’t exist anymore. The war was awful, and our lives were awful, but we can’t go back.”

Marc’s anger transformed his face into an evil profile that reminded them all of Reicher. “I can do it without you.”

Adrian braced for a death spell.

Marc gathered energy to enter the time stream.

“You can, but you won’t.” Angela looked at the door. “Cate.”

Marc tensed as Cate and Cody entered the room. “Why did you bring them?!”

Cate was crying. “You’d make me go away again?”

Cody tried not to cry. “I’ll love you anyway, Daddy.”

“No, I...” Marc hadn’t thought about his kids. If he went back in time, Julia wouldn’t get to trick him. Cate and Cody would never exist.

“Their pain is terrible and it’s hard for you to handle.” Angela stayed still as the kids approached him. “But they deserve the chance to live. Can you really take that away from them?”

Marc felt the trap close in. Part of his mind wanted to keep fighting. The other half was relieved that Angela had found a way to stop him.

“Please don’t make me go away, Daddy!” Cate hugged his waist. “I’ll be good now!”

Marc slowly thawed under her wild sobs. He dropped the knife and hugged her back. “It’s okay. Don’t cry.”

Cody joined them.

Wade and those waiting in the hall were dismayed and shocked by Marc’s actions and words. Because he only cared about his own feelings, he had just lost his second chance to be a leader in Safe Haven.

Angela knew. She wasn’t unhappy about that.

Wade and the others assumed she'd planned it this way for that reason, but they weren't sure. All of them were confused about what was happening.

"What about us?" Greg didn't want to go back in time. "But I can't go home and act like none of this happened."

Harry sent his feelings clearly. "I won't stop advancing, no matter how I have to do it."

Shawn sent bitterness. "If you lock me up, I'll take my own life."

Biff crossed his arms. "I won't give up my defender."

Angela frowned around at all of them, including Marc. "I'm not Reicher. I'm not making deals with you. If you're not willing, I don't want you in my camp."

Marc shook his head. "None of us should be allowed out of here. We're too dangerous to be loose in the world."

Angela had no doubt that was true, but she refused to abandon them. "I'll be the judge of that."

"We've done bad things here."

"I know." She sent out a wave of love and compassion. "I'll forgive you and so will everyone else. Can you forgive me for sending you here?"

All of them were touched, but still angry about what they'd gone through. They didn't answer.

Angela wanted them to understand how important this run had been for everyone. "Your sacrifices have ensured peace for thousands of people, not just Safe Haven. You're all heroes. I'm

sorry we can't go back and undo the damage. You'll have to find a way to live with it."

Shawn didn't believe that was possible. "How?"

"I'll help you. So will everyone who came with me."

Members of the rescue team entered now that things were calmer.

Lisa ran to Greg. She ignored his tensing body and hugged him tightly. "I missed you so much!"

Greg remembered longing for her when they'd first been captured. A bit of that emotion returned, allowing him to put an arm around her, but he glared at Angela over her shoulder.

Charlie came in, ignoring his dad. He was furious with Marc. He went to Harry. "You'll be able to help all our people now. And you can teach me. Your skills are amazing."

Kindness and hope had been drained from the mission team for months. Charlie's words got through to Harry. The damaged medic nodded slowly. "Maybe."

Charlie smiled at Shawn. "You can both train me."

Shawn grimaced. "I'm just a neutered nurse."

After Marc, he was the most bitter. Angela had no choice but to tell Shawn the truth. "You weren't going to stay good. It was either this or let you hurt Missy and then kill you for it. In our camp, I had to wait for you to do the crime."

Shawn was crushed. "I'm not a bad man!"

“No, but you are weak. You have been all along. Tara proved that, but so did your easy acceptance that Missy is right about you becoming a couple at some point.”

“You lied!” Shawn sent her an image of her words. “You told me I’d have a life mate!”

Angela brought up that moment in their past. “No.”

Shawn snickered. “Kyle is so in over his head.”

Angela chuckled with him. “Yes, he is.” She leaned her head back and propped her feet on the dash. “Get me to our new home by sunset and I’ll tell you which Eagle to ask for a one-night stand.”

Shawn laughed. “What if I get you there an hour before sunset?”

Angela blew him away. “I’ll tell you which one will sleep with you for the rest of your life if you want her to.”

“We picked up Tara a few hours later and you assumed the attraction you felt meant she was the one. Then she tricked you, cost me a child, and you switched to Missy. You’ve never asked me for the real answer.” Angela spilled that secret with sadness. “It was Courtney. Her love would have held you both to the good side. Kenn’s affair wouldn’t have happened. She wouldn’t have snapped and tried to blow us all up. Everything changed because you were rash, arrogant, and weak.”

Shawn began to cry. “You should let me die.”

Angela shook her head. “I never considered that. Many of our citizens made awful errors in the past. They got a second chance. Now, you have that same gift.”

Shawn was devastated that his choices had led to so much misery. “I don’t know if I can recover from this.”

Angela didn’t blame him as much as he would blame himself from now on. “I’ll help you. All of us will. Just don’t give up on yourself and we won’t either.”

That helped Zack to hear; he was still worried about reverting to his old self. He stayed outside the door and willed Angela to keep dropping truth bombs that would make the mission men understand they couldn’t stay here.

Shawn slowly gave in. “It saves Missy?”

Angela nodded. “She’ll have a happy marriage to Cody once she accepts the change. It’ll be up to you to make sure that she understands you don’t want her that way.”

Shawn asked the harder question. “What happens to me?”

Angela wanted to tell him he would always be needed as a medic, but she didn’t believe that was enough.

Charlie was reading the thoughts of all the team and storing what they’d gone through so he might be able to help them later. He assumed Shawn didn’t think he could have a normal life now. “You can

still have sex. Castration just lessens the desire; it will take some work, but you can still have a mate and stuff.”

Shawn immediately denied that hope. “I won’t try. This was done to protect an innocent child.”

Greg stared, making a connection. “Was my eye taken for the same reason? So I couldn’t see you as well anymore and interfere with you and Marc?”

Angela sighed. “No. When those lives we discussed are taken, look back on this and hate me instead of yourself. That goes for all of you. Hate me and give yourselves a break. That’s an order.”

An awkward silence fell as all the men considered what that meant. She was telling them she expected them to still follow her orders.

None of them were sure if they could do that.

Outside, Kenn came down the hallway. He’d felt the ugliness happening here, but he didn’t agree with the team on most of it. He didn’t want to go back in time. He didn’t enter the time push room. He joined Wade near the door.

Kenn held out one of the candy bars he’d taken from the supplies that were being gathered. The other military men were still guarding the level where he’d left them, but Kenn hadn’t been able to force himself to stay there. He needed to be around his real team.

Wade didn’t understand what was happening with Marc. He hoped Kenn could clear things up. “You told Trent something while we were clearing the tunnels.”

Everyone around them tensed at the reminder of clearing their island.

Wade kept going, though he felt it too. “You said Marc wants to be Adrian, that it was never about Kendle or Angela.”

Kenn answered in hopes that someone could use it to help Marc. “He killed a kid and a woman he loved. He can never be like Adrian now. Adrian would never have gone that far.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Kenn shrugged. “It’s true, though. Marc’s done things since the war that make our Marine service seem like a walk in the park. He crossed his own moral line too many times.”

“But this doesn’t make sense. Why would he give it all up just to go back and do it all again?”

“Nature scared him.” Kenn gave the answer without gloating. Only the truth could help Marc now. “That’s never happened to him, ever. He didn’t know how to handle the fear, so he went to full retard instead of popping off single, careful shots.”

“I don’t get the reference.”

“Full auto wastes ammo and is only for special circumstances. In this case, Marc did most of it to claim a nuclear sub in case the boss refused to manipulate time.”

Wade scowled darkly. “For the final battle.”

Kenn nodded. “Yes. He believes we can kill Nature with a nuke.”

Greg realized Marc had lied to him. The team hadn't been in danger from sinking the submarine.

Wade scowled. "I still don't get the reference."

Kenn shrugged. "His confidence retarded, failed. He lost his edge and responded without thinking it through. He should have chosen to fire strategic blows and force the enemy into a corner."

"Will a nuke work?" Zack was listening closely, as were the others in the hallway and the crushed team in the time room.

"Maybe, but it's a high price to pay. It won't just remove her, you know." Kenn didn't remind them about fallout and the large range of such a weapon. They all knew it already.

Wade was still considering it. "If we get her from a distance..."

"Maybe, but we'd doom anyone living in that area." Kenn spilled one of Angela's secrets now. "It doesn't matter anyway. The boss isn't going to keep that submarine, no matter what Marc wants."

Angela nodded. Kenn was right. As soon as possible, she was going to sink that machine of destruction.

"We'll never beat her, Angie." Marc's fear was in his tone, as well as on his face. "We need that weapon!"

"Let me worry about that, too."

"You don't understand! You didn't fight her!"

"No, you did—alone. It won't be that way next time." Angela now understood letting that happen had been a mistake.

“You can’t sink that sub!”

Angela didn’t answer this time.

“So what happens now?” Biff didn’t care about the sub. He only cared about keeping his defender.

Angela scanned the angry, nervous, traumatized team in sympathy. “All of you have to decide where you go from here.”

“You’re not going to drug us and drag us out of here?” That was Biff’s biggest fear at the moment.

Angela shook her head. “No. You’ve been through enough of that during your time in this awful place.”

Greg was relieved by that, but also terrified of it. He stepped away from Lisa. “I don’t think I can settle back into the normal routines.”

Everyone else but Marc nodded in agreement. They were too different now, too changed, to resume their former lives.

“We’re not going home.” Angela stayed where she was despite wanting to wrap Marc in her arms. “We’re going to a deserted location for some recovery time.”

That got Marc’s attention. “For how long?”

Angela shrugged. “As long as it takes for all of you to want to go home.”

All of them doubted that time would ever come.

Kenn moved into the doorway. “What about the work we’ve been doing here?” Kenn knew that was a deal breaker for most of them, including himself. There was no way he could stop scroll diving now.

Harry nodded. “We’ve made amazing advances. If we can teach others how to do this, we can save patients that weren’t savable before.”

Biff and Shawn wanted to add their support so Angela would understand how important it was to them, but their advances were different from what Harry had done. They remained silent and hoped Angela would come through for them. After all, if she had wanted them gone, they already would be.

Angela regarded Marc. “How do you feel about it?”

Marc wasn’t sure how he felt about anything right now. His brain was scrambled. “Do whatever you think is best.”

“Best for you, best for the team, or best for Safe Haven?”

Marc glared. “You’ve already stopped me from going back and changing things. What more do you want?”

Marc’s bitterness wasn’t a surprise. Neither was his anger. Angela took a few steps forward. “I want you to find peace with the past and move on so that you can be happy with the rest of our lives together.”

“How can we have a life together, Angie? There will always be ghosts between us and I don’t just mean that piece of shit still locked to the floor.”

Angela didn’t look at Adrian. She also didn’t free him from Marc’s captivity spell. Marc’s gifts had clearly aged well during his captivity, but it wasn’t a fair trade. “None of us are perfect. We’ll

always make mistakes and have to figure out how to live with them. None of it's easy. It's not supposed to be. I don't know why it was designed this way; I just know we have to survive it."

She took another step toward her mate. "You're one of the strongest people I've ever met in my life. If anyone can figure out how to go on from this, it's you. I believe that with all my heart."

Marc was tired. He was also furious. He had no idea how to handle his emotions now that every hope he'd had was gone. "I don't know where we go from here. I don't know anything anymore."

Angela smothered her breaking heart and took another step toward him. "If you can let us help you, I believe that will work itself out."

"And if it doesn't? What if I always carry this hatred and mistrust for you, for him, for everyone?"

Angela smiled sadly. "There will always be bad guys for you to hunt."

She swept the anxious team. "There will always be places I can send you that will allow you relief from what you're feeling right now. We can also try memory charms, therapy sessions, and cage matches to relieve the anger. There are a lot of options. Please don't feel like you have to give up. That's the only thing that any of you have to do right now—don't give up."

Half of the team was willing to take their chances with her. Greg and Harry now assumed she'd done it to help camp members who would die without their advances.

Kenn believed she'd done it so she would be in control of those advances, along with being able to claim official command over any UN troops they encountered during the final battle.

Shawn, Biff, and Marc were different. Shawn had suffered more physically, Biff was scared of being defenseless, and Marc was broken mentally. Angela understood those men weren't going to just give in to whatever she wanted. *And I don't need them to. In fact, I need them to keep challenging me. Otherwise, I'll become the same dictator that Reicher was.*

Angela was under no illusions about how ruthless she had become. She often walked the line between good and evil to secure a future where these things didn't happen anymore. She didn't want to go bad. *But if that's what it takes to give us peace...*

All of the team was scanning her thoughts. It bothered some of them to find out how far she was willing to go. It comforted the others.

"I found out some things about your father."

Angela tensed at Marc's words.

Marc didn't spare her, though he also wasn't cruel about it. "He tried to breed a family name like the others, but most of the kids didn't survive because he dropped them on unfit or unstable teenage mothers who were easily taken advantage of. He never stuck around to raise the babies or make sure they were cared for. As far as I could find out, there are only two adult members of your

bloodline alive right now—you and him. Darius hasn't been heard from in years. He went off the grid long before the war.”

Angela didn't like hearing that. “I had hoped he was dead. I was born into this time for this purpose, but that doesn't mean my line should continue. It doesn't mean that any of our three bloodlines should continue, honestly. Once we settle the rest of the future, it might be best for all of us to collect our kids and go away.”

The rescue team she had brought along didn't like that.

The team she had come here to rescue agreed completely.

Angela swept the mission team. “I'd like you all to stay here while we get the lab cleared and I sort through the people. Obviously, we're not taking all of them. We can't. I hope you understand.”

Most of the men nodded. The staff members here had helped Reicher torture people, and the subjects were severely damaged. Taking them back to Safe Haven was a bad idea.

“I'll come back in a while to see what you've all decided. If you're not coming with me, I would ask that you not join Tilly's group either. You're all too powerful. You'll wind up taking over her group and creating another rivalry. The last thing I want is for us to become enemies.” Angela was only a few steps away from Marc now. She slowly closed that gap.

Marc froze as she gently wrapped her arms around him. Sweaty vanilla invaded his nose and then his brain. He wanted to hug her back. He also wanted to hurt her. The only thing he could do was not move, not make a choice.

Angela kissed his cheek softly. “I’ve always loved you. That didn’t change for me because of anything you’ve done since the war or even before the war. We were meant to be together. I still believe that, and I always will.”

Angela retreated and wiped away a tear. Then she turned away and walked out. Marc would make his choice and so would everyone else.

Wade made Lisa and the twins come along too. Angela was right to give the mission team time to talk. He hoped it would be enough to convince them. Wade couldn’t imagine leaving them here.

Angela sighed. *Neither can I, but I won’t go back in time for them or anyone else. This is the life I’m playing to the end.*

Chapter Thirty-Seven
None of It's Easy

1

Angela stopped in the hallway to get control of her emotions. She didn't need anyone to see her weak right now, but it was a struggle to control herself. *I may have lost him.*

She had known that was a possibility when she sent him here. She had bluffed Reicher with her plan to use a nuclear weapon on this lab, but he might have won in the end. None of them were going to stop experimenting. If they were set loose on the world, they would only continue what Reicher had started. *That was why he was smiling. He knew I wouldn't be able to eliminate them.*

Tilly could feel Angela struggling with a hard decision. Tilly didn't envy her leadership at that moment.

Neither did Adrian. Despite how badly he wanted to be in control of Safe Haven, moments like this were convincing him that he was no longer strong enough to do the job. If Angela was smart, she would lock them all in here and blow it up like she had fake planned.

Tilly moved them on to another topic. "What are you going to do about everyone else in here?"

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Tilly followed Angela to the elevator. “I’ll take them in. The staff here weren’t responsible for most of what Reicher was doing.”

“Why do you want them?”

“They’re my citizens. Just like with you and your team, I hope I can help them, fix them.”

Angela didn’t think that was possible, but she respected Tilly’s loyalty to her countrymen. “Let’s get them all assembled and we’ll sort through each dorm.” Angela didn’t agree to let Tilly take them in.

Tilly felt that and shrugged. “I can’t read their minds the way you can. If you believe they’re too far gone for anyone to save, then I’ll respect that decision.”

Angela studied the woman. “You don’t have to take any of them. Just because you escaped this hell, that doesn’t make you guilty.”

Tilly winced. “But it does, a little. I ran away and hid. I organized a resistance force that couldn’t do much. I left them all in here. I share some of the blame.”

Angela felt that blow even though it was unintentional. She had gathered up a group of people from America and fled. Though she’d managed to save most of those she’d brought along, she’d left the rest of her countrymen to fend for themselves. She knew it hadn’t gone well for them. “I understand. I really do, but there’s only so much we’re capable of handling at one time. If you had stayed in this lab, or if I had stayed in America, we

would both be dead now and none of the people we have saved would be better off. Leaders have to make hard choices.”

Tilly nodded. “And then we have to live with them.”

Angela sighed. “That’s what I have to drive into my men now. We’re all still alive for a reason.”

Tilly brought up something she hadn’t felt comfortable discussing last night. “We’ve heard rumors that there’s another battle coming.”

“Yes. We’re calling it the final battle, though that never seems to be the case with us.” Angela shrugged. “I would imagine all of the battles after that one will seem like tiny skirmishes in comparison.”

Tilly stayed next to her as Angela began filling her in on that battle and who the participants were supposed to be.

Behind them, the rest of Angela’s crew left the time hall with sympathetic glances at the mission team. Lisa was the last one out, other than Adrian, who was still stuck in place. Lisa didn’t care if Marc executed Adrian. She only cared that Greg was coming with them, but she didn’t beg or badger. Greg had been through enough. He deserved to make his own choices.

Silence fell as the rescue team left and the mission team stared at each other. None of them knew which way to go.

Adrian stayed quiet. Marc’s freeze spell was strong. Adrian was certain he could get through it,

but it would take a lot of power and drawing attention to himself wasn't wise right now. Marc was deciding his fate. Adrian could feel the Marine stewing on everything that had happened between them.

Adrian did consider speaking up in defense of his actions, but he chose to let Marc make the decision. Marc was an intelligent man. He wouldn't just run through the bad things.

Marc hated Adrian's confidence. He hated Adrian and everything the man stood for. He wanted him gone forever.

He also wanted to leave Angela with Adrian and walk away so that he never had to face these feelings again. *I can pretend none of this ever happened. Adrian will love her and the kids and I can go do what I do best—kill.*

The tension thickened as people caught that and began to agree. If Marc went rogue, most of this team was going with him. It wasn't because he was their mission leader or a friend, because that was no longer true in either case. They were attracted to running and not having to face everything. Trying to recover would be hard.

Marc realized all of them were waiting for him to make the choice. "We can just roam the wastelands, killing and not caring."

"What's the alternative?" Biff wanted to be clear on that.

Marc glared at Adrian. "The alternative is accepting this pain and misery in every day of our

lives. The alternative is constantly facing our mistakes and never being able to change them. The alternative is looking in the mirror every day and loathing who we see there. The alternative is being hated by the people that we love and never being able to change their opinion of us. The alternative sucks.”

Adrian was unable to stay out of it this time. He forced out words through the lockdown spell. “Life isn’t meant to be easy. It comes with ups and downs that are awful and wonderful. If you run, that’s not really living. You might as well take your lives now because you won’t find any peace out in the wastelands. The absolution and forgiveness that you’re searching for can only be found in your own hearts.”

Marc barely stopped himself from firing a death spell. A tiny part of his mind wanted to listen to Adrian.

Adrian knew he was on the edge of death once again, but he had already spent most of his life that way. He pushed on, hoping he could help them. “She didn’t send you here to die. She sent you here to secure a future for everyone and that includes all of the men in this room. You’re strong enough to get past this and learn how to be happy again. You are Eagles in her army and while that is not an easy job, it’s the most important job in the world. Everyone in Safe Haven needs you.” Adrian smiled at his former rival. “I need you. You’re the only one

keeping me on the good side. If you leave, I might as well give in and do whatever I want, too.”

Marc’s anger flared up. “Don’t put that on me! You’ve always been a terrible person. I haven’t!”

Adrian was able to shake his head. “Not true. I was raised in these labs. I was forced to be someone I didn’t like, someone I couldn’t stand every time I looked in the mirror. I know exactly what you’re feeling right now. I still managed to find moments of greatness through all the hell and so can you. Don’t give up on yourself, Marc. Don’t give up on her, on Safe Haven, on the dream. Without you there to remind us of the moral line, we’ll cross it too often and collapse the entire system that we’re trying to rebuild.”

The rest of the team listened, agreeing with some of it and disagreeing with the rest. Adrian had been raised in the labs, but that didn’t mean he understood what they had gone through.

“But it’s not just about the last eight weeks, is it?” Adrian fought against the lockdown spell and stood up. “Everyone here hates themselves for things they did before they came here. You can’t blame it all on Reicher or me. You made those choices on your own. Now you don’t want to live with it and try to make things right because it’s too hard.”

Adrian broke the rest of the spell holding him in place, but he didn’t move. He studied each one of the men in understanding and sympathy. “This is what life is about. We may not like it. We may wish

that we could make it all go away, but this is how it works. This is the way it was designed. We have to be tough enough to come through the ugly parts and make changes so we don't repeat our mistakes. Without that step in the process, we would just be a pack of animals screwing and killing and never being able to affect changes. This mental pain is what separates us from the animals. It's not thumbs or the ability to build or destroy—it's our minds."

Adrian's words were reaching Marc. He wanted to keep trying because to do anything less would make him feel like a coward and he would never be able to tolerate surviving if he felt that way. "Keep going."

Adrian was encouraged that Marc was allowing him to speak at all. He chose his next words carefully. "There are a lot of kids in this lab, and they're just as confused as all of you. I assume the boss will take most of them back to Safe Haven because she loves children. But will she be able to help any of them?"

Greg immediately shook his head. "She won't know how to reach them."

Harry agreed with that. "She won't know how to heal any of their defects or injuries. Their mental cracks will turn them bad."

"It will drive them crazy that she can't get what they've been through." Shawn was positive of that. "They'll need firm reinforcements from people who are *not* like Reicher."

It didn't bother the rest of the team to hear that, but it did bother Adrian and Marc. Neither of them liked how much Angela was similar to the evil man who had run this lab.

Adrian pushed that line of thought. "She's been on the edge for a long time now, Marc. If you walk away, I don't think I'm strong enough to keep her good on my own. She doesn't trust me the way she does you."

"What happens if she comes with us?"

Adrian knew Marc wasn't including him in that. He shrugged. "Jennifer and the others might be able to hold it together for a while. Angela has trained them much like Reicher has the inhabitants in this lab. Will it be enough?" He shrugged again. "That's impossible for me to say. What I do know, is if she has to give up leadership to follow you, she'll never be the same. The woman we both love will be gone and the evil bitch we hate will take her place. You won't be happy with that, and neither will she."

Marc knew that to be the truth. Angela was better off in Safe Haven than she had been during her childhood and certainly better than during her time with Kenn. Needing to follow the rules and be a stronger person for that camp had improved her quality of life. Marc wasn't sure if it had improved her mental state, but he was positive that his constant fighting with her had interfered. If he had been a supportive mate during their time in Safe Haven, Angela would have been happier. *If we leave together, she'll never forgive me for that.*

Adrian didn't tell him he was right. He didn't need to; it was obvious.

The speaker activated in the corner. "We're going to send in some food and hot coffee for you guys. I hope that's okay." Piper's voice was calm and reassuring.

Marc nodded quickly, hoping the woman didn't say anything else. They were in the middle of working out what was going to happen to them now. They didn't need the distraction, though the food was welcome. Stomachs were growling all through the room.

Adrian understood Marc was ready for him to be gone too. He moved toward the exit. "I'll bring in the food and then keep everyone else out. When you're ready to let us know what you've decided, knock on the door or just shoot me through the glass."

Some of the team chuckled at Adrian's bravado as the man left.

Marc didn't laugh. Adrian had already sensed what was going to happen if they decided to go rogue. If Angela wasn't going to be happy either way, then Marc wasn't going to let Adrian live after everything he'd done.

Kenn came over to Marc with a somber expression. "Me too, right?"

"Yes." Marc had let go of some of his anger toward Kenn, but like with Adrian, he couldn't just walk away and let it go. Kenn had also committed atrocities that needed to be paid for.

Kenn was tired of constantly feeling bad for the mistakes he'd made in the past and not just those with Angela. He had been a difficult team member while in the Marines, and he'd committed more than one murder during that time. He looked Marc in the eye. "If you don't believe I'm worthy of another chance after the way I've changed, I'll let you end it. I'm tired of being hated by everyone for things that I can't change now. You make the choice and I'll live or die with it."

The rest of the team nodded in agreement. Marc would have the final say on their lives now. It was all up to him.

3

Angela stopped at the terminal in the hallway near the gory security room.

Erin had easily gotten into the computer. She glanced up. "I think I figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"Why Reicher let this all happen." Erin pointed at the monitor. "Read his log."

This will be my last entry.

Every time I've looked ahead, I've seen only death. I can feel it catching up to us. I've done everything I could to ensure the work being done here will continue. As long as there's a single survivor from this lab, the progress we've made won't stop. The new leader will continue my work,

even if it's without the harsh methods I've used. I didn't die in vain. I provided a future where these labs will still exist, even if it's only in the minds of my subjects.

Angela stopped reading. “Copy it all to a thumb drive.” She would read through it while they were on the sub.

She scanned the security room, then motioned toward Ray and Dace. “Clear this facility—take everything we can transport in the RIBs. Pile it topside and we’ll get it moved. When you reach the kennels, put them all down. We’re not taking any of the hounds back to Safe Haven.”

The men hurried off to grab a few people and organize it. They had all expected her to strip the lab and no one wanted to share space with the flesh-hungry dogs.

Angela sighed. “It’s time for the walk-through.”

This was the part Angela had been dreading almost as much as dealing with Marc. She now had to decide who got to live and who had to die.

“We have them all waiting for you, Boss.” Wade stayed on her heels as she went toward the staff area first. Marc had told them to go pack, and many of them had, but the rest were pacing nervously, waiting to hear what fate had been chosen for them.

More of the rescue team joined Angela, not trusting the strangers around her.

Angela entered the staff dorm and stopped to scan.

Everyone in there froze, expecting the worst.

Angela made her choices quickly, being as fair as she could be. She pointed at three of the women in the rear. “Go to the top level right now.”

The nervous caretakers hurried by her and the team.

Angela signaled three others. “Top level. Make it quick.”

Her glares and ugly tone convinced them they were about to be removed. All of them hurried by her while hoping the top exit was open. Maybe they could escape while she was down here and distracted.

Team members escorted them to keep that from happening.

Angela glanced around at the other three dozen staff members. She did a second scan to verify her choices. Then she smiled politely. “Wait here until we leave. We’ll send in food.”

The staff members relaxed.

Angela went to the lounge next and repeated the same process. She chose several of the subjects and sent them to the top levels with the others. She also sent an escort with them to make sure they got there.

Tilly stayed by Angela, but she didn’t understand why the woman was only picking a few of them to go along. She assumed Angela saw something in the few she was sending to the top level that said they could be saved or retrained.

Angela went to the resident hall next, where mothers and breeders were waiting with the babies. More caretakers were also there. One of the battered women refused to meet her eyes. Angela was instantly furious over her condition.

Tilly scanned the mothers and breeders and spotted Marion. Tilly hurried forward. "It's great to see you, mate!" She reached out to hug the woman.

Marion slapped Tilly hard enough to take her to her knees. "How dare you!"

Marion slapped her again. "You are the reason my son is dead. You and the other traitors caused his death!"

Behind the women, Isabel stayed next to the crib that held her babies. Marion's reaction was a shock.

"It's all your fault!" Marion slapped Tilly a third time.

Angela started to step forward and stop the abuse.

Marion didn't pay her any attention. "I let you go! Why did you come back?! We don't want you here. You were a traitor to this lab and everything we stand for! I should have killed you instead of letting you go."

Isabel began to understand all of Marion's help had been hiding how she really felt. *Then why did she save me from Joseph?* Isabel ran a hand over her swollen face in confusion.

"It's all ending now! I hate you!" *Slap!*

The anger Isabel had been hiding hit her all at once. *That's Reicher's mother. She saved me because she's like him.*

Isabel looked at the other cribs. *If they leave her alive, she'll restart it all.*

Before anyone could interfere, Isabel drew the knife from her pocket that she had hidden there when the computer began warning them of a breach. She rushed forward and stabbed Marion in the back.

Marion slid to her knees, now face-to-face with Tilly. Blood trickled out of her mouth. "Traitor!"

Angela pointed at Isabel. "Now we'll take you."

Tilly got to her feet, stunned by the woman's reaction. She rubbed her stinging cheek. "I thought she cared for me and that's why she let me go."

Angela had already read Marion's mind. "She believed in everything Reicher was doing here. She just didn't want him to bond with any other female. In time, she would have killed Reicher's daughter, too."

Isabel limped to the crib to get her children.

One of the other mothers spoke up angrily. "Isabel's been pushing out kids for them to kill for years!"

"People can change." Isabel gently lifted her babies. "I lost my sister. That's enough punishment."

During the chaos, Isabel had found Sasha's body in the security room. *She died trying to find a way out because I asked her to. I'll carry that guilt forever.*

Angela scanned all the mothers, seeing the good and the bad in them. She signaled toward the door. “If you want to stay with your kids, collect them and go to the top level; wait for me there.”

Only a few of the mothers took their kids and headed for the exit.

Angela gestured at the others. “Do the rest of you want to keep your kids and stay here?”

All of the remaining women appeared horrified. Many of them shook their heads or made faces.

Angela pointed at Trent. “Put them in the dorm with the others who’ve decided to stay here.”

The women were relieved that they weren’t being forced to take care of the kids. They left quickly.

As soon as they were gone, Angela and the rest of the team began swaddling the babies and preparing them to be relocated. They also provided healing spells.

It didn’t take long. Some of the infants were weak, but it was obvious that they were well cared for. That was more than Angela could say for anyone else in this haunted bubble.

Isabel carried a baby in each arm as she limped toward the lift. She didn’t know if she would be killed later, but as long as it came after she was out of here, she didn’t care as much now. *I heard Safe Haven loves all kids, even those of their enemies. I want to see the sun before I die. That, and knowing my kids will live, is enough.*

Angela caught that as the woman left. She knew Isabel wasn't all good, but her love for her children had convinced Angela that she was worthy of a second chance. *And once she's healed up and reformed, she'll join my army.*

Angela swept Marion's body in approval. Isabel's aim had been perfect. With the right training, she would be a good protector for any of their pregnant women. *We'll just need to keep her away from the men for a while. She hates them for what Reicher did to her sister.*

Angela sighed miserably. Her next stop would be the worst. "Get them to the top level and keep stripping this lab. I'll catch up to you when I'm done."

Angela left.

Tilly followed her, not sure where the woman was going in such a depressed state.

"The kids' dorm is left, but I'm not taking all of them. If Marc doesn't come home with us, I'll find a way to survive it. *This* is the choice that might destroy me."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Close

1

“I can do it for you, Boss.” Wade didn’t want her to get upset.

“No. This is part of my job.” Angela knew Reicher had children here. She also knew the kids were all scarred so badly that it was unlikely they would ever recover. Cate and Cody were exceptions to that rule. She now believed that was because their bloodlines were from a founding family. If not for that, they would have gone bad.

Not all of the kids were here. The older, more corrupt teens were with the adults who were staying. Angela had scanned them quickly as she went by their dorm and then sent them in with the others. None of them were coming with her.

All the young kids stood up as Angela entered. They recognized her as the alpha.

But she was aware that they weren’t regarding her as their leader. Marc now held that position in their minds.

Angela forced herself to get busy, hating her job at this moment. She was devastated at the chaotic, ruthless thoughts and images she immediately picked up. The few adults she had picked out were either honestly here against their will or they still

remembered their previous lives and longed for that. Some of them were also in the process of changing, like Isabel. The two dozen children in front of her ranged from 5 to 13 and all of them were completely trained for this lab. If they were let loose on the world, they would be as bad as Marc and the mission team, if not worse. The mission team would at least stop at hurting children. These kids would kill each other without a regret. It was the way they had been trained.

I don't know if I can do this. Angela struggled to make the choice that was best for the future of her camp and everyone else who had survived the war.

The door opened behind her.

Angela felt Marc's presence before he reached her. She didn't acknowledge him right away. She also didn't try to read his mind. She was terrified of the answer that he had come to give her.

"We're not leaving these kids here."

Angela wanted to agree, but she couldn't. "They're evil, Marc. I can't take them to our island."

"We'll cover the kids. They just need time."

Everyone was surprised when the mission team went toward the children and told them to start gathering their gear. They didn't handle the kids with warmth. They used firm tones and glares where it was needed.

It got through. The kids responded to the men, connecting to them.

Marc waited for a minute to make sure that his team had it covered. Then he faced his wife. “There’s something I need to say to you.”

Angela braced for a threat or another attempt to get her to kill Adrian. She could feel that man out in the hallway, waiting for orders.

“We’ve decided to try. I’m not promising anything, but…” Marc sighed. “We want to recover. We believe you and the traitor can help us.”

“We can.” Angela waited for more, braced to take whatever ugliness he wanted to deliver.

Marc reached out and ran a gentle hand along her jaw. “I love you. I also hate you. It’s hard for me to separate the two, but I’ll try harder to give you the respect you’ve more than earned.”

Tears ran over Angela’s cheeks. “Thank you for picking me over yourself this time.”

“It’s my honor.” Marc went to help with the kids.

Angela cried openly, not caring who saw it this time. Marc had repeatedly hurt her in the past by not picking her when it mattered. The fact that he had made the right choice this time was an emotional blow that she had no resistance to. It might allow her to recover as well. The mission team weren’t the only ones who were scarred from this run, though they had dealt with the worst of it. Knowing she might lose the man she loved in order to secure the future for everyone else had been a horrible burden to carry.

The rescue team went to help Marc and his men with the kids, now welcoming them back. That hadn't been possible until they made their choice. Now that they had, it was okay to let them know how much they had been missed.

Angela wiped her face and then keyed the radio on her belt. "It's almost time to leave. Meet me on the top level in one hour. I repeat, in one hour, we're out of here."

2

"Let's go."

They had been gathering supplies and gear for most of the time they'd been here. It had all been taken topside and was being guarded by Tilly's people, who were relieved that Tilly was okay and Reicher was dead. Angela wanted to take more of the bigger items, but they didn't have the space or a boat nearby that could handle it.

Adrian shrugged. "We'll get by without it."

"We always do." Angela headed for the exit.

It was a good moment for the Australian Resistance Force when Angela and Tilly emerged through the beachside tunnel together without serious injuries. If either of them had been hurt on this run, it would have interfered with the societal connection that had to be reestablished now. They needed to be able to visit and trade with each other. It was almost impossible for any society to exist alone in this new world.

Everyone who had been sent to the top level was escorted out next. Many of them were handcuffed until they could be trusted.

No one protested. They were just relieved that they weren't being abused, though many of them were still worried that would happen later.

Many of the lab members had never been outside of Reicher's domain. Stepping into the sand, feeling the warm sun on their faces, listening to the gulls and the roar of the nearby ocean was all new to them. They stared and moved awkwardly, trying to adjust.

Marc was the last one through the steel door. He paused in the egress and looked back. It had only been two months, but it felt like everything had changed for him. He didn't know how he was going to be able to handle everything that came after this, but he did know he had to try. Angela and his kids deserved that, but so did he. *I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but I'm not a coward anymore. I'm not going to run this time.* "Computer, lock down this lab. No one in and no one out."

Marc stepped through the exit as it began to shut. He knew those inside would find a way out, but not for a while. He would be long gone before that happened.

Inside the lab, the computer began warning the residents that a lockdown was in process.

Those who'd been left behind shared relief that the strangers were gone.

The steel door shut; a heavy lock clicked over.

That noise signaled an end to the run for the rescue team. All of them let out cheers of success and triumph.

The mission team also celebrated, but they did it silently. Surviving this run was the hardest thing they'd ever done.

Goldie noticed Isabel. He gawked at her swollen, beaten face and the gray starting to come through her hair. She looked her real age. Then he saw she was carrying her kids.

Isabel was also shocked by his appearance. The healing bite marks were all over his body. She pointed.

Goldie limped over to collect his kids from Ray, crying. "Thank you! Thank you!"

The sound of his relief drew attention. Marc watched the injured man love on his children. He hadn't forgotten his promise, but it was hard to keep hating him. Goldie had been telling the truth the entire time, and he'd opened the door so Angela and the rescue team could enter.

Goldie looked over at him. "As long as you take care of my kids, it's okay if you kill me. I understand."

Marc nodded. "And I'm going to take you up on that, but not until your kids are older."

Marc rotated toward his team. "Be a good father and I may forgive you in time."

Marc spotted Gus on the gurney. He went over to check on him.

Adrian fell in step with Marc. “Gus got the cure for the rage illness, but it will take a while for it to have an effect.”

Adrian had caught many of the flashes in Marc’s mind about what they’d gone through, including Gus torturing them on the warehouse floor. He hoped Marc would be able to forgive Gus for snapping.

Marc spoke to Angela. “Gus will need extra care. He was made to believe you sent him here to die so that Brittani and Daryl could have a life together without him around. Not all of his anger is from the rage illness.”

Everyone was relieved that Marc didn’t seem to be holding a grudge against Gus.

The rest of the team had already forgiven Gus for his actions. They knew he hadn’t been in control of his mind even before they’d been captured.

Goldie moved closer to Isabel with a baby in each arm. “What happened to Cerise?”

Isabel had overheard that one. “They found her body in a lift. She was stabbed.”

Goldie was sorry about that. “But maybe it’s a good thing. She had a memory gift that was unique. No one should have that type of power over someone else’s mind.”

Standing nearby, Angela heard that comment but she didn’t tell them she had already copied Cerise’s gift during her short stay in Safe Haven. She agreed it was dangerous. She didn’t want anyone else to be able to do that. Taking away

someone's memories needed to be a very rare occurrence.

Angela glanced around and found everyone waiting for instructions. She keyed her mic. "Start sending the RIBs, Saul. We're ready to go."

"Whatever you say." Saul's voice indicated he was unhappy.

Angela didn't have time to dig into that right now. There were still things to be handled before they could leave. She turned to face Tilly.

Tilly could tell Angela had made another hard choice. "You're not going to take us with you."

"No."

Tilly stiffened. "Why? Because you blame us for what Reicher did to your men, eh?"

Angela sighed. "No. Honestly, there comes a time when any nation has to stop taking in refugees and just care for their own citizens. We don't have enough supplies, food, or room for all of you, but there is a beautiful country here that needs to be reclaimed and who better to do that than the inhabitants who have survived here all along?"

Tilly was disappointed, but she understood that answer.

Angela delivered some sound advice. "Find a military base, secure it, and take the next two and a half years to strengthen yourselves."

Trevor joined them, frowning at the bruises on Tilly's cheek. "What happens then?"

"The final battle between good and evil. We'll need you on our side. Go dark for now and grow.

I'll contact you when it's time." Angela moved toward the shoreline, where the tide was coming in. "We have company coming and not the good kind. Tilly and her people will handle it. We'll provide support if needed."

Tilly and Trevor drew their guns and turned around to defend the large group.

The gunfire scared a lot of the staff and mothers from the lab, but they followed Angela toward the ocean anyway. They had figured out they were being taken in as refugees even though Tilly and her group were not.

The small beach gang was quickly handled. Many of them were insane. They had chosen to rush a large, armed group with no hope of winning. Gordon was in the front line as they handled the problem.

As soon as it was over, Tilly put Gordon in charge. "Keep our people together. Send someone to find transportation. There's a city five minutes from here and we're going to reclaim it right now."

They'd ridden here in and on old farm equipment that had used up all the fuel Angela had brought along.

Angela was proud of Tilly for making that decision. It would have been easier to go hide in an underground base like she had suggested. "I'd like to transport some of your cattle to our island. Can I send a ship for them?"

"Of course, but it may take us a while to find any."

Marc spoke up. “Two miles north, Reicher had a dairy farm. You’ll find everything you need there to feed your people until you can start farming again.”

Tilly and her people were thrilled to hear that.

Angela held out her hand. “We’ll bring items to pay for the cattle in a few months.”

Tilly shook. “No, you can have the livestock. We’ll round up enough to get you a small farm started. It’s the least we can do for what you’ve done here. We never would have been able to defeat Reicher on our own.”

“I’m not sure that’s the case, but I accept your offer. We already gave you our radio channels so you can make contact, but give us a little while to recover. This has been a long, hard run.”

Tilly tugged Angela in for a fast hug. “Thank you for everything.”

Angela hugged her back, but she didn’t say it was her honor. This had been a costly run and the total price had yet to be determined. “Good luck.”

Angela turned and walked toward the shoreline to oversee getting her crew back to the sub.

Tilly and her group watched them go while also observing for more unwanted arrivals.

Wade smiled as he walked by Tilly. “We split the lab supplies with you.”

It was another blessing as far as Tilly was concerned. They were low on everything that a society needed to survive. Not having to take in the inhabitants of the lab was also a blessing, but Tilly

still felt bad for it. *Maybe we'll come back and offer them shelter after Safe Haven leaves.*

Wade hurried to catch up with Angela and then brought his shield up over her so the wind would stop blowing sand into her face and hair.

All across the beach, descendants began doing the same for the normals in their group, protecting them like their kind was meant to do.

Adrian fell in near Angela, but he studied Marc.

Angela asked the question that mattered the most to her right now. "Can you put him back together?"

Adrian fingered his swollen eye. "I believe so, yes."

"All of him?"

Adrian frowned. "No. He'll never be the same man."

"Good."

Adrian realized she had let it all happen so Marc would have to change. It was more proof of what he'd said about her walking the line. *Maybe it's the pregnancy causing it. Is her baby evil?*

Angela frowned. "It's not the baby; it's me. I no longer care about fragile emotions or stubborn values. People will do things my way from now on and we'll have peace."

"And the final battle?"

She hesitated.

Adrian saw she wanted to abandon the other normals and descendants to their fates. He waited for her answer with a deep scowl.

“Safe Haven can exist on our island for a long time. Why should I waste our precious lives to keep helping others?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Maybe. You’ll have years to convince me they’re worth it. Until then, let the rest of the world rot. We don’t need them.”

Wade spoke up. “You’ve grown bitter and you’re tired of death. But you can’t give up, Boss. We have a destiny, a duty, and you can’t forsake it now after all we’ve been through.”

“Can’t I?” Angela scanned Tilly’s group to see where they were and then keyed her mic. “Now, Saul.”

People rotated her way to see what she was doing.

“Keep those shields up.” Angela didn’t look toward the lab.

A few seconds later, a loud whistle echoed. A fiery projectile flew through the air and then dove toward the steel door.

People shouted and ran toward Angela as the torpedo slammed into the lab entrance and exploded. Flames shot out; thick smoke rose into the beautiful blue sky.

Huge sprays of sand and water flew up and then came back down.

Another torpedo hit the lab below the water line. More ocean and sand flew into the air, along with hard debris that smacked into their shields.

Marc realized she had just killed everyone left in the lab. “No! No!”

Angela lifted her chin against the shock of her crew and the dismay of Tilly’s group. She didn’t offer a reason or an excuse.

Adrian stopped by Marc, but he stared at Angela. He was stunned that she could kill so many souls without showing any emotion. *We’re too late. She already went bad.*

Marc held his head, crushed. “There were kids in there! Why did she do that?!”

“They were corrupt, I assume.” It was still brutal. Adrian was shocked. She’d even fed them a last meal before killing them. *And none of us knew what she was doing.*

Next to Adrian, Zack snorted. “Don’t lie to yourself. You knew she wasn’t going to let them live.”

Marc tried not to cry. “But she blew them up!”

“Would it have been better if she slit their throats or poisoned them like she did at the mountain?”

Neither man answered Zack.

Angela kept moving toward the RIBs that the sub crew was now sailing toward the shore. “When I said no more loose ends, I meant it. All runs will now operate the same way. If they aren’t with us, then we’ll eliminate them.”

Marc couldn’t stop the tears now. “It’s not right!”

“Neither is constantly being in fear of an attack from people we’ve spared.” Angela glanced around with glowing red orbs. “We’re going to rule this world.”

Wade frowned. “To what end?”

“Peace. Or death. Those are the only two options now. I won’t settle for anything less.”

Some of them thought she had flipped. A few of them understood she was corrupt. None of the others spoke against it. They all wanted peace and Angela was determined to give that to them.

Marc staggered. His mind started to shut down. It was too much.

People began moving toward the RIBs again.

Angela waited to see what Marc and Adrian picked. The Eagles would follow their lead.

Adrian caved first. He’d had months to contemplate how it could go if they did it right.

Marc’s team stopped by him, hating it but also wanting it. All of them had considered what it would be like if descendants were in control of the world.

Marc tried to fight it and do the right thing. “We can’t...”

“We can.” Biff was eager. “We’ll use the skills we’ve gained here. And it won’t even be that hard. All we have to do is follow her lead.”

Marc knew what they wanted to hear. He knew what Angela wanted to hear. Until this run, he couldn’t have given it to them. Now, he was too tired to keep fighting that destiny. He stepped over

his moral line. “Okay.” He looked up at his men sadly. “We’ll do it her way.”

Biff and Greg helped him toward the coming RIBs.

Angela let out a sigh of relief. The only person who could have stopped her had just caved. *Thank you, Reicher. You did what I couldn’t. I owe you a debt that I’ll pay by raising your sons to be good men who will support the new world I’m building.*

Angela glanced over her shoulder at the only descendant among Tilly’s group.

Gordon nodded to her while his parents were staring at the burning lab entrance. Charlie had filled him in while they hung out together. Gordon agreed completely. *Be safe, Alpha.*

And you, Gordon Mitchel.

Adrian also looked back at the boy.

Gordon flashed a familiar grin and then turned back to guard duty. He had a lot of citizens to keep alive.

Adrian was horrified by how fast Gordon had fallen in with Angela’s plan. *I hope you know what you’re doing.*

Angela sighed. “That has not been revealed.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because I refuse to go backward. This is the next step in humanity’s future, and we’ll take it together.”

“What happens to those who won’t fall in line?”

She shrugged coldly. “We’ll walk over their bodies. Negotiating is no longer an option.”

Behind her, Marc and his team heard that and were oddly comforted. She sounded just like Reicher.

The End
What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scene

Marc watched in apprehension as Joseph picked up a scalpel. He longed for his gifts so he could read the man's mind. Without them, he was forced to use his old-world training. "You just took a shower. I can smell it."

"It's a daily control method." Joseph faced Marc. "It keeps me sane."

Marc snorted weakly. "It's not working."

Joseph paused. "How do you know that?"

"I'm very good at reading people."

"Not even Reicher knows that!"

Marc snorted. "Trust me, he knows it. If he didn't, I wouldn't be here. I'd already be dead and you would be set to inherit this abomination." Marc yawned.

Joseph's grip tightened on the scalpel. "He'll have to give it to me when you're gone."

"Yes," Marc blinked to clear the moisture from the yawn. "but only if you kill everyone in line in front of you."

"There is no one in..." Joseph rotated toward the door. He'd slipped by Thalia on the way in. She was handling loose ends right now.

"He'd give it to a woman before you." Marc chuckled. "Hell, he'd give it to the hounds before you."

Rage flared through Joseph's body, but his mind stayed cool and calm. He stepped toward the man on the table, smiling. "I'm going to enjoy this."

Marc tensed. *I won't*. He ran through his options and found one that would amuse him no matter how it ended. "Once he gives it to me, can I just give it to you?"

Hope spread across Joseph's freshly shaven profile. "You'd do that?"

"I would." Marc kept going as Joseph reached him. "But I can't if he breaks me. I'll need your help."

"Be specific on that."

"Keep me drugged up so he can't work his magic on me. Convince him that handling my team first is the way to convert me."

Joseph stared at Marc, clutching the blade that could change his future in a brief second. His mind shuddered through outcomes faster than he could view them. But he saw the ending. "You're going to kill me."

Marc realized Joseph was able to see ahead; he didn't lie. "I'm going to kill everyone in here. Why would I give you a pass?"

Joseph kept viewing the future, fingers turning white from his tight grip... Then he began to laugh. "He thinks he won!" Joseph grinned at Marc. "You're smarter than he is. He knows that already, but he can't accept it and it costs him the future."

“I hope it works out that way.” Marc fought another yawn. “We both know fate doesn’t like it when we assume a conclusion.”

Joseph did know that. “But we can make it happen. Fate loves ambition and determination.”

Marc was encouraged. He waited patiently, letting Joseph believe he was deciding his fate and the fate of his boss and this lab.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

“You’ll do what?”

“I’ll help you. After you gain control, you’ll give me leadership.”

“Deal.”

Joseph grabbed Marc’s ankle. “Hold your foot up so I can dig out that debris.”

Marc didn’t move; he really couldn’t. The drugs had control now. But his mind said this was what Joseph had come for—an agreement, not death. *I just made a deal with a devil.*

Joseph began rooting in Marc’s foot, enjoying the blood while wishing the man could feel it and scream. “I’m not the devil, Mr. Ghost, but with a little love, I could be.”

Marc grunted. “I’ll give you a little love, Joseph. You’ll give me Reicher.”

“You have a deal.”

Deleted Scene #2

“We’re getting another distress message from the Australian lab, sir.”

Corbin gestured for the underling to play it.

“The Australian lab has been breached. Leadership has changed. All other labs must go to high alert.”

Corbin scanned the camera showing the topside of this lab. Nothing was moving. It looked as desolate as ever. “We’re staying dark.”

The underling nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Corbin was still tempted to observe that sector through the satellite images, but it would give them away to anyone monitoring those space objects. *I knew there was trouble coming. As soon as we captured that last batch of subjects, I had us go dark. It was the right choice.*

Corbin scanned the screens that showed the lower levels of this underground complex. He narrowed in on a small room with a narrow bed holding his most valuable captive.

“We’ve finished with the conversions on batch one. Would you like to start batch two?”

Corbin nodded absently. The large group of kids were being put through the standard process that would make them into loyal little minions. Corbin fingered the eye patch he’d been wearing since that capture. The woman protecting those kids had taken

his eye and almost gotten his life as well. “Get set up for a session.”

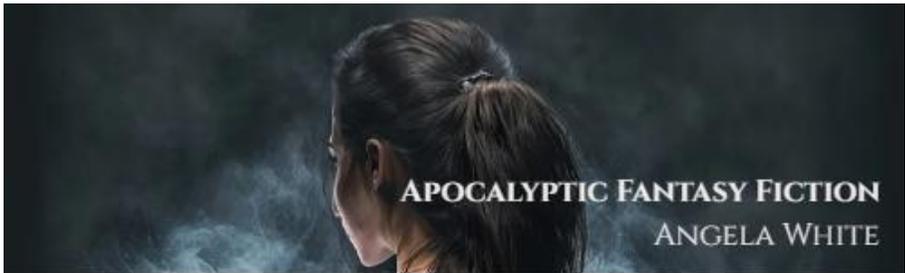
“Yes, sir.”

Corbin heard the disapproval. “Problem, *Rabbit?*”

Paul ducked his head. He hated that nickname. “No, sir.”

Corbin smirked in contempt. Then he went back to studying the monitor. It had been a year and a half since the war. He doubted it was time for the quest to start, but he couldn’t help longing for it. “Wake Alexa Mitchel. Let’s see if she’s ready to travel.”

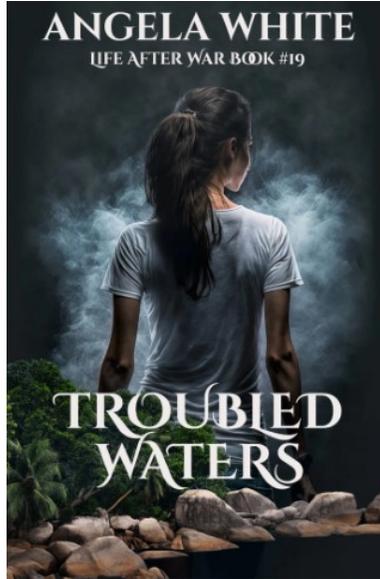
Audio



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Book 19



[Troubled Waters](#)

“**W**e’ve spent time on life and liberty. We mostly agree, and we’ll come to compromises on the few areas where we don’t. Tonight, I’d like to work on the pursuit of happiness.” Angela looked around the table. “Life and Liberty are definite declarations that we can define. The pursuit of

happiness is vague and dependent on the individual, not the collective.”

She took a sip of her tea and continued. “When one of those pursuits slap against the first two, we’ll see where the line is and make only the laws that pertain to it and are necessary. We’re not anarchists who feel there shouldn’t be any laws. We know society needs some basic rules to keep the peace. It’s not giving up liberty. It’s being smart. With no law against murder or kidnapping, you can’t have the right to life and liberty.”

Lisa wrote it in their ledger. “So the pursuit of happiness should be absolute, except when it hits the first two.”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe. I’ve been working hard on this one for months. I’d like to get us started by covering everything that doesn’t work or can’t be covered. It’ll go faster if you toss items at me and I shoot them down. But it can’t be absolute. There are always exceptions.”

Wade frowned. “Like what?”

“A society where there are no laws about working, or jobs that people know how to do, will never grow. Trash will gather on the streets. People will defecate wherever they want.” Angela gestured. “Outbreaks will become common. Medical care won’t recover, and so on.”

Jayda tried to be the voice of reason. “But we’ve done that one and it doesn’t work. People weren’t so much lazy before as they were unwilling to give

up the healthiest, best years of their life to a job they hated.”

“Agreed. So how do we handle that?”

Gus didn’t want to force citizens to do anything. “We let them volunteer.”

“Okay. But what if no one shows up?” Angela waited for his answer.

Gus didn’t want to follow that any further. “They will.”

Angela’s voice hardened. “But what if they don’t? The founding fathers didn’t cover enough of the what-ifs and look what happened.”

Silence went around the table.

Angela held in her displeasure. “One possible choice is to ask for volunteers and hope. Clearly, I won’t agree with that. What else?”

Wade tapped the notepad with his pen. “I need to know if we’re going back to money or a barter system before I can give an idea.”

Jayda frowned. “I think money sucks. Some people could eat well and some couldn’t? Some people could buy a car while others took two buses every day? Not every poor person deserved to be.”

Lisa nodded. “None of them did if we consider the old saying that money is the root of all evil.”

Angela understood their point. “It’s not, but it did screw up our freedom. We went from being ruled by a king to being ruled by how much money we could earn. We just traded masters.”

Wade shook his head. “Capitalism still gave us more advancements and periods of peace than any

other system. But I agree we need something better.”

“It’s always been just that, right?” Lisa wasn’t sure.

Angela nodded. “Yes. We took what we wanted when we were cavemen. We eventually figured out trading was better. Trading then turned into actual coins. There were a lot of stages along that ride, but that’s the basics.” Angela sipped her tea again.

“So we want to be able to let people walk into a shop and get what they need without money. The requirement is they have to work a shift or two a week, or a month.” Wade thought that was a fair trade.

Gus scowled. “But that takes away their freedom. They’re once again dependent on a job to survive.”

Jayda sighed. “I guess we can’t just let them volunteer. It might work for the fun chores, but it won’t give us the best person for the job.”

Lisa had an idea. “If no one has to work, then magic can get things done.”

Gus smiled at her. “That gives magic a purpose and settles the normals. They’ll love us because they won’t have to work.”

Angela had to wait for the other protests before she could speak. “We want one set of laws for everyone. We can’t make half our population work and not the rest, even if it is just with magic. Who else has something we can pick apart?” She waited

patiently, hoping one of them would find something she'd missed.

Wade said what the others didn't want to hear. "It has to be a mandatory time they put in toward the community or we might as well keep the system we had. We can't give them complete freedom from working."

Angela also hated that choice, but there wasn't a better option right now. "But we can give them choices that past governments took away. Let's guarantee a small piece of land that they can farm and have livestock on, so if they refuse to do it this way, they have another choice. I won't tolerate homelessness anymore."

Lisa led them into another issue they needed to resolve. "Which brings up yet another layer of government control. When we allot them that land, we can do lotteries for locations and such, but how do we oversee those eventual millions of homesteads? There will be laws they still have to follow. One example would be they can't dump waste just anywhere or use explosives without knowing what they're doing."

Gus scowled again. "Why not? It's their life to give."

"An explosion might catch a neighbor's land on fire and kill them." Lisa pointed at the ledger. "The landowners have to have rules that protect the first two rights of everyone else."

Gus leaned back in his chair. “So there’s really no possible way to have true freedom and a thriving society.”

Angela sighed. “I’m searching for a way to make that happen, but they’re at odds. Society works best when citizens participate. If they don’t, society stagnates.”

Jayda swallowed the last of her tea. “What’s the result of that?”

“Stagnation? Within a couple of generations, we’re back to only living until about 50. After that, it will drop by about 5 years every decade until society eventually collapses. Our need for each other is tied to how we build and fix when we come together with common goals and common sense. We were designed for this right here.” Angela smiled. “But it’s break time now. Let’s stretch, walk, maybe snack, and then keep bending our minds. The future of humanity depends on what we’re doing. I don’t want a numb ass to interfere. Get up and move around.”

As the others went into the hallway of the sub, Wade and Gus lingered. The two men had become friends since leaving Australia.

Wade waited until they were alone. “I’ve been thinking about Kendle and the Garden of Eden.”

Gus frowned. “How are those two connected?”

“What if she was there?”

Gus knew Wade didn’t mean that literally. “There were only two people, according to the Bible.”

Wade countered that. “There were three, according to our history text.” They’d all read the descendant history book now.

Gus leaned against the wall. “Okay. So?”

“What if the translation isn’t literal? Fiction writers added, twisted, and embellished real life stories all the time. If we hadn’t been told the Bible was literal, could we view it as a work of literature that was recording laws as they were made, with a twist?”

“I don’t believe so, but say that’s true. What does it change?”

Wade waved a hand. “Everything. We read about Nature infiltrating the garden with animals. At the end, she used one that could speak. But what if it wasn’t an animal?”

Gus ran through the possible new characters, but didn’t find the answer. “Who?”

“Marc’s twin.”

Gus stared in shock. He’d forgotten about that. “But if Marc had a twin in this life, wouldn’t he have had a twin in every life?”

“Yes. It makes sense in a couple of ways. The design rarely puts threes together. It’s pairs or herds, or a single couple trying to go it alone.”

“There are a lot of those alternate relationships in our camp.”

“Peacefully?” His own relationship might be an exception to that rule, but it was too soon for Wade to be sure.

Gus snapped his mouth shut. No, most threesomes were not peaceful. Safe Haven had several of those going and most of them were happy. It was rare, but they were also young relationships. The test of time would tell on those. “Some species might be designed for that setup.”

“True, but if you were creating humanity, would you really only give them one female and two males in each garden?”

Gus finally got it. “I might do the opposite, but it makes more sense to do two pairs and have the mothers work and breed together and the men work and fight together to feed and protect everyone.”

“Exactly. On trips *out* of the garden. We were meant to explore. The garden was a nursery for the women.”

“Like the island will be for Safe Haven.”

Wade laughed. “Not if the fairer sex has their way.”

Gus focused on the main topic so he didn’t get confused. “You think Marc’s twin was meant for Adrian.”

“I believe it was supposed to be willing for all of them. And when the other woman figured out neither man wanted her, she became bitter...”

“And helped Nature corrupt Eve.”

“Yes. I’ve been watching the female interactions in camp, as everyone knows. When one does something, the others follow. It’s exactly like the men. So the snake told Eve she’d had an apple.”

Gus snorted. “There wasn’t really a snake.” He’d never believed that.

“Maybe the other woman was the snake, but I don’t think it was an apple now either.”

“I’ve heard about the bestiality theory.”

“And?”

“And I don’t buy it.” Gus’s eyes blazed for a brief second. “I wouldn’t take an ape over Angela and no one else would either.”

“Same. I believe the apple was murder.”

“What?”

“We were told Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because of something Eve did.”

“And we found out it was really Adam’s anger that got them banished.”

“Right. We assumed he murdered Elliot. Why else was he never mentioned?”

“So where does the other woman come in?”

“She convinced Adam to do it. And then Eve got rid of her.”

Both men thought about how ruthless Angela was. Kendle was gone now. Marc had done it, but Angela had planned it. Both men were sure of that.

Gus slowly nodded. “Maybe. What does it mean?”

Angela had been listening. She stepped back into the doorway. “It means all the members of the garden were corrupted. That’s why humanity can’t be peaceful. All our lines are flawed.”

Wade had been contemplating Reicher’s words. “Is Cody the exception to that rule?”

Angela shook her head. “Sadly, no.”

Gus glanced at her small belly bump. “What about that one?”

Angela walked away without answering. She was once again impressed by their intelligence, but she didn’t want to say her unborn child might be the most evil girl to ever walk the earth. There was no way to know yet.

Angela rubbed her stomach and headed for the small mess on the sub. “Let’s get you something to eat, huh?”

Her stomach flipped. A cold chill went through her chest.

Angela rubbed her stomach again. “I’ll love you no matter what.”

Her guts settled.

Adrian rose from his seat on the stool by the mess entrance. He’d caught it all. “Something’s not right with you.”

Angela snorted. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Your emotions are changing too rapidly.” He forced out the words. “That baby is a problem.”

Angela smiled sweetly. Her eyes lit up bright red. “You didn’t see that. You don’t remember this conversation. Go back to work.”

Adrian blinked, dazed. He struggled to remember what they were talking about.

Angela watched him return to his place on guard duty. Then she went into the mess for a bite to eat.

Wade had followed her. He'd seen it all. *Should I tell someone?*

Cody came from a nearby compartment. He took Wade's hand and tugged the man down. "Listen."

Wade blinked, dazed.

Cody whispered again, then let go.

Wade moved on, trying to remember what he'd been doing.

Cody joined Angela in the mess.

Angela held out a cup of powdered milk. "Nice copy."

Cody beamed. He drank the milk and enjoyed her warmth.

Cate was already at the small table in the corner. She reached down to pet the wolf who was curled up by her feet.

Dog whined when she stopped. *Get the ear!*

Cate laughed and resumed rubbing his soft fur.

Angela and Cody joined her at the table.

None of them spoke. They didn't need to. Protecting the pregnancy was a common goal for all four of them now. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with the new baby, not even Marc.

The radio on Angela's belt crackled with Ray's concerned voice. "Boss, we've got a storm on the radar."

Angela knew it wasn't just any storm by his worried call. "Be there in three."

"Copy."

Angela finished eating before going to the bridge.

Cate and Cody stayed behind with Dog. They weren't allowed to touch anything in the bridge. It was a boring room for them.

Angela smiled at people as she went by, trying to send out calmness to counteract the tension Ray's call had caused. *There's another one who can't take Mitch's place on the radio.*

Angela entered the bridge.

Ray leaned aside so she could view the radar.

Angela tensed. "What the fuck is that?!"

Ray nodded. "Exactly."

The green and red mass didn't have a shape, but it was enormous. It covered the entire bottom half of the screen.

"It started coming in about an hour ago. I kept waiting for the end to appear."

Angela understood what he meant. In an hour, it was now covering hundreds of miles and it was coming straight for them. She keyed her radio. "I want everyone back onboard right now. Move your asses!"

"That's why I made an open call."

Angela patted Ray's shoulder. "Sorry."

He shrugged off her apology. "I know I'm not as good as Mitch. I'm not trying to be."

"Let me know if you want that training."

Ray did, but he knew his limitations. "No, you're right. I can't take his place, but I'll let you know if I find someone who can."

“Perfect.” Angela loved working with Ray. His calm, reasonable attitude was the exact opposite of most of her crew.

Ray scanned the radar again. “Are we going to outrun it?”

“No. Prepare for a dive.”

Ray swallowed his fear. It would be his first time diving.

“You’ll do fine.” Angela went toward the meeting room, keying her mic again. “All activities are cancelled for this evening. Adrian, I want everyone accounted for within the next half hour.”

“I’m already on it, Boss.”

Angela went to the ladder and climbed it to stand on top of the sub. In the distance, a greenish gray mass was coming their way at terrifying speed. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Zack was already standing on the sub and scanning the coming storm. His voice deepened into fear and dread. “I have—once.”

“What was it?”

“A level 5 hurricane named Katrina that killed thousands and sent thirty-foot tidal waves across every landmass it hit.” He looked over, unable to control the fear. “Get them back onboard quicker, Boss. Or we’ll lose them. It’s moving faster every second.”

Angela immediately headed for the RIB. “Come on. Let’s go get our people.”

Zack stayed on her heels as she jumped into the wet RIB and fired up the engine. All around them, troubled waters bumped against the sub in warning.



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