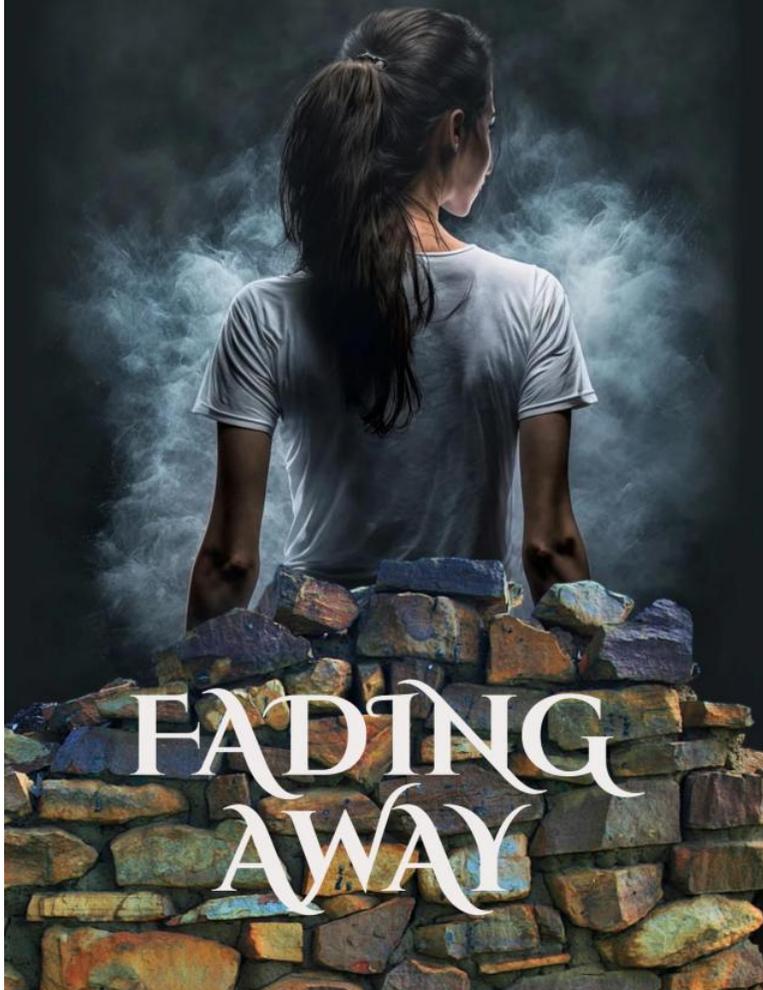


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #20

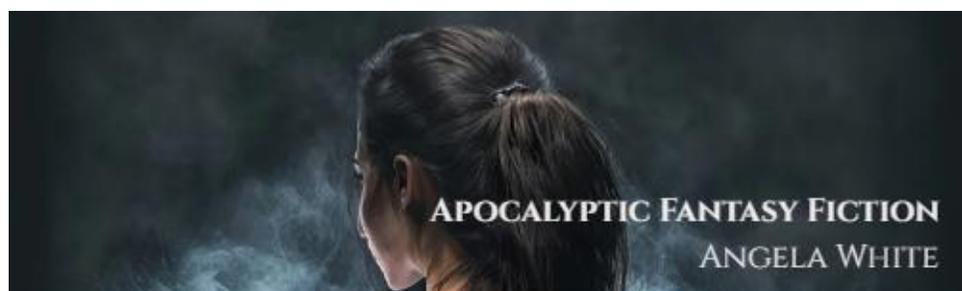


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Fading Away
by
Angela White

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Nature's Point of View

I can't stand these humans anymore!
I've beat on every door
And blown them down!

They're coming for me soon!
But they'll sing a different tune
When I blow them up!

How can the Creator love them most!
How can they have the confidence to boast
When I've already blown them away!

They have no respect!
Their lives are a wreck;
How can they blow me off!

Why are they still alive!
Why do these humans thrive!
Why are they allowed to connive!
Why are they so damn hard to deprive!
Why are they always in overdrive!
Why are they linked to my hive!
Why do they always survive!
Why are they still alive!
They have to die.
Or I will.

Chapter One
Ghosted
Pitcairn Island

1

“**S**afe Haven can’t be gone.” Shawn examined the bright, noisy, empty landscape in confusion. The only things moving were the birds and the gentle waves. “Where are they?”

Angela directed the two twitchiest men toward something that would keep their hands busy. The waves of panic coming from them said it wouldn’t take much to flip them into rash behavior. “Wade and Kyle will get our ride ready.”

“We don’t have enough fuel for the RIBs. We’ll have to paddle them.” Wade tossed Angela an ugly glare as he headed toward the compartment where that equipment was stored.

“Where are they?!”

Angela ignored Shawn’s question a second time, mostly because she didn’t have an answer. “It will take a few minutes to inflate the boat. I want to hear ideas now, *before we go over.*”

Several people glared at her for the implication that she didn’t want them to leave the submarine at all. None of them spoke yet, but Angela understood she wouldn’t be able to give that order. This was a

large landing party, and these men weren't going to listen to her this time, despite everything they had been through together. Panic was almost in control of their minds. "I'll go first. I have no idea why Safe Haven appears to be gone."

"Stop saying that!" Ray was scanning the empty island in terror. *Grant!*

Angela ran through the possible options again and decided there wasn't much she could do from here. She wanted to know what was happening, too. *I'm just not being a girl about it.*

Her sarcastic thought didn't transmit to the hive. Angela had already forgotten their gifts were out. *Damn it! Being without her power sucked. I get it, okay? I should be grateful for these abilities and never even consider giving them up. I get it now. Give me my damn camp back!*

Angela didn't expect a solution to present itself upon her demand, but she still waited a few seconds in case it happened. When it didn't, she resumed leadership. "Adrian has point over the bridge. Greg has point over the sub, with Jayda and Piper as support. Harry will take over point next and pick his own shift leaders from those available at that time." She didn't need to assign the others openly. She'd already given them jobs to do while she was gone, including Charlie.

Angela's calm delegation of authority helped some of the team members regain their composure. They swept in all directions for problems and

waited for orders, but they didn't lose that slight edge of panic.

Angela hated it. It reminded her of pulling the men from Reicher's lab. *I just started to make progress with them!*

Angela was furious at this newest obstacle in their path. *When I figure out where to aim my anger, everyone else had better look away. It won't be pretty.*

Kenn and Gus drifted toward the RIB to offer Wade and Kyle more hands. They were impatient to reach the island. They were both positive the entire camp was taking shelter in the tunnel system beneath the town. They didn't want to waste time on discussing things.

"Maybe they had to evacuate." Theo assumed Angela had invited him along in case Safe Haven had problems that required an engineer.

"If they evacuated, there would still be signs that they'd been here." Zack was barely controlling his anxiety as he swept the island and found nothing. "Some of those dock posts we put in went down 10 feet into the ocean bottom. I seriously doubt they would have pulled every single one of them during an evacuation."

Everyone reluctantly agreed.

Angela sighed. "Who else has a theory?"

Marc had been staring silently at the island, fixating on the spot where he'd killed Kendle. It had been haunting his mind for months now, but he no

longer had the same feeling while staring at the place where it occurred.

Marc's hair blew in the breeze, drawing Angela's attention. He was letting it grow out, while keeping his face clean shaven. He was sexier now than he'd been before. *I think the pain in his eyes is magnifying it.*

Angela turned away. *It wasn't worth it.*

Marc felt her guilt wave. He distracted her. "I'm going to give you my impression, but you're not going to like it. None of you will."

Angela gestured for him to go ahead anyway. She already knew what he was going to say. She didn't need her gifts to guess on this one.

"Safe Haven is not on this island. In fact, I don't believe Safe Haven has ever been here."

"Exactly." Ray was relieved that Marc had said what he was thinking.

Some of the others voiced disagreement, but Angela nodded. "We're going to go over verify that, but I agree. What are the odds this is the wrong island? A lot of landmasses have similar wildlife and foliage. Is it possible we found an uncharted island shaped like ours?"

People were already shaking their heads.

"No." Shawn helped Wade pull the inflated RIB over to the edge of the submarine and then retreated. "Permission to Blink?"

"Permission granted." Angela motioned Cate and Cody to protect him. They were almost fully

geared this time, like the adults. Only guns were missing from their belts.

Shawn immediately sank into that thread, taking it back to the very beginning. *Safe Haven was here when we left. Safe Haven was here when the boss left. Whatever took place happened after the boss came for us.* He began tracing that thread.

Angela and the others left him alone; they all hoped he could come up with an answer that made sense.

Marc wasn't offended that the attention had switched off him. He drew them back now with the rest of his thoughts. "It feels like a trap. Someone wants us to be here, but not for good purposes."

Now that Marc had stated it, the rest of them were able to feel the bitter sense of danger coming their way yet again. Eagles scanned for incoming problems while Angela began running through the list of possible assassins and enemies who might be hunting them on their island. She thought of several names, but only one of them fit this situation. *You cheating bitch! We had a deal.*

Marc stared at the cliff top now, remembering how he had been battered by Nature. *I wonder if our deal is still in effect.*

Angela reached out and took Marc's hand, but she didn't interrupt his train of thought. Most of the men in the team around her were now digging in to find a solution instead of letting their fear make the choice for them. She was satisfied.

Angela scanned all the way around the submarine, guarding them while they worked; Cate and Cody did the same. It was a joint effort.

Angela had little confidence of being able to figure it all out on her own this time. *That's why I have a team.*

“Let’s go.” Wade held tightly to the handle of the RIB while Kyle prepared to launch them. It had only taken them five minutes to inflate it this time. Repetition was making them faster.

Angela had considered using two boats, but it would only have made sense if this was a rescue operation. It wasn’t.

Angela sank down in the small space between Marc and Zack. She swallowed a shudder as the waves lapped against the sub. She would always detest large bodies of water now. “Let’s see those arms flex.”

Neither of the men gave her the small chuckle she was trying to draw.

Angela wasn’t surprised. It hadn’t been funny enough to cut through the tension. She didn’t try again. Pushing them was a bad idea.

The RIB slid through the calm water with hardly any resistance, thanks to so many men using the oars. They had taken the extra set from the other RIB so they could get to the island faster. As they propelled the boat through the calm ocean, they continued to scan for their camp and come up empty.

Angela felt fresh panic rising in each of them, even the men who were generally reliable in intense situations. This would be another test for even the senior men who had already gone through so much. The cold shield of battle dropped into place over Angela's mind. She rallied her team. "A lot of you are thinking about running off as soon as we hit the beach."

Angela ignored the water spraying over them from so many wild oars. "I don't need gifts to know that. It's all over your faces and in your body language. The instant this RIB touches hard ground, half of you will jump out and head off to the last place you saw your loved one."

Angela's braid swung to the side as she glared around at each of them. "Don't do it. We're going to calmly disembark and then walk every inch of that island, stopping at all possible locations. I don't know what's going on, and neither do any of you. Remember your training. I'm tired of burning bodies and adding names to the memorial."

Guilty wincing went through those who'd been planning to run off.

The mission men smothered flashes of their time in the lab.

Everyone else refused to think about how many bodies they had burned after the radiation illness.

Everyone in the boat with her straightened and tried to have faith that Angela would bring them through this like she had their many other crisis moments.

Angela was glad she had helped them regain more of their Eagle egos, but inside, she continued to fight her own panic, and she knew the same was true of them. It was impossible for an entire island of people to disappear. It also wasn't possible for all of the structures to have been removed without some evidence of them remaining. There were too many impossibilities in the equation. "So much for using Occam's Razor."

Ray forced himself into the conversation in an effort to keep control. He had already planned his exact movements to leap out of this crowded ship and run to their town. "Occam's Razor may be the only thing we *can* rely on right now."

Everyone else in the boat was familiar with that method of handling things. Assuming the most likely cause or scenario was a tried-and-true method of solving problems, though it didn't always lead to exact conclusions. The process of trial and error to prove or disprove the scenario was where things had gone sour. It was sometimes hard to agree on what experiments would prove a hypothesis. It was easier when it didn't involve magic or a mystery. In this case, it involved both.

Angela scanned the submarine while everyone else continued to gaze at the island in fear or longing. "Occam's Razor is an ineffective plan for some of the issues we're dealing with, including the very magic that we're all missing so much right now."

Ray forced his tired eyes away from the island. He hadn't slept much since the hurricane. "We need a place to start, and I think assuming the worst is a bad way to go."

Angela gestured for him to continue even though she knew where he was going with it. Most of the men in the boat were now listening to the conversation while trying to keep up. The distraction was good for them.

"Right now, we're not picking up anything." Ray took another glance around the team to verify that.

Heads shook; profiles darkened.

"We're all assuming the worst. I think we should go at it from the best possible scenarios first and work our way down. That's easiest done when using Occam's Razor as a guide."

Wade and Kenn leaned toward Ray in anticipation of words that might make them feel better.

Ray didn't have any. "I don't think Safe Haven exists yet. We're about to test that hypothesis by walking the island. If we discover it's true, we'll be tempted to believe that means they're dead."

"Are they?" Zack was terrified.

Ray shrugged bitterly. "That's as far as I've gotten. Check with me later."

Angela tensed as the resistance of the water increased. They were over the small rapids lining the beach a few seconds later, but she still checked on the submarine again. If anything happened to

their ride while they were on land, they would be stuck here, and she was suddenly sure that would be the end of them. *The answers we need are not on this island.* She knew that before she stepped onto it.

Adrian appeared on the top of the submarine. He made a brutal gesture with his hands and then stomped down the ladder and shut the hatch.

“What did he say?” Theo was out of practice with Eagle code.

Angela faced the island again. “He said hurry up.”

Marc snorted. “He told her to concentrate on her job while she still has it.”

Angela’s anger was just as vivid without her gifts. Heat came off her and started to dry her damp teammates as they reached the beach.

Marc helped them pull the boat above where the tide would come in. He staked it down while trying to use the mental grid that refused to appear. “Being a normal sucks.”

Every member of the team nodded.

A normal... Theo stopped as a memory ran through his mind. *I don’t want to be here. I feel that clearly. Why?*

He struggled through the blank spot in his brain.

Theo stiffened as a lock broke and memories flooded in. *Damn. I’m thirsty.*

Angela walked across the beach slowly but steadily, senses taking in every inch of the ground they had recently claimed. She didn’t spot a single

piece of trash or debris. There were no tools left in the grass. There were no forgotten socks. There were no fire rings, or glinting bottles dropped in a drunken haze. All of the signs of their civilization were missing. *Ray's absolutely right. Safe Haven is not here.*

Angela's brilliant mind immediately snapped another word in place. *Yet.*

Angela stopped and looked at Ray.

Ray waited for the question he didn't know how to answer. He was almost too stunned to believe it himself, even though signs were all around them.

"Keep working on it?"

Ray nodded immediately. "You know it, Boss."

Angela rotated toward the missing jungle path while the rest of the team tried to figure out what they were talking about or ignored the conversation in favor of their own useless mental calls. No one was answering them.

"If we use Occam's Razor, where do we start?" Zack didn't want to unintentionally curse the run with his fear. He was already viewing this as another Eagle adventure to be survived.

Everyone regarded Ray.

Ray took them to where his mind had started while they stood on top of the submarine. They had discussed it briefly, but his mind had kept following that thread. "If Safe Haven has never been here, then the most likely reason is that we're on the wrong island."

Zack patted his gear to be sure he hadn't lost anything on the ride over. "You and Saul doped it out, and then you sailed us here. It's not wrong."

Kenn stared in concern. "The island is exactly the same. Just the camp is missing."

Gus frowned at Isabel as she shoved by him to move up in the line. "The odds on two identical islands are astronomical."

Ray gestured toward the water. "Then everything was removed by either the ocean, an attack, or a bugout."

The team quickly tore apart those explanations.

"Even a bugout would leave signs that people had been here." Wade pointed at the ground. "We kept that huge wedding tent here for a long time. We should still be able to see the indents in the mud and grass."

"We saw all the damage after the hurricane on Howland Island." Kenn refused to give into the chill that wanted to rise at the name. "There's no way a hurricane took it all but left everything in pristine condition."

"Why would invaders take a tourist toilet?" Gus pointed, disproving the other theory. "There was a bathroom there, right?" He already knew the answer.

"Yes." Angela led them into the jungle. "Keep going."

Ray understood he was her brain right now. He marched over the jungle path that he still hated. The radiation illness had weakened him; not all of his

physical health had returned. “There’s another possibility, but it’s absolutely crazy. This is where Occam’s Razor doesn’t really apply anymore.”

Cate and Cody stopped and rotated in tandem toward the submarine.

Angela kept walking. “I felt it, too. Keep rolling.”

Tension went through the group. Those who didn’t feel it looked toward the others for a quick explanation.

Kenn gave them a distracted answer. “Something’s happening on the sub. Adrian and Greg will cover it.”

None of them were happy to find out the new people had waited for them to leave before causing problems.

Angela hoped Adrian retained control, so they weren’t stuck here. She had no idea what to do if that happened. She already knew the small armada they had amassed wasn’t here.

“What’s the other possible explanation?” Zack stepped over a pile of vines that he distinctly remembered ripping out of the ground with his hands when they’d first arrived because they had tripped him so many times.

Ray opened his mouth. “Safe Haven hasn’t gotten here yet. We’re decades behind them in the timeline.”

Silence echoed through the team as they considered that. Their first impulse to laugh and insist things like that didn’t happen was clearly

wrong. All of the descendants were sending out silent calls, hoping for their power to return. They were opening doors in their mind and screaming for missing witches and demons that usually jumped eagerly to perform their requests. It was hard to say time travel couldn't happen when realistically, none of this should have been possible.

Marc recovered first. "How would you guess that happened?"

Ray wheezed as he continued to keep pace with the group. "Triangle."

All of them stiffened. Many of them had considered that ghost story after having contact with the yacht that had been old when they found it but new when they left it.

Gus opened his mouth to say the obvious anyway.

Kenn shook his head. "You'll feel like a dumbass if you say it, so don't."

Gus snapped his mouth shut.

Kyle ignored them all in favor of paying attention to their environment. He caught a glimpse of a scarred horse vanishing into the trees. He assumed the goats were around somewhere as well. *Chad got them off the boat when no one else could. We should have known something was up with him right then.*

Ray continued using Occam's Razor in a situation where he couldn't be sure it applied. "If not a triangle, then a wormhole or a weak place between dimensions. Somehow, we slipped through

the folds of a world quilt and got lost in the cotton batting.”

Angela snickered despite the gravity of the conversation. “Stuck in the cotton batting. That’s what I’m going to call this run when I make my report about it.”

The humor in the situation was good, but it didn’t calm their racing hearts or the disbelieving minds now exploring that possibility.

Angela didn’t want them dwelling on that yet because it wasn’t the only possibility. “There are a couple of other options to pick from.”

“Excuse me. Coming through.” Isabel pushed her way through the front line of men without responding to their displeasure that she was here. “Make room.”

Theo scowled at her. “You shouldn’t even be off the sub. Slow your roll.”

Isabel ignored him. She slid between Marc and Angela to take the bodyguard position.

All of the men frowned at her this time.

The Eagle gear didn’t look right on Isabel. She was too tall for it and too thin. The gun belt hung too low, and the vest was too obvious under her black shirt. She was clearly the rookie on this run.

Isabel shrugged. “Adrian told me to guard the boss, and that’s what I’m doing.”

Theo sneered. “Adrian is an outcast in our camp. He doesn’t have the authority to tell you to do anything!”

Isabel shrugged again. “She needs someone watching her ass right now.”

Kenn gestured. “She has a team of men who will kill for her. Why does she need you?”

Isabel pointed out the obvious. “Her mate will cover their kids, and the rest of you are all here to find your friends or family. No one’s protecting her right now.”

Several of the men began to berate themselves because she was correct.

The rest of them gave Isabel tolerant perusals that were usually reserved for their more ambitious rookies.

Isabel didn’t care about their approval. *I only care about the boss. The rest of you are just fuzzy dots in my peripheral vision.*

Angela stopped them close to where the airstrip had been. She scanned for the fallen log where Stanley had saved her life and found a grove of tall trees that hadn’t been beaten down yet by the weather. Even the airstrip was different. There was no stone runway anymore, just faint imprints in a dirt and grass cover that reminded her of Howland Island.

Angela headed for the main hatch near here that they had been using to reach the tunnels.

Minds went to clearing this island. Hardened Eagles tensed, searching for the next threat.

Angela knelt where the hatch should be and dug through the thick padding of vines, but she didn’t

find anything. “Has anyone seen a hatch since we landed?”

All of them realized they hadn’t.

“Spread out 25 feet and search. There were half a dozen hatches through here before we left.”

No one wanted to go into the tunnels under the conditions they were experiencing now. All of the improvements they had made would be absent. It would be like having to clear the underground all over again.

“If you find one, do *not* open it. We are not going down there.”

Everyone was relieved to hear that. They were also concerned when no one was able to find an entrance.

“Pirates took over this island a hundred years before the war.” Ray was kicking at the ground with his boots. “The tunnel system should be here, just maybe not all of it.”

“Why does that matter?” Gus knew it did by Ray’s pointed tone.

“We might be able to narrow down this timeline if we can find something identifying.” Ray gave up the muddy search and waited for instructions.

“Ray and Kenn will do a fast trot and scan at the edge of the cliff.” Angela motioned. “We’ll check the bunkers and the clinic next.”

Two men took off toward the cliff on the other side of the airstrip, hoping they would see their ships anchored below.

Angela led the rest of the twitchy team to the thick jungle path that was no longer beaten down and clearly visible. If not for having traversed it so many times, she wouldn't have known which way to go.

Isabel kept pace, enjoying this environment more than she had Howland Island. Even with the insects here, it was more like the pictures she had seen. She didn't mind the workout on her legs and lungs, and she had often sweated in the small gym that Reicher had provided for the staff. *I guess I'm not a sand and water person. I like the grass and the trees.*

Ray and Kenn caught up to the team, shaking their heads before anyone could ask. There was nothing in the water below, not even the dock. The cave was also missing.

Angela knew they would have told her if they had spotted anything, including infrastructure. She increased the pace, avoiding the small creek. She was certain crocodiles still resided here. Those creatures lived for a long time. There was no reason to assume they wouldn't be here and every reason to assume they would.

Angela was having flashes of old sci-fi movies where time travelers were constantly being warned not to interfere because it would make future changes. Until they knew what was going on, she didn't want to kill, destroy, or even break a single thing on this island, including the dangerous reptiles that would be sunning themselves right now.

“I saw something.” Shawn stopped and pointed.
“Behind that tree.”

The team advanced together to check it out.

Cody squinted at the path they had just come through. “Something moved over there.”

Shadows appeared all around the team.

Hands reached for weapons.

“Steady, Eagles.” Angela slid into the center of her team. “Listen and then react.”

She didn’t know what was happening either, but she didn’t want anyone accidentally hit in the panicked crossfire.

“There it is again.” Cody took a step toward the shadow he could see.

Marc put a hand on the boy’s shoulder to stop him. Marc was also able to view the outline of a person trudging toward them over the path that was now worn.

A loud laugh echoed through the air in front of them.

“That was Tonya.” Kenn hurried toward the treehouse, taking over the lead.

“Keep up.” Angela followed. She was sure about what was going to happen, but she didn’t know how to warn them other than to remind them of who they were. “Remember your lessons, Eagles.”

Before any of them could question, noises flooded the jungle. Conversations, laughter, grunts and groans from hard work, and the sound of

civilization all reached their ears at the same time. Everyone flinched at the quiet being disturbed.

Shadows moved around them. Slowly solidifying, those shadows became familiar people who hurried by them without notice. It was quick and loud, with full color and no recognition.

“What is this?”

“How can they not see us?”

“Hey! Tonya!”

Several of the team yelled and waved, but they didn’t get a response.

Kenn stopped as the treehouse clinic they had all laughed about came into view, except it was only a giant tree now. The clinic and porch around it were missing.

A shadow walked across the path in front of Kenn. He observed in shock as it cleared into Tonya’s profile.

The clinic appeared, beckoning.

“Tonya!” Kenn grabbed her shoulder.

Tonya flickered like in old films, but his hand didn’t go through her. She disappeared.

Kenn groaned. “She was here!”

Cate pointed. “She still is.”

The camp blinked back into life around them.

Isabel stared at Kenn’s big body and beefy hands, expecting anger at the situation.

Everyone watched Tonya stroll into the clinic with a baby in one arm and three cats meowing around her feet.

The clinic door opened, revealing a packed room of Safe Haven residents waiting for their turn with a medic. The laughter and calm conversations implied it was scheduled and not an emergency.

An instant later, the treehouse vanished again. All of the noises faded. A confusing silence filled the jungle.

All of them waited for the shadows to reappear.

Louder noise snapped into place this time as the camp became visible again. A group of chattering den mothers came by with kids who were due for a checkup.

“Are they ghosts?” Kyle forced his brain to work overtime for a solution. “Are they dead?”

Ray slowly denied that. “No, but we might be.”

“Did you use Occam’s Razor to come to that conclusion?” Theo was now in a very snotty mood.

Ray reached over and smacked Theo lightly in the forehead with his palm. “Think about it!”

Theo tolerated the physical correction from a senior man, but only for that reason. Ray rarely ever put his hands on anyone outside of training. “I don’t get it. Just tell me.”

Ray stepped closer to the busy clinic. “This is what it’s like when you break on through to the other side, yeah.”

His attempt at humor drew a fleeting grimace from the few people who knew that song.

Ray simplified it for everyone. “Either they’re slipping through the timestream, or *we* are.

Whichever one is more likely, is the one we base our next actions on.”

“Neither one of them is probable.” But Angela understood his point. “It’s a lot more likely that *we* encountered something while we were on this run as versus Safe Haven encountering something here on the island. I agree with Ray’s theory. It’s us, not them.”

Kyle shuddered, voice dropping. “We’ve been ghosted.”

Chapter Two

Same Day, Different Time

1

“**H**ow did we go back in time without doing the reset?” Gus ignored the flash of killing Valerie, the time pusher in the lab. He already knew that moment would be with him forever. There was no reason to dwell on it every time it popped up. *I’ll have plenty of time to obsess over it later.*

“Maybe someone else did a reset.” Theo was neat and clean, with no beard and a healthy glow. He looked better than he had in a while. *But I don’t feel good. I don’t want to be here!*

Theo rubbed his sore nose; he wasn’t mad at Ray for that moment, but he was disappointed with himself for losing the match, for losing Debra, for losing his place in the Eagles. Being here was bringing back all his failures.

“I have another theory.”

People groaned at Ray’s comment.

Angela motioned. “Let’s hear it.”

Ray was still studying the happy citizens who were coming and going from the treehouse clinic. “I need to hear their conversations first.”

The team all moved closer. Many of them marveled at how calm they were now being,

considering the situation. It said a lot about Eagle training that they were able to stand here and make deductions instead of giving in to the panic.

Ray assumed that was because of Angela's presence, but he was still impressed. He focused on the clinic. The door had remained open after Tonya went in. It was caught on the edge of a floormat, providing a clear view inside.

The clinic now had a tall, narrow pharmacy stand next to the main desk that held commonly used items that didn't need to be locked up. The main desk was fully organized and stocked with paperwork, folder stands, and even two small pamphlet holders with printed sheets on how to treat land sickness and morning sickness. The medics were encouraging the breeding tree like Angela wanted.

The two rear isolation rooms were busy with pregnant women and their recovering radiation patients. Samantha and her twins were in the waiting area, presumably for a checkup. It looked like people were coming in small groups, providing some much needed socialization, but work was also getting done.

A crew was connecting power lines to the coolers in the corner, while another team was behind the small clinic, mounting what appeared to be lock boxes of weapons and ammunition that the guards would use to defend their population if needed. Next to the clinic, animals were in a small

roped off area while gardeners planted a winter feed seed nearby.

Ray scanned the roof and found two rookies attempting to erect a windmill wheel and the cords that would transfer the power from it. A stack of battery packs sat nearby. Ray assumed Kenn would upgrade that project when they returned. *If we return.*

Ray took a quick glance at Kenn and saw he only had eyes for Tonya and his son. Ray understood completely.

The baby appeared to be doing much better. Ray wondered again if that was because of the cats that were spending a lot of time with the infant. That had started to be a joke before they left. It was like the adult cats had adopted KJ in place of their two lost kittens.

Yip! Yip!

The sound of the puppy playing made some of them tense. Dog was helping the mission men, but they were far from over it.

The kitten and the puppy were playing in the reception area, making people laugh. The antics of the two young pets were keeping good vibes flowing through the waiting room that had to be warm from having so many people in there at one time. Ray stepped closer so he could hear the conversations. Out here, the birds and the workers were too loud.

Kenn kept observing Tonya, looking for her reaction to the golf hat-wearing medic who was

running the front desk and openly staring at her in longing. Kenn could already tell Tobias didn't have a chance with Tonya, but that was based on a relationship. He had no idea what her preferences were in males if she decided to pick a relief source. Because Tobias was so willing, it required an evaluation.

The guard in the corner was also observing Tonya. Kenn didn't turn his attention to Rico yet. *She'll get laid before she starts searching for a new mate. One threat at a time.*

Ray still couldn't hear the conversations from where he was standing, though the mumble of many voices was hitting all of them. Ray looked at his team leader with a lifted brow.

Angela nodded. "But go slow. We have no idea what will happen."

There hadn't been a single reaction from the shadowy camp so far. Safe Haven's population didn't know they were here.

Ray entered the clinic, automatically sliding over so others could enter. He stood along the wall and listened to Anna and Daniella talk while they updated patient files.

"...but it's not enough space to have the lab and the surgery center in here."

"Maybe we could build onto it, so Tonya doesn't have to travel back and forth so many times every day."

Tonya concentrated on collecting the fragile blood samples that had just been taken. "I don't

mind the exercise. I don't always have time to do my Eagle workout every day now, so this helps."

"Still, when Kenn and the other guys get home, we'll talk to him about adding on to the clinic."

Anna shook her head. "I think we have to add up."

Daniella waved it off. "You know what I meant."

Ray realized that conversation wasn't going to yield what he was searching for. He shifted his attention to the woman sitting near the fireplace exit. He tried not to stare at Samantha's mostly bald scalp and wild eyes so he wasn't distracted.

"You're doing fine." Neil glared at the camp members who had hurried over to surround Samantha and the twins as soon as they arrived. She'd jumped and snapped rudely at them, then started apologizing. "It's only been nine days. You're pushing yourself too hard and so is everyone else!"

Samantha twitched at the loud tone and then steeled her nerves. She flashed a smile at the other women who were leaning away from Neil's anger this time. "We're still adjusting. Thank you for asking."

It didn't sound like the Samantha any of them knew, but they were all grateful to have her back alive, even if she was drastically changed.

Wade came into the clinic and joined Ray along the wall. His eyes went over his family, hunting for signs of improvement.

Ray again switched his attention to a different conversation. He'd gotten part of what he needed, but he didn't think the rest of it would come from listening to Samantha try to force herself back into their society. It was obvious that she was still haunted and terrified. He didn't envy Neil's job of caring for her and feeling helpless because he couldn't do anything when she jumped or had a nightmare. It was horrifying that Chad had chosen to physically torture her. It had been so long that Ray had almost forgotten about their serial killer veterinarian.

Ray faced the rear rooms, where Morgan was walking a group out with calm smiles. He saw Morgan's attention go over the waiting room and then come to rest on the main entrance. Ray assumed someone was due soon, someone Morgan was worried about. Ray hoped it wasn't another possible assassin; he knew it wasn't good by Morgan's body language. He was tense and tightly wired.

"I've just started with this surgery stuff, but Tobias has been doing it for decades. We shouldn't have any problem removing those tonsils when you decide you're ready. Until then, maybe avoid the spicy foods, since that seems to give you a flare-up."

“I will. Thank you.” Hannah gave him a soft smile and went to the desk to check out.

Morgan scanned the main door again and then smiled at the family in the corner. “Sam, you’re up.”

The wave of tension that went through the clinic was uncomfortable for everyone.

Samantha forced herself to stand.

Neil pushed the stroller forward, intending to go along. He’d chosen to handle each moment that way and let her decide which ones she wanted to face alone. He didn’t want her to have to ask for help. He just wanted to be there for her.

Samantha put a hand on his shoulder. She didn’t speak, though. She wasn’t sure that she could.

Neil put a comforting hand over hers and then sat back down to let her try doing it on her own. She insisted on handling her recovery that way every single day, forcing herself to heal. Neil was proud of her. He was also furious. He didn’t know how to get rid of that emotion. It seemed like that was all he was allowed to experience now as a punishment for Becky’s murder.

Samantha lifted her chin against the sympathetic and curious glances of everyone else in the clinic. Her voice shook as she forced herself to respond like an Eagle would. “Mind your own business!”

People smiled at her or nodded in approval. Samantha had been through a horrible ordeal, but she refused to give up. They respected that.

Ray expected Wade to follow them.

Wade didn't move. He had no desire to see Samantha's agony up close. *I can't help her. All I can do is say the wrong thing and be crushed by her pain.*

Ray was surprised. The charming, handsome playboy of their camp looked the same, but he'd changed.

Morgan led Samantha to the exam room without touching her. He often escorted the women in with a light touch on their arm because it made them feel more comfortable, but in Samantha's case, it might make her flee. He was very aware of how tightly she was pulling on her courage as she entered the room behind him and shut the door.

Morgan's voice came through the hallway clearly. "Tell me how you're feeling right now."

"I feel like I'm stuck between who I was and who I might be now. I'm in limbo."

Ray nodded in agreement as he went outside and hopped off the porch next to Angela. "Did you get all that?"

Angela snorted, trying not to be offended. "Would you like me to recite it for you?"

Ray grinned at her. "Actually, yes, I would, Boss."

Angela waited for Wade and Kenn to come back out and join them. Then she impressed Ray by

having the correct answers. “It’s been nine days since Sam was taken. That means it’s been eight days since we left. We have a timeline now. We don’t have to worry about figuring out what timeline we’re in, because it’s parallel to this one. We didn’t go back in time. We got stuck between the folds of the cotton batting.”

“So we’re not time travelers?” Zack was almost disappointed. For a minute there, it seemed like they had found a way, even though accidental, to travel back in time without doing a reset.

Ray rolled his eyes. “Time travel is not possible.”

To his surprise, several of the group laughed out loud.

Ray realized what he had said and joined them.

Angela was still gathering information. “What would the next step be?”

“We need to keep exploring the possible theories, unless we believe we have the correct answer.” Ray had enjoyed the many physics conversations he’d had with Tim whenever they were on duty together. They hadn’t had one since he’d become their preacher, but Ray had every intention of resuming those moments with his friend. There was no reason an Eagle and a preacher couldn’t be good friends. The fact that their jobs and goals were diametrically opposed didn’t matter. “If we think we have it figured out, then the next step would be to outline possible solutions for that theory or problem.”

“We believe we’re stuck in limbo; we have to find a way out.”

Ray nodded at Kenn. “And the quickest way to get out of someplace is usually to figure out where you went in.”

“Eagles also forge their own paths where necessary.” Angela swept for hatches around the clinic and found them all there. She went over to one and gently swiped it with her boot.

It disappeared, but Safe Haven didn’t. *Interesting.*

“Agreed.” Ray turned toward the main town path. “I want to see if we’re able to interact with them. I know Kenn just tried, but I want to confirm that result.”

Theo hated trudging through the jungle. “Why?”

“Because maybe we can slide through a fold by making contact. It’s like tapping an alternator to get a car to start.”

Angela had been contemplating the same thing, though she’d equated it to smacking electronics to make them start working. “Agreed. Be careful.”

“You know it.”

“Wait a minute. Where is he going?” Theo didn’t understand what was happening.

Wade frowned at him. “Ray’s going to try to make contact. If it works, it might startle everyone around us. Samantha doesn’t need that stress right now.”

Theo snapped his mouth shut, embarrassed that he hadn't figured it out on his own. *And that's another reason I'm not an Eagle anymore. I don't seem to be able to put others first now.*

Isabel stayed close to Angela and enjoyed being able to see Safe Haven without them being able to see her. She had been worried about fitting into the legendary camp. This was a great opportunity for her to check them out without so much pressure. So far, she was impressed with the happy, resourceful population, but she also sensed they were dangerous—a lot like Reicher had been. She attributed that to having so many magic users in one place.

Shawn forced his feet to follow the team. Terror was beating in his mind. *We're lost. We can't get home.*

He wanted to have faith that Angela would get them through this, but he'd just gone through eight weeks of hell and all the while, he'd told himself the same thing. *She left us there. She let them hurt us.*

Shawn didn't know what was happening, but he was certain that Angela did. *Maybe she decided we're all too damaged to return to Safe Haven.*

Gus put a hand on Shawn's shoulder. "Go easy."

"What?"

"Whatever you're contemplating right now is ugly. Go easy on that. You don't need the stress and neither do we."

Shawn found a smile for the man, but he didn't feel it.

Marc slowly dropped to the rear of the line; Cate and Cody stayed with him.

Marc kept his voice down. "What are you picking up right now?"

Cody shook his head. "My gifts are out this time, too. I'm not getting anything."

Marc lifted a brow toward his daughter.

Cate crossed her little arms over her chest in frustration. "I'm yelling, but no one's hearing me."

Marc still wasn't sure why Cody had retained his gifts during their hurricane adventure, but that wouldn't do them any good right now anyway. He filed it to work on later.

"Why not do it in the tunnel bunker?" Theo hoped to catch a glimpse of Debra. He doubted she would be above ground right now. She preferred to stay with the main camp.

Ray noticed the flinches from the men who'd cleared those tunnels. Theo wasn't thinking it through again. He was expecting to walk through cleared spaces with lighting and safety, but that didn't exist in their timeline. "I saw Morgan's watch. The restaurant should be full of people we can try to reach. It's breakfast mess right now."

Angela realized the team schedule was ahead of that now. Being on the sub had encouraged them to rise earlier and go to bed earlier.

"There's a hatch over here." Kenn pointed.

Everyone scanned it as they went by, seeing a square, rotting board instead of the reinforced hatches they'd improved upon settling this island.

None of them tried to open it. They didn't want to go down there.

Kenn's cologne wafted over Theo, drawing a sideways nose curl. He hated that scent. "Why is the little king and his bodyguard with us?" Theo's snarky attitude wasn't improving.

Cate glared at him. "We're not safe away from the alpha."

Cody slid closer to Marc as his father glared at the engineer. "Neither are you."

It only took them a couple of minutes to reach the town, but all of them were dripping sweat by the time they got there. It was a humid day on the island and the warm breeze wasn't giving them a break. The jungle swayed menacingly but offered no cool breezes despite all the shade from the trees.

"What's happening on the sub?" Kenn had enough room to worry over everyone.

Angela wiped sweat from her neck. "Our vigilantes found another problem. They handled it."

"Without permission?" Kenn was surprised.

Angela smiled coldly. "Who said they didn't have permission?"

Kenn didn't like the sound of that any more than the others did. "Safe Haven won't do well with that setup."

“They aren’t in Safe Haven.” Angela slowed as the town came into view. A smile broke over her face. “They’re building the family den.”

The den had three of four walls framed and a small basement was being dug out. Stacks of supplies lined the project; a dozen camp members were working while another dozen took a break nearby. It was the method Angela had recommended to keep people from getting burned out. The two teams traded off every twenty minutes in a race to see which side could get the most work done safely in that time.

Daryl was overseeing the build. He walked through the construction zone with a clipboard, a firm tone, and the confidence of a man who was eager to accomplish big things. It was attractive.

Angela saw he also had the worried body language of someone trying not to think about the problems he was currently managing. “He’s working to avoid reality.”

Gus pointed. “She’s why.” He was horrified by how weak Brittani looked as she sat in a nearby chair and sipped from a mug. He’d caught the flashes of her being pregnant and ill, but he hadn’t understood how bad it was; his animosity faded a notch. “You have to interfere there, Boss.”

Angela wanted to. “She used her one request on me. I can’t get involved at all.”

“Her what?” Isabel was being drawn into their dramas already. It was hard not to when she could

feel how concerned they all were for the sickly breeder.

“When you save a life in our camp, you’re rewarded. You can ask for anything. If it’s reasonable, or not, I try to honor it.”

“Why would you do that?” Isabel wasn’t used to a reward system.

“Because those sacrifices deserve to be honored.” Angela studied Brittani. “She saved my life and maybe this camp. If I’d died in Ciemus, I doubt Safe Haven would have left America.”

“We wouldn’t have.” Zack was positive of that, as were the others.

Isabel waved arrogantly. “Still, you’re the alpha. They have to do what you say. There’s no reason to give them anything beyond your protection.”

Angela ignored the team that was sneering at her guard or staring at the townspeople who clearly didn’t know they were here. “Reicher didn’t love his people. I do.”

“I don’t understand.”

They could all tell Isabel was genuinely confused. They waited for Angela to finish the mini lesson while they regained their breath from the jungle walk.

“Did you love your sister?”

“Of course.”

Angela stopped next to Ray. “I love my camp. Every single one of them are like sisters and

brothers, children, and grandparents. Their lives are more important to me than my own.”

Isabel tried to make the connection. “But you’re byzan. Byzan don’t feel those emotions for hardly anyone.”

“Have you known many byzan?”

“A dozen, through lab evolutions. All they ever felt was anger.”

“That’s because showing caring for someone was a weakness to be used against them.” Angela forced a smile at the woman as she ended the lesson. “Think about that for a few days, and watch everything we do, listen to everything we say. You’ll get it.”

Isabel nodded. “As you wish.” She was already studying her companions. It wouldn’t be hard to dwell on that mystery while she continued to observe so she could fit in.

Angela motioned at Ray. “We’ll stay right here so we don’t interfere.”

Ray stepped forward. “Rules?”

“Do whatever you can to make contact.”

Ray muttered in frustrated resignation. “Never thought I’d miss my power so much.”

Heads bobbed in agreement.

Ray went toward the busy construction crew.

“Jennifer!” Kyle ran to the jungle path that came out on the other side of the town as Jennifer appeared, surrounded by the brawlers. Those famous fighters were all in Eagle gear now and armed. She looked comfortable being surrounded

by them. Kyle noticed it and stored it for later examination.

“Jenny!” Kyle ran to her and grabbed her arm.

The entire town vanished in an instant.

A dead silence filled the island. Even the birds went quiet for the first time.

“Where did she go?!” Kyle spun around.
“Jennifer!”

The shadows blinked into view.

Kyle followed Jennifer, reaching out.

The instant he touched her, she vanished again, along with the rest of their camp.

“That’s unsettling.” Marc was staying calm, but his mind was flying over possible ideas and solutions.

Kyle dropped his arm, groaning. “Jenny...”

It took longer to come back this time, and the shadows didn’t fully clear up. Kyle resisted the urge to shout. He concentrated mentally instead. *Jenny, I need you!*

Pop!

Gifts returned in an ugly slap that caused people to jump, groan, and curse.

The shadowy town disappeared again.

Angela greeted her witch gratefully. *Welcome home.*

The witch curled up in her mind and went to sleep without responding. She was exhausted from trying to fight her way through the fog.

Marc immediately used his gifts to sweep the island, hunting for a signature he knew too well but didn't find.

The hive connection activated.

Angela absorbed the feeling in relief, but she didn't waste time. There was no way to know how long it would last. "Use those gifts. Go one at a time, try whatever you think might work, and then we'll move on so we aren't duplicating and wasting energy. Ray will go first."

Ray wasn't upset that Kyle had interrupted his attempt to make contact. He tossed out a tracking grid that bounced back with only animal signatures. "Nothing." He knew he didn't have anything that would work. He still went through his gifts, trying them all until he ran out of energy.

Angela motioned. "Zack."

The descendants tried to make contact and failed. Even with their gifts, they were powerless.

Angela let half of them try, then stopped it. "This isn't working. Team meeting. Let's go to the cliff top."

Theo didn't want to leave the town yet. He hadn't gotten to see Debra and he doubted she would be at the airstrip. "Why not do it right here?" He braced for another scold.

Marc followed Angela. "We can't see the submarine from here."

"She's still worrying over that?" Kenn cursed as he figured it out. "Hurry up. If we lose that sub,

we're stuck here for real." Kenn took off at a fast jog.

The rest of the team followed.

Marc brought up the rear again, glancing at Cody once more.

Cody shook his head. "She's not here."

Cate frowned. "Who?"

"Kendle." Cody walked in the alpha's footprints. "Not even her ghost survived."

Chapter Three
Are You Sure?

1

Angela swept the pristine submarine in relief even though she'd already checked in mentally with Charlie during the short walk here. "Get us set for an overnight camp."

The team liked that order. A couple of them had been considering mutiny if she told them to go back to the submarine.

Angela understood. She was almost certain she knew what had happened to them, but her crew still needed to be convinced. This meeting would help with that, but time on the island would finish it.

Ray hurried over to the edge of the tall cliff and peered below anxiously. He saw all of their missing ships bobbing peacefully in the cove. The cave below them cast a distinct shadow on the water. "It's all back."

Some of the team scanned for proof of that in the nearby landscape. Most of them began setting up camp so Angela would start the meeting. Her silent stare at the submarine said she was using her brilliant mind. None of them wanted to interrupt her even though they had a hundred concerns running through their own minds. They had gotten used to

her covering everything they thought of, but also everything they missed. Even in a moment like this, they wanted to watch her mind work so they could try to copy it and be more like her in that way. Her ability to come up with a devastating plan was legendary, as long as it was an action moment. She didn't usually get full credit for her intelligence in other moments.

The worried, scarred men keeping track of her mind for a solution knew that, but they weren't sure if it was intentional or not. Angela didn't get much time to herself and even less privacy. If it became known that talking to her was like using a supercomputer, the camp would monopolize her even more than they already did.

"Why are you staring at the sub?" Theo was one of the few team members not scanning the island or the water. He was slapping at mosquitoes and wishing he had insisted on staying on the submarine. *An engineer can't fix this.* "You said the action there was finished."

"We'll cover it during the meeting."

The team frowned at Theo for interrupting her, but also because she hadn't scolded him for it. He'd had a bad attitude since they reached the island and it wasn't like Angela to hold back when somebody needed to hear brutal truths that forced them to evaluate their behavior.

Ray caught an outline of Grant on the bridge of one of the UN ships in the cove below them. A small group of people were following him around, leading

Ray to believe it was a training class. Ray approved even while he disagreed. They needed more people who could sail the ships; any of those people could be a danger to their only captain.

“He’s not the only captain anymore.”

Ray nodded to acknowledge Kenn’s comment, but he didn’t argue or leave his post.

“Do you want a pot meal, or should we scavenge from our kits?” Wade had decided to cook so he would be distracted. Despite knowing they couldn’t make contact, he already had the urge to go back to the little clinic and follow his family around so he could at least feel close to them.

“Do a pot meal and put on extra coffee. Take it out of my kit.” Angela tapped Ray on the shoulder. She pointed at the submarine. “Every 30 seconds, you scan.”

Ray quickly nodded, glad he was being allowed to stay where he could see Grant. He didn’t ask why he needed to watch the sub if everything was fine there. It obviously wasn’t.

Angela joined Cody, helping him retrieve enough fallen branches for Wade to build their campfire. Her mind was flying through all of the many possibilities. She leaned down.

Gus opened his mouth before he considered it. “You don’t have to pull him aside if you need help with something. We already know his brain works like yours.”

Angela froze.

The rest of the team looked over, catching Angela standing close to Cody and obviously whispering to him.

Angela peered over her shoulder, including all of them. “That information might get him killed. At the end of this run, I’m going to remove that memory from your minds. Please give me your permission to do it.”

Everyone immediately nodded, including Isabel.

Angela blasted all of them with a wave of happiness. Then she switched her attention back to the boy who was patiently waiting for her to finish her questions. “Why green?”

Cody didn’t hesitate. “It’s in her nature.”

Angela snickered at the clever wordplay. She stood up with her arms full of logs and waited.

Cody went to Wade. “Where do you want these?”

“Why ask me?”

“You’re my first official mentor.”

Wade had heard about this from Adrian, but he’d never thought to take part in it. “Do you agree to abide by the rules of this apprenticeship?”

Cody nodded at Wade. “I’m honored; I agree.”

Magic swirled through the air, binding the two males together.

Wade pointed at a clear section of the dirt in front of him. “Start laying them out two by two, on top of each other. Like you’re building a...?”

“Chimney.” Cody put his load down and motioned at Angela.

Angela put her logs down with a straight face and then went to find more. It didn’t feel odd to be taking orders from him. It felt right.

Cate smiled at Angela from Marc’s side. She was on guard duty over him and also taking comfort in his presence. A small part of her had been terrified that Angela was like her mom and she couldn’t be trusted to help Marc when he needed it the most. The lab rescue had given her more trust for her stepmother, and more love. *Anyone who comes between us is in a lot of trouble.*

Wade and Cody quickly got the meal started. Mugs of coffee were passed out a short time later. As soon as everyone had a drink and picked a seat or a tree to lean against, Angela got them started.

“I don’t see any reason to go through all of the possible options and ideas. Every one of us are thinking the same thing. What I want to do is start working on a solution. So, first thing’s first: This is really happening. We’re not ill or hallucinating. We’re stuck.”

Every head nodded.

Angela continued. “I assume you’ve all heard of the 10th man principle?”

Only a couple of them had, forcing Angela to do a quick explanation. “If a group of people all agree with something, it’s the duty of the 10th man to be contrary. He has to dig into the thing they’ve agreed

on and try to tear it apart in any way he can, to make sure it really is correct. It's been called other things and it can be used in other ways, but that's what we're using for this situation. I'm going to list out what we agree with. Our 10th man is going to take notes and start trying to find any mistakes in the theory."

"Why look for mistakes?"

Kyle rolled his eyes. *And I thought Trent was the dumbest one along for this ride.*

Even Angela frowned at Theo's lack of brainpower this time. "Mistakes hold answers. If you'd stop feeling sorry for yourself long enough to examine the mistake you made, you'd find a way to make sure it never happens again, thus fixing the mistake and giving your mind, and the rest of us, some peace from your shitty attitude."

Theo flushed as the others agreed.

Shawn got his notebook out to get things moving again.

Angela began laying out what all of them had been thinking. "Everything got hinky after we found the yacht. The storm came, our watches and clocks stopped working, several of us got a rash, and something started to click our gifts on and off like a lightbulb."

Angela did a fast sweep of the submarine and then turned back to the team now observing her across the hotly burning fire. "I'm positive of three things. First, Nature did this. Cody and I agree it's not a coincidence that the cloud was green. We've

even been calling her the Green Lady. Nature did this to us.”

Everyone agreed, including Shawn. So he wrote it down.

“The second thing I’m positive of is that we’re supposed to stay like this forever. Nature doesn’t want us to go back to Safe Haven. I assume that means we are no longer protected on this island. In limbo, our deals don’t apply.”

Marc nodded when people turned to him for confirmation on that one. He’d been fretting over it since they first stepped onto the island. The sense of protection that usually hit him hadn’t arrived. There also hadn’t been any flashes of Kendle’s death. Both of those things told him this island wasn’t really *their* island. “I agree. In our timestream, Safe Haven isn’t here. In Safe Haven’s timestream, we aren’t here.”

“That’s exactly it. And the third thing I’m positive of is that we *can* go back. If we find that green cloud and sail through it, we fix this mess.” Angela saw only a couple of them were following her train of thought.

She tried to make it easier on the ones who didn’t have enough mental capacity to concentrate while Safe Haven blinked in and out of existence all around them. “Imagine a huge room with thin walls and one door, but that door moves around continuously. If you’re lucky enough, or ambushed, you can go through that door. Once you do, you’re on the outside of the room. You can almost get

through it because the walls are so thin. You can see through it in places, you can hear through it,” Angela sniffed dramatically, catching the odor of salt and the jungle. “and you can even smell it, but you can’t quite get there, you can’t quite touch it. That’s where we are right now. We have to find that door and go through or we’re stuck here.”

Shawn had been writing the entire time she was talking. He read through it now and immediately caught something he needed an answer for. “Do you think that opening spins in the same pattern every time or is random?”

“Why does that matter?” Gus was trying very hard to keep up with the conversation and doing well, in his opinion.

“It matters because we have to find it.” Shawn’s hand demonstrated as he spoke. “If it’s the same pattern every time, then we can retrace our steps and just sit there and wait for it to come to us. If it’s a random pattern, we might be screwed.”

“Why are we screwed?” Ray didn’t turn from his post. “With a nuclear sub, and scavenging for our needs, we could chase it.”

“That might take years.” Cody understood everything Angela was saying. “And during those years, we’ll continue to forget who we are and what we’re doing, like Mel has.”

Ray nodded. “The longer you’re in, the harder it is to get out. She’s proof of that.”

The mission men all thought of the lab and winced. That saying also held true for captivity.

They were free now, but still living through it in their heads.

Angela unconsciously fingered the baggie in her jean pocket. She never went anywhere without it. “We have to find that green cloud. We must find that door back to our timestream.”

They all sensed she didn’t want to talk about a plan any further. They all agreed that Nature had done this to them; sitting here discussing what they were going to do about it while Nature might be listening didn’t make sense. That conversation would have to wait until they were back on the ocean.

Everyone tensed for Angela to give the order to leave, despite the overnight camp that was still being set up.

Angela sipped her mug of weak coffee and did another scan of the submarine.

“You said you’d tell us why you keep watching the sub.” Isabel was curious.

“Ray can give you that answer. He figured it out a few minutes ago.”

Ray still didn’t turn from his post. “I’m on watch for that green cloud, or a storm, or a whirlpool. Now would be the perfect time for Nature to swallow our ride so she can make sure we can’t find that door.”

People began sweeping the ocean in search of a green cloud with a brutal lady guiding it.

Theo finally understood how much danger they were in. “Why are you staying here?! We have to get back to the sub!”

He stood up and spun toward the darkening path. “Come on!”

Angela stuck her leg out.

Not expecting it, Theo tripped and landed face down in the bushes next to their camp.

Angela smiled. “That’s better.”

Mission men sniggered.

“Why *are* we staying?” Gus felt like he could get away with asking that.

Angela sent a dark glare around the entire group. “We’re staying because none of you have done your daily session yet and I won’t tolerate that!”

Her furious tone instantly sent the mission men back to their captivity. All of them tensed.

“What do you want us to do, Boss?” Kenn fell back into it seamlessly.

Angela pointed as she spoke. “Scroll dive.”

Kenn stiffened.

“Blink.”

Shawn nodded eagerly. He was always willing to sink into his mind and forget reality.

“Dimension hunt.”

Marc understood he was taking Greg’s place in that. He didn’t refuse the order. He was able to do everything the others could.

“I also want us to make calls.”

“Why are we making calls? We already know it doesn’t work.” Kyle was still stunned that he hadn’t been able to get through to Jennifer at all.

Angela gestured at the ocean. “Call that green bitch back here so we can make a new deal. If we can get her to show up, we might not have to chase anything.”

“What exactly are we searching for?” Kenn needed to be clear on that so he knew which scrolls to collect.

Angela was ready for him. “We need an answer to Shawn’s question. Is that cloud random or does it follow the same pattern every time?”

Isabel couldn’t stop herself from speaking up again. “It was a lot more effective to do their sessions individually. Reicher rarely ever had them concentrate on one thing together.”

Angela’s red orbs traveled Isabel’s body in contempt. “I’m not Reicher.”

She swept the listening men and made a rude gesture. “Why aren’t you working?!”

Isabel took a step back. “Are you sure?”

She turned around before Angela could answer.

Angela let it go this time. She was more interested in the information in Isabel’s brain than she was in obedience, but Isabel wasn’t able to just give her access to all that data. Because of the way she had been raised in the labs, she also had to be handled rougher than what Angela would have preferred. For this moment, though, she had shown

a bit of courage. Angela was rewarding that by not crushing her like a bug.

3

“It’s not working.”

Angela didn’t need Kyle to tell her that. All of the mission men here were trying their hardest to find an answer, but they were all coming up short. Even Shawn was having trouble concentrating. The fog-head was coming back, and it was hitting the mission men harder than it was the rest of them. Angela believed that was part of the trap. Nature didn’t want them alert enough to figure out a solution.

Angela turned up the radio on her belt, where the anthem from the sub’s speakers was coming across in staticky beauty. She hoped it would help them concentrate, but she knew it would be ineffective soon. *I need to find another way to keep us awake.*

“Why did you really keep us here?” Isabel had stayed close while the afternoon passed into early evening and the shadows settled over the noisy island like a blanket. She was now peering at those dark spaces in trepidation and cursing herself for leaving the safety of the submarine. *I don’t like land very much, any land.*

“There’s a special, odd time at the start of every day, right before the sun begins to rise. I’m waiting

for that moment to see if I can use it to our advantage.”

The mission men didn't hear her. Unless she was using the sharp tone that implied danger was coming, they were concentrating on the job she'd given them.

The rest of the team tried to make themselves eat the soup Wade and Cody had prepared, while listening to everything Angela said. They were also trying to find an answer, as well as occasionally sending out a call to Nature when they thought of something that might bring her to them.

No one dwelled on what would happen then.

Zack kept an eye out for his family and for crocodiles. “We could threaten her ancient threads again.”

Zack didn't want to go underground in the dark any more than he had in the daylight, but the idea was solid. “We already know that's effective.”

Marc shook his head distractedly. “It might break our deal in the other timeline and expose our entire camp to her fury. I won't agree to that.”

No one argued with him. The beating Marc had taken during the battle with Nature had given him the right to make that decision. He'd felt her rage up close and still managed to forge a deal. If he said no, then it wasn't a good idea.

Marc sank back into his mind, calling out again. *You talked to me before. Why won't you come talk to me now? You can't be scared.*

The other men picked up his thought and resumed their own mental taunting or begging.

Isabel motioned toward Ray. “He needs a break. He’s rubbing his eyes a lot.”

Angela allowed it. “Fifteen-minute switch out.”

Isabel happily took Ray’s place at the edge of the cliff. She had already spent time staring at the gently bobbing ships anchored below them, but she still enjoyed the view. She wanted to be valuable to the alpha and she couldn’t do that if all she was ordered to do was stand here and look pretty.

“I never said you were pretty.”

Isabel felt that deeply. Instead of crying or sending a nasty insult back, Isabel focused on the ocean and tried not to cry. *I can do this without that diet. Looks aren’t important. I’m with a good alpha this time and that’s all I need. I don’t care if she doesn’t like me. Her happiness doesn’t matter in comparison to mine.*

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Cody left Wade and joined Isabel near the cliff. He stared at her in concern. “You won’t really be one of us until that changes. You’ll live on the outskirts of our love and long for it until it drives you crazy. The alpha will hesitate to put you down because she feels bad about your sister; she thinks she owes you a debt.” Cody’s orbs lit up bright red. “But I won’t. Never forget your place with her.”

Cody went to Angela’s side before Isabel could force a response from her shocked mind.

Cody put an arm around Angela's waist and hugged her, sending his comfort and warmth. Marc was too busy to do that for her right now, but the little boy knew she needed it.

Angela hugged him back and wished things were different. The life Cody had led so far was awful and runs like this weren't helping. He deserved the chance to be a normal little boy, with a normal little boy's happy life, but they all had to face destiny and his was bigger than the rest of theirs.

"We don't have anything she needs." Shawn had been trying very hard to concentrate on the problem instead of the drama. "If we had something she needed, then maybe we could force her to let us out of here."

Angela considered the baggie in her pocket again and reluctantly shook her head. "What if we tried the opposite?"

Shawn's brows drew together. "You mean get rid of something she wants?"

Angela didn't want to revive Marc's deep guilt over his last bad choice, but she didn't have a choice this time. "She locked us in here so we can't use that nuclear submarine against her. At least, that's my theory. We've pissed her off by surviving, of course, and we insulted her several times on several levels, but everything was fine until we decided to keep the sub. It all went hinky after that."

Marc winced, mood dropping again. He still felt awful about it.

“What if we promise to get rid of the sub?” Theo had stayed on the ground after being tripped. He had just rolled over in the itchy grass.

Shawn denied it. “There’s still no reason for her to let us out of here. We’re basically helpless at this point.”

Angela studied Shawn thoughtfully. “Are we, really?”

Shawn frowned at her again, deeper this time. “You want to start firing off weapons and hope that gets her attention?”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe. If that’s what it takes.”

“Where would you even aim that would matter to her, other than this island?”

“I have no idea. I do know we’re not going to traverse small islands all over the globe, tunnel into them like rabbits, and start stabbing stuff.” Angela gestured. “You all have new threads to work on now. Get to it.”

None of them noticed the lack of anger in her tone this time. They dove back in, searching for a solution to please their leader. It had nothing to do with Reicher.

Angela caught it and stored the moment to replay for them later. Some of these men were terribly damaged, but all of them were survivors. This moment was more proof that life could go on for them without Reicher’s voice always flashing in the rear of their minds.

“Don’t kid yourself. We’ll never be free of that!”

Angela sighed at Kenn’s growl. “Concentrate. Your life with Tonya depends on us finding a solution.”

The mission man grunted and dug back in.

Angela waited for daylight and hoped she was wrong. It would be easier if they were all ill or sharing the same bad dream. *I may not be able to get us out of this one.*

Her doubt drew attention.

Angela didn’t scold them; she gave comfort. “I won’t give up even if I’m dead. I expect the same from my army.”

“We’ve got you, Boss.” Kyle came closer to provide protection while he worked on the puzzle, too.

Shawn led them to another thread. “We need to know why she keeps giving us our gifts back. Is she screwing with our minds, or does she *have* to let us have them back for some reason? If we knew that, we might be able to narrow down a way to get her here.”

Angela stilled as Adrian spoke up in her mind.

She hates it when we take her energy...

Angela passed that around the team, considering it. She felt a tiny glimmer of hope. “If she comes herself, we can deal. If she sends her anger, we could fall.”

“Can we die like this?”

All of them had wondered that but hadn't wanted to ask. They gave Gus dirty looks.

"Yes, I'm almost sure we can." Zack had already been worrying over that one.

"Why?"

"Because of the rashes. Those skin cells died. It left scars on me where I itched too hard. But also because I don't believe this was an accident. We've been tricked into a bad place for a bad reason. Killing us while we're here makes sense. It would be a twofer." Zack fought a chill. "There's no coming back from death while in limbo."

"I say we try it anyway." Kyle was desperate for hope. "We don't have much else to work with."

Angela went to the nearest tree and began to draw energy.

Her tired witch groaned in pleasure. *More!*

Angela's energy bank began to fill.

The team studied the clouds and the ground for trouble.

Marc used his grid, searching for a large green dot flying toward him with snapping teeth and stunning eyes.

Angela motioned. "Try it."

All of the descendants were quickly full of energy. Nature's power dwarfed theirs.

"Something's happening." Angela felt the wind pick up. The sky darkened faster. She flinched as icy rain broke over their camp and started putting out their fire.

Marc shook his head. “I don’t have her on my grid.”

The rain increased, drenching them all in seconds.

Angela sighed. “Get us moved over a bit and rebuild the fire.” She went toward the jungle path to retrieve more dry, fallen logs. Nature was only soaking their campsite.

“Stay here. I’ll get it.” Isabel hurried into the unknown to get the wood.

Angela watched out for the dangerous woman while the men shifted their camp to a dry spot. Nature didn’t seem to be that upset even though so many of them had taken her energy. *She’s thrilled. I can almost feel her gloating over this trap.*

Marc nodded. “She won’t come to us unless she has to and even then, we’ll need something powerful to force her into a deal.”

Angela believed him. “Then we’ll do it the hard way and chase a snot cloud, but not until I’m certain we can’t do it from here.”

Marc didn’t ask if she had a secret plan or if she needed his help with it. He went back to dimension hunting. He now understood why Greg was so addicted to it. *I could explore those other worlds for the rest of my life and never visit them all.*

Angela glared at him.

Marc dropped his chin and went back to work without arguing.

Angela tried not to let the guilt steal her own concentration. *I’m going to find a way out of here.*

Every minute you make us spend in limbo will be repaid in the end. Count on it.

Nature heard the threat and marked it. Even she knew Angela didn't bluff.

Chapter Four

Imposter Syndrome

1

“**T**he fog’s starting to hit me again.” Ray rotated. “Can anyone take my spot for a few...?”

Ray gawked at the empty camp. *Where is everyone? And why didn’t I hear them leave?*

The small camp was cold and empty. Dawn’s bright light beat down on dirty sleeping bags and a burnt-out fire ring.

“Boss?” The island was coated in a light layer of haze that was slowly dissipating as the sun rose. The bird calls were loud, annoying. Ray realized it was early morning now. “I must have dozed off for a while.”

Ray scowled as he felt a light beard and weak legs that had clearly gotten a lot of use. *The fog.* “How long was I out this time?”

He examined the campsite and found grass starting to come through the mounds of disturbed dirt. Trash was stuck to the ground. “It’s been two days.”

Ray didn’t feel like he’d been eating this time. He dug in his pockets, missing the kit that was no longer on his shoulders.

He came up with a protein bar and ripped it open eagerly. He staggered through the camp as he ate, searching for a canteen. He had no idea where his was. He had his belt and gun, but all his other tools were absent. He didn't even have his K-Bar.

Ray felt his backup blade resting along his ankle and congratulated himself on not losing his boots during the fog. "Boss?!"

"Why are you yelling?" Gus rolled over, making Ray jump.

The big man had buried himself beneath a pile of leaves and weeds alongside the campsite.

"Gus! Are you okay?"

"No, someone's yelling." Gus stood up.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." Ray grabbed the canteen from Gus's belt and drank while waiting for the man to finish waking up.

"Where is everyone?"

"No idea." Ray belched. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was cold, but I didn't have a blanket. I crawled over the dead body and dug under these..." Gus tensed. "The body?"

Kyle groaned, slowly sitting up. "That's exactly what I feel like—a dead body."

Gus and Ray were happy to find out the body wasn't a corpse, but it didn't clear up what had happened to them.

"Boss?" Ray got louder this time, hoping the rest of the team was also camouflaged nearby. *Even*

during fog-lock, we tried to follow our training.
“Boss?!”

“Over here.”

The three sore men stumbled into the jungle behind the small radio shed.

Angela kicked the tree she was in. “Up here, though I have no idea why.”

Angela began to carefully lower herself down the thick tree trunk, being careful of her large stomach. Her loose hair snagged on the tree repeatedly as she descended.

“There’s Theo!” Gus pointed at a lump of weeds. His memory was slowly filling in. “Boss told us to go to ground.”

Kyle nodded tiredly as he patted himself down, seeing what gear he had. “The fog was coming in and we were all feeling it.”

Theo gagged from stomach acid and sadness. He’d followed Debra and Ian around, watching them fall deeper in love. *I’ll never get her back.*

Theo no longer looked good. His clothes were torn and he was streaked with dirt. “Anyone know how long it’s been?”

“Two days, I think.” Ray spotted a loose radio on the ground and pulled it from the debris. He switched it on.

“Angela! Marc! Someone answer me!”

Ray flinched, almost dropping it. He keyed the mike. “This is the rudest hotel I’ve ever been to!”

He promptly switched it off, bringing welcome silence. Adrian's shouting was clear in their minds now, though, preventing the peace to think.

"Shut up already." Angela dropped to the ground, scowling at her weak, filthy condition. "I could eat absolutely anything right now." She caught her balance. "I mean it. Gum, nuts, lint. Pass it over."

Kyle had his kit, though it was muddy and torn. He dug out ration bars and gave one to all of them. For a minute, ripping and crunching was the loudest noise.

Papers fell to the ground.

Angela didn't make them pick it up. She hadn't wanted to change anything here, but the fog had taken away that option. *We're not time travelers anyway.*

Ray shared the canteen. It was the only one among them. "We need to find water."

Gus grunted. "And the rest of the team."

"They're all in town." Angela broke off another chunk of the dry food. "They couldn't come back after we finished."

Kyle flicked an insect from his arm. "Finished what?"

"I tried to reach the townspeople at daylight. Some of you were already under the fog. I took the others. I told them to stay in town so I didn't lose them on the way back."

"Then you came here to watch over us?" Ray loved that.

Angela shrugged. “I think so. I remember running through the jungle toward a cliff.”

Men winced. She could have fallen. Any of them could have.

“Why did you leave the others in town?” It surprised Kyle that Marc had allowed it.

“They weren’t fading as hard as you guys were. I hoped following the ghosts of their loved ones might keep them awake.” Angela belched loudly and shoved the other half of the ration bar into her pocket as she rotated toward the town path. “Let’s go round them up and get the hell off this rock. I can’t think here.”

Kyle and Ray wanted to protest about leaving their loved ones, but reason prevailed. There was nothing they could do from here. They had to chase that cloud now, before they faded again.

“We have a pattern if it’s really been two days.” Angela struggled to clear her mind. “It can come on fast or slow, but we get three days of alertness each time we come back.”

“Does that include the two days we spent fogged-in?”

“No idea.” Angela swept her hair into a long rope and tied it so it would stop blowing into her face. “We’ll try to cover that next time.”

None of them were anxious for the next time.

Ray had added it up. “It will take us two days to get back to Howland Island.”

Kyle scowled. “Add another day to reach the spot where we found the yacht and encountered the fart cloud.”

Angela snickered. “Fart cloud. That’s great.”

Gus was eager to reach the town. He increased the pace, forcing Angela to go faster. “We need to collect the team and go, while we’re awake.” He was afraid of being left here now.

Ray was more interested in figuring out a solution to their other problem. “Why didn’t we lose our gifts this time?”

Angela took the canteen they were passing, but she didn’t drain it like she wanted to. She sipped and passed it on. “Maybe Nature is setting a honey pot. We can stay here, get fogged and have our gifts, or we can try to find the cloud and suffer all of it as normals.”

Kyle was beyond frustrated. “That’s some great choice!”

Ray rubbed his face. “Look at it this way: we’ll be too cloudy to care.”

Angela chuckled, feeling better at the sarcastic attitudes of her team. *I love these men.*

That made her frown. “Has anyone spotted Isabel?”

Everyone tensed at the picture of her going foggy and getting hungry.

Angela sighed. “We’ll collect her as we go. Look sharp, Eagles.”

She led them into the town, aware of their snorts and eye rolls at her words. None of them looked sharp right now, in any way.

Angela followed the blue signature on her grid to the barn. She went behind it and stopped in surprise.

Marc, Cate, and Cody were sitting along the wall. Marc was reading and Cate was sleeping, while Cody shielded them both.

Cody glared at Angela. “You said you’d be right back!”

Angela laughed this time.

Cody lowered his shield.

Cate stirred at his side. “My turn?”

“No. Mommy’s here.”

Cate rolled over and saw Angela. She flew toward her, arms opening and face clenching.

Angela hugged the child and waited for her to calm down. Cate had been abandoned so many times that moments like this would always bring out her worst emotions. “Nice job staying with your brother.”

Cate let go and then yawned. “Can we sleep lying down now?”

Cody was still neat and clean. Cate was covered in dirt smudges and dusty, ripped clothes. She’d enjoyed some of the free time to be wild.

Ray swept the man reading a book near the kids. “Why do they remember what happened?”

“It doesn’t always affect the younger ones.” Angela couldn’t tell them why. She didn’t know.

Cate bit into a ration bar and groaned. “Real food! Need real food!”

Angela pulled an apple from the tree they were next to and bit into it. When it seemed normal, she passed it to the little girl.

Cate crunched into it eagerly, dropping the ration bar. Angela had told them not to eat anything from the island and they hadn’t.

Cody stood up. “We can go now.”

Marc yawned and flipped the page in his book. “Let me finish this. It’s good.”

Angela saw he’d found a tattered paperback. “Did you fog out?”

Marc shook his head. “Not fully. I read my book. It kept me alert.”

Angela stored that information, along with the title. *Animal Farm* was a short, easy-to-read classic that held deep lessons on leadership and politics. At another time, she would have been eager to hear what he’d gleaned from those pages.

Adrian’s voice came over Angela’s radio. “Can I get an update?”

Angela quickly keyed her mike. “Get a guard on top of that sub to watch for bad weather. Don’t rely on the radar. And clear this damn radio! I can’t take the sound of your voice right now.”

The shocked silence said Adrian had heard her.

It was easy enough to hear the hurt in his voice when he finally answered. “You got it.”

None of them enjoyed his pain, not even Marc.

Angela motioned. “Piggybacks. Pick a pig.”

Cody went to Kyle.

Kyle lifted the boy, then tugged his Eagle jacket back into place.

Cate slapped Theo on the leg. “Down, piggy!”

Theo loaded the girl without protesting. He didn’t feel good, but he was fully awake now. Carrying a burden might help him stay that way.

Marc shut the book and leaned his head against the barn wall. “I need coffee.”

“Same.” Gus gave Marc a hand up. “Any idea what happened to our kits?”

“Wade has them.” Cody pointed.

They all spotted Wade snoring near the family den that was still being built. He was under their kits.

Everyone hurried forward, eager to collect their gear.

Wade woke with a wince, fully aware. He blinked at them through dry eyes and an almost withered body. “Nothing worked, Boss.”

Not being able to reach his family was the second worst feeling he’d ever had. Finding out Samantha had been taken was the worst. Even being a withered shell couldn’t compare. *I had my happy home and now it’s gone.*

The others figured out Wade was in mourning. They didn’t scold him. They understood his pain.

Angela and Gus shared energy to get Wade back on his feet. It was clear that he’d spent the last two days trying all his spells in an attempt to reach Samantha and Neil.

Wade's beautiful body filled out in seconds. His hair grew out another inch of shiny strands that even Angela wanted to run her fingers through.

Wade tried to smile his gratitude.

Angela made a face. "Don't do that."

Wade sighed miserably. "I'm ready for whatever you have planned. There's nothing left in my heart but sadness."

He knew he was being punished for being the camp whore. He got it now. He just didn't understand why she'd hurt Samantha. All of his need to make Angela pay was gone, pushed aside by the misery of knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

"Not even Amy?"

Wade shook his head sadly at her. "Not a single reaction, no matter what I tried."

Gus was still in a hurry to leave. "We're short Shawn and Kenn."

"And Zack."

Ray pointed, but didn't stare. "Zack's in the tree by the restaurant."

Angela did stare as she walked over there. Zack was slumped in the fork of the tree, without clothes. She didn't want to know how he'd gotten that way, but she couldn't help guessing. His body wasn't injured or even dirty. It looked like he'd calmly stripped, then climbed the tree.

Zack's lids opened. He peered down at them.

Angela waited, curious. "Good morning."

Zack stiffened as her eyes went over his bare body. *Bare?* “Why am I naked?”

“That’s my question, too.”

Zack shifted his leg to cover his cold balls. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

“Okay.” Angela motioned at Marc. “Give the naked man a hand and some clothes.” She’d put the extra gear in Marc’s kit this time.

Marc yawned as he reached out.

Zack jumped down to avoid being touched while he was unclothed. “I got it.”

Marc grinned. “I saw your pee-pee.”

Angela’s laughter made them all feel a little better.

Zack took the spare pants that Kyle handed him. *Why am I naked?* All he could remember was something about getting Nature’s attention.

“Stop making so much noise!”

They looked over to find Shawn sprawled at the base of a nearby tree.

Shawn was red-eyed, red-nosed, and smeared in dirt all over his body. Clumps of dirt fell from his hair as he tried to stand and slid back down the tree. He landed on the empty bottle he’d filched from Wade’s kit while he was too withered to protest.

Wade caught that, nostrils flaring. “And you let me lay there like that?”

Shawn was too drunk to care.

Wade lunged forward and grabbed Shawn’s ankle. He began dragging him through the town.

Shawn didn’t fight back.

Kyle stared. “What’s his problem?”

Angela pointed at the hatch near the tree where Shawn had been.

They all saw it open; camp kids came flying out for breakfast, including Missy.

They assumed Shawn hadn’t been able to make contact with her. He was filthy from being in the tunnel, though. It was a wonder he’d made it back out alive.

Wade kept dragging Shawn over the dirt path toward the jungle.

Gus followed, frowning. He wanted to head for the beach and their boat. “Where’s he going?”

“To collect our last man.” Angela followed, wincing as Shawn finally noticed the pain and started shouting. “Shut him up, will you?”

Wade deftly stopped and rotated, big fist swinging out.

Angela sighed as Shawn slumped to the ground. “That’s not exactly what I meant.”

Wade grabbed that same ankle and resumed his walk and pull. “It’s quieter.”

Angela smiled ruefully. “Fair enough.”

Zack tugged on Kyle’s gym shoes and hurried to catch up.

Kyle tossed him a sweatshirt. Then he tossed him his kit.

They followed Wade toward the clinic, where Tonya and her son were living now. Angela had told Tonya to stay close to the clinic and she had.

So had Kenn, who was sitting on the ground near the porch.

Kenn looked up in bleary relief. "It's about time."

Wade frowned at that word. Being here was reminding him strongly of Chad.

Angela joined Kenn on the porch. "You didn't fade out."

"I scroll dived, like I was told to."

Angela forced herself to smile at him. Then she let her orbs glow red. "Get on with it!"

Kenn slowly stood, swinging his kit onto his shoulder. He'd found a lot of information, but only some of it mattered. "I'm certain about three things. First, the map was correct. Our reality flipped; we were right about that. Second, each time will get longer and deeper until we're all like Mel. And last, it's not random. That green cloud, moving door, whatever, will hit that same place again at some point."

Zack rubbed his beard in annoyance. He'd shaved right before they left the sub. "Why do you think that?"

"Because nothing in nature is random. It always follows a pattern." Kenn yawned.

"Weather is random."

Kenn shook his head at Zack, not asking why the man was getting dressed. "No. Conditions create predictable patterns. Environments create predictable harvests, births, temperatures. Nothing on this planet is random."

Everyone tried to think of something that was, to disprove his theory.

Kenn had spent the last two days doing that. He knew it was true. “We have to get to that location and wait.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Angela swept the disheveled team and felt the protests of her coming order. She relented even though she knew it wasn’t a good idea. “It’s your choice. I won’t knock you out and drag you along like Wade will.”

She stayed where she was, confusing the men who expected her to go to the sub now. “I need to see something, try something, and then I’m leaving. If you stay, you will be stuck here.”

A few of the team were torn. They could see their loved ones and watch them. It wasn’t enough, but it was something.

“What are you searching for?” Kenn wanted to be able to help. Not being able to make contact with Tonya and his son was driving him crazy. He needed Angela to hurry up and find a solution.

“Proof.” Angela handed her kit to Cate to carry. “I went for a dream walk. I might have made contact, but I’m not sure.”

They looked up as the clinic door opened and three men came out, all carrying Bibles.

Tim was in the lead, and still projecting the same quiet confidence that he had always presented to others. Angela knew there was more underneath the surface, but it wasn’t time for that to come out right now. She needed a different sign from him.

Ed and Ralph followed.

Theo scanned the men. “Why did you try to contact normals through a dream walk?”

“For exactly that reason—they’re normals. They pay more attention to things that are out of the ordinary than the descendants do. We’ve accepted how odd we are. As I’m sure you know, the normals have not.”

Everyone listened as the trio went by.

Ed let Tim go down the ramp first. “It could be trackers pretending to be Angela.”

Tim nodded. “It’s their mistake, then. I know the boss wouldn’t contact me that way.”

Ralph considered how Kendle had stirred them all up. “I believe someone is trying to mess with us again. There’s no way it was the boss.”

Tim kept a calm tone. “It was an imposter.”

Ed gestured. “We need to tell Jennifer.”

Ralph shuddered. “Let’s try Tonya or Daryl.”

Tim smiled. “Okay.”

All the men were afraid of Jennifer.

Angela watched them go into the jungle, staring thoughtfully. “This is the first time I’ve ever felt like an imposter. He wouldn’t believe me, no matter what I tried.”

Marc was happy Tim had reacted that way. “It’s good.”

“For Safe Haven, yes. For us, not so much.”

Everyone waited for Angela to insist that it was time to go now.

Angela motioned toward Marc. “They’re coming out now. Give it a try.”

Marc realized Angela had been keeping track of his thoughts. Halfway through the book he’d been reading, an idea had presented itself. Even if it worked, he wasn’t sure what to do with it, but he wanted to know if it was possible.

The clinic opened again. Terry held it for the two cats. “Go catch mice or something.”

Marc knelt at the end of the porch so he was eye level with the cats that were quickly prancing toward him.

Marc hissed, loud and angrily.

Both cats immediately drew up. The fur on their backs lifted. The big bunker male swiped out with sharp claws.

Safe Haven blinked out of existence.

Marc slowly stood up. “Well, I’m not sure if that was helpful.”

Cate gasped. “I’m telling Dog!”

Marc chuckled.

Angela knew Adrian was keeping track of them now. He was seeing and hearing everything that they were. He was also remaining quiet, and she was grateful for that. She really didn’t want to hear him at all. *But I need information.*

Angela keyed her radio. “Give me an update now.”

Adrian's cautious voice came right back. "The sub is fine. People are accounted for. The radar is clear and the guard up top said there's nothing in sight but blue skies. Oh, Dog wants to know why Marc is being mean to his cats."

Angela didn't answer even though she snickered as the rest of the team laughed. They had been out of sight of the submarine for a while now; it was bothering her.

"Are we ready to go?" Ray was.

Angela pointed. "We have another experiment to try."

The clinic opened once again. Jennifer came down the ramp, holding little Autumn. Morgan was behind her, carrying Roy. Their guard, Megan, glared at all of them.

Angela was unhappy that Jennifer had picked Megan as a guard, but she didn't mind Morgan being with the girl. Like Kyle, she was happy there was someone who would protect Jennifer if she needed it. *Like now, though I doubt this will work.*

Angela turned toward the nearest tree.

Kyle tensed as Isabel slid down the tree trunk and snuck toward his wife.

Isabel was filthy. Her muddy hair hung over both shoulders, smearing more mud onto her torn clothes. She'd clearly had the same type of fog-out that they had experienced, but after two days in the clothes, Isabel finally looked like an Eagle. The dirt on her face, boots, and hands lent credibility to that image.

Isabel pulled the knife from her tool belt and increased pace.

“What is she doing?”

Angela put a hand on Kyle’s wrist before he could interfere.

Isabel rushed forward, knife blade slamming into Jennifer’s free arm.

Safe Haven once again blinked out of existence all around them.

Kyle pulled free of Angela’s hold and glared at both of them. “If it had worked, she would have gotten hurt!”

Isabel sheathed her knife, shrugging. “I’m sure you’re powerful enough to help her with a tiny slice. We needed that information.”

Kyle glowered at the woman. “Remember that the next time you need help!”

Isabel waved him off. “Mind your job and I’ll mind mine.”

Her words made everyone think Angela had told her to do it.

Angela ignored the glares and the disappointed emotions now slapping her from most of the team. “It’s time to roll. Fall in, Eagles.”

No one protested or ran off. The two demonstrations made it obvious that staying here was a waste of their awake time.

Wade grabbed Shawn’s ankle and resumed dragging the man along.

No one interfered. Shawn had left a teammate in pain. They weren’t sure yet if he had been under

the effects of the fog, but finding him around the kids was disconcerting. Many of them began to match moments in Shawn's history that they now considered glaring signs. The biggest one wasn't his affection for Missy, surprisingly enough. Shawn's burn box had been full of pictures of camp women in the showers, of all ages. What they couldn't understand was why Angela had shared her gifts with him at all.

Angela didn't correct their impressions. She'd thought Shawn was changing, and his past before the war hadn't given her any hints of his mental instability. *I might have made a mistake there.*

She didn't have a perfect track record anymore. *I'm still human, even though I'm not normal. I'll try harder to do better. And in the meantime, I'll watch Shawn and make a final choice when this tedious run is finally over.*

"You're missing something, Boss." Gus caught up to Angela.

She held up a hand to stop him. "You're right." Angela kept heading for the beach. "But I didn't forget it." Angela keyed her radio again. "I'm sending back half my team. Swap out with anyone else who needs to come over."

Adrian's voice was relieved. "Thank you." There was no way everyone on the sub would believe what Angela's team was going to report. They needed to see it for themselves.

Angela didn't respond to the team members who started grumbling. They understood she wasn't

going to the sub yet. “I have one trick left to try before we go chase that cloud.”

Marc caught her eyes. “Is it dangerous?”

“Of course. That’s why I left it for last.”

Marc shifted closer. “Where do you want me?”

“At my side, always, but honestly, I have things for you to cover on the sub.”

Marc’s mood lifted. He waited for her next order.

“I want most of you back on the ship. Cross your fingers that our RIB is still on the beach.”

People noticed Marc’s calm acceptance of the situation and of Angela’s leadership. It was good; it also worried them. Marc just didn’t seem like himself anymore.

Marc didn’t care about their concerns. The fog-mind had cleared his emotions. Reading the old book had cleared his brain. He didn’t like the conclusions it had led him to, but he felt better just by going with the flow. *Let her carry the weight. I’ll survive in her shadow and be happy.*

Angela’s lip curled.

Men who saw it slowed a bit to put distance between them. If she exploded, they didn’t want to be caught in the crossfire.

Cody held onto Kyle and kept his mind blank. If Marc found out what was coming, his mental control would snap. *And that won’t help us. Daddy’s now on a need-to-know basis.*

Chapter Five
Long Way Down

1

“**S**houldn’t we wait for the others?” Isabel no longer liked the island.

Angela snorted at Isabel’s comment.

Isabel flushed, keeping pace with the quickly hiking leader. She glanced over her shoulder toward the beach, where a small group from the sub was now paddling toward the island to pick them up. Marc and the others were already back on the ship. Angela had waited on the beach to make sure they got back safely, but she’d refused to stay there.

Isabel studied the jungle around them, heaving in air and sweating heavily. *This place sucks.*

“You haven’t seen it in its glory.”

Isabel didn’t argue with Angela. She also didn’t agree. She’d been in love with the island when they first arrived because it was better than the rocky ground of Howland Island. Now, she despised both.

“Pay attention, rookie.” Ray didn’t need to bark. He stayed on Isabel’s heels and kept her moving.

Angela picked up the pace, leading them to the tree where she’d woken. “Spread out. You’re searching for a clear baggie with a stick inside. Do not step on it!”

Her smaller team obeyed, but they weren't sure why she wanted that specific stick.

Angela didn't explain. She couldn't. She was afraid that Nature would hear her and understand Angela might have secured a powerful advantage in that final battle.

Angela's fast sweep said this area was littered with their garbage. "Even in an alternate timestream, we leave trash." She sighed, kneeling to hunt through the muddy debris at the base of the tree.

The others did the same.

Isabel stood to one side and watched over them all. She took her duty seriously. She was upset that she'd been separated from the boss during the fog-brain, but that wasn't her fault. The rest of the time, she'd been solid on this run.

Angela searched in the mud pile—*I hope it's just mud!*—and came up with the baggie she was hunting for. The small section of antler gleamed at her through the dirt. "I found it."

Angela quickly put it in her pocket and wiped her filthy hands on her filthy pants. "I want to check our campsite for anything we've forgotten. We can't just come back for it."

Wade thought about waking up beneath their kits. "How did I get covered with gear?"

Isabel frowned at him. "You said let me have it and they did. I'm surprised you don't have bruises all over your body."

Wade leered at her. “How do you know I don’t?”

Isabel didn’t mind the playful banter. “I peeked. You’re clean.”

Wade chuckled, trying to break the growing tension. Wade didn’t know where it was coming from, but he recognized it. “Watch your six.”

“I’m fine.” Isabel gestured. “Watch *her* six.”

Ray had been paying attention, too. “Why does Isabel remember more than the rest of us?”

“She’s different.” Angela didn’t elaborate. She had other things on her mind.

Isabel frowned again. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait for the rest of the team?”

“No. They have different goals than I do.”

“What?”

Wade took pity on Isabel, who was surprisingly stubborn about following rules. She didn’t think they had enough manpower to protect the boss; Wade respected that. “The men coming over now don’t believe Marc’s report. They need to see it, feel it, for themselves.”

“What if they get hurt or need help?”

Angela increased pace again, working her legs and lungs while giving her mind a break from the panic she was feeling. Sometimes a body needed labor and nothing else.

Isabel opened her mouth.

Wade put a finger to his lips. “Let her work.”

Isabel realized she was distracting the boss. She clamped her lips shut and followed.

Wade jiggled the boy on his back. He was shocked that Angela had let him stay. “Walk for a bit?”

Cody nodded sleepily. Being carried was great, but it made him want to stretch out and snore.

Wade lowered the child to the ground.

Cody quickly went to Angela and took the place as her second bodyguard. Cate had gone with Marc to watch over him.

Ray saw Angela was headed for the cliff; he added the clues in surprise. “How did you get Marc to agree to this experiment?”

Ray sighed when Angela didn’t answer.

Wade filled in the missing piece. “He didn’t know she’s about to do something reckless.”

Ray heard Marc’s shouts start in his mind. He shrugged. “He knows now. Hurry up or he’ll stop you.”

Angela broke into a run.

2

“Open this door!” Marc pounded on the hatch to the bridge again, sending small waves of dust into the air. “Open up!”

“Sorry, can’t hear you over the growling wolf.”

Adrian’s calm refusal infuriated Marc. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“No. Do the job she gave you.”

“Open this door!”

“Go away. We’re all full in here.”

“I’m going to pound your ass for this!”

“Well, it’s good to know our relationship won’t change.”

Marc gawked with his mouth open.

Cate tugged on his arm. “We have to go now, Daddy.”

Marc let Cate pull him toward the ladder to the second level. Angela’s last order had been for him and Cate to check on the kids and stay with them until she returned. Marc hadn’t thought anything about it, but the feeling of Angela about to try something dangerous was loud and clear now. “I won’t be there to help her!”

Cate kept pulling him toward the ladder. “Cody will cover it.”

Marc snorted. “He’s just a little boy.”

Cate didn’t argue.

Marc started down the dusty ladder, aware of the mess and the twitchy people that said they’d gone fog-dead here, too. “You know what’s about to happen.”

Cate descended the ladder behind Marc. “If it works, we can stay here.”

Marc forced out the words. “What if it doesn’t work?”

Cate refused to tell him, but fear came off her in thick waves.

Marc understood. *Angela might die.*

Marc’s fury returned, but he still went to check on the kids. He was done disobeying her orders.

He'd meant that. *If she dies, I'll just snap and kill us all. No big deal.*

Cate shut the bunk room door and locked it. Then she did the same to the other entrance. "No one goes in or out."

Marc suddenly understood what was happening, what Angela was going to try. He thought of his son being over there with her. "She only has one of the three."

"That's why we have to protect the others." Cate brought up her shield and let her orbs glow bright red. "It won't be long."

3

Kenn entered the medical bay. He slid Shawn on an empty cot with a relieved grunt, then went to the door.

When he shut and locked it, Harry's lips thinned. "She sent you to protect me."

Kenn nodded. "She has an idea."

"Yeah, I'll bet she does." Harry began storing the files he was updating. A quick glance at Kenn revealed some of how he'd spent the last two days. "When this is over, you need some sleep."

Kenn winced.

Harry shrugged coolly. "Fog-rest isn't the same. I know."

Kenn felt like he could sleep for a year. *And I might. That's why I'm scared to do it.*

Harry wiped his face, still trying to wake up. He'd come to right here in this chair, wearing just a towel around his waist. His sore legs, arms, lips, and hips said he'd been using them. He also had a satisfied tingle that made him certain of what he'd been doing. He was afraid to leave the medical bay and find out who he might now be coupled with. He had absolutely no memory of the last two days so far, not even blurry flashes.

"I saw a rubber on the floor on the way down here. It was...well used. Maybe you'll get lucky, and it was yours."

Harry grimaced. "I'm not worried about getting someone pregnant."

"Reicher kept the lab clear of diseases, so it can't be that. What's your problem?"

Harry changed the subject. "What happened on the island?"

Kenn glanced around at the dirty medical bay and the even dirtier medical officer. "What happened on this sub?"

"Fog-shit."

Harry's refusal to answer was drawing Kenn's attention, but he had other information he wanted to gather first. "Why did she let the little prince stay ashore?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's safer over there."

Kenn accepted that explanation because it was obvious that Harry really didn't know. All the medic was concerned about was trying to figure out

what he had done under the fog-effect. Kenn tried to offer some comfort. “None of us can be held responsible for what we do when Nature is in control of us.”

Harry glanced over at the unconscious man Kenn had brought in. He’d already read Kenn’s thoughts to discover what had happened. “Does that go for him, too?”

Kenn’s face iced over; his tone cooled. “Absolutely not. Shawn’s time in the fog may have proven that he *is* a predator. Get ready for removal orders to come down on him.”

Harry wasn’t convinced. He’d spent a lot of time with Shawn on their run. They were judging the man prematurely. “Did the boss say that?”

Kenn grunted. “She never openly says stuff like that, but we still know it’s coming. If you had seen her face when we found him, you would know it, too.”

Harry hoped they were wrong. He didn’t waste time trying to find a defense for Shawn, however. It was completely possible that he didn’t have one. *Not to mention I have other things on my mind.*

“Are you going tell me or are you going to force me to dig around in your brain, ’cause I don’t want to. It might be yucky in there.”

Harry was startled into a chuckle. Then he brought up his strongest mental wall. “Leave me alone or you’ll be sorry.”

Kenn was surprised to feel a little intimidated. He left Harry alone. *But I will find out and so will*

everyone else. Safe Haven doesn't keep many secrets and that includes things that happen on runs.

4

Kyle and Zack were on duty outside the mess. They delivered head shakes and dirty looks to the two subjects coming down for another meal.

The worm men were plumping up after steady medication and meals, but their obsession with food hadn't lessened. It was another hard recovery moment that they would have to go through to fight the addiction. Many of their members had tried to find comfort in food, including Zack's son, Timmy. It couldn't be allowed. Besides obesity being so unhealthy, they simply couldn't spare the extra rations every time someone got sad or angry.

"Something big happened while we were gone."

Kyle snorted at Zack's comment. "You think?"

Zack ignored Kyle's snarkiness. All of them were feeling that way right now. "I mean something big. None of them will meet our eyes and this ship is a mess. I smell sex and candy."

Kyle swallowed a crude thought as that old song began playing in his mind. "They had a party for sure, but I counted. We're all here. Adrian wasn't lying."

"I did the same. Everyone's here except for the five people who just paddled over to the island, and the boss's group."

“I understand why Biff, Greg, and even Charlie wanted to go over. Angela’s still on the island and she only has a couple of protectors with her. What was up with Trent and Jayda going?” Kyle was almost offended that he’d been sent back.

Zack didn’t know. “Maybe they needed to get away for a while. I’ve heard this is a hard job. Not that I’ve experienced that, you understand.”

Kyle chuckled. “No. This is the easiest job in the world. We can tell from the mental and physical scars.”

Gus came out into the dusty hallway and scanned the bottom level. He found someone from Angela’s land team guarding every compartment. *She put us under a lockdown. She didn’t call it, but it happened just the same.*

Gus went back up the ladder to stand guard over the bridge with Theo. Angela had been adamant about where they were supposed to be until she returned to the submarine. As always, Gus was thrilled to be given such an important duty, but he was also curious about what had happened while they were gone. The entire ship was full of quiet, shamefaced people, and the sub was dirty. Garbage, bottles, and condoms were all over the place, even in the hallways. *If I didn’t know any better, I would guess they had an orgy.*

Descendants who caught that winced in guilty recollection and quickly walked away before anyone could ask them questions.

Gus wiped his hands down his pants to remove the layer of grit. He didn't know where it was coming from, but he couldn't seem to avoid it.

Gus was glad to be back on the sub for the amenities, but he hated the smells. *We need to clean this ship.*

Theo ignored his partner. He didn't care what anybody had been doing on the sub while they were gone. All he cared about was finding a bottle or can that still had something in it.

Gus looked over. "You're supposed to be charmed."

Theo leaned against the bridge hatch, blowing out a bitter breath. "Yeah."

Gus realized the memory charm had broken. He assumed Angela knew. He wasn't going to interrupt her with that right now, but it was disappointing. It also explained Theo's nasty attitude on the island. "When?"

"Right as we landed. Then the fog hit. It took it away for a couple of days, but it's strong again now." Theo's voice dropped into misery. "I'm not going to be able to hold out."

"Sounds like you want the fog to come back."

Theo nodded eagerly. "I hope it does!"

Gus's big fist swung toward Theo and cracked into his mouth.

Theo slid to the ground with a calm expression on his face. "Thanks..."

Gus rubbed his fist and smiled. "It's my honor."

Adrian's voice rang out through the bridge door.
"That's just great!"

Gus braced to be reprimanded for hurting Theo.
As long as he isn't torturing me, I'll be okay.

"You know this is a closed-in room, right?!"

Gus heard the wolf snort.

Adrian's painfilled voice echoed again. "Damn, Dog. Did something die inside you?"

Gus blanched and stepped away from the door.
Wolf farts were nothing to laugh about.

5

Standing guard outside the dusty theater, Bret listened to a conversation between the caretakers. Angela had told him to cover this post until she returned.

"Not all of us go foggy. I heard that his oldest son didn't." The tattooed mother sipped her weak coffee.

The longhaired mother leaned in. "I heard none of them did, including him."

Tattoo put her cup down. "Is that a connection we can use to get him to go back? Maybe it means something."

Longhair scowled. "I can't believe you want to go back to living in a lab."

"I felt safer there."

"Well, the boy watching over us didn't go fog-crazy either and he's Reicher's demon seed...or Adrian's."

Bret didn't react; he kept listening. He was used to people underestimating him and blaming him for the actions of his family. It didn't matter to him if he was a Reicher or a Mitchel. Both families were incredibly gifted and very cursed.

"We'll mention it to the boss later and claim credit for it if it works. We need to get in good with his wife."

Bret smirked. *I'll mention it to the boss, too, but not the commonality she'll have already figured out after reading the lab files. I saw and heard a lot of things that happened while she was gone. She's going to be very angry.*

Gus was scanning everyone up here. He'd caught most of Bret's thoughts. He matched that last part with Angela's attitude toward Adrian. "What did he do?"

Bret lifted his chin. "I'll tell the alpha when she's ready."

"So it doesn't start more drama between him and Marc? Good boy."

Bret made a face. "They do that on their own. I don't want to be disloyal to the man who might be my father."

Gus considered that. Another Mitchel may have joined them.

He smiled at the boy. *Better a Mitchel than a Reicher.*

Bret refused to answer.

“I’m going to slow time.” Angela didn’t wait for her small team to protest. “This is the only big experiment we haven’t tried yet.”

“You should have left me on the sub in case there’s trouble.” Ray didn’t have any faith in Adrian’s ability to handle that job. “It caused a rogue wave last time.”

Isabel shifted closer to Angela, but she didn’t know how to help. Isabel’s job in the lab hadn’t involved anything with the time pushers, other than birthing them and then caring for them.

Angela gathered a few items from the burnt out campsite and then went to the cliff edge. She wanted to be able to see the submarine while this was happening. There was no longer a guard monitoring the ocean around them and it felt like it was already late afternoon even though it wasn’t possible for that much time to have gone by since they woke up. “Limbo doesn’t keep the same clock as reality.”

She wasn’t sure how she knew that, but she was certain of it. That would make it harder to predict their fog-drench moments.

The team kept pace with her and swallowed protests. She was going to do it whether they agreed or not.

They were also secretly relieved and hoping that she would be successful. Many of Angela’s plans had sounded crazy and then worked out perfectly. They needed this to be another of those miraculous moments.

Cody hung at the rear of the group, almost forgotten by the adults now.

Angela stopped near the edge of the cliff and took in a deep breath to calm herself. She was emotional right now. *We can all thank Adrian for that.*

She could imagine how Marc would twist this into another drama moment once he found out, but she couldn't help the anger in her heart. It didn't matter that Adrian had been under the effects of the fog-fuck. *I kept my honor. Why couldn't he?*

Ray caught that and mentally groaned. He wasn't sure what Adrian had done, but he had little doubt it was bad. He was suddenly looking forward to hearing about it later and watching Marc beat on him for it.

Angela swallowed her upset stomach and her nasty attitude. She entered the timestream gently and then brutally shoved against it, lifting her shield.

Time immediately began to slow around them; the trees shuddered and the bird calls became distorted. It grew harder to breathe even though there had been a steady breeze as they reached the top of this cliff. All of them observed in amazement, especially Isabel, who hadn't known this was possible without the blood of founding family children.

Ray wanted to explain that they could only go so far without having all the necessary requirements to perform a reset spell, but he kept his attention on

Angela instead. He was worried about the story of pushers dying in the middle of the process without an explanation.

Wade had found out Gus killed Valerie in that moment, but he also kept his attention on the boss instead of setting that straight. They could discuss the overlooked details later. Right now, Angela was using an enormous amount of energy and concentration to slow time. Anything could go wrong here.

Ray zipped his jacket against the sudden chill in the air. *Something's about to happen.*

Danger zeroed in on the group and took aim at Angela.

Cody ran by the stopped team.

A long, thick shadow flew out of the jungle.

Cody didn't have time to cast a spell or call a warning. He shoved Angela as hard as he could, sending her over the edge of the cliff.

Her long black hair came loose as she fell, fanning out around her like a superhero cape that didn't work.

Cody bounced off and slid into the dirt at Isabel's feet.

The pointed tree branch sailed out into the open air instead of impaling Angela.

Time snapped back into place with the loud pop they had anticipated.

The ground shook. A thick splash echoed from below and was lost in the tremor.

For an instant, no one moved.

Then the team flew to the edge to see if Angela had survived the fall. Hands went to radios, while minds shouted for help.

Cody stayed on the ground, heaving in deep breaths. “I hope she wasn’t afraid of heights. That was a long way down.”

Chapter Six
Unprotected

1

“**H**elp her! You have a deal in place with us!”

The ocean didn't respond.

Greg slapped the water next to the RIB, mentally cursing Angela, Marc, Adrian, and Nature. “Go faster!”

Trent, Jayda, and Biff paddled harder, but the ocean was a formidable obstacle. It seemed like a long time to reach the spot where Angela had gone under. She'd hit the water at an odd angle. Greg believed she'd been knocked out, at the very least.

As soon as they were close enough, Greg dove into the ocean. He only had one good eye now, but it was locked onto the blurry form he hoped was Angela.

Biff would have followed Greg in, but he had the job of controlling the boat during the rescue. Angela hadn't told them who they were going to be saving. They were all upset that she was in danger again.

Jayda stayed ready to help Greg get Angela into the boat. She had been asked to help because she had been one of the few who were alert enough to

do the job. She assumed the same was true of Trent, who was manning the other oar.

Greg surfaced near the RIB with Angela's body on his back, spraying saltwater. He gasped in air and held onto the side as Jayda and Trent carefully pulled Angela into the boat. "She has a life jacket on." It had been bringing her body up as he went down, making it easier.

That told the rescuers she had known she was going to be a target. Greg and Biff were angry with her for putting herself at risk. Trent and Jayda admired her courage. They were feeling light on that right now. It was good for them to have an in-their-face example.

"She's breathing." Trent covered Angela with the emergency blankets they had brought along. "Get us to the medic."

Jayda gave Greg an arm into the boat while Trent and Biff started paddling toward the sub. They needed to get Angela to the medics to make sure she was okay, but they also needed to get off the ocean. It was clear that Angela's deal with the water King wasn't valid anymore. It also confirmed that Marc's deal with Nature for the island wasn't applicable either.

"She killed a lot of birds with that flight."

Greg frowned at Biff's wording, but he couldn't argue the point. Knowing they were unprotected was important information to have. It was also frustrating. They had gone through hell to clear the island and Angela gone through hell to reach the

ocean and make that deal. None of them were happy about the change.

Greg took the oar from Trent and began to paddle against the ocean. The tide was coming in. It didn't want to let them get back to the submarine.

Biff and Jayda both used their strong arms to help, while Trent kept Angela covered and murmured comfort in case she was able to hear them. She was breathing, but unresponsive.

He glanced at the top of the cliff, curious about what had happened. They'd seen the tree branch come flying over the edge after Angela's body. He assumed Nature had attacked them again, but he wasn't positive. *It almost looked like someone pushed her off the edge.*

Greg nodded. "Cody. The kid saved her life."

2

On top of the cliff, Ray and the others cheered in relief as Angela was rescued. They were all stunned by how fast things had happened. It felt wrong to be without her now, and dangerous. The feeling of being watched was strong.

Ray gestured. "We need to get to the beach. As soon as they drop her off on the sub, they can come back for us."

Cody slowly pushed onto his feet. "We have to see if it worked first."

Everyone scowled at the boy or shook their heads.

“We have to check on the boss.”

“We want you back on the sub right now!”

Cody refused without showing any fear or using his magic. He imitated Angela’s firm voice. “We have to get the results of the experiment before we leave; otherwise, she did it for nothing.”

Cody calmly walked toward the path that would take him to the town.

Still stunned, Ray and Wade followed the boy.

Isabel brought up the rear and continued to listen to everything that was said.

“Does anyone know why she set it up for Cody to do that instead of one of us?” Wade didn’t have enough information. He was suddenly curious how close Cody and Angela had become since the boy’s mother brought him to Safe Haven.

Ray gestured bitterly. “She didn’t trust us with it.”

Cody quickly denied that. “If one of you had known what was going to happen, you would have taken her place. She knew I would follow her orders.”

“So it *is* a trust issue. Interesting.” Isabel walked backward for a few steps to verify their six was clear.

Wade and Ray glared at her, but there was no denying the truth. Angela had trusted Cody more than her team.

Cody tried to make them understand. “The alpha likes twofers, right?”

Wade nodded. Angela was famous for them.

“She got a lot out of this moment. If someone else had been given my chore, it wouldn’t have worked out the way she needed to.”

Ray wanted to believe that. “Give us a rundown of what she accomplished and maybe we can agree with you, kid.”

Cody didn’t think Angela would mind now that the main moment was over. “We found out the deals for the island and the ocean don’t stand here in limbo. We found out Nature is specifically hunting the alpha. She could have aimed for any of us and probably gotten in a hit, but she didn’t. She wants Angela the most.” Cody smiled, proud of himself. “We also found out I can be dependable in an emergency. I needed the practice.”

Ray was horrified. “She picked you because you need the action?!”

Wade felt relief. He had been wondering how Angela planned to set it up for such a young child to lead them. After seeing Cody in action, he was feeling better about that. “But it’s still not a good reason. She could have trusted us with it.”

“If she had told you, you would have interfered. And even if you didn’t, Nature would have heard and then the alpha might have been killed. Angela only keeps secrets when it matters. This time, it mattered.” As far as Cody was concerned, the moment was over and so was the conversation. He led them toward the town with his chin up and a stride that unknowingly matched his father’s.

Ray and Wade were forced to accept that explanation. They both kept track of Cody, viewing him in a different light now. They'd known the child was special, and most of them had heard about Angela's idea to put Cody in leadership at some point, but neither of them had put much faith in it. Angela had gone through heirs like some people went through underwear. Deep down, neither male had really believed she planned to relinquish control to anyone. Watching Cody march calmly through the jungle after saving her life made them change their opinion.

"That little boy's going to take her place."

Ray nodded. "She's out of her mind." He added a concession because of Cody's behavior. "Or maybe it's absolutely magnificent. I'll get back to you on that."

Wade chuckled. He took it to the next level. "He'll need a lot of training and help if he's going to do her job."

"Agreed. Let me know if you need a hand with that."

Wade remembered that he was now working with Cody as a mentor; he quickly ran through all of the things he was good at, trying to figure out why Angela had sent the boy to him first.

"Maybe it's your ability to deal with the opposite sex so well." Ray hadn't forgotten that Amy had beaten Cody up the night of the island matches.

“Maybe.” Wade wasn’t sure. It felt like he was forgetting something obvious.

Isabel gave them the answer with a small smirk. She was surprised neither of the intelligent men had figured it out. “She put the boy with you because of your honor. He can’t get that lesson from his dad. Marc wants one thing and he’ll never get it. No matter how much we want to, we can’t bring the dead back. Even in limbo, he can’t have what he wants the most.”

No one knew what to say to that, mostly because it was true.

Cody took out a small notebook. “I have a list of things to accomplish. By the time I’m done, the RIB should be back for us. It won’t take me very long.”

Ray and Wade were instantly reminded of Angela. They were curious what was on the boy’s list.

“I don’t think the alpha wants some of the others to know about this.”

“It’s not always a trust issue with the Eagles,” Ray informed the boy. “Sometimes it’s a lack of manpower. Some of the people who went back are completely trustworthy, like Kyle.”

Cody nodded solemnly. “So noted.”

It was impressive the way he took the correction. Wade asked the next question. “What does she have you doing?”

“We’re going to bury something, draw something, and try some stuff. The alpha wants to

know if these things will be here when we finally make it back to our own timestream.”

Isabel had spotted something on their first day here. “They didn’t notice the smoke from our campfire.”

“It’s possible that they didn’t detect it because of the way Eagles control a campsite.” Wade had automatically built a fire that wouldn’t produce as much smoke or light. It was an Eagle rule.

Cody consulted his list again. “The alpha said one of you have a cigar. Now is a good time to fire it up.”

Isabel removed the cigar and lighter from her pocket, aware of the surprise of the men. “I took this from the lab while we were on the way out. Reicher didn’t allow smoking, but he did store smoking products to use for barter with the outside world.” She quickly fired up the cigar and began inhaling.

The men smirked at her cough and then stopped laughing at her when she mastered the next draw without that reaction. She was a fast learner.

Cody led them into the town and over to the frame of the den that was being worked on again. He took a marker from his notebook and began to draw on the wooden frame, where it would be obvious but protected from the weather.

Cody was here.

Isabel snickered. “That’s funny.”

Cody checked that off his list. “Blow smoke in someone’s face.”

Isabel stepped forward and exhaled thick cigar smoke right in front of Daryl.

Daryl walked through the cloud without reacting at all.

Cody marked that off his list. “Turn your radios up all the way.”

All the adults did it, wincing at the national anthem blaring over the waves.

Wade even held his radio out so that Daryl had to walk right by it.

“No reaction at all.” Cody wrote it down.

Isabel gestured. “He just went by the frame. There’s no way he missed your note. He can’t see it.”

Cody also wrote that in his book. Then he stilled to listen to the conversation.

The others assumed he was trying to verify if Safe Haven had felt the time push.

“It was only a small tremor. The frame should be fine, but we’re going to go around and verify that before we do any more work.” Daryl led the small work crew into the center of the family den they were building. “Go around each corner and check for cracks or loose beams. If you find one, call me over and we’ll fix it.”

Cody wrote something in his book.

Wade glanced over his little shoulder to read it.
The time push affects all realities.

Wade agreed with that, but he didn't comment as Cody continued to the next thing on his list.

“Bury something along the walkway where it won't be covered by a building or debris.”

Wade quickly pulled out an old knife that he'd brought along as a throwaway. He used it to dig a hole next to the frame of the den and then buried it.

Cody copied the location of the knife and the note that he had written. “We need to make marks on some of the trees around here.”

Ray took care of that one, using his favorite blade to carve letters into several of the trees that lined the town. It was Grant's name.

Cody made a record of it that, including which tree and what had been carved on it.

Isabel puffed on her cigar and enjoyed being allowed to smoke.

Cody looked over at her. “Put it out now. I don't like the smell.”

Isabel immediately obeyed.

Ray and Wade stared. Identical thoughts passed through their minds.

He's our team leader and he's already good at it.

Cody stepped toward one of the trees and quickly plucked off a small branch with a lot of leaves. He marched toward Daryl and held it up, observing.

The adults watched him curiously, not sure what he was trying to prove or disprove with this experiment.

A breeze came through the town, moving all of the leaves on the branch in Cody's hand. The breeze traveled on and rustled Daryl's hair.

Cody dropped the branch and then made a note about it in his book. "The weather is the same in both realities."

The adults waited eagerly this time for his next experiment. It was obvious that Cody was right. Angela wouldn't want everyone to know the results of these experiments.

Cody stored his book and marker, then pointed at a very old hatch near the center of the town.

In their reality, that hatch didn't exist. Wade believed it had been removed long before Safe Haven's arrival. He went over and quickly pried it up.

Pitch black darkness greeted him. The smell of old dirt filled his nose.

Fear ran over Wade's spine. *Clearing these tunnels was awful. None of us should have survived it.*

Cody placed a hand on Wade's wrist. "She said we don't have to go down there. If you think it's the same, that's good enough."

Wade was unable to hide the relief in his tone. "It's the same. These tunnels haven't been cleared. If we go down there without Marc, we won't come back up."

Cody pushed the wood out of Wade's grip, shutting the tunnel. "That's everything on my list."

Let's get back to the beach and catch a RIB out of here."

All of them fell in behind the confident boy.

Wade and Ray exchanged glances.

"He just completed his first run."

Cody didn't tell them it wasn't his first run. He didn't want to talk about the things his mother had made him do before they'd joined Safe Haven. This small adventure could hardly compare to the death and destruction he'd been forced to hand out to people who didn't deserve it. *My life is so much better now. And I want it back! Cheating like this is a coward's tactic. I never thought Nature was a chicken.*

Wade and Ray tensed as they caught that, expecting Nature to retaliate against the child.

Cody was still following the notes in his book by trying to goad her into showing up, but he was glad it hadn't worked. *I can't handle her alone. If she shows up, I'll fail this run.*

Isabel brought up the rear and tried to keep an eye out for danger, but her mind continued to replay Angela being knocked off the cliff. *I hope I'm brave enough to do something like that someday. She's an inspiration to all of us.*

"She's injured, I think." Cody was keeping track of all their thoughts, along with the environment. "We're unprotected now, in every way."

It only took them a few minutes to get to the beach. It was a relief to find Kyle, Jayda, and Trent paddling the RIB to the beach to pick them up. They were almost here.

“I’m one minute early.” Cody stored that in his notebook with a few other observations about this short run.

As the boat was dragged onto the beach and Kyle came over to get Cody, ignoring everyone else, another realization set in for Wade.

Kyle lifted Cody into the boat first, and then motioned to everyone else. “Boss is in the med bay. Let’s go.”

Wade and Ray pushed the boat back out into the surf while Isabel climbed in. A few seconds later, they were underway.

Wade focused on Kyle. “You’re not telling us something.”

Kyle rowed harder. “I was told to wait for the right time.”

Wade was almost positive he already knew what it was. He was willing to wait for confirmation, but he was still amazed. *Cody’s run isn’t over.*

3

“It’s been over an hour! Update us!” Marc was standing in the doorway of the bunkroom with his big arms crossed over his chest. He was blocking the entrance closest to the medical bay.

Harry frowned at Marc's shout. Marc had helped them bring Angela's body to the medical bay. Harry had then kicked him and everyone else out so he could examine her. "She's fine as far as I can tell. She has a few new bruises, but that's it. The baby's heartbeat is strong and so is hers. Stop panicking."

A cheer went through the ship. Most of the people on the dusty submarine were relieved to hear that. It had been a tense wait.

"Then why isn't she waking up?"

Harry had been hoping Marc wouldn't ask that yet. "I don't know." He hated to give that answer.

Despite all of the evolutions and power that Harry had at his fingertips, there was no way to know what was going on with Angela's body. They needed to wait and see what happened.

"We can't do that." Wade was on duty outside the mess now. "We have to figure out what to do. We've estimated that we'll only have a few days before the next fog-attack. The boss wouldn't want us to stay here and just wait for her to wake up."

People began calling out orders and instructions, plans and ideas, blurring it all together in a jumbled mess that no one knew how to respond to. In a moment like this, Angela had always directed them, or their team leaders had assigned everyone to something. That wasn't happening now.

Kenn came out of the bathroom and delivered an ugly glare in several directions.

The shouting people fell silent.

Kenn stayed in the hall instead of getting a shower like he'd planned.

"Theo locked himself back in the brig." Kyle was on continuous rounds of the submarine. He peered into the medical bay for a fast check.

Thomas moped on the dusty cot near the medical desk. He had come in for a checkup. Harry had handled it and then told him to stay here so he would be off his feet for a couple hours. He wasn't allowed to leave yet. He'd spent too much time on his legs, causing them both to swell in places. The medic had done a great job on his shark bites, but only time could heal him the rest of the way.

Shawn was in the cot next to Thomas. He was still unconscious, but Harry was attributing that to the bruises on Shawn's face. He believed Shawn and Angela would wake when their bodies were ready to handle reality again. "I thought Theo was dry."

"The memory charm broke while we were on the island." Kyle moved on.

Harry wasn't surprised that the memory charm hadn't held. He also didn't want to think about anything that had happened during the fog-fade yet. He finished making notes in the file and then went into the isolation room to check on Angela. He didn't believe she was in a coma, and it didn't feel as dangerous as the death sleep she had gone through before, but he really didn't understand why she wasn't waking up yet.

Isabel was on duty in the hallway outside the medical bay. She listened to the conversations nervously. She didn't like it that Angela wasn't waking up, but she also didn't have a command structure. If anything went wrong, the woman didn't know who to turn to for orders or help.

Cody hadn't been seen since they paddled him back to the sub. Isabel instinctively knew he was being protected in the cubby. *And if it's not safe for him to be roaming the ship, then the alpha isn't safe here, either.* Isabel stayed close to the entrance of the medical bay in case something went wrong.

Thomas rubbed his sore knee, trying to get the swelling to go down faster. "What are we gonna do?"

Harry straightened his white coat. "It's time for us to go chase a cloud." He'd heard the gossip from the landing party; everyone had. Only some of them believed it, though.

Wade frowned from the doorway of the mess. "The boss didn't give us orders to go anywhere."

"She also didn't give us orders to stay here, right?" Harry knew she hadn't or they would have already felt Ray sail them into the cove to wait.

"The boss will make the choice." Kyle paused and keyed his radio. "What do you want us to do now?"

Cody's voice immediately came back on the radio. "Set the autopilot to take us back where we came from."

“I’m on it.” Adrian was still on the bridge. He had no problem with following that order. Like the others, he knew they needed to go before the next fog-ripple.

Wade chuckled at the proof of his thoughts. He wasn’t amused, however. *What have you done to us, Boss?*

“He’s a little boy. Very funny.” Thomas was sure it was a bad joke.

Erin came out of the shower compartment with dripping hair and a deep scowl. “He can’t tell us what to do!”

Harry got loud so he would be heard. “Somebody ask Marc!”

Marc keyed his radio. “Angela gave Adrian and Greg point when we first arrived. I think they should keep it.”

Marc didn’t want leadership and he had no idea why Cody was giving instructions over the radio, but most of it didn’t matter anyway. He was only worried about Angela and the ghost in his head that wouldn’t quit haunting him.

Adrian’s voice came over the intercom again. “I was told to follow orders.”

“Exactly. Marc’s orders.” Kenn didn’t want Adrian in charge of this moment so he couldn’t be blamed if anything went wrong. Adrian was already in some kind of trouble with the boss. He didn’t need to make it worse.

Kyle didn’t back down. “Marc was *not* put in charge.”

Kenn pointed. “That doesn’t matter. We all know she’ll make up with him and put him back into leadership as soon as we get home. Might as well let him have it now.”

Adrian’s voice was firm over the radio this time. “I’m not doing that. We have orders. You’re not listening.”

“The boss made a call.” Kyle ignored all the protests as he opened his notebook and held it out toward Marc. “Angela gave me one order before we split up at the beach.”

Marc read it.

Cody is in charge. Make sure his orders are followed, any way you have to.

Marc met Kyle’s eyes in horror. “This is a joke, right?”

Kyle shook his head as he stored his worn notebook. “Angela is down, the fog will be back soon, and her untrained heir is in charge of us all. I see absolutely nothing funny about this.”

Chapter Seven
The New Boss

1

I'm free! I'm free! Dog flew down the ladder to the second level. *You'll never catch me!*

People jumped out of the way as the wolf barreled through the hall and slid by the bunk room. He forced a narrow turn into the medical bay entrance, hitting the frame and using his nails to catch himself on the slippery tile. *Ha-ha!*

Dog flew straight to Marc and jumped up on him. *I'm free!*

Marc rubbed the wolf while waiting for Greg to attach the heart monitor to Angela. Harry was giving them all hands-on lessons whenever things were calm enough for it. "Is he out?"

Dog snorted in contempt. *No. I even gassed him. He's not coming out of there.*

Marc let it go for now. Adrian would have to come out of the bridge at some point.

Greg retreated from Angela's body. He didn't want Adrian to be able to skip out on Marc's anger. He also wanted Marc's anger to have a clear target. He keyed his radio. "Come on out of there, Adrian. There's work waiting for all of us."

Adrian chuckled over the radio. “I take orders from the boss.”

Everyone stilled to hear what Cody’s response would be; they were curious if he knew how to handle things.

“The lockdown is over. Adrian will sleep in Ray’s cot, then take the next shift sailing the submarine. Shawn will take a turn tomorrow.”

“No, he won’t.” Isabel wasn’t going to allow that. “He’s a criminal!”

Cody’s voice came right back over the radio. “My order stands. I’m in the therapy cubby, working on schedules if anyone needs me.”

The little boy sounded exactly like Angela.

Each of the mission men rubbed the wolf lightly as Dog came around for their daily interaction. Their fears were quickly being conquered on that front and the wolf was the reason why. All of them were grateful. Their love for Dog was shown in scraps fed to him from pockets, an extra ear rub, smiles, and praise.

Kyle keyed his mike. “Any orders for us?”

“I’m thrilled that you asked.” Cody was ready for this. “Put the parasite subjects in the brig for food theft. Keep them in there until they’re back on a healthy eating schedule. Charlie can man the medical bay while the other medics take a break, shower, then sleep. Isabel will keep duty over the alpha for this shift. Next shift over her will be Marc and Greg. Move her to the bunk room where she’s

surrounded by the people who love her. Do it right now.”

There was silence for a few seconds and then people got to work as they realized things would be better covered that way. Everyone assumed Angela had left notes for Cody and felt relief.

Except for Marc. He refused to stress over it at all. *I'm going with the flow.*

“She’s safer in this isolation room.” Greg hated the idea of Angela being in the bunks with everyone else. Now that Harry was letting them in here, Greg had planned to put out his sleeping bag in front of the isolation entrance.

“Follow orders.” Harry began gathering the equipment they used last time in the bunk room. “We should leave that corner of the bunk room set up as an extra medical bay.”

Marc’s tone was perfectly even. “Talk to the boss about it.”

Harry frowned but didn’t comment further. He was too wrapped up in his own mind to handle anyone else’s mental issues. *I think there was five of them.* He was finally getting flashes of what he’d been doing.

Marc rolled his eyes at Harry’s foggy recollections of an orgy. He helped the medic gather supplies and clear a path while Greg lifted Angela back into his strong arms.

Marc watched how carefully Greg handled her, seeing the man had his emotions held in tight control. *He’s ready to pop.*

Greg glared, but didn't open his mouth to spew the *I told you so* he felt they all deserved. As long as Angela was in charge, she was going to keep getting hurt. Greg didn't think he could handle it even one more time.

Marc agreed completely. *Neither of us will be able to stay with her.*

Marc's mind went to the man on the bridge and then flinched away. It wasn't fair that Adrian would get to stay with her because he didn't care if she endangered her life.

Adrian was keeping track of Marc. *That's not true. I care deeply.*

Marc grunted. *You don't show it.*

I show it a lot. You just don't believe me.

No, I don't. I believe you've faked so much of your life that you don't know the truth anymore.

Adrian sighed. *No, that's you, Marc. Don't project your weaknesses onto me.*

Adrian withdrew from Marc's mind and settled on the cot behind Ray for his break. He knew Marc and Greg were furious that Angela had gone off on another plan without telling them. It wasn't a good time to be out there. *Cody doesn't need that drama during his first run.*

In the therapy cubby, Cody's lips tightened. *It's not my first run!*

He hated being underestimated. *But I can't talk to them about my mom. They don't understand how*

torn up we are over what she did to us. Only the alpha understands.

Cate nodded. She was standing near the door, watching as the caretakers led the two worm subjects out of the theater. Their sweatpants and shirts were dotted in food stains, proving the accusation. The five women escorted the unresisting subjects to the brig.

In the rear of the theater, Mel stroked the purring cat in her lap and continued to enjoy the film. *I don't know who I am, but I don't care. Movies are great!*

Everyone else took quick glances into the cubby at Cody. They were astonished that Angela had put a child in charge. Many of them were sure it was a gag. Some of them wondered if they could take advantage of it.

Cate glowered with red orbs.

People moved on quickly, not wanting to draw her ire.

“You need another guard up here.”

Cody concentrated. Then he smiled. “Done. Anything else?”

“Just for the alpha to wake soon.” Cate didn’t want to go through more fog without Angela.

Neither did Cody. “But she gave me a job and I’m going to do it well.”

Cate smiled at him over her shoulder. “Congratulations.”

Cody didn’t accept the praise. “It’s not over yet.”

“When things settle down, I want you to do a round of the sub.”

Greg caught the tone. He stepped closer to Marc while Harry covered Angela and reattached the monitors to her chest and arms. “What am I looking for?”

Marc didn’t lower his voice. He wanted people to know. “I need a complete report of everything that happened here while we were gone, for the alpha.”

Harry finished what he was doing quickly, then left the bunk room. His mind was full of Morgan’s information-hiding mental spiders.

Greg had been wondering that as well, though he’d been here the entire time. “I’ll give you *my* full now.”

Marc sat in a chair near Angela’s bed. “I already read yours. You’re one of the few who aren’t trying to block me with spiders, walls, or Neil’s damn clouds.”

That didn’t make Greg feel better. He adjusted his eye patch and forced away the bitterness about why he needed it. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to keep things under control while you guys were gone. It went crazy, fast.”

As a senior Eagle, it was a huge disappointment to Greg that he didn’t seem to have any resistance

to the fog. He'd spent the entire time in his bunk, dimension hunting.

Marc waved him off. "I doubt she's going to hold people accountable for what happened during the fog-bush."

Greg snickered. "We're all calling it something different. I wonder what the boss chose."

Marc couldn't help a slightly bitter tone this time. "He's in the therapy cubby. You should ask him when you stop by there."

Greg caught the unspoken order and gave Marc a nod. He wanted to know how much Cody had been aware of before this run, too. Greg hoped it wasn't a lot. Cody didn't need Marc blowing up at him like he was always doing with Adrian when something didn't go his way.

"You think you won't do the same thing in my place. Funny."

Greg gave him a cool glare. "I never said I wouldn't. I'm just tired of *your* moments."

Greg left the bunk room before that could trigger an argument. He and Marc would have a sit down at some point and Greg was certain it wouldn't be much longer now, but it wasn't time for that today. The halls were full of people, some of whom were following Cody's orders; others were allowing bad thoughts to take the lead in their minds.

We need to get another guard on him. Even if he's only following a list of instructions, he is the boss right now. He needs to be treated like it so

Angela will be pleased when she wakes up. Greg went up the ladder to the first level, aware of the worried people who had been listening to their conversation and now wanted to know if they were on Marc's shit list or about to be there.

Greg didn't offer comfort to any of them. *If you're on Marc's bad side, there's probably a good reason for it. I know.*

3

"There's probably a good reason for it. She wouldn't put a little kid in charge unless she was getting something important out of it. Or unless there's no danger to worry about, so it's okay for him to practice his future career."

"I'm not following a damn kid. This isn't right."

"It's interesting. We wondered what type of gifts Marc's son has. This might give us that information."

"Yeah, but we were talking about the older one, not the pup."

"He does have a lot of kids on this ship."

"Exactly. It's hard enough to keep track of descendant children anyway, let alone this many. It may not feel like it, but we're in danger."

"Because we're normal."

"Yes. Thankfully there weren't any deaths while everybody was zoned out, but there could have been. No one was in control during that time. All the magic users wanted to do was party. Did you

notice what our kind was covering even when their minds weren't alert?"

"Yes. I found several kits of stolen items. I've been unpacking them and putting them back each time. Our kind only worried about survival."

"And so we should. All of the normals in Safe Haven are settling in and allowing Angela to take over everything without including them. There were only a couple of normals on the Council before. The day we left, Ralph was removed from that Council. We don't have enough representation to make sure the new laws will protect us from them."

"Lisa said Ralph resigned from the Council."

"He had to. He broke the rule about not telling anyone he was on it, but that's a crazy rule anyway. Everyone knows you can't keep a secret in Safe Haven."

Kyle cleared his throat, drawing attention from the two women who were whispering at a table in the far corner of the mess. "Yes, everyone knows that and yet here you are openly conspiring and assuming no one is listening."

Kyle took out his notebook and began writing things down. It wasn't their names or anything concerning the conversation. He was making notes about condensation on one of the pipes in the mess ceiling. He didn't think it was supposed to be that way.

The two women didn't know what he was writing. They instantly began defending themselves—one with promises of never betraying

Angela and the other with threats to tell the alpha they were being harassed. Lisa had filled their ears with stories and warnings.

Kyle continued to write in his book as they sputtered out excuses and drew the attention of other people in the mess. While they were gone, one of the other rescued refugees had attempted to get into the bridge by prying at the hatch with a crowbar while everyone was distracted. The caretakers had heard the noise and came from the theater where they now spent their nights. There hadn't been as much mess this time, but it had still been bad. It also hadn't been enough to discourage the others. These two women had also been rescued from the lab, but they weren't grateful for it. They were scared.

Kyle left the galley and stopped at the medical bay. Greg had already done rounds of the sub in the last hour, but Kyle had gotten the sense that it needed to be done again. The conversation between the two possible traitors had drawn him right away.

Unlike the tension in the mess, the medical bay was perfectly calm. *That's because the patients in here are unconscious or sleeping.*

Thomas had finally given in to the comfortable bed and crashed. Shawn hadn't woken yet from being knocked out on the island. His injuries had been treated and bandaged, but that was it. He hadn't even been covered up.

Kyle went in and took care of that. Until Shawn was found guilty of a crime, he was still an Eagle and he deserved to be treated like one.

Kyle flipped off the light in the medical bay. He stepped back out into the hall and found Jayda standing there. Kyle grinned at her and then moved on. Jayda was an excellent Eagle, as long as there was no fire involved. It was a relief to have her along.

Jayda enjoyed having her gifts back, but catching Kyle's thought reminded her of how crazy things had gotten on the sub while Angela was gone. *I can't believe I did that.*

Jayda scanned the medical bay and then went down the hall. She was on guard duty, but not much was happening. The medics were finishing their showers and Angela hadn't woken yet. Everyone else was settling in for the ride and waiting for news. It was fairly common in Safe Haven for them to be in the middle of one of these moments and Angela was often involved. As their leader, she was supposed to be on the front lines and she was.

Jayda's thoughts went to the little boy in the therapy cubby and bounced away. She couldn't imagine him being on the front lines, even though he already had been during his time in their camp. She assumed he had already gone through a lot before he joined them. Jayda wasn't going to ask. She was going to follow his orders, however, as long as they made sense. Like the others, she assumed Angela had left the boy a list of things to do and cover. As long as that's all it was, it was fine. *It's not like we have anything else to do until we find that cloud.*

Jayda swallowed her bitterness and her embarrassment as Biff and Trent came down the ladder and headed for the shower. *I can't believe I did that.*

Jayda's body lit up she caught a whiff of Biff's cologne. *Sexy.*

Biff grinned. *Right back at ya!*

Trent chuckled. "Later, guys. There's work waiting."

4

Kyle continued his rounds as the sense of betrayal faded but the feeling of danger didn't. He could feel the restlessness and displeasure of everyone on board. They were all tired of the constant fight for survival, but they didn't know what to do about it. They were constantly being shoved into situations with no control. Some of the Eagles blamed Angela for it. Kyle blamed fate and the grand plan they were all bound to against their will.

Kyle went to the bridge. Before he could knock, Ray's annoyed voice came through.

"Everything's fine in here. Radar's clear."

Kyle understood how Ray felt. Being on that island with their loved ones but not being able to have the reunion they needed was awful. Not knowing when they were going to get that moment was even worse.

Kyle had faith that they would come through this. Everything he had heard so far implied Angela had known this was coming. As long as that was true, she would have made plans to cover them for it.

Many of the Eagles were getting fed up with being an unknowing pawn in her schemes, but fate wasn't giving them another option. Kyle was bitter about it, too, but not toward their leaders, past or present. He didn't understand why they were the only group being targeted. He assumed it was because they were the only ones left with any strength to fight back. *We really might be the final shield against evil.*

Kyle scanned the cubby at the end of the hallway and found a pair of bright blue eyes observing everyone on this level.

Kyle joined Kenn without glancing inside at the busy little boy. There was always a lot of paperwork involved in running their camp, even when it was as small as this one. "It's good that you've changed so much that you can be trusted to watch over Marc's son."

Kenn frowned. "I'm on duty over his daughter."

Kyle had thought Cate was on duty over Cody. "Whose order was that?"

"Cate requested me."

"Why you?"

"I make her feel safe." Kenn was proud of being called.

"That's so odd."

Kenn nodded. “Yep.”

“No, I mean that you answered her.”

“The boss asked. He gave her what she wanted.”

Kyle understood Kenn was willing to follow Cody’s leadership, too. “Because Angela left him instructions?”

Kenn took up a post inside the cubby this time. “No. Because it’s Marc’s kid. I’ve always been on team Brady.”

Kyle laughed. That clearly wasn’t true.

Cate balled her fists against her hips. “Stop being mean to my friend.”

Kyle kept chuckling. Inside, he delivered a firm warning. *Don’t ever disappoint that kid, Kenn. She’ll fry you alive without a second thought.*

Kenn knew that was true.

“Is she in danger?”

Kenn stepped into the small cubby and quickly grabbed the scissors on the table. The submarine shuddered as it hit a rough wave. Items flew off the table and smacked into the little girl.

Kenn kept the scissors, storing them in his pocket.

That answers that question. Kyle wasn’t sure why Cate was a target now, but her brother wasn’t. “What’s going on with her?”

“I think she has something Nature wants.”

“What?”

Kenn shrugged. “Angela didn’t tell me that. She just said to keep the kid alive while she took a nap.”

Kyle snorted. He scanned the room thoroughly this time, nodded at Cody, and then moved down the hallway. He would find out what was going on later. He was no longer a rookie who had to know everything right as it was happening. He was also no longer a senior man trying to keep his position by making sure he had every piece of available information. Kyle was safely above both of those now. He was calm, rational, and quick to react appropriately, as long as his family wasn't involved. *Then I'm just a man fighting for his heart.*

Kenn sent Kyle a thought. *I know how to get Adrian out of the bridge.*

Kyle sniggered. "I'm in, just do it later so he's rested enough to take Ray's place after Marc beats his ass." Kyle was still pissed that Adrian had hit him with the electric baton and forced him to let the kids heal his cracks. *But it bothers me even more that I know that pain now. I didn't need even more sympathy for the mission men. I don't have room for it.*

"Why do you think I'm waiting?"

Kyle headed for the ladder, feeling a descendant trying to reconnect to the hive. "Shawn's waking up."

Kenn's cool voice echoed down the hall. "The boss said to leave him alone."

Kyle kept walking.

Kenn glanced at Cody.

Cody denied him. "Kyle will follow my orders. It's the others who might not."

“Most of the men on this ship will adjust.”

Cody whispered now. “It’s not the men I have to worry about!”

Kenn thought of the future waiting for him at Angela’s hand. He sighed deeply. “Same.”

Wade came up the ladder and took the post in the hallway outside the cubby.

Kyle immediately felt better. He headed for the medical bay, hoping he didn’t have to put a friend down. *Don’t be bad anymore, Shawn. Don’t make me kill you.*

5

“I think Wade tried to kill me.” Shawn smiled to show he was joking.

Harry checked Shawn’s vitals and was happy to find they were normal. “What did you do?”

Harry had recognized Wade’s particular knuckle bruise across Shawn’s mouth.

“I didn’t help a teammate in need. I was stuck in my mind.” Shawn felt bad for that. “It was too foggy to fight.”

“Well, you’ll need to handle that.”

“I will.” Shawn shut his lids as his head swam. “I know what they’re all thinking.”

Harry chuckled. “You are one of us.”

Shawn laughed to keep from crying. “They think I tried to hurt Missy while I was in the fog.”

“Did you?”

Shawn's voice was full of pain. "I finished tracing the thread I was given. I was crushed when I got to the end of it. I miss Safe Haven and Missy, and my Eagle status. I also miss Pam and Morgan. What crushed me was discovering we can't get home. I'll never see them again."

Harry was relieved to find out Shawn had a good excuse, but he worried about that answer. "Why can't we go back?" The sub was already underway.

"Nature's patterns aren't random, but she isn't going to let us find that cloud again. She'll blow it off course or send a storm to carry us off course. It's where chaos theory fits in. We're stuck. There's no going home." Tears ran from Shawn's eyes.

Listening from the doorway now, Kyle cleared his throat. "The boss told you to find an answer. Don't give up."

Shawn tried to get control of himself. "I killed a woman at the IDC who wasn't completely bad. I had to do it to keep my cover until you guys arrived. That's why I feel hinky to you now."

Kyle was glad to finally have an answer for that. "You know what happens on runs rarely stays on those runs."

"Yeah."

"You need to talk to the boss about it at some point and let her decide what you should to do, if anything."

"I will." Shawn wiped his face. "Can I go? I need a shower."

Harry nodded. “Just move slow and call if you need help.”

“I need a great meal, a shower, and a guard on my bunk while I Blink. Don’t let me forget to come back up.”

“I’ll cover it.” Kyle was proud of him for not giving up. He was also terrified that Shawn was right. “Blink hard and fast, Eagle. We need that answer.”

Chapter Eight
Is He Right?

1

“Here comes the boss.”

Dace turned from the locker with a smile. “Angela’s awake? That’s awesome.”

Lisa frowned. “No.”

Dace caught her thought and scowled. “That kid is not the boss!”

Lisa shrugged. “Well, he’s coming this way.”

Dace resumed gathering his stuff to get a shower. “This is the worst joke ever.”

Lisa silently agreed, but it wasn’t because of Cody’s young age or his lack of experience. She didn’t want a magic user in charge at all.

Dace put his kit over one arm and then tucked the crutch under his other arm for balance. His ankle was better now, but his fear was worse. He stole a fast glance at Lisa.

Lisa felt it and snorted. “No, I’m not coming into the shower stall with you.”

“But you’ll be in here, right?”

Lisa was sore and tired. She also smelled like sweat and ashes. She was eager to get a shower and then sleep. “Yes.”

She still had a few shifts left over Dace while he healed. Angela claimed it was so Dace could change her mind about magic users, but it wasn't working. After spending so much time around him, all she felt for Dace was an annoyed sympathy.

Dace hobbled to the door as Cody arrived. He saw the boy's escorts and chose not to say anything rude. He quickly headed for the shower stall.

Lisa waited for Cody to call him back; she saw Cody's expression and blanched. "You're here for me."

Cody gently took her hand. He didn't use magic; he used natural charm. "Try a little harder? For the boss?"

Lisa nodded reluctantly. She liked Angela and she wanted to trust her. "It's hard."

Cody let go and took a note from his book. "The alpha said you need to have a therapy appointment today."

"I will. But it won't work. I can't be charmed by any of you." Lisa opened the note as Cody went out into the hallway.

Helping Dace get over his fear of life will let you do the same.

Lisa crumbled the note and tossed it into the waste can. *I don't want him!*

Lisa didn't want any of them now, not even Greg. The craziness during the fog had convinced her that she was better off staying single. *Even people in committed relationships betrayed each other.*

Cody glanced over his shoulder. “Dace is terrified of dying. He doesn’t want to jump your bones. He just doesn’t want to become a pile of bones.”

Lisa flushed. “Stay out of my brain, kid.”

Cody lifted his chin. “Never gonna happen. Get over it.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?!” Lisa knew she was yelling at a child now, but she couldn’t help it. “I don’t want to be around any of you!”

Cody stopped and turned.

Lisa tensed.

He smiled at her. “Do you feel better now?”

Lisa was startled into a chuckle. “Yes, actually.”

“Good.” He winced as Dace swung into the shower stall too quickly and slipped. The crutch flew across the floor as he fell. “Dace needs to be yelled at. You’re good at that.”

Lisa stomped toward the stall. “Fine!”

Kenn assumed every word of that had come from Angela’s notes, but he was impressed by how well Cody had handled the angry woman. Kenn scanned Cate, Cody, the hallway, and the eyes peering out of rooms on this level. “You’ll all get a turn. Be patient.”

People quickly ducked out of sight at his knowing sarcasm.

Cody checked his notes. “We’re not supposed to listen to her yelling.” The boy snorted and headed for the mess. “Good luck with that one.”

Kenn chuckled.

Cate heard steps and tensed.

Kenn rotated, hand going to his gun.

Cody tugged his sister along. “That’s my next appointment. Be nice. She’s one of us.”

Cate frowned at the woman hurrying toward the mess for her shift on guard duty. “Piper isn’t a descendant.”

Cody smiled warmly at Piper as she tensed and slowed. “She will be in the future, and even if she chooses not to be, she’ll always be one of us on the inside.”

“Because she’s Invisible?” Kenn didn’t have a problem with Piper.

“No, because she’s nice and kind, and brave. She’s an Eagle in Safe Haven’s army.”

Piper teared up. “Aww. You’re such a sweetheart at times. Are you sure you really want this job?”

Cody’s face went blank. “No.” He waved at the mess entrance.

Piper went in, scanning for trouble. She stored his answer to add to her report to the boss. *I’ve documented most of the strangeness that happened on this sub. Angela might want the notes for her book.*

Cody pointed. “Greg wants them.”

Piper hesitated. “I have duty right now.”

Cody took her post near the counter. “It’s covered. Give him your update.”

Piper did what he wanted as Kenn and Cate flanked the boy. The post was covered and then some.

Greg was at a small corner table in the quiet galley. He smiled as Piper approached him. “Good evening.”

“Same to you.” Piper sat down with a feeling of relief and safety that she knew came from being close to a senior Eagle. Greg was very skilled, dependable, and honorable. *I wish more of the Eagles were like him.*

Greg tapped his notebook. “Tell me who isn’t and I’ll run them out.”

Piper got her own notebook out. “This is a list of everyone I saw breaking rules and giving you guys a bad name.”

Greg studied her. “Where did you spend the fog-cation?”

Piper snickered at the name. “I’ve been calling it fog-zero.”

Greg chuckled and waited for her answer.

Piper sighed. “I spied on everyone.”

Her answer didn’t surprise him. “Did you have orders to do that?”

“No.”

“I see.” Greg took the papers she handed him. He sensed he was supposed to do something else here and waited.

“I also got laid.”

Greg chuckled. “Okay.” He didn’t ask who the lucky man had been.

“Aren’t you going to tell me I’m bad for spying?”

“That’s not my job.” Greg gestured toward Cody. “What did the boss say?”

Piper’s voice dropped to a mutter. “He said I’ll always be one of you, but it feels bad. Spying on people is wrong.”

“Did you like it?”

Piper nodded. “It’s part of why I found Dace so attractive, I think. He really was like a secret agent.”

Greg understood right then. “I need to go over these notes. Enjoy your new job.”

Piper gawked. “What?”

Greg lowered his voice. “We need to know what the others are doing, Piper. We can’t always use magic. Without spies, we’re in the dark.”

“You want me to keep doing it?”

“Yes.”

Piper tried to think around her surprise. “Who am I spying on?”

Greg’s anger bled through his tone. “The normals, of course. They’re conspiring while accusing us of being the threat.”

“But...I’m a normal.”

“It’s time for you to make the choice Lisa was nagging you about right after the hurricane.”

Piper flinched. She didn’t know anyone had caught that brief conversation.

Greg stood up. “Welcome to Angela’s army.”

Piper scowled. “I didn’t make the choice.”

“I have faith in you.” Greg nodded to Cody on his way out.

Piper felt peace enter her heart. Behind it came amusement. “He gave me a therapy session. And it worked.”

Cody marked Piper off his long list. “We can go now.”

Kenn waited until Piper came over to take the guard post. Then he escorted Cody out of the mess. “Where to?”

Cody squared his little shoulders. “It’s time for updates.” He headed toward the bunk room, where most of the senior men were lounging and waiting for Angela to wake up.

Kenn stared. “Where did you get those balls, kid? They’re huge.”

“I borrowed them.” Cody grinned. “My dad isn’t using them right now anyway.”

Kenn’s laughter echoed through the hallway.

2

Lisa had lingered in the shower entrance to listen. It wasn’t a surprise that Piper was siding with the descendants. Her taste in magic users had already been known. Lisa conveniently overlooked her own relationship with Greg. She quickly stepped into the shower compartment to avoid Cody and his entourage.

Dace hadn’t been expecting her to turn around so quickly. He was unable to hide his expression.

Lisa saw his fear clearly this time. It was open and crushing. *He isn't getting better.*

Dace quickly covered with a leer. “Do you want to wash my back?”

Lisa opened her mouth to take Cody's advice. Yelling seemed appropriate.

It also felt wrong.

The small pause gave her time to see relief flash over Dace's face.

Lisa snapped her mouth shut. *He's scared. He's a magic user and he's safe on the submarine now, but he is still deeply afraid.* “What happened to flip you?”

Dace scowled toward his broken ankle. “You were there.”

Lisa refused to accept that evasion. “This isn't about Nature.”

She realized she hadn't heard Dace talking about Safe Haven at all since they arrived. Everyone else was worrying over the future and the boss, but not Dace. In fact, she hadn't heard him have a single serious conversation with anyone. “What's going on with you?”

People around them went quiet to hear Dace's answer. Many of them were curious. The others wanted to know why he'd thrown Piper away for Lisa, who couldn't stand him.

Dace's emotions were fluctuating too hard for him to control his response this time. Part of the truth flew out of his mouth. “That damn lab!”

Lisa fought the automatic bond that wanted to form. Those few hours in the lab had also changed her forever. “You had a solid run; you did well. What happened?”

Dace slumped into the chair next to the sink. He let go of his crutch; it fell to the floor, making a loud noise.

People jumped all over the submarine.

“Just get it out and get it over with.”

Dace stared at her in misery. “They’ll call me a coward.”

Lisa waited, patiently this time. Now that she understood Angela really did want her to give Dace therapy sessions, she was able to see more signs that she’d missed before. Every time someone got close to exposing Dace’s problem, he reacted in a silly or inappropriate manner to distract them. He’d pushed Piper away because she would have figured it out already. It really wasn’t matchmaking. Angela thought Dace would be honest with Lisa because of their reluctant bond.

Dace hated feeling this way. He was tired of trying to hide what he was going through. He reached out. “I can’t do what they do. I’m one of them, but I’m not. I never would have been able to survive in that lab, not even for a few days! I’ll never really be one of them...because I’m a coward. The attack while we were on Howland Island drove it in.”

Lisa could understand how devastating that would be for someone like Dace. Until this run, he

had been full of eagerness for action. “You’re making an unfair comparison. The men who were sent on that run are hardened fighters who had already gone through hell and back, more than once. It’s unreasonable to expect a rookie to be able to survive whatever they can.”

Dace had already told himself that, but it didn’t square with the feelings in his heart. “More than once, meaning they survived the first time and then went back for more. I can’t do that. When we get home, I’m resigning from the Eagles. That’s why I’m not stressing over leaving limbo. I’ll be a failed camp member that everyone will scorn. It will drive me out into the wastelands. There can’t be a Safe Haven for me now.”

Tears leaked out of his eyes.

Lisa didn’t try to fight the bond this time. Even though her issue was different, she understood completely. “I didn’t know what I was signing up for, either.”

Dace shook his head. “But you’re not a coward. You believe there’s a problem and you’re fighting to save your people. We respect that, even though we don’t believe we’re the danger. We all see you as a fighter to be honored.”

Lisa hadn’t thought of it that way. She also didn’t want to be distracted by that drama. She was almost certain that if she helped Dace here, Angela would ease up and stop putting them together. “I’m sure you’ve heard that bravery isn’t the absence of fear.”

Dace blew out an ugly snort. “I’ll bet the person who said that was never in a government lab or being crushed by rocks while slowly drowning.”

Lisa chuckled. “I’d bet you’re right, but it’s still true. You think I’m brave for what I did, but I was terrified the entire time we were on that beach. When it all fell out and we went under, I panicked. Holding onto you was a desperate attempt to stay alive. It could have been anyone under there with you, Dace.”

“I almost wish it had been.” Dace scrubbed the tears from his face. “I hurt Piper and I’ve ruined my friendship with you and several other people. I wish it had been Ray or Erin or even Kenn.”

Lisa forced out mock indignation. “Kenn over me? Really?”

Dace laughed with her, genuinely instead of the fake amusement he’d been spewing as a defense. He slowly reached out and took her hand. “I’m very sorry for the way I’ve treated you. Tell Angela I’ll work through it. She doesn’t need to keep torturing you by putting us together.”

Dace let go of her hand and began pushing on the wall so he could stand without the crutch. “I’ll get my shower, alone. You should go get a cup of coffee or something.”

Lisa turned her back, but she stayed in the shower compartment. Dace’s apology meant a lot to her. *I still don’t want to date him, though.*

Dace began adjusting the water. “Good. You’re better than I am. You deserve someone with honor and courage.”

“Oh, stop it! There’s nothing wrong with you!” Lisa was yelling before she knew she was going to. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. I can’t take it anymore. So you’re scared to die. All of us feel that way!”

“Not like this.”

Lisa continued to yell. “Yes, exactly like this! How do you think I feel knowing that all of you magic users could kill me at any minute?! That’s real fear.” Lisa froze as she realized she’d exposed her true feelings.

Dace had paused with his hand on the faucet. He regarded her over his shoulder. “I guess I’m not the only one who needed a therapy session.”

Lisa realized he was right. “Angela does love a twofer.”

Dace chuckled. “That she does.”

“What are you going to do?” Lisa couldn’t imagine Dace in any position in their camp except as an Eagle; he was right about that. This might really push him out of Safe Haven.

Dace stepped into the shower carefully. He tugged the curtain closed. “I’m going to die a horrible death out in the wastelands because I can’t find the courage to be brave right here.”

He increased the flow of water so he didn’t have to hear her response.

Lisa hated the small curl of pain that went through her heart. She'd already had the same thought. *As long as I keep pushing against them, I won't be allowed to stay. They'll either remove me or I'll leave before it gets that bad.*

Lisa was conflicted. She had enjoyed her life in Safe Haven so far. She wanted to be here. She also wanted to be safe. She was tired of all the death and chaos that followed the descendants.

Cody tapped on the shower door. He had been standing there listening. "He might need you to yell at him again."

Lisa stared at the boy. Her mind was a mix of emotions that made her brain hurt. "This wasn't just for him."

Cody shook his head. "Of course not. The alpha loves you, Lisa. She's fighting for you. Can't you try a little harder to do the same for her?"

At that moment, it felt like that might be possible. Lisa sighed unhappily. "The lab flipped me, too. I saw what your kind is capable of, and it terrified me. You could easily enslave humanity anytime you want to."

Cody didn't deny that. Instead, he offered a view he didn't think she'd tried yet. "The alpha put you on the council so you could help form the future for both sides. She brought you on this run so you would have the information you need to make those decisions. She doesn't want the normals to be dominated. That's why she picked you for her team, as well. You've spent months with her, in multiple

situations. She knows you can be counted on to be fair and honest.”

Lisa went through some of those moments in her mind. It was easier to see them now that Cody had pointed it out. She’d had several personal conversations with Angela while doing team training. She’d been allowed to stay close and she’d been privy to secrets in their camp before most people found out about them.

Cody helped her make a final conclusion. “Angela has been evaluating you for leadership all along. Your doubts are normal. You’re not disappointing her or angering her. You’re fulfilling a hard, amazing destiny.”

Dace peeked around the shower curtain. “What about me?”

Cody shrugged lightly. “All rookies go through a moment where they have to decide if they want to continue trying to climb the ranks. Safe Haven is often a dangerous place, and we need you for those fights, but we also want you to be happy. There’s no shame in being a camp member if that’s what you decide is best for you.”

“But?” Dace knew there was one. He felt it.

“But no one is going to make this decision for you guys. You and Lisa have all the information you need. Once you go over everything, it will be easier to pick the path that’s right for you. Be proud of yourself and remember what we’re all fighting for.” Cody scanned his notebook quickly to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything.

Lisa's emotions were overwhelming her now, a lot like Dace's had been a few minutes ago. She wiped her eyes and waited. It felt like they weren't done yet.

Cody gave them a hard look this time. "We won't tolerate disruptions, drama, or devious behavior from anyone. If you believe it's okay for the normals to conspire and hurt us but still survive, then it would be best if you left." Cody gestured at Dace. "You're dripping water on the floor."

The little boy headed toward the bunk room.

Lisa had stiffened with every word he uttered. *Is he right? Am I protecting bad people?*

Dace closed the shower curtain and braced against the wall. He stood there, trying to find a way to sort through everything. *I wish I had someone I could talk to about this now.*

Lisa and Cody had triggered a waterfall of emotions that would have to be handled so they didn't drown him like Nature had tried to do on the island.

Lisa wished she had someone she could talk to about her new fears. *No one else understands how I feel.*

In the hallway, Cody cleared his throat pointedly. "Why do you think the alpha put you two together? It certainly wasn't for any children you might have. Those pretty kids would most certainly be too adventurous and compassionate to exist in a camp like ours."

Both of them were distracted enough to consider what those kids would be like.

Cody smirked and headed for his next chore.

3

“I have that report for you.” Greg joined Marc. He didn’t look at Angela’s body.

Marc heard more people come into the bunk room. “It has to wait for a bit.”

“Why?”

“The therapy sessions aren’t over yet.”

Greg leaned against the wall, content to wait. He’d listened to Cody get through to Lisa where none of the adults had been able to. *I’m willing to give the boy the benefit of the doubt now.*

Marc glared. “You don’t want Angela to do it because it’s dangerous, but you’re okay with my little kid having the job?”

“I never said I didn’t want Angela to be in charge. That’s *your* issue, not mine.” Greg rubbed the burn scars on his arm and refused to say more.

The tension rose as Marc stiffened at the insulting truth.

Cody stepped into the bunk room, feeling the chill. No one in here was in a good mood. *The alpha is right. It’s hard to keep an army happy unless they’re fighting for survival or handing out death.*

The descendants grimaced guiltily. They didn’t like that about themselves, but there was no denying it was true. It wasn’t just the normals who had to be

micromanaged to keep the peace. All humans were flawed.

Cody stayed by the entrance as he opened his notebook. “I want your updates. Starting with...” Cody found Harry across the crowded, silent bunk room. “You.”

Everyone else watched to see if the senior man would give the boy what he wanted.

Harry slowly straightened in the chair by Angela’s cot. “Full details or the basics?”

“I want all of it.”

Harry opened his book. “Then that’s exactly what you’re going to get.”

Chapter Nine
Circle Back

1

“Her condition hasn’t changed. She’s stable. She doesn’t have any injuries that we’ve been able to find. She just isn’t waking up.”

Cody began writing in his book. “What have you already tried?”

Harry knew that list by heart. He’d been going over it for the last hour, trying to find anything he’d missed. “Several of us tried to connect to her mentally. The smelling salts aren’t working. Neither did a B-12 shot. I also considered using the counteragent to the government knockout drugs, but we don’t know what it might do to the baby, so I haven’t tried that yet.”

“What do you plan to try next?”

Harry didn’t look at Marc. He hadn’t mentioned this to him yet. “She was able to go in and help Marc when he was in the death sleep. If she doesn’t come out of it on her own, we’ll send Marc in.”

“That’s good.” Cody peered up from his notes. “Now give me an update on you.”

Harry wasn’t surprised, but he was a bit self-conscious. “I had another evolution. I can magnify my X-Ray gift from across the room. For example,

I can see your little heart beating faster than it should be because you're nervous."

"Actually, I'm worried about the alpha. It bothers me to see her like that." Cody wrote something in his book and then waited.

So did their witnesses. There was a feeling that Cody was going to drag out a secret here. Everyone wanted to hear it.

Harry frowned at the boy. "I'll tell the boss when it's time."

Cody copied that answer. He regarded Kyle next.

Kyle was ready. "Security on the ship is tight again. There were no injuries while we were gone, as far as I can tell. Gus is doing guard duty over the brig now. The bodies of the women who got out of control right after we left have been burned."

Everyone glanced over as a faint noise neared the doorway.

Mr. Sneaky entered first, with the fur lifted on his tail. The cat hurried over to Dog and began rubbing on him.

Dog licked the cat and sneezed. *Dusty!*

Mel stopped in the doorway, staring at them all in tolerant confusion. *I don't know any of these people.* She wiped grit from her wrinkled arm and went on down the hall. *This is an odd plane. I wonder who's flying it.*

Cody kept them moving. "Food status?"

Kyle frowned a little. "We're going through it faster than Angela estimated for this run, mostly due

to thefts that keep occurring. Now that those people are in the brig, it should even out. I'll keep an eye on it."

"And how are things, personally?"

Like Harry, Kyle didn't want to open his soul in front of everyone and certainly not to a child. However, he was an Eagle and he wanted to make sure the boss was happy with him when she woke up. "I'm a little shocked by everything that's happened. Not being able to make contact with anyone rattled me a little more. I'm working through it."

"And your anger issues?"

Kyle shrugged. "What anger issues?"

Everyone felt the lie.

Cody didn't call him on it. "I'd like an update on the sub now."

Adrian had been listening. He'd connected mentally as soon as the boy started rounds. Adrian activated the PA system. "We're underway on autopilot. Ray's on his break. The radar is clear. No problems to report."

Cody wrote it down. "I have schedules for everyone." He took the papers from his book and handed them to his sister.

Cate hurried over and pushed them into Wade's hand before retreating back to her spot behind Cody.

"I was told to have you check the math."

Wade scanned the schedules and was pleasantly surprised. “Can I assume the boss made this before we left the sub?”

Cody lifted his chin. “No, you may not.”

Cody didn’t say he’d been studying Angela’s methods for months now. The Eagles should already know that. “See that it gets posted?”

Wade nodded, grinning. He already liked Cody’s no nonsense attitude toward getting things done.

“The 10th man is next.”

Harry gave Shawn a hard nudge. “That’s you.”

They’d switched Shawn to the bunk room a short time ago so they could keep an eye on him while he Blinked.

Shawn came out of his mind long enough to shake his head. “No luck so far. All the threads dead end in limbo. We don’t have anything Nature wants enough to cut a deal.”

Cody motioned. “Stay here and do duty over the mission men while they work.”

Cate frowned. “What?”

Cody delivered a stern glance to all of the suddenly tense men. “The alpha gave them an order on the island. They haven’t accomplished the goal yet.”

Cate marched over and shoved her canteen into Shawn’s hand. “Drink that!”

Cody regarded the surprised, uneasy witnesses. “If you have something the alpha needs to know, put it in your nightly report. I have a folder ready for

those. If it needs to be handled now, come see me in the mess after I'm finished with rounds."

Kenn brought up something the boy had missed. "You forgot to pick an XO."

"No, I didn't." Cody glanced at Wade. "I also like a good twofer."

Wade stared. "You chose me. That's why I couldn't figure out why Angela put you with me first out of everyone. She didn't do it; you did."

"Yes." Cody smiled at Wade. "You're good enough for the alpha, and I'm a smart kid. Why would I pick anyone else?"

Wade laughed. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I just did, so now, I guess."

Wade couldn't help himself. "As your XO, I have a question."

"Yes?"

Wade ignored the men who were tracking the conversation expectantly. They knew Wade was Eagle-minded. He would ask something that all of them wanted to know. "How long is this run supposed to last for you?"

Cody finally looked at Angela's body. A shadow passed over his dirty face. "Either two days or two years. She wasn't sure."

Grimaces and fresh tension flew through the room.

Cody pointed at Cate. "Keep them working. We need that solution."

Cody left the bunk room.

Most of the mission men picked a bunk so they could be comfortable while they worked.

Cate began marching between the beds, glaring at people who didn't immediately get started on the job they were supposed to do.

Marc watched his daughter and tried not to think about anything.

Greg came over to Marc. He was eager to start dimension hunting, but he still had a report to deliver.

Marc nodded reluctantly. "We'll go to the mess shortly."

He suddenly wasn't sure that he wanted to know what all had happened while they were gone, but it was too late to call it off now.

2

"Why is everyone mad at you?"

Adrian jumped, turning in the chair. "I thought you were sleeping."

Ray yawned. "I was. Then I felt a disturbance in the force."

Adrian chuckled at the common joke.

Ray put his hands under his neck. "Come on. 'Fess up."

Adrian turned back to the monitors. "It's not everyone. Just Marc."

"What did you do to him this time?" Ray had no doubt that Adrian was at fault.

Adrian wanted a shower. He stank like great sex that was long over. He didn't want to leave the bridge yet, however. He was sure to run into Marc. He needed to wait until everyone was sleeping. He'd hoped Ray would stay that way for the entire shift. This interrogation wasn't welcome. "I knew she was going to try something reckless and I didn't tell him."

"Ah." Ray saw Adrian was fully geared, including his vest. Ray wasn't sure if he liked that or not. Most of the men on this sub were playing it more relaxed.

"They're not worried about sucker punches or shivs."

Ray laughed. "True." He was mostly geared, but he'd also left off the heavy vest now that he was back on the ship. "And Greg?"

"Pretty much the same reason, though I think he has another beef, too."

"We'll circle back to that. What about Kyle?"

Adrian tensed. "I, uh, may have hit him with an electric baton."

Ray's eyes widened. "That's suicidal."

"Yeah."

"And Theo?"

Now Adrian's voice dropped to a mutter. "His therapy session was also *shocking*."

"Wow. You have been a bad boy."

"Stop it."

"Why is Dog angry with you?"

Adrian scowled. “I was able survive his gas bombs. He wanted to flush me out so Marc can have a payback moment.”

“And Gus?”

Adrian’s guilt increased. “Punishing people was his job in the lab. I took it.”

“Okay. Why is Cate upset with you?”

That one was easier and not really his fault. “No training session in three days.”

Ray circled back. “What’s Greg’s other beef?”

“He’s jealous of my relationship with Angela.” Adrian pouted as he realized Ray had tricked that out of him.

“And Kenn?”

Adrian flushed this time. “I made a bad choice during the fog-clog. He’s disappointed in me. Again.”

Ray considered that answer, then pushed harder. “And the boss?”

Adrian winced. “Same answer.”

Ray snorted. “She wasn’t disappointed. I was right there with her. She was pissed off, dude.”

Adrian grunted. “I broke a rule and she’ll have to punish me again.”

“What rule?”

“That’s between us.” *For now.* When Angela decided to handle that one, everyone would hear about it. Until then, Adrian didn’t want to stress over it.

“Is that everyone?”

Adrian didn't see any reason to stop now. He'd already let too much fly. "Some of Reicher's staff are pissed that I helped take Marc out of there. They want to go back to their other lives."

Ray circled back again. "What was the choice that disappointed Kenn and infuriated the boss?"

Adrian knew it was going to come out sooner or later. *And Ray will be more forgiving, I hope.* "I, uh, stepped out of the bridge for an hour."

Ray sat up on the cot, staring. "You left the bridge unmanned?"

"Dog was here."

"That's not funny!"

"If anyone came in, Dog would have eaten them. He didn't fog-out."

"What if something went wrong with the sub?!"

Adrian gave a contemptuous snort. "None of us really know how to pilot this thing, Ray. If something goes wrong, we're screwed whether the bridge is manned or not."

Ray figured it out. There was only one thing that would have gotten Adrian to leave his post. "You left the bridge for a piece of ass!"

Adrian winced. "The fog hit me hard. Harry didn't relieve me. I was in this tiny compartment with that stinking wolf for almost two days!"

Ray rose from the cot and went over to the hatch. He unlocked it and shoved on the heavy door. "Get out."

Adrian frowned. "What?"

“You need a loving correction from your team! Get out.”

Adrian stood up. “I was told to stay in here.”

“And you didn’t! Get out.”

Adrian moved toward the open door. *Maybe I can sneak into the cubby and lock it before Marc notices it’s open.*

A sense of menace went through the bridge and then the entire submarine. Conversations stopped; heads rotated, searching for the source.

“This is military vessel SS Cotopaxi calling to the underwater ship approaching the tip of South America. Come in, please!”

Adrian had frozen next to his chair. He looked at Ray now.

Ray only had one answer. “I don’t know enough about it. We might be on the radar of a number of ships.”

“Why can’t we see them?”

“Maybe their radar is stronger.”

“Stronger than a nuclear sub?”

Ray had to admit that wasn’t right. “Cloaking?”

Adrian knew there had been several government projects concentrating on that when the war came, but none had been successful. “Ignore it.”

Ray nodded as he came over to take the captains’ chair. He was sure Angela would have ordered the same. The feeling of evil was clear.

“Come in unidentified vessel! We need help. We’re taking on water too fast. We can’t pump it out and we’re going down. SOS!”

Adrian swept the dusty monitor that was showing the bunk room. He half expected Angela to wake up.

So did Ray.

Blip!

Both men flinched at the loud noise.

Blip! "Warning! Impact course detected." The computer flipped the lights to red throughout the submarine. *"Warning! Autopilot has detected an error in the course. Adjust immediately!"*

Ray gawked at the consoles and hundreds of dials and switches. "What do I do?!"

Adrian wasn't happy to have his point proven. "Disengage the autopilot and slow us down."

"Belay that." Thomas hobbled into the bridge with Jayda holding his arm for balance. "Do not stop this sub, Ray."

Ray tried to think through the panic. "If we hit something we'll sink it!"

"It has to be a glitch in the system." Thomas pointed at the empty radar. "There's nothing there. This is a glitch."

"Or a trick to get us to stop." Adrian recognized the feel of a trap. "He's right. We'd be able to see something on the radar."

The radar flickered as they watched. Then it lit up with bright green dots all over the screen.

"Warning! Impact warning!"

Thomas paled. "Okay. That's not good."

"I'm stopping us." Ray reached for the control.

“No.” Adrian was certain that Thomas had been right the first time. “Keep going.”

“I need orders on that!” Ray was still pissed. “You’ve been removed from bridge duty. Get out.”

Thomas didn’t want to get involved in these choices yet. He stayed quiet and hoped it really was a glitch.

“Listen to your instincts, Ray. You felt the wrongness. Don’t do it. We’ll all be sorry.” Adrian was sure of that now.

Ray put his hand in his pocket. “I want Marc to make the call on it.”

“I’m here.”

They all turned to find Marc’s big body blocking the exit.

Marc scanned Adrian’s paling face in satisfaction. “Keep going. I don’t care what we hit. We don’t stop unless there’s no other option.”

Ray nodded nervously. The menace coming from Marc was almost as bad as what had come from the SOS call.

Adrian didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. He waved toward the hall.

Marc stepped aside to let him come out.

Adrian exited the bridge with Marc on his heels.

Ray shut and locked the door while Thomas and Jayda studied the radar and hoped Marc had made the right call.

“*Warning...*” The computer alert shut off. The radar went blank.

Ray grinned in relief. “Just a glitch.”

Thomas limped over to the chair next to Ray. “I’ll hang here for a while.”

Jayda stayed near the hatch and let her mind return to shaming her for what she’d done while fogged.

Adrian stopped abruptly. A line of muscled men were standing in the hallway, blocking the other rooms and ladders. All of those men were angry with him.

Adrian called for Angela again, pulling on their bond.

Gus, Kyle, and Kenn advanced.

Marc rolled up his sleeves, exposing large, scarred arms that were ready to deliver serious pain.

Greg climbed the ladder and took Marc’s right. “I’m not jealous of her feelings for you. You’re wrong about that.”

Adrian realized they’d all been listening to his conversation with Ray. He braced as they came closer. “Then why?”

Greg sneered. “You should have gone into hell with us.”

All five men came forward, fists lifting.

The door to the cubby opened. Cody stepped out with orbs glowing bright red. “Stop.” He didn’t wait to be ignored.

Power flew through the hallway and surrounded the men with discomfort. It increased to pain. Then it doubled. And tripled. Screams filled the air and choked out all other sounds.

Cody let go of them.

It took a minute for the screams to fade. Cody's displeasure had a lingering effect.

Cody blinked; his eyes returned to normal, but his voice mirrored Angela's exactly. "There will be no retribution in this camp! We stand for justice and honor. This is neither of those."

The shivering, shuddering men watched as the boy went back into the cubby and shut the door.

"Well, now we know."

Greg and the others nodded shakily at Marc's comment.

Adrian was still standing. He'd refused to move and possibly trigger the child's wrath. "You pushed him to see what he would do?"

Marc stood up, brushing dust from his pants. The floor was sporting a light layer of it on both levels. "Even when she's not in charge, she's still protecting you. It had nothing to do with Cody. He's just her method of enforcement."

Greg nodded again. "Exactly."

None of the men were mad at the kid, though a couple of them now held more respect and a bit of fear. Cody had used his gifts against his father. That was brave.

"It's also wrong." Adrian didn't hold back like he had been. "All of your kids are on the edge, Marc. You need to do something or you'll lose them."

“How would you know?!” Marc’s bitterness took control of his mouth. “Your kids are all corrupt!”

“That question answers itself.” Adrian stepped around him and headed for the ladder.

Marc was left without a target as the other men faded into the shadows. Everyone was disappointed that they hadn’t gotten to beat on Adrian. It would have alleviated the boredom of waiting for Angela to wake up and save their asses once again.

Only one of them considered that this was her way of making them do that for themselves. Greg tried not to want her more and failed. *I was in love before we left for the lab run. Now I’m in awe.*

3

“Therapy sessions will resume in the morning. Schedules have been posted.” Cody let go of his radio and yawned. He’d been up for a long time now. “Next?”

Charlie scanned the notes. *“Make sure everyone is occupied before you crash. Charlie will wake you if there’s something you need to handle. Do not sleep anywhere except the bunk room.”*

Cody ran through the list of people he was overseeing. “A movie is playing. A meal is cooking. All posts are covered and Adrian is ready to take over guard duty here. The caretakers are roaming. I scared people earlier. I think it’s all covered.”

Charlie frowned at how casually the boy said that. “It’s not good to hurt people or scare them.”

“It’s effective.”

“Mom doesn’t scare people unless there’s no other choice.”

Cody rubbed his face tiredly. “If I don’t scare them, they won’t obey me. I don’t have her record or gifts.”

Charlie knew that was true. “Just don’t overdo it, okay? We can’t push you over that line.”

Cody snapped the lock on the folder and handed it to Charlie. “I have to sleep now.”

Cate held the door while Piper swept the hall for problems. She’d taken over for Kenn at the last shift change.

Piper ignored Adrian as she led them toward the ladder.

Adrian understood even as he swallowed hurt feelings. Being good enough for secret interactions but not public moments was painful to his ego.

The caretakers fell in around them, glaring at anyone who came close.

Dog hurried out of the radio room and nudged Cody’s hand.

Cody rubbed Dog’s soft fur. “Wanna nap with me?”

Dog whined eagerly. *Can my cat come, too?*

Cody laughed. “Of course.”

“Who has point now?”

The mood fell.

Piper shrugged. “You have to give it to someone. Angela usually picks Kyle because he can be counted on to handle things calmly.”

“Isabel has point, with Wade.”

Piper blanched. “You can’t give it to a rookie outsider cannibal, kid.”

Cody frowned tiredly. “The alpha wants them both to learn compassion and crowd control. There’s nothing happening right now. It’s a good time.”

“Then give it to Wade, with Isabel as his trainee.”

Cody nodded. “Do that.”

Piper was glad the boy listened. At his age, he had a lot to learn.

Cody went down the ladder in the middle of the group. He wasn’t self-conscious at all. He was exhausted. He hurried to the bunks.

Cate pulled the blanket aside and waited for him to crawl in. She covered him up and kissed his forehead. “Night, Bubby.”

“Night, Sissy.”

It was hard for their witnesses to think of him as the descendant who’d hurt the men earlier.

Cody’s eyes popped open. His glowing red orbs went around the room.

Now they could see it. The bunk room went silent again.

Cody went to sleep satisfied.

“Let’s get that beer now.” Marc led Greg into the mess. He wasn’t thinking about anything that had happened.

Greg grabbed two beers from the cooler on the counter and followed Marc to a table in the corner where they might get a little privacy.

Marc wasn’t in the mood for this, but he also didn’t care enough to shut it down. *I’m coasting now.*

“She left notes for us. That’s how we knew to head for the cove instead of the beach.”

Marc had already figured that out.

“I didn’t know until then. That’s why I didn’t tell you. I found the note when I got into my kit for Advil.” Greg still had a little of that headache. The fog was bad in every way.

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

Greg gestured with his bottle. “You clearly can’t handle that shit yet, man. We’ve only been out of hell for two weeks. She probably assumed you would balk at going through something stressful. And she didn’t have a choice. These things were going to happen whether she made plans around it or not. The difference is that she would be dead and we would be stuck.”

Marc tried to find some humor to break the depression of coasting. “We’ll find a way out of the cotton batting.”

Greg refused to let that slide. “Not without her.”

Marc didn't want to hear the excuses anymore.
"What do you want from me?"

"Let the tiger out of the cage. We need you to lead us."

Marc didn't respond.

Greg opened his beer and took a drink. Then he tried again. "You can reach her and wake her up like she did for you."

"Maybe."

"Then why haven't you tried?"

"She didn't leave me a note."

Greg frowned. "Stop being jealous."

"It's not jealousy, like with you and Adrian."
Marc knew Greg absolutely was jealous of Adrian.
"If she wanted me to come get her, she would have left me a note, too."

"Maybe she assumed you would already know to do it."

Marc stared at him. "She knew these people would party and break rules."

Greg nodded. "She's getting something from it."

"But what?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours."

Greg considered it for a moment. "There was a lot of sex. Breeding tree matches?"

"Half of those moments are being viewed with regret now. The people are avoiding each other. How is it good for kids to be born to parents who don't even like each other?"

“Maybe in the future they’ll like each other?”
Greg hadn’t even considered that.

Marc shook his head. “If we assume that’s true, then Harry has five marriages coming, Jayda will have a life like Samantha’s, and Adrian isn’t staying with Sadie. When we get home, he’ll be single again.”

Greg shrugged instead of letting Marc know that last one had struck a nerve. “She sees farther than we do, man.”

“Why does she let it all happen and never tell us? Haven’t we proven we can be trusted?”

Greg snorted. “The opposite. If you’d known she was going to be shoved off a cliff, would you have stayed out of it?”

“No.” Marc wasn’t coasting deeply enough to allow that. “But I mean why does she let herself be hurt so much? She could have changed some of those moments.”

Greg had also worried over that one. “I came to the conclusion that if she changed it, someone else would be caught in her place.”

“Same. Until today.”

Greg realized Marc had caught something important. “What did I miss?”

“She’s suicidal. Still.”

Greg scowled, head shaking. “I don’t see that.”

Marc continued as if Greg hadn’t spoken. “And if she’s still feeling that way, then she’s more than unhappy. She’s miserable. Unhappy people don’t

want to end their life; they want to change it. Miserable is what comes when they can't."

Greg reluctantly listened. *That can't be right.* "We would have seen signs of it."

Marc gestured angrily. "We saw a huge one today. She let Cody shove her off a cliff! She could have slid aside, or ducked, or warned everyone. She took the most extreme option."

Greg was man enough to face that. "She did have another choice this time. No one else was even close to that edge."

"And she went back up there even though she didn't need to."

Now Greg was drawn in. "Why *did* she go back up there?"

"Ray said she was hunting for a baggie, but she found it and then decided to gather loose gear from the campsite. It doesn't fit."

Greg put the final piece together. "Unless she wanted to go over the edge."

"Exactly." Marc opened his beer and drank it all down without stopping.

Greg's mind spun around his most recent interactions with Angela. He'd sensed deep sadness and attributed it to her missing her babies. "Maybe she needs time with Adrian."

"He doesn't make her happy now either."

Greg wasn't sure that was true. "When was the last time she was honestly happy?"

Marc had already asked himself that question. “When we were in Ciemus. William made her happy.”

Greg snapped that into place next. “You’re thinking you should try to be like him now? Just without the murders to get her attention.”

“I’m *not* thinking that.”

“Good, because she wasn’t really happy with him. She was just happy to be around someone like her.”

“And now we’ve gotten to the point.”

Greg didn’t understand at first. “You’re like her. A lot of people are byzan, including half the men on this submarine.” Greg lowered his voice. “And you both have the glow.”

Marc shook his head. “I’m not like her.”

“I don’t get it.”

Marc glared at Greg. “You embraced being different. You like it.”

Greg nodded.

Marc’s voice cooled drastically. “I hate it. I’m not like her because I don’t like it. I want to go back. She wants to die because she’s so alone.”

Greg had lost all control of the conversation. He waited for Marc’s point.

“We could make you a byzan.”

Greg stiffened. “Stop.”

Marc ignored him. “It would make her happy to have someone like her in camp, someone with a brain, ethics, and an obsession. Then she’d stop being so reckless.”

Greg began to laugh.

It drew Marc out of his depressing deliberations. “What?”

“You might as well go on and make Adrian a byzan. He’d have more luck keeping her happy when you leave.”

Marc made a face. “Adrian’s already a byzan, against her orders, and she hasn’t punished him for that either.”

Greg was stunned.

Marc smacked his bottle against the table, not caring when people turned toward them. “Anyone but him!”

Greg understood, but he didn’t want to be a part of Marc’s schemes. They always failed. “Stop thinking about leaving.”

“I was told to figure out what would make me happy. I’m doing that.”

“You’re trying to find something to keep her in Safe Haven while you go roam the planet doing whatever you want.” Greg was tired of it. He decided it was a good moment for brutal truth. “She knows you’re going to leave her again. *That’s* why she’s reckless. She doesn’t want to be away from you.”

Greg remembered why he’d wanted to talk to Marc, other than the report he needed to give. “You’ve been quiet, moody, and non-responsive since they pulled us from that damn lab. You’re smothering yourself to see if you can be what she needs, what the camp need.” Greg pointed. “You

can't. It's clear to us, so stop it. Be who you are and we'll work it out. We're tired of the coward sitting in your seat."

Marc didn't rise to the bait. *I can only be pushed over that line by two people now. One of them is on guard duty. The other is unconscious.*

Marc got another beer. *And so the waiting continues.* "I believe you have a report to give me."

Greg understood Marc wasn't going to cooperate yet. *You won't have a choice at some point.*

"But that point isn't now."

Greg sighed. "Yeah." He opened his notebook. "This is what happened while we were gone..."

Chapter Ten
In The Fog

1

Charlie stared at the note in his hand. His brows came together.

The kids are alone. Go to the bunk room right now!

The last thing Charlie remembered was getting dressed after the landing party left. He'd gotten his kit from his bunk and come up for a therapy session. Then the fog had stolen his mind.

Charlie looked around. He didn't recognize any of the compartments around him, but he was able to tell what most of them were used for by the furnishings and equipment they held. "What am I doing?"

Charlie came out of the therapy cubby. He automatically tugged his kit onto his back so he didn't lose it. The paper in his hand drew his attention again.

Go to the bunk room right now!

Charlie decided to follow the instructions. "Maybe someone there can tell me who I am and how I got here."

Loud music thumped through the walls, drowning out the laughs and conversations. The

noise said he wasn't alone. That was a comfort, but it didn't help.

As soon as Charlie stepped away from the cubby, three teenagers with a stolen bottle half full of whiskey ran inside and slammed the door shut. The lock clicked.

Charlie barely noticed. Noises and movements were hitting him from all directions. It was hard to concentrate on just one of them while the fog ran through his mind.

Charlie walked down the hall, staring into each room as he went by. *This is a very odd apartment complex.*

He paused outside a room that had a large viewing screen playing an alien film that he had seen before but couldn't bring up the name of. The theater chairs held one older lady with a mangy cat on her lap.

Charlie knew her, but he couldn't remember her name. "Sneaky. That's the cat."

Mel didn't look away from the screen. She was enjoying the flick. She didn't care about anything else going on around them. "I'll roast some oysters for you in a while. Right now, I want to watch the telly."

Charlie didn't ask her any questions. It was rude to interrupt someone when they were viewing a movie. *I might not know my name, but I do know that.*

Charlie walked by a smaller compartment that held a radio set up, stacks of other electronics, and

a bedroll in the corner with a man and woman moaning and groaning. Charlie was suddenly furious even though he couldn't remember who they were. He went on without interrupting the blond man, however. "I need to find the bunk room."

A low growl caught his attention. He followed it to a large hatch that prevented him from seeing what was making the angry scratching noises on the other side.

Charlie went to the ladder. He knew better than to open the door with an animal on the other side. "Now if I could just remember who I am."

Charlie didn't know which way to go when he got to the bottom of the ladder. There were too many compartments. "Bunk room?"

People going by ignored him for their own pursuits. Louder music blared through speakers. Laughter and groans echoed beneath the deep beats, telling him a party was definitely underway. Charlie wanted to have fun, too, but the fog was stealing his excitement. He turned into the first compartment and followed a short hall to a large space with a huge bed and six naked bodies on it.

Charlie stared in surprise. *How are they all fitting on there?*

Harry didn't notice their company. He rubbed, squeezed, licked, groaned, and thrust. The women had grabbed him from the medical office where he'd been staring at the computer in confusion. They'd started stripping him right there. *We came*

in here because the beds were too small in that other room.

Harry's caretakers were beautiful blondes, brunettes, and a redhead that were much older than they appeared to be.

It clearly didn't bother Harry. He was giving it all he had. It had been nine weeks for him without sex. He was making it an experience to remember. His scarred body was in constant movement, matching that of the happy women undulating around him.

Charlie knew he should leave, but he'd never seen so many naked bodies in so many positions. *I want to try that someday.*

One of the caretakers lifted her mouth from Harry's hard body. She smiled invitingly. "There's space enough for you."

Charlie's body responded instantly. He blushed. "No. Thanks, though. I need to grow up before I try that."

The woman shrugged and resumed her meal.

Charlie continued on to the next room with a bit of regret. *I would have remembered that forever. I think. I can't recall my own name, so maybe not.*

The other bedroom was empty except for a paper taped to the headboard.

Get to the bunk room and lock it down!

Charlie didn't know who had left the message, but he knew it was meant for him. He went back by the flesh-pile and reentered the hallway.

The ground swayed under his feet. The sound of water hitting metal echoed.

Charlie glanced around. “Are we on a ship?” He smiled. “Cool.”

More grunts and whimpers of pleasure filled his ears as he went down the hallway. There were three people in a shower stall. A familiar woman with burn scars and short hair was stripping for a redheaded man and a playboy type who were both handling themselves. They weren’t touching the woman yet, but Charlie was certain that would start shortly.

Jayda’s caramel skin gleaned in vibrant health and sensuality as she rotated and swayed.

The two men shouted encouragement and stroked faster.

Jayda tossed her bra toward the doorway. It sailed out into the hall.

Charlie went by before one of them could invite him in. He was being driven toward a different end, but this was all making him horny.

Charlie peered into a large room with tables and a long counter. It looked like a cafeteria. He saw three men behind the counter stuffing in food as fast as they could chew and swallow it. They kept digging through the shelves and cabinets at the same time.

The men were too thin. Charlie hoped they kept eating so they put on some weight.

The subjects stopped for a brief moment as they realized they were being watched.

Charlie scanned the rest of the dark cafeteria, hearing the familiar shuffle of cards.

Three women and a man with crutches were sitting at a large center table in the cafeteria, playing cards and drinking.

Erin was only wearing socks now, and a purple bra.

The others were naked.

Erin laid down her hand. "Full house!"

Groans and laughs filled the mess.

They didn't notice Charlie.

That looks like fun, too. Charlie wanted to join in. He went back into the hall instead. The dim rear corridor gave him the creeps, but he kept going.

The smells were rough. *I think I'm lost.*

Eyes peered out at him from behind the incinerator.

Lisa reached for her gun. "Who is it?"

Charlie stopped, holding up a hand. "I'm just looking for the bunk room."

Lisa pointed. "That way, on the left."

"Thanks." Charlie saw her nervous glances over his shoulder. The man next to her was holding a crutch, but he didn't seem like he was able to protect himself or the woman. "Are you okay?"

Lisa nodded quickly. "We just want to be alone." Lisa had taken a few things from the mess when the partying started. Then she'd brought Dace here so he would feel safe.

Charlie was glad. He already had a chore to cover. "Cool." He went back into the hall.

An awful smell came from the next door on the left. Charlie knew it was part of the chore he needed to handle. “I think I’m being punished.”

Charlie went in and found one adult man sleeping in a bunk. The other side of the room held baby beds, stacks of supplies, and more crying kids than he could count in a fast glance. He peered at the paper in his hand and then at the kids. “I’m definitely being punished.”

Bret came out of the bathroom in the rear of the bunk room. “Are you Charlie?”

Charlie felt a connection. “I think so.”

“Good.” Bret went over and shut both doors, locking them. “I found a note that said to come and help you. We have to lock it down. No one else is allowed in here.”

Charlie was still staring at the crying kids. “Why are we on a ship?”

“We’re on a ship? Cool.”

Charlie dropped his note as the crying became louder. “Well, let’s get it over with.” He’d spotted instructions taped to the wall by the baby beds.

Bret stayed by the exits. “My note said I’m supposed to keep people out.”

Charlie’s nose curled. “Just put one of the diapers by the doors. No one will ever come in here again.”

The bunk room held two dozen babies. Bret felt overwhelmed. “How are we going to feed them all?”

The kids reached out, crying louder.

Food!

Yucky!

Hugs!

Charlie heard them clearly in his mind. It broke through some of the fog. “Come over here and help. This is a job for as many hands as we can find.”

Bret reluctantly came over while scanning the lone man in the bunk. “Should we wake him up?”

Charlie shook his head. “I don’t know him. Do you?”

Bret didn’t. “Is he a problem?”

“No idea. We’ll keep an eye on him while we work.”

Bret swept the man again, seeing huge arms, an eye patch, and a tool belt of dangerous weapons. “If he starts shit, we’re in trouble.”

Charlie tried not to gag. “His shit can’t possibly be this bad.”

2

“It’s getting wilder out there.” Bret was back by the door, away from the needy infants who hadn’t given them a break from their demands. He was stealing a moment of doing nothing but standing still and listening. “It sounds like something broke in the mess.”

Charlie rocked the little girl and burped the little boy, using both arms. His foot pushed against the large crib, rocking the three toddlers to sleep at the same time. “I heard it.”

Bret checked the locks again. He'd done it each time he viewed the note written on his wrist in ink. It wasn't his handwriting.

“Don't open that door.”

Both boys turned toward the bunks.

Greg yawned widely and then sat up. He drank from his canteen and stood. “Gotta hit the head.”

Charlie switched the two babies in his arms to the waiting bassinets, then gently covered them up. This room was a little drafty. He went to the last two babies, smiling at them. “Thank you for waiting so patiently.”

Goldie's twins began fussing now that it was their turn.

Charlie laughed. He'd quickly adjusted to hearing the kids in his mind. Making them happy made him feel good. *I might want kids of my own someday.*

The fog thinned a little more. A woman's face flashed through his mind. “Tracy.”

Memories flooded back in thick waves that pushed away the rest of the haze.

Charlie smiled in relief. “Awesome.” He hated fog-head.

Greg came back into the bunk room and went straight to his filthy bed. “Wake me if you need me.”

Bret frowned. He was tired of digging through the kits and personal stashes in here, tired of changing diapers, and having babies spit up on him.

He wanted an adult covering those things. “Shouldn’t you stay awake and help with the kids?”

“Yes.” Greg shut his lids and resumed dimension hunting.

Charlie didn’t care. He put the last two babies on the changing table and got to work. He let the memories of Tracy flow in any order they wanted. For this moment, he wasn’t angry or lonely. He was just thrilled to have his mind back. Not knowing who he was had been terrible.

Bret nodded. “I agree.” He grinned. “Hey!”

Charlie wiped the baby clean and tossed the filthy wipe. He repeated the movement without gagging this time. “Our gifts are back.”

“They weren’t out for long.”

“How long...” Charlie saw the time on the clock. He frowned. “That can’t be right.”

“What?”

“It says 8:23 a.m.”

Bret added it up. “That means it’s been almost a full day.”

“Check the date.”

Bret stared in dismay. “That can’t be right. Maybe it’s glitching like the other clocks and the radar.”

“Yeah, maybe.” But Charlie could feel a deep soreness in his arms and spine now. *And my eyes feel like they’re made of sandpaper.* “I think it’s been longer. We were fogged for 48-hours.”

Bret reached for the door handle. “We have to go get the alpha! She’s still on the island!”

“Do not open that door!” Greg glared at the boy. Bret let go as if he’d been burned.

“It’s not over yet.” Charlie didn’t want Bret to be afraid of Greg. “We don’t budge until the Eagles call all clear.”

Bret couldn’t stand not knowing what was happening with Angela. “Is she back? Is she okay?”

“I don’t have my grid right now.”

“That’s your mom! Come on.”

Charlie glanced at Greg and found the man observing him in concern.

Charlie slowly shook his head. “She’s still in the fog. I don’t have a connection.”

Charlie started changing the other baby while he spoke. “Something’s about to happen.”

Greg nodded. It had brought him right back up. The feeling of danger was clear.

Greg concentrated, listening hard.

Silence greeted him.

“It’s gone quiet now.”

Bret realized Greg was right. The moans and laughs had stopped. Even the music had been shut off.

Cold air blew through the submarine, chilling everyone.

Let me in...

Charlie stiffened. She recognized the presence, though not the mental voice. “No. Go away.”

Let me in, foolish child.

“Not on your life or mine, lady. Go away before I call my mom.”

Your mother is between times. She can't hear you.

Charlie covered the infants and then carried them over to the second crib they'd prepared earlier. "You're a liar. Go away now. I'm busy here."

The sense of menace faded slowly, leaving them all with goosebumps.

"Good job." Greg yawned. "She'll probably try it with everyone now, but only a couple of you can grant her permission to board our ship."

"How do you know that?" Bret didn't understand what was happening. "Who was that?"

"Shh..." Greg wanted to listen to Nature's attempts to seduce the partiers. If any of them caved, they would be out of the Eagles. *Even during the fog, honor matters.*

Greg stayed with Nature mentally, but he was terrified at the thought of facing her. He stayed quiet.

3

Nature strode angrily through the untouchable submarine, scowling at the tiny pests she wasn't allowed to crush. She was here without permission; it made her powerless.

She sniffed delicately, tracking the pungent scent of a founding family line. *I smell them all over this ship!*

She could also tell they were weaker versions than the ones who'd gone to her island.

Nature shivered as pain went through her broken rack. She walked with her hand over the injury and cursed the wolf. She'd figured out where she lost it and who was responsible. *I want to break apart this ship and watch that traitorous animal drown!*

Nature went up the ladder in a smooth pull, now contemplating the two teenage boys who'd refused her demands. The minute they left this ship, she would aim for their hearts.

The smell of old blood grew stronger. Nature tracked it to a small room with two mating humans. She inhaled deeply and identified her target. *Mitchel.*

Adrian felt the arrival of death, rage, and incredible power, but he was too deep in to stop now. He pounded harder, mashing Piper's clit perfectly with each strong thrust. They both cried out as that edge neared again.

Let me in...

Adrian kissed Piper, stealing her breath as he shoved her over the edge with a lip nibble.

Piper arched, tensing from head to toe. "Thank you!"

Adrian slid closer and covered her with his body. The orgasm rocked him so hard his leg clenched. He licked her neck and pushed in deeper.

Let me in now!

Adrian rode the waves, stalling. He wasn't able to deal with Nature in this condition. He was in the throes of lust. He'd wanted to slide between Piper's

long legs since seeing her in the pool in Ciemus. *It's so tight!* He lifted her leg higher onto his hip and restarted them again.

Nature recognized the flesh rut, but she loathed being ignored. She leaned down, purring in his ear. *I'll deal...*

Adrian used the fresh desire to drive life back into his softening body.

Piper shuddered, unable to believe the way he was able to pull pleasure from her so easily.

You belong to me... Let me in!

Adrian rolled Piper over and thrust up in quick, hard jerks that bounced her and restarted them both on that erotic climb for the third time. He wallowed in the physical side of it and refused to let enough blood get to his brain to allow a single thought.

Nature faded angrily. *I'll be back; you'll be very sorry.*

Adrian was sure that she was right.

4

“No one gave her permission. That saved us.”

Greg nodded. He didn't tell Marc that only a few of them could have done that. *He should already know.* Greg didn't want to remind Marc that his kids were in danger again. “That was a serious breach in security. We have to find a way to defend against her visits.”

Marc snorted.

Greg flushed as he recalled they were powerless against her. “So what do we do now?”

Marc reached for another beer. He didn't ask what Cody had known. He didn't need to. Cody had been aware of all of it, and he hadn't told anyone. "We wait."

"For what?"

"For Angela to wake up and save our asses again, of course. I thought you were smart enough to recognize that pattern."

Greg tried not to get angrier. "Didn't it occur to you that she could use a break, that we're supposed to handle it ourselves this time?"

Marc wiggled an angry finger. "Yes, but that's exactly what I would have done before. This time, I'm doing nothing."

Greg didn't know what to say that would get through to Marc. He walked away, shaking his head. "I'll never understand why she tolerates either of you."

Marc lifted his beer in a foamy salute. *I feel the same way.*

Chapter Eleven

Working Through It

1

“**H**ow is she?”

“No change.” Marc swept Angela’s sleeping form in concern. “Harry’s going to start an IV in the morning to make sure she and the baby are getting nutrients.”

Adrian poured a cup of coffee and joined Marc at the table. He didn’t fear being beaten on now. “Any movement at all?”

“No. We’ve started rolling her over every five hours to make sure she doesn’t get bedsores.” Marc was being haunted by this waiting game. It reminded him too much of the rest stop, of waiting to find out if she would live or die.

Adrian also contemplated those days, but he focused on how she had helped them end a tyrant’s rule. Cesar hadn’t survived that encounter with the Eagles and their timid seer. *That gave her the confidence to do all the rest of it. Without that night, she never would have become who she is.*

Marc found it easier not to get nasty about it this time. Accepting Angela’s choices was nothing compared to being in that lab. It was still hurting all of them, though it was slowly losing power. In a few

months, it would only make their stomachs tighten. A few months after that, it would just bring grimaces. A year from now, it would hopefully be like all of their other ugly survival moments—blurry and fading.

Adrian stared at Marc's scruffy face and red eyes instead of Angela's body. "You've been doing well. Even the ones who want you to fight back are proud of you."

Marc snorted. "Whatever."

Adrian grinned. "I guess you know they want the tiger back, and I don't, but I mean it. You're not embarrassing her or questioning her choices anymore. She's happy about that."

"I know. That's why I'm doing it."

"You chose to do what makes her happy."

"Obviously."

"But you don't mean it."

Marc sighed. "I do, most of it. She's brilliant. She protects all of us with everything she has."

"It sounds like you're bitter."

"Ya think?" Marc stared at Adrian in resentment. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Give true, unflinching support to her and the other females?"

Adrian chuckled. "That's easy for me." His voice cooled; his eyes hardened. "I honestly see them as equals."

Marc slumped in the chair. "I suppose your mother taught you that."

Adrian nodded. “Yes. I’m surprised your mother didn’t pass it on to you. From what I’ve heard, she was also strong and brilliant.”

“She was.” Marc refused to share those memories. “She was also ruthless. I viewed her as my tormentor.”

“What about the other women in your life?”

“What other women?”

“The aunts, friends, grandparents, cousins, girlfriends, lovers...your twin sister.”

Marc tensed. “Stop.”

Adrian smiled coldly. “Like that’s going to happen. This is a therapy session, Marcus. We’ll keep doing these until you get over it.”

“We never get over our traumas. You know that. They ride our asses forever.”

“Not when we stop giving them power over us.”

“Drop the psychobabble, *Dr. Mitchel*. You’re not really a shrink.”

“Fine. When you dwell on those ugly moments and let them change your mood or stop you from functioning as a happy person, that’s giving them control. You have to stop yourself from thinking about it. Refuse to engage every time your brain brings it up. You say no and manually redirect your mind to a different topic that’s strong enough to hold you.”

Marc immediately thought of his time in the Marines.

Adrian shook his head. “No, that’s the part you have to let go.”

“It wasn’t all bad.”

“I would imagine most of it was good for you. That doesn’t matter. That culture taught you to look down on anyone who appears weaker.”

Marc couldn’t help being defensive. “I didn’t treat them differently. Some of the men did, but I was better than that.”

“And yet, you silently agreed.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do, and it’s all from observing your interactions. Would you like to know what gave you away first?”

Marc nodded curtly. He couldn’t change his behavior unless he knew exactly what he was doing wrong.

“When she got hurt the first time, you tried to convince her to quit. You never would have treated a man that way. You would have told a man to toughen up and keep going.”

“I love her. I hated seeing her hurt or in pain. I wanted to protect her.”

“As would anyone, but that wasn’t the real reason, was it?”

Marc realized Adrian knew that shame, too. Lying was futile. “No.”

Adrian stayed still so he didn’t inadvertently trigger Marc’s physical anger. None of this was easy on him. “Tell me the truth. Get that poison out.”

Marc contemplated being under the water while Angela was in charge. That action had been

enlightening and devastating at the same time. “I didn’t believe she could do it back then. I wanted a man to have those jobs, those runs.”

“Now tell me when that changed for you, because I know it has. I feel it.”

Marc again considered their underwater hell. “She handled it better than I would have. I never would have considered putting us in a canvas shelter. I might have tied us to the trees and taken the air tanks, but we would have been crushed in the waves of debris that kept coming in. She foresaw it and covered it, and I don’t mean with magic. She didn’t have her gifts and she was fighting the fog. Her mind sees so far! It’s amazing.”

“She’s built for this job. If she ever leaves it, she’ll start fading away.”

Marc’s mind switched to the book he’d read. Before the war, he’d found Orwellian tales to be depressing and without much hope that humanity could survive itself. He still felt that way, but reading *Animal Farm* had also struck another nerve with him. *She’s been like the horse all her life. She works and works and never finds the peace she’s trying to build.*

That story had been done from the point of view of the animals who threw off their human oppressors and ran the farm themselves. *That’s what we’ve done. We’re running our own farm and it isn’t going well. Is that because we can’t be trusted? Was Orwell right?*

“Yes, but also, no. Humans have a great capacity to change.”

“When they’re beaten or tortured into it.”

Adrian shrugged. “It’s environment mostly. If we raise the kids differently, they’ll turn out different.”

“Is that why she has my son doing the job that should have been mine?”

“Partially, yes. But it’s also because that’s his future. She’s training him to keep advancing her goals.”

“And what goals are those?”

“Peace for all. Goodwill on Earth. The return of a happy Creator who shines his light without vengeance.”

“Bullshit.”

Adrian laughed. Then he realized Marc had distracted him. “Tell me about the other women now.”

Marc thought of his aunt Judy, who had stayed with an abusive man for most of her life. She’d birthed two abusive sons.

“Who else?” Adrian was keeping track of Marc’s mind to hopefully make this easier on both of them.

Marc ran through the females, with nothing good to think about any of them. *The aunts and cousins were all like my mother—they controlled their men brutally and didn’t give them loyalty in return. My first official girlfriend was a lot like my mother.*

“Jeanie, right?”

“Yeah.” Marc remembered how pushy she had been when they were alone. “Jeanie wanted me for the power of my family name and possible control over all of us in the future. She didn’t even really like me.”

“Your older sister let herself be beaten on.”

“Yes. She allowed herself to be married off to unsuitable men to please my mother.”

“And the twin sister?”

Marc sighed miserably. “My twin was also timid. She was terrified to use her gifts against anyone, let alone our mother.”

Adrian took a guess. “Your mother was a normal; she thought your twin was possessed.”

“Yes. I look back and I can see now that she was scared of magic.” Watching the normals around them made it easier for Marc to recognize.

“Why?”

“She knew my sister would be the one to remove her for the way she treated me.”

“So she did it before your sister could. And you watched it happen without using your gifts to help her.”

Marc fought the shame. *Think of something else!*

“There’s no reason for you to keep carrying that burden, Marc. Little kids are not meant to challenge adults. We have to grow up first. Then we handle it as they deserve.”

Marc nodded. He'd ruined his family after becoming an adult. Many of them had died in prison. His mother had spent her last days in a nursing home where she was abused. "But I hated her for pushing me into that."

"So you stayed in the Marines, where they slowly returned your sense of honor and self-worth."

Marc snorted. "I stayed in the Marines so I didn't go home and take her place as head of the family. I loathed them, but I could feel that Brady lineage wanting me to take my rightful place."

Adrian felt their bond strengthen. He also felt that way about his family. "You would have been good at it."

"Probably." Marc let out a long, deep breath. He felt better talking about these things. It was just hard to get it started through his stubborn mind.

"Angela wants the old you back."

Marc's eyes flew to his. "That can't be right."

"No, there's nothing right about it, but it is correct. She misses your first relationship. The Eagles miss your rough attitude. You've made quite the impression on all of us."

"What does that have to do with the way I treat her?"

"Everything. At some point, that tiger will come back out of its cage and you'll have to decide how far into the jungle you want to go. If you take it too far, like you were before, you'll lose her even though she thinks it's what she wants."

Marc made a face. “Because she doesn’t. She really wants me to be like you.”

Adrian laughed. “I assure you, she does *not*. She wants the old Marc, just with this new understanding of how valuable she is.”

“I can’t balance the two. It’s one or the other in my brain.”

“Maybe your demon can help when that time comes.”

“Do you let yours pick your words and actions?”

Adrian nodded. “Sometimes. It’s better now, so I don’t have to do that manually. My power has earned my trust.”

Marc had thought he and his demon were on good terms, but the slightly cold air in his mind said differently. “I’m a mess.”

Adrian chuckled again. “We all are. No one comes through life in the same condition they started in. We adjust, we improvise...”

“We adapt, we overcome.” Marc grinned despite himself. “I love that movie.”

“Same. Do you remember how Gunny Highway treated the females?”

Marc frowned. “He tried to get laid. He didn’t see them as equals.”

“But his ex-wife took him back anyway because she loved him, missed him, and she knew he wasn’t going to change any more than he already had.”

Marc waited for the point; he was certain he wasn’t going to like it.

Adrian dropped that bomb gently. “Angela has been doing that with you since you two were kids. She’s always known who and what you are deep inside. She loves you enough to stop trying to change you now because it always takes pain. You’ve never changed your mind about anything unless you were hurt first.”

Marc tried to find a moment where that wasn’t true.

Adrian waited, but he was confident that Marc wouldn’t. He’d been making these observations for over a year. He was confident in his conclusions.

Marc grunted, arms crossing over his chest. “What does that mean?”

“It means she’s been putting in all the hard work. You owe it to her to find that balance and be the man you’re both satisfied with. You can’t make her happy any other way.”

Marc scanned the sleeping people around them who were probably faking to listen. He used them to get something he needed. “Do you know what she’s hiding?”

“As usual, you’ll have to be more specific.” Angela had more secrets than anyone Adrian had ever known, and that included himself.

“About the final battle.”

Adrian shrugged. “Again, more specific.”

Marc hit the table. “Don’t play with me! I’ve been straight with you.”

Adrian sighed. “I’ve caught flashes and then it goes dark.”

Marc's anger vanished in an instant. The fear rose. "She has no plans to survive."

"No. She's too full of guilt and shame that she won't let go of."

"She believes she deserves it."

"Maybe she does."

Marc scowled. "She's the kindest, most caring person any of us have ever met!"

"Agreed. She's also the most ruthless. Anyone who has ever crossed her would verify that—if they were still alive."

Marc refused to let Adrian talk bad about his wife. "She doesn't deserve any of this."

"Ah. You're still under the impression that she would have picked something else for herself but couldn't."

"Isn't that how it happened? I shoved her onto a path she never would have taken. Fate finished what I started."

"No. She could have picked a different way at any point."

Marc was desperate to save her more than his marriage. "Prove that!"

Adrian tried to find the right words, but there was only one thing he could say. He hoped it didn't restart an old quarrel. "She put her kids in danger to keep this job."

Marc's mind snapped that into place. The old anger flared up.

Marc shoved it down. Making progress here was more important. "Keep going."

Adrian was proud of Marc. “Even after all the issues she’s had, she kept the job. Look at her—I mean, really see her. She’s scarred all over her body and her mind now. She could have walked away at any point. You didn’t do that to her, Marc. She chose it.”

Marc knew he would consider that later. He hoped it would be a comfort. “We have to find a way to save her.”

“I’m working on it, but her plans are so intricate! And she’ll just change them where she needs to. We have to find a way to make her think it’s her idea to survive.”

“I’m going to use the kids against her.”

Adrian nodded. “That’s good, but it won’t be enough. We need some other leverage.”

“What we need is to figure out exactly why she chose to die.”

Wade sat up. He was tired of pretending to be asleep. He wanted to help.

Wade had spent the last two days working with Cody and advancing Angela’s other plans. That included making sure everyone kept their appointments. “Will she do another therapy session, a real one?”

Adrian shrugged. “She will if we tell her the others need to see her pouring out her heart and soul, too, but I doubt she’ll be honest.”

Marc’s frustration spewed out. “We have to save her! She deserves it more than anyone. She’s saved all of us over and over again.”

On the bunk near them, Charlie rolled over. He pushed up on his arm. “That’s why she decided to handle the final battle that way, I think. She loves the job, but she hates the pain she causes to achieve those goals. She wants to escape that guilt, and to stop herself from doing it to anyone else. She knows she’s becoming corrupt and dangerous. She also knows none of us are strong enough to stop her if she crosses that line.”

Charlie yawned as they gawked at him in disappointment that they hadn’t figured it out themselves.

Charlie sat up in the bunk and wiped crust from his eyes.

Adrian and Marc exchanged dumbfounded, amused glances.

“We can use that.”

“Yep. Your kid’s a genius.” Adrian grinned. “Not you, though. Just the kid.”

Marc laughed.

Angela let out an annoyed breath and smacked the cot. “How am I supposed to sleep through all this jibber-jabber?!”

Everyone rotated toward the bunks in hope.

“She’s awake.” Zack rubbed his smooth chin. He loved a close shave. “That doesn’t sound like she’s okay, though.”

“Angela?”

“Boss?”

Angela groaned and sat up. She glared around at all of them. “I worked a double and then cooked a meal. What the hell?!”

Cheers filled the room. That had been the night before they reached Pitcairn, but she had some of her memory back. That was the first stage of returning to their reality.

Angela tolerated the hugs from Charlie and Marc, and the shoulder pats from the others. She knew something bad had happened. She struggled to remember what it was.

Marc kissed her chilly cheek. “You were out like a light. We couldn’t reach you for days.”

“Days?” Angela checked herself for injuries; her hand settled over her big stomach in relief.

Marc kissed the top of her head. “Harry said the baby’s fine. She’s the right size and everything.”

Angela smiled, forcing back tears. “I needed to hear that.”

“And we need you.” Marc nuzzled her cheek. “Don’t ever sleep again, okay?”

Angela chuckled dryly with them. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

Marc handed her a canteen.

Charlie stayed next to her, providing protection. He and Marc hadn’t left her side except for bathroom breaks, and then Adrian or Greg had filled in.

Angela stood and grabbed onto the bunk to keep from falling. “Why do my legs hurt so much?”

“You have a lot of bruises from the way you hit the water.” Harry was sorry he hadn’t been able to heal it, but her body was very slow to respond to magic now.

Angela winced as she remembered the fall. “I’m lucky to be alive.”

She turned slowly, searching for the one who’d saved her.

Cody grinned from the next bunk over. He and Cate had also stayed close when they weren’t working. “We missed you.”

Angela staggered to their bunk and hugged both kids.

Charlie yawned again, and watched Angela and the twins without jealousy or bitterness.

Adrian noticed Charlie’s happy vibes. “Something happened with you.”

Charlie nodded. “It’s good, though. Really good.”

“Wet dream?”

People frowned at Kenn for the crude comment, but some of the males, and Charlie, snickered.

Adrian motioned. “Tell us. We need another good boost.”

“Tracy had the baby. I dreamt about it.” Charlie grinned, sending out more proud vibes. “They’re both fine. I’m a father!”

Nearly everyone began offering him congratulations. The bunk room grew loud with all of the voices. Almost their entire group was in here right now.

Marc, Greg, and Adrian also joined in, but they kept shields over their thoughts.

Charlie had a light mustache starting to come in and wild bed hair sticking up on one side. His t-shirt and boxers completed the image, making him look too young to be a father. Angela mourned his lost youth, but she didn't blame Tracy. She blamed the war. "Congratulations."

"I'd like to add to the good mood." Shawn sat up as they all rotated toward him. He'd been Blinking so much that he was starting to feel rough again. "I might have figured out how to get us home."

"That's great!" Angela limped toward the bathroom.

"What do we have to do?"

"Is it hard?"

Shawn hadn't stopped for a shower, though he had changed clothes. The kids had made sure he was fed, watered, and emptied out, but he'd refused to stop Blinking for anything else. "Not hard at all. We just have to drop a nuke and not die in the blast. For us, that should be easy."

Chapter Twelve
It's Wrong

1

Angela staggered against the wall as she reached the bathroom. “I’m listening.” She disappeared inside.

Cody chuckled. “When you have to go, you have to go.”

The adults were still staring at Shawn.

“We’re not using the sub!” Trent tensed the new muscles he’d been building in the small gym. He was instantly furious that anyone would even consider that.

“Are you okay, Shawn? ’Cause that sounds like you’re not.” Even Kenn wouldn’t agree to use a nuclear weapon and he loved working with anything that went boom.

Gus also put his foot down. “We’re not restarting the war.”

Zack tried to be reasonable and explain why it was an awful idea. “Even if the blast doesn’t hit any survivors, or us, the fallout will still spread and kill people in other areas. We can’t be responsible for that.”

Shawn took a drink from the canteen that Cate nudged toward his hand, letting them get it all out so he could explain without being interrupted.

Kyle thought about Pitcairn Island and the beloved, unreachable family waiting there for him. Being disconnected this way was worse than the separation of a normal run. *I still can't believe I couldn't get through to her.* Kyle was willing to try something drastic. “A new nuclear explosion probably would bring Nature to us. He’s right about that.”

Trent’s red curls shook violently. “It’s not worth killing more innocent people!”

Kyle wanted to discuss all the options, even the ones that were bad. “We could pick somewhere without people.”

Trent’s voice raised again. “And just where would that be?! We’re not bombing other countries. That’s the same old shit restarting and I won’t be a part of that!”

Zack tried to shut it down before Trent triggered a physical fight. “It doesn’t matter where we do it. The fallout would still spread everywhere. Angela isn’t going to do that.”

“Enough.” Marc gestured before Trent could keep it going. “Let the man talk.”

Shawn didn’t care about the tension. “There are nuclear reactors melting down all over the planet. Fallout is spreading everywhere anyway. I’m sorry to add to that, but the planet has to filter it out. I can’t fix that issue. We’ve already destroyed the world. The best we can do is pick a location that was hit hard the first time, so there won’t be live people there.”

Trent smacked the wall in frustration. “It’s still not right!”

“Wait. Why would it draw Nature to us if it’s happening all over the planet?” Isabel winced at a stomach cramp and then tried not to think about how hungry she was for raw meat.

Zack remembered Isabel had been in the lab all of her life. She didn’t have common knowledge unless it related to her old job. “Because those power plants are just empty buildings. As each one melts down, it’s more proof that the reign of humans is almost over. A new detonation will remind her that she hasn’t killed the rest of us. We might recover and she can’t allow it.”

That was what Trent was afraid of. “And then she’ll come in force. She’ll sink us!”

Kyle shrugged. “We can dive. She has very little power under the water. That ecosystem is controlled by a very different entity.”

“Nature isn’t a mouse that we can lure in with a dab of peanut butter.” Kenn tried to offer a different solution. “And we may not need to try anyway. She came here, to the sub, while we were on the island. She tried to get someone to open the hatch for her, which would give her permission to be here.”

Half of the listening people hadn’t known that. Fear filled the air; everyone regarded Angela as she came out of the bathroom.

Angela got clean clothes from her kit as she spoke. “Nature was able to come here, but she

couldn't do anything except tempt us. We were only in danger if someone caved."

Zack frowned. "We want her to come to us, right?"

"Not while we're in the fog. We have to be fully alert when we deal with Nature." Angela delivered an approving smile at all of the people who'd been fog-napped. "Great job on not giving in to her seductions."

"We had other things going on." Biff grinned at Harry.

Harry blushed. "I don't even remember her trying with me."

"Well, you did have other things on your mind." Biff snickered. "And on your mouth, your hands, your—"

"Stop!"

Biff laughed. "No, I don't remember hearing that from any of them."

Those who'd enjoyed random sex during the fog relaxed about their behavior since the Eagles didn't seem to be upset about it.

Shawn didn't get distracted. "Nature is bound by the basic laws, like we are."

Angela pulled her hair into a ponytail. "But only when we're not on land. She has total dominion there."

Shawn nodded. "When we're ready, we give her permission to be here."

"What happens when she arrives?" Biff assumed Angela had a plan for it.

Angela snapped her bra into place. She didn't turn around. "She isn't going to walk into a trap, gentlemen. She'll wait until we're fog-fucked again."

Greg laughed. "Her name's the best."

"That's why she gets the big bucks." Biff stroked his short ponytail. He'd decided to try longer hair. So far, he liked it. *So did Jayda. She finished me off with a lap dance.* He blushed at the memory. *Tits in my face, hands in my hair, and we came together. It was amazing.*

Trent grinned, distracted from his anger. It had been a fun, taboo moment that he would never forget. Trent hadn't experienced that type of sex before. *Now, I might crave it forever.*

Angela smiled tolerantly, but the waves of cold air coming from her dampened the improving mood.

Kenn was catching on now. "If we all refused her this time, we will next time, too. She'd have to pick a time when we're alert."

Shawn gestured pointedly. "And she won't. So we'll drop a nuke and pull her in."

"California was hit hard in the war." Charlie had realized it was his vision coming true.

"We did have one weak point in her attempts to seduce that permission to be here." Angela slowly rotated to glare with bright red orbs.

Adrian swallowed as all eyes came to him. As one of the founding family lines, he could invite or refuse visitors. "Take it away. I've been blacklisted.

Say the words and take away all of my power in this camp.”

Angela padded over to Adrian while fastening on her gun belt. It clicked loudly in the sudden tense silence.

Adrian froze as she leaned in and softly kissed his cheek.

“Thank you.” She stepped back, eyes still bright red. “But you’re going to be very sorry that you forced me into this.”

Only Adrian knew what she was talking about. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“But you’re not sorry right now.”

“No. It’s wrong. I was put here to protect them and to love them. I’ll never support it.”

People began to realize there was more going on with Adrian than just him leaving the bridge unmanned.

Bret shivered at the tension. He slowly inched toward the exit and went out into the hall. *When Reicher got like that, someone died.*

Angela was sorry she’d spooked the boy, but she couldn’t help the fury.

Isabel also retreated, expecting a violent fight. She could feel Angela’s anger.

Adrian quickly tried distraction. “I’ve studied Nature’s reactions for a year. I believe taking our gifts away is a charm or a spell. With the fade, it’s almost like it gets stronger each time. That’s a curse or some ability that she has and we don’t.”

Kenn didn't want Angela to stew on whatever Adrian had done. He helped move them along. "You got through to Tim on the island, even though it didn't go well, and the cats saw us, or sensed us. How can we use that?"

Angela snorted, not looking away from Adrian, but her eyes returned to normal. "Exactly as it was intended. Nature gave us just enough hope to keep us there, working on it, while we keep fading away."

Shawn delivered some more bad news in the pause. He was still doing his job as their 10th man. "I think it's a mistake to assume we'll have three days each time. Nature cheats."

Adrian winced.

Angela's orbs lit up bright red again.

Cody distracted her this time. "You said she's different. How did you mean that?"

Angela saw where he was pointing.

She moved away from Adrian, calming, but everyone understood that explosion was going to happen and it would be ugly.

"Isabel is autistic. She's highly functioning, dangerous, and hard to reach. In a way, she's already been fogged. There's only so much you can add to that."

Trent was enjoying being able to hear the mental comments this time. He was adjusting well to being a descendant. It was fueling his Eagle ego and making him more aggressive than he usually

was. “She’s not important right now. How do we predict the cloud?!”

Kenn and Kyle frowned at Trent.

“We just have to determine the pattern.” Marc regarded Angela. “Time binds all matter in a triangle.”

Shawn tensed. “A triangle!”

Trent frowned. “I don’t get it.”

Kyle swallowed a huff. *He’s not very smart.*

Trent’s face fell.

Kyle groaned as he remembered Trent was now a descendant and a new one, which meant he was constantly listening to every thought from the people around him. “I’m sorry.”

Trent glared. “Honesty is best. Just be ready to eat that opinion.”

Kyle nodded smoothly. “I will.”

Kyle loved it when a rookie was able to prove a senior man wrong. *It usually means they’re meant for leadership.*

Trent brightened.

Angela gave Kyle a subtle smile. The mobster was great with their fighters.

“I have an idea.” Cody tugged on the top button of his long sleeved shirt, but he didn’t open it despite being a little too warm.

The room went quiet as everyone turned toward Cody.

Cate stepped in front of her brother, glaring at them.

Cody gently pushed her aside so they could see him. “We’ll pick a shield crew. That team will stay under shields no matter what’s happening or where they’re at. If it is a spell or a curse, the fog won’t be able to get through, so we’ll remain alert.”

Zack scowled. “What do you mean *we*?”

Cody smiled. “I’m going to lead the shield team.”

The caretakers all glanced at Marc to determine his reaction. They followed Angela’s orders to the letter, but they still considered Marc to be the boss. They had no problem with his son running things in her place. But they knew he did.

Just go with the flow. Marc focused on Adrian instead. “Why haven’t you been doing Keeper duties?”

“It stopped coming to me right before we reached the lab.” Adrian hadn’t thought much about it. “I assume it will restart soon. I think it gives the Keeper a mental break to prevent burnout.”

Cody handed his notebook to Angela. “Thank you for the practice.”

“Thank you for doing such a good job.”

People realized Angela was back in charge now. They congratulated Cody.

“Nice work, kid.”

“How does it feel to finish your first run?”

Angela’s lips thinned. “It’s not his first run.”

Cody hugged her tightly.

Angela held the boy and finally let them all off the hook. “We’re going with Cody’s plan for now.

Later, we'll use one of mine. The shield team will be Cody, Charlie, Kenn, Wade, Jayda, Bret, and any of the mothers who want to stay with their kids."

A dozen people spoke at once.

Standing near the door, Jayda listened and wondered what would happen when this run was over. She had no doubt about them being successful in getting home, but they were all so damaged and changed that it was hard to imagine them staying for long.

Jayda had her own team waiting upon arrival. She'd done well with them before this run, but Jayda wasn't sure if she still wanted that honor. *I might want to go find my old friends and family. They deserve to be in Safe Haven, too. I feel like a coward hiding from them.*

Shawn caught that and frowned. He was feeling cowardly, too, though the situation was different. Shawn remembered jumping from their cruise ship during the storm. *I had balls then.*

Shawn grimaced at the bad choice of thought, then let a chuckle through. *I can't heal if I don't let myself.*

Wade glowered at Shawn.

Shawn dropped his head. "I really am sorry. The situation got to me."

Wade didn't forgive him. He kept glaring.

Angela broke the tension this time. "It's your turn, Zack."

Zack stared in confusion. "What?"

Angela smirked. “You said you would get back to me.”

He stalled. “On what?”

“On why we found you in a tree, naked.”

Zack flushed. “Must you?”

Angela grinned. “Come on. Take one for the team. We need the laugh.”

Zack sighed. “I was trying to tempt Nature to show herself so we could talk and maybe make a deal.”

“Naked?”

Zack groaned. “I was sure she would be proud of her work. I’m very well endowed.”

Laughter went through the witnesses.

“Very?”

“Very.”

Angela wanted more. “So you...?”

“Strutted my stuff around the jungle.”

More laughter rolled through the ship.

“Where did the tree come into play?”

“I was trying to get close to her.”

Angela figured it out. “You scored with a tree. How was it?”

Zack hung his head at the groans and laughter. “I’ll never live this down.”

“Did it work?”

Zack sighed. “I don’t know. I always go right to sleep after a great orgasm.”

“Then it was good. So noted.”

Zack covered his face with his hand. “It might have been the best I’ve ever had. I think I’m ruined for normal sex.”

The PA system broke through the laughter. “Boss, I’m getting a call.” Ray had been watching on the monitors and listening mentally.

Angela felt a deep chill. She sighed. “Here we go again.”

Men nodded at her in recognition.

“Let’s hear it.”

Ray played the call.

“This is the SS Sulphur Queen. We see you, submarine. Slow down! You’re coming in way too fast!”

The computer warning system activated next, blaring loudly. “*The navigational system has detected a collision course!*”

Ray shut it off. “It was a glitch last time. And I don’t see anything on the radar.”

Adrian keyed his radio. “Keep us moving, Ray.”

“I don’t take orders from you!”

Angela felt death arrive. She grabbed Cody and shielded him with her body.

An instant later, the submarine slammed into something hard and dense, sending them all flying like toys.

The impact knocked debris and people into the air. Kenn grabbed Cate and rotated with the force, hitting the bunk rail in her place. He slid to his knees as she landed on the mattress. Blood welled from his forehead.

Awful cries matched the loud shriek of metal grinding. Marc let the momentum carry him over one of the cribs, protecting the startled kids with his body. He held on as the submarine shuddered, slowing down as it pushed through whatever they'd hit.

Wade fell, allowing the force to toss him toward the other baby beds. Debris hit his back in several places, leaving painful welts.

Isabel caught Trent's big arm and held on to keep from sliding.

The sub jerked to an ugly stop, sending more people to the floor. The grinding metal noise stopped; the cries didn't.

Kyle groaned, hands coming up to stop the pain in his chest. He felt blood and glanced down.

"Medic!" Zack put his hand over Kyle's wound to stop the flow.

Angela rose, pulling Cody up with her. A fast glance around said they hadn't gotten through the crash unscathed. "Medic!"

Harry was already crawling over. He put a hand on Kyle's bleeding chest.

Nothing happened. His gifts were gone again.

Angela groaned. "Really? Now?"

Harry took the shirt Gus handed him and pushed it over the wound. "Any idea what it was?"

Kyle pointed, causing fresh blood to ripple down his chest, soaking the cloth.

A bloody screwdriver rolled across the floor by the wall.

Harry kept pressure on the wound. “There’s only blood half an inch up on the tool. Hopefully it didn’t penetrate more deeply.”

Harry felt around on the wound to determine how bad it was.

Shawn retrieved the first aid kit from the wall holder and stepped over dazed people and debris to reach them.

Angela scanned again. “You okay?”

Kenn wiped blood from his face. “Something hit me and kept going. I’m fine, but I am pressing charges against the driver.”

Angela chuckled.

Marc and Wade checked on the crying kids.

Cate went to Kenn and held his hand. “It’ll be okay. We’ve got you.”

Kenn felt tears rise and swallowed them with a growl.

Cate giggled. The crash hadn’t upset her. She’d been through worse.

“Thanks, mate.” Isabel smiled at Trent. He’d hugged her close when she grabbed his arm, automatically protecting her.

Trent let go of Isabel, hand tingling from the contact. “What did we hit?”

“No idea.” Angela keyed her radio. “You okay up there, Ray?”

Ray’s voice came right back. “A little banged up, but yeah. Give me a minute on a damage report. I’m checking things now.”

“Copy.” Angela saw Harry was handling the injuries. She headed for the exit. “Let’s go see if we can help whoever we hit. They’re probably sinking.”

Those who weren’t hurt or busy followed her to the ladder, all hoping that wasn’t the case. No one wanted to go into the water after any survivors.

Cody stayed on Angela’s heels, but he didn’t speak. He was replaying the instant of them saving his life. The screwdriver had been meant for him. Kyle had taken that hit instead. His smaller body would have been impaled.

Angela reached back and grabbed his hand, trying to send comfort.

Cody felt better right away.

Angela let go and hurried up to the first level while people behind her stopped to look into the other compartments to determine if anyone else needed help. The submarine was a mess again. It looked like it had been lifted up to make everything slide to one end. It would take hours to clean.

Angela pounded on the bridge door, then kept going. “I want that damage report!”

Ray flinched. “Working on it!”

“Work faster.” Angela doubted the sub had much damage. It was built to withstand almost anything, but if they did need to do repairs or evacuate, she had to have time to cover it.

Angela hurried to the hatch as more of the people behind her broke off to check compartments on the top level of the sub.

Angela reached the hatch and then paused. She had a bad feeling.

“It’s quiet.”

Angela nodded at Cody’s concerned comment. If they’d hit another ship, that boat was already beneath the water. If it was still sinking, there would be noises to match and the cries of people trying to survive. All she heard was a dull cracking noise.

Angela went up the ladder, once again cursing herself for wanting to be a normal. *I miss my gifts.* She had no idea what was waiting for them up there. *But it’s not good. I’m already sure of that.* “Stay close to me.”

“I will.”

Adrian finally caught up to them and grabbed Angela’s ankle. “Stop. Don’t go up there without a team.”

Angela kicked out of his grip and then kicked again, catching his nose.

Crunch!

Angela went on up the ladder as Adrian fell down. “Don’t ever touch me, *cheater.*”

Adrian didn’t hear her through his screams.

Isabel pushed Adrian out of the way and followed Angela and Cody up the ladder. “Medic!”

Marc sneered at Adrian as he also climbed the ladder.

Adrian kicked out angrily, catching Marc in the leg.

Not expecting it, Marc fell forward, smacking his head on the steel ladder.

Angela stopped at the top and looked down.

Adrian curled into a tight ball, holding his nose as it bled.

Angela missed her gifts even more. “You’ll pay for that, too.”

She pushed the hatch open and went up.

The caretakers hurried out of the theater and followed them up the ladder.

Ray’s voice came over the radio. “I’m not seeing any serious damage, Boss. We have a warning light to check something called the seawater valve, but that’s it.”

“Copy. We’ll cover those as we go. Keep that door locked.” Angela didn’t want to take a chance on whoever they hit getting access to the bridge.

“You got it.”

A frigid blast of air swarmed through the open hatch and ran through the top level of the submarine.

Angela shivered. Her mind snapped it all into place. “It’s winter in this hemisphere.”

“So?” Isabel stayed close to Angela as she climbed out of the sub.

“When you have cold air and water, what do you get?”

Isabel stared in surprise. “Ice.”

“Exactly.” Angela pointed. “We hit ice.”

She stepped aside so the others could come up. “But that’s not the problem.”

Isabel followed Angela’s line of sight and found ice as far as she could see in front of the submarine.

The front of their ship was deep into a layer of it, causing a large fracture that was still splitting into the distance. The sound of it was deep, loud, eerie. “We’re stuck.”

“Maybe, but that’s not what I meant.” Angela swept the frozen landscape, still cursing her lack of power. “We’re not alone.”

Three other ships were mired in the thick ice and all of them held shadowy forms that were pointing or waving. “And those aren’t ghosts.”

Chapter Thirteen
Self-Correcting

1

“**T**ake him to the bunk room and stay with him.” Angela gently pushed Cody toward Isabel.

“I want to stay with you.” Cody was eager to be a part of everything.

Isabel tugged on Cody’s arm. “It’s not safe for you up here. They don’t have their gifts to protect you.”

“I don’t understand what the problem is.”

Isabel kept herding the boy toward the ladder. “I’ll explain it to you when we get downstairs.”

Cody allowed Isabel to get him back into the submarine because of that promise. He could feel the tension in the air, but he didn’t know where it was coming from.

Angela went toward the front of the submarine that was now encased in thick layers of shattered ice. It reminded her of the water buffaloes that had disintegrated in the mountain earthquake. Her next flash was of losing Jeremy. Samantha and Neil weren’t the only ones who were scarred by that death.

Marc could feel Angela’s distracted state. He wanted to keep coasting, but that wasn’t possible at

this moment. He shifted over so his big body was between her and the possible danger.

Angela immediately felt safer, but she didn't have time to reward him for stepping up. They were in a lot of trouble. *We spend too much time this way.*

Angela went to the end of the submarine, but she didn't tread onto the ice that had pushed over the surface and scattered large chunks of the bluish white debris. There was no way to know if it was safe to walk on. It looked as though almost 10 feet of the submarine was now in the ice.

“We can put this thing into reverse, right?”

Angela shrugged at Erin's question. She wasn't sure. “We'll talk to Ray.”

Erin glanced around and stiffened. “I see live people.”

Angela knelt and gently pushed on the broken ice covering the front of the submarine. It didn't give at all. The sinking feeling settled into her gut again. She looked at Marc. “We might be stuck.”

Marc returned her worried glance. “We'll find out when we try to move.”

Angela headed for the hatch. She was already sure they were, but she still hoped to be wrong. Submarines were built to spend a lot of time beneath the water, not stuck in the ice. It was also possible that this wasn't too much for their ship to handle. She just had to hope they got lucky.

Marc encouraged the others to follow them back to the ladder. The tension was growing. Angela wasn't acknowledging the three other ships that

were stuck in the ice around them, but it was only a matter of time before some of those people became determined to make contact. Marc was already absolutely certain they shouldn't do that. The mood up here wasn't good.

Marc didn't know which one of the three groups were the problem, but his money was on the pirates. There were at least 30 aggressive, thin men with a mix of ill-fitting gear and swords on that ship. A fast glance might discount them because of that, but Safe Haven had already encountered pirates since the war and even though they had won, this wouldn't be an easy battle because they didn't have their gifts. This run didn't have a lot of physical fighters. Marc wasn't confident enough in the men below to handle so many combatants at once. *Because if there are 30 of them in view, then there are probably double that amount down inside the ship. We would be seriously outnumbered in that battle.*

Angela stopped at the top of the ladder and motioned the others to go down ahead of her. She took the moment to examine the other ships.

The closest one was a huge oil tanker completely surrounded by ice. It was impossible to tell if the tanker had crashed into it like they had or if the ice had formed around it. The layers were thick, with no cracks or shatters on the three sides that she could see. There were only 10 nervous men and women in view, but they were all well-armed. Their blue and gray uniforms identified them as

employees of the company that owned the oil tanker. Angela briefly wondered if they were carrying fuel, but there was no way to tell from here. She also wondered if they might not be a bigger threat than the pirates. They were in better shape. That implied they were either better fighters, better armed, or both. There was no way they would have survived this long being that close to pirates otherwise.

The small sailboat on the other side of the oil tanker held a barking dog and two men wearing winter clothes that had been modified into cut-off shirts and ragged shorts. She could see the bandages from their injuries and she could feel their fear. Angela saw each of them was holding a machine gun, but their anxiety implied they were out of ammunition. She was surprised they hadn't been overrun by the pirates or the oil workers. The barking Golden Retriever should have been claimed for food in this environment. *Maybe none of them have been stuck here long enough to be that hungry yet.*

Marc kept his body between Angela and the ships while tilting to the side to allow her a view. She needed to be able to see everything around them to make a choice on what they were going to do next. Marc kept an ear out for crunching ice that would imply someone was coming their way. That was all he did, though. Angela was the boss and Cody was her heir. Wade was the XO. *I'm nothing in this camp now and I have to remember that.*

Otherwise, my byzan status will force me to fight her for control on everything. It's all or nothing with me; it always has been and that's the problem.

Angela felt Marc's distracted state this time. She pulled on his arm and sent him down the hatch, shaking her head at the protest he would have reluctantly given. "You're going with the flow, remember?"

Marc flushed. He hadn't known she'd caught that thought earlier.

Angela snorted at his surprise and waited for him to go below.

While she waited, she skimmed the other side of the pirate vessel and found numerous wrecks with no people, no lights, and nothing usable other than the wood they were built from. Again, she doubted the other ships had been mired in this ice for long, otherwise they would have reclaimed those wrecks for fuel or warmth. None of the ships around them were nuclear. Two of them required fuel in some form to be operational.

Angela narrowed her lids against the glare of the ice and cold sunlight. She didn't make any gestures that could be mistaken for friendliness or hostility. She didn't want to trigger a meeting or an attack. She wasn't ready for either one.

The radio on her belt echoed loudly in the tense silence. "The sub seems fine, Boss. I'm going to try to pull us out of here. Let me know when you're ready."

Angela didn't detect any lights on any of the vessels, but one of them had enough power to make call on their radio. *They tried to warn us. When things go crazy, that's the group we might be able to trust.*

She felt all of the stranded travelers around them getting ready to try to make contact. The ice was thick enough all around those three ships for people to walk on it. There was a small fissure in the ice next to the submarine that would have to be jumped, but it was entirely possible for everyone now watching her intently to reach their ship. Angela keyed her radio. "Lock us down. Meeting in five minutes in the mess."

Angela quickly went down the ladder, pulling the hatch shut. She locked it and then double checked it. Then she motioned toward the rear hatch. "I want a guard on both entrances; make sure they stay locked."

Gus pointed at Erin, who had reluctantly come down the ladder right before Marc. "Cover the rear."

The woman went without protest. She was happy to have something to do.

"I'll cover this hatch."

Angela shook her head. "Get another hard body on it. I want you to stay by the bridge."

Gus motioned toward other people in the hallway.

Angela went inside the therapy cubby and shut the door. There was something she needed to handle

and even though they were in another bad situation, it couldn't wait. "I'm sorry I scared you."

Bret stayed still and didn't answer.

Angela moved into his view and stopped. He was squeezed into the tiny corner between the shelves and the wall. It was his go-to place when he got upset.

"You saw people get punished in the lab."

Bret forced himself to nod because it was expected.

Angela hated his fear. She also welcomed it this time because it was going to give her an opportunity to help him through one of his mental traumas. It was easy to overlook the fact that he needed help because of who he was. "You believe you were safer there."

Bret didn't nod this time. He was too scared to.

Angela didn't need him to confirm it. "Tell me why."

Bret was afraid to refuse. He forced out a mumble, while bracing for a punishment. "Reicher had rules. As long as we followed them, we didn't get hurt."

Angela waved a calm hand toward the hallway, where Adrian was still sitting against the wall and bleeding. The medics hadn't gotten to him yet. "He broke a big rule."

Bret knew she wanted an interaction here. He forced himself to keep responding through the fear of her anger. "What rule did he break?"

She studied the blue-eyed, blond boy. “Does it really matter?”

Bret slowly shook his head. “No. Any rule that is broken has to have a punishment.”

“Then why are you upset?”

“You hurt him.”

Angela nodded. “Who punished people in the lab?”

That answer was easier for Bret. “Sometimes the security force; sometimes, Reicher.”

Angela gestured again.

Bret got her point this time, but it wasn't enough. “You said vengeance wasn't allowed and then you hurt him!”

Angela didn't react in any way except for words. Bret was showing an emotion now and she didn't want that to stop. “Some rules deserve a harsher punishment than others. Why do you think it was vengeance?”

Bret's confused anger paused while he tried to find an answer. His fear also began to fade. “I'm not sure.”

“You know how angry I am with him for the things he's done in the past, so you assumed those emotions were part of my reaction.”

That made sense to the boy. “But it wasn't. You're fair and honest...”

“Go on and finish that sentence.” Angela didn't need gifts to know he had held something back.

“You’re more powerful than all of them. If you wanted it to be vengeance, then it would be and they wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.”

“And I’ve considered going that route, but I won’t. Reicher’s people are incredibly well-behaved as long as things are going their way. When things are not going their way, they become dangerous and unruly.”

“Aren’t Safe Haven people the same way?”

Angela shook her head. “Even when they’re furious with me, they understand I’m fair and I don’t lie. I have no reason to. Like you said, I usually have unlimited power. If I wanted to be bad, why would I hide it behind a good act?”

Bret was finally able to relax. “I guess you wouldn’t.”

Angela smiled at him. “It’s okay to be afraid of people who are more powerful than you are. It’s also okay to question the motives of people who are more powerful than you. Reicher taught you not to rebel for any reason. He was openly bad, and he mistreated his staff almost as much as he mistreated the subjects he held captive. The difference between us isn’t always obvious because many of our methods are similar. As you spend more time around me, you’ll understand why the impression you have of me is wrong. You’ll self-correct as we go.” Her voice cooled. “But you are *not* allowed to punish yourself anymore.”

A deep frown came over Bret’s expression.

“I mean it, boy. If I think you need to be punished, then I will damn well do it. You have not broken a rule, unless you punish yourself again without my permission. Are we clear?”

Bret held in a shiver, scared again. When she got mad, it was impossible to ignore. “I’ll stop, I promise.”

Angela pointed. “The cuts on your arm will start to heal in the next couple of days because you aren’t aggravating them by adding new cuts or picking at the injuries to punish yourself. If I see those spots opening up, then we’re going to have a huge problem. Don’t make me put you through a daily medical exam and punishment. I’ll do it and everyone on this sub will help me. I will also lock your gifts so you can’t hide from us. Torture is not allowed in my camp, not even the kind we do to ourselves.”

Bret tried not to cry. He took a chance and reached out to her. “It doesn’t feel right. The lab hurt me. That feels like home.”

Angela wasn’t surprised by that revelation, only horrified. It exactly matched the desire of the other kids in her camp when it came to having match ups. Bret’s mental struggles would lead him into those same situations, but only losing that fight and having someone else cause him pain would actually be satisfying. She wasn’t sure yet how she would fulfill that need for him without allowing him to be abused, but she was determined that she would. Bret was a good kid who had managed to survive awful

people. He was one of her orphans and she wanted him to recover and have a wonderful life. That wouldn't be completely possible, but a lot of it would be as long as they were both willing to work on it.

Angela headed for the exit. "I need a bodyguard. Stick close."

Bret was completely distracted by that. "I don't have my gifts and I'm not a fighter."

"You're incredibly observant and very in tune to my moods even without your gifts. I need that. The others aren't translating me as well as you are."

Bret assumed she would want him to tell people when she needed something or to alert them to any problems they missed. He was happy to do the job. He fell in behind her as she exited the cubby without realizing he had just had his first therapy session with the boss.

Angela walked by Adrian without glaring at him like she wanted to, but only because of Bret. Some of her reaction had been vengeance. *I'm only human. I try not to be most days, but it doesn't always work.*

Adrian held his bleeding nose and watched her, but he wasn't resentful. *I deserved that and more for crossing her.*

The radio crackled again with Ray's nervous voice. "I'm going to try to pull us out of here now by changing the rotation of the propellers."

Ray had a clear view of the situation on the front camera monitor that wasn't mired in the ice and

blocked. He was hoping to back out like it was a car. “I’m following the instructions Saul left and I have a manual... You all should probably hold onto something.”

Angela paused near the radio room and took a firm grip on one of the metal handles that were set into the wall for exactly this purpose. She also braced her feet against one of the metal bumps in the floor that accompanied those handles. She didn’t know what they were called. During a dive, sailors could be thrown around everywhere. The handles and spots on the floors kept that from happening. Angela and her team had already used them several times. She hoped it wasn’t needed as she gestured at the people around her to do the same.

The submarine engine became louder. It ramped up quickly and began to drown out the sounds of grinding metal and breaking ice. The ship shuddered and jerked backward.

People cried out, not expecting it even though Ray had warned them. Angela noticed that in dismay. She willed Ray to go harder and faster. She could feel time running out on them again.

The engine grew louder as Ray tried again to reverse their course. Warning bells sounded through the bridge door. Lights flickered and the grinding noises continued, but the submarine refused to budge.

“I don’t think we moved at all. I’m going to try again with a little more force this time. Hold on.”

Angela and the others who were using the hand grips held on tighter at Ray's warning.

The submarine groaned this time, shivering and shaking. Debris fell off tables and shelves, clattering to the floor. Some of them cracked, shattering pieces of ceramic that had been brought from the lab. The lights flickered again.

Down in the mess, the damp pipe that Kyle had noticed began to drip.

Ray's disappointed voice came over the radio once more. "I don't think it's a good idea for me to keep doing that. I have alarms going off all over the console. We'll have to try something else."

"I'll get back to you." Angela let go of her radio. She went to the second floor.

Groups of people were already waiting on her. Others were wandering around and staring at everyone else without recognition.

"We're going to have to make this fast." Angela entered the mess and went to the counter for a cup of coffee. She was chilled from being topside for just that few minutes. It was extremely cold up there and it was going to get colder in here the longer they stayed. "I need ideas."

"Any chance we could dig it out?" Kenn also got a mug of weak coffee from the counter, not looking forward to doing that. As one of the biggest men here, he was certain to be assigned to a digging crew.

Angela wasn't sure. "Even if we could find the tools, it would take a long time. I think we only have

enough gear to outfit half a dozen workers at one time for the environment.” She didn’t believe having her people on top of the submarine in plain view was a good idea. “What else?”

“Can we melt it somehow, just enough to get free?” Gus zipped his jacket against the cold draft that was lowering the temperature in the sub.

Again, Angela wasn’t sure. “We have a few blowtorches, and we have things we could burn to start a small fire on top of the ice, but I have no idea how long it would take us to melt through enough to get loose. What else?”

“We could wait for it to thaw.” Biff didn’t mind waiting now.

Zack did. “We can’t sit here and wait. We’ll be overrun.”

Even if they didn’t have trouble with the other stuck travelers, the fog wouldn’t let them stay here and wait it out. Angela kept going. “Next?”

Greg offered an idea. “Kenn was able to affect the cruise ship, like Tonya. Can he do it with the submarine?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t he say something?”

Most people hadn’t known. Angela sighed. *Too late now.*

Greg didn’t care. “I’m serious. Is the sub angry or happy? Sad? Feeling ill from lack of repairs and care? Maybe it can tell us how to get the hell out of here.”

Angela shook her head. “None of us have picked up anything like that and there’s no magic right now anyway. Next?”

Kenn was grateful that he didn’t have to try it without his gifts. He hated to be embarrassed.

The normals let their mental thoughts go upon hearing that. *They’re like us now.*

Steps echoed, drawing attention.

“His injuries are minor.” Harry wiped his hands as he entered the mess to give his update. “It bounced off his rib. He’ll hurt for a few days, but our top Eagle is fine.”

“Good.” Angela didn’t want to return to Safe Haven and tell Jennifer that her husband had been hurt. “What about the others?”

Harry gestured at Kenn’s small bandage. “Some bruises and dings from falling, but that’s it. We got lucky.”

“I think Shawn should go sit with Ray while we figure this out.” Wade could feel the fog coming. “Shawn was learning to sail the cruise ship. He can help with the sub.”

“I agree. Go on.”

Shawn slowly went toward the exit. *Why do I feel like this is a punishment?*

Piper returned to Biff’s idea. “Why can’t we wait? The other people up there might even be able to help us.”

Most of the rescue crew was from that last UN battle for the islands. They hadn’t faced the pirates

yet. Wade shook his head. “Not a good idea. We’ll fill you in later on our other encounters.”

“We can handle pirates.” The caretakers weren’t afraid of any confrontation now. The leader of their pack, Selina, leered hungrily.

Harry frowned at her. “Real Eagles don’t eat their enemies.” He grinned. “Just their friends.”

The women laughed and blushed, except for Selina.

Selina scowled. “But we’ll grow old and ugly. You won’t want us anymore.”

“Not true.” Harry had quickly adjusted to his new desires. “We’ll grow old and ugly together.”

Selina’s heart swelled. “Aww. How strange.”

Everyone laughed.

“What if we shoot our way out?” Wade was an Eagle. That had been the first thing he’d thought of.

Angela stared at him, almost able to read his mind. The consequences of doing that were small in this environment, unless the ice prevented the torpedo from getting far enough away from them. In that situation, they would probably blow themselves up. “We need Thomas.” She looked around for him.

“Over here.” Thomas was studying a small puddle on the floor. “We have another problem.”

He pointed. “That pipe shouldn’t be leaking.”

Angela and the others came over to examine it.

“Are you able to fix it?” Angela hadn’t forgotten that Thomas had been an engineer before the war.

“I think so, if I had the right tools and a couple hands to help me.”

Angela quickly pointed at a few people. “Stay with him and help him with whatever he needs to get this fixed. Keep me posted.”

Angela pressed the intercom button near the entrance of the mess. “Ray, how many torpedoes do we have?”

It took a few seconds before Ray’s voice came back over the radio. Surprise was the clearest emotion. “Two.”

“Tom!” Angela forced Thomas to focus on her instead of the leak. “What happens if we fire a torpedo too close to the ship?”

Thomas answered without hesitating. “We drown, of course. Submarines can take a lot of damage, but a direct torpedo hit to the front of the ship while stationary would probably sink us in about 10 minutes.”

It was another awful decision that Angela didn’t want to have to make. *But this really is why I get the big bucks.* “Ray, give me five minutes to get everyone settled and then I want you to blast us out of here.”

Ray responded immediately. “Are you crazy?”

Angela laughed without amusement. “I must be, because I mean it. Four minutes and 55 seconds. Don’t be late.”

“You got it.” Ray sat in the captains’ chair and began hunting for Saul’s instructions on how to fire

the torpedoes. He had no idea how it worked and a short amount of time to figure it out.

In the mess, everyone stared at Angela in surprise. It was so quiet they were able to hear the pipe drip.

Angela waved impatiently. “Get that leak fixed. You have four minutes and 45 seconds. Do not take your time. Everyone else, pick a kid to save in case we start sinking. I want everybody lined up next to the ladders.”

“If we go up there, we’ll freeze or be overrun by those pirates.” Marc didn’t like the risk she was taking with everyone’s life.

Angela gave him a dark glare. “As long as you’re just going with the flow, you don’t have a say so in any of these choices. Just do what you’re told.”

Marc immediately dropped his head and fell back into his mental issues.

For one instant, Angela felt hatred for Marc always taking the easy way out. Then she remembered how much he had gone through and that feeling vanished.

She gave him a small smile and a quick kiss on the cheek and then went to gather all the life vests they had. It wasn’t Marc’s fault that he was damaged. It was hers. *And I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to fix it. As long as we survive this.*

Chapter Fourteen

I Want Him Dead

1

“**S**o how do we do this?” Shawn locked the bridge door and joined Ray by the console.

Ray finished reading that section of the manual and tossed it onto the pile of other books. “Saul had everything ready. The book says not to load the torpedoes until we’re about to fire, though, so maybe it won’t work. There’s a good chance it will damage the ship.”

Shawn shrugged, smiling sweetly. “At least we’ll go down together.”

Ray laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

Shawn began cleaning the bridge while Ray went over the notes again. Ray would let him know if he needed help.

Ray scanned the monitors and found the ship braced and ready. He checked the time and keyed his radio. “Thirty seconds, folks. Hang on.”

Shawn kept working on the mess. The entire sub looked like this from their sudden stop. They’d learned to clean the area where they were stationed while on the cruise ship. As long as they didn’t get fog-punched again, it would be clean in no time.

“Here we go.” Ray pushed buttons in the order Saul had written down.

The submarine’s speakers activated automatically. *“Prepare for launch! Launch sequence is underway!”*

Lights switched to red all over the ship, including the bridge.

Ray frowned. “Red lights are *so* 1980.”

Shawn chuckled. “Maybe we can find some purple bulbs.”

“I prefer blue.” Ray pushed the next set of buttons. “You really should hang on. I’ve seen films of launches. We’re going to feel this.”

“Okay.” Shawn kept cleaning. Most of the mess in here was from an overturned garbage can.

“Warning! Launch will happen in five...four...three...two...one!”

A horrendous noise filled the submarine, making people clamp hands over their ears. A huge bang echoed, reminding everyone of fireworks. Then the entire ship lifted in the water, breaking the ice around the front. The heavy ship fell back down, cracking more ice.

People who’d grabbed their ears flew into the air and slammed down with the ship.

A concussion boomed out.

The torpedo hit the thick ice in front of the ship and plunged through, impaling layer after layer as it traveled.

A mile away, the torpedo hit a clump that was too solid to break through; it exploded, sending ice and water into the air.

The submarine sank heavier into the water as the ice cracked free of them. It didn't stop there. The crack expanded in three directions, heading for the wreck graveyard and the oil tanker. Ice exploded in small, deadly sprays as the crack widened. Huge chunks of ice floated away, widening the gaps.

In the bridge, Ray rubbed Shawn's thin arm and leered. "Comfy?"

Shawn was in his lap.

Shawn flushed a deep red.

Ray patted Shawn's cheek and then shoved on him. "Get that sweet ass off of me. It's not right to tease an engaged man."

Shawn jumped up, trying to find something to say. The motion of the sub had tossed him into Ray's arms.

Ray smiled sweetly this time. "What happens on the bridge, stays on the bridge."

Shawn burst out laughing.

2

Pirates cheered in delight as the crack hit their ship and split around it, freeing them. They sank into the icy water and began to be pulled along by the new current now going through the center of the frozen area.

The crack slowed as it hit the oil tanker, not going around, but the wave of water from sinking and breaking ice splashed over the ship forcefully, knocking it free.

The oil tanker dropped deeply into the ocean and then popped back up. The excited people on that deck hurried to man their stations, shouting and crying, hugging and slapping hands.

The sailboat didn't move yet, though the cracking ice would eventually free it. The dog continued to bark wildly, but the two men on that boat only watched anxiously as everyone else was freed.

In the distance, more stuck ships were jarred loose from the ripples of the other cracks and the new movement of the water. Lights came on, engines fired up. More missing boats appeared through the ice, showing a vast field of travelers who watched the crack or listened to it. Many of these groups eyed each other in confusion or fear. None of them stopped or helped each other. Out here in limbo, everyone was on their own.

“But that’s not how we roll.” Angela keyed her radio. “Let’s get injuries handled. Take people to the medical bay if they need it. Clean the ship and get a meal started.” Angela paused to remember what she’d been about to say.

Around her, people were celebrating being free of the ice. They didn’t see her concern, her confusion.

Angela recovered the thread and finished by sheer will. “We’re not stopping again. Settle in and try to remember who we are. Even when we’re in trouble, we’re still Eagles. Keep your honor close. It’s very easy to lose.”

3

“Thank you.”

Harry taped the bandage neatly over Adrian’s bruised nose. It wasn’t broken as far as he could tell, but the witnesses said there had been a crunch. There wasn’t much he could do either way. Bones took a long time to heal and they were never as strong after a break.

Adrian took the pain pill Harry gave him, grimacing at the dry swallow.

Harry had to ask. “What did you do this time?”

“I didn’t keep my hands to myself.”

Harry chuckled. “You’ve made a life of that.”

Adrian slowly stood up, letting the stained medic help him. “It usually has a more satisfying ending.”

Harry began gathering the bloody garbage. “Give me a number.”

Adrian held his throbbing nose and stared blankly. “A number?”

Harry put the medical supplies back into his bag. “Women, thickhead. How many women?”

“Why?”

“Curiosity. Jealousy. Male pride.”

He had Adrian's attention now. Adrian chose to answer so he would have the right to ask a personal question of his own. "I stopped counting when I hit 150."

Harry whistled. "Damn."

Adrian wiped his hand down his pants to remove some of the blood. "You?"

"Twenty-four, I think. My college days are a little blurry."

"That's respectable. Why the jealousy?"

"Your magnetism, and a little because of your ability to get out of any mistake you make, no matter how rash or devious."

Adrian frowned and then groaned at the pain in his face.

Harry chuckled. "True. You don't get out unscathed, but you do survive."

Harry wiped his hands on the apron he was now wearing whenever he did medical care, if there was time to put it on. "How many of those were simultaneous?"

Adrian understood why Harry was asking and grinned. Then he groaned again. "Damn it!"

Harry laughed.

"I'm glad you enjoy my pain!"

"Don't be a baby. Most of your Eagles have gone through this and they refused to whine. A couple of them might have passed out, but there wasn't any whining."

Adrian huffed. "And have any of them been sliced open with a sword?"

“Nope. The boss saved that just for you.” Harry lifted a brow.

Adrian realized he was still waiting for an answer. “Three. You beat me.”

Harry smiled coldly. “Of course, you would think that’s why I asked.”

“It wasn’t?”

“It wasn’t.” Harry headed for the ladder.

“Hey!”

Harry kept walking.

Adrian followed. “Tell me why!”

Harry waited until Adrian caught up to speak. He kept moving them out of the way and out of the boss’s line of sight. “I figured something out during that moment. It’s something fundamental about these post-apocalyptic women, but I don’t think you know it. I’m proud that I get it. I’m surprised that you don’t.”

Now Adrian was intrigued. *I have to hear this.* “Spill it.”

“What will you trade?”

“Trade?” Adrian followed him down the ladder.

“Yes. This is valuable information. I worked my nuts off to earn it. It’s not free.”

“What do you want?”

Harry entered the trashed medical bay and waited. It was covered in thick dust and loose gear. He shut the door behind Adrian and faced the man. “I want you to take one for the team.”

Adrian sank down onto the dust-covered stool as his mind swam. “Which team and what caliber?”

“Ours, and .50 cal.” Harry lowered his voice to keep from being overheard. “Draw the tiger back out of his cage. Angela wants the old Marc back. She won’t do it because she feels guilty about sending him into that lab.” Harry’s face turned cold. “But you don’t, do you?”

Adrian refused to lie. “Not even a little.”

Harry sneered. “And that’s why I don’t feel bad about this trade. You get the tiger out of his cage and I’ll tell you the secret I learned.”

“No.” Adrian wasn’t a novice at this type of negotiating. “I have to get something else from this.”

Now Harry hesitated. He’d been hoping information about females would be enough. “What do you want?”

“Get the senior Eagles to vote Marc back into leadership.”

Harry immediately held out a hand. “My word on it.”

Adrian shook, feeling like he’d been tricked. “Tell me the secret.”

Now that he’d gotten what he was really after, Harry did. “They’ve changed. They’re hunting us and I don’t just mean for sex. Women are going to take charge of this broken world and then men are going to pay for every mistake of those who came before them. We’re never going to be in charge of the world again.”

“Ah. So that’s why you want Marc back in leadership.”

“I need him back in charge, Adrian. You’ll support female rule. It can almost be *any* male, just not you.”

Adrian understood the fear behind Harry’s finagling, but he didn’t agree. He also didn’t try to convince the medic that he was wrong. They were approaching a dangerous place in history where the balance of power was swinging wildly between the genders. Things would get rough no matter who came out on top. Adrian believed women would have more compassion in the end. If men took power back, women would be slaves within a decade of that date. The species might even go extinct and that couldn’t be allowed to happen. *At the very least, the women will protect the kids and that’s what I care about the most.*

Harry had been digging into Adrian’s thoughts on this topic for months before this run. He didn’t need his gifts to know what Adrian was thinking. “You’re underestimating their capacity for violence. Men can be swayed by sex, good food, and deals like this one. Women can’t; when they go after something, nothing sways them from that goal. If they take over, we’re screwed.”

“Why are you worrying over something that won’t happen for a long time?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It’s already happening, Adrian. Our grandchildren will be slaves if we don’t do something about it.”

Adrian felt a deep chill. He knew that was possible. “I’m not entirely unsympathetic.”

“Unsympathetic? Is that all this means to you?”

Adrian thought about his mother. “I’ve wanted women in charge of the world since I was old enough to comprehend what it might mean for the future.”

“It won’t be the utopia we’ve been denied.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you.”

“Fair, but we’ve had a very long time of male rule and all we ever get out of it is yet another war, more abuse, and more death. There’s no way the woman can do worse than we have. Stop me if you’ve heard this before.”

Harry realized Adrian wasn’t going to change his mind, but he still had to try. “You could be one of us again, really. All you’d have to do is ensure male leadership in the future.”

“I won’t be a part of that.”

“Yes, you will. Draw that tiger out of the cage and then step aside. Marc won’t tolerate half of what you will.”

Adrian headed for the door. “I’ll do that much, but you might be unhappy with this choice later when you can’t handle the tiger.”

Harry had no plans to try to handle Marc. “I’m going to give him control of the world and let him fix the problems. I suggest you disappear when that happens. You won’t survive his first cuts.”

Adrian was tired of being threatened. He delivered some hard truth of his own. “Angela won’t allow this to happen. If you believe she

doesn't know you're conspiring against her choices, you're nuts." Adrian opened the door. "If it concerns Marc, she knows about it."

Harry believed that was true, but it didn't matter. Angela was an amazing leader. It was blatant proof that women could take charge of the world and do whatever they wanted. *I know they've been abused and oppressed since the beginning of time. I just don't want my sons and grandsons to pay for those crimes.*

4

Adrian shut the medical bay door and turned around. He stopped, tensing.

Cate was standing right in front of him, glaring with her little fists clenched.

Adrian knew she didn't need a push. He gave her one anyway. "Excuse me." He went around her.

Heat flew through the hallway as her anger rose. "Training!"

Adrian went into the bunk room.

Cate followed, boiling. "Train me!"

People turned and stared, trying to determine why she was yelling.

Cody shushed her. "Be nice."

Cate smacked Adrian's hip. "Talking to you!"

Adrian frowned at her. "You're learning patience."

"No!" Cate was fed up with waiting.

Adrian shrugged. “Okay. How are you enjoying being a body man?”

Cate’s face squished up. “Boring. Easy.”

“I see.” Adrian motioned to Kenn in Eagle code.

Kenn’s face fell as he understood what Adrian wanted him to do. “No way. She’ll start hating me again.”

They all knew Kenn valued his friendship with the little girl. It was admirable.

Angela glared from across the room where she was checking on the babies. “Do it.”

Kenn sighed miserably. “Fine, but I don’t want to. I want that clear.” Before anyone could react, Kenn grabbed Cody by the arm and lifted him into a tight embrace. Then he wrapped a huge arm around Cody’s neck and started squeezing.

“Hey!” Cate flew over and pounded on Kenn’s leg. “Let him go!”

Cody held still. He knew this was just a demonstration, but he was still afraid. Kenn could kill him with one quick jerk.

Marc appeared in the doorway, but he didn’t interfere even though he wanted to.

“Let him go!” Cate kicked Kenn in the shin and then did it again.

Kenn forced himself to lightly kick the girl in her own leg, taking her to the floor.

Cate scrambled up and started searching for a way to do real damage that wouldn’t also hurt her brother.

Kenn made sure he didn't squeeze too hard, but he made it look like he was trying to kill Cody.

Cate snapped. She screamed horribly and aimed for Kenn's balls.

Kenn turned, avoiding her easily.

Cate climbed up his back and slammed her little fists into his skull.

Kenn didn't react.

Cate started to cry. "Don't hurt Bubby! Don't hurt Bubby!"

Kenn broke. He lowered Cody to the floor and glowered at Adrian and Angela.

Cate hugged her brother, crying harder. "I'm sorry!"

Cody followed through with the lesson even though he didn't want to do it, either. "He could have killed me. You have to try harder!"

Cate dissolved into heartbreaking sobs. "I will! I will!"

Adrian took back over the short, painful lesson. "Pay attention!"

His shout snapped her attention to him, along with everyone else.

"Even people you believe you can trust are hiding bad stuff inside, Cate. Most of the time, that badness only hurts them, but you can't tell until it's too late. A body man never trusts anyone."

"I hate you! I hate this lesson!" Cate ran forward and punched Adrian in the crotch.

Adrian gasped, covering himself with both hands. He tried not to fall and failed.

As soon as he reached the ground, Cate slammed her fist into his jaw. She followed it up with a knee to his chest.

Adrian fought not to pass out.

Everyone watching understood she'd gone easy on Kenn.

"You made him do it!" Cate swung again, aiming for Adrian's throat.

Marc grabbed her by that arm and lifted her into his embrace. He got a firm hold on her struggling body and walked out of the bunk room.

Everyone listened in surprised nervousness.

"He made my friend do something bad! It's his fault!"

"I know."

"I want him dead!"

"I know that feeling."

"When can we kill him, Daddy?!"

Marc's sigh echoed. "Not until he finishes your training."

"Too long!"

"Yeah. But you need these lessons."

"No. My friend would never hurt Cody!"

"Not now, but Kenn wasn't always good. That's the lesson, Cate. People change and sometimes they go good. Other times, they go bad and you won't know until it's too late. As a body man, you really can't trust anyone."

Cate put her head on Marc's strong shoulder and cried.

Kenn couldn't take the sound of it. He marched out of the bunk room.

Cate spotted him. Fat tears rolled over her red cheeks.

Kenn went to her, ready to take a beating. "I'm sorry. Put her down so she can kick my ass for a while."

Marc put her on her feet.

Cate ran to Kenn and wrapped her arms around him. Her sobs grew louder.

Kenn picked her up and held her while she cried. When his tears mixed with hers, everyone was surprised.

Except for Angela. *That's why I put them together. She's bringing out his humanity and he's bringing out her need for other people. In the future, they'll be inseparable. Not even Tonya will be able to come between them.*

"Is that a good idea?" Wade realized he'd read her thoughts and grinned through the pain. "My gifts are back!"

Angela celebrated with the others and refused to answer the question.

Distracted, Wade still caught the evasion. *That doesn't bode well for Kenn's relationship.*

Angela switched the topic before he could ask. "I want supplies brought in here for the kids. I want all loose guns and weapons collected and put in the lockers in here. If there's any alcohol left, lock it up, too. Put out all the ration bars you can find."

People had stopped in surprise at the orders. A bad feeling went through the submarine as Angela keyed her mike. “Ray, come grab some rations and get back on the bridge as fast as you can. Shawn will stay with you this time.”

“This time...?” Ray groaned. “It’s happening again.”

Angela nodded. “We all feel the fog coming. We have to get ready for it, as much as we can. I want the shield team in here and in place in the next five minutes.”

Dog whimpered, coming over to Angela. *Don’t lock me up!*

Angela knew it was rough on the wolf to be in such a small area. “Then you have to hide.”

Why?

“We’re all armed, Dog. If we don’t know you, we’ll shoot first and mourn later. If you are found, act like a puppy.”

Dog snorted. *A what?*

“Act cute so whoever finds you doesn’t think you’re dangerous. It’s not just guns and knives that are deadly.” She rubbed his charred ear. “Be safe.”

Then she walked out into the hall. “Five minutes! Hurry up!”

The sub came alive with activity.

Thomas limped out of the mess with tools in his hand. “It should hold for a week or so...” He held up the wrench and duct tape. “What was I doing?”

Angela went to Marc and slid into his arms. *I hate this part!* “It feels like saying goodbye.”

Marc held her tightly. “Even in the fog, we’ll always be in love.”

“Forever and beyond.”

Their radios began pushing out garbled voices on the edge of panic.

“Fog-hole is back, Boss. I can’t concentrate.”

“Does anyone know my name? I can’t remember it.”

“Who wants to play poker?”

“That sounds like fun!”

Reports and confusion filled the hallways and the radios.

Angela hoped she’d done enough to secure them, but time was up for her. She let go of the handsome man and walked away. *I hear a movie playing. I like that one!*

She hurried up the ladder, following the sound of Caribbean pirates.

Chapter Fifteen
You're The One

1

“Does anyone need a break yet?”

Cate shook her head at Cody. “I’m good.” She had a strong shield over everyone in the smelly, messy room. *I’m never ever having kids. They stink too much.*

The almost crowded area made Cate nervous. There weren’t that many people, but all of them were in one area, making it seem like there was. After Adrian’s harsh lesson, it was hard for her to be in here. She tried to keep space between her pacing path and everyone else.

“I’m okay for a bit longer.” Jayda was learning how to hold her shield for long periods. Her shield was inside Cate’s and not nearly as strong, but it was still up. Jayda was proud of herself for being able to hold it for this long. An hour didn’t seem like much until you tried to do something hard for the entire time.

“I’m ready to switch out.” Bret didn’t let go of his shield yet. His was the outer layer.

Cody brought up his own strong shield over all of them.

Bret let go and took a deep breath. He was used to having a shield up for a long time, but not over top of multiple people and other shields. It was great practice for him.

“Nice switch.” Charlie was taking care of the kids. He would have a turn at shielding everyone later. Right now, he was burping the babies as Kenn finished feeding them. Wade was on diaper duty nearby and making noises that made them all laugh as he acted it up to keep the tension down.

All of them were worried. The submarine was on autopilot, but if they ran into more ice, there was no one to handle it. They hadn’t heard from Ray or leadership since the lockdown started. If there was a problem, they were on their own.

The baby belched out thick, white goo.

The hair in Charlie’s nostrils dried up, pinching painfully. “Wow. Whatever they’re feeding you is now illegal.”

Chuckles went through the group.

Charlie had a receiving blanket over each shoulder, a diaper bag tied around his waist, and a garbage bag attached to his belt. He was fully geared for childcare. He hadn’t been happy about the assignment at first, but he’d adjusted quickly.

Charlie had expected to be angry the entire time he and Kenn were locked in here together, but the Marine’s response to Cate earlier had encouraged curiosity instead of anger this time. He opened a conversation. “Why do you want to know what gifts I have?”

Even the babies went quiet as fresh tension filled the shielded room.

Kenn was still eager to get that answer. “It’s not so I can use you. Scroll diving made me want to dig into mysteries even when I’m awake.”

Kenn shrugged, tossing the empty bottle into the bucket with the others. “And I’ve always wondered.”

Charlie understood he’d overreacted, but he didn’t apologize.

Kenn grinned. “I really hate a mystery.”

“No, you love solving them. Maybe you should become a detective. We’ll probably need that in the future.” Wade was exhausted, with stained clothes, a beard coming in, and a deep satisfaction that was allowing him to maintain a solid mood. Caring for the kids had helped him stay close to Neil and Samantha in a way. He’d spent months caring for their twins. This wasn’t as good, but it was better than nothing.

Kenn hadn’t considered that career route. He did now. It fit perfectly with what he wanted. “But Safe Haven doesn’t have any mysteries...”

Everyone laughed.

Kenn broke the improving mood with some brutal truth. “I won’t be alive to fill that job.”

Wade frowned. “Are you sick?”

“Have you seen something?”

Kenn nodded at Charlie’s guess. “Your mom is going to kill me in the final battle, or right after it. There’s no way she’ll ever let it all go.”

Charlie scanned Kenn's neat Eagle gear and shaggy hair. *He looks more laid back that way.* "You don't know her plans."

"But I do and I'm tired of pretending I have a future with my family. I just want to spend the time I have left doing what makes me happy."

Charlie stared "You don't want to get married anymore."

"I do, but not if we can't stay together." Kenn let out another choice he'd made. "Tonya has better matches right there in camp. It's cruel to let her get more attached and then break her heart when Angela kills me."

"Don't expect me to have sympathy. I've wanted you dead for a decade." Charlie had also been surprised and moved by watching Kenn cry with Cate. "But that job would be a good legacy to leave so your son doesn't have to carry your bad family weight."

Kenn felt hope. "Will you ask your mom about it?"

Charlie snorted. "Nope. Face her on your own. You weren't scared to hit her, scream at her, abuse her. Man up."

"I will." Kenn was impressed with how easily Charlie seemed to be adjusting to caring for little kids. Not even diaper duty slowed him down. Kenn handed the cooing little boy to Charlie. "We were okay for a minute and then you got pissed at me again. I'm sure it was my fault, but I don't know what it was."

Charlie switched the burping cloth to his other shoulder and got the baby settled. “You cheated on Tonya. I believed you were changing. You disappointed me.”

“I’m sorry for that, for all of it.”

Charlie softly patted the happy infant’s back. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Kenn grunted unhappily. “Your mom will kill me early if I cross that line again. No worries. I may only have two and a half years left, but I want every minute of them.”

“Two and a half…” Jayda realized they were almost halfway through this year. It was already May. “Time goes by too fast!”

Everyone agreed with her.

“Are you able to do this and talk at the same time?” Wade joined Cody now that all the diapers had been changed.

“Yes.” Cody was getting good at multitasking. “The alpha insisted I learn how to do more than one thing at a time.”

“Good, because it’s your turn.” Wade sat in a chair by the tense child. “Do you know what she wants you to work on in your therapy sessions?”

“Yes.” Cody refused to think about it. “I don’t want to do this in front of everyone.”

Wade already knew that. He went on anyway. “Angela told me you’re feeling guilty about your mom’s death.”

“I was told to forget about it.”

“And have you?”

Cody shook his head. "It's too hard."

"Would you do it again?"

Cody showed his intelligence. "I don't think so, but I can't be sure. She was a bad person." Cody felt better just from saying that aloud.

Wade was impressed by the boy's acceptance of who he really was on the inside. "Angela has done things she regrets and would still do again. She punishes herself for it. She doesn't want you to do that."

"Then someone else has to." Cody had tried to stop hating himself. He couldn't.

"What punishment would be fitting?"

Cody paled. "Removal."

Wade denied that. "We don't remove kids, but even if we did, that's not equal to the crime. Try again."

Cody picked at his fingernails, restlessly digging out any speck of dirt. "Jail?"

"Maybe, but for how long? It was a first big mistake and she really was a bad person."

The others began to understand Cody had hurt his mother.

"Years. It's wrong."

"Have you heard of work release or time off for good behavior?"

"No."

Their witnesses also began to realize Cody had done more than just hurt his mom in a moment of anger.

“They were old world programs. Work release let prisoners out of jail for work shifts that helped them pay for damages. Time off for good behavior shortened their sentences as a reward for improving, for changing, for learning from their mistakes. Those two programs were reserved for the inmates who had a chance to be good people again at some point, or for the ones who were serving sentences for things they might not have been able to control.” Wade gestured. “Like you.”

Cody waited nervously, not sure where this was leading to.

Wade wanted to be kind, but Angela had warned him he had to be firm or Cody wouldn’t feel like he was really being punished. “You had no control over your mother’s abuses and choices. You’re very young, so you haven’t learned to control your reactions as well as an adult. You would have been eligible for those programs.”

Cody put those pieces together. “I’ll work hard and be good, and then it won’t have to be years.”

“And?”

“And...I can be out while I’m working.” Cody felt relief at that.

So did Cate.

“Yes. But we’re starting a program for younger offenders. You won’t go to jail at all. You’ll be on probation. If you mess up while on probation, all the other programs are off limits and you’ll spend the full sentence locked up.”

Cody trembled. “I’ll be good and work hard.”

“Excellent.” Wade smiled at the boy. “Do you need a break yet?”

“No.” Cody had too much nervous adrenaline flooding his little body. He was thrilled with how this had gone and scared because now so many people knew he’d hurt his mother. “Thank you.”

Wade smiled at the boy again. “It’s my honor.” He glanced around, smile fading. “Who’s next?”

2

Zack smacked Biff’s arm onto the cleared mess table and growled. “Who’s next?!”

He shoved away from the groaning man, flexing. “Who wants some of this?!”

“That would be me.” Greg came forward to meet the challenge.

Women watched the arm wrestlers and chewed on the dry bars that were stacked on the counter, while considering trying to join in.

“We need another player over here!” The boisterous redhead whistled. “Poker seat is open!”

People went that way.

The mess was full of activity as the partiers enjoyed the games and the company. Noise rolled through the bottom level of the sub.

Biff rubbed his sore arm while scanning the unfamiliar people, searching for anyone he knew. He had a feeling that someone important to him was absent from this gathering.

Party, he amended. It was clearly a party.

Biff walked by the tables where boardgames were being enjoyed and then by the counters, where several people were raiding the cabinets behind it for food. He didn't blame them. The ration bars were all over the tables, but they tasted like the dust that layered everything.

Biff went out into the hall and stood there, trying to get his mind to focus. *I'm missing someone. Who is it?*

Biff listened to the water hitting the outside walls. "It must be raining."

He went toward the ladder at the end of the hallway. *Who am I?*

Biff stopped, unable to walk and concentrate at the same time. He leaned against a closed door, frowning. "I'm looking for someone... Right?"

"Let me out."

"We're not supposed to open the door."

"He's alone out there. Let me out."

"The fog will take you."

"I don't care. It's not right to leave him alone."

"Fine. Shrink those shields away from Jayda and open the door."

Biff brightened. "That's it!" He turned toward the opening door, drawn to the voice behind it. "I miss Jayda."

Jayda slid out of the bunk room and smiled at Biff as Wade shut and relocked the door. "Hi."

Biff smiled in relief. "You're the one."

Jayda felt the fog already trying to wind into her mind. She took his arm and hurried them toward the captains' quarters. "Come on. Let's go take a nap." She was very tired.

Biff went willingly, relieved. *I don't remember her name, but I know I need her.*

Jayda's heart melted. She locked them in the smallest room and tried to concentrate as the fog swarmed her mind. *He's a good man. Angela might be right. But I'm not staying with him in this camp. If he wants to be with me, he'll have to leave willingly.*

"I wish I could read your mind to see what you're thinking about."

Jayda studied him with a brain now swimming through light fog. "I can share with you."

Biff didn't want her to get in trouble. "Are you allowed?"

Jayda shrugged. "No idea. We can find out together."

In the room next to them, Marc put his book down. A deep frown ran across his face. "That was deeply unsatisfying."

He pushed the book off the edge of the bed. "And it made no sense. They weren't natives who didn't have a knowledge of civility. They killed other kids and no one cared. Boys will be boys doesn't cover murder. And why that title? Flies were barely even mentioned!"

Marc stood up, stretching his legs. “I need something else to read, something good.”

He glanced around, ignoring the noises of the party going on around him. A computer terminal caught his attention. “Some nonfiction might be nice after that barely edited dump.”

He switched the computer on and began scrolling through the files.

3

“Can you tell me my name again?”

“It’s Dace.” Lisa kept a tight grip on his wrist. “Come on.”

“That’s right!” Dace smiled at her as he hobbled along at her fast pace. “Thanks. It won’t stay in my brain.” He knew he’d already asked.

Dace tripped over a wet towel on the floor. He caught himself and kept moving.

The pungent odor of alcohol filled the air. Lisa assumed someone had found the locked cabinet in the mess and broke into it. She went faster. Sober descendants were bad. Drunken magic users were dangerous.

Lisa heard Greg in the mix of voices. She hoped he stayed safe, but she didn’t consider asking him to help her guard the normals. They weren’t even friends now.

Lisa kept moving them through the crowded hallway of partying descendants. She was the only

normal in sight. The others had already gone to their hiding place. “Go faster.”

Dace didn’t know why the pretty woman was leading him away from everyone, but he wasn’t concerned. *She looks like someone I can trust.*

Lisa tugged him aside as Dog came hurrying through the hall and went ahead of them.

Dace stopped, tensing. “Is that a wolf?!”

“He’s okay.” Lisa got them moving again. “Dog’s just scared of the fog.”

“It’s foggy outside?” Dace was glad they were in here.

Lisa pulled him into the dark, narrow, rear compartment.

Dace’s ankle flared up, making him stumble. “Hey. How did I get hurt?”

“You fell into a hole.” Lisa didn’t have the concentration or the patience to explain it to him. He wasn’t going to remember it anyway.

“It’s me.” Lisa called the warning to keep the other normals from panicking. All of them were alert and nervous, but that could easily change to terror. The foggy descendants still had their gifts, but unlike last time, they weren’t grouping up for sex and staying distracted. They were roaming the ship and interacting with each other. Lisa didn’t want to find out what would happen if one of those interactions went badly.

Lisa led Dace into the group.

The other normals scowled at her, but they didn’t complain. Lisa had agreed to join them, but

only if Dace was allowed to be here where he was safe, too.

Dace smiled at the nervous normals. “Hi.”

They nodded back, but they didn’t encourage him to focus on them and their thoughts.

Lisa pointed at a corner. “Sit over there and get off that ankle.”

“Good idea.” Dace sank down where she wanted him.

Lisa stayed between the entrance and her people. “Be quiet, like before. Read or play cards. Don’t think about where we are.”

“It’s different this time.”

Lisa sighed at the comment from one of the tattooed mothers. All four women had left their babies with the shield team, at Lisa’s recommendation. The magic users loved kids, all kids. They were safer there. “I know.”

Loud shouts came through the hall.

“They’re rowdier.”

“That’s why I brought Dace in here. If it gets too bad, he might use his gifts to help us.”

Dace stared around, wondering what gifts this Dace person had.

Lisa wasn’t worried about his fogginess. Dace was a good guy deep down. If she screamed for his help, he would give it.

A scratching noise echoed from the rear of the charred compartment, where the shadows were too thick to see anything.

Lisa’s hand slid to her gun.

Dog came out of the darkness.

Lisa frowned at him. She didn't mind the wolf most of the time, but she was surprised he'd chosen to come back here with her and the other normals. "What do you want?"

Dog knew she didn't like magic. He didn't try to communicate mentally with her. He sat near the exit and tried to be cute.

Lisa waited, sure it was a trick. "Are you spying on us?"

Dog snorted and looked down the hall toward Piper.

Piper was coming through the partying, conversing people with a pen and notebook in hand. It was clear that she was writing down everything she saw.

Lisa chuckled at the obvious answer. "Okay. Fair enough." She made a connection. "You're not safe out there, either."

Dog laid down in front of the door. His ears twitched almost continuously as he listened to everyone.

Lisa felt a little better. "Fine, but stay over there. If someone comes in, eat them."

Dog snorted again. He rolled over and regarded her upside down. *Is this cute?*

Lisa stared in confusion. "Maybe he's fogged, too."

Dog let his tongue roll out of his mouth.

Lisa retreated a step. "I hope he's not sick."

This is not going well. Dog rolled over and tried to seem like a harmless puppy. He wagged his tail and slid himself up against the wall. *How do puppies do that?*

“We could take over this ship right now.”

Lisa scowled darkly. “No. Stop thinking about doing that.”

The mothers all frowned at her.

Lisa shook her head. “All you’ll do is get yourselves, and maybe the rest of us, removed.”

“Then we need to get off this ship.”

Now Lisa reluctantly nodded. “Even in limbo, we’d probably be better off on our own.”

4

“Why didn’t we fog out?” Kyle shifted in the medical cot so he could see Adrian.

Adrian yawned gently and didn’t feel any pain. *Guess the pain killer is still working.* “I’m not sure yet. We aren’t the only ones, though.”

Kyle had napped for a while after Harry handled his injury. He’d woken to find them all fading away. “Who else?”

“None of the normals went foggy. Neither did Dog, Piper...or me.”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “That figures. You never suffer with us.”

Adrian wasn’t in a good mood. “Cry a little louder. Maybe Lisa will come and take you to their hiding place, too.”

Kyle snapped his mouth shut, but ugly thoughts ran through his mind.

“I can still hear you, you know.”

Kyle considered rolling over and punching Adrian until he was nothing but a bloody pile.

Adrian glared hotly. “I’m done taking hits, from everyone. If you start it, I’ll finish it!”

Kyle had seen Adrian at his best right after the war. He was weaker now, but Kyle wasn’t guaranteed a win. He snorted. And didn’t attack.

Adrian was glad. He wasn’t sure about a win, either. *But I’m done being their punching bag. Not even Angela will be allowed to treat me this way anymore.*

“Oh, stop. You’d give your right nut to her on the off chance that she might kiss the left one!”

Adrian laughed. “Maybe. I’d want it in writing, though.”

Kyle fought the amusement. He liked being mad at Adrian.

“That’s because you know I’m the only one who can help you get what you want. Your pride says you can’t ask for it, that you have to take it or force it out of me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Adrian gently itched his swollen nose through the dusty bandage. “I’m talking about your fear of your wife and her place in Angela’s plans.”

Kyle moped. “You can’t do anything. She won’t listen to you now.” Kyle glared again. “Thanks for

that, by the way. Dipping your wick into Piper's candle may have screwed the future for all of us."

"Because you made plans around me without asking me what I wanted or because of the magic laws?"

"You were doing so well!" Kyle paused. "What about the magic laws?"

Adrian was disgusted. "I used to consider you the smartest man in my army. What the hell happened to you?"

"I could ask you the same thing!"

They both went quiet as loud steps neared the locked door.

Thud-thud-thud! "We need more players." The man moved off down the hall. "Poker in the cafeteria!"

"That was Trent." It wasn't hard for Kyle to tell through the slight haze of drugs that was wearing off. He had mild pain flaring in his chest again and fog sneaking into his mind.

"He does love to play cards."

"So does Erin. She's taking the shirts off of every back."

"She didn't flip into the lust wave last time. She just wanted to card shark her way through the fog."

"She's actually really good at it—no cheating."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Kyle's Eagle jacket had a small hole in it, right over the heart. It had saved his life. Kyle rubbed the wound through the slightly bloody bandage. He'd gotten used to being healed right away by magic.

This reminder of his mortality wasn't welcome, but it didn't change his mind about who he was and what he wanted. *Life comes with risks.*

Kyle listened to the wildness around them. He had no doubt he would be enjoying himself, too, if the fog took over his mind. Right now, he was storing details on their people. Some of them were on the edge of dishonor. Kyle hoped they pulled back. He hated removing people from their ranks.

Adrian hated this bush beating. He sat on the cot and faced his top Eagle. "Ask me and we'll go from there."

Kyle immediately let it out. "In Harry's scenario, what happens to the women who've grown to love being in charge?"

Adrian frowned. "If they won't give it up, the men will take it from them. In Harry's future, *no* females are in leadership. They're probably back to being barefoot and pregnant to keep them too busy to interfere."

The mobster stretched his legs and sighed. "Jennifer won't ever give it up."

"Neither will Angela."

"Is that why you refused to help with it?"

"Partially." Adrian pushed aside the bitterness to be honest. "My daughter, Alexa, is an amazing leader. It's not always about Angela."

Kyle was surprised. He was also relieved and foggy. "I can't support Harry on this one, either."

"We can work on that...together."

Kyle stared at him. “Work on what? And who are you?”

Adrian sighed. “Just not today.”

Chapter Sixteen
Waking Up

1

Angela woke slowly. The noises around her echoed loudly in her sensitive ears, bringing calm instead of anxiety. Children laughing and adults chatting implied things were okay. *Do I know who I am?*

Angela found the answer immediately. *I'm the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp.*

She was relieved, but also concerned. She had no memory of what she'd been doing. The last thing she remembered was joining Mel in the theater for a movie.

Angela didn't open her eyes yet. She wasn't ready to deal with the people, even though she could feel them turning toward her in hope and relief. They were aware that she was waking up. *I need another minute.*

Angela tried to determine her physical status by feel; she felt rough. Aches and soreness hit her from almost everywhere. Her stomach was the only thing that didn't hurt. Her hand slid over the noticeably larger belly bump.

"She's almost back with us." Cody had been scanning her mind regularly.

“Give her another minute. Waking from the fog is unpleasant.” Kenn was glad he hadn’t had to go through that at all yet. The stories from the other men they’d taken to the island had been enough to convince him. He didn’t want to experience it for himself. As part of the shield team, he and the others in here had been able to skip it this time.

Angela drew in a deep breath and then opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was the military clock on the wall. The early afternoon time didn’t bother her. The date did. “It’s been five days.”

“Yes.” Kenn kept his distance. “How are you feeling?”

Angela gagged.

Kenn grimaced. “I’m sorry I asked.”

Angela slowly sat up on the dirty cot. “How did I get here?”

She had told them not to let anyone in or out of this room and that included her.

Cody came over to the cot. “You knocked on the door last night and told us you were ready to go to bed. Then you sat right there and started dozing off. Isabel was out there with you. I told them to let you both in.”

Angela saw Isabel lying on her side in the dusty cot next to her. The old looking woman was sleeping soundly. Strands of gray hair were all over her pillow and her shirt.

Angela swung her legs over the side of the bunk and grimaced as an awful smell met her nose. She

glanced down to find herself wearing a pair of Kenn's sweatpants. She recognized them from their years together. He only liked one type. "Where was I before this?"

Charlie saw her displeasure. "The twins and I put clothes on you when you came in. That was all we could find that would fit. He didn't touch you."

Kenn was glad Charlie had mentioned that. He didn't want Angela to believe he had taken advantage of her while she was in the fog.

Wade yawned. "Kenn traced your backtrail by your condition."

Angela didn't try to get up yet. Her legs felt like they wouldn't hold her if she tried. "Walk me through it, Grunt."

Kenn cleared his throat. He could already tell she was in a bad mood. "Well, when you took your jacket off, an ace of hearts fell out of your sleeve, so we're fairly sure you were in the mess playing poker with the Eagles at some point."

Angela chuckled softly, trying not to trigger the nasty migraine she could feel waiting in the wings.

"There was a stethoscope taped to your side. We think your other clothes are probably in the medical bay because of that."

Angela glanced down and found the stethoscope still there. She carefully pried it off. "I was listening to the baby's heartbeat. She's up under my ribs now."

It came in a quick flash that also revealed her stripping down to avoid the heat. "It was hot."

“That makes sense. Descendent pregnancies put off a lot of heat.” Wade was still gathering notes for Neil’s book. Angela’s experiences would be added to it.

Kenn continued. “We don’t know where your boots are, but your feet are purple, and we know the Eagles love grape Kool-Aid. We hope to find them in the mess or the medical bay.”

Angela wiggled her filthy toes. “I don’t remember being in the mess at all.”

“Most of our people spent their time there during the last fade.” Kenn kept updating her. “A few other people tried to get in here, but Cody said not to let them in, so we didn’t.”

Angela lifted a brow at the boy.

Cody was disappointed with some of their people. “They were only thinking about getting more power. I didn’t want my team to have to hurt their friends.”

“Good choice.” The need to use the bathroom forced Angela out of the cot. She stood slowly, holding onto the steel rail. Bits of debris fell to the floor. “What else?”

“You have clumps of dust in your hair. We believe you were on the floor somewhere at some point, and there are pieces of food beneath your nails. You don’t seem to be suffering from malnutrition, so we honestly think you spent most of your time in the mess, except for a movie marathon.” Kenn grinned. He’d been waiting for this one. “When you came in last night you were

talking about how wonderful Top Gun is. You were even considering making a rule that everyone in camp had to watch it.”

Angela didn't remember seeing that movie. “Did I say why it was important?”

“You said Val Kilmer's ass is a piece of art that should be studied.”

Everyone laughed.

Angela blushed and headed for the bathroom. “Give me another minute and then we'll go out and see who all survived.”

Now people grimaced at her callous comment.

Angela had been trying to be funny. *That's twice that hasn't worked for me. I either need to try a lot harder or give it up. Some people are just not funny.* “You can let go of the shields now. Anyone who can't do a full shift can go to sleep. Wake Isabel and get her on guard duty in here. Tell her to unlock one door at a time so she only has one to cover.”

Kenn went to a bunk and fell in it. He'd been up for a long time, but it hadn't felt right to leave Wade as the only senior man, even for sleep. Kenn wondered what Tonya was doing as he shut his eyes. *I miss her. I miss my son.*

Angela went into the bathroom while the other people got busy or let go of their shields. All of them were tired, but they had quickly adjusted to sleeping in shifts so none of them were totally worn out except for Kenn. The kids were doing well, considering everything that was going on. The same

was true of everyone on the shield team. They could only hope the rest of their shipmates had fared as well.

“Start yelling updates at me.” Angela flushed the toilet.

Cody motioned.

Kenn resumed delivering the information from his cot. “We didn’t hear any fighting, but the sub has been stationary for days. The computer switched us over to auxiliary power yesterday. We’ve been trying to reach Ray on the bridge, but we haven’t had any luck. I’m sure his personal radio battery is dead, but the intercom system on this ship should be active.”

“Do you want us to draft a cleaning crew as we go through?” Wade was positive the ship was trashed. They had heard slams, thuds, and the sound of things breaking as people roamed.

“Not yet. I may need to put those people on a different team.” Angela came out of the bathroom. She had pulled off Kenn’s sweatpants. Even in a moment like this, they had given her a bad flash of the past. She walked toward the exit in her boxers and tank top and nothing else. “Find me a clean change of clothes and bring them to the shower.” She pointed at Wade. “Guard duty until Gus is up and running.”

She didn’t want to put anyone on duty over herself, but she didn’t have her gifts back yet and there was no way to know what was waiting for them on the other side of the door. She didn’t hear

noise coming from the rest of the submarine at all. The sound of water flowing around the ship was loud; it was possible that a trap was waiting for them.

Wade fell in behind her.

Cody beat them to the door.

Angela shook her head. “You always let your team clear it first. Leaders are never on the front lines.”

Cody spoke louder to be heard over the babies who’d just woken, wanting diapers changed or stomachs filled. “Is it because I’m on probation?”

“No.” Angela was glad he was taking it seriously. In time, he would consider himself punished and be able to let it go.

Cody moved aside in disappointment. He’d been in here for a long time. He wanted out and so did his sister.

Angela understood, but it wasn’t safe. “Give me an hour to get things settled and then you and Cate can do whatever you want until your next shift.”

Cody went over to the bunk where Cate was snoring. He didn’t wake her up, though. He wanted to wait until they were allowed to be out of here.

Most of the kids were sleeping. Their clothes were stained and they all needed a good bath, but they were cleaner than the men who’d been caring for them. Angela was satisfied that she’d left them in good hands. She’d been tempted to stay in here with the shield team, but she’d faded out before making a final choice on it.

Cate was wearing pajamas and slippers, while snuggled under one of Marc's blankets. She looked cute and comfortable in the drafty room.

"How was she?" Angela had worried about the little girl being caged again. Her lab captivity had probably made this harder on her.

"She and Kenn played cards, read books, drew pictures, and worked through more of her issues; it wasn't bad at all." Charlie was glad he was able to say that. He'd also expected Cate to be a problem in this close-up space. "She still wants to kill Adrian, though."

Angela snorted. "Tell me someone who doesn't."

Charlie laughed. "True. Need another guard?"

"I need a gopher, actually."

Charlie pushed out his two front teeth. "I'm your rodent."

Angela chuckled. "Find Adrian. Roll him off of whatever warm body he found this time and send him to the shower. I need his updates."

As soon as Wade opened the door, he and Charlie did a fast scan and then stepped out.

The hallway of the submarine had an inch of grit and garbage to trudge through. It stank like sweat and trash, making stomachs turn. Wade was suddenly glad he'd been in the bunk room. Dirty diapers only stank as long as it took to change them and stash them in a garbage can with a lid. The submarine smelled like a trashcan whose lid had never been put on. It was rank.

Isabel closed the bunk room door and leaned sleepily against it, but she didn't lock it in case she needed to get out there and help defend the alpha. Isabel smiled over at her babies. The twins were sleeping peacefully. They'd been well cared for while she was in the fog.

Charlie used his mental grid to track Adrian. He found him in the medical bay. "We'll be right there."

Angela went toward the shower. She couldn't stand the smell of herself. *It's like chocolate vomit. What the hell did I eat?!*

People woke throughout the bottom level of the submarine as the noise of Angela and her team emerging began to echo. Moans and groans filled the air.

Angela entered the shower compartment and looked around for other people.

It was empty but filthy. Towels were all over the floor, along with wash rags and empty bottles of shampoo. Bars of soap were stuck to the stall floors and wash rags were molded in the corners. Filthy clothes had been kicked to the sides to create a small path to reach the stalls, but that was it. A layer of grit and dust covered all of it.

Angela changed her mind. "Start drafting that cleaning crew."

Wade went to handle it.

Angela searched the mostly empty lockers and found a washrag. There were no clean towels.

She quickly stripped off her clothes and went into a stall as Adrian and Charlie entered.

Charlie went right back out.

Adrian quickly put his back to her. "I'm here."

"So am I. What a coincidence." Angela turned the water on.

Adrian winced at her tone. It said she hadn't forgotten anything, and she was still furious about it. Adrian considered apologizing or trying to explain his rationale, but neither of them wanted everyone else to know what rule had been broken. He waited for her to ask for his updates.

Angela began soaping the rag by rubbing it against a bar of soap that was stuck to the wall. "I assume we didn't have a visitor this time."

Adrian shook his head. "Nature did not show up."

"And you were alert the entire time?"

"Other than normal sleeping, yes."

"Have you figured out why you don't get fog-fucked?" Angela pried the stiff ponytail holder from her matted hair and held it under the water.

"I think it has something to do with the deal you guys made, against my will, to turn my power over to Nature when I die. That's as far as I've gotten."

Angela began to wash, holding in a groan at the pleasure of the warm water now beating against her aching body. "Did anyone stay alert with you, other than Piper and the normals?"

"Not that I'm aware of. As soon as the pain pills wore off, Kyle went in the fog. He spent most of the

time in the mess with the Eagles, playing cards and arm wrestling. When Jayda left the protection of the shield team, the fog took her, too. The normals were awake, but they stayed hidden. I took them a bag of supplies yesterday and checked on them. Everyone was fine.”

Angela felt him withholding something. “Just spit it out. I’m in no mood for your bullshit today.”

Adrian winced. She really was in a bad mood. “The normals are talking about leaving. As soon as we get near a landmass, you may have to let them off the ship or we’ll have to put them down in another riot.”

Steps echoed. Marc appeared in the doorway. He was neat and clean, but his eyes were bloodshot and dazed. It was clear he was still living in his mind.

Adrian tensed. “She called me in here. It wasn’t my idea.”

Marc went into the shower stall and took the soapy washrag from Angela so he could wash the areas she couldn’t reach because of her large stomach getting in the way.

Adrian didn’t watch. “Are we done?”

Contempt layered Angela’s tone. “Oh, not even close, Mr. Mitchel, but that’s all I need from you right now. Get out.”

Adrian reflected on his newest deal with Harry. He regarded Marc over his shoulder and pushed gently. “You should ask her who she spent the last five nights with. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t you.”

Marc snickered. “You’d be wrong. And that’s not the first time, is it, Mr. Mitchel?”

Adrian stomped out of the shower compartment. “Prick.”

Marc’s voice echoed after him. “Pick a room and start cleaning it.”

Angela leaned against Marc’s warm body, not caring that she was getting him wet. Every floor on the submarine would benefit from soapy water dripping on it to help loosen the layers of garbage. “Thank you.”

Marc kissed her dirty cheek and then gently nudged her toward the water so she could rinse. “You really do smell rough, Baby-cakes. Let’s try a second wash.”

Angela flushed in embarrassment. “I wish I could remember what I was doing that causes this smell and then never do it again.”

Marc wasn’t able to help her with that. Between reading any material he could get his hands on, foraging for food, and curling up next to her for sleep, he didn’t know anything else that had been going on. “I’m sorry. I don’t have that information, but I can try to find out.”

Angela didn’t want him to waste time on it. “I’ll figure it out as I go. For now, I need to make sure everyone’s accounted for. Can you help with it?”

Marc considered how he’d been handling things so far. Going with the flow was an easier way to get through this. *But she absolutely hates that. It forced her to get mean with me while we were stuck in the*

ice. If I keep pushing that line, I'll lose her anyway.
Marc stepped back. "Give me 10 minutes."

Angela was relieved that she didn't have to deal with Marc's drama right now, too. "Take 15. I'm going to do that extra scrub."

Marc grinned. "Good!"

He hurried out before she could throw the washrag at him. The state of the sub and the people was a concern, but seeing Angela's larger stomach had made it possible for him to relax. Anything could have happened to her during those five days in the fog.

Piper was standing in the hallway. She slid aside to let Marc step by. "Is it okay to go in there?"

Marc shook his head. "Not for you." He was out of sight a few seconds later.

Piper hesitated.

"Come on in." Angela's voice was cold.

Piper entered the shower compartment and braced for an ugly moment. Angela's voice said she'd had enough of being nice. "I can come back later if this is a bad time."

Angela had no censor working right now. "I understand being horny. I just need to know if you thought it through or was it because of the fog?"

Piper knew not to lie about it with the boss so angry, but she wouldn't have anyway. "I wanted him before we ever met. His legend drew me from across the country. I watched and waited for the moment when it might be possible and then I pushed his buttons to get what I wanted."

Angela didn't need to ask what buttons she'd pushed. When it came to sex, Adrian was a very basic man. It wouldn't have taken much. "I don't know where we stand."

Piper had been worrying over that. "I hope things between you and I won't change at all."

Piper's hair was in a long, dark braid and her outfit was a mirror of Angela's Eagle setup, even down to the tank top. Angela didn't mention it, but it bothered her. "Do you really believe that's possible?"

"Yes, I do. You're a fair, honest, reasonable woman who already has more swinging sacks chasing her than she can handle. All you have to do is let it go."

Angela thought about it while she finished her second wash. She shrugged. "We can try it your way."

"Really?" Piper was thrilled. She'd been expecting a harsh punishment.

"Do I need to give you the same warning I gave to Sadie about him?"

"You can if it will make you feel better, but I already know what type of person he is."

"Then why do you want him?"

"Why do *you* want him?"

Having the question tossed right back at her made Angela defensive. Instead of starting a fight, she moved them onto business. "Give me your updates."

Piper got her notebook out. “I didn’t fog-out this time, either. I wanted you to know.”

Angela’s gifts popped back into place, making her flinch. She didn’t see her witch, but she could feel that entity trudging toward her. “Okay.”

Piper wasn’t done with the personal topic. “I avoided him this time to keep him out of trouble, but also because I wanted to collect information openly. I don’t want you to think we’re bunny-hopping every time you turn your back.”

Angela finished her second rinse. “I really don’t care about that anymore. Updates.”

“Shawn left the brig. I don’t know where he went. I lost track of him when things got crazy. Most people stayed in the mess, as I’m sure you know since you were in there with them for a lot of that time.” Piper studied Angela, curious about how much the boss remembered.

Angela didn’t give her that information. “What else?”

Piper was disappointed, but she kept going without pushing. It was obviously a bad time to do so. “There were a couple of arguments, but no fighting. We had a few thefts again, but nothing dangerous. It was a really good idea to lock all of the weapons in the bunk room with the shield team.”

“Thank you.” Angela couldn’t help her coldness toward the woman. It wasn’t necessarily jealousy, but it was dismay. *I believed Piper was smart enough to stay away from him.*

Piper shrugged. “The ovaries want what the ovaries want.”

Angela gagged again.

Piper laughed. “We need to get some food in you soon.”

Angela tried not to repeat the gross reaction.

Piper moved on to the next thing on her list. “The teenagers stayed drunk again. We’re going to have to do something about that.”

“I know.”

“Maybe they can be in with the shield team next time.”

“I have a different place in mind for them.” Angela shut off the water and breathed deeply of the clean, steamy fumes. “Is that it?”

“Not even close. I spent the last five days trolling everyone on the ship. I have pages of notes and insights.”

Angela definitely wasn’t in the mood for that. “You can put it in your nightly report unless it’s something I need to handle right now.”

Piper was disappointed again. Being an official spy for the boss had sounded exciting. But it wasn’t at this moment. She could feel how much Angela just wanted her to go away. “Will it help if I say I’m sorry?”

“Only if you really mean it.”

“I wouldn’t. It was a secret heart’s desire that I was finally able to fulfill. I’m sure you understand how powerful that can be.”

“I do.”

A tense silence hung in the air, making Angela's stomach turn. She didn't want to be upset with Piper, but she couldn't help it. Everyone knew Adrian and Sadie were a couple. Piper had interfered in that relationship and Sadie was going to get hurt. There was nothing good about this, even without the huge rule that Adrian might have broken.

Still, Angela didn't need the tension. She needed Piper doing her job and not dwelling on an angry boss looking for vengeance.

Angela came out of the stall and began drip drying. She pointed at the notebook while Piper stared. "Anything really good in there?"

Piper dropped her attention to the paper instead of gawking at Angela's swollen belly. She had gotten a lot bigger over just five days. "Some of the matches you wanted are starting to happen, like Lisa and Dace."

"Is there anything really bad in there?"

Piper tensed. "One of those couples crossed a dangerous line."

"Who?"

"Biff and Jayda."

Angela began pulling the clean clothes onto her wet body. "What did they do?"

"They broke a magic rule."

"Which one?"

"They shared without permission. Biff is one of you now."

Chapter Seventeen

Go Away

1

“**G**ood morning.”

Jayda felt familiar arms around her as she opened her eyes. The musky, sexy scent confirmed who it was. Memories began flashing through her mind between lances of pain from a headache. She groaned.

Biff chuckled. “That wasn’t the response I was hoping for.”

Jayda sat up, clutching the sheet to her naked body. “This didn’t happen.”

Biff grinned. “Oh, I assure you, it did.”

Jayda stood on shaky legs, pulling the sheet with her. “You know what I mean.”

Biff didn’t promise to act like it hadn’t happened. He stayed in the ruffled bed and watched her as she stumbled around, searching for her clothes. Even though she was a mess, like him, he found her beautiful. *I wish I could wake up every day like this.*

Jayda made a face. “You’re the only one.”

Biff frowned. “When are we going to talk about this?”

“Never!”

Biff had been awake for the last hour, enjoying the feel of her while trying to figure out if it was the right time to push for what he needed. Wade's classes had made it clear that females didn't like to be pushed because it made them feel like they were being forced. Biff didn't want that type of relationship with Jayda. *I want my happily-ever-after. That only works if she's happy with it, too.*

Jayda pulled her dirty pants on and began searching for her shirt. She wasn't concerned with underclothes. She just needed to be covered enough to make it to her locker for her kit and then to the shower to scrub off a few layers of shame. *Why do I keep doing this?*

Jayda's red hair was growing out over her strong shoulders, reminding Biff of what she'd gone through. He remembered fighting that fire. They'd almost lost eight valuable people. *I'm glad they all survived. I'm also sorry I wasn't able to keep Jayda from getting hurt.* "Both times we've fogged out, you came to me. That has to mean something, Jayda."

Jayda understood he wasn't going to let it go this time. She began buttoning her shirt. "Maybe it does, but your happily-ever-after and mine are different."

"Tell me yours and maybe I'll be able to understand why you keep pushing me away."

Jayda rotated to face him and found a handsome, muscular, naked man lying in the bed. Her first urge was to join him. It was obvious even

when she didn't want it to be. They were more than compatible. Jayda decided to give him the truth. "I'm leaving Safe Haven when we get back. I have to go find the family and friends I left behind. Anything between us would have to come after that."

Biff was relieved by her answer. He'd been worried that her attraction to Gus was what was holding her back. "I can work with that. If you just need time, no problem."

Jayda didn't want to lead him on. "If I can't get my family to come back with me, then I'll stay with them. You might be waiting for nothing."

After spending so much time with her while they were in the fog, Biff was now confident they were going to have a wonderful future together. "If that's the way it ends up, then so be it. I just don't want you to close your mind to what might be a perfect relationship for both of us."

Jayda sat in the chair to pull on her boots. "Perfect relationships are a myth. I just want to be happy with who I am and who I'm with."

Biff rolled onto his side and propped up on his arm. "Do you think that could be with me?"

Jayda scanned his beautiful body again. A leer crossed her lips. "I've come to you every time we've been fogged, so no."

Biff laughed at her joke. He also stopped pushing. *When she's ready, so am I.*

Jayda smiled at him. *Thank you for understanding.*

He smiled back. *It's my honor.*

They stared at each other in surprise.

He read my mind. "You're one of us now."

Flashes went through both of their minds at the same time.

Jayda let out a new groan. "Angela might banish us for this."

Biff was now worrying over that, too. "There's no way I'll be able to hide it from her. I didn't even realize it myself until just now."

"We're not going to try." Jayda finished tying her boots and stood up. "Get some clothes on that beautiful body. We need to go talk to the boss."

2

"We need to talk to the boss about this." Lisa followed Dog out of the incinerator compartment. "She's always said we don't have to stay if we don't want to."

She looked around in dismay. The ship was filthy again. *I'm not cleaning it this time.*

Dace followed the normals and tried not to feel bad for hiding with them. If there had been a problem, he might have been able to help. He didn't meet anyone's eyes as he went by.

The other normals followed Lisa, but all of them were scared.

"She's not going to let us leave. We belong to her."

Lisa rubbed her face and fought the need to yawn. It had been a long five days. “We’re not slaves.”

“No, we’re more like unwanted property.”

Lisa stepped over a pile of trash. “I don’t think we should leave while we’re in limbo. We need to wait until she fixes the problem.”

“Did you see how long they were all fogged this time? The next time it happens, it could be months. The time after that, it might be years. If we don’t get off this ship now, we’re never going to.”

Lisa didn’t argue further. She had made her choice during the five-day wait. She was confident Angela would offer a tolerable solution. *She asked me to give her a chance to prove we can trust her and I’m going to do that.*

“I think that’s a good idea, but you should probably give her a few hours to get things settled.” Adrian nodded at Lisa as he came out of the filthy, empty radio room. “She’s not in a great mood.”

The normals behind Lisa scattered, leaving her and Dog alone with Adrian.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “They were perfectly fine for the last five days. I don’t know why they’re freaking out now.”

Adrian gestured at the trashed submarine. “They’re afraid they’ll become the entertainment at the next descendant party.”

Lisa studied his many bruises and bandages. “Are they right?”

Adrian frowned. “Of course not. There may be a few Eagles and camp members who would do things like that, but as I’m sure you know, we’ve weeded out most of the problem people. And when one of them pops up, Angela takes off their head. The scenario they’re worried about is unlikely. Even in the fog, Eagles have honor.”

“*You* didn’t.”

Adrian flushed at the accusation. “I had reasons for the decision I made. Let me know when you’re faced with a choice between duty and honor, Lisa. I’m curious as to how you’ll go since you seem to think you’re perfect.”

Lisa flushed this time. “I never said I was perfect. I am ready to be off this ship and away from all of you, however.”

A new voice entered the conversation. “As soon as we fix this problem, I’m sending you and the other normals back to the mainland. It’s obvious that you’re too frightened to hang with us.” Angela came up the ladder with a dark glare at Adrian. “Is everyone accounted for?”

Adrian quickly nodded. “Marc’s working on it. We’re still short a few people.”

“Who?”

“Harry, Greg, Gus, Shawn, some teenagers, Zack, and the caretakers.”

Angela put her hand on her hip. “Then why are you standing here making things worse?”

Adrian got out of her sight.

Angela regarded Lisa.

Lisa stared back, but she wasn't feeling as brave as she usually did when she dealt with the boss. "I kept all of my shifts over Dace."

"That was over with days ago."

Lisa pushed her hair out of her face. "He didn't feel safe, so I let him stay with us."

Angela wasn't in the mood to pull punches. "You're terrified of descendants and what they may do to you, but you brought one of them into your hiding place while he had his gifts. Are you biased or a hypocrite?"

Lisa understood Adrian had been right that this was a bad time to approach the boss for anything. "I'm sorry."

"So am I. I meant it. As soon as I get this problem fixed, I'm sending you back."

"Thank you." Lisa headed for the ladder and also got out of sight as quickly as she could.

Wade came up the ladder and joined Angela. "We found the teenagers passed out in the corner of the mess, behind the counters. All of the shelves back there are empty. I don't know if it was stolen or eaten, but it's gone."

Angela wasn't surprised. "Put the teenagers in the brig and let Theo out. Send him to check on the leak in the mess. Tell him to take Thomas along. Let the subjects out, too. They've been on ration bars for five days, with limited water. If they gorge, they'll just throw up and drive in the lesson. Plus, with the shelves empty, there's very little for them to gorge on."

Wade wrote that down and waited in case she had anything else she wanted him to cover.

“Find Shawn. I don’t know exactly where he is, but it’s dark and he’s crying. I can’t take it right now or I’d do it myself.”

“You got it.” Wade went to search for the damaged mission man.

Angela came down the hallway and stopped in the doorway of the theater. At first glance, it was empty except for Mel, but she could hear someone else snoring. She went in and began checking the floor between the seats.

She found someone right away. “Gregory!”

Greg slowly opened one eye. A horrendous smell ran up his nose and brought him to full alertness in seconds. He tried not to breathe deeply so he didn’t inhale the odor again and puke. “Where am I?”

“No one cares. Get up. I have work waiting for you.”

Greg stared at Angela through a bloodshot eye and an awful hangover. “Boss?”

The awful odor hit Greg again; his face turned green. “What is that smell?!”

Angela pointed.

Greg rotated his head and saw a giant foot resting on his chest. Blackened toenails and layers of filth mocked his control over his stomach.

Angela walked the rest of the rows, searching for their other missing people.

Greg shoved the foot off his chest and scrambled out of the way. “Gross!”

Gus snored a little harder and then rolled over, snuggling into a pile of reeking debris in search of warmth.

Greg kicked the man lightly. “Get up, stinky. There’s a shower calling for you.”

Angela paused at the rear of the theater. Harry and his women were dog-piled on the floor between the last two rows of seats. They were all clothed, but dotted in love marks. “Harry!”

Harry put a finger to his lips. “Shh. I’m trying to die here.” His hangover was incredible.

Angela had little sympathy. “Get to the mess and find something to eat. Send your harem to the shower.”

Harry began gently waking the five caretakers.

Angela went to the front of the room and lingered, waiting for all of them to leave.

Mel was still asleep in the front row with Mr. Sneaky on her lap. Angela didn’t disturb her, but she enjoyed the flashes of spending hours here with Mel during the fog. They’d enjoyed a lot of classic films that Angela hadn’t had time to watch before. For her, the fog hadn’t been bad.

Greg pushed Gus toward the exit. “Go on. Wash those dirty feet.”

Gus stumbled out of the door without replying. He was barely awake.

Harry escorted his women to the exit. He kissed each of them on their cheek, drawing blushes and smiles as they left.

Greg and Angela watched in surprised admiration. They had no idea how Harry would keep the peace with that many women in his life, but both of them were sure Wade would be happy to observe it. In this case, Wade might want to take notes for later classes.

Angela motioned as the last of them left. “Make sure they get to the showers and then gear up. You’re on my landing team.”

Angela’s sweet scent went up Greg’s nose and relit the fire burning in his gut.

He hurried out so he could do what she wanted and get back. He understood she was about to go topside. He was grateful that she wanted him to accompany her.

Harry waited for them to be alone. He could feel Angela wanting a private word. He was instantly defensive and not sure how he would respond when she told him to end his relationship with the older women.

“Why would I?”

Harry stared in surprise. “You’re not going to?”

Angela lowered her voice. “I want you to make sure all of them get a portion of the special food we froze last week. It’s in the morgue cooler, labeled hazardous materials.”

Harry gawked at her as he tried to figure it out.

Angela didn't let him off the hook. She was killing time while waiting for the rest of her landing team to finish waking and cleaning up. She also wanted to make sure Harry was fully alert so he could perform any medical duties if they needed it. She had no idea what was waiting for them topside.

Harry figured it out all at once. "Body stew."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Ask me again in a few weeks if you haven't figured it out on your own."

Harry shrugged snottily. "You're the boss."

A flash of his conversation with Adrian ran through his mind. Harry quickly went out before Angela caught it. *I'm not awake enough to deal with an irate, emotional female.*

Angela's eyes narrowed. "You may think I'm an irate, emotional female now, but you really have no idea how true that could be. I control myself well, considering how hard you guys like to push me. But I'm not going to live up to your impressions today. In a few weeks, that might change."

Harry immediately regretted his thoughts, but he didn't stop and try to explain. *This is not a good time.*

Angela stayed in the doorway of the theater, concentrating. They were now only missing one person.

Angela remembered where Zack had been found the first time the fog came through. She began walking the submarine, peering upward.

She found him in the filthy radio room that Adrian had already cleared. Angela crossed her arms over her chest and cleared her throat. “Zackary!”

Zack pried an eye open. He glanced down and found Angela staring at him with a familiar expression. Zack immediately knew what had happened. “Am I naked this time, too?”

“Yes.”

He shut his eyes. “In a tree?”

“In the rafters.”

Zack was able to feel the cold pipes and wires all around his body now. “Your turn.”

Angela only had one question. “Are you hungry?”

Zack’s eyes shot back open. “That’s your question?!”

Angela shrugged. “I’m staring at a pair of the biggest balls I’ve ever seen, Zack. It makes me want sunny side up eggs with sausage.”

“Oh, God.”

“I think there’s a hair on my plate, though.” She reached up.

Zack jumped, banging his sore nose on a pipe. “Leave it alone, woman!”

She shrugged. “I won’t eat that.”

Zack’s body was once again perfectly neat and clean. Even his pubic hair was trimmed. *As a woman, I appreciate the work that takes.* “Can you do this again when Nature gets here? I might need the distraction.”

“Go away, Boss.”

“Fine. But don’t overcook my eggs. And pull that hair. It’s right at the bottom of your left—”

“Boss!”

Zack groaned again as she left, laughing. “I will definitely never live this down.”

Angela stopped as Biff and Jayda came up the ladder and hurried toward her with guilty expressions. Angela considered letting them give reasons and explanations, but she didn’t have the patience for it. “I want you both on my landing team. You have five minutes to get ready.”

Biff turned back toward the ladder. “Come on. This can wait.”

“No, it can’t. We broke a rule, Boss.”

Angela connected Biff with a quick wave of her hand, welcoming him to the hive. “I said you would get to be a descendant and now you are. There was no rule broken. It was the fulfillment of a deal. Carry yourself with pride and remember that you were already one of us before this happened.”

It was almost a mirror of what Angela had said to Jayda when she’d become a descendant. It cemented another bond between the couple.

“You’re really not mad?”

Angela pinned Jayda with a hard look. “If you do it again without permission, you’ll probably be banished.”

Jayda didn’t want that. She wanted to be able to come and go; the thought of being blacklisted from Safe Haven was horrifying. “I won’t.”

“Satisfied?”

Jayda realized Angela had given her the punishment she expected. “Not at all.”

Angela snorted. “Join the club. There’s a lot of us.” She gestured roughly. “Go get ready. Full gear, including a double vest.”

Jayda hurried off, heart pounding. She hated confrontational moments with Angela. Not because she was afraid of survival, but because she hated to disappoint the woman. Angela was her hero and her mentor. *But her son is the one I adore.*

Charlie’s three-hour conversation with her right after the explosion had helped Jayda regain enough of her composure to try living life without a safety net of always carrying fire extinguishers and avoiding flames at all costs. Charlie’s calm, kind words would live in her mind forever.

Angela was thrilled when she caught that. She hadn’t known what snapped Jayda out of her terror, but it was wonderful to find out it had been Charlie. His medical skills were growing.

See, he followed in his mommy’s footsteps after all.

Angela ignored the sarcasm from her exhausted witch as that entity finally returned. She went toward the bridge.

The intercom on the wall activated with Ray’s hard voice before she could raise her fist. “If you pound on that door, my brain will fall out of my ass and slide under it!”

Ray wasn't usually crabby. Angela grinned at the camera.

Ray unlocked the door and opened it. He stood there for a minute, letting her get a full view of him and the bridge. Coming out of the fog this time was painful.

Angela saw the bridge was pristine. So was Ray. She had no idea how he'd managed to stay so clean, but it wasn't surprising. Ray was usually fastidious about his appearance and his environment. She was glad; it was one less area to clean. "Update me."

Ray was as ready for her as he could be, considering that he felt like crap that had been crapped on. "I don't have much to report. I woke up a little while ago. I'm sore, tired, and grouchy. I don't know why Shawn left. I also don't remember locking the door behind him, but I did because it was."

The bridge was covered in yellow sticky notes again; Angela was also glad to see that. "What's our location?"

"If the radar is accurate, we're two miles from Howland Island and there are multiple blips around us. I can't identify them. The topside cameras are no longer working."

"Give me time to clear our location and then Marc will watch over the bridge while you take a break. First, I want you to try calling home. The cloud may have come and gone while we were all fogged."

Ray didn't tell her that he'd already tried. He sat in the chair and picked up the headset.

Angela listened to the submarine while she waited. The sounds of eating, showers, cleaning, and conversation were echoing. Everyone was awake now.

Angela's radio activated. "I found Shawn. He's okay."

Angela could tell from the sound of Wade's voice that it wasn't true. "Copy. I'm covered. Stay with him."

"Copy."

Angela hoped Wade would be able to ease some of Shawn's torment. Shawn was quickly reaching a point in his mental chaos that would have to be dealt with. It was going to depend on the kindness of another abused person on this sub.

Nails on the floor drew Angela's attention. She watched as Dog hurried into the theater. She assumed he was eager to spend time with the cat. She was proud of him for staying with the normals the entire time. She doubted they appreciated it the way she did. The fears some of them had about becoming entertainment for the descendants weren't completely unfounded.

"Come in, Safe Haven. This is the rescue team. Come in, Safe Haven."

Everyone waited to hear if Ray got an answer. If so, this run was really over.

Silence spoke louder than words.

Angela went toward the topside hatch while Ray tried again. Her team fell in around her, making her feel better. All six of them were skilled in their own ways and awake enough to be helpful if there was a problem. “Let your shield down. I don’t want to reveal our gifts yet.”

Bret let go of his shield and grinned at the surprised adults around him who hadn’t known he was there.

Greg, Kyle, and Piper gave the kid a respectful nod.

Jayda and Biff rolled their eyes and returned to ignoring him.

Bret frowned.

Angela shook her head at him. There would come a time when everyone would notice Bret and be grateful that he was there. “Stay close and don’t be aggressive.”

That told everyone she expected to be contacted when they went topside.

Kyle began checking his weapons and gear. “What are we looking at?”

Angela unlocked the heavy hatch and began to push it open. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Kyle frowned. “My guess is something dangerous.”

“Then we’re on the same page.” Angela went up the ladder. “Different timestream, same old shit.”

Chapter Eighteen

Moving With A Purpose

1

“Hold up there, Boss.” Greg quickly pushed his way to the ladder. “You’re not supposed to go out first and you know it.”

Angela felt a bit like Cody in that moment. She reluctantly slid to the side on the rail so Greg could go first. He was right about the rules, but she hated putting other people in danger in place of herself.

Greg already knew what was about to happen. Every interaction Angela had had in the last 15 minutes had been nasty, riling them all up. Everyone was ready to kick ass and take names. This was why. It was also why she had gone up the ladder first. Greg swallowed his anger at her methods and got ready to turn it on their enemies.

Greg climbed onto the top of the submarine and stopped, blocking the hatch with his body so Angela and the others couldn’t come up until he scanned for problems. He found several of them right away.

There were a dozen ships around the sub now and some of them were too close. “Send Bret to the bridge. Tell Ray to go quiet and do it right now. Radios off!”

Their short-range radios normally reached about half a mile. Everyone around them would be able to listen if they found the right channel.

They've probably been listening since we arrived. Watch your six.

Greg nodded at Angela's mental comment.

Bret took off running toward the bridge so he could come right back and join the team. He hadn't made it up the ladder yet.

Angela and the other fighters came out of the sub and stood on the damp surface.

A cheer split the air from some of the people around them. They were happy to discover the submarine crew was alive.

The sound of a ship moving away from theirs echoed next. Those travelers had been surprised by the emergence.

The third noise that echoed was the one that bothered Angela the most. It was the sound of gear being zipped up, guns being cocked, and men directing their fighters into place for a battle. *It always comes down to this.*

Piper listened to the cheers and shouts from the other ships, frowning. *I hope the boss doesn't make contact with any of them. We're not ready to handle that.*

Greg stepped in front of Angela, gun coming out and up as he scanned.

Piper followed his lead, drawing her gun.

Angela took a fast glance around, but that was all she was able to get in.

Salt hit Jayda's nose. A bullet hit her shoulder an instant later, spinning her around as it landed.

Biff caught Jayda as she fell, directing her to the ground instead of watching her go overboard.

Angela and Greg had rotated in tandem, both lifting their guns, but only Greg fired at the three thin refugees running across the submarine toward them.

Bang-bang-bang!

All three of Greg's shots landed, dropping two of the men and knocking the third into the ocean. Greg's missing eye didn't interfere. He'd already learned to concentrate twice as hard to make up for his physical limitation.

Jayda screamed as Biff felt around on her for an injury.

Biff's mind was full of horror, but he didn't panic. "It cracked the double plates; it didn't go through. You'll be okay."

Piper scanned Jayda and saw she was alive. She checked on the boss next.

The gun felt hard and heavy in Angela's grip as the next wave of combatants ran forward. She hadn't been practicing. Angela squeezed off a reluctant round that hit the side of the submarine and then ricocheted into the neck of a refugee who was about to fire on Greg.

"Nice accident, Boss!" Greg fired again as four more invaders came from around the bridge wall with knives and swords.

Two of the men fell.

Kyle's slugs took down the other two an instant later.

More bodies fell, drawing cheers and anger from the witnesses on the other ships.

Piper kicked the hatch shut and planted herself over top of it. She scanned the entire submarine in quick rotations, searching for more threats.

Angela holstered her gun now that she'd given off the impression that she wasn't one of their fighters.

Greg reloaded while Kyle covered him. He didn't see anyone else on the submarine, but it was possible that more people were hiding behind the command tower walls.

"Is she okay?" Angela came over to help Jayda if she needed it.

Jayda had stayed down so she didn't put herself into an Eagle's line of fire. "I'm fine, Boss."

Biff grinned in relief. "I've always thought so."

Angela laughed. She sometimes forgot how amusing Biff could be.

"We're walking it. Get her inside the sub." Greg was furious that their attackers had targeted one of the women first. *Damn cowards!*

He and Kyle marched over the slippery surface of the stationary submarine with guns in hand and fury in their hearts.

Angela knelt near Jayda as best she could, considering how her stomach protruded; she used that as a cover to scan the other ships around them.

Some of the boats were getting further away now as they realized this wouldn't be an easy fight, but others were shaking their heads at the pathetic attempt to take over. *We won, but it wasn't enough.* "Get her on her feet. Do not go below."

Biff and Jayda both stared in surprise even though she clearly had the authority to overrule Greg's decision.

"What?" Biff was angry that Jayda had been shot. He wanted her in the sub where she was safer.

"It's okay. I want to stay up here anyway." Jayda was surprised that Angela was going to continue risking her life in this moment, though. *Wasn't one close call enough?*

Angela put her back to the other ships so no one could read her lips. "It's intimidation. I don't want them to think we lost anyone in this fight."

Biff understood. He let go of Jayda's arm and went to help Piper guard the hatch. He didn't want anyone to know she was special to him so she wouldn't be targeted later because of it. He pointed angrily.

Angela tugged Jayda along. "We need to get the cameras in working order. Stay close to me."

From a distance, it looked like Biff had given them an order and they were following it. Angela was satisfied with that, but it wasn't going to be enough. *This situation will call for a different level of crazy than what we usually use.*

"All clear!"

Kyle and Greg came toward them, but slowly. They also felt the menace coming from some of their witnesses. There were more than enough people here to overrun them if they were lucky enough to get down into the submarine. The odds on that were slim, but it would still be better to put off the impression they couldn't be taken.

Greg scanned for magic. "I wonder if any of them are like us."

"There's only one way to find out." Kyle sent out a mental call. *Descendants are welcome with us. If you're a magic user, come on over.*

No one responded to his call.

Piper was watching Angela and hoping nothing else happened while the pregnant woman was up here. In the clear light of day, it was obvious that Angela shouldn't be involved in action situations for the next few months.

Bret banged on the hatch from the inside. "Let me come up and help!"

Piper kicked the hatch with her boot. "It's all over now. Stand by."

Angela stopped at the front of the submarine. "Do not let him up here." She didn't want their witnesses to know they had kids onboard.

She and Jayda began cutting off the duct tape that had been wound around the cameras to prevent them from seeing that someone had gotten on board. The duct tape was days old and incredibly sticky from being in the sun for all of that time. It didn't want to come off.

Piper remained on top of the hatch to make sure Bret couldn't come up.

Greg and Kyle began working on the rear cameras while scanning the people around them.

Kyle sent out another mental call. *We have spots open on our crew for magic users. Magic users can find sanctuary with us.*

Kyle kept an eye out for any of the ships that might be coming closer or people who might be trying to make contact without letting the other sailors know about it.

All of the ships looked old to him. Kyle saw wooden vessels using steam propulsion and carrying no cargo, based on how high they were riding in the water. Sunbeaten faces stared back at him in curiosity. They wore old style clothes that were ripped and torn from so many washings. *Those people have been in limbo for a long time.*

His attention was drawn to a tall-masted schooner with several people onboard that he would classify as dandy. The single woman among them wore a long, flowing gown and a vacant expression that said she didn't know what was happening. Her companions carried muskets and fierce profiles that warned they weren't an easy fight. It looked like the other ships were leaving them alone, but Kyle wasn't sure why. Out of all the ships, the schooner was the oldest and the most vulnerable. Even the small sailboat with the barking dog would be better in a fight because it could catch the wind easier and get away. The schooner had torn sails that were

almost paper thin and faded. Those rips would prevent it from catching the wind. It was odd that they hadn't already sank or been overrun. He caught a glimpse of the name on the pointed front: *The Patriot*.

"Cool name." But it didn't mean anything to him. The conditions of the people did. All of them had red skin and bald spots from hair falling out. It was creepy.

Kyle scratched his arm where he'd had the rash. There were no signs of it left, other than the memory in his brain.

Angela finished with her camera and then stood near Jayda while she finished hers.

Jayda kept prying at the tape. "Why were we attacked?"

Angela scanned a huge cargo ship that had to be 400 feet long. It was easily the largest boat around them. The two dozen men on that top deck stared with hard expressions and hands gripping weapons of many varieties, but not a single gun was in sight. Smoke rose steadily from that ship, telling everyone they had fuel to burn.

Angela scented the air and picked up the odor of sulfur. *That's what they're carrying, though I doubt they're burning it for fuel.*

The cargo ship was sitting heavy in the water. Angela wondered where they'd been going when limbo stole their lives. She assumed they had been transporting goods, but they could have been on their way home to the families that still didn't know

what had happened to them. *This is sad.* “They probably watched for a couple of days and thought we were all dead. So they came over to investigate but couldn’t get inside. They weren’t completely sure about us, though, so they didn’t try to make contact. After five days, I assume we surprised them.”

Kyle came toward the closed hatch. “They didn’t have a plan. That was a reckless attack. The next one will be more organized now that they’ve seen us fight.”

Angela made a fast, ugly choice. “Roll those bodies into the sub.”

Piper stepped off the hatch. “Making more stew?” Almost none of the secrets on the sub were safe from her now.

“More intimidation. If we push them off into the water and then hurry below, everyone out here will believe we got lucky. Keeping the bodies makes us appear crazy. Before we handle the bodies, come stand next to me and study each one of the other boats openly, as if we’re trying to decide which one of them we’re going to challenge.”

Kyle caught on to what she was trying to do. “Don’t write anything down either; wait until we’re out of sight.”

Piper was confused. “What’s wrong with writing things down?”

Angela tugged Jayda closer so she was finally out of view of a direct shot. “It makes us look too smart. We need to be scary, not nerdy.”

The team joined Angela and began doing what she wanted. Their observations were not comforting. Many of the lost travelers around them would put up a hard fight. There was little chance that they wouldn't need to use their magic, but that couldn't be counted on anyway, thanks to Nature. This was a bad situation that was probably going to get a lot worse.

Jayda tried to appear menacing while telling herself it was just another day in the life of an Eagle. It was easier to get through the pain, and through the fear that wanted to take over. *It's not just fire that scares me. I knew that before, but being shot just drove it in.*

Greg looked over at Angela. "I'd feel a lot better if you went below. They already think you're a girlfriend or a ship pincushion. It won't matter if you go."

Angela barely stopped herself from telling him to go to hell. She stomped convincingly toward the hatch, glaring at Piper. "Let me in."

Piper knew not to laugh. Even though this was an act, Angela absolutely was angry at Greg for the suggestion. She wanted to be involved in the action as much as Cody and the others did.

Piper lifted the hatch.

Greg noticed the three ships that had been stuck in the ice with them were in the rear of this larger group and not having anything to do with the others. He assumed they had followed the submarine out of the colder weather and into a situation that was still

dangerous. For one instant, he considered making contact with the people on the sailboat. The Golden Retriever that never stopped barking was drawing a lot of attention. He doubted they would be alive two days from now.

Angela caught that as she started down the slippery ladder. “We’re going to buy them some time as soon as we sail away. They might last a little longer.”

Her voice implied they may get involved if the sailboat people were attacked. Greg suddenly hoped that didn’t happen. It would be better for everyone on the submarine if they didn’t open this hatch again until after they’d sailed back through Nature’s snout cloud.

Biff gestured roughly. “I want you below deck, too. Now.”

Jayda knew that was also a good act for their witnesses. She sent him a joking violent threat mentally and then disappeared down the ladder.

Piper waited for the men to tell her to go below as well.

Neither of them did. Piper wasn’t pregnant and her automatic defense of the hatch proved she was in a better place for this mentally than the others were.

Kyle pointed vaguely toward Howland Island, where a large group of dock workers had taken over. It was obvious there had been a large battle for the island. A dozen bodies were rotting along the rocky beach.

All Greg could see was the mental flashes of the mission team who had survived the hurricane on that island. Zack's need to get up somewhere high when the fog came was a sign of that trauma. He just hadn't recognized it yet.

Biff also pointed at spots on the small island and mumbled under his breath, making it seem as though they were considering claiming that tiny mass. He wasn't sure why Angela wanted their witnesses riled up, but she always had a good reason for her choices; he didn't hesitate to follow the mental orders she was still sending while standing at the bottom of the ladder. Moments like this were the reason she was the boss and he was an Eagle.

"How long are you going to leave them up there?" Jayda was already worried about Biff.

Angela distracted her. "You two make a cute couple. I wish I'd thought of it."

Instead of getting upset, Jayda snickered. "You have quite the talent for matchmaking. Maybe you should open a business and make a living just putting people together."

Angela splayed her hands pointedly. "I thought that's what I was doing here."

Laughter echoed out of the submarine and floated through the air. It put off more of an impression that the sub crew was able to handle whatever came their way.

"Take the first body that comes down to the incinerator and then go to the medical bay after you

drop it off. Let Harry check you over and make sure you're really okay."

Jayda didn't argue with Angela's order. She felt like she'd been shot. Jayda swallowed a laugh and went to do as she'd been told.

2

On top of the submarine, Greg kept directing things like Angela wanted. Kyle was their top Eagle, but Angela didn't want anyone to know that. Greg didn't ask why.

"Let's get these bodies below." Greg went over and began pulling on the nearest one.

Biff joined him while Kyle stayed next to the hatch with his gun in hand and his head on a constant swivel, searching for problems.

Mutters and cries of alarm began to fly through their witnesses as the men pushed those bodies into the hole and let them fall. It immediately gave the impression that they were cannibals.

Greg used his foot to push the next body into the sub, not reacting when the dead man's skull cracked into the steel rail with an awful noise. *Some of us really are cannibals. It's not an act.*

Angela and Jayda had moved out of the way. Angela pointed at Bret. "You need to work on muscles. Help them get these bodies down to the incinerator."

Bret didn't ask what they were for. He'd seen body reclamation in the lab and assumed they would be eaten.

Lisa and the other normals on the top level quickly ducked back into their compartments to avoid the bodies and the boss. Their minds went over possible reasons Angela would keep corpses and flinched away.

The other people in the submarine were curious, but not enough to ask after having heard or already experienced Angela's bad mood today. Most of the time it was okay to talk to her about anything; that wasn't now.

Angela went to the bridge and knocked lightly. "As soon as they get down here, take us to where we encountered the yacht."

"You got it."

Angela had stopped here on the brief hope that maybe the cloud had passed through this trajectory and they could sail through it on the way. There was no reason for them to stay here.

Thud! Another body slid down the ladder, leaving a gruesome mess.

Angela signaled Gus over. "Help take that trash to the incinerator."

Gus didn't argue. He didn't have any memory of what he had been doing during the fog this time and it was bothering him. *I'm almost certain I did something important. I wish I could remember what it was.*

Angela sympathized with his mental mayhem. She still didn't know most of what she had been doing, though Kenn's detective work had narrowed it down. *I think I took a vacation. I'm sore, chafed in places, tired, grumpy, and I can't find half of my shit. Sounds like a vacation.*

Another body came down the ladder.

Piper pulled it through the hall, grunting at the weight. *I'm getting my workout today.*

The dead body didn't bother her, though the odors did. Death always added bad smells, but their attackers also reeked of body odor. *I guess soap is in low supply in limbo.*

That's enough. Angela sent a mental order so the men who were still topside would come down. She was eager to be underway. She knocked on the bridge door again. "Get us moving, Ray."

Biff and Greg moseyed down the ladder and grabbed the last body. One of them began to drag it toward the second level while the other went to find cleaning supplies to take care of the mess.

Angela admired Greg's thick arms as he dragged the body past her. It was hard not to. He'd spent a lot of his time on this sub in the gym. He hated to feel weak. His time in captivity had scarred him in more ways than just the obvious.

Kyle stepped onto the ladder and put a hand on the hatch, but he waited. There was still information to be gathered and they needed it.

Angela didn't join him like she wanted to. He was right. There was one last thing they needed to find out.

The submarine slowly powered to life around them and began inching forward through the warmer water.

Kyle kept his head above the surface, enjoying the motion and the breeze but not the view. Some of the ships around them were already following.

"The impressions I got weren't all bad; some of them have faded and they're following the leader in hopes of a rescue."

Kyle nodded at Angela's comment as the line of ships behind them continued to move. "Why are they following us instead of each other as that leader?"

Angela gave the answer that made sense to her. "We're the only ones moving with a purpose here. The others are adrift in every way."

Kyle shut the hatch, hoping the group that had taken over Howland Island decided to stay here. It was unlikely, however. They already knew that island wasn't capable of sustaining a large amount of life for long. Mel and her cat had been extremely lucky to survive there for so long. It was more likely that the group would quickly board their anchored ship and fall in line somewhere in this haunted convoy.

Kyle held in a shiver at the image of them eternally crossing the globe, drawing out ghosts from every area they passed.

Marc was standing in the corner of the hallway, providing an extra hardbody in case an enemy had made it down the ladder. He caught Kyle's thought and let the shiver out. It reminded him of his nightmare before he and Angela had met up in Indiana. He'd dreamed of the walking dead pushing them into the ocean. This was too close to that for comfort.

Adrian went down the ladder to the second level before Marc or Angela noticed him. The gunfire had brought him up here to make sure she was okay. *That reaction will prevent me from ever having a long-term relationship that might make me happy. I have to let go of her and I don't know how.*

Adrian went to the incinerator to help dispose of the bodies.

3

"He think I didn't see him. Cute." Marc crossed his arms over his chest, drawing Angela's attention. She held in a grin. *I need to get laid.*

Several men perked up through the sub, but none of them crossed the line by offering to help her with that.

Marc felt her ogling him. He wanted to handle her needs, but he already knew she didn't mean right now. *You're due in August. I'll pencil you in for October.*

Angela laughed. "Deal."

Thalia's voice spoke up in Marc's mind. *Screw her all you want. You'll always belong to me and my father.*

Marc grimaced.

Angela glared. "Keep fighting. Whatever that voice is saying, it's not true."

Marc didn't answer.

Kyle put out one more mental call. *We have spots open for magic users on our crew. We have full rations, a warm bunk, and plenty of ammunition. Make contact at the next stop if you want to be considered for one of the spots on our crew.*

All of them listened to see if anyone responded, but none of them expected it. Most of the people following them didn't need a job. They were lost in the fog with no way out. All they could do was follow and hope that led them to safety.

"That sounds exactly like what we've been doing all along." Marc nodded at Angela and then went into the therapy cubby to wait for his next session. He still had about half an hour, but he wanted to spend that time thinking about some of the things he had read during the fog.

It wasn't the classic books, however. Those had already been pushed out of his mind. He had scrounged through lockers and kits during the fog, collecting reading material, but the logbooks on the computer were holding his attention now. Reicher's was next.

Marc was both eager for and dreading that read.
*I'm almost certain it's going to change my life
forever.*

Chapter Nineteen
I'm Game

1

“They’re bringing bodies down.”

“Ooh... New flavors!”

The five caretakers laughed eagerly as they finished their showers. The steamy, messy room smelled a lot better now that so many people had gotten cleaned up in here. Their wrinkled bodies jiggled and shook as they dried and dressed.

“If you hens hurry up, I have a surprise for you.” Harry was trying to clean the floor. He was making progress, but the garbage can was now full, as were all the hampers. He was running out of space for the waste.

“Yeah!” Selina dropped her wet towel on top of the pile. “Tell us!”

Harry smiled tolerantly. “Patience.”

Harry glanced up as footsteps sounded.

“Get in there.” Wade pushed the crying man.

Shawn stumbled into the shower. He was covered in ashes, snot, and tears.

His filthy state caused Harry to get out of his way.

The caretakers quickly exited the shower stalls, clearing space.

“Get those nasty clothes off.” Wade stomped in and picked the farthest stall. “Hurry up.”

Shawn belched out vomit breath.

The caretakers fled, gathering behind Harry to finish drying off and dressing.

Shawn started stripping, but the tears didn't pause. They dripped down his gaunt cheeks and fell onto the filthy floor.

Wade got the water running and then went to the lockers in search of a washrag.

“We're out.” Selina pointed. “We used hand towels.”

Wade grabbed one and put it in the stall. “More washing space is good with a mess this big.”

Wade's guts roiled again as Shawn's body odor attacked his nose.

Selina eyed Shawn's nasty body, nose curling from the smell. “Better take two.”

Wade decided that was a good idea. “He needs a complete wash, twice, at least. Any chance you ladies feel like earning FND credits?”

The other caretakers shook their heads and tried to hurry so they could get out of here.

Selina shrugged. “If he can take it, I'm game.”

“Cool. Help get those clothes off of him. I'll do his top, you work on the bottom.”

Selina didn't care. The offer of FND credits was more appealing than Harry's surprise. She went to Shawn and started ripping his clothes off. There was no way they could clean his pants and shirt.

Shawn held onto the wall and let the woman have her way with him. *I don't have any fight left in me.*

Wanna bet? Wade smacked Shawn in the back of the head.

“What’s your problem?!”

Wade smacked Shawn again. “I should have been up there helping with the fight, not down here babysitting you!”

Wade shoved him toward the stall. “We’ll finish it in there. We’re dirtying the one clean spot on Harry’s floor.”

Harry chuckled. He pointed at the exit. “There’s a stew warming in the medical bay. Save a bowl for Selina.”

The women all understood what it was. The four caretakers flew out of the shower compartment, shoving each other and laughing happily.

Harry had gathered jogging pants and half tops for the women. Wade thought it looked out of place, but he didn’t comment on it. *Harry dressed them like suburban trophy wives, not Eagles.*

Harry glared. “Because they don’t have to be Eagles! Give them a chance to be something else!”

Wade rolled his eyes. “They’re fighters, dude. Don’t try to change them into what you want them to be.”

“Stay out of it!”

The women had stopped to listen, all frowning.

Harry waved them on. “Don’t let the stew go to waste.”

Selina wasn't disappointed. She was enjoying stripping Shawn. *I love male bodies the most. Alive or dead, they're beautiful.*

Wade blanched. "Stop it."

Selina didn't try to convince him. They didn't have to think the same. *That's my favorite thing about this camp. I don't have to be a clone of a clone of a clone. I get to be myself.*

That made Wade feel a little better about the woman. He handed her one of the hand towels while Shawn leaned against the stall. "Lots of soap. Scrub and rinse. Scrub and rinse."

The tattoo covered woman had purple streaks, thanks to the dye she'd taken from the lab. Her natural brown hair blended well with it, making her look special as she knelt between Shawn's legs.

Shawn burst into thicker tears.

Wade was out of patience. He began scrubbing Shawn's back, not being easy.

Selina hated the sadness coming from the filthy man. "What's his problem?"

"He was a Blinker." Wade didn't think it needed any further explanation.

It didn't. Selina's face filled with sympathy. "You poor baby!"

She started washing him, being gentle. "We'll get you all spruced up and find you some calm music."

Shawn didn't respond; the tears didn't stop.

"Why music?" Wade was willing to take suggestions from the caretaker. She'd been in the

lab long enough to know what might help and what might hurt.

“Reicher said the right song could snap a Blinker in or out of depression. He used music with deep beats and no lyrics mostly. He let their minds invent the words; it made them feel better about being neutered.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Selina was used to being questioned while she worked. Reicher had hated it when progress slowed down for any reason. “Same, but he rarely had trouble with the Blinkers, so I think it worked. He also kept them distracted constantly with challenges and rewards. He didn’t give them time to act like this.”

Harry had been drawn into the conversation. “Did he ever try to reverse it?”

Selina nodded. “Several times, but it wasn’t successful. He stopped trying because those Blinkers took their lives after it didn’t work. He refused to sacrifice any more of them in those experiments.”

Shawn shuddered.

“What about the men who left the program? I assume there were a few of those.”

Selina was sorry she couldn’t give Wade a better answer. “Three Blinkers were retired during my time in the lab. One of them fed himself to the hounds.”

Wade winced.

Harry huffed angrily.

Shawn shivered at the cool hand of fate on his bare skin.

“One of the retired men lasted a year. He was put in the records department on part time shifts. He slowly went crazy; he killed the entire wing of record keepers and was put down.”

Wade didn't want to know about the last man. “Stop.”

Selina went on as if there wasn't a limp penis bumping into her ear as she scrubbed Shawn's leg. “The third guy asked to be put into the breeding program. He was sure he could mentally encourage his body to recover.”

“Regrow testicles?” Harry snorted. “That's not possible.”

“No, he meant the reproduction part. He said life has unexplained mysteries and healing was one of those.” Selina began washing Shawn's man parts without a change in tone or expression. “He went on to sire a dozen children. He was one of Reicher's favorite case studies.”

Shawn glanced down at her, dripping tears into her streaked hair. “How did he do it? Really?”

Selina smiled at the evidence of his intelligence. “He paid the scientists to make him cocktails of testosterone that he added to his meals and drinks. He grew a beard that reached the floor. The breeders loved playing with it. So did his kids.”

Shawn wiped a wet arm across his face, sniffing. “I don't know how to do that.”

Wade waited instead of offering his own ideas. He was curious if Selina would have a better plan.

Selina gently washed the scar line where his testicles used to be. “Well, I might be able to advise you on some of it, but you’d have to get the boss’s permission first. It will use up more rations; she’ll have to account for that.”

Harry opened his mouth.

“Shut up.” Wade glared. “I’ll deal with you in a minute!”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut; a deep frown filled his face.

Shawn tried one more time to recover. “What do you want in exchange for helping me?”

Selina didn’t care about the witnesses. She spoke from the heart. “A family. I wasn’t allowed to be in the breeding program. I watched the other women have children and be loved by the men who gave them those kids. It wasn’t perfect, but it was still more than I had.”

Selina’s flat stomach had obviously never held a child. Wade was certain she was telling the truth.

Shawn felt sad for her. “Why weren’t you allowed?”

“I didn’t pass the mental evaluation.”

Shawn felt a bond trying to form. He didn’t fight it. “Which part?”

“Trust and attachments. The test revealed I would love my kids too much to let them be taken away.” She shrugged, misery leaking through her

words. “In any other world, that would have been a good thing, but not in Reicher’s lab.”

Shawn held still as she stood to reach his waist and hips. “What’s the advice?”

“A specific diet and sexual therapy.”

Shawn had promised he wouldn’t try to recover that part of his life, but that had been back when he’d held a hope that he could handle it. The depression was with him every second of the day now. “I agree to your terms.”

Selina shook her head. “Permission first. Get that and then we’ll talk.”

Wade glanced over to see how Harry was taking the news.

Harry was relieved. Selina was too stubborn and independent for him. *She can be someone else’s problem to tame.*

Harry’s coat was wrinkled but clean. He tugged it shut and started buttoning it over his dirty clothes. He would get a shower later, when they had clean towels and washcloths. *Maybe we can get some of the women working on the laundry piles.*

Wade was offended on behalf of their women. “Why not you?”

Harry’s nose went up. “I’m too valuable to waste on laundry.”

Wade glared. “And that brings us to the moment I’ve been waiting for.”

Wade left Shawn in Selina’s hands—literally. “I heard you and the boss earlier. I read your thoughts about the future.”

Wade stood tall as he dried his hands on his shirt. “When Samantha recovers, she’ll want to take her place by the boss. If you try to interfere with her recovery, Neil and I will find a way to kill you. We will *never* tolerate the future you have planned for our women.”

Wade’s threat didn’t bother Harry. *I can survive anything you try.* Harry started to explain his reasoning so he didn’t lose Wade’s friendship.

Wade held up a finger. “Shush. You can’t change my mind. All you can do is make me ghost you sooner.”

Harry didn’t want to fight with Wade. He was sorry this was coming between them. “I’ve always considered you a friend.”

“As have I, but if you get your way, our wives and daughters will be reduced to the same setup Reicher had in that damn lab. I don’t care about your reasons, only the results, so put it out of your mind.” Wade flicked his hand. “Go feed your cannibals their stew and think hard on what the Eagles stand for.”

Harry stomped toward the door, getting angry. “Wanting women to be submissive and care for the house and kids is not slavery!”

“That’s your perception; it isn’t mine.” Piper glared at the medic.

Harry hurried by her, muttering. “I’m not going to argue with any of the emotional women on this ship.”

Piper was on guard duty in this hall now. She peered inside. “How can he not see that *he’s* being emotional?”

“He’s scared.” Selina pushed on Shawn’s soapy arm to get him under the water.

Wade was now willing to listen to the caretaker. “Scared of what?”

“Himself. Us. We had some great moments in the fog, but the females directed it all. He almost sank down into being cared for. It made him feel like less of a man because he didn’t lead it.”

“Did you give him the chance to lead?”

“Of course not. We know what we want. If a man can’t give it, we understand and move on. If he just won’t give it, we scorn him and move on. Either way, Harry is now certain that he’ll die alone because he’s like Marcus.”

Wade hated it that so many of their solid men had been crushed on this run. “What does he need?”

Selina shrugged. “A submissive wife who cleans, cooks, and cares for their kids?”

“I’m sure there’s someone in our camp who fits that.” Wade didn’t like it, though.

“It could also be a woman, or women, who won’t take his shit and force him to view them as equals—like Angela does with Marcus. Hard to say until he snaps.”

Wade frowned. “Snaps?”

Selina smiled at Shawn when he started rinsing on his own. “He’s at the age for a midlife crisis. Reicher let the men switch jobs for a few months to

get them through it. But Harry likes being a medic. His snap will come when he makes a final choice on his future.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“If he goes the right way, it might just be a fight. If he goes the wrong way, it could be a beating for the person who disappointed him.”

“We need to get the women away from him then.”

Selina snorted at Wade. “They’ll eat him alive. Leave it alone and let it play out. You might not have to do anything at all.”

Wade chuckled.

Selina responded to his approval, smile widening, pupils dilating. Wade’s charm was powerful even when he wasn’t using it.

“I’ll still tell the boss.”

Selina regarded him in surprise. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less from you.”

Shawn looked down at her with a pensive expression.

Selina grinned. She smacked his bare ass. “Get washed. We have a lot to talk about.”

Shawn’s lips twitched.

Wade watched in approval and relief as Shawn did what she wanted. *Women are amazing problem-solvers. Anyone who can’t see that is blind or flat-out scared that they can’t keep up.*

Wade made a wonderful connection in that moment. *Samantha will help us. She’ll try to fix*

herself. All we have to do is support her and lend advice to keep her on a steady path.

Wade saw Adrian walk by with a crisp Eagle jacket that was about to get an owner. Wade smiled wryly. *I asked to be part of his therapy sessions so he gave me my own patients.*

Adrian snorted in his mind. *I had nothing to do with it. The boss is an amazing problem-solver.*

Wade laughed.

Shawn and Selina looked at him curiously.

Wade didn't spend time explaining it. He stayed by the door and let Selina repair some of the damage Reicher had done. Wade now understood why Shawn was so torn up. He believed he was going to be alone. Watching all the couples on this ship was eating at him mentally. *Now, he'll have a chance at a relationship with someone who knows what he's been through and still wants him.*

Adrian caught that, too. He was happy for Shawn, but sad for himself. He could get laid anytime he wanted, but he would never have a family with a woman who loved him deeply.

Piper stuck a foot out.

Adrian hit it and stumbled.

Piper directed his fall into her arms. She followed him down and sealed their lips.

Adrian wasn't stupid. He kissed her back and hoped her passion would be enough to carry them through whatever was coming.

Wade had been drawn by the noise. He stared at them in approval. As long as Adrian had a warm body in his arms, he would leave Angela alone.

Adrian deepened the hot kiss and wished that was true.

Piper held on tight and told herself she could be happy with only half of his attention.

Adrian pulled Piper to her feet. “I have a delivery to make. When your shift is over, come find me.”

Piper eyed his body hungrily. “Oh, I will!”

Adrian laughed. He kissed her soft cheek and headed for the bunk room.

Piper watched him go with a worried expression.

Wade thought about offering her some advice and then changed his mind. There was nothing Piper could do to break the bond between Adrian and Angela. Many people had tried over the last year; it just wasn't possible.

2

Isabel had been watching them go by with the bodies. *I smell stew!*

She forced herself not to mention it. She'd sworn off that forbidden diet and she was sticking to it no matter how hard it got.

She'd also listened to the conversation between the men in the shower. She already knew the alpha here wasn't going to let Harry have his way, but it

was worrisome. Isabel was close to the other caretakers. They'd spent all their lives together in that lab. She didn't want them to settle for the demeaning life Harry had planned for them. *I'll talk to the alpha about it later, when her mood improves.*

"This is yours." Adrian handed the jacket to the graying woman. "We normally do a bonfire party, get drunk, and tell dirty jokes. I'm sorry I can't give that to you."

Cody peered around Isabel, looking for proof that everyone was okay.

"She's fine." Adrian knew the boy was worrying over Angela. It gave them a small bond. Adrian had been worried about her, too.

Isabel hugged the jacket happily. "I don't need the party. This is what I want." She quickly stripped her sweater and donned the jacket. It had a rookie patch on it. "Thank you!"

"Thank you for watching over the boss even during the fog." Adrian smiled warmly, flashing bright white teeth. "Keep that up and you'll go far in her army."

"*Your* army, you mean." Isabel knew who the bruised and bandaged man was now and who he'd been before.

Adrian refused to accept her approval. He didn't deserve it. "Not anymore. Angela's the boss. The rest of us are just her loyal minions."

Isabel laughed. "Great answer." Her amusement fled as she delivered a warning. "But not everyone on this ship is loyal."

Adrian already knew. “Innocent unless proven guilty is our cornerstone, but if you find a problem, follow your training and handle it. Nothing can be allowed to endanger the boss.”

Isabel already felt that way. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her alive.”

“That’s the job. You may give your life for hers. Are you sure?” Adrian was glad he couldn’t smell much right now. The mix of dead bodies, nervous normals, sweaty workers, and hungover Eagles would have made him sick. *And then there’s the garbage, piss, shit, and puke in the corners and halls.*

“Yes. If my life saves hers, then it will finally be worth something.”

Adrian frowned. “Your life is already worth something. We’ll help you see that.”

Isabel didn’t argue, but she’d never felt like she was worth much to the people she worked for.

Adrian added her to his mental list of those he planned to help find their self-worth. *I’ve done it for hundreds of lost souls. I can’t wait to help Isabel see her full potential. Once she does, being an Eagle won’t be enough for her. She’ll climb the ranks quickly.*

The other people in the room came over to congratulate her and welcome her.

Kenn met Adrian’s eyes. “Shouldn’t we be making plans to get the hell out of limbo?”

“Probably.”

“Does Angela have a plan this time?”

Adrian wanted to say yes, but he couldn't. "I haven't asked. We're not exactly on speaking terms."

"Maybe you should apologize." Cody was eager to find a solution and get home. He missed everyone in Safe Haven now.

"I can't. I'm not sorry."

"Yet."

Adrian sighed. "True. She doesn't make idle threats. At some point, I'll be on my knees again, crying and begging for her forgiveness."

Kenn hated it that people felt that way about her. "She's not God!"

"Good, because she doesn't want that job." There was a big difference between taking control of the world's recovery and making people worship her. Adrian knew she didn't want that at all.

Kenn's anger cooled into fear. "Are you sure?"

Adrian considered the question, then left without answering.

Kenn wasn't comforted. He also wasn't more concerned than he already had been. Someone had to be in charge and she was good at it. *As long as she doesn't take it too far, we'll be fine.*

"And what if she does?" Charlie glared. He wasn't certain where Kenn's loyalties were on the whole taking over the planet plan.

Kenn followed Adrian out without replying.

Charlie made a mental note to tell his mom.

Then he added it to his notebook in case he got caught in the next fade. "Because there will be

another one. Nature has us right where she wants us.”

Gus came down the hall at a fast pace. “The boss just passed the word. She wants all of us in the mess.”

Everyone who heard him was thankful. They came from every room with smiles of relief and anticipation. It was time for one of her grand plans. They were all eager to see what her brilliant mind had come up with this time.

And I wish I could show it to you. Angela sighed as she headed for the mess. *I’m sorry to put us through all of this, but I only have one bullet in my mental gun. I have to save it as long as I can or surviving now won’t matter. Nature is the hardest enemy I’ve ever faced. If I’m not very careful, she’ll get the win and we’ll get the grave.*

Chapter Twenty
Smart Guy

1

“**T**hings are different this time.” Biff downed the old, weak coffee left in his cup.

“I agree. We’ve never dealt with a situation like this before.” Zack chewed on a ration bar and thought of Safe Haven camp meals in longing. *My teeth can’t take this diet much longer.*

Biff twisted the empty cup in his jittery hands. “I’m talking about the boss. Why hasn’t she given us a plan of action yet?”

Zack glanced around the mess that was filling with dirty, stinking people. Zack was perfectly clean other than a layer of dust. *And a hair out of place somewhere on my left ball.* Zack flushed at the memory of Angela reaching for it. “That’s probably why she called us all in here.”

Biff wasn’t convinced. He was upset that Jayda had been shot. The fact that she was now pulling guard duty outside the mess with a bruise on her shoulder that looked like she had been kicked by a horse wasn’t helping him calm down. “I mean it. It’s not the same.”

Zack had spent enough time taking part in Angela’s plans to comprehend there was a reason

for everything she did and for everything that she *didn't* do. "Have faith. She knows what she's doing."

"How is that possible?" Biff tossed Zack's words back at him. "We've never gone through a situation like this before."

Zack wasn't sure how to instill faith in the rookie because of everything the mission men had gone through in the lab. Eagle methods didn't apply here. Biff was doubting leadership, but only because of what Reicher had put him through. It was a normal reaction. Zack decided not to get mean. "We'll see what she called us together for and go from there."

Biff rotated toward the door as more people entered the mess. It was quiet in here despite almost everyone being present. He frowned as Angela came in with Wade on her heels and a small line of guards behind them. *She's too pregnant to handle this problem.*

Zack snorted. "If anything, that will make her more ruthless. Be quiet now."

Biff closed his mouth and tried to remember how happy he'd been before this run. Getting Jayda's attention had given him a brief respite from his mental demons, but that was over now. *All it took was one bullet.*

Angela already had her notebook in hand as she stopped in the middle of the smelly room. "We have a lot to get done before we reach our next location. I'm going to go over each item and assign you to it.

We're all going to be busy for the next 6 to 8 hours. After, you'll sleep and then get up and finish anything left on the list."

Angela took the cup that the Air Force man brought out to her. Jack was running the mess, but he hadn't gotten food rolling yet. He was still working on hot beverages.

Wade gently took the cup from her and drank from it. He smiled. "Hot chocolate. Yummy."

He handed the cup back to Angela and then waited patiently for her to continue.

The man moving back behind the counter flushed at the silent accusations now flooding the faces of almost every witness.

Wade shook his head at Jack when he would have protested. "It's not personal. It's just our training."

"It's not right." The Air Force man felt like he'd been singled out even though he hadn't done anything wrong. He pushed another mug across the counter toward Wade and then crossed his arms over his thickening chest in disapproval.

Angela took over before they could get into an argument. "Everyone needs a shower and then a medical check today, in that order. I don't want to hear any excuses. Do not go to bed until you've gotten clearance from the medic."

No one asked why she was making that rule. It was obvious when they glanced around. Thin, pale, grumpy people with sunken sockets and irritated skin were sitting at every table. None of them

looked healthy. The fog wasn't having a good effect on their health.

"I have a short list of items from our captain that needs to be covered ASAP. I'm putting Theo and Thomas on it. Any alerts or warnings you see as you work need to be reported directly to them, as well as put into your nightly report." Angela sipped the mug and immediately put it down. Her stomach couldn't handle something so sweet yet. She needed real food in there first.

"I want a crew to make sure we're producing clean water." She pointed at Biff. "You're in charge of that. Grab two caretakers and get it tested like we were doing on the cruise ship. Then fill the storage barrels and all of the canteens."

Senior Eagles were already copying her orders as she spoke. Some of the rookies began doing that, while everyone else stared impatiently, waiting for her to get to the big solution they needed.

"I want the same shield team to gather supplies for the kids. I know we're running low on a lot of things. We'll do the best we can, like switching over to the cloth diapers." Angela shrugged at the unhappiness coming over the faces of the shield team. "It sucks, but it's what people did before those disposable wonders were invented. The mothers from the lab know how to use the cloth diapers. They'll give demonstrations."

Angela glanced at Lisa. "Make sure they do it." The shield team were all descendants. The normals would have to be encouraged to follow through.

Lisa nodded coolly, understanding she had just been put in charge of that. "I will."

It wouldn't hurt her to learn how to use cloth diapers, either. Lisa just didn't like the unspoken accusation in Angela's tone that if something went wrong with the normals, she would be held responsible for it.

"All of the babies are using powdered milk in their bottles now. The mothers' milk has all dried up." Charlie wasn't looking forward to the bottle and dish cleaning that still needed to be done, but he was happy that Angela was keeping him with the kids. It meant he'd done a good job.

Charlie wasn't sure why she hadn't put one of the breastfeeding mothers in the bunk room with them, but he assumed it was intentional. He now doubted the mothers were going to survive this run. He didn't look in their direction to give it away, but he felt bad for them.

"I'll make sure we send powdered milk bags in; you'll have those supplies before I hit the rack tonight." Angela wanted the kids well-covered.

She consulted her notebook. "I need someone to take stock of the food situation." She looked over at Gus. "Piper said you made some type of granola bars while you were fogged out. It fed everyone and we're still eating on them. Can you do that again?"

"I'd be happy to." Gus still enjoyed cooking. He always had. He found it calming now, and he needed that. Going in and out of the fog was hard on him. Each time he woke and remembered

everything that had happened, it was like living through it for the first time all over again.

“Wade decided the men will handle the laundry and the women will scoop trash and clear the floors. If I didn’t already assign you to something, you’re on the laundry or cleaning crew based on that.”

Men turned toward Wade in confusion.

“What?!” Harry glared. He was sure Wade had done it to spite him.

Wade didn’t look at Angela and give her away. He thought fast and found an answer for why she’d picked it and blamed it on him. “The women need the muscles and the men always get stuck doing the dirtiest, hardest work. I thought it was time for some more equality.”

Men relaxed, smiling as they realized the laundry was an easier chore.

The women gave Wade dirty looks now, but deep down, they were satisfied that he was trying to beef them up with more muscle mass.

Harry couldn’t protest, but he knew it wasn’t true. *He did it to punish me.*

Wade rolled his eyes at Harry. “That’s not my job.”

Angela cleared her throat, drawing attention back. She braced for bad reactions as she closed the meeting. “That’s it for now. Let’s get this ship cleaned up.”

People began speaking over top of each other.

“What’s the plan?”

“When do we drop the nuke?”

“Why did you bring bodies in?”

“Is it true there are a bunch of ghost pirate ships following us?”

Angela let out a deep sigh. “We have to get these things done. Is there anything *important* that needs to be covered right now?”

Silence fell through the mess at her abrupt tone. It was obviously still a bad time to talk to her.

Angela went to the center table and sat down, but she didn’t give them what they wanted. She couldn’t. *If I do that, we’ll all be lost.* “We have to get ready for the next fade. I hope we’ll reach our destination before that happens, but we need things covered in case we don’t.”

The senior Eagles were always willing to follow her because of her track record.

Everyone else was forced to agree because they didn’t have the authority to overrule her.

Angela motioned toward the two people now entering the mess. “You have permission to help him in any way that you can, so long as it doesn’t break our basic rules.”

Selina smiled.

Shawn made a face. “Instrumental music sucks, Boss.”

Angela chuckled. “Stop by the bridge and pick out something you like.”

Theo entered the mess with the two worm subjects following. He came over to Angela’s table. “They’re going to stick with me and try to learn

some engineering skills. We worked it out while we were in the brig.”

“That’s a great idea.” Angela didn’t detect signs that the last five days had been rough on the trio of men. In fact, it looked like they had bonded during their time together. It also helped that as an engineer, Theo had been able to get in and out of the jail cell whenever he wanted. As far as she was concerned, during a fade that cell might have been the safest place to be. “How are you?”

Theo knew she was worried about him breaking. He tried to offer some comfort. “It’ll be a battle every time, and I may lose some of them, but I won’t lose them all.”

Angela was proud of him. “This is where you regain your honor.”

Theo nodded. “And I want that more than anything.”

The men and women at the tables around Angela listened and watched in frustration. They didn’t understand why she wasn’t handling things like she had before.

Biff gave Zack a pointed look.

Zack got up. “I’ll run the washers. Start bringing me the piles. Stack them outside the laundry compartment.”

“I saw some shovels in the rear of the incinerator room.” Erin smiled at Greg and then followed Zack. “I’m going to start clearing trash on the top level.”

That seemed to be a signal for everyone else. They began heading for the chore Angela had listed instead of nagging her into giving them what they believed they needed.

Angela was relieved. They couldn't force her into it, but they could make her angry and interfere with the plans she already had in place, plans that she wasn't able to share with any of them. *Once again, I get to carry the weight until it all blows up. I know it's my job, but it's so isolating!*

Marc came over to the table and sat down across from her. He wanted to stay out of it, but after helping her get her shower and seeing how big her stomach was now, that wasn't an option. "When it does all go down, you are going to have help, right?"

Angela nodded immediately. If it had been anyone else, she would have told them to mind their own business. Marc had lost a daughter due to her insistence on handling things alone last time; he had the right to demand that promise from her. "I will not try to handle this alone. You have my word on it."

Marc pushed her mug toward her hand. "You need the sugar. Drink up."

Angela obediently sipped and studied him over her cup. She could tell he had deep thoughts in his mind, but it didn't seem like he was ready to discuss them yet. "I'm here whenever you need me."

He smiled. "I always need you."

The good moment between the couple spread nice vibes through the mess, but it didn't calm the worried people. They were in trouble and they expected their leader to fix the problem.

Angela consulted her book again to make sure everything was covered. "We need that check of the sub done as soon as possible. Can you make sure they don't miss anything?"

Marc stood up, providing a good example. "I'll cover it."

It was another push to get people to do the things she had listed. It annoyed Angela that she needed to handle things this way, but since she couldn't tell them what was going on, it was the only option available that would keep the peace until it was no longer time to be peaceful.

Angela stayed in the mess and continued to direct people through the chores over the next hour. Even though she wasn't able to give them a solution yet, she still needed to stay visible. Even the mission men felt better when she was in public view.

No one else asked about the bodies she had brought in or the ships that were following them. It was obvious that she wasn't going to give them an answer.

Angela tried not to think about it so the descendants didn't pick it up and talk about it in front of the others. The normals were already on edge. The last thing they needed to hear was that there were 100 or more lost souls following the submarine like ants on a honey trail. At some point,

they would find out and that would have to be handled, but it didn't have to be right now. *There's no reason to stir them up yet. There will be plenty of time for that later.*

2

"Maybe she doesn't know what to do."

"That's what I believe, too."

"Do you think she'll figure it out?"

"The Safe Haven people have a lot of faith in her. Maybe."

"What should we be doing?"

"Following orders so I don't have to remove you." Angela glared at the long-haired caretakers who were taking a break in the theater. "Get back to work!"

The two women quickly got out of her sight. No one wanted to challenge her. Even pregnant, Angela was dangerous.

Angela entered the theater and went to the woman who was still in the front row. She stepped carefully over the trash. This room hadn't been cleaned yet.

Mr. Sneaky hissed at her.

Angela glared at the cat. "Do it again. I dare you."

Mr. Sneaky hissed again and then jumped to the floor to avoid her retribution.

Angela chuckled. "Smart guy."

Mel laughed with her. “He’s got some nerve, that cat.”

Angela leaned in, not wanting her conversation to flow out to the normals who were cleaning the top level of the submarine. “I need to talk to you about something, Mel.”

Mel turned around in the comfy theater seat and gave Angela her full attention.

“When we go back through the cloud, it might be dangerous for you. I want to give you the option of staying here, before we get too far away from your island.”

Mel was fully alert now even though she still didn’t remember who she was. “Nah. Even if I don’t make it, I still want to try. I want my life back.”

Angela was already fond of the woman. “Are you sure? I could find another land mass to drop you on. And you can keep the cat.”

Mel studied her. “I guess you seen something bad coming for me.”

Angela nodded. “If I leave you here, at least you’d be alive.”

“This ain’t no life, Lass. I don’t know who I was before, but I do know I always faced each challenge head on. I’m not going to drop and run like a child. When you go through, so do I.”

Angela patted her hand. “You always have a place with us, Mel.”

Mel reached over and gave Angela a quick hug. Then she turned toward the movie. “I like this one.”

Angela stood and went to the doorway. Mel was already falling back into her unaware state; that was a sign of the fog taking over her mind. It wasn't a sign that the fog was hitting the rest of them, though. Mel had lived that way for so long that her mind automatically blanked out on her in regular intervals. Most of the descendants had tried to reach her mentally, but none of them had been successful. *The longer we're in, the harder it is to get out really does seem to be the case. I think we have one more fade and then I'm going to be forced to do something desperate.*

Angela saw Cate slip into the therapy cubby. Marc's session was long over. Adrian was in there cleaning.

Angela stepped closer so she could hear what they were talking about. She didn't want to use her gifts because Adrian would become aware that she was listening. Cate already knew she was. The little girl didn't miss much.

Neither do I. Adrian brought up his shield around the therapy cubby, blocking Angela out.

On another day, Angela might have blasted through his shield to prove she was stronger. Today, she couldn't trust herself to only blast through his shield. She might fry him alive if she didn't like what she found.

She headed for the bridge to check in with Ray. They were keeping close track of the radar now, in hopes that a green storm would roll across their path.

3

In the therapy cubby, Cate gave Adrian an ugly look. “You’re not supposed to treat the alpha that way.”

Adrian rubbed his aching nose. “She’s not supposed to treat me that way, either.”

Cate wasn’t old enough to understand all of the drama that was involved in their relationship, but she was certain whatever Adrian had done was bad. “You have to tell her you’re sorry, even if you don’t mean it. That works for us.”

Adrian felt honored that the little girl wanted to help him get out of trouble. “I can’t do that this time, squirt. You’ll find out when you get older that eventually you have to stand up for what you believe in, even if no one else likes it or will stand up with you.”

“What did you do?”

Adrian wasn’t going to let the little girl in on those details. He settled for half of the truth. “I’m making her pick between duty and honor, like she’s always making me do. If she makes the right choice, everything will be fine. If she doesn’t, I’ll probably have to leave.”

“That’s what my daddy wants.”

It wasn’t news to Adrian. “He also wants to leave again. If he decides to do that, I don’t want you to feel like it’s your fault. He’s not running

away from you or even from Angela. He's running away from himself."

Cate sat down at the table. "Is it time for you to give me a new lesson?"

It was a huge difference from her abrasive, demanding behavior. Adrian nodded. "Help me clean things in here and we'll talk about how to be a better leader even when you don't want to be."

Cate made a face. "Why does that matter to me? I'm just a body man."

"That's part of the lesson."

Cate shrugged. She didn't care what Adrian was teaching her so long as he was doing it. She was tired of being in the bunk room with the other kids and she had already put in an hour on cleaning other sections of the submarine. What she really wanted was a few minutes of personal time with a good friend where they were able to have fun and not be stressed. The submarine was full of anxious people. It was hard on her.

"You enjoy hurting people."

Cate waited, not sure how to answer.

Adrian showed her his newest bruises. "When you get mad, your first instinct is to hurt the person who angered you."

Cate frowned. "Some people need to be hurt."

"But that's not your choice to make. We have an alpha." Adrian pointed at his bandaged nose. "She decides on punishments, not you."

Cate crossed her arms over her chest.

“If you can’t learn to control yourself, you can’t be a body man.” Adrian gave her a hard look. “It was your reaction to Cody being grabbed that was wrong. If you had stayed cool and calm, you could have negotiated for his release. Attacking wildly serves no purpose except to make the situation worse.”

Her bottom lip came out.

Adrian didn’t take pity on her, though he did lower the shield around the room. He could feel Marc now wondering what they were discussing. “You knew deep down that Kenn wouldn’t hurt him. You should have called his bluff.”

Cate was distracted from her growing anger. “I got scared.”

“Fear is the hardest emotion to control.” Adrian kept cleaning the small space. “It rules your life, little girl. You’re scared all the time now and it shows.”

Cate scrubbed tears from her eyes.

Adrian fought with his own emotions, like he’d had to do with his own daughter. “You can face it or hide from it.”

“Hiding doesn’t work. I want it gone!”

“As do I. It bothers me to see females afraid to live.”

“Make it go away.” Cate forced out the next word. “Please?”

Adrian smiled warmly at her. “I will. My word on it.” His voice cooled. “But I need something from this deal.”

Cate waited again instead of rushing in.

“Very good.” Adrian rose from collecting the trash on the floor. His knees popped loudly. “I’m tired of being abused by people who bring those moments on themselves. I want your protection.”

Cate stared in shock. “But I hate you!”

Marc chuckled outside the door. It faded slowly as he walked away.

Adrian didn’t get distracted. “Why do you hate me? Because your daddy does?”

Cate glared. “And you break the rules and make me feel bad.”

“You asked for training. You demanded it. Why is that my fault?”

Cate didn’t have an answer. She saw his point and gave in grudgingly. “Fine. I’ll stop hurting you.”

“I want more than that, Cate.”

The little girl tensed at his tone. “I can’t cross the alpha!”

Adrian shrugged. “Then I can’t train you. If you really want my lessons, you have to keep me safe from everyone.”

Cate slammed her fist on the dirty table, knocking more trash to the floor. “It’s not right!”

“I agree.” Adrian dropped down across from her, lowering his voice. “And that’s not all I want.”

Cate tensed. “Too much!”

“I’ll give you something else, too.”

“What?”

“A best friend.” Adrian flashed an image of another lonely child on this sub who needed a good friend.

Cate caved immediately. She missed Joey. “Tell me what else you want.”

Adrian brought up a mental image of the normals on the ship, of how he’d found them huddling together behind the incinerator. “They’re more scared than you are. They need to be protected.”

Cate hadn’t been expecting that. She didn’t mind helping people who were weaker. “From who?”

“Your new mommy.”

Chapter Twenty-One
Family Planning

1

“What happens when we get back?”

Tension went through the air of the messy cabin. The captains’ quarters hadn’t been cleaned yet. It wasn’t a priority.

“I haven’t really thought that far ahead.”

“We have time right now. Think about it.”

“I don’t want to be rushed on this decision.”

“I didn’t realize you were trying to make a choice.”

“Everyone on this ship is trying to make a choice about their future.” Erin sat up in the bed and leaned against the dusty headboard. “Do we have to have this conversation?”

Greg was surprised she was avoiding it. “I thought you were happy with me.”

Erin sighed. “I am, so far, but we’ve only been together for a short time, and you know how fast things can change.”

Greg was still surprised. “I told you what I wanted on the island, and you agreed. Has something already changed for you?”

Erin reflected on everything that had happened since then. It hadn't been long timewise, but it also had been. "Can I be honest?"

Greg began to brace for bad news. "Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Erin rose from the bed and began searching for her clothes.

Greg braced harder. Anytime a woman began dressing during a conversation, it implied she wasn't going to stay after that conversation was finished. Erin's actions were a lot like a man who had gotten what he wanted but didn't want to stick around for a relationship. *I'm starting to feel a little used.*

Erin's arms were muscular, as were her legs, but her flat stomach drew his attention. He wanted to see it grow with life, like Angela's was doing.

Erin pulled on her shirt and then came to the bed. She sat on the edge and pulled the cover over her chilly legs. "I'm not sure that we have a real future. I need you to convince me."

Greg slowly shook his head. "I can't. It's not like I can turn these feelings off."

"And I knew that on the island, but I thought we were going to leave Safe Haven. There's no way I can stay there and watch you drool over the boss during the day and then let you sleep in my bed at night." Erin softened her tone. "It's too much to ask, you know?"

Greg did. “I’m sorry. But I don’t understand why you believe anything has changed. We came to an agreement. I’ll honor it.”

Erin met his eye. “You asked me what happens when we get back. That implies *you’ve* changed your mind, not me.”

There was silence for a moment as Greg considered that. *Have I changed my mind about leaving?*

Erin waited patiently, but she already knew what Greg’s answer was going to be. He wanted children now in case he didn’t survive one of his Eagle missions, but he wasn’t going to give up being an Eagle. It was part of who he was.

“I still want to leave. I also want to stay. They need me. They need *us*.”

Erin felt the same. “I’m willing to go or stay, but I’m not willing to be your mattress bunny on the side. Convince me I’ll be your only focus of attention and we’ll go from there.”

Now Greg was the one who felt pressured to make a choice. He briefly considered telling her what she wanted to hear, but he chose not to. Erin was too smart for that. “You won’t ever see or hear about it. I’m already keeping a cool distance between myself and the boss. I don’t think it’s reasonable to ask for more because we’re friends, too. We will occasionally talk outside of business matters.”

“I agree with you completely as an Eagle and a member of the camp. As a woman who wants to

love you, there's not a chance in hell this is going to work out for either one of us. You know that."

Greg had been refusing to think about it. The fading sessions made that easier, but he'd woken this morning with a feeling of emptiness that had been impossible to fight. He wanted a commitment in his life to concentrate on. That was why he had brought this up; he now regretted it. "Where does that leave us?"

Erin reached over and clasped his big, warm, scarred hand. "I can still play with you, but I can't be serious. I'll be going to the medical bay later to ask if they brought any birth control along."

Sadness filled Greg's heart. He really did want a child of his own to love. "Can't we meet in the middle?"

"I already have been, Greg. I've wanted you for a long time. Finding out you had a thing for the boss was a surprise for me and a disappointment." Erin shrugged. "If I had known about it before this run, I probably wouldn't have come along."

Greg understood Erin was here for him and the future she had been hoping they might build together. "All I can do is promise it will never interfere with our relationship."

Erin wanted to accept that, but she'd already seen how Angela was able to twist men around her little finger. "I'm not convinced."

"What if we get married?"

Erin's heart jumped in happiness. At the same time, loud warning bells went off in her mind. "Do you love me, Greg?"

Greg immediately nodded. "I wouldn't ask you to have my children if I didn't have strong feelings for you. I didn't ask Lisa to do that."

Erin knew that wasn't the same thing, but it was a sign of his commitment to their future together and that was really all she needed. "If that's what you want to do, then I'll agree, but I don't want you throwing it in my face ten months from now or two years from now that I pressured you into getting married. I'm perfectly happy to maintain a friends with benefits relationship and you can pick someone else to have your kids."

Greg rolled over and kissed her, putting as much love into it as he could.

Erin surrendered willingly and hoped it would be enough to give both of them the happiness they deserved. *But even if it doesn't, I'll still be his wife and that's a line in the sand that Angela won't cross even if she gets rid of all the other dogs yapping at her feet.*

Footsteps sounded outside the captains' quarters. The lovers didn't notice.

In the hall, Angela continued on to the medical bay. She was in the middle of walking the submarine and checking on everyone, as well as verifying the preparations for the next fade were either done or in progress. It was after midnight and

most people were sleeping. Soft music was playing through the speakers that seemed to have a calming effect on all of the mission men. She had already made notes to let one of them pick the music from now on.

Angela didn't spend time worrying over Greg's new life choice. *I don't want him anyway. This works perfectly for both of us.*

Angela slowed as she reached the medical bay, hearing voices. Almost everyone had gotten a fast medical check. Harry was finishing up with one of the final few now. Angela lingered by the door to listen.

Inside the medical bay, Lisa sat in the chair and began pulling her dusty shoes back on. "Are we done?"

Harry stared at the notes he'd made in her file. "The upset stomach and slight weight gain are probably normal for this situation, but I'm waiting on one final test to finish." He gestured toward the small tray next to the exam table.

Lisa tied her shoes and stood up. "There's really no need to wait for it. I know what's wrong with me and so do you." She headed for the exit. "I'm pregnant."

Harry went over to the tray to verify that, but he was almost certain she was correct. He didn't ask her who the father was. Lisa had only been with one man the entire time she'd been in Safe Haven.

Lisa stepped out into the hallway.

Angela was right there.

Lisa flinched, hands automatically coming up to protect her stomach.

Angela stared at her. All of the plans for Greg's peaceful, happy future flew out the window and sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Lisa stared back, not sure what to expect. "He's not yours."

Angela wasn't sure what to say yet. She was thinking. *I was perfectly fine with the thought of Erin having his kids. Why does it bother me to find out it will be Lisa instead?*

Angela ignored the woman's tension and slowly reached out to hug her. "Congratulations."

Lisa tensely returned the hug. *I certainly didn't expect that.*

Angela stepped back, aware of several people now listening to the conversation. Greg wasn't, but the story would quickly spread. "Make sure you pull extra rations for yourself and don't forget the vitamins."

Lisa scowled at her. "Why are you being nice about it?"

Angela shrugged. "We need the babies. It doesn't matter to me who their parents are, except in a few limited circumstances."

Lisa quickly clicked that together. "You mean Adrian."

Angela controlled the immediate anger that tried to flare up. "I put a moratorium on Mitchel's breeding because they can't be trusted and because

so many of those children either die or go corrupt. They have to be watched carefully to make sure neither of those things happen.”

“What about me?” Lisa assumed she wouldn’t be allowed to leave now.

“There are right ways and wrong ways to handle situations like this. You have a lot of choices to make.”

“I’m keeping it!”

Now Angela’s eyes narrowed. “Why? There’s a good chance the child will be one of us. Do you plan to use its gifts?”

“No. I plan to love it and raise it as a good person who can be trusted to do the right thing.”

Angela heard the warning and the accusation. She pushed a little harder. “When you leave Safe Haven, Lisa, what do you plan to do with that freedom?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Maybe not, but it will be Greg’s business. I am not forbidding you from leaving, but you have to talk to him about it and come to a resolution that satisfies *both* of you. If you go running off while carrying his baby, Greg will hunt you down. There won’t be anything I can do to stop him.”

Lisa paled. She’d already worried about that scenario, but hearing it spoken aloud brought fresh terror to her mind. “I don’t want that.”

“Neither do I. He’ll hear about this as soon as he comes out of the captains’ quarters. Don’t wait too long to talk to him or he’ll assume the worst.

He's been through a lot in the last few months. Don't add to his stress."

"That's funny coming from the person who put him through most of that hell." Lisa turned around and headed down the hall. "Stay out of my business, boss lady. This has nothing to do with you."

Angela understood she had scared the woman with that warning, but every word was true. *The only thing Greg wants more than me, is to have a child of his own. As soon as he finds out he has one on the way, all deals he's made with anyone else will be shoved off the table.*

Angela heard Wade coming down the hallway. As her XO, Wade was responsible for any number of operations that kept the camp flowing smoothly. She was grateful to have him, but she held up a hand to make him stay out in the hallway as she entered the medical bay.

Harry saw her and immediately started grumping. "I can't believe you overloaded me this way. I've done 33 medical exams today. Thirty-three!"

Harry began changing the paper cover over the exam table. "And now I guess you want me to make sure everything's okay with you, too!"

Angela stayed by the door, anger growing at the open disrespect.

Harry shoved the dirty paper into the garbage can and stomped over to the computer. "Take off your clothes and get on the damn table!"

Angela didn't move.

Harry looked over with an ugly frown. “I don’t have time to baby you. Just do it!”

Angela’s eyes lit up bright red.

Harry tensed, comprehending he had crossed the line. “I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“I made sure every one of those people showered before they came in to see you, right?”

Harry quickly nodded. “And I do appreciate that, but—”

“I also made sure they worked a shift before they got the shower, so they would be too tired to argue with anything you told them to do, didn’t I?”

Harry tried to explain. “I didn’t think there would be so—”

“You also got to use your gifts all day with no supervision.”

“And that did make things easier, but I—”

“I also made your women happy with the stew. When you get out of here, you can look forward to a hot meal, a massage, and sex without any backtalk.”

Harry flushed. “That really was nice of you. I appreciate—”

“I made sure we brought in supplies for the medical bay first. I also had the mess send you a nice dinner.”

Harry’s emotional control had already been wavering. It broke. “You’re taking great care of me! Stop it! I’m not a child. I’m a man!”

It was more proof of what Selina had said about Harry being afraid of falling into what he

considered to be the woman's position in life. "A man would act like one and say thank you. And then he would give me his updates and send me on my way. I'm obviously too pregnant to still be on my feet after 12 hours."

Her calm, rational argument infuriated Harry and embarrassed him. His mouth opened but nothing came out.

Angela nodded. "I understand completely. That's how you make me feel now, Harry. At some point you'll have to come to terms with your mommy issues, but I don't have the energy to walk you through it. Give your updates to my XO when you're done in here, and then go let your women take care of you for a while. It's obvious that you need it, even if you don't want it."

Angela left the medical bay before Harry could recover enough to argue.

Wade silently clapped, grinning. Harry had had that coming and then some.

Angela gestured. "Updates, please."

Wade fell in with her as she went up the ladder to the top level she hadn't walked through yet. "We did the check on the sub that Ray wanted. As far as we can tell, there aren't any issues other than the pipe that's leaking again in the mess. Theo and Thomas spent most of the day on that. They've decided they need to weld an extra piece of pipe in place and then seal it. They're going to start working on that as soon as they get up in the morning."

“Good.”

“We’re fully stocked on water again and all of the buckets and canteens have been filled. Gus did a great job on those homemade granola bars. They taste a hell of a lot better than the ration bars. Ray sent Shawn out of the bridge to help after he took his break, so they’ve been able to push through about eight batches. We’re fully stocked on food for a few weeks.”

Angela shuddered at the thought of being in limbo long enough to eat them all. “Everyone has done a really good job. Pass the word that I’m happy about it.” There was no trash beneath her feet; the tiled floor gleamed. The women had done a wonderful job on it.

“I will.” Wade had done his share of the work as well. His arms were very sore. *I never knew folding laundry could hurt so much.* “Zack is still in the incinerator compartment, burning the bags and piles people brought in. I’ll relieve him as soon as I’m done with these updates.” Zack had spent most of their radiation illness in the incinerator room of the cruise ship, burning bodies. This had to be giving him bad flashes.

“What about the supplies in the bunk room?”

“Everything’s fully stocked again, except for diapers and formula. Thankfully, all of the younger kids seem to be adjusting fine to the powdered milk. Everyone hates the cloth diapers, though.”

Angela remembered her own months of using those when money got low. “Don’t we all?”

Wade chuckled.

Angela saw Cate duck out of the therapy cubby and go into the theater. The little girl didn't look at her.

Angela frowned. She didn't know why Cate was suddenly avoiding her, but it would have to be handled. It wasn't good for Cate to isolate herself. "I had you listen in on the conversation with Harry because he'll need to talk about it later and you're very good with emotional females."

Wade busted out laughing. "I'm going to say it to him exactly like that."

Angela snickered. "I almost want to hear it."

"I'll see if I can arrange that."

They both paused for a moment as a small group of normals came out of the theater and went down the ladder. They were obviously avoiding the little girl who had gone in there.

Angela considered demanding to know what had happened, but she restrained herself. Just like the men on this ship, Cate had gone through a lot of abuse during her time in the labs. Pushing had to be done carefully. "What's next?"

Wade checked his notes. "That's it from me except for a personal question."

"Shoot."

"Why are you training the boy so hard?"

Angela had been expecting something worse. "Because Cody needs it."

"Not that boy." Wade pointed at the corner. "That one."

Bret lowered his shield, frowning. “How did you know I was here?”

“Because she’s had you on guard duty every single day since we pulled you out of that lab. She’s prepping you for something and I want to know what it is.”

Bret was still dirty, and he hadn’t gotten a medical check yet. Angela had insisted that he follow her around with his shield up. Bret didn’t mind. He hadn’t wanted to do laundry or clean the floors anyway.

“I’m keeping him out of trouble and giving him the experience that he needs to join the Eagles as soon as we get back.”

Wade wasn’t sure if he believed her. “He’s young for that.”

“I know. That’s why he’s getting the extra training.” Angela shook her head at Bret when he would have volunteered more information.

Cate peered out of the theater room, drawn by the conversation. She hadn’t known Bret was there, either.

Angela smiled at the girl.

Cate ducked back into the theater.

Bret immediately brought up his shield and then vanished from sight.

Wade recognized the evasion, realizing they hadn’t told him everything. Unlike the other men she dealt with, Wade didn’t push for an answer. He just assumed she had a good reason for it. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“No. I’m almost done with my walk-through and then I’m going to fall into a bunk and sleep for about 10 hours. Wake me if you need anything.”

“I will. Who has point overnight?”

“Cody will cover it, with you.”

Wade didn’t have a problem with that even though he knew some people might. *That’s why she waited until everyone was asleep.*

Wade smiled at her and then headed toward the ladder so he could take over Zack’s chore. *That really is why she gets the big bucks. We should give her a raise. She’s more than earned it.*

Angela laughed. “If I could get an extra hour of sleep a day for the next three months, that would be awesome.”

Wade wrote it down as he got out of sight. Angela didn’t ask for much personally. When she did, everyone wanted her to have it. This request was more than reasonable, even though it might not be easy to accomplish. A boss’s work in Safe Haven was literally never done.

Angela glanced into the radio room as she went by. Marc was in there, sitting at the computer console. The look on his face told her he had found Reicher’s files and was now flying through them the same way she had. Marc had taken a shower and helped the other men with the laundry for hours. He’d gone on a break right after dinner and then come here. He hadn’t returned to the laundry compartment.

Angela considered interrupting him and locking down the computer. *But I can't. He has a right to know.*

Marc minimized the file and glanced over at her. “Is it bad?”

Angela reluctantly nodded instead of trying to act like everything was okay. “You’ll probably think it is.”

Marc already suspected what he was going to find. He was most of the way through the files now. “What do *you* think?”

Angela blasted him with a wave of need and acceptance. “It doesn’t matter to me. As long as we love each other, we can get through this or anything else.”

Marc returned her smile and her wave of love, but it was tense and distracted. His eyes went back to the computer screen and resumed absorbing the details of Reicher’s reign.

Angela gestured at the man now standing in the doorway of the therapy cubby. “I want you to sit with him.”

Adrian wasn’t sure what was going on as he slid by her to enter the radio room. He assumed the worst, however. Her tone wasn’t comforting and neither were her words.

“Don’t leave him alone.”

Adrian didn’t protest that he’d been up for almost 24-hours. When Angela wanted something from him, he gave it and suffered. Their relationship

was carved in stone. It would always be hard on him.

Angela moved down the hallway, hoping Marc was able to handle what he discovered in that file. *He died too fast. I wish we could go back and kill Reicher all over again.*

Marc caught that and shuddered. “So do I.”

Adrian settled onto the other stool to wait. He connected to Marc’s mind and began to read the file with him.

Reicher’s log. Special Project #0167

Shit. Adrian didn’t know if he would be able help Marc with this. *She may have finally given me a chore I can’t handle.*

Chapter Twenty-Two
Reicher's Log
Special Project #0167
Marcus Brady

One of my special projects came home today. I usually have to send a tracker out to dart and drag them. Project #0167 came looking for me. The notes that follow prove most of my theories and have given me hope for the future even though I won't be in it. Before he leaves this lab, I will be dead, but I've achieved my life goal of freeing the future for all of us. My heir will never let the world be held hostage to the whims of any one person, group, nationality, or country. Marcus is all I could ask for in an heir and then so much more.

Special Project Week One

My first impression is that he can't be corrupted. Marcus was raised away from the strong influence of this lab. He has a moral line that won't be easily crossed. He can be forced to do evil acts, but his soul is bathed in the light of our Creator. I've rarely come across a man who portrays that so strongly. I will try my normal list of sessions to verify these impressions. My biggest question at this moment is where his twin sister ended up, but I can't ask him.

He has been placed into isolation and will be left alone to determine his mental stability. Our brief conversation right before his arrival was tense and filled with hints of hatred and violence. As always, I'm amazed by the human capacity for both war and peace at the same time. His military record is spotted with defiance and the refusal to follow orders. His record also implies a strength of character that kept him in the United States government for all of his adult life. He was dependable and ruthless in battle. Even the crazy Americans recognized that talent and tolerated his disrespect.

I will not do the same. I already see his potential. Respect is the foundation I will build with him through talks that allow for no lies. He will be the first subject to get complete truth from me. If it goes sour, I will have to kill him. He can never be allowed to leave this lab unless he's a convert.

Marcus has been isolated for five days now. I'm about to initiate contact through the monitor. He came here to kill me. If I give him the chance, he will try. I expect his isolation room to be rigged in some way. I'll view the tapes later to detect what amazing trap he designed for me.

He spent the time using his environment to cover an escape attempt. There were no signs of mental cracks, but I sense them.

Our conversation went almost exactly as I had suspected. He pushed and poked, searching for a weakness he can use. He found a soft spot, but he didn't dig in. I'm not sure why he hesitated. He could have ripped me open right there and feasted on my guts. My need to present a picture-perfect image is one of my few weaknesses.

I'm almost sorry he didn't. I'm looking forward to the challenge of breaking him.

On a personal note, I'm quite proud of how he has turned out. I believe getting to influence his formative years while in a different environment made all the difference.

Special Project Week Two

Marcus is still in isolation, though that is about to change. He is incredibly angry, stubborn, and intelligent. He's also belligerent, so much that it's hard to keep up with his mind at times. My illness may also be interfering. I will have Thalia evaluate him soon to compare our impressions.

I've detected cracks in Marcus that surprise me. He's torn between who he has been forced to be and who he wants to be. Once he gains freedom, he'll have to make those choices. I have to make sure to impose my will on him so those choices will represent my goals after I'm gone.

He dug out another weakness of mine tonight. He called me on being lonely. I should have

punished him, but he was correct. It's been so hard being here and knowing not a single one of my offspring are like me. It's my shame that the closest one is a female. She cannot inherit my place, though I will use that threat to keep the others in line. Most of my subjects are frothing at the mouth at the thought of my demise, but I will be in their minds forever. Marcus already suspects that, but the isolation treatment is forcing him to accept my company. It pains me to admit that I don't want it to end.

Tonight, we discussed his connection to the Creator and the trip he made to the weighing station, but he didn't know more than I already do. His wife is leading that charge. I'm eager to have her here and working on my goals.

I felt the rage inside Marcus for the first time when I brought up his recent execution of a female. It was a surprise to discover his love for her. We'd been told there wasn't a physical relationship between them. That intelligence was incorrect. Our spy in their camp clearly doesn't have access to all of those tantalizing secrets. His suicidal state was also discussed. He's miserable. Human minds often contemplate taking that easier way out, but Marcus is too bonded to the people around him. He loves his team and his offspring. He's obsessed with his wife.

As am I.

Special Project Week Three

Marcus almost confronted me about who I really am. He softened me with amusement and then drove in a nail. He tried to make me bleed, and I did. I'm ashamed of my anger in front of him. I'm also more certain of the hard choice I've made. Marcus will take my place as leader of this lab and leader of the United Nations. Nothing will stop me from accomplishing that huge goal. He's perfect for this job. He just doesn't know it yet.

I opened doubt in his mind about WWII and a bond began to form. He is a soft denier, but he will revert to his old way of thinking about that topic. He was brainwashed his entire life to believe the lies. It would make him crack to change his mind, so he won't. He automatically protects his sanity while digging into my mind for discrepancies. He's magnificent.

I humbled myself to him at the end of our contact and he still refused, as I knew he would, but he will remember that I can be humble and I've been honest with him in all of our conversations. After he accepts this position, it will eat at him that he could have avoided the abuses of his men and himself if he had just given in.

Marcus will be relocated to the warehouse floor now, where he will suffer alongside of the men he claims to adore but is jealous of. I will not break those bonds open nor force him to face his own lies.

Time will do that for me. Marcus wants to be hurt. Without it, he cannot forgive himself.

It's like looking into a mirror.

Special Project Week Four

Marcus is ready for the next stage of conversion.

Theory HK129: Subjects who hate each other can have stronger bonds than friends. I tested this theory with great success tonight. Marcus tolerated the abuses of his enemy, but he could not ignore it. I saw all his tells. Those fast flinches and quick grimaces also gave him away to my daughter. Thalia's skills at torture are unmatched in this lab. I've never known her to show sympathy or interest in the subjects. Tonight, she revealed both.

Thalia's response to Marcus is heightened by his natural magnetism. He is one of the founding family lines. It was strong for her, enough that I'm considering breaking an old deal and making a new one. The UN is gone. I'm in complete charge. I can do whatever I want.

Marcus tried to kill me as he was taken off the warehouse floor, but it was a shallow, pathetic attempt. He thinks to coast through this captivity, kill me when it's all over, and return to his life. I've warned him repeatedly that he may not leave, ever, until he signs the contract. It scares him that it may be true. Moving him from the warehouse sent relief

through his mind and refused to let him kill me. Our bond is coming along nicely.

Marcus loves his team. He will sacrifice any of them, except the Marine. Kenn Harrison can be used against him in many ways. If he dies, I may lose the slippery handle I now have on Marcus.

On a side note, Kenn Harrison is a talented man. He might make the perfect right hand for Marcus once he accepts his destiny. I've added him to the next phase of training so he will be ready when that moment comes.

Special Project Week Five

Joseph interfered with the conversion training. He met with Marcus without my permission. He refused to tell me what they discussed. Marcus was sedated before I found out.

I've let both of them believe I'm in the dark. Despite the unplanned push, Joseph has helped me with Marcus by giving him hope for a successful ending.

Marcus believes a win at the end of this run will make the rest of it worth it. He'll discover how untrue that is at some point. I doubt I'll be alive to see it, but it will happen. At that moment, a new crack will open in his mind, but it won't be one that can be healed by any means except his own efforts. If he chooses to let it crush him, it will. There's nothing I can do to counteract that now. We're too

far in. I'll be giving him a break soon with constant sedation so he can calm down and accept what's coming. Subjects can't be pushed too fast, and Marcus is no exception.

All leaders have flaws. Marcus has the capacity to forgive his weaknesses and shore them up so they no longer do him damage. It will depend on his will to recover. At this point, I may have pushed him too far. His suicidal tendencies have grown as he comes to comprehend how changed he'll be when I'm finished. The surprising part is that despite his brilliant mind, he doesn't understand this is who he really is on the inside. Marcus only wants to be the light in the darkness, but he was born to be both. He's a perfectly balanced human, with equal parts good and stupid. It's an honor to witness him coming to these realizations. The old world would have given him this knowledge, too, but it would have taken a lifetime. I've done it in five long, hard, satisfying weeks. The rest is just finishing touches.

Special Project Week Six

Marcus called the weigh station and received an answer!

He immediately sacrificed his connection to that realm in order to keep me away from there. It is more proof of his moral line. He simply cannot be corrupted. In time, he'll believe that. He was always right about the repel effect. I'm too far gone to make

those connections. When I wasn't, I didn't know our family line has that gift. Oh, to go back!

But I'm not doing the reset to reach my youth and reclaim it. I need that reset to capture another target and there's nothing I won't give up to do it. As soon as that subject arrives, I will reset time.

I find myself thinking that I will not recapture Marcus when that happens. I will let him come to me, as this conversion has worked out so well. In the future, all subjects that need to be captured will be drawn in this way. Making them believe they can go back and fix their errors is an impossible lure.

My illness has forced me to turn over the rest of the process to Thalia. Oddly, she's the only one I trust in here and yet, I have little regard for her. She knows and tries to please me in hopes of changing that. I admit to feeling more warmth for her than I did before, but it is only because of her successes in converting Marcus. They have a bond I didn't suspect would form. As usual, I'm using this new information to achieve my goals. Thalia's marriage has been dissolved. I've made new plans for her future.

Marcus is already testing Thalia and forcing her to adapt to his methods and reactions. She classified it as a win because he made the call to the Creator. I see it as a loss because he closed that channel to us forever. It is the first loss for her since she was

gifted with the job of torturing our subjects into submission.

My son, Joseph, suspects I will give Thalia my position upon death. He refuses to believe I'm giving it to an outsider. Only Thalia understands what I'm doing. If she were a male, I might even be able to love her.

Special Project Week Seven

Things are moving much faster. I can feel it all winding up to a climax I won't enjoy. My illness is stripping me of my job, and of my respect. Death is heartless.

My projects have all been ended or finished, except for my greatest legacy. Marcus has been kept sedated to prevent his cracks from opening further while I work on his team. Kenn Harrison is indeed the perfect XO for this job. Marcus will get him into shape when he takes over. I've laid that strong foundation. He'll build the house on it.

I can't let Marcus dwell too much on our conversations. I've shown too many weaknesses during this conversion process. My illness is impossible to hide. His sympathy for me is well-hidden, but it is there. If he were allowed to dwell on it, he would understand it's not nearly payment enough for all of the lives I've crushed.

I miss our talks. Marcus has left a mark on me, as well. I wish I had more time to guide him into

this job, to spend with him as a family should. My offspring here are disappointing in comparison. I never desire their company. Even the quick moments with Thalia aren't close. Those emotions are more of what a man feels for a woman who handles his needs. My legacy is more valuable, more important.

Marcus will be woken today and given time with each of his surviving team members. Thalia will handle that. I wish I could! She's a master of pain. Digging into minds is where I excel. I'm jealous of the time she'll get to spend with him. I'll watch it from the control room, with Joseph, my greatest failure.

I've had a few of those over the years, but Joseph is my worst. When Marc takes over, he'll need to remove Joseph immediately or they'll end up fighting to the death, like I did to get this position. I don't want Marcus to start his reign by killing his brother. That pain never fades. I know.

Special Project Week Eight

Safe Haven is almost here. I can feel Marcus's powerful wife hunting me minute by minute. This is the culmination of a year-long design that went according to plan in every step. Safe Haven eliminated all of the threats to my control, including their own government. They killed Joel at the IDC, who might have been able to defeat me through brute force. They killed the pirates with their

effective gas, and they delivered this mission team into my hands. They gave me Marcus as a honey pot, thinking I wouldn't know what end is coming for me. I would be insulted by their arrogance if I wasn't so eager to see it happen. Angela is coming and Marcus knows! He chose to take the easy way out finally and signed the contract. He is mine forever, even if she takes him away from here.

And it was never for him. Finding out he is perfect for this job was a wonderful bonus. I drew Marcus to get to his wife. She'll storm these liquid halls and kill those I no longer have the strength to control. Or I'll get the best of her and we'll do the reset. Either way, she'll also belong to me after this. She won't know it at first. She'll see my methods and the results and she'll enact them, bit by bit.

Angela will take over my experiments and bring many of them to a conclusion. My legacy will live on through her. And through my son. I couldn't be prouder of Marcus. He has proven so many of my theories on rearing a child out of the lab. He is smarter than I was at his age, but he carries my dislike of females and my hatred of any authority that isn't my own. The labs will change locations, maybe, but they will continue.

My illness has almost won. The pain is a constant companion from which I can no longer escape. Even the medications do not dull it enough to allow a comfortable death. When Safe Haven arrives, I will be an embarrassing specimen.

I will use the strength of my offspring to push Angela into letting the mission men live. Anyone in their right mind can tell they need to be put down. I'm counting on the love she carries for Marcus to make that choice. She'll try to help them recover and because of that, it will ensure my legacy survives. Descendants will rule the world. I've seen to that with every drop of blood hacked from my lungs.

Special Project Summary

Conversion of Marcus Brady has been successful. He is the official heir set to inherit control of everything. All the goals I had for this subject have been met, along with a few I added upon his arrival in the lab. I have overseen almost every stage. I am confident he will follow in my footsteps for however long he lives. My regret is not getting to witness it.

I'm hours away from death. I feel it sitting in the corner, smirking at me. The reset will likely happen. Marcus will not be able to stand knowing he could go back and change it all. He'll pick two weak Mitchel children and use them, while saving a third child from one of the other lines. He'll take us all the way back to before the war so he can change the choices that made him who he is now. He'll say it's to save all those who died in the war, but everything he does connects to his childhood.

He'll pull his mate from her bad life and run away with her. Then he'll try to forget all the knowledge he has. The reset does not take away the memories of the people who use that dangerous spell. It will drive him crazy. And he'll take them to a lab, in hopes that he'll still be the heir. If he comes here, he will be. If he goes to any other lab, his conversion process will start over and Angela will be under our control, too. Either way, I have won. He'll never get me out of his brain, as it should be. The words of a father to his son should live forever.

Special Project Final Entry

Hello, Marcus. I hope my log has been entertaining and eye-opening. All of your stalls and schemes meant nothing. You were doomed from the start because of who you are. There was never a chance for you to win the mental battle against me. Don't dwell on that failure. Concentrate on your goals and pushing them through no matter what obstacles life throws into your way.

If your brother survived, kill him or he'll kill you. I probably don't need to tell you that. Your conversation with Joseph is still your secret, but I can guess that you offered to trade him this position. You can't or the magical bond will snap and take your life. You can't pass this awful, amazing job to anyone unless you're about to die. That was in the fine print.

Your wife was always my goal, but as you spent time with me, I found a fondness for you that allowed me to expand my plans. You demonstrated all the ruthlessness this job requires. You told me you weren't corrupt enough to do it, but you know now that wasn't true. You're hard enough to do whatever it takes to gain control of the world and run things as you see fit. Anytime you doubt that, remember that I believed in you. No one else matters in the end, not even your mate or your children. You're my son; make me prouder than I already am.

I'm sure you have a lot of questions. Many of those answers can be found in my other files, logs, and diary. I suggest you read them all. In your heart, you know the conversion process is a lifelong event that only ends when you die. Every day will bring you closer to me even though I'm gone. Seek the truth, no matter how ugly, and push on. That's all you have to do to find the peace that you've been missing since I walked out of your life.

Be strong. Be safe.

I love you.

Dad.

2

Marc looked over at Adrian, who was still sitting on the stool and tracking his thoughts. "Deep down, I knew as soon as they started talking about how it bounced."

“The sonic gift?”

Marc nodded. “I used a bounce when we escaped the mountain.”

Adrian remembered that moment. He waited for Marc to go on, now understanding why Angela had told him to sit in here. This was an ugly pill to swallow.

“Reicher had tracking, too. He used it during the riot.”

Adrian started the therapy session. “Say it and get it over with.”

Marc did. “My real family name is Reicher. Brady was just the name he used with my mother. I’m Marcus Reicher.”

Adrian kept it going. “How did that happen? I thought he never left the lab.”

“He lied. I read some of the other logs before this one. Darius, Angela’s father, escaped the lab multiple times. When he was recaptured, he told Reicher that he’d hidden in a backward little town in the middle of nowhere. Reicher decided he wouldn’t be a real leader if he didn’t experience the real world at least once. So he left his brother Rico in charge and went to America.”

“Why didn’t anyone know?”

“Those records were scrubbed. Every leader of the lab rewrote history for themselves. He didn’t tell anyone he left twins behind, either. He wanted kids to study that had never been put through his conversion program. He even chose a devoutly religious woman to tip the scales.”

“I never would have guessed.”

Marc kept explaining so he didn't have to face it yet. “Reicher settled into the normal world and tried to be good, but only to test a theory.”

“He was trying to find out if free kids could be corrupted?”

Marc shook his head. “Not at that point. He was trying to see if he could go good after being bad for so long. That's why he chose a religious woman, hoping she would influence it.”

“I assume it backfired.”

Marc shrugged, trying not to feel the pain that was waiting for him. “After six years, he concluded there was no change in himself at all and he returned to the lab on his own. Reicher was a lot older than Joseph estimated.”

Adrian wasn't surprised. “Consuming corpses and lifeforces lengthened his life and kept him alive even through the cancer.”

“Yes. He didn't want to relinquish control, but he pushed me and Thalia together because he knew he couldn't stop death from taking him.”

Adrian had pulled the memories of that from Marc as soon as they'd rescued the mission men. “She was the one live mix of Reicher and Mitchel DNA that he accomplished.”

“Yes. He stopped mentioning those attempts in his logs.”

“Maybe he gave up on it.”

Marc knew better. “He accomplished that goal. He didn't need to keep doing it.”

“But only one survival out of ten attempts seems extreme.”

Marc shrugged bitterly. “Well, he did have a hundred children over his extended lifetime. Plus, he found out only females could result from that mix and survive without being insane, and we know how he viewed that gender.”

Adrian was curious about something. “Why couldn’t he ask where your sister was?”

Marc suppressed his rage. “I would have figured it out with that one question.”

“So Reicher’s your father.” It was fitting. Adrian tried not to feel jealous. “You inherited it all. You now have the name, the reputation, and the scars to prove it.”

Marc scowled as pain began to sink into his heart. “Maybe, but I won’t restart the labs, not for any of us.”

Adrian began working on Marc, like he’d done with Cate. “No, your wife will handle that.”

“What are you talking about?”

Adrian explained, leaving nothing out and adding a lot in.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Double Hit

1

“**W**e’re here, Angela.”

When she didn’t answer, Adrian reached out to shake her awake without thinking about it.

Angela’s lids popped open.

Adrian flinched back.

Angela’s eyes lit up bright red in instant anger. “You’re a slow learner.”

Adrian winced. He hated it when she woke in a bad mood. “Ray wanted me to come and tell you we’re here instead of putting it over the radio and waking everyone up. Wade’s busy checking on the leak.”

Angela sat up and looked around. The bunk room was full of restlessly sleeping people who grunted and groaned. Their dreams weren’t peaceful. “Where is he?”

Adrian hated it that her first thoughts always went to Marc, but he wasn’t allowed to say that. It made his voice cool. “He stayed in the radio room last night so no one would see him cry.”

Angela wasn’t surprised by that. Marc had been dealt an ugly hand. She stood up and tugged her jacket around her large stomach. “I’ll be on the

bridge in a few minutes. Send Wade to me when he's done."

Adrian frowned at her. "Aren't you going to talk to him?"

"Not yet."

"Marc needs you, Angela."

"No, he needs to accept who he is. He can't do that with me in his face, making those choices for him."

Adrian didn't back down. "He can't be left alone right now."

Angela glared. "Then why are you here in my face, making those choices for me?"

Adrian turned around and left. *She's bitchier today than she was yesterday.*

Angela caught that and snorted. She didn't toss an insult at him, but she wanted to. She still couldn't stand the sound of his voice without being triggered. *Of all the people in my camp, I was certain he would be the last one who would go against me.*

The brief conversation they'd had about her taking over and him being by her side for all of it flashed through Angela's mind.

New anger rose and made her stomach boil. He hadn't been lying, but he also hadn't told her how hard he would try to keep it from happening before he finally caved and helped her with it. *If I had known, I never would have brought him along for this run.* Of all her reasons, sympathy for Sadie was driving the anger the hardest. *She deserves better.*

Angela saw Cody sleeping next to his sister. She assumed Wade had sent the boy to bed. Her XO was still on point. Wade would definitely need to sleep soon.

Angela hit the bathroom and then headed for the bridge while people in the bunk room began to wake and perform their morning routines.

Ray opened the bridge door as she arrived. He waited for her to come inside and then relocked it. “All of the ships followed us, I think. There are a lot more blips on the radar, and the cameras are out again.”

Angela understood what he was saying. “I’ll pick a hard team when I go up.”

Ray scanned her large stomach. “It would be better if you let Wade go in your place.”

Angela didn’t give him an answer on that. She stepped aside as Ray opened the door again to let Wade in.

Wade felt the tension and immediately attributed it to the man who had sent him up here. Angela hated dealing with Adrian now.

Ray motioned toward the radio. He was eager to try reaching home again. Being on radio silence was hard. “If I get any calls, do I answer them?”

“No. And don’t try to call home yet.”

“Why?”

“The people following us don’t need any more information.”

“Won’t it piss them off to be ignored?”

“Maybe, but it’s better than giving them details they can use against us. We don’t want them to track our loved ones if you were to get an answer. Just let it ride.”

Ray put a hand on his hip. “What about the people up there who need our help?”

Angela wasn’t going to change her mind. “We have to help ourselves first.”

Ray didn’t comprehend how bad her mood was. He pushed again. “Won’t they be able to tell us—”

“What? They’re stuck, they keep forgetting who they are, and people have died in here?” Angela coldly waved off his next question. “They don’t have anything we need. We have everything they need. It’s a mistake to make contact. They don’t know for sure if we’re a friend or an enemy yet. I want to keep it that way.”

“But—”

“No!” Angela knew she was being short-tempered, but she could feel the slight tendrils of fog trying to slip back into her mind. *Nature keeps blasting us this way to stop me from making a plan. That’s cheating. I hate cheaters!*

The few descendants listening to Angela’s thoughts quickly withdrew from her mind so they weren’t targeted.

Angela gestured at Wade. “I want you to stay in here with Ray this time. I can’t count on Shawn to do it.”

Wade understood things were about to get ugly again. He took a post near the exit, with his hand on his holster.

Angela was satisfied that she had secured the bridge and their captain. She left without responding to the rest of Ray's silent concerns. She didn't have time to walk him through anything that might happen now. She had to get the cameras working again and topside cleared before the fog returned in full.

Angela keyed her radio. "I need four vested Eagles to the top hatch. Move your asses!"

The sound of boots running toward her echoed a few seconds later.

Behind her, Wade locked the bridge door and hoped everything went well. He felt bad for not being out there with her, but he had been given the most important job on the ship. If they lost the bridge or the captain, they were doomed. *And I'm exhausted. If there's a fight, I might not be much help.*

Greg, Kenn, and Biff arrived first. Angela could hear others on their way up. She took a deep breath and then motioned. "Let's get topside cleared and the cameras uncovered. Watch your six."

Still dazed by the news he'd gotten from the gossip vine a little while ago, Greg hurried up the ladder. He unlocked the hatch and began pushing it open.

It was ripped from his hands. A mass of swinging, kicking pirates swarmed through the hatch, dropping into the team.

Greg was kicked and slammed into the ladder. He fell into the pile of fighting, screaming pirates and team members.

Angela lifted her shield over herself, and the hatch to keep more pirates from coming down as the body pile of fighting men on the floor used fists, legs, and heads to subdue each other.

The first pirate to gain his feet drew his gun.

Cate came to the doorway of the theater where she had slept. "What's going on?"

Kenn shoved the girl back into the room while swinging.

The pirate fired, hitting Kenn in the stomach at close range.

Kenn dropped to the floor, grunting at the familiar pain. *I feel like I've been here before.*

The pirate ran into the theater, aiming for Cate. "Come here!" He wanted a hostage.

Mel rose from the front row; she tossed the cat from her lap. "Hey!"

Mr. Sneaky attacked the pirate, latching onto his face with teeth and claws.

The pirate rotated, shrieking.

Mel stabbed him in the gut and ripped her knife upward.

Blood fell to the floor in a thick stream.

Marc and Adrian ran from the radio room, guns in hand. They fired carefully, hitting two pirates that were running toward the theater.

Cate saw Kenn lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Fear welled in her throat. “Medic!”

Dog and the caretakers joined the fray, arriving at the same time.

Cody came up the ladder with them. He wrapped his shield around Angela’s and stayed behind her, peering around to observe the violent fight.

Cate didn’t care about any of it. She ran to Kenn with magic already flowing out to heal his injury. “You can’t have him! Go away, Death!”

Harry reached Kenn at the same time. He also used his magic on the pouring wound.

Kenn stared at Angela as his blood drained onto the floor. Pain rolled through his gut in harsh streams, drawing a scream from his lips; he didn’t look away from the boss.

Angela hadn’t gotten to watch the last time Kenn was shot because she’d been occupied with covering the dying people in the infirmary. She stared this time, examining her feelings for him. Hatred was still the clearest. She would never be able to forgive and forget.

But there was also sympathy now. He had saved Cate. He’d made mistakes, but he had changed from the abusive man she’d loathed over the years. He had people who loved him now and that was something she’d been sure would never happen.

Angela directed healing energy at him.

Kenn shut his eyes and thanked God for her choice.

“Save my friend!” Cate continued to use her magic and ignore the fight that was happening by the ladder.

“We will.” Harry was already sure Kenn would live. *The boss doesn't want him dead yet or he would be.*

Marc and Adrian couldn't fire into the punching, grunting pile. They each pulled an enemy out of the mass and pushed them toward Angela.

Cody stepped in front of her and sent a sonic wave that dropped the two men and continued on.

Marc automatically ducked and then absorbed it, using the move to grab another target.

Angela shifted to the side, keeping her shield strength as strong as she could get it despite the energy drain. Her power was going down too fast, but there were a dozen pirates still trying to get into the sub.

Cody killed another pirate and then put his shield back over the hatch. He could feel Angela weakening.

Biff snapped the neck of the pirate in front of him. He dropped the body and spun, searching for the next one.

Marc shoved a pirate at him and caught the one Adrian pulled free. He mirrored Biff's violent neck snap.

The Eagles went through the pirates quickly, showing no mercy.

Biff joined Cody and lifted a weak shield for the first time. He grinned. “This is awesome!”

Jayda made it to the first floor and stood at that ladder to guard it. She saw Biff’s shield and shared in his good mood. *It really will bother me to leave him behind.*

Biff’s shield flickered. His energy was already gone. It vanished.

Gus arrived on the level and brought up his more powerful shield.

Biff smiled. “Thanks, man.”

Gus chuckled. “You’ll get there. Practice it all the time.”

“I will.”

At the bottom of the body pile, Greg held his side and tried not to pass out. He didn’t have a healing skill. *I got distracted before a fight. That was a mistake.*

Angela let go of her shield, leaving it to Cody and Gus as she marched forward. Death spells rolled from her hands, finishing the last three pirates. The mess was considerable.

She dropped down next to Greg and tried to heal him.

Erin put a hand on her shoulder to lend energy. She was watching Angela’s hair turn gray. Erin didn’t have a healing gift, either. It was all she was able to do.

Lisa flew up the ladder, shoving Jayda out of her way to get through. She ran over to Greg and put her hand on his bloody side.

The knife that had impaled him fell out to the gory floor.

Magic ran from Lisa's hand. It sank into Greg's wound and began healing it faster.

Erin stared in dismayed surprise. "She's one of us."

Angela stood up as pain went through her spine, watching the wound heal itself. "No, but the baby is."

Erin's heart dropped as she understood. "You're pregnant."

Lisa didn't care that everyone now knew her secret. "Come on! Heal up!"

It was a surprise for the witnesses to see her try so hard to save Greg's life. None of them had believed she cared that much.

Because of the connection with a descendant baby, Lisa was able to read their thoughts. She didn't waste time telling them it was actually the baby's emotions. The panic her child had felt upon Greg's possible demise had flooded her system, too. There was no way she could have resisted trying to help him.

Angela pointed at Marc and Adrian, who were subduing the last pirate. "We need those cameras cleared."

Marc shoved the last pirate to Adrian; Adrian slit his unprotected throat. Both men hurried toward the hatch as the body fell.

Cody and Gus didn't know how Angela wanted to handle it. If they lowered their shields to let Marc and Adrian through, more pirates would get down here; those screaming, kicking, punching men were armed and dangerous.

"Keep those shields up." Marc stepped right through the double shield.

Adrian followed him without a problem.

Gus and Cody both stared in shock as the two senior men engaged the dozen pirates with fast gun shots. They didn't have to clear a line of fire now.

Angela stayed at the bottom of the ladder and listened to the fight, heart pounding. She had used too much energy. She needed to rest, but that wouldn't be possible until she knew the men up there were safe.

Other Eagles recovered and went to the ladder to go help.

Angela shook her head. "They don't need you in the way."

Obnoxious screams came through the open hatch. The hard thud of a body hitting metal echoed. A sonic wave bounced off the open hatch and flew out to sea.

The Eagles who had been about to go up and help stopped. Angela was right. Marc and Adrian had it covered.

Angela scanned the chaos as pain rippled through her body. “Check for a survivor. Quick!”

The Eagles began roughly checking the bodies, assuming she wanted to force one of them to give up information before they died.

“Hurry up!” Angela slid to her knees, hands and feet withering. Pain flew through her body and began to center in her stomach.

Biff grabbed a moaning survivor and dragged him over to Angela. He was the only one who had guessed what she was doing. He didn’t have a problem with it, but he wasn’t sure if some of the others might.

Angela latched onto the pirate’s lifeforce and drew it out of him with a hungry groan. She consumed it in front of everyone, including the two stunned children.

Pain continued to roll through her body, but she could feel the lifeforce softening the stomach cramps that had been building.

Dog shied away from her. He could hear the pirate’s lifeforce struggling as she absorbed it. The cries were awful to his sensitive ears. He ran into the theater in search of his cat.

Mr. Sneaky immediately jumped onto the wolf and began to lick his ears.

Mel chuckled, slapping her knee. “Ain’t that the darndest thing!”

Angela let out a sigh of relief as the pain finally subsided. The feeling of her body shutting down was excruciating. She leaned against the bloody

ladder, trying to finish recovering before Marc came back down the ladder. He was likely to be upset when he saw what had happened. She needed the energy to be able to deal with him, but also to finish leading them through the chaos. *I can't be on the frontlines anymore after this run.*

Gus helped Angela stand. He sent energy into her swollen body without asking her permission. He hated to see her this way. Despite everything that had happened since he joined Safe Haven, Gus didn't blame Angela for any of it. He also didn't feel as hateful toward Brittani now, either. All he wanted was for this run to finally be done so they could all go home. Whatever happened after that might not be pretty, but it would be better than what he was looking at right now. There was blood all over the top level floor and streaks of it on the walls and ladder; the sweet, coppery scent was filling the air.

Biff kept an eye on Angela. "Nature tried a double hit on this one."

Erin didn't understand what he meant, but she was distracted by watching Lisa fuss over Greg. *I lost him before this run even started.* "What?"

Biff pointed at the boss. "She sent in the pirates and hoped Angela would drain herself trying to keep everyone alive."

"And she did."

"Yep. Marc's going to be pissed."

"We need two stretchers up here!" Harry took charge of the situation. He was certain that both injured men would live, but there were medical

procedures that needed to be followed. They also couldn't clean the mess until after the patients were taken below.

Cody knew Angela didn't want Harry in charge of anything. He stepped in front of the man and calmly opened his notebook. "Let's get these bodies out of here. The laundry people will cover that. The floor cleaners will come up and do it again."

For a few seconds, no one moved or spoke. They stared at the boy and waited to find out if he was able to lead them through the rest of this moment.

Harry started to brush the boy aside.

Cody neatly captured Harry in his shield and then consulted the notebook page. "Check on the bridge, and seal us up as soon as my dad comes back down." He didn't care about Adrian.

Harry stopped trying to get out of Cody's shield. *I forgot. That's Marc's son. It's okay if he leads us.*

"Good job." Harry smiled encouragingly at the young boy.

Cody lowered his shield and walked away from the man. "I gave out orders. Get on it!"

His cold bark got immediate movement this time.

Angela stored all of it, relieved and scared. *I'll do anything to keep us alive. I'm sorry for it, but that will never change.*

Cody nodded at her. *So will I.*

Theo and the two worm subjects had gone to the medical bay as soon as the first gunshot rang out. Theo had been certain they would need supplies. He heard Harry's call for the stretchers. "We'll be there in 30 seconds!"

Theo directed the two subjects toward the gurneys while he continued to put bandages into Harry's medical bag. He assumed the medic would want it.

Isabel poked her head out of the bunk room as the three men came by. "Ask the boss if she needs me up there."

Theo nodded at her, but he doubted Angela would remove Isabel, Charlie, or Bret from guard duty over the kids until the situation was completely resolved.

In the doorway of the mess, a small group of normals listened to everything and exchanged sly glances. The descendants on the ship had taken a hit. That was obvious by the calls for stretchers. They had won this time, but it hadn't gone smoothly.

"Angela wasn't ready for this." The longhaired mother was certain of it.

Tattoo mother agreed. "Yeah, but we can't do much. There's only half a dozen of us."

"Less. We lost someone. Lisa flipped to their side." Longhair had spotted Lisa flying toward the ladder with panic on her face. "We'll have to be careful around her now. She's one of them."

Thomas came limping down the hallway from the tool compartment in time to hear their conversation. He acted like he hadn't caught it as he went into the mess to keep working on sealing the leaky pipe.

He was mentally tracking what was happening above him, but he was also keeping track of everything that was happening down here. He wasn't sure if Angela knew the normals were conspiring, but she would as soon as the fighting was over.

The normal mothers knew Thomas was a descendant. Hoping they had gotten lucky and he hadn't heard them, the women scattered into different parts of the submarine and reflected on what had happened and not what they could make happen the next time there was a problem.

Screams and gunfire echoed from the top of the submarine, telling everyone Marc and Adrian were still clearing the surface of the sub. The small number of enemies they had killed during this fight implied a larger fighting force was still waiting for them on the other ships. The story of some of them being ghost-like began to circulate through the submarine, winding up the tension of every normal who heard it.

Thomas joined the Air Force man at the mess counter for a minute. He knew Angela was watching Jack to determine if he was going to turn out like all of the other military men they'd rescued

from the lab. Thomas was the only one who was fitting in so far. All of the others were dead.

Jack shook his head. "I'm not a threat and not planning anything, but their constant suspicions make me angry, so I throw off a bad vibe. I'm not what they think I am."

Thomas had served as a scroll diver in the lab with Jack for a long time, but they hadn't been what he would call friends. They were certainly brothers-in-arms, though. "When this is all over, ask the boss to go through your mind and clear you. She did that for me and I'm good now."

Jack began wiping dust off the counter without answering.

Thomas frowned. "Is there some reason why you can't do that?"

Jack sighed miserably. "We all have secrets, even you."

Thomas's frown grew. "She knows my secrets and none of them are that bad."

Jack shrugged. "These people have different rules than what we've lived by for the last decade. I'm adjusting to it, but I would never cross the alpha. Marcus is a great boss and this is a great camp."

Thomas scowled deeply this time. "Angela is the boss!"

Jack sneered. "You know better than that. Women are not allowed to have that position."

Thomas tried to remain calm. "You said yourself they don't follow the same rules. In Safe

Haven, women can be in any position, including security and leadership.”

Jack gestured in annoyance. “They’re all humoring her. And look what happened. Someone almost got into the submarine. Women should never be in leadership.”

Thomas stared in surprised dismay. “That’s your secret. You liked the rules in the lab. You want us all to live that way again.”

Jack nodded. “It wasn’t always easy, but it followed the natural order of the world. These people have no right to change things.”

“They have every right. They conquered the lab and killed Reicher. They can make any rules they want to.” Thomas delivered a warning. “I think you should be glad that Angela isn’t the type to remove someone over thoughts like yours.”

Jack was filling out well on the Safe Haven diet. He had also been spending time in the gym. His healthy body mocked Thomas’s healing injuries. “Are you going to tell on me?”

Thomas nodded immediately. “You’re a full convert. You agree with everything Reicher had going on. She’ll know about it before I hit the rack tonight.”

Jack sighed sadly, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “I’m sorry it came to this. I’ve always liked you, Tom.”

Before Thomas could react, Jack leapt over the counter and wrapped his hands around Thomas’s neck.

The two men went down with one of them fighting for his life and the other fighting to take it.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Is There Any Doubt?

1

“Duck!”

Marc slid to one knee in front of Adrian, reloading while Adrian fired.

Adrian put his back to Marc to cover the other direction, confident that the Marine would get his weapon reloaded in time to handle the five pirates running toward them with long knives and shouts.

The few remaining pirates watching them from the ship that was anchored only ten feet away were screaming insults. None of them were armed. They had given all of their ammunition to their attack party. All they could do was throw garbage and debris in hopes of distracting the military men.

Marc slammed in the mag, tugged, and quickly lifted the weapon.

Adrian understood Marc was furious and it had nothing to do with the pirates that were advancing from all over the top of the submarine. “Just let it go.”

Five rapid shots echoed. The sound of bodies dropping came next.

Adrian also fired, but it took him seven shots to handle the four closest pirates.

“Duck and switch!” Marc didn’t give Adrian time to think about the order. He rotated, while rising to his feet.

Adrian automatically rotated and ducked, taking Marc’s position smoothly.

Both men opened fire again, hitting four more determined pirates.

Marc knelt to reload.

So did Adrian.

Ten more pirates came from opposite directions, trying to reach them before they reloaded. The attack party was now out of bullets except for a couple of slugs in guns that had fallen to the deck when their owners went down.

Adrian slammed the magazine in as fast as he could, forgetting the tug to make sure it fed in correctly. The magazine slipped out into his hand.

Marc remembered to tug his mag. These guns had seen a lot of use now. He took aim on the closest threats and fired three quick shots.

Adrian reached for his knife as he failed to get the mag properly seated again.

Marc shoved Adrian down and leaned over top of him to fire at the pirates coming from that direction.

Marc got all of them on Adrian’s side. Blood sprayed both men at the impacts from such close range.

Bodies fell in a pile around the locked hatch. Overwhelming them wasn’t possible with Marc

behind a gun. Their attackers didn't know how skilled the Marine was.

Adrian finally got his mag seated properly. He shot the two remaining pirates that were just now reaching them from Marc's side.

Marc quickly reloaded while scanning for the next wave.

Adrian didn't see anyone else on the front of the submarine. He took a fast glance over his shoulder to verify that Marc was covered. He was already ashamed of how badly he had done in this fight. He needed to make sure Marc was okay.

Marc stood while scanning for the next problem.

For a few seconds, all they men was search for threats, ignoring the few bleeding, groaning survivors in the body pile around them. It was almost a perfect circle.

Several of the desperate refugees on the ships around them waved or shouted as they made eye contact, wanting Marc to know they hadn't been a part of the ambush.

Marc didn't answer any of them.

Neither did Adrian. "They can tell we're alert. I think that's why we keep getting attacked. They believe we're causing the fade."

Marc didn't care about that right now. He quickly walked the body pile, firing fast shots into pleading survivors.

Adrian knew how angry Marc was. They had both felt Angela drain herself. "When you go down

there, don't cause a scene. It will ruin all of the progress you've been making."

Marc fired another round into a possible survivor that he thought might be faking death.

The cold bark of Marc's gun told Adrian he was being ignored. Marc's fury was still growing.

Marc did one more scan and found nothing moving on their ship. Blood was running over the side of the submarine, along with body fluids. "All clear."

He headed for the hatch.

Adrian quickly stepped in front of him while holstering. "Don't do this."

Marc shoved Adrian out of his way.

Adrian tripped over the hatch and fell, sliding toward the restless waves that were slapping into the sides of the submarine.

He got a hand on a rail and pulled himself up onto his feet. "You didn't get me this time, shithead!"

Adrian tripped over a body. His arms flailed as he fell backward and slid down the side of the submarine. "Marc!"

He was still screaming as he plunged under the water.

Marc stomped down the ladder, closing the hatch behind him.

“That was quick knife work.”

They hadn't started cleaning up yet. The smell on this top level was a reminder of captivity for the mission men. All of them tolerated the odor, but none of them were okay with it.

Mel smiled at the people who were thanking her. “It's the least I could do for you chaps.”

Dog came through the celebrating people with Mr. Sneaky on his back. People reached out to pet the nervous feline.

“You did a good job, too.”

“Good kitty!”

Because Dog wanted it, the cat tolerated the attention. It didn't lean into their quick caresses, but it didn't hiss at them, either.

The cat was clinging tightly to Dog and licking his ears again as he trotted around, showing off one of the day's heroes. Dog was sorry he had missed the action, but he was thrilled that the cat was fitting in so well.

Mel went back into the theater, drawn by the sound of Aliens.

The calm mood was broken again as the hatch opened and Marc hurried down the ladder.

People got out of his way.

Angela stood still and waited for the scolding and possibly even shouting that she expected from him.

Marc stomped over to her. He reached out and grabbed her wrist.

Angela didn't tense up the way most of their witnesses were doing. She had never felt threatened by Marc and that included now.

Marc stared at her, tormented.

Angela slowly put her hand over his.

Marc shot energy into her, filling her banks without pain.

Brilliant blue sparks lit up around the couple and greeted Adrian as he came down the ladder, dripping salt water and anger.

Marc leaned in for a brief kiss.

Angela wrapped her arms around his neck, not caring about the blood splatters or gunpowder on his clothes and hands. "I love you."

Adrian stomped toward the therapy cubby, realizing Marc had never intended to argue with Angela. It had been an excuse to abuse him.

Marc retreated and then went to the therapy cubby for his session. His light chuckle as he shut the door proclaimed everything was fine.

Angela knew that wasn't the case. Marc was furious, just not at her. Nature had actually tried a triple hit with this one by driving another wedge between them, but Marc had seen through it and turned it around to give them a short, much-needed bonding moment. Angela was proud of him and just as furious with Nature as he was. Almost all of the nightmares they'd gone through since leaving American soil were Nature's fault. She had a lot to answer for.

“Let’s get these men below.” Cody pointed at Gus and a few others who were strong enough to handle it. Theo had just brought the stretchers up.

They lifted Kenn’s body onto a stretcher and began taking him below. Cate stayed close until they reached Angela. Then she broke off and ran to her. “I’m sorry! Thank you!”

Angela hugged the girl back. “Whatever it is, I forgive you for it.”

Cate continued to hug her and cry. “I won’t make deals with Adrian anymore!”

Thud! The sound of a punch and a body hitting the floor echoed from the therapy cubby.

Everyone understood Marc was punishing Adrian for real now.

Angela wiped away the little girl’s tears. “Remember what we told you about bad people trying to make you do bad things? Next time, it’s okay to come to me or your dad. We’d never be mad at you for something that isn’t your fault.”

Cate hugged her again, holding tightly. Having a mother who was kind and understanding was still very new to her. “He tried to get me to protect the normals over you. He tried it on Daddy, too.”

Thud!

Adrian screamed. “I won’t do it again! I won’t do it again!”

Despite the threats, Adrian still wasn’t fighting back.

Angela understood why. “He’s giving him a release.” She gently pushed Cate toward the ladder. “Go stay with Kenn.”

The little girl ran off down the corridor to catch up with the people transporting Kenn to the medial bay.

Erin glanced over, distracting herself from the newest drama that she wasn’t sure how to handle. “Who’s giving who a release?”

“Marc needed it. He got some bad news last night.” Angela shook her head when Erin would have asked what it was.

Normals in the compartments around them had heard that Adrian was trying to protect them. They peered toward the therapy cubby, wondering if they should go help him.

Angela forced those people to meet her eye. “Would you like to be in the bunk room this time? You’d be safer and more comfortable.”

All of the normals immediately shook their heads, including Lisa, who was helping to get Greg onto the second stretcher. “We’ll be fine on our own.” The thought of being locked in with the powerful descendants wasn’t appealing.

Angela’s eyes narrowed. “This is your last chance to stay with us. Anyone caught conspiring will be removed.”

The normals turned toward Lisa for help.

Lisa shrugged. “I told you she’ll let us leave. You have to stop letting your mind invent problems that don’t exist.”

Lisa retreated as the medics lifted the stretcher. She looked at Erin.

Erin walked away. Despite being furious at the newest setback to her happiness, Erin was almost relieved. *At least I didn't get pregnant and then this happened. That would have been so much worse.*

Lisa followed the stretcher. She wasn't sure what would happen between her and Greg now, but as soon as he recovered enough for a conversation, they would have one. Angela was absolutely right. She needed to handle this the correct way so it didn't blow up in her face. *But I'm still leaving. Greg will just have to accept that.*

Everyone who caught her thought frowned. If Lisa wasn't willing to stay, then Greg would leave with her so he could be close to his baby. They already knew what his reaction was going to be to that ultimatum. Lisa was stealing one of their top men. No one would look kindly upon that, not even the normals she wanted to protect.

Angela gestured at Cody. "There's a new problem in the mess that needs to be handled. People will be quick to jump to conclusions. Gather the evidence before *you* make a choice."

"I will." Cody quickly hurried toward the ladder. He could already hear raised voices echoing up through the submarine.

Angela looked toward the therapy cubby and then went into the theater and sat near Mel, who was engrossed in the classic horror flick. She needed a couple of minutes to herself. *I thought I might lose*

the baby again. That's the worst feeling in the world to me.

Pale blue sparks flowed from her stomach and up into her heart.

It was the first contact Angela had had with the baby in weeks. Tears came to her eyes. "Momma loves you."

She could almost feel Nature observing in disappointment. Angela allowed a few tears to fall, but she didn't get so upset that it would have a bad effect on her body. Descendant pregnancies were hard anyway, but in this situation she was always one bad moment away from losing it all.

Bitterness tried to sink into her heart; she pushed it away. *I have faith that the future is going to hold better things for all of us. You can kill me and you can crush me, but that's the only way you can stop me. I'll never give up.*

3

"Just give up and come on out of there so we don't have to drag you out!"

"Let us in there!"

"We don't know what happened yet. Stop it!" Wade kept his big body in the entrance of the mess so Gus and the caretakers couldn't get through.

Gus didn't get violent with Wade. That wasn't the target of his anger. "Give yourself up, Thomas. Do the right thing!"

“You said we should handle it if we found a problem.” One of the caretakers pushed hungrily on Wade’s big arm. “Let us in there so we can handle it!”

The yelling in the hallway was keeping everyone else in their compartments until leadership settled things down. No one wanted to be unjustly targeted.

It bothered Wade that all of the witnesses were willing to let Gus and the caretakers punish Thomas without attempting to defend him or even making sure that he deserved what they wanted to deal out. *We still have a lot of work to do with these people.*

Cody came down the hallway toward the chaos.

Isabel peered out of the bunk room. She was wearing her new rookie jacket. She hadn’t left her post. “I heard most of what happened.”

Cody held up a finger so she would wait. He had to get control of the situation first.

Standing in the entrance to the medical bay, Cate saw him go by and quickly hurried out. She lifted a shield around him and glared at people.

No one paid her any attention. They weren’t upset with Cody or Cate.

“You don’t know that he’s guilty yet!” Wade had developed a lot of sympathy for Thomas while they were surviving a hurricane and shark attacks together. He wanted to give Thomas the benefit of the doubt. “Back off!”

Gus was eager to punish someone. “All of the other military men went corrupt. We already know enough.”

Cody stepped out of Cate’s shield and slapped Gus on the leg. “Move!”

Gus was startled at being hit by a child. He automatically retreated, staring in surprise.

Cody ignored the caretakers who were now retreating from him and his sister. Everyone knew he was Marc’s son. They didn’t want to draw his father’s anger.

Cody ducked under Wade’s arm and entered the mess.

Gus quickly recovered. “Get him out of there! He might get hurt.”

Wade still blocked the others from entering. He could feel Cody evaluating the situation in a calm, fair manner. It made Wade more confident in Angela’s choice to make Cody her heir. He almost had full faith in the small boy now. *After he gets a lot of training.*

Cody didn’t look at the man hiding behind the mess counter and shakily holding a gun. He studied the crime scene first.

The mess was still clean, except for the spot in front of the counter where the two men had obviously fought. There wasn’t any blood, but there was a puddle of urine and the strong stench of feces that said Jack was definitely dead.

“He attacked me. I was defending myself.”

Cody also held up a finger to stop Thomas. He wanted a minute to evaluate the situation for himself. Angela was in his mind right now, directing the moment, and Cody didn't want to disappoint her or miss anything that she was telling him to look for.

Cody saw Jack's body on the floor by the counter. He had been strangled from all appearances. Jack's body was lying on its side, implying he had fallen over as he died. There was also a large bruise on Jack's cheek that said Thomas had headbutted him to get free.

"Why did he attack you?"

"I was going to tell on him for conspiring against the alpha." Thomas was relieved that Cody seemed to be willing to listen to his side of it. "I used the new Eagle training we've been getting to punch him in the throat and then crush his windpipe while he was on top of me."

Cody scanned Thomas's neck and found long bruises popping up in the shape of fingers. Cody turned toward Wade. "Get Isabel's report."

Wade motioned Gus to do that. "Sometimes things are not as they seem."

Gus was disappointed that he wasn't going to get to discipline someone, but he was also relieved that Thomas wasn't the bad guy. He did hate being wrong, though. He marched toward the bunk room, glaring at anyone who was foolish enough to make eye contact.

Isabel stayed in the doorway of the bunk room, not letting Gus enter as she told him what she had seen and heard.

Wade frowned toward the angry caretakers who were still filling the corridor behind him. “You have other work to do. Get on it!”

Wade’s angry tone got the women moving, but not quickly or willingly. It was obvious that they still believed they had been right to rush in without proof.

“We need to make sure they get more Eagle training soon or we’ll lose them.”

Cody wrote it in his book.

So did Wade.

Wade didn’t want to put the women down, but more than that, their fragile medic was already attached to them. No one wanted to make Harry’s trauma worse than it already was.

Wade gestured toward Biff and Jayda, who were lingering near the medical bay to get an update on their injured men and also to spend a minute together. “Get this mess cleaned up. Help Thomas to the medical bay so Harry can check him out when he has a free minute.”

Biff and Jayda hurried over.

Jayda had been horrified to come up and find Biff and Greg in the pile of pirates and bodies. For just an instant, she had thought they were both dead.

Biff was still upset that Jayda was on duty at all, but after his own close call, he found himself eager to resume work so he didn’t dwell on it. He now

understood why Jayda hadn't protested when Angela assigned her to guard duty right after being shot. *It's the reaction of a real Eagle.*

4

In the medical bay, Harry worked on the two injured men while following along mentally with what was happening outside the small room. He didn't like the way Wade had spoken to his women, but he also didn't like how aggressive the women were being. He considered his brief conversation with Jack and then quickly smothered it. *I hate it that he was right.*

Harry stepped around Cate as she came back in to sit with Kenn now that Cody didn't need her protection. Harry considered telling the little girl to leave and then decided not to. It wasn't the female children that he had to worry about.

Kenn slowly opened his eyes, surprised to be alive. His bloody clothes stuck to his hand as he felt around on his stomach to verify the injury had been healed. The pain in his stomach was gone, but the fear in his heart had grown. *She hesitated this time. Next time, she might let me die!*

Greg was already awake, laying on the cot next to Kenn. He caught the man's thought, but he didn't respond. Kenn was almost certainly correct. At some point, Angela was going to end his life in payment for everything he'd done to her and

Charlie. *But not until she's gotten everything out of him that she can.*

Greg fingered the hole in his shirt where the knife had impaled him. He wasn't sure if it had been intentional or a lucky accident as the first wave of pirates flung themselves through the hatch. Either way, he was lucky to be alive.

It was surprising to find out who had done most of the healing. He'd thought Lisa hated him now. He never would have thought she'd do it.

Greg glanced over and found her standing near the isolation space, watching him. Greg didn't know what to say to her. The pregnancy had been an accident. As far as he knew, she had been using birth control. He assumed that it had failed, something that happened in 0.03% of cases. Birth control wasn't always foolproof.

Lisa was scanning his thoughts through the power of the baby. She wanted to let that go, but honor refused. "I stopped using it right before you left."

Greg stared at her. "Why?"

Lisa shrugged. "At that point, I wanted to make us both happy."

Greg realized she had been trying to give him something she knew he wanted desperately. He wasn't angry with her, but he was uncertain about their future. "And now?"

Outside the medical bay now, Erin paused to hear the answer. What happened here would determine part of her future, as well.

Lisa gave a small, cold shrug. “We can talk about it after you get out of here.”

Greg frowned. “You’re not going to take off the first chance you get?”

Lisa didn’t tell him that had been the original plan. The warning from Angela had stopped that in its tracks. “No. Heal up. I’ll still be here when you’ve recovered.”

Greg glanced at her stomach.

Lisa tensed. She knew what he wanted; she just didn’t want to give it to him in front of all these witnesses.

Harry lifted a brow. “Is there any doubt?”

Lisa let out a sigh as she came closer to Greg. “No. And that’s not why he wants it anyway.” She knew he wanted it for the bond with the baby, and for the emotions he was keeping in check. One of his dreams was coming true; he needed to know that it was really happening.

Lisa didn’t worry about wiping the blood off her hands and shirt first. Eagles were used to seeing that, though she was certain it was rougher on the mission men than on those who hadn’t been in Reicher’s lab. Her sympathy for Greg grew stronger.

Lisa assumed that was the influence of the baby, but she couldn’t be sure. Until she’d become scared of magic, she had held a great affection for Greg.

Greg gently put a big hand on her stomach.

A bright blue spark ran up his arm and vanished.

Love and longing filled Greg's heart and didn't leave room for anything else.

Lisa saw his reaction and understood Greg was going to be in her life for at least the next 18 years and there was nothing she could do to change that.

Now standing in the entrance of the medical bay, Erin wiped a tear from her eye. "Thank you for the time we spent together. Our relationship is now over."

She put her chin up and walked away.

Greg barely noticed. All he could think about was finally having a son or daughter to love.

5

"He has a kind heart." Bret was standing next to Angela, providing an extra guard. He didn't have his shield up. There was no need for that. There were Eagles all around them who would defend her if it was needed.

"Yes. Greg is a good man." Bret was once again dressed like a rookie, but Angela had ordered him to take a few hours off today in hopes that he would find another activity that brought him some peace of mind. So far, all the boy wanted to do was work and that was never good for the human brain. *We all need downtime, even the kids.*

"I want you to keep a shield over the medical bay until Harry's finished with our injured people. Then spend some time with Cate." Angela still

wanted her to have the best friend that Adrian had promised.

“What about you?”

Angela didn't answer. She went to the wolf that was still parading a cat on his back. “Stop by the bridge and let Ray pet your pussy. He doesn't get much opportunity to do that.”

Ray was laughing as he opened the bridge door. “Good one, Boss.”

Dog hurried into the spotless bridge. *My cat saved the day!*

Ray reached out to pet the reluctant kitty, still grinning. He loved it that everyone was comfortable enough with him to make jokes like that. If they hadn't, then he would have felt singled out. The Eagles always gave each other shit. That was how their friendships grew.

Angela quickly closed the door in Ray's face. “Lock it!”

Ray did as he realized what she had done.

Dog and the cat both rushed over to sniff and paw at the door.

Ray went to the captain's chair and tried not to gloat. When Angela wanted something, she got it.

His amusement faded as he realized she had locked Dog with the cat to keep him company this time. “But not me. I'm about to fade again. We all are.”

Angela looked around.

Bret saw her confusion. He quickly lifted his shield around her, but it was too late.

She stared at him blankly. “It’s movie time!” She walked through his barrier and went to the theater.

Angela stepped over the blood on the floor that was slowly spreading. She didn’t seem surprised by it. In fact, she didn’t seem to notice. That bothered Bret more than her lightning-fast fade.

Bret felt bad about leaving her alone up here, but he had orders to follow. He kept his shield around himself and hurried to the medical bay before the fog took everyone else, too.

Inside the bunk room, the remaining members of the shield team also brought up their barriers and locked the doors. It was time to settle in for the wait.

In the therapy cubby, Marc gestured. “Lower your shield. I don’t want to be awake for this.”

Adrian had quickly smothered them in three layers of his shielding as soon as Angela locked Dog in the bridge. “Somebody needs to remain alert and keep things together.”

Marc agreed with that completely. “You do it. That’s not my job.”

Marc moved out of Adrian’s shielding before the man could react.

Confusion came over Marc’s face first. Then he spotted a book on the table. “I don’t think I’ve read

that one yet.” He settled at the table with the copy of Moby Dick.

Adrian reluctantly left, rubbing his sore, bruised jaw. Out of all the people on this submarine, Marc was the most likely to be able to take care of himself and if he couldn’t, Angela was 15 feet away in the theater. Even when they faded, they still spent their nights together. *Nature can try all she wants, but no one will ever be able to split those two up.*

Adrian grunted. *But that won’t keep us from trying.*

Chapter Twenty-Five
Sell It

1

“Let me in...”

Everyone in the bunk room tensed at the firm female voice demanding entrance to their den.

Then they recognized the voice and exchanged sheepish smiles.

“It’s Erin.” Isabel regarded Cody. “Should we open up?”

Cody glanced around to see how everyone else felt about it. He didn’t have a problem with Erin, but the others in here knew her better than he did.

“I think we should.” Wade was tired of childcare duty, but more than that, the noises from the rest of the submarine were drawing him. It sounded like everyone was having a great time.

Wade missed hanging out with the Eagles during downtime. For him, as the new XO, there hadn’t been any of that since he got this job. “She’s okay.”

“I agree. Let her in.” Charlie came over to help guard the entrance as Isabel unlocked it.

Erin kept her shield up as she entered. It didn’t stink in here yet, but she was sure that wouldn’t last

long. There were a lot of babies and all of them would have to have a diaper change at some point.

Isabel quickly relocked the door.

Cody included Erin inside his doubled shield easily. He could feel how tired she was from keeping her own protective barrier up.

Erin let go of her shield in relief. “Thank you. I don’t think I could have held it much longer.”

Everyone realized Erin had protected herself so she didn’t fade like the rest of the descendants on the sub. It seemed like only the normals had been spared this time. Even Ray had left the bridge. He was currently in the mess with the Eagles, enjoying match ups and downtime. If anyone else was still alert, they were occupied or hiding.

Erin did a fast scan to discern who all was in here. She immediately noticed there wasn’t as many warm bodies this time. She assumed the fade had come too fast for the other people to get here. “I can take a shift over the kids if you like. I don’t mind diapers.”

Wade made a face. “I do!”

Chuckles circled the room.

Shouts echoed through the walls.

“What’s going on out there?” Cody and the rest of them were pretty sure they knew, but waiting around in this one room was boring. He was using the time to practice his leadership skills.

“They’re having match ups in the mess. They cleared a small corner. No one has been seriously

injured yet, but they're just getting started." Erin rubbed her red eyes and fought a yawn.

Charlie regarded her. "Is that why you decided to come in here with us?"

Erin reluctantly shook her head. "I just didn't want to fade right now. It's hard telling what I might do if I don't have an awareness of what it might cost me."

"Are you saying Lisa is in danger from you?" Wade knew all about Lisa's bombshell. Most of them did.

"Absolutely not." Erin let out a long sigh. "But I've wanted Greg for a long time. I might fight for him and that would be bad for all of us."

Wade liked hearing that. He also believed she was a much better match for Greg. Finding out Lisa was pregnant had been a shock to all of them. "Did you talk to Greg about it yet?"

"No. I did the right thing and stepped aside."

Charlie listened to the ocean outside the submarine, brooding. It sounded like there was a storm. He hoped someone was keeping track of things on the radar even though he wasn't sure what they would do if a storm came right now. "What does that mean?"

"I told him our relationship is over." Erin didn't mention the engagement. Greg hadn't actually asked her to marry him, so she hadn't felt like it was official. Announcing it now would just be starting problems that none of them needed.

Wade read her thoughts. He respected her decision, but he didn't agree with it. "Greg got a big shock and then he almost died. I think you should talk to him in a few days. If he made that type of a commitment to you, then I seriously doubt he's in love with Lisa."

Erin snorted bitterly. "Love doesn't have anything to do with it. She's going to have his baby and that's all that matters to him now."

"So his commitment to you was...?"

"An agreement that I would give him a child before the final battle. He's afraid of not getting to experience fatherhood before he dies." Erin shrugged sadly. "I can't compete with that."

More loud shouts echoed from the mess.

Wade fought not to get distracted. It was obvious that Erin needed help. *I'll bet that's why she really came in here.*

Charlie nodded.

Wade struggled to find the words that wouldn't immediately trigger new drama in their camp but that would also help the kind woman he had come to respect during this run.

Cody beat him to it. "The alpha didn't put Lisa with Greg. My dad did that and she was unhappy about it. When she found out you and Greg were a couple, she was relieved. I don't think Lisa will be good for Greg. You might be abandoning him to someone who will hurt him. Maybe you should change your mind."

People gawked at the little boy in surprised agreement.

Erin had come to respect Cody on this run. His age didn't truly represent who he was becoming on the inside. "Our relationship isn't that strong. If I were the mother of his child, then he would come to love me. Without that bond, I'm just a girlfriend and that would never be enough for me."

She made a face. "Not to mention the awkwardness of being with him while Lisa's kid runs around."

Cody understood the adult emotions more than they believed he was capable of. "The alpha has a relationship like that with me and my sister. It works out well. Not all stepparents are hated."

"But your mom isn't in the picture, stirring up trouble or getting in the way." Erin winced as she realized what she had said.

Cody pushed away the sad flashes of his mother that always wanted to come whenever he talked about her. "Lisa is scared of magic. She isn't going to stay with us unless something big happens."

Wade heard the unspoken accusation. "She decided to keep the baby. Does anyone know why she would do that, considering it will probably have gifts?"

"She told my mom it was so she could raise it to be a good person, but I doubt that's the case. Lisa barely knows how to be a good person herself." Charlie had been listening to everything that was going on today while caring for the kids. "They

were starting to fade, so I don't know if my mom caught all of it. Lisa was mostly considering how convenient it would be to have a child who could keep her safe when she goes back to America."

Isabel frowned. "What's the problem with that?"

"The problem is that I didn't detect any thoughts beyond that. She's being very careful not to consider whatever future it is that she's chosen for herself. She might be planning to sell it."

Mutters and gasps went through the bunk room at Charlie's comment.

"That is a very serious accusation." Wade wrote it in his book. "We will investigate. If we find out that's true, she won't be allowed to leave with his baby."

Isabel was confused. "Don't you already have laws for that?"

"No, but it won't matter to the boss. My mom will never let Lisa leave with a baby if she's going to sell it, and that includes a normal child."

Wade nodded. "We do need to get those constitutional documents in place, but even those wouldn't really cover something like this."

"The right to life, liberty, and happiness doesn't cover it?"

Wade shook his head at Isabel, reminding himself that she had grown up in the Australian lab. It was surprising that she'd even heard of the right to life, liberty, and happiness. "When our constitution was enacted, slavery was still

commonplace. The amendments that were added removed that horror, but right now we don't officially have that document to point to in these situations. We have to get new laws in place on what happens to the kids, specifically our kind."

Erin was surprised by the turn this conversation had taken. "Lisa didn't seem that type to me."

"I didn't think so either." Wade finished writing it in his notebook. "But we all saw the lesson Kenn gave to Cate. What's on the outside is hardly ever the same as what's on the inside. Lisa has learned to hide her thoughts very well from being in our camp for so long."

"Does that make you want to fight for him?"

Erin nodded at Cody's question. "I only stepped out of the way so he could find happiness. If she's going to hurt him or take his baby and sell it, the last thing I want to do is to stay out of that."

"We'll make sure the alpha knows all of this as soon as the lockdown is over." Cody smiled at her. "Until then, you're welcome to stay with us. There are a lot of diapers that need to be changed as soon as we get them all fed."

Erin glanced over at the cribs and baby beds that all held at least two infants who were starting to get restless. She made a face. "I lied about being okay with diapers. I've never changed one."

Charlie laughed, motioning her over. "You're in for an eye-opening experience. I mean that literally. Breathe through your eyes. If it comes in through your nose, you might die."

More laughter went through the room, bringing tension levels down.

Erin took the opportunity to ask a question that had been bugging her since the first fade. “Has anyone figured out why the fog only affects some of us? Cody had his gifts during the first one and so did several other people.”

Cody regarded Wade.

Wade didn’t have a problem with discussing it in front of Erin. He still liked it that the boy had verified his opinion, though. “We believe it’s a targeted spell or charm. Nature is only aiming for some of us.”

Charlie had also been considering it. “I don’t think that covers it all. Maybe we have to be above a certain age for it to work on us.”

Wade shrugged. “We’re still trying to narrow down why it doesn’t affect the younger kids. Your mom and I agreed it’s probably directly targeting the people in the camp who might be able to defend everyone else.”

“That brings up another question. Why doesn’t Angela have us shielding everyone on the sub?” Erin gestured. “We could all be covered by taking turns and then no one would have to go through any of these fades.”

Isabel answered this time. “When I asked her that, she said Nature would probably take away your gifts to prevent any of us from being protected. This situation is bad, but it would be a lot worse if

none of us were able to be in here taking care of the babies.”

Charlie had also asked his mom that question. “I believe she’s also not doing it because some of our people need a break from the awful shit in their minds. Being in the lab was rough on them. If the mission men stress on it all the time, that will make things worse. The fading might actually be helping them.”

That made sense to everyone. For Erin, it gave her a lot more appreciation for Angela’s leadership and a little more hope for Greg and the others. It was still horrifying to catch glimpses of the abuses they’d suffered. She felt terrible for them, even Kenn, who she didn’t like.

Another loud victory roar echoed from the mess.

“I think that was Zack.”

Eric grinned at Wade’s comment. “Did you hear how they found him last time?”

Chuckles came in response.

Wade stared at the door in longing. He couldn’t help wanting to join them even if he wouldn’t know who he was. He was confident in his survival skills in this situation.

Cody smiled at Wade. “We’re about to have company. You can switch places with them.”

Still standing by the entrance, Isabel tensed. She didn’t doubt the boy.

Wade shook his head in reluctant denial. “It wouldn’t be right for me to leave you guys in here without senior people.”

“The coming company’s senior. Get ready to switch out.”

Wade’s mood improved. He just hoped whoever was coming could be trusted to handle the situation. *Because I really could use a few hours or even a full day of downtime.*

He hadn’t gone through as much as the mission men, but the sound of the ocean slapping against the submarine was slowly wearing on his nerves. Being under the water during the hurricane had definitely been traumatic. Even the memory of hot sex in the swimming pool on the cruise ship with Neil and Samantha had been ruined by his new fear of the water.

Erin joined Charlie by the babies. “What should I do first?”

One of the kids let out a long, ripping fart, followed by the sound of a diaper filling.

Charlie laughed, pointing. “You’ll start with that one.”

Erin shook her head. “I knew I should have stayed outside.”

2

“Let me out.”

Kenn frowned at the medic. “It’s a lot safer in here with us.”

Sitting on a stool in the corner, Lisa snorted but didn't argue.

Harry walked toward the door. "I'm ready to get laid and sleep. Let me out now. I'm not afraid of the fog-slap."

They had spent time cleaning the rooms and their weapons, but all of them were bored and ready to be out of here. The space was too small for this many people.

Bret carefully shrank his shield so it no longer included Harry or the entrance of the dusty medical bay.

The two slender caretakers waiting for him in the hallway leered in anticipation as Harry joined them.

Harry put an arm around each of their shoulders and let them lead him away. He didn't care that the fog was already rolling into his mind like a freight train. "I want sex and then sleep, in that order. I don't care what else happens."

Bret expanded his shield again to make sure the door was covered.

Kyle lifted his shield and added it to Bret's. He had been napping in the isolation room when the fog came. He hadn't woken for the action before that, either. His minor injury was healed now, but he was still exhausted from the recovery process and the painkillers.

A loud shout echoed from the mess.

“They sound like they’re having fun.” Kenn was fully healed now and trying not to think about any of the demons in his mind.

“We’re not going to be able to stay in here for much longer.” Thomas had been checked out by the medic; he had decided to stay with the shield team this time. He didn’t feel like fading away again. After being attacked by Jack and surviving, he had a lot of things running through his mind that needed to be sorted. He couldn’t do that if he was fog-drunk. “We don’t have any food in here and honestly, I need the bathroom.”

Bret and Kenn both nodded. They also needed to hit the head.

All of them regarded Greg.

Greg realized he was unofficially in charge of this group. He wasn’t sure why that position hadn’t been automatically given to Kyle, but he didn’t question it. Being in charge for a little while sounded good. It would keep him from considering his doomed relationship with Erin or his fragile bond with Lisa. He was afraid if he stewed on either one of those he would be tempted to make a rash decision that might destroy everyone. “We’ll make a stop at the head and then join the shield team in the bunk room. I’m sure they could use some extra hands for diaper duty.”

People let out moans and groans, but they were all relieved that they wouldn’t be spending the rest of the fade in this small medical bay without supplies. It had caught them all off guard this time,

even the boss, who hadn't been heard from since the action this morning. Everyone assumed she was in the theater again.

Bret yawned. "That's a good idea. We can all have a break that way."

"I agree." Kyle wasn't actually tired yet, but he knew he would be soon.

Greg motioned toward the door. "Let Lisa go first so it doesn't freak out any normals in the hallway to see us."

Lisa flushed. She stood and went to the exit. "I'm not going with you guys." Just being in this small space with a few descendants was uncomfortable. Everyone in the bunk room was a magic user. She would still be the only normal and that was unacceptable.

Greg wanted to argue with her because of the baby. He managed to keep his thoughts to himself, this time. "Keep those shields tight around the rest of us, Bret."

Greg looked over at Kyle.

Kyle gave him a subtle nod. Bret would think he was the only one on shield duty during the bathroom break, but Kyle would be supporting him. It was standard Eagle procedure for hands-on training moments with rookies. They always performed better if they believed they were on their own.

"Lisa."

Lisa didn't turn around at Greg's call. "I'll be fine. We'll talk after the fade is over."

Greg had to be content with that. She'd refused to discuss the pregnancy at all in front of everyone else. That wasn't going to change. "Be safe."

Bret shrank the shield again and fought another yawn.

Lisa didn't feel any different outside of the shield than she had while she'd been inside it. It was a huge relief to her in that moment to be normal. She didn't want to know what it was like to forget herself and everyone else, but she was aware that being a normal didn't mean it wouldn't happen to her at a later date.

She stepped out into the hallway and went to the incinerator compartment to check on the normals, and Dace, who she hoped had been smart enough to hide with them. *We have to trust Angela to get us out of this one. After that, we can go back to being stupid.*

The males in the medical bay all silently agreed with her. They were looking forward to Angela's next grand plan. None of them understood why Angela hadn't already enacted that plan, but they were now assuming it was because she didn't have one. That scared them.

"Grab everything you want from this room. We won't be coming back here." Greg stood and stretched. He had rested peacefully after Harry's medical check, but he would soon take a turn at shielding the team. They had worked out a quick schedule a while ago.

Kenn followed Greg. He wished he felt more like joining the match ups going on in the mess, but like Thomas, he didn't think fading right now was a good idea. *She hesitated this time! She almost let me die!*

Cate put a hand on Kenn's wrist. His fear was impossible for her to ignore. The little girl had been quiet the entire time she'd been in here helping to shield them. She was on a break now.

Kenn smiled at her. "I'll be okay."

Cate patted his wrist. "Yes, you will."

Kyle didn't like Kenn's emotional turmoil, either. He could tolerate the Marine, but everything he had gone through in the lab had forced Kyle to develop a true sympathy for Kenn whether the man deserved it or not. "She's not going to end you as long as you're friends with that little girl. Cate means a lot to Angela, and it would crush Cate if you were to die. Stop worrying about it. Your friendship is going to give you a free pass."

Kenn immediately felt a little better upon hearing that.

Greg frowned at all of them. "Can we pay attention here for just a few minutes? There's really no excuse for it since none of us faded!"

Everyone tensed at Greg's bark. Then they straightened and began paying attention to what they were doing as they left the small safety of the medical bay and headed for the bathroom.

All of the Eagles felt naked without the willing support of team members who would normally have

come running at the first sign of a problem. They had their vests on and they were armed, but it didn't feel like enough fighters if there was a problem.

The corridor was already starting to get dirty. They were forced to step over pieces of trash, but it was a relief to not find human waste yet. They knew that would happen if the fade lasted for long, however. None of them were looking forward to the cleanup that would have to be done yet again, especially considering that they had just finished cleaning the submarine right before this fade struck.

Everyone went into a stall to do their business except for Bret and Kyle. They waited until the rest of the team finished so they didn't get distracted. Just a few seconds of a lapse in concentration would mean all of them were sucked into the fog.

Sounds from the mess grew louder. Grunts and groans and heavy thuds told them the match ups were in full swing.

"I hope no one gets hurt." Bret knew Harry wasn't going to come back and help them.

Kyle wanted to give the boy comfort on that, but he couldn't. It sounded like things were getting wild, but there was no medic on duty. He remembered his own fog-slide. Based on that, he doubted the descendants would even realize they had the ability to heal some of the injuries. He didn't remember anyone using magic during the last two fades and that included the boss. *I think that's why Nature hits us one at a time with these spells.*

Kenn came out of the stall. “I think it’s also because the charms might cancel each other out.”

“Spells.”

Kenn shrugged. “Whatever. She can’t use them on us at the same time.”

That made complete sense to Kyle. He got his notebook out and wrote it down while waiting on the others to finish doing their business.

“Why hasn’t Angela done something about it yet?”

Greg came out of the stall. He didn’t want to upset the boy, but Bret had a right to know how serious the situation really was. “She normally wouldn’t have tolerated us being hit so many times without retaliating. A lot of the senior men believe she doesn’t have a plan yet.”

Kyle agreed. “We’re being hit so hard because Nature isn’t giving her time to recover and come up with a solution.”

Thomas wasn’t happy to hear that. He preferred to believe a different possibility. “Maybe whatever plan she has just can’t be put into place yet.”

Kyle paused. “That would mean she’s waiting for something. What do you think it is?”

Thomas was glad to be included and thrilled that this group wasn’t viewing him as a murderer just for defending his life. In the lab, he would have been punished for it. “I’m not sure, but I keep returning to what happened when you guys were on the island during the first fog-fade. When she woke up, she wasn’t worried about the ship, the kids, or even

another attack. All she was concerned about was finding something she lost. As soon as she found it, she started thinking about those other things again.”

Cate knew what Angela had been searching for. She patted her pocket but didn’t tell them she knew what it was.

Bret glanced over at the little girl.

Cate slowly shook her head.

Bret understood Cate wasn’t allowed to tell anyone. He gave her a small smile. It was nice to find out he wasn’t the only one who had secrets with the alpha.

Cate smiled back, admiring his blonde spikes. *He looks like Adrian.*

Everyone caught that thought and frowned.

Greg got between the children, trying to interrupt the bond that was quickly forming.

Kyle snorted. “The boss put them together. She might not be able to have a Mitchel, but Cate can and so can others.”

Kenn also stepped between the kids. “You’re both too young for that.”

Bret and Cate didn’t know what the adults were talking about. They continued to steal glimpses of each other and then stare curiously whenever their eyes made contact. They just wanted a friend. They didn’t care about the problems that might come from that relationship.

“Is everyone ready?” Kyle led the group toward the bunk room, while still allowing Bret to believe

he was the only one holding up a shield around them.

Bret felt Cate watching him. It gave him the strength to keep the barrier up even though he was exhausted now.

Kenn groaned. "That is not gonna go well."

Greg nodded. "Maybe we can talk to the boss about it later."

Kenn snorted. "You're on your own, dude. I'm not going to interfere with anything she has going."

Instead of calling him a coward or telling him to do his duty as an Eagle, Kyle slapped Kenn on the shoulder. "Finally, you get it."

All of the adults were chuckling as they reached the bunk room door.

Isabel quickly opened it. "Hurry up!"

Wade slipped out. "Have fun."

Kenn and the others hurried inside; they were relieved that they didn't have to convince the shield team to let them in.

As soon as they were all inside, Isabel relocked the door.

Cody lifted his shield over all of them. "You can let go now and take a nap. Great job."

Kyle and Bret let go of their shields at the same time, both letting out a small sigh of relief.

Bret immediately went to one of the cots and stretched out.

Kenn motioned toward Cate. "Find some clean clothes while we're in here." It bothered him to see

her wearing his blood. He didn't mind it on himself. It was different on her.

Cate went to the cot next to Bret and crawled into it, but she stayed sitting, watching him.

Kenn groaned again. "We need to get in front of that right now."

"I thought you weren't going to cross the boss on anything?" Greg grinned to show that he understood.

Kenn sighed in confusion. "I don't know what it is about that kid, but she brings out the best in me. The least I can do is keep her away from anyone with that last name."

Charlie didn't know what they were talking about, but it wasn't hard to guess what last name they were discussing. He didn't like most Mitchels either. He instantly sided with Kenn. "Who is it?"

All of the people from the medical bay gestured toward Bret, who tensed on the bunk.

Charlie's frown filled his face. "He's a Mitchell? Crap."

Bret was tired of being talked about as if he wasn't there. He let the truth out before he considered it. "My parentage was never tested. I might actually be Reicher's son." *If that's true, then I'm your uncle.*

Stunned silence went through the bunk room.

Bret regarded Cate. "I can't change who my family is. Your dad won't like us being friends, either."

Cate already wanted a friendship with him, mostly because he was trusted with big responsibilities, and no one seemed to like him. Bret was an underdog, and she would always be drawn to those. “I don’t care where you came from as long as you’re a good person now.”

“Thank you. Other than the alpha, you’re the first person who’s been nice to me.” That wasn’t completely true. Adrian had been nice to him, but Bret didn’t count that because Adrian was a banished member of the camp who didn’t hold any authority to help him get along with people.

The adults immediately felt bad for how they’d been treating Bret.

Greg saw Erin changing a diaper. Their eyes met.

The baby boy began peeing, soaking the front of her shirt.

Erin sighed. “That’s what I get for taking my eyes off the balls.”

Greg laughed with her as he came over to help.

Charlie kept staring at Bret. He was working on what Bret had sent mentally. “How can you be my uncle?”

Cate shook her head at Bret again.

Bret ignored her this time. “Marc just found out that Reicher was his dad.”

Another stunned silence went through the room as the adults exchanged looks of horror. Then they all groaned or denied it.

“That can’t be right.”

“Please tell me that’s wrong.”

“It’s not. That’s why Marc decided to fade this time instead of coming in here to shield people and help with the kids. He doesn’t want to face it.” Bret gave a small shrug and settled deeper into the cot. “He doesn’t get to pick his family is either, but at some point, he’ll have to face it. That’s when you should all be worried.”

Everyone else began to worry about it right then.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Blacklisted

1

Lisa hurried into the incinerator compartment. She was suddenly very worried about Dace. She hadn't seen or heard him at all since the fade began.

The incinerator room was once again dark and smelly from the trash that had been burned and from the small stack of bodies that were still waiting to be handled. Zack had been working in here earlier, but he'd wandered off as soon as the fog began to take effect.

“Dace?”

The tattooed mother came out of the shadows. She smiled at Lisa. “Good, it's you.”

She pointed. “We invited Dace in here with us this time. We thought that would make you happy.”

Lisa was relieved. “Thank you.” She hurried over to check on him.

The three other normal mothers came out of the shadows and joined the first one near the large piece of refuse-burning equipment.

Lisa saw Dace laying on his side and assumed he was taking a nap. She frowned. “How long has he been out?”

“He knocked out right after we brought him in here.” The first mother smiled at Lisa again, drawing her attention while the other normals took items from their pockets. “He was asking about you. It was sweet.”

Lisa knelt next to Dace and put a hand on his shoulder to wake him up.

First Mother ran forward and put her knife against Lisa’s spine. “Don’t move! I don’t want to hurt you.”

Lisa froze as she realized she was in danger again.

One of the other mothers came over to them with a roll of duct tape.

Lisa blanched as she realized what was about to happen.

First Mother pushed the knife against her aggressively. “I mean it. Don’t move!”

Lisa allowed them to take the weapons from her belt. She reluctantly didn’t resist as they tore off long strips and began to bind her hands in front of her. As the tape started to go over her mouth, she retreated and tripped over Dace’s leg.

Dace didn’t react at all.

Is he dead? Lisa stared in horror. “What have you done?!”

First Mother shoved Lisa against the wall while the other woman got the tape over Lisa’s mouth. “He took a little lump on the noggin. He’s fine. Sit down and be quiet so I don’t have to do the same to you, mate.”

Lisa did as she was told, but her mind almost couldn't accept the fact that it was the normals who were putting her into a dangerous situation and not the descendants. *I thought I was safe with them!*

The normals moved away from Lisa as soon as she was bound and sitting down.

First Mother frowned at Lisa's bloodstained clothing. It infuriated her that Lisa had fought on behalf of the descendants. If she had stayed out of it, they would now have one less magic user to deal with. "Where are the others?"

"The caretakers are collecting loose weapons and directing descendants into the mess." All of the women were wearing stolen Eagle gear. "They're also handling the medic. They refused to hurt Harry, so they're having to satisfy him first and then get him to eat the drugged food. It may be a little while before they join us."

First Mother scowled. "I don't understand why they didn't just knock him out."

"They said he was too evolved for us to dart or drug him; he'll just push it out and then start fighting. He thinks he can't be killed; they didn't want to test that theory."

First Mother made a face. "In the future, relationships between normals and descendants will not be allowed! They have to give him up. We certainly can't take him along when we leave."

Lisa listened to their conversation in dismay. She was suddenly very sorry she had wound them

up so much that they thought this was their only option.

One of the normals shrugged in distaste. “The caretakers are cannibals. I don’t think we should take them along at all.”

First Mother tried to be compassionate because they were fellow normals. “We all had to consume that diet in the lab. It takes time to recover from trauma.”

All of them fought flashes of the abuses they had suffered under Reicher. He was the number one reason all of them disliked their current hosts. It wasn’t that they were longing to return to that lifestyle; they wanted to make sure it could never happen again, but the Safe Haven people were stronger than Reicher. If they were allowed to take control of the world, labs would become common.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway.

The four mothers vanished into the shadows with hands tensing for a fight if it was needed.

Lisa kicked her foot against Dace, hoping to wake him up.

“It’s just us.”

Two caretakers entered the incinerator room, both carrying heavy kits.

“We were able to get three of the dart guns. There are only 20 darts. We have to be careful with our aim.”

“We also have to be careful who we hit. If this all goes sour, we’ll just be banished from their camp, according to the stories we’ve heard from

them.” First mother made a face. “If we accidentally kill one of them during the chaos, or hurt one of the kids, we’ll be removed.”

All of the women were in fear of that. None of them were conforming to the way Angela wanted things done. It had become obvious since their rescue from the lab that they weren’t going to be able to stay in this camp. The fading only made it more obvious. The longer they were in, the harder it was to get out. The normals were tired of waiting for Angela to come up with a solution.

First Mother counted. “We’re still missing two people.”

One of the caretakers leered. “They were almost finished with Harry when we left. It didn’t take much tonight. He always gets worked up when the boss lets him spend all day using his medical skills unsupervised.”

First Mother was glad to hear it and also a bit disgusted. “The shield team in the bunk room might be able to pick up on what we’re doing. Try to think good thoughts until we start. Then we’ll go clear out every room before we get to the mess where they’re fighting. If we try to take the mess first, we risk having magic users from the other areas coming in to help them.”

The leering caretaker paused. “What if that shield team comes out to help? They’re all magic users.”

First Mother shrugged. “That’s why we also took bullets. We’ll use them if we have to. Nothing is going to stop us from getting off this ship.”

Lisa was able to reach up with her bound hands and rip the tape off her mouth. Instead of yelling for help and drawing easy targets into a trap, she tried to reason with the women. “You don’t know how to sail the submarine and Ray faded as soon as the boss locked him in there. He came out a little while ago. He’s in the mess.”

First Mother stomped back over. She tore off a new strip of duct tape. “You mind your own business. You’re not one of us now!”

Lisa ducked the tape. “I want off this ship as much as you do, but you’re going to strand us here! We have to wait until this fade is over with and they get to a landmass. None of us know how to sail the sub!”

First Mother slapped the sticky tape over Lisa’s mouth and then grabbed her hands. She quickly taped Lisa’s hands and ankles together so it would be harder for the woman to pull the tape from her mouth again. She didn’t bother explaining her reasoning. She didn’t trust Lisa now; none of them did. Lisa was pregnant with a descendant child. She was blacklisted from this rebellion.

Now taped into a cramped position, Lisa wished she had shouted for help. She began to do that mentally, hoping the shield team in the bunk room would hear her and come handle this without

anyone getting hurt. There was no longer an option. The Eagles had to get involved.

The mothers and the two caretakers settled back into the shadows, sending their minds to thoughts of the past and even to some of the abuses they had suffered in the lab to keep any alert descendants from knowing what they were doing. It was the method they had been employing for the last week and it was entirely effective. Not one of Angela's army knew this was coming.

More footsteps echoed; the other two caretakers joined them.

“He took three bites of the soup and fell over. If he knows who he is when he wakes up, he'll be able to use his gifts to call for help. We're on a tight schedule now and the clock just started ticking.”

First Mother, who had been chosen to lead the mutiny, picked up one of the dart guns and headed for the door. “If you've never fired one of these before, then just be a decoy. I only want people who can shoot well to handle this part of the plan.”

One of the caretakers who had just finished satisfying Harry picked up a dart gun. “I've had two short rookie lessons and Owen used to let me do target practice with his gun in the lab even though I couldn't use darts or bullets.”

It was the most experience that any of them had, other than their leader.

“Where is Selina? She should be here with us.”

First Mother sneered in contempt. “She made a deal with one of the subjects. She's not going to

break that. We can't trust her now, either." The woman tossed an ugly glare in Lisa's direction. "It's sad that so many females will sell us out and this time, it was for a man who doesn't even have balls. In the future, those women will be considered traitors. They won't be allowed to stay in our towns, barter for supplies, or receive our protection in any way. They'll be on the run."

Lisa glared right back. *I'd be safer on my own anyway.* She gave Dace another sharp kick and continued to mentally shout for help.

2

"Eat this. It will help." Selina shoved a piece of food between Shawn's lips before he could ask her what it was.

Shawn obediently chewed and swallowed like he'd been doing the entire time they'd been in the mess watching the fights. Shawn was having a hard time remembering who he was and why they were here, but a beautiful woman was feeding him food and the entertainment was stellar. Beyond that, what more could a man ask for?

Selina had dug through all of the lockers as soon as the fade started, searching for small tins that the Navy men had often stored for trading when they reached a port. She'd found enough to start the diet that she hoped would help Shawn achieve both of their goals.

Selina didn't feel bad for abandoning the other caretakers and Harry. *I only get one life and I should be allowed to live it.*

Selina had always known her fellow caretakers didn't trust or even like the men they'd been forced to deal with. She hadn't viewed things that way. Most of the men who'd been in the lab with them had been there against their will, like everyone else. She still didn't agree with the methods or the things that had happened, but she knew blaming all males was futile. Everything that had been wrong with the lab could be laid at the feet of Reicher and those who came before him. She didn't hate all men just because a man had hurt her.

Thud!

Thud!

In the corner of the mess, Ray and Zack traded brutal blows that brought both battling brutes to their knees. They rose in tandem, while trying to shake off the disorientation that had taken over their minds.

The mess was starting to stink and garbage was starting to pile up, but it still wasn't as bad as last time they had faded together. All around the tables, bloody men who had already been in the small cage they had created with chairs watched and groaned as the hits landed. Those still waiting for their turn chewed on granola bars and enjoyed the fights.

Zack automatically ducked the next punch Ray threw and leaned into his own swing, catching the man in the stomach.

Ray staggered.

Zack followed it up with a left and then a right. As his opponent fell backward, Zack made a split-second decision not to follow him down with a final blow that might kill him.

For that split second, Zack became fully alert and aware of what was going on around him. *I pulled the punch!*

The rest of his memories flooded in, reminding Zack why he'd been worried about that in the first place. Relief entered his heart as he retreated, allowing Ray to gain his feet. *If I didn't hurt anyone during the fog, then I certainly won't do it while I'm awake. It's okay for me to get married. I won't hurt Allison or my kids.*

Ray marched forward angrily.

Zack's mind faded back into the fog. He staggered as Ray punched him and then tripped over the chair barrier. He smacked against the wall; blood began to drip from his nose.

Ray strode around the circle, flexing his muscles. "I win!"

Zack decided he'd had enough of the fighting. He pushed himself to his feet and limped over to the counter to find something to drink.

Ray accepted the congratulations of the strangers around him. He continued to enjoy winning the fight while wondering why he was fighting at all.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, but no one in the mess reacted to it.

Two of Harry's caretakers hurried into the mess with a large pot that was steaming. "We brought dinner for everyone! Come and get it!"

"Yeah, food!"

"I hope it's better than these granola bars." Gus spit out a dry chunk and moved toward the smiling women.

A bad chill went through the room, bringing Zack near to alertness once again. Fear entered his mind. He peered around for the threat.

The first thing Zack heard was water. Terror sank into his veins. *I have to get up high somewhere so I don't drown!*

Zack hurried out of the mess, searching for a place to hide.

One of the caretaker's eyes narrowed, but she didn't try to call him back. Zack was a descendant. He might still be able to read her mind. Instead, she grinned widely at Ray as he came over to get a bowl of soup. "Grab it while it's hot!"

A line began to form while the caretakers dipped out soup into a stack of bowls they'd brought with them.

As each person got their bowl, they began to drink it, not bothering to find a spoon. It smelled too good to slow down and scoop out bites.

Shawn started to get in line for the soup.

Selina took his hand and led him toward the exit. "That might not mix well with everything else I've already fed you."

She gave him a smile. “Maybe we should work on the other part now.”

Shawn didn’t know what she meant, but a beautiful woman was leading him away from a party. He’d had that happen enough times to know he was probably going to be happy with the end result. “You lead, I’ll follow.”

“Exactly.” Selina took him out of the mess without looking at the other caretakers. She did feel a little bad about leaving them with Harry, considering that Harry wanted to turn them into something they weren’t, but she had already decided she wasn’t going to interfere. They were allowed to make their own choices, the same as she was.

The caretakers continued to smile and feed the men and women in the mess while another match started.

“I think it’s our turn.” Trent pointed at Biff. “I want your woman if I win.”

Biff and Jayda had been sitting close to each other, sharing dirty thoughts. They both looked over at Trent now.

“I thought we were going to share.” Jayda smiled at Trent. “I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“I don’t want to share.” Trent moved toward the ring. “You can still pick one of us, but this will let you see who’s the better fighter.”

Jayda shrugged. She didn’t have a problem with that. She liked both men equally.

Biff rose to the challenge, grinning. “I hope we’ll still be friends after I beat your ass.”

Trent laughed. “Of course. It’s not personal. I just want to know who the father is once she gets pregnant.”

“Oh, okay. I understand that.” Biff climbed into the ring.

Jayda leaned forward eagerly, enjoying the fights. “Get him!”

The fog was thick and heavy in everyone’s mind. None of them questioned anything that was happening beyond what they wanted right at that moment. Nature wasn’t giving them a chance to determine right, wrong, or future consequences of their actions. Their inhibitions had been ripped away.

Outside the mess, the mothers and the caretakers waited patiently. It would take a little while for the drugs in the soup to have an effect on everyone. Those who didn’t partake of the food would have to be darted, but the longer they gave everyone to get a portion of the meal, the fewer people they would have to try to shoot in the chaos that was sure to happen. Coups were rarely nonviolent. The women were all prepared for this to turn ugly.

First Mother decided to go secure the top level. She motioned the others to come along; she also put her finger over her lips and then pointed to her mind. She didn’t want them to think bad thoughts and bring the shield team out to fight. She wasn’t sure

exactly how that would work since she hadn't seen them battle with their barriers up, but she was hoping they wouldn't be able to do both if they came out. As soon as one of them left the shield, the fog should take them. *And then we'll cover it from there.*

First Mother climbed the ladder at a leisurely pace, giving off the impression that everything was fine.

The others followed her up the ladder, all reflecting on how happy they were to be here. They were about to disable the alpha and her husband. A single bad thought might result in death.

First Mother went by the bridge, where she could hear the wolf pawing restlessly at the door. Someone had shut him in there after Ray came out. First Mother was glad. The wolf hadn't faded during any of the fog attacks. If he had been loose, they would have had to kill him. The drugs in the darts weren't made for animals. It had rarely worked on the hounds in the lab.

First Mother led the others down the hallway toward the theater. She took the kit off her back as she stepped into the entrance. "Ladies, I need to close this door for a little while so it doesn't get cold in here."

Mel and Angela both continued to focus on the screen. Only one of them even acknowledged it. "We don't mind." Angela resumed enjoying Riddick.

Angela and Mel were both eating granola bars and drinking lukewarm canteen water. They didn't seem to care what they were consuming while they watched the movie.

First Mother put her kit inside the door. It had supplies in it for the women. She didn't want anything to happen to the hostages they were now securing. She gently closed the hatch and rotated the handle slowly so it wouldn't creak loudly and alarm the other passengers.

As soon as it was locked, the normals went to the therapy cubby. This was the moment where they expected things to go crazy. Marc and Adrian were still in there together and Adrian hadn't faded during the last fog attack. He would have to be darted.

First Mother gently knocked on the door and then pushed it open. "Can one of you please help me with something?"

Marc glanced up from his book. He was almost at the end. "It's just me in here. What can I do for you?"

Marc was still wearing his blood splattered clothes from earlier. He was putting off an odor that was filling the room. First Mother quickly lifted the dart gun and fired while trying not to gag.

The dart plunged into Marc's arm.

Marc frowned at her as the drugs flooded his system. "What did I do to you?!"

He slid sideways in the chair and fell over onto the dusty floor.

First Mother looked around for Adrian and didn't see him. She pulled the door shut. "It's what you might do in the future that concerns me, Mr. Brady."

She exchanged triumphant glances with the other rebels. "We've won."

3

"Good boy." Adrian ran a fast hand over Dog's back. He didn't linger long enough to allow the animal to snap at him.

Dog tolerated it. He knew they were in a lot of trouble.

Adrian was still in the ocean-soaked, blood-splattered clothes that he had fought in, though it had all dried now. He was chafed in places, matching the many bruises and scrapes he had. He felt like crap; witnessing the women take over the ship so easily was making it all worse. He wasn't prepared for a physical confrontation with anyone.

Adrian wasn't sure what to do now. Almost all of the Eagles had been subdued or locked up in less than ten minutes. As soon as he opened the bridge door, he expected one of the two armed caretakers who were patrolling the top level now to either shoot at him with bullets or darts.

Either way, it was unacceptable. He couldn't use his gun because it was dangerous in the sub. Too many people and life support systems would be in the line of fire, and the odds of rushing the

dangerous women while not being darted or shot were slim. He had given both of those eager women their first rookie gun lessons himself. They had picked up on it quickly. There was very little chance that they would both miss him. He couldn't leave the bridge.

Adrian scanned the radar and saw a small storm over them. The monitors up there showed only rain, though, and no green clouds. He assumed it was just a normal storm. Nature wasn't going to send that snot cloud just in time to save them.

Adrian scanned the other monitors, searching for anyone who was aware and able to help. He had already tried to reach the shield team, but the multiple powerful layers of mental barriers were impossible for him to get through. He was going to have to try contacting them over the ship's intercom system soon, which might alert their captors.

He didn't know what would happen from there, but he also didn't think the shield team was able to come out fighting like they normally did. As soon as they left their protective barriers behind, they would forget who they were and what they were doing. The women would easily overwhelm them at that point. They were safer in the bunk room. "I need someone who didn't fade."

Adrian scanned the monitors again, starting with the top level. Marc was already unconscious in the therapy cubby. Angela and Mel were locked in the theater. Both of those women had faded.

Adrian wanted to rely on Angela's automatic instinct to fight for her people, but she was heavily pregnant. He had decided not to involve her unless there was no other choice. Adrian didn't want to endanger the baby. He was relieved that the normals hadn't hurt her. That would have brought him right out of the bridge.

In the radio cubby, Zack was currently climbing into the rafters. "That's no help." Adrian kept hunting for an ally.

He saw movement on the monitor in the corner of the incinerator compartment. He narrowed in and recognized Lisa and Dace. It looked like Dace had been subdued. Lisa was alert and trying to pry the tape off her hands and feet.

Adrian's hope went up a little. Lisa hadn't faded. Now that she had been taken hostage by the clever normals, it was possible that she would be willing to help. Just in case she wasn't, Adrian kept searching.

The next monitor showed the mess, where groups of men and women were sitting at the tables and quickly falling asleep. The match between Trent and Biff had ended in blood, a possible broken wrist, and the casual insults of friends who were now wandering off with Jayda into the corridor. It was obvious that all three of them had faded. Adrian assumed they would be found together after everything was over. He kept looking.

Adrian didn't scan the bunk room yet. He swept the showers, and found them empty. The bathrooms

were also empty, as was the medical bay and the small gym. He turned his attention to the captains' quarters.

He saw Harry lying in one of the beds, appearing to be sleeping peacefully. Adrian had watched Harry scarf down the soup. "I should have interfered there. I just didn't know there was a problem at that point." He resumed hunting for someone he could rely on to help.

In the luxury quarters next to Harry, Shawn and his purple-haired caretaker were getting a shower together. It was obvious that Shawn was in the middle of a fog episode, but the caretaker didn't appear to be struggling mentally. She was directing Shawn into pleasing her. Adrian didn't think she was part of the mutiny.

He wondered if her brief bond with Shawn would allow her to help them. "Maybe we can make a deal of some kind." There was no one else. Selina and Lisa were the only ones who hadn't faded, other than their captors.

Adrian was stunned by how fast the entire submarine had been conquered and so far, the only shot that had been fired was the dart that had hit Marc. "When Angela wakes up and finds out you guys shot Marc, every one of you are dead. It won't matter that you're trying hard not to hurt people. You don't understand how vengeful she can be. But you will."

Adrian willed Lisa to hurry up and get free while at the same time also wishing Shawn and

Selina would hurry up with their personal moment. But waiting for either one of them wasn't an option. Adrian reached out for the control switch to the ship's intercom system. He knew there was a way to narrow it so the communication only went to a specific location, but he wasn't sure how to do it. "I guess it's time I learned. Wish me luck, Dog."

Dog growled.

The cat purred.

"Good enough." Adrian began to flip switches, hoping he got it right.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
One Shot, One Kill

1

“**T**his is the last one.” Charlie gently put the sleeping baby into the crib next to his sister. “We should have a couple of hours now before they wake up and we need to restart the process.”

Erin made a face. “Only a couple of hours?” She was tired and sweaty, and she smelled like the diapers they’d been changing.

Charlie laughed. “Anything we put in them doesn’t stay in there for very long.”

The kids were all sleeping peacefully now. The adults were glad for the break. Childcare duty was a hard chore when they didn’t have enough hands to cover it.

Erin went toward the bathroom to wash up. She was grateful there was a restroom in here. She’d been using it a lot.

Cody yawned widely. “I need to do a switch now.” The boy had been using his shield for hours. He needed a break.

Bret brought his shield up.

Kenn also lifted his barrier, taking a turn.

Everyone else held still so they would be protected during the switch. They were slowly perfecting it.

Cody let go of his own doubled shield and sighed in relief. It took a lot of energy and a lot of concentration to bring up the shield and hold it anyway. Keeping it in place over an entire room of people for hours was exhausting.

“The noise has mostly stopped.” Greg wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

Kenn nodded. “It sounds like Wade got them to settle down.”

“He shouldn’t have left.” Kyle was disappointed that Wade had chosen to go have fun in the fog instead of covering the duty he’d been given.

The others had expected Kyle to feel that way. As the top Eagle, he also had the right to discipline Wade for it, but they all hoped he would let it go. No one needed the extra stress right now, but they also understood why Wade had left. After doing shield team duty so many times, they were sympathetic. They also wanted downtime that didn’t include screaming babies or obnoxious smells that sank into their clothes and wouldn’t let go.

Cody tensed. Now that he was out of the shield, thoughts were coming to him from all over the ship. None of them were good.

Kyle and the others saw his reaction. Tension filled the witnesses.

“What is it?” Kyle prepared to lift his shield. He was on a break right now, but he wasn’t confident that Kenn and Bret could keep their barriers in place if there was a problem. Both of them were new to doing this.

Cody concentrated, trying to determine where the threat was coming from.

The intercom system activated with Adrian’s quiet voice, making some of them jump. “Can anyone hear me?”

Erin went over to the intercom and hit the button. “What’s going on?”

Adrian’s sigh of relief came through the speaker. “The normals have taken over the ship. Keep your door locked and your shields up.”

Everyone froze for a few seconds, not sure how to handle this newest situation.

Adrian was relieved that he had finally found the right settings and gotten through to them. “I have a plan, but it’ll be dangerous. You’ll have to keep the kids covered in case it doesn’t go well.”

Kyle came over to the intercom. “Tell me what happened.”

“Harry’s women and the mothers who should be in there with you taking care of their babies have taken over the ship.” Adrian was furious. “They drugged Harry, along with almost everyone in the mess. Do not eat any of the soup!”

Kenn began to check his gear for battle.

Charlie did the same.

Erin activated the speaker. “Where are they now?”

“Where’s my mom?” Charlie was more concerned with her than with eight normals who should be easily subdued.

Adrian’s voice came right back. “They locked your mom in the theater, right before they shot Marc with a dart. He’s unconscious.”

Groans and headshakes went through the bunk room this time.

“They signed their death warrants with that one.”

Kenn nodded at Erin’s comment. Angela would never let it slide. “So what’s the plan?”

The speaker activated again. “There are two entrances to the bunk room. When our captors go by the first one, you can use the second one as a decoy and then come out of the first and be behind them.”

“We’ll have to make sure we clear the line of fire.” Kyle made sure his gun was loaded and ready for action. In a moment like this, he didn’t mind letting Adrian decide what they were going to do.

Cody glared around at all of them. “You have to make a new plan.”

Kenn frowned. “Why?”

“Because we can’t kill the normals for this.”

“Angela wouldn’t tolerate it.” Kenn tried to reason with the boy. “She would remove them.”

Cody shrugged. “Well, I’m not her and I’m in charge. Do not kill the normals or I’ll take your Eagle jackets!”

His threat echoed. None of them were sure if he had that authority. They also weren't sure that he didn't.

Cody understood he needed to explain why he'd made that decision. "Their deaths will hurt the alpha because she loves them and I'm tired of her always being upset. Do *not* kill them."

Erin had been holding in the speaker so Adrian could listen. "Did you get all of that?" She let go of the button.

Adrian's reluctant voice came through the speaker. "Yes, but I don't agree. However, he's the boss right now. We'll try to do it his way."

Despite being positive that Angela was going to kill the rebels anyway, almost everyone was relieved by the decision. They felt bad for the normals who were just scared and trying to make sure they survived. After being without their gifts and dealing with the fog, it was easy to understand why the normals were frightened enough to do something like this.

"We'll do it your way, kid, as long as they haven't killed anyone." Kyle's voice was firm. "If they hurt any of our people, we're going to remove them and I don't want to hear any more about it."

"It's a deal. I'll be the decoy." Cody walked toward the first door to be ready.

Cate flew out of the bunk and pulled him back. "You're not allowed to be on the frontlines! I'll do it."

None of the adults liked the idea of the kids being involved in the action at all, but they were short on manpower. A small team would run up behind the women. A small child in front of them was certain to be a distraction for that moment.

Bret yawned and sat up in the cot. “I think you should let Isabel do it.”

Isabel had been quiet during this conversation, shocked into silence at what her fellow caretakers were doing. *I should have spent more time helping them adjust.*

“We all feel that way.” Kenn glanced over at Bret curiously. “Is it because she used to be one of them?”

Bret nodded. “She can tell them she knocked all of us out. They’ll be relieved to have another normal in their group to help cover things.”

Isabel was eager to prove that she was different than the women who were committing mutiny. “I’m in.”

Bret was now scanning the situations around them through the shielding, though it was incredibly hard. “I think there are still people awake in the mess. They’ll have to get that area covered. They’ll need all the hands they can get to do it. Make them believe you’re on their side.”

Kenn and Kyle both studied the plan and decided it was probably a good one. They didn’t like using a female decoy, but their options were limited at the moment.

The speaker activated again. “Lisa and Dace are tied up in the incinerator compartment, but she’s almost free. I’m going to make contact with her. She can help.”

Kenn shook his head. “Lisa hates magic. She won’t fight alongside us. If you reach her, just tell her to stay out of it and we’ll handle things.”

Adrian didn’t argue or agree. “The purple-haired caretaker, Selina, is in the captains’ quarters with Shawn. She isn’t part of the mutiny. I think you should use her and Lisa to your advantage.”

Kyle held up a finger to stop Kenn, who was about to give another negative response. “We may want them.” He activated the speaker. “Tell them to be ready to assist in whatever way we need so they don’t get blamed for what the other normals are doing. That should secure their cooperation.”

Erin liked that. “Lisa was responsible for stirring them up in the first place. It’s only fair that she should help.”

“The caretakers are still walking the top level and waiting for their drugged soup to take effect. If something changes, I’ll contact you.” Adrian switched off the speaker.

The adults in the bunk room spent a minute considering everything that was about to happen. Then the Eagles fell into battle mode. Their hands automatically checked weapons and gear while their feet got them into position near the rear exit so they would be ready upon Adrian’s call.

Isabel went to the first door alone, swallowing the acid now burning its way up her stomach. She was about to get action for the first time as part of a team. It was exciting and intimidating. She didn't care for the mix. *But I'm going to do a great job here and secure my place as one of Angela's Eagles. I didn't have anything to do with the mutiny, but if I can end it, I will. I don't care if I used to be friends with some of those women. They've crossed a line they can never come back from.*

2

"I'm sorry. I don't understand what the problem is."

Selina smiled at Shawn as she led him out of the small, steamy bathroom. "You took care of me. I'm happy." She had helped him finish washing and then gotten him into a pair of boxers and a robe.

Shawn yawned. "Is it nap time now?"

Selina led him over to the bed. "That sounds good to me." She got him into the clean bed and pulled up the covers. She leaned down and gave him a kiss. "Thank you."

Shawn didn't know why she was being so nice. He was just grateful that she wasn't making fun of him for not being able to achieve an erection. "Will you stay with me?"

Selina pulled on her shirt. "Absolutely."

When she had volunteered to help him, Selina hadn't imagined that she would derive much

pleasure from their moments, but he was very skilled with his hands. Shawn had a gentle touch. “Get some rest now. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Shawn obediently shut his lids. He couldn’t remember what all had happened, but it felt like he’d had a very long day.

Selina watched as he fell asleep. She also hadn’t expected the emotions that were now hitting her. She hoped they were successful in returning his sexual function. Shawn seemed like a good man who could give her a good future.

The intercom on the wall activated with Adrian’s quiet voice. “Can you hear me.?”

Selina looked around, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from.

“I’m watching you on the monitor. I need your help.”

Selina recognized the voice as Adrian, but she was reluctant to get involved with him due to his bad reputation. It had already preceded him.

Selina went to the speaker; she kept her voice down so she didn’t disturb Shawn. “What do you want?”

“The other caretakers and some of the mothers are conspiring. They’ve taken over parts of the ship. We need your help to regain control.”

Selina was instantly afraid for herself. She knew anything the caretakers did would look bad on her. “What do you want me to do?”

“Can you be a decoy or a shooter?” Adrian was eager to have multiple people for those roles in case it didn’t work the first time they tried it. The luxury quarters were at the end of the hallway, which would make it easier than using the bunk room doors.

Selina considered that briefly and then reluctantly shook her head. “I don’t think I can fire on them.”

“Eagles can be trusted to make the hard choices.”

Selina frowned at the camera in the corner. “I don’t care about being an Eagle.”

“But you do care about Shawn.”

Selina nodded. It hadn’t taken long for her to develop a deep sympathy for the man. She suspected it could turn into a lot more if they were given enough quality time together.

“He’s a descendant. The normals are never going to let him live. Shawn will be eliminated just because of who he is.”

“Not on my watch!” Selina hurried over and locked the rear door that led up to the command center. She then went into the next room, where Harry was still asleep on the bed. She locked that door, too, then returned to the room where Shawn was.

Adrian began to understand she wasn’t going to cooperate, but he still had to try. “We need your help.”

Selina gestured at the sleeping men, now standing between the entrances of the two bedrooms. "I'm staying right here."

Adrian didn't tell her there was a little girl who would love her for that choice. Selina was about to have the family she'd always wanted. All she had to do was follow through on the choice she'd already made. "I understand. Keep those doors locked and I'll let you know when it's all over."

Not everyone could be an Eagle. Some people had to be camp members, but Selina had just demonstrated a loyalty to Shawn that he hadn't received from any female in his life so far, other than Missy. Adrian was very happy for him even though this was a bad situation.

Selina went to Shawn's kit and drew out his gun. She put it on the end table next to him and then sat in the chair by that table, hoping she didn't have to use it. *Please don't come in here, ladies. I've made my choice and you won't like it.*

Shawn opened a blurry eye. He wasn't sure what was pulling him out of sleep, but his gaze went straight to the gun on the end table.

Selina smiled at him. "I'll keep you safe. No worries, mate."

Shawn went back to sleep.

Adrian scanned the other monitor, where Lisa was just about free. She was the only one left to try. If she refused to help them, the shield team would be all that stood between Safe Haven and whatever horrible fate the normals were planning for the

magic users. “Come on, Lisa. Do the right thing this time.”

3

“Did everyone enjoy the soup?” First Mother strode into the mess with the dart gun lifted and a huge smile on her face.

Theo peered up from Gus’s side. He’d been trying to wake the big man, but he wasn’t having any luck. “Is there a doctor in this weird hotel?”

“Not anymore.” First Mother quickly fired a dart and hit Theo in the side.

The two parasite subjects took off running as Theo fell over.

The two other mothers ran after the men, unleashing a small barrage of projectiles. Neither of the subjects were hit.

First Mother cut them off by going around the other side of the counter. No one else in the mess was awake to interfere. She took careful aim and hit one of them in the leg.

One of the other mothers got a lucky shot and hit the second subject in the ass.

First Mother looked around for anyone else that needed another dose.

No one in the mess was moving now. The drugs they had put into the soup were hard-hitting and quick acting. Reicher had used them in the lab; they were very familiar with the effects.

“Get the guns and knives.” First Mother took Theo’s weapons.

“I can’t believe this was so easy.”

First Mother shrugged. “Sometimes things go your way. Finish up here and then we’ll go catch our ride.”

“Do you think they’ll follow us?”

“I doubt they’ll even remember we were here.” First Mother was delighted that the normals weren’t affected by the fog. It was going to provide a perfect alibi. The magic users would wake up and believe this had all been part of the fade out and not an attack. As long as they didn’t hurt anyone, they were in the clear.

In the corner by the bloody matchup ring, Wade kept his chin down and pretended to be asleep. His shield was shrunken tightly around his body; he was waiting until they were close enough to disable. It would be dangerous to the innocent people in here if he let go of his shield and just opened fire. His aim wouldn’t be as good right now.

Wade also didn’t want to kill the women. He hated doing that. *But my boss may give different orders. You’d all better hope she wakes up in a better mood or my clumsy aim would have been the better way to go.*

“Come on, Lisa, you can do this.” Lisa had gotten the tape off her mouth again, but she was fighting with the tape around her wrists and ankles. She had unwound bits and pieces of the sticky adhesive, but a large chunk was keeping her from getting free. “Try harder!”

Next to her, Dace hadn’t regained consciousness. She had verified his breathing in relief, but he wasn’t able to help her.

Lisa tore off another small strip in anger and frustration. “I now hate duct tape!”

Lisa continued to work on the edges, fighting her panic. She had to get Dace somewhere safe and then help regain control of the submarine so she wasn’t removed. The only way to do that was to reach the shield team.

Lisa could hear people walking around. She assumed it was the mothers or the caretakers. She had heard them deliver food to the mess; most of those people were likely now drugged and out of commission. The shield team was her only hope. *I have to fix this before someone dies.* If that happened, all normals might be removed.

Lisa stripped off the last wad of duct tape and stretched her legs. She snapped the thin band left around her wrists and quickly stood, trying to be quiet. That was almost impossible with duct tape. She was surprised no one had heard her trying to get free.

Lisa went to the door and peered out.

The hallway looked empty for the moment. She decided to take the risk. Lisa hurried to the bunk room, flying by the mess.

She breathed in a large gasp of air, relieved that no one had seen her. She knocked lightly on the bunk room door. "I'm bringing Dace in here. Be ready to open up."

Lisa hurried back to the incinerator compartment before she got a response. She wasn't able to use the baby's gifts right now. Her stomach was hurting too much. She was afraid to.

Lisa grabbed Dace under his arms and began dragging him toward the exit.

As she pulled and tugged, and her stomach continued to pinch and cramp, it occurred to her that she had officially switched sides. *All it took was one hostage situation. Imagine that.*

5

In the bunk room, everyone exchanged worried glances.

Cody wasn't sure what to do. "Do you think we can trust her?"

Erin frowned. She didn't like Lisa at all now. "I don't know. It might be a trap."

"I think we should give her a chance. She did try to talk the normals out of doing something stupid." Charlie had scanned Lisa's thoughts many times over the last week in search of threats. Angela had asked him to keep an eye on Lisa anyway, but

he'd also done it for Greg. "I don't think Lisa is the problem."

Kyle nodded. "I agree. Get ready."

The speaker on the wall activated. "It looks like Lisa's bringing Dace to you. Be ready to open the door when I call it."

It was a relief to know that Adrian was their eyes and ears in this situation.

Lisa dragged Dace by the mess, where the caretakers and mothers were now disarming everyone. No one spotted her or heard her despite all the noise it was making to pull his body down the dirty hall. The storm outside was causing the water to make a lot of noise, too.

Isabel opened the door.

Kenn helped drag Dace's unconscious body inside.

"The normals took the sub. They knocked Dace out." Lisa looked around and saw Greg. Then she saw Erin helping with the babies. A cloud passed over her face. *I still can't stay in here.*

Kyle tried to get the information they needed. "Do you know where they're all at?"

"Four of them are in the mess. I think the others are on the top level." Lisa stayed next to the exit. "Dace was hurt and he won't wake up. He needs a medic."

Charlie was too tired to heal the man. He shook his head at Lisa's anxious glance.

“Adrian’s on the bridge. He said the caretakers drugged Harry. He’s in the luxury cabin.” Kenn could feel Lisa’s anxiety. He attributed it to the unconscious man they were now putting into an empty bunk.

Lisa watched, making sure they were gentle. “I’ll go get Harry.”

“You should stay in here with us where it’s safe.” Greg didn’t want her endangering their baby.

Lisa scowled at him. “I’m going to get the medic!”

She hurried off down the hallway, feeling better now that she had gotten Dace to a better location with his own kind. They would protect him. Lisa couldn’t imagine waiting in the bunk room now anymore than she could have before. She hurried toward the captains’ cabin, hoping Harry hadn’t ingested enough of the soup to be completely knocked out.

Lisa tried to open the door, but it was locked. She knocked. “Harry! We need you!”

Selina came over to the door, bringing the gun with her. “Go away!”

Lisa didn’t have time to argue. “Dace got hurt. I need Harry to come and help him. Open up!”

Selina wasn’t sure what to do. She looked between the two rooms, understanding she really couldn’t defend them alone. Lisa was a normal and she might be in on the mutiny, but Selina didn’t think so. The panic in her voice sounded genuine. She unlocked the door.

Lisa quickly hurried in and shut it behind her. She gave Selina a shaky smile. "Thank you."

She hurried over to Harry before the woman could answer.

"He hasn't moved since we came in here." Selina relocked the door and stayed next to it to keep anyone else from entering.

Lisa shook Harry as hard as she could. "Harry!"
"I believe he was drugged."

Lisa contemplated the stories from the lab. Harry had been able to almost bring himself back from the dead during some of the sessions there, but only when he was about to die. "We'll threaten his life."

Selina scowled, now regretting her decision to let Lisa in. "Get away from him."

Lisa leaned down and wrapped her hands around Harry's neck. She began to squeeze. "Wake up!"

Selina lifted the gun. "Get away from him!"

Lisa ignored the caretaker. "So help me, Harry, I will kill you. Wake up!"

Selina's finger tightened on the trigger.

Harry's eyes popped open.

Lisa flinched back at the instant rage staring at her. "We need your help!"

Harry glared. "You could have just asked me."

He sounded completely alert and very angry. Lisa retreated, hand unconsciously coming down to protect her stomach. "I'm sorry, but I need you."

Dace was hurt; your normals are taking over the ship!”

Harry’s mind swam from the effects of the soupy sedative. “Hang on.”

The women watched in disgusted surprise as he pushed the drugs out of his system. It was a gross yet fascinating procedure that sent rivulets of dark, dirty liquid from his mouth, nose, and even his ears. It looked like he was crying from every orifice.

Selina decided she’d seen enough. She went back to Shawn, keeping the gun in hand. She closed the door between the two rooms and locked it. Everyone out there was on their own. All she cared about was keeping Shawn alive until they regained control of the submarine. Selina had no doubt that it would happen soon. Even in the fog, Angela was protective of her people. She wasn’t going to let this ride much longer.

“Hurry up!” Lisa fought her fear to reach out and grab Harry’s arm, pulling him from the bed.

Harry removed his shirt and wiped clean with it while following her. He wasn’t worried about donning more clothes over his damp sweatpants. He just wanted to find the women who had betrayed him. “And when I do, you’re all going to pay. Safe Haven’s rules no longer apply!”

Lisa didn’t care about his plans for vengeance. She yanked the door open and hurried out into the corridor. “Come on!”

The sound of a gun cocking froze the blood in her veins. She turned around to find First Mother standing there, pointing a gun at her.

First Mother saw Harry coming out behind Lisa. She had also heard of Harry's miraculous recoveries in the lab; she knew she was going to be the main focus of his anger.

Harry spotted her. Evil came over his face.

First Mother panicked and tugged the trigger.

Harry rotated, pulling Lisa along to protect her.

The gun fired.

Lisa and Harry both fell to the ground.

One of them was bleeding and groaning.

The other was dead.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Uninvited

1

“**W**hat did you do?!” Three of the mothers and caretakers from the mess ran down the hallway toward the cabins.

As soon as they passed the first bunk room door, it opened. Kyle and Greg hurried out while Bret stood in the entrance and tried to keep his shield over both men.

First Mother stared at the two bodies and then the gun. Blood had sprayed all over her arm and face from the close impact. “I didn’t mean to do it!”

Lisa curled into a ball at her feet, moaning at the awful pain in her shoulder. “Greg!”

Lisa calling for him was one of the worst things Greg had experienced since being rescued from the lab. It went right in his ears and straight to his heart. “I’m coming!”

Lisa passed out.

“Lisa!” Greg grabbed one of the fleeing normals and slammed her into the wall as he kept going. He could see Lisa lying at the end of the hallway, next to a body he hadn’t identified yet.

Kyle also grabbed one of the normals, but he quickly wrapped a hand around her neck and jerked.

The gunshot that was still ringing through the submarine had changed the rules for all of them. He wasn't taking survivors.

First Mother saw the men coming toward her and darted toward the ladder. She didn't fire at them. She fled.

The remaining caretaker from the mess also ran for the ladder.

Greg reached her first. He grabbed her by her long hair and yanked her backward so Kyle could handle it. Greg slid to a stop near Lisa and dropped to his knees. "She's been shot!"

Kyle saw Wade come out of the mess with his shield up and realized the man had been playing possum. Kyle tripped the terrified tattooed traitor trying to run by him to get into the bathroom and then left her for Wade as he hurried toward the ladder to stop the other normal.

In the chaos, two of the caretakers from the mess hurried into the incinerator compartment and vanished into the shadows before anyone noticed them.

Bret couldn't keep his shield up over all of the moving men. He concentrated on Greg as Kyle left his protection.

Behind him, Erin, Charlie, Cody, and Cate kept their shields up over each other and the crying kids who were reacting to the noise and tension.

Isabel wasn't sure how to help. She closed one of the doors and locked it and then went to the other one so she could watch the hallway and know what

was going on. She felt bad for the outmatched mothers and caretakers, but she was frightened for herself and every innocent normal on this ship. Harry's body glared at her. Safe Haven had lost someone. Angela would make every one of them pay for it.

2

First Mother made it up the ladder and fled toward the topside hatch. "Help me!"

Adrian had been observing it all in horror on the bridge monitors. He unlocked the heavy door and pushed it open.

Dog flew out and immediately targeted the fleeing woman. His quick jump through the air prevented her from reaching the ladder.

First Mother fell to her knees as the wolf landed on her back. The gun went flying from her hand. She hit the floor and felt her death arrive. "Get that hatch open!"

Dog crunched into her neck from the rear, ending her ability to give orders.

The mothers who had been patrolling the top level hurried toward the topside hatch.

Dog let go of his prey and lunged toward them.

One was already jumping up the ladder and reaching for the hatch while the other lifted her dart gun and fired at the wolf.

Adrian saw everything go wrong in slow motion.

The dart hit Dog and dropped him to the floor in a brief second.

The woman reloaded as she lifted the dart gun again, aiming for him.

The turncoat on the ladder unlocked the hatch and began shoving on it.

The sound of angry male voices echoed through the opening.

Adrian understood they were about to be in serious trouble. He made a fast, hard decision. He ran out of the bridge, barely missing the dart that flew over his shoulder. He ran toward the woman angrily, drawing his knife.

The woman dropped the dart gun and fled into the therapy cubby. She slammed the door and retreated.

Angry men began to descend into the submarine, shoving the hatch opener down the ladder, out of the way. She hit the floor and cried out, cradling her knee.

“Grab anyone you can find!”

“If we get the leader, they’ll have to let us out of the fog. Find their leader!”

Dozens of angry oil workers came down the ladder.

Adrian got the theater door open and then slid inside and shut it right as the first oil worker reached the floor. Adrian locked the steel entrance, hoping none of the men now entering the submarine would know how to use the controls in the bridge to disable the locks.

“Come out of there!”

“Tell us how to stop it!”

“Give us our lives back!”

Doors shut and locked all through the top level of the submarine as the furious oil workers invaded the ship. They were positive the people in the submarine were causing their limbo. After witnessing them fight off pirates and use magic to keep enemies out of the sub, it was clear who their captors were.

The caretaker crying at the bottom of the ladder screamed as the men pulled her to her feet. “Stop! My leg’s broken!”

One of the men shoved her harshly against the ladder. She hit her head and dropped like a stone. Blood ran from her nose.

“Don’t kill them until we find the leader!”

The woman in the therapy cubby with Marc retreated into the corner where Bret usually took shelter. She was suddenly very sorry that she had agreed to participate in the mutiny. It was obvious from the angry shouts of the oil workers that they weren’t going to provide a ride out of here like First Mother had expected. Whatever deal she had made with them on her stolen radio had been a lie. *We let bad guys onto the ship! Angela will kill us all.*

3

“Find the boss!”

Kyle stopped at the top of the ladder and peered over it to evaluate the situation.

A quick scan revealed only knives and bludgeoning weapons, but no guns. There wasn't time for more before he was spotted.

“That might be the boss! Grab him!”

Kyle pulled the trigger twice as he hurried up the ladder. He slid sideways to avoid the wild swing of a steel pipe. Kyle lunged to the side and hit the bridge wall; he used the momentum to spin himself around it.

His gun and arm banged into the bridge hatch. He instinctively threw a hard elbow to disable the man who was about to grab him from behind.

Kyle spun again, gun coming up. *Bang-bang!*

Two bodies fell.

Kyle jerked on the bridge door and slid behind it as a heavy pipe came down and slammed into where his head had just been. He fired once more at the men rushing him, getting one of them in the throat and missing the other completely.

Kyle cursed Adrian for leaving the bridge unmanned while quickly shutting and locking it; the group of men reached him. They pounded and banged on the door, shouting for him to come out.

Kyle turned around to verify that the bridge was empty.

Mr. Sneaky batted at a sticky note and chased it across the console, pushing various buttons along the way. Warning notices were coming up all over the screens, alerting him to the use of gunfire being

forbidden on the ship. Ray's sticky notes were all over the floor.

"That explains why Ray left." Kyle found the only note that mattered and stuck it back on the door where the cat would have to jump to reach it.

Do NOT leave this room!

4

Down on the second level, Greg had wrapped his shirt around Lisa's heavily bleeding shoulder. He'd only spared a quick glance at Harry. The man was dead. There was nothing they could do for him.

Lisa came to, crying out, as Greg applied pressure on her wound to control the blood loss.

Greg breathed a sigh of relief. "I've got you."

Lisa turned her head and found Harry's bloody body right next to her. The bullet hole in his chest stared at her in accusation. "He saved me!"

"Can you walk? We have to get you out of here."

Lisa broke down in the sobs from the pain and the guilt. "He saved my life!"

Kenn ran down the hall and helped Greg get Lisa onto her feet. The two men hurried toward the bunks as steps began to echo from the top level.

As soon as they were inside, Isabel shut and locked the door.

Greg took Lisa over to Cody, hoping the boy would be able to help her.

Cody used his gifts on her injury, but it was slow work. The magic wasn't strong right now.

Bret kept his shield up, but he was getting tired. It was a lot easier to keep it around people who were stationary.

Lisa continued to cry. "He saved me. He saved my life!"

Greg hoped that moment would allow her to understand she had been wrong in every way, but there wasn't time to deal with it right now. He gestured toward the intercom. "I saw Adrian leave the bridge. Do not respond to any communication attempts."

Thomas dropped his hand from the speaker he had been about to activate. "The enemy has the bridge?"

Greg was studying Cody's face to see if the healing had been successful. He didn't look at Erin. "They were screaming about the fog. I don't think they came for our ship."

"Where's Kyle?" Charlie was trying to keep track of everyone.

Kenn had been covering the entrance. "He was flying up the ladder the last time I saw him."

The speaker box activated with Kyle's out of breath voice. "I made it into the bridge. We have been invaded. There are at least three dozen targets. Go to lock down!"

It was a relief to know that one of theirs was still in control of the submarine, but nothing else was good about this. All of their knocked out or faded

people were in danger now. It was very unlikely that the oil workers would try nonlethal methods like the normals had.

Kyle activated the speaker again while observing on the monitors. “We’re going to have to do this fast. As they come by, pick a few of them off and lock yourself back in. It doesn’t look like they have guns, but I can’t be sure from here.” Kyle groaned in frustration. “And the fog is already making it hard for me. I won’t be much help in a few more minutes.”

Kenn and Thomas went to one door while Erin and Isabel covered the other.

“Did I see Wade out there?”

Greg nodded at Kenn. “He handled one of the caretakers and then went back into the mess. I assume that will be a small trap for anyone who goes in there, but he doesn’t know how many targets there are. He could be in a lot of trouble.”

“Is there any way to contact the theater from here? We need to get the boss to wake up.” Greg was positive that if she knew everyone was in danger, Angela would be able to fight through the fog.

Cody shook his head. “Don’t involve her. She wanted to fade out this time so she didn’t lose the baby. Don’t make her make that choice. This is why she has Eagles.”

No one argued with the boy’s order. Losing Eagles was awful. Angela losing the baby would be just as bad.

Kenn drew his gun. “Watch your line of fire.”
Everyone prepared for things to get uglier.

5

The two mothers who had taken cover in the incinerator compartment heard the oil men exploring the ship and calling for Angela. They peered out and found the corridor clear. Both females hurried up the ladder to reach their allies.

“We’re the ones who called you!”

“We’re your passengers. You promised us a ride out of here!”

The two dozen men turned around as the women reached the top of the ladder. Their faces lit up.

One of the oil workers, Killer, advanced to meet them. He grabbed the first woman who reached him and pulled her into his dusty arms. “Are you the boss?!”

The mother realized he had mistaken her for Angela. She shook her head while pushing on his tightening arm. “She’s in the theater; we’re the ones who called you for help. We let you in!”

The arm continued to tighten around her chest.

“She’s lying!”

“Which room is the theater?!”

The mother who hadn’t been grabbed had come to a screeching halt near the top of the ladder. She pointed at the correct room and stayed ready to run. It was already clear that trusting the strangers had been a bad idea.

“Tell us how to get out of the fog!”

“We don’t know either!”

“She’s lying! I can make them tell us the truth!”

Killer glared insanely. “Get the other one!”

The mother at the top of the ladder quickly slid back to the bottom level, abandoning her friend.

The arm that was tightening around her chest was preventing the captured caretaker from talking. She shut her eyes as he squeezed harder. In her damaged mind, it was Reicher killing her in payment for this rebellion. She died screaming as he crushed her ribs and punctured a lung.

The oil worker dropped the broken body and looked around for another target. Killer was no longer sane enough to distinguish between friend or foe, innocent or enemy. He just wanted out of the fog, and he didn’t care how he achieve that goal.

“Let’s get these doors open!”

“We have to clear the ship first. There might be more people down there.”

Most of the men agreed. They went toward the ladder while Killer went to the theater and pounded on the hatch. “Come out of there and face us!”

Not getting an answer infuriated Killer. He began kicking on the heavy metal hatch, trying to break it down.

6

In the theater, Adrian marched over to Angela. “Wake up! We need your help!”

Angela stared around him. “This is my favorite part of the movie.”

The dialogue from the film echoed loudly. “*You’re not afraid of the dark, are you?*”

Gunfire and violence blared out of the TV, causing Angela to smile. “I love the Riddick movies...but not the animated sequel. That was just stupid. And don’t even get me started on the fourth one.”

Adrian got between her and the screen, leaning down. “You have to wake up now! They’ve taken over the ship!”

Angela pouted. “I’m trying to watch a flick.”

Adrian grabbed her by the arms and shook her. “Wake up!”

Angela pushed out of his tight grip and resumed enjoying the action show. “We can talk later. I’m busy right now.”

Adrian sighed in frustration while listening to the oil men start searching the top level. He didn’t know what to do to wake her up. “We’re screwed this time. The alpha is no longer protecting us.”

Mel glanced over. “Then you’ll just have to do it yourself.”

Adrian scowled. “Be serious!”

Mel resumed watching the movie.

“Open this door!”

“Maybe it’s empty.”

“Then why is it locked?”

“Good point. Open up!”

Selina kept the gun aimed at the door, but she didn't fire. She wasn't sure who was out there, but she was very aware of her precarious situation now. If she accidentally shot the wrong person, she would still be blamed even though she hadn't been a part of the mutiny.

“Break it down!”

Fists, feet, and thick metal pipes began to pound into the flimsy wood. The doors to the luxury cabins weren't made to withstand much.

“It won't take them long to get through.”

Selina looked over and found Shawn sitting up in the bed.

Shawn gazed back at her, recognizing her terror and the compassion in her eyes but not her. He was slowly coming out of the fade, but it was taking too long. “Brace your feet.”

Selina understood she was going to have to kill whoever came through. She did as he instructed, heart hammering furiously.

“Roll your shoulders back and try to relax the tension.”

“Break it down, I said!”

Furious fists broke through the first door. They stomped into the compartment where Harry had been sleeping.

“There's no one in here!”

“There's another door! Break it down!”

Selina rolled her shoulders back and tried to relax the tension.

“Lift the gun in your dominant hand, finger alongside the barrel. Cup the butt gently with your other hand from the bottom and wrap your fingers around the side of your hand that’s holding the gun.” Shawn rose from the bed and moved over so he wasn’t in the line of fire in case the men outside also had weapons.

Selina cupped her free hand around the gun and tried not to vomit from the stomach acid-causing adrenaline that was flowing through every inch of her body.

“Lift your arm a little more. Good. Straighten your elbow. When they come in, aim for stomachs. It’s a large mass so it’ll be easier for you to hit. After they’re down, follow it up with head shots.”

Selina lifted the gun.

The door caved in.

She opened fire.

The noise was deafening, but she didn’t let that distract her from hitting the targets. She wasn’t going to let them hurt Shawn.

Shawn stared in surprise as she fired four times and four large men fell on top of each other with great chest and head shots that didn’t leave survivors. “Nice job!”

Selina pulled the trigger again, catching one of the now fleeing survivors in the spine. He fell forward, providing a small block between the rooms

with his body. Blood ran over the carpet and marked his trail.

“Save your ammo.” Shawn was glad to feel the fog leaving his mind. He took the sexy woman by the elbow and gently tugged her over toward the corner. He stayed behind her, still not sure of her name or who she was.

“That went well.” Selina turned her head to the left and threw up on the pictures hanging there.

Shawn grinned. “That’s definitely the reaction of a rookie.” Memories and emotions flooded in, not giving Shawn a chance to recover from each awful hit.

Selina felt his distraction. She shoved backward on him, getting him fully into the corner where he would be protected. She kept her finger on the trigger and prayed no one else tried to come in here. *Because if they do, I will kill them. Nothing is allowed to come between me and my new life. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep it.*

8

“Don’t go in there! They have guns!”

The group of oil workers who were coming to assist them turned down the second level hallway instead, searching for an easier target.

“We need a hostage, damn it! Find someone we can grab!”

The group of 15 oil workers on this level hurried down the passageway with knives and long metal

pipes in their hands. It was all they had been able to bring from their mostly stripped ship. The guns they'd had when limbo took them were long empty. They didn't even know where those rusted arms were now.

“Check in there!” One of the men pointed toward the bathrooms. He moved further down the hallway, scanning the dark, stinky passage at the end of this corridor.

The bunk room door flew open, slapping into the man's face in a brutal hit.

He dropped to the floor as two armed men came out and opened fire.

The oil workers were now trapped between the luxury quarters and the bunk room. They rushed forward, trying to reach that dark corridor at the end of the hallway.

It was too many for the shield team to handle at one time. Greg fired one more shot, hitting an oil worker in the chest before ducking back into the bunk room. There wasn't any choice but to use their guns this time. They had to hope it didn't hit anything important.

Kenn picked off the man coming out of the bathroom and then fired a random shot into the crowd of the others who were rushing up the corridor.

Two bodies dropped.

Kenn grinned. “Two for one!”

Isabel pulled him into the bunk room by his arm and quickly slammed the door shut while Erin locked it.

Fists and pipes began to pound on the door as shouts and threats filled the air.

“Kyle said there were three dozen of them. How many do you think are left?”

Kenn shrugged at Erin’s question. “I heard five shots from Shawn’s gun.” He had recognized the familiar sound. “If all of them landed, and he’s good enough for that, then I would say we have at least two dozen more.”

The shield team ignored the heavy thuds and shouts outside while they evaluated their new situation. The hatches on the bunk room were thick metal. There was no way the infiltrators were getting in here without explosives.

Out in the hallway, the oil workers quickly came to the same conclusion. They moved toward the next open door, still searching for a hostage.

The leader of the oil group stopped in the entrance of the mess, stunned by the sight. “It’s full of bodies.”

The men behind him pushed into the mess and were also shocked by the sight of so many corpses laying on the floor, leaning against walls, and sitting in chairs. It looked like they had been killed while in the middle of a meal.

“What do you think did this?”

“I think they did it to each other.”

“The woman we talked to on the radio said they didn’t know anything about the fog.”

“We were supposed to take them hostage so we can get information from them, not kill them as soon as we got our hands on them.”

Everyone was unhappy that their information sources had been killed or scared off. They couldn’t get out of the fog if they didn’t know how they had gotten in here in the first place.

“What if they were just caught in limbo like we are?”

“That’s not possible. We saw the magic they were using. That’s what’s doing this to us.” The leader marched in and began checking the bodies. “Find a live one. We need a survivor who can tell us how to get home. Don’t forget to take their weapons. We need those.”

Wade couldn’t wait any longer. Any of the bodies they checked were actually live people who would be used as hostages. He rose from behind the matchup ring and smiled at the men who were turning toward him in shock. “Hello, gentlemen. Welcome to Safe Haven.”

“Get him!”

Wade strengthened his shield as much as he could and glared at the men who were now pounding on that barrier and hurling threats. “At some point, my boss is going to wake up and find you guys in here. When she does, don’t come crying to me. I am not your friend.”

“He’s using magic!”

“That’s the boss! Don’t kill him!”

“Let us out of here!”

“Give us our lives back!”

Wade understood they were caught in limbo and blaming Safe Haven for it. He used it to his advantage and waved them forward. “If you win, I’ll let you out of the fog.”

It would keep them busy, give him his downtime, and prove that he deserved to be not only a senior Eagle but also Angela’s XO.

The oil men hurried over, leaving the unconscious people they believed were dead.

Wade was glad that he didn’t see any guns. He hadn’t tested his shield alone yet. He believed he could hold it against a few bullets, but multiple people firing at him would be too much to handle while fighting at the same time.

Wade quickly scanned the mess to see if anyone might be able to help, but no one was awake other than the team in the bunk room who were now pinned down by the oil workers who had stayed in the dusty hallway. Nothing moved except for workers who were either coming toward him or grabbing granola bars and half eaten bowls of soup.

Wade knew he wouldn’t be able to wait them out. Not all of the men would eat the drugged meal after they saw their companions be affected by it. There was really only the solution he had already chosen.

Wade shrank the shield a little to bring a few of the men closer. Then he pushed it out and trapped

them inside the barrier with him. He pulled a knife with one hand and formed a fist with the other. “I wanted a matchup. I believe this qualifies.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Watch This

1

“I found someone!” The door to the command center had opened easily.

Biff and Jayda hadn’t woken up despite all of the noise. Trent had only been roused by the faint echo of gunshots. He peered around sleepily. “Is everything okay out there?”

Five oil men crowded in and dragged the trio to their feet.

Biff’s mind registered the danger but only in a vague way that didn’t allow him to react. He felt hands snatching items from his belt; he didn’t know what they were. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Jayda screamed as rough hands began groping her on the pretense of searching for any weapons she might have.

The oil men had been without female companionship for a long time, but that wasn’t what drove most of them. They knew they were only going to get a short period of alertness before the fog dragged them back under. They pulled Jayda out into the hallway, ignoring her screams and struggles.

Biff charged forward with his chest out. “Get your hands off her!”

Killer stepped in front of him; he knocked Biff into the conference table with his big body.

One of the other oil men grabbed Killer’s arm and pulled him back out. “We have to question them first.”

Biff didn’t understand what was going on, but he felt a sense of relief as the larger man went out into the corridor. Then he realized that’s where Jayda was. He hurried out and was grabbed by two of the workers who quickly began to wrap ropes around his wrists.

Biff, Jayda, and Trent were quickly tied up and disarmed. None of them really understood what was going on. They didn’t know they had the skills to fight back.

“Where is your leader?!”

“How do we get out of the fog?!”

Jayda recoiled from the loud shouts. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

One of the calmer, wiser oil men recognized her reaction. “She’s in the fog. They all are. They can’t tell us anything.”

Killer came toward her eagerly. “I’ll make her talk.”

Wiser man pushed him back again. He pointed toward the ladder. “Make sure no one else comes down here.”

There were other ships all around them in this foggy hell. They didn’t need to be attacked while

their backs were turned. The oil men had dominated every confrontation they'd had in the fog, but it hadn't helped them find a way home. None of them were sure how long they had been here now, but it was long enough to turn good men into desperate souls who were willing to do whatever it took to get out.

“I want three of you to go check on the rest of our men.” Wiserman wasn't the leader, though the others often deferred to him as if he were. They recognized his intelligence; he just didn't have the physical stature or the aggressive nature to go with it. If not for that, he would have been leading them all along.

Three of the men hurried toward the ladder.

Wiserman pointed at the entrance to the therapy cubby. “Find out what's in there.”

They had now gotten the doors open or broken them down to all of the compartments on this level except for two. One was the room where Wiserman was already sure the leader was hiding. The other was a small compartment at the end of the hallway where one of the women who had called them had run to when Killer did what he did best. Wiserman was hoping she would be able to tell them for sure where the leader was or at least who it was. If they got lucky, she would know how to get out of the fog. At the very least, she would be another hostage to threaten. “I'll kill all of you to get out of limbo. Your lives mean nothing to me. Start talking!”

The three oil men stomped down the ladder to the second level and looked around for the rest of their group.

“Over here, mate.”

The three men rotated to find a woman with purple hair and a gun.

“Put your hands in the air and stay still or I will shoot you.”

One of the men took a step forward.

Selina realized she may have overreacted, but her finger was already pulling the trigger; the three sharp, horribly loud blasts brought fresh attention from both levels of the sub.

Shawn tugged her back into the luxury cabin so she was out of view of the people now running in their direction. “You’re going to fly through the Eagle levels. Wait until the boss finds out how good you are.”

Selina was just relieved that he wasn’t mad at her fast reaction. She leaned against him and waited for the next action to begin.

Shawn was still fighting bits of the fog, but things were a lot clearer now. What wasn’t up to par was his body. He didn’t know if it was because of the fog or something else, but he seemed to have very little control over his shaking hands. He was using Selina to help the other people on the ship with small distractions and chipping away at the enemy forces. Selina had told him about Adrian’s

radio call, but Shawn still wasn't sure who that was or if they should trust him. Shawn had told her to shoot anyone she didn't recognize.

"I feel like I'm forgetting to do something." Selina tried to remember her training as footsteps neared the cabin.

Shawn groaned lowly in her ear as it came to him. "Reload!"

Selina didn't know how many bullets his gun held, but she had already use eight of them. That seemed like a lot. She knelt like she'd been taught and quickly popped the magazine out onto the carpet.

Shawn had automatically put the extra ammunition in his pocket as he dressed. He handed her a full magazine while listening to the bodies being discovered. Another group was less than 10 feet away from them. They were only separated by two thin inner walls of the submarine.

Shawn contemplated that for a second. *Inner walls...*

Shawn directed Selina to her feet with gentle hands on her shoulders. Then he turned her toward the wall. He put a finger to his lips to make sure she was quiet. He sensed the oil men were about to enter. He pointed at a spot on the wall, and held up three fingers. Then he ran a finger gently down the wall.

Selina understood what he wanted. She retreated and lifted the gun.

Shawn put his hands over his ears to muffle the noise as Selina fired three neat shots into the wall.

They were immediately rewarded with the sound of bodies dropping and another one banging into the wall as the owner screamed.

Footsteps moved away from the door.

Selina quickly peered around the wall and found the room empty except for bodies. She waited for Shawn's next instruction, but her heart was no longer pounding furiously. The cold shield of battle that she hadn't understood when it was described to her was completely covering her senses now, lending a calm mind and a controlled body to a deadly situation. She was thrilled to find out that she was able to do this. She hadn't been sure after listening to some of the Eagle stories, but her responses here had been perfect so far.

Selina and Shawn eased toward the main entrance to the luxury quarters, listening to Jayda's screams and Biff's shouts above them. Trent's angry voice was in there somewhere, too, along with the new sound of a caretaker screaming for help as she was dragged from her hiding place. More noises of violence were also coming from the mess. Shawn recognized Wade's angry grunts and insults. *We need to get in there and help him.*

Shawn took Selina's free hand and got ready to run. He willed her to see it in her mind how they needed to go even as he brought up his other hand and began mimicking running and shooting.

Selina tensed for a brief moment at the images he put into her mind. She understood what was happening and allowed that cold shield of battle to cover that surprise as well. Magic had always startled her a little, though she didn't fear it like the other normals did. She gave him a quick nod, reminding herself of the big mental red X along the right side of the corridor. She had to be careful not to fire into the bunk room where the kids were.

“Ready?”

Selina stepped forward, pulling her wrist free so she could cup it around her gun hand.

“Get down!”

“She has a gun!”

The oil workers who were patrolling outside the mess had been about to rush the luxury quarters and overwhelm whoever was in there. The sight of a woman with a gun wasn't a comfort to them. Killer had crushed one of the females. All of the women on this ship would be hunting for vengeance.

Selina's first shot hit the crotch of the oil man in front. Her second shot got the screaming man in the chest as he dropped.

“Run!” One of the more timid members of the oil crew fled back into the safety of the mess even though the wild magic-using fighter in there was quickly going through their group, too. He would rather face a fast fighting death than what the woman was doling out.

Shawn stayed behind Selina with one hand almost on her shoulder to keep from losing her

while his body stayed half turned to make sure no one was sneaking up behind them.

The other oil workers in the hallway also ran back into the mess.

Selina barely kept herself from firing after them. It was too close to the bunk room wall. She kept marching down the corridor, watching intently for anyone to poke a head out.

The door opened behind them. “Do not fire that weapon, Eagle!”

Kenn’s sharp bark prevented Selina from shooting him out of pure reaction. She spun back around and kept going toward the mess.

Shawn assumed the man was on their side. He stayed with Selina.

Kenn and Greg fell in behind them while Erin followed and kept them covered with her barrier to prevent them from going foggy until after the action was over. Everyone in the bunk room had agreed they needed to go out and help clear the sub. Listening to Wade’s fights was awful, but the screams coming from the top level were worse. The thought of hiding while their people were being abused was intolerable.

Isabel quickly shut the door, but she was on the outside of it. During the chaos, she ran toward the ladder to the top level without any of the fighters noticing.

Inside the bunk room, Cody locked the door. “She made the right choice.”

Charlie looked over at him. “What choice? Do you know what’s about to happen?”

Cody stayed by the entrance. “Hold on. I want to hear what happens.”

Charlie didn’t insist. He also wouldn’t forget. It sounded as if Cody had known all of this was going to happen and he hadn’t told anyone. It reminded him so strongly of his mom that tears pricked Charlie’s eyelids in hot little stings. *This is the first time we’ve been in trouble that she hasn’t come to save us. Did she do this on purpose to remind us how much we need her or to teach us that we’re capable of handling these moments without her?*

Cody glanced over. “Why does it have to be one or the other? You know she loves a good twofer.”

3

“Remember not to shoot anyone you recognize. One of our people are in there.”

Selina nodded as they neared the mess door.

Kenn didn’t like the sound of that. It implied Shawn wasn’t out of the fog yet and shouldn’t be making choices like this. “Maybe you should let us go first.”

Greg went around him to take the lead.

Shawn held up a hand, keeping his voice low. “Wait. Watch this.”

Selina stepped into the doorway in open view with her gun up and ready.

Oil men inside the mess tried to duck behind the counters and get out of her line of sight as she opened fire.

Selina got the two men who were eating granola bars and not paying attention. She shifted her aim toward the middle of the room next, then fired again, getting another man in the knee as he tried to duck.

She swung to the right and saw Wade inside his bubble, fighting. She swung back to the left in time to shoot the man rushing her from the shadowy corner. *Bang!*

Selina popped the empty mag out and let it drop while reaching behind her for a fresh mag from Shawn. She was counting it now.

Shawn slid the mag into her hand, observing in admiration as she quickly fed it into the Glock and tugged it to make sure it was seated properly. They had added that new instruction to all of their rookie training because their weapons were worn. They needed to start rebuilding their arsenal.

Selina fired at two more men who had tried to rush her while she reloaded. She got one of them in the head and the other one in the arm. The impact spun him around. She shot him in the back before he made the complete rotation.

Greg and Kenn stepped around her now and also began to fire on the few remaining oil men in the mess.

Those men were searching for a place to hide now or holding their hands up in surrender.

They were shot on the spot.

Erin shrank her shield around herself and hoped she had bought them enough time to finish the fight before the fog took them. She stayed in the hall, watching the ladders for more intruders.

Wade knew the Eagles were here. He had lowered the enemy numbers enough to help, and he was covered in blood, bruises, and scrapes from the fighting. He was sure it hadn't been very long, but he was suddenly exhausted. He let go of his shield and felt his energy immediately start to return. The fog came with it.

“That’s one hell of a fighter.” Shawn observed in admiration as Wade threw a punch with his left hand to disable one of the oil workers and at the same time kicked out with his left leg, bringing it up high enough to crack into the second man’s nose. Both oil workers went down.

Wade used the knife in his right hand to quickly slit the throat of the guy who had the broken nose. The other man was slowly suffocating from a crunched windpipe. There was no need to waste the movement on him. He would be dead in less than a minute.

Kenn and Greg hurried over and began checking the bodies to make sure there were no survivors.

Wade took pity on the smothering man and quickly plunged his knife into the man’s eye and yanked it back out.

Selina stayed by the entrance with Shawn, grimacing. “I know what happened in here and I am not cleaning it up!”

The Eagles chuckled at her reference even though they couldn’t pull up the name of the show it was from. Now that they were out of the layered shields, the fog was already stealing their minds. They tried to hurry and clear the scene so they could get back to the bunk room. Cody wanted them to return even though they wouldn’t be much help. All of them had agreed. The bunk room was the only safe space on the ship right now.

Fresh screams echoed from the top level of the sub.

Kenn turned that way. “Should we go up there and help?”

“No. Come with me now.” Cody had come back out of the bunk room even though he wasn’t supposed to. He had doubted the men would be alert enough to get themselves back to safety before the fog took over. He wanted Erin to have support.

Erin smiled at him. “Sometimes, it is okay for the boss to be on the frontline.”

“Noted. Let’s go.”

All of the shield team followed the little boy without question.

Selina holstered her weapon and directed Shawn into the line of fighters. “I want you to go with them.”

Shawn didn’t protest. As far as he was concerned, the purple-haired woman could take

care of herself. He handed her the two magazines he had left.

Selina pocketed the extra ammo as she escorted them to the bunk room and waited for them to all get inside. She regarded Cody as he began to close the door. “Keep it locked this time. Don’t let any of them out.”

Cody nodded. “Be safe. Happy hunting.”

Selina grinned and hurried toward the ladder to the top level while Cody closed and locked the door. It felt wonderful to have so much trust and responsibility. “I’m never going back to who I was. If they want to take this away, they’ll have to kill me.”

4

“I found the leader!”

“We need to go help our people!”

“We can get them to surrender if we have their leader.” Wiser man pointed at the large dark-haired male on the ground in front of them who was covered in military markings. “He’s a Marine. He’s the leader.”

The eight oil men left on the top level immediately agreed with Wiser. Everyone knew the US government had been playing around with time travel. They all believed they’d been caught up in one of those experiments, but the military was refusing to come in and save them because then

news of the project would have to be released to the public.

Wiser tried to lift Marc and couldn't. He gestured at the man who was guarding the ladder. "Killer, come drag him out of here."

Killer lumbered over eagerly.

"Don't hurt him until I tell you to. Put him with the other hostages."

During the excitement, Isabel came up the ladder and ran toward the hatch as fast as she could go over the slippery floor.

Wiser sensed something coming. He turned around and found an older woman now climbing the ladder to the topside hatch. "Don't let her get away!"

Isabel jerked the hatch shut and flipped the lock as multiple hands grabbed her ankles and legs. She didn't resist as they pulled her down. She was delighted that she'd been able to get the hatch shut. She wasn't happy to be a hostage, however. The biggest man was leering at her like he couldn't wait to cause her harm.

On the other hand, she was proud of herself for being brave enough to do this. None of the people in the bunk room had covered this possibility, but it had been all she'd thought of since the oil men had entered their ship. All the other boats around them had to know they were being attacked. If the hatch had been left open, things could have escalated into uncontrollable. As of right now, more than half of

the oil workers had been killed. She'd been counting bodies on the way up here.

Wiser grabbed Isabel by the arm and shoved her toward the other hostages. "Is that your leader?!"

Isabel saw Marc. He was unconscious and being manhandled over to the line of bound captives by the huge man who had leered at her. "His name is Marcus Brady. He's the leader of the United Nations."

Wiser's face lit up in triumph. "We have your leader! Surrender right now or we will kill your boss!"

5

"Angela!" Adrian listened to the chaos outside in dismay. "You have to wake up now!"

Mel had fallen asleep in the front row. Two seats over, Angela was crunching through a granola bar while digging small bits of stale tootsie rolls from her pocket. She didn't respond.

"This calls for desperate measures." Adrian smacked the snack out of her hand.

A brief awareness flickered in Angela's eyes and then disappeared. She frowned up at him. "I would have shared."

Adrian leaned on the arms of the recliner and kissed her.

For another brief instant, he felt her return to reality. Anger and desire floated off of her in a thick wave that immediately stiffened his body even

though that wasn't the goal. Then she was gone again. There were a pair of dusty lips against his that didn't know who he was.

Adrian groaned again in frustration. "What do I have to do?!"

Outside the door, Wisner raised his voice to be heard through the sub. "Surrender right now! I will kill him!"

Adrian froze as his mind made a bitter connection. *Anytime Marc's been in danger, she went crazy. During the last fade, they still spent the nights together. They can't be split up. I had that thought earlier, but I didn't understand how powerful it was.*

Adrian took a few more seconds to make sure it was the right thing to do. If Angela snapped, she would be hard to control.

Jayda screamed again out in the hallway as someone abused her. One of the caretakers also screamed for help.

Adrian realized there was no choice. He knelt in front of Angela and leaned in to whisper five short, deadly words. "Marc is about to die."

Angela stiffened. Heat began baking off her skin.

Adrian quickly retreated so he wasn't her first target.

Alertness flooded into Angela's mind in a gush of pain and pride. Her connection with Marc lit up. "Where is he?"

Adrian pointed. “The oil workers took him hostage. They’re going to kill him if you don’t surrender.”

Angela slowly stood, letting the snacks in her lap fall to the floor. Her orbs began to glow bright red.

Adrian hurried over and began unlocking and opening the door. “We’re coming out! Don’t shoot!”

He slid to the side to let Angela out.

In the hallway, Wiser man felt death flying toward him. He instinctively knew the pregnant woman now standing in the entrance, studying him as if he were a bug, was the source. Her bright red eyes were terrifying.

He ran.

Angela’s orbs went over the scene in a quick blur. Biff and Trent were tied up and laying on the floor while one of the oil men held Jayda tightly and let his hands roam her body. Another man was holding Marc’s arm as he sat against the wall. One quick jab would see that knife go right into Marc’s chest.

One of the normals who had started this mess was struggling against two oil men who had her leaning over the table in the therapy cubby. They hadn’t raped her yet, but that moment was coming shortly.

“Watch your line of fire!” Adrian hoped that would be enough. He stayed inside the theater as Angela advanced.

At the end of the corridor, Selina had made it to the top of the ladder. She saw Angela and assumed the woman was in danger, but she targeted a different threat. She aimed carefully at Marc's captor and then squeezed off a shot.

Killer fell to the floor with a stunned expression and a flood of blood.

Isabel kicked the oil man who was standing over her and the two males. She hit the side of his ankle as hard as she could and listened to the crack in satisfaction. As he hit the floor, she rolled over and wrapped her bound hands around his neck, pulling him in close as if for a hug.

The man cringed away as her teeth neared his face.

Selina fired again, getting Wiser in the back right as he made it into the therapy cubby. She came up the ladder the rest of the way, and then fired again at the two men guarding Biff and Trent.

She missed.

Both shots ricocheted off the metal walls. One of them hit one of her targets anyway and dropped him. The other bullet disappeared into the radio cubby as the second man ran toward Angela, meaning to use her as a hostage.

The instant he made contact with her skin, flames burst out all over his hands and ran up his arms. He spun around and pinwheeled through the hallway, slapping at himself to put the fire out.

Selina fired a last time and took him to the ground, silencing his shouts.

Selina and Isabel both rushed toward the cubby, where the two oil workers were now using the last caretaker as a human shield.

Both women fired.

The caretaker was hit first. She went limp in their grip with blood pattering down her chest.

Selina and Isabel fired again, catching both oil workers in their stomachs. They rushed in and followed it up with headshots that showed no mercy.

Angela blinked; her eyes returned to normal. She scanned the hallway and saw all of the combatants had been taken care of. She could already hear the cheers of people on the second level that said the threat was over down there as well.

“You didn’t need me for this.” She went back to her seat while Adrian stared in shock.

6

“Are you okay, Boss?” Isabel was in the doorway now to check on them.

“Fine. Just a little warm.”

“Do you know what’s going on and who you are?”

Angela picked up the granola bar she had dropped and brushed the dust off it. “My name is Angela. I’m the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We’re in limbo and people were killed. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to finish the movie.

Shut the door.” Angela increased the volume on the film.

Adrian didn’t know what to say. He felt like he should scold her and apologize at the same time. To keep himself from doing either, he shut the door and went out into the hallway where he began to direct the cleanup. The mess was massive; it would take a while. He planned to use the physical labor to wear himself out so he didn’t have to think about anything that had happened. *I don’t understand why she isn’t upset.*

Angela studied the images on the screen and refused to consider anything that was going on around her. There would be time for that later. Right now, she wasn’t ready to face the results of her choices.

A tear rolled down her cheek despite her efforts. *Now I’m an emotional woman, but he’s no longer alive to see it.*

Mel had woken up. She patted Angela’s hand. “I’m sorry that you’re sad. We can put on a different film.”

Angela wiped away the tears. “I’m also happy, Mel. That’s why I had to sit this one out. It’s never easy for me to remove someone I respect and care for, but I always follow through once I make that decision. He was doomed from the minute I sent him on that run.”

In the corridor, Selina joined Adrian. “What should we do now?”

Adrian shook his head. “I don’t think there is anything we can do. We just have to wait for the fog effect to fade like it has before.”

Biff held out his hands for Isabel to cut the rope. “I think it’s already starting.”

Adrian and the others looked over at him.

Biff was ashamed that he hadn’t done more during the fight. “I remember who I am and how I got here.” Biff fought those ugly flashes to give everyone a guilty smile. “It’s almost gone.”

All over the submarine, dazed, foggy people began coming to alertness and staring around them in shock at the bodies. The fog began to withdraw from their minds. Reality started to return, bringing relief, pain, and shame.

Isabel was happy. “It didn’t last as long this time.”

Selina shrugged. “Maybe Nature is getting tired.”

Adrian snorted. “It’s more likely that she’s furious this didn’t work. She’s probably regrouping to hit us with something uglier.”

Isabel handed the knife to Jayda so she could free the other hostages. “Either way, we won this round.”

Adrian contemplated the dead medic laying on the floor of the second level. “Anytime we have a loss, it’s not a win.”

“Even if she wanted that person to die?” It was as close to questioning the motives of the boss that Jayda was willing to come right now. Witnessing

Angela fry an oil worker alive without even realizing she was doing it had been frightening.

Adrian nodded. “Even the people who need to go are still a loss. Harry was one of us. That will never change.”

Chapter Thirty
Make Your Own

1

“We need to get everyone accounted for.”

Adrian took charge of the situation, but only because there was no one else up here yet who was experienced enough to do it.

The top level of the submarine was almost unrecognizable. Blood and bodies covered nearly every inch of the floor; graphic red sprays were all over the walls. It would take them time to clean this. The smell of gunpowder was hanging heavily in the air, but it would soon be replaced by the stench of the dead. Cleanup had to start now. He regarded Isabel. “I’d like to put you in charge of that.”

Isabel wiped the blood off her mouth onto her sleeve as she joined him outside the theater. “I can handle whatever job you give me.”

She was elated by her behavior. She hadn’t been sure she was brave enough to be in Angela’s army before, but now she knew she was.

Adrian gestured. “Get your notebook out. I have a list.”

Selina reloaded her gun and holstered it while listening to Adrian.

“Once you get everyone accounted for, find out if a few of them are alert enough to help us dump the bodies that are up here.”

Isabel began to take notes as Adrian continued.

“The bodies that are on the second level will be taken to the incinerator. There’s no reason to make extra trips to dump them all up here or burn them all down there. We’ll handle them based on whichever location they’re closest to.” Adrian’s leadership-minded brain kicked in. “Check on the teenagers in the brig, too, and then find out if the shield team needs anything. I don’t want them to come out until we clear the ship.”

“You got it.”

Adrian regarded Selina. “You’ll help me clear the top of the sub when I’m ready to go up. Until then, loot all of these bodies for anything we can use. Take it all.”

Selina immediately got busy.

Adrian gestured toward Jayda this time. “See if you can get Biff and Trent to the medical bay. We’ll have Charlie take over as medic as soon as everyone else is alert enough to cover the kids.”

Jayda got an arm around Biff and helped him to his feet. She did the same for Trent and got both beaten men moving toward the ladder. None of them asked why Harry couldn’t handle it. They assumed he was tied up somewhere.

“One of our men likes to hide up high. Don’t forget to sweep the rafters while you’re searching for people.”

“I won’t.” Isabel went to the small cubby and stepped over the bodies to get inside. “I’ll start right here and work my way through.”

Adrian was confident she would be able to cover it. He spent a moment watching her, anyway. Despite not having much Eagle training, Isabel and Selina had both responded as if they were full members of Safe Haven’s army. That deserved recognition and promotions as far as he was concerned. He hoped Angela rewarded the brave females for it.

Adrian considered knocking on the theater door and asking Angela when she was coming out to retake control.

He quickly changed his mind. It was obvious that she didn’t want to be in charge right now. He didn’t believe it had much to do with the pregnancy, however. The baby hadn’t been in danger. *What did she do?*

The answer came to Adrian as he regarded all of the bodies waiting to be disposed of. *We only lost one person. Why did she target Harry?*

That answer also came as he continued to focus on the corpses. Harry had been growing too strong, too fast. His mind had been warped in the lab. *She was afraid we wouldn’t be able to stop him from growing more powerful.*

As soon as he had the thought, Adrian realized it fit perfectly. This way, Angela hadn’t had to discipline Harry in ugly sessions that weren’t going to control him anyway. He was no longer here to

poison the minds of other men who might also want women to be subservient, and she hadn't had to do any of it. Harry had died a hero, according to Lisa's tearful sobs. It had worked out for the best for everyone, except for the damaged medic she hadn't been able to save. Once again, Adrian was in awe of her.

He was also afraid. Anytime someone crossed her, Angela made sure they were never able to do it again. Even during a situation like the fog, she could be counted on to be deadly. *And I crossed her openly with Piper. I might be on her list now, too.* His bond with Kenn grew stronger.

Adrian took a firm hold on Marc's wrists and carefully began to pull the man into the radio cubby, away from the bodies and blood that was once again forming wide puddles on the dusty floor.

He got Marc settled onto the rumped bedroll in the corner. He flipped on the light and then went back out.

Adrian didn't like the idea of leaving Marc to wake up alone. He went over to the wolf and lifted him.

Dog had been susceptible to the drugs because he was a magic user, like they were. Adrian was just relieved that the animal was breathing normally. He took him into the radio cubby and laid him down next to Marc so they could wake up together.

Isabel's voice echoed calmly from the therapy cubby. "Two dead male oil workers. Check. One very dead female traitor. Check. Two giant testicles

hanging from the rafters. Check.” She sighed. “Too bad I’ve already eaten...”

Adrian burst out laughing, telling everyone the threat was over.

2

“What will happen to her?” Greg asked the question most of them were now considering. The fog was fading, allowing reality to hit them once again.

The hole in Lisa’s shirt and the tacky blood drying around it drew Greg’s eye repeatedly. He wanted to order Lisa to stay out of future action moments until she gave birth, but he didn’t have that right. Safe Haven’s rules were firm about people being allowed to make their own choices. He would just have to live with it and hope that his child did, too.

Everyone rotated to look at Lisa.

“She’ll have to be punished.” Kenn was sorry to tell Greg that, but there was no way Angela was going to let it slide just because Lisa was pregnant. She had stirred up the normals and now eight of them were dead, along with Harry, who was a cherished camp member and one of the mission team. If Lisa wasn’t punished, someone in their camp might even take matters into their own hands over this.

“Well, she did rile them up.” Erin wasn’t feeling any sympathy toward Lisa, but she knew Greg was. “She might even be banished for this.”

Lisa had only stopped crying a few minutes ago. Cody had been able to heal her gunshot wound almost all of the way. She wasn’t in physical pain now, but mentally, she was a wreck. “Then I deserve it.”

None of the others were sure if leaving camp was still what Lisa wanted. They didn’t ask.

Greg did. “What do you want now?”

Before this, Lisa would have blown him off with half-lies and fake promises. Now, she gave the truth. “I want to stay in Safe Haven with the magic users. I was wrong. I’m sorry!”

Greg was relieved. “I don’t know if that’s possible, but I’ll talk to the boss about it.”

“I’m not ready to make that choice yet.” Cody grinned at the people who looked over at him with frowns. “But I have an idea.”

“What is it?” Even Lisa was now willing to listen to what the boy had to say.

“The alpha said would spend a week in jail and then you can be released on the same punishment programs I’m on.”

It was a confirmation of what many of them had already assumed. Angela had known all of this was going to happen. She had left Cody with detailed instructions to handle it.

Lisa didn't care about whatever the little boy had done; she was just thankful. "Tell her I'm sorry."

Cody's voice grew hard. "She already knows that, but you'll tell her yourself when she's ready to hear it."

Lisa quickly nodded. "I will. My word on it."

Greg was also relieved that Lisa wasn't going to take off. *Now we have a chance.*

Lisa was able to read his mind again through their offspring's power. She scowled over at him. "It doesn't change anything between us. I don't want you!"

Her gaze went to Dace who was sleeping in the cot nearby.

Greg stood and began digging through his pocket. "Good, because I don't want you, either. I just want to be able to help raise my child."

Greg went over to Erin. He knelt in front of her and held up a small golden band that he had looted from a body. He didn't tell her where it had come from.

Before he could actually pop the question, Erin stopped him. "I broke up with you."

Greg smiled at her. "I was very foggy. I don't remember that."

Erin stared. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes. This is what I was fishing about the other day when I asked you what happens when we get

home.” Greg gave a small shrug. “I didn’t want to be embarrassed if you were going to say no.”

“And now?”

“And now I think I can take being embarrassed if that’s your answer.” Greg held the ring toward her. “Erin, will you marry me?”

Erin took the ring with tears coming to her eyes. “Absolutely.”

Greg put the ring on her finger and then rose to kiss her.

People clapped for them and came over to offer congratulations.

Outside the door, another voice echoed. “One newly engaged couple. Check. Someone in there crying so hard they’re snorting. Check. Not going in there until they’re finished with that. Check.”

More laughter echoed through the ship, confirming that this battle was over. Almost everyone had survived. Nature had tried hard to eliminate them, but once again, they had come through it. Many of them were tempted to believe Angela had planned it all out and that was the reason why.

The former leader who was now dragging bodies to the ladder knew differently. He was still stewing on her reasons. *She did this intentionally and it wasn’t just to remove Harry. She doesn’t want us to rely on her as much now. She finally made the choice between leadership and protecting herself until she gives birth. My camp came in*

second this time. Adrian was very happy about that, like he knew Marc would be.

Adrian was also furious.

3

“There’s no one up here.”

Adrian shut the hatch and looked around, but he was sure Selina was correct. There were still ships around them, but the oil tanker was already sailing away from their location. The surviving oil workers had figured out their people weren’t coming back. They were now fleeing the scene to avoid retribution.

A couple of other ships were also moving away from them. Adrian assumed those people had been considering challenging the oil crew if they won, hoping that Safe Haven would have dented those numbers enough for them to have a chance at winning this time. Isabel getting the hatch shut and locked had probably saved lives.

Selina and Adrian walked the top of the submarine together, each with a gun in hand, but it wasn’t needed. No one else up here was going to challenge them now.

As they reached the end of the submarine, where cameras had been damaged this time instead of just being covered, Selina pointed. “I think the sailboat is coming over.”

They watched the approach of the new people closely. The brunette men were thin and sunburnt.

Their dog was thin and missing patches of fur in places. It was obvious that limbo hadn't been kind to them.

The men waved and made friendly gestures, but it was the sound of the dog's hoarse bark that convinced Adrian to allow the contact. *I don't care if Angela gets mad at me for this one. I'm tired of ignoring good people.*

Adrian was already positive the two men were meant to be a part of their camp. He just didn't have the authority to invite them in. *But I can give them a chance to get that invitation.*

Selina was covered in red splatters and black flecks of gunpowder. It was drying to her skin, giving off a revolting impression.

Neither of the men leered at the gory, purple-haired caretaker, making Adrian feel better about them.

Selina stayed close as Adrian allowed the sailboat to come alongside the submarine.

"Thank you!" The tall man on the right had his hand on his big gun, but he didn't lift it, not wanting to seem like he was a threat. "Thank you for talking to us. We're not with that oil ship."

"We've fought with them a couple of times. There used to be three of us." The shorter man stared up at Adrian in hope and fear. "Have you been fading, too?"

Adrian spoke over the barking dog. "Tell me who you are."

“We went on a fishing trip right before the war. We’re plumbers from Albany.”

The tall man took over as the younger one went quiet, thinking about everything they had lost. “I’m Dario. This is my son, Ned. We sailed through a storm and got lost.”

Adrian was more confident that he had decided to make contact with the men. Safe Haven desperately needed those skills. It had occurred to Adrian that everyone stuck in limbo around them might be like them—someone Nature wanted gone. That meant they were probably useful.

“A storm with a green cloud?”

The men nodded at Selina, ignoring the dog that was still yapping.

“That’s how we got here, too.” Adrian hated how thin and miserable they were. He slowly took off his kit and then tossed it onto their boat. “There’s a little bit of food in there, a spare gun, and some ammunition.”

“Can’t you let us onto your ship?”

Adrian quickly shook his head at Dario. “My boss isn’t in the mood to be generous right now. We were attacked. It’s a bad time to pick up refugees.”

The men understood the attack by the oil workers had ruined any chance they had of getting off their flimsy sailboat right now.

The dog continued to bark, but not at them directly. It was looking around, as if searching for someone.

“You can try to follow us to our island, but I don’t think you’re going to make it around the tip of South America in that boat.” Adrian wasn’t sure what to do about it yet.

Selina pointed at the oil tanker slowly disappearing over the horizon. “That ship would make it.”

Adrian nodded while the men frowned. “There can’t be that many of them left now. We removed three dozen in this fight.”

The men in the sailboat were familiar with the numbers. “That means they only have a dozen people left and some of those are too injured to fight. We left a mark in our last meeting.”

Adrian spoke louder to be heard over the barking that was now increasing in volume. “Meeting?”

Dario nodded. “A lot of us out here came together for a meeting to try and figure out what happened and how to get out of it. But we couldn’t trust each other. Insults flew; bullets came after that.”

The dog was getting on Selina’s nerves. She glared at the animal. “Sit. Hush!”

To everyone’s surprise, the beautiful Golden Retriever immediately sat down and went quiet, staring at her in anticipation of her next order.

Dario smiled in relief. “He hasn’t stopped barking since we lost my brother. It’s my brother’s dog. It never listens to us.”

For Adrian, it was another sign that Selina was going to be very useful in their camp.

For Selina, it was another sign that she was meant to be here.

For the two men in the sailboat, it was proof that Adrian's group were the good guys.

It was a relief for all of them.

"You should keep your distance until we leave. Then stay as close as you can and hopefully follow us out of here." Adrian was worried about the men making it.

The hatch behind them began to open as Kenn and Greg came up with the first body.

The men in the sailboat tensed again, remembering what they had already seen. "Are you cannibals?"

Adrian shook his head.

Selina nodded.

Adrian chuckled. "Yes, and no."

Adrian felt another one of the descendants waking up and reconnecting to the hive. He knew who it was. Shawn and Charlie were doing medical care on everyone. They were giving the knocked out people a counteragent that Isabel had recommended from her time in the lab.

Adrian gestured at the dusty kit the men hadn't touched yet. "We're on channel 7. There's a radio in there."

Adrian went down the ladder.

Selina stayed up top to guard the hatch while the others started dumping bodies. For the first time,

Selina didn't look at the corpses and view food. This time, she saw desperate men who had been trapped in a bad situation and were unable to escape it or tolerate it. She felt bad for all of them. *I guess this is what it feels like to be a loving and caring person. Kinda sucks.*

Selina began a rotating patrol over the submarine, giving comforting nods to the people on the ships around them who were brave enough to wave or try to make contact, but she didn't forget she was up here to keep her people safe. If any of the strangers got aggressive, she would handle it. *My new mate is below this deck. No one is getting down there without permission. I don't care if they are just good people who were also caught in the fog. My family will always come first. Reicher would hate me for that.*

Selina lifted her chin and continued to smile. That alone made it all worth it.

4

Marc woke up without the use of the counteragent. He didn't open his eyes. He let his mind start sorting itself out first.

Marc felt the warm weight of Dog laying across his leg. It was a comfort. The rest of his skin was cold. He assumed the top hatch was open, chasing away the warmth.

He could hear people moving through the halls and compartments around him. None of it was

aggressive or panicked. Marc knew he'd been hit with knockout drugs. That was the last thing he remembered. The calm outside this room told him they'd won that battle.

Marc's thoughts went to Harry next. *He's gone now.*

He still agreed with the plan Angela had made to handle the incredibly dangerous medic, but that didn't stop the guilt or the pain from that loss. *I brought him along. All of this is my fault.*

He and Angela had discussed conquering the lab in depth before he left. Very few people had known about it. They had played amazing roles of pretense to prevent Reicher from seeing what was coming. That plan had resulted in a win in some ways and severe losses in others.

The labs were gone now. Even if a rogue element tried to restart them, it wouldn't be as bad as what Reicher had done with his UN cover while striving for world domination. And if Safe Haven got word that a lab had been reopened, they would dispatch a team to handle it. Reicher's reign was truly over.

In some ways, it would also never end. Reicher had been correct about that. Some of his methods were too successful, too brilliant, to never be used again. When Adrian had stated that Angela would continue Reicher's work, he'd been correct in many ways. The difference was that Angela would never abuse her people just for kicks or control. There

would always be an extreme reason or she would forbid it.

Is that good enough? After everything we went through, shouldn't I make it my goal to be sure that none of this can ever happen again?

Marc wanted to immediately say yes. Before joining Safe Haven, he would have been able to say it and mean it. His moral line then had been what drove every moment and every choice he made. Joining this camp had changed all of that.

Marc tried to be fair. The war had actually been responsible, but Safe Haven had enhanced his instinctive ability to be ferocious in the fight for survival. He had done things for them that he had flat-out refused to do while he was a Marine. Every line that he had declined to cross before had been crossed now, more than once. He was fundamentally changed in every way.

So the answer is no. But only because I recognize that the war changed the rules. There really is no line too far when it comes to the survival of my family and my friends.

Marc listened to heavy splashes outside the submarine. He knew what they were doing up there. That was always the worst part after the action was over.

Marc's mind went to Harry again. Harry had made amazing leaps in the evolution of the descendants. Marc doubted anyone would come close to matching his feats for a very long time. And when they did, the new laws on magic users would

require their enforcers to stop those people before they became too powerful. That law would only have to be enacted in cases where the person refused to stop searching for the next evolution, for the next leap in power. If they could be content with natural evolutions, then they wouldn't have to be eliminated. That would be for the safety of not only the normals, but also to keep the descendants from becoming slaves. A lust for power like that could only end in misery for those around them.

Marc knew Angela was also in pain from Harry's death, like he was, but he didn't reach out to her yet. He was taking another step on the road to his recovery. *How do I feel about things now?*

The plan that he and Angela had created together had finished with Harry's death. She'd refused to go further because Nature would know what was coming. The only plan for that was locked inside Angela's dangerous mind.

Nature had made a huge error there, but Marc doubted it would matter. He still didn't believe she could be beaten by magic, though he was certainly going to do his share of trying when the time came. *We have to make a deal with her.*

Marc realized his mind had automatically skipped him over the question. He followed the advice of his therapist and forced himself to confront it head-on. *I hate me. I hate her, and I hate everybody on this submarine. I hate the island, I hate Adrian, and I still want to reset time. Does that mean my father won?*

Marc winced at the thought of his parentage. He was trying to accept it, but it was hard. He didn't want to hate himself for the things his father was responsible for. He was tired of family legacies being toxic.

Dog lifted his snout from Marc's leg. He had been awake and listening to Marc's contemplations. *Why does it matter?*

Marc looked down at the wolf. He tried to find a way to explain it so the animal would understand. "What the father does, the pups pay for."

Dog understood that. His pack had been destroyed for something he had no part in. *But why does it matter now? That world ended with a bang.*

Marc frowned lightly. "Everyone around us knows who he was. They'll always look at me and see him now. There's no escape from that."

Dog nudged Marc's chilly hand. *You mean like with Conner?*

Marc winced again as he realized how badly he had treated that teenager. Everything Adrian had done had bled over onto his offspring. Marc was positive that had been a common event throughout their lives. "It's not fair, but it is how the world works. None of us ever really forget where we came from. If it's good, we're proud of it forever. If it's bad, we're stained by it forever."

Dog didn't like Marc being upset. He also didn't want Marc to slip back into following the leader and being passive. Their two-member pack had never worked that way. Dog wasn't sure what his role

would be. *Then you need to leave a legacy that erases the one that came before it. You don't have to follow in his paw prints. Make your own.*

The simple answer made Marc smile wistfully. "I love the sound of that. It would mean my children don't have to carry the weight of my actions."

But Marc was realistic. "Not all of my actions were good. Not all of them in the future are going to be good. Survival has forced me to commit atrocities over and over. If I keep being a Boy Scout, we'll keep losing people until there's nothing left for the Boy Scout inside to be proud of anymore, to love anymore."

"Then you have to meet in the middle." Adrian was standing in the entrance. He didn't want Marc to go through this last rough phase of therapy alone. "All human beings are made up of love and hatred. All of the other emotions are weaker versions of those two. It's supposed to be an equal mix of love for the good things in your life and hatred of the bad things in your life. The love is meant to make you cherish the good and the hatred is meant to make you change the bad."

Marc waited, trying to let Adrian help him even though he'd heard this before. He hadn't been ready to listen back then.

"Natoli's people believe a soul leans toward whichever one of those he feeds the most. They view it as two wolves fighting for control over a pack. When you feed the negative more than you

feed the positive, the bad wolf gets more control, more authority over your life and your choices.”

Marc waited for the punchline, but he doubted it would be funny.

“You feed the bad side more because you’re afraid of the good side, Marc. You believe the good side is too weak to keep you alive and achieve your goals, so you shun the happiness that you have and feed the bad side because you value strength over love or compassion.”

Marc hadn’t thought of it that way, but it did make sense to him. His entire childhood had been based on being strong enough to survive his mother, his cousins, his uncle, and his doomed relationship with a little girl named Angie. If he had fed the compassionate side back then, he would have been crushed under the weight of it all.

Adrian shook his head. “But you’re not that child anymore, Marcus Reicher. You’re a powerful man who doesn’t have to pick between the two. You could never be so compassionate that I would think you were weak. I believe the same is true of everyone in our camp. We all know the tiger exists inside you. He scares the shit out of us, frankly. But we’re damn glad to have him when things go wrong because he can be depended on not only to help us, but to do the right thing for his country and his family. We respect that. There’s nothing you could do in a soft moment that will ever take that away. You’ll always be the tiger to us and we’ll always love you for that.”

Adrian went down the hallway, allowing Marc to finish the session on his own. He was confident that Marc would adjust better now. It had been a long road to get Marc to a place where he could accept that both sides of himself were important, were needed. He had spent his entire life picking between the two and trying to smother the unneeded one, only to find out that both of them were vitally important to his sanity. As soon as he stopped trying to pick, Marc's cracks would heal, as would the trauma of finding out what his family line was responsible for. Adrian was thrilled for him.

He was also jealous. *And I can admit that without doing anything about it.*

Adrian had been trying to counsel himself in the same way that he had been doing with the mission men. Part of that was refusing to keep feeding the positive side of himself when he knew the dangerous side couldn't afford to be neglected. There were future battles to come and Safe Haven needed him to be ready. He had spent this trip going through things in his mind, the same as the mission men had, but he hadn't made a big revelation yet. Adrian still felt like the same playboy, the same sneak who couldn't be trusted with the team, let alone with an entire camp of fragile, precious refugees. *Until that changes, neither will I.*

Chapter Thirty-One
You're Different Now

1

“**C**an I talk to you for a minute?”

Kenn rolled the stiffening, stinking body off the submarine. It hit the water and sank. “Sure.”

He wiped his hands down his tacky pants and then joined Greg near the end of the submarine.

Biff and Trent were also disposing of a body. Both men were casting ugly glares toward Kenn. Kenn hadn't responded yet.

“I know what you're planning to do when we get home.”

Kenn stiffened. “Stay out of it.”

Greg wanted to, but he was bonded to Kenn through their time in the lab. He didn't want to care about the Marine; he just did. “I can understand why you believe walking away is a good idea, but it's not. Don't go.”

Kenn recognized Greg's determination. Because he couldn't avoid this conversation, Kenn didn't hold back. “Angela almost let me die this time. Next time, she might.”

Greg nodded. “And if she does, you deserve it, but until then, it's wrong to walk away from the family that's depending on you. That's probably

why she let you live. Don't make her regret her choice."

Kenn had already considered that angle. "But what good is it to Tonya to be shackled to a man who can never escape the bad choices he's made?"

Greg sighed. "I think it's different when the man proves he's changed."

"You didn't feel that way while we were on Howland island." Kenn gestured toward Biff and Trent. "Even the rookies want me dead. There's no way it won't bleed all over Tonya at some point."

"Personally, I believe Tonya can take care of herself." Greg kept going before Kenn could interrupt. "I also think she's worth fighting for. Don't you?"

Kenn snorted. "Of course, she's worth it. That's why walking away is the right thing to do."

"So you're going to give her up to Tobias or whoever might be a better match for her." Greg made an ugly noise. "I never thought you were a coward."

Kenn didn't react to the insult. He understood Greg was trying to trigger something inside him, but Greg didn't understand what it was like to be hated and to hate himself. "She doesn't deserve to pay for my mistakes."

"Tonya knew about your past and she still had a relationship with you, got pregnant by you, and agreed to marry you. You made a commitment to her. It would be shitty of you to walk out on that."

Kenn had already told himself that and all the other things he could feel rolling through Greg's brain. "I don't think there's anything you can say that will get me to change my mind. I appreciate this pep talk. I really do, but I've made up my mind. As soon as I can get away, I'm leaving Safe Haven. I don't care about being alone. I care about Tonya and my son enough to leave them in peace."

Greg studied him for a minute, trying to find the right words. He was surprised when they rolled out of his mouth. "I need you to stay."

Kenn moped. "Why? You've never liked me, either."

Greg believed Kenn should have been banished at the very least for his abusive nature. "It isn't about liking you, Kenn. We went through eight weeks of pure hell together. And now we've lost Harry. I need the mission men to stay together—for me, not for you."

Kenn was shocked by the admission. He didn't know what to say.

Now that he had already revealed himself, Greg didn't hold back either. "When I look in the mirror, there are still times that I'm not sure I'm going to make it through this."

Kenn thought of the moment where Greg had almost taken his life right after his rescue from the lab. It hadn't been that long ago. Greg had done so well since then that Kenn had almost forgotten about it.

“There’s not a single soul in our camp or on this ship who understands what we’ve all gone through. If we don’t have each other to rely on, then maybe none of us will recover.” Greg included Biff, aware of the man listening intently even though he was acting as if he wasn’t. “There’s only six of us left now. Don’t break up the team. We need you and you need us.”

Kenn didn’t want to feel any compassion for Greg, but he couldn’t help it. Greg’s words were hitting the target dead center.

Greg sighed. “You’re afraid of dying. We all get that, but it’s really not a fear of death anymore. You’re scared to live, Kenn. You believe you deserve to be miserable, so you’re not going to let yourself recover. I know. I’m battling with that myself. I need you and the other mission men around to remind me, telling me it’s okay that I survived.”

Kenn felt tears trying to flood against his eyelids. He considered saying something snarky and then blowing the man off. He also considered embracing Greg like a brother because he was right. No one else would ever understand because they hadn’t gone through it.

Greg lifted his eye patch so Kenn was forced to acknowledge the horror. “Say you’ll stay until I can look at this in the mirror and not think about how easy it would just be to end it all instead of facing it.”

Another unbreakable bond formed between the men. Kenn now felt that way every day of his life. He reluctantly surrendered. "I'll stay. But just until you're better and then I'm gone."

Greg lowered the eyepatch. He tried to smile; it came out in a rough grimace. "I don't believe that day will come. I'm going to lean on you every chance I get and I want you to do the same to me. We'll get married together and raise our sons together and we'll share the terror in the middle of the night together. We'll also share our desire for someone we can't have. Any time we have trouble in our lives, we'll fall back on each other."

"You make it sound easy."

"I don't expect any of it to be easy. That's why I chose a badass as my support system. You're my brother-in-arms and I'll always have a place open in my life for you." Greg glanced over at Biff, who was openly crying now. "The same goes for all of you. The bond between us will never be broken."

2

"We'll start down here." Cody led the way into the incinerator compartment. He had his notebook open, as did Wade.

Cate kept pace with them and prepared to bring up her shield if Cody needed it.

"How many bodies are left?" Cody glanced around and tried not to linger on the three corpses that were in here waiting to be burned. The

incinerator was already bright red from the use it had gotten over the last few hours. It needed time to cool off.

Wade checked his notes. “There are two more bodies in the luxury cabin where Harry was knocked out.”

Cody made notes about the condition of the room, including the duct tape on the floor and the bag of weapons that had been stolen. “Make sure you account for all of the weapons.”

“Do you want me to give people their guns back?”

Cody nodded. “But not until after you sort through them and make a list of throwaways and who they belong to.”

Wade didn’t ask why they were doing that. It was something leadership had already been worried over. They needed to know who all was armed in their camp. It was important information to have when you were always being attacked.

Zack came in from collecting more garbage. He sat the bag next to the bodies and then joined them. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more help during the attack.”

Zack had woken in the rafters again, with an amused woman staring up at him. It was a great shame for him that he always hid now instead of helping.

Cody peered up at Zack. “You need to start therapy for your fear of drowning. Take the first spot that Adrian has open.”

Zack stared in shock. He hadn't realized that was why he was doing it.

Cody was sympathetic. "I don't like the water anymore, either. I understand."

Zack tried not to tear up. Having an excuse for his behavior instantly made him feel better.

It also made Wade feel better. He had been wondering if there was something mentally wrong with Zack. Now, he knew there was. "I'll make sure he shows up."

Cody left the incinerator compartment and went toward the bathroom. He didn't go inside. It was busy with waking people who were trying to clean up and wash away some of the things that had happened. "It's still dusty. How can it be dusty when we just finished cleaning?"

That was a question Wade didn't have an answer for yet. He shrugged. "All of the rooms on this ship are like that."

Cody made a note on it.

Isabel came out of the shower without worrying over anyone staring at her body. She looked younger and attractive again, but the men in here with her weren't interested. Shawn was in a hurry to get cleaned up so he could join Selina on guard duty and Ray was muttering about home and his choice to leave the bridge during the fog.

Cody caught Ray's attention as the man pulled on his clean shirt. "Everything worked out the way it was meant to. The boss isn't mad at you. Let it go."

Ray stared in shock as the boy went down the hallway. *He might really make a good leader someday.*

Cody stopped at the laundry compartment next. No one had started working in there yet. There were small piles of laundry all over the room, but it wasn't as bad as last time. He made a note on it and kept going.

Wade glanced into the laundry compartment as they went by. His heart hurt as he remembered Harry's comment about getting the women to take care of it. Wade was in mourning for his friend and still trying to accept what had happened.

"He died a hero." Cody didn't like Wade being upset. "Make sure his name gets added to the memorial when we get home."

Wade nodded. "I will." He didn't linger on Cody's words about Harry dying as a hero. All that mattered to Wade was that Harry was dead; he hadn't been able to save the man. Wade had made it a personal goal that all of the mission men would be rescued. Other than the four rookies who had died in the lab, he'd almost met that goal until now.

"Do you feel bad because you didn't go into the lab with them?"

Wade immediately nodded. "One of those cages should have been mine."

Cody wrote that in his book. He would make sure Angela knew Wade was feeling guilty over that. He would also need a therapy session.

It was interesting to Cody that Wade wasn't scarred by fighting the hurricane, other than a perfectly normal distrust of the water now. Wade's emotional turmoil was directly connected to the mission team and everything they had suffered.

Cody stopped in the entrance of the mess. It was currently being cleaned. All of the bodies had been removed and everyone who'd been drugged was either awake now or had been taken to the bunk room. The fighting ring was gone, as were the trays of granola bars and the pot of drugged soup.

Cody got Gus's attention. "There's a stash of food supplies in the lockers. We need a great meal. Make it something nice, but not heavy. We've earned it."

"You got it." Gus hurried out from behind the counter, where he'd been staring at the empty shelves in dismay. He was eager to make a real meal. His stomach wouldn't stop growling.

Piper continued to put chairs back where they belonged and gather up garbage from the floor. She didn't glance over at Cody or Wade, but she knew they were there.

Cody scanned her and frowned. "Why do the women do that?"

Wade wasn't sure what he was talking about. "Do what?"

"Dress like the alpha. They try very hard to look like her to the men they want to attract. Why do they do that?"

Wade knew Cody wasn't asking for personal reasons. "They think their men will love them more, or at least pay more attention to them, if they look like Angela."

Cody lifted a brow. "Does it work?"

Wade slowly shook his head. "Only for a couple of interactions and then the men quickly see that they aren't the same. It's actually a little deceptive. I wish Angela would stop allowing it." It reminded Wade of his own moments with women pretending to be her. He knew for a fact that it was disappointing in the end.

"Why does she let them do it?"

"Because she hopes it will work. Angela doesn't like the attention from their men. She wants them to pay more personal attention to the women in their lives and less to her."

Cody stored that one mentally for a later evaluation.

Piper began removing the braid from her hair as they left. The brief conversation had made her feel like a fraud. *And if Wade says it won't work, then it won't. He knows more about relationships than any of us.*

Cody and his small group continued to the bunk room. Once again, he didn't go in and get in the way.

In the bunk room, Erin and Lisa believed they were finally alone. The kids and babies were napping while Erin stood guard in the corner.

Erin took the opportunity to ask a question that desperately needed an answer. “Why did you really get pregnant?”

Lisa didn’t want to get into a fight with Erin. She also didn’t want people to think she was hiding anything. “We both wanted a baby.”

“Were you planning to sell it?”

“No!” Lisa finally let the truth out. “I thought it could teach me to not be afraid of magic users since it will be my baby and we’ll love each other.”

That was a relief to Erin and everyone else who heard it.

Cody put it in his book. The noise of his pen on the paper drew Erin’s attention.

Erin caught his eye. “Two-minute break?”

Cody grinned at her. “Permission granted.”

Erin hurried toward the head. “I think I’ve been drinking too much water.”

While they waited, Cody scanned to see who was still asleep and was relieved to find all of them but Dace starting to wake as their bodies processed the drugs. It wouldn’t be long now before everyone was up. The bathrooms were about to get a lot busier.

“We’ve been cleared for duty. Where do you want us?” Theo and the two worm subjects came down the hallway to join them.

Cody lifted a brow. “Do they have names?”

Theo waved. “Gio and Nero. They’re both Greek.”

That didn't mean anything to Cody. He tapped his book. "Medical update?"

Theo understood Cody was working. He gave the boy what he needed. "All three of us have been cleared. Gio and Nero are both fully recovered from their parasite infection. They can be put on any duty you need them on."

Cody pointed toward the mess. "Gus needs more hands making the meal and getting things ready in here."

Theo was happy to do what he considered to be an easy chore. He led the men to the mess without a complaint.

Erin came out and resumed her post. "Thanks."

"Yep." Cody went to the medical bay next. It was empty for the moment, other than Charlie, who was entering notes on the computer.

Charlie felt them arrive. He kept typing in notes while he talked. "Our people are okay, as far as I can tell. Lisa is almost healed. So are Greg and Kenn. We got lucky that we only lost one person."

Wade winced.

Cody smiled at Charlie. "You should take a break and get a meal. You've earned it and then some."

Charlie smothered a yawn. "I will and then I'm going back to help with the kids. It was hard but satisfying. I enjoyed spending time with the babies."

Wade understood that was because Charlie was missing the newborn that he would probably never

get to see. He hoped Charlie found a woman soon who was better for him than Tracy had been. After watching the boy for the last weeks, Wade was positive that Charlie would be a good father and Safe Haven had a lot of orphans who needed that love.

Charlie kept typing. “Mom just woke up. It won’t be much longer now.”

Wade was thrilled to hear that, but he was also scared of what would happen.

Cody stopped at the brig next, where three very somber teenagers were all sitting on the floor of the cell, playing UNO. They had been left with enough food and water to get through the fade; they still had most of it. All three teenagers glanced up hopefully as they noticed Cody and Wade.

Wade shook his head. “You have a few days left on your sentence.”

The boys didn’t argue. All of them were glad they weren’t being removed for theft. In the lab, Reicher would have tortured them and maybe even fed them to the hounds.

Cody held a great sympathy for the teenagers, just like he did for the mission men. “The alpha wants you to join the Eagles as soon as we get home. You’ll be busy and it’s hard work, but you’ll be loved by everyone in our camp.”

Two of the boys quickly nodded. They were eager to believe in the Safe Haven dream.

The other boy was more leery. Troy had been born in the lab and lied to nearly every day of his

life. “I don’t want to be an Eagle. I don’t want to hurt people. I want to help them.”

“There are a lot of ways to do that in our camp.” Wade wondered if the kids in the lab had been taught any skills beyond using their magic to protect Reicher and advance his goals.

Cody wondered that, too. “What do you think you would be good at but also enjoy?”

Troy lifted his chin against the coming scorn from the other teenagers. “I like to cook.”

Wade and Cody smiled.

“We like to eat. That could work out well.” Wade made notes about it in his book.

Cody gestured toward the unlocked cell. “You guys are getting time off for good behavior. You could have left at any point and gotten in trouble, but you didn’t.” He knew the teenagers hadn’t been affected by the fog. “You can all go now. See the medic for a checkup as soon as he returns from his break. We’ll give you something to do from there.”

“Thank you!”

“That’s awesome!”

Cody walked away from the brig, feeling like he had given them hope for their future. *And I think that’s all any of us really want—hope for a better future. Safe Haven will provide that in some ways, but the only true satisfaction in life has to come from our minds and our hearts. If we’re not happy with our lives, we have to make the changes. We can’t wait on other people to do it for us. We only get one*

life. It shouldn't be spent waiting on someone else to make us happy.

Cody continued down the corridor toward the luxury cabins. He didn't shy away from the stinking bodies. He stepped around them and went into the room where Harry had been knocked out. After a brief moment, he continued on into the next cabin, where Selina and Shawn had made their stand. "She did a great job."

Wade agreed. Selina's marksmanship was already making the rounds of the gossip vine. She had earned a rookie jacket that would be delivered to her once they got home. They had only brought one along and Isabel had already received it. "She'll be hell in the Eagles. I can't wait to help Shawn train her."

Cody nodded. A frown came over his face.

Wade felt the boy trying to make a decision. To move things along, he offered an opinion. "We could shut these rooms down. There's no reason for us to spend time in here. Isolation isn't good for our kind."

Cody wrote it in his book. "I agree."

Wade always liked it that Cody was willing to listen to suggestions. He had more of those, but he sensed Cody was almost in a hurry now. He began making notes in his book that he would give to the boy later.

"The alpha is almost ready to come out. I'm trying to get done before she does."

Wade could hear how much Cody was looking forward to handing control back over to Angela. It was a relief. “Where to next?”

“I need an update from Kyle.”

Wade led the way up the ladder toward the bridge. Ray was awake and in the shower. Kyle would keep that post until Ray was ready to take over.

As soon as they reached the bridge, Kyle opened the door. “The radar is clear on the weather front. There are still a lot of ships around us, but they’re keeping their distance. All of the cameras except for one are working again.” Kyle twitched as the dusty cat flew by him and hurried down the hallway. It vanished into the radio cubby, presumably to spend time with Dog. “Ray had notes put up in here. The cat played with them and knocked them around. I don’t want him punished for leaving the bridge.”

“Good, because I already told him he wouldn’t be.” Cody smiled, making his face hurt. Angela had told him to smile a lot while leading, that it would make it all go easier.

Kyle was happy that Ray wasn’t in trouble, but anger still bled through his voice. “I want Adrian punished for leaving the bridge unmanned during a crisis. He didn’t have the fog screwing with his mind.” Kyle had been considering it for hours while cleaning and watching the radar.

“So you’re willing to give Ray a pass but not Adrian. How is that fair?” Wade wanted all of them to get a pass, including himself.

“Ray can be trusted. Adrian endangered everyone on the ship.”

Cody immediately shook his head. “He protected the alpha this time, instead of the camp.”

Kyle scowled. “And we’re rewarding that?”

“Yes. He’s learning to value single lives over the collective. For him, that’s progress.”

“I don’t understand why he gets yet another free pass.”

“Because he’s changing. Before, he would have sacrificed any of you for the dream. Now, he’ll try to save everyone.”

Kyle was forced to accept that answer even though he didn’t like it.

Wade thought it was extremely insightful and accurate.

Cody moved on to the next room. He went inside this one and studied his father.

Marc stared back.

Cody had known who they were since the lab rescue. He had come to terms with it. He hoped Marc would be able to do the same. “I’m going to stay here for a little while. You and Adrian can finish rounds.”

“You got it.” Wade left to give the family privacy.

Bret lowered his shield. No one had known he was following them around except Cody and Cate. “I’ll go get a checkup and a shower now.”

“No.” Marc gestured. “Stay with us. We’ll go have a meal together in a few minutes. We can collect Charlie on the way.”

Bret stared in suspicion. “Why? You hate Mitchels and I might be one.”

Marc stood. “You also might be a Brady.” Marc had chosen to keep his name, not Reicher’s. “Either way, you’re Cate’s friend or Cate’s future mate. We’ll spend time together now before that happens.”

Bret brightened. “You mean like a family?” It was what he wanted the most.

“Yes.”

Adrian passed by the doorway. He was glad for Bret even while being sad that there was another kid he couldn’t be with and love as his.

Adrian joined Wade for the rest of the walk-through. They covered the therapy cubby, the command center, and then stopped near the theater, where the door was still closed. Most of these compartments were cleaned and ready for use again. This main hall wasn’t.

Biff, Trent, and Jayda carried the last body up the ladder together, but they weren’t speaking to each other. Things had gotten too awkward during this fade.

Wade waited until they finished and came back down.

Jayda knew why Wade was lingering as soon as she saw him. “They were fighting over me in the fog and I enjoyed it. I don’t want to be like that. We

can't spend time together anymore. They're mad at me for making that choice."

Trent didn't want her to take all of the blame. "I just don't want to share my woman."

Biff looked between the two, frowning. "I don't understand why either of them are upset. In the fog, we were all happy together."

Wade didn't want to get in the middle of their drama. "You need to sit down and work it out. Isolating, ignoring, and insulting isn't going to go well. Take my word for it. Have a long conversation and make the choice that works out best for all of you." He gave them a small smile. "There's nothing wrong with the lifestyle that all three of you secretly want but don't believe the camp can handle. I'm here to tell you, they can, and they will as long as *you* do."

Adrian agreed with Wade's short speech, but he didn't add to it. He didn't need to. When it came to relationships, everyone listened to Wade. He had a lot of experience.

Marc's group came out of the radio cubby and went down to the mess together.

Adrian almost broke. *I miss my daughter, and my sons. I miss Shannon. I miss Nancy and even Sadie. I miss it all. I want to go home now. I want my life back!*

The theater door opened; Angela studied Adrian.

Behind her, Mel was cleaning up the theater and stewing on the things Angela had just told her about their ongoing battle with Nature.

Adrian didn't step closer like he wanted to. "I'm sorry for the way I tried to wake you up."

"Okay."

"I mean it. It wasn't romantic. I just didn't know what else to do."

"You hoped our bond would kick in. I understand."

She really didn't seem angry. Adrian was relieved by that, but he also felt the new distance between them, the coldness. "I'm sorry I left the bridge."

Angela gave him a small smile. "It all worked out like it was meant to."

Adrian stared at her. "I understand why you stayed out of this one. It's the same reason I came in here instead of staying on the bridge."

For one brief instant, she gazed at him in approval and need. Adrian had put the coming baby before the camp, too. It was a powerful moment.

Then her eyes cooled and that wall of ice came down, but she didn't dismiss him.

Adrian waited when she kept staring. "What are you looking at?"

"You. You're different now."

Adrian understood what she meant. "I'm sad. It doesn't happen often."

"Tell me what you want the most."

Adrian's answer was immediate. "Peace."

“I can’t give you that. You’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“Forgiveness, then.”

“That’s possible, if you earn it.”

“From you?”

Angela laughed and walked away.

People heard Angela’s voice; they started coming from rooms and compartments. As she headed toward the ladder to the second level, they followed her, including Adrian.

Selina came down from topside and closed and locked the hatch. She also followed the pregnant woman.

People came out as Angela went by, trailing her.

Angela went to the center table of the mess, where her family was sitting.

Good smells were now coming from the grill, making stomachs growl. Silence fell as everyone noticed her. None of them were resentful or angry this time, just miserable.

“I have a crazy, terrible plan that might get us all killed.”

Cheers echoed through the submarine, loud enough to reach the two men and their barking dog in the sailboat outside. They had stayed close, following Adrian’s suggestion.

Those two men immediately started getting ready to set sail. They didn’t know exactly why the submarine people were happy, but they knew what it meant for them. *We’re finally going home!*

Chapter Thirty-Two

Challenge Accepted

1

“Is everyone ready?” Angela glanced around the mess, where she had decided to make their stand. It was the biggest open space on the ship.

Most of the people waiting nervously around her nodded and hoped her crazy scheme worked. A couple of them shook their heads and then grinned to show her they were joking.

Charlie pointed toward Dog. “Shouldn’t he be locked in the bridge with Ray again?”

Dog whimpered.

“He might be useful. He was able to give her an injury in our last fight.” Marc didn’t want to take away any of their possible weapons against Nature. He expected this to be even uglier than the first time he’d faced her.

Zack gestured. “It’s better that Dog sees how we fight her so he’s ready for that final battle, too.”

Marc looked over at Zack. “Why have that final battle at all? If we can kill her here and now, it’s over.”

Wade frowned. “Aren’t we supposed to just hold her here so the Creator can reunite with her?”

“She declared war on us. We either kill her or she’ll kill us. There is no middle ground on that outcome.”

The others fell silent as they realized Marc was right. Nature had taken cut after cut from the Safe Haven herd. They were all furious about it and tired of being a target for her unfair wrath.

“Good luck.” Charlie went into the bunk room and locked the doors. He was staying with the kids and with Dace, who hadn’t woken yet from being knocked out by the caretakers. Charlie didn’t know what to do for him, but there were other things that had to be handled before he could dig into that issue. The biggest one was forcing Nature to let them go home.

Angela glanced around the mess. Everyone had finished eating an hour ago, but no one had left while they discussed her plan. They still didn’t know exactly what it was, only that she needed all of them to fight with everything they had. It wasn’t a hard request for most of them. They’d been doing that all along. Their only given goal here was to bring down Nature’s shield so their sniper could get a clear shot.

Angela stood and went to the far corner of the mess, getting as far away from the entrance as she could. She brought her shield up as she walked, telling everyone it was time.

Angela concentrated as if she was trying to reach the weigh station or even Hell. She wasn’t positive on how to connect with Nature. Her magic

wasn't based around nature, like Samantha's. "I invite you to come talk. I'm giving you permission to be here, just for a conversation and maybe a truce."

Everyone waited tensely.

Nothing changed; there wasn't an answer.

Angela shrugged. "Okay, I invite you here just to talk."

The sense of Nature looking their way was impossible to miss. Several people brought up their shields even though she wasn't here yet.

Angela could feel the hesitancy. Nature would likely assume this was a trap. *And she would be right.* "You've damaged my husband and taken lives from my camp. I don't understand why you're afraid to face me. This is your chance to gloat."

Nature came closer to observe the humans on the ship, but she didn't rush in blindly even though she wanted to send them straight to the bottom of the ocean. Angela was reaching out because she believed she was able to handle whatever she was pulling in. Nature hated Angela for the respect she'd earned.

Angela understood she would have to take this all the way. She drew in a deep breath. "I have something you're missing, something that is causing you constant pain. I'm willing to trade for it. Come in so we can talk." Angela's eyes began to glow red. "And if you don't, I'm going to send a

nuclear warhead straight to Pitcairn Island and destroy your ancient threads. My people aren't really there in this dimension, but you are, aren't you?"

Nature growled in rage, sending sharp wind against the submarine. She had no choice but to show up. *That one doesn't bluff and it will take me a century to recover from such a blow.* "I'm coming in."

Angela braced as cold, dangerous wind blew through the closed-up submarine and ruffled the hair on every head. Goosebumps crawled up their arms and a chill went through their stomachs as ice began to climb along the inside walls of the submarine. It cracked and popped, making everyone jump.

Angela immediately began trying to make a deal. "All we want is to go home. In return for that, we'll give you a lot. We'll start with teaching our population to honor you and respect you. No more pollution or environmental damage."

Nature began to stomp down the second level corridor toward them. Each step rattled the submarine and rocked it in the water that was growing angrier from the wind she was still sending.

Angela tried again. "All educational classes in the future will cover you as a live entity that should never be abused."

Another heavy footstep rattled the walls. It gave Marc an ugly flash of clearing the island.

Eugene laughed. "They're just plants. They can't hurt us."

A large vine shot out of the dirt wall and plunged into Eugene's throat. Blood ran down his chest.

Marc sent healing orbs anyway, but he already knew it wouldn't matter.

The other vines slowly retreated as Eugene's blood soaked into the ground; the dirt stilled.

"Did anyone find out what his problem was?" Marc felt bad that he hadn't talked to the man.

Shawn stood as the blood curved toward his boots. "He was afraid he was gonna die on this run."

Marc felt the next flashback coming and allowed it as the rage built.

Marc saw Shawn's arm dripping blood from a vine impalement that hadn't gotten far enough to do real damage. He waved at Christian. "Bandage that. Someone get us a count."

Christian stepped forward, lifting his bag over the body pile. He tripped and landed face down against them.

A wounded grounder on the edge of the pile grabbed him and pulled him down.

Christian tried to scream, pulling backward, but the grounder squeezed his chest and didn't stop.

Crunch! Crack!

"Grab him!"

"No!"

Christian sagged against the pile as Marc and the Eagles stabbed the grounder again and again.

Chad pulled Christian free, turning him over.

Christian's head fell to the side; blood dripped from his mouth and nose.

"God damn you!" Marc punched the dirt walls bitterly, rage pushing against a mental scar. "I will kill you!"

Nature laughed at him.

The submarine rattled as Nature took another step down the hall.

Marc's thoughts went to Reggie, and then Harry. Rage flew through his mind. *We lost another medic!*

Angela glanced away from Marc so he wouldn't see that she'd set it up for him to make that connection at this moment. If she had reminded him of it before, he wouldn't have the anger that was now coming through his skin, bringing his shield to life.

"We'll get your husband to come back!" Angela doubled her own shield.

Nature stalked toward them in fury. "I'm going to sink you. There's nothing you can do to stop me."

"We'll remove your enemies!"

“I’m doing that right now!”

The Eagles all brought their shields up. The sense of menace flying through the submarine was terrifying and yet small in comparison to the entity now appearing in front of them. Nature’s stature was just as imposing and magnificent as it had been on the island. She was surrounded by metal and walls, but she didn’t seem weaker or caged like some of them had been hoping for.

Her beautiful green plumage glowed and her bright green eyes went over them in avid hatred as she stopped in the entrance of the mess. Ice continued to grow up the walls, freezing equipment and adding weight.

“Just tell me what you want!” Angela was fed up with this intimidation tactic.

“I want you all to die!” Nature entered the mess. Mr. Sneaky hissed.

Dog growled.

The Eagles got between her and Angela. Camp members and kids also stepped between them, forming a small line of defense. Everyone brought up their shields.

Except for Marc. Marc went out to meet the enemy.

Nature recognized him in contempt. “You signed your death warrant by inviting me here!”

“Or maybe it’ll be your death.” Marc lowered his shield and fired the biggest sonic hit he had ever thrown. It used up half of his energy bank in one blow.

Dog darted forward, matching the speed of the hit.

Nature's shield lit up bright green around her as it landed. It rattled the entire submarine as it bounced back, but it did absolutely no damage to her barrier.

Dog darted by her and headed for the other side of the mess counter, buying Marc time. He had planned to go for her throat if Marc's hit had taken down her shield.

Nature focused on him. "You took something from me!" She stomped toward the wolf.

Mr. Sneaky lunged off a nearby table and launched into the air toward Nature.

The cat dug claws into Nature's shield and yelped at the instant pain. It dropped to the ground and followed Dog behind the long counter.

Marc's team advanced together. He was in the center with his shield down. All six descendants around him had shields up, creating a barrier they hoped would be enough to keep Nature from killing Marc while he fired on her.

New to fighting this way, it was awkward for Marc to throw between their shields. His blast of sonic hit the counter of the mess and blasted through the condiments and the small stack of trays. Dusty debris and plastic went flying.

Marc quickly fired again, adjusting his aim.

Nature caught it with her shield and threw it back at him.

The descendants around Marc collectively grabbed it and absorbed it themselves this time, but the mismatch of power was a huge oversight. All of them stopped or fell, shields failing as pain wracked their bodies.

“We didn’t think that one through. Regroup!” Marc pushed groaning people out of the line of fire.

Mel, Isabel, and Selina had already stepped forward to support Marc. They emptied their mags or threw their knives to draw her attention away from the men.

Nature’s shield deflected all of it, sending metal and lead ricochets.

Descendant shields grabbed most of those projectiles and quickly dropped them to the floor.

Ice was still growing up walls and making the floor slippery. It was also adding weight to the submarine that the ship wasn’t ready to handle. It sank heavily in the water, forcing Ray to figure out how to balance them.

“You agreed to talk!” Angela was furious. “You have broken the rules of hospitality! Take out her shield, Eagles!”

Nature ignored their displeasure. She moved toward Marc while drawing energy to fire her first blast.

Kenn shoved Marc out of the way to keep him from being hit.

Nature fired a pain spell.

Kyle was already running toward Nature from the side, hoping to get in a hit while she was

distracted. He got in front of the blast and was knocked into the other two men.

Kyle quickly scrambled to his feet, grinning around at the stunned people. "I'm a hybrid. That won't work on me."

Angela saw Nature was about to fire again. She expanded her shield and pushed Greg into the crossfire.

Greg was able to absorb Nature's hit and refill his energy banks. He laughed wildly. "You could've just asked me, Boss."

Angela chuckled, but she didn't take her attention off the furious entity who was watching them in dismay. A brief expression of fear had passed over Nature's face.

Dog lunged through the air again, using his body as a distraction.

Nature followed him, spewing anger from her eyes and mouth. "How dare you side with them against me!"

Shawn stepped forward, drawing her away from Dog. "I'm invincible, too."

Nature threw fire at him in annoyance.

Shawn calmly glanced down at the flames that were now rolling up his arms and legs, causing excruciating pain. *Okay, so maybe not.* Shawn screamed and dropped to his knees as people ran over to help put out the fire.

Selina quickly reloaded and ran forward while firing but she didn't shout like a lot of the others had. She concentrated on hitting the exact same spot

on the shield with every slug, hoping one would punch the others through.

Nature paused again but only in fury, not pain. She prepared to return fire.

Selina grabbed Shawn's arm and began dragging him backward.

"Over here, you crazy bitch." Kyle drew Nature's attention to the empty side of the mess. He and Marc both fired at her.

The hits bounced off her barrier once again.

Adrian fired a weak destruction spell and also had it sent right back. He groaned as he absorbed it. "I can't get through her shield!"

Piper didn't waste time firing at Nature. She brought up her shield and ran to stand over Adrian while he recovered. She already knew bullets weren't going to be able to get through. She was depending on her magic.

Angela tried to keep track of the chaos happening throughout the mess, but it was hard. Two dozen people in motion at the same time, along with a wolf and a cat that were zigzagging back-and-forth to keep Nature distracted, was hard to keep track of. She hated the abuse her team was already suffering, but she needed them to keep trying. *We have to find a weakness.*

Wade had stayed out of the fight until now, hoping to find something he could use against Nature. He was an alpha byzan. Most of them were byzan. In his mind, that made them strong enough

to handle this challenge. He drew all of the energy he could muster and put it into a fire spell.

Flames flew out of Wade and surrounded Nature's shield.

Nature vanished inside it; the shield went down, releasing smoke and a mild wave of heat.

Denied the opportunity to see if it would have worked, Wade cursed ferociously. "You darn cheater!"

Nature reappeared in front of him, closer, and fought fire with fire.

Wade got his shield up in time and deflected it, sending it right back at her.

Nature absorbed it this time, laughing at him. "You may be byzan, but you'll never be as strong as I am."

Kyle fired at her, using his new knockout tracker gift. He'd only used it successfully once before.

Nature absorbed the energy through her barrier. She sneered at him. "That won't work on me, either."

"How about this?!" Kyle threw another knockout spell and then followed it up with two more blasts of his freeze ability.

Nature absorbed the knockout again and then used her shield to deflect Kyle's freeze spells. They bounced into the counter and hit Dog, who was taking cover with his cat. Both of them froze in place.

Kyle let the demon inside have complete control as he rushed forward and let out his most powerful spell. The pain clouds surrounded Nature's shield but couldn't get through. It rebounded into the entire team, drawing cries and shouts.

Kyle quickly ran behind the counter to clear a line of fire for the others and to allow his energy bank to recharge.

Nature advanced angrily.

"Now!" Theo shouted at the two men who were behind the counter.

Gio and Nero placed the jumper cables onto the battery and the steel rod that Theo had laid out near the entrance of the mess. Electricity shot through the wire, knocking Theo into the wall. Sparks shot up through Nature's shield and gave off thick smoke, but it still didn't fall.

Gio and Nero rushed out and grabbed Theo, dragging him behind the counter. Other than Theo's gun, they didn't have gifts or a defense.

Biff darted toward Nature while firing his gun. "There has to be a way to get through!"

Jayda ran forward with her gun up and fury on her face. "Lower your shield, damn it! Face me like a man!"

They both unloaded their magazines and darted away.

Kenn tossed three small personal incendiary devices and then turned away as they exploded an instant later. He had put them on the shortest trigger possible.

Nature was jarred by the three explosions. Her barrier became cloudy again, but still didn't fall.

Greg remembered his demon telling him that no one recovered from a hybrid death spell. He fired one at Nature while covering Kenn.

Nature's shield didn't react, but she did. Her eyes narrowed; a cruel smile came to her lips.

The men emptied their mags as Nature advanced.

Greg felt it coming. He tried to bring his shield back up in time and failed. Fire ran along his body, dropping him to the floor.

Lisa and Erin both ran forward, screaming and firing their guns in his defense.

Gifts began to disappear as Nature tossed out a weak interruption spell. It wouldn't hold them long. She was already exhausted from how many times she had hit them with these spells since they entered limbo.

On the bridge, Ray had been watching everything. He activated a dive, hoping to throw Nature off but also to finish balancing from the heavy ice that was still growing along the walls.

Bodies slid across the mess as shouts rang out and magic flew through the cold air.

The submarine leveled out a few seconds later and the fight resumed.

Lisa and Erin worked together and dragged Greg out of the line of fire.

They stayed next to him as he tried to recover from the second-degree burns that were popping out all over his skin. It wasn't the first time he'd felt this way. That allowed Greg to fight the pain and get to his feet.

Zack stayed in front of Angela, with his sniper rifle in hand. *All I need is one opening.* If her shield went down for even an instant, he was ready.

Marc got back into the fight. He tossed a sonic blast, aiming for the bottom of her shield, where he was hoping it might be weak.

Everyone ducked the rebound. Nothing was getting through.

Nature tossed out a force spell and knocked Marc into the wall of the mess.

Adrian ran to the front line with energy ready. He prepared to fire his new gift, though he wasn't sure what it was. The door had only opened a few seconds ago in his mind.

Next to Adrian, Trent had figured out he wasn't scared of being a descendant. He just wanted to retain his humanity as much as possible. In a moment like this, he was grateful to be different. He adjusted his aim and threw his strongest spell at the same time as Adrian, merging the two gifts.

The doubled hit landed on Nature's barrier and rattled it, forcing her to take a step backward.

Kyle was surprised that Trent had been smart enough to try that. *Why didn't I think of it?*

Angela stared at Trent. *He is anything but dumb.*

“Incoming!” Thomas pulled the pin on the grenade. They were his favorite weapons now after watching Angela kill the shark that had been hunting him.

The grenade slid to a stop right up against Nature’s shield.

Gus ran up behind her and hit the shield with his handheld flamethrower and the small electric baton at the same time to keep her distracted.

Mel stayed in front of Angela and fired the dart gun into the shield. Isabel had loaded it with darts that contained triple the normal amount of drugs.

Cody blasted her with sonic streams from the side.

Nature roared. She expanded her barrier and shoved Gus out into the hallway. The grenade rolled over the mess floor toward Mel.

Isabel ran over and kicked it.

The grenade exploded against Nature’s shield, bringing it down.

Zack brought his rifle up...

Nature rotated, only leaving him a small target.

Zack fired three times in rapid succession.

All three slugs plunged into Nature’s weak thigh, splattering blood down her leg and across the mess floor.

Nature immediately fired back, sending razor-sharp sticks that took the form of knives as they flew toward Zack.

Zack brought up his shield and caught most of the knives. He brought up another shield inside it and then let go. Sticks clattered to the ground.

Nature quickly brought up another shield and then another inside of it as she screamed in disappointed rage and pain.

Reloaded now, Gus again fired into Nature's barrier while standing in the hallway.

None of it got through. Bullets bounced off her shield and pinged down the hallway, hitting the bunk room door.

Inside the bunk room, Charlie listened to the fight with multiple shields up over the babies. He tried not to feel bad for being in here. If his mom and dad lost this fight, he would be the only defense the innocent kids had. *Not that I'll be much help. If mom can't handle this, then I'm definitely screwed.*

"I think we're screwed, boss!" Zack was cursing himself for not being able to do more damage.

Greg pushed Mel out of the way as he reengaged. He stabbed his knife into Nature's shield repeatedly, trying to distract her again.

Nature held onto his knife and smacked into Greg with her outer barrier, knocking him across the mess floor.

Wade fired another spell, marveling over the giant fireball that emerged once again. Being a byzan alpha had its privileges.

The fireball landed on the shield and began to burn through it.

Nature brought up a wall of ice along the inside and melted the fire.

Wade groaned in frustration. “Somebody kill that hag!”

“Hag?!” Nature snarled at him over the insult.

Marc tried to get to his feet, but the hit he’d taken robbed him of the strength. He couldn’t even lift a shield as Nature focused her fury on him.

Kenn dropped on top of Marc, protecting him with his body. His gifts were out; he couldn’t lift a shield.

Angela brought up a shield around both men as Nature’s pain wave reached them. She absorbed it easily and barely felt any discomfort from the different levels. It was a relief, and a concern that she didn’t have time to explore.

The Eagles regrouped to do it all over again.

Furious, Nature sent out a command to Adrian. “Kill them all!”

Adrian could feel his gifts wanting to respond to her order. It was frightening to suddenly not be sure if he could control himself. It was also infuriating. *I was made to control Nature, not the other way around.* Adrian concentrated and opened the door that Marc had noticed in his mind. “You will do as I command!” Adrian sent out the mental blast.

It hit Nature’s barrier and rattled it again, but she didn’t pause or retreat. She fired back at him in fury.

Trent stepped in front of Adrian in automatic defense like he had been taught in Eagle training. As Nature's shutdown spell settled over his skin and Jayda began to scream, Trent shut his eyes. "That's a pass."

He sank to the floor.

Biff ran over and tried to heal Trent.

Jayda snapped. Horrible screams and bright orange flames burst out of her and surrounded Nature's shield in a fiery barrier. It began to burn through the layers, giving all of them hope.

Nature lifted another new shield inside that one and then let the others go. The flames that had been trapped inside rolled out, hitting Jayda full on.

Jayda quickly dropped to the ground and rolled to put herself out. She marveled at how calm she was considering it was fire and then she came up firing. "You leave them alone!" Smoldering embers smoked from her clothes and her hair as she sent a powerful blast of heat.

Nature stopped and braced, absorbing the blast.
It's time to get serious.

Angela felt the moment of no return arrive. It was obvious they weren't going to be able to get through Nature's shield by force unless they merged hits and that would trigger an all-out battle. Despite what she'd told her fighters so they would give it their all, she really did need a discussion.

Angela pulled the baggie from her pocket and held it up. "I'll crush this antler. You'll be in pain forever!"

Nature barely heard the threat as she stalked toward Marc again.

Angela pulled the antler piece out of the baggie and squeezed on the end of it. A small splinter cracked off.

Nature flinched at the pain and turned. "That's mine!"

"Not unless you take it from me." Angela drew the threat to herself to give her Eagles time to recover.

"Challenge accepted!" Nature understood what Angela was doing. In an instant, her barriers lowered and ugly hits began flying out.

She caught Wade and Marc in the first blast with a pain spell that immediately dropped them to their knees.

The next pain spell swarmed over Kyle and Piper, drawing screams and proving that he wasn't immune to every level of that magic.

Nature belched out more pain spells, disabling the men and women who were trying to line up in front of Angela to offer a defense.

Adrian also tried to recover and get between them. "Run, Angie!"

Nature blasted him with pain and then directed flames toward Greg and Kenn. The men were hit and engulfed in seconds.

Their friends and teammates used their gifts to help the screaming men, leaving Angela mostly unprotected from Nature's unbridled fury. People

were down all over the mess now, most of them with serious burns.

Isabel stood strong between them. “You can’t have her!”

“I admire your bravery.” Nature knocked Isabel out of the way.

Isabel slid down the mess wall, groaning.

Nature rushed up to Angela and leaned down into her face. “You’ve lost it all!”

“You’d think that.” Angela smiled coldly. “Now, Bret.”

Bret dropped his shield and lunged forward from Angela’s back while she ducked, thrusting him forward.

The long knife went deep into Nature’s throat. He ripped it downward as he hit the ground, shutting his eyes against the green blood now spraying all over them both.

Angela rose as Nature fell; she covered Bret and herself with a dense shield as blood began to hit the floor. “Surrender or die right here.”

Chapter Thirty-Three
Life Goals

1

“**S**he did it.” Marc’s shock overrode the pain, dulling it. He exchanged a triumphant look with Angela. “You did it!”

Nature saw his reaction. Fury spewed out as ice, freezing her wound.

“She’s healing! Watch out!”

Greg and Kyle fired together.

Nature slowed time in panic. Her glowing orbs went over the relieved humans in scorn. She narrowed in on the strongest. “I have time for one. Who do I take from you?”

Angela battled through the time slow as if they were back in the swimming pool on their cruise ship. She expanded her shield, pushing.

Bret helped her; the others who were able to also joined them, forcing time back toward Nature.

“Horrid humans!” Nature’s throat was still dripping her essence onto the floor, where it steamed against the ice. Pain was making it hard to move, to pull energy to heal herself. She focused on Marc, reaching out with branch-like arms and twiggy fingers that gleamed with razor sharp nails.

Angela used her byzan mind’s fast speed. *You’ll die if you do that. Honor our deal. Talk!*

Nature hated fear. She loathed any weakness in herself. "I am immortal. He is not!"

"Liar!" Angela was already teamed with her sniper. *Now, Zack. Same spot.*

Zack had still been tracking Nature on his scope. Angela pushing time allowed him to fire normally.

Nature fell forward at the three new hot slugs in her injured leg.

Her shriek of rage frightened the people who were alert enough to know what had caused it. Over half of their fighting force was down.

Angela pushed harder with her barrier, forcing the moment. "Truce to talk or we'll finish it all right here!"

Nature rose, becoming the haughty, untouchable entity they'd first met. Her shield came up, glinting at them.

Everyone tensed for the battle to restart.

Angela didn't want that. "I'm sorry for your pain."

Nature spun, roaring. "You caused it!"

Bret kept his shield over Angela, but he didn't need to stay camouflaged and run through his energy faster. She definitely knew he was here now.

"I'll fix it." Angela held up the antler shards. The wound in Nature's throat had almost sealed itself. Only tiny green drops were coming out now. That clearly wasn't the way to kill her.

Nature glared. "You can't be trusted."

"Says the chick who came here on false pretenses." Angela chose the largest antler piece

and tossed it gently, forcing Nature to catch it or risk it breaking further as it hit the ground.

Nature caught it. She let go of time and her shield, unable to keep holding it all and react.

The awful pop slapped into everyone, causing ears to ache and stomachs to tighten.

Greg quickly put a hand over Lisa's stomach to protect the baby.

Bret's shield bent inward but held.

Nature's beautiful lips curled. "Abominations."

"Bitch."

"Thank you."

Angela chuckled. That was a purely female response.

They studied each other in respect, fear, and hatred.

Angela gave first, no longer using the fist. It was time for the open palm. "The old stories say you can't regrow parts, only heal them. Will you be able to reattach it? There wasn't any information on that."

Nature didn't want to give them any more knowledge than they already had, but she sensed Angela was going to make a grand gesture here. She was curious what it would be. "After I rest, it will seal as if never parted from me."

Nature glared toward the wolf that was still frozen in place. Only his moving chest said he was alive.

"We have medics left that you haven't murdered yet. We'll help you heal it."

Nature wasn't impressed. "You cannot be trusted!"

"I want to go home!" Angela's anger came forth for the first time. "You lied, cheated, and stole from me! Agree to my terms or I'll make it my life's goal to sever your head from your body! Then I'll feed it to my Dog!"

Nature flinched at the shout, intimidated even though it was humiliating.

Angela calmed her tone and her expression, but the rage stayed in her eyes. "You'll notice there's a piece missing."

"Give it to me!"

"I will. When we get home. I buried it on the island before we left. No one else knows where it is. Even I barely remember. I marked a tree." Angela smiled softly, coldly. "Don't make me hunt you. Because I will. I've ascended and descended. It's only a short matter of time before I come to your realm and attack you while you sleep, while you feed, while you birth your children."

"That's not possible!"

"None of this is possible, and yet, here we are." Angela took a single step back and gestured politely. "I invite you to sit and be healed, *if* we're able to do it. It's not like we've practiced this before."

Nature knew Angela could be trusted to honor her deals, even though she'd called her untrustworthy. Angela was the first honest human she'd ever observed. *She's also the first human who*

was able to tempt me enough to force a moment like this. I destroyed the others who challenged me and not a single word was spoken.

Curious, and now mostly healed, Nature went to a table and perched on it with her body tensed for flight. “A truce has been struck while we discuss the terms of a surrender.”

Magic flowed around the two females, making the survivors tense.

Angela went to the table across from Nature and leaned against it, giving her aching spine a small break. She didn’t take her eyes from the enemy as Shawn and Cody approached them. Shawn’s burns were healing, but Nature could easily give him more.

Selina stayed on Shawn’s heels, glaring at Nature and Angela. “I don’t like this.”

“Shush now.” Shawn smiled at Nature, using the old charm he’d relied on to seduce new women in their camp. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

Nature roared at him, mouth opening to twice its size. Gleaming sharp teeth clicked together.

Shawn had stopped. He forced another smile as he made his feet move. “My, what a lovely grill you have.”

Angela laughed. She couldn’t help it.

Nature didn’t understand why the neutered male hadn’t fled.

“We’re getting used to fantasy being our reality.” Shawn pointed at his belt. “I have medical supplies in my bag. No weapons.”

Nature observed suspiciously as Shawn unzipped the fanny pack and pulled out packages of gauze.

“I’ll remove those slugs first, unless there’s a better way to handle it?”

Shawn’s questioning, polite demeanor encouraged Nature to respond. “I absorb and process it.”

So she’s been shot before. Shawn continued. “Will it go faster or easier if I remove it?”

“Yes.”

“This will hurt.” Shawn didn’t want to startle someone so powerful. Even wounded and forced into this truce, Shawn could feel how deadly she still was.

Nature snorted and spread her legs to shift her bleeding thigh toward him.

Shawn’s body lit up. Wood began growing in his pants.

Shawn smiled at her in deep gratitude. “Thank you.”

Nature stared back emotionlessly.

Shawn leaned over her perfect thigh and wiped the green blood away so he could see the bullets.

Nature glared at the humans now watching her, expecting a betrayal.

“How do we get out of limbo?”

Nature sneered at Angela. “Why would I tell you that?”

“You want to be whole again. I know.” Angela rubbed her spine and refused to think of the dead children she was still mourning.

Nature didn't seem to feel it as Shawn dug out slug after slug, dropping them to the floor.

Selina stayed close, scowling, with her finger alongside the trigger of her gun.

Angela tried again. “Tell me how to get us home.”

“It's not worth it!”

Angela understood. “You have your biggest enemies trapped in limbo where they'll never be able to reach you again after this. You have some of your missing antler back. You can resume terrorizing the survivors and try to forget this embarrassment.”

Angela laughed coldly as Nature nodded arrogantly. “Besides the nuclear weapons that I *will* use, you've forgotten our friends and family. They'll know it was you. They'll figure it out easily. We vanished at sea. Every human on the planet will connect it to the triangles. And then the hunting will begin. My heirs are more relentless than I am. They're also less forgiving.”

Angela held out the shard she'd broken off the antler, giving it to Cody. When Shawn was finished with her thigh, Cody would work on her antler. The wound in her throat was gone now. Her rate of healing was astounding and frightening. They really didn't have the advantage here.

“Your threats mean nothing to me!”

Shawn flinched at the anger but kept working.

“Liar.” Angela could tell how nervous Nature was to be here in the flesh. Angela was surprised that it had worked out so well. Her lids narrowed. “Unless you wanted this to happen.”

Nature studied her slyly, greedily. “I am willing to deal...”

Adrian tensed.

Angela rotated toward him.

Adrian sighed deeply. “I’m sorry. She saw my weak spot.”

Angela glowered at him. “Don’t do it.”

Adrian faced Nature. “I want the normals protected from my kind and from *you*.”

Nature grinned with that doublewide mouth.

Adrian shuddered. “I’ll do it. I’ll fight on your side.”

Eagles began shouting at Adrian.

Nature held out a branch hand. “Swear on it!”

“You first.” Adrian came forward through the glares and curses now hitting him from almost everyone.

“I will stop hunting the normals.”

“And?”

Nature gloated toward Angela. “And I’ll stop that one from enslaving them.”

“No!” Angela screamed, eyes lighting up bright red.

Adrian shifted between them, face and voice begging for her to forgive him. “Don’t break the truce. She’ll kill us all this time.”

Nature had the advantage. She watched Shawn heal her leg in satisfaction and relief. She really hated pain. It was too effective in battle. *I'll have an armored shell the next time we meet.*

Angela had been reading Nature's thoughts all along. She revealed that now. "Swear off your hunt for vengeance and there doesn't have to be a next time."

"Never!"

Angela calmed, disgusted. "Fine. Let Cody heal your antler while you tell me how to get out of here. Then you can get lost and we'll do the same."

Nature was crafty and furious. She was also concerned and weaker than she appeared. She knelt so Cody could reach her antlers. She held the large piece out to him with a glare. She didn't care that he was young. *It's often the young ones who are more apt to bite than their parents.*

"I agree."

"Never without permission!"

Angela hid a smirk and studied her, reaching for a five-fer.

As the negotiations continued, men and women on the floor kept trying to heal and help their teammates or their loved one. Small healing sessions were ongoing throughout the mess.

Angela didn't have time to determine who might need her help. She knew better than to take her attention off the dangerous entity now watching to see if she made that mistake. She hated it, but her team was on their own until the negotiation was

finished. “We don’t know most of the rules or laws that govern us. How many are there?”

“There are 10.”

“We know four. Will you tell us the others? We can’t live by them if we don’t know then.”

Nature’s brows came together. “You’re abiding by the old ways?”

“As much as we can, yes.”

Nature looked around at the wounded people. “You have enforcers, but none are here.”

Angela nodded. “What is rule five?”

“You’ve already broken it more times than can be counted!” Nature scanned Lisa’s slender body. “Normals and angels are not allowed to mix!”

Well, that explains why some people believed that in the old world. Angela lifted a brow. “Why not?”

“It dilutes the bloodlines. All your hybrids will become the majority and then the parent lines that created such perfection will be lost.”

That made sense to most of them, though they all agreed there was enough space for both pure lines and hybrids to coexist. “But if everyone was mixed, we might have peace.”

Nature scoffed as Cody placed the second antler piece into the right position. “If that were true, why can’t your colonies of the same kind coexist?”

Angela sighed. “Because we’re not really the same on the inside.”

Nature's scorn dripped from her voice. "Even those who are the same cannot fight the need to kill, to destroy. It is the worst part of your design."

"I agree. What's the sixth rule?"

"The quest for more power always leads to corruption and death, never satisfaction."

Angela frowned. "We've learned that one."

"Do not share gifts! Have you learned that?!"

Angela wasn't scared of the shout. "Yes, but we'll continue to do so as I see fit for our survival."

Nature inclined her head in recognition. "As the alpha, that right belongs to you."

Angela kept it going, calming things while trying to get what they needed. "What else?"

"Enforcers must keep the peace. That is their sole purpose."

Angela paused. "Why did you make rules for humanity if you want them gone?"

Nature's brows came together again. "There was no choice. All life forms must have laws of existence. The Creator made it so."

Angela listened to the moans and grunts of her crew, but she still couldn't help them yet. "What's the ninth law?"

Nature refused to show sympathy for those who'd been injured. "Consuming lifeforces is forbidden, even to heal."

"What about flesh?"

Nature frowned. "All life forms eat flesh."

"Herbivores don't. Plants are made of fibers."

“Those fibers are the flesh of the plant. All life forms consume each other. Why would humans be different?”

Angela hated that answer. “Because we’re civilized!”

Nature scoffed. “Really? Where? You destroy each other without a second thought while learning absolutely nothing from the experience. That is the opposite of civility.”

Angela couldn’t argue with that. She didn’t try.

Nature considered Angela’s threat to nuke the island, but she didn’t ask about it. She didn’t want to remind Angela of that.

Angela hadn’t forgotten. It just wasn’t time to use it.

Ray’s voice came over the intercom during the pause. “I’m going to surface now.”

People held onto whatever was around them or each other as the front end of the sub lifted and began taking them to the surface.

Angela and Nature braced their legs against the tilting floor so they didn’t have to reveal a weakness in front of an enemy.

The sub broke the surface a few seconds later and bobbed back into balance.

The negotiations continued.

“Is there anything we can offer you to change your plan for the Creator?”

Nature glared at her. “How can you protect the one who gave you such an awful destiny?”

Angela shrugged. “The very gift of life itself requires that duty. The conditions that were placed upon us are harsh, but as the Creator, He has the right to place those conditions. Without Him, I wouldn’t exist.”

“That is unfair.”

“No argument. And the tenth law?”

Nature stiffened as Cody’s magic sealed the antler together, sending a warm glow of relief through her tired body. “Manipulating time and dimensions is only allowed for survival.”

Angela tested a theory she’d long held. “It was cruel of you to mark our children for that spell.”

“It was fitting. Only the family lines can accomplish it.”

Angela smiled. “So it was you. All of these rules, these curses, are your doing.”

Nature’s eyes narrowed. “I did not give you the duty of dying for the normals, though you do that daily without persuasion. That came from creation.”

Angela tried to confirm another theory. “Because we’re being punished.”

Nature nodded. “For corrupting His precious creation. Even I am not able to escape His wrath on that.”

“We gave them the dark side that caused so much violence.”

“That is unclear.” Nature glared again. “It is possible that you only added to it. Even beasts are savage to survive. It may be an inherent trait given to ensure the success of a fragile host.” Nature was

bitter and growing more weary with every word. She rarely conversed with humans. It was exhausting.

Angela pushed again, keeping Nature's attention on her and not on Cody. "Are you planning to kill Him when He returns?"

"Yes!" Nature didn't care if her enemies knew it. "You'll bring Him back to His doom. Even now, I'm learning how to battle in this form, how to spot weaknesses, how to barter for a win. You have taught me much already."

"What do you plan to do after you kill the Creator?"

Nature saw no reason to lie. "I will remove His restrictions and ascend to rule the kingdom in His place."

Angela wasn't surprised by that even though it was terrifying. "Do you plan to allow any human survivors?"

Nature's lips thinned into a line.

Angela understood. She would wipe the earth clean until it was a lush and beautiful paradise that contained only animal life forms; humanity would cease to exist. Angela wasn't angry about that. She didn't have time to waste on being emotional unless it gained something. "Tell me how to get home and let our time together be finished."

Nature gave in. She'd gotten most of what she wanted from this truce talk. She'd never expected them to surrender and they hadn't; neither had she. "I will send the cloud in one turn of the clock."

Angela pushed. “I want immunity from this ever being used against us again.”

“The clouds have patterns. I can only promise not to blow you into their path intentionally.”

That wasn’t good enough for Angela. “If we hit one by accident, you have to come right away and let us out.”

“Agreed.” Nature felt her wanting something else. “Say it and be done.”

Angela showed a softer side, trying to create a bond. “Stop hurting the water king. He suffers from mankind’s mistakes the same as nature. Make the sharks split up again. Give the whales a chance to live.”

Nature was surprised by the request. “Why do you care, beyond having a food source?”

“It hurts me inside to see you hunt them. The ocean king wants it to stop. I’m sworn to him, as you know.”

“Willingly.”

Angela nodded. “I would have sworn my power to nature when I die, but you took over her life and have been holding her hostage since you came down. Never without permission has to apply to you, too.”

Angela went on in the stunned silence. “Marc will give his power to nature if you leave her and go back where you came from.”

Nature’s fury erupted. “I will never go back without complete control! He took me from my family! And then He took me! Strange things were

ripped from my form and went on to be devoid of compassion. I was alone!” Nature shoved Cody away as he finished healing the final shard into place. “No deal! Ever!”

Angela could feel the sadness of the nature goddess who was trapped in her own form. The Creator’s wife was running the show. She was helpless against that type of power.

Cody felt it, too. For one brief instant, he acted his age. Cody’s eyes lit up bright blue. “Get out of her! That’s not your life to live!”

Nature saw his eyes and recognized his lineage. All hell broke loose again.

People ran toward them, lifting guns and drawing energy for spells.

Angela brought up a shield over Cody.

Nature fired a death spell. It hit Angela’s barrier and melted it.

Nature fired again.

Cate jumped in front of Cody.

The spell hit the little girl and went right through her shield as screams echoed.

“No!”

“Cate!” Cody’s control over his emotions snapped. He fired his own alpha death spell, hitting Nature before she could get her shield back up.

Nature stiffened at the hit, groaning in pain and fear.

Cody fired again. “Die!”

Nature got her shield up this time. She tried to absorb the hit to replenish her energy.

She failed. Her shield took the hit and shuddered.

Angela whistled. “Give him some support, Eagles!”

The descendants with energy left fired their strongest spells at the same time.

The dozen hits merged as they landed.

Nature’s shield vanished, leaving her open to Zack’s rifle.

Adrian brought up his shield around Nature, stunning everyone.

“Get out of here.” Adrian knew he couldn’t hold it for long.

Nature was also stunned that Adrian would protect her even though he’d made a deal to do that.

“Your permission to be here has been revoked.” Angela glared, stopping herself from firing anyway. “Go blow a cloud our way and try to remember that we have more right to be down here causing trouble than you do!”

Nature growled. Then she calmed and began to fade. “I will expect you to honor our deal, as well. You have one hour upon arrival and then I’ll come back and none of your abominations will survive!”

“Agreed.”

Nature faded from sight. Then she left the submarine, angry but satisfied with what she’d gotten.

Everyone was relieved when she left without continuing the fight. They were all about out of energy.

Cody and Bret ran to Cate, shooting orbs toward her body.

Marc joined them, along with Shawn.

Kenn hoped they could save the girl, but his rage had a different target. He pointed his gun at Adrian. “You traitor!”

Adrian didn’t move and trigger Kenn’s anger. He didn’t have the strength left to defend himself. He waited to see his fate. *She can betray me here and finally be done with all of it.* He regarded Angela, waiting for her to pick.

Angela sent healing orbs into the merged stream that was lighting up Cate’s little body. Tears were falling over her, as well as prayers and curses when she didn’t respond.

Shawn knelt by her and began CPR.

Cate coughed as air was forced back into her lungs.

Angela sighed in relief. *Magic isn’t perfect by itself. We need normal methods, just like we need the normals.* She stopped using energy, aware of being on the edge of drained. They would all need to recharge after this.

“Angie!”

Angela smiled at Adrian, ignoring Kenn’s shout. “Very nice.”

Kenn stared at her. “What?”

“He did exactly what I needed him to. I’ll never punish him for that.”

“He betrayed us! He helped our enemy!”

“He created a bond with Nature. She’ll trust him now. When the final battle comes, we’ll use that to our advantage.”

“You knew he was going to do that?”

Angela frowned. “Of course. He never would have done it on his own. He hates Nature more than Marc does.”

“Not possible.” Marc’s rage was white hot. It would never go away.

Adrian didn’t argue, but Angela was right. He’d watched Nature kill off his women, his family, his country, and his camp. Marc was just getting started on those totals.

Adrian turned toward the exit. “I’ll stand watch over the top.” He wanted to know the instant the cloud arrived.

Kenn was coming to conclusions that both relieved him and scared him. “That’s why you’ve kept him alive all this time. It has nothing to do with Marc.”

“On the contrary.” Angela smiled warmly at Marc as he held his groaning daughter and tried to forget how it had felt to watch her die. “Everything I do is connected to Marc. That has been true for all of our lives. It will never change.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Does That Include You?

1

“We need some help over here!”

Wade hurried over to help with Trent. Jayda and Biff were both drained and on the verge of being in danger from using too much energy trying to save him. Trent’s body was covered in burns. Wade didn’t know if he would be able to help the man or not. He was low, too.

Angela took charge. “Selina, go help Charlie prep the bunk room medical ward for multiple patients. Stay with him.”

Selina heard an unspoken order to keep Charlie safe while assisting him. She gave Shawn a quick smile and then hurried out of the mess. Shawn had several minor injuries. She knew he would be taken care of after the more important cases, so the sooner they got the bunk room ready to handle things, the sooner he would be seen to.

Angela saw blood dripping onto the floor. She pointed at Cody. “Help Gus.” He had been impaled by one of Nature’s branch knives through his big bicep.

Cody hurried over, drawing on the last of his energy. He was almost drained now from saving Cate and battling with Nature.

Angela scanned again, this time searching for anyone who was still in danger. She waved a quick hand and broke the freeze spell over Dog and his cat.

Dog groaned, dropping to the floor to recover, while the furious cat hissed and took off out into the corridor.

“Sit down until we can get to you if you have a head injury.” Angela scanned again for serious injuries.

She found two. “Mel, take Thomas and Theo to the bunk room.”

Thomas had shrapnel injuries along one side of his face. Theo had burns from being electrocuted. Both men were alert enough to help Mel get them on their feet.

“Stay in there and help if you like.”

Mel gave Angela a sad smile. “I wouldn’t.”

Angela winced. She hated what would soon happen, but there was little choice in the matter. Mel had made her decision.

Angela continued the triage. “If you think you have a broken bone, hold up a hand.”

She was dismayed by how many people held up a hand or let out a groan. *Nature knows we can’t heal broken bones. She delivered those injuries intentionally.*

Angela waved at Kenn. “Help them into the chairs in the bunk room. Keep all of the broken bones together. It will make it easier for us to put the casts on them. If you find a bone sticking out of the skin, call me.”

Kenn was only covered in bruises and aches from the pain spells. He snapped off a sharp salute, grinning. “You got it!”

He hurried over to Isabel, who had taken one of the hardest hits from Nature. The woman had put her body between the enemy and Angela, earning respect from him and everyone else. “Where are you hurt?”

While Kenn helped Isabel to her feet and showed her how to cradle her possibly broken wrist, Angela went over to check on two of their men who weren’t responding yet. All of their people had burns and small splinters, but Greg and Kyle looked like Trent. She could tell both men were breathing, but the blisters and puncture wounds were hard to view.

Kyle glanced up at her. “I’ll be okay. I’m just catching my breath.”

Angela chuckled. “Take your time.” She was relieved that none of his injuries appeared serious, though his oddly shaped wrist was a concern.

Angela knelt next to Greg. Two of his fingers were bent all the way back. They would have to be re-broken and set. He was also covered in blackened clothes and ugly, second-degree burns that were going to cause him a lot of pain as they healed. Most

of them were out of energy now. A lot of the non-life-threatening injuries would be left to heal on their own.

“I’m not dead.” Greg finally opened his eye and regarded Angela. As their eyes connected, magic sparked, showing both of them a flash of the future. It was the same one Angela had shared with Adrian, but now, Greg was in his place, helping her raise her daughter and get through Marc’s absence.

The vision vanished.

Angela educated Greg before he could apologize or try to convince her. Both options were flying through his brain at the moment. “I gave you a better future.”

Greg focused on her in open longing. “I still want that one.”

Angela’s warmth fled. Ice replaced it. “Never.”

Greg sighed; he locked it all away. “Okay. I can be content with that.”

Angela carefully rose off the floor. “We have more broken bones over here.”

Gio and Nero came over to help with that.

Angela scanned again, triaging minor injuries. Nature’s pain spells were still hitting everyone, causing shivers and shudders and the occasional groan. Everyone also had gashes and slices that would need stitches, including herself.

Angela tugged her sleeve over her arm to cover the jagged 4-inch wound that wasn’t very deep and had hardly bled at all. She would go last. “How is he?”

Wade leaned back from Trent, completely drained now. “He’ll live. It will take a while for the rest of the burns to heal.”

Jayda and Biff hugged, thrilled with the news.

“You two go make sure Charlie has a place ready for Trent. As soon as he does, we’ll get him moved. Bring a stretcher back with you.”

Biff and Jayda were also covered in small splinters, bruises, and other minor injuries that needed to be handled. They barely noticed it as they hurried off to do what Angela ordered. They were eager to get Trent under Charlie’s watchful eyes in the ward.

Angela went over to Cate, who was being held by Marc and congratulated by everyone around them. “Good job not trusting Nature.”

Cate snorted as she pushed up into a sitting position in Marc’s lap. “We all knew Lady Snot can’t be trusted.”

People laughed. Their amusement faded as Cate unzipped her jacket and began unfastening a bulky double vest.

All of the men who’d worn one in battle knew how hard it was to move and sometimes even to breathe with all of that weight. They were shocked that Cate had been able to do it.

All of the women who saw it smiled at the little girl in approval. A child was demonstrating how strong a female could be in the face of danger. The men in Safe Haven often saw that from the adult females, but it didn’t always garner the type of

respect it deserved. Seeing it from a child would drive in the point and help the Eagles accept more women willingly onto the teams.

“You did a really good job. I’m glad we’re friends.” Bret was also bruised and slightly bleeding in places, but he was in complete awe of Cate, who had copied his shield duty after only a few days.

Cate made a face and pointed. “You have to go away from me! Your dad went against the alpha. He’ll keep breaking the rules. You can’t stay with us.”

Silence fell through the mess even though people didn’t stop working. Everyone was surprised by her reaction.

Bret was the most surprised. “Why not?”

Tears came to Cate’s eyes. “Because I’ll learn to love you and then you’ll hurt me, like Adrian did to the alpha. It’s what Mitchels do.”

Marc was incredibly proud of his daughter right then.

Angela met his eye. *Now you have what Adrian promised. You have a bond with her that can’t be broken.*

Angela focused on Cate. “Bret isn’t bad yet, but he will be if we push him away for things he hasn’t done. He needs our love and our guidance.”

“But he’s a Mitchel!”

Angela contemplated the man who was now patrolling the top of the submarine in self-imposed isolation this time. “We don’t punish people for

their family's choices. If we did that, then all of us would have to be locked away."

Cate accepted that answer, mostly because of her mother.

Bret waited for Cate's reaction.

Cate glared up at him. "Well, are you gonna help me up or not?!"

Bret hurried to give her hand while the adults laughed, and Marc blew out an audible sigh. It was also a lesson for him. He and Adrian really did need to let go of their hatred for each other. That would be easier when there was distance between them and time dulled the pain of everything that had happened.

"Why did she leave us alive?" Wade had a lot of questions. "Why did we leave her alive?"

Marc realized Wade was talking to him. "Nature did it intentionally, like Angela did. They both had to wait or they would have given away their hands."

Wade looked over at Angela. "What does she have left?"

Marc shrugged. "A lot, probably."

"What do *you* have left?"

Marc chose to be honest. "Very little." He gave Wade a small smile. "But it's more than I had when you pulled me out of that lab. Over time, it will grow."

Angela was pleased to hear that, but she didn't want them to believe this had been a win. "I may have doomed us in that final battle. She'll never let us get this close again."

Marc wasn't sure if he believed that anymore. Everything he and Angela had predetermined about Nature had turned out to be accurate. She was vain, weak to feeling pain or any other human affliction, and she was brilliant. She'd come here and gained several advantages, and she had been very careful not to kill anyone, or at least not to give them an injury the descendants couldn't heal. Angela had chosen not to hurt Nature so badly that she wouldn't honor their deal. Two brilliant minds had met and only a few serious injuries had resulted from it. *That's because they both got something they wanted.*

Angela nodded.

"What did Nature get?" Zack didn't think it had been much.

Cody rattled it off. "Teaching future generations to love and respect her, her antler healed, and no nuke sent to the island."

"Yes. That island is more special than she's led us to believe." Angela was glad to have that theory confirmed. "She also got Adrian to agree to fight on her side, willingly."

"Plus she knows how we'll fight her now." Zack still thought they should have tried to kill Nature, but he'd followed Angela's rules and only wounded her.

"What did we get out of this?" Wade had only counted four things. He was curious to know if he had missed something.

“I think I pulled a seven-fer.” Angela glanced around, unable to contain a small gloating smile. “It might be a personal record.”

Trent came to enough to force out a reply. “Let’s hear it. I know I didn’t get all these new scars for nothing.”

That killed Angela’s gloating. *I deserved that.* “As long as she honors our deal, we’re going home now.”

She waited for them to let out their small cheers. Even the mission men were eager now, but she doubted that would last through their first full day back in camp.

“That was one. Two was learning the rest of the basic laws for magic users. Three was learning who made those laws. It wasn’t all Nature. The Creator chose our destiny, or punishment, depending upon how you want to see it. I view it as both.” Angela gestured toward the top of the submarine, where Adrian was now listening mentally through his connection with Marc. “The normals will no longer be hunted by Nature, though she’ll probably get someone else to do it for her and she already planned to kill me anyway. I’m not positive if that one counts.”

But it does to me. Most of the normals on this ship had been killed. It was a preview of what was coming for all of them in the future if they couldn’t find a way to coexist. “Number five is that we found some of her weaknesses and we know how to get in a few hits. The downside is that she’ll have armor

next time and probably more minions to fight for her. She's scared of us now. That makes her more dangerous."

The Eagles considered that, except for Wade, who was waiting to hear the other gains. He was positive one of them was connected to the mission men.

Angela hugged Cate as the little girl came over to stand guard. Cate was out of energy. Cody had used hers to help the healing go faster. Angela was fascinated by how that had happened, but she wasn't dwelling on it right now. There would be time for it later. "Number six is personal. Everyone on this trip gained something and lost something that will influence their future in a positive way. Most of you already know some of those things, like Greg becoming a father in about five months."

The people who hadn't known congratulated the burned, one-eyed man who was now sitting up next to Kyle and listening.

"So what's the last one?"

Angela gestured. "Ask Kenn." He had just come back in from helping Gus to the bunk ward.

Kenn brought up the mental image of the map he had scroll dived for in the lab. "We just had another first. No one has ever had a meeting with Nature."

"I'm not sure that's true." Marc had caught Nature's thoughts. "She's been shot before. That means she's had contact with our kind before. Most likely it was a talk where she wasn't on the

offensive from the beginning. She was scared that this was a trap. I'm almost positive that's why she reacted so aggressively."

Kenn shrugged. "Well, it's a first for us. The government didn't let us have this type of information. We've now been to the weigh station and Hell, and we've had dealings with the Ocean King and the possessor of Nature. That deserves to be recognized."

"No doubt, but they're right. It's a six-fer." Angela shrugged.

"You got your seven." Wade stood and looked her in the eye. "You didn't have to remove Harry yourself and he died a hero."

People regarded Angela; a quiet coldness went through the mess. Most people didn't know why she had allowed Harry's death, but they did know she could have stopped it.

Angela didn't hide the pain in her voice. "The quest for more power has always been a problem with our kind. Most of us only want to use it for defense of our camp or our lives. Occasionally, the power hunt will get the best of one of us and we'll start chasing it just because we can. For a little while, that person is not a threat. After so many successes, however, the evolutions come so fast that even the enforcers can't keep them in line. The government labs didn't let very many byzan survive at one time. That was the reason that was given every time I've come across information on it. Harry's death was a hard choice, but I'd do it

again.” Angela let them see the complete truth this time. “I would do it *all* again. *Every single second.*”

Silence held as she left the mess. No one doubted her. They just weren’t sure how they were supposed to feel about it.

Kenn followed her out, now helping Kyle to the ward. “How was Kyle able to take so many more hits than the rest of us?”

“He’s immune to more.”

“Shawn and Greg, too?”

“More than them. His mate is an enforcer. She didn’t give him a mental child. She split her power with him.”

“How do you split a demon or a witch?”

“One half is good. The other isn’t. She gave Kyle the good half.”

Kyle let Kenn help him to a chair. “Jennifer battles the other half daily.”

Kenn was confused. “Can’t she just banish the bad half?”

Kyle shook his head. “Then she wouldn’t have gifts. She’s teaching the bad side to love and to be loved. So am I. It’s very time consuming and annoying.”

“Does this mean no more fog?” Zack had followed them, like most of the fighters were now doing.

“Yes. The fog and taking away our gifts were two separate spells. It was too much energy for her to use at the same time.” Angela smiled at Bret as he led Cate in. “You have one request.”

Bret wasn't sure that he had actually saved her life, but there was really only one thing he wanted. "I need to know who I am. Can you tell me that?"

Angela nodded. "We have a lab technician who can handle it for you as soon as we get back to Safe Haven."

Theo glanced up as Angela stopped near his cot. He still wanted a break from engineering, but he no longer wanted the adventure. *She gave me exactly what I asked for.*

"Yeah, sorry about that." Angela really was.

On the bridge, Ray was listening to them with his hand hovering over the radio. He was eager to call home, but their conversation had caught his attention. *She didn't give me what I wanted. She did worse to me.*

Ray realized Angela had put him in Grant's shoes. All he had done for most of this run was sit in this room and sail the ship. It made him feel small and useless. He now completely understood where Grant was coming from. *I hate it when she does that!*

He also loved it. *Adrian never would have been able to accomplish as much as she has. He doesn't dig into our souls as deeply.*

Ray also had a new perspective on the normals. Until now, he hadn't realized they could be dangerous, too. Letting Grant become a descendant wasn't his choice, but now Ray believed he could live with it either way. All of the normals who had

died during this run had been deadly even without training. Grant was more skilled than any of them. In a bad situation, he could already be counted on even though he didn't have magic to use. Ray understood that now.

Ray checked the radar and found it the same. His tension was growing again. He wasn't sure they could trust Nature to let them go. *But I do know we can trust Angela to get us out of it if Nature double-crosses us.*

Ray observed Angela on the monitor. She was gathering medical supplies and talking with people, calming them now that the action was over. Ray assumed she was trying to prepare them for going home. It would still be hard on the mission men, but Ray had faith that she could do it. *Anyone who can stand up to Nature and come out of it alive is a badass. Pregnant or not, crossing our boss is a very bad idea.*

2

“What if she doesn't send the cloud?”

Biff's question drew attention from the medicated people, reigniting the tension and the conversation.

Greg frowned. “How long is one turn of the clock?”

“An hour. We've gone through most of that. It won't be much longer now.” Angela patted the edge of the plaster strip she'd just wrapped around Greg's

wrist. He was the last broken bone patient to be handled; she was covered in white splatters.

The other injured patients had all been treated. Most of them were moving around restlessly. Everyone was worried that Nature had lied about letting them go.

“We’ll figure something out. No need to stress over it unless it happens.” Angela began cleaning up the bandages and garbage. Charlie had done a quick, good job with the wounded, but they’d all felt Harry’s absence. That loss would rise up every time they had a fight or the mission men gathered. Harry would never be forgotten.

“What do we tell the camp?” Kyle was used to collecting a cover story for their Eagle adventures. He often created those now, but this was beyond him.

Angela hadn’t fully decided yet. “Let’s hear some ideas.”

“We tell them the truth.” Wade knew he wouldn’t be able to keep it from Neil.

Kenn snorted. “They’ll never believe it.”

Wade shrugged. “Does that matter?”

Kenn nodded. “Maybe. When they think leadership is hiding something, things can get crazy.”

Wade grinned. “So we make something up, like engine trouble.”

People laughed at the joke.

It made others think about the nuclear sub and Angela’s threat.

Greg had a related concern. “What are we doing with the submarine?”

“We’re keeping it.” Angela had made that decision shortly after Nature arrived.

Greg tried to understand her choice. “For intimidation?”

“For defense.”

Greg had thought long and hard on this topic. “It might not work on her. Nature includes nuclear reactions.”

“If her shield is down, it’ll work.” Marc was sure of that.

Greg frowned. “Do you still believe we’ll need to use it?”

“No. It’s just an insurance policy.” Angela didn’t tell them she would scuttle the submarine at some point. She still believed it was too much power for any one group to have. *But I’ll keep it until I think we don’t need it anymore. It’s foolish to throw away a weapon like this. Marc was right about that.*

Kyle brought them back around to his question. “What do we tell the camp?”

Angela wiped her hands. “We say we had a fight with Nature and she almost trapped us. That’s the truth. We’ll leave out the cloud part.”

Angela looked around. “But they’ll view it in our thoughts, in our memories, in our nightmares. Our loved ones will know what we went through. Because it’s so fantastical, they’ll avoid talking

about it because they just won't know what to say to us."

That made sense to all of them. It also made them sad. Not being able to openly discuss what had happened, what was still happening, would be hard on them.

"We're going to continue the therapy sessions, even after we get home." Angela's eyes lit up to show them she meant it. "No one will be excluded."

Marc regarded her. "Does that include you?"

"Yes."

Bret frowned. "And you're really going to do it this time?"

"Yes."

Bret studied her. "Are you lying?"

"Yes."

While everyone laughed and snorted, Angela grabbed Greg's hand and snapped his fingers back into place.

Greg's scream echoed through the submarine.

The familiar noise was a terrible comfort to everyone who heard it. Without someone screaming in pain, they wouldn't know who they were or what they were fighting for.

Chapter Thirty-Five
Snot Cloud

1

“**W**ill we be honoring all of the things you promised Nature?”

Angela nodded at Kenn. “As much as we can. Our survival will always come first.”

“And what about the cannibalism?”

Isabel made a face before Angela could answer. “Make sure I don’t get any of that. I like myself this way, no matter how old and wrinkled I get.”

Angela smiled at her. “Now you look beautiful to me.”

Isabel smiled back. “I understand what you were trying to teach me. In the labs, byzans are closed-off, guarded creatures who are constantly under threat. They only had time to care about themselves.”

Angela nodded. “Exactly. The labs were the abominations, not us.”

“Why were the caretakers allowed to be cannibals at all?” Wade wanted an answer on that. It was very important to him.

Angela didn’t need to lie or hold back now. “I allowed it because I wanted Harry’s DNA in the breeding tree. The forbidden diet would have kept

those women young enough to give him some children.”

People stared at Selina, who was the only surviving caretaker, other than Isabel.

Angela shook her head. “She’s not. All chance of getting Harry’s DNA went with him.”

“That may not be true.” Wade sat in a chair, next to Gus. “He was popular for service calls in Safe Haven. One of them might get lucky enough to be pregnant.”

Angela gave him a look.

Wade got his dented notebook out and wrote it down so he wouldn’t forget to check on it when they got home.

Greg glanced over at Biff as he was brought in. The burns were still healing from the magic. The pain was fading slowly. “Thanks for saving my ass during the fight. Now we’re even.”

Biff grinned. “Good, because I can’t leave with a debt like that owed.”

Greg frowned. “Leave?”

Biff nodded. “I’ll be escorting Jayda when she goes to find her family. If she’ll have me.”

Jayda beamed. “I will. And Trent, too, if he wants to come along.”

Trent wasn’t in any condition to make that decision yet. He stayed still on the stretcher as he was carried into the ward area, not answering.

“I can’t dimension hunt anymore.” It had just occurred to Greg that it was one of the forbidden rules Nature had revealed.

Wade lifted a brow. “What have you found so far?”

“More importantly, what are you hunting?” Kenn believed that mattered more than what he had discovered.

Greg regarded Angela. “A dimension where I can be with the woman I love and we’re both happy.”

Angela’s expression didn’t change. “Any luck?”

Greg shook his head. “I found some places we should actually nuke, but nothing where humanity is in charge.”

Angela scowled, along with the others. “You found slave planets?”

“I found dimensions where humanoid creatures were being hunted for food. We were cattle.” Greg had no desire to return to those places.

Angela could feel a new plan trying to put itself together in the rear of her mind. She shoved it out. “Dimension hunting will be forbidden unless it’s for survival.”

Greg was almost relieved. Now, he wouldn’t have any excuse to avoid enjoying the rest of his life with his children and his wife.

He gently clasped hands with Erin and then looked over at Lisa. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Erin had a different question. “Are you still scared of us?”

Lisa considered it and slowly shook her head. “I’ve been able to hear your thoughts this time. All the worries that built up in my brain were unfounded.” She stared at Dace, who still hadn’t woken. People were beginning to think he wasn’t going to. “I’ll stay in Safe Haven so you can be close to the baby and I can take care of Dace.”

“Will you be happy with that?”

Lisa nodded at Greg. “I’ll be happy because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Is that why you matched me up with Adrian?” Piper was staring at Angela. “To give Adrian something to concentrate on instead of what he can’t have?”

Angela wanted more from Piper than just questions and glares. “What do you think it is?”

Marc was also curious about this one. He waited for Angela’s answer while keeping track of the time. It was going by fast, and he wanted to be topside to watch as the cloud came in.

Piper had stopped trying to be like Angela. She’d decided that being herself was a better idea. “You know I’ll fight to get him let back into camp and Sadie never would, because she likes having him all to herself.”

Angela was pleased by the proof of Piper’s intelligence. “He deserves a woman who can keep up with him and you deserve a man who will remind you to enjoy life and love yourself. That was a three-fer.”

Piper frowned. “Three?”

“It will free Sadie up for a different future and break her commitment to the traitor.”

Now Piper got worried. She scowled. “But that’s okay for me?”

Angela shrugged. “You wanted to live on the edge of danger. You decided you wanted him and you got him, remember? I didn’t put you guys together. I’m simply reaping benefits from it. Be mad at yourself. I don’t have time for it.” Angela scooped up the cat in the doorway and went toward the ladder.

The cat wrapped around her arm, purring.

Angela’s heart almost broke. *I don’t want to do this.*

She went up the ladder to the theater anyway.

Mel was back in a chair in the front row, but the screen was dark. She hadn’t put on another movie.

Mel was already forgetting everything that had just happened. Her mind was telling her it was one of the films she had enjoyed. She looked over at Angela, trying hard to hold onto who she was for this moment. There was something she needed to say.

Angela kept stroking the cat while she waited. She was braced for what came next, but the tears were already trying to take over her emotions.

“I don’t remember much about who I was before, but even during the fog, my biggest regret always seemed to be not spending more time doing fun things and enjoying the company of good people. I was always concerned with fuel ratios and

aircraft weight. I forgot to live. You gave that back to me. Thank you, for everything. I'll never forget it."

Angela sighed, turning toward the hatch. "It's my honor, Mel, and my pain."

Radios across the ship lit up with Adrian's excited voice. "There's only 10 minutes left."

Everyone wanted to go up and actually see the cloud this time, even if they got a rash from it. They knew how to solve it with saltwater rinses and they had an abundance of that. People began moving toward the hatch.

Angela peered over her shoulder at Mel. "Let's go up now."

Mel followed Angela toward the ladder. She also wanted to view the cloud. She hoped it would trigger her memories. But even if it didn't, she would still be surrounded by good friends. *And sometimes, that's all you need to be happy.*

In the bunk room, the conversation continued without Angela.

"Be careful with Adrian." Wade liked Piper. He didn't want her to get hurt.

Piper ignored him.

Wade had to try one more time. "He did this on purpose to force her hand about the normals."

Bret had stayed here. He didn't want to see the cloud. He wanted to know what would happen to his father now. "He figured out she messed with his

mind and he came at her in a different way, just like she predicted.”

Greg was also paying attention. “If he can get the vote to go against magic laws, then she can’t take over unless she goes full blown tyrant.”

“I missed something.” Biff was trying to keep up but he didn’t have all the information.

Greg filled him in. “Adrian had sex with Piper. He cheated on Sadie intentionally.”

Wade frowned. “Adrian got a five-fer on that one. The boss still has the record, though.”

Greg began counting. “Magic laws might not rule the world, he got laid...”

“He made Angela jealous even though she won’t admit to it.”

Greg hated that, but he was certain that Wade was right. “What else?”

“He upheld his family legacy.” Bret tried not to feel pride about that. “Even during a crisis, he’s still a ladies’ man.”

“And Piper will give him the baby that Sadie wouldn’t.”

Piper blushed, but she didn’t deny Wade’s observation.

Zack had also been counting. “You forgot one. He’s scared of leadership now. He doesn’t think he can live up to Angela. Doing all of this put him back on everyone’s bad side.”

Kyle had just been cleared by the medic. He stood. “It doesn’t matter. We made a deal with him and it stands. The Eagles will not participate in that

final battle unless Angela and Adrian lead us, together.”

Cody was trying to keep up with the adult conversation. “Did she do that on purpose, too?”

Wade nodded. “Of course. Enslaving anyone is wrong. Adrian’s the only one who can stop her from following through.”

“Is that why she bluffed Nature with the bomb threat?”

Everyone shook their heads.

Greg gave that answer. “If Nature doesn’t send the cloud, Angela will unleash nuclear fire on our island.”

“What?”

“She wasn’t bluffing, kid; she never bluffs.”

2

Gus had followed Angela. She waited for him at the top of the ladder. She tried not to stare at the fresh stitches in his arm.

“I need a minute.”

Angela knew what was coming. “You want me to let you punish people with lab methods when we get home.”

Gus dropped his chin in shame. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Then I’m leaving.”

Angela disliked having to handle things like this, but Gus was giving her no other choice. “I can’t let you do that. Without rules, you’ll become the

very thing we're fighting against. Torturing people is wrong."

Gus met her eye. "Isn't that what you do?"

"Not for personal gain."

"I can't stay here."

"Because you liked the job in the lab."

"And the leadership."

Angela found dark spots in his mind. "You're becoming corrupt."

Gus didn't want that. "You sent me in there. You have to help me!"

Angela had already planned to try, but Gus had also saved Charlie's life. She hadn't forgotten that. It made her more determined to pull him through. "It'll be ugly and there's no guarantee that it will work."

"Does it help people?"

"A lot of them, but you have to be strong enough to control your need to hurt others."

"I am."

"I believe that, too, or I wouldn't agree. Go with Jayda to collect her family. I want you to keep her alive and bring her back safe. If you do that, without breaking, I'll agree to you leaving and not being hunted."

Gus blanched. He headed for topside without saying anything else.

Theo came up the ladder next, followed by Gio and Nero. He was still hurting from being shocked, but it was getting better. "I'm going to stay for now. But I still need that break."

“You’ll get it.” Angela was thrilled with his choice. She’d already dropped the charges against him, though it wasn’t official yet. Wade would give him that good news later. “What about your friends?”

Theo smiled. “They’ve decided to be electricians.”

“Excellent. What’s their story?”

“They were college medical test subjects when Reicher had them brought in. They’re immune to many illnesses. He was studying them to find out why. When it didn’t go anywhere, he amused himself by trying to find an illness they weren’t immune to.”

Theo was now their role model because he was also fighting an addiction. Angela was happy with how that had turned out. “You’re off duty as soon as we land. Plan your month off accordingly.”

Theo led Gio and Nero toward the topside hatch. “Let’s go watch Nature keep her word. I’ve heard it’s amazing; I’ve never seen it.”

Angela didn’t want to see it. She wanted to stop time right now. She forced herself to climb the ladder anyway, aware of Marc and their kids coming up from the second level. She stood to the side to clear space and to scan the boats that were still around them.

Mel came over and clasped her hand.

Dog hurried up the ladder, sniffing around for the cat.

Mr. Sneaky jumped onto his back and began purr clawing.

Angela chuckled and tried not to think about the sad parts of life.

“Here it comes.” Adrian pointed.

The green cloud was exactly the same to the few people who had seen it the first time. All of them tensed as it neared the front of the submarine.

People on the ships around them began pointing and shouting. It was hard to tell who was happy and who was scared.

For Angela and her team, it was a mix of both. This was the moment where they found out if Nature was letting them go home or if she was pulling some other awful trick on them.

Zack ran his tongue over his teeth as the vibrating sensation returned. He slid a hand to his holster as the cloud covered a large section of the sub.

Angela reached out for Marc’s hand as pressure began to build in her chest.

Marc clasped her hand and put his other arm around Cate.

Cody leaned against them and prepared to bring up his barrier in defense; he didn’t trust Nature to honor their deal.

Some of the ships around them began to pull up their anchors. Others began to sail in the opposite direction, frightened.

As the cloud finally reached where they were standing, Angela understood their urge to run.

Pressure was building in her mind now, sending adrenaline through her body. Her grip tightened on Marc's hand.

The cloud surrounded everyone on top of the submarine, dulling sound and sensations. It slowly robbed them of sight as well, smothering them in damp, fluffy clouds that gave them goosebumps and chills.

Angela heard things moving around them in the foggy cloud. She was grateful to be alert.

The sound of the water grew distant; for one instant, Angela thought her chest would explode. Then they were through the cloud and the pressure was gone. Her ears popped painfully, causing her to flinch. All around her, people did the same as the cloud rolled by them and began swallowing the other ships. And then they were through it; a bright, beautiful day met their gazes. The calm ocean around them mocked their fear.

“Come in, rescue team. Answer your damn radio!”

“That’s Jenny!” Kyle ran toward the hatch so he could join Ray in the bridge. Ray was already answering the call.

Watches began to run again; alarms beeped and were quickly shut off with grins of happiness. Equipment all over the submarine came to life and resumed working.

“They followed us.” Adrian pointed. He was happy to see the two men hadn’t taken their advice

to attack the remaining oil workers. It proved they were good people, just maybe not Eagle material.

The small sailboat with the barking Golden Retriever came through the cloud behind them. The dog was once again yapping as the two men on board with it hugged and cried. Their relief began to spread through the people still standing on top of the submarine.

Adrian caught Angela's eye. "I told them to follow us to the island, but I don't think that sailboat will make it."

Angela was already aware. "We'll pick them up shortly and hold them in the brig as the QZ until we get home."

Adrian was happy with that. He signaled to the sailboat to come alongside of the submarine so he could give them the good news.

"They're not the only ones." Wade gestured. "A lot of boats are coming through."

Everyone watched, hoping there wouldn't be another fight.

The pirate ship came through the cloud right behind the sailboat. The few remaining pirates on board were screaming.

Angela and her team observed in horror as the pirates burst into flames and burnt alive on the top deck of the oil tanker.

The ship caught fire quickly, sailing past the submarine like a flaming torch.

Angela's group saw another tall-masted vessel coming through and braced for something ugly.

The Patriot sailed through the cloud, but there was no one on board the schooner now. The men and the one woman in the flowing formal gown were gone. The ship itself began to sink as it went by the submarine, revealing a deck full of dust and old clothing. It barely made it past them before the ocean swallowed it completely.

“There’s another one!” Kenn’s shout drew their attention to a steam propulsion vessel that still had people on board. As he watched, two of those men dropped to the deck, clutching their chests. The rest of them exploded into giant sprays of dust that scattered over the deck of their ship and into the wind.

The ship continued on without sinking and without a crew.

Angela’s group was frozen in place now, watching in stunned revulsion as the next ships came through.

Two more sailboats and a yacht came at the same time. All of the people exploded into dust and creaking wood that quickly began taking on water. The ocean also swallowed them, sending back only tiny bits of debris that bobbed to the surface and then began to sink a final time.

The two men on the sailboat that Adrian was talking to had also frozen, waiting for the same thing to happen to them. The Golden Retriever hadn’t stopped barking. It was picking up all of the pain and fear around it.

“Here comes another one.” Zack didn’t want to watch but he found himself unable to glance away.

It was the oil tanker this time, with only a few of the oil workers still on board. Those men burst into flames and were still burning as the ship sailed by the submarine, knocking debris out of the way from the other casualties.

Angela felt death approaching them once again. This time, there was nothing she could do to stop it. She reached out her other hand to the woman next to them.

Mel also felt it coming. She smiled sadly at Angela as she reached out for one last embrace.

Angela stiffened in pain as Mel returned to the dust from which she had been born. It sprayed the top of the deck and her boots, bringing deep sadness and tears. “Goodbye, Mel.”

Mel’s clothing and personal items dropped to the deck as the wind began to blow her dust off the ship.

Dog took off running. He scooped up the cat in his mouth and ran for the hatch. *I’ll save you! I’ll save you!*

Right as Dog neared the hatch, the cat exploded into a small puff of dust that settled over his face like a warm hug and then Mr. Sneaky was gone.

Awful howls ripped from Dog’s throat, bringing more tears and sadness to everyone who heard it.

The Golden Retriever stopped barking. It felt Dog’s pain.

No one was surprised when the Retriever put his head back and began to howl along with the wolf. Pain wasn't isolated to one person or one animal or one species. It was universal.

Angela knelt and retrieved Mel's journal from the pile of dust. She put it in her pocket to read through later.

"Do you think she really was Amelia Earhart?" Marc had been curious about that for weeks now.

Angela shrugged. "I choose to remember her as my friend. That's the only one that matters to me."

Isabel looked over. Her true age was apparent now in the longer gray hair and the deep bags covering half of her face. Her wrinkled fingers reached out toward Angela. "I meant what I said."

Angela hugged her. "I bought you as much time as I could."

"And I thank you for that."

After spending all of her life in the lab, Isabel had never gotten to explore the true fighter inside. Now, she was too old to be an Eagle even though she had the rookie title.

"Keep that jacket to remind you of how important you are to me and to everyone on this ship. We can't beat age, but we can remember who we were and be proud of that no matter what else is taken from us. You were an Eagle on this run and you'll always be an Eagle to me."

More ships came through the cloud behind them. Most of them suffered the same fate as the others, sinking by fire or returning to dust. Two of

them sailed off into the horizon with several grateful people on board who didn't stop to converse. They had their own lives waiting, their own destinies, and they were eager to face that on their own terms.

Angela stayed on top of the submarine, thinking about Mel while watching all of them come through. Even in a time of deep sadness, she hadn't forgotten that she was the leader here. If any of the surviving groups became hostile, it was her job to handle them. *And I do want this job. Even when I can't do it anymore, I'll still want it.*

"It's time to go home now." Below them, Angela could hear Ray and Kyle exchanging information and celebrating. "Tell them we'll be there in two days."

All around her, mission men considered what it would take before they would be able to be happy about going home, too. None of them were eager to face the pain and the mistakes, but all of them were positive that Angela would try to help them through it. Above all else, she loved them. It was the one constant in their post-apocalyptic lives.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Admire The Smoothness

May 12th

1

“**I**’ve called us here for a group therapy session...” Angela forced a bright smile onto her face, looking around at the men who had burns, bandages, and casts. A lot of the crew were in here, though Dog was in the brig, visiting with the Golden Retriever and scaring the two new men they’d picked up. “We need to talk.”

It reminded them all of Marc saying that after they’d cleared the island tunnels. He’d insisted they had to talk to each other about the horror so it didn’t eat them alive.

No one spoke up.

Angela had ordered them all to come back to the trashed mess, including Ray. The sub was on autopilot. There was nothing for him to do right now anyway. If an alarm went off, they would hear it on the baby monitor he’d set up from the lab equipment.

“We all lost and gained something while we were in limbo. Let’s work on that.” Angela needed them to see it wasn’t all a loss.

Adrian felt the silent order, but this group setting was a harder challenge to manage. He waited, observing until he needed to get involved.

Angela regarded Wade.

Wade sighed, shaking his head. He didn't want to admit to his weaknesses in front of everyone.

Kyle stepped up. He wanted this over with so he could return to the bridge and listen to Safe Haven's daily radio announcement. "I lost some of my confidence. I guess the gain was my cracks being healed."

People rotated toward him in surprise.

So did Marc. "You still seem confident to me."

Kyle ignored the itchy cast on his arm. "It wasn't my Eagle skills."

Wade took a guess. "Jennifer?"

"Yes. I believed we had a bond that could get through anything. This run has shown me I was wrong."

Angela was curious. "Did you try to dream walk?"

"Yes. I couldn't find her through the fog."

Angela didn't give possible explanations for that. Therapy was supposed to get the patients to come to those conclusions for themselves. "Do you feel better with your cracks healed?"

"No." Kyle rubbed dead skin from one of his healing burns. The concussion was gone, but the rest of his injuries weren't.

"Because you believe you'll be too passive to stay our top Eagle."

“Yes.”

Snorts and eyerolls went through the room.

Kyle felt better from that, but he didn't allow it to cover his concerns. “I'm torn. I want to keep going...and I want to retire.”

Zack glared around the bandage on his face. “Hey! You just stole my thunder!”

Kyle laughed at the joke. It was common knowledge that several of the men on this ship were considering retirement.

“All of the Eagles have earned the right to quit.”

Ray nodded.

Kyle frowned at Angela. “Retiring isn't quitting.”

“Then why do you feel that way?”

Kyle knew what she was doing, but it still worked. “It feels like quitting.”

“It's not, no matter what Ray thinks.” Zack sent a glare in his direction.

Ray stiffened. “You can't just walk out on us because things got hard!”

And now we've arrived at the real reason Ray had to be here, too. Angela waited, letting the men sort themselves out.

“You haven't gone through as much as we have.” Kyle wasn't angry at Ray for feeling that way. It matched what he was feeling.

“Don't give me that. You're not leaving because you're tired. You're scared you're going to die in the final battle.” Ray gestured rudely. “You're running away so you survive.”

Now Kyle got angry. “And why shouldn’t I?! I’ve been on the front lines this entire time!”

Kyle got control of his loud voice. “We all know how that final battle will play out. We’re violent killers. We can’t be allowed to survive it even if we win.”

Heads rotated toward Angela.

Angela didn’t lie to them. She offered hope. “It will take decades for us to resettle our country and reestablish supply lines, defenses, laws. Without violent killers, those things won’t happen.”

Kyle stared at her, wanting to believe her. This was his first real therapy session. He was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Angela dropped it. “You gained more than just healing, Kyle. You want to live now.”

Kyle felt that enter his heart and ease his mind. She was right. His hatred of himself was gone.

“You forgave yourself for the things you’ve done. Do you know why?”

Kyle considered it, ignoring the murmurs of the others. “I saw the lab. I could never be that evil. I only use my skills for the greater good.”

“And that’s why you couldn’t get through to Jennifer in a dream walk. You know it’s dangerous and forbidden. You didn’t try as hard as you could have.”

“Like you did.”

“Exactly.” Angela hid her unease at her own motives. “If you decide to retire, we’ll make do

without you. Just don't let fear make the choice for you."

"I won't." Kyle felt better now. The weight was leaving his heart. "Thank you."

Angela motioned. "You can go if you want."

Kyle leaned back in the chair, now eager to observe the others.

Angela chuckled. Kyle wasn't going to leave the Eagles. Some of the others would, but not him. He was happiest when things were crazy. Now he could accept it without guilt.

Angela regarded Zack. "Let's talk about your thunder."

Zack flushed. "Do we have to?"

Angela waited. Zack's problems were minor compared to some of the other men, but it didn't feel that way to him.

Zack tried to get it over with quickly. "Cody said I'm scared of drowning. I don't know how to deal with that, but it's not why I'm thinking about retiring. That started shortly after I was nailed to a warehouse wall."

Angela sympathized. "Because of the ugly brush with death or because you lost valued team members?"

"Both." Zack tried not to relive that agony and failed. "The guilt won't leave me alone." His voice cracked. "Carl begged me to help him and I couldn't!"

The mission men all blanched or grimaced. They'd gone through the same thing with each other and with the rookies who hadn't survived.

"What did you gain on this run?"

"A new fear of water." Zack knew he needed to open up a little more about that. "It's why I strip and climb. The clothes drag me down."

Wade understood. The heavy vests Angela had made them wear had kept them on the bottom, under the water. It had been scary. It was what Wade had hated most about the hurricane.

"What did you lose?"

"My confidence that I can keep doing this job if I decide not to retire."

Ray saw it differently with those words. Fear of death was something all Eagles faced and fought. Fear of not being good enough was a serious problem.

Angela knew several of them shared Zack's worries. The fight with Nature hadn't helped. "What do you think would fix that?"

Zack snorted. "Never losing another fight and staying the hell away from warehouses and water." He knew those weren't real options, though. Zack sighed. "Maybe I'll join Wade and Trent on the diving team."

"Why would you do that when you're afraid of it?"

"If I do it enough, the fear might fade." Zack realized he had answered his own problem. "So

putting my life in danger will help me handle the fear?”

“Sadly, yes. If we don’t face our fears, they rule us. They win.”

“And what if we face them and die?”

Angela led him into a new view. “You see death as a loss, but that’s not always the case. We risk our lives daily for others. If we save them, we won.”

“Only you could see death as a win.”

Angela chuckled at him but inside, that bothered her, too. “Tell me again what you’ve gained and lost.”

Zack thought about it seriously this time. All the eyes on him gave him the right answer. “I lost the rest of my confidence as an Eagle. I gained back my confidence that I won’t revert to old behaviors, even when drunk or fogged.”

“You’re not alone in that.” Angela focused on Wade.

Wade groaned. “So I didn’t hump anything that moved. I still left my post.”

“So did Ray. So did others.”

“And it’s not okay!”

“Tell me what you gained and lost.”

Wade forced out the answers. “I lost respect for myself. I never thought I would leave my post.”

“You’ll have more sympathy for people who make mistakes now.”

“Yes, but I lost respect for myself!”

“No one else has.”

Wade glanced around to verify that.

Only Kyle had been angry about it, but his displeasure had been replaced by an understanding that none of them were perfect, himself included. “You protected the kids and the little boss. You waited until someone was there to take your slot. Let it go, man. You’re good.”

Wade was relieved. He was also ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

Wade’s humility strengthened his bonds with all of them.

Angela smiled. “Now tell me what you’ve gained.”

Wade contemplated it, not sure. He had learned how to care for damaged people. He’d bonded with Cody, and he’d figured out that he thrived on adventure. *I can’t just be calm all the time. It’s not who I am.* “The respect of my teammates?”

Heads nodded. Most of them had surrendered to the fog and didn’t care about duty.

Wade frowned. “This can’t be right.”

“Because you feel better even though you don’t believe you should?”

Wade nodded. “Yeah. How do you do that?”

Angela glanced at Adrian, not having sympathy for his bright red burns. “I learned from a master manipulator.”

Awkward chuckles came; they waited to see who she would pick next.

Angela checked the clock. Adrian had told her not to keep them in a therapy session for more than an hour at a time because it was sometimes too

much to take in at once. They needed time to think it through, but she decided that wasn't always needed. Each person she'd handled so far was already doing that. "Let's hear from one of the mission men now."

The room went still and quiet.

Angela frowned, treating them like they needed. "Don't make me pick!"

Greg rubbed the rough cast on his wrist; it was covered in signatures. "I lost my confidence that I can do the job without letting my desires get in the way." Greg was deeply ashamed of that. "I'm sorry. It's why I decided to leave. I don't want to be like Adrian."

Heads bobbed in approval.

Adrian flushed.

"And what did you gain?"

Greg smiled at Erin. "A soul mate." He glanced at Lisa. "And a son."

Lisa snorted. "It might be a girl."

"It's not." Greg was positive.

Lisa shrugged. "I like boys."

Greg chuckled. "I did notice that."

People laughed with them.

Angela didn't. She pushed Greg into more honesty. "Do you still hate me for the lab run?"

Greg focused on the fresh burns that were covering the older scars. "Yes. We all do."

The mission men didn't look at Angela. They also didn't deny it.

Angela already knew. “I hate myself for sending you in there. I’m deeply sorry for it.”

“But you’d do it again.”

“Yes. Your sacrifices allowed us to stop an ancient evil. You will be the last people to ever suffer that.”

“Then it was worth it.” Greg understood he could hate her for the choice and still be okay with it. “We lost good people, but we gained peace for all the future subjects. Based on that, I’d volunteer again.”

Lisa frowned. “You were ordered to go. She didn’t give you an option.”

Greg shook his head. “I pushed her into that. She didn’t want me to.”

“And you gained my respect from that choice.” Angela smiled back. “I’ll always be there for you. When life gets hard again, and it will, come talk to me. Our friendship can’t be broken by unrequited love.”

Greg was happy to hear that. A little more of his survivor’s guilt and his anger faded.

He was right. It worked. Marc didn’t stop his jealous thoughts this time, but he didn’t dwell on them, either. “I lost some more of my humanity by helping with parts of your plan. I gained the knowledge of who I really am.”

Angela wanted to let him go with that, but Marc needed this session just as much as everyone else. Even those who were only listening and not participating would use these moments to help

themselves adjust to losses in their lives. No one would have to go through it alone or in the blind. “How do you feel about your father?”

“I loathe him.” Marc sighed. “I also respect him more now than I did while we were under his thumb. He was brilliant. I’ll never be that smart.”

“Keep going.”

“I feel like shit for what my team went through. I still can’t believe it was partially my plan.” Marc let it all out. “I’m happy that you protected our baby this time, but I’m furious that you put Cody into leadership on this run. He could have been hurt. Cate was hurt! And I hate that green bitch. Why did you stop us from killing Nature?!”

Angela waited, letting him get it out of his system.

“You’re always putting us in danger to protect the normals when they don’t deserve it!” Marc was horrified at himself, but he couldn’t stop that next ugly spew. “You shouldn’t be in leadership! It’s a man’s job.”

Gasps echoed. Even the canines in the brig fell silent at the fresh tension.

Angela felt those blows deep in her heart, but they weren’t surprises. “Now tell me the biggest one.”

“You let me kill her!” Marc clamped his lips shut. He didn’t care as much now about Adrian being alive. Kendle’s death was the one that would haunt him forever.

“What would your father say about that?”

Marc glared at her. “He would say it’s my own fault for falling in love with someone who wasn’t an approved match for me.”

“I don’t agree.” Angela put aside her own emotions to help her mate. “I blame Kendle. *She* made the bad choices. She pushed and pushed until removal was the only option. If she had stopped, she would still be alive.”

Marc knew that was true.

Angela pushed him again. “If you say it, it loses power over you.”

Marc shuddered. “I loved her. I still love her. I miss her.”

“And you want her back.”

Marc surprised most of them by shaking his head. “I just wish I hadn’t been the one to do it. Then I’d have someone else to hate for that instead of myself.”

“And how is that coming?”

Marc calmed, unable to sustain the anger. He was too tired, too drained. “Better now that we faced Nature. I understand more of why you made so many choices I didn’t agree with. We got lucky that she didn’t just kill us all.”

“I agree.” Angela followed a thread that had been nagging her for a week. “You read a lot on this trip. Other than your family line, did you discover anything else?”

Marc didn’t know what she meant. “I was just enjoying downtime, until I got to Reicher’s logs and files.”

“Which book did you like the most?”

Marc frowned. “It’s not liking exactly. The one that stuck to me the hardest was *Animal Farm*.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re doing exactly what they did—we’re making the same mistakes and restarting the same problems.”

“Do you identify with the pig?” Angela certainly hoped not.

“Boxer.” Marc’s expression was tormented. “The horse kept taking all the weight and saying I’ll just work harder, until he died from overuse and was forgotten about without having ever made those changes.”

Angela forced herself to keep going. “Is it because that’s how you live now?”

Marc locked eyes with her. “It’s because I see *you* doing it. For all you give, you get very little in return.”

People shifted uncomfortably as they realized Marc was right. She worked tirelessly and asked for little from them unless there was a fight. Then she demanded everything they had, including their lives.

“I worry about that, too.” Angela didn’t shield them from her emotions. “But even if I never accomplish my goals, I’ll die knowing I tried my hardest. I didn’t use other people. I didn’t steal their time, their effort, their hearts, or their sanity. I loved them all as best I could. In the end, I hope that will be enough.”

Marc frowned. “Enough for what?”

“Enough to earn me a judgement chamber rebirth instead of a fiery eternity?” She shrugged tiredly. “Maybe just to rest in peace and not have to come back as a ghost? Either of those are fine for me.”

“It’ll be different now. I don’t know yet if I can adjust.”

Angela sent out a wave of approval. “Keep working on it?”

Marc nodded. “I will. And I don’t really hate you. I just get mad that we’ve been so cursed for so long. Sometimes, I think you should have abandoned me and then we’d at least have peace with someone else.”

“It wouldn’t have worked. Fate would have screwed with that, too.” Adrian didn’t like it that Marc felt that way. “I never deserved her. You’re the perfect match for her. I know it now and I probably knew it in every lifetime. Chasing the impossible is just who I am.”

Adrian realized he’d just gained something. *That’s what drives me—the impossible.*

“And that’s where we often match.” Angela moved on. She wanted to get more people covered instead of letting them wander the ship and stew on their failures. “Who else?”

“I lost all of the military men, except for Thomas.” It had been haunting Kenn that all of his picks and partners from the lab turned out to be so bad.

“Considering how awful that place was, one out of fifteen is actually good odds.” Greg nodded at Kenn’s surprise. He’d meant it when he’d said they would rely on each other. “What did you gain?”

Kenn stiffened. “I gained a new awareness of how fast time really goes by. I don’t have much left. I want it to count.”

“You’ve been told repeatedly that she isn’t going to kill you. She already would have.” Shawn gave Kenn a hard stare through his burnt face. “Do you think this was the first time she hesitated?”

Kenn didn’t look at Angela. “That’s what scares me.”

“But it should give you faith.”

“How?”

Shawn gestured, then winced at the pain from the healing burns. “She probably hesitated every time she had to make the choice, which means she decided to let you live even back when you were still being a shithead. You’re a much better man now. So she still hesitates, but she finds you improving more each time and always decides to let it go. Why would that change?”

“It wouldn’t.” Kenn was relieved to see Shawn was right. “Unless I revert.”

“And you won’t.” Charlie flashed an image of Kenn giving him tough love during his manhood challenge. “You hated it. You’re not that SOB anymore. We still hate the old Kenny. The new Kenn is likeable, trustworthy, and welcome with us.”

Angela kept her thoughts to herself.

Kenn noticed she hadn't said it.

Angela frowned, blowing out a sigh. "You're in the good right now. Don't fuck it up!"

Her sharp shout made Kenn relax and stop picking at his cast. "I won't."

Marc put a hand on Kenn's shoulder. "Thank you for saving Cate."

Kenn tried not to cry. "Stop it now. I don't have a tissue."

"You also don't have a reason to leave Tonya." Angela didn't want the winning formula to be changed. "Stop trying to avoid the sadness of a relationship ending. She's not leaving you for anyone except yourself. You're the only one who can screw that up."

Kenn didn't answer, but it lingered in his brain.

Angela caught Gus's eye. "Next?"

Gus shrugged. "I haven't lost or gained. It's all the same for me." *Even the burns.*

"You lost your hatred and need to do violence to your ex. You gained confidence that you'll recover at some point and be able to be in a camp with them."

Gus stared at her.

Angela shrugged. "You're not as messed up as the rest of us. It was one of the only things you need help with."

Gus chuckled. "So I'm normal? Awesome!"

Everyone laughed, even Lisa and Selina.

Angela kept them moving. “I believe we have time for one more. Who else wants to ease the burden on their souls and connect with their fellowman?”

“Me.”

“I’ll go.”

Shawn and Thomas grinned at each other.

“Time for two, or more, it is.” Angela focused on Shawn first. “You’re worried about going back on your deal not to try to recover that part of your life.”

Shawn contemplated his body failures. He’d even had trouble during the oil worker attack with his hands not working correctly. “I didn’t know it meant that much to me. I’m not whole anymore. I have to try to fix it.”

“And I gave you permission to do that.” Angela didn’t want to treat him differently, but there was no choice. “In the near future, this is how sex offenders will be handled. As soon as they show signs, they’ll be neutered.”

“I’m not a sex offender!”

“You were a peeping Tom who took pictures of women and girls in our camp for your sexual pleasure. That crime was overlooked by almost everyone.”

“But not you.”

Angela shook her head. “No. I’m trying to create a world where sex crimes don’t exist at all. If peeping Toms know they’ll be neutered, most of them won’t progress to rape, kidnappings, murder.

I hope it can all be stopped at the first sign of perversion.” Angela took pity on the humiliated man. “You were broken or damaged as a youth in some way, Shawn. It affected all of your life, even after an apocalypse. I don’t blame you or hate you. I still love you and want the best for you. This way, you get to live and the women and kids don’t get hurt.”

“I’m also a test subject to see if it keeps them from offending anyway, right?” Shawn had thought long and hard on it.

Angela didn’t lie. “Yes. If you fall, we’ll revert back to my first plan of death upon a single sign. The future of all sex offenders will be decided by your actions.”

“Then I only lost. I didn’t gain anything.”

Angela snorted. “You gained a warrior that any man will want a year from now when she’s fully trained and glowing with happiness. I gave you a true match, Shawn. Love her like you both deserve.”

Selina blushed as men began to study her to discern what was so special about her.

Shawn put an arm around her.

Selina sighed happily. A faint glow lit up her skin, proving Angela’s words.

“She’s one of us.” Erin recognized that glow. She’d seen it on herself shortly before she got her gifts. “She’ll pop soon.”

“Maybe.” Angela shrugged. “But if not, she’s one of us in every other way.” Angela regarded Thomas. “So what’s your beef?”

Thomas laughed. “You’re all nuts, like me. I like that.”

Angela knew he meant it. “Being the lone good soul in your wing had to be hard.”

“It was.”

“I noticed you’ve stopped scroll diving.”

“It was never my obsession like the others. I wanted to live in reality, too.”

“And the issue we discussed on Howland Island?”

Thomas grinned at her. “Gone. I have no trouble with females in leadership now. You’re amazing. I’ll never trust Reicher’s training over you.”

Angela was thrilled that Thomas was recovering so well. “I want you in my breeding tree. Get back to me in a month, after you’ve had a chance to sniff the skirts.”

Thomas laughed at her Navy slang. “I’ll do that.”

The computer interrupted the good vibes. “*Autopilot will disengage in thirty minutes.*”

Ray regarded Angela.

Angela nodded. “Tell me what you’ve gained and lost and then you can go back to the bridge.” They would be home in half an hour. She wanted Ray on the bridge for that as much as he wanted to be there.

“I gained piloting experience, including a triangle tall tale that people will sort of believe.” Ray sighed. “I lost some of my cockiness. I’m feeling more humble. I don’t know if it’s a fair trade. I liked the cock.”

Angela laughed with him. “You were a fighter in the fog. You’re always a badass, even when you’re humble.”

Ray smiled at her as he stood.

So did Zack. “I finally got that wild hair.” He reached for her hand. “Check it out. I’m smooth and bald now.”

Angela jerked her hand away, laughing harder. “God, Zack!”

“That’s what she said.” Zack followed Ray. “Do you keep neat and trim for your man?”

Ray’s groan echoed. “God, Zack!”

“That’s what he said, too.”

Angela found air to breathe with. “Session adjourned. You may now all go admire the smoothness.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Close

1

“**A**ngie.”

Angela peered into the brig, where the new people were behind bars and looking nervous. Dog was lying nose-to-nose with the caged Retriever. Both animals were whining and crying real tears.

Angela didn't interrupt the odd bonding moment. She entered the bunk room and went to the ward area that held their few remaining patients. It had been two days since they'd dealt with Nature and most of their injured people were healing nicely. A couple of them had shrapnel wounds that were resisting treatment, but Safe Haven had better antibiotics for those infections. Tonya would get them all tested and medicated shortly after arrival.

Angela was glad to see the medical supplies were packed up. They now had a small stock of blood to add to the camp coolers, along with vials of medications and other drugs they'd brought from the lab.

Everyone was happy to be back in their own timestream now, but they were still mourning the losses. The bunk room was quiet, as was the rest of the sub. Angela didn't like it, but she understood.

She wasn't in the mood to pretend to be happy, either.

Adrian followed her, frowning. "You can't keep avoiding it."

Angela smiled at Trent. "How are you feeling today?"

Adrian was the camp therapist now. He'd understood right from the beginning what job she wanted him in. That meant he had to keep pushing her. "Angie."

Trent understood Angela was using him as a buffer. He didn't mind, but he wasn't keen on revealing his decisions in front of everyone.

"Just get it over with." Angela ignored her own advice and waited for Trent to answer.

Trent lifted his chin. "I'm resigning from the Eagles. I'll be joining the den mothers after my broken wrist and burns heal."

None of the scorn he expected emerged. Angela wrote it in her book while their witnesses nodded in approval. Trent was great with their kids and they always needed strong fighters to help watch over them.

"I'll also be helping Wade with the new diving team."

"I love that idea!" Angela wrote it in her book, along with a reminder that Trent had given a diving lesson right before he was taken. He might need a therapy session for that.

Trent and Wade grinned at the feel of her pleasure.

Angela focused on Trent, getting a small start on that therapy now. “If you skip every adventure moment after this, your brain will tell you it’s because you’re scared. If you start to believe it, do something about that before it affects your choices and your life.”

“I will.” Trent glanced over at Jayda and Biff, who had stayed close to him for the last two days. “And speaking of choices... I’m out. I’m sorry.”

He quickly explained before they could start throwing questions and complaints. “I don’t like to share. I found that out. There’s no hard feelings on my end.” He leered at Jayda. “I do wish I’d gotten to love you completely at least once, for the awesome memory.”

Biff laughed. He didn’t mind sharing. “Whatever she wants is fine, man.”

Jayda blushed. “Uh...I’ll get back to you on that.”

Angela went to the next cot while the trio resumed their friendship. “Has there been any change?”

Lisa shook her head. “Charlie and some others have tried to reach him. He just won’t wake up.”

Angela put a hand on Dace’s chilly wrist. She didn’t exert herself, but she snooped around mentally. She didn’t find anything out of place, but she also didn’t find any thoughts or even dreams. In that moment, she missed Harry all over again. His genius would have found the problem and solved it. Angela felt helpless.

She let go of Dace's wrist and focused on Lisa.

Lisa dropped her head. "I'm sorry. I know that's not enough, but I really am."

"Thank you." Angela waited. With this camp, there was always more.

Lisa stared at Dace. "Can I stay with him until he wakes up, or until we know for sure that he isn't going to? Then I'll serve whatever sentence you think is fair."

"Cody told you what your punishment will be. I believe it's already started." Angela glanced over at Cody to verify that.

Cody pointed.

Cate lowered her shield. She was right next to Lisa.

Lisa jumped.

Everyone else laughed. Cate would guard Lisa for a while and force her to see that magic users were just like anyone else.

"When should I start serving that week in jail?"

"After we get home and get settled. We'll be in the QZ for a little bit. You'll stay with Dace through all of that."

"Thank you."

"Thank Cody. It was his choice."

Lisa scowled. "That's enough now! All of this came from you. We know you left him notes and he was always on duty with a senior man."

"Exactly like any trainee." Adrian nodded at Cody in approval.

Cody smiled back, standing taller.

Piper stared, drawn once again to Adrian's light.

Other people offered kind words to Cody and also to Cate again.

Adrian continued with his new job. "Tell us what you gained and what you lost."

People went quiet to listen, instantly reminded of the group therapy session and the things that had been said or settled there.

"I gained experience in dealing with people, handling problems, and seeing what makes them who they are. I got some action, too." Cody's voice rose with his anger over Cate being hurt. "I lost my love of nature. Between the damn water, the damn ice, and the damn Snot Lady, I now have no desire to ever be outside again!"

People laughed, but they could also tell he meant it.

Adrian put that into his notes for later and then snapped his book shut. "The boss is avoiding her therapy moment. She needs convincing."

Angela glared at him as people started to scold her. "You're such a bitch!"

Adrian laughed. "Yep."

Angela held up a hand to stop the people who had already started trying to convince her. "Okay. I'll do it."

But she didn't.

Adrian pushed again. "Tell me what you've gained and lost. Get it over with."

Angela sighed. “Fine. I protected my pregnancy first this time and I faced a fear of Nature. I’m not as scared of that final battle now.”

People stared. No one had known she was scared of it at all.

“I lost a best friend.” Tears came to her eyes. “I miss Mel.”

Adrian wasn’t buying it. “What did you get from this run, personally?”

He’d already known the other benefits and marveled over her ability to make and carry out so many intricate threads. He wanted to know how she’d been affected.

“I found out I’m not really corrupt yet or I would have killed you and probably Piper, too.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s a lot.”

“And?”

“I derive pleasure from helping my people through their issues. Don’t discount how important that is to my wellbeing.”

“Just tell me the truth and get it over with! We all have to go through these stupid sessions. It was your idea!”

“Fine!” Angela let her true misery show. “I’m still a bit suicidal. But I’ve made progress on that.”

“How?”

“I survived this run after letting my men go through eight weeks of torture. When we left home to come get them, I wasn’t sure that would be the case.” Angela couldn’t stand their pitying stares.

She headed for the exit. “We’ll be home in about fifteen minutes. Start packing.”

2

“It’s almost time to disembark this tin can, sailors. I hope you’ve enjoyed your tour of the mysteries of Safe Haven. We hope you’ll remember us kindly when you post a scathing review online.”

Chuckles went through the line of people who were gathering at the topside hatch. Ray had stopped the submarine and was now calling them on the PA for a quick update.

“When you reach land, after you kiss it, you will be directed into the quarantine zone where the sound of flapping tents will make you hard and make you cry. That will be a confusing mix to anyone who hasn’t been on this cruise. Don’t feel bad for it; you won’t be alone.”

Angela shouldered her kit and swept the radio cubby as Ray continued. She wanted to make sure she had everything.

“Our time together has been memorable. Please invite me for the next run to Hell. I’ll bring the snacks. Granola bars are not on my menu. Ball sweat tastes better.”

Angela snickered while people bellowed out laughter in surprise. She decided not to scold Ray for it even though there were kids here to hear it. These children had seen and heard a lot worse.

So had the adults. As she stood there, Angela decided not to take away their memories of how good, how smart, Cody had been on this run. *We'll keep him alive. The camp needs to know he's special.*

Angela went into the hallway, where people rotated toward her in anticipation. They all expected her to have some final comforting words. She looked around, seeing who was eager and who was terrified. "I'll need my team when we land."

Tension flew through the group.

Satisfied, Angela went to the ladder. She would be the first one off this time, and she would stand at the QZ tent and guide each of them back into their other lives. The time they'd spent in limbo was already fading, making it hard to remember why they'd been so scared.

Dust fell from the ceiling as she opened the hatch.

Angela shivered. *Until that happens and then we're not sure if we can breathe.*

Angela climbed onto the top of the submarine.

A loud cheer went through the air, drawing her attention to the cliff and then the hillside above the beach. Safe Haven had come to welcome them home.

The cheering faded; people began taking in the casts, the burns, and the bandages as the team climbed out behind her. A call for their medics went through the crowd.

Angela saw a line of Eagles keeping people from rushing down. There was a long beach tent set up to the right of the dock, waiting to quarantine them. It looked like Jennifer had gotten things ready.

Angela faced the nervous men and women who were still climbing out behind her. “Quick, let’s run!”

Light amusement went through them at her joke. They understood she was trying to make them feel better.

Dog actually did take off running, but he only went toward the quarantine tent. *I’m home! Here, kitty-kitties! I need you.*

In the rear of the group, Adrian guided the two new men, giving them details and keeping them calm. He just hoped their dog didn’t start barking again. It was on a leash and wagging its tail wildly at all the good vibes.

Angela felt Jennifer starting down the path to come greet them. She keyed her radio. “Stand by please.”

Jennifer stopped, frowning. She stayed on the path near a large tree for the shade. It was bright and humid out again, though the sky was promising rain later.

Ray came up the ladder last. He’d brought them to a gentle stop half a mile out and then let the incoming tide gently push them into place alongside the new, long, sturdy dock. Safe Haven had been

very busy while they were gone. Ray was eager to see what other improvements they'd finished.

Angela scanned to be sure they were all together. Then she led them off the sub while hoping she never had to set foot on it again. The rescue team had just spent almost four weeks on the water. It was more than enough.

Angela spotted impatient faces in the growing crowd that was now pushing against the Eagles. They wanted to come down. They didn't care about the quarantine rule. After almost any other run, it would be a wonderful homecoming. For this moment, it was already making the mission men start rethinking their decisions to stay for a while. She could feel it.

Angela let her eyes glow bright red.

The crowd cheered harder and pushed forward.

Angela sighed. *They're not scared of me now. Duh!*

Jennifer understood Angela wanted everyone to keep their distance. She turned around and let her eyes glow like fire.

Silence ran through the crowd and stopped the pushing in an instant.

Angela refused to feel jealousy. Having their love was better. She knew that for a fact.

Angela headed across the dock with her team on her heels. As they walked, those men and women scanned the crowd for their loved ones. Waves came from both sides, along with bright smiles and fast glances of guilt. Kids shouted names and

cheered again, recapturing the good mood, but they didn't cross Jennifer's line.

It was clear that Jennifer's reputation as their hardass enforcer hadn't changed with her belly bump. She'd gotten bigger, of course, but she couldn't match Angela's giant mound. Angela was only two months from her delivery now and it became obvious to her as much as to the others when she reached the beach. Gravity on land was different than on the water. Aches immediately started in her spine and ankles.

Angela scanned the trees along the beach. She found the one she wanted and led the way to it, walking slowly.

Her crew stayed close.

Angela put her arm around Cate, hugging the girl closer as she shied from all of the happy, curious gazes.

Angela stopped near the tree and waited for her team to surround her. "Block their view."

They all gathered around, not sure what was happening.

Once they were thick enough around her, Angela carefully knelt and began digging in the dirt.

Understanding came. The crew watched to see what she came up with.

Cate pulled a small baggie from her pocket and dropped it into the dirt pile.

Angela tossed some dirt on it and then stood, bringing the baggie with her.

Marc and Cody shook their heads at those who would have questioned.

Angela brushed the dirt off the baggie and turned back toward the beach.

Gasps and alarm went through the crowd as Nature appeared.

Shields came up; weapons lifted.

Angela went toward Nature without fear as everyone above them now retreated, gasping as they understood why Angela hadn't let them come down yet.

Nature glared at Cate and Cody.

Both kids flipped her the bird.

Angela and her crew laughed.

Nature glared.

It was a beautiful moment.

Angela stopped a few feet from the impressive entity who appeared to be fully healed.

Everyone stiffened. Angela's stomach seemed way too large for her to be allowed so close to someone so dangerous.

Angela held out the baggie.

Nature took it; the baggie melted away, leaving her final antler shard.

"Would you like a hand with that?"

Nature scoffed. "Keep those hybrids away from me!"

Angela's lids narrowed as she watched Nature reattach the antler. It sealed in tight. *She didn't need our help on the sub. She just wanted to see who has*

healing gifts. Now that she knows, she'll target those people even harder.

Nature groaned in relief.

Angela waited, hoping she could talk about another type of truce. "It's not the kid's fault for what the descendants did when they came down to earth."

Nature glared at Cate and Cody. "I care not about the magic lines."

"It's the normals then..." Angela understood in a blinding flash. "You hate the normals because the Creator cheated on you with one of them! That's why you're hunting them."

Nature glowered. "I am no longer hunting them, according to our deal, but I will not tolerate being touched by filth!"

Angela was angered at the rudeness. She barely kept herself from responding in kind.

Nature scanned her crew and narrowed in on the teenagers who'd refused to let her in. Her hatred for them resurfaced.

Charlie and Bret tensed, hearts starting to pound.

Angela frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes!" But Nature wasn't able to strike out at them like she'd sworn to do. As long as they were on this island, they were safe.

Her attention went to the teenagers who'd been locked in the cage when she entered the sub the first time. Nature smirked. "All four family lines are

gathered now. They won't all survive. That pleases me."

The boys shivered and retreated behind the wall of now angry mission men. They didn't like Nature's threats.

"Wait. *Four* family lines?" Angela was stunned. She studied the boys, trying to figure out who they were.

Nature began to fade from view. "They belong to the line that died right here." Nature sneered at Marc. "Killer!"

Marc understood. "They're Kendle's relatives. The fourth family line is Roberts."

The crowd cheered again as Nature vanished. They assumed Angela had gotten her to leave.

Jennifer's eyes narrowed.

"Reicher, Mitchel, Roberts, and Wells." Angela turned back to find Nature gone. She didn't try to reach out again despite wanting to discuss other deals and the past.

Shawn was hard again. "How could anyone cheat on her? Is He nuts?"

"No, just the giver of a very common human trait." Angela regarded Adrian. "Spreading the love."

Adrian laughed.

Angela didn't.

Wade shrugged. "I think He was just searching for happiness, like the rest of us."

Kenn wasn't able to let things go, but he did keep his voice down. "You lied!"

Angela went toward the quarantine tent, shaking her head and holding her stomach. “I gained the skill of bluffing on this run.”

Her voice soured. “And I lost some more of my humanity. Make sure Harry’s name gets added to the memorial, along with Mel and Mr. Sneaky. I want to see them every time I go in there.”

Marc was searching for hope now, and watching the teen boys who didn’t understand why they were getting his attention. “Can we really beat her in the final battle?”

Angela sighed. “No, and we’re not going to. As far as I’m concerned, there *is* no final battle coming. Let the Creator and his deranged wife settle their domestic issues themselves. We’ve got our own problems to worry about.”

Adrian didn’t argue, but he also didn’t agree. When the time came, he was certain they were going back. Fate would see to it.

The mission men continued to discuss it while following Angela toward the QZ that was lined in familiar yellow tape.

Kyle was struggling to understand Nature’s emotions. “If she hates Him, why did she get so upset about being cheated on?”

“Because she doesn’t.” Wade was sure of it. “She still loves him.”

“That makes things harder.”

Wade nodded at Marc’s comment. “If the Creator feels the same, it could also make things easier.”

Before Marc could answer, a shout echoed. Full of pain and need, everyone turned toward it.

2

“Wade!” Amy ducked the Eagles trying to stop her. Her bare feet flew like pistons down the beach, throwing up sand clouds that made some of the crew wince at the memories.

Wade knelt and caught her, grinning and trying not to cry. “Hiya, Cutie.”

Amy giggled and held tight to his neck as he lifted her.

“You didn’t call me for weeks!”

“Sorry about that, Doll. I didn’t really have a choice.”

Amy squeezed tighter. “I forgive you. Welcome home!”

Wade gurgled an answer, making her laugh again.

Missy came flying through the crowd next, just as fast and agile as Amy had been. She flew by Jennifer and zeroed in on Shawn.

Selina stopped and stayed out of the way as the dirty, sobbing little girl flung herself into Shawn’s arms. Their tears mingled as he held her.

Missy pulled it all from his mind in seconds; her gifts had grown while he was gone. She wasn’t locked anymore.

Selina smiled at the girl over Shawn’s shoulder. “Hi.”

Missy's eyes lit up bright red. She shoved out of Shawn's arms and marched toward the nervous caretaker.

Most of the witnesses went still and quiet, not sure how badly this might go.

Missy grabbed Selina around the waist and held on tight. "You didn't leave him!"

Selina automatically hugged the girl back. Warm emotions filled her heart. "This is way better than being in the lab."

Missy stared up at her. "They hurt you, too?"

Selina nodded. "But that life is over. I'm trying to make a new one now."

Missy grabbed her hand and tugged her over to Shawn. "You have one with us. Forever!"

Shawn put an arm around each of them and headed for the QZ. He didn't look up at Pam or Morgan, but he could feel both of them watching him and wondering how differently things might have been if they'd all stayed together.

Grant smiled as Shawn went into the tent, but the captain only had eyes for Ray, who was right behind the new family. He didn't leave his post, but he wanted to.

Ray blushed at the heat in Grant's eyes. "It's good to see you, too."

Grant chuckled and kept leering as Ray entered the beach tent. Then he resumed scanning for problems. Ray was in there now. Any threats out here would be met with lethal force.

Morgan wasn't surprised that Shawn hadn't acknowledged him. He scanned the returning crew and found them light. *Harry's gone. I knew it was him.*

Morgan had dreamed of Harry's death. He narrowed onto Isabel. *Isn't she the one who killed him?*

Angela shook her head at Morgan. *Later.*

Morgan let it go for now.

Pam went back toward town and tried to be happy that Shawn had made it home. She didn't stare at the little girl walking with Shawn or his new woman. *I don't care. I don't care.*

Everyone who caught her thought knew it was a lie.

3

Wade entered the large QZ tent and stopped. There were camp people inside. One of them was Samantha.

Samantha put the blanket onto the cot and looked up. A warm smile crossed her face. "Welcome home."

Wade's heart thumped. "You're the prettiest thing I've seen in my entire life."

Sam blushed under his hot gaze.

For a brief instant, everything was back to normal.

Then the ocean outside hit the beach restlessly, slapping into the rocks.

Samantha shuddered.

Wade shivered.

A new bond formed between them in that instant.

Neil observed in approval as Wade hurried over with Amy still on his hip. He kissed Sam softly and hugged her close. *Nice*. Neil was thrilled to have Wade home where he belonged.

Right back at ya! Wade grinned over Sam's shoulder.

Neil laughed, heart finally settling into a more peaceful rhythm. "Where were you guys?"

Wade's happiness dulled. "Stuck in the cotton batting."

Neil stared. "The what?"

"I'll tell you later." Wade let Amy and Sam direct him to a cot so he could take off his kit and get ready for a medical check and debriefing.

The church group was also in the tent and all wearing welcoming smiles that cloaked secrets.

Zack frowned at them as he came in. Then he forgot his suspicions as Allison and his sons ran over.

"Dad!"

"Welcome home!"

Zack hugged them all and kissed Allison.

Allison held on tight. "Don't you ever leave again!"

She laughed, but Zack nodded. "I handed in my letter. I'm retiring."

His sons all smiled, but not in approval. Allison was the only one who was happy about it.

Daryl stored that information as he rose from placing a kit under a cot. “Welcome home!”

He found Gus in the crew. “Brittani said she wants a call on the radio from you or she’ll come down here.”

Gus chuckled. “I’ll call her.” He knew she wasn’t able to come on her own. The brief fade they’d had on this island had revealed her condition. “Tell her if she doesn’t stay in bed, I’ll leave again.”

Daryl stared. “You seem...different.”

Gus’s tone dropped into stone. “I am. We all are.”

Daryl could see that as he glanced around. He didn’t ask questions or make comments yet. He tried to give them time to adjust to being home. Ray had been very specific about that during his radio calls.

“Where is he?” Crissy pushed her way by the medical team that was now entering the large tent with heavy bags and relief. “Gus!”

Gus looked over, surprised. *Is she here for me?*

Crissy ran to Gus and hugged him.

Gus returned her hug in shock. He found her mother standing by the flap, smiling at him.

She’s so beautiful. Gus was still mesmerized by Bernice. *She can’t be here for me.*

Daryl slapped him on the shoulder. “You’ll be hated by every single single guy in camp now. Nice work.”

Gus laughed. Relief filled his heart, pushing out another chunk of bitterness as Bernice joined them.

4

Outside the tent, Adrian scanned the crowd, but he didn't spot Sadie. Conner's wave and bright smile was a relief, though.

Welcome home.

It's great to be back.

Conner felt his curiosity. *She's still in town. She'll be by later to talk to you.*

Adrian sighed. *I've got things to talk to her about, too.*

Conner saw Adrian's warm glance at Piper. He groaned. "I can't be a part of this."

He headed for the path to town. *Come see me when you get out. We'll do lunch or something if you survive talking to Sadie.*

Adrian chuckled. *I'll do that.*

He entered the tent and chose a cot near the wolf. Dog had picked a bed by the flap and curled up on it to wait.

Adrian pointed at nearby cots for their two new people. He was relieved that their animal had stopped barking so much. He assumed Dog had helped with that.

Dog looked up. He spotted the three cats entering with the medical team.

The cats spotted him.

Fur lifted on all of the animals.

Adrian laughed when the others around them tensed.

Dog whined.

The cats meowed, coming toward him.

It triggered the howling of the Golden Retriever that was on a leash and now sitting by his owners.

The cats began hissing and retreating.

Dog groaned. *Can't we all just get along? For me?*

Dog's misery hit the cats, and calmed them. All three tabbies joined him for a licking reunion. Fur began dropping to the floor as the grooming commenced.

The Retriever stared, shocked into silence. *That's disgusting.*

Adrian chuckled. "Dog and his cats have a very special relationship."

The Retriever's nose wrinkled. *You heard me.* It immediately began barking again. *Someone finally heard me!*

In the happy confusion, Kenn and Tonya locked eyes.

Kenn hated being afraid. He hated the ball of acid in his gut and the chills making him hide a shiver. As he stared at Tonya, it occurred to Kenn that he might be happier if he followed Zack's lead and retired.

Tonya had also stopped to stare at Kenn. He was scarred, in more ways than just what she could see. His mind was a wall of fear and pain. *I don't know how to help him.*

They gazed at each other over the giant gap of terror and self-doubt.

Adrian cleared his throat. "Say hi. Hug. Cry."

Tonya chuckled.

Kenn grimaced. He'd had enough of crying. He stepped toward Tonya while bracing for ugliness.

Tonya could feel how scared he was of being rejected. His eyes went over Tobias, who was also watching them sadly, and then over Rico, who was glaring. Both of those medical team members had insisted on being here.

Tonya met Kenn. She sealed their lips and held him tightly, like she'd been dreaming of for three months.

Kenn let her hold him and heal his heart. *She still wants me!*

Tonya snorted against his lips. *Cue the crying.*

Kenn felt the tears and didn't know if they were his or hers. And it didn't matter. *She still wants me!*

"I was giving you a way out."

"I don't want it. I want you."

"I've always been yours. Kiss me and then we'll cry together."

Tobias sighed in disappointed resignation. *She really does love him. Damn.*

Rico stormed out of the QZ tent.

4

Angela stayed by the flap, making sure everyone was accounted for. She didn't look at

Jennifer yet. She could feel a problem there waiting to reveal itself.

Jennifer approached the tent with a blank expression that changed into deep need and pain as she neared Kyle.

Kyle was also still outside the tent, studying her. Jennifer's stomach was bigger now. She was beautiful to him.

Thick sparks flew between the couple.

Kyle lowered his mental barrier.

Jennifer began to read his mind in dismay. Everything he'd suffered hurt her.

Kyle also read her thoughts and concerns, happiness fading a bit. *She isn't the same, either.*

Jennifer sighed. "Does it matter?"

Kyle shook his head. "No. Whatever it is, we'll get through it together. It's what we do best."

Jennifer finally smiled. "Welcome home."

Kyle embraced her gently and let the feel start healing his aching heart.

Angela regarded Marc, who was staring at the dock. He'd killed Kendle there. His mind was full of the memory. *He isn't staying.*

Marc turned and entered the tent without responding.

Angela sighed. She'd known that already, but a tiny part of her heart had hoped he would, just like when they were kids. *Sometimes, loose ends and bygones have to come first.*

Cody looked up at her. "But he'll be back, right?"

“Yes, he’ll always come back to me. He just won’t stay. That pattern started thirty years ago. It’s what feels normal to him.”

Marc tensed as he realized they were talking about him.

Cody wanted Marc to stay. He pushed harder. “What about you? Your needs matter, too.”

Angela shrugged. “I gave up my needs when I became the leader of this camp. And I’ll tell you a secret.”

“What?”

Angela smiled, holding in the pain that almost felt like home to her after all these years. “I made the right choice. Safe Haven will never leave me. It’s the one thing I can always count on.”

She brought up the bubble around the entire camp, while Marc and the others grimaced and Jennifer frowned.

The camp cheered, easing her pain.

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed again. *The real boss is home.*

Jennifer pushed out of Kyle’s arms and walked away. *I’m not sure how I feel about that.*

Kyle was shocked and immediately afraid. He’d never worried about anyone challenging Angela for leadership, and certainly not his wife. He looked to Angela for help.

Angela forced out another bright smile as she directed the kids into the quarantine tent. “We’ll get through it, together. It really is what we do best.”

Kyle couldn't be comforted by platitudes like a rookie "And when that doesn't work?"

Angela's face went cold; she looked toward the ocean, searching for a green storm cloud. "Then we'll make dangerous deals with desperate people and hope no one we love gets hurt because of it."

Kyle wasn't sure how to take that. He immediately became scared for his wife.

Angela nodded as a vision began playing out in front of her. "You should be. She hasn't been taming the bad side, Kyle. She's been listening to it."

"What's it telling her?"

Angela snorted scornfully. "You already know."

Kyle did. "She wants your place. And she thinks she might be able to take it from you now."

"Hard lessons are coming for her." Angela smoothed out her face and her voice, still scanning the calm ocean around the submarine, but she wasn't seeing that. "Don't get in the way of it."

"She's my wife!"

"And my heir, my teammate, my friend. If she skips the hard lessons, we'll both lose her. Stay out of the way and let her see the mistakes. If you protect her, you doom her."

Kyle trusted Angela with their future and their camp. He also loved his wife. "I can't take your side over her. I'll ruin my marriage."

"No, you'll save it. If she doesn't correct her path, she'll die and nothing you can do will save

her.” Angela shivered as the vision of the future faded. It was new, unexpected, and painful. “Everything depends on your Eagle honor, Kyle. Don’t let us down.”

Kyle didn’t watch as Angela entered the tent. He kept staring after his wife as she headed into the jungle. There was little doubt that she’d heard all of it.

Kyle didn’t know what all Angela was talking about, but he was suddenly certain that she was correct. Angela loved Jennifer. She would never hurt the girl, so the death threat had to be coming from someone or something else. “I’ll save you, Jenny. Just like you saved me, and then things can go back to the way they were.”

Jennifer didn’t answer. She was busy listening to the sly voice inside.

Kyle felt the magic stir. Guilt hit him for leaving Jennifer alone so long. She needed contact with the good side that he now carried. Without it, she wasn’t whole.

Kyle stared after her, almost crushed. “I have to give it back. I can’t be a descendant anymore.”

Grant looked at him curiously. “Is that even possible?”

Kyle slowly headed into the tent. “I have no idea, but I have to try. She means more to me than the power.”

Grant sighed, frowning. “Too bad your wife can’t say the same.”

Grant dropped the flap before Kyle could ask what he meant. Jennifer had changed while they were gone. *She's not going to let you give it back even if you figure out how to do it. She likes the bad side too much to give it up.*

The last month had been tense for most of the camp and that included the other co-leaders. Everyone was relieved that Angela was back. They would make that clear as soon as she was out of quarantine. Grant expected the trouble to begin before that, though.

He finally spoke what he'd been thinking for weeks. "Leaving her here was a huge mistake, Boss, and now that you're back, we're all going to pay for it."

Still observing the camp, Nature's lips curled. "You have no idea how right you are."

The End of Book 20

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“It’s time for your therapy session.”

Angela froze for an instant. Then she shut her notebook and clasped her hands in front of her. “Shut the door.”

Wade entered the therapy cubby and closed them in together. It was a good sign that she hadn’t blown him off or just told him no.

Wade sat across from her and effected a snobbish tone. “Now, what seems to be the problem?”

Angela’s lips twitched. Wade really was very charming. “Which topic?”

Wade faltered. “I don’t follow.”

“You asked what problem. I need you to narrow it to a topic before I can answer.”

Wade dove in on what he assumed was giving her the most trouble. “Let’s talk about Marc and his time in the lab.”

Angela immediately brought up a barrier for privacy.

Wade approved. Marc and the others didn’t need to hear this. “We both read Reicher’s log. And thank you for that, by the way. I’ll never get it all out of my brain.”

“Same. And that’s the problem, I suppose. At some point, he’ll pull it from my mind. Or yours.”

Wade nodded to acknowledge that. All it would take was one hint and Marc would dig in. Wade had no illusions that he would be strong enough to keep Marc out. “Have you considered just telling him?”

“Yes.”

Wade didn’t need to ask if Marc would react as badly as she feared. The information in those files might crush Marc.

“He’s not recovering; he’s avoiding. The guilt is eating me alive.”

“And yet, you’d still do it again.”

“Yes.”

“Because he was intolerable the other way.”

“Because I love him and I want to keep him!”

“At any cost.”

Angela glared. “Yes.”

Wade studied her. “How long have you known?”

This was the part she didn’t want to discuss. The answer was awful. “Since Cate joined us. Her memories of Reicher triggered too many similarities. I matched it to his sonic bounce spell in the mountain. Then Cerise came and there was no denying it.”

“And you still sent him in there.”

“Yes.”

“That was cruel.”

Angela crossed her arms over her chest. “We were going to split up. I couldn’t take another minute of his disrespect.”

“But you also couldn’t crush him yourself because you love him.”

“Yes.”

“So Reicher did it for you and now you have to live with half a man.”

Angela snorted. “Marc’s never been that.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Angela let the truth out in regret. “I don’t like this version of him, either. I have to hurt him again to help us both.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“I’m going to let him read Reicher’s logs. All it will take is to leave a few books lying around. He’ll fly through those and then start looking for more reading material.”

“Why would you do that?”

“He needs to know the truth about his parentage.”

“Won’t it finish destroying the man he was?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And he’ll either finally be able to really love me for who I am or I’ll set him free. This is our last chance in this lifetime. I’m almost done.”

Deleted Scene #2

“You’re looking a lot better now.” Harry shut off the computer file and rotated on the stool to face the Air Force man.

Jack began buttoning his shirt. “Thanks. Can I talk to you about something that’s bothering me?”

Harry nodded. It troubled him that only Thomas and Jack were left of the 15 military men they had rescued from Reicher’s lab. Harry assumed Angela had known most of those men weren’t good, but leaving them behind hadn’t been an option. Kenn never would have tolerated it. “What’s up?”

Jack stood and came over to Harry, keeping his voice down. He didn’t want anyone to overhear them. “Why is the leader of your refugee camp a female?”

Harry stared at him stupidly for a minute. He didn’t understand the question. “What?”

Jack pushed ahead. He’d been studying Harry for the last week. He was certain he had approached the right man. “Women are not allowed to be in leadership positions. Are you all just humoring her?”

Harry wasn’t certain how to answer that question. “Angela’s the boss of Safe Haven.”

“She’s filling in for someone, right? She took Marc’s place while he was gone.” That had been

Jack's assumption since finding out the leader was a woman.

Harry realized Jack had a problem with female leadership. He tried to come up with the proper response through the surprise. "Why does it matter?"

Jack let Harry in on a secret from the labs. "Reicher refused to give them any authority because it was never enough for them. Every time one of them got into a leadership position, they tried to take over and change things. He always had to remove them."

Harry knew Reicher had been averse to female leadership, but he hadn't considered the effect that had on the subjects. "You don't have anything to worry about in that way with us. Angela is a good leader."

"A good leader who changes things, right?"

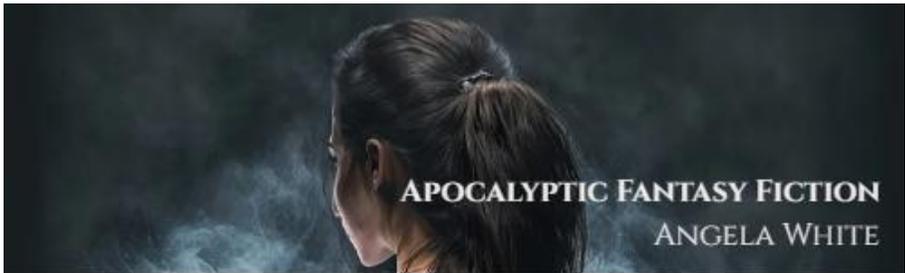
Harry didn't answer as his mind showed him several rules Angela had made that Adrian never would have allowed.

Jack pushed a little harder. "If women get their way, all men will be subjects in a world lab. You have to get her out of control and back into a subordinate role where she belongs."

Jack headed for the exit. "I don't have anything against her or any other female, you understand. I just don't want to be a slave."

Harry continued to stare in shock as the man left. *Is he right?*

Audio



Did you know the Life After War series is now available in audiobook format?

[Audiobook Page](#)

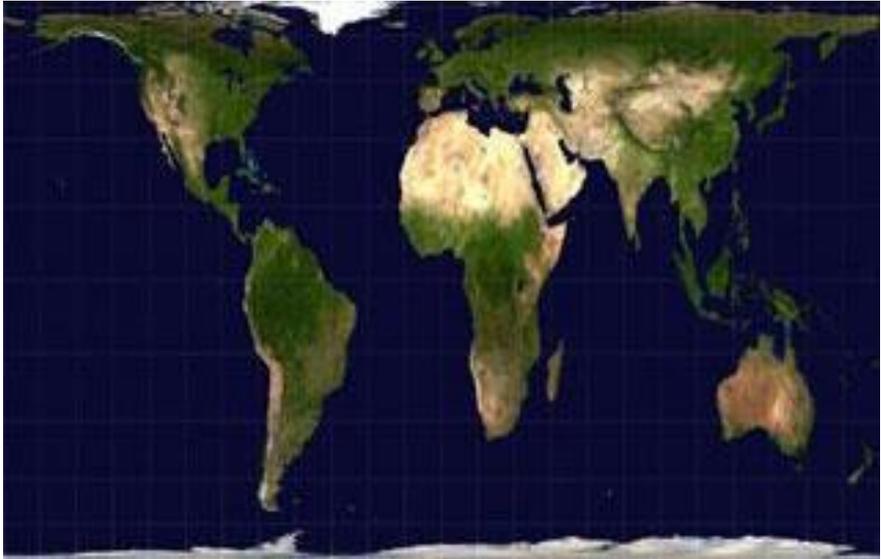
Map

I'm Going to Blow Your Mind.

Or maybe I won't. You may already know. I found out about it from a TV show about 10 years ago and then I checked to see if it was true. (All the research I had to do for these last few LAW books, like where they were traveling to and from, reminded me of it.) The first map below is the one most of us know and have used throughout our lives. It's called the Mercator Projection, named after the man who made it back in the 1500s.



And it's wrong. The map below, the Peter's Projection, is actually correct in size and location. Sort of.



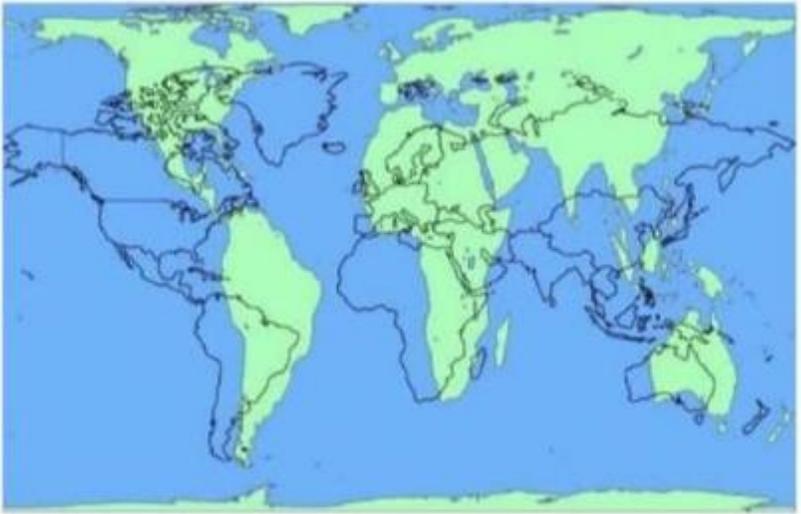
This one shows the correct orientation:



What is that?!

It's the world we all live on. The landmasses actually come up from the bottom of the globe, so we're really all upside down. The northern hemisphere that we know isn't really in the north.

Here's an overlay so you can see the differences. The light green is the accurate map and the top, is really the bottom of the globe.



How's that for mind blowing? Just thought you should know.

Book 21



Dangerous Deals

1

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Morgan frowned, pausing the scalpel over his target. “Now?”

Tobias glanced toward the infirmary entrance, where Rico was on duty. His guard was a few feet away, looking bored. “Yes.”

Morgan knew what it was. He gently scraped the scalpel against the toenail that he was removing,

separating it from the flesh underneath. “Ask Ralph.”

Ralph grinned at the men. He wasn’t feeling anything thanks to the local anesthetic. He was just happy to be contributing toward Morgan’s surgery practice. It was his way of making up for his bad choices. “Fine with me.”

Tobias didn’t care who heard them. “When are we going to do something about him?”

“We’re not.” Morgan continued to cut away at the toenail’s adhesive-like connections. “The boss will deal with it. She’s only been out of the QZ for a couple of days.”

Ralph pursed his lips. “The others are taking too much time in there.”

“Only by a few days.” Morgan gently pulled the nail free and held it up. “Got it!”

“Nice work.” Tobias handed him the gauze to wrap around the toe and catch the blood. “You’re getting better.”

“I’m trying.”

“Good. The list of volunteers is long.”

People had been asked to sign up if they had something small they needed taken off. Morgan’s practice would help him when they had to tackle the cancerous breast waiting on Candy’s chest.

Ralph focused on his toe, but he pushed the conversation back to where Tobias wanted it because he agreed. “It’s really not good to have Rico on duty. He’s a UN flunkey. He shouldn’t be allowed in our camp.”

Tobias nodded. “He used the last month to get closer to Tonya. It’s not right. She should be told who he really is.”

“I’m surprised that she doesn’t know.” Ralph really was. He had thought Tonya was smarter than that.

“She obeys our rules.” Morgan checked on the nail and was happy to see the bleeding was already slowing. “She doesn’t get into people’s minds without their permission.”

Ralph huffed. “It’s a bad rule.”

Tobias bagged the trash. “And he’s a bad man.”

Ralph frowned. “Why did the boss agree to it?”

Tobias shrugged. “Maybe it’s because he’s related to Marc.” That story had already made the rounds, along with several others that were almost too far out to be believed.

Morgan was already tired of the conversation. He smeared antibiotic ointment over Ralph’s toe and then took the clean bandage Tobias had ready for him. “Let it go, Toby.”

Tobias smiled at the nickname. He understood it was their way of accepting him. “I’m trying. I just like her, you know?”

Morgan snorted.

Ralph laughed. “We’ve noticed.”

“Why did everyone agree to keep it from her?”

Morgan sighed. “Leadership wants her to have a chance at a different life.”

“With Rico?” Tobias glared. “She deserves better than a UN flunkey who ran away rather than to stand trial for rape.”

“Who raped someone?” Tonya came in and stopped at the sudden tense silence.

None of the men met her eye.

Tonya glanced around, including the guard.

Rico dropped his eyes. He’d been listening to them talk instead of watching the hall. She’d caught them all off guard.

Tobias was fed up with babying the new man. He pointed at Rico. “He’s under guard because he may have raped someone before he came here. He tricked the boss into not telling anyone so he has time to bond with you. Guess what he’ll want from you next?”

Rico flushed, freezing as her shocked gaze came to him. “It’s not like it sounds.”

Tonya pulled it from his mind without trouble. Her gifts had grown over the last few weeks. Her eyes widened. Her anger rose. “How dare you keep that from me!”

Tonya pulled her gun, marching forward. “You bastard!”

Rico didn’t move as her gun went to his chest.

Morgan quickly freed his hands. “Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

Tobias pushed. “She won’t regret it. She’s saving herself from being raped at some point.”

“It hasn’t happened, so she’ll go to jail!” Ralph was angry with Tobias now. “Stop causing problems!”

Tonya didn’t care about any of that. All she could see was the huge lie Rico had kept from her. *He’s Reicher’s brother!* “How could you do that to me?”

Rico barely breathed. “I didn’t want you to view me that way. I needed to show you I’m a good man first.”

“Why?”

“So you’ll love me.”

Tonya’s finger tightened on the trigger.

Rico’s guard came closer, but he wasn’t sure if he was going to interfere. Finding out Rico might be a rapist on the run who was being given a chance to match up with their lab tech had infuriated him. He was fully on Tonya’s side here.

Morgan kept working on Ralph’s bandage, but he scanned Tonya repeatedly. “If you do that, you’ll be banished. The boss won’t let them kill you, but she won’t be able to let you stay.”

Tobias willed her to pull the trigger. “I’ll go with you. You won’t be alone.”

“Stop it!” Ralph knew what Tobias was doing now. “Kenn will kill you for this!”

“I’ll handle him.” Tobias wasn’t afraid of that broken mission man anymore.

Tonya slowly rotated with the gun still up.

Tobias blanched as she stopped on him.

Tonya's eyes were bright red. "I've always known you were a problem. Now, we'll see if you know how to get yourself out of the hole you've dug."

Morgan chuckled. "And that's why she's one of us."

He handed Ralph a baggie. "Here are some extra bandages. Change it once a day and apply the ointment."

Ralph studied Tonya. "Aren't you going to do something?"

Morgan shook his head. "I'm not on that duty right now."

Rico's guard rotated as footsteps echoed.

Daryl saw what was happening. He marched over and snatched the gun from Tonya's hand. "We have bigger problems."

Tobias remembered how to breathe.

Rico glared. "Leave her alone now. She doesn't want you, either!"

Ralph smiled. "Thank you."

Daryl flipped Tonya's gun around and handed it back to her. Then he ignored all of them except for his target.

Morgan tensed as Daryl came over to him. "What is it?"

"They just pulled a body onto the beach. It looks like it was murder. We need you to come verify that."

Tonya was distracted. She holstered with a sneer and a glower that told Rico and Tobias she would pay them both back at a later date.

Morgan was their senior medic. He hated examining bodies, but it was part of the job. “Okay. I’ll get my bag.” He dried his hands and went to get his medical bag. “Who is it?”

Daryl lowered his voice. He hated to be the bearer of bad news. “I’m sorry, man. It’s Pam.”

Morgan stared. “What?”

Daryl kept going. “That’s not the worst part.”

Tonya snorted. “Excuse me?”

Daryl forced out the rest. “Pam’s been murdered, and Missy is missing.”

2

“Has anyone touched the body?”

“Just to pull her out of the water.” Daryl led Morgan down the beach to where a handful of guards were keeping people away from the corpse. “We came to get you right after that.”

Morgan ignored the people offering him sympathy. He was almost numb from the news. Pam had been fighting her alcohol addiction and she’d stayed away from him and Shawn, especially after Shawn had come home with a new woman in tow. As far as Morgan knew, Pam’s only enemy was Missy. It was already looking bad for the little girl that he loved as much as he would a biological child.

Shawn and Selina were standing near the group of gawkers. Shawn met Morgan's eyes in abject terror.

Morgan didn't try to calm him down. Shawn's new woman was already working on that. Morgan went to the body and knelt, heart now breaking. *I'm sorry, Pam.* He hadn't wanted to be with her anymore, but he certainly hadn't wished this on her.

Morgan started at her soggy head and worked his way down. "Mud in her hair. Her skin isn't wrinkled. She didn't die in the water. She was dumped there."

Tobias recorded the observation.

"Clothes aren't torn. No bruising. It doesn't seem like there was a sexual assault. I'll verify that later."

People murmured at each revelation.

"No shoes. No bra. She was surprised, probably right after she got up this morning."

Tobias looked around for the brawlers. "Get ready to take her to the ship."

One of the brawlers broke off and went to get a stretcher.

"It wasn't robbery. She still has her rings and diamond necklace." They hadn't had many thefts in Safe Haven because those items were no longer considered precious, but Morgan still wanted to rule everything out.

"Do you want us to roll her over?" Stuart and another brawler had pulled the body from the water. "We saw her on a patrol."

“Yes.” Morgan kept studying the body as the two men rolled her over.

Gasps went through the growing crowd.

A large rip in the rear of Pam’s shirt glared at them. Dark blood had stained the material and her skin.

Morgan knelt, examining the wound. He let out a worried grunt. “It’s a stab wound. The knife is small...”

“Like the ones we give to the kids for their tool belts?”

Morgan nodded at Tobias even though he didn’t want to. “Yes. Send someone to her cabin. You’re searching for a murder weapon.”

“Someone needs to go get the boss.”

“We already sent for her.”

It would take Angela a few minutes to get here. Her large stomach was slowing her down. She’d been released from the QZ tent yesterday. Morgan wasn’t sure where she’d spent the night, but it hadn’t been on the ship or in the tent with Marc.

“Get her on the stretcher. Take her to the ship. Send someone to all the places she’s been. I want a complete record of her whereabouts for the last two days.” Kenn came through the crowd, glaring at people. “Get to where you belong!”

Kenn was thrilled to have been given the job of first detective, but he was horrified to be needed so soon after getting the job. He went to Morgan and began copying everything that Morgan had discovered so far.

Kyle motioned to the other brawlers. "I need a security check. Make sure everyone is accounted for."

The brawlers hurried off, eager to do their job. Most of the time, they didn't have anything to do but walk the island. Today, there was a break from that.

People moved off, not wanting Kenn to bark at them again. They headed for population centers to spread what little they knew. As usual, Safe Haven's favorite pastime was gossip.

Shawn led Selina away from the others. "Come on. We have to go find our girl."

Selina frowned. "Why? Was she close to Pam?"

Shawn sighed unhappily. "Not exactly."

He filled her in as they left hearing range of the others. "Missy hates her. She's a suspect now."

Selina's anger lashed out. "They can't have her. Missy's mine!"

Shawn felt the same way. "We have to find her first and keep her from incriminating herself."

As Shawn left, Morgan looked up at Kenn.

Kenn wanted to act like he hadn't heard that.

Morgan refused to allow it. "Make a record of it. If she did this, she can't be given a free pass. Murder is against everything we stand for."

"Wait." Tobias got their attention. "You're all forgetting something important."

"What?" Morgan hoped Tobias had caught something that would clear Missy.

“You said she was dumped. There’s no way your little girl could have done this, at least not alone.”

Morgan took hope from that. “You’re right.”

Kenn didn’t get distracted. “Some of our kids are very strong and very determined. If she wanted to do this, she could have found a way.”

Tobias knew it would crush Morgan if Missy was guilty. He kept poking holes in the unspoken theory that was forming. “She hasn’t been around Pam in months. We don’t have any reports of new problems between them. Maybe she’s being framed.”

Morgan stiffened. “That implies we have a killer on this island.”

Tobias pointed toward the cruise ship, where they’d left Tonya glaring at Rico. “Maybe on the ship, too.”

Morgan latched onto that explanation. “It would be easy to frame Missy for this, but why would anyone else want to kill Pam?”

Kenn narrowed his lids against the setting sun as he watched Shawn and Selina hurry off into the jungle. “Maybe it was someone who felt threatened by old ends.”

3

“She didn’t do it! You know she wouldn’t do it!” Cody was frantic. He ran alongside Angela, begging for her help.

“I agree.”

Cody waved angrily. “Then why are you having them hunt for her?!”

“It has to be investigated, Cody.”

“But they all think she did it!” Cody glared at the staring, gossiping people they were passing. “She wouldn’t do this!”

“Calm down.” Cody’s friendship with Missy was clouding his vision, as it would anyone who was terrified of losing that relationship. “We’ll find her and see what happened.”

Cody lowered his voice. “But what if she did it?”

Angela knew he wanted her to promise that Missy would be spared the fate of the other killers they’d dealt with.

Angela couldn’t do it. “Go find Samantha and tell her what’s going on. Missy might need a good lawyer.”

Cody took off running, pushing his way through the gawkers.

Angela cradled her stomach so she could travel faster over the jungle path. She wasn’t supposed to be on her feet now, but this couldn’t wait and it couldn’t be handled by the other co-leaders or her heirs. None of them were able to be objective. They all either loved Missy and Pam or disliked them. So did Angela, but she’d often been able to put her biases aside to find the truth. This would be no different, but it might be harder. If Missy was found guilty, Cody might never forgive it or forget it.

Wade fell in with her, frowning. He knew she wasn't supposed to be out here tramping through the jungle. He didn't scold her, however. This was important. "We're not missing anyone else. We didn't find any signs of intruders."

Angela was disappointed to hear that. She'd been hoping for a tracker so she didn't have to accuse one of her camp of murder. "Anything you haven't told our detective yet?"

Wade leaned closer so they weren't overheard. "None of the kids have seen her since last night. She was pissed about Pam being rude to Selina."

Angela sighed. Missy and Selina had fast become a pair. The caretaker already loved Missy and Missy was already calling her mom. *There's the motive. This just keeps getting worse.*

She felt Wade's misery and grunted. "What else?"

"Amy saw her sneak out of the den last night. She hasn't been seen since."

"Damn." It was looking more and more like Missy was guilty.

"I told Neil to ask Samantha if she wants to help on this one."

"Cody is on his way to get Sam now."

"So you think she did it."

"I believe there's a lot of evidence, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's guilty."

"Agreed. We have to keep an open mind."

They both stopped as Kenn came through the jungle. A familiar little girl was on his back, slamming her fists into his head.

“She deserved it! She deserved it!”

Kenn put Missy on her feet, but he kept a hold on her wrist. “We found her in the clinic.”

He pointed at the baggie on his belt. “There’s blood on her knife.”

Kenn waited. He knew what had to come next, but he had refused to be the one to do it.

Angela shook her head when Wade would have taken the hit for her. “Missy, you’re under arrest for the murder of a Safe Haven camp member. You’ll be taken to the jail now. Would you like to say anything in your defense?”

Missy burst into tears, but her words didn’t change. “She deserved everything she got!”



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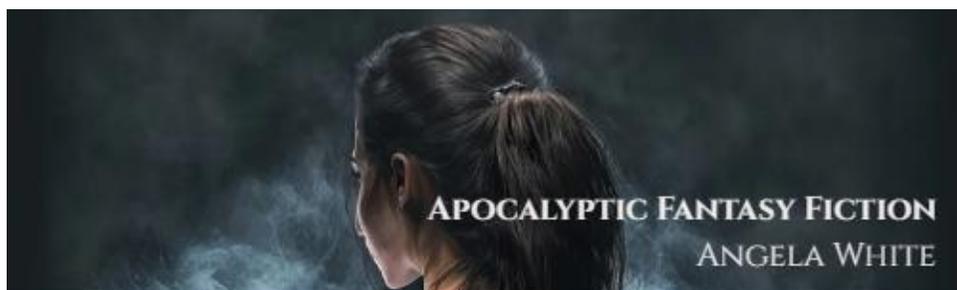
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